TOM WOLFE
A Man in Full
A Novel
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This novel's story and characters are fictitious. Certain long-established institutions, agencies, and public offices are mentioned, but the characters involved in them are wholly imaginary. One institution, the Santa Rita jail, is dealt with anachronistically. The jail was demolished not by the last major earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area but shortly before it.

Quotations from Epictetus are drawn from The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers, edited by Whitney J. Oates (1940).

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Almost exactly thirty-six hours later, which is to say, at 7:30 a.m., Monday, it was one of those brutally bright April mornings you sometimes get in Atlanta. Even up here on the thirty-second floor of the PlannersBanc Tower, behind a sealed inch-thick thermoplate glass wall, with a ten-ton HVAC system chundering cold air down from the ceiling, you could sense the heat that would soon oppress the city. The conference room faced east, making the glare from the sun unbearable. There was nothing in front of all that plate glass to reduce it, either, no curtains, no blinds, no screens, not one shred, not one slat. Oh no; the whole thing had been carefully thought out, and everybody at the PlannersBanc end of the table knew exactly what the game was.

Everybody, not just the senior loan officer Raymond Peepgass, knew this breakfast meeting was an elaborate practical joke, starting with the word “breakfast.” Peepgass had made sure the whole lot of them had been advised that if they wanted breakfast, they had better attend to it before they got here. And that they had done, apparently. Nobody was even looking at the “breakfast.” They were all settling back and eyeing the mark, the quarry, the prey, or whatever you should call the butt of
a practical joke involving half a billion dollars. It was the old man at the other end of the table, the Croker Global Corporation's end. To Peepgass, who was a mere forty-six, any man sixty years old was an old man, even a man as burly and physically intimidating as Charlie Croker was.

Obviously Croker did not realize he was it. He was reared back confidently in his chair with his suit jacket thrown open. The fool seemed to think he was still one of those real estate developers who own the city of Atlanta. He was grinning at the underlings on either side of him, his lawyers, financial officers, division heads, his aging Relations preppies, and his so-called executive assistants, who were a couple of real numbers with skirts up to . . . here . . .

Christ, he was a brute, for a man sixty years old! He was an absolute bull. His neck was wider than his head and solid as an oak. (Fleeting it occurred to Peepgass that he, a member of the first Amped-Up Audio generation, raised in a treeless spec-house development outside of San Jose, California, had never, so far as he knew, seen an oak, much less a bull.) Croker was almost bald, but his baldness was the kind that proclaims masculinity to burn—as if there was so much testosterone surging up through his hide it had popped the hair right off the top of his head.

Look at him . . . the way he's beaming at the two numbers with the legs. They're standing, hovering over him . . . so gorgeous! . . . a pair of real model-girls! . . . Miles of blond hair, both of them, down to their shoulder blades . . . long legs glistening with youth, lubricity, and panty hose . . . That one . . . the taller one . . . such a lovely long neck . . . pale skin . . . a slender face, a full-budding lower lip, a demure high-necked silk blouse with a floppy bow tie of the same wan and vulnerable fabric . . .

Croker looks up at her with a broad grin and says something, and Peepgass can make out only one thing clearly, a name: "Peaches." Peaches. He couldn't believe it. Only in Atlanta would you actually come across some blond bombshell named Peaches.

A cloud rose up Peepgass's brainstem. Sirja was blond and sexy, too, wasn't she . . . That little Finnish hooker—a notions buyer for a Helsinki department store! How had he ever let a 105-pound Helsinki notions buyer do what she was now doing to him . . . With a sinking feeling, more of a nervous intuition than a thought, he realized that the
Charlie Crokers of this world would never let any such thing happen to them . .

Just then Croker’s gaze wandered toward a far corner of the room and a doubtful, puzzled look came over his face.

Peepgass’s colleague, Harry Zale, the workout artiste, leaned his huge head over and said out of the corner of his mouth:

“Hey, Ray, check out the big boffster. He just noticed the dead plant.”

It was true. Croker’s eyes had drifted over to the corner where, in a dismal gloaming, there stood a solitary tropical plant, a dracaena, in a clay pot, dying. Several long, skinny yellowish fronds drooped over like the tongues of the dead. The pot rested on an otherwise empty expanse of Streptolon carpet pocked with the mashed-in depressions of desk feet, chair casters, and office machines that had been moved somewhere else. The old man had to squint to make it out. He was puzzled. He could hardly see a thing. From where he was sitting, he should have been able to look out through the plate-glass wall and seen much of Midtown Atlanta . . . the IBM tower, the GLG Grande, Promenade One, Promenade Two, the Campanile, the Southern Bell Center, Colony Square, and three of his own buildings, the Phoenix Center, the MossCo Tower, and the TransEx Palladium. But he couldn’t . . . It was the glare. He and his contingent had been seated so that they had to look straight into it.

Oh, everything about this room was cunningly seedy and unpleasant. The conference table itself was a vast thing, a regular aircraft carrier, but it was put together in modular sections that didn’t quite jibe where they met, and its surface was not wood but some sort of veal-gray plastic laminate. On the table, in front of each of the two dozen people present, was a pathetic setting of paperware, a paper cup for the orange juice, a paper mug with foldout handles for the coffee, which gave off an odor of incinerated PVC cables, and a paper plate with a huge, cold, sticky, cheesy, cowpie-like cinnamon-Cheddar coffee bun that struck terror into the heart of every man in the room who had ever read an article about arterial plaque or free radicals. That, in its entirety, was the breakfast meeting’s breakfast.

To top it off, on the walls a pair of NO SMOKING signs glowered down upon the Croker Global crew with the sort of this-means-you lettering you might expect to find in the cracking unit of an oil refinery, but not at a conference of twenty-four ladies and gentlemen of banking and commerce in the PlannersBanc Tower in Midtown Atlanta.
On second thought, Peepgass decided, to say that Croker or any other shithead actually noticed all these things at first was probably overstating the case. At first they merely sensed them, stimulus by stimulus, through their antennae, through the hair on their arms. It was the central nervous system that finally informed the tycoons that they had descended to the status of shithead at PlannersBanc.

