

(Searching for)
SOLID GROUND



a novel

by

Pete Shanks

*Advance Praise for
(Searching for) Solid Ground*

“Coruscating intelligence”
Yawn Upchuck

“Darn good yarn”
Capt. W. E. Johns, dec’d.

“Probably libellous”
George the First, ret.

“Not enough naughty bits”
Penile Wrath

“Not enough drugs”
Gwen Queasy

“So beautifully written”
Rushda Judgeman

“I don’t understand”
Yawn Minor

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to
Stacey, Alison & Jane
for years of inspiration

All the bad people are imaginary;
all the good thoughts are true.

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Thanks to Robert Hunter for giving me permission to quote from his lyrics for “It Must Have Been the Roses,” “Uncle John’s Band” and “Ramble On Rose,” all of which are published by Ice Nine Publishing Company. There are brief quotations from other works; I encourage the reader to seek out the originals, most of which I would prefer, but for possible legal restrictions, to quote at greater length.

επαμεροι, τι δε τις;
τι δ' ου τις;
σκιας οναρ ανθρωπος.
αλλ' οταν αιγλα διοσδοτος ελθη,
λαμπρον φεγγος επεσιν ανδρων
και μειλιχος αιων.

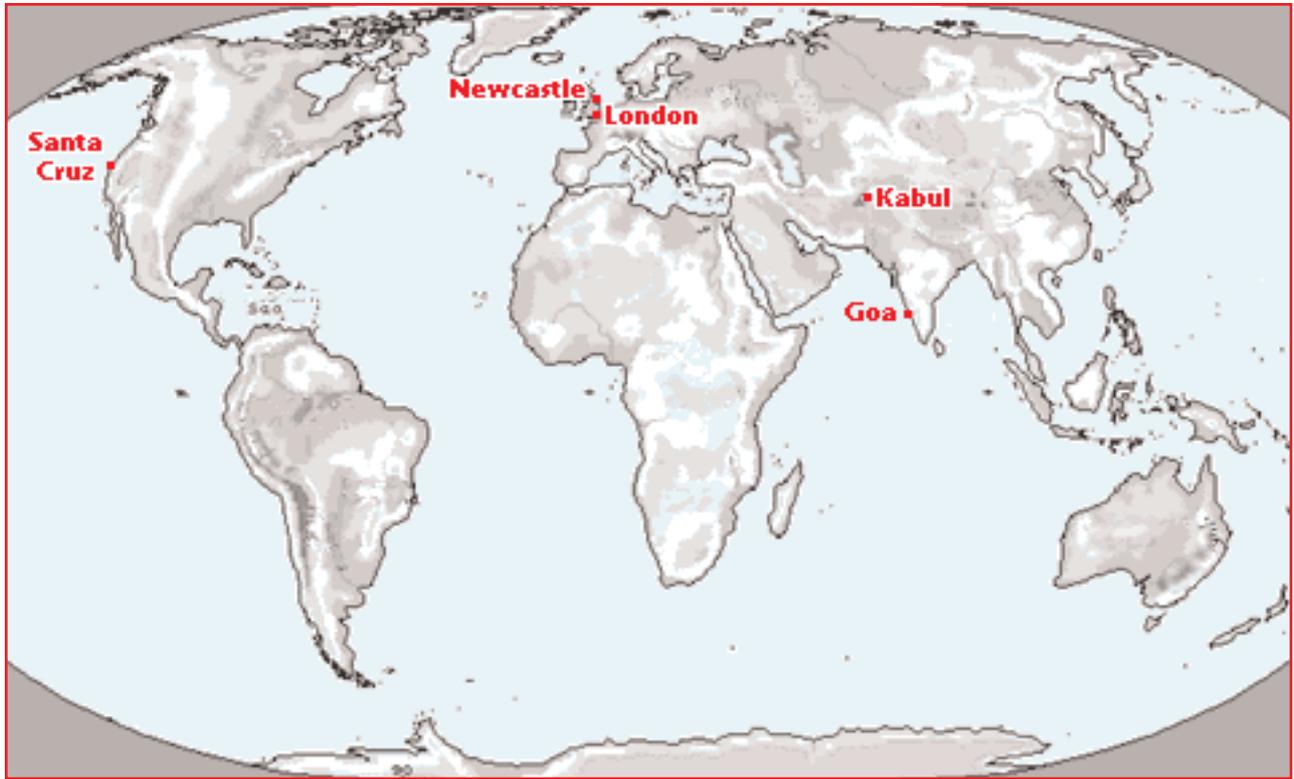
Wills-o'-the-wisp, what are we?
What are we not?
We are a dream of a shadow.
But when the pure light shines,
Radiance rests with us,
And a gentle life.

Pindar,
Pythian Odes,
5th century B.C.E.

I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together
... GOO GOO GA JOOB

John Lennon, "I am the Walrus" ("No you're not!" said
Little Nicola), credited to John Lennon–Paul McCartney,
published by Northern Songs, owned by Michael Jackson, &
recorded by The Beatles for their 1967 Tragical History Tour

(SEARCHING FOR) SOLID GROUND



1

I am this world and I eat this world. Who knows this, knows.

Taittiriya Upanishad,
ca 7th century B.C.E.

LATE ONE AUTUMN EVENING, a hundred miles below the Forest of Nicene Marks State Park in California, the great turtle on which the earth depends flexed its carapace. Eased by the action, it slowly settled into comfort and dozed again, to lie almost still and silent till some other irritation of growth or decay should urge it once more to wakefulness.

On the surface the shock was palpable. Houses on the ridges that worshipped Loma Prieta were blown off their foundations, to land where they would as ruins and rubble. The downtown districts of both Santa Cruz and Watsonville, the centers of each end of the county, were devastated. A hundred miles north, by some quirk of energy transmission too subtle for the scientists, the landfill of San Francisco's Marina District pulsed, the Bay Bridge partly fell and the Oakland section of I-880 collapsed.

At 7.1 on the Richter, the Quake of October 17th, 1989, was a Pretty Big One. Half a dozen residents of Santa Cruz County died and thousands more lost millions of dollars worth of things, from trinkets to palatial estates. Some fled but most remained, shocked but determined to remake their lives, their towns, in the face of catastrophe. In the eerie, candlelit evenings that followed there was a grim sense that they had taken the blow they half-expected, rarely acknowledged and always feared. There was anger, fear, grief, and occasional bleak humor, mixed with collective love and determination into a roiling mess of feelings encased in a sense that the way onward was up.

What followed was worse. Not the dozen or so 4.0 or greater quakes that hit in the first seven hours; not the ninety measuring 3.0 or more that came in the next thirty days; not even the lengthy

5.0 that scared the living daylight out of everyone two days after the Loma Prieta Earthquake itself. What was terrifying was the cumulative effect of five *thousand* separate aftershocks in the following month — one every eight-and-a-half minutes on average, much less near the beginning, longer later, but stretching on for months, maybe years.

After a couple of weeks, the survivors learned to remember to forget, like novice sailors finding their sea-legs, but then Cal-Trans reopened Highway 17 and shoppers could drive to the better-stocked stores of San José. In the new routine, they opened their car doors and braced themselves for the tiny adjustments that the quivering land continually demanded ... and shook themselves because the pavement was still.

They were out of sync with their world.

Everyone always is, to a degree, except for the odd ecstatic mystic and the occasional artist surfing the zeitgeist to immortality, but most of the time most of us resonate closely enough with our universe to ignore the anomalies and accept the mundane realities of everyday life. We accept the paradox of a shared culture of individuality. We know that molecules are mostly empty and the earth barely more substantial than the vacuum of outer space but still, when in need of balance, we say we ground ourselves.

Solid ground is a convenient approximation, a useful fiction, part of the consensual reality that we agree to honor.

Solid ground is a cliché.

Solid ground is a myth.

(Searching for) Solid Ground is a quest for right living in a wrong world.

It's also a love story of sorts, but then what tale worth its salt is not?

2

Only connect! ... Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height.

E.M. Forster,
Howards End, 1910

I DON'T GET IT," said Annie, trying not to wrinkle her forehead. "I just hit a time-warp."

"Forward or back?" asked Brendan casually.

"Back, definitely," she nodded. "That's how I know it's a time-warp — it's weird but it's sort of familiar. If it was a forward time-warp it would only be strange, right?"

"Unless you hit a place where time went backwards. Then you'd jump forward to the familiar and back to the strange."

"Well it's back to the strange, all right, but I remember it anyway," she explained confusingly. "I haven't felt this way for twenty years."

"How?"

"I dunno exactly. It's like, I'm the only one in step. You know? There's an entire universe out there that's completely out of its tree and they can't see it and if I say so they say it's me and I say it's them and ... the whole thing's crazy. But I know I'm right."

She widened her eyes and inspected her beer. They were perched on bar-stools at the Front Street Pub in Santa Cruz, California, sampling the Lighthouse Lager and wondering where to have dinner. Brendan took a solid pull and smacked his lips noisily before setting the glass down with an air of decision.

"I know what you are," he announced, pausing for effect, "You are alienated."

"Oh no I'm not," she laughed. "I'm a psychopathic deviate."

"You wha?"

"Really. It's official. I did the MMPI tests when I was getting career counseling at Cabrillo and the instructor told me. I thought she meant I was nuts at first, I was really worried, but actually that's not what it's about."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, all it is, is I don't follow rules just 'cause they're rules, I've gotta know why."

"Oh, I get it," Brendan cut in, "Of course. Your answers deviate from the norm of conformity. Hell, that's what I'm saying."

"You mean I really am alienated."

"'Fraid so."

"Alienated. Darn. Just when I thought I was getting over it. You don't have to be young, huh?"

"Nope." Brendan usually had the answers.

"How about hungry? Do alienated people eat dinner?"

"Only if it's vegan; vegetarian at least."

"How about Seychelles?"

She meant the restaurant of that name, though no-one who knew her would have been too surprised if she'd made a bid for hustling off to a tropical island. Exotic warmth had become her favorite coping mechanism, her drug of choice at the end of the muscle-bound eighties. They drained and dismounted, tipped and left, laughing in the warmth of a summer evening in Northern California, and floating away again from darker insights, slowly coalescing underneath.

3

Titles are but nick-names, and every nick-name is a title.

Thomas Paine,
The Rights of Man, 1791

BLACKIE AND WHITEY HUNG AROUND KABUL in the days of the weasel king. They added immeasurably to the gaiety of nations, not least because of their outfits. Blackie had a black corduroy safari jacket, with belt and large patch pockets, that he wore with matching cord Levi's and a charcoal T-shirt, while his mate had a tropical suit that, from a distance, in the late afternoon with the sun behind him, looked rather like one of Tom Wolfe's cast-offs. Even the French freaks dug the gear; for a pair of Limeys, they were striking.

Everyone knew them by sight and nobody knew who they were. This they obviously encouraged: It only helped their collective reputation as minor masters of the mind-fuck, not to mention being a sound precautionary measure for a pair of sub-rosa entrepreneurs. No one was too clear how they kept themselves afloat (natch) but it was generally accepted that if you needed a little crank of a morning, Whitey was a major dude, while those who wanted to mellow out on the sticky Afghani hash with little flecks of opium blended through it would be well advised to have a quiet word with Blackie. Acid, Mandrax, mushrooms, 'ludes, bombers and other such commodities were a mutual endeavor and subject to availability but the staples were always in stock and under a continuing, rigorous program of quality control.

Advertising was not an important part of their operation, although if they had to file tax returns they would presumably have been able to write off a significant proportion of their personal consumption as a business expense (the free samples alone would have sent shudders down the controller's spine). Not for them the corner-of-the-mouth 'Hey mister' come-on or the deniably sibilant 'Hasssheesh?' They just lounged around the courtyard with Rizla papers and Samsun tobacco and passed the time with anyone who felt like stopping by. If the subject came up, which was not unknown under the circumstances, well, yes, they could help

you out. Price was not a big deal — shit was so cheap that negotiations were on the basis of say-a-buck for yay-much — and everyone was happy. It's a rare privilege to find yourself doing so well by doing so good.

This activity cannot have passed unnoticed. Indeed, nothing whatsoever in Kabul passed unnoticed, which seemed to be an unstated keystone of their local marketing plan. Back in those halcyon days of the late sixties, the most remarkable things were available in the bazaar, at competitive prices dictated only by the invisible hand of classical capitalist theory, not forgetting the quantifiable transportation and risk factors. Every currency in the world was available, at exchange rates that bore little relation to the fantasies of the *War Game Journal*. Disque Bleu cigarettes cost less than they did even in Paris, where the government took its cut as profits rather than taxes. You could find Pentax cameras and pre-war Lee Enfield rifles, traditional carpets and workmanlike scimitars, elaborately embroidered waistcoats in vibrant colors with tiny mirrors sewn into them and (it was widely rumored, having been on the front page of the London *Daily Excess*) eighteen-year-old hippie chicks who'd been kidnapped and sold into white slavery for a taste of the awful potions of the orient.

The tales of women (and men!) who had suffered fates worse than death (and worse, death!) were the nub of the local tourist-based distribution opportunity for organic and/or manufactured relaxants and stimulants. Let's face it, the bazaar was exotic and fascinating but it was also, if you had a brain in your head, scary. Freaks who stuck around got used to it, or at least learned how to cope, but the smart ones never forgot just how weird it really was.

The simple code of the Afghan male was: Don't fuck with me. Since this was assumed to be reciprocal, a mutual understanding between men was not hard to maintain. Step out of line, though — just

give a hint of something that could be construed as disrespectful — and the polite if taciturn offers of tea and a puff at the hookah disappeared fast. Even in the big city, where not everyone carried a gun at all times, a knife was as much a part of the costume as the flat Afghani turban, and it was large and sharp and expertly handled.

Western women had to have a lot of nerve to wander around on their own. Being chattels, they were fairly safe with their putative husbands (male pride was assumed to extend to protecting the wife and even if these European kids were as feeble as they looked, who knew what they were packing) and more or less fair game without them (male pride also extended to the challenge of conquest, although shameless infidels were presumably easy pickings). In this, Afghanistan was more direct and arguably more honest than Britain, but not so fundamentally different. It was a man's man's man's world, in the hippie subculture as in the dominant paradigm, and the good-looking old lady, epitomized by Marianne Faithfull [*sic*], was as much of a trophy as the businessman's Barbie, and often as fucked over, fucked up and generally ignored (except for fucking and even then).

If a woman had the temerity not to buy into the game, to show a quiet pride and hide fear, she stood a chance of establishing herself in a special category — Amazon, perhaps — that opened interesting possibilities, but it was a hard row to hoe in London, and potentially deadly in Kabul. Most split for India pretty quick. To get there, you admittedly had to get through Pakistan, where the hassles were at least as numerous if less lethal; in the considered opinion of one experienced woman traveler, “Lahore is the armpit of the world.” Once you made it through, however, you found that

Hindu women's lives were vastly more accessible. The Muslim women of Afghanistan were practically invisible to the outsider, the chadoor an impenetrable black hole within which personality disappeared.

The frisson of danger that never quite left the visitor's awareness was attractive — controlled fear can even be a turn-on, as more than one woman silently stretching a relationship to get her through the rest of the Muslim countries could attest — and added immensely to the entertainment value of Kabul as a tourist destination, but it was a tedious accompaniment to routine transactions like scoring. Besides, good authority (the U.S. embassy) had it that drugs were illegal and even though better authority (the street) was certain that the weasel king was personally in charge of the hashish industry, not to mention the odd numbered bank account in Zurich, absolutely nobody wanted to get busted.

Enter Blackie and Whitey, your friendly middlemen. They were as safe and simple to deal with as the neighborhood Tupperware hostess, and much lower-pressure salespeople. Hell, they gave away as much as they collected for and the thoroughness of their testing procedures ensured a well-satisfied clientele. In fact, their customers were generally so completely zonked that they never noticed the essential illogic of this charitable activity disguised as a commercial venture. Not that they had anything to complain about, and the few economics majors and budding capitalists who started to apply practical dentistry to the gift horse in front of them soon concluded that they were just too stoned to understand and why on earth not.

After all, the operation evidently ran on the interesting principle, ‘Stay high, sell low’.

4

They can drop all the atom bombs they like for all I care : I'll never call it war, and wear a soldier's uniform, because I'm in a different sort of war, that they think is child's play. The war they think is war is suicide, and those that go and get killed in war should be put in clink for attempted suicide because that's the feeling in blokes' minds when they rush to join up or let themselves be called up.

Alan Sillitoe,
*The Loneliness of the
Long-Distance Runner*, 1959

BACK IN THE HEYDAY of Tricky Dick and Spiro, Annie and everyone she knew lived their lives at the edge of society. The straight world called them crazy and the feeling was surely mutual. Faced with the multiplying insanities of Selma, Watts, My Lai, Kent State ... what could the young folks do but listen to a rock'n'roll band?

Life did get very weird, for a while back there, and the freaks got ripped out of their skulls. Getting by, high and strange.

Not again, she hoped, wasn't once enough? Was it all coming back? Heaven preserve us, that'd be a scary thought.

In the time between Watergate and Desert Shield, Annie tried, they all did, to reach an accommodation with the outside world. Getting high gradually dissolved into just getting by. Dope stopped being important, and who the hell felt strange anymore?

Not Annie. As the nineties began, she was working as a physical therapist and, as far as she could tell, blending right in. She still didn't buy the hierarchical crap that went along with the sale of medical services in her country, but that was normal — most of the other workers in the industry didn't either. And, as in any job, she mostly talked to her co-workers, not her customers and certainly not the big boss, whoever that was. Some group of doctors, she presumed, or other rich people. It made no difference to her.

The PTs, like the X-Ray technicians, the nurses, and all the other subgroups in hospital society,

were not a bunch of clones. It was a matter of scale, of course. From far enough away, or from microscopically close, they were all essentially identical carbon-based life forms, but that's not the human experience. When you looked at them as people, no two seemed to be quite the same. They defined themselves by the choices they made, and Annie had come to think of the selections as parts of a multiple-choice list, a social smorgasbord, itself the local variant of some greater grouping. For example:

CATEGORY	CHOICES			
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
<i>Household</i>	nuclear family	couple	house-mates	other
<i>Partner</i>	opposite sex	same sex	either sex	other
<i>Hair color</i>	blonde	brown	black	other
<i>Diet</i>	omnivore	no red meat	no flesh or fowl	other
<i>Vacation</i>	Disneyland	Yosemite	Baja	other

And so on. Pick all (d)'s and you'd be pretty unusual; but not much odder nowadays than a straight-(a), generically known as the Ozzie & Harriet. Annie saw herself as a *b-a-b-c-d*... and reckoned she was normal. She liked to work rather less than most, and not many others thought that it was worth quitting a job in order to spend the winter in Thailand, but that just made her kind of

interesting. Her choices generally fell within current definitions of acceptable behavior, which are rather more elastic than once they were.

She knew very well that the men who signed the checks and put their names on the invoices set up the system and profited from it. And that part of their trip was to convince themselves that they were normal. More precisely, that everyone else either was or wanted to be like them. No one else seemed to be taken in, which put the bosses in the minority and made them the strange ones, right?

The customers probably assumed that anyone in uniform was a fully paid up supporter of the régime. That didn't necessarily mean they approved — they didn't have anywhere else to go. Anyway, there wasn't much time to chat and most of them were too sick and self-absorbed to get into political discussions, unless they were about health insurance.

It's just the way it is, the way Annie saw it. It's a dumb old system if you take it at face value but no one does; so, like everyone else, you find a way of working around it, or through it, or under it like some tropical weed that hides under the concrete until it can work its way through the cracks and force them apart and bring the building down and dance over it in flowers.

Let's face it, Annie was an old hippie and proud of it.

She may not have looked like it (oh yes she did) but then she never did (oh yes she did). This was a woman who refused to do without eye shadow, even when living in the Haight in its heyday. "I'm doing my own thing and I like eye-liner," she said, foiling her hippie critics with a call to the higher dogma of self-expression. Besides, face-painting was fun and Keef Richards was getting into kohl ... but that was a long time ago.

A couple of decades later, Annie had, according your point of view, sold out (cheap?), bought in (dear?), found her place, lost her way, given up, hunkered down, gone to sleep, woken up, forgotten the question or found the answer.

Interpret it as you will, she wasn't fighting her surroundings so much anymore. Sure, to some extent she'd gone along to get along but, hey, it had worked both ways. Hadn't it? She might not like

the way a lot of things were around her, exactly, but they were better than they used to be. She remembered people laughing at her and calling her a screwy eco-freak as she flattened her cans and separated her bottles in the early days of volunteer recycling; now, when she volunteered to help with the local (20th anniversary!) Earth Day celebration, everyone thought it was a good idea except a couple of idiots on the radio — she never actually met anyone who said they were anti-environmentalist. That's progress, right? We used to be the cranks and now they are.

The planet might be collapsing but at least the country was at peace. The Cold War was over and if the superpatriots wanted to say we won, well it was sort of true so let them have their fun. Just so's we weren't doing any fighting. The Vietnam War was long gone and no one would dare do anything that crazy again. Would they? If anyone tried, everyone would just stop them. Wouldn't they? Wouldn't they?

It didn't work out that way.

During the build-up to the Gulf War, in October 1990, she found the precisely right peace-symbol brooch in Macy's. It was silver, about an inch and a half around, with the angled lines not squished too close together and not splayed too wide apart, solid enough but not clunky, just the exact thing. She wore it on her uniform the next day, kind of nervous and ready to justify it. She would talk to anyone about war and how idiotic it was, patients, doctors, anyone. Really she kind of wanted someone to object, so she could stand up for her beliefs but her principles wouldn't let her force her views on anyone, so they'd have to complain first.

No one actually told her to take it off. They just put on their stars-and-stripes lapel pins and smiled, or in some cases glared.

Uh-oh.

Strange? Her? Again?

Annie picked up on this sense of distinction and figured out how to ride with it. She could have decided to bury herself a little deeper, to encourage the sense of identity she wanted to feel, even with the straightest of her co-workers; she could have flung her differences in their faces and pursued pol-

itics in the workplace, at some risk of reprimand or worse. Characteristically, she considered and compromised. It was one thing to take risks, quite another to do so blindly. She did, however, refuse

to deny her self, and in so doing began again the great task of defining and discovering and celebrating the truth of who she was.

Not strange, but a stranger at home.

5

There's nothing at the end of the rainbow
There's nothing to grow up for any more

Richard Thompson,
"The End of the Rainbow," Richard and Linda
Thompson, *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight*, 1974

NOTHING ABOUT BLACKIE AND WHITEY made much sense at first glance. Both of them, by their accents, were clearly Geordies ("Where the Animals came from, before Eric Burdon got soft," they explained to Southerners, Americans and anyone else unfamiliar with the magical properties of Newcastle Brown Ale) but not much more was obvious.

Blackie, for a start, was white. That is, pinkish. He had the ruddy complexion, deep freckles and auburn hair that is often associated with folks north of the border, where the men are tough enough to wear knee-length skirts and the women smart enough not to. He was lumbered with the handle Winston Leonard Spencer Black by a remote and elderly father who seemed more choked that the old warmonger had been flung out of the office he'd never been elected to than that his wife of nearly a quarter of a century had died in childbirth, leaving him with an afterthought to go with three teenagers. The aunt who took over the household had enough smarts to preserve the boy from the torment of being a 'Winnie' and everywhere north of Leeds he was known as 'Len,' which might at least have been after the immortal Hutton. When he reinvented himself in college, he stuck to the simple variant of his last name and eventually began to dress to match.

Whitey, by contrast, was not black, although he claimed to be half Cherokee on his father's side. His mother Mandy insisted, with impressive detail, that her fiancé had died over Dresden, during the most obscene bombing raid before the flight of the *Enola Gay*. Her cattier neighbors wondered how she could be so sure, since allied losses surely weren't high enough to cover all the candidates, but most of them went along with the posthumous engagement "for the child's sake." When the babe was born, his

genes obviously supported the young mum's story but the general reaction was shock rather than relief. "It's a bloody papoose," one cynic who learned his racism at the movies put it, and the community attitude was fixed.

Mandy soon found her boy a step-dad, who was free enough with his fists to silence anyone who insulted the kid, which might have been more useful had he not relied upon the same technique to teach the lad "our ways." Not surprisingly, the boy preferred the way of the pink Cadillac. When Elvis betrayed the world he had created by going into the army, the young loner dived into the nascent blues scene. There his high cheekbones, smooth skin, straight black hair and inscrutably indeterminate age made him instantly memorable. Unfortunately even the cops managed to figure out who he was, which led in fairly short order to a stint in Borstal, being thrown out of the house, and escape to the smoke a little ahead of the pack, just in time to catch Alexis Korner at the Marquee and the six-man Stones in Richmond.

His timing was fabulous.

Whitey turned seventeen the month before four Scouse wiseacres with cool boots and pouffy suits released their first single. In the next two years, the scene exploded. The Stones made it, and then — *pace* Keef and Brian — the really hip bands started to get signed. Bowing to the inevitable, the record companies declared that street credibility was in and Fabulous magazine began to feature such uncompromising groups and unlikely teen idols as The Animals (who were), Them (quite) and even The Pretty Things (who weren't).

In this context, a six-foot Apache who had toured with Slim Harpo (well, a five-eleven half-Cherokee who'd heard of him) could become a professional bass player. His agent called him Running

Bear after the old Johnny Preston hit and used his picture and phony bio (but not his limited musical talents) on three dodgy singles and one appalling album. Out of this, he got a year's worth of hash, several enthusiastic screwings, a number of useful contacts and a lasting moniker, courtesy of Sonny Boy Williamson. He was introduced to the old bluesman back stage at *Ready, Steady, Go!* one afternoon when the bullshit was flying even more copiously than usual and the television asslickers had been drowning the great man in Scotch. Sonny Boy glared at this Limey kid in a flowered shirt who'd been introduced as an Apache. "Look like Whitey to me," he growled, and it stuck.

Blackie at the time was trying to get himself thrown out of the London School of Economics. This was harder than you might think, since the invariable rule among English universities was that the more exclusive the institution the more infallible were the admission procedures — after all, if you're grooming the leaders of a hierarchical social system, you can't have them thinking that luck played any part in their selection — and the LSE certainly thought it was pretty hot shit. So did the New Left neo-Marxists who were beginning to dominate the student body. They were thrilled to welcome a rough diamond from the north, with the authentic working-class donkey jacket and jeans, the taste for an ale or ten after a Saturday afternoon on the terraces and the fock-you way of talking. Most of them did not want to hear that the accent was only slightly more authentic than Mick Jagger's cockney and the clothes were a pure reaction to a bourgeois background. (The beer and football, however, were for real.) Len Black had spent nearly two decades buttoning his lip and despising his surroundings; the habit was becoming hard to break.

The astute reader (pay attention at the back there) will already have divined the catalytic agent that brought these two outcasts together. Ale was

part of it, and football too, but what connected them first was Afghani black at ten quid an ounce. Whitey had access and Blackie had a little cash. This was in the days when three and a tanner would get you a couple of pints, two in the back stalls and cod 'n' chips on the way home ... not exactly, but ten pounds was a week's wages for a lot of crummy jobs. The quid deal, at about twenty to the ounce, was the most common unit for transactions.

The connection didn't start out primarily as a business. Stoners were a rather exclusive sub-group in the days before Dylan turned on the Beatles, who proselytized the world with the help of an enthusiastic volunteer advertising campaign centered on San Francisco. Jazz musicians, poets and beatniks manqués were the main users. Mods and rockers alike stuck at first to uppers, such as the famous Purple Hearts, the better either to dance the night away or to have a punch-up on the beach, which after all was why the army popularized amphetamines in the first place. The politicians were mostly puritans, shocked at the notion that illegal smiles were breaking out all over. The mid-sixties dopers were alienated, apathetic, hedonistic, self-involved and soporific, knew it and didn't give a flying fuck. It was a great relief for all of them to find each other. At last there was someone who understood.

As it happened, there were soon rather a lot of people who seemed to understand, including a goodly proportion of the undergraduates at every major campus. Blackie was introduced to dope by one of the few people he met to hold Karl Marx and Adam Smith in equal contempt, who taught him to score from this half-breed half-musician in Notting Hill. When his patron graduated (to the Atlas mountains of southern Morocco), Blackie began to do other people favors, and Whitey asked him not to bring too many of them around.

Fair enough, figured Blackie, who at least knew how to count. Might as well pick up a commission.

6

The north side of my town faced east and the east was facing south

Pete Townshend,
The 'oo, "Substitute," 1966

SANTA CRUZ IN 1990 WAS WIDELY BELIEVED to be a state of mind, which was quite a shock to those residents who didn't share it. The progressive majority may not have been an oxymoron but it wasn't overwhelming either. The silent minority lived and had its representatives on the City Council; they did not understand quite how much of their frustration was shared by the leftist politicians they loved to attack.

It was a classic confusion between up wing and down wing — both left and right were likely to libel the city's eponymous atmosphere as flaky. The difference was that the left thought the flakes agreed with them and just weren't willing to do anything and the right thought the left *were* the flakes and all too willing to act. The right could (and loudly would) complain that Santa Cruz was the first city in the world to propose becoming a nuclear-free zone, back in the '70s, while the left moaned (and grumbled and kvetched) that no one ever got around to doing anything about it.* Hey, the place was laid-back, alright?

The place was also diverse. It may have routinely voted Democratic (and in primaries, as liberal as possible) but the local paper, fondly known to many of its readers as the *Senile*, had in 1990 reached its 133rd year without ever endorsing a Democratic candidate for President. The conservatives griped about the homeless, the homeless griped about the progressives, the progressives griped about each other and everyone stood shoulder to shoulder in agreement that they lived in the most wonderful place in the universe.

The climate was, and remains (doubtless thanks to the ban on local nukes), temperate. The annual heat wave falls conveniently after Labor Day, when tourism is beginning to drop off and the

locals have a sporting chance at parking within jogging distance of the beach. Every decade or so it freezes hard enough to test the plumbing and possibly dust the beaches white at dawn. To keep everyone on their toes, mother nature sends in a catastrophe once a generation or so, in the form of fires, storms, floods or quakes. This has been going on at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, when the modern community began to grow, and with luck the effect is one of pruning. The flood of '55, for example, led to the downtown Pacific Garden Mall and its vivid street scene, which was getting a little tatty by the time it fell apart under the quake of '89. Of course it hurt at the time, but do rose bushes like to be cut back?

Some liked to blame the University of California campus that was founded in '65 for the town's tangential relationship to reality as defined in the rest of the Untied States of 'Merka, but that was partly prejudice. Certainly the City on the Hill helped things along but there must have been something in the air already. It wasn't the students, or even the professors, who ensured that this Left Coast burgh faced South; East Cliff Drive not only bordered the Pacific, it was even slightly north of West Cliff. To isolate this idiosyncratic geography, the great eternal plan raised mountains to the north and east and covered them with redwoods. This made it harder for tourists to come in, which business folk regretted, and easier to hold off the sprawling growth of Silicon Valley in the '70s and '80s, which all right-thinking people sought to avoid. If San José ever finally overwhelms Los Gatos, the citizenry of Santa Cruz will be found at the summit, laying down each other's comfort to keep the affluent hordes at bay.

Heaven knows what the eighteenth-century inhabitants thought of the place, since hell surely holds the Catholics who built the Mission in 1791 and proceeded to treat the indigenous population

*In 1992, the municipality did finally become the one hundred and ninety-first nuclear-free city.

as vermin. The market town that developed served north county agriculture over the next century, as Watsonville still serves the south, and achieved its next breakthrough as a weekend retreat for the increasingly prosperous masses of the city of San Francisco, a few hours by train to the north. By 1913 the municipal wharf and the Boardwalk were built and the first generation of pleasure seekers were aboard. The newspaper wars of the '30s helped popularize summer cabins in the redwoods up the San Lorenzo Valley, a few miles inland, as the *San Francisco Examiner* gave them away in contests. Explorers ventured to Hawaii and brought back longboards — ignorant blonds from southern California contest the claim but Santa Cruz is the original Surf City — which exploded in popularity in the '40s when the revered O'Neill invented the wetsuit and set up a store to finance his surfing jones. Meanwhile more of the city folks began to choose the seaside to loiter in through their declining years and part of the city began to doze.

It was in the Santa Cruz mountains that Garcia lost a finger fooling with an ax. A little later, his band the Warlocks, soon to Gratefully Die, supplied the soundtrack for the first of Kesey's Acid Tests, held in Santa Cruz county, just outside Soquel. (Ah, what Annie would have given to have known of *that* ahead of time!) And when the Haight got too heavy, the hippie diaspora (and yes, Annie was part of those muddled masses yearning to get it together in the country) sent its contingent south. Marin and Humboldt deservedly took pride of place but the smallholders of Santa Cruz brought their share of weed to market (and no, not Annie, a consumer rather than an entrepreneur).

By the early '70s this disparate conglomeration of surfers and pensioners, students and ex-hippie craftspeople, united only by their relatively relaxed approach to the necessities of life — if you want intensity, head north or south or east, young folk, there ain't enough here — was feeling the pressure of population growth. As Colorado discovered, and the Keys and every other magical spot, everyone wants to be the last one in. The old money, as usual, wanted to milk the opportunity for all it was worth, on the standard theory that what's good for business is good for the town, meaning of course

the money. When the philistines tried to build a convention center on the headland overlooking the wharf, they provoked a reaction that actually overturned the city's political structure. Slow growth became the slogan of the day.

Social structures, stores and services naturally began to flourish in counterpoint. Organic food stores sprouted like weeds, put down roots and eventually turned into laid-back supermarkets. Therapists of every hue felt the space was right to practice and some of them even got good. The Resource Center for Nonviolence grew to gladden the hearts of Gandhians everywhere and act as lightning rod for an ever-changing cast of pissed-off opponents. In its own way, less funded and more focused, so eventually did the Lesbian and Gay (and later, after a screaming fight, Bisexual) Community Center. Seven independent movie screens competed with six in the city limits alone that were owned by the majors. Trad culture was represented every year by Shakespeare, Tandy Beal and the Cabrillo Music Festival, pop by the bands at the Catalyst and the free-floating pickup basketball game behind the Loudon Nelson Community Center. This last was about the only place in town that was not apparently lily-white, aside from the Spanish-speaking ghetto in the shadow of the boardwalk.

And then there was the Booktent. Bookshop Santa Cruz was the soul of the town, a meeting place and landmark, with its rocking horse, its store cat and its floating staff of part-time artists and full-time bibliophiles. When the building fell in the earthquake, so many volunteers turned up to help salvage the stock and move it into the temporary pavilion that would hold the store for the next three years that people were being turned away by eight in the morning.

Even one per cent per annum does accumulate, however, and as the '80s moved into their eleventh year and the city had to figure out how to rebuild one more time, the pro-capitalist forces were trying to regroup. The spaces around and within the city were gradually being filled and a conflict loomed on the Greenbelt that had been voted in, but not bought, years before. Much of the tax base had collapsed (no pun), the Feds were too tightfisted to

pay for rebuilding (no surprise), and the business interests were pushing again for growth at all costs (no shit). They slammed their opponents as anti-business, as socialist, as leftist, and as usual they missed the point. Since they valued and fought to preserve their own economic power, they automatically tagged anything they disliked as 'bad for business' and put that forward as an unassailable argument. Wrong, twice.

What cranked the engines of the painted and pierced, leather and cotton, shaved and shaggy, artsy-fartsy peacenik dammit *different* mob that confronted the self-righteous in and out of the council chamber were issues of a whole other nature. They wanted a civilian police review commission, as if it wasn't obvious that the cops were there to protect decent citizens and their property by any means necessary and they were doing a damned good job of it. They wanted to tell our President who art in Washington how he should conduct his foreign policy, which was nothing to do with the business of our town. They wanted to stop huge chain stores from expanding into residential neighborhoods where there was good money to be made, just because it would be mildly inconvenient

to some of the folks who had to live there. Worst of all, they wanted some kind of anti-discrimination law that would make every business in town hire only fat junkies with green hair and pierced noses, thereby alienating ordinary people, among whom for some obscure reason were counted anorexic alcoholics with blue rinses and pierced ears. My mutilation is always better than yours.

A good Marxist who called for confiscatory taxes and socialized housing, now there was an enemy with issues the conservatives could understand and fight, and expect the same in return. This kooky stuff about inalienable rights, it was all too mushy to take seriously. What did they think the point was, the pursuit of happiness?

Oh come on, don't be so literal minded.

Really, that's absurd.

Silly.

But that was what put the town on the national, sometimes even the global, map.

What made Santa Cruz so, well, *Santa Cruz*, was the insistence of a goodly portion of the residents on the value of serious folly and the over-riding importance of the personal.

Stay cool, dude.

7

μηδεν αγαν

Nothing to excess

Inscribed at the Temple of
Apollo in Delphi, sometime before
the middle of the first millennium B.C.E.

ANNIE HAD NEVER been much of an activist. Not to the outside world, anyway. She was not someone whose first fine furious reaction to injustice was to rush in and fix it. She was a thinker who by nature would rather focus on the mote in her own eye than start hacking away at the beam in someone else's. Smart enough to graduate (psych major, what else?) without endangering either her eyesight or too many forests by over-indulgence in the literature, she retained enough respect for rationality to prefer not to argue without facts, and enough distaste for research to leave her bigger on concepts than details. If needs must, she had the ability — she breezed through her physical therapy qualifications with no more than the usual abnormal strain — she just didn't like to use it. Good for them, she'd say when she saw people leafleting for some cause she liked, I'm glad someone's doing it.

She wasn't just biased against books; TV was worse, in fact banned from the house, and radio meant music. She was never seen reading a newspaper (looking up movie times doesn't count) and browsed magazines only in waiting rooms, where she rarely spent much time since she was chronically unpunctual. To a standard modern American information junkie, she seemed completely isolated. She developed a social skill at masking her almost total ignorance of the minutiae of gossip. Plenty of people are ignorant of sports heroes, or elected officials, or soap opera starlets, or distinguished poets; even those who are up on all such matters in one country are likely to be completely lost in another. Why did they get this Johnny Carson geezer to host the Oscars instead of someone famous, went the world-wide cry back when. Who? would say the kids in a scant decade. Exactly, said Annie, why bother noticing them at all? The global superstars you couldn't miss — as of 1990, the

blessed Marley, Madonna, Arnold, Gorby, Bush ex officio, perhaps one or two more, with a few holdover has-beens like Reagan and Jagger — and the rest you didn't need. You could always imply that any given topic was a blind spot.

Annie got her information through the oral tradition. That is, her boyfriend told her things and she remembered them. This was a time-tested pick-up method, and she was not averse to using it when appropriate, but it translated usefully into longer-term relationships. Serial monogamy was her game of choice and the incumbent was Brendan, who was the kind of person who avoided thinking by collecting data. Perfect.

Brendan was a genial introvert, with a strong bent to concealing his true emotions from the entire universe, including that part of it occupied by his self. As his youth faded into adulthood, he had invested a few years in frivolous but concentrated drug use, tequila sunrises and lines of coke being his preference, with multiple minors in god knows what if she was keeping score; he claimed to have lost track but was pretty sure he'd tried it all. He usually kept quiet about those days, less out of shame than because he didn't fit the contemporary model of dependency. True, he avoided both hard liquor and cocaine, as well as smack and cigarettes, but he hadn't found himself in Jesus and he still used beer, wine and grass of an evening, especially on weekends. Basically, he said, he'd gotten bored with getting wasted but he'd nothing against putting a buzz on from time to time.

Less intellectual and more objective observers might think he had lucked out in reconnecting with a college friend who had set up an art program for kids and wanted someone to put together a magazine of children's writing. This opportunity came up exactly when Brendan was ready for a change

and who's to say it didn't save him from getting serious about heroin. With his intensity, he'd have been gone by now. In the event, he was harnessed and focused, and he often loved his work, which he did with great care and responsibility. It put him in touch with the wonders of childhood almost completely untainted by tears and tantrums. Fine by Annie, who'd long decided against adding to global overpopulation.

If Brendan was Minister of Information for the pair of them, Annie was Social Director and as such scoured the *Good Times*, the local weekly freebie, every Thursday night for ideas. If she left it to him, nothing would be planned more than ten minutes ahead and that never worked. She liked the *idea* of spontaneous revelry but the reality too often included a mind-numbing stasis of indecision and/or dirty hair and inappropriate clothes. A modicum of staff work was indicated.

"Hey, this looks kinda interesting," she called out. Brendan looked less than fascinated but he lowered his book. "Mario Savio's gonna be on campus."

"Who?"

"You remember him, the guy from *Berkeley in the Sixties*."

That is, Berkeley, the city and especially the campus of the University of California, in the decade leading up to about 1973, which was the subject of a recent documentary. They'd gone to see it out of a sense of nostalgia and loyalty, and to see if they or any of their friends were in it, which they probably were, but only as distant extras in DayGlo costume in the latter part. None were identifiable for certain.

"Huh. What's he doing now?" Data, give him data or give him life.

"What do you think?"

"Talking about *Berkeley* ..."

The natural hypothesis, given modern media techniques.

"Yeah, they've got a whole panel discussion, tomorrow night, a whole bunch of people who were in the movie, Bettina Aptheker, Frank Bardacke, they were in it, right?"

"Sure thing. Let me see."

It's a guy thing. At least it was with those two: Significant facts were expected to go into the male via the eyes and into the female via the ears. She passed over the paper without wasting a thought on it.

"Well, that looks interesting," he proclaimed as if it were an inspiration. "You wanna go?"

8

Opium is the opium of the masses.

Punch cartoon,
late 1960s, parodying the crack
Karl Marx made in 1844 about religion

BLACKIE AND WHITEY gradually became friends. They didn't talk about it, to each other or anyone else, but if they had they might have pointed out their shared background up north and their mutual tastes in music, sports and intoxicants. They wouldn't have copped to the similarities in their screwed-up families. The accepted caricatures were that one had a loving mother but no money and the other had been comfortably off but motherless, while an equally important reality was that both had been horrendously lonely and terrorized by the men who ruled their households, albeit in very different ways. The most important things they had in common were too private to mention.

Especially the fact that sex was raising its gorgeous head. Homosexual activity between consenting adult men was legalized in Britain in the mid-sixties, after a century of state repression (which women had not suffered, since Queen [*sic*] Victoria refused to believe that ladies would do such a thing and therefore that it need be prohibited; she provoked a constitutional crisis by refusing to sign the bill until the reference to females was removed) but the general attitude was, at best, one of tolerance to the unfortunate. The burgeoning counter-culture wasn't much of an exception.

Whitey had fucked a number of older guys for quick cash, but then economic necessities had led him down a lot of dark alleys (so to speak); he'd also taken full advantage of the scrubbers who came as perks of the music biz. Blackie's sexual experience was limited to frustrating fumbles and the occasional feel with appropriate females his father knew, a pair of joyless back-seat couplings, and a short and surprisingly unsatisfactory relationship with one of his fellow students whose principal result had been to establish his credentials as one of the lads since he'd stayed all night. Either of them would have force-fed you a knuckle sandwich if you tried to call them queer.

They weren't, of course, they were bi and closeted so deep they thought everyone hung around with their noses in the overcoats. It took two years and an accident of business before they acknowledged what any self-respecting faggot could have told them a month after they met. As business boomed in the exciting times leading up to what some copywriter called the Summer of Love (Owsley should have trademarked the term), they evolved to dealing in weights — buying, and later selling, by the pound — and then keys, and then occasionally serious quantity, which brought them into closer contact with the original exporters. One of the Afghans visited London and, when the business was concluded, made a pass at Whitey, who accepted as a professional courtesy and later admitted he'd enjoyed it, as Blackie admitted he was jealous. Several long, fat joints, some discussion and a lot of mostly companionable not-talking later, they took each other to bed for the first time. They both had women after that, and occasionally men, but they accepted that their own partnership was primary. This was still in the days before Gay Lib, though; they kept it ambiguous. 'None of your business' was the watchword, which conveniently meant they didn't have to think about it.

Privacy, moreover, went hand in hand with secrecy, which they did have to keep in mind. Those were the days when the legend who inspired *Private Eye's* archetype Knacker of the Yard roamed the land in search of fame and promotion by way of hauling in pop stars. The English fuzz, as Keef later complained, wouldn't stay bought, which may have had something to do with their ill-deserved reputation for honesty. They cultivated the motto "if you want to know the time, ask a policeman" as an indicator of how safe you were with the British bobby and carefully concealed the phrase's origin in the Victorian copper's habit of rolling drunks for their watches to supplement his meager income. The

Vice Squad had a series of cozy arrangements with the Soho pros, disrupted by occasional forays from upper management but generally satisfactory to all parties. This new milieu of semi-professional dope dealing, on the other hand, was both a menace and an opportunity. There were no substantial pay-offs to be had from part-timers not doing much more than covering their own consumption, but there were headlines and commendations for the taking if you collared them.

Acid was legal as the game got going, and so in effect was smack, which any doctor could prescribe and many did. Coke was in one of its periodic declines — its usage peaked in the 1890s, the 1920s and the 1980s — although diet pills and other uppers were distributed, often legally, widely enough that everyone knew what the Stones meant by ‘Mother’s Little Helper.’ The big crackdown, then, was on the least dangerous of all the psychotropic substances, poor old cannabis. Grass was not generally available, since it was so much more efficient to transport the less voluminous pressed resin, this being in the days before the California scientists devoted their attention to the generation of modern sinsemilla. This led to the biggest health risk in smoking, other than those attendant upon incarceration (psychological trauma, beatings, rape, impoverishment, vitamin deficiencies and so on; Keef again: “I don’t have a problem with drugs, I have a problem with policemen”), namely nicotine addiction, since Britons commonly mixed their hash with tobacco to make it easier to smoke. Cigarettes, however, were not yet considered a social problem.

Whitey’s time as an aspiring pop star couldn’t long survive the new television bias against miming (later revived under the fancier label lip-synching), especially when it was combined with a prejudice in favor of technical ability that lasted a good ten years. He pulled in the occasional gig as a model, flogged the comps he conned out of record companies and anything else he could quietly liberate, and took the odd job as a roadie, which was a bit too much like work for his taste, but soon realized that dealing was his true calling.

Blackie staggered through all three years of his economics course, motivated by the monthly bank

drafts from his septuagenarian sire, now clearly more dotty than doting, whose sense of duty combined with his offspring’s sense of convenience to overcome enough of their mutual antipathy to avoid severing relations completely. The brief ritual visits that punctuated each of the three annual university vacations were characterized by communal bouts of almost silent drunkenness. The older heirs, thirty-five going on dead, clearly regarded the afterthought as an unfortunate dilution of their expectations. When the old bastard finally croaked, they bought young Len out with alacrity. The funeral coincided with finals but he didn’t bother explaining to his siblings so the last he heard from them was a stiff letter and modest check from the solicitor. It was an obvious rip-off but worth it to keep them off his back. “Cheap at half the price,” he explained quizzically.

A few years later, Blackie might have turned his inheritance into part of the down payment on a new Rolls for Bhagwan, and who’s to say everyone wouldn’t have been better off, but in the legendary summer of ’67 there were career opportunities aplenty servicing the hippie market, or more precisely the legions who had read about Haight-Ashbury in the influential series in the *Evening Standard* and been inspired to turn on and tune in as long as they didn’t really have to drop out. Given the capital to take care of the cash-flow crises that are endemic to start-ups, even in the labor-intensive service sector, how could the partnership pass up the chance to expand?

Street-level distributors were usually part-timers using accidental contacts to help out their mates, and most of them were happy to stay that way; there was nothing like a dealing bust to bugger up your chances of a straight career. Out of that came the legend of the amateur who just happened to stick a couple of keys in his pocket on the way home from his holidays in Lebanon or wherever and got his friends off as a public service. Sure. And the Avon Lady had a little cosmetics factory in her backyard.

Getting high was a social statement, maybe even a political one, and it certainly was fun, especially if you were into music (and those were the days when the music was important), but supply

was a business matter, baby. This was rock'n'roll — striking it rich was part of the point. Style did count, which used to confuse the accountants and the New Left, neither of whom understood Lennon's psychedelic Rolls Royce. Hard-faced men in dark suits with bulges under the armpit were exploitative pigs, no matter what their merchandise, while beautiful people in Paisley jackets were underground heroes, no matter what their profits. Life ain't fair, signor. You gotta understand your customers.

Whitey set up the meet, and Blackie cut the deal. Essentially, they stuck to the youth market, negotiated their own agreements with importers from an approved roster and paid a franchise fee that guaranteed non-interference from the multinationals and provided some limited insurance against hassles from the constabulary. There were also optional provisions for legitimizing the

income (what, after Watergate, everyone would call laundering) but not for vacation pay or pension plans. For those, individual initiative was recommended.

Any doubts they had about turning pro were swept aside in the rush of secret stardom. They knew just how hip they were and anyone who didn't know didn't count and who cared. The legal alternatives all seemed to involve selling or making shoddy crap that no one needed and everyone had to be bribed to want with visions of impossible dystopias they were supposed to desire. Dealing dope involved giving people what they wanted and seemed to need. Compared to the conventional alternative, as J. P. Donleavy remarked in a somewhat different context, it was so much less of a sin

and
fun
too.

9

Like leaves on trees, the race of man is found,
Now green in youth, now withering on the ground;
Another race the following spring supplies;
They fall successive, and successive rise :
So generations in their course decay;
So flourish these, when those are pass'd away.

Homer, *Iliad*, ca 750 B.C.E.,
translated* by Alexander Pope, 1716

DEFLYING PRECEDENT, Annie and Brendan reached the campus lecture hall early, if hungry. They had planned to grab a bite at the Whole Earth but thought they should check out where they were heading first and were rather shocked to discover the place was almost full.

“This bodes well,” mused Brendan, “Are you starving?”

“I ate lunch,” pointed out Annie. “I think we should get seats.”

“Yeah.”

“We could go to Joze afterwards.”

“OK, but I’m half-famished already. How ’bout you grab a couple of seats while I get something to tide me over? You want anything?”

“No, go ahead, I’ll be up there,” agreed Annie, pointing three-quarters of the way up the center block.

Serendipity. Had Brendan not been hungry, Annie would not have had the next twenty minutes or so on her own and would surely have experienced them, and the hour that followed, differently. Set and setting would not have been the same, nor therefore would have been the psychic, and hence the physical, consequences. Perhaps some other concatenation of coincidences would have provoked a parallel track of action, reaction and building momentum — could the author have found that thread? — or perhaps the lines would have curved apart, until hidden by the shade of other mountains they faded into indistinct memories of possibilities lost, blurred by other geographies found.

Like it or not, and on some elusive principle she would have said not, Annie had been coupled. Not sutured together at the hip, no longer obsessed by passion, but generally taken as two. Work was different — work was not life and hardly real, but that’s a different tale to tell — but away from that, what she did she did as part of a pair, including to be sure what she did alone, because that she did not least to maintain her individuality within the duo. She reacted with and against but forever around the fact that she and Brendan were living in tandem.

Naturally she thought about it. That was exactly the kind of thing she did think about, sometimes with an honesty so brutal it deceived, to reach a kind of truth stripped so bare of varnish and shaping qualifications that eventually it lost its meaning and turned into falsehood.

She was afraid, she was comfortable, she was bored ... but these were symptoms, partial realities at best. She was middle-aged and scared and no longer attractive to men ... and these were rationalizations and partial lies at least. Sometimes she hoped for an *affaire*, a blast of intensity to boost her sense of power and shock herself out of the rut, even a grand romance to change her life (but let’s make sure Brendan’s away for a week or two, at first, to keep the options open), but the logistics were hard to handle and there was something crass about the self-image involved in back-door rambles at her age. There it was again. Was forty-three really so ancient?

Looking around as the seats filled, she calculated with routine horror that the students were young enough to be her children, the babies of the American Cultural Revolution of ’68–’72. But for

*“It is a pretty poem, Mr Pope,” commented Richard Bentley at the time, “But you must not call it Homer.”

the Pill, and one awful experience with the abortion doctor, at least one surely would have been hers. She'd taken enough chances back then.

It wasn't her college days she remembered as the 'best days of her life' but the years that followed, when success wore the rags cast off by riches and risks were not to consider but to embrace, when the only rule was that there was none but the Golden and if that didn't add up, well math was for accountants and generals. In school, there were schedules to keep, a structure of sorts and a shared agreement that life on campus was worth a B average. When you graduated, the choices sharpened and a refusal to choose was the grandest risk of all.

The kids tumbling in, laughing and sullen, flirting and lonely, whispering to their friends and calling across the room — they all seemed so *ready*. Automatically, she noticed the fashions; California caz ruled, largely unisex and heavy on the backwards baseball caps, with a surprising sprinkle of tie-dyed T-shirts to grate even further on her nostalgia. She caught a burst of valley-girl accents and did an aural double-take when instead of mall-speak she found herself eavesdropping on activism — “He's like, let's get a permit and we're all, just do it, y'know, he's so-o bourgeois liberal.” She envied the girls their confidence, their sense of who they were. Certainly they were self-selected for interest in a panel discussion about their parents' rebellious leaders, but they didn't seem awed, just interested, even excited. There was life in the room, and potential for the unknown.

The rows of seats focused down on a small stage, where tables were butted lengthwise in front of seven or eight seats in a row. Two of them had microphones in front of them, and there was a water jug and an upturned pile of paper cups, but otherwise the tables were bare. Behind them were a triptych of blackboards, with the confused remnants of several classes half erased. A skinny young man in tie-dye and Levi's adjusted the mikes, flipping his long straight hair behind an ear as he leaned forward.

“No testing, no testing,” he muttered in each and earned a laugh.

As he moved to the edge of the stage, he greeted an older guy with a smile and shrugged in response

to something as if to say, be my guest. The gray-beard accepted a hand up to the podium, followed by a strikingly beautiful young woman with straight dark hair falling over her shoulders and subdued turtleneck and slacks. Typical older man, thought Annie (wrongly, as it happened, in this case), he can get away with it but I couldn't. Why not? went a little voice she hadn't heard for a while. Fears of failure haunted her thoughts of shame. Who cares? said that little subversive, her hippie conscience, why should anyone tell you what to do? or feel?

The woman on stage leaned awkwardly down to one of the microphones, tried to unclip it from its stand and finally lifted the whole apparatus and began to speak. Her tentative whisper boomed out, to her evident surprise, and quieted the room.

“Hi, I'm with the Students for Social Responsibility and we're, that is, we need help, we want to get a survey round to everyone on campus, students, faculty, everyone, staff, to see what they want to do if a war starts in the Gulf. Like, do we want to close the campus?”

There was a hearty “yeah” from part of the audience at stage left, echoed with a couple of cheers of “Right on!” and a general froth of mutter.

“No, no ...” she continued, “This is a *survey*, right? I mean, I think we should shut down for the duration and probably occupy it, but we want to know what the support is on campus and we need help to get the survey around. We want to get it to every class and every dorm, just for a start. Anyway, if you're willing to help, if you could come and see me afterwards ...”

The man next to her leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“Oh, yeah, right, my name's Sara, and my number's 555-2024* — I'll put it on the blackboard — and you can call me, or come to the next SSR meeting, Sunday night at Stevenson. Seven o'clock. Thanks.”

Hmm, thought Annie. These kids have got it together. Must be a grad student. [Do we detect an age-ist bias?] Good for them. Maybe there really is hope.

*Not in this continuum it isn't. Don't even try calling, it's a fake number. This is fiction, remember?

Sara passed over the mike to the guy with the short gray beard, who cleared his throat and looked out at the crowd.

“Uh, hi,” he smiled. “It’s really nice to see all you folks here and maybe we can learn something from history.” Friendly groans of recognition erupted here and there. “I know, I know, it’s not a seminar.” That earned a derisive cry of approval.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I came up here because we want to make a connection between the town peace groups and the campus, and we’re planning a major action. Probably a lot of you were at the last rally, in San Lorenzo Park? A week, nearly two weeks ago?”

There was a widespread chorus of agreement. Annie felt rather out of it for not having been there. She looked bright and interested and smiled, trying not to make it look defensive. Sara finished chalking her phone number on the board and raised her fist in the classic power salute. Graybeard seemed slightly taken aback by the enthusiasm.

“Right. Great. Well, the next one’s going to be even better. We’re gonna blockade the Military Recruitment Center in Capitola. Shut it down!”

The enthusiasts over by the far wall rang out their cheers of “All *right!*” The first buzz was definitely favorable. Annie’s little inner voice tip-toed to the precipice of agreement and edged back in concern about self-preservation. This sounded, well, heavy, and that was a word she hadn’t used in a generation, and this was a scenario she hadn’t pictured for almost as long.

“You won’t have to be arrested,” continued the speaker quickly, picking up on the second thoughts undulating through the audience. “Some people will be, there will be CD but most people won’t do

it, and if you want to do CD, please do a non-violence prep first. I think there’s gonna be — Sara? ... Yeah, SSR is gonna do some preps, watch for flyers I guess. Anyway it’s going to be on Thursday, the 15th, lunchtime, starting 11:30. I’ve got some flyers here, I’ll pass them around. There will be a community meeting on Tuesday, two days before, at Louden Nelson at 7 o’clock, to talk about what’s going to happen.

“Anyway, that’s it. Two weeks from yesterday. Shut down military recruiting! Thank you.”

He went to put the microphone back down on the table but Sara reached for it and he passed it over.

“Thanks, Eric. And that weekend, two weeks from tomorrow, SSR is organizing a march from campus and a follow-up rally by the Mission ...” Eric passed her a flyer. “Oh, cool, it’s on here. Far out. So if you can’t make it to the blockade, come march with us on Saturday. It’ll be fun. Thanks.”

She set the mike down and the two of them walked round to the front of the stage and down to floor level. They split up the pile of flyers and started distributing them to the front rows and up the gangways, in smaller bunches. Annie took one and passed them on.

The skinny guy called for more announcements and a couple more people jumped onto the stage with meetings to promote and their own agendas to push but Annie drifted away. This sounded like the start of something. The energy around was intoxicating. She could easily get a Thursday off (her weekend work karma was excellent) ... this could be interesting.

Why not?

10

Aujourd'hui, ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit, on le chante.
Nowadays, if something's not worth saying, you sing it.

Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais
Le Barbier de Séville, 1775

BETWEEN JANUARY '67 AND JUNE '68, "Ruby Tuesday" turned into "Jumping Jack Flash," to the joy of heads everywhere, who fooled themselves into thinking they were taking over. Business was fine but not that important, in the heady times of Covent Garden all-nighters, the first generation of self-consciously Underground bands (not buskers but the young Mr Floyd and the pre-folkie Fairport), new mags like Oz and the Red Mole, anti-Vietnam demos in Grosvenor Square (hip enough to attract Lennon and Jagger), macrobiotic diets and William Morris wallpaper patterns on men's clothing. Even the busts were ludicrous, with the censorship cases being ridiculed in the straight press and the London *Times* risking contempt of court to protest the railroading of the Stones.

Meanwhile the *Sound of Music* soundtrack continued to dominate the British album chart, with 68 weeks at number one, in twelve different runs between *Beatles for Sale* and the White Album. Yodelay-heehee.

In the year leading up to "Honky Tonk Women," everything got nastier. The pigs harassed Brian Jones to death, possibly with some help from whoever cleaned up his place before the cops got there. The reigning monarchs of music were getting fractious and married. Across the Channel French students and workers were closing down factories and fighting the *flics* in the street. The Chicago police riot was followed by Judge Julius Hoffman's remarkable performance as he tried to throw the book at a heterogeneous collection of future legislators, social workers, yuppies and coke dealers who were supposed to have organized it. Swingin' London just didn't seem relevant anymore, and that was all it took for the scene to die.

Dope didn't disappear. On the contrary, consumption went right on growing long after the initial fuss began to fade. The phrase 'going up to university' took on new meaning each fall as the freshmen refined their social expectations to include more than the Dean's sherry. Each spring, another crop of siblings badgered their elders for a taste and helped the joys of getting high to percolate down below the mandatory minimum school-leaving age.

Battle lines were being drawn, as the establishment tried to crack down on insurgent youth, and it's hard to imagine a more appealing way for adolescent males to pledge their allegiance than staying up real late, getting high, getting laid, and cranking the volume way past ten. Unfortunately, attempts to crank 120 decibels out of a Woolworth's mono player meant for the sedate reproduction of *South Pacific* at sub-conversational levels tended to draw unwelcome attention, especially at three in the morning, while getting laid in any traditional sense required the active co-operation of actual female persons, so many of whom seemed to honor the concept of Free Love more in the abstract than the specific. That left not going to bed, which was easy, and getting as stoned as possible, which was a matter of cash and connections.

Hey, Jude, those were the days, half as nice as Blackberry Way. With a little help from my friends the good, the bad and the ugly (Albatross; Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da; Lily the Pink), I heard it thru the grapevine: Get back, get back, there's something in the air and it's making me dizzy.

Yummy, yummy, yummy.
Munchies, anyone?

11

There are no whole truths; all truths are half-truths. It is trying to treat them as whole truths that plays the devil.

Alfred North Whitehead
(1861–1947), *Dialogues*, 1954

BRENDAN JUST MADE IT BACK ahead of the featured panelists, bearing Calistogas and trivia. Annie half-heard something about a half-met half-wit and his half-known half-sister who was nearly famous and supposed to be funny. She would have interrupted but she didn't exactly have anything specific to say and by the time he noticed she had something on her mind the program was ready to go.

Over dinner afterwards, she let him talk about the [good] old days, even prompting him with snippets from her remarkable memory. They gossiped, too, about the discussion, mostly speculating on what seemed to be veiled and nuanced antagonism between old comrades. When the topic turned to modern tensions, Brendan moved into his geo-politics/social-science mode, elevating the discussion neatly into abstract theory and diverting it from any emotional connection with the now.

“So Savio thinks there's a major depression coming,” he observed. “I guess he reckons the Gulf Crisis is Bush's way of diverting attention from the real issues.”

“Poor guy,” put in Annie. “He must feel awful, seeing it all come round again when he worked so hard before.”

“Well, as he said,” countered Brendan, “There's no magic flyer to build a mass movement. There's a tide in the time that produces the people it needs.”

This kind of flabby bullshit was not what Annie needed to hear. Oh, it may have been true, and she had no interest in arguing with it, but she didn't really want to detach and discuss what people the time might need and how it might create them, she felt strangely pulled to join in, to act somehow, not trying to shape events so much as trying to be herself and let the time take care of itself. You're either growing or you're rotting, as her friend Jan had told her just the other day. Think if you have to, she might have added, but feel 'cause you must.

She didn't even show Brendan the flyer she'd kept. She didn't know why, but it felt private and she wanted to let whatever seed it had planted germinate before subjecting it to the withering questions and whencing reasoning of his mind. She had a secret hope now, buried but ready to rise. She wanted it to become a dream, not a plan.

12

Everybody must get stoned

Bob Dylan, “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,”
from *Blonde on Blonde* and a thousand concerts,
live albums and bootleg tapes, 1966–2000 and counting

WHITEY BEGAN TO GET SUSPICIOUS around July '69. They had been trying to hold down the number of their contacts and increase the amounts they moved each time, as the pyramid grew organically from the bottom, but street instincts told him that too many people were getting to know their faces.

“Don’t wanna go back in the fuckin’ nick, man,” he emphasized one night over the post-prandial number.

“No chance,” insisted Blackie, “They never even see us touch it.”

This was true. They had set up an elaborate system of cut-outs by this time that meant that none of their customers ever saw either them and hash or them and cash in the same room. Nor did either of their chief lieutenants handle both money and merchandise; and both were bound by ties of friendship, gratitude, loyalty and especially fear. The justice system among criminals was a lot more effective than the criminal justice system.

“This gig’s getting heavy, man,” Whitey explained.

“How come?”

“Dunno, but somethin’s gonna go down, an’ I don’t wantit t’be me.” He paused to pull on the joint and squeezed the next two syllables out with just a trickle of smoke. “Or you.”

“Yeah,” admitted Blackie, letting go of his own plume of smoke. “Let’s hit the road.”

“Jack.”

“Right.” There was a pause for inhalation. “India?”

“Dunno,” admitted Whitey. Concepts may have been his end of the partnership; details and budgets were left to his mate. “Nepal’s in India, yeah?”

“It’s right near it,” Blackie said. “We could get temple balls.”

“Thai sticks.”

“Manali.”

“Khyber black.”

Blackie looked at his mate skeptically.

“Ahmed’s? In Kabul?”

Whitey nodded with an enigmatic twist of the lips. He was good at those.

“Ahmed wouldn’t want me around,” Blackie pointed out.

“Can handle him.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about.”

“Fuck off.”

“Right, right. My point exactly, go roll another one.”

Which he did, thereby postponing discussion but not deliberation. Blackie knew enough to respect his partner’s instincts. Whitey’s street smarts took him in blind leaps — from one, he might not even know what direction ten was in, but he’d skip at least to six, stride to seven, look around and then jump on to ten; Blackie liked to know where ten was when he started out, and to reach it in an orderly sequence of consecutive integers but he accepted that Whitey’s guesses were always useful first-order approximations. Maybe it was time to quit.

It had been a fine game, flying blind on skull sweat and hope, but the odds against a comfortable old age were long. Besides, setting up the system had been fun, a challenge in practical economics, but running it was beginning to feel like work. And the chances of evading arrest were bound to keep going down, given the propensity of the cops to manufacture evidence if it was otherwise unobtainable and given the fact that no one ever forgot their sources, so the number of people who could shop them to cover their own asses never did anything but increase. The real irony would be if they quit and *then* got framed. Which was less likely if they

had an alibi. Like being several thousand miles away. Even a jury might buy that one.

Over the next few days, he checked out the books carefully. Mostly this meant a lot of mental arithmetic (for security reasons they operated on the zero-entry bookkeeping system), but Blackie was good at that. They'd been reinvesting most of their turnover, skimming living expenses as needed, and quietly replenishing his original investment, the equivalent of which was safely in Switzerland. Assuming life in Asia was cheap — a pound a day was a commonly quoted number — if they cashed out now, they could live out there for ... *six and a half years*. And still have a couple of months left over. Even at a slightly more extravagant standard of living, it was clear that they could do the Asia trip in as leisurely a manner as they felt like at the time. In a couple of years, no one would think of fingering them.

"Cool!" was Whitey's response.

"But why can't we," wondered Blackie, "Do business while we're over there?"

"'Cause we're retiring, right?"

"Well, maybe we're taking a sabbatical ... like they get after seven years at college?"

"Nah, 's time for a holiday."

"All right already, people are always gonna want to get high. We can hang loose on the rest of it for a while."

"Sure."

"Just let me figure out how we get there."

They decided to adjust the business plan to emphasize short-term profit maximization. One major score and split. Fortunately, an important opportunity was looming — Bob Dylan's return to performance after a three-year hiatus was expected to draw a quarter of a million to the Isle of Wight, almost all of whom were likely to get high there. It was known that there was a Canadian called Hugh who hadn't yet come down from participating in a government study of the short-term effects of massive cannabis ingestion, and a few more might choose to abstain, but not many. Except of course for those few dozen in attendance who would wear arch supports in sensible shoes about six feet south of their obvious ears ... but coppers in mufti were

too easily identifiable in those days to represent a serious inconvenience to businessmen. One percent market penetration, at a quid deal each, would gross £2,500, more than twice the average annual take-home pay at the time (and about one-fifteenth of what Dylan was getting); five per cent at a fiver ... ten at fifteen ... well, let's just say there would be a lot of bread floating around.

Exploiting this gift from the gods required an adjustment in corporate procedures. Essentially they planned a temporary vertical expansion into the retail sector, using clout established through a history of volume purchasing to hold costs down and keep margins up even at standard retail in circumstances that would normally justify a special mark-up. Concert deals outside of the Deadhead axis were (and are) notoriously bad for the consumer, since there was no expectation of repeat business. Conversely, the availability of good, solid, fifteen-quid ounces — prices had gone up a bit — was likely to be bruited about rapidly. The myth of Woodstock was in the air, not the days of rolling in mud but the selfless dedication of the men with a mission to turn on the world. Good deals at the Isle of Wight were part of the public preconception. Really, it was a service. The punters expected it.

Through Sunday night, it worked like a charm. Business was brisk in the shantytown that sprung up by Thursday (called, inevitably, "Desolation Row") and boomed on the final day. The organizers claimed to have printed 120,000 tickets and sold most of them, but someone must have had access to another printing press because there were a lot more people than that; rumors of tax scams were rife. Dylan left the stage just after midnight and the crowd, after the ritual cheers and boos, began to dissipate towards the ferries to the strains of the Beatles' "Get Back". Blackie and Whitey wandered along in the middle of the crowd, figuring on safety in numbers since they were carrying cash, stuffed into a beat-up old rucksack. There was a tedious queue that took most of the night, leading to a jammed boat and a boring crossing. It was almost five when they reached the car.

That's when the roof fell in.

13

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive? the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive?
You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower!
And you Locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me not!

Allen Ginsberg,
“Sunflower Sutra,” *Howl*, 1955

A VERBAL BY NATURE, Annie enjoyed a good gabfest; it cleared her brain and left her with a better idea of what she wanted, oddly enough even when she didn’t exactly discuss what was on, or under, her mind. She cultivated her gabbing friends with care, listening for a season to one while talking to another, trying to maintain a balance with each over the ages, lest the relationship get out of whack and bore itself to death.

Her favorite gossip at the time was a sweet-natured white-identified gay black pianist/travel agent who had taken the name Sebastian after falling in love with *Brideshead* on TV. Sebastian was deliciously wicked on men, casually wise on wine and song, and sympathetic on anything with style. He knew everyone and everything he cared to know; he was a serious student of the art of dissing the deserving while schmoozing the special. Specialness was the secret of his charm — he had a genius for convincing whoever he wanted that they were uniquely important to him. Anyone who couldn’t see through the masquerade was of no interest but anyone who appreciated the performance was rewarded with loyalty and absolute discretion on matters of real importance. Foibles, of course, were fair game, the stuff of trade in the art of tattling.

“What’s up, girl?” called Sebastian at Annie’s left shoulder as she leaned into the room.

“Oh, hi!” she responded, sharing a delicate hug, then dropping her purse on a chair. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Darling, are we shocked?” She looked suitably chagrined. “The day you show up on time is the

day I date Madonna and you *know* how jealous I am about those men she dances with. It’s the flaw in your oyster that makes you perfect. I count on it. Anyway the view here is terrific, check it out, honey.”

“You’re awful,” Annie responded primly. “I’m going to get a latte.” But she turned the long way round on the way to the counter so she could take a peek, and sure enough there was a beautifully tousled boy who looked about fifteen and was probably twenty, sucking meditatively on a pencil as he bent over a book.

He’s half your age, she frowned.

But what fun, he blinked back.

Anyway he’s straight, I hope, she smiled, half against her will.

Not a chance, he tittered.

“You want anything?” she said out loud.

“Get outta here”.

Coffee has been the conversationalist’s drug of choice for centuries. An upper, of course, it lacks both the edge of amphetamines and the completely self-referential egotism of cocaine; it releases inhibitions without the whine of booze or the giggle of grass. A cuppa char goes well with a chat, too, as the English know, but the tea buzz is different, assert the connoisseurs, and the chemists agree. They’re both methylxanthine rushes but coffee’s is strictly caffeine, while tea fills it out with the sweet complement of theophylline (ah, impurities and poor relations, the bane and joy of the experimentalist’s life). Geniuses from Johnson — the word freak, not the beer-chugging Texan — through Balzac, flying through the night behind the strong

black java on which he finally OD'd, and down to Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti in North Beach fueled the fire of their conversation with coffee's bitter blasts. So naturally the coffee house is where the gossips gather.

Annie's fluctuating, and when possible limited, work schedule gave her the room for afternoon engagements. Sebastian simply insisted on the time for elegant living; at the drop of a full-bottomed wig, he'd have adopted lace collars and sedan chairs. He made most of his money booking trips for his friends and theirs, by appointment at any hour of the day or night, and spent a high proportion of it, even at discount rates, investigating vacation destinations. Annie was one of the few who both approved and understood, though their styles were different. She went every year or so for months and stretched it as long as she could, while he went every month or two for days and overloaded his credit card. What they shared was estrangement from the cultural conditioning of eight-hours-on–sixteen-off, fifty-weeks-on–two-off, forty-five-years-on–and–atherosclerosis-city. The world, they felt, damned well *ought* to be their playground.

