

COMETBUS



#45 \$2

COMETBUS #45

STORIES + COVER

BY ANON.

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just to say "Hello".

Tonight I was on

the usual reflective

walk with my heart

overflowing with love

for humanity, walking

in the richest neighbor-

hoods + waiting for the

Cops to come so I could

fright them + feel

vindicated + maybe even

relaxed. But, they never

came. I couldn't keep

walking forever.

Dejected, I returned

home + challenged the

unwanted house guest

to a murderous duel.

He talked me out of it,

so there was nothing

else to do but come

here + finish the fanzine.

that was
everyone for everything

Ann.

1. Two Stories

MIKE AND I WERE LOOTING THE LEFTOVERS AT U.C. BERKELEY ONE YEAR AND FOUND A STATUE. DRUNKENLY, WE CARRIED IT DOWN BANCROFT. A LIFE-SIZE BUST, AFTER TWO BLOCKS IT WAS MORE HEAVY THAN AMUSING. MIKE WALKED INTO MILANO, MADE HIS WAY THROUGH THE CROWD, THEN SET IT DOWN RIGHT ON TOP OF A STRANGER'S TABLE.

TEN YEARS LATER, HE WENT ON A BLIND DATE. WHEN SHE BROUGHT HIM HOME, MIKE WAS MET WITH KNOWING EYES, STARING AT HIM STONILY FROM BETWEEN FERNS IN HER GARDEN. WHO WOULD HAVE KNOWN? ALL THOSE YEARS THEY'D BEEN TELLING HALF OF THE SAME STORY.

SAL AND I WERE WALKING ALONG IN THE UNDERGROWTH ALONGSIDE INTERSTATE 580 BY LAKE MERRITT. SHE TRIPPED OVER SOMETHING AND REACHED DOWN TO PICK IT UP. ANYWHERE ELSE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A ROCK, OR A HUBCAP, BUT TRUE TO FORM, THIS WAS OAKLAND. SHE PULLED HER HAND UP FROM THE IVY AND I DUCKED. MUCH TO HER SURPRISE AND MINE, SHE WAS HOLDING AN UZI. FOR REAL. NOTHING TO DO BUT TRY TO WIPE OFF HER PRINTS AND BURY IT A LITTLE DEEPER.

AND THE BOTTLE OF GIN I DUMPSTERED? I CAN'T STAND THE STUFF, SO I GAVE IT TO JESS. EXCEPT, IT WAS NOT GIN AFTER ALL. JESS PROVED MY POINT, WHICH IS, EVERYTHING THAT'S FOUND WAS ONCE LOST, HIDDEN, OR THROWN OUT. MAYBE BETTER NOT TO KNOW WHY. BETTER NOT TO KNOW WHERE IT CAME FROM OR EXACTLY WHAT IT IS. BETTER SOMETIMES NOT TO ASK FOR THE REST OF THE STORY, BETTER SOMETIMES NOT TO TELL. BUT HE ASKED, AND I WAS ONLY TRYING TO BE HELPFUL.

"WHAT'S THE WORST THING IT COULD BE?"

HE SAID. I PRODUCED A LIST FROM THE POISON CONTROL CENTER, AND WAS ONLY HALFWAY DOWN WHEN JESS TURNED GREEN AND WENT INTO THE BUSHES TO PUKE.

ON A WHIM, AND SORT OF AN ACCIDENT, I FOUND MYSELF IN VANCOUVER. I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY LUCK. THE LEGENDARY CANADIAN SUBHUMANS WERE DOING A REUNION SHOW THAT VERY NIGHT. IT WAS ALREADY SOLD OUT WHEN I GOT THERE, BUT THAT WAS ALRIGHT. EVEN SORT OF A RELIEF. I THOUGHT OF ALL THE GREAT BANDS I'D GONE TO SEE BUT FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER NEVER LAID EYES ON. UNDERAGE, BROKE, SOLD OUT, OR KICKED OUT, THOSE WERE THE BEST SHOWS OF ALL. SITTING OUT FRONT WHERE THE SOUND OF THE MUSIC BLENDED WITH THE STREET SCENE AND THE ROAR OF PASSING CARS. AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW, AND EVER SHALL BE, WORLD WITHOUT END. AMEN. I SETTLED ONTO THE PAVEMENT WITH THE OTHER PUNKS, MAKING NEW FRIENDS, TRADING STORIES AND SCHEMES FOR SNEAKING IN.

"NO STAMP? TRY WALKING IN BACKWARDS"

"DRESS UP AS THE BACK DOOR"

"SAY SOMEONE ORDERED PIZZA"

"AND ALL SIX OF US ARE HERE TO DELIVER IT?"
I DON'T THINK SO"

"WE'LL SAY WE'RE THE OPENING BAND"

"FUCK IT, WE'LL BE THE OPENING BAND!"

"HEY LOSERS, THE FUCKING OPENING BAND
ALREADY PLAYED!"

SHE WAS RIGHT. YOU COULD HEAR THE
SUBHUMANS STARTING INSIDE.

OF ALL THE TRICKS, I'D FORGOTTEN THE OLDEST
IN THE BOOK. I WALKED UP THE STAIRS PAST THE
SUSPICIOUS GLARE OF A HERD OF NECKLESS BOUNCERS.
"GUEST LIST", I SAID, AND AS THEY LOOKED UP THE
NAME I GAVE I CRANED MY HEAD AROUND LIKE A
LLAMA, LOOKING OVER THEIR SHOULDERS FOR A
BETTER ONE.

"NO SPIRO AGNEW ON THE LIST", THEY YELLED.
"GET OUT!!!"

THE HEAD BOUNCER SEIZED ME AND PICKED MY
FEET OFF THE GROUND, READY TO BOWL ME HEAD-
FIRST DOWN THE STAIRS AND OUT THE DOOR. I
QUICKLY PUT IN A POSTSCRIPT.

"PERHAPS THEY PUT ME DOWN UNDER MY
NICKNAME, 'POPO'?"

THAT DID THE TRICK. INSTEAD OF THROWING
ME OUT THE DOOR, THEY CROSSED POPO OFF THE LIST
AND THREW ME RIGHT INTO THE PIT.

I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT, THE SUBHUMANS WERE SO FUCKING GOOD, REALLY SCREAMING AND PUMPING AND POUNDING IT OUT, NOT JUST GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS. AND THERE WAS GERRY HANNAH, PROUDLY PLAYING HIS FIRST SHOW SINCE BEING ARRESTED AS PART OF THE VANCOUVER FIVE MORE THAN TEN YEARS AGO.

I CHEERED, I DANCED, I SANG ALONG. BUT IN ALL THE SWEAT AND PASSIONATE NOISE, THERE WAS A THORN IN MY SIDE. A NAGGING GUILTY FEELING I COULDN'T GET OFF MY MIND.

"WHO IS POPO?", IT ASKED. "WHERE IS POPO? DID HE SHOW UP AFTER ALL, JUST A LITTLE LATE?"

MY MOM WAS ON A DATE. TIME: THE EARLY FIFTIES. PLACE: DETROIT. THE ICY RAIN IS FALLING DOWN AND FORMING MUDDY PUDDLES. HUGE AMERICAN CARS ROLL DOWN THE ROAD AND PEOPLE RUN CROUCHED UNDER UMBRELLAS OR WRAPPED UP IN RAINCOATS. ON THE CORNER IS A RESTAURANT, FANCY BUT NOT GAUDY. THROUGH THE WINDOW YOU CAN SEE MY MOM AND SOME DUDE, FINISHING THEIR MEAL. NO FOOL, MY MOM ALLOWS HIM TO PAY THE BILL. THEY STAND UP, RETRIEVE THEIR COATS FROM THE DOORMAN, AND WALK HAPPILY TOGETHER DOWN THE STREET.

HOWEVER, IT IS NOT MEANT TO BE. A CAR RACES BY AND HITS A HUGE PUDDLE. MOM STAYS DRY BUT THE GUY IS SPLASHED HEAD TO TOE. HE TAKES OFF HIS OVERCOAT, NOW A SOAKED, RUINED, MUDDY MESS. WHAT A THING TO HAPPEN ON A DATE WITH MY MOM! BUT, EXAMINING THE DAMAGE, HE SUDDENLY LIGHTENS UP.

"WHY, THIS ISN'T MY COAT AT ALL," HE LAUGHS. "THE DOORMAN MUST HAVE GIVEN ME THE WRONG ONE!" THEY RETURN TO THE RESTAURANT AND HAND THE DRIPPING MUDDY BUNDLE BACK TO THE HORRIFIED DOORMAN. "THERE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN A MISTAKE," THEY SAY. "YOU GAVE US THE WRONG COAT."

INDEED, THE DOORMAN CHECKS THE TAGS AND APOLOGIZES, HANDING OVER A COAT OF A SIMILAR CUT.

HAPPY, WARM, AND DRY, THEY STROLL DOWN THE STREET AGAIN WITH A SMILE AND A GEM OF WISDOM TO PASS DOWN TO FUTURE GENERATIONS. "THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SHLEMIEL AND A SHLEMAZEL," MOM TELLS ME MANY YEARS LATER. "ANY SHLEMIEL CAN GET THEIR COAT SPLASHED IN MUD BY A PASSING CAR. BUT TO DO IT WITHOUT EVEN PUTTING IT ON OR GOING OUTSIDE, THAT TAKES A SHLEMAZEL."

POOR SHLEMAZEL. HIM AND ALL THE OTHER POPOS OF THIS WORLD, IN THEIR MUDDY OVERCOATS,

STUCK IN THE OTHER HALF OF MY FAMILY'S STORIES. PROBABLY SEVEN FEET TALL, WAITING OUTSIDE THE SHOW, IN THE RAIN, WITH AN AXE TO GRIND, LITERALLY.

ONCE I SPENT A MONTH IN STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN. UNTIL THEN, SACRAMENTO WAS THE FURTHEST I'D EVER BEEN AWAY FROM HOME AND FRIENDS. IT WAS EXCITING, BUT SO LONELY AS TO BE ALMOST UNBEARABLE. I JUST WALKED, DAY AND NIGHT, MOSTLY IN THE STREETS OF THE OLD TOWN, GAMLA STAN, WATCHING THE STREET MUSICIANS PLAY. NO CONVERSATIONS WITH ANYONE, NO HUMAN CONTACT AT ALL, JUST THE SONGS AND THE SOUND OF FOREIGN WORDS AND PEOPLE PASSING BY.

I WAS WHISTLING THE OTHER DAY WHILE I FLIPPED THE EGGS AND POURED THE MORNING COFFEE.

"WHAT'S THAT?" MY ROOMMATE JOHN ASKED, SO I TOLD HIM. A SONG A BAND OF STREET MUSICIANS PLAYED ONE DAY IN GAMLA STAN IN THE SUMMER OF '85. STILL STUCK IN MY HEAD, GOD DAMNIT.

"YEAH, THAT'S FUNNY", HE SAID, MATTER OF FACT. "I THOUGHT I'D HEARD IT BEFORE".

MY ROOMMATES KEEP PULLING RABBITS LIKE THAT OUT OF THEIR HAT. "OH, I DIDN'T MENTION I USED TO BE A TEACHER AT A GIRLS' SCHOOL IN NEW HAMPSHIRE?", SAYS THE BEARDED SAILOR GUY. "YOU DIDN'T KNOW I HAD A TWO FOOT MOHAWK AND A MAGAZINE?", SAYS THE HIPPIE.

NOW IT WAS JOHN'S TURN. "STOCKHOLM? SUMMER OF '85? GAMLA STAN? YEAH, I WAS THERE AT THE SAME TIME, DOING RESEARCH ON THE SWEDISH LABOR PARTY."

MY MOUTH DROPPED AND INSTINCTIVELY BEGAN MUTTERING, "WEIRD, WEIRD, WEIRD, WEIRD" THOUGH, AS SLUGGO LIKES TO REMIND ME, IT'S ACTUALLY NOT THAT WEIRD. OUR PATHS DON'T CROSS AND INTERSECT BY CHANCE, BUT BY THE CHOICES THAT WE'VE MADE.

I WENT DOWNSTAIRS AND WENT DIGGING THROUGH OLD ISSUES UNTIL I FOUND IT, A PHOTO OF THAT WONDERFUL BAND PLAYING ON THE STREET. TWO GIRLS AND TWO GUYS, DECKED OUT AND DANCING ALL AROUND, SINGING AND STRUMMING ACOUSTIC INSTRUMENTS AND RADIATING A RARE WARMTH. A LOVE FOR PERFORMING, FOR EACH OTHER, AND FOR LIFE ITSELF SO STRONG IT SWEEPED ME OUT OF MY SHELL. IN SHY STOCKHOLM, NOTHING ELSE HAD COME CLOSE TO DOING THAT.

JOHN WENT UPSTAIRS AND CAME BACK WITH A PILE OF CASSETTES. CAPTURED ON TAPE WERE THOSE FAMILIAR OLD SOUNDS. FOOTSTEPS AND FOREIGN WORDS, STREETCARS AND FALLING RAIN.

LONELY AND OUT OF PLACE LIKE ME, JOHN HAD CARRIED A TAPE RECORDER AND CAPTURED THE SOUNDS OF STOCKHOLM AS HE WALKED THROUGH IT EVERY DAY. OBSERVING PEOPLE BUT NEVER INTERACTING WITH THEM, AT LEAST NOT SUCCESSFULLY.

THEN HE FOUND IT, ON A TAPE OF STREET MUSICIANS. SURE ENOUGH, THE SONG I NEVER THOUGHT I'D HEAR AGAIN. BETTER EVEN THAN I REMEMBERED.

"BUT THEY WEREN'T LIKE THE OTHER STREET MUSICIANS", I PROTESTED. "I WAS IN GAMLA STAN EVERY DAY AND I SWEAR THEY WERE ONLY OUT ONCE. ONLY FOR AN HOUR, ONLY PLAYING TO FIFTEEN OR TWENTY PEOPLE AT MOST."

JOHN SAID, "I KNOW. I WAS ONE OF THOSE FIFTEEN OR TWENTY PEOPLE."

I IMAGINED I COULD HEAR THE SOUND OF MY OWN HANDS IN THE APPLAUSE BETWEEN SONGS. JOHN THOUGHT HE SAW THE CORNER OF HIS COAT IN THE CORNER OF MY PHOTO. BUT WHO KNOWS? WE WERE PROBABLY STANDING SHOULDER TO SHOULDER.

ONE DAY TOWARDS THE END OF MY STAY IN SWEDEN, A GUY CHASED ME DOWN AND, OUT OF BREATH AND IN BROKEN ENGLISH EXPLAINED THAT HE HAD BEEN TRYING TO CATCH UP TO ME FOR THREE WEEKS, EVER SINCE THE DAY I HANDED HIM A FANZINE OUTSIDE CENTRAL STATION, THEN GRUNTED AND RAN AWAY.

HIS NAME WAS DEE DEE. WE SAT EATING TOGETHER AT A LARGE LUNCH COUNTER OVERLOOKING THE STATION, KEEPING AN EYE OUT FOR MONGO, A SKINHEAD WHO WAS LOOKING TO BEAT DEE DEE'S BRAINS IN.

A NICE BOY, THAT DEE DEE. OUT OF A MILLION PEOPLE I'D PASSED HOPING FOR A WORD, A GESTURE, OR A CHASE, HE WAS ONE IN A MILLION. FOOLISH NOT TO REALIZE THAT EVERYONE ELSE WAS WAITING TOO, FOR SOMEONE ELSE TO MAKE THE MOVE. TO CONNECT DIFFERENT LIVES AND LOOSE ENDS, AND COMPARE STORIES.

DEE DEE HAD TRACKED ME DOWN, ASKING EVERYONE IF THEY HAD SEEN THE SHY AMERICAN FANZINE EDITOR. FINALLY ONE COUPLE SAID THEY HAD. EVIDENTLY I PASSED BY THE LICORICE SHOP WHERE THEY WORKED. NOT ONCE BUT OVER AND OVER, EVERY DAY, IN MY ENDLESS TRUDGE THROUGH OLD TOWN.

MY EARS RANG, I WAS SO HAPPY. TO BE SEEN BY STRANGERS, NOTICED BY PEOPLE WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING IT, LOOKED FOR AND REMEMBERED.

SUDDENLY I FELT MUCH LESS ALONE. IT'S GOOD TO REMEMBER THAT NOW. HOW JUST PASSING BY, WE TOUCH LIVES THAT WE DON'T EVEN KNOW, AND BECOME PART OF STORIES TOLD BY PEOPLE WE DON'T EVEN KNOW EXIST. THE WAY MONGO IS PART OF MY STOCKHOLM STORY AND HE DOESN'T EVEN KNOW I EXIST. HOPEFULLY.

2. Story of The Curse

I CAME HOME. IT WAS VERY, VERY DARK.
"POWER CUT OFF?" I CALLED OUT.

"YES," SAID A VOICE FROM THE DARKNESS.
SETH KELLY.

"ANY FOOD?"

"NO." MY OTHER HOUSEMATE, J.P.

I STUMBLED AROUND THROUGH THE WRECKAGE FOR A MINUTE BEFORE I FOUND THEM. THEY STOOD IMMOBILE IN THE EERIE, FLICKERING GLOW OF A SINGLE CANDLE. THEY WERE STARING AND POINTING AT MY MONKEY.

"BOYS! NO NEED TO MAKE RASH DECISIONS! WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?"

"WE THOUGHT ABOUT THE WAY THINGS WERE GOING," J.P. SAID.

"WRONG. THE WAY THINGS WERE GOING WRONG," SETH SAID.

"IT SEEMED LIKE THERE MUST BE A CURSE"

"SO WE DECIDED TO LOOK FOR IT"

"AND LOOK WHAT WE FOUND"

THEY POINTED AT THE HORRIBLE, GRIMACING, PURPLE PAPER MACHE MONKEY. SHADOWS FELL ACROSS THE FACE OF THE ALREADY DARK AND EVIL THING, MAKING ITS GRIN AND WIDE EYES ALL THE MORE DEFIANT AND CHALLENGING. THE MONKEY POINTED BACK WITH AN OUTSTRETCHED MIDDLE FINGER, FLIPPING THEM OFF.

"SURELY YOU ARE NOT SUGGESTING THAT MY MONKEY HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE UNEXPECTED TURN OUR LIVES HAVE TAKEN. WHY, IT'S JUST A SWEET PRESENT FROM MY SWEET GIRLFRIEND, MAYE"

AT THE SOUND OF THAT NAME, MY HOUSEMATES COWERED AND HISSED. DUCKED AND COVERED. PREPARED FOR LIGHTNING TO STRIKE TWICE. THEY SAID, "EITHER THE MONKEY GOES OR WE DO".

A FRIENDLY, CUDDLY LITTLE MONKEY. PEOPLE FREAK OUT OVER THE WEIRDEST THINGS. LIKE MAYE, WHEN SHE TOLD ME ABOUT SLEEPING WITH ANOTHER BOY WHILE I WAS AWAY FOR THE WEEKEND, I WAS UPSET. SHE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY. I GUESS THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT WILL SET SOMEONE OFF. WHEN I MENTIONED I HAD KISSED ANOTHER GIRL, SHE GOT UP AND RAN AWAY, STRAIGHT OVER THE BACK FENCE OF THE OLD CITY HALL.

FUNNY GIRL. WHEN I RAN INTO HER TWO HOURS LATER IN ONE OF THE ALLEYS, SHE WALKED UP WITH HER HEAD HUNG LOW AND A TINY FLOWER IN HER HANDS. AN OFFERING AND AN ASKING TOO, FOR FORGIVENESS, REAPPROACHMENT, UNDERSTANDING. FOR GIVE AND FOR TAKE. ALSO, AN OFFERING JUST FOR ITS OWN SAKE.

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN A BAD SIGN WHEN SHE STOLE THINGS FROM HER FRIENDS TO GIVE TO ME, WHEN SHE GAVE ME THE PRESENTS FRIENDS HAD GIVEN HER, WHEN SHE TOOK THE PRESENTS I GAVE HER AND GAVE THOSE AWAY TOO, TO OTHER GIRLS WHO, MAYE SAID, LOVED ME MORE THAN SHE EVER COULD. BUT A BAD SIGN WAS LIKE A GREEN LIGHT FOR ME. A GOOD SIGN AND I WOULD HAVE BEEN THE ONE TO RUN.

FINALLY, THOUGH, IT ALL BROKE. SINCE I COULDN'T RUN I JUST SAT AT HOME SCREAMING, HITTING THE WALLS, AND TEARING OUT MY HAIR.

IN A NEARBY TOWN, MAYE BOARDED A BART TRAIN. IN HER ARMS, A LARGE PURPLE MONKEY. THOUGH THE TRAIN WAS CROWDED WITH THE MORNING COMMUTE, MAYE SAT SIDE BY SIDE WITH THE MONKEY, BOTH STARING STRAIGHT AHEAD AND FLIPPING OFF ANYONE WHO COMMENTED OR TRIED TO TAKE THE PRIMATE'S PLACE.

THOUGH I HAD SAID I NEVER WANTED TO SEE HER AGAIN, THERE SHE WAS KICKING DOWN MY DOOR. WHO ELSE WOULD SHOW UP WITH AN ANGRY PURPLE MONKEY IN AN ATTEMPT TO WIN BACK MY HEART? IT HAD BEEN AT MY APARTMENT EVER SINCE, AND SO HAD SHE, MUCH OF THE TIME.

OH, MAYE. SHE ALWAYS CHALLENGED ME, WOULDN'T EVER LET IT BE EASY. WOULDN'T LET ME GO OUT WITH HER, THEN WOULDN'T LET ME BREAK UP. SHE WOULDN'T STAND FOR MY BULLSHIT, AND THAT MADE ME LOVE HER ALL THE MORE. BUT LOVE ONLY MADE IT HARDER TO LIVE. THE LANDLORD CAME AND BOOTED US OUT INTO THE STREET. SETH LOST HIS JOB, J.P. LOST HIS GIRLFRIEND, AND I WAS SUCH A MESS I COULDN'T THINK OR SLEEP OR EAT.

IT WAS LIKE TRYING TO GET RID OF SCABIES, WHEN THERE'S NOTHING LEFT TO DO BUT SET FIRE TO ALL YOUR CLOTHES AND DRIVE OUT OF TOWN NAKED.

A COWARDLY MOVE, I KNOW. I'D ALWAYS CONSIDERED MYSELF SOMEONE WHO COULD MEET PROBLEMS FACE TO FACE. I WANTED TO BE DIFFERENT FROM EVERY OTHER MAN IN MAYE'S LIFE. THEY HAD ALL LEFT, STARTING WITH HER FATHER. BUT I WASN'T SO DIFFERENT.

