

Fiction
The Unbinding
By Walter Kirn
Installment 22

[ExpressLink.com]

Sabrina,

We fear for you, big sister. You don't reply. And you haven't acknowledged receiving the research file that my pal here at eBay assembled on Kent Selkirk. I'm guessing that you haven't read it because if you had, you would have gotten back to me, almost certainly in tears.

So let me be the bearer of bad tidings: Not only isn't this character who he says he is; he isn't (from what I can gather) anyone.

Though there was a Kent Selkirk, once upon a time. A number of them, actually. But only one of them was white, Midwestern, and would be the same age today—were he alive—as your Ray-Banned man of mystery. This Kent Selkirk was born in 1976, the day before our nation's Bicentennial, in Thief River Falls, Minn. His father, Norris, owned a two-plex movie theater and headed up the local chapter of a now-defunct fraternal lodge, the Ancient Order of the Plains Astronomers, which claimed to derive its creeds and ceremonies from a Native American birchbark scroll containing the "Improved Ojibwan Star Plattes." All that's known of Kent's mother, who died when he was 5, is her name, Alicia, and her gift of a 16-volume family scrapbook to her county historical society.

In 1993, the record shows, the first Kent Selkirk took seventh place in a regional essay contest backed by the National Rifle Association ("Self-Defense: A Common Good") and was cited, twice in the same month, for Operating a Motor Vehicle While Under the Influence of a Scheduled Substance. He enrolled one year later at Cass Academy, a military school in Minneapolis, from which he was later expelled for unknown reasons. After a misdemeanor marijuana arrest and a charge, later dropped, of sending threatening letters to the faded pop sensation Boy George, he joined the Coast Guard, was stationed in Sitka, Alaska, and died in the crash of a Sea King helicopter in February 1997 while evacuating a capsized Russian crab boat.

According to his recent writings on MyStory.com, the fraudulent composite who has since adopted Selkirk's name also grew up in Minnesota and also attended Cass Academy. But according to a range of documents—some publicly available, many not, and a few of the most sensitive obtained through anonymous channels at Dad's law firm—he shares little else with the original Selkirk, whose Social Security number he started using in the fall of 1999, first to obtain a Montana nonresident hunting license and then to complete an employment application for a "VIP personal security" post at Proton Protective Services of Chicago. The outfit fired him 24 days later for "violating professional decorum" while guarding the green room of the Oprah Winfrey show. This

pseudo-Selkirk, according to our data, is five inches taller than his namesake, blue-eyed not brown-eyed, sandy-haired not blond, and possessed of a 19-point IQ advantage that classifies him as a “low-mid near-genius.”

I’ve also seen and compared the two men’s photographs. In a CyberCupid online dating profile from 2001, your fellow posted a series of color snapshots (crudely and unconvincingly Photoshopped) depicting him in a poncho and Nike baseball cleats standing atop what he refers to as “The Six Sister Peaks of Old Bhutan.” This faux-alpinist doesn’t resemble in the slightest the Selkirk in Cass’ sophomore Memory Book, who is shown accepting a framed citation for “Excellence in Night Reconnaissance.” He does share, however, the X-creased forehead of another Cass student named Ormand Dorngren who, after reneging on a commitment to Army ROTC, went on to study Dramatic Arts at Furley Junior College in Spokane, Wash., but left after two semesters to play a seraph in South Dakota’s Black Hills Passion Play.

Dorngren, too, is dead, however. In the spring of 2001, during an Earth Liberation Front assault on a salmon-killing Canadian dam, he was sucked underwater by massive turbines that presumably pulverized his body, which was never recovered. Oddly, a picture that ran with the obituary in his hometown Minnesota newspaper shows a young man much leaner and sharper-featured than the sweet soldier boy of the Memory Book or the phony outdoorsman on CyberCupid. I can only suppose that Dorngren, the former acting student, enjoyed experimenting with his appearance, much as neo-Selkirk likes tinkering with digital imaging software.

For the last six years or so, your “Kent” (who also goes by the surnames KC and Casey) has made his presence felt on numerous Web forums related to a dumbfounding array of hobbies, issues, and enthusiasms. In 2000, for example, he joined an international petition-drive urging the People’s Republic of China to release imprisoned practitioners of the outlawed martial art Qi Gong. At about the same time, on CyberCupid, he revised his description of his ideal date from “Picnicking on blueberries and wine as our dogs chase Frisbees through the wildflowers” to “Getting sweaty in my Dodge while blasting classic Pantera tracks.” Two months later, on another dating site intended for under-30 faithful Mormons, he described his profession as “touring anti-gang speaker” and summed up his personal philosophy as “Always taking care to close the carton and leave at least one nice glassful for the next guy.” The book that he said had most influenced his life? The *Rand McNally World Atlas*. “It reminds us that we’re surrounded by H2O, almost all of it undrinkable and much of it in the form of ice. Kind of humbles you and makes you wonder.”

This, big sister, is only the beginning of your quasi-Kent’s electronic odyssey. Other highpoints include a hysterical nine-page e-mail to the respected blogger Andrew Sullivan, in which he contends that “loose American college girls spreading drug-resistant STDs across the spring-break beaches of the globe” justify “anything Islam can throw at us but especially the bio-stuff.” Two years later, here on eBay, he ran a short-lived enterprise selling “ionized wild sheep colostrum” as a therapy for childhood autism, which he hinted that he’d suffered and recovered from.

Just weeks after we shut him down, he popped back up as a source for “Grecian EroSalt,” a powdered female aphrodisiac that he boasted was capable of turning “a slumbering menopausal nun” into a “nymphazoid all-night bedpost humper.” Meanwhile, over on NasaKnows.com, a site devoted to the search for extra-terrestrial life, he claimed that concealed in the SimCity computer game is a video clip of Billy Graham, Muhammad Ali, the Bush brothers, and others bowing to what he calls “The Orionic Eminence” on a dry lakebed in the Utah desert. On a site for cosmic rationalists, SaucerScoffers.net, he mocks the same notion as an urban legend.

I think you get the picture. There is no picture. Whatever his parents really named him and his teachers brought him up to be, “Kent Selkirk” has shed his mortal form to become a holographic data-ghost composed of appropriated biographies and incompatible sensibilities. Stay away from this goon. If you’re with him now, get out. If he follows you, fire at his mid-abdomen and, once you’re certain the beast is down, call Dad.

Even though no further warnings should be needed, I leave you with this excerpt from a short bio that KS submitted just 10 months ago to a matchmaking service called E-Symmetry. It’s headlined “Am I the One You Seek?” and it runs alongside a county-fair gag photo of the monster’s toothy mug grinning through an oval hole in the head of a life-size cardboard Dalai Lama.

“ ... but chiefly because my vocation is compassion. Eight hours a day, five days a week, I don a satellite-connected headset into which my far-flung fellow humans funnel their confusion and apprehension. Sometimes the work exhausts me, I’ll confess, but not once in my years of assisting faceless strangers have I forgotten to whom I’m truly listening: traumatized newborns, forced from the womb, whose umbilical lifelines have been cruelly severed, forcing them to solicit sustenance by wailing and shrieking nonstop until they die.”

Please don’t kiss this creature. Please don’t touch him. Remember when I was 6 and you were 8 and we emptied a packet of dehydrated brine shrimp into a mayonnaise jar full of water? Remember how those tiny, eyeless swimmers fluttered translucently to life and survived in the fluid untended and unfed until it evaporated and we replaced it—only to watch our “sea monkeys” revive themselves? This is the sort of being I fear you’re dealing with, but a million times larger, posing as a man.

Hugs abounding,
Your sleepless little sister