

THE AUTUMN SKY

*A blast of cold air chills the burning man.
Gyozan's howl of laughter, Ganto's scream of pain.*

1

Over there we mostly felt reduced to expendable merchandise in the name of some national pledge or other. I guess I saw some things, I said when someone maybe got around to asking. The song and dance man taught us all we knew, led us to the edge and said, Let's see what you can do. The blast that gave my shoulder a kick and tumbled a running man in a burst of what looked like feathers. The dead came and straddled us. We had trouble washing away the stink which followed us around town in all the bars and brothels. It's a saying they have here that man's heart is like the autumn sky, but it's more like dead leaves skittering across the boots you march in. I lay frozen, the blanket gripped in both hands up to my chin. Hunters with shotguns prowled my blood and guts looking for a feeling, any feeling, to plug and take back home still warm and jerking and show a woman, any woman, that names a man, any man, a brute.

2

Tomi keeps her eyes averted even after I pop the champagne cork. Tomi barely touches her dinner. She sits at the table with her eyes downcast or looking at her little girl in the highchair, like a porcelain doll, bangs cut straight across her forehead above eyes slightly tilted. The child's being very pleased with herself striking her plate with a spoon. I propose a bon-voyage toast. Tomi puts her hand over the top of her glass. Oh, for crissake, Tomi, have one sip anyway, says Hap. His face has already turned two shades of red. I keep pouring. They've been out doing last-minute shopping, he tells me, rushing his words in order to prevent any awkward silence from slipping in. I ask him how he sees their future in the States. He pictures for me a neat bungalow with a backyard swimming pool. The good life, he beams. He talks on and lets his chicken grow cold. We thaw out enough and finish the bottle. The child, Junko, starts to fuss and it's plain to see that Tomi wants to leave, so we skip dessert. We push back our chairs. Just then there's a commotion on the other side of the dining room. Hap's face darkens. That bitch again, he says to me. Who's she? asks Tomi. Never mind, mutters Hap. She's the camp tramp, number ten, no good. The American woman is shouting in a shrill drunken voice at the master-of-arms who's rushed over to try to calm her down. Keep your fuckin' hands off me! she shrieks, knocking over a glass of water on the table. I don't get it, Hap says to me. Know her old man? A nicer guy you won't meet, married to a drunken slut like that. What's wrong with this picture? A light rain has begun falling outside the windows.

The three, Tomi, Hap, and child Junko, will board a ferry next day, Sunday, on the first leg of their journey to the States, and that night the ferry rolls over after breaking loose from its anchor in high waves a few hundred feet from shore. Later on I play the dinner scene over and over in my head. In this version Hap scowls before he sits down. The kid's almost asleep. In this version, Tomi smiles and doesn't put her hand over the the top of the glass and I pour a good slug of champagne into it. The three of us raise and clink glasses and they order dinner. In another version we stand face to face making our goodbyes and I watch them walk out of my life forever. In this version the band in the dance hall down the corridor crowded with soldiers and their girlfriends strikes up the first dance of the evening with *Let's Fall In Love*. Concerning the drunken American woman in the club dining room that night, in this version Tomi looks at her but says to both of us, to Hap and me: You don't know her heart.

3

I think I'm boarding the night train for another town. For some reason, I dream the damndest dreams when I'm on a train. Dreams of common crowds and chaos, the world our dead hero. Dreams of talking birds telling me the faster you go the safer you are. These train dreams of mine run my head in circles. Excuse me, sir, said the porter, there's a lady wants you to join her in the club car. I was absolutely certain I'd never set eyes on her till that moment. She was plain, rimmed glasses, pulled-back hair, with an amused expression on her face. Even as I turned away she called to the barman, He'll have the same. Hold on, I said, annoyed. She held up her hand, leaned closer and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper, "Relax, my love. We don't have to pretend here." Jump-cut to a young GI sitting across the table from The Local Girl in a coffee shop named *The Blue Moon*. Anyone with eyes can see a breakup taking place. Bloodshed and the stink of death mean nothing to her, his face in his hands, weeping over a street kid that could barely speak a word of English. The drunken staff sergeant's voice in his head repeating over and over, Hear what I'm saying, boysan? Once they've learned how to play you, you're a sucker. You no understand, the Local Girl is saying to the GI. Boysan, the staff sergeant is saying in yet another part of his head, I told the bitch tough shit, get rid of it. Back in the club car the mystery woman and I touch glasses and offer a toast to the raw and terrifying edge we live on. I seem to be hearing myself screaming from far away. All at once it flashes into my consciousness what this was about. We'd met in one of my train dreams. We'd made out in a room somewhere. I knew now I was asleep dreaming and that all I had to do was wake myself up and I'd find my head sunk in a pillow pressed tightly against the window in second class, the darkness outside sprinkled with a few stars and lights from distant farm houses.

Realizing I was in a lucid dream, something decided to let it go on and see where or what it might lead to, maybe to a shock of recognition. Suddenly we're in the coffee house Blue Moon again and The Local Girl is saying to the GI Boy with the pale green eyes and bristly haircut, "Why you so mean? I have family. You no understand." Has he just been her meal ticket then? Like the sergeant's telling him? Now the drunken sergeant who's been insulting him about The Local Girls says, "You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you, boysan?" the young GI says, "You're the second person tonight who's told me I don't understand," and he very deliberately pours his drink down the shirt front of the drunken staff sergeant. But who was the real *she* after all? One day I'll think I saw her in the back seat of a cab as it waited for the light to change and she was either screaming or laughing. It's the part of the story that gets hazy, tipping this way and that. I understand, the Young GI mutters through swollen, bloody lips as the MP's cuff and haul him off. I do, I really do.

4

It was now the year of the ponytail. Space was the thing. What remained of Autumn Sky, as I recalled that earlier time of my life, was all too easy to access. Once I thought I saw a boat by that name docked at Sausalito. I wondered, could I get used to living in a shoebox room with one window? I took refuge in a book, as usual. The expression *don't rock the boat* meant something else to me. Eventually, so I had heard, she could finally hold someone's child on her lap, after the disaster, that is, long after. I'd recall seeing her study her hands as if they might yield some kind of answer desperately needed. I'd once promised her I'd write the story she wanted, but I never could. I recalled her telling me that some nights she awakened to the whispers of shoes in the closet. Who's that pacing the floor? Eventually I saw that she'd mostly needed me to help her say goodbye. I pictured again the morning light illuminating the flower arrangement in our room at the inn. Already by then way in over our heads.

5

The train rolls on through the long night. The blustery weather turns to snow. "Let's see what you can do." I drew a bead and squeezed the trigger. Well, looks like we got us another duck hunter here. A door blows open and a sudden chill sweeps in. Dream, we called her, Dream the escape artist, sculpted in icy satin shimmering under the colored lights. She'll leave you pale and wandering on the road of sorrow, wails

the saxophone. Of course she knows I want her, I can see it in her eyes when she settles her gaze on me appraisingly. This is what melting feels

like if you've been an iceberg. Yeah, I guess you learned some things over there. I grope around for something to talk about that won't open old wounds or rub salt into new ones. But I wonder to myself in the midst of our small-talk, Do decent men go outside and fuck street whores in a field ambulance in the middle of a freezing night during a fire mission in a combat zone? Reduced to being no longer human? The face under mine like a pale moon flickering in the muzzle flashes from the 105s firing nearby. The uncontrollable shaking and terrified whimpering in the broken darkness as I crawled back out.

6

This irks the shit out of me. It's not the secrets of his soul he's telling me that I want to hear. I don't want him to be taken for such a jerk. But his face tells me he is deadly serious, a bad sign, even though he claims he has a handle on it now, nothing to worry about. It snows, it snows, it snows. Trouble blows in through a crack in the lies that are told. In the *Blue Moon* the young GI watches the Local Girl walk away and knows that this time it's for good. I watched Dream merge with other couples on the dance floor. And later, the big American whose familiar figure I can just make out, Hap, strolls with a child on his shoulders and a woman beside him too well known by me, a family threesome in a park where everything is turning into flowers again. Never before age twenty had I seen a dead body, not even my grandparents' where I'd hung back in the church during the funeral services. And certainly they weren't anything like the first bodies I did see later, hardly bodies at all, more like these *things* in frozen postures at the bottom of a drainage ditch where they'd been heaped. Forgive me. I am the song and dance man, emphatically dramatic, eyes level, body erect, in front of the mock lemon tree. This is nine times twelve equals endless vow.

7

Like one snowy evening I'm pulling night shift in the outpatient clinic when she turns up at the front entrance of the Army hospital, Dream, the snow queen herself, dressed smartly in street clothes, and catches the expression on my face. She gives me that bargirl look I'd come to know and distrust, then steps into the elevator. The doors close and I stand there like a dope with her scent in my nostrils. She's here to see my sick buddy Hap who has been laid up with a case of hives resulting from an allergic reaction to penicillin. None of us know it yet but she will end up herself on the same ward later after the ferry disaster. Strangely, so will the drunk woman in the club that night. Her nice-guy warrant officer husband whose name I forget will also drown the Sunday the ferry rolls over. His body will wash up on shore and be returned to us. When the woman identifies it she'll sob, *Was that goodbye*, and try to slit her wrists and have to be put in restraints.

8

In this version Tomi survives, but as a much changed Dream. Hap's body is never found. The kid comes back like a bundle of garbage and we have to wear gas masks. The fish have stolen her eyes. I can never get it quite right. I picked flowers and arranged them in vases. I lit incense and watched the smoke swirl in the sunbeams. I think I can see a late fall afternoon as Dream is helped into a taxi at the side entrance of the hospital. Tomi whom we called Dream in kinder days remembered now. And in this version the yellow leaves have faded and the trees are bare. A troop of young chattering schoolgirls is passing by on the sidewalk, and for an instant or two they seem to flow like a stream around her, embracing her, then pass on, their shadows rippling alongside in the thin November light.

THE LEPER

June 30 Of the three derelicts I've nicknamed Limpy, Walkman, and The Leper, the latter is unquestionably the most unpleasant. I tagged him thus because when this one comes around most commuters waiting for the bus turn their faces away, afraid to confront such a loathsome creature. I mean loathsome, foul to eye and nose. Limpy, Walkman, some of the other street characters are disquieting, but this one. . . runny nose, blurry half-closed eyes, slackened jaw, drooling, comes shuffling up with a broken gait, shoes in ribbons, arms hanging down limply. As far from soap and water as a person can get, as unpleasant to have around as a leper with runny sores. Alcoholism and defeat hang over them all, but this one comes on like a pestilence. Some serious illness besides the rest. A spastic? Nobody, including me, can bear to look him in the face. While selling my newspapers I watch the scene unfold the same way mornings during rush-hour time. So wasted, so totaled out on booze or whatever, he goes unsteadily up to the lines of people waiting for the buses. I don't know where he goes for the rest of the day, but here early in the morning during rush-hour where the commuters board buses for the city, he's turned up almost without fail. I'm not sure why he interests me this much. Is it because, unlike the other bums, he panhandles so flagrantly, throws the challenge right in your face. Far from hiding his ugliness, he seems to thrive rubbing our noses in it, going up first to one commuter, then another, points to his mouth, rubs his gut, uttering nearly unintelligible sounds -- grunts really. You can't ignore him, absolutely cannot. People in line just shake their heads and turn away a step, but he makes the rounds just the same. Persistence. So far he's not hit on me for spare change.

July 16 More about the Leper. He's been on the street every morning this week. His coat, a Mackinaw despite the weather, has seen better days, to say the least. Greasy, out at the elbows, its lining hanging down in shreds across his butt. Bits and pieces of straw stuck to it. His hair is matted, blondish, probably naturally curly. Drool drips almost unceasingly from the side of his mouth. What affliction? And the mouth itself turns down, bitterly, as if it hasn't smiled in a lifetime. One thing, though. He's a loner. While Limpy, Walkman and the others sit on the benches smoking, he hits on the commuters standing in line, one right after the other. In the murky light his head looks as if it's topped with tangled string. When I got there this a.m. he was curled up asleep on a bench, feet drawn up in tattered sneakers, no socks. Lying there like a stone while the sea of humanity flowed about him, buses arriving and leaving in clouds of exhaust fumes, bellowing and hissing in a way that makes me see them as dragons stuffed with human cargo. He slept on.

When he awoke later, it was to bum a cigarette off someone. He smoked greedily and coughed. A real coughing fit bending him double right in front of everyone, all the tidy people hating to look, crowds of people in a hurry, waiting for the bus. Faces averted again. The sun was just up brightening the scene a little. Suddenly he squinted my way, the watery eyes fixed on me in a sullen, chilling stare. Drags himself up, puts out a grimy hand, black under the nails, and lo and behold drops a dime on my stack of papers, rasping: "P-a-a-a-paper."

I could barely make out the word. I gave him one. It costs a quarter, but what the hell.

July 26 Since writing here last I've kept my eye out for him while wondering why I'm doing so. For one thing, his panhandling makes my day, he's such a showman. Up close and personal. The sight of him puts off everyone in the passing parade, yet he never misses the chance to tap some likely senior citizen or student on the arm, grabbing their attention and immediately launching into his begging routine. Yesterday morning one of the stuffed-shirts in line must have said something, whereas most people just shake their heads brusquely and bury their faces in the paper I just sold them. The Leper first flipped him the finger right under his nose, then topped it off with a kind of jig, actually more like a mockery of a jig, defiantly. Watching, I doubted he was even drunk. Something proud and unyielding behind that stumblebum exterior. Abject doorway groveling is definitely not in character for the Leper, that much is obvious. Which fascinates me, and I rather admire him in spite of the distastefulness. But still some crucial piece in the puzzle is missing. A couple of times now I've slipped a quarter or two into his hand. Why not? Who can say how the Bodhisattva comes? He never ever thanks me or anybody. He squints at the money in his open palm, his mouth twisted down, slobbering, nose dripping in the center of a bruised and dirty face, then shambles off to the coffee kiosk next to the bus stop. A few minutes later I saw him smoking. Smoking and doubling over coughing. An expensive brand too. Sherman's. "Where'd you learn to jig like that?" surprised myself by saying as he shuffled by coughing up globs of phlegm. But he didn't bother to turn his scruffy head. No sense of humor? Hard of hearing? Dreaming of that next drink?

August 1 Glad I took this odd job. Besides helping to pay the rent, it puts me smack in the middle of everyday life, like a field study in some college humanities course: *Rubbing Elbows With The Masses, 3 credits, 2 Hours, 7:30 to around 9:15 a.m. Monday through Friday, South Street at Excelsior*. It's beginning to grab me. At first when Phil, my boss, offered the job to me one morning in the bakery we both frequent, I

thought What, me? Sell papers like a paper boy? Me, a scholarship student of the arts? Standing in a smock with three small-change pockets, passing out the day's poison to people going to work? I hesitated but then it struck me that a short summer job like this could provide a new experience to write about maybe. People of all kinds seem to like to chat with me as they wait for their bus, expressing the usual views, the hard-luck stories, horrendous stories some of them. I can hear their loneliness, their sadness behind the words. I take it all in amid the rush-hour swarm going on around us. It doesn't feel like just any old job. Funny but sometimes it 's like I'm holding down the job as a practice, a sort of street ministry.

August 5 I'm a soft touch. They all know that, the street people. Limpy hit me up for bus-fare again today. "I'll pay you back when I get my SSI check." Yeah, sure, that's what they all of them say. I'm sure most of it goes for drink once the stores open. Limpy has taken me for nearly twenty bucks, I'd guess. I try not to mind, or let it show, but by now when I see his black coat coming toward me I try to look busy. This morning he went off to catch a bus. But first I took the opportunity to ask him if he'd seen the Leper (though naturally I don't use that word in a conversation with the street people.) He scowled, twisting his mouth around, and looked hard at me when I tried to picture for him the person I had in mind.

"Who, you mean Sandra?"

My jaw fell. "Sandra? That's female?" The "that" was unfortunate, but. Limpy nodded, searching my face with his sunken, angry eyes. "Yeah, female, I guess you could say."

I was speechless, flushed with confusion.

He spat. "She's around. Maybe in the tank again. Got her check and blew it again. Four hundred bucks. Spends it partying. Bottom of the barrel, that one." He snorted into a balled-up rag of a handkerchief. "She's hanging out with that pig Walkman." Without more ado he limped off and disappeared in the crowd. A woman! My imagination grappled with the name Sandra fitting the face and figure of the one I still thought of as The Leper.

August 9 I've been asking around what people know about my Leper Sandra. Turns out she's no stranger. Been hanging out around these parts for a year or longer, known only too well by many. They shake their heads and shrug and sigh with a hopeless expression on their faces. A birdlike woman who it turns out works for the County Human Resource Department, I think, told me that she, Sandra, is their despair. Just a burden on the taxpayer, blaw blaw. "She has Cerebral Palsy, you know.

She's had it since adolescence. Killing herself with alcohol. You feel for the poor thing. Such a shame, but. . ." She heaved another sigh and got back in line. Who's to judge? How'd I act if I were the wretch? Lately I've dreamed about her, can't remember details, just that in some way they leave an aftertaste of abiding sadness, so I've resolved to be generous with her no matter what.

August 11 She's back. And sporting a black eye. Saw her shuffling up the street our way. Passing right by me, blurry-eyed, cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth as usual. She waved perfunctorily. Well well. I returned the honor dying to ask her about the shiner, but held back. She had on a pair of faded and soiled cord pants almost out in the seat. They were also too long for her so that she half-stumbled on their ragged ends. I've heard she holes up sometimes, after cashing her county check, in a cheap Motel around the canal area. But now she looks like she's been sleeping outside again, maybe under the freeway with Walkman. I watched her bedraggled figure move alongside the lines of commuters all spruced up for work. A woman carrying a book reached into her coat pocket and dropped some money in Sandra's hand. The latter eyed it, sneered, seemed on the point of tossing it on the pavement but finally stuck her hand under her mackinaw, then went up to the next likely person, a well-built middle-aged man in a business suit who ignored her and squared his shoulders. Just when I was leaving, close to nine, the cops pulled up in two cars. One of them from each car got out, holding a night stick, but on seeing who it was they put the clubs back on their belts and shook their heads as if to say, Oh, her again. She stopped, weaving in her tracks, twisted up her dirty face in a bitter grin, muttered something that made them nod. As they came up, she docilely crossed her hands at the small of her back, accustomed to, and, as it seemed, even ready for the cuffs again.

August 20. No sign of a my Leper lady yet. I should stop calling her that name. The county social worker told me that the police periodically pick her up and after being sentenced, she's cleaned up, dried out a bit and put to work. Limpy tells me there're a lot of bad numbers on the street and that Walkman is one of them. According to him she's been beaten up and even raped more than once by some rough customers. Time in the workhouse or the farm might even save her ass, he says, and asks if she owes me money. Thinks, no doubt, that's the only reason I'd mentioned her. Which did not stop him from putting the pinch on me once again. Damn he pisses me off. I gave him some change, "coffee money" uh-huh, added on to all I've staked him so far. I must have a word with him about this soon, but keep putting it off because I guess I want to be

the good-guy sap who can't say no.