WHEN I RETURNED, NEARLY A YEAR HAD PASSED. IN MY DAD'S BASEMENT UNPACKING, I FOUND TRACES OF RATS. THEY HAD GOTTEN INTO MY BOXES AND EATEN HALF OF MY FAVORITE T-SHIRT AND A COPY OF SNIFFIN' GLUE. I FOLLOWED A TRAIL OF PAPER AND SHIT AND CAME TO A FAMILIAR FACE. THE MONKEY. ONLY THERE WAS A HOLE WHERE ITS MOUTH HAD BEEN, AND ITS INNARDS WERE PUKED OUT IN A HORRIBLE STINKING, ROTTING MESS. AS IF THE HEART AND SOUL OF THE BEAST HAD MOVED ON, AND ONLY THE EMPTY SHELL REMAINED. IT WAS THE SAME AS MY LOVE FOR MAYE, SO I KEPT THE DAMN THING. HOLLOW NOW AND DESECRATED, IT WAS ALL I HAD LEFT. I BOXED IT UP SO THAT NOTHING MORE COULD GET IN OR OUT.

I TOOK PRIDE IN THE FACT THAT MY FLEETING, AWKWARD RELATIONSHIPS ALWAYS TURNED INTO LASTING FRIENDSHIPS, MORE SATISFYING AND SWEET THAN THE ROMANCE HAD BEEN. BUT MAYE AND I WOULD NEVER BE FRIENDS. GREAT AS LOVERS, GREAT AS ENEMIES, BUT LOUSY AS FRIENDS. WE TRIED, BUT IT WAS NO USE. MAYBE I HAD FINALLY FOUND TRUE LOVE. NOT THAT TRUE LOVE IS A BITTER, ROTTEN DEAD MONKEY IN A BOX. BUT THEN AGAIN, MAYBE.

DURING OUR BRIEF ATTEMPT AT FRIENDSHIP, MAYE SAID WE SHOULD TAKE THE MONKEY DOWN TO THE PIER AND THROW IT OFF TOGETHER. BUT I SAID NO. I WASN'T READY TO LET IT GO JUST YET.

LAST YEAR I SPENT MONTHS CLEARING OUT MY DAD'S BASEMENT. LITERALLY, MONTHS. HE'S EVEN MORE OF A PACKRAT THAN ME, AND MUCH LESS ORGANIZED. UNCOVERING GHOSTS NEARLY FIFTY YEARS OLD MADE ME AWARE OF ALL THE THINGS I DON'T WANT AROUND HAUNTING ME, WAITING TO BE REMEMBERED. TIME TO TAKE OUT MY OWN TRASH.

WHEN NEIGHBORHOOD CLEANUP DAY ARRIVED, THIRTY BOXES OF CRAP WERE OUT FRONT OF MY DAD'S. I SAID MY GOODBYES. TO THE MONKEY, TO MAYE, EVEN TO THE LONG AGO DOOMED APARTMENT WITH

J.P. AND SETH. I SAID GOODBYE AND WALKED AWAY, AND AS I LEFT I COULD ALREADY HEAR THE SCAVENGERS WITH THEIR PICKUP TRUCKS AND SHOPPING CARTS COMING TO PICK THROUGH THE PILE. WHO CAN RESIST A BOX CLEARLY MARKED, "CURSE"?

3. Between the Days

IN BETWEEN THE FRANTIC, FRENZIED WEEKS OF RUNNING AROUND GETTING READY TO LEAVE AND THE CALM, BLISSFUL MOMENT OF ACTUALLY DRIVING AWAY, I ALWAYS WISH THERE WAS AN EXTRA DAY. IN BETWEEN DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL, FAREWELL AND BETTER TO FORGET. WHO AM I KIDDING? I WISH THERE WAS AN EXTRA YEAR.

IF I COULD ONLY MAKE THAT MOMENT LAST. NOT THE CRESCENDO OF BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE, NOT THE BEGINNINGS OF BUILDING A NEW ONE IN ITS PLACE. JUST A CIGARETTE IN THE RUBBLE TO PAUSE AND TAKE IN THE CHANGE. BECAUSE, LIKE SEX, THE SWEETEST PART IS NOT THE CLIMAX, BUT THE CALM AFTER THE STORM. FOLLOWED BY THE COFFEE, CIGARETTES, THAI FOOD AND ICE CREAM AFTER THE CALM AFTER THE STORM. SEX AND LIFE, BOTH TOO GOOD TO LAST, YET PERHAPS TOO GOOD TO RUSH. YES. YOU COULD ARGUE THAT THE WORLD IS NOT A WOMAN AND LIFE IS NOT A GLORIOUS YET EMBARRASSING ONE-NIGHT STAND. BUT REALLY, WHAT'S THE USE IN ARGUING ABOUT IT?

IT HAPPENED TO ME, SO I KNOW. ONLY ONE LAST THING TO DO BEFORE I LEFT TOWN, BUT IT WAS A DOOZY. A ROOT CANAL. SO I SAID GOODBYES AHEAD OF TIME. GOODBYE WILLEY AND FATHER, FAREWELL TO MY FISH AND SPENGER'S AND MIDNIGHT BASKETBALL. MY BAGS WERE EVEN PACKED IN ADVANCE.

THE APPOINTMENT WAS AN EARLY ONE. VERY EARLY. CRIMINALLY, INHUMANELY EARLY. BUT AFTER WEEKS OF ANTICIPATION, THE OPERATION ITSELF WAS A BREEZE. FAST AND ANTICLIMACTIC. MY FIFTH ROOT CANAL, AND ONE SITUATION WHERE MY INCREASING CALLOUSNESS AND INSENSITIVITY REALLY PAID OFF. I WALKED OUT OF THE DENTIST AT TEN IN THE MORNING ALL PATCHED UP AND FEELING FINE AS WINE.

THERE WAS NOTHING TO RECOVER FROM, NO

NEED AFTER ALL TO GO HOME AND SLEEP. JUST A NUMB MOUTH AND A WHOLE UNEXPECTED DAY LAYED OUT AHEAD OF ME. SONNY, MY RIDE, DIDN'T LEAVE UNTIL EIGHT.

I WAS STARTING ON MY SECOND ICE CREAM CONE WHEN I SPOTTED THE GRIMPLE BOYS OUTSIDE THE TELEGRAPH 7-11. I YELLED AT THEM. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU GUYS DOING OUT IN THE DAYTIME?", I SAID.

BUT IT CAME OUT MORE LIKE, "WGDLBLRRGDBDM". MY TONGUE WOULDN'T WORK RIGHT TO FORM THE WORDS. THEY JUST LOOKED AT ME WEIRD.

"DAMN, DUDE", THEY SAID. "WHO FUCKED UP YOUR FACE?"

I LAUGHED AND LAUGHED, AND DROOLED. A ROOT CANAL IS A HARD THING TO EXPLAIN. ESPECIALLY WITH FRESH STITCHES IN YOUR MOUTH.

WALKING DOWN DWIGHT, I CAME ACROSS YOLANDA AND COREY IN HIS FRONT YARD, KISSING. IT WAS SWEET TO SEE, A LITTLE TENDERNESS AND TORTURE BEFORE SHE SCURRIED OFF TO SCHOOL FOR THE DAY. LEAVING HAS THE SAME LOOK AND FEEL WHETHER FOR AN HOUR OR A YEAR, TO YOUR POLITICAL SCIENCE CLASS OR TO WALK AROUND THE WORLD. IT'S JUST A MATTER OF HOW MUCH AND HOW FAR GONE.

EASIER TO LEAVE SOMETHING YOU HATE, EASIER TO STAY AWAY FROM SOMETHING YOU LIKE, BUT IF YOU LOVE IT NO ONE KNOWS WHAT TO DO AND YOU FEEL CHEATED AND CONFUSED, WHICH IS I THINK WHAT YOLANDA WAS GOING THROUGH THAT MORNING WITH COREY AND WHAT I'D BEEN GOING THROUGH THAT WHOLE MONTH WITH BERKELEY, GETTING READY TO SPLIT. TORN BETWEEN UNDERSTOOD AND UNKNOWN, CHALLENGING AND COMFORTING. TOO MUCH FOR COREY, THOUGH, WHO JUST NEEDED A LITTLE BIT OF COMFORTING.

EVERYONE TURNS ON THE CHARM WHEN IT'S TIME TO SAY GOODBYE. HOW CAN YOU HELP FALLING IN LOVE WITH THEM ALL OVER AGAIN? HOW CAN THEY HELP BUT RUN AND HIDE KNOWING IT WILL ONLY MAKE YOU MISS THEM MORE? THAT'S HOW IT GOES, NOT JUST WITH BOYS AND GIRLS, BUT EVEN WITH MY STUPID CITY. IF ONLY IT WOULD RAIN ON ME ON MY WAY OUT OF TOWN. BUT NO, IT WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CAREFREE SUNNY DAY I HAD EVER SEEN. THE BAY SHINED, THE HILLS CLIMBED, AND EVERY WINGNUT AND FLOWER WAS OUT IN FULL BLOOM. I TOOK COREY OUT OF YOLANDA'S ARMS AND DRAGGED HIM DOWN THE STREET. A LITTLE STROLL TO EASE HIS TROUBLED MIND.

WE WERE TALKING. ABOUT GIRLS. AS USUAL. EXCEPT, A LITTLE MORE EXPLICITLY THAN USUAL. PEOPLE OUT WATERING THE PLANTS STARED AND BLUSHED, CATCHING THE TONE OF MY SLURS IF NOT THE EXACT WORDS. I IGNORED THEM AND WENT ON, IN TEXTBOOK DETAIL.

"YOU KNOW HOW IT IS WHEN HER LEG IS UP LIKE THIS, AND YOU'RE TWISTED AROUND WITH YOUR HEAD LIKE THIS, AND THEN, YOU KNOW, SHE'S LIKE, MIND IF I DO THIS?"

"UH, SURE," COREY SAID.

"DO YOU LIKE THAT?"

I MEAN, WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL? EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT SEX, BUT NO ONE EVER REALLY TALKS ABOUT SEX, YOU KNOW? IT'S ODD. BUT I GUESS I DON'T EITHER, OR HADN'T MUCH BEFORE.

COREY OPENED ONE EYE BIGGER THAN THE OTHER AND SCRUTINIZED ME. "TELL ME," HE SAID. "DID THEY GIVE YOU ANY DRUGS AT THE DENTIST?"

"DRUGS? ME? I DON'T EVEN TAKE ANESTHESIA. NOT EVEN FOR FUN.

"BUT THIS WASN'T MY REGULAR DENTIST," I ADDED. "AND COME TO THINK OF IT, HE DID GIVE ME A LITTLE SOMETHING. SNUCK IN A SHOT QUICK BEFORE I COULD STOP HIM. MAN, I WAS PISSED. BUT I FORGOT ALL ABOUT IT. UNTIL NOW. WHY DO YOU ASK?"

IF I DID DRUGS ALL THE TIME I WOULD HAVE FIGURED OUT WHAT COREY ALREADY KNEW. IT WASN'T THE STITCHES MAKING ME SLUR MY WORDS. I WAS GONE WITH THE WIND. AND COREY, I NOW NOTICED, WAS STILL IN HIS PAJAMAS.

"IT'S SUCH A NICE SUNNY DAY," I SMILED. "BUT FUCK IT, LET'S GO BACK TO YOUR BASEMENT AND JAM."

"MAYBE IF I SMOKED A FEW BONGLOADS AND TOOK HALF A HIT OF ACID, I'D BE ABLE TO ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND YOU," COREY SAID, AND SO HE DID.

WE PLAYED EVERY SONG WE'D EVER WRITTEN TOGETHER OVER THE YEARS, THEN EVERY SONG WE'D EVER WRITTEN SEPARATELY, THEN BITS AND PIECES OF EVERY SONG WE'D EVER HEARD. PLAYING DRUMS WAS DANGEROUS, SEEING AS HOW I ACCIDENTALLY HIT MYSELF IN THE FACE EVEN ON REGULAR DAYS. I JUST HOPED THE STITCHES WOULDN'T POP OUT SCREAMING ALONG LIKE THAT.

THE SUN WAS STILL OUT WHEN WE FINISHED, THE BIRDS WERE STILL CHIRPING, AND A STILL CALM HUNG IN THE AIR. TIME HELD BACK AND HAD YET TO CATCH UP. I WAS THANKFUL FOR THE

BREAK FROM THE RUSH. A PAUSE BEFORE LEAVING BUT LONG AFTER SAYING GOODBYE. A CHANCE TO LOOK BOTH WAYS.

"COREY", I SAID, "IMAGINE WAKING UP IN BETWEEN THE DAYS".

"TOTALLY".

"YOU FIND THE CAST OF CHARACTERS IN YOUR LIFE HAVING A CAST PARTY. THEY'RE MINGLING HAPPILY WITHOUT YOU TO ENFORCE THE RULES AND REINFORCE THE ROLES THEY'VE BEEN ASSIGNED".

"YOLANDA TOO?" HE LOOKED WORRIED.

"NO, FOR ONCE SHE'S RIGHT NEXT TO YOU AND STILL ASLEEP. YOU CAN SEE HER WITHOUT HAVING TO LOOK AWAY. YOU CAN BE TOGETHER FOR A WHILE WITHOUT EITHER OF YOU HAVING TO LEAVE".

"I DON'T KNOW WHETHER TO STAY IN BED", HE SAID, "OR GO AND JOIN THE PARTY. OR WAKE UP YOLANDA AND BRING HER AS MY DATE".

"I KNOW. ME NEITHER. BUT MAYBE YOU DON'T HAVE TO DECIDE. MAYBE THERE'S TIME FOR EVERYTHING".

"YOU'RE KIDDING".

"NO, JUST HIGH AS A KITE".

COREY SAID, "I KNOW YOU'RE ALWAYS WRONG. BUT JUST THIS ONCE, I REALLY HOPE YOU'RE RIGHT".

4. Tale of Two Cindys

CINDY AND CINDY WENT TO A SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE IN CONWAY, ARKANSAS. THEY WERE NICE, THEY WERE PLEASANT, THEY WERE ENTHUSIASTIC. BUT THEY WERE PLAIN. NOT MEAN ENOUGH, SHARP ENOUGH, QUIET OR LOUD ENOUGH TO REALLY BE NOTICED. TWO LONELY LOWER UPPER CLASS ALMOST PUNK GIRLS ON A LIBERAL ARTS SCHOOL CAMPUS SADLY SET TWENTY FIVE MILES FROM THE CITY, WHERE THE REAL ACTION WAS. THEY WANTED TO BE NOTICED. WHO CAN BLAME THEM? WHO AMONG US WILL CAST THE FIRST STONE? WHO REALLY WANTS TO BE ALONE? BESIDES ME.

THEY USED TO BEAT UP GIRLS LIKE CINDY AND CINDY BACK IN THE DARK DAYS OF EARLY 80'S PUNK. THE DARK, DESTRUCTIVE, BAD, EVIL, GLORIOUS, WONDERFUL I-MISS EARLY 80'S PUNK. GIRL PUNK GANGS WOULD DESTROY THOSE POOR NORMAL GIRLS WHO DARED TO SHOW UP AT A SHOW. IT WAS

VICIOUS YET LAUGHABLE, LIKE MOST THINGS AT THE TIME. YOU COULD SEE THE PEACE SIGN BLEACHED INTO THE BACK OF CAROL'S HAIR AS SHE POUNDED HER FISTS INTO THE FACE OF SOME POOR BLONDE COLLEGE CO-ED OUTSIDE OF RUTHIE'S INN.

CINDY AND CINDY WOULDN'T HAVE LASTED LONG AT RUTHIE'S INN, BUT THEY FIT RIGHT INTO THE LATE 90'S LITTLE ROCK SCENE. I WOULD NEVER WISH HARM UPON EITHER CINDY, NOR UPON MYSELF, YET THE FACT REMAINED. NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS WOULD I BE ABLE TO HAVE FUN AT ONE OF THOSE SHOWS.

"WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER", THAT'S WHAT THEY SAY. I SAY, "DEATH IS PAINLESS, BUT EVERYTHING ELSE HURTS LIKE HELL". WOULD I WILLINGLY RUN THE GAUNTLET AND BE HIT BY EVERYTHING WHICH HAS HURT ME, SHAPED ME, AND GIVEN ME STRENGTH AND CHARACTER OVER THE YEARS? NOT ON YOUR LIFE. I WOULD SIT ON THE COUCH INSTEAD, RELAXING AND CATCHING UP ON OLD MAIL. I WOULD BE A SPINELESS, FORMLESS, BORING SCHLEP. I WOULD GO PAY SEVEN BUCKS TO GET INTO THE LATE 90'S LITTLE ROCK SHOW AND, WITH MY BACKPACK ON, SING ALONG WITH AVAIL. NO ROUGH STUFF, THOUGH. THIS IS NO PLACE FOR THAT.

OKAY, EACH TO HIS OWN. BUT IT WAS NO GOOD FOR CINDY AND CINDY EITHER. TOO REMOVED FROM THE BASE INSTINCT OF LIFE, WHICH IS, BASICALLY, DEATH. MAYBE SEX AND DEATH. THEY SAID, SEX AND DEATH? I WANT SOME.

BUT, POOR DISCONNECTED LIBERAL ARTS SCHOOL COLLEGE GIRLS, THEY DIDN'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO LIVE. DISCONNECTED FROM EVEN THE MOST BASE INSTINCTS, THEY COULDN'T APPROACH ANYTHING NATURALLY. TRYING IS VERY IMPORTANT, FAILING IS ALSO GOOD, AND SUCCESS CAN DO GREAT THINGS FOR YOUR CONFIDENCE AND ABILITY TO PERSEVERE. BUT TRYING TOO HARD ALWAYS MAKES YOU LOOK LIKE A BAD JOKE. WHEN THE GIRLS ANNOUNCED THEY HAD CHANGED THEIR NAMES, I HAD TO LAUGH. "SIN" AND "INDY."

WHY DO I HATE CINDY AND CINDY, WHOSE NEW NAMES I COULD NEVER BRING MYSELF TO SAY? THEY ARE FRIENDS OF MINE, THAT'S ONE GOOD REASON. BUT THERE'S SOMETHING MORE. I HATE THEM FOR TRYING SO HARD, I HATE THEIR DISHONESTY IN TRYING TO CHANGE AND BE ACCEPTED INSTEAD OF JUST ACCEPTING THEMSELVES AND WAITING FOR EVERYONE ELSE TO CATCH ON OR FUCK OFF. MOST OF ALL I HATE

THE NAGGING LONELINESS AND THE NEED FOR ACCEPTANCE. CHANGING YOURSELF IS HEALTHY AND NECESSARY. IS IT ALSO ALWAYS DISHONEST?

WHY DOES IT SEEM SO GREAT TO ME TO BE SHAPED BY THE HARDSHIPS OF LIFE BUT NOT TO SHAPE YOURSELF TO SHORE UP AGAINST THEM? MAYBE I JUST HATE THEIR VULNERABILITY, THAT IMPATIENCE AND OPEN SORE THAT MADE BOTH CINDYS CHANGE NOT ONLY THEIR NAMES BUT ALSO THE WAY THEY DRESSED, THE WAY THEY LIVED, AND THE PEOPLE THAT THEY KNEW.

WHAT CAN I SAY? THE WORLD SEES SIN AND INDY, EXCITING AND BOLD IN THEIR SEPARATE WAYS. I SEE THE TWO CINDYS UNDERNEATH IT ALL, BACK WHEN THEY WERE INSEPERABLE. I'M SAD AT THE WORLD BECAUSE IT'S SO HARD TO CHANGE AND STILL STAY TOGETHER. BECAUSE WHAT BROUGHT THE TWO CINDYS OUT OF THEIR SHELL ALSO SERVED TO SET THEM FURTHER AND FURTHER APART. IN THE RUSH TO RECREATE, THE FRIENDSHIP WAS CAST ASIDE, FORGOTTEN LIKE THEIR OLD NAMES.

5. Temescal, again

WALKING THROUGH THE BUSHES, THE HIDDEN TRAILS UNDERNEATH THE TANGLES OF FREEWAY IN THE OAKLAND HILLS. WE USED TO RUN ALONG HERE SMEARED WITH BLACKBERRIES FOR WARPAINT, CHASING AND LAUGHING THROUGH THE IVY, KISSING AS WE SLID DOWN THE STEEP DIRT SLOPES. WE USED TO TALK ABOUT LIVING HERE, IN A SECRET SPOT I'D FOUND. NOT JUST ROMANTIC, IT WAS PRACTICAL, WE HAD NOWHERE ELSE TO GO. THEN, LIVING IN A LEAN-TO IN THE BUSHES SOUNDED ROMANTIC EVEN ALONE. NOW IT WOULD JUST BE LONELY. LONESOME.

ONE OF THOSE TRICKS LIFE PLAYS ON YOU. GET OLDER AND THEY CALL YOUR ANGER BITTERNESS. YOUR ALIENATION BECOMES A BURDEN INSTEAD OF A BADGE OF PRIDE. OH, I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE WE COULD LIVE THERE TOGETHER STILL, MAKE STIR-FRY ON THE COLEMAN STOVE AND WALK ON DOWN TO THE LIBRARY IN THE MORNINGS. BUT YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO DO IT NOW, AND WHAT'S WORSE, MAYBE I WOULDN'T EITHER. SOMETHING OF THE INNOCENCE IS GONE.

I WALK ALONG NEW PATHS, BUT WHEN I COME TO THE RAZOR WIRE I JUST TURN AROUND. BEFORE

I WOULD HAVE MARCHED RIGHT OVER. YOU HAVE THE SCAR TO PROVE IT, FROM OUR FIRST DATE. YOU IMPALED YOUR WRIST ON THE RAZOR WIRE BY THE RESERVOIR, I CUT MY THUMB ON BROKEN GLASS TRYING TO BREAK INTO THE BLIND-DEAF SCHOOL. WE WERE REALLY SOMETHING. THE WAY YOU HELD AND COMFORTED ME, THAT BLOOD BROKE THE ICE.

WE WERE TUMBLING THROUGH THE BEDS OF FLOWERS OUTSIDE THE HOSPITAL WHEN THE SECURITY GUARD CAME AND TOLD US TO MOVE. PATIENTS INSIDE WERE COMPLAINING, WE RUINED THEIR VIEW. WHO COULD COMPLAIN ABOUT TWO PEOPLE VERY MUCH IN LOVE? I COULD NOW, PROBABLY. ADD IT TO THE LIST.

I REMEMBER LAKE TEMESCAL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, SPLASHING AND SO HAPPY JUST TO LOOK AT EACH OTHER IN THE MOONLIGHT. EVEN DAYS LIKE THIS, TOO SUNNY AND SHARP, STRESSED OUT LIKE YOU ALWAYS WERE, WE COULD DRIVE THERE AND JUMP RIGHT IN. I WALKED UP TODAY TO DO JUST THAT, BUT IT WAS CROWDED WITH HAPPY FAMILIES. I PICKED SOME ROTTEN BLACKBERRIES AND WALKED AWAY.

