



Tales of a

Miscellaneous Man

J Berk

TALES OF A MISCELLANEOUS MAN

By J. Berk

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Cover photo by: Tyler Roylance

All that follows actually occurred... especially the parts I made up.

Summer Vacation" too, though also in a much different manner than when say, I told my 3rd grade class about Cooperstown. Gone were the brightly colored crayon drawings. Gone too was the sense of the world as being only as large as I could ride my bike. Gone were the bright, cheery quarters and molded plastic chairs. God, how time has made everything so much rougher and darker. The gloomy leather barstools and smoky wooden walls of this place could not be much further away from my old elementary school classroom. And how different these large, lumpy men are from the supple friends of youth.

Yes, the passage of time was on my mind. This would be my last "What I Did With My Summer Vacation" report ever. This was my last "summer job" and "summer apartment" ever. Ever. Here I am, going back to school for the last time. And after that, the modifier would be gone. Just job. Just apartment. Just life. It gave me a lump in my throat just to think it. It was sad. I was sad. Good though to be at the bar. My bar.

* * *

my bar

You know how some bars have themes? Sports bars, Irish bars, fun bars? My bar was an alcoholic bar. The only theme it had from its bud clock to its jagermeister mirrors was alcohol and its consumption. It certainly wasn't a college bar, though it was located close enough to school that I could walk home drunk. It was just far enough away from campus, I guess, to keep from becoming collegiate. Or maybe it was too scary for most college students. Not that it was actually dangerous or anything, but college students are easily frightened. Anything outside a carefully pre-packaged fabricated reality upsets them. Really, there was really nothing to be afraid. The inhabitants of my bar, the older men who wiped away their days every night there, acted tough, but they weren't going to hurt anyone. They were just paunchy blue-collar types or haggard dads. Harmless. Kind enough once you got to know them. I liked them. To show my affection I game them nicknames. Drunk Ed. Drunk Jimmy. Drunk Dave. Not very inventive, I know, but accurate, I assure you.

You know what? They weren't really "blue collar" guys. Those kind of guys don't exist anymore. At least not around here. Not since all the factories moved out of town. Call them "tan collar" workers maybe. They worked with their hands and clearly were not white collar but

nonetheless stayed clean. I don't know, tan just seems right to describe the confusing jobs they held. Drunk Jimmy, for example, installed and serviced the pay-per-view systems in hotels. What color collar would you say that was? Hell, I don't know but I do know he had a fine collection of bootlegged porn. He was a very smart guy and I always wondered why he had such a strange job. Again, maybe it was the porno. Drunk Ed was just a moron (sorry Ed, you know I love you, but it's true) and was usually unemployed. He lived with his mom. His shirts had no collars but were always well-ironed. The other guys had similar stories.

At first they did view me with a fair amount of trepidation and bared their teeth, trying to scare me off. They gave me snide looks and wouldn't talk to me. I didn't like it, but also didn't take it personally. They didn't want their local pub to be overrun with college assholes. They were suspicious of college kids. I understood. Hell, I was a college kid and I was suspicious of college kids so how could I not understand? I respected that it was their turf and, as long as I acted in a certain acceptable manner, in the end it was OK. Eventually I was sort of one of them. They allowed me into their world. Same with the bartender. "The Closet."

I saddled up to the bar and saw him, the bartender, my friend, standing there swathing a dirty glass with confident, neck-snapping flicks of his thick wrist. I call "The Closet" my friend with no small amount of pride. It literally took months to warm up this large cold rock of a man. He too hated college kids but over time he saw that I was different. At least I think I was different. But I guess everyone does. Everyone always thinks they're the exception. It's like, I'm a misanthrope see, and I can meet someone and say "I hate people" and they'll be like, "me too" and not realize that they are people and I hate them. They think they are them and everyone else is, well, everyone else. They don't see that if I hate people I hate them and that if they hate people then they hate me and that everyone hates everyone and everyone hates me.

I sat down on the stool and kicked a foot down on the beam running under the bar. One. I then swung my weight around on the swivel and kicked my other foot down. Two. Finally pounding my fist down for the three count I ordered -

"Give me your biggest, strongest . . . cheapest drink."

"The Closet" giggled his tiny giggle, a strange laugh for such a mountainous man. It amused him whenever I ordered that way. It was a ritual and it felt good. I had to do it, even though I wasn't sure I should be drinking such a strong drink. I was still weary and wobbly from the events I am about to retell and thought the alcohol might make me pass out or go

crazy. But I had to do it. I couldn't let "The Closet" down.

I guess the story as to why I called the bartender "The Closet" should be explained now. It started by me calling him "W.C. Fields" in my head, on account of either his prodigious nose or his incredible hatred of the young. I forget which. Both are true. Then, the nickname morphed, as nicknames do, into just W.C. and then into "Water Closet" – the British term for toilet (also called a w.c.). So it wasn't a long leap to go from calling him Water Closet to just The Closet, both the sake of brevity and the fact that it made him sound like a strange superhero. Of course I never called him any of these names out loud. It was always "Sir."

The Closet poured me a Long Island Ice Tea, as it was the drink that filled my requirements of size, power, and economy. It was thank you, sir, then sips slow & shaky through a tiny straw as I walked towards the end of the bar. My steps, like my sips, were unsure of themselves, and I really thought I might pass out. It had been a strange couple of days and I had not rested much since My Summer Vacation ended.

It was sort of a strenuous trip.

I walked towards the guys. They were expecting me, waiting with an emotion approaching eagerness. For a few years now it had become tradition for me to tell them of the various jobs, women, and adventures I held during the summer that had passed. They liked to hear my tales of youthful indiscretions. To them I was young and free and lucky. Funny. Here I was wishing I was a kid again and here they were wishing they were my age again. Everyone wishes they were younger, I guess. All of us wish we could go back and back, probably eventually all the way to the womb – the only time of our lives before shit gets really fucked up. I guess that explains why I'm so obsessed with hot tubs. But now maybe I'm revealing too much. I should just start the story.

But first I should explain one more thing. How had I been doing this for years if I'm only 21 now? Telling stories in bars when I wasn't old enough to drink in them? Well, that's easy. I've been drinking illegally since high school, thanks to Donny Osmond. Huh? You ask. That's right, I say. Donny Osmond. I got a fake ID with the name: Osmond, Donald. Why? Who would get a fake idea with the name Donny Osmond? No one, of course, and that's exactly why I did it. Everyone always thought it was real, that I'd have to be crazy to fake that. So I got away with it, unscathed. Tell you the truth, The Closet probably knew it was a fake, but didn't really care. He had been busted for serving to the underage about 700 times (brave young souls getting take-out only) but was friends with someone on the force so always got off. He did still call me Donald, and in fact

everyone at my bar did. They knew I was underage and never asked to see my ID, of course, but I was careful to tell everyone that my name was what my ID said so as not to arouse suspicion. I didn't know that The Closet cared as little for liquor control laws as he did for sanitation ones. So even after I turned 21 and could use my real ID, I just kept up the charade. I didn't know how to tell everyone I'd been lying. How do you tell your friends that you're not who you said you were?

I sat down at the bar in the sole vacant stool. The one with the least amount of duct tape, and thus least desirous. It was cold and hard, rough and painful. I was flanked on the right by Drunk Ed and the left by Drunk Jimmy who laughed in their soft seats as I took the pain. The rest of the crew was not there and would have to hear it another time. I cleared my throat and prepared to tell them whole story.

Well, not the whole story, not the back story.

* * *

"the whole story, the back story"

If I wanted to be academic about it I could say by way of topic sentence for this paragraph, "I was feeling rather depressed, and the reason for this was tri-fold" and then go on, point by point to show how I was feeling low. Or, I could just say "I'd been feeling real fucked up all summer" and leave it at that. If I were being academic, I could enumerate the reasons for my low feelings as 1) my less-than-ideal living situation, 2) my unpleasant employment and 3) a disruption in my brain chemistry perhaps caused by points one and two. Or, I could illustrate it with an example like how one day I was eating a bagel and some potato salad (my favorite) and just threw the sandwich down and said out loud to no one in particular "ah, fuck it, what's the point? I'm just going to finish this sandwich and then it'll be over and then I have to go back to work and then I'll forget about it and then I'll be dead."

If I were being academic, I could illustrate point number one as follows: I shared a tiny, putrid, hot apartment with three maniacs who invaded my personal space like a bunch of Napoleons overtaking Poland. I shared my room with my buddy who worked nights sorting garbage and came home every night at 3AM stinky and wily. He would often lose his mind in his sleep and become a little frightening. But I don't want to badmouth my boys ('twould be bad form) so I'll just say living in that place

cramped my style.

For point #2 I could wax about the soul-sucking office job I had and get all Marxist about how when the worker has no connection to his work, all dignity is lost. Or I could say that every day I sweated in a cubicle, in the asshole of an enormous building, filing, computing, and dying. How it tore me up to look out the window and see the whole world blooming and booming with summer while I sat in those bowels pretending not to want to kill myself. Or I could just say, "well, my job sucked."

Finally, I could comment on the chemical imbalance in my brain that was almost certainly diagnosable depression. I could warble on about which came first, the chicken or the egg. That is, did the chemical imbalance make me respond to the first 2 so negatively? Or did the previously stated problems make me depressed? For this I would have no answers but would just pose some potential hypotheses. Many people have shitty jobs, live in less than perfect situations and still don't want to kill themselves, so it could be the latter. But also my situation was pretty awful so the former could not be discounted. My conclusion would be difficult to be conclusive about, so I would just restate the thesis. That is, I would say "I'd been feeling real fucked up all summer" and just leave it at that.

I should explain one further note which was that I wasn't sad all the time. I had moments of happiness, of good humor, of laughing laughing laughing at everything like I used to. And I refuse to believe that those moments were just covering up, just denying, just a coping, just a way of dealing with my actual sadness, though I guess it could be. I don't really know how any of this works.

Let's just really leave it at this: It was as though my brain was out walking and somewhere (it didn't know where), and stepped in some dog poo of misery that just stuck to the bottom of its shoe. The poo was always there but you only smelled it if then wind blew a certain way.

The wind was blowing that way more often.

Of course I wouldn't tell Drunk Ed and Drunk Jimmy any of this. I wouldn't tell them about how my depression had resulted in some fairly strange behavior (and that strange behavior for me is pretty strange behavior). I wouldn't tell them how I spent some nights partying and then some hot lonely nights locked in my room by myself staring at a ceiling fan, listening to headphones, sweating, swearing, crying. About how I lost my mind on weed and beer. About how I would be at a mini-mart alone at 4 in the morning, red-eyed and crazy, convinced that I had a beautiful poem in my head so would buy a pen and a pickle from the confused clerk. About how I would write my heart out on that paper pickle wrapper and in the

morning look at it and see that it was pathetic. About how I'd been plagued by thoughts of futility, desolation, loss, wonderment over my place and what it all means. About how I spent nights wandering in parks or suburban streets 'til 4 in the morning looking for . . . for what? Just wandering, I guess. Like Jesus. Like Buddha. Like lots of people. Wandering is a long-held tradition. Great men throughout history have wondered. Rousseau. Thoreau. That was part of the reason for the trip (My Summer Vacation) I guess, and maybe I would tell them that.

But I wouldn't tell them that another reason for it was that I was engaged in a petty sort of rebellion against my father by going on the exact kind of trip he would hate. I would probably tell them a joke about why we picked to blindly drive across this fat land of ours. Maybe, if I'd mention my father at all, I'd just tease about how my dad was the kind of guy who would have 400 maps, alternate travel routes planned out, spare spare tires, various medicines in Ziploc baggies, faxes of the blueprints of every parking lot he may be parking in – stuff like that. I could tell them that. But I wouldn't tell them about the depths I had plunged to. They didn't need to know all that. I was afraid to tell them.

Finally, I wouldn't tell them about how deep my relationship with Gar, my buddy on the trip, had become. How I told him and he seemed to understand things I would never talk about with them or anyone else for that matter. How we had a rare and spectacular friendship. I would keep it light and tell them about how we had become good friends based on a mutual understanding of doors. This was partially true, of course, because both Gar and I worked for our fathers who, through some dull coincidence, both worked in doors. Not like inside, but in the door business. Thus we did have a strange start to our friendship based on a mutual ability to recognize different types of door hardware. We could both tell the difference between, say a hollow metal with its superior 3 hour fire rating and one with a ¾. Or, sometimes we'd see a specific type of doorknob and both yell out, "right-hand reverse!" This, as you can well imagine, was always a source of bonding.

I took a few more sips of my L.I.I.T. and began my tale. I decided to start at the beginning, as was the custom at the time. I apologized in advance, admitting that I'm not a very good storyteller and that I'm tired and really out of it besides. Please forgive, I said, if it wanders at times. They said it was fine and I should stop fucking stalling and start talking. So I did.

"The true beginning was when Gar and I thought up the thing, I guess. It was in one of the phone conversations we would have at our Dad's offices, each of us hiding among door parts, chatting in hushed tones on dreary office phones about how much we hated our jobs. We decided we should take the last week of the summer off and go on a trip. The tedium of cataloging hinges and shit like that had at least yielded the fruits of small bank accounts that could furnish a real epic-like wandering road journey as long as we skimped on non-essentials (like food & shelter). We couldn't afford to go anywhere but we wanted to see something, anything, to get out of our sick little worlds of petty office room bargaining and just be free, damn it, like a man's supposed to be.

We planned on having no destination. Just driving. West. Really, that was it. No destination at all. We told everyone who asked that we were going to Iowa just because that always made everyone ask why Iowa? and we could give the sardonic response that it's the journey and not the destination that's interesting. That is, I would say that until someone pointed out how that sounds like a line that would appear in a fake-deep song sung by some pathetic tough guy trying to sound sincere. I had to admit that they were right and never said it again.

But we still kept Iowa as our pseudo-destination. We had very little plans as to what to do along the way and less of an idea as to what to do when we got there. It was a vague and ridiculous plan altogether if in fact it even could be called a plan at all. I don't know, I just thought it would be fun to have as little of a concept as possible as to what I would be doing.

We talked about it all summer and asked our Dads off for the last week. They asked why and thus we had to tell them what we were doing, sort of, and this meant getting all sorts of shit about preparations and caution and the monotony of a 50-year old's view of a vacation. No offense, guys.

So the week of the vacation finally arrived and it coincided with the date my Dad had tickets to a baseball game in Harrisburg. I had forgotten that I had already told him I'd go, so I honored that. We were headed West and he had an extra ticket for Gar, so there was no way I could get out of

it without hurting the old guy's feelings anyway. Not that there's anything wrong with going to a ball game with my Dad, just that I was eager to be on my vast, wild road trip and there I was with my Dad, his friend and his friend's thousand year old mom (who all met us at the game). It wasn't exactly what I was in the mood for. But we drove separately, in Gar's car, so that at least after the game we wouldn't have to turn back and could just keep heading west, west, west.

The game was all right and the old lady was actually a stand-up broad. She was really blunt. If she didn't like something, she told you. Gar and I both admired this, after laboring for months under the turgid oppression of inter-office politics. My dad's friend would say something like, "I wonder if those people are all going to the game, there," and she would say "I don't care." I liked that. The game was uneventful and ended soon enough with the only excitement being a triple play in the bottom of the 3rd and Gar getting diarrhea from a rancid hot dog. My Dad gave him pepto-bismol out of his zipper med-pac. I just shook my head. My Dad is like that, you know. Anyway, 9th inning, good-bye, and the real beginning.

We tore out of the parking lot to the west with no idea where we were going but just going. It was nice. We sang and made up stupid songs in the car. We took some back roads off the highway and there's really some pretty country out there in Western PA. I remember one road in particular that was low, in sort of a gorge. It was all craggy and foggy and there were no signs of life anywhere. I liked that. We drove and drove. After a while we saw signs for a college.

"Let's go there," Gar said.

"What for?" I asked.

"I dunno," he said, turning the wheel and exiting onto the off-ramp. He followed the signs and drove to the school, parked, got out and stretched. "Let's go," he said. I followed along. He was trying to talk to everyone who passed, but they were most unfriendly.

I decided I'd play along and starting asking everyone, "where's the party?" They all just looked at me oddly. Every one of these people was a bristly-haired jock or buttoned-up chick. They seemed like they hated us before they even met us. I wanted to leave but Gar was undeterred. He saw a dorm with a propped open door and went for it. I followed. We walked around and no one said anything to us but they made it clear that they didn't want us there. Gar said he had to piss so he went to the bathroom. I followed. There, posted on the wall of the pisser, was the reason it was so fucked up there. There was a construction paper bulletin board display that mentioned Jesus about 300 times. We looked around.

Everything did. How did we miss that? It was a goddamned Bible College! We had a good laugh over that one. The heathen Jew and devout atheist peeing in a Bible College. Seeing as how there has never been beer or girls or any interesting people at a Bible College ever, we got back into the car and drove on, still laughing.

We drove long into the night. We thought about not sleeping at all and just trucking it 'til morning, but then saw a sign for a campground. Gar had his tent with him and we figured we could save money if we didn't stay in hotels. We didn't know how many more campgrounds we'd see out in Ohio, so we pulled in. It was mostly deserted. We had to peek around to find the guy who ran it. And when we did, he was really gay. Really.

We told him we wanted to spend the night and succeeded in accidentally bargaining him down on the price just by being slow. He was like "20 bucks" and we just looked at each other because we are idiots and then he yelled out "ten bucks" and we said "deal." Our first destination was a baseball game, our second a bible college, and our third a gay campground in Ohio. God bless America.

The two of us setting up the tent was a Laurel & Hardy adventure, as you may well imagine. The difficulty of the situation was compounded by the fact that it began to rain hard part way through. The ground became a huge mud slurpee and it was impossible to get the legs to stick. We mucked around and knocked the tent over at least a dozen times. Finally, somehow, we (and by "we" I mean "Gar") MacGyvered the thing and got it to stand. We got inside and set up for sleep. He had a cot, I just had a sleeping bag. Nonetheless it wasn't a bad set-up. I felt like a monk and, with the sound of the rain typing on the nylon above my head, I fell asleep.

We woke up early and stuck our heads out through the flap in the tent like a couple of meteorologist groundhogs. We didn't see our shadows though; it was overcast and gloomy. It wasn't raining, but we could tell by the worm stink and puddles everywhere that it had poured all night. In fact everything around us was completely soaked, but we were bone dry. The shitty-assed tent had held up. We were proud of our work and thought that maybe we could make it OK after all. No time to gloat, though, for the temporary home had to come down – it was time to go. We unhinged the tent (more confidently and competently than we put it up), packed up the car, and left. We waved good-bye to the gay campground owner and took off.

We decided to take the main highway, forgoing mystery for speed. Even though we had no idea where we were going we knew we wanted to get there fast. Gar squeezed the accelerator, pushing the limits of legality and reason. We were making great time.

After a half-tank of gas length of time we decided to consult the map. Doing so showed us that the highway we were currently on unfurled further north than we had anticipated. In fact, we realized we would not be far from Canada. I forget which of us said it but we both agreed that it wouldn't be a truly epic adventure unless it extended into another country, so we decided to visit our neighbors to the North. Why not? We drove for a while then stopped in an old-style diner and, over exquisite velvety pancakes, joked about how everything would be different in that exotic land of Canada.

Gar said he was OK to drive some more so did so while I sat hunched in the back and played my guitar. I wrote a song called "The Gayest Campground Owner in Ohio." I'll play it for you sometime. It really swings. After a few hours we reached Michigan and then started to see signs in French and speed limits in kilometers. Canada could not be far away. We stopped for gas, switched spots and I drove the rest of the way.

Before long we reached the Ambassador bridge, the border between the multi-colored land of our birth and that mysterious grey blob on the map up above. As I crossed I felt a little excited. Sure it's only Canada, but I had never been to Canada before. I puttered along in the thick traffic across

the bridge and thought, "man, a lot of people are going to Canada." Finally we made it to the other side of the bridge, where there is a toll booth and customs stop. The customs official asked our business.

"We're going to Canada," I said.

"I can see that," he said. "What are you going to do in Canada?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well how long are you going to stay?" he asked.

"Depends," I said. "What's there to do in your fine country?"

He sized us up for a long moment then said, "there's a strip club right up the road."

"We're going to that strip club up the road," I said triumphantly and smacked the steering wheel with gusto.

He laughed and gave us directions. We drove and took pictures along the way of Canadian flags outside of buildings. I noticed there were lots of bars and sleazy places everywhere. The drinking age in Canada is just 19, I remembered, so there's this whole alcohol trade that caters to Michigan youth. Not Tijuana but still pretty cool, I thought. Windsor, Canada is one party town. We found the strip club, parked the car and went in.

It was the middle of the day and I thought maybe the place wouldn't be open. But not only was it open but there was no cover charge. Can't beat that. We entered and found it sparsely populated with dirty old men and dirty young men. The club was . . . well, it looked like a strip club and I know that you guys know what a strip club looks like so I'll save my breath.

The "greeter" at the bar told us that, although there was no cover, there was a drink minimum. Somehow we talked her into letting us split a beer. The whole trip was on an absurdly small budget and the beers were about five bucks a pop. Even in stupid Canada dollars, that's pretty much money. The price was driven up by my insistence to buy the Molson "Canadian" lager instead of a cheaper American brew. I just had to sample the local color of the foreign land. So we sat there, two dudes sharing one Canadian beer at a strip club. The girls were on break, so except for a chubby who kept hounding us to go in the back with her, there were no dancers and in fact no women in sight. We just sat and waited in the quiet. We had nowhere to go. Time passed.

Then, with the suddenness and loudness of a desert wind storm, the lights went out and powerful distorted guitar chords screeched out of huge speakers I now saw framing the stage. Cue the spotlight and bam, a blonde, spiky haired sex machine leapt out from behind the curtain and grasped the

pole adroitly like a lemur leaping from a tree to a brass stripping pole. We were shocked. She was incredible. She whipped off her scant covering and soon was completely naked. No pasties or g-string or anything.

"Canada is awesome," Gar whispered to me. I just sat and stared. We didn't even tip. We just sat there. A few guys put a rolled up dollar in their mouths and lay on the stage. The dancer picked it up with her boobs. It seemed pretty fun but I was scared to try it. Gar just didn't have a dollar to spare.

Every once in a while the bartenders would try to get us to buy another beer but we politely declined. Like I said we didn't have the money. There was woman after beautiful naked woman on that stage, though none as great as the first. After a while though, even strippers get boring. Also, we got sick of the tension from the bartenders over our perpetual sharing of a beer. I guess two guys sharing one beer for hours is kind of weird. So we left, laughing.

We walked back towards the car and, blinking excessively while our eyes adjusted to the sunlight, looked around at the town. We explored a bit, walking up the street from the strip club though not straying far from the car, as if we were tethered to it. Canada wasn't really any different than home, really.

"What else do you want to do?" I asked.

"I dunno," Gar said.

We stood there in the grey north with our hands stuffed in our pockets. The wind whipped our jackets in 4/4 time. Birds flew north for the summer. Time moved on.

"Well, let's go," he said abruptly.

"OK."

We shuffled back to the car and left, waving to the customs official as we passed back to our Native land.

**

"You went all the way to Canada to go to a strip club?" interrupted Drunk Ed, chewing on an ice cube. "There's strip clubs around here."

"It's the journey, Ed, the journey," I said.

"You're crazy," he said.

"Let him tell the rest of his story, you prick," said Drunk Jimmy.

"I'm just saying."

"You're just saying?"

They bickered like this for a while. I waited for them to finish, taking pulls on my tiny straw all the while.

**

I wrestled with the map while Gar drove out of Canada. I saw that we were within striking distance of Ann Arbor, Michigan – a college town I had heard about. It has a reputation for being an artsy sort of a place and I figured maybe we could see some music or pick up some art school girls or something. Art school girls are always the cutest.

"Ann Motherfucking Arbor it is," Gar said. I laughed.

We drove for a few dull hours and got there right around dusk. The grey sun was squishing itself all over those pinetop hills. It had started to rain. There weren't many drops falling but the ones that were fell quickly, as if there was something very bad up in that sky. Was the raindrop stock market crashing and were they taking their own lives? Was the sky on fire? What were they leaving behind and where were they heading? Were they running away or were they coming home? And were they happy when they got there? Some made it into big, joyful puddles. Some got impaled on grass blades or diamond rings. One landed in my eye. They didn't know where they would end up, but they had to go, I guess.

We maneuvered among these fat, perplexing drops and cruised around blindly until we found what seemed to be downtown. It was pretty decent. There were lots of bookstores and weirdo shops. We saw an interesting character riding a pink bike. The art girls were there, as expected. We saw them through a rain-streaked bookstore window (a few drops landed on bookstore windows too, I guess). They wore thick-framed glasses and hunched menacingly over Foucault and terse coffees. Who was I kidding? They were out of my league. I didn't even try. We wandered on.

We saw a bunch of crazy looking kids sitting under an awning playing chess. A good a place as any to try to meet some people, we figured, and walked over. Gar gave the what's up to someone, then sat down for a game. I don't know how to play chess so just milled around, and started chatting to some young punks in the rain.

While Gar flicked pawns, rooks, kings, I asked the punks if there was anything good going on. They looked at me kind of strangely. Perhaps they were victims of the punk rock orthodoxy and were suspicious of someone out of uniform. But after some shucking and name-dropping on my part (I wasn't proud to do it but referenced some punk bands I knew back east so they knew I was OK) they did open up a little and we talked a bit. They said that there would be a show tomorrow night. I said that tomorrow night we would be long gone, baby. We were just passing through. They told me we weren't really missing much and that their local

scene was really pretty lame and that it was better in Chicago.

One of them leaned over and said, "hey look at these bugs doing it." He laughed. I looked. Indeed there were two large, black with yellow spotted bugs having sex on the sidewalk. Wow, I thought. Life creates life in every shape and size. I left home and could be anywhere in this enormous universe but here I am, watching two tiny creatures procreate on a rainy Michigan sidewalk with a couple of punks. The punks looked at me strangely again, perhaps sensing that I was a little too interested in the bug sex.

"Check, motherfucking mate!" Gar yelled, and slammed his piece down triumphantly. The kid he beat twisted in his denim jacket and looked a little downtrodden. He asked for a re-match but Gar declared he was retiring from the Ann Arbor chess scene undefeated. He said we had to go.

"We do?" I asked.

"Yep," he said.

"Dude, you should go to Chicago," said one of my new friends. "It's better in Chicago."

"Maybe we will," I said. "Maybe we will."

We walked to the car and I asked Gar what was next. He said he didn't know but just felt like getting out of there because the chess-playing punks seemed so judgmental. We sloshed down the street towards the car and lamented the fact that people who are outside the mainstream so often develop their own fundamental attitudes and thus drive away what would otherwise be like-minded comrades. You'd think chess-playing punks would understand and be accepting of difference. "Fuck those people," I said. "At least you kicked that kid's ass at chess." He nodded. We walked on.

It was getting late and we had no ideas what to do next except head west, I guess. We got back in the car and struck out across Michigan, a little out of sorts but enjoying ourselves nonetheless. After a while of driving (I forget how long) we saw a huge sign advertising ASIAN MASSAGE in Jackson, Michigan.

"You know, I could us an ASIAN MASSAGE," Gar said.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Riding in this cramped car gives a man a backache," he said with a mischievous grin. It was obvious that he knew but I figured I had to say it anyway –

"Those places are whorehouses," I said.

"Duh," he said, exiting the highway, following the sign's directions. I was a little uneasy about it but also interested. We found the parlor after

some twisting and turning, and parked the car.

"Are, are you sure you want to do this?" I asked but he was already out of the car. We walked up the door. I made him knock. He did and we waited a few seconds with no answer. I was ready to give up and head back. Then, the door flew open and revealed a jasmine-perfumed Asian woman. She was dressed in a kimono, was holding a fan, all that. Over her shoulder I could see a heavy red light and a misty warmth rising from the room. Whoah.

"Hey," said Gar, nonchalant.

"You want massage?" she asked. We looked at each other and said nothing. She peered suspiciously then asked, "how old are you?"

"21."

She pondered this for a moment then blurted, "you have to be 22" and slammed the door.

We stood there, stunned, then laughing. Did she think we were dangerous? Did she think we were cops? You don't have to be 22 to do anything, surely she thought something was up. I was kind of relieved that we didn't have to go through with it but Gar was mad. So when we saw another similar sign a few miles down the road, he decided we'd go for it again. What was this, the ASIAN MASSAGE district? We repeated the awkward knock and wait procedure. While we stood there I looked at the door.

"Hey, Gar," I whispered. "Check it out."

In unison we said quietly: "right-hand reverse."

Then, get this, I swear the exact same lady answered the door. I thought that maybe she had whole superpowers and had transported. It really messed with my head. But then I figured that it was her twin sisters and they had set up competing massage parlors across town as some sort of bizarre family feud. I could only imagine the interworkings of that strange relationship and tell you the truth it didn't make me feel much better. I didn't have much time to ponder it though, because she slammed the door on us without even asking our age. Whatthehell was that about? What was wrong with us that we couldn't even pay for sex? I told Gar it's that he looks like a cop and he told me it's that I look like a fag. Both are probably true and either way there would be no ASIAN MASSAGE for us that night.

We got in the car, our manly pride a little bruised. Nothing to do but point the car west again and search for greener pastures. Only a tenth of a mile or so down the road we had to stop at a red light. After a time, as is often the case, it turned greener. But rather than the expected

acceleration, we sat. We sat and sat and sat.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I don't know," Gar said and laughed a bit. He was stomping the accelerator like it was a brush fire but the car was not responding. It remained as aloof as a Chinese hooker. Maybe it thought we had to be 22 to drive it. The car made a tiny yet sick noise, like a society lady makes when she sneezes. Then, it didn't even make that noise. Silence.

After a moment of panic and frenetic key turning and pedal stomping, we figured we'd better get the car off the road. Luckily, there was a mechanic's shop right there and I was able to push the car into the lot. . . I guess it sounds stupid to say it was lucky, since it would've been lucky had the car not broken down after getting turned down by 2 twin whores, but it seemed lucky at the time. Of course there was no one there at the mechanic's shop, it was close to midnight at this point, so it really wasn't any help at all. I saw that there was a all-nite mini mart type place up the road and we tiptoed up along the weeds to go use their phone.

In a capitulation to my father, I had joined Triple A before the trip so at least I had that going for me. I pulled the card out of my wallet and called the 1-800 number. Fucking useless. Get this, the bastard said, "we can send a tow truck out, where do you want us to tow you?" How the fuck was I supposed to know? Isn't that their job? How would I possibly know where to tow the car in the middle of Michigan? Asshole was completely fucking useless and we were out of options. I hammered the phone into its cradle and called it fuck. Only thing to do was spend the night in the car and hope the mechanics could fix it in the morning. We bought some sort of pies and lemon drinks at the mini-mart, stuck a letter explaining our predicament to the windshield (in case a mechanic came while we were still sleeping) and tried to snooze in the car.

But the goddamned thrush of American business never sleeps. The car was just a few yards off the highway and as such we were bombarded by the deluge of commerce. We heard constant land thunder from 18 wheeled engines and were incessantly strobed by their lightning headlights as we tried to rest. Trucks just kept flying by, with sewing machines for New England, ice cream for Texas, sonic tongue cleaners for California. Dizzying. The storm of the modern world was worse than the real storm we had faced the night before. But somehow, hope against hope, ass against elbow, laying with my head up against the seatbelt and my legs twisted around the dashboard in an awful display of human origami, I did manage to finally fall asleep.

"... small town michigan thinks it's better in ann arbor, ann arbor thinks it's better in chicago, chicago thinks its better in california, california thinks its better in new york, new york thinks it's better in small town michigan. the whole country like a dog chasing its tail, searching for a better place that exists nowhere ..."

Joints creaking like an un-oiled French door, I unraveled myself like a one man circus out of that clown car and stretched my arms and legs in the rising sun. It was very early. Probably about 5:30. The mechanics hadn't arrived yet and Gar was still sleeping. Trucks still cruised by. I snatched the note off the windshield and stumbled around the parking lot in the gray dawn, yawning. I was a little worried about the car but assumed that somehow everything would be OK. I never had much faith in anything but always held a general unabiding feeling that everything would always be OK. Don't know where I got that from but it's always served me well. Anyway, Gar soon woke up too and joined me in milling around the lot, kicking paper cups. We talked about what we would do if the car was in really bad shape and came to the mutual conclusion of a shoulder shrug.

Before long the first mechanic arrived and we rushed to him and explained what happened. He was a strange fellow, furry and odd. He jerked his limbs around when he moved as if he was made of wires or was a marionette operated by a puppeteer trying to quit smoking. He himself wasn't trying to quit smoking, though, and took long slow drags as he listened to our story. He didn't say much and just nodded a lot and made a sort of confused face. I'm sure he wasn't expecting his morning to begin by being ambushed by me and Gar first thing so I guess I can understand his confusion.

"Well," he told us, "guy who works on these things, a fella named Jim, he's not here yet. Should be in soon. I suggest you wait for him."

So we did. We waited for Jim. We waited. We waited. The furry guy came out about an hour and a half hour later and told us that Jim's wife called, and that he was on the toilet all morning. We laughed. The furry guy looked at us weird.

Another guy, not the expert Jim was, but more familiar with Gar's car than the furball, soon arrived. He peeked around under the hood and gave us the preliminary verdict of "You're fucked." We laughed again, appreciating casual swearing as always. "Oh, man are you fucked," he added. We laughed again. He played us like a Catskill comedian, going with the material that was working. "Fuck fuck fucked!"

"Well," I asked. "What's there's to do in Jackson?"

"Stay out of trouble," he said, turning suddenly serious. "The cops here are bad. We have the biggest walled prison in the world."

"Wow."

"It's way better in Ann Arbor," he added. "Couple of guys like you would love it there."

We waited for a while longer, my faith in the gods of "it'll be ok," slowly disappearing along with the dawn. What did he mean we were fucked? Jim would know.

But Jim never did arrive, the shitty bastard could still be on the toilet for all we know. The guy who ran the place said the car really should be taken to a local dealer anyway, and that there was one nearby. He did us the favor of calling them (fuck you AAA) and they sent a tow truck to pick it (and us) up. The guy who came to pick us up was a giant misanthrope of confusing ethnic origin. I think he might have been Czech. Whatever he was, as we rode with him in the cab, he made both Gar and me feel uncomfortable and small. He did get us to the dealership without incident, unloaded Gar's car with an angry toss, then disappeared altogether.

Gar talked to some people in the dealership office. He showed them some papers, they showed him some papers, he showed them some more papers and somehow an agreement was reached. I wasn't really paying attention. After the proper number of papers were moved into their correct places, the car was left in a garage and we had nothing to do but wait. We pized out into the car lot and just wandered around looking at the automobiles that, unlike ours, deserved that term by actually being mobile.

* * *

"I got a zen koan for you boys."

"What's a ko-an?"

"Shut up."

"Is an automobile an automobile if it is not mobile . . . and if not,

what is it?"

"... A foreign car, most likely."

"Shut up!"

"A nicely upholstered piece of foreign crap most likely."

"Shut up!"

"... No, he's actually right. That is correct."

"It is, I am?"

2 of 3 laughed.

* * *

Gar and I were just killing time looking at some used black truck when a car salesman, who did not know the circumstances of our arrival and probably just figured we were a couple of guys out looking at trucks came over to us, gave us the squishy car dealer handshake and, predictably, introduced himself as Sam.

"You boys looking for a truck?" he asked, all Midwest charm and car dealer bravado.

"Well," said Gar. "Maybe."

He told Sam the whole story (leaving out the part about the ASIAN MASSAGE and lots of other details so OK I guess it wasn't even almost the whole story) and Sam seemed genuinely taken by our plight. I wondered if he still thought he could sell us a truck and was just working the compassionate guy angle. It really bothered me right then that you can never trust someone when money is involved and since money is always involved, well, we're all pretty much done for.

He did seem to be working us because he even asked if we wanted to take a test-drive. Gar said that yes he did. This surprised me but I went along. We leapt into the big black automobile and drove around, discussing our options. It did not take long.

"I can't really buy a new car," Gar said.

"I know," I said. "So what are you doing?"

"I guess maybe I could try to trade in the other one?"

"Anything you can get for that will be a bigger piece of crap and surely won't get us home."

"You're probably right. Hey, want to get some root beers?"

We were passing an A&W stand so Gar pulled the hulking black beast into a spot and we got out and ordered root beers. We drank them at the outdoor tables.

"As long as we got root beer, we'll be OK," he said.

I doubted it but nodded my head. The root beer was excellent. I guess petty visceral pleasures are one of the few things we can be sure of and, sitting out there in the warm wind sucking on a root beer, I did feel pretty good. The big picture was just too much so we focused on a tiny pixel of it and it helped us feel saner. We both started laughing, bemused by the plight we had gotten ourselves into, then drove the truck back to Sam.

Old Sammy must've been doing some ruminating while we were gone because when we spoke again he wasn't trying to sell us the truck. He knew we weren't going to buy it, or anything, from him. But he was still being very friendly. Almost paternal. (He either did some ruminations or else ran a credit check on Gar from his office and saw that he had no money whatsoever). Either way it worked out for us because he became very kind. He said that there was no way the car was going to get fixed that day and that he would drive us to a campsite, "I see you gotcher tent there," if we wanted. We said it sounded good to us and thank you. We got some stuff out of the car – bags, clothes, tent, guitar, and piled into his personal truck.

As we drove to the campsite we talked. He told us that he felt bad for us, that he had sons our age, that he used to play guitar and bum around the country when he was young and that he thought helping us was a good Christian thing to do. I guess it takes 3 extra compelling reasons for a man to help his fellow man, just feeling bad for us wasn't enough. But I wasn't complaining. Whatever his reasons were didn't matter, we were just glad to have someone help us.

It was a long, long ride and I was starting to feel a little uncomfortable about being so far away. How would we get back? How would we get food? He just kept driving and driving. To pass the time, and since I was interested in his comment about taking road treks when he was young, I asked him about what it was like back then. He told wonderful stories of hitchhiking to Florida and sleeping outside in Texas, visiting friends, making friends everywhere – all about how wonderful it was back then. It made me jealous to hear about the exact kind of trip I wanted to have but clearly was not having and never would. It was just too hard in the modern world. But then I figured that he was just glorifying the past like everyone does. It couldn't have been that much better back then, could it?

* * *

"You're wrong on that one," said Drunk Jimmy.

"For once I agree with this asshole," said Drunk Ed. "It was better back then."

"Ah, you guys are just romanticizing too," I said.

"No way," said Drunk Jimmy. "We grew up in a special time."

"You could get laid all the time," said Drunk Ed.

"That's not what I'm talking about," said Drunk Jimmy. "It's bigger than that, though it was nice to be able to have sex without thinking it'd kill you. There weren't chain stores everywhere, there was an actual point to going to a different part of the country."

"I remember when baseball stadiums weren't named for companies," Drunk Ed said. Jimmy ignored him and continued.

"You could hitchhike, strangers would pick you up all the time. Now they just think you'll kill 'em."

"Or they'll kill you," said Drunk Ed. I just read about some kids who jumped a train in Michigan and got shot in the face. You're lucky you didn't get shot in the face. Shit like that never happened back then"

"It must've happened back then," I said.

They both shook their heads. "Maybe it did, maybe it didn't. It's more than that," said Drunk Jimmy. "There was a spirit in the air, an optimism, a sense that we could change things. People helping people. Doing important things. There's none of that today. Your generation's broken."

"Hey, people helped us," I said. "People helped us a lot." I tried to not feel so deflated and continued with my tale.

* * *

So anyway, get this guys, on the way to the campsite I asked if we could stop and get some supplies. By supplies I of course meant vodka and miller genuine draft. We made the good Christian drop us off for liquor at this shady shack of a store that looked like it was about to fall over. Just as long as it stays up long enough for me to get some booze, I thought. It did and, after an argument with the lady behind the counter about my out-of-state license and the fact that it says I have hazel eyes even though I don't (I checked the box for hazel just because I like the word hazel) we got a case and a bottle. For some reason we hadn't thought to get food, even though we hadn't eaten all day. Anyway, Sam dropped us off at the house/office at the front of the campsite, gave us a number to call about the

car (told us to ask for him) and wished us luck.

"Goodbye, MichiganDad," I whispered. His truck spit exhaust in our faces and he was off.

* * *

"Does your ID really say hazel?" asked Drunk Ed.

"Yeah," I said.

"Let me see it."

I reached into my wallet, lifted the card in between in fingers and snapped it onto the bar, like I was in Vegas dealing stud. Ed screwed up his face, peering at the licence, then looked at me, then the licence. He was stunned.

"What?" I said.

"Holy shit," he said. "Holy shit! You're name is Josh?"

"Uh, oh," I laughed nervously.

"Why'd you tell us your name was Don? Who the fuck . . . Look at this Jimmy, fucker's name is Josh."

"Why did you lie about your name?"

"No, I, I just . . ." I tried to snatch back my legit ID. He kept it away from me like a little kid. "Come on," I said. "When I, it's just, when I came in at first I wasn't of age, I had a fake. I didn't want you guys calling me a name different than what The Closet thought my name was so I --"

"The Closet?"

Oh, fuck, I thought. I never called The Closet "The Closet" out loud. It's a strange feeling to have something that you've only ever voiced in your head now repeated loudly by an increasingly belligerent drunk. All my secrets were coming out. I felt like I was going to puke.

"The, the bartender," I said.

"The Closet? Why the fuck did you call him that?"

"Oh, man, it's a, it's a long story, just, just give me my ID. My name is Josh. You can call me Josh from now on and let it go. Next round is on me. Just drop it."