Sept. 25 The days are winding down for me and my "street ministry" -- Back to the classroom soon. But that's not what I want to write about. Sandra's back again. Same old rags. She sat apart, hunkered over on a bench and could hardly lift her head. Nobody sat down anywhere near her. The same half-shut eyes, the same trembling, grimy hand holding a cigarette, which she lit and re-lit as she sat there until it burned down to a butt burning her fingers before she tossed it away. Finally she noticed me. I was making change for a guy buying a paper. Our glances met and I couldn't help giving her a smile which she did not return. But after a few seconds she staggered to her feet, came over, put out her hand without uttering a word. I slipped a whole dollar bill into it. Why why why am I such a sucker for sorrow and shame? She said nothing and shambled across the street and I lost sight of her. I must be nuttier than anyone.

Sept. 27 Saw a sight today that staggered me. The two of them were there, Leper and Walkman, who, incidentally, gets his nickname from his walking madness, walking the streets all the time when not avoiding cops, dumpster-diving or panhandling. Any reference to the past invites the same answer: "That was that and this is this." Sharon was drunk on her seat on the bench, just a complete hopeless mess, and he, hard-ass Walkman was on his knees on the sidewalk before her wiping the dirt from her cheeks by wetting a bandana from a canteen with such single-minded tenderness that we all stopped in our tracks and just stood there gaping. The two of them seemingly oblivious, lost in their world of two. Except that Walkman sported the black eye this time.

Oct. 1 Limpy took me by surprise this a.m. We didn't talk about anything at first. I stand away from Limpy, who reeks of urine and body odor. He made a face, his head with its shock of long hair hanging from his thin neck like a dried sunflower on a stalk. Slowly he raised it and looked at me and said fiercely, "If they owe ya they don't know ya, right?" I said nothing, counting some change I was moving from one pocket to another. "*Right?*" he snarled, curling his lip." Put out your hand," he ordered. I didn't understand so he said it again, louder this time: "Put out your hand!" I did so, palm up, and he started slapping dollar bills onto it, counting off as he did so, "One, two, three, four, five, six," and on up to twenty, "and a half-buck for interest," finishing with his bony forefinger stabbing my chest while saying straight to my face, "Don't think you know it all, mister" before limping off into the hurly-burly.

Oct. 4 This'll be my last entry concerning my stint on the street selling papers. I've made my farewells. Strange. I'm still shaken a bit by it. I got pissed at her. Really pissed, I'm ashamed to say, completely lost it. I'm getting ready to leave and kind of in a rush not usual for me. She finally shows up, bedraggled as always, staggering, blotto at 8 a.m., but this time she said to me as if out of the blue: "W-what's going t-to happen to-to-to me, D-Dave?" My usual answer to such a question is a refrain from a popular song, You gotta laugh a little, cry a little, and leave it at that. Of course we both know what's going to happen, but something possessed me to utter the unexpected, as if caught unaware in the middle of some wayward thoughts: "If You really want to know, I'll tell you," I began. Her tousled head nodded drunkenly. I started: "Know what a cadaver is?" She shook her head, so I took a few seconds to explain that it's a corpse, often an unclaimed body to be dissected for medical reasons. I spoke, speaking very deliberately in a flat, almost indifferent tone: "Your naked dead body will be stretched out face up on a surgical table under bright lights in the middle of a room crammed full of medical students arranged in tiers on either side staring down at you. The instructor, called a pathologist, will pick up a surgical knife and lay you open from your breastbone to your pelvis, reach inside, pull out your soused and bloated liver, hold it up, and say to the class, *See, this is what alcohol does* . That's what will happen, Sandra. Okay?" I stopped short, horrified at myself. What was I thinking? For a while she just stood there swaying on her feet and pausing as if to absorb what I'd said, her face twitched into something resembling a grin, finally saying in her cracked voice: "T-Thanks, Dave. Y-you always m-make my d-d-day." I drove away upset with myself, with her, with life. Something got into me. That wasn't how I wanted to leave it with her. I turned around and drove back, parked, went searching for her but in vain, as somehow I knew it would be.

PENNY CANDY

DOUG

Doug's in his room smashing up the furniture when Q-ball comes on the double and manages to talk him into taking a walk instead. They roam about the grounds, then follow a road that leads into an old neglected, mostly abandoned part of the main cemetery shortly to be turned under. Many ancient-looking grave markers are still standing about, though crookedly. Doug kneels in the weeds to read the inscriptions. Wow, man, look here: *Lester Cook, 1849, 1893. Survived by beloved wife.* Wow, look at that one: *Beloved Daughter Stella, 1901-1916. Forever in our hearts.* Same age as me, man. What'd she died of? Lots of people died young back then, worse than now even. Wow, man. Q-ball can't believe what he's witnessing. The kid's turned suddenly almost reverent. It's clear how moved the boy is. This is the same kid who's made it plain that he has no time for "expressing how he feels." Doug's a big headache for the staff at Fern Hill, the residential treatment center for kids between 12 and 18 who've run afoul the law or otherwise screwed up. Most of the time so far Doug's been too angry to reveal any vulnerability. It's Doug that gave Q-ball his nickname one day in the Rec Room where they shot pool together. Q-ball has taken on and to date been the kid's Staff Rep, responsible for helping him succeed in the Program. Walking now, they end up in the newer part of the cemetery where the rich are buried in mausoleums. This blows my mind, man, says Doug, stroking the granite with his fingertips, running them over and over the ornate stone carvings. Stately Tuscan cypress trees edge the parking lot. The noontday light pours down. Doug can't hold back his excitement as Q-ball, awed, follows him around the gravestones laid out evenly like islands in a sea of spongy green, freshly sprinkled grass. Delight is written all over the boy's face. A cemetery? You never know, Q-ball thinks with a surge of hope. Slowly the two circle the grounds another time before heading back down the road to the Fern Hill dorms, where the vibrations will be something quite other than they are here at the moment.

CHRISTIE

As one of the newer kids puts it, Christie looks like she'd just stuck her tongue into an electric-light socket. Her hair, her facial expressions, her energy feel supercharged, even dangerously so. She's the queen bee, 17 years old, one for the books, confounding everybody, herself included. In Group she's quick, formidable, and shocks counselors and kids alike with her cutting but insightful remarks and feedback. She seems always on the verge of exploding in your face or baking you a cake, sometimes both at once. Complicating things, Q-ball has been assigned as her Staff Rep, too. But so far she's let him know the dorm is

strictly her turf and that he hasn't earned the right to be a part of it, that she's not taking orders from some new dude on the floor, not yet, no way. *You have to earn respect here*, her attitude says, ignoring him completely as she turns on her heel. Q-ball kind of looks to Doug and her as being his right and left hand in that order. Allies rather than foes. The two hold their own with the other kids who pretty much go their way anyhow. But whatever strategy Q-ball's tried so far hasn't worked on this defiant young woman. Everything's falling apart around his ears and it's his job to put it back together, along with the help other staff members. That's the working assumption. Christie calls Q-ball *Mister Clean*, after the bald figure of the commercial household cleaning product. She alone calls him that. It's her way of marking him hers, and she will spare no pains in pushing each and every boundary to the limit to suit herself as she pleases. Staff meetings are consumed by the Christie Problem as well as the Doug problem. Q-ball is warned not to trust her but to keep a steady grip and help her stick to the Program. At the end of it, if the kids have toed the line, proved themselves, they can "graduate" and return to society and family life, if there is any.

Q-BALL

He comes home totally drained after his two-and-a-half-day shift at the agency. He takes a beer out of the fridge and goes out on the balcony in the sunlight and drinks it down in a few thirsty gulps, stretches out his legs, closes his eyes, puffs his lips and emits a sigh of sighs. This gig is taking its toll. It's much tougher than he expected. The stress level is huge. Small wonder the turnover is big among counselors. No sooner do the kids get to know them a bit and even trust them than they, the counselors, quit and leave for something easier than dealing with these feral children. Last week one of the boys, a 13-year-old from the inner city, put his fist through a window and was rushed to the hospital E.R. That same week Cindy ran away and Florence got into a fist-fight with another kid at school on the Fern Hill grounds. It's gotten so bad at times that he wants to quit like the others. His nerves are so shot that he begins to get the shakes the evening before the day his shift begins. He cannot for the life of him stop wondering what keeps him going back there. Social work is not his thing. And he has never been partial to youngsters in the past. But a job is a job and right now he needs it bad, after a year of wrong choices and worse luck. He's gone off track and knows it, painfully, realizing that he's not all that much different from the kids he's supposed to help lead "normal, happy lives." He downs the beer and goes to get a fresh one.

DOUG

He's decided he wants to round up some of the others and escort them to the cemetery that blew his mind the other day, and he wants Q-ball to help him clear it with Rosenberg the staff leader. A full-moon night is coming up soon. Full-moon nights very often turn out to be a nightmare around Fern Hill. Fights, dope, drinking, sex, Staff dreads them. Dances haven't worked, on the contrary. Going to the movies or on some excursion hasn't worked either. But this coming full-moon could be different, argues Doug. He'd like to lead them up the road to the new part of the cemetery grounds, and is quite worked up about the idea. He sees it as a sacred ceremony and those who want to come along had better act accordingly or he personally will kick some ass. Q-ball listens, perplexed, amazed. It's a beautiful summer day and the nights have been clear and mild, promising a perfect night for viewing. Viewing? Yeah, lying on top the stones face up. It'll trip 'em out, Doug continues. Get them calmed down quiet and peaceful. How about it? Q-ball agrees to take up the matter with the director. Always saying no doesn't work. Discipline and caring, of course, but even more so they need to be encouraged to express themselves in healthy ways. Like this one. So why not? Why not indeed, says Q-ball, off to knock on the director's door.

CHRISTIE

Q-ball is under the impression that his relationship with her has turned a corner, because suddenly she's not only accepted him into her presence but has reacted favorably over the notion of his being her Staff Rep, and she's already kissing up because it's time for her to make Phase Two of the program, and if she can make Phase Two then she can go home some weekends to see how it works out. He knows she needs to be on his good side in order to pass and make the grade. It's obvious to him that she's being sugar-sweet, manipulating him in any way she can. Some nights on shift, Q-ball walks the hall in the dorm where he shares duties with his coworker, Leslie, in a kind of Mom & Pop arrangement for the shift they're on together. and they like to say goodnight to the girls before locking up. Q-ball is struck how different the girls are at this hour, once they're tucked in, docile, childlike, stalling for time by making clever small-talk before lights out at 10 o'clock. Some nights Christie reads to them from her notebook in which she's written poems and edited entries concerning life at Fern Hill. She hopes to share them with her folks when they come for a visit once she makes Phase Two. She's playing Little Miss Perfect. her change in attitude is a relief, but nobody quite believes or trusts it, she's so slippery, except Q-ball, who wants to believe, if only because for now at least it makes his job a lot easier.

One night he's making the rounds alone. Christie's door is closed and as he passes it he can hear her muffled sobs coming from within. He doesn't know her whole story but enough to form the opinion that the girl's hurting bad, worse than she'd ever let on to him or anyone else. He knows she knows he's softhearted and will try to get away with whatever she can. But the sobs aren't faked. They sound brokenhearted. He wonders what's going on but bides his time. Outside, the moon is rising, big, round, bright, a night away from being full.

Q-BALL

He goes around the dorm with Christie and Doug, who has permission to visit the girl's dorm, watering the house plants and picking up a bit. The two youngsters get on so well that there's concern they're getting down together secretly after lights-out. If there's a time-bomb waiting to explode, this is the one. Christie's laugh is loud, even raucous, and Q-ball has to remind her to keep it down, which she accepts without sassing him back for once. Doug is quieter, fundamentally more serious, and they tease each other playfully while dusting furniture and washing the windows. Christie's made cookies the prior evening and they all three sit at the table in the dining nook munching them and sipping weak coffee. Outside, a couple of deer wander onto the burnt-brown lawn. Birds chirp nearby. Doug's urging Christie to come along on his cemetery jaunt planned for that evening, but Christie demurs, playing for time, it seems to Q-ball, and Doug's face begins clouding up, forecasting a storm coming on. Before the boy can get carried away, Q-ball steps in by having him go for something in the storage bin. Q-ball rubs his eyes. He feels burnt out, edgy. He suggests to Christie that she come along that night, it'd please Doug whose heart is set on showing the group a new experience to share with them, but she puts him off and all at once he's raising his voice and they begin to argue. Just then Doug returns and they break off, Christie pissy, Q-ball grinding his teeth. When Q-ball and Doug are outside behind the girls' dorm once more, Doug kicks the garbage can and then sputters out under his breath, "Slut-bitch." Q-ball swears he can hear tears just beneath the boy's anger. Trouble. What a shame that people just can't seem to get along no matter what. That night under the full moon Doug arranges his troop of fellow-sufferers on top of the markers and soon in fact they all settle down in silence gazing skyward, until only the crickets and the distant sound of traffic can be heard. Christie is not there. Q-ball falls asleep and only when Doug shakes him does he wake up, and they all start back, shuffling down the road in silence, spellbound by the perfect night blue with moon-glow. He hears many wows whispered as they descend the road. Q-ball, gripped in anxiety, waits and watches.

DOUG

He doesn't have to wait long. Doug's in a snit big way, worse than ever, a drag on the energy wherever he alights. His thin, bony arms hang loose from a white T-shirt two sizes too big. He drags his feet, his eyes down, his mouth tight, pouting, and Q-ball in his attempts to get a word out of the boy is flatly shut out. Doug accepts the penny candy Q-ball offers him, eating it only after he's turned his back and is walking away. "This shit rots your teeth, man, don't you know that?" He tries to snarl the words, stopping and turning not quite around, but they merely make Q-ball blink at him. It's taken time for Q-ball to sense how deep Doug's mood has its source in his feelings for Christie, who, incidentally, hasn't been to Group in three or four days and is hardly around, seemingly moping and down sick in her room. Doug hangs around the playground alone, looking lost, swinging a stick like a golf-club. He takes his meals and eats them away from the others. Since the full-moon night he hasn't gone to the cemetery once. He slams doors and riles his pals, fights break out and the counselors shut down the dorm and call for Group, which takes an hour or more to get underway, the kind of night so typical of life at Fern Hill. Doug drags himself in, the last arrival, sprawls in his chair and fixes his stare on the floor between his feet. Soon the angry shouts and slamming doors begin. Q-ball is out somewhere looking for Christie. There's a change in the weather. Storm coming.

CHRISTIE

A month has passed. Christie is having her first meeting with her parents in the office of the director, who has brought in the case worker as well as Q-ball as the girl's Staff rep. The purpose of the meeting is to determine or dramatize whether Christie is ready for her first weekend visit home now that she's reached Phase Two. His job, Q-ball's, is simply to listen to the case worker steer the conversation by asking pointless questions, *just* listen unless invited to speak, but he's feeling his own agitation as the case worker pussyfoots around the core issue: *Do Mom and Dad want their daughter to visit on the weekend or not?* Meanwhile Christie sits on a chair in the hallway, dressed presentably, looking tense yet dejected, waiting to be called into the office by Q-ball on a sign from the case worker. The door opens and Q-ball comes out into the hallway. He has just a minute earlier broken the correct etiquette by asking the Big Question, and Mom, with a heave of her breast, has given her answer without missing a beat, *Well-I, it has been awfully nice and peaceful without her lately.* As soon as Q-ball steps out the door and Christie sees his face, she springs to her feet and says loud enough to be heard inside, *The Bitch doesn't want me, does she!* and starts running, Q-ball close behind. He catches up with her in the parking lot

and takes her by the arm as she curses and screams her head off, and leads her away. They get into his VW Bug and pull out of the driveway as the kid keeps cursing her mother to hell in the foulest street language she knows. They drive like this around the nearby hills until little by little the curses subside in power and finally stop altogether, replaced by small strangled sobs. Before returning to Fern Hill Christie has him stop at a supermarket. She wants to buy ice cream to take back to the dorm and treat the other kids, if Q-ball doesn't mind paying for it.

Q-BALL

Christie is in youth detention in Berkeley. Heads shake. Breasts heave loud sighs. At the Staff meeting called, Q-ball is blasted for acting irresponsibly. Earlier the night in question, he'd been dead on his feet and let her lock up for him (Leslie was on her night-off break), which is utterly and completely against the rules. Christie had seemed cheerful all evening and offered to do it for him if he needed to go to bed early. Being so sweet and helpful. He should have suspected something was off, they said, but he took her up on her offer and fell asleep as soon as his head sank into the pillow. Around two that morning he's awakened by the phone ringing next to the bed. A small stifled voice says on the other end: "It's me, Christie. I'm in Oakland in Juvenile Hall. I know Staff won't let me return but will transfer me to another agency. You'll come and see me, won't you? What? Yeah, I was with Junior." Q-ball remembers Junior, a biker and former kid at Fern Hill, or as Junior called it in his swaggering way, *In fernal*. Hadn't they all warned him, Q-ball, about her devious or at least unreliable ways? What was he thinking? Turns out that her midnight caller had whisked her away more than once of late. She'd slip out the window and ride out of Fern Hill on the back of Junior's hog. Q-ball remembers there had been talk of them making it when Junior was still a student. About the same time Doug was admitted. This is when Q-ball hears himself as if from afar, his voice raised, defending Christie, recalling the time she cooked Thanksgiving dinner for the whole damn dorm as just one example of her basic goodness of heart, and how about the time. . . and he starts crying, tears streaming down his cheeks, nose running, and realizes in the way he hurts that he sounds like the kid's father or at least somebody who cares for her terribly, even if he didn't realize it until this very moment.

THE POTATO MASHER

Roger with his hockey stick and Dick with his wooden potato masher set out for an adventure of some kind, playing war. Their steps took them through the neighborhood into an adjoining park and municipal golf course where on the frozen links lay sand-traps and other stuff that could be assaulted like bunkers or trenches, and they could throw the wooden potato masher, charge with the hockey stick straight at the enemy, fight, fall, rolling in the barren patches between crusty snow a couple of inches deep. The Minnesota winter blew around their heads and made their eyes water. But Dick felt warm, even hot under his woolens, breathing hard, his breath wisps of steam in the rays of the weak December sunlight. They took out several enemy machine-gun nests with their imaginary grenade and rifle, then sat down on a bench to rest. Still a little out of breath, Roger spoke: My Pop says there's a bomb no bigger than a table saltshaker that can wipe out a whole city. Do you believe that?

I don't know. I hope we have it and not them.

We better, said Roger, or we're goners, everyone in America.

Maybe it's just properganda.

Propaganda, not properganda, stupid.

But Dick was looking at something. He pointed.

What's that over there? The creek-bed, it's red. See it?

Oh yeah, I see it.

It's an SS soldier pretending he's dead, said Dick, shading his eyes with one hand. They'd both seen the documentary very real and bloody about the battle of Stalingrad, leaving its impact on them for weeks. The snow and cold made it feel like Russia here. Since seeing the film they'd sometimes pretend to be German soldiers, sometimes Russian, today they were Russian, attacking the Germans. It was fun to change sides.

Might be others setting an ambush, said Roger in a stage whisper. Throw the sucker!

