

## **BEAT THE DUST**

May 2008

### **Featured Writer, Mark SaFranko**

#### Introduction

Beat the Dust has broken its own rules this month, devoting the whole of the May edition to the previously unpublished work of one featured author, the father of all underground writers, Mark SaFranko. Described in a recent interview (Zsolt Alapi, *The Danforth Review*) as 'one of the best writers you have probably never heard of', American Mark SaFranko truly is a writer in the broadest sense of that word – a great novelist (*Hating Olivia: A Love Story* and the excellent sequel *Lounge Lizard*, Murder Slim Press), a short story writer (a new anthology, *Loners* is due out later this year, again through Murder Slim Press), a playwright, a poet and a song writer. This edition of Beat the Dust gives readers a unique chance to experience the full breadth of Mark's work and all of it previously unseen. We have extracts from an unpublished novel, a short story, three poems, the opening scenes from two of his plays and songs from a forthcoming and recent album. As well as a great writer, Mark is an accomplished painter. The self portraits featured in this issue were painted by him. Beat the Dust would like to thank Mark SaFranko for agreeing to be the first of our featured writers.

Zsolt Alapi interviews Mark SaFranko

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**ZA:** Your writing is both dark and provocatively sexual. What's your take on love and relationships?

**SaFranko:** Sexual attraction is a sort of madness that passes. The rest is very complicated. I don't mean to be flippant here, but that about sums it up. Love and relationships are treacherous ground that any person of complexity never negotiates without extreme trepidation.

**ZA:** You said in an interview that you are interested in characters who are "in trouble," mostly with themselves. How does your fascination with obsession figure into this, particularly through your depiction of Max Zajack, the protagonist of *Hating Olivia* and *Lounge Lizard*?

**SaFranko:** Obsession is a wonderful literary device. I think of a book like *Of Human Bondage*, probably the best novel of sexual obsession ever written, and how once it hooks you, you can't put it down. If readability is a literary virtue, this is a good thing. Being an obsessive type myself, it's natural territory for me.

**lost in the crowd**

Randall Hughes is absorbed in a *Times* feature on an upcoming retrospective of one of France's most fabled *auteurs* when he happens to glance up for the first time.

It's half-past two in the afternoon. The crowd has grown more teeming since he arrived with his son in tow, which has to be expected on one of the first mild days of spring after a long, dreary winter, and it being a Sunday, no less. The throng has an international flavor: there are Orthodox Jews and Muslims in full religious dress, Indians and Pakistanis in native garb, Asian- and African-Americans, and they're all doing pretty much the same thing — chasing their kids around the vast playground that forms the heart of Van Sion Park.

"Bart!" he calls, peering into the blur of humanity. "Barty!"

He marks his place: he's through nearly three-quarters of the piece, having tuned out the horde's din, which is distinguished by the incredibly original, ecstatic chorus of children's voices. There's no sound in the world like that of kids at play. The closest analogy he can conjure, though it still falls short, is a flock of shrieking, wing-flapping geese.

Randall Hughes no longer has the bench he's sitting on all to himself. At the other end is a couple jabbering in a tongue he doesn't recognize, but whose origin he'd place in the Mideast -- though he could easily be wrong. It crosses his mind as casually as a stray scrap of paper in the wind that there's a war going on in that part of the world; there always seems to be a conflict raging somewhere. He returns to his article. If his hectic schedule permits, he's going to make sure and get down to the Film Forum and take in as many of the dead genius's films as he can. That man, Jacques Garrault, enjoyed a remarkable life until he was prematurely cut down by a rare form of cancer. It was the kind of life Randall envies: big, full of adventure and sex and acclaim, the kind he himself always dreamed of having.

When he's finished reading he looks up again. "Bart!" he says, trying to penetrate the maelstrom of swirling bodies all around the bench, where he perches cross-legged with his residue of resentment toward Rebecca, his wife. She'd claimed that morning that she absolutely had to have at least a few hours to herself, mostly in order to fumigate the closets in the apartment without a three-year-old underfoot. True, she assumes the lion's share of Bart's care, as well as holding down a full-time job, and so she deserves a little time to herself, but the same consideration should apply to him: *when does he ever get a break?*

Now it isn't that Randall doesn't care for his son. How could anybody *not* be absolutely smitten with a platinum-blond, thirty-six-inch bundle of unbounded energy? It's just that he has his *moments*, exasperated, crazed moments when he wants to break free of it all. Some people, he thinks wryly, would say that such selfish desire is exactly what's wrong with the world today. But doesn't every man at one time or another entertain the same fantasy?

Randall folds *Arts And Entertainment* and drops it next to the backpack that travels everywhere little Bart goes. He runs his hand through his thinning hair and adjusts the rimless glasses on his face. He has to think hard to recall what Bart is wearing, and after a moment it comes to him: a striped navy polo shirt and dark blue corduroy pants, an ensemble that doesn't quite match. Lack of color coordination irks him, but as his wife explains it, on a small child it doesn't matter, and moreover it's a major chore to keep up with Bart's laundry as it is -- he should try it some time if he doesn't believe her.

The prattling couple at the opposite end of the bench has disappeared when Randall wasn't looking. He gets up and scans the area. "Bart!" he calls again, this time through cupped hands, though he doesn't know exactly where to project his voice.

When they first arrived the child had been playing in the big sandpit a few feet away, darting back to the bench occasionally to demand "Shovel, Dadda! Shovel!" which of course Randall didn't bring. It's possible that the plastic utensil is tucked in the trunk of the car, but the parking lot is a hundred yards away, and he didn't feel up to traipsing all the way back there. Then Bart climbed out of the pit, chunks of coagulated sand sprinkled in his fine hair and layered in crusty patterns over his clothes, and made a mad screaming dash toward one of those combination sliding board-ladder-tunnel contraptions that kids so love to lay siege to, and he'd returned to home base once or twice from that activity too, until...until now.

Randall makes his way past the sandpit to the contraption, bumping into and veering out of the way of several catapulting miniature bodies in the process. On a sloping gangway two boys who are somewhat taller than Barty are pushing at each other like jousting bulls. Like ants, kids swarm every angle of the apparatus, but Bart is nowhere to be seen.

*Where the hell can he be?* Randall scales a chain ladder and scours the entire playground for as far as he can see. Everywhere he looks are kiddies, swarms of gleeful kiddies, but no Bartholomew. It doesn't make sense. The boy has to be here *somewhere*.

And Randall's heart skips a beat.

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Rebecca, mild, red-haired, green-eyed Rebecca, contends during their arguments (more frequent and unsettling now that they're parents) that her husband prefers his career to his family, but Randall knows that the charge isn't exactly true. It's true in *some* quantity, but it isn't *exactly* true. He cares for them, but he cares for his career just as much. He's practically killed himself on the way to becoming creative supervisor of a successful New York commercial production outfit -- but his ambitions haven't been fulfilled, not by a long shot. No, he has other items on his agenda. He's constantly attempting to maneuver himself into position to become the director of photography on a movie, first a good, solid indie with one or two name actors, then on to bigger and better things -- like a major Hollywood project. He's shot several no-budget and short films in addition to his regular projects for Baird and Lowhouse, and he's convinced he can do something bigger. The point is to make a name for himself. And that takes dedication and hard work. Backbreaking, unrelenting work. So much work that there's scarcely room for anyone else in his world, including a wife -- let alone a child.

What was it Rebecca said to him over dinner recently? "I never realized you were going to be so...so *hands-off* with Barty...." It wasn't an accusation; it was more in the nature of a stunned realization that had found its way into her mouth after a period of unconscious processing. He didn't try to defend himself, but when she blurted later that she was "disappointed" he didn't spend more time with the boy, the discussion ended in a major flare-up.

