

Relic's Reunions

Also by Vernon Frazer

POETRY

Improvisations (I-XXIV)
Demolition Fedora
Free Fall
Sing Me One Song of Evolution
Demon Dance
A Slick Set of Wheels

FICTION

Stay Tuned to This Channel

RECORDINGS

Song of Baobab
Slam!
Sex Queen of the Berlin Turnpike

ANTHOLOGIES

The Jazz Voice
Thomas Chapin—Alive

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by

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Beneath the Underground Books

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of *Relic's Reunions* originally appeared in serial form in *Plain Brown Wrapper*.

The author thanks the Adam Ward Seligman Fund and the California Community Foundation for their generous support.

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Cover Art: John Bryan, Jonathan Duboff, Vernon Frazer, David Pardi

The author has used the names of some real people, living or historical, in this novel. None of them did or said any of the things attributed to them.

ISBN 0-9633465-6-3

Beneath the Underground
132 Woodycrest Drive
East Hartford, CT 06118

*To John Bryan
for his friendship and support*

Move over, all you AVANT-POPists who've already spilled your guts into type, justified or un. Move over, all you Definitely Postmodern Dudes hellbent on deconstructing what was never constructed in the first place. Make way for the latest literary maverick ramming his grizzled head through the slushpile. Make way for the latest Underground Man. Make way for me: Edsel Relic.

Edsel Relic isn't my real name, but it's close enough for fiction.

My background's as fictional as my name. Look at my face: the WASPish triangle softened by the Celtic red tint between the gray streaks of my beard. Then look at the Eastern European eyes blazing obsidian above the mouth pursed to hawk vile consonants in your face. Could be a dash of Moor or, just as easily, Russian, Polish, Spanish...Don't expect my last name to clue you in. Relic could be English before the spellings went standard or some five-syllable handle a Customs Cop chopped short at Ellis Island. The way the world mixes and matches, who's to say what we really are?

Whatever my roots, Relic has symbolic value: I'm a cultural dinosaur clomping across the stage(s) of evolution straight into a remake of *Godzilla* or some other '50's horror show. As long as I can knock over high-rises, though, I'm no more extinct than the Bomb.

Now Edsel, that's more to the point: a car that never caught on from a time when I never caught on either. Even now, after the Gas Riots of the '70's...even now, when the Japs make the American cars the patriots dump their Hamiltons and Jacksons on...even now, you are what you drive. And after hundreds of thousands of miles this rustguttered clunker is still chugging forward, the past and future equally dim as the smoke of Time huffs and puffs through its gaskets.

Wear and tear? Definitely! The Demolition Derby of the '50's battered me into peacetime shellshock. My head tics, shoulder twitches and wild-eyed

rants...all the things that start you cringing like a leper's advance...might've come from the sledge hammers of my parents' divorce. Or maybe they're just symptoms of my Tourette, which took a circus of shrinks a lifetime to spot. Either way, I'm not what you want to see when you look in the mirror.

Regardless, I floored my shaky front end forward. The race riots of the '60's dented my doors and cracked my windshield. I ran on Vinblastine Sulfate fumes through the '70's and knocked through Reagan's low-octane '80's. Here in the '90's I'm keeping my eye on the millennial gauge. Riding the Eternal Present that links past to future I've beaten the Big C (as much as anyone can) and won and lost a few bouts with madness. The door's sprung, the body's rotted, but fashion or no, I've got a ways to go.

It seems like I'm always driving. Not your coast-to-coast Kerouac jaunts. No, just short hops: the day gig, the jazz club, the stripjoint, the Old Lady—a crazyquilt road-stitching that patches a self out of the shattered continuity of the American Dream. As I seam my routes, I look for rips that might lead to frontiers as yet undiscovered. And find margins.

To navigate this relentless wreck I talk into a microcassette on the Interstate, scratch notes at a red light, tap my PC keyboard at home...try to piece together the home movies and reel dreams of the past, make some sense of them even though the perspective changes at every point: narratives, fragments, bulletins, bedtime conversations, streams of consciousness...whatever way I can rivet memory into place, even for a moment. I've got plenty of time to remember out here—not that remembering necessarily clarifies experience. Sometimes it just embellishes facts with tricks of the imagination.

After all my time behind the wheel I've learned this much: the car is more than an a V-8 Impala pumping through pimple-faced pud fantasies or a '59 Pontiac with tail fins like rocket-ribbed condoms, a babe at your side, the stickshift stiff and ready. It's the engine of rootlessness that drives us from a gutted past to a future that's gutted before we get there.

It was rootlessness that brought Brod Allen, Dale Hunter and me together, then sent us our separate ways. In high school I figured we'd go down in history, a triumvirate like Caesar and his cronies. Only not as dead. *Sic transit gloria* and all that! I figured we'd go our separate ways, then meet at self-proclaimed summits to celebrate our triumphs of literature, music and art.

Instead, Brod and Dale exist as whispers of memories, voices...so hard to call them back with any clarity...of tone, of timbre...so hard to cut through the scar tissue of experience to the raw flesh of memory. Whenever I try, I prick a nerve of bitterness, buried but still throbbing through the decades. My mind screams every time I poke it. I'm still trying to sort through the past, to tie up loose ends where I can. And bury it, like my mother's Cancer-raped cadaver, so I can move on. It's a thankless task, one that some condescending editor will call...well, yeah, I guess it *is* a Coming of Age novel—*Old Age!*—with the development on the arrested side.

Whatever. We play the hand we've been dealt. Bet the rock, bluff the hard place, and hope we win the diamonds instead of the coal. Maybe I wanted my Wild Man persona, my demons. Even if I didn't want it, my genes sprouted enough spooks inside me to create the image as well as the person. Sometimes I confuse the two. It's not easy being your own creation.

In memory, Brod and Dale are my own creations as well. If ambiguity defines contemporary fictional characters, my leaky memory gaskets should help me portray the windows of a mind in motion and the people who helped give it direction. Even after we split, I figured I'd write a novel about the three of us. It was supposed to begin like this:

There it goes!

A celestial sperm whips its tail across the 4:00 A.M. sky, then trails into vapor. Angel glitter from *It's a Wonderful Life* tinkles against the '54 Plymouth squatting in the driveway hacked through oaks, pines, maples and sumac.

"Did you see that, Brod?" Dale's nasal voice resonates from the shotgun seat. "Like, it was a Shooting Star."

Brod, in the back, stops pawing at his larger-than-life mouth. His lips twist like a horse trying to whinny. "I saw it."

"I think I even *heard* it." Dale hums the faint whistle of a missile beyond the horizon. "Like *that*."

"Did you see it, Edsel?" Brod's trying to bring me into the conversation.

"I missed it." The exigencies of first-person viewpoint aside, I was trancing out on the blue after-images floating above the yellow dividing line on the road at the end of Dale's driveway and thinking how the Morning Glory seeds had transported us to a plane where Time existed as an Eternal Present—except for Shooting Stars and their attendant durations.

“You’re so unobservant,” Brod chides me gently.

“You’ve got to be *aware*.” Dale’s intonation choreographs a strut. “Only the observant people—the *aware* people—become *hip*. You dig?”

I dig the dig: I’m not hip. Or not hip enough. I’ve read Kerouac, bought the banned edition of *Tropic of Cancer*, tried to smuggle in the banned edition of *Naked Lunch*, learned that Bird Lives...I’ve smoked pot, I’ve swallowed hallucinogenics—and I’m *still* not hip. Never mind, it’s just Dale running his one-up peer game. No. Brod saw this vapor-rocket light the sky too.

My fingers tighten around the steering wheel. Maybe the Shooting Star is a symbol of Destiny. Maybe the two who saw it will follow it beyond this boondock horizon: Brod to the West Coast tomorrow, Dale to Tufts next week. I’ve had my chance. Flew like Icarus toward Greenwich Village, melted my wings over Brooklyn and crash-landed back in West Mannamok. I’ve failed. They’ll succeed. Maybe that’s why they saw the Shooting Star and I didn’t.

Of course, this could just be a hallucination the Morning Glory Seeds brought on...

But if it’s a hallucination what’s Walter Cronkite doing here in the hipster’s grungy sweatshirt and bluejeans? Is CBS trying to boost its ratings by reviving its *You Are There* show from the Golden Age of television?

America’s Most Trusted Man pokes a microphone under Dale’s tapered nose. “Tell me, Dale. What *is* the significance of the Shooting Star? Is it a harbinger, or simply a hallucination?”

Dale lights his Dunhill pipe with studied nonchalance. “I would have to say it has, uh, elements of both. I consider the hallucinogenic experience an intensification of reality, a *sharpening* of our existing sensual awareness. From the standpoint of our heightened perceptions, it *is* a ‘harbinger.’” His nod tamps a period. When he tamps his tobacco the white dot on his pipestem quivers in the camera lights, then whisks to vapor like the meteor’s trail.

Cronkite leans into the back. But Brod climbed out and hopped onto his 1200cc Triumph while Dale was talking. Cronkite starts after him. Brod kickstarts the bike and blazes west through pinwheeling sunrises, across the prairies, over the Rockies, to San Francisco and beyond.

I grind the ignition. Exhaust whirls around my window like smoke rising from Hell. I shift into reverse.

But here's Walter, poking his microphone through the smoke. "Edsel, our reports indicate that you didn't see the Shooting Star. Can you explain to our viewers how you missed what your colleague calls a harbinger?"

"L-l-l-leave me alone, goddammit! My best friend just took off for the coast. And this tiresome Taoist, he and I are barely getting along. When *he* splits, I'll be stuck in this hick town with nothing but hayseeds—"

Cronkite turns to the cameras. "There you have it, ladies and gentlemen..."

You're just hallucinating this old TV show, I tell myself.

"...our account of the night the Shooting Star soared over West Mannamok's Artistic Triumvirate, which will come of age in the 1960's and... 'YOU ARE THERE.'"

Dale snatches the microphone from Cronkite, jabs it at my face. Sneers: "AND YOU ARE NOT!"

Instead it begins like this:

When I'm on the hang the phone never rings. But when I'm cranking against a deadline... *RING! RING! RING! RING!*

There goes my concentration. *Shit!* If this isn't an assignment, a gig or a close friend on a deathbed...

"Hello, Edsel, this is Bambi Belair..."

Bambi Belair! My Aphrodite Incarnate from high school. Bambi Belair! The Circe whose aqua eyes, filmstar figure and creamy-smooth voice reduced me to whimpering about her physical beauty while Brod and Dale wanted to discuss Beauty in its higher forms. Bambi Belair! The cheerleader whose sexual charisma sent the boys of West Mannamok High into Testosterone Overload and Hump Lawless, my nemesis, into a jealous frenzy aimed at me. I stumble toward the answering machine, trashing the studio floor with loose manuscripts. "Hey, it's been a long time."

Maybe not long enough. She "married Hump Lawless"... Congratulations! Mr. and Miss America unite..."have three kids, fifteen, fourteen and twelve"...to breed behemoths amid the nightmare rubble of the American Dream.

I spare her the Cancer wards, the Tourette, my mother's death rattle...all the *real* shit.

"I saw your article in the paper last week," she says. "It was really

good."

"Thanks." I *had* to become good. Writing was the only way I could communicate without stuttering back then.

"The reason I'm calling, Edsel...The Class of '63...we're having our 25th reunion. Last night, the committee started talking about your article and we realized how long it's been since anybody's *seen* you. We'd really like you to come."

"Those weren't exactly *Happy Days* for me down there..."

"It would give you the chance to *write* about them."

"Actually, reunions have been done to death." The textbooks say Tourette can generate oppositional behavior. If it can't, West Mannamok High sure can. Don't go off on her.

"Well, we'd like you to come, even if you *don't* write about it."

"Y'know, Bambi, if you and a few other people wanted to get together with me as *individuals*, I'd be open to it. But the Class..."

"Just think about it. That's all we're asking."

That much I can give her.

...AND NOW, MINDSCREEN THEATER PRESENTS...

(regal flourish of trumpets)

“NEWSREEL MEMORIES”

Old Glory unfurls over Iwo Jima while trombones bray the Marines Hymn's brassy diatonic triumphs .

Fifth Avenue Victory Parade. 1,000,000 flags wave at General Ike in the jeep heading the motorcade. Close-up: Whitey Goodbrand, a lean crewcut Eagle Scout, waves his little flag at the soldiers marching by.

Main Street U.S.A. A mob of Old Glories and placards proclaim “I LIKE IKE.” Presidential candidate Ike waves to the throngs throbbing around his campaign convertible. On the New Warsaw side of the Great Divide, Cub Scout Edsel Relic, all freckles and bones, shouts, “Lift me up, Daddy. I want my flag to fly the highest.” On the West Mannamok side, Hump Lawless hulks over Brod Allen, Sid Silverman and all the other cowering Cubs in his den till they cough up their nickels, dimes and quarters.

Korea. Second Lieutenant Goodbrand, in marine fatigues, reads a newspaper in his foxhole. Artillery booms in the distance. The headline zooms forward: “IKE WINS.” The now-muscular Goodbrand rises from the pit, begins his inexorable march through the headlines of History spinning into focus over him. “STALIN DIES, MALENKOV NEW SOVIET BOSS.” Captain Goodbrand marches through college on rural Connecticut football fields. “U.S. MAKES H-BOMB.” Whitey Goodbrand, B.A., marches into West Mannamok Elementary School, a fourth grade teacher committed to teaching

his students how to hide under their desks when the Communists drop the Bomb. "BADBOY ELVIS GOOD AS GOLD." Goodbrand, beginning to paunch, marches through the girls' lavatories, ogling the budding breasts of the nymphets in his sixth-grade class. They giggle, shriek or flirt. "IKE WINS AGAIN." Goodbrand, a Little League Coach, breaks stride long enough to accept a winner's trophy, then struts through a vortex of headlines whose dizzying whirl brakes to a stop with: "GOODBRAND NAMED VARSITY COACH."

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"Allen! You shower up yet?"

Brod Allen doesn't answer Goodbrand. He broods on the bench across from me, three textbooks and a spiral notebook resting on his knee.

Tight teenage asses bounce into the shower's hiss, then out, dripping. Lockers slam open and closed, graymetal clatter.

Goodbrand raps his clipboard. "Hey, Allen! 'You shower up?' I asked you."

Brod's wooly brows knot over the olive eyes deepset in his acne-blasted face.

"You're so slow on the field, you couldn't be *that* fast in the shower."

Silence.

The battle started last year. Ninth grade. This year it's turned ugly.

"If you don't shower, Allen, I'm not gonna pass you."

Brod's lips tighten.

"What's the matter? The boys get you all hot and bothered?"

Brod's eyes narrow in their pitted caverns.

"Nobody leaves till Allen showers up," Goodbrand announces, then slants a smirk at Brod.

The collective uproar: "C'mon, Allen. Shower up! You're gonna make us late to class."

"You don't care if your classmates get ciphared, eh, Allen?"

Brod's a rock withstanding Goodbrand's peer pressure ploy and the waves of rumbles, sputters, threats and taunts that crash against him. Five minutes, ten... it'll take eons to wear him to sand.

"C'mon, Allen. Come on! We don't wanna get in trouble."

Goodbrand shrugs, swaggers into his chickenwire office next to the exit.

Behind Brod, Hump Lawless pats his right mitt prissily over the upsweep of his Elvis wave. As he sheaths his comb in his backpocket, his biceps bulge thick as my thighs.

“FREAKIN’ *QUEER!*”

Hump’s bellow splits the air cheesy with crotchrot. His mincing steps toward Brod accelerate into a trucking gait. He brakes, leans his Fred Flintstone face into Brod’s impassive stare. “You put your faggot hands on me, I’ll break your freakin’ *back!*”

Brod looks past the splayed nostrils steaming his face.

“C-C-Can’t you l-l-leave the k-k-kid alone!” I say. “Maybe he j-just doesn’t want to be late to c-c-c-class.”

“Shut up, T-T-T-Twitch!” Hump roars. “You’re a freakin’ queer, too.”

From behind him: “Freakin’ queer Relic!”

I try to look past Hump’s shoulders, huge beneath West Mannamok High’s blue-and-white letter sweater. Can’t see who said it. Could be any one of thirty kids. Anyone but Sid Silverman, who’s inched behind Lawless, trying to look like part of the herd that ragged him as Sid the Yid all last year.

Hump paws down his cheeks and chin as if thinking, then tramps into Goodbrand’s cage. “Coach...”

Goodbrand, feet crossed on his desk, turns toward the troubled stare of his Triple Threat. Last year Hump was the first freshman to make any of the varsity teams...soccer, basketball, baseball...and the first to lead all three in scoring.

“...Uh, one more cipher and I’m suspended.”

Without Hump Goodbrand will lose three conference championships, lots of headlines and a shot at vice-principal. The coach plants his feet on the concrete floor and scribbles a hall pass.

Once Hump splits the outcry begins. “Coach, we’ll get ciphers too.”

Goodbrand grumbles through twenty-nine passes, including Brod’s and mine.

“Freakin’ queer, Allen,” Hump snorts, leaning next to the water fountain in the hall. “You too, T-T-T-Twitch.”

His name-calling knifes my gut. “D-d-d-don’t call me T-T-T-Twitch.”

He smirks. “Okay, T-T-T-Twitch.”

“Okay, T-T-T-Twitch,” erupts the Cool Hair Chorus behind us.

My head jerks to the right. My fist cocks beside my chin. Even though

Hump's 190 pounds of muscle to my 130 of bone, I want to nail the mother-fucker.

"Getting brave, T-T-T-Twitch?" Hump thuds forward. His frame doubles in size. His dead-eyed stare surrounds me. His snicker echoes off the plaster.

My stomach sinks, then yo-yos against the back of my throat. I picture his ham-sized fists looping anvil blows against my cheeks and chin, pounding me down to a pile of bruises and broken teeth on the brown tile floor where I watch through the slit of a swollen eye Hump's cock-strut while he crows his triumph to the Cruel Hair Crew. Damn my flash rage!

"Don't stoop to his level," Brod says.

Good idea. Maybe it's not too late...to cop out. My fist loosens, slinks into my right pocket. The corner of my eye catches Goodbrand smirking in the doorway. His crossed arms tell me he's not going to interfere with his Triple Threat. Hump's menacing stare eases over his mocking gloat. One by one, the Cool Hair Chorus burns me with the contemptuous leer reserved for weaklings, then saunters down the hall.

"It drives me crazy," I tell Brod on our way to geometry. "Doesn't it bother you?"

"Sometimes. But I try to consider the source."

