

*Noisome Beasts*

*An Excerpt*

*By Robert Chatham*

If one must live in New Mexico, Todd thought, one must have ample mouthfuls of onion rings. Fumbling in the greasy yellow carton, he pulled out five enormous, breaded onion rings, and stuffed all of them into his mouth at once. He poured more root beer into his mouth and nearly choked on the mess. Coughing heartily, he spat the masticated slop onto the sidewalk, and then reached for another handful.

Blue skies. Burning heat. Cacti and plains as far as the human eye can possibly see. Todd had lived in New Mexico for eighteen years and still marveled at the stark, barren life that he lived. Gallup was no true home for one of the world's most talented rappers, he'd told himself, his parents, his friends, coworkers, and – on several occasions in the past month alone – begging hobos.

He beamed proudly as he remembered Frank, the homeless gentleman that he'd now spoken to three times. Frank was everything a father should be: open, warm, receptive. "Good rapper, good rapper," he'd repeated to himself earnestly as Todd pressed three dimes and a crumpled dollar bill into his dirty hand. Todd had resisted the urge to hug the grizzled bum only because of the raunchy, eye-watering smell wafting from his dirty red coat.

Todd proudly strutted down the street, smiling broadly, tossing the used fast food carton to the sidewalk. He laughed loudly to show how unconcerned he was, tossed his hair (though, having a crew cut, he appeared to passers-by to be avoiding an angry bee flying too close to his ear), and marched on, arms held stiffly at his sides as he bobbed up and down. Now deep in thought, he worked on his latest opus: a rap song about the prodigious efforts it took to maintain a steady reputation at the Cracker Barrel, the deadly pains of not having any sort of girlfriend, the uncertainty of who his birth parents really were.

Todd choked back a cry as he thought about it. It was far too much for a man as young as

he to endure. It was heart-breaking, and he shouldn't have to deal with it. A tear dripped down his cheek in a startling display of self-pity.

“All that and I still have to work the evening shift at the Cracker Barrel,” he mused furiously. “*Always doing time at the Cracker Barrel...* What rhymes with barrel?” he thought, and then smiled. His mind was a steel trap, always looking for his next amazing rhyme. He'd been inspired to write four stanzas of a new opus, “Fronting with the Cracker Barrel Crew,” and was working daily on the fifth verse.

And, deep in thought, he continued his steady pace. He ran his greasy hands through his hair, trying to simultaneously wipe them clean and give his crew cut an impressive sheen. He stopped and dumped the last of the root beer on the street. He stood nervously before the Cracker Barrel. One of Gallup's most austere attractions, it loomed over the milling citizens like a squat southern woman dolefully partitioning out handfuls of biscuits and salt pork. The hideous facility where Todd worked for slave-labor wages. Was he really set for the day? He reached into his pockets and felt around: a slim wallet with a picture of Batman, a tube of lip balm, a little baggie full of Honey Nut Cheerios, his pocket notebook, an ink pen. Yes, Todd was definitely set.

Sighing heavily, he walked in, grabbed his apron, and cinched it around his waist. He yawned. It looked to be a long, tiring day. There were already five customers in the dining area, and no doubt they would all probably want him to bring food, or something. How would he balance their drink refills with the careful attention that his rap opus so greatly deserved? He shrugged and grabbed a pad to write down orders. He was readying himself to greet the first table of customers when a large, hairy hand clapped down on his shoulder.

“Sanders,” barked his supervisor, Mr. Jacobs. Mr. Jacobs was forty years old but still worked a job just a step above minimum wage. He also wore polo shirts at least two sizes too

small. “Do you know how late you are today?”

Todd did not know. He had to repeat third grade twice because he could not tell the hour hand from the minute hand on the mimeographed worksheets. He also had trouble remembering that when the minute hand pointed to the “2”, it actually meant 10 minutes. After his third go-round, they just told him to stick to digital watches and moved him forward out of pity. The only problem was that the cheap five dollar digital watches that Todd bought always managed to drown themselves in soapy water when he was forced to wash the dishes at the Cracker Barrel. After digital watch number four – his personal favorite, a pink-and-green number – had passed away, he’d cried for half an hour. Never again, he had promised himself. I can’t do it. I’m just not that strong.

Todd was paralyzed by surprise and bewilderment, but finally managed to regain his voice. “Thirty minutes?” Todd guessed.

“Eight minutes, wise-ass,” snarled Mr. Jacobs. “Sanders, let me clue you in. Four o’clock is when it all begins. People get off work early, they want to celebrate, want to take the wifey and kids out for a big family meal.”