"How do you expect me to accomplish anything if I have to be a wet nurse?" he'd shouted across the dinner table while Bart watched with his bright, intelligent black eyes from behind his train set. "I work seven days a week, Beck: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday! *Seven days a week!* How do you think I've gotten to where I've gotten to in life? *Not by playing Mister fucking Mom!*"

Immediately after the explosion he'd felt guilty, though Rebecca had by now grown used to his acid comments and outbursts. He hated like hell that his son might be cowed by his anger, but at times he just couldn't help himself.

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A ragged troop of gray clouds marches across the powder-blue sky, which has the effect of immediately depressing Randall, who is at a complete loss for what to do. He clammers off the play contraption and begins to circumnavigate it in search of his son. In the back of his mind, ominous thoughts like those dark clouds above begin to gather, but he's not about to allow them to break open in his mind just yet. Because he still believes that Barty *is here*, within a few feet of where he stands, and so there's no real need for concern, let alone panic. It's just a matter of focusing the eyes, of being able to pick your child out from all the rest, and when the space is overrun with little people, that isn't such an easy task. The hubbub has if anything increased, and it's difficult for Randall to hear himself think. He drifts in circles scanning the faces of the children who swirl around his feet like so many leaves until he finds the circumference of his hunt widening -- to the swings...then a smaller version of the contraption where his boy was romping...a maze cut out of waist-high hedge.

But no Barty. No Barty anywhere. No Barty near the stone creatures -- hippopotamus, pelican, tortoise -- whose snouts will turn into spraying fountains come summer, no Barty beneath the basketball stanchion, no Barty on the whirligig.

Now this *is* ridiculous. Randall retraces his steps and wends his way back, past the sandpit and bench and stroller, toward the stream that originates at the small zoo at the north edge of the park and flows through the playground toward some unknown destination. It's a logical place

to look because Barty loves tossing pebbles into any body of water. Maybe he's found his way to the water today -- just maybe.

Randall skids down the gravel decline past the beech and swamp maple saplings that lead to the murky water's edge. There's nothing to see, however, save for a pair of leisurely paddling mallards. A boy of five or six careers down the bank in pursuit of his soccer ball. He retrieves it before it hits the water, looks curiously at Randall, then scampers back toward the play area. "Sorry," he says before taking off.

Like a sinister poison, a newer, deeper anxiety steals into Randall's limbs. The possibility that Bart is truly *not* here, in this park -- that he's *gone* -- takes root in his mind for the first time. He feels the icy terror of a tightrope walker who suddenly develops a mortal dread of heights.

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Ever since Bart was born, Randall Hughes has been slowly sliding into what people might term a classic mid-life crisis -- if that term is ever used anymore. It isn't merely his chronological age that accounts for it; rather it's the fact that despite his cravings for fame and success, he isn't sure when he crawls out of bed every morning whether he cares all that much if he satisfies them. And then he works even harder to siphon off the tension caused by this paradoxical ferment, and the result is a vicious cycle of desire, ambivalence, and disgust. He fantasizes actually going through with a divorce and starting his life over again, indulging this time around in some of the things he's never allowed himself before. He's always, for instance, harbored the urge to travel, and while he's done some typical tourist stuff, he continually stifles the itch to do more. Sometimes, on the bad mornings, it even seems to be too late.

Then, too, there are all those available women. It isn't that he didn't have his share before Rebecca...but maybe he'd quit enjoying them all too soon. Why, even today, before losing track of his boy, he'd had his eye on some of the young moms in the playground, tried once or twice to decipher whether there was any message in a returned glance, wondered whether they ever had the same desire to bust loose as he does.

The fact of the matter is that his record is not entirely clean. There've been two or three "lapses in judgment" -- one that nearly came to mean serious trouble. Donna Lynn had been his production assistant around the time Barty was born, and she was simply too much to resist. They only had sex two or three times, after hours in his Chelsea office when everyone else had gone home for the night, but the experience had been enough to shake him into the awareness

that he could lose his bearings altogether if he gave in to his whims without discrimination, and so he put a stop to it.

It's sadly amazing how thoroughly Barty's arrival in the world has annihilated his sex life with his wife. With an apartment overflowing with toys and diapers and bottles and general chaos, not to mention general exhaustion, sometimes weeks can pass before he and Rebecca make love. What's more, he's lost his old appetite for his wife's body. After having Barty, Rebecca let herself go a bit. A roll of soft flesh spills over the band of her underwear when she leans on the bathroom sink applying her makeup. One of his friends at Baird and Lowhouse, a finance specialist who's about to go through his second divorce after a decade and three children, likes to say that kids "ruin *everything*," and Randall can certainly attest to the truth, at least in one respect, of that adage. Yet there are so many complications inherent in breaking up a marriage - - not the least of which is the effect on the little ones involved -- that it isn't a decision to be taken lightly. All the things Randall didn't understand when he was younger, Barty's three-year existence have forced him to come to grips with.

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Randall's third reconnaissance of the Van Sion Park playground is another exercise in frustration, but this time with a crucial difference: he's looking now, at least vaguely, for a *perpetrator* in addition to Barty, a suspect among the grownups he sees on the loops he traces en route to his car, where he calculates Barty may have tried to return in some misguided attempt to get hold of his shovel. But as he half-walks, half-runs across the footbridge that traverses the stream and passes the tennis courts scanning the faces of everyone he encounters, he realizes that this search is absurd since an abductor -- and he has the feeling that an *abductor*, specifically, is who he is looking for -- would have swept Barty away from the entire area by now. The image of a reptilian psychopath luring his child into mortal danger flashes across Randall's mind, but he shoves it away just as quickly -- it's something he simply can't handle.

There's nobody, not a soul, near his blue Saab, which sits sandwiched between an SUV and one of those reborn Volkswagen beetles, whose attractiveness Randall hasn't yet decided on. After surveying the length of the sidewalk in either direction, a lump forms in his throat. *Where are you, Bart?* Really, how is it possible that the child could have been snatched from under his nose? Up until this frightening moment he's not truly believed that such a thing could happen. And now that it's apparently come to pass, how different it is from what's portrayed on TV --

there's none of the overt hysteria you see on the small screen, only a disoriented mother or father wandering in circles without a clue what to do next....

But this is obviously no time for trying to figure things out. Because every moment now is of the utmost importance.

He unlocks the car and pops open the glove compartment, where he keeps a pack of Parliaments and book of matches stashed for the occasional cheating smoke (he officially "quit" around the time of Barty's birth). He lights up and drags nervously as he jogs. Within a minute he's back at the playground, sweating profusely, near the bench where he'd been reading *The Times*. It's ironic, even cruel, that the newspaper and pack are on the bench where he left them, and the stroller where he'd docked it, complete with Barty's pint-sized denim jacket dangling from the handlebars. The fact that they haven't been moved, that they retain the appearance of being cold and untouched, is all Randall has to see in order to be convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that something evil, or at least highly unusual has happened to his son, since he knows for certain now that Barty hasn't returned to the bench. His only hope is that the boy has been taken sick, or been injured or run off for some reason, and not kidnapped.

On the lip of the sandpit where the boy was playing sits a raven-haired, thirtyish woman in jeans and windbreaker watching her sons pat down a mound with their dirty dimpled hands. The sight makes Randall feel like the loneliest man in the world.

"Excuse me...did you happen to see a boy, a little boy about this high" (he holds a flat palm toward the ground and describes Barty's clothes) -- "in this vicinity lately? Say the past few minutes or so?"