*Shithead* was the actual term used at the bank and throughout the industry. Bank officers said “shithead” in the same matter-of-fact way they said “mortgagee,” “co-signer,” or “debtor,” which was the polite form of “shithead,” since no borrower was referred to as a debtor until he defaulted. Why did bankers turn so quickly to scatology when loans went bad? Peepgass didn’t know, but that was the way they were. At the Harvard Business School, back in the 1970s, he had taken a course called Structural Ethics in Corporate Culture, in which the teacher, a Professor Pelfner, had talked about Freud’s theory of money and excrement . . . How did it go? . . . Dr. Freud, Dr. Freud . . . He couldn’t remember . . . When people at the bank now referred to Croker as a shithead, they truly meant it. They truly felt it. His botching things was malfeasance. It made them look so goddamned bad! Half a billion! Now his heedless deadbeat squandering was making them all look like fools!—suckers!—patsies! And he, Raymond Peepgass, was one of the patsies who had signed off on those foolish loans! Fortunately, others up the chain of command had also. Still, he was a senior loan officer, and the banking industry was shrinking, and there were plenty of former senior loan officers of Atlanta banks who were now sitting in their dens in Dunwoody, Decatur, Alpharetta, and Snellville, middle-aged and hopelessly unemployed, staring out the window at their sons’ basketball backboards in their driveways. At PlannersBanc today, the watchwords were “lean and mean” and “mental toughness.” For seventy-five years the bank had been called the Southern Planters Bank and Trust Company. But now that seemed too stodgy, too slow-footed, too old-fashioned, and, above all, too Old South. *Planters* was a word humid with connotations of cotton plantations and slavery. So Planters had been sterilized and pasteurized into Planners. Nobody could object to Planners; even the most dysfunctional welfare case in the Capital Homes could be a planner. Then the two words, Planners and Banc, were fused into PlannersBanc in keeping with the new lean, mean fashion of jamming names together with a capital letter sticking up in the middle . . . NationsBank, SunTrust, BellSouth, GranCare, CryoLife, CytRtx,
XcelNet, 3Com, MicroHelp, HomeBanc... as if that way you were creating some hyperhard alloy for the twenty-first century. The French banc was supposed to show how cosmopolitan, how international, how global, how slick you had become. Obviously PlannersBanc hadn't exercised sufficient slick steelly Mental Toughness with Charlie Croker, and Croker's troubles remained a live threat to Peepgass's position. He was eager to see Harry Zale go to work on that big arrogant egomaniacal shithead down there at the end of the table.

He leaned over toward Harry and said, "Well... you about ready?"

"Yep," said Harry. And then he smiled and winked and said, "Let's take the safeties off the ring binders."

Peepgass's heart jumped inside his rib cage. The Male Battle was about to begin! But even that much explanation would have been beyond him. (He could have used Dr. Freud's help on this one, too.)

There were a dozen men at the PlannersBanc end of the table. But the show was all Harry Zale's. Harry, who was about forty-five, had a big jowly round head with a thin top dressing of black-and-gray hair combed straight back and a chin that swelled out like a melon. He was one of those mesomorphs who have short arms and thick chests and torsos. Just now Harry was jotting down a note, and you couldn't help but be aware that he was left-handed, because he was the type of awkward left-hander who hunches way over and curls his shoulder, arm, wrist, and hand into a pretzel shape as he writes. But for what he did, Harry Zale looked perfect. He was a workout artiste, and the workout artistes were the Marines, the commandos, the G.I. Joes of commercial banking. Or maybe the term should be D.I., for drill instructor, since Harry liked to refer to what was about to take place not as a workout session but as "boot camp."

The time had come, and so Peepgass drew himself up in his seat and raised his voice and announced to the entire table, "All right, ladies and gentlemen—" And then he paused. What he meant to say next was a brusque "Time to get started." But that was close to being an order, and he was not sure he could look Charlie Croker in the face and bark out an order. And so he said, "Why don't we get started?"

The Croker Global people who had been standing now took their seats. The fabulous bird, Peaches, sat right next to Croker. The other sat several seats away.

Peepgass had no intention of referring to Croker by name. Or, if he had to, he wouldn't call him Charlie. He'd call him Mr. Croker as
coldly as he could, by way of letting him know that things have changed, that he was no longer a star customer, a priceless pal, and an Atlanta business giant; he was just another shithole. But as he looked at Croker’s square-jawed face and massive neck, the memory of how fawningly, how ingratiatingly, how constantly he had called him Charlie, of how many times he had charmed him within an inch of his life, came flashing back to him; and contrary to every conscious intention, he heard himself saying:

"Charlie, I believe you met Harry on the way in." He gestured toward the workout artiste. "Harry’s the head of our Real Estate Asset Management Department"—eventually, although not immediately, the shitheads always figured out the acronym—"and so I’ve asked Harry—" He paused again. He couldn’t think of how to say what it was Harry was about to do. "—I’ve asked Harry to get things under way."

Harry didn’t even look up. He just kept on writing on a yellow legal pad, with his left arm and hand all curled around it. Silence commandeered the room. It was as if Harry had more important things than Mr. Charles E. (for Earl) Croker on his mind. Presently he lifted his big chin. He sighted Croker down his nose and let his gaze linger . . . and linger . . . and linger . . . without saying a word . . . the way a father might lead into a man-to-man talk with a boy who knows he’s been bad.

And then he said in a high-pitched, rasping voice, "Why are we here, Mr. Croker? Why are we having this meeting? What’s the problem?"

Oh, Peepgass loved this part of Harry’s workout sessions—the rude, grating, condescending way they started off! This was why a workout artiste like Harry Zale was known as an artiste! This was artistry. This was boot camp in the Planners Banc Tower.

Croker stared at the artiste. Then he turned and looked past Peaches toward his chief financial officer, a young but dour presence named Wismer Stroock, probably not much more than thirty, who wore glasses with rectangular titanium frames and had pale skin, a heavy five o’clock shadow, and the sunken cheeks and stringy neck peculiar to compulsive joggers. Croker smiled at Stroock in a smirking way, and this smile said, "Hey, what kind of cute little stunt is this supposed to be? Who is this character? What is this why are we here bullshit?"

Harry kept staring at Croker, never once blinking. But Peepgass had to give Croker credit; he didn’t blink, either. How long would it take Harry to get the saddlebags this time? Everybody rated Harry’s performance that way, according to how long it took him to get the saddlebags.
Finally Croker said, "You called this meetin', my friend."

