

Stan Slade and the Case of the Killer MEME

By John DiFelice

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It was the worst idea in the history of worst ideas. That's what they had called it. It was meant as an insult, but to Stan it was the highest form of praise. Bad ideas were the stickiest kind, with an M-R5 rating on the Dawkins Scale. He could still hear the voice of his first memetics teacher, Professor Nitsche, echo through the vast emptiness of the Blackmore Auditorium.

"The human mind remembers the best and worst of things," he said between shameful glances at the young women scribbling away in the front row. "It remembers the edges of the bell curve."

If there were any truth to what Nitsche had taught him, then everyone in the world would remember the day Stan Slade came to Philadelphia. What lay inside Stan's head was an idea so revolutionary it would push the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution to footnote status in Philadelphia's history. Stan came in search of a meme-gene crossover, something postulated by only the most fearless memetic researchers but something that had never been observed. The brightest minds in genetics, memetics, and human physiology said a meme-gene crossover was impossible. Proposing otherwise risked all credibility, tantamount to a public request to halt funding or publication in even the most irrelevant journals. But as is often the case with things deemed scientifically impossible, they become possible with the utterance of the statement.

Stan raised his head against the shadow cast by the brim of his hat revealing weathered eyes that had seen too much, eyes that had looked outward and then inward and couldn't decide from which to turn. They scanned the darkening skyline of the city and fixed on the two sharp peaks of the Liberty Towers. Stan hunched his shoulders against a cold gust of April wind before he snapped the broad lapel of his rain coat up around his neck. He lowered the brim of his hat once more, pausing a second to

enjoy the feel of the black felt between his fingertips. A storm was coming. He hoped it wouldn't ruin his experiment.

He stopped short of the concrete steps that led down to the Broad Street subway line, fearing the music of the subway buskers—the guitarists with missing strings, the trumpet players who were a hair too flat, singers who could not remember all the words. They were the worst: the singers. They made up words to a well-known melody, mutating even a pleasant meme into something that could take days to dispel. A chill passed through him as he remembered an incident in Chinatown a decade before. This required caution.

He descended, avoiding fresh wads of chewing gum in favor of ancient tar stains. Halfway down the steps, he shot a glance over his shoulder. He couldn't be too careful. Earlier in the day, he had picked up a tenacious meme that required something from the Beatles genus to root out. The meme was innocuous, a flippantly created melody with no intentional malice; even so, he could not allow himself to host such a replicator, not with his job title. He had profiled it in a matter of seconds: it was a standard one-four-five musical replicator, a bastardization of a popular rock and roll song from the previous century, employed to sell hybrid cars in this one.

But even this harmless jingle held danger, and therefore justified Stan's work as a detective in the memetic regulatory industry. A vague smile raised his upper lip as he appreciated the simplistic beauty of the process. The jingle sounded like so many others. It could confuse his brain, mixing with similar tunes, so, before long, he would be humming something slightly different, which would then be overheard by another person, whose brain would do the same thing. His ability to understand how a rogue meme could turn a human brain into a breeding ground provided no immunity, and he gave the jingle its due respect, one he knew could not be returned. Humans created and propagated memes, but memes were lifeless, given the illusion of life by the human mind and its penchant for imitation. Stan cycled through "Obla-Di, Obla-Da" off of the White Album. This was one rogue jingle that had met the end of the line.

But this other meme, the one he sought, was something altogether different. They said a meme-gene crossover was impossible, but what did they know, and who were they to say so? And why had he rhymed that last thought?

He shook a cigarette from his pack of Red Apple and stopped in the middle of the subway platform. In front of him, a bum dressed in a schizophrenic patchwork of burlap sacks sewn together with coarse, thick string ranted incomprehensibly. Waves of commuters swept past him through billows of steam from the subway tracks. White clouds converged on the burlap man, circling him like ghosts inspecting the tattered rag on his head and the cardboard boxes that served as his shoes. Stan squinted as he tried to make out the advertising on the boxes. He wondered why steam rose from a subway track.

