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Hollywood Babylon

by Devan Sagliani

"David Lee Roth has the best cocaine," she said, her eyes at half mast, with the strings of dirty black yarn growing out of her head, in place of where her hair should have been, stuck to the inky mascara chunks congealed on her monster-sized, plastic eyelashes like a bad case of instant karma; "but he doesn't share it unless he thinks you'll fuck him."

"I'd fuck him," Sandra replied lazily, the drawl of the syllables lethargic and hollow now that her buzz was kicking in. A thin sheen of heroin sweat covered her exposed skin, giving her a preternatural glimmer. Her small breasts and huge, pink nipples juxtaposed awkwardly against salient and angular hipbones that just screamed sex to whoever was listening, from a hundred-story megaphone ten miles wide.

"I'd suck his cock..."

She was standing there smoking, adorned only by a pair of full bottom panties covered in cartoon strawberries, like the kind you might shoplift one day from a Target department store, if you were a mentally deranged, dead-broke junkie whore who got her rocks off by having overweight Mexican security guards chase you down the streets of Hollywood and holler at you in broken English until they collapsed panting and dry heaving in the dead weeds growing out of the cracks in the pavement. The day she stole them she actually had the nerve to walk back over to her hapless pursuer and pat him on the head, cooing a gentle string of dirty suggestions into his ear before laughing and skipping away. He clutched his chest, his face screwed up, and tried desperately to tune her out, but she had gotten inside of his head. She had won.

She always won. That was part of her trip, never losing, in spite of

the fact that society classified her as a loser.

Drew could be equally psychotic. It was no mistake that these girls were best friends; they had drunk each other's blood under a full harvest moon when they were sixteen and had been hand fastened in a bacchanal orgy of lesbian sex and cheap wine, which is not something you easily forget. Since then they'd given up on pagan rituals and white Wicca, but not the trysts.

They claimed it kept them connected, telepathically speaking.

"...and lick his filthy, dirty, old, rock star asshole..."

Sandra got on her knees in front of me as if to suggest a demonstration was in order and I tried not to flinch. She was the Queen of punk-rock-points (PRP's) and run-on sentences. She was our fucking idol, all of us, and she knew it, which only made her little tirades worse when she got wound up. You would have thought it was her idea to blow up the Beverly Center in the first place, but it wasn't; it was something Drew slipped in my ear one night like a tiny poisonous insect, letting it crawl through my brain killing everything it touched along the way, until I thought I had come up with it on my own.

Sandra had tennis bracelets covering both of her wrists that she had made one of the local poseur kids buy for her at a Hot Topic store and bring back.

Puppy dog slaves to the High Queen Whore, that's what she called them.

Sexless alter boys pumped up out of their fragile little minds on hormones and Sex Pistols was more like it.

The bracelets were made out of black felt with bright white skull logos sewn into it, like something you might buy from a DÃa de los Muertos festival on Olvera Street. They were trendy and stupid and totally unlike Sandra, but they covered the scars and kept her from

having to explain one more time how she didn't know why she kept cutting herself but that she was pretty damn fucking sure it wasn't a fucking cry for help.

7 punk-rock-points for excessive expletives, especially in a single sentence, that's just part of the game we play, the one where I don't ever get to go home again.

She had on guy's tube socks with bad elastic, their dingy gray ringed on top by two bands of color, cherry and lime Slurpee to be precise, and unlaced low-top Converse shoes; a dirty shade of faded black.

Her fingernail polish was chipping off, Urban Decay "Frostbite," showing glimpses of the pristine original nail beneath the purple paint. She wrapped her small arms and tiny hands around my waist as she spoke but she didn't acknowledge me.

I tried to keep from getting an erection.

I wasn't shocked that she'd fuck DLR.

Nothing she could have come up with back then would have surprised me.

She was always saying shit like that, and not just to get a rise all the time.

She'd actually do it if it came down to it, just to prove a point, to who the fuck I don't know.

5 PRP's for added profanity, straight to me and my soon to be high score.

"...and let his friends masturbate on my tits, bukkake-style..."

She was desperate to prove that nothing mattered, and that one action was just as pointless as another, and that beyond the fear

and the terror and the horror of existence was just this meaninglessness that pervaded everything, and eventually it wore you thin until you surrendered to it or you went insane and suffered some great self-immolation.

"...and shove Jujubees up my ass..."

She absentmindedly played with her clit through her underwear while she talked.

I'm pretty sure I was rock hard by this point, but I didn't want her to know. I didn't want her to figure out that all I could think of was her getting my shaft wet by licking me then stuffing me into the back of her soft throat while Drew watched.

Nothing mattered, true, but I could hear the blood pumping in my veins like an unseen symphony cueing up for a crescendo.

We were playing at being nihilists.

You have to understand that this is not entirely my fault.

I was born to fail them. It's just in my nature, that's all.

Sandra was born to be a fuck puppet, genetically predestined to swallow random lovely strangers DNA like it was a deliciously flavored lysergic, (she liked LSD-25), and while they moved on to fabulous lives she could never imagine knowing, she never tried to tag along for the ride.

One action was just as pointless as another she used to say.

She provided excellent service, according to the web reviews chronicling her "encounters," as they liked to call them online.

She gave the GF-fucking-E: The "girlfriend" experience, which basically means that, if you want her to, she pretends that you really fucking matter, like someone would if they were dating you,

instead of just being a cum receptacle for the rich and the spoiled and the lonely.

5 points for inserted swear word.

She was a wonderfully eccentric note in the texture of the upwardly mobile professionals sexual landscape, exotic and memorable, like sampling rare cuisine; a Suicide Girl escort or a pose-able punk rock Barbie blow-up doll in the flesh. Most of her clients dressed in Armani and left prepaid Amex cards on the dresser that she checked via cellphone or sometimes via wireless plug-in modem on her Toshiba portable before providing manual release.

She gave the big happy ending.

The toll free number for checking the total amount registered on an American Express Gift Card in America is 1-877-796-4678. Operators are standing by twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to answer your calls. Giving Sandra these cards meant that she couldn't be traced by purchase. Sandra was a bit paranoid, even for a beautiful and intelligent junkie whore. Cash is also untraceable, as far as I know, but she didn't like carrying it on her and she refused to get a bank account.

She was our fucking idol, seriously, and we dutifully listened to everything she had to say.

She used to make me laugh so hard that had I been drinking milk it might have shot out of my nose and for that I think she is absolutely priceless. She also bought me oatmeal raisin cookies after a security guard beat me up once in front of Turner Liquor for mouthing off to him, and that made me decide that I would love her no matter what she said or did until at least the last day of my life. She and Drew were both prepared to be by my side on that day. I just never knew how literally they meant it, or what they were honestly expecting of me.

Everything has a purpose that it is destined to fail at or betray.

There is no other way this could have turned out.

"...while whistling Dixie with my cunt lips if he asked..."

Beyond the fear and the terror and the horror of existence was just this meaninglessness that pervaded everything she would say, like a personal mantra. We had seen it, come to believe in its resounding power, come to accept it.

It became the ultimate truth.

Most of her clients did not know that she was a junkie because they never looked close enough to the ink dripping down her otherwise porcelain flesh to see the tracks in the middle of the art. There was usually a puncture wound in the small hollow of her tiny right arm that she tried uselessly to cover with cheap Joe Blasco foundation, if you cared to look for it.

"...at least for the coke."

"Don't be fucking ridiculous," Drew replied, her lips pulling into an abrasive and sexy sneer. She was brushing one of her frazzled, black licorice dreadlocks out of her face, away from her mascara, and snapping a bowl from a dirty blond bubbler she had stolen from the Lion's Den head shop in Canoga Park. She lifted a lot of their merchandise before they went under.

"David Lee Roth is a fucking dinosaur. He looks like a cross between David Lee Roth and a fucking Muppet now." She held then hit in as she spoke, croaking the words out before exhaling a long plume of green and blue smoke that circulated in the small, depressingly windowless, pink room we had taken over.

The building was abandoned, in the middle of Hollywood, on the boulevard no less, not ten blocks from the Scientologist's Celebrity Center where Tom-fucking-Cruise went.

5 points.

The only way to get in was through a second story window that was boarded up with cheap plywood, but first you had to climb up the side of a fence and onto a ledge, then swing yourself across by holding onto a pole.

We slid the board back and crawled in to find office after office of abandoned desks, like a ghost world left intact or a museum whose sole theme was the working conditions prevalent in the late 20th century during the height of Capitalism.

Feel free to insert your very own 'Office Space' joke here. We sure did.

We nicknamed the building Hollywood Babylon Manor and overnight it became our center for anarchist operations. I took to scrawling it onto windows with a Sharpie, on benches, in wet cement...pretty much everywhere I could.

Hollywood Babylon.

We decided to strip down to our underwear because it was the middle of summer and the heat was just totally fucking overwhelming and there was no way to cool off. It wasn't that big of a deal, since Drew and I had been fucking since the first hour we met (in the back bathroom of a Subway on Melrose) and Sandra was technically a call girl.

Drew immediately took another hit.

"I like the Muppets," Sandra taunted. "Especially the one with the big long nose. I always thought he had something special to offer me. Imagine the possibilities."

"Sicko," Drew said, choking on a fat hit that quickly filled the room as she let it out. "Now you're talking like some kind of a freaky plushophile. You're not going system on us, are you?"

She was talking about Crass.

She was talking about furies.

She was talking but I stopped listening when I saw her eyes, and then her lips were just moving but I wasn't paying a lot of attention to them.

Her eyes were the color of cyanide flavored pop rocks, washed down with fizzy cherry Coke.

In my head a single thought kept repeating itself over and over like one of those insipid and banal sitcom commercials that follows you from station to station on the radio in Los Angeles.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

Her eyes were like two glossy candy suckers, the kind where the flavor never matched the color.

Sandra began to pretend to fellate me, her mouth opened wide, her shiny lipstick inches from my groin. I took a dollar out of my pocket and threw it at her. She acted shocked and thrilled by a whole one dollar bill just for her.

Drew laughed at us.

Her pupils were blown wide open, like bad politics mixed with pop culture at two in the morning when all you can think about is that you're out of money and speed and you know you don't really want to come down gracefully after all.

It played over and over in my mind, like a song hook, until the words became an unwanted, chalky Valentine candy heart with the inscription worn off the face, rolling around in an empty container, unpicked and unwanted.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

"What about Gene Simmons?"

"What about him?" Sandra let go of my ass with a squeeze and turned back to Drew, who was taking off her clothes.

"Would you fuck Gene Simmons for cocaine?"

"Don't be disgusting," she said, making an exaggerated face that suggested she might throw up.

"Why not? Why is David Lee Roth okay but Gene Simmons isn't? What if he had a ton of great snow?"

"I may be a professional sex worker, but that man is a pig."

"I thought you were a nihilist?"

"Call me Annie-fucking-Nihil, baby."

Add 5 points.

"I thought nothing mattered to you?"

"I'd fuck Sammy Haggard before I would let that greasy Dago lick my fuck with his possessed Satanic cow tongue."

Drew slid off her bra and shook her freed breasts.

"That feels soooo much better."

"So, since tomorrow we might all die trying to prove a retarded point about the uselessness of consumer culture, what do you want to do on your last day on earth?" Sandra asked, suppressing a giggle.

Drew smiled, her eyes coming up from Sandra's beautiful face to meet mine.

"Let's have sex, all of us...let's fuck and fuck until we can't fuck anymore and then lay around twitching until we fall asleep and 10-fucking-PRPs to Drew for having the balls to say what we were all thinking, no doubt.

Incomplete thoughts from my journal filtered through my head as I watched the sun creep through the windowpane and across the cold floor; totally non sequitur. I had taken a white, spiral bound notebook and scrawled across its glossy face with an indelible marker.

Random. Notes. From. A. Maoist. Anarchist.

I didn't even know for sure what the words meant because more than anything they were Drew's words. I didn't bother to look up their definitions. I just thought it looked cool, subversive, contrary.

Whatever.

It was that same type of mentality that had attracted Drew to me in the first place, the posturing, so fake and transparent, but what else was there to do? Punk for the fuck of it. Nothing to rebel against. I raged out of my lack of injustice, an anemic subversion of conformity.

Where I grew up everyone has two point five kids. They marry young and divorce quickly and remarry right away. They go to church but don't believe in religion. They vote Republican, no matter what the issue, and hope for the best.

Where I grew up everyone is working hard to be a clone of everyone else and though I couldn't put my finger on it, exactly, I had been trying since early in my childhood, since I first saw the invisible bars of this nearly imperceptible cage of mediocrity.

Where I grew up everyone is working hard just to blend in with everyone else.

I took to spending weekends in the city, hitchhiking to get there, and returning by Monday morning to the family breakfast table as if nothing had happened. The rents never once mentioned my little Houdini act, at least not to me. They liked to pretend to be blissfully unaware of my absences. My father used to talk about sports with me every morning over his grapefruit and dry toast. I would sneer at him and reply with an assumed English accent like I was Sid-fucking-Vicious.

2 points.

I was so fucking fake back then, but I had no guide to propel my anger and frustration forward, to channel it into something constructive that might make a difference in the world. This was before I even knew what it was that I was fighting against so desperately, before I had heard of Che and the Zapatistas and Chairman Mao. It was before Drew opened my eyes to the suffering occurring all over the world so that people like my parents and their friends could spend all of their lives in a false sense of security, eating steak dinners on the veranda and drinking martinis with the neighbors and playing eighteen rounds of fucking golf while talking on their new cell phones.

2 points, because it was too obvious.

I was hanging out on Melrose, two-toned liberty spikes gelled up with the dried fetus of gooey Knox Blox and pointing like church spires to high holy heaven, black fingernail polish, leather jacket with the Dead Kennedy's Holiday In Cambodia album silk screened onto cotton then stapled securely on it with cheap studs, safety pins jammed through my ears and ripped, faded, stone washed jeans on.

I was one hundred and ten percent fucking poseur.

I was smoking DEATH cigarettes.

It was what caught her attention the first time she ever spoke to

me. She came up to bum one.

I don't remember a word of what she said to me.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

How could I resist you, Drew Groll?

We got high off some cheap weed she had and I stole a bottle of rum from a shop down near Vine and then she took me to meet Sandra, at her old apartment on St. Andrews, near Western, and I never went home again.

Just like that I made the decision to follow her from the quiet and peaceful existence I was rejecting in the suburban sprawl, that place where my middle class parents had built a dream home for themselves and raised me like a delicately nurtured virus, a test tube aberration, into the wretched belly of the inner city. Just like that I went from living the introverted life of a shy nerd to this extraordinary rebirth as a punk rock street urchin/speed dealer.

It made so much sense to me that it seemed like destiny, like I had been searching for it my whole life.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

The second time we fucked I told her everything, and she laughed at me.

I remember we were eating take-out at the time, greasy noodles with vegetables but no meat, because Drew's a vegetarian.

I had never drank Thai Iced Tea and I was surprised by how sweet it tasted.

The bookshelves of her apartment were full of weird philosophy and conspiracy books I had never heard of before in my life. I read almost all of them before we got evicted, before we ended up

selling them to a store up on Franklin near Birds for whatever they would give us, so we could eat and buy supplies to make sprack.

"You won't last," Drew said without hesitation.

"You'll just crack one day and head back to the land of milk and honey where mommy and daddy love you," that's what she said to me.

"You aren't cut out for this," she told me.

"You'll bitch too much."

"You should go back to your local mall and beg them for a job selling motivational posters in expensive frames to yuppies, or making juice smoothies for cheerleaders and their faggot rapist jocko boyfriends."

I never bothered to tell her that young urban professionals had largely given way to DINK's when it came to being indiscriminately picked on; double-income-no-kids.

I never bothered to tell her that I had no plans of ever going home, that I could tell from the first time I kissed her that I wouldn't ever be able to go home again, that nothing short of the end of the world would separate me from her.v

The day the world ended I planned on being with Drew Groll.