Muh fri; he spoke with a South Georgia drawl. Croker had lived in Atlanta for forty years, but his act—Peepgass regarded it as an act—was Baker County. Peepgass had never set foot in the place, of course, but he took Baker County to be about as Redneck as it got in Georgia. It was in Baker County that one of the first big civil rights protests of the 1960s had been ignited. A sheriff known as Gator Johnson had shot a black man named Ware after Ware had made a pass at the black mistress of the white overseer of a plantation belonging to Robert Woodruff, the president of Coca-Cola. Gator Johnson! thought Peepgass . . . and if you read all the articles about Charlie Croker in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *Atlanta* magazine and the profiles that had run in *Forbes* and *The Wall Street Journal*, you had to endure constant references to the piney woods, the swamps, hunting, fishing, horses, snakes, raccoons, wild boars, infantry combat, football, and a lot of other Southern Manhood stuff; but above all, football. Back in the late 1950s, when Georgia Tech was a national football power, Charlie Croker had been not only a star running back but a linebacker, one of the last players on any major football team to play both offense and defense, earning him the title, on the Atlanta sports pages, of "the Sixty-Minute Man." The Sixty-Minute Man became a local legend his senior year in the closing seconds of the big game with Tech's arch rival, the University of Georgia. With forty-five seconds left on the clock, Tech was losing, 20–7, when Croker ran forty-two yards for a touchdown. The score was now 20–14. Following the kickoff, with twenty-one seconds remaining, Georgia was trying to eat up the clock with routine running plays when the Georgia quarterback attempted yet another handoff to his fullback—and Croker blitzed through the line from his linebacker position and took the ball out of the quarterback's hand before his own fullback could reach it, knocked the fullback to the ground like a bowling pin, and ran forty yards for another touchdown, and Tech won, 21–20. To this day old-timers recognized him in malls or lobbies and yelled out, "The Sixty-Minute Man!" *Atlanta* magazine had asked him what kind of exercise regimen he followed now, almost fifty years later, and Peepgass had always remembered Croker's answer: "Exercise regimen? Who the hell's got time for an exercise regimen? On the other hand, when I need firewood, I start with a tree." Croker was the kind who liked to be known as Charlie, not Charles, because it was earthier. On his own plantation in Baker County he actually had his black employees call him Captain
Charlie, or just Cap‘m. But he was the kind of Cap’m Charlie who always had to let you know he was a self-made Cap’m Charlie.

“And since it’s your meeting,” the Captain continued, “I s’peck you’re gettin’ ready to tell us why.”

He said it with such a relaxed smile, Peepgass began to wonder if Harry was going to get any saddlebags at all.

“No, I wanna know if you know,” said Harry. “Think of this as an AA meeting, Mr. Croker. Now that the spree is over, we wanna see some real self-awareness here. You’re right, we called this meeting, but I want you to tell me why. What’s it all about? What’s the problem here?”

Peepgass watched Croker’s face. Oh, he loved this part, too, the moment when the shitheads finally realized that things have changed, that their status has taken a header (into the excrement).

Croker eyed Harry, really sizing him up now, not sure how to play it. (They never were.) Every manly fiber in his being—and Charlie Croker’s being was positively thick with manly fiber—wanted to put this condescending asshole in his place, firmly and rapidly. But if the session turned into a personal pissing match, he was at a distinct disadvantage. The condescending asshole could cause him severe grief. PlannersBanc held all the cards. PlannersBanc could bring six other banks and two insurance companies piling in on top of him. Croker Global owed the other lenders an additional $285 million, making a total of $800 million, of which $160 million were notes he, Croker, was personally liable for.

“Well, we’re here,” said Croker at last, “we’re here”—(and if you don’t know why you’re here, then we can’t help you out)—“to see about restructuring this thing, and we’ve come here with a good solid business plan, and I think you’re gonna love it.”

With that he reared back in his chair again, mighty pleased with himself, and Wismer Strooock and the rest of the financial types and lawyers and division heads and the Banking Relations preppies and Peaches and the other model-girl reared back also, looking mighty pleased with Himself, too.

“But what is ‘this thing’?” asked the Artiste. “You’re talking about solutions, about a way out. First we gotta know what we’re in, because it’s getting deep, and it’s thick, and it’s slimy. The Croker Global Corporation is sinking into the ooze. You’re disappearing on us, Mr. Croker, like the Lost Continent. Before we lose you, you gotta tell me what this ooze is.”
At this point Croker did something Peepgass had never seen a shithead do before. Quite nonchalantly he stood up, looking neither this way nor that, as if there was no one else in the room. He was a mountain! He took off his jacket—and as he did so, his chest flexed into a couple of massive hillocks. He undid his cuff links and rolled up his sleeves—and his forearms looked like a pair of country hams. (Peepgass had seen pictures of country hams in the Christmas mail-order catalogues that every credit-card holder in metropolitan Atlanta received.) He loosened his necktie and unbuttoned his shirt at the collar—and his mighty neck swelled out until it seemed to merge with his trapezii in one continuous slope to the shoulders. And then he arched his back and stretched and preened and showed the room his omnipotent deltoids and latissimi dorsi, which bulged beneath his shirt. Then he sat down again. His minions, Peaches and the rest, rose in their seats and then settled back with him.

"Now," said Charlie Croker, narrowing his eyes, lifting his chin, and putting on the grimace that signifies tolerance stretched just about to its limit, "you said something about . . . ooze?" Sump'm 'bout . . . ooze?

Peepgass's heart tripped faster still. The Male Battle was now surely joined.

Harry was a bulldog. He wouldn't let go, and he wouldn't let the big bofster break up his routine.

"That's right, Mr. Croker, ooze." Harry threw in a lot of Mr. Crokers, but Croker wouldn't lower himself to utter Harry's name, if, indeed, he knew it. "Ooze . . . as in Ooze Creek. It seems to me we're drifting up Ooze Creek without a paddle."

Now began a round of verbal fencing in which the Artiste kept cutting off Croker's evasions, blusters, rambles, tangents, until finally Croker was in a corner where there was nothing to do but come forth with the damning information. Even so, he sidestepped at the last moment and made his grim young sidekick, Wismer Stroock, say the actual words. Stroock was very nearly Croker's opposite. Croker was all heartiness and manly charm and bluster and Down Home Drawl and cagy Old Dawg of the South; Stroock was all MBA Youth and Low Cholesterol and High Density Lipids and Semiconductor Circuits, and by his voice you couldn't tell where he was from, unless it was the Wharton School of Business and Economics. Yes, he said, Croker Global had borrowed a total of $515 million from PlannersBanc; and yes, Croker Global had
now failed to come up with $36 million in scheduled interest payments and a scheduled $60 million repayment of principal.

