

# Avoiding Mr. Screamerhead

by Dan Crawley

Clement stood on his backyard patio, his whole body rigid, immobilized. All around him clumps of weeds framed the chipped edges of the small square patio, and a few steps off the slab a dense overgrowth of weeds had overtaken a brief but very steep slope. A tan cinder block wall enclosed the yard, and on the other side of the back wall the thick overgrowth continued its hilly descent. All of the surrounding mountains also were covered in green; it had been a very wet winter for this desert region. The very bottom of the canyon was cut by a four-lane interstate. A low lying sun reflected off scores of windshields, creating a conveyer belt of sparks. But Clement didn't seem much interested in panoramic vistas. Instead he scrutinized the waist-high slope of weeds below him.

Clement tugged at the short sleeve of his shirt and mopped up the sweat on his forehead. The genuine sweat-inducing heat was still a few months away. Next Clement mashed the heels of his hands into his eyes, like someone might do at the side of the road, standing next to an unsympathetic DPS officer. He reached into his shorts' pocket and pulled out a small key ring. Then he hurled his keys, only three of them on the ring, down into the slope of weeds.

Clement yanked out a cell phone from his other front pocket.

"Hiya Weave," Clement said into the phone, sounding distressed. "It's me. Hope you get this message soon. I'm locked out of the house. I know, I know. I lost my house key, my car key—my whole key ring. So...I'm really consumed with finding my keys at the moment. I'm sorry I'm wrecking your plans for tonight. We'll rain check it. I...I'm free all other times... like you don't already know this." He lowered the phone and held it against his hip. Clement took one step onto the dirt, leaning slightly forward, and let out a long yell, no words. Two small birds rocketed out of the weeds. Clement threw his cell phone into the weeds.

Clement found the gardening shears and a hoe where he'd left them last, around the corner of the house. They were rusting in the dirt, a circle of weeds closing in.

Clement opened and closed the gigantic scissors with a lot of effort,

the pin joining the blades markedly tight. He tried hacking away some of the plants at the top of the slope, attempting the beginning of a passable trail, but grew frustrated and tossed the shears behind him onto the patio. He picked up the hoe, a sun-bleached price sticker plastered across the blade. He jabbed his shoe into a larger bush at the top of the slope and squashed it down as if it were a billowing parachute trying once more to lift off the ground. The next step was more of a slide. Clement's next two long strides crashed him down the slope through the thicket. The hoe was a wild rudder. Near the bottom left side of the slope Clement fell to his knees, his upper body continuing forward. The hoe, now a dangerous pendulum arcing over his body, missed the back of Clement's head by inches.

He yelled, again.

Clement finally stood and leaned his upper body one way and then the other, his feet steadying themselves on the slanted ground. A yard or so above him the harsh sunlight, partially block by the wall, cast a shadow that horizontally halved the entire slope. He began hoeing, with great effort, and soon made a narrow path back up the hill. He dropped the hoe and limped toward the sliding glass door. He tugged on the handle. It wasn't budging. Clement swore as he picked up the hoe again and, this time, gingerly made his way down the slope. Once back at the spot he fell, Clement hoed frantically at first, and then eased up a bit after clearing a fat comma-shaped gouge around him. The front of his shirt and the thighs of his shorts were stained green, his knees dirt-torn and bleeding. His waxy palms sprouted blisters, which he couldn't help picking now and then. Dark blotches sprawled under the armpits of his blue shirt. Clement pushed around the springy plant flotsam and searched the exposed dirt.

A latch sounded off. The glass door slid wide open.

"You back here, Clem?" a woman's voice called.

"I'm here," Clement said. "I'm down here."

Weaver appeared at the end of the patio. She stood with the toes of her high heel shoes almost touching, as if she was soon diving off a board. She wore a short black gown that showed off her pale legs and sun burnt thighs. Her freckled shoulders bore ultra-thin spaghetti straps. Her bright red lipstick and nail polish matched exactly. She clutched a small hand bag, maybe large enough for her cell phone, if that.

"Hiya Clem," she said with enthusiasm. "Nice, the house is officially unlocked. Let's go, let's go."

"Hiya Weave," he said, looking down into the weeds instead of up at his wife.

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"Why are you down there?"

"I lost the keys," Clement said. "Like I said on the message." He pointed all around him. "I'm looking for them."

"Down there? But how? Never mind. You can look for them later," Weaver said. "Clem, I'll help you look for them later. You still need to shower. Come on, we need to get—"

"You got here fast. My message sounded that bad, huh?"

“Actually, I left work early,” she said brightly. “Like I told you this morning. And I changed at work so I’d be all ready for our big plans.” Weaver made a pose and dramatically waved up and down her black gown.

“I guess my message sounded bad?”

Weaver grinned, her teeth whiter because of her lipstick. “You didn’t sound that bad. You’re frustrated, you lost your keys. Come up here, my darling; going out will do both of us good.”