I was Drew's shiny new puppy and she knew it right away, so she started training me and teaching me how things in this world really work. She began preparing me for a life of urban terrorism.

I never bothered to tell her that I knew she was only testing me when she said mean shit to me. I smiled and gave her a practiced look and she'd smile too, and then we'd usually change the subject. We never talked about food when we were hungry, sleep when we were tired, or blowing up government buildings when we had just

finished making love.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

It wasn't always like this.

I wasn't always an alchemist, turning Sudafed into pure gold with common household cleaners, selling super pure meth to hookers and street people and desperate West Hollywood queers, to fund our anarchist brigade.

I wasn't always obsessed with monkeywrenching in my spare time like some pathetic activist on a rampage after reading Palahniuk's Fight Club, playing 'Project Mayhem' by posting flyers in the middle of the night along deserted streets and vandalizing corporate coffeehouses like Starbuck's for kicks.

We terrorized the parking structures in Beverly Hills, on Rodeo, super gluing the locks of new SL500's or A6's shut, dumping sugar into the gas tanks of 2005 BMW 5 Series no more than a few weeks old. Sandra shit in a Bentley Continental GT, on the driver's seat, then took plastic gloves from a hair dye kit and smeared it all over the inside of the windshield. With the doors closed and the windows rolled up it must have gone to over a hundred degrees inside the car that day, spoiling the new leather with a smell that was guaranteed to never come out.

We penetrated the tall glass buildings in Century City late at night and demolished their pristine interiors, spraying the walls with obscene slogans, cocks and cunts, and stole sensitive corporate paperwork, then left it at the L.A. Times in-desk. We doused the carpets with hydrogen sulfide, smashing the flat screen monitors or drenching the insides of every computer hard drive in salt water and Coca-Cola, before slipping out undetected in the first rays of the morning sun.

Each successful mission propagated a bigger and more high profile mission.

We were totally obsessed with destruction.

"We are fighting them with their own weapons, eating them alive from the inside out," Drew would say, and then I would quote to her from Audrey Lorde:

["The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."]

Then she would slap me and I would slap her back twice as hard and then we would start beating each other with our fists until we were on the ground. Soon we would be screwing ourselves, all of our anger, into one another. Sometimes Sandra watched us fuck with a detached look, as if we were a nature program she recalled seeing as a child, replaying on the Public Access Channel; or a porn movie from Eon McKai.

I didn't used to live in such a kinky and sad melodrama, like a wilting flower hanging out of a melancholy book of unrequited love poems.

I used to be on the fast track to an Ivy League college.

I used to have a full head of hair, neatly coiffed with the strays on my neck trimmed close, instead of a blazing pink Mohawk.

I used to spend all my time surfing the Internet and talking in chatrooms instead of making bombs out of expensive luxury sports utility vehicles with diesel fuel and ammonium nitrate, but back then I couldn't get a date with a girl to save my life.

I had taken to sneaking a lot of porn into my bedroom but could never really get into it because it made me feel bad to think of these chicks having to pose naked or get fucked by strangers for money. I'd close my eyes and desperately try to imagine my fantasy, to keep it intact, then open them again and look at the girl spreading her insides open so far you could almost see up into her lunch. No matter how hard I tried to close them out of my thoughts

they kept coming back, the sad eyes embedded in those naked faces, and it would kill my mood. Eventually I would give up and my half-flaccid member would dangle sore and bruised and unfulfilled in front of me like a rag of flesh.

Everything is always in motion.

Ammonium nitrate fertilizer can be effectively used to stimulate the growth of both avocados and broccoli, just two of the fine products growing in Oxnard California, which is where we had to travel to steal a truckload of the stuff from Agro-Chem & Associates.

Everything is always changing, growing or dying.

Considering that the same type of material was used in the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh, and all of the noise that everyone had been making about Homeland Security since September 11th, I thought it was going to be a lot more difficult to get our hands on, but it wasn't. There was no one guarding it. There was no one monitoring who came and went on the property. It wasn't even locked up. The hardest part of boosting it was having to shovel it into the back of the sports utility vehicle and onto the plastic bags we had glued to the insides of the stolen truck with duct tape, because it stunk and there was a lot of it.

With the rear seat down there is approximately one hundred and five cubic feet in a 2005 Cadillac Escalade. We packed every inch of it we could with fertilizer.

April 19th, 1995 was a perfect, sun-drenched Oklahoma morning in full springtime bloom. Against a picturesque deep blue, cloudless sky, a bright yellow Ryder Rental truck carefully maneuvered its way through the streets of an unsuspecting and blissfully ignorant populace in downtown Oklahoma City. Just after 9 am, the truck came to a stop in a parking area outside the Alfred P. Murrah Building. The driver stepped down from the cab and casually walked away. Two minutes later a deafening roar sounded as the truck's deadly 4000-pound cargo bomb ignited and the government

building was hit with enough force to shatter over one third of the seven-story structure and reduce its north face to smoldering rubble. According to bystanders, a massive ball of fire momentarily outshone the sun as the north side of the building disintegrated. Traffic signs and parking meters were ripped from the pavement, while shattered glass exploded in every direction like a hail of bullets, maiming nearby pedestrians. Timothy McVeigh never heard or saw any of it because he was already blocks away, wearing earplugs to protect himself from the blast, which was so powerful that it lifted some people off the ground up to a mile away.

April 19th, 2005 was a perfect, sun-drenched L.A. morning in full springtime bloom. Against a picturesque deep blue, cloudless sky, a shiny black stolen Cadillac Escalade with run-flat tires on twenty inch "dub" rims carefully maneuvered its way through the streets of an unsuspecting and blissfully ignorant populace in Beverly Hills, down San Vicente towards the Hard Rock café on the corner of the Beverly Center, at the Beverly boulevard intersection.

History was, a decade later, about to repeat itself, with similar deadly consequences.

We might not have been able to provide such an astonishing show of fireworks, but we could still create chaos, we could still disrupt the system.

We thought we could get away with it.

We knew that they would never see us coming. All people saw when they looked at us was three white, punker kids, society's disenfranchised trash, begging for spare change. We were not terrorists. We were a shoplifting hazard. We were about to change the way the world looked at us all again, like Columbine, like Red Lake. We were ready to set it all on fire, for anarchy, for better or worse, and to take our place in the annals of this fucked up American history, in pop culture, and on a zillion tawdry and meaningless cable news programs around the world; if we lived through it.

We really did think we could get away with it. After all, it wasn't the first bomb we had set off or the first commercial property we had set fire to. It was just bigger, much bigger, and far more public. It was a full blown airborne media event waiting to happen, as unexpected as September 11th, that would spread the fear and distrust of the system across the planet like a shockwave that no one would forget.

There was no way the parent company, Taubman Centers, Inc., could shut this up.

I think I knew from the first moment I saw it that I wanted to blow up the Beverly Center, that I would have eventually tried even if I had never met Drew Groll. I wanted to see it explode in a rain of glass and fire, all of it, in every direction, showering the jaded civilians in their cars on La Cienega, the diners eating at the Daily Grill across the street, the people watching from across the street while they ate at Jerry's-fucking-Deli; everyone in L.A. who thought they had already seen it all.

5 points for speaking power to the truth.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

Drew rolled over and opened one eye at me suspiciously, stretching and yawning like a lazy cat. I silently pushed the coffee I had scored from the corner market towards her and she smiled. It was difficult freighting coffee to the building and she knew it.

She leaned over and kissed me and Sandra groaned.

"What the fuck are you doing up at seven in the goddamn fucking morning kissing and making out with one another after we all screwed the night away?"

Drew let out a burst of short, nervous giggles and I kissed her again. Sandra began looking for her drug kit and sharpening a

needle on a matchbook with her eyes half open.

Everything is always on its way to someplace else.

Adam works for a big insurance company that uses a cartoon duck as its spokesperson.

He lives in Palo Alto with his wife and his two children.

He goes to church on Sundays when he is in town, belongs to the local Masonic lodge, and is a former Cub Scout leader.

He's a respected member of the community, a successful businessman who likes to dabble in golf, and real estate speculation. Last year he donated a tenth of his salary to several well-known charities, and his wife made sure that every single one of their friends heard about it.

He's mag-fucking-nanimous.

5 points for being sneaky.

He's also a terrible masochist, whose only hope of getting his dirty rocks off and making it through another year to his 12th anniversary, with the cow that ate his beautiful young wife, hinges on the possibility of seeing Sandra in the Marriot Hotel near LAX before he heads off to Pittsburgh for a sales meeting or Atlantic City for a conference.

Adam needs Sandra to abuse him. He needs her to blindfold him, tie him up, and put burning cigarettes out on his scrotum, after shoving vibrating sex toys up his lubricated rectum.

He needs Sandra to scream at him, beat him with a paddle, and piss on him.

He needs her to rake her nails over his delicate white skin, to torture his nipples with clamps, and to jack him off into her hand

before rubbing it in his face.

He needs her to tell him that he doesn't deserve this kind of attention and that he's not worthy to be whipped with a braided cat of nine tails, or cut with a single tail whip, or have his testicles pierced with butterfly hypodermic needle points.

He needs to be left hanging in the dark for no more than an hour or he won't have enough time to make it to the terminal, past all the terrorism security check points, and onto his plane. If you stop to think about it, it's hysterical, considering we're planning on using his gas guzzling, environmentally-unfriendly, midlife crisis mobile to commit a commemorative terrorist attack on the tenth anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. He won't even have enough time to stop in the bathroom and relieve the persistent stinging on the inside of his bruised thighs with Aspercreme. He'll just have to pop a Soma.

None of us needed the hassle of Sandra turning a trick the day before our big event but since Adam parked his Escalade at the airport while he was gone, so he doesn't have to be at the mercy of a retard driving one of those blue shuttles when he gets home, tying him up and delaying him just a little ensured that we'd get a chance to swipe his keys and parking stub. It took Drew and I nearly a half an hour to find his SUV but no one gave us a second look when we pulled out, which is strange, for a guy with a pink Mohawk and a girl with dreadlocks and sleeve tattoos.

Fast forward to Oxnard, then to the parking lot of our abandoned office museum that never opens, and then add in everything that I have already told you and we're current.

That means you can officially consider yourself up to speed, so if you need to flip the tape over or switch cameras before you continue your "unofficial government interview" without the presence of my lawyer, now might be a good time. I guess after Gonzalez, Abu Ghraib, and Gitmo I should consider myself lucky. Right. Onward then.

It may have been the best night of my entire life, which means I should have known that I would never see her again.

I'm getting ahead of myself.

I won the coin toss and so I would be brandishing the flare gun with which we intended to ignite our cargo, after crashing it head on into the Hard Rock at ground level on the northwest corner of the Beverly Center, at the cross streets of San Vicente and Beverly Boulevard across from Cedars Sinai Medical Center and the Jerry's-fucking-Deli. We figured if we buried the bomb deep enough inside the caf  that the detonation would take out a large section of the parking lot and hopefully the Macy's above it would tumble down onto the street in a fiery ball of melting merchandise.

Unlike Oklahoma City, we would reduce the chances of civilian casualties with an early attack. The famous Hard Rock Caf , with its midnight blue Cadillac with painted flames jutting through the roof, opened daily at 11:30 am. It seemed only fitting that our Cadillac would prevent it from ever opening again.

I was supposed to dump the diesel fuel after we crashed, then we would rush across the street to the Tail of the Pup and fire off the flare gun until it ignited. After that, there was no plan. We would just sit there and watch all the confusion, we would breath it in like amniotic fluid and feel complete.

Call me Andy-fucking-Nihil baby.

0 points.

The guide we relied on for monkeywrenching suggested that we use brightly colored ski masks to distract and confuse bystanders. Drew, who is beautiful beyond the telling and who I miss more than words, recalled that a series of bank robberies were committed in the nude, which prevented eye witnesses from recalling what the robber looked like. She said that no matter how much the FBI

questioned people making deposits on the days of the robberies, or tellers from the bank, all they could remember was the size of the bandits penis, that he was attractively well hung, and that he had pleasantly trimmed his pubic hair. The media later dubbed him the naked bandit. He was never caught.

It was her idea to go naked, wearing only 14 hole Doc Martins so that running across broken glass wouldn't be any kind of problem. We were laughing most of the way, driving up Sunset, totally unconcerned with the morning traffic and turning left onto San Vicente, rolling down towards fate.v

Sandra had shot up early, way more than usual, and then when she came out of it she started snorting my homemade crank. Drew and I smoked some chronic then switched to the last of the peanut butter colored concoction I had whipped up the night before. We were all pretty well buzzing.

It wasn't until we got up close, past Melrose, that I noticed the problem, noticed the ring of protestors out in front of the mall, all carrying signs with PETA stickers and cheap, catchy slogans smeared on them. All of the rush and bravado that I had been pumping myself up on began to diminish. There were going to be a lot of civilian casualties if we continued, not to mention way more press than I expected, and witnesses. I started to hyperventilate at the thought of hurting all of those people, and I tried to reach over for the wheel, but Drew held my hands and Sandra floored it into the crowd.

The protestors were chanting something while television cameras circled them.

There were models in the front row of protestors, Hollywood celebrities protesting fur, or red meat, or something.

There was an evil and malicious glint in Sandra's eyes when she recognized what was happening.

It was what they had both been dreaming from the beginning. To the girls it was like Christmas and Easter and the Super Bowl all rolled up into one.

We were going well over 70 mph with no sign of stopping.

We were headed for the front of the Hard Rock head on and gaining momentum.

We were going up and over the curb before I blacked out, the first wave of protestors parting in front of us like a sea of people, and then all I remember is the sound of breaking glass.

When I came to there were people all around us, Drew was gone, and Sandra was lodged in the windshield. Her driver's side airbag never deployed. She hadn't worn her seatbelt and suddenly it struck me that maybe she hadn't planned on living through this in the first place.

Everything around me seemed to be in motion, creaking or falling or bursting into flames.

I remember smelling the diesel, which meant that either the milk containers had burst in the crash or someone had already emptied them onto the fertilizer, mixing the bomb components.

The fumes were so strong they made me gag.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

I crawled out of the open passenger side door and into a swarm of people before I noticed that my flare gun was missing. No one would come near me. I was naked and covered in a film of white silt from when the airbag went off, and a stream of bright red blood was trickling out of my nose. I must have looked amazing.

I remember that some of the news cameras closed in on me, that there was a lady from one of the local channels with a large black

microphone with an affiliate logo emblazoned on it, that she kept asking me if I was part of the protest.

I remember that I was having trouble focusing, that I didn't remember how I had gotten there, or know why I was naked, wearing only blue Docs, but that it didn't really bother me.

Within the minute or two that I stood there trying to get my bearings, cameras came out of everywhere, every channel I could imagine. There was a lady screaming from within the café and I heard a little girl crying near me but I couldn't see her. I looked down at the ground, trying to catch my breath, and I saw a trail of white powder leading off across the intersection, mixed with blood. I raised my head and squinted and my eyes came back into focus.

There, standing across the street, was Drew, leveling the flare gun at me, stark naked.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

I raised my arms and spread them out like Jesus on a great big invisible cross and smiled. There was a popping sound, and hissing, and then I saw it coming towards me, a bright red glowing flare moving so fast that I barely had time to register what it was before it hit me in the face and the world went black.

I didn't have time to wonder why she had left me in the car, if she had thought I was dead too or if she was angry at me for trying to make Sandra swerve at the last minute.

I didn't have time to ask her if she meant to hit me with the flare or if it was an accident, if she had wanted me dead or why.

I didn't have time to react to her being run down by an MTA as she stepped off the curb to fire at me.

Right before I felt the flare hit me in the head I noticed that everyone had stopped screaming, that the world had gone

absolutely one hundred and ten percent quiet, and I thought, in a detached way, that it was very strange.

