



My Life As A Phone Book

A Collection of Short Stories

By Richard Miller

He thought and he thought
Until his head grew quite sore
So he gave it a good rub
And then he thought some more

He thought about this
And he thought about that
Why, he even thought about his good friend
The cat in the hat

He thought about the tree
That grew in his yard
Then he thought about his mattress
Of which he considered too hard

He thought about the things
That live in the sea
And then he thought if he were a tree
Which kind would he be

But of all the things he thought of
None simply would do
What the Grinch was looking for
He hadn't a clue

"Perhaps I'll write a story
About a mysterious green fish
One, that when caught
Would grant you a wish"

"Or maybe I'll write a story
About a magical old car
One that can fly you to places
Both quite near or quite far"

But nothing the Grinch thought of
Urged him to write
So, he began pacing the floor
And pace it he did, all night

Then suddenly, he stopped
As his face filled with delight
For he had an idea for a story
And one that was just right

"Why, what a wonderful idea
For all the time that it took
I think I'll write a story
About the life of a book"

"A phone book, no less
And all the stories it contains
So putting words on paper now
Is all that remains"

Introduction

Chapter 1

That's right. A book about a book. And not just any book, mind you, but a phone book of all things. Now I ask you, how stupid is that?

Yeah. That's what I said.

At first, anyway.

That is, until I realized that it's not as stupid as you might think. After all, *you're* reading it, aren't you? But then, what does that say about *you*?

Uh-huh. Don't you just hate that? The moment you realize you're one of 'them'? One of the stupid people? Sure, you do. You hate it. You hate it because suddenly, all the pretenses and self-delusions in your life go away, and you're left with no other choice than to face the hard, ugly truth about yourself, suddenly realizing that for the rest of your life, the title of every book you read will end with the words 'for retards like me'...

You: "Excuse me, do you have that new book?"

Barnes and Noble employee slapping self on forehead: "Sheez, not another one. Like, what is this? Stupid People Day or something, and I missed the memo? Look, bud, we got all kinds of new books. It's what we do here. You're gonna have to help me out a little and narrow it down just a tad. Like, what's the title?"

"Oh yeah, sorry. How to Operate a TV Remote for Retards Like Me."

"No, sorry. Haven't got that one in yet. But, I do have a new arrival that you might be interested in."

Reaches under counter and produces a copy of 'My Life as A Phone Book'. The customer's face lights with excitement..."

Oh, wow! That sounds ssssoooo stupid! I'll take it!"

Cha. Fucking. Ching.

Lots of stupid people out there, and the thing is, some of them know how to read, like YOU. Lotsa money to be made there, lots. That's a hhhuuugggeee market when you stop and think about it. I mean, you people are literally lined up at the curb waving fists full of greenbacks, saying, 'Hey, looka! We're stupid people. Please take our money! Write a stupid book. We'll buy it!'

So, can you blame the guy? The author? For sticking his bucket under *that* money faucet? No, of course not. Besides, if it wasn't him taking advantage of you, it'd just be someone else. Because face it, as long as there's

stupid people money to be had, there'll be people figuring out ways to take it. People like TV evangelists and 1-800 psychics, for example, not to mention the phone sex hotlines.

Yeah, the sex hotlines.

(laughs) What a joke – late night commercials featuring hot, eighteen-year-olds wearing skimpy, see-through lingerie, and bent in your favorite porno poses; super close-ups of their 'fuck me' red mouths opening in slo-mo...

You know the ones I'm talking about. You should. You spend enough money calling them. Well, now, wanna know what you're *really* spending your money on? What the woman on the other end of the phone *really* looks like? I don't mean the photo she emails or texts you. I'm talking about a *real* picture of her.

(holds up a Polaroid)

That's right. An ass-ugly, wart infested, three-hundred-pound, Sasquatch gas bag stuffing her fat, mole encrusted face with yet another Bean Burrito El Grande (buys them by the family 12-pack), all the while, seducing your stupid ass with her best 'young slut' voice between bites.