Cupping her brow against the sun's glare, the woman squints up at him.

"Co za?"

Futile -- she doesn't speak a word of the language. The others, parents and children, nearby are not the same people who were here when he and Barty arrived. But Randall knows that he has to make the effort even though his heart is sinking. He tries everyone, plying the same question, but the result is always no.

He's downright frantic now, panic-stricken. How long should he go on before asking for help? *Who* is he supposed to ask for help?

He takes a few deep breaths. For the time being, and since time is of the essence, he will do what he can, and that means hustling across the asphalt lane that girdles the playground, to the zoo where he and Rebecca and Barty visited last year. Shoving bodies out of the way, he

rushes toward the gate. He tosses a few bills under the grill of the ticket booth and pushes through the turnstile. Bart's favorite animal was the peacock, so Randall starts there.

Today the humans are lined up three deep at the pen that also holds emus and llamas. They're waving their cameras, leering, gesticulating, tossing crumbs and coins, trying to touch the captive beasts when there are signs everywhere forbidding it. *People are worse than animals*, he muses disgustedly as he scrutinizes the mob before moving on to the mountain lions, the vultures, the owls, the African tortoises....

The monkeys have likewise drawn a large gallery, and they too had fascinated Barty with their crowd-pleasing antics. But again, sadly, the result is the same: more fools and idiots, more mindless whoops and screams, more ignorant and inane remarks about the species on display. Nevertheless, Randall knows that he has to push on, he has to cover every inch of the zoo. But everywhere he goes — the bison pasture, the bald eagle enclosure, the barnyard animal pens -- he is disappointed anew.

In a crestfallen swoon he finds himself back at the bench. The frenetic activity of the children is still in full swing, but without Barty. *Gone. Maybe forever*. Randall knows that he has to report the boy's disappearance to the park officials -- but where are they? Come to think of it, he's never set eyes on a single person in uniform in this park. Why the hell is it that the authorities are never around when you need them, but if you leave your car at an expired parking meter for five minutes, you can practically guarantee a citation on the windshield?

And what about calling Rebecca? He mistakenly left his cell phone at home today, another unusual circumstance in a day full of them. He can run over to the tennis courts, where he spotted a public telephone, he can place a call to someone, but now he's afraid of leaving the point where he last was with his child. At any rate, all he can accomplish by phoning his wife now would be to alarm her into impotent hysteria. And won't it be a simple matter for her to blame him for what's happened?

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Like it was yesterday Randall can remember it, even though years have passed since the conversation took place. A Saturday afternoon...he and Rebecca were lounging on the bed, watching the green-gray Hudson roll by far below their apartment window. The window was open, and the raw scents of damp spring and salt water from the harbor were in the air. He'd recently been given a critical assignment by Baird and Lowhouse, the first of many, to oversee the creation of a promo video for a hot new Toronto modeling agency. If it wasn't exactly where he wanted to go, it was a step in the right direction.

"I've been thinking, Beck," he began that day as a tugboat pulled an ugly barge full of trash out toward the ocean, "why don't we forget about having kids? I mean, let's just not have any."

Children could only interfere with his plans. The truth was that when he and Rebecca first met, he'd been the one who wanted a family, and he pressed for it, which forced Rebecca, he saw in retrospect, into a posture of demurring, parrying, putting off. But with time some shift had occurred in their respective psyches. Randall came around to the understanding that children would be excess baggage, and that there was no point in beating a dead horse anyway: if Rebecca didn't know what she wanted, why persist?

That day Rebecca had said nothing. From the corner of his eye he tried to gauge her reaction to his proposition, but the obscuring cascade of her long hair prevented him from seeing her face. He'd assumed that her silence meant acquiescence. "Think about it: it'll be just the two of us. No headaches, no responsibilities, no albatrosses around our necks. We'll be free forever to come and go as we please. We can travel the world. We're both totally into our careers anyway, right? I look at our friends who have kids, like Ted and Marguerite, and I have to be honest with you -- I didn't know what the hell I was *thinking*. Bottles and diapers, temper tantrums, bills out the wazoo....It's definitely not for me. I suspect it isn't for you, either, if you're honest with *yourself*. Think about it, hon -- no brats, and we got it made."

Looking back, Randall understood that Rebecca's reticence at that delicate moment masked a secret motive: she was leaving her options open. And as the years passed, and her biological clock ticked more insistently, she underwent a change of heart. Four years ago she decided she wanted to try for a short period of time -- a year, say -- to have a child. She wouldn't go out of her way, she'd merely dispense with birth control, and if after that one year she wasn't pregnant, she'd abandon the notion of motherhood altogether.

Out of a sense of duty and loyalty Randall went along with Rebecca's proposition, half-reluctantly, half-curiously. For some reason -- namely the idea that at forty the two of them were too old -- he didn't believe the experiment would come to anything. But within a couple of months Rebecca was pregnant.

In the early days of Bart's life, when Randall was kept awake at night by his fussing and crying, or when Rebecca asked him to watch the baby for even an hour in the evening when the nanny was gone for the day and she had to step out for some reason, it would invariably culminate in a nasty confrontation.

"What did I tell you, Rebecca? Didn't I tell you no goddamn kids? Didn't I? Why the hell wouldn't you listen to me? Why didn't you have an abortion like I told you to? *Why?*"

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The strangest thing is how much he ended up loving the boy. They'd even moved to Jersey on account of their need for more room, and nowadays Randall finds himself thinking about Bart throughout the day, even longing to see him when they're apart. He's planned many things for the future: he'll explain life's mysteries to his son, forge a bond of friendship with the kid. Barty turned his world upside down.

Now this....Losing Bart in a crowd seems a vicious punishment for his earlier disinterest and antagonism, but it appears that's exactly what the fates have meted out. Like a man already dead, Randall regards the vacant bench in the weakening light of late afternoon, scans the stragglers hopefully, hopelessly....It's going on five o'clock, and he and Barty should be on their way home to dinner. He can only shudder at what Rebecca's reaction will be when he eventually makes it back home without her precious darling.

How long has it been since he's set eyes on his son? Two hours? That in itself is hard to believe. He knows chances are slight that the little guy will come running from somewhere to embrace his leg, and he knows likewise that he can't wait any longer to take some more powerful action. No doubt he's waited too long already.

He darts up the hill toward the tennis courts. Halfway there he stops. The words "Park Office" catch his eye.

It's a shabby outhouse set slightly off to the northeast. How did he never notice it before? The door is slightly ajar. A heavysset woman in a khaki uniform is at the desk smoking a cigarette and staring at a commercial for dog food on a miniature black and white TV set. A grumpy scowl creases her face.

"Can I help you?"

"Has anyone found a lost child?"

She stares at him, not understanding. It seems a poorly worded question, even to him.

He explains as best he can.

"Well, I suppose I can come out and help you look."

"No, no, you don't understand. It's late, it's already late." He stutters out another fragmented explanation.

By now the ranger is out of her seat. For some reason Randall takes note of her labored breathing when she moves to the door.

"Can I use the phone?" he asks.

"Go ahead." There is no empathy in the woman's voice. *What is wrong with the world?* he wonders. She passes him and goes out of the door into the sunlight.

Randall grabs the desk phone. Is this an emergency? Of course it is! Should he call 911? Not really: no one is hurt, there have been no crimes committed that he knows of for sure. He

punches in "O" for operator. He's confused -- he doesn't know whether or not he's doing the proper thing, and that fat park ranger has already disappeared when she should be helping.