He struck a match and cupped his hands to shield it from the wind of an oncoming train. The crackle of paper as he put the flame to the cigarette's tip was so pleasurable that he wondered if he even needed to inhale. He denied himself for a few seconds, teasing his addiction before the glorious first drag. He emptied his lungs, filled them again, and watched the exhaled smoke mix with the tumult of steam. He studied the glassy-eyed faces of lawyers, commodities brokers, and financial analysts as they passed, laptop-toting men with ears hard-wired to invisible devices buried in their suit jackets as their heads bobbed to the arrhythmic shuffle of leather-soled shoes on painted concrete. Where were the women? Why had he rhymed that earlier thought? Why were there so many businessmen on the subway at midday? Why was he asking so many questions?

He refocused his mind on the McCartney song. No, it was a Beatles song, but McCartney wrote it. He remembered the arguments that echoed down the halls of the Dawkins Institute as they took on the monumental task of categorizing all memes. Did Obla-Di belong to the McCartney species under the Beatles genus, or the other way around? It became confusing very easily.

"Pardon me. Can you stake a fellow American a meal?"

The bum's question shook him from his analysis with its jarring and anachronistic level of diction.

It was a voice belonging to a nineteenth century tale that did not fit the Depression Era content, *Moby Dick* meets *The Maltese Falcon*. No, not that film, he thought, and then churned through the taxonomy he had helped create: Visual Kingdom, Film Phylum, Talkie Class, Black and White Order, Drama Family, Action Genus, Western Species. *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. But it could also be categorized as a burlesque, a parody of *Sierra Madre* used in a Warner Brothers cartoon in which Humphrey Bogart asks Bugs Bunny: “Can you help a fellow American who’s down on his luck?” Same sentiment, same cultural context, different words: a mutation. If he didn’t think carefully about it, Stan would be unable to remember which was from the original film and which was from the cartoon. And he didn’t think either was from the book that was the source of the meme. There’s a name for that scenario, a name Stan himself had coined: a Burlesque Meme Mutation. Ironically, the term never caught on, utterly failing as a replicator.

Stan looked at the bum once more and met his eyes. The bum smiled.

“How you doin’?”

Where had he heard that before? He chuckled to himself. Where hadn’t he heard that? He heard it often in this town: it was a colloquialism as catchy as a strain of Covid. Not, “Hi, how are you?” Not, “Good day to you, Sir.” But “How you doin’?” The bum asked again.

Stan marveled at the inner workings of the human brain, of how the man could effortlessly flip from a psychotic rant to an almost pedantic level of articulation, and then drop down to a studied provinciality with expert ease. It was a testament to the brain’s complexity and a reminder that humanity had only scratched the surface of understanding it. Sometimes he thought there was no understanding of it at all.

Down the track a young Asian girl butchered Mozart on a cheap violin, but Stan appreciated her playing because it was the perfect background to the spectacle dressed in rags before him. He handed the bum fifty cents, walked over to the girl, and dropped a dollar into her bucket. She had earned more than his pity, despite her stained and faded dress and thousand-yard stare. It mattered to

him that she had tried to earn it, especially in the city that launched the greatest meritocracy the world has ever known, where the U.S. Constitution was born, a document he admired as one of the deadliest killer memes ever conceived. To adhere to it is to shut your mind to any other philosophy of governance. Powerful, he thought, but nothing compared to the grand-daddy of all killer memes: the Ten Commandments. First commandment: Thou shalt not have other gods before me. With that one statement, it slaughters all other collections of God-related memes. A person cannot follow that commandment and believe in any other religion, thereby removing any competition. One had to stand in awe before it and marvel at its authors, who had such a deep understanding of meme replication and how to prevent it thousands of years before it was given a name.

Stan now searched for a different kind of killer meme, a literal one, one that could bring about bodily death through genetic change without the time required for evolution. He was removed from his position at the Dawkins Institute when he first suggested it. He still felt the sting of the great injustice, of the last presentation he was ever allowed to give in the Blackmore Auditorium, the one the board of trustees did not allow him to finish. Even old Professor Nitsche, his mentor and steadfast defender, stood with body and voice shaky from Parkinson's Disease and declared Stan's theory baseless and without merit, citing an appalling lack of evidence and adding that such a suggestion was too outlandish for even the most carelessly rendered science fiction.