They went to each other's parties, of course, and knew each other's partners as and when, but these daylight assignations were the time for confidences. When Sebastian wasn't working at night, tinkling the ivories at the Bistro or punching the agency's computer, he claimed to be cruising and if he was half as active as he boastfully implied, Annie would only be in the way. Of all the people who knew Brendan as Annie's, or the other way round, Sebastian was the safest confidant for her, and she as much for him. They were players in games that simply didn't overlap.

"Darling," he said as she settled herself and began to blow on the foam atop her coffee, "Have we been getting our beauty sleep?"

"You're so tactless," riposted Annie. "Don't you know you're not supposed to let a lady think she doesn't look in the absolute pink?"

"Sweetheart, since when did you get ladified? C'mon, dish. What's up? I *know* something's up."

"How's come?"

"A girl simply knows. Is it the brute? Has little Bren been forcing himself on you again? Was it fun?"

"Oh, shut up. No, it's not Brendan. Well, maybe it is. I don't know."

Sebastian leaned back and sipped, fluttering his eyelids over the cup out of habit in a coquettish stare.

"So it *is* Mr Brennie. What happened? Girl, what *did* he do? Or is it something he *didn't* do?"

"You think everything is sex, don't you?"

"Of course. Too much or not enough, that's the human condition, with little spurts of satisfaction in the middle."

"Spurts?"

He flipped a hand at her in faux-dismay. "Get over it," he giggled. "So which is it?"

"Not enough, I suppose," she admitted, "But that's not really it. I suppose if we had a thrilling sex life maybe I wouldn't be feeling so sort-of old and bored and kind of lost. But then, you know, maybe I'd only be kind of lost and sated at the same time."

"Ice cream fucking."

"When you want a full meal, right?"

"But, Annie, what brought this on?"

"Oh, I guess it's been building up."

"Yeah, but something happened. Last week you were talking about going to Costa Rica and getting a tan and now you're all full of this stuff. What's new? When did it start?"

"I guess it was Friday," she admitted, "When we went up to that *Berkeley in the Sixties* thing on campus. It got me thinking, you know, how I never *do* anything. I mean, I ... it's like the system and me, we've sort of made a deal, and they don't hassle me anymore and I don't bother them, I guess."

"Ain't that growing up, honey?"

"But I never wanted to grow up."

"Aha!"

"What do you mean, 'aha'?"

"Feeling a little old, are we, dear? Creaking in the joints when you get out of bed?"

"Well," she confessed. "But that's not it. I mean, sure, that is it, too, and seeing all those babies..."

"Beautiful, aren't they?"

“...seeing all those beautiful babies, doesn’t help, especially with you older guys leching around after all the cute ones...”

“Older? *Moi?*”

“Seriously, Sebastian, they make me remember what it was like when it didn’t matter what ‘They’ thought,” waggling her fingers to show the quotes, “Except that you didn’t want ‘Them’ to like you. Know what I mean? It was easy, what you did was, you did what you wanted as far as you could, and ‘They’ didn’t like it and ‘We’ did and that’s sort of how ‘We’ knew who ‘They’ were.

“And now, I figure maybe I’m part of Them, or maybe They think I am anyway, and, I don’t know, except it doesn’t feel right. And then I was thinking about the war, this new one that’s coming up, and I don’t know, I just ... don’t They *know* I’m against it?”

“That’s a peace brooch, isn’t it?”

“But, y’know, I never used to have to wear something like this for everyone to know straight off what I thought, well, except for some foreigners maybe who thought all us Yanks were the same. It’s cuckoo, that’s what it is, They’re nuts and I just feel so ... lost.”

Sebastian shucked the faggy jive and held his friend’s hand.

“I didn’t think you were political,” he said softly.

“I’m not,” she protested. “I never was.”

“And you don’t really want to be a hippy again.”

“No, not exactly.”

“So what do you want?”

Oh dear, the impossible question. What she wanted, inevitably, was to know what she wanted, but something so general can be hard to think. She let herself go barreling off on a specific.

“Did you hear that people were going to invade the Recruitment Center?”

“Yeah, next week, week after.”

“Right. Now, seems like that could be something.”

“Go for it, girl.”

“You think?”

“Listen, honey, if it makes you feel good, do it, that’s what I say. Anyway, if you’re going to find

anyone who thought like you then and thinks like you now, that’s where they’re gonna be, baby.”

“Yeah,” she mused. Her latte was cool now and she took a long pull and licked the foam meditatively off her lip. “Yeah.”

“So check it out.”

“How? I mean, is there some way I can find out about it?”

“Well, sure. I know this guy who’s in the group doing it, they meet every week I think.”

“Sebastian, how come you know everything?”

“I make it my business, dear. Actually, he was talking about it at the Blue Lagoon with this cute little trick, so I didn’t catch everything, but the *Planet* will have it.” He got up and stepped round the corner, coming back in a moment with a tabloid and turning to the calendar at the back. “Here it is, Persian Gulf Peace Coalition, meets every Tuesday, 7 o’clock. There’s a number if you want to call.”

“Where is it?”

“East Side United Methodist, out near Seabright.”

“It’s a *church?*” Annie was shocked, really shocked, to find a religious institution fomenting what she envisaged as a sort of anti-establishment enterprise. She’d heard of radical Christianity but it still seemed like an oxymoron to her, and distinctly off-putting. Except for the occasional straight wedding, she hadn’t been in a church since childhood.

“Darling, you’re prejudiced!” squealed Sebastian with delight.

“Hmmm. I guess,” she admitted. Prejudice has never been hip.

“And I thought you weren’t. Well, that *is* a relief. My favorite little bigot.”

“I guess some of them are OK,” she conceded, almost seriously.

“Darling, some of my best friends...” He couldn’t hide the smirk.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Anyway, they just rent out the room, they do it all the time. The pastor’s pretty cool but I don’t think he actually does anything in this group. He was really good with getting the AIDS project going. Does all kinds of shit. I thought they were at the Resource Center but I guess they had to move.”

“So it’s not just a bunch of students?”

“Oh, no dear, this is the town one. This is the one for people like you. Here, keep it.”

“So you don’t think I’m kinda, y’know, foolish?”

“To wanna be a peace freak?” He mimed horror and then smiled. “No, not at all.”

“Thanks, Sebastian. Thanks a lot.” She looked at her watch. “Oh shit, I’ve got to go.”

“OK,” he said agreeably.

“But I haven’t even asked how you’re doing.”

“I’ll be fine, honey.” He looked suggestively

over to the corner window. “With a little bit o’ luck, I’ll be just fine. I’ll tell you all about it next week.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

They hugged pleasantly and he backed away and looked her in the eye.

“You *sure* this isn’t about old Brennie?”

She settled her purse strap on her shoulder, flicked her hair back and turned to look at him.

“No,” she said. “I’m not.”

And she shrugged and walked away.

14

Are you lost daddy I arsked tenderly.
Shut up he explained.

Ring Lardner,
The Young Immigrant, 1920

THE MINI WAS PARKED about a mile from the dock, in a quiet suburban street with small trees where no one was likely to break into it, not that it was worth much. There was enough of a dawn to make the streetlights look foolish, glowing orange in a gray beginning to resolve into color. Cars lined the road, slumbering in their shined-on-Sunday glory. It was a Bank Holiday Monday and the world was sleeping in.

“Gi’ us the bag.”

They froze. Turning, they saw a hard case standing in front of a van with ‘ACME PAINTING SUPPLIES’ written on the side. He wasn’t tall but he was eight feet wide and not fat. Also he had two companions getting out of the back of the van and two more approaching the doors of the Mini. Where the fuck did they come from?

“Gi’ us the fucking bag.”

Blackie was about to say something but Whitey waved him down and passed over the backpack. The three got back into the van without another word. They waited until the other two were driving away in the Cortina they’d come from, up the street, and then pulled out nice and easy and took off after them. Blackie stared at the space where their tail-lights used to be. He began to shake like a sapling in a force one gale and put his hands on the car roof to steady himself. He thought he was about to throw up. There were no words.

“Get in,” said Whitey, very, very softly. There was tenderness spun gently around his tone, but the center was adamant. “C’mon, kid, get in the car.” He was sunk deep behind his skin, keeping the words and the pain suppressed so his gut could work out what to do. This was his arena, as thinking was his mate’s, and he needed to act just right and he needed to do it in pure certainty. Romantics might call it the way of the warrior, mystics the style of the saint, but Whitey was a street kid in deep shit

and he didn’t call it anything, which may be why he stood a chance of grasping it.

No crap about the Native American heritage, please. He was an intelligent primate, trying to focus his faculties in the midst of crisis. The Indian image is legend, the savages noble only by contrast with the scientists who stare at their memory. People have that quality of stillness and depth inside them — all people, else they be robots — but most of us don’t find it accessible. We glorify strangers for it, and pretend that they pass it down in some mysterious way so that we ourselves need not try to look for it within ourselves. Whitey wasn’t being Cherokee, he was being a person.

Blackie was on the verge of being sick.

“Who the fuck were they?” he groaned, looking over from the passenger seat.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Blackie’s world was falling apart. He’d never really been frightened before, never understood that when he’d poured petrol onto the gangplank he’d used to escape the prison barge of the family business he’d made certain there would be no direction left to call home. It had been a game, all of it, even the casual jokes about vacations in the cozy little nick, even the elaborate precautions against being caught with incriminating evidence, even the lawless image of the honest anarchist. He’d never had a sense of consequences; like responsibility, they had been something you didn’t acknowledge and wouldn’t deal with. He planned, he calculated, but he never saw what he was doing. And now he couldn’t see what to plan.

There must have been nearly ten grand in that bag. It was their stake, or most of it. It was gone. He got that far and then he couldn’t even formulate the next question. Oh shit. His mind was totally short-circuited.

“What are we gonna do?” he muttered.

Whitey was staring off above the road, going very fast with the precision of a Formula One racer. He was usually a terrible driver but this morning it seemed he didn't have to be, if he took his mind off it. His lips began to relax till he was almost smiling.

"See Mario."

"What if he did it?"

"He did it, he wants to see us. He didn't do it, he wants us to see him."

"Fuck, man, we're trying to get away from that shit."

"What's time?"

"Just after six."

"Can't ring yet. Go to Waterloo, get breakfast, call him at eight."

"I don't want breakfast, man."

Whitey glanced over and then spoke to the windshield.

"You dunno what you want. Why didn't they duff us up?"

"You gave them the bread."

"Yeah, but ... tough fuckers. Do it for fun. Gotta know what's going on. Mario'll find out."

They made the call at eight. Evidently it was expected, because they got immediate directions to an address in Streatham, where they were told to walk in without knocking and wait in the living room. Half an hour after they got there, Mario walked in. He was freshly shaved and smelled of cologne. His suit was immaculate, his shirt striped with a white collar, his bodyguard enormous and totally silent. He didn't waste time, motion, or words.

"You boys are in trouble," he opened. They waited. He was telling them. Different trouble? "There's a warrant. Old Bill's watching your flat and they'll be in as soon as you get to bed."

Blackie was almost catatonic. Whitey was very still but at least he was present.

"Got taken," he said. "Five of 'em. Worked the Isle of Wight."

"You silly pricks."

Mario pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his palms, then sat down with his back to the window. He lit a Peter Stuyvesant without offering them around and looked around the room. The furniture was imitation Danish modern; five years

before it had at least been fashionable, now it was just uncomfortable. There were ducks on the wall and a large potted plant in the corner. He'd grown up in rooms like this, a south London Italian, quick with a blade and smart enough to want out. At thirty, he was a junior executive, with a wife and kids in Dulwich, a nice piece in Shepherd's Market, a taste for good champagne and a sincere inability to understand what the younger generation was coming to. But his mama didn't raise a fool.

"You boys trying to get up or out?" he asked. He had too much presence to need to make threats. People told Mario the truth. They just somehow knew it was a good idea.

"Out."

"Stupid fuckers. You ever think of letting us in on your little secret?"

Blackie was about to explain but saw Whitey playing stoneface and tried to follow his lead. It seemed to be the right thing to do.

"What you got in the place?"

"Nothing. Passports."

"Cash?"

Blackie felt the eyes on him and tried to keep his voice matter of fact.

"About a grand," he said. "Little less."

"Forget that," advised Mario with a thoughtful nod. "Might be enough to keep the rozzers quiet if I put a word in the right ear. Got any more?"

"Yeah. Some."

"How much?"

When they didn't immediately respond, he went on.

"Look, boys, I shouldn't be doing this but I like you. I'll let you have one mistake. OK. But you gotta understand, I'm your only hope. Without me, you go down. Five years, maybe eight. They're gonna find heavy weight under your sofa. Trust me, they want someone. There's pressure. I'm telling you, it'd be easier for me to just walk away, let 'em have you, and after this caper I'm tempted. Rodge here thinks I'm soft but I like to look after my people. It's just the way I am. Goodness of me heart."

At that, Mario had the decency to smile. A little.

"So tell your uncle. What have you got?"

Mario waited patiently. Rodge the Enforcer leaned on the wall, which looked about ready to quit. Whitey caught his partner's eye and nodded.

"Tell him."

Blackie told. It was humiliating, but he was in shock and didn't really feel anything till later. At least when he was explaining their system of hiding places and listing the assets that were in them he could be knowledgeable, in control of the information if not of the situation. He left out the account in Switzerland, which they might be able to get to, and that decision gave him some vestige of self-respect. He didn't consider whether Mario might be wise enough not to press them about it, for that very reason, but he couldn't have known without forfeiting it so perhaps it was just as well. Otherwise he laid a true bill and even felt gratified to pick up a nod of appreciation for its clarity. It reminded him of being top of the form in school.

School, however, was a decent enough symbol for what they had been trying to avoid, the nameless horror they ran from. The regimented satisfaction of other people's goals? The systemic subordination of individuality? The awful sense of absence that came from living someone else's dream? The futility of success or the terrible consequence of failure? That's about how muddy it was, how inchoate and, like most emotional responses, how confused by the abstractions that are meant to clarify.

What was certain was that Blackie hadn't thought it would come to this. The humiliation was not in the failure itself, that was only a temporary set-back, like an exam you can always re-sit; nor was it in the cry for expert help, which was only sensible, as when you call a plumber to fix the drains or a tow-truck to pull the car or a lawyer to get you out of jail. The horror he felt was that he had been fooling himself. He'd been playing a game and thinking he was detached from it, that somehow there were special rules that applied since the system was going to fall and they were trying to dance in the ruins. Being busted would be a drag, but also a badge of honor. Being evaluated as a junior member of Mario's team was not. He hadn't wanted to be anyone's person. Especially not some smooth-dressing rough-talking upwardly mobile

thug's. He recognized the middle-class bias and hated himself for that too. He felt as phony as a toupee.

He wanted to start all over again.

Whitey's take was different, of course. He had never been tempted by straight society's rewards because society had never even bothered to pretend he might get them. Conformity was a non-issue, because no one had ever thought there was any point in encouraging him to do anything. They flogged him into an obedience they never expected to last. At some point he would presumably have chosen some form of organized crime (either the Mob or one of the legal alternatives quoted on the Stock Exchange) and settled down to a drab middle age, had it not been for the middle-class revolt of the mid-sixties. If he was admired by his partner for savvy and street smarts, he reciprocated by responding to the idealism he wasn't much good at articulating. They had common ground in a love of sensation and reactive rebellion, and they complemented each other better than either of them knew.

Whitey understood that you couldn't start over, but he sure wanted to wipe the slate.

The original plan still made sense to both of them. Overland to India and wherever showed up. Kicks, man, and lots of good, cheap dope. Out of sight, out of mind; outasight 'n' outta your skull. Tempus fugit for the temporary fugitives. There was enough cash for starters stashed around town and they should be able to wire for the Swiss once they got somewhere. It was worth a shot. What else was there to lose?

Mario fixed it.

His concept of a fee structure was a little one-sided — he thought it perfectly reasonable to charge 100% of what he recovered and then rebate whatever he felt like afterwards — but he was undeniably efficient. No charges were filed, since to everyone's amazement neither drugs nor cash had been found in the raid, which reflected poorly on the tipster behind it. (Since the fink was believed to be their ambitious former money man, his bad rep could be seen as a beneficial side-effect.) The passports were recovered and, at Whitey's request, supplemented with more creative documents just

in case. One-way tickets by train to Thessaloniki were acquired and, just to be sure that they weren't wasted, Rodge the Enforcer accompanied the aspiring travelers as far as the Channel, where he handed over an envelope.

"Two years, right?" he explained. "I see either of you cunts before September '71 I'll break your fuckin' legs for yuh, know what I mean?"

Rodge was not one of nature's most enlightened beings. His grasp of the vernacular was stronger on emphasis than on anatomical accuracy,

let alone verbal felicity. People did, however, usually grasp the gist of what he had to convey.

"What if we run into you on the Costa Brava, then?" joked Blackie.

Tilt. Bad move. Neither subtlety nor a sense of humor was a major component of an enforcer's job description. Physical strength and quickness were considered of greater importance.

"Fuck off, creep," clarified Rodge.

"Yes," agreed Blackie, with a sudden burst of understanding. "Right, then."

15

It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them.

P.G. Wodehouse,
The Man Upstairs, 1914

ANNIE PLAYED IT COOL with Brendan, which was smart from her point of view even if it was not exactly fair from his.

“You got your Macintosh group tomorrow?” she asked on Monday night, while they were doing the washing up. She’d been rehearsing the elaborately casual manner, for reasons she was still vague about, ever since she had left Sebastian four or five hours before.

“Yeah, I’ll probably grab a bite in town.”

He had his hands deep in suds while she wiped and put away. Phase one: he didn’t ask why. She inspected a casserole dish, rejected it and passed it back. He grunted at it and grabbed the little orange scrubby pad to remove the last debris.

“Thought I might check out the anti-war group.”

“Oh yeah?”

Phase two: he invited comment without demanding reasons (yet).

“Yeah, I dunno, seems like it might be a good thing.”

“Huh.”

Why was she so nervous about this? Would he see this as deviant behavior? Would he be threatened? Should he be? Why was she even thinking in these terms? She polished a plate till it glowed.

“Anyway they meet on Tuesdays, seven-thirty to nine or so. I thought I’d see what gives.”

“Cool.” Then he laughed, pleasantly. “I thought you were the one who always said you didn’t do demos.”

Phase three: he noticed the newness (well, that was good). But he didn’t seem overly bothered.

“Yeah, I didn’t, but, I dunno. Anyway I just thought I’d check it out.”

“Great.”

Maybe she had succeeded in establishing the peace group on the same basis as the computer

group. Maybe that was totally appropriate. Certainly she had satisfied the letter of their unwritten rules of engagement, and if she sinned in the spirit, well, no harm was done. Perhaps none ever would be.

After all, they did have their separate identities. For a start, Sebastian was her friend, not his, and in a way this could be seen to have arisen from that connection, which would logically exclude him. Brendan never quite knew how to take Sebastian’s flirtatious come-on, not that he was homophobic, why, some of his best ... well, several people he knew anyway ... that is.... Brendan’s logical acceptance of gay rights, which truly was as real as his belief in civil rights for people of color, never quite translated into social comfort. The old dope scene that once had taught him to be easy with blacks and chicanos was an overwhelmingly straight male deal, with gays in a parallel universe that never quite intersected with his own, one of amyls and uppers and disco doses of acid, where his had been hash and tequila and lengthening shades of Mexican powder. Sebastian, no fool, teased Brendan taut, secure in the knowledge that Annie knew he wasn’t trying to steal her man.

She had called the contact number before Brendan got home from work and had a pleasant, short, conversation with some guy. He might have been the one she’d seen on campus; she wasn’t sure and didn’t think to ask until they had hung up. It was one of those calls without a specific point in which the real meaning all takes place underneath the surface. On top, she confirmed the time, date and place of the meeting and that she would be welcome to show up, all of which was explicitly included in the listing she had in her hand; down below, all she really found out was that whoever answered the phone wasn’t a complete asshole, which wasn’t a total shock either, given the group’s

evidently pacifist mission. Pressed, she would certainly have admitted eliminating a negative (the come-on she faced wasn't too repulsive for her to investigate further) and she might even have accepted the positive implications of the undeniable fact that she had made the call. She hadn't even given her name, so absolutely no one else knew she had done it, but she did. She didn't have to go, but she suddenly realized that that would be backing out, so she must have made a decision.

Not sharing all that with her partner was a decision of another order, and one she still kept buried for a little longer.

Her timing was immaculate. The tomorrow-night's-activities conversation petered out around the last of the dishes, and was promptly buried by an unexpected visit from their neighbor. Once he had left, clutching the wrench he'd wandered over to borrow and digesting the beer he hadn't needed to be offered twice, the moment had long passed. If Brendan was surprised that she reached for him that night in bed, he showed no sign, and if she was in any way impelled by guilt, she kept that too well hid. They lay there afterwards, close and comfortable, and she wondered for a while why she thought she was missing anything, and slipped smiling into sleep.

16

Man: An animal so lost in the contemplation of what he thinks he is that he overlooks what he undoubtedly ought to be

Ambrose Bierce,
The Cynic's Word Book, 1906,
aka *The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911

ONE MONTH AFTER the Pretty Big One, the general appraisal was that life was on its way back to normal. Not this-is-the-daily-routine normal but at least something like we-make-our-own-decisions normal. The roads were largely open, the power was on, the emergency shelter at the Santa Cruz Civic auditorium was closed and Watsonville had rescheduled the election that would finally bring the Chicano community into the political process. The quick-response teams from the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA, whose mission is preserving politicians in the event of nuclear war, though it keeps in practice dealing with more natural disasters) had worked their tails off and left the scene to the desultory attentions of the desk-bound bureaucrats and paper shufflers from the Small Business Administration (SBA, whose mission is making loans to companies that are large, if not enormous). Somehow long lines and a lack of response seemed more like standard government operating procedure than people conducting interviews in motels at ten at night.

President Bush had his photo op in Santa Cruz, making promises no one would keep, and Mick Jagger descended to Watsonville, flinging a half-million-dollar tax-deductible purse of gold from the Rolling Stones. Lesser lights soon followed. Billy Graham, Governor Deukmejian and Marilyn Quayle bracketed the spectrum from God right, and Cesar Chavez marched with farm workers for the left. Bill Graham (the other one, Mr Presents, who had hit up the Stones) raised a million bucks with a concert by Santana and others, and matched it with another million of his own. Local gal Jill Croston (made good as Lacy J. Dalton) came back to sing; the Flying Karamazov Brothers touched down to their sidewalk juggling roots; and Crosby, Stills and Nash reopened the Catalyst stage to a

roaring crowd on the very night that Germans danced on the Berlin Wall. The month-long orgy of attention was fine and exciting and over and enough. It was time to go back to work.

Two months later, that is three months after the quake, the prevalent feeling was that the illusions of November were completely absurd. Glorified tents called pavilions had given the downtown merchants of Santa Cruz some kind of Christmas season but what excitement there had been died in the chill of breeding familiarity. Damp in a drought, January muddied the floors even as it promised scarcity for the summer to come. Construction wasn't moving; demolition had scarcely begun. Still, the consensus was that at least there was more of a realistic view: Healing was under way.

After another moon had waxed and waned, the realism of the month before looked suspiciously like psychopathology. Bridges were still out, businesses were still folding, planning was still in process, people were still waking up in the middle of the night and occasionally they still noticed the ground shaking. They told each other about the time they had needed to heal and the process of adaptation and the growth of comprehension and the requirement that they allow the curing to happen, and how relieved they were that at last it was taking place.

Six months after the Loma Prieta Earthquake, it was tax time and thousands ran screaming to their accountants and their therapists as they came to terms with the black and white and red and the deductions and estimates and allowances. Finally, they felt, finally they could come to terms...

By the time the anniversary rolled around, even the most sensitive souls could show visitors the rubble of their city without tears welling in their eyes, most of the time. It was amazing, they

recalled, how long it had taken to get a grip on things, how hard it had been, and how at every step of the way you had looked back to see how you had fooled yourself on the stair below. Soon now, they were sure, the plan would be approved and rebuilding would really begin.

Abused children, we are told, often bury their horrors so deep they have no conscious knowledge of the assaults on their bodies and their souls, yet they suffer and know they suffer and know not why.

Survival trick number one: denial.

Coping mechanism: constant revisionism.

This is how it *really* is, we insist, standing where we do today, because we cannot feel anything more or less.

In the calculus of the heart, as we shiver closer and closer to resonance with the vibrations in which we stand, do we come ever to admit our secrets or will we always let our approximations masquerade finally as truth?

There never was a merry world since the fairies left off dancing, and the Parson left conjuring

John Selden,
“Parson,” *Table Talk*, 1689

IT WAS NOT PERHAPS a dignified departure, but to Blackie and Whitey it was more important that at least they were away. The boat was waiting and the sea was relatively calm. They walked through Belgian Customs and Immigration without a hitch, the first and one of the easiest of the half-dozen borders those tickets would take them through. They changed trains in Munich, then headed south-east through Austria and down the long axis of Yugoslavia.

The ride was immensely boring but even that was a relief of sorts. They had been cooped up in a petit-bourgeois hell for a week with nothing to distract them but fear and the telly. Now at least there was motion. They could feel it, in the regularly unpredictable asymmetry of the rails, they could see it in the lights at night, the little ones like stars slowly drifting by, the vivid rush of the houses by the tracks, the northbound trains that blurred to nothing and left sudden images of startling clarity. They saw a man pissing out of a carriage door and saluted his memory with honest laughter. They saw trucks lying on their side, abandoned in pairs by the side of the long empty road. They saw buildings still collapsed from an earthquake five years before and wondered why they hadn't been rebuilt yet. They sat behind the glass as the world moved past and slowly they began to rejoice.

On the second morning they crossed into Greece and disembarked at Thessaloniki. It was the crossroads of the ancient world, they read, and thought it well put. The weather was hot and the writing on the wall looked like essence of calculus. Hot damn, this must be traveling.

On the advice of a likely-looking young Dutch couple they saw near the station, they headed for the Youth Hostel, which they were assured did not require membership cards, manual labor or morning prayers. It was in fact located above a 24-hour

mega-volume jukebox, the centerpiece of the neighborhood hang-out — not so much a hostel as a hostelry, which was much better. Here they paused to regroup, disband their preconceptions and orchestrate the adventure. Bleary over a pair of lagers, they were surprised to hear an English voice calling for a “Fix.” Blackie looked over.

“Fix?” he enquired.

The new guy raised a bottle of a fizzy orange drink with the Greek letters ΦΙΞ printed on it and laughed.

“Fix, man. Greek Fanta. Really, it's not bad, I've been looking for a Fix for days.” He cackled some more. “You guys must be heading East.”

“Right.”

“Lucky sods. I've got to get back to college.”

This caused the metaphorical raising of an eyebrow. (To do it literally would have been to violate the code of cool and that would never do.) The stranger did not look like the proverbial clean-cut kid who'd been to college too. (Five years was plenty of time to turn Dylan's *bon mots* into proverbs in those days.) Nor did he look like a traditional pasty-faced junkie, nor have the low-rent pseudo-rock-star image that was so fashionable in undergraduate circles, nor was he a degenerate version of anything obvious at all. Later sociologists would see his kind as the missing link between the flower children and the heavy metal archetype, but in Western experience thus far, he was *sui generis*. This was not to last. Welcome to the traveling freak.

Thin as a coke dealer's smile and coughing behind the cheapest rot-gut tobacco available, he had glee in his eyes and knots in his beard. His hair was long and obviously innocent of Sassoon's scissors, his face burned to the point where his teeth seemed to gleam, which flattered them. From south to north, he wore: leather Indian sandals with loops for the big toe, broken in but still not bending the

way western shoemakers would want; pajama pants of thin cotton that once had surely been white; a decorative scarf, printed in light purple with symbols and miscellaneous icons of presumably religious origin and worn as a sort of belt; a buttonless shirt with wide, three-quarter-length sleeves and an embroidered pattern around its deep vee neck, under an extremely small waistcoat with pockets big enough at a pinch for rolling papers and loud enough in its psychedelic weirdness to wake up the street with its angular patterns of red and gold and blue from the high Himalaya. Prayer beads, ankle bracelet, copper amulet and silver earrings completed the ensemble. Had he been French, he would have topped it off with kohl around the eyes, but even without that final touch, he looked as bizarre even in Greece as a tropical fish in a London pet shop.

Like the fish, he would fade when he languished too long out of his element.

“How long you been gone?” asked Blackie, talking as much to talk as anything.

“Three months, I guess, pretty much. I pissed off early so I better not get back late.” He chuckled and re-lit his bidi, offering them around. “You tried these? El cheapo Indian ciggies, sort of. They’re great, except they’re always going out. Once I found these, I only bought regular fags to make joints with.”

“Good smoke?”

“Oh man, it’s everywhere. Leastwise, once you get past Iran.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. It’s not too cool here and for Chrissake be careful in Turkey and Iran. You heard of the Sultan Ahmet?”

“Uh-uh. Where’s that?”

“Place to go in Istanbul. You want to check out what’s happening, go to the Pudding Shop in Sultan Ahmet. Don’t eat there, it’s awful and anyway it’s full of fucking Aussie overlanders, right pricks the lot of them, but everyone knows where it is, it’s got a bulletin board and everything, and there’s lots of cheap hotels right near it. They’re all about the same I reckon.

“Anyway if you hang around Sultan Ahmet, this asshole’ll come up and ask if you want to score some hash. Just don’t do it. This is the deal: He

shows you a lump, decent size piece, wants twenty lire or so for it, seems reasonable, you score, you head off to your room and you haven’t even shut the door when the cops getcha. They take you for whatever they think they can get — ten quid, hundred bucks, whatever, depending — and if you don’t pay you’re looking at ten years in a fucking Turkish nick and you don’t want to even think about that, so you pay up. The cops kick back some of it to the front guy and flip him back the dope too. That asshole’s sold the same bit of hash god knows how many times this summer.”

Blackie was nodding his head in appreciation.

“So he gets it coming and going.”

“Too fucking right, mate, as the Aussies say. He keeps your bread, he gets a cut of the pay-off money and goes off to do it all over again. It’s fucking criminal is what it is.” He cracked up again. The spirit of the holy jokester was in fine form.

This was the *Baedeker*, the *Bradshaw*, the *Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit* of the time, and a damn sight more accurate than most: Talk to your fellow travelers and find out where to go. The only freak guidebook available at the time was BIT’s, which basically told you to ‘ignore this book’ (not *this* one, theirs), although the hilarious Douglas Brown was already getting his research together for the groovy cats with the bread to score his rap and the efficient Tony Wheeler* would soon be on the scene. In fact, there probably weren’t enough people on the road to make a viable market, not in the sense that Paris or Rome had a tourist market ... but there were certainly enough to form a floating community. And, like plaid-trousered and polka-dotted Mid-Westerners lost in Europe on \$5 (then 10, then 20 ... 50) a day, they had their dress code, their rituals of inclusion, their shared tastes, their need to spend time with their own in the midst of the strangeness around them. When you saw another freak you

*Tony and his wife Maureen founded Lonely Planet to publish *across ASIA on the cheap* in 1973. Tony was kind enough to make available not only a photocopy of his first edition but also one of Brown’s long-lost tome *Overland to India*, published in 1971 by new press in Toronto, a classic of the era that Flip&Jane once hauled all over the continent with emotions that developed from interest to anger to extreme amusement.

said hi, and then you talked. And you talked about where you'd been and where you were going, and how, and what it cost.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? It was.

This technique wouldn't have worked so well for those in a tearing hurry to register proof of propinquity by exposing emulsion and jetting away. A series of social engagements were called for, ceremonial consumption of local beverages and, where not absolutely contra-indicated, other relaxing substances. One tended to hang out a while, resting between overnight buses or waiting for the other shirt to dry, considering options and counting cash, passing the map and speculating on the infinite possibilities it suggested.

In the end, you followed the trail. It was built around available local public transportation — the Magic Bus came later, offering an almost-scheduled service from Amsterdam to Delhi in converted vans

with mattresses in the back — which was the source of a lot of the charm, much of the discomfort and all of the savings. West Asia on a dollar a day, if you didn't mind discomfort. Mediæval saints were said to recommend starving and mortification as spiritual exercises and not a few young freaks were similarly tempted. The normal reasons, however, were neither religious nor masochistic. They were much simpler. The less you spent each day, the more days you could afford to stay on the road.

Standard cultural conditioning, once again — 'MORE IS BETTER' but incorporating that lovely late-sixties twist 'LESS IS MORE'. So less was more or less better because less gave you more which was naturally better than less even though you couldn't have more without wanting less, which was clearly the not-goal not to aim for in the endless quest for not-being, or nirvana.

Have a chillum and ponder.

Few rich men own their own property. The property owns them.

R.G. Ingersoll,*
Address to the McKinley
League, New York, 1896

THE CHURCH ANNIE WAS HEADING FOR looked like someone's fantasy of ancient Greece, with steps and columns facing grandly over a rather ordinary four-lane street, not far from Lucky's supermarket and Thrifty's drug store. Whoever had cobbled together the pseudo-classic build-by-numbers holier-than-thou God-is-our-heavenly-banker-and-we-are-in-control design had achieved a complete dissociation from its surroundings that in its own way was right out there with the best of the drive-in Elvis Memorial Chapels of Love in the Nevada desert. Unfortunately the construction was better than the architecture, so it would take more than a blast of trumpets to tear the monstrosity down.

The Pastor, whose taste was as finely developed as his humanitarian sensibility, had looked hopefully for signs of distress after the almost-great quake, but was now resigned to remaining at least until higher authority determined that the road's four lanes should be fruitful and multiply. He would probably have been happier with a God-in-a-Box prayers-to-go operation, especially since the congregation rarely filled a quarter of the house, but he made do.

The one major benefit of the grandiose structure was that it included all manner of useful rooms at the side and back, which housed a small preschool by day, and were always available to community organizations by night, for a nominal fee if they could afford it. Any group that was not positively in favor of war and oppression or actively against peace and civil rights was welcome. That let out the White Aryan Resistance, for example, and arguably a number of groups whose members owned large living rooms. Turning down fascists,

*Perhaps alluding to this comment by Robert Burton, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621–1651: [The rich] are indeed rather possessed by their money than possessors.

however, was not a problem; scheduling meetings of the elect so they didn't overlap had been, until the soft-hearted minister turned it over to his more efficient secretary. Now the evening rush put Sundays to shame.

Annie turned right at the colonnade, as per instructions, and sought a place to park. The annoying little digital clock on the dash was blinking in surprise that she was early. In its own way, this was as aggravating as its usual censorious listing of how late she was, and more by the minute young lady, see here. Her irritation, as much as her promptness, was a mark of anxiety. It wasn't every day she did something new.

She walked up the steps to and through the side door near the back, following a large man with a long blond ponytail. Smiling nervously, she called after him, "Is this where the Gulf War group is meeting?"

He turned to reveal a wispy beard that scarcely concealed an oversized baby face. The beginnings of a twitch played around the corners of his mouth.

"If you mean the PGPC, right through that door. If you want the war group, you have to go to the Pentagon."

There was a little edge to his tone. Annie couldn't tell if he was giving her a friendly smile or a sarcastic smirk but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Right," she said, "The *anti*-war group. I sort of didn't think you were in the army." The pink triangle badge on his chest was a dead give-away but she didn't feel confident enough to specify.

"Maybe I'm undercover," he said, but his amusement was becoming less aggressive as he saw her holding her own.

She shook her head, chuckling, and followed him into the room. Six tables were arranged in a U shape, with the twin stems bracketing an old blackboard, framed in wood and featuring three-letter

words with a in the middle, written large — cat, mat, fat... Two men and a woman, all in their early twenties, were kidding around by the board, trying to work all the words into sentences.

“The fat rat batted the cat on the mat,” offered one.

“No, no,” said another, “The cat in a hat sat on the mat with the bat and the fat rat. We want to keep it peaceful.”

“You want a Gandhian *rat?*” asked the woman incredulously. She was about half the height of the second speaker but apparently made it up in feistiness.

“Don’t be species-centric,” corrected her comrade. “Why do you think they put so much effort into torturing rats anyway? It’s ’cause they’re smart.”

Right on, thought Annie, I must have come to the right place. Over by the cross-wise tables, an old bald guy was conferring with the man she had seen making the announcement on campus and writing something on a large piece of paper. People were filing in, nodding to each other and taking seats. Annie decided she had better grab one and chose one discreetly in the middle of a long side. She felt kind of isolated, with everyone else, it seemed, sharing greetings if not confidences, but there was another woman sitting quietly opposite her, fiddling with some sewing and that made her feel a little better about just waiting. The tall rat-lover slid into the seat on her right and said “Hi” in a friendly tone. He looked as though he would say more but the bald guy was noisily clearing his throat to get attention.

“Agenda items, anyone?” he called to the room.

“Shouldn’t we do check-in first?” retorted the bearded blond Annie had followed in, who had settled down at the far corner.

“OK,” said the first guy, “Let’s do check-ins and then agenda review, OK?”

Most of the people raised their hands and twiddled their fingers. Annie was puzzled but rat-man leaned over and whispered, “That means we have consensus, we all agree.” Annie nodded, mouthed “Thanks” and wiggled her fingers like the rest.

“Well, I’ll start,” said the guy who seemed to be in charge. “My name is Luke Gasheon and I’m a member of the Greens but I’m not authorized to

represent them at this meeting. We consensed last week that we’d try to pick a facilitator at the end of each meeting, to draft an agenda, and I agreed to facilitate this meeting. I’d like to welcome everyone, especially I see some new faces...” He paused to nod at Annie and at a guy sitting a few places to her left. “And I’ll try to explain as we go along. First thing we do is just go round and say who we are and maybe a little about how we’re doing and so on, just briefly, and anyway I’m Luke and I’m doing pretty good tonight.” He gestured to the person on his left, who was so far the only person Annie remembered having seen anywhere before.

“I’m Eric,” he muttered and left it at that.

“I’m Graham,” said the next guy, a slender youth with very long, very straight, very beautiful, nearly blond hair that he pushed back over his shoulders. “I just heard — someone picked it up from PeaceNet I think — anyway I heard from Phil Frank that the Pentagon just ordered 250,000 body bags. Extras. I mean, I’m sure they keep them in stock, right? Anyway I thought we all ought to know that and we should find some way of telling everyone.”

“We can put it on agenda review,” interrupted Luke.

“Yeah, right. Anyway I just, I’m kinda blown away by it. Check.”

“I’m Sunshine,” said the woman with the sewing. “And I just can’t ... how do they even think about it? I don’t know, every time I think about what they’re doing I get so upset. I’m glad to be here, because otherwise I might just, y’know, kind of ignore what’s happening, and anyway maybe we can stop it. So. It’s good to see all of you again, and it’s good to see a new person, and especially a woman.” She looked Annie in the eye. “Hi.”

“Oh no,” said someone further round the table, “Not gender balance again.” He was smiling, almost joking, but evidently hit a sore spot, for Sunshine bristled.

“I didn’t say that,” she objected.

“Process!” came the call from several people at once. “Process!”

“All right, all right,” said Luke. “No dialogue, and anyway we’re still on check-in.”

Annie was a little confused by all the back and forth, but on balance encouraged. These people

seemed to have their own rules and she figured she could always learn rules, while more importantly they seemed to be her kind of folks, more or less. There weren't enough women, that was true, and as usual in Santa Cruz the crowd was white, but at least the people were real. No suits! Another prejudice, she knew full well, but so what. She realized that, especially after finding out that they met at a church, she had half-expected and entirely feared a convocation of missionary Christians wearing trousers with turn-ups. Instead she seemed to have stumbled into a congregation of her peers, only politically more so. Certainly worth staying awake for.

The introductions rumbled on, flooding Annie with more data than she could assimilate in real time. She relaxed into it, allowing herself to be satisfied with general impressions. There seemed to be a coterie of young people, recent graduates perhaps, and then a random scattering of ages thirty to seventy, maybe more. People kept coming in until there were maybe two dozen in the room, which was getting full. Two of the arrivals stood out, a tall skinny guy with terrible teeth who refused a seat and propped himself against the window, muttering something vague about being connected with the networks and keeping the light shining, and a little girl of about two, who toddled in with an armful of toys. She was shepherded by an anxious dad, who settled them both on a couch by the back wall and greeted the company with a quiet wave.

At her own turn, she explained herself with a quiet, "Hi, I'm Annie and I don't like what's happening in the Gulf and I was on campus last Friday night and I saw, um, Eric, and I picked up a flyer about the Military Recruitment Center and I thought I'd find out what was happening." A chorus of nods and mmm's shuffled around the table and the group focus moved on, to her relief.

As the circle reached completion, the blond guy — "Patrick," he had said by way of check-in, and nothing else — raised his hand again, and gained acknowledgment.

"Vibes-watcher and time-keeper," he prompted.

Luke looked vaguely out of sorts, and Annie diagnosed a spat of male territoriality. Piss on my turf, would you? She was somewhat amused by this, her frustration at its absurdity balanced by a

sort of relief that she hadn't left the familiar world of conflict. Patrick's next move, however, did surprise her.

"I'm sorry, Luke," he said, clearly breaking the rules by not waiting to be called on and yet trying to mend them at the same time. "I should let you facilitate at your own speed. I call the vibes against myself."

There was certainly something ritualistic about the apology, especially its wording, yet its sincerity was obvious. Somehow its contradictions seemed to encapsulate the atmosphere.

Annie spent the meeting switching between modes of passive participation. She didn't contribute, in the sense of speaking and making suggestions, although quietly sympathetic listeners are valuable in any meeting, but she split her time between focusing on the subject at hand and on the type of group it was. And then she backed off from the present in an unquenchable attempt to integrate the experience. Foolish, of course — insufficient data — but she would, wouldn't she.

Patrick did intrigue her, and for good reasons that she wasn't yet ready to probe. He was obviously management material to the bone, quick and incisive, with the kind of intelligence that could extract the nub of a suggestion and recast it to include the gist of other ideas. Luke was the nominal facilitator but it seemed that Patrick was running the meeting, letting topics drift by without comment if he simply agreed, and effectively blocking decisions when they didn't naturally go the way he wanted. Some of the time there was a passive-aggressive cast to his behavior, as though he would pout for what he wanted even if he refused to fight; sometimes he would drift away, his eyes roaming the ceiling and his face turning slack. Just when he was about to look like a first-class jerk, however, he would snap back to attention and present a cogent plan, a timetable for the action a week from Thursday, for example, that was close enough to satisfying everyone's demands that a trivial compromise would settle it. The only question that remained was, did he consciously include the deliberate mistake, or was it left in the plan out of some genius for management by committee that even he was not aware of? Only his creator knew for sure.

There is nothing wrong with management skills *per se* (let us postulate), but they sometimes seem odd when exercised in the trappings of the dearly beloved (and nowhere near as dead as some would have us believe) counter-culture. And that's where Patrick was such a gorgeous manifestation of contradiction. It wasn't just looks: Long-haired redneck dopers long ago made the transition from paradox to cliché and did it quicker than Duane Allman and Dickie Betts could consummate a solo, while the tie-dyed family of the Grateful Dead developed an efficient multi-million dollar marketing division that won the ungrudging respect of many a Brooks Brother. Certain kinds of straight style were certainly incompatible with radical society, principally uncomfortable ones from high heels to stiff collars, but no kind of bent clothing disqualified anyone from straight thinking.

What Patrick had was a case, in fact a truckload, of fully internalized PC instincts. He believed, Oh Lord, he truly believed, in consensus process, in the value of equality, and in the danger of trusting in leaders.

Patrick the anarchist leader.

Every time he saw that headline rising in his brain he cringed and shrank into his considerable shell. And every time he saw something ludicrously incompetent developing that surely he could fix, the urge arose to plunge right in. Since, like Oscar, he could resist everything except temptation, plunge he often did, only to bring himself up short and gasping in the awful realization that he was leading again.

Paradox as paradigm, and what the hell is wrong with that?

Annie worked out something close to this a little later, but she sat through the meeting in a general aura of comfort. The disagreements were muted — that they agreed on a vibes watcher was an excellent start to not needing one — and sharpest on the most trivial of issues. There was a boring and argumentative passage not long before the end, when they were discussing the name of the group. In rock'n'roll terms, this was the drum solo of the performance, the definitive proof that, as Robert Christgau once wrote, it's not hard to rock out in

9/8 time — it's impossible. No-one seriously interested in that kind of bureaucratic debate was qualified by political inclination to take part in it. No wonder it dragged on.

"We're not a coalition because we're just here as individuals, not representing organizations."

"That's what I like about it."

"There isn't any Persia anyway, that's just a colonialist imposition."

"It's geographic, not political."

"I think we're a committee."

"A nonviolent committee."

"Let's make it the Persian Gulf Peace Group, then we can be the pee gee squared."

"Group is not an 'in' word. I will not be associated with a group."

"I'm tired of those words like 'nonviolent'; how about 'harmonious'?"

"Look, I'm for all this stuff and so on, but 'harmonious' means we're getting near the compost end of natural."

This brought a longed-for laugh that defused the discussion and let Luke finally table the discussion till next meeting (again).

Announcements followed, many and varied, highlighted by a blizzard of fuzzy photocopies and an unstoppable ramble from the lamppost guy with the dodgy incisors that was accepted in good part, evidently as a payback for his complete silence during the rest of the meeting. That led to check-out, another go around the table, largely devoted to mutual politeness and thanks to the facilitator but occasionally interspersed with thought.

"You know," said the guy on Annie's right, "I really enjoy spending this time with all of you. I'm glad we come together to try to do something about, well, George's war and all that but mostly it's the coming together that I like and I think it's even more significant than the doing. What we're doing with ourselves is actually more important in the long run than what we're trying to do out there. We're learning to respect each other and our differences and our agreements and that gives me a really good feeling. Thanks."

Annie had nothing to add, but plenty to take away.

19

Americans have a special horror of giving up control, of letting things happen in their own way without interference. They would like to jump down into their stomachs and digest the food and shovel the shit out.

William S. Burroughs,
Naked Lunch, 1959

WHITEY WAS OUT OF HIS ELEMENT and getting by on his deep, natural reserves of cool. He was used to an environment he understood, one he'd invested time and energy in mastering, where people gave him respect and looked to him to tell them what to do. Suddenly, he was in the middle of something strange, where he didn't know the rules and couldn't tell straight off which way to go. He could handle it, he knew that, he'd handled new scenes before, but it was something of a shock to be reminded that he had to put in the effort.

Worse, his partner was doing it better. Now, that was new. Their entire relationship had been based on a power structure, implicit but clearly understood, that rested on Whitey's superior understanding of the essence of the world they lived in. The week before they left had only brought this more clearly to the surface. Blackie would fill in the blanks, ice the microdots and brew the teas, but his intelligence and capacity for detail operated under Whitey's direction.

No more. It was Blackie that established the first, easy relationships with the compadres of the highway, Blackie who had the initial grasp of the geography of the region, Blackie who thought to zip down to the tourist office and pick up a free map of Istanbul — the crossroads of the ancient world, they read, with interest — and a minimal Turkish phrase-book, so it was Blackie that learned to stumble through a currency transaction outside the Blue Mosque and Blackie who picked the hotel they stayed in. It was profoundly disorienting for both of them.

The white suit came out of a need for control. Need it be mentioned that this was not the result of any conscious deliberation on the subject of compensation mechanisms but rather something that, pressed, Whitey might have described as a whim

that felt right at the moment? At that, he'd probably have looked to his mate to supply the *mot juste*. Still, sartorial responses to any environment fall into one of three basic categories — the conventional (pin-stripes in the City, pajama pants on the hippie trail), the inattentive (absent-minded or vaguely concerned with warmth) and the costume ball (pick a personality and dress to match). Which one represents an attempt to assert individuality over a flickering and transient universe? Which sounds like the most fun?

The pair of them were wandering aimlessly through the covered bazaar one afternoon, cheerful behind sensory overload, sugar and thick Turkish coffee. They fondled the amulets and pretended to bargain over candlesticks. They passed aisles of sandals, rows of rugs, even counters filled with electric lamps, and happened on the clothing section. There were racks of rotten imitations of shirts that had been fashionable five years back, when Engerlund swung like a pendulum do and Mary's quant counted for more than her qual. There were knock-off jeans that copied imitation Levi's and almost spelled the brand names right. There were hustlers with second-hand lines to cover the deficiencies of their second-hand gear. It felt just like home.

"It's Kensington Market without chairs," suggested Blackie.

"Portobello Road with a roof on it," countered Whitey. "Hey, look at that."

The suit was hanging at the back of a booth, sneering quietly at its surroundings. It was an off-white, two-piece, double-breasted number with turn-ups and, on inspection, proved to have a remarkably authentic-looking Jermyn Street tailor's tag on the inside pocket. The entrepreneur in charge had some enthusiastic tale about an English

milord who had traded it for a local costume in an attempt to infiltrate the seraglio. He was stronger on identifying salable myths than on historical accuracy, the Sultan's harem having vanished long before the lounge suit made its appearance; the item in question had in fact been lifted from the Hilton suite of a pretentious American not two weeks earlier, and matured in the back room until the former owner had flown away with the paperwork for his pumped-up insurance claim. Whitey endured the classist sales pitch without comment, checked the size — 40 chest, according to the tab — then cut through the crap.

“Try it on?”

Behind the curtain was a tiny private area for fittings, and in front of the stall was a full-length mirror with only a slight ripple in its surface. The shoulders were the very thing, the pants perhaps a smidgen on the loose side (“Nonsense!” they retorted sharply. “This is simply a comfortable fit. None of your pop-star instant vasectomies for us. We are a classic style.”) but exactly the right length for low heels.

“It's *you*,” cried Blackie. “It's perfect. It's the *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, it's *Casablanca*, it's everyone's dream of a tropical outfit.” He cracked up laughing, bouncing across the aisles and annoying the serious shoppers. “It's fabulous.”

“Cool, innit?” agreed Whitey, adjusting the fit around his armpits.

“Man, that'll knock 'em dead in India,” Blackie burred on. “A porter for Bwana, no that's Africa isn't it, Sahib, that's right, chop chop, tucker for the Sahib.”

“Chop chop's Chink.”

“Well, whatever they say in India. That's amazing, man. Just think what that'll do to the heads of the border geeks.”

“Freak out the punters.”

“Very true, my lord. Would you like me to do the honors? We do not wish to be robbed.”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Yessir, Mr Whitey, sir. Leave this one to me.”

Negotiations dragged on through much of the afternoon, and encompassed more than one round of tea and several diplomatic periods of rest and recuperation during which the conversation turned

general. The numbers gradually approached each other. They started at Saville Row full retail on the one side and back-of-a-barrow-and-rather-warmish on the other, which was a significant discrepancy, and ended up somewhere just south of Take-Six-on-sale, a major concession on the part of the shopkeeper but then his expenses had been limited and he came to approve of these young Englishmen. They had a proper respect for procedure (alternative translation: a lot of time to kill). It was a pleasure to do business with them.

None but the most disingenuous would claim to be ignorant of the effect of floral prints with beards on the teeming grays of Fenchurch Street. And Whitey certainly understood the statement his suit would make in the legendary opium dens of Pakistan. St John wore one from time to time, with whiskers and mane — it would be immortalized on the *Abbey Road* cover not long thereafter — and probably for many of the same reasons, but it was unlikely that you would run into him at a greasy spoon in northern Iran, or squatting by the side of a broken-down bus just east of Qandahar, or even taking a morning break at the Coffee House in Connaught Place. The Lennon look was best on the front page or the TV news. Whitey had every intention of wearing the wretched thing out.

It said, “I'm here.” It said, “I want to be seen.” It said — well, much of what it said would depend on who was listening. In its pristine glamour, it was read as a claim to wealth; as it took on a layer or two of dust, it acquired a patina of world-weary existential angst, or faded chic, or insufferable pretension, or fearsome repulsiveness or ferocious attraction. The really cool response was no response at all, because that was the response it was not programmed to elicit, but the suit was sharp and woe on the hapless hipster who merely pretended not to notice it, for unto him would fall the requirement of competing in the Hipness Olympics, where the aim is not to win but to avoid taking part. The suit controlled the environment by forcing a response from all who encountered it. Now *there's* a way to make yourself memorable.

White tennies were easy to find, and white shirts were standard issue and available cheap. The look was set and Blackie, who was most of the way

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there already, got into the spirit. He had the jacket, which was practical, and black cord jeans, ditto, and of course zippered black boots from Anello and Davide, appropriate for every occasion, so he simply dumped the pretty blouses and scoured the

stalls for black shirts. Cotton T's were the best he could get, but they weren't out for the Ritz here. Ties would have been over the top.

The re-invention of their selves was under way. The trip was on.

For all their psychedelic unpredictability, the Dead remained a working group longer than most. It wasn't until fall 1974 that they disbanded for an indefinite period. Their fans, an unusually loyal lot known as Dead Heads, remained utterly confident of a revival.

Charles Perry, "The Sound of San Francisco"
in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, ed.
Jim Miller, New York: Rolling Stone Press, Random House, 1976

LYING IS NEVER HIP, exactly, but mystery is definitely cool and mysteries, like lies, depend on hidden truths. Annie was trying to think as she hit the highway, but she survived the drive anyway. What should she tell Brendan? What, after all, *was* there to tell Brendan? What on earth was going on anyway?

Laying it out unsorted like that, be it noted, was not an available option.

Being a woman of mystery had its appeal, as did being a beacon of forthright honesty. Either way, however, she had to know what was going on, and it was increasingly obvious (even to her) that she didn't. Map reading 101: Identify a landmark, USGS survey marker, hilltop, river, stream, creek, brook, or anything. You have to find a starting point.

Mindlessly steering the Rabbit up Graham Hill Road, Annie was in a strange state, half-thinking, half-feeling, vaguely luxuriating around game metaphors. Like most acidheads, past present and future, she found the concept of human interactions as patterns of consensual rule-bound activity intuitively appealing. Like most non-academics, she manipulated theory best through concrete example. Baseball, say, not a fancy of hers, which helped: She had a general idea of what was going on, uncomplicated by details, love or real interest.

To hit the ball, she had to get to bat, and she wasn't in the on-deck circle. She wasn't in the dug-out. She wasn't even in uniform. Hell, in the panicky reality of a dream, she didn't even know the address of the ballpark and she was stuck across town without cabfare trying to get directions from smiling tourists who didn't speak her language.

Downshifting to roll through the stop sign at Sims Road, she took herself firmly in hand. Para-

noia, she asserted, a pointless indulgence. Shape up or ship out. Or? And? Uh-oh.

The house was warm and smelled faintly of grass. Brendan was curled up in the big chair, with his legs under him and his head deep in the Cretaceous, courtesy of Stephen Jay Gould. The standing lamp behind him threw his face into shadow but for the reflections off the page, as the stereo washed the room with rhythmic browns, rippling guitar leads and saxophone spikes. The melody, like the scene, was familiar but the performance, like the book, was new. Annie breathed a contact "Hi."

"Hey there." He put a finger on the book and looked up with a soft smile. "Recognize this?"

"Sounds like jazz," she ventured with vague disapproval.

"Anything else?"

"Kinda like the Dead."

"Yeah!" exulted Brendan. "It's the new Dead album, I got it on the way home, it's great, they got Branford Marsalis to play with them on *Eyes of the World*."

And so it went. There was no decision for Annie to make on the Brendan question, she understood all of a sudden; the decision seemed to be that there was no question; or the decision was that there seemed to be no question; or something ... perhaps she had found, if not the ballpark, then at least the direction she had to head in order to find it. He did ask about the meeting but he barely seemed to notice that she yawned away comment as if overwhelmingly tired. She, on the other hand, did notice, which seemed odd, which occurred to her, which was a surprise, which seemed unusual or at least somehow wrong, as she vaguely saw herself falling uncontrolled towards infinite regress.

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But she did see herself, which was something,
even if what she saw was someone completely out
of control.

So was he, and she started to see that too.
Opposites may attract, but in long relationships
like calls to like.

Mirror, mirror in the bed
What's this warning in my head?
If at night my soul should wake
Would you let it crash and break?
Or keep it soft and safe and warm
Rested well and free from harm?
Mirror bright, mirror gleaming
Someday shall we rise up screaming?

People say that life is the thing but I prefer reading

Logan Pearsall Smith,
 “Myself,” *Afterthoughts*, 1931

RESPLENDENT IN THEIR NEW GEAR, Blackie and Whitey boarded the Erzerum Express, which meanders at a leisurely pace through the not-especially-lovely countryside of central Turkey. This was the classic, or direct, version of the Trail. Other alternatives included taking a boat ride along the shore of the Black Sea, attempting to hitch-hike the coastal road (possible but usually more expensive, since slower), and brazening the Turkish bus system; this last may have been a mere bagatelle for veterans heading west who’d cut their teeth on Afghani and honed them on Nepali approximations of the long-distance coach, but it represented a considerable challenge for the inexperienced heading towards the depths of the Mysterious Orient for the first time.

Buses in Iran, however, were something else. Say what you will about His Most Unbelievably Imperial Majesty Reza Shah Pahlevi, King of Kings, Lord of Hosts, Lackey of Langley, Master of Creative Genealogy and Elevator Shoes, under his absurd and vicious régime the buses ran on time. They put Greyhound to shame, too, with their scrupulous cleanliness, air-conditioning, piped-in pop music and comfortable seats. It was a function of the country’s development status: Too poor (as was Greece) for widespread car ownership, it was rich enough to invest oil revenues in roads on which to burn it — ideal conditions for the growth and development of internal combustion engines. Add in a national beautification project sponsored no doubt by the lovely Mrs Shah, a not-very-statuesque sort-of-stunner who sat down for all official photos so that her diminutive husband could stare commandingly over her shoulder, and you had a really charming transportation system, featuring fountains to herald the main towns with hosannas before the statues of His Immaculate Parent, the descendant of a hundred generations of monarchs, ninety-eight or so of whom had languished in self-

effacing oblivion until the time would come when the brothers Dulles might restore their heir to his rightful place on the Peacock Throne.

Yes, well, Mrs LBJ campaigned against billboards while her hubby flung beer cans over the desert. We all have our bullshit to bear.

Teheran was a town of contrasts — the crossroads of the ancient world, they were surprised to discover — that had developed an efficient system for housing Western wanderers. It directed them to the Amir Kabir, an inconveniently situated hotel above a spectacularly enormous tire store. Once the weary had picked their way between the retreads and the ersatz Michelins, they were surprised to discover hot showers, English menus and tolerably clean rooms for six bob* a night. There were other places to stay but they generally cost more, provided less, and demanded knowledge of Farsi. Shocking as it may seem, even in those pre-revolutionary days, the Persian proletariat simply didn’t like Europeans. Money alone just didn’t cut it. Plenty of eminently intelligent Iranian restaurateurs would pass up a sale rather than sully their premises with infidel lusts. Meshed was worse, since it is a holy city — it was not uncommon there to spend hours searching for a café that did not put up the shutters on sight of a tourist — but Teheran was not wildly accommodating. Unless of course you were seriously rich, in which case, as a presumed close

*Six bob was about 70¢ US at the time, and became 30p in the UK after decimalization some sixteen months later. Strange that, changing from a time-honored duodecimal-cum-vigesimal system understood by every British schoolchild (how much do you get back from half a crown if you buy two big chocs at fourpence-ha’penny? one and nine, of course ... no wonder they built an empire) to one under which no one can make change without consulting a computer. Might as well have gone straight to binary and cut out the middle person.

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personal friend of the Shah's, the Rolex was your oyster, and heavily discounted too since you didn't need the money. Off in the backstreets, a tumbrel was being constructed with your name on it, but please don't give it a thought. No one else did.

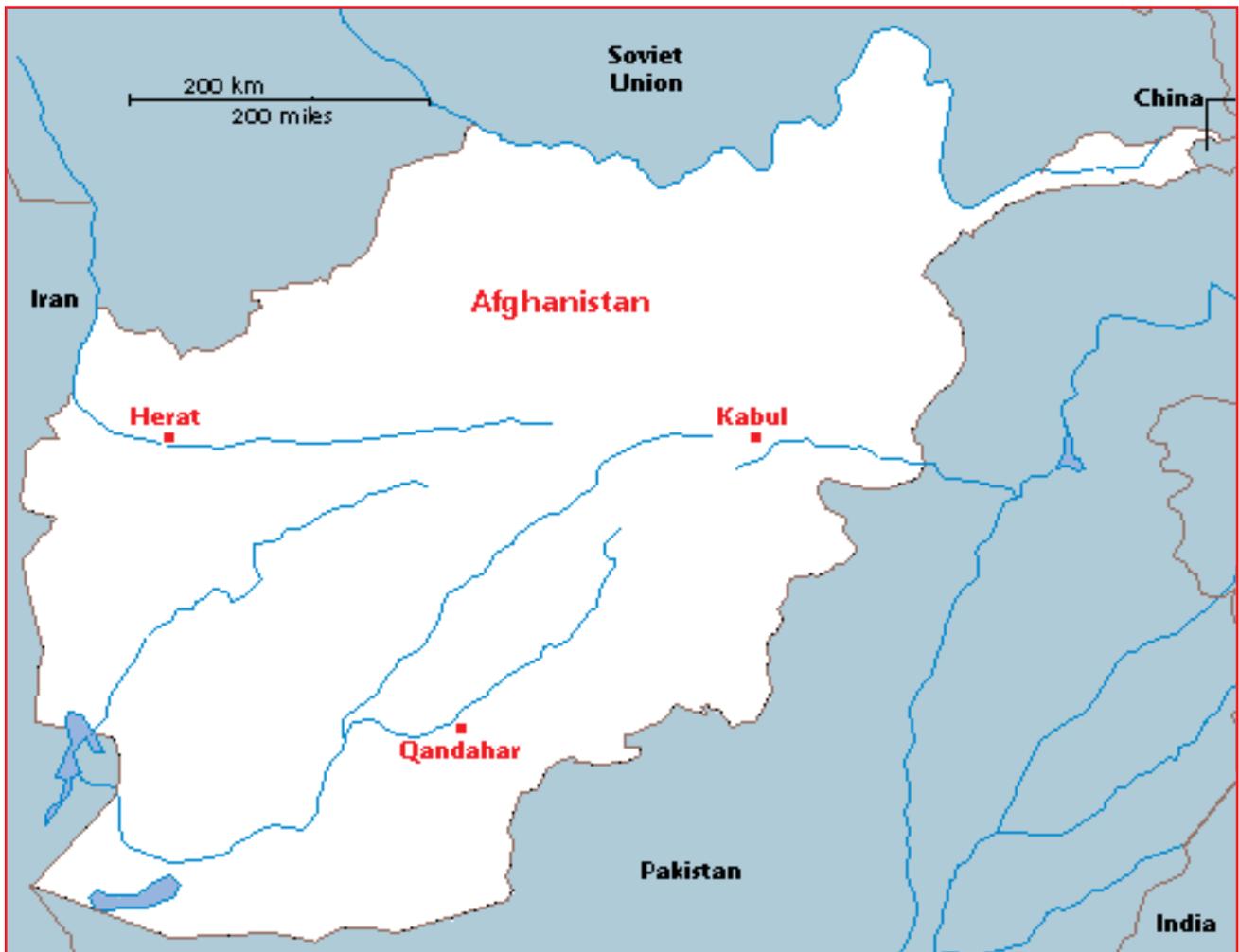
All this was still a blur to our young protagonists. They soaked it in, they absorbed the experience, but mostly they tumbled by rote from seat to bench and back on the bus. The land flew by, the people, strangely recognizable and recognizably strange, approached and withdrew, taking money, providing food and shelter and a way to move. It was like living behind a fish-eye lens. The outside world slid into focus and bent away, its moment past. And all this sober as a defendant (the judge probably being half-crooked). No wonder they called it a trip.

Shell-shocked in the Amir Kabir, they opted to head east with all due dispatch, in other words as

soon as the underwear dried. South was Isfahan, legendary home of poetasters and holy mosaics (and beyond question the crossroads of the ancient world), but the call of the hookah was more insistent than the wail of the muezzin. Iran was unusual but what they wanted was flat-out weirdness. When the rush comes, the only thing to do is to ride it all the way out.

They would have taken the train, a well-recommended overnight service, but it was booked for days, so they roughed it by road. Pausing in Meshed long enough to get the picture and, eventually, a surprisingly good omelet, they headed off by degenerating buses to Taybad, the Iranian border post, to Islam Qala, the Afghani border post, and finally to Herat, the most western of the three cities of the then kingdom of Afghanistan.

Geographically, that is.



Boire sans soif et faire l'amour en tout temps, madame; il n'y a que ça qui nous distingue des autres bêtes.

Drinking when we're not thirsty and making love all year round, ma'am; nothing else distinguishes us from other animals.

Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais,
Le Mariage de Figaro, 1785

HONEY," ASKED SEBASTIAN even before Annie was settled, "Are we having fun yet?"

He was sitting with his back to the window, so the indirect north light framed his features and drove his expression back into the darkness of his skin. Annie had to squint as she looked at him, and that was conveniently bad for her skin, so she looked off to the infinite distance over his shoulder.

"That takes coffee," she parried. "It hasn't kicked in yet."

"I can think of other things," he murmured suggestively.

"How *is* your sex life, anyway?" she asked, partly out of genuine interest, well, curiosity, well, nosiness; to some extent as her share of a balanced conversation between friends; and more than anything because she wanted to avoid discussing what she had asked him to meet her to talk about, namely herself. One's most fascinating topic, of course, is always oneself, but at certain times one only wants to discuss oneself superficially. The trouble with friends is they may not let you get away with it. You can't always get what you want ... but you know sometimes you just might find ... you get what you need [cue the London Bach choir with Charlie, Bill and Keef shooin' them along].

In the past ten days, Annie had been to work six times; had been to sleep eleven times if you count a nap on one of her days off; had eaten ten lunch-time yogurts, eight hot dinners, one hurried avocado-and-everything sandwich, and one huge bowl of popcorn-and-wheatgerm, not to mention miscellaneous beverages filled with carbohydrates simple, complex and (in the case of one can from a machine) downright confused; had been jogging four times and for one long walk; had seen a mediocre movie and decided (wrongly but ortho-

doxy insists that she was entitled to her opinion) that the Dead had forgotten how to sing; had passively attended another political meeting and actively avoided discussing the details of it with Brendan; had lost two pounds and found them again; and finally had gotten smart enough to call up Sebastian for a session of his estimable kaffeeklatsch therapy.

"Remember that hunk we saw here last time?" he began.

"You didn't."

"Honey, you better believe it."

"Cradle-snatcher."

"Willie's twenty-one and not at all innocent."

He paused to let the beginning of a smirk roll slowly across his upper lip. "He just looks that way."

"You picked him up here?"

"Right after you left. I have to admit, he helped. I don't think he *had* to let his pencil roll off the table just as I was heading to the bathroom. Of course, a girl doesn't ask."

Annie laughed. She was as close to expressing a direct emotion as she had let herself be in days. Felt good.

"And you took him straight home?" she asked, incredulous. Sebastian always boasted of being a hedonist but somehow she had never been completely clear on the details. Completely anonymous instant bathhouse fucking was something she had learned about from him, occasionally in scabrous and sometimes hilarious detail, and they had shared tales of Chablis-and-roses romancing, which they both enjoyed, but the direct yet individual approach was something in between. How was it done? she wondered. "Did you ask his name first?"

"Of *course*," he cooed, giggling gently. "He's sweet. Actually, if you really want to know..."

“Tell, tell.”

“... he had a study group to go to so we arranged to meet for a drink later on. Three or four, in fact. Brandy Alexanders...”

“Yuck, milkshakes, how tacky,” she complained. “Like a date at DQ with a cheerleader. Did he have a big letter on his sweatshirt?”

“... and *then* we went home,” he continued over her. “Oh, be quiet.”

“So you did seduce him.”

“I did not,” he insisted. “It was more like foreplay. He asked *me* if I was doing anything later.” He paused for reflection and added judiciously, “’Course I asked *him* what he was doing for dinner, and that’s where the study group deal came up. What’s it to you anyway, you never picked up a guy?”

“Never,” she insisted.

“Darling, your nose just grew another inch.”

“Well, it’s been awhile,” she grinned. “And I *always* knew their names.”

“Oooh, touché, I hope.”

“Almost always, anyway.” She drifted away. “There was a guy ... but that was in Goa, which doesn’t count. What was his name anyway? I can’t remember.”

“See? Does it matter? Maybe you never knew.”

“Oh, of course I did. I always believed in relationships, it’s just that, well, they turned over faster back then.”

“Oh, right,” he scoffed. “We will serve no fuck before its time.”

“No, really,” she persevered. “I bet there was more anonymous screwing on Saturday night after the bars closed in Merced than there was in the Haight.”

“Het sex.”

“Yeah, all those cowboys and cowgirls getting loaded and getting laid, they didn’t know who they

were, let alone who they were out in the pickup with.”

“With the rifle in the back window.”

“Absolutely. Phallic, you bet.”

“Darling,” laughed Sebastian, “I didn’t know guns turned you on.”

“Nuh-uh,” she chortled, “Not me. No way. I always figured it was some kind of transference. You know, big gun, little prick.”

“You white folks maybe. Us black studs got big barrels, baby.”

“Oh, donnez-moi un break.”

“You don’t like me as a Panther, darling?”

“Small pee maybe. Oh, God. Don’t make me laugh.”

He giggled in turn and playfully bounced the conversation back to her.

“You ever do it in a pick-up?”

“I never even turned it down in a truck. I wasn’t too popular in high school, specially with the kind of guys who had pick-ups.”

“Aww.”

“Yeah. College was better though.”

“Oh, college is always better.”

“Speaking of which, are you going to see your student again?”

“Eight o’clock, honey.”

“Tonight?”

“You bet.”

“Second date?”

“Third.”

“Oh, my. *Are* we having fun yet?”

“Sho’ nuff, sugar babe.”

“Mm-mm, cut out the Superspade shtick, it doesn’t work.”

“Not for you, honey.”

She laughed again. Damn, but he was good for her.

The going up was worth the coming down

Kris Kristofferson,
 “The Pilgrim — Chapter 33,”
The Silver Tongued Devil and I, 1971,
 also featured in the movie *Cisco Pike*, 1972

“NOW THIS IS A LITTLE MORE LIKE IT,” pronounced Blackie, grandiloquently gesturing towards the square in front.

They had scored on the border, after clearing Immigration and while waiting in line for Customs. The presumption was that under those circumstances one would get ripped off. They probably had been ripped off. Given the quantity, quality and price, however, it was hard to complain. Indeed, after sampling, it was virtually impossible. It was presumably no coincidence that the Customs officials were also moving in something of a slow-motion haze that one might suspect was not entirely unconnected to the same kind of self-imposed handicap against the speedy processing of applications that was slowing down some of their clientele.

Some obnoxious straight arrow from München-Gladbach had the effrontery to complain about the hanging around, so his baggage was taken apart and his toiletries subjected to ridicule. He wouldn't take the hint and pull out his wallet so after about half an hour the game got old and he was waved through. He had difficulty repacking and got a hard time from the driver for holding up the bus. This confused him and he spent about half an hour trying to find someone who would listen to his sad tale but no one was that dumb and finally he shut up.

When the going gets weird, the weird get into it. Finally Blackie and Whitey had reached one of the legendary places where you could kick back and get high and no one gave a shit. It had been a hard week, damn it, they deserved the rest. They hung out, drank tea, rolled 'em and smoked 'em and shared 'em, and passed the time soaking up the psychic landscape. It was a great movie with an authentic location, starring an imported cast of

dozens and featuring a nameless mob of colorful local men and a faceless crowd of black-veiled beings thought to be women. The outside reality was just too much to handle at first; the foreground by-play presented plenty to chew on. Conversation waxed and waned but there were always ripples of interaction to read. Traditional village entertainment: Stare at the neighbors. All the more fun when they're moving on and won't be around to complain.

The German time and motion expert had a plan that got him to Agra in time for the next full moon and took the next available overnight to Kabul. Unfortunately, he picked up a nasty case of amoebic dysentery, perhaps from brushing his teeth too often, and spent an agonizing week in and out of the hotel toilet before trying to escape by eating opium to seal himself up and freewheeling down the Khyber in an ancient jalopy; he gave up and flew home from Karachi, married a drop-out from ballet school and eventually became the first vice-president in his company to vote Green, although he kept it quiet, but that's another story.