The blackness reached up and swallowed me into a dreamless void like an iron fist closing around me. There, in that complete darkness, one thing repeated itself in my brain, over and over again, the like hook from a bad pop song about love gone wrong.

I'm in love with I'm in love with I'm in love with Drew Groll.

Beyond the fear and the terror and the horror of existence there is nothing, I know that now.

Everything is always in motion, thrashing headlong into the final abyss, a great and memorable self-immolation, just like we were.

So it really doesn't matter what you do to me anymore. Feel free to take my confession and make an example out of me, like McVeigh, like Moussaoui, like any number of other freedom fighters who fell victim along the way to their nagging conscience or ineptitude.

She was my ultimate truth and now she's gone.

You have to understand that this is entirely my own fault.

I was born to fail them. I know that now. It's just in my nature, that's all.

History 1-A

by Mark Barkawitz

It was the fall of '72. I was living in a '51 Chevy pick-up truck, on the bed of which I had built a wooden, cab-over camper with an A-frame roof to which a crooked, faux stovepipe was attached. My roommate, Atom, was a dog. Literally, a sixty pound, two-year-old mutt-part shepard, part lab-I had gotten as a pup. Curled up next to me in my sleeping bag in the camper, we kept each other warm while parked overnight on the streets of Monterey, where after dark it was already colder than any winter either one of us Southern California transplants had ever experienced.

That morning, the signature fog lifted early. The sun shined brightly. As the morning warmed, Atom and I decided to take a ride down the coast to look for some surf. (With winter approaching, I wasn't sure how much longer I'd be able to stand the chilly waters.) We stopped off for some donuts and coffee, and because I needed to use the restroom, then headed south on Pacific Coast Highway, past the towering redwoods and gated domiciles of Carmel and continued around the extreme curvatures of the coastline as it approached Big Sur with its sheer drop-offs and profound chasms connected by concrete bridges. While steering the truck with one hand, I put a Three Dog Night tape in the eight-track player I had mounted under the dash. As I sang along-"On-n-e is the loneliest number that you ever knew-w-w . . ."-Atom sat with his head out the passenger side window, the wind blowing his ears back like a cartoon character's, his nostrils flaring as he breathed in the salty air that rushed past his coal-black nose. It was a weird time in my life. I was between things. My 1-A draft classification had finally been rescinded and replaced with a 1-H. A holding classification. Which meant for the first time in three-and-a-half years (I had gotten a lousy Lottery number) Uncle Sam wasn't trying to draft me into the Army. I would've made a lousy soldier anyway. Wasn't much on taking orders. Always questioned Authority. But now, my life was

my own again. I wasn't going to die (For what?) in some remote rice paddy in Vietnam, as had been the fate of two of my classmates from my high school graduating Class of '69. And there was Ray Stevens, the goofy kid who lived across the street from me growing up, who at eighteen had enlisted, and by nineteen, returned home with a steel plate in his skull and a daily heroine habit. No one came back the same as they'd left. Rules of War. I guess that's why I'd quit my job at the factory, closed-out my paltry savings account, and gone on the road for a while. As I had explained to my girlfriend and my mom (separately, of course), I just needed some time to think, to re-adjust, to mellow-out. I used the turn-out and, as had become my habit, signaled the cars behind me to pass.

As I drove over the long bridge that transcended the mouth of the Little Sur River, I had a clear view of the glassy swells which rolled in from across the deep, blue-green ocean, wafted the kelp beds, crested as waves, and lapped over into white foam ribbons that uniformly approached the shoreline. On the other side of the bridge, I pulled over behind the only other car parked on the side of the road, a blue-and-white '57 Ford station wagon with rusty surfboard racks attached to its roof and a red, white, and black POW/MIA bumper sticker pasted on its tail end.

Atom and I got out on the sandy roadside. The barbed-wire fence had already been cut and peeled back to accommodate public access to the sand and ice plant-covered hillsides that led down to the white sand beach a half-mile below. The air was unusually still for northern California. I wanted to get out in the water before the afternoon wind whipped up, and so hurriedly unlocked the back door to the camper, pulled out my surfboard—a six-foot, five-inch double-finner that I'd shaped and glassed myself in a friend's garage—and my O'Neill wetsuit and booties. Regardless of how warm it was on the shore, I knew the water would be cold. Suddenly, a car horn honked. I looked over quickly to make sure Atom hadn't wandered out on the highway—he hadn't—just as a Datsun crammed full of jarheads in civies-GIs on their way back to Fort Ord—sped by. The driver cursed me: "Goddamn hippie!" The guy in the back seat held his arm out the open, side window and

flipped me the bone. Fortunately, for my sake, they didn't stop to kick my butt. Instead, the little import continued north, white smoke belching out its tailpipe, as it snaked around the curve and over the bridge. I figured they didn't like my long hair and bell-bottom over-alls. Or maybe it was the large, white letters painted on that side of my windowless, plywood camper: "DROP NIXON, NOT BOMBS!" He was their Commander-and-Chief. For at least two more weeks anyway, when we the people would go to the polls to cast our ballots for a new president. On the passenger side of my camper was painted the campaign slogan: "McGOVERN & PEACE." Sure, it was a long-shot. But the war had motivated me politically. It was my first time voting and I had a right to my opinion. Even if it was hopeless. But I was damn glad that I hadn't had to explain that to those irate GIs, who saw me as an enemy of the state. They didn't know I was on their side, too. Or that my best friend in Monterey was likewise stationed at Ord. But it was a time of tough decisions. Most of those guys, like my friend, had probably been drafted and were just pissed-off at the situation in which they found themselves. All I had was freedom. And they hated me for it.

I changed into my canvas trunks, grabbed a towel and a bar of wax, and locked up the camper and cab. Atom and I headed for the beach. It was a long hike. But my huarache sandals were worn and comfortable. My board was relatively light weight, compared to the long boards on which I had learned at the foot of the cliffs at Huntington Beach. But like many others, I had been swept up by the experimental, short board revolution of the late Sixties and early Seventies. In Rat's garage—a high school classmate and fellow surfer—we began shaping our own boards. From the old, foam blanks of long boards, which we skinned ourselves by ripping off the old fiberglass—the invisible fibers of which stuck to our bare, sweaty skin and made us itch for days—we reshaped new boards into radical designs of our own choices. Smaller and smaller and smaller, until they barely floated us as we paddled out into the waves at Malibu, Newport, Doheney, San Clemente, and North San Diego county. It was all trial and error. Some designs worked; some didn't. As the sun beat down, my skin began to sweat under the black, rubber wetsuit slung over my shoulder. I followed Atom's

crooked tail, which had been broken in a doorway before I got him, as it wagged back and forth like a cockeyed windshield wiper down the winding foot trail towards the beach, where the waves loomed larger the closer we got.

When we hit the sand, Atom raced towards the shoreline, roused the grubbing seagulls, "Woof, woof, woof!" and chased them down the beach as they flew away. It was his favorite thing to do. On the sand, a solitary beach towel lay over a pair of sneakers. The only surfer in the water—black in his wetsuit, floating on a small, blue board out near the point (I figured it was his Ford parked back on the road.)—dropped—in late on an overhead left. But standing backside on his short board, which hung too long at the top of the wave as it broke, he pitched over—the—falls in a gnarly-looking wipe-out. His board bounced up in the air, landed in the whitewater and turned sideways as it washed in towards the shore. Outside, the surfer's head, like a seal's, popped up from underwater and craned around to look for his board before spotting it inside. He began the long swim for shore, which was no easier—though warmer—in a wetsuit. I hated the swim in after a wipe-out. Especially up north, where the water was colder and deeper, lush with kelp beds, and populated with sea lions and steelheads and other large, shadowy shapes swimming just below the surface. On the inside, the now-boardless surfer caught a wave and bodysurfed towards the beach, where he trudged exhaustedly to his blue board on the shore. As he carried it under his arm towards the towel on the beach, we acknowledged each other—brothers of the waves—from afar with the nod of our heads. With the exception of Santa Cruz, a surfer enclave just north of Castroville—artichoke capital of the world—the beaches and waves of northern California were sparsely populated, unlike the beaches down south, where the milder climate and songs of California Dreamin' about Beach Boys' summers enticed hoards of surfers and families and tourists to enjoy the warm sun, sand, and surf. After stepping into my wetsuit and stretching it up and over my legs, chest, and arms, I zipped up then struggled to pull on the skintight booties that would keep my toes from freezing. I grabbed my board and wax and headed past him—the only other person on the beach. As he peeled the wetsuit down to his waist, I called over:

"How is it out there?"

"Brutal, man." He looked a little older and more experienced than my twenty-one years, with a grown-out crew cut and tattooed bicep—maybe a Marine insignia—but I was too far away to see it clearly. He towed off. I nodded back.

The waves of northern California were often like that: big, thick, and oblivious to human enjoyment. As the icy water on the shoreline washed over my booties and sent an ache through the bones of my legs, I peered out at another overhead set on the outside—it was getting bigger with the in-coming tide. The waves looked fast, with a steep drop, but make able for a good surfer. Unfortunately, my board was designed more for maneuverability—with a wide tail to accommodate its dual fins—than speed. So if the waves got any bigger, I would be in trouble. I tossed my board upside down in the shallow water to harden the wax on its deck, then picked it back up, and stepped backwards on the incline of the wet sand and dropped to my knees. As I waxed my board, Atom raced past me in the other direction, "Woof, woof, woof!" chasing down the shoreline after another low-flying seagull he would never catch.

Paddling-out was a chore. Especially when the waves were overhead and consistent. Standing knee-deep with my board in the in-coming whitewaters, I watched and waited for a lull in the booming, outside sets. When the momentary calm outside finally arrived, I dove on my board to push it through the lip of a four-foot wave on the inside. As it washed over my head, the icy water froze my brain, snuck in the neck of my wetsuit, and sent an icy chill down my spine. My arms reached forward, dug deeply and rapidly in the cold water, which iced and stiffened my bare fingers. I maneuvered around the inside breakers as fast as I could paddle, but kept checking the outside, aware that at any moment the next set would appear. Hoping that I wouldn't get caught inside by the overhead waves, I put my head down momentarily, breathed deeply, and continued to paddle hard towards the point where an underwater reef caused the swells to peak and break uniformly, and the outside kelp beds helped smooth the surface from ocean chop. But when I

looked up again, a big set loomed on the blue horizon and I knew I couldn't beat the first wave before it broke—damn—so I stopped paddling, sat on my board, and waited for the inevitable. The thick wall of water rose, then came crashing down with the whitewater exploding in front of me. I pulled myself to the nose of my board, held my breath, and sunk my head under the surface, clinging tightly to the rails of my surfboard in an effort to submerge myself under the power that smashed over me, pushed me farther down, then overwhelmed me completely, bouncing, churning, throwing my board and me backwards towards the shoreline. When I finally popped up in the bubbling aftermath of the whitewater, I paddled instinctively towards the outside to keep from drifting farther inside. The swells from the north pushed me farther south. There were a half-dozen more waves in the set and each one had its way with me. But I fought and paddled and swore and eventually, between sets, made it outside to the point, where I just lay for a while, alone, sucking air, face down on my board with my feet dangling underneath me in the tentacles of kelp that reached up from the deep.

I was in no hurry to catch a wave. Needed to regain my strength first. But when I looked up again, I was in good position—just to the right of the peak—for the approaching swell, which looked about six-foot-plus.

I couldn't resist, sat up quickly, and oscillated my legs in the water to rotate my board towards the shoreline. As the wave swelled underneath my board, I leaned forward, and with a thrust of my legs and one, quick paddle of my arms, pulled into the wave at its top and stared down its steep face. Jumping to my bootied-feet, I crouched low and dropped—in on an angle to the right, just as the peak broke to my left. As I raced to the bottom of the wave, facing the wall of water which crested above and behind me, I swiveled my hips and knees to turn the board hard, propelling it, gaining more speed, beating the breaking curl, then cutting back into it—tempting Fate—only to bounce off the lip and crank another hard bottom-turn. The wave was about to close-out on the inside, so I kicked my board through its breaking lip and flipped back over the wave, then

belly-flopped back down on the water's smooth surface. Yes! God, yes! This was my favorite thing to do. But there was no time for celebration. Instead, I immediately began paddling—with renewed vigor—through the last in-coming waves of the set and back outside for more.

Because I'd ridden a right and the drift from the current was also pushing me farther south down the beach, I was on the other side of the point now. The ocean was suddenly calm now in the deep water outside. The continental shelf dropped off much more steeply up north than down south, which made me feel as if I were paddling in the middle of the ocean. The momentarily lull brought an eerie silence to the surface. But I knew at any moment, another outside set could pop up and squash me like a sandcrab, so I put my head down again and pulled hard to finish my paddle back over to the point.

But as my left hand dug deeply underwater, its open palm suddenly reached down upon a smooth, cold surface—like naugahyde—the outsides of which my fingers couldn't reach. It moved below me. With a gasp, I yanked my hand back out from the ocean, which rose momentarily like a belch under my surfboard, then subsided just as quickly.

Parts of words spat out as I hyperventilated and jerked my head around in all directions to see where it was, what it was I had touched? And although I saw nothing unusual, I knew I had to get the hell out of there. Now! But I was afraid to put my hands or feet back into the water because of whatever it was that was below me.

Outside, a set started to roll in. But there was no way I was paddling out any farther. I just wanted to get back on land. So in an effort to turn my board back towards the shore, I leaned to the side and barely scratched the surface with my hands, keeping my feet up in the air and out of the water, as I negotiated a wide half-turn, wishing and praying—"Oh, God, oh, God, oh . . ."—that I had a bigger board that floated me better, that I wasn't about to get eaten by whatever it was that I had touched below me.

As the first wave in the set broke and boomed like a mortar behind me, I grabbed the rails of my board as tightly as I could hold and waited for the whitewater, which hit me a second later, enveloping me completely in its churn like sock in a washing machine, bouncing me, prying me from my board that I wouldn't relinquish for fear I would surely die. Finally, my head broke the surface of the whitewater that continued to propel my board shoreward. I didn't dare stand. This was no longer a ride—it was survival. So I belly-boarded the soup all the way inside until my skags dragged into the sand, where I abandoned my board, ran out of the shore break, and tripped face down onto the dry sand, out of the ocean's reach.

I heard myself breathing deeply, rapidly. But I was too freaked to move, until something suddenly warm and wet licked the side of my face. I started to scream again and jumped away. But it was only Atom.

"Oh."

I looked out at the ocean but there were only waves and my abandoned surfboard on the shoreline. On the beach, there was no one else now. The only other surfer had vanished with his blue board, towel, and sneakers. Atom stepped closer and sat down next to me. I put my arms around his neck and leaned against him.

"What the hell was that?"

But he didn't answer. Instead, he spotted another seagull as it landed on the shoreline—daring him—and with his usual explanation, "Woof, woof, woof!" took off running after the gull, leaving me alone to contemplate my demons.

On the hike back to the truck, I tried to rationalize what had happened to me, what it might have been that I had touched, and what had moved the ocean below my surfboard? But there was no explanation that made any sense. I had to tell someone. To get an objective opinion, theory, explanation. So after dark, I parked my

truck at the curb outside the mobile home park in Monterey where my friend Dick lived off-base with another GI. Atom and I walked in the park with its two dozen rental units and parked RVs interspersed under giant redwoods. From his aluminum porch, the manager, balding, middle-aged, and pot-bellied under his flannel shirt, whom I recognized from my last visit, yelled over to me:

"I told you to put that damn dog on a leash when you come in here."