Dick swung back his arm and threw the wooden potato masher with all his strength and a sense of satisfaction. He wanted just this kind of grenade to toss even though it was not like the ones the U.S. military favored, the pineapple -- this kind had a handle for extra boost. He'd seen it in a Dime Store and bought it secretly with his allowance money. Nobody in his family would understand what he wanted with an old-fashioned wooden potato masher that even Grandma didn't use these days.

It flew end-over-end and landed out of sight in the creek-bed not two feet away from the patch of red color. *Boom!* he shouted, Check it out, he ordered Roger. Give me your rifle, I'll cover you.

It's a machine-gun today, said Roger, not a rifle.

He handed over his hockey stick and Dick pretended to lay down fire as

Roger ran in a crouch toward the frozen creek-bed. It had thawed since the last time they played here, but now it was frozen up again. Just at the lip of the creek-bed Roger stopped short and looked down, then jumped into it and right back out again with a wild look on his face. It *is* a body! he yelled out at the top of his lungs, I'm not shitting you! Something in his voice convinced Dick he wasn't and he ran up to join him, his heart suddenly pounding even harder. He was scared but tried not to let on in front of his sidekick. "Holy shit!" was all he could say. For there in the ice, clearly visible, was what was obviously the body of a person, face up, frozen stiff, half submerged in ice, a red woolen scarf like a frozen flag. Roger was down on his knees peering at the body, giggling excitedly. Dick looked around. We gotta report this right away. He sounded scared, out of breath.

Maybe we'll get our pictures in the newspaper, exclaimed Roger. I think it's an old woman, he added. Can't tell for sure, but it looks like an old woman.

Dick felt funny. C'mon, Rog, we hafta get out of here!

Hold your horses, said Roger. You scared or what?

I ain't scared, I just want to tell somebody is all I'm saying.

I bet we get our pictures in the paper, Roger said again.

Maybe, but, but -- Dick trying his best to be calm -- we can't unless we tell somebody. This is serious, Rog.

Okay with me, said Roger. Let's go. The day suddenly seemed to have gotten much, much colder. They started back. Damn, said Dick after they'd walked for five minutes. I forgot to bring the potato masher. Shit! And your hockey stick. Later, said Roger. The cops'll drive us back there. I betcha they'll ask us a lot of questions, take our names and pictures and stuff. Wait till they hear about it at school! We'll be kinda like heroes. He sounded near breathless with excitement. Dick said nothing for a while. They went on, half walking, half running, soon reaching their neighborhood, the houses up close to one another, smoke rising from some of the chimneys, remains of a snowman in one yard, now and then a car passing by, the tires swishing on the sanded road. Nobody but themselves on the sidewalk. Many families were likely still at church or inside their houses cracking nuts and sampling cookies. Finally the boys reached the modest house on the corner where Dick lived. Dick recognized the car parked by the curb. His grandparents had arrived even though it was much too early for Christmas dinner.

Dick had his key out and the the two boys hurried inside the back door, stomping their feet. Dick started unbuckling his overshoes when the door to the kitchen opened bringing a toasty smell and his mother's slightly flushed face, brightened in a smile. A neighbor was in the kitchen helping with dinner. Laughter and voices drifted in from the room beyond. Dick kicked off his overshoes and stepped up into the kitchen.

Roger stayed standing in the hall by the snow shovel and hanging winter gear, blinking his eyes, wiping his nose.

Dick's mom said to him, Merciful heavens, you look frozen! Come in, Roger, come in and get warm! I'll make cocoa. I told you guys it was too cold out. Where'd you go anyway?

Dick and Roger exchanged a glance. Then, drawing himself up and in a matter-of-fact tone that betrayed nothing in particular, Dick said: We found a body. A dead body, frozen stiff in the golf-course creek. Really and truly, Mom, we did.

Yeah. An old woman, looked like to me, anyway, added Roger, showing his big front teeth in a crooked grin. Better call the police.

A SUNDAY INCIDENT

That particular Sunday morning at breakfast he had suggested the two of them pack a picnic lunch and go there early to beat the crowd. The city was invaded by tourists and a summer hot spell had set in. A favorite skinny-dipping spot was within easy walking distance from their flat. He smoked a joint while Kay made and packed sandwiches and got into her bathing suit to wear under her street clothes. It was still early, around ten, and already getting hot. Derek looked forward to enjoying a swim in the nude, having a relaxing Sunday afterwards, just hanging out, reading the paper, watching sports on the tube maybe, a beer in hand. Kay was planning to cook a light supper, finishing up with her fabulous crepes suzette and coffee.

But when they got to their destination, making their way down the steep path to the beach, he was surprised to find it deserted when all the other times on weekdays bunches of people had been there swimming nude, throwing frisbees, sunning themselves. It seemed odd to him, especially for a Sunday. They found a spot where the sand was dry and flat and spread their blanket. Derek pulled off his T-shirt and pants and walked to the edge of the water where a gentle surf rose and fell. Kay was too shy to swim nude, and anyway she wasn't ready to go in quite yet, preferring to stay on the blanket with her book. The salt breeze smelled like fish and seaweed and felt pleasingly soft against his skin. Derek took a look around and quickly dove into the surf.

Of course he knew that "skinny dipping" in public was frowned on by the law. But it was popular now. Times had changed and everyone was doing it. Besides, it wasn't flagrant but mostly hidden from direct public view. And even if the cops did show up, they'd probably just stand up there on top of the cliff using a bull horn to tell them they were in violation of such-and-such a code and had better get dressed and leave or else suffer the consequences. But surely they wouldn't bother to walk all the way down the steep and rocky trail. Derek was paddling in a swell. The water was startlingly cold. He dove down a few feet, and when he surfaced, pushing his hair out of his eyes with one hand, he looked up and saw a police officer winding his way down the path. Kay lay propped on her elbows reading and didn't see the officer until he was almost at her side.

He was trim, wore the uniform well, dark sunglasses, boots shined to a gloss, gun and nightstick belted on his hips. Even from where Derek was in the water he could tell that the cop was about his own age and appeared to be smiling talking to Kay, before turning his face toward him. Slowly, deliberately, he lifted his arm and waved Derek in. Derek started a crawl but it was slow going. The swells seemed somehow larger and the back-flow was definitely stronger. Finally he could touch the sandy bottom with his feet and push himself toward the shore. Kay had

sat up and was looking straight his way. At last he made it in, almost, blue and shivering, genitals shriveled up nearly inside him. Not a gallant sight to behold, especially for the woman of his life who was proud to a fault and wanted things kept low-key and embarrassment free. At that moment a swell took Derek from behind and sent him sprawling spread-eagle almost up to the tips of the cop's boots. Derek tried to lift himself but again was sent sprawling by the next swell which then dragged him back across the sand before he could regain his footing, adding more insult. It took every ounce of strength he had to right himself and walk the last couple of yards in. Kay witnessing the whole humiliation. Another officer came down the path and joined the first one. They ordered Derek to get dressed. They were polite and told Kay they were taking him in and would drive him back after the booking. They didn't cuff him, thank god. Now Derek understood why there was nobody on the beach that morning. The police had evidently been arresting people since the last time he'd been there. The cops took him by the arm and led him back up the cliff and into the squad car, leaving Kay to return home alone lugging the picnic basket.

After being booked at the nearest police station, Derek returned to his apartment chagrined to the gills. Been detained two hours, fingerprinted, mug shots taken, forms filled out, charges of indecent exposure made, a sex crime which they explained would be reduced to a misdemeanor once he went to court, pleaded guilty and paid the fine. It wouldn't have been so bad being arrested for a cause you believed in, as so many people were, but for swimming nude? How heroic was that? It was ignominious, ridiculous! Kay was waiting at home for him and had the table set for dinner when he opened the door at last. Fog had started to roll in outside the bay windows. They ate in silence, a silence heavily weighted, avoiding looking at each other. Derek sipped some wine from his glass, twirling it by the stem between his forefinger and thumb as he fixed his gaze out the window. He'd seen the look on her face when he came in the door. It said what he feared. He could feel it now hanging there between them, an humiliation twice worse than guilt. All at once he felt as though some sort of sea monster had him in its jaws dragging him down into the darkest depths. Without looking at his wife, unable to check his rage, Derek heard himself say in a cool, flat tone of voice: "Do you know I had an affair in London when we lived there?" Even years later, long after the divorce was settled, his thoughts kept going back to that Sunday when everything once lovely between them drowned in shame.

THE ROUTINES OF WAR

Master-Sergeant Thorton, or *the Great White Father* to us, was on R&R in Japan when the Korean civil authorities arrived and swept the company area for house boys and any other uncertified orphans they could find. Orders had come down from High Command to cooperate with our South Korean ally in their effort to round up homeless children left in the wake of the fighting, dozens of whom had latched onto our units in the confusion of war. Among the children rounded up was a 13-year-old Korean orphan runt named Kim. The name Kim seemed to us Americans what every other male was called here in Korea, so The Great White Father (shortened to GWF hereafter) came up with the name Mike. Other kids were also given pet names like Tiger or Bingo or Half-pint. GWF brought the boy along, keeping him out of sight, personally looking after his safety during the shifting movements on the MLR, or Main Line of Resistance, where the fighting was still at this time going on in the form of a long cruel stalemate. What in years to come would be known as "The Forgotten War" was nearing the end of its third year and the fighting was mostly a scramble for the high ground as the armistice negotiations dragged on month after month at Panmunjom. The most popular attitude among our troops on the line was that you couldn't win it *or* lose it, you could only get your head blown off, so keep a low profile. Our company still sustained casualties along the way. When Morganelli and Tucker got ambushed on patrol and their bodies carried back afterwards, the C.O. took it very personally and had GWF make the company pay for it by having platoons practice squad and ambush tactics while in reserve until they dropped.

We were currently positioned near a place on the map pronounced "Mung-dong-ni", within sight of Heartbreak Ridge, a bloody piece of real estate from earlier in the war, scarred, blasted and very bleak. It was early summer, hot and quiet for the most part except for the artillery batteries nearby periodically sending high-explosive shells whooshing overhead which we called "Outgoing mail." Anyway, the orphan kids were popular, Mike especially. He had the smile that breaks your heart and haunts you to your final day. His eager willingness, almost hunger, to be of service to GWF: Wash clothes? Shine boots? Bring chow? Okay, boss, he'd say, his one working reply to everything -- the kid became the company favorite, almost a mascot. Mike was never far from GWF: see one and you'd soon see the other. It wasn't just a front GWF put on, a tough, sober-minded professional soldier. He was that. You didn't detect affection exactly in his voice when he spoke to or about Mike but you knew he cared more than he showed it. The affection on both sides was there, obvious to everyone. There were murmurs of GWF thinking about one day after the war sponsoring the kid somehow. But now Mike was gone, swept up in the bureaucratic red-tape of the regime. The CO said

to keep a lid on things until GWF's return from Japan. So you might say we held our breath waiting.

The daily routines went on as we did our various jobs, always alert to the improbable possibility of a sudden big push from the other side, such that we wore helmets and carried our weapons wherever we went. Most of us lived in bunkers or squad tents on the reverse slopes that marked the edge of no-man's-land, out of range of direct enemy fire, though occasional incoming mortar rounds reminded us of where we were. At chow we'd speculate how bad it was going to be when GWF found Mike missing. GWF was not a man to be messed with when he took a certain stance. Then in the middle of the night it started raining and we went back to slogging through the muck and mire. That next day GWF showed up in the HQ where he bunked and worked, dressed in fresh, creased fatigues as usual, his face a mask of determination. We stepped aside when he was around. He started by getting the company clerk to track down the numbers he needed in order to call certain people. He glanced at the morning reports. He checked in with the company commander. He smoked. He drank coffee in the mess tent. He entered and left almost at once the NCO dining room, another squad tent. Mostly he was on the phone. His voice could be heard, though level, on par with his steel-gray gaze. I was over with the medics in a bunker which, after many rotations of young men who value ease and comfort, thanks to them, made living there feel luxurious. Rain fell in torrents. The roads turned into quagmires. Life was the most miserable for the new replacements on patrol or guard. Morale sagged some more. GWF stomped about in his poncho with its hood pulled low over his face and with the air of someone chewing over something deep and difficult. But so far not a single word had left his lips about Mike. The word *abducted* came and went in his few remarks about civic officials. The guy was old school, he had connections. We just waited, but for weeks nothing happened. Mike did not reappear.

The sounds of steady rainfall and wind mingling with the artillery fire turned my dreams surreal. We treated the sick and wounded, few as there were, fortunately, and waited it out as we had all the other times. Then, suddenly it cleared up, and just as it always seems after a storm, the sun shone brighter, the birds sang louder, and a quiet descended over us in a way rarely known before. A hawk circled high over no-man's-land. Rumor was that the armistice was on the verge of being signed, now that the last hurdle, the prisoner-of-war issue, was settled. Even so we were kept on partial alert. GWF appeared with the C.O. and cautioned us not to slacken. The shooting was still going on. Then soon after, on a full-moon night, it was over, the armistice signed, hostilities ended. Most of the troops would soon be pulled back or rotated home. 36,000

lay in graves or remained unaccounted for. Hearing the news, the celebrants for the most part were subdued, happy it was over for them but not carrying on much about it. Most of the medical detachment was pulling back the next day. I wandered around shaking hands, turning down beers and cigars, on the lookout for GWF. Finally I found him in his quarters standing alone leaning forward against the wall with his head resting on his arms, his back to the door. It was a posture that said "Leave me alone." A bottle of Jack Daniels stood half empty beside him, but he wasn't drunk. I knew that. The man could drink like none other and still not be drunk as we think of drunk. A Great White Father doesn't "get drunk." He didn't move an inch. His breathing was hardly visible, almost as if he were holding his breath. The others, officers and enlisted men, had stepped outside for more drinking in the mess. A Sinatra record was playing on the sound system outside. He heard me, recognized my step, I knew he did, but he wouldn't look around. We stood there awkward and speechless like that, him with his face buried in his arms, me staring at the short white bristles on his neck between his collar and the back of his fatigue cap. After a minute or two I turned and left, closing the door firmly but quietly behind me.

IN THE LAND OF THE HOLY CAR

1960

“Never but never pay more than a hundred bucks for a used car.” Such was Burl’s rule when it came to the Holy Car as he called it. Possess not in order not to be possessed, a principle he lived by and stubbornly adhered to as a man and artist, among his other dictums concerned with bucking the system. He would greet you with a robust *How’s your liver?* first time you met, seize your hand in his powerful grip, give it a hard squeeze and a pump or two, and you’d find yourself facing a bear of a man that seemed to have just walked in from a long hike in the mountains or woods, dressed accordingly in a lumberjack shirt, work pants and paint-spattered shoes, a broad, laughing, even dangerous smile breaking open the bearded face with its pair of alert dark-brown eyes fixed on you.

We’d gather at his funky “pad” blue with smoke and noisily packed with assorted artists and at some point in the proceedings as we sat around sipping Grain-Belt Beer from cans, he’d start telling self-mocking anecdotes, car stories mostly, the outrageous ongoing saga of his war with the *holy car*, stuffing and lighting his pipe, chuckling throughout, regaling us with the latest disaster: How the car wouldn’t start or would die on him in the middle of rush-hour traffic, spring a leak, have another flat, run out of gas, need a push, new wipers, brakes, battery, plugs, hoses. A miracle it ran at all. But the guy held firm, 100 bucks max for a used car. The growing postwar consumerism was an evil to confront, and what better symbol of his revolt than the automobile. Burl’s misadventures with “the holy car” were legend among his friends. The stories and his way of telling them convulsed us with laughter, everyone, except for Angie, his wife

She was a saucy, green-eyed Irish beauty around thirty who reminded me of Vivian Leigh the film actress. Their son Matt slept in an upstairs bedroom, sometimes appearing in pajamas in the doorway rubbing his eyes, a chip off the old block with his dark features and wide impish smile. He was about eight or nine at the time. Family vacations were mostly spent in the north woods at a year-round lake cabin which had been in Angie’s family for decades. Burl would pile the family into his junky car of the moment and set off up the highway north, eventually getting to the lake cabin, Matt curled-up asleep in the back seat, Angie hysterical, the car radiator boiling over for the third time, and Burl himself about to do the same, sweaty, tired, but determined to chuckle it away. They were there, weren’t they? Summers they’d invite me up to the lake house and we’d sit around and talk about the difference between fine art and Beat poetry or what we liked about Elvis or didn’t. Some of Burl’s acrylic abstracts decorated the walls. But usually after dinner we’d hang

out in the screened-in front porch, talk and watch the fireflies wink in the moist night air as the wrenching cries of a loon echoed across the darkened lake.

Matt seemed to grow a head taller during the last summer I spent with them, his tan skinny body, ribs showing and shoulder-blades sticking out like little wings as he shivered in the sun after a swim. Burl began teaching him that summer to be the bowman when they paddled the canoe and portaged the local chain of lakes. I watched them chopping swiftly and evenly across the smooth shimmering sun-path on the lake in the last lingering minutes of daylight. Matt liked the funny stories his dad told and laughed along with the rest of us save for Angie. Matt's summer chum, Tommy, a neighbor kid, and he spent half their time in the water, their high-pitched voices ringing in the air as they swung on a rope and dove somersaulting from it into the lake, or tossed horseshoes out in back under the Norway pines. They ate like boys do. The grocery bills soared. Burl found a summer job painting a friend's house in a nearby town, and he was up and gone before I was awake. I'd vaguely hear him leave, the broken-down car cough to a start, then bump and creak over the driveway a few yards away from my window. All day there was beach sand on the floors everywhere and Angie cooked and cleaned energetically with her usual good cheer. I pitched in and helped clear the table and wash the dishes. There was laughter. Everyone seemed happy. It was an easy-going time.

Then in the middle of one night I was awakened by the car horn blaring full-blast outside in the driveway. It sounded like a beast in torment. Later I heard that it had started spontaneously due to a short in the wiring. But to me, still half-asleep, the alarming noise the car was making sounded like a call for help or a threat. I heard Burl's steps and the screen door slam. I got up and peeked out the window. In the illumination of the yard light I saw Burl give his sad wreck of a car a terrific kick with his boot. It had no effect, the horn blared on. Burl tugged on the hood trying to get it open but it was evidently stuck and wouldn't release no matter what he did. I watched Burl climb up on the hood and begin to jump up and down on it with the full force of his 220 pounds galvanized into action by rage, finally crushing it. The horn went silent, eerily silent. Next day the old wreck was dead and couldn't be driven to the job site. Angie claimed he'd murdered the old clunker. Burl tried as always to laugh it off, but Angie was upset. The violent way he'd handled the matter spooked her, she told him in a quivering voice not far from tears. Matt came in and sat at the breakfast table, saying nothing. I sipped my coffee and tried to look invisible. "It was uncalled for," Angie went on in a

scolding voice, pulling her bathrobe closer around her shoulders. She was visibly shaken. "I don't know what gets into you sometimes, Buddy," calling him by his pet name. Burl glanced at me, folded his arms, and got to his feet. "I have to go."

Angie flared up. "And may I ask how? Walk to work?"