Todd nodded furiously, his mind working: “*Big family meal / ...*” and his mind went blank. On the spot improvisation, or freestyling, was not his strong suit. He knew that each word, each line, each syllable of his raps was something to cherish and to really ponder. “But what rhymes with meal?” he thought desperately, drowning out the rest of Mr. Jacob’s words.

“So you get out there,” finished Mr. Jacobs, “and you take those orders.” He began snapping his fingers in front of Todd’s nose. “Come-on-come-on! People come here, they want drinks!” he shouted. “Drinks and bread! That’s how we get ‘em! So go take care of them and let’s get moving.” He clapped his hands loudly, while the surrounding staff members ignored

him. Every human has the instinctual urge to block out anyone who shouts the words “Let’s go, people,” which happened to be one of Mr. Jacob’s favorite things to bellow at his employees. He’d heard the phrase in a movie once, as a child, and the words had seared their way into his brain as symbols of power and might. He dreamed himself a general, a brilliant magnate whose lackeys and gophers sat limply, waiting for his stentorian command.

Todd cleared his throat and nodded, walking into the dining area. He was on his game at once; though there were only five seated tables and he was only responsible for two of them, he knew that the best waiters treated their customers like kings and princes. He needed his job, he reminded himself: he needed his savings. He had \$324.79 so far, and with that seed, he decided, he’d grow the vine that was his future. First, he decided, he’d buy a car – not a rusted green Ford like his best friend Edgar bought from his cousin, but a sweet red convertible. A rapper needed a car with gigantic, revolving, sparkling rims; a rapper was a poet, and his wheels were his punctuation.

“Thank you for choosing Cracker Barrel,” he announced. “My name is Todd. May I take your drink orders, please?” The customers spoke and he wrote, and every word they spoke flowed through his pen and onto the paper like the beat of some unbelievable rhyme that was just begging to be born into the world and spoken with conviction.

And with the red convertible, fame, women, and his own apartment would arrive. His parents would knock on his door, crying miserably, “Please let us move in with you!” “GET OUT OF HERE, YOU’RE SIXTY YEARS OLD,” he’d shout at them in a victorious voice, and he’d watch them for about six seconds to see their eyes widen in recognition at their own words distorted and thrown back at them, and then he’d slam the door in their faces.

Back to the kitchen to fill the drink orders. He’d be famous in his own time, like some

brilliant prince raised by peasants and serfs and placed rightly upon the throne as a grown man, recognized by the noblemen and women as someone incredibly amazing and with a really sweet set of wheels. He smiled wistfully to himself as he set down the sweet tea and the ice water with lemon in front of the two customers at table number four.

The dull blonde with the wrinkled brow stared hatefully at the ice water in front of her. “What the hell is this,” she muttered slowly and quietly to herself, and then shrieked it to the room at the top of her lungs. “*WHAT the HELL is THIS?!*”

Todd stepped back, eyeballing the beverage. Was there an insect in her water? He hoped that was all it was. If it was a spider or a piece of green bell pepper, he’d have to run back to the kitchen, shrieking and terrified.

“LEMON,” the woman hissed, and pushed the glass off the table. The plastic tumbler hit the floor, ice and water and a lemon wedge scattering. The cup bounced once, solemnly, and then rested amidst the mess.

“If I wanted lemon, I would have said lemon,” the dull blonde told him. The brunette across from her smirked and crossed her arms. “I’M the one who asked for lemon,” she murmured scornfully, but the blonde paid her no attention.

“Get me your manager. Get him out here, get him out here now,” the blonde hissed. Todd stepped back, taken aback. From dreams of convertibles to cold water pooling around his sneakers in less than thirty seconds was, for him, a personal record. Meanwhile, the entire room – customers and servers alike – was staring at the trio. The blonde snapped her fingers aggressively at him, shouting “*Andele, andele!*” At that very moment, Mr. Jacobs walked through the swinging doors from the kitchen, looked at Todd, scowled, and began making his way over to the table.

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Fired! Todd felt a strange, burning combination of broken-heartedness and elation. It was a shame; he'd worked at the Cracker Barrel for six weeks, longer than any other job he'd ever had. He smiled wistfully to himself, nostalgia building in his heart, clogging his arteries. He felt like crying again. Todd cried, on average, three times a day, so he was very close to reaching his daily limit, and it wasn't even 5:00 yet.