But Atom had never been on a leash. He'd always walked at my side without one and I didn't think he'd appreciate the tethering, so I pretended not to hear and continued across the grounds to my friend's one bedroom, mobile home, where I knocked on the aluminum front door. Jethro Tull's "Fatman" reverberated from inside through the aluminum walls. A moment later, Dick, already out of his Army fatigues, barefoot, wearing levis and a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt, let us in. His hair was short, but longer than any of the other GIs'. He, too, had had a lousy Lottery number. The inside of their place was already filled with the aroma of beans and chilies. Dick's roommate Dave—a crew-cut, red-headed, red-neck enlistee from Arkansas—was in the kitchenette, dicing with a butcher's knife more chilies and onions, which he scraped from the chopping block into the big pot that was simmering on the two-burner stove. A bottle of Tabasco and a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels rested on the counter next to a shot glass filled nearly to the top with the eighty-six proof liquor. Dave was a cook at Fort Ord. He cooked daily for six-hundred GIs. He was making another pot of his killer chili, which was way too hot for human (or canine) consumption, but because it was free and because I was on a tight budget and because Dick never had any money because the Army was always deducting fines from his monthly paycheck for his insubordination and bouts of AWOL, we ate it. And Dave knew we would eat it—none of which he ate himself—and relished watching us suffer through each bowlful. So each batch was a little hotter, a little spicier, a little more killer.

"What's happenin'," Dick said. It was more of a greeting than a question.

I answered anyway: "Freaky stuff, man."

But before I could explain, Dave said: "Git your damn dawg outta ma kitchen." He held a butcher knife blade up on the chopping block, like an exclamation point.

Atom had wandered from my side over to sniff what was cooking on the stove above him. He wasn't actually in the kitchen. But Dave didn't like Atom. I didn't know Dave well enough to know if it was something in particular about my dog or me or dogs in general that he didn't like. But it was his pad, so I called Atom back over. I sat on the lawn chair next to the slumping couch with its green sleeping bag on which Dick slept every night. The bedroom was Dave's, who paid most of the rent. Atom sat next to me. The black & white TV was on but there was no voice coming out of Walter Cronkite's moving lips as he reported the "CBS Evening News." The sound was turned off in deference to the rock music playing on the stereo. Dick's empty Army boots slumped on the floor by the TV.

There was ritual to surviving a bowl of Dave's killer chili. Each demanded a six-pack of cheap, commissary beer, which was exempt from federal taxes and most of the alcohol content, and a half-loaf of white bread. I reimbursed Dick a buck-and-a-half for my six-pack and my half of the bread. He took two, icy-wet cans from the ice chest on the floor—the bachelor-sized refrigerator in the kitchenette was strictly for Dave's food supplies—and set them down with a loaf of Wonder bread on the coffee table between us. At the stove, Dave ladled out two large bowlfuls of chili, which he set on the counter, steam rising from each like twin volcanoes. "Come an' git it, boys." Tilting back his head, he shot down the whiskey, then pretended to smile at us. Dave was a hard guy to like.

Each delicious spoonful of kidney beans, ground beef, and tomato sauce was accompanied by spicy onions and fiery chilies that set every taste bud in my mouth ablaze, made my throat and ears burn, my eyes water, and my brow sweat. I tried to douse the fire with long draws of cold beer from the popped top of the barrel-shaped

can and smother it with slice after slice of the dry white bread from the open loaf. I gulped in air to cool my lips and tongue, while explaining in detail what had happened to me earlier out at the point in the mouth of the Little Sur River.

Dick, a fellow surfer, whose dinged-up board leaned in the corner of the room behind him, surmised: "Probably just a big rock under water with some kelp."

In between gulps of beer, I replied: "No way, man. I know what a rock feels like. I'm telling you, this thing was alive." I wiped the sweat from my brow with my shirtsleeve.

"Boy, you been smokin' too much a' that loco weed," Dave conjectured, while sitting on the loan stool at the counter. He poured himself another drink from the bottle, and from his perch, looked down on us.

"I wasn't stoned, man." It was the usual assumption about hippies. Why else would we look, act as we did? "Something was out there. I touched it and the ocean rose below me." I gave Atom a slice of white bread. Dave looked on disapprovingly.

"A blow-hole at high tide'll do that sometimes," Dick offered. His brow was sweating, too. He chugged down his beer, got us two more, and put a Van Morrison album on the turntable. The speakers crackled from the scratches on the black vinyl under the needle.

"A submerged blow-hole sucks down," I countered about the possibility about a hole in the rock reef. "This lifted me up. As if something breached below my board before diving deeper."

"Yeah, Ahab. Like you went surfin' with a whale." Dick shook his head, disbelievingly. "You're flippin'-out, man." He took another spoonful of chili and likewise sucked air to cool his insides.

"Maybe it was a shark?"

We both looked over at Dave, who at the counter was already staring back at us through narrowed eyes, like slits of dim light. "Ya know, like one a' them giant, man-eatin', white kine."

Of course, that had crossed my mind earlier. But I had eliminated its likelihood. "I would've seen the dorsal fin on the surface. Same thing with a dolphin."

"Not always." Dave stared at the shot glass he had already raised from the counter, as if looking for the answer to my conundrum in its dark, liquid contents. "I hear tell, sharks sometimes strike from below, thinkin' you surfer boys in your black wetsuits is seals." He smiled again and posed in rhyme: "An' ain't seal-their fav'rite meal?"

As I said before, Dave was a hard guy to like.

On TV, the scene switched from the CBS studio to a battlefield in Nam, where an Army helicopter with its blades rotating waited on a make-shift landing pad, as soldiers in combat fatigues and helmets unloaded stretchers with wounded GIs and IV bottles attached. As Van Morrison irreverently sang about a marvelous night for a moon dance, the three of us in the aluminum room stared at the silent, black and white images next to Dick's empty Army boots.

Dave shot down his Jack Daniels.

The fiery chili made my eyes water.

"Goddamn war," Dick said for us all.

After dinner, I felt bloated from all the yeast and my head was still flushed from the spices and I just needed some fresh air, so I excused myself: "I have to feed my dog." But when I closed the front door and stepped outside with Atom, a cop car was already parked in front of the manager's mobile home and he was outside talking to the cop, who sat behind the steering wheel. I hoped the conversation wasn't about me. But apparently, it was. Because as we tried to nonchalantly pass by, the cop signaled me over. We

approached the patrol car.

"That your dog?" he asked.

I glanced down at Atom by my side, who was already staring up at me, as if wanting to be claimed. I had to laugh. "Yeah, he's mine."

"It's a fifty-dollar fine for not having him on a leash."

"We forgot it in the truck." I glanced over at the pot-bellied manager, who was standing nearby, and pretended to smile. "We were just going back to get it." I started to walk away. But the cop called me back:

"Hold it a minute."

The car door opened and the cop got out. He was a lot bigger and whiter than I. And he didn't look friendly when he ordered: "Put your hands on the car and spread your legs."

I sighed and complied. It wasn't the first time I'd been hassled by The Man. Once again, the long hair and bell-bottoms. But as he patted me down, Atom growled. "Cool it," I said, before the cop shot him. Maybe that's why I felt akin to the Civil Rights Movement. I was a minority by my own choice. And was treated as such by The Establishment. After he found nothing for which to arrest me, he wrote me a ticket for an unleashed dog. I had thirty days to pay or go to court to fight it. A warrant would be issued for my arrest if I ignored it. I tucked the ticket into the pocket of my overalls and he let us leave.

The next morning, we were awakened by someone pounding on the camper door. Next to me in my sleeping bag, Atom barked: "Woof!" I heard a car engine idling outside my plywood walls and immediately suspected it might be The Man back to roust us again. Maybe search the truck this time. So I shushed Atom and didn't answer until I heard Dick's familiar voice: "Wake up in there."

In my long underwear, I opened the back door. Dick was dressed in civies, standing next to his car—a little two-seater, foreign job with the temporary registration taped to the windshield—parked at the curb, driver's door opened, engine running. Gray fog darkened the sky and suspended a dewy mist. I had no idea what time it was, but it really didn't matter. Atom jumped down from the truck and sniffed the closest redwood tree available. As he lifted his leg, I felt the urge to do likewise.

"I called in sick." Dick treated his inscription in the Armed Forces like a job he didn't want. He wasn't exactly Government Issue. "Wanna get some breakfast?"

I yawned and nodded.

Like anybody else, I needed to use a bathroom first thing in the morning. Especially after all the watery, commissary beer which had washed down last night's dinner. Unfortunately, my homemade unit wasn't equipped with a commode. So I dressed quickly and locked up the camper. Atom was already sitting in the space behind the seats, when I got in the passenger side of Dick's Sunbeam Alpine. He floored it almost before I could close the door. He liked driving fast, shifting through the gears. Considering the state of my bladder, I didn't discourage him.

"Did you ever find that damn snake in your car?" I asked. We had caught a gopher snake—maybe three feet long—while hiking in a field at a State Park about a week ago. Dick wanted it for a pet and had put the snake in the glove compartment for safe keeping on the drive home. Unfortunately, there was a small hole in the back corner of the glove compartment and the snake had escaped and now lived somewhere inside the car's dashboard.

"No. But I locked a feeder mouse in here the other night and he was gone in the morning." He downshifted, turned at the corner as if on a course, and explained: "They only eat live food."

I already knew that.

On the outskirts of downtown Monterey, he turned the Sunbeam into the lot of a donut shop, screeched to a stop, and yanked on the emergency brake. I wasn't a big donut fan. But through the front wall of glass, I could see the restroom door inside, and by now, it was one of those any-port-in-a-storm situations. Dick and I got out. I told Atom:

"Hang out."

He jumped over the seat and sat in Dick's place with his head out the partially-opened window, watching us. Behind the counter in the donut shop, a guy about my age in a hairnet was serving the customer ahead of us. I gave Dick a buck and said: "Get me a large coffee and two crumb."

But when I reached for the knob of the restroom door, it was locked and a gravelly voice, as if in a cave, called out from inside: "Occupied." Public restrooms—I hated them! I sat down at an empty table. Dick sat across from me with our breakfasts. I didn't dare take the top off my styrofoam cup of coffee. I crossed my legs tightly and tried not to stare at the door which remained silently closed.

Dick sipped his large coffee and began to pull apart his cinnamon roll. "Dave says you can't bring your dog in the house anymore."

"What?"

Just then, the restroom door opened from inside and out stepped a wino with scraggly beard and burrs in his uncombed hair. He wore a stained, torn Army jacket, in which he had obviously slept, and holey shoes which exposed parts of his filthy feet. He shuffled over to the corner booth, where a styrofoam coffee cup waited alone on the table.

Dick couldn't help grinning between bites of his cinnamon roll. "Good luck in there."

I didn't even want to touch the doorknob now. But I held my breath, stepped inside my only respite, and emptied my bladder as quickly as I could. My lungs began to complain for air, but there was no way. And sitting down was totally out of the question. Light-headed from the lack of oxygen, I flushed the toilet with the sole of my Converse All-Star—the white canvas of which I had adorned with blue stars and red stripes like a flag—and thought I would pass out while hurriedly washing my hands. I used a paper towel to turn the doorknob, stepped out, and sucked in lungfuls of replenishingly breathable air. But when I sat down at the table across from Dick, and appraised my junk food breakfast, I knew it was over.

"I'm going home, man."

He stopped in mid-bite. "Home? Why?"

So I told him I had had it with bad meals and filthy, public restrooms. With love-it-or-leave-it cops hassling me and invisible monsters under icy-cold water. With rowdy jarheads in Datsuns, snakes in dashboards, and assholes in mobile homes, to which he diagnosed:

"You're flippin'-out, man."

Maybe. I gazed out the glass wall. In the driver's seat of Dick's car, Atom looked as if he were about to back out onto a highway where canines ruled the street. I thought to myself, it might be a better world. But to be perfectly frank, I was tired of sleeping with a dog.

Instead of the scenic Highway One route down the coast, I opted to drive inland to Highway Five and got on the freeway south. Instead of putting another tape in the eight-track, I turned on the AM radio in the dash and searched for some human companionship to keep myself awake on the long drive. The sun had already set and I was driving with my headlights on, listening to a news-broadcast, when I heard the report of a surfer who had been attacked by a killer whale at the same beach I had surfed the day before.

"I knew it!" I looked over at Atom, but he was curled up asleep in the passenger seat and wouldn't have appreciated it anyway. The newscaster went on to explain that the surfer's board had been bitten in half and his leg nearly severed. Brutal, man. But he was saved by a fellow surfer, who had bravely paddled to his rescue and brought him ashore on his own surfboard. I wondered if either was blue? If he were tattooed victim or hero? You couldn't know everything from a story. But I could see the wounded surfer on a gurney in my mind. IV bottle attached. I was tempted to stop and phone Dick. But I didn't. I figured he'd hear about it. His diagnosis had been colored by the same green-eyed grudge as the jarheads who had cursed me from the Datsun. So I was suddenly secure in the knowledge that I hadn't actually flipped-out. That what I felt-in the mouth of the Little Sur River-was real. That I just wanted to go home again. To my mom's cooking. And my girlfriend's bed. (Not necessarily in that order.)

A couple weeks later, with two-percent of the vote tallied, Walter Cronkite announced on television that the American people had re-elected Richard Nixon to the White House. Even though he didn't get my vote. Even though I had marched on Nixon Re-Election Headquarters back home with the Vietnam Vets Against the War, led by a paraplegic veteran in a wheelchair, about whom Oliver Stone, years later, would direct a movie. (Inexplicably, my role was left out of the film version.) I repainted my camper. In the ensuing investigation up north, it was discovered that the Navy had been breeding killer whales at their private base on a point a few miles south of the Little Sur River, intent on using them offshore in Vietnam, as radar-equipped, kamikaze torpedoes. It created quite a stink from a public relations standpoint for a war that was already unpopular. The project was abandoned. From a personal standpoint, I was never the same again in the water. Post-Whale Syndrome. Always paddled with my feet up. Always wary of unseen danger. Speaking of which, that snake finally fell out of the dashboard of Dick's car about a month after he sold it to his Staff Sergeant, whose unwary wife drove the Sunbeam over a speed bump too fast, which jarred loose the serpent from his roost down

onto her nyloned ankle, causing her to freak-out and crash, coincidentally, through the window of the same donut shop we had visited on my last day in Monterey. No one died, but there was collateral damage. Dick went AWOL again and upon his return spent thirty days in the brig. But they never did send him to Nam. He finished his tour at Ord, and unlike my classmates who had died in combat, married, had a daughter, and moved to San Diego. I don't see him anymore. I hope he still surfs. After Dave's release from the service, he opened a chili joint back home. But I heard it burned down. Karma. I don't know what happened to goofy Ray Stevens. Over-dosed, rehabbed, or prison? The only roads for a junkie. Oh yeah, and right after I got home, I lost that damn ticket when my mom put my bell-bottom overalls in the washing machine. A month later, I got a summons informing me there was a warrant out for my arrest in Monterey. I had to send their municipal court the last hundred-and-thirty-five dollars I had in the whole world and was forced to take a temporary job as a painter, while working my way through college. Eventually, I got a haircut and bell-bottoms went out of style. The war ended. I still hated public restrooms. Two newspaper reporters brought down the Nixon White House. My girlfriend and I married and divorced. I re-married. (So far, so good.) Bought a home. Had a son and a daughter. My mom still cooked me dinner on my birthday and Christmas Eve with the family. And all the while, Atom got old and gray. He died at eighteen (126 in dog years). We buried him in the backyard. I like to think he's chasing seagulls in heaven. Woof, woof, woof! And even though long boards are back in style, I still ride a short board. However, I put a leash on it now, so I don't have to swim in after wipe-outs. But I never did put a leash on Atom. He was a good dog.

The Santa Fe

by Skeeze Whitlow

Never was any collection of rag-tag freeloaders so happy as when that ol' Santa Fe came pluggin' into Flagstaff. Happy to revel in all life's spunk. Happy to rise above the scorching desert. Excited about what might await us. As we made our ascent, the cloud ceiling dropped; vegetation increased; the atmosphere became dense, muggy. Our freight pulled into the railyard and the day's heat subsided. Anxiety over our destination eased. Great silvery wheels locked; the screech of breaks deafened; the world stood still. We stretched our legs.