Two Aussie boy scouts from Brisbane blinked a bit, circled the wagons and also decided to push on, waiting just long enough to lose the Kraut. They'd done the Official Grand Tour of the Mother Country, complete with dutiful round of European ruins and museums and the standard love/hate relationship to Earl's Court, where the plethora of familiar accents attracted and repelled them in alternating and roughly equal degrees. They believed in sport and sunshine and the promise of a prosperous Queensland and thought these Asians were pretty decent sorts to visit, really, as long as you kept your eye on them.

Every day new pilgrims appeared at the caravanserai, a polyglot potpourri of miscellaneous

misfits, as the men who were then trying to make Nixon and Agnew seem intelligent, or at least fit for polite company, might have put it.* Heading west were the hollow cheeks, some of them sick and most of them in a hurry. Herat was a 22-hour ride from Kabul but if you timed it right you could catch a border bus without a break and pour yourself onto an overnight to Teheran, which in theory arrived early enough for you to head north-west to Turkey that same day, fueled by *nan* and greasy goat stew, numbed by fatigue and cultural overload into accepting the mystery of almighty movement and collapsing into transcendence. Saving on hotels, too.

The eastbound gang were less goal-oriented and tended to stick around longer. In one view, they had reached their mark — if India was the Grail, the symbolic destination of the trip, the endorsed Afghan visa was the badge of the serious traveler — while at the same time they knew they had just been limbering up and this was where the serious adventure started. This was unfair to the major potential for weirdness, danger, dope and stimulation of the last couple of thousand miles of their journey, not to mention such frightening potential side-trips as jaunts to Damascus or Baghdad, but it pointed to part of the game that people didn't always want to cop to. They wanted strange and they wanted safe, they wanted weird and they wanted to invent their own familiarity. They wanted their own playground, and the western grown-ups, who had wrestled for centuries with the unconquerable uniqueness of India, had never taken over Nepal or Afghanistan. Thailand, the other notably uncolonized nation, was already pandering to pricks on R 'n' R from Vietnam (not from Cambodia, no sir, not from Laos neither) and well

*William Safire, who wrote “the nattering nabobs of negativism” for the only Veep ever to be forced to quit, moved on to a *New York Times* column that actually influenced foreign policy in the eighties, while Pat Buchanan, his contemporary as a running dog jackal of the only Pres ever to be forced to quit, ran for President in '92 complaining that the century's most vicious American practitioner of class warfare had betrayed their cause. Then he did it twice more! And some people wonder at the consistency of the U.S. moral collapse over the three decades after My Lai.

on the way to its ugly reputation as the world's red light district. In later years, Nepal would rent its mountains and risk its soul, and the Khyber would again be filled with ambushes and firefights as its people were dragged once more into the ancient games surrounding Russia's desire for a warm-weather port and access to the Persian Gulf, but as the first hopeful bloom of the seventies spread over the east, there was innocence abroad in the starkness of the desert and the mountains.

It was a beautiful canvas.

For the really neat visuals, you had to look at the French. They wanted an audience, that was obvious, and the least you could do was to oblige. *Vogue* is not merely a magazine, it is a national obsession, but sociologists disagree as to whether this is a cause or an effect. Proponents of the view that the French breed the world's extremists cite the global acceptance of the derisive term 'bourgeois' and the reactionary phrase 'épater la bourgeoisie' — as translation, 'to shock the middle class' misses that *je ne sais quoi*, that nuance, the subtle shading of sensitivity that sets the French apart, at least in their own estimation — as evidence that the Gallic temperament, when not more phlegmatic than really necessary, evinced a predisposition to shock that stretched back to Rousseau and beyond. Perhaps this is why so many of them turned to smack. The sins of theft and social ugliness in the traveling community were generally ascribed to 'French junkies' of any nationality or addictive tendency.

Surely this couldn't have been Anglophone prejudice? The youth of France tended to follow their elders in their exaggerated insistence on maintaining their native language instead of speaking English like normal people. It was quite strange. After all, if you weren't lucky enough to be taught English at home, there were always schools. The ex-colonial Asians did very well, the Dutch were usually spot on, the Scandinavians not far behind, even the Germans, with their tendency the verb at the end to gutturally put, could make themselves understood. Why on earth the snail-eating dandies from the wrong side of the Channel wouldn't buckle down and learn to talk properly was quite incomprehensible to most of the Brits, Yanks and Australasians to be found wandering the highway

in South Asia, where the lingua franca (an Italian expression, be it noted in passing) was English. Pure snobbery was the only explanation. It was past time the Frogs got with the modern world.

Probably no one mouthed this nonsense consciously, but to an extraordinary extent the sins of the parents, on both sides, continued to visit my-my-generation. Why don't they all f-f-fade away?

Whether the French freaks were into fashion statements or in-your-face agitprop, they weren't dumb. They toned it down through Turkey and Iran and blossomed into their finest glory in Quetta, if they went the southern route, or else in Herat. The winter was hard, a time for keeping warm and heading south as soon as the passes were clear, and the summer was too hot for comfort, but the spring and autumn were exactly right for clothes as adornment, jewelry as costume, bodies for painting and all the world a stage.

Afghanistan, for obscure reasons that may have had something to do with cheap and ineffective foreign aid of the sort that makes it more blessed to give than to receive, if only because of the tax deductions, was the used clothing store of the world. What the Salvation Army couldn't get rid of at home, it seemed, they shipped off to Kabul, where wily merchants palmed it off on their country cousins. Feminine frocks and polyester pantsuits may or may not have been a hit in the harem — one assumes that the little basic black with pearls would have been considered *de trop* behind the veil but who knows — but mix-and-match masculine clobber was a great success on the street, where the combinations were interesting even to denizens of the King's Road and Carnaby Street.

The army-surplus greatcoat was a practical and popular item, in Chelsea as in Qandahar, and the Londoners would have loved to accessorize it with the bandoleer, loaded with live ammo, and even possibly the calf-tight, crotch-comfortable cotton pants; they would generally, however, have drawn the line at sandals in the snow, and certainly at shapeless suits rejected even by Witnesses on their Watchtower rounds. Button flies were still common but buttons apparently scarce, or considered of questionable utility, so where suit trousers were

worn (mostly on formal occasions for the benefit of foreigners) it was not unusual to see the tail of a traditional vast shirt flying proudly forward beneath the belt. Ties, if they ever accompanied the glad rags, tended to the conceptual, in sketchy approximation of the ideal of the Champs Elysée. The variations on western costume looked satirical and often ridiculous. The people wearing them did not. The gear was cheap and practical and available and of little consequence. A man was a man because that was what he was and what of it?

Should a man, then, choose to invent a wardrobe, why look askance? Every culture has its absurdities, from high heels to starched collars, or from nose-rings to pre-faded jeans. Try explaining to an inescapably poor person why funky is chic; if they catch on to the style of it, try explaining why destroying something in order to sell it as new is good business; if they get that, try putting your rap to some socially useful purpose that needs it, like advocating an end to the weapons industry, for surely you are blessed with the gift that selleth snake-oil in the reptile cage.

In the bazaars of Herat and Kabul, anything you could imagine could be found or fabricated. Besides the pre-owned (and soon-to-be-stone-washed in the river) clothes, there were bolts of cloth, wonderful examples of embroidery, wools and leathers dyed by hand (dubious when wet, for lack of curing) or imported in bulk (perhaps without strict attention to the technical requirements of customs), and plenty of cross-legged tailors with ancient foot-powered Singer sewing machines to assemble the outfit. If you came, they would build it.

Following the French down the road of self-expression through costume, but on the whole much more accessible as individuals, were the Italians. They tended to display their elegant nipples, through curly black chest hair in the case of the males or insouciant shifts for the females (who may have been hardened by the lechers of Rome but soon learned the value of shawls and such for exploring outside of the hotel walls in Muslim countries), and show off silver on their wrists and necks and ears, but laughed at their own pretensions. They were having a high old time and didn't they know it.

(SEARCHING FOR) SOLID GROUND

A little proof for the capitalist universe: Practically none of the freaks headed home with a penny in their pockets, except for the seriously sick (most of whom tried to hit up the embassy for repatriation). Herat and east wasn't a picnic, to be sure, and it wasn't a vacation either, it was a trip and the only way to take it was all the way out. The cheaper the living,

the longer the ride. There were boring conversations aplenty to be had about cheaper rooms and cheaper meals and cheaper ways to hustle back from Z to A, and most people succumbed to that dreary temptation. No one wanted the trip to be over.

Were they having fun yet?

Betcha bottom dollar they were.

We know the truth, not only through our reason, but through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them.

Blaise Pascal,
Pensées, 1670

ANNIE KNEW THE CENTRAL VALLEY the way asthmatics know pollinating plants. Every memory of growing up there was filled with suffocating desperation. College had been her way out and she had never wanted to go back. She couldn't remember ever having wanted anything except to split. Thinking back over thirty-some years, she figured she must have absorbed the desire for escape by some kind of familial osmosis from her mother, who had been stuck there to the day she finally turned up her toes. Jack Handley, her dad, had family scattered down Route 99 from Lodi to Fresno; she had cousins dotted east from there up the Sierra foothills towards Yosemite and Kings Canyon, the kind of rednecks who ran the Best Westerns and Union 76 stations and looked on the nature lovers of the coast as sheep ripe for regular fleecing. When Annie headed for the wilderness, as she sometimes liked to do, she studiously avoided her relatives; they no longer went hunting hippies on the weekend, but they couldn't forgive her for her inadequate consumption of meat, beer, gas and garish souvenirs. Her sort just wasn't wanted, and the feeling was entirely mutual.

Her mother Belle was an Oklahoma refugee who had a pretty good time in San Francisco in the early forties and basically lost touch with her family, which had scattered out of the dust bowl, not exactly on old-Joad wagons but not far off. Pregnant and hitched, she found the road to Turlock a greased downhill slide. It was so easy to let her mother-in-law help and so hard to make her stop. By the time the old witch's powers were waning, Belle was marooned in the mildest of mindless comfort and ready for not much more than television and cheap port wine. Jack totaled the truck and walked away twice in the year after his parents passed on, celebrating his inheritance, but on the third attempt he lost a fight with an eighteen-wheeler and left the women-

folks to fend for themselves, as they figured they had been for years.

Kennedy was President, trouble was brewing with the coloreds (and Castro and, though the fact was not yet widely acknowledged, with faraway Uncle Ho) and Annie was a freshman in high-school who already felt no part of the Central Valley. Raging hormones no doubt, and none the worse for that, but as happens more often than the world likes to admit, they hit her brain as well as her womb. Sure she wanted boys and she wanted them to want her (and, yes, she wanted to want them to want her too; fitting in always matters) but for her life it was more vital that her emotional attitude to society was fixed. The straight world, she concluded, was repulsive. To redefine her analysis in abstract terms comfortable to a later generation, Annie saw the culture she was raised in as racist, sexist, classist, nationalist, ethnocentric, species-centric, egocentric, insupportably hypocritical and indefensibly immoral. In a word, fucked.

It is important to remember that this was an emotional response. Annie was no more of a fool at fourteen than at forty and there was certainly an intellectual component to her point of view but her principles predated their justification. They also predated her daddy's death — she once earned herself a whipping by asking naively what was wrong with Communism if it meant treating everyone the same — but the emotional and financial turbulence that arose from Belle's attempts at single motherhood certainly helped to cut her loose. Some people find themselves in adolescence, others simply discover who they are not; maybe they get the best of the bargain.

As graduation approached, her grades stayed high and she began to wish that she was too. The football team didn't think she was cute, the homecoming crowd thought she was weird, the rich kids

thought she was poor, the poor kids thought she was too clever for her own good, and most everyone thought she was a nigger-loving Commie. She didn't have to say anything, they just knew. It was grossly unfair, since by and large she kept her opinions to herself, but they were of course right. Nevertheless, although she heard about the Gulf of Tonkin incident in '64 and vaguely thought it was wrong to send big planes to drop bombs on peasant rice farmers, the controversy that really engaged her was the one that swept the nation: George, she insisted, was the Beatle she wanted to marry.

Shortly thereafter, Belle made her big mistake. She nixed Berkeley. Belle was all in favor of Annie's going to college as a way of escaping the Naugahyde® Hell™ that preserved her once lively self, now encased in a body as cracked and wrinkled as the couch. Private schools and out-of-state tuitions were off the board; the University of California was at its peak, but so was the Free Speech Movement. Inevitably, Annie thought Berkeley was where it was at, and Davis, the great agricultural school that attracted her brighter classmates, an absolute no-no. But there was this campus opening in Santa Cruz.

You never can tell what woulda or shoulda or coulda but here's a guess: If Annie had gone to Berkeley, she'd have been engaged in fighting the war, and through it the system, and might have ended up as so many did, completely tied in to what she wrestled with. She would naturally have been a charter member of the Free Socialist Republic of Berkeley, and subsequently become identified with the loyal opposition and grown up to high culture, universal day-care, Chez Panisse organic gourmet dining, neighborhood policing, Peet's coffee, shrink raps and silk (not shrink-wraps of plastic), and all the impedimenta of East Bay upper-class (oops; intellectual) life in the Reaganbush era. In the long run, Belle's ghost might not have thought it so bad an end.

Instead, she schooled in a beautiful wooded vacuum, where the students were jammed into temporary trailers, the acid and grass flowed like blood, the concept of the college was scarcely more solid than the buildings that were supposed to rise from the mud, there were no grades for any class ever, the only graduate program was the History of Consciousness

for crying out loud, and the rest of the universe was far, far away and long, long, gone.

This Berkeley view of UCSC is unfair but not totally unrealistic. A lot of very bright kids elected to go to school in the redwoods and of course their surroundings affected their attitudes. Still, most of them got over it and became respectable oenophiles, intelligent attorneys, sensitive parents, conservative liberals and conventionally oxymoronic purveyors of the status quo. Even those who truly felt cut loose from mainstream society generally found a line to hold, often in the university system itself. It's hard to argue with the proposition that what's good enough for Angela Davis is good enough for some white kid (more accurately, it's hard to argue against it successfully, though it would be fun to hear *her* try) and it's worth reminding the Sproul-centrists that the Santa Cruz campus is where the sweet black angel eventually took up residence.

Annie spun out in college. Turned on, tuned in, and avoiding dropping out solely by virtue of native charm, narrative evaluations, and a complete inability to think of anything better to do. Like Blackie in London, like Juanita in Rome, like Klaus in Heidelberg, like Skip the Beard in Brooklyn, like Sebastian (well, if you must, Jimmy at the time) in Oakland, like thousands of others she might or might not some day meet on the avenue, she was learning that the old rules no longer applied and the new ones hadn't been written down yet.

You could hear them, though, you could hear them loud and clear if you turned your radio all the way up into the mystic.

College was just a place you lived while you found out this stuff. Professors professed but no one thought they taught. The students were too busy experimenting, with each other in the age-old games, with new and thrilling choices of what to eat and smoke and drink and wear, with a million different thoughts they thought had never been thought before. And if most of it was not new to the world, all of it was new to them — much having been hidden deliberately by the conspiracy of convention — and the joy was in the discovery. There was plenty of learning going on amid the chaos and the laughter.

The wages of that particular time of sins were life.

25

Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée, car chacun pense en être bien pourvu.

Common sense is the best distributed thing in the world : everyone thinks they have plenty.

René Descartes,
Le Discours de la méthode, 1639

NEW ZEALANDERS ARE TO AUSTRALIANS AS Canadians are to Americans, but less aggressively; they normally rank with the Dutch for all-around multinational sympathetic behavior. They also tend to get lumped in with their more strident neighbors, which they always resent.

The Brisbane boy scouts who had taken the same bus to Herat as Blackie and Whitey had showed up with a pair of Kiwis who, it transpired, had no desire to be viewed as part of an Antipodean quartet. Ed and Barb, the couple from New Zealand, were very healthy, quite sharp and extremely polite, so they adroitly manoeuvred the Okkers into committing to a departure date in time to discover a pressing need to, ah, spend some time contemplating the famous tiles on the fifteenth-century mosque. Barb was a blonde abstainer who looked like an angel and took on all comers at chess; Ed was a friendly type who accepted the occasional toke to be sociable and after a couple of days shocked the assembled company by saying — not announcing, admitting, apologizing or even bragging, just stating because it happened to come up — that he was coming off a stint in the British army.

“Not much on the politics,” he elaborated, “But you got a lot of time off and the skiing was great. That’s how I met Barb.”

“In the army?” puzzled Blackie.

“Skiing.”

“Check,” interjected the cherub in question, with a practised lack of obvious devilry. Whitey was bent over the board in deep concentration and flicked his hair behind his right ear to clear his view and discourage an importunate fly. “I was an instructor,” she continued, “and they assigned me all the English-speaking guys.”

“I’d done a little back home,” he said, “In the South Island ...”

“That’s where I learned too ...”

“But I thought I’d play it down a bit ...”

“Ed needed extra attention, that was obvious ...”

“At the start. And she was a professional ...”

“Ski instructor.”

“What else?”

The angel blushed and made as if to fling a pawn in his direction, but restrained herself. Everyone laughed except Whitey, who reached forward and took her Bishop with his Rook, promoting a losing exchange that only postponed the inevitable. Barb turned her attention back to the game. She knew exactly how she was going to wind it down but she knew that Whitey didn’t and she gave him a chance to catch up by going over the position one more time before taking the Rook with her Knight.

“So anyway,” continued Ed, “I made her a better offer.”

“Oh yes?” countered Barb. “Where’s my paycheck, then?”

“The pay’s not so good,” he admitted, “But the benefits are excellent and there’s no taxes.”

“But the working conditions,” she laughed. “Anyway I didn’t pay taxes in Austria. We left before they caught up with me.” She looked half-proud at her outlaw credentials.

“Ah, yeah, but the company’s all right though, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes.”

They were waiting to get home before they got married and figured this was their big chance to see everything before they got tied down to the farm — her parents ran a country store and his family mostly raised sheep — and the mortgage and the

business of raising kids. How level-headed can you get? They were not reflective types, just well-brought-up young people who believed deeply in doing unto others pretty much the way you'd like them to do unto you and found that in their experience it worked quite well. How were they supposed to know that all the different cultures they'd visited and all the nice people they'd run into along the way would leave them feeling just the slightest bit

empty when they returned to the, so to speak, green green grass of home? Their folks thought they were nuts when they took their two kids with them to teach agriculture in the Philippines, and when they came back the press wrote them up as half-saints or something. This staggered them. They were just Ed and Barb, they explained.

They never did figure out this was anything special.

26

Jumping from boulder to boulder and never falling, with a heavy pack, is easier than it sounds; you just can't fall when you get into the rhythm of the dance.

Jack Kerouac,
The Dharma Bums, 1958

MOST PEOPLE DON'T LIKE BEING ANIMALS. Strange, that, but it gets weirder. Somehow it always does get weirder. That makes some odd kind of sense when what you're thinking about is what we never call the infra- or sub- and often call the super-natural. Fate is weird and weird is certainly our fate.

Even among folk who accept our kinship with the apes, those who (like Annie) notice and respond to emotions in animals are often accused of anthropomorphism. Since 'anima' in Latin means 'soul', it would make more sense to say that people at their finest are being animalistic.

Anthropocentrism we are all used to; it's just an extension of the casual racism that infests us. Since the term itself is, not to put too fine a point on it, anthropocentric, modern usage has developed the less elegant phrase 'species-centric' to generalize the point, but not far enough. We tend to be also genus-, family-, order-, class-, phylum-, kingdom- and even biology-centric.

We actually call the place we hang out the universe, as if there couldn't be any other.*

Gosh, we're awful.

Well, perhaps we can't help it.

The fact remains, however, that we stretch and bend and lean and twist, and sometimes we break, just like the earth underneath our feet. Every month the tides pull us this way and that, and some of us bleed and all of us sway through swings of mood. Often, like the earth, we bind ourselves to shapes that slowly, slowly lose their relevance until finally we crack and run screaming through the world to change and rip and tear and settle and bind and gentle back down to what we finally keep. For a while.

Rumbling discontent to lava to molds and cooling to another form.

Most of us don't much like thinking that we are part of this old planet.

Why should it be strange that the psychology of a person would match the geology of the earth?

*Thanks to Terry Pratchett for knocking the word 'multiverse' into my skull with his *Discworld* novels. It took a hardback edition to pound it in, but it was worth every penny I paid for it.†

†I borrowed it from Lucy.

27

To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune;
to lose both looks like carelessness.

Oscar Wilde,
The Importance of Being Earnest, 1895

PRIVILEGE SNEAKS UP ON YOU even (especially) when you aren't aware of it. Annie wasn't used to sophisticated political or social analysis when she went to college — who is? — but she thought of herself as downtrodden. Her daddy was dead, her momma was a part-time waitress with a modest insurance windfall and a drinking problem, her high school classmates leaned heavily to the red-neck and the pregnant, and she herself knew altogether too much of Slim Whitman's and too little of J.S. Bach's music to feel at home in the eddicated classes.

She was also white, smart, healthy, off to school and on her way out. Which direction was more or less up for grabs. There were very intelligent kids in her class, headed for academe and/or DC. There were very rich kids in her class, not cattle-ranch rich but Beverly Hills rich, the kind who thought they were middle-class because their families didn't have Rockefeller money. There were of course very ordinary kids, your basic half-bright booboisie, backbone of the system, bending a bit at the time what with the draft and the civil rights movement and all, but ultimately prepared as everyone knew to straighten up and bear their mortgages like men or their babies like women, according to plan.

And then there were the college hippies. If you took them seriously, which no one did, themselves theoretically included, they were every parent's nightmare. They were throwing away their big chance, which wasn't always quite as obvious as they would have liked, perhaps because it wasn't always quite as true as they believed. There are two ways to be a young adult: ask your parents for help or tell them to fuck off. The latter was then in vogue.

Vietnam kept the boys in school (solidarity, novelty, boyfriends and all the usual reasons kept the girls) with the stick of lost draft deferments to

go with the carrot of a general good time. This clouded the issue and encouraged conceptual dropping out, a performance art form that gained quite a vogue. Naturally, this also gave the temporary bohemians the excuse they craved for completing their education — I'd drop out, man, but it's just too heavy — but the difference between real rebels and adolescent actors was obvious right up front to those involved. In this they were ahead of their parents, some of whom were out- and even en-raged by trivial and passing fashions, while others were tolerant of what turned out to be harbingers of serious rejection that would hurt and baffle them in the years to come.

Annie learned to date in college, a major advance. In high school she was socially inept but she got a fresh start by leaving town and plunged right into the Sexual Revolution. The pill was on the market and STDs were something that used to happen before penicillin. The meaningful relationship soon became the snide synonym for the quick fuck but like all clichés it grew out of a seed of truth. If you dated you probably screwed and if you didn't like the date you didn't do it again. The horrified grown-ups assumed that the screwing was the goal or the payment or in the worst case both (nympho hooker), but the dogma was that the screwing was basically a by-product of life, desirable healthy fun, no more no less. The truth, of course, was in between, reality with its usual dull liberal tinge.

Annie dated a rich kid for a while and even visited his people in L.A. They liked her very much (this they said) and thought she would fill in some of the time before the heir looked for a wife quite adequately. This they would never have mentioned (unless it became absolutely necessary) but they used some kind of family telepathy to convey the concept to the youth in question. Annie was too

smart not to pick up on the message, and he was too callow to admit it to himself, let alone her, so she dropped him in a moment of cold fury. He stared at her like the stuck pig he was, and she learned her place. Which wasn't what he thought it was.

She was ashamed of her own family, however, and mostly kept them quiet. It wasn't the money directly, because her cash in hand was well within normal limits even if her expectations were on the low side, it was straight class issues. She soon realized that a girl like her was expected, not just by her mother but also by both professors and classmates, to grab the opportunity to better herself and with the endearing dysfunctionality that was the core of her personality she responded by asking ... why? She hated her background but she hated worse being told to hate it. One solution was simply to conceal it.

Paradoxically, this lumped her in with the middle-class rebels, where she hid easily enough but lost her origins anyway. Some would say she embraced exactly what she was trying to avoid, only in a decadent variant. Oh well, life with the misfits was generally more appealing. The dope was good too.

Especially the acid. Most drugs are avenues of escape, either by oblivion (downers from booze to smack) or by emotional distance (tobacco, cocaine and uppers in general); *d*-lysergic diethylamide tartrate 25 (pleased to meetcha, don't be formal, most people just call me LSD but my friends know me as acid) was *designed* for introspective inquiry (by whom is a question that the great Dr Hofmann, who stumbled on its interesting properties way back in 1943, would like an answer to). When Annie got over her first reluctance, and made her first good connection, she jumped right in.

Those were the days when a dude who thought he was pretty darn progressive could say that he wouldn't mind if his old lady slept with someone but he'd feel betrayed if she took acid with another guy. Annie understood — this is a woman who heard Mick Jagger bitching, "Look at that stupid girl" and not only wasn't offended but identified with the singer by the simple expedient of transposing the sexes — although she wouldn't go quite that far. The amazing chemical intimacy of acid was simply too important to restrict. But for a deep

reluctance to force anyone anywhere to do anything any time, she would have been right out there advocating spiking the water supply. Tripping was good for you. This basic lesson she learned in school and kept for the rest of her days.

What tripping is not good for, it is generally agreed, is being a good little worker bee. This was a looming problem as graduation approached, solved for some by graduate school (which took care of that old draft problem too), for some by genuflection to the mercantile economy, a repulsive option to potential lawyers and aspirant hippies alike, and for others by a fashionable embrace of voluntary poverty. For a lot of young men, this usually became a convenient cover for food stamps, low-rent dealing and living off their girlfriends. ("But honey, I couldn't live with myself if I cut my hair just to get a job.") The women did admittedly find it somewhat easier to get hired — clerking, waitressing, stripping and generally being exploited left and right. It was tolerable for a while, as long as the hours were short.

Annie picked up a righteous job at one of the brand-new natural foods stores, where they didn't pay much but actively wanted the help to identify with the customers. She shared a house on the west side of town with a fluctuating population of three to five others, sharing more or less all of the little they had. There were no prospects exactly, but the living was fair even if the options seemed few. She would have settled back into something no doubt, but for the next cataclysmic accident. Her mother died.

This was a blow, more of one than she had expected, but it sure did bust open the opportunities. Belle had become an awful old drunk by then, just about holding down a lunch-time shift at the diner. She resented her daughter's inattention and grumbled at her over the phone, but occasionally admitted, in the evening when alcoholic truth had crept up on her but not yet taken her down, that she was proud that the girl had graduated and happy that she had gotten away. In later years, Annie came to feel sorry for her mom, and to wish that she had known her better; then real memories would water down the sentiment, and she would feel sorry for herself yet glad she wasn't tied down to the old bat.

The shocking fact of being orphaned, at a time when everyone she knew had two parents alive, usually married to each other, set Annie apart a little; there was no one left to judge her, no one to react against. She was legally adult and effectively alone. If you prefer, legally alone and effectively adult. Ready or not, olly-olly-ox-in-free.

There is a privilege to the long childhoods of the soi-disant middle class, growing and finding themselves for twenty or thirty years, but the children are tied with gossamer to beds of down. They cannot lose the knowledge that supporting their struggles for self-realization are the hidden reinforcements of forgiveness and cold cash that they expect from the family that nurtures them like orchids. Helpless, Dylan pointed out, like a rich man's child.

Yeah, sure, say the poor if they have time to think, trade you in a heartbeat. Damn right.

Annie at twenty-one had been cut loose and given one big chance. There was no net below her tightrope now — she had never really expected one — but there was padding in the form of Belle's

estate. She sold the house, with some interference from her repulsive Uncle Homer, and stubbornly insisted with a great stone face on bringing the cash out of the county. Graduate school, she muttered vaguely, to keep him quiet, maybe next year.

And started making plans to travel.

Seeing the world was a classic fantasy, but all too few fulfilled it. The rich kids were of the opinion that they couldn't afford to waste their precious time; the poor kids knew damn well they just didn't have the cash. Given daring, deprivation and possibly petty crime, either could overcome the obstacles but neither normally would. So those who did gained a cachet not to be scorned. They were winners in the officially unacknowledged competition of counter-culture status-seeking, flinging aside the pettiness of wage slavery for the freedom of the road. Traveling was a worthy ambition in itself, a goal you were lucky to attain, a source of respect and envy.

Annie's privilege was Annie's curse: the freedom of a balloon comes only when you loose the tether.

The waiter roars it through the hall
 “We don’t give bread with one fish ball!”

George Martin Lane,
 “Lay of the Lone Fish Ball,” 1855

IS THIS AN OASIS OR an asylum?” asked Blackie on their sixth day in Herat, as they settled back for their afternoon tea and biscuits. The tea was black and served in small glasses with sugar cubes on the side to strain it through, and the biccies were a curious amalgam, halfway to shortbread and definitely not by Huntley & Palmer, yet the ritual survived even as the Empire crumbled.

“You got to have camels for an oasis, I think,” he continued after careful thought. “There are plenty of nutters, though.”

“They got camels,” Whitey pointed out.

This was true. The traditional camel caravan still existed, following unmarked routes through the central plateau of the country, inhabited only by nomads who ignored the central government, if indeed they really knew it existed. In turn, the Ministry of the Interior happily overestimated their numbers, to attract foreign aid, and was glad to see the occasional wanderer hitch his beast in town. The aid, however, was designed to eliminate them by connecting the cities with black-top and providing trucks and buses to run on the brand-new roads. Tourists were not encouraged to hit the hinterland.

“Got a few. It’s not right for an oasis, though.”

Blackie gestured towards the square below them. There was a truck on blocks, being repaired by several oil-stained surgeons and an appreciative audience of kibitzers squatting around a hookah. The morning bus was resting over in one corner, the afternoon one was yet to arrive. Even the flies seemed to be taking a siesta. Dust from the road out of town hovered in the warm breeze and sank exhausted onto the buildings. Aside from some of the clothing, it could have been a scene from one of the gritty but warm-hearted Italian Neo-Realist movies of the fifties. Early Fellini, de Sica’s *Bicycle Thief*, like that. Not Erroll Flynn in the French Foreign Legion.

“I was thinking of palm trees and shit, yeah?” elaborated Blackie. “Little mirages in the desert, shimmering off by the horizon.”

“Wanna shimmer?” smiled Whitey, passing the joint.

“Right, right.” [longish pause for the avoidance of exhalation] “Ah, Puff the magic dragon.” [further pause for unavoidably explosive exhalation] “But they got water here, they got people ...”

“See the kid with no legs?”

“Say wha?”

“By the mosque.”

“And he’s really got no legs?”

Blackie was trying to get a handle on the idea. Like most verbal people, he was reduced to burbling while the wheels went round. He’d heard all right, but he didn’t grok. He understood the words, four easy monosyllables [legs / no / with / kid] prefaced by an article and, give or take an interrogative inflection, the simplest verb form in the language, but he was having trouble hooking them into his reality. The question meant: Wait a minute, I’m trying to catch up.

“Yeah.”

If Whitey had been successfully socialized by his stepfather, he’d no doubt have come back with some illuminating retort like “Said so, di’n’I” that does even less to further the conversation than the automatic riff of repetition. That reply would have meant: I’m dominant in this interaction and I want you to acknowledge it. It’s what penguins do, and goats, and eagles, and dolphins. They are not exactly verbal but then ‘di’n’I’ is not exactly a word, at least in English. It’s all in the intonation.

What he actually meant was: Take your time. Or even, Have some of mine if you’re short. Whitey liked to stick to the center of his own experience and had no great interest in or talent for annotating it. He was a seer without regard for the prophet margin. He did need to absorb, to internalize his

experience, to structure it in his head, but he did this without conscious calculation. Whitey rarely bothered even to discuss what he'd seen with his closest friend, preferring just to check in occasionally to ensure they were on the same page. Blackie tended to achieve his synthesis in conversation and his process helped his friend to pull it together, as Whitey knew (without knowing) and so gave the other space in which to back and fill and ramble on.

Ah, the achievements of the subconscious, how like the base instincts of the lower animals, who don't know enough to act just, so they just act. Why 'lower'? one wonders, Why 'base'? Why get high to get down, for that matter? Why this obsession with hierarchy and pyramids and putting ourselves (natch) on top. It looks awfully pointy on top of a pyramid, you'd think it would be uncomfortable.

People are meant to do the things that are meant for people to do. When they do, they are good people, and when they don't they are usually unhappy. Sometimes rich, too, but that's rock 'n' roll. Even the bad die young.

"What'd he look like?" probed Blackie.

"Three legs."

"Robert Johnson, man! 'I got three legs to truck on...'"

"Right..."

"'Stones in My Passway', *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, side two, somewhere in the middle."

"Yeah."

"You mean this kid, like, you mean you can see them?" Blackie was really horrified. Like a child[ish person] with an itch, he scratched.

"Just stumps, man. Like elbows or something." Whitey looked over to his right and saw that Blackie was not just hearing him but listening. He went on describing. "Sittin' on, like, a tray on wheels."

"You mean, he can push himself around?"

"Yeah."

"He beggin' or what?"

"Yeah."

"Oh right, it's by the mosque, you said. Like with a tin cup or something?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus."

The really strange thing was that Blackie had seen the leper. He just hadn't noticed him, and especially he hadn't imagined what it must be like

to be him, because he hadn't heard about it or told anyone about it or even exactly thought about it. As Whitey described him, an enormous kaleidoscope of images came into focus, a thousand different pieces of society fusing and shattering around a single soul in physical collapse.

"You never see anyone like that at home do ya?"

"Nah."

"I guess we don't have them really, I mean you'd get to a doctor and you'd get artificial limbs or at least a wheelchair or something. And you'd get social security, a place to live and everything."

"Hide 'em."

"Yeah, maybe, but ... I really don't want to see it when someone's that messed up. I'd say we should put them to sleep, maybe, except that I couldn't want that, I couldn't be someone who wanted to off the crips, I couldn't live with myself if I did, you know, I just couldn't stand to think I was that much of a shit."

"You'd think on it."

"Yeah."

"So maybe you're not."

"Thanks, man." Blackie paused for a minute, not-looking out over the dusty square. He turned his head and caught Whitey's eye for a moment and nodded with uncharacteristic solemnity and turned back to the wall across the street. "Maybe that's why we're here, to make ourselves see things we don't want to see at home and we don't want to think about."

This was getting too far out there for Whitey.

"We're here 'cause we don't want to get fucking killed," he pointed out with a small but genuine smile.

"Nah," countered Blackie, getting back into the swing of it, "We're here 'cause we're too damn lazy to get on the bus to Qandahar."

"Yeah."

"And besides, there's so much to see in this fucking outdoors lunatic oasis deal. That's what it is, man, I got it — a reality oasis."

"?"

"Right, man, England's nuts, I'm nuts, you're nuts. This is real."

"OK."

"So give the real nut a fake biccie then. I'm glad we sorted that out."

A man who could make so vile a pun would not scruple to pick a pocket.

John Dennis,
editorial note in *The
Gentleman's Magazine*, 1781

SEBASTIAN PAUSED IN MID-SMIRK as he noticed Annie's evanescent attention floating lightly away again. He knew he was there to entertain and distract but he also knew he was there as a mirror. Like a good dancer, he led by following, anticipating not simply what his partner expected but what the dance itself required for its perfection. Conversation was a talent of his, like the mambo or the Virginia reel, and he enjoyed it well, but the afternoon date, he knew, was in the service of friendship, and talking was only part of the style. It was time to twirl and listen.

"Where you gone, girl?" he inquired softly.

"Long, long ago," she said, "Far, far away, isn't that how it goes?"

He brushed this aside with a smile that cracked his dark features and showed again his stunningly white teeth. Annie noticed them and wondered (again) if he had them cleaned specially for the effect (surely he knew the effect) or if he was just lucky or if they really only looked that good from the contrast ... and then she noticed herself (again) gathering wool and avoiding something, she wasn't sure what. Sebastian sat calmly through this parade of thoughts wrapping themselves around feelings to hide them from public view like some deformity, a scar or birthmark or even the early signs of a pregnancy. The chorus of images took only a second or two to pass, but Annie was aware, as though she were very high, of each individual phrase of the melody, each measure, each note, each vibration, each ringing unvoiced descant. The momentary stillness of her silent audience seemed incredibly patient and warm, and forgiving and outgoing. She was near to tears and not sure why, but so much that was going on just then was out of her reach that it did not seem unusual, just safe and almost expected.

Go on, he didn't say.

"I don't know," she stumbled, "I was flashing on being twenty-two."

"Mmm-mph?" he prompted.

She chose to interpret this as, "Why were you thinking about that?" — which was fair enough, since it could have been what he meant.

"I don't know," she repeated, as a verbal tick, almost a grace note, essentially shorthand for "I haven't yet decided what I am about to say." Not the most elegant choice of cliché, perhaps, but serviceable, and an acceptable, even proper, mannerism. Even the greatest of griots uses repetitive, essentially meaningless paradiddles, as an improvising musician rests both player and audience on fragments of tune from time to time; it is a technique as old as Homer, with his 'rosy-fingered dawn' and his 'wine-dark sea' (what was he drinking anyway? wasn't he blind? and is this proof?). Sebastian took concision to another level by elegantly expressing his patience in absolute silence and complete stillness. He waited even to drink until she was ready to continue.

"I was thinking of pick-ups and the Valley and then getting away."

"To college, right? Here?"

"Ye-ea-ah," she contradicted him slowly.

"You were here," he objected with barely an interrogative.

"Oh yeah," she agreed quickly, "But maybe that wasn't getting away. I mean it was, but." She drifted a little, as though the rope was pulling at the stakes. He took in some of the slack and tried to fasten it down again.

"But."

"It wasn't until my mom died that I sorta cut loose."

He leaned forward a little and touched her hand but kept quiet.

"That was the end of '69." She looked at him, so unusually serious and still, and remembered the way they usually bantered and gave a brittle giggle. "The year, honey, the year." He smiled slowly to

acknowledge the pleasantries but no more, to keep her focused, and still he didn't reply. She looked a little nervous and then accepted that she wanted to talk, even if she didn't want to. Or some such superficial paradox. It didn't matter much.

"I was always doing what she wanted. Or what she didn't want. You know what I mean?"

"You were reacting," he offered.

"Yeah!" she agreed, "Yeah ... Yeah, that's right. It just always mattered what she thought, even though, well, it never seemed to me she was very good at thinking, if you know what I mean."

"You mean she was dumb."

"No, not exactly, she could see, she just couldn't, y'know..."

"Act."

"Right, right."

"What did you do when she died?"

"I went to India."

He laughed. Not a polite, encouraging simper; not a quasi-surreptitious giggle; a full-throated bellow that had heads turning and noses being buried in newspapers; an explosion born of surprise and delight that modulated like Aretha testifying into a joyous acceptance of life, one of those delightful moments when routine conversation, like ordinarily excellent singing, transcends itself into something purer and finer and far beyond apology or complaint.

She looked surprised, then relieved, then happy, and then at last she joined in.

The espresso machine steamed its enjoyment, and the two young men behind the counter began to tango. Glasses shattered as solitary drinkers jumped onto their table-tops to shimmy skillfully to the music in each other's heads. Chairs were pushed to the wall as anarchists in black melted into tie-dyed confusion and hurled each other between their knees and above their shoulders, spinning in free fall till the walls bent outward and the sun sent its rainbow bending through the window to paint over the wall.

Oh, why not?

Actually, they both looked slightly embarrassed, avoided looking at the audience and tried to shrink within a cone of silence, like compliant little customers.

"You went to India?" he prompted in a stage whisper.

"Well, not immediately," she countered, trying to set a natural volume and having a hard time now she was conscious of the question (yes, that one again, it's inescapable and unanswerable and the human condition in a nutshell) but succeeding eventually as she learned to forget (natch). "There was a lot of stuff to take care of first."

"Why India?"

"I don't know. It was the most exotic place we could think of, I guess."

"We?"

"Yeah, me and Cedar," she smiled nostalgically.

"Cedar?" probed Sebastian gently. "you've never told me about him."

"It was a long time ago."

"That one of those sixties names?"

"Oh, yeah. He was a nice Jewish boy called Jacob Bernstein until he discovered peyote. His folks were both professors at Cornell, probably still are, actually. He's a shrink, now, in Manhattan. Nice Jewish wife and daughter, two daughters, haven't seen him in years."

"A shrink called Cedar?"

"Oh, god, no. Not in New York." They both giggled, but almost inaudibly. "He gave it up right after we got back, went off to med school."

"That's when you broke up, then? When you got back? Bum trip?"

"No, no, I mean, yeah, I mean ... It's complicated. It was a great trip, maybe the best ever, but we just, we went different ways after, you know. I've still got a soft spot for old Cedar. India was his idea really, I know what it was, he wanted to do the yogi bit, you know, find out about the Hindu and Buddhist masters and all that."

"And did he?"

"Well, we did do a meditation class in Benares but I don't know that we found what we expected, exactly. That's not how it went. It didn't matter."

"What does?"

"Yeah, right."

On this note of existential profundity they sat for a moment, licking the foam from their glasses. Cappuccino side-benefit, texture on top of taste. Not to mention the rush, now settling down to

leave them with a generalized and almost indefinable state of alertness.

Sebastian rolled his shoulders in a feline stretch, then his neck, casually casing the joint. It might have been a defensive mannerism — it takes a peculiarly self-confident black guy to sit with his back to the door in a white environment, however liberal it may think it is — or it might have been predatory cruising, or by now it might just have been habit. He couldn't have said what he saw, for nothing needed to catch his attention, and that was all he wanted to know. He wasn't a simpleton and he was affected as all get out, but uncluttered elegance was his style of choice, in mind as in more conspicuous matters, like clothes.

Annie barely noticed. She was staring off into the unfocused distance, both in time and space, not thinking, not remembering, not doing anything even as positive as clearing her skull, just sitting. Spacing out. With most companions this would be rude, she realized, coming back to the coffee-house with a start.

"I'm sorry," she said abruptly. "I'm not being very good company."

"Sweetheart, that's fine," he assured her. "You want another coffee?"

"No. Oh, sure, why not. Thanks."

"Live dangerously," he admonished her, gathering the glasses and nipping in to the briefly open counter quick like a bunny before another line formed.

Annie watched him flirting with the guys behind the counter. She was sure they were straight, and sure that he knew it, but everyone seemed to be enjoying the game. She kind of wanted to play. She felt as though she was rather dangerously high — passive, vulnerable, somehow so secure that she was open for mischief from robbers and cops and people who pretended to be friends or enemies and none of it really ... counted.

Is the opposite of paranoia ... innocence?

Annie didn't think she was innocent anymore. She thought that might be what she was missing.

When innocence is lost, does it forever disappear? Marked down to vanishing point at the dawn of the terrible nineties, it was distressed, discounted and discarded, out of style and out of stock. You

can't find it in the boutiques or the supermarkets or the retailing giants that buttress the malls of America. Garage sales, perhaps, or little gray-market operations. More likely, you will see it growing wild in the country, far from the cattle ranches and state parks, a hardy perennial that never quite gets ploughed all the way under and doesn't seem to do too well in the domesticated garden.

Annie was beginning to remember what it was like to see the world stretched before you in limitless beauty. She wanted to feel that way again, but she knew by instinct that imitation is no substitute. Action and reaction may be equal but they're never the same.

"There you go, dear," curtsied Sebastian, setting down the glasses without spilling a drop. "Will that be all?"

"Why don't you join me?" she smiled.

"Don't mind if I do," he said, sliding gracefully onto his chair.

They sat a moment, waiting for the coffee to cool. There are worse ways of spending an afternoon.

"I thought—" } they started simultaneously.
"I thought—" }

"No, you—" offered Annie but Sebastian waved her on and sat in Buddha-silence so she had little choice but to stumble on.

"I thought I wanted to talk about what was going on, but I just seem to be, you know, spacing out. Thinking about my youth, isn't that awful?"

"Maybe a youth is what you need," he leered.

"Oh shut up. Did you hear about the body bags?"

He blinked at this non-sequitur but let her go on.

"I heard at the Persian Gulf meeting the other night. The Pentagon's put in a rush order for, I don't know, 200,000 body bags."

"What?"

"Yeah, really. They're shipping their whole stock to Saudi Arabia and they need to back-order ASAP."

Even Sebastian's cool was threatened by the implications. He shook his head and shivered as if to clear it.

"Two hundred thousand."

“Corpses. That’s what they’re planning on. Worst-case, sure, but that’s only our lot. I mean, there’s half a *million* Iraqis there right now. Waiting for the bombing to begin.”

“They don’t count, sweetheart, you know that, they’re Eh-rabs.” He pronounced the last word to rhyme with Ahab (like the old racist jingle), sneering in best cracker imitation.

“It’s OK now,” she countered, “We’ve got a black Joint Chief.”

“A credit to his race.”

“Boss, yet.”

“Chairman, I think they call him.”

“I dunno,” she laughed, “He always seems to be standing up in the pictures, you know, with that pointy stick.”

“It’s pointy but it’s skinny,” kvetched Sebastian as stage lecher.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” Annie objected as herself or someone very like.

“Right, straight into the morgue,” he countered. “What’s happening with that demo? You working on that?”

“Here,” she said, rummaging into her purse and giving him a handbill. “Pass it on, I was going to leave some here anyway.”

“So you *are* working on it.”

“Not much, really, I just showed up to a couple of meetings. I’m going, I’m off Thursday and Friday next week so why not. You want to come?”

“Not my trip, honey. Maybe I’ll stop and visit.”

“Can I call you if I get busted?”

“Of course, any time.” He paused. “But what about little Brennie?”

“He doesn’t know too much about this. I’m pretty much certain I *won’t* get arrested, I’m not planning on it, but, you know, I don’t want to bother him.”

Sebastian took it like a down pillow, mulled it around, and kept it in, softly reclaiming his original shape and never uttering a word, such as:

Oh right, Annie. Nice one. You won’t even talk to him about it because you don’t want to bother him. Typical. Are you saying his response would be, “Don’t do it because it might put *me* out?” Uh-huh. You’re saying you don’t want to deal with an unpredictable situation; you don’t want to be real with him. And if you don’t want to be real with him, and you do want to be yourself, then where you at, baby?

He did stone-face well, and even kept a gentle layer on top, so her lies were absorbed and absolved without being analyzed or explained or ricocheted back to wound.

Annie knew what he was doing, of course she did, and allowed him and let it all stay down below her surface. She had come to talk, and she hadn’t talked, and that was OK in some weird way. Her surface was rigid, locked into place, but somewhere deep down in the subconscious her self was beginning to stir. It was frightening, and avoidable, and going to happen. Somehow it was connected with this political stuff, she was coming to know even as she refused to admit or deal with or even think about it, and somehow it would work itself out, because she was going to let it.

Admit it or not, she was someone ferment was meant for.

All I know is that I am not a Marxist.

Karl Marx,
attributed in a letter
by Friedrich Engels, 1890

WHITEY'S CHESS PARTNER moved on just in time to prevent a way of passing the time from becoming a way of killing it. Hobbies so easily become habits. The cast of transients had turned over completely in ten days and the threat of repetition loomed. Nothing necessarily wrong with that — stability is the word with the positive spin — but it's a different trip and it requires an adjustment.

Hanging out with simpatico strangers who shared your wide-eyed exhaustion was a gas-gas-gas; watching equally pleasant people churn through the changes you faced the week before could be a serious drag. Of course, it did present opportunities to take a leadership rôle (snap to it, chaps), but in freak society anyone who wanted to take charge was likely to be rejected by the putative chargees, who voted with their feet in a hurry. This didn't stop young men from trying it on to pick up chicks, usually without much luck; nor did it stop young women from battling their baby blues and asking dumb questions of cute guys, with a somewhat higher success rate. Some patterns are hard to lose.

Sticking around called for a kind of settling down. For a few days, maybe a week, there was plenty of stimulation from mastering the local logistics. This room OK? Where to eat? Is there a chemist — drug store — village shop — place to buy some fucking Lomotil? Where's the poste restante and did we tell anyone to write here? Do we need to score? What, how, when, where? What do you mean, 'Why?' we're almost out. Can we string the clothesline on the roof? You didn't leave the Tide in Teheran, did you? All the inconsequential details of daily life, the stuff you do without thinking so you can live a modern western life at all, became engrossing, sometimes challenging, when you hit a new town in a new culture that may not have heard of the problems you want solutions for, or not when they're phrased the way you put them. Case

in point: Why search for Lomotil if what you wanted was to seal yourself up to take the all-night bus? Opium was cheaper, more effective, and much more widely available. Probably had fewer harmful side-effects, too, temporary attacks of narcolepsy being useful under the circumstances.

Step two was to know all this shit and still find ways to keep yourself entertained. Getting off and getting it on were always possibilities but despite widespread and often hilarious accounts in the tabloids, gleefully encouraged by over-articulate and under-occupied young drop-outs, fucking and fixing by themselves were rarely enough to satisfy the brain's incessant clamor for sixteen hours of multi-channel programming. Even the junkies could be seen daily taking the air in search of raw material for their home movies, until they got so close to the great rush in the sky that we and they and everyone else might as well forget about them.

Compulsory screwing was certainly a popular item in the curriculum, sex having been invented by stork-delivered baby boomers in the mid-sixties, but it evoked multiple levels of emotional complexity, acknowledgment of which was almost completely taboo. And (whisper it not in the halls of the Playboy mansion) even Hefner himself couldn't keep it up around the clock (well, not every day) and Barbarella was only a Barbie with a temporary patina of exoticism — aerobics was always her thing, and the daily workout was never intended to take all day. If the professionals had their limits, so too did the enthusiastic amateurs. Games are not much of a way of life. Fun, though.

Whitey was used to watching. Back to the birth of modern cool, in the days of be-bop and beatniks, the central image has been the silent loner leaning on the doorjamb, head tilted to let the smoke curl past the eye, imperturbable yet restless, questioning but all-knowing, beautiful and disheveled ... in a word,

James Dean, dead and therefore immortal. Whitey had learned that part and he played it well. It had carried him through scenes he wanted to see and earned him a measure of distant respect that almost made up for the loneliness he brought to it, the pain that gave his dark eyes their depth and goaded his self to the strength that strangers admired.

For Whitey was also used to being watched. The unhip secret of cool is that the self-contained loner needs an audience to ignore and to fascinate. A million teenagers practiced their posture in front of the mirror and hit the high street to strut their stuff and brave the gentle ridicule of the grown-ups for the look and feel of other adolescents; most of them copied their style from the outside in, whereas the irreparably hip evolved the look from the inside, but the kids were onto the act at some important level. The poseurs of Berkeley, California, faced the posers of Berkeley, George, and concluded that God, like hell, was other people.

So Whitey, in his ineffable detachment, had defined himself in reaction to, and had lived in connection with, his surroundings. By inclination, he was not an intellectual; he didn't get off on free-wheeling bouts of the verbals. How amazing it was that this so neatly fit the stereotypes of his childhood. Not a single teacher had made a serious attempt to adjust the imprints of his family and their friends. Girls, they understood, couldn't do math and darkies had best be given vocational training so at least they could be useful. Even his best, perhaps his only, friend and companion, who knew beyond a peradventure just how smart one had to be to invent a self and a life and hold them together under pressure, sometimes fell into the trap of associating words with whites and equating vocabulary with intelligence. Blackie didn't know he was doing it, which is normal, but Whitey didn't know how much he was hurt, which is sad.

Picture an emotional Helen Keller: a maelstrom of emotions inside, separated from a storm of sensation outside by a lonely boy with neither the psychic nor the literal vocabulary to discuss the reality of his life, but with the strength to yawp a *no* and the need to build a *yes* with tools no one had ever told him existed.

At home, the sounds and the scene papered over the void. Sixties pop was the sound of sensation, the father of rock and the legitimate child of rock'n'roll (whose bastard took after grandpappy Hank Williams and hijacked half of country music). It signified with a smile and coded cool in the words for journalists to (mis)interpret, but it served to calm and to cover as much as to wake and to lead. In this it mirrored as it defined the scene around, the questing, questioning, querulous calls for battle without blood, for instant evolution, for change — right now, all the way but not too far.

Establishment cynics grumbled that the kids weren't serious but never acknowledged how hard it is to conjure up a new destiny. When you call, like Emma Goldman, for a dancing revolution — “Je suis Marxiste, tendence Groucho,” said the insurgent students of '68: “I'm for Groucho's style of Marx, brother” — you risk the seduction of the dance for its own sake. Better that by far than the body-numbing and brain-killing monotony of hopelessness that comes with acquiescence. Feeling anything is better than feeling nothing — a credo for freaks and therapists alike.

So Whitey in Herat was losing his crutches and slightly scared to walk. On the road, the traditional sources of sensory overload were mostly lost, although the intensifiers were emphatically present. But there were buses and trucks, there was a highway out of town, there was the allure of motion, the invitation of the new. Why stop to think? There was more to see.

He who binds to himself a joy
 Doth the wingèd life destroy;
 But he who kisses the Joy as it flies
 Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

William Blake,
 Notebooks, ca 1791

THE TROUBLE WITH THIS ACID," Cedar mused, wiggling his fingers in front of his eyes, "Is, it's melted."

Annie paused a moment to fold her brain around this confusing statement.

"Say, what?"

Cedar squatted and let the sea tickle his toes while he played with the surface of the water. He flicked the tips of his fingers in front of his eyes, sending the droplets back out through the sunlight into the ocean, checking the after-images and smiling ruefully. He was the very picture of an experimental scientist evaluating the test of a hypothesis. At least he thought he was. With his bushy black beard, long thick curly hair, cut-offs and T-shirt, he looked more like a beachcomber, but then marine biologists often do. Not chemists, though, and not high-priced New York shrinks — except in their pupal phase.

"It's been an hour and a half, easy," he continued.

"You too, huh?" chimed in Annie. She was feeling placid and pretty, with a colorful (but certainly not garish) piece of cloth from the local market wrapped sarong-style over her bathing suit, and a loose shirt hanging open. Casual elegance, she thought, haute hippie style, and she had it just about exact. The silver (well, the jeweler said it was sterling) ankle bracelet was the exact accessory, adding in just that touch of the exotic that distinguished the ensemble from that of the ordinary tourist on vacation. Anyway, that was the idea. What actually let her carry off the image was mostly the way she felt and bore herself, but perhaps she needed the costume to get into the part.

"I keep checking out my knees," continued Cedar as if into a Dictaphone, "And I keep getting

that feeling like I'm ... coming on to acid ... but if you keep on coming on then you're not coming on ... you're just ... feeling like you're coming on..."

Annie stood with her back to the ocean and the waves lapping over her ankles, scratched the side of her nose and addressed the problem empirically.

"Shall we try another?" she ventured.

"Why not? Try two. Three. Shit, try the whole fucking stash, that's what we got it for, isn't it."

They sauntered up the beach, along the damp line where the sand was firm and warm. The sun was higher than they were, on a perfect Christmas day on Baga Beach in Goa, on the coast of India. Annie had left her religion behind in Turlock of damned memory, and Cedar of course had been brought up with Hanukkah, but Goa was at least superficially Christian, after four hundred years of Portuguese rule, and celebrated the nativity with laid-back enthusiasm for what seemed like weeks. It would have been churlish not to join in, and foolish not to add your own spin to the entertainment. Hence, partly, the acid.

We soodle — is that a word? thought Annie.

"Yeah, it's a great word," confirmed the walking dictionary beside her. "That's exactly what we're doing."

Presumably, thought Annie, I said that out loud. I thought I was just thinking. Or maybe he's picking me up in some kind of telepathy. Hmm. Soodling slowly down the shore, fetching the fisher-folks casual glances and rolling the rainbow edges of the shimmering scene and ... damn! It's working! There's more to this stuff than I thought. But not like it was, no, not the way we expected.

"Hey," she remembered suddenly, "We gave that dude a lousy deal."

"It was only for some hash."

“Yeah, I guess.”

“And I told him I couldn’t guarantee it any more.”

Cedar was absorbing the full dimensions of a psychedelic tragedy. He’d scored fifty microdots right before they took off, with the express intention of finding the right environment and doing some serious exploring inside his skull. The place was here and he was here and so were the questions: If a little acid is fun and a good hit helps you see what’s going on in your life and in your world, what does a really big dose do? And what is really big anyway? The word was, too much was just enough; but how much was that?

Annie didn’t really give a shit, but she like the idea of having some acid around. It was easy to conceal, in microdot form, and far too cheap to be worth smuggling for cash so the pigs didn’t look for it much. More than that, however, she liked the idea of having some person around. Not just anyone, sure, and realistically probably not a woman. Other women were for friendship, for gossip, for support but not for long-term intimate companionship. Housewifery was out, and marriage was a bourgeois anachronism, but the social preconceptions were harder to kill than the names or the legal institutions. Besides, if you went off traveling like that with another girl, what would you do if one of you got involved with some guy and the other one didn’t? It was asking for trouble. Yeah, right. Hey, have things really improved that much in the last couple of decades?

Not just any man, of course, but Cedar was the incumbent and he was into it. In many ways, the whole trip was his idea; it had her unqualified endorsement but she might not have done it if he hadn’t been so up for it. Certainly she would have done it differently without him, but she was much happier to come along on his journey than not to go at all. She tended to drag them into slightly less frugal quarters, and she heartily discouraged the practice of sleeping on railroad platforms, which he thought was practical, but most of the time they traveled fairly sociably. It was a minor advantage to have a walking encyclopædia along (early multimedia, really) even if he was so far into head trips he sometimes seemed like an android. He certainly meant no harm.

As the çï-devant Jake Bernstein, the alias under which he was known to government officials and close family members, Cedar was, after all, an initiate and minor acolyte of the academic cult. God knows what the Pranksters had done, up the road from Santa Cruz in La Honda, but in Harvard the professors kept notes. Leary and Alpert made it all the way through the system of write-it-down, publish-when-possible and keep-your-source-data before they caught up with the freaks out west and the kids on the street. More than that, they did it in a department that believed that the rat-torturing B. F. Skinner was some kind of profound theorist and that operant conditioning would explain the universe. They couldn’t help but write down how much they ate and they took some truly impressive quantities.

Street numbers were rather less reliable than rat psychology, of course, but the early explorers laid down some benchmarks. A good hit of Owsley was said to be 500 micrograms of pure LSD-25 — aka Dr Hofmann’s excellent discovery, Sandoz’s gift to the universe, etc — and people both split them and doubled them, making a rumored spread of 250 to 1000 mikes. If you just wanted to groove, you could get off on a hundred or less (which became the standard dealing dose by the late ’70s), while the scientists in Cambridge, using Sandoz pure while it was still available, took up to two thousand.

The legendary Mr Owsley was out of business by the end of the sixties, and his quality control standards were more honor’d in the breach than in the observance, but in 1970 good stuff could still be found. And those microdots had been heavy duty. They had field-tested them one weekend up at Mount Tam with some friends ... but that’s another story. Call them 500 mikes each and you wouldn’t be far off, as of early November in Northern California.

On Christmas day, in Goa, the same dots felt like fifty.

“What do you mean, melted?” asked Annie in a puzzled tone.

He paused to look at her. What on earth was she talking about? Slowly the brain clicked through the cycles: history, no; cash, no; local topography, no; ah yes, conversation. Engage tongue.

“Evaporated. Catalyzed. Disappeared.”

“But it didn’t *melt*, right?” She was looking bewildered. It was important to get things straight. “I mean, the little tabs look just like they always did.”

“Yup, the little tabs are there. Well, they were this morning.” Cedar was being careful. He had been much influenced by an Introduction to Philosophy course that featured silent trees falling and the like. I see therefore it is, conundra like that, favorites of undergrads and profs alike, at least in philosophy and physics. The engineers tended to bah-humbug such speculations but then people who actually built complicated things were not an important component of either the hippie or the academic tradition.

“So the stuff in them isn’t the same as it used to be.”

Cedar, on some level, thought he was a scientist, but Annie was the one with the step-by-step approach, especially when hewing to a straight line in a twisted personal sub-reality.

“Well, either it’s different or we’re different, ’cause this is different.”

She started to giggle. He caught her eye and then her laugh. She spread her arms out and lowered her head back so the sun poured down her throat, and he did the same. She slowly spun around, him too, a pair of lazy windmills calling for the touch of a breeze.

Maybe losing a hundred bucks—worth of acid wasn’t such a big deal.

“Sure enough, it’s different.”

“Little warmer.”

“Warmer temperature, cooler scene.”

“Cool scenes don’t make no chemistry.”

“Hot times mangle it?”

“They don’t do it no good. I bet that’s what did it. What the hell, I bet we can find some more.”

“I don’t care that much. Not right now anyway.”

“Still wanna do another?”

“Sure. Wanna get a mango juice?”

Livin' on the road, my friend
Was gonna keep you free and clean

Townes van Zandt,
"Pancho and Lefty," sung by
Emmylou Harris, *Luxury Liner*, 1977

BLACKIE AND WHITEY BOUGHT TICKETS for the overnight to Qandahar and were carried out of the vineyards around Herat and into the afternoon desert, where the sun and the dust dried their faces like raisins. The passengers were mostly local men, with a leavening of tourists — that is, travelers, as they defined themselves — to provide the entertainment. A few black-shrouded women huddled against the windows, protected or imprisoned by their men, occasionally touching their children if they were small girls or boys too young to walk; by puberty, girls were women, it seemed, and shut away, and males were men when they could hold themselves erect (so to speak). The hard-faced boys did not cry. They learned the life their fathers knew. Like lions, they left their mothers' breasts to assume the mantle of king. For this they took a terrible punishment, but they did not know it. Where life is hard, hard is simply life. Complaint was less than pointless; it was inconceivable.

Cushioned from some of the world's harder edges by the soft detritus of the tea-time number, Whitey sat in the middle seat of a three-person bench between the axles, not-moving, not-thinking, not-being, not-trying to float into a transcendent state of not-presence. On his left, a graybeard of unguessable antiquity — 35? 75? a man of lines and superb carriage who offered no conventional western clues to his age; a man, 'tis enough — sat straight, silent and immobile, hands clasped in front of his jaw in what might have been seen as a Christian attitude of prayer had they not been propped on the end of an ancient Birmingham-made rifle that could have been taken as booty in the Khyber Pass by his father, or grandfather, or conceivably by the man himself. By the window, Blackie was staring into the distance, at the brown and dusty hills, or were they mountains, that slowly

shifted in perspective as the shadows began to grow and the bus rattled further (you could even say furthur) and again, shaking its passengers like Bond's unstirred martini, or Mick's maracas as he didn't fade away.

Blackie pulled out a cigarette and offered them down the line. Whitey took one but their benchmate declined, patting his heart with his right hand by way of apology for his rudeness at declining the hospitality. The two of them smoked in silence (the ambient industrial noise fading to background soundtrack, as the minds kicked in to filter it out), Whitey not-focusing on the turban two feet in front of his head, and Blackie not-seeing the landscape outside, shimmering and slowly dissolving like an ephemeral movie set in an unexpected rain, as the lighting began to disappear and the colors were drained from the backdrop, so slowly that you barely noticed as each of them took their leave and bid adieu, yet quickly enough that if you looked away and back the scene was always different, and yet the same, but somehow strange. Was he part of the landscape, or was it part of him?

"Does Oxford stop at this train?" Blackie mused aloud.

This drew a response from Whitey: He moved his head a one-sixteenth turn to the right and sent his eyes ahead with the silent question.

"Relativity, man, relativity."

The eyes didn't have it and so signified.

"It's an old story, and I think it's true," pontificated Blackie, an unlikely candidate for the college of Cardinals but a preacher as to the miter born. "This professor of physics was at Paddington and he called out to a porter, 'Does Oxford stop at this train?' The porter probably thought he was just a professor and let it slide but some undergraduates heard him and told everyone he'd gone gaga ..."

“Yeah?” interposed Whitey, rising a little from the depths of slumber. Blackie’s riffs were often just background sounds — he was only an intellectual and given to jabbering about useless crap but he made an entertaining noise; it was kinda cute, though that wasn’t one of Whitey’s adjectives — but this one seemed to have some potential.

“Right. Only they spread the story and it got back to the professor and he started to use it in his own lectures.”

Whitey’s left eyebrow lifted. It was a neat trick, not really spoiled by the fact that his right one went down a little at the same time. Blackie’s smile responded to the medium, his words to the message.

“He meant it, man. I mean, he spaced out putting it that way to the guy on the platform, but it doesn’t make any fucking difference which one’s going where. It’s all just relative, just like here. Look at that mountain, it’s moving.”

They did. It was.

“Perspective, man. You can’t tell how big it is, either.”

They tried. They couldn’t.

“You got the air, it’s dead clean, except for this dust the bus kicks up, and it’s drier than a witches tit, you could see for fucking *miles* here.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s the point, man, I don’t. I’m just taking it on faith. I read it, it’s logical, it makes sense, I believe it.”

“Why?”

“You fucker, you always ask the good questions.”

“Gimme good answer, then.”

“Right,” responded Blackie, cranking the old left brain into gear. Freed from the coaches of college, it liked a work-out every now and zen. “Parallax.” He began to sketch with his forefinger on the back of the seat in front, resolutely refusing to be distracted by the fact that the medium of his art was dust on vinyl. “We go from here to here, and the mountain’s here, so the angle off to the right changes from this to that and the angle up to the top of the peak changes in the same kind of way, and if we know how far we’ve gone, that’s this line, call it A , and we measure these angles b and c , then

we can calculate by trigonometry the distance B , which is going to be pretty close to C . . .”

“But the mountain’s moving.”

“Fuck you, we’re on a bus.” The subtle riposte is a hallmark of the natural academic. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter, the maths is about the same both ways.”

“Maybe the bus is on us.”

“Trouble with you goddam freaks is you expect us to mean what we say.” Blackie cackled as he said this. Near as he could recall, it was a direct quote from a triumph of his college days, when he’d twisted his tutor into an uncharacteristic loss of equilibrium. Yeah, he’d replied, it’d be too much for you to say what you mean.

Whitey was on an inquisitive roll.

“It’s all empty anyway, right?”

“Right, man, that’s right. All these atoms are just bunches of electrical emptiness, that’s right. Sorta like the solar system.”

“So how come if we’re in the bus, we’re not *in* the bus? Know what I mean?”

“You mean, how come we don’t get all mixed up with it and mushed together?”

“Yeah.”

“Beats me, man. I had to hang around with the social scientists. I never figured out how anyone who wasn’t into acid could grok that shit about atoms being empty.”

“Been there,” Whitey grinned.

“I’ll take your word for it, man,” laughed Blackie. “Yeah, it’s heavy shit. Those cats are weird, you know, the physicists. My lot were much more boring. Actually, they were a right loada pricks. Gave me a social disease.”

The other groaned silently.

“Easy action.”

Whitey adopted his best Puerto-Rican-main-man hard-face and they started to snap their fingers in classic West Side Story style. Not too many Jets were tangle-haired hirsute redheads but Blackie figured he made up for it by having the bit about fancying Natalie Wood down cold.

The two of them were in a bubble, isolated by language and culture and possibly inclination from the Afghans in the seats around them, and by their neighbors from the potential comrades a few rows

away. This was cool, even appropriate, but as they grew silly they found curiosity permeating the invisible membrane. Even granddad next door looked over, stonefaced still but not necessarily disapproving. These boys were large, he seemed to notice, but they acted like children. If this offended his sense of the natural order, he showed no particular sign, simply observing the unusual reality on his right. Blackie caught his eye and hammed up the finger-clicks, but still managed to provoke no clear response; perhaps a glint of amusement? Or was it contempt? Either, of course, would do. As Blackie caught himself watching the old man observing them watching him looking at ... the old relativity mind-games and the infinite mirror regressions came back, like Escher stairs leading him around and up to himself and away and back up again, and he began to laugh, first self-consciously and then with a fine disregard for all that crap, a huge and beautiful humor that was so obviously joyous that the ancient himself deigned to smile.

A hand snaked between the seats and tapped Blackie on the left shoulder. It held a short, fat, hand-rolled, good lord ... could it be? Blackie blinked in mild disbelief. This, after all, was a public omnibus, a transport of delight perhaps but not a rolling opium den. The smell was interesting, though. It must be. He took the proffered doobie in his right hand and raised the end that wasn't on fire towards his lips, only to be distracted by a gentle tap on his shoulder that nearly pushed him through the window.

The philanthropist behind was looking horrified, as though Blackie had failed to belch at the end of dinner. In formal British terms, the solecism so narrowly averted was of the order of passing the port counter-clockwise or mopping up gravy by unwrapping Ma Rainey's breadroll. Fortunately, this Afghan Emile Post was committed to promoting education and understanding among the infidels. He recovered the number in question and demonstrated proper technique by inserting it between the middle and ring fingers of his left hand, then making a loose fist, covered at the bottom by the right hand and raising the two-handed structure to his lips, which touched only his own

flesh, where the left forefinger curled round, and remained decorously (and presumably salubriously) separate from the object to be circulated. With a smile that was probably meant to be gracious but came across wicked, he passed the joint over again.

Blackie followed protocol this time and drew a hit that elevated him clear through the roof and landed him in the middle of the luggage and free-loaders on top of the omnibus. The black smoke curled his toes and straightened the little hairs at the base of his spine. Only years of training saved him from the humiliation of coughing half of it straight back out. The chillum technique — for it was devised long before the invention of Zig-zags, Rizlas and the like, to accommodate the sharing of little clay funnel-shaped pipes — was stunningly efficient at providing an optimal admixture of oxygen, incinerated tobacco by-products and miscellaneous lightly processed (and, in this case, remarkably high-octane) opiates. Look on it as fuel injection for the psycho-active engine. Zero to eight miles high in 1.7 seconds.

Whitey took his turn with characteristic aplomb. He wasn't really trying, but no one could take him at the impassive game, not when he was alerted and ready to play. He put hand to mouth, double-clutched gently to stoke the flame, and fumigated his lungs, nose, guts, limbs, brain, eyes ... until he could see the whipped and eviscerated light gray tendrils escaping through his epidermis and staggering, lost and somewhat confused, through the elegant folds of his alabaster finery. Motion clearly being dangerous, he avoided it as far as possible, merely offering the agent along to his left.

The ancient had been patiently not-staring and accepted the reefer with aplomb. Not for him, however, the newfangled two-handed backhand; the vast fingers of his left hand were quite adequate to the task of blocking the unnecessary airholes without calling on the assistance of a second team. His right hand rested nonchalantly on his gun as he raised the other and extracted, without apparent effort, an extraordinary quantity of the gaseous products of combustion. As rock-steady and surely quite as blasted as his occidental neighbor, he

passed the now-shrunken joint back to the row behind.

Two of the occupants passed, so the generous donor took his hit and recirculated the remainder. Blackie got another good one but Whitey felt the acrid taste of the last effective blast and, to general consent, killed the roach. Reciprocal smiles were as much conversation as any of them felt like manag-

ing, so they burned the end of the daylight in unfocused meditation as the bus's shape in gradually distorting silhouette slid eastward across the desert.

Following the shadow deep into the unknown.

Something was hidden there.

Something relatively important.

Or some important relative.

Probably not Emmylou, though, worse luck.

Plus on apprend à connaître l'homme, plus on apprend à estimer le chien.
The more you get to know men, the more you admire dogs.

a sentiment attributed to a quite remarkable number of French women, including the 19th-century writer A. Toussenel, the 18th-century revolutionary Mme Roland (Marie-Jeanne Philipon) and the 17th-century queen of letter-writers, Mme. de Sévigné

EVERY COUPLE OF MONTHS, Brendan spent a Sunday doing manly, manly chores, such as hacking back the seasonal fire hazards and visiting the Ben Lomond County Dump with the detritus, the household garbage and the recycling. For this purpose, he had custody of a little yellow pick-up from a previous relationship, an ancient Datsun with dubious brakes and sickly muffler, the kind of truck that doesn't get sold because there is no way that it is going to pass any kind of legitimate inspection. He was very proud of every dent in that battered vehicle. It was testimony to his bucolic butchness. Went right along with the lumberjack shirt that he donned religiously for the occasion, to blend in with the rustics of the San Lorenzo Valley, most of whom were likewise engaged in blending in with each other, and what is wrong with that as long as you don't brag about it? They all had a great time and the trash did get moved to the landfill.