I consider the source all through geometry class, vow not to let the bastards get to me anymore. But heading down the hall and into the lav before lunch, I walk through a Virtual Highschool Yearbook with twenty, thirty, maybe even fifty Hump clones on each side of the hall:

Mack Wyllis, class of 1963, 1964 and a 1968 G.E.D.: "Don't spaz n' spray your pants in there, T-T-T-Twitch." Americo DiCristo, the principal of West Mannamok High School, now retired: "While it might be appropriate to talk to Hump in my office, it would not be

Mel Olds, the history teacher, is standing right there. You'd think he'd tell them, "Leave the kid alone." But he doesn't. And for all his forbidding rhetoric Mr. DiCristo seems more concerned with looking fastidious in his gray suit than with getting these bullies

Pete Impala, class of 1963. Now, as then, a liquor salesman: "Don't t-t-t-twitch when you aim your pud, hey." Bob "Coop" DeVille, Class of 1963, voted Best Hair, now a talk show host on community access TV: "Your mom fucked my dog." Mel Olds, class advisor,

appropriate to cipher off my back. Christ! *now deceased*: "I get
him. He is, after all, Don't they understand paid whether they pick
the Constable's son." how much it hurts? on him or not."

And faces misty from memory through featureless smirks:

"You're mother's a whore!"

"Freakin' queer!"

The insults blister my ears from the lav to the cafeteria entrance, which Coop DeVille and Pete Impala flank with sentinel slouches. DeVille dips his spitcurl, slides forward, then rises in front of me, his fishmouth gaping over a pud-hand mike. "Hey, T-T-T-Twitch! This is your Man in the Street interview. Give us *your* opinion on the state of nutrition in American schools. How does the food taste? How do you *think* it should taste?" So many questions, they overwhelm me. Why is this wiseass playing newsman with me when he's never wanted my opinion before? Why is he asking me when he can see I've brought my lunch? How I can stop spitting my first consonant over and over so I can give him an opinion? Flustered, I look around till Impala's eyes catch mine. He nods over the ironic crease of a grin that seems to signal his amusement with DeVille's out-of-the-blue questioning. "Enjoy your lunch, hey."

Geez, they're pretty friendly all of a sudden, I think, a ripple of reassurance warming me as I weave through the crowded tables to the empty one at the far corner of the cafeteria where I sit alone every day. Maybe they *do* like me, despite all their ragging. Hmm...My ham sandwich looks as though my mother slapped some Gulden's on it: brown, darker than mayo. Maybe she was in a rush and forgot I don't like mustard. Oh well...

This isn't mustard!

I spit out the squishy turd. Hump gloats at me from two tables away. Starts the derisive chorale of laughter that swells the room till the windows warp outward.

|||||

Twenty-seven years later, the taste stays sharp in my memory. So do the sandwiches stuffed with ketchup-stained toilet paper to look like bloody Kotex and the three winter coats knifed to shreds in my locker. My mother called the principal, the parents...it just got worse. And worse. I wanted to

quit school, move away from the bastards. I pounded the speedbag in my cellar a good hour every day, till the ache in my gut went away—for the night. Call it an obsessive-compulsive component of Tourette, but the taste still plays its loop inside my head. And I still pound a bag.

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“Music soothes the savage breast” Daddy says chewing fingernails one hand on steering wheel whistling Sinatra between bites but for me it’s Bobby Rydell *come on Wild One* Frankie Avalon *Goddess of Love that Fabulous Fabian I’m a Tiger* singing along with my 45s after school Saturday mornings Sunday after church I know the cheekchilling thrill of a good verse my lungs blasting voice cracking highnotes a new record ten times over dreaming lipsynching my latest hit 5 weeks No. 1 front foot tapping back fingers snapping left shoulder pointing at American Bandstand audience grinning through the lines of the songs the lines of chicks swooning chicks mooning over me and me actually brave enough to ask them out grinning like a toothpaste ad cracking jokes they laugh at like these cool guys Bobby Rydell Frankie Avalon Fabian but who’d go out with “T-T-T-Twitch” as Hump and the boys call down the hall I can’t sing anyway except alone in my bedroom and my hair “can’t do a thing with it” try the Elvis low upward sweep from left hair’s not straight enough not like Hump’s not even Vaseline I’ve tried it all Brylcreem Vitalis Wildroot Cream Oil STP straight and in combination anything and everything to open doors maybe soccer I was the best wing on JV even Goodbrand (the jerk) knows that I should go out for Varsity but Second Year Latin grades for college even if I did play the guys wouldn’t like me not the chicks either the same old thing me singing along with the hot-shots from Philly alone in my room no matter how hard I try

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After weeks of whispered asides in Geometry, Brod invited me to spend a Saturday afternoon at his house. Why not? He doesn’t *seem* queer, I thought, fighting the tape loops of Hump’s taunts in my head. As long as he keeps his hands to himself...

My fear turned out to be peer-induced homophobia, nothing more.

Talking over lunch, we discovered we were just two horny kids too shy to even ask girls for dates.

Once we confided our hopeless crushes, Brod asked me to listen to his favorite passage from *Nutcracker Suite*, playing in the background. After a few measures, though, the tympanic clomp of engineer boots through the back door broke our concentration. "I hate to interrupt this Meeting of Great Minds, Mr. Stravinsky," Brod's brother Garrett said, "but we have to bring some firewood in from the shed." He tossed a grease-smear grin my way. "Maybe Professor Einstein here can help us."

"We're going for a walk in a few minutes," Brod said. "Why don't we get it now?"

"Brilliant idea, Igor."

"Thank you, master." Brod rose from the diningroom table, hunched over and hobbled after his brother like Dr. Frankenstein's deformed associate.

When Garrett went back to the barn, I said, "Even your brother thinks we're a little different."

Brod sighed. "He's different, himself." Then grinned: "But he hasn't realized how much yet."

"Fixing a car in a barn, that's what most of the kids want to do."

"He's not just fixing up that old MG. He's *rebuilding* it. The engine, the body..."

"Maybe that does make him different," I allowed.

If Brod and I were different from the kids in the school's three or four In Crowds we were just as different from each other. How slowly Brod moved his thickly-muscled frame compared to the rapid-fire jerks of my skeletal physique, I noticed during our afternoon stroll down the rolling backroads where the last leaves of autumn dangled brown on the trees or crinkled under our feet. Brod, who wore a blinder-stare in school, turned his eyes toward the lowsweeping limbs of the maples overhead and wrinkled his nose as he inhaled the brisk November breeze. He told me he absorbed tranquility from the sound of the fir branches rustling on the Christmas Tree Farm we passed, then I told him I enjoyed the exhilarating bustle of people on city streets. But Ingram's Falls, one of his favorite spots, overwhelmed me with its crashing power. "This is great!" I said, watching the white spray rise from the rocks at its base.

"Come spring, I'm going to bring my easel down here and paint it."

"I didn't know you painted."

“Oh yeah. It’s something I might like to spend my life doing. That, or compose music.”

“Do you compose now?”

“Oh no, it takes *years* to learn how to compose.”

When the day shaded to dusk, Brod played a second-year piano exercise with a loving if sometimes fumbling touch on the upright in his living room. The goosebumps his eighth-note crescendos raised on my cheeks were still chilling me when he rose from the piano bench, his lips curled almost apologetically. “I just started taking lessons again last month,” he said.

“You sound good to me,” I said, following him down the twilight-darkened hall to the diningroom.

“Do you still play the trumpet?”

I settled into a chair at the table. “Not since fifth grade.”

He turned the logs glowing faintly in the fireplace, then looked at me, his thicket of eyebrows raised over a brightening gaze. “That’s too bad. I bet you’d be pretty good by now if you stayed with it.”

“Well, I wanted to.” Once my parents split I couldn’t get a ride to the music teacher’s summer lessons. By the start of sixth grade, Elvis Presley had made me forget the trumpet. Guitar was *IT!* But not to my mother: “I scrimped and scrimed to pay off that friggin’ trumpet and you didn’t play it. I buy you a G.D. guitar, you’ll forget about it in two weeks.” When I stopped talking, I heard the revived heat and crackle of the wood, and *La Mer* floating in from the bedroom just off the kitchen.

Brod shook his head slowly. “Gee, that really must be frustrating for you. I find it hard to imagine *my own* life without music in it, you know?” His glowing eyes inched out of their caverns to make contact with mine.

“That’s why I wanted the guitar.”

“But there is a bright side to it. You don’t have to play rock and roll.” He laughed.

“But I *like* rock and roll,” I said, remembering how I’d nearly sung my throat raw in my bedroom that morning while playing my 45s. Then my stomach fluttered my dread. I tried to stop my face from wincing in anticipation of Brod’s spurning me.

“To me, rock and roll is really the lowest common musical denominator,” he said, softly. His palms, raised in explanation, seemed to serve as a fraction’s dividing line. “I hear so much music that’s really interesting... Classical music, electronic music...” His palms lowered to rest on the table.

“There’s some jazz on WOXR that I enjoy, too.”

After *La Mer* he spun *Rhapsody in Blue* to show me what jazz sounded like. It didn’t hit me the way jazz would later: an orgasm throbbing syncopated surges along the mind-body continuum. But I liked it. “If I listened to it all the time, though, the kids in school would think I’m too weird or something.”

“You mean, you listen to music just so people will *like* you?”

Under Brod’s puzzled stare I felt foolish for singing

Teenage Popular(ity) Music

I

“got no got no got no”

“You got no
friends”

WANT

“No friends,
Edsel”

“got no got no got no”

FRIENDS

“The only friend I’ve had since I moved here was Sid Silverman,” I said, then explained how the friendship had turned into a feud in sixth grade. “I’ve tried everything to make these other kids like me, but nothing seems to work.”

“If you want to be popular with them, you have to be like them.”

Flash! The faces of Hump and his Hallway Hell-Hazers, Cool Haired Hump replicas sprouting on the rhizomes of his vile root. “When I think of them, I

want to smash them," I said, relieved that I could finally express my rage to someone.

"If you feel that's what you have to do," Brod said. "I prefer nonviolent solutions, myself. Listen. Would you like to stay for dinner? My mother should be coming home from work any minute."

I called home. My mother gave her weary approval. While Brod warmed the Swedish meatballs he'd made that morning, he continued talking about nonviolent solutions, mentioning Mahatma Gandhi, Bertrand Russell and Martin Luther King, names I'd read in newspapers or history books but never thought I'd find myself talking about. My ignorance embarrassed me.

"I haven't read their work, myself," Brod admitted. "From the little I've read about them, though, I'm pretty sure their approach can work."

Other than the sit-ins King was leading in the south, all I knew about pacifism was that Bomb protesters, beatniks, nonconformists and other "weirdos" practiced it. To discuss pacifism with a person as bright and talented as Brod made me wonder who the weirdos really were. Maybe Brod was an exception to the rule...

But his mother, who, like most mothers, didn't seem weird, supported peaceful solutions herself. When our dinner conversation danced from the music on the hi-fi to the problems Brod and I had in school, she said, "I've spoken with Mr. DiCristo myself this week. He told me he would talk with Mr. Goodbrand. I'm sure they'll arrive at a reasonable solution."

"You're dreaming!" Mr. Allen snorted. "We can't win the school a damned Conference title and we're not Old Money. And since we're not, that smug little Guinea bastard won't lift one damn finger to help us." His words whizzed past me, leaving a wake of whiskey breath.

Mrs. Allen squeezed a half-smile through the beginnings of a blush. "I'm sure Mr. DiCristo doesn't think along those lines."

"And I'm sure he does. I've only *known* the jackass since the third grade." Mr. Allen drained his shot, then glowered at his chaser.

Brod lowered his head, the pout on his lips knitting the comment that would raise the level of discourse. "Regardless of what they decide, I still think passive resistance is better than violent retaliation. Your own compassion forces your enemies to respond more compassionately toward you."

Mr. Allen slapped the table, splashing beer over his hand. "You can't teach people what they can't *learn*." He grumbled, staggered to his feet and

weaved down the hall toward the living room. Her tightlipped face a beet, Mrs. Allen excused herself to clean up the kitchen. Brod and I retreated from the table to his bedroom.

"I hate to say this, but I agree with your father," I said, settling into Brod's lower bunk.

Brod placed his hi-fi needle on the *1812 Overture's* opening groove. "He's too bitter...among other things." Brod climbed onto his drafting stool. "The way I look at it, if you kick a dog, it growls to protect itself. If you don't kick it, it doesn't growl. It's pretty basic, really."

"When I think of Hump, *I* feel more like the kicked dog."

"But, don't you see? *He's* reacting too."

"Reacting to *what*?"

Brod gave me his "You don't know?" look: eyes wide and bright, mouth slightly agape. "Old Man Lawless clubs him around pretty good."

"Really?" I couldn't imagine the bovine blob of a Constable doing anything more violent than sitting in Stone's Dairy on a career-long coffee break.

Brod nodded. "They live down the road a piece. Hump used to come by here on his bike, bruises all over him."

Sitting there like a wellfed thoroughbred, I felt pity for Hump. But wondered what I'd feel Monday if one of the Cool Hair Crew kicked me like a mutt.

|||||

Another kick in the chair from the hayseeds at the table behind me that fucking line scratched across my notebook gotta copy the whole page over to get the Extra Credit for college fucking bastards do it every class my gut that ache won't stop till I pound the bag in the cellar then my old lady screams "You're wrecking the friggin' house" but what can I do I mean my gut aches it fuckin hurts almost an ulcer at fifteen and what can I do but pound and pound and pound till it goes away what can I do but pound the next hayseed that kicks my chair except they're all four inches taller twenty pounds heavier and stronger from tossing bales of hay five hours a day on Lundberg's farm.

There it is again!

The penny loafer pulling back looks like Coop DeVille's. Good! I've got a

chance against him. He's big, but slow. I've run circles around him on the soccer field. Right in the middle of Mel Olds' mumbled monologue on the Crusades I get up, stamp to the desk behind me.

"How many times have I told you to stop kicking my chair?"

"You talk like you're *angry*....T-T-T-Twitch."

"And I'm *sick* of you calling me that!"

"*Suuurrrre*...T-T-T-Twitch." DeVille's voice surrounds me like the taunts of Hump's Cool Hair Chorus.

Whap!boom! My one-two rips into his face, sends his vaselined spicurl flapping. If he gets up, I'll kill him. The bastard! Why's he looking at me like that, the fucker! *Crunch!* Blood gushes from his nose, down his chin, over his cupped hands, then splatters the table. Let him get up now. I'll *really* finish him. He doesn't move.

While I return to my seat, Olds continues to drone obscure parallels between the Holy Roman Empire and his serving as a platoon sergeant at Anzio. Not one word about my punching DeVille.

After class, I knock on DiCristo's open door. "Yes, Edsel," he says, purple eyelids drooping above his dimpled grin.

"I-I just b-beat up B-Bobby DeVille. He...k-kicked my chair in History class again." Will DiCristo cipher me? Suspend me? Bring the hammer of authority down on me like the sinewy arm at the end of *Dragnet*? My shoulders cringe as I wait for his crushing response.

DiCristo's mouth falls open. His jaw swings to his upper lip, drops as if it's about to dig some choice word from deep in his memory, raises as if missing it, then sweeps down and rises again, the face around it puzzling over its empty sweeps. "I told you to come to *me* with these problems."

"I did. Ever since last year. And things just got worse." I tremble. Where's my punishment...for fighting, for insolence, for some transgression against the Just and Righteous Order of Things?

Seeing none coming, I suck an uneven breath and rush to my next class.

|||||

...AN UP-TO-THE-MINUTE MINDSCREEN THEATER BULLETIN...

Our Mindmagic Neurotransmitter Camera has followed Air Canada and Oriental Airways flights to their respective landings at JFK Airport. A tan

VW minivan rolls down the Air Canada passenger ramp, a blue Honda Accord down the Oriental Airways ramp. The cars cross the vast runways, stop in front of the "DEPARTURES" terminal. At the entrance, their fenders and doors clatter to the asphalt. Emerging from the hoods of the VW and the Honda, respectively, are Brod Allen and Dale Hunter. Brod wears a tweed jacket over a faded plaid shirt, Dale a pinstriped three-piece suit. Silver patches Brod's coarse brown hair. Dale's fine blond strands glow Grecian Formula luster. Behind them, the vehicles dissolve like pod husks from Invasion of the Body Snatchers. As they approach the entrance, their tentative glances search each other's faces, then brighten with the light of recognition. They shake hands firmly as the P.A. system announces: "Flight 1963 now leaving for Mannamok, Connecticut..."



Hump and the Cool Hair Crew called me "Tiger" for two days, then left me alone. With a one-two and a followup jab I'd accomplished everything DiCristo had tried to do in a year of answering my mother's raging telephone calls and lecturing pigheads in his office. My gut finally stopped aching. Because I had to throw those punches, though, I lost every bit of respect for the system that had petrified me into obedience.

The system had seemed frightening but fair during orientation, when DiCristo first lectured us eighth graders on what to expect in our High School Careers.

"Now that the Russians have launched Sputnik," he declaimed, "it is absolutely *imperative* that your generation restore America's superiority in the Space Race. It is absolutely *imperative* that your generation show those godless, atheistic communists that they cannot destroy our way of life in this, the greatest nation in the history of the world."

My mind's eye followed a Soviet missile as it arced over the North Pole, whistled over the school toward Washington, D.C., then blew the White House into dust rising on a mushroom cloud. *Imperative!* I agreed.

"To maintain the discipline necessary to make you into the best citizens possible, we employ a cipher system," DiCristo continued. "Cipherable offenses include talking in class, tardiness, profanity and fighting."

What if I get ciphered for asking to borrow a pencil? Sometimes I swear at recess. I've never been in much trouble. But here...I don't know.

“Nor do we tolerate Public Manifestation of Affection.”

What if I forget and hold a girlfriend’s hand? The forbidden thought swells a boner along my inner thigh. My wool dress pants rub over it. I want to move the boner, but what if somebody—maybe even Goodbrand—thinks I’m doing something perverted? The dull gourd sound of wool scratching across the boner—*fffffweeet! fffffweeet!*—can anybody else hear it?

“There will be no talking back to teachers. Insolence means *suspension*. Smoking on school grounds will result in *automatic suspension*. Drinking liquor on school grounds means *automatic expulsion*. If you receive eight ciphers, you will be suspended for a week. After twenty-four ciphers, you will be *expelled*.”

Can I possibly be a Good Citizen here?

“Fortunately, *most* of you are Good Citizens. In my twenty years as principal of this school, I have been forced to expel only one person.”

What if I’m the second?