I USED TO GET SO JEALOUS EVERY SPRING, KNOWING YOU'D WANT TO GO SWIMMING IN THE SUN AND SO WOULD ALL THE YOUNG BOYS. BUT NOT ME. I SLEPT ALL DAY AND WROTE ALL NIGHT, GRUMPY AND MEAN. I LIKED SWIMMING AND SUNSHINE, BUT NOT WITH YOU. THEY MADE ME FEEL OLD.

I ALWAYS SAY HAPPINESS IS OVERRATED, BUT SO IS DEPRESSION AND REGRET. REMEMBER SITTING AT THAT PARK BY THE HOSPITAL YOU SAID, "THIS IS ONE OF THOSE PLACES PEOPLE COME RIGHT AFTER SOMEONE DIES, AND THEY SIT HERE LOOKING ALL WEIRD." THEN YOU SAW MY FALLEN FACE. I HELD UP FINGERS TO SHOW, NOT VICTORY OR PEACE, BUT THE NUMBER TWO.

WHAT CAN I DO? BETTER TO ADMIT IT OR PRETEND? SOMETHING OF THE INNOCENCE IS GONE OR AT LEAST TAPPED OUT AND DEAD TODAY. BETTER TO DRINK MORE COFFEE AND WALK THE DWIGHT WILDERNESS TRAILS. TRY TO SHAKE IT OFF, AGAIN.

6. Both Sides Now

WHEN ABEL DIED, ELSA WAS THE FIRST PERSON I THOUGHT TO CALL. THEY HAD A TIGHT BOND, EVEN IF NOT IN TOUCH MUCH IN RECENT YEARS. BUT BY

THE TIME I REACHED HER, SO HAD OTHER BAD NEWS. ABEL'S FAMILY DIDN'T WANT HER AT THE FUNERAL. "HE ALWAYS SAID YOU PUT A CURSE ON HIM", THEY TOLD HER.

JESS SAID, "THAT'S FUNNY. HE TOLD ME THE SAME THING"

"WHEN WAS THAT?", I ASKED.

"IT WAS IN THE CITY, I RAN INTO HIM ON SIXTEENTH STREET. HE SAID, 'HEY JESS, COME OVER HERE', LIKE HE WAS LETTING ME IN ON SOME BIG SECRET. HE SAID, 'LOOK IN THE WINDOW'"

"I LOOKED IN AND WAS A LITTLE STARTLED. THERE WAS A YOUNG WOMAN IN A GREEN DRESS EATING A BURRITO. ABEL SAID, 'YOU SEE HER? SHE PUT A CURSE ON ME'"

"I SEE", I SAID TO JESS. "DID ABEL SEEM UNHAPPY OR WORRIED?"

"NO, HE SEEMED REALLY PLEASED. HE WAS PRACTICALLY BEAMING WITH PRIDE"

AS I SUSPECTED, ABEL HAD TOLD ONLY HALF THE STORY.

THAT'S THE WAY THEY SHOULD BE TOLD, PURPOSELY MISLEADING AND INCOMPLETE, FIVE PERCENT UP FRONT AND THE REST IN INSTALLMENTS OVER TIME, WITH INTEREST. BUT IT MAY TAKE YEARS TO TELL THE WHOLE THING. INTERRUPTED, LIKE ABEL, EVERYONE THINKS YOU'VE ALREADY MADE YOUR POINT WHEN IN FACT YOU HAVEN'T EVEN GOTTEN TO THE BEST PART. NO ONE THOUGHT TO ASK WHAT KIND OF CURSE IT WAS, AND IF HE WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THE RESULTS.

WHEN WENDY AND I BROKE UP, SHE RETURNED EVERY SINGLE PHOTO OF US TOGETHER. SHE SAID, "I GUESS I WON'T BE NEEDING THESE ANYMORE". IT WAS WORSE THAN BEING CUT OUT OR EVEN RIPPED UP.

SHE WAITED FIVE YEARS FOR HER SECOND REVENGE. "OH, THOSE", SHE LAUGHED. "I HAD COPIES MADE BEFORE GIVING THEM BACK".

LIKE COTRONA SAYS, THE SECRET IS NOTES NOT PLAYED. IT'S NOT WHAT PEOPLE TELL YOU, BUT WHAT'S LEFT UNSAID. THEY BUILD A CAGE WITH LITTLE PIECES OF STORIES AND KEEP THE REAL FEELINGS AND MEANINGS LOCKED INSIDE. YOU HAVE TO TRY TO FIND THE KEY, AND THEY HAVE TO TRY AND HIDE IT. THAT'S THE ART OF ROMANCE, AND FRIENDSHIP, AND ALL CONVERSATION.

PETRA AND I USED TO WALK AROUND GOLDEN GATE PARK. I COMPLAINED ABOUT BOOKS ON COMPUTER OR SOMETHING EQUALLY DUMB, AND PETRA YELLED, "I GUESS IT'S NOT PUNK ENOUGH! BETTER GO BACK TO

WRITING WITH ROCKS AND CHISELS! IT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU UNLESS IT'S FROM A DUMPSTER!"

SHE LET HER ANGER BUILD UP, AND WHEN IT BROKE, A TORRENT OF CAUSTIC COMMENTS AND DEFENSIVE ATTACKS RAINED DOWN. BUT THEY WERE OUT OF PLACE, NOTHING TO DO WITH THE SITUATION, OR CONVERSATION AT HAND.

STILL, I UNDERSTOOD HER POINT. IT WAS ALWAYS THE SAME THING. LIFE WAS MEANT TO BE LIVED, NOT WEIGHED DOWN BY BITTERNESS AND NOSTALGIA, CRITICISM AND COMPLAINTS. LIFE WAS ABOUT CHANGE AND THE WILLINGNESS TO TRY NEW THINGS.

I LEARNED THAT FROM PETRA, AND IT CHANGED MY LIFE, EVEN THOUGH I DISAGREED. MY BITTERNESS AND NOSTALGIA CAME FROM EXPERIENCE, AND I WASN'T READY TO JUST THROW THAT AWAY. IT WAS A PART OF ME, LIKE THE HABIT OF PICKING THINGS APART AND PUTTING THEM DOWN. FOR HER, LIFE MIGHT BE ABOUT TRYING NEW THINGS, BUT I'D MUCH RATHER LISTEN TO THE RADON ALBUM A THOUSAND TIMES IN A ROW. YOU KNOW?

ALL THAT SAID, SHE WAS RIGHT, BUT I ENJOYED BEING WRONG. THE FUNNY THING WAS, SO DID PETRA. BUT AS IS SO OFTEN THE CASE, SHE SAW THE QUALITY SHE HATED ONLY IN OTHERS.

"WHY'D YOU BRING ME OUT TO THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE?" SHE DEMANDED.

"IT'S NOT THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE," I SAID, "JUST A DIFFERENT NEIGHBORHOOD THAN WHERE ALL YOUR FRIENDS LIVE"

SHE SCOWLED. "IF YOU LIKE THE SUBURBS SO MUCH, YOU DON'T NEED TO APOLOGIZE TO ME ABOUT IT. BUT PERSONALLY, I LIKE BEING AROUND REAL PEOPLE"

"THESE PEOPLE ARE JUST AS REAL," I SIGHED. "AND WE'RE ONLY TWO MILES FROM YOUR HOUSE"

"NO NEED TO ARGUE ABOUT IT," SHE SAID. "I CAME OUT TO HAVE A FUN TIME, NOT TO ARGUE AND GET ALL FREAKED OUT. IF YOU LIKE THIS CULTURELESS WASTELAND IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, THAT'S FINE. BUT WE MIGHT AS WELL BE ON THE SURFACE OF THE MOON."

THAT PETRA, SHE ALWAYS HAD TO HAVE THE LAST WORD.

"I MISS MY OLD FRIENDS," I SAID, WALKING BACK TO THE MISSION. "IT'S TOO BAD THEY COULDN'T MAKE THE TRANSITION. TOO BAD THEY DIDN'T HAVE THE PATIENCE TO STICK AROUND"

"THEY'RE GONE," SHE SAID. "IT'S OVER, SO WHY TALK ABOUT IT?"

"BECAUSE I MISS THEM"

"THERE'S A REASON IT'S CALLED THE PAST!"
"BUT I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT THE PAST, PETRA. I'M TALKING ABOUT THE PRESENT. IT'S SO MUCH BETTER THAN I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE, SO MUCH EASIER. IF ONLY THEY WERE HERE TO SEE IT!"

"THEIR LOSS IS YOUR GAIN!"

"NO," I SAID SADLY. "THEIR LOSS IS MY LOSS."

"WHY COMPLAIN ABOUT DECISIONS SOMEONE ELSE MADE?" SHE BARKED. "IF YOU WANT TO THROW YOUR LIFE AWAY WORRYING ABOUT GHOSTS, GO AHEAD. BUT I'M GOING TO GO GET A BURRITO!"

SITTING AT THE LITTLE TABLE AT THE TAQUERIA, SHE SAID, "ALL MY FRIENDS ARE GETTING MARRIED AND HAVING KIDS! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! WHAT ARE THEY THINKING? THEY'RE ALL DISAPPEARING INTO THE WOODWORK! IT'S DRIVING ME CRAZY!"

I'D HEARD THIS BEFORE. BUT I HADN'T LISTENED CLOSE ENOUGH, HADN'T THOUGHT TO ASK. TOO CAUGHT UP IN MY OWN HALF OF THE CAT AND MOUSE GAME, I HADN'T SEEN THE CLUES AND CHASED AFTER THEM. IT CAUGHT ME TOTALLY BY SURPRISE WHEN SHE SHOWED ME THE RING. SHE WAS ENGAGED, SHE SAID. AND THE LUCKY MAN WAS NONE OTHER THAN MY OLD FRIEND TOM.

MY JAW DROPPED. "BUT PETRA..." I STAMMERED. SHE SMILED. "I NEVER SAID I DIDN'T WANT TO."

7. Lost Boy Raised by DJ's

GROWING UP, I LEARNED SIX THINGS FROM MY PARENTS. ONE, DON'T WATCH "HOGAN'S HEROES" BECAUSE IT MAKES THE HOLOCAUST INTO A JOKE. TWO, DON'T MAKE FUN OF PEOPLE FOR BEING INTELLECTUALS. THREE, DON'T LET ANYONE TAKE YOUR FINGERPRINTS. FOUR, DON'T PLAY WITH GUNS, EVEN SQUIRT GUNS. FIVE, DON'T RIDE IN THE OPEN BED OF A TRUCK OR YOU MIGHT FLY OUT AND DIE LIKE THAT HAPPY COUPLE AT THE KIBBUTZ BACK IN '51. SIX, BEWARE AGENT PROVOCATEURS.

THEY WERE ALL VALUABLE LESSONS, AND YET, THEY SEEMED ARBITRARY AND DISCONNECTED TO ME. THE LARGER MORAL FRAMEWORK AND MEANING OF LIFE REMAINED A MYSTERY. IT MIGHT HAVE FOREVER HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR KALX, NINETY POINT SEVEN ON THE DIAL. THAT WAS WHERE I LEARNED DIGNITY, RESPECT, AND UNDERSTANDING. IT TOOK THE ENTIRE STATION STAFF TO HAMMER IN WHAT MY PARENTS HAD ONLY HINTED.

IT SEEMS STRANGE NOW, BUT KALX USED TO BE LOCATED AT THE LAWRENCE HALL OF SCIENCE, UP ON TOP OF THE BERKELEY HILLS. IN THE CORNER OF THE LAWRENCE HALL SNACKBAR, NEXT TO THE VENDING MACHINES, HUGE PLATE GLASS WINDOWS DISPLAYED BLINKING LIGHTS AND WHIRLING MOTORS. JUST ONE MORE SCIENTIFIC EXHIBIT, EXCEPT THIS ONE HAD HUMANS IN IT. A REAL LIVE RADIO STATION. LIKE ALL DISPLAYS UP AT THE HALL, IT WAS INTERACTIVE. A BOX MOUNTED TO THE FRONT WITH A BUTTON AND A SPEAKER. "PUSH TO HEAR THE DISC JOCKEYS"

I RAPPED ON THE GLASS OF THE OVERSIZED FISH TANK, POINTING AT SIGNS I'D TAPED UP FACING IN: "PLAY BLACK FLAG"; "PLAY THE RAMONES". I PUSHED THE BUTTON BUT THE ONLY THING TO COME OUT WAS AIR SUPPLY AND KANSAS. I WAS PACING AROUND THE SNACKBAR IMPATIENTLY WAITING WHEN A SIDE DOOR OPENED AND THE DJ STUCK HER HEAD OUT. "IF YOU WANT TO HEAR IT SO BAD", SHE SAID, "YOU CAN PLAY IT".

ONCE I'D GOTTEN IN THE DOOR, I DIDN'T LET IT CLOSE ON ME AGAIN. SOON, I WAS THERE EVERY SPARE HOUR OF THE DAY, FILING RECORDS AND BUGGING THE POOR FOLKS JUST TRYING TO DO THEIR SHOWS. SNIVELING, SCRATCHING, AND BEGGING FOR ATTENTION, I BECAME THE KALX DOG.

MY PARENTS HAD ALWAYS BEEN SUPPORTIVE, BUT KEPT OUT OF MY PERSONAL BUSINESS. LESS OUT OF PERMISSIVENESS, I THINK, THAN THE FACT THAT THEIR OWN PARENTS HAD NEVER GIVEN THEM THE PRIVACY THAT KIDS NEED. AS A RESULT, I WAS INDEPENDENT AND SELF-ASSURED. BUT I WAS ALSO A SNOT-NOSED BRAT WITH NO IDEA OF HOW TO LIVE OR HOW TO TREAT OTHERS. MY NEW FAMILY WAS ALSO INCREDIBLY SUPPORTIVE, FIRST JUST BY TAKING ME SERIOUSLY AT ALL, THEN LATER BY TAKING ME INTO THEIR CONFIDENCE AND UNDER THEIR WINGS. BUT THE KALX FAMILY WAS DIFFERENT. MORE SAPPY, MORE DIVERSE, MORE VOLATILE, MORE SENSITIVE.

"WHAT WAS THAT LAST SONG YOU PLAYED?"; I ASKED JUSTINE ONE DAY. "IT REALLY SUCKED".

SHE SNAPPED AT ME. "YOU DON'T NEED TO TELL ME THAT", SHE SAID. "IT'S LIKE TELLING YOUR MOM HER DRESS IS UGLY".

SHE HAD TO SIT ME DOWN AND EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING HONEST AND JUST BEING RUDE. IT WAS HARD TO UNDERSTAND, BECAUSE IN MY FAMILY CRITICIZING SOMEONE'S TASTE WASN'T CONSIDERED RUDE. OF COURSE, IN MY FAMILY WE HAD PRETTY SIMILAR STANDARDS, SO IT WAS USUALLY SOMEONE ELSE WHO RECEIVED THE CRITICISM.

JUSTINE USED A BAD EXAMPLE, BECAUSE NONE OF MY MOM'S DRESSES WERE UGLY TO ME. BUT THAT WAS THE POINT. EVERYONE HAS DIFFERENT FAMILIES, DIFFERENT STANDARDS, AND DIFFERENT TASTES.

NOEL CORNERED ME ONE DAY WITH A JOAN ARMATRADING ALBUM. "IS THIS YOUR WORK?" SHE ASKED.

THE COVER WAS BARELY VISIBLE UNDERNEATH THE SCRAWLING OF A HUGE BLACK MARKER. A DRUNK LOOKING FISH, THE LOGO OF MY FAVORITE BAND. THE SAME FISH WHICH LOOKED ON FROM SCRAWLED DRAWINGS ON MY SHIRT, MY HAND, AND MY SHOES. I'D TAKEN THE LIBERTY OF BEAUTIFYING SOME OF THE KALX LIBRARY, RECORDS SO LAUGHABLY STUPID LOOKING THAT NO ONE WOULD EVER WANT TO PLAY THEM. AS IT TURNED OUT, I'D PICKED THE MOST POPULAR RECORDS AT THE STATION.

"DON'T STOP WRITING ON THEM," SAID NOEL. "BUT HAVE RESPECT. USE A SMALLER PEN"

I LEARNED FAST, THINGS I'D NEVER LEARNED FROM MY PARENTS OR SCHOOL. JUSTINE TAUGHT ME HOW TO SLIP CUE AND BACK ANNOUNCE, HOW TO MAKE TAPE SPLICES AND LOOPS. SHE ALSO TOLD ME BRAVE AND MATTER OF FACT ABOUT BEING RAPED. DOUG TOLD ME ABOUT HIS TIME IN VIETNAM. HE ALSO TAUGHT ME HOW TO SEGUE SMOOTHLY BETWEEN CARDS, TURNTABLES, AND REEL TO REEL. IT WAS ALL PART OF THE LEARNING PROCESS, AND THE PROCESS OF BECOMING PART OF THE KALX FAMILY.

JOEY DESOTO WAS THE STATION BAD BOY, ALTERNATELY CHASTISED AND ADMIRER FOR BREAKING EVERY RULE IN THE BOOK. HE DRANK A CASE OF BEER AND PLAYED FLIPPER LIVE TAPES FOR HOURS ON END WITHOUT EVEN SAYING THE REQUIRED HOURLY STATION IDENTIFICATION. HIS CONSTANT STREAM OF OBSCENITIES WAS THE REASON THE BOX MOUNTED IN THE SNACK BAR WAS NOW TUNED, NOT TO KALX, BUT KBLX, THE LOCAL EASY LISTENING CHANNEL. JOEY EPITOMIZED MUCH OF WHAT IS GREAT, AND USUALLY MISSING, FROM RADIO. BUT I DIDN'T ADMIRE HIM, EVEN IF WHAT THEY SAID ABOUT LYDIA LUNCH AND THE LAWRENCE HALL BATHROOM WAS TRUE. I ADMIRERED RON WURTZ, THE SOFTSPOKEN TALK SHOW HOST INSTEAD.

I LIKED RON'S SHOW ENOUGH TO WAKE UP AND WALK ALL THE WAY UP THE HILL EARLY SUNDAY MORNING WHEN THE BUSES HADN'T STARTED TO RUN. RON KNEW HOW TO TALK, BUT ALSO HOW TO LISTEN. HIS QUALITIES BROUGHT OUT THE QUALITIES IN RADIO WHICH MAKE IT UNIQUE. THE INTIMACY OF BEING

ALLOWED INSIDE SO MANY HOMES, THE ANONYMITY OF BEING HEARD AND NOT SEEN, THE GIVE AND TAKE AND TEASE WITH THE LISTENERS OVER THE AIR AND THE PHONE LINES. IT WASN'T JUST PERFORMING LIKE JOEY DESOTO'S ONE MAN SHOW. A DYNAMIC, OVER-BEARING PERSONALITY DRAWS YOU IN BY STRENGTH OF CHARACTER ALONE. THAT'S AN EXCITING AND IMPORTANT PART OF RADIO, BUT NOT WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER MEDIUMS. RON WAS A MASTER AT STIMULATING CONVERSATION AND MOODS AND IDEAS, NOT JUST CONTROLLING THEM. I THOUGHT IT WAS FUNNY TO KEEP HANGING UP ON ANNOYING CALLERS WHEN I CO-HOSTED THE SHOW, BUT RON TOLD ME TO STOP. "NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR JUST YOUR VOICE FOR HOURS," HE SAID. "NO MATTER WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY":

BANDS STOPPED BY TOO, OBSTENSIBLY TO FILL IN THE DEAD HOURS OF TOUR, BUT REALLY TO TEACH ME OTHER IMPORTANT LESSONS IN LIFE. THE MISFITS STOLE A BUNCH OF ANIMAL SKULLS OUT OF ONE OF THE LAWRENCE HALL OF SCIENCE DISPLAY CASES, ALMOST RESULTING IN KALX GETTING KICKED OUT. REALLY TOUGH, GUYS. BLACK FLAG CAME AND STOLE ALL THE TSOL RECORDS. THEY WERE LATER RETRIEVED AT ANOTHER RADIO STATION, IN THE URINAL. WHY? BECAUSE TSOL WORE MAKEUP. HMMM. HUSKER DU CAME TOO, AND THEY WERE NICE, BUT THEIR ROADIE WAS THE ONE TO ILLUSTRATE AN IMPORTANT MAXIM. IT WAS NONE OTHER THAN D. BOON. HE SAT EATING FRIED CHICKEN, DRINKING BEER AND JUST LAUGHING AND LAUGHING, SAYING SOMETIMES IT'S BETTER JUST TO BE ALONG FOR THE RIDE.

THERE WERE OTHERS. OTHER BANDS, OTHER DAYS, AND MANY MANY OTHER DJ'S. I STUCK AROUND THERE FOR YEARS, THROUGH TRAINING, OFFICIAL AND UN-OFFICIAL, AND EVEN WENT TO THE KALX SOFTBALL GAMES. BUT I NEVER GOT A HANDLE, NO COOL ON-AIR NAME LIKE "ACNE KING" OR "THE TEENAGE TROTSKY". I NEVER DID BECOME A DISC JOCKEY MYSELF. I LOVED BEING PART OF IT, BUT PERHAPS LIKE D. BOON, I WAS HAPPIEST BEHIND THE SCENES.

8. Photobooths

TODAY IS A SPECIAL DAY CUZ I TOOK A PHOTO-BOOTH AND ALL THE PICTURES WERE GOOD, OR AT LEAST OKAY. SLUGGO ASKED, "COULD I HAVE ONE?"; BUT I LAUGHED IN HIS FACE.

"SLUGGO", I SAID, "PHOTOS ARE FOR GIRLS. ANYWAY, THERE'S ONLY FOUR". I COUNTED THEM OFF LIKE PETALS FROM A DAISY. "ONE FOR THE LOVE OF MY LIFE, ONE FOR THE FUTURE MOTHER OF MY CHILD, ONE FOR MY CRUSH, AND ONE FOR MY GIRLFRIEND".

"SEE!" HE POINTED. "WHY DO YOU ALWAYS COMPLAIN ABOUT ME BEING SLEAZY? YOU'RE THE SLEAZY ONE!"

"SLUGGO", I CONFIDED. "THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SLEAZE AND ROMANCE. PHOTOBOOTH'S HAPPEN TO BE ROMANTIC".

"I'VE SEEN SOME SLEAZY PHOTOBOOTH'S", HE SAID. "ON YOUR WALL".

IT WAS TRUE. I HAD MANY PHOTOS OF CRYSTAL, BUT, SOMEHOW, NONE HAD HER HEAD IN THEM.

"SOMETIMES SLEAZINESS CAN BE ROMANTIC, I ADMIT".

"YOU CAN TALK YOUR WAY OUT OF ANYTHING", SLUGGO LAUGHED.