This was Stan's chance to prove his theory correct and return triumphantly from the outer fringes of memetic research to where he rightly belonged: back at the Dawkins Institute, as its head. This brought him to the City of Brotherly Love in the first place, but love was not what he was after. He sought hostility, and knew he would find it at the sports complex at Broad and Pattison.

He turned back toward the violin player as the incoming train blew past her, burying her well-intentioned musical transgressions beneath the howl of steel wheels coming to a stop against the rail. She continued to pull her bow across the strings, oblivious until the train's final pneumatic blast gave the coda to her performance.

“Keep practicing,” Stan muttered with a tip of his hat.

Almost every seat on the train was taken by Philadelphia Phillies fans on their way to Citizens Bank Park for the home opener. Auspicious, thought Stan.

A surge of riders pushed him further into the car and up against a pole. A sign above the doors informed Stan that he too could develop skills to pursue opportunities in electronics, web development, computer programming, criminal justice, or other of today’s fastest growing career fields. He turned and looked down the length of the car.

Between an eight-year-old girl with the word “Juicy” embroidered on the seat of her sweat pants and an octogenarian shaking a filthy thermos at her with disconcerting glee, he could see a young woman in a light gray skirt suit and dark-rimmed glasses. Head down, she read from a yellow legal pad. She slashed the paper with her pen, flipped to a blank page, and began to write. Once he saw her, Stan could look at nothing else.

She was long and slender, and appeared so naturally at rest in the seat that Stan imagined she had been designed into it by Frank Lloyd Wright himself. Her lips were more full than thin, and turned up at the corners, giving her mouth the appearance of a subtle smile. She needed no lipstick or rouge, but wore them anyway. Her eyes were almost too far apart, and may have seemed so if not for their large size, which, combined with the high arch of her brow, gave them a depth that contrasted with the freshness of her face. Her skirt made no apology for her legs and their effect on men. Stan found it difficult not to stare.

As more baseball fans packed the train, they pushed Stan closer to her until he was grasping the metal bar directly over her head. He could see her reflection in the blackness of the adjacent glass. A Daily News lay in the empty seat beside her, open to the sports section.

"Need a place to sit?"

The voice was soft yet assertive, and she did not look up from her writing when she spoke. She had noticed him notice her. Detective amateur hour, he thought, but then felt better about it. A woman

like this would expect men to stare.

"Thanks, but I'm fine where I am," he replied.

She removed her glasses in such a deliberate way that Stan half-expected her to say that she knew about the affair, or knew where the diamonds were, or knew where he had hidden the gun after burying the body. She looked up at him with eyes that matched the color of her suit, only brighter and paler, made paler still by the jet black bangs and bob cut that framed them.

"This is all copyrighted," she said with a playful pen tap against the paper. "Just in case you get any ideas."

"You a writer?" asked Stan, with such a contrived aloofness that it made him wince.

"Sometimes," she said, and then returned to writing.

A prerecorded voice announced that the train was about to pull into the Lombard-South Street station. She did not move. Stan hoped her plans and his were the same.

"Headed to the ballgame?" he asked, but not wanting to sound too hopeful, added, "You don't look like you are."

"Neither do you," she replied without looking up.

With those words Stan had the overwhelming sense that he had played out this scene before, that he had been on this train in Philadelphia as an alluring sometimes-writer scribbled down notes, read them, crossed them out, and then scribbled them again. He was certain he had met her before, but was equally sure he would have remembered. He would not have forgotten that face and those legs had they been on two different women; to see them together on the same woman made him hear wind chimes and smell honeysuckle.

He inhaled deeply through his nose, but then a thought occurred to him, a dreadful thought: perhaps this wasn't a chance encounter; perhaps the familiarity she invoked was not misplaced, not an artifact of insomnia or loneliness or paranoia or a synergistic monstrosity of all three. Perhaps she had been sent by his enemies—those at the Institute who wished to discredit him. He could not forget what

he learned in the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles: that sometimes murder could smell like honeysuckle.

The detective in Stan awoke from the brief spell the bespectacled stranger had cast upon him.

“What are you writing about?” he asked.

“I write short stories,” she said. “At least I try.”

She uncrossed her legs and then crossed them again—an act that should not have seemed as intimate as it did to Stan.