Annie spent the time on such equally vital tasks as hand-washing the delicates, his sweaters included since she insisted on doing her own and accepted his as part of the deal. Their agreement was quite explicit, a subject of intensive discussion when they first cohabited and occasional negotiation even at this late date. On the whole it worked out fairly well. He did most of the provisioning as well as the dump runs (Trade Czar, he appointed himself, being in charge of both the in and the out of the standard consumables) while she did the bulk of the cleaning and laundry in good traditional style (Queen of All She Surveyed) and they each tried to leave the cooking to the other when they couldn't agree on eating out. The one unbreakable rule of the kitchen was that whoever

cooked was excused from washing up. Volunteering was, of course, permitted, but the chef was allowed to choose to wash, dry, put away or just keep the other company.

Fair's fair, as Brendan's Uncle Fred was regularly quoted as saying, all's well that comes out right in the wash.

Fred was a bounteous source of clichés and comfort, at least in the legend that they shared. Annie had never actually met the man, who was rumored to live in Minneapolis or somewhere equally frigid, scalding and generally unappealing (to her, that is; many consider it a Prince of cities). His value was as part of the consensual reality that made up Annie and Brendan's relationship, the small sharings that they had with each other and no one else that reminded them softly of the real affection that lay below the surface friendliness.

Ah, but where was the passion?

Where was it ever? wondered Annie gloomily, as she wrapped a light jersey in a towel and proceeded to pat it from wet to moist to damp and ready to dry flat where the neighbor's cat couldn't get to it. Hadn't they been driven together by the need to have someone to do things with? (Why did going to the movies alone seem so unacceptable anyway?) Drawn from companionship to attraction? From self-interest to sex — shouldn't it be the other way around?

Shoulda shoulda shoulda — shoop-shoop-shoulda. Sounded like a doo-wop number, by one of those street-corner groups with a number in the name, like the Five Lincolns or the Four Kittovers or the Three Angelas or the Two Much or the Ones Upon a Dream. Shoulda musta oughta. Duty

booty cooty. Wanna wanna wanna. Musta needa gotta. Gotta gotta get away.* Aw-righ!†

This kind of stuff was all very well for pounding the water out of the woolens but it didn't really get her anywhere unless catharsis counts. Brendan used to say that in the face of an unshakable determination to promote ZPG (i.e., since they didn't want to have kids), the mating instinct was an anachronism, like the appendix, no less real and no more important. Sometimes, she thought, he was very smart and sometimes he was full of shit.

"Hey there," announced the object of her mingled opinions, "You want some lunch?"

"I'll just grab a yogurt in a minute," she responded, unwrapping the sweater and arranging it on a fresh towel by the window. "Make sure you don't let Mookie in, will you?"

"Sure," he said, rummaging in the fridge and emerging with fixings. "I'm going to be bad and do peanut butter and jelly, you sure you won't join me? Molly gave us that great blackberry jam."

"Hmm. Toasted?"

"Deal."

For people who weren't really into cooking, they seemed to spend an inordinate amount of their time together around the kitchen. Brendan always claimed he would rather just get shot up with the daily dose of vitamins, minerals and whatever. They even give water intravenously to dehydrated runners, right? Annie muttered about roughage but finessed the theoretical by ignoring it as usual; what she insisted on was avoiding animal products whenever possible. Unless she was someone's guest and it would create a difficulty, in which case she went along with the menu as planned. Unless it was veal, which was absolutely beyond the pale. Brendan thought being a vegetarian lowered the blood pressure, raised the life expectancy, lowered the weight, like that; Annie just knew it was right. No argument, no need. The piece of meat passeth all understanding.

*© 1965 Richard-Jagger, which is pretty cheeky if you think about it; let's blame management.

†Jagger, ca 1963—, passim but surely P.D. Over the decades, the consonants have disappeared until the interjection is predicted to reduce to approximately o-i shortly before Mick finally melts.

"Saw José and Christina at the gas station," he said as he laid out ingredients over the counter. "They say hi."

"Uh-huh," she replied vaguely, wrapping another sweater, this one thick and heavy. "This is the last one."

"Mm-mph."

They concentrated on their separate tasks for a minute, Brendan spreading peanut butter (organic, no salt) theatrically in time with Annie's rhythmic pummeling.

"Pound that sucker!" he encouraged. "Beat the shit out of it! Just take your aggressions and let them go! Let it all out!"

"It's your winter sweater, you know," she panted when she stopped.

"I know."

A deal's a deal, it was all part of the agreement, he wasn't going to bring it up.

"Did Magdalena have her baby yet?"

"I don't know, there was a line and they were just leaving as I drove in, we just yelled across the forecourt."

"Probably not or Christina would have told you. I'll have to give her a call." She gave up on the massive green monster and laid it out for the sun god Ra. "You want to ask them over to dinner?"

"Sure, why not. Here, take your pick, I made them the same."

"Thanks," she said, carefully picking the less immaculate one. It was another of their standing arrangements: The maker offered the choice, the chooser picked the worse, the maker got the best and everyone felt right about it. There was order in the universe, or at least in the kitchen. It was very fair and very comforting. It was also very boring, if you happened to have gotten out of bed on the wrong side that year.

"How about Thursday?" he suggested. "You're off Thursday and Friday this week aren't you?"

"Yeah," she admitted — agreed, stated, this wasn't an investigation, not yet anyway — as she prepared to tear into the sandwich. "But that demo's coming up."

"Thmm Rmmcrmmmtmmnt Cmmntmmr?"

"Mm-mmm," she confirmed, correctly interpreting his question as "The Recruitment Center?"

“Isn’t that a lunchtime deal?” continued the Inquisitor, gently.

Actually, the cross part of the examination was all in her head; he was just asking a question. And she had nothing to be guilty about. It was all very confusing.

“Yes, 11 to 3 it says on the flyers, but it’s kinda open-ended. Some folks seem to want to actually occupy it, you know, I mean like as long as possible.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mm-mmm.”

Eating conveys a lack of stress. You can’t fight while you eat. Well, you can actually, but it kind of plays down the issue. Annie knew these tricks from childhood, where she had raised getting around confrontations with her mother to a high art. Rule one, absolute denial. Nothing exceptional is happening. Rule two, admit the minimum and give as little as possible. Rule three, take the long way round and tip-toe, literally and figuratively. Save the loud screaming for last; used occasionally the shock value sometimes prevails but you have to tend the quality of surprise carefully.

“You gonna?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Ah, the Machiavellian social lie: ‘I don’t know’ meaning ‘I’m not ready to tell you yet’ and ‘Maybe’ meaning ‘But don’t say you weren’t warned’. Not quite as duplicitous as the old denial-by-sarcasm (‘What have you been doing?’ ‘Oh, having wild and passionate sex with Bill all afternoon’ — which neatly conceals the affair you are, in fact, having with Bill), but far more useful as ammunition in any subsequent mouth-to-mouth combat.

“Can I come?” followed up Brendan with what seemed to Annie to be elaborate casualness. Sometimes he wasn’t as thick as he looked.

“Of course.” Deep sincerity and invitation. “The main event’s meant to like cover every possi-

ble lunch hour. When are you thinking of coming down?”

“I’ve got an issue to put to bed this week,” he reckoned aloud, sounding quite relaxed, “So I don’t know quite how it’s gonna be. Can I leave it fluid?”

“Shhurr,” she agreed, inhaling the last of lunch and licking her right paw, where peanut butter had leaked, “I’ll know more about it on Tuesday, ’cause there’s a set-up meeting at the red church by the Nickelodeon. People are gonna talk about what’s gonna happen and then I think we’re gonna make signs and stuff. Wanna come?”

“Nah, I don’t want to go to a meeting. Storming the Recruitment Center sounds kind of fun though. Remember the riots in Oakland?”

He was back on safe territory here, facts in the database. With developing cynicism, or perhaps it was just an increasing awareness, Annie sliced him open, took stock and pushed him down the direction she wanted him to go.

“That was in the movie, wasn’t it?”

“Right, right. Thousands of protesters and hundreds of cops, or was it the other way around, buses burning in the street.”

“Panthers.”

“I don’t think so, were the Panthers big yet? They were more Black Power than anti-Vietnam anyway. I could look it up”

He was off. She was safe. It was over.

Over over?

For now, she was passing as a partner and perilously close to passing on. Sometime soon she would have to admit it. Sebastian knew and kept it to himself. Brendan was developing suspicions but kept them from himself. Annie was trying to hide by herself.

It was getting lonely in there with no one to talk to.

Not even herself.

34

It's not their fault they do not know
The birdsong from the radio
It's not their fault they often go
 To Maidenhead
And talk of sports and makes of cars
In various bogus Tudor bars
And daren't look up and see the stars
 But belch instead.

John Betjeman,
"Slough," *Continual Dew*, 1937

WHEN THE BUS GROUND SLOWLY TO A HALT in the middle of a landscape that looked at best like a rough draft of a habitable spot, a sketch that had probably been discarded because even Mother Nature couldn't figure out how to fit in, oh, water, shelter, soil, helpful amenities like that, Whitey's first paranoid response was that the ancient contraption had given up the ghost. There's a sleeping bag in the pack, he comforted himself, and apples and water under the seat, so we'll survive. His second, worse, nightmare was that, no, they couldn't protect their shit against fifty Afghans, tough as nails and mostly armed to the teeth. Perhaps it was a plot, a conspiracy by the bus driver and company to strand the filthy rich infidels, or their corpses, where no one would identify them until it was way too late to do any good except to ease the minds of the putatively doting relatives. He half-expected the rifle barrel he still saw out of the corner of his left eye to swing around and poke him in the ribs and rudely encourage his emergency exit.

Nothing of the sort: It was time for the sunset prayers. The muezzin were miles away but Allah is with us always. The men filed quietly off the bus, most of them with rugs under their arms, developed a swift consensus as to the direction of Mecca and laid out their mats. Mecca, of course, is a physical entity, but it exists, like the Oxford train, at least partly by consensual agreement among the faithful; what are a few degrees north or south in comparison to the higher reality of obeisant focus? And what are a few paranoid delusions in comparison to an obeisant focus on the reality of highness?

"This," thought Whitey, "is bizarre," and in his head he was right.

Buses are normal, ran the riff in his skull. It flowed underground like Alph the sacred river but still it fed the surface vegetation of his consciousness all unknown. We can handle buses, it continued. They go from here to there, and back, and occasionally somewhere else if the driver gets lost. We hang out in them, we talk, we space out, we even cop a quick smoke in the back if we think we can get away with it. But no way on God's green Earth, or God's bluish planet, or even God's light brown desert, do we get out of them at random and bang our foreheads on the ground.

Foreigners, said the subliminal shit-stirrer behind his neocortex, are out to get you.

Sez who? came back the righteous realist.

Blackie was gesturing at the tail end of the procession to the great outdoors, and Whitey pulled himself towards the aisle. He stumbled down the center, balancing on alternate seatbacks, instinctively averting his eyes from the remaining Afghans — women and kids last being the operative motto — and nodding blankly to the tourists, most of whom were checking their passports and preparing to stretch their legs. He jumped the three big steps down and grinned when he didn't quite fall but instead saw the world changed forever by the flash that struck him in that one convulsive leap.

Poincaré, they say, changed the history of the human understanding of mathematics by getting on a bus (the solution to a vexing problem appeared to him as if by magic, leaving him with

only the dull task of writing it down) so why should we wonder that Whitey (no matter that he had never heard of the great scientist) would toss his world-view up in the air and see it come down, rearranged and ever more tightly organized, by getting off another?

“This,” thought Whitey, “is normal,” and in his head he was right again.

Standing silent in the moonscape, he saw the beauty and the power of the bodies beneath the tattered demalio outfits before him. Mammalian muscles stretched in the pride of ritual abasement, these were the true men, proud and humble like lions when the monsoon floods them out of their water-hole. He tried to imagine his step-dad touching his forehead to the ground and he couldn't, and he knew immediately that the loss was as much his own.

He thought of that worthy's careless ignorance of his own body, of the boozing for its very own sake that had killed so many Saturday nights during his childhood in Newcastle, of the goal-oriented fucking that passed for sensuality in more modern circles, and he wanted to cry for the terrible separation he felt as a Westerner from a life he was sure must exist; and he looked again at the fifty rocks that rose and fell in the unearthly twilight and he saw that they were men and not so different from the sand and the stars and he wanted to laugh for the terrible integration he felt as a person from the world he knew lived in him, as he was present in it.

The prophet Elijah he was not, however. Even as approached some mystical moment, he was fully aware of his partner heading off behind a boulder for a quick leak (but why hide it?), of the concealed mothers, chained to the veil and locked out of their possible selves by the inexorable conspiracy of men (and how could that possibly be natural?), of the single loud-mouthed idiot back on the bus and stupid enough to disturb the silence (not to mention risking being torn apart by bears, or extremely heavy dudes in wide turbans), of the battered bus and the incongruous new road, the product of 'aid' of course ... he knew, in other words, what the scene looked like to, say, a television journalist.

He knew also what the scene felt like to someone inside it, and this was new to him.

Suddenly, Whitey felt vaguely embarrassed. He thrust his hands in his pants pockets, turned away from the crowd and sauntered over to the emotional shade of a huge rock. He cut himself apart from the scene, drawing back like a camera and insisting on his self, the observer, the one looking and pretending not to be part of the scene. He wanted to bottle this reality and put it away in his backpack. He wanted to talk himself down. He was scared. He was content. He hadn't decided what he was feeling and so he forgot to feel it.

Whitey's moment of clarity diffused into an inchoate confusion. He was left with a sense that there was something there to know and that somehow he could know it and someday he would.

If he was allowed to.

By himself.

Blackie shuffled gently out from the small granite mountain at stage left and squatted beside his friend, forearms resting gently on his thighs. The gibbous moon was high in the east, seizing the moment from the dying sun and bathing the desert in the coolness of its monochrome. The browns and blues were melting into elegant grays, earth tones fading under moonbeams into fantastical abstracts that turned the scenery into a sequence of impossible sculptures. The Afghan men began to roll up their rugs. Most of them wandered off in their turn to piss in a spot chosen apparently at random, a few dozen yards from the bus. A couple of the western guys joined them, and the women hustled off in the opposite direction, where there was a little more cover. The driver and his sidekick checked the oil. A wiseass local adolescent kicked the tires and got yelled at for his pains. Whitey felt a sense of normality seeping back and began to giggle. This was normal? Rather than try to explain, he pointed at a boy who had been imitating his dad on the other side of the clearing and now was following him back to the bus, without, it seemed, remembering to put away his penis, which flapped tiny and pink through his new (to him) western-style long pants. Dad gave his son an amused whack upside the skull and laughed with his friends. The kid looked sheepish and walked away with his nose in the air, like a cat who had fallen from the back of a chair.

Ciggie? offered Blackie without a word.

Thanks, nodded back Whitey.

They rocked on their heels, kinda slow and kinda easy, smoking and smiling at the little fragment of the universe in front of them.

Look, gestured Blackie, here comes what's-his-face.

The humanitarian from the row behind walked up, grinned his greetings and bummed a smoke with practiced nonchalance. You didn't need to understand Farsi (or was it Pushtu? Afghans spoke one or the other, if not both or possibly neither; it was always a confusing country) to see he wanted a cigarette. And Pushtu (Pashto? Farsi? whatever) would never be enough to figure out what the hell he was really looking for.

The Greeks had a word for it, they say, but who speaks the auld tongue these days? In Athens they use the demotic and the rest of us shrug and say with Shakespeare (Uncle Bill never ceases to amaze) that it's Greek to us. Not that our native tongue is much more accessible, even perhaps for Bill. It's so hard to find the mot juste that English gives up and pretends that the French have that certain *je ne sais quoi*. The trouble with words is that they're never quite right, except when they're right by definition and then they rely on a flimsy scaffold of others no better than themselves. It's inevitable: People make up the words to express their thoughts, which lose something in the translation, except when they gain, which is worse. The language of math is the exception, of course, but algebra won't score you a

coffin nail, let alone let you explain why you're asking for it. Especially if you don't know.

There was no hostile vibe around this Afghan, so far the only one on the bus to reach towards the foreigners. His name, he later explained, was Zahir, after the late king (whose son, the incumbent, bore the prescient moniker Nadir and would be the last of the line). Zahir seemed to be willing to put up with a fair load of shit from his peers for the dubious privilege of hanging out with a pair of linguistically impaired aliens. He wasn't pushy, he didn't appear to be after their money, he couldn't engage them in deep conversation, he just hung out. Presumably it helped that he was bombed out of his gourd.

The silently smoking conversation had barely begun when the mechanics made it clear to all and sundry that the machinery was in excellent condition and they couldn't understand why the punters weren't back in the seats. There was no reason to turn the call of nature into an excuse for frivolous chit-chat. They'd paid good money for their tickets, so why didn't they use them, instead of hanging about making it hard for honest working folks to do their job. Like airport announcements, the words were incomprehensible to a goodly chunk of their intended audience, but the meaning came across anyway. Something about the beetled brows of a pissed-off Pathan bus driver caught the attention even of his compatriots. No one wanted to be stranded. No one ever does.

The only good reason for getting lost is getting found.

Sailors Visit Tropical Ports

U.S. Navy recruitment slogan,
freely distributed in New England
on windshield-ice-scrapers, ca 1970

GOA IS HAUNTED by Europeans and lives untroubled by the fact. The ghosts of Portuguese sailors roam the shore, a pale yellow pathway bounded by palms on the east and the Arabian sea on the west, undulating to Africa. Content in their exile, they rub shoulders with the fishermen and flirt with the families, relaxed in the rhythms of life by the ocean. Forgotten by history, ignored by the chroniclers of kings, lost in mists of their own device, they smile and dance and live on in joy.

Century after century, kids from the Atlantic left behind what they couldn't have and signed up for adventure. Modern admirals freely use the myth of tropical harbors with their hot-blooded women to attract young men; did Vasco da Gama? Did the Vikings? the Phoenicians? Panjim could be the port they were talking about. And once you get there, take a few days off, head north a few miles, and then try to tell yourself that rounding the Cape wasn't worth it.

The wandering freaks were connected to those kids of long ago. Not to the civil servants, not the Jesuits, not to the millionaire traders or the ocean-going merchants. The colonialists had their place in the crumbling city of Old Goa, where once they spent a century building a richer metropolis than Lisbon and held it for another three and a half

before the Indians casually took it away. Their spirits were howling at the jungle as they watched fifteen generations of work vanish slowly into the mildew and the forgotten backwaters of commercial history.

The miraculously preserved body of St Francis Xavier was the premier relic of the old order, and trotted out once a decade for display. In the 1970s, he still drew a good crowd. The wait was a couple of hours before the faithful got their moment filing past the corpse. Once, according to legend, he aroused such devotion that a nun bent over to kiss his feet and took a solid mouthful of toe instead. Certainly a big toe was missing, along with various other bits of limb supposedly sent back to Rome. To a skeptic, the corpus just looked like a crummy embalming job. Western infidels called him St Francis Xavier Cougar and the eastern youth learned to deride what their parents were taught to revere. The cathedral remained, huge, a stone Gothic monster out of medieval Europe, towering monumentally over a lost and dying culture, a heart transplant that the land finally rejected.

Official Portugal may have written the histories and had themselves mummified into textbooks, mourning the failures of the past, but the happy ghosts were still in the breeze by the palms.

Dancing.

36

I do not seek, I find.

Pablo Picasso, 1881–1973

Pablo Picasso was never called an asshole

Jonathan Richman,
“Pablo Picasso,” ca 1973

Born in Spain, died in France, he was not scared of baggy pants

Guy Clark, Radney Foster &
Bill Lloyd, “Picasso’s Mandolin,”
Guy Clark, *Boats to Build*, 1992

THE BUS ROLLED SOUTH and then east, over a surprisingly smooth stretch of blacktop. What else could a poor boy do but listen to the sounds of a little evening? The locomotion was king and Persian pop music crackling over the radio mingled with the almost-rhythm of the reign as the axles rose ’n’ guns slapped against the luggage racks. Reverie passing for meditation supplied the in-flight entertainment. Words fled, pictures dissolved. Movement and industrial sounds were all that were left, white noise in the darkness till the clocks lost the beat of time, preferring to stand still for hours and then jump (ah, but they never [well, hardly ever] went back) to some random hour that pleased them.

When the lights were on above the aisle, those that hadn’t burnt out, the night was black and impenetrable, existence itself limited to the caterwauling chunk of steel and glass. Soon enough, the driver killed them, and the eerie landscape stole into focus, all grays from charcoal to pearl, broken only by the dim yellow of Lucas headlights and the occasional flash and glow of cigarettes within. Once or twice, the distance showed a glimmer of fire, perhaps a lantern; some of the darker shadows might have been tents or houses; otherwise, the absence was absolute.

Hurling into a void, relaxed and out of control.
Yes.

REPORTER: What do you think of Western Civilization?

GANDHI: I think it would be a good idea.

Mahatma Gandhi,
on arrival in England, 1931

Nonviolence Agreement

**For the Nov. 15, 1990 Blockade of the
Capitola Military Recruitment Center**

For the purpose of building trust and to create a foundation of safety so that we know what to expect from each other, we agree to the following guidelines for this action:

- 1) We will act nonviolently, with respect for all people we encounter. We will seek to express our feelings without verbally or physically abusing anyone.
- 2) For this action, we agree we will not destroy property. However, many of us in the nonviolent resistance movement do not regard property destruction as inherently violent, and recognize its validity as a tactic in some situations.
- 3) We will not bring alcohol or other non-prescription drugs. Alcohol and drugs at an action can endanger ourselves, and others, legally and physically. They can also hamper our ability to communicate and work together with clarity.
- 4) We will not bring firearms or other weapons to the action.
- 5) Participants who risk arrest recognize that they may face legal consequences as a result of their actions and are prepared to accept these consequences. We encourage jail solidarity.

Legal Information

The legal phone number for this action is **555-1182**.

All actionists risking arrest should have the number memorized or written down where they will have access to it throughout the arrest and incarceration process. The phone will be staffed beginning immediately after any arrests, for as long as necessary. As of Nov. 13, we have not secured legal counsel to represent arrested actionists, but it may become available if necessary.

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name
 The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth
 The named is the mother of ten thousand things

Lao Tsu,
Tao Te Ching, sixth century B.C.E.,
 translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, 1972

THE SPIRITS INDEED WERE WILLING for the wild night ride to last forever, but the flesh, as St Matthew pointed out, is weak. The Afghans apparently didn't notice, but the foreigners, flimsy as usual, at some point became convinced that forever had come and regrettably gone. Their bladders were full and their stomachs empty, and both were complaining loudly that this was the wrong way around. No one had reached the pitch of desperation required to interrupt the teamster at the wheel, whose wrath would intimidate an avalanche let alone a poor freak who thought he had to go, but it was close. The rush to the door when the bus finally pulled up proved it.

First things first: The men immediately crossed the street and irrigated the desert, while the women scurried behind a building to do the same. Stretching gently and wondering what to do next, Blackie and Whitey saw the driver heading off to the side of the house and were starting to follow when Zahir smote them across the shoulders and pointed at the front door, making eating motions with his other hand. A passing American saw them and got it immediately.

"Fat city, man, it's a truckstop," he explained. "The driver eats free for stopping here, natch. Probably gets free hash too."

The four of them ducked under the lintel and into a dimly-lit room with rough wooden benches and tables. A pair of paraffin lanterns vaguely illuminated the scene without troubling the brain with inessential details. A horde of turbaned men with stern visages was ripping into mutton kebabs and nan, the flat local bread, as though they hadn't eaten for days or, slightly more likely, they expected the mad driver to drag them away at any moment.

Zahir took over, sitting his charges firmly against the wall and calling for four specials, guv, and hop to it, we haven't got all night, what are you laughing at, even furriners gotta eat, anyway they're all right, you wanna make something of it?

"Fancy some tea, then?" ventured Blackie. "Chai?"

"Chai?" yelled Zahir, extremely loudly to make certain he was understood, and then to the patron's back, "Char chai." That worthy affected to ignore the order but reappeared instantly with dinner and rapidly with glasses of tea. It was probably as well that the light didn't allow for criticism of the dishwashing. Anyway, you can get amoebic dysentery from cups that look pristine. What's a little goat grease between friends.

Eat, eat, mimed Zahir extravagantly, and demonstrated the technique. He ripped a strip off the huge circle of nan, used it to grab a pellet of mutton and threw this miniature burger whole into his mouth, where he chomped it energetically to make room for the next. The Yank joined in with enthusiasm and the two Limeys imitated him, albeit a little slower.

"Hey, man, this is great," opined the American, feeding his face in a frenzy through a bushy brown beard. "I got so sick of greasy goat stew and I hate fucking omelets." He was tiny, maybe five-two and speed-freak skinny, with bottle glasses and baggy Levi's, but miraculously he had a voice and a stomach as big as all outdoors. "Say, boss, can I get another load of this?"

The innkeeper graciously accepted the compliment by inclining his head a millimeter and conjuring up the goods, seemingly out of thin air.

"You guys going straight through to Kabul?"

“We reckoned we’d stop off in Qandahar,” replied Blackie. “We figured the overnight would be hell enough.”

Zahir had ripped through his dinner and was sucking down tea through his sugar cube, staring at his new friends (whom, let’s face it, he didn’t know at all) and bantering lightly with his old ones (whom he’d met at the bus station). They were clearly amused by his tolerance of these ignorant strangers but that didn’t faze him. His snappy ripostes may have been witticisms worthy of Oscar Wilde, to judge by the appreciative rumbles they elicited.

“Actually, it’s better than I thought,” continued Blackie, who was feeling slightly unnerved at being the object of such obvious, and seemingly ribald, speculation. Better to pursue a conversation, even with a stranger, than just to sit as a passive object of laughter.

“It’s the Russian road,” explained the Brooklyn professor.

“Foreign aid, right? Or do you just mean they hired Russian engineers?”

“Fuck no, they couldn’t pay ’em to come here. They probably didn’t even want ’em.”

“Huh?”

“You know the specs they built this road to?”

“No, what?”

“Fifty tons dead axle weight.”

“So?” Blackie was not an engineer.

“So it’s built for tanks. Take a look at the map, man. The Soviets put in roads south from the border to Qandahar and to Kabul, so they could move in when they’re ready, get to the oil in the Gulf. State Department’s no fucking better, mind you. They saw what was going on, and blacktopped up from Quetta and Peshawar to Kabul and up from Iran to Herat. They figure if the Commies move south, they wanna move in and take them on up here. No sense in fighting in the oil fields. What’s foreign aid for anyway?”

“What do the Afghanis think? I mean don’t they have something to say about it?”

“Hey, man, they’re getting roads free. Anyway they figure they can kick anyone’s ass any time. Look what they did to you Brits.”

“Right,” agreed Blackie, with that perverse British pride in really humiliating defeats, like

Dunkirk and the Black Hole of Calcutta. The psychologically inclined among them say that the people who built the empire on which the sun never set are so secure in their superiority (even long after dark) that they can accept the occasional disaster; most of the latter-day imperialists, however, don’t actually understand that those were defeats. Hey, it’s a coping mechanism. It works. “Carry on up the Khyber, lads.”

Whitey chuckled appreciatively, which led Zahir to laugh in sympathy but drew a puzzled look from the transatlantic cousin, who was under the illusion that he spoke English.

“Khyber pass, arse,” elucidated Blackie. “Rhyming slang.”

“Far out, man,” laughed the fellow from the former colony. “Good old Blighty, eh what, chaps.” Sensing from an unhurried flash of Whitey’s eyes that he might have trespassed onto sacred territory, he hurried to make amends. “The vernacular incorporates history, yeah? It’s classic, man.”

One of those, thought Whitey, pulling paraphernalia from his pocket, but Blackie was into it.

“S’right,” he agreed, tossing over a cigarette and then distributing them generally. In the interests of maintaining the current level of international amity, he did his best not to count the remainder once half a dozen of Zahir’s buddies had gratefully accepted his sketchy hint of an offer. “You know what we call tea, dontcha?”

“What?”

“Cuppa char.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Char, chai, it’s all the same, man. Hindi or what, I dunno, but fuckin’ right it’s Asia, man. And it’s working people, right, it’s sailors and kids in the army, King’s shilling and all that shit. They got picked up by the press gangs and they go to work and some of them come home and there you are.”

“Global village.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You know what they say about the psychic in the whorehouse?”

“No, what?”

“The medium gives the massage.”

Blackie looked away in severe distaste and Whitey concentrated on crumbling hash onto the

bed of tobacco in his spreadeagled joint. Zahir looked on with interest and everyone else affected to ignore them all.

“Hey man,” he continued unabashed, “Looks like a groovy little number, actually a groovy big production number.” (Whitey nodded gravely as he hand-rolled the mixture to a meticulously uniform consistency; he was after all on display in front of an audience of presumed professionals.) “Sort of a first-act closer, as we say on the Great White Way.” He double-rapped his signet ring smartly against his tea glass and raised his hand in ritual acknowledgment of the absent applause. “Rimshot. Hey man you know they’re getting off in back, can’t beat ’em with a stick, might as well join ’em.”

“If the crew’s flying, I wanna be on the plane,” opined Blackie.

“Right on, brother.”

“At least if we fall off the floor I won’t be worrying about it.”

“Damn straight.” Somehow he didn’t look like John Wayne, even when he thrust his bird’s-nest beard way out from his tiny chest. “Pardon my French. I was in one of these back woods juke joints in Iran, couple of months back, been hanging out with the bus driver and he took me round back with the teamsters. Fuck me if they didn’t get pipes of O on the house.”

“Opium? In a transport caff?”

“No shit, man. They were outta their skulls. Didn’t dare sleep all night, just holding that bus on the road. Sheer force of psychic energy. Rest of the passengers never knew how much they owed me. Hey, thanks, dude.”

Whitey was getting the measure of the little guy. Hot and cold running entertainment in every room, all he lacked was an on-off switch. Circumstances conspired: freak hospitality, the sharing ethic, a hope for ever more outrageous riffs when the fuel tank got up to overload, the scientific urge to see if filling the face would dam the flow; really, there was no choice. He offered the unlit doobie, by now a smooth cylinder more than half a foot long — any good Cuban revolutionary cigar-roller would have been proud of it — and readied the matches.

The Yank wedged the joint expertly between the middle and ring fingers of his left hand, cupped

that fist with his right and pressed them ceremoniously to his forehead.

“Bom Shankar!” he cried and presented the white touchpaper for ignition.

Whitey, with the fastidious attention to detail that he applied to anything he cared about and nothing else, held the flame steady as the other puffed the overstuffed stogie into joyous life, with enveloping bushels of smoke to signify the fire within. Here too was someone who took pride in his craft, be it only the humble trade of fumigator, and the two of them connected in appreciation.

A proper respect for the moment, allied with temporary technical difficulties, kept the group in silence as the number circulated. It was little more than half consumed when the conductor leaned into the doorway, gibbering vigorously. The assembled company treated him with the respect he deserved — they ignored him completely — but by a remarkable coincidence they unanimously decided within a couple of minutes that the time had come to venture into the night air. Zahir told his new friends not to rush anything but as Blackie crushed the roach they picked up their skulls and tried to walk.

“Nice one, Squirrel,” offered the American to Whitey, who looked taken aback.

“Spurs fan?” he asked derisively.

“Hey, I just got it from this Limey I was hanging around with. What’s the deal? What’s Spurs?”

“Buncha southern wankers.”

“Football,” clarified Blackie. “London team. They’ve got a poofa called Cyril playing left back.”

“No offense, dudes. Tell me about it in Kabul, hey? Name’s Skip, by the way.”

“I’m Blackie. That’s Whitey.”

“Cool.”

Mutual nods, shapeless backing and filling. Skip the Beard knew for sure, and the others accepted by instinct, that they might never see each other again, they might never learn anything important about each other, they might be left with nothing more (or less) than the memory of a meal in the middle of the night. Isolated in the dark of a smoky truckstop, there were emotional currents too tenuous to name, perhaps too dangerous to notice, or else too trivial to dignify with attention. Had Blackie

found an intellectual mentor? Was Whitey jealous? Was Skipper nervous, was he attracted (by whom?), was he just a little dog with a big dog's mouth? Was he standing in the rain with a matchbox holding his emotional clothes or was he just another cross-cultural failure to communicate? Did any or all of them like each other or even care to consider it?

No matter, they each needed a name. Some places it's a shield, presented first like colors, to identify (one of the Hampshire Twistleden-ffinnes, or the Shropshire?) and to hide behind. Others, it's precious, a secret divulged only with intimacy, camouflaged like as not by some meaningless euphemism to be discarded as the stranger melts away and mutates towards friendship. Freak culture as ever was confused, between the value of

directness, of unmediated emotion and pure action, and the habits of social ritual. Even the English could talk with a newly-met member of their peer group, yet at the end there was this lingering discomfort: They Hadn't Been Introduced.

But they had met. Whatever the words, they had moved through some kind of an encounter and it couldn't be complete without learning each other's handle. Who was that short, dark stranger?

Strange compromise: Introduced as they parted, they had met as allies, assumed to have more in common with each other than with all around them, and they left as something more or less. Propinquity had propinked and a pair of relationships had begun, or even ended. All cats are gray in the emotional dark, man.

To fear love is to fear life, and those who fear life are already three parts dead.

Bertrand Russell,
Marriage and Morals, 1929

CEDAR AND ANNIE WANDERED INLAND, past the palms and onto the road. Anyone with the sense of a retarded donkey was enjoying a siesta; no one at all was in a hurry. The bus from Panjim wheezed past, half empty at this end of the route, and dropped off half a dozen sweaty exotics and a few locals with string bags of groceries and tired expressions. The driver, the conductor and the engineer squatted on their haunches for a cigarette. They passed it between them like a joint, sticking it between the second and third finger of their left hand and puffing through the curled forefinger. The conductor was the bag man; the driver held the wheel; the engineer was about thirteen and mostly along for insurance, so when the bus was satisfactorily oversold he was reduced to riding on the roof, but the kid knew his stuff — he fixed the contraption every time it broke. It must have been genius. Given a decent machine shop and a few uninterrupted weeks he'd have made an Indian the first man on Mars, if it wasn't for the forms. What forms? Quite. How could he fill out the proper forms if they haven't been written yet? Not that he could read them anyway. Stick to fixing internal combustion engines, lad, it's a solid career and you won't regret it.

The five-minute walk to the café took a solid half-hour of strenuous effort. They coagulated, panting, on the benches. The power was on for the blenders, but no one else was there except a pile of ripe fruit and the kid who was stuck with the mid-afternoon shift. He looked about five and was really about eight. He was flipping desultorily through a pile of cartoon novels in Hindi and in English, neither of which he read or spoke.

"Merry Christmas," they greeted him solemnly. The kid looked at them with a small smile and wagged his head pleasantly as he waited for their order.

"Do mango, baba," ordered Cedar decisively.

"No," Annie interrupted. "Ek mango, ek papaya." It was most important to keep these things straight.

"Ek mango, ek papaya, okay." The boy set to work, dicing fruit and tossing it into the blenders with the casual expertise of a practiced chef. He poured the results into glasses and carried them over to the table. "Char rupee." He put the bills into the tin moneybox and went back to his comics.

They sat, staring vacantly out at the street. The place had no walls on the three outer sides, just posts holding up a corrugated iron roof over four wooden tables and pairs of benches. Behind the counter, there was a half wall and a curtain that closed off a room where the kid's father was snoozing. He was in his early twenties and looked thirty. Mom was away somewhere with the little ones. The five of them lived behind the store. It was beginning to look like they could get an extra wage-earner. After this season, the boy would be able to handle all the day-to-day operations. If the tourist business kept picking up, dad could probably find something regular in one of the restaurants, he was good with customers. They had a transistor radio. Life was looking up.

Annie leaned across the table and touched Cedar's hand.

"I'm sorry about the trips."

"Thanks." He looked in her eyes. "It's OK, you know."

She smiled and took his hand, gently. She didn't really know but she was more than willing to fake it. It was not a time for inquisition, it was a time for empathy.

"You're nuts."

"Yeah. So what."

"So nothing. I'm just glad you're here." As she said it, she realized it was true. Strange undercurrent: She also realized all of a sudden that it was not always true but she didn't usually think about it, she

just accepted his presence as a given in a palatable gestalt, an irritation, a constraint, a help, a comfort.

“Yeah, me too.” Cedar sipped and looked away, as though unwilling to believe his own truth.

“Yeah.” She waited a moment before continuing. “And I know what you mean, I think. I like to trip every six months or so, just to take stock, kind of, to find out where I’m at.”

“And to have fun too.” Balancing was an irritating habit of his, pointing out the other side of anything. Annie was fair-minded enough to admit he was right, though, especially then since she was feeling friendly. It was sort of pleasant that he keep a perspective.

“Oh yeah, it’s fun too, all right.”

“You feeling anything?” Enquiring minds want to know. Scientists, journalists, gossips, confessors, people perhaps.

She squinted into the distance. “Yeah, some. It’s kinda nice. No tigers jumping out of the trees, just a little coming and going and taking a peek at it all.”

“Hey, Yankee, Merry Xmas.”

“Guten Abend, Herr Klaus,” ventured Cedar in foreign. Annie kept quiet. She had seen this guy around, and Cedar had spoken of him, but the German had never acknowledged her existence and didn’t seem to be making much of an exception right now. She suspected he fancied her and had her tabbed as Cedar’s property, which was flattering and insulting in fluctuating proportion. She sat back to watch. It was a good time to be an audience.

“No, no, no, it’s not yet evening. It is no matter, it is not important. How you doing? You have smoke? Hey, baba, ek chai. Tea you want? You are OK? You look kind of ...”

The German casually filled the place, as always. He swung around another bench and parked himself and his little Nepali bag onto it. His black beard curled into his chest hair and seemed to dissolve out of focus. If you told him he looked like Jim Morrison in his late or alcoholic junkie phase, he would usually have taken it as a compliment. Cedar found him intimidating and amusing both, in small doses.

“We are ... kind of ... here, you want a cig or a jay?”

“On the day of Christmas, I would turn down reefer? Bom Shankar.”

It was only a baby joint, sized to fit in a cigarette pack, and he inhaled about a third of it in a gulp. They each got a solid toke and passed it back as he blew smoke clear across the street. The kid laid the tea down, shaking his head tentatively and muttering “No ganja,” and retreated towards the back.

“Hey baba, ganja good, bom.”

The rest of the joint disappeared soon enough between the three of them, which made the others feel slightly relieved, on top of slightly guilty, not to mention slightly stoned. It was never quite clear where to draw the line in Baga and the operative rule of common sense was to avoid obvious confrontations and embarrassment. But then common sense never was, especially where Klaus was concerned.

“You guys, you are going to Anjuna tonight?”

Plural, eh, noticed Annie. So I do exist. Well, that’s a relief.

“Maybe, why? What’s happening?” Cedar was vague where Annie was silent.

“Man, you didn’t hear about the full moon party? Christmas, it’s gonna be bigger yet.”

“Full moon was, what, two, three days ago? What gives?”

“Ja, day before yesterday. Big party. Rock’n’roll, man, they got the Who’s fucking sound system, they got guys flying in from America, I hear John Lennon’s gonna be there tonight.”

“Ah, bullshit, man, c’mon.”

“That’s what I hear in the bazaar, man. They say Yoko don’t dig it but she said John should come and do it, get it together on the beach. Maybe Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, I don’t know, I just say what I hear. Come on over, be a gas, man.”

He tossed his head back to flip the hair out of his eyes, drained his tea and wiped his hands on his yellow pajama pants.

“Good deal, man, thanks for the toke. See you tonight, huh?”

He threw a coin in the general direction of the kid, who caught it neatly, and shambled onto the street. Annie began to giggle.

“Hello, world. Was he over the top or am I further gone than I thought?”

“Fifty-fifty. Both. Who knows?” Cedar was fading back into fantasy after the effort of keeping up with Klaus.

“Let’s go over to Anjuna tonight.” The social director at work.

“Sure, why not. How do we get there?”

“There’s a path, we can walk. Juanita was telling me yesterday. She said there’d be a party, too, but she didn’t say anything about any rock stars.”

“Figures. Hey, we’ll make ’em up.”

“Yeah, if we got some better drugs we could hallucinate them.”

“Right! Go fly out of windows, like what’s-his-name’s kid.”

“Art Linkletter, right. If I were his daughter, I’d probably take the long dive too.”

“Sure you would. C’mon, you wanna do a Brian Jones?”

“Huh?”

“Get loaded and go for a swim.”

They tumbled laughing into the street, dazzled by the cortical sunlight. The mid-day sleepers were heading outside and the serious sunburn artists were coming back from the beach. In both directions, the crowd was slow and ready to smile. The palms shimmered and gentled a supple beat like maracas softly shaken and mixed very low, the backdrop for an acoustic twelve-string and perhaps a mandolin or a country fiddle, lonesome but deeply content.

Der Mensch ist, was er isst.

A man is what he eats.

Ludwig Feuerbach,
in Jacob Moleschott, *Lehre der
Nahrungsmittel: Für das Volk*, 1850

ALL THIS STUFF ABOUT MANGO SHAKES built by eight-year-olds and greasy goat stew served by supercilious bandits may seem a little unusual to the average reader in these decadent days, given child labor laws and hygiene inspections and the like. But then readers of (*Searching for*) *Solid Ground* are far from average, despite the fondest hopes of author, publisher, printer, bookseller and everyone else with a financial interest in the matter (if indeed such there turn out to be). Undoubtedly their tastes in, indeed their very need for, food vary enormously.

For those on trains in Mongolia, or Toyotas in the Serengeti, or pinned down by casual gunfire in Lima or Los Angeles, food may not even be quite as available as they might wish. They should probably save this chapter for later, and skip over the eating bits to get on to the nice escapist storyline. Bye.

For those suffering angst at home, ditched by lovers, dumped on by bosses, sandbagged by life, underwhelmed by the available options ... for them, comfort food is indicated — chacun à son gout, as the don said, passing the port — scrambled eggs or burgers or cereal, what the hell, popcorn for dinner or strawberry jam, whatever makes you feel relaxed and happy. Put a childhood fave on the stereo if you can, settle back and let Annie and Blackie and Cedar and all the rest of the alphabetic gang down to Whitey and Xavier and Young Zahir do the experimenting for you.

Others, however, may want to get into the swing of the thing. They may want a bit of shake-up from the old routine, something a teensy bit different, a little bit of a plunge into the unknown (but not too far). In the spirit of helpfulness and education that characterizes the best popular entertainment, here for your delectation is a tasteful and instructive solution.

SOLID GROUND'S NUMBERLESS CURRY

This subtle but piquant courtier will cater to any fantasy you request. It will caress your palate and waft gently past your mucous membranes to the delicate haze of the brain's pleasure centers, or if you prefer rough trade it will fight your throat and burn your ass in the morning. Revisited, it will always surprise and never disappoint — unless, of course, you want it to.

INGREDIENTS

sufficient	Vegetable oil
enough	Onions
several	Spices [to taste, vigorously]
not a few	Vegetables
the odd	Banana & apple
necessary	Water
preferably	Peanuts
perhaps	Coconut
optional	Chicken
finally	Sour cream

Makes quite a bit. Serve with chapatti, puri, flour tortillas, nan, any other kind of bread-like substance or some other carbohydrate such as rice, or perhaps even noodles; economical Indians go heavy on the carbs and light on the sauce, while affluent hippies tend to reverse the proportions. Mango chutney is good with it, unless you go too heavy on the sweet fruit.

DIRECTIONS

Put the oil into a large pan, preferably cast-iron, and add the spices in a generous quantity while applying gentle heat. Roll the oil around so that the spices dissolve into it without leaving lumps. Add the onion(s) and stir them around (by now the

pan's probably getting warm) so that they are covered by the spicy oil, which has been yellowed by the turmeric. Chop the vegetables and fruits and throw them in, being careful not to splash because turmeric stains. If you want to add chicken, brown it first and then stir it in. The pan may be full before you're through but don't worry, a little cooking will make more room. Fill up the cracks with water and shell the peanuts while you wait (unless you bought them shelled, in which case you're on your own for entertainment). Simmer as long as possible — until a bit after the veg is all soft is minimal; all day and night would probably be great but who could wait that long; about the length of a movie should be good. Right before serving, stir in a significant dollop of sour cream, which makes the world of difference.

PHILOSOPHY & DETAILS

Making this, or rather, this kind of dish, is an object lesson for control freaks. (For example, most of us in this culture, to some degree; at least, it's a lesson for that side of the personality.) Loosen up. It practically never goes wrong. Good cooks don't worry about the details most of the time and, at least on this occasion, you too can act like a good cook.

The spices really are a matter of taste. Try starting with about a pinch of each and play from there. A good guide as to which to use can be found by looking at the ingredients of any commercial curry powder; it's worth keeping some on hand and throwing in a chunk to cover any you're missing. Turmeric, cumin, ginger, mustard, pepper and salt (if only a tiny bit to help combine the flavors) are pretty much essential; coriander is often good; fenugreek has a cool name but who knows what it tastes like; and feel free to try the 'Italian' spices, such as oregano, or some of the Simon & Garfunkel spices ... or Lea & Perrins' confection ... or any

other inspiration. Just remember, a curry does not have to be hot — you add that by putting in more of the hot spices, such as red pepper, hot mustard, crushed chillies, Tabasco sauce, and so on. Don't leave them out altogether, though, because the fruit and sour cream, especially, will dampen down the intensity.

Enough onions to sort of cover the pan to start with is about right. Chop everything coarsely, they all mush down when they simmer long enough. For vegetables, you could use most or all of: bell peppers, zucchini (or courgettes if you prefer), carrots, mushrooms, perhaps green beans or broccoli, a tomato or more for the liquid, maybe some garlic, which some people prefer to add after the onions, although others like to toast bits in with the spices.

The fruit is inessential but interesting. The water could be supplemented with wine or possibly some kind of juice. The oil is really a replacement for *ghee*, the clarified butter that is normally used in the Indian sub-continent. For that matter, the turmeric is at least partly a substitute for saffron; if you want to feel really exotic and extravagant, take out a bank loan and get your hands on a gram or so of that powder, but it's really wasted in this *mélange*. Might as well blow your nose.

Traditionally, *Solid Ground's Numberless Curry* is a vegetarian dish. (By appointment to select audiences for decades.) It works fine with chicken, and might work with other meats, but on no account try to use left-over turkey. The only time this recipe has unequivocally failed was in California one year, the week after Thanksgiving; turkey meat is strong stuff and overwhelms everything. Eschew it.

Hold onto the essentials: onions coated with oil in which spices have been melted, simmered with veggies and such and served with bread of a sort.

Be careful. People may start thinking you can cook.

I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands and wrote my will
across the sky in stars

T.E. Lawrence,
from the Dedication of
Seven Pillars of Wisdom, 1926

THE BUS CLATTERED ITS WAY through the night, into the minor metropolis of Qandahar, vibrant no doubt since it wasn't actually dead, but pulsing at a rate of seconds per beat in the bland yellow of early morning. Skip the Beard was sacked out in his seat as Blackie and Whitey stumbled inelegantly down from the bus, feeling vaguely inadequate and vastly relieved to be off the monster for a while. Even Zahir remained mostly aloof, propping his eyes open with the inevitable tea but barely acknowledging the coming of the day or the going of his new-made buddies. Even the business of extracting their packs from the pile of bodies on the roof went smoother and quieter than usual, despite or perhaps because of the fact that the rooftop riders were largely asleep. It was the time of the season for zombies.

Half a dawn later, the dust was settling behind the exhausted smoke of the departed charabanc and the yellow was intensifying into the hard glare of a desert day.

"Hot," observed Blackie unnecessarily.

"Cowtown," commented Whitey unfairly.

"Walk," suggested Blackie unilaterally.

"Crash," countered Whitey unpersuaded.

"Food," tried Blackie undaunted.

"Hotel," suggested Whitey unhurriedly.

"Joint," they decided unanimously.

Remarkably, the unusual indulgence of a breakfast bomber, at an hour when any respectable stoner would expect to be deep in dreamland, reversed their energies. Doubtless it was something to do with polarities or planets or sympathetic vibrations (or not) but Blackie lost his drive and Whitey found it. Leaving his friend to watch the bags if he could, Whitey inspected the options within three blocks, selected a hotel and signed in for a room, eyeballed a couple of alternative capps

for later on, and came back to collect his companion. He led him to the room, and laid him down in the comfort of their own private space. Sometimes it's more than good to have a friend to hold.

"Sleep well," said Whitey with a tenderness not many would see.

"Mmm," replied his mate and it was enough.

Some time when the sun was high, they awoke, lightly brushed with soft sweat, and wordlessly reached for each other. They kissed with a gentle passion that almost surprised them both and softly caressed each other till one, then the other, moaned quietly in private pleasure, as his partner smiled at the sight and comforting touch of ecstasy.

"I'm glad you're here with me," whispered Blackie.

"Yeah," affirmed Whitey and drifted back to sleep.

Blackie lay almost awake in the siesta time, floating and lazily watching shadows crawl along the wall. Non-thoughts flickered at the edges of no-mind as he undulated in and out of the confines of his body. He had a healthy disrespect for the flabby lunacies of the TM™ groupies — Mamasrichkid Mishmash Yogi and the giggling ilk — but here he was, doing the work, all uninstructed and formally unenlightened. This was meditating? No, no, he insisted, and yielded into thought.

Omne animal post coitum triste est, every creature is sad after sex, he recalled, the one Latin tag that stuck in his head, it being the only one about fucking, and now he vaguely knew that he hadn't understood it at all. He'd thought it was about the shame that followed urgent and heedless ejaculations, the aftermath of careless masturbation or even consensual exploitation, the hollow sense of the fulfillment of mere needs, not even desires, let alone loves. He knew the disgust of bad sex well

enough, he knew too the warmth of closeness, and now he remembered that even in English *triste* doesn't just mean sad and he was left with a sense of wistful connection, of gentle bathing in the deeper regions of consciousness, and so the proverb became memorable, not as a smutty wisecrack but as a prayer that begged to be true.

Was that what the tantric sex-magic trip was about? He was mildly curious, not prurient but inquisitive, and beginning to understand that he wasn't on his way to India to plumb the secrets of the Orient, but he might just snag a hold on a secret of life on the way through if he wasn't looking for it. It's not that the journey was the reward, not at all. The journey was the journey, the reward was the reward, and clarity came from not confusing the two. It wasn't a bad thing to go to Asia to study the ancient wisdom, but it wasn't a good thing either, it was just a thing to do and why not.

Sure as shit beat working in the heart-attack machine.

Ah, but loneliness, the cloak you wear, was that the risk you ran? Not here, he thought, not now. At least there was someone. What more could you ask? What less could you demand? What else could you need? Something, he knew, something. There was loss not far from the contentment but yes there was ease too, and a glint of hope. Not that he would find it, whatever it was, but that he would find out what it was, or at least if it was, or maybe perhaps what finding was, or even something else entirely but connected. He was aware only of a color, a hopeful reddish ochre just out of sight, like a phantasm that dances in the periphery of vision and vanishes at the instant of attention. He tumbled and rose, a being apart, a self without a being, a point without a self, an existence without a point, a connection without existence, a process of connection, a being of process, a person, an animal, a matter of life, a life of matter.

He meditated, and later he slept.

When he woke, he put his clothes back on and with them his armor but he couldn't quite forget. Doors close again that once opened by chance, but they don't necessarily lock.

The day was blown, of course, and the night followed close behind. Policy decision: Fuck it and

split. Someone else could dig Qandahar, spell it with a K if they liked, Kabul was calling and there was a bus tomorrow afternoon at three. Puzzling through the illegible script on the ticket, Blackie thought he saw the time and the price, but Whitey wouldn't bother to look.

"They wouldn't fucking dare to rip us off, man."

"We wouldn't hurt them."

"They don't fucking know that."

True as this was, it did the employees of the bus company a notable injustice. Travelers were under the protection of the Koran, by explicit injunction, and management certainly wanted to keep in good with the mullahs. It is remarkable how reliable people can be when they are convinced that their souls are on the line. Of course, when it's backed up by a shrewd bodily desire to avoid assassination, that helps too.

A baffling evening spent avoiding local reality gave way to a night of catching up on sleep. It is strange how irregular the sleeping process can be, when shaken out of its usual patterns. Major coke-heads and speedfreaks scramble through days of twitch and movement, collapse the clock round and emerge ahead of the game, short-term, and like as not to get run over by a truck years before paying their debt to their fried brains. Conversely, your inoffensive opiate dreamers spend their eight hours in a stupor on a bus, half a dozen more in siesta under the noon-day sun, and still need a solid ten plus to get caught up the following night. It's not fair. Somewhere along the line they missed out on a full night's worth of wakefulness. And then on the *next* day, they're still bumbling about, failing to absorb or even observe the glories that lay out of the hotel's view. Oh, well, no matter; in the words of the sainted Lennon, they're only sleeping. What else *is* there to do?

Whether by grace of the fear of the Lord or of earthly unbelievers, travel went off, so to speak, without a hitch. The bus arrived early, which was worrying, but it left late, which was strangely reassuring. The seats and springs were dilapidated but not destroyed. Whitey had profited from previous experience enough to stock up a generous supply of pre-fabricated one-paper joints that fit neatly into

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his cigarette packet. This practical accommodation to circumstances was always the hallmark of the man of affairs he considered himself to be, although he flew under different flags of convenience for different dialects — heavy dude, he might have copped to under great pressure, where others would call

him a streetwise hipster (cool, dad), a globetrotter (gimme a break), an addict (yawn), a psychopathological outsider of introverted tendencies (if you say so), or just a smart freak. Whatever, the supply he brought was sufficient, though the night be long (yeah), 'till I belong (yeah) to you (oooh).

BLOCKADE of the CAPITOLA RECRUITMENT CENTER

Thursday, November 15th, 11:30–2:30

Meet at Jade St Park (at the end of 45th Ave) at 11 o'clock
March (about 4 blocks) to the center, at 4550 Capitola Road.

Participants are encouraged to come to a Community Meeting, on Tuesday, the 13th, at Loudon Nelson, at 7 o'clock, to discuss what will happen at the action.

Some volunteers will be doing Civil Disobedience, and expect to be arrested. Others will picket and witness.

If you want to do CD, please do a Non-Violence Prep first. One is scheduled for tomorrow, Saturday, Nov 3rd, 10:00–5:00 (bring lunch), UCSC Student Center, East Conference Room; another will be on two evenings — Tuesday 6th and Thursday 8th, 7:00–10:00 each night, same location.

Organized by the Persian Gulf Peace Coalition

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MARCH FROM CAMPUS

Saturday, November 17th

Students for a Responsible Society are organizing a march and rally.

Meet at the Bay Tree Bookstore on Campus at 11:00
March down through town from 11:30
Rally at Mission Plaza at 1:00, featuring Eric Larsen,
the Marine conscientious objector.

The map shows the layout of the Capitola area. At the top, it labels 'Soccer Field', 'Tennis Courts', and 'JADE STREET PARK'. Below these are 'Here Be Dragons (mob & homes)' and a 'Parking Lot'. The main street shown is 'JADE STREET', which runs east-west. To the west of Jade Street is '45TH AVENUE', and to the east is '41ST AVENUE'. Along 45th Avenue, from north to south, are 'TOPAZ', 'OPAL', 'JEWEL', 'GARNET', 'EMERALD', and 'CRYSTAL'. Further south, 'DIAMOND' is also marked. A large rectangular area is labeled 'Here Be Dragons (apartment complexes)'. Inside this area, a box is labeled 'NOT EXACTLY TO SCALE' with a north arrow pointing down. Below this area, 'CAPITOLA ROAD' runs east-west. Along Capitola Road, from west to east, are 'S&L', 'CSAA', and 'DMV'. A 'Private Entrance for S&L' and 'Main Entrance for Recruitment Center' are indicated with arrows pointing to the S&L building. A 'Parking Lot' is also shown near the S&L building.

The flyers, front (left) and back, that nearly killed Annie in Chapter 42

“What is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “Without pictures or conversations?”

Lewis Carroll,

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 1865

ANNIE WAS NERVOUS as she left the house to head for the demonstration or blockade or occupation or whatever it was going to be. What *was* it going to be? That was the source of her concern, she suspected, and in itself that seemed feeble-minded. After all, they kept saying that you didn’t have to get arrested if you didn’t choose to, and they seemed to know what they were talking about, didn’t they?

“Well,” she said out loud as she turned onto Graham Hill, “Whatever happens, it’ll make a good story.”

Ah, the old motto. She remembered now. It had done her well for years, as she scrambled through awkward situations, from overcrowded third-world transport to ludicrously inappropriate job interviews. Serious assault, rape, even broken-hearted grief, these might be beyond the pale but anything less would turn into humor eventually. Embarrassment and discomfort were always worth laughing at in the end. Shame over trivialities is just too foolish to last.

She knew very well where she was going, Sims Road, Highway 17, 1 South, 41st Exit, up past Capitola Road, near DMV and Triple-A, but in a fit of mindless doubt she reached over to grab the flyers (see opposite) from the passenger seat in search of instruction, which she didn’t need and they didn’t really give her anyway.

Shit.

The near-side wheels hit the verge and bounced. Suddenly she was skewed and skidding and most of the way into the wrong lane, then suddenly straightened out — how did she do that? — then there was a pickup storming towards her and she wrenched the wheel as she came out of the skid but overcompensated again and she was edging the grass a second time, but only just, and then after an instant eternity the road was clear and she was in the right place and had no idea how or why. Her

heart was pounding fit to bust, up from her regular ± 60 to what seemed like a furious 180 and more to the point thumping her ribs like some kind of punk rocker’s big bass drum. Her knees were literally shaking and she grabbed the wheel so tight it seemed as though either car or fingers would have to give.

Whoa.

She lifted her right foot, slowed to the point where she heard a beep and suddenly looked into the rear-view mirror and discovered that some asshole was tailgating.

Well fuck him, she thought, he can get by soon enough.

The long straightaway with the Henry Cowell park on the right was coming up, she knew, so she just flipped the indicators on so show she was intending to pull over and kept on going. This seemed to aggravate the jerk even more and sure enough, as they came out of the turn and over the rise he floored the accelerator and horn both and vanished into the distance wailing. She headed for the side of the road anyway and coasted to a halt on the grassy verge.

Whoops. Well, that was pretty dumb, Annie girl. But it’s OK, right? Right. Well, then. All right. Make a good story. Sure. Be a lousy one if I didn’t make it.

After a minute or so, the tingling in her knees more or less went away and her heart stopped rattling her cage (though she still heard it, she was sure) and she began to feel she could stand or even maybe drive. The little digital clock on the dash said it was 11:17 so if she didn’t get a move on she’d probably be late. That wouldn’t really matter but she wanted to make a good impression — it’s always desirable to make a good impression on people that you want to make a good impression on — she wasn’t quite sure why but there it was and here was she and all dressed up and ready to go to the ball.

Costume had been a question. Actually, it still was, since she had, after careful consideration, left a number of options open. There had been a certain amount of discussion at the preparatory meeting, centering on words like ‘neat’ and ‘clean’ which didn’t do Annie much good because she always was. She had the impression that a pretty little frock would be considered appropriate by some of the male organizers but she wasn’t going to dress for men for this thing for heaven’s sake. It might get cold and besides she didn’t really have one. She considered her long wool skirt but it was kind of old-fashioned and she didn’t have good shoes for it, since she figured she might be on her feet a lot and they had better be functional. Clean jeans, dark green turtleneck, black sneakers, little colorful cotton scarf tied loose at the neck; optional windbreaker, woolen shawl, warm sweater — you can’t be too careful — and she threw the woolly hat and rain poncho into the back seat at the last minute just in case. She was aiming for a tasteful fade into the woodwork and pretty sure she had hit it. A bit straight for a hippy pad (ah, she remembered) and a bit bent for a five-star hotel, she figured she wouldn’t get thrown out of either of them. And she would stay well-groomed, warm and relaxed.

Cool. That, she knew, was nineties for groovy, another term she had once had to try not to use; she never did use heavy to mean, generically, good just as she felt no temptation to lapse into gagging valley-speak. Still, maybe she could be cool. It was OK. But you can’t make the scene if you don’t get to it, she thought ruefully but knowingly in masscult cliché, so get in gear, girl.

The, er, brush with death (it sounds like a cyanide comb), which her mind could not really articulate without imagining her own newspaper headlines, left her with the salve she had been searching for. Intimations of mortality were transmogrified at some basic level into an extraordinary intimacy with her own morality. Quite uncharacteristically, she drove at the exact speed limit (35 to 25 to 55 to 25 again at the end), in the slow lane where available, miraculously untroubled by idiots climbing into her tail-pipe, and remained hyper-aware of every place she went past. Her mind was open and full and focused, all at the same time. She

was sensitive to the beauty of the scrub-oaks on the right, gentling their breath in the still autumn sunlight, and simultaneously remembering that it was a *redwoods* park, named for the august monarchs that lived over in the next valley, down by Highway 9; no complaint, no concern, it was just a fact she noticed for a millisecond and filed and indexed and put away but could always retrieve. She recognized and accepted the process and simply went with it, letting her rational mind organize without obsessing, letting her reflexive body guide the machinery and react as necessary, detaching and distinguishing her self in a clarity she rarely attained. She knew she was doing the right thing, whatever it was. She was ready.

She remembered, not in its details but in its intent and broad outlines, a trick she had been taught by her friend Neerava back in the days of spiritual guidance and meditation workshops, a walking meditation designed for the crowded streets of Poona but one that worked in any western town if you could simply reach the level of unself-consciousness to try it. You hold your hands some six inches in front of your nose, and move the fingers rhythmically, sensuously and continuously in imitation of some kind of Hindu hand-dance, concentrating entirely on the activity. Then you begin to chant, a repeating mantra, anything from *Om Mane Padme Hum* to *Hail Mary Full of Grace* would do, although there was a specific prescribed, concentrating entirely on the sound, without at any moment ceasing the finger action. Then you walk down the crowded street, maintaining entirely the bubble of self-contained devotion defined by the pair of all-encompassing activities to which you have committed your body and brain, and — it need hardly be added — without bumping into walls or pedestrians or any of the other miscellaneous impediments to locomotion. The result, she remembered, was a wonderful walking meditation that somehow freed the self from the mind and body both and promoted an inner transcendence that she had rarely attained.

That’s exactly how she felt.

There was plenty of skull room left. Why had it been so long since she had tried that, she wondered, and knew the answer was the kind of self-con-

sciousness that contradicts a real consciousness of self, and filed that away without self-accusation or real complaint. No wonder it had been so long since anyone had fallen in love with her; perhaps that was about to change — she knew suddenly she could will such a thing into being and wondered if she would, without decision or argument. *Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time?* An Irish voice came drifting past the æther and another part of her brain tabbed it as Van Morrison and located the quote from last year's album that Brendan had been raving about and she didn't think she had even listened to but she must have. Some golfer from Pasatiempo cut in and she applauded herself for the smoothness with which she eased back to maintain a distance and then synchronized with the flow of slow-lane traffic once more. Sliding around from 17 to 1 South, merging into one lane around the on-ramp curve and then into one with the fast

lane and over to the right because she wanted to potter along and it would only cost a minute or maybe two, it was a complicated manoeuvre executed with consummate skill. At moments like this, everything fit.

"They don't know me," she laughed aloud, "So it doesn't matter."

It was another of her old mottoes, another worthy weapon against ungodly trepidation, another heroic paradox. There is no shame in doing what you really want if no one you care about knows you are doing it; an excuse for evil, certainly, but just as surely an excuse for good. To be able to act without considering the preconceptions of others is to trap into a source of power and strength.

Of course, it only works if you know yourself.

Annie, I'd like you to meet Annie.

How are you doing?

Haven't we met somewhere before?

Qu'ils mangent de la brioche.

Let them eat cake.

attributed to Marie Antoinette,
ca 1789, but Rousseau in 1750 called a
similar remark well-known; another has
been attributed to Marie-Thérèse, ca 1670

KABUL WAS NOT A DISAPPOINTMENT when Blackie and Whitey arrived, it was simply a relief. Enough was enough of those goddamned buses for a while. They drifted without much conscious attention onto Chicken Street for the traveler's conveniences. Who knows what the place was called in Pushtu? Presumably it had a name, which may even have been written down (backwards) but practically no western freaks read the script and many of their hosts couldn't read at all, and over the years the English name for the low-rent tourist center came to prevail, as it did in Kathmandu, where Freak Street and Pig Alley remained on the official, G.I. city maps into the '90s, long after the freaks, but not the pigs, had vanished.

The first hotel they picked, by the scientific method of applied randomness or uncontrolled experimentation, was adequate but unexciting. It supplied beds, locks, running (or at least jogging) water, intermittent electricity and a sun-baked roof for doing the laundry, and they used the facilities for a couple of days as they took their bearings. It didn't really cater to the resident trade, however, and as they looked around they began to wonder if there might be a better choice.

Kabul is at its best in the fall, when the summer sun has not yet given way to the snow drifts of winter. The air is thin and clear, and any discomfort from the noonday heat is soon salved by the cool of the evening. The biggest factor in the climate is the altitude, which regularly used to be a matter of discussion. Straight Europeans asserted that it was over 2000 meters, while old-fashioned Anglo-phones insisted that it was really some 6500 feet; the modern element, bolstering their opinion with the observation that it took more time to cook food and less time to get wasted, just said it was high.

The indigenous population took a properly detached view of these absurd controversies. Kabul was, of course, normal and anyone who failed to appreciate this was more to be pitied than censured. Besides, it was rude to argue with guests, no matter how misguided. If they dishonored your family, you might knife them; short of that, they should at least be tolerated.

The first day Blackie and Whitey hit town was spent in the inevitable haze of recovery, discovery, smoke, sleep and general acclimatization. The next was spent on laundry, in addition to all of the above, and the middle of it largely on the roof. Sun-tans were not de rigueur or even normal in underground culture; they were barely acceptable, being too closely associated with the dreaded Costa-del-Sol-for-an-all-in-paella-and-chips-fort-night mentality that one so despised if one wanted either less or more. Still, midnight white was hard to maintain in the tropics — Afghanistan is, in point of mere geographical accuracy, well north of the Tropic of Cancer, but the tropics are a loose concept in the imperialist dictionary and tend to encompass all the areas that the White Man wanted to take on as a Burden — and the safest way to ensure that the clothes weren't ripped off was to watch them as they dried. This also made it easier to do all the laundry at once.

"Where's the one-hour dry cleaner?" asked Whitey.

He looked fetching, lying around in the suit and nothing else, but the garment was gathering that distinct patina of experience.

"We'll find one," grinned his mate, clad only in a towel of dubious color. "What I need is a third T-shirt."

"Find a tailor."

“Yeah. Reckon I will. Mind you, this stuff’s practically dry already.”

“Hot.”

“Dry too. This sun’s fucking intense, man.”

“What camel jockeys do.”

“What? Oh, I get it. Fucking in tents. That’s awful. That’s not like you, I thought I was safe with you. Jesus Christ. Must be the altitude.”

“Gotcha,” muttered Whitey with a half-smile and gathered up the materials for the inevitable.

“It’s the heat. Gone to his head,” explained Blackie to the clothesline. “Mad dogs and fucking Englishmen. And you’re not even fucking English.”

“Half.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Proper sahibs go out in the mid-day sun. You fucking Cherokees can’t take it.”

“Just smart is all.”

“Well, I grant you it’s getting warm.”

The weather was a continuously fit subject for conversation, as always, especially for the British — when you perch on the edge of a major landmass, you tend to get buffeted and interested in the process — and autumn was an appealing season, but it certainly wasn’t a sufficient reason to stay in Kabul. The buses out were bad, to be sure, but not unbearable. The apple pies at the government restaurant in Pashtunistan Square were great but scarcely irreplaceable; you could get sick of them in a couple of weeks, probably much quicker if you flew in from the First World. The bazaar was bizarre, the rugs rugged, the barracks barricaded and the museum distinctly antiquated. All fair enough, but why on earth did Blackie and Whitey decide to hang around?

Well, first of all, they didn’t. In the overall scheme of the universe, as things finally worked out, they really weren’t there all that long, it just seemed that way, to themselves as much as to most of the people who encountered them. Circumstances just encircled them; they leaned lightly on unlatched doors and found themselves moving into rooms they hadn’t expected to find, for reasons they never intended to obey. At least in the beginning, it was less that they did decide to hang around than that they didn’t decide to leave.

If they really wanted to cop out, they could blame it on Barb. The Kiwi couple were three days ahead of them, having selected the all-day torture-rack option and skipped the scenic South altogether, but intending to spend a week in the capital and expecting that the Brits would catch up. Ed was a bit susceptible to the hipness bullshit they tended to cloak themselves in but Barb was not only unimpressed by it, she actually liked them anyway. What a shocking thought. Someone who claimed to be as uncool, even as ordinary, as she did actually saw through their disguise and discovered that if she smiled at them, without forethought or premeditation, they would both smile back and everyone enjoyed the interaction. Revolutionary, nothing less.

On the third day, they sauntered out for some further exploration, feeling relatively spiffy in their clean underwear. They soon alighted, as one tends to, at a humble but pleasant place of refreshment, in this case one with tables that abutted the sidewalk, all the better to see and be seen by le tout Kabul, or at least that subsection of freak tourists who lurked in those regions. The mullahs and the righteous skirted the area, lest they be tempted to impose sanctions on the infidels. The right of women to bare their faces had officially been proclaimed, not long before, and initially enforced at gunpoint, by 30,000 troops who were not loath to shoot. At least one token cleric was gunned down as an example, but the war was far from over. The soldiers were withdrawn, and the holy men tried to avoid confrontation for the moment. The infidel tourists were not their primary target group, but they were certainly an aggravation, especially the whores. Of course they were whores, you could tell by their noses. You could see their noses.

That’s not fair, but that’s bias for you. Most of us can only take the multicultural bit just so far.

Anyway, Blackie and Whitey were enjoying the delights of the local street scene, and if it was not strictly authentic, (a) they didn’t know and (b) they didn’t care.

Refreshed, relaxed and ready for anything, they were having a ball.

You say I took the Name in vain
 I don't even know the Name
 But if I did, well really, what's it to ya?

Laffin' Len Cohen,
 "Hallelujah," *Various Positions*, 1984

ECSTATIC CLARITY IS HARD TO HOLD anywhere, least of all in the land of malls and fastfoods, carwashes and beauty salons, chainstore white sales and silver-screen chainsaw massacres. The two basic real reactions to the absurdity of Capitola's 41st Avenue are disgust and amusement. Storekeepers & doorkeepers, gu'mint & bizniss, buyers, oh yeah and window-shoppers too, the whole white-noise conspiracy of life as she is lived (there and then, to be sure, but take a look around, dear reader, look around just in case) connive instead to promote a dull acquiescence, a response tortured by neon and faked excitement into remaining emotionally null, one that does not get in the way of acceptance. Yet silent assent with the superficial is never the way of enlightenment and even a momentary satori such as that which touched Annie on the Graham Hill Road is enough to break the fragile bonds of consent. The street, to her, on that day was simply absurd. Try as she eventually would to forget and to fit in, in some way that cluster of consumerism would remain lost to her forever.

She steered the Bunny delicately off the freeway, softly guiding the reins so they hugged the right-most of the three lanes heading their way, and reveling in the response of the machine. She saw the light was green and noticed it glowing to amber as they rolled past, so she lightly spurred the steed through the set immediately beyond the turn and they cantered easily across the lanes in the momentary gap in traffic till they could take a watchful position on the left.

How appropriate, she thought, with increasing good humor.

Trapped in the multitude at the light where Clares crossed, she looked around, at BK on the hard right and Sizzler off to the forward left, sand-

wiched between Home Savings and the Pacific Western Bank. The enormous parking lot for the Capitola Mall stretched out at right front, half empty on this Thursday morning but tensing for the assault that would follow Thanksgiving a bare week hence. She remembered a time, two decades before, when nothing but Sears on the right and Longs and Albertson's on the left sprouted higher than inches from the acres of grass. The empty lots were gone now, the holes all filled in, the road widened and flattened and painted and infected with traffic lights up and down its length.

Poor little road, thought Annie, it probably didn't want to grow up either.

Rollerskating gracefully with the buffalo herd, the Rabbit slid slowly into the left-turn lane at Capitola Road. It was not an entirely necessary move but Annie let her have her head and they sauntered past Albertson's dumpster on the left and DMV on the right. The crowd was smaller here, away from the central shrine of commerce, and apparently completely composed of cars. Not a person was in view, which surprised Annie even as it precisely matched her preconceptions. The scene was startlingly normal. She had expected some visible change, some sign of anticipation, authority battenning down the hatches as it waited for the gales of revolution to howl at the gates. Instead, she saw spaces in the parking lot at Triple-A and, just beyond it, by the stop sign where the road narrowed and the right lane was funneled off to 45th, a thoroughly bored one-and-a-half-story redwood-faced building not long past the first flush of youth, yawning at the corner.