"BUT PHOTOGRAPHS DON'T LIE, IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING? MAYBE THAT'S WHY YOU'RE DRUNK AND HALF NAKED IN EVERY SHOT I HAVE OF YOU. COINCIDENCE? EVERY PHOTO YOU HAVE OF ME IS A PICTURE OF DIGNITY AND RESPECTABILITY".

"EVERY PHOTO I HAVE OF YOU, YOU'RE ALONE. THAT'S WHY".

"IT'S TRUE", I SAID, "THAT I DON'T LIKE TO TAKE GROUP SHOTS. REMEMBER THAT LAST TIME WE TOOK PHOTOS TOGETHER? NO POINT HAVING BAD PHOTOS OF MYSELF AROUND, SO I HAD TO RIP UP HALF OF THEM. AND YOU LOOKED BAD IN THE OTHER TWO, WHICH MADE ME LOOK EVEN WORSE. I COULD ALMOST HEAR THE GIRLS SAYING, 'IF HE'S SO DAMN SUAVE, WHY'S HE HANGING OUT WITH SOME SKINNY NEW WAVE CREEP WHO LOOKS LIKE LUNCH MEAT??' SO I HAD TO RIP UP THOSE TOO".

"YOU'RE SCARED OF THE COMPETITION IS WHAT YOU'RE SAYING".

"IT IS BAD POLICY", I ADMITTED.

"YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE?", HE SAID.

"WHY DOES EVERYONE ALWAYS WANT TO TELL ME WHAT THEY HATE?"

"I'M NOT EVERYBODY. YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE?"

"GETTING STRANDED IN EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN WITH JUX".

"BESIDES THAT".

"FALLING DOWN THE RAMP AT TOMMY'S DISHROOM IN CLEVELAND HEIGHTS BEFORE THEY REMODELED AND TOOK IT OUT".

"YES, YES, BUT JUST SHUT UP! I'M TRYING TO TELL

YOU SOMETHING. NO ONE GIVES ME PHOTOS ANYMORE. THAT'S WHAT I HATE. ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME NOW? ALL I GET ARE XEROX COPIES."

"BECAUSE ALL THE GIRLS ARE GIVING ME THE ORIGINALS," I SAID.

"THAT'S WHAT I'M WORRIED ABOUT. NOW EVEN WHEN SOMEONE DOES ACTUALLY GIVE ME A PHOTO, I WORRY. IT'S NEVER THE WHOLE STRIP. JUST ONE, OR THREE. THE OTHER ONES WERE BAD, THEY SAY. THEY HAD TO BE RIPPED UP. BUT I WONDER. DID THEY REALLY KEEP THE BEST ONES FOR THEMSELVES? OR GIVE THEM TO SOME OTHER GUY? AT LEAST YOU'RE HONEST ABOUT IT."

"I WOULDN'T LIE TO YOU, FRIEND."

"YOU DIDN'T REALLY RIP THOSE PHOTOS OF US UP," SLUGGO ASKED. "DID YOU?"

"INTO TINY SHREDS, WHICH I FLUSHED DOWN THE TOILET. I HAD NO OTHER CHOICE."

"YOU SHOULDN'T EVER THROW AWAY PHOTOS. EVEN UGLY ONES. THEY'RE A PART OF LIFE TOO, JUST LIKE UNHAPPY MEMORIES."

"SO YOU SAVED THAT LAST STRIP FROM SAL?"; I COUNTERED.

"GOD NO. I BURNED IT AND BURIED THE ASHES."

I'D SEEN PEOPLE DO AMAZING THINGS WITH PHOTOBOOTHS, FROM RECREATIONS OF THE BRADY BUNCH INTRO TO REINACTMENTS OF THE JFK ASSASSINATION, BUT NONE AS CAUSTIC AS THE DEAR JOHN LETTER FROM SAL. FOUR FRAMES, SAL WITH THREE SIGNS: GOOD, BYE, SLUGGO. THE FOURTH FRAME WAS BLANK, JUST THE EMPTY BOOTH.

"WHAT A BAD TIME THOSE TIMES WERE"; I SAID FONDLY.

"A TERRIBLE TIME," HE REMINISCED. "I BET YOU BURNED YOUR PHOTOS OF MAYE TOO?"

"NO, I NEVER DID." NEVER HAD ANY TO BURN. NO PROOF WE'D BEEN TOGETHER, NOT EVEN IN THE SAME ROOM, AFTER NINE LONG MONTHS. ON THE LAST DAY, WE SAT IN THE KRESS PHOTOBOOTH, BUT IT MALFUNCTIONED. CAME OUT AS A NEGATIVE FAST FADING TO BLACK. WE KISSED GOODBYE AND THE IMAGE WAS GONE, WITHOUT A TRACE. BUT WHY BOTHER SLUGGO WITH THE DETAILS?

"YOU'RE LUCKY," HE SAID. "I WISH I HADN'T BURNT MINE EITHER. I DON'T THINK I'D EVER WANT TO LOOK AT THEM AGAIN, BUT JUST THE SAME, THEY WOULD BE NICE TO HAVE. THAT'S WHY I SAVE EVERYTHING NOW."

"THAT'S WHY NOW I WANT TO RIP THINGS UP AND THROW THEM AWAY," I SAID. "BETTER TO LEAVE IT

ALL TO MEMORY. LET IT CHANGE OVER TIME AND DISAPPEAR."

"YOU DON'T WANT THE GOOD TIMES TO DISSAPEAR, THOUGH?"

"SLUGGO", I SAID. "WHO DOES?"

9. Three Things

I WENT TO SEE JERRY BROWN, THE MAN WHO PUT THE WINGS ON "WINGNUT".

"TWO THINGS I WANT TO MAKE CLEAR," HE SAID. "NUMBER ONE, OAKLAND IS A REAL PLACE. NUMBER TWO, IF YOU WANT TO GET REAL, THIS IS THE PLACE TO BE. THIRD, AND LASTLY, WHERE THE HELL IS DUBLIN ANYWAY?"

THAT'S HOW TO PICK OUT A WINGNUT IN A CROWD. THEY ARE INCAPABLE OF HAVING TWO SEPARATE IDEAS. ANY TWO IDEAS MUST BE TURNED INTO AN EQUATION THEN ADDED, SUBTRACTED, OR DIVIDED TO MAKE A THIRD.

WE USED TO EXPLAIN THE PHENOMENON LIKE THIS. A: GOT A SMOKE, STONE? B: PULLING AN ALL-NIGHT ROT AT GUD FUD. FURTHERMORE, AND THEREFORE, X: ONE PLANT TWO FEET TALL, ONE PLANT FOUR FEET TALL, ONE PLANT SIX FEET TALL. PERFECTLY LEGAL.

IT'S A PARTICULAR COMBINATION OF CRITICAL THINKING, POP PSYCHOLOGY, MATH, AND BAD ACID. ITS NATURAL HABITAT? THE BAY AREA, OF COURSE. ITS ORIGINS? CONCEIVED ON THE STEPS OF THE UNITARIAN CHURCH ON THE CORNER OF VINE AND WALNUT IN BERKELEY, WHERE I USED TO SEE MS. SABERHAGEN, THE FREAKIEST OF ALL THE BERKELEY SCHOOL SYSTEM'S FREAKY SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS SITTING STONED OUT OF HER GOURD READING POETRY ALOUD TO A CAT. FROM THERE IT SPREAD AS A FLU-LIKE VIRUS VIA PEET'S COFFEE. HALF UCB, HALF SLA, PLUS TWO THIRDS EST, IT DUG IN ROOTS AT THE LOGICAL CROSSROADS, TELEGRAPH AND HASTE.

FAITHFUL BELIEVERS NOW FLOCK FROM FAR AND WIDE TO VISIT THE CRADLE OF WINGNUT CULTURE. BUSES ARRIVE IN A STEADY PROCESSION EVERY SUMMER, HASTILY DISCHARGING THEIR LOADS. LIKE A MODERN DAY BERLIN AIRLIFT, ONLY BACKWARDS. THE NEW ARRIVALS DESCEND UPON THE HALLOWED GROUND, CHANTING.

"WE, THE BERKELEY LIBERATION FRONT", THEY CHANT, "HAVE TWO NON-NEGOTIABLE DEMANDS.

"ONE, FREE THE LAND. TWO, SMASH THE MAN. NOT TO MENTION, CONSEQUENTLY, AND OF COURSE INCLUDING THE DISTRIBUTION OF ALL SURPLUS WEALTH, FREEDOM FOR ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS, AND LEGALIZATION OF ALL NATIVE PLANTS, INCLUDING HEMP! HEMP! HEMP!"

EVEN THE BAY AREA COPS HORN IN ON THE ACT. I MEAN, EVEN THE OPPRESSOR TRIES TO CO-OPT OUR CULTURE. "JUST TELL ME TWO THINGS", THEY SAY, "I'M REAL CURIOUS. DIDN'T YOU SEE THAT 'STOP CLEARCUTTING' SIGN BACK THERE? WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU CAN BREAK THE LAW? NOW WHAT IF YOU'D GOTTEN HIT BY CRITICAL MASS WHEN CROSSING THE STREET? YOU'D PROBABLY CALL THE COPS, SMART GUY, AND COME TO US CRYING ABOUT TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT. DO YOU REALLY THINK THAT'S FAIR? HOW DO YOU THINK THAT MAKES US FEEL?"

"OFFICER, WITH ALL DUE RESPECT", I SAY, "EAT SHIT. SUCK MY ASS. DIE, PIG. P.S.: I PLEAD THE FIFTH."

IT JUST SO HAPPENS THAT THE FIRST GIRL I EVER KISSED IS NOW A JAILER IN THE OAKLAND JAILS. SERIOUSLY. SO WHEN WORST COMES TO WORST AND I GO FEDERAL, MAYBE I'LL STILL HAVE A CHANCE TO GET LUCKY, YOU KNOW? THIS TIME I'LL BE READY. AND TALLER THAN HER. WHICH REMINDS ME, USUALLY OF ANOTHER GIRL OR DIFFERENT JAIL OR A COMPLETELY UNRELATED STORY.

I WALK INTO THE CAFE AND CATCH THE EYE OF THE BOMBSHELL BEHIND THE COUNTER. "THERE'S ONLY TWO THINGS I NEED IN THIS WORLD", I SAY. "AND YOU HAVE BOTH OF THEM."

SHE LOOKS UP. "COFFEE AND A BEER."

"THAT'S RIGHT", I SMILE. "AND CASEY, IT'S ALWAYS GOOD TO SEE AN OLD FRIEND AGAIN."

10. Argument at a Chinese Restaurant

I'M AT BERKELEY'S CHEAPEST, GREASIEST CHINESE RESTAURANT. I LIKE THIS PLACE, NOT ONLY BECAUSE IT'S CHEAP AND GOOD, BUT BECAUSE WITH THE LOW PRICES AND LOCATION COMES A SORT OF HUMBLE WARMTH. THERE'S NO OUTSIDE TABLES, NO

HUGE PICTURE WINDOWS. NO FREE SHOW WATCHING THE COLORFUL LIFE OUT ON THE STREET BUT OFFENDED WHEN IT LOOKS IN. THERE'S NO MUSIC ON, NO TELEVISION, NOTHING TO BREAK THE ICE. IT'S THE WRONG PLACE TO BRING A DATE, BUT THE RIGHT PLACE TO BE BY YOURSELF WITH OTHER PEOPLE ALSO READING THE PAPER AND EATING ALONE.

TONIGHT I'M JOINED BY, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ONE U.C. BERKELEY STUDENT FROM SENEGAL; ONE HOMELESS ERITREAN BARD; ONE DREADLOCKED GIRL FROM PHILLY; AND ONE LOCAL CARTOONIST WHO'S HAD THE SAME PUNCHLINE FOR NEARLY TWENTY YEARS. BERKELEY'S A SMALL TOWN ONCE YOU'VE BEEN AROUND A WHILE. WE ALL KNOW EACH OTHER BY SIGHT IF NOT BY NAME, BUT WE SIT AT SEPARATE CORNERS. MINDING OUR OWN BUSINESS, OR SEREPLITIOUSLY WATCHING THE BUSINESS AT THE TABLE IN THE CENTER RING.

A MIDDLE-AGED MAN SITS WAITING. ANXIOUS, FIDGETY, HE DOESN'T LOOK PARTICULARLY OUT OF PLACE HERE, EXCEPT WHAT HE'S WAITING FOR SEEMS TO BE SOMETHING TANGIBLE. THE REST OF US ARE ANXIOUS, BUT IN A PERMANENT SORT OF WAY. TAPPING OUR FINGERS OR CHECKING THE CLOCK, WE'RE MERELY CALCULATING THE TIME LEFT BEFORE ARMAGEDDEON, COUNTING THE NUMBER OF VOWELS IN THE BIBLE, OR ALPHABETIZING FOOD ADDITIVES. AMUSING OURSELVES WITH THE USUAL OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE MIND GAMES.

I'M THINKING, AS USUAL, ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS. OTHER PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS, AS A BREAK FROM AND NEW PERSPECTIVE ON MY OWN. A RELATIONSHIP NOT AS THE SUM TOTAL OF TWO INDIVIDUALS, BUT AS AN INDIVIDUAL THING ALL ITS OWN, WITH CHARACTERS AND QUALITIES OFTEN UNLIKE THOSE OF EITHER PERSON INVOLVED. A PHYSICAL THING, BUILT LIKE THE WAY PRISONERS "BUILD" TIME IN JAIL. CREATED AND SUFFERED, NOT JUST EXPERIENCED PASSIVELY. A JOINT CREATION THAT, AS WE ALL KNOW, CAN GROW OUT OF CONTROL AND TURN INTO A RAMPAGING MONSTER NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO KILL.

WHILE MY OWN GIRL IS AWAY, I'VE BEEN WATCHING OTHER COUPLES, WATCHING THE WAY OTHER COUPLES DEAL WITH THEIR PROBLEMS. THE WAY THEY COPE WITH JEALOUSIES AND FEAR. THE WAY THEY COMMUNICATE AND STRUGGLE TO MAKE THEIR FEELINGS AND NEEDS CLEAR.

NO ONE ELSE IS ANY BETTER AT IT THAN WE ARE. THEY MULTIPLY THE PROBLEMS, ESCALATE FEARS, ENCOURAGE JEALOUSY, SHUN UNDERSTANDING

AND COMFORT, AVOID REASSURANCE AND A SOOTHING WORD, AND DRESS UP FEELINGS AND NEEDS AS DEMANDS AND ACCUSATIONS.

FROM A DISTANCE THE DOOM IS SO CLEAR IT'S ALMOST LAUGHABLE. SO CLEAR THAT IT'S ALMOST SADDER THAN MY OWN DOOM BECAUSE I CAN SEE SO EASILY HOW AND WHERE IT'S GOING WRONG. THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE, LOST IN TRANSLATION.

FOR INSTANCE, I SAY, "IT FREAKS ME OUT WHEN YOU'RE SO DRUNK YOU DON'T REMEMBER ANYTHING THE NEXT DAY."

SHE LEAVES THE ROOM TO GIVE ME SPACE SINCE I'M FREAKED OUT. BUT WHAT I WANT IS FOR HER TO BE CLOSE, TO SAY ALL THE THINGS SHE SAID LAST NIGHT NOW THAT SHE'S SOBER. I'M SAYING, "PLEASE COME CLOSER" AND SHE HEARS, "GO AWAY."

IT'S LIKE TWO DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS I READ OF "HISTORY WILL ABSOLVE ME." "SENTENCE ME, I DON'T MIND", FIDEL CASTRO CONCLUDES IN ONE VERSION. "CONDEMN ME" IN ANOTHER. THE MEANING IS SIMILAR, BUT THE DIFFERENCE IS LITERALLY LIFE AND DEATH. I HAD AN EERIE FEELING I'D MISUNDERSTOOD THOSE VERY SAME WORDS.

THAT'S WHEN THE BLONDE WALKED IN, AND EVERYONE SLOWLY TURNED AN EYE TO THE DOOR. A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST. MATURE, WELL-ADJUSTED, AND WELL GROOMED. SHE PULLED UP A CHAIR AND SAT DOWN CENTER STAGE, FACING THE DINOSAUR. NOW THAT WAS AN UNLIKELY COUPLE IF I'D EVER SEEN ONE, AND GOD KNOWS, I HAVE.

IT SEEMED TO BE A REUNION OF SORTS. A HAPPY REUNION OR A SAD ONE? REUNIONS ARE A LITTLE OF BOTH, SO HARD TO TELL, BUT IT WAS CERTAINLY NOT AN EASY ONE. YOU COULD FEEL THE TENSION FROM THEIR TABLE IN EVERY CORNER OF THE ROOM.

HOW LONG SINCE THEY LAST MET? HOW LONG SINCE THEY HAD FIRST MET? AND WHAT COULD THE CIRCUMSTANCES POSSIBLY HAVE BEEN? CLEARLY IT WAS ANOTHER TIME AND ANOTHER PLACE, LONG GONE. A TIME HE SEEMED TO REMEMBER WISTFULLY AND SHE SEEMED HAPPY TO FORGET. ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE, FAR REMOVED FROM THE PRESENT STAGE ON WHICH THEY WERE PLAYING OUT THEIR ROLES. TWO OLD LOVERS IN AN AWKWARD REUNION IN A GREASY CHINESE RESTAURANT UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYES OF FIVE BERKELEY WINGNUTS. EVEN THE SHORT ELDERLY COUPLE WHO RUN THE PLACE WERE HOVERING AT THE COUNTER TO OVERHEAR.

SHE TALKED TOO LOUD, IN AN ANNOYING VOICE. WE ALL SHOOK OUR HEADS IN SYMPATHY. WORN FROM THE YEARS, THIS MAN HAD SUFFERED FOR HIS CONVICTIONS WHILE SHE HAD THROWN THEM, AND HIM, AWAY LIKE SO MUCH TRASH. YOU COULD SEE IT IN HIS FACE.

BUT THEN HE OPENED HIS MOUTH. WE GASPED. WHAT GOOD ARE LOFTY VALUES AND HIGH IDEALS? NO ONE WANTS TO LISTEN TO YOU TALK IF YOU'RE JUST A STUPID JERK. ALL GUYS ARE STUBBORN AND THICKHEADED, BUT THIS ONE TOOK THE CAKE. I WINKED AT THE COOK AND HE WENT IN BACK TO SPIT IN THE GUY'S EGG FLOWER SOUP BEFORE IT WAS BROUGHT OUT TO THE TABLE.

I IMAGINED IT WAS ME AND MY GIRL, TWENTY YEARS DOWN THE ROAD. HOW COULD I BE SO STUPID STILL? HOW COULD SHE BE SO COLD, AFTER ALL WE'D BEEN THROUGH? IF WE WOULD JUST SLOW DOWN, GET A CHANCE TO BREATHE, TO TRY TO STOP AND TURN IT AROUND BEFORE IT WAS TOO LATE AND WE FELL TOGETHER INTO A BOTTOMLESS PIT OF ANOTHER FIGHT. TERRIBLE WHEN YOU'RE GOING OUT BUT UNTHINKABLY WORSE WHEN IT'S OVER FOR REAL AND YOU CAN'T JUST KISS AND MAKE UP. SUDDENLY I WAS DESPERATE TO SEIZE MY GIRL AND TRY ANYTHING TO MAKE IT WORK. BUT SHE WAS IN ANOTHER STATE. OUR WAY OF TAKING A CHANCE TO BREATHE, NOW FOR MONTHS AT A TIME, HOPING THAT WOULD SOLVE THE PROBLEM.

I COULD SEE HER TRYING TO MAKE IT WORK, BUT THE WORDS WERE EVERYTHING BUT THE THING HE NEEDED TO HEAR. I WAS WAITING TO HEAR IT TOO, WAITING WITH BAITED BREATH. SHE TALKED AND TALKED BUT THE WORDS DIDN'T COME. I WANTED TO CRY, TO SCREAM OUT, TO PUT THE WORDS ON HUGE CUE CARDS SO I COULD SAVE THEM, SAVE ME, SAVE ALL OF OUR SAD LIVES FROM ONE MORE MISUNDERSTANDING. BUT IT WAS TOO LATE. THEY DUG DEEPER AND DEEPER DOWN.

SHE LOOKED GOOD. HE WAS A MESS. AND I WAS, WHAT? YES, JEALOUS.

IT MADE ME MISS MY GIRL EVEN MORE. WHERE WOULD WE BE IN TWENTY YEARS? I MISSED THE HOPELESS, HELPLESS TIMES, SCREAMING AND CRYING, AT LEAST WE WERE TRYING TO MAKE IT WORK. ARGUING AND BREAKING DOWN IN PUBLIC TOO, EMBARRASSING OURSELVES AND EVERYONE AROUND, ALTHOUGH, REALLY, LIKE A BABY CRYING, IT'S JUST PART OF LIFE.

ONE NIGHT WE WERE WALKING TOGETHER ARM

IN ARM DOWN ELSWORTH, AND WE HEARD AN ANGRY VOICE. "FINE, JUST STAND THERE LIKE A LAZY BITCH!" IT SAID. "HARE KRISHNA! HARE KRISHNA! SEE YOU IN THE NEXT LIFETIME!"

OUT OF THE SHADOWS CAME A FURIOUS GUY IN A DHOTI, AND BEHIND HIM, A SOBBING GIRL IN A SARI, BOTH WITH CHALK ON THEIR FOREHEADS. TWO HARE KRISHNAS IN AN ARGUMENT. WE COULDN'T BELIEVE OUR EYES. JUST LIKE THE REST OF US, EXCEPT I POINTED TO HIM AND SAID, "DON'T EVER TALK TO A WOMAN THAT WAY!"

11. Martov

ONCE I WAS IN A BAND WITH A BUNCH OF GRUMPY OLD MEN. THAT WAS NICE. I GOT TO BE THE YOUNG IRRESPONSIBLE ONE FOR A CHANGE. THE BAND WAS CALLED "MARTOV" AFTER THE GREAT MENSHKEVIK LEADER WHO LOST THE BID FOR POWER AFTER THE BOLSHEVIKS TOOK OVER RUSSIA IN 1917. A POLITICAL BAND, BUT STRANGELY, ONLY POLITICS FROM ABOUT 80 YEARS, AND 8000 MILES AWAY.