“Sometimes I ride the subway on my lunch break to watch people,” she continued. “I take notes, sketch them out, look for inspiration.”

“And have you found any inspiration?” He sounded too eager.

“Well, I hadn’t,” she replied, then stared up at him again. “Until just now.”

Stan could see the barbed hook protrude through his upper lip and felt her tug on the line.

“So what do you write?” he asked, feeling short of breath. “Melodramatic-harlequin-vampire-zombie-coming-of-age stories?”

She laughed. “No. I’m partial to comedies.”

Stan chuckled through his nose, sounding snider than he had intended. She didn’t seem to notice or care.

“I started writing serious topics, but not anymore,” she said.

“Why not?”

She tucked her hair behind her left ear. “People don’t care about serious topics. They want to be entertained. They want to laugh, or read about sex, or both.”

The train came to a dead stop twenty feet from the platform, causing all who stood to lurch forward and claw at the metal poles to keep from falling. As the train started moving again, Stan could hear rowdy laughter, muffled at first, but then gaining volume as the train pulled into the station and stopped. The subway doors opened, and a small group of loud men poured into the remaining space.

There were four of them, and each wore a white Phillies jersey with red pinstripes and the name

of a Phillies player on the back. Each jersey looked two sizes too small, and the bulging musculature of their upper bodies tortured the fabric and seams of the well-made shirts.

“No way, man! Maria Rosato?” said the man wearing the Utley jersey.

“Yes, he did,” added the man wearing the Moyer jersey.

“What can I say? I’m a sucker for big cans,” said the man wearing the Victorino jersey.

“Oh, Daddy, I hope you wrapped that shit good.”

“And he should know,” added the man in the Werth jersey.

“Don’t worry. I wrapped it like a Christmas present, Daddy.”

“Just for her.”

“Yeah, only I ran out of paper, know what I’m saying?”

The Victorino fan grabbed himself halfway down his thigh and gave a tug. Despite the close quarters, he gesticulated wildly as he spoke, and with each rotation of his wrists, the cuffs around his biceps seemed to cut off circulation, engorging the veins in his arms until they popped from the flush surface of his skin.

“Check it out.” He reached down his shirt and pulled out a gold crucifix. “My cross was hittin’ her forehead so hard, she went home lookin’ like a vampire who lost a fight with a priest.”

A roar of admiration filled the subway car as Stan watched the men gather together, arms over each other’s shoulders, and mutate a Bernstein-Sondheim meme from West Side Story.

“Maria! He just banged a girl named Maria!”

Stan looked down at the woman, who wrote furiously onto her notepad between furtive glances at the new passengers.

Stan knew he had to act swiftly, but did not know why. He could not intellectualize his actions, but pushed past an elderly man and a pregnant woman and stood by the muscle-bound quartet to shield her from them. Her gray eyes looked up at Stan and the corners of her mouth rose as her eyes reduced to slits.

Stan closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. He hadn't touched liquor, but he felt drunk. He had acted without thinking, without purpose. He searched his motives to understand what had happened to him and why his heart pounded in his chest. He had lost perspective. He had lost distance from himself and his subject matter. He cycled through Obla-Di once more and reminded himself why he was in Philadelphia. "I am here to conduct an experiment. I am here to conduct an experiment." He recited the mantra until it mixed with Obla-Di to ill effect, and he had to stop. He kept his eyes closed, but could not shut them tight enough to block the quartet's singing. He kept his eyes closed, but he could still see the spark in the gray eyes of their next victim. Stan's thoughts became jumbled as he fought back feelings so wantonly destructive they could only be jealousy. He wanted to open his eyes but was afraid to catch a glimpse of his reflection, afraid to discover he had grown fangs and claws to match how he felt on the inside.

He heard Professor Nitsche's voice: "Take inventory of what you have, not what you want."

It worked. He rediscovered what fate had given him: four prime subjects to test his hypothesis. He failed to realize this because he had taken his eye off the goal and did it for the worst possible reason. He did it for a dame; for a woman he didn't know and could not possibly care about; for a black-haired, gray-eyed, comedy-writing twist.

Stan opened his eyes. He turned to her, and she stared back at him with such genuine concern that he nearly succumbed again.