What??? Your mom!?! Oh man, sorry about that. My bad, but I mean, who woulda thunk it, right? Like, what are the odds? You can take a moment to vomit if you like. I'll wait.

(whistles, taps foot, drums fingers, studies strange stains on the ceiling)

♪ Dum de dum dum ♪ didi do didi ♪ do dum de ♪ dum dum do di...

Ah! I see you made it back! Good. Now, where was I... Oh, yeah - like I was saying, lotsa stupid people money out there just waiting to be had. And know what? There are as many stupid people scams out there as there are stupid people waiting to fork their money over. For instance, the powdered water commercials come to mind. Remember them?

(Billy Maze wannabe pitchman standing behind kitchen island with a sink and faucet in it)

"That's right, friends! No more carrying clumsy water bottles. No more hauling water jugs, 5-gallon water coolers, canteens... All you ever need again to enjoy the instant benefits of cool, clear, refreshing water is THIS!"

(reaches in top pocket and pulls out a small, 8-ounce packet about the same size as a hot cocoa pack. Holds it up for the camera. Camera zooms in, making packet printing clearly readable: POWDERED WATER. Just add H2O. Tears off top and dumps contents - a whitish powder in this case - into a tall, crystal glass. Places glass under faucet and fills it almost to the brim. Brings it to his lips and drains the glass in a single, long gulp. Lowers glass and smacks his newly refreshed lips.)

"Aaaahhhhhh! So refreshing! But don't take my word for it, listen to what our customers are saying..."

(Framed closeup of a bleach blonde bimbo with a fake Dolly Parton smile plastered across her face, holding a drained, droplet-covered drinking glass next to her overly blushed cheek.)

"Looks and tastes like the real thing!"

(She winks, and the breeze caused by her hubcap-sized fake eyelashes could be felt by the viewing audience at home. Screen cuts to distinguished looking guy in business suit carrying briefcase. Poker face. Could be a lawyer, could be a CEO. Holds up two packets.)

"I never go anywhere without them. Essential must-haves, in my professional opinion."

(cuts back to pitchman)

"There you have it, folks! Real testimonials from real people just like you! But wait! That's not all! There's more!"

(walks to 5-gallon water cooler. tears top off of a single packet)

"Not only does Pack-A-Wawa really work, but it's economical to use as well. Saves you hundreds and hundreds of dollars over the designer bottled water you're buying now!"

(pours contents of packet into cooler. grabs garden hose, turns nozzle on, and begins filling the Igloo.)

"One single 8-ounce packet can make a glass, a jug, or even a 5-gallon cooler like this one! Fast and easy!"

(turns nozzle off, drops hose. dips glass in cooler and again, drains it in a single gulp. smacks lips.)

"Aaaahhhhhh! Sssoooo refreshing! And you can be refreshed too by taking advantage of this limited time offer while supplies last. So why not pick up the phone and order yours today at our super low introductory prices? Operators are standing by!"

(holds glass out toward camera. camera zooms in, while at the same time, the screen slowly fades to white. a 1-800 number appears across the entire screen.)

Yeah, powdered water. Brilliant. Simply brilliant. But as ingenious as the powdered water scam was, it can't hold a candle to my all-time favorite, the legendary sea monkeys. Remember them? Used to be advertised in the back of comic books along with a lotta other stupid shit? Shit like x-ray specs (lets you see through women's clothing), whoopee cushions (fake farts), fake dog poo (rubber, pet dogs hated it), foaming chewing gum (active ingredient known to cause cancer), vampire fangs (yeah, right), exploding cigarettes (record eye injuries recorded by hospitals), itching powder (another carcinogen)... Lotsa stupid stuff for sale in those comics, meaning, lotsa stupid stuff sold, meaning, lotsa stupid people money raked in. Lots. But of all the stupid shit advertised in those old, long forgotten, full page comic ads, the Stupid Award - the 'Oscar', if you will - has to go to the sea monkeys. The one item that stood head and shoulders above all the rest.