He wasn't dropping it. But then:

"Let it go, Ed." A deep voice boomed from over my shoulder, then giggled. Holy Shit. The Closet was standing right behind me. I thought I would faint. How much had he heard? "Let it go," he said again in a

solemn, undeniable tone. It seemed as though he understood in an unspoken way how I was feeling and that it was important to me somehow. He rescued me. "Let it go."

He let it go.

I continued, increasingly drunk and now even more delirious, my heart racing, my words spilling out like a novice tapping a keg.

* * *

So we uh, we rang the bell at the office and waited for the campground owner to come out. Predictably, he was an ancient man who introduced himself as (of course) Norm. He gave us the skinny on staying there. It was only like 10 bucks a night or something so that was OK. Plus they had showers which was nice. He was a pleasant enough guy and, with a puckered finger traced the path on the camp map to show us our new lot. We told him we'd see him tomorrow and walked to our new home, Lot 17. Is it just me or does everyone have that impulse to stake out a "home" in every unfamiliar territory? It can be your hotel, your car, or, Lot 17, but I feel like there is some instinctual need for a homebase. Instincts or fear?

Anyway, home was now a smallish square plot of dirt & grass, a dusty fire pit and nothing else. Well, here we are. With little energy we set up the tent. In the distracted mood we were in it actually went rather easily. It was still much too early to go to bed and, nothing else to do, we started drinking. We hadn't eaten all day so soon were drunk. Gar excitedly declared something like, "not eating saves money in two ways! You don't have to buy food and you get drunk faster!" He said it like he had just discovered the secret to the universe. I had to laugh.

Rummaging through our bags for some entertainment we realized we did bring the tools necessary to play our curious version of 2man baseball (the rules of which are far too complicated to go into now) and decided to try it drunk. Before long it got too dark to see the ball and for a second I thought that drunk-dark-2man-baseball in the middle of nowhere Michigan would be the death of me, but I pressed on. Good a way to go as any . . .

I did survive, albeit rather narrowly. Gar whizzed a couple line drives uncomfortably close to my ears and we decided to pack it in. I fumble-thumbed some drunk songs on the guitar then hit the sleeping bag. Gar splatted into his cot and we fell asleep without talking much. What

was there to say, really?

"Good night, you bastard."

"Eat my balls."

"how can i say the feeling of winding down the wind-whipped road in the back of a pick-up truck, driven by an angel of a hick who never saw us before and will never see us again but picked us up without a doubt and said to his babies, "kids, this is hitchhiker number one and hitchhiker number two."

"hi, kids."

I woke up, having slept rather soundly despite being pretty cold on the floor there of the tent in my sleeping bag. I didn't have blankets or even a pillow or anything. My first thought of the morning was, "Jesus, what was I thinking?" The second was "I have to piss." Third, "where's Gar?" I was by my lonesome in the tent. Fourth. . . . Hell, I can't tell you every thought the whole day. I answered number 3 by going to do number 2 which was actually, to do a number 1. That is to say I went to piss and found Gar there in the bathroom. He was holding up the wall and whizzing.

"How long you been pissing in here?" I asked.

"Oh about 3 and half hours," he said. We both were a little hungover.

"I guess I'll take a shower," I said.

"Pussy," he said. We both had planned not to shower the whole trip, that's why he said that. But since there were showers there and we had already paid for the use of the campground and everything I figured I might as well. Might help shake off some of the sandbags in the brain I was still feeling from the vodka & mgd. I explained as much and he figured whatthefhell, he'd shower too.

Next order of business was breakfast. Like I said we didn't eat anything the whole day previous. Gar, however, surprised me by saying that he wasn't hungry.

"What, do you operate on photosynthesis?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Yes I do."

All kidding aside, he really wasn't hungry. I, being a normal

human, was. We had a few supplies in the bags and I ate some peanut butter with my pocket knife. Hardly the breakfast of champions. More like the breakfast of assholes. It sufficed for a little while, though, and I felt some strength come back.

What to do, what to do? Sam had dropped us smack fuck in the middle of nowhere. There was literally nothing within walking distance. Well, I guess that's not true. There were plenty of trees, fields, shit like that. A pond. But nothing to, you know, do. We wandered down towards the pond, figuring we could kill some time down there doing whatever. We figured the car would be fixed by the end of the day and that Sam would come pick us up and we would leave. Nothing to do but wait, but no big deal. We found some sort of bicycle-boat apparatus down by the pond. I had never seen anything like it. We hopped on it and started pedaling all around. It was actually pretty fun. There were some giant-assed purple dragonflies dive-bombing us. For a while I felt like I did when I was a kid, just playing, you know? We had nothing to do, we had nothing. It made us adventurous and innovative and willing to step at least a little outside of our normal well-worn path of things to do. It was real fun. Yeah, maybe it would be all right.

It was approaching noon (the time Sam said to call to see about the car) so we pedaled back to shore and disembarked our strange vessel. We walked to the office and found Norm sitting in the front room behind a screen door rocking in an old chair. We chatted with him for a short while, though it was not easy to do so because one of his men was mowing the lawn on an old rider mower that sounded something like what I thought a tank must sound like. Over the war din we yelled our situation and were able, through a combination of hand gestures, intuition, and luck, to let him know that we needed the phone. He said we could go ahead inside and call. Don't worry about the charges, he said (or I think he said that). What a nice man, I thought (unless he actually said something else).

To find the phone we had to walk through the office which, as I said before, was also his house. It was a nice little place, very dignified in a country old man sort of way. I thought I'd be happy if I ended up in such a place, free of the suffering of modern life. Then I saw an old framed photo of Norm and a movie-star looking lady who I figured was his wife. She must be dead now, I thought, and remembered that suffering is everywhere. Gar was wading his way towards the phone, oblivious to my thoughts, concentrating on finding out about the car like a poodle sizzling at flashpoint on a butterfly. He scooped up the old green phone and dialed.

I listened and watched as he talked.

"Yeah this is Gar . . . Yeah, about the car . . ."

His eyes were wide.

"Yeah, I'll hold . . ."

He idled nonchalantly for quite some time.

"What?"

He reddened.

"Yeah, I understand but do you understand? I'm on vacation. I'm stuck here."

Spittle formed at the corners of his mouth.

"Well when do you suppose you can look at it?"

His shoulders sagged.

"OK . . . just . . . I'm really stuck here. . ."

He slid the phone back to its home. Obviously bad news. Still, I was impressed by how capable he was at dealing with official people and the sort. I always sucked at that.

"Good news, right?" I asked playfully.

"Fuck," he said. "They said maybe they can get on it tomorrow but probably not 'til Friday. I'm just afraid 'cause if they don't do it Friday, they're closed for the weekend and then for Labor Day. Fucking assholes never do any actual labor and then they take off a holiday for it. Fuck."

"Shit," I said. "I hope that doesn't happen. We have to get back to school."

"I fucking know."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't fucking know."

Norm walked back to see what was going on, or specifically to see why two guys were swearing so much in his living room.

"Good news?" he asked. I laughed. Bastard stole my line.

Gar explained what they said to Norm who nodded rather wisely. We would be doing a longer stretch here than we figured, we said. That's OK, he said. We asked if there was anywhere we could get some supplies. He said he had some stuff around but if we wanted to buy anything major, there's a Wal-Mart a way's off.

"Pardon us city-folk, but how far exactly is a 'way's-off'?" I asked.

"Oh about 8 miles or so, all the way at the end of the road there," he said.

"Thanks. We'll leave you be now."

I was proud of how well I handled the small-talk with Norm. Usually I suck at that too.

We walked back towards home and talked about what we would

do.

"Think we can walk 8 miles?" Gar asked.

"Maybe, but not 16 miles."

"Just think of it as 8 miles."

"But we have to get back home too."

"8 miles."

"Fuck, I'll try it if you will."

"Let's go."

* * *

"Don't tell me you walked 16 miles on an empty stomach to get to Wal-Mart, you stupid fuck-Josh," Drunk Ed said. It sounds mean but he had dropped the animosity, now just teasing me.

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. Buy me another one of these and you'll find out," I said, shaking the cubes around my empty Long Island.

"You did not walk 16 miles on an empty stomach," he said. "I'll flag down The Closet," He did so, ordered me another, and waited for the 2nd act as I greased up my mouth with booze.

* * *

After garnering better directions than "a way's off," from one of our fellow campers who looked at us like we were crazy and in fact were right that we were crazy, we headed off towards Wal-Mart.

I was remembering back to my high school days when I used to run track and recalled that one day I did 10 miles. It was the most I'd ever run, but I did it. And that was running. This was just 8 and only walking. Besides, we did have all day. And never mind that it was so hot and we hadn't really eaten and were hung over. Never mind all that. We could do it.

The proverbial journey of 16 miles begins with a single step so nothing else to do but take it. Put chuck taylor in front of chuck taylor and pull that Wal-Mart in. The walk was fairly beautiful. There were no people, no buildings and few cars. Lots of life though. Some huge birds picked at their wings and stared at us like they too thought we were crazy

and I didn't like the look in their eyes. Some horses behind a fence passed some judgment too, probably fearing that we'd jump on them and ride off, which is exactly what I would have done if it weren't for the barbed wire and my long-time fear of getting arrested for horse-thievery. Life was there too in the form of plants and flowers, who were considerably less judgmental in their waving. In fact, as they swayed to the music of the wind they seemed to be urging us on. I gave some of them little high-fives as I passed, same as I used to when I ran in high school. I was feeling good. I told Gar as much.

"Well my feet hurt," he said. I figured he was just being a big baby and told him to suck it up. We walked and walked and walked, though after a while what he was doing probably can't really be called walking proper because of the way he gingerly tried to keep pressure off both feet at all times. It's hard to do and even harder to explain. I still didn't believe that he was hurting, for whatever reason.

"Let's hitchhike," he said. I was leery. I've never been a you know, hitchhiking kind of guy.

"Just suck it up," I said.

"It fucking hurts," he said.

He sat down on a log and took off his cheap sneakers while I watched and waited impatiently without talking. He took off a shoe and yowled. Blood was soaking through his tube socks. Uh-oh. "Fu-uck me," he said. "I got blood blisters and they're popping." Oh, man. We had only walked probably three miles by my estimation. Too far to turn back but impossible to press on. Life is like that sometimes. We needed a third option.

"We're hitchhiking," he said. That wasn't what I meant. But what else could we do?

He started thumbing and I internally hoped no one would stop. Only a few cars were passing and each time my wish was granted, no one even slowed down.

"Come on," he said, "you have to do it too."

I reluctantly stuck out my thumb, sure it was just going to serve as a beacon for a murderer or whatever. I just got no faith in people, I guess. Either that or I watched too many after-school specials. Hitchhiking never leads to anything good and more often than not leads to some pedophile slipping a pill into your ice cream and taking you home and keeping you locked up in a closet while he dresses in jungle clothes and does some very bad things to you after the camera fades to black.

But I did it anyway. The first vehicle that passed us sped by and

I was relieved. Then I saw the blurred red blur of brake lights, then the white lights of reverse. He was coming back. I just have that kind of charm, I guess. It was a purple minivan and pulled to a sudden, dusty stop a few yards ahead. Gar and I looked at each other, then ran ahead and jumped into the car. How could a driver of a minivan be evil? But an experienced hitchhiker will always tell you to size up the driver and not just the vehicle. An experienced hitchhiker will always tell you to carefully peer in to the car and get a steady look at the occupant or occupants within before hopping aboard same as they do to you before stopping. You're not at their mercy, an experienced hitchhiker will tell you – you can pass them up the same as they can you. But like I said, I am not (or was not then) an experienced hitchhiker. I'd never hitched at all before. Hell, I'd never even hitched up my pants.

Gar leapt into the front seat, I jumped in the back and rifled shut the sliding side door. It was just like my parents' mini-van, I thought, before even checking out the driver. Then, when I did, I wanted very much to shit. This man was not like Dad. He looked completely insane. He was heavily wrinkled, not just on his face but all over his head. He looked like nothing so much as a talking raisin. But not in the cute California Raisin "heard it through the grapevine" way but in a freaky "I'm going to rape you" way. He had patches of hair, few teeth and a considerable amount of drool hanging off his chin.

"We're just going to the Wal-Mart up the road," Gar said, struggling to remain calm.

"I just got back from the doctor," the raisin sang in a highly fluctuating melody. "He didn't even touch me. Gave me some new pills, though." He waved a baggie of pills in front of Gar's face.

Was this for real? He only had us in the car for 10 seconds and already had out the pills. That wasn't supposed to happen until at least after the second commercial break. He didn't even give us any ice cream.

"We're going to Wal-Mart," Gar said again and I repeated it too.

"Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart."

I thought we could break through his fuzzy brain and at least get our point across. He ignored us and looked sad.

"My sister never talks to me anymore."

"Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart."

"I was in Battle Creek one time. It's nice up there."

"Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart."

You know you're in bad shape when Wal-Mart becomes your

mantra.

"I used to be on some different pills but now I got these."

"Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart."

All the while I was sizing him up, looking for weapons, wondering if I could take him in a fight. I reasoned that I probably could. He was pretty old and saggy. I envisioned myself putting his wrinkled raisin into a headlock while Gar wailed on him. I was tense. But alas, it wasn't really a concern – I had overreacted again. Before long (man, driving is a lot faster than walking), he pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot and rolled to a stop. I hopped out, safe and unbuggered. After my fear subsided I had to feel bad for the guy. He was just another of the Legion of the Lost. A sad crazy person in a purple minivan, wishing that his sister would love him, his doctor would take care of him, and that he could go back to Battle Creek wherever the hell that is. We all want those things in one form or another.

"Thank you, sir," I said through the open window. "Good luck with all that." I waved and he went back off to wherever it was he was going/not going before I came into his life . . .

Gar and I had the expected "whatthellhellwasthat?" conversation you can imagine a couple of guys having after hitching a ride to Wal-Mart with a psychopathic talking raisin, but enough of that, we had arrived and had some consuming to do. It wasn't just a Wal-Mart but an entire strip mall – a veritable stomping ground of consumerist heaven. In addition to the near infinite purchasing possibilities in the Mart of Wal we could also, for example, buy new sneakers or ladies dresses or power saws if we wanted. Also, there were the ubiquitous fast food slop shops. We had our choice from all the major players. Regal Burger Bars. Buccaneering Fish Stands. Bluegrass Greased Fowl. But I of course am not a carnivore so we decided on Taco Bell where I could swallow toxic bean sludge that would kill me, but not any animals. Better than, say the Scottish House of Whores which does both.

We went in to the Bell and I realized how hungry I was. Funny how you can forget that when you need to. But now my saliva glands were reminding me of days of neglect. Stomach too. He growled the command to order everything twice and who was I to argue? I got about 450 burritos and a bucket of soda (total cost: \$3.49) and set myself to gorge. . . . Alas, I should've just saved myself the trouble and thrown the burritos directly into the toilet because of course that is where they ended up in just a few minutes. I had diarrhea before we even left the place. I think the reason that Taco Bell is so cheap is that you rent, rather than purchase their food.

Maybe it's not really their fault. I was hungover, frightened, and hadn't eaten anything but peanut butter for a day and a half. That's not really a recipe for gastrointestinal health such as you'd find in the book "Recipe for Gastrointestinal Health." But the toxic bean sludge sure didn't help. It felt like iron spikes sliding through my large intestine (the human large intestine, contrary to popular rumor, is not actually several miles long when unraveled but just about 6 feet. This is long enough, nevertheless, to be too much fleshy tube to pass a metal spike through without feeling considerable pain. Human nerves, on the other hand, are actually several miles long – 45 in the skin alone – and every one of those highway miles from bowel to brain was saying "ouch" in no uncertain terms.) It hurt like hell.

Eventually I finished and stumbled out to the dining room, actually weaker than I had been before I ate. Gar was resting contentedly over his chicken burrito wrappers.

"The Shits?" he asked

"The Shits," I said.

"Fuck."

Shits or no shits, we had work to do. We walked to Wal-Mart, though what I did can't really be called walking proper what with the hunched way I had to keep my cheeks together to prevent further leaking while also trying to keep them apart so as to keep pressure off of my chafed hole. This last is thanks to the cheap Taco Bell toilet paper. How can a corporation rake in like 900 billion dollars a year making people poo and not be willing to spring for some decent t.p. in their jon? It infuriates me. Anyway, Gar still had the bleeding feet and was doing that whole crab-walk song and dance so we were quite a pair. We ambulated this odd way through the aisles of Wal-Mart, joking about how they have everything in the world. Gar was trying to make me laugh by going on about how fun it'd be to go up to the counter and try to weird out the cashier with the most random assortment of items to buy.

"Shoelaces, applesauce, a bumper for an '83 hatchback, porno mags."

"Toy handcuffs, little girl underwear, a welding mask."

"A TV, an axe, a case of grape soda."

"300 screwdrivers, some corn oil, industrial strength adhesive, a toilet lid."

"16 cans of black spray paint, a camera, baby food, a pair of dress shoes, an ironing board, needlenose pliers."

To his credit he made me laugh at a most unfunny time. I was delirious, sick, sore, and constantly wondering how the hell we were going

to get home (that is, to Lot 17, never mind my real home which seemed like a dream, a lifetime away). I wasn't really thinking about making smart purchases. I was in a fog the whole time we were there. Plus we didn't have much money. We did have, you know, MAC cards with accounts with a little bit of scratch in 'em so could've afforded a few things. But what we ended up buying sounded like one of Gar's jokes. Raspberry seltzer, band-aids, pepto-bismol, a chessboard, a flashlight. That's it. We went up to pay and -

* * *

"Wai, wai, wait. What do you mean that's it?"

"That's it."

"You went through all that to get raspberry seltzer, band-aids, a chessboard, pepto-bismol, and a flashlight?"

"Yep."

"Why didn't you get any food?"

"I, I don't, I was feeling sick and I don't know, my head wasn't really on straight."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard."

"Hey, it was my idea to get the flashlight."

"You're ridiculous. You didn't even need the band-aids and pepto before you left."

"Yeah, I don't really know what we were thinking. . ."

The guys looked at me a little queerly now, but I was in it too deep to hold back. I took a deep inhale of alcohol, let loose a deep exhale of story-telling.

* * *

Where was I? Oh yes, in line at Wal-mart with absurd purchases and a sore anus. We were paying, desperate. We had no idea what to do. Gar couldn't face walking back (even with the band-aids) and I did not want to hitchhike again (even with the pepto-bismol). One insane raisin was enough I said. My feet hurt like hell he said. We both had a point. Again, a third option was needed. We decided to solicit opinions (and hopefully

assistance, cash, sex, booze) from others. We started telling our plight to anyone and everyone who would listen. The cashier lady, people behind us in line, a nun. Everyone seemed genuinely concerned and all tried to think up plans to help us. The cashier lady was especially kind and gave us information about a hotel. She was really nice but every time she talked Gar and I kept looking at each other and trying not to laugh at her gooberish accent. Out there in those wiles of Michigan they talk in that Minnesota way that sounds rather Canadian and very funny. "Oh gee naw, that is a mess ya gotcha self inta, eh?" Funny. But I shouldn't make the fun. She was amazingly nicer than anyone would've been back east. She let us use their phone to call the hotel. Gar did and talked to them for a while (uh huh, uh huh) then hung up. It was too expensive to stay there and, the more we thought about it, was a stupid idea anyway. What would we do once we got there? We'd have to get back home somehow. Gar looked at me with the Rasputin stare and I had no recourse against that.

So it came to pass that for the second time that day I stood in front of whizzing cars with my thumb outstretched, inviting danger and further ass-damage. We had run a few yards down a grassy hill and a concrete embankment towards the main road and found what we thought, for whatever reason, was a good spot. There were a lot more cars out there than where we started, and we were sure someone would stop. But no one was biting. I don't know why. I had taken a smiley face sticker from Wal-Mart and was wearing it as a ridiculous badge of irony on my dirty shirt. Gar was standing like a crab and pulling thirstily on the 3 liter bottle of raspberry seltzer. Like I say, I can't imagine why no one was stopping . . .

But of course someone did stop (otherwise we'd still be out there - a couple of corpses with smiley face stickers, stinking of raspberry and death). It was a pick-up truck and I thought this seemed good because that way we could sit in the back and not have to be up front with the guy in case he was insane. He didn't seem to be insane, though. At least he didn't look like a talking raisin or any dried fruit really. And he didn't have any bags of pills (that I could see). He simply asked us "where y'all headed?" with a smile. We'll told him, he said he knew that place and would be gladta take us there after he picked up his kids from school. Gar thought that was a good sign, since if he had kids he wouldn't be a murderer. I of course thought that he was lying and didn't have kids but rather was using that as an excuse to drive somewhere out of the way where he would surely kill us with shovels. I worried and worried in the back of that cab until, sure enough, he stopped outside a one-room school house the sort of which

I thought only existed in black & white. Two young boys came running out to the truck, waving book bags and glee. They only seemed slightly confused by our presence and not worried at all when their Dad introduced us.

"Kids, these are some hitchhikers. Hitchhiker number one and hitchhiker number two."

"Hi kids."

"Hi hitchhikers."

With that they jumped into the cab, gave dad a hug and a kiss, and slammed the door. We were off towards home. Home. As that pick-up cruised up and over those hills and dales I felt my stomach rise and fall not from sickness but from exhilaration. To sink low, to taste the wet bottom, and then to rise up through the muck to the sweet heights – is there anything greater? Maybe what I did's not all that but it got me thinking. What's better, a stagnant life of nothappynotsad or a life of jagged ups and downs that can make you feel this good, even if the lows hurt like hell? It's like love, I guess. Is it better to have loved and lost? It's like a drug, with all the highs and lows, but all the more better because it's real . . .

The pick-up dragged its heels to a stop at the path leading to our campground. It was about a half a mile to Lot 17 but we were sure we could make it from there. We effused thanks to the man but he just grinned and tipped his deer cap like it wasn't a thing for nothing. The kids waved distracted waves, popping gum bubbles and looking at their feet. Then, they disappeared.

We didn't even have time to start stumbling towards home when another pick-up stopped next to us. It was a huge black one not unlike the one we played with back at the car lot and for a second I thought it was Sam the car dealer. It wasn't, though, it was a fellow camper. He asked us if we needed a ride back to camp. We said sure, thanks, and got in. In the short little ride we told him our circumstances too. He seemed annoyed that we would be out camping so unprepared. I thought that was odd. Why would this bother him? What we were to him? I would later realize that he was annoyed because he had to help us. Of course he didn't actually have to help us, he could have just ignored us. That's what most people (read: people back east) would have done. But his moral compunction or whatever wouldn't allow him to let us suffer so long as he knew about it. It's like when a father is aggravated when his kid does something dumb and needs his help. He can't just let him suffer, he can't. Even if he has shit to do. Also, this guy was like a pro camper and I think just the idea of a couple of guys in a tent with nothing else thinking they were camping took

away from the sanctity of the experience for him. Really I don't know what his reasoning was. But he did help us. And not just with the short ride. He gave us the greatest dinner I've ever had.

When we reached Lot 17 and started to get out of the truck he reluctantly told us he'd send his wife over to see about getting us something to eat. He also asked, kind of condescendingly, if we knew how to make a fire. Of course we did, we said (lying) and he said he'd send some lighter fluid and matches too since we probably didn't have none of that there in those happy face sacks. We thanked him profusely and he left. We couldn't believe our luck.

Mrs. Condescending Camper came by sure enough at around 5 o'clock and brought meat, rolls, all that. She was considerably nicer than her husband and wowed me with unexpectedly beautiful eyes. Goddamn these sweet midwesterners. She also left some lighter fluid and matches for us, which we used to hilarious effect. Gar hosed about 100X the recommended amount into the fire pit, then chucked a match in and caused a damn near explosion. We laughed oh how we laughed. Cooked up some meat too.

You're probably wondering about that. I said before that I was a vegetarian and truth is I am, or that is, was. But that meat there came from her own personal animal – raised with love and killed with kindness. Not some horrible meat-farm exploiting the world but just a pretty-eyed lady with a cow. Nothing wrong with that. Plus, I was damn hungry. Threw some salt in there, stuck the pan in the fire (she gave us a pan too) and I'm not going to lie to you, it was the best tasting meal I ever had. I ate feverishly, intensely, but wishing it would never end . . .

To be a misanthrope rescued by strangers. To be a vegetarian eating meat. To be starving then eat so well. To be a city fuck lying on his back staring at huge trees and happy stars . . . I was changing. And it was good. Drank a few slow cans of mgd. Strummed the old guitar. Read a little by the fire. Talked about nothin. Fell asleep early with fat smiles.

"... I found a friend. A little toad on the ground, no bigger than the tip of my thumb. I put my hand in front of him, he hops and turns around. I put my hand there, he turns and goes left. I put my hand to the left, he turns and goes right. He turns and he goes and he turns. I pick him up, fascinated by this little creature. I look into his face, I see that he's smiling.

... I think, 'how like me this peculiar little creature. He doesn't know where he's going, doesn't really know where he was. Doesn't know why all of a sudden he's up in the air, in a place he's never been before. He just keeps turning, moving along, moving left if the hand is on the right and the other way around. And he's smiling. It's a joke and he gets it. Yeah.' I call to my friend. 'Hey, you know? We're gonna be all right.'

Then, the toad jumped out of my hand, fell to the ground, and broke his neck Dead."

I woke up early and saw that Gar was still sleeping soundly on his cot. I stole away into the wet morning alone, feeling good. The sun was at just the right angle to be spilling through the beautiful giant trees in the most monumental fashion. I rushed back to the tent to get my camera but I'm sure the pictures won't capture the hugeness of it. I got out my notepad and tried to write it down, to describe in words, though I knew that wouldn't get it either. Nothing can really show the beauty, the immensity, the enormity of the reality of it. It's a feeling and you can't capture a feeling. I can't get it on a page, in a song, mixed in paints. The ephemeral feeling that existed that morning amidst the streaming sun in the Michigan woodland and in my heart cannot be captured and will never be recreated. Oh well.

I decided to go for a walk. The night before I had done a little reading and, get this, the only thing I brought to read on the trip with me was a mini book by Henry David Thoreau called Walking. In it he talks

about how walking not to go anywhere can be a high art. I liked that so decided I would try it as soon as I had the chance. With Gar still sleeping and the fairly beautiful natural setting, now seemed as good a time as any.

I took off without any agenda and just walked. I took the opposite direction we had gone to Wal-Mart and saw that before long there was a small town a mile or two down the road. I saw on the wood-burned sign that the name of the town was Concord. Just like Thoreau, I thought. Huh. What are the odds? I walked on.

It was beautiful out there and I think I did enter some sort of meditative state as I sauntered down the weedy paths exiting the campground. I had a long time to kill; we weren't going anywhere that day. I thought. I thought about how long a day can be. Days always seemed short to me but with time dragging out as it did I saw how a day can be really, dreadfully long. The expression, "gay as the day is long" finally came into focus. That must be pretty gay. I also thought about how it is accepted wisdom that "time flies when you're having fun" (this expression exists in every civilization in one form or another all the way back to the dawn of man, whereas an expression such as "shit or get off the pot" is purely an expression of modern times since it is only in relatively recent human history that man has had reason to hurry ... and toilets).

All kidding aside, you have some crazy kind of thoughts when you have long, slow hours of nothing to do but just walk among the trees. It makes you think, why do we rush so much? Why do we want life to pass us by so fast? Maybe monks are on to something. They slow life down and maybe to them it feels like they live to be 200 years old and isn't that what everyone wants? Yes, but everyone also wants to have fun which, as we know, makes time pass quickly. I guess it's another one of those basic ironies that make human existence such a pain in the ass. Another one is that if someone you love is getting sick of you they will try to pull away and this will scare you because you love them so then try to hold on tighter and, since they are already sick of you, this will make them feel smothered and make them want to pull further away. The more you try to hold on, the more certainly you cement their leaving. I've been on both sides of that awful equation.

Sorry if I'm blathering on, but these are the kinds of thoughts I'd been having a lot lately. The lonely nights locked in my room by myself staring at a ceiling fan, listening to headphones, sweating, swearing, crying, thinking about these kind of things. These are the kind of thoughts you have when you're feeling low. And the kind of thoughts you can't help but

have when you're walking out there with nothing to do. These thoughts and the really big thoughts. Thoughts of time. Thoughts of existence. Thoughts of suffering. You enter a reflexive mood and attempt some high ponderance of the really big questions. The Questions. Not like how did I end up here, here on this trip in Michigan but here, here on this earth? Not how do I get something to eat but how is it that I turn food into energy and why? The big Why? I have questions about fireflies I don't think anyone can answer.

I stomped back to the campground after what must have been over 2 hours of think-walking. Gar was waiting for me and by the looks of it was pretty bored. He was playing chess with himself.

"Who's winning?" I asked.

"I am," he said, "but it's close." I laughed. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Sauntering," I said. "You should try it sometime."

"Yeah maybe well, now you're playing some chess," he said.

"OK," I said and he moved the pieces back to the starting gates and started going over which piece moves here and how many pieces this one moves and all that. I had been taught how to play chess at least a half a dozen times before but it never stuck for some reason. Too many things to think about at once, I guess. Or, was it something else?

"You have to sacrifice a pawn for other pieces sometimes," Gar said. "Two pawns is worth a rook, three pawns is worth one . . . and of course you do anything to protect the king."

"What a goddamned feudal game," I said. He just laughed. But really, I felt bad for all the pawns who had to be sacrificed for the kings and queens. What a goddamned cruel game. If I was a chess piece, I'd be a pawn for sure and would I want to get stomped by a horse or run over by a castle to save some goddamned king who could only move one spot at a time the same as me? Alas, I don't know if it was my anti-monarchist politics or my lack of spatial reasoning or the simple fact that I'm a dumbass, but I still couldn't get chess. Gar got a little annoyed and kept trying to press on even though I was obviously the worst chess student in the world. You know how Kasparov beat that supercomputer? I would lose at chess to a photocopier. Really, I'm bad.

So Gar went to check on the car again, even though there wasn't likely to be any news. He was wishing against reason, probably figuring that anything'd be better than spending another couple days in a tent with such a shitty chess player. I waited around the lot while he went to use

Norm's phone. In a few minutes he came back glum. The news was as expected.

"Maybe tomorrow afternoon, they said," he said.

"Assholes," I said.

"Dicks," he said.

So we had a whole day to kill and chess was out of the question. We played some 2man-baseball but our hearts weren't really into it. Gar's feet still hurt besides. We played down by the pond and I caught a toad, killed it by accident, felt bad. It was a long day.

Later we went into Norm's supply shed store thing where he sold stuff on the honor system. We stole some cans of spaghetti. Felt a little bad, but justified it because it was enormously overpriced. Only problem was we didn't have a can opener. We attacked it with my pocket knife and were able to gouge a decent sized gash in the top. Sucking out cold spaghetti noodles from a can was our dinner. Not as good as last night, but you can't expect meat from heaven every day. Mr. & Mrs. Condescending Campers were nowhere to be seen all day.

We did find some old video games in the back of the shed. This was a very thrilling discovery but of course you needed quarters and between us we only had one. We co-played a game of some strange video game I had never heard of and it wasn't really interesting. The point was to rescue a cat from a tree or something like that. Our ladder kept breaking and we didn't make it past level one. Pathetic. Gar tried to jimmy open the coin thing so we could play all night but it didn't work. Only other thing there was in there by way of entertainment were some ancient magazines. I read all about Reagan's bid for re-election in Time. His prospects are pretty good, it seems.

It got pretty bad for a while there but eventually night came and we just went to bed early. Just killing time 'til sleep. Is that all life is?

" . . . Concord, Michigan is the middle of nowhere. Not as much America's heartland as her backside. Maybe not even the backside but probably a more unambitious and unobtrusive part, easily forgotten, barely washed and unchanged in fifty years like the back of a knee or you third toe. Huge trees, small stores, friendly people and not much else. Worlds away from my east coast life. Just the kind of place you might want to spend a summer vacation but not at all the place I had hoped to spend my summer vacation."

I woke up early again and again took my now traditional walk (is two days long enough to be considered a tradition?) and again, just sauntered. I took a slightly different route and saw there was a restaurant in Concord. Why didn't Norm tell us that earlier? Jesus. Eventually I found myself back at the campground, having apparently made a huge circle without even knowing it. My head was still spinning when I saw Norm, sitting in his screened in front room as always.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning . . . Hey, why didn't you tell us there was a town right down there?"

"You didn't ask."

"Granted."

He invited me in and I took the rocking chair opposite him. He produced a glass of water out of nowhere and I took it, thanking him. It seemed as though he was waiting for me, as if he had something to tell me. Probably he was just glad to have someone to talk to. We small-talked for a while and eventually got into some fairly meaty discussion. I don't remember how but we started talking about how scary Detroit is. He said that "a lot of people blame the Negroes, but the Negroes are OK. They'll make it one day. I have faith in the Negro."

Child of a politically correct-era that I am, I bristled at his use of the word "Negro," missing the point of what he was saying altogether. Then I thought about it for a second and saw that it was clearly not racist.

I probably subconsciously expected him to be racist. I mean, here was an old, white, Christian male – the enemy, right? But that's just a stereotype too, right? I could've objected to his use of the outdated term but that would've been just nitpicky. Here's a man who grew up with racism his whole life as an accepted fact of reality and then all of a sudden it was the worst thing you could be. And the words have changed half a dozen times. That has to be hard on an old guy. Who cares what words we use if our hearts are in the right place? And if our hearts aren't in the right place will that be changed because we memorize a new term of socially accepted race-dividing? Norm probably never was a racist in the first place and certainly wasn't now. He came to the right conclusions just by sitting on his rocker and being kind. He didn't even need a sociologist or some uptight jerk telling him the terms to use. Who the hell cares if he still calls them Negroes?

We talked for a long while, a couple of hours, really. Besides his enlightened views on race he told me about his life working in the auto factories out there in Michigan, on both sides of the picket lines. Labor for years, then management. He said he got a lot of flack from his buddies for going over to the management side but how else would he get anything done? He said sometimes people try to kill the mosquito on their knee with a hammer and just end up with a broken knee. Sometimes a little delicacy is better than force. And he did, as management, gain some concessions for the workers, and wasn't that better? I had to say that yes it was and I thanked him for telling me that story. . . Good old Norm. Again I thought that it would be an OK spot to end up in life as a campground owner and that maybe I needed the trees and the quiet. He didn't escape suffering, no, but did seem to have a lot of shit figured out and just set there, whiling time through his rough fingers easily and happily. . .

Gar came out and found me, having woken up and gotten really bored by himself around Lot 17. I kept leaving him all alone and felt bad about it. He seemed kind of annoyed and perplexed by it, but said nothing.

"Come on, you rat turd," I said. "I'm buying you some pancakes." He of course didn't know that there was a restaurant right down the road and was surprised and pleased to hear it. I told Norm I'd talk to him later, then, and showed Gar the way to the diner. We walked and I talked enthusiastically about Norm.

I got us lost but then found the restaurant. It was a greasy spoon of a place, actually called "The Greasy Spoon." It was a real old diner. Real. I eyeballed the cast and crew. A fuzzy-headed gentleman moaned a sad song about this year's corn crop while flicking cigar ash off his flannel

shirt. A beautiful farm girl waitress brought us pancakes as thick as a man's arm and do you want white or wheat there, sugar? These people were real and they were wonderful. Maybe this was what I wanted to see in the first place when I went looking for nothing? Maybe I had found something after all. A different way of life. A kindness in people. Or at least some damn good pancakes. We supped, paid, and left.

Walking back towards camp Gar and I talked about our options. We'd go call the car place first and if they said it'd be ready today, we'd get Sam to come pick us up and then just head back. We'd take a day or two and get home by Sunday and head back to school on Monday. And if not? We were fucked fucked fucked, just like the comedian said back in Jackson. Gar laid it down. The car place was closed the next three days and if they didn't start the car 'til Tuesday we'd end up missing the whole first week of classes. Plus how much more time could we survive out here? I secretly thought "forever" but didn't say it.

Back at camp Norm let us use the phone again and the result was expected. I knew it. They hadn't even looked at the car yet. Unbelievable. My secret wish had been granted but I didn't even really want it in the first place. We had to get home but how? We carried on and on in that back room and again Norm came in to see what all the commotion there was all about. Not that he didn't know. He was prepared. He held some shaky papers in his hands and smiled.

"Maybe you boys'll be interested in this," he said.

He showed us the papers. There, written in his own delicate hand was a list of flights & prices from Detroit to Philadelphia in the coming days. "Way I see it, the best one's if you leave Sundee 5:30 PM. Some deal it's only one hundred twenty dollars a piece round trip. Then you can get back to school on time and fly back when's it's done. You can use the return trip for up to," he paused, peered over his glasses at the papers, "120 days."

I never so much wanted to kiss the elderly.

He had saved us! Oh, Norm, you sweet old coot.

"Thank you so much! Thank you!" We gushed and gushed.

"Now don't you mind, boys. You still have to worry about how you're going to get to Detroit from here."

"Ah, nothing to it, Norm," Gar said. I thought he knew something.

"Do you know something?" I asked.

"No," he said and shrugged. "I just thought it sounded good."

So, cut a long story short (is it too late to attempt that? Probably. Probably too early too) we called Sam the car dealer and he said he'd pick us up

tomorrow. Then it'd be up to us to get the bus to Detroit on Sunday. If needed, he'd get a guy to drive us to a travel agent where we could get bus tickets to Detroit. Oh, Sammy, you'll get into heaven for sure. It was going to be OK.

We still had a day to kill and did so with drunk 2man baseball and good cheer. We tried to get Norm to don the glove and throw the pill around but he said he hated baseball. He did do some vodka shots, gingerly tipping the shot glass to his old liney lips. It was really funny.

The long slow evening eventually rolled in and dusk swarmed from all angles like an attack of giant woolen sweaters. Out there in the country the air at night is so warm and so thick you could eat it with knife and fork and a can of pop on the side. Beautiful.

We woke up early and sure enough angelic Sam swerved into the dusty road and picked us up. We thanked Norm again and told him we'd stay in touch and maybe say hi when we came back to get the car. He seemed sad to see us leave and that made me sad. But no time for tears in this world, we had a plane to catch. Sam apologized about the car and asked us how our stay was. I said Norm was pretty great and Sam said, yeah, isn't he?

Back at the dealership. Gar's car still sat there dead, an unmoving hunk of steel. Sam was acting a little reluctant to help us anymore, maybe because he felt we were becoming a burden. Or maybe he just had something better to do. But he did get a guy to take us to a travel agent across town where we could pick up our plane tickets and see about a hotel and getting to Detroit and all that. Once that was hooked up he said good-bye forever and left us with the guy who drove errands for the car dealer, a guy who was almost certainly an ex-con. "Man With The Hairy Face" Gar and I called him. He was frightening. But he did his duty and silently ushered us to a travel agency across town. One step closer to home on the backs of the kindness of a stranger.

We walked into A-1 Travel to the bojangles of a sleigh bell on the door and were met by a very receptive lady behind a desk. She seemed to be expecting us (did Dad or Grandpa place a call?) and was very kind. She was the travel agent who would help us, she announced. She looked sort of like a bird, but with a red blouse and a string of pearls. And the ability to operate a computer. She soon had our plane tickets printed out and handed them over with a dramatic flourish.

"Here you go, one hundred twenny dollars a piece, flight leaves tomorrow afternoon from Detroit airport."

"Wow, thanks," Gar asked. We did have a problem though, which was that neither of us had even 2 dollars on us. I had an idea I was keeping in my pocket for a while and now brought it out, sighing.

"I'll call my Dad. He'll put it on his credit card."

I did so and I don't want to relate the fairly embarrassing self-effacing I had to do to get my Dad to save my ass. A whole part of my

reason for going on the trip was to show my father that you could go out unprepared and still survive. I was attempting a petty sort of rebellion by going on the exact kind of trip he would hate. And here I was, using his good credit rating to bail me out.

He was nice about it but it was horrible for me. I gave the phone to the bird and she took my Dad's information, giggling the whole time. I didn't know my Dad was so fucking funny.

"Your Dad is charming," she said, cupping the speaker with her wing.

"Yeah." I said. "Can I talk to him again?" I had to ask him if on top of everything he could pick us up at the airport too. He said sure son and that was that.

"Well that's great, then," the bird said.

Only one more thing.

"Do you know, how do we, can we get to Detroit airport by tomorrow evening? We don't have a car."

"Well," the travel agent said, her bird eyes flashing like the lights of a Nova (the car, not the celestial body) "I'm going to the Detroit Airport after work today. Do you want a ride?"

"Sure," we said happily. "Yeah." Accepting rides from strangers no longer felt like anything for a thing.

"Well," she said. "I have to piddle my dogs after work, but if you meet me back here at 5:30, we can go in my van. . . Reason I'm going to the airport is to pick up my boyfriend." She said this last with an eyebrow flourish reminiscent of a Marx brother (specifically, Karl. "People of the world unite, we have nothing to lose but our eyebrows!")

Needless to say we laughed at the phrase, "piddling my dogs," and also at the idea of this middle-aged bird having a boyfriend who winged in for travel agent sex. Only thing is she seemed a little desperate so he'd probably break her heart. Poor bird. Didn't say any of this of course.

"OK! We'll meet you here at 5:30."

"There's an Old Country Buffet in the mall about a mile up the road, if you're hungry," she added.

"OK!"