*What is wrong with the world?*

"The police. And hurry, please...."

As the signal buzzes somewhere in the distance, Randall Hughes stands in the doorway looking up. The preternaturally placid sky above Van Sion Park seems to be mocking him. Why had he gone on reading that stupid article when Barty failed to respond to his first call? Why had he made eyes at the brunette who'd chased her tyke around the bench? *Why had he had those affairs behind his wife's back way back when? And why, why had he been so goddamned self-centered and egotistical all his life?*

*Why? Why? Why?*

Randall Hughes shuts his eyes. He clenches his jaw, grits his teeth. He's in some kind of amorphous pain, a pain that seems to beset him from everywhere at once and yet have no specific point of origin. What he doesn't understand is that he's begun to feel the weight of the guilt that's bound to crush him before his natural life comes to an end.

Zsolt Alapi interviews Mark SaFranko (continued)



**ZA:** How much of Max is based on your own lived experiences or psychopathology?

**SaFranko:** All of Max has at least some basis in my own experiences. Sometimes there is distortion, exaggeration, for effect. On the other hand, a great deal, perhaps the most important material, is left out, sacrificed to pace. Both *Hating Olivia* and *Lounge Lizard* were significantly longer books before I took the butcher knife to them. As for my psychopathology, only a shrink could answer that.

**ZA:** Max is an aspiring writer, although failing at his craft. Despite this, his comments on writing and "authenticity" pervade both *Hating Olivia* and *Lounge Lizard*. To what extent did you intend the reader to accept his voice as "authority" on the creative process and writing?

**SaFranko:** None whatsoever. I would never expect anyone to follow my advice regarding anything. Everyone is different. So this is just Max talking to Max. That said, you can always tell a real artist from a long way off, can't you?

### **the flies**

Being the sort of person who writes plays and film scenarios  
I know my fair share of actors  
In fact they can be found everywhere in New York City  
Like a very common species  
Of insect

Occasionally one of them lands a television series  
or a movie or a play  
And the world goes wild  
Falling to its knees in homage  
To this man or woman, boy or girl  
Whose greatest talent is memorizing  
And reciting someone else's words or  
Looking good on camera or  
Projecting emotion on stage

The logic of it never ceases to amaze me  
Because I've done it, and it's not all that difficult  
Hell, I even got paid for it a few times

Meanwhile I sit in this chamber, night after unpaid night  
Concocting brewing sweating wringing  
My guts  
Onto the page  
So that actors might have something to do with  
Their hands and eyes and mouths

I accept it; it's the natural order of things

To most of them (and their producers and directors and agents)  
I'm just a huge, steaming pile of hot dung  
To be feasted upon when my flavor is deemed ready for the Marketplace

While they buzz over me  
Waiting

To come and eat their fill

### **the cost**

Letters in the mail  
Nothing important, except near the bottom of the stack

A notice from the bank that the minimum

needed to keep a regular checking account open  
Has been doubled from  
250 to 500 dollars

Writing has cost me everything  
My health  
My balls  
My sanity

Now, to crown it all  
To add insult to injury  
It has cost me my checking account

Zsolt Alapi interviews Mark SaFranko (continued)



**ZA:** Both *Hating Olivia* and *Lounge Lizard* echo Henry Miller's *Sexus* and Charles Bukowski's *Women*. How were you influenced by their writing? In what ways do you think your writing (and sensibility) differ from theirs?

**SaFranko:** You've made astute connections here, Zsolt, especially in the case of *Sexus*, which is my favorite Miller work, along with *Tropic Of Capricorn* and a short, late essay called *Mother, China And The World Beyond*. I discovered Miller much earlier than Bukowski, but love the work of both men. There are obviously things inside me – a contrariness, a dissatisfaction with everyday life, among many other things -- that respond to the world-views of both, as well as that of other so-called "confessional" writers such as Celine, Philippe Djian, and Mohammed Mrabet. Our individual pasts and experiences make for differences, however. Perhaps my cynicism is more thoroughgoing than either Miller or Bukowski. And that may be a product of the age.

**seedy** (scene one of a play awaiting production)

#### Cast of Characters

Eddie Tilsen:

A middle-aged, unemployed actor. Handsome at one time but has gone to seed. An arch, sometimes artificially charming and winsome personality, developed from years of trying to get work, is always apparent -- except when we see flashes of black despair.

Hank Smith:

Eddie's best friend. A heavysset, unattractive but shrewd and slick Wall Street type. Very ethnic. Perhaps the slightest hint of a rather comical Middle Eastern accent. The fact that he calls himself "Smith" is absurd in itself. Naturally taciturn and surly, but is capable at moments of heartfelt emotion.

Esmeralda (Tracy Sinnett):

An exotic dancer in her twenties. Tattooed and pierced in various parts of her beautiful body. Alternately seductive, bubble-headed and shrewd.

Scene

New York City.

Time

Late summer, early fall. Now.

SETTING:

A seedy strip joint somewhere in lower Manhattan. A harsh spotlight on the center of the stage. The spotlight illuminates nothing.

AT RISE:

Loud, mindless music. Emerging from the darkness, a topless ESMERALDA gyrates sensuously into the spotlight. Lights slowly up on the strip joint audience. Mesmerized, EDDIE and HANK watch ESMERALDA'S performance from their seats.

EDDIE

(Pointing)

Hey -- check this out -- skinny with big tits! Do I love 'em like that, or what?

HANK

Ooh -- Ooh, baby ... she is something, isn't she? Christ Jesus ...

EDDIE

Look at her, will you? You ever see anything like that before?

HANK

Not in the past two hours ...

EDDIE

Look look look ... Just like a little girl lifting her dress ... Ever notice how little girls always have to show you what's under there?

HANK

Christ fucking Jesus...

EDDIE

You always get that ass-backwards. It's Jesus fucking Christ ... Anyway, like it says in the Bible: Bring on the dancing girls!

(HE tips his beer bottle. Completing her routine, ESMERALDA undulates off the stage and works her way slowly toward the MEN, who continue their conversation without ever taking their eyes off her)

EDDIE

Could you imagine putting the wood to that, buddy?

HANK

I mean, can you fucking imagine?

EDDIE

No ... Yeah ... Man, I gotta tell you ... I can hardly take this! It drives me crazy, watching something like her. My mouth waters, and everything ...

HANK

Tell me about it ... Ever since I threw Jennifer out, it's been like the Sahara — fuckin' nothin'. Dry as a bone.

EDDIE

Well, you're looking at the Great Oasis, pal.

(Pause)

Damn -- I wish I had a few hundred smackers to blow ...

HANK

Forget it with that already! What did I tell you? You need money, I'll spot you whatever you need.

(HE reaches into his trouser pocket and slips EDDIE three bills)

EDDIE

(Accepting them with a show of reluctance)

Thanks, man, thanks. You know I'll pay you back.

HANK

Hey — how long we been friends? How far do we go back, you and me?

EDDIE

A long time. A long, long time.

HANK

Right -- a long, long time. So forget about money. You help me out, I help you out. And it's not like you're going anywhere anytime soon.

(ESMERALDA shakes her incredible breasts in HANK's face. The effect

is that of a snake charmer hypnotizing a cobra. As part of an age-old ritual, HE hands over a bill. ESMERALDA smiles lasciviously, moves over to EDDIE and performs the same routine)

ESMERALDA

(Oozing seductiveness)  
Hi, guys ...

EDDIE

Hello, sweetheart ...

ESMERALDA

Having a good time tonight?

EDDIE

I can't think of any place in the world I'd rather be.