"No, I'll hitch. No need to get hot under the collar, doll"

Tears began filling her eyes.

"Oh, Angie, C'mon," said Burl, but she cut him off. "Oh, c'mon yourself!" and starting to sob she hurried out. A moment later we heard her slam their bedroom door. Burl, looking a little sheepish, threw me a glance and chuckled: "Ah, the Irish temperament," and then to Matt: "Go to your mom, son," before stepping out the door.

1970

A cold summer fog was blowing in, burying the city. I was in my flat stretched out on the couch reading, exhausted from weeks of working on a novel about an ill-fated love affair, living alone again, divorced. I was about to warm up some leftovers when I heard the buzzer. A deep male voice came on the speaker which I couldn't quite place though it was strangely familiar too. It was Matt, but not the skinny kid I recalled but a grown man, standing in my doorway, tall, bearded in shorts carrying a huge backpack and smelling faintly of campfires, sweat and solitude, the same flashing and impish smile in the center of a black beard. Matt! He was a younger version of Burl for sure, Burl whom I'd seen but once briefly since moving to the west coast in the year of the Magical Mystery Tour. Matt crunched my hand in his the same way his dad had once done. "How's your liver?" he said, and we laughed. I remember how alert he seemed, but on the edgy side, tense, and I soon discovered he was barely one step ahead of the law, charged with draft evasion. The Viet Nam war was raging out of control. "They want my body for their damned war," he said at some point, meeting my eyes, "and they ain't going to get it, the way they got Tommy's. You remember Tommy?" he asked. I said I did, kind of. "Came home in a body bag," Matt said. "No way," I said after a pause. It soon became apparent to me that the young man had no real plan and was exhausted and nearing the end of his resourcefulness. He was as stubbornly fixed as his Dad had been about certain matters, and without any abiding bitterness or blame either. We shared the warmed-up leftovers and caught up a bit. Turned out he'd been on the run for months, hopping freights, the law on his heels. Dangerous way to travel, I remarked, and he replied, "Not nearly as dangerous as hitchhiking." He let on that he'd been almost killed twice in road accidents, once ending upside down in a Nevada highway ditch, the driver gasping his last breath

slumped beside him. "I'm jinxed, man, cars are out to kill me," he said. He admitted he was jittery. Every passing footstep in the hallway made him turn his head. Afterwards he produced a hash pipe and we had a smoke while I put on some music. Slowly he relaxed. I invited him to put down his sleeping bag and stay as long as it worked for both, but he already felt he needed to move on as soon as possible. Before continuing I asked about his folks. He barked a laugh and said, "Pop's bought a new car, you heard me, a *New* car." I shook my head: "Finally succumbed, huh?" "The System is mightier than the vow," said Matt. He grew sad for a moment. "That was months ago now at least. See, there's no way to call or write, I'm too easy to trace otherwise. We leave traces wherever we go, man. It's just a matter of time and they'll catch up with me. I need to get invisible." He chortled in the exact way Burl used to when times got tough. But this was a matter not so easily laughed off. Later that week I drove him to a place where he might hitch a ride. My last glimpse of him was in the rearview mirror, standing by the roadside with his thumb out.

1980

I'd rented a car and driven halfway across the continent to pay a visit to my old friends who'd invited me once again after years to visit them at the lake cabin in the north woods. The years had made a difference, no question about it. Maybe it was time for a change. We'd talked on the phone every once in a while, the calls getting longer and longer apart. Then the inevitable call came in the middle of one night, Burl's voice on the other end black and thick as oil, and I already knew what he was going to tell me, and I was right. Matt had been a passenger in a car hit broadside by a truck just miles from the family place in town. They didn't know if he was going to make it or not. Most of his bones were crushed, all his organs pushed up into the chest cavity. He was on the critical list at the Mayo Clinic and presently in a coma. The prognosis wasn't good. Angie didn't come to the phone. Now, years later, as I drove up the road I recalled that night long ago when Burl demolished his jalopy on this very spot, and Angie's fury the next day. I remembered we talked later, she and I, when she claimed that cars have souls, all things do, and should be respected accordingly, that it was this very difference between Burl's view and hers that put the most strain on their marriage. Crushing the hood the way he'd done felt to her like he'd violated a universal principle of some dreaded kind. As soon as I drove up to the house, the front door opened and Burl came out in his boots and lumberjack shirt, almost as if no time had elapsed between then and now. A How's-your-liver was followed by the old iron handclasp. Where Burl came from, men didn't hug even these days. There was a lot more gray in his beard, and he moved slower, but otherwise it was Burl, bearlike and blustery as ever. Angie joined us and we hugged each other rather tentatively. She seemed like

herself but distant, an unreachable star, not warm and laughter-loving the way I remembered her. I don't know what I had expected after all this time and the loss they'd sustained. Inside the house it was cozy warm, the air thick with mixed aromas of home cooking and pipe tobacco. It was only when I went back out to get my things that I noticed a new Toyota two-door in the converted shed. It was a far cry from the heaps of the past. Teaching art in a college had paid for it even if his art did not. Burl caught my eye. "Yep, runs like a charm. All four wheels turn at the same time, by god."

Back inside I saw the framed pictures of Matt as a boy and young man arranged on the fireplace mantle. Burl glanced at Angie looking at them. Angie's face softened in a smile. She turned to me. "Sit down. Let's have a drink." I accepted and she stepped into the kitchen and returned with three vodka-tonics on a tray. Burl looked at her again and raised his eyebrows. "It might be a tad early, Babe." Angie put down the tray and snorted a laugh. "Did you say *Babe*? He called me *Babe*. You heard him. Never in all our years has he called me *Babe* until just lately. Well, you can suit yourselves, but I'll have a drink to that. Salud!" Burl reluctantly raised his glass and took a sip in spite of himself. The day had abruptly turned into evening. Angie told me to take my shoes off and put my feet up and went to fetch more finger-food and drinks. While she was in the kitchen we could hear her banging around. Burl got up and went to her. I heard Angie raise her voice at him, slurring her words, so it seemed to me. Burl came back and nodded toward the door which I took to mean, Let's get some air.

Dusk in fact was gathering, A few light raindrops pattered down. Burl steered me on the well-trodden path to the lakeside where the canoes had once been tied up. There were no canoes now, no boat of any kind. The tree with the rope the boys had swung on and jumped off into the lake was no longer there either. We stopped at the lakeside and faced the water, watching the raindrops dimple its surface.

"She's always blamed me, you know," he spoke softly, almost in a whisper. "I set a bad example, she says. Maybe I did, I don't know." He was silent for a minute: Suddenly: "God, that boy could paddle, the best bowman I ever had! We did Rainy Lake and on up together and he never petered out once. I taught him how to live and he goes and gets himself killed. Did you know that after he was released from the hospital, after a year of horrendous pain and surgery, he left the hospital in his walker, we were just behind him, and he pushes himself right into the oncoming traffic lane. I totally lost it. They put me on the nut-ward, kept me drugged and strapped down in bed. Angie started drinking." We were silent for a while. I stood there next to my friend in the twilight as the

patter of raindrops increased. I thought of Matt and Tommy, those summer days of another world and time. Strange, I thought, both young men were like casualties of the same war. I must have given Burl a funny look. He let out a guffaw, lit his pipe, and finished the story. "When we finally got back up here, Angie did all the driving, and I mean *all* of it. I couldn't get myself behind the wheel even to fetch the mail at the bottom of the hill. I couldn't go near a car. Still can't, much."

THE ROUTINES OF WAR 2

It started the day he walked from the campus across the bridge over the river, the day after the last big fight with his girlfriend, the day he saw his poor grade on the History exam he'd studied so hard for, or so he thought, just one more message that it was time for a change, a major shift in goals. He knew he wanted to be a writer, a poet, but what did he know worth writing about? Panty Raids organized by the guys in his fraternity? Agreed, the day of Great Literature was over, but current social trends had coarsened the fiction being produced in contrast to the masterworks of the past century or so. Besides, hadn't Hemingway made his career on war? Hadn't Tolstoy been under fire in the Crimea as a young man? Hadn't Mailer and Jones become famous writing their first novels just after WW2? What about Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*? He lengthened his stride. A cold March wind blew dust down the street and into his eyes. He entered the Federal Building carrying in one hand a copy of Gide's *The Fruits Of The Earth* which he'd picked up in a college bookstore at the last moment. The little he'd read in it had a moist, hothouse air that he imagined was very French, a seriousness and sensitivity lacking in the people and places he was familiar with.

He entered the Selective Service office he'd looked up on the directory, and presented himself before the desk of a matronly woman who scanned him with appraising eyes as he approached. Could she help him? Yes, he would like to volunteer for the Draft. He took out his wallet from which he pulled his draft card, handing it over. The clerk looked up something in her files and said with a pleasant smile, did he know he had a college deferment? Well, yes, but. He saw her puzzled expression as she ran her eyes over him and asked what the book was he was carrying. When he showed it to her, she blinked her eyes, glanced down, then up, meeting his eyes with an inquiring gaze. In a lowered tone of voice she asked whether he'd thought this over carefully first. Yes, pretty much so. And did his family know of his decision? Well, not exactly. He'd tell them after, tonight in fact. The matronly clerk paused, resting her elbows on the desk and drawing in a long breath of air. Reluctantly she handed over the necessary forms to fill out. When he had done so, she told him not to sign them yet, that she'd like a word more with him first. She excused herself and disappeared for a while. When she returned, he handed over the papers. She took a look at them and said, "I'm going to hold these until noon tomorrow. Call me before then if you still want to do this and we'll start processing your notice. But talk it over first with Mom and Dad. Will you do that? Here's my card." Act in haste, repent in leisure was the message here. But he was resolute. His mind was made up. Next morning he called the number and asked for the name printed on the card. When a woman's voice came on

the line, he explained who he was, cleared his throat and told her he'd be there to sign the papers as soon as he could make it. One might say he acted on a whim, a mood, motivated by all the wrong reasons, childish really. But it was done and there was no turning back.

That summer he was inducted into the army and within a year came to regret his mistake as the dead and wounded piled up from the fighting he had no part in. The shooting war seemed to be happening in the very places he was not in or had just left. He carried around the heavy weight of disappointment. So far there was nothing special to write about. His first journey up to the line with other replacements one freezing January day offered a moment of excitement when they were stopped by a large sign painted in bold block letters that stood beside the road:

Stop! Road under enemy artillery observation next 400 yards.

All vehicles maintain 50-yard intervals.

His heart quickened a little, but each following time it became routine, ordinary, even boring as they sped along and not then or ever after drew enemy fire, none, not a single shot or shell. Slowly it dawned on him what a jerk he was, still a misfit, never in the right place at the right time that suited some urgent need. Many of his buddies from Basic had seen action already, some were dead or lay wounded in an Army hospital ward. Irrational as it was, he felt jinxed, cheated out of a crucial test of character besides providing grist for the fiction he would one day produce. So far he hadn't tested himself under fire just like the hero in Crane's story. What fights there were were mainly brief bloody skirmishes, almost over before they began and always somewhere else. Bored by the usual rush-and-wait routine, the constant moving forward or back along the main supply route, he kept his thoughts to himself. In his letters home he dropped hints of danger and close-calls without telling outright lies. He had nothing to write home about, he, the writer, the future novelist of this grave, soon forgotten conflict. Not one enemy soldier had he seen. Not one bullet or shell had been fired his way. It was creepy how dull and uneventful most of his days were turning out to be. He felt awkward around his buddies who'd learned firsthand what it felt like to be shot at or blasted by artillery and mortar fire. Had he heard? one or another would ask him. Joey with the First battalion was catching it daily as were Phil and Buster with the Triple Nickel on the coast. Tim was back home in the States with his Bronze star and prosthesis. Joker was recovering at MASH. It was embarrassing, even humiliating to have to listen to these accounts of people he'd trained and come over with, who knew now what he did not: war, real war, combat. That knowledge made guilt well up in him. Now he realized that there would be no war stories forthcoming from him, probably ever. He

kept his own counsel but the letdown gnawed away at him day and night. It looked obvious to him by now that he was as safe as if he'd never left home. Layers of sandbags and distant rumbles did not make a proper war when printed on a page. His tour began like that and would stay like that until it was up and he was rotated back home and soon after that discharged, and then it would be the same as it had been, college dorm, Frat life, a girlfriend, the works right down to two kids and a split-level bought on a GI Bill loan. The irony was not lost on him. Faring well or ill was largely a matter of chance wherever you were, and he was plain healthy even if tired or cold or dirty like everyone else. The inspiration to be a great writer he once relied on had all but withered away, his literary hopes and dreams as insubstantial as the milk-misty dawns in this land of the morning calm. He knew it was crazy. Besides, it looked like the conflict was going to end soon, his war, his one big topic, this disappointing venture in tedium and frustration, which of course, he reflected, was a suitable subject for a War book, too, just look at *Mister Roberts*, for example. One day perhaps long years from now he'd get a nugget of luck and turn out a passable kind of war story, but so far the war had produced no literature but who could tell yet what the future would have to say about the time he'd once spent here? In his eyes nothing was going on worth noting. The war was winding down and would soon end, he'd go home, and for the rest of his days there'd really be nothing worth passing on about it to anybody. Actual experience of combat had gone unknown by him, luckily or not. He didn't have a scratch on him, no scars to show for his time there. He was kidding himself. What kind of writer was that? A sense of guilt brooded behind his smile. Maybe instead he should go back home and write about Party Raids after all. His heart sank. Unknowingly he'd allowed his life to become the very thing of which he inevitably ridiculed others: a cliché.

VICTIMS OF BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Two Sketches

one

We were the three that summer of '44, inseparable as Musketeers. The whole world was at war and we three longed to be Leathernecks and come back as heroes covered with ribbons and medals instead of mere boys playing war, imitating imaginatively what we saw on theater screens week after week sitting in the dark consumed by a wish to be *in it*, to hit real beaches under heavy fire, to fly real fighter planes and be real men brave and strong instead of boys on bikes bored with summer days. We longed for something with crunch in it and ached for a real fight more than just tossing one another around, scraping elbows and knees, giving and receiving a bloody nose, and so it went until the day the "Geek" showed up alongside our favorite target, James the Sissy who hated us for the rough games we played that often sent him home in tears.

Parker was our "squadron leader" that afternoon and it was he who lifted his head to say, Hey get a load of that, it's James, and what is that geek he's holding hands with? C'mon let's have some fun. Dog-day heat was upon the town and the lakes were green and scummy and home was dull and we I guess felt lazy cruel and crazy as we wheeled and rode to intercept the Sissy and the Geek, the pink pudgy cross-eyed grinning curiosity beside James. We rode up and blocked their way and Parker says, Look here, James's got himself a girlfriend, and we hooted. She's not my girlfriend, says James, she's my sister, and Parker winks at us and says to her, Hey what's your name beautiful? and we hoot some more. All at once the Geek lets fly a gob of spit that lands on Parker's cheek. We're so stunned that we let them slip away. Parker screams at them across the traffic passing by, THIS MEANS WAR!

Then we parted but not before swearing revenge. At home in my bedroom I looked through my deck of bubblegum war cards that you could trade for others you liked better and how I wished I was in a submarine deep down in an ocean far away from here. I pumped Ma to explain the meaning of geek, a new word in my vocabulary. A loony person, she said, who eats live chickens in a carny sideshow. What's got into you anyway? she said. Nothing, I said. Ending this sad tale, I am sorry to say we chased them down. I meant them no harm. It was only play-war after all, just a game. Things went wrong. They ran, we ran after them and ended up entangled and I found myself face to face with the Geek who once again let fly a gob that caught me squarely in the eye and furious I seized her by the arm and swung her around and tumbled her down a grassy slope. She brushed herself off whimpering but unhurt.

A shriek not from her but from James, such as I'd never heard, a single scream almost animal shattered the air and shot through me like hot lead or cold steel. At once I turned on my heel and found myself walking as fast away from there as my legs could carry me, choked up, beginning to run until out of anyone's sight, biting my lips, saying to myself urgently, *Don't cry! Don't! Don't! Don't! Don't! Don't!*

THE DICKENS WITH THEM CHICKENS

Two eight-year-olds, Alice and Janet, sit on the sidewalk in front of the house in the midday heat playing jacks beside a sprinkled lawn. It's late in summer vacation, a languorous hour and the girls are bored to death. What a perfect time for the Cisco Kid himself to come along, his cap-gun in its ruby-studded holster, hat pushed back on his head. He's still panting because he's just polished off a whole gang of bad guys down by the creek. He's hot and thirsty, dreaming of lemonade, and walks with a slight limp because his horse has a broken blister on its heel. His eyes dart at the two girls but instantly return to a level gaze straight in front of him. He is the Cisco Kid and likes keeping things simple this way. At this very same moment he hears his name being called. He knows he should keep on going, but he turns his head. Both girls are looking at him, one of them actually smiling, the brown-haired one, but not the blond one, who sang in the last school Christmas pageant, "O come to the church in the wild wood," in her high pure voice, her blond hair and white dress shining in a pink spotlight. Ever since then the Kid, whenever he sees her or sometimes even thinks of her, gets that feeling down in his funny place. Can this be why he saunters over and totally forgets about the blister and the lemonade?

"Hi," says Janet, the other one. The one his mom says has the dickens in her eye. Janet smiles at him, Alice plays dumb. Janet looks up at him as he stands there wondering what to say or do. "Wanna go see some chickens?" she asks, with that look in her eye his Mom was talking about.

Chickens? thinks the Kid. "There ain't no chickens around here," he draws.

"Oh yes there are, We know where, too." And she checks herself from giggling.

Now the Kid is dumb about a lot of things that go on in the world, but not so dumb that he takes the word "chicken" to mean what it usually means. He is not a literalist. Janet jumps to her feet and Alice does likewise. "Okay, show me," he says at last.

"Follow us," says Janet, while Alice goes first.

The Kid tags along behind, aware of something ominous edging closer with each step. After they walk for a while, Janet turns her head but keeps walking: "Do you know where babies come from?"

"Sure I do."

"Okay, where?" They stop and the Kid points shyly to his breastbone, and both girls suppress a hoot of laughter. The Kid's face burns with shame and he wonders if he shouldn't have taken himself on home and skipped this chicken business. But it is too late. It will always be too late for him at a moment such as this.

Next we see him sitting at the dinner table barely eating a bite. His parents are both there and he studies their faces minutely for a clue about how to be in the world he finds himself in, a world sworn to secrecy. He asks to be excused and goes to his room where his gun and hat lie abandoned on the bed. He seats himself on the very edge of his chair, pondering the experience he's having. All at once life for the Cisco Kid feels very slippery, and he's afraid he's lost his balance and is already falling.