The boner’s growing harder. And hotter. I cross right leg over left, left over right, back and forth. Nothing stops it, nothing eases it. No room to stretch, kids all around me on metal folding chairs. And the heat, the September heat! My glasses steam. My sweat streams over them. I wipe my face till my handkerchief drips. At last a comfortable position, legs raised high so cock touches thigh—no more woolrub—just the softness of flesh on flesh. Feels so good at last, too good to do anything but enjoy the relief of the gentle rubbing. From the doubledoor exit Goodbrand’s sentinel glance passes over me. Relax, you’re not doing anything wrong, you haven’t touched yourself. But the *ciphers!* Let the pressure grow, the pleasure flow—so good, so good...so *suddenly pulsating---POP! POP! POP!* the exquisite syncopations throb against my inner thigh. Oh, God! Comfort at last!

My hand brushes the wool. A patch of wet. *Creamy* wet. Am I blushing! Oh, shit! I look around. Nobody’s noticed. Or have they? But I feel weak. Dizzy. Feverish. DiCristo dismisses us. I approach Goodbrand’s towering masculinity. He can probably read the shame on my face. No doubt he’s thinking, The little creep’s already pissed his pants. “What’s the matter, Relic? You look white as a sheet.”

DiCristo’s lecture terrified me so badly I didn’t even consider that I was starting puberty. I thought I’d pissed my pants in terror. In retrospect, I didn’t. I’d *ejaculated* in terror.

But the reality of the cipher system didn't match DiCristo's rhetoric. Except for coming late to class in 9th grade I didn't get a cipher until my senior year. Meanwhile the jocks and hoods turned the johns into pits of nicotine and knuckles. After I hit DeVille in 10th grade I didn't want to be a Star Jock or Class President. I wanted to be something else.

I just didn't know what.

Not till my mother took me with her into Hartford for the January sales. While she shopped for shoes and dresses I spent an hour in the D. Funk Department Store book section looking for a novel for my next book report. My eyes scanned past *The Dharma Bums*, then jerked back. Hmm... Kerouac. Wasn't he the guy *Mad* magazine mentioned when it spoofed the Beatniks last spring? Hmm..."Reckless wanderers out to scale the heights of life...wine, weekend girls and oriental mysticism...sexual orgies...skyrocketing poetry-jazz bouts..." and the guy on the back, jeez, he looks like he might stop in at Grampa Relic's fishing shack after work, shoot the bull with my father and all the regulars there...factory workers, truck drivers, town drunks...I could see Kerouac in his plaid flannel shirt and five o'clock shadow clomping through the door.

"Hey, Jack!" my father says, stringing together the fishnets for shad season. "You gettin' much poontang these days?"

"Y'know, I was out to Mingo's the other night. This gal, built like a brick shithouse, she was, she comes up to me, sez..."

A regular guy. Maugham and Hemingway on TV, they looked so *eminent* with their white hair...sounded so *distinguished*, especially Maugham...that British accent, you know. But this guy, Kerouac...

This guy Kerouac turned me on to a world I never knew existed. True, he smoked pot...but he didn't become a marijuana addict, the way DiCristo said you did if you tried it even once. Kerouac never turned to robbery, never had the girl in his "yabyum' sexual orgy" sell her body to pay for his next fix...Maybe it wasn't so bad...And the spiritual stuff, Buddhism...okay, so he *wasn't* a Christian. At least he believed in *something*. That's what my mother and my father always said: *at least if you believe in something!* And hitch-hiking across the country! The people he wrote about seemed so accepting. Here was a world where I could be myself, stutter, twitches...everything. I didn't have to worry about whether the Russians would overtake us, whether I was doing my part as an American.

Fuck doing your part as an American! *Fuck* Sputnik! I was never that

good at science, only average. I want to thumb across the Iowa prairie, the Rocky Mountains, sleep in knapsacks on roadsides, have orgies...can't even get a date here...the jazz, only heard what Brod's played for me, but it sounds *wild!*...I could stay alone in the mountains and meditate if I wanted...Nobody would make fun of me. I'd live in Greenwich Village, Venice West, the Left Bank of Paris, Tangier...sit in coffeehouses or sidewalk cafes making highbrow conversation with brooding women who hung on my every declaration of existential despair...toke bones with them in shabby tenements bare lightbulbs blazing from wires hanging in the center of the room...rock them into writhing ecstasy on a stripped mattress with rips but no covers... that was the way to live, alright...barebones...*Fuck* "Keeping Up With The Joneses!" *Fuck* college! I'd go later, after I'd lived in all those cosmopolitan cities. Goddamn! Here was a life I could live without ever having to worry about presenting myself to a Dean of Admissions, a Corporation President, anybody who could decide I didn't fit into their respectable public life because my tongue locked or my head twitched.

Fuck the jocks! *Fuck* the hoods! *Fuck* the Ozzie and Harriet family dream! I don't want what they want. Not anymore. They don't want me, I don't want them. I don't want to be what they want to be. I don't want to be what they want me to be. I want to be...

A WRITER!

— *If you feel comfortable writing about the Reunion, go for it.*

— *That's the problem, hon. I don't know how comfortable I'd feel reuniting with people I don't particularly like.*

— *We can hold the space at the paper. Maybe your friends—*

— *Last I knew, Brod lived in Toronto, Dale lived in Bangkok. No way they'd come back here, not for this.*

— *25th anniversaries are special. Maybe they'll come back and you'll get to see how they've turned out.*

— *That might be worse than spending a night with strangers. Besides, if the Child is Father to the Man, then the Alternate Destinies I've imagined for them are pretty accurate—in spirit, if not fact.*

— *You always live inside your head.*

— *Inside my head, outside...It all comes down to perception. I dunno...If I went back...*

— *You could slow-dance all night with the woman who called you.*

— *I was just infatuated with her, hon. Obsessed with the Idea of her. There's no point in your even pretending to be jealous.*

— *Moi! Pretend! She was your Great Love...real or imagined. Why shouldn't I be jealous?*

— *Because she ended up marrying my Nemesis, one Harley Davidson Lawless, Junior, a.k.a. Hump.*

— *A born biker!*

— *Convertibles were more his speed, actually.*

— *Now I get it. The Illustrious Writer-Hero returns home to rescue his True Love from the Unholy Barbarian.*

— *Hardly. The way I see it, she's got him, and I've got you. And we've all got gravity.*

—So, go back and see where you fit in among the balding heads and sagging bellies.

—I never fit in back there. Not from Day One. I dunno. I guess we moved there looking to live out some kind of Ozzie and Harriet fantasy...

THE ADVENTURES OF OZZIE & HARRIET RELIC

by

Edsel Relic

as told to

A. Schrinck

(Exterior. A white, two-story house on a tree-lined street in a quiet neighborhood just up the hill from a seamy New Warsaw housing project. Interior. Living room. EDSEL, dressed in Beau Brummel sailor's suit, smiles at HARRIET, who sits next to him on a couch. On the TV, the perennially tipsy Dean Martin croons his hit song, "Memories Are Made of This.")

MEMORIES

HARRIET

What a wonderful comic book! You write such nice stories, honey.

EDSEL

Thank you, Mommy. I'm going to write comic books when I grow up.

HARRIET

My cute little Walt Disney! You're the best and smartest little boy in the whole wide world.

EDSEL

That's what I want to be too, when I grow up.

HARRIET

You will be, honey. You will be. Just like your daddy is the best man in the whole wide world. *(Door creaks open in kitchen.)* Here he is, now. Hello, honey.

OZZIE

Haa-LO! *(OZZIE wears dark green work clothes and a perpetual five o'clock shadow. EDSEL runs toward OZZIE, waving his comic book.)* What's that, bub?

EDSEL

My latest work, available at a comic book store in *your* neighborhood.

OZZIE

(Puzzled look.) Who's that supposed to be, bub?

EDSEL

Come on, Daddy! You're teasing me again! It's Mommy, you and me. Just one big, happy family!

OZZIE

(Phone rings.) I'll get it.

AUNT MINNIE

(Voice.) He's working late at the factory. If you can come upstairs now, I'll give you a ride you'll never forget. I want your big, stiff cock inside me, fucking me hard. *Real* hard. Just the thought of it makes my pussy

gush.

OZZIE

Your pipes are leaking?

MINNIE

All over the floor. I'm standing in a puddle of cunt juice, just waiting for you to ream me with that big hard prong of yours.

OZZIE

Minnie's got a problem with her plumbing. I'll be back in just a little while.

HARRIET

That's your Daddy, Edsel. Always willing to help. *(Fade out.)*

ARE MADE OF

(Interior. Classroom. OZZIE, HARRIET and EDSEL gather around MISS BRYANT'S desk.)

HARRIET

Ozzie and I talked about it, and we've decided Edsel shouldn't skip second grade. He's a little on the highstrung side...

OZZIE

Yeah, he's got those nervous mannerisms. Besides, he'll be too young for the third grade kids. We don't want him to have no problems. We just want him to grow up to be a nice, normal kid. Right, bub?

EDSEL

Right, Daddy. Just like you.

(Exterior. School. OZZIE, HARRIET and EDSEL on the sidewalk, moving away from the building.)

EDSEL

Does that mean I won't be smart anymore?

HARRIET

You'll be even smarter, once we move away from all those hoodlums in the project.

OZZIE

The country's the place to raise a nice, normal kid. (*Rubs EDSEL's hair.*)

THIS

(Interior. Second floor landing of EDSEL's home. EDSEL listens to the heavy moans and sighs, then knocks. From behind the door:)

OZZIE

Jesus Keeee-RIST!

MINNIE

I'll get rid of 'em. Just lay there.

(The door opens. AUNT MINNIE answers in black bikini briefs and fishnet stockings. One arm folds across her bare breasts.)

EDSEL

Hi, Aunt Minnie. Is Daddy there?

MINNIE

Ssshhh! He's lying down. He came up here to fix a pipe and he got tired. Go downstairs and let him rest.

(EDSEL looks past MINNIE. In the bedroom just off the kitchen, he sees OZZIE gasping for breath on the bed. OZZIE's stiff cock, bulging purple veins throbbing, swells till it fills EDSEL's field of vision. Then, the door

slams in his face.)

MEMORIES

(Interior. A café in New York's East Village. EDSEL, salt-and-pepper bearded, recites in a gravel-tinged voice while playing a walking acoustic bassline. On the red brick wall behind him, the house in West Mannamok rises on a vacant lot.)

a dream
built from the ground up
by the family team
Mommy and Daddy
every weekend
digging the foundation
hammering the frame
notching the knottypine walls
nailing the roof
& me
(bored two years of weekends)
cheerleading
the family dream

(Onscreen. Cut to living room of EDSEL's New Warsaw home. Dean Martin sings in the background.)

HARRIET

That's what he said. You were upstairs, sleeping. What were you *doing* up there, anyway?

OZZIE

I was tired, hon. Minnie said she needed help with the plumbing.

HARRIET

I'll bet she did, the friggin' hoor. I'll be glad when we get the hell out of this house—and get you the hell away from *her*.

ARE MADE OF

(Exterior. House in West Mannamok. Zoom to close-up. OZZIE hammers the last nail into the roof, climbs down the ladder, tells HARRIET:)

OZZIE

I don't love you no more. I want a divorce.

THIS

My first day at West Mannamok Elementary School, Mr. Goodbrand's raw voice resonated with passion as led us fourth graders through the Pledge of Allegiance. My cheeks chilled with goosebumps as I reflected on our great nation's Holy Trinity: God, Ike and Walt Disney. This was America, and I was living the American Dream.

Baseball was a cornerstone of the Dream, the game every nice, normal kid was supposed to enjoy. Playing my very first game at recess, a fly ball bounced in front of me, skipped between my hands and rolled to the leftfield fence. Next thing I knew, runners were rounding bases, fielders chasing the ball, kids charging at me. "Why'd you miss it, hey!" Pete Impala shoved me. I shoved him back. He hit me. My wild right caught his adam's apple. He went down, grabbing his throat. Mack Wyllis's head of red hair flamed toward me. My left twisted his chin. Hump Lawless chugged toward me, wearing the first engineer boots I'd ever seen. "YOU MADE US LOSE!" he roared just before he tackled me. Mr. Goodbrand pulled him off my chest.

"I raised Edsel not to fight," my mother told Mr. Goodbrand after school. "What kind of hooligans live in this town? His first day in school, he's fighting three bullies."

"Believe me, Mrs. Relic, I know Edsel didn't start it."

"They ruined his good clothes."

"He can wear jeans here. All the kids do."

"Jeans! In New Warsaw, all the kids *dressed up* for school."

"Life is different out here, Mrs. Relic."

It certainly was. While Mr. Goodbrand made Hump spend the next day's recess inside, I lost a bag of agates to Laura Dodge, a pudgy Marbles Wizard with a hustler's puckish grin. The following day, while Laura was winning another bag of agates from me, Hump pushed me. "Gimme those marbles. You made me stay inside."

"*You get away,*" Laura said. "*He's my boyfriend now.*"

Hump grabbed my shirtcollar. "I'll show you!"

Mr. Goodbrand came to my rescue, his college letter sweater bright as a knight's polished armor.

"I'll show you *good!*" Hump turned and rammed his head against the school's brick wall.

When I tried to make Laura like Mr. Goodbrand, I felt as though I was banging my own head against the wall. The neat way he fluttered his eyelids after turning up their undersides made her sick. Worse, when he marched through the girls' lavatory at the end of recess, shouting "Back to class," he embarrassed her. Worst of all, he only gave her B's and C's while he gave me straight A's and almost as many gold stars as David Wynn, the future valedictorian with the Toothpaste Ad grin. Mr. Goodbrand even wrote on my report card: "Edsel is sure to accomplish great things in life."

Mr. Goodbrand's praise made me want to be like him: strong enough to beat the entire class at tackle football singlehanded and handsome enough to make my mother say, "He could come riding up to me on a white horse anytime," even though my father sputtered when she did. Mr. Goodbrand's patriotism inspired me to lie awake at night dreading a Communist invasion or the inevitable nuclear attack we prepared for every morning by cringing under our desks with forearms protecting our eyes from the blast. Mr. Goodbrand's sense of fair play let me bat in our recess softball games whenever Hump, the perennial team captain, said I couldn't.

MEMORIES

“You goddamn fuckin’ riverrat no-good adulterer bastard! *Go!* Forget you ever *had* a wife. Forget you ever *had* a son.”

The front door slams.

Sobs from the bathroom. There’s my mother, sitting on the toilet, tears running down her face, drenching her clothes, glistening beads in her thick black triangle.

“Mommy, what’s an adulterer?”

“A man who does terrible things to women with his prick.”

“Is Daddy one?”

“That friggin no-good riverrat bastard! He’s no good just like all the other goddamn riverrat Relics. And I thought he was sweet and clean and fine.”

ARE

(echo music)

sweet

&

clean

&

fine

sweet

&

clean

&

fine

sweet

&

clean

&

fine

MADE

EDSEL

You're an adulterer.

OZZIE

You don't even know what that is, kiddo.

EDSEL

I know *you're* an adulterer. You and Aunt Minnie.

OZZIE

Minnie's more of a woman than your mother will ever be. (EDSEL *presses the back of his head against a ridge in the knottypine wall. He grimaces as he presses harder and harder.*) Stop that! You'll hurt yourself.

EDSEL

Not till *you* stop being an adulterer.

OZZIE

I don't love your mother no more. I want a divorce.

OF

night terrors voices screaming cast iron candleholders smashing the knottypine walls of the Ozzie and Harriet dream Goddamn fuckin' adulterer Don't you never hit me again You're lucky I don't kill you you goddamn fuckin' lowlife

THIS

nightly boner I get dreaming of Aunt Minnie's muscular calves wrapped around me as I go to sleep face buried in the softness of her breasts the shame of him the shame of me the shame of

MEMORIES

"Let me sleep with you tonight, honey."

"Sure, Mommy."

My Aunt Minnie boner shrinks. Better not think of her with Mommy in the bed, rocking womanly warmth against me until:

Kremlin footsteps in the hall, Kremlin flashlights in my eyes. I cower, pretend I'm asleep.

My father clicks off the flashlight, goes to the bedroom across the hall.

ARE

the country life days of solitary play go by slow no kids nearby too far to walk no one to talk with to play wiffle ball with so I play alone all day *Who's Who in Baseball* statistics *Baseball Digest* scouting reports "good hit no field" I batted .338 that year 26 homers 103 rbi no range at first base fumble ball over drainage wall but bottom of the 9th bases loaded 3-2 count a loooonnnng drive to deep center field deep into the bleachers at the end of the driveway 87 feet homer's 60 feet in wiffle ball "uppercut swing can't hit curve" struck out 128 times that year but a high drive deep to right field going going gone into the bleachers the raingutters stuck Audie Murphy *To Hell and Back* combat helmet Daddy's jigsaw carbines nail triggers get those krauts crawl through weeds bam bam bam Davey Crockett coonskin cap blazing trails oak hickory ash sumac the quarry across the road the Alamo remember the Alamo Santa Ana Jim Bowie sick in bed Crockett died fighting the country life days of adulterers Daddy and Aunt Minnie nearby too far to walk no one the fighting the names so I play solitary all day *Baseball Digest* scouting report lonely boners .259 that year 41 homers Aunt Minnie's beautiful no not beautiful dirty little ball over drainage wall

beautiful Aunt Minnie no no no dirty things adulterers a loooooong drive to more of a woman than wiffle ball riverrat like me Minnie is beautiful no no no a high drive into the bleachers solitary play days go by slow *To Hell and Back* combat helmet Daddy's an adulterer those krauts baseball statistics coonskin cap little boners dirty things men do remember the Alamo remember the KGB flashlights in bed mommy in bed too Crockett died fighting Minnie is beautiful no not bottom of the 9th bases loaded Daddy and Aunt Minnie is beautiful no not beautiful no no no no no

MADE

EDSEL

Can't we go talk to Dr. Sternberg again?

HARRIET

All that friggin' headshrinker does is take my money.

OF

broken china broken windows broken dreams broken broken If you don't stop fighting I'm going to kill myself Put that knife away Edsel go to your room

THIS

After the domestic shelling ended a lightness rose inside me. At times it felt like the post-coital comfort I came to appreciate years later. More often, it felt like the resignation an amputee must feel after losing a diseased and pain-filled limb.

Instead of a despised adulterer, my father became a friendly visitor who never criticized or scolded me. Every Saturday we rode to Grampa Relic's

fishing shack, where we hung out with a half-dozen unshaven working stiffs in a room tight with shadnets, hipboots and cigarette smoke. Then we'd go next door to the trailer my grandparents lived in, eat Grandma Relic's blueberry pie and watch wrestling matches on TV with her. As pleasant as those afternoons were, they never replaced the thrill I felt when my father helped me earn my Cub Scout badges in New Warsaw.