It was unbelievable how nice these people were. We just kept being saved. By car dealers, the elderly, raisins, hicks, condescending campers, Men With Hairy Faces, birds. And now, here, we were given the gift of an Old Country Buffet. We walked the mile and oh, heavens, the piles of biscuits and fried meats and stuffings and salads and soups and oh lord oh lord. If you're counting, we'd only eaten about 3 times in a week. Here was

the motherload. For \$5.99 we could unlimited soda refills chicken grapes pasta and fuck it i'd eat sausage i ate meat before and who cares we are living and i'm hungry and let's go let's go.

We were feeling high-minded and pleased with these new plot developments. There was a waitress working there (question: why do they have waitresses at buffets?) who had the most unbelievable eyes. She was young, charming, beautiful.

"You have pretty eyes," Gar said as she took away our 47th plates. She just blushed and turned away, shy, adorable.

Oh, I should've learned my lesson from the Taco Hell experience but of course did not. I ate too much too fast and soon felt sick. Gar did too. He hadn't crapped the whole trip since he took that pepto-bismol back in Harrisburg 8 lifetimes ago. We had a while 'til 5:30 so tried to walk it off around the mall. We went in to an Oshmond's sporting good store and played with all the equipment. We tried on some boxing gloves and beat each other in the aisles. It was funny until Gar landed a gut shot and I felt really sick.

"I have to crap," I said.

"Uh-uh," he said. "Me too."

We found a public bathroom in a Target store and sat in dual stalls, shitting our brains out in a gastrointestinal duet that would have made no one proud.

"Hey, Gar," I said through the walls of the stalls.

"Yeah?"

"We're shitting on Target."

We were in there for quite a while. It takes time to pass a weeks worth of strange food and a 47 course meal. When we were done Gar looked at his watch. It said 5:26. The dog-piddling was surely over by now and we just had 4 minutes to make it back to A-1 before our ride left. We washed and dried our hands (taking an extra second to shoot the hand dryer down our pants because it feels sooo good) then sprinted out of the bathroom. We wanted to make sure our Bird didn't take flight without us. We ran like our lives depended on it and I swear we broke Roger Bannister's world record and clobbered that mile in well-under 4 minutes. The Bird was just pulling it to the lot in her minivan as we crossed the finish line, out of breath. She waved a tiny winged wave and seemed really happy to see us.

We got in the van and I thought for a second she might try to piddle us (we were breathing so heavy that we sounded like panting dogs). But she didn't, just made some nice comment about how we didn't have to run

now, then pulled away. The minivan had lots of dog hairs all in it that stuck to my sweaty arms. But besides that the ride was uneventful. Just an hour or so through smoggy traffic to Detroit. After that, it was travel agent sex for the bird and 24 hours 'til home for us. She dropped us off, we gave her fifteen bucks for gas and good-bye.

Gar set his watch. We had 24 hours to kill in Detroit. I thought of Norm and his talk about how dangerous the city is. He had faith in the Negro and hell I do too but I wasn't eager to go find out what the wild urbanity of that hard-luck city could do to a couple of honkeys with questionable luck. We decided we'd just stay put in the airport. The last 24 hours of my last summer vacation ever and they were going to be spent in the Detroit Airport. I looked at the smiley face sticker from Wal-Mart I had attached to my backpack. Even he was frowning.

We decided to get one of those lockers you can get to you know, store your stuff. That way we wouldn't have to haul around bags all night. That way our valuables (yeah right) would be safe. We did that and nothing to do but kill time. Bludgeon time. Annihilate time. Put time in a headlock and wail on it. Slap time up and down and choke it with our bare hands until it bled and spit on our shoes. It was going to be a long night.

Ah, that makes it sound worse than it was really. I didn't mind the waiting. Waiting was something I was used to. Working in a miserable office with nothing to do gives you at least that skill. One nugget to be happy for about that awful experience. I no longer had a hard time passing long stretches of boredom. Like a career prisoner who says of a 3 year stint, "that's easy time, I can do that standing on my head," I thought of 24 hours in the Detroit airport as nothing compared to the hundreds of hours I labored away in the work dungeon. And after the hours at the campground, I felt like I was an experienced killer of time. A time assassin.

"Easy time," I said to Gar. "This is easy time." He wasn't so optimistic and searched for amusement in the airport, running from wing to wing, buying books then returning them, watching the planes take off, and so forth. An hour here, an half hour there. Killed. Eventually we found a video arcade and that was again, of course a good thing. We shared a quarter or two, slowly rationing the change we had picked up from lunch or whatever on some video golf (which I hate anyway but was the best thing there). Then it got interesting. We saw a group of young girls. Don't get all excited, they were too young. About 16. But it was still interesting. We overheard them talking.

"I wonder what Jenna will look like"

"I'm so excited"

"Do you think she'll be different?"

"It might be weird"

"Who's Jenna?" Gar asked, bobbing his head like he was taking all this in. They laughed and had no fear which was nice.

"Yeah, who's Jenna?" I asked. They laughed.

They really weren't afraid of dirty older guys in the airport asking them questions which was good I guess but I fear for them in the future. Not every stranger you meet in an airport is as a holdover from more chivalrous times. Anyway, they told us who Jenna was.

She was one of their ohmigod bestest friends, and had weirded everyone out by deciding to spend the summer at some sort of youth military boot camp thing. Don't ask me how that all works, I don't know. I just know that they were one of those groups of girlfriends that no doubt saw each other every single day and when one of their crew (I guess the oldest because she must have been 18 to be in the military, right?) was away for a couple of weeks it was a pretty big deal. They all had flowers and cameras and seemed very emotional. We tagged along and watched as they met Jenna's parents (who eyed us oddly) and then sat with them as they waited for the plane. What the hell, a bit of the old human melodrama as spectator sport beats the crap out of video golf. Plus it's free.

While we were waiting one of the girls gave me some of her Reese's Pieces Peanut Butter cups, which I thought was very nice. I think she liked me. There was a bit of friendly back and forth and it came up that one of the girls' parents were out of town. Dirty Gar, God bless 'im, tried to convince her that letting us stay at her house would be a good idea. Of this she was having none. Even though the peanut butter friend was in favor of it in a head-tilting sort of way. Ohmigod, I thought. Would I be spending my last night in bed with a 16 year old? Just sleeping, of course. . . and maybe a little kissing. No, no, no, none of that I thought, I couldn't. And besides that, her friend was very firm in her conviction. And besides that the flight was arriving! Ohmigod! Jenna's coming!

Jenna looked pretty good, with a healthy glow, though a bit nervous. She kept pushing her short hair over her ears and looking at the ground as if something down there was very interesting. Maybe she didn't like all the attention. Maybe there was some crazy reason she decided to do the whole boot camp thing and it was a very, very big deal for her. Maybe she had some breakdown or heartbreak or abusive dad, I'll never know her story. And she'll never know mine. I'll just always be the weird older guy in the background of her pictures from the airport.

Jenna, Mom, Dad & the girls left. Swept up in the excitement they didn't even say good-bye to us. We were left alone again with our video golf and boredom. I'll spare you all the details of the countdown since if it was so boring for me to live it, I'm sure it has to be worse for you to hear it. Every so often we checked the wristwatch, joking (sort of) about how we just wasted another hour of our vacation and our lives.

Sleep became a concern and, wondering around, we found that there was a hotel in the airport. We thought about getting a room but of course couldn't afford it. They jack up the price and bleed you dry if you're stupid or desperate enough to stay there. We were both but didn't have the cash to back it up. Gar pleaded with the black ladies working there to let us have a room for free or at least sleep on the couch on the lobby and, though they laughed repeatedly, slapping their tired knees with hands spiked with elaborate fingernails, they said there was no way. The boss would kill 'em, they said and we understood. We wandered around and looked at all the pointless shops and retarded theme bars that were closed and stupid. We rode the Jetsons moving sidewalk thing back and forth, back and forth, shaking our heads in pity.

It got late and it started to get really cold in the airport. We were just wearing t-shirts and shorts so decided to go get our jackets out of the lockers. Only one problem. They lock up that part of the airport at night. Our jackets were hidden away from our shivering bodies behind elaborate security fences. We begged with all sorts of security guards who had only a spurious grasp of the english language and held much contempt for their jobs and the obnoxious white travelers who so often snapped at them. They were, as expected, no help.

We shivered and ran around trying to stay warm. Gar got in a wheelchair and started flying down the ramps just to you know, pass the time. He got yelled at by a security guard who said, stupidly enough, "don't you 'ave anything else better to do?" "NO," Gar said. "No I do not." The security guard said something like well just get out of the goddamned wheelchair.

I was so cold that I started running laps to try to get some blood flowing. Then I got an idea. I went to the bathroom. Sure enough they had a hand dryer. I could sit under there for warmth! So there I sat, huddled in my t-shirt with the smiley face sticker, sporadically smacking the button (push butt** rub hands under *arm ***) to give me temporary relief from the chill of the Detroit Airport's insane cooling system.

Happy birthday to me.

I soon left the bathroom, wandered more and, eventually the need

for sleep overpowered the need for comfort, safety and sanity. It was close, and a photo finish for sure. They don't want you sleeping in the airport, I guess, so they make no horizontal surfaces whatsoever.

Every chair, every bench, every everything is broken up with armrests as if people's arms are so much more goddamned tired than the rest of them. Finally we climbed under the torture chairs onto the flat floor. The metal rods that outlined the chairs provided just enough room to lie like a couple of prone sailors in pine boxes. I lay there, counted the pieces of discarded gum and wished for death. Eventually we slept for oh a couple of hours like that, rigid, freezing, disconsolate.

8.

At about 5 o'clock a.m. the bustle of travel commenced with renewed vigor. Variegated shoes began to whiz past our final resting place. The thuds, squeaks, and flaps woke me and for a few minutes I just lay there and watched those shoes. Bustling tennis shoes. Haughty high-heeled pumps. Angry wing-tips. Tiny mickey-mouse patent leathers tugging along behind maudlin sneakers, frazzled and insane. The world is nothing if not varied, I thought. And hurrisome.

I crawled out of my space, kicked Gar in the side by way of awaking him and he soon joined me in windmill calisthenics and some sun salutations to try to undo the damage to our spines. It must've been quite a sight right there in the middle of crazy commuters, businessman solo travelers and family early start vacations to watch us spinning and attempting yoga. I say attempting because I don't know how to do it at all and Gar's not a yoga expert or anything. He said he learned the sun salutation in an acting class. I think that was what gave him an idea.

"Watch this," he said (after we had walked back towards our terminal & retrieved our gear).

We went to the ticket counter and the story he told the lady there, I tell you, it almost made me cry. And I knew that his grandfather wasn't dying. It was incredible, though, the way he huffed and shuddered and looked all innocent and sad. The lady behind the counter had no choice but to get us on the next flight outta there as quick as possible and would the 6AM be soon enough? I almost jumped with excitement but then remembered we were mourning a dead, no dying grandfather, so kept it inside. We would be winging home in less than a half hour.

Home. Unbelievable.

I had to go call Dad again, to let him know we'd be getting home 12 hours early and could he pick us up at about noon? It was early but I knew, luckily, that he always wakes up at the exact same mind-boggling hour of 5AM and would no doubt already at the table in his underwear, eating a bagel, drinking a cup of tea with one sugar, and reading the paper backwards.

"Dad," I said.

"Is everything OK?" he asked, the voice of worry.

"Sure, we're, we got an earlier flight. Can you pick us up at noon?"

"Sure, son."

"Flight eight oh nine."

"Got it."

"Thanks, Dad."

"No problem."

"And Dad"

"Yes?"

"See you at noon."

"Goodbye, son."

Our flight was about to board so we hurried through the paperwork and electronic zapping of various codes necessary to get us the seats. We thanked the lady at the counter and she wished Gar luck and expressed her sympathies and we were on the plane.

Seatbelts. Take-off. Small cups of soda with ice. Baggies of yellow powdered snacks. Trip to the tiny bathroom. Winking at stewardesses. Turbulence. Descent. Landing. Disembark.

We touched back down on Eastern soil and even though I'd never been to the Philadelphia airport before it felt like home. The accents were right, the banners were of the correct sports teams, and so forth. And there was Dad. Waiting for me like he used to at the bottom of the slide. Never mind that I was huge and hairy and smelled bad, he was there. He was always there.

"Hi Dad," I said, laughing, embarrassed.

He just smiled and shook his head. We had the expected conversation where I told him/not told him what all went down. He said, "well, I'm just glad you're safe" and tell you the truth I had to be glad that he was glad. The whole ride home I was in a daze. We got back to my house from Philly, then I drove Gar to his house in Jersey. Sad to drop him off, really. We had bonded in an intense and spectacular way on the trip and were deep, robust friends. But I pulled into the driveway where his mom ran out and gave him a giant aproned hug and me a pleasing, "hello, dear." I knew I'd see him again in just a day back at school so it really wasn't that tearful of a good-bye.

Then I drove back home alone.

That familiar stretch of Route 80 from Jersey to Pennsylvania looked just a little different than it did the last time I drove it some weeks ago. Or, more precisely, the objects were not changed but the viewer was. Every thing was turned just slightly in my brain so that I could see

everything differently. Hard to put into words. Not necessarily better but certainly not worse. My whole sense of things, of life, of the country I lived in, of my family, of my wants and needs, of my friends, of life and death and suffering and time and twin hookers in Michigan, it was all re-aligned inside my skull ever so slightly like when you bump a movie projector just slightly & everything comes into focus. Or was it now out of focus? I really couldn't tell, all I know is that I'm changed. And that it will be all right. Maybe I will find my place. Maybe I will find a better job. Maybe I could pull out some of the old magic. Maybe I could find a way to find a middle road. Maybe I could make peace with my father and still be able to live in unison with my truest, innermost wishes. Maybe I could be free and secure. Maybe I would crawl out of the depths to which I had sunk all summer. Maybe it would be all right.

* * *

I stopped, pounded the rest of my drink (which was really just molten ice cube and a little syrup at this point) and almost collapsed from exhaustion, delirium, whirly-gigging head swimming and too much talking. My throat was a little hoarse, my mind was a little spent. Had I told them too much? Have I told you too much? Had I done more than I set out to do at the beginning when I wanted to just tell my summer vacation to 2 innocuous drunks? Had I given away my secrets? Did I thrust me out of me by accident, my inner ocular pressure exploding out of lips loosened by booze and exhaustion? Did cutting through the layers of my onion reveal something that would make me, not them, cry? Did I step outside the lines of acting in a certain acceptable manner? Was I just another lame confused kid? I thought all this staring into my flamboyant vessel of a booze glass and was reluctant to hoist my eyes to meet their gaze. What would they think of me after knowing my fears, my insecurities, my insanities, my altogether goof-hearted weirdness and strangeboy charm?

"You're my hero, Don," Drunk Jimmy said, shaking his head wistfully, answering all of my questions but not really answering them at all with this strange sentiment.

"Me too," echoed Ed.

I guess that means they liked the story?

THE END

TWO: COLLECTED STORIES

Soon enough we were all swapping tales of our 21st birthdays. I told my tale of, you know, the usual. Jack Daniels, my best friend's girlfriend, some Mexicans, another girl, some stranger touching my cock, a video camera, passing out with a pot pipe in my mouth and almost lighting my eyebrows on fire. Waking up in a shirt with no pants. You know, the regular. Jefé told his story of the strip club where he got stripped, whipped, and called a fag by some Hell's Angels. Another friend of mine told a story I don't remember anything about other than the phrase "a pie plate-sized puke stain on my shirt" but I'm sure it was pretty good. They all were. We felt proud that we had done the holiday right and were set to buy a drink for the young stranger who proudly displayed his sparkling ID next to us at the bar. We wanted to make sure his night was not a letdown, though we were sure it couldn't top ours. Nothing could.

We must've been talking loudly because another stranger, this one an older man, heard us over the Johnny Cash on the jukebox and saddled down at the bar next to us.

"I heard them stories," he said. "And they're all pretty good. . . . But I gotcha beat."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, eyeing up this mysterious wanderer. He looked a bit like a sea captain and was confusingly placed in this landlocked setting. He had a chunky beard and a tight hat, a faded flannel shirt and sweatpants tucked into ski boots.

"Well, none of ye fulfilled the tradition," he said. "So I gotcha beat right there from the get-go."

"What tradition?" I asked.

"21 shots?" asked my friend, the one with the pie plate-sized puke stain.

"You did 21 shots?" said Jefé. "Whoah."

"21 shots is for babies," said the stranger. "Back then we'd do 21 mixed drinks. Drinking the Alphabet we called it. One for each letter. Alabama Slammer, Black Russian, Cosmopolitan, Dead Canary, Evil Goldfish, Fuzzy Navel, Gin & Tonic . . ."

"You drank 21 mixed drinks?" asked Jefé, raising his eyebrows in that incredulous manner he has.

"Well, almost," said the stranger, almost shyly.

"Who's the baby now?" asked my friend, the one with the pie plate-sized puke stain, raising up for a high five.

"Not to be a pedant," I said, "but there are 26 letters in the alphabet."

"I don't consider V through Z letters and never will!" the stranger said intensely, slapping his meaty fist on the bar.

I could respect that, I thought. "I can respect that," I said.

"Don't be calling me a baby if you can't even finish the alphabet, maybe you're a baby . . ." said my friend, the one with the pie plate-sized puke stain.

"Let me tell it first," said the man. "Then you'll see."

We settled back to listen to this odd sea-farer tell his tale of a 21st birthday that must have been 30 years ago. He remembered it like it was yesterday. "I remember it like it was yesterday," he said. "I just got a new car."

"What kind of car was it?" asked Jefé, interrupting. He was a bit of a motorhead and cared about such things. I'm not, however, so don't. I completely forgot what he said. Camaro . . . Corvette . . . something with a "C". Is a Coryzol a type of car? Anyway, the man continued.

"I told my wife I was going out for the night with one of my buddies for some manly activity."

"You had a wife?" asked Jefé.

"Some manly activity, sounds like you're a . . ." said my other friend.

"Stop interrupting, you two," I said.

"Thank you" said the man. He continued. "Yes, I had a wife. A kid too. . . That's how it was back then. We did everything earlier because we didn't think we'd live so long. I didn't have a home of my own, though. We lived with my wife's parents." He paused, waiting for a smart-ass comment from one of us but there was none so he continued. "I left the wife and baby at home and drove my new car to pick up my buddy who lived out on a farm up north. We drove out to the only bar in town and by manly activity I mean some serious drinking."

He shot a pointed glance at my friend, the one with the pie plate-sized puke stain.

"Drinking the Alphabet. A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L. Bartender just stood there laughing and pouring. He'd never seen anything

like it, he said. He didn't think I could do it. . . "

He paused for a while and chewed his lips, then continued in a quieter tone.

"Now you kids might be surprised, but I wasn't such a cool dude when I was young."

We all gasped in fake surprise. Jefé covered his mouth dramatically in that funny way he has.

"I was kind of what you kids would call a nerd."

It always gives me a weird feeling when old people use slang and here he had done it twice in two sentences. I shuddered a bit and took a quick sip on my 7&7 to ease the pain.

"But 21 meant I was a man and I had to prove it. No matter what. Sure I got sick 'round about Q, but I kept going."

"What did you drink for Q?" asked Jefé.

"A Quicksand" said the man. "Damn fine drink."

"What's in it?" asked Jefé.

"A bunch of crazy stuff. It's not bad though, not bad at all. Now, shut up, boy, and let me continue."

Jefé shut up. The man continued.

"I drank all the way 'til a Singapore Sling when my buddy, who was drinking along albeit at a slower pace, hell he hadn't even made it up past a Long Island Iced Tea, started throwing up. Threw up right into his glass. Bartender said he'd never seen anything like it. Also said we had to go. Scaring away the customers, he said. Too drunk, he said. I could've made the 21, I know I could've. But we had to go and, seeings as how I was further along in the alphabet, I told my buddy he'd better drive. Even though he was vomiting into glasses, he was better off'n me. I could barely stand. And it's a good thing he did drive because I got quite ill on the way home and had to throw up myself. But get this, I couldn't get the window down. I'm reaching and reaching, searching and searching for that handle, and then remembered that I hadn't put the crank back on from when I was painting the inside panel there. I had to open the door and hang out, tossing every letter of the alphabet down that country road. My buddy was swerving all over the place, laughing like a sonofabitch. I hung on for dear life and threw up all the way home.

My buddy dropped me home and sped off with my new car. I stammered into my wife's parents' house and was feeling a bit hungry. I'm sure you boys know that empty stomach hungry feeling you get after you toss your cookies."

We all did. I sipped my drink quickly again. He continued.

"I found some ham & bean salad that my mother-in-law had made and fixed myself a huge bowl of it. I went to take it upstairs to eat in my room. Now, they were a large family and had lots of pictures of all the relatives. They kept 'em in sort of a shrine lining the stairwell. Hundreds, hundreds of framed pictures all up and down that huge staircase. I struggled up, holding the railing with one hand, my ham & bean salad in the other. Staring at all those frozen faces, it was kind of creepy, you know? Anyway, I made it all the way to the top and boom, gentlemen, just as my foot hit that top stair I passed out. Stone unconscious, loaded with ham & bean. Well of course I dropped the bowl and of course I fell backwards all the way down the stairs. And of course I knocked down every single one of those pictures, broke most of the frames and made an incredible racket. My father-in-law, crazy bastard, heard the noise and thought I was an intruder. He came out with his shotgun and shot me in the leg."

He deftly swung his leg up onto the bar and pulled back his sweatpants to reveal a scar on his shin. We all looked at the leg, then each other.

"Next thing I knew I was in the hospital. Woke up there with my leg hurtin' like a sonofabitch, covered in little cuts, stinking of ham & bean. Know what the first thing I said when I woke up was?"

None of us ventured a guess. "I said 'Get me a goddamned Rum & Coke, I got 4 letters left!'" He broke off in a laughing fit and lit a cigarette.

We sat stunned for a moment of silence.

"Well, what happened to the car?" Jefé asked. Figures he would.

"God damn it," I said. "That's not the point."

"That's a good story," said my friend, the one with the pie plate-sized puke stain. "That's a good story."

We had to agree it was pretty good and all looked into our glasses, murmuring and burping. It wasn't as good as the one we heard about a guy who shit himself then ripped the bar sink off the wall while trying to wash his ass, but that's another story. The old man's 21st birthday was pretty good and we told him so. We were willing to admit when we were beat. Old crazy bastard clapped us on the back, ordered us all a round of Quicksands, then grabbed his hat and left, disappearing into the misty night. Back to his ship or his 1968 Coryzol or whatever. We drank the Quicksands in his honor and I'll tell you what, they weren't bad. They weren't bad at all.

africa: in search of justice, drugs

I was in Africa, the country of Ghana to be precise, on a month long study abroad program, ostensibly researching the effects of the Intermonetary Fund/World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs on Ghana's local economy. Ghana was touted as a stalwart example of the success of the program. It didn't take me long to come to the conclusion that this was total horseshit. It wasn't a charity or "development" program but rather a way for Western business to bleed more profits out of an impoverished nation. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. I should've been clued in by the fact that the World Bank is actually a bank. I mean, the word's right in its title. When's the last time a bank every did anything charitable for anyone? Only thing I can think of is the perfunctory lollipop at the end of your visit, and hell, most of 'em don't even do that anymore.

One of my first stops was the University where I met with Ghanaian professors and economists all of whom were rather in dismay at how their country was getting fucked. They couldn't do much about it, though because the P.R. from the World Bank was so powerful and made everything seem so damn rosy. In a country where most people can't read, who's going to take the time to dissect the figures and see that they are again getting the screw? It was altogether depressing as I saw how in an effort to boost exports, farmers had to stop growing food and start growing cocoa (the country's main export). This was considered "good for the economy." I guess eating somehow wasn't. The country sunk further and further into debt and saw more and more profits leak overseas

What a goddamned success.

Furthermore, the price of education went through the roof under the World Bank programs. One professor I talked to couldn't even afford to send his own kids to college. An uneducated populace is one of the best things a repressive ruling class can hope for. They know this where I come from too. "Ignorance is a disease," the professor said. And, "the books — they tell you lies." What's a man to do?

I didn't spend all my time there beating my head into the impossible rock of global finance. It's too hard on a man's soul. I had to seek some

release from the continual depressing sights and figures. Thankfully I was able to fit some extra-curricular activities into my schedule of research and meetings with my American professors.

What I mean by extra-curricular activities is of course drink & drugs. It is no wonder that most political progressives and other sensitive souls are susceptible to a need to rearrange the chemicals in their brains. It's too depressing otherwise, to live your life face-to-face with the stone-cold reality of the naked oppression and violent inequality that marches all over the globe and has for all times. There have been teetotaling progressives, like Gandhi or Jesus I guess, but most of us are not Gandhi. Or Jesus. I, certainly am not. I sometimes need release from the constant eye-moistening, chest-constricting sadnesses of reality and the bottle or the herb does this better than anything else I knew at the time. Some fellow travelers of mine felt more or less the same, despite the fact that we had little in common on the surface. We had a couple hours one day between meetings with our professors (the American, not African ones) to go "exploring" and we took full advantage to go explore Ghana's marijuana culture.

The leader of our little group which had splintered from the larger, boring group was an Ecuadorian from inner-city Newark. People from inner cities always seem to have some secret pool of confidence that is a mystery to me. This guy did anyway. He seemed to always know what was about to happen and just what he was going to do about when it did, whereas I just sort of bumbled along, surprised by everything. I was trying to get over the sycophantic relationship that always develops when kids from the suburbs befriend city kids on TV. The city kids are always aloof and the suburban kids are dorky. It was going OK because he liked my radical politics. That never happens on TV. The Ecuadorian was even more of a radical than I was, which I guess is understandable considering his background. But really I should stop relating everything to his background, he was a rare, intelligent, and interesting guy.

The other in our group, besides me, was a little hippy girl with dreadlocks. She was quite nice and not nauseating like some hippies are. She of course was looking for some weed, hippies being associated with the drug from their beginnings – back before every subculture and even the main culture used weed like they do these days. Think about it: artsy writer types praise the mind-expanding and creative effects of the drug, lots of punks get high, hip-hop culture basically worships weed, hippies of course have the well-known connection, frat boys are obsessed with weed, some country musicians (think Willie Nelson) smoke weed, & even metal bands

write songs about weed, use pot leaves in their artwork and construct giant bongos to use as stage props. Kind of weird if you think about it, but I guess it's good that something brings everyone together. I'm looking forward to the day that weed-smoking sneaks into the last holdout group and becomes an integral part of nerd culture. Then we can all really get together and smoke a fat one. I guess Carl Sagan was trying to spearhead that movement, toking up and writing books on astronomy as he did. Too bad it didn't catch on.

Anyway, me, the hippy and the Ecuadorian went looking for weed (sounds like the beginning of a very strange joke) and it was easy to find despite its extreme illegality. Huge hand-painted signs all around the country screamed that possession of even a small amount was punishable by 20 years in prison. I of course had visions of myself in African prison and wondered how I would explain that to the folks back home. Nonetheless, spurred on by the enthusiasm of my cohorts, we went and talked to some people we knew would have weed. By this I mean Rastafarians. There's a fair number of them all around Ghana and they are easily identifiable by their dreadlocks and you can be sure that they are always carrying. It's part of their religion for God's sake. We wandered through the jagged streets of town and found a couple of them sitting under a portico playing checkers. We slid up to them. They were friendly, though somewhat disinterested in our presence. This was actually nice because we were met with thronging overenthusiasm by everyone we met.

Really, there was a great worshiping of Americans among the Ghanaians, which I found odd in light of my knowledge that our country was engaged in a vast plan to further force them into poverty and generally give them the screw. But alas, everywhere I met people would rush up to me and yell "obroni!" This is of course the local word for "whitey," but not in a derogatory way. They would always excitedly ask where I was from, hoping it was America. When I answered that, yes, I was an American, the inevitable counter-response was "maybe you can take me back with you." There would be fevered excitement to ask me about my homeland and it became a bit tiresome. I started saying I was from Canada. This engendered the response of "maybe I can come with you, then go to America" which wasn't really any better. So I started picking more and more obscure nations of white people, France, Australia, Hungary, Luxembourg. Sometimes, if I was feeling gutsy, I'd say I was from Sierra Leone. Or, on occasion, Ghana. This was always found to be quite funny.

Some mangy mutts sat at the Rastas' feet and as me & my friends

talked to them and made purchasing arrangements (the Rastas knew our interest before we had to announce it), I pet the dogs. One of them was pregnant and lay there with her tongue out to the side panting and whispering. I liked her.

"What's the dog's name?" I asked.

"Weeandem," one of the Rastas said.

"Weeandem?" I asked, confused.

"We and Them," he said slower, "everybody."

I liked that and thought that if I lived in Africa I'd probably be a Rastafarian. There isn't much leeway for social rebellion in traditional societies. I was glad they were there.

We bought the stuff for a fairly unbelievable price and went to look for someplace to smoke it. We wandered around a bit, then just walked out into the middle of a field. It was safe enough, we reasoned, though I don't know why. We walked on the hot moist ground. A sudden downpour had just soaked the dry earth and made it muddy and indistinguishable. We walked past some sad homemade toys of wrinkled discarded cans with string attached meandering melodramatically in the muck. We walked past two dusty chickens who lost their minds, freaked out and danced with each other. We stood in a very secluded spot. The silence was almost deafening. Then a goat wandered by and peered at us. As we passed the joint the Ecuadorian said, "What's up, goat? Wanna smoke a spliff?"

The goat did not.

One of the chickens came right towards me and hopped up and down, kicking her legs out to the side and cocking her head, as if asking me to dance. Poor chickens, I thought, you get a bad rap. You are not any more fearful than other birds and often, as illustrated here, less so. Sparrows, for one, are afraid of everything and are always twitching their eyes and spazzing like speed freaks.

"Sparrow should be a derisive term to denote cowardice," I said, gesturing broadly. Everyone looked at me queerly (goat included). Of course they didn't have access to my train of thought, so I guess it didn't make any sense at all to them why I would say that. We all laughed (goat excluded).

Oh, getting high made it all a little better, as did the camaraderie with the strange fellow travelers with whom my lot was unexpectedly thrown. It was quite strange, however, when we had to return to the meeting with our (American) professor and I could see what a bald-face liar she was. Funny how that never struck me while I was sober. Under the influence of marijuana, false pretenses become extremely visible. Maybe

this is a reason politicians outlaw it? I don't want to be some weed conspiracy theorist but really it was something, how easy it was to see her lies. Anyway, the meeting ended and I was released back to my Mamma.

Mamma, as she insisted I call her, was the wife of the head of the local Presbyterian church, whose home I was staying. They were nice enough, though they constantly tried to convert me to Christianity. Most of the time I was at their house I avoided them and spent time with their five-year old grandson who lived there (the whereabouts of his parents was never expressed). Ben, as the little man was known, did not speak any English so made for excellent company. He was also a hell of a drummer. He tried to teach me some rhythms with the expected lack of success. He also taught me a local game involving beans and a board with little carved indentations. I beat him a few times, though don't know how I did.

I also spent time with Mamma's two sons who were approximately 18 & 20 years old. One of them was sure he looked like Shabba Ranks and talked about it all the time. I said I didn't know what Shabba Ranks looked like. But he insisted.

"I look like Shabba Ranks, yes?"

"Sure. Whatever."

"Yes!"

... Snapshots of life with this family: Mamma introducing me to strangers as her son, with no explanation. ... In a courtyard getting lessons on how to balance buckets on my head from one of the girls at the house. I got pretty good at it but wasn't as proficient as them because I have "obronj head." They shape the heads of their babies when they are born to be flat on top and thus can carry water, tables, sewing machines, Buicks. ... Going to church and being applauded wildly during the offertory by about 700 people ... Trying to pet a goat wearing a ribbon on its neck who lived there and kept running away from me. Someone told me that the ribbon meant that he would be butchered next and that was why he was so scared. I asked, "could the goat possibly know what that ribbon meant?" and got no acceptable answer.

After a few days of this (with no contact with my fellow travelers) I felt as though I again needed some alteration of the chemical equation in my brain, as you may well imagine. Weed was out of the question as I couldn't escape the grips of at least one of the Presbyterians for more than 2 minutes. So, one day I told Shabba and the other brother whose name now escapes me that we were going out drinking. I could use a beer I told them, though my real agenda was to sample a local drink I had read about in one of the lame guidebooks I had. It said that Akpeteshie, as the drink

was known, "gives an effect more like being high than drunk." Sounded good to me. I kept that wish in my pocket, though, because the brothers were pretty lame and would no doubt put up some resistance. In fact they put up some resistance just to going out drinking at all. But I told them they had no choice and we were going. I told Pappa and Momma they better not wait up and not to get confused if I creep into bed with them by accident. I don't know why I said that.

So we went out just after dinner time to find the local bars. There were plenty. Most of them were of the French plain air style by which I mean a few tables outside next a shack that had some bottles of beer. The beer was bad but the setting was nice and the prices were fairly ridiculous. I only drank the local beer. They did have Guinness, but I was on a personal boycott of Guinness because I felt that the advertising campaign they used in Ghana of "Guinness is Good for you" was too much blatant lying. Yeah, I know they used to use that slogan in the West too but it still bothered me. I mean, if saying that a drink that causes liver damage and hundreds of other ailments -- not to mention stupidity is good for you -- is not false advertising, than the phrase has no meaning. I know what alcohol does to me and I don't care but I don't like being lied to. Anyway, I struggled through a few of the Star Lager (the local beer) and bought a few for the boys. Then I dropped the bomb. Smooth as the ass of a flat-headed baby I asked, "You boys ever try the akapateshie?"

They looked at me, then each other, then broke into wild, unmitigated laughter. Odd. I had expected a reaction, but not quite this one. Was it that strange, really? Was it like I was asking for Canned Heat? Or crack? Undeterred, I pressed on. "I'd read about it," I said "is it good?" Still they looked at me in wide disbelief. "What?" I asked. "What is it?"

"I . . . I do not think you want to try that," Shabba said. "I do not think you would be able to walk home." More laughter from the two of them.

"Sounds like a challenge to me," I said. "I'll try some if you do, and we'll see who walks home."

"Oh, no, I am not, I will not drink that," said the other brother.

"I will not either," said Shabba. "But we will get you some. If you would like." They laughed.

"I would like."

He went up to the bartender and began talking in their local language and pointing to me, laughing. I waved a Miss American wave. Apparently, they did not have any of the mysterious elixir, for the bartender kept shaking his head and throwing his palms up into the air. I watched his

face and suddenly saw a light bulb go off over his head. (Wait. In a country with limited access to electricity, is this a fair way to say that a man had an idea? Should it be a candle lighting above his head? I suppose so, but that sounds dangerous). The bartender leapt from behind his bar and took off running down the street. He was wearing small, cotton shorts that barely covered his ass. I thought this was funny and giggled a bit, but then found it a little embarrassing for everyone involved.

Shabba came back.

"Where the hell is he going?" I asked. Shabba looked disapprovingly at me for a moment for my un-Christian language and then said, "He will get it for you."

"Where the h. . . from where?"

"He will get it."

I sat back and struggled with my Star Lager and waited. It wasn't long. In just a few minutes the bartender with the cotton shorts and the ass came sprinting back down the muddy, busy street with a tiny glass in his hand. It was filled with a clear liquid that looked innocent enough.

"There it is," Shabba said. Certainly, there it was. I didn't ask any more questions about where or why he went, figuring it was probably no use. I just paid for the drink (tipping generously of course for his running and ass-embarrassment) and bought a couple beers for my brothers. They didn't touch them, though. They just sat on the edge of their bench, watching me intently. It was as though I was about to eat fire or something.

"Here's to ya," I said, and gulped the drink in one steady swing. "Neeyah," I added, as the drink burned, then numbed every part of my body that it touched, and a few it hadn't. . . . Didn't feel like getting high, felt like getting punched in the mouth. My lips felt like they were swelling up and I thought that maybe the bartender had just emptied some antifreeze from his van into a cup and that this drink would be the death of me. That'd be hard to explain back home too, but at least I wouldn't have to be the one to do it. My eyes felt sparkly, my teeth felt hot and I had all these crazy thoughts before even putting the glass down.

The boys laughed and groped at each other like it was the funniest thing since Jesus.

"Not so bad," I said, and truth be told it wasn't after those first self-effacing moments. I got all drunk and lovely and the rest of my time there was pretty OK.

. . . Snapshots from the bar: A discussion with Shabba and Eric (that's his name!) about music. Drunk philosopher I am, I posed the

challenge, "define music." Shabba: "it's the language of love." Me: That sounds like a greeting card. Shabba: "Thank you." I didn't explain that this was not a compliment. Eric: "it's the sounds that are pleasing to the ear made by instruments and people singing." Me to Eric: "Oh, what about the birds singing?" Eric to Me after a lengthy pause: "Thank you Mr. Joshua, for showing me a better way." . . . A political discussion in which some weird older drunk guy who had joined us at our bench illustrated the world's economy by showing how a glass was Africa and a bottle was The U.S. and don't you know the bottle will always be bigger than the glass? Also, I think the bottle opener represented the U.N. but I forget how. The glass of akpeteshie had, as far as I remember, no significance whatsoever. . .

bullets & typewriters

tempus edax rerum

The sense of denial was so palpable in the old shop that you could almost see it in the air, rising like bendy waves of heat off an Arizona highway . . . Ah, that's a bad comparison to start with. The sense of denial was visible, that much is true, but the arid Southwest with its endless open spaces and clay oven warmth, is about as far away as possible from the cramped, cold reality of the old shop. To even mention the desert in reference to that place could put you in the wrong frame of mind. I'll try again. Think more like this:

The old shop was stuffed into a cramped corner of the country like a huge thumb in a tiny mitten. It was shoved under a rickety roominghouse like dust bunnies under a frayed carpet. In a place already filled with litter, bikes, and rust, the old shop was crammed in like one more piece of rubbish into an overflowing trash bin chained to a light post. Pure clutter inside and out. No open spaces in there but rather a dangerous-looking floor-to-ceiling heap that seemed as though it could crumble at any moment into a dusty wreck. That heap was like something from another world, or at least another time. It was composed of the husks of dinosauric machines and strange tools of an unknown use (maybe like a dentist's yet clearly not) whose purpose you would never understand. It was like nothing you've ever seen and for some reason you liked it. And the air. Oh the air. The air both inside and outside the old shop has so little in common with the hot, thin sterility of an Arizona desert that it seems almost odd that we call them both air. It was chilled and thick. Roaring with the steel smog and dancing pollutants of factory, car, and too many years of too many people who didn't care too much. Filthy. Inside the old shop it wasn't dirty, really, though everything was coated with a dark film. A delicate blackness. An inky stain covering everything, from the walls to the curtains, to the hands of the employees. Try as they may, wash as they did with manly, gritty soaps, the darkness remained. It was part of them.

Speaking of the employees, if you couldn't see the denial in the air, you could certainly sense from the forced smiles and constant

overenthusiastic talk of these gentlemen ("oh yeah, that's great, oh yeah") exactly how bad things had really gotten. They wore the mask of denial so flush to their faces that you wondered if they even knew themselves that it was a mask. Ah, they knew. They just did it for him. They loved him. They pretended for him. For him.

Him, er, he was the one who owned the shop. He was the one who built the shop. He was the one who put his heart into it. He lived above it and it lived inside of him. They could get other jobs. They could take a few weeks to scour off the blackness, put on a clean shirt and go apply for a new job somewhere, faked resume in scrubbed hand. It wouldn't be the same but it would put food on the table. Pay for video games and salad. They would be all right. But he, what would he do? He was not taking this well . . .

If your eyes weren't acclimated to the atmosphere well enough to see the noncorporeal waves of grief, if you couldn't pick up the falseness inherent in the breathy chatter of the workers, if somehow you missed all these clues – one second of conversation with the old shopowner would let you know, with the subtlety of a ding at the end of a line, the exact nature of the harsh and desperate truth.

It was devastating.

Sure he had made attempts at technological relevance, almost guiltily putting Wheel of Fortune CD-ROMs in the display window and things like that. But that wouldn't save him. Sure he still had a few costumers who for whatever insanity clung to a bygone era despite the fact that they were no doubt ridiculed by their friends and family (if they had any). But that wouldn't save him either. And still there was the library account. It brought in steady business. Not as much as it used to, mind you. Hell, when he first got that account it put him far enough in the black that he could splurge and buy the thick jangly watch you still see hanging on his hairy arm. But that was a long time ago. A long time ago. It couldn't be long now until they would flee like the others. And what then?

A proud shaman lorded over his land with the wisdom of the ages, dispensing dusty knowledge with a powder and a mysterious stick. Who knew how he did it? Everyone just knew that he did. He knew the answers to all your questions, sometimes even before you asked them. He had a steady, unshakable confidence, and a good humor. Even a grace. The restless searching of his younger years had ceased and he reached that goal which is maybe the highest goal that can ever be reached. He found a home. He had his place in the world. He was respected, prosperous, and successful. Then the Christians came.

I was a bad roommate. Of course there have been worse. I always paid the bills on time, often more than my share. I didn't leave cans of potted meat lying around to fester like some roommates do. I didn't have sex with my roommate's girlfriend or use all the Italian dressing or anything like that. I just had an unlucky tendency to break things. And many of those things had an unlucky tendency to be his.