That's *it*?

Somehow she had thought there should be portcullises and turrets or at least lines of guys in uniforms spitting and scratching their crotches in a

masculine kind of way, like baseball players. The blockade had been advertised, she knew, and someone had been assigned to inform the local fuzz. Was anyone going to show up? If there were no cops did that mean there were no protesters? What if they gave a revolution and nobody came? Did she have the wrong day? Heaven forbid, was she early? Unthinkable, but it all added to the preposterously surreal air of the moment. Oh well. What next?

Following the curvy white arrow, she entered the first of the seven short blocks to the rendezvous site and caught out of the corner of her eye the first intimations that something might indeed be up. There was an unmarked white van parked beside a wall the wrong way, hogging three spaces in the nearly empty parking lot, and beside it a neb-bish with what looked like a video camera. At a glance, he didn't look official but he might have been media. (Hey, we're going to be on TV.) She didn't stop or even slow down to catch any more detail — she was on her own and sought the safety of numbers — but she was relieved to see at last that *something* was up.

Tooling down the Jewel Box, past Crystal and Emerald and Garnet and coming up to Jewel itself, the scene was playing out as tedious suburbia, modern condos on the right and slightly older single-family dwellings on the left, leave it all to Beaver and let the world drift by. But as she crossed Opal

towards Topaz and Jade Street came into view, there before her ... suddenly, like a fast fade to a different reality ... was a motley crew of levelers ... bagpipes skirling ... no, that was just the movies ... hoisting placards and milling with smiles like self-assured anarchist workers waiting for the Redcoats to cut them down. But wait! They *were* self-assured anarchists, and just because they didn't expect muskets to be aimed at them didn't mean they weren't keyed up for confrontation. The facts of the situation came down on Annie for a moment, and her heart-beat went up again for a moment, and then subsided as, well, as the facts of the situation rose to shelter her.

It's us, she thought, and felt welcome.

Safe from the wasteland of automotive heaven, surrounded by people in all their noisy, smelly, smiling, frowning, thinking and ultimately loving selves, Annie was coming home.

She was also looking for a place to park. It struck her, in the manner of the best acid flashes of insight, that the metaphor was fine and she giggled as she turned down Jade and spotted a space and reversed into it as if it were the easiest and most natural thing to do. She hated parallel parking, she reminded herself, and then corrected herself gently. No, she hated failing to parallel park. Today she could even do that. Hell, today she could do anything she wanted.

I feel an earnest and humble desire, and shall till I die,
to increase the stock of harmless cheerfulness.

Charles Dickens,
a most remarkable
19th century novelist

HHEY, GUYS,” CAME THE CALL from across the street. “When did you get into town?”

Stepping out of a doorway was Barb, trying to act demure but being foiled by own naturally exuberant vitality. She was dressed appropriately, with a long denim skirt, closed shoes, turtleneck and head scarf, carrying a brown paper parcel by its loop of string and looking just a little warm underneath it all.

“Mind if I join you?” she went on, pulling up a chair against no resistance at all, obvious or otherwise.

“Two days,” said Whitey with a smile, nodding the rest of his greeting.

“Where’s Ed?” contributed Blackie.

“Oh, Ed went off to walk round the old fort or something. The old walls of the city. Takes most of the day, apparently. He always likes to hike places, you know.”

“Healthy bastard,” commented Blackie, accepting a ciggie from Whitey. (Barb didn’t indulge.) “Thought you did too.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a mental health break. We made a rule when we started this trip that every week we spend one day apart, whether we want to or not, just so we don’t get on each other’s nerves, you know.”

“Here?” inquired Whitey acutely. It wasn’t just Muslim men who were protective of the li’l lady; most Westerners heading towards India were hyper-sensitive to the possibilities of white slavery, rape, kidnapping and being forced to wear the local regalia behind the harem doors. Better safe than sari was the general motto.

“Yes, well, that’s what all this stuff’s about, isn’t it,” she replied, untying her scarf at the back and flicking it briefly over her nose and mouth. “Makes me feel like the Queen Mum or something. Hot

though. You’d think those black veils would be something awful.”

“They don’t go out in the sun much,” pointed out Blackie, “And they make ’em real loose and light.”

“That’s true, that’s right. You know, I saw a woman this morning, in that shop right there, and if she didn’t have the veil on, she could have been in Harrod’s.”

Huh? indicated Whitey, leaning forward.

“Lipstick, nylons, nail polish, the whole bit. She showed me when the toad who runs the place went out back to get something for her. She asked me if I spreckened Deutsche but really hers was worse than mine. Pity, that.”

“Chai?”

“Oh, I’ll have one of those cherry pop things, thanks. Yaw soda.” This to an eight-year-old ambling by, filling orders with the aplomb and efficiency, though neither the uniform nor the income, of the maitre-d’ at the Savoy Grill. “You tried them yet?”

“Hmm-hnh.”

“They’re not bad. Kinda sweet, but anyway they’re fizzy so they can’t be too dangerous, I hope. And they come in these cute bottles, see.”

Young Abdullah shuffled unobtrusively back with the beverage, which came in an old-fashioned (no!) pressure-sealed reusable glass container, bottle-shaped but working like a Mason jar, with metal wires to snap the top securely on. Poker-faced and punctilious, he popped the top and ruined its hygiene by running his finger around the rim, in search of glass fragments, before pouring most of the reddish liquid into a glass of dubious provenance. Hey, by the time you reached Kabul you’d picked up at least some immunity to the standard pests. None of them paid any attention to the dan-

gers of the ritual. Abdullah waited for payment, and took the bill he was proffered away for change. He was entirely capable of keeping track of half a dozen running tabs in his head and if his grandpa would only let him at the cash box he could handle that too, but he had been well schooled in the old American maxim: In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash. Some of these foreigners tried to get away with murder. They had to be watched.

“Cool,” said Blackie, picking up the bottle and playing with the mechanism. “That’s really smart.”

“Remember them,” mused Whitey.

“Yeah? I don’t.”

“Had ’em at Scarborough.”

“At the seaside? Yeah? Bet you got to have rock too, with words in the middle.”

“Hmm-hmm.” A smile. The North Sea would freeze your balls off in a minute but it was still a part of the ocean and it lived and moved, swaying with the promise of a release from daily life. For all the chilly inconvenience, it earned the ritual worship of the Whitsun holiday. For some, it was all there was to connect them with the rhythmical joys of nature (until the blues came calling) and who knew if they knew, the news was true that was never discussed.

“Me aunty wouldn’t let me have any. Said they’d ruin me teeth. Fuckin’ bourgeois git.”

Whitey smiled and Barb started to commiserate but Blackie broke in:

“So what’s in the parcel, then?”

“A bunch of material. I’m going to post it home. Some of that mirrored embroidery, different stuff. Got it from the old lech across the street.”

Huh? they asked in silent unison.

“Oh, he’s awful. I went looking around with Ed yesterday and he had the best selection, not the best prices mind you but they’re all cheap anyway, so I go back today and he’s all over me, you know, rubbing up against my backside and pointing things out and trying to feel my tits — ’scuse my French — so I had to keep pushing him away. He was OK as long as the Afghan woman was there, but then she went and yucko.”

“Coont,” grunted Whitey, to Barb’s surprise, once she heard through the accent to the obscenity below.

“Why didn’t you leave?” asked Blackie, practically.

“I was bargaining!” she insisted. “I’d only have had to start all over. So I just stayed near the door, and kept pushing him away and telling him No! and pointing at other bits for him to lay out. It didn’t feel dangerous, exactly, it was just a royal pain in the neck. Anyroad, it’s done now. And I got him down to less than half price.” None of them knew if this was good or not but it sounded good; the wily merchant was surely copping a nifty profit margin along with the attempt at a feel. “Anyway, where are you two staying?”

“Down the street. Can’t remember the name. Dunno if it has one. Must do, I suppose?”

Whitey shrugged, like Atlas on a particularly good day, juggling the world and keeping it safe, all at the same time. Some questions weren’t worth asking. Not that he bought the Ayn Rand bullshit, but he was more *Let It Bleed* than *Let It Be*. Neither of the twin farewells to the sixties had been officially released yet, but the Beatles’ last gig had been blasted over Saville Row at the end of January and the Stones’ smart-ass response (perhaps the only answer record to be released before the question) had long been rumored on the street. Spill the venom and let wordless — but never mindless — nature do the healing.

“Any good?” asked Barb.

“It’s OK. Nothing special. I wouldn’t stay there forever, you know, but it’ll do. Where are you?”

“A mile or two north of here. We call it the Grape Place, ’cause it’s got these amazing grapes all over the wall at the end of the garden. I dunno what Yusufi calls it.”

“He’s the owner?”

“Not really, he’s the manager, I think. He’s really nice.” Lechers and occasional thieves aside, Barb thought everyone was really nice, which was probably why they were. “He says the owner’s away, maybe in England, it’s kind of hard to tell, because his English isn’t, y’know, great.”

“Garden?” inquired Whitey. The generic inn they had alighted at was short on such amenities. Its illustrious founder aimed at the budget trade with his Motel One-Half, supplying for 20 Afs (less than fifty cents U.S.) a clean, comfortable room

without the cleanliness or comfort. No TV, no pool, no breakfast and certainly no wasted footage. Gardens, indeed. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting weekly rates. No shit, Sherlock.

"Oh yeah, it's like a real Afghani house. It's got a courtyard, big walls around, you know, and these great flowers and little ponds and stuff. It's gorgeous. Sixty Afs a night double, three-fifty a week."

Whitey looked over at his mate and raised the interrogative eyebrow. He looked so cool when he did that, Blackie got distracted for a moment and began to laugh. They discussed the pros and cons of sticking around versus moving on, with the obvi-

ous implications about relocating, possible visa extensions, sybaritic comfort compared to spartan frugality, and so on, in silence for at least a couple of seconds before Barb broke in on the debate.

"You want to come take a look? Ed won't be back for hours yet but I've got the chess set."

"Right, then."

"Besides, I've about had enough of walking around by myself for the day. You'd be doing me a favor. I mean it's OK, it's just it gets to you after a bit."

"Yeah."

"Our pleasure."

All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.

George Orwell,
Animal Farm, 1945

ANNIE AND CEDAR STUMBLED onto the beach, holding hands and laughing. They chased each other around a palm, drawing a sleepy stare from the nearest hammock, Heffalump chasing with their own footprints, until they caught each other and exchanged a prudish little peck on the lips. And smiled, and tried again. Take two had more conviction, but not too much and not too long, as they simultaneously moved into awareness of audience. Not that the fisherman cared or was even really looking anymore; a moderately good Christian, he was saving his strength for the revels of the evening.

“Let’s go home first,” said Annie, who seemed to have the higher energy level.

“Sure,” agreed Cedar amiably.

It wasn’t far, so they struggled along in the soft sand up above the high-tide mark, towards the thatched huts at the edge of the beach. They were renting a little one, not much more than a tent really. It fit their caste precisely: hipper than a hotel; less transient than crashing on the beach but not as committed as renting a four-room bungalow for the season; much more chic than Calangute at the south end of the beach but not as wild and inaccessible as the rumors of Anjuna, across the river and past the headland to the north. All this within the general category of tourist, a high-status bracket still, sub-species traveling hippie. It took either the Indians or the English to keep the class details straight. The important thing was to be comfortable within your assigned status. Goans did not consider themselves Indian and so weren’t burdened by the caste system, but then traveling freaks weren’t either. Leastways, they both thought so.

The hut was on the edge of a little family enclave. Half a dozen buildings, mostly three or four times its size, were grouped around a common well. An extended family lived in them, none of

whom spoke much English or seemed to exhibit much curiosity about their tenants. They owned a fishing boat and a lot of nets that always needed repair. A few evidently had cash jobs, because they disappeared most days, or for days at a time. The clan may have meant the hut for the youngest couple or they may have built it specially for renting to tourists — either way, the seasonal Rs 200 a month (say, thirty bucks at the time) clearly came in handy. They maintained a smiling distance from their customers; as the weeks went by, it seemed to evolve into a distant and mutual respect.

Cedar reached the hut first, opened the padlock and pulled at the wooden doors.

“Gotta go to the market tomorrow and get a better lock.” He was touching base with practical reality. Just for a visit.

“Big Mama’ll keep anyone out of here,” responded Annie, tossing her purse on the sleeping bags that served as mattress.

“Yeah, probably,” he admitted, “But what if she isn’t watching?”

“You think *they’d* rip us off?” She was horrified.

“Hell no, it’s the French junkies that scare me. You could bust this with your bare hands.”

“You’re right, I guess. I just don’t want Big Mama to think we don’t trust her.”

“You think she trusts *us* all the way? She keeps an eye on us too, y’know. She wouldn’t care.”

“Probably not. I gotta go pee.”

Annie headed into the compound. As she passed the well, the pigs took notice. Goan pigs are different from those considered normal in the west in several ways, the most obvious of which is their size. The western species are bred for bulk, pumped up like Sumo wrestlers, and fed more drugs than the average shot-putter. Their eastern cousins, who are probably more like their ancient ancestors, are the size of small dogs. They do, however, share with the likes of the fabled Empress of

Blandings a healthy respect for food and a considerable natural intelligence.

They also provided the disposal process for human waste.

The toilet facilities were set back from the main group of buildings, on the opposite edge from the tourist hut. They consisted primarily of a wooden platform, raised on stilts to five feet above ground level and enclosed by walls of bamboo leaves. The ambiance was sylvan and soothing. Until you looked down, through the hole behind your feet.

The pigs would dance for your offerings.

Now, *that* was an example of operant conditioning. Intermittent reinforcement, too, since the swine wanted shit and much of the time they had to settle for a shower of piss.

“No, no, no,” she laughed, wagging her finger at the gathering crowd. “Don’t bother. There’s no point right now.”

They followed her anyway, snuffling and snorting and jumping into the air. Cedar chuckled and eased back against the door frame, lighting a Bristol and letting the tobacco smoke rub against his throat. The matriarch, the woman they called Big Mama because she was short and round and they didn’t know her name, stuck her head out of the kitchen to see what the noise was, shrugged her shoulders, flashed her enormous grin and shook her head as she slipped back inside.

Annie was sure she could read her mind: ‘Crazy foreigners. What could be more ordinary?

And yet they laugh. They’re so rich for sure they could rent a hotel room in Panjim but they stay here with us and the pigs and the chickens. Go figure. But they do laugh, so maybe they’re not so nuts after all.’

She wanted to make certain Big Mama knew they were not laughing at her, they were laughing at the little piggies. For she was also sure she could see the thoughts behind the little piggy faces: ‘C’mon, gimme, me, me, I want it, I need it, I love it; hey, hey, let’s go check it out; I wanna raise, gimme more, here, me, more, more, more.’

Silly piglets, she thought, squatting down like an old Asia hand. You’re just doing what they want, you know. You get more to eat, you get fat, you think you got it good. But *they’re* the ones getting rich off you and the fatter you get, the better for them, until that happy day when they don’t want you running around any more and it’s off to market with you (or straight to the cleaver and the oven) and don’t you kid yourself that you’re gonna have any kind of choice in the matter. If you want the easy life and the daily treats, you pay. Now or later. Or both.

Whoa, she thought, this could get heavy.

She strolled back to the hut, smiling and pigless. Cedar stubbed out his butt in the sand.

“Didja see Big Mama?” he grinned.

“Yeah,” said Annie. “She doesn’t miss a thing. C’mon, you wanna go for that swim?”

“Sure, why not.”

47

THE TOM ROBBINS MEMORIAL CHAPTER

*with apologies to Oscar Hammerstein II
and the nonviolent but vocal cast
and crew of Mouth Pacific*

There is nothin' like a prime
Nothin' in the world
Here's a chapter you can rhyme
And it's only because it's prime.
Lots of numbers in math are perfect but brother
There's this one special flavor that is nothing whatsoever in any
way shape or form like any other
With Blackie on her left side
And Whitey on her right
Barb knew she had a safe ride
Past every lech in sight
It's a waste of time to worry
Over things this chapter's got
Be thankful for
The things it's not
There's no factors in this prime
And no new actors in this prime
There's no dividing in this prime
Or combining in this prime
There's no mystery in this prime
Or even history in this prime
There ain't a thing that's wrong with the chapter here
That can't be cured by ...
Washin' this verse right outa your hair.

Possunt, quia posse videntur.

They had power because they seemed to.

Virgil,
Aeneid, 31–19 B.C.E.*

THAT WAS THE MORNING the legend was truly born. It was fraudulent, of course, but then legends always are, and anyway it was based on an emotional reality. Walking down the street that day, as escorts, guards, friends, companions, rivals perhaps or partners — no one could tell and that too was part of the point — Blackie and Whitey and Barb owned the world.

Barb, queen, trophy, mistress, friend — too simple a status that for strangers to see, too private for them to enquire about, another irrelevant mystery at the essence — bestrode the edge of the sidewalk, beautiful, healthy, sane and consciously unfocused. By handing her fear over to her escorts, a tiny weight for them that left her free to float, she lost the need to search for trouble in embryo and so it vanished before it appeared. The sharks smelled no blood and hesitated and were past. She avoided eye contact without trying, yet she looked as she pleased, detached but not disconnected, musing and amused, radiating affection for the world with the confidence that comes of safety.

On her right, Whitey strode impassive and dignified, his jacket billowing into the street like a flag, proud and signifying. Certainly, in its natural habitat, north of Piccadilly and west of Regent Street, the suit might have seemed to have fallen from grace, to have become a shabby shadow of its maker's intentions. Effete cousins, crossing the

street to see without being seen, would surely have snickered at the scars it bore — my dear, did you see the state of those turn-ups? and the right sleeve? I'm positive there were only three buttons left at the cuff — and taken themselves off for a teensy little drinky and a languorous afternoon of gossip and innuendo. But the suit cared nothing for that. Like the gorgeous animal it clothed, it had moved into stranger lands and learned to live a life of its own device. Its beauty no longer had anything to do with a lack of dirt or the precision of its pressing. Its elegance came from line and form and the latent power of its fabric and tailoring. There was no test for it on Bond Street, no accomplishment in holding its shape in the lobby of the Hilton. Here, with the horse-drawn carriages and battered pick-up trucks, it measured itself against a world that gave it no obeisance and was proud to survive.

Whitey watched, as ever — the world could see — but not in any apprehension or aggression, not even in curiosity. He did not speak or stare, he did not seek to impose himself on the street scene, nor to protect himself from it. He walked, and the people and cars gave way before the grace of this creature who walked. How simple it is to walk, and how difficult.

On the shop side of the trio, Blackie was looser and more engaging. He laughed out of senseless joy, he caught strangers' eyes and smiled, he even broke ranks for a moment to glance at a storefront or to notice a hawk (or it might have been a vulture or a buzzard; he wasn't strong on ornithology) swooping over the rooftops in search of prey or carrion or just the rush that comes from dodging the shotguns one more time. His hair was growing thick and full now; newly washed it had that tousled look that pop stars invest so much energy, intelligence, cash and technology to achieve. Sabrina back in Ken High Street, who'd been doing it for years, would have

*Published unrevised and posthumously, against the author's expressed wishes. Virgil and Kafka have this in common, that their great fame derives from the refusal of their literary executors to destroy their masterpieces. Is it right to betray a memory to immortalize it? Does it matter? And will Sony/CBS/Columbia ever release the complete 1966 live recording of Dylan and the Hawks? [At least the last question (written in 1993) now gets an answer: Yes, in 1998. And Bob wasn't even dead, though Richard Manuel of the Hawks was and Rick Danko followed in 1999.]

been horrified by the split ends but quietly gratified, or on an extrovert day even noisily boastful, that the cut held much of its shape as it spilled over the width of his shoulders. The beard was new since the trip began, redder than the long hair on top, and finally coming into its own. It gave definition to his face without quite hiding his cheeks and it set off the teeth he flashed in friendship, and made them seem whiter than they were.

Blackie looked like an affable pirate, dancing as he pleased on the edge of the world.

That morning they were a trio — Mouseketeers, anyone? — and no less so for the fact that none of them wanted or knew it. Barb was the catalyst, of course, the one who focused the other two. Certainly they competed for her affection, her respect and attention. Buried not far beneath the skin was the tension of sex, of three-way jealousies too trivial to admit or forgive, too powerful to forget had anyone been fool enough to press the issue. (Ed, for example, waving feebly from the edge of the picture.) Unresolved, it did no harm. They were themselves and there and they could want without needing to have and have without needing to want. Posture or play, never mind. They didn't.

The men picked up a purpose from the woman; she gave them a sense of society that stayed long after she left. Helping, flirting, befriending, walking, this was not traveling or being a tourist, this was living and this was what a person would do. As she gave, she took, too, not just in the flattery of being liked, even desired (but that was for Ed), but in the connection of showing, of simply taking a stroll. They all felt good, they felt real, they felt there, in command of a world of their own.

On their own terms, they reigned. Over nothing, to be sure, but those were the terms.

Months later, in Bali, Barb ran into an Australian who had seen them that day. He wondered what had happened to her friends and was shocked that it took her a moment to place his memories in the fabric of her own. Inside, it was a normal day, simply the one she spent in Kabul without Ed. It only looked special to the outside world. That's how legends begin.

The Grape Place was fully as advertised. It stood in a quiet, dusty street, lined on both sides by high brown walls with occasional gates set into them. There was a discreet sign in Pushtu and a couple of nails implied that there had once been another, perhaps in English, but nothing else suggested that the neighborhood was anything but residential, the kind of area of the city where senior civil servants might live, or entrepreneurs of a certain standing. At the time, this was true, though much would change in the temporary tourist boom of the '70s, and again in the dark times that followed. Converted to hotels, then abandoned and confiscated, many of these villas were trashed either by the Soviet invaders, blitzed on whatever they could score, or by the relentless guerrillas destroying the city to save it, and later seized and surrendered and bartered and finally rebuilt in the chaos of the '90s. They would see a bad couple of decades, but back in the sixties the suburb was a sleepy island of rest.

Of course, bedrooms are places of rest too, and we all know how terrifying are the wars that take place in them.

Everything is exactly what it seems, and more.

It takes industrial-strength tranquilizer
 A shot of Old Crow and a glass of Budweiser
 To help the working man through the working day

M. Licht, "Industrial-Strength Tranquilizer,"
 sung by The Austin Lounge Lizards on
Highway Café of the Damned, 1988

PROPERTY MAY BE THEFT, as Proudhon so trenchantly put it, but it's a rare anarchist who'd deny that yours is even less righteous than mine. Trouser pockets, however, as Don the Tailor asserted, ruin the line of pants, and formal handbags are a trifle *de trop* at demonstrations. Diligently pursuing the art of eternal compromise, Annie slipped her car key off the ring, buried the rest in her purse under the passenger seat, safely out of sight of anyone who might be tempted to relieve her of the burden of ownership, locked the doors and checked the hatchback. If she eased the key down into her jeans pocket, with a single folded double sawbuck just in case, you could hardly tell it was there.

The black flag with the encircled scarlet A was indeed flying as she walked towards the crowd but it was by no means alone. NO BLOOD FOR OIL read the nearest, eight foot of sheet strung between broomsticks or something, as was the BRING THE ... banner just being unfurled. Another had a huge, stylized marijuana leaf and the slogan LEGALIZE HEMP which seemed more than mildly irrelevant, if unobjectionable on principle (but wait, let me tell you about substituting hemp for petroleum products ... did you know George Washington ... you can use hemp cloth for polyesters ... and then there's medical marijuana ... would you sign the initiative ...). Clearly the prettiest was one with a hand-painted quarter-arc four-color rainbow on light blue, curving around the single word PEACE in white. Others were approaching — the assembly was running a little late, to no one's surprise except perhaps the protestees but who knew what they thought — and Annie could see the women of WILPF, including the dean of the protesting contingent, a veteran of the original suffragist crusades

who had campaigned against World War I and saw no reason to stop now.

Largest, proudest and most elaborate was the famous WAGE PEACE banner of the Bill Motto Post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, proudly borne by anti-warriors who had earned their stripes in Vietnam or Korea or Normandy or the Philippines or even in Flanders field and returned to campaign against ever making those mistakes again. The national VFW, generally a rabidly pro-militarist bunch despite the shabby treatment their members were used to after demobilization, tried and failed to fling the Santa Cruz radicals out for making a fuss about Central American interventionism; but the pacifist kooks held ranks and won in court. Their membership overlapped with Vietnam Veterans Against the War and other activist groups, and they could absolutely be relied upon to witness against the spilling of uniformed blood. Well, sometimes they had to be asked: they knew, and so did every anti-war activist in town, just how much moral authority they brought to the gig, especially of course to a gig like this one, and they didn't like being taken for granted any more than anyone else ever does. The local press, who knew the cast of characters well, never tired of using them for visuals, and wouldn't consider it an official rally unless they showed.

Not that being official was entirely desirable, you understand, but certain rituals must be performed.

Annie was surprised by the number of people, over a hundred she guessed without much confidence, and equally surprised by how many she vaguely recognized and how few names she knew. Evidently the Tuesday rehearsal, at which everyone had been tickled pink when fifty people showed —

the circle had grown so wide you practically had to shout across it — had not been the half of it. On closer inspection, many of the vague recognitions dissolved into prototypes, none the less reassuring for all that but slightly more effort to start a conversation with, and some of the names were skirting the bounds of memory, but the guy unrolling the nearest banner, now revealed as BRING THE TROOPS HOME ALIVE, she knew. He was Eric, the graybeard she had seen up on campus announcing the action in the first place. He didn't talk a lot at the meetings but people seemed to defer to him and he seemed to get things done; he made reports and she remembered he had agreed to get banners together. Annie suspected he only came to the meetings to be tactful. Anyway, he wasn't a young trickster, which made him, for her, easier to approach, and he seemed to be looking around like he wanted someone to help, so she went up to him.

"Hi," she said brightly, "Can I help?"

"Oh, hi," he replied from behind his shades. Annie thought she could see through to his eyeballs, but he was not quite catching her eye. Perhaps he was peering at her pineal. "Could you hold that a minute?"

"Sure," she responded obediently, and reached for the top of a pole. It was surprisingly difficult to control and she quickly grabbed it with both hands. At the other end was Luke, the old bald guy who'd also been at all the meetings. He seemed to be trying to hold his end straight and lean himself forward to proofread the front at the same time, which was a crucial confusion of rôles. Annie had to brace herself to keep her end up.

"Luke!" remonstrated Eric, not without a touch of asperity that one would hope was out of place on such an occasion.

"Sorry," claimed the other, truthfully as if that were all that mattered, "I was ... shouldn't we have, you know, wind holes?"

Annie was baffled for a minute, and didn't even know that was a pun. Eric was lost in contemplation. Luke looked frustrated at playing flagpole.

"You know," he offered with smothering helpfulness, "Shouldn't we cut little bits out so that the air can flow through and we won't get sort of blown about like a sailboat?"

"Grhmmph," acknowledged Eric and moved back a step, bumping into a passer-by and apologizing almost under his breath. He stroked his goatee like some rive gauche dauber and pulled a Swiss Army knife out of his pocket. "I was just," he began to explain and paused, sighing, before regaining the strength to continue. "Just trying to figure out where to put them without getting in the way of the letters."

"Ah," said Luke supportively. That's giving him credit for intent; it came across as infuriatingly intrusive. Annie wondered what next. She stood silent.

"Hmm," admitted Eric.

It looked like things would work out but Annie was beginning to wonder what she was doing with the old dogs. Wasn't it time for a new trick? She smiled blandly. Luke stood, subdued. Eric ripped into the sheet, cutting two sides each of half a dozen triangles, so they flapped in the breeze. He stepped back to inspect and he saw that it was good. He nodded his approval at his handiwork.

"I don't know ..." Luke started, "That is, my back ... I probably ..."

He looked around for help. The crowd was coagulating into columns and generally preparing to march. The vets were assuming their place at the head of the column and various people were organizing around them. Reunion clusters were being herded into line. Shape and purpose were beginning to emerge. Luke looked concerned.

Eric folded up the knife and slid it into his vest pocket. Evidently it didn't feel right there, so he took it out and put it in his right pants pocket, and then shifted it over to the left side. That was satisfactory. He nodded.

"Here," he offered.

Luke turned over the pole with obvious relief and ostentatiously examined the banner from a short distance.

"It looks great," he said. "Nice job." He saw his wife waving at him and vanished to join her.

"Hmm, thanks, er, Ann," ventured Eric with a twist of question for flavor.

"Annie," she prompted.

"Yeah, Annie, thanks." He nodded and might actually have been looking straight at her, though

eight feet was just too far to tell. “You OK with this?”

“Sure.” It was good to have something to do. She didn’t mind being seen, well, actually she rather fancied the idea, someone might take a picture, and she didn’t have anyone in particular to rush off and talk with, and besides the banner gave her a good rôle to play, and we all need a good rôle when we are not quite sure what we are doing.

“Great.”

They stood there for a moment and then Eric called over to a young skinny guy with longish blond hair and a psychedelic tie-dyed T-shirt who was walking past.

“Bob, Bobby.”

“Hey, Eric, how’s it going?”

“Good, good. Listen, could you ...?”

“Hey, no problem.” They swapped positions. Eric turned to head off to whatever was next on his agenda and then recalled the amenities.

“Uh, this is Annie, um, Bobby, right, see you in a minute.” And vanished up towards the front.

“Cool.” Bobby had an engaging laugh. “Hi, Annie.”

“Well, hi.”

“After you?”

“Well,” ventured Annie, who had actually thought about the subject, “Maybe if you go first, the people in cars will be able to see it. I mean, if we’re going to be on the right-hand sidewalk, right? Going round three sides of the block, that’s the idea, yeah?”

“Hey, good thinking. OK. Yell if I go too fast.”

“I will.”

It was a little like learning to move in a three-legged race but they got it done. Annie found herself skipping to get in step, which seemed to stop the thing from bobbing up and down so much, but the wind-holes worked and they soon got it right. They took a place near the back of the column, which stretched out in an impressively long crocodile half-way up the street, all on the sidewalk nice and legal. Eric came striding back, in the roadway inspecting and favored them with a grunt of approval. A cop car drove by very slowly but otherwise unobtrusively. There was a uniformed policeman up at the corner and someone listening to him and nodding as the column took the hard right on 41st Avenue. No one else was watching.

There seemed to be a vacuum of attention but at least they were trying to fill it.

Oh well, thought Annie, here we go.

Things change — prices go up, schedules change — good places go bad and bad places go bankrupt — nothing stays the same.

standard warning from
the front of each of the Lonely
Planet travel guides, 1980s-1990s

IT IS A RARE and beautiful feeling to walk into a place for the first time and know that you belong together. To know that the scene is not complete without you, and to understand that you are completed by it, that is terrible, for it cannot last, and wonderful simply because it is.

For Blackie and Whitey, the Grape Place wasn't home — home is what there's no place like, or where one starts from, or where they have to take you in (depending on whom you consult) — it was more like the eye of the I, the vortex that called them and awaited them for its own completion. The courtyard was empty without them, and they wanted a place to sit. As in a movie filmed on a great location, the actors and scenery molded to each other; they fitted together just as they were, and the universe knew it.

While Barb checked that Ed hadn't got back yet, Blackie scouted the courtyard, with its tables and flowers, and the second-story balcony overlooking it all. He fancied an airy double upstairs and did the math in his head — less than two quid a week for the pair of them wouldn't exactly bust the budget. Shit, at this rate they could live like Sultans for practically forever.

Whitey didn't even look around.

"Fancy a game?" he said to Barb and led her over to the big chess set in the middle of the quadrangle. Presumably he had observed it out of the corner of his eye but it certainly seemed as though he were operating on automatic. When the 'boy' (who was, let us be clear, in fact a pre-adolescent male human) showed with the mint tea that the house supplied gratis to players and kibitzers alike, Whitey inclined his head in an elegant bow of acceptance.

"And a hash biccie," he ordered with élan.

"Charras cookie?" clarified the urchin.

"Hn-hnn."

"Far out," added Blackie, "I'll have one too. You tried them, Barb? Any good?"

"Not me," she demurred, accepting white and pushing forward the King's Pawn two squares. "But they speak very highly of them."

"They speak, do they?" responded Blackie, as though disappointed. He was new enough to this scene that it still seemed pretty exciting but he wasn't so naive as to admit it forthrightly. "Can't be enough in 'em. They won't care if I roll a stoney here do they?"

"Oh, no," answered the angel, "They've even got papers if you need them."

"Later, maybe, I'm all right for now. Hey man, how the fuck did you know about the cookies?"

Whitey was still moving through the opening gambits, which he actually knew, so he looked up from the board and shrugged. Nothing about the Grape Place would ever surprise him in that incarnation and he accepted the knowledge as no more than his due. Blackie knew the rules almost as well and knew that he knew but was far more conscious about what he didn't know, which was why he knew, and worried the question, the way he might keep feeling a cavity with his tongue in the hope that he would find out more about it. He never did, but the activity reassured him.

Telepathy was always a favorite among the seriously stoned, and so was precognition, but we don't actually need them to explain the strange familiarity of the familiar strangeness they sauntered into. It could be that they had registered some stranger's description while crashed out in Herat or catching z's in Qandahar or possibly even while doing the laundry in Teheran. Certainly they had already reached that plateau of traveling insouciance on which you take advice but never notes and look at

guidebooks mostly for giggles. Even at that early date in the development of the tourist infrastructure of Kabul and Kathmandu, Kashmir and Kerala, Calcutta and Quetta, the local entrepreneurs needed the punters as much as the heads needed the rooms — and the right punters, just as the heads needed the right space. If you've got a hotel full of laid-back dopers, the last thing you need is aggressive Okker boy scouts disturbing the peace with drunken brawls or calling the cops in a panic because someone offered them opium. Supply and demand work at least as efficiently in Asia as in Vegas, and with less distortion from misleading advertising. Once you've tuned into that, you can pretty much toss the reference library.

It could also be that the Grape Place was the apotheosis of the hashish dream of the Kabul cowboys, a sort of paradise conjured into being by force of collective will that could not exist without being perfect and could not be perfect without everything that therein was. Given that, if Whitey was as tuned in as everyone thought he was, how could he not know it down to every last detail?

Now we're getting close to archetypes and unconscious collectives and coming right back round to that ol' debbil mental telepathy, hippie dreams for the Jung at heart.

Be that as it may, which it inevitably would, it falls to the reputable historian to record that the first and only occasion on which Whitey mated Barb took place the day he was handicapped by the first of many famous hash cookies (and certainly the mating was restricted to the board of chess, what could you have been thinking). The epic contest rolled on like Columbia through lunchtime and siesta, past the heat and on into tea-time, English tea-time that is: every hour was time for a glass of the Afghan brew. Spassky would have seen no threat to his title; Fischer, the terrible infant of world chess who actually was that threat at the time, would have dismissed the match in a heartbeat (if he had one); purists of every hue would have cried havoc, but dogged persistence wore Whitey's opponent down at last. In the first hour, they merely exchanged pawns; the next saw the slowest knight-for-bishop swap in recent recorded history, yet it remained inconclusive for it was followed, with all the headlong momentum of cooling

lava, with the reverse bishop-for-knight, leaving each with one of each; in the fourth, Whitey forced the elimination of queens and edged his way to dominance, finally compelling Barb to let a pawn through to ascension. After that, though it took a while, the end was inevitable, even if his moves emerged through increasingly visible layers of fog, while hers by then were no quicker, being filtered through an endlessly looping clarity of desperation.

Blackie hung around, lackadaisically rolling smokes and occasionally monitoring the living sculpture developing suntans in the middle of the courtyard. Sometime in the early afternoon he took an executive decision and went on an extensive tour of the available housing arrangements. Pausing only briefly for nominal consultations with his distracted partner, he entered negotiations with Yusufi, establishing that they would take up residence on the next day, initially in a large room next door to the upstairs bathroom, with right of first refusal for the corner when it came free. Not incidentally, the languorous pace of the discussion, and his mate's association with everyone's favorite customer, recommended him to the manager as gentleman of quality. They exchanged civilities, cigarettes and compliments; at last they even told each other their names, just barely in time to close the conversation with ritual politesse and the promise of future discussion. It was an auspicious introduction, or so it seemed at the time.

Ed showed in the middle of the endgame, or perhaps at the end of the middle game (it was hard to tell), to be waved aside with an affectionate "Hi, there," a distracted kiss and an unanswerable, "Later."

So Ed and Blackie filled each other in on the missing days and established plans. They were joined in casual chatter by some Dutchman on his way west, not very sick, who told them tales of rural Nepal and promised adventures at every instant. Then he broke out a pack of cards, hailed a passing Swede, and engulfed them in an elementary game of Bridge that lasted till the Chess couple were finally packing it in.

All in all, it was as relaxing a time as any of them could remember.

More of the same seem more than merely called for. It seemed inexorable.

The least movement is of importance to all nature.
The entire ocean is affected by a pebble.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 1670

CEDAR AND ANNIE shuffled through the hot sand, carrying their shoes. When the monsoon came, the rainwater would stream down to wash the beach clean and merge back into the waves that thundered up to and over the edge of the strip where the houses cowered. Those who watched would thrill to the force of the ocean militant and bow the head in peaceful submission. And in the winter, when the air was dry and the wind was down, they remembered and were careful of the feelings of the sea.

The Goans didn't play in and around the ocean, they worked there. They parked their shallow boats above the high-water line and sat beside them, reweaving their nets. They drew strength and comfort from the rhythm of the tides and knew better than ever to think about it, knew it on some important, atavistic level that long predated the Christian missionaries or the Muslims before them; the primordial, pre-conscious sensations out of which the pure, true, certain animism grew in its best, mind-free, all-connecting power.

In the midst of this, the foreigners sunbathed and the Indian tourists came to gawk.

Oh, Baga was better than most. The day-trippers found enough exposed flesh in Calangute, at the other end of the beach, where most of the buses from Panjim turned around. Up in this part of the beach, there was, for the moment, a truce. The freaks were here, enough of them at least, out of a deep and hidden respect they too didn't talk about, didn't understand, possibly didn't even know, for those same ancient forces and the connections they made with the fishing families whose home it really was. There were whiter beaches and cheaper huts down south, there were better restaurants and cleaner showers all over. But there was a deal in Baga: We'll help you with a little cash and you'll let us hang out around your home, and no one's gonna lay any trips on anyone, and no one's gonna get bent out of shape. It was pretty cool.

It wouldn't last, it couldn't. The entrepreneurs wanted to sell hot showers and mango juice, Kerala weed and Manali black; the freaks wanted to buy them; next would be soft beds and Ambre Solaire. The bargain was Faustian, certainly, but it had been made. All too soon, the money men from Bombay and Paris and Boca Raton would surely be there, bringing in the tourists for fleecing and renting the Goans to do the job. The profits would fly away like the suntans, leaving just enough of their poison behind to destroy the old ways and with them much of what drew the first tourists in.

The power of Baga was soluble in cash.

Christmas was not the time to mourn. Annie and Cedar stripped off their clothes and waded, then dived, in the amniotic water. In Calangute, they'd wear clothes; further north, they wouldn't think of it; in Baga, they'd wear them if someone was watching. No one was near, so they played naked in the swell with only the tinge of guilt that aesthetes carry when they walk into a holy cathedral just to look at the paintings.

Did they know they felt uneasy? No, but that doesn't mean they weren't affected by it. It was not a moment for cameras, they knew that, not a picture to skewer like a butterfly's wings. It wasn't a time for conversation, even; for singing, perhaps, if it were gentle enough. To luxuriate in the downy waves, to feel the angled sun, to drift in the awesome arms of the ocean, that was the worship, the practice for the day. They could see the art in the holy place and feel the rapture too, a perfect form reaching behind the mind to touch the soul. It was a beautiful afternoon.

The sun meandered across the sky, as it will in the tropics, until it saw the horizon and began to rush to its goal, spreading and reddening as it went. It kissed the sea and dived, leaving the sudden blackness of the first evenings after the moon is full. The stars winked playfully at the earth, like children in charge till big sister gets up. Three miles away, at

(SEARCHING FOR) SOLID GROUND

the far end of the beach, the lights of the big hotel insisted on their own importance. Nearer by, the oil lamps and candles gave a friendlier glow. Yes, they were just as artificial, and, no, they were not the same. (That truth, like so many others, is there for you directly, or not at all. It dies under the critic's knife.) Behind, electricity was strung along

the road, and the little restaurants were open for business.

Even on Christmas, the Goans ate at home, before heading out to celebrate with their rotgut rakshi, but even on Christmas the tourists ate out, before heading on to celebrate with their own and each other.

And it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.

And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.

The Bible, Joshua, 6 : 20–21,
describing the siege of Jericho
in about the 13th century B.C.E.

THE MARCH WAS QUIET and tentative as it started. Annie achieved her balance and began to catch her stride but was feeling a little weird in the eerie emptiness. Trailers to the left of her, condos to the right, into the vacuum of naught strode the one hundred. Up ahead there was a rumble of galloping autos and maybe an incantation beginning but she couldn't make out the words. Some friend of Bobby's fell into step with him and they began a call and response:

"Whadda-we want?"

"Err-mmm..."

"Whenda-we wannit?"

"We-e-ell..."

That drew a local chuckle, which broke the tension, and a couple of choruses loosened up all the voices near the back of the column and readied them for the more, ah, traditional numerical versions. How convenient it is that 'four' is such an unstrained rhyme for 'war' and 'eight' for 'state' (adjectives optional and often scatological, except under the nose of a cop). By the time they turned the corner onto 41st, where the cars supplied an audience if no one else did, the last brigade was well warmed up and ready for an organizer with a battery-powered bull-horn to head down the line and lead them into new choruses.

"Hey, Bush! Hey, Quayle! People's lives are not for sale!"

Once again, Danny-boy proved his value to the left, as an inexhaustible source not just of jokes but of easy rhymes — jail, fail, male/mail, bail/bale ... no sweat for any street rapper or even white college poetaster. His master's name, however, seemed cal-

culated to bland out opposition: It takes real talent to advance beyond 'Lick Bush' and make a meaningful rhyme out of forge/gorge/??? without getting into serious mangling of the language. Desperate sloganeers were reduced to arguing that burbling incoherence was not inappropriate when directed at a leader so lacking in the syntax thing.

Annie picked up on the chants with ease. They were doing their job. Not converting anyone ("Oh sure, I heard this great slogan and saw the error of my warmongering ways." Right!) but consolidating the faithful. Hymns to themselves, who else? The reality bubble was growing. In the silence of Jade Street there was a sharing of loneliness in the crowd, a sense that individual isolation and helplessness could be bound together into something of comfort, of nurturing growth. The sorrow and outrage of a memento mori was being focused and gathered into the power of complaint.

And there wasn't even a war on. Yet.

No one had died in Operation Desert Shield, unless you count car accidents and such that would have been even more likely on the autobahns and motorways and turnpikes and freeways back home. Congress was beginning to rumble about the War Powers Act and its constitutional rights. The opinion polls, not coincidentally, were showing increasing public discontent with the idea of American boys laying down their lives for Big Oil and diminishing support for forceful intervention to reverse Iraqi aggression in the Gulf. The peace movement had hope and deserved it.

"If you wanna end war and stuff, you gotta sing loud," insisted the infant Arlo, way back when, in

the song that became a major motion picture and set him up and saddled him for life, and he knew whereof he spoke.

In the joyous noise of the chanting crowd on the sidewalks of 41st, the movement was the message. As in the best rock 'n' roll, the words were only signposts to the real meaning, necessary, sure, but irrelevant in their details. Annie still felt cut off from the drivers imprisoned behind their crash-pruf safe-T-windows but her sense of identity was coming into focus, even as it expanded beyond the isolation of the individual towards the group. Some of them would nuzzle at each other, some of them were probably idiots, some of them were ugly as babies and some were beautiful as sin, some were warm and friendly and some were coldly aloof, and all of them were her and she them. Annie was argumentative and stupid and hideous and ravishing and openly accepting and locked away and everything else she saw and felt and knew in the column around her.

It felt good.

As the line snaked round the corner of Capitola Road, taking a right to head for the goal, it curved all round both entrances to a Chevron station. Irresistible. The march came to a complete and sudden halt.

"No blood for oil!" they called out vigorously, over and over.

Now this was not strictly within the agreed scenario. Annie was situated nicely, with the banner just short of the entrance on 41st, where she had an excellent view of the proceedings but maintained unsullied innocence since she herself wasn't blocking a thing, not even the sidewalk. If there had been an unsuspecting pedestrian, a rare enough sight at that intersection, they could easily have edged past, if they didn't mind seeming to be part of the peacenik crowd.

Only one driver was gassing up at the time, and he affected not to notice the goings on, rapidly finishing his fill-up and hustling into the Mini-Mart, where the cashier was peering through the smoked glass and grabbing the phone. Passing traffic

beeped, but in sympathy with whom it was hard to say. There seemed to be some discussion at the head of the march, while at the tail those who had been behind Annie were crowding forward to see what was going on.

"Not big oil, not the state, we are gonna choose our fate," started someone with a loud voice and infected the crowd for a dozen rounds.

Some of the people at the organizing meeting had wanted to sit in at the gas station, but they had conceded that blockading the military offices was the target for this action, the message being that cannon fodder was in demand. Still, there was a lot more traffic through this intersection, and for a moment Annie felt the heady thrill of a crowd buying for unpremeditated action. A cop car pulled up right beside her and a uniformed representative of the Capitola City government swallowed hard, adjusted his shades and opened the passenger-side door.

"C'mon, c'mon," he called, apparently trying for firm politeness, "Don't block the driveway."

As the line was stretched all around, he was really only talking to about a dozen people, and they began to shuffle forward to the sidewalk proper. The crowd had made its decision, but insisted on crowing a while longer before beginning to walk. The cop seemed to know he'd won, because he just kept muttering about moving along, without much evidence of doing anything to enforce it, and sure enough in only another minute or so the mob undulated onward.

The frisson of excitement was great, though. We could have, thought Annie, we could have taken the place and held it too. She felt the power and understood that the rest of the march did too. They didn't have to use it, exactly, but they did have to know it was there.

So did she.

It wasn't so much that she drew strength from the energy of the crowd as that she gave to it and in giving felt her own increase.

Or was she making the whole thing up?

Did it matter?

δις ες τον αυτον ποταμον ουκ αν εμβαιης.
You can't step into the same river twice.

Heracleitos,
ca 500 B.C.E.

WHITEY'S COOL WAS CLASSIC and instantly memorable in a scene which valued sang-froid. Not only did he not have to do anything, he was almost compelled *not* to do anything, except to model self-possession and savoir-faire, and for that staying elegantly wasted was an excellent start. Even in the shorter days of autumn, the altitude helped the sun to bleach the raiment and burn the skin, till he looked as though the contrast was turned way too high and, as the pounds melted off under the strain of the lo-cal high-purge Afghan diet, the picture was squashed like a wide-screen movie squeezed into a narrow TV. Some fried-brain British kid had to be hauled off screaming when he tried to adjust his set.

"His hat's under his feet," the poor fellow insisted. "I have to fix the vertical hold."

Yusufi intervened unobtrusively and got a pharmacist to show up with downers and Vitamin C, which relieved the symptoms for patient and audience both, but it took Blackie to point out that there was, in fact, a straw hat on the ground and from one angle it looked like it was under Whitey's left sneaker.

"It's all a matter of point of view," he insisted as usual. "Never doubt the underlying truth of Captain Trips."

Whitey, actually, was more than half convinced that the picture tube really was on the blink, but he was far too blitzed to complain about it.

Blackie, whose own contrast was blurring into some generic dark russet as the cheap black dyes of his shirts began to fade and his expensive-looking tan became burnished to blend with his extravagant whiskers, was rarely less loaded but always more eloquent. His rep was rapping and he earned it good. Not that he dominated every conversation — half his knack was that he was developing into a world-class listener, while the other half was that he

would talk to anyone. What held him this side of obnoxious was that, unlike the ancient Mariner, after he stoppèd one of three, he held them with his glittering eye only as long as they wished, letting his guests leave with the warm feeling that someone wanted to hear their story as well as tell his own. It was great entertainment for all and, in time, developed into a first-rate sales pitch.

The pharmacist's house-call was something of a turning point. Blackie had been developing, over daily glasses of tea, a casual acquaintance with the manager that had progressed, after a week, to the occasional sharing of a hookah in the back room. This was an honor afforded only to long-standing customers, the kind who were metamorphosing into paying guests, with some as yet unspecified, perhaps unthought and surely unspoken, possibility of partnership or at least alliance. Certainly it made Blackie the natural intermediary between tourists and management at time of crisis. He established that the freak-out was under control, approved the prescription, relayed the news to the assembled company, and then proceeded to satisfy his own curiosity.

"So that cat's a doctor, man?" he asked as things settled back to languor.

"No, no." Yusufi was surprised. Doctors were scarce and therefore only considered necessary for important questions of diagnosis. Obvious chemical psychosis didn't count, unless it refused to respond to treatment. "He is a man, how do you say, a man who sells medicines."

"A chemist?"

"Yes, indeed." The manager was proud of his English (quite justifiably; beat the hell out of the Anglophone's Farsi) and liked to improve his vocabulary. "He is a chemist. Is that not the name of a shop?"

"Right, right, both. The shop and the guy who runs it. The Yanks call it a drug store, which is

pretty cool, huh? I mean, a chemist sells drugs, yeah?”

“But in England the shop is a chemist and the person is a chemist also?” Having kicked the shit out of British troops at regular intervals for a century, and periodically even accepted the occupation of Kabul by infidels, the Afghans understood the primacy of the Queen’s English. America was a vaguer concept, associated with money more than valor and therefore less important.

“Got it.” Like most Brits, Blackie was fiercely proud of the absurdities of his linguistic birthright and as determined as a Frenchman (though he would never have put it like that) to defend it from the logic of outlanders. “So the cat’s a chemist. He get training for that?”

“Most certainly.” The manager was horrified and almost showed it. “He is an educated man. He has been to Paris.”

“Paris?”

“For his education. First to Teheran and then for one year to Paris for the diploma.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Blackie was impressed. Where he came from, pharmaceutical chemists were unimpressive little creatures, the kind of berk who went to university but never seemed to have any fun. Even stripping away Blackie’s contemptuous bias, we are left with the truth that becoming a chemist was in Britain, and the West generally, a safe and predictable and essentially ordinary career option, requiring a sense of responsibility and considerable accuracy (repeat business being important, you have to watch those poisons) but not much in the way of imagination or exotic foreign travel.

But then, literacy in Britain was well over 95%, while Afghanistan had it about the other way round.

Where so few people in a nation could read that no one even knew how many people there were, let alone how many of them could write their own name, accomplishment was measured on a different scale. The innkeeper who could write a bill and converse in a foreign tongue was a person of achievement and, at least in his own mind, of well-deserved status. The camel magnate or carpet dealer who carried a million transactions in his

head remained a man of substance but the small educated class was developing its own self-confidence and finding its niches in which to operate. Traditional herbalists retained the trust of the bulk of the population, but the wonder drugs of the mysterious occident were beginning to take over the market and it was hard to keep the tablets straight without reading labels. Pharmacy was useful, profitable, and exclusive, so naturally it was taken up by sons of the new upper classes.

Besides, it gave you an excuse to go to Paris.

“He didn’t get a prescription, did he?” Blackie’s sense of the rules was that chemists did what they were told, essentially by doctors, except when babying children of all ages.

Yusufi was baffled and stone-faced a complete lack of response.

“I mean, you didn’t get a doctor to figure out what drug to use.”

What on earth for? the other did not say, politely. Blackie found himself stumbling around the silence.

“You mean, the chemist just decides what drug to hand out?”

“That is his job.”

It began to fall into place. If the chemist was taught — in Paris, no less — what drug was for what purpose, then why should he require some doctor to instruct him on their application? Given that the entire country had about fourteen fully-fledged doctors, the system made a lot of sense, even if you bought the standard physicians’ point of view.

“So there’s no laws about it?”

This time the polite stare was almost anticipated. The little light-bulb in Blackie’s head was beginning to turn on.

“He gave him Mandies, didn’t he?” Pause; shrug. The 64 million Af question: “Would he let us have some?”

Of course he would, you ninny, anything he’d got — Mandrax (or other Methaqualone-like downers), tincture of opium (laudanum to you, grandpa), methedrine, morphine, sometimes even pharmaceutical cocaine. Selling drugs was his job. They were flown in from Geneva and other points of pristine cleanliness, absolutely legally, and distributed strictly to licensed pharmacists, who were

expected to use their judgment as to which customers needed the product. Commercial considerations were known to affect that judgment on occasion. That made ethical sense, too: the voluntary separation of a small amount of hard currency from some wide-eyed freak wanting to adjust his consciousness financed any number of medical emergencies. At least, it could. We can but hope.

If you knew what you wanted, and you knew what they had, and especially if you could speak French, you could saunter into any druggist's, assuming you could identify it from the street, and pretty much order what you liked. That did, however, take nerve. Like as not, the guy behind the counter would restrict his comments to a sniff of recognition and a grunt of price. Not for him the cheery, "Mornin' luv, what can we do you for today then?" Nor the time-wasting discussion of the relative efficacy of alternative products when applied or ingested to treat a given malady. He was more likely to combine the graciousness of Manhattan at rush hour with the cheery disposition of back-street Moscow after a hard night with the vodka. Pay up and get out. Anything more would be servile; anything less would put him out of business. Pride carves a fine line.

The chemist who had made the house call became known as Jacques, which wasn't his name but bore some relation to it and had been what his Parisian acquaintances had called him, back in the halcyon days of his education. He was, inevitably, some kind of cousin of Yusufi, Blackie never quite figured out how far removed, and was not unwilling to practice his French. Under the circumstances, Blackie was willing to try his own, being as he was the proud possessor of an 'O' level in the subject. Their accents, while both virtually incomprehensible to any genuine Gaul, were surprisingly compatible, and business transpired.

"See if he's got any speed," suggested Whitey, who was completely cut out of the dialogue but always available to monitor the action.

"Est-ce que on peut, ah, acheter du, hmm, amphetamine?" essayed Blackie.

"Comme du Benzedrine?"

"Oui, oui, exactement comme ça. Des, errm, pills?" Reliable stand-by number one (talking real

loud) being clearly inappropriate and perhaps even dangerous, Blackie fell back on number two, using an English word with an exaggerated foreign accent. He made it sound something like 'peels,' in falsetto.

"Des pilules," grasped the other quickly, "Pas des poudres."

"Yeah, I mean, oui."

"Bien sûr. Cinq milligrammes par pilule. Toujours. Absolument."

"Five-mil bennies," translated Blackie for the benefit of his partner.

From there it was down to natural negotiating talent, and the four-way discussion gave everyone the space to formulate opinions and edge gently towards agreement. More tea, more consideration, a round of cigarettes, a little toot from the hookah, tea again and a tasty bite of rock candy to be washed down with it. A pleasant and productive afternoon interlude for one and all.

The first deal was for a classic set of sideways shifters — pairs of ups and downs — fifty of each, COD in 24 hours, 25% discount for cash dollars, no deposit required since the order could be filled out of stock. The product was import quality in appearance (an occasional function of pharmacy was pressing pills from the bulk powders, a fine traditional craft now almost lost to the world) and, it soon emerged, in potency. Speed-rapping the next day, Blackie was a whirling advert for the one, after a glorious night that testified to the other. Even Whitey smiled and the two of them unloaded half the stash that morning.

Sound familiar?

It wasn't the money. Really, there wasn't much in it, they still had plenty and expenses were downright trivial. It wasn't any kind of urge to proselytize; they didn't care if anyone didn't want the pills, Barb for instance, self-possession and preferably humor being far more important. It wasn't any kind of experiment or accommodation with the country around them; it had almost nothing to do with where they were, except for certain trivial details of availability.

It was what they did.

Familiar patterns pulling hard in the middle of the weird. Entropy and compensation, gravity and

(SEARCHING FOR) SOLID GROUND

inertia, phobias and phobias, ingrained memories and hidden dreams.

Seek the strange and find yourself grasping for the certain.

Don't we all?

Chained to our habits, we stumble where we ought to dance, and when we trip we sometimes fall, and as we fall we may laugh or we may cry, and who's to tell ahead of time. The line between

human tragedy and human comedy is too subtle, too obvious, too vague and too certain to see.

Change and illusion, the illusion of change, the changing illusion of what we know we say we think we want.

Relax, man, it's cool.

Sure.

Sure?

Shh.

Dis-moi ce qui tu manges, et je te dirai ce que tu es.

Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.

Anthelme Brillat-Savarin,

Physiologie du goût, 1825

WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR DINNER?" asked Cedar, as they stumbled finally up from the shore in the gathering gloom. "We ought to have dinner, don't you think?"

"We should, I guess," admitted Annie, adding practically, "Can you handle it?"

"Oh yeah. Anything but pork."

She grimaced.

"Don't even think about it."

"Cornflakes."

"Say, what?"

"Yeah," he mused into reminiscent (or was it imaginative?) fantasy, "A nice bowl of fresh, crunchy, Kellogg's cornflakes. That would do nicely just about now."

"But you never touch them at home." Granola was already de rigueur among le tout Santa Cruz, if a touch déclassé among the macro-biotic and vegan sets, who shunned milk. As for cornflakes ... aside from the ingredients, the packaging was there to scorn, and the advertising, and the connotations, and ... well, Annie was shocked.

"But I could."

Live free and die.

"Try the railroad station." Annie's guiding principle of *laissez-faire*, or 'do your own thing' as it was generally known at the time, trumped any personal inclinations (always excepting the absolute extremes, like the livers of tortured geese or the flesh of abused baby calves). She was quite willing to be helpful. She didn't have to eat the stuff.

But why not? The great Mr John Harvey Kellogg was a convinced vegetarian, indeed a health-food nut of the first water. He is said to have developed his famous cereal in 1876 for reasons of both health and religion: he claimed that, as part of a balanced diet (can't you hear the pitch now?) his corn flakes would help to (wait for it) lower that hard-to-manage sex drive. Hmm. Try that one on

MTV. On second thoughts, Annie's instincts may have been sound.

"But there isn't one." A railroad station, he meant. "Anyway, when they do have them, the milk's warm and the cereal's soggy."

Cedar was right, as Annie knew, but that won him no sympathy. If only she had understood the full complexity of the situation. It was true that, presumably under British guidance, Dr Kellogg's brilliant innovation had become a staple of the Indian Railway's menus. Careful of their variegated clientele, the authorities maintained separate establishments for vegetarians and carnivores, and tried to ensure that English children, Hindu siddhus and Muslim grandmothers had equal access to their dietary preferences. Alas, the prevailing conditions of technology and weather conspired to enforce certain adjustments, not all for the better.

Many of your average dopers, awakened by hash or habit or even hunger to a desire for instant culinary gratification, reverted as by instinct to childhood. Seeing one of the first names they ever learned to recognize, with that flowery \mathcal{K} , that distinctive, almost calligraphic, typeface — seeing it printed, on an actual menu, albeit in some undistinguished text font — they couldn't help themselves. They demanded the fulfillment of a childhood dream: Cornflakes for dinner. In a real restaurant, with the part of Mom played by a waiter in livery. The vision came alive and stayed, even after the soggy, warm reality intruded. It tapped into a primæval longing that, once aroused, lurked in the system like malaria. Outbreaks might recur with little or no warning. Time was the only cure, together with removal to more temperate climes where the desire could be sated quickly and, in all but the worst cases, definitively, by consumption of a single bowl, with a sufficiency of sugar and cold milk.

(Pause for a public-service announcement. Travelers are advised that purchase of the Giant or Family-sized package is usually unnecessary and is not recommended as a first step in treatment; the urge to do so, prompted by the vision of apparently unlimited supplies, is best suppressed. The variety package usually contains plenty of good stuff and the rest can easily be palmed off on small children who know no better. This announcement has been provided by the management of this story as a public service to our readers. Fade back to plot.)

Annie's incomprehension notwithstanding, Cedar was trying to grasp something normal in the middle of the bizarre, and if his psyche was temporarily so twisted that his concept of normal was reduced to an image from television, which is really what was going on, well, he'd come down soon enough. Meantime, he'd hold on by trying to push patterns he knew over the strange reality he was confronted with.

Whatever rush had come from the afternoon acid had dissolved into a generalized sense of

energy and well-being. Under these circumstances, eating was partly habit, partly a way of passing the time till moonrise, and partly the result of a commonsense call from the superego for fuel. Artificial energy, it insisted, is a supplement, not a replacement, and the evening's expedition promised to require solid provisioning. Regrettably, even after the helpful encouragement of a pre-prandial blast of Afghani black, the body was not entirely willing to cooperate with the suggestions of the mind. They settled in the end for a taste of the blandest dahl available, with a couple of chapattis, a banana and several cups of tea. This would have to do.

"What is matter?" quoted Cedar, and answered himself, "Never mind." Annie smiled; she'd heard it before. "What is mind?" he continued, "No matter." Annie smiled louder. It was, after all, a good one.

Philosophers and hippies have more in common than members of either clan usually care to admit.

Not enough gourmet chefs in the lot of them.

Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better.

Richard Hooker, 1593,
as misquoted by Dr Samuel Johnson,
the “harmless drudge,” in the Preface to
his *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755

PSYCHOBABBLE 101: TRANSFERENCE. Did the collapse of her town, and the very ground on which she stood, lead Annie to bulldoze her relationship? Or to see it for the shaky structure of unstated assumptions that it was? Or to examine the foundations and by staring begin to undermine them, like a subatomic physicist or the baby Super-girl testing her laser eyes?

Was it the quake that make her look at her crazy dissociated society, or government, or world? Question her values (again) or re-evaluate the compromises of ordinary existence? Yearn for children to carry her genes along or insist once more that this world was no place for kids? Call for peace or declare a truce with her self-appointed administrators?

Was the quake a wake-up call?

Or was it just a way of letting the San Francisco Giants drag out a World Series they were destined to lose? The first proponent of this theory was Baseball’s Master of the Malaprop, Ron Fairley, the then KNBR radio commentator (along with the incomparable Hank Greenwald, himself more temperate if not more lovely than a summer’s day at Candlestick), at roughly 5:10 P.M., six minutes after

the first big temblor and about twenty before the third game of the Series was due to start. Ordered to fill in while the producers found out what the hell was going on, dear Ron began by telling his expectant audience that, after two disappointing defeats, “Manager Roger Craig decided to shake up his team a little bit.” The trouble was, no one knew if he was joking.

When Mao called for a constant revolution, a periodic rattling of the cages of the senior government officials, what was wrong with that idea? It’s fairly obvious that it was a mistake (it didn’t work for the Giants, either), but why?

Is it just as bad to blow things up deliberately as to sit rigid as a brick wall when you need to sway? Is it in fact the same thing?

The great turtle on which the earth depends does not care. The turtle sways as it sleeps and the people forget at their peril, and remember at the cost of constant fear. No win, no lose, no point in keeping score. But perhaps it’s useful to know that you’re in the game. Maybe it helps to keep your balance.

What help? What balance? What you?

What next?

As I went walkin' I saw a sign and
 On that sign it said NO TRESPASSING
 But on the other side it didn't say nothin'
 That side was made for you and me

Woody Guthrie, in a frequently censored
 verse from "This Land Is Your Land," the answer
 song to Irving Berlin's hit, "God Bless America," 1940

AS CAPITOLA ROAD HEADS EAST from 41st, it becomes obvious that not only is Homo not particularly sapient, the species isn't even locally dominant. From the gas station (a feedlot for cars), the demonstrators passed a little shopping center (anchored on an auto parts store), then the Department of Motor Vehicles (where they bring their 'owners' for periodic ritual certification), another gaggle of stores (with supplies for offices and their folk) and finally the California State Automobile Association (the map, towing and insurance company, known as Triple-A for reasons of euphony and history). The whole scene should have been enough to make any individual person feel puny and powerless.

Paradoxically, Annie felt liberated.

This may partly have been a case of sheer bloody-mindedness — you can always trust a psychopathic deviate to come up with the superficially inappropriate response — but mostly it arose from an understanding that the dragons were real. Whatever exactly it was that she was becoming part of trying to prevent or reverse or avoid or stop, the danger sure seemed to be tangible right about there. There's nothing like a real menace to bring out the fight in a yuman bean.

Annie, of course, was also participating at a remove, practically bringing up the rear with her half of a banner. Stylish, useful, even crucial, but in some sense not central. She was there and glad of it, but yet again in the midst of what felt like some else's game. There she goes again: distanced from her own liberation. Takes a real talent for dissociation, that, especially given some awareness of the entire spiraling process of contradiction. People-ness, probably.

The front of the line was nearing the building at the corner, and chanting louder. This must be the

big confrontation. Send in the cops — there should be cops. So far the marchers were legal, just walking — diddly-diddly-just-a-walking, if you don't know how to do it, I'll show you how to walk the dog — and it would take active piggery to bust them while practically single-filing along the sidewalk, but surely they had a right to expect passive piggery at least. It was quite disappointing. Gallons of adrenaline, well, milliliters, microliters, anyway plenty, coursing through a cubic yard or so of collective blood, and all for naught but the oomph to keep on trucking. Aha! The TV camera, thank god for that. The banners waved and the voices burst in the air.

The snake curled round the corner to strangle the building in its embrace and might have managed it if the military offices had been all that therein was, but two other enterprises filled the wings of the structure. Facing south, with its own entrance that the crowd undulated past, was an S&L (apparently solvent) that the Proudhonistas had their eye on for when the revolution got a little closer but let alone for the nonce. Facing west, in fitting culmination of the neighborhood ambiance, was an insurance agency that specialized in (you got it) auto policies (real estate too, as long as you weren't renting, life as an investment, and possibly health if you insisted and could afford it). DeFreitas, Gwynn & Pollard, or DGP as the agency liked to be called, for the high-tech ring of it, did share the main entrance with the military folk, though their office also had an unmarked side entrance in the west wall, facing Triple-A across the driveway in from Capitola Road.

Being of a thoroughly modern and practical design, the building had no door that faced the street, since no one ever walked there with ordinary intent. The parking lot at the back, accessible from either of the streets that formed the corner, dis-

gorged the customers to enter at the central internal angle. The small hallway there presented, at left, DGP's glass door and beyond a counter and a plantation of laminated desks and metal cabinets, polished and tended by their carefully coifed acolytes. Hard right was the back door to the S&L, which was generally kept locked — certainly on this fateful day — and used only for access to the bathrooms (soft left and round a corner). Half-right was the way to the four Service offices, Army and Navy dug in on the ground floor, while the Air Force and Marines were encamped upstairs with a commanding view of the terrain.

All in all, a thoroughly defensible position but one vulnerable to siege tactics. The recruiters, unassisted, could surely defend their offices from the barbarian hordes like Horatio at the bridge, but by exactly the same token a small but determined group of obstreperous opponents could prevent access from the outside. Not that people were generally lining up around the block to get in, since most of the work went on by phone and mail and appointment and especially during scheduled visits to the high schools (Be all that we want you to be! Earn your college tuition! Get job training! Get a job! Jus' git! And get paid for it!) where the uniformed flacks provided a form of career counseling. The demo having been announced weeks ahead, there had been plenty of time to formulate the military response. The obvious strategy was that first made famous by Quintus Fabius Maximus Cunctator in the third century B.C.E., when he wore down Hannibal's troops by simply refusing to engage them. The tactic of choice, therefore, was withdrawal. Three of the four recruiters calmly set up appointments elsewhere and kept them; Marine Sgt. B.T. "Booker" Jones was made of sterner stuff but on general principles he wasn't going to let a little thing like a scheduled demonstration affect his lunchtime habits and it happened that as the marchers arrived he was half a mile away, eating a thoroughly mediocre dish of Szechwan chicken and pretending that there was nothing unusual about the day. The effect was no different: When the Vizigoths rambled in, the Legions were absent.

The cops knew this and were greatly relieved. There was nothing they wanted less than to have to wade into a big-time confrontation and rent out

space at the County jail to hold their arrestees, the local hoosegow having a more intimate atmosphere that was certain to be overwhelmed by any significant influx of clients. Capitola's finest duly showed up, but diplomatically parked across the street, where eagle-eyed pacifists could detect a couple of car-loads of the boys in blue serving and protecting the populace by leaning against their black-and-whites and shooting the breeze. A lieutenant with PR skills and a radio-equipped sidekick waited at the front door like a major-domo for the multitude to assemble.

As, eventually, they did, pouring into the parking lot and spilling indiscriminately over the white lines and between the slumbering vehicles. By the time Bobby led Annie and their banner triumphantly past the financial institution and onto, gasp, private property there was a most satisfactory crowd milling cheerfully through the designated driving area in front of the main entrance, overflowing through the handicapped parking and surging up the steps to the door, where it coagulated around the cops. The WAGE PEACE and NO BLOOD FOR OIL banners were already framing the shot, one on each side of the negotiating committee, in an effective image that made the lead on two local TV news broadcasts and the front page on three newspapers the next day, much to Eric's satisfaction. Annie smiled broadly at Bobby and he laughed back. She tipped her head to suggest they move back to frame the further edge of the crowd and he agreed, so they became the semi-official Last Line of Offense and stood there patiently with the best overview in the house, except for the mysteriously anonymous strangers videotaping the proceedings from upstairs at Triple-A.

A lot of smiles were being passed around, which seemed to bother a few of the more intense participants, who were after all trying to Save Lives by Stopping a War, but clearly reflected the mood of the majority. Even the head policeman seemed pretty relaxed, now it was clear he wasn't about to be crushed by a hydra-headed banshee. Some day-glo traditionalist had a bubble-blowing toy and sent little soapy spheres flying over the crowd. This thing was turning into a party.

Now, that's a politics I can get behind, thought Annie. I knew I was in the right place.

What experience and history teach is this — that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it.

G.W.F. Hegel,
*Lectures on the Philosophy of World
History*, 1830, translated by H.B. Nisbet, 1975

WHEN VICES BECOME HABITS, it's time to stop; but when habit's the vice, it's hard to tell. The little bourgeois monster in every skull clings to the illusion of control and builds its hopeless defenses to invite attack. Predictability is the ally of the death squads and comfort is their calling card. Nemesis is a great kidder. She likes us to think she cometh swooping and enveloped in clouds of flame, all the better to sneak up in mufti and catch us from the back.

Pause to clear the throat and quote from Chapter 8, above:

Essentially, they stuck to the youth market, negotiated their own agreements with importers from an approved roster and paid a franchise fee that guaranteed non-interference from the multi-nationals and provided some limited insurance against hassles from the constabulary.

The *mutandi* having been mutated in the usual unpredictable ways, Blackie and Whitey soon found themselves barreling down what looks suspiciously like the same old tunnel they had known a couple of years, several cultures and half a world before. They didn't see it at the time, of course, or they probably wouldn't have. Then again, Blackie had a good LSE Marxist education and might have relied on the master's famous dictum about history coming round twice, as tragedy and as farce. Not that he believed the CP bullshit, but it's a damn good line, even if Uncle Karl did rip it off from his wisecracking mate Fred rather than the more prosaic Hegel (who, as Alex Cockburn pointed out, sounds much more impressive than Engels, both now and certainly in 1852). Faced with a cabal of academic leftists, Blackie would publicly have

insisted, of course, that Doris Day put it better: *Que será, será*. Six weeks at Number One is plenty to burn a line into an eleven-year-old brain, and that kind of audience gets even more pissed off if you pretend that Queen Doris wrote her own multilingual material.

The meeting with Jacques was serendipitous, but what sent them down their slippery path was the happenstance that another of Yusufi's relatives, or perhaps friends, in any event his supplier — for of course he could lay his hand on a little hash if you wanted, though he didn't make a big thing out of it — was the same Ahmed that Whitey had once so Biblically known in London. As coincidences go, it really wasn't much: Hash was very common, but professional dealing was less so, and Kabul, like everywhere else, evidently had a real population of a couple of hundred, the remaining millions being there mostly for decoration. Like everything else that went on around the Grape Place, the meeting was tinged with inevitability and no surprise at all.