Whatever pleasure I felt during those Saturday parietals disappeared during the week, when I lived with a mother who'd changed drastically from the one who read me comic books and praised me endlessly:

HARRIET

I work all day, then I have to come home to *this* friggin' mess! You're a fuckin' slob! A no-good riverrat! Just like your goddamn old man! Just like all the friggin' Relics!

EDSEL

I'll go to my room and close the door. I don't want to get *your* family's germs.

HARRIET

(Slaps EDSEL.) YOU GODDAMN FUCKIN' NO-GOOD RIVERRAT BASTARD! DON'T TALK ABOUT MY FAMILY THAT WAY. *(Hits him in the face, back, ass and legs with a belt as she screams:)* YOU GODDAMN FUCKIN' HOOR! YOU'RE NO FUCKIN' GOOD! JUST LIKE YOUR FATHER! JUST LIKE ALL THOSE GODDAMN FUCKIN' NO-GOOD RIVERRAT BASTARD RELICS! *(Close-up. EDSEL's face is bruised, raised with welts and bleeding from the nose and lips. He dodges the belt that lashes at him like a whip. As he watches for the next blow, his head jerks to the right, a cowering exaggeration of a boxer's bob-and-weave. Cut to the bedroom, where HARRIET lies staring at the ceiling, her nostrils fluttering.)*

EDSEL

How come you beat me? Don't you love me?

HARRIET

(Coldly.) I don't love you. I never loved you.

(Cut to OZZIE's green '55 Ford station wagon. Then to interior.)

OZZIE

(Bites his fingernails as he drives.) You don't hit a kid that way. Not all over the back and face. Twice on the behind and that's enough. She keeps hittin' you all the time, somebody's gonna hafta call the State on her.

EDSEL

Not the State! That's for Bad People. Not my Mommy. (Bites skin off his fingertips.)

OZZIE

Remember, kiddo. You can *always* come live with me.

|||||

"You're *yellow*, Relic," Goodbrand told me when Laura complained I was beating her up on the schoolbus in sixth grade. "One day your mother will see you're not the little angel she thinks you are."

Goodbrand didn't want cowards on the Giants, the little league team he coached. When the Braves picked me, he pumped up the Giants in school with: "Relic thinks he's better than you 'cause he's a *Brave*. What do we do to Braves? We *scalp* 'em."

"Scalp the Brave! Scalp the Brave!" the kids on the team screamed. Hump, whose home runs cleared the playground fences two or three times a day, screamed the loudest.

One recess I stood in the on-deck circle, bickering with Laura over what bat I should use. A softball bounced off my head. "Keep your eye on the game," Goodbrand yelled from the pitcher's mound. When I turned to take the bat from Laura, another softball hit me. "Relic's a *Brave!*" Goodbrand crowed. "*All* the Braves play like him."

I went 0 for the season. The Braves fared only slightly better.

The next fall, winter and spring I hit softballs, hardballs and wiffle balls every day. While the boys played football I played softball with the girls, anything to make myself a better hitter. The first game of the next little league season I tripled off Hump, the Giants' best pitcher. I hit the ball far

enough for a homer, but stopped at every base; since the Giants had a good outfield, I didn't want to embarrass myself by running into an out. While I stood on the bag dusting myself off a steamfaced Goodbrand stamped to the pitcher's mound and motioned for Pete Impala, the first baseman, and Mack Wyllis, the third baseman, to join him. Mack slapped the ball into the pocket of his glove and hustled Giants-style toward the coach. As they stood with their backs to me, I just *knew* they were talking about how much I'd improved as a hitter. Next time they'd know better than to make fun of me. I could read their embarrassment on the face of Hump, the only player who glanced at me. When Mack returned to third, his face forcing a gummy grin, he said, "Take a lead, why doncha," in a tone friendlier than he'd ever used with me.

"Good idea." I'd fake a move toward home, to rattle Hump. Maybe I'd get a rally started, win the game in the first inning. I'd show them. They'd never make fun of *me* again for being a Brave. I tagged the bag. As I took my lead, I thought Mack gave me a comradely pat on the rump. But *hard!* I turned to tell him, "Not so rough." His toothswallowing gloat glowed a beacon's light over the ball in the webbing of his glove. Hump snickered. Goodbrand nodded from the bench. Every eye in the bleachers seemed to blaze my stupidity at me. My eyes watered when the ump screamed:

"YOU'RE OUT!"

MEMORIES MEMORIES MEMORIES

(playground music: antiphony)

***"Crazy Edsel goin'
to the headshrinker"***

I'm not crazy

***"You gotta be crazy
you twitch like that"***

I'm not crazy

***"Maybe he's got
St. Vitus Dance"***

***"Spaz Spaz
Edsel's a Spaz"***

I'M

***"Crazy Edsel
Crazy Edsel"***

***"Crazy Edsel
Crazy Edsel"***

NOT

***"Lookit him itch
Lookit him twitch"***

***"Just what I said
The kid's gotta be***

CRAZY

"CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY"

4:00 A.M. Just in from an Alphabet City gig. Stretched out, spacing out to TV reruns. A few more tokes and it's Z City. But...what's this? Art Baker, the ancient TV emcee, thrusts his finger through the tube, jabs at me straight from the black-and-white '50's and bellows the name of his old show:

“YOU ASKED FOR IT!”

Behind Baker's accusing finger a maroon Austin-Healey wheels onto a campus road. Ivy, brownstones, arches. Interesting...I can feel the engine revving in the pit of my gut. Must be the drive. Takes a while to unwind.

Superimposed: two naked bodies thrash on a mattress. Bill Evans' jazz etherea mists the nitty-gritty. Odd...I can feel the bump and grind—thought it was wheels. Am I ripped or what!

The Healey pulls into a “FACULTY PARKING ONLY” space. The camera zooms to its interior.

What's this! Dale pushing his way into *my* novel before *I'm* ready to bring him in? The nervy bastard! Pretty good shape for his age, though. Sand-blond hair graying at the temples still slants bangs across his forehead. Replacing his black hornrims with contacts has heightened the Asian cast of his almond lids. But the wrinkles under them...yeah, the Leathery Sophisticate look. He leans into the face of the aspiring poet next to him and frenches her.

Cut to classroom. The pages of student notebooks rustle the shuffle-rhythm of anticipation that Dale rides to the podium.

“Good morning, students, groupies, camp followers and junior wannabes ...hee hee. Today, my display of charisma centers on the topic:

CAN YOU TRUST THE NARRATOR?

Dale preens for the close-up: head tilted to the right, he flashes his lopsided grin, trademark of the poet renowned for his “sensitive, perceptive observations and keenly ironic commentaries on contemporary life” and holds up a copy of his latest book of poetry, *Can You Trust The Narrator?* Its gold National Book Award medallion shimmers in the lower right corner. Superimposed: a bookstore display rack blares “Can You Trust The Narrator?” thirty times.

“The subject of today’s discussion is performance poet and wannabe novelist Edsel Relic, pictured on the screen behind me...”

Close-up: me, wild-eyed and snarling, backing out the door after a bad gig at a biker bar: “*Jesus Christ!* At least *I’m* not a Heavy Metal asshole. Yeah? Well, *fuck you too!*”

Beercans chase me through the parking lot.

Dale: “How *vile!* Is this guy a *tweal*, or what?”

Typical Dale jive! He’d *never* show the gig I just got back from: a full house on East 3rd screaming for an encore, even though Slam Night’s hyper host likes to keep his show hopping.

A Boeing 747 soars across the screen. Sunspokes strike the silver, carom through a prism, then spear me through the tube. Interesting special effect...

Brod: (*voiceover*) “Interesting...How long have you been with the Embassy?”

Dale: (*voiceover*) “Fifteen years now. The money’s good, the Thai tickie even better. So, what sent *you* on this Flight to Nowhere?”

“Somebody called about the reunion and said Relic was coming.”

Dale arches his eyebrows. “And you thought one last look at the Basket Case would remind you how well off you are.”

“Really! He was in rough shape when he passed through Big Sur in ‘69.”

As Dale turns to the class the camera zooms to the airplane’s interior. From his seat in the plane Dale announces, “This is Brod Allen, Edsel’s Best Friend By Default in high school,” and turns to the seat next to him. “Brod, our viewing audience would like to know: Can you trust the narrator?”

Close-up. Brod’s graystreaked full beard, tattered tweed lapels. “I wouldn’t trust him. He’s taken his lumps, I admit. But individuals do have choices. Matter of fact, I told him in high school, ‘If you take the high road

through your difficulties, you'll become a charitable, gracious person. If you take the low road, you'll become a surly, foul-mouthed bastard.' His choice is obvious."

"Are you familiar with Relic's, uh, corpus?"

"I've heard it on college stations when I've been waiting for the Classical Music programs to start. Sometimes you can't escape unpleasant realities."

"And what, Brod, is your considered opinion of Relic's work?"

"Well, Dale...I imagine there are some people who would find it interesting—to a very limited extent. Speaking personally, though, I think his portrayals of exotic dancers and wasters degrade the human spirit rather than uplift it. And the negative attitudes...he really seems to grow worse with age."

The pompous ass!

Brod slips the passenger headphones over his ears. Strains of a *Brandenburg Concerto* fade to white noise through the phones, then segue to the scratching and screaming voices of a group therapy session. Onscreen Sid Silverman, my first friend in West Mannamok, nods his head of beige kinks—the same rhythmic gesture he used in high school to look like he's not on the outside looking in. It doesn't work with his group therapy session, either.

Dale (*from the podium*): "Sid Silverman..."

Silverman turns away from the group. "Bob Silverman, now."

"Yes, uh, Bob. Give us *your* opinion of Edsel Relic."

"Personally or professionally?"

"Both."

"Strictly Lunatic Fringe."

Onscreen: myself in memory's mirror. Silverman is staying overnight at my house. In bed, I cry for my dead grandmother. When she came home from the Lahey Clinic with uremia she tried to talk to me, but her mouth froze in a soundless scream of pain. She pressed a half-dollar into my palm, then died that night.

"I don't have any relatives," Silverman says. "They got killed in the Holocaust."

I didn't know what the Holocaust was then and didn't care that he was Jewish. We were best friends till I told him how terrible I felt because my mother beat me all the time, told me I was no good and that she never loved me.

“You’re just feeling sorry for yourself.”

WHAM! Black eye, bloody nose. Needless to say, my punches ended our friendship. Didn’t he understand the pain...my welts, my bruises, my mother not loving me? Well then: “Sid the Yid.”

But in eighth grade Hump and the Cool Hair Crew rolled the namecalling bandwagon at me: “Hey, T-T-T-Twitch! Your mother sucks off all the schoolbus drivers.”

Sid (now Bob): “You’ll just have to accept being a scapegoat—like I do.”

(—I’ve always regretted that one, wish I’d handled it better. But he’s a shrink now and he still can’t see past his own resentments. You’d think he’d learn from his patients how damaging and scandalous divorce was in the ‘50’s. Not to mention missing a retroactive diagnosis of my Tourette. This isn’t the guy I want to tell my troubles to, not at \$150 an hour—)

“When he was ten or eleven, Relic made a choice to live within the victim’s behavioral modality. It became, for him, a successful coping mechanism. Rather than grow into new behavior, he persisted in provoking responses that would insure his victimization.”

(—precisely why Sid—er, Bob—ran my free verse poem as a block of prose in the school newspaper and said “It read like prose to me” when I asked him why he did it —)

Dale: “And now, for another trip Down Memory Lane...”

Camera pans from West Mannamok Plaza...chain supermarket, pharmacy, Chinese takeout...parking lot jammed with Hondas, Toyotas, Hyundais and Jettas...to Main Street. A “HOMECOMING DAY” banner hangs from the trestle crossing Main, too dilapidated for trains to travel over. Recently-appointed Veterans Administration Director Goodbrand marches down the empty street in gyrene dress gear, between the high school turned Senior Citizens Center and Big Ed’s Soda Shop, boarded, graffitied and graying. Past the five-and-dime turned antique shop and the hardware store turned Vintage Clothing boutique. Goodbrand halts at the base of the trestle, glares through the screen:

“YOU’RE YELLOW, RELIC! MAYBE NOW YOUR MOTHER WILL SEE YOU’RE NOT THE LITTLE ANGEL SHE THINKS YOU ARE.”

(—the irony she always called me Devil “Devil like your old man that adulterer and that bitch Minnie” Devil Devil Devil till being good seemed impossible and Devil my only option—)

Cut to West Mannamok High, eighth grade. “So, Jeff was blowing into

my ear..." Laura Dodge says a row in front of me. Her baby fat has burned off her waist, hips and thighs, leaving a bulging bustline. She's dating juniors. Did I miss out!

Zoom to the apartment above Laura's Vintage Clothing. Screams. Crashes. Closeup: Laura looks at the screen as if at her bathroom mirror, eases a tentative, trembling hand over the gangrene-purple welt that fans from her half-shut left eye to her cut and swollen lip.

"Tell us, Laura. Can you trust the narrator?"

"Edsel! The way he used to hit me? Listen, you goddamn dickless wonder, I don't *have* low self-esteem. I don't *have* to put up with that kind of abuse."

Voice from rear: "I'm talkin' to you, *bitch!*"

"Gimme a minute, Mack."

"Are you going to the reunion?" Dale asks.

"Like *this!* Are you kidding! It's bad enough I've got to run the store. If you see Edsel, tell him I still remember beating him at marbles. That's probably why he didn't grow up with all of his. Excuse me. I've got to get back now."

She turns smack into the ham-sized fist hooking across the screen.

Dale addresses the class. "Relic couldn't even score during the Sexual Revolution. After awhile he finally figured out how to approach a girl. But once he got to first base, he couldn't figure out how to get to second. I remember when he came back from freshman year. I'm down at Potter McBride's, like that, and he walks in, so I say, 'Hey, Edsel. How's your *love life?*' Hee hee."

(—*as if the motherfucker had telepathy that summer Shannon my college love married John Lawrence how'd he know where to strike*—)

"In high school he was such a bore, going on about Bambi Belair. She looked okay, but her *mind*..." Flashes thumbs-down.

Onscreen: a yearbook photo of Bambi Belair, fetching in cheerleader's outfit. Zoom to hands removing the outfit from a dresser drawer. Offscreen: grunting noises. "Oh, shoot!" Onscreen: Bambi's green eyes stare flat as a landlocked sea at the camera: "I never thought of it as True Love. He was more like a creep. Every week, Monday or Tuesday, he'd call and ask me out for Friday or Saturday. He always called at the same time, too. Four o'clock in the *afternoon*. He just wouldn't take the hint."

(—*true true I was a creep in my obsession however glorious it seemed at*

the time remember writing this essay about the impending apocalypse and the fall of the patriarchal social order and rushing it to my teacher Mr. Flowers to make my dramatic delivery in her presence a week later Flowers says "I've read your essay and I really think you should make an appointment with Mr. Piazza the school social worker to discuss your anger"—)

Main Street. Goodbrand marches under the trestle, heads out of the ghost-town downtown.

Closeup. The Pink Elephant Bar & Grill, historic drinking hole of three generations of townies. A Harley and two luxury cars flank the glass entrance, dividing a row of rustbodied Ford and Chevy pickups. To the left of the Harley the Cadillac Coupe DeVille with custom plates reading "DEVILLE" angles across two spaces. The Buick LeSabre straddles the gravel to the right of the bike.

Interior. An autographed photo of Mickey Mantle during his Triple Crown season hangs above the liquor shelf. Voiceover: "So, you guys comin' to the Big Two-Five?"

Close-up: Hump, 250 pounds of belly nearly bursting through a sleeveless T-shirt, wipes the oak bar. The cobra tattoo on his left arm puffs its hood. A ponytail trails his overgrown crewcut.

Well, shag my ass! I never thought Hump would update his Elvis do.

Coop DeVille, perched importantly under his gray toupee, intones: "Of course I'm coming. It's a time when faded memories come back into focus, a time when—"

"When watching wrestling beats hell outa your cable show," Pete Impala quips from the next barstool. His Chicago chop has grown into a wavy pompadour, dyed black but gray at the roots. Low Rent Urbane, in silk sportsjacket, with briefcase.

Dale: "I hate to interrupt this emotionally-charged occasion, but I have to ask the three of you a question: Can you trust the narrator?"

"Trust the *what!*" rips through Hump's rustcolored beard.

"The narrator," DeVille says, knowledgeably.

"What's a freakin' narrator?" Hump asks.

"A guy who tells a story, hey."

"I hear stories alla time in this joint. Depends on who's doin' the tellin'." Hump wipes his hands, glances wistfully at the photo of Mantle.

"Edsel Relic," Dale says.

Pete looks into the camera. "I'd trust Relic."

"I wouldn't. He suckerpunched me."

"You're the one kicked his chair, Coop. Got him all fired up."

"You got Alzheimers, Pete? *You* kicked it, not me."

"C'mon, guys..." Hump looks through the screen at Dale. "Yeah, I think I could trust Relic. Bambi's tryin' to get him to come down for the reunion she says."

"She's trying to get him to write an article about it," Dale says.

Hump crosses his arms. The cobra's hood swells across the bicep. "In that case, I ain't trustin' the little twitch till I see what he writes about me."

Cut across Main to the twin red barns of Johnson Food & Grain. Paunchy old men with chickenskin noses toss burlap bags into their pickups, then roll toward the back roads.

Dale: "And let's not forget Bubba Jensen, himself..."

The class cheers the rustic New Englander who drives his pair of oxen from the grainery lot through the screen into the classroom. He wipes the sweat from the skin beneath the last filaments of his once-curly hair. His red plaid flannel shirttails point straight out from his billowing gut. "When I seen what I got myself into with her and that kid, I'd like to died. You couldn't do *nothin'* right for that woman. And *him!* Tell ya, I look at him and I'm glad *I* never had a kid. She used to call me 'Fat Boy' and he picked it right up, he did. I come home from the factory and it's 'Fat Boy this, Fat Boy that...' Kid useta listen to this weird music—noise, *I* call it—late at night. Ten o'clock I'd go to bed, hadda be up at five, and he'd be playin' the damn stuff. Sit on the porch to watch the news, you could hear it blastin' clear acrosst the house. Tell ya, I couldn't get no peace around him." He trudges offscreen, stepping in the flop his snorting oxen drop.

"And now, a word from Potter McBride."