Why the sea monkeys? Why do they rate higher than the other stuff?

A few reasons, actually, but mainly, because of the sheer magnitude of the stupid factor involved with this one. Right off the charts. Like, somebody turned the 'Imaidiot' dial all the way up on this one. Not only turned it up, but

broke the knob clean off twisting it. We're talking serious brain impairment stuff here, like the new gold standard in low volume brain activity.

At any rate, here's why they're my favorites...

First of all, you have to keep the time frame in mind here. All of this took place decades before there was such a thing as truth in advertising, and well before the government ever lifted a finger to protect the poor, naive American consumer. We're talking about a time when seat belts were an option most cars didn't even have, while at the same time, dashboards were made out of military grade steel dynamite couldn't dent. Which meant fender benders were usually fatal. It was the days when chain smoking was promoted by movie stars as the sexy new 'in' thing to do, while elsewhere, asbestos was being heralded as the new 'miracle' fiber, meaning it was used to manufacture everything from babies' clothing to breast implants and maxi pads.

And then there was television, a place where guns never ran out of bullets, cops were honest, politicians never lied, and gunshot victims never bled. They just held their arm. Always the arm. Never an eye, a forehead, a knee cap... just the arm. Watching the old westerns and war movies, you wondered if gun sights back then were built that way, to aim for the arm.

Yep, the good ole days. A time, as some of you will recall, when widespread stupidity festered like a disease across the entire country. A disease that would eventually come to serve as the perfect breeding ground for products like the one I mentioned above, the sea monkeys. It was, in fact, the only time in consumer history that something like sea monkeys could have ever even happened.

And happened, they did. More than that, they thrived.

The thing about the sea monkey fad is that it relied on a complete and total lack of common sense. Think about it - monkeys grow in the sea? Like, how'd I miss *that* episode of Wild Kingdom?

And something else. What would a sea monkey look like, even? Scuba mask, swim fins, a snorkel? Really?

Sheez.

The second thing is, the ad actually showed a picture of one. Not a real picture, like a photo or something, but a kind of cartoon version of what one was supposed to look like. And I gotta tell ya, nothing at all what you would expect a sea monkey to look like. No tail, no fur, no long arms, no evil, flesh-tearing monkey fangs...nothing. Instead, this fucking thing looked EXACTLY like a seahorse. EXACTLY. But that wasn't what they were calling them, the sea monkey peddlers. They couldn't. That would have made some kind of sense, raising pet sea horses, and advertising something that made sense just wasn't gonna work for these people.

You see, for them to sell something that made sense would be to, well, attract the wrong type of customers. Customers they didn't want. Customers whose brains actually functioned, meaning that it wouldn't take them long to figure out that what they got for their money wasn't what the comic book had promised them. Not even close.

And to that end, you gotta admire these guys, designing an ad so clever that it would *only* attract the right customers. Retarded customers. People who, as a category, are certain not to complain, ask questions, and most

importantly, demand a refund. In other words, the perfect customer base. In fact, it was this one single element - having retards for customers - that would prove to be the key to the whole sea monkey success story.

Why?

Simple. Point #3.

This is my favorite part, the main reason why sea monkeys go home with the 'stupid' trophy...

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So, you get your mom to make out a check to 'Sea Monkeys R Us' and mail it, then patiently wait the requisite six to eight weeks for your purchase to finally arrive. And what a day that is, or so you were hoping - waiting on the front porch, watching the mailman, just knowing he's gonna put his tiny car in park and grab a small wooden crate from the back, the one with lots of air holes in it - the scene you've pictured in your mind every day for weeks now. It's the reason you rush home from school every day and anxiously wait on the front porch.