TANTALIZING SMELLS AND FLAVORS

The story goes like this: Larry's wild about Mary, and Mary's gaga over you, and the three of you are shut up inside a cabin on a lake waiting for the rain to stop, far from the noisy city. That's the scenario, the setup. The cabin, log-hewn coated with creosote throughout, has a platform loft sharing a picture window view of the lake and where one of you has to sleep, since the only other bed is a double folding one downstairs in the common room. So the other two will sleep in that. The problem is that Larry's your best friend. His relationship with Mary isn't yet a settled affair, though he acts as if it is. He has no inkling of her feelings for you, at least not that you know of. Mary vowed not to betray your secret. Everything has so far felt like a long swim in ambiguity as the three of you, dripping wet, unload all your stuff in a common pile in the middle of the floor three feet inside the door. From this point on, as each of you hesitates briefly about where to put your bags, the big question behind it all looms larger and larger. That's the situation. That's the inevitable story.

Mary: Brr. I'm soaked. I'm going upstairs, you guys build a fire in the wood stove and warm this place up. It's freezing!

Larry's being cool about it and just goes on unpacking. You're left to build the fire. You open the flue and get started. You're both being cool. Up in the loft Mary's issuing more orders in the cheery tone that's supposed to make being bossy okay.

Larry: I've a better idea. I'll make us a shaker of martinis, very smooth and dry, and you come down and we'll all drink and warm ourselves in front of the fire.

Mary: Are you flirting again with me, Larry?

The rain drums on the roof and falls in sheets that turn the downstairs part of the window view into a blur of runny colors. Larry is going through the cupboards, drawers, banging around, humming a little show tune.

Mary: Let's just have tea for now, Larry. Save the good stuff for later.

You're trying to concentrate on making the fire and it keeps going out, and moreover it appears that the flue is not open. Smoke is drifting out and rising.

Mary: *Oh my god!* you're smoking the whole place up. Put it *out!*

Larry comes over and monkey around with the flue, then kneels beside you and starts making the fire from scratch. Soon there's no more smoke and a fire is beginning to crackle in the wood stove, slowly warming up the cabin.

You get up and go make a pot of tea, Mary's favorite, a rare Burmese spice tea you'd introduced her to one time after making love. You rummage in the cupboard for cups, picking out three of various sizes and styles, and arrange them on the drop-leaf kitchen table while the water in the teapot heats on the propane burner.

Mary: Either of you dopes know how to cook?

Larry: Do I know how to cook? Are you insulting me, your personal chef?

Mary: We're going vegan this weekend. You guys agreed.

You have thawed the vegiburgers beforehand and they're ready to be warmed up and served. The air is getting warmer and now smells of tasty food cooking. Turns out you and Larry have both brought along the wine. Mary joins the two of you and pushes a chair up. Larry, on the spur of the moment, is mixing up a stir fry on another burner. You light a couple of candles you've found and set them aglow on the sideboard, admiring how they soften the atmosphere when you turn the light-dimmer down a touch. Mary puts out place mats and sets the table briskly. There are just three chairs, the fourth one being heaped with your belongings from earlier, which you go to remove.

Mary: Leave them there for now, they're all mixed up. Let's eat. Aren't you *starving*?

You take the seat of the odd-man-out before you notice it, but now it's too late to move. Mary and Larry sit close beside each another, and you dig in, Larry and you while Mary nibbles between little sips of wine and tea. Larry puts his arm around Mary's shoulder and after a few seconds removes it. Mary's busy talking, looking across the table at you while playing footsie momentarily underneath it. She sips her wine before she sips her tea. Once done, she starts cleaning up, necessitated by a sudden urgency.

Mary: One of you guys can grab a towel and wipe these, if you like.

Larry is busy rolling a joint, tipped back in his chair, and ignores the suggestion. He lights it with a lighter and passes it to you, and you take a small toke, not like once you did, and pass it back to him.

Larry: Mary, you want a hit on this?

He gets up and offers it to her. Her hands are wet and a hank of hair hangs over one eye. Larry holds the joint to her lips and she takes a luxurious drag and turns away holding it in, goes and returns with a deck of playing cards, exhaling in one gusty breath the smoke from her lungs, engulfing you both. It looks like an evening of fun has maybe just begun, but be cool. It's still early. Anything can happen yet.

A RAINBOW IN THE SKY

Morgan Pike, the late hero's father, came into the kitchen through the back door and sank into a chair with an audible grunt. He was finally getting around to fixing the leak in the garage roof. Dark storm clouds were massing in the west. Doris, his wife of thirty years and the mother of their son killed in action in the mideast, leaned back against the sink and watched him in silence.

"Another storm brewing up out there," said Morgan. "I'll just hafta throw the tarp back on the roof again. Is there any more coffee?"

"I don't know, make some."

He looked at her, meeting her eyes. "Let's not start again, please?"

She continued to fix her gaze on him. "God, you're thickheaded sometimes."

"I'm his father and your husband. Is there something more?"

"No, I guess not then."

Morgan heard her, his once beautiful, desirable Doris, Homecoming Queen, lovely wife and mother, drag herself back out the door. Just then the first fat drops of rain thunked down followed at once by the wind along with the downpour, a flash of lightning, a crack of thunder. Soon it was dark as night outside. Morgan Pike rose to his feet and turned on the light switch. He got busy heating the kettle for his coffee. Another and another walloppaluza flash and crash shattered the air. And then, as if a hand had lifted it, the storm stopped, rolled on and was rumbling off in the distance. The room brightened up. Morgan sat down at the table with his steaming coffee mug. He heard steps and Doris appeared again in the doorway. She sat down across from him. Tried to catch his eye. "You know, Morgan," she said in a faraway voice, "you always said I spoiled him by taking his side even when I knew he deserved a spanking, but did you ever wonder why, or what part you might have played in it?"

"Doris, please, dear, don't do this."

Finally he looked over at her and frowned. "My God, woman, I loved that boy even if you think I didn't, that it's my fault he was killed."

"Murdered."

"No, goddamn it, a soldier killed in the line of duty. Laid down his life for his country."

But she had turned her deaf ear his way. He noticed that strange expression on her face that scared him now, it seemed so unlike her somehow, another person almost. She spoke:

"Morgan, let me ask you. Who brought me that stuff you got after you heard I was pregnant again?"

"What, when? What stuff? What're you talking about now?"

He wanted to flee but thought better of it.

She went on: "You were on the road for that drug company and it was

hard times. Who was that, my dear husband? Your devoted wife took it, as you know, got sick, aborted almost, but miraculously did not, and he was born with bright blue eyes that never changed color from the first time they brought him in for nursing. You wonder why I always took his part?"

"Doris, honey, this isn't helping. Grief counseling is what you need."

" You bet I took his part," said Doris. "One-hundred per cent. Sweet Jesus, yes. You never loved him, not really, because he could never live up to what you wanted. You paid little or no attention to him, always too busy with work. Yeah yeah yeah. Poor student, worse athlete, he wasn't good enough as a son for you, so send him off to war, why not, make a real man out of him. He listened to you right up to the end, mister."

"My God, what terrible things are you saying?" He held down the emotion rising in him. But she was obviously elsewhere already in her head, changing subjects rapidly. Now she was talking about another time back then.

"We came home from a company party, remember?" she was saying, rubbing her hands together. " It was late, Rosy was in bed but Bill was still up and I told him how once I'd tried to put an end to my pregnancy. I cried and he squirmed a little and said it didn't matter, uncomfortable as he looked, embarrassed for me, confused by this sudden confession his mother had just tossed in his face. It kind of popped out. I guess I never knew how guilty I've always felt deep down inside. Didn't ever realize it till just lately. Like any jam he got in was somehow my fault in a roundabout way. Guess I'd had too much to drink at the party and forgot myself. I was wrong to tell him. Oh, god," her voice trailing off the very same moment that Morgan raised his eyes and noticed a rainbow in one corner of the window.

After the sobs she was deathly quiet, they neither of them speaking, lost in their thoughts. Morgan made a mental note to order a bouquet of flowers for his wife during their time of bereavement. He'd send her fresh flowers every week at least. Maybe he'd check it out first with Rosy, their daughter. She'd tell him if it was a good idea or not. He poured himself some lukewarm coffee and waited for the enormous weight pressing down to lift a little. When he looked out the window again, the rainbow was gone but the sky was as blue as before.

HUMPY HEAVER'S BACK IN TOWN

It evolved first from her saying, "Oh-oh, humpy fever is back in town," as she noticed his growing hardness beside her in bed. But it soon changed into "Humpy *heaver's* back in town". It began as sex code, a part of their private bedroom lore, before spreading to include other references. "Humpy Heaver's back in town," by now could mean anything, a new public official voted back into office, for example. It had a far wider range of meaning than mere sexual arousal.

Martin and Abby were technically roommates sharing chores and living expenses, that was established from the first, whatever else they might become, lovers, partners, later on. Abby was a nurse booked by an agency, working rotating shifts and changing hours during the week and weekends. Martin was, in the eyes of some people, a nobody, a ne'e-r-do-well living off the profits of some property sold following the death of his last parent. His teaching degree and license sat in a cardboard filing box stacked among others in the back of a closet. Martin was almost forty-three, Abby was twenty-three. He did the grocery shopping and most of the general cleaning, including a weekly trip to the laundromat. Abby prepared one complete meal per week for them to sit down and share, the rest of the meals, except breakfast, were eaten on the run. The one-bedroom flat they rented was downstairs at ground level. Inside the flat, were you to put four marbles on the wooden living room floor, each marble would roll a different way, but the place had its unique charms, beautiful rose bushes not the least of them plus a big back deck overlooking a vacant lot crammed with wild blackberry bushes. Some days you could smell the sea that lay beyond the rolling hills. It was a comfortable and convenient living arrangement for both parties, with no binding relationship commitments on either side. They hiked, watched movies, ate out a lot, but in general preferred keeping to themselves in separate rooms, she in the bedroom sewing or knitting or reading, he in the kitchen or out on the deck where he read and smoked. And some nights, and not just nights, Humpy Heaver was back in town. And so it went, more or less smoothly, for seven years.

A raven hops around a compost heap. Suddenly it ruffles its feathers, skips once or twice, and takes off, cawing, cawing, which sounds like mocking laughter to Martin as he trudges glumly along the farm road toward the salty smell of the sea. It's been a month or two since his coming here to the retreat center to clear his mind, bring the unruly ox under control, and find a serious place to start from in an effort to rebuild his life. The cottage life, rose vines, cats and all, is a thing of the past. He feels as if he's acting on remote. The clump of his footsteps seem entirely detached from the rest of his body. They seem

to be taking him deeper into some shadow land where evening primrose glows in the half light, the mountain misted over. He doesn't care that much where his steps take him, everywhere's the same, up to no good. His life had sprung a leak and drained him dry. A big black hole in the center of his being is collapsing into itsy-bitsy microchips. A new moon is already whispering his name from far away over on the other side. Well, no one person or thing is to blame. True, she had a habit of dumping on him without warning. "Sometimes I feel like your mother," he said one evening, washing up the supper dishes which she'd agreed earlier she would wash and wipe, but hadn't, and as she came out of the shower, her head wrapped up like a turban in a terry cloth towel, passing behind him as he bent over the sink, he gave her the perfect opening for one of her spiky comebacks: "You're not my mother," she replied, "you're my maid." He heard her steps walk on and the sound of the bedroom door closing with the click of finality that stabbed his heart like an ice pick. His heart bleeding to death in the center of his chest at the same time pounded like a bass drum in his ears. He felt faint with conflicting emotions and began to tremble from head to foot. Figuratively speaking, sometimes a building can fall on you and you walk away without a scratch; another time a snowflake can crush you. Relationships, at least in his experience, have been just like that. Well, he knew she was obsessive-compulsive and hypoglycemic, the child of alcoholic parents, on antidepressants, more hand-to-mouth and wayward wanderer than young woman with firm career goals in mind. Wasn't she, after all, more like a hologram, he wondered, looked real and three-dimensional enough, but is just thin air between your hands when you reach for it.

He passes some kids on the road. They seem stoked on Colas and candy. The entire world is drug-happy, he thinks. Even weed was no help to him in his present state of mind but only intensified his suffering. There were those other times, those fun and tender and ordinary times that in their afterglow flowed through his veins like molten lava. He tried to shake them off. He'd been down this road before. He was surprised how well he knew it, how familiar the empty ache inside him was. He always knew it would end as it did, the bedroom empty, the mattress turned upon its side, not a hair left behind to remind him she had once lived there with him, slept and made love in that bed with him, tucked up close together, himself feeling like a world-famous golfer who'd just putted the entire universe into the 18th hole. Why do we throw the one thing away that we need the most? We got sidetracked, he tells himself, kicking a clod of dirt with the toe of his boot. Pony up, she said. It's over. Your bald monk's head just burst into flames, she added. Sorry you missed it. Rage, rage. It filled heaven and earth. Insult followed

insult. True, he did threaten to kill her. But that was just talk in the heat of the moment. The women's shelter called and warned him, but they had

rest is missing, lost somewhere

OH NO, NOT ANOTHER DEER-IN-THE-HEADLIGHTS STORY

BRUCE

It was time to take his pills. They rested in a plastic pill box marked A.M. P.M. arranged by days of the week. They supposedly were working, the pills, clearing up the problem or else aggravating it. In any case, the implied seriousness of taking and not taking them was no laughing matter. Health relied on diligence. Hospitals were, after all is said and done, no fun. Any time now all doors would close for good. The pills were to be taken after eating and washed down with a full glass of water. The printed warnings and possible side-effects that came with the instructions were alarming mind-bogglers. In the land of the pill, you tread with care. He's amazed he's still alive, even though his attention-span is waning at a stunning rate. Are pills making you more or less ditzzy? In a drug culture such as ours, taking your pills is a daily ritual paid homage to with single-minded devotion. Where would we be without our pills? The endless refills, insurance payments, we take our pills and carry on. I am telling you the obvious. He, our reverential pill-taker, goes to bed unknowing and wakes up the same way. Glad to be here, hope to stay, addicted to living, to the grand principle of being. Requires repeated repair work as time goes by. Each new year one's no wiser, just worse for wear. But there are pills to help one make it through the day and, more importantly, the night. Even though Mister takes his pills at regular hours, he still feels a profound and merciless existential dread, having been raised on *The Stranger*. The plaque in his brain arteries is also spreading, according to various sources of electronic information. Who wouldn't be paranoid? It's been like this it seems for ages. He hears the quiver and the quaver in his voice and takes his pills. Then off to bed.

BEA

She wonders exactly at what age pooping, or being regular, gave out and became a grave object of concern. She hunts the shelves at the pharmacy for the latest in laxatives. Prunes have turned out to be a big help but require fortification with pills or other supplements to assure success. She is amazed at herself, at her concern about such, well, rather lowly things. It has come to her attention through access to the Net and other immediate sources of information that the colon is like another brain in regulating psycho-physical functions. She believes it, swears by it, reads up on it and consults the Net. Questions around excreta oddly fascinate her. She claims the bowels even play the major health role in all animal life and affirms that holy shit is not just a vulgarity. Vaguely she wonders aloud how much food she has consumed in her lifetime and how much defecated into toilets in places she's been to and lived in around the world. Her mind pictures huge dumps of human

excrement. She claims the subject of bowel movements ran in the family.

Her first husband used to take an enema every day of the week except weekends, and if he missed one day he swore he got a nagging headache and became a beast to live with. Fearing constipation comes with the territory. Every morning Bea and Bruce compare pooping data over toast and coffee. Its peaks and valleys are duly noted. Truth be told, both Bea and Bruce are sick and tired of being sick and tired. A good morning on the pot undeniably leads to a smoother day. But it's difficult staying regular.

MESSAGE IS FULL

2:16 a.m. July 19, phone buzzes:

Recorded message, man's voice: *Hello, sorry, can't come to the phone right now.*

Beep

Woman's voice : Scobby Dells, Jungle Man, who you think you be talkin' to like you done to me last night? Makin' me look bad, baby. Pick up de damn phone, Pufferhead, goddamnit, you is there, I knows you is. You a mean man, you know dat, Scobby Dells? Mean and low down. You pick up yo phone. Hurry up, I knows you lising . O-o-kay, don't, I staying on yo line till you answer or time runs out on dis message. You hear me, mister? I'm telling you it's you gonna be sorry. . . . Oh, please, baby, you know I care but dat don't mean you can treat me dis way, no way. C'mon, Scob, pick it up, big man, I ain't hanging up till da message run out. You hear wha I'm sayin'? Scobby, p- lease talk ta me. I ain't got no time for dis shit. You ain't got no time for dis shit fo' damn sure, don't think you do. You can't hide no more. Yo life is right in yo face big as shit, don't turn away, Scob, ain't gonna do no good. Not now, baby, don't do this affer all we gone through together. Don't you wanna grab what's left? This ain't askin' too much from you, an' you knows it too. . . . Fuck you, then, hide, run away, travelin' man, you got nothin' an' nobody to run to, you mutha --

Beep

Recorded female voice: *Message is full.*

8:52 p.m. March 12, phone buzzes:

Recorded message, woman's voice: *"You have reached the home of Lyle, June, Cissy, and Val. Please leave a message, number, and a good time to call. Thanks for calling.*

Beep

Man's voice: Hi, maybe you'd care to tell me what the hell's going on? I may be just your husband, or was, but I still live in the same house as you, in case no one has noticed lately. Better take something to clear your mind and call me back. Collect yourself and we'll talk it over. Navigate a little, will you?

11:19 p.m. December 31, phone buzzes:

Recorded message, man's voice: *"Smith's cat and dog hospital. Happy new year."*

Woman's voice: Happy new year, Pig.

Same man's voice: Oink oink.

Woman's voice: Honey still loves her piggy. Just so you know.

Same man's voice: Grrr woof-woof grrr.

Woman's voice: You're such fun. I forgot how much.

Same man's voice: Meow bow-wow. Tweet-tweet. Quack-quack.

Woman's voice: Life is fun, Daffy Duck. I'm off to a party with my date. Bye-bye.

Same man's voice: Bah-bah buzz-buzz moo-moo.

(Click)

3:45 P.M. October 22, phone buzzes

Electronic recorded message voice: *There is nobody here to take your call. Please call back later :*

Beep.

Woman's voice: Now where might you be? Mother, can you hear me? Mother? Hel-lo-o. Where are you? Mother, Mom. Hello, hello, hello? I'm waiting, hello hello.

Second woman's voice: Sweet Christ in hell, Gail, I'm not deaf, but obviously you are. I am not at home the message says, but who pays attention to that, right? and it takes me time to reach the phone. What is it anyway?

First female voice: Well, that's a cheery how-do. What's wrong? Get up on the wrong side of the bed?

Second Woman's voice: Every side of the bed is the wrong side at this stage of the game. One day sooner than you think, you're going to discover that for yourself. Truth is not beauty, dear, it's pain. Are you still working all hours of the clock? Of course you are. I know, you're both zealots. No flies on your butts. I haven't time for a chat right now. Zitta's coming by and I'm still in my robe. We're going shopping, mall tramps that we are, but you're okay? Hm? I bet you just found yourself a bit short and thought you'd give your old ma a call. Such a darling my daughter is. So how much? Now, before you get defensive, I know how hard you both work but the thing is costing me already a pretty penny, I don't mind lending a hand while you're getting started, Gail, but I'm not a bottomless well, contrary to what you and Tom seem to think I am. No, no, no, I'm just saying, tell me how much, but it has to be absolutely the last and final time. Draw the papers up and I'll have Bruno look at them. We'll talk soon, dear. Promise.