"So where's Joey?" asked the guy in the Victorino shirt.

"Ah, he's depressed again."

"Depressed? What could that human hump possibly be depressed about? He lives with his mom and doesn't even pay rent."

"Yeah, and he's got us."

"I miss that fat fuck."

The gray-eyed woman rose as the train pulled into the station at Snyder. She squeezed past the

elderly man and pregnant woman; unlike Stan, she politely excused herself first. Stan's pulse rate quickened as she approached. Her head was down, but she looked up at Stan when she reached him. She stood only an inch or two shorter than his six feet.

"Excuse me," she said as she squeezed between him and a college student texting on his phone. Her left breast imperceptibly brushed against Stan's chest.

"So what are we going to do with Joey's ticket?" one of the four asked.

Her gray eyes turned back toward Stan, and she gestured toward them with a nod. Somehow she knew Stan did not have a ticket to the game.

Her presence among the four men brought about an abrupt silence, but they did not act as Stan thought they would. They did not smirk, they did not make catcalls, they barely looked at each other, and made no other visible form of communication.

"Excuse me," she said as she walked past them to stand in front of the door. Stan could see her looking at the Victorino fan's reflection in the subway-door windows.

The train stopped, and she exited without looking back. As soon as the doors shut, they started.

"My God, what I would do to that!"

"Sweet Mary, mother of Jesus!"

"Madone!"

"That looks like a lot of fun right there."

"You should've asked her if she wanted to go to the game. Christ, do I have to think of everything?"

The woman had liked these men, or at least found them interesting. What Stan found interesting was the recursive nature of memes, how they are both products of and driving forces behind cultural change. The four men were a good example. Somewhere in its history, Philadelphia became less *Philadelphia Story* and more *Rocky*, less playground of the elite and more home to the underdog—visceral, dirty, tough, dangerous, passionate, filled with working-class romanticism, savage and tender.

Formal recognition of this metamorphosis came when the Rocky statue was placed in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art: as grand and discordant a mixing of memes as Stan had ever seen.

The train pulled into the Pattison station. The doors opened, and the baseball fans flooded the platform and drained into the large escalators that led up to the street. Stan hung close to the four as they boarded the escalator.

“Too bad we’re not playing the Mets today,” said one. “Remember when I puked on those assholes wearing the Mets gear?”

“Classic.”

“Yeah, you don’t come to our house wearing a fucking Mets hat.”

“Hey,” said the Utley fan. “We gotta unload this ticket, Daddy.”

“Why don’t we just keep it? Whoever we sell it to will be sitting with us. What if we don’t like him?”

“Well, just don’t sell it to a jerk-off.”

“If I didn’t want to sit with a jerk-off, I wouldn’t have invited you.”

All but the Utley fan laughed.

“Pardon me, fellas,” Stan said. “I’m looking to buy a ticket.”

The four men fell silent and looked down the escalator toward him suspiciously.

“What’s that, buddy?”

“I’ll buy your extra ticket,” Stan said.

They looked him up and down. “You don’t look like you’re heading to a ballgame. You look like, uh, like an I-don’t-know-what.”

“Well, I am going to the ballgame and I need a ticket.”

Stan took out his pack of cigarettes and packed them against the palm of his hand. “I overheard you talking about selling one, so I thought I’d ask.” Stan pulled out a cigarette and let it hang loosely

between his lips; it flopped up and down as he spoke. "But if you'd rather not, it's no skin off my nose. I'll find another one somewhere else." Stan lit up his cigarette and took a long drag.

"Hey, you're not supposed to smoke in here," Utley said.

"What are you, the cigarette police?" Stan said casually. "Don't tell me a tough guy like you is gonna whine like a twist about a little cigarette smoke?"

"Like a what?"

His friend laughed. "A twist. You know, a woman. I heard that shit on some old movie."

Veins bulged in Utley's neck and biceps. "You calling me a woman?"

"Not at all," Stan said calmly. "With the kind of hardware you have strapped to those arms, you look like you could break me over your knee. For that, you would have my respect, but just know that you'd take some losses of your own. But you may not want to take such a threatening position. It's poor salesmanship."

The Victorino fan laughed. "I like this guy."