OUR FLIERS AND RECORD COVERS FEATURED THAT STYLE OF ART KNOWN AS SOCIAL REALISM, HARDLY DISTINGUISHABLE FROM THAT OTHER STYLE KNOWN AS FASCIST PROPAGANDA. BOTH FEATURE STURDY, DETERMINED LOOKING MEN WITH HIGH CHEEBONES DIGGING DITCHES, SWINGING PICKAXES, AND OTHER MENIAL TASKS THOUGHT TO LIFT THE SPIRIT AND CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE MASSES. A BARTENDER, A WRITER, AND THE COUNTER GUY AT A COOKIE STORE, WORKING BUT NOT EXACTLY WORKING CLASS, GLORIFYING THE WORK WE WOULD BE THE FIRST TO AVOID. THE BASSIST WAS EMPLOYED AT THE POST OFFICE, BUT THAT DIDN'T REALLY COUNT. HE WAS A LINE BOSS, NOT A LABORER. SAT ON HIS STOOL TELLING EVERYONE TO WORK FASTER. THEN CAME TO REHEARSAL AND COMPLAINED HOW STUPID HIS WORKERS WERE. I ADMIT, I'VE NEVER LIKED BASSISTS MUCH.

"THIS SONG IS ABOUT THE DECEMBRISTS", I YELLED FROM BEHIND MY DRUMS. "ZHELIABOV, MIKHAILOV, AND MOROZOV"

"YOU JUST GOTTA BE A WISE ASS, DON'T YOU?", THE SINGER SPIT. "ACTUALLY, IT'S ABOUT THE NARODNIKS. MAY THE SPIRIT OF THOSE MARTYRS GUIDE US IN OUR STRUGGLE!"

IT'S IMPORTANT TO LEARN FROM EXAMPLES, BUT THERE IS SOMETHING TO SAY FOR PUTTING THINGS INTO CONTEXT. AS TROTSKY SAID, "THE ART OF LANDSCAPE PAINTING WOULD NOT HAVE ORIGINATED IN THE SAHARA DESERT." TUESDAY NIGHT IN A SAN FRANCISCO BAR, THE THINNING CROWD SCRATCHED ITS THINNING HAIR. ALL EXCEPT A DRUNK SLAVIC LANGUAGES MAJOR FROM S.F. STATE WHO HECKLED US ABOUT THE PRONOUNCIATIONS.

I MISSED POLITICS BEING MORE A PART OF PUNK. BUT MARTOV WAS ALMOST A PARODY OF A POLITICAL PUNK BAND. DISCORDANT, MONOTONOUS SONGS ABOUT IRRELEVANT, HOPELESS CAUSES. HEARTFELT BUT KINDA SUCKY. I LIKED IT, THOUGH, EVEN IF NO ONE ELSE DID. HISTORY IS LIKE PORNOGRAPHY FOR ME, ESPECIALLY THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN COMMUNIST ANARCHISTS, SO I WAS HAPPY. IN TURN, A HAPPY, LIVELY DRUMMER WITH STYLE AND A FRESH APPROACH CAN BRING ANY MUSIC TO LIFE. NOT TO BRAG, BUT IT'S TRUE.

THE SINGER TURNED AROUND OCCASSIONALLY TO YELL, "SLOWER! SLOWER! SLOWER!" I'D LEARNED THE SONGS LISTENING TO THE OLD MARTOV RECORD, WITH THEIR OLD DRUMMER. IMPATIENT, I PLAYED IT AT A HIGHER SPEED, AND PERHAPS WAS STILL PLAYING THE SONGS THAT WAY. BUT TELLING A DRUMMER TO SLOW DOWN IS LIKE TELLING A GUITARIST TO TURN DOWN. LIKE TELLING A MARXIST TO RESPECT A DIFFERING OPINION.

"PEOPLE WHO GREW UP IN BERKELEY WITH AN ECONOMICS PROFESSOR AS A DADDY" THE SINGER LAUGHED INTO THE MICROPHONE, "MAY NOT UNDERSTAND THIS SONG. BUT THE PEASANTS IN PETROGRAD DIDN'T NEED A BUNCH OF BOOKS TO UNDERSTAND ECONOMICS."

"THIS NEXT SONG IS FOR STALIN," I SHOUTED. GUITARISTS MAY HAVE THE MIKE, BUT THEY ALWAYS FORGET YOU CAN'T START A SONG WITHOUT DRUMS. "BUT LET'S NOT FORGET POL POT, HOXHA, MAO, AND THE REST OF THE GREATS WHO ALSO KNEW HOW TO PUT INTELLECTUALS IN THEIR PLACE."

THE BAND TURNED TO SNEER AND THE SLAVIC LANGUAGES MAJOR BEGAN TO CHOKE ON HIS OWN VOMIT, BUT I'D MADE MY POINT. NOT ONLY IS ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM BY INTELLECTUALS REPREHENSIBLE AND DISHONEST, IT'S ALSO BEEN THE DOWNFALL OF NEARLY EVERY COMMUNIST MOVEMENT IN HISTORY.

PART BAND, PART STUDY GROUP, PART DEBATE TEAM. WE ARGUED AND BICKERED, BUT WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU EXPECT FROM GRUMPY OLD MEN? AT

LEAST, FOR ONCE, IT WAS SOMETHING WORTH ARGUING ABOUT.

OUR SHINING MOMENT CAME AT A CIVIC CENTER RALLY FOR HOMES NOT JAILS. THE CROWD MILLED ABOUT ACROSS FROM CITY HALL WHILE DOWN THE STREET, IN A RENTED FLATBED TRUCK, WE AWAITED THE SIGNAL.

GO! JORDAN FIRED UP THE GENERATOR. LITTLE TOM STARTED THE TRUCK'S ENGINE AND TOOK OFF DOWN FOLSOM STREET. WE LAY FLAT ON THE FLATBED, OUR EQUIPMENT CONCEALED BY BANNERS HANGING OFF THE TRUCK'S WOODEN GRATING: "APPLES, FIVE FOR A DOLLAR." "WATERMELON, TEN CENTS A POUND."

AS WE PULLED IN DIRECTLY ACROSS FROM THE MAYOR'S OFFICE, I CUT THE CORDS, FLIPPING THEM OVER, REVEALING THE SCRAWLED MESSAGES ON THE UNDERSIDE: "HOUSING ON DEMAND! SHELTER, A RIGHT NOT A PRIVILEGE! STOP THE CITY!"

A FEW SPEAKERS CLIMBED ABOARD, DELIVERING QUICK AND CONCISE PLANS AND A LIST OF DEMANDS. THE CROWD RAISED THEIR CROWBARS AND CHEERED, NOT JUST ANOTHER SYMBOLIC MARCH. BEING DENIED A PERMIT FOR A P.A. HADN'T STOPPED THEM. NOW, BEING DENIED HOUSING WHILE HUNDREDS OF BUILDINGS IN THE PRESIDIO SAT VACANT WOULDN'T STOP THEM EITHER.

BUT FIRST, A FEW SONGS FROM MARTOV. JUST A FEW, TO RALLY THE TROOPS AND FILL THEM WITH REVOLUTIONARY FERVOR. AS WE PLAYED THE POLICE CARS BEGAN TO ARRIVE AND THE BLINDS OF CITY HALL PARTED TO MAKE WAY FOR NERVOUS EYES. I COULD FEEL THE REAL POWER OF MUSIC AND THE REAL POWER OF HISTORY TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME. NOT OUT OF CONTEXT AT ALL.

12. There's no Outside

I CALLED UP JED. HE WAS AT LYNETTE'S. I FELT BAD CALLING HER HOUSE AT THREE A.M., BUT AT LEAST HE WAS STILL AWAKE.

"JED," I SAID. "YOU GOTTA COME HOME SOMETIME. CAN'T BE STAYING AT THE GIRL'S PLACE EVERY SINGLE DAY. WE NEVER SEE YOU ANYMORE. IT'S NOT FAIR. IT'S NO FUN LIVING OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE WITHOUT YOU THERE, AND BESIDES, WE GOT REHEARSAL AT EIGHT IN THE MORNING!"

I WAS AT MY DAD'S HOUSE, TIPTOEING AROUND WHILE MY DAD SLEPT IN THE OTHER ROOM. A GREAT PLACE TO GET A LITTLE QUIET WRITING TIME, BUT NO GOOD FOR THE TRADITIONAL AMENITIES OF A PARENT HOUSE: FOOD. ALAS, THE CUPBOARDS WERE BARE EXCEPT FOR SOME MEALY OATMEAL.

NICE TO HAVE A LONG WALK, A CHANCE FOR REFLECTION AND ADJUSTMENT BETWEEN YOUR HOME AND THE REST OF THE WORLD. BUT A TWO AND A HALF HOUR HIKE TAKES ENERGY. ACTUAL NUTRITION, NOT JUST NERVOUS ENERGY FROM CAFFEINE. I HADN'T EATEN IN TWELVE HOURS. UNDER QUESTIONING, JED ADMITTED HE HADN'T EATEN IN TWO DAYS AND HADN'T SLEPT IN THREE. HE ALWAYS DOES THAT, PUSHING TOO HARD AND NOT TAKING CARE OF HIMSELF. I DO IT TOO, BUT CAN SEE IT IN JED EASIER, WHICH IS WHY I HUNT HIM DOWN EVERY FEW DAYS AND BRING HIM HOME.

FIVE ON A SUNDAY MORNING WHEN WE SET OUT, AND ALL THE STORES WERE STILL CLOSED. THE SUPERMARKET WAS IN THE WRONG DIRECTION.

"DON'T WORRY," I SAID. "THERE'S A TINY LITTLE MARKET RIGHT BEFORE WE GET INTO THE HILLS. IT'LL BE OPEN. AND THERE'S A CAFE NEXT DOOR WHERE THIS GIRL I WENT OUT WITH ONCE USED TO WORK. MAYBE THEY'LL STILL GIVE ME FREE COFFEE".

OF COURSE, WHEN WE REACHED THE STORE IT WAS CLOSED. THE CAFE WAS BOARDED UP AND DRIPPING WITH HUGE PAINTED LETTERS: "FUCK OFF, CREEP!"

YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN. BEING DENIED COFFEE AND FOOD IN YOUR TIME OF NEED FEELS LIKE A PERSONAL ATTACK EVEN WHEN IT'S JUST A SIMPLE CASE OF BAD PLANNING.

WE HIKE ON DESULTORY, DESPONDENT, LIGHT-HEADED AND CONFUSED. AND THEN, YOU KNOW THE STORY OF THE MORMONS AND THEIR SALTY LAKE? HUNTED AND BACKED INTO A CORNER, THEY SETTLE AND STRUGGLE TO TURN THE DESERT VALLEY INTO FARMABLE LAND. UNLUCKY BASTARDS, HERETICS AND POLYGAMISTS THAT THEY ARE, THEY LOOK UP TO SEE THE SKY BLACKENED BY A HUGE SWARM OF LOCUST WHICH PROCEEDS TO GLEEFULLY ANNIHILATE THE CROPS AND ALL THE MORMON'S HARD WORK. OH, WOE UNTO GOD. OH, DOOM.

BUT THEN, WHAT SHOULD APPEAR? SEAGULLS. MILLIONS UPON MILLIONS OF SEAGULLS. POOR

MORMONS, TO HAVE THIS MOST FILTHY AND DISGUSTING ANIMAL AS THEIR SAVIOUR. BUT THE SEAGULLS DESCENDED UPON THE VALLEY AND ATE ALL THE LOCUST. HALLELUJAH!

WHERE DID ALL THE SEAGULLS GO? I DON'T KNOW. BUT, WALKING UP THE CREST OF THE HILL, JED AND I WERE SIMILARLY SAVED FROM EXTINCTION. WE MIGHT HAVE WITHERED AWAY RIGHT THEN AND THERE, DEAD IN OUR TRACKS, HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR A CAMARO THAT DROVE BY BLASTING BON JOVI AND LITTERING THE VALLEY WITH SUNDAY PAPERS. TRULY A MIRACLE OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS. ATTACHED TO EACH PAPER WAS A FREE BREAKFAST CEREAL SAMPLE.

JED, YOU MAY RECALL, IS MY PAL ENGAGED IN A PRIVATE WAR AGAINST ANIMAL-RELATED PRODUCTS AND FOOD ADDITIVES. HE GETS MAD AT ME FOR EXAGGERATING HIS VIGILANCE, YET IT WAS HE WHO JUST LAST WEEK, IN A CRUDE ATTEMPT AT CENSORSHIP, CHECKED OUT TWO BOOKS, "GLYCEROL" AND "GLUE, GLUE, AND GELATIN" FROM THE BERKELEY PUBLIC LIBRARY AND WAS INTENT ON DESTROYING THEM UNTIL I CAUGHT HIM IN THE ACT AND PUT A STOP TO IT.

JED IS EXTREMELY CAREFUL ABOUT WHAT HE EATS, AND AS A RESULT SOMETIMES GOES DAYS WITHOUT EATING. I'VE TAKEN TO KEEPING FOOD FOR HIM RIGHT IN MY FILING CABINET IN CASE OF EMERGENCIES. FILED UNDER "JED" ARE SHEETS OF SEAWEED AND PIECES OF MATZOH. INGREDIENTS IN MATZOH: FLOUR AND WATER. THAT'S ALL.

JED CHECKED THE INGREDIENT LIST ON THE SUGAR CEREAL BOX, AND THAT WAS THE REAL MIRACLE. NO ANIMAL PRODUCTS. BARELY ANY FOOD PRODUCTS EVEN.

ANGRY HOMEOWNERS BEGAN TO WAKE UP AND FIND THE SANCTITY OF THEIR SUNDAY PAPER VIOLATED. RUBBING THE SLEEP OUT OF THEIR EYES, THEY SAW JED AND I FRANTICALLY DASHING UP THE STREET, SHIRTS AND PANTS STUFFED WITH UNCOUNTABLE BOXES OF SUGAR SMACKS AS WE HEADED FOR THE HILLS.

THE PLAN WAS THUS: DOWN TWO BOXES AT THE DUCKPOND; TWO AT THE RIDGE BY THE SHOOTING RANGE; TWO WITH THE COWS IN THEIR PASTURE; AND TWO AT THE ALVARADO PARK PLAYGROUND IN THE FINAL STRETCH FOR HOME. BY CAREFUL PLANNING WE COULD PRESERVE AND SUSTAIN OUR ENERGY LEVEL AND STILL LEAVE FOUR BOXES

LEFT OVER FOR THE HOUSEMATES WAITING FOR US IN EL SOB, ASLEEP AND HUNGRY, WHO HAD ENTRUSTED JED AND I WITH THE HUNTING AND GATHERING OF FOOD.

WE WALKED HAPPY AND PROUD THROUGH THE VALLEY, CREEPING WITH THE CREEKS, ROLLING LIKE THE HILLS. NOT A SOUL IN SIGHT FOR MILES. PEACEFUL, FREE, AND EASY, YET STILL PUNK AS FUCK.

WHEN I TIRED OF JED'S ENDLESS BANTER, INSTEAD OF SCREAMING I JUST BEGAN TO RUN. JED GAVE CHASE, HIS VOICE A MUTED, COMFORTINGLY UNINTELLIGABLE THROB IN THE DISTANCE, NOT UNLIKE THE BLEATING OF A SHEEP.

I KNEW THE STEEP, NARROW PATHS WELL, AND EVEN RUNNING I WAS ABLE TO DAYDREAM AND PONDER THE BEAUTY OF LIFE. THE JOY OF EARLY MORNING AND THE SOUND OF CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE SWIMMING POOL. THE TOUCH OF ICE CREAM ON YOUR TONGUE ON A HOT SUMMER DAY AND THE STEADY RHYTHM OF SEX. THE PLEASURE OF SOLITUDE AND BEING ABLE TO ENJOY YOUR OWN THOUGHTS, THE EXCITEMENT OF CONVERSATION AND BEING ABLE TO SHARE AND SHARPEN AND COMPARE. THE PASSION OF MUSIC, THE SWEETNESS OF SILENCE, THE CRISPY DELICIOUS YET WHOLESOME TASTE OF SUGAR SMACKS. LIKE LOVE AND LIFE, MADE TO BE ENJOYED, NOT CAREFULLY SAVED. MADE TO BE DEVoured, NOT LUGGED AROUND WHILE YOU RAN THROUGH THE COUNTRYSIDE FROM JED, WHO STILL WOULD NOT SHUT UP. BUT I LOOKED BACK AND HE WAS SUDDENLY QUIET. WE SEEMED TO BE OF ONE MIND.

WE STOPPED, SHRUGGED, SMILED, AND THE REMAINING BOXES WERE CONSUMED IN A BLIND FURY RIGHT THERE ON THE BLUFF WITHOUT BARELY STOPPING TO CHEW. THEN WE WALKED ON, FEELING GUILTY BUT SURPRISINGLY HAPPY. WITHOUT ANY BOXES WEIGHING US DOWN, WE MADE THE LAST MILES IN RECORD TIME AND, ARRIVING HOME, SNUCK AROUND TO THE BACKHOUSE. BETTER NOT TO WAKE UP THE HUNGRY HOUSEMATES. BETTER TO WAKE UP THE SIX PACK OF PABST INSTEAD.

JED SWEEPED UP SEWAGE IN THE BACKHOUSE BASEMENT WHILE I GREETED THE WAKING WORLD FROM MY WINDOW. POINTING AND SHAKING MY FIST MENACINGLY, BUT SMILING ALL THE WHILE.

"ARE YOU READY?" JED CALLED UP.

"SURE, WANT TO BRING THE BASS AMP UP OR SHOULD I BRING THE DRUMS DOWN?"

"WELL, WE WOULDN'T WANT TO WAKE UP THE HOUSEMATES. DON'T WORRY ABOUT MUSIC, LET'S JUST REHEARSE. THINK YOU COULD TOSS DOWN A BEER?"

AND SO, FROM THE OLD BACKHOUSE UP ON THE HILL, IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, TWO VOICES COULD BE HEARD. FROM JED'S SICKENING DOOM DOWN IN THE BASEMENT AND THE SUNSWEPT YET WRETCHED AND MOLDY TRASH HEAP OF MY ROOM ON THE GROUND FLOOR, TWO VOICES BLENDED AND ECHOED OUT INTO THE CANYON BELOW.

"THERE ARE TOO MANY ANIMALS TO FEED
IN THE CITY IT'S A CAGE
ALL SLIMY, ALL SHITTY
SLEAZY MODS AND STUPID FUX
CREEPING CREEPS AND JAMES AND JUX
SHOTS OF WATER GOING OUT OF MY HEAD
MAKING FRENCH TOAST NOW HERE'S JED"

"SOME PEOPLE LOOK FOR SOMEONE ELSE
TO OPEN UP THE DOOR
TO CHANGE THE WATER BUT
NO ONE'S EVER SEEN ANYONE BUT THEMSELVES
I KNOW THE TRUTH
WE'RE EXPERIMENTS AND WE DON'T KNOW IT
I KNOW THE TRUTH
THERE'S NO OUTSIDE"

13. BGATSBSISOT

BEAUTIFUL GIRL AT THE STUPID BAR SHOW IN SOME OTHER TOWN, YOU COULD SAVE ME. YOU'VE GOT MYSTERY AND CHARM, STYLE AND FORM, A STRENGTH OF CHARACTER THAT SAYS YOU KNOW YOURSELF WELL AND DON'T NOTICE ME AT ALL. YOU'VE GOT A CERTAIN SOMETHING THAT STANDS OUT IN A CROWD. IT SAYS, "I DON'T FIT IN"; WHILE MINE SAYS, "I DON'T BELONG". GIRL, I NEED TO KNOW, HOW COULD YOU BE SO OUT OF PLACE AT THIS PLACE AND STILL ACT LIKE YOU OWN IT?

I SEE YOU TALKING TO YOUR FRIEND, THE ONE ALL THE BOYS ARE STARING AT. SHE MAY BE A GODDESS OR A PILE OF GARBAGE FOR ALL I CARE. IT'S SAPPY BUT TRUE, MY EYES ARE FOR YOU ALONE. LATER I'LL LEARN TO BE CIVIL. SHE IS YOUR FRIEND, AFTER ALL. BUT I BELIEVE IN KEEPING A LITTLE DISTANCE ALONG THOSE LINES.

YES, THE TWO OF YOU WERE LEANING AGAINST EACH OTHER, SMILING AND DRINKING AND LOOKING AT ME THE SAME. THEN GOD BLESS AMERICA, YOU BROKE FROM HER AND WALKED MY WAY. STRAIGHT IN FOR THE KILL, TEETH GNASHING AND LASHES LASHING, YOU PRESSED UP AGAINST ME, OUR BODIES INTERTWINED. YOU WHISPERED IN MY EAR.

"ARE THERE INS AND OUTS?" YOU ASKED.

I SHOULD HAVE SAID YES, OR NO, OR SOMETHING CLEVER. BUT I SAID THE TRUTH, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE: "I'M NOT WORKING HERE".

HIDING IN THE CORNER BY THE DOOR, PROPPED UP AGAINST THE WALL, EYEING EVERYONE SUSPICIOUSLY, YOU THOUGHT I WAS TAKING MONEY. BUT NO, BABY, I'M NOT THE DOORMAN. I'M A MUSICIAN.

MY STORY? WELL, LET ME TELL YOU. I CRAWLED INTO TOWN SO WEARY AND WORN, AND I SAW THE FLIER. THAT I WOULD BE THRILLED BY A NINE-PIECE SKA BAND FROM NORTH DAKOTA SHOWS I'M NOT AS INFLEXIBLE AND PESSIMISTIC AS THEY SAY. IT SHOWS MAYBE THAT I'VE LOST MY MIND AND ALL SELF-RESPECT AFTER BEING OUT TOO LONG ALONE.

THERE I WAS, AT HARDEE'S, NURSING MY SIXTH CUP OF COFFEE, WHEN THEY WALKED IN. A NINE-PIECE SKA BAND FROM NORTH DAKOTA IS NOT HARD TO SPOT, AND WITH ONE GUEST PER MEMBER I KNEW THEIR LIST WOULD HAVE ROOM FOR ME. "HEY", I SAID. "YOU MUST BE THE SKAPATALISTS!"

WHICH COULD BE WORSE? PICKING THE HOTTEST MONTH OF THE YEAR TO WALK ACROSS THE MIDWEST, OR BEING IN A BAND WITH A NAME LIKE THAT? YOU COULD SAY WE CHOOSE OUR OWN FATE.

YES, DARLING, I MAY LOOK LIKE A DRIFTER, BUT I KNOW EXACTLY WHERE I'M GOING. TWO WEEKS AGO I LEFT MINNEAPOLIS AND IN TWO WEEKS I'LL WALK INTO WICHITA. I'M NOT RUNNING FROM MY PROBLEMS, NOR AM I BLIND TO THE BIGGER FORCES OF LIFE. I'M STARING THEM IN THE EYE TO STAKE MY CLAIM: YOU CAN KEEP MOVING WITHOUT BEING AIMLESS. BUT, BEAUTIFUL GIRL AT ETCETERA ETCETERA, WITH YOUR PASSION AND POISE, YOU PROVE THE SAME POINT SIMPLY AND WITHOUT SO MUCH FUSS, JUST IN THE WAY THAT YOU DANCE.