“I can’t,” Clement said matter-of-factly. He scanned the exposed slanted ground beneath him. “I need these keys.”

“Right now? We’ll use my keys until we find yours.”

Clement looked wounded. “You made the plans.”

Weaver squatted and picked up the gardening shears. She smashed her purse between the side of her ribs and an elbow, awkwardly holding the shears out in front of her like a toppling tray. “These are killer scissors.”

Clement squinted up at Weaver, although the line of sunlight was now far up the hill and he stood completely in the shade. “I think I hurt myself,” he said. “I fell down.”

Weaver easily chopped the blades together.

“After you lost your keys? How, of all places, did they get down there?”

Clement sighed and said, “I was doing nothing all morning, like usual, so I thought I’d clear out some of these weeds before you got home.” He lifted the hoe as if Weaver hadn’t noticed it until now. “Whack at a few bushes. Get...everything out of my system while trying to clean up...” Clement’s voice gave up.

“You’ve cleared away a lot so far,” Weaver said, nodding her head, pointing with the shears. “This weekend I’ll help you and we’ll finish the job. Then we’ll have a proper looking backyard.”

“As you can see,” Clement said, waving a hand dramatically up and down his body, “I had a bad accident and the last thing I want to do this weekend is weed. Weaver, I fell really hard...all the way down this hill. I had just begun hoeing a few weeds up there when I must’ve lost my footing and tumbled down here. I guess my keys came out of my pocket...in the fall, and I know they ended up somewhere around this general area.” The sides of his shoes were buried under an avalanche of dirt.

“You screamed,” Weaver said, now pointing the blades at him.

“I what?”

“I heard you scream at the end of the message.” She moved off the patio, and was in the act of scalping a few small yellow buds off an especially

tall weed. Weaver bent over, her bony elbows jutting out. Her black strapless bra was a wide belt cinched across her pale chest. “You left me a message and then you screamed out.”

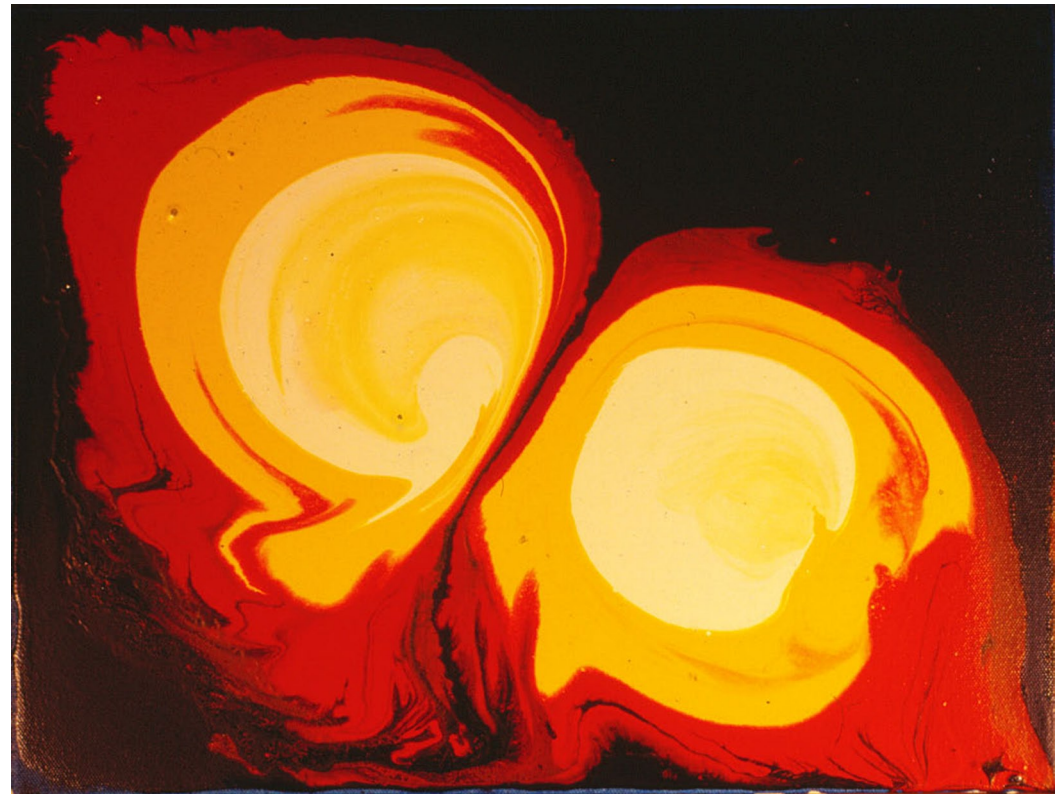
“I guess I did. When I was falling. I called you and must have stepped too close to the edge. A crazy misstep.” Clement twisted his upper body to the left. “I think the phone came out of my hand...as I was rolling and rolling. It flew that way. Both my cell phone and my keys.”