But that's not what happens. Oh, sure, the mailman arrives with your package, alright. But there is no tiny wooden crate. No crate, and for sure, no air holes. Just a plain looking envelope that he places in your box, and then raises the little red flag letting you know your sea monkeys have indeed arrived.

So, so disappointing. Like, what kind of monkeys fit in a flat envelope? But, whatever. Money spent, product delivered, you meander your way to the mailbox and collect your precious monkeys of the sea. I mean, what else you gonna do, right?

Right.

Anyway, you carry the envelope inside. You open it carefully so as not to hurt your new pets, and once opened, what you find inside is yet another envelope, a much smaller one, one that appears to be made out of some kind of wax paper. 'Glassine', your mom calls it. Also, along with the wax paper envelope, there's a slip of paper inside with instructions printed on it. The paper reads 'Empty contents of envelope into small fishbowl', which you promptly do, having purchased the bowl weeks ago in anticipation of this moment.

BUT, just before you dump the contents, you take a peek in the envelope to look at your baby monkeys, only, there are none. Just a pile of whitish looking round things. Like tiny balls about the size of the eggs in your ant farm.

And you think...like eggs in my ant farm...

And that's when it hits you - BINGO! These *aren't* sea monkeys. They're sea monkey eggs! Genuine, real-life monkey eggs! Wwwwooo hhhoooo! Sea monkey eggs! Sea monkey eggs! Wwwwooo hhhoooo!

And you're right. Well, almost. At least about the egg part anyway. They're eggs, alright, only not the sea monkey kind. They are, in fact, mosquito eggs. Or, to use the correct terminology, mosquito larvae. Thousands and thousands of them, and as everyone knows - or *should* know - mosquito larvae need water to hatch.

But you don't know they're mosquitoes. All you know is that two days later, you have oodles and oodles of teeny tiny baby sea monkeys, all swimming around frolicking in their new home, your room.

The thing is, these aren't your normal, everyday mosquito larvae. Far from it. These are larvae from an odd strain of mosquito only found in Africa, from within the dark regions of the Congo, and known to produce extremely toxic, highly allergic reactions to anyone not a native of the country. What's more is, not being from this country, they are completely immune to American insecticides and bug repellents. The companies here never once considering the possibility that there may be more resilient, hardier, almost impossible to kill, strains of the pest somewhere.

But you don't know this, any of it. All you know is that your pet sea monkeys are growing at an alarming rate and becoming easier to see and enjoy with each passing day. Before long, you don't even need the magnifying glass to watch them anymore, they're growing so fast.

So you rush home from school every day and run straight to the fishbowl to check on your pets, anxious to see how much bigger they've gotten while you were away. It becomes a daily ritual for you, your routine, even, day after day. That is, until the day you come home only to find the fishbowl empty; that your precious sea monkeys have somehow escaped.

Or, at least you *think* they're gone.

Hard to tell because there's so many mosquitoes in your room, they're almost a cloud in their own right. Tens of thousands - maybe HUNDREDS of thousands - of them. So many, it's hard to see through the dense fog they make, but you try anyway. You swat one, and it's instantly replaced by a hundred others. You do your best to cover up and make your way to the fishbowl to rescue your beloved pets, but you soon find out that the effort is a lost cause. The situation has become nothing short of hopeless, if not downright nightmarish.

Your mom rushes to the rescue, having heard your blood curdling screams from across the house, and begins spraying the room with one of those handheld pump sprayers loaded with bug spray. But it's useless. She may as well be spraying fake pixie dust. No effect whatsoever except to make the mutant mosquito cluster even thicker as they peel themselves from the ceiling and walls to swarm and attack.

So there you are now, you and your mom, standing on the front lawn, watching an army of those mosquito control guys, the ones wearing beekeeper suits, assault the house. You watch as they open windows, set off fogger bombs, swing giant swatters, and literally fight a battle they can't possibly win.