I broke his Evil Kinevil motorcycle stunt toy by launching it down the stairs and couldn't even fix it due to a self-imposed ban on the use of crazy glue. I shorted out his guitar amp by playing it way too loud. I broke his Pixies tape listening to it in the inane 1983 portable stereo I kept in my car. You get the point. And then, I broke his typewriter. I was trying to make labels for our newly recorded punk rock demo tape (he on drums, me on the aforementioned loud guitar). I didn't know that you couldn't roll a label backwards. How would I know? Anyway, it got stuck on that roller thing and jammed the machine completely. Attempts to open it up and fix it myself brought me face-to-face with a confusing world of gears and knobs the likes of which I had never seen. Only thing to do was get it fixed. But where? Who repaired typewriters in this day and age? I looked through the phone book and found one lonely entry. Great. I could fix it before my roommate would even know.

I ripped the page with the map out of the phonebook and went looking for the typewriter shop. It was two towns over and in a part of town I had never been to. Once I got there, I saw why. It was even weirder than the considerably odd part of town I called home. The phone book told me five-oh-nine Main Street and, since there was only one real street in the town, I figured it had to be the main one. I couldn't find the store, though, and kept having to drive up and down the shabby road, getting a continual eyeful of its strange and worn-out denizens all the while. They were some of the most bizarre people I've ever seen, yet all looked more or less the same. Same with the storefronts. They were nearly indistinguishable. Pawn shop. Pawn store. Pawning shop. Seeing all these people's once prized possessions or priceless family heirlooms on sale made me sad.

Above each shop were walk-up, stay-by-the-week apartments identical in their raggedness. I must have gone up and down that street ten times without seeing any sign of typewriting. I was about to give up, then imagined going home to tell my roommate I had broken another of his possessions. I looked again. Driving with my nose practically on the windshield and peering intently through the safety glass like an old woman, I finally found it. A crooked 5 and a wobbly 09 hung on a non-descript door with a homemade sign advertising the wares within. What a funny

little store. I parked.

Hoisting the typewriter which did not type onto my hip so as to have a free arm, I labored towards the door. Before I could reach for the knob, the door flew open to the sound of a sleigh bell ringing and the visage of an overenthusiastic man. He rushed at me in a bit of a frenzy and I almost dropped the typewriter out of fear.

"Hey there! You got a T-100 there!" he said before I was even inside. "It's a good machine. A good machine. Don't you love it?"

"Uh, yeah" I said, not expecting this assault. "It's, uh, it's my roommate's. I, uh, broke it. I want to fix it for him"

"Oh, OK, let's see here. Come in. I'm sorry. Let's, let's see what's the problem let's OK boss, let's crack that baby open."

"Do you, can you give me an estimate?" I said, now inside the store and struggling to concentrate while being assaulted with the stunning visual assault, the energy of this wildman and a strange sense of something heavy in the air.

"Oh, of course, pardon me, well, let's see. I'll have to what did you say was wrong with it?"

"I think there's a label stuck inside."

"Ah, what happened? You roll it backwards? You can't do that."

"Yeah. I, I didn't know"

"Well, I'm not sure how much it'll run. We'll have to bust it open, see if we can repair the pieces or if we have to get replacement parts. It's hard to get parts for these babies. For the IBM . . . Yes! For the Panasonic . . . Yes!" Each time he said "yes," he lowered a hairy fist onto the countertop like a referee barking out a ten count. "For one of these babies?" He paused dramatically. "They're a little hard to come by." I laughed inwardly at his strange gusto.

"I just want to get it fixed" I said. Then, thinking again of the trail of destruction I had left behind, added "whatever it costs."

"OK" he sang, and whistled on the inhale. "OK. We'll get right to work. Do you want to wait here or, should we give you a call?"

"How long do you think it'll take?"

"Oh, not long. I see here we can save these parts. And I got some of the best men working here. THE BEST."

As if on cue, two beleaguered typewriter repairmen came out from the back. They said the same kind of things as he did – excited talk about the typewriter and such, though something about the way they said it seemed odd. I thought I should leave. But I didn't want to have to come back and I didn't feel like walking the dirty streets in this part of town.

Since I didn't need a pink bass guitar or another Nintendo, there was no reason to browse the pawn shops. No one actually shops in those places anyway, the owners would probably think I was crazy. I wondered how they all places stayed in existence if all they did was buy things. Better not to find out.

"I'll just stay if that's OK" I said.

"Sure. Sure it is chief, have a seat" he said, motioning towards a badly bandaged chair. I sat down and picked up a newspaper lying on a small table. I was glad to have some diversion and began to scan the headlines. I realized that the paper was a few weeks old. It struck me as funny how quickly everyone had forgotten about the important issues the headlines screamed about less than a month ago.

"Are you a writer?" one of the repairmen asked me. I looked up.

"He looks like a writer" said the other.

"I, no. I'm a musician." I said.

"He looks like a writer" the second one repeated.

"Writers and musicians look the same, but he has glasses." the first one said to his partner. "That's why he looks like a writer. Writers always have glasses."

"Is that the case?" I asked.

"A lot of great writers loved the typewriter" the shopowner interrupted. He spoke slowly and importantly, gesturing grandly. His workers exchanged conspiratorial glances, probably wishing they hadn't mentioned it. They had heard this before. "Mark Twain was the first to use it and he's the greatest writer of all. Hemingway used it. He said he could only write on a typer. Said it sounded like a shotgun firing bullets. Said it made his writing tough." He now cupped his mouth on the side as if telling a secret, though continued speaking in a loud, oratorical tone. "It's no wonder today's writers keep turning out all that weak crap. They all switched to computer. They all got those goddamned whisperquiet computer boards. Makes their writing soft."

I laughed. He glanced at his thick watch and beamed. "This will be done in just a few minutes. We can save these parts. No need to order new ones. Just remember not to roll backwards with the labels. No backwards roll!"

I thanked him, paid a measly fee, and left the store shaking my head and laughing. I ridiculed him in my mind as I walked to my car. I couldn't wait to tell this story. What a maniac! Absolutely obsessed with typewriters in the digital age. He was pathetic. I got into my car, still laughing. I popped a punk rock tape into my ridiculous tape player and,

about to press play, stopped cold.

It was devastating. If he was pathetic, what was I? Here I was listening to tapes (tapes!) of old music in an ancient tape player. I was outdated too. The whole range of circumstance that brought me into his world was my own sad desire to hold on to a distant past. The broken borrowed tape of a band I liked in high school. Playing with toys. Ten years might as well be one hundred years. Being in a punk rock band. The sound was invented the year of my birth, why couldn't I move on? The shopowner was not funny, he was sad. I was sad. The whole world is sad. Life is sad. Everyone's trying to hold on to better days that never existed in the first place.

He was like a tribal leader who never saw the missionaries coming. Like a scribe before Mr. Gutenberg came along. Like an assembly line man replaced by a robot. Like, like a printing press operator replaced by a typewriter. This has happened before. This happens all the time. Grasping grains of sand in a windstorm. Devastating.

My mocking turned to sympathy. Everything this man had built, had worked for, had loved – it all disappeared through no fault of his own. His business was outdated, his way of thinking was outdated, his clothes were outdated, even the way he killed himself was outdated. A month later he shot himself with an antique German pistol in his room above the store.

Devastating.

The world didn't mourn but I did. More than when actors or millionaires or other people on TV die. I mourned. I forced myself to remember and record every detail of that store and that man, both of whom I would never see again. And I vowed to always, always use that typewriter and never switch to computer. In his honor, in honor of the past, in honor of dead men. And I did. For a few weeks. Until it broke again and there was no one left to fix it.

**hey ho, let's go:
get that slut out of my house!**

This is a love story, as you can probably tell by the subtitle and I will talk about the girl in a minute. But first I need to give you a setting. This is easy to do since, for once, I can actually remember the time and place. I can even give you an exact date if you want one. I can do that because I met the girl at a Ramones show (which you maybe could tell by the main title). Going to see The Ramones was a holy tradition for my crew. Every time they played our hometown club we would get roaringly drunk and go see the show at all costs. It was one of the very few traditions we actually stuck to and, in all honesty, ranked in importance above Thanksgiving. Sure it didn't go back to 1492 or anything like that, but it did date from the ancient times of early high school and did persevere all the way until their farewell tour. Those shows are solid rocks, or buoys if you will (oh, and you will) in my endless stream of drunken days and nights. I use Ramones shows every time I need to remember when such and such an event took place. That and haircuts.

This is probably why I can't remember anything any more. The Ramones broke up a few years ago and I've had the same boring hair for years. But this was back before all that and I remember the exact show and hairstyle. It was after high school and before Adios Amigos. After slick jock hair and before the Mr. T. mohawk. I was 19 and sported a giant red afro.

OK, before I talk about the girl, I guess I should clarify something in the above paragraph. I said that we would get drunk and go to the show "at all costs" and you're probably wondering about that. When I say "at all costs" – I mean it. Boy, do I mean it. Sometimes it was very difficult to do. What if one of the crew was out of town on the holy day? What would we do then? And who could we trust to stay sober enough to drive? This was a daily problem but especially so on Ramones Day. Another problem, and an especially hairy one in the early years, was how to do the whole getting drunk part. Excessive boozing was an integral part of the celebration but not always so easy to pull off. When the tradition started we were so young that we didn't even know anyone who could buy us beer.

And then we didn't have anywhere to drink it. Those years featured numerous shenanigans such as pilfering liquor from a parental stash and pouring it into a soda can to be drunk outside the show. Or the dreaded and dangerous beer drinking in the back seat of the car on the way there. "Keep the bottle low! Keep it low!" On occasion we'd even have to dip into the stash of ancient beer my buddy Lou kept under his bed for "special occasions." I'll tell you, you haven't lived until you've tasted a can of Busch that's spent 2-3 summer months under a sweaty bed. But like I said, at all costs.

The show I want to talk about actually featured no such difficulties so I don't really know why I'm talking about all that. We were all in the area and had nothing to do. No one was away on vacation to Sea World or anything, so there was nothing like that to worry about. We were still not of age, but could get booze easily thanks to the bizarre level of success our ridiculous band had achieved. We had some fans and hangers-on who were old enough to do the legal purchasing, usually for a nominal fee. . . . I always admired these great men and often dreamt that I would make a career out of buying beer for underage kids once I turned the golden 21. . . . But until that day, I would have to roll with guys like Fat José, who bought us a ton of 40 ouncers for this special day. I call him "Fat José" because, well he was fat and named José. But also to differentiate him from another friend, "Skinny José." You can guess what he was like. Skinny José had a van and because he was diabetic was usually willing to stay sober and drive. We kind of used him on account of this but he didn't seem to mind. It was his one and only dream to be in a band and he looked up to us a great deal even though we didn't consider ourselves real musicians. He was just glad to hang around us and would always ask questions about what it was like to be in a band. We would always say we didn't know. He thought we were kidding but really, we didn't know. Anyway, thanks to the José's, the drink and the drive were well taken care of, so there was nothing to worry about on those fronts.

Finally, and most notably, we actually had a place to drink in. This summer of love was the first time that one of our crew had an apartment of their own. I would like to take a moment now to talk about this place. My buddy Rocco and a couple of other guys were renting it. It was a disgusting filth pit on the very wrong side of town. The kind of place where towels served as curtains and nothing served as towels. We spray-painted the ceilings, trashed the furniture, pissed on the kitchen floor. There were pet rats living in cages and many more rats living in the rest of the house. More than once we peered under a towel and saw women knife-fighting on

the street. It was kind of a tough neighborhood. Most notably, there was a crazy club down the street that even we were afraid of. One night some guy shot another guy 12 times on the sidewalk out front. He then fled and went to his girlfriend's apartment and hid in her kid's closet with all the stuffed animals like E.T. But that's another story. In the winter the only heat in Rocco's place was from the gas stove and in the summer it was a sweaty 100 degrees or more at all times. It was a dark little stinky cave with irregular temperature control. All the floors were sticky and had that pungent vinegar smell of old beer. In other words, it was perfect.

OK, not quite perfect. One problem was that the TV didn't get any channels. They had an ancient TV and VCR, but didn't even get PBS. All we could watch was videos and the only videos they had were porn. It was an interesting batch of porn that included some foreign ones, most notably an Israeli one. Watching porn as you well know is more or less an infinite source of entertainment but I'll tell you, you get a weird view of the world when the only thing you see on TV is porn. TV is like your window to the modern world and if all you see through that window is porn . . . To this day I can't take the conflict in the Middle East as seriously as I know that I should. It's almost as bad as those people who only watch MTV or Dan Rather. Almost.

But it was a great place. The neighbors were more or less afraid of our crew and the cops stayed out of our business. They were more occupied with the knife-fighting ladies and the Spielbergian antics at the club. Thus we were left free to do pretty much whatever we wanted. What we wanted to do usually was to run into the streets naked, to play massively loud music 'til 3, 4 o'clock in the morning, and to drink. It was great. Maybe you're wondering about safety issues, since it sounds like a dangerous neighborhood. If so, I thank you for your concern. And if not, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. But either way I assure you there was nothing to worry about. There weren't that many drive-by knifings, and the gunshots were limited to specific grudges. There were a lot of thefts, but word must have gotten out among the thieves that there was nothing of value in the place except porno, so we were pretty much safe. Every once in a while a crackhead would make an attempt at a break-in, but crackheads usually move real slow and can be chased off with a stick.

Anyway, this apartment is where we met up for the big Ramones show I want to talk about. Like I said, Fat José bought a ton of alcohol, and Skinny José was going to drive. This left the rest of us to get really drunk by the time we left for the show. I swear you've never seen that much malt liquor disappear that fast. Unless you've been to some sort of shady

magician show I don't know about. Anyway, by departure time, we were hammered. Everyone piled into Skinny José's van. Now, that van was great too. It had no seats and was filled with engine parts. We rolled around in the back on the way to the show with these engine pieces and I remember wondering how the van actually ran, with so much of the engine inside. Poor Skinny José must've felt like a harried Catholic mom what with all of us clamoring in the back like rowdy children. We groped him and farted on each other. He just shook his head and was like "oh, my rock 'n' roll boys."

He was a trooper, that Skinny José, and got us there safely. He pulled up at the club and looked for a parking spot. There must have been thousands of people who celebrated Ramones Day because the lot was overflowing. We'd have to park far away and walk in, but we didn't mind. It was a beautiful summer evening. A gorgeous summer evening. The kind of evening . . . The kind of evening most writers would go on and on about. The kind of evening you'd have to be a cold-hearted bastard of a writer not to write about. But unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your vantage point) I am one such bastard. So we shall skip the description of the weather and get right into a funny story about pee. I had the old bursting bladder from the 200 or so ounces I drank before we left and, seeing how far a walk it was to the club, I decided I'd have to go outside like a bear. I found a tree and whizzed all over it. Lou saw me, came over, and did the same.

"I'm a good environmentalist" I slurred to him, hosing off the bark. "Here I am, going out of my way to water this poor little old tree."

"You idiot" he said. "You're killing that tree. The ammonium in your whiz will destroy its root structure."

"Ah" I said. "Kill it, save it, whatever."

The wit of this comment was not lost on a group of metalheads standing nearby. They must've overheard me because they laughed toothy laughs while repeating "kill it, save it, whatever" over and over again. God, I had no idea I was so funny. I took a moment to examine these creatures. They were in clear violation of several open container laws and also seemed to be violating some unwritten laws of fashion and hygiene. Ah, they were all right. I swaggered over and started talking. We got along famously. One of them gave me an unmarked bottle out of the cooler in his truck. I, smart as I am, drank it without question. I'm here to tell you, if nothing else, to always drink unmarked bottles from a metalhead's truck. It was damn good.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Magic Juice" laughed one of the Lemmys.

"Who are you, Jack in the Beanstalk?" I asked.

They all laughed so hard that I thought they were going to die. Man, I was really funny. Now, the rest of everything for a while is pretty blurry. You can only imagine what the Magic Juice did to me, and so can I. I literally have no idea. I didn't get sick or go crazy or anything, I just blacked out for a long time. I mean, I didn't pass out, I was still up and doing things, only I don't remember any of those things. . . . I can't even begin to guess what was in that mysterious concoction. Part of what I was doing turns out to be talking about lots of interesting things with my newfound friends. At least that's what Lou recounted to me later. He and I had the following conversation after I left this crew of metal-loving freaks.

Me: They're right you know.

He: Who is?

Me: Those death metal guys.

He: What do you mean?

Me: Death, destruction, it's all coming.

I have no memory of talking about death and destruction with those guys and no memory of telling Lou about it. Huh. I lied, though, when I said I don't remember anything because I do remember a bit of a conversation I had with one of the metalheads that was very interesting. I said to him, "don't you think that these open container laws are stupid?" He said that indeed he did. I continued. "What's the point? I mean, what an arbitrary line to draw. You can drink but it has to be out of a bag? Everyone knows what's in that bag, what's the difference?"

"Well" he said "that's how everything in life is. All of the universe is one entity, you see. And we just act as though it is divided into small parts. So when you try to draw lines on anything, it is somewhat foolish and always can be questioned. I mean, what is the difference between legally drunk and not? One drop of beer? One sip? One molecule? The difference between legal and illegal is just a chimera. The difference between anything is. At a certain point, every piece of logic breaks down. Accept that and then you can see the world for what it truly is."

"Wow" I said. "You're some sort of Mr. Miyagi of the underworld." Everyone laughed again and then blackness. . . . I don't remember anything else about that whole chapter, but I know it did go well. For years, literally years, I would get waved at by guys in Camaros.

That Juice really must have been Magic though because the rest of the day was charmed. Get this: The opening band, no doubt some soulless local sucks that would only have served to bring everybody down, cancelled. Their van broke down. Maybe too much of the engine was actually under the hood. What this meant was that The Ramones would actually play twice as long! I started to worry that perhaps the Juice had killed me and I was in heaven. If so, why were there so many ugly girls here? But The Ramones took so damn long to get started that I figured it probably wasn't heaven. I always assumed that shows in heaven would start promptly. I mean, if you're God, what excuse do you have for not being prompt?

I guess it's good that the delay did occur, though, because it gave me time to recover from the Juice and I can actually remember what happened next. Otherwise this story would not make much sense. I was still drunk though, from the malt liquor, so it might still not make much sense. But believe me it's better than the Juice. Anyway, when The 'Mones let fly that first 1-2-3-4 and that chainsaw guitar started rolling in, I worried again that I had died. Even with all the ugly women around. It sounded so damn good! More than good. Perfect. It was pure beautiful energy. The music almost had physical form, like a stream of chi shooting out of the Marshall stacks and frolicking with the drunks and half-wits in the gorgeous summer air. It was magical, I tell you magical. . . . Shit. Maybe I spent too much time talking to Miyagi.

I danced and sang and warbled along, lost in the teeming crowd. Everyone sang with me and looked happy to receive me. I've never felt at home in a crowd my whole life until then. For once, I didn't feel so outnumbered. It was like everyone there was my friend. Which was good because I had lost all my friends. Well, every once in a while I would just catch a glimpse of a José or two, and for a while I met up with Lou. He looked really bad. He was sort of an alcohol narcoleptic and could faint at a moment's notice when he had too much to drink. Apparently he had had too much to drink. He kept passing out in the pit and was only alive because he was being held up by two huge British guys. These Britishers, who apparently had seen me with him earlier shouted in my general direction "Eh, you're freakin' friend's bloody drunk!" I went over to relieve them of their holding-up duties and looked at these strange characters. They looked sort of like punks but had longish hair and wore fingerless gloves. They were really nice and might have been gay, but with the British I guess that's almost redundant to say. Ah, they were all right.

I tired of holding Lou up and, after a while, propped him up against

a wooden fence. Then, a brilliant idea hit me. I could climb this fence. I don't know why, it didn't really go anywhere, but I thought it needed to be climbed. I hoisted my hulk up onto it and was about to get yelled at by a bouncer when my foot piece broke way and I slid to the ground, slicing my arm on a rusty nail. The fence was to stay unclimbed that day.

Lou faded in and out of consciousness, staying awake just long enough to offend somebody. I remember one such instance when he was chatting up a fat girl. "You're the kind of woman I need" he said, and she beamed. He continued. "You have no sharp edges. I couldn't hurt myself." I think he sincerely thought this was a compliment. But, judging by the thunderous slap he received, she probably did not.

I left him there and wormed my way up front for the final couple of songs. It would be over soon, I reasoned, for even epics must end. I mean, even Beowulf ends and it doesn't even have a double-long chorus of "Gabba-Gabba-Hey" as a finale. I guess it might, I've never read to the end. I hate that story. But someone probably would've told me if they sang Ramones at the end. Anyway, the show did end and I was kind of mad that there were no encores or nothing. I guess I shouldn't complain. Those guys played their heart out for over three hours and they're really old. Like Grendel old.

I found Lou where I left him and saw that Skinny José was jumping around him playing air guitar. Even on air guitar he somehow sucked. Rocco found us through some sort of radar and our crew was almost complete. But where was Fat José? We looked everywhere for him and couldn't find him. You would have thought it more likely that we'd have lost Skinny José, because he's smaller and all. But there we were, missing the fat one. We couldn't leave without him. Having just one José simply would not do. Hell, two was barely enough. But we looked and looked to no avail. I even climbed on Rocco's shoulder to get a better vantage. Still, no Fat José.

I did see a lot of good-looking girls from up there and started asking all of them to come back and party with us. With Fat José out of the way, there would be plenty of room in the van. This pick-up line wasn't working though, so I tried new tactics. Lots of girls, way more than I would have expected, actually seemed to be considering it. I tell ya, I had the magic that day. One super cute girl in a Catholic schoolgirl suit lifted up her skirt and showed me her panties. She was with a guy so couldn't come with us but I still thought that was a most pleasant gesture. One group of girls really seemed to be considering it and came over and talked and flirted and all that. They were cute and willing. That is, until one of

them shrieked "he said I have no sharp edges" and pointed at Lou. That pretty much vetoed it for the rest of us. Damn.

But this is a love story and you're probably wondering when I find love. The answer is now. Two very attractive girls actually took the initiative and came up to me. One tapped my foot from behind and said "you guys looking to party?" I said something like hell yes or something and that they should come along. Plenty of room in the van. She said she had her own car but we should give her directions. I said I'd go with her, since I don't know any street names and suck at giving directions. You might be thinking that this was a clever thing for me to say, to make sure they didn't get away. But truth is, I don't know any street names and suck at giving directions. Sometimes being an idiot is useful.

So it came to pass that I was riding in a car with two lovely ladies. The one who had tapped me was older, the other was her sister and younger. I was happy to find out that the older one was of buying age, since we had lost Fat José and needed more hooch for this after-party. It was then that I decided I loved her. You might be thinking that's not much of a basis for love, but really there's more. First of all, I admired her guts and apparent craziness for wanting to go with us. Second of all (OK, this is really first of all) she was beautiful. She had small, fine features and lips like . . . Another kind of writer would have something good to say about those lips. I just knew I wanted to kiss them.

We chatted in the car and, turns out the reason she was so gutsy was that she was a proud member of our nation's Air Force. I'll be damned. I guess when you fly planes and shoot people, a couple of dirty punks aren't that scary. Plus, she thought I was cute. She told me as much while we were still in the car. I would kiss those lips, I thought, and considered myself the luckiest man in the world. Now, I've never been a great supporter of America's armed forces but thought maybe I could reconsider my stance on this particular issue. A man has looked past more for a pair of perfect lips.

We stopped at a pizza place near Rocco's apartment and bought a couple of six packs of beer. "My treat," she said and I knew it was love (see, I told you there was more). We got to the apartment and found the other guys were already there, engaging in various infantile behaviors. Of course there was porno on the TV and I worried if this would scare away my new love. But she didn't seem to care one whit. Not even about the Israeli porn. I guess there was a lot of that back in Desert Storm. The guys were extremely happy that we came back with beer and I told them that she had treated us. That took care of any potential hard feelings. They loved

her too then. But she was mine and I knew it. They would have to fight over the sister, who had not spoken much the whole time we were there. She didn't know eighty-three ways to kill a man like her older sibling so was probably scared. Hell, she was still in high school so most likely only knew about fourteen, fifteen ways tops. I worried a little bit about how she would fare with the fang-toothed hounds of male horniness that were my friends, but wasn't too concerned about it. I had other things on my mind.

It was going amazingly well with my lady. Too well. I half-expected that she would actually be a man or something. She was willing, after just a half hour or so of drinking to go off alone with me. We went into Rocco's room, away from everyone. She followed me in, closed the door and sat close to me on the bed. "Do you think aliens exist?" I said.

Uh, yeah, I know it might have not been the best timing for that, but I figured that since she was in the Air Force she would know and, under the spell of my rampant sexiness, would be willing to shed state secrets as willingly as her shirt.

"Uh-huh" she purred, slinking like a cat about to take off its shirt.

"Yes! I knew they existed!" I said, wasting more time. Sometimes being an idiot is not useful. I was being cocky, I guess. I was so sure I would score that I didn't sense that time was not on my side. But, alas it was not. Before I even got my first taste of those sweet lips, we were interrupted in a most surprising manner. No, not an alien, but Fat José. He burst through the door grinning from ear to fat ear, carrying a couple of 40 ounces like shot guns and puffing on a huge blunt.

"Where the hell did you come from, Gordo?" I asked.

"I ran" he said, laughing like a maniac. He had the sweat glaze to prove it. "Want some weed?"

"You, you? . . . Yeah. Yeah I do."

So I never got the exact details of how that tubby bitch ran there from two towns over but it's probably a good story. I was too distracted by the garbage bag full of weed he was unfurling from his pant leg. This was nothing new, Fat José always had garbage bags filled with weed tucked in his pants. In fact we often joked that the reason you got so high when you smoked his stuff was not from the tetrahydrocannabinol but rather the strange, psychedelic effects of his ball sweat. Seriously, it was good weed.

We sat in Rocco's room and got high. Everyone else stayed in the other room, for some reason, and it was just the three of us smoking pot and talking about the military. Fat José surprised me by knowing a disturbing amount about different kinds of Air Force planes. He was going on and on about it with my lady who seemed rather disinterested. She subtly squeezed

my hand while this was going on, so I knew it was OK. Sitting there high with this beautiful woman showing delicate, gentle affection almost made me think I had died and gone to heaven again. But if so, why was Fat José there? I decided not to care and leaned in close to her during a lull in the conversation about the B-1 or some shit. And so it came to pass that my first kiss with my true love came under the watchful, bloodshot, widely pupiled eye of Fat José. Romance I have found you.

Now, this was not the first or the last time that one of our crew got some love with another one of us in the room. There actually is a story about Fat José along those lines that is really good. But I won't go into it here. Anyway, he was getting too high to pay much attention to us anyway and was more like a strange Puerto Rican statue in the corner of the room than a real person at that point. He rocked back and forth as if blown by some inner breeze and giggled. I tried saying something to him to test his level of awareness and got no response. This was all the cue I needed. I slipped my hand under the shirt of my love and cupped her perfect, tiny breast. She wore no bra. It was unbelievable. We kissed again. I swear her breast and my hand were an exact match, as if feeling her up was a cosmic act conceived in heaven. Surely she would object if it went further, I thought. But she didn't. Instead, she gently slid her hand up the leg of my shorts and kissed me again, saying, "you have soft lips." Magic.

How far could this go? I wondered. Would she do me right here on Rocco's bed under a grinning José? That seemed weird even for a military girl. That seemed weird even for me, but whatever. I was game. As her hand inched towards my cock 'n' balls, we were again interrupted. This time by a violent commotion in the next room over. Worried about her sister, my love had to go check it out. I followed. The statue stayed.

What we saw was Rocco was kicking furniture and screaming "Get out! get out!" This cannot be happening, I thought. This cannot be happening! But there it was, happening. Rocco had a crazed look on his face, very different from his normal goofy smile. He was definitely not kidding around. I tried to bargain with him but he snapped some foul words at me and ordered me out. I knew better than to argue with someone as drunk as he clearly was. Drunks, as a rule, don't listen to reason.

We all clamored out onto the street and I asked what the hell happened. Lou was a little freaked out but was still laughing. He explained what went down: He and the sister were playing the game where you call 1-800 porno numbers. I can understand their wanting to do so. It's really funny. You can hear these sleazy messages for free and just hang up when you have to put in a credit card. Try it some time. I'm here to tell you, if

nothing else, to try calling 1-800-ANAL-BOY. That's really my favorite. Rocco would later claim that he thought in his drunken state that they were making toll calls. Really, I think he was just mad because the sister wouldn't kiss him and there I was on his bed kissing the most beautiful girl in the world. I guess I can understand but I was infuriated then. But what could I do? The sister was spooked by Rocco's testosterone rage and my love guessed she had to take her home. No!

I was panicked. My mind raced. What could I do? What could I do? I had planned on sleeping at Rocco's. Now that wasn't an option. But more important than sleep, where would I get laid? We were all fucked up beyond repair and Skinny José, the diabetic bastard, had left already. We had nowhere to go and no one to drive us there. Lou did have his Mom's Chrysler (he drove us to Rocco's back before the show) and my love had her car there too. Lou said he guessed that maybe he was sober enough to drive. I doubted it but didn't care. "Good," I told him. "You do that." Then he said he'd take me home and I panicked again. I couldn't leave her. I crafted the unfathomable plan that I would go with the two ladies. It made no sense because Lou lived right near me and the ladies lived about two towns over. But I had to for, you know, obvious reasons. Lou wasn't helping any, even though it should have been clear what I was doing. He kept telling me that he needed me to come with him and work the pedals while he steered. I kept telling him he'd be fine and then said that I had to help them get home because they didn't know that part of town. It was a bad lie but it worked. We walked to our cars.

I was worried that my love was too drunk and high to drive but she insisted. She seemed to be doing OK. At least better than the driver of another car we saw who was flying in a Chrysler the wrong way down a one way road. The sister sat sullenly in the back while we chatted. I don't know how we explained to her why she would drop her sister off and then take me home, but the real reason was clear. So we did. It was late, probably after 2 when she dropped her sister off. We were alone. We kissed a little in the car. Damn! It just struck me that we should have gone and parked somewhere and just done it in the car. Why didn't I think of that? Chalk it up to another time when being an idiot is not the most useful thing in the world. What I did instead proved that beyond a doubt. But I'll get to that in a minute.

We drove towards my house and stopped at a 7-11. She told me she had to fly back out to base at 6 in the morning. Unbelievable. I better be worth it, I thought. It was empty in the 7-11 except for the troll lady working the counter. Me and my love danced around in the store to the

muzak. Such a lady was she that she made you want to dance to muzak. The troll lady looked at us with her stupid troll eyes. We danced over to the coffee. The troll was making a fresh pot and had all the supplies sitting there. I took a coffee filter and put it on my love's head as a hat. It was cute. We paid the troll for the coffee and left, dancing all the way. We got back in the car and what I did next defies explanation. Even reminding you how drunk and stoned I was probably won't make stop you from wishing I was right there with you so that you could slap me and call me a dumbass. I took her to my parent's house. Remember that I was only 19 and I lived with my Mom and Dad." I didn't know what else to do. Like I said, the obvious solution of humping in the car didn't strike me until just now. I know. I'm slapping myself.

It was after 3AM when we got to my parent's house. There I was stoned, drunk, horny, with a gash on my arm, coming in to my parent's very nice, quiet, tree-lined neighborhood with a member of the Air Force. It must've been quite a sight. We walked in and tiptoed up to my room. I was sure they wouldn't hear us. Too bad I forgot that Mom's have that Spidey Sense that tells them what their children are up to and that it even works in their sleep. Or, it might have something to do with the fact that my room was just across a tiny sliver of a hallway from my parent's and we weren't being as quiet as we thought. We sneaked into my room and shut the door. We kissed. We whispered. We kissed. We groped. I coughed. Mom knocked on my door. And here's where you really will have a strong desire to smack me or, at very least, put this down and go read something by a smarter writer. Like Charles Manson. I don't blame you.

I was in my room with a girl at 3AM and my mom was at the door. Sure, it looked bad already. But we weren't naked or anything and all the lights were on. So what do I to try to make the situation better? I tried to trick my mom by pretending I was in there alone and that I was sleeping. So I took off my clothes, shut the light and told the girl to hide in the closet. Yeah, kind of like in E.T.

So instead of in the light and clothed, now it's dark and I'm in my underwear when I go to crack the door and say, "What, Mom? I'm sleeping?" It must be said here that my mom is really nice and not one to yell or discipline too much at all. My behavior may be a little explained by the thought that I could get away with anything because my parents were push-overs. No? OK.

You didn't have to be Spiderman or even a mom to notice that there was someone in the room. And no matter what kind of mom you were you couldn't not be pissed that your son was drunk, in his undies, and had a girl

in his closet at 3AM. But I kept trying to explain which of course only made it worse.

"Who's in there?" Mom yelled.

"Uh, a friend." I said.

"Get that slut out of my house!" Mom said, shocking me deeply. She had never used words like that as far as I knew.

"She's just a friend, Mom." I said. "I made a new friend, I brought her over to the house. You have friends, you bring them over, I just keep different hours than you. Is that so wrong?"

"Get that slut out of my house!" Mom screamed. "There are rules in this house!"

"Ah, Mom" I said. "What's a rule? The difference between legal and illegal is a chimera. At a certain point, every piece of logic breaks down. Accept that and then you can see the world for . . ."

Infuriated by this as you may well imagine, my mom bust in the door and started spanking me. I swear. Right there in front of my love, my Mom was spanking me in my underwear. I think it was then that I realized that the Magic Juice had worn off.

"OK. OK. She'll leave. Ow! Mom! Stop hitting me!" I said and my mom went back to bed. I ushered my love down to the front door, not bothering to put on pants. She was ridiculously unfazed by all this. I opened the door for her and she threw her arms around my neck and gave me one last kiss. Unbelievable. And she left. That was it.

I did see her one other time. It was a few years later at the same club we first met. I can't say when exactly because The Ramones had broken up by then. It was, of all things, a Marilyn Manson show. I know. I was only really going to see the opening band. They featured a certain slender Puerto Rican on guitar. Yup, Skinny José had finally done it. His band wasn't half bad either. But get this: They cancelled. Van broke down. Marilyn Manson played two sets! It was pure hell. Why didn't I just leave? Well, Rocco drove and, don't tell anyone this, but he likes Marilyn Manson. I was so depressed. And not just because I fucking hate Marilyn Manson. I was in some soul-sucking long distance relationship with a college girl and was also going through a whole bunch of other shit I don't feel like talking about. Weirdly enough I got hit on by two 15 year-old runaway girls that night. One of them actually tried to stick her hand down my pants. But that's another story. I was really, deeply depressed. I sat on the floor in the back contemplating suicide the whole time (see, Marilyn Manson is dangerous – the music sucks so bad you want

to kill yourself) and when my love came up to me and said "hi" it was all I could do to raise my head and say hello. Stupid loyalty to a college girl that was probably cheating on me anyway stopped me from even considering how nice it would've been to finish what I started all that time ago. So that's basically it. Except for my Dad teasing me whenever we see a woman in uniform and Fat José asking about "that pilot chick" from time to time, there was never any mention of any of it ever again. Oh well.

**In Loving Memory of Joey Ramone
1949-2001**

seal piss

"I can't believe you keep fucking that guy."

"Well, once you break the seal." She laughed.

"Break the seal?"

"Once you fuck someone once, you might as well keep fucking them if, you know, it's good. I'm not going to add a number and just get laid once." What a strange slut, I thought. She keeps goddamned statistics. "Breaking the seal, you know, it's like when you're drinking and you have to piss. Once you go for the first time, you can't stop. You broke the seal."

"Speaking of which," I said, seizing upon the opportunity to get a moment alone by excusing myself in the direction of the hopper. Why did it bother me that she was fucking that guy? What was there between us now? Nothing. What was there ever? Nothing. It's just that he's such a goddamned sweat-soaked neanderthal. A cop. Jesus. Is that it?

Occupied by thoughts of this singular mind-destroying nature, I was distracted as I pushed back the rotten door into the single shitter men's room.

"Oh, excuse me," I said. It was occupied. A man was hiking up his pants in front of the sink.

"You're all right," he said. Ah, if he only knew, I thought, he wouldn't say that. I'm not all right. My friend's banging a cop, for one. I look at him again. Shit, he's homeless. How did I miss that at first? Too enamored with my own mental traffic, I guess. This poor man was having trouble securing his pants. They were, after all, held up with just a wrought, knotted piece of string that served as a belt. Jesus. I decided to bust his balls. Just, you know, in the sporting, friendly way that men have.

"Were you pissing in the sink?" I asked, laughing.

"No, sir. No, I was . . . I'd have to be pretty . . . to do that, Sir, I'd have to —"

Shit. He thinks I'm serious. "You were pissing in the sink," I said, drawing my voice out to such an obvious level of joking that I thought he might find it condescending. Like the way you tease a child. But he wasn't

getting it! He thought I was going to arrest him or something. Maybe he thought I was a goddamned cop. I didn't care if he was pissing in the sink and besides, knew that he wasn't. "It's OK," I said, still laughing. "We all piss in the sink sometimes."

"No, I never – " he said.

"I have," I said.

He looked at me queerly. Then, slowly, his huge black nostrils flared up like a dragon's and he cracked a smile.

"Ah, me too," he howled, laughing a disjointed, relieved, deep, cacophonous, belly laugh. He rested his head against the wall and his pants started to creep terribly away. Jesus. Then, still laughing, with one fell swoop he fixed his pants and snapped the belt back into place. The pants would be secure for a while. "Me too," he said, and laughed again. "Me too." He exited.

I stood there pissing, still smelling the pungent nosegay the man had left behind. I stood there pissing, staring at the rat-eaten exposed wires in the wall. I stood there pissing, counting the 86 (I had done this before) different colored tiles some maniac had used to tile this bathroom. I stood there pissing, breaking the seal. Can't beat that, I thought, and laughed, shaking my head from side-to-side and just a little bit down. You can't beat the happiness of acquiescing with a stranger under the oddest circumstances and enjoying a laugh. And you can't beat the sadness of a rumpled soldier, reduced to the living on the fraying edge of sadness, reduced to struggling with a piece of cord just to hold up his goddamned pants. Reduced to thinking that I of all people was about to lower the boom on him.

I walked back to my holster-sniffing friend. "What took you so long?" she asked.

"The seal's not the only thing that's broken," I said.

"What do you mean?" she laughed.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing."

the strangest thing that happened that weekend

part one

Watching Jesus jump out of a second-story balcony into a swimming pool full of topless women was certainly among the stranger events of that weekend, but it was not the strangest. Fleeing the cops after a busted drug deal and stumbling into a secret night club absolutely packed with absolutely drunk middle-aged people gyrating to easy-listening might, on other weekends, win the blue ribbon for weirdness. Not this weekend. The same can be said for waking up in the freezing cold at 4 AM to help pull a very large and recently de-virginized black man off of your best friend. Some weekends – oh yeah, sure, that's the strangest. This weekend, no way. Oh, and before I start, I should say that despite what you may have heard, almost getting into a fight with three rednecks and a midget on a bus is not the titular event. It's not that it didn't happen (hey, of course it did) – it's just not the strangest thing that happened that weekend.

The first thing I remember about that weekend is pleasant enough, nice enough, and not at all strange. That is, unless you consider moments of small but unrestrained joy to be strange, which I guess some people do. Me and Rocco were stuck in some serious beach traffic on our way to Ocean City. I mean, we were getting passed by sea crabs. We were just about to set ourselves to becoming comfortably pissed off when we remembered that we had a bag of chips, a jar of salsa, and a six of beer in the back seat. Not bad, not bad. We had a little picnic right there in the stopped car and allowed ourselves to feel smugly superior to our fellow motorists whose pinched and angry faces were just visible through the glass of their little pods. Our windows were open to the breeze and, as the salty air blew in on our feast, Rocco declared in his gruff, jaunty voice, "this is the greatest thing ever."

Sure, Rocco was a bit of a simple man but I admired his gusto and, despite obvious differences, we were good friends. He had that childlike happiness too many of us lose. He had that . . . well, it seems odd to use the words "Rocco" and "joie de vivre" in the same sentence but there you

go. It just happened. He was the kind of guy you had to like. And not just because he could break your arm if you didn't. Though, of course, he could. He was an All-State wrestler in high school and could have gone on in the sport if he wanted to. But he didn't want to. He didn't want to do anything at all except for play guitar (anything, that is, outside of answering that one siren call to which nearly all men are useless to resist). I admired his single-mindedness and always wished I felt about something the way he felt about that guitar. Why did I always find myself chasing one string for one minute and then another and then another like some hyper housecat?

Anyway, Rocco was a fabulous musician as a result of his dedication, and not just of the pound-and-thud type – though that was the kind of band he was currently in (and I was currently fronting). To hear this dangerous-looking ex-wrestler-punk talk serious about the genius of Beethoven, and Lydian chords, and chromatic scales, and all sorts of other shit I couldn't understand was to have the pleasant if somewhat disquieting sensation of feeling a stereotype sliding off. Rocco, like most people once you got to know them, defied easy categorization.

The rest of the crew that we were soon going to meet up with in Ocean City (now that the car was moving along slowly but surely) were wrestlers too. Oh, except for Jesus. He, of course, played football. Quarterback. The other wrestlers were Carl, Jimmy and Frances. Carl, though you would never know it by looking at him, was Rocco's cousin. He was dark, furtive, intense, and small (weight class: 124, Rocco: 189). Another thing about Carl – he had the craziest eyes I've ever seen. I'm convinced that those eyes were half the reason he was a two-time state champ. Don't get me wrong, he was one hell of a wrestler, but those eyes probably made his opponents shit their singlets before they even had a chance to find out. It was, as they say, over before it started. I liked Carl well enough even though he scared me.