Weaver straightened up and pursed her glossy lips. She was thinking. “So you called me and said you lost your keys before you fell down and lost your keys?”

Clement’s voice rose an octave. “You know, I’m in pain right now.” He jerked around the wooden handle like a gear stick. “Listen. I fell and lost my keys and then I screamed out—”

“It’s okay, calm down, honey.” Weaver’s expression remained good-natured.

“Let me find my keys. Can you do that?”



“Yes.”

Clement hoed aggressively for a few moments, and then he slowed and used the blade to shovel small piles of dirt. Weaver watched her husband, barely moving, the shears drooping at the end of her hands.

“I guess my scream sounded pretty bad?” Clement finally said.

“Not so bad.”

Clement let out a weak, “Aaaaah,” and smirked and leaned heavily against the wooden handle. “Crazy,” he barely said. He squinted up at Weaver.

“Actually,” Weaver said, smiling. She swayed back and forth as if she was holding in a burst of laughter. “You know who you sounded like? Think about it, Clem. Mr. Screamerhead. Remember Mr. Screamerhead?”

Clement said, “Oh my God.” He wiped at his face with his shirt sleeve.

“He sat on the fire hydrant—”

“He lived on the bus stop bench.”

“In front of those apartments—our first home. I haven’t thought about him in years, Clem. Every morning, as you left for classes, I’d remind you, ‘Now, you steer clear of Mr. Screamerhead.’”

“You thought he might throw a rock through the wind shield,” Clement said, his chin now on his hand on top of the handle. “Or worse, pee all over your hood.”

“All he did was scream,” Weaver said. She stretched out her left leg like a slide. “He’d sit all day and night, looking at the traffic on Apache Boulevard, screaming his head off. No words. Did you ever hear him speak one word? No, only, ‘Aaaaaah.’ Poor guy. Can you imagine what was going on inside his head?”

“He wasn’t screaming because of what was inside his head,” Clement said. “He was upset, that’s all. He didn’t know where to go next. What to do next.”

“Oh, Clem,” Weaver said. “Oh, Clem, come up here.”

“Can’t we just go out another night?”

“Aren’t you tired of being cooped up in this house?”

“No.” Clement hacked at a waist-high bush near him.

“Let me take you out.”

Clement stopped hoeing and again leaned heavily against the wooden handle. “My right foot, Weaver, is killing me,” Clement said, sounding so feeble, on the verge of tears. “Maybe it’s broken.”

“Your foot is not broken. Stop it, already.”

“I’m not lying, and I feel horrible about missing your great dinner

plans and a movie or whatever. I do. I’d give anything if I could march right up this hill and go with you, I swear. I just can’t. I can’t, Weaver. So now you can stop it, okay? We’re staying home because I’m in terrific pain and I’m not.... Listen, can you just go? You can go and have a great time without me, okay?” Clement speared the hoe across the slope. The heavy end disappeared in the thick weeds, the wooden handle bobbing diagonally like an oar.

“Do you really want to blow off the only person who feels as bad and depressed as you do?”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes, yes, I do.”

“You’ve a place to go every day.” Spittle flew out of his mouth.

“You’ve got everything going for you. You’ve got everything you want.”

Weaver took a deep breath, and said with emphasis, “I want to go out tonight with you and you don’t. So I don’t have everything, do I?”

“Can’t I just find my keys?” Clement shouted.

“Fine. You’ll need these then,” Weaver said. Her bony elbows straightened and the gardening shears took flight.

Clement dove into the weeds. He blew hard and the webbing of green-bleed twigs and pollen and dust floated around his reddened face. He spit and spit, blinking his glistening eyes.

“Clem, it landed a mile away from you.” She went on, taking all of the stab out of her voice, “I’m sorry. I’m just very upset. How am I not being supportive? Just tell me. Tonight means...please, please, come up here. Roll up here, if you have to.”

Clement dug his hands into the earth, his fingers burrowing like a spreading runners.

Weaver hiked her dress up over her pale hips. She kicked off her shoes and stepped down the narrow path Clement had cleared earlier. She held the hem of her dress in a tight ball at her stomach, and the weeds scratched her white skin. Her bare feet flinched at the thorns and sank in the soft dirt. She finally stepped over Clement’s body and sat down, straddling his lower back. She picked a twig out of his hair.

“Clem, I really wish I knew how to help you. Tell you what comes next. How can I help you?”

“You can’t,” Clement said in a monotone from beneath her.

Weaver reached over his right shoulder and yanked at his elbow. Clement put up a little resistance, but, after a moment, she pulled his hand out of the soft dirt. She reached over and pulled out his other hand, this time without much effort at all.