Whitey was rolling when Ahmed first showed up. The hookah was fine but he retained a yen for the traditional three-paper number. Blackie was trying to get Yusufi to explain the fine points of the national sport, Buzkashi, a combination of the more vicious aspects of polo, American football, ice hockey, the Eton wall game and bare-knuckle prize-fighting before the Marquis of Queensberry started messing with it, the 'ball' being the headless corpse of a recently sacrificed goat. Inured as he was to the soon-to-be-legendary eccentricities of the British football fan, Blackie was beginning to doubt that any fine points actually existed, when he noticed his mate look up and nod briefly in the general direction of the door. Pushing through the beaded curtain was a face that took a moment to place.

“Ahmed,” grunted Whitey, sitting cross-legged with the fixings on a battered copy of *Time* magazine on his lap.

“Ahmed,” said Yusufi, rising to his feet and bowing slightly.

“Fuck me,” said Blackie, not meaning it literally.

“English,” grinned the newcomer pleasantly.

“Chai?” offered Yusufi. When all assented, he clapped his hands and summoned the lad from the kitchen, who returned instantly with glasses and sugar and boiled sweets.

Ahmed took a seat, and a hit, and a sip, and batted the verbal ball around softly.

“You like our country?” he served with gentle ritual at the pair of them. Clearly he remembered Whitey and apparently he didn’t consider that their sexual relationship was anything so pedestrian as to be presumed or assumed or resumed or consumed or even necessarily summed at all. Or maybe he did. He was very accommodating to Blackie, who was fighting back paranoia and jealousy and similarly unhip emotions, and covering his fears with conversation.

“Yeah, man,” he replied with studied casualness, “Of course it’s the people, innit?” and opened his arms to gesture over towards Yusufi and Ahmed both.

Those worthies bowed in acknowledgment.

“Most kind,” accepted Ahmed.

“Long time,” ventured Whitey, who knew Blackie was in trouble.

“Indeed.”

Tea was cooled with the breath and imbibed noisily through the sugar and teeth.

“Been in England lately, then, have you?” tried Blackie.

“No.”

Some useful instinct kept the visitors no closer than that to the subject of business, which was hovering above the surface of all four minds but below the vocal level. Given that they had so little else in common, however, the atmosphere was a little strained. Yusufi explained to Ahmed that he that he was explaining the rules of Buzkashi to the English, and then explained to Blackie and Whitey that he had explained that ... it made for slow going.

Ahmed seemed to be of the opinion that the sport had gone to the dogs in this effete modern era, which gave him something in common with middle-aged aficionados everywhere. Blackie brought up the prodigious Stanley Matthews (of Blackpool,* England, the World and surely dimensions as yet undiscovered) as evidence that football wasn’t what it was either, but failed to elicit a spark of recognition. Whitey circulated a second joint and fortunately the talk became unimportant.

“If you will excuse us,” suggested Blackie after a while, “Perhaps you two have something you wish to discuss?”

“Please, take time,” remonstrated Yusufi and Blackie almost did but Whitey read the comment correctly as a ritual dismissal.

“Later,” he nodded.

“Later,” agreed Ahmed, and they gradually disengaged so the English could depart.

Naturally the tourists became the immediate focus of attention, but Ahmed chose immediately, as if without calculation, to downplay his interest. He admitted having made their acquaintance some time before, in their homeland, but he concealed the exact nature of their connections, both personal and professional. Yusufi was a good man but there was no percentage in revelation for the sake of mere gossip.

Meanwhile, not a hundred feet away, the tourists themselves were figuring the implications and looking for the angle.

“You reckon he knew we were here?” wondered Blackie.

“Nah,” guessed Whitey (accurately).

“I dunno, man,” argued Blackie, working it like a rough-edged tooth. “It’s a pretty weird coincidence, I mean, the only fucking Afghan we know and shazam just like we rubbed the lantern up he pops.”

“’f he’da known, he’da looked surprised.” Wisdom struck and it was over.

“Wanna do business?”

Shrug.

Pause.

*Sir Stanley ended his career in 1965, aged fifty, playing for Stoke, his home-town team.

“Man,” ventured Blackie as it all meandered into focus, “I mean ... we are doing business, aren’t we? We wanna hang around a bit, we got the set-up, right? The chemist’s shit’s cool but if we got our hands on a little weight, we could break even, no sweat. Be like the old days. And ten to one fuckin’ Ahmed’s in with the fuzz.”

“Yeah.”

“And this is a pretty fucking cool place to hang out a while.”

“Shitty fucking nick, I bet.”

“Well, yeah, sure, but that’s where your contacts come in, right? And your good old baksheesh. Find the flow, just do your number and go with it.”

Whitey probably knew better but he forgot. They decided to wait a while — they didn’t really have any other option — but the seed of the idea had been planted, lightly fertilized and gently watered. Dedicated public servants that they were, if the choice came up, it would surely be no choice at all.

Come, hear Uncle John's band
 Playing to the tide
 Come with me or go alone
 He's come to take his children home

Robert Hunter,
 music by Jerry Garcia, the Grateful Dead,
 "Uncle John's Band," *Workingman's Dead*, 1970

CEDAR AND ANNIE REPAIRED to home base after dinner to collect the supplies they might need for the evening — trinkets to barter with, such as banknotes and pre-rolled joints; Zig-zags and fixings, in an air-tight tobacco tin, in case more were needed; and extra layers of clothing for that inevitable time when the moon was high, the blood sugar was low, the breeze was off the ocean and the mercury sank below sixty. Besides, the woolen shawl with the tasteful purple and green was absolutely *de rigueur* and the Levi jacket was tamed to a pride of pale blue glory. With an ankle bracelet here and a set of silver rings there, wooden beads and copper bangles, oh yes, they were set to strut.

"What do you wanna do about that acid?" asked Cedar. It was, if you wanted to be picky, his in that he had originally scored and paid for it, but their understanding was that all perishables were held in common and it evidently qualified.

"You got it?" she stalled.

"Right here."

He pulled out the little cotton bag of valuables that he kept hanging from his neck, tucked under his shirt. "Passport, travelers checks, large-denomination unmarked used bills, recreational drugs ... here we are ... all the essentials in one handy container." He struggled with the foil wrap and extracted a little wad of scotch tape, pressed into which were about three dozen microdots. "Probably shouldn't have kept it here. Oh well."

"We could trade it, I suppose," Annie offered tentatively.

"Eee. I dunno," prevaricated Cedar, who had strong feelings about the honesty required to live outside the law, "I feel bad enough about that shit we scored with it yesterday, day before, whenever."

"Well," she suggested practically, "Do you want to take some?"

"I don't think so."

"I might," she said. "Why don't I hang onto it?"

He tossed it over with a grin and she dropped it of course but stowed it away with her own vital papers and girded her loins for the journey.

A flashlight would have been useful, as they discovered within moments of departure. Of course, one small enough to fit discreetly in a pocket would have been about as helpful as a white cane, while a beacon of the Great White Hunter variety might raise disturbing thoughts among those they were likely to meet, many of whom would probably see it as flashing into red and blue and whining like a siren. Hup, two, three, four, shape up, fly right. Retinas would collapse, untold bits of stash would fly into the sand from suddenly paranoid fingertips, once-friendly heads would scatter from their path. No, forget it. There are times when the virtues of efficiency are much over-rated.

"Where's the moon?" Annie complained.

"It's coming," explained the scientist. "It's just behind the palms."

"Well, tell it to hurry up," quibbled the modern consumer.

"Alright, already." Cedar paused and turned to face approximately East, forefinger raised like Charlton Heston reminding the Almighty not to neglect his heavenly duties. "Oi, moon! Hands off cocks, hands on socks!"

"No, no, careful," remonstrated Annie, suddenly post-modern in her pre-patriarchal sensibility. "She'll get offended. There, there, nice moon, don't mind him. He's seen too many World War II movies."

“Legs off lovers, covers off beds.”

Cedar thought it sounded like one of those lines Ronnie Reagan might have had in one his wartime B-grade features, ‘Bedtime with Hellcats of the Navy,’ perhaps.

“She’s a *good moon*,” continued Annie, wisely ignoring the distraction. “She just wants to make an entrance.”

Cedar took this in, sensibly refrained from personal comments like ‘You’d know, wouldn’t you’ and jumped to the nub of the matter:

“I thought you knew the way, or possibly vice versa.”

“I didn’t actually cross the river,” Annie explained seriously, “But I saw the trail and Juanita — remember you met her at Sigi’s? — talked about it. We’re OK on the beach, to the end, then we follow the river back up to the ford at the end of the road. It’s not high tide, is it?”

“No, it’s going down. It was high before sunset. Come to think of it, so was I.”

“Me too, a bit. So anyway, we go across the river...”

“And into the trees?”

“... and take the path to the left, towards the ocean. Hey, gimme a little space. Let me finish.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

“OK. It’s pretty easy. It looks like it just goes all the way. It’s only the next beach, you know. I heard ten minutes.”

“Lead on, McDuff.”

“Look, she’s coming.”

The palms were edged with silver. The eastern stars were beginning to fade. The sky over the ocean looked blacker by the minute.

“See,” he chortled. “It works.”

“Right.”

“Damn straight. Told her to get her act together and look at her now. There she is, bang on schedule. I got her number.”

“She’d have been there anyway.”

“Prove it.”

“Can’t.”

“See. It’s scientific. Cause and effect.”

“Bullshit. There’s a name for it. It’s a fallacy.”

“Post hoc, ergo propter hoc.”

“Oh, sure. Who’s that?”

“That’s Latin, that is. After this means because of this, something like that.”

“When it could be the other way round. Like, because the moon was about to rise, you raised your hand in the air.”

“Or it could have nothing to do with it.”

“Or maybe it just feels good to point at the palm tree.”

“Maybe the palm tree controls us both, me *and* the moon.”

“Now you’re talking.”

Ten minutes may have been the scheduled flight time for a world-class athlete in training. It might even have been a reasonable estimate for a moderately active grandmother with a couple of healthy puppies to walk. It was completely unrealistic for a pair of freaks suffering from self-inflicted handicaps.

For a start, their concept of temporal perception was not a little distorted. Serious dopers may live shorter lives in the perception of those aliens who control the surrounding culture; but they often live much longer ones within their own reality, operating as they do outside of the general consensus about clocks. This they share with poets and runners and lovers and others of genius. It doesn’t do a lot for increasing GDP but then no one in an extra-temporal state really cares much about the opinions of those who are handcuffed by their wrist-watches. He that is without time among you, let him first blast the stoners.

Happily handicapped, then, by an inability to see why they should bother to estimate the duration of approximately two-thousandths of one percent of a year — it was not that they *couldn’t*, as Kesey once proved by surreptitiously taking his own pulse in the middle of an acid rush, thereby astounding a scientist with the accuracy of his own supposedly subjective estimate of the passage of one minute; rather it was that they *didn’t give a flying fuck* — but harshly hobbled by a couple of decades of brainwashing that insisted that they really [sic] ought to bother about it, they staggered off the end of the sand and skirted the last houses of the settlement, tiptoeing up by the interface between earth and water, near the indefinable merging of stream and ocean, creeping along the

riverbank with glacial slowness, in the eyes of a Goan beholder not yet deeply involved in the evening's consumption of rakshi (call it moonshine or white lightning and you won't be far wrong; the alcoholic Europeans held sway there for long enough, surrounded by ganja-puffing Hindus and visited by Muslims with their exquisite sense of sin) but in no way surprised or even disappointed to observe that someone had the jump on him and he had better get going if he wanted to catch up and what else was a good Christian holiday for anyway; or with a prudent sense of caution, in the eyes of those whose thonged feet with their exposed toes were all too likely to encounter and indeed lose an argument with one of the inconvenient and downright unpredictable rocks that now seemed to be littering the landscape; and certainly with minds swirling and circling around these and other matters, vital and trivial, distracted by a mild lack of predictability in the sensory input — impulse power, Mr Sulu, Scotty thinks the instruments may be unreliable — but firmly committed to progress and the Admiral's instructions to explore the universe and record its mysteries, which reverberated in their skulls as they approached the asphalt of the highway south where it ended at the ford, the last familiar landmark before the dragon-infested wasteland of terra (more immediately, in point of mundane fact, aqua) incognita.

Cloaking each other in the courage of shame — who? me? chicken? — and grasping their trouser-legs firmly with both hands, they plunged into the icy torrent. Well ... they stepped into water. Knee-high, warm as the cooling air, and heading down and out to the ocean. Under such pleasant circumstances, fantasies of hardship, of Hannibal or Jungle Jim, became hard to maintain.

They almost strode the dozen yards to the opposite shore.

Fortified by this bracing success, they embarked upon the trail to the left. As the moon rose out of the trees, they could begin to rely on instinct to avert their stumbles, and to notice the monochromatic splendor of their surroundings. Mr Disney himself could not have sketched a more ideal model for a rocky path by the ocean. Each boulder had been placed with care, each tiny, salt-flecked shrub had

passed the scrutiny of that amazing central casting that only exists in an animator's skull.

The overpowering acrylic light of noon would present a different image, but the subtle wash of the early moon turned every temporary panorama into a fantasy of serenity. Not servile and yielding like a down pillow that retreats and shapes itself to the human form, or a geisha coddling her john, each vista was filled with power, with the tensile, muscular beauty of a runner warming up for her race, abrasive enough to bite the soles of your feet if you failed to pay the proper respect, and calm with the certitude of permanence.

The shadows on the right grew darker; the white horses ambled on the top of the waves. The lights of Baga disappeared behind a tiny cliff. For an exquisite moment, they stood, wide-eyed innocents in thrall to the evening, holding hands in front of the rocks and the limitless sea.

The soundtrack was breathing and heartbeats, waves and wind, the occasional pebble scurrying out of the way. And then there appeared a distortion, a coloring to the undertones, faint at first, bobbling up and down around the threshold of earshot like a minor hallucination.

Could that be an electric guitar?

She looked at him for a quick reality check. No words were needed. He looked back. They hurried on another twenty yards, to the corner of another minor promontory, and stopped to listen.

That's a snare drum. Coming from around the next headland.

They savored the moment and tiptoed forward, as though intruding might make it disappear. No, it grew steadily stronger. The trail narrowed briefly and she took the lead, striding to the corner and stopping so suddenly he bumped into her and was about to object when he saw what had frozen her.

"It's a concert," she gasped.

"It's a whole fucking stage," he added unnecessarily.

"Maybe Klaus isn't so crazy after all."

"That's not the Who's stack." Oh fiddle-dee-facts, Bernstein, lighten up.

"But maybe it's part of it." There, there.

Another entire beach lay out in front of them, stretching for miles into the distance, pure and

white in the moonlight, but neither of them paid much attention to it. For, at the near end, at the edge of the sand, there was a sound stage and a pair of stacks of amps and speakers, and a band bathed in electric lights playing rock 'n' roll to an audience of hundreds, surrounded by twinkling candles.

Cedar began to laugh. Dumbfounded, he giggled and jumped up and down and clapped his hands.

"It's *true!*" he exulted. "It's a stoned beach party."

"Frankie Avalon gets weird," tried Annie, who always felt she had missed out on something because she was a California kid who had never been to a beach party before she was a senior in

high school; Turlock had always made her feel underprivileged.

"Right! And Annette Vermicelli."

"Funicello." They did, however, have TV in the Central Valley, and movie theaters too.

"Funicular, whatever. C'mon."

"It's a convention," suggested Annie.

"Say what?" laughed Cedar. "You mean like Republocrats and Demicans?"

"Yeah!" she laughed back. "Right. A bunch of people who all agree with each other getting together, that's a convention, right?"

"Weirdest bunch of politicians I ever saw," Cedar muttered darkly.

"My kind of politics," Annie insisted. "Let's go."

Man was made at the end of the week's work when God was tired.

Mark Twain, the name under which the notable 19th-century typesetter Samuel Langhorne Clemens chose to write

HANGING OUT, HANGING LOOSE, hanging on to her broomstick and finally just hanging, Annie entered meditation space and cruised around it at warp speed. The twirling boys and dancing girls floated by while the big dogs on the steps growled and postured at each other and the elders looked sage and rosemary according to chosen gender rôle. Office workers peeked surreptitiously at the carnival miming tantalizingly in front of the double glazing. The warm sun of a drought fall didn't reach into the corner focus under the overhanging roof, to the irritation of the Hand-iCam operators, but bathed the overflow crowd in pleasantries and encouraged them to joke and play in unbizness-like, indeed un-Mercan, frivolity. The wooden face of the building, used to the solemn respect that the cult of cash demands, frowned censoriously on the parking lot, which shuffled its feet in embarrassment like a puppy that had been locked up too long in the house and fouled the welcome mat.

"I'm going to work," insisted an abrasive voice by Annie's shoulder.

"Ah, that's, sort of, ah ..." explained a voice that she recognized as Luke's, a diagnosis that was rudely confirmed when he fell into her right shoulder, almost sending her flying. She struggled to keep her balance and hold the banner upright, then watched Luke climb apologetically back to his feet and saw one furious Marine going ballistic not three feet away.

"You have no right to stop me!" he was yelling.

"On the contrary," explicated Luke in his most maddeningly pedagogical style, "We have every right, even, you might say, a duty..."

Sergeant Jones was, to put it kindly, discom-bobulated. He was building up a dangerous head of steam, cheeks scarlet and eyes bulging, and apparently preparing to take on every one of these god-

less enemies of the republic and the flag for which it stands, single-handed and barefisted. Looking at him from a distance, anyone would have thought the whole thing was a complete surprise to him, which was the intended effect, although in fact it had taken four beers over lunch for him to reach this planned peak of spontaneity, as was embarrassingly obvious at close range. He should have stuck to vodka, but then Sgt Jones was stronger on execution than on planning, which was part of why his long and undistinguished career had risen no higher. And vodka was a Commie drink anyway.

"My duty as a Marine..." he began to babble, and things could have gotten nasty, but fortunately a uniformed cop (who had been briefed ahead of time by the lieutenant, who in turn had been tipped off, under promise of absolute secrecy, by the Army man, who had no intention of appearing anywhere in the same area code as a headline in the last year of his service) appeared on his right and distracted him.

"Excuse me, Sergeant..." he interjected, tentatively.

"Thank God you're here!" barked the hapless non-com, who was beginning to realize just how badly the barbarians outnumbered him. "I need to get into this building!"

"Yessir," said the policeman, who had been well trained in the delicate art of affirmative contradiction. "If you'd just step this way for a moment."

"My office is in this building!" insisted the irate leatherneck.

Annie was staring with some interest at the back of his nearly-shaved head, most of which was visible below the forward-tilted hat, as the flush of his anger gradually spread around and turned it a fascinating shade of puce. He was not particularly tall, five ten perhaps, but plenty wide, a muscular endomorph who probably lifted weights to keep his

body fat down. He had a big neck, framed with veins that were beginning to throb in an alarming manner. She thought better of warning him against apoplexy, imminent though it appeared; it didn't seem like advice that would be welcomed. All in all, she preferred to stick to the rear view, which at least meant that he was fulminating at someone else.

"Yessir," agreed the obliging public servant, "Perhaps you could have a word with the Captain."

"Right!" said the earnest Marine, who never met a chain of command he couldn't follow, and straightened the lid on his simmering brain. He followed the uniform towards a large white van that Annie suddenly realized must be the mobile HQ for the Capitola police, beside which a middle-aged, middle-class, gray-suited white guy was standing with a look of quiet authority.

"Darling, what fun!"

Annie turned back to see a grinning Sebastian ogling the exit of the furious Sgt Jones.

"Sebastian, what are you doing here?" she cried.

"I just came to have lunch," he insisted, waving a little brown bag, "And I thought I might find you here. What a lovely fellow."

"Mm-phmph," grumbled Luke, "He almost knocked me down."

"You are all right, aren't you dear?" inquired his wife, Pat, solicitously.

"That's not the point," he insisted, but he let her lead him off to cool himself down in the shade by the wall.

"How exciting," continued Sebastian dryly. "It's wonderful theater, but where are the picnic tables?"

"Hey, there's a bunch of grass on the other side," chipped in Bobby, who had been beaming beatifically over the whole confrontation from the north end of the banner, "Why don't we go see if we can plant this thing?"

"OK," agreed Annie promptly. "You first."

Bobby fended off a couple of worried 'You're not leaving's and half a dozen other sign-bearing humans joined them as they paraded around the west side of the structure and onto the grass that faced Capitola Road. It turned out that a number of people were already sprawled on the grass, resting from their journey no doubt, and a few were lined

up to wave at the passing vehicles. Short of spading into the manicured sod, which would have been socially, environmentally and politically unthinkable (We Are the Good Guys, Remember) there was no way of making the sticks stand up but Bobby was ready to wave the flag a while and someone actually volunteered to spell Annie, who took her up on it with a promise to return soon, and sat down (grokking that grass is a sittable substance) with Sebastian.

"Want some?" he offered. "Avo and jack."

"Sure," she said gratefully. "Got anything to drink?"

"You can share my Calistoga."

"Thanks."

"Who was that masked man, darling?" inquired Sebastian casually between mouthfuls.

"I think he said he was a Marine," offered Annie. "He said he wanted to go to work."

"Silly boy."

"Boy?"

"Oh, you know what I mean, dear. Anyway, the cops won't let him, is that right?"

"I'm a stranger here myself," she shrugged. "Looks like it. Hey, Patrick would know. Patrick!"

Sidling round the corner, hands clasped in front of his chest, was a Witness parody, white shirt, black suit, both slightly faded and wrinkled, neither ever in fashion. A tie, by God, but dark and shiny like an undertaker's castoff, skinnier and not much longer than the blond ponytail hanging down his back. The baby face and fuzzy beard belied the attempted solemnity of the eyes and the sanctimonious mincing of the walk. Dumb insolence at its very finest: He had putten on his sooten shoes and turned the notional gesture of respect into a technically deniable fuck-you to the official universe, including to be sure the one he had made his own.

"Hi," he said, conveying a wealth of nuance. For instance,

- He couldn't remember her name.
- He did recognize her.
- He gave her points for banner-bearing.
- He did not recognize her companion.
- He gave her more points for having a black companion.
- He liked to be recognized.

- He knew he shouldn't be giving points.
- He didn't want to want to be recognized.
- He couldn't help being judgmental anyway.
- He knew he could but he didn't want to admit it.
- *etc etc*

A heavy load for a monosyllable but it's all in the intonation.

"Patrick, this is Sebastian," pronounced li'l Emily Post, and the men nodded at each other with solemn flirtatiousness (for a fleeting moment, Annie started picturing them entwined, a sinuous knot of variegated browns and pinks, but thrust it firmly to the back of her brain), "Sebastian, this is Patrick, who's one of the, um, central people in the PGPC."

"Oh, I ..." Oh, shut up.

"Mmm, I know."

"You do?" She looked up at the jolly blond giant, "He knows everyone."

"Say no more," straightfaced the sky like Paul McCartney in the movie *Help*.

"I shall say no more," she completed like Eleanor Bron. "What's up? How come you're not up on the steps there talking with the cops?"

"No, no, not my scene. Eric and Nancy and people can deal with 'the authorities.'" He made them sound like a contagious disease, which perhaps they were. "I'm just psyched to get arrested and that's not happening, at least not yet."

"How come?" Annie had never been too clear on the etiquette of these things.

"We won, I guess," he shrugged.

"What about the fellow with the gross neck?" asked Sebastian.

"The red-blooded American fascist?" smiled Patrick.

"Yeah, the guy with the blood pressure problem," chipped in Annie.

"The cops are tying him up," exaggerated the missionary. "It's really funny to watch. He wants them to carry us off, which is what I was here for anyway, but the cops won't do it. They're saying we can stand around and demonstrate all afternoon as long as we don't break into the locked offices and we let people into the insurance place, and they've got a side door anyway."

"So?"

"So here we are. How long you wanna stay?"

Annie smiled and blinked a moment.

"I don't have to work till Sunday," she said slowly and elicited a laugh that struggled out of a massive burden of contradictory implications — approval of the spirit; contempt for the naïveté; acknowledgment of comradeship; hopes of struggle; fears of glory ... your basic don't-ask-me-I-only-work-here response, proffered as an excuse by middle management everywhere (but not to be lumped in with the original version as put forward by the proletariat, who never had a choice).

"I think they're thinking more like when they go into overtime, five o'clock, maybe."

"Well, OK, it's a nice afternoon." She felt put in her place and somehow superior for knowing it. It was a good day so she was magnanimous. "Anyway, we wait here right now."

Patrick shrugged.

Annie nodded over to the banner.

"I'll help Bobby with that. Yell if anything happens, will you?"

"Sure. I'd better get back, in case."

"See ya." [Cubed.]

Sebastian chuckled wickedly as Patrick walked away.

"What's so funny?" asked Annie. "Didja date him or something?"

"No, it's him. He's so smart he can't even believe himself."

"What do you mean?"

"Look," explained Sebastian, who rather enjoyed having a straight to explain to (it helped him understand), "You've got your gays, right, and your straights, and then your straights who are sort of bi, and your bi's who are really gay, and your gays who are really bi, right?"

"Sure," said Annie, "That makes sense. So?"

"So then you've got your folks who really are bi and say it so loudly that even they think maybe they're really not — and half the gays out there think all bi's are really gay anyway — and they're OK when they're doing it but they sure do have problems when they're trying to think about it and then they start listening to what they say and it all falls apart. Poor boy."

“Patrick,” she said, trying to keep up.

“Maybe,” he said, copping out. “I gotta go back to work. You’re going to be here later, then?”

“Looks like it,” she beamed. “Be here or be square.”

“Later, gator.”

He picked up the trash and wandered away. She figured she should go back to work too, and strolled up to the banner. The woman who had taken her end said she was fine but Bobby could use a break so she took his end. They stood on a slight rise, smiling

vaguely at the mostly baffled drivers slowing to the stop sign at the corner or sliding right through the yield. Some of them waved, some tooted their horns in support, one or two yelled with bemused hostility (“Go back to Santa Cruz” was Annie’s favorite; she thought that’s where they were, but the Capitola natives clearly had a more restrictive view) and a few pretended not to notice that anything out of the ordinary was going on. For them, Annie revealed her regal wave and an especially large smile.

It all felt so ... normal.

60

Bigger fleas have little fleas
On their backs to bite 'em
Little fleas have smaller ones
And so ad infinitum

Gleaned from the oral tradition ca 1959,
after de Morgan (1872), after Swift (1733), and so
on down the unbroken chain of out-of-copyright theft

PERCENTAGES WERE AHMED'S BUSINESS. He was an all-too-modern trader in the exotic herbal products of the orient, who knew exactly where he stood in the chain of distribution, and was not entirely happy with his circumstances. He was familiar, indeed quite comfortable, with the traditional wisdom that you have to give a little to take a little. That was not the problem. He accepted a certain amount of back-biting, as a cost of doing business. Ahmed was convinced, however, that his position in the endless chain was not precisely what it ought to be. He was a bigger flea, he felt, than the one he seemed to be nibbling on, and he deserved more than he was getting.

To be concrete, Ahmed was aware that retailers in the UK were raking in better than a thousand Afs a tola for product that he was buying for ten and delivering to the country in bulk at £120 a kilo, meaning that someone other than his good self was appropriating some four-fifths of the million or so Afs each ten-key shipment was realizing, which offended his sense of truth, justice, fair play and natural law.

The math he did in his head. A tola is about four-tenths of an ounce (in practice it's usually sort of *that* much or *yay weight* on the scale); a kilo is a little over 35 ounces; a pound sterling was then some 180 Afs or exactly US\$2.40; and any Kabul dealer, in currency, hash or anything else, could translate fluently between all of the above without conscious effort. Distrustful occidentals were always thinking they were about to get ripped off, and slowing down the transactions to multiply, carry, divide and lay it all down on paper — solar cells and portable calculators being yet to arrive on the planet — but no reputable dealer would fiddle

the conversions. Not for a potential repeat customer anyway. At least, he wouldn't expect to get away with it. And if he did, he'd lose all respect for his opposite number.

To the objective outsider, Ahmed's problem was fundamentally no different than Mario's. Both of them were in the business of putting producers together with consumers, and neither of them had a natural connection with both manufacture and retail distribution. They seemed like a natural alliance, since Mario had no obvious links to the growers and processors and pressers (although he did have access to alternate sources in Lebanon, Morocco, Kashmir and Nepal), while Ahmed had no pre-existing relations with enforcers or street dealers in London, Amsterdam or any other major European metropolis (although he did have a couple of cousins who were rising in the ranks of the diplomatic corps).

Mario, however, was fundamentally management, while Ahmed was by inclination an entrepreneur. The south-London Italian had risen through the ranks, from runner through enforcer to supervisor and finally to his present position on the board of directors of the local subsidiary of the corporation. He liked order, deference, hierarchy and tradition. He was entirely used to taking instructions from his superiors and having his own decisions unquestioningly obeyed by the troops. Sixties-style street dope was just a new product line for him, not fundamentally different than whores or extra-regulatory gambling, just another service to supply to a public that persisted in electing governments that denied its wishes. He couldn't stand the hippies, really, because of their anarchic tendencies. Like most of the old-guard criminal fraternity,

he was as conservative as a cop and just as likely to moan about long hair and poofy paisley prints. He had heard about Ahmed's celebratory fuck with Whitey and been thoroughly shocked. Mario was straight, all the way, an organization man and a convinced Tory.

Ahmed, by contrast, was a trader and a self-sufficient anarchist, though he wouldn't have bothered with the term. He leant more to action than to introspection and his attitude to bosses was that they represented an unnecessary business expense. He liked the English kids he dealt with and he resented the structure that Mario represented. He had insisted on visiting Britain to see what he was getting into, and understood the dynamics of doing business under the aegis of the organization in place, but it chafed on general principles.

Besides, there was that lost profit margin.

Ahmed never admitted it to Blackie and Whitey but he had been badly affected by their disappearance. It wasn't the money, it was the feel of the matter. For a couple of years there he had had a steady and profitable trade, with people he could put a face to and more or less trust. This was comfortable, which at least partially made up for the fiscal limitations. There was a human scale to the transaction, which he considered important.

He had been deeply offended by the appearance one day, some weeks before, of Rodge the Enforcer, who had flown to Kabul with new instructions about delivery. Rodge, the reader will recall, was not one of the illuminati. He was, in point of fact, a thug. And a chauvinistic English thug to boot, whose only real virtue was loyalty. He didn't like

foreign. He was a messenger, not a diplomat, and he had no concept of how to deal with an Afghan. In this, he was not all that different from his boss, it is only fair to say, for no manager without a blind spot for xenophobia would have considered sending such a crude representative into such a subtle culture.

The intended message was of course delivered: Future shipments should be directed to so-and-so's attention at such-and-such a contact number. Unfortunately, another message was sent along with it: You are mine and may remain so as long as I wish. On some level, this too was intended. Rodge conveyed it everywhere he went, through sheer force of what we might call personality. The intention, however, was deeply flawed.

Rodge outweighed Ahmed, outgunned him, this being in the dark ages before airport security got intense, and insulted him without even trying. He failed utterly, however, to intimidate him, succeeding only in making the Afghan extremely angry. Typically, it was the little things that hurt most, and when the Brit gratuitously insulted the tea his hospitable host was supplying, he almost provoked a final confrontation. Rodge never knew how close he came to missing his plane home, permanently. Fortunately this transgression took place in private or Ahmed might have had no choice in the matter. As it was, he bade a smiling farewell to the messenger, who remained as ever unaware of the emotional cancer he left behind, and promptly began to plot liberation and revenge.

And then these two showed up.

Allah was good.

61

What a tangled web we weave
Go round in circumstance
Someone show me how to tell
The dancer from the dance

The Eagles (Randy Meisner, Don Henley, Glen Frey & Bernie Leadon), "Saturday Night," *Desperado*, 1973, ripping off both Sir Walter Scott (1808) and W.B. Yeats (1927), which ain't bad for rock'n'roll

Have to get people off their asses first.

Robert Christgau, panning the above in a contemporaneous review, reprinted in *Rock Albums of the '70s: A Critical Guide*

TO THE NORTH, THE SILVER SURF undulated towards the sand and the dark skirt of palms that hid it from the rice paddies beyond. That vista was oscillating gently with the wind and tide, around the kind of idealized image that gets painted on velvet and flogged to folk who know what they like, and they do, and they are right. Forget the pejorative, the view was pretty. If you want something more challenging to put up on your mental wall, factor in the rot and life, the sandcrabs and the humans, the abrasive sands and the stinking seaweed, all true, all there, all fine and beautiful ... but lighten up already, it was Christmas and party time. Prettiness may be transient and insubstantial but it's there till it's gone and none the worse for a' that.

Off to the right, about east-north-east as Annie led Cedar around the headland, was the gathering of their tribe, worshipping at the electric altar by Anjuna beach. The stage was real, the lights largely imaginary; the players determined, the playing stochastic; the dancers setting rhythms and the whole audience performing for the ones with instruments and microphones (yeah, mikes too but we'll get to that); a glorious mass attempt to hallucinate the higher reality of joy.

The principal focus was certainly the stage but we're not talking math here, and we're dealing with a bunch of instinctive anarchists. Smaller shrines with candles more or less marked the perimeter, a

loose-knit chain of portable chai stalls, purveyors of banana bread and coconut cookies to the dessert-deprived. Within the half-ellipse were other groupings, talkers to the ocean side, dancers near the land, sleepers crashed out at random in between. Some had blankets and baskets and sat up properly like their parents on a Sunday spree, some wore facepaint and not much more, atavism in action, and most fell far between and enjoyed both. The vibe was clearly accepting and easy (just ask anyone) or easing into acceptance (full moon festivity, not just a good idea, it's the law) or facing an easement (never trust a prankster, it was nights past full and the fun went on) or ... it was safe and loose and warm and friendly and only just as silly as anyone happened to want it to be.

"Munchies," exclaimed Cedar as they approached the rim.

"OK," agreed Annie, acting as designated navigator. "Look, there's Juanita." She waved companionably as Cedar detoured to the food supply. "I'll be thataway."

"Cool," acknowledged her companion, who was more boggled than he cared to admit by the fortuitous manifestation of everything his little heart currently desired and lacked. "I'll bring things."

There was tea, in the little clay disposable pots typically used at Indian railroad stations, which

cost paisa per hundred to throw by hand and reverted almost instantaneously to soil when tossed out the window, thus eliminating the need for trash containers (except, perhaps, on the beach). There were little pakoras and samosas (the food, not the dictator), the cakish bread and the breadish cookies, and one or two items he chose not to inspect too closely just at the moment. Decisions, decisions. He took one of these and two of those, with a little of that and a bit of this, all piled on a pair of banana leaves, ordered a couple of chai's and bore the comestibles off grandly to where Annie had established home base, as an annex to her friend's encampment.

The stallholder shared a smile and lifted the kettle from the coals. She knew he'd be back. Not many of the tourists stiffed her and she could usually pick them early. Besides, she was doing gold-rush business. When the hordes are migrating, food's a better commodity to be in than even sex and booze, just ask the Santa Cruz potato farmers who followed on behind the miners of '49 and cleaned up. Of course by 1853 the crops were rotting as everyone tried to get into the act, and by the late 1970s Mrs daSilva was going to have to get corporate or get out, but hey just then the prospects were pleasing and man wasn't looking too vile either.

Cedar was back before the tea cooled, with a fistful of rupees and no taste for haggling. She gently extracted an elegant sufficiency and waggled her head to indicate it was enough. He beamed, not really confused but happy to let it go.

Juanita was Roman, despite her handle, but had polished her English over a year at the London College of Printing, where she had studied graphic design, Notting Hill Gate, Afghani black and a young gent called Steve who had finally failed inspection, for reasons which she had described to Annie in graphic and hilarious detail over a cuppa after they met while eyeing the same bale of cloth in the market. There was enough for two but heavens you wouldn't want to run into someone else with the same party dress now would you, not when you'd had it custom made. Since both were willing to admit they were more interested in meeting simpatico types than in grabbing that particular pat-

tern and no other (people > things, hippie axiom #12 or was it #35?), they had compromised on two totally different styles and headed off to chat.

Juanita was there with a small colony of Italians who had flown out two weeks before for a month or so and rented a large house communally. Her boyfriend was a brand-new architect who had been to Columbia and the Sorbonne — he came from a line of lire billionaires (at six-hundred-odd to the buck at the time, this was big-time wealth even in real money) and could certainly afford her fare — while she was unemployed and had the time, so why not and wasn't it great. Three other couples were with them, all vaguely arty, seriously tanned, exceptionally stylish and almost completely unable to converse in English on any abstract level.

The concrete, however, was covered, and Cedar's arrival bearing this and that provoked immediate reciprocation with the other.

"You like to smoke?" offered an exhibit Mike Angelo would have killed for, black curls, sinuously rippling muscles, gold chain with crucifix tickling the chest hair, Mastroianni eyelids and accent — not "yuh like-ah ter smoke-ah" à la Chico, something more like "oo li-aiké t'smo-oh-oke" but we'll leave the phonetics to the reader's imagination — and a hand-made item that evoked Cedar's respect, avarice, desire and attention.

"Does the pope shit in the woods?" he responded automatically.

"Scuse?" countered the generous host, baffled, but Juanita's 'old man' had put in his college time on the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers and was happy to prove it.

"Is the bear a Catholic?" he grinned and turned, presumably to translate because he raised a solid chuckle that wasted a good opening blast of smoke but hey there was plenty more where that came from.

"Si, si" he coughed and passed it around.

The boys were bonding (which doesn't mean the girls didn't get their hits) and suddenly concerned about the proprieties so hands were extended to shake, European-style, and names were formally exchanged.

"I'm Federico, but in New York they used to call me Fred."

“Fuck, man, in New York they used to call me Jacob,” an unusual admission that came directly from the local psychic disturbances, “But I’m Cedar. This is Annie.” True, of course, but a bad move. Do we smell the hint of a property claim? No, no, of course not. Sure we do but no one’s talking.

“Carlo.”

“Guiliano.”

“Sophia.”

“Maria.”

“Juanita.”

The necessary dozen handshakes — Annie and Cedar nearly found themselves greeting each other in the confusion — took a while but the group settled down, picking up (it has to be confessed) on many a stereotype. What can we say? Clichés develop out of observation and ritual social behavior is bound to tradition by a law almost as relentless as gravity. Yup, the girls talked tailors and the boys talked guitarists, and none were fully satisfied and all were fairly content. It took Annie to say something truthful, but then she always was reluctant to follow convention except under duress, which was hardly the ruling principle of the time.

“I hate to say it,” she lied, “But this music is, um, not really my kind of thing.”

She paused for brickbats that didn’t materialize.

“In fact,” she truthed, “I kinda wish they’d stop.”

Federico laughed and Carlo joined in. Juanita smiled encouragement and explained:

“They’re Germans. They’re into that industrial noisy shit.”

“You know,” offered Federico, “Like the Velvet.”

“Sure,” said Cedar, butting in. “Like ‘Heroin’ and all that stuff from the first album.”

“They’re junkies?” asked Annie, misunderstanding. She had always preferred harmonies to instrumental freak-outs anyway.

“No, the song,” explained the encyclopædia.

“Sure,” said Juanita, “I’ve seen them around.”

“Yeah,” said Federico, “I saw them in the Village one time.”

Cedar was impressed. Annie was confused. Federico was primed to reminisce about the Big Apple. Carlo was thinking of retiring to the Italian-language conversation behind him. Juanita offered Annie consolation.

“Anyway, don’t worry,” she confided. “They keep changing the people.”

Public opinion seemed to be on Annie’s side, with the significant exception of (a) those on stage, who were oblivious to the known universe as experienced by anyone else and (b) the remaining die-hard hip- and head-shakers, most of whom seemed to be merged with their own movements, inventing a beat that none could hear and somehow failing even to achieve consensus on that to the external eye. But they were having a good time.

Annie lay back on the soft cotton blanket, one of four the Italians had brought, and looked at the stars and giggled.

“You know,” she said, and Juanita looked over (the boys were into criticism and shared second-hand experience) “I’m lying on the beach at a party in paradise and I’m complaining about the band.”

Juanita giggled too, and laughed and lay back herself.

“Yeah.”

“I mean, far freaking out.”

And they laughed again, and rolled around for the sheer sensuous pleasure of it.

How is it that I can come out to here
 And be still standing
 And never hit bottom and keep falling through
 Just relaxed and paying attention

Roger McGuinn (then
 known as Jim), the Byrds,
 “5D (Fifth Dimension),” 1966

CONSCIOUSNESS IS A DANGEROUS TOOL. As a many-edged sword, it cuts every which way: not only do we try not to change when change we should, we try too hard too soon, and sometimes we make adjustments we don't even need.

Acid gets in there somewhere.

How else do you reach the fifth dimension?

Not that the Byrds wrote druuurgh songs, you understand, nothing of the sort, “5D” was all about, er, transcendental meditation, yes, that's it, or was it the Zen of Physics, or the Tao of Motorpsycho Nitemares, or simply the universe as seen through long bangs and granny glasses on organic herbal tea (tea, geddit, hepcat word for grass?). Of course when they did get busted by the AM radio it was for a song that really was about getting a long way off the ground (with the help of Pan Am) ... but ain't that typical.

Now that's out of the way, let's see if we can hook together Annie then (halfway out of her tiny) and Annie later (trying the activist's hat on for size), not to mention Blackie and Whitey (then and there and where and when). It's a gestalt. If it's about the sixties it has to be a gestalt, and 1970 was right in the middle of the sixties, which ran roughly from the death of JFK to the resignation of RMN. (In the UK, from the defeat of the fourteenth Earl of Doubtless Whom to the second coming of the Aralvilsn after the interregnum of the blasted 'eath.) Somehow it all fits in, it has to, right, it's all one, man.

Cedar may have planned a course of exploration with Captain Trips, but that's just him. Annie took it because she wanted to. The interesting question is, why did she want to?

Earthquake city, day return.

Cedar's problem was that he tried to go up to the ticket window and order one. Nice try, kid, but a thorough-going examination of the psyche is like love: you can't get it simply by asking.

Happiness is always a by-product.

Annie in later years kept trying too, but the results got less and less dramatic. Sometimes there would be flashes of intense love, like the time with Brendan when Peggy Seeger's original solo version of “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” came sneaking onto the radio and filled the room like a warm mist that left Annie weeping with joy and appreciation of the depths of human intimacy. It was the most beautiful thing in the entire history of the planet, but that didn't change anything, not even her life. Well, not much.

It wasn't that the acid got weaker, although on the street it generally did, it was more that Annie learned to function on acid. Typical, typical. The first goal of the trippers was to give away everything they had learned and to experience the universe directly (God, they sometimes called it); the second was to master the trick of quotidian rituals under the influence, dealing with cars and dealing with cops and dealing with kids and dealing with everything else that simply had to be handled and therefore was. With this useful skill came the ability to do more and more and get from it, uh-oh, less and less.

If you know there is coming a mighty holy-courst, to rend the city from wall to wall and purify it of sin, well, probably you squirrel away a few useful things to make rebuilding easier, it's only practical. Like FEMA with its helicopter getaways for the President and Pentagon, you plan for change by trying to minimize the effects. Bad move. If change

is needed, accept it, and if it isn't, avert it; but any child will tell you that Humpty Dumpty ain't getting back on top of that wall, no, not never no more.

Annie's town in '90 was as fractured and confused as her psyche and for many of the same reasons. Neither of them knew how to face the coming years, and both of them were standing in a doorway that neither had intended to open. The future is a foreign country, they do things differently there and the guide books are worse than useless.

Bookshop Santa Cruz rode the transition. The warm and friendly post-hippie living-room ambience was shattered forever, but out of the pavilions that housed the business during the transition arose a new, clean, well-lighted place, an urban store with room for Isabel Allende to come and read, with no more shabby used hard- or paperbacks, with a coffee-house attached and sidewalk tables, with entrances fore and aft and space for the free papers and the expensive imports, an efficient and appropriate enterprise for the new and sparkling city.

Before the earthquake, they couldn't have built it without riots.

Psychic riots, anyway.

The city had been changing — the people were changing — but no one wanted to admit it. Jump-cut through a photo album and evolution becomes obvious even when it seemed like stasis in the moment. Yesterday's community bookstore was history before it crumbled, only no one knew it. Not ready to collapse, not even to disappear, but to move from the center of the story of the city. The earthquake purged it of its seventies sins and let it be born anew for the nineties. The owner was Mayor when the shop and the street fully reopened (in early '93), and a fine figure of a Mayor he was too, solid as Santa (the city's first name, as he liked to point out) and taking the heat from left and right.

Without the Pretty Big One, the transition would have cost the store the love (though possibly not the dollars) of its clientele. The move was needed, but not seen to be needed, and perception is often the more important part.

As a young woman, Annie would take her acid sometimes knowing for absolute certain that she

would find out during the trip how she felt and therefore what to do. It was, as such, a decision-making tool. But only if you were willing to surrender, completely.

Whitey didn't need it (oh yes he did) and Blackie wouldn't take it (oh yes he would). They took it of course, everyone did (hey, wait a minute, cry the vocal majority ... yes yes well everyone they approached as peers ... and don't try to pretend that you never fell into *that* trap of false identification), but neither made a fetish of it and for those opposite reasons. Whitey's street instincts gave him a resilience that only needed adjustment when dulled by his acceptance of another's routine; and Blackie, poor lad, knew only his reason, expensively trained as it certainly was. Both of them were led to the sensory side, managed hallucinations and the like, the trivial if beautiful concomitants of the psychedelic experience.

They got their rude adjustments from Mario and his mates.

Which meant, of course, they brought them on themselves.

The town that's shaken doesn't usually bring it upon itself (much). Mortar dried to dust, shoddy construction, landfill putting houses where waves should be, all these make things worse but they don't actually create the explosion. (Fiddling with the water table might, though.) But if you build of wood and wattle and live lightly upon the land, the quakes that will happen anyway will ripple around and through your home, and leave you to sleep again. Fear and foolishness are the greatest killers.

You can try to impose or you can try to adapt.

Masters of the universe are likely to be humbled.

Stewards may learn to cope.

Marxism has been called a Christian heresy, but that misses the point. All the dogmas of modern western civilization — capitalism, communism, the religions of the book, the class system of the modern multi-national, and a million other hierarchical systems — are really old-fashioned scientific heresies. They are all based on the systematizing principle, the naming of parts, the construction of elaborate systems of cause and effect, of discarding the irrelevant and focusing on the experimental

model, the entire panoply of ideas that, for better and worse, built the world we have today. Science from Babylon to Newton.

The nuclear physicists have been coughing ostentatiously for the better part of a century now, but the social sciences haven't caught up and many of the theologians (in Rome or Canterbury as in Teheran or Oklahoma) are light-years away. The basics they thought they knew are simply wrong. Time need not be one-way. The observer does affect the observed. Randomness is real.

It is not that Christianity (or Judaism or Islam) is contradicted by science.

Christianity is bad science.

And it is not that Annie chose, in the face of a stultifying sense of middle-aged pointlessness, to put herself in a situation where new impulses might awake a spark of creativity within herself. That's just what she did.

She didn't have to name it, all she needed was to be it.

Relaxed, and paying attention.

The man who lives by himself and for himself is likely to be corrupted by the company he keeps.

Charles H. Parkhurst,
who probably meant women
too though we can't be quite sure

ANNIE'S DAY OF RAGE passed with surprising speed and altogether too much good humor for her own comfort, more like an afternoon of mild annoyance, until she adjusted her concept of what she was doing. She realized, as the shadows began to seep over the grass, that she had taken on this thing under a bunch of misapprehensions, none of them fatal to the enterprise and most of them common to the community, pro and con.

For a start, she had thought it would be exciting. And here she was, spacing out at leisure in fair imitation of a statue (at her moments of self-confident vanity) or the scaffolding that supports a billboard (as she rose to self-effacement). It was interesting, like sitting cross-legged with a couple of hundred gurupies at the feet of some self-identified perfect master (how could you deny his claim without making your own?) and going through the changes that come from blankness and light ... but somehow she had expected externals, not opportunities for introspection. Adrenaline rushes and baton charges, being swept into action by the psychology of a crowd, overwhelmed into a preconscious response by fear and yelling and anger and pain — yes, she had thought it would hurt, had even wanted the bruises and blood (but not too much, of course, enough for scabs but not for scars) and the hatred that rises from violence, your own and anyone else's — white noise for the head and chances for chaos, explosions and reactions and anything out of the ordinary, that's what she had wanted.

She had looked for passion and what had she found?

Community?

Was that it? What kinda thing is that? If this was home, why didn't she want to leave? If this was just a moment, how come she was in it so firm, even as she floated around it so loose? She wasn't with

Brendan, that was for sure, she wasn't with Sebastian in friendship, she wasn't with doctors and nurses and orderlies at work, she wasn't with anyone, no one, not at all, and they weren't with her, they were just holding the other end of her burden or perhaps she was holding theirs, is that what they thought, how could they know she was absent, but she wasn't was she, she was there for them as they needed her and maybe, just possibly, they were there for her in the self-same way. Who could tell?

Reality, what a concept. Who made up the rules of this game? And what position was she playing anyway? This was safe ground, turf she had wandered over for twenty-five years, rarely looking down to examine it because she knew what was there. The sense of connections, the infinite web of existence, the ritualized actions of being, the various rules for persons and rocks, the whole nexus of outlook that characterized, yes, she knew, the acid-head in her, the point of view that she found supported by psychedelics, all this she knew backwards. She knew also that it didn't come from drugs or practices or anything learned or taught, it was there first within her, and presumably was why she liked those things that seemed to draw it out. This for her was faith, something that therein was and best left alone, not much to talk and no point to think. Fun though, sometimes.

Cedar had been into that, she recalled, he liked to probe and discuss and analyze and she could keep up if she wanted but never really saw much point. It was funny she thought about him again, she pondered, that was twice in a week and it must have been years. He, too, was part of her being, that long four-dimensional (six? weren't they talking about ten?) worm stretching back to conception and on to death, the entity called Annie that floated in but out of space and time and whatever else there

was around them. She was sure that if they met they'd connect, she had liked him a lot, enough probably that his wife would prevent the meeting, though nothing could take them out of each other.

Brendan would have kept up with Cedar, she thought, but mostly to prove that he could. Maybe that was it — he could, and she liked that in him, but he didn't always and even if she didn't want to she wanted him to. No, that didn't sound right.

Suddenly, as the Triple-A shadow brushed her feet and a white little car, a Nissan or Honda or something, she couldn't tell anything newer than a '69 Malibu anymore, pattered by with an acrid blast of exhaust, must be something wrong with it, and double-honked and one of the cops across the street frowned at it, and the woman off to her left was waving at a friend walking up, and someone way behind was shouting and a bird, she was sure there was a bird but she didn't know what it was saying, and the new coolness was on her ankle and she awoke to the grass tickling because she had shucked her shoes, and her back beginning to suggest it was time for a change : as all this was going on, and a hundred thousand million billion trillion other excitements

no doubt, beyond the range of her senses but well within the grasp of her consciousness, she had an awful thought, a holy one that stopped her dead in her tracks. This game she watched, the one she played and stepped outside and mused about, she never thought she had made it up.

She was peripheral to her own reality.

And as she drifted out of the Annie persona, into some kind of meta-Annie, someone who knew she was her and knowing, the kind of Annie who could not only look at the reality patterns but place herself at their edge, aware all at the same time that doing that was not denying the other, that the woman at the edge was capable of centering and never losing the distance, of being and not-being all together and all in one, it changed. Nothing, everything, both and neither. Ah, Heisenberg, prophet of the psyche. She looked, she saw, she knew, she changed, and of course she stayed the same because she was already who she became.

I remember this, she thought. This is true. I have been here before.

And with great good sense she thought it was time to eat.

Mit der Dummkeit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens.

Against stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain.

Friedrich von Schiller,
Die Jungfrau von Orleans, 1801

BLACKIE THOUGHT HE WAS THE LOGICAL and Whitey the emotional half of their partnership. Whitey knew Blackie thought this, and knew he was wrong, knew even that he was confusing verbal facility with reasoning ability but, having neither talent nor taste for debate, never said anything about it and often failed to convince himself. Anyway, it was Blackie who got the two of them really entangled with Ahmed and Whitey who didn't stop them.

"Look, man," explained Blackie, after they had moved the first few tolas, "There's a lot of folks here who want to take shit back, and we can get it for them. We get it from Ahmed, pass it on, take a cut, easy as falling off a log."

"Not fucking worth it," objected Whitey.

"You reckon?"

Shrug. "Yeah."

"You mean, what do we get out of it? Admittedly shit's so fucking cheap, it's like twenty percent of nothing's nothing, right, that what you're talking about?"

Shrug. "Yeah."

"That would be Ahmed's deal, wouldn't it. He'd get the cash and we'd be the faces. Shit, you're right, I mean, who would they fucking turn in if they got busted?"

Shrug. "Yeah."

"But what if we turned it around? I mean, what if we just told Ahmed where to go to in London, he'd get a better price and we'd get a percentage of an English deal. And everyone thinks we're just pissing about here and doing nothing and all the time we're raking it in off the top."

Blackie was flying now. His pride hadn't fully recovered from the humiliation Mario had put him through, not to mention dear Rodge and his more concrete approach, and he wanted it badly. Putting

one over them would be a revenge he could savor, and if none but he knew about it, that would be even better. Knowledge is power and secrets are its purest form.

Whitey was more uncomfortable. He wasn't into revenge for its own sake, and he'd never known anyone to get away with an end-run around the firm, which he did accept would in theory be a coup for the ages. But he was into Blackie, and he could see Blackie was into the concept, and maybe he should suspend his skepticism and go along. He could veto any such scheme; a single solid No wouldn't be the end, but a wall of them would. He was reluctant to lay it down, though, without explaining what it was that made him do it and he couldn't nail that to himself, let alone to an enthusiast. The alibi was fine, the idea possible, the whole thing stunk but he couldn't convince himself enough to overcome his wanting to go along.

Shrug. "Yeah."

Blackie was not a total clod, and Whitey was being even more phlegmatically monosyllabic than usual.

"You're uncomfortable with this, are ya?"

Shrug. "Yeah."

"How come? You think it's gonna get out. You know the way around that — yeah, you're right —" Blackie was eliding nicely through imagined disagreements that masked the real, basic one, and Whitey let him get away with it. "If it's not our idea, we're covered, man. I betcha I can get Ahmed to bring it up anyway, I think he was gonna yesterday but there were too many people about. Man, if we do *him* a favor, then he'll cover us, and we don't have to be greedy, we're just gonna have a little fun with it. He'll pay, you know he will. He's an OK dude."

This was a bit of a stretch for Blackie, but not an unreasonable one. Fact was, Ahmed *was* an OK

dude, for real. Fact also was, Ahmed was one whole twist of the spiral ahead of Blackie, and trying hard to project the *image* of an OK dude — and wise enough to the ways of the world to do it by treating the English as if they were Afghans. He didn't laugh at their jokes unless he thought they were funny (those ones usually weren't meant to be humorous, but the genuine response was what counted), he treated them with rough-hewn politeness, and he was scrupulous about not letting debts of business or hospitality get out of balance.

Shrug. "Yeah."

Maybe guilt blurred Whitey's vision a little. He was usually capable of distinguishing between an OK dude and an OK dude making OK overtures, but he may have thought that Ahmed was compen-

sating for that One Night of Sin back in w11. Really, it hadn't been that big of a deal, more like Five Minutes of (to tell the truth, somewhat one-sided) Fun, and if it hadn't been for the jealous ramifications and the way that led him and Blackie on, it would have vanished quicker than most of his arse's commercial transactions. There was no sign of a repeat, unless this friendliness was leading up to it and after half a dozen visits that didn't seem to be going on. But there was a tinge of emotional coloring there that might be enough to explain a faintly off-key note, in Ahmed's performance or possibly, in this joyously pre-post-Modern era, in Whitey's abilities as audience. He let it slide.

Now, that was emotional. And exceptionally illogical.

Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,
 Or like a fairy trip upon the green,
 Or, like a nymph, with long dishevell'd hair,
 Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen :
 Love is a spirit all compact of fire,
 Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire.

Big Bill Shakespeare,
Venus and Adonis, 1593

CEDAR WASN'T REALLY INTO DANCING. He was more of a head-trip kinda guy, but Annie could get behind a beat if someone showed her where it was, so when Juanita took her hand and helped her to her feet she shucked her shawl and shoes and went up front.

The new band was as limited as the last, but much friendlier: It's hard to fuck up Buddy Holly songs unless you think about them way too hard, and Annie was soon lost in a web of childhood melodies and simple rhythms, timeless chants of community wavering around the four on the floor. For half a song, she found herself flirting with a little peacock who wooed and won and gracefully renounced her back to Juanita, who had vanished into some elusive dimension of her own and returned to share the story. And then she rose above the moment, lost the lyric and found the pulse and for a brief and gorgeous illuminated minute she danced in her own glory, dum-diddle-um-dum-dum-dum, the Bo Diddley beat, the barber-shop beat, love is real, yeah, and she began to sweat and pant and laugh as she came back down. They clapped and laughed and when the band went into a slow one Juanita offered but Annie was shy so they headed back to the ranch and collapsed on the rug.

Toddling around was a very small boy who had mislaid his parents somewhere along the line. He didn't seem exceptionally concerned (presumably this had happened before) but he wanted a lap to lay his head in and Cedar was elected by some mysterious means. He seemed surprised by this, but hey, why not, it was only his lap and he wasn't using it just at the moment so he let the cherub be.

Annie, who wasn't all that enthusiastic about rug-rats in general, let alone in this kind of imposed particular, nevertheless felt a pang of responsibility and wondered if they should, well, *do* something about the child.

"Like what?" asked Cedar, not unreasonably.

"I don't know," she muttered, "Find his mom I suppose."

"Hell, she can't be far away. Kid's fine, just sleepy. Hang loose."

Right, follow that dogma, hold that dream. Annie was reduced to reminding herself that it, or he, Wasn't Her Problem. Anyway, it Wasn't Her Lap. Later on she could Mount a Search for Mom. These headlines and blips of shorthand were at the front of her brain, where logic was trying to impose a framework on what it perceived. Name That Tune said the frontal lobes and Who Cares said something in back and mm-mm-mm-mmm-mm-mmm hummed something vital and warm from deep down below. Somewhere in the periphery of her awareness a song wound down with many a clashing cymbal and a smattering of applause all round.

"We have a couple of announcements," said a voice, mangled somewhat by the P.A. but more intelligible than at the average airport.

Cedar was explaining something while casually stroking the baby's curls but Annie listened up for the lost-and-found.

"There's a wallet someone's turned in, a little bag actually, with a passport and — no I'm not going to say —" [chuckles, rippling, passim] "Anyway if you've lost it and you know what's in it, come backstage and ask for Anthony."

No lost babies?

“There’s a couple of other things back here people have turned in, so if you’ve lost something, you might check it out. Be cool, though, right? I mean, don’t come up unless you know there’s something.”

Evidently not. Maybe Mom hadn’t missed him yet.

“Anyway, if you find something, you can turn it in, we’ll do another of these a bit later.”

OK, next up, they could announce a found baby.

“And one more thing. If anyone wants any acid, you could come over to that side of the stage, that’s your left, my right, that side anyway, if you want any acid.”

Say what?

Double-take city, big-time. Half a thousand heads turned to ask, Did you hear what I heard? A dozen languages, all unneeded for a single thought that needed no translation. No shit, they all replied, and half a thousand legs rose as one and headed to their left (stage right). Some stayed, certainly, but the colony leaned as one. The band began to play but no one seemed to notice.

“Wanna come?” said Annie to Cedar.

But the kid, he gestured.

Lay him down, she signed, but just then the boy whimpered and stretched and adjusted himself around and Cedar couldn’t bring himself to move.

“I don’t know that I need any right now,” he said casually. This was probably the acme of his entire career of cool. Free acid for the asking and turning it down because it was mildly inconvenient and he was mostly down from a trip already.

“I don’t need it,” countered Annie with resolute practicality. “In fact it probably won’t do me much good, after this afternoon,” [repeated doses seem to lose efficacy until the body has had time to replace the serotonin the acid inhibited, or some such] “But this I gotta see.” Sometimes cool is way less important than sheer enthusiasm. “I’ll try and get you some anyway.”

The crush by the stage was good-humored but the philanthropist at its epicenter was looking freaked out. “One each,” he burred plaintively, staring in evident surprise at the diminishing stash. He gave off a strong impression that he had expected to give out the odd few, a couple of dozen perhaps, and

here he was besieged by hundreds, and, worse, he had enough for all and had just trapped himself into a level of generosity he had not anticipated. And now, if he backed away from the offer, he might get lynched. “One each,” he mantra’d, picking the little blotter squares carefully out his pouch. If the stuff was any good, he must have gotten ripped from the distribution process alone. “One each” began to slide into meaninglessness as he couldn’t tell who was up for a second go-round anyway. Shit, this was what he’d wanted, wasn’t it, that stoned evening in San Francisco only a week before, when he had met the Trip Farmer and promised to turn on the scene — respect from the guys as a big-time dude and chicks all over him, right? — for a price break big as all indoors. “One each,” but he was over the shock now, easy come, easy go, and hey he’d always wanted to be a legend, hadn’t he.

“My boyfriend’s got a baby asleep on his lap, can I have one for him?”

Jesus, who were these people?

“C’mon, please. He can’t wake up the kid.”

The crowd was diminishing some anyway, and one of the Italians backed her up, in an impressively foreign accent.

“Si, si, is true, I see it.”

And it didn’t sound like a put-on and it was too hard to argue and OK take it, and she slithered back and away and out, and he was back to the “One each” and finally left almost alone and almost out and almost sad and wondering if it was worth it, till the band called him up on stage.

“This is my man,” shouted the new singer, a tall guy from Austin with straight hair to his nipples, a twelve-string, and a ten-gallon hat that impressed the hell out of the European women. He covered the microphone a moment, and added, “What’s your name, man?”

“Billy,” said the benefactor, aw-shucking gracefully.

“Doctor Bill the Night Tripper, let’s give the guy a big hand,” he cried in best Colonel Ed Barnum fashion. “Yeah, good for Bill. And now we’ve got a little song of own we put together, hope y’all like it. This is for Thomas, if he’s still here. It’s A Little Ditty For The Acid Around.”

And the band rolled into a riff stolen from an Animals single, from Dylan’s first album, from the

semi-legendary Ric von Schmidt in the coffee-houses of New England, from a thousand different juke joints and speakeasies and whorehouses and dancehalls in the deep south, and who knows how far back and beyond; and the Armadillo ambassador leaned laughing into the mike.

Timmy got leery of Allen and his pal
But old Rum Baba, he knew what to do
Jack could attack till Kesey got queasy
But speedmeister Neal, he knew what to do

You flow as you go
Till you're high as a kite
And even your ego
Is out of your sight

Coleridge Khan when Wordsworth won't
Keep him out of Porlock and he'll know what
to do
Alice B. was on the bus, off the bus, on the bus,
what a fuss
Her friend Gertie, she knew what to do

You flow as you go
Till you're out of the sky
And all of your ego
Is lost to the I

Dylan's no villain, Mick's not really sick
And his mate Keef, he knows what to do
Ringo for king! Oh, Paul is sure to fall
But Johnny and George, they know what to do

All together now

You flow as you go
Till you're high as a kite
And even your ego
Is way out of sight

And the crowd played Waltzing Matilda.

Cedar really didn't want the hit, and Annie wouldn't keep it, so she took both with barely a twinge of guilt and headed back up to the band, laughing at what she heard of the song, and holding the paper under her tongue but that got awkward when she wanted to dance so she swallowed it anyway and moved with the music and it went on forever, and the riff rolled around, and people cheered and made the man sing the verses all over again till his voice went hoarse and he broke a string and the guy on bass came up and tried a Beatles number and he couldn't really hack it but everyone wanted him to so they pretended he could and they moved so fast and so strong and so well that you could feel the bass drum through the floorboards (but wasn't it sand?) and the stars were flashing like mirrored balls and like Joshua the crowd blew down the walls (but they weren't there) and laughed and jumped and (damn, it's coming on already) and there was energy, yes, unstoppable and the vibe, yes, it's true, there was no other word, there were no words and what was was certain and certainly was, be it so or no, and there were they and light and full of wonder and, yes, aspiring, and, yes, a-blazing, and, yes, no footing seen.

Fairyland, a home.

Don't know what I want
But I know where to get it

Johnny Rotten (John Lydon), the
Sex Pistols, "Anarchy in the UK," *Never
Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistols*, 1976

HEY," CALLED ANNIE TO HER BANNER-PARTNER of the moment, "I need to take a break."

"Scool," called back the young woman at the other end, a Pendleton-and-jeans type who looked femme and dressed butch (Kids today, thought Annie, in a matronly moment, you just can't tell), "Hey Suzie, you wanna come here a while?"

Suzie, Laura Ashley hand-me-downs, nose ring and ripped red sneakers, came softly smiling up (Partner? wondered Annie, Roomie? Oh what the hell, but it's fun to guess) and relieved Annie of her duty without a further word of English being spoken, which suited Annie.

Having asserted herself, she was ready to float again ... coffee, the drug of choice ... there must be some. Of course! Dharma's was down the street. This organic fast-food joint had tried to preface its name with a big em and a little see, but carnivorous lawyers in expensive suits soon put a stop to that nonsense. (Now, who was it who had that farm ee-eye-ee-eye-owe? Scrooge McDuck?) Still, the concept survived and it was an act of solidarity to visit every now and then, one that Annie actually liked to do. Turned out the place was doing unusually good business in take-out, thanks to the largely sympathetic crowd up the street, which was only too relieved to know that the nearest watering hole was also the most correct in miles. Every demo should be so well catered.

The parking-lot scenery was not inspiring, nor was the muddle of uniforms she stumbled across, in conference at the far end of the Triple-A building. The coffee was frankly mediocre, she knew she should have gone for the freshly squeezed juice of free-range carrots that had been raised with love not chemicals. The cookie she had rewarded herself with for the afternoon's efforts was a little stodgy and bland. And she had an irrepressible

shit-eating grin all over her face. It drew attention all over, suspicious from the bluebottles, friendly from the demo freaks and hangers on and frankly inquisitive from some guy about her own age, which she took as a compliment, accepted casually as her due, and flung carelessly aside as replaceable. Some days you're on.

She meandered back through the steel and chrome towards the human bustle at the other end. Something was up, it seemed. There was a focus around the door and she decided to aim for it. As she approached, some kid she didn't know, in surfer-dude shorts and bootleg blackface Air Bart T-shirt, asked her politely, "Excuse me, are you going into the insurance office?"

"No," she laughed, "I'm here with the demo." He was presenting a hand-lettered sign that read *If you have business with De'Frietas, Gwyn & Pollard, please come through.* She read it carefully.

"I think that name might be spelled wrong," she pointed out tentatively. She knew very well two of them were, but she was almost as reluctant to impose her opinions as she was to give them up. Still, the sign seemed like a swift move and they might as well get it right. "Isn't it 'ei'?"

"I before E except after C?" suggested the youth, taking another look at his placard in a friendly kind of way.

"That's English," pointed out Annie, encouraged, "I think he's Portuguese or something." Tsk, tsk, kiddo, *he*? She was right, naturally, but one is not supposed to make these assumptions in political discourse. The one-in-whatever chance of slighting a woman who had made it always trumps the hard reality of the odds. This confused Annie, who thought it made more sense to tell it like it was (he) than like it should be (it, they, recast to avoid); she missed in this the power of words to create the

truth they describe, but more surprisingly she missed her own ability to blend and bland and give her audience what it expected. What was she doing, slipping out of character? Or into it?

“Well, I know it should be a double-en,” conceded the maitre-d’ with dignity, overlooking any faux she might have passed, “But I figured it would look worse to fix it.”

“It’s a great sign, anyway,” Annie rushed to tend to the fragile male sensibility. “Was it your idea?”

The tight knot by the entrance was unraveling some, and the negotiating lieutenant was drifting out the side.

“Yeah,” said the kid, happily.

“Well,” she wondered, “What’s happening?”

“Oh, the cop wanted to know when we were gonna split.”

“And?”

“And Keith said, When was Bush going to bring the troops home, and the cop said, C’mon, we’ve let you had your fun, and Luke said, What do you mean fun, and Zoe said, We haven’t even started yet, we’re occupying this joint, and then the guy from the Insurance office started to get really mad...”

“Even though we were letting people in?”

“Yeah, we had this sign already, from the last time he came out ... anyway, I guess it’s kind of a stand-off right now.”

As stand-offs go, thought Annie, or is it stands-off, it’s pretty cool. No sign of Black Marias or riot gear. Just then, a large van pulled around the corner and she flinched for a second before realizing that it was white and had a huge great dish antenna on the roof and *Action News 11* painted prominently on the side. Hey, live remote. Check it out. The sign-man saw her looking and checked it out.

“Cool,” he commented. “Live at five.”

“Already?” wondered Annie, who had lost some touch with local time but not, she thought, that much. It couldn’t be much past, oh, well, four-thirty she supposed and kept it to herself.

“Takes them a while to get set up.”

“Should I get people round from the front?” she wondered.

“In a while, sure. We got half an hour anyway.”

“I’ll go spread the word.”

Me? she thought and laughed again.

Why not?

There is no such thing as an innocent purchaser of stocks.

Louis D. Brandeis,
U.S. Supreme Court
Justice, 1916–1939

AND SO IT WAS THAT Ahmed and Blackie approached each other in the ancient dance of avoidance, where none will call a step by its true name and each will only play if the playing itself be hid.

Ahmed had the advantage that cometh of knowledge. Certes, the details of the demise of the auld régime were kept from him but in themselves these were of little consequence. The banishment he had deduced (the survival had been the surprise) and the essentials of the administrative restructuring had been handed on down to him, engraved on stone, for concealment in his tabernacle. The tradition of the trader cloaked him in its mystery and reminded him constantly of his goals and also his practical limits. Finally, he was operating, and knew it, on the territory of his familiars, where the footing might be perilous but the path he had trodden before and expected so to do once more, and more again.

Blackie just thought he knew what he was doing.

Thinking, unless trammled by instinct or common sense, is always a fatal mistake.

Ahmed played Yusufi like a well-tempered clavier and the siren song brought Blackie panting and all unsuspecting. To the end of the association, Blackie was sure that the whole thing had been his idea, perhaps shared in synchronicity with the innkeeper. A hint here, a delicate nudge there, a suggestion of helplessness meshing with an urge to assist, and in a matter of weeks the hotelier was confiding to his customers of longest standing:

“My friend Ahmed, you recall,” he began tentatively and elicited the traditional headshake of acknowledgment, “It has seemed to me that all is not perhaps the way he would wish with his business in your country. His brow is furrowed when we meet, his camels are full but his heart is heavy.”

“Yeah?” quoth Blackie, not without sympathy or interest.

“Indeed. I am wondering if perchance...”

Say no more. The quadrille unfolded with scrupulous deliberation, as though the dancers were undulating through aspic, but days not weeks passed before:

“Oh, cousin,” Yusufi ventured in private one afternoon, “It has occurred to me that there might be a means of making your labors even more handsome in their success. My friends from England...”

“They are good men.”

“Indeed, and the thought has arisen: Could they not be of use, with their understanding...”

Considerations followed, and invitations, and deliberations, and imaginations and eventually confabulations, until the outlines of a mutually beneficial way of looking at the world emerged from the smoke. Ahmed was smiling inside, and Blackie too. Yusufi was glad on the surface, for facilitating was its own reward (gilded no doubt by an unvoiced expectation of the traditional unnecessary token of gratitude). Whitey’s face remained impassive as ever; if the tendrils of trouble were brushing across his senses, he continued to conceal the knowledge, from himself as from the rest. This he would come to regret.

Time was needed to make the arrangements. There was nothing in writing but a message was devised that could be conveyed to a trusted source in West Ken, one of whose existence Mario was considered to be unaware, but one who would recognize a recommendation from the Newcastle boys and have the sense and patience to follow advice. The eventual bearer was a youth new to the Embassy in London, bound to Ahmed’s brother by ties of childhood friendship, educated in part in exotic California where he had observed though not consorted with the hippie phenomenon, completely

unknown to the local practitioners of the business at hand, and deeply in need of the wherewithal for the thorough enjoyment of the pleasures of Mayfair. His appointment would have been a most serendipitous surprise had it not been carefully arranged, a matter of which he remained joyfully ignorant.