I can't say the same for the other two. Oh, they scared me alright, it's not that. It's that I didn't like them. Maybe that's not really fair to say since I had only really met them a couple of times and only for fairly brief moments those times. You see, they were Carl's roommates and teammates at State. Whenever Rocco would drag me up there to visit his cousin, Jimmy & Frances would be there, a bizarre binary duo. We would of course ask them to drink with us but they were always fasting for some big match or something. They were the team's superstars and as such, I guess, had to be concerned about things I never worried about. Like health. Try as I might, I just didn't get them and I'm sure the feeling was mutual.

I should differentiate between the two before we go on, lest you

think them completely alike. Their backgrounds were just about as different as could be while being more or less exactly the same. Frances was a poor black kid from somewhere in the South who got huge hauling shit on crap jobs his whole life and got tough and mean from fighting off rednecks. Jimmy was a rich white kid who got huge lifting in designer gyms and got tough and mean from his insane father. Completely different paths to the same dull destination. Life is like that sometimes. Anyway, they really were superstars. Just about world-class. High school All-Americans, College All-Americans, and maybe one day the Olympics. If they didn't somehow make wrestling a career, I trusted that they were dumb enough, gutless enough, and possessed of enough general disregard for human feelings that they would one day make great businessmen. They were just those kind of guys. Which reminds me.

"Rocco, don't you think it'll be weird hanging out with those kind of guys?" I asked through a mouthful of chips as we puttered along.

"Fuck it," he answered. "It's a free place to stay, Ocean City rules, and there'll be lots of beer. Plus don't forget The Jacuzzi Bar. Can't beat that." Riding the crest of my three-beer buzz, I had to agree. "But I know what you mean," he added, nibbling spilled salsa off his seatbelt, "those guys are weird."

We finished the beer and chips and, OK, were a little drunk in the car. Traffic still crawled along and we were in need of entertainment anew. I forget who started it but soon we were both making fart noises with our mouths to pass the time. It was really quite hysterical and I must admit I was a little saddened when the traffic finally broke and we whipped into town.

part two

We easily found the hotel the guys had told us to meet them in (they had come down the day before) and then looked for an out of the way place to stash the car. It's a dead give-away to a hotel manager if you park your car within sight. Then they know you're going to try to crash in their building without paying. Those people are goddamned hawks. But we've been through this all before so had the edge. A short bit of trolling revealed a good spot – not far away, and well-hidden. Done and done.

Next order of business is handling the hotel clerk. First

impressions are key, so I do the talking. I give the man the friendly how-de-do, and the old "we are just stopping by to visit our associates and we won't be just be a minute." He rolls his eyes at the word "associates" and I worry if I have overdone it. I start having visions of sandy crotches from sleeping on the beach. That is always awful. But I get snapped out of it when the clerk smiles and bleats a "fuck if I care" out of toothless lips. I take a second look at this character. He had a disinterested expression, saggy eyes, and a moustache of unknown caliber. His arms had sleeves of bad pen-ink tattoos, the clear mark of a man who either has done some time or is just completely insane. He was obviously not the manager or the owner, but just a droney ex-con stuck on night shift who couldn't give a rat's ass if we stuffed forty people into one room so long as we didn't interrupt his cigarette and Gunsmoke reruns. Somehow I missed that about him at first.

Room 2A was easy to find and we bust in, not bothering to knock. After my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting and nicotine haze, I found the room pretty much as I expected it to be. Five cases of cheap, high-alcohol content beer were stacked to cool on the air conditioner. A few bottles of various cheap liquors bobbed in ice-filled trash cans. There was some of that wine that comes in a box. The TV was turned on, with the sound off to allow for bad music blaring. Tobacco spit dripped off everything. This last was thanks to Jesus, who always chewed tobacco and had little regard for axioms on cleanliness. And yet, even though the room looked exactly like I thought it would and I already recognized the boys, for a brief instant I was sure I was in the wrong place or at least in some parallel universe. What the crap was this? I mean, whatthecrap (!?) was this? Seated on the bed between 339 pounds of world-class wrestler wearing painted-on stretch pants and a confused smile was a blonde, thin woman. Woman. Woman?

I was entirely unprepared for this phenomenon and thus left completely disconcerted. Sonsofbitches might as well've set off mustard gas bombs as have a woman in the room. I couldn't even mentally process the data. It's like when your dad shaves his moustache for the first time in 30 years and when you see him it just baffles you so much that, even though it looks so goddamned weird, you can't even tell what it is for a minute and just stare and laugh and ask, did you lose weight? An unconscious expectation shattered by a previously unseen reality. That strange it was to find a woman in the room. My first thought was plain and simple. Hooker. But I doubted these guys had gone that far. Mainly because I knew they were broke.

I should explain. It wasn't really that out of the ordinary that a woman would be present. Carl for one was a bit of a Casanova. It's just that Jimmy and Frances were legendarily bad at matters concerning the fairer sex. Even I had heard the stories, as they were the source for rather continual ribbing. It went like this: Jimmy was still all messed up over some girl who broke his heart when he was like nine. She kissed him at some roller skating party and he was all in love. He was sure in his little heart that he was going to marry her one day. But get this: She kissed everyone at that skating party and in fact kissed everyone in the neighborhood. He actually caught her smooching his best friend one day in a garage. Quite the tragic prepubescent scandal. Broke his heart.. He still pined for her to this day. Kind of cute, really, but the way he never let it go was just creepy. Kinda stalker creepy. So everyone gave him grief about it.

Frances was just stupid with women and was a huge virgin. He would always find some way to mess up even the surest pieces of tail. The story got to be so legend that every time a girl so much as talked to him, everyone would start cheering and howling. This couldn't have helped things.

After perfunctory hello's someone explained that this mysterious femme wasn't a whore but just a low self-esteem almost-pretty girl who was staying in the room next door. Poor almost-pretty girls. They might be the worst off of them all. She wasn't the first or the last of her kind I would see run into oncoming traffic. At the moment, though, she was happy, getting lots of attention and enjoying it greatly (like all almost-pretty girls do). Even though most of the current attention was based on the question of whether or not she was wearing underwear. I immediately joined in this fascinating debate (casting a vote on the side of nay) and soon we were all laughing. Someone threw me a beer, I cracked it, chugged it and thought hey, maybe these fuckwads are all right.

Carl set out the plan for the evening like a Vince Lombardi of alcohol. The eventual goal was of course to go to the bars and, specifically, The Jacuzzi Bar we had heard so much about. You could sit in a Jacuzzi, legend held, and bikini-clad waitresses would bring you beer. A great place. A wonderful place. The type of place that those of us raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition never thought we'd ever see without at least dying first. But before that we would get drunk here in the room. Got a good running start. Save money that way. Drinks were expensive at these beach bars, Carl explained, catering to on-break college students and vacationing middle class thirty-somethings as they did. And especially at the Jacuzzi

place where drink prices were near strip-club proportions. So, since there was such a shit-load of alcohol here (oh, and could we each pitch in five bucks?) we could get nice and soppy before we went out.

"Coach," I asked, "is it beer before liquor or liquor before beer?"

"Good question," he said. "But I forget the answer. Better drink both at the same time."

"Right," I said and attempted to pour some vodka and my full beer into my mouth simultaneously, amusing everyone and thoroughly messing myself. We laughed, oh how we laughed. The good spirits continued and the plan was definitely working. We would be heartily drunk before we went out. I was already feeling it pretty strong myself.

Almost-Pretty Girl even brought some of her friends over and it was quite a little party. Some people went outside into the lobby, some sat and stared at the TV, others mingled. There were several small interweaving groups like, you know, all parties have. Rocco whipped out his guitar, as he was so inclined to do when he was drunk, and went out onto the small balcony out the back of the room to give a concert. He played beautifully. Everyone was wowed. Jimmy was so moved as to say, "Damn. If I was a girl, I'd fuck you" – a sentiment in which I was not alone in feeling was pretty gay. The awkward silence caused by this border-line slip into homoeroticism was thankfully broken by a yelping Jesus. He had been part of the group outside the room in the lobby overlooking the pool, and now burst into the room.

"Check this out!" he screeched. "Hey fuckwinds, check this out!" With more than appropriate energy, we followed Jesus out into the hallway. "Look!" he yelled. We looked. "See?" he asked. We saw. Tits. Nice ones. Holy crap.

A woman, probably around thirty (though her breasts were considerably younger) and with a nice set of 'em, was bounding about the pool with her husband or boyfriend or whatever. He was genuinely pleased with the display and the now-growing gawking audience. Some guys pretend they like it when their girlfriends flash their tits, but are internally jealous and only act like they're not pissed so they don't seem like a square. But this magnanimous man seemed genuinely psyched. We nodded, clapped our approval, and lobbed them beers from the balcony. Someone started yelling a conversation and, turns out, they were from the same small town in Pennsylvania as we were.

Huh, I thought. Small world. Strange world. You never know what to expect from this goddamned crazy life. It's just a constant series of unrelated and insane occurrences following no plan and without any

semblance of predictability. A ridiculous hodge-podge of non-stop single instances one after the other. And leading to what?

"NEEEEEEE-YAAAAH!!!!!" Huh? I turned my head towards the source of the howl and saw, as if to give external reality to my inner thoughts, demonstrating proof of the hypothesis that life is absurd and random, Jesus with his knees pulled to his chest, rocketing over the balcony and sailing in a graceful half-parabola into the pool below. Yes. Jesus jumped off of a second story balcony into a pool with topless women in it. Wow.

Needless to say, everyone cheered wildly and exchanged more than a few vigorous high fives. Also, needless to say, Jesus' football career was over. He got up and walked away triumphant, though with a slight limp that would turn out to be a hairline fracture to his heel. He would suffer for years for that brief moment of asinine glory but I'm sure he'd say it was worth it. I sure thought it was.

He climbed back up to the room and someone tossed him a beer by way of congratulations. Everyone assured him he would be their hero for all times. He grinned through obvious pain and stuck a new piece of chaw in his chin. We all downed a beer in his honor. The party continued at a more fevered pitch, though to tell you the truth, I was feeling a little ill-at-ease. As you can imagine, it was a weird scene and, despite the camaraderie I found upon first arriving and the excitement over Jesus' leap, I wasn't really connecting with anyone. Rocco was the only one there I really knew and he was spending most of his time catching up with his cousin and drinking excessively. Attempts at conversations with Jimmy or Frances were basically monumental failures, replete with lots of shoe-gazing and awkward beer can tapping. The uncomfortable silences were only broken by me saying something that weirded them out.

I of course was interested in the ladies in the house but found them to be shallow, boring, stupid, vacant, lame and worse of all, unwilling to talk to me. Ah, nuts. I stared blankly at MTV (sound down, of course) just as an excuse not to have to talk to anyone. Oh, TV, what a great invention you are. You have answered the prayers of mankind and set it so that we may never have to speak to one another ever again. We spend more time with you than with our loved ones. No, you are our loved one. Thank you for allowing us to gaze at you and avoid the difficult pain of interaction. You sure were working for me. I felt invisible bathed in your blue glow. I felt safe and happy. That is, until something on your tube caught my eye. A semi-familiar-looking scary old guy in an evil fedora and grey suit danced around your eye. I couldn't place the man's face, and without benefit of

sound did not know who he was. You sure were showing a lot of him. Why is he so familiar? Then, calm as if you were showing a NyQuill commercial, you announced that William S. Burroughs had died.

Now this was before I had even read Burroughs, but I knew who he was and that he was more or less a guy who really knew how to stack 'em. Somehow it bothered me that he had died and that no one here cared. I doubt they had ever even heard of the man. I can't quite put my finger on it, it just bothered me. One of Almost-Pretty Girl's friends was sitting next to me and I made an attempt at conversation, anticipating its result in advance.

"William Burroughs died," I said to her, pointing to the TV with my beer.

"Who's that?" was the response I expected and received.

"A writer," I said.

"Huh," she said, then looked away. I cursed her internally. Stupid bitch. Then, she burst out, "Oh wait! You said Burroughs? I know him." I was shocked. I loved her then. She continued. "Wasn't he Tarzan?"

"Yes," I said, as sarcastically as possible. "William Burroughs was Tarzan."

"That's sad," she said turning to one of her friends, "Hey, Tarzan died."

"Awww," she said.

"Jesus," I muttered.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Oh, nothing, I was just . . . never mind."

I looked around the room. Rocco was doing a headstand and drinking two beers at once in the corner. Carl was sitting on the bed flashing those insane eyes at a girl from next door. Jimmy and Frances sat close and pretended to be interested in what the other was saying. Where was I? I tried to shove my growing discontent down my throat with huge gulps of ice beer. I finished its bitter contents in just a few sips and let its husk slide out of my hand and clamor to the floor below.

part three: some time later

"Up and at 'em," Carl said. He was getting the troops together like a true field general. He explained that he felt the subtle vibrations of the

onset of party stagnation and wished to act before it could get really bad. Huh, I thought. Here was a guy who was failing all of his psych classes, yet was a clever master at sensing delicate changes in people's moods when it came to drinking. Too bad that wasn't a major, I thought. And what do you mean, before it gets bad? I asked him, though truthfully I was feeling the effects of the ice beer like a warm glove around my brain and wasn't too upset with anything anymore. Time to go out to the bars, he explained, ignoring my question (probably sensing the exact proportions to which I had meant it but didn't really mean it). Promised Land, here we come. I sucked down another, threw the can over my shoulder into a potted plant and shambled along. The Jacuzzi Bar, he said, was a few miles away. We would take the bus. The bus down here was just one dollar for an all-night pass and ran all up and down the main strip. Perfect for drunks. Perfect for us. He knew where the pick-up spot was and was surprisingly good at leading us there. Surprising because he himself was inordinately drunk at this point, and everyone else (including Almost-Pretty Girl who surprised one and all by staying with us despite the fact that all her friends had left) was too.

Wandering out into the cool summer night air was good for my head. Having to sit and talk to everyone was not. Like I said, the conversation wasn't really flowing. And here, sitting at the bus stop, talking was all there was to do. Not even the social lubricant of liquor could grease these stuck lips. It was quiet and very awkward. We didn't even have beers to suck on, stare at, or tap. Common ground was once again established by picking on Almost-Pretty Girl. Jesus was really messing with her and she was getting upset. For the first time I noticed that she seemed a little insane. Her face twisted into a gnarly fist and she yelled something like "you are making me fucking crazy" in a most non-joking tone. We laughed nervously and quietly resumed a period of discomfort. Thank God, the bus arrived.

We hurried on and found the bus loaded with drunks. I took a seat in the back by myself to avoid social interaction and settle in with pleasant thoughts of The Jacuzzi Bar ahead. I surveyed the scene. I could see a few rows in front of me that Jesus was again tearing in on Almost-Pretty Girl with passive aggressive yet disturbing ferocity. Frances was talking to a very strange looking redneck who wore more confederate flag paraphernalia than teeth. Now, that's something, I thought. Huh. Rocco stumbled back to me to ask if I was all right. Yes, I lied. I didn't have to explain further, for someone pulled the stop cord and the bus complied without question. The reverse inertia thrust Rocco into my lap in a violent manner. We

giggled. He sat there for a moment and pretended to be a baby. I had to look around his giant head to see what the screaming was all about at the front of the bus. Turns out it was Almost-Pretty Girl, fleeing and running across the multi-lane highway through oncoming traffic. Huh.

So we get to The Jacuzzi Bar. It was, like most everything in life, less than it was cracked up to be (certain exceptions: Wrigley Field, sex, Shakespeare). I was a little disappointed. First off, the bikini waitresses weren't there. I guess it makes sense. I mean, it does get cold at night. We're stupid. It was just like any corny beach-style college bar with tiki torches and all that crap. Only difference was a few sad tubs and a pool with dingy water. Attempting to hide our dismay, we took over a jacuzzi and acted cheerful. I drank 2 beers very fast. Being that Almost-Pretty Girl had fled, it was just us boys – a good old sausage party in the pool. We did almost succeed in getting several women to jump in with us, but by "almost" I mean "not almost." Christ, I thought, heaven is a sausage party.

After a bit of fake good times we got out of the jacuzzi and found a table. At least then we could seduce women. We were having no success until two college girls wondered over to us. They were the type of girls I didn't even know existed anymore. The type of girls with their initials embroidered on their sweatshirts. Somehow classy yet somehow not. Reserved yet flirty. Southern. One was fat and the other was boring. My guys acted excited, though, possibly because they were feeling a little worried about seeming gay due to the hot tub meat fest. I, harboring no such insecurities, just couldn't stand it.

The boring one drawled, "aren't you fellas gonna offer me a drink?" and I knew I was in the wrong bar or perhaps the wrong century.

"Screw you, Margaret Mitchell" I said, drawing perplexed glares from everyone. Fuck that, I wasn't buying her anything. The drinks here were balls expensive as promised (no discount for the lack of bikini girls) and I was drinking quick to try to relieve my awkwardness and anger. I had four beers in the short time since we arrived. The result was a quick lesson in reverse American history, watching a backwards timeline of our great presidents & statesmen. Jackson became Lincoln became Washington. I was running out of money.

"I'm outta here," I told Rocco. "I'm going for a walk." He protested but, "no, stay and work the fat one . . . she lllllikes you." I waved him off and took off with soaked pants into the beach night alone. It was nice to have a little solitude, if not actual quiet. The boardwalk was packed with gabbing teens, whistling machines and loud pointless music. It was an altogether crazy kaleidoscopic mix of colors and noises. It made me think,

for a second, how odd it is that we have taken the shore, the ocean, one of the greatest reminders of the power and beauty of the natural world and packed it so full of neon and skee-ball as to render it as unnatural as any place on earth. I mean, I like a good round of skee-ball as much as the next guy (unless the next guy happens to be "Skeeball Ed" Pasqual, 12 time New Jersey state skee-ball champ – now appearing on a sign winking at me) but why are we in this war against nature? Why is there so much fakeness everywhere? Why this big lie? I walked quickly towards nowhere.

A brief salvation, or at least diversion, came in the form of two very young guys playing acoustic guitars and basses on the boardwalk. The kind of guys always playing music everywhere on every boardwalk. Stringy hair and limbs tied back with bandanas. Open instrument cases peppered with small change. Ratty pants and chuck taylors. You know the drill. But somehow these guys were different. They had none of the nervous uncomfortableness or over-eager pretentiousness so many of today's street performers have. Maybe they were young enough to not yet be torn up by ambition and greed. Maybe they were just that rare thing: real. Whatever it was, they played wonderfully. The kind of music you secretly like but won't tell anyone because you don't want to seem soft. Not sappy shit but heartfelt music that talks to some spot maybe hidden inside. Sincere. Good. I was jealous.

When they were finished, I wandered over and slurred my words of wisdom. "Don't ever stop," I said.

"Don't ever stop what?" the bass player asked, spitting strands of wind-blown hair out of his mouth.

"Don't ever stop playing just for the love of playing." I said it as if it were some holy truth.

He looked a little confused by this and paused for a moment, then smiled, shrugged, and responded with all the innocence in the world. "Why would I ever stop?"

"Why would you ever stop?" I repeated quietly. We batted fists and I wagged off.

Hope against hope, I found my way back to the jacuzzi bar, navigating by the garbage cans and french fry stands that were the Ocean City landscape. The guys were still there, of course, still working Scarlett O'Hara and her fat cousin. Not surprisingly the women had gravitated away from Jimmy and Frances and seemed to be cozying up with Rocco and Carl. Carl had the pretty boring one and Rocco, as predicted, got the chubby. It was an altogether boring scene and, bolstered by my experience on the boardwalk, I was not in the mood for such chicanery. Time to stir

things up. I announced loudly to anyone who would listen my plan for some "serious hot tubbing."

"They're closed," Jimmy said. I looked and saw that indeed the jacuzzis were clearly roped off.

"So?" I asked.

"So, closed means we can't go in."

"I know what closed means, but they're not really closed, there's just some yellow rope around them. Are you afraid of a yellow rope? What is it going to do, jump up and choke you?"

"Shut up" Frances said, aiding his friend. I was outnumbered.

"I'll go," Rocco said triumphantly, and jumped up, much to the dismay of his plump paramour. We were operating on drunken logic for sure, but I sensed there was something else at stake. He strode with purpose off the deck and down to the jacuzzis. No one was looking. We moved stealthily. Like ninjas. Stupid, drunken ninjas. We moved to jump the rope. I tripped, of course, and made a crazy racket. Still, no heads turned. Unbelievable. I got up, peeled of my shirt and slid into the tub. Rocco did the same. We turned on the jets and relaxed. Still, no one noticed! "This is the greatest thing ever," Rocco said. Again, I had to agree.

I sat back and my head began to spin pleasantly, like on a carousel. Rocco began doing some odd jostling and smiling. In a few seconds, he presented me with his shorts. He was naked. I found this quite hysterical, laughed and followed suit.

We were having a grand old time (I could say we were having a 'gay old time' which would be dually funny because Rocco actually looks a lot like Barney Rubble, but I don't want you to get any ideas). In addition to the corporeal sensations of hot tub and booze, we had the child-like glee of breaking rules and getting away with it. I leaned back and said, "this is the greatest thing ever" – and it was. Just before the boot came crashing down.

The boots, rather, were actually penny loafers belonging to Jimmy and Frances. Those schmucks came down to gawk at us, probably glad to have a respite from their own horrible conversation. They said dumb things. Their presence created enough of a melee to draw the eye of the bartender. "Thanks, guys," I said as the inn keep walked towards us in a strident, military manner.

"It's closed" he shouted, his voice all gravel and football practice. "Can't you see the fucking rope?"

"We forgot," Rocco said, reminding me why I do the talking.

"You forgot? You for . . .! Just get out or I'm calling the cops. I've had enough of this."

"Yes, sir," I said, "but you see, we need just a minute."

"You need a . . . ? Get out now!"

"One minute."

He was confused by my order, but nonetheless complied. I could sense that he didn't really want any trouble, but was just pissed that part of his job required throwing drunk idiots out of hot tubs. As long as we complied, there would be no problem. He walked away muttering.

We did need the minute to retrieve our floating shorts and clothe ourselves, an act whose soundtrack was the amazed groaning of Jimmy & Frances, and the tittered excitement of the fat cousin (she had wondered down to see what ever all the excitement was about while Scarlett no doubt was making out with Carl. He would probably succeed in getting in her pants without even buying her a drink. Amazing). "You were naked in there?" "Holy shit." "Fags." "Oooh." We dressed, annoyed at how it had ended, but pleased that we had gotten away with something.

The bar was closing now, and we had a summit to decide what to do next. Carl and Scarlett had disappeared, Rocco and I were sopping wet. Everyone was way too drunk to consider rational decisions. What to do, what to do? Jesus jumped back into the scene and declared that he wanted to go look for some weed. Rocco and I figured this sounded about right. We followed him while the other guys, fat girl in tow, exited bar left, and headed back to the hotel. Good.

part four

I had no idea how to go about finding drugs but Jesus was a more experienced buyer and had some sort of weed intuition. He said he knew right where to go and led us back to the bus. Almost immediately he found his mark. Sitting right across from us was a weird guy with scabby knees, dreadlocks, and a general drug-dealing appearance about his face and neck. Jesus leaned over and began talking to him in low tones. From the look of it, it was going well. Still, I was nervous. I always hated drug dealing. I guess it's good that I do because the insufferable social contact is probably the only reason I didn't become an addict of some sort. At the next stop, Jesus motioned to us to follow him and we do. We get off the bus and walk

down the beach to a secret spot behind some dunes where we could make the pass. Ever the chicken, I make sure I'm not the one handing any cash or saying anything to anyone until it's safe. Jesus led the way and handled all that stuff. They shuffled off into the dark and –

Just as the awkward pass was about to take place, the pressure cooked handshake of too much subtlety to be real, the exchange of money for drugs – the dreaded flashed before us. . . . Now, I had only ever done small-time buying – a dime bag here, an eighth there, but I always had inflated worry in my mind, as if I was unloading cargo loads of smack on a pier. Every transaction for me was nerve-wracking, every dealer an undercover cop. It was a long-time fear beat into my head by TV, movies, parents. . . . And here, now, in this strange place and without all my faculties, it was actually happening. A cop car, sirens blaring, headed right for us.

I just stood there like the proverbial drug-buying deer in the headlights. Stunned. Luckily for me, Rocco had quicker reflexes than I. He grabbed me on the fly, yelling "Run!" and run we did. Jesus took off in one direction and me and Rocco absolutely booked down the beach. He first and me after. Drunkenly trying to manipulate the landscape, 4 beer-soaked feet flopped on sand, propelling 2 gooned up dune hurdlers down the shore. It was not a pretty sight. But the old adrenaline is a strong drug too and she carried us far down the beach, kicking sand in the direction of our impending arrest. Now, I should add, we might not have even been in danger of being caught. We were on the beach, behind a fence, and the cop lights were coming from the street. Certainly we were not the only hooligans guilty of some offense that night and it is possible that the red & blue was there for someone else. We'll never know.

Still running, but safe by all measures, Rocco motioned to a large old building with lights and music streaming out. It was full of people and seemed like a good place to stay a while. We walked in through a side door and I immediately turned on my heel to leave. Rocco was all, "no, come on, let's go in" but I could see we did not belong in this place. I felt incredibly conspicuous. I was sure someone would notice us and kick us out, or worse call the cops. Maybe it was leftover paranoia, but maybe it's justified. I mean, we really did not belong here.

First off, it seemed like a private party. We had thought it a bar or nightclub, but there was nowhere to buy drinks and no one to pay a cover charge to. And we were certainly not on the guest list. Secondly, we were the youngest people in the place by about 20 years. And thirdly, our appearance was none too user-friendly, what with Rocco's pitch black dyed

hair, tattoos, ripped shirt and my general disheveled appearance. Not to mention our wet pants. The crowd was very well-dressed and snobbish looking. The type of people we always expected to hate us and who almost always did not disappoint. I was just waiting for an evil hand to land on my shoulder and show me the door. But here's the thing: no one noticed us at all. All these drunk middle-agers just looked right past us. As if they couldn't assimilate our existence into their world. Or, and more likely, they were just too drunk to care.

Now here's the really funny part: Rocco starts trying to pick up women. He's chatting up these society ladies, offering them drinks he didn't have, like he owns the place. He was my hero right then. I was too awkward to even breathe but there he was trying to pick up chicks. I mean, sure, he got shot down every time, but you have to admire his balls for trying. The turn-downs were pleasant enough, and I think I saw some of them smiling. One matron even danced with him for a little while (there was a live band playing elevator music on a stage in the corner) and shared her cigarette. When he asked her if she wanted a drink, the only words I heard her say were "I'm polluted" – a sentiment I thought had more significance than she even knew.

After a time, Rocco decided it was time to leave this strange place and I followed. We found our way to the front, exited past a confused bouncer (who, seeing us for the first time, probably felt as though he should be kicking us out but there we were, leaving on our own accord so what could he do, kick us out more?) and found our way back to the street. From the front, the place showed no signs so it was either indeed a private party or perhaps a secret nightclub. Both thoughts made me confused. We walked out towards the main road where we would wait to catch the bus back to the hotel. Calm. Quiet. Standing there under a streetlight in the silent night air, I felt as though the evening might slow to an agreeable pitch and was glad for it. At last I would have some peace.

Rocco had other ideas.

We got on the bus and, to my utter bewilderment, as soon as we were aboard, Rocco opened up his billfold, took out a fistful of crumpled bills and made the astounding proclamation "I'll give twenty dollars to anyone who will suck my cock." As much as I was floored, the occupants of the bus were even more so. Especially by the implication hinted at by the lack of gender specificity on "anyone" which said that maybe the offer was not aimed solely at women. Now I knew (did I?) that he didn't mean it, but no one else on the bus had a clue. One of them, an Italian with a stuttering problem, took particular offense and was not shy about saying so. The

details of the argument that ensued escape me now, save the detail that Rocco could have easily exited the dilemma at any point by saying he was just kidding, which of course he was (was he?), but did not do so. The jawing escalated and, though the Italian would have probably backed down due to Rocco's size and apparent insanity, I thought a fight was brewing and had to take steps to prevent it. Somehow, I ushered Rocco to the back of the bus away from this Sicilian crackpot. There, I thought, we would be safe. Again, I was mistaken.

At the back of the bus, glowering at us and cracking knuckles like a bunch of '40s gangsters, were three rednecks and an angry midget. They were none too pleased with Rocco's display and planned to show their ire the old fashioned way. "We'll get off when they get off, and give it to 'em good" the leader drawled to his troops his voice part W.C. Fields, part Hitler. He was a paunchy red-head and was none too tough-looking but obviously a mean sonofbitch. His boys nodded in agreement and cracked more knuckles. Rocco, apparently drunker than I at this point, did not notice the obvious threat and stepped up his theatrics to another level. For some reason knowable only to him, he started to pretend that he was ill. Heaving, retching, moaning, and writhing on the floor. I was completely flummoxed. Why was he doing all this? Was he trying to get us killed? Now, it must be said that I have been privy to plenty of weird behavior over the years, plenty of drunk buffoonery, and plenty of fucking with people as sport – but I really could not understand Rocco's behavior right then. What could I do? What could I do?

Clearly, the answer was to pretend that I was a evangelist and cure Rocco's illness. I put on my best velvety preacher voice and began to wail "heal my child, there is Satan in you, Saaa-taaan!" to which Rocco responded by slowly raising from the floor, proclaiming his newfound health and love for Jesus. It was as if we were a highly practiced performance art duo. Or maybe it wasn't. Remember, Rocco wasn't the only very drunk person here. My bizarre performance pleased him greatly and we repeated it several times.

I like to think that somehow I was acting in unconscious self-preservation. That I was following some genius instinct that if you act mostly nuts (offering strangers cash for head) people will try to beat you up, but if you just go completely insane (play-acting evangelism on the bus) people will think you're too crazy to even deal with and just leave you alone. Which is exactly what they did. The good ole boys and the midge got off before we did, sneering and knuckle-cracking all the way. We were safely on the way back to the hotel. Safety. Deep Breath. Thank you

Jesus.

part five

We got back to the hotel without further incident. On the ride back, Rocco shed no light on his actions other than "that was awesome." I just shook my head. We walked without talking. Later, it would strike me that maybe the reason he was so unrelenting was that he was stuck with the wrestlers and sorori-girls in the jacuzzi bar due to family obligations while I wandered solo on the boardwalk. He probably felt especially tweaked by the stultifying influence of his cousin's friends and felt like getting as weird as he could be just to prove a point: That he could. He would have never have put it into words like this, though. Mainly because I'm pretty sure he doesn't know the word "stultifying." In retrospect, I admire him for taking a stand. But right then, I was too dizzy and sick and crazy and tired and mad to give him any number of props.

We reached the hotel and I completely forgot to even pretend to sneak past the front desk clerk. I was angry with myself for the lapse and froze up, sensing his presence. But, alas, it didn't matter – our mustached clerk-friend was enjoying a marbolo red and an especially engrossing episode of 'Gunsmoke' just as we thought he might be. He didn't even look up.

I dragged myself up to 2A, exhausted and drunk. I opened the door and was almost knocked back by a blast of stenchy Arctic air. Apparently the air conditioner, cranked on high to cool beer earlier in the evening, was left on full-blast all night. The room was freezing cold. It was dark and there were bodies strewn everywhere (who were all these people?). I considered a trip to the air conditioner and felt a bit like Matthew Henson, the great African-American explorer of the North Pole, as I surveyed the frigid, imposing terrain. But even he, brave soul that he was, didn't have to deal with land mines of angry drunk wrestlers. He just had some pissed off penguins. And maybe a walrus or two. So I abandoned the thought and resigned myself to a horrible night of sleep huddled in the corner near the bathroom. I tried to wrap myself in my flimsy t-shirt and get some sleep while everyone kept kicking me on their way to the can. It was worse than it sounds.

I was woken up many times by said piss-kickage, and once by a startling announcement. At about 4:30 AM the door flew open and there

was Frances. With the back-lighting from the hallway and his arms raised in victory, he looked a little like Moses as he thundered his proclamation down to the world. "I got laid!" he yelled, then passed out and landed on Rocco's back. Rocco emit a tiny yelp. He was trapped. As I pulled the giant, dead, freshly-laid weight off of my friend, I thought it interesting that this was such an important event in Frances' life and yet I cared so little. Then, I thought about a time when I was 9 years old and found a dead rat in the woods behind my friend's house. I jabbed it with a stick and the wood passed through its decomposing midriff like so much cottage cheese. Then I fell into a jittery slumber.

part six: seven a.m.

Still exhausted yet unable to face one more minute in that damn stinking icebox, I literally crawled out of 2A seeking warmth and fresh air. To my surprise, as I was dragging myself onto the balcony, I looked up and there was Carl. I couldn't tell if he was coming or going. I could tell, by the sparkle in those mad eyes, that the lucky bastard had spent the night ringing the Southern Belle. He was probably eating the Georgia Peach too. Scarlett was probably an acrobat in the sack. Those uptight girls always are. Wait, that's not true. I thought all this but didn't say it. I didn't say anything but rather grunted and gave him the stern head nod.

Still acting as field general, without so much as a hello, Carl assured me that he had the end-all hangover cure and that I should follow him. Now, an astute reader will notice that I drank eleven beers in this story as well as some vodka (and who knows what in that mysterious time between the end of part one and the "some time later" of part two) and that many of them were that ice beer crap – so the hangover I'm talking about was pretty severe. I laughed as I thought about how I drunkenly declared ice beer and wide mouth cans to be the greatest technological innovations of our time. I laughed but then stopped because it hurt. I felt like I could empty the contents of my stomach at any moment. My head felt like I had a telephone pole dropped on my face lengthwise. Repeatedly. My hair hurt. I was freezing cold, mentally disturbed, socially awkward, and balls tired. So I just followed along, unsure of what else to do.

The two of us did not speak as we walked. We walked in silence down from the balcony from which Jesus had rocketed. We walked past the

pool (now empty, quiet) and on to the vacant street. No buses, no drunks, no threatening rednecks. Just spotty traffic and a few gulls cawing overhead. We walked across the street and down to the beach. Swimming? Was he fucking serious? My stomach lurched and lolled as I watched the waves. "I, I can't go in the ocean now, Carl!" I said.

"Do it" he grunted, "it'll make you feel better." I figured I had nothing to lose and decided I'd try it. Besides, maybe I'd get lucky and just puke in the ocean and die.

We stepped down to the sand. We took off our shoes and shirts. I set down my glasses. We emptied our pockets of our empty wallets. He walked down to the water's edge and I stumbled along behind. We stood just out of reach of the tide's fingers. I stepped a little further. I paused for a moment, then danced backwards when the tide rolled in and I felt the first cold bite of the sea foam on my ankles. Seized by what I do not know, I ran down the demonic shore and leapt into the water. It was cold but nice. I did a pathetic dog paddle out a bit further. Nice. I squinted into the sun, filled my lungs deeply and – thinking that the phrase has more interest now than it did in my YMCA days – assumed a dead man's float. The motion of the endlessly rocking waves made my stomach turn a bit, but I started to relax and began to actually feel a little better. I rolled over and began to float on my back. I let the waves toss me around. The briny saltwater replaced the very unpleasant taste in my mouth. I relaxed.

Then, the strangest thing that happened that weekend, well, happened. I sensed a presence a few yards away out to sea. Carl was behind me so I knew it wasn't . . . holy shit. I squinted towards the presence and there, staring me in the face were two large dolphins. I had never seen anything like it in my entire life and was completely mystified. I swear they were smiling. Carl stealthily swam up and floated next to me as the dolphins bobbed up to our prone bodies, just out of reach. Neither of us said anything. We didn't even look at each other. We didn't want to scare them away. The dolphins hovered about us for just a few seconds, then disappeared back into the water. I floated there stunned by these creatures, by the dance of the amazing sunlight, by the unbelievable mystery of the sea, by life, by nature, by everything.

We never said anything to each other about it after that, each perhaps unsure that it had really happened and each not wanting to spoil the memory by finding out that it didn't. It was so strange. It was so beautiful. I was blown away by the simple beauty of it all. I found it incredible that in this dehumanized and twisted world, such ancient joys could still exist. I was baffled that all this pointless suffering could harden into one moment

of bliss. I was amazed that two sour drunks, sick with liquor and with life, could find a minute of transcendence amidst the chaos.

And that was the strangest thing that happened that weekend.

In memoriam, Edgar Rice Burroughs, 1875-1950,
author of Tarzan, and other books.

the whole damn truth

When I woke up my first question was: Whose pants are around my ankles? The Second: Where am I? Slowly, sickly, nauseatingly, as if remembering a stranger's dream, I distantly recalled the events of the previous night and this morning. I answered both questions and gained a little footing in the mental quicksand. I started to feel better. That is, until a third question struck me with a panic. How long have I been in here? It may have been a few minutes or it may have been several hours. Fuck. I searched for a clock. Of course there was none. Shit. How long has it been? I had no idea. The last thing I remembered was laying my head down on the toilet paper dispenser. Then blackness. Then now. . .

I stared at my ragged face under the fluorescent glow of the exposed bulb above the men's room mirror. In addition to the perpetual missed shave scruff and bloodshot eyes, there was a thick red streak across my forehead.

This did not look good.

I gently creaked open the door and tried to sneak back to my dark cubicle without drawing the eyes of co-worker vultures. I walked slowly, still unaware of how long it had been, still clueless on what to say if it was as long as I feared. What would they say? What would I say? What would anyone say? Surely there's no protocol in the company handbook as to how to deal with an employee missing work time from being unconscious on the shitter. Especially if the employee is the boss' son.

Yeah, that's right, my father was my boss. Maybe you're thinking I shouldn't have been worrying so much? That I could've just told everyone to fuck off? Invoke the nepotistic perks inherent in being the spawn of the head cheese? Ah, yes, I would say, but it doesn't quite work that way. I'd be a liar to say that there aren't advantages to being the boss' kid, but so too are there disadvantages. It hefts a certain responsibility. Disgruntled employees are always wanting to take a shot at you, for one. And for two, if you fuck up, that's not just your boss yelling at you – that's your dad. All of a sudden you're 5 years old again. Maybe worst of all is your own sense of duty to try not to make your old man look like an ass for hiring you

(despite the fact that he clearly was).

Now, my pops is a good man. He's not a kick-your-ass dad or even a yell-at-you dad. If anything, he's an "I'm-disappointed-in-you"-dad. He's always been good to me. Just different than me. He's a solid and respected member of the community. A homeowner. A provider. The whole nine. He had always expected that I would become those things one day. And I, for the most part, allowed him to think that that's the path I was heading down. I was going to college, I was working for him, I was maintaining the appearance, more or less, of respectability. And he was proud. But recently, fissures in the facade had started to appear. This was not the first time I had fucked up at work, and my appearance showed the wear and tear of someone living a hard life. Also, he became a little suspicious when I wouldn't give him the address of my new apartment.

I wobbled quietly out of the men's room, trying to silence the squeak of my shoes and the whoosh of corduroys. Figures I'd have to borrow loud pants. I turned the corner. No one. I slinked down the hall. Still no one had seen me! I peered around the corner. Tumbleweeds. I took a deep breath, made a quick dash and, safety! I was back seated in my dingy cubicle as if I had never left. Relief. I looked at the time on the bottom right-hand corner of my computer screen. Panic. It had been two hours and thirty-three minutes since I went to the bathroom. If anyone was paying any attention at all, surely they would have noticed this. Maybe I'd just say I had diarrhea. A few moments passed and I thought that maybe I wouldn't have to tell anyone anything. Hell, I was often left to work unguarded for hours at a time and maybe this was one of those times. I started to relax. I stretched my arms, scratched my belly and grinned. I felt proud that I had gotten away with something stupid yet again.

Then, I sensed a heavy presence behind me. Maybe it was not for me. Then, a whiff of familiar aftershave. Uh-oh. A fatish hand squished on my shoulder. I was done.

"You OK?" asked the owner of the hand. My father.

"Um, yeah." I answered without turning around, my voice thick with sleep.

"Where have you been?"

"I was in the bathroom."

"I've been waiting for you for . . . you've been in the bathroom for two and a half hours?"

"Was it that long?" I asked, trying to look innocent as I turned to meet his glare. The ole puppy dog eyes might have worked when I was in first grade and threw a baseball through a window or something but now

with my shabby face, toilet paper line and all, it didn't have the same effect. I did not look good.

"Jesus, are you OK?" my dad asked, noticing the disrepair of my visage.

"Yeah."

"Are you sick?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Were. . . were you sleeping in the bathroom?"

"Uh. Sort of." Fuck.

"Now, son, you, you know you can't be doing that."

"Sorry."

"I'm disappointed in you."

"Sorry."

He paused for a moment, mulling things over. This was some sort of breaking point for him, I guess. He was never very forceful with me at all. He had only ever spoken strongly to me a few times that I could remember. But I had never fell asleep on the toilet before.

"Now, God damn it, son. Sorry's not going to cut it this time. You've got to stop screwing around. You look like hell. You've been coming in late, doing poor work. You won't even tell me where you live. . . Do you mind telling me what you were doing last night that was so important that you can't even stay awake at work?"

Did he really want to know? Of course he didn't. Was it too late to say the diarrhea line? Yes it was. Why did I tell him I was sleeping? Should I just tell him just that I drank too much last night? He didn't even know I drank at all. He didn't know very much about me at all. He certainly didn't know the truth. That I was in a ludicrous punk rock band, that I cavorted with midgets and thieves, that I lived in a filth-pit, that I hung out in slums, etc. He didn't know any of this. I'd been living a lie. For a moment I entertained the thought of following the example set by my friend the previous night and saying "fuck this facade." I thought about telling him the whole damn thing. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

the truth

Well, Dad, first of all, I tend to get shit-faced drunk most nights.

