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* A little item in the *Wall Street Journal* is couple of days ago gave a hint of the vast changes that are taking place in the land where the fields of waving grain don't nod under spacious skies but instead are quickly harvested and shipped off to Russia, Bulgaria, Lower Volta or wherever but the A & P.

The Journal's straw in the wind noted:

Long lines at the gas pumps have proved a bonanza for an enterprising book distributor. He has hit the jackpot peddling books to bored motorists. His salesman bundle carts up and down the lines selling an assortment of books. "Business is booming," he said. "The longer the lines, the more we sell."

This could have repercussions far beyond the wildest dreams of the most radical revolutionist. I myself have seen subtle signs. Just the other day I was enjoying a Quaker Pounder with Cheese at my favorite McDonald's, savoring the waxy sunshine, when I was joined at my little concrete table next to the gravel driveway by my friend Clarence, a local plumb of some renown and natural being, being a plumber, visit wealth. He moodily lit into his Big Mac, squinting heavy drops of that white goo down his shirt front, but he seemed indifferent.

"Clarence? Is something troubling you?" I asked, clipping a french-fry into the cutup.

"Nah. Not really," he grunted, sucking at his Coke and crunching the ice nozzle.

"Okay, Clarence. We've been friends ever since school. If there's anything bugging you, my ear's ready. By the way, what's that lump in your coat? You passin' a rod?"

"Jesus, you mean it shows?" Clarence tugged his coat to hide the bulge. "I was hoping it didn't show."

"It does, Clarence, and you're gonna get that Robert-Hay sport coat of yours all set up shape carrying heavy lumps like that around. What is it?"

Clarence sheepishly reached into his pocket and pulled out a heavy paperbound, thumbed and dog-eared volume.

"It's a book," He was embarrassed.

"Yes, I see it is, Clarence. It certainly is a book. What is it?" I glanced at the title page, and my Quarter Pounder squirmed under my surprised grasp.

"Why, Clarence, you're reading *Moby Dick*. You surprise me. I figured the heaviest reading you ever did was maybe an in-depth profile of George Maharis in *TV Guide*."

"Well," Clarence went on, "I don't get much time for TV no more since I spend most of it in line for gas. Anyway, a couple of weeks ago I'm sitting in line—been there maybe two hours—can't run the radio 'cause my battery's down, and this guy comes along selling books. Now I can't remember buying a book since that gay came around door-to-door and caught me off guard and I bought that damn set of encyclopedias. But I'm desperate, so I bought the only book this guy had left, and it turned out to be this fishin' story."

Who knows where it will lead. As a nation we have spent most of the Twentieth Century, generations have grown, matured, withered and died totally stoned on the acceptable narcotic of TV, rock and whatever other diversions they could find to keep them from having to think. A country totally removed from the world of literature and ideas, and now the gas shortage threatens to make up a nation of thinkers. This could have spectacular results. There are those who say that in a few years electricity will

The one truly ominous effect of the now-familiar gas lines is that they threaten to turn us into a Nation of Thinkers

become so expensive that random use of TV and 400-watt stereos will become totally prohibitive. A great silence will fall over the land. There will be months of screaming, twitching withdrawal convulsions.

All sorts of deadly possibilities occur. For example, Meditation. Contemplation. And possibly even the first signs of Elementary Thinking will develop among hitherto simple, childishly innocent masses. Once this takes hold, there's no way of predicting the direction it will go. Careers based on noise and motion will suddenly collapse. I envision a scene that might go something like:

UNDERLING: Mr. Nader, I have good news for you this morning. At last there's been an accident! And I'm pleased to inform you that it was fatal.

NADER: Great Scott, where? Alert our Action Study group. I'll issue a White Paper. God, it's like the old days again.

UNDERLING: I think we may be able to

work something out on this, chief. It's promising. A man got kicked by a horse, in Dayton, and died two days later. He . . .

NADER: What? The entrenched, power-mad, profit-crazy *Horse Monopoly*, eh? Undeterred, we owe it to the American public to pursue relentlessly the . . .

Merrily, we drew the curtain on this sad scene of a Nader frantically attempting to breathe life into the faded ashes of his once blooming career which had promised to put him up there in the Pantheon of Heroes along with the Joan of Arc . . . until the rug was yanked out by the simple processes of just cutting off the gas.

Of course none of this will come about without great strife and conflict. All enormous cultural changes in any society at any time in history are always accompanied by what appears to be chaos and bitterness. We are now entering that period. At first there is the almost universal refusal to accept the reality that the party is over. Brother falls upon brother. Strife is rampant. It was just this way when the Roman empire began to crumble under the onslaughts of Christianity, and new things began to take shape. Initially, there is suspicion of one another. For example, New Jersey firmly believes that Connecticut is getting more gas than they deserve. New York claims it is not getting its fair share. Maine wants more. Ohio wants more. Everyone wants more, naturally, at the expense of all the others.

Some blame the Devil, and currently—if you haven't noticed—the Devil is having a helluva spectacular rise on the rating charts. Cotton Mather would feel a warm glow of recognition if he could see the long lines of Indians waiting through rain and hell hour after hour to see *The Exorcist*.

It is easy to believe in evil spirits, demons and Mephistophiles when the apparently inexorable old order begins to fal. Who is causing it? What diabolical plots are afoot? Brutus blames Caesar and murders him. And down at the Colosseum the games grow wilder and wilder. Some take refuge in any time of great change in Box. The orgies of Rome are legend. Germany in the Twenties made the Roman orgiasts look like the Bobbsey Twins. We've got Linda Lovelace.

So today my friend Clarence, waiting in line at the Shell station, begins laboriously to read the first book he's read since he bailed out of Junior High. They say great art always stems from adversity. Who knows what the seed-stap could be? Once you begin reading novels, you might be tempted to begin writing one. Sitting for long, moody hours in the front seat of an unmodded chump of iron with 400 hobbed horses under the hood leads to unaccustomed contemplation, introspection and all sorts of strange Zen-side effects.

Who caused it all? Maybe Nixon. Maybe Satan. Maybe sun spots. Bob Dylan? Casey Stengel? Who knows? But Clarence, the plumber, is reading *Moby Dick* in his Impala tonight and the wind is rising in the East. *