McBride's walrus physique waddles down a fir-lined New Hampshire slope. "Weeeellll, he wasn't a *bad* writer," he says, his words blowing the hairs of his shaggy gray mustache. "But he didn't show nearly the promise you did, Dale. He just couldn't seem to find himself. He dressed like a college beatnik, talked this slang nobody could understand and kept chasing after cheerleaders who wouldn't give him a second look. When I started my Seminar in Contemporary Issues, he seemed to want to *joke* about literature, philosophy, the civil rights movement, the peace movement and topics of general interest rather than *discuss* them. Either that or he'd interject his personal life. Kind of like: 'The World is my Psychotherapist.'

Hawhawhawhaw!"

I've had it.

—SO I WAS FUCKED UP. SO I'M *STILL* FUCKED UP. BUT IF IT WASN'T FOR ME, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE EVEN STARTED THAT SEMINAR. YOU WOULDN'T HAVE *KNOWN* DALE.

But Home Movies don't listen and don't answer back.

Dale: "And let's put the lie to the stutter as long as we're at it."

Home Movies, they just keep on rollin':

A year after the divorce my mother starts dating Bubba. Sunday cookouts at his brother's. His nephew Earl and I play one-on-one baseball. "B-b-b-b-ball one," he says.

"That was no b-b-b-b-ball," I mimic. "It was right over the p-p-p-plate."

And the s-s-s-s-stutter started then. Age twelve. Didn't slow down till I went to Brooklyn. I still stutter, but not as badly. For thirty years I thought I was paying the price for making fun of him. Now, it seems more like echolalia, compulsive repetition of words. Who knows which way the nature-nurture spin really carried? Even Judeo-Christian guilt and retribution might be chemical imbalances. And my years of penitence pointless.

"And now, for the definitive word from Maury Steiner, Relic's head-shrinker in college..."

Zoom: Steiner, balding, bearded and horn-rimmed, sits behind his desk: "I'd say he was definitely a nut."

The classroom cracks up laughing.

"His life seemed to be a continuation of the adjustment problems that began with his parents' divorce and continued not just through high school, but all the way through college and no doubt into later life. During therapy he frequently expressed a strong need to reject you and Brod, but wasn't able to act on it because both of you had already rejected him."

—THAT'S A VIOLATION OF PATIENT CONFIDENTIALITY, STEINER. I COULD SUE YOUR ASS! FUCKHEADS LIKE YOU BLEW THE DIAGNOSIS! I MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN THE KID WHOSE FAMILY HID HIM IN THE BASEMENT ALL HIS FRIGGIN' LIFE! YOU SCHMUCK!

"Thank you, Dr. Steiner. And now, class, the evidence is in. And it's your verdict. Can you trust the narrator?"

"NO! NO! NO!"

—THERE'S TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY, DAMMIT! THIS IS JUST A PLOY TO DISCREDIT ME, SELL A FEW COPIES OF YOUR BOOK AND HIT

ON THE CHICKIES AFTER CLASS. I KNOW YOU. YOU'VE DONE THIS A MILLION TIMES BEFORE.

But Dale doesn't respond, the class doesn't respond. Even now, he rattles my cage. Here I am, standing alone at 5:00 A.M., raging at my memory.

"I'm having an autograph party at the college bookstore. You're all invited, of course."

As he leaves, the class runs after him.

His book shines close-up on the screen:

CAN YOU TRUST THE NARRATOR?

—You sound like you're having a bar-room brawl in there!

—Look. I've got a right to react. A writer has to control his material—even if it means going out of control to wage war with his own mind. Sure, I ranted and raved. So what! Elvis Presley would've shot the damn tube. Hunter Thompson, too.

—I don't care who controls what. I just want to go back to sleep.

—Fine. Dale made his fucking point. I'm not Mr. Charm or Mr. Warmth. And there are reasons why people don't trust my reactions even though I'm basically honest one of them being that I'm an exceptionally fast talker even when my stutter's pumping because like right now for example I'm just trying to get all these ideas out before I lose track of them or bury them under all the detritus of accumulated information in my head and some people automatically assume a fast talker wants to run one past them when all I'm trying to do is get my point across while all these other points are whizzing past me in rushes that may or may not—

—Your mind is racing again. This reunion business is really stressing you out. Maybe you should try another medication.

Alright, *alright!* I'm cool now. In the interest of Domestic Harmony. But I've still got another point to prove. Or disprove. I can't tell my story accurately, no matter what I do. Every new experience, every repetition of old experience for that matter, changes you. Changes me. Like adding a new atom of carbon onto a carbon chain changes the molecule. Everything I've lived through changes the way I see, hear and tell this story.

Want to know what I think about the tired old question Dale dragged out of the baccalaureate mill? Trust me, don't trust me. It's your call.
But it's my life. And my story.

Since it is *my* story...ahem...Dale will just have to wait a little longer to enter. In fiction as in reality his presence won't achieve its maximum catalytic effect until

(trumpet flourish)

BROD AND EASEL ANSWER THE IMPONDERABLE QUESTIONS

WHAT IS TIME? came up because Brod and I had so much of it to spend with so little to do. While the jocks and hoods were making out in their hot Fords and Chevies, Brod and I were spending our afternoons and evenings discussing art, literature, music, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, existentialism, any subject that came to mind. We were living the Life of the Mind because we couldn't find a way to live the Life of the Body. Every moment I spent longing for Bambi Belair's early prototypes seemed to last an eternity—for Brod as well as for me. When my months of incessant pining finally shrank his patient face to a pout, Brod tried changing the subject by elevating the level of discourse: "What if The Moment and Eternity were really the same thing?"

"We'd have to reshape our concept of Time. And if I could just have that One Eternal Moment with Felicia Ford..."

"You *artistes* are so far up in the clouds, I'll bet you don't even know what time it is," Brod's brother scoffed as he got up from the table to rinse his dinner plate.

"Think of Sex as Time, and Time as the connection of new circuits," I whipped back, straight from Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park*.

"If *your* circuits were wired better, you wouldn't be sitting here all night

talking about Time.” An impish grin widened Garrett’s eskimo-round face. After wiping his hands with the kitchen towel, he pretended to push it into Brod’s face. Brod turned away, tightlipped.

While I struggled to push a retort past my tongue Brod sniffed the dignity back to his mottled face. “I wonder just how we can define what Time really is,” he said.

“The Past and the Future seem fixed,” I offered. “But the Present is always past by the time we can identify it.”

“What if we looked at Time as a continuum, with the Past and the Future *all* contained in the Present?”

“Then, everything we have been and will be would be with us in every passing moment,” I said.

“Yet the Present would always be in flux.”

“If the two of you spend your present and future gabbing about Time, you’ll never get any flux,” Garret said, tossing on his Varsity sweater.

While we groaned he left to pick up his date.

WHAT IS LOVE? rose like a teenager’s hard-on when Brod struggled through a crush on Veronica Bonneville, a freshman on the verge of putting out for Mack Wyllis. “Even if she and I never go out, I wouldn’t want to see her get knocked up,” Brod said. “Maybe I’ll write her a letter telling her how I feel.”

Wise in the ways of unrequited love, I warned him not to put his feelings in writing. But Brod had a mind of his own—and guts that bled melodrama and lurid detail through his antique fountain pen. Touched by his concern, Veronica told him to mind his own goddamn business, Mack threatened to beat the living shit out of him, and the other forty-two kids who read his letter laughed him off the schoolbus.

My approach to the Imponderable Question was more existential. Reading Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro” and “The Time of Her Time” prepared me to lift myself by my sexual bootstraps to heightened awareness. I thumbed a ride to Big Ed’s Soda Shop across from the high school. Maybe Felicia Ford would be there and the college guys who hovered around her on summer break wouldn’t be.

The place is dead except for Ed and me. So I play the pinball machines with the urgency of a hipster in the Times Square neon night, rack up five free games in the face of the Existential Void. Enough to keep me enter-

tained till Felicia floats in on her golden beam of eternal beauty or the carpool drops off my mother across the street from the soda shop. But Ed tells me to stop playing, there's not enough business to keep him open.

There's nothing for me to do till my mother arrives except sit on the highschool lawn and bone up on "The White Negro." It's the *only* thing to do. In an age fraught with the imminent threat of nuclear destruction, especially an age spent in the endless waiting so enervating to the human sensibility, the quest for experience acquires a desperate intensity, an urge to affirm simultaneously the religious and sexual unions that enable one to transcend the existential void of human alienation. In a cultural wasteland of billboards and Seconal, the sense of sex—the drive toward ecstatic union with reality—heightens the white negro's keen sensibilities with every tenth-grade girl that passes him on the street. To assert his virility in the context of his soul-sapping social surroundings, the hipster must retain his cool stance through whatever measures he deems necessary, e.g., wearing shades as he makes his step toward his manly conquest of the moment.

"Hey, baby," he says, his hoarse whisper muting the intensity of his passion in the face of the Void.

"Hay is for horses," Felicia says without stopping.

WHERE ARE OUR DARING YOUNG DREAMERS? Mr. Stryker asked his tenth grade English class. His eyes shifted from brown to hazel to green as they searched the blank faces behind the desks, then settled into a gray colloidal gaze. I didn't dare answer. Neither did Brod. After class I inched up to Stryker, asked if he'd read the opening 57 pages of my first novel. His yes triggered a weeklong paroxysm of anxiety. Would he tell me to forget my writer's dream and join the soccer team? I worried, especially when he sat at the desk next to mine, glancing down at my manuscript then up at me, his eyes glowing in tandem with a mellow grin. "I think it's *great*," he said, his voice creaking his last word like a rusty hinge at the back of his throat. "It's obvious that you're in love with language, even *drunk* on it. But you should work on making your internal and external viewpoints come together."

I explained that I was trying to exercise the objectivity I'd developed after Brod had said, "In order to write, I think a person would have to become ruthlessly objective" while he was painting the last splashes on "Ingram's Falls in Spring." I'd dropped my copy of *You Can't Go Home*

Again on the grass next to his paintjars, stepped forward to feel the thaw-thick spray against my face and concentrated on being objective until I seemed to observe myself in my anguish, joy, ecstasy, and despair from a spot a foot above and six inches behind my left shoulder.

Stryker nodded. "It's nice to know a few of my students have inquiring minds," he said. "What you wrote is a good try, it's really great." He tapped the manuscript. "But it does need a little more work."

"Do you mean...Do you think I have *potential*?"

Stryker stared at me, his eyes a burning beacon. "If you're sincere in this, and I think you are, I would encourage you to pursue this, even if it means foregoing your formal education."

Alright! I had an Authoritative Opinion. Someday I'd go to college, but writing was more important.

"Your education is more important," my father insisted. "Listen, bub. I had to quit school and go to work shining shoes during the Depression. Get that education. Nobody can take it away from you."

"If you want to, go ahead," my mother said flatly, through the fatigue that had replaced her flaring rage at my father and anybody in her household who remotely resembled him.

"There probably are things you need to learn that you won't learn in school," Brod said, painting the final mist on his waterfall canvas.

IS THERE ONE TRUE RELIGION? disconcerted Brod and me a week after 10th grade ended, when we went to visit Stryker at his apartment. Now that summer was here, I had more time to concentrate on writing. After 75 pages my second first novel read like a "Joycean *tour de force*" (as I imagined the *New York Times Book Review* would describe it) that changed styles with each book I read. I could hardly wait to hand Mr. Stryker my truly Protean achievement.

But Literature in general and my novel in particular seemed to occupy an insignificant space in the Grand Scheme of the Universe settling into place behind Stryker's restless eyes. "I've got to take care of some personal business before I read anything," he said, stretching his slender arms across the back of his blue velour sofa. "I've never had a week like this before."

Neither had I. While I was still getting used to the grown-up feeling of having a teacher for a friend and seeing him lounging at home in T-shirt and gray chinos, he was leaving the Catholic Church to become a Jehovah's

Witness. "It's really *great*," he said. "The people who sell *the Watchtower* know the scriptures better than the priests who taught me in the seminary. In fact, there are matters of translation that might interest you as a writer. Did you know that Christ was crucified on a tree, not a cross?"

No, I didn't. Nor did I know about the twenty-three concubines one pope kept in the Vatican.

Brod and I left Stryker's house, our religious beliefs shaken.

"It—It's hard to imagine someone actually *abandoning* Catholicism," Brod said, his lips pursing then pushing as if trying to articulate an elusive afterthought. "Even if there *was* no Hell, no Purgatory, no excommunication...I don't know *what* my father would do to me if I did."

"It's scary. I mean, all our life we've been taught 'These are The Answers' and now, now it's like *none* of them seem true." What I had considered a Bogus Faith had become a True Faith for Stryker, who impressed me as a sensible man with an inquiring mind. After all, he liked my writing.

We spent the rest of that July afternoon following the summerdry stream near Brod's house through brush and swamp till we found ourselves standing at the top of Ingram's Falls, watching the water trickle over the ledge to spatter the rocks below us. In some unspoken way we'd expected some answers to our agonized what-ifs to splash us like the May spray. But the answers flowed thin as the water, and to no crashing conclusion.

When I got home I looked into my mother's darkened bedroom, hoping she could give light to my shaken faith. Instead she said with weary indifference, "You've always been like an atheist."

Me, an atheist! I didn't like the interminable sermons, the wool itch of my dress trousers, the way she and Bubba repented in church, then broke commandments in the parking lot. But that didn't make me an *atheist*. I used to light the altar candles. Holy holy holy! I wanted to marry a Lutheran girl. My mother's words slapped me the way they did when she told me, "I don't love you, I never loved you," the way she did at least once a week during the year after she and my father split. If your mother doubts you, who will believe in you? Who gives me answers? What do I choose?

"I have seen him eat o' the honey-comb
sin' they nailed him to the tree."

Ezra Pound my priest

writing

my god

DOES GOD EXIST? gushed out of our anguished questioning. Sensing the historical importance of our discussions, I brought my two-track tape recorder to Brod's.

|||||

Brod: Yes, but not as the white-haired patriarch we've been taught to think of. If we look at the forces that create order and harmony in the universe, then we might get a better idea of what God really is.

Edsel: Order and harmony don't prove God exists.

Brod: Of course they do. Look at Nature, the way the seasons move in cycles, the earth and moon in their orbits—

Edsel: Accidents of Chance. The universe is so big, anything could happen once, twice, even more.

|||||

Brod: When I saw Stryker downtown yesterday, I told him I was thinking God and Nature are one. "Oh, you're a pantheist," he said. I was crushed. I really thought I'd discovered something new.

|||||

Brod: I wonder what would happen if you thought about God while you masturbated.

Edsel: A Cosmic Jerkoff!

MIND OR BODY? led to **REASON OR INSTINCT?**

Brod: The Life of the Mind is supreme. Think of the powers of the Mind, powers which we mere humans have yet to harness.

Edsel: We're animals before we're anything else. Our brains are biological

entities. Maybe some of us can use our brains to alter our bodily chemistry—rushes of adrenalin, I don't know—so we could move things with what we call our Mind.

Brod: It can't be. We're rational beings. The Mind is Supreme.

Edsel: Reason is a tool, and most of us hardly ever use it anyway. Man is an animal. An *irrational* animal.

Brod: He *can't* be. The Mind is *Supreme*.

Edsel: Is either one of us being rational?

Brod: Let's change the subject to

WHAT IS ART? To start, Brod reads from his journal: "...I would like to paint something as powerful as the waves in the painting in the room where I practice piano. To express the transcendent beauty and power of Nature is my heart-felt wish. I would painstakingly capture the foam caps on every crest of every wave, the curve of every crest as it is about to break with the swollen waters—a scene so real that the water will literally crash off the canvas."

"I think art should *extend* reality, give you new insights into it," I said when Brod finished reading. "Like the excerpts from *Naked Lunch* in *Big Table* and the *Evergreen Review*. I see the writer's role as Thinking the Unthinkable in order to explore new possibilities of reality." Looking through his prism of personal trauma Burroughs had fused surrealism and satire into a vision that elevated the comic to the cosmic. His routines made me laugh myself into a near-mystical state (or maybe just oxygen deprivation). "In fact, Burroughs' fold-in technique might be a promising means to extending reality," I say, even though I've never been able to find examples of it in the literary magazines yet.

Brod raises his eyebrows to preface a respectful difference of opinion. "Without reading any of it, I'd have to say it sounds more like a party game than literature."

"But you can use to it explore the *possibilities* of reality, instead of just transcribing what's on the surface," I insist.

"I suppose it might have *some* potential. I read that the Dadaists tried to do something like that in France. But I really prefer to read literature that probes the minds and souls of its characters in meaningful ways."

I was going to probe my own mind and soul in meaningful ways. Think the Unthinkable. Rub bellies with Sex and Death on the fringes of the under-

world. “Steep myself in vice,” as Burroughs did—as soon as I found enough vice to steep myself in. For the time being, I’d just steep myself in *Junkie* and what I could find of *Naked Lunch* in the little magazines.

Naked Lunch was banned in the United States, just as I imagined my own books would be banned—but finally presented to an audience whose appreciation would reward my years of anguish, struggle and poverty by my twenty-fifth birthday. Confident that no customs agent would ever *think* a person from a hick town like West Mannamok would try to smuggle it in I ordered *Naked Lunch* from Olympia Press in Paris. Every day of the summer before senior year I checked my mailbox. The longer I waited the more I worried that some incredibly savvy customs agent had caught on:

Sirens, whirling red lights. As I’m dragged in handcuffs through a news-reel headline

CUSTOMS CRACKS TEENAGE DOPE-SEX-SMUGGLING RING

and tossed into the back of a Police Cruiser, stern and startled voices surround me.

Mother: “To think my own flesh and blood would do something like that!”

DiCristo: “We will make an example of this depraved young man.”

Constable Lawless: (*to Customs agent*) “Uh, you mind if I take a gander at the good parts?”

The book never arrived. When Customs lifted the ban four months later I bought the Grove Press edition.

INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIETY, like all the other Imponderable Questions, eventually carried into the classroom. In junior year I raised it when I asked Mr. Flowers, who replaced the fired Mr. Stryker, why the school encouraged us to read Thoreau’s “Essay on Civil Disobedience” but discouraged us from practicing civil disobedience against unjust laws supporting racial segregation in the South.

“If you did, you’d have anarchy,” he said.

“That’s what Thoreau wanted. He was an Anarchist.”

“We live in a democracy. Our right to vote gives us the power to elect people who will change unjust laws. How do you feel about the right to vote? Students?”

Laura Dodge: “The right to vote is the most important right we have.”

Bambi Belair: "If you don't vote, you don't get any say in what happens."

Edsel Relic: "If you vote, you have to accept what either party gives you. If you don't vote, you withhold your consent to be governed by either party."

Flowers' milkdud eyes rolled toward the ceiling. "Well, Edsel, that certainly is a *different* viewpoint."