OH, BGATBSISOT, YOU'RE EVERYTHING I'VE COME TO LOVE IN THE MIDWEST. BIKES LEFT UNLOCKED AND NON-HIPPIE FOOD CO-OPS. WAKING UP SHIVERING AT DAWN AND STUMBLING OUT INTO THE WIDE OPEN EMPTY STREETS OF ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL UNFAMILIAR SMALLTOWN, BUT FAMILIAR ENOUGH

TO FIND THE CHEAP DONUT SHOP WITH FREE REFILLS AND FRIENDLY FARMERS. YOU'RE THE MORNING PAPER AND EVERYONE IN THE SHOP TALKING TOGETHER, THE BIGGER PICTURE I WOULD NEVER BE PART OF JUST DRIVING THROUGH. I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I CAN GO ON THIS WAY, AND YET, HOW COULD I EVER GIVE IT UP?

SWELL LOOKING BROAD AT THE CRUMMY DIVE LAST NIGHT IN WHATEVER TOWN THIS IS, I WOKE UP THIS MORNING IN A TOOL SHED STILL THINKING OF YOU. WHAT ARE THE CHANCES YOU WOULD BE OUT ON THE MAIN DRAG TODAY, LOOKING FOR ME? I HAD NOTHING BUT NIGHTMARES LAST NIGHT, TERRIBLE NIGHTMARES OF MAPS AND MATH, ALL THE DIFFERENT DISTANCES AND TIMES AND PLACES. I KEPT WAKING UP IN A COLD SWEAT, AND THEN THEY WOULD BEGIN AGAIN. IT DOESN'T TAKE A FANZINE EDITOR TO FIGURE OUT THAT AT THIS POINT, FINDING YOU WOULD BE BETTER THAN FINDING MYSELF, WHICH IS THE PUNCHLINE FOR THIS WHOLE DUMB PLAN.

I'M WALKING DOWN THE ROAD HOPING YOU AND YOUR CUTE BUT INVISIBLE FRIEND ARE LEAVING TOWN TOO, AND PULL OVER TO PICK ME UP. I HOPE SO, BECAUSE, BABY, THIS HIGHWAY SUCKS. HARDLY A SHOULDER TO WALK ON, AND GRASS INSTEAD OF GRAVEL ON THE SIDE. FEELS GOOD FOR THE FIRST MILE BUT HURTS YOU MORE IN THE LONG RUN.

14. Kevin Stories pt.5

AFTER SCHOOL ONE DAY, KEVIN BROUGHT ME ALONG TO MEET HIS GRANDMOTHER. I THOUGHT OF SNOW AND AIRPLANES AND ELEVEN MILE ROAD. AS FAR AS I KNEW, ALL GRANDMOTHERS WERE JEWISH AND LIVED IN DETROIT. THE IDEA OF CLOSE FAMILY LIVING IN CLOSE PROXIMITY SEEMED FREAKY TO ME. STILL DOES, REALLY. BUT EVERYONE'S FAMILY IS DIFFERENT. ESPECIALLY KEVIN'S.

IT SEEMS LIKE A DREAM NOW, A FADED BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO FROM THE TURN OF THE CENTURY. THAT'S HOW MUCH THINGS HAVE CHANGED IN FIFTEEN YEARS, EVEN IN BERKELEY. REDEVELOPMENT HAS ALTERED THE CHARACTER OF DOWNTOWN. ONLY A LITTLE OF THE OLD FACE REMAINS, AND NOT FOR LONG. NICE TO SEE NEW BUSINESSES ON THE STOREFRONTS ON SHATTUCK, BUT I WISH THEY'D LEAVE THE SIDE-

STREETS ALONE. CENTER AND ALLSTON, AND IN BETWEEN ON MILVIA WAY, WHERE KEVIN'S GRANDMOTHER HAD HER PLACE.

IT WAS A WAREHOUSE, A SWEATSHOP, FILLED WITH PATCHES AND FABRIC SCRAPS AND ANCIENT SEWING MACHINES. DUSTY AND DARK, THE FACTORY HAD STOPPED RUNNING WHEN KEVIN'S GRANDFATHER DIED. HOW MANY DECADES BACK HAD THAT BEEN? MEN IN KEVIN'S FAMILY DIED YOUNG, AND HIS GRANDMOTHER WAS OLD AND GREY.

BUT NOT FRAIL, NOT HELPLESS. LIVING ALONE IN AN APARTMENT IN THE BACK OF THE OLD FACTORY, COMING AND GOING THROUGH THE ALLEYWAY, SHE SEEMED INDEPENDENT AND HAPPY. LIKE MAMA CASS LIVING IN THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY ON SCOOBY DOO. CERTAINLY NOT LIKE ANYONE I KNEW. BUT NOT A CARTOON, A SUPERHERO, OR EVEN A ROCKSTAR. DON'T BE FOOLED BY OUTSIDE APPEARANCES. INSIDE THE APARTMENT IT WAS A GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE LIKE ANY OTHER. THE SAME WEIRD SMELLS, PHOTOS, CANDY, OLD FURNITURE, AND MEDICINE.

"KEVIN" I WHISPERED, "SHOULDN'T YOU HAVE COMBED DOWN YOUR HAWK? SHOULDN'T YOU HAVE PUT ON SOME NICE CLOTHES?" BUT HE JUST LAUGHED. "SHE'S MY GRANDMOTHER, NOT SOME STRANGER. SHE MAY BE OLD BUT SHE'S PRETTY COOL."

NOT SIX MONTHS LATER, THE WAREHOUSE WAS SOLD, ALONG WITH THE PARKING LOT NEXT DOOR WHICH SHE ALSO OWNED. A HOLDING COMPANY MANAGED THE SALE, AND GRANDMA WAS WHISKED OFF TO AN OLD-AGE HOME. IT SEEMED TO HAVE CAUGHT KEVIN OFF GUARD. HE SQUINTED IN ANGER AND GOT A GLAZED-OVER LOOK THE DAY WE PASSED BY AND THERE WAS A SIDEWALK SALE OUT FRONT SELLING OFF THE OLD PATCHES AND MACHINES. ANTIQUE KITSCH TO THE SWARMS OF SCAVENGERS, BUT ONCE A LIVELIHOOD AND A LIFE FOR KEVIN'S FAMILY.

SHE'D BEEN RIPPED OFF, FLEECE, SHANGHAIED, HE TOLD ME. BY PEOPLE MASQUERADING AS FRIENDS. AFTER THAT, HE NEVER SAID ANYTHING ABOUT IT AGAIN. ONE MORE SUBJECT WHICH MADE HIM TENSE AND FIERY EYED WHEN I TRIED TO ASK.

ONCE I MADE THE MISTAKE OF MENTIONING THAT THE BUILDING HAD BECOME A SQUAT FOR THE NEWEST ARRIVAL OF RUNAWAYS.

"I'LL KILL ANYONE WHO SETS FOOT IN THERE," KEVIN SAID, AND HE MEANT IT. SO I LIED. MUST HAVE BEEN SOME OTHER PLACE, I SAID. I GET THEM ALL CONFUSED.

THEY BUILT A SKYSCRAPER, BY BERKELEY

STANDARDS AT LEAST, WHERE THE PARKING LOT STOOD. THEN TORE DOWN THE SQUAT WHICH WAS ONCE KEVIN'S GRANDMOTHER'S PLACE, AND PUT IN, WHAT? YES, A PARKING LOT. IT SEEMED STRANGE, EVEN SPITEFUL. I THINK ABOUT IT ALMOST EVERY TIME I CUT THROUGH ON MY WAY TO THE LIBRARY.

15. Control

I WAS AT A PARTY. WELL, NOT EXACTLY A PARTY, IT WAS AN INFORMAL, IMPROMPTU GATHERING. BUT THERE WAS BEER THERE, AND GIRLS, AND TERRY WITH THE HOWARD COSELL VOICE WAS PLAYING HOST. A TRUE HOST, WITH A SOOTHING CHARM THAT'S NOT ONLY CONTAGIOUS BUT DELIBERATE. UNDER HIS GRACE, EVERYONE FELT COMFORTABLE. LAUGHTER AND CONVERSATION SPREAD EASILY.

COREY AND I HAD STOPPED BY ON A WHIM, A CHANCE TO WIND DOWN AFTER A STRESSFUL REHEARSAL. MUCH TO MY SURPRISE, I WAS DRAWN IN TO A DISCUSSION OF OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDERS. INSTEAD OF HIDING SHYLY IN THE CORNER OR WASTING TIME WITH SMALL TALK, I FOUND MYSELF SPEAKING MY MIND ABOUT WHAT'S ON IT NINETY-NINE PERCENT OF THE TIME. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS I'D FINALLY COME TO THE RIGHT PARTY.

"I HAVE TO TOUCH EVERY OTHER PARKING METER," SAID ONE GIRL.

"MY MOM'S DEAD AND I STILL CAN'T STEP ON A CRACK IN THE SIDEWALK," SAID ANOTHER.

"SOMETIMES I ALPHABETIZE MY GROCERIES AT THE CHECKOUT STAND," I ADMITTED BY WAY OF INTRODUCING MYSELF.

"I ALPHABETIZED MY WHOLE ROOM, INCLUDING MY BOYFRIEND," LAUGHED THE PARKING METER GIRL.

"I HAVE TO LOCK EVERY LOCK SO MANY TIMES, I NEVER GET ANYWHERE," GROANED THE GUY BY THE STEREO TRYING TO DECIDE WHAT RECORD TO PUT ON. "EVEN IF I MAKE IT ACROSS TOWN IT'S NO GOOD, SOMETIMES I HAVE TO GO ALL THE WAY BACK AND CHECK AGAIN TO MAKE ABSOLUTELY SURE."

"I CAN BARELY LEAVE THE HOUSE I'M SO SCARED I LEFT THE STOVE ON," SAID A GIRL WHO APPARENTLY SHARED THE PLACE WITH TERRY. "THE FUNNY THING IS, IT'S NEVER HAPPENED, EVER. BUT STILL I WORRY."

"I USED TO SEE THIS BUSINESSWOMAN," I SAID. "SHE LOOKED TOTALLY NORMAL, BUT EVERY BLOCK SHE HAD TO ADJUST HER SHOES, HAD TO TIE AND UNTIE THEM. I GUESS YOU COULD SAY I GOT A LITTLE OBSESSED MYSELF, BECAUSE AT THE SAME TIME EVERY DAY, SHE WOULD PASS BY MY WORK, AND I HAD AN ALARM CLOCK SET SO I WOULDN'T MISS IT. JUST LIKE CLOCKWORK, SHE'D BE ACROSS THE STREET, FUMBLING WITH HER LACES. THE SAD THING IS, RECENTLY I REALIZED I PULL UP MY SOCKS EVERY BLOCK!"

"I TAP MY THUMBS" CONFESSED THE KID ON THE COUCH NEXT TO ME, WHO HAD A NERVOUS HABIT OF RUBBING HIS RIGHT EYE, THOUGH I GUESS HE HADN'T NOTICED THAT YET. "THEY HAVE TO END ON AN EVEN NUMBER. YOU KNOW, IF IT COMES UP ODD I HAVE TO START ALL OVER."

EVERYONE SIGHED. "WE KNOW! WE KNOW!"

"I'M WORKING ON A CHART," I ANNOUNCED. EVERYONE PERKED UP THEIR EARS IN ATTENTION. LIST LOVERS LOOKING FOR THE NEXT LOGICAL STEP.

"A CHART FOR EVERYTHING. I'M CONVINCED THAT IT'S ALL MATHEMATICAL, FROM THE AMOUNT OF TIMES WE USE A WORD TO THE AMOUNT OF TIMES WE HAVE AN IDEA, AND THE METHOD WE EXPRESS IT. TRY COUNTING THE TIMES YOU TAP OR THE CRACKS YOU SKIP OR THE LOCKS YOU LOCK, AND YOU'LL SEE. WHAT WE ASSUME TO BE INFINITE AND RANDOM IS QUITE FINITE AND STRUCTURED AFTER ALL. OF COURSE WE ARE ALL UNIQUE, BUT EACH UNIQUE RUT COULD BE EXPRESSED IN ONE CHART, PERHAPS ONE LONG NUMBER. OUR NATURAL RHYTHM. OUR LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR. ONLY THEN COULD WE HOPE TO STUDY IT, ALTER IT, OR PERHAPS BETTER PERFECT IT FOR ABSOLUTE EFFECTIVENESS."

THERE WAS A ROUND OF APPLAUSE. THERE I WAS, THE LIFE OF THE PARTY. A FEW GIRLS ADDED ME TO THEIR LIST OF OBSESSIONS.

JUST BY OPENING UP AND REALLY TALKING, WE COULD ADMIT ALL OUR LITTLE PECULIARITIES. THE VERY HABITS WHICH MADE US HUMAN, WHICH TIED US ALL TOGETHER IN ONE BIG BOARD GAME, NO LONGER HAD TO BE AN EMBARRASSING SECRET! AH, GLORIOUS IS THE SIGHT OF A NEW DAWN! SWEET IS THE SOUND OF US THROWING OFF OUR CHAINS!

"SO," SAID THE CRAZY MOTHERLESS GIRL WHO COULDN'T WALK LIKE NORMAL HUMANS, "WHAT DRUGS DO YOU TAKE FOR IT?"

"YOU MUST BE ON PAXIL," SAID THE NERVOUS WRECK RATTLING THE COUCH. "YOU CAN RECOGNIZE

A PAXILHEAD ANYWHERE BY THE WAY THEY TAP THEIR FEET ALONG WITH EACH SYLLABLE THEY SPEAK, AS IF TRYING TO BURY THEIR WORDS".

I GROWLED AT HIM, PULLED MY FEET UNDERNEATH ME, AND SAT INDIAN-STYLE.

THE PARKING METER GIRL HAD TO PUT IN HER TWO CENTS. "MY THERAPIST SAYS AS LONG AS YOU'RE SEEKING HELP, THE MAIN PROBLEM IS ALREADY SOLVED. NEVERTHELESS, SHE HAS ME ON PROZAC, LITHIUM, RITALIN, AND THORAZINE. JUST TO BE SURE."

TERRY, SEEING THE BEADS OF SWEAT FORMING ON MY FOREHEAD, STEPPED IN WITH A SLOW NUMBER, A LITTLE SOMETHING TO EASE THE TENSION AND GET THE PARTY ROLLING AGAIN.

"I HAVE THIS THING AT THE GAS PUMP," HE SAID. "I'VE GOT TO GET THOSE LITTLE NUMBERS TO MATCH UP, OTHERWISE I CAN'T GO ON. I'LL BE THERE ALL DAY UNTIL I GET IT RIGHT. EVERYONE HAS SOMETHING LIKE THAT, SOME LITTLE QUIRK. AND YOU KNOW WHAT THEY'RE ALL ABOUT, DON'T YOU? WHAT ALL THESE PERFECTIONS ARE LOOKING FOR?"

"YES!" I SAID. "RHYTHM!"

"FLATNESS!" SAID A YOUNG CHILD I HADN'T PREVIOUSLY NOTICED.

"SYMMETRY!" YELLED SOMEONE ELSE.

"MAXIMUM AWARENESS!"

"MATHEMATICS!"

"CONSISTENCY!"

"NO," SAID TERRY. "NO, NO, NO, NO, NO," HE LAUGHED. "IT'S ABOUT CONTROL."

"CONTROL!," I GASPED, STANDING UP IN SHOCK. "WHO, ME??"

THE ROOM FELL SILENT AND ALL EYES TURNED TOWARD COREY, WHO STOOD POINTING. GUITARISTS, THEY JUST CAN'T STAND IT WHEN SOMEONE ELSE IS THE CENTER OF ATTENTION.

"YES," HE SAID. "YOU".

16. September

I'M NOT FOND OF SHARING MY PROBLEMS, TROUBLES, WORRIES OR FEARS. IT DOES NO GOOD TO DISPLAY THEM, PARADE THEM, DISSECT AND EXPLAIN THEM. BUT PEOPLE ASK, AND I HATE TO LIE. CLOSE FRIENDS KNOW INSTINCTIVELY JUST BY LOOKING IN MY EYE.

I HATED TO SEE MY TROUBLES REFLECTED IN

THEIR FACES, SO I AVOIDED THEM. FIRST THE EYES, THEN THE OLD FRIENDS ALTOGETHER. I CULTIVATED THE FRIENDSHIPS OF PEOPLE WITH WHOM I HAD A DIFFERENT SORT OF BOND. NATURAL, CHEMICAL, UNRELATED TO ANY SOCIAL FRAMEWORK OR SHARED PAST. INTIMATE YET COMPLETELY IMPERSONAL. LIKE THE SAN FRANCISCO PEN-PAL I'VE HAD FOR TEN YEARS BUT NEVER MET, THESE WERE PEOPLE I KNEW WELL YET NOT AT ALL. "LET'S MEET," I SAID. "ONCE A WEEK." I LOVE ROUTINES, AND WAS SORELY IN NEED OF A NEW ONE.

FRIDAYS I CAME TO THE FANCY RESTAURANT AND PICKED UP A WAITRESS THERE. DOWN AT THE CORNER OPEN-AIR CAFE WE SHARED HER LUNCH BREAK AND HEATED CONVERSATION WHICH TO A STRANGER MAY HAVE SOUNDED MORE LIKE WORD ASSOCIATION. PERHAPS SHE WAS A BIT INSANE, I DON'T KNOW. BUT IF SO, IT ONLY MADE IT EASIER TO TALK WITHOUT THE USUAL STIFLING PRETENSIONS AND LIMITATIONS. SHE COULD TAKE AN IDEA OR EMOTION AND LOOK AT IT FROM ALL SIDES WITHOUT NEEDING TO KNOW WHERE IT CAME FROM. PLAYFULLY.

NAMED, DESCRIBED, AND LET OUT OF THE BAG, MY PROBLEMS WOULD HAVE MULTIPLIED IN LEAPS AND BOUNDS. LIKE A GOLDFISH, GROWING TO THE SIZE OF THEIR SURROUNDINGS, SURROUNDING ME. BETTER TO KEEP THEM IN THE BAG. BETTER TO TALK ABOUT THE BAG, ITS SIZE AND COLOR AND SHAPE. THE INCONVENIENCE OF CARRYING IT AROUND AND THE FEAR IT MIGHT GET STOLEN OR MISPLACED. LESS BORING THAT WAY, AND SOMEHOW MORE TO THE POINT. THE WAITRESS SAID WHAT I CALLED THE BAG SHE THOUGHT OF AS TRAYS AND PLATES.

I RAN AND RODE CRISSCROSS ACROSS TOWN LIKE CLOCKWORK FOR PEOPLE AND CONVERSATIONS THAT WERE COMPLETELY UNPREDICTABLE. A NICE DUALITY, LIKE THE SIMULTANEOUS ANONYMITY AND INTIMACY, CONNECTION AND ESCAPE. IT WAS A TERRIBLE MONTH BACK IN THE BAY, AND I WAS A WRECK. BUT TAKING A NEW APPROACH KEPT ME FROM FALLING OFF THE EDGE. BUILDING RAPPORT AND FRIENDSHIP ALONG NEW, IMPROVISED, UNUSUAL LINES ADDED AN ELEMENT OF THE SURREAL. IT SHOWED THAT MY OLD, FALLING APART WORLD WAS NOT SO REAL EITHER, JUST A DIFFERENT SET OF CONSTRUCTS I'D HELPED TO BUILD.

WE DIDN'T KNOW EACH OTHERS FRIENDS,

HISTORIES, HOMES, OR THE LANDSCAPE OF EACH OTHERS LIVES. WE DIDN'T KNOW EACH OTHERS PROBLEMS, AND IN THE CASE OF THE WAITRESS, NOT EVEN ONE ANOTHERS NAMES. DESPITE THAT, OR IN SPITE OF IT, WE GOT ALONG, AND STARTED TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER WELL. SOMETIMES YOU FORGET THAT ONCE ALL THOSE THINGS ARE SHED AND SHAVED OFF, THERE'S STILL A WHOLE PERSON UNDERNEATH.

17. El Niño

SEAN CALLED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. "GOD DAMN!" HE SAID, IN AN ACCENT THAT CAME FROM BEER AND MANUAL LABOR RATHER THAN A PARTICULAR REGION. HE YELLED INTO THE PHONE AS IF I WAS ACROSS A CROWDED BAR. "AARON? AARON!! I JUST REMEMBERED! I LEFT A SIX-PACK IN THE BUSHES BY THE BAY BRIDGE! LET'S GO GET IT!"

IN THE MIDST OF ALL THE FIGHTING THAT HAD BEEN GOING ON, NO ONE WAS QUITE THE SAME AS BEFORE. A LOT WAS LOST. BUT SEAN LOSING A SIX-PACK. THAT WAS UNHEARD OF.

IT WAS JUST ME AND JAG AT HOME SITTING IN THE RUINS OF WHAT I'D FOUGHT SO HARD TO KEEP. I HAD WON, BUT SOMEHOW LOST EVERYTHING IN THE PROCESS. THAT'S WHAT KIND OF MONTH IT WAS. IT TORE OUR LITTLE GANG IN TWO. PITY THE FOOL WHO FACES THE CROWD TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF. IT DOESN'T JUST MAKE YOU BITTER, IT MAKES YOU LONELY. THAT SEAN WOULD MAKE AN OVERTURE OF FRIENDSHIP AT THIS TRYING TIME MEANT A LOT TO ME.

IT WAS WAR, WITH MY LANDLORD, NEIGHBORS, AND OLD FRIENDS ALL ON THE OTHER SIDE. THAT'S HOW IT FELT, ANYWAY. WE HAD THE DOORS LOCKED WITH NEW LOCKS, THE WINDOWS BOLTED, THE CURTAINS DRAWN, AND IT WAS ROUGH BECAUSE WE WERE REPAINTING EVERY WALL, COVERING GRAFFITI THE SUBLETTERS HAD LEFT. THE FUMES WERE SO STRONG YOU COULD ALMOST SEE THEM. OUR NEIGHBORS, WITH THEIR NEVER-ENDING DEMANDS FOR CIGARETTES AND MONEY, HAD EVEN LEARNED MY GIRLFRIEND'S SECRET KNOCK, SO I DIDN'T ANSWER THE DOOR AT ALL NOW. BUT SEAN IS SO LOUD YOU CAN HEAR HIM A BLOCK AWAY. HE DIDN'T NEED TO KNOCK.

JUST A WEEK EARLIER, WE'D GONE TO THE WATERFRONT. BUT THAT WAS DIFFERENT. A SPECIAL OCCASION. LIKE ALL OCCASIONS, HAPPY OR SAD, IT INVOLVED THREE CARLOADS OF FREAKED OUT DRUNK PEOPLE, ENDLESS PLANNING AND BICKERING AND STALLING FOR TIME, AND THEN ALL THREE CARS DRIVING OFF IN SEPARATE DIRECTIONS TO GET LOST.