“But this situation is not acute,” said Wismer Stroock.

Peepgass cut a glance at Harry, and they both smiled. The developers and their minions never used the word problem; to these shitheads there were only situations.

“The underlying assets remain sound,” Stroock continued. “After the market saturation of 1989 and 1990, the absorption rate of commercial space in metro Atlanta has steadily increased, and vacancies have dropped below 20 percent, making Croker Concourse, as a prime outer perimeter property, perfectly positioned for the inevitable upswing in demand. As for Croker Global Foods, our facilities are mainstays in fourteen key markets, from Contra Costa County, California, to Monmouth County, New Jersey. It just so happens that all our divisions have been hit simultaneously by the same cyclical downturn, that’s all. What we’re talking about here is a cash-flow situation. All our divisions have potential for tremendous growth in the near term, once the general climate improves. Now, you take Global Foods—”

Oh, he was very smooth in his modem-mouth fashion, this Wismer Stroock. He commenced a disquisition about Croker Global Foods and its wholesale food distribution centers and about “emerging pockets of regional restaurant strength” and “food deflation” and “dampened margins” and “the enhanced pricing of crop packs”...

Harry let Stroock have his head until he said, “Anyway, what we’re really looking at here is the prospect of a significant uptick in cash flow over the next two quarters. This is not a stagnant situation by any means. All we really need is a temporary freeze on these big principal payments, and—”

“Whoa!” said Harry with a grating whine, “whoa, whoa, whoa. Did I hear the word freeze?” Then he looked at Charlie Croker. “Mr. Croker, did Mr. Stroock just say something about freezing the principal payments?”

He kept staring at Croker with his chin lifted and his head cocked, as if his credulity was being put to a severe test. “Let me tell you two gentlemen something about loans. A loan is not a gift. When we make a loan, we actually expect to get paid back.”

“Nobody’s talkin’ about not payin’ you back,” snapped Croker. “We’re talkin’ about something very simple.” Sump’m veh simple.
“Simple I like,” said the Artiste. “I’d like to hear some simple proposals as to how we’re gonna get paid back. Simple, no assembly necessary, batteries included.”

Peepgass noticed that the first little dark crescents of sweat were beginning to form on Croker’s shirt, beneath his arms.

“That happens to be precisely what we been showin’ you,” he said.

“All I’ve heard so far are some projections concerning office leasing in Atlanta and the American food service industry,” said the Artiste.

“We’re talking about half a billion dollars here.”

“Look,” said Charlie Croker, “you may recall that one of your own people, Mr. John Sycamore, assured us over and over again that if—”

“Mr. Sycamore’s no longer on the case.”

“That may be, but—”

“Mr. Sycamore is no longer a factor here.”

“Yeah, but the fact is, he was your representative, and he practically got down on his knees and—”

“Mr. Sycamore’s hopes—”

“—begged us to take that last $180 million loan and assured us—”

“Mr. Sycamore’s hopes—”

“—if any situation arose regarding the payback schedule, he—”

“Mr. Sycamore’s hopes and dreams, whatever they were, no longer exist so far as the obscene mess we have now is concerned. They disappeared down the memory hole.”

Charlie Croker stared, steaming. Peepgass smiled to himself, albeit morosely. If John Sycamore had any sense, he was at this moment busy sending out résumés. A dapper and ebullient little fellow, Sycamore had been the salesman, the line officer, who had opened the door to Charlie Croker and Croker Global’s half a billion dollars’ worth of debt. At the time that had made Sycamore a star, a real “first-tier” operator, to use the PlannersBanc parlance. Back then big loans were spoken of as “sales,” and hotshots like Sycamore worked for the “Marketing Department.” Now that the huge debt had gone bad, Sycamore’s career at PlannersBanc was a shambles. He was officially a shithead, too.

Seeing that Croker was once again speechless, Harry chose this moment to take off his jacket. He stood up and removed it very slowly. Peepgass knew what was coming. This was always a great touch.

In the process of taking his jacket off, the Artiste thrust his thick chest forward. Running down it were a pair of suspenders. They were broad and black, these suspenders, and even at the other end of the table you
couldn't miss the motif embroidered on them in dead white: the skull and crossbones, repeated over and over.

As for Charlie Croker—the shitheads, Peepgass had observed, always pretended they hadn't noticed the damnable death's-head suspenders; although later, if they were in any mood to reminisce, they would invariably ask about the suspenders and inquire if this had been a calculated gesture on the Artiste's part or if he just happened to be wearing a pair of skull-and-crossbones suspenders. Croker did the usual. He tried to act as if he hadn't noticed. He looked away and scanned the room . . . but of course there was no relief there, just more of the cheap and seedy details, the Streptolon carpet, the synthetic furniture, the no smoking signs, the glare, the dying dracaena, the vile cinnamon-Cheddar coffee buns on the paper plates . . .

The little crescents of sweat under the tycoon's arms, Peepgass now noticed, had become full half-moons.

An elaborate practical joke! Yet none of it was designed simply to humiliate the shitheads and punish them for their sins. What would be the point of that, when you needed them to help you recover hundreds of millions of dollars? No, this was boot camp, in Harry Zale's formulation. The main purpose of a boot camp, like the Marine boot camp at Parris Island—Harry had been in the Marines during the war in Vietnam—the main purpose of a boot camp was psychological conditioning. The idea was to strip away the recruit's old habits, soft comforts, and home-turf ties and turn him into a new man, a U.S. Marine. Well, your typical shithead was a business executive who arrived at a workout session with bad habits, creature comforts, regal ties, a layer of fat, and an ego that would have made the Sun King flinch. The word tycoon, from the Japanese, meaning "mighty ruler," might be a cliché, but it was no exaggeration in the case of your typical chief executive officer of an American corporation here at the turn of the century. He was surrounded by people who jumped whenever he crooked a finger or cut a glance. They performed all onerous chores for him, no matter how slight. Your typical big shithead like Charlie Croker had not had to stand in line at an airport, walk through a metal detector, or utter his name to someone at a counter for years, unless it was to board the Concorde. He lived a life of private planes, private elevators, hotel suites, Lucullan meals, golf weekends, ski weekends, ranch weekends, and cutie-pie weekends, as in "boffing bimbos in the Caribbean," which was one of Harry's favorite phrases. A "big boffster" like Charlie Croker was an
executive who used the company airplane to go boffing bimbos in the Caribbean and kept the executive offices positively wiggle with cutie pies, such as the pair who were seated with him at this very table right now. To see this shithead go on in these magazine articles about what a son of the Down Home sod he was was ludicrous.