The Borden chemical car we rode was equipped with welded platforms, forward and aft 'valued perches from which to view the most spectacular scenery offered on this continent. All that scenery had passed previous to approaching the Arizona border, where the great behemoth made a stop, allowing Joe an opportunity to rip off a pack of bologna. Much to our surprise, we discovered, then, how many other freeloaders shared this Santa Fe with us.

Now, here in Flagstaff, me and Joe were anxious to howdy-do. We climbed down, clomping over the yard's crushed stone rock, eager to get acquainted; to find out who it was that'd been cheering, back when Joe was runnin' like hell to catch 'er on the fly. This Santa Fe was a humongus feat to industrial commerce; about a quarter mile long, carrying everything from food staples to occupational necessities 'not to mention our little party. Throughout scenic miles left behind, we beheld those towering sandstone formations which make New Mexico the land of enchantment. Between Albuquerque and Flagstaff stand an astounding array of huge rock towers, carved by wind and rain, absorbing rays of a sun bursting to humble all. Words can hardly describe! To get my gist, you'll just have to quit school, leave home and hop a Santa Fe for your own damn self. Then you'll understand the wonderment of life. Then

you'll grasp the requirements of good quality people and quality dope and a prompt rail line zooming across land before time. A land full of baffling terra cotta formations reaching toward Heaven like great sun dials. For all along the way magic glistens. Down under the ties ' inches below the spinning sets of flawless chrome-like wheels ' glittering little stones form the mound of track-bed, reaching up, kissing our eyes like jewels. Bright sun bounces off these gemstones in flickering rhythm ' tch, tch, tch, -- as each railroad tie breaks monotony like links in a serpentine chain.

Once past these monuments, nose to nose with the Arizona border, our train stopped. And spotting the store, Joe decided to go pick up a snack. Next thing I knew, he was off the train, breaking into a slow trot, kicking up little clouds of dusty haze. I bit my lip: the store stood a couple football field's distance away, and the engineer wasn't exactly gauging this trip to suit our whims. Resting on a great curve of track, the Santa Fe was busy unloading cars up into a switchback. The afternoon's heat seemed unbearable. Joe was taking too long. I began to fret. Why the hell couldn't he just stay put?

Suddenly, the transport machine jolted; and it wasn't just a few cars being unloaded ' we were moving! A shot of fear seared through me ' what if the train started and Joe was too slow and he couldn't catch it and we got separated ' out here ' two thousand miles from home and all his belongings were with me. I realized what a good friend he was, that our dependence upon each other was mutual. How badly I wanted him to hurry the fuck up and get out of that goddamned store and run.

Run he did! The store owner came running out after him! And there was this little fence he had to hurdle and wow, he tore ass like nothin' you ever saw 'cause he was scared he was going to get nabbed for shopliftin' and get wrapped up in a lot of red tape. Afraid the Santa Fe might leave him behind. Afraid he be stranded. Afraid of missing the ride of a lifetime! Lifting his knees, throwing his feet, straightening his back, arching his shoulders, pumping his arms like windmills ' he ran and ran. Then, double timing it, his

great strides leaped and lurched across the dry caked earth, heels kicking to the tune of a frightened gazelle.

I started yelling and cheering him on, and the store man was right behind him screaming bloody murder, and the other freeloaders on the train started a ruckus of shrieks and the train was in motion and there didn't seem like time enough and the steel wheels were screeching like electrical feedback, picking up speed with every turn, and Joe was running out of breath and he tripped over a rock or something, so that the store man was able to gain on him. But then he got up and his second wind kicked in and he just bolted over the parched earth. Everything stood still for a sec, and the grocery store man bit the dust. Joe's feet raced across that blistered plain with all the effort of someone who deserves to win; someone who's desperation keeps his testy feet out of the bight. He was happy as hell to be young and free and have a whole squad of hoboes cheering him on, making him want to catch up. A moving freight full of bums, destination: Bum's Paradise! Whoa! Joe wasn't going to miss it for the world ' he had his ticket! His seat was reserved. And we were all jumping up and down on platforms, on flat cars, through open box car doors; hanging over the tops of gondolas. We wanted him to be with us; wanted him to be like us ' with the wind in our hair and tomorrow in the wings. We were giddy-glad for the spunk of a higher power in the bottoms of his shoes. We needed him! Needed all the high-spirited son's-o-bitches life has to offer.

Next thing I saw was his smilin', sweaty face right beside me, the veins of his forehead protruding, pulsating, ready to burst, pert' near poppin' through the skin. The fierce effort of body and soul, straining; yet he was holding on, holding strong, carrying his weight. Making time. Nailin' 'er on the fly. Every second counted and he wasn't about to let 'er get away. 'Cause this was his only chance. This was the chance of a lifetime and he wasn't gonna blow it 'cause life had always done him right and he was gonna do it right ' by making it right on time!

Right beside me, keeping stride with this giant of commerce; my

best friend ‘ my only friend! The wind wheezed in and out of his youthful lungs with great strain. He was gonna make it. Because trial and error and desperation and indulging need all conspired to make him want to make it. I lay down on the platform and reached out my arm; he grabbed my hand and I didn’t think I had the strength to pull him up and, while it had seemed that Joe might actually out-run this machine, the monster’s velocity surpassed and the pressure of speed made my fingers slip and he must’ve seen terror in my eyes ‘cause I saw terror in his and I would’ve hated to lose touch and my fingers inched down around his wrist and his fingers locked around my lower arm and I thought oh shit, but then he jumped and swung his legs and feet out and I yanked with all my might and the momentum of his own movement caused him to land with a plop right beside me ‘ half on top of me, yet firmly on the platform. And safe. Not dead! So everything was kosher. And we should’ve thanked Heaven for all the help, but we were childish and self-centered. And God must’ve felt compelled to turn a blind eye, thinking He’d lost that boy for sure; hey, nobody wants to witness a hundred and fifty pounds of dead meat shining crimson in the afternoon sun. Only what might-have-been, wasn’t. So we still had a lot of miles to put behind us.

Rolling over, Joe was out of breath and exhausted. But he couldn’t stop laughin’ ‘cause he was half goofy with his own charmed life. All throughout the freight train, scattered groups of fellow hoboes cheered, their ringing, rip-roaring, obliging voices testament to a good life. A life on that road which carries you hither and yon so long as you maintain strength enough to ride it! They were going wild with happiness ‘cause Joe was still kickin’ and he wasn’t gonna slow down for nothin’. ‘Cause there ain’t nothin’ worth slowin’ down for.

I looked at him, at what an agonizing dirt-streaked mess he’d become, and what a tragedy it would’ve been if he’d made one false move when he took that leap of faith back there. Boy, was I ever glad it was done and over, I thought of suggesting that we not take any more chances. What a dumb suggestion ‘ we’d never get anyplace! Inhaling deep the dry air, I rolled my eyes and patted him

on the shoulder. The heartbeat surviving from this moment to the next is one fine-tuned accomplishment. He, of course, wore this big ol' shit-eatin' grin and reached deep into his shirt. He pulled out a pinkish-clear plastic container, handing me a pack of Oscar-Meyer bologna.

'Here! I didn't pay for it ' I was in too much of a hurry.' The bologna being the triumphant prize he'd risked his stupid life for.

'Well, did you get anything to go with it?'

'No I saw the fuckin' train start rollin'' He was all out of breath. He didn't say anything else for a goodly stretch. Then he looked me dead in the eye, asking, 'Hey, if I woulda missed this train would you've jumped off?'

'I don't know.'

He should've figured as much. On a ride like this, I wasn't at liberty to entertain any such possibility.

Identity

by M. J. Hamada

You awake feeling different. On your back, lying atop the bed sheets, you stare at the shadows animating the ceiling, then at the large sun-illuminated window on the opposite wall, its light heating your body, which you next examine, amazed at what you find: this is not your body. Rising to your elbows, you cup, gingerly, with hands that are not your hands, the breasts that were not here last night, except in your dreams, perhaps. Yet you do not consider your dreams or the fact that you may have dreamt someone else's dreams: you are too fascinated by the breasts. They are large and round, like boxing gloves. Boxing gloves? That's ridiculous, you think. Even your mind is changing, has changed. You recall your father once saying, "When you walk, talk, eat, piss and think like a girl, you are a girl," but now you wonder whose father had actually spoken those words, whose memories you are recalling. No, your breasts are not boxing gloves; they are desert sand dunes, moonlight playing over them. On one breast, you run a finger across the pink flesh of the areola; it dimples at your touch. You squeeze the nipple—your brain being pricked by a thousand needles, your thighs tingling from a growing heat—and feel sensations untapped since you were pushed from the womb and into this world of overwhelming stimuli. You spread your legs and move your hands downward.

Last Words

by Thomas E. Jordan

With the skill that comes from a life of doing so, the three dig the grave. The older man, Jeremiah Stufflebean, long in the face with dead, dark hollow eyes and a beard of black and white stubble, works in the hole squaring the corners and smoothing the walls. He wields a worn, short-handled spade his father had used for the same task.

The younger man, Daniel Tilburn, is still new to this work having just replaced his deceased father at it a few months before. He's lean, almost emaciated, and naked to the waist despite the late fall's coolness. Daniel works behind the older man using a round-nosed shovel to collect the soil dislodged from the walls. He takes thin slices of dirt mingled with small stones from around their feet steadily taking them farther into the Earth a fraction of an inch deeper with each scoop.

It's a complicated dance they play. As Jeremiah moves around inside the pit performing the finish work, Daniel remains behind him sweeping up the spoils and sending them to the surface.

The final member of the group, Samuel Miller, is tall and muscled with broad shoulders. His arms reveal all too readily that he has spent a lifetime at manual labor. Too large to comfortably fit in the holes they prepare, he always works above the others collecting the passed up soil with a small, square-nosed sand shovel. He places each scoop onto a two-wheeled cart hitched to a skinny mule barely larger than a donkey.

The three don't make a sound as they work. No voices, no grunts or groans. Around them is only the sound of blades slicing the ground followed by that of clods of soil landing either out of the hole or on the cart. Overhead in the canopy of black oaks and walnuts, a calliope of birds and squirrels call out to defend or mark their

territories. If the men wished to make the effort to note it, they could. But they don't. It has been part of the background of their lives for so long, they hardly ever notice it anymore.

When the grave is uniformly to the top of Jeremiah's head, a narrow wooden ladder is lowered into the hole. The two inside hand their tools to Samuel and perform an act of resurrection. While they climb out, he leaves their shovels on the cart in the same position he has dozens of times before.

With the grave completed, Daniel lays two split fence rails and stout ropes across the pit to receive the casket. He nods at their product, then steps aside to allow the others a look.

Jeremiah wipes his face with a faded red cotton handkerchief before checking their handiwork. When he speaks, his voice is deep and Ozark, almost Elizabethan in its cadence. "A poor grave for a good man," he says.

Daniel pulls a thick blouse over his head and shoulders. The others look at him while he tugs at the hem making it hang correctly on his sparse frame. When he's finished, he steps to the edge of the grave and gives it a quick inspection. "A good grave for a poor man," he replies.

"Fare for the boatman, " says Samuel, tossing a small handful of coins into the hole.

The trio ignore a youngish man with the outline of a barn owl, the Reverend Alexander Buchanan, dressed in a simple black suit with a dark narrow tie, riding up on a brown and white gelding. He calls to them over the lichen-covered stone fence surrounding the cemetery as a creak of leather accompanies his swinging down out of the saddle. "You've finished just in time, men." Buchanan motions over his shoulder while hitching the horse to a rail there for that purpose. "They're just a little ways behind me."

While Daniel leads the mule away, the others trail behind. They stop

at three tree stumps almost out of earshot at the back of the burial ground just inside the fence. When the moon signs turn right, they plan to burn out the stumps.

A wagon, drawn slowly by a team of matched black horses, rolls into sight. A small, straggling crowd of people walk silently behind it. To the rear of the procession, a line of wagons and buggies follow to take them away after the service has been completed.

When it reaches the cemetery, the wagon halts at the gate. The man driving it, somewhat formally dressed in black attire, doesn't look back over his shoulder as six sad-faced men draw a plain, wooden casket from the wagon box. After lifting it onto their shoulders, they carry it through the gate to the fresh breach in the ground. The crowd follows coming together to fill the space around the grave.

Before he settles onto the middle stump, Jeremiah reaches under the cart's seat and produces a mason jar filled with clear liquid. After removing the tin lid and taking a sip, he hands it to Daniel. "This'll keep you warmed up while you're not working," he tells the lad.

Daniel takes a small, polite drink. Violently he shakes his head trying to force the sensation from his mouth and throat. On the edge of shaking, he climbs to his feet and gives it to Samuel.

"You'll get used to it in time, boy," Samuel says, softly, before taking a sample of the liquid himself. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. There's a bite to the drink that seems to skim away every dead cell of any flesh it contacts. "It was a good batch." He pauses a moment, then adds, "for a change."

"The best the Reverend ever made, I think." agrees Jeremiah, retrieving the jar for another drink.

In short order Buchanan is tossing a handful of dirt into the grave while the casket is lowered into the darkness. The pallbearers manning the lines let them slowly and steadily slip through their

hands. After it bottoms and Buchanan has said his final words, the crowd breaks up. Some head immediately for the gate and their waiting rides. Others linger visiting the graves of family members to check on how they look. Soft bits of conversation mixes with the chatter of children at play outside the fence.

As the last family leaves, the local sheriff, in his brown and tan uniform, a straw-colored western hat and black cowboy boots, enters the graveyard. Without looking around he goes straight to a juvenile post oak a few feet from the open grave and leans against it. He studies the low branches above his head for a few moments before pulling his pen knife from his pocket and slicing a length of timber to start whittling down to fodder for starting camp fires.

Buchanan nods to the Sheriff before turning to motion for the men to finish their work. The Sheriff barely acknowledges Buchanan with a slight wave of his knife.

As the three begin shoveling soil from the cart back into the hole they'd created, Buchanan stands to the side and watches. The tone of the landing dirt slowly changes from a hollow drum-like sound as the first shovelfuls cover the casket to a more solid plodding sound as the hole fills.

"Well, it looks like even with the Reverend here dying on us, we're still having a pretty successful revival," Buchanan says to make conversation after watching the work for a few minutes. "Last night we had two more young girls come down and give their souls to the Lord."

Samuel nods his head and purses his lips while he continues working. "Those young people will probably manage to keep it going for another week or so, I'd say."

Buchanan's eyes dart towards Samuel. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, nothing much. It's just that a big, long-running revival like you're having here is a good chance for them to meet and do some

courting they wouldn't be getting to do any other way," explains Jeremiah.

"The real measure of just how successful you are at harvesting souls'll come when you hold your baptizing," grins Samuel. "So I wouldn't be counting my chickens from this one until I saw just how many of those young people comes forward for that step."

"I don't believe you," Buchanan blurts out, shaking his head.

The men work on silently, keeping to their own thoughts. Steadily the level of soil in the grave rises. Occasionally one shifts from removing soil from the cart to stab at the soil in the grave with his shovel compacting it a bit to forestall some of the settling certain to follow.

Buchanan, uncomfortable with the lack of conversation, breaks the silence. Something the Reverend Thomas Henderson had told him from his deathbed was weighing heavy on his mind. "I hear you have a quaint, interesting custom around these parts with burying your dead," he said, when the grave was about half-filled.

Jeremiah stood and rubbed his back, working it straight. "And what would that be?"

Buchanan paused for a moment before saying anything, wondering if he should or not. Finally he spoke, almost haltingly. "That you're not allowed to speak ill of the dead after their grave is filled," he said.

The two other men stop working. Slowly they look towards Buchanan. The look on their faces make him feel as if he had uttered an unspeakable truth.

"Is that true?" asked Buchanan.

Samuel nodded. "It is, but we don't talk about it all that much."