It's only when the second wave of mosquito control trucks arrive - the reinforcements - that you begin noticing things. Bad things, and twenty minutes later, you find yourself in a hospital emergency room with lips inflated like two truck inner tubes. They're the same color, even - black.

Your eyes have swollen shut and are the size of softballs, and your ears are now roughly the size of a home satellite dish. Two of them. One mounted on each side of your head. Your forearms begin to swell so big, they begin to look like two gigantic Vienna sausages, and is the reason everyone starts to call you Popeye.

The team of doctors finally show up, but they're no help. No help at all. They simply stand around looking at you, baffled and clueless. Having never seen anything like this before, they simply scratch their heads and shrug, and do the only thing they can do - give you a bottle of aspirin and send you home. They pat you on the back as

they show you the door, and tell you to get plenty of bed rest and drink lots of fluids. Do that, they say, and you'll be feeling better in no time. No time at all, you'll see.

But it's months before your body returns to normal, or anything like it. Almost a year. It took nearly six months alone for the nightmarish itching to stop, and about the same amount of time for the huge, open sores to close and stop oozing pus. The swelling finally subsided...sort of...meaning that your testicles have shrunk back down to their normal size - that is, if normally, they were the size of bowling balls. Whatever the case, the fact remains that you still can't find your penis. You're not even sure it's still there.

At some point, your elephant-like ears develop a strange, incurable disease and have to be removed, meaning they're no longer an issue. You eventually get your vision back, but it's never quite the same again. You forget what colors are, or, what sharp focus is, or what seeing one of everything was like. Your legs, like your forearms before them, still look like two swollen Vienna sausages, but your mom tells you it will be an advantage should you choose to play professional football one day, and you believe her. You have to, she's your mom.

Across the country, it becomes known as *The Mystery of the Missing Sea Monkeys*, a strange phenomenon that suddenly gripped the country at about the same time kids everywhere began experiencing extreme allergic reactions. From what, exactly, no one knew.

Both these mysteries - the disappearing sea monkeys and the overnight surge in hospitalized kids - suddenly appeared, oddly enough, at about the same time the African mosquito epidemic was running rampant across the country.

All the pieces to the puzzle were there in everyone's face, but no one saw it. No one even bothered to look. It took years before anyone connected those dots - the dots between hideously deformed kids, disappearing sea monkeys, and an inexplicable plague of rare and deadly African mosquitoes.

Strange.

Strange indeed.

By the time the FBI and other government agencies finally figured it all out - had all the pieces to the puzzle in place - the sea monkey peddlers had long since collected their stupid person profits and fled to a country with no extradition laws.

Smart.

Cha-Fucking-Ching (Or however you say it in Bumfucka, Uganda).

Proof once more that there's a lotta stupid people money out there for the taking.

Lots.

Just the way it is.

Which brings me back to the purpose of this book - to relieve stupid people of their money. People like you. But you don't need to feel bad about it, about buying the book, that is, because trust me, you're in good company. Better than good. We ship these things out by the truckloads every day and still can't keep up with demand. Literally can't print them fast enough. And profitable? As if we were printing the money ourselves - 'In Stupid We Trust'.

Thinking about it, maybe I should feel bad about that, taking advantage of stupid people. I should, but I don't. The way I see it is like this - at least reading this book won't cause your body parts to swell up or permanently affect your vision. So there.

But you know what? I said the same thing as you when he first told me about it, about the new book idea. 'Stupid idea', I sez. That is, until he stuck a sheet of paper in that ancient, piece of shit typewriter of his, and went to work. Didn't stop typing until the last page was done. And when it was, the book was finished, and I read the stories, I got to admit. I had to rethink 'stupid'.

And who, exactly, is 'he', you ask?

Who, indeed.

Basically, he's the strangest, most enigmatic, and disturbed individual you're likely to ever meet. Only, *you'll* never meet him. Not a chance. And, even if you did manage to meet him somehow, you could never get to know him. That would require talking to him, and frankly, that's something he never does, talk. Ever. He just writes. Always the writer. Always the observer of life and never the participant. Just how the guy is.