At the outset, Peepgass had to admit, PlannersBanc had only made things worse. In the quest for “big sales,” line officers like John Sycamore had catered to the tycoon’s every lordly vice. The bank had treated Croker to enough food at the PlannersClub, up on the fiftieth floor of the PlannersBanc Tower, and at the dining room of the Ritz Carlton Buckhead to keep half of Ethiopia alive for a year. And Cap’m Charlie, no dummy, had buttered up his lenders as well. A real “first-tier” officer was one who maintained a close personal tie with the big borrower. So when Charlie Croker had telephoned Sycamore to say he had an extra ticket to the Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Sycamore had risen from his dying mother’s bedside at Piedmont General Hospital and left her a number at the clubhouse where she could reach him if she felt she was departing this trough of mortal error for good. In those, the palmy days, when Croker visited PlannersBanc, he was taken straight to the executive floor, the forty-ninth, where there was a reception room with a $270,000 custom-made rug the size of a tennis court, and he had sat only at conference tables of mahogany with fruitwood bandings, amid walnut-paneled walls and more custom carpeting, and was served only viands by the in-house chef and coffee from New Orleans in bone chinaaware bearing PlannersBanc’s logo (a highly stylized Creative Director’s phoenix with outstretched wings) beneath white ceilings fitted with pinhole spotlights that lit up pictures so baffling they were bound to be worth a fortune. And beyond the glass window walls, always exquisitely curtained against glare, all of Atlanta, with its new glass towers rising up like the Emerald City of Oz, was laid out before him. (It’s all yours, Charlie.)

There was one more thing about the shithead’s relationship with the bank . . . something Peepgass never talked about to anybody at the bank, even though he was sure that plenty of his colleagues were aware of it and felt it. There were believed to be—he knew very well what people outside banking thought, had known it ever since his days at the Harvard Business School—there were believed to be two kinds of males in American business. There were the true Male Animals, who went into investment banking, hedge funds, arbitrage, real estate development, and
other forms of empire building. They were the gamblers, plungers, traders, risk takers; in short, the Charlie Crokers of this world. And then there were the passive males who went into commercial banking, where all you did was lend money and sit back and collect interest. At Harvard the only thing considered duller, safer, and less adventurous than working for a bank was working for some old-line can't-miss industrial firm like Otis Elevator, which only needed caretakers. The Charlie Crokers were convinced that if they got in a tight corner, they could always manipulate the banking types—such as Raymond Peepgass. Using their stronger wills, greater guile, and higher levels of testosterone, they could always get them to roll over their out-of-control loans, restructure them, refinance them, or otherwise push trouble off into an open-ended future.

But lo!—somewhere in the shallows of the PlannersBanc hormone pool the bank had found the likes of Harry Zale, the workout artiste, the bank's own Marine drill instructor. Harry was here to make the shitheads pop to, to render the fat, melt down the ego, separate the soul from its vain props, and create a new man: a shithead who actually focuses on paying back the money.

Still standing, Harry took a deep breath, which thrust his chest out and flaunted the skull-and-crossbone suspenders even more flagrantly. Then he sat down and raised his big chin and looked down his nose once more and gave Charlie Croker another lingering stare and said:

"Okay, Mr. Croker, we're all waiting. The floor is now open for concrete proposals for paying back money. As I said, simple we like, no assembly necessary, batteries included."

It was probably the Artiste's infatuation with this little metaphor of his that finally did it. Croker had been no-assembly-necessary'd, batteries-included'd, why-are-we-here'd, dead-dracaena'd, coffee-burned, lectured at, and trifled with long enough. He leaned forward with his huge forearms on the table and the testosterone flowing. His shoulders and neck seemed to swell up. He thrust his own square jaw forward, and the lawyers and the accountants all hunched forward with him; and so did Peaches.

A small and ominous smile was now on Croker's face. His voice was low, controlled, and seething: "Well now, friend"—frin—"I wanna ask you sump'm. You ever been huntin'?"

Harry said nothing. He just put on a smile exactly like Croker's.

"You ever headed out in a pickup truck early inna moaning and lissened t'all'ose'ol' boys talking about alla buds 'ey gon' shoot? People,
they shoot a lotta buds with their mouths onna way out to the fields... with their mouths... But comes a time when you finally got to stop the truck and pick up a gun and do sump’m with it... see... And down whirr I grew up, in Baker County, theh’s a saying: ‘When the tailgate drops, the bullshit stops.’”

He eyed Harry even more intently. Harry just stared back without blinking, without altering his little smile so much as an eighth of an inch.

“An’eh’s been a certain amount a bullshit in ’is room ’is morning,” Croker continued, “if you don’t mind the introduction of some plain English into these proceedings. Well, now the tailgate’s dropped. We’re here with a serious business plan and a serious proposal for restructuring these loans and straightening out this situation. But we’re not here for a lecture about the nature of loan obligations... see... I’m not sure who the hale you think you’re talking to, but—”

“I know exactly—”

“—you need to be straightened out—”

“I know exactly—”

“—on a coupla things, my—”

“I know exactly—”

“—frin, because—”

“I know exactly who I’m talking to, Mr. Croker.” Croker’s voice was low and strong, but Harry’s high grinding whine cut through it. “I’m talking to an individual who owes this bank half a billion dollars and six other banks and two insurance companies two hundred and eighty-five million more, that’s who I’m talking to. And you know, there’s an old saying here in Atlanta, too, and that saying is ‘Money talks, and bullshit walks,’ and the time has come to talk with money, Mr. Croker. All I’m telling you is what’s already obvious. All I’m telling you are some home truths in the privacy of this room. You wanna throw this thing open to all seven banks and the two insurance companies and have a real workout session? We can do that! Happens all the time. It’ll have to be in an auditorium. Nine different lenders? We’re talking about more than a hundred people sitting in an auditorium, with an audio system and microphones, and it’ll be incumbent upon every one of those lenders to pick up a microphone and tell you something over the wall speakers that I’m gonna tell you right now, very quietly, in this little room, across this table, on behalf of only one lender, PlannersBanc, and it’s this, Mr. Croker...” Seeing that Croker was suitably stunned by
his belligerence, the Artiste paused for maximum effect and then said in a menacingly calm voice, "This is one of the worst cases of corporate mismanagement... one of the grossest violations of a fiduciary obligation... I've ever seen... And in my job I look down the gullet of mismanagement and malfeasance every day. You and your corporation have taken five hundred million dollars from this bank, Mr. Croker, and treated it like your own private Freaknik, like you could take five hundred million dollars from us and do anything you wanted with it, go hogwild, go Freaknik, because nobody could touch you, because this was Freaknik time for Croker Global and the town was yours. Well, I got news for you, Mr. Croker. This ain't Saddy night no mo'. Freaknik's over, baby. You know what I'm sayin'?" Peepgass's heart was pounding. He couldn't tell whether Harry was imitating Croker's Down Home accent or a black accent or both. "This here's the morning after, bro, and Croker Global's got the biggest hangover in the history of debt defalcation in the southeastern Yew-nited States."