"It's just an extension of the logic of the Declaration of Independence."

WHAT IS EXPERIENCE? New York the Village books records the Saturday round-trip special home at ten the streets of my future NYU girls in Washington Square tight jeans long straight hair Norman Mailer orgasms like "The Time of her Time" Mailer's pad on Bleecker gray slate facade walking by hoping The Man Himself would walk out spade hipsters slouching on Southwest Row benches Junkies Row berets and T-shirts hoarse whispers "Blasé man" spade cat walks into 8th Street Bookshop "Man I done my good deed for the day" Brod and I repeat the phrase emulate hoarse whisper hipster half-mumble for months after Monk side at Record Hunter 5th Avenue sounds like noise even with Coltrane on it but Mailer says Monk is Hip and Brubeck Square Grand Central Bookstore "BANNED" selections from all the writers I like and some new ones I'll be banned someday banned to the *New York Times* bestseller list catch the train home back by ten study faces as we walk by the windows bland face beercan on sill "Looks like he had a good time at Madison Square Garden" the face snaps into a sneer a switchblade slices the air he shoves the shiv against the window we run past the next three cars board looking back smoking car smoke our pipes read our new books home by ten alive

so

we can make a trip the following week to dig jazz at the Subterranean Coffeehouse. With Brod's new driver's license and his mother's old VW we headed to Hartford, flaunting the berets and the pipes we'd bought in the City.

"Before we go to the Subterranean, let me show you where I go when my mother brings me here shopping," I said over Cantonese combination platters while looking out Dim Luk's second-floor window at the Thursday night shoppers, insurance clerks with long hair and legs flickering through the streetlights and glittering fronts of Asylum Street's luggage stores, jewelry stores, five-and-dimes and department stores. After dinner I brought Brod to the Public Library's golden glow where I'd experienced the

glory of books stack after stack after stack and the thrill of going of knowing I'd be on those shelves some year, past the Main Street Arcade's pinball pings and rings and stubblefaced nightpeople slumped under the neon foreboding forbidden thrills, past the Wadsworth Atheneum where Hartford Art School students—"my mother calls them beatniks"—sat on the lawn all day. At a gray monolith we stepped into a basement bookstore, walls of Mailer, Miller, Algren and Kerouac. I left with *Sunday After the War*, *Barbary Shore*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

"That's one thing I've never understood," Brod said, watching me lug the books. "You read so obsessively. Sid is so much more relaxed about it. If he sees Tolstoy, he says 'Hey, I think I'll read it.'"

"Silverman doesn't want to be a writer," I said.

"I don't know that it's a good thing to pursue anything so single-mindedly."

"It has its drawbacks. Like, these books weigh, uh, sixteen tons and what do I get?"

A groan from Brod as we walk up Trumbull Street to the Subterranean Coffee House, shivering past the Hotel Claret advertising ROOMS \$9 WEEK in its dim lobby. Unshaven middle-aged men stagger through the door onto the street ahead of us, their ragged overcoats wrapped tight against the raw February air.

At the Subterranean, a storefront with a purple velvet curtain drawn behind a shoulder-high tavern window and a hand-printed JAZZ TONIGHT sign, I pay my dollar and take my first step into the nightlife. Cats and chicks sit around nailbarrels covered with red-and-white-checked tablecloths or with their legs crossed on cushions tossed on the grungy hardwood, nodding to the band's loping groove.

The lanky tenorman looks hip in an intellectual way: blond bangs sweeping across the high plain of forehead toward Buddy Holly hornrims, butt-down Ivy League pinstripes and corduroy pants. He twists his tenor from side to side, bending his notes with body english as his biting Coltrane licks breathe Stan Getz's airy tone. Eyes closed, I ride his solo flights on "Bye Bye Blackbird," "Green Dolphin Street" and other tunes Trane recorded with Miles. When the band goes on break I say to Brod, "This is a gas!"

Brod nods, a gesture more of assessment than agreement. "It's a lot more exciting in person than on record, I think." But he doesn't sound excited.

Not the way I am. I was hoping he'd lose himself in the music, the way I do. Become a convert.

The saxophone player saunters past our table. I catch his elbow. "You sound groovy, man."

"Thanks," he says. "I'm just trying to make the changes. I caught Trane last night at Birdland and haven't, uh, slept yet."

"Trane is a gas, man." I'm just beginning to surrender my ego to the sheets of sound that Trane builds to ecstatic shrieks.

"Have you heard *My Favorite Things*?"

"Not yet."

"Get it. It's fan-tas-tic! I'm going down to hear him again tomorrow."

"You're old enough to get in, man. I'm only sixteen."

He flashes me a sly grin, a slight gap between his front teeth. "Listen. I have to see this chick over here. I'll talk to you later."

When Brod and I leave during the next set, he returns my nod.

(Alright, Dale. Since you've already pushed your way into my story, you can give us your answer to the Imponderable Question under discussion.)

A month into my Senior year, my parents moved from Wethersfield to West Mannamok. It didn't take more than a day or two riding this boxy orange schoolbus driven by this squeaky-voiced Tobacco Roader for me to figure out I'd taken a big step down. Unlike some people I know, though, I make the best of a situation instead of bitching and moaning about it.

There was absolutely no comparison between Impala and DeVille and my friends in back in Wethersfield, but Impala and DeVille got invited to all the parties in town and got me good prices on beer. I really had to bug them to get *good* beer, not the bottom-shelf stuff they got loaded on. Once they tried my Lowenbrau, though, I didn't have to insist.

If Impala and DeVille were the Cool Guys in the high school, Relic and Allen were the Geeks. Allen didn't play the part so much. He just looked studious and dull, with those checkered shirts and chino pants. But Relic was a one-man sideshow, even though he dressed about the same way Brod did. He was short, about five-six or seven, a string of bones rattling between an anxiety attack and a nervous breakdown. When he walked he flapped his elbows like a chicken without feathers. About the only saving grace he had was that in spite of himself you got the idea he might be

intelligent. He always carried three or four books under his arm: Kerouac, Mailer, Ginsberg—writers nobody else in the school even knew about, maybe not even the town. My friends in Wethersfield had read some of the same books, so I knew he had *something* going for him. Relic was always looking for attention, doing and saying things to try to make you laugh but getting under your skin instead. His own skin was thinner than the onion paper I used to type my poems on. Impala told me Relic was fair game till he suckerpunched DeVille. A year or so before I moved to town, there were fifty or sixty kids who called him names, took his school books out of his locker and hid them in the town library, put ketchup-stained toilet paper that looked like sanitary napkins in his sandwiches, things like that. If he'd had a sense of humor about it, he might've been popular the way he wanted to be. Instead, he got so agitated they just *had* to do it again and again. I never saw it, myself. The hazing had stopped by the time I moved there. DeVille told me Relic couldn't take a joke. Impala said DeVille had the bloody nose to prove it.

The first time I saw Relic, I had this funny feeling that I knew him from somewhere. I wondered how smashed I must've been to make a scene with a geek like him on it. Too smashed to remember, not smashed enough to forget. Meanwhile, Relic kept looking at me as if he knew me from somewhere, too.

We finally figured it out after about two months. He'd stretched himself across one of the empty seats near the back of the bus, where I used to sit and smoke with DeVille and Impala. Relic had his nose in some book, one of Nelson Algren's I think, but kept looking up while we were talking. DeVille handed me my copy of Coltrane's *My Favorite Things* LP. "If this was American Bandstand, you'd be embarrassed by the way we'd score it. Pete and I asked each other, now let me ask you: Where's the *beat*? Where's the *melody*?"

"On the record." With a quick laugh I flashed the cover at them, then tucked it under Goffman's *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* and Cummings' *100 poems*, the books I was reading in those days.

Relic kept looking at me through a screen of aromatic pipe tobacco, his mouth gaping as if he wanted to say something.

Impala squinted through his Lucky Strike haze. "*I* couldn't find it, hey."

"You just have to listen," Relic said to Impala, but looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Only *you* could find it, Relic,” Impala said.

Relic winced as if somebody had raked a razor across his face. What did he expect? We weren’t even talking to him. If Relic had had the patience to wait, some people might have let him in.

Impala ran his hand over the brush top of his Chicago chop, then angled his face toward DeVille’s carefully-greased triangle of hair. “So anyways, Dale and me, we were smashed, hey...”

“And Impala, he’s taking the curve at a hundred and *ten*, like that,” I said, “and I’m barfing out the window when this truck...”

Looking back on it, I can see Relic was desperate to meet people who had something in common with him. But I was too busy trying to get myself into a scene I didn’t really fit into, myself. I wasn’t a hayseed wearing hay-baling flannel shirts and worn jeans. Tufts was where my father and grandfather went to school, and I was getting ready to go there by wearing the bangs that were a college style back then. The Buddy Holly glasses looked cooler than Edsel’s twealy tortoise shells. I liked to wear button-down shirts with stripes to make my six-one look even taller. My friends—the Seers—taught me that people pay more attention to you if you’re tall. But I played the townie part, talking about booze and cars and parties until Impala and DeVille got off the bus a stop ahead of me.

While we were sitting alone in the back, Relic chewed on his lips, screwed his face into a position that looked so strained I almost grimaced in sympathy, then asked in this quivering tone, “You play tenor, don’t you?”

I puffed my Dunhill and nodded. What was he leading up to?

“Last winter at the Downstairs, we talked about *My Favorite Things*.”

It took me a moment, but I remembered. What the hell, I thought. The kid digs sounds. So I invited him to get off the bus with me, dig some Trane and Miles sides at my place—and try my cavendish. Edsel was smoking cherry-flavored tobacco in a five-dollar British Briar! The boy needed an education.

“The chemicals in those aromatic tobaccos will sour your bowl,” I said, sliding my leather pouch across the stereo table that separated the chairs in my bedroom. After receiving my, uh, crash course in quality pipes and tobaccos, he started telling me nonstop about his writing. When I told him I wrote poetry, he asked to see some of it. Naturally, I obliged him. At the time, cummings was a major influence on my work. My lines broke mid-word, clever quips peeking around unclosed parentheses to tease the reader.

“Good stuff, Dale!”

I nodded. I thought so, myself.

“Did you win a Scholastic Writing Award?”

“No, uh, First Prize always goes to the chicks who write ‘Ode To My Ironing Board.’” I laughed so hard at that line I had to hold my ribs together.

“I was so *pissed*. My story only got a fucking Honorable Mention.”

“I saw it in last week’s paper. Congratulations, anyway.”

“Thanks. I didn’t even know you knew my name.”

“I’ve heard about you and Allen. I was just waiting for the right, uh, situation.” Actually, I wasn’t.

“Here it is,” he said, suddenly cocky. “Y’know, you’re slumming when you go hang out with those yokels.”

“But they get me good prices on beer.” I flashed my old camp trademark “hee hee” before I continued. “Besides, I hear you and Allen...you’ve got it up here”—I tapped my temple—“but you just don’t *swing*.”

Immediately Relic got defensive. “There’s nothing to swing with. No jazz, no pot, no chicks...”

“There’s plenty of that where I used to live.” I told him about the Seers, my friends from Wethersfield who were writers, musicians and actors. At the time, most of the older Seers were living in the Village. They smoked pot, went to jazz clubs, worked Manpower—the Village life Relic drooled over as he told me how he and Brod started doing day trips down there in 10th grade to buy books, records and pipes. One Seer, Black, was a talented actor who dropped out of Emerson College when two hipsters on the faculty there shocked him into the Brave New World of Bohemia. Oink, a quiet sort with filmstar looks, was another Seer. He dropped out of Brown University to write a novel. Dauphin wrote poetry like Charles Baudelaire and dropped out of Wesleyan. He lived with Black and Oink in the Village until he flipped out. Renwick Porsche, the drummer in our band at the Subterranean, had dropped out of Trinity College and gone to Paris.

“Brod’s brother just dropped out of college and went to France.”

“Wick is over there hanging out with, uh, William Burroughs.” My nod chalked up a point. Anybody could go to Europe. Garrett Allen’s college-boy search for something more fulfilling than an engineering degree hardly compared to a cat who was making Burroughs’ scene. I wanted Relic to understand that the Seers weren’t pariahs, like him and Brod:

Everybody is trying	T	to get in with
They all know	H	are more advanced
more cultured	E	more sophisticated
more sensitive	S	more intelligent
better lovers	E	have what everyone
else wants	E	but what
have doesn't	R	rub off
Hee hee	S	Hee hee

“In fact, we’re having a session in Wethersfield Friday night. Why don’t you, uh, give me a ride and dig some sounds?”

It was a simple invitation. But Relic got uptight about getting the car from his mother, whining out all kinds of excuses why he might not be able to get it.

“If you can make it, fine,” I said. “It’s just a session.” At the time, I disdained having a driver’s license. Impala would always give me a ride.

“But you don’t *understand*. There’s my mother’s carpool. I haven’t had my license that long, she might not let me drive that far.”

I’ve got to say, listening to Relic whimpering lame excuses was definitely an Experience.

(Interior. Car. The red reflector light of Brod's motorcycle pierces the windshield.)

EDSEL

Geez, I'm doing 60 and I can barely keep up with him. I could lose my license if I get a speeding ticket.

DALE

Tickie! Relic's gonna get tickie tonight!

EDSEL

I don't even *know* any chicks in this town.

DALE

This chick Diane DeSoto saw your Honorable Mention, like that. She asked if I knew you.

EDSEL

Nice to know literary chicks actually exist. She goodlooking?

DALE

About right for you. She's a good make, too. *(Nods knowingly.)*

EDSEL

(Staring at the reflector moving away from him.) I've never even *kissed* a girl. I-I don't even know what to do.

DALE

Tickie! Relic's gonna get *tickie* tonight! Here's what you do. (*Rolls his eyes, raises his eyebrows, cocks his head to one side*) Chicks dig quizzical looks, like that.

EDSEL

Trouble is, I can't practice them while I'm driving.

DALE

You might even get boned tonight. The Seers brought back some pot.

EDSEL

Maybe I should just stick with that. What brings them in from the Village, anyway?

DALE

See that sign on your left?

EDSEL

Y'mean, the Shadycrest Sanitarium? My mother spent a year there with St. Vitus's Dance when she was ten or eleven.

DALE

They're in to see Dauphin. His parents committed him there. He, uh, flipped out in the Village a few weeks ago.

EDSEL

What a drag!

DALE

Bouts of madness are something *all* us Seers will pass through on our way to becoming the most advanced novelists, poets, musicians and actors of our time. Hee hee.

EDSEL

Y'know, I've been having this daydream all day. It's gonna sound foolish, but...I keep wondering: what if somebody didn't show up and

I actually got to play?

DALE

Sometimes there are vibes in the air, you never know.

EDSEL

Even if I got the chance, I don't know how to play anything.

DALE

Tickie, dope...Relic's gonna get everything, all at once!

|||||

"The bass player's got the flu. Either of you guys know how to play bass?" Rockford Plymouth called from the piano bench the minute Brod and I inched through the door behind Dale's leggy swagger. Rock's eyes hook on Brod, who shakes his head no.

Dale turns to me. "Want to try it, Relic?"

"I've never p-played one before, but I'll t-t-t-try," I say, my voice wavering. My daydream's coming true. I'm practically shitting my pants. "But, you cats are good. And I-I don't want to mess up your scene, you know?"

"We play everything in C," Dale says. "I can show you the notes."

While he's showing me a half-dozen chicks glide into the family room, all of them prettier than Bambi. The sophisticated laughs of a Hollywood Blonde and a Future Little Theater Director trill above the blurred murmur of conversation. Except for Rock, who wears a ragged T-shirt, the guys sport button-down collars. With my beret and my sweatshirt wearing through at the elbows...am I a hipster or just a hick?

Dale introduces Brod and me to Black and Oink, to Hollywood, Little Theater and Diane DeSoto. DeSoto smiles graciously as she congratulates me on my Honorable Mention. I thank her, discreetly admiring the full breasts blooming under her maroon turtleneck. The tortoise-shell glasses give her plain face an intellectual cast. Not bad. But...what do I do? Well, before I make my move I want to get to know Black and Oink. They're standing inside the tight circle where Dale's cranelike limbs jerk disjointedly amid the whirl of buddybanter. Though a gargoyle facial twist

Dale squeals, "*Teal!*"

"*Twealy teal,*" Black whips back.

Oink's dark eyes light over the slightest crack of a smile. Hollywood and Little Theater giggle at the exchange.

What absurdist gesture could I make that would bring me into their circle? I glance at Brod. He doesn't seem nearly as eager as I am to try Brother Dale's Cure-All For Teenage Troglodytes. Maybe I should check out DeSoto, now sitting alone on a sofa in the room's dimmest corner...but what do I *do*? Walk toward her, tilting my head at coy angles the way Dale showed me? Raising my eyebrows? Rolling my eyes? By the time I reach the cushion she'll think I'm a spaz. I've got enough twitches already. I wonder what to do till Dale announces, "I want to get Relic *boned* tonight."

My eyes slink around the room. DeSoto doesn't look like she's heard him expose my innocence. After I smoke I should just go over...but what if I stumble over my words? What if my gentle caress thumps her like a polar bear's paw? What if she laughs at my inexperience? What if Black and Oink and the other Seers laugh at me? While I'm what-iffing myself into paralysis DeSoto moves to a chair next to Hollywood and Little Theater. Maybe later...

Dale asks Brod and me if we want to turn on. After Brod says no, thanks, five of us pile into Black's Ford Fairlane. The moment the doors slam shut, Black passes bottles of Lowenbrau clockwise from Dale in the front, to Rock, Oink, then me in the back.

"No thanks," I say. My darting eyes search for narcotics agents in the shadowy cars lurking just outside the streetlight's dull radial glow.

"Relic! You're a *teetotaler*?" An expression of shock sharpens Rock's sculptured features.

"If I get stopped...the cops can detect liquor, but they can't detect pot." Does my explanation sound lame to these cool guys?

Black glances at my reflection in his rearview mirror. "Relic's a fuckin' Legal Beagle." He lights a torpedo-tipped Camel. It circles the compartment, lands in my hand. Here it is, my Virgin Toke!—coughed and sprayed all over the front backrest. "So, Black..." I say after my throatclearing hack "...uh, w-where do you live in New York?" I know, but I want to start a conversation.

"We were living on Sullivan Street. We're back here now."

Well...I thought I knew. "What *happened*?"

"We were broke, the jobs were shitty, we were sick..."

