

# MISSISSIPPI MIRROR

## By Alan Haehnel

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ISBN 1-60003-262-1

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**CAST:** (F) Carmen, a high school girl in therapy.

*(Throughout the monologue, CARMEN tries hard to keep her sarcastic mask in place, but memories of her father and her need for acceptance break through it.)*

Yeah, so, what's it going to be today, Doc? What clever questions do you have for me? That's what all you people specialize in, ain't it? Clever questions. Do you go to, like, clever question seminars for headshrinkers, hm? I bet you do. I bet you and all the others get together and have these nice white tables with little fruit salad cups and your name tags at your seats and you sign up for workshops--the whole nine yards. **(putting on a very affected air, perhaps with a British accent)** "Oh, Doctor So-and-So, nice to see you. Will you be attending the Clever Question workshop this morning? I understand Professor Head Headshrinker of Headshrink University will be presenting. It ought to be quite educational. Oh, and I say, did you happen to catch last night's seminar on Advanced Leg-Crossing technique? I was riveted, positively riveted." You all cross your legs, you know that? Even though it's not supposed to be good for your circulation. Every one of you guys I've ever. . .

Oh, nice question. You paid attention at your workshop, yes you did. Got your money's worth at that conference. My mother's always going off to conferences, you know that? **(fake pitiful, like a child)** She never takes me. That must be why I'm so lonely, depressed and suicidal. Momma never takes me to have fruit salad cups.

Okay, okay. Back on track. You want me to tell you about the other counselors I have worked with. That is a clever question, indeed--a nice way to get at my background, see what I've heard, what I've paid attention to. Beautiful. I commend you, Doctor.

So. By counselors, do you mean professional headshrinkers like yourself or just any counselors? Any? Wide open, then, huh? A very open-ended clever question. The best kind. Okay, let's start with Mrs. Doherty, grade eight guidance counselor. She was a very nervous lady, very antsy, very mousy. And, just between you and me, not very bright. You know the guidance office posters, right? "Attitude determines altitude," "Life is not a destination, but a journey," "Reach for the stars and even if you miss

you'll end up getting mooned," whatever. Well, I think Mrs. Doherty figured that all she needed to do was recite that kind of guidance poster wisdom and she'd set us all straight. **(putting on her Mrs.Doherty imitation)** "Now, um, Carmen, I understand, uh, that you are going through, well, quite a difficult, uh, time right now." **(breaking from the imitation)** Touching her nose--this was Mrs. Doherty's thing. All the time touching her nose while she's talking to you. I think, when she was alone, she probably went right inside it, but that's just a theory. **(continuing with the imitation)** "And, um, you know, we all have these periods in, uh, our lives when we need to just, um, well, try to get better sense of, uh, the forest through the trees, you know. I think, uh, the most important thing to keep just uppermost in, uh, our thoughts, in, in, in our minds is that how we feel today does not dictate how we have to feel tomorrow. We, uh, we control our destinies, you know." Yuh. Very effective. Mrs. Doherty helped me realize a major irony: that our educational system hires some of the dumbest people in society. She also taught me to keep away from my nose. I'll always be grateful to her for that.

Oh, yes, yes, moving on, right, right. Don't want to get too distracted from the task at hand. Other counselors. Other advice-givers. Hm. My first professional was Jack Leamy. Good old Jack. He wanted me to call him by his first name, you know. Buddy-buddy. **(imitating Jack)** "We can talk, Carmen. I'm not above you. I'm not judging you. Say what you need to say." He had a bad habit, too. Not as constant as the nose thing, but he would throw in this 1960s hippy language, you know--he was that age, this old guy who grew up in the 60s and never really got past it. "That's cool." That was Jack's favorite saying: "That's cool," and he'd bob his head in this laid back way. I liked him okay. I mean, how do you not like a hippy throwback? He was all about self-discovery. "Carmen, what do you want to be? Close your eyes. Try to find your groove. Think of yourself as a piece of music. Or a light show. What music do you hear, Carmen? Do you hear Hendrix? Zeppelin? Maybe Bach? What color are your lights? Are they flashing, swirling?" The truth was, of course, that he claimed to be about self discovery, but when I told old Jack that the music I heard was rats chewing on my hair and the light I saw was black lightning in a stark, white sky. . . He wasn't too "cool" with that. And anyway, we had to quit our sessions when he got busted for possession. Poor Jack, still back in Psycho-Psychedelic World.

Now, there was my father. He was a great one for advice, especially when he'd had a few. And he had a very good technique, too, for making sure you were listening. What would you call it? Reinforcement? **(drunken, swinging her hand with each "whack")** "Why don't you

clean yourself up, Carmen, you look like a damned tramp.” Whack. “You don’t want to turn out like your mother, do you?” Whack. “Live by my rules or get the hell out!” Whack. Sometimes he’d just skip the advice and go right to the reinforcement. Whack. Whack. Whack. Yeah, dear old Dad. He definitely missed his calling. Could have helped an awful lot of people before he suffocated on his own vomit and died.

You know something, though? I remember him when I was young, like about five or six. I don’t think he was drinking much then. You know, he. . . he would put me on his knee, and I was like a chatterbox. I would just tell him about every little thing that happened even if nothing happened. I mean, I’d spend ten minutes on a toothpick I’d found or something. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so. . .

My last shrink before you was an Indian woman--not Native American, you know, but the real deal, from India. Took me the longest time to figure out what she saying. Half of our sessions were filled with “What?” But, you know, you would have been proud of me. I never once asked her if she had worked as a telemarketer. I was good about that. She was a tough one, though. No buts--that was pretty much her motto. **(with an Indian accent)** “It seems to me, Carmen, that you have become an expert at blaming other people for your troubles, but I have heard very little about what you plan to do to alter yourself. Life is not designed to be easy.” As soon as I’d start to say “but,” she’d say, “No buts. No buts, Carmen. As long as you allow yourself to say ‘but,’ you will not change.” She was a tiny woman. She wore the traditional Indian dress, with the dot on her forehead and all that, but she was the drill sergeant of therapy. Every session I expected her to tell me, “Carmen, drop down and give me 100 pushups! No buts!” What? Oh, she dropped me. She said she didn’t want to see me again until I was ready to stop making excuses.

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