And, I don't know. Maybe that's why he writes to begin with. His way of participating in life without actually having to get involved. No commitments, no investments, no strings, just the lives he creates in fiction, and then vicariously lives through. Nice, neat and clean, not to mention convenient. Wanna be someone else? Wanna be rich? Famous? A rock star? Just roll another sheet into the trusty old Underwood and hammer away. Easy as that.

Gotta hand it to him, pretty cool.

And the real bonus here? Once he finishes writing the story? His new fictitious life? There'll be plenty of stupid people lined up and waiting to buy it. Like I said...

Cha.

Fucking.

Ching.

Not a bad way to make a living when you think about it. Not bad at all. But enough about him, back to me and *my* story.

(sees you looking at him with that look. that 'yeah, right - *your* story' look. the brows furrow, the face twists with rage, and the eyes glare.)

THAT'S RIGHT! (Thumbing his chest.) MY STORY!

OK, sure. (stabbing an unlit cigar at you) Maybe I'm not the one who wrote it, but I'm *sure* as hell the one telling it, so yeah, *MY* story! About *ME!* (pointing cigar at himself, now) Me and my life.

(big sigh)

(he calms, takes a deep breath, and collects himself. he runs a hand over his hair to smooth it, then digs in his pocket and produces a match. he strikes the match and lights the cigar, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger as he puffs it to life. he blows a large, blue cloud and then shakes the match out. He holds the cigar in front of him and studies it, admiring it, and as he does, continues, but mumbles the next words as if saying them only to himself.)

Yeah. *My* life.

(another puff, and the end of the cigar glows bright orange. he savors the smoke for a moment, holding it in, then blows another cloud.)

Yeah.

My life as a phone book.

Chapter 2

OK. So you now know who and what I am, a phone book. And not just any phone book, but one with an attitude - obviously. Why the attitude?

Because. You people just don't get it. You never have, never will, and, well, it pisses me off.

Let me explain...

You see, when someone looks at me, what do you think they see? Well, of course they see a phone book, Einstein. That's not what I meant. What I mean is 'how' do they see me?

I'll tell you how.

When someone thumbs through me, what they see is an endless list of names. Names that seem to go on and on and on, page after boring page. Names that, for the most part, mean nothing to them. Names of people they don't know, or ever plan on knowing. In other words, strangers. People of no particular interest or concern to anyone.

And that's how people see me - a book of unimportant, uninteresting strangers.

And I find that interesting. At the same time, I also find it irritating - the way you people see me. Not that it's an entirely inaccurate view, because it's not. BUT, it would be an incomplete one, for sure. There's another way of looking at me. A much more profound way, and that is, that I am a collection of lives. That's right. A collection of lives. Because, behind each name contained inside me, there is a life. And behind each life, there is a story. An untold story. One YOU don't know.

But I do.

I know the stories. And because I know the stories, who better than me - a phone book - to tell them?

Why?

Because I know the people, is why. Every one of them. Every name listed within my pages, for years and years now: your neighbor, your neighbor's neighbor, his neighbor's neighbor, his neighbor's neighbor's neighbor...all down the line. I know them all. The same way I know you. That's right, I know you. I know everything about you - where you work, what you drive, who you buy your weed from, the name of the receptionist you're banging behind your wife's back...the time you farted in the elevator and tried to blame it on the old man next to you (really?)...

I know it all. And not only you, but I know your family as well: your wife, your kids, your dog...things *you* don't even know about them, but I do.

Yeah.

I even know what it is you do in your basement late at night when you're alone, and you think everyone's sleeping.