"What's up with the raincoat and the hat?" asked the guy in the Moyer shirt.

"Forecast called for rain," Stan said.

"Yeah, it did," added the guy in the Werth shirt. "I heard that on the news."

"Look fellas," Stan said. "You have a ticket to sell, I'm looking to buy. If you decide before we reach the top of this escalator, we can do business. If not, there will be many other people outside trying to sell tickets." He took a long drag but didn't exhale all at once, instead letting the smoke escape with his speech. "And to show my appreciation, I'll buy the first round once we're in the ballpark."

"The ticket was twenty-eight bucks."

Stan reached into his wallet and pulled out two twenties.

"I don't have any change."

"That's all right," Stan said. "Keep it."

The group of five left the station and walked out into brilliant sunlight. A cool wind blew the remaining clouds into New Jersey while echoes of the Phillies' PA announcer pulled the Broad Street Line commuters toward the stadium. Stan walked past truant college students and businessmen alike, high on cheap beer and lighter fluid from charcoal grills. He walked past barefoot girls dangling their smooth, seventeen-year-old legs over the tailgates of F150s as men threw a football around the parking lot. Off in the distance, the retching of an inexperienced drunk accentuated the melancholy of a Springsteen song playing on a car radio.

Citizens Bank Park loomed over them, but Stan didn't see a state-of-the-art baseball arena. He saw a massive laboratory where ground-breaking memetic research was about to happen, a historic scientific event that would be unknown to any of the forty-thousand-plus Phillies fans there to watch Cole Hamels face the Washington Nationals. Stan could feel the electricity in the air flow through him and raise the hair on his arms. He looked at the faces of those who had come for entertainment. How could they suspect they'd bear witness to an experiment equal to Galileo dropping balls from the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He ran up ahead and bought two hats from a street vendor.

They passed through the turnstiles into the park, and Stan went to buy beer. He knew how important it was to gain the trust of the subjects when conducting an experiment, to keep their confidences, and honor any promises given. Stan ordered light beers from one of the concession stands on the two hundred level. He handed one out to each of the guys.

"Thanks for the donkey piss, Daddy."

The seats were in section four hundred thirty-four, one removed from the action on the field but very close to where the real action takes place in Citizens Bank Park. Philadelphia fans had long been known for their inhospitable treatment of other teams' fans, the Phillies players themselves, and each other, and most of the newsworthy examples of this behavior occurred in the higher levels. But it wasn't until a week-long battle with meningitis that the reason for this came to Stan.

Feverish and exhausted but with a heightened perception, he had saw the virus inside his brain

as it spliced with a thought. He hypothesized that the proximity of the virus to his brain made the meme-gene crossover possible. It was all conjecture, but the pieces seemed to fit. He studied the events that led to his illness and the role each could have played: that a virus had caused the meningitis while he was working eighty-hour weeks on a difficult case that had filled his mind with negative memes and anger. Stan had been very, very angry that day because that was the day he had found out about the decision of the Dawkins Institute board. He believed that great anger was the key, the spark that ignited the crossover.

Stan settled into his seat and removed his fedora. It was time for part one of the experiment. He pulled the Phillies cap he had bought outside the ballpark snugly over his head. He attempted to observe the effect of a physical representation of the Philly Fan meme on himself. He closed his eyes. He drank his beer. He waited.

The first pitch was a four-seam fastball for a called strike.

“Yeah, Hamels!”

“That’s it!”

“My man!”

The second pitch was a curveball that missed the outside corner of the plate.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Send him to Reading!”

“Your mother!”

Stan felt no change in himself, no onset of a genetic change that could offer a reason for the heightened levels of adrenalin and testosterone of those who came to this ballpark.

Hamels retired the side, but not before Cristian Guzman doubled to left field.

“I’m slittin’ my throat over here!” yelled one of Stan’s mates.

The game was scoreless at the top of the second inning, and all four of Stan’s friends were on their third beers. Hamels missed with a fastball and a cutter to Josh Willingham, but his next pitch found

the strike zone and the sweet spot of Willingham's bat. Willingham took the pitch deep to left field as all stood to watch Ibanez sprint hopelessly to the wall. The ball sailed over it for a home run. The stadium, as a living, breathing entity, groaned.