By my third toke Black's sadness seems to cloud his puffy Anglo-Saxon features. I can't believe *anyone* would come back from the Village. But Black doesn't seem to want to say anything more about it. Maybe Oink will add a few details. No, he just sits next to me in the back seat, his ruddy face staring sphinx-like toward the front where Black and Dale crack jokes about people I don't know doing things I've never done while my shoulders jerk with every passing pair of—*Police!*—headlights.

"Dale tells me you're working on a novel," I say to Oink.

"It dried up after eighty pages," he says, then shrugs.

I've tried to break the ice by talking about the Village, about writing... Don't these guys want to talk about *anything* with me?

Dale peers over the front backrest. "You feel anything, Relic?"

"I don't *think* so," I say. "I mean, my forehead tingles..." I start laughing, can't stop.

"Relic's boned," Dale says. "Let's play."

The minute I start pulling the bass strings to Rock's "False Waltz," I'm bouncing to the beat with both feet, nodding my head to the groove or thrashing it from side to side while Dale rips blazing Trane licks that rocket me into the Ecstasy Zone. Then Rock whips sizzling single-note lines to a crashing block-chord climax, his sinewy arms stretching the width of the keyboard. After the fill-in drummer thrashes through a few choruses, Dale takes another long solo that leads to the head.

When the set ended I expected something...*momentous*...to happen, someone to walk over and say "You sound good" and launch me into euphoria or "You sound terrible" and embarrass me in a roomful of strangers. I would've settled for some less than momentous comment that brought me into one of the five or six conversations filling the space in front of me.

Dale dipped and glided through the animated clusters. His ease with people and his ability to make them laugh reminded me how awkward I felt. Since I couldn't break the ice with Black and Oink I didn't think I'd fare any better with any of the other cats. Maybe *now* I should try DeSoto, if I can spot her in the crowd. But what if she didn't like my bass playing? I felt so conspicuous *not* being part of a lively conversation that I backed into a corner with Brod and hoped somebody would notice us and come over. Would I feel any less out of place at a West Mannamok party? In my chemically-altered Mindscreen Theater real and imagined parties merged:

*

Black raises a grocery bag above the huddle of Seers laughing about more people I've never met doing more things I've never done. "This is a party, so let's fuckin' *party!*"

*

Hump's mug-waving right hand sloshes beer over the livingroom rug while his left holds Bambi by the waist. "Ev'ybody have a good time. C'mon, ev'ybody have a good time."

Coop and Pete weave up to him. "These kids from Portland, hey. They okay to sell to?"

"Yeah, *great* guys," Hump says, nodding toward the collegiate-looking out-of-towners.

*

"You sound like you have a lot of libidinal energy tonight," Hollywood says, strolling past Dale.

"Just don't use it all playing," Little Theater adds through her pearl smile.

"I haven't, and I won't." Dale glides to her side, slides an arm around her waist and guides her to one of the cars outside. I picture his lips nuzzling against hers in the back seat, their lithe bodies writhing to some stage of passionate undress.

These chicks sure are *experienced*, I think, shuddering with envy and apprehension. If only one of them—*DeSoto!*—would approach *me* so boldly...But here I am, seventeen years old, and I've never even *kissed* a girl. These chicks act like they know even more than the West Mannamok kids who come home from college on holidays. Maybe I should talk to DeSoto. No, she's listening to this mop-headed cat named Crawford bubble about some new folksinger named Dylan.

*

"It's really tough," Laura Dodge says. "I mean, Jeff is stationed in

Germany. He doesn't even get leave till Spring..." Mack leans forward, his gummy grin leering as his flat gray stare lifts from her breasts to her watering eyes.

"You don't hafta be lonely, not while I'm here."

"Oh, Mack! I didn't know you could be so understanding." She totters forward. They stumble into an embrace, then stagger upstairs.

Shit! I missed out on her again.

*

"Dylan has a way of touching your deepest feelings," Crawford says, helping DeSoto with her coat.

"I'd really like to hear him," she says, her eyes eager.

Shit! I missed out on her too.

*

"Yeah, that lay-up I made sank Portland, right at the freakin' buzzer," Hump says to his tottering circle of admirers.

"Oh, Hump!" Bambi sighs, her eyes a sea mist of admiration. "That shot was the most graceful thing I've ever seen. It was so *beautiful!*"

"You're not so bad yourself." He grabs her hand and leads her upstairs. Behind a half-closed door Hump's monster prong jumps straight out of the back row of 9th grade History into the gushing gash between Bambi's raised and kicking legs. Moans, shrieks, whimpers...

"*Whoa!* He's givin' it to her good," Pete says, squinting through the keyhole at Hump's hairy ass pumping on top of her.

*

For all their intelligence and awareness the Seers seem just as cliquish as West Mannamok's backwoods runamoks. I'm getting tired of wondering what's wrong with me for not being able to inch into their circle. I've got other things to wonder about. "Did I, uh, did I sound okay?"

Brod turns to me, a grin swallowing the purple acne scars on his cheeks. He nods his head slowly. "Yeah, you sounded pretty good, matter of fact."

"It *felt* good," I say, feeling gratitude blush my face. "Y'know, it's really

funny, man, I had this daydream that I'd get to play and then, like, it just happened."

Brod draws reflectively on his woodsman's pipe. "It's amazing, the powers the mind has. Most people never develop their ESP."

"In fact, I'm thinking about how I can get the bread to buy one. I mean, the two dollars a week my mother gives me as an allowance, the two my father lays on me every few weeks, all the bank accounts my mother started for me then drained to the last five bucks, cash presents for Christmas—" My racing mindmouth stops as the front door bursts open. My flash paranoia: *It's a raid!*

*

Sirens. Red police lights strobe through the windows. "The cops, hey. "It's a raid."

"They can't do nothin' to me, my old *man's* a freakin' cop," Hump slurs, swaggering to the door in his jockey shorts. He reaches for the knob, drags the door open, then reels backward and falls. A squadron of gray hats tramps past him.

*

It's not a raid. The Seers roar their beerbreath toward Brod and me. It's just an attack of curiosity on their part, pot paranoia on mine.

"Does he *race* that fine machine?" Rock asks.

"I don't know," Dale says. "Ask Allen."

The Seers crush around Brod, suddenly a celebrity for owning a motorcycle. Brod answers their questions, but his eyes dart toward me as if saying he's uneasy being the center of attention. My return nod makes me feel too much like Silverman pretending to fit in. I wish they'd shift some of the attention toward me to stop yet another reprise of

Teenage Popular(ity) Music

while Rock leaves to take a phone call and Black and Oink continue gunning

Brod with questions and Dale mock-dodges them with spider-legged footwork.

When Rock comes back to the family room, a sweat glues his fine brown hair to his high forehead. “Listen, uh, Dauphin...just, uh, he just *died*. The electroshock...”

Dale’s tweal-step hangs in the air before making its sober descent.

[][][]

I

“gotta have gotta have gotta have”

As we curve the hills and quarries back to West Mannamok, I ask Dale if the Seers dug me.

“They had no objection to your being there, like that.”

Is that all? “I didn’t know—I mean, I couldn’t get any conversations going with them.”

“The Seers don’t, uh, accept outsiders easily.”

So I’m still on the outside, even with writers and jazz musicians. People like *me*. Friends are something I’ve had so few of that I really

“You got no
friends”

WANT

“No friends,
Edsel”

some desperately and I really thought I’d make them here, from everything Dale said. To break off the sounds that fill my silence I talk about what happened—or didn’t—with DeSoto. “Y’know, I mean, like, I saw her sitting there. I didn’t know if she was waiting for me...”

Dale sips his last Lowenbrau. “You should’ve just sat down next to her. Chicks dig it when you’re aggressive, like that.”

“Well, I didn’t *know* her, y’know what I mean? I mean, I felt kind of funny

going over. Like, what do I say, what do I do?"

"I *told* you, she *digs* literary types."

"Think I should try the next time I see her? If she doesn't have something going with Crawford, I mean."

"You can try, but chicks get funny..."

His comment seeps in while I try to keep pace with Brod's reflectors. "It's too bad the Seers split the Village."

"They were too *thin*," Dale says, more muscle in his tone than on his body. "You've got to be *tough* to make it with the Big Boys. *Intellectually* tough, *emotionally* tough, *spiritually* tough. Like that." Nevertheless, Dale insists, the Seers are *very* advanced on the human evolutionary scale...*very* advanced...advanced beyond definition. But the toughness.... "Dauphin was too sensitive, too vulnerable. His parents are covering up. They don't want their insurance executive friends to know their son killed himself."

"Electroshock *can* be lethal. Robert Lindner says—"

"I know, I've read about it. But Dauphin tried to pill out in high school. After he quit college last summer, he tried razorblades. The Seers figured he'd be better off with them down in the Village. But he couldn't make it. He just couldn't *make* it."

While he's talking the Corvair wheels toward the wooden Shadycrest Sanitarium sign swinging under a copper lantern on the right.

"The bastards here were supposed to *watch* him, at least."

Dale rolls down the car window. Early December wind blasts through the compartment, chills my bones. He drains his Lowenbrau, belches a guttural glissando, and sticks the bottle out the window. I look in the rearview mirror for constables or State Police cruisers. The corner of my eye catches his arm winding the empty like a bolo punch—"Fuck you! You let my friend die in your *shithole!*"—and the bottle flying through the air, a prism for the lantern's glow...silver and gold twists of light...till the twists explode black against the sign. Fragments glitter down as we cruise past.

Even as I'm looking around, half-dreading some cop I failed to spot, I'm laughing: This is the gesture of a true poet. "You sure nailed that sign, man."

"Like Max Roach says: 'Deeds Not Words.'" Dale's shoulders curve a concave around his titter.

I'm still looking for cops...and up the road at the red reflector on Brod's Triumph. He's almost out of view. I've got something up my sleeve, though.

“Brod’s gonna be surprised when we get to your place ahead of him.” I swing a right onto Hidden Hill, a bumpy diagonal that cuts two miles off the route to Dale’s house. I’m gunning up the grade...30...40...50...55!...the Corvair can’t go any faster up this grade, but Brod will think I exceeded the speed of light. I can hardly wait to see the—

—*WHAT THE*—!

The Corvair hits a bump, springs into the air. Weightless feeling, a roller-coaster’s downward drop. Tires chirp the asphalt. The curve, watch the curve! Skidding! A tree! Can’t make the fucking *curve*! Hit the brakes. *Hard!* Wheels screech. Stink of burning rubber. Four-wheel drift sideways, out of my control. Well, if we land in a ditch maybe we can push it out. Maybe there won’t be any dents. Oh shit! On its two left wheels—I can *feel it!*—and tilting more. *Oh no!* Maybe it’ll still land flat. I’m looking at pine branches climbing the darkness... feeling the sudden float...the rollover... hearing the metallic thud of roof hitting gravel, the clatter of shattering glass.

It stops. I land on my head, but not hard enough to hurt. Still alive, at least. The door! Wedged against the asphalt. I scrape it open enough to squeeze out. Then look back into the darkness. “Dale! Are you alright?”

No answer.

“Dale! Are you alright?”

Christ! What if I’ve killed him?

“I’m alright, Relic.”

My breath shudders my relief. The streetlamp outlines a roar of jagged crystalline teeth, the remaining glass in the rear window. The right rear tire, closest to the road, is still spinning. “Let’s get away in case it blows up.”

We run a good hundred yards. Nothing happens. I find a house, call my mother. What a drag! I’ve just begun to meet all these

(“got no got no got no”)

FRIENDS

standoffish as they are, discover chicks who might dig me (if only I knew what to do) and now...it might be months before I see them again. If ever.

"I guess it'll be a while before I put the make on DeSoto."

"*Jesus Christ, Relic!* You nearly get us killed, and now you're worried about putting the make on some chick you hardly know!"

"We've already made it out alive." I look at the car and laugh.

"What's so funny? We're *lucky* we're alive."

"*I know.* But look! I didn't even dent the side." With a roll and a flip, I should've crumpled the side like aluminum foil, mangled a door...there's artistry of some kind in here. Maybe it's not the response he expects, but I'm already looking beyond the horizon

at the black '61 Chevy of West Manamok's one-man police force. Constable Lawless squeezes his medicine-ball middle through the car door and half-struts, half-waddles toward the broken glass we're standing on. Smoke pumps out of the cock-sized stogie waving its weaponlike shadow over the asphalt. I tell him what happened, omitting the pot and the booze. Good thing Dale tossed his bottle.

Not long after Lawless, my mother and Fat Boy arrive. The unspoken words in her dark brown eyes make me feel scummy and stupid.

Brod arrives. Starts to ask a question, but I shush him so I can hear Fat Boy and Lawless talking near the cruiser:

"...You kiddin'! I lay a hand on that kid an' she'll kill me. She just as much as said so."

"Once a day's how I keep mine in line. Don't matter *how* big he is."

"The kid's not a crazy driver, Harley. It's his first accident, I tell ya."

"No, Bubba, I *gotta* give him a ticket."

I'm really in trouble now. Even in the cold, my face and hands are clammy with sweat.

A crackle inside the cruiser. "Wait a minute." Lawless mumbles officially into the receiver, then lumbers back. "Okay, Bubba, I'm gonna give the kid a break. Got an emergency on the other end of town."

After the cruiser screeches away I tell Brod what happened. "I just wanted to surprise you with my shortcut."

Brod shakes his head. "You certainly did."

—What you've let me read so far tells me this isn't the first time your life has turned upside-down.

—I thought I was the joker in this relationship.

—You've been awfully serious lately. The diagnosis, the reunion...

—All my life I've thought my reactions came from a traumatic childhood. Standard Freud. Now—

—Now you've got a medical basis for it.

—For a lot of things. They say one side of the brain doesn't dominate the other as much in people with Tourette. Maybe that's why I can play bass while I recite poetry. Maybe that's why I was able to switch from batting right-handed to batting left-handed in 6th grade. All the kids, even fuckin' Goodbrand, kept saying, "Bat righty, Relic," like I was screwing around. But I knew I was a better hitter lefty. The Tourette explains my mind racing, the way I scat whenever I hear music, my drinking so much liquid—

—Your tireless tirades. Next you'll be telling me it gives you psychic powers.

—I did find years ago that sometimes things I write or imagine come true. The night before the school fire I told my mother, "I don't want to go tomorrow, I wish the place would burn."

—You're the Carrie of your generation.

—Not really. William Burroughs has talked about having things he writes about come true. later. I don't know what causes it, but I was really surprised when I found that my pot fantasy about Hump's party actually happened that night.

—Sometimes I think you just plain think too much.

—Like Hamlet. "To go or not to go..." Here I am: a little bit of an artistic career, a great woman, a job that pays the bills—I've got all the things I need

to go to the Reunion and say, "Look, you motherfuckers. I'm as 'normal' as I need to be to play your stupid game." Only now I've been handed a certificate that says I was crazy all along.

—You're not crazy. You just think too much. Listening to you is like watching The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis.

—Au contraire, my dear. It's like watching

THE MANY LUSTS OF MAYNARD G. KREBS

(EDSEL sits on the backless bass stool in his studio. Along the wall behind him stretch a pair of file cabinets and a desk made of two solid oak doors that support bookshelves, a personal computer, two cassette decks, a CD and a record player. The computer monitor flashes "GATEWAY 1963" in gold. The letters spin and jumble, then congeal into a graphics display of Rodin's "The Thinker" abstractedly tapping syncopations on the bongos squeezed between his legs.)

GROUNDED!

Like, you know, even now the word makes me cringe as if I was back there. Well, actually, I *am* back here, thanks to Virtual Fiction, not to mention the Eternal Present Brod and I pondered into ponderousness.

Believe me, it's not a good feeling being back here, even if Lawless did let me off. When I walked into school Monday morning I thought my flipping the Corvair would be the biggest news in town. But seeing Hump squinting at the world through eyes blackened and swollen to slits and scowling through puffed and cut lips told me something even bigger had happened. The flame that fired Mack Wyllis had turned to charred wood alongside Hump as they leaned wearily against their locker. Impala looked so chastened he couldn't raise his upper lip to quip about me driving upside-down. In the lav DeVille combed his spicurl sullenly. For once, he wasn't broadcasting his mouth.

Sid Silverman broadcasted the story to Brod at recess. After the Portland

game Hump staged a Victory Party at his house while his father was on patrol. Pete and Coop sold a case of beer to undercover State Cops posing as Portland High students. Meanwhile Mack and Laura hit it off so well they ended up fucking in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Felicia Ford, smashed on grain alcohol, dragged Hump upstairs. (At least it wasn't Bambi!) One thing led to another and finally to a gang bang. According to Silverman, who watched from the sidelines with a Coke in hand, the cops raided the party while Hump, Pete, Coop and a half-dozen others were starting sloppy seconds on a passed-out Felicia. They charged Hump, Pete and Coop with distributing liquor to minors and lascivious carriage. Felicia Ford's family took her to a Catholic boarding school the following morning.

All Monday morning my mind whipped and whirled with my exhilaration at my imagination's near-psychic accuracy, then dipped into despair at the damage my accident had done to my social life. The more I saw Hump that day, the sorrier I felt for him. Even a brute like him didn't deserve to get pounded the way his father must have pounded him after the bust. Nobody did. But my pity had its limits. After all, I was

GROUNDED!

There's nothing like being grounded to make you stir-crazy. I couldn't get out of the house unless Brod or one of Dale's parents picked me up, and I was asking them for more favors than they had time to give. Getting my car privileges back and stopping at Stone's for a solo soda looked more and more like a lost paradise compared to the nightly tape loop of life at home.

(VGA monitor. YOUNG EDSEL sits in a tattered, torn and battered snot-yellow Naugahyde chair in his cellar, smoking a calabash pipe and reading from a foot of books piled on the floor next to him. Upstairs, FAT BOY slouches in a livingroom chair. Ashtray crowning the peak of his gut, he chainsmokes Marlboros while gazing stuporously at "The Rifleman" on the Magnavox. HARRIET paces between the living room and the cellar door, where EDSEL's pipesmoke curls under the bottom crack. She opens the door.)

HARRIET

Jesus Christ! You and that friggin' pipe! You stink up this whole house.

EDSEL

If I had wheels, I wouldn't have to.

(The door slams. EDSEL sputters, resumes reading. HARRIET resumes pacing, then opens the door again. Cut to studio.)

|||||

Christ! I couldn't even get out for a shake and a shot of Debbie Impala, Pete's younger sister, whose hourglass of hips and hooters bulged through her tight white Stone's Dairy uniform. Instead I spent my schoolday afternoons replaying my one date with Bambi.

(On the VGA monitor we see the white stucco exterior of Stone's Dairy. Interior. EDSEL and BAMBI sit at the counter, looking strained.)

BAMBI

It's good. But what's *that* you ordered?