The key advantage to Fingers (as the contact was known, from the unusually lengthy and talented digits that had made his first modest fortune in elementary school by dipping unbeknownst into the confectionery counters of the neighborhood shops) was that Ahmed was offering to front the first load, and half the second, and to guarantee the price of at least the third. Fingers, therefore, had an opportunity to break into business with a capital investment of essentially nothing, and the safe expectation of predictable prices lower than he could have found without dealing directly with the importer, albeit higher than said importer could otherwise secure. One middleman was down and each end benefited.

There was an element of duplicity: The impression was conveyed that the Afghan principal (never named) was new to the business and controlled or at least inspired by the English emigrants (themselves identified by implication but never actually specified). Had Fingers been sure that there was a double-cross involved, no matter that he knew by name no London professionals less famous than the Krays, he would probably have backed away. But he didn't — exactly — ask, and so he didn't — precisely — find out.

Other details required attention as well. Visas were required of foreigners intending to vacation in the land of Zoroaster, and they expired all too soon. This little difficulty was by no means insuperable, given the judicious application of appropriate incentives, generically known as baksheesh, but winter was coming and there were arrangements to make, so it was agreed that the English would depart awhile and return in the spring to assist as then required. Blackie was reluctant to let the action go, but Whitey persuaded him.

"Softly, softly, catchee monkey, man," he explained.

"I'm not rushing into anything," protested Blackie. "You know we can slip a few quid to some-

one in Interior and get the docs fixed. Why not just stick around and move it on?"

"Fuckin' cold winter," smiled his mate.

"Fair enough."

And so it was that Ahmed and Yusufi spent their winter in snowbound Kabul, patiently preparing the advancement of their respective businesses, while Blackie and Whitey took the sunshine tour of the south. They wondered at the cows in the streets of Delhi, glimpsed the Taj Mahal by moonlight, relaxed awhile in the nascent Goan beach scene, meandered through Kerala and crossed to Sri Lanka. They learned to snorkel around the coral, burned till they tanned, and generally lived the life of Reilly on a couple of quid a day. The occasional gastric disturbance and the temporary discomforts of public transportation were all that disturbed peace and harmony, and it was a considerable surprise when trekking season arrived and the white folk began to head for the Himalaya.

"Wanna go to Nepal?" asked Blackie, broaching the subject at an impromptu board meeting one afternoon at Hikkaduwa. "It's a nice beach and all but Ceylon's getting kinda old."

Blackie knew at the front of his brain that the island nation was independent and called Sri Lanka, but the conventions of Empire were burned deep into his skull. The map on his classroom wall dated from the era when the sun never set on the Empire, which was always colored red, and this modern Commonwealth stuff was sure 'nough hard to handle, as St Otis would have it. It didn't help that they kept running into people who lamented the leaving of the Raj and the order it brought. Blackie was aware that these old fascists were folks he'd despise at home, but he responded anyway, as a Brit by God.

"Sri Lanka," muttered Whitey, who for reasons of genetics and personal experience was more sensitive to such matters.

"Yeah, right, but what about it anyway?" Blackie continued. "Everyone seems to be going up to Kathmandu, and then from there you can just take off into the mountains, man, go see them Tibetans."

"Sherpas."

"And real Tibetans too, man — they came over the mountains when the Chinese moved in, like

they just walked over like 20,000-foot passes and shit. Be a gas to go see them, man. Get a little whiff, walk all day. Incredible, man.”

“Walking?”

Whitey did not have the benefit of Blackie’s education, which had included liberal doses of organized sports, to wear the little buggers out if nothing else, and preferred to take part in athletics as a spectator.

“Well, yeah.” Blackie was a little defensive at his partner’s response — he really did fancy the hiking for the hiking’s sake, at least in theory — and he responded by retreating fast to common ground. “Kabul’s defrosting, too. Maybe we should think about getting back to Ahmed. Figure he’s lined up Fingers yet?”

“Probably. Yeah. Better check it out.”

“Cool,” responded Blackie, with executive decisiveness. “So let it be written, so let it be done.” He

had heard Yul Brynner say that in *The Ten Commandments* and thought it was neat. “I think we can do Madras–Delhi in one through train. You up for a two-nighter?”

Whitey groaned and grimaced and finally grinned agreement.

In retrospect, it all seemed choreographed, a pattern devised by the fates and taught to the actors whether they willed it or not. The rounds of movement to the music of the seasons, ritual responses to predictable cues, excitement on the surface glittering but failing completely to mask a sense of inevitability swelling below, all these combined to lean Whitey into following where he should have led, and Blackie to leaping where he should have looked.

But had they been able to name what they did, what they did would have been other than it was, and so perforce would they.

And we.

Just like Crazy Otto, just like Wolfman Jack,
 Sitting plush with a royal flush
 Aces back to back
 Just like Mary Shelley, just like Frankenstein
 Break your chains, count your change
 And try to walk the line
 Did you say your name was Ramblin' Rose?
 Ramble on, baby, settle down easy —
 Ramble on, Rose

Robert Hunter, "Ramble On Rose"
 music by Garcia, recorded by the good ol'
 Grateful Dead at the Lyceum, London, *Europe* '72

WHEN ANNIE RAMBLED BACK from the dance-sand to the blankets, Cedar was draped around the kid and sleeping. The child's light-brown curls were weaving into Cedar's black beard and his bare feet tucked back into the man's denim thighs. They had the loose and relaxed quality of cats.

The moon was high — higher than she was, Annie thought inconsequentially. She guessed that the trips were real and the effects imaginary, or was it vice versa, but she saw no visions, had no hallucinations, felt no handicap. She could have driven a car if she had wanted, which she certainly didn't, and to save her life she might possibly have been able to solve an equation in algebra, which was about where she had left her math years before. What she had, on top as it were, was insight, a strange clarity that led her to see, not to invent but to acknowledge.

Cedar's just visiting, she thought with enormous compassion, he doesn't belong here. For the first and last time, an infinite moment, she loved him perfectly, not as an object to keep, chloroformed and spiked and displayed under glass, but as a memory to cherish in private forever. She understood, as he still did not, the way the modern Grand Tour they were on would lead him back to his family and the life and work he thought he was escaping. She saw him as a boy, lying before her, casually and gently cuddling a smaller, and preparing to move into the manhood that was made for him. He *ought* to be in grad school, she realized, he *is* a shrink, she saw his self inside him as a sculptor might see a figure trapped inside a stone, but he was not hers to create or lead or guide or even

advise. He was a good boy, he would be a good loving husband and father, and not for her and not with her.

Don't fence me in, he had cried, as if to hex his doom.

Help me, she had screamed, I need someone to hold on to.

And so it had always been a mismatch of sorts, but suddenly she saw that she — and he, and all their friends no doubt — had this, too, backwards. Why was it that everything she knew was wrong? She had no family to speak of, and had never realized how used she was to floating alone. It hurt, of course, like love, and she asked for its opposite to ease her pain. She had envied Jacob his parents and sisters and even his braindead brother the jock, and respected him for his bravery in leaving them behind; and he had wanted her freedom and lack of attachment, and had tried to define himself as a man cut loose and self-invented. They had seen in each other what they didn't have in themselves, and thought the other could teach them how to ease their pain. It doesn't work that way, she understood now, suddenly.

I won't tie you down, honey, that's not what I want.

But tying down was what *he* wanted, even more than it was what he feared. Call it grounding. Call it grown-up. Call it acceptance. Call it responsible. Call it sensible. Call it any compliment you choose but *frehivvensake* call *her* a cab, she's outthere.

I loves you, Jake, she whispered softly. (She called him Cedar as long as he wanted, but she knew now what his name really was.) I loves me too.

Juice, she thought suddenly, I wonder if you can get shakes here. Sorting out other people's directions was thirsty work. The sleeping beauties were fine, not a peep had been heard of missing infants, maybe he wasn't even missing anymore, maybe his Mom had spotted him and left them alone, anyway later would do. She would listen, in case. The Italians were gone someplace, dancing or walking by the surf, or kneeling at the altar of munchies or something. She was wired and antsy and needed to move. Time to explore. Maybe there would be a restaurant in back of the stage, under the palms, with kerosene lanterns and menus and milkshakes. There must be something, anything would do.

There was, of course, she wasn't falling off the edge of the world. More like, she was falling off the edge *into* the world. As she loosely circled the crowd, pulling her shawl around her shoulders against the middle-of-the-night chill — half from the breeze outside wafting in from the surf and half from the blood within complaining about the sugar levels no doubt — the corollary to her comments on Cedar was nagging at her for expression and resolution and bringing with it a practical question she could avoid but not evade.

I belong here, she thought with certainty, so how do I do it?

If I can't do it, then maybe I don't belong here after all.

I don't belong anywhere, so why should I think of doing it?

Whatever 'doing it' means.

Oh Annie, Annie, why are you *thinking* like this? came an unknown yet somehow familiar voice from deep inside. You knew better when you were looking down at the sleeping boys, you really did. I did? You ... we did. We ... who we, white woman? You, me and the palm tree, kiddo.

She laughed and looked at the friendly palm slow-dancing beside her. She reached out to hold its hand, settling instead for giving it a hug and leaning into the rough caress of its bark, prickly and comforting like a true love's beard. A gaggle of revelers sauntered by and saw them and laughed, not at but with.

"Neat tree, that," smiled one woman. The words were actually French — "Bel arbre, ça" —

which, most nights, was impenetrable to Annie but the meaning and goodwill were unmistakable.

How kind of you to notice, please excuse me for not engaging in further discourse but I'm a little busy just at the moment, smiled back Annie.

That's cool, the other waved back, See you around.

"Adieu," cooed Annie in sudden inspiration, and the little group turned their heads to reciprocate before rambling on easy, to the music and the moonlight down by the shore.

Annie let go of her new friend and rubbed her back meditatively against his trunk, luxuriating in the gentle abrasions that rippled up her spine. This is good, she thought, we like this, me and the palm tree. Us and the rest of the universe.

And the little voice she knew and trusted came bubbling back up to say: That's more like it. Stick to what we know. Feel your pleasure and honor it but for everything's sake don't rationalize it out of existence.

She patted the palm good-bye and headed inland, feeling the earth under her bare feet. The path was smooth, for the most part, but not yielding like the sand. Occasionally, it pinched at her feet, until she half-wished she had worn her sandals, but she wouldn't go back to fetch them.

Sure enough, she soon saw a lantern in a lean-to, with funky wooden benches, half a roof of palm fronds and half a wall of banana tree. Four or five people were slumped around real tables in the conceptual room, none of them looking up for much in the way of conversation, thank heaven. Half-cut and clinging to his rakshi bottle, the presumed proprietor was leaning on a door-jamb that led to the kitchen, itself defined more by action than area. The scene looked kinda seedy, thought Annie with a sudden sense of dislocation, But so I bet do I, and she geared herself up to walk right in and she sat right down, and still she let her mind roll on. It was a crazy little tableau, she thought, South Pacific meets On the Waterfront, with all the energy off and everyone twisted.

She cut away again, looking at herself looking at them.

It was funny, she thought.

Sure am.

ANNIE'S SONG

*with apologies to Zeno and
the Paradoxes, and to Ogden Nash,
but under no circumstances to John Denver*

Annie's not her real name
 (Well, maybe in the novel)
 But who-is-who's the Roman game
 So if you want the *clef*, don't grovel,
 Just peek behind the title
 Page at the benediction,
 Yet keep in mind the vital
 Truth below — it's fiction.
 If she were really based on them
 Would I have had to claim the
 Prosaic license, taken when
 I published a disclaimer?
 Illusion is the field you plow
 When you pick up a pen;
 Do you think I'm lying now?
 Or was I truly lying then?

[To make the moral even cuter:
 The author didn't wield a pen,
 Nor pencil, Dictaphone or pad.
 Knowing that he started bad,
 And needed to rewrite again
 (& again & again & again),
 He typed on a computer.]

You lose your love when you say the word 'mine'

Neil Young,
"Love Is a Rose," *Decade*, 1977

ANNIE," CALLED A VOICE from the parking lot wilderness. "Hey, Annie."

She was surprised enough not to respond at first. She had been so busy reinventing herself that she was sure she was invisible. After all, if she was living at the edge of her own perceptions, how distant and vague she must be to anyone else's. Somehow, she missed the realization that you can be peripheral to yourself and simultaneously central to another (love, they call it, meaning obsession). Not to mention the primary truth of game-playing flirts forever (aiming to spark obsession as kindling for love, or lust at least): abstinence makes the hearth glow under.

"Hey, Annie. Jeez, you going deaf in your old age?"

Finally she admitted the call was for her, and turned with a holy vacancy in her eye. This guy about her age, she guessed, was trotting in her direction, purple needle-cord shirt flapping outside standard-issue Levi's. He was breathing hard from the contradictory effort of yelling and rushing, but smiling away the sting in his words. Actually, if he had shaved in the last couple of days, he'd have been quite cute.

"Brendan!" she laughed like a silly kitty who's been caught falling off the back of a chair. "When did you get here?"

"Am I here yet?" he panted back, coming to a rest close enough for a G-rated kiss of presumption and promise, more than friendship and less than passion.

Enough? she wondered, and answered herself: No. Actually he was rather inconvenient just at the moment, and maybe she could slough him off for a bit. Then she realized this was cruel and tamped it down (without actually stamping it out). So she hugged him.

He didn't quite know what to do about that. Brendan wasn't much of a hugger and, in his expe-

rience, nor was Annie, which showed how much he knew, and her too. It felt good, though, and he joined in with surprised enthusiasm.

"So how's it going?" he asked meaninglessly as they slid softly apart.

"Fine," she responded in the same dialect.

She took his hand (held hands!?) and led him away from the kerfuffle, which seemed to have much of his interest, and towards the front of the building where 'her' banner was.

"There's going to be live TV in half an hour," she explained, "But my job's been holding up half this sign over here."

He grunted, half-smiling vaguely. She seemed ... different somehow. Not as ready to let him do the defining or something. It was odd, but not necessarily bad. Brendan really wasn't much of an introvert — fill 'er up was his usual attitude to the brain — but he could sense at least that sensing was on the agenda. He just tended to think about it too much.

Annie wasn't thinking about thinking at all. Suzie was still holding up an end but her anonymous partner/paramour/posslq/patron/peer/posy/-pal/pippin/puppet/poppet/perhaps-she-was-and-perhaps-she-wasn't (Annie was not being verbal at that moment, but her imagery was along these lines) had laid her burden down and was collapsed on the grass with a number of others. Annie wandered over to them, unselfconsciously dragging along the somewhat self-conscious Brendan. She smiled at the group who looked up at her in a friendly kind of way.

"Channel Ten's setting up for a live broadcast," she announced.

"Eleven," corrected Brendan, but gently.

"Eleven, OK," she admitted, "We don't watch TV so I get confused." This drew a sympathetic, almost silent, rustle of support that she was grateful for and that drowned out in her mind the aware-

ness of that little ‘we’ she had snuck in there almost without noticing. (Brendan had heard and rather liked it but kept quiet for now.) “Anyway, they’re going to be on at five, so we probably want to get over there then.”

“What time is it?” asked someone sensibly. There was considerable blankness, as it turned out that none of those present was wearing a watch. They called for help to another cluster.

“Four twenty-seven,” volunteered some guy with a digital watch, “Approximately,” which won him some good-natured laughter. “Why?”

Someone who knew him started to explain, and the word began to ripple along the grass like a flame spreading through sun-baked brush that hadn’t been cleared. They were all ready to *do* something — anything, almost — it had been a lovely afternoon but their attention spans were pushing the limit. It was typical that TV, having decimated the powers of concentration of the Youth of Today, should so neatly come to the rescue.

Join the Studio Audience, kids; just send a Stamped, Self-Addressed Envelope to Out Now! c/o the Capitola Military Recruitment Center, etc etc. Back after a word from our sponsors. Better Jobs for Most, brought to you by Admiral Dynamism, General Nukes, The Blockhead Corporation and Partly Marionettes: Join us for target practice with lifelike Arabs — they even bleed like people — and we’ll keep enough of you working to pay the cops to lock up the rest. And now back to the evening’s entertainment (afternoon on the Left Coast).

Annie wanted to be a star (but anonymous); and she wanted to be a lover (but independent); and she wanted to be a daredevil (but safe); and she wanted to do her duty (but enjoy it); and she wanted to be alone (no she didn’t); and that left the problem of Brendan. Maintaining a firm grasp on his right hand, she led them (really, quite in charge) across the grass to the BRING THE TROOPS HOME ALIVE banner that Suzie and some new guy in denims, more like Annie’s age, with a long black ponytail, were displaying to the passing cars.

“I’ll take over again,” she offered brightly, mostly at Suzie who was nearer.

The standard-bearers looked at each other in silent colloquy. The merest quiver of an eyebrow

from the far end presented the offer and after a tactful moment it was gratefully accepted.

“OK, thanks,” replied Suzie brightly, handing over and bouncing off to the gaggle across the lawn.

“Pretty girl,” commented frank, being unusually Brendan.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” countered Annie pleasantly, “I’m pretty sure she’s hooked up with the woman in the Pendleton shirt.”

“Nothing personal,” he hastened to add, “But aren’t they all bi nowadays?”

“Beats me.”

“Ducky, I never thought.”

“Oh shut up.”

Finding his hands free, he jammed them into his jeans and stood in front of her, rocking back and forth like some kind of demented gnome.

“I could probably pick up some chains at OSH on the way home.”

Frown.

“Yeah, yeah, just kidding.”

Beatifying smile.

At the other end, the tall, dark stranger was standing stonefaced as though he couldn’t hear. His very stillness was intruding on their chit-chat, which was falling apart into the kind of self-conscious rôle-play that (Annie was beginning to understand) drove them both up the wall. Could they communicate in public? Why should it make any difference, privacy didn’t seem to help.

“So, you going to stick around then?” inquired Brendan reasonably.

“Yeah, I guess,” she prevaricated. (What the hell does it look like?) “What about you?”

“Really can’t. I’ve still got to do the whole final layout.”

Annie was vague about the details of his job, but she had observed from long experience that once he got his head inside the computer it bid fair to stay there for hours at a time, and he had warned her that this was deadline week. To be accurate, she’d counted on it but she wasn’t quite admitting as much, not even in her interior monologue, at least not yet. She tsk’ed or tut’ed in autonomic dental sympathy.

“It’s either get up at dawn or do a bunch more tonight,” he continued.

Annie wasn't paying much attention anymore. The brief moment of power and strangeness had wafted away and she was back in a familiar land of ritual, where Brendan rambled on and she didn't interrupt. Actually she was much more interested in the guy at the other end of the standard they bore, as rigid as a Marine but far more intriguing. Kaw-liga, she thought, Hank Williams' wooden Indian, and she put that away as potentially racist (or was it? Hank wouldn't tell, buried forever in his tower of song) but Lige seemed to stick as a name. She needed a peg to hang him on. Wasn't that a robot? Brendan would know, but she wouldn't ask, I mean really, not now. Yes, nearly, Lije for Elijah, that was it, an SF book she'd read in desperation in Thailand when it rained and there was nothing else left. She would find out, she supposed, sometime soon, but Lige with a gee would do for now. Kaw-liga fell in love, anyway, he was a romantic and really far more sympathetic than that awful Pinnochio with his lying nose. The nose knows. Her own was bobbing gently (it should have been growing)

as though she were listening to the explanation of all the problems that beset poor Brendan this week and put his schedule so far behind.

"Anyway, I think I've got it sorted out now," he summed up, "I just have to put it all together."

"Poor baby."

"I'll feel better if I do it tonight. I was on the way to Aptos to pick up some stuff at the *Post* when I thought I'd swing by, see if you were still here."

She grinned. "Still here."

"Right."

"OK."

"Well then."

"Yup."

"Later."

"Later."

Kiss.

Kiss.

Just a peck really.

A step back.

Away?

Onward.

In these matters the only certainty is that there is nothing certain.

Pliny the Elder,
leading polymath of
the 1st century B.C.E.

WHEN THE BOYS GOT BACK TO TOWN, they discovered that Ahmed's machinations were well advanced. His brother's friend was ensconced in Mayfair, and had successfully passed the word to young Fingers, whose surprise and initial concern had been dispelled by (what else?) visions of the joys of paradise. Or at least dreams beyond his wildest riches.

The rude awakening came as they began to understand that their part in the transaction was essentially over. Ahmed was polite, certainly, but Blackie and Whitey had failed to grasp the fundamental rule of trading: never sell the goose if you can sell the golden eggs. Once they had passed on the name of their contact, what else did they really have to sell?

To whom?

Ay, there's the rub. Ironically, their very survival depended in part on Ahmed's over-estimating their Machiavellian talents. He assumed, as a matter of purest routine, that his own name, description and whereabouts were in the hands of some trusted associate who was handy with some variety of lethal implement and would exact revenge of a routinely swift and terrible sort should the lads disappear. He himself took such precautions automatically. He might have risked a plausibly deniable termination with extreme prejudice, to use the CIA jargon then current, had he thought that they constituted a threat, but he was a gentle soul in his way and abhorred unnecessary violence. As long as everyone kept their side of a bargain and, almost equally important, did so with grace and good manners, he far preferred to live and let live.

Besides, their specialist knowledge might yet be useful.

So, once they were safely settled again in the upstairs corner room at the Grape Place (Yusufi relocated a Belgian junkie, who hardly noticed, as

they imbibed the first ceremonial cup of tea; any lingering ill-feelings were smoothed away with a baksheesh lump of hash approximately the size of a golf ball), Blackie and Whitey found themselves with time on their hands. In addition to the agreed percentage, at least what they assumed was the agreed percentage, Ahmed threw in essentially unlimited quantities of product for personal consumption and/or local distribution. Well, they had to do something.

Yusufi conjured up Jacques once more, and the Swiss pharmaceuticals began to flow. On Blackie's request, instead of deadheading (the very word) back from the second run west, Ahmed's man carried a couple of hundred microdots, which Fingers was dabbling in as a sideline. Ahmed didn't want to get into retail at either end, so he passed them on at not much above cost and all of a sudden Kabul joined San Francisco and Amsterdam and Oxford and various other places as a regional center; it may have been the only one in which the university was not a major trading point. Mushrooms involved more research among herbalists and swamis and mystics of all denominations, but when it came right down to it, what else was there to do but research? The pair of them threw themselves enthusiastically into their work.

As spring went tripping lightly o'er the sill, and the hard light of summer began to bake the walls, it seemed that they were all set. Cash income was low and all in Afs, but the currency was convertible in the bazaar to anything from Johnny Walker Black to Japanese Yen, and expenses were lower still. Whitey's chess improved to the point where he occasionally wished Barb would come back so he could measure himself against her, even up, best of five, any stakes you choose (he had hopes, and occasional fantasies, that didn't include Ed and not always Blackie either). Blackie took up bridge,

where it was harder to find a partner and a pair to play but the mathematical logic was right up his alley; memory was occasionally at a premium, to be sure, but he made sure the handicaps were well shared. Violent exercise, in the form of a stroll down town, broke up the routine, and the changing tapestry of travelers was as good as television any day.

Well, most days.

Actually, a spot of mindless telly would have gone down a treat now and then. A football match might have been good. Some decent sounds. Yusufi had scraped up a battered old Dansette from somewhere, and a selection of surprisingly good LPs. The quality of the collection improved notably on the evening that three or four of the residents had spent in a record-pitching contest, won by Whitey with a classic collection of Brenda Lee's *Greatest Hits* that cleared the far wall and surprised the hell out a neighbor taking a meditative evening dump, but the quantity was open to criticism. Every new arrival seemed to head for the same damn' records, which rapidly became scratched beyond belief, these being the days before cassettes were common or CDs invented.

The trouble with specifying paradise is that the filled order is always dead.

Blackie was educated as a liberal-arts generalist, to be vague (anything more precise would be less accurate, which is exactly the point), but the mystical clichés of post-Einsteinian science were the common currency of both formal discourse over port and uninhibited rapping over reefer.

He *knew* that shit.

The mathematics of Heisenberg was purest gobbledygook to him. The chaos theory that was gestating at the moment — some of which had been inspired not so far away in space or time by the Hindu philosophers of Varanasi, where Ralph Abraham's *Quest for Psychedelic Math* had led him — was completely foreign to him (and pretty much everyone else). The subtleties of modern cosmology, with its cannibal galaxies and the background music from the start of the universe, this universe, a universe, the original om mane padme hum, were still the stuff of scientists, not mass-cult magazine pieces; the only black hole he'd heard of was a torture chamber in old Calcutta.

But he *knew* that shit.

What Blackie knew as if by instinct — presumably it came to him by osmosis from his family environment — was that if you put him into a controlled, structured environment with defined rules and limits of behavior, he'd go nuts.

So he did.

The boredom, thought Blackie, was their own fault. They had defined a kind of ideal set-up that was rigid and planned and ultimately contradictory, like immaculate snooker. W.S. Gilbert devised the ingenious punishment of a game played "on a cloth untrue with a twisted cue and elliptical billiard balls," but for a spectator the opposite would be at least as bad. A continuous sequence of precisely predictable Newtonian cannons and snookers would put the attendant public into cryogenic storage, carefully marked AWAKEN WHEN SOMETHING INTERESTING HAPPENS. (Scientifically this is a dubious analogy, for Sir Isaac could not in fact precisely predict what would happen when three balls collide, but Blackie didn't know that, so let us let it lie.) If you name your poison, he thought, you'll regret it.

Fortunately, Uncle Werner the Man Who Was Certain About Uncertainty came riding to the rescue.

The solution, it came in a flash, was beer.

If this seems just the slightest bit enigmatic, don't worry about it: Whitey was baffled too. One moment his mate was burbling about Kraut professors, the next he was thirsty. The connection was elusive but at least the conversation was moving to common ground.

"Don't you see?" said Blackie (who did), "What we need is a change."

"Ale?" asked Whitey (blindly).

"Well, we haven't had any in ages, have we?"

"Yeh."

"I bet you can get it at the Inter-Continental."

"Mmm."

"So let's go."

"Who's Werner?"

"Well, what I meant was, you see, if you look at something you change it, that's what Heisenberg said — Werner Heisenberg — and here we are and I was bored and I was looking at being bored and all of a sudden I get a thirst."

Whitey was still bemused.

“This Kraut run a brewery then?”

But he was already reaching for his jacket and patting his pockets for the standard impedimenta of Kabul excursions. Blackie understood that Whitey wasn't looking for lessons so much as striking sparks at a venture. Alcohol was nominally unavailable in the Muslim world, and genuinely expensive compared to everything else, so its use was restricted to the middle class and the rich tourists. Traveling freaks tended to look down on drinkers as beerheads (i.e. straight) or worse (i.e. pigs aka bluebottles, blue meanies, feds, cops, ze

gendarmerie, or possibly squaddies or other sorts of military men); and besides, an evening's boozing cost more than even a serious session at an opium-den-cum-whorehouse, let alone the kind of casual stoning that really was the norm. Geordies in general were in theory exceptions, Newcastle Brown being the sacrament of the region, but their religion insisted on a precisely proper form of oblation, and that was regrettably rare, so even they tended to be teetotal for the duration.

Couldn't hurt to look, though.

Could it?

No people whose word for 'yesterday' is the same as their word for 'tomorrow' can be said to have a firm grip on the time.

Salman Rushdie

Midnight's Children, 1981

STAGE LEFT, A SWARTHY pint-size Goan restaurateur is leaning against a doorway and cradling a mostly-empty fifth. He is wearing a sleeveless white undershirt and patched brown pants, in unconscious imitation of the young Brando after whom he has therefore been nicknamed by his habitués. Stage right, a pair of emaciated peacocks, whom we shall call Alphonse and Gaston for reasons of tradition and anonymity, are engrossed in their own

reflections in Alphonse's silver-topped cane. To their left a couple of indeterminate origin — call them Boy 1 and Girl 1 — are lost in dreams that exclude themselves, let alone each other and everyone else. Next to them is an empty table, flanked by a pair of rustic benches. The backdrop is a vague, dark panoply of greens and blues with flecks of brown. Shards of electric music almost drown out the rustling of leaves in the wind. Nobody moves.

SCENE THE FIRST

Enter Annie from the audience and through the proscenium. She is a pretty[,] young American, looking vague and vaguely looking. She takes her place at the vacant table, surreptitiously sneaking

a glance at everyone else, who all affect to ignore her. Nobody moves, much. After a subjective eternity or objective minute, she breaks the relative silence.

ANNIE: Papaya juice?

I'm thirsty.

MARLON:

What a shame.

ANNIE:

Really, I'm thirsty.

MARLON: [*nods, almost imperceptibly*]

She is thirsty.

ALL:

ANNIE: [*twitches as though about to smile*]

Sheesh.

With the delicacy of the very drunk, Marlon liberates himself from the doorjamb, turns and looks into the shadows beyond, where (visible to any of the other characters with eyes and brain

to see, but not to the audience) his wife is sleeping by the fire. Having finally established this to his own satisfaction, he turns with equal deliberation and resumes the initial position.

MARLON:

Chai.

Papaya's off, love. We got tea.

ALL:

Decisions, decisions.

ANNIE:

OK.

OK.

GIRL 1:

Ek chai, baba.

Me too, I guess.

BOY 1:

Do.

It's what's happening, man.

A, B1 & G1:

Yeah.

BOY 1:

Tin.

Her and her and me is three.

MARLON: [*pointing at each in turn, from nearest to furthest*]

Ek, do, tin.

One each for you three. What about you two in the corner?

Char, panj?

Don't fuckin' make me do the whole thing twice.

There is a long pause. Finally Alphonse comes to the realization that someone has directed some-

thing verbal in his direction, and looks in bafflement at his partner, who finally connects the dots.

GASTON: Du thé? You want some tea?
ALPHONSE: Ah, non. No way, man.
GASTON: [gives Marlon the royal wave] No, man, we'se just sittin'.

Marlon uncurls himself once again, with evident reluctance, and staggers off-stage.

ALL:

There is a very long pause, in which the actors urn becketts of respect if they maintain our attention. Finally, seconds before the crowd begins to leave en masse, Marlon reappears with two glasses, which he distributes to Annie and to

Girl 1, retreats again and produces a third. Annie smiles at him brightly, Girl 1 vaguely, and Boy 1 conceptually at most. The tea is too hot to drink. Marlon resumes his stance holding up the lintel. Nobody moves.

ALPHONSE: On veut peutêtre Wanna do some more coke?
 encore du coca?
GASTON: Bien sûr. Course.
ALL:
BOY 1: Buddy, can you spare a line?
GIRL 1: Me too? Huh? Huh?
ANNIE: Yeah, you bet, pretty please.
MARLON: Say wha?

Those with the tea are at least temporarily bereft of the communication skills required to wangle an invitation to participate in the snow. Given that two of the three are nubile females and at least one is solo, we are left to assume that Alphonse and

Gaston are (a) gay, (b) in committed monogamous relationships with jealous people who might sneak up at any moment, or (c) too far into powders to care about trivialities like sex or food. They are skinny enough to make (c) the odds-on favorite.

BOY 1: [Desperately working on his telepathy]
ALL:

*Why don't we do the show right here?
 So, what now?*

Gaston languishes to his feet, in what passes for a burst of energy, and places a random but plausible assortment of coins on the table. Alphonse levers himself up with the cane, then raises it to inspect the damage done to the shine

*of its handle, sniffs expressively and follows his friend out to stage right. Marlon eventually assimilates the currency and resumes the position. There is a very long pause. Nobody moves.
 Curtain.*

SCENE THE SECOND

The curtain rises again, to find the remaining characters in the same positions as when we left them, some indeterminate time before. Occasionally, one lifts a glass, but gives the impression that the cup remains empty.

There is another very long pause in this tropical Winter's Tale. Suddenly, a large and

obviously male Mediterranean nudist (otherwise effectively covered with curly black hair from nose to toe) approaches from stage right, to the evident surprise and consternation of all, who arise in some confusion.

Exeunt omnes, pursued by a bare.

A man should keep his little brain attic stocked with all the furniture that he is likely to use, and the rest he can put away in the lumber-room of his library, where he can get it if he wants it.

Sherlock Holmes, September –th, 1887, as recorded by John H. Watson, M.D., late of the Army Medical Department, in “The Five Orange Pips,” according to Dr (later Sir) Arthur Conan Doyle, in the *Strand Magazine*, November, 1891

ANNIE AND LIGE AND THE STANDARD they bore were summoned in due course and paraded with measured tread around the building and towards the principal entrance, where they were directed into position by the wall. They were gratifyingly close to the center of the action, since both the professional photographers behind the cameras and the amateur politicians in front had every interest in composing dramatic and effective shots for the audience out there in television- and newspaper-land.

Annie did her best to look attractive, intelligent, serious and strong, not necessarily in that order; she hoped she succeeded in raising the tone of the assembly. At the other end of their modest burden, Lige looked solid and serious, far from a fool and, she had to admit, in fact could hardly avoid it, knee-tremblingly sexy. She hoped that the melting sensation on which she was trying not to concentrate did not distract, and would have been most gratified to know that it only resulted in making her seem more alive, and so more committed, and certainly more appealing in her own right. To say she was more herself, which she certainly was, would be to flatter her with nothing more than the truth: All that day she had been flopping in and out of being really something. Although she didn't know it, because she didn't know it, Annie was hitting a peak. Again.

At *forty-three*? she would have asked with incredulity at any time before.

If it feels right, she was at last ready to reply, be it now.

From her vantage point, the broadcast itself was anti-climatic. She had a fine view of the back of a gorgeously-coifed (if you like that sort of thing,

which she didn't much) head, atop sensationally broad shoulders, the effect slightly spoiled by a wire that crept up the back of the shaved neck and plugged in behind the left ear. Was this an android? she speculated. Human or humanoid, you make the call. Facing them was a scruffy technician in patched shirt and inartistically ripped jeans, who operated the equipment and generally seemed to have put himself in charge. Visible to his left was a small monochrome monitor that displayed a standard opening sequence, a pair of anchors and suddenly themselves, very small but the banners showing up clearly. Back to the studio. No sound for the masses but the 'droid waved them steady and presently reappeared in miniature, exuding black-and-white sincerity and cartoon command for twenty-five seconds, followed by ninety of miscellaneous filmed featurettes, fifteen or so of quick questions with Luke (how did he get in there? Annie wondered Who picked him? Himself, probably, with a major assist to his age and race and class and general availability), a brief wrap-up and a further fifteen of unrehearsed scripted by-play with the anchors over the hill in San José.

Cut. Wrap. Extras, take a break. Back on set in forty-five minutes, please. Principals to make-up. Script conference, five minutes, back of the truck. Thanks, everyone. Good work. (Clever 'droid to tell so much and say so little.)

The camera saw pulsing life and an enterprising reporter in the middle of the action. Annie saw the usual sham and felt vaguely disappointed. She wanted to be part of something substantial, not a movable prop for a TV set.

The 'droid was trying to look human, making mechanical small-talk with Luke, who was clearly

in expansive mood after his fifteen seconds of fame. There was a milling and a murmuring as the audience focus dissipated. Annie wondered what to do, and looked around for someone whose name she knew. Surely someone could tell her.

“Patrick!” she called, “Hey, Patrick!” for he was close (but no cigar of course) though heading away and surely he would know.

“Oh hi,” he smiled tentatively.

“What’s next? What’s up?”

“Well, not much till six o’clock really.”

“Then what?”

“Same again. Instant replay.” He laughed cynically and then let the real humor leak through in a moment of unsought, uncaught humanity.

“How’s come?” She was serious, he could tell.

She really didn’t watch TV — more, she really did actively avoid it, to the extent of blocking out the kind of basic information that everyone around assumed you knew. Even Patrick, who never watched the idiot box, had absorbed the conventional structures in his not-yet-too-distant childhood and remembered them for use as needed; but Annie, who once had surely known (or maybe from birth she had kept it out, being gifted with some idiosyncratic neural blocker that repelled not porn, not violence, not sports or news or infomercials or talking heads or sitcoms with laugh tracks but television its very own self, a magnificent mutation lost alas to the species when her tubes were tied — or perhaps with modern biotechnology, they could ... but no, They would never allow it), had erased the knowledge from her brain, ripped the index card out and burnt it, wiped the disk with magnets, shredded the paper trail, shoved the evidence into the dumpster and buried it under noxious chemicals and decomposing objects that no-one wanted to disturb. Pretty good for forty, thought Patrick (and yes that flattered her by a year or three, which he wasn’t even trying to do — hadn’t said aloud — though yes something there was stirring good god what is going on) as he came to understand and prepared to explain, as he liked to do and scorn himself for it.

“They do two local news broadcasts,” he expounded, “Half an hour at five, then half an hour of national — Eleven’s ABC so it’s Peter Jennings

from New York or wherever — then more local at six, either an hour or half an hour, I’m not sure. Then they do another one later, at eleven, but they don’t usually do live feeds for that one, they use tape and the studio.”

“So now we wait till six.”

“Right.”

“That’s just one station, though?” When Annie wanted to know something, she worried it. And when her ignorance was this vast, the ball of string she started to unravel could run all night.

“Oh, sure. Channel 46 was here earlier, and 8, and I think 35, but they took film, well, video actually, and I suppose they did reports from the studio. That’s why you want to do things before four o’clock, to give them time to get back — unless they’ll bring the truck out.” He paused the lecture tape and actually looked at her. “You don’t want to know all that do you?”

“Not really,” she admitted after a moment, “I’ll just forget it.”

“Quite right too,” laughed Patrick, glancing over towards Lige, lingering a little on the Giaconda smile he saw there, wondering a moment and setting the thought (if that is what it was) aside. He sidled off rather than engage.

So for forty-some minutes more several gross of people muttered and mumbled and passed the time in a loosening swarm that spilled out beyond the TV trucks and under the noses of the plain-clothes video cameras above. Near the center of the hive, a still-discernible focus at the main door to the building, framed by Eric’s beautiful banners, Annie was tired but determined to hold her ground (stardom’s siren song simpering sweet seductions; and what else would she do?) and wait for future developments. Human static prevented conversation across the length of the sign, but she exchanged meaningless glances with the lovely Lige, and occasional insignificant words with acquaintances floating by. It was a non-time for unthought and she drifted into a subfeeling lack of condition that served well enough for the brief moment.

The televised rerun, as is their wont, was more predictable than the original, less interesting, and blessedly soon dispensed with. Once the ’droid had accurately delivered his closing conversation, he

unclipped the mike and earpiece and handed them over to the technician, who examined them suspiciously as if his replaceable charge might have damaged the valuable equipment.

“Back at eleven, then?” asked Luke cheerfully, right in front of Annie, who listened in interest. This time he hadn’t been interviewed on the air but he had established himself as some kind of de facto liaison.

“I doubt it,” replied the robot. “But I don’t make those decisions. You don’t know what’s going to be happening yet, do you?”

“We’re going to have a meeting in a minute,” confirmed the self-appointed mouth. “Shall I give you a call?”

“Better yet, call my producer,” said the ’droid, proffering a card. “I’ll tell him you might. Luke, right?”

“Luke Gasheon, that’s it.”

Annie smiled to herself. It seemed clear to her that, short of torching the joint, they were unlikely to attract live coverage late at night. She supposed she should want more media attention for the cause, but in fact was ashamed of a lust for glory she was too honest to deny. Perhaps in reaction, she suddenly knew she wanted to stay and wanted the cameras to leave. The day had been for the world at large; the night would be for herself.

The workers from the offices around had left, except for a few who had joined the besieging crowd. The ink-stained wretches had joined the television crew, one would like to think in the bar for a quick one, but probably in depressing industry over their alphanumeric keyboards. The military men were long gone, having bowed to overwhelming force and decided to wait to fight another day. The police had concluded hours before that nothing worse than simple trespass was likely to occur, and none were in evidence except one token uniform and the lieutenant, who wore a worried look and was trying to get predictions from anyone who would talk to him; he was being ignored, which didn’t suit him.

The assembled crew poured into the building to hold a meeting. Patrick, still wearing his Sally Army suit, sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor with half a dozen others, where he could deniably lead the affair. Annie looked in over her shoulder and saw the room was filling fast. She gestured over to Lige, who nodded in easy agreement, and they leaned their lovely banner carefully against the wall and took positions next to each other and right by the door, with the lieutenant leaning hungrily in near Annie’s right shoulder.

His presence was an early source of minor contention, with some calling for privacy and others happy for all to hear; the latter group prevailed, which saved the cop the minor difficulty of bugging or otherwise eavesdropping on the discussion. The remainder of the convocation proceeded in predictable fashion, the viewpoints expressed about what to do next covering the available spectrum:

- red: storm the ramparts and dig in
- orange: swarm over them but be nice about it
- yellow: be careful so none of us get hurt
- green: we agreed not to damage property as well as people
- blue: all this argument is really rather distressing
- indigo: we need to persuade people, not antagonize them
- violet: well, the military does have its place, just not this war

not forgetting the infra-red (saboteurs) and the ultra-violet (infiltrators), who all kept quiet; the white light comprised of them all; and the black anarchists psychically wandering on their own to smash the state and/or live in harmony with each others’ souls and hopefully their own.

Consensus was clearly a ways off, and even the cop was beginning to look bored, when Lige leaned close to Annie, who offered her left ear in anticipation.

“Fancy a joint, then?” he whispered.

If it ain't baroque, fix it.

Canon Pachelbel,
the soundtrack king
of the late 17th century

THE INTER-CONTINENTAL WAS LOCATED not just in downtown Kabul but in Greenland, that seedy and baffling virtual space of imitation faith and imminent disaster, where spies and salesmen confuse each other and even the cynics are idealists, unless they prefer their vice versa. It was the only proper hotel in the country, according to diplomats and the sort of travelers who use expense accounts — journalists, mafiosi, missionaries and the like. Its great attraction to all of them was its almost complete emancipation from Afghanistan. There was a barely-visible reality wall at its entrance, and splendidly robed fighting men to restrain the natives from attempting to broach the citadel. All in all, it was a dump.

The place did, however, have a sort of a bar, to which Blackie and Whitey repaired out of some atavistic instinct. All it had taken was the firm resolve to enter and the wall that had kept them out with the riff-raff for the previous several months dissolved. As dirty hippies, they were banned; as wealthy westerners they were honored guests; and which they chose to be was, to a surprising extent, up to them.

Their hair was long, remarkably long by now; clearly they were no conventional workers. Blackie had taken to braiding his, which with his bushy auburn beard and burly build gave him the air of a prospecting engineer on the verge of a major discovery, diamonds perhaps, or something to be used for nuclear research. Whitey's was straight and shone like polished jet, parted in the middle and hanging down past his cheekbones till he flipped it back over his shoulders; in the Saville Row tailoring, battered a bit but still showing its aristocratic heritage, he carried himself with a silent confidence that disarmed most authority — without the air, he risked the purely racist responses of the would-be colonialists who infested the area and to whom the management liked to cater.

The beer was German, expensive, and excellent. They took a table and awaited developments. She didn't take long to arrive.

A group of five off-duty airline personnel came in, still uniformed, evidently thirsty and chattering away in the kind of language that uses ü's or ø's or possibly even å's. Given this cacophony, the greatest redeeming feature of the uniforms was the implication that they must speak at least some of the only great language that doesn't mess around much with funny squiggles on top of its letters (single dots are *normal*). Not that it would have mattered much except that one of the stewardesses was not only an exceptionally pleasant sort of person, especially when she removed her cap and unpinned her long, straight, blonde hair, but contriving to smile over in the general direction of the English while she arranged it, rather like Whitey's but more so, over her shoulders.

"Ay, ay, lad," nudged Blackie, "I think we've got a live one here."

"Hngrh," agreed Whitey under his breath. He was looking at her with a directness that would have been disconcerting to most people. She seemed to like it.

The other four, it soon became obvious, were effectively paired off, which was encouraging. Pilot and co-pilot, or something of the sort, each specifically working on one of the stews. The odd woman out was much the coolest of the bunch (well, the two salivating on the sidelines thought so; they would, wouldn't they) and seemed to hold the others at a slight remove. Her skirt was shorter, her hair longer, her eyeliner heavier and her lipstick lighter than the other flight attendants. She conveyed the clear impression that she had already turned down each of the men flatter than week-old beer, and rather enjoyed watching the process of her colleagues getting picked up, as long as she

could maintain her distance. She accepted, as no more than her due, a highball from one of the oafs and a king-size cigarette from the other and backed quietly out of their way.

The room was eerily quiet, filled with the ghosts of empires that never were, and someone's misbegotten dreams of progress. Over all presided a supercilious bartender whose splendid uniform fell just slightly short of a full complement of brass buttons and whose almost-pristine turban was wound with an insouciant flourish. The temptation was to think that both he and his domain had seen better days, but these in fact were they. Men and buildings faded fast in the harsh reality of Afghan independence.

Exactly half of those present seemed comfortable with the ambiance. The other four were in a hurry, evidently there to absorb a quick one before dressing for dinner in the depressing simulacrum of splendor provided across the hall and presumably undressing thereafter for entertainment in the ersatz efficiency of the suites upstairs. Four pink gins evaporated and there developed a bustle of standing and nattering and a gathering of purses and peaked hats, in the midst of which the odd one out sat enigmatically while Whitey edged up to the bar on her other side. A final cackle of consonants and unfamiliar vowels as the barman approached left her alone, stubbing out a cigarette and waving casually at her departing colleagues.

"Two beers." Ale there wasn't, for all the initial hopes, but this lager stuff was supple. "Whisky?" This to his left, with maximum cool and effortless presumption.

"OK." The language problem, as expected, wasn't.

With a nod and an eyebrow, he led her over to the table. An almost-tangible psychic curtain fell around the table, another kind of reality wall that pushed away the rest of the world while three sets of adrenal glands went on alert. Instant, obsessive, envied love does this, the kind of bond that puts pairs in a bubble where they breathe each other's air, until they marry to fossilize the feeling — but this was not quite that (though lust was lapping hard below all their minds). Doom was in the air, a sense of possibilities, of destiny laid open by the completion of a triad, a *karass*, a puzzle that slotted

together to form a base to build a future on, however brief or vast.

She's one of us, thought Whitey vaguely. (Blackie often thought in words but his mate dealt mostly in dreams and symbols too rich to write.) Barb was not — had not been; seasons had passed — though she was in some way connected. Barb was a life force of her own, one that Whitey had tapped into (Blackie a little less; and others too by proxy, Pete G. for one, probably Skip the Beard and doubtless more all around the continuum); she had touched them and moved them and indeed had helped to put them where they were, but they were a spice to her life, not an essential and therein lay the difference. In a way, Whitey had loved Barb, but never needed her. This one, well, need was only one of the urgencies in the air.

Blackie wanted words, as ever, so he began the inquisition.

"Gita," she responded coolly.

"Like the Hindu thing? The Bhagavad-Gita?" Orthography and derivations were important to him. Anyway they gave an edge, a way into the icy storm.

"Brigitte," she corrected briefly. "But you can write it with an 'a' because you're English, yes?"

"Yeah, right, we're from Newcastle. That's Whitey," (acknowledged with a blink or something fractionally more vigorous, "And I'm Blackie. You with an airline then, Gita?" (make friends and influence people, especially charming young ladies, by repeated use of their secret name).

"Charter. We fly out of Copenhagen. I am Danish," she clarified, responding slightly to his enthusiasm. Whitey offered a ciggy and she took it with slightly less self-consciousness. "But we are here because the Ariana jet broke down in London so we are filling in for it."

"The jet?" prodded Blackie.

"Maybe they have two. ¿Quien sabe? Anyway they break a lot."

"So you back to London tomorrow?"

They all knew she couldn't be. (And if the reader didn't, the author has been falling down on the job.) The atmosphere simply forbade it. Leaving aside the pointlessness of recounting a purely incidental encounter at this stage of this particular game (count the pages, the novel is winding down,

or is it blowing up), Gita was no casual lay nor yet a compulsive conversationalist. Though she enjoyed the iceberg façade, with all its implications of depth and important secrets, she was (and knew it) inside the force field, drawn by something she recognized without history or teaching, ready to play the rôle of Flying Fickle Finger of Fate and, yes, ready to pay for the privilege.

On the surface, however, the talk was trivial.

“No, Mecca, then back here in two days. Then maybe again, it depends if they can make their own aëroplane work.”

“Mecca?”

“Sure, the Haj.”

“Hodge?” Whitey was baffled and willing (good for him) to show it.

“Haj. Pilgrimage. Every Muslim is supposed to make the journey to Mecca once in his lifetime, they say, it’s very holy, but I think they sort of expected they’d have to walk over the desert, you know.”

“And now the crafty little buggers fly in a 707, yeah?” completed Blackie gleefully. “Instant karma!”

“Karma’s Hindu,” pointed out Whitey, whose sense of rightness was sometimes disturbed by Blackie’s ebullient approach to matters outside his own cultural context.

“‘Instant Karma’s gonna get you, knock you right off your feet,’ ” talk-sang Gita, to an obvious and, to her, amazing lack of recognition on the other two faces. “You don’t know that? John Lennon, John and Yoko, Plastic Ono Band, whatever. New single, ’s cool.”

“No shit!” exclaimed Blackie, not sure whether to be proud or resentful that the great man had beaten him to what he thought was a pretty nifty piece of wordplay. Whitey nodded and actually smiled; sounded good to him.

“Yeah, they cut all their hair off, too,” she continued.

“No shit!”

“Sold it off for peace.”

“No shit!”

“Yes shit!” she grinned. My, she had good teeth. Blackie felt faintly queasy about inspecting them like a vet but Whitey’s eyes just opened a tiny bit wider and Gita responded in kind. “How long you guys been gone anyway?”

“Left Europe in September, more or less.” Blackie was still doing the talking, though his partner was doing the communicating. “Six months, nearly seven.”

“Wow. How long you staying?”

“Oh, a while.” He wasn’t quite ready to get into all that, like the reasons they split or how they could afford drinks at the Inter-Continental — heaven knows why, it was obvious enough to her, being as she was in the transport business so to speak herself; she’d been tempted to carry but so far at least hadn’t done it. Blackie decided instead to glide the conversation back a bit and down a different direction.

“So how do these camel jockeys like the ’plane, then?” he asked, adding as an afterthought, “Done it before, have you?”

“Sure, one time. They’re OK, though, I like the Afghans actually.”

“Yeah, me too, I’m just being, you know ...”

“Rude,” finished Whitey, with a tight smile that loosened a little when the others joined in.

“Pooh, you want rude, you should talk to those shits,” she said, nodding at the door that had long since closed behind her fellows. “I had to get away.”

“Looked like they had something on their minds,” smirked Blackie.

“Oh sure, they fuck,” Gita sneered, moving into the open, “They probably smoke too, but they’re just bourgeois pigs really. I was telling them about this poor old guy last time, yes, never been on an aëroplane before, probably never been out of the desert before, he’s about a hundred and ten, right, he’s off to Mecca to die, practically. I saw him before, he was bug-eyed, I mean, he thinks we’re like from another planet, you know, but he was OK, not grabbing your tits or anything like those shits from Stuttgart or Milano or any of those fucking businessmen, you know?”

They knew. (And if they were closet tit-grabbers, they kept quiet about it.)

“Anyway, this old guy has to go, you know, so he gets out of his seat and he squats down in the aisle and —”

“No shit!”

“Yes absolutely shit!” She was laughing now and so were they. Blackie was rolling half off his chair while Whitey’s grin matched Gita’s tooth for tooth, if slightly less brightly.

“So he does it you know. I mean, that’s just what he does, yeh? He pulls up his pants and goes back to his seat and there’s just this huge turd sitting there on the rug. I nearly stepped in it.”

“So what’d ya do?” followed up Blackie.

“Oh I got some paper towels and a — what is it? — une truelle?”

“Truelle? Trowel! Like a fish-slice or something.”

“Yeh, yeh, and I scooped it up.” She shrugged mischievously. “No big deal.”

“The others,” prompted Whitey.

“Ach, them. I told them, you know, they didn’t do this run before, you know, so I tell them and they freak and they talk about throwing the guy off the ’plane and tearing up his ticket and everything. Puouh.” She blew them away theatrically. “They are as bad as Americans.” She paused, then amended: “Not all Americans. The ones with blue hair and chequered trousers, you know.” Perhaps the second whisky had got to Gita a bit.

“Wanna get high?” Whitey was ready to cut to the chase.

“Why not?” she asked rhetorically. “Not here, though.”

“Come on back.”

“Why not?”

The rest of the evening was all that any of them could have hoped, involving as it did a little of this, a certain amount of that and a most gratifying quantity of the other, in combinations and permutations that left little to any of their imaginations. Gita had a ten-o’clock call, but the co-operative (not to mention envious) Yusufi conjured up a nine-o’clock cab and an eight-thirty alarm of sorts (fist on door, functional if abrupt) so that was not a difficulty. She took her leave at the Grape Place door, with mutual agreements that on her return two days later they’d get in touch, so to speak, as Blackie couldn’t resist pointing out, wagging his eyebrows at the pun. She glowed in the morning sun, more gorgeous than ever despite (because of?) the damage done to her eyeliner, and blew kisses out of the taxi window.

“Copenhagen,” mused Blackie, “Perhaps it deserves its reputation.”

“Fuck me,” agreed Whitey.

“Hey, guys,” came an American voice from the dim and distant past.

“Fuck me,” repeated Whitey.

“Fuckin’ hell,” added Blackie, “It’s Skip the Beard.”

Let me forget about today until tomorrow

Bob Dylan,
 “Mr Tambourine Man,”
Bringing It All Back Home, 1965

TEA IS GOOD, THOUGHT ANNIE. Tea is always good at times like this. Times like this are good too. Just need a little tea, oh why not, here it is. My, that’s useful.

She was a little confused but well under control. The Goan publican, the European couple and Annie shared a moment of the night in vague companionship. She became caught up in the leaves, the little ones fluttering like chicks or kittens or baby ducks, and the big ones waving with grand and gentle gravity, Palms on the Sunday before Easter, solemn and sweet and lovely.

She looked up for Christ and saw him smiling. “Jesus,” she greeted him in astonishment.

“Ek chai, Marlo-ji,” muttered the newcomer, leaning on the other half of the doorjamb.

Annie revised her assessment, and deduced that she had kept her false recognition of the stranger within her own psychic or at least auditory boundaries. His build was crucifixion-skinny and his eyes were soulfully set; his hair was black and long — too straight perhaps for ancient Judea but even so much too real for a Baptist girl brought up to worship chocolate-box paintings of bearded blonds with nails through the fleshy part of their hands — and pulled back in a loose plait, away from a smooth face with cheekbones that would whet a razor. A sandalwood choker set off the deep tan of his neck, as did a shabby pale high-collared sleeveless vest, worn far too small and open, and below them knee-length cut-offs, crudely chopped above the knee with threads raveling where they would, white beneath the grime, once distinguished but baggy now and patched, transmogrified but clinging to life and purpose and usefulness. The man looked tired to the point of exhaustion and beyond, and fifteen pounds underweight, but beautiful behind it all, as though he were gliding on an edge like a bicyclist freewheeling downhill with no

brakes and nothing but luck and reflexes to keep him from disaster.

He saw her looking and she saw he saw and he saw she saw he saw and she ... waved him to the bench opposite her and he took it.

“Acha,” he acknowledged, and the same again to Marlon, whose prompt return presumably meant the kettle was still on.

“Can I have another, please?” asked Annie, giving up all pretense at speaking Goan/Hindi/Whatever, but raising her glass in the international gesture for refill.

Me too, mimed her new companion, slurping fast between cooling breaths. Obviously the pot wasn’t as hot as it had been.

Marlon nodded and raised his nose at the other couple, who denied him thrice, once each and once together. As he vanished once more into the kitchen, wondering perhaps if all this round-the-clock service really was worth it, the icon drained his first glass and spoke.

“Smoke?” he enquired civilly. Despite the look, the accent placed him somewhere in Britain. An intriguing combination, and bearing gifts too.

“Sure,” she responded equably.

The makings were conjured from the depths of an enormous trouser pocket. (Saville Row workmanship that, in the old style, designed and built to carry the enormous coins of pre-decimal Britain, lasting through the years like a safe surviving intact even as the house burns down and the ashes slowly cool ... to Annie the disintegrating shorts were nothing special, merely a trivial part of the parade of costumes, by themselves no stranger than most, though the jacket she would surely have seen as something ... but we know a little more of their provenance, do we not, and later so would she, but not yet, no, not for a while yet.) Long fingers, which in their own way had been apprenticed and

trained to automatic craftsmanship, laid out the components on the tabletop, expertly assembled them, lit the white touch-paper and passed it on. Annie took hers with aplomb, asked with an eyebrow and passed it on to the couple next door, whose appreciative grunts of response still gave no clue to their nationality. Dutch, perhaps? wondered Annie, quite unreasonably interested, as she blew a gratifyingly fat plume of smoke politely away from the approaching Marlon, who declined a hit and retired to his standard position, gloomy as Eeyore and not much more forthcoming. Annie squeezed one more out of it in her turn, and passed the roach to the Dutch (Belgian? she suddenly wondered; she'd never met a Belgian freak) woman, who drained and killed it with casual expertise.

The icon waved to acknowledge their thanks, emptied his lungs, yawned hard and dug finger and thumb deep into the nose-side corner of his eyes. He looked dead on his feet.

"Haven't got any speed, have ya?" he asked Annie, who shrugged and shook her head. He looked over at the other table. "Any speed? Uppers? Whites? Fuck — coke, acid, anything?" They shrugged and raised their palms in the universal sign for uselessness and ignorance. "I'm fucking knackered," he added unnecessarily (which would have proved the point for anyone who knew him, had it ever been in doubt).

Annie was deeply sorry for him, empathetic and caring and wanting desperately to help. Oh, she thought, light bulbs flashing on in the midst of the little gray cells, I could, couldn't I.

"I've got some acid," she ventured tentatively, "But it's shitty."

"Yeh?" A sparkle of interest lifted the lids.

"Just a minute." Annie was elevated, special, super-hip, in with the in crowd, foolish for feeling so frivolous, oh shut up self and find it. Which, vainglorious or not, she rapidly did. She pulled the tiny package out from beside her passport, tucked the pouch back inside her top, and began to fumble with the foil. "It was really good a couple of months ago but I took some this morning and it's gone off." She got the wrapping off and revealed the chunk of scotch tape wrapped around the microdots. It didn't peel back very effectively.

"Way off. Must have been the heat, I suppose. My old man kept it next to his skin while we came over-land." Yuck, she thought, 'my old man' — even I'm saying it; worse than 'heavy' that is. Nevermore, she vowed po-faced, scrabbling at the tape ravenously. "Guess it was too long really."

"Saw these."

"Yeah?" Annie was surprised for a second. "Oh, could be, we traded about ten for some hash. Reckon we gave the guy a shitty deal."

"Had two."

"Yeah?"

"Mmm."

Annie was getting frustrated. "Well, you're welcome to them if you want, if you can get at the fucking things." (She didn't usually swear much either but it seemed called for under the circumstances.) The couple next door weren't paying much attention, beyond keeping a weather eye open for any further items of interest that might be moving about. Marlon was more or less asleep. Annie passed over the packet with a grimace. "You have a go."

He looked at it a moment, testing the adhesive with a fingernail, and pulled away a chunk that contained half a dozen or so. A further second's inspection yielded a decision and he raised them to his lips, scraped them on the edge of an incisor and swallowed the lot, noticeable chunks of sticky stuff included.

Annie was impressed. It wasn't just the insouciance with which he treated what —let's face it — could have been about three thousand mikes, not to mention the glue (it wasn't like the kind of glue you sniff, she was pretty sure, but still). It was something about the decisiveness, the animal integrity that seemed to suffuse his being. More than self-confidence, it seemed to presage a state where questions like that simply disappeared. Transcendence, whispered her trained, educated, left-brain shrink-self. Sssh, came back the boss. Yes.

"Why d'ya need to stay awake?" she asked, partly out of genuine curiosity, partly to have something to say.

"Fucking electrics'll never last the night."

"Oh." She was even more impressed. "You're in charge of the music, then?"

“System.” He didn’t seem the talkative type (to Annie, this was a pleasant and intriguing change in itself) but he was willing to reply. Besides, he owed her and he knew it. “Generator, mikes, amps, speakers.” He shook his head, like a true pro plying his trade under difficult conditions. “String and fucking baling wire. Fucking miracle it’s still going.”

He gulped down the rest of his tea. Annie wasn’t ready to lose him yet (he was the most exciting thing to have happened all day) so she matched him slug for lukewarm, sugary slug. What was his name, she wondered, but that seemed too direct, too uncool to come straight out and ask. She wanted to tag him, however, for she liked to have a label to hand. What was it they called electricians in old war movies? He didn’t look (she thought, although she was really only guessing) like someone from north of the English border (or south either, truth to tell) so ‘Scotty’ wouldn’t do. Sparks! That was the one. Not quite right, but yet, was he striking something, all unconscious, in or off of her ... was this a pun of sorts? No matter. It would serve.

“Have another,” she suggested mildly.

Meaning, natch, both more and less than that (that too, as well). Sparks (we might as well follow Annie’s usage; his secret name was still hidden, from himself as much as from us, at least for the moment) looked straight at her, perhaps for the first time, with the various veils of whatever the hell he had been taking since god knows when parting briefly, showing her something gentle as well as direct, and opening to him a person who seemed interested, a little subdued perhaps, but hip without being hard ... not to mention the obvious, that she was extremely cute and on her own. He cocked an ear at the drifting sounds from the beach, which seemed to be keeping themselves together pretty well. He knew his nerves were on an edge, he hadn’t stopped — had he eaten? he wasn’t sure — he could use — oh, give yourself a break, lad, he said to himself and almost cracked a smile.

“Banana bread?” he countered.

“Why not?”

Indeed.

I am shocked, shocked, to find gambling is going on in here.

Captain Louis Renault, played by Claude Rains,
Casablanca, script by Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein
 & Howard Koch, with uncredited help from Casey Robinson,
 from an unproduced play by Murray Burnett & Joan Alison, 1942

ANNIE BURST OUT SMILING at Lige's irreverent suggestion. Tsk, tsk, she thought, who's a naughty boy then. Pshaw, harrumph, pfui, tchah (pick one, they're all typographic tricks for non-verbal thinking). Where shall we do it?

Barely aloud, she responded:

"Sure."

And felt the delicious thrill of harmless sin.

Lige inclined his head doorwards and they edged unobtrusively back into the cop and past and on outside. They sauntered down the steps, shoulder almost to shoulder, and out through the parking lot with maximum *caz* and minimum gab, leaving the Savings and Loan behind and heading off for the mysteries of 45th Avenue keeping an inconspicuous lookout for unmarked cops and other undesirables. Left again, he transmitted, and right down 47th, and she picked it up and they headed down for the edge of the park by the railroad tracks, still without saying a word.

The sun was down but not quite out. The brittle warmth of the autumn afternoon was being shattered by the coolth of a clear evening. The first planets were emerging to view, set off like gemstones by flickering stars on blue-black felt over in the eastern sky.

Annie felt peaceful and safe. Nervous and excited too, for sure, but nothing bad would happen to her here. This she *knew*. She was aware (ah, that's the key) not only of where she was but of who she was, and as much of who this stranger was: not where he had been, not even where he was going, but of who he was inside, a sudden psychic connection, an insight born of love. Not lust, exactly; not an urge to live together and mate forever; a free and joyous and complete and total acceptance of someone she simply saw the essence of and trusted.

Yeah, kid, rape city.

That corner of her brain existed, the normal, real, justifiable nervousness that every woman

knows in this era of regenerate barbarism (did it ever disappear?) and she did not deny it, she simply knew that here, now, it was not relevant. Annie was as skeptical as anyone she knew about vibes, spirits and the whole paranormal charade of phenomena: no more than most she knew, mind you, and less than many she didn't. Language was not her strongest suit (this in fact was an advantage in these matters, which turns the concept upside down of course), but some things she knew could happen. Let the overeducated few perform their academic miracles of self-justification — synchronicity, very well, call something so (many do); stick your right forefinger slowly and surreptitiously up in the wind and call it autodexiodactylorthobradycryptozephyranthropoprotophantasmoparaprognostication if you will (no one does); label and box and try to tie down what you see and deny what you feel, that's fine, that's fine, just don't insist on containing her experience within your own, like a blind Ptolemaean astronomer denying shooting stars — Annie was there and Annie knew. Don't try this at home, kids, its easy to fool yourself and impossible to explain why it was that she knew, and she was right, that foolish was the least of what she was that soft darkening evening.

Lige walked.

He pulled a packet of Samsun tobacco from his pocket and extracted a pre-rolled little number, which he lit as they strolled down the road. Annie caught a whiff, and yes, no Dutch brew that. He brushed his hand by hers and she took it from him and walked a stride or three then raised it, gently toking and sauntering and eventually transferring it back without bursting her lungs. Less effective, less conspicuous. No point in being too obvious, no harm in being too cool. And again, and back, until he flipped the butt onto the ground to stamp, before stooping to pick it up like a properly con-

cerned addict who didn't want to sully the pavement. He placed it tidily in a trashcan, conveniently provided at the corner of the park, and they turned right towards the community center and the tennis courts.

Still not a word.

Annie felt a giggle coming on, and almost let it.

"You know, we did make an agreement."

Lige looked at her quizzically.

"We said there wouldn't be any dope at the demo."

Lige looked at her again. Annie smiled. He seemed so completely unconcerned.

"Well, they, I guess they didn't want anyone getting busted or doing anything stupid or ..." She tailed off, as she understood that they were doing what they thought was right, or at least acceptable, and if she was treating others (with consideration and gentle care) the way she wanted them to treat her — following the Golden Rule that is and was and ever more no doubt shall be — she was getting a little buzz on, now, was she not, ah not to worry ... now where was she? yes, now wasn't it up to her? She smiled wider now and looked up at Lige's solid and gentle face for confirmation.

"Fuck 'em," he clarified.

"Yes. Right, then," agreed Annie, in unconscious emulation of another voice, half a world — half a lifetime — away, one that she had never known.

They reached the high fence that surrounded the tennis courts and peered for a moment at the players. Mothers and daughters were playing mediocre but friendly doubles under the lights on one court while two athletic young men thrashed the ball with more vigor than accuracy on the other. Like any ordinary scene, it was the opening to a universe and simultaneously nothing of any interest at all except to some of the participants. Annie and Lige were merely observers there. They turned in tandem and began to stroll back towards Jade and 45th.

"Hang on," said Annie, "I want to get my shawl."

She half-jogged the fifty yards to where the Bunny was waiting patiently by the side of the road, worked the key from her pocket and opened the door. The shawl was on the back seat, and she

caught Lige looking at her ass with stony-faced appreciation as she bent in to pick it up. After a moment, she smiled to herself and decided to take it as a compliment. He didn't speak but he sure gave off an aura. She walked back to him a little more slowly, settling the shawl around her shoulders and wondering whether to kiss him.

"You think they'll decide to stay all night?" she asked instead.

"Yeh."

"Gonna?" she asked, slipping into his taciturn habits.

He inclined his head in the classic Asian style, forty-five degrees, halfway between a nod and a shake. She recognized it suddenly and with delight for what it was (acceptance more than agreement) but before she could comment he bounced the question back.

"You?"

"Yes, I expect so. Wanna get back?"

Lige waggled his head again (she felt self-conscious about saying anything now, and slipped into that fine foreign body language that he seemed to assume she shared), and they began to head up 45th. The sky was almost dark now, and suddenly they saw the moon rising on their right, huge and white and awesome. It floated above the little houses of the jewel box, edging through the suburban greenery, stretching and gathering its power and wonder.

"Look," she said, "It's full."

"Acha," said Lige, and reached an arm around her shoulders.

They stood there, staring, for just a minute, and both bowed their heads in worship. Annie slid her right arm around his waist.

"Aaaaauuummmm," he murmured almost under his breath.

"Aaaaauuummmm," she harmonized quietly.

They turned to face each other and kissed, slowly, softly, long and sweet and silent and smooth and very very still. She pulled away, and stared at his face. Something ran across it, something dark and ancient and mysterious, and there was a flash of un-named mutual recognition, and suddenly he looked very fragile beneath the surface of strength.

"Who are you?" she said, and he began to cry.

Rise like lions after slumber
 In unvanquishable number —
 Shake your chains to earth like dew
 Which in sleep had fallen on you —
 Ye are many — they are few.

Percy Bysshe Shelley,
 “The Mask of Anarchy,”* 1819

THE CURSE OF DETACHMENT is the failure to engage. The problem with engaging is you can’t detach. Only the Bodhisattva does both.

Not that your ’umble is making claims to Buddha-hood, you understand.

Kerouac-hood, perhaps.

The blessed Jack was a lousy brake-man on the San José railroad, and if truth be told not much of a hitch-hiker either. He couldn’t stand hippies and he withered away as an awful old drunk, by all accounts.

So what.

He wrote the Great American Novel, isn’t that justification enough?

Nope.

What made him great — still does — is not what he wrote, not what he did, not even what he thought or believed. It’s what he felt. Whether he knew it or not. He tried. And if the bastards ground him down at the end, that’s not his shame, it’s theirs. Everyone who boxes him up and puts him on a shelf and labels him as literature (good or bad) is missing the point, and that includes (natch) dear old Duluoze his very own self. He was a fucked-up All-American football star literature major, and

*Shelley was clearly an anarchist by modern standards — a hippie, actually, a free-loving, dope-taking, pacifist vegetarian pantheist of poetic genius — but in this apocalyptic poem he uses the term ‘anarchy’ to convey brutal and bloody lawlessness, which the people of England, inspired by Hope, can lay low with the other Destructions disguised “like Bishops, lawyers, peers or spies.”

remained so even after he tossed all that out of the window, along with conventional plot and editing and character development. He never killed the urge to detach, even when he was most engaged.

Poor sod.

Hero.

All of us are both when just we dare. The travelers on the hippie trail, the politicians in the streets — never think they’re not self-conscious, never think they think they are. It’s not the doing that really counts, it’s the feeling that makes the deed inevitable.

Never learn in order to write, write in order to learn.

The author of this book, with whom I share body and brain, is nevertheless not me, though I fear I chose most of the epigraphs. For example, I consider Bob Dylan to be the greatest artistic genius of my lifetime, which roughly coincides with the second half of the twentieth century, while the author is clearly a Deadhead; moreover, I was a Beatlemaniac from November ’62, while the author is a Stones fan (it used to matter). From a nineties perspective, Dylan permeates the culture and the Beatles are still behind almost everything vibrant in pop music (not to mention their necrophiliac chart-topping; sure, I bought ’em, even kinda like ’em), so of course they show up, but when I sat down to write, the first step was generally to put on *Workingman’s Dead*. God knows why, the God of (*Searching for*) *Solid Ground*.

It’s not important, it’s just vital.

Yes, you made your own amusements then
Going to the pictures

Robin Williamson, The Incredible
String Band, "Way Back in the 1960s,"
The 5,000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion, 1967

YO, DUDES," HOLLERED HIS HAIRINESS, "What the fuck are you doing up at this ungodly hour?"

"Never known you when we weren't," countered Blackie happily. "You were sacked out in a bus last time we saw ya."

"Must be fuckin' artificial energy," retorted the little man, wearily dumping his pack in the dust.

"Yeah, right, one or the other."

"Lucky fuckers. Any room in the old caravanserai?"

Whitey observed the pair of them batting words across the driveway, apparently by reflex and certainly without more than incidental meaning, rather like dogs nuzzling each other and circling to sniff each other's butts. He was glad to see Skipper, he accepted, and Blackie was more, and that was all right. Why, he didn't wonder. Presumably he was succumbing to the lure of the somewhat familiar in the midst of the forever strange.

Blackie and Whitey had thought about the little Yank they had met in the night once or twice, incidental curiosity, nothing more, but it was enough to keep his image catalogued where their brains could fetch it without any bother, the way you know your friends. In such mysterious ways had intimacy developed in absence. Somewhere in that bus they had offered up a thread to Clotho, who went on silently spinning in the dark, till the measurement of Lachesis matured and, yes, Atropos approached with her scissors to cut the cloth to fit. And soon they would wear the coat.

"Yusufi," called Whitey practically, "Got a room?"

The innkeeper strode out to inspect the new arrival and nodded solemnly.

"After two hours," he announced.

"Cool," said Skip, "How you been, man?" Which elicited another generous little inclination of

the turban. "Any chance of breakfast? Can I dump my bag in the office? Through here, right? Great, man, great. Just put it on one side, no sweat."