(HE hands over a bill. Then another bill. ESMERALDA dances more tantalizingly, which eventually coaxes EDDIE into handing over his last bill)

ESMERALDA

You like me?

EDDIE

Are you kidding me? You're lovely ... gorgeous.

HANK

Gorgeous ... lovely.

ESMERALDA

I like you, too. I want to do ... a special dance for you.

EDDIE

(Quickly)  
How much?

ESMERALDA

Twenty.

(EDDIE glances at HANK, who slips him another bill. EDDIE passes it to ESMERALDA. SHE begins to perform a lewd gyration over EDDIE's lap)

EDDIE

What's your name, darlin'?

ESMERALDA

Esmeralda ...

EDDIE

Esmeralda. That's nice. Just like the hunchback's beauty.

ESMERALDA

What?

HANK

This guy's a Shakespearean actor — he knows something about drama, stuff like that.

ESMERALDA

I'm impressed. How about you? Don't tell me you're a writer ...

HANK

No. I'm a businessman. Wall Street. Numbers are my thing.

ESMERALDA

Some people think numbers are everything ...

HANK

I don't know if I'd go that far ...

(EDDIE moans with pleasure when  
ESMERALDA reaches down and massages  
his crotch)

EDDIE

Mm ... wow ... You certainly know ... how to do it, honey ... Now you're getting me really excited ... Listen, Esmeralda ... Do you, uh ... do you by any chance make house calls?

ESMERALDA

(Kissing him lightly)

Sometimes. Depends on the situation. And the money, of course.

EDDIE

How about dancing privately for me and my buddy here? Would you, uh -- would you be open to that proposition?

ESMERALDA

(Without thinking)

A hundred apiece. When did you have in mind?

HANK

(Quickly)

How about tonight?

ESMERALDA

Ooh, I don't know ... It does sound like an interesting offer. But I would have to pay them off first.

HANK

'Them'? Who's 'them?'

ESMERALDA

The gentlemen who run this place. I have to fork over a fee to work the night -- don't tell me you didn't know that. My income is derived solely from the generosity of tips. In other words, the kindness of strangers. See what I mean? And so far it's been kind of a slow night.

HANK

(Incredulously)

You mean you gotta pay them?

(To EDDIE)

What a racket, huh? You believe that?

EDDIE

Somebody's got it backwards, all right. They should pay you.

ESMERALDA

You're so sweet ...

HANK

(To ESMERALDA)

How much you owe them?

ESMERALDA

Twenty-five.

HANK

How about I pay the fee for you ...

(HE reaches for his wallet)

EDDIE

But another hundred apiece, buddy.

HANK

What did I just tell you?

(HE hands over a few bills to  
ESMERALDA)

ESMERALDA

Thank you ...

EDDIE

Now -- when can you get out of here?

ESMERALDA

Whenever I want. All I have to do is sign out.

HANK

Go sign out. We'll make it worth your while.

ESMERALDA

(Coyly)

You better. So -- where am I supposed to go?

HANK

What do you mean, where are you supposed to go?

ESMERALDA

Like, where do you guys live?

HANK

Why don't you just ride with us?

ESMERALDA

It's gonna take me a few minutes to get ready, you know? I have to change, powder my nose ...

HANK

One-thirteen East Sixty-second Street. 2D. Just hit the buzzer.

(HE reaches into his pocket again)

Here -- for the cab. Make it fast.

(SHE leans over and kisses HANK,  
then grooves out of the spotlight.  
After a short beat during which they  
seem paralyzed with disbelief, EDDIE  
and HANK jump up, pull on their  
jackets, and bolt for the exit.  
BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE 1

Zsolt Alapi interviews Mark SaFranko (continued)



**ZA:** Both of your novels satirize the American Dream; specifically, *Lounge Lizard* is a vicious indictment of the Reagan years and the "ME" generation. Do you consider your writing to be, to some extent, social criticism?

**SaFranko:** I would say yes, insofar as you're reading the inner life of an outsider, a malcontent who happens to be stuck inside a machine that's antagonistic, or at least not sympathetic to, his deepest self. Max is a man out of step with the world. But at no time does anything political interest him, or me, in the least, which is not to say either of us is unaware of what's going on in the world. So that's a modifying element here. I suppose you could call it informal social criticism.

**no strings attached** (chapter one of a novel awaiting publication)

*Clever*, I remember thinking at the time. *Very, very clever*. Because I had it all figured out. At least that's what I told myself.

You know how it is. You hatch an idea, then you grind it out in your brain until it makes perfect sense. Until all the pieces fit -- like when you finish off a big, elaborate jigsaw puzzle, except that it's not exactly a child's game. Then you decide: *Hell, yes. It'll work. I can pull it off, no sweat*.

Until you find yourself in a boat on the ocean, your doubts surrounding you like circling, bloodthirsty sharks. Until your misgivings, your regrets, your errors close in on you like a gigantic vise. Then you're not so cocksure anymore.

But let me go back to the very pedestrian beginning of it all.

What I'd do first was run up the red flags of infidelity, then, after Monica was enticed into taking a closer look -- and finding nothing -- I'd actually go out and *have* the affair. What reason would she have for being suspicious after already checking me out and finding me innocent?

Very clever indeed.

Yes, that's the way I'd do it.

Let's face it: extramarital affairs are tough. If you can manage it, you're better off making do with what you've got. The problem is, if you don't take the chance, you're stuck with your life, and nothing ever changes.

There was of course *really* no way of knowing whether or not the whole thing would fly, but I figured it was worth the shot.

Because I had to face it -- I was bored to tears with my life. Whatever it took to spice it up, I'd have to make the effort. Until now, I'd been too afraid.

Why wasn't I afraid anymore? Hard to say. Maybe I'd just convinced myself that the time was right. Maybe I was tired of just thinking about it and had to act. Maybe I'd reached the point of no return. But at the end of the day it's impossible to know for sure.

The first part of the plan was a piece of cake. Everything I needed was right there on the Web for the taking, courtesy of the Sharpeye Investigation Agency:

"Signs of Infidelity -- 30 Clues to Cheating Spouses"

Indicators like "sudden increase in time away from home," "decreased sexual interest," and "subject attends more work functions alone" were the easiest to fake, and therefore the ones I employed most often to arouse my wife's suspicions. But jolting her out of her rut took some doing. Much more than I expected, frankly. Now I knew why people cheated -- because they could get away with it. At least up to a point. But I was going to be different. I wanted to be *sure*.

So I had to practically beat Monica over the head with my red herrings because she's fundamentally such a guileless soul, and I'd never before during our long years of marriage given her reason to mistrust me.

It was only later, when I resorted to tactics like "getting laundry done independently," "asking about spouse's schedule more often than usual," and "suddenly buying spouse more gifts," that she finally woke up.

"Are you having an affair, Richard?" she finally asked one evening after I'd dragged in a few hours late for dinner for the umpteenth time.

There was an almost pitiful mixture of determination and anxious vulnerability on Monica's face. The conflicting emotions made her look a little like a kid trying to screw up her courage to stand up to her parents for the first time.

We were sitting in the recently remodeled living room at the time, she on the long sofa, me on one of the easy chairs. She was cradling a flute of Cheval Blanc. I had a glass of iced tea. Diane, our fifteen-year-old, had already gone upstairs to bed.

"I've been meaning to ask you for a while now, but...."

"You *have*?"

She nodded, a little sheepishly. I pretended complete and total shock at the mere notion of faithlessness. I'd actually been taking in *Ask The Dust* at the local multiplex with two other patrons earlier that evening, but naturally I didn't tell her that.