EDSEL

Hot fudge, with pistachio and maple walnut ice cream.

BAMBI

You're supposed to have *vanilla*.

(Studio.)

I admired Bambi's clearcut notions, even though they were the opposite of mine. They say opposites attract. I knew if we shared an entire evening together, we'd share an entire life together. If I kept trying, it would happen. Meanwhile, Dale's unstinting support was only a phone call away.

(Onscreen. DALE's face appears on the Thinker's body. In the background, DALE's fastidiously-made bed. DALE turns toward EDSEL, who sits on the bass stool in his studio, then says into his telephone:)

DALE

If a chick says no twice, she's not interested.

EDSEL

You've got to be persistent, that's what they say.

DALE

(Irritably) If a chick *really* wants you, you'll know it.

(Studio.)

Bambi never let me know she wanted me, but Hump let me know he wanted her. A routine leak in the lavatory at the start of Senior year became a gradeschool recess replay: "You stay away from Bambi, or I'll break your freakin' back, y'hear?"

But Bambi wouldn't admit Hump had any claims on her.

"Well, are you going out with him?" I persisted for my own safety.

"Maybe," she said, the way she did when she wanted to spice her persona with a dash of mystery.

Her dash of mystery added a bucket of misery to mine. Maybe she meant to keep me guessing, but I did more than guess. My mind turned her "maybe" into a monster-sized "YES!" with Bambi's perfect breasts squeezed tightly together in the notch of the Y, her long blonde hair brushing the tips of her cinnamon nipples as she licked her lips to lure Hump's hirsute loins into hot pursuit of her. Then she climbed the E buck naked, wrapped her lithely-muscled legs around the vertical pole and impaled herself on each horizontal replica of the table-leg dong Hump flashed in ninth-grade History class, and finally reclined along the curves of the S, her liquid eyes languid with longing till Hump turned her over and mounted the S-curve of her hips, thighs and calves from behind, his ramalamadingdong slamming into her driven by a power-pumping ass covered with curly steel wool. Then, if that wasn't torture enough, she would climb into Hump's rocket-finned '59 Pontiac convertible, breeze through town with the top down (even in winter), Hump's massive arm curling her tight against his side, stopping for a long kiss in Stone's parking lot or in front of Big Ed's, the whole school looking at Bambi learning how to shift Hump's dick-shaped four-in-the-floor. And I would watch the loop of my dreaded fantasy repeat itself with infinite

variation and no relief except:

(Onscreen. HARRIET opens the door.)

HARRIET

Jesus Christ! You and that friggin' pipe! You stink up this whole house.

EDSEL

If I had wheels, I wouldn't have to.

(The door slams. EDSEL sputters, resumes reading. HARRIET resumes pacing, then opens the door again. Cut to studio.)

|||||

(Onscreen. The Thinker rubs his crotch while a VOICEOVER says:)

...AND NOW, MINDSCREEN THEATER PRESENTS...

(regal flourish of trumpets)

***“A BRIEF—BUT COMPREHENSIVE—
HISTORY OF EDSEL RELIC’S ONANISM”***

(The Thinker works himself and his wand into a sexual frenzy. He stands up, moans ecstatically as his hard-on shoots its wad. It flies through the monitor and splatters EDSEL's face.)

|||||

grounded after the crash no rides to escape the house no rides to Brod's or Dale's no Wethersfield chicks to give me tickie grounded in nights alone with old memories fragments of background music floating to foreground dream music dry dream or wet ethereal Frankie Avalon record hops "Hey Veeeenuss! Oh Veeeenussss!" doing the bop with Debbie Impala eighth grade dreaming the slow dance of romance precocious breasts pressed

against me brown eyes misty as the lakeshore night full red lips parted to receive me too afraid to ask her for the moonlight walk on the bathingsuit beach I press myself up against the firm apple buns between the thighs “make my wish come” six ecstatic throbs then wake up my crotch in the creamy puddle “true” tell my mother “I think I wet the bed again” she says “You must be playing with yourself” I tell her I’m not

||||

Vaseline spicurls dangling down pimple-pocked foreheads, Wildroot Cream Oil Pompadours rising from gawky necks hidden by upturned collars, 9th grade History’s Back Row Chorale sings out: “Hey, Edsel. Didja evah?”

“D-D-D-Did I ever what?”

“Didja evah pull ya woolie?” DeVille hawks a Swamp Yankee accent.

This is no time or place for honesty. “Uh, y-y-y-yeah.”

“Whadja get?” Mack forces the antiphony.

“Uh...”

“He didn’t get *nothin’*,” Hump snorts a *capella*. “He’s a freakin’ *pussy*.”

“You’re a freakin’ *pussy*,” Pete calls back to Hump. “Wha’d you get?”

“Don’t call *me* no freakin’ *pussy*. *I’ll* show you what *I* got.”

Hump whips his hard square hammer out of his bluejeans, waves his raw, throbbing symbol of power around, squeezing its tip to a 100-watt bulb with bulging veins for filaments. “You freakin’ queers happy now?” He tucks it back in. A vigorous ripping *zzzzziip!* just as Mr. Olds strolls through the door.

||||

“Ma, what’s jissom?”

“Where did you hear that word?”

MEN

“Th-the kids in school. Th-*they* were talking about it. W-w-what is it?”

DO

“It’s what happens when boys do what they’re not supposed to.”

TERRIBLE THINGS

“I mean, what does it *look* like?”

TO WOMEN

Her round face tightens around her thinlipped revulsion. “It’s a sticky, yellow-whitish fluid.”

WITH THEIR PRICKS

I stand over the toilet, pants at my knees. Picture my cock swelling the way it does when the throbbing wakes me and makes me think I’ve wet the bed. Picture myself getting down and dirty like Hump...those lewd strokes in the back row. Yeah, I’ve got it now. Picture the frenzy, the buildup, the ache that threatens to break...the hot iron...in my hand...ready...to *explode*—a burst! of *molten fury!*—and there I am, picturing myself watching this cocksnot squirt out of me, long erratic arcs that loop toward the toilet but mostly splatter the seat and back, the curdle scumming the water... picturing myself puking at its vileness, puking at my shame for doing something so impure, puking all over the bowl, the floor, the wall tiles. Desperately I flush...Instant Vertigo!...and just before I faint in my imagined mess like a Bowery drunk, what do I see? the Tell-Tale Sign, the Dead Giveaway: a spot of that milk-dripping snot worming over the rim. My mother will find me there, give me smelling salts, beat welts onto my back and pack me off to

[][][]

Dad's ratrace for some fatherly advice after watching Grandma Relic ogle Antonino Rocca, Skull Murphy and other mangle-minded wrestlers on TV, watching Grampa Relic smoke and chew tobacco at the same time and talk with the truck-drivers and laborers about baseball, fish and nookie, and stopping at Dad's new home to find his second wife's note saying she feels more comfortable not seeing me because I called West Mannamok's farmers hicks and her father was a farmer, then ride home listening to him whistle along with the Glenn Miller placidity on the Mannamok airwaves.

"You really should jerk off," he says, turning into the driveway. "It'd make you a lot more relaxed." He stops the car, then chews his fingernails.

"But what if I get caught?" I hear my mother's voice whistling through her raging dervish whirl: Another goddamn fuckin' no-good Relic just like his old man! Doing dirty things to women with his prick before he even has a woman to do dirty things with! "What if she throws me out?"

"I've been telling you since the divorce, bub, you can *always* come live with me."

At least I wouldn't be in town to hear the kids laugh about me like they do about the two or three girls every year who get knocked up then drop out or go to boarding school like Felicia Ford. It's bad enough being the school's scapegoat. Becoming a pinched pudwhacker would drop me below the bottom.

|||||

The summer before junior year, I turn to Brod in desperation. Look around, make sure his mother's at work and his brother's off in the shed rebuilding his sportscar. "Listen, Brod...Do you, uh...jerk off?"

"Yeah, sometimes." He keeps the details stashed behind his wall of reserve. Private matters. Talks instead about the William Blake engravings he thinks about when he's painting and the list of Blake aphorisms Mr. Stryker passed out a few months before his conversion made him repudiate them. From Brod's diningroom table we look to the bathroom with the yellow paint peeling off the half-open door at the end the hall.

"The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," we say, just about in unison. Our laughter tumbles over our words.



Now that I'm grounded I'm going to read *Tropic of Cancer*. I've had it on the shelf since the end of Junior year, waiting for this moment. Through all the public uproar about its dirty words and dirtier sex, I've kept my faith in the beautiful writing I saw when I browsed through it in bookstores—one of my four eyes turned, of course, toward whatever clerk might worry about my moral development. I'm worried about my moral development, myself. That's why I promised myself I wouldn't read it till I turned eighteen. But when you've had a traumatic life like I've had you grow up sooner. At seventeen, it's time to ride the Whitmanesque rhapsodies of Henry Miller's language.

The minute I open *Tropic's* cobalt blue cover a cacophony of righteous murmurs whirls around me.

DiCristo: "...deleterious effects on the morals of our nation's youth..."

Mom: "...just once to ruin a life..."

and all the other malarkey. Look, I answer, in a mindvoice that doesn't stutter: John Thomas and Lady Jane didn't turn me into a rapist last summer when I read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. I hardly think Miller's anguished nights in the streets of Paris are going to corrupt me.

Page two: "a gob of spit..."

Good punctuation to end my argument. On to the lyricism of the Left Bank...

But not before Tania stirs a bone in my own prick, and makes me want to straighten out the wrinkles I'd find if I knew where to look (besides page 5). Not only do my loins swell, my whole body swells with the promise of what Henry will do to her. I've got to do something myself, but

the front-

door lock clicks. My mother's home. It's down to the cellar with pipe and book to sit and read and lay (so to speak) low, below the bitching that begins when the lock clicks and ends when she and Fat Boy go to their twin beds—broken by a half-hour phone call from Brod. With Tania's wrinkles rubbing my face—not even *Lady Chatterley's Lover* did *this* to me—I'm restless through each section, living till lights-out time.

10:30. I close my bedroom door: turn the knob gently, thumb on lock, push flush with the molding, make sure nothing clicks. Good. I spread facedown on my mattress. Bambi floats into my mind's boudoir, her aqua eyes moist

with mist, her creamy voice cooing as she lifts her white see-through negligee, slowly baring her full breasts, curved belly and shapely legs, then slides herself against me as she eases into bed. I rub against the soft roll of her belly, careful not to make the springs scrinch. Her phantom legs lock around my real loins and pull me deeper into her, deeper into the swell of moans and murmurs, deeper into the *throb-throb-throb-throb-throb* that rocks my back and pelvis, deeper into the creamy puddle turning cold against my crotch.

I've done it! My Tourette hack gives away my guilt, but I've done it. Like Mailer's White Negro I've lifted myself up by my sexual bootstraps. Promiscuous in mind if not heart I abandon my private Venus the next night for Debbie Impala, Pete's younger sister, whose buxom beauty rivals Bambi's. My coming pumps a thumping jazz bassline with drums dropping syncopated bombs behind it. Then there's the entire cheerleading squad and every girl other I've ever had a crush on, the ecstasy of each solitary conquest and the comfort of lying in my own little puddle, an imaginary body warming me while my conscience warns me that my mother or the kids in class will spot the pubes sprouting on the palms of my hands, the dementia, the twitches I have getting worse...

|||||

(VGA monitor. HARRIET opens the door.)

HARRIET

Jesus Christ! You and that friggin' pipe!

Faint strains of Newsreel Music emanate from the Memory Archives. On split screen KGB agents march through Russian streets, U.S. soldiers through Alabama. They converge on a single screen, where their identities merge, carrying carbines and clubbing Negro pacifists with nightsticks.

DiCristo: (voiceover): “Certainly no upstanding American could possibly be opposed to racial equality. However, it must be achieved *gradually*. Such issues cannot be forced. That is why the methods of the protesters are subject to question.”

While the soldiers pound black skulls into bloodpulp on sidewalks, Goodbrand and Hump march side by side to the foreground. Rows of Old Glory unfurl the length of their walk. DiCristo follows, holding a silk banner that bears the newspaper headline: “WEST MANNAMOK, GOODBRAND WIN SOCCER CONFERENCE. LAWLESS SCORES FOUR.”

The militia, now KKK-hooded, marches through Southern streets. In the background, nigra shacks flame orange against the night sky.

Goodbrand, Lawless and DiCristo advance to the snare drum’s tattoo, fires blazing behind them, a headline spinning through the distant smoke to superimpose itself on their inexorable advance:

WEST MANNAMOK HIGH BURNS

||||

(Studio. Close-up of “The Thinker,” then EDSEL.)

The fire destroyed one wing of the school, forcing DiCristo to divide the

gym at center court into four classrooms. At assemblies the Senior class sat in the left-rear room, where partitions screened the stage from view.

“The time for me to meet my Maker is fast approaching,” DiCristo’s funereal voice intoned behind the gym’s partitions. “The time is coming soon when I will be called to join God, our Beloved Father.” From the Seniors’ quarter of the gym I watched Old Glory, high above the partition, wave in the wind of DiCristo’s weekly rant. “Until my Maker calls me forth, however, I stand second only to President John F. Kennedy in my opposition to Russian tyranny. Premier Krushchev himself has ordered missiles to be trained on this school, trained on my very office, because he *knows* that I am his second most dangerous enemy next to the President himself.”

Ho hum. The repression-inspired raving of a failed priest who cloistered with his mother seemed harmless enough until he announced: “To prepare you to keep our nation strong and great, to prepare you to guard the precious freedom that allows us to say what we believe against the Communists—who would never allow their citizens to criticize their godless, tyrannical government, as we have the right to do in this great nation of ours—to prepare you to protect and preserve our way of life, I have determined that it is more important, more important than ever before, that all Senior boys learn their military obligations to their country.”

WHAT

is this shit? I said to myself.

“Why should I have to go?” I said to Potter McBride, the school’s new English teacher, just before our forced meeting with the Army and Marines recruiters. “Christ! Patriotism is for people who don’t have the courage to stand alone.” My elbows flapped my outrage against my ribcage.

“If I were you, I’d just sit in the back and chuckle very softly to myself,” filtered through McBride’s thick auburn mustache. He looked at Brod and Dale flanking his desk, then back at me.

“But I’m psychologically *unfit* for military service. I’ve been to a psychiatrist, I’ve seen the school social worker...”

McBride’s dense blue gaze lightened to a mocking gleam. “You don’t have to convince *me*. Just make sure you convince *them* when they call you.”

As Brod and Dale and I trudged to the presentation I said, “Next time

Brod can get his mother's car, Dale, you should come out to McBride's with us." McBride wasn't your typical highschool English teacher. While the kids in my class whispered that McBride's walrus paunch and mustache, corduroy jacket and eggstained tie marked him as weird I thought his style marked him as a bohemian intellectual stuck for some unfortunate reason—like the draft—with teaching school. I asked him to criticize a few stories I'd written over the summer. He told me he liked my ability to write in a variety of styles. At the end of September Brod and I started to spend our study halls talking with him. By November we were visiting him and his wife Sharon at their secluded hilltop cottage on the outskirts of town, exchanging ideas around his Franklin woodstove. We enjoyed the thrill of an adult treating us as intellectual equals.

"McBride seems okay—as far as teachers go," Dale said. "Some of the Seers' parents are teachers. If you're smart, you know where to draw the line." His nod tapped a period. Then he tossed off the subject with limb and facial contortions that mocked the terror we were supposed to feel at the military's manly presence.

My anxiety throbbed under my skin then burst into terror at the microcosm of America I'd stepped into. Goodbrand, a Senior Class advisor, stood sentinel at the door in his marine dress uniform—a role model for the gorillas. David Wynn, class valedictorian, flashed his toothpaste-ad grin from the front row at the Army and Marines recruiters. He'd do four years in ROTC at Yale, then smile his way to Air Force major. Next to Wynn Sid Silverman poised to execute whatever command might inch him beyond fringe membership in the Officers Club. Front row center Hump and Mack drooled attentively. If they could get paid for stomping people they'd peel off their faded flannel shirts and jeans and doubletime into combat fatigues. Impala and DeVille formed the right flank. Impala might become a pilot who dropped cases of beer to teenage guerrillas for the right price, the way he did for the kids in town before he got busted. If a little guy like me could beat up DeVille he'd become a bootcamp casualty. The Future PFCs of America, bland and faceless, filled the middle rows. Was I really supposed to risk my life so people like these could continue to treat me badly, or give silent assent to the ones who did? No way I'd fight for *any* of these fuckers! But I didn't want to establish myself as a troublemaker. I'd ask my questions politely and respectfully, just in case the recruiters kept a list of dissidents to be drafted.

Army opened flaccidly: "After your eighteenth birthday, you have five days in which to register with your local draft board."

"What happens if you don't sign?" I asked from my backrow seat, trying to control my quivering tone. I swallowed the clogged feeling that could trigger my throat-clearing hack.

"You really *should* sign," Army said.

"But, what happens if you *don't* sign?"

Army's clearwater eyes rolled back into his head. He took a deep breath. His fingers tapped together, then locked in prayer position against his chest. "This is immaterial. You really *should* sign."

My throat cleared. It *had* to. "But, what happens if you *don't*?" If I had to keep pressing for an answer I'd start spitting consonants.

"What are the legal penalties for refusing to register?" Dale asked in the official murmur he used to parody his underwriter father.

Army gaped like a landed fish gasping for water. His eyes rolled upward, as if seeking deliverance, then rolled toward the Marine recruiter, brushcut like Goodbrand, with coal spears for eyes and a chin like Lumpjaw from Disney's *Bongo*.

Lumpjaw passed Goodbrand a glance that seemed to say once again the Marines had to rescue the Army. "I'll handle it," he said, marching to the foreground. "We had a guy in Bridgeport refused to sign. He did eighteen months in Federal prison. Does that answer your question?" Fire kindled behind the anthracite irises that glared at me.

"Yes."

Lumpjaw nodded, then explained the educational and career opportunities the military offered, all the while swaggering back and forth in front of the blackboard and flicking glances at Army, as if hinting that the real Winners, the *real* Smart Guys, joined the Marines. When he finished, Army offered to answer our questions.

"On what grounds can a person obtain Conscientious Objector status?" Again my tone quivered. Again my throat tightened its muscles to clear itself. How can you ask these questions without looking like a trouble-maker?

Army's eyes rolled again. His chest heaved. Maybe looking like a trouble-maker wasn't such a bad idea. He might give me a 4-F right then and there, just to shut me up. What

THE HELL

I thought.

“Let *me* handle that,” Lumpjaw said. Flames circled the coals of his eyes. A thin smile danced on his tightrope