Yusufi remembered the little prick now. He was harmless, almost entertaining. Besides, he knew those two, and his money was good. Bowing to inferior force, he accepted the bag, and ushered the others over towards the dining area.

"Oh, man, stupidest fucking thing, I took the overnight bus from Peshawar. Do not do that unless you are totally desperate, man, there's no sleep, no view, no music, no one awake to score from at the border, trying to do the whole thing on just some crummy Temple Balls — you had them, right? — very fucking pretty, Nepali government seal and everything, piss-weak and pourable, you got anything decent?"

"Pourable?" laughed Blackie. "What you saying, lad?"

"Down the drain, man. Oh, shit, I need tea, I need hash, I need food, I need a bath, I need sleep, I need a good fuck, I need everything and it's my birthday, almost — day after tomorrow — they got a word for that in Nepali, like mañana but one better — and no-one to bake me a cake."

Skip the Beard contrived to look so sorry for himself that everyone laughed. The boy brought tea and apple turnovers. Blackie did the honors on the appetizer. Whitey reached into his coat pocket and extracted half a dozen pills.

"Billy Cotton?"

Skipper looked puzzled. "I wish you fucking Limeys spoke English," he complained.

"Wakey-wakey," threw in Blackie by way of explanation. "He's on telly. Catch-phrase."

"Amphetamine Billy, eh? Well, most kind I'm sure. Damn! Where the fuck d'ya get these? These are Swiss, aren't they? You got a connection?"

Whitey nodded and they lost the evidence.

Not that he needed the encouragement, but with it Skip the Beard was truly launched and over the next couple of hours entertained all (not to mention Sun-Dry the newly-named washer-woman, to whom he offered a most unlikely quantity of soiled garments of indeterminate original hues), with a compelling patchwork of tales that encompassed doctoral studies in Varanasi (complete with orthographic digressions ranging as far afield as the disappearing bee sound in Modern Greek, hence the strange but ubiquitous word *μπεατλες* meaning Fab Four but spelt em-pee not bee), and meditation camps in the lower Himalaya (complete with theology from Tibet and the fluvial geography of Central Asia, comparing and contrasting the combined flow of the Brahmaputra, Indus and Ganges with that of the mighty Mississippi–Missouri), and railway lines of gauges many and various (with speculations as to why the Indian ones were built by the British but not of standard gauges, if anything of width 56.5 inches — and no better in metric at 143.5 centimeters — deserves the term standard anyway), and on and on and on till Whitey almost regretted supplying the fuel and even Blackie was ready to retire and leave the little fellow sitting and talking to the wall, as responsive an audience as he seemed to require anyway.

Still, they liked the cheerful little sod.

“He’s nuts,” approved Blackie that afternoon up in the aerie.

“Yeh,” smiled his mate.

“We should get him a birthday present. Why not? Surprise the little bastard. Whaddya think?”

Whitey nodded. Sure, why not.

“Ah but what do you give to the man who has nothing?”

“What’d he want?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” enthused Blackie, “He told us didn’t he. Tea, check; hash, check; food, check; bath, well, shower, check; sleep, right now, check; ... oh, shit.”

Whitey, who had never paid as much attention as his partner to these verbal pirouettes, failed to follow and Blackie had to clarify:

“He needs a good fuck.”

Whitey looked up and caught Blackie’s eye. They were never far out of sync.

“Gita,” they smiled in harmony.

“I bet she fucking would if we asked her,” added Blackie, unnecessarily.

The cloth the Fates were weaving for them was beginning to reveal its shape. The threads were spun long and straight, stretching back to the unsuspecting souls and on to eternity, where they would be entangled and wound around and around like silken twine till the fabric’s strength was as the strength of ten for its heart was pure and its aim was true and it was well formed. The cloth was becoming a noose.

“Gotta get t’her,” pointed out Whitey, in a little interjection with massive consequences of guilt and horror to come. He proved his complicity with that simple observation, and when he finally looked back, he was too clear to deny it. Their alliance covered everything, they never said but always believed; they might have admitted as much in the privacy of the bedroom interrogation chamber, with a single candle pouring its light unbearably through their eyelids and into their brains, and the truth serum of love agonizing through their veins. But they were wrong. It is an axiom of torture that you cannot make a victim reveal what he does not know, and they did not understand the exquisite truth that becomes a lifeline in disaster but a poison forever before that time. Had Whitey left this lark entirely to Blackie, he would have been taking out insurance against pain and paying the cost in commitment — he would have been spared some of the burden of guilt, but the moment he paid the premium he would have lost in his soul the absolute partnership he believed he had earned and needed and wanted and found. No, he couldn’t have done that, he was too much the idealist, but that is not to say he couldn’t look back afterwards and wish not to be himself. Poor man, he was wrong to hope for such a thing, and crippled later perhaps by the desire, but at the time, like a gambler on a streak, he drew his hand and never questioned the thought of playing it.

“Yeah,” ruminated Blackie, “We figured she’d just come here when she got off work.”

“When?”

“Well, that’s the point, innit. Tomorrow sometime, probably late afternoon, anywhere from two to six she thought.”

“Hmpfgh.”

“And Skip’s gonna be here, right? I mean, we can always keep him here, that’s easy, but no way can we stop him being here.”

“Grndh.”

“So if we wanna get to Gita ’fore she gets here, we better go hang out ’t t’Inter, yeah?”

“Yeh.”

“Three be safe, she won’t come early.”

Which settled it. Further planning was considered superfluous until her consent was obtained. Mild fantasies were briefly bandied about, concerning large red ribbons and other small decorations, but mostly the imaginations were left on their own to develop. The hour, it was thought, would produce the plan.

And so it was that, the following afternoon, Blackie and Whitey once more shimmered through the reality gates that guarded the jet set from the incoherent assault of camel dung. The sun shone equally on both sides of the divide, half way down the sky, and the clocks all read three (more or less) but the calendar in the street, Blackie explained, was pretty certain the year was 1390 and the one inside was distinctly confused, oscillating unpredictably between the fourteenth century and the twentieth, or the eleventh, or fifty-first, or occasionally the fifty-eighth, (all according to dynastic

or religious preference) or even perhaps the first: a case could be made for calling the year 24, to correspond nicely both with those present and with the atomic era itself ... in which perforce everyone around was living, whether they knew it or not.*

With such idle banter, Blackie was preparing to pass the idle hour of waiting. They checked with the desk clerk, dressed in black, who (probably) informed them that the Danish flight crew was not back yet but expected momentarily (he might have been merely being polite and saying what he hoped they wanted to hear), so they turned as by instinct for the watering hole. After all, the afternoon could profitably be spent in taste-tests of such imported brews as were available. Whitey, half listening to the garbled speculations on Hindu and Jewish and Buddhist and Confucian and heaven knew what methods of telling the year, walked softly through the open door and halfway to the bar before stopping abruptly in his tracks.

Blackie bumped right into Whitey’s back and began to complain until he saw what Whitey had just seen, and quit, paralyzed. Sitting on a stool by the bar was a blast from the past, looking puzzled and getting himself outside of a long and fairly cool lager.

Rodge the Enforcer.

*At that moment, which Blackie and Whitey usually thought of as early June 1970, the year was, in increasing order, 19 by the British Regnal system of dating, 24 Atomic, 178 French Revolutionary, 1091 Nepali (Newar), 1390 Muslim, 1892 Indian (Saka), 1970 Christian, 2028 Indian (Vikrama), 2281 Grecian (Seleucidae), 2630 Japanese, 2718 Babylonian, 2723 Roman, 5072 Indian (Kaliyuga), 5084 Mayan, 5730 Jewish, and 7479 by the Byzantine reckoning.

If some of these seem somewhat conjectural, the reader raised in the Christian world would do well to recall that the “anno domini” method is inaccurate, since Jesus is thought to have been born a few years (perhaps seven

B.C.E.; it was devised by the modest but brilliant Dionysius Exiguus (Dionysius the Little) in the sixth century, by his reckoning, and popularized by the Venerable Bede a couple of centuries later.

We do not, of course, have to be limited to annual cycles. The Chinese cycles (of sixty years) had by then been running for about 4247 years (since 2277 B.C.E.). The Hindus take an even broader view of such matters for some purposes and use a cycle of 4,320,000 years, more or less, which means we are still stuck in nought or is it one and even as a species may never see a cycleversary. Pity that, it should be a heck of a party.

Are birds free from the chains of the sky-way?

Bob Dylan,
 “Ballad in Plain D,”
Another Side of Bob Dylan, 1964

SPARKS ATE THE WAY HE DRANK, with contained enthusiasm and complete commitment. Annie, by contrast, was eating mostly as excuse. She peeked at him as she licked crumbs off her fingers and smiled at herself, not wanting to be obvious about the sensuality, well not too obvious, but he didn't seem to notice. Evidently he was hungry.

“How long's it going to go on?” she asked, as much for the sake of something to say as out of curiosity.

He looked up at her and she got confused. How long was what going to go on? Was this a cosmic question? A matter of opening hours? A flirt's gambit, all innuendo and no substance at all. But wait, it was her question and the least she could do was clarify it, if only for herself.

“The party,” she decided.

He shrugged pleasantly. “Morning.” Pause. “Maybe later.”

“When did it start?”

Now that drew a wan belly laugh, more cosmic reverberations rattling around the palms. There were no watches that night.

“Sunset. Last week. Depends.”

“And you've been holding it together the whole time?”

“Hngrh.”

“You must be exhausted.”

He looked her in the eye and thanked her and accepted her respect and acknowledged the ploy and offered his own and wondered who she was and whether a pass was on or should he wait.

“Hnng,” he said.

“Poor baby,” she said, leaving her meaning vague: Sympathy or satire? Come-on or take-off? A counterfeit cover for genuine pity or was it the real pinchbeck? If she didn't entirely know, or couldn't tell or wouldn't admit, how the hell could he? Easy, she thought, looking at his eyes as he

raised them to hers. His were dark and huge, opened wide, the pupils black and enormous in the moon-shade of the teahouse, the irises round and complete, the whites meeting underneath — sanpaku, yes? Cedar would know; it was spiritual, wasn't it? a sign of the evolved being — they were the eyes of a truth-teller, a prophet, a soothsayer, a perfect master, a creature of enlightenment, yes, a man who knew, a person of power and dignity and respect. She shivered and decided she had better bring them both down a bit.

“Where did all this stuff come from?” she asked, out of lack of interest.

“Hong Kong.”

As she cranked up her courage and he fell back on reserves of patience, they passed a time which seemed now short, now long, fluctuating with maddening unpredictability as the emotions and the engagements and the tiredness and let's face it the drugs floated in and out, a clockwork quarter of an hour, or a subjective slice of eternity, filled with answers and questions that led to a sketchy history of minor corruption and major planning, rumors of money and facts that were never to be known, even for an initiate ... some said the cash came from the guy who set up Woodstock; others that it was a bored and big-time dope dealer; or someone behind a record company; or, of course, all three together or separately or even rolled into one ... but anyway Sparks, it emerged, had been present and rolling as ever the summer before when no one was in Goa (except of course the Goans, and a few from the mysterious West whose personæ were less than gratæ elsewhere in the known universe and best kept generally incognitæ) and he had let it be known (for like jailbirds, the supercool kept their pasts respectably hidden unless they felt like letting the curtain slip a calculated fraction for effect or a moment's advantage) that he had been not just a

pop star (of a sort and for a moment, in a group — this being the time after and before they were called bands, like Glenn Miller's and Duane and Gregg Allman's — that someone smoking with them had actually heard of, if not exactly admired, which served as a sufficiently heavy reference) but, which was more to the point at the time, a tour manager afterwards (rather than roadie for obvious reasons of prestige and self- and therefore public esteem) who knew how to build a stack without frying the amps, and how many watts to use (Charlie, on drums, for a start) and whether you needed to know about ohms and ampères and fairer days and coulomb nights, and jools (on fire about then with Brian Auger's Trinity, and well out of the reach of mere mortal men awake) ... and yes that's not what he said though much of it was in the texture of his voice and no it's not what she heard but the facts were never the point and meaning itself (while important and taken by both with proper solemnity because lying or boasting would have tarnished a moment they sought together to improve) was outside the purpose of her inquisition, so leave it that as he lifted the veil she caught a glimpse of something and if she never could quite nail the truth of what remained in the end someone else's former reality, sketched though it was with monosyllabic precision, she caught a hint suggested here with a sliver from a third (or is it a fourth, or another, or one that never was then or there but only here and now, ah but where is now and who for that matter is here but us) ... all this, and much more, and far less too, pirouetting around the æther they filled which in turn filled them, as the sand dripped slowly down through the pinched glass and built its castles, not in the air, oh no, Prospero, spare us your improbable nightmares, but down on the shoreline while the tide in all its white-capped splendor headed in towards the beach, chasing after the moon at the height of its magical powers.

"Come," she whispered, holding out a hand for him to take.

They stood. He reached to his pocket with his other hand but she waved him down and tendered a legal note to Marlon, who blinked and gestured and returned a couple of coins, small it seemed so

she waved them away without even counting — she always checked but not tonight, to-nigh-igh-ight, there was no time for tri-vi-al-i-ties — and they strolled softly into the dark.

He was led but he did not follow. She was inspired but she did not think. He knew how to be with her and she believed in herself completely, and both were together and present in the moment and both knew all there was then to know, which was nothing, and magnificent. And yes as we look through the long lenses of time and space, so the shabby costumes fall away and the tawdry tinsel dissolves, yes the smudges of sand and foam disappear while the supple subtlety of physical grace and untrammelled emotion sharpens into tighter and tighter focus, yes then we see them, by a beach and under a moon, hostage to none but each other, perfectly clear and clearly perfect.

Annie wasn't looking for pleasure, no indeed not, not even the delicate and selfish variety that comes from obeisance and giving, still less the affirmations that spring from the wonders of pain. Nor was she out to impress, to invest a piece of her self in athleticism and inventiveness for the sake of compliments expressed or implicit. There were no consequences here, not in any mundane form, no futures or pasts, no dreams of rug-rats or retirement homes, no intentions of quietly boastful confidences, no fears of blisters or worse in that happy time between the discovery of penicillin and the boom of herpes, all too soon to be followed by the gathering doom of HIV and AIDS. There was nothing here, nothing at all, and everything in a grain of sand. She was here. Surely that was enough. Annie.

And Sparks.

Here he was, gone and back, come again blinking in the moonlight. What was it about her that drew him out of his protective carapace? Something there was for certain, and he began to remember a purity, an innocence lost perhaps, a reality he knew he needed and once had known that lately he had managed to forget he had forgotten. She thought, it was obvious, that she was impressed by his importance in the little world he had helped to invent, his centrality to the power structure — ah, indeed a glorious pun, he knew, one he would not

choose to make but never imagine he could not recognize what he did not chase, and the happenstance of it reminded him of one who would, indeed, of him whose memory he had tried to lose — so she would screw him like a light-bulb, as the generator of the hub of the night-time universe, the man without whom (he denied it, but in this unlike most things he was wrong) the music would be quiet and the stage dark, a little god in a tiny world ... and she was impressed, she was, but so was the French chick from the day before, and the boring Italian cunt who had tried to move in ... groupies, they were called back home, at least in polite company, and they were used if they were there when wanted, and sometimes they were not, and none but a fool paid the slightest attention.

Not her, he knew, and so not him, not here, not now.

Sparks had tried to disappear, and no one he met had noticed. Which meant he had succeeded. Oh, some body was there, to be sure, an extremely efficient roller of doobies and a tolerable electrician whose wiring mostly lasted at least until the feedback freaks conspired to blow it out, but no one had talked with him, or listened with him, or been with him, no one for months, and the scabs were closed over his wounds.

Why did this woman want to pick them off?

Because, of course, he wanted her to.

He didn't know that.

Nor did she.

Annie took them slowly into the shade of a palm, another, a third, until the blackness hid them almost from each other and certainly from everyone else. There was the slightest of breezes, cool enough to raise the roughness of tiny goose bumps on their forearms, carrying an indistinct mutter of music that she knew that he heard and so they could ignore for only its absence would intrude. She kissed him then, and he was part of her kiss, but he did not take her and she did not force. She simply began to flow and cover and envelop, not laughing, not yielding or taking, but leaning and bending and nibbling and licking and opening and taking and all the time he stood there, gorgeous as a statue, and she ran her hands around and gently ever so softly held him to her.

There was an unnervingly sweet persistence to her and he knew that he must not move. He laid his hands lightly on her shoulders and looked and remembered what perhaps never had been and yearned for what certainly never would be. He thought of the coarse redness of a beard softened by the months to a bushiness that mixed and mingled with his own fine blackness till the tangles disappeared and the life within them began to flow.

She didn't plan or calculate or try, she wasn't giving, barely even taking, just continuing along a path she had chosen but not expected and certainly not wanted, she didn't even like it if truth be told but liking was as little a part of what was going on as anything else in words, she never understood her own strange motivations, and she heard from a distance a moan that sounded almost like a sob and there was a terrible flash of mindfulness — now isn't this an experience that puts one closer than ever to some shameful fantasy of anonymous subservience, of indeed groupiedom, and isn't this all just a little, well, ridiculous — all of a sudden she was there, in the risible flesh, and thus gone from the true reality, but almost as soon as she lost her way she found it again and so she vanished and so reappeared, wanting nothing, wanting everything, enveloped in a pure and sticky warmth, a glee, a moment, a prayer, a sigh, a swallow and the sweetness of a kiss.

She rose as smoothly as she could manage, smiling wryly at the sudden awkwardness of legs and knees, and ran her fingers up to his cheekbones.

"You're crying," she murmured, shocked but not surprised, and reached up to lick his salty cheek.

He raised his arms and caressed her hair and worshipped in tears what he never would see again. She kissed his neck, and lowered her head, and buried her ear in the smoothness of his chest, and held him tight and firm in wonder.

"Not you," he croaked under his tears. "Not you."

I know, she rubbed, with wit enough to be silent, I know.

She understood then that she acted better than she knew. She was there, she had thought, for adventure — for kicks, for fun, for thrills, for fantasies named and swiftly fulfilled — and now she

saw herself first as a sort of holy woman, a witch or a weird, a sorceress, even a Fate, drawn there for some purpose she could not touch or label or explain, and then suddenly she broke through, one more step beyond, as she realized that such a simple trick could never be enough — a goddess worshipped being only a whore in raiment — and the same was true of the awful God the Father, as she held a man and wondered at herself and the full extent of her knowledge as she opened up to sorrow and pitied the divine in all its disguises.

There is no purpose but purpose itself.
And yet it is enough.

“I love,” she whispered.

He stroked her hair, untangling the evening’s salty knots, and understood there need be no you in love and so he need never let it slip away, for love can remain when lovers are gone.

What he needed was not another.

What he needed was his own self.

An eye for an I and a taste for the truth. The chains of this law will set you free.

The rain it raineth every day
 Upon the just and unjust fellah
 But more upon the just because
 The unjust hath the just's umbrella

from the oral tradition, attributed
 in slightly different form to the 19th-century
 Lord Bowen by Walter Sichel in *Sands of Time*, 1923

I DON'T KNOW," Lige whispered, like someone fumbling in a foreign language, "I don't know." Annie kissed his neck, and lowered her head, and buried her ear in the smoothness of his chest, and held him tight and firm in wonder as her world imploded.

Not you, he sobbed in silence, Not you.

I know, she rubbed, wordlessly, I know.

Strange unromantic place for epiphany. Standing on a sidewalk in the jewel box, amid the slumbering cars, with flickering TV screens peeping out between the curtains, and the moon seeming out of place, like a priest in the marriage bed. Tiny lawns with children's lost toys, and the lost dreams of grown-ups trying to forget. Some understandings cannot be denied.

They hugged, Annie and Lige, they hugged for ever as the stars unfurled and the night grew long and cool. They hugged for days, as lifetimes passed with blinding insights none could know. They hugged in prayer and glory, they hugged till the planets bowed before them. They hugged, in point of rude fact, until a baffled householder wanted to park in the driveway next to where they stood, and the glare of his headlights broke them apart in laughter.

They looked, at themselves mirrored in each other's understanding.

"Sparks," she said.

His clarity dissolved into puzzlement.

Sparks? he replied with wrinkled brow.

Sparks, she confirmed, smoothing away the creases with her hand.

"Goa," she said, and the lights went on.

"Goa," he said in naked wonder.

"Seventy," she elaborated, and he waggled his head with a child's smile. "You did the electrics, didn't you?"

He agreed.

"I never knew your name, I called you Sparks."

"I know you."

"Yes, me too."

He raised an eyebrow like a drawbridge, distancing himself with irony as the superficial inquiry served only to indicate a lack of real interest. The connection that came from the ability to ask wordless questions — see, we understand each other, do we not? — could function just as well to keep the other away — we are not really going to talk, are we? — and Lige/Sparks had used this for years, he was a master of the indistinct and deniable feint who could conceal even as he flaunted his vulnerability.

"Shut up," said Annie, reasonably.

So (natch) he didn't, but the chuckle was genuine and if it seemed out of character (and it did) that was only a sign of how buried his identity really was. Hard shells protect but stifle too.

"Know what I called you here?" she asked suddenly, expecting the answer 'no' and getting it in gesture. "Lige."

"Lige?"

"Like Kaw-liga."

"Fuckin' hell."

"True."

There was a pause which somehow wasn't embarrassing, to the surprise of both.

"Well, Hank's cool," he admitted, looking on the bright side.

"You know Hank Williams."

"Course."

"I thought you'd be mad."

"Am."

"Are not."

"Not."

"Are."

He gave up and kissed her, out of mingled passion and respect. He couldn't remember having this kind of looseness, dare he say it, fun. He wasn't in love, no no, but he was on, or she was, or someone was, and damned if he was going to stop it. She leaned back, and looked again. She was always looking, that one. (In his experience, true enough.)

"So what is your name?"

"I have many names."

This was simply true: Annie's labels had never been among them, but he had had passports by then in five names (and three nationalities), he had had lovers under several of them and many others, he had drunk and stoned under another overlapping cluster of cognomina, worked under yet another ... the set of sets was beginning to approximate infinity, where everything is equivalent to naught (and good to evil, perhaps, or is that not — naughtily — the same?) or meaning to null, how appropriate for the most-defined word in the English language, 'set' itself, a group or cluster of so many meanings, all distinct, and together a blur without some context to, so to speak, set it in ... such intellectual speculation was never his verbal style, but the concept was entirely familiar. He had used so many names that sometimes he thought he had achieved a blissful non-attachment and sometimes merely that he had forgotten his own. When he spoke, he wasn't kidding and his tone confirmed it and Annie could hear.

"So you have no name?"

"I do not know my name."

The tears were close again. He was terribly delicate just then, his self close to exposed, the rock of his surface scratched and fissured. He stood there with immense dignity, speaking the truth, and she knew it.

Bring him down, she thought, bring him down.

"I'm Annie," she said, as a matter of purely mundane detail, and continued just as matter-of-factly, "What did they call you in Goa?" After a moment, she explained patiently, "I need to call you something."

"Goa," he said, and she waited while he disappeared into a past he rarely visited anymore. "Goa," he repeated, thinking of times he never remembered.

"In Goa they called me Whitey."

"But that's not your name."

"No."

She was pressing, she knew, but he wanted her to. What was she doing for him? And what, in turn, was he doing for her?

If she was his sibyl, he was her seer. She made him look at what he refused to face, and he gave her the power to change her own life too, for in presenting reality to him, she accepted it as her own due. More rigid than stable, apart they learned to survive and yearned to transcend. Together they each were compelled to something they could not dare alone. They each carried a glimpse of heaven, and showed it to the other.

"Come," said Annie practically, "We should see what they decided on."

"Yeah," said Whitey.

They were suddenly aware that they were out of place, clinging to each other on that suburban sidewalk, which raised the specters of cops and neighbors and other sources of tedious curiosity. They had more work to do, they accepted that, and they knew somehow there would be room for it, right then, right there, well, up the street actually.

They held hands and walked slowly towards their glorious doom.

Et tout le reste est littérature.
Everything else is just literature.

Paul Verlaine,
“Art poétique,” 1882

SHIT,” HISSED BLACKIE UNDER HIS BREATH, as he recovered his balance. “Shit on shingles.”

Keep quiet, Whitey thought, taking charge.

“You,” growled Rodge the Enforcer, putting his glass on the bar. “Been looking for you.”

Yeah, reckoned Whitey, impaled by the stare from the stool, Bet you have.

Christ, thought Blackie, why?

For a long, long second, the tableau stood.

Rodge was taking his time as usual. He could move fast enough when required but knew in his bones that ponderous inevitability was his most effective garb. Besides, while he had been intending to ask these two to assist him with his enquiries, he was not yet ready to carry out the capital sentences their anarchist convictions probably merited. He was after Ahmed.

Blackie was simply paralyzed with fear, and its attendant shame. He had blithely been carrying on (again) as if there were no consequences to consider. Or as if he acted in a sort of vacuum, sneaking around the inconvenient facts he wished to avoid, and denying the uncomfortable truth that problems, like happiness, present a moving target. This little local difficulty, however, was looming like a mother-fucker and there didn’t seem much room to squeeze around the side. He was blanking out in panic.

Whitey was coming to his senses. In the space between breaths, many things fell into place and he understood completely what had happened, and what was going on, and indeed what was about to take place. The trivial details would always escape him: that Fingers had been spotted going into the Shakespeare with bulging pockets and leaving with more cash than was entirely good for him, that he had been followed and nabbed and busted big-time by one of Mario’s henchmen, that he had crumbled under persuasive pressure and punned on his own name by pointing East and nominating Ahmed; of

all that, the only fact Whitey ever knew was what he knew immediately — Fingers had fucked up. Everything else was unimportant.

“Yeah?” he replied, stony-faced.

“Yeah,” amplified Rodge. “Got some questions for you boys.”

“Yeah?”

Posturing dogs, all bark and bristle.

“Yeah. Like, what in fuck are you doing here?”

Rodge’s dialogue should be construed as subtleties; to convey the preceding utterance as ‘Li’ wor’n fukya doin’ere’ is to sacrifice fluency on the altar of exactitude. Consider his language as rather closely translated from the original Cockney and you won’t go far wrong.

“Yeah,” began Whitey, but was interrupted.

“You told us, man,” objected Blackie, who was missing the subtleties of the monosyllabic negotiation, “You told us. Stay away till September ’71, that’s what you said, so here we are.” He moved up to Whitey’s right shoulder and waved his arms innocently.

Sometimes Blackie could be a right thickhead.

“Yeah,” repeated Rodge, “And what in fuck are you doing *here*?”

“Yeah,” sighed Whitey, trying to regain lost ground, “Danish cunt. Stew. Charter.”

This was plausible, and in fact (like all the best cover stories) true, and the ring of authenticity puzzled the Enforcer, whose built-in lie detector was silent. He wasn’t used to having the truth thrown in his face at such an early stage in the interrogation. Doggedly, he shook it off and continued.

“Yeah?” he accepted with man-to-man curiosity (maybe later she’d be, ah, available) and pressed on. “And why are you in fucking Kabul?” Rodge was clearly not impressed with the oriental charms of the city. Or, for that matter, of the substances that constituted for some its major attraction.

“Well, it’s the crossroads of the ancient world,” ventured Blackie with a bravado that dismayed his partner and finally convinced their Nemesis of his duty in this encounter.

Rodge had no trouble suffering fools — let’s face it, he was intellectually challenged himself, though not even Mario would say so in front of his back — but he could not stand wise guys. He understood Whitey on some levels, even rather liked him; they had knocked around some of the same street corners, back in their struggling teens, though where Whitey had sold blowjobs Rodge had rolled the drunken faggots, getting more cash out of the game and more fun to boot (so to speak). Blackie he despised, not least because he had no difficulty in smelling the fear beneath the verbal dexterity. Blackie was up to no fucking good, and it was his clear duty as Enforcer to find out what kind of no fucking good and to mete out his just deserts. Rodge didn’t know why Mario called it that (butchers didn’t do afters) but he knew how to do it all right.

That his duty was also a pleasure was just his luck.

Tactically, however, he was not in the best of situations, there in the very public bar of the Inter-Continental. He was carrying, sure, this being in the days before airline security and technology got serious, but even in this cow town he felt inhibited about flashing it in front of the bartender. Blackie had cottoned on to this fairly quickly, which was why he had relaxed more than he should have. Whitey was the one to respond appropriately.

“Yeah,” he said quickly, to forestall unpleasantness, as in Don’t mind my friend he can’t help it, “Beer?”

“Yeah,” agreed Rodge slyly, “Why not?”

A Plan was forming in the distant recesses of his mind.

“That’s better,” he continued as he finished the one he had and passed the glass over for a refill. “So when do we get a shufti at the bint, then?” (This drew a surprised glance from the barman, who spoke some Arabic and frankly considered it beyond this lout, which of course it was — he spoke the polyglot Cockney with no idea of its derivation) “What’s her moniker anyway?”

“Gita,” said Blackie, who was confused but trying to follow the new diplomacy as best he could. “Due in from Mecca any time now.”

“Been playin’ Bingo, has she?”

There was a moment’s regrettable silence while the other two absorbed the unbelievable fact that Rodge the Enforcer Had Made a Joke.

“Mecca Ballrooms, geddit?”

As the penny dropped, Blackie began to giggle hysterically, a dubious move, and Whitey shook his head in appreciation, which was a slightly better one.

The conversation flagged at that point, and they focused their attention more productively on the assimilation of brew.

The Plan in its infancy was to lull the boys into a false sense of security by being jovial and convivial, and then to lure them up to his room and put the serious frighteners on them until they revealed the whereabouts of that double-crossing git Ahmed who was disturbing the balance of trade in the UK with unauthorized imports. In theory, not a bad wheeze. In practice, a tad too dependent on the principal actor’s powers of dissimulation. Rodge the Enforcer had all the qualities needed for an old-fashioned silent-movie Bad Guy — he could project power and venom without saying a word — but he would never make the transition to Leading Man. Empathy just wasn’t his gig.

He was also about a liter ahead in the beer stakes. As the trio propping up the outside of the bar came to finish the round Whitey had bought, the two newcomers were just warming up, their thirst barely slaked and their interest in further investigations merely piqued. Rodge, however, had fifty ounces of liquid sloshing about his gut, and something had to give sooner or later. Nevertheless, he bore up under the strain manfully.

“Three more, guy,” he instructed the man, and turned to the others, in the interests of implementing the Plan. “So ... you wanting to get home, are you?”

“Grrnh,” acknowledged Whitey to his left, while simultaneously sending massive telepathic instructions to his right, along the lines of Leave This To Me.

“Yeah, well, bottoms up.” Rodge took a hefty draft and smacked his lips. “Maybe I got some

good news for ya.” That should hang on to them, he thought, while we regroup. “Half a mo’ while I take a quick slash in the bog.”

He stumbled a little as he dismounted from the stool, for two and a half British pints (or four standard American bottles) is a reasonable quantity of any kind of witch-piss, and that German lager has more of a kick to it than your standard bitter-drinker is ever willing to admit. Perhaps it clouded his judgment; or perhaps, as Mario had been known to suggest from time to time, judgment just wasn’t his strong suit. At any rate, he assumed that their new-found conviviality, not to mention three-quarters of a glass of free beer, would be plenty to keep these lads awaiting his imminent return. He smiled back at them as he vanished into the gentlemen’s toilet.

“Move,” ordered Whitey.

For once Blackie went along without comment. In five seconds flat, they were out of the bar, in five more out of the hotel, and in another fifteen they were into the nearest side street, around a corner and running like hell. A minute later, they were into the unmarked lanes, panting and pounding and shaking like the leaves on the tree.

“Into the bazaar,” directed Whitey, and they slowed to a walk and headed for the easy anonymity of the most crowded area in town.

“No,” he changed his mind. “Hotel.”

They avoided the main drags as far as possible — by now they knew that little area of the city like cabbies — and kept a weather eye open for traffic, although the streets were mostly exposed and offered little opportunity for ducking into doorways. They figured Rodge didn’t know where they were going anyway, so the more distance they put between themselves and the Inter-Continental the better, and they force-marched it to the Grape Place in something close to record time.

Yusufi was surprised by their appearance, hot, bothered and noticeably uncool, but too polite to comment. He gladly arranged for tea to be delivered to their room, where a Council of War was instantly under way.

“Gotta split,” said Whitey, too cool to fool and too cross to cross.

“Um,” temporized Blackie.

“Now.”

“OK.”

“Pack.”

“Gotta tell Ahmed, man.”

“Yusufi.”

“Right.”

Without even pausing to roll a number, they began to throw things into bags. They relied on the 80/20 rule — eighty-percent-successful packing would be plenty, thank you — and in ten minutes had most of the gear stowed. There remained the question of where to go.

“Bamian?” suggested Blackie. “Those huge great Buddhas are supposed to be a groove.”

“Mazar?” shrugged Whitey.

Mazar-i-Sharif was way the hell up by the northern border, where cartographers and politicians will have their little joke, as a glance at any map tells (see Chapter 21). It was almost in Uzbekistan, which at the time was theoretically part of the CCCP (a little Cyrillic thrown in there for free) and a source of reliable exoticism that was surely beyond the scope of a Cockney Mafioso. Mazar was legendary among traveling freaks because so many talked about going there and so few actually made it. Alexander the Great was one who did, hanging out near there for a couple of years; it was said therefore to be the crossroads of the ancient world.

“Bamian’s kinda touristy, I guess,” conceded Blackie, though it must be said that he was stretching a point even there. “Still there’s a night bus. It’s, what, a hundred miles?”

“More. And slow.”

“True. Five hours?”

“Twelve.”

“Jesus. Two in the morning, two in the afternoon. Oh shit. But Mazar’d be a lot more.”

“Yeah,” Whitey had to admit, taking it in steps made more sense. Mazar wasn’t much above two hundred miles as the vulture flies, but it was likely to be a two-day trip even if they got a through bus. The northern roads tended to be rudimentary. Bamian was a notable side trip but sort of on the way. It should be no big deal arranging transport from one to the other.

“Get to Bamian tomorrow, then just get a place to kip for the night, move right on, stay a step ahead of the bugger. He’ll never go out of Kabul anyway.”

“Right.” Whitey hauled a bed out of the way and turned his attention to the third floorboard from the far wall. “You fix it with Yusufi, I’ll get the shit.”

“Cool.”

As Whitey knelt to prise up the board that concealed various important and official documents, mostly authentic, as well as rather less legal items such as pharmaceuticals, he was feeling surprisingly good. They were working together well, Blackie

had recovered from his wisecrack fear response — got his arse in gear was how Whitey put it — and it seemed like they would get away clean. Up in Mazar they could put together another plan.

There might be a little difficulty whenever they finally got back to Blighty but that would have to be more than a year away, and time would wound the old heel maybe. Still, that was later. Now was moving.

Moving made him feel good.

Up and down the City Road
 In and out the Eagle
 That's the way the money goes
 Pop goes the weasel!

W.R. Mandale
 (or perhaps C. Twiggs)
 "Pop Goes the Weasel," 1853

SORRY," SPARKS WHISPERED. "Sorry." His voice was so quiet it was almost telepathic.

"It's alright," Annie whispered back.

The palms were fronding above, the ragged harmonies in the distance were climaxing as usual, the wind was cool and the tree-trunk rough. She waited.

"Never cried," he said.

Never? she thought and bit her tongue in case it were true.

"Not since Blackie popped his clogs."

What? she wondered, and this time let it be known, eliciting a sadly silly smile.

"Turned up his toes. Passed away."

Oh. Died, the word too hard to say. But she couldn't resist.

"What's pop?"

"Pawn."

Right. Just the one pair, she understood quickly. She held him very tight, squeezing him hard, and suddenly the music stopped, all of it, as though someone had pulled the plug.

"Fuck."

"Must you?" she said, loosening her grip to give him the chance.

Nod.

Blink.

Damn all these blind horses.

Every country has its own constitution; ours is
absolutism moderated by assassination.

‘An intelligent Russian’
in Count Münster’s *Political
Sketches of the State of Europe*, 1868

THE DECISION HAD BEEN TO STAY. The lieutenant was disappointed. In fact, when Annie and Whitey arrived back at the parking lot, the ossifer could be seen by the psychic to be foaming at the mouth and tearing out his well-groomed hair. Less gifted or more mechanical eyes would simply have noticed him pacing and turning and pacing and turning like a speedfreak on a coke jag. He was not, in short, a happy unit.

Patrick, as was his style, was restraining his satisfaction and acting as if nothing could be more normal and predictable than to spend a night on the threshold of the military’s offices. He was organizing take-out food from Dharma’s, the conveniently situate vegan eatery (which solved one of Patrick’s problems by donating a spread), and being lugubriously practical in his best Witness manner.

The crowd was seriously diminished, the announced all-nighters being slightly fewer than the previously announced Willing to Risk Arrest volunteers, since several of the WRAs had intended to sign out all along and had expected to be home by now; one or two were mildly aggravated that they wouldn’t be busted this time. Their day would come.

Once the ossifer had walked off his tantrum, he confirmed that Policy had decreed that the cops would hold off at least for the night, as long as the peace was not obviously breached. “But that’s what we want to prevent,” some buffoon interjected, and even then the lieutenant kept his cool, admittedly only by grasping it with both hands.

The Occupation was now officially an Expression of Free Speech and as such a Constitutionally Protected Right. Subject to revocation in the public interest, of course.

μονου γαρ αυτου και θεος στερισκεται
αγενητα μοιειν ασσ' αν η πεπραγμενα.

Even God cannot undo
What already has been done.

Agathon,
ca 447–401 B.C.E.

HHEY, LIMEY” MUMBLED AN UNUSUALLY QUIET SKIPPER, “Something heavy’s going down.”

Time stopped. Whitey stuffed the papers, all of them, in the inside pocket with the button (proper tailoring at work) and slogged silently through the nightmare quicksand to the door. He hushed Skip the Beard with a finger and leaned round the corner by the stairs. He could see the door to Yusufi’s office, and framed in it was Rodge the Enforcer, with one hand yanking back a fistful of Gita’s gorgeous hair and the other shoving into the small of her back what looked like the biggest revolver Whitey had ever seen. Clotted 45, like that.

There was some yelling.

One chance, Erroll Flynn. Whitey jumped from the balcony, landed with a foot on the back of the Enforcer’s left leg. Rodge crumpled backwards and a shot went wide into the ceiling. Whitey rolled out from under as Gita squirmed away and Rodge began to turn, still sitting awkwardly. Blackie jumped and

Rodge fired and Blackie’s face disappeared. Whitey was on his feet and he kicked and the hot gun went flying and the big man grunted and then Whitey’s boot got his face and blood spurted out of his nose and the next one damn near took his head off, snapped his neck and suddenly Rodge was lying impossibly bent and Gita was sobbing and Skip was panting and even Yusufi was shaken out of his usual calm and Blackie was on his back, not moving, saying nothing, nothing at all, and never would again.

Never.

“Shit,” said Skip, breaking the sudden silence.

“He made me tell him,” moaned Gita hysterically.

“Go to my cousin’s,” advised Yusufi. “He will help you go to Pakistan.”

Whitey vamoosed pronto. Scarpered sharpish. Made like a motor and rolled.

No thinking, no feeling, no looking back.

Just split.

I'll be your mirror
 Reflect what you are
 In case you don't know

Lou Reed,
 "I'll Be Your Mirror,"
*The Velvet Underground and
 Nico*, aka the banana album, 1966

YOU HAD TO KILL HIM, THOUGH, didn't you?" said Annie. She had to say something. "Him? Fuck him," retorted Whitey. "No, thanks." "Yeah, me neither." "Doesn't bother you, then?" "Fuck no." "Yeah, I guess it wouldn't." "He topped me mate, and he'da done me and all." "Yeah, I guess he would." "Yeah." "So." "So." She smiled in the darkness. "Not exactly nonviolent was it." "No." "Feel bad about that?" "No. Yeah. Sometimes." "Hurts, doesn't it." "Yeah." "You talked to anyone? Professional, I mean? A therapist?" "No." "You're talking to me. Well, somewhat. A bit." "Fuck knows why." He smiled in turn. She could hear it in his voice and see a glint of tooth in the reflected moonlight. It was late in the evening, or perhaps the middle of the night, it was hard to tell. The moon was probably high but they couldn't see it directly. They were sitting on the stairs inside, shoulder to shoulder, no one else in soft earshot, and Annie had been learning the petty details behind the serious stuff she had tapped into twenty years before. Pulling teeth, it

was, but rotten ones from the abscessed flesh; they began to come easier as she gentled them away.

Her own, of course, well they were different. Yet somehow by sitting there in acceptance he made her present them too.

"You know I'm not like ... I never was, not then either."

"Like?"

"Well, the way I ... it's not how ... I mean ... I don't know why ..."

"Oh."

"You know what I'm ..."

"Blowjob?"

"Yes, that's it. Women don't, much, you know, like them. I mean, it's just ... I don't know, really I hate them."

"Yeah."

"I mean it's so, I don't know, depersonalized."

"Yeah."

"Did you know that? I mean then? Was that something that helped to put you over the edge? Did you start understanding something? Did you see something? I don't know, I bet you had lots didn't you? Did you ever remember me?"

"Yeah."

"You did?"

"Yeah. You were ... different. Wasn't, wasn't sex was it?"

"Not for me."

"Me too."

"I knew I'd never forget. I don't actually think about it, not often, never did really, but it was there. Maybe I was trying to prove something. Maybe I wanted to feel worthless. I felt so good, so good, maybe I didn't trust the way I felt and I wanted to be

fucked over. Maybe I wanted you to prove I was just a waste of time.”

“Yeah.”

“But you didn’t. You were a person, not some kind of, I don’t know, asshole with a cock.”

“Came.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t enjoy it did you.”

“No.”

Probably she could only have talked about it in the dark. They sat together for several long seconds, neither touching but both being touched, until Annie broke the silence again.

“It was perfect, you know.”

“What?”

“When you left. When you went to fix the wiring or whatever it was. You just went, and you didn’t look back.”

“Crying.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

“But you know I didn’t want you to stay, not really. I just, I don’t know, I just wanted to know I existed, and you existed. I mean, I couldn’t have stayed either, I couldn’t have, you know, lived with you or something, that wasn’t what it was about, was it?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean no.”

“Yeah.”

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. His was a smooth cheek, rarely shaven and barely needing it, with prominent bones and a strong profile she could almost see in silhouette.

“Tell me what you did when you left me.”

“Fixed the wiring.”

“I know that. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.”

“So?”

There was a long pause. She let him have the space, hoping — knowing — that he would finally tell her more. Obviously it was hard for him, but she trusted him. She didn’t know why. Why wasn’t where it was at. When, maybe. How. What. And definitely where. She waited.

“Annie,” he said, and stopped.

It was the first time she had heard him say her name. It was her name, she knew, not really know-

ing why, but as surely as his was secret, so hers was hidden in the open like the purloined letter. Common and simple, it was so important that most people didn’t understand how essential to her it was, and she liked that, she liked that twinge of vitality hidden. It was the difference between, for any child of the sixties, ‘beetle’ and ‘Beatle’ — or ‘beet’ and ‘Beat’ for followers of the Fifties Vegetable Movement — all in the meaning and none in the sound. When Whitey said ‘Annie,’ he meant it. His voice was like a prophet’s eyes, it bore into her soul.

She waited, thrilling.

“You changed my life.”

“No,” she contradicted, “You did.”

“We did.”

“How?”

She waited again. It would come.

“Cried for Blackie. Let go. Of everything, really. Nearly took sannyas. Fucked off to Nepal instead. Ladakh. Fuckin’ amazing it was.”

“So what happened?”

“Nothing. Everything. Thought about you. Magic woman. Guru said you carried my satori.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Nirvana on Anjuna beach. Beautiful. Not sad. Didn’t smoke for a week. Slept fifteen, eighteen hours. Woke up, everything still bright and shiny and new, and like perfect. Yeah. Everything perfect.”

“Yes!”

“Thought I was soft.”

“No.”

“Guru said no.”

“Was that Bhagwan?”

Whitey shook his head. Annie could feel it without touching.

“French dude, half-French. Pondicherry. Rajneesh was just getting big then, too big for me. OK though.”

“You told him about me? What did you tell him?”

Annie was intrigued. And flattered. She liked to be remembered, and somewhere in her skull she had put herself down big-time for acting like a little idiot, a tame grope, an easy piece, a quick lay, a thousand little insults that denied responsibility for

anything except weakness. She vacillated. For also of course she saw herself as having forced her attentions on this fragile icon, witch that she was of enormous power and strength, a vessel for forces to shatter his complaisance with his own lack of authenticity, the patchwork that shielded him from a reality he needed to construct.

“Nothing.”

“Oh come on.”

“Really.”

“You can tell me, it’s OK.”

“He just knew.”

“What do you mean?”

“Annie, he was there.”

“No one ... what ... that is ... I mean ...”

“Don’t fucking ask me. He was there. He was just there. He just knew. I don’t know. He just told me all my life, everything, he told me you too.”

“Well what did he tell you?”

“He said, he said there was someone and I had met them, he said that I didn’t carry my own satori in this world ...”

“Satori’s not Hindu though, is it? Isn’t that Zen?”

“Yeah, Guru said ...”

“What was his name?”

“Dunno.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Really. Different name for everyone. Cottoned on, just called him Guru. Dug it.”

“So was he Hindu?”

“Mostly. Shaman, y’know. Everything. Peyote man too.”

“Like the Native Americans?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, he said you didn’t carry your own satori in the world.”

“Yeah, but someone did and it was you.”

“How do you know?”

“Anjuna.”

“Why did you cry this time, Whitey? Why did you cry when I asked you who you were? What was it, Whitey?”

“Guru told. I forgot.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Annie.”

“Yes.”

“He told me when I saw it again I could find a rest.”

“A rest.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you mean? What do you mean ‘a rest’? To sleep?”

“No. To stop.”

“To stop.”

“Running. Thirty years running. Sometimes moving, sometimes stopping, always going. Home, Annie. Never had no home. Guru said I’d see two satoris, one to cut me loose and one to let me stop. Want to stop, Annie. Want to stop. Time to stop. You let me stop.”

“I do?”

“Yes.”

He relaxed against the wall but she stiffened slightly. He noticed of course and wondered.

“Whitey?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean with me?”

“Oh no.”

“No.”

“No.”

“What do you mean then?”

“Not like that, love, not that.”

“No.”

“Me, y’see. Me.”

“You.”

“Mirror, really, isn’t it.”

“You mean you see yourself in me, or when I’m here or something.”

“You too, love. You too.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

“I see me in me ... oh ... you mean, I see myself in you, or with you or something.”

“Yeah, Guru said.”

“Said what.”

“Said you hold mine ‘cause I’ve got yours.”

“But.”

“Yeah.”

“But...”

She didn’t quite know what to say. She didn’t exactly know what level to take all this stuff on.

Metaphor, right? But of what? Or was it a glimpse of something different? She was very clear. She was very confused. She was very clear that she was very confused. Or perhaps the other way round.

All day, she thought, I've been here all day. Everything sharp and precise and absolutely definite and definitely absolute and sometimes blurring like an amateur photographer trying to keep up with a moving target. It can't be him, it was here from the beginning, back when the car nearly crashed — back when she recovered from that idiot nearly hitting her, that is — the whole day had been filled with wonder.

"... But it can't be you, I've been here all day."

"Yeah, you knew."

"What do you mean? What do you mean 'I knew'?"

"You knew ages ago."

"Huh?"

"You brought me here."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Sunday. Lunchtime."

This was getting strange. Annie thought back to Sunday lunchtime. She damn sure hadn't had any contact with Whitey. What was lunchtime? Oh. That was when she had told, or rather not-told, Brendan what she was going to do. When they were eating peanut butter and blackberry jam on toast and talking about Christina and whether Magdalena had had the baby. Yes. She had in some sense decided before then that she was going to the demo — she was pretty sure she had told Sebastian over coffee — but in some important way it hadn't been real until she told Brendan, or at least established that plausibly deniable well-I-warned-you cover story. That was when *she* knew she was going, whatever she had told to or hidden from anyone else. Before that, all was tentative, as the sheikh said of the discovery of oil, as Brendan always said. Why was he creeping back into her thoughts?

"It was Sunday lunchtime I finally decided I was coming."

"Figured."

"What does that mean? Where were you?"

"Big Mountain."

"What were you doing?"

"Fighting the BIA. Helping out."

"So why did you come here?"

"You called."

"You didn't know me. I mean, how did you even hear about this?"

"Mate from Santa Cruz brought supplies."

"And he was coming back here?"

"Yeah."

"So he gave you a ride?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you take it?"

"You called."

He wouldn't be budged.

She waited, not wanting to accept. He sat there calmly, waiting for her to believe. Finally he nudged:

"Guru said time isn't always one way."

"Meaning?"

"Sometimes it's two-way, like effect and cause."

"I don't get it."

"Maybe you felt right 'cause you were about to be right and you were right 'cause you felt right and you brought me here 'cause you needed to, only you just didn't know it."

This was, by a fair length, the longest and least comprehensible speech she had ever heard him make — she had become expert at lifting information out of him but he rarely volunteered. It did make a kind of sense though.

"Yeah?" she postulated.

"I dunno," he backtracked.

"Yeah."

"It's like ... You're here, aren't you?"

"Yes. Of course."

"No."

It was some kind of a meditation move, something not quite there, yet so right it couldn't be denied. What was he doing to her? What had she been feeling all day?

Who was she?

She was Annie.

She clung to that, for a long moment, half an eternity in half a second, it grounded her and told her where and how and what and when and who she was, and then suddenly all of them fell away and it was immediately certain and obvious and true and definite just who (yes, and when and what and how and where, though none of them mattered much), who she was.

She was Annie.

The difference was absolutely clear.

There was no difference, and not much similarity either.

“No,” she admitted, “Not of course.”

“But you knew you were going to be here.”

“Yes. No. Not on top.”

“Under.”

“Yes.”

“Under told me.”

“Yes.”

“Like, force field, coming. You, me, we had to be here. We weren’t here, no force field. ’Cause there is, we had to. Had to come. No sweat.”

“Yes.”

Now she had tears in her eyes. No one could see but her and so probably him. They sat together in silence, rubbing shoulders, well, her shoulder, his arm. He gave off a warm and comforting vibe. I never say things like that, she thought. Vibe, what a thought. Oh stop thinking, she thought. This kind of circle was sucking her in when he broke it.

“What’d you do after Anjuna?”

“Grew my life.”

What? Where did that come from? What did she mean? Yes, that was right. How could she be right?

“Hmm?”

“Yes, I did. Never quite ... looked at it like that. I went back to Cedar — did I tell you about Cedar?”

“Un-uh.”

“Well, his real name’s Jake anyway. He’s the guy I was traveling with then but he wasn’t a traveler, he’s a shrink in New York, and what happened actually was I went back and he was asleep and I was very awake and I never told anyone — ever — what happened but I sat there and I danced and I think I danced all night, I mean the acid was something...”

“Not much.”

“No but enough to keep me going, you know. And I figured out that I wanted to do that, to travel but not to, you know, smuggle or do business much or stuff, just to go and be in wonderful places and, in the winter especially, and so I’d get some kind of a job, you know, something that would pay good and I could always get one and just leave when I wanted to, and I worked it out.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I got back, and, you know, Jake went back East, and I got my PT qualification.”

“Hnh?”

“Physical therapy. It’s, you know, medicine so there’s always work, and the pay’s good. Anyway, the point is, that’s what I did after Anjuna, you know, I worked it out, I just did it all step by step, and there it is, that’s what I did.”

“And now?”

“Yeah.”

“Bored?”

“I just haven’t, you know, thought about it.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s like, I’ve been playing the part of me.”

“Pretending.”

“Right. Right. I’ve been pretending to be me. Only right now it doesn’t seem like that. Have you been pretending to be you?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“That’s what you were doing at Big Mountain, wasn’t it? You were, you were pretending to be an Indian.”

“Am.”

“Oh sure, but you’re not, are you? I mean, that’s only a little bit of who you are. Isn’t it? You were there because they accepted you because you were one of them, weren’t you? You were! And that’s why you want a rest, ’cause you want to be accepted for being you, not for being one of anyone else, even anyone you really really like.”

How on earth ...?

It all came from outside her. She thought she had nothing to do with it, but she did of course, and it was her, wasn’t it, and it was her who wanted to be accepted — loved, she couldn’t say loved, like died it was one of those magic words you dare not speak — and so she knew him, because she loved him, because she loved herself.

And he for her.

Suddenly they were both crying.

Quietly they reached for each other.

There was a little hall, a floorway not much more than a couple of yards long, but they weren’t even that long themselves, and they lay together and rose in passion and gentleness, for each other or themselves or something between and beyond.

(SEARCHING FOR) SOLID GROUND

“I know where you can stay,” she whispered,
much much later into the darkness left as the moon
began to sink in the sky.

“Yes.”

“I’ll make a call later.”

“Thanks.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Thanks.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Watch my taillights fading
There ain't a dry eye in the house

Keith Richards,
Jagger–Richards, The Rolling Stones,
“Before They Make Me Run,” *Some Girls*, 1978

ANNIE'S NAME IS TAKEN from the song “It Must Have Been the Roses,” by Robert Hunter. *Annie laid her head down in the roses, the roses and the ribbons in her long, brown hair.* In the version on Garcia's *Reflections* album, it blasted incessantly through Lompico in the fall of 1976 and the long, beautiful, drought winter that followed. *All I know is I could not leave her there.*

Since then, I have loved the song on the Dead's *Steal Your Face* and Hunter's own *Tales of the Great Rum Runners* (both of which came out earlier), then on *Reckoning* and *One From the Vault* (Garcia must have liked it as much as I do), and in my own skull many, many times, hiking or running or simply spacing out in fantasies of performance. And still I don't know the lyric. Y'see, it's not what the song says, exactly, it's the way the words make you sing.

Jerry sang that song the best.

The words are signposts, indicators, nudges in the direction of a feeling. “If my thought-dreams could be seen, they'd probably put my head in a guillotine,” sang Uncle Bob in '65, but he made it through, just barely, because they couldn't hear the words on the signposts. They *knew* somethin' was *happenin'* but they *dinnowaddit was*. The words never matter, it's the emotion that counts, and that's in the tune and the rhythm and especially the singing, but words are the maps we can print in a book.

Anyone who can immediately identify all the quotes that follow was probably me then. I made the list at the end of a trip to Chomolongma aka Sagarmartha aka Everest in 1978. Some of them are certainly incorrect, in that the author didn't write them that way. Some of them are from lousy, even offensive, songs, but they wouldn't get out of my skull. They all need music, though at least one is

lifted from a printed page (but then, if *Blonde on Blonde* is a novel, and I swear it is, *Gravity's Rainbow* is rock'n'roll). Those with an asterisk or more were real obsessions. Their order is the one in which I wrote them down at the time. Taken together, in the grand tradition of Dylan's *Self-Portrait*, they paint some kind of a picture.

Ain't that a part of what rock music does for us?

Ain't that a function of art, professor, to help us make sense of the world and our place in it, and our sense of everyone else's?

These lines were not chosen because they have pretensions to providing a credo, though some of them do, they were chosen because they resonated. The choice was never conscious; they simply represent the songs — sometimes it was just a phrase, sometimes a melody, sometimes a whole recording, a tiny symphony in my head — that would not leave my memory when I was trekking and I was away from electricity for over a month, in the days before Walkmen for walking men (like James Taylor, perhaps?). As such, they provide a possible gateway to understanding a point of view. Not an argument for it (there's nothing to defend or attack); not an explanation of it, or analysis, or even description. A way in. If you can hear the beat go down, if you can connect with the rhythm and the melody, in short if you like rock music, then here's another way of getting a fix on a person. Not a character in this book, exactly, but someone who could have been. A friend of Skip the Beard's, perhaps, or Blackie's. Maybe a lover once of Annie or of a friend of hers. Someone like that. He shows up briefly in Chapter 18, with the uncredited line of dialogue about pee gee squared, but otherwise he's not here. Much.

Anyway, they're mostly great songs and you should hear them (again).

*It's an ordinary story about the way things go, round
and around nobody knows but the highway goes
on forever.*

The going up is worth the coming down.

*I am the Antichrist, I am an anarchist, don't know
what I want but I know where to get it, I want to
destroy passers by 'cause I want to be anarchy.*

**Dance with a lady with a hole in her stocking, don't
it feel good.*

*When the day goes down I won't be waiting around
for you.*

****Ooh baby, it's hard to change, I can't tell you how
to feel, some get strong, some get strange, sooner
or later it all gets real — walk on.*

*Ladies have their problems, the battle of the sexes, it's
just the same in Egypt, it's just the same in Texas
— even East of East of Eden.*

**Baby try it two times, once for sure ... why hold out
for more? ... wouldn't you know you got shoes to
wear?*

***Love is a rose, you'd better not pick it, it only grows
when it's on the vine, handful of thorns and you
know you've missed it, lose your love when you
say the word 'mine'.*

*Forsaken, almost human, he sank beneath your wis-
dom like a stone.*

*Yo-do-e-oh-e-oh-e-oh-e-oh-YEEEEAH! [&c ...
Cherry Oh Baby]*

One more cup of coffee 'fore I go to the valley below.

**As the island slowly sank, the loser finally broke the
bank in the gambling room ...*

*The clubs are all closed and the ladies are leaving,
there's nobody nobody knows on the street ...*

*Trouble with you is the trouble with me, you got two
good eyes but still you can't see.*

*Freezing cold December then — bloody January
again!*

**Ja! Ja! Ja! Ja! In Prussia we never eat pussy.*

*And you, you stand around and ask for ashtrays, can't
you reach?*

**Livin' on the road, my friend, was gonna keep you
free and clean, now you wear your skin like iron,
your breath's as hard as kerosene.*

Riders on the storm [the Kathmandu classic]

*I've been thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinking. [Barrett failing to
sing]*

I don't do that much talking these days.

Well, shake it up baby now, twist and shout.

*Combed my hair in a thousand ways but it came out
looking just the same.*

*Line broke, monkey got choked, they all went to
heaven in a little row boat, clap hands.*

**The boy's too young to be singing the blue-ue-ues
(ah-a-aah-ahah)*

*I do believe in your hexagram but can you tell me how
they all knew the plan?*

Well I used to be disgusted, now I try to be amused.

*Well since my baby left me, I found a new place to
dwell.*

*Life I love you, all is groovy (bah-dah-dadah-dadah-
da)*

She took her stand at fifteen hands, I'd ride her easy.

**Can I just have one more moondance with you, my
love? [coupled with, much to my distaste] I'm
being followed by a moonshadow.*

*He come dancing across the water with his galleons
and guns.*

Sex and drugs and rock and roll are very good indeed.

She drove a pickup truck painted green and blue.

I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to fade...

Lose my mind and dance forever
Turn my world around

Richard Thompson,
“Night Comes In,” Richard & Linda
Thompson, *Pour Down Like Silver*, 1975

ANNIE WORKED THE WHOLE THING out that night. Well, she learned it. Spotted it, perhaps. Came to see. Noticed. The point is, she didn’t spend any time thinking about it, she simply realized in the morning that all the thinking she had vaguely meant to do had been done, without any particular memory of having done it. It was rather like waking up from one of those dreams in which you run around for hours beset by a constant clanging of brass to find the phone ringing. Only in this case, it must also have been one of those dreams you don’t remember when you get out of bed. That was as good an explanation as Annie’s logical mind could dredge up, anyway. Ask the cerebrum to explain something mysterious and it’ll excitedly postulate a meaningless hypothesis by dubious analogy any time you choose.

Try another: It was as though she were looking at herself in an ancient fogged up mirror with the silver backing rotted off, and gradually, without any deliberate action on her part, the fog was being rubbed away and the silver paint touched up, all from the inside, by friendly pixies too small to see but too large to ignore, a throng of perfectionist elves swarming invisibly around the glass and working so steadily and gradually that it was hard to notice any difference until she looked away and looked back and suddenly there she was, herself, in such plain sight that it was obvious what she should do.

Not that there was a lot of light, you understand. To venture a short quotation from Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, (1759–67), this is what the scene looked like by four in the morning:



(For the complete quote, see pp. 61–62 of the 1967 Penguin edition, reprinted 1985.)

There was a lot of night left and a great deal to tell, most of it not in words but what else do we have to represent on paper the activities of the small hours? Annie and Whitey lay together for indefinite hours, heads about touching, arms softly cuddling, legs caressing with clumsy grace through the trousers that kept them warm. They talked in words, in thoughts, in the swell and the ebb of bodies at rest in peace, and they told themselves how they came to be and they listened to their selves and each other.

Which of them spoke, and when, is hard to disentangle, and pointless. Whitey was never one of the world’s great narrators anyway, and Annie had a maddening tendency to circle around and jump elliptically, as reminiscences came to mind. All this is of course very realistic but not exactly easy to read. We proceed to précis.

Whitey’s wanderings had taken him over most of the Orient, for several years. He roamed the subcontinent as long as the money held out, shuffling passports to avoid the mundane traps of the Indian Civil Service (a six months stay made tax forms due, for example), went everywhere twice and remembered most of it. Once he finally made the big hop over Burma, whose government was notably inhospitable to students, hippies, westerners, ne’er-do-wells, long-hairs, druggies and foreigners in general, he began earning in a variety of guises. He tried out as a character actor in Bangkok — the strong and silent type, dubbed anyway of course — but suitable parts were few and far between. He smuggled gold between Hong Kong and New Delhi, intermittently and rather profitably, until fifth thoughts and the unfortunate example of a colleague who was compelled to accept the hospitality of Mrs Gandhi’s government

prompted him to retire from that line of business. For a few months he tried being a ship's mate in the South Pacific, which was extremely romantic but he evinced a regrettable tendency to become seasick when the ocean belied its name. He then became a nightclub DJ in Kuala Lumpur — moremusicmoremusicmoremusic, ah, the good old Big L, Radio London, he'd learned its lessons well — and developed a minor cult as enigma for almost a year until someone's baksheesh got mislaid and he had to hustle up to Phuket for some R'n'R (well, with a name like that it's foreordained, isn't it). On the then-still-unspoiled beach, he lay himself down to rest and decided it was time to head for the land of his ancestors. His other ancestors.

He had scored a Canadian passport in a tricky but useful little deal in KL, so that seemed to be the place to head and so he did. He was worried about the accent, even though the broad Geordie had been sandpapered down by a decade of exile, since it clearly conflicted not only with the Native American features but, more crucially, with the Toronto birthplace his papers claimed. He developed a cover story about wartime evacuation and reverse migration thereafter and ... and no one paid the slightest attention. He strode through immigration smuggling something whose price was far above rubies. Not a virtuous woman, pace the end of the Book of Proverbs, but his unruly and questing self.

After Canada, getting into the States was no sweat. He drove across the border in the middle of the morning and was gone like a cool breeze. Peltier was busted already, and the Feds had their large symbolic boots and large actual revolvers on the necks (both actual and symbolic) of the American Indian Movement, but Whitey gravitated without difficulty to the welcome clutches of the remaining rebels. The A.I.M. survivors (1) accepted half-breeds as full compadres without question; (2) considered bisexuality absolutely normal behavior, neither required nor forbidden; (3) allied themselves perforce with outlaws, especially those with any instincts to anti-establishmentarianism, in the modern or secular sense of the word; (4) had contacts with the Native American Church, whose peyote rituals with their psacramental psychedelics, all-night chanting and guided meditations made

more sense to Whitey than any religion he had run into yet. He joined right in.

For a while there he had thought Guru was wrong. He thought he had found it. Home. He didn't want to admit, even to himself, how much he wanted it ... and so for a while he wouldn't admit that the life wasn't — quite — right. Something was off. He wasn't from the res, but he came to understand why so many who were got bombed on the edge of the white man's territory, where they couldn't go back and they couldn't go forward and their wheels just spun out of control and they tried to cauterize the pain with whiskey and grass and pills and powders. This was not new to Whitey, not the feeling, not the determined attempt at a chemical solution, and he finally recognized the pattern.

They weren't home either.

Maybe no one was.

But Guru promised.

From the middle of the Reagan depression of the early eighties to the Reagan boom of the late eighties, between which where Whitey was living there was no noticeable distinction, he had muddled along in a most uncharacteristic manner. There was a hint in the tale of a wife or equivalent, and a suggestion of offspring (perhaps inherited), and a definite flavor of ennui. Mid-Western towns took over from the desert and yielded in turn eventually to wanderlust and the call of the Golden State. A chance ride in Arizona reconnected him with Indian activists fighting the arbitrary land divisions of Big Mountain, with all its complex alliances and shifting conflicts. Whitey's anarchist tendencies, which he had lately learned to call by their proper name, put him with the Good Folk against the hierarchies tied in with the Feds and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (a name as euphemistic as Department of Defense, though older; it might better be called the Bureau of Anglo Affairs, as the other is surely the War Department), none of which was calculated to make him popular with officialdom but still. And then Annie had called.

Listening to this, and as a good girl Annie was well trained as a listener, she felt rather prosaic with her steady jobs (taxes withheld and vacation accrued) and her planned trips (with return airfare if not an actual ticket) and her steady sequence of

replacement relationships (sometimes, thrillingly, overlapping). She prodded with questions, she stroked and smoothed and rippled the story out of him, and much of the while she felt grotesquely inadequate, until she recognized as much herself and then drew one further conclusion.

They were the same.

Not physically, of course, and not obviously in certain regards. She had been based almost always in California. PT school had taken her away for a while she preferred to forget, and later an infatuation had too, for one year she was happy to remember, and another that, well, no longer existed. She had traveled most of the warm world and, for one who hated the cold, a surprising number of the chilly parts, which so often sneak up on you en route to somewhere interesting — the freezing equator at altitude near Quito, for example, or Erzerum too late in the autumn, or Moscow for the cheap flights that meant you had to change planes. Usually she thought she had a rather interesting existence but as she listened it seemed tame, safe but uninspiring.

And yet.

She had never really wanted anything closer to the flame. And he, it seemed obvious, was scarcely boasting about the hard road he'd come, all alone all the way, on his own ... boy, he'd sure come a long way from ... home ... ah, Kristofferson's song could hardly be avoided, with its mingle of envy and pity, romantic squalor and hard-lost innocence. Whitey was no closer to that mythical 'edge' than she herself, he just lived on a different plateau; and she had been no less lost than he, simply floundering in a different whirlpool. For his would never be hers, and hers would never be his. It's an absurdly simple truism, the kind of fact that never makes sense because it's meaningless or obvious, according to temporary taste. No matter, never mind. Wasn't that some kind of philosophical pun? Brendan would know. Cedar! That's right, it was one of his. Those two had a lot in common (well, whoda thunk) and yet she knew which one was hers; Manhattan? No chance. Ah well, she thought in the clear light of five in the morning, what is mind is yours and what is yours, dear Bren, is mind. I can live with that.

As she woke from the not-sleep she hadn't been having, this much was clear: She didn't want to be anything other than she was. It was a great relief. She didn't want to be young again. She didn't want to be single again. She didn't want what she could not have and this she knew was balance.

There was a curve to her life, and she did not want or need to repeat the excitement of invention, the charge that had come twenty years before, when possibilities were new and open. She wanted to build on that now, to gather up her spirit again for another long haul on into a graceful and reasonably ethical middle age. Yes, she could call it hypocrisy, as in her nastier moments she might. Yes, she was compromising some, not inventing an existence from scratch but accommodating a little to the practical circumstances. So what?

Brendan, she knew, was all right. No, he wasn't everything she had ever dreamed a man could be, but how much of that, she wondered, was really her. She had hidden from him, hadn't she. She had blamed him for the lack of commitment and excitement and invention that stemmed from her own little death. She didn't need to die. She could be alive, and that did not need to exclude him — it might, some day, but not now, not today, not here. She had been caught in a self-encouraging spiral of distance and that she could in fact adjust.

That was what she was going to do:

Nothing.

Everything.

Now and forever, or at least as long as she remembered.

It's not what you do, it's the way that you are when you do it.

And would she? And did she? And did he? There's a hole in this story, dear Liza, a hole, and reality keeps trickling on through the bottom of it. Dear Annie's not a saint and she'd probably be an awful bore if she suddenly turned into one. She wasn't hit with a thunderbolt that came from outside and transformed her in a blaze of light. She came to see, for a while, and with that sight and even its memory she could tread the path she needed to walk. She fell from grace again, for she was human, but of this you may be sure, the knowledge of that power can only be forgotten, it never can be lost.

(SEARCHING FOR) SOLID GROUND

So did she?

Well that's another tale, and yours, dear reader, is as good as mine. *(Searching for) Solid Ground* is the story of the search for a sense of possibilities, and the story too of how people think they look for what they need and actually cling to what destroys them. The rest of Annie's life is up to her. And you.

Whitey's is clearer, perhaps, because he made a break. His seems like a story with an ending, where hers seems like one that just rambles on. His tale went something like:



and the conventional story is of course the twiddly bit in the middle, but you could look on hers as:



and suddenly her potential for repetition becomes clear, does it not? For Whitey's sake, one would certainly hope that his pattern did not convolute into endless repetitions of blind alleys and random lunges into the future or even the past. For Annie's, that the more gentle curve did not become an endless loop.

It doesn't have to.
They learned that.

We know what we are, but know not what we may be.

Mr Bill Shakespeare,
Hamlet, 1601

SEBASTIAN SAVED ANNIE A PHONE CALL by showing up at some completely unheard-of hour of the morning, ahead of even the cops, bearing with him two large vacuum flasks of freshly-brewed high-octane French roast and a couple of dozen croissants.

“They’re only from Safeway,” he apologized, “And all I did was warm them up. But I couldn’t help thinking, you poor girl, there’ll probably be nothing but carrot juice and I know how we need our coffee in the morning.”

She shared, as was the obvious intention, and the assembled multitudes sang hosannas.

He also saved her from making any request at all by edging her to one side and whispering:

“Darling, who is that dish you were talking to? Can I pick him up and take him home with me?”

“Only if you’re sweet to him,” said Annie firmly.

“As pie, I promise, cross my heart and hope to die.”

“OK,” she said, with her best Mona Lisa smile, “Come on. Whitey, this is Sebastian; Sebastian, I’d like you to meet someone I’ve known for twenty years.”

“Darling! How wonderful!”

Whitey smiled. Actually it was a shit-eating grin. And Annie went off to phone home.

Yes, home.

Brendan was taking the day off (once he’d just ... OK, OK, the afternoon off) and would meet her for lunch or a little before. The prospects for the weekend looked excellent.

The Occupation ran on for the day, by general consent — even the rabid Sgt Jones didn’t show up, so there was no excitement at all — and concluded in time to hook up with a March from Campus on the Saturday. Friday may have been an anticlimax but, hey, the joint was closed for four days straight, only two of which were on the weekend, and the publicity was great. A few ambitious souls tried to get a Blockade going again on Monday but by then burn-out was epidemic and the whole deal fizzled like a firecracker on the Sixth that has been left out in the pouring rain.

The war is history, of course, in the consensual reality of reader and writer, and in the exquisitely distinct one of author and characters too. Roughly 250,000 people died. The Arab League in 1993 estimated the monetary damage at \$600,000,000,000, or 18 months worth of total GNP for the entire Arab world, if that kind of number makes more sense to you. Eight thousand people flooded the streets of Santa Cruz in protest when the bombing began and were roundly ignored by their overt government and perhaps the covert one too. President Bush claimed a 92% approval rating that spring but he was defeated in his reelection bid the next year. It’s poetic justice to kick the bastard when he’s down. Well, justice anyway. Fun, at least.

But we digress.

Did everyone else live happily ever after? Of course not. But sometimes they did. It was up to them, really.

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I do not know
whether I was then a man
dreaming I was a butterfly,
or whether I am now
a butterfly dreaming I am a man.

Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu)
ca 369–286 B.C.E., translated by
H.A. Giles in *Chuang Tzu*, 1889

THE WEEK ENDING 12 A.M. April 15, 1993, was described as one of low seismic activity in David Fowler's Geo Watch column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: A mere 26 earthquakes registered higher than 1 on the Richter scale, and only nine registered two or more, with the biggest a paltry 2.7. Four a day, on a slow day.

PS

OH, YES. WHITEY'S SECRET NAME: Sebastian
was rumored to know what it was, but he
never told me.

—PS

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