THE CAR I WAS IN MANAGED TO MISS THE LAST OAKLAND EXIT NOT ONCE BUT THREE TIMES, PAYING THE TOLL AND TURNING AROUND AT TREASURE ISLAND AGAIN AND AGAIN. FINALLY SEAN AND I WERE DROPPED OFF AND SENT OUT AS A SEARCH PARTY, BUT NO SURPRISE, WE COULDN'T FIND ANYONE FROM THE OTHER CARS, AND LOST HALF THE BEER LOOKING. IT TOOK A WEEK TO RECREATE HIS STATE OF MIND PROPERLY TO REMEMBER WHERE HE STASHED THEM. NOW WE DROVE TO THE TOLL-BOOTH'S QUICKLY AND EFFORTLESSLY, AND IN TEN MINUTES I WAS STANDING AT OCEAN'S EDGE. HE REACHED IN A BUSH AND PULLED OUT SIX BOTTLES, NICE AND COLD.

FOR ONCE, I DIDN'T NEED TO CONVINCE ANYONE, DIDN'T NEED A SPECIAL OCCASSION, OR A MOB, OR A TON OF ALCOHOL. THEY WERE MORE THAN HAPPY TO SET OUT ON A LONG WALK. JAG STALKING LIKE A SPIDER OVER THE DIRT ROAD AROUND AND UNDER THE BASE OF THE BRIDGE. SEAN STRAIGHT UP AND DOWN AND VERY SERIOUS, BUT WITH A BOUNCING STEP THAT MADE FUN OF HIS DEMEANOR. LIKE GODZILLA. I LOVE TO WATCH MY FRIENDS WALK.

TO BE TRANSPORTED FROM A DOOM AND FUME FILLED TOMB TO A MOONLIT BEACHFRONT ROAD IN MERE MINUTES OPENED MY EYES TO THE BIGGER PICTURE. ALL MY PROBLEMS MIGHT JUST BE A CAVITY NEEDING TO BE FILLED. AT WORST, A TOOTH WHICH NEEDED TO BE PULLED. I SHOOK MY HEAD OUT, RATTLING THE WORRIES AND FEARS AROUND IF NOT KNOCKING THEM LOOSE.

WE CROSSED THROUGH THE TOLLBOOTH TUNNELS, TIPTOEING PAST THE TOLLTAKERS' FEET, THEN BACK TOWARDS THE OLD TRANSMITTER AND ITS HIDDEN BEACH. UNDER THE MOON AND ALONG THE CRAGGY ROCK PATH AND SANDY DUNES, THREE OLD FRIENDS TALKING AND LAUGHING EASILY, IN BETWEEN THE FREEWAY AND THE MARSHLAND AND THE BAY. CAN'T SPEND YOUR WHOLE LIFE FIGHTING AND WORRYING AND EVERYTHING NOT WORKING. BUT YOU DO ANYWAY. AH WELL.

"LET'S GO SWIMMING", SEAN SAID.

"FUCK YOU", I SAID.

"NO, IT'LL BE WARM", SEAN SAID. "FROM EL NIÑO"
"IF THE GOD DAMN SUPERFUND WAS AVAILABLE
AS A WALK-IN CLINIC", STARTED JAG, "THEN I
WOULD CONSIDER YOUR ASININE SUGGESTION A
POSSIBILITY. AS IT IS I THINK I'D RATHER GET
SHOT BY A BUNCH OF WATERFRONT GRINGO FISH-
ERMEN ON THEIR WAY TO WORKINGMAN'S LUNCH
FOR A, UH, OMELET AND TWO—"

"SHUT UP, JAG!!" WE BOTH YELLED. HE
STAYED ON SHORE WHILE SEAN AND I STRIPPED
DOWN. LAST TIME SWIMMING IN THE BAY I GOT
HYPOTHERMIA AND ALMOST DROWNED. AND THAT
WAS THE HOTTEST DAY OF THE SUMMER.

I'D THOUGHT ALL THAT TROPICAL STORM TALK
WAS MEDIA HYPE, BUT FOR ONCE SEAN WAS RIGHT.
THE WATER WAS THE TEMPERATURE OF HEALTH
FOOD STORE COFFEE. LUKEWARM.

"FUCKING SHARKS! MICROBES! DON'T COME TO
ME WITH YOUR EL NIÑO BULLSHIT WHEN THE GULF
WAR SYNDROME COMES OUT AS A BEVERAGE!
I'LL STAY HERE ON THE SAND, THANK YOU, AND
WAIT FOR IT TO HEAT UP ENOUGH TO TURN INTO
BROKEN GLASS."

I PUT MY EARS UNDERWATER AND FLOATED
ON TOP OF THE SCUM AND DISEASE, WATCHING THE
LIGHTS OF SAN FRANCISCO COME ON, LIKE A
JOURNEY SONG. MY HOPE RISING LIKE THE SUN.

18. Me Too

LITTLE SLEEVELESS SHIRTS THAT SAID, "PUNK
RULES", SAFETY PINS AND BURNING DISCO RECORDS
AT THE SCHOOL. DOWN IN THE BUSHES BEHIND
THE BLACKTOP WE SOAKED THEM WITH GASOLINE
AND WATCHED THEM GO UP IN FLAMES. GIGGLING
HIPPIE GIRLS WERE MORE THAN READY TO TRADE
IN THE SUGAR HILL GANG FOR OURS. TROY, JOHN,
TIM, AND JOEY SMILING THROUGH THE THICK BLACK
SMOKE. ME TOO, BUT I WAS JUST TAGGING ALONG.
A YEAR YOUNGER AND NOT YET WISE TO GIRLS OR
THE WAYS OF THE WORLD.

"PUNK RULES? YEAH RIGHT! MORE LIKE, PUNK
SUCKS!" THE GUY AT THE HARDWARE STORE WAS
ALWAYS YELLING AT US. "PUNK BITES. PUNK IS
BUNK", HE SAID, RACING FROM BEHIND THE COUNTER
TO FOLLOW US THROUGH THE STORE. BUT, ALAS,

TOO LATE. WE ROUNDED A CORNER AND SHOVED CASES OF BUBBLE GUM IN OUR SOCKS, DOWN OUR PANTS, IN OUR POCKETS AND MOUTHS IN SECONDS FLAT, THEN CURLED OUR LIPS AND SNEERED BACK. FUCK YOU, DUDE.

WE RODE BIKES TROY AND I BUILT WITH SPARE PARTS AND A HAMMER, NOTHING ELSE. IF PEOPLE WERE GONNA LAUGH, WE MIGHT AS WELL BE FUNNY. MINE HAD NO PEDALS AND A YELLOW BANANA SEAT WITH AN A.M. RADIO GLUED UNDERNEATH. RIDING TO SEVEN-ELEVEN AND BACK FOR SLURPEES AND MORE SPRAYPAINT, FLINSTONES-STYLE ACROSS THE ASPHALT WITH NO BRAKES AND THE STATIC TURNED UP ALL THE WAY.

THE T.O. YARD HAD ALWAYS BEEN THE STAGE. SCHOOLED THERE FROM KINDERGARTEN TO THIRD GRADE, THEN ON TO FIREWORKS, GRAFFITI, MOTOR-CROSS AND WEED. NOW WE FOUND PUNK WHILE THE TEENAGERS JUST FOUND NEW WAYS TO BE MEAN. THEY BLEW UP A GIRL'S FACE ONCE, PUT A LADYFINGER IN HER CIGARETTE AND WERE STILL LAUGHING A WEEK LATER. NOT MY FRIENDS, BUT THE OTHER DEAD-ENDS. THEY BROKE INTO THE SCHOOL THROUGH A SKYLIGHT AND RACED MOTOR-CYCLES DOWN THE HALLS. STOLE ALL THE SCHOOL'S RECORDS AND THREW THEM AT EACH OTHER IN THE DARKNESS OF THE SCHOOLYARD. THE NEXT MORNING THE WHOLE BLACKTOP WAS COVERED WITH BROKEN BLACK VINYL SHARDS.

LET THE OLDER TRASH LAUGH IN THEIR TRANS-AMS, YELLING "FAGGOTS" AT US. EVEN ON BANANA SEAT BIKES WITH NO PEDALS WE LOOKED TOUGH. A CUT ABOVE THE REST BECAUSE WE WERE ONTO SOMETHING NEW. TIM POINTED HIS CIGARETTE LIKE A KNIFE, SAYING, "YEAH, BUT HAVE YOU HEARD THE DEAD BOYS, MOTHERFUCKERS?"

19. Meetings

JODY GOT AN APARTMENT IN THE CITY. SHE DECORATED THE PLACE WITH HEROIN, THREE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS, ONE FATAL OVERDOSE, AND A FAILED STINT AT S.F. STATE WORKING TOWARDS A DEGREE IN PARASITOLOGY. WHEN IT ALL COLLAPSED AROUND HER IN A WHIRLWIND OF BAD LUCK AND CONFUSION, SHE FOUND HERSELF RETURNING TO THE SUBURBS AND

HER MOTHER'S HOUSE, SOMETHING SHE HAD VOWED NEVER TO DO. SHE TOOK A TABLE AT LYON'S IN WALNUT CREEK AND SAT DOWN TO A CUP OF BITTER GREEN COFFEE. BACK HAUNTING HER OLD HAUNT AFTER YEARS OF FEELING HUNTED AND OUT OF PLACE, SHE BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF. NORMALLY PARALYZED BY SHYNESS, JODY FELT THE CONFIDENCE OF A NEW BEGINNING. SHE BEGAN TO TALK WITH THE BOY AT THE NEARBY TABLE WHO WAS ALSO PASSING THE NIGHT ALONE. NEXT THING I HEARD WAS A POSTCARD FROM JORDAN, MONTANA. WITH EYES CLOSED, THEY HAD PICKED IT OUT ON A U.S. MAP AND DRIVEN STRAIGHT THERE. NOW JODY WAS WORKING AS A PROJECTIONIST AT THE LOCAL THEATRE. THE BOY WAS BAGGING GROCERIES DOWN AT THE IGA. ON WEEKENDS THEY DROVE THE PLAINS LISTENING TO THE POGUES AND LOOKING FOR SPEED. TOGETHER AND HAPPY.

I MET A COUPLE GIRLS AND ENDED UP AT THEIR PLACE. SANDRA AND MARGO. IT WAS LIKE FINDING BURIED TREASURE. I WAS SO EXCITED I CALLED UP CARLOS TO TELL HIM THE NEWS. TWO GIRLS, I SAID. ATTRACTIVE, EDUCATED, AND PUNK. THEY HAVE A BERKELEY RENT CONTROL APARTMENT, GOOD TASTE IN ART, AND A VAST RECORD COLLECTION WITH EVERY RECORD WE WANT. ALL THIS AND SOMETHING PREVIOUSLY UNHEARD OF: THEY'RE ACTUALLY OUR AGE.

CARLOS SNARLED. "YOU SEEM TO HAVE FORGOTTEN THE FACT," HE SAID, "THAT GIRLS DON'T TALK TO ME." THAT WAS THE END OF THE SUBJECT AS FAR AS CARLOS WAS CONCERNED. HE WENT ON WITH HIS MONASTIC LIFE, PLAYING IN BANDS AND WORKING AS A RECEPTIONIST AT THE CHURCH. BUT HIS SELF-PITY WAS RUDELY INTERRUPTED ONE NIGHT WHEN SERVING WINE AT A CHURCH DINNER. A PRETTY CATHOLIC GIRL SAID, "HEY, DON'T YOU PLAY BASS IN SWEET BABY JESUS?"

CARLOS AND MARGO MADE A PERFECT COUPLE AND I KICKED MYSELF FOR ASSUMING THAT THE ICONS ON HER WALL WERE KITSCH. SADLY, SANDRA AND I DID NOT FARE AS WELL. MY GIRLFRIEND DROVE HER OFF AFTER SHE MADE THE FAUX-PAS OF SHOWING UP AT THE ASHTRAY IN HIGH HEELS.

VICTORIA WAS GOING OUT WITH ONE OF THOSE PATHETIC IDIOT WRITERS WHO COVER THEIR WALLS WITH REJECTION SLIPS BUT WOULDN'T EVER THINK TO SELF-PUBLISH THEMSELVES. LUCKILY SHE LEFT HIM AT HOME WHEN IT CAME TIME FOR HER EUROPEAN TRIP, BECAUSE ON THE BOAT TO IRELAND SHE MET DAG. AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT

SORT OF BOY. A MANIAC. BY WHICH TO SAY, I APPROVED AND WAS MAYBE EVEN A LITTLE JEALOUS. ONE NIGHT HE BORROWED MY BIKE WITH NO BRAKES AND RODE STRAIGHT DOWN ONE OF SAN FRANCISCO'S STEEPEST STREETS. WHEN HE LANDED ON HIS HEAD, VICTORIA WAS BESIDE HERSELF, BUT DAG JUST LAUGHED. I SAID, "DAMN! WHERE CAN I FIND ME A GIRL LIKE THAT?!"

ANGIE'S UNCLE IS SORT OF THE FRUMPY EX-HIPPIE TYPE. ANGIE'S NEW AUNT IS THE WOMEN'S WEIGHT-LIFTING CHAMPION OF THE UNITED STATES. WOULDN'T YOU KNOW IT, THEY MET SITTING NEXT TO EACH OTHER ON AN AIRPLANE. EVEN LAUREN, MY OLD HOUSEMATE. SHE CAME OUT TO ST. LOUIS TO VISIT ME, AND MET HER PRESENT BEAU WHEN TRANSFERRING TRAINS IN MEMPHIS. I'VE NEVER SEEN HER SINCE. HER BOY IS THE CONTROLLING TYPE AND IS PROBABLY WORRIED THAT IF SHE TAKES ANOTHER TRIP SHE'LL FALL FOR SOME OTHER JERK.

AND MARC, FUCKING MARC WAS SO OUT OF HIS MIND DRUNK THAT HE GOT IN HIS CAR AND PLOWED THROUGH THE WHOLE NEIGHBORHOOD TAKING OUT EVERYTHING IN HIS PATH. MIRACULOUSLY, NO ONE WAS INJURED. MIRACLES COME IN PAIRS, IT SEEMS. IN JAIL HE MET MONIKA, A WONDERFUL GIRL WHO ALSO HAPPENED TO BE DOING TIME AT THE TIME. I GO TO LIBRARIES EVERY DAY, BUT MARC GETS DRUNK AND GOES TO JAIL, AND WHO IS HIS NEW GIRLFRIEND? YES, A LIBRARIAN. UNBELIEVABLE.

20. Ice Cream

I'M LOOKING FOR THE ICE CREAM PLACE WHERE I USED TO LIKE TO GO, BUT I JUST CAN'T FIND IT.

IT WAS DOWN A QUIET SHADED STREET, SO DIFFERENT FROM THE FLASH AND SNARL OF THE BUSY AVENUES WHICH SURROUNDED IT FROM ALL SIDES, ENVELOPING IT, EFFECTIVELY HIDING IT FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

THE RIVERS AND RIVULETS OF PEOPLE SWARMED PAST THE APARTMENT I SHARED THAT SUMMER WITH JED AND LYNETTE. JUMP IN AND YOU WERE CARRIED THROUGH THE NUMBERS AND LETTERS IN A STEADY FLOW, SOMETIMES GATHERING FORCE INTO A WAVE WHICH SWEEPED AWAY EVERYTHING IN ITS PATH. SUCH

WAS THE WAY OF THE CITY. AT ONE CRUCIAL JUNCTURE, I WOULD TEAR MYSELF AWAY AND BREAK FROM THE MOB.

DOWN A SIDESTREET, THEN A SIDESTREET OF A SIDESTREET, AND SO ON. LIKE ONE OF THOSE RUSSIAN DOLLS, THE CITY GOT SMALLER AS YOU OPENED EACH PIECE AND LOOKED INSIDE. A CHANCE TO SLOW DOWN AND SHAKE OFF SOME OF THE SWEAT AND FEAR AND MURDER. TREE-LINED STREETS AND BENCHES AND SMALL STOREFRONTS, WARM SMELLS AND SMALL CHILDREN. THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS AS COMFORTING AND FREE AS THE ICE CREAM ITSELF.

THERE WAS A GIRL WHO WORKED AT THE ICE CREAM PLACE. THERE WERE LONG LINES FOR ICE CREAM THAT SUMMER, SO THE GIRL WAS ALWAYS TOO BUSY TO TALK. SHE MADE EYES AT ME AND HANDED OVER HUGE WAFFLE CONES, THEN I WOULD RUN AWAY. PERFECT.

CONSTANTLY DEFLECTING AND PARRYING INSULTS FROM THE NEW YORK CITY FOOD CLERKS WAS A GOOD GAME. LIKE CHESS, EXCEPT YOU NEVER WON. I LAUGHED RIGHT IN ONE GUY'S FACE WHEN HE ASKED TO SEE I.D., BUT HE GOT THE LAST LAUGH. "YOU LOOK SO DAMN OLD," HE SAID, "I WANTED TO MAKE SURE YOU WEREN'T ALREADY DEAD."

CHARMING, AND YET SOME DAYS I WASN'T UP TO THE CHALLENGE. FREE ICE CREAM FROM A SMILING GIRL WAS A NICE CHANGE. I COULD LAY DOWN MY DEFENSIVE SHIELD. IT MADE ME FEEL AT HOME.

HOW DID I FIND THE ICE CREAM PLACE IN THE FIRST PLACE? BY NIGHTS AND DAYS OF ENDLESS WALKING, SEARCHING, SCOURING THE CITY? NO, THAT BROUGHT ME ONLY ANXIETY AND EXHAUSTION. I FOUND THE ICE CREAM PLACE, THE BEAUTIFUL TREE-LINED NEIGHBORHOOD, AND THE GIRL TOO, ALL BY STAYING HOME ONE DAY, WHEN SHE HAPPENED TO CALL.

"I HEARD YOU WERE IN TOWN," SHE SAID. "ALL STAYING IN ONE CRAMPED LITTLE APARTMENT ROOM. I'M HOUSE SITTING OVER IN THE WEST VILLAGE, AND THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM OVER HERE. A HUGE THREE STORY HOUSE, AND I'M HERE ALL BY MYSELF." THE LAST WORDS WERE IN ITALICS.

YES, WE WERE ALL IN ONE CRAMPED, STUFFY LITTLE APARTMENT, AND I WAS SICK AND TIRED OF BEING SCRUNCHED UP IN THE CLOSET WITH THE DOOR HITTING MY KNEES EVERY TIME ANYONE CAME IN AND OUT. BUT I'D LEARNED A THING OR TWO ABOUT LOYALTY. I HAD TO BITE MY TONGUE AND TURN DOWN THE INVITATION.

THE GIRL ON THE PHONE WAS LAURA. INFAMOUS LAURA, OF WHOM LEGENDS WERE MADE. LAURA, JED'S OLD GIRLFRIEND AND, CONSEQUENTLY, LYNETTE'S SWORN ENEMY. WHAT THE HELL WAS LAURA DOING IN NEW YORK? SHE HAD A WAY OF POPPING UP IN THE STRANGEST PLACES.

THIS INTRUSION INTO OUR ALREADY STRAINED LIFE WOULD DRIVE POOR LYNETTE OVER THE EDGE. SO, I HAD TO DO THE RIGHT THING. KEEP IT A SECRET. NO USE WORRYING LYNETTE, JED, OR MY OWN GIRLFRIEND BACK HOME, ADA.

A LOYAL FRIEND AND BOYFRIEND, THAT'S ME. I RESISTED TEMPTATION AND A THREE STORY MANSION IN THE WEST VILLAGE. BUT WHAT HARM COULD THERE BE IN GOING TO GET A FREE ICE CREAM CONE? JUST ONCE. THEN TWICE. THEN ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK.

MANY FLAVORS TO CHOOSE FROM, BUT I PICKED THE FAMILIAR VANILLA EVERY TIME. LIKE COFFEE, WHAT GOOD IS THERE IN FOOLING AROUND AND ADDING FLAVORS? VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE, NOT THE SUSTENANCE.

BUT IT WAS BOUND TO HAPPEN. I SHOWED UP ONE NIGHT WHEN BUSINESS WAS SLOW, AND LAURA GOT OFF EARLY. I WALKED HER HOME. DOWN THE QUIET STREETS FILLED WITH WARM SMELLS AND LITTLE CHILDREN. INTO THE GUTS OF THE CITY, STEPPING OVER USED CONDOMS AND CRACK BABIES FROlicking IN THE GUTTER. AMIDST THE SKYSCRAPERS AND BROWNSTONE CASTLES DIVIDED INTO A ZILLION BROOMCLOSET APARTMENTS STOOD JUST ONE REGULAR HOUSE. A GRAND HOUSE, COVERED IN VINES. IMPRESSIVE, BUT NOT FANCY. STATELY, YET HOMEY. RELUCTANTLY, I STEPPED INSIDE.

THE HOUSE BELONGED TO ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S TOP SELLING ROMANCE NOVELISTS, A FAMILIAR NAME WHOSE BOOKS CAN BE FOUND IN EVERY SUPERMARKET AND 7-11 IN THE COUNTRY. HER REAL NAME, HOWEVER, IS LESS FAMILIAR. LOYAL READERS MIGHT BE SURPRISED TO GO LOOKING FOR THE SPRIGHTLY, PERKY, FORTY-SOMETHING WOMAN WHO UNDERSTANDS HOUSEWIVES SO WELL, AND FIND INSTEAD THAT BEHIND THE NAME AND CAREFULLY MANAGED APPEARANCE IS AVRAM MOSKOVITZ, AN OLD JEWISH MAN WITH BUSHY EYEBROWS AND AN IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION OF SIGNED FIRST EDITIONS. NO JOKE.

AVRAM'S WIFE, A GENTILE, IS THE HEIRESS TO THE BLACK FLAG FORTUNE. THE BUGSPRAY, NOT THE BAND. THEIR SON, NATURALLY, IS A STUDENT AT ONE OF THOSE ANNOYING, PRECIOUS, SHELTERED, "EXPER-

IMENTAL" FINE ARTS COLLEGES WHERE EVERYONE IS THE GOOD-FOR-NOTHING SON OR DAUGHTER OF THE WEALTHY AND FAMOUS. HE IS A FRIEND OF LAURA, WHO, FOR ALL I KNOW, MAY BE THE DAUGHTER OF DAVID GEFFEN AND GOD. I DIDN'T ASK. I KEPT CONVERSATION TO A MINIMUM AND KEPT A SAFE DISTANCE.

THE SON WAS IN INDIA SEEKING SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT. THE PARENTS WERE AT THEIR SUMMER HOME IN KENNEBUNKPORT, MAINE. LAURA WAS ON THE FIRST FLOOR PLAYING PIANO. AS FOR ME, I WAS SITTING AT THE LARGE OAK DESK OF AMERICA'S FOURTH-TOP-SELLING ROMANCE NOVELIST, DEEPLY LOST IN FANTASY, DRINKING HIS BEER.