(click)

5:05 P.M. January 19, phone buzzes

Recorded message, girl's voice: *Bugaloo I'm here for you, tell me what's on your crazy mind. Quick, in fifty words or less:*

Beep.

Youthful male voice: The last bubble from the sunken hulk of your life has just burst. There, how many words is that, road girl?

(click)

JUST VIV

She had a smooth and melting voice that played off against the acid of her words. When asked at work, for example, where her boss was, she answered, "Big foot is hiding out with the Loc Ness monster," meaning his law partner. "The drum sounds, the tribe gathers in the dusky dawn," was how she described being called into an early morning conference. I liked her remark about a famous big-shot around town with whom her name got entangled at one time: "He wore a frown the way a king might wear a crown as an emblem of his power." In private she admitted she felt used but knew very well that she could be corrosive enough to crash the whole grid. In society she played the part of the grande dame with just enough flair to make her amusing. And she always seemed to know what to wear at varying social events without ever suggesting ostentation. Clothes wise she made a virtue of taste and expected it to be top priority under any circumstance however disagreeable. Strange to say, despite our vast difference in age, education, worldly knowledge, and taste in most things, I liked her, genuinely found her fun and even inspiring, and she liked that, not having much company around her any longer, but heaven help you should you ask her age. But she liked being liked and she showed it. She kept you keenly alert, verbally and mentally on your toes through lively conversation, not exactly gossip, more like salon confabulation that for her passed as being in the know. She used to say, "People can't tolerate much success or luck -- in others." Viv had gone places and done things unknown in my experience, or that's the feeling she wanted you to get from the aura she gave off. She had lived, capital L, and had long since grown bored with it all, including being bored. This indifference suited my mood at that time in my life as I sifted through for a few old coins worth keeping. I was fed up with love in all its many guises. People, especially people armed with earnest good intentions, especially put me off. Anything that smacked of phoniness (which arguably are most things and people) stuck in my craw, as it did in Viv's, and we had some wicked laughs at their expense before downing the last drop of our aperitif. Viv by starlight, okay. Viv in the morning, forget it. She knew, as most women do, that two-thirds of appearance is cosmetic. Show, merchandise yourself, is what one does if one is playing the games of life for real.

Viv is also at the same time an imaginary character in a spy story by someone never heard of before. Briar Patch was her character's name in the spy series where she was, according to the political climate at the time of the writing, working for the CIA, NRA, NKVD, secret terrorist cells, the mafia, drug lords, and, well, you get it, Viv as super spy and mistress of intrigue. But off the page, Viv is actually more like the little old lady passing by celebrated in the song of the same name. There were

many Vivs. Viv in rags, Vin in furs, Viv in the drawing room, Viv in the bathtub, Viv at the opera or racetrack, Viv out slumming the town, the Viv we all once knew, loved and loathed, old auntie Viv who tickled you in the ribs and made you clap shut your ears when she'd begin to sing in a staged voice, "Oh Jani, Oh Jani, how you can love!" Darling, she'd intone, "before the boat we're supposedly merrily sailing gently down the stream in crashes on the rocks, do finish whatever it is you're trying to do."

I don't know who was the bigger narcissist. We had tea today in a tea room where someone who calls herself a gypsy read my tea leaves and, as the song goes, looked into my future and drove away all my fears. Not quite. Viv asked out loud so everybody could hear: "What scene is this take we're in? The one with the chocolate soldiers and bloody shoot-outs? The same era in which I was gang raped? My how the years do fly by." It's all an act put on for the shock of it, to benefit our worldly education, and amuse her. It's expected of her. The woman's a chump when it comes to being spotlighted, boring as she claims it is. Strange to say, Viv was the name of my 7th-grade homeroom teacher. Our classroom war ran in step with WW2, ending when it did in 1945. By the way, Viv's real name was not and is not Viv. She has no real name. She was invented by an unreal author. At this point, let's pause and wonder at what has been wrought here. A mirror reflecting a mirror reflecting a mirror ad infinitum. She keeps coming back in my thoughts, dressed in satin and lace, in coveralls, in a black silk suit and veil, Viv as widow, Viv lighting up a fatty and passing it around, Viv the Sicilian, the Greek, the Squaw in buckskin, the hostess who won't let you get a word in edgewise while cornering you with a plate of petite afternoon sandwiches, Viv, for vivid, a creation of Hollywood and a writer's fantasy. She's typecast in the universal unconscious, Viv as anima writ large, created one moment, rubbed out the next. It's all done with mirrors, she insisted. Viv, come back, Viv, come back. Death asks too much of us that are left behind.

A TRUE BUT UNLIKELY STORY

Shoes Burky, younger sister of the late celebrated business mogul Suit Burky, slumming what she herself called the Wonder Hall of her mental fabrications, her own acrostic puzzle along with her private Periodic table of elemental constituents, factors which alerted her that she was in for something inescapable as well as inevitable -- her work having come full circle from being in the public spotlight to being ignored almost as nonexistent, an historical turning point when the prevailing zeitgeist had been boredom plain and simple, which she championed, or at least had passed for such to the point of being trendy, this in turn favoring Shoe's work such that word spread and people started flocking in droves to the galleries and museums to view some of the most blatantly vapid stupefyingly boring work ever displayed, Shoes herself falling asleep on her feet even before her champagne reception. A huge success, that whole parties ended in the guests sound asleep.

But how long can lassitude maintain itself as a style, a fad? Not so long, which is hardly surprising. In other words, the boredom vogue the apathy ennui tedium monotony prosaic yawning world-weariness blahs expressed & witnessed nearly everywhere as being cool in life as in art, this fad which had persisted longer than any one had imagined started languishing away out of its very own laid-back existential mode, at first groggily and then seemingly overnight, *poof*, gone, at least as a discernible social phenomenon, soon replaced and animated by the profit motive and newfound horizons waiting to be exploited under the rubric of development in turn viewed as a return to positive values, the exact opposite of the previous mood of and taste for numbness made into a fashion trend and blamed in some quarters on the media, on academia and on some dark unnamable conspiratorial force operating from the position of adversary as The Other Out There or TOOT for short. Yes, it was tool-up, tune-up time, consumer time again, arms deals and gun lust time, time of the holy trinity Consumption-Progress-Profits, the population rendered sufficiently vulnerable to induced need, meaning that Shoes Burky's exquisitely-styled boredom was kaput zapped done-for forgotten and relegated to the already overflowing dumpster of history. Shoes yawned, and who wouldn't? stretched out on her secondhand chaise lounge gazing through half-lowered eyelids at the flat monotone decor of the room's interior with approval, the more dead space the better to be in. But then hadn't her astrologer submitted that a change of scene was in her future, which had proved true as she relinquished or severed any connection she'd enjoyed with the world of culture and commerce, motivated as they were by ambition but anathema to her. She no longer palled around with celebrities in high-end places.

Yes, hadn't he told her it was right there in the alignment of planetary forces beyond all human agency? The inertia was still there to be plumbed & summoned at will thank heavens. But admittedly she was done for and where more perfect a finish than here in the zero-quotient mood of her own condo? The style she'd so vociferously advocated and won over to her side was now passé invalidated kaputnik. She lifts her ear for the barest whisper of dusty bones, shifts her weight on the chaise which gives a tiny tired squeak deep in its springs, shuts her eyes and smiling blissfully is soon making strange muffled sounds.

JUST LIFE WITH NO ESCAPE

FOREIGN POSTCARDS ON THE WALL

a sequence

Says No 1: Going up the Irrawadi River in my Ghostmobile, under mosquito netting, one bright star shining in one dark corner of the heavens visible from my pillow below the window. You could hear the tide come in, though far from the sea. The hum of the diesels lulled me back to sleep. I was cracking up, measuring the exact distance between hilarity and sorrow. Wait, please, not another song and dance. Rolling down the river in my Ghost Boat, going through mist and fire. And my eyes are open, wide, wide open. Kesa is my lover who lives down the river where the Dragon King is holding forth. I shall speak of them again, perhaps. We are chugging now and will soon be there. The Bardo is shimmering blue as we round the next bend. The mountain cottage seen from a distance looks like iridescent gold and is not to be trusted. I remembered this part from before, somehow. Confused wordplay underscores the pictures passing by. I am forwarding myself in bytes by way of a keyboard. Where were we there in that exact place we keep meeting in, floating down the Irrawadi dream boat shot from cannons like Puffed Rice? What Bardo are we in here now? Chicago, seems like. Waiting for the elevator going up. And he awakes the dream world which scatters like minnows. A slight ripple-effect lingers, though, and all this coming day the one-time batboy of the team will call the plays while haunted by a dream in iridescent gold and he won't even know it. A silent drizzle of dream forms fall into place like handmade ravioli swimming in tomato sauce and basil. It's New Year's eve, after all, that one night in which you *have to* have fun. Nothing kills enjoyment faster than the effort to have fun. Before the clouds come, before the crowds come, I got to see a man about a horse. Show a little spunk, can't you? she pleads. Just a spark?

Says No. 2: From here on you're on your own. As we deepen into a winter mood you notice your hands have withered and darkened. Silver light and shades of gray are your new colors. Fingers white as death. Brown withered leaves and rusty barb wire. The long winter nights. The firmament. The cold. A fire burns in the wood stove. Your footsteps sound in the midnight silence on your way to the bathroom. Vague bittersweet emotion. The phone rings and rings. The uses of narrative are of no value here. "So we're throwing a masked ball," says our Belle Star, "nine to midnight. Do come." "I threw a baseball once," I mused aloud, peering at her fake diamonds through my monocle. "You'll come, then," she said, and I replied in good faith, "By my word, I believe I will, shall, whatever, just promise me I won't have to have a good time." I wasn't fancying myself costumed in 18th century finery, a court dandy, which keeps making a slow comeback in certain fashion circles. How did we get here? Why, on the Irrawadi river, of course, deep in some interior zone you no longer recognize, your habitual reference points subverted.

Says No. 3: What is meant is mostly mumble-jumble, but select mumble-jumble, the crackle of paper stuffed inside a pocket. A receipt for two containers of cottage cheese. As soon as I'm left alone I pretend to myself I escaped with no contract signed, but surely the leading character will come out to play if coaxed. Bring on the clenched-jaw phone calls thick with meanings, things falling apart. I'll give you honesty, not making a sound, refusing to blink. O cannibal fire, O dank prince, do they creep up at night to feast upon your flesh? Devour then recast you each dawn? No pawing at the seams, you troglodyte, lest the whole plot comes apart. No scratching old wounds until they bleed on paper. Small wonder the late Gray Knight

when pried open revealed false eyelashes
batting sweetly undefended. I told you.
Only an empty shell remains, no better than
a memory. Key left in the mailbox, folded
sweaters in a drawer. Everything in its right
place. A trash truck rumbling down the road
at 4 a.m. Our next goal is to mull over the
text for clues. To make a run for it is no
longer an option. Sorry.

Says No. 4: Are you trying to punish me?
The marks of guilt fade into regret, its
bitter taste lingering on time's wet lips.
Two-faced agreements made through hand-
signals. Close-up on domestic comedy, the
body stuffed behind the couch, the lamp
holding back the gloom, a sense of mute
desperation in the room. The allure wore off
just an hour before. No sleeping -- not
tonight. Second cup of ice-cream less
satisfying than the first. What do you think
I want dropping by the wayside before the
bubble breaks? I've been here and moved
on to the next thing. To feel like I am where
I am enough. A satisfying yet chilly climax.
The sun rolls over us like a steamroller.
Death sets behind our words. Night still
falls on the little noodle shop no matter
what.

Says No. 5: We carried out our own bags.
The world again begins to subdivide. You
turn up between your lover's legs, part
beast, part bird, part fish, a satisfying
climax with whom to share a donut moment,
batting false lashes falsely. Small wonder
the late White Knight when pried open
refused to answer our calling for full
disclosure. Remember? Coming out from
behind our hope chest, intrinsically
ambiguous, well versed in the ways of wind,
casting around for its exact customized
fittings. Instead we lingered and sank into
our special corner. A sunken heart is pulled
from the drain under the floor. I hear you
say we can bear it signifying the signified

by its creative potentiality. On the other hand, all our relations keep freezing up. The moment this happens our ghost trip has ended.

October 23

Dearest One,

Doubt the storyteller unwary of his tales, that's the message I get and get again. Outside the windows the sky is a perfect sea of blue. So peaceful with fluffy clouds like old sailing ships floating across it in a stately procession. The bed next to mine is empty now, its vacancy rubbing a raw spot despite the fact I barely knew his name or anything about him. The mattress is rolled up temporarily. A custodian sweeps and mops the floor. It's the finality that reaches down into the core of you. That sense of treading on the edge of absolute unknowing.

Some nonspecific kind of stroke has landed me here. Four days now. I am to be released back into home care, soon I hope. But I am still here, am I not, and hasn't it always been so from the point of view of oneself? When can I ever remember not being conscious of me being here? Perhaps in dead and dreamless sleep only. You don't remember the moment you slip into sleep. Waking up, you and the world are back again. On the other hand, the old bird in the other bed is gone for sure. There is still an apparent me as witness in an apparent world, I feel life pulsing in my veins. Before my eyes a hospital ward in the light of a heavy white dreariness eats my life, as if I still have one. A time comes, wrote the poet, when even death doesn't help. . . when life is an order, just life, with no escape. It appears after all that I'm the one who comes to meditate and quiet the body-mind, carrying a notebook and pen. The clueless one.

So he was in the other bed by the windows when I was wheeled in late at night, tubes in both my arms, shot up with drugs enough to either save or kill me. Next morning after breakfast, sunshine edging in, we nodded across the space between beds, each waiting for the other to break the ice and introduce himself, setting in motion the tiresome trading of stories. His name was Vern. I couldn't catch his last name and didn't need to. The nurse, after raising the blind, took away our dishes and I buzzed my bed back down flat. No way was I in a mood to watch news or sports on the tube or appear up for a chat. I'd wait till the doctors made their rounds, take my pills, roll over on my other side and nap until being awakened for some pill or test or other. Vern yielded enough information for me to learn from him that he was here because of severe back pain. He'd been having it off and on for a month or more. They were running the usual tests. He was a gray, jowly man, beetle-browed, on the grumpy side. I took him for a retired investment counselor or a lawyer. He let on

hat he was retired and living in Southern California on a avocado farm he

runs with his wife and daughter. He buzzed up his bed and unfolded the morning newspaper. "Maybe we'll both get sprung tomorrow," I remarked by way of mutual acknowledgment. Of course I haven't lived my four score plus years not to have learned a lesson or two about having expectations. Meanwhile my left fingers and that side of my face were experiencing sporadic numbness as if given a shot of novocain. Was it a stroke, a TIA, spasms, just what? The doctors seem perplexed. The scans show no signs of blood clots in the brain. My dizzy spells and TIAs over the past several months had reached a new plateau, such that in the recess deepest in my mind I expected I would more than likely soon be either seriously impaired or dead, and I was hoping for dead, but so far obviously I am neither. We didn't talk all that much, either us grumps. Avoid small-talk, it slowly withers the soul. Vern snored when he napped.

Well, that was yesterday. In the middle of the night Code Blue brought the house down. The team rushed in and my curtain was drawn, but I could hear what was happening on Vern's side. After the frantic and routine efforts failed, I heard the team leave and only then became aware of the grieving sounds and a voice say, Would you like the hospital chaplain? And the sound of squeaky shoes going away followed by somebody, presumably the wife, or widow, punching a number in the phone, and a mature woman's voice, calmly holding back surges of tears "Lois? Darling, Daddy just died." A young woman's voice screamed. It came from the phone but I clearly heard it. The sounds we make when we grieve some irretrievable loss are unlike any other sound we make. I guess I am a sentimental man, easily moved in the presence of death and grief. I have witnessed it a lot, but am still surprised by the rush of emotion I each time feel in its presence. A veteran of a long life, I came here to the hospital ready to die, yet I live on. A quite younger man than I, Vern, came here to relieve a backache, and Vern as Vern is gone forever. I never knew the person called Vern, yet I miss him, I do, I feel his absence in a very raw, tangible way. I see death as an object of consciousness, like Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull in his outstretched hand. So my apology to those who want a happy end. Yet happy I am. For a certain length of time something awakens in me that needs to celebrate the goodness of life and pay homage to it before it's too late.

Kisses,

Pops

LETTER FROM A LOST TIME AND PLACE

We have exiled ourselves out of this world. Waiting in the shadow of the beast. Brother and sister mine, we say, the universe is a mutual eating society. Just look around. Life makes a meal out of life feeding upon itself. We end on our knees, our foreheads pressed against the floor. We are being eaten constantly as we must eat. This is no time to look away. Nature laughs when we cry. The moral connotations change but the the process continues ever on whether lesser or greater.

That was it plain and simple. From tyrant or prophet or both. And we set ourselves up each time because we can't help ourselves. Survivors don't look back. You are what an arhat is not and you believe so until you aren't any more. The wolves in the pack are howling for blood. The faces in the cities and towns we pass through no longer recognize who or what we are. People are scared, frozen in fear wherever you probe too deeply. Have you ever been treated like a menace? She drew up her feet and tucked them under her and gripped herself in her arms. You'd have thought I was a deadly snake. Me, her teacher, once the star of the show. The times have changed us all and yesterday is no longer any consolation.

Finally the rains came and the raindrops were silver. We drank hot chocolate in mugs heaped on top with melted marshmallow. I answered the knock on the door but no one was there. Who was it that rode her bicycle down the hill and called out my name in the dark? We grope through the slushy snow but the gnawing feeling has gone. A bent sword hangs from a hair a foot above my head and everyone's head. I think my mind has wandered away from me. The screen keeps flickering with images I have not seen before, though I think they have something to do with me. Sing me a song. Let me die in the arms of my beloved. The central figure enters. There I am, you say.

In the final draft let's have no more traces of the earlier cynic who appears between the lines of the text. Let's have him erase himself as an entity indistinguishable from the text. See it as a masked ball but without knowing which mask you have on before it is torn off and burned in the fire, never to be seen from without. But on a day such as this one lost in rain, mother can't hear, father can't walk, the rest of us gargle with mouthwash to hide all traces away and take our seats. We keep the lights turned down. They are marching again in the streets. The courier said the almond trees are flowering this year as never before. And the roses are coming back again. It does not bear repeating, yet the story

goes on and on that some of this was excised by the editor but has been restored since his execution.

k

STOP HERE

When the prince arrived at the pavilion, the old devil had a heart attack. But she was worth it a hundred times over. He snapped his fingers, brush and ink were brought. He snapped them again, a screen was brought. He snapped them again. They returned waiting for his final words and death poem, their heads bent staring down, waiting solemnly. In the room along the walls were examples of his River Style brushwork. One poem could be translated as: "It's too late to run for it." Another as: "I was born in Buddha's arms. Where is she now?" Now the old bird had just a single breath left in his lungs. His assistant waited with pen and ink to write it down. He bent over, The prince whispered in his ear, "If my arms became your grave, any other world is folly." And in fact steps can be heard and the rustling of chain mail and armor .I sink on my cushion and fold my hands. Glenn Miller is playing in my head. Tommy Dorsey? Harry James? Nothing was pulled from the fire. I'm losing you, you're cutting out. I reconfigure moments long gone. Brusha brusha brusha. Better get Wildroot Creme Oil, Char-ley. Circumstantial evidence points a finger at. We interrupt this program to bring you an important public announcement from the President: Today one bomb from one bomber wiped out one city in one second. Ralston cereal can't be beat. Who's on first?