Last night actually was nothing rare, really. Nothing extra crazy. If anything, it was a quiet, even classy night. At least it started out that way. Me and the guys in my band had a night at the theater. Now, you're wondering, what was an absurdist scum punk band doing at a play? Good question, Dad. Glad to see you're paying attention. The answer is Balls. Don't get goofy, Balls is our new bass player. He was in a play and asked us to go see him. I know, we were surprised too. That's what I mean, he just fucked his facade. It was the first time we had any inkling that he was more than a punk rock drunk and that he was also into art and theater and things of that ilk. Let me explain.

Balls had quite a reputation as a ridiculous boozier who lived on pizza and borrowed time in a walk-up above a hoagie store. He was always getting hammered and starting fights or dropping cinder blocks through the windshields of ex-girlfriend's cars. Stuff like that. One time, legend held, he stood on a barstool and peed on someone's back at a local tavern. He was also a fixture in the local punk rock circuit and fronted some of my favorite bands back in the day before he switched to bass in his old age. When we needed a new bassman, our friend Teddy O'Boyle suggested we try Balls. They were roommates in the past and still stayed in touch. So we found him and asked him to join the band even though we had never heard him play. Yeah, we don't really care about the music. He agreed wholeheartedly. He leapt into our stupid act with both fiery feet. At his first show with us he wore a leopard print thong and rolled around on the floor in a pool of piss before pulling his bass cabinet on top of him. I know, it was great.

We started hanging out a lot with Balls, but you know how it is -- guys can spend a lot of time together without actually getting to know anything about one another. All we do is get drunk, loud and stupid. Now, Balls certainly is the first two but is not at all the latter. Get this, he is really a man of delicate sensibilities and more than a little intelligence. He would (as I found out last night) buy cheap K-Mart paints and turn out throw-away masterpieces on the back of old pizza boxes. He would sometimes get really serious about music and record love songs on a 8-track (playing all the instruments himself). He also would totally freak out from time to time and pull something drastic like moving to New Jersey with a vegan. Then he'd be home pissing on backs in a couple of weeks. His double life must have left him quite conflicted and I can only imagine the mental anguish he went through to decide to tell his punk rock friends that he was in a play. It probably represented a fairly important step in a difficult quest to unite the disparate aspects of his psyche. We just called

him a fag, which probably didn't help.

No, we weren't really against his being in a play and we certainly didn't care if he was gay (which he wasn't). We're just a group of young males and, as such, our main mode of discourse is calling each other fags. One of our own being in a play certainly qualifies as fodder. But we were also supportive of our new friend and could relate to a guy wanting to do something solid while also being a drunk; though we would never say it. But yeah, we would go.

Me and the rest of the guys made typical half-assed attempts to dress nicely for Opening Night. I wore my only pair of nice pants (khakis I had swiped from an old roommate -- speaking of which, have you noticed that I wore them to work every single day except today?) and proudly donned my cleanest dirty shirt. The rest of the guys made similar efforts and Rocco even put on a wide tie. We all made fun of him then went to the play. I'd like to say that it was a stirring bit of art that touched the soul and moved all of us deeply, but it really wasn't. Not that it was terrible, it was just typical community theater work. Pretty non-eventful. The most striking thing about the play (after the shock of reading the program and seeing that "Balls" was not our friend's Christian name but rather that he was christened Harold) was the chick who played Ophelia. She was an absolute cock-stiffener. I know. We all joked that we could see why Balls was into this theater shit, with the tail like that running around. Though to tell you the truth, I at least could tell that he took his role very seriously and was putting a lot of effort into it. Any poon he scored was a side note. Really, he wasn't half bad as an actor. Not excellent, but definitely solid. He really seemed to understand the role of Polonius. Oh yeah, it was Hamlet.

After the performance we waited for him and when he came out into the lobby we all applauded sycophantically. He asked us what we thought and we tried awkwardly to give him a good review. Awkward not because he was bad but because it's hard to all of a sudden change the level of interaction with someone from drinking buddy to serious artist. I mean, the last time I saw him he was puking in a sock and now I saw his very serious treatment of Polonius. I searched for the words but couldn't find them even though I wanted very much though to let him know that I for one saw and appreciated his attempts to break out of his pigeon holed, rat-trapped existence. I guess this is why I told him I'd go with him to the Opening Night after-party even though the rest of the guys were heading back, saying they wanted to hit the \$3 pitcher special at the bar next to our apartment. I wanted to have a moment with Balls and hopefully make him

feel good. It wasn't just because I thought Ophelia would be there, I swear it wasn't.

I rode over to the party with Balls and the aforementioned Teddy O'Boyle, Balls' ex-roommate. Teddy was exactly the kind of guy who made Balls' life so difficult. He would chastise the poor guy, not just bust his chops but actually verbally belittle the man whenever he would try to do something that didn't involve Pabst Blue Ribbon. He was so violently dismissive of Balls' attempts to change his station that I was surprised they stayed friends. Come to think of it, why was I his friend? Then I remembered that his new place had a hot tub. I was also surprised that he was there at the play. If he was so against this type of thing, why was he here? Turns out he had met Ophelia one day some time ago and was lusting after her ever since. "You know I must really be into her," he said as we rode in Balls' pick-up truck to the party, "I never pass up \$3 pitchers." True love. The whole way there he talked grotesquely and made lots of dumb jokes like "Ophelia? I'll feel ya." Poor Balls. Poor me. Poor humanity.

The party was at the Stage Manager's apartment. He lived in the next town over, on the west end. As we rode I was surprised that I had forgotten how many nice places there are so nearby to my dirty home streets. Yes, Dad, where I live now is basically a slum on the south side of town.

Is it the same in every place that the south side is the worst and the west the nicest? You never hear about the problems of west L.A., but always South Central. South Side Chicago is a bad place too. Yes, the south side of every town is the bad part and in fact it could be said that Mexico is America's south side, or Africa Europe's, though this is a bit of a stretch. A notable exception, as has probably been noted elsewhere, is the South of France, which I am told is lovely. I'm not sure how the Upper East Side of New York fits into this equation, but I know for a fact that it is nice there.

Who decided on these random designations? Who decided that this slice of land over here will be manicured with flower beds and big homes and shiny windows while this one, this one over here, will be filled with the desperate, the poor & the insane wandering around on filthy streets dotted with crack viles and soiled wigs? The land's the same. Just that river separating two places. Just that river and a generation and a mental divide. Separating grass from concrete. Light from dark. Suburban from urban. Me from you.

Anyway, the stage manager's apartment itself was very nice, as befitting its west end locale, even if it wasn't a Riverian chateau or a fancy penthouse. I walked in with Teddy and Balls and we were introduced to the cast and crew, most of whom were already there and sipping beer out of bottles (ooh-la-la). I made a mental note not to call anyone a fag. Someone would surely take offense. I didn't want a repeat of that awful flare-up at a very different kind of party when I jokingly told someone that they sounded like a "crackhead." Balls was really trying hard to meld his worlds and I didn't want to fuck it up for him.

There were a smattering of theater types there, but I don't want to go on and on about them because I'm not very interested in them. Actors strike me as a particularly low form of humanity. There are certain exceptions of course, but most of them are egocentric attention-seeking megalomaniacs. You can never trust them. They are professional liars. Same for lawyers. Lawyers maybe are slightly better because they only pretend to hold any opinion that is profitable whereas actors actually pretend to be a different person. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm a liar too but only in a petty way. These people lie on a huge, grand scope. Now, if you realize that most of our rulers (politicians) started out as lawyers you can start to see why everything's in the bag as it is. Then if you realize that movie stars (actors) are our royalty, our kings and queens, it becomes really scary. Why are they worshiped so? Because they do so well what we all wish we could do. Be someone else. We worship our liars. We are a society that is ruled by and in awe of its champion liars.

I wasn't actually thinking in grand societal theories about these actors at the party, really I was just ignoring them because I was interested in finding a certain mad princess. Ophelia was thy name-o. She wasn't there yet, but I knew she was coming because Balls told Teddy as much on the ride over. Now, Teddy did see her first so I had no right to put on the creep and I would honor that. I didn't even like Teddy, but I respected his right to hit on the girl first because he had met her first. We didn't have much, but we had our stupid honor. Of course I inwardly hoped that she would fall for me, though I assured Teddy that he could go for her unopposed. See? I told you I'm a liar.

I tried to mingle and familiarize myself with these foreign digs. There were nice rugs (noticeably bereft of beer or blood stains) and some very charming lamps. There was a painting hanging on the wall and, in an attempt to mingle politely, I asked the Stage Manager about it. He said it was an improvisational painting done by The Genius as he gave some poetry reading. The Genius was a character they acted with who also wrote

and, apparently painted. The painting wasn't any good, but I didn't say anything. I did get bored with the talk about a Genius who didn't know anything about painting and soon I stopped mingling altogether and found myself in a beer chugging contest with Teddy.

Regarding Teds, I badmouthed the Irish bastard earlier, but really he's a decent guy. In between chugs we were talking about Balls and he gave me the skinny on all that stuff I told you earlier about New Jersey and the pizza paintings. I could tell that Tedward was baffled by this side of his friend more than he was hateful of it. He just attacked it because he didn't understand and feared he would lose his buddy. I could respect that. Ah, Teddy's all right. Plus, sometimes he could say some really funny shit. He said some such comedic line about how I looked like a marmot sucking on that beer right in the middle of a big swig during our contest. I spat out a laugh and a huge mouthful of imported beer sailed onto the carpet. Oops. Several eyes turned disapprovingly to me and I tried to cover.

"I coughed," I said.

Aces.

Hey Dad, while we're talking, can I take a minute and tell you how much I fucking hate working here? These people drive me mad. First of all, they are constantly talking about the weather. Like it matters to any of them. They work all day in this huge glass cube, then go to their homes and sit in front of the TV 'til bedtime. They're outside for maybe 30, 40 seconds a day and yet talk about the weather 4,5 hours a day like they're farmers. I hate them. And the work is absolutely pointless. I just shuffle papers around in some weird pattern. I think everyone else does the same. Maybe there's some method to this mad document dance but I sure don't get it. The only thing that keeps me going is knowing that I can get drunk at night and that I will go back to school in the fall. Whatever I end up doing after school, you can be sure it's not this. How do people do it? How do they suffer this insufferable shit for 30 years and not kill themselves? There's always a dream, I guess, always the lottery or some cheap calendar with a picture of Hawaii on it, or the promotion. Or, worse, they like it. And this is the thought that scares the hell out of me. They need it. They crave it in their sick hearts like a whipped dog who loves the attention the belt has to offer.

So back to the party. As will happen sometimes, time passed. Soon enough our star lady arrived. For some reason I was staring at the door when she came in, so I remember every detail of her entrance. I saw the knob rotate slowly, even beautifully, if you can believe that. I saw a hand pass through the frame first, carrying a slender wrist, leading a victory

parade of arm, elbow, shoulder. What splendor. She floated through the door and seemed to have a spotlight on her even off stage. An unparalleled beauty from her eyelashes to her fingertips. What I'm saying is, she was fucking hot. So entranced was I that I briefly forgot my code of honor to Tedly and focused on formulating a plan as to how to have her. That is until Teedder whispered to me, "holy shit look at them titties." Like I said, true love. Shit. I couldn't invoke the tin sheet on him, especially after our earlier bonding. But God, she was lovely and he didn't really seem to understand her delicate beauty like I did. I saw her as a fragile, delicate flower. A flower I wanted to bone. I watched her float around the room, greeting everyone with effervescent grace. She really was a princess, I thought, just as she started to walk over to where we were standing.

I stepped quickly to cover the beer stain I had produced, thinking that I would change everything for this woman. Ted and I jostled for position, each sure she was coming to talk to us. We bucked up and puffed out our chests like a couple of chimpanzees at a 7th grade dance. I had never seen Teddy so nervous. He was quite an experienced playboy. She was just that kind of woman. So she walks over to us and, without even so much as a second glance, passes right by. Damn. She was just coming to get a beer.

I was deflated but Tedsheet was undeterred. I guess that's why he's the playboy. Sometimes the only difference between success and failure in the laying arts is the willingness to try the impossible. . . . Who was it that said that? Ghandhi? I must say that looking at that woman then, to have her did seem to be an impossible dream. She did not even seem of this world. It would be like trying to hold a phantasm or a cartoon character. Anyway, Ted started with the chit-chat and she said she did remember meeting him and oh yeah how wonderful to see you and all that. He was so excited that I felt like telling him she was a fucking actor and probably didn't remember him for shit. But I didn't. I just introduced myself and, despite the loyalty and all, held her hand for a half-second too long and looked deep in those milky way eyes.

I would change everything.

At that moment, Balls came over to greet her.

"Why, hello, Daddy" she said. I immediately thought this was some term of sexual affection and wished she would call me Daddy or Asshole or whatever she wanted.

"Hello, daughter" he said and I remembered that Polonius was Ophelia's pops in the play. This put me one step ahead of Ted, who was certainly not paying any attention.

"Why did you call him that?" Teddy said, laughing.

"Ophelia is Polonius' daughter in the play" I interrupted. Then out of nowhere, I added, "Ophelia – poor Ophelia! O, far too soft, too good, too fair to be cast among the briers of this working-day world, and fall and bleed upon the thorns of life!" What was that? I guess I had heard it in English class in high school and somehow stored it in long term memory. How, I'll never know. I guess you can do anything for a beautiful woman. I felt like that guy who got a huge adrenaline rush and lifted a truck off his wife after a car accident. I was in the zone.

"Thank you" she said, slightly confused yet with a definite glimmer in her eye, "that's really . . . thank you." I was scoring points. I was flying. I was thrilled. I was feeling really great. That is, until she walked off with Balls and Ted punched me in the stomach. Oops.

Hey Dad, you know Stan the deaf guy who works in my department? He's not deaf. Really, he told me. He fakes it. Well, sort of. I mean he really can't hear but it's because those things in his ears, those aren't hearing aids, they're ear plugs. He told me the whole story. He could sense that I hated everyone in the office and as such we were kindred spirits. Remember when he was out sick a while back? He wasn't sick, he was in Vegas. He had half the money he needed to be able to quit working. It would take him another 10 years to save up the other half. But he just couldn't take it. So he went to the roulette table and put his life savings on black. He said that if he won, he'd have enough to quit and would do so as soon as he got home. And, if he lost, he'd kill himself. Well, he lost, in what must have been a heartbreaking and dramatic scene. He was tottering away from the table to go jam a gun down his throat or something, when he bumped into an old lady. He said "excuse me" but she didn't respond. She was deaf. He thought about how nice it would be to be deaf. He thought that he could handle the office if he didn't have to hear all the inane weather chatter. Then it hit him, he'd fake deafness, go back to work and live for a while longer. So he researched some ear thing and told everyone he had it and had to wear those things in his ears. They're just ear plugs. That's what your office is like. The only sane person here has to fake deafness and/or consider suicide and gambling just to survive. Don't tell him I told you, though. If you call him on it, his death'll be on your hands.

As I got drunker and drunker, the limits of my sense of honor were being tested. It was getting harder and harder to keep away from the fair Princess. But the shot to the gut did help. Tedward had every right to do that, he really did. We consulted, as he no doubt sensed what was going on.

I lied and told him I wasn't trying anything but was just making conversation. We bickered a bit about it, not noticing what was going on right in front of our eyes. We didn't notice that it would be a moot point soon enough. Then, someone announced that this party was really just a warm-up and that everyone was moving to Rainbright's, the local gay bar, for karaoke. I didn't even know we had a local gay bar, did you? But I said I'd go, not allowing the irony to escape me that I was going to a gay bar for a woman.

So we went and let me tell you, you haven't lived until you've seen karaoke at a gay bar. Rainbright's was an amazing scene. Everyone put on an spectacular show. Some black guy was doing splits and spins while singing "Wind Beneath my Wings." Everyone drank a lot, and there must have been 20 underage people there. A drag queen belted out "Rock Lobster." A fat guy did a disturbingly accurate impression of Judy Garland. I think it was the most fun bar I've ever been to. There was no animosity, no anger, no cares for anything. Half the time it seemed that no one even cared if you paid for your drinks. A mad mix of strange folks came and went and everyone got really drunk. Rather drunk by this time ourselves, Teddy, Balls and I signed up to sing "Hungry Like a Wolf" and did it punk rock style. The gays were none too impressed, but applauded nonetheless. After we were done, Micheal, the host of the evening said over the microphone "Isn't it nice to have some straight boys here with us tonight?" I was stunned. How did he know?

"Whoah" I said to Teddy. "Gay guys have superpowers." He agreed. For awhile, we were so fascinated with the strange scene that existed so close to where we lived yet so far from how we lived that we forgot to pay attention to The Princess. She had other things on her mind anyway. It continued like this for some time, with lots of gay singing and drinking. Teddy was fascinated by a drag queen and even grabbed her boobs. It was weird but hey, whatever. I was doing shot after shot of sambuca with a lonely one-eyed homosexual in the corner. He wore an eye patch and was an altogether baffling figure. He could see even with only his one eye that I was straight and I was again baffled by the ESP of the homos. "How do you do that?" I asked.

"Subtle hints" he said. "Plus no gay guy would wear that shirt." For a second this hurt my feelings, though I don't know why. What was wrong with my shirt?

You know, Dad, I can see why Stan would want to kill himself rather than work here, really I could. Here I sit every day, in this dark

cavern, shuffling papers, throwing records into the computer one after the other after the other. I don't know why, I don't care why. I have no connection to my work, no fulfillment when I'm done. I know, I'm working my way up. I know, I have to suffer like everyone else. I know. Just like in an abusive family. Everyone suffers for years to get to the top. Then when they get there, they are sure to make everyone else suffer. It's what psychologists call a cycle of abuse. Our whole economy is a cycle of abuse. Everyone gets so much shit from their superiors (parents) that when they get in charge, they are total violent angry pricks and dish out all the gut-kicking abuse to their kids (employees). But you know what the worst part of it all is? That I have to pretend to like it. That is the greatest assault to a man's dignity and why people in service jobs always lose their minds. Their jobs are awful, just awful and they're supposed to hate them and all they want to do is bitch about them but they have to smile all day every day. Every time you force a smile or say "good, thanks" when you don't mean it, the dark worm burrows deeper and deeper down your chest and when it's finally eaten all the way through your heart you snap and maybe shoot some people. What do you have to lose? You have no heart left, no sense. That's what happens to postmen. They have a terrible job but all day have to smile and pretend they like it. It's a hell. Every time I hear someone say that phrase "going postal" it is followed by a laugh and it reminds me exactly how cruel man is. God, we're awful.

The gay bar was closing up, but Micheal invited everyone back to his house for yet another party. My 3rd gay party in one night, shattering the previous record by three. It was already about 2 in the morning, but I went, of course. Not just because Ophelia was going, and not just because my new pirate friend asked me to, and not because my ride was going, but because I need to stretch out every hour of every night between the day to day hell that is working for your company. I would rather sleep just one hour a night and almost die on the toilet like Elvis than to have the largest percentage of my waking hours be spent inventorying door parts. I would kill myself, really I would. Micheal had a nice little place, also on the west end. The party had thinned out and was just Micheal, Long John Homo, Balls, Teddy, Ophelia and myself. All guys and one girl. Sure, half the guys were gay but I still didn't like the odds. She was an incredible woman but even princesses have their limitations.

Micheal packed a bowl and we all sat around in a circle on the floor smoking weed. My head was already spinning from the drink and all inhibitions were down.

"Do you think I could catch gay from sharing this pipe?" I asked.

"You wish, honey" Micheal said. "You don't have a gay bone in your body. But your friend here," he said, pointing to Teddy with the pipe, "I'd like him to have a gay bone in his body." He then laughed like an 80 year old lady and everyone else broke out too. Poor Teddy. He looked a little confused. But he surprised us all.

"Do you have a fatty boombalatty?" he asked steadily, nodding his head and grinning. That means, "do you have a big dick?" Dad. Micheal didn't know either. I guess it's a generational thing. Did I mention that he's in his 40s? Anyway, this apparently wasn't as an odd of a question as it might seem because after its meaning was explained, Micheal just stuck out his lip and nodded a self-secure "yes." Huh.

Strangely, Ted did later find a way to offend this seemingly impossible-to-offend crowd. As we got higher and higher, he just couldn't resist asking the homo pirate why he wore the eye patch. It was apparently an off-limits topic because Micheal kept making "cut it" motions with his hands, but Teddy continued undeterred. Ted really had no trouble with the problems of a double life because he just said whatever came into his head at any given time. He just did whatever he felt like without ever even having the thought that maybe he should not be doing it. The homo pirate started to explain that he had cancer and I could see why Micheal wished to stem the conversation before it started. The pirate's lone eye filmed with tears as he said, "I have six months to live."

Well that pretty much put an end to the convivial atmosphere of the party. Before long it wrapped up and we were on our way. But not before one final confusing act. Micheal asked Teddy if he had a picture of himself. Teddy of course did not, so then Micheal asked for a kiss. Teddy agreed and gave him a little peck. Weird.

To our amazement, Ophelia offered to drive me, Balls and Teddy home. Ted and I both thought this meant that we would score, despite the fact that neither of us had been doing a very good job of hitting on her. It was a good thing she did offer to drive, though, because none of us were in any state resembling one in which we should be driving. All of us have driven drunk many times, sure, but with the weed and all we were well past even the liberal line we draw as to the intoxication level that precludes operating a motor vehicle. Hell, Balls was barely conscious. Ophelia was a little high, but sure she could handle the wheel. Terd and I scrambled into the back of Balls' pick-up and Ophelia helped Balls into the cab. We lay there on our backs looking up at the stars, laughing about the absurdity of

the evening and everything. It really was beautiful, lying there stoned, staring at the stars.

We got back to Ted's place and he tried one last ditch effort at coital bliss with the princess. "Do you want to come in and go in the hot tub?" he asked, figuring whatthefhell. She looked at Balls, then responded. "Sure."

We were floored. This was the best news either of us had ever heard. Imagining the naked princess in bubbles almost gave me a heart attack. Balls was so drunk that he was having trouble getting out of the truck. Ophelia helped him to his feet and put her arm around him to help him in. Ted and I hurried into the house, fired up the jets, put on the disco lighting, and hit the stereo. What a love shack he had there.

Over the roar we talked about how to proceed. I still couldn't declare my intentions but he could tell. Luckily for me, his sense of honor wouldn't allow him to send me away if there was a chance to see Ophelia nude. He wanted to be able to share that with me and I thank him for it. His loyalty almost made me feel guilty when I thought about how I was going to screw him over and take his woman. Ah, fuck it, she wasn't really his anyway. So he loaned me a pair of shorts, though I was sure I was going to be out of them soon. I put 'em on, hopped in the tub, and sat there waiting for heaven. It was really stupid. I guess we thought she was just going to get naked and run right in. We didn't want to fuck it up so we just sat and waited. She wasn't even in the house yet and there we were sitting in the tub. Time passed again. I figured I should go see what was happening.

I stumbled into the front room and saw Ophelia leaning over Balls on the couch. He was passed out and to my utter amazement she had her hand in his pants and was working his cock! Here me and Ted were doing our best all night (sort of) to get this woman and Balls just gets drunk and passes out and she was practically raping him. Unbelievable. I guess I should have seen it coming. I mean, there was plenty of foreshadowing. And come to think of it, he deserved her. Really. I mean it. Sure I'm jealous but Balls really showed some guts with the whole play thing. He put himself on the line and was rewarded. God bless him. I didn't even bother to go back into the hot tub room to tell Ted the verdict. I just left and walked home.

Ted's house is about 2 miles from my apartment and it was a long lonely walk back across town at 4AM stoned, drunk & wet. It seems like this kind of thing always happens to me. I worried that I would get caught by the police or worse, the criminals. It was really a strange, almost epic

journey. But that's another story. You really don't want to know what it's like to walk through the bad side of town completely high at 4AM in borrowed pants. Suffice it to say that it's weird.

I stumbled into my apartment and passed out immediately on the couch. I didn't even make it to my room, didn't even think about setting the alarm and wouldn't have woken up at all if Rocco hadn't been up and about at 7 to get ready for his job. He farted on my head on his way to the shower and I woke up confused. Seeing the time, I rushed to get dressed and didn't get very far. I had no pants. My only pair still lay in a heap at Ted's house, a sad symbol for the hope of love never received.

I had to ask Rocco if I could borrow some pants. I knew I couldn't come to work wearing shorts. That would be unprofessional. Rocco laughed, asked me what the hell I was doing last night, and gave me his best pants – these big fashionable corduroy numbers with the racing stripe you now see before you. I somehow kept it together to ride my bike to work without dying, rushing, sweating and huffing all the way. I was quite proud of myself for actually being early. Think of that, hurrying intensely to get somewhere you hate. Think of it. So what if I then passed out on the toilet an hour or so later? I mean, don't I get some points for trying?

So that's about it, Dad. That's what I did last night. Heavy drinking, drugs, gay pirates, punk rock, drag queens, borrowed pants and female-on-male molestation. Like I said, a quiet night. Oh, and I fucking hate working here so much that when I leave I smile and you know what? It hurts to do so. I don't mean anything cute by that, I mean it literally hurts my face. My smile muscles are atrophying.

XXV.

Did all that really happen? Did I really say all this to my father? Maybe. But remember, I'm a goddamned liar just like the rest of us.

happy new year

I decided to give up hair as a new year's resolution. I knew I wouldn't keep it up all year, but at least it would take a week or two for the stubble to grow back in, and that would be longer than I usually kept my resolutions. Not all my hair, mind you, just the waist down. I wasn't a freak.

Somehow I convinced my buddy Rocco to go in with me on this bizarre experiment and we went to the drug store and bought nair, razors, every hair removal kit we could afford. Rocco wanted the electrolysis machine but I told him he was being ridiculous.

We were attending a big party that night, (it was after all New Year's Eve) and knew we'd be naked at some point in the evening. So why not do the shave-down this night, before the party, so we could unveil our shorn nads for everyone? We went back to Rocco's friend's house and announced our intentions. Those guys all looked at us like we were crazy but were sort of used to our strange "antics." We asked if anyone wanted to help us remove the hairs, and winked at the girls in the house. Sure it was dirty but if we got them to touch our naked selves, that wouldn't be bad, right? Only one girl responded enthusiastically. We weren't surprised by this, she would respond positively to any chance to touch any cock ever. But we couldn't be picky so said, "let's go upstairs."

"OK," she said. "Only one problem. I'm tripping."

Rocco said something like no way you're touching my sack with a razor then, but for some reason I just said, "I said, let's go upstairs."

She followed me up and everyone was really shocked. This seemed to go beyond antics. Letting a tripping girl shave your nuts was beyond weird to them. I don't know why but I really didn't think it was a big deal.

I went into the bathroom, disrobed and first tried the nair. It burned and made a weird smell and also wasn't working very quickly. "F it" I said, "let's just shave." So we got out the new razors (for "sensitive skin" the package said. if only it knew.) I jumped in the shower, lathered up my ass and balls with shaving cream and let my friend, the tripping girl, shave away. She focused in the most intense way, like only people on drugs can.

"I feel like I'm making a beautiful painting," she said.

"Well my ass is a work of art," I said.

"Your ass is stupid," Rocco said. He was still in the bathroom, letting the nair eat through his dense Hungarian thicket. Sucker. He'd be there all night.

While the tripping girl worked (it took quite a long time) I listened to the banter from the guys in the house. They were all laying into one guy, busting his balls in a most unmitigated manner. I felt bad for the fucker. He wasn't verbally equipped enough to defend himself. When he walked by the bathroom door I said to him, "I'm sorry, man."

"What!?!!" he yelled, tossing his outdated metal mane backwards.

"No, I'm just . . . sorry."

"Did you shit in my shower?" he said.

"No, I mean, they - "

"Well alright then, as long as you didn't shit in my shower."

I had to like that philosophy on life. Here he was, 30, pathetic, poor, getting picked on, having my ball hairs all over his tub, a devotee of a music and a style long-outdated and never really accepted in the first place - and he was still alright as long as I wasn't shitting in my shower. To this day whenever some egregious nonsense happens to me (as it does every day) I say to myself, "well at least no one's shitting in my shower."

My genius instinct was correct in letting the stoned girl shave me, she did a thorough and delicate job. It looked like I had a newborn chicken strapped to my lower abdomen. If she was drunk I never would've let her do it, but tripping (and it was mushrooms, not acid, so less insane) seemed OK. And it was.

I looked damn good.

Rocco was still laboring with the nair and I flaunted my baby chicken in his face. It was almost time to go to the party and he still had a forest down there. Pathetic. He said, "F it, I'll get the rest later." So I would be the only one. Figures. We dressed for the party. Rocco's band was playing that night so he borrowed my mexican wrestling mask and also wore a pair of underwear with the ass cut out. He wrote "peek-a-boo" on his buttocks and that was pretty funny. I put on an American flag bedspread and boots.

"Well I'm ready to go."

"Me too."

The party was about six blocks away from where we were, and we decided to run it. It was about absolute zero outside but there we were, nearly naked (and me without even any body hair) running through the

streets of our decaying town to a party. Cars honked and waved at us as we made a streak of red, white, blue, and peach at top speed. We arrived out of breath and burst into the door.

"Oh, fuck," I said. It was supposed to be a punk rock party. I mean, they had asked Rocco's band to play, so I figured they'd be open to any amount of weirdness. But they were not. It was a crowd of mechanics and army guys (including one guy who used to scare the crap out of me in the 6th grade by being about 6 feet tall and mustachioed). Needless to say, they did not respond well to a couple of nearly naked and hairless maniacs showing up at their door. I pulled the bedspread close to my body and prayed.

We went in anyway and no one really hassled me. Maybe they thought I was a good patriot. Really they just ignored me (hey, 6th grade all over again) and soon enough some more of my crew arrived. The rest of Rocco's band and some other guys. The tripping girl. Mr. Shower Shit. We all drank bad beer out of plastic cups and stayed out of the main room of the party where some coke was flying around. I already had taken enough risks in one night, thank you.

We all huddled around in one corner of the room and toasted to our various healths and in fact had a sincere moment of camaraderie and good cheer. It is one of the best things one can hope for to be part of a cadre of like-minded fuckers who can see things as "us against them" in a solidarity sort of way.

Soon Rocco's band took the stage (the kitchen floor) and the festivities really began. It was my job to be that guy, you know, the overenthusiastic fan who gets everyone into it. Who is willing to be the first one to start dancing, who pours Yukon Jack into the band's mouths during guitar solos, and sprays themselves with beer. It's a cliché but I didn't mind doing it. Someone had to.

But in this time, with this crowd, it really was most unusual. I paraded around and danced and swung, and -- someone pulled off my bedspread. I had kept it wrapped around me the whole night and while everyone assumed I was nude under there, they didn't assume they'd be seeing a plucked chicken. The response to seeing something they didn't expect and couldn't understand (could I blame them?) was to throw beer cans at it. So as the clock struck 12 my naked, shaved body got pelted with beer cans thrown by a bunch of confused mechanics and army men.

Happy New Year.

Where could the night go from there except for a fight? Not involving me at all, however, if you'll believe that, but two girls. Say what

you will about equality of the sexes, I think there are a few things about men that the ladies shouldn't aspire to. They were all macho and refusing to back down and punching and, well, that pretty much put a damper on things. The band stopped playing. I collected my bedspread. The tripping girl came down. And in a few weeks the hair grew back.

I didn't shave it again.

THREE: EXCERPTS FROM THE TOUR DIARY OF THE COCK FOXES

Some notes by way of introduction: For some years I was lucky to be part of a wonderful group of young men in a music group. We played a few shows a year in fire halls, colleges, basements, churches, and a few other places. What follows is a fictionalized account of those experiences. Some dates, dialogue and exact places have been altered. Names have also been changed because it's funnier that way.

Two of the shows have been written into fairly traditional short story form so as to provide some narrative structure and also to give some insight into what I was thinking back then. However, quite often there was not much thinking going on. Thus, the other stories are exact excerpts from the drunken notes I would try to scribble down after each show. "The Tour Diary." It seems that the rambling inarticulate nature of these notes most accurately portray the reality of the time. It is all presented here for your amusement.

the thanksgiving tour

... oh man I have to start keeping track of all the funny shit that happens with the band because it is getting more unbelievable every time. and one day when we're famous it will be cherished by our legions of fans (yeah right).

... so here goes: last night was our "thanksgiving show," our 3rd show so far in Wembley's basement. who knew thanksgiving could be so ridiculous? first of all we decided that since there weren't any good "thanksgiving carols" we should write a few. we came up with 1) "i like freaking turkey," a song not about having sex with the fowl but just how great it tastes. 2) "squanto," a hysterical song lou wrote about the famous indian shitting on your face. (it's really, really good – wish i could write songs that good, really) 3) "i'm gonna fuck ya, you turkey" – a 70s style porn song with wah-petal and everything

... of course the crowd couldn't really hear the songs (first of all, the crowd was about 6 people) and the equipment was all fucked up and Rocco got pissed at our other guitar player, Leroi, for playing all weird static the whole time. lou used some ridiculous percussion that was about all anyone could hear anyway. it sounded awful

... we all wore various make-ups, masks, clown noses, lingerie, bras, speedos, etc.

... we covered the whole basement in plastic and at the end of the show just doused ourselves in thanksgiving leftovers. we had mashed potatoes, gravy, rocco ate some pumpkin filling off of lou's buttcheeks.

... it was a good show.

the crawling out of the basement tour

... this was a real tour, ok, not really, just one show but oh man what a strange gig it was. first off i made the several hour drive with rocco who waxed philosophical in his strange way on the ride there. "hey, i know what happens after we die." "you do?" "yeah, it's just like before we were born. see this piece of road that the lights are hitting? it's lit for a minute, then dark. that's life. you don't remember anything after you die, same as before you were born." "huh."

... we get there and there are veterans and american flags all over. strange ... the guy who rented the place and booked the show was a radiologist and still wearing his scrubs. he ushered us in happily. i think he has some sort of malcom mclaren fantasy.

... we were getting dressed in the bathroom and someone came in and said, "is this punk rock or rocky horror?"

... we played 3rd of 4 bands, an honor for our first real show. the other bands were metal and kind of bad.

... i wore a bathmat and a skirt with flamboyant drag queen makeup. lou did the mohawk huge and wore a secretary outfit. rocco was some sort of superhero with face paint and long underwear. . . the crowd loved it, we raffled off shit and someone actually took it. we actually had a mosh pit. we got naked and leapt into the chinese food buffet the radiologist had provided for the bands in the back of the hall. that was pretty fun.

... oh and the music sounded ok. after we played the radiologist kept asking us to get naked again and go run on stage during the other band's set. i wouldn't do it, i thought it seemed too staged and lame.

... he recorded the show off the board and said he was going to release it as a compilation of all the bands. he offered to get us a hotel in maryland but we all said we had to go and did, driving home triumphant. one illuminated spot and then darkness. . .

stinky tina: a tale i'd rather not tell

Part Five: New York, New York

"Does anyone have some spare change . . . or a bullet for my head?"

"Jesus, lady. You got to get a better line than that."

"Aw fuck it, I tried. No one listened anyway."

"What do you need? A couple of bucks for food or something?"

Her eyes grew wide and a deranged smile flew across her smacked-out face like a bird escaping from a shithouse window. How sad, I was thinking, that a person could be so excited by the idea of a couple of dollars. So sad that no one before me had stopped to help this poor woman. New York was one cold bitch. To think, in our world—

"The Cock Foxes!" she yelled, pointing at the band name painted on my friend's jacket and interrupting my train of socially relevant thought. "Do you know The Cock Foxes?" Oh Jesus, lady, I thought, I was already gonna give you some money. You don't have to blow smoke up our asses. I mean, there's no way a NYC crackhead knows who we are. No way. But maybe?

"You know The Cock Foxes?" I asked, giggling.

"Yeah," she said. "I love those guys. One time I saw them throw a whole frozen turkey into the audience . . ." She really had seen us. I mean, few bands throw turkeys into the audience, so it probably wasn't a guess. But maybe?

"Where did you see them?" I asked.

"I think it was in Reading. Reading, PA"

"At a church? Actually it was outside of Reading"

"Yeah, in a church outside . . . hey were you there?"

"Yeah we were there. . . We are The Cock Foxes. I mean 2/5 of them anyway."

"Holy shit . . . no way!" She was foaming over with excitement, like a rabid pit bull meeting its favorite band. I was not used to it. "Man you guys are awesome! I mean that was one fucking show. Hey, I used to

be in a band called Ted Bundy's Playhouse. One time we hacked up a mannequin on stage with machetes. But I mean you guys really put on a show. The whipped cream, the fake blood and I loved those costumes. Hey, do you remember that night?" She spat out her words as if they were seasoned with ass-flakes. "Hey, do you remember that night?"

Did I remember that night? Did I remember that night? Did I remember that night? I couldn't forget that night if I tried. In fact, I did try. I had spent much of the last two years trying. But with my so-called friends reminding me of it on a pretty much daily basis, with the police file created that night, with those couple of trips to the clinic as a result of it, I sure as hell did not forget that night. Fuck. I thought I was just being some good citizen handing out some cash to a down-and-outer but now this smackhead had to go remind me of one of the most ridiculous and foul-smelling evenings of my entire life. And now I have to tell the story. Fuck fuck fuck.

Part One: Bethlehem, PA

The day that changed everything started as any other. The whole band was there at the Lair (the basement of our drummer's mom's house). Me and Lou on co-vocals, Rocco on guitar, Charles on bass and Wembley on drums. We were pretending to work on songs, drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon and insulting each other.

"You chicken-eating rat fuck."

"Eat my balls you greasy torpedo chaser." Stuff like this. Being in a band was fun.

We had no gigs lined up in the foreseeable or non-foreseeable future and thus were free to wallow in our own sloth. We could sit there with our fingers in our belly-buttons and spout big about what we would do on stage, knowing full well the time would never come that we would actually have to back it up.

"Let's all wear firemen hats."

"We could lead the crowd in aerobics."

"I've always wanted to come out on fire."

"We could offer someone in the crowd twenty bucks if they could beat Rocco in a wrestling match." Now this was an idea we could run with.

"What if they win? We don't have twenty bucks."

"They won't win," Rocco said with solid confidence.

Charles replied, "I'll beat you right now, you big woman," and leapt upon him with an insane arm-flapping flourish. The surprise factor knocked Rocco to the ground but Charles' early momentum was soon reversed. Rocco picked him up easily and swept him into an airplane spin. Charles laughed with girlish glee. Rocco then spun lightning-quick and whipped Charles to the mat. Our twenty-bills would be safe.

As Charles contemplated a counter-attack and Rocco moved in for the kill, the phone rang.

"Saved by the bell," quipped Charles, jumping up and doing a queer sidewise dance step to grab the cordless.

"Dude, let me get it. It might be for my mom." Wembley had a good point. There was no good reason for Charles to answer the phone at Wembley's house but there it was, happening. Undeniable. To add to Wembley's consternation, he did it with a bad Gandhi impression. "Hello?"

"Dude, knock it off, give me the phone, you ass." He had a point there again, but it was getting him nowhere.

"Yes, this is the home of the world-famous Cock Foxes," Charles said. This of course made Wembley livid. I mean, would you want your friend answering the phone at your mom's house with a Gandhi impression and an advertisement for your profane punk rock band?

Wembley leapt at Charles, furious, but Charles was quick and skipped aside. We all, of course, laughed at the spectacle. The scene grew more confusing as Charles appeared to actually be having a conversation about the band with whomever was on the line. He was saying stuff like "Yeah, it is," and "Oh, hey man, what's up?" and "Are you serious?" "And no, I don't have to ask 'em. Fuck 'em. Whatever they're doing, they'll drop it. Yeah, we'll play. We'll fucking play."

Wembley grew outraged, imagining that Charles was confusing the hell out of one of his Mom's co-workers or some such shit. He would have made more of a fuss but was restrained by Rocco in a clever half-nelson. That Rocco really was a good wrestler. I just figured the other person had hung up and Charles was speaking to a dial tone; perpetrating talking to someone about a gig for our amusement. "All right man, we'll see you there" he said after a lengthy silence and some frantic note-taking.

"What the hell was that about?" a off-key duet demanded in chorus.

"You are so dead," said Wembley.

"Well, ladies," Charles responded, ignoring him, "I just got us a gig

for us opening for The Star Spangled Shits."

"Whatthefuck?" The chorus was now a quartet. After swearing to us for twenty minutes that no, he was not fucking with us, and that yes, we really were opening for the Shits, we very nearly had five pairs of pee-pee and poopie-stained pants on our hands.

The way it went down was this: That was the guitar player from Mormon Meltdown on the phone. Wembley should be thankful that he answered it, Charles said, since the guys from M.M. were old friends of his. They were supposed to do the opening honors for the Star-Spangled Shits show tomorrow night in Reading but couldn't because their drummer was on the disabled list. Turns out he broke his arm trying to steal a pack of peanut butter crackers from a vending machine. I guess it fell on him or something. He should have just spent the fifty cents. So it was up to them to find a band to fill the bill and Charles had given him the Lair's number at one of their shows a few weeks back so he called us up and could we play?

Could we play? We had nothing else to do anyway but Charles was right in assuming that we would drop anything for this. We wouldn't pass up a chance to play with The Star Spangled Shits if we had dates with supermodels (which we did not). The Shits were one of the most up and coming punk rock bands in Pennsylvania. Their mix of rowdy leftist politics, scorching guitar licks and massive mohawks ensured their success. They were young, but already legends. We had only ever played outside the basement once. Open for The Star-Spangled Shits? Absolutely. This was the big time.