"Me? An *affair*? No way, honey! What on earth would give you that idea? We've been married for how long now -- seventeen years? And in all that time, when have you ever known me to be interested in another woman?"

She gazed at me steadily with her soft, beautiful gray eyes, which hadn't dulled even though she'd recently crossed the threshold of an early menopause. I thoroughly understood the expression in them: she wanted to believe me with all her heart, but she had to rely on her

considerable native intelligence and intuition to guide her -- she's that kind of person. And of course those qualities were exactly what was making this all so difficult.

After more questions about my increasingly errant behavior, all of which I answered calmly -- and truthfully -- she appeared to accept my explanation and the subject was dropped. After all, she had no hard evidence to confront -- or accuse -- me with, right? *I hadn't done a single thing to be guilty for, had I?* And she still loved me, didn't she?

In the following days, she sure acted like she did. Love me, that is. At least I saw no evidence to the contrary, including the fact that we didn't miss our regular Saturday night lovemaking session. And the truth is that it was just like it always was -- boring. A damned-near deadly snore that was hardly worth the energy expended.

Nevertheless, despite my reassurances, I could have sworn I caught glimpses of something -- and someone -- shadowing me whenever I was out and about. The appearance of an unmarked, forest-green Chevrolet Lumina in the parking lots of the dry cleaner in Roseland, the Whole Foods organic supermarket in Montclair, and the takeout Chinese restaurant in West Caldwell caught my attention, though it may have been nothing more than coincidence -- after all, there are scads of green Chevies on the road.

It's just that this one always seemed to *hover*, and the fact that the windshield was tinted and I couldn't make out who was inside, seemed a bit odd.

Maybe it was just my imagination working overtime, since I was on the lookout for anything unusual. Like an idiot, I never thought to check the license plate, to be sure one way or the other.

Then one day I discovered an invoice from the law offices of Simon and Levandowski in a bone-colored envelope in the bottom drawer of the desk in Monica's upstairs study when I was hunting for a box of staples, and any doubt was erased.

*"Dear Ms. Marzten:*

*Below please find the final report of our operatives, Ronald Pleasants and Wallace Van Loan,"* it began. There followed a list of dates, excursions undertaken, surveillance conducted, and expenses incurred in the performance of such duties.

At the bottom, under "*Findings*," was this:

*"After extensive investigation over more than four weeks, it is our conclusion that the subject, your husband Richard Marzten, is not involved in any extramarital activity whatsoever. His behavior, while at times somewhat less than predictable or systematic, is in our view innocuous and innocent -- in other words the behavior of any normal, law-abiding man of his age, occupation and lifestyle...."*

Etc.

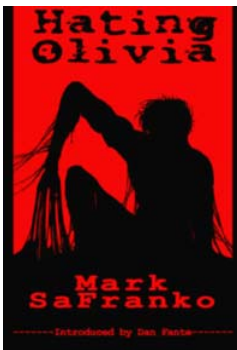
Beautiful. A little stilted maybe, but otherwise perfect.

There was even a little handwritten addendum of congratulations on my fidelity to my wife from Mister Roger Simon himself. And, of course, the total cost — which was nothing short of breathtaking. But sixteen grand was a small price to pay to establish my impeccability, and my wife could certainly afford it.

Apparently Monica had wanted to do a thorough job of it, and she had.

Watching her afterwards, I got the feeling she was satisfied, at peace. For that money, I hoped she was.

Zsolt Alapi interviews Mark SaFranko (continued)



**ZA:** In *Lounge Lizard*, Max speaks out against the writing of Joyce, Nabokov, and the Beats, to name just a few. To what extent does his taste in literature reflect your own?

**SaFranko:** I happen to love much of Nabokov, especially *Laughter In The Dark* and *Lolita*, among others. Same for Joyce. What I was speaking against here was tiresome academic prejudices, the prejudices that proclaim a certain artist the greatest this or the greatest that. My reading tastes are surprisingly catholic, actually, and include the likes of writers from Proust and Casanova to Patricia Highsmith and Ruth Rendell. As for the Beats, I never found myself engaged by any of them. Perhaps this is my failing. On one level, I suppose that I view them as Ivy Leaguers masquerading as rebels. Once you've passed through an Ivy League institution, you're never truly an outsider. You might think you are, but the world doesn't see you as such, even if the perception is unconscious. The doors always swing open for those guys. But on the whole I've found the Beats pretty much boring and unreadable.

### **the promise**

The first three scenes of a play produced at the Millennium Forum Theatre in Derry, Northern Ireland in 2003.

## Cast of Characters

- Harvey Gillman: A veteran theatrical agent.
- Sharon Striker: A would-be actress who is no longer an ingenue. There is a very fragile, sensitive quality, something a little "off" about her.
- Wendy La Brava: A young, sexy stripper and aspiring actress.

## Scene

The afterlife. Various locations in New York City. Inside the characters' heads.

## Time

Back and forth from the present to the recent past.

## Scene 1

- SETTING: The afterlife -- if there is one.
- AT RISE: HARVEY falls to the stage like a meteor out of the darkness. After a moment, he gets up, dusts himself off, and like a disembodied ghost stands in a ray of eerie mist.

## HARVEY

What can I say ... you do things in life. You do things, and you don't always consider the consequences. Because if you did that ... you'd be paralyzed. Like some neurotic who mulls over every step he takes, who looks around every corner, who ... you're intelligent, you get the idea. The problem of course, is that you make mistakes. This is part of the human condition. We are not perfect. But mistakes can be costly. Nowadays more than ever before. What a world, huh? From business to your sex life ... mistakes can cost you. So -- I made a mistake. The wrong mistake. And believe me, there is a distinction to be made between a garden variety mistake and ... the wrong mistake. But hey -- you can't worry about hurting people's feelings in this business, right? I mean, you just can't be sensitive. This world ... this city ... is for the tough. Don't believe it, take a walk down Broadway. Go take a walk on any street in this town ... The real problem is that ... today human life isn't worth the trouble it takes to fuck somebody. It's true. Sad, but true. But hey -- I didn't realize that until I arrived here ... Had I known it at the time, I might have done different than I did. I can tell you this, however -- regret is useless. Because here's the thing -- you can't do other than what you have to do. Which is the fallacy about free will. I mean, free will is the most ridiculous fucking concept ever concocted by the intellect of man. You know when free will operates? In -- what's the word? -- retrospect. That's when. In re -- tro --

spect. The free-will fairytale has caused more unnecessary guilt than any other idea in the history of the world. Now I'm no philosopher -- every belief that I've put together for myself is out of my own experience. That's the kind of guy I am. That's why I'm -- I was in the business I was in, see? Without that hard-nosed experience of reality, you can't do shit. You can't sell shit. And selling shit was what I did for a living ...

(HE looks around forlornly)

Now I'm not complaining about being here, because we all end up here sooner or later. I mean, it is only a matter of... sooner or later, right? You get the idea. Anyway, like any guy who does what he has to do, I was only doing my job that day, when it all started ...

(BLACKOUT)

## END OF SCENE 1

### Scene 2

SETTING: HARVEY GILLMAN's Manhattan office.  
A door at stage right. On one corner of his desk is an answering machine and telephone. Stacks of actors' photographs lie scattered over the desk and around the floor.  
A couch at stage left. Behind the desk is a window that gives out onto a view of the city.

AT RISE: Midday. HARVEY paces as HE talks on the cordless telephone.

