

## The Corner Store

Having already dealt with the bizarre, I wandered into a store on the corner of Border and Strasse. From the instant I entered, I knew this would be an equally mystifying experience.

There was a large mirror on the door that exaggerated the width of my torso. I seized the opportunity and did a bodybuilder flex. For a fleeting moment, I almost looked like one, but I felt something give way on my well-worn Levi's. I glanced down to find the top button undone, and then did some more reconnaissance. No one saw me. I rebuttoned and began to browse.

The first item that caught my attention was a display cabinet covered with orange cones. Curious, I read the label. Perhaps I shouldn't have.

"It's Pet Pylon! Yes! Your very own synthetic sidekick! Are you tired of cold engines, flat tires, and other automotive problems? Well, fear no more! Yes, this little orange cone is quite a formidable mechanic... its Master of Automobile Engineering degree is even included! CAUTION: Do not place in trunk."

I decided to decline on the plastic mechanic. I suddenly felt a throbbing chill in my temples. The feeling intensified as I slowly pivoted to the right. I glanced up to meet the frozen stare of the otherwise calm-looking clerk. I nervously reached out and groped for a Pet Pylon, at which point she turned around to read the latest New Yorker. The chill abated. Did I understand it? No, but neither did I question it.

Tucking the package under my left arm, I met yet another interesting set of items: flares! Let's see...

"You'll always draw a crowd with Fun Flares. And when we say you'll draw a crowd, we're not kidding! We stand behind our flares 100%. If you're not satisfied, just send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: Fun Flares, 1431 Sea Street, Xorbecia, CA 99999, and we'll fill it with your refund, immediately!"

Okay, so now I'm faced with a product parody, a ridiculous guarantee, and a fictitious city. The clerk made up my mind last time; let's see what she thinks now. I made a slow, obvious grab in the general direction of the flares. As my open hand neared a \$5.95 packet, her breathing got heavier and her eyes were transfixed on my hand. This reaction was thoroughly unexpected, and I slowed my movement to a halt so that I could verify what I was seeing. My hand stopped, but she didn't. She licked her lips sensually, her eyes glazed over, and her face flushed into a radiant red. My body tensed up, and I noticed a significant increase in both room temperature and humidity. As the clerk began to unbutton her overstuffed blouse -- another feature I had missed -- I found myself off balance. Rather than turn my head and miss the show, I shot my hand toward the Fun Flares display to prevent my fall. As my fingers came in

contact with the familiar cellophane, the clerk nonchalantly rebuttoned her blouse, straightened her hair, and picked up the latest Better Homes & Gardens.

I secured my footing and released my grip on the package, hoping for a repeat performance, but she just turned a page and read on. I decided to take the flares regardless of my disappointment, and as I reread the guarantee, I felt a presence... all right, I saw a shadow, but I did feel kind of strange.

I looked up to see three yuppies in three-piece suits wearing three times too much Dep in their hair. The one in the middle noticed the packages I was holding and introduced his group.

"Hello, my name is Maximillian Bretaun. I am the president of Autowerks Corporation. The man to my left is Robert Carlton, my executive vice-president in the States, and on my right is Matthias Schoenfeld, my EVP in Germany. I'll admit, it's a little, how do you say, corny, but we are clearly standing behind our products. If for any reason you are unsatisfied with your..." He paused to scan my intended purchases, then continued, "...Fun Flares or Pet Pylon, remember the guarantee. Thank you for supporting our organization." He then shook my hand. The three of them then proceeded to walk toward the door, and as the American VP passed me, he put his hand on my shoulder and warned, "Remember how claustrophobic our Pet Pylons are: it's better to keep it in the front seat with you."

"All right. I'll remember that."

I didn't understand, but I tried to sound like I did. They exited the store, and greeted an incoming customer who looked to me like a "street philosopher".

I decided that it would be easier to relax than to think, so I watched the regular -- he seemed to know the store well -- as he moved among the displays. He was very deliberate; he knew what he wanted and where to find it, and I didn't see his gaze wander anywhere but toward the next item.