A boy like you from a good Fort Smith family would probably have trouble getting your hands around something like that," Jeremiah added.

Buchanan let the remark pass. He pointed with his chin toward a grave on the other side of the cemetery that looked like its covering soil had collapsed and dropped a little over a foot below the ground around it. "I guess that would explain that."

"That's "Bloody" Bob Carmichael." Jeremiah spit in that direction. "Our fathers and grandfathers buried him a full twelve feet deep to give the devil an extra chance at him."

"And then they never finished filling it in just so we could talk about the old bastard like this with a clear conscience," added Samuel, going back to work with the others.

Buchanan pulled a white handkerchief from his inside pocket and patted his forehead dry. He didn't know what had brought the perspiration to his face. The day wasn't that warm. In fact, as it was getting later, it was getting cooler. "Surely he wasn't that bad of a man?"

"He hung my great, great, great grandfather," Daniel spouted.

Jeremiah swung a scoop of dirt into the grave. "Carmichael commanded the Union Home Guards in these parts during the war--"

"Union? War?" Buchanan asked. "You're not talking about the Civil War, are you?"

"Bastard lived until 1897," said Samuel. "Up there in his fine house on that hill in the middle of all that land he bought off the widows and orphans he'd created during the war."

"But that was" Buchanan was at a loss for words. "Surely you're still not--"

Samuel stopped working. He looked Buchanan in the eye. "The people he killed aren't any less dead." He paused a second before asking, "Are they?"

"Just like old Bill Tilley over there." Over his shoulder, Jeremiah asked, "You know the Reverend here brewed up that batch of hooch that killed him?"

Daniel stabbed his shovel deep into the pile on the cart while glancing towards the Sheriff. "I heard that when you asked him about it, the Reverend lied to your face. That true, Sheriff?"

The Sheriff's voice was slow and deep. "Told me him and Tilley had had a falling out and that he'd bought the stuff that killed him over in Madison County. I went through the motions, went over and asked a few questions, but couldn't ever find anyone to lay the blame on. So I just had to let it go."

"Heard he also had a woman he used to see down along the river." Samuel looked at Buchanan. "You talked with him before he died. You know anything about that?"

"She was in Spadra," Jeremiah offered. "The Parson here was in Clarksville at the Bible College. He wouldn't know about things like that."

Samuel held a scoop of soil on his shovel over the open grave. "That was how he covered his tracks for going down to see her. He'd say he had church business down to Clarksville and then he'd slip off to her while he was down there." He twisted his wrist and dumped the shovel. The dirt falling into the grave landed with a dead, final sound.

Daniel kept working at the same pace. "Heard she ran a bar, or something—"

"Or something' would be one way to put it," interrupted Jeremiah.

"And just what do you mean by that?" Buchanan asked. He was suddenly learning more about the dignified old man he'd been called upon to aid and comfort on short notice than he'd ever expected.

Jeremiah stopped working. "Well, Leroy Pervis was down to Clarksville one day and saw the Reverend hitch hiking out of town."

"So? He didn't own a car or anything. How'd you expect him to get around?" asked Buchanan.

"He was south of Clarksville bumming for a ride into Spadra," added Jeremiah. "He watched him get out of a car in front of a bar down there and just go in like he owned the place."

Buchanan stood his ground and tried to make reason of what he was hearing. "Maybe it was the only place around there to get a cold drink? There's spots where it's like that down that way I hear."

"Maybe so," Jeremiah replied, "But after he left and caught a ride back towards Clarksville, Leroy went inside and asked a few questions."

Near breathless, Daniel asked, "What'd he find out?" Jeremiah could hear the boy's hunger to know what life was like in the exotic flatlands to the south.

"That the Reverend Henderson had just finished passing a measure of time with a woman of negotiable virtue."

"No," Daniel said, incredulously.

Jeremiah turned to face Daniel. "And he also learned that it wasn't the only time he'd been down there for her company."

"You don't think he used our offerings to . . . , " Daniel's voice trailed off, his mind struggling to place this new information and

what it meant in it's proper place.

"I'm sure he only used his moonshine money for such as that, Daniel," Samuel said. "The Devil's money for the Devil's work."

They worked silently a few minutes more, the level of fill in the hole steadily growing. As the first shovel of the final layer hit the ground, Jeremiah spoke. "Of course, we don't know what else he might have been doing. That's just what we've happened to find out about." Jeremiah leaned his shovel against the cart and retrieved the mason jar. After wiping the sweat away from his face with his shirt sleeve, he took a deep drink. With a smack of his lips, he passed it to Samuel.

Samuel laid his shovel aside and savored a mouthful of the liquid before handing it back.

Jeremiah tossed the jar to Buchanan. "He tell you anything before he died that needs to come out?"

Buchanan held the jar up and looked through the remaining clear liquid at the others. "I don't know what you see in this stuff," he said. "I look into it and all I can see is the Devil's mischief." With that he parted the lid from the brim and poured it out on the ground. Slowly he screwed the lid back on before pitching it back to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah cradled it like a long lost child. "Why'd you want to do that for?" he asked. "That was probably the best hooch the Reverend ever made. And you just poured it out like like" He dropped the jar balling his fists as he took a step towards Buchanan.

Daniel stepped in front of Jeremiah and blocked him from moving any closer to the Parson. "Calm down now, Jeremiah," he said, straining to make his voice firm despite the fact he didn't enjoy the full conviction of his actions. "He was only doing what he thought was right. And you know how people like that never take the time to

think those things through."

"You saw what he did!" Jeremiah shook his head as he backed down a step. "That was from the Reverend's last batch and he just dumped it out." Seeing it was safe to move out of harm's way, Daniel stepped back to lean against the cart. "You just don't do something like that with something special," added Jeremiah.

Samuel rested a hand on Jeremiah's shoulder. "Easy now, Jeremiah. Don't get so worked up over it. Just think for a minute. Chances are pretty good the Reverend really didn't make that batch, you know."

"What'da you mean?" Jeremiah asked, looking Samuel squarely in the eye.

"Well, now think about it. Just how many batches did the reverend really run off that were actually worth drinking?" Samuel looked towards the Sheriff. "And how many batches you think he passed off as his own were actually seized evidence he'd bought off you after you were through with the trial?"

"He could have finally gotten it all right for once," Jeremiah said, turning back to the cart and picking up his spade. "It could have been something like a gift from God since he was going away."

"I don't think he did," said the Sheriff in a quiet, level voice.

Daniel sat on the ground and rested his shovel back against his shoulder. He motioned for Buchanan to join him. "They have a few more things that need to be said before we can finish here," he told the Parson.

Buchanan shrugged his shoulders and settled where Daniel had indicated as he loosened his tie.

"So you're saying that not only was the man a poor moonshine maker, but he was a liar and criminal as well?" Jeremiah asked.

The Sheriff stood and brushed cuttings from his pants. "You couldn't say much that was good about the man's product, but you sure had to admire his determination to keep working at it."

"That's not so. He wouldn't—"

"He did. After every trial he'd come by my office and give me a dollar a pint for what I was duly sworn to dispose of." The Sheriff looked around to make sure they were alone. "I'm not sure now is the proper time, but since he's gone, if any of you boys'd like to take up his slack, I'll be having another batch to sell off after court week after next."

Jeremiah started deflating. "I just wanted something good to remember about him."

"Well, if that's all you're after," Daniel called from where he and Buchanan were sitting. He pointed towards Buchanan with his thumb. "You can give thanks to the Reverend there for getting us the Parson here."

"That's right," Samuel added. "If it wasn't for the Reverend's "church business," we'd probably have Tom Porter trying to run the church right now."

Jeremiah nodded. "Maybe you're right there. Never did completely trust that man."

"I've met Tom Porter," Buchanan said. "He seemed like a pretty sincere man to me."

"I think he has a bit of wanting to be a snake handler in him waiting for a chance to come out," replied Jeremiah.

"Well, there you have it," Daniel said. "The Reverend knew his time was about up, so he sends the call down to the Bible College and they send us this man," he points towards Buchanan, "to protect us from the likes of Porter and his ilk."

Daniel grins as he sees it all sewed up in a neat package. "Sure he's young and has some rough edges, but I'm sure that if we give him a little time, they'll smooth down to suit everybody after he's been with us for a bit."

Everyone around the grave agreed as they looked at Buchanan.

"That'd be a nice thing to have happen, Daniel," Buchanan said. Sensing it was time to leave, he climbed to his feet and looked towards his borrowed horse. "But I only came back here to comfort an old man in his final days and see him safely into the ground with the proper words said over him." Buchanan took a small step away from the group. "Nobody ever said anything about my staying here. In fact, I've already got my bag packed to leave. It's sitting on the foot of my bed right now waiting for me back at the Reverend's place."

"That's your place now, Parson," Samuel said.

"Yep," Jeremiah added, "You've already made yourself at home here. Even stayed and preached at the revival for us."

"I was only doing my Christian duty. Next week I'm supposed to be preaching the Sunday service at Dardanelle. They're looking for a preacher there and I'm planning on it being me."

"You could miss that visit," the Sheriff said, not looking up from the last bit of his carving. "Lots of things a fellow could be held for in the county jail until the judge comes by in a couple of weeks."

Jeremiah slapped his leg. "Then I guess it's settled. At the revival tonight we'll vote at keeping the Parson here on to replace the Reverend." Jeremiah smiled, sweetly. "And I promise it's a vote you'll not lose."

"And just what makes you think I'd want to trade a congregation of quiet Methodists down in Dardanelle for some pack of wild

backwoods Pentecostal holy rollers like yourselves?" Buchanan was having a hard time keeping his words from running together. He was in a situation that called for fast talking and it wasn't happening quick enough to save him.

Jeremiah put the empty jar back under the cart's seat. "The Lord works in mysterious ways, Parson," he said. "You may not see the workings of his plan right now, but somewhere down the line, when he wants you to know it, you'll see it."

"And it'll all make sense," Daniel added, nodding his head.

"Guess this means you're going to be living with us for a bit." Samuel offered his hand to Buchanan. "You're going to enjoy being with us so much."

In a daze Buchanan took it. Samuel was long pumping the Parson's arm slow letting go of his hand.

The Sheriff folded his pocket knife and patted Buchanan on the back as started out of the cemetery. "I'll drive by tomorrow morning to pick you up. We'll run down to Clarksville and pick up your things." A hint of a smile crossed his lips as he stopped at the gate and looked back at Buchanan. "We have so many quaint, interesting customs for you to learn about. Such as how we like to have the man who preaches the funeral over our old preacher be the one who replaces him."

"You don't mean—"

"It's a lifetime job," Jeremiah said. "How long you last at it is entirely up to you."

Daniel climbed to his feet and picked up his shovel. "You ready to finish the job now?"

"I guess so." Jeremiah sunk his shovel into the remaining pile on the cart. Before lifting his scoop, he turned back to Buchanan. "You

never did answer our question."

"What question was that?" Buchanan asked, still dazed by the turn of events. In the back of his mind he wondered just how long it would be before they'd be digging a hole next to the Reverend for him.

He suddenly began to see why so many of those old backwoods preachers were such firebrands. Their only release from their situation seemed to be getting somebody worked up enough against them to run them off or take their lives.

He wondered just what he could do that'd make that happen for him. Maybe have an altar call at next week's baptism. No, he thought, something like that'd be expected of him. Then it dawned on him, he'd have an altar call at his first wedding. That'd stir them up into wanting to get rid of him soon enough. At least he hoped it would.

"While you were with the Reverend before he died, did he tell you anything you want to mention here before we finish?" Jeremiah asked.

Buchanan thought for a second. "Well, I guess you could say the Reverend unburdened his soul to me of a number of things before he passed on."

The three stopped everything and looked at Buchanan.

"He said Mrs. Lincoln couldn't make gravy worth eating if her life depended on it. So, if she invited me over for dinner, I was to keep on my guard about eating it.

"He told me to keep an eye out for the Widow McDonald. Said she liked her men young and in the prime of life. And no doubt it'd only be a matter of time before she'd be sitting her hat for me if I stayed around here very long."

Jeremiah held his shovel of soil over the grave. "Anything more to add?"

Buchanan pursed his lips as he thought hard for a second. "Just that he told me to keep a firm hand on you men. He didn't know for sure just what you'd be trying to pull, but he said to be on the lookout for it."

Jeremiah moved his wrist and allowed the final shovel of dirt to land on the grave. "I don't have any idea whatsoever about what you're talking about," he said.

Buchanan looked the older man firmly in the eye. "We'll find out when I go to leave after next week's baptizing."

Samuel tossed his shovel onto the cart with the other tools and moved to lead the mule away. "That's if you'll be trying to leave."

"We'll see then," replied Buchanan.

As they all walked away, Jeremiah looked back over his shoulder. "You know, for all his faults, the Reverend there wasn't all that bad of a man."

"True." Then Buchanan added, "Hard to ask for anything better to be said about you when it's your time to leave, I guess."

Samuel nodded. "Especially when all the bad that's ever going to be said about you has already been mentioned."

"Amen," said Buchanan.

A Mind is a Terrible Thing

by Ariana Johns

So there it was, the entire rain of her life, splattered all over the hallway, smeared down a path that led nowhere. She reached for a glass of water, but she didn't move. Every action she took was checked and deleted by her body, just like when she used to dream, and she'd try to wake up--she'd get up, again and again, while her corporeal body lay still. Alana took a deep breath and felt her lungs fill, assuring her that she was in fact living. She would have to move somehow... she had to clean up, put things in order.

Jessica had been wearing pink this morning, shimmering around the house, a beautiful laughing ghost. Alana revered her, but then that's why Jessica wore pink--to show off, to tug at her sister's stomach, making Alana feel cold and dizzy. It worked, as always, and Lani had run from the living room into the relative safety of the bathroom. Jessie didn't like to be anywhere near the bathtub, so Alana could lean against its cool side and feel safe from the machinations of her sister. The tiles on the floor were pale green and yellow, and as Lani counted them yet one more time, she twisted her hair around her finger, then sucked on a pale strand. Jessica sang loudly as she stood outside the bathroom window, a twirling tune with no melody, no beginning or end. It was always that way with Jessie, ever since they were children...

It had been a lovely childhood. Lani and Jessie were both adorable little girls, with pets and a pretty yard and a mother that devoted herself to them. Erica Von Mallich did very little else but tend to her garden and her girls. Watching things grow and knowing that they were hers, hers alone and no one else's was the one thing that kept her going. Consequently, both the garden and the girls needed constant tending, and Erica built her walls high and strong. The Von Mallich estate and its contents were the cause of much speculation and more than a little consternation.

Erica was strong, a formidable presence, and she excelled at most things. Useful things, that she taught her daughters. Cooking, gardening, ritual magik, Santeria, tarot and weather forecasting. The girls each had their fortes--Lani was a gifted witch and gardener, while Jessie was physically dexterous and markedly beautiful, which seemed to lure a delicate madness to her, making her all the more resplendent. The three of them had lived graciously together, supportive and loving, until Erica disappeared one Friday morning, after going out to buy the moon's provisions. In truth, she felt that since her daughters were now twenty-five and twenty-nine, it behooved her to find a man for them, but telling the girls would alarm them, so she quested solo, under the presumption that abandonment would strengthen their characters.

Nine moons had filled since that morning, and Jessica had died three moons and four nights ago, leaving Alana without a moment's peace. She had tried to bury Jessie's body, but Jessie possessed a visceral ghost and she would dig her body up every time, then hide it so Alana would find it again and again, at the most inopportune moments. Eventually they reached a compromise, and Jessica's body was now draped gracefully over her favourite divan, free to take in the elements and do what came naturally, or not. Unfortunately, with that game finished, Jessie was more restless than ever. Not that being dead didn't have its own rewards--like anything else, it was what you made it. But Erica had put such a strong force around the house that not even Jessie's anxious spirit could leave. So she had only her sister to play with, and it was increasingly difficult to make Alana take heed.