"You suck, Hamels!"

"I hope your kids get run over by a gas truck!"

"I don't think he has kids, Daddy."

"Then his sperm. I hope his sperm gets run over by a gas truck!"

Stan, who had not observed anything close to the results he hoped to see, decided it was time for part two of his experiment. In his preparations, Stan considered the possibility that it was not anger which triggered the crossover event, but fear. That was why he had bought the second hat.

The skies were clear and sunny over Citizens Bank Park. Winds blew in from the west at fifteen miles per hour. The Victorino fan had just raised his hand to hail the beer man—"Yo, Daddy! Beer! Yo! How 'bout some beer!"—when a full sixteen-ounce cup of beer hit him on the back of the neck, drenching his shirt and covering the people in the row before him.

"What the fuck?"

"Go back to Jersey, you prick!" yelled a voice from above.

He turned to look back at the upper rows, but stopped dead when he saw Stan. He was seated with his shoulders hunched, his hands folded between his knees, and a Mets cap on his head.

The fans above hurled more beers at the men.

"You motherless prick!" He shouted at Stan.

"I told you he was a jerk-off!"

"Get that son of a bitch!"

They lunged at Stan, but a deluge of beer and plastic cups squelched their advance.

"Goddamnit! Come here, you bastard! I'm gonna puke on you!"

The guy in the Utley shirt grabbed Stan by the front of his coat, pinned him down with one arm,

and then put his finger down his own throat to force himself to vomit.

“Hold—” Utley retched. “Hold still, goddamit—”

Stan did not wait for him to complete the task. He broke free of his grasp and half-ran, half-fell down the rest of the rows toward the exit.

“Grab him!”

Stan dropped the Mets cap on an empty seat, and it was picked up by an elderly man who looked up to see a guy in an Utley jersey projectile vomit two inning’s worth of beer and ballpark franks all over his face and chest.

Stan ran until he reached the subway station, and threw money—more than he owed—into the window slot. He ran down the long escalator and thrust his arm through the closing subway doors, squeezing through them just as the train pulled away.

The train rolled out of the station, and Stan sat breathless. He had not observed anything resembling a meme-gene crossover at Citizens Bank Park. All he’d observed was the result of decades of memetic conditioning: Philly fans were supposed to act that way, so they did. As he tried to recall the day’s events, he felt their memories disappear like pages torn from a yellow notepad. The only thing he could remember was the woman on the train.

The train lumbered into the Snyder station and stopped in its usual abrupt manner. The doors sprang open, and he saw the long legs he could never forget. She sat on a metal bench and wrote onto her notepad, but looked up the moment he looked at her. She rose and pushed through the people leaving the train, reaching it just before the doors closed.

She stood next to Stan in front of the doors. The train started to move. He smiled at her.

“How’d the writing go?” he asked.

“Could’ve gone better,” she replied. “I couldn’t focus.”

“How so?”

She shook her head. “I wanted to write this hard-boiled detective piece, and then I tried to

lighten it with some comedy. But it got a little weird at the Phillies game.” She held up her Daily News sports section with an article about the previous day’s home opener.

“Weird’s not bad,” he said.

“No. It isn’t,” she said. “I wanted to capture what it’s like here, the scope of it all, but my head became filled with too many things.” She tore the pages from her notepad and crumpled them into a ball.

“I’m sorry,” Stan said.

“No. Don’t be,” she said. “It’s not your fault. I like how I wrote you, but I’m unsure about the ending.” She looked at herself in the subway door window. “Surprise twist endings are so M. Knight Shyamalan.”

“Yes,” Stan said as he reached into his coat pocket for his cigarettes. “But they’re irresistible.”

She nodded. “That meme is a killer.”

She chuckled. It was time to get back to her office. She had taken too long for lunch and would have to walk as fast as her short legs could carry her. She hoped the preppy subway guitarist at the Market Street station was gone. He had played Obla-Di, Obla-Da incessantly, as if it were the only song he knew. That was a very sticky song, a very sticky meme. She knew she would be humming it to herself for the rest of the day. It was too bad the other guitarist wasn’t there, the grungy one with the sadness in his voice. He usually played a lot of Springsteen.