He couldn't afford self-pity, he decided. He had to be a man. Steeling himself, he remembered how angry he was when his mother had demanded that he go down and apply to the Cracker Barrel. If only she'd had the foresight to see his heartbreak when it was discovered that he was obviously overqualified for the position! Todd pulled out his little notebook and wrote: "*Cracker Barrel: I was overqualified...*" He chewed the tip of the pen that he'd reluctantly stolen from the counter on his way out the door, Mr. Jacobs shouting the whole time. And suddenly, a brief smile lit his face as he finished the line: "*To serve to chicks some food that's fried.*" He practically danced down the street, delighted. It was rare that he was able to complete a really amazing rhyme so quickly. This was definitely going into his opus.

Or was it? A gnawing fear crept into Todd. What if he hadn't worked long enough to truly gain the experience necessary to write such a grim exposé? What if his rap sounded paltry, sounded too hollow and naïve? He was an exacting man; he couldn't settle for mediocrity. What if his work was stalled, dead, worthless?

It was his parents' fault! If they hadn't forced him into indentured servitude, he'd still be at home, working on his album! He cursed a little and then felt bad. What good was labeling one's self a cuss-free rapper if one was going to have that kind of attitude when the tapes weren't rolling?

He slapped himself on the back of his hand harshly, still slowly shuffling his way down the street. He did not relish the idea of returning to his parents' house and admitting to them that it was all a mistake. He could almost hear his father's snort of dismissal, could practically see his mother roll her eyes. It wasn't enough that he'd tried, that he'd really made an effort at being a model employee, that he'd become near a hero to the entire staff at the Cracker Barrel with his modesty and charm and resolve. They'd essentially carried him around on their shoulders – cooks, bus boys, dish washers, and waitresses – when he'd loudly recited his latest rap song (“Sources of Fiber”) at closing time one evening. He was definitely their hero, and he wouldn't forget that, especially when he was composing the chorus to his opus.

Yet every single time he'd tried to share his creative output, his father held the newspaper close to his face as if he were trying to study the very dots that made up the typeface; his mother turned up the volume so that Dan Rather's voice shook the windows and the next-door neighbor gave them the finger as he walked to get the evening mail.

Were they even really his parents, Todd wondered, and not for the first time. They didn't know him, didn't understand him. And did they even really look like him? Todd had a thick mop of brown, tangled hair (or, rather, he had before his mother had shorn it all off with a pair of electric hair clippers as a punishment for the last time he'd been fired), while Todd's father was bald. Todd's mother was a girl, so Todd knew he didn't look like her at all. Probably he was adopted, Todd reasoned with himself for the fifth time that day.

He knew who he really wanted as his father, had known for over half his life. He still remembered the feeling he had when he first heard the stern, authoritative voice of the actor Reginald VelJohnson saying – no, commanding – “Go home, Steve. Go home, go home, go home.”

Reginald VelJohnson, the bright, shining star of the television show “Family Matters” was everything that his parents were not. As Carl Winslow, he was kind, wise, strict, and a man that Todd could respect. Unlike Todd’s so-called father, who merely worked as a customer service representative at a local bank, Carl was a police officer. He had a real career fighting real criminals.

And Carl knew how to listen, unlike Todd’s father. One day, in a fit of brilliance, Todd came up with the ultimate brilliant idea: it would make his father millions – maybe billions – in commissions. “Put this up on your marquee,” Todd ordered his father. “*“Tu Pac is alive in the bank basement. Great interest rates on CDs.”*” When his father protested, saying that he could not put a rumor about a dead rap star on a bank advertisement, Todd stomped his foot in fury. “Look! Just listen. I don’t know if Tu Pac is alive. You don’t either. No one does, not really. But listen – if just one person comes in and asks about it – that’s a customer you didn’t have before.” It was brilliant, infallible. But Todd’s father just shook his head and opened the paper again.

Carl Winslow – Reginald, really – would have listened carefully. He would have taken proper notes and thanked his son profusely and typed up a proposal to his supervisor. He would have driven Todd to the marquee and stood beside him with his arm around Todd’s shoulders, staring proudly at the brainchild of his son, as customers stormed the doors of the bank and all but threw their money into the tellers’ faces. Todd nearly wept with the unfairness of it all.

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He trudged up to the front door, wiping his feet carefully on the front mat, which greeted him with a cheerful “Welcome to our Humble Home!” It was hideous, a mauve and tan weave that his mother had purchased at the local dollar store.