I soon lost interest and turned around to browse some more. As I rounded a corner bedecked with various headlights, I saw the man in the shabby, gray coat again, but this time he was more languid, no longer hurrying around, and it appeared he was overheating. The temperature felt reasonable to me, so I wondered if he was possibly sick. I watched his eyes shift erratically behind bright red sunglasses as he pulled a blue handkerchief from his pocket. He slipped off his shades and dabbed at his eyes with the cloth, but when he continued wiping the other parts of his face, I noticed that he had no eyes -- just smooth skin above his nose! I figured this to be a mind trick, and since many things seemed to change when I turned around, I did so. I looked back, but the man still had no eyes. His coat, however, was now white, and his handkerchief had turned to yellow. I repeated the process of looking away and then back again, but all that happened were the alternating color changes from gray to white and blue to yellow

and back. As he raised the still-red shades to his face, I saw eyes blinking inside the glass, or so I assumed, because I could see the eyes in the red-tinted surface, but they weren't stuck to the back of the sunglasses, and they certainly weren't on the man's head.

I walked forward, and he turned to face me. I figured money would get his attention, so I held a five-dollar bill in front of his sunglasses to see if he would notice. He cracked a smile, and in a voice one would expect from a grizzled bum, he said, "Hey, is that Lincoln for me?" He could see it, all right, so I thought *what the hell* and handed it to him.

"You can really see?"

"Sure, can't you?"

"Yes, but... well, pardon me for saying so, but it looked like you don't have any eyes."

"Well, you're right, I don't." He removed the shades to show me. "I guess I wasn't lucky like normal people. Never did have 'em. I didn't know there was more than four senses until I was thirty-five."

"That's a long time to be blind."

"Yeah, I guess so, but I never knew any other way. People kept telling me what it was like to see, but I seemed to do all right without it, so it didn't matter to me if I could see or not. Round about my thirty-fifth birthday, I decided I didn't like getting hit by things I didn't know were there, and asked everyone I knew if there was any way I could learn to see. They all told me I couldn't learn, that I had to have eyes first.

Well, about a month later, my sister comes running in the house with something inside a box, rattling all over the place. 'It's from Uncle Ed! I knew he didn't forget you.' She came over and sat down beside me, and then started reading his letter about how he'd found the perfect birthday present, but it took a while to get to him so he could send it. Anyway, she opened it up and said, 'Imagine that! It's a new pair of sunglasses, but they got eyes in 'em.' She figured that was some new computer image so it would look like I had eyes. When she put 'em on me, though, I fell off the couch when all this color stuff appeared. It was everywhere! I started seeing things... after a while I could tell which ones were close and which ones were far away by trying to touch them and then guessing where my hand was.

'What's wrong, Eric?' Anne said as she knelt down beside me. I turned my head toward her voice, and for the first time I saw what my sister -- what a human being looks like.

She and the rest of my family taught me about what I saw, and what things were, and stuff like that. It took a lot of getting used to, but now I can see as well as anybody. I found out that these sunglasses -- Seeing-Eyeglasses they're called -- were made by a company called Autowerks, and ever since then I've been coming in here to see what new stuff the company has come up with. This is the only store I've ever seen that sells it, but it's no bother to come out here."

Eric stopped talking, and I felt as though I had watched one of those miracles of modern technology movies. He looked at his watch, and said he had to go, but it was nice talking to me and thanks for the money. As I waved goodbye, I got the impression there was more to this store than I had heretofore suspected.

I continued to look around, and found the display of Seeing-Eyeglasses. They were only twenty dollars, so I grabbed a pair as sort of a souvenir. I heard the clerk giggle loudly as though she had read a joke in her magazine, but it was nothing significant.

Next to the shades of second sight was a large video game. I fumbled in my coat pocket for a quarter and actually found one. Amazing. I hit the one player button, then starting fanfare for the electronic race filled the store. I discovered I was quite proficient at this game. After two hours, I had racked up three extra cars and a couple hundred thousand points. I wondered what the point of such an easy game could be, when my car abruptly closed on a hard-braking semi in front of it. I swerved to the right, and munched a reinforced steel billboard. Instead of simply sending in the next car, the game asked me if I wanted to keep what I had, or continue. I was kind of tired of the game, so I hit the button for "Stop". The coin return slot grew -- I don't know how -- and a small box dropped out. It had a button marked "Start", an "Extra Cars" display that registered "3", and a "Time Remaining" display that was blank. I pocketed the device and opted to head out.