### HARVEY

Let me see what I ... Let me see what I can ... Let me see what I can do. Not to worry. No ... yes ... no ... I -- no -- it's gonna be ... right, right. I'm telling you, Steve. Yes, I know it could be ... Hey, it's a film, isn't it? A film's a film! ... Not these days ... Hey, don't I know it! ... A three million dollar budget is nothing to sneeze at! For New York, Downtown Cinema Corporation is ... anything with his name on it ... look at that flick he bankrolled, the one written and directed by what's his name, the guy from Jersey ... you know, he was in, what was it, like Batman or something, as a t.v. reporter, something like that ... I know, I know. I hear you. Not to worry! You will get what you need. And you will get it from this agency, hear? I promise you, Steve. Ay - - I ever let you down before? Steve -- Steven -- "Streets of Night?" Streets of Night. Remember? ... Okay ... Hm? what?

(HE looks out the window)

Already looked at a handful ... I'm looking at some more ... today ... I know you haven't been happy with what I've sent over so far ... me neither ... what the hell, sometimes it takes a while ... Look ... yeah -- O --

(A "buzzer" sounds. HARVEY presses a button)

Yeah?

VOICE OF SHARON STRIKER

Sharon Striker? I'm here to see Mister Gillman?

HARVEY

Yeah. Okay. Suite 501.

(HE presses another button)

Steve. Gotta go. I got another one here, on her way up. Maybe she's the one.

(HE presses another button)

Okay. Come on up.

(HE presses the first button)

Steve. I'll let you know ... A few more today. Soon as I know ... Right ... Right ... Right ... Right.  
Later.

(HARVEY replaces the receiver in its cradle and sits behind his desk. HE begins to shuffle through a fat stack of photos. The door opens and in walks SHARON STRIKER, a jittery, eager-to-please woman smack on the verge of middle age. HARVEY looks her up and down as if he were evaluating a piece of meat)

SHARON

(Extending her hand)

I'm Sharon Striker. Pleased to meet you, Mister Gillman. Thank you so much for having me in today. I --

HARVEY

(Shuffling through his stack until HE finds SHARON's photo)

Hm-mm. Right. Uh-huh. Okay. Sharon Striker --

(Looking from the photo to SHARON)

You don't look exactly like your picture.

SHARON

(Nervously)

No? No one's ever told me that before.

HARVEY

You look ... older. Who you been dealing with, huh?

SHARON

Well. Uh. No one agent in particular.

HARVEY

You gotta be careful who you listen to. You freelance?

SHARON

What? Y- Yes. I freelance.

HARVEY

Mm-hm.

(Turning the photo over and scanning  
SHARON's credits)

Okay. Now I remember. Mm-hm ... This production of Streetcar. Where exactly is "Stage Two?"

SHARON

"Stage Two?" In, uh, Sussex County, New Jersey.

HARVEY

Jersey. Mm-hm. All right ... okay ... now what they're looking for, for this film ... is, uh, a female to play a waitress in a diner, okay? They'll consider someone without much of a resume so long as she's good. So long as she's right. And Steve Albright, the casting director, is interested in a particular type, something waif-like, someone who can play a little beat-up, see? It's a minor role, but an important one, the kind can make the actress who lands it lots of noise. After all, this is an Evan Schwartzman film --

SHARON

(Pausing, stunned)

You mean I'm reading for an Evan Schwartzman film? Wow. I- I'm flattered. I mean, I knew I was reading for a film, but I had no idea it was an Evan --

HARVEY

Yeah, well, I have to keep certain information under wraps, you know? So -- what do you have for me?

SHARON

(Confused)

What do I have for you ... ?

HARVEY

Yeah. Like what do you have to show me? When people come up here that's what they usually --

SHARON

Oh ... Oh! A monologue.

HARVEY

Right. A monologue. Okay. So why don't you let me see --

SHARON

(Looking around)

Right here?

HARVEY

Of course. Sure.

SHARON

Okay ... I just need a second to ...

(SHE closes her eyes and takes a deep  
breath)

HARVEY

(Slightly wearied)  
Take your time ...

SHARON

Okay, okay ...

HARVEY

Wait a -- what's this from? This monologue?

SHARON

Sorry. It's from an Off-off Broadway play called "Sepulveda Shenanigan."

HARVEY

"Sepulveda -- "

SHARON

"Sepulveda Shenanigan." Have you seen it?

(HARVEY shakes his head dumbly)

SHARON (Continued)

It ran downtown for a few months back in the mid-seventies? A friend of a friend was the playwright. Tom Huggins? Actually, he died of AIDS, oh, I don't know, maybe five years ago ...

HARVEY

AIDS. Yeah. That's a tough one. Okay. Let's hear it. Dazzle me.

SHARON

(Anxiously)

All right ...

(Contorting her face and body --  
'getting into character')

"Roland ...

(With an inconsistent Southern accent)

"You really can't leave me like this ... I don't think you understand what it means to me that we've been living here together for four years now. You're everything I have in life, everything ...

(HARVEY becomes quickly bored with the amateurishly stilted and melodramatic performance. HE yawns, then begins riffling through the stack on his desk)

SHARON (Continued)

"I just don't know if I can make it without you. Because all I ever wanted, see, all I ever wanted in my whole life, was for you to love me ... "

(The telephone rings. HARVEY quickly grabs it)

HARVEY

Gillman Agency ... Yeah ... How late?

(HE glances at his watch)

Okay ... Yeah ... All right. Just make sure you're here before four. What time were you scheduled to see me? ... Yeah. Okay. Just make sure it's before four. Right.

(HE hangs up and looks at SHARON, who is crestfallen. For an instant, HARVEY appears to have forgotten who SHE is and what SHE's doing in his office)

HARVEY (Continued)

Sorry. I should have warned you. The phone's gonna ring. My assistant's on vacation --

SHARON

Would you like me to start over?

HARVEY

(Indifferently)

Just ... uh ... just pick up where you left off ...

SHARON

Oh, dear ... where was I ... All right, now I've got it ... "Because all I ever wanted, see, was for you to love me -- "

HARVEY

O-kay. Thanks for coming in, Sharon.

SHARON

But I'm not through --

HARVEY

I've seen all I need to see. Trust me.

SHARON

But ...

HARVEY

Trust me.

SHARON

But ...

HARVEY

It's all about quality, the quality of an actress. And now I got a feel for your quality. Thanks for coming in, Sharon.

(HE rises and shakes SHARON's hand. SHE turns to leave, hesitates, stops, turns to face HARVEY)

SHARON

Can I ask you something?

Sure.

HARVEY

Am I in the running? For this part?

SHARON

Sure. Sure you are.

HARVEY

Really?

SHARON

Of course. Course I have to interview other people, you understand ...

HARVEY

Because I really want this part, Mister Gillman. I really need it. I really have to have the chance to ... especially now that I know that it's an Evan Schwartzman film. Of course, I understand you have to see other people --

HARVEY

I'm telling you ...

SHARON

Now I will admit to you ... I'm really just getting started in this business. I mean, I've done things, I've worked, but --

HARVEY

In Jersey.

SHARON

Well -- yes ...

HARVEY

Right, in Jersey.

SHARON

But I've done other things, too. I've been in movies, I mean, you've seen my resume.

HARVEY

Yeah? What movies?

SHARON

Well, Litigation ...

HARVEY

Litigation? With Michael Douglas ... As who? I mean, who'd you play?

SHARON

Well — actually -- I didn't have a name. I was an extra. Though I was singled out to deliver a line when the Michael Douglas character came into the courtroom to address the jury, which nearly got me into the union. But it ended up on the cutting room floor ...

HARVEY

It happens ...

SHARON

That one was probably the best known ... Then I was out of commission -- sick in the hospital for a while ... And I need to get something -- bigger -- something more than extra work at this point in my career ...