Inside, he could hear the television blaring and his mother loudly yapping to herself about

the various women on television who had offended her that afternoon. He rolled his eyes desperately, imagining telling his mother that he'd been fired. Her look of concern, her tears, the conversations with his father, and, later, the accusations and hair trimmer. He held his stomach with disgust. No, now was definitely not the time for his mother to discover he'd been fired. Could he sneak upstairs without notice?

The answer was yes, absolutely. He snuck up to his room and took inventory. One black-and-white television adorned with a pair of aluminum-foil covered rabbit ears. One mini shelf full of albums from his favorite bands (Van Halen, Aerosmith, and Barry Manilow were his current favorites, but he had a wide selection that also included some Sugarhill Gang records and – his crown possession – a 45 single of the song “Bad Company” by the band “Bad Company”). A twin sized bed, his laundry basket, two trashcans (neatly emptied, he happily noticed), another shelf holding his absolute best model tanks. Six – no, wait. Five bags of cheese puff snacks.

Five.

Suddenly, Todd could not breathe, he was so furious. Bellowing in absolute madness, he stomped down the stairs to the living room.

“ALL RIGHT,” he shouted loudly. His mother, still complaining to herself, immediately froze and then unfroze long enough to turn around to look at him. The television blared advertisements for cough drops in the background, oblivious to the shrieking.

“WHEN I LEFT FOR GOING TO THE MALL AND THEN WALKING AROUND DOWNTOWN AND THEN GOING TO BURGER KING FOR A SUPER LATE LUNCH AND THEN DOWN TO WORK AT THE CRACKER BARREL, I HAD SIX BAGS OF CHEESE PUFF SNACKS IN MY ROOM. SIX BAGS, I PAID OUT OF MY ALLOWANCE AND THE MONEY I GOT FROM CRACKER BARREL, THAT WAS A DOLLAR TWENTY FIVE A

BAG AND NOW THEY'RE ALL GONE. WELL, ONE OF THEM IS.”

Mrs. Sanders, his mother, wore a pink bathrobe over a bleach-stained t-shirt and a pair of faded navy sweatpants that were probably older than Todd. Her mouth opened and worked, trying to make some sort of pathetic explanation, but Todd wasn't through, not by a long shot.

“THIS IS HOW YOU TREAT ME, THIS IS HOW YOU ALL TREAT ME, LIKE I'M JUST A SNACK HOARD THAT'S READY TO BE RAIDED WHENEVER YOU TAKE OUT MY TRASH FOR ME. GOD, I HATE YOU!!! I HATE YOU ALL!!!”

Todd's mother continued to stare, her mouth agape, completely and totally flummoxed.

“HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU DO THAT!!!” Todd shouted. “THIS IS THE STUPIDEST DAY OF MY LIFE!!! GOD!!!”

Todd's mother, realizing her son was leaving an empty space between his sentences so that she could muster a defense, spoke up hesitantly. “I – I don't know what happened to your food, Todd,” she faltered. “The only thing that happened is I went to your room to take out your trash and - “

“AND YOU HAPPENED TO SEE MY SNACKS AND THOUGHT YOU'D HELP YOURSELF!” Todd shouted emphatically. He stomped his foot as hard as he could. “YOU AREN'T EVEN MY REAL PARENTS, MY REAL PARENTS WOULDN'T EAT ALL MY SNACKS AND LEAVE ME HUNGRY AND TIRED RIGHT AFTER A LONG DAY AT WORK!”

“I didn't take your snacks, Todd!” cried Mrs. Sanders. “And don't say I'm not your real mother! That's not true; it's hurtful and you know it. Your father and I showed you the birth certificate. You can't run away from us just because you're having a hard time!”

“SHUT UP, FOSTER MOM,” Todd shouted. “I'M DONE WITH ALL OF YOU! I'M

LEAVING! I'M GOING TO FIND MY REAL FAMILY, AND THEY'LL KNOW WHAT TO DO. WHEN I GET FIRED, REGINALD WILL SIT ME DOWN AND HAVE A TALK ABOUT HOW I CAN LEARN AND GROW FROM THE EXPERIENCE, AND THEN HE'LL SMILE AND SHOUT AT THE NEIGHBOR KID, AND WE'LL ALL LAUGH."

"Who's Reginald?" Todd's mother asked tearfully. Todd stared at her for a minute, eyes glowing pale blue. Then he turned on his heel and walked out the front door, slamming it so hard that the wreath on the back fell onto the floor.