In fact, Lani was so corporeally weak from lack of food--the provisions had run out some time ago, leaving only the lime tree and a few small lizards for sustenance--it was all she could do to walk and breathe in her physical body, without allowing her astral self to take over entirely. And that was her battle now, as she lay on the cool bathroom floor, with Jessica's demented rhapsodies filling the air she was trying to breathe. If she were to inhale her sister's songs, she too could become mad, and someone had to tend to the house until Erica returned.

The house itself was hardly behaving well. Toys the girls had played with as children were scattered about the halls, despite having been burned long ago. When Alana would pick them up to discard them, they complained bitterly and wriggled free from her grasp, falling back into chaotic piles of past. It was time to delve deep into magik, to find a sensible solution to what was rapidly becoming an untenable situation, but finding a peaceful spot to begin was proving to be an enormous challenge.

Alana crawled into the bathtub, contorted her body into the same position she had first found her sister's corpse in, and turned her head toward the window. Jessie was gone, the air refreshingly free of music. Lani took a deep breath and closed her eyes. As her body numbed, she found herself facing a steep rocky incline. She reached one arm out, then the next, feeling the familiar pop as she left her frail, crumpled body and began the treacherous climb. She had yet to make it to the top, and she was certain that if she could, she would be able to find the path, to discern the key to releasing Jessica and perhaps even gain the insight to solve her own dilemma.

She grabbed a handful of dry weeds, wedged her feet as deep into the cliff as she could, and began her ascent. Handful after handful of stubborn weeds pulled her slowly up, till soon she encountered the valley of purple flowers. She'd made it this far before, and assumed that the rest of the climb would be easy, that the fecundity of the purple plateau would soothe her scratched belly, give her torn hands and knees momentary respite. Even now, the option of rest was seductive, but every time she'd tried to make it through the field, its heavy floral scent pulled her under-quicksand from Oz—and she'd awaken the next day drained and aching in her porcelain bed. This time she exhaled all the air from her raw lungs and pressed her belly tight against the dry, harsh mountain. Opening her eyes wide into the arid dust, she strained her vision upward and held her breath until she floated up, away from the ground, and with her attention focused at the summit, she glided gingerly above the exquisite venom of the valley and ascended to the peak of the mountain.

At the top, she inhaled deeply and looked at her surroundings. Gazing breathless in a circle, her bones quickly shrank, feathers sprouted from her skin, and her vision intensified as she took flight just above the trees, her falcon-self fully realized for the first time. Ignoring the tempting scent of prey, she focused through the leaves into the dense forest, intent upon following the guidance of the wind.

Soon a clearing became apparent, and she alighted on a branch to watch. There it was, the entire rain of her life, splattered all over the hallway, smeared down a path that led...somewhere. Floating down to the forest floor, she shifted to her cat-self and padded softly down the trail. Everything she'd ever known, thought, or dreamed recapitulated itself around her, but she kept her focus straight ahead, and soon Alana stood at a door. Her astral body now human-shaped, she stared at the large wooden door that loomed in front of her. Knobless as it was, there seemed no way to open it, so she determined that if she were to concentrate her will, she could walk effortlessly through the heavy oak. This assumption proved incorrect, and as she fell back from the collision, strong arms caught her and gently turned her around.

Erica Von Mallich laughed heartily at her daughter's expense, then she tilted Lani's head up and kissed her bruised nose.

"Darling, I'm so happy that you finally arrived." She held Alana's slender waist and looked her over. "You look well," she said, nodding her approval.

Alana felt a rush of emotion so overwhelming she could barely sort it out. "I...mom, I'm starving, and Jessie..." she burst into tears then, and Erica stroked her hair as she held her.

"I know, angel, it's okay. Jessie will be happy here with me, and you'll be fine. But you must bury her one more time, and place this over her heart. She'll stay in the ground, and her spirit will be free." She handed Alana a most unusual stone-odd not for its colour or

texture, but for its shape, which kept changing, making it difficult to hold. "It will calm down when it's on her body," Erica said as she turned away.

"Wait! Mom, I can't—I'm staying here with you. My body's a mess, and I can't go back to that house, it's sapping my sanity! And I don't want to be alone—I miss you, and I won't go back, I won't!" She felt like—and had become—a little girl, literally tugging at her mother's skirt. Erica bent down and took her daughter's small hands.

"You'll see me again, and Jessica too. And don't worry, you won't be alone. I found a beautiful boy for you, but you have to be a big girl now." She pulled Alana back into her thirty-year old self, and turned her so she was once again facing the door. "This time, just knock. He'll answer and you'll be home. He'll help you recover your strength, and the house will behave. In fact, soon you'll be able to leave it, if that's what you want. Now go, and walk in beauty. I love you, my darling."

Alana stood alone in front of the door, took a deep breath, and knocked.

Her Boiling Point

by Gary Batson

When Angela kissed Charlie she melted in his arms like Godiva chocolates.

She'd forgot all of her problems in his strong arms. He was well built, ruggedly handsome and he was dark like Godiva chocolates. She wore dreads and she was the color of carnation milk. In his arms she forgot her son, who lost his sight at the age of 17 from a crippling diagnosis of diabetes. She forgot her daughter, who was kidnapped by her ex and now the authorities had a warrant for his arrest if only they could find out where he was to serve it. She figured South Carolina or North Carolina. He always wanted to leave New York:

"Rough-ass New York," he would always complain between jobs. But, he did try, he always tried. She could never quite figure out if it was the fault of society, him or a combination of both. Tonya's father, well, he had a temper that simmered like the Hawaiian volcanoes and erupted unpredictably.

"I love you, Angela," Charlie took a break from her lips and spoke in the midst of their passions.

"I love you too, Charlie" They were in a secluded area of the Berkshires, a favorite getaway spot they drove to on occasions. The green of the Berkshires was rich and Eden like, and often one had to blink twice to confirm mortality. Charlie and Angela were on top of the lowered seats in the back of Charlie's SUV. They were nude and comfortable by the sun that baked on this late Spring afternoon. The tinted windows insured their privacy, but, right now they only wanted to kiss. They wanted to enjoy each other. Angela wanted to briefly forget about Randy, her son's father.

She chose her men right, she thought. They were always

professional, relatively successful. But, no matter your choices, you can never tell how one would handle pressure, or life's twists and turns. Randy could not take the pressure of his son's illness. It seemed to undermine his manhood. He fell in love with someone else as an excuse to leave. She tried again with Bill, Tanya's father, but he refused to leave, even when the chemistry died; even after the police escorted him out. But, she made a fatal mistake by letting him pick Tanya up from school one day. It's been a week now since she's seen her daughter. Charlie thought she needed this break from her worries. She could resume the search later. She knew Tanya was safe with her own father, she just did not know what it would take to get her back. So along with Charlie's rifle and the gun that her father left her before he died, she planned to find Tanya and hunt Bill down like the dog he was.

"I love you, Charlie!"

It was her last "I love you" before climax.

Nameless Things

by Richard A. Becker

"Tell me many tales, O benign maleficent daemon, but tell me none that I have ever heard or have even dreamt of otherwise than obscurely or infrequently."

-Clark Ashton Smith, "To the Daemon: An Invocation"

The orange trees lent their fragrance to the warm breeze. A car kicked up dust as it passed mine, and I drove further into the heart of Los Angeles. Up on the hills of Griffith Park, crews struggled the concrete troughs into place for the new observatory the city was building. I have always been fascinated with the stars, yet I've never been very good at astronomy. I have always needed someone to point out to me the shape of the swan and the dragon and the hunter in the sky.

In the backseat of my Ford, a little soapstone figure clunked now and again against the case of my portable typewriter. I was satisfied that the dead woman who had inspired my current job had had no family in the area, despite the rumor that she'd lost everything in the St. Francis flood five years ago. Hundreds had died that night in 1928 to propitiate a dark god which no Californian could name yet which it was their perceived duty to deny: the god of earthquakes, flash floods and next month's bills. Within my limitations, I had followed every possible lead on the suicide short of visiting the scene of her death. The local paper, the Examiner, had punched up the dull little story of her suicide as ACTRESS SLAYS SELF IN OCCULT SHRINE.

I am not a private investigator, nor even a public one. I was at one time a journalist, having ducked shrapnel in the Ardennes whilst hunched over a notepad. Now I am a scribbler of garbage, pounding furiously on a portable keyboard so that other men may put their names over my words and pay me quietly to disappear in a haze of half-truth and supposition.

My employer's name is Barker, a former military man, now a publisher of young ladies' hygiene books and boys' adventures and Phantastic: A Journal of the Impossible. The title, I believe, refers to the magazine's hopes for paying subscribers. But I digress. It was on behalf of this last that I was sent to California from Chicago. Barker and his chief editor, a fellow named Mannwahring, had been sent a lead from one of their clipping services – an article about a starlet's suicide, from a local newspaper, mere days old. The yellow journalist who'd written it for the Hearst papers had claimed the girl had killed herself for occult reasons, and Barker had never been able to believe in a vain sacrifice of any sort. He wanted to know more, and I was his tool.

On the automobile radio, a man with a strong Midwestern accent recited a bit of doggerel:

" -- the Red New Deal with a Soviet seal, endorsed by a Moscow hand
the strange result of an alien cult in a liberty loving land --"

I have never had much interest in politics, having avoided joining the boys in the union rallies back home. I tuned the radio elsewhere and listened to a half-decent soprano in a ballroom somewhere singing "The Boulevard of Broken Dreams" accompanied by so-and-so's world-famous orchestra. Having passed the great white elephant of the Memorial Coliseum, never knowing what it memorialized, I drove down Wilshire Boulevard with the plain view and aroma of the oil derricks to its north and the lumbering bovine facade of Bullock's Department Store. I seldom intentionally take the scenic route in my travels; I am plainly frequently lost and rarely in a hurry.

Once, when I was assigned to go to Maine, I instead took a train to a pleasant rural area of New York and holed myself up with my typewriter and a few good books. I intended to simply create my work from the fabric of my imagination. I was surprised after three days to find that a man hired by Barker had found me, reported my

activity to him, and had returned to tell me I would be fired if I didn't legitimately perform my job within 24 hours. I acquiesced. It's hard to get a job these days. There had been a report of a poltergeist, an angry and violent ghost. Most of the available story was the usual I-heard-what-someone-told-me and I-was-just-a-minute-too-late-to-actually-see-it, and I hadn't been sure if my boss had really wanted all of that nonsense in the piece. I placed a person-to-person call, and he made his terms clear. "Yes, yes, write it all," Barker hissed. "Everything. Leave nothing out." I have not questioned the nature of my job since then, but follow every tiny crumb-trail left in a story. The crumbs, after all, are not for me.

Driving, I let my mind drift back into imagined memories of the Angelino and the Chumash, cooking jackrabbits in the chapparal, hiding from the Spanish monks and their soldiers. No one now knew what they had placed their faith in, only that it had made no difference to the universe. I believe it is Jung who theorizes that we, all of us, share an unconscious mind. Our symbols and our dreams make concrete the shared mythology of our souls, if we have souls. Our joys and our despairs move in tides, drawn up in our blood by some hidden moon and pouring out of our bodies by that same invisible whim. That old Hun Hegel had it all backwards: It is not the spirit of the age which moves the hand of mankind, but the great shared psyche which dreams the spirit of the age into being. A mirage in a desolation.

It was warm enough to sweat yet not hot enough for shirtsleeves, so I waited out the noontime in the refrigerated air of the Million Dollar Theater downtown. I had wanted to see something with Hepburn or Dietrich, but I settled for mush-mouthed Garbo rattling her costume saber in "Queen Christina." Women were still something of an enigma to me, though I appreciated Garbo's good looks and the spotty-faced candy girl's tightnesses of uniform like any other fellow. Edith had left me two years ago in 1931, when I was still on the dole and I couldn't keep myself from getting a bit rough when we fought over the bills. I think that if she had met me today, with my salary of twenty dollars a week and traveling expenses, that she would never have seen my impotent sulks blossom into pointless

rage. But who knows how much of the world lies submerged in what-ifs and could-have-beens? Perhaps someday I would find someone else to share my life, if that is what we do. For now, the dead starlet was woman enough for me.

She had slit her wrists in the bathtub and done the job properly, lengthwise, leaving nothing behind her but a red ring in the tub and a cheap apartment full of poor furnishings and odd personal effects. No family, no real friends, no future unfinished. A Jane Doe grave in a nothing-personal site and four column inches to draw the attention of an old military officer in Chicago and his stooge who proofread "Why Missy Can't Swim Today" and ordered me to learn all that I could as if I were the Flying Squad and Eliot Ness rolled into one. Learning all that I could about the girl had taken half a day so far, and would likely take another half more to finish. And that would be that.

I took my early dinner under the striped awning at the farmhouse-like Cafe Trocadero in Hollywood, ignoring the imminent arrival of Phil Ohman's musical interlude. The newspapers were full of Roosevelt and the economy and the League of Nations, column after column of restlessness and broken banks and men with guns and solutions. According to Barker, Chancellor Hitler and his cabinet are members of a German society called the Thule Brotherhood. Amidst their cabalistic proceedings of runes and old gods they had found "strength through joy" and the wherewithal to rebuild their country. Perhaps that was so, but Americans have no Iron Dream to unite them, demanding instead a mutable mirage that can be all things to all people. Each of us seeks their own way to re-ascend the heights from which we leapt in 1929.

People still wished for drink to ease the pain of the fall. I had never been much of a drinker besides a bit of wine and the odd beer or two, so Prohibition had meant little to me. There was talk among the men at the Trocadero about the assembly-line jobs that might still be had at the new Chrysler plant in Maywood, and among the women about the extras needed on the new Clark Gable picture. I,

too, kept my mind on my business at hand. They had not had a ribbon for my Smith–Corona at the Sunfax Super Mart or among the ivy–covered columns of the Colonial Drive–In, and so I drove into Westwood Village and amongst the palm trees found the Mecca of all things useful, the Sears–Roebuck outlet. I made my purchase just moments before closing time, and was ready to continue my quest.

The dead starlet had lived in an older hotel on Franklin Avenue. The next–door neighbor was a Negro and his wife, and they had directed me to the landlady down the hall. She had let me into the apartment with her passkey and a few dollars of Barker’s money had convinced her to show me the dead girl’s belongings. There was no family, or if there was, no one knew who they were or where they were. They could as easily be in Oshkosh as Okeefenokee, as far as the landlady was concerned. SUICIDE PACT WITH THE LORD OF DARKNESS, I had visualized. STARLET BLEEDS SCARLET IN BIZARRE LOVE–NEST FOR THE EVIL ONE.

What I had found had been very odd indeed. There had been no images of Satan, no inverted crosses, no pentagrams, nothing of that sort at all. Not even a dime–store edition of that old English pederast Crowley. Instead, I had found bolts of yellow and salmon–colored silk strewn everywhere, cheap incense in cheaper Chinatown pots, a dusty old bottle of absinthe half–drunk, piles of cheaply printed poetry in little pocket editions and a small soapstone figurine. It was the poetry and the figurine, and the letters dispersed haphazardly among the poems, which I knew Barker would have an interest in. Identified variously as CAS, Klarkash–Ton or Clark Ashton Smith, the author of most of the poems had corresponded a bit with the dead girl. I haggled with the landlady, settling on a low price to take the things I needed for my work. I picked up the sheaf of poetry and correspondence, stuffing them into a box with the little statue, and left.

I returned to my hotel room and pored over the stuff I had acquired.

The statuette was crude and grotesque, a squat little idol of something called Tsathoggua which partook equally of the characters of bat, sloth and toad and smiled contentedly with a jack-o-lantern mouth and heavy-lidded eyes over its bloated belly. A real charmer, the statuette was identified as some sort of god that I'd never heard about in Bulfinch and was hand-carved by the poet Smith. The poet's literary work was a bit more advanced than his solid artwork, though hardly perfect.