HARVEY

Sure.

SHARON

And you think that you can get me into this audition, for this Evan Schwartzman film --

HARVEY

We'll see what happens. Now if you'll ex --

(The phone rings and HE grabs it)

Gillman ... Steve ... just now ... uh ... probably not ... I don't think so ... I promise you, you'll have something from --

(HE suddenly notices SHARON standing there)

HARVEY (Continued)

(Cupping his hand over the mouthpiece)

Thanks, Sandy ...

SHARON

Sharon.

HARVEY

Sorry. Sharon.

SHARON

Thanks, Mister Gillman. I appreciate it, I really do. Just as long as you think there's a real chance that --

HARVEY

(Into the receiver)

Listen, I promise you ...

SHARON

Thank you. Thank you so very ...

HARVEY

Bye now ...

(HE waves at SHARON)

SHARON

I hope to be hearing from you soon ...  
(SHE exits)

HARVEY

Steve? -- You there? You'll have what you need by the end of the week ... What? Nothing ... nobody, some community theater actress who I thought might be ...  
(HE rolls his eyes)

I mean she's one of those losers who's been to every acting class advertised in the trades, and nothing's ever gonna help ... But you never know ... sometimes you find something ... No, no, I don't think so ... I mean nothing you'd be interested in. Nothing I'd be interested in ... She didn't look like anything, if you wanna know ... I got somebody else coming up in fifteen minutes ...

(Glancing at his watch)

Hey, Steve -- I'm telling you, okay?

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE 2

Scene 3

SETTING: The afterlife.

AT RISE: HARVEY in the mist.

HARVEY

Okay. So when I first saw her picture, I thought I might want to fuck her. I mean, it's not an uncommon thing to want to do if you're a straight guy working this business in New York City. Sometimes you get fooled. I got fooled. The deal with the picture. It happens. It wasn't the first time. It's a business of illusion. But when she came up to the office I changed my mind. That bit about the hospital ... I didn't pay attention to it at the time ... in one ear and out the other ... You know, I wasn't thinking. I mean, you say things. You never know when you might want to use somebody for something else. Extra work, say. There's always a need for extras. They don't want to be extras, but what are you gonna do? It was an honest mistake, when all was said and done. I was making a promise to Steve. She thought I was making her a promise, see?

(Beat)

I wasn't thinking. And you have got to think.

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE 3

Zsolt Alapi interviews Mark SaFranko (continued)



**ZA:** In his introduction to *Lounge Lizard*, Dan Fante talks about being "pissed off" at the American publishing industry for failing to acknowledge your talent. Why do you feel it has been difficult for your work to be published in the U.S.?

**SaFranko:** God bless Dan. But first of all, it's only been my novels that have been unwelcome in the United States. I've published well over 50 stories in many different types of American magazines, from the commercial and mainstream to the marginal and offbeat. My plays have been seen on many New York and Irish stages over the years. But when it comes to my novels, no. I think that the reasons for this are complex. First, I don't fit the profile of the typical successful American novelist. No MFA, no writing workshops, no Ivy League degree. Moreover, the writers I've admired are either European, Simenon and Balzac and Hamsun, or American exiles, like Highsmith, Paul Bowles, Henry Miller. If the editors at the big houses are largely young females and I'm seen as a misogynist, that's not a great match, right? If the vast majority of readers in the US are women — and that's a fact — then I don't fit into the plan. If most of the books published by men in America are "ladies' books" — in other words really intended for a female audience whether or not they're written by women or men — then I'm in trouble. Those, I believe, are at least some of the reasons I'm not wanted in the US. What's enormously frustrating for me is that the vast majority of my novels, another eight or ten, haven't been able to find a home. And that's a lot of unread work.

**hard logic**

Can we ever understand the pattern of a life? Or is it a rank illusion to say "Last week was a bad week" given that most of the time we don't know what the hell is killing us and/or what is helping us thrive and grow, given the nature of reality. Which when you get right down to it is like the guts of a kaleidoscope in motion or the shifting sands of the Gobi

Whatever comes to us, comes from an unforeseen quarter.

Love. Good luck. Cancer. The other horrible stuff. What you are doing with your life is not really what you should be doing with it or what you think you should be doing with it and so on and so forth. Maybe your entire existence is one big mistake.

Then again when you get right down to it you could be wrong

Once you look it's easy to see

Like the moon shot into an enormous black sky when you have not anticipated its presence

Like the fly on my jacket lapel, which has appeared out of nowhere in this café down by the waterfront

And when Death that miserable bastard shows its face  
 And my eyes close for the last time  
 There will be nothing  
 Nothing

But one more lousy mystery

Zsolt Alapi interviews Mark SaFranko (continued)



**ZA:** Your novels are graphically sexual. Did you intend the sex to be erotic or pornographic?

**SaFranko:** In *Hating Olivia*, the sex descriptions were intended to add to the honesty of the narrative. So many times I find so-called "sexually graphic" descriptions in literature to be little more than superficial. In *Lounge Lizard* the point was to demonstrate that an addiction or obsession can twist what should be pleasant into something less. But then sex in itself is an animalistic ritual, isn't it? So why the window dressing? Rather than either pornographic or erotic, the intention was actually something quite different – to portray a facet of a single character at a given point in time. Incidentally, outside of the Zajack novels, you wouldn't find much sex in any of my work.

**ZA:** How would you want people to remember Mark SaFranko, the writer?

**SaFranko:** As multifaceted. I'm a playwright, a short story writer, an occasional poet and essayist as well as a novelist. I'm a songwriter and musician. I've worked as an actor. Sometimes I paint. I've always been fascinated by artists who have successfully crossed back and forth between disciplines: Noel Coward, Bob Dylan, Anthony Burgess, Da Vinci, Cocteau, Paul Bowles, Charlie Chaplin, etc. I've simply not been able to prevent myself from succumbing to the lure of the guitar, or the paint brush or whatever. Nevertheless, I get out of bed seven days a week and go straight to the typewriter, even when I have to report to a bad job. Writing is the core for me. But of course there's this: once I'm dead, will I care how or if anyone remembers me? I don't think that anyone, Shakespeare included, could take himself that seriously.

### **apology (love lives forever)**

This semi-autobiographical song written by Mark, is from the 2007 album STRANGERS IN MY BED (River Jack Records, 2007) and available on iTunes. Vocals, six and 12-string electric and acoustic guitars, bass, drums -- Mark SaFranko.

Lyrics:

Traded in my guitar for a typewriter  
 In another lifetime long ago  
 Things didn't work out for me in Havana  
 So when I saw that big boat I had to go

Love lives forever  
 But it lives only in your mind  
 So if you pass me on the river  
 Think of me as blind

Never got to that sunny Greek island in the ocean  
 Where I told you to lie low and wait for me  
 I'm not a wanted man anymore on a poster  
 Besides you were always a better traveler than me

Love lives forever  
 But it lives only in your mind  
 So if you pass me on the river  
 Think of me as blind

Got a wife and a kid and a house in the suburbs  
 Where I swore to you I'd never be  
 But sometimes life grinds you all the way down into powder  
 Which is all that's left of me

Love lives forever  
 But it lives only in your mind  
 So if you pass me on the river  
 Think of me as blind

### **forget him and stay behind**

This version of an instrumental, originally written by Mark in 1974, was recorded in 2008 and is from the forthcoming album I STILL DON'T KNOW WHO I AM (River Jack Records 2008). All the instruments -- acoustic and classical guitars, percussion, violin -- Mark SaFranko.

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