The brothers were called the Happy Pappy Boys. A Pappy was a bed pillow. It was different from cushions. A Pappy was your friend and comfort. A Pappy heard and saw all your dreams at night. Pappies held learned conversations and exchanged secret information. The brothers were like Happy Pappies. They invented them. Only the two of them knew that they were Pappies and not pillows. You can have your blanket, Charlie Brown. They had their Pappies. One day they watched them burn up their Pappies in the coal furnace in the basement. Once you have known a Pappy in your life, you have known freedom from fear of failure. This homily I taught and passed on to my students, and they to theirs, and the Happy Pappy lineage continues to this day. Go back to bed. Bury your head in your pappy. The Happy Pappy Brothers still live. You will find them there.

Buzz says, Nut cases interviewing nut cases must not use real names here in the land of Oz. Carrying a project to a successful conclusion is called walking the voodoo corridor. Shady O'Grady is team leader. His affect is pure concentrate of bile. He has a long scar on his left cheek, I have e razor nick on my right. He has the eyes of a stalker, I have the

wits of an escape artist. Precisely at eleven a.m. we meet in the board room where our once happy voices sang out the company song and slogan. Buzz leaves a message beforehand: "prepare for a long session."

THE ANGELS ALL AROUND US

The lilacs have been blooming. Grandma's favorite flower. A big bunch of them stand in a cut-glass vase on the table. She enjoys arranging them herself. Grandma is 86 and has been on the verge of death for years but still goes on living despite her afflictions. She sits where the light is good for knitting and darning, a shrunken old lady in the shawl crocheted years ago, her birdlike body settled into her chair like it's part of her, her feet in thick wool socks crossed at the ankles. A rectangle of sunlight inches along the floor. Grandma says through her loose dentures,

"Here she comes."

"Who?"

"Her. Sophie."

"You dreamed about her again?"

Sophie's been gone 65 years but has suddenly returned in the old woman's dreams. Grandma rocks herself a little in her chair. She doesn't seem to hear the question. Grandma frequently slips into reverie. She goes far away and mumbles under her breath.

"What's that, Grammy?"

"She's so happy we'll be together soon. You don't believe me neither, do you?" she says at last.

"Is Sophie an angel, Grandma?"

"Mercy, child. Of course she is. She's right here in this room with us."

"How old is she now, Grandma?"

"Age don't matter none."

At this precise moment the rectangle of sun on the floor dims and disappears. Putting down her knitting Grandma watches it. "She's gone." Grandma sits with a happy expression on her face looking through her glasses at her hands opening and closing. Her smile slowly fades. The sun returns. A kind of sleepy feeling seeps into the atmosphere. The presence of angels? Grandma sits there in the sunny silence of the room perfectly still for a minute before resuming her knitting on a winter cap only a child could wear.

CHOCOLATE LAYER CAKE

Feeling good about yourself. That's how everyone talked. Using the current patois. I just couldn't figure out what she kept telling me, the confused details of a protracted and painful divorce in which only the lawyers on both sides were getting richer. Such was the general tenor of the conversation, I recall. She mixed up references in a way that left you hanging somewhere in space. You just knew looking into her eyes that she was doomed from the start. Turns out from an overdose of drugs less than a year later. It was ruled a suicide, but Trish wouldn't hear of it. If anything it was an accident, her own fault for not tracking better. She spoke in the tone of voice people use when they will brook no argument, so I said nothing. Turns my stomach to hear sweet words pour out of the same mouths that talked dirt behind her back. I'm not dismissing her faults, but she was one of those people who simply cannot never cope. Lots of people can't. They're born to hold back in a world that thrives on aggression. She told me more than once that she simply did not fit in here or anywhere else, that she was born feeling marginalized, the dumb kid in class, the social misfit. All true maybe for her, but from outside it looked like she had a pretty good life, I recall, poor for the times maybe but money and a luxurious life-style had never been a priority for her anyway, and besides she had Trish to help her get by, to keep an eye on her diet and health in general. Trish was there for her and with her, and we all prayed things would get better for her. Trish was just the right person, even if it was maybe unhealthy or codependent in the long run. Trish was a ball of exuberance. And she could stretch a dollar farther than anybody else we knew. She had an eye for bargains. She knew how to have fun without overdoing it. For us it was a mystery how the two of them locked onto each other, I recall.

The funny thing was it was Trish that ended up staring vacantly out of windows at the ash-gray weather. Grief alone kept her going until it also began to fade away. Even sorrow was going. The love of her life killing herself remained for her simply unacceptable. We were careful to stay as far away from the subject as possible. Yet she'd return to it every time and get worked up again. The doctors were forever changing the drugs and dosages without any real benefit over time. How dare they say she killed herself! *They* killed her. I nodded sadly. Truth is, I think it was suicide, did from the first. Death was there in the chair smiling at you, pouring your coffee. We all saw the same picture, except Trish who lived in denial. We suggested hobbies, scheduled movie nights with a friend or book clubs she might try, or how about volunteer work? Trish shook her head and said she wasn't ready yet. She was having a hard time and still very tender. She looked ashen. I recall how often people dismissed her viewpoint as not worth listening to and would talk right

over her, she told me. It was humiliating but if she confronted them they'd twist the story around to make it seem it was her doing alone that created the difficulty. If she had such a poor self-image she should get some professional help. Feel better about herself. Just like that, the way everything personal seemed to be taken care of in those days. Go to a therapist, change your eating habits, get some exercise, drink more water, try yoga. The health-minded generation. She called me one day after the cremation and needed to talk. I know what clinical depression looks like, Trish said. She was making great progress and doing fine before they started monkeying around with changing her prescriptions. God knows how many visits we made to the therapists and doctors over time, she went on. She felt betrayed by life itself, by faith in something she'd felt was holding it all together behind the scenes and could be trusted. Her usual high spirits noticeably sagged. She used to glow. Like enter a room and the whole place and the people in it would just naturally light up. Now that was gone too. We poured brandy into our coffee and sipped it. She talked on. Outside, the trees were changing, I recall.

I'm okay, getting on day by day, but after midnight is hard. I rack my brains trying to remember something I might have done or said that triggered a reaction she couldn't handle. I was always there for her. She knew that. She didn't hide stuff from me, she couldn't, we knew each other too well. She loved me. That never flagged or faltered in any serious way since we'd met. The night before I found her on the kitchen floor we'd been happily reading in bed. She got up to take her meds before sleeping, came back, shut off her bedside light and crawled back in. It doesn't add up. But so what? She's gone and I'm here. She swallowed almost the whole bottle, over a hundred antidepressant pills despite the fact I monitored everything she took. You and the others believe she killed herself. Her mood disorder or whatever they called it was hardly there most of the time. Trish went on harping on it in this vein, I recall. There was no point to it. She wasn't exactly haggard but the results of losing the light of her life were showing more every time we met. We loved Trish and she knew it but we no longer mattered really. What once mattered more than life itself for her now lay in ashes. She was ready to curl up and die herself, she said, I recall. We helped her when she let us. I tried my best. All of us did. There was no message from her or about her after that for a long time, we all agreed, I recall.

MIXED MESSAGES

Unless you are numbered among the elite, before Checkov was, you are not. Try again. Very well. Nord belonged to the yacht Club where the Rotary met once a month. Nord, beautifully groomed, elegant in taste and manners. Face and name spread over the society pages of the Sunday newspaper. Old money. Could happen in any age or time. A question of the class you're born into. What does he do? I saw him the first time when I was a kid. He wore wings over his heart and drove a red convertible with a beautiful brunette close beside him. The handsome airman I longed to be. The image imprinted in my mind since that day during the war. When he comes back, goes the story, he's welcomed with open arms by everyone, Nord the decorated veteran shot down twice and saved both times and a war hero. At his reception held by old family ties at the yacht club he receives near adulation. When he rises to speak the applause starts and goes on without a pause for five minutes. His face is still handsome but harder than before which only stamps it with more strength of character. I forgot to mention that this man Nord also happens to be my twin brother. I respond to his beck and call and shadow him wherever he goes. It is I who am making him into a symbol of glory, turning the true story into legend and myth. You'll hear it one night while camping out under the stars. Some human beings are special and chosen, it seems to say, as the story goes on to describe how Nord glories in his fame and growing enterprises. In part two we meet him soaking in a hot tub with Clint and Spider and Leticia talking about the advisability of buying up a chain of stores and converting them into yoga and exercise studios. Nothing goes wrong, the deal is made and becomes another huge publicized success. I negotiate the deals and continue making gestures of sympathetic joy for his seamless achievements. I sign the checks. Part three finds him taking the lead in politics and winning every campaign. We eat cheeseburgers and bump heads over whether with pickles or plain. Otherwise it's smooth sailing on to victory. He's a family man with an impeccable public record. People rally around him and his noble causes which congress pass with nary a nay. Lord Nord I call him under my breath. I work late nights dreaming him up. He thrives. No obstacle is too big. What can I do? There has to be an incident that comes to light. We wait and wait for something to surface that proves to be his undoing and starts the inevitable tailspin but it never comes in spite of every effort the author makes for the story to end otherwise. The turkey.

Suggested Story-line Incomplete

I hate birthday parties and suchlike events but had accepted the invitation anyhow. Just what happened that night while I was tripping and freaking out is part of a phantasmagoria. I found myself stuck in a noisy overheated room with a bunch of queens and lesbos dancing madly under black-light to earsplitting music. Babs said I made a complete ass of myself, her friend. Evidently I'd tried to entice Babs and Lotte into a three-way bedroom scene. What a jerk. To worsen matters I'd split my sides laughing and giggling about it, she said. Wasn't funny a bit, she said. I had a moment's recollection of Lotte's raw animal presence rolling like waves of warm summer over me. I got to the party late stoned on mushrooms and before the evening was out I saw visions of glory in an ashtray heaped with ashes and Lotte transmogrified from a cold Strindbergian bitch into Anita Eckberg before my eyes. Being out of my head was no excuse, said Babs. I had, she said, betrayed my true narrow macho nature for them all to witness. I had insulted her, her lover and friends, gay and lesbian, and I had insulted myself. Babs said how blind she had been not to see it before. Mercifully, I couldn't recall details, just diffused impressions melting in a haze. more dream than actual. I was a big disappointment to her, she said straight out. I'd lost control and blew my cover as a guy who liked and respected women and all that. I knew I'd stepped over a crucial line and touched a place of deep hurt in her, so I let her huff and puff some more and get it all out and said to my face. Lotte was gone off somewhere and we were alone in the entryway. I stammered my apologies but an enormous chasm had opened between us and both of us were helpless to fill it, at least for now. No right moment presented an opening for making amends. So we parted and left it like that for the time being. How dense can you be sometimes? I got careless. The words that come out of your mouth before you can catch them. Everybody knows that one. Babs had a way of communicating displeasure almost without any noticeable change in tone or expression. Our relationship had gone off the tracks as relationships tend to do. And it may have stayed that way if Lotte hadn't decided within a year or two of their living together that she was straight after all.

The funny thing is I stopped smoking pot about the same time that Babs moved to Berkeley and in with Lotte. I'm not implying there was some connection between the two events. Babs introduced me to Lotte at her, Lotte's, apartment. She made it sound like we were in tight when I took us for nothing more than easy-going acquaintances. There was nothing "longtime" any more anywhere anyway except of course war. I hadn't thought all that much about it for I'd been busying myself trying to break into the underground press and getting my name around. I decided to spruce up for the party I hated going to just in case I should run into somebody that had influence. This need to make a good impression in

the conventional sense seemed to mean that I was getting serious about finding my own place in the world. It was now the early '70s and the social norms were breaking down even faster, especially racial and sexual ones. Babs sang accompanied by herself on a guitar, Dylan, I think, it's hard to remember, I was tumbling inside of some kind of grotesque phantasmagoria, as I already said, until I must have collapsed because the next thing I knew I awoke and found myself alone stretched out on a couch among the ruins of the night as dawn brightened in the Windows. I felt myself returning to normal in pieces and parts overshadowed by a dreadful sense that something I had said or done had ruined Bab's birthday party the previous evening. I tossed off the blanket and looked around to see if I could remember where the john was. As I stood wobbling on my feet I realized even more how urgent was the need for me to pull my life together and the sooner the better.

The first time Babs got high on pot (she later admitted) was at a huge peace rally in Golden Gate Park. I was there sitting next to her on the ground among thousands of others. Giant bombers were being passed down the line and Babs amusedly took a good pull off of one when it came around. She instantly threw a coughing fit. Some kind of aircraft from an antique air show happened to drone over just then and a guy's voice rang out, "Run, it's Nixon's private air force!" and Babs came apart as though it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. We looked at each other. She was wide-eyed, and I said to her, "You're stoned, girl." Not that we were together or anything like that, just getting to know each other a bit in the casual way of the times. That very next day I bought a "dime" bag of Mexican weed from one of the hippies in the house, rolled a couple of joints and phoned Babs at the Victorian crash pad of a friend of a friend's of hers where she was living for the time being. Babs was out, so I left my number and asked that somebody tell her Tony called. I hung out for a while before going back to my humble pad on Cole Street. The guy who seemed nominally in charge of the house I shared with a bunch of transient retards had been a Wall Street broker before dropping out and coming west. He mused aloud while we shared a joint, "Mama, all I wanted was grass and freedom and you gave me work and marriage."

Babs had a music degree of some sort that would enable her to sub in public schools, not that she hadn't tried, but you know how the competition is in today's overcrowded marketplace. Somehow or other she was getting by like the rest of us then. You could smell Mummy and Daddy in the clothes she wore, however funky they might be. A lot of money came down that way from parental largess but a lot more came from the burgeoning dope scene. Overnight everyone but everyone was dealing. Babs herself got into it for a time and let people know that she

wanted to be a singer, a vocalist, even a soloist if good enough. The wanting part was about as far as she had gotten so far. Cleanliness wasn't confused with godliness. Muck and madness go hand in hand. We nearly ended up in bed together but for the fact Babs was a proud and confessed lesbian and I was totally hetero. That question apart, we shared the view that being naturally whacko as we obviously were or felt we were could somehow hold off maturity let alone mortality. We shared a born dread of looking dorky, like the people we came from. We smoke weed. Wow. Here, try some LSD. When you see how whacko whacko can be then it gets really whacko. What is real? What isn't? Crazy. We were having the time of our life. We'd meet somewhere and catch up. Babs was getting a gig here and there singing. She was auditioning for The Lamplighters, she told me, and the other news was that she'd fallen in love and into a relationship with someone named Lotte, a foreign exchange student living in Berkeley. They were seriously considering moving in together which meant in Berkeley. I noticed the change in Bab's appearance. Besides being flushed with happiness, her face and features seemed to have crystalized into a person new to me and she noticed my surprised expression and smiled. She was so at ease in herself and with her life, it seemed, and I was glad for her. In general it can be said that I like the company of women and am a pretty fair listener. "Do you know how rare that is among men?" she said. Nor did it matter to me what sexual orientation people had, I was smugly proud of my open-minded tolerance. Her taste in dress also had shifted away from thirdhand boutiques to more uptown, her hair cut shorter also and styled to fit her oval face better than straggling around or over it as it had in the past. You wouldn't call Babs dykey, at least as seen from the male-gender side Nor was there anything near girly about her. Perish the thought. Nor a party girl except politically. A serious-minded person, Babs. But the restless kind. Gradually it became apparent that she could only take so much of the laid-back scene. She was beginning to worry about her future when Lotte appeared. Whenever the two of us met we'd sneak off for our ritual puff or two. She didn't cough any more when she inhaled. Being with her seemed easy because we didn't lay special expectations on each other. Months would pass before we'd make a date to meet. I had yet to set eyes on her lover, Lotte. The world was moving fast and we along with it.

Around the same time the Vietnam war ended, after a couple of dead-end jobs with horrid bosses, I met someone, as they say, and things eased up a little between Babs and me, especially after she met my girlfriend, Anise, and saw us all lovey-dovey together, as they say, and pronounced it hopelessly straight and therefore neither interesting nor threatening. And that was that. Babs seemed to have taken on a more hard-boiled stance since her breakup with Lotte which she claimed awoke old wounds around abandonment issues. She didn't cry on your

shoulder or anything like that. She looked great and I told her so. She had to doll-up for her singing job in a theater-restaurant in the East Bay. She didn't return the compliment about looking great. I didn't expect to see her again and wrote her off as a part of the past. Some more time passed, I don't know how much, but enough for me and Anise to get married and separate. Once I got over my breakup I moved back to Bernal Heights where I shared a flat with a guy I sometimes worked with and was rushing out the door when her phone-call caught me. I remember because it was about the same time this guy and I were working on a deal with an editor of *Rolling Stone*. I was surprised to hear her voice. At first I didn't recognize it. I hadn't heard it since whenever. She had won a raffle which prize was a dinner for two at Ernie's in the city. And she thought of me. What a laugh. Babs and I splurging at Ernie's like the class of people we'd disdained before. We the once barefoot hippy pilgrims of the new age (which neither one of us ever really were). Even posing high status we knew we didn't have the world we wanted but quite the other way around. And I guess I wanted to show her I wasn't the male chauvinist she thought I was, and she wanted to show me she wasn't just another dyke man-hater I took her for (which I never had, never, at least I believed I hadn't). As she put it, she could find it in her newly budding Buddhist breast to forgive me for being such a jerk. She was still singing, trying new styles, gospel and blues, no longer just the popular sweet-bird songs of love, loss and longing. Yet for all of that, a struggling career in singing was losing its appeal and she needed a change that would get her out of the city. She noted my look of surprise. "I need some fresh air in my life, Tony," she said, "instead of this nutty hustle." I listened and nodded as I always did. We were both stone sober. Neither of us smoked or drank any longer. We split the tip and agreed that the arugula salad-dressing was fabulous. Once out on the sidewalk we parted with a final wave. Nixon's personal air force of antique planes would have hardly raised a smile on her lips or mine either.