Relax already. I'm not going to tell anyone. As far as I'm concerned, what you do is your business, no matter how disturbed, deranged, sick, or utterly disgusting I may find it. *Your* business. So quit looking over your shoulder and chewing your fingernails like that. If the police haven't kicked your door in yet and shot tear gas canisters through your window, they're not going to. Like I said, I'm not gonna be the one to sell you out. Not yet, anyway. But don't push me. I've been known to change my mind.

(takes another satisfying puff)

Anyway, back to what I was saying...

That's what I am, a collection of stories. And while none of the stories in here will ever rival *Gone with the Wind* or something, these are the ones that will stay with you. Maybe for a long time. Maybe forever. Maybe they will even become part of you, of who you are.

Why?

Because these stories are real. Sometimes touching, sometimes gut wrenching, but always - ALWAYS - real. Real *and* profound. Unlike anything you've ever read.

You see, these stories are not about heroes. They are not about the gifted and talented, or the rich and famous. They're not about the beautiful, the privileged, or even about the guy who was in the right place at the right time.

Nothing like that.

They are, instead, stories about everyday, ordinary people like yourself. Nobody's. People who spend their lives struggling, doing their best to simply get through each and every day. The bill payers. The ulcer owners. The people working at jobs they hate, while at the same time, doing their best to keep their marriage together and their affairs in order. They raise their kids, bury their pets, provide for their family, pay their taxes, and all the while, wonder what ever happened to the dreams they once had. People who do not - nor will they ever - have enough time for the things *they'd* like to be doing. And even if they could somehow find the time, they don't have the money.

And never will.

Yeah. Those people. Just your ordinary, everyday working stiffs and their stories. Stories about tears shed, laughs shared, and hearts mended or broken. Stories about dreams that come true, as well as the ones that don't, the ones that shatter like glass, instead. Stories, even, about spending a lifetime looking for that one, elusive true love, and finally finding it, only to discover that it was just another heartbreak in disguise.

Lots and lots of stories to tell, and some of them here in this book.

It's stories, for example, like the one about John, the barber you've used forever, and how he goes home every night to a barely lit living room, alone. No kids, no wife, no TV, no pets, just an empty house that at one time was a home.

But is no more.

And in this empty house, in his loneliness, John the barber thinks. He sits in his recliner in near darkness and thinks about the woman he once loved and married. The one who one day up and left him. Simply walked out of his life without so much as a 'goodbye' or 'see ya'. Just one day gone.

But he still loves her, this woman, and probably always will. Which is why he sits in his chair every night and thinks about her. He thinks about her and wonders, wonders if she's OK. If, wherever she is, whether or not she's happy and doing well. Wonders, even, if maybe she will one day return to him and the home she walked away from so long ago.

And that's what he does, this barber, this lonely man, John. He sits alone at night thinking and wondering, forever searching for answers he'll never find. Answers to questions like...

Why? Why did she leave?

And you know what? The answer - in context, anyway - really wouldn't matter. Whether she left him because she found someone new, or if it was simply that she didn't want to live with him one more day. The exact reason wouldn't even matter so long as he knew what it was.

Because the closest he ever came to knowing the 'why' was a note with a single word written on it – 'Bye'.

So now he spends his days sitting...and thinking...and wondering.

And probably always will.

How sad.

And then there's the story about Stephen, the eighteen-year-old plucked from the loving arms of his girlfriend, only to find himself dumped in the killing fields of Vietnam. You remember Stephen, don't you? The boy you paid to do your yard work every summer? Yeah, him. The boy next door. Did you ever stop to wonder what ever became of him? Why he stopped coming around to cut the grass? No, I didn't think so. That being the case, let me tell you what happened to the poor kid...

Unlike the rest of his platoon, Stephen didn't die that day in the rice paddy when the VC overran his unit. He wasn't that lucky. Don't get me wrong, he was plenty mangled, alright, by a grenade. Only, it wasn't an enemy grenade. It was the grenade his commanding officer pulled the pin from, and then held to his chest, deciding it was time to check out, *his way*. Just couldn't take another moment of the horror, it seems.