Now Peepgass's eyes were fastened on Charlie Croker. Croker looked as if his breath had been knocked out. He no longer looked furious. The smoke was no longer coming out of his ears. He still stared at Harry, but his stare was frozen and opaque.

The Artiste! Oh yes, this was artistry!

It wasn't that the Artiste was tougher than the tycoon, more of a man, and had dominated him in a fair fight. No, it was the tone, the stance the Artiste dared assume, the insolence he so cavalierly brandished as his natural prerogative, the way he lifted his big chin and looked down his nose and, with every twist of his body and his grating whine, announced: "Behold! Nothing but another shithead." With a few arcs of that chin he had knocked the vain props out from under the great man, ripped away the insulation and the princely protocol, and left him sitting white and plump in his birthday suit, a sinner, a debtor, a deadbeat minus his dignity, naked before an unsparing dun.

Peepgass noticed that the tycoon's half-moons had begun to enlarge and had spread across his shirt along the curves on the underside of his mighty chest muscles.

Harry began speaking in a softer, lower voice. "Listen, Mr. Croker, don't get me wrong. We're on your side here. We don't want this to turn into a free-for-all with nine lenders, either. And we wouldn't particularly look forward to the press coverage." He paused to let that terror threat, the press, stalk the room. "We're the agent bank in this
setup, and that gives us the privilege of looking out for PlannersBanc first of all. But we gotta come up with something concrete.” He extended his right fist up in the air as high as it would go and said, “Where’s the money gonna come from? It ain’t gonna come . . . poof!”—he sprung his fist open—“from outta the air! Mr. Stroock assures us you got a lot of sound assets. Okay . . . good. The time has come to make them liquid. The time has come to pay us back. The time has come to sell something. I’m with you—the tailgate has dropped.”

At that point young Stroock jumped in, evidently to give his boss, Croker, time to get his breath back and his battered wits together. Just “selling something,” said Stroock, was not such an easy proposition. Croker Global had considered this particular option. But in the first place there was a complex of interlocking ownerships. Certain corporate structures within Croker Global’s real estate portfolio actually owned certain independently structured divisions of Croker Global Foods, each of which was a corporation in its own right, and—

“I’m aware of all that,” said the Artiste. “I’ve got your organization chart. I’m entering it in the Org-off.”

“The Org-off?” said Wismer Stroock.

“Yeah. That’s a contest we have at PlannersBanc for the worst-looking organization chart. I thought nobody was gonna be able to beat Chai Long Shipping, out of Hong Kong. They got three hundred ships, and each ship is a separate corporation, and each corporation owns a fraction of at least five other ships, and each ship has a color code, and the chart is ten feet long. Looks like a Game Boy semiconductor panel, blown up. I thought Chai Long was a sure thing in the Org-off until I saw yours. Yours looks like a bowl of linguine primavera. You just gotta untangle it and sell something.”

“Unh-huh. I see. Do you mind if I finish?”

“No, I don’t mind, but why don’t we entertain a few modest proposals first.”

The Artiste turned to an assistant on his other side and said in a low voice, “Gimme the cars, Sheldon.” The young man, Sheldon, snapped open a ring binder and handed Harry a sheet of paper.

The Artiste studied it for a moment, then looked up at Croker and said, “Now, in your last financial statement you list seven company automobiles, three BMW 750iL’s valued at . . . What’s it say here? . . . $93,000 each . . . Two BMW 540iA’s valued at $55,000 each, a Ferrari 355 valued at $129,000, and a customized Cadillac Seville STS
valued at $75,000 ... By the way, how'd you get here this morning?"

Croker gave the Artiste a long death-ray stare, then said, "I drove."

"What'd you drive? A BMW? The Ferrari? The customized Cadillac Seville STS? Which one?"

Croker eyed him balefully but said nothing. The steam was coming back into his system. His mighty chest rose and fell with a prodigious sigh. The dark stains were inching closer, from either side of his chest, toward the sternum.

Harry said, "Seven company cars ... Sell 'em."

"Those cars are in constant use," said Croker. "Besides, suppose we sold 'em—to the distinct disadvantage of our operations, by the way. What are we talking about here? A couple of hundred thousand dollars."

"Hey!" said the Artiste with a big smile. "I don't know about you, but I have great respect for a couple of hundred thousand dollars. Besides, your arithmetic's a little off. It's five hundred and ninety-three thousand. A thousand more insignificant items like that and we've got half a billion and plenty to spare. See how easy it is? Sell 'em."

He turned to his assistant again and said, "Gimme the airplanes." The ring binder snapped open, and the assistant, Sheldon, gave him several sheets of paper.

"Now, Mr. Croker," said Harry, looking at the pages, "you also list four aircraft, two Beechjet 400A's, a Super King Air 350, and a Gulfstream Five." Then he looked up at Croker and, in a voice like W. C. Fields's, repeated: "A Gulfstream Five ... a Gee-Fiiiiiiive ... That's a $38 million aircraft, if I'm not mistaken, and I see here that yours has certain . . . enhancements . . . a Satcom telephone system, $300,000 installed . . . A Satcom telephone enables you to telephone, while you're aloof, from anywhere in the world, isn't that correct?"

"Yeah," said Croker.

"How many of Croker Global's operations are overseas, Mr. Croker?"