I dropped by the counter and presented my items for purchase. The clerk wiped away several tears, set down her Omni, and proceeded to ring up the bill. I shelled out thirty-eight bucks, grabbed my stuff, and left without a word.

I popped open the trunk of my Buick and tossed the grocery bag inside. I heard a sudden rattling inside the bag, followed by a large rip. I saw the tip of an orange pylon protrude from the hole in the bag and remembered the warning. I opened the package and took out Pet Pylon. It seemed to shiver as I removed it from the trunk, went around the car, and tossed it onto the front seat.

Enough weirdness. Time to travel. I withdrew my road map from the glove compartment. A sudden gust of wind snatched it from my hands, and it flew out the open door behind me. I leapt out of the car and slammed the door behind me. I heard the sound of cracking glass and looked back to see an unfriendly venation on my

window. Through the fragmented safety glass, I could barely make out Pet Pylon squirting some kind of liquid on the window. I then remembered the map and turned to pursue it.

It was blowing along the ground, as though someone was chasing it with a lawnmower doing a wheelie. I ran after it, but as soon as I began closing on it, its trajectory spiraled upward as if caught in a small tornado. It climbed higher and higher into the sky. While I was trying to keep focused on the map's position, my peripheral vision detected a small dark cloud speeding directly toward the map. I thought it must have been smoke, but when it came within about 100 yards of where I figured the map to be (or some comparable distance), a lightning bolt arced toward the center of my vision. I saw a small flash of flame, and assumed my map had been toasted. The blazing object tumbled toward me; I could see now that it was some kind of paper. I attempted to dodge the miniature inferno, but the wind carried it toward me wherever I ran. I gave up and stood still. I could just make out a part of the cardinal direction arrows on an unburnt of the paper, and I knew that it was indeed my map that had been divinely destroyed. The last of the embers burned out just above my head, and the ashes peppered my hair. Great. Well, I had to have some kind of map, so I returned to the corner store.

I walked in the door, and the clerk stifled a laugh. "Got any road maps?" I asked as casually as I could.

"I guess I should have warned you. Maps from out of town aren't appreciated here." She reached back and took a folded-up specimen from a holder. She knew. I didn't know how she knew, and she probably knew that too. But I didn't want to know any more about it.

"This a map for this area?"

"Most of the time."

"Come on, I gotta get going. Is it or not?"

"Well... yes."

"AIEEE!!!"

We both looked around suddenly to discover the origin of the scream. I noticed a stiff white rat on its back with its paws up in the air like an overturned coffee table. Its head was near a mirror, and I noticed a tiny gray whisker protruding from its chin.

"Well, we got the rainforests out of office, but now the Happy Hunting Grounds have moved in. I'm no politician, so I'm outta here," I proclaimed with sudden

inspiration. The clerk's jaw dropped, so I didn't have to worry about her enigmatic small talk. Now I knew what it felt like to speak in tongues.

I dropped five quarters on the counter. The clerk emerged from behind the counter and slid her arms around me. She hugged me tightly, and I, not knowing what else to do, hugged her back. She ran her soft hands through my hair and tilted my head. I started to reciprocate, but a plastic *clack* intervened. I looked down and saw a name tag smiling "Kristin" at me. I knelt to retrieve it, looked back up, and she offered a hand. I accepted.

"Thank you," she said as she pulled me up. A rather extreme form of a kiss erupted between us. "I could close the store," she muttered between breaths.

"No, I really do have to go."

Kristin gave me a blank look and then smiled warmly. "Yes, I guess you do." She smoothed back my hair and kissed my forehead. She was taller than I was.

"Don't be a stranger," she smiled as she squeezed my hand. I found it difficult to leave, even though her affection had appeared abruptly as her other bizarre emotional reactions. This was different somehow. But I had committed myself to be on my way, and so I walked out the door. I wondered what the hell was so important that I couldn't stay and figure this one out, but I decided to go with my instincts and leave.

I then wondered if one of the quarters was bicentennial, but it was too late now. I reached out for the door handle and saw the keychain dangling from a very familiar slab of metal inserted into the ignition. I began to be glad that no one had stolen my transportation, but that was interrupted by the realization that my window was no longer cracked. After the shock passed, the gladness resumed for about 23 seconds, whereupon it was augmented by the satisfaction that Pet Pylon was a good buy.

In the car, down the road.