SEARCHING GRAY EYES IN THE HALF-LIGHT

The Dickson's nine-year-old son Josh choked to death on a piece of hard candy lifted from his grandmother's pink cut-glass candy dish. It was years before Joe or Marge could bring themselves to talk about it openly, and only then after spending countless hours in grief counseling therapy sessions. They grieved their loss the way they had lived, bountifully. Life till that one terrible moment had treated them well in their comfortable, busy, normal-happy way. Ever since Josh's death the strain in their married life began to tell. It seemed to get worse and worse like a fabric on the verge of ripping apart. There began more drinking and fooling around in the usual boring and obnoxious manner common at such times among certain couples who have suffered the sudden death of a child, an only child so close to them, dead from a piece of hard candy lodged in the throat when no one was around. And where, by the way, were they that afternoon at Grandma's? In the boathouse with the door latched and the sandy floor under their bodies. They didn't enjoy many impetuous getaway moments like these any more and making them last longer was part of the fun. Grandma was no doubt napping and Josh hunting around with his slingshot Joe made for him. Next, the threesome they had been had unimaginably vanished in the snap of a finger. Try as they did to have another child, none was forthcoming. After a certain time it was Josh's absence that filled their lives as it had been his presence before. The bitterness, the below-the-belt remarks that began cropping up between them at dinner parties and in public was embarrassing to witness. Marge got sloppy drunk, going around sticking her tongue in your mouth when you tried to slip by in the crowded kitchen. Then she turned up with a black-eye which, no matter how you tried to spin it, was clearly the result of Joe's fury. Everyone knew and everyone looked the other way. In that part of the country you don't even these days betray your true feelings if they 're negative, you hide them behind a smile, the acceptable social norm. Getting drunk at a party and wearing the lampshade on your head now and then is considered normal behavior, but public displays of personal unhappiness or emotional disorder are considered gauche. If something gets too heavy, take a walk and cool down. Good manners reveal good core values. The couple's abusive treatment of each another in private did not spill over in their work at the store. Their lives and marriage were lived on hold, the intricacies of space and time filled with the chores of existence. Slowly, gradually, their life assumed the shape it would keep to the end. Then Maybelle appeared from out of the mist. In response to their ad in the newspaper for a part-time live-in housekeeper. Her name was Maybelle, the buxom and wise, who baked and cooked, washed-up, swept-up, last to bed Maybelle, and the deal was struck over coffee and a Christmas pudding, and when she came to work she moved her own

dresser into the guest bedroom, a cumbersome mahogany work of wonder, which after considerable effort was installed there squarely in the middle of this bedroom seldom used over the years save for the occasional guest or family member. By the way, she remarked one day to Joe or Marge, wiping her hands on her apron, I have a grandson nine years old named Josh who I'd like you to meet.

It was a Sunday and Maybelle brought her grandson Josh over for a prearranged visit and some homemade pie still warm from her own oven. If this were a film, I'd frame our first glimpse of Josh as a reflection rippling on the windowpanes, just ripples or waves of moving colors that only gradually become recognizable as a young boy approaching the back door, his hand in his Grandma's. Just waves of color as the titles and music come up, setting the atmosphere for the possible improbability, the poetic, the exquisite unnamable. The Dixons were knowingly susceptible to the old pain his youth and name had the power to arouse in them, yet they yielded to the temptation of seeing him with their own eyes, and here the welcoming moment was. Nervous smiles all around. And how old are you, young man? Nine. Oh, nine is a very good age to be. Indeed. Do you like candy? I hope not. It's bad for your teeth, that's right. Indeed. And you really have to pay attention to hard candy. There's a stage in heaven, did you know that, where the candy kids dance? Indeed. Afterwards they are strangled back to earth. Well then, be on your way. That's how Marge spoke while Joe looked on dismayed. They ate the pie and politely thanked the Dixons and were out the door. The Dixon's agreed that the boy while very nice looking hadn't looked like their Josh at all really, much bigger nose and ears. He was polite and shy just like their Josh, his pair of searching gray eyes in the fading light resting, lingering on them for a few moments before turning away, the door left for the Dixons to close behind him.

REVIEWS moved to NEW NAME cwk

In this debut collection set in unspecified time and place. a tour de force of consanguinity, customs and ceremonies, the trees whisper and sigh and the orchestra plays a soulful version of "Blue Dreams," school's out, it's tick season, and pelting rain keeps the cast of characters indoors dreaming about the pot at the end of the rainbow while baited by lust and intrigue complete with a diamond jubilee, a rock festival and pizza parlor extravaganza. Staging a comeback after being caught with his hand on a Poor Boy, ascetic master Freddy Dick humanizes a brick, a feat beside which copping the family jewels doesn't amount to a hill of beanpoles. *Pink Plumber Review*

It flared and faded but not before trekking over mountains and molehills. Just so you know, be ready for abasement and some foul-mouthed mash-ups, blue lanterns and breathless portrayals in the omniscient voice that sound like it's been sucking laughing gas while lucid dreaming with a hard-on. The overall message here seems to suggest that the only thing achieved by dropping your drawers in a love nest is a whole heap of trouble that won't go away. Not nearly nervy enough. *Evening Post And Chain*

Not quite the executive education piece we'd hoped for but pertinent to the times all the same. About a hotshot on some kind of exchange floor. Myriad dollar signs dance on your eyelids as you read accounts of banks, bailouts, bonuses and back-room dealings that make for lively reading at times along with a sinking sensation in the pit of your stomach. Just change your name from Casper to Jacque, run for the biggy, your campaign backed with aplomb by a lady with a stable of highbred racing horses and just adores your inside connections to world powers. It deserves whatever it gives and gets at twice the discount. *Bee sting Monthly*

Required reading for mutant adolescents and the addled old, the narratives sag around the waist. Less butter and sugar, more salt and pepper. You're left hungry after swallowing a vaguely tasteless and tedious stew at a banquet dinner party to raise interest in a new kind of fare. Sorry, no. *Post No Bull*

page moved to NEW NAME cwk

GOOD TIMES, SAD TIMES

We heard the news on the tugboat Vallejo during a seminar given by maybe the most popular speaker of the times for the times. I see the moment as clearly as never before, The Great Wise Man coming back into the room which incidentally had begun to sway gently but perceptibly beneath our knees or butts as the tide was evidently coming in and at that same moment a white seagull landed on the sill outside the picture window, he came back into the room and with a very solemn expression on his face told us that word had just come that the Beloved Zen Buddhist teacher we all knew or about had just died that very morning, a Sunday I believe. I was there. We took a break and shuffled outside for a breath of fresh air. I remember I was a little queazy like seasick and thought for one alarming moment I might actually throw up right out in front of everybody at such a delicate moment. Fortunately a few deep breaths of that cold damp salt air restored me and after the break I went back for the afternoon part of the lecture, now overhung with the sad lesson made evident before our eyes. How many times do we say goodbye in how many ways? We were there for that hard lesson after all. As it has turned out, its mastery is no easy thing.

The small theater company was putting on original plays straight from the underground theater in New York and the young people, especially students and New Agers, were if not stampeding at least flocking to see the productions. Beckett and Ionesco were already old hat, the small theater company was mounting one-acts by new important names on the theater scene never heard before west of Chicago. The fame of the small theater spread and soon it was invited to Colleges and universities and later to New York and on to Europe for theater festivals where their new-age rebellious message was greeted by enthusiastic students beating to get in even after the doors were closed the show underway. The small theater company while very popular was nonetheless very expensive to support and while actively fund-raising with a growing base relied on the money of the young man who had first started it with a partner, someone who later split away. He was good-looking, wealthy (for the times), inspired and inspiring, generous to a fault and from the start a man who could not live without a woman wife or lover or both and who therefore found himself constantly dead center for Cupid's arrows. Dissension among the members of the ensemble grew apace its manifest success as a force in theater. The politics of sex and power are the very stuff of comedy as well as tragedy. The small theater no longer exists and hasn't for forty or more years. Some of the old-timers have been recently talking about writing about the small theater, its many plays on and off the stage.

BATTY MATTY

There is a story I have heard that is so improbable that it's probably true. According to what I heard, there was this painter, this artist who had once painted 10,000 ink-brush paintings of horses before his sumi-e master approved of one worth keeping. After that this painter swore he'd never paint another horse so long as he held a brush. Somehow, goes the story, the artist ended up in San Francisco just when LSD was becoming the portal to new horizons. Under its influence he started a large painting in the room he rented in the Tenderloin, except that this time he worked with colors on canvas or plywood, adding layer upon layer of paint and acrylic polymers plus found objects until after a couple of years of this the work was too large to get through the doorway and had to be lifted out of the apartment windows by a crew with a crane and taken to the gallery that had purchased it. And indeed the work proved to be a critical if not popular success and over time steadily decreased in market value and finally sold to the little old lady in tennis shoes who bought it and had it crated and trucked to her mansion in the hills at a cost hard to imagine. This much is documented. It's later that is unclear, when myth replaces fact, or to be precise, myth replaces myth. But it seems that the little old lady in tennis shoes had other ideas for the painting or work she'd bought. According to most accounts, she was known as eccentric around gallery and art circles and was tolerated and even played up to because of her wealth and support of the arts. Her name was Lady Madeleine Mayberry, according to sources, though uncharitable souls referred to her as Batty Matty. As the story goes she was so pleased with her placement of this artwork that she invited the artist creator of this artwork for a private tea at three in the afternoon at her house where presumably a butler or maid would show him into a huge old-fashioned elegantly styled drawing room and ask him to please wait a moment, Lady Madeleine would soon join him. Presumably he waited and immediately noticed his masterwork mounted exquisitely under soft spotlights, approachable from three sides, equally indecipherable. We can imagine he was pleased and maybe entertained certain expectations of financial reward as support for further work. We can picture the tall double doors opening and the little old lady in tennis shoes sweeping into the room with a straw hat on and carrying a pair of rosebush clippers, all cheer and smiles. The meeting went well enough, says the story, until the grand old lady Batty Matty told him she had ordered a special brass nameplate for it. It would have his name on it too of course. And what was it going to be called? We may imagine them taking a last nibble of cake and a last sip of tea or coffee. She prefaced by saying she was calling it just the way it looked to her. And that was? *Horsing Around*. What? We see the artist gasp, turn pale and at once stride out of the house and out of sight forever, according to the story as I recall it.

WHERE LATE THE SWEET BIRD SANG

Babs got stoned on pot the first time (as she later admitted) at a peace rally in Golden Gate Park. I guess it was around 1969 or so. I was there sitting next to her on the ground among hundreds of others. Giant bombers were being passed down the line and Babs amusedly took a good pull off of one when it came around. She instantly threw a coughing fit. Some kind of aircraft from an antique air show happened to drone over just then and a guy's voice rang out, "Run, it's Nixon's private air force!" and Babs, still coughing, came apart as though it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. She coughed and laughed at the same time so hard that she turned red in the face. We looked at each other. She had tears in her eyes from laughing like that, and I said to her, "You're stoned, girl." Not that we were together or anything like that, just getting to know each other a bit in the casual way of the times. But something in the delight of that moment stayed with me, I guess. That very next day I bought a "dime" bag of Mexican weed from one of the guys in the house, rolled a couple of joints and phoned Babs at the Victorian crash pad of a friend of a friend's of hers where she was living for the time being. Babs was out, so I left my number and asked that somebody tell her Tony called.

Babs had a music degree of some sort that would enable her to sub in public schools, not that she hadn't tried, but you know how the competition is in today's overcrowded marketplace. Somehow or other she was getting by like the rest of us then. You could smell Mummy and Daddy in some of the clothes she wore, however funky they might be. A lot of money came down that way from parental largess but a lot more came from the burgeoning dope scene. Overnight everyone but everyone was dealing. Babs herself got into it for a time and let people know that she wanted to be a singer, a vocalist, even a soloist if good enough. The wanting part was about as far as she had gotten so far. Cleanliness wasn't confused with godliness. Muck and madness go hand in hand, I guess. We nearly ended up in bed together but for the fact Babs was a proud and confessed lesbian and I was totally hetero. That question settled, we shared the view that being naturally whacko as we obviously were or felt we were could somehow hold off mortality or at least maturity. We shared laughs over both having a born dread of looking dorky, like the people we came from. We smoked weed. Wow. Here, try some LSD. When you see how whacko whacko can be then it gets really whacko. What is real? What isn't? Crazy. We were having the time of our life. I make it sound like we were tight, I guess, but it didn't feel like that to me. Being with her seemed easy because we didn't lay special expectations on each other. You wouldn't call Babs dykey, at least as

seen from the male-gender side Nor was there anything near girly about

her. Perish the thought. Nor a party girl except politically. A serious-minded person, Babs. But the restless kind. Gradually it became apparent that she could only take so much of the laid-back scene. Whenever the two of us met we'd sneak off for our by now ritual puff or two. She didn't cough any more when she inhaled. She was beginning to worry about her future, she said. The world was moving fast and we were too busy building it or resisting it to pay attention to what was what any longer.

We'd meet somewhere and catch up like that. Babs was getting a gig here and there singing. She was auditioning for The Lamplighters, she told me, and the other news was that she'd fallen in love and into a relationship with someone named Lotte, a foreign exchange student living in Berkeley. They were seriously considering moving in together which meant in Berkeley. It was the early '70s and the social norms were breaking down even faster, especially racial and sexual ones. There was nothing "longtime" any more anywhere anyway except of course war. I noticed the change in Bab's appearance. Besides being flushed with happiness, her face and features seemed to have crystalized into a person new to me and she noticed my surprised expression and smiled. She was so at ease in herself and with her life, I guess, and I felt glad for her. I guess it can be said that I like the company of women and am a pretty fair listener. "Do you know how rare that is among men?" she said to me one time. Nor did it matter to me what sexual orientation people had, I was too smugly proud of my open-minded tolerance. Her taste in dress also had shifted away from hippy to more uptown, her hair cut shorter and styled to fit her oval face better than straggling around or over it as it had in the past. I mostly still hung out in my humble pad on Cole Stree shared with a bunch of transient retards The guy who seemed nominally in charge of the house had been a Wall Street broker before dropping out and coming west. He mused aloud while we shared a joint, "Mama, all I wanted was grass and freedom and you gave me work and marriage." That had summed it up for me as well, I guess, although I'd been busying myself trying to break into the underground press and getting my name around some. It was still a happy-go-lucky time, and then I blew it with Babs.

I was to meet Lotte her lover-partner for the first time at Babs' birthday party in Berkeley where she was living now with Lotte. I hate birthday parties and suchlike events but had accepted the invitation anyhow. Just what happened that night while I was tripping and freaking out is part of a phantasmagoria, I guess. I found myself stuck in a noisy overheated room with a bunch of queens and lesbos dancing madly

under black-light to earsplitting music. Babs said I made a complete ass of myself in front of everyone. Evidently I'd tried to entice Babs and Lotte into a three-way bedroom scene. What a jerk. To worsen matters I'd split my sides laughing and giggling about it, she said. Wasn't funny a bit, she said. I had a moment's recollection of Lotte's raw animal presence rolling like waves of warm summer over me. I got to the party late stoned on mushrooms and before the evening was out I saw visions of glory in an ashtray heaped with ashes and Lotte transmogrified from a cold Strindbergian bitch into Anita Eckberg before my eyes. Being out of my head was no excuse, said Babs. I had, she said, betrayed her, insulted her, her lover and friends, gay and lesbian, and I had insulted myself. Babs said how blind she had been not to see me in my "true" colors. Mercifully, I couldn't recall details, just diffused impressions melting in a haze more dream than actual. I was a big disappointment to her, Babs said straight out. I'd lost control and blew my cover as a guy who liked and respected women and all that. I knew I'd stepped over a crucial line and touched a place of deep hurt in her, so I let her huff and puff and get it all out and said to my face. Lotte was gone somewhere and we were alone in the entryway. I stammered my apologies but an enormous chasm had opened between us and both of us were helpless to fill it, at least for now. No right moment presented an opening for making amends. So we parted and left it like that for the time being. I felt horrible, my true character revealed as she said. How dense can you be sometimes? I got careless. The words that come out of your mouth, the things you do before you can catch yourself. Everybody knows that one. Babs had a way of communicating displeasure almost without any noticeable change in tone or expression. Our relationship had gone off the tracks as relationships tend to do, I guess. And it may have stayed that way if Lotte hadn't decided within a year or two of their living together that she was straight after all.

Babs had sung that night, Dylan, I dimly recall, it's hard to remember, my mind was tumbling inside of some kind of grotesque phantasmagoria, as I already said, until I must have collapsed because the next thing I knew I awoke and found myself alone stretched out on a couch among the ruins of the night as dawn brightened in the Windows. I felt myself returning to normal in pieces and parts overshadowed by a dreadful sense that something I had said or done had ruined Bab's birthday party the previous evening, as soon proved to be the case. I tossed off the blanket and looked around to see if I could remember where the john was. As I stood wobbling on my feet I realized even more how urgent was the need for me to pull my life together and the sooner the better. The funny thing is, I'd decided to spruce up for the party I hated going to

just in case I should run into somebody that had influence. This need to make a good impression in the conventional sense seemed to mean that I was getting serious about finding my own place in the world. Around the same time the Vietnam war ended, after a couple of dead-end jobs with horrid bosses, I met someone, as they say, and things eased up a little between Babs and me once she'd met my girlfriend, Anise, and saw us acting all lovey-dovey together and pronounced our relationship hopelessly straight and therefore neither interesting nor threatening, I guess. And that was that. Babs seemed to have taken on a more hard-boiled stance since her breakup with Lotte which she claimed awoke old wounds around abandonment issues. She didn't cry on your shoulder or anything like that. She looked great and I told her so. She had to doll-up for her recent singing job in a theater-restaurant in the East Bay. She didn't return the compliment about looking great.

I didn't expect to see her again and wrote her off as a part of the past. Some more time passed, I don't know how much, but enough for me and Anise to get married and separate. Once I got over my breakup I moved back to Bernal Heights where I shared a flat with a guy I sometimes worked with and was rushing out the door when her phone-call caught me. I remember because it was about the same time this guy and I were working on a deal with an editor of *Rolling Stone*. I was surprised to hear her voice. At first I didn't recognize it. I hadn't heard it since whenever. She had won a raffle which prize was a dinner for two at Ernie's in the city. And she thought of me. Wow, going ritzy, I said. What a laugh. Babs and I splurging at Ernie's like the class of people we'd disdained before. We the once barefoot hippy pilgrims of the new age (which neither one of us ever really were). Even posing high status we knew we didn't have the world we wanted but quite the other way around. And I guess I wanted to show her I wasn't the male chauvinist she thought I was, and she wanted to show me she wasn't another dyke man-hater I took her for (which I never had, never, at least I believed I hadn't). As she put it, she could find it in her newly budding Buddhist breast to forgive me for being such a jerk. She was still singing, trying new styles, gospel and blues, no longer just the popular sweet-bird songs of love, loss and longing. Yet for all of that, a struggling career in singing was losing its appeal and she needed a change that would get her out of the city. She noted my look of surprise. "I need some fresh air in my life, Tony," she said, "instead of this nutty hustle." I listened and nodded as I always did. We were both stone sober. Neither of us smoked or drank any longer. We split the bar bill and agreed that the arugula salad-dressing was fabulous. Once out on the sidewalk we parted with a final wave. Nixon's personal air force of antique planes would have hardly raised a smile on her lips or mine any more.

DUTY

D=danger

U=unity

T=training

Y=youth

This sign hung inside over the door of every hut in the camp. Danger is what drew us there even though we may not have known it at the time. To meet danger you need unity of mind and body, of principle and action, of working in harmony with others toward fulfillment of a common goal, and for that you need training, and because the training is arduous to the breaking point strength is a requirement and thus youth is emphasized. In addition, youth is less afraid of danger. That was the argument.

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