"As of now, none, but—"

"And I see you've also got a set of SkyWatch cabin radar display screens, worth $125,000 installed, and a cabin interior custom designed and furnished by a Mr. Ronald Vine for $2,845,000. And it says here there's a painting installed on that airplane worth $190,000." The Artiste raised his great chin and looked down his nose at Croker with a mixture of incredulity and disdain. "Are those figures correct? They come straight from your financial statement. You presented these items as collateral."
“That’s right.”
“That’s $40 million tied up in that one aircraft.” He turned to his assistant. “What’s the total value of the other three planes, Sheldon?”
“Fifteen million, nine hundred thousand.”
“Fifteen million, nine hundred thousand,” said Harry. “So now we’re talking about $58 million worth of airplanes. Where do you keep those airplanes, Mr. Croker?”
“Out at PDK,” said Croker, referring to the airport for private aircraft in DeKalb County, just east of the city. PDK was short for Peachtree–DeKalb.
“You lease hangar space there?”
“Yeah.”
“How many pilots do you employ?”
“Twelve.”
“Twelve . . .” The Artiste arched his eyebrows and whistled through his teeth in mock surprise. He smiled. “We’re gonna save you a whole lotta money.” He smiled again, as if this was all great fun. Then the smile vanished, and he said with a toneless finality, “Sell ’em.”
“That we could always do,” said Croker, “but it would be totally self-defeating. Those aircraft are not used in a frivolous manner. In Global Foods we got seventeen warehouses in fourteen states. We got—”
“Sell ’em.”
“We got—”
“Sell ’em. From now on we’re gonna be like the Vietcong. We’re gonna travel on the ground and live off the land.”
He now turned to Sheldon and said something out of the side of his mouth that Peepgass didn’t catch. The young man’s binder popped open, and he handed the Artiste three or four sheets of paper.
Harry studied them for a moment and then said, without looking up, “The experimental farrrrrrmmm.” He sounded like W. C. Fields again.
“Twenty-nine thousand acres in Baker County, Georgia . . . We got the correct spelling here, T, U, R, P, M, T, I, N, E?”
“That’s right,” said Croker.
“The place is called Turp-um-tine?”
“Turpumtime,” Coker said with an edge to his voice. “It’s always been called that. Turpumtime’s been in operation since the 1830s. For the first fifty or sixty years the only crop they had there was turpentine, and that was the way the—the farm workers pronounced it, ‘turpumtime.’ As a matter of fact, they called themselves the Turpmtime Ni—the Turpmtime
People. That was all they did, for generations, they harvested turpentine from the pine trees. We got descendants of the—of these people—working there right now."

Peepgass wondered why Croker was suddenly so forthcoming, informative, and reflective.

"It's listed here," said Harry, "as an 'experimental farm.' My information is that it's a plantation."

"Well, down 'eh below the gnat line," said Croker in an amiable voice, "anything much over five hundred acres, they're liable to call it a plantation."

"Yeah," said Harry, "but my impression is that Turpmtine is known specifically as a quail plantation. Do you shoot quail at Turpmtine?"

"It's quail country. Certainly we shoot some quail there. Be hard to resist."

"But would you say that's the main enterprise at Turpmtine, shooting quail? Mr. Sycamore visited Turpmtine several times, I believe, and that was his impression."

Croker's huge chest delivered another labored sigh. Peepgass knew exactly what he was thinking. First they tell me Sycamore's out of the picture, and now they're quoting him as an authority. But what he said was "Turpmtine's been a workin' farm for more'n a century and a half, and it's still a workin' farm. In fact, now more'n it's ever been. It's the main testin' ground for our food division." He was now dropping g's by the bushel. "We got more'n a thousand experimental plats—spearmental plats—at Turpmtine where we're runnin' experiments on crop production and rotation and tillin'—we got experiments with robots that'll level an acre of—"

"And you also got fifty-nine horses, valued at $4,700,000, according to this," said the Artiste. He held up one of the sheets of paper Sheldon had handed him. "Whatta these fifty-nine horses do? They don't pull plows, do they?"

"The horses are a profitable business in their own right," said Croker, managing to control his temper. "The market for good horses is fireproof. Besides that, we got a good stud business."

"That's what I understand," said the Artiste, studying a sheet of paper. "It says here you got a stud named First Draw, and he's worth three million dollars." He lifted his big chin and peered down his nose at Croker.

"That's true," said Croker.
Harry said, "First Draw . . . Does that horse's name by any chance allude in some way to the proceeds of a real estate construction loan?"

Sniggers and guffaws from the PlannersBanc end of the table; and not even Croker's somber young Wismer Stroock could resist a small smile.

Croker paused, then said with a sudden burst of joviality, "It's a gamblin' term. Refers to the game of draw poker."

"I'm sure it's a gambling term," said the Artiste, "but I'm not so sure the game is poker."

More sniggers and guffaws. Everybody at both ends of the table knew that when a developer obtained a loan commitment from a bank, the bank released the money to him in stages, and the first stage was known as "the first draw." There was a motto among the developers in Atlanta: "Buy the boat with the first draw," which meant, Buy the seventy-four-foot Hatteras motor yacht you've always wanted, the house on Sea Island you've been dreaming of, the condominium in Vail, the ranch in Wyoming, with that first release of money, just in case something goes wrong and you don't make any profit on the project. Strictly speaking, using the first draw that way was illegal—fraudulent, in a word—since in the loan agreement the developer promised to devote every nickel to the project. But in the heady days of the late 1980s and then again in the late 1990s the banks had winked and looked the other way, and there were, in point of fact, quite a few boats named First Draw moored on Sea Island and at Hilton Head, and there was a stallion down in Baker County . . .

"First Drawwwwwww," said the Artiste in his W. C. Fields voice. "Yowza, yowza. Is it also a fact, Mr. Croker, that you ride some of those fifty-nine horses while you shoot quail at Turpentine?"

"Well, you best get off uv'em first, before you shoot a shotgun, or you'll regret it. But cert'ny, you ride out to the fields. And it's good for the horses."

The Artiste eyed the shithead dubiously. "Fifty-nine horses . . . $4,700,000." Then he looked down at the sheets in front of him. "Twenty-nine thousand acres . . . land, improvements, and equipment . . . a 5,000-foot concrete runway capable of accommodating a Gulfstream Five jet aircraft . . . Total value, $32 million . . . All told, with the horses, that's $37 million right there." He paused, then said in his dead-even voice, "Sell 'em."

"Sell . . . what?"
"The plantation and the horses. The works."

Now Croker paused. He squinted into the glare, as if to see the Artiste better. "For the moment I'm gonna leave aside the importance of Turpentine to the future of our corporation, and I'm gonna mention two other things." The old man seemed to have decided to take the reasonable approach. "First, this is not the time in the real estate cycle”—sackle—"to put a 29,000-acre farm on the market. But I'm sure you know that. Second, Turpentine is not just a farm. It's an institution... a very remarkable institution."