We got whipped into a tizzy. We only had one day to prepare for this monster gig. All the shit we'd been talking was now going to be thrown in the fire. First order of business was of course the music. We scrambled to our places and frantically practiced our set. By "practice," I of course mean drinking and arguing. After a half hour of this we didn't even pretend to bother with our instruments and instead spent most of the rest of the night planning our stage costumes. The music would take care of itself, but what would we wear? We looked through our box of costumery. We had to make it special. The box held the usual: leopard skin Speedos, plastic alien masks, some thrift store lingerie, crumpled vests and dresses, a bathmat, a few furry suits of various makes and sizes, some jumpsuits and superhero outfits, you know, the usual. Good stuff all of it, but nothing struck our collective fancy for this special night. We needed something extraordinary. But what?

I forget who came up with the idea but once they did, we were all

in agreement that it quite simply had to be done: Women's Bathing Suits. I don't know why, but something about the idea of all our hairy asses peeking out of lady's swim trunks just seemed perfect. But how to get them? None of us had the kind of money needed to blow on an item like this and we couldn't expect to find five lady's swimsuits at a thrift store. Time was short, money was short, and desperate times called for desperate measures.

"We could steal our mom's bathing suits," Rocco suggested and that seemed about right. So, right then, five young and drunk men all agreed to go home, steal their mother's bathing suits and meet back the next day to make the two hour drive to Reading, Pennsylvania and punk rock glory. Let the good times roll.

I went home and went to bed, opting to pull the heist when I woke up the next morning. I did it and it was surprisingly easy to pull. I suppose it's not that surprising, really. Why would my mom think to hide her bathing suit from her son? And since I convinced my Dad to drop her off at work so I could use the mini-van to drive to the gig, there was no chance of her coming back until five o'clock. I would be gone by then, making music history. So I went into her room and swiped it without any trouble. I just hoped she didn't need to go swimming that weekend. But how many 50 year old ladies go swimming? Not my mom, I hoped. I hopped out of my pajamas, tried on the suit and it did look funny. I started to sing my songs into the mirror, wielding a hairbrush as a microphone like a goddamned schoolgirl.

I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone then but I was a little nervous about performing in public, especially now that the audience would include actual strangers. The whole attitude of punk rock and of this band in particular served as armor to protect me from any worries about having my feelings hurt but I still have the old normal human emotions and feared embarrassment and wanted success and all that.

At the last song, I yelled a "thank you, good night," slapped myself in the face and headed out. I threw my shit into the minivan and went to the Lair. It was 2 o'clock.

Everyone was already there, doing normal pre-show things. Tuning guitars, packing up drums, putting the bathing suits into a sack, scooping cat shit out of the litter box into a plastic baggy – the normal what have you. I probably should explain. Usually (I mean at all 3 basement gigs) Lou would shit in a bag before the show to give away as part of a raffle. Today I guess he was constipated or something – so we had to use cat shit

instead. For some reason as soon as I walked in he insisted that I help in what I considered to be a one man job. I had to hold the bag while he scooped and flipped. Cat shit smells bad. Wembley was a little annoyed that we were messing with his catbox and was all "guys, don't make a mess, do you really need to do that?" but we countered with "then you shit in the bag, chickenhead," to which there was clearly no comeback. Lou ridiculed Rocco and Charles for tuning up, calling them rockstars and the like but they continued undeterred. I guess they took the music a little seriously in their own way and secretly I felt good that they were nervous too.

There was just one last preparation needed for the show. Since one of our songs was called "I Like Freakin' Turkey" (written for the Foxes' basement Thanksgiving show in response to the obvious lack of proper Thanksgiving carols but turning into such a great song that we played it at every show) we figured we should get a turkey and do something with it on stage. This was, after all, the big time. Lou and I ran to the store to select the biggest, cheapest turkey we could find while the others finished up around the farm. A decent sized, moderately priced fowl was procured and we stuffed it under the seat in the back of my parent's minivan.

Like I said before, I had obtained use of the minivan for transport to the show. I was aware of the irony at work, the minivan being the suburban symbol of stodgy economy and practicality, the vehicular choice for soccer moms and frumpy middle class wishing-they-had-a-sports-car dads. And there we were, rebellious punks, out for anything, breaking the chains of normality, and to get there we'd take a verdant green minivan. I of course wished we had a ratty van or at least something without proud parent stickers on it, but what are you going to do? At least the minivan was big – roomy enough to seat 5 punks, a huge Peavey stack amplifier, a bag with mom's bathing suits and a defrosting turkey. I still don't know why Chrysler doesn't use this as an ad campaign. We did still need another vehicle though, because of the drums. So Wembley drove his car with Lou riding shotgun so he "wouldn't get lonely" (when he said this we all of course called him gay). Thus in the minivan it was me, Rocco, and Charles.

I made Rocco drive just because, well I'm horrible with directions and not too keen on driving at all, often running over things, hitting mailboxes, stuff like that. If someone else drove I wouldn't have to worry about my directional impairment and could limit the number of times I was called a retard on the trip. That number was still in the dozens, mind you, but everyone else too suffered at least the same so I didn't take it personal. I don't know what it was like in Wembley's car but in the minivan there was

an air of excitement and a little tension that transcended the normal hum of insults and insanity. We were all a little nervous, though no one wanted to admit it. Rocco and Charles actually had to play the songs and now in front of a larger audience – I can understand their natural stage fright. Rocco specifically really loved music for music's sake, not just for a stage to be a freak. I saw him subtly strumming out imaginary chords on his hairy leg as we drove in relative quiet to the show. .

Part Two: Reading, PA

Well we got there (Rocco not getting lost but somehow intuitively knowing how to get to a place he had never been, an act which of course baffled me though I said nothing) we were surprised to see that the show was in a rather sedate neighborhood. Looking at the white pillared homes and chummy couples out walking the dog, it would have been easy to believe that I had driven and that we were at the wrong place. At least the minivan looked like it belonged. But we verified the address scribbled on a sweaty paper that Charles had in his pocket with the number on the front of the building and pulled around in back. There were splatterings of leather-jacketed (in the warm weather, the act smacked its lips with pretension) and metal-studded youth peacocking about the parking lot. We had found our place.

Most incredibly, the place, The Place, was a Church. Well, not really in there with the pews and the stage and all that, but in a sort of all purpose "rec hall" just behind the church that they rented out. We were playing on church property? The idea was stupefying. Did they know what they were in for? Who was putting this show on? How did they pull this off? I had lots of questions, none of which would be ever answered.

Lou and Wembley pulled in right behind us and we wandered around, looking for someone to tell us what the hell was going on. We knew this was the right place but didn't know where to go or what to do. Like I said, we had only ever played one show outside the basement before.

The kids just smoked cigarettes and eyed us with a general disregard, a well-practiced cool. I felt uncomfortable. Then, Charles recognized someone and rushed him, chatting enthusiastically. I wasn't sure who he was or what his connection to the show was until his friend, a short troll with hair that looked like the nest of pigeon who had stopped caring,

came up, arm in sling. They were Mormon Meltdown, the band who had cancelled and thus given us the chance to play. I almost started to wish they hadn't.

"You should've just paid for the crackers," I said. He just laughed, "I didn't have fifty cents and I wanted some crackers, man." His voice sounded like it could have belonged to a hippy or a space alien.

"These are The Cock Foxes," his bandmate said.

The guy laughed, "Cock."

This guy was a moron and they clearly weren't in charge in any way but were familiar with the m.o. of shows here, having played there many times before and could at least guide us to someone less idiotic. They pointed to the double doors where we should go and put our gear. I grabbed something small to test the waters and pushed back the double doors and stepped inside. It was brown and a little acrid, not what I thought a church hall would look like but matching rather well with my conception of what a real punk rock place should be. There was a huge pile of music equipment off to the side of four foot high stage. We'd be on a stage! I now realized for the first time. The height of the stage that bands played on are sometimes equated (jokingly or not) with the size of the band's ego. Rock star egos are anathema to punk rock cool but nonetheless I liked the idea of being on a real stage. That other place we played had just a tiny riser for the band, and in the basement it was just a rug.

I set my bag down next to the stage. One of the other bands was going over their songs, singing madly to an unplugged electric guitar. They seemed quite drunk so couldn't be the legendary (and straight-edge) Star-Spangled Shits. We went back and got the rest of the gear, now that we really knew this actually was the right place, and on a later trip I immediately spotted the Shits lounging about. I had never seen them play before and truthfully had never even heard their music, but knew it was them from first glance. They had that undeniable air of stardust about them. They didn't act like they thought they were better than anyone else, just that they knew that everyone else thought they were. It's hard to explain but undeniable when you see it.

Charles rushed at them and introduced us. They were affable enough and I tried to remain non-star struck. "So you're the Cock Foxes," their drummer said, chewing some gum and looking like Billy Idol, "I hear we're in for a treat."

"If you like whipped cream and naked dudes," Lou said. Billy laughed. I was surprised that our reputation had preceded us. That Charles was quite a talker though, so figured that's how word got around. I checked

was quite a talker though, so figured that's how word got around. I checked out the rest of the scene. In addition to the leathered punks there were gatherings of serious hardcore kids, wearing purple hooded sweatshirts and looking cleaner than the punks. They also looked angrier and were built like Russian Olympians circa 1952. Then I remembered that a local, very popular hardcore band was on the bill as well, and wondered if that was them. The fans and the bands were always indistinguishable.

We were hauling stuff back and forth from the minivan to the pile and trying to acclimate ourselves to our new surroundings. We never did find out who was in charge and only knew the order of the bands because the guy from M.M. told Charles. It was a six band bill. We would play third. This seemed impressive to me as the order in which bands played was a marking of their standing in the hierarchy. Bands who were playing their first show ever (at every show I've ever been to there was always at least one band playing their first show ever) would go first, followed by a slightly more experienced group, then the local heroes, then the out-of-town headliners. This was a big show, starting early and going late, so had a variation of that basic theme, but stretched out. Also, in an act of magnanimous good spirit, The Shits offered to play 2nd last so that the hardcore band and local favorites could close the night out. Of course our placement of third was based on Mormon Meltdown's credibility and not our own, but we were willing to take any glory even if it was meant for someone else and only came to us by way of a deflection and a broken arm.

The first band started to play while we were still unpacking and no one really paid attention to them. Most everyone was still outside. The band took it well, though, no doubt recognizing that they were lucky just to be on this bill for their first show ever. They sounded pretty awful, with tiny practice amps strung together, trying desperately to compete sonically with the drummer's impassioned, but arrhythmic poundings. I wondered why the drummer had such nice skins while the rest of the band had the kind of equipment that is refuse to a thrift store. Then I remembered that it's not uncommon for drummers to share a drum set at this kind of show, and that the drums clearly were not his. So all you could hear was drums and vocals, thanks to the rather fancy PA system they had rigged up. I'd be singing through that, I realized, and worried that perhaps you could actually hear my vocals for once. Would people then realize that I sucked?

I danced along enthusiastically, to try to give some sense of crowd for these aspiring youth and also to distract myself from the feeling that I didn't know what to do in this setting. Like I said I had been to punk rock shows many times before but this one felt a little different. I don't know if

it's because we were playing or because it was a bigger show, in a bigger city, with bigger bands. The bands were actually more or less the same, but the crowd did seem different. I was aware of the rankings and posings, the formulaic hairstyles and habitual pins and stickers (of bands I never heard, 'zines I never read) that served as calling cards to a secret society that while I was a part of, I wasn't really a part of. Understanding a new culture is hard, I thought and wondered if I ever would be able to pick up on the subtle clues and style decisions that served as signals these like-minded individuals used as signposts to navigate their world.

It was even worse during the second band, who played ska. I only watched the very beginning of their set because we had to go get ready, but I saw enough to be fairly put off. Everyone danced in unison, moving with exact synchronized appendages. All these supposedly tough guys swaying to the soft dub sounds. What made this stuff different than easy listening or soft rock? Just because the guys on stage wore the right hats? Seeing such rampant conformity among these supposed non-conformist gave me no small disappointment. Like when you find out that charities embezzle money or priests molest children. Aren't there any good people out there, you wonder. Isn't there anyone who can break free of the thunderous drudgery of being just another follower, another user? But, they were just people, I guess. And most of them just kids, really. Adolescents. There were some rare ones. Some free and wild ones whose association with the punk rock scene or any group was really tangential and their only association was really to themselves. I liked them best of all. Ideas of unity are nice, but to force everyone into the same mold seems a little ridiculous for a bunch of anarchists.

We went back to the bathroom which would have to serve as "backstage." It was hysterical because people kept coming in to piss or whatever and there we were, applying make-up, stepping into bathing suits and so forth. Get this, both Charles and Wembley backed out of wearing the bathing suits. They gave some lame excuses but it was clear that they were interested in playing the power-play game and were hoping to move up the rankings in the eyes of their peers. At least with Charles that's what it was, with Wembley you could never be too clear what the hell he was thinking. We berated them for pussying out but more or less just let it go.

Rocco, Lou and I stepped into our bathing suits and laughed at each other the whole time. In addition to the bathing suits (that simply would not have been taking it far enough) we accessorized. Rocco painted his face white, put some wristbands on his arms and some furry slippers on his feet. I draped myself in an American flag cape, poofed my hair to

obscene proportions, and put on a garter. Lou donned gloves and goggles, and brandished a stick of pepperoni as a scepter of the absurd.

It was time to make our entrance and, as custom, Wembley was to go ahead and lay down a drum beat so that we could make an entrance worthy of superstars. Also he brought with him the bags of supplies to be planted that would figure in the stage show. Charles went out with him, ostensibly to disassociate himself from us as much as possible, though it would be hard once we were on stage together. Anyway, the drum beat began and with a little bass thrown in for effect, we marched out and chanted our own band name. We really were our own biggest fans.

As we paraded out from the back bathroom area, we drew happy grins and strange looks from most of the crowd. I heard one guy say appreciative, nodding his head "man, no one does this anymore."

I stepped towards the stage and wondered if there ever was a time that guys stole their mom's bathing suits, carried lunchmeats and wore make-up on a regular basis.

We hopped on stage, I tripped over my American flag. Great. The crowd looked at us in our stupid costumes, hardly breaking their snide slouches except for a few who gathered close up front, eager to catch whatever mayhem we would throw. They seemed like this was what they wanted all along. They loved us. And of course we hadn't played a single note yet. Eventually, of course, we did and the first song went well enough. I was proud that I remembered all the words. It was one of mine.

See, we had two lead singers. This gave us the comparative advantage over other groups that while one of us was singing there was always someone else to rile up the crowd, go run in to the masses and start fights or leap onto the laps of some disinterested sorts lounging in the back. Lou was good at this and whipped up a whirlpool of activity in front of the stage. During an instrumental break I jumped down and attacked him just because, well you know. We flailed and punched each other hard, but like women. It was stupid and the crowd loved it. The part of the audience that was up-front grew and included some of The Shits. In particular, their bass player roared with support, slapping his thighs in terrible gales of laughter, grabbing everyone and "did you see that? did you SEE that?" whenever we did something especially stupid, be it soak our tits in whipped cream, pop blood caps in dumb fake fights, or spank our own asses like flesh drums. We raffled off the cat shit in an elaborate and stupid routine that actually involved passing numbers out to the crowd. We had it rigged so we could pick someone who looked like they'd hate it to win the bag. We just made sure he or she would get number four and then when I "picked a number out

of a hat" I always said four. This time the four-man was an older balding guy who we were sure would freak. But he took it in stride and accepted his prize, then flung it at us as he should have.

We did the whole planned routine and offered 20 dollars to anyone who could beat Rocco in a wrestling match (Lou announcing the offer like a ringmaster) and to our surprise some guy actually went for it. He grappled pretty good (and turns out was a high school star) and almost knocked Rocco down. He did have the advantage because our boy was wearing slippers and they, as their name indicates they might be, are slippery. The match actually went on really long and got kind of boring. We declared it a draw and told the guy he could have the money, but he'd have to come get it. I stuck the bill in between my buttcheeks. He passed.

We were in it deep and it was too late to be nervous. We went through the rest of our set with ease and manic intensity. At one point the bathing suits were discarded, leaving us naked altogether (except for the whipped cream and fake blood). At another point I was banging my head on the stage though I don't know why and kind of wish I hadn't.

When it came time for the song about turkeys, Lou grabbed the defrosting fowl and hoisted it above his head and, like a pro bowler (that is, if you can picture a naked, skinny, mohawked pro bowler covered in whipped cream and fake blood) tossed a strike down the center of the audience. They parted like the Red Sea as it skidded across the floor. One guy, who from where I stood looked like a hobo, chased after it and slid on his knees, as if it was something very precious. I heard him yell, "don't waste food, don't waste food! I could eat that!" It was sad but funny.

Why is it shocking to waste food but not money or some other non-food, non-money item? Like when someone smashed an expensive guitar. You could buy food with the money that you wasted on that. But if someone were to see you burn a ten dollar bill or throw away a turkey, they'd probably get more upset about the turkey. But they're the same in our society. I guess the love of turkey is a more basic and primal love than for a piece of green paper. And I guess that's the way it should be. Anyway, I remember thinking, after hearing the stilted groans of the crowd, that this was a stunt we would have to repeat. But, since we didn't have that many pieces of green paper, we would have to remember to go retrieve that turkey and bring it home. That is, if that hobo doesn't eat it first.

The rest of the set was great, even though we fucked up a few times and I forgot some of the words and things like this, but no one seemed to care. People were dancing and laughing. It was very strange. Was it because the "cool" people had accepted us or were we genuinely liked? It

was hard to understand, never having been liked before, we assumed there was a catch. But while it was going on we just soaked up the accolades, scant as they were in the big scheme of things. Funny how if you become what is well-liked, you stop hating the idea that people like that which is well liked.

We had even female fans. Strange girls with the mohawks or severe bobs in plaid skirts and nose rings. Tattoos and cigarette-burned arms, nonetheless looking cute and flirty. There was one in particular who I saw standing off to the side next to the guitar amp (people climbed up on stage all the time at these kind of shows and she was one of them) looking very peckish. She just stood there, unassuming, her head cocked to the side, fidgeting a little like a kid waiting for her mommy. Her posture stood in opposition to her appearance, which was a little tough. She had neon, bright, fluorescent, toxic waste green hair scabbily shaved and styled into a floppy mohawk. She wore heavy boots and ripped shorts beneath a tank top opening to hairless arms. She seemed to be waiting patiently for an opportunity to talk to us and when Lou asked the crowd as part of his introduction for the song "We Masturbate" if anyone in the crowd liked to uh, do that act, she raised her hand like it was kindergarten. Lou called on her accordingly, then asked her "oh yeah, what do you like to masturbate with?"

She replied like it was the most casual question in the world "fruits, vegetables, whatever."

"Oh yeah, what kind of fruits?" he asked and so on. They're having this whole conversation his foot up on the amp, leaning over to her, looking back at me from time to time, both of us naked, forgetting that we were on stage altogether. He wasn't talking into the microphone at all and the crowd was just scratching their collective head. We weren't really seasoned performers, I guess.

"Start the damn song," someone yelled and we remembered where we were and let fly the "1-2-3-4" and plowed through the 30 second song. It was our next-to-last number. Our last song was a cover, a classic punk rock tune that I yelled while Lou performed his now legendary "butt trick" that I'm too gentlemanly to explain here.

We marched back off the stage the way we came, feeling tremendous and huge. The adrenaline rush kept off the soreness and concussion symptoms I would feel later. Out of the main room, we stumbled into the linoleum hallway and struggled to dress in a mood of self-congratulations. We recounted highlights of the events that had just occurred, as if we needed to verify their existence by forming the recent

memories into words that could be shared and repeated. "I can't believe they liked the turkey." "I didn't think you guys'd get naked." "They loved us." Rocco declared simply, "we're the greatest band ever." I felt better for allowing myself those same narcissistic thoughts. It really felt that way. We hurried to dress again, to wash the whipped cream which had already soured off of our bodies, to gain some semblance of perspective on what had just happened. I packed up my clothes, jammed my stinky bathing suit into my gym bag, and hurried out into the parking lot where the minivan was parked. There was no reason to rush so, but everything felt electric, hyper. Charles wanted to go schinooze so we told him we'd get his gear. Wembley did his drums, Rocco hoisted his amp and tossed it safely in the van in a few seconds. Lou said he wanted to watch the next band. That left just me to haul the rest of the gear. I didn't mind and just made frantic back and forth trips like a beaver building a strange dam.

On my first trip to the van, I felt a diminutive tap on my sweaty shoulder. I turned and saw the girl from the stage, the one with the green mohawk and ironic smile.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey,"

"Good show out there."

"Yeah, thanks, I, we, I didn't think anyone would like it."

"No way, you guys are great. I wish there were more bands like that. At least it's interesting." She said this with the implication that everything in the entire world, including the crusty punk band already starting inside, was not interesting. I hoped she'd think I was an exception too.

She was hugging herself and seemed maybe cold in the windy summer night.

"Do you need a jacket?" I asked. "You look cold."

"Does it have whipped cream on it?"

"Uh, uh, hee-hee," I said, suave.

"Sure."

I gave her the jacket I had stuffed into my bag, and truth be told it did have a little whipped cream on it. She didn't mind.

"Thanks."

"I, I have to get the rest of our stuff," I said.

"OK."

She followed, tugging along like a found puppy. There was a far-away sadness in her and something in me wanted to take care of her. And have sex with her. She helped carry some gear like an old roady and it

struck me that she probably picked up guys in bands before. But who cares, I thought, I was a guy in a band. It felt funny even to think it.

On one of our trips through the parking lot I was accosted by a strange figure. He had long, loping hair that framed a face bristling with scruff. Somehow he had a sense of intelligence about him, perhaps because he was wearing glasses. Though the way they sat askew on his bumpy nose probably made him look more mad than professor. He wore combat boots and a leather jacket spattered in punk rock paraphernalia. I realized it was the hobo who had earlier chased the turkey. He wasn't a hobo but rather an aging punk. He stank of vodka and beer. He stepped in front of me and struggled to stand, as if the asphalt were moving.

"Hey, man," he said. "Want some pills?" He laughed and produced a dizzying array of reds, blues, yellows, and browns in a plastic baggy. There were pills of all shapes, colors, sizes in there. There was even a piece of cork, for some reason. He waved the pills in front of my face.

"Uh, no," I said "Thanks."

"Suit yourself," he said, and stuffed a handful into his mouth. Pill pieces fell out as he chewed like he was some very, very sick Cookie Monster. He took a mighty swing of the vodka, wiped his mouth with a dirty sleeve and asked, "do you want to fuck me?" I instinctively moved to protect my new friend, who stood there watching this all with a bemused expression. No one said anything. He repeated his question, staring me right between the eyes. "I said, do you want to fuck me, man?" He was addressing me, I realized. Uh-oh.

"No," I said. "No I do not."

"Ah, you're not really punk rock," he said. "If you're really punk rock, you'll fuck anybody."

"I guess you're right, then," I said. My punk rock reputation was certainly not worth a bugging from a hobo.

"You'd fuck me if I had a shotgun to your head," he said. Uh-oh. This wasn't funny anymore. I was a little scared. I looked around for the rest of the guys, specifically Rocco, but the parking lot was peculiarly empty. What kind of maniac was I dealing with here? Would I be shot and raped in a church parking lot like I always feared? The fear subsided, however, as the hobo passed out and fell neatly into a parking spot. As the vodka dissipated from his bottle, so did my fear. Even if he had a shotgun, he wasn't too scary lying there unconscious. I stepped over him and proceeded towards my minivan. I left him lying there. Maybe I should have been concerned for his health, but after all he did just threaten to rape

me. Also, I figured that stuff like that must have happened all the time.

"That was weird," I said. The girl, Tina, just shrugged. Maybe she thought that happened all the time too, that people were always offering me pills and rapings. I dropped off my final sack of stuff in the minivan and went back in to watch the rest of the show. The band was that group of guys I saw drunkenly practicing when we first came in. They sounded pretty good. Very powerful and tight like a desert windstorm and just as short. They packed up and it was time for The Star-Spangled Shits.

They hung an upside down American flag up behind the stage and took a long time to set up. They were meticulous with their gear whereas everyone else was completely slapdash. While they set up, an old man came up and gave a speech. He wasn't that old but actually introduced himself as "The Old Man." I recognized him as the 4man, the mad cat shit flinger. We hadn't realized that he was with The Shits and served as something along the lines of a tour manager and punk rock motivational speaker/warm-up act. I didn't hear too much of what he said, but it sounded good. He then introduced the band and they started to play.

They were just a 3 piece, though you would never know it. The chain saw guitar and incessant tom-tom-tom drumming mixed with the most fabulous and fastest bass lines I ever heard filled the room with tension and electricity. The singing was all 1970s England, spitting and clawing anger about hypocrisy, lies, capitalism, the government, and the decay of the punk rock scene. Seeing them up there, I doubted it. They were simply awesome.

At one point a crazy woman ran on-stage and took the microphone. "I'm singing a song," she said, spitting out her words as if they were seasoned with ass-flakes.

"OK," the guys said, shrugging, undeterred and launched into a grind song while Princess Le Puke (as she introduced herself) freaked into the microphone. Even that sounded better than anything we could ever do I thought, jealous. They were a great band. I wished it would never end.

But of course it did, concluding with a rousing sing-along about killing rich people that led into a cacophonous blast of every instrument at once shattering.

Well the next band sucked so we went outside to talk to The Shits where they were packing up their van (a real punk rock vehicle, black, falling apart, loaded with stickers and charm). It came up that they needed a place to stay. Charles invited them to his uncle's house nearby where we were staying.

"We are?" I asked. I had no idea.

"Yeah," he said, "what the hell. He's out of town all summer. He gave me a key."

"He did?"

This was a shock to me, all of this, and quite exciting too, since I would have a place to bring my new friend. Why didn't he tell us this before? Of course, we weren't good enough for his uncle's house but to impress the rock stars, I saw how it was. I didn't really care, it was a chance to have our own peculiar version of that clichéd holy trinity: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. With the latter already achieved and the former on tap, how would we garner the middle? Our drug of choice was just booze, but were all too young to buy. We couldn't ask The Star-Spangled Shits to buy for us, could we? They were well-known as teetotalers. Luckily for us, they had a little entourage that included a merchandise selling girl as well as The Old Man. Lou was chatting up the merchandise girl and got her to go to the liquor store on the way back to Charles' uncle's.

Part Three: Charles' Rich Uncle's House

I drove the minivan with Charles, Tina, and Rocco. When we got there I was stunned.

"Jesus Christ," Rocco said, "who's your uncle, Donald Trump?"

And that pretty well summed up what the place looked like. There was a fountain in front, a huge lawn, about a thousand rooms. It was a goddamned palace.

"Why didn't you tell us you were related to billionaires?" I asked.

"He's not a billionaire," said Charles, "he just has some money."

Of course I was impressed by people who could afford new pants, so maybe I'm exaggerating a little, but it was a nice place.

The Shits followed us there, save the merchandise girl who rode with Wembley and Lou to buy booze. It was quite a sight, their punk rock van, all of us dirty and disreputable characters out there on the lawn of a mansion. Quite a sight indeed. We hadn't been there 15 minutes when a cop showed up. Charles went out and explained that we were relatives of his rich uncle and that seemed to satisfy Johnny Law who didn't really give a crap and was probably just annoyed that some high-strung neighbor had called in a panic "there's dirty kids on the lawn!"

Of course we were about to break at least one law, as Lou and Wembley and the Merchandise girl showed up with armloads of Old English, the malt liquor. Underage drinking was happening at a ridiculous pace, as we all sucked down the booze enthusiastically. I had never had the stuff before and was drinking it like wafer, unaware of its liquid crack like properties. Before long I was hammered, and wandered out of the living room (where the main party was) and leaned against the hallway wall.

The Old Man from the Shit's entourage was walking by, for some reason, and he addressed me.

"You feeling all right, there?"

"Sure, Roy," I said. Of course his name wasn't Roy and I remember this only the next morning and felt stupid, but he didn't seem to mind. He just smiled.

Now feeling the tingly sensations meandering through my bloodstream, down arms into fingers, down into gut, into legs, into brain – the spaceship alcohol was exploring my body, visiting strange and distant shores with its message of idiocy and malnourishment. I started to feel like a rising satellite and slid down the wall and sat red-faced with my back against the laundry room door. I started to talk too much, like I do when I'm really drunk.

"You're my new hero, Roy," I slurred.

"Why's that?" he laughed.

"Everyone sells out when they get old, you're the oldest punk I ever met. That rules." I went on, telling him how much I appreciated his life of punk rock at such an advanced age and drunkenly spilling my fears about growing old. "Punk rock is messed up" I said, "it doesn't give you any hope for what to do when you get older. What are you supposed to do?"

"Die of a heroin overdose," The Old Man said, laughing.

"I guess so," I spat. "No one figures what you are supposed to do when you get old. I always think about it, though."

"It's a youth culture," he said. "All subcultures are."

"So why are you still part of it?" I asked.

"I'm still young," he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'll drink to that," I said, and did. I guess I should have let it drop there, but continued for some reason. "Punks aren't supposed to get old. At least hippies can get old," I said. "At least they can move to Montana and live on a commune or become photographers or something."

"Don't tell me you want to become a hippy" he said.

"No," I said, "just – what can old punks do? I want to live to be old, to fuck with people in the nursing home."

punks. The scene, really was born in late 70s, right around the time you were born, I'm guessing. so the oldest punks then were your age now so, do the math, the oldest punks in the world are only . . ."

I tried to count on my fluid logged hands and fumbled with the figures before arriving at the conclusion of "pretty goddamned old."

He laughed, and said, "more like 40."

"OK, still there aren't 40 year olds running around with mohawks."

"No, but there are some of us who look sort of normal because we have to, but carry on a spirit of rebellion, of non-conformity, of distrust of wealth and power, and a love for the music."

"Hey, we sounded pretty awesome tonight, huh?"

"Caution now, no one likes arrogance."

"But we sounded so good!"

"Correction, you felt so good. Everyone in a band thinks that their band is the best band ever. It's not ego or pride, really, so much as it is an incredible feeling to be making music with others. You only get that feeling when you yourself are playing, not when you are listening. It is a great feeling which can easily be mistaken for the assumption that your band is actually good."

"If it sounds good to me, it's good."

"Caution, now, you're getting into heavy territory."

"What do you mean?"

"Just, you're getting into deep territory there. I love that kind of shit. But people are always getting pissed at me when I go off on philosophical ramblings."

"Lay it on me Old Man, I can handle it. I go to college."

He looked at me with the appropriate disdain this comment deserved. Most people who have been to college can't handle a philosophical conversation any more than I can handle my liquor and I knew it. But he laid it on me anyway, launching immediately into, as promised, deep territory.

"Ah, what is 'good' anyway?" he began. "First off, as with any philosophical inquiry, we must define our terms. Is something good just because a large number of people say it is? Or is there an inherent 'goodness' that can be recognized by everyone. In other words, is it subjective or objective? If it's just what people say is good, we have to say that Mariah Carey is one of the best artists out there and we both know that isn't true. I can't even stand when they call people like her a recording artist. Artists are . . . artists are someone people like that aren't. Her only talent is a freak genetic condition that allows her to sing really high. That's

like saying someone who's really tall is a height artist."

"Yeah, fuck the tall."

"Seriously, if we are to understand anything about the creative process, about art, we have to differentiate between art and entertainment. You can be the soppiest sack of shit turning out the most disgusting recycled formulaic chickenshit for the masses to unthinkingly consume and they call you an artist? You're an entertainer. That's bullshit. Now, we took pride in the old days in being anti-art because of the pretentiousness of the art world, but shit, I bet even the art world doesn't want to be called an artist in a world where Mariah Carey's one. The original ideas of art and punk rock, the true essence —"

"Like Plato and the forms," I said, proud of myself, remembering philosophy class.

"Like Plato and the forms," he said.

Lou ran into the room, wearing a Youth of Today t-shirt and no pants, yelling, "Houston we have porno!"

He had found a porn movie in Charles' uncle's room and had popped it into the VCR with the big-screen TV. I had no choice but to go look at it. The conversation would remain unfinished. It was like that in those days. It could go from Plato to porno real quick.

In the den area sat Lou, Rocco, Wembley, the others, and Tina, watching giant organs, pubic thatches the size of bushes, jamming each other on the huge screen. Not too many girls like porn so you know, it's always cute when they do.

"Let's get naked," yelled Lou and clothes started flying off of everyone. Tina included. And here's where it gets hazy. The Old English, I guess, finally really kicked in. The other guys say that Tina had a real weird looking pussy. Someone asked her about it and she said that battery acid spilled on it when she was young. It ate part of her lips. Also, she was on the rag right then. I don't remember that and I was to see it up close.

Yes, the details are hazy but somehow I know I ended up on the bed in Charles' cousin's room with Tina, both of us naked. A gentleman of course doesn't say what goes on behind closed doors, but I will say this: I had a sore ass and a funny taste in my mouth for days. I will say that we didn't have sex.

Funny how, even drunk to the point that I probably would have let someone cut off my arms if they wanted to, I drew the line before having sex with her. I wouldn't do it without a condom, I just wouldn't. The fear was drilled into my subconscious and could not be washed away by buckets of alcohol. AIDS talk was everywhere back then. It was the era of Magic

Johnson getting it and that boxer who was in Rocky. And Lord knows I'm not as tough as those guys and besides, they probably weren't out bagging sneezy chicks with mohawks and deformities.

I kept going over that night in my head. No we didn't have sex but we did engage in some "high-risk" behaviors (no, I won't say what — I'm a gentleman I told you) involving dangerous body fluids. And the more I thought about it in the coming weeks and months, the more I worried. For example, she sneezed a lot and said it was just because she was allergic to the cat. But they didn't have a cat, so I took that as a bad sign.

Also I was encouraged by my so-called friends who never tired of reminding me of my rendezvous and cracking extremely awful jokes about me having AIDS (awful yes, but we joke about that which we fear). To add to all this, when word got out about my little affair among others in the scene, I had to hear repeated sickening stories about her legendary escapades. She was known by one and all as "Stinky Tina" for her considerable stench and questionable morals. For example, someone told me they visited her apartment and found dozens of condoms lying everywhere.

"At least she uses condoms," I said, trying to generate hope, to fool myself as my stomach sank.

So I took my place in that '90s rite of passage: The Aids Test. It was awful. I was sure I was going to get it, God punishing me for my insensitive jokes. I went, gave blood to a nurse who, as part of the cruel game, questions you about your "unsafe" behavior. I figured there was no pussy-footing with that kind of shit and figured that a health care professional could handle it so I laid it all out in plain English.

"Well, I got really drunk and *** the *** of a pretty nasty chick who was having her period," I said.

True to my expectations the nurse remained calm, she probably heard worse. She just said, "now don't do that again,"

"Yeah, don't worry about it," I said.

You have to wait something like 90 days before it shows up and then another couple of days after the test, another joke by God and/or the medical community. The whole time, neurotic as I am, I thought every cough was my end, every sneeze a harbinger of my demise. But alas, I'm fine, thanks for asking.

I woke up and looked over at her on the other sick side of the bed feeling bad. I was confused, with a sore ass, hungover and in great pain. My body hurt from the overexertion of the show and from my first

experience with malt liquor. There was a raised walnut on my skull thanks to my wise decision to bang my head on the stage and all my muscles ached from the fighting and moshing. It was a very bad day and I had only been awake for 30 seconds. It has to get better from here, I thought.

I got up, pretending that I didn't know that Tina was already awake and walked out of the room. She participated in the charade and let me go, silent. On my way out I looked at the pictures on the wall. There was one of Charles as a dapper young prep schooler, his hair neatly combed, his suit well pressed, his tie neatly tacked. A benevolent smile on his fresh face. We were all like that once, I thought, and look at us now.

I stumbled into the bathroom and saw the Old Man there whizzing.

"Rough night?" he asked, laughing.

"Little bit," I said. "Move over, I have to piss."

We sword fought with our piss streams and it made me laugh, as that act always does. Maybe today will get better, I thought. I shook, flushed, told the Old Man he was not my father.

I stumbled downstairs and as soon as I did, the berating began. Lou, Charles, Wembley, they all started saying things I can't repeat here, mocking me for my run-in with the mangled vagina in the most lewd fashion imaginable.

"Shut up, you bastards," I said.

"I tried to go stop you," Wembley said. "Lou wouldn't let me."

"Hey, you're a big boy now," Lou said to me, "if you want the AIDS, it's up to you."

"Thanks?"

The Shits were packing up, getting ready to leave. They thanked us for letting them crash there, for putting on a good show. The bass player again told us how great we were. It felt good. The Old Man wished me good-bye, laughing again. I started to remember our conversation and wondered if I had said anything stupid. I was sure I did and was about to apologize, but didn't bother. They left.

"Can we get the hell out of here?" I said.

"Don't you want to go back up for another round?" Lou asked.

I didn't answer.

"Lighten up, man" he said. "We're leaving soon. We just have to find Rocco." He laughed.

Rocco was missing but turned up soon enough we did. He was laying in the basement on the concrete floor in a pool of his own (probably) piss. He hopped up when we kicked him and seemed to be feeling good. Better than me anyway.

Better than me anyway.

"Hey you bastards," he said. "What the hell happened?"

"Not much," Lou said. "Berk got AIDS."

"Thanks," I said.

"Come on, we're leaving," he told Rocco.

"Don't forget your girlfriend," Charles said. "We can't leave her here."

"Fuck."

I went up to the bedroom, saw her sitting on the side of the bed, now dressed. She looked like she was crying.

"Are, are you OK?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," she said blowing her nose. "Just – the cat."

"We're heading out, do you need a ride somewhere?"

"Oh, sure, thanks."

We acted awkward, uncomfortable. Should there be a morning kiss? An apology? An insincere promise of a phone call? I wasn't good at this shit. Is anyone?

We walked down together, the guys all averted their eyes, trying not to laugh. We gathered up what junk we had strewn around Charles uncle's house and I walked out to the minivan. I opened the rear door and was knocked back by the stink of the defrosting turkey. We had left it there all night and it was rotting and bleeding all over my parent's minivan. Why did I have to say today couldn't get any worse?

"Jesus Christ," it smells in there, Lou said. I grabbed the turkey, furious, threw it across the lawn. It landed in the fountain.

"I thought turkey's couldn't fly," Lou cracked.

"What the fuck are you doing?" asked Charles. "You can't leave a rotting turkey in my Uncle's fountain."

"Well I can't leave it in my parent's minivan."

"It was your idea to save it," he said.

"Can't we just leave it here?"

"Fuck you."

I went out into the yard, everyone looking at me and laughing, and scooped up that rotten, falling apart, and now soaked fowl carcass, hugging it like a dead baby. I just plopped it back in the minivan and said something like fuck it, I'll get it later, let's get the fuck out of here.

I said I'd drive this time and could we please hurry the fuck up. I wanted to see that house in my rear view, to put it behind me, to go home, to rest my head, to die.

Rocco, Charles, and Tina got into the minivan, Wembley and Lou

were again taking his car home. She gave me directions to her house and I drove, out of the gleaming suburbs where Charles' uncle lived and into the sad, poor part of town where she lived. Most everyone on the streets was retarded. I dropped her off, said a forced good-bye, now not even caring about how I was supposed to act, though I of course still did not know.

It was difficult driving, mainly because everyone where I looked I saw yellow streaks. It looked like nothing so much as that the entire world was covered in piss-stains. Turns out it was from my concussion suffered, of course, by my own wise decision to bang my head against the stage.

We drove home in relative quiet. "The guys for once actually cut me some slack, seeing that I was in no mood for anything. I dropped them off at their homes and then went back to mine.

Part Four: Home

On the way there I stopped at a park and repeated my turkey punt, though this time didn't have to retrieve it, just left it there in a grassy ditch, its shoulders sagging, its ass split.

I pulled into the driveway at my house, wondering how I would explain the stench in the car to my parents. The minivan rocked to a stop in its familiar parking space and I got out. I walked in, needing parental kindness, wishing for my soft bed. But there would be none of that.

As soon as I stepped inside I saw that my parents had very strange looks on their faces. There wasn't even a hello, just a "son, I can't even believe I'm about to ask this but, did you steal your mother's bathing suit? She swears she knew where she left it and it wasn't there and we know you were in our room. You left your pajamas in there."

"Um, oh, I . . . "

I trailed off, unable to explain. I felt like I was going to cry. How could I explain this? How could I explain anything? There was simply no way. It was too far gone. I was too far gone. The bathing suit was jammed into my bag, rotting with sour whipped cream. What could I do?

I just ran out of the house, slamming the friendly screen door with a difficult fist. I was done. They didn't even smell the car and I was done. I ran, without any idea as to where I was going. Almost puking, almost crying, my head spinning, staring at the piss-stained world, I ran. I ran down the tree-lined street in the midday sun. I ran past the playing children,

past the smiling daddies, past the swimming pools, past the makeshift skateboard ramps, past the innocence of my own youth. I couldn't help myself from shaking my sore head and, with the thoughts of the debauchery of the past night and of my life in my mind, with the collective stink of turkey rot, rancid whipped cream and regret burning in my nose, I wondered "how did it ever come to this?"