Unfortunately, Stephen happened to be in the blast radius at the time. He survived, Stephen did, and what was left of him was dragged off to a POW camp where, for the next fifteen years, he was beaten, tortured, starved, and humiliated on a daily basis. Year after misery filled year. That is, until he was finally released as part of an under the table 'financial aid for POWs' deal the U.S. government had struck with the Vietnamese government.

Finally.

After fifteen long years, he was going home.

His legs were so badly ravaged that he had to be helped down the army transport plane stairway and into the taxi waiting below on the tarmac. The taxi was there to take him from the military airport in New York to the nearest civilian airport, where he would board the plane that would finally take him home.

...take him home.

Home, a place he once thought he would never again see.

Home, where everyone was waiting to throw their loving arms around him and smother him with hugs and kisses, including his girl, Melissa, who, like everyone else, never once gave up hope, knowing in her heart that the day would come when he would return.

And now that day has come. Only, Stephen never did make it home. At least not alive. The taxi he was in got t-boned by a drunk driver on the way to the airport. Killed the taxi driver instantly, but again, Stephen, forever the lucky one, lived a little longer, in a coma he never came out of. Finally died in the hospital a few weeks later, with everyone saying it was for the best. Said at least he made it back home.

Yeah.

(sigh)

And, of course, the drunk driver walked away from the accident without a scratch. Spent two years in prison and was released only to drink, drive, and kill again. This time, a soccer mom and her two lovely daughters.

And that's the kind of stories you'll find in these pages.

...

...

...

...

...

NOT!!!!!!!!!!!!

BBBBWWWAAAAHHHAAA HHHAHHAA HHAA HA HA HHHAHHAA HHAA HA HA

OH, THAT'S FUCKED UP! (doubled over, holding his stomach)

BBBBWWWAAAAHHHAAA HHHAHHAA HHAA HA HA! HHHAHHAA HHAA HA HA

FELL FOR IT, DIDN'T YOU?

BBBBWWAAAAHHHAAA HHHAHHAA HHAA HA HA! HHHAHHAA HHAA HA HA

DID YOU SQUIRT A FEW? YOU DID, DIDN'T YOU?

BBBBWWAAAHHAA HHHAAA HHHA HA HA HA HA!

(calms a bit)

Oh man, that's rich. Toooo fucking funny.

(collects himself. grabs a tissue and dabs his eyes.)

You just gotta love stupid people. You gotta love them because...THEY'RE FUCKING STUPID!

You can tell the dumb fucks ANYTHING and they'll believe it!

Oh, man.

(dabbing his eyes again with the tissue.)

Seriously? You think that's the kind of shit psycho boy here writes? What, like this is the Hallmark Family Hour or something?

BBBBWWAAAHHAA HHHAAA HHHA HA HA HA HA!

Sheez. Tooooo funny.

(puts the tissue away. relights his cigar and puffs it back to life, blowing several clouds of smoke as he does.)

Really had you going, though, didn't I? Don't feel bad. Everyone falls for it. But no, wholesome and heartfelt are not words you're gonna use to describe this guy's stories. Fucked up and disturbed, yeah, but warm and fuzzy? Never gonna happen.

At any rate, that's why I'm here, to tell you the stories. And I gotta tell you, I really don't want to be here doing this shit - entertaining you. I got better things to do with my time, but that's not how Hannibal Lecter here wrote the book. He wrote it with me narrating them, telling them to you in a way that only I can. So, like it or not, you're stuck with me, just like I'm stuck with you. So, that said, how about we both just grin and bear it, and muddle through this thing so I can get back to what I was doing.

And what this means is, at this point, you have a choice: either put the book down and forget you ever met me, or, turn the page.

Your choice.

But I have to tell you - if you do turn the page and read on, one thing's for sure...

You'll never look at a phone book the same way again.

Bet on it.