The old man's voice was suddenly warm and resonant. He launched into a passionate account of Turpentine's history, with some more about "the Turpentine People." He told of how Croker Global was today one of the biggest employers of unskilled black labor in that part of Georgia. He told of black workers tending the plats, black workers tending the horses, black workers tilling the soil, black workers preserving the ecology of Turpentine's eight thousand acres of swamp. You could hear his voice welling up toward a peroration.

"Nobody else is gonna employ these people the way we do. Nobody but Croker Global is gonna have experimental plats and agrochemical experiments and a horse operation and peanuts, cotton, timber, and an ecological program—"

"And quail shooting," said the Artiste.

"Yeah, all right, quail shooting. That provides employment for these people, too. We got some black dog trainers, and they're damned good at it. We got—we got people tendin' the dogs and the horses and the copses and the wagons and... and everything else. Now, if Croker Global pulled out, sold out, where would these people go? I'll tell you. On welfare. We're talkin'bout southwest Georgia here, out in the country, the real country, and these folks don't just go off to some... other job. These are good, proud folks who don't wanna be on the dole. These are good country folks who see welfare as a stigma. These are Turpentine folks who count on Croker Global as the one steady rock in their lives. So there's no way you or me or anybody else can look at Turpentine as just some asset to be capitalized or liquidated. There's a dimension here you can't put in a financial statement, a dimension that involves pain and suffering, that involves a human cost."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Harry, lifting both hands, palms outward, and casting his eyes down in the gesture that says, Please, no more. "I understand pain. I understand suffering. I understand the human
cost.” Now he looked up, straight at Croker, with a gaze that bespoke the utmost sincerity. “I’ve been there. I was in the war . . . I lost four fingers . . .”

With that he raised his right fist above his head as high as it would go, with the back of his hand twisted toward Croker, so that it looked like a stump of a hand with only the ridges of the four big knuckles remaining. Then he extended a single finger upward, his middle finger, and kept it that way, a look of quizzical sadness on his face.

“Sell it,” he said.

Croker stared at the upright middle finger and squinted and stared some more, and his face grew red. And then Peepgass saw them . . . the saddlebags! The saddlebags! The saddlebags had formed! They were complete! The great stains of sweat on the tycoon’s shirt had now spread from both sides, from under the arms and across the rib cage and beneath the curves of his mighty chest until they had met, come together, hooked up—two dark expanses joined at the sternum. They looked just like a pair of saddlebags on a horse.

Oh, Peepgass loved it! Harry had done it again!—gotten his saddlebags—even with a tough old bird like Charlie Croker!

Fellows here at the Planners Banc end of the table were nudging each other and smiling. They’d noticed it, too. Peepgass was elated. Somehow Harry had redeemed them all. He turned toward the Artiste and said, behind his hand, “Saddlebags, Harry! Saddlebags!”

He meant it to be *sotto voce*, little more than a whisper, but it came out much too loud. He hadn’t meant to grin, either, but he did. He couldn’t hold back. He could see Croker staring at him.

The Artiste lowered his arm, and Croker began to sputter. His voice was low and deep in his throat. “Now, listen . . .” he began.

In a perfectly pleasant voice Harry Zale said, “Just a moment, Mr. Croker,” and he leaned over toward Peepgass and said in a low voice, “Time for a little lender’s cactus, wouldn’t you say?”

Peepgass chuckled. “Perfect,” he said. Oh God, this would be rich.

Harry straightened up and looked at Croker and arched his eyebrows. “Now you listen . . .” Croker resumed, his voice lost somewhere deep in his trachea.

“Excuse me, Mr. Croker,” said the Artiste, “but we’re gonna have a lender’s cactus now. So we’re gonna ask you gentlemen and you ladies to step outside the room so we can cactus.”

“You’re gonna what?” asked Croker.
“We’re gonna have a lender’s cactus.”
“Did you say cactus?” asked Croker.
“Right,” said the Artiste. “So if you’ll just step outside for a little while, we’ll appreciate it.”
“Are you trying to say caucus?” Croker was all but snarling.
“No, cactus,” said the Artiste with a merry smile. “This time we want all the pricks on the outside.”

The Artiste kept the smile spread across his face, as if this was all good Boys’ Locker Room fun. The tycoon stared with as furious a scowl as Peepgass had ever seen on a man’s face. All that the Artiste gave him was the big unblinking grin. Ten kinds of mayhem must have been going through Croker’s mind, but he said nothing. Slowly he rose, and Wismer Stroock and the rest of his retinue rose with him. The long-legged bird, Peaches, now standing beside him, stared at the old man’s shirt. For the first time Croker seemed to be aware that it was a sopping mess. He glanced down morosely at his saddlebags, then picked up his jacket and wheeled about and started walking out of the room.

He took a step, and then when he took a second step, his entire huge body seemed to buckle and collapse to starboard before he could right himself. Then he took another step and then another, and the same thing happened again. Evidently something was terribly wrong with his right knee or his right hip. The whole room was watching. On he walked toward the door, taking a normal step and then buckling, taking a normal step and then buckling. It made it seem as if the drubbing he had just suffered at the hands of Harry Zale had taken some terrible physical toll on his body.

Then he stopped and paused for a moment. Slowly he turned about. He stared, balefully, but not at Harry Zale. He stared at Peepgass himself, and with a hissing stage whisper he said:
“Asshole.”

All at once Peepgass was aware that now everybody in the room, at both ends of the table, was looking at him. They were waiting for him to respond. But he was stunned, speechless. And more than that—he was afraid. What did he dare say to this enraged bull down at the other end of the table? A moment ago he had been so elated!—reveling as the Artiste had reduced the great tycoon to a sweating, sputtering, groggy, humiliated shithead. A moment ago he had felt redeemed, avenged against Croker and his entire saber-toothed ilk! And now he stood here paralyzed while a scalding realization spread through the very
lining of his skull: I can't take this man on! Not even verbally! Not even when he's thrown such an insult—"Asshole"—right in my face in front of my own people! And he stood there, unable to make a sound, while his face burned and his heart pounded.

Croker shook his head disdainfully and turned away and continued his gimp-legged retreat from the room, taking a step and buckling, taking a step and buckling, taking a step and buckling.

Peepgass just stood there, frozen, speechless, afraid to look into the eyes of anybody else in the room.