[illegible]

Postscript

I did it again.

cleveland 1, atlanta 0

On Watching the World Series in a Hospital with 20 Punks

The antiseptic hallways of Carlisle County Hospital gleamed in ironic counterpoint to the 2 streams of dirty, tired-looking young men sitting in the rigid institutional chairs along the walls. All the men had a similar style about them and were clearly here together. It was also clear, however, that they were divided into separate encampments. All camps squirmed with discomfort, but not because of the torture-rack seats (though that couldn't have hardly helped, could it?), but because of something else. That something else, what was it? Was it manly pride? Could be, but probably not. Was it genuine anger at the other groups across the hall? Not really, though there was some was posturing that way. Was it disappointment that the show had to be cancelled for an impromptu trip to the hospital? We were all looking forward to playing and hearing music but ah, it probably wasn't that either. I can't tell you exactly what everyone was thinking – that would be impossible. I can only guess. I know that one kid was intent on getting a story for his 'zine. That's all he was doing all night. And I can tell with you with a certain degree of certainty what one guy in particular was thinking. That one there, with the ragged red soufflé hairdo, marker drawings all over his arms and legs, and dirty, exhausted shorts. That guy, of course, was me.

I was thinking about the baseball game on TV.

No one else really seemed to be paying attention to it at all, even though it was the World Series. This might seem strange. A group of young men not interested in sports viewing? How odd, right? I mean, market research shows young men aged 18-24 as a prime target demographic for such an event, right? And sitting there captive, most anyone would have watched the TV just to have something to stare at. But of course we were not most anyone. We were not your normal young men. We did not show up on the demographers charts. We were punks.

We had made a clear, personal decision to step outside the mainstream (or did it choose us?). We didn't watch sports. If we thought

about them at all, it was in the context of carefully preened leftist ideology. We thought sports were barbaric or wasteful. We thought they were stupid. We thought they were bread & circuses, fodder to distract the masses while the bosses robbed the people blind. We thought it was especially wrong to root for Atlanta because they were owned by Ted Turner. Turner owned CNN too and thus was part of the global chokehold of media-induced lobotomies. We thought the beautiful Cleveland stadium the game was being played in was a sad waste of tax payer dollars. I knew all these things and believed them too, to a certain extent, but just felt like watching the game anyway. Being an ideologue is quite exhausting. I needed a break. Maybe everyone else here did too? Maybe that's why everyone looked so tired? Maybe that's why they looked so uncomfortable? Maybe they were worn out from posturing, from making each decision based on a previously chosen set of ideas while also trying to remain free and spontaneous. Or maybe that was just me. Like I said, it's impossible to know what they were thinking. It could have been a lot of things. It had been a difficult night.

I guess I should back the fuck up and explain how we got here in the hospital in the first place. It started, of course, with a punk rock show. My buddy Lou, the co-lead singer of my band, was hosting the show in the basement of his shared college house. So of course our band (The Cock Foxes) was playing. He had scored big scenester points by getting The Star Spangled Shits to come play with us for a second time. Another group who's name I forget – something like The Dirt Trains but that wasn't it – was there too. It was an interesting bill. We were all punk rock bands, but had nothing in common really. The Shits were college, political, leftist punks. Songs about class war and things like that. The Dirt Trains (we'll just call them that until I remember the real name) were not from college and this was in fact probably the first time anyone in their families had been on a college campus. Their set list included songs about beer, killing people, things like that. We were just an absurd freak show, hard to classify and we liked it that way. Truth be told, part of our band was college political types (though our songs never talked about it) and part of it was not. What we had in common was our weirdness. We just liked to dress bizarrely, or just get naked and perform in a dada sort of way. There wasn't that much thought behind it, really. It was just something to do. But the more we became part of the scene, the more that time went on, the more complex things became. Life is like that.

The evening had started out well enough. We had procured the requisite vegan meal for The Shits (pizza without cheese, salad) and a case

of Genesee Cream Ale for the Trains. Us three bands all hung out before the crowd arrived. We listened to Misfits on the stereo and had good cheer. Then, things got tense. It was getting close to show-time and the singer for The Trains pulled out the new stickers his band had created. They said WE BEAT WOMEN. This was an outrage to the lead singer of The Shits. He was the first man I had ever met who in all sincerity referred to himself as a radical feminist. He had no humor when it came to misogyny.

I didn't think the stickers were funny but also didn't care that much. I figured they were kidding. What damage were they really doing to the plight of women by being idiots? But the singer from The Shits got on his soapbox and talked about how he wanted his shows to create a space where women could feel safe, and how the society as a whole attacks women and other downtrodden and wasn't that what we were rebelling against? He did have a point. The guy from The Trains just said it was funny. And that it's no big deal, man.

Lou, as host of the show had to weigh in on it somehow. He wanted to walk the fine line between the desire to be vigorous and free and supportive of all expression while also not wanting to be racist, or sexist, or anything-ist. Of course the sticker bothered him but if he told people what to think, well, isn't that what we were rebelling against too? Yes, but... There was always a yesbut in those days. Yesbut, yesbut, yestbut. "Scene unity" said we all had to get along but like I said, we didn't have that much in common. The guy from The Trains grabbed his stickers, stormed out of the room, and called the guy from The Shits a fag. That didn't help too too much.

There was no time to debate, though, the show did have to go on. The basement was filled, the crowd was getting wily. The Trains were the first band to play and, tell you the truth, I don't remember if they used the stickers or not. I was too busy getting ready for our set, which was to begin right after theirs.

Getting ready for a show was an intricate and asinine ritual for our band. There was the costumery to consider, of course, and then there was the drinking. There was always the drinking. Sometimes beer, sometimes liquor, today, worst of all, the Mad Dog 20/20. In the 40 oz. bottles. Two for each band member. Oh, and yeah there was beer too. And liquor. But it was the Mad Dog I was most worried about. With the strangeness of this day's social occasion, 2/5 of the band was otherwise occupied. Lou, like I said, was setting up the show and had that whole host complex thing. He had to make sure everything was going OK. Our bass player, Charles, was enamored with The Shits because they were "rock stars" in the punk scene.

He spent the whole time talking to them and doing ass-kissy things. To me, such sycophantism really went against the core of punk rock and it bothered me that he was like that, but I never said anything.

So it was just me, Rocco (guitar), and our drummer, Wembley from the band, and a few non-band people in the backstage area. The non-band people were: Blackjack, Triple V, some local kid trying to interview us for his 'zine, and a couple of straight-edge freshmen from Lou's school. Blackjack was our friend from home, Rocco's roommate, an "honorary Cock Fox" and official band artist. Triple V (his parents had named him something like Vincent Valbert Vincenzo or something absurd) was a local punk and follower of our band. Like a lot of the guys from the area he was large and oddly shaped. We all thought it had something to do with Three Mile Island, the famed meltdown-prone nuclear power plant in the area. He was good friends with The Dirt Trains but would rather sit in the back with us and drink than watch his friends play. "Aw, they suck anyway," he said. He was sharing a bottle with Rocco and I could see that they were kindred spirits. They laughed at the same jokes. Or, rather, they grunted back and forth and then laughed at what may have been jokes. No one else could understand them for all the world. They kind of looked alike too. Rocco was also kind of large and oddly shaped, and he didn't even have radiation to blame.

"Did your Dad ever make any business trips out this way, say 17 years ago?" I asked Rocco.

"Er?" he said.

"Triple V is totally your long lost illegitimate brother."

They laughed and drank some more. Said more unintelligible things. Blackjack was drinking his share too, clobbering massive amounts of beer with noises that reminded me of my uncle's pig farm in Indiana. Not just one pig, he sounded like the whole farm. The ten 40 oz. bottles of MD and the entire case of beer were disappearing fast. Of course the straight-edge guys were not drinking at all, so this meant that just 5 of us had done all that damage. And Wembley hadn't had any MD and I was mainly drinking beer, as was Blackjack. Thus, if you can do the math, what I'm trying to say is that a fairly inconceivable amount of MD 20/20 was flying down the oddly shaped gullets of Rocco and Triple V. They were hammered.

Maybe you're not familiar with "straight-edge" and are wondering how and why those kids weren't drinking. I can't explain the psychology behind it and don't feel like doing a history lesson here, but just know that it was a school of punk/hardcore that developed in opposition to the

excesses of drink and drugs. They were opposed to any chemical substance abuse and some, "hardliners" as they were known, wouldn't have sex. Like I said, I can't really explain it. I don't know why anyone thinks the way they do or why they do what they do. I don't write from an omniscient point of view. I barely right from an anything-scient point of view.

Anyway, these guys weren't hardline, but were straightedge and serious about it. They liked our band for some strange reason and were eager to hang out with us even though we were all drinking. One of them was drinking a Mountain Dew and in fact was always drinking a Mountain Dew every time I saw him.

"Hey," I said. "Caffeine is a drug, you're abusing that."

"It's not the same," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's just not."

"Well, you take aspirin when you're sick, don't you? That's a drug."

"That's different, that's a medicine, it makes you feel better."

"Hey Rocco," I yelled to grab his attention. He was holding his head close to Triple V's and grunting. "Does alcohol make you feel better?" His eyes lit up like a pinball machine and he raised the bottle enthusiastically, taking a giant swig and grinning as happy as a baby.

"See," I said. The straight-edge guy left. Rocco took another giant swig. He was clearly getting shit-canned.

"You better not forget the songs," Wembley said.

"Shutthefuckup."

They had kind of an antagonistic relationship.

Besides drinking, the backstage area was always the place where we would dress up in our absurd costumes for the show. I was suiting up in an outfit I was most proud of. One day I was at home and out of nowhere it struck me that "we should wear adult diapers on stage!" So I went out and bought some. It really did look funny. Plus I could whiz myself if I wanted to. Rocco was wearing a diaper too and we both were getting decorated with marker. Blackjack, like I said, was the band artist. He was drawing vivid pictures of anal sex, skulls, bleeding heads, tombstones, and things like that all over our bodies. It was into this strange scene that a couple of girls, Lou's friends from the college, walked in on.

"Umm, is Louis here?" one said.

"Louis?" Triple V said. "Louis?" We all laughed for about a half hour at her using his proper name.

"No," I said.

All this strangeness must have been a little surprising to these rather straight-laced-looking girls, but it probably was not shocking. After all, they were friends with Lou, a guy who was known to pull some fairly incredible stunts even out of the context of a punk rock show. He would, for example, strip naked and push his intestine out of his asshole. He would always do this on stage, but also at parties, in libraries, at the drop of a hat, really.

Rocco demanded that the ladies help decorate him. They looked at each other, shrugged, and grabbed a marker. Yeah, they could handle some weirdness. Rocco loved the feminine attention and didn't care that they were completely covering his arms, legs, chest, and back in swear words. Stuff like "suck my left one" and "cock." Balls. He drank insanely the whole time and reveled in it.

That done, and the Mad Dog finished (yes, all of it), there wasn't anything to do but wait. The Trains were still playing. But Rocco was getting restless. He wanted to make his big entrance early. But not wanting to give away his costume (is marker and a diaper really considered a costume?) he rummaged through the smelly cardboard box that housed all our extra costumes. He found a gorilla suit and mask, put it on, and ran out onto the floor. I peeked out and watched.

The crowd loved it and pushed him and jumped on him and rode on his back and all sorts of stuff. He was a happy primate, incredibly drunk-dancing while The Trains played. People went nuts with glee. With all the chaos, he kept bumping into their equipment. At one point, he knocked over a speaker. No big deal, stuff like that happens all the time. But some guy from the audience, a friend of The Trains, lost it. He started screaming, then attacked Rocco. Now it was really chaos. The crowd swerved around them and the guys in the band, seeing their friend wrestling a gorilla, moved to help him. Maybe they were still upset from the sticker flap from before or maybe, as they would claim later, they didn't know what was going on. It was possible. Those guys never knew what was going on. Whatever it was, they responded most violently. The bass player started pounding Rocco with his bass. It was brutal. The other guy, the guy who was originally attacking him, was still hitting him too. Someone ripped off his suit. The shredded gorilla fur flew in the air giving the scene the strange feeling of a jungle hunt. I tried to run up to help Rocco but so did about 20 other people. The thronging mass overpowered both fighting men (the bass player had jumped aside) and they went flying through the glass pane of a door.

Broken glass, shrieking, blood squirting everywhere, cursing. The

other guy got up and held his hand like it was a dead animal. Two of his fingers dangled, something snapped. He howled in pain. Rocco just stood up and said something like I'm all right. The 4 inch long cut on his shoulder said something different. It said through its skin-flap crimson mouth "take me to the hospital quick." He pinched its lips shut and blood spat like a bad special effects display all over the walls. Several people literally had to duck out of the way of its stream. "I'm all right," he kept saying but we knew he wasn't.

Lou rushed into action, told everyone to go the fuck home and told someone to grab some towels, apply pressure to the wound. He did a good job responding to the crisis. Probably he was expecting one all night. Rocco kept insisting he was OK but we knew he had to go to the hospital. I pulled a cape out of our box since I knew he couldn't get a shirt on over that cut. We wrapped Rocco in it like he was James Brown, only he wasn't faking his injury.

The hospital was only a few blocks away, Lou said, and maybe it'd be best just to walk. It wouldn't be good to show up drunk driving at a place with so many cops around. And please, no one call the ambulance, he said. They would bring cops and there were about 45 laws being broken in that place. Everything from public nudity, to disorderly house, to "entertainment without a licence," to underage drinking, to corruption of the young. Lou would be the one to bear the brunt of all those charges. For a guy in pre-law, that would look bad. But Rocco was stumbling around pretty bad and I didn't think walking was a good idea. But I was sure too drunk to drive. Everyone was.

Then, one of the straight-edge kids piped up and offered to play EMT and haul the injured men to the hospital. I badmouthed him earlier but we were all glad that for whatever strange reasons he had, he was sober. He was all meek and was like "can we put some towels down? I don't want blood all over my Mom's Saturn." Lou procured some towels and they were off. I said I'd just walk and meet them over there.

I walked with Wembley and that 'zine kid. He kept trying to do his interview.

"Now's not a really good time," I said. I was drunk and pissed. I didn't have the ideology like the singer from The Shits but I did want our shows to be a place where people could at least have fun. I always hated macho hardcore and macho everything, really. I hated fights. But we did play a loud, angry sort of music that did attract a certain kind of guy. Is this what we should be doing? I love punk rock, but is it really for me? I was thinking all this as we walked to the hospital. It wasn't a few blocks,

it was a couple miles. Good thing they didn't try to walk it. That Lou, he has no sense of how far things are away. He also has no ability to estimate how many people there are at an event. He would later say of the show, "I don't understand why we only took in \$200 in door, there must have been a thousand people there." He really thought there were a thousand people in that basement.

Anyway, we got to the hospital; the 'zine kid tagging along the whole time like a puppy taking notes. The guys from The Trains showed up too, of course, to check on their friend. The guy who started the fight with Rocco was their good buddy. They had borrowed his equipment, they said, and that's why he was so rambunctious about the speaker falling. They apologized to us for the bass beating and we were like "yeah, whatever." I didn't want to give in and say it was no big deal but I didn't want to hold a grudge or start more fights. Like everything back then, it was a fine line to walk. Everything represented something, every action was a stand to be debated.

The Shits soon showed up at the hospital too and joined everyone in waiting to see what would happen. There was still animosity between them and The Trains and it was tense. So here we are at the scene I was describing at the beginning. Everyone was tense. Besides the posturing and attitudinal problems mentioned earlier, we were all a little worried about our friends. I mean, we knew Rocco would be all right. He'd been through windows, and worse, before. But he did lose a lot of blood. The Trains were genuinely worried about their guy though. I overheard their conversation. A finger injury, of course, was not threatening. But sad thing was, he was a guitar player. The drummer (granted, not a medical professional and in fact about as far as you could possibly get from being a medical professional) made the preliminary diagnosis of "severed tendons." That would be bad. He said he'd seen it happen to a guy before. If that's what it was, their friend could never play guitar again. There's that one guy who is blind and has like one hand and plays classical guitar with his tongue, I thought. But I didn't say it. It's true, though.

Like I said, all I was doing was watching the baseball game. I was tired. I had been drunk, and excited, anticipating the show. Then the adrenaline rush from the fight and its after-effects, then the waiting around. My body and mind were, if not crashing, certainly unwinding. I felt like a tired slinky pushed down an old flight of stairs. I couldn't hold thoughts in my mind of scene politics, of anti-corporate ideology, of severed tendons, of anything. I just watched balls and strikes. Brown and green. Thwacks and oohs. I remembered my days as an awful second basemen on a little

league team. To be a major leaguer was my one and only dream. The ballplayers were my heroes. Was that really me back then? How is that possible? Lost in thoughts of nostalgia, exhaustion, 4-6-3 double plays, I forgot all about the stress and how important this all was supposed to be. Then I got snapped out of it.

The double doors that separated waiting room from operating room flicked open. There was a bemused ER attendant leading Rocco back to our custody. With everything that was going on, I forgot how he was dressed and decorated. We brought him in drunk, wearing a diaper, no shirt, covered in profane scrawlings from head to foot. With the exception of a paper suit and a clean line of stitches on his shoulder, he was still all those things. No wonder the attendant was smirking. They had to stitch right through the word "BALLS" on his back.

He teetered out towards us. "Hey, you bastard," I said. "What's the word?" I was feeling reconciliatory and just felt like sleeping.

"Doctor said I have to eat some meat," he slurred. Then, looking at the vegan Shits, "what do you think of that, pussies?"

"OK, OK, I said, no reason to be belligerent here. The fight wasn't with them in the first place. And the other guys apologized anyway"

"So I'll go get a burger, then we'll play."

"Dude," I said, "the show's cancelled."

"What?!" he said, furious.

"Uh, we, uh, Lou, we had to cancel the show, we had to bring you here," I said.

Lou, who was outside pacing around, got word that Rocco was out and came back in the automatic doors into the hallway where we all stood. Rocco yelled at him.

"You cancelled the show, why?"

"Rocco, what did you want me to do?"

"I could still play, you pussy."

"I had to cancel it."

"I quit your gay band anyway."

He still seemed drunk. It had only been a couple of hours since he drank all that MD and maybe the blood loss made him lightheaded. He was acting crazy. Of course, he sometimes acted crazy with a full compliment of blood. Still, he had never quit the band before.

"Come on, man, don't --" Lou said

"Fuck you," he said, and waved him off. He walked away. We knew we couldn't let him go out on his own but also knew we couldn't argue with him when he was in such a state. The old rock and a hard place. I

"Fuck you," he said to me. If he was going to be a prick about it, the decision wasn't even hard. Crazy bastard.

"Lesss go drinkin'!" Rocco shouted and grabbed his old friend Triple V, who had been leaning nonchalantly against the wall the whole time, taking this all in. V looked at us, flashed a look that could have meant "I'm sorry, but I have to do this," but maybe I'm imagining things, and scuttled off down the hospital hallway. As they were leaving Rocco turned and gave one more, wide-brimmed "Fuck yooou" to everyone in sight.

We all peeked at each other, said nothing, shrugged, and started to leave. The straightedge kid with the car said had already left, had to get the Saturn home to Mom he said. So Lou, Wembley, the 'zine kid, and I walked the couple miles back towards the house. The Star-Spangled Shits, having been officially offended by Rocco, had already driven off in their tour van. The Dirt Trains of course had to stay and wait for their injured friend, to see if he was OK. They would be in for a long night.

As we walked the 'zine kid was still trying to get an interview from us. "Jesus Christ, would you piss off?" I said. But Wembley was giving him the interview.

"I've always wanted to be interviewed," he said. Whatever.

So they talked about who would you say your influences are and what will you be doing in 10 years and all that crap. Like we knew. I walked along with Lou, a few paces behind the interview, feeling glad to be alone with my old friend. We had been friends since almost birth. Had been through everything together, through grade school, through the same girls in the neighborhood, through the increasing complexity of our lives, through baseball. We were on the same little league team. He, like me, was an enormous baseball fan in his youth.

"Looks like the Indians might win tonight," I said.

"I hope so," he said. "Fucking Ted Turner."

I didn't say anything.

postscript

The Indians did win the game, but the Braves won the series. Rocco rejoined the band. (That night, actually. He came back to the house with Triple V, ripped beyond belief, carrying dozens of pairs of panties and giggling. They had broken in to the girl's dorm after getting burgers and

take-out beer. He said he was sorry, he was just feeling crazy until he got that burger, pussies). We played a bunch of more shows, though never with either The Shits or The Trains again. The Shits went on to actually become rock stars; they played to 30,000 in Philadelphia the other night in an arena named for a bank. I wonder if everyone there felt it was a "safe place." The corporate sponsors probably did. The Trains never played another show.

I don't know if their friend, the guy with the severed tendons ever was able to play guitar again. I hope he was.

After we graduated school, the band broke up. Lou became a professional fighter of the man and I support him all the way. I'm a half-assed author. We still get together sometimes. Know what we usually do? We watch baseball. We root against the Braves.

Oh, and that 'zine article came out. It said that, according to their drummer, in 10 years The Cock Foxes will be "still rocking out, still being punks, still getting crazy, still being The Cock Foxes."

farewell tour

... well I guess this is the last one, even though we've had about 12 farewell shows (which is funny because we've only played about 13 times) i think this really is the last hurrah. the numbers did align for a countdown to destruction, which in fact it was ...

... 4 kegs of beer, 3 tons of dirt, 2 gallons of liquor, and about 100 people at a giant party. the dirt was for a huge mud wrestling pit fred & the guys built (the show was at their house) in the back.

... i wrestled in mud early in the evening and even body slammed fred, a feat of unbelievable strength if i do say so myself. there in the ugly side of town all of us were naked wandering around covered in mud. the hose was hooked up to wash up with but it was only hot water so we had to either be scalded or incredibly dirty. i chose the latter and later showered with about 10 people in the shower inside.

... one guy kept walking around saying he was the quik rabbit and he did look the part, another guy set his shoes on fire.

... there were hundreds of cans of pabst and a huge ice luge created in the kitchen to do shots off of. everyone was hammered and even some winos walked in off the streets. there were dirtbags, college girls, and winos, all getting annihilated together.

... the show: we played pretty good, i guess, though the highlight of the show will always be the milk enema that lou shot out of his ass into the crowd. it was unbelievable and defies words. i was wearing a mexican wrestling mask and lingerie, lou wore a hula skirt, a tiara, a clamshell bra and some huge inflatable dragon slippers. it was quite a sight to find him dressed that way passed out drunk later ...

... they built a stage downstairs with a barricade and there were throngs of people taking pictures and everything. i felt like elvis.

... the end of the show was basically a riot. everything in sight getting smashed and dismantled. air conditioners were flying around, the sewage pipe broke, a refrigerator got smashed

... after we played we went back out into the mud pit after the show and i took lou on in a huge match with about 200 spectators. all the

people from the party and just strangers in the neighborhood watched the culmination of everything (all night we were just beating on each other. two best friends just smashing each other, i had him at one point on the ground wailing his head into the concrete floor. he was too drunk to feel pain.)

... he had me down on the ground and was waving his scrotum in my face. the crowd was going nuts, cheering, so i had to fight back. i grabbed his balls as hard as i could but he was so drunk that he didn't move at all. it wasn't until i dug my nails in deep that he howled and leapt off and i paraded around, goading the crowd on.

... at the end, we hugged and everyone begged us not to break up. i kind of wish we weren't, but am glad we did.

... it's time to move on.

FOUR: OTHER (MISCELLANEOUS) WRITINGS

what is a miscellaneous man?

Eschewing trends, ignoring fads, oblivious to all larger demographic concerns, a Miscellaneous Man shits on all categories. Maybe dabbling in punk rock, maybe chewing on intellectual concerns, maybe taking a bite out of politics, a Miscellaneous Man never feels at home in any scene, university, or group. Whatever "that" is, a miscellaneous man "doesn't go in for all that." Miscellaneous Men dress iconoclastically and insincerely. Miscellaneous Men do not belong to any social circles or sewing clubs. Miscellaneous Men are hard to define. There have not been any great Miscellaneous Men throughout history that I can point to as examples, but I am certainly not the first. There may be thousands, even millions of us, I will never know. It is not likely that we will have a convention any time soon. Miscellaneous Men may work in electronics, teaching, or any job whatsoever. But they are not electricians, teachers, or any "ers" or "ians" at all. This also includes bikers, writers, or Christians. This is not to say that they do not bike, write, or Christ -- but they do what they do, they are not what they do. Miscellaneous Men are open to all things and suspicious of all things at the same time. They are not likely to go to parades, rallies, or shopping malls. Miscellaneous Men can be any age and in fact can also be women. They live between the lines, fall through the cracks, and stay away from crowds. They are not misanthropic, or that is to say they don't have to be (for they certainly can be), they are just separate folks. They can like people as individuals but not usually as groups. They don't own very much apparel with brand names or sports teams on it. They are the category "did not respond" in polls. They are the one dentist in five who does not recommend Trident after ever meal. Miscellaneous Men are mentally free and socially awkward. They don't worry about a lot but are often not happy. Miscellaneous Men don't care about hula hoops, computers, car model numbers, or Top 40 music. Miscellaneous Men buy whatever is on sale. Miscellaneous Men don't want to be bothered. Here's to ya, guys & ladies, I understand if you don't want to associate yourself as one of me -- I don't want to associate myself as one

of you either. Nonetheless, I'm thinking of you tonight, drinking cold wine to cool the burn spot on my lip from where I absent-mindedly put a lit cigarette into my mouth backwards. Here's to ya.

a sneaky suspicion

Sometimes I have a sneaky suspicion that the whole world is up to no good. That behind every closed door, down every dark street down every drain there is a plotter, a conspirator, an evil person. That this whole town, this whole country, this whole stinking spinning spitball is sitting around thinking up ways to screw each other over. To screw me over. Every last one of 'em bastard. Every transaction a monetary one, a violent move, a power-grab.

It's not for lack of evidence. The bombs, the wars, the fistfights, the scars, the knives, the Peloponnesian slingshots, the secret meetings, the conspiracies, the petty back-stabbery, the lawsuits.

Then I think about what I'm doing now: Sitting in my car in the rain, eating. A loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese, a feast in any other time and here for me for a small fee of two dollars twenty-nine. America can't be all bad. This world can't be all bad. I tune in the rock 'n' roll radio station, music free of charge. This is all right. The rain is free too. It bounces off my windshield and makes a beautiful patterns of racing drops, streaks and stripes, polygons and rhombuses. The rain and the glass, the organic and inorganic meeting, co-existing peacefully, making art for free, for me. Civilization can't be all bad.

Is a painting still beautiful after you found out it was painted in the blood of murdered babies?

waking up alone

Waking up alone, the day is filled with infinite possibilities. The only limit is my own mind. Of course, waking up alone too often makes a man lonely and crazy but it is necessary and valuable sometimes. It's a balancing act like anything else, but never trust anyone who can't stand to be alone. The one and only reason why artists may be better off than other people is that they like to be alone with nothing to do. For most people this is the greatest fear, for an artist it is maybe the best time of the day. Creation.

I wake up no earlier than 10:30, most often later. The first thing on my mind is my art, often coming through in baffling unclear dreams that I think would make good stories but never really do. I force myself to shower even though I'm not going anywhere. If I don't shower I'll just lay around in my underwear all day and I don't want to do that. I have work to do. So I wash and dress as if I was going somewhere important. The writing dominates my mind and sometimes I forget if I shampooed and end up doing it twice. I don't mind, I like long showers. It is a feeling of complete isolation and intensity. The writing dominates my mind as I dress and sometimes an idea in the shower was actually good and I rush to write it down, sometimes in a state of half-dress. Sometimes one pant leg is on and the other sluffs along behind like a puppy. So, yes, I do not even meet that clichéd mark of the universality of man. That is to say, I don't put my pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. I put one pant leg on, write feverishly and often times badly, and then put the other one on.

I write for a while, sometimes hours, usually creating new stuff at this stage in the game. It is tiring mentally and eventually I need coffee and eggs. I walk down to the diner. I flirt with the girl working there. She's from Indiana and we talk about Muncie, Farmland, basketball. She flirts back. My girlfriend knows I do it and the girl at the diner knows I have a girlfriend. It is all rather innocent and she is too young anyway. They have the strongest coffee and it makes my mind too active to write. Some writers

need the stimulation, they have writer's block. I'm there sometimes but often have writer's deluge and need to calm down before I can get anything down.

So I watch the protests on TV, drinking Mondavi wine (it was on sale) out of the bottle. "Go, get 'em kids," I say. "I doubt you'll win, but you have my support." I rooted for The Joker, The Washington Generals, and every Russian in every Cold War anti-Commie Hollywood propaganda piece in my youth. Of course Batman, the Globetrotters and Rocky all won. Would this be any different?

that's one super market

one.

a chip-toothed motherfucker with a half-assed beard (the sort of which is precisely too short to be intentional and precisely too long to be merely an accident) approached me in aisle seven round abouts the drāno and, with a sheepish self-effacing grin, asked me for "a few dollars to buy some food, sir, please." what the fuck, i thought, feeling somewhat generous that day, and reached into my billfold to examine the contents within. i had no singles, but for some odd reason four five dollar bills. stern abe lincoln looked at me in quadruplicate and, what the hell, i gave one to the guy. he was pleased beyond belief and thanked me in a way i found somewhat embarrassing. "think nothing of it" i said & "god bless you." this last surprised me. why did i say that? i never said "god bless you" but it just came out so there you go. the guy jackknifed down the aisle, out of sight. i selected the large bottle of extra-strength drāno (for reasons we need not go into here) and went to pay. there being just one cashier, the guy was right in front of me in line. he tried valiantly to shield his purchases, but they were sliding at a painfully slow speed down the conveyer belt into clear, horrible view. cigarettes and dog food. he bucked up as though to offer some sort of explanation, the old pathetic routine winos have to go through all the time, but i surprised him and myself a second time by winking at him. what was wrong with me tonight? he grinned enthusiastically and "i thank you sir, i thank you" and all that. on the walk home i had visions of the guy, sitting at home happily smoking, petting a well-fed dog. or, worse, eating the dog food himself, then having a smoke. or, best, eating the dog food while his dog happily smoked. what a show. and all for only one stern abe lincoln. super market, indeed.

two.

i was waiting in a baffling 10pm thursday line and became aware that the man behind me was very impatient. he was looking over my shoulder, making crazed gestures and engaging in some vigorous eye rolling. also, he seemed very happy. odd. we made eye contact and through some unexplainable combination of gestures & weird noises, he let me know that he was 1) annoyed by the slow-moving line, 2) deaf, 3) drunk, and 4) had driven to the store. i gave him a thumbs up on all accounts. he gave me a hearty high-five. we had a decent non-verbal communication going. but then he threw me a curve. he began making boobie gestures and pointing at me. puzzled, i ventured a guess. "do i have tits? no." now it was his turn to be puzzled. either because he hadn't understood what i said or because he had. either way i wasn't going to repeat it, as i had drawn the fat glare of the policeman stationed by the door with my first outburst. i ventured another guess "a woman?" he nodded, yes. "do i have a woman?" he nodded, again. "yes," i said "i have a girlfriend" inwardly adding, "why would a single guy be buying eggs at 10pm?" he gave me another extensive high-five and let me know that he too, had a lady. "good for you" i said, and meant it, as i paid and turned to leave. noticing the confusion brewing behind me, i turned and told the cashier "he's deaf." he appreciated this wildly and wagged a most triumphant thumbs-up at me as the automatic doors parted and led me back into the cold night.

a big ass soda, a revelation, a side of fries

So I'm in line at Wendy's, thirsty but waiting patiently to order their bucket of soda known as the "Biggy." Now, anyone who knows me knows that I like anything that comes in huge portions, but I especially like the "Biggy" because it affords me the simple pleasure of pretend-mispronouncing it as the "Big Ass." As in, "large fries and a big ass Dr. Pepper, please." It usually amuses the 80 year old woman or ex-con or retarded guy or prepubescent greaseball working the counter and it always gives me a weird thrill. Say what you will, I say you have to take fun or make fun anywhere you can in this dehumanized modern world. Plus, it's necessary to have something to think about and giggle at while waiting in lunchtime lines at a downtown Wendy's. The line moves at a pace that can only be described as glacial as the half-wit employees try to fill the orders of the quarter-wit customers in a deadly combination that makes a mockery of the term "fast food." And today it was even slower than usual as a new trainee -- a poor sap who was 80 years old, retarded, an ex-con, and a prepubescent greaseball (don't ask me, I just work here) -- fumbled with even the easiest of orders. I swear I heard this exchange:

Customer: Just a large fries, to go

Employee: Would you like fries with that?

This was becoming too much. The joy of my planned impishness soon faded and began to be replaced by impatience. I was getting pissed. Not being one to let my anger get the best of me and not being one to be like one of those gutless assholes who inflate their egos by yelling at poor saps like our trainee friend, I tried to distract myself. I began reading the menu. Chicken. Burgers. Fries. And drinks. Drinks. I'd never really looked at the drink menu before, my decision as to what to order always preordained by greed and comedy to be the big-ass. But today, bored, I look at the drinks. Drinks. Small, Medium, Large, and "Biggy". I look at the drinks. Small. Medium. Large. Small. Medium. Large. . . I stared at these options until my eyes glassed over and, still waiting for the maniacs in front of me to figure out if, indeed, they did want fries with that, my mind began to wonder.

What, I started to think, was between a small and a medium? Or a medium and a large? A medium-large? A small-medium? And what was then between those two and those two? Just how many drops of the Pepper did the ex-con have to squeeze into a medium to make it a large? And what was it while it was neither? . . . how many molecules? how many atoms? I suddenly and drastically became aware of the grey areas of perception that go unnoticed most all of the time. Small, medium, and large are merely convenient definitions for a infinite and undefinable reality. They are just constructions, random constructions to deal with an amazingly complex continuum between nothing and everything. If you wanted to, you could increase a small to a large so gradually that you could not notice the changes, but then you would notice. What is that?

It made me think about first time I looked at a hair under a microscope in 4th grade and saw it as a massive rope. Then we looked at newsprint under there and the letter e, no all the letters, all words, all everything, was just dots and lots of empty space.

On a molecular level there is no difference between me and the table and the floor. And there is space in both. So, looked at from close enough or far away, they are literally the same thing. Therefore there is no me, no you, no fries, no "Biggy", no ex-con -- measured from far enough away, or close enough in. I suddenly felt, at the risk of sounding corny, one with the universe. It felt. . . religious. I'm a cynic and a non-believer most all of the time, and the closest I'd come to a religious experience before was that time I saw a Catholic Schoolgirl bend over, but I think this was indeed a religious experience.

"Can I help you sir!?! " Shit. It was my turn to order. I was one of the lollygagging jackasses holding up the line that I always complain about. "A, a Big-assed Dr. Pepper" I said humorlessly, drawing only a blank stare from the employee. He filled the order, I paid, and walked back to work and routine. Though I was changed.

Enlightenment at a downtown Wendy's? Well not all that, but, yeah, I'll have fries with that. Yeah.

is it good to be me?

It was the kind of July day that testicles dread. So hot and moist was it (both in my pants and in the world at large) that the boys drooped and lolled like the tongues of twin lions. They sank further and further, stretching their elastic hats to their logical extreme and beyond. Perhaps they were wishing to shed their mortal skin altogether and make a run for it down my leg and out the bottom of my trousers to nestle in the cool earth below like moles. Perhaps they were inwardly sensing through some genius instinct that heat rises and down there is the place to be on this kind of July day. Oh if only I was as smart as my balls.

It had been another profoundly stupid day at work, the 60th such day in a row. How long could I keep it up? I wondered. I only got the job, well let's see . . . 60 days ago. Not a good sign. Every day so far was awkward, uncomfortable, boring, and pointless. This day was all that and worse on account of the above-mentioned heat and also on account of the fact that I was wearing underwear a few sizes too small. They were relics from a simpler time, when my waist-size, like my worries, was smaller. But they were the only ones in the drawer, so what are you going to do? Answer is, have a day with physical as well as the expected social and mental discomfort.

All day those torturous skivvies wished to abscond further and further up my crack. And with the heat causing the boys to plummet southward, it was a battle of biblical proportions. It reminded me of the Sunday school paradox, "could God create a rock so big that He Himself couldn't move it?" Call it the Irresistible Shorts meet the Immovable Walnuts. Call it whatever, it wasn't too comfortable.

I dealt with that skirmish all day, shifting and sluffing, hiking up, then pulling down, sweating all the while. Worst was when I reached in through the front of my pants when no one was looking and accidentally burst the buckle on my cheap thrift-store pants. Oh Lord. I panicked for a minute, then, with a flash of brilliance unexpected of me, crafted a makeshift pant-fastener out of office supplies. If you're ever in such a jam,

a paper clip and one of those brass fasteners are all you need. Ah, who am I kidding? You'll never be in that situation, will you? It's just me.

I spent all day moving gingerly, painfully. Trying to keep the pants up, the shorts down. And trying to do it so no one would notice. I didn't want to have to explain. And it was a long day that I thought would never end. But finally that skinny minute hand dragged its lazy ass to the 12 and his short, fat brother, hour said "What? 5?" It was quitting time at last.

I ran out of the office building as I had for 60 days now, wanting to distance myself from my oppressor as quickly as possible. I'm sure you can understand my motives. But alas, it's a bad idea to run in undersized underwear. Sure enough, rrip. The underwear tore. Great.

I stopped running, assessed the damage, and limped to the car, holding up my pants while battling the underwear. The shredded shorts now had no bearing at all as to what they should be doing with themselves. They weren't even really underwear now, just a waistband and some shaggy fabric hanging sadly. I didn't even try to fix them, just got in the car, defeated. They slid further and further up my hind as I sweated along in rush hour traffic. "Not long 'til home," I thought. "Then you'll see." Was I talking to my underwear? Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

I only lived one town over, about 8 miles from the office, so felt confident in making that threat to my undies. It would not be long and then retribution, in what form I did not know, would be mine. But with the lights and the traffic and the, what's this? Construction? Detour? Ew.

I only knew one way to get home, being a directional retard as I am. North, south, east, what? I could get lost in a phone booth. I'm just that kind of guy. Especially in the city where my office was. I barely knew my own hometown and I only ever came here for work. And only for two months. I tried to follow the detour, along bruised and dangerous streets. What an ugly place this is, I thought, forced to look at it at 5 miles an hour rather than 40.

As I sat through the detour the underwear situation deteriorated. It went deeper and deeper into my soaked ass-crack like a dedicated explorer, though what it was hoping to find I will never know. "Fuck you, Merriwether," I said, addressing my underwear yet again. "This aggression will not go unnoticed. Counter-measures will be taken." I was going to take the underwear off. I reasoned that I could slip them off there in the car and coast home in relative comfort. I reached in through my fly, down the front of my pants, up the leg, and in an amazing feat, got one leg out of the undies. Great, right? Wrong. I don't know if you know this, but you can't get underwear off while you're still wearing pants, even if they're ripped.

The waistband is in the way. Oh, God, why have You forsaken me?

"You're going down, Mr. Toughguy," I said, louder and unembarrassed. Funny how doing anything over and over again, even talking to your underwear, becomes less odd each time you do it. I reasoned that if I could rip the waistband the underwear would unbuckle and release me from its evil clutches. Now just to . . . fuck, where am I?

In focusing on the underwear, I utterly forgot to pay even one iota of attention to where I was going. There were no more detour signs and, of course, I was lost. This was an even worse part of town than I was used to. An angry part of town, a boarded-up part of town, a pot-holed part of town, a part of town with many one-way streets and many furious motorists and many children running into the street in their underwear darting through traffic suicidally.

And there I was, lost, with my underwear half-off, in pain, hot, tired, depressed from working, pissed. Almost totally and completely ready to give up hope. I peered close at the awful streets, searching for any landmarks, any signs of life, any sparks of human sanity, any anything. And I resumed the attack on my underwear. I jabbed at the elastic band with my loose keys, nothing. I pulled and stretched it over the steering wheel, nothing. Now I was really almost without hope. Then, I had a brilliant idea. Like a wolf stuck in a trap gnawing off his leg, I began to chew on the waistband. First a few small hairs of synthetic fiber parted with their mother, then substantive rips in the band, and then!

The music of heaven played in my head. Angelic French horns blared brilliant bell-like tones, stomach-rumbling timpanis pounded a triumphant rhythm of good over evil, all the gorgeous lushness of harps and violins sounded in my inner ears, in my heart.

For not only did the waistband break (snapping violently and monumentally) but at that exact moment, I figured out where I was. I passed a corner with a with a taco stand on one side and a used book store on the other that always, to me, symbolized hope and all that is good. And most importantly, I knew how to get home from there.

I shoved the broken underwear down my legs, whipped them out of my pantleg and threw them on the passenger seat, almost screaming with joy, taunting my nemesis, my underwear. I was going home, I was free, I was victorious, ecstatic.

Now here's the question. Is it good to be me? Is it better to have these kind of asinine triumphs over stupid misfortune or not to have them in the first place? Because that joy, that was real joy. That was real heavenly, divine appreciation for something, felt with all my being. And

you don't get that many times a day. But that pain I felt, that was real pain too. So is it worth it? Does it even out in the end? Is it all part of the cosmic yin and yang of existence? Hey, I don't know the answer to such profound questions, ask my balls. They're the smart ones.

*"J. Berk is the Harry Crews of slamdancing copy shop heroes, wallowing like a happy animal in his cock-eyed perils of punk rock decadence and the sublime pleasures of city creep marginalia. 'Tales of a Miscellaneous Man' is an easy riding foray into the endless party of a normal guy going quietly weird in a world alternately terrifying and ridiculous, depending on his booze consumption. In other words, it's a pretty f***** funny book."*

—Sleazegrinder

J. Berk, 25 or so, was a singer and a guitarist for too many stupid bands to mention. His poetry has been published at home and abroad. He is the author of the play Damn it, Grabowski and this book. He is not comfortable bragging about himself.

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