LAURA WAS A TRAMP, BAD NEWS, EVERYONE HAD SAID SO. BUT NO ONE HAD MENTIONED THAT SHE WAS WELL-VERSED IN RUSSIAN CLASSICS AND A PLEASURE TO WALK WITH DISCUSSING LITERATURE AND HISTORY. LIKE MOST EVIL TRAMPS, SHE HAD A GOOD SIDE WHICH EVERYONE ELSE HAD OVERLOOKED.

BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE. I'M NOT LOOKING FOR LAURA. NOT FOR HER GOOD SIDE OR ANY OTHER PART OF HER. I'M TIRED AND SICK AND MY THROAT IS A DUSTY OLD GRAVEL ROAD. I'M LOOKING FOR ICE CREAM. BUT I CANNOT FIND IT. THE ICE CREAM PLACE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM THIS EARTH. NOT JUST REPLACED BY A STARBUCKS OR SOMETHING, BUT ERASED, ALONG WITH THAT QUIET TREE-LINED NEIGHBORHOOD AND THE COMFORT THAT CAME WITH IT. HERE I AM, BACK IN NEW YORK, BUT NEW YORK WITHOUT THAT LITTLE BIT OF COMFORT IS TOO MUCH FOR ME. WALKING AND SEARCHING BRINGS ME NOTHING BUT ANXIETY AND EXHAUSTION, AND THIS TIME THERE'S NO APARTMENT TO ESCAPE TO AND WAIT FOR THE CALL.

KNOCK YOURSELF OUT BEING A TRUE FRIEND AND LOYAL BOYFRIEND, AND WHAT DO YOU GET? IS ONE ICE CREAM CONE TOO MUCH TO ASK? BUT WHO TO ASK? NOT LYNETTE, WHO NEVER EVEN KNEW LAURA WAS IN THE SAME TOWN. NOT JED, WHO SENT REGARDS WHEN I WENT TO LAURA'S WORK, BUT WISELY CHOSE NOT TO VISIT IN PERSON.

NOT LAURA. SHE'S NO LONGER AT THE ICE CREAM PLACE, AND NO LONGER IN NEW YORK. I KNOW BECAUSE SHE WROTE ME ONCE FROM HER LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE. UNFORTUNATELY, I HAD MADE THE MISTAKE OF MENTIONING LAURA TO ADA, WHO MADE ME PROMISE THAT IF LAURA EVER WROTE, I WOULD NOT RESPOND. SO, I DID NOT REPLY. I THREW AWAY THE LETTER AND ANY CHANCE OF

EVER FINDING THE ICE CREAM PLACE AGAIN.

IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO ME, ALL THE GIRLS AND TROUBLES AND WORRIES. I WOULD BE HAPPY TO BE ALONE AND PAY FULL PRICE, OR EVEN DOUBLE, FOR THE ICE CREAM I ONCE RECEIVED FREE. BUT IT IS NOT TO BE.

21. Folklore

PUNK ALWAYS HAD A STRONG SENSE OF STORY, AN ORAL TRADITION PASSED ON AND PASSED DOWN WHICH SHAPED THE WAY WE TALKED ABOUT, AND THOUGHT ABOUT OURSELVES. STRANGELY, THE MUSIC ITSELF NEVER REALLY REFLECTED THAT. THE SONGS WERE PART OF OUR LIFE BUT NOT VICE VERSA. FOR EVERY HUNDRED SONGS ABOUT EL SALVADOR, THERE WAS ONLY ONE ABOUT OKI-DOGS.

NO GOOD TO BE SO WRAPPED UP IN YOUR OWN LIFE AND IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS THAT YOU IGNORE THE REST OF THE WORLD, BUT THE OTHER EXTREME IS JUST AS SKEWED A PERSPECTIVE. "YOU CAN'T EVEN SKATEBOARD IN LEBANON", SAID THE SINGER OF DEADLY REIGN, A BAND I INTERVIEWED MANY YEARS AGO. THOUGH IT'S NATURAL TO DEFINE YOURSELF IN NEGATIVE TERMS, IT LEADS TO UNANSWERED QUESTIONS. WHAT CAN YOU DO IN LEBANON? WHERE CAN YOU SKATEBOARD? I HAPPEN TO BE STUDYING LEBANON CURRENTLY AT THE COLLEGE LIBRARY, BUT NOWHERE CAN I FIND BOOKS ON THE CULTURE AND HISTORY OF DEADLY REIGN AND THE OLD CONTRA COSTA PUNK SCENE. SEE WHAT I MEAN?

NOW SO MANY STORIES NEVER GET TOLD. WHY? BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE SCARED TO TELL THEM. IT'S ONE THING TO SHOW OFF FADED SLAYER TATTOOS AND PASS AROUND PHOTOS OF YOURSELF IN A DIFFERENT STAGE OF LIFE, WEARING AN ARMY UNIFORM OR WEDDING DRESS. BUT IF YOUR OLD STORIES AND PICTURES ARE PUNK, EVERYONE RUNS THE OTHER WAY. "OH NO" THEY SAY. "NOT ANOTHER JADED BLOWHARD TALKING ABOUT THE GOOD OLD DAYS" IT'S SAD BECAUSE FOR SOME OF US IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO TALK ABOUT OUR PERSONAL HISTORY WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT THE PAST, AND PUNK.

ED AND SHANTELL GREW UP IN THE CITY OF TUOLOMNE, POPULATION 1,700, TEN MILES EAST OF

SONORA. ED WALKED FROM HER HOUSE ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS, SHANTELL FROM HER HOUSE ON THE RIGHT SIDE. HALFWAY BETWEEN WERE THE STEPS WHERE THE TWO GIRLS WOULD MEET AND SIT ALL DAY, WATCHING THE TRAFFIC PASS AND WAITING TO GET PICKED UP BY THE CLASH. ED HAD READ AN INTERVIEW WHICH MENTIONED THEIR VAN, A HIGH-DOME CHEVY WITH A LIGHT BLUE STRIPE.

SOME DAYS A VAN OF THAT DESCRIPTION PASSED, AND ED AND SHANTELL JUMPED UP AND DOWN WAVING THEIR ARMS. UNLIKELY THAT THE CLASH WOULD FIND THEMSELVES IN TUOLUMNE, TEN MILES EAST OF SONORA. BUT THEN AGAIN, YOU NEVER KNOW. YOU HAVE TO HAVE HOPE IN SOMETHING.

ROGER JOINED THE JUNIOR AVIATION LEAGUE IN SIXTH GRADE. THE PLAN WAS TO STEAL A PLANE, FLY TO ENGLAND, AND FIND JOHNNY ROTTEN. JOHNNY HAD RAVED ABOUT AIRPLANES, OR YOUNG RUNAWAYS, OR BOTH, IN AN INTERVIEW ROGER HAD READ.

"YOU WEREN'T SERIOUS", I ASK.

"DEAD SERIOUS", HE SAYS. "WE LEARNED, TOO. BUT THEY KEPT THE IGNITION KEYS LOCKED UP WHERE WE COULDN'T GET TO THEM. WE KEPT TRYING, UNTIL THE FIRST PUBLIC IMAGE RECORD CAME OUT. THEN WE GAVE UP ENTIRELY."

THE LAST TIME I PASSED THROUGH DAVIS, I STOPPED BY TO VISIT ROGER. HE PULLED OUT A FILE. "GUESS WHAT THIS IS", HE SMILED. ONE LOOK AND I COULD TELL. BACK WHEN I LIVED AT HOME, THE ONLY WAY I KNEW HOW TO CLEAN MY ROOM WAS TO GATHER UP ALL THE CRAP, TAKE IT TO A SHOW, AND THROW IT OUT INTO THE AUDIENCE. PUNKS WILL CATCH ANYTHING THROWN OFF A STAGE. EVEN PEOPLE.

ROGER TOOK FLIERS OUT OF THE FOLDER ONE BY ONE, AND LAYED THEM ON THE TABLE. MOST WERE FLIERS I HAD MADE, AND I WAS PROUD OF THEM. BUT THEY REMINDED ME OF BANDS, NOT THE SPIRIT OF THOSE TIMES. THEY DIDN'T TELL ME HOW WE HAD ALL COME TOGETHER OR THE SEPARATE DIRECTIONS WE WENT AFTER THE SHOW. I WISHED I HAD THE STORY OF THAT LAST BUS HOME INSTEAD OF A RECORD BY THAT LAST BAND. I WISHED WE HAD WRITTEN IT ALL DOWN. NOT TO ELEVATE THE TRIVIAL TO GRANDIOSE HEIGHTS, BUT I'D RATHER LISTEN TO ED OR ROGER'S STORIES THAN LISTEN TO THE PISTOLS OR THE CLASH, ON MOST DAYS.

"HERE'S THE GOOD PART", ROGER SAID. HE BEGAN

TURNING OVER THE OLD FLIERS I HAD TOSSED, AND MUCH TO MY HORROR, THERE WAS WRITING ON THE BACK OF EACH ONE, RANGING FROM LOVE LETTERS TO NOTES TO MY PARENTS ASKING THEM TO WAKE ME UP FOR A DENTIST APPOINTMENT.

"WOULDN'T IT BE COOL", ROGER ASKED, "IF EVERY FLIER HAD WRITING ON THE OTHER SIDE LIKE THAT?"

BUT I DIDN'T ANSWER. I WAS MORTIFIED. MY MIND REELED AT THE POSSIBILITIES OF WHAT OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE FOUND.

"WEREN'T YOU JUST SAYING", HE LAUGHED, "HOW YOU WISH OUR DAY TO DAY LIFE HAD BEEN SAVED AND WRITTEN DOWN?"

"OUR DAY TO DAY LIFE, YES. BUT MINE, NO. IT'S EMBARRASSING. GIVE ME THOSE THINGS BACK!"

THERE WAS A FANZINE FROM LOS ANGELES CALLED "DESTROY". THERE WAS ALSO A FANZINE FROM FLORIDA BY THE SAME NAME. FLORIDA HAD SENIORITY, SO THE WEST COAST VERSION YIELDED TO PRESSURE AND ADDED INITIALS. FROM THEN ON IT WAS KNOWN AS, "DESTROY L.A.". UNFORTUNATELY, THE POSTMASTER GENERAL HAPPENED UPON A COPY AND DREW THE WRONG CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE NEW NAME.

FUNNY TO THINK OF THOSE KIDS PLOTTING TO "DESTROY LOS ANGELES", BUT TO THE FBI IT WAS NO JOKE. THEY SHOWED UP AT THE DOOR WITH A SEARCH WARRANT AND A CHARGE OF SEDITION. THE AGENTS BROUGHT ALONG A FILE FILLED WITH EVERY LITTLE DETAIL OF THEIR LIVES, EVEN XEROXES OF THEIR LAST SIX MONTHS OF MAIL. WISH I HAD A COPY OF THAT FBI FILE NOW, INSTEAD OF A COPY OF THE FANZINE.

22. Lucinda

WE STAYED UP ALL NIGHT, DITCHED HER FRIENDS, AND THEN, SITTING AGAINST THE BIG TREE IN THE MIDDLE OF HO CHI MINH PARK, WE KISSED. WE JUST SAT THERE KISSING AND KISSING FOR AGES. IT WAS THAT GOOD. BUT THEN, WHEN WE GOT UP AND HEADED DOWN TO THE AVENUE HOLDING HANDS, WE STOPPED COLD AFTER HALF A BLOCK AND SHE LOOKED AT ME WITH BIG EYES. THEN SHE SAID, "I FEEL FUNKY". NOT FUNKY LIKE, "I WANNA DANCE", BUT FUNKY

LIKE, "GIVE ME MY HAND BACK", AND I KNEW EXACTLY WHAT SHE MEANT. I FELT FUNKY TOO. WALKING AROUND LIKE THAT JUST WASN'T IN THE CARDS, NOR THE STARS, FOR ME AND LUCINDA.

WHAT KIND OF CRUEL TRICK WAS LIFE PLAYING ON US? FALLING US IN LOVE BUT KEEPING US FROM BEING TOGETHER. IT WAS WEIRD. WE LIKED EACH OTHER, WE WERE ATTRACTED TO EACH OTHER, YET TO BE SEEN HOLDING HANDS WOULD BE THE ULTIMATE EMBARRASSMENT. I COULDN'T TELL WHAT IT WAS, BUT ANYONE FROM A MILE AWAY WOULD HAVE KNOWN.

"EVEN YOUR MOM HATES ME", SHE SAID. "THAT'S RIDICULOUS", I SAID, BUT WOMEN HAVE A WAY OF TELLING THE TRUTH. IN FACT, MY MOM DESPISED HER, AND THAT SHOCKED ME BECAUSE THAT HAD NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE WITH ANYONE I BROUGHT HOME. OBVIOUSLY THERE WAS SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THIS GIRL.

FUCKING LUCINDA. SHE WALKED THROUGH LIFE LIKE SWEET PEA, BUILDINGS AND SAFES FALLING ALL AROUND, PEOPLE SHOOTING AND SHOOTING UP AND FREAKING OUT, AND NONE OF IT TOUCHED HER. NOT AT ALL. LUTHINDA AND THETHILIA WITH THE FAKE LITHS AND THE SELF-IMPOSED HANDICAPS, FROLICKING THROUGH THE NEEDLE GALLERY ON THE WAY TO MEET ME, LUCKY ME, EVERY NIGHT THAT SUMMER, TO SIT ON THE STEAM GRATES, ON COCAINE OF ALL THINGS, HIDDEN BY TALL BUILDINGS AND ENVELOPED IN CLOUDS OF STEAM, LEANING ON EACH OTHER AND LOST IN WARM AND DREAMY SECRECY, KNOWING THAT THE MINUTE WE GOT UP AND WENT BACK INTO THE WORLD WE'D BE WET, COLD, AND AWKWARD.

LATE AT NIGHT ON THE ROOF OF THE HOTEL CARLTON, IN THE MOONLIGHT AND THE COOL BREEZE, CHEWING GUM, WRAPPED UP IN EACH OTHERS SKINNY ARMS, WE'D KISS, THEN PULL AWAY AND SHAKE OUR HEADS. SHE'D LIGHT A SMOKE. I'D HIT MY HEAD AGAINST THE WALL, CURSING THE STARS.

23. Closing Time

WOULD THEY KICK YOU OUT FOR SITTING ALL DAY WITHOUT BUYING A THING? FOR CURLING UP AND SLEEPING IN THE CORNER? FOR SMOKING WEED IN THE BATHROOM AND CUTTING LINES ON THE TABLES

UPSTAIRS? NOPE. THE SIGN SAID, "NO MOOCHING OR DOSING", BUT IN PRACTICE THIS TOO WAS IGNORED. EVERYONE MINDED THEIR OWN BUSINESS, TALKING IN UNDERTONES, READING OR DRAWING OR JUST THINKING. ONLY ONE RULE APPLIED, UNSAID BUT UNDERSTOOD. NO PHOTOGRAPHS. NO CAMERAS AT ALL. THAT WAS THE ONLY WAY TO GET KICKED OUT OF THE VILLA.

TANYA MADE THE MISTAKE ONCE, SHOWING OFF HER NEWEST FLEA MARKET FIND, A TWIN-LENS ROLOFLEX. LIKE MOST MISTAKES, ONCE WAS ENOUGH. NEVER MIND THAT THE CAMERA WAS BROKEN AND WITHOUT FILM. TANYA'S PLEAS OF INNOCENCE ONLY FURTHER RILED THE MOB. THE VARIED AND HARRIED REGULARS IN EVERY SEAT SANG TOGETHER, A CRY OF SHOCK AND OUTRAGE. THE "ALL ARMED MEN ARE SCUM" GUY MIGHT EXPLAIN IT THUSLY: "BRING A GUN TO SHOOT ME, YOU ARE SCUM. FORGET THE BULLETS, YOU ARE A FOOL AS WELL."

THERE MAY BE PHOTOS OF TANYA, FORCED FROM THAT DAY ONWARD TO BUY HER COFFEE AT THE HATED AND ENEMY CAFE, ESPRESSO ROMA. SNAPSHOTS OF HER SITTING ON THE PATIO AT A LITTLE, CROWDED TABLE. AS FOR THE REST OF US, ALONE OR TOGETHER AT THE BIG TABLES IN THE DARK, DANK CORNERS OF THE VILLA, NO PHOTOS EXIST. THE SCRAPBOOKS OF THOSE YEARS ARE ENTIRELY BLANK.

WHEN THE PLACE CLOSED, IT CAUGHT US COMPLETELY UNAWARE. WE PANICKED, TOOK EVERYTHING NOT TIED DOWN. CUPS, CHAIRS, SUGAR SHAKERS, YELLOW LIGHT BULBS, AND THE BATHROOM KEY. WE WISHED WE HAD TAKEN PHOTOS TOO, SET UP A TRIPOD AND JUST SHOT EVERYBODY FAST. AS IT WAS WE GOT KICKED OUT WITHOUT EVEN BREAKING THE RULE, WITH NOTHING TO PORE OVER AND COMPARE BUT OUR MEMORIES.

WE TOLD STORIES, BUT EVERYONE'S STORY PAINTED A DIFFERENT PICTURE. EVEN WALLS AND FLOORS MOVED FROM THE FORCE OF MEMORY, AND WINDOWS APPEARED OUT OF THIN AIR. A SINGLE SNAPSHOT MIGHT HAVE HELPED TO RECREATE THE PLACE FROM OUR HANDFUL OF MEMENTOS, AS WE VOWED TO DO.

WHAT ABOUT ALL THE PLANS TO MEET AT THE VILLA IN TEN, TWENTY, FIFTY YEARS? ROMANTIC TRYSTS OR OATHS OF FRIENDSHIP, EVERYONE HAD MADE DATES. SLUGGO AND SAL FOR THEIR FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY. RAMSEY AND THE ANCIENT GREEK CHICK, SEE YOU IN TWENTY YEARS, BABY. WE ALL

LIKED TO TALK ABOUT BEING OLD TOGETHER THERE. IT WAS THE ONLY FUTURE WE'D EVER PLANNED AND LOOKED FORWARD TO. HAD THOSE FUTURE PLANS STARTED TO BE OUTDATED AND EMBARRASSING? EVERYONE SEEMED HAPPY TO BURY THEM ALONG WITH THE PAST.

THE PLACE WAS DULY MOURNED, AND OUR TIME THERE ENCAPSULATED AND BURIED DEEP IN THAT HOLE KNOWN AS NOSTALGIA. EVERYONE SHED A TEAR THEN BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF, AND THE FUTURE PLANS WERE NEVER MENTIONED AGAIN. NOTHING LIKE A FUNERAL TO USE AS A CATALYST, OR EXCUSE, TO MAKE THE CHANGES IN YOUR LIFE YOU'D BEEN MEANING TO MAKE BUT SCARED OF WHAT YOUR FRIENDS WOULD SAY. CLAIM THEM IN THE SPIRIT OF THE DECEASED. LET'S DRINK TO THE VILLA. REMEMBER THOSE TIMES? IF ONLY WE COULD DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN.

BUT, FUNNY THING, NEW OWNERS BOUGHT THE VILLA AND BROUGHT IT BACK TO LIFE JUST A FEW MONTHS LATER. THE NAY-SAYERS SAID, "NAY, IT IS NOT THE SAME," AND THEY WERE RIGHT. THERE WERE NEW, THRONE-LIKE HIGH CHAIRS WHICH MADE YOU FEEL WIZARD-LIKE AND FOOLISH. BUT IN ALL OTHER RESPECTS IT WAS THE SAME OLD CRUMMY DIVE. THE SAME WOBBLY TABLES AND NICOTINE-COLORED PAINT. THE SAME NAME, THE SAME INDIFFERENT OR PERHAPS BLIND WORKERS. THE SAME COFFEE, STILL THE BEST AND CHEAPEST IN TOWN. IN FACT, THEY HAD EVEN LOWERED THE PRICE. WHY BE PICKY ABOUT A FEW SILLY CHAIRS? THEY WERE BROKEN SOON ENOUGH, ALONG WITH ANY HOPES THE NEW OWNER HAD OF TURNING THE PLACE INTO A BREEDING GROUND FOR HIP AND HAPPY STUDENTS.

I LOVE THINGS GETTING WORSE JUST AS MUCH AS THE NEXT PERSON, BUT I HAD TO ADMIT, THE VILLA WAS JUST AS GREAT AS EVER. IT MOVED WITH ITS OWN MOMENTUM, REFUSING TO BE KEPT AND CONTROLLED LIKE A MEMORY. MANY PEOPLE DRIVING THIS CAR, AND MOST OF THEM ARE ON ACID. MANY TRAFFIC SIGNS ON THIS ROAD AND MOST ARE BEST TO IGNORE. KNOW WHAT I MEAN? I WASN'T LOOKING FOR AN EXCUSE TO START A NEW LIFE. I SETTLED IN HAPPILY BACK AT THE SAME OLD CORNER TABLE, AND THE YEARS STARTED ROLLING BY AGAIN.

ANYONE WHO KNOWS ME KNOWS I LOVE LEAVING, AND WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS, AND BREAKING UP, AND SAYING GOODBYE IN GENERAL.

BUT WHY SAY GOODBYE TO THE VILLA? LIKE CALLING ANGEL FROM THE PAYPHONE IN BACK, WHEN I TOLD HER I COULDN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE. WE WERE BOTH CRYING AS I CROSSED THE STREET, TOOK ALL MY STUFF OUT OF HER APARTMENT, AND WALKED OUT FOR GOOD. BUT WHAT THE HELL, I CROSSED THE STREET BACK TO THE VILLA, GOT ANOTHER CUP OF COFFEE, AND SAT BACK AT THE SAME TABLE. LOVE COMES AND GOES, AS DO WE ALL, WITH DRAMATIC FLOURISHES. BUT SOME THINGS DON'T NEED TO CHANGE.

I SEE TANYA IN HERE SOME DAYS, WISER NOW AND HAPPILY UNKNOWN TO THE NEW OWNERS. EVERYONE ELSE STAYS HOME. WHY COMPLAIN ABOUT IT? I LIKE STAYING HOME SOMETIMES TOO. BUT NEUTRAL GROUND IS A HARD THING TO FIND, AND ESSENTIAL TO DEVELOPING AND NURTURING FRIENDSHIP. SEEING PEOPLE AT THEIR SEPARATE HOUSES IS JUST NOT THE SAME.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN THE DISTANT FUTURE SHOWS UP ON THE DOORSTEP? WHEN THE DAY ARRIVES, WILL SLUGGO AND SAL SHOW UP AS PLANNED? BOTH? NEITHER? OR JUST ONE? AND WHICH ONE, I WONDER.

THEY WILL FIND ME IN THE CORNER, AS ALWAYS. FUNNY RUNNING INTO YOU HERE, THEY WILL SAY.