I read his poetry. It was hardly the fashionable blank verse of the literati, relying heavily instead on meter and rhyme and two-dollar words. But it had strong imagery, and a perverse insistence on uncertain sexual and mental deviance lurking in its shadows. It spoke of opium visions, languid nights of dreaming decadence, and nameless things. The girl had found it fascinating, apparently, her dog-eared little booklets of the verse being scribbled over with many footnotes and underlining and !!!s. She had taken an especial shine to the hints of Sapphic idylls in the poems, probably cribbed by the author from earlier Frenchmen, and occasionally penciled in the name "Nadine" near those passages. There were a handful of letters between the starlet and the poet as well. She had many questions for him about his inspirations, the source of his occult learning (all invented, he said) and her own interests in Theosophy and orientalia. Polite responses were given, all posted from a little Northern California town called Auburn.

Much had become clear. Young girl comes to Hollywood with dreams of becoming an actress, graduates from the harmless fluff of astrology to the costlier silliness of occultism, and comes to a fascination with another young girl. It's unrequited, she despairs, and she kills herself. This was one possible answer, one conclusion I could obtain from the facts. From another perspective... from another perspective, she had found answers in Smith's cosmic poetry that made the whole of life something of an afterthought. I read and re-read the verses, seeing nothing there but purple words and faux erudition and the nagging feeling that something inside me had gone missing for a very long time.

In any event, I mused, Barker would not be satisfied with the Sapphic suicide theory. Phantastic was not a detective magazine.

Through the window of my room, the beacon atop City Hall glimmered faintly in the night and I could hear the Fuller Brush salesman down the hall huffing as he got the most for his money from a Mexican girl he had hired downtown. It's said that in his dying years, the tycoon J. Pierpont Morgan desperately sought the occult secrets of the Ancient Egyptians. His passion for their mysterious wisdom animated his flaccid, decaying body when nothing else might. Perhaps there is something of that urgency in all of us.

I read and re-read the poetry and the letters, wrestling with their hothouse images and sardonic manner. Who would live and die for this pulpy stuff? Was there anything more to this than it seemed?

I only knew that the starlet's death scene had sparked a wish in me to know more. Not merely facts, but the reasons for the facts. Inside, I knew that she had put the razor to her veins because... because that is what people do when there is nothing else to do. For the same unnamable reason that a man slaps his wife when he has no bread for the table, or he becomes a 'typer' of gibberish for others. But perhaps obscure Tsathoggua, toad and sloth and god at once, was nearer the truth than I was.

Tsathoggua smiled sleepily, wreathed in the votive smoke of my cigarette.

The next morning, the sweet fragrance of wild sage drifted on the wind as I drove across the Colorado Street Bridge in Pasadena. Dozens had chosen the beautiful span as their jumping-off point to die in the Arroyo Seco; the barbed wire along its sides unspooled past me as I headed for the train station. I boarded the northbound Southern Pacific and watched the suicide bridge disappear behind me in the distance.

"Defeat has been unconsciously the quest of all religions, all philosophies, and all sciences."

- Charles Fort, "Lo"

Barker had already wired me sufficient funds in Los Angeles for all that I might need. Once in Northern California, I found that my rental options for an automobile had been somewhat reduced, for instead of Hollywood I was in the land of ranchers and politicians. My cash deposit won me the right to drive an aging Packard along the bad roads north and east of Sacramento into Smith country. Chugging up the Sacramento Valley, I found the county seat of Auburn and its several hundred inhabitants.

After I checked into the little local hotel, they directed me on to nearby Indian Ridge and the Smith residence. No, no telephone up there, they said. But they're friendly enough people, though old Clark's a little odd. No reason you can't go to their doorstep. I drove perhaps ten minutes through the hilly area, with its outcroppings of black volcanic stone and twisted gray-green pines and straight green buckeyes. Here and there, meager plum and cherry ranches dotted the landscape, framed by the snowy Sierras to the east and the dim blue of the Coast Range to the west. Double-checking myself against the townsfolk's directions, I found myself at the Smith place.

It was a plot of land rife with tall, yellowing grass and scrub clinging to the thin, stony soil. There was a one-story wooden frame house clad in a jumble of stained boards and shingles, abutted by a grove of blue oak trees. An outhouse stood not far behind it, and a pump-operated well not too far away either. Here and there a bit of junk rusted amid the straggle of boulders lying in the "yard." There was no sound but the wind in the trees. I got out of the Packard, putting my bribe-gift for the poet under the seat to keep it cool, and went to the front door. There could only have been four rooms in the house at most; it was a very picture of neatly maintained poverty. Through the screen door I could see scattered crude drawings and paintings in an untrained primitive-like style, as of a

man seeking to emulate tribal folk art. I knocked on the doorframe.

"Timeus, is that you?" an old woman's tremulous voice answered me. I called in, introducing myself, asking after Clark A. Smith. "I'm Mrs. Fanny Smith," the old lady replied. "You say you want to talk to Clark?" I said I did, and asked if he went by the name of Timeus. "Timeus is my husband. Clark is our son." She neared the door, and I saw her more clearly. "Yes. Our only boy. Clark," she concluded. She was a stout, tallish woman of advanced age in a patterned farm dress who peered at me through glasses. Her skin was sallow and she breathed with some difficulty, inviting me into her home to wait for Smith's return. I accepted, entering the front room and its cool dimness. "Clark takes care of us. He is such a good boy."

The front room was a neatly organized collection of old furniture, kerosene lamps, bric-a-brac and books. The books were well-read, covering a broad range of topics from gold mining to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary. Art, signed by Smith, was scattered around the room - paintings and drawings, and a couple of the odd little statuettes partially carved from soft stone. Over it all hung the smells of dust, age and the sickroom. The old woman talked and fretted on about every little thing, bragging about her Clark and complaining about her Timeus and how long he always took down in Auburn, it being supply day and all. I struggled to focus my thoughts on Smith's work and its hints of truths outside my world. She offered and made me a cup of unsweetened tea, which I was about to sip when a heavy footfall approached the front door.

I turned. Behind me stood a weathered man of about forty, a bit under six feet tall and rather thin despite his large chest. He wore a neat blue suit, colorful patterned shirt, and a blue beret. It was as if I had somehow stumbled across a Montmartre painter in a walnut plantation. The hat nearly provoked me to laughter, but there was a somber expression in his heavy-lidded eyes that somehow lent dignity to the ridiculous ensemble. His weathered face was graced with a wispy brown moustache, setting off lank brown hair that hung slightly over his collar. I leaped to regain control of the situation. "Clark Ashton Smith?" I said.

"Yes, I am Clark Smith," he said in a deep voice. "What can I do for you?"

I named myself to him and explained that I had come from Chicago to write about a matter related to his poetry. He seemed surprised and a little wary. Smith struck a match and lit his pipe. "Forgive me. I am not fond of crowds, and I do have a hard time meeting new people," he said. "But you're interested in poetry?" I affirmed that I was, and named the poems which the girl had underlined most fervidly. I wished to know more, especially about his inspiration. They invited me to stay for dinner and began to present Smith's work to me.

They proudly showed me the current cover of a magazine called *Weird Tales*, a tasteless and lurid painting of two nearly nude young girls daubed by a woman named Brundage, which might have illuminated a manuscript of the dead starlet's failed love affair. Smith's work was behind that cover. I felt an odd surge of kinship for him. My own worthless typings were entombed between covers no better than those, differing only in that they prostituted philosophy, religion and cosmology instead of nubile flesh. Smith's mother apologized for the fleshly indiscretion, noting that such things went with the "art world." I nodded sagely in agreement. We went over Smith's own odd little drawings and paintings in excruciating detail, which bored me endlessly as it was clear that he was much more of a wordsmith than a visual artist.

What had I expected? A reclusive Hermetic sorcerer in a remote cabin in the mountains, attended by a shaven cabal of catamites and virgins? Rohmer's Doctor Fu Manchu? Madame Blavatsky's Dadaist cousin, perhaps? It was no matter. Increasingly, I saw no reason at all why this particular man produced these particular artworks, nor why anyone should follow his visions in any direction whatsoever. Perhaps outside his mother's influence he would have more to say for himself, I reasoned.

Smith Pere finally returned, amid a storm of recriminations from his

wife. He was a thin little man, with a beaky nose and an old-fashioned moustache turned white like his hair. He spoke with a faded British accent. "Hullo, I'm the elder Smith," he smiled to me. "Timeus Smith." He could not have been a day under seventy-five, and had the air of a ne'er-do-well who'd finally been pinned down to one spot like a well-collected butterfly. His collector was infuriated at his lateness, a full forty minutes, and did not mind berating him for it before his son and a guest. "Fanny keeps me on a schedule on our supply day," he whispered to me. "Afraid I might go running after one of the young girls in town." He winked jovially, and I mustered a thin smile. Throughout the afternoon, and through the simple dinner, both men deferred to Fanny Smith's every whim. She was polite to her men, but firm, and it did not take me long to see who wore the pants in the household.

Dinner was simple, mainly beans and bread and a little meat supplemented with homegrown vegetables. No one held much store by saying grace, to my relief. After dinner, we smoked while Smith did the dishes. His father held forth to me about his footloose youth and his many misadventures on the road from England to California. It did not take long for the older Smiths to grow bone-tired and ready for sleep.

When Smith had seen both his mother and his father to bed after their many medications, he joined me to sit outside the house. I had in the meantime gone back to my car and retrieved my planned gift for him: A bottle of wine "imported" from Canada which we could drink together. "I'm afraid I don't have many chances to sample vintages," he said. "Especially in this godawful cow-town."

"None of us do anymore. Prohibition, you know."

He smiled and stuck a pocketknife in the cork, twisting it and pulling it out with a smooth turn of his strong, leathery hands. We drank out of odd little cups he'd made himself. It was not long before his taciturnity mellowed to a warm glow, and I was surprised at how much Smith had to say when his guard had been dissolved by the wine. He became voluble about his thoughts and his ideas,

things which clearly no one in the nearby community ever discussed with him, let alone his elderly parents. His polite reserve was as much for their sake as for his own daily behavior.

Smith had dropped out of high school and educated himself from books, a task made easier by his nearly photographic memory. He had worked many odd outdoor jobs, hating any work that demanded he stay indoors or keep normal hours. Smith, the poet, had chopped firewood, picked fruit, dug wells, mined for gold, and a great deal more. He had few anecdotes to tell of these things, but after the wine warmed him further he told me a bit more. It seemed he was also the town's own Don Juan, romancing the bored local ladies, single or married. Poets, I clucked theatrically, and he had laughed richly at that. I poured him more wine, generously, and then gave myself a much more judicious amount.

"Are you familiar with the works of Charles Baudelaire? `Les Fleurs du Mal?' I once translated the work for myself. Listen."

I had read the book once, in an English translation, but it had been in my freshman year and it had been for "the spicy parts." But the wine had not yet finished working its magic, so I nodded for Smith to commence. His memory was truly remarkable – he spoke aloud the words as if the text was before him. Yet all was not well. I gritted my teeth. I was no Francophone myself, but the poor man had obviously learned exclusively from books. He had never actually heard the language spoken aloud. He did not hesitate in his recitation, which bespoke great confidence, but after the first few words of "Les Femmes Damnées" declaimed in that strange quasi-French I chose to concentrate instead on the distant sound of an owl hooting.

When he had finished, I gave polite and wholly deserved praise to his voice and spoke vaguely of the quality of Baudelaire's verse. Ambiguity is the stronghold of hope. I named for him the dead starlet, explained the circumstances of her death. A frown creased his broad forehead as he swam through the alcohol fumes. "Yes, I remember corresponding with her," he said of the dead girl. "She

was always on about the visions she'd had drinking absinthe after reading my poetry. Terrific stuff. I felt like I was Coleridge or Chambers, reading her letters. She got soppy about another girl as well. One of those, do you think?" I shrugged. He certainly didn't need my confirmation of the obvious. "I carved the Tsathoggua for her on commission, when she'd learned I sculpted as well. She had originally wanted something a bit more sensuous, but I said I was new to the medium. I've been thinking of selling my sculpture. Nothing very high in price, just a few dollars here and there." I grunted affirmation of the statement, honestly not very enthusiastic at the prospect. "At least it would be my own stuff. I would hate to write for someone else, letting them put their name on my work. That's Lovecraft's game."

I felt a pang, followed by curiosity. "Lovecraft? What's that?"

"Howard Lovecraft. He and Bob Howard and I write for the same sorts of magazines, chiefly for Farnsworth and 'Weird Tales.' Those two have a great deal more time for letter-writing than I do. It must be nice. I hardly have time to write for sale these days, with all I must do around here." He smiled sleepily. "But they're both prose writers, too. I am first and foremost a poet. I used to write and edit poetry, primarily. But George was right. There is no money in it. Poor old George." It took some time to piece together that "poor old George" Sterling had been his literary mentor, an obscure fellow in Carmel, now dead. He'd known vanished Bierce, who had likewise been an enthusiast for Smith's early poetry. "One wonders whatever became of Bierce," Smith murmured.

"He was amongst Pancho Villa's men," I said. "Or so I've read. Good way to get yourself killed. Not much of a mystery."

"No, you're quite right. Not much of a mystery at all. Nothing much is a mystery, is it?" he said. "We create all the mysteries ourselves, then give ourselves the answers we like. Even slit wrists can be an answer, if there is no other."

I focused on the stars blazing in the clear country sky and asked, "Is

there any other?"

"I don't know yet."

I poured him more wine and asked him if he had found his verse in the visions of narcotics. "Opium?" He laughed. "A little tobacco, a little wine and poetry are enough for me. I'm not Thomas DeQuincey. Besides, where would you get opium in this nasty little backwood? They would think it was some new-fangled fertilizer." He muttered imprecations about Auburn and its inbred citizenry for some minutes, then, as I made mental notes to myself about what facts I would invent for Barker's story. A man could follow me and learn if I had done my research, but he could not follow me and know what my research was. Barker wanted answers. I would give him answers. I had none for myself. But I continued to listen to Smith as he rambled over the wine cup.

Smith supported his narrow chin on his hands. He cleared his throat. He had something important to say to me, or thought he did. I listened. "I think sometimes that poets have a vision of another world," Smith said. "And artists as well. That there is something beyond this rotten planet. Something rare and strange." I nodded. "You know something?" he slurred. "I sometimes think that if enough beauty is brought into the world... enough poetry, or paintings, or sculptures... that something out there rewards us. With a little mercy. A gift for the dying." I winced at his earnestness, and tried to joke that perhaps he meant Tsathoggua, the toad-sloth-god of his invention. He frowned and concentrated on his words and said, "Maybe. Any dream will do, if it can get you away from this."

I thought of his florid poetry and crude painting, and could not imagine it easing the passage of anyone from this world. The image of the girl in her bathtub amid cheap yellow silk made it no easier. But what dream could?

"I hate this place," he muttered softly. "I will leave it one day, as a butterfly leaves its hated husk to rot into the soil. I will leave them

behind, and never return." His heavy eyelids might have touched shut, for all that I could see in the starlight. His mouth dribbled slackly, and his breathing deepened. He had passed out. I sat there in the darkness beside the man for long minutes, listening to the sound of his breathing. There was a creak and a cough from within the house.

"Clark? Clark, I need you," the old woman groaned in the night.

"Must be asleep. Here, I'll help," said the old man.

"No," the old woman whimpered. "Clark? Clark..."

But Smith was entirely passed out in the chair, his quaint handmade cup draining into the dry earth. Having no desire to overstay my welcome, I walked back to my car, pushed the starter button, and began to drive back into Auburn. Beside me, Tsathoggua smiled sleepily. I was a little sleepy myself, and I pulled over onto the shoulder of the empty road to clear my head for a few moments.

I gazed up at the stars and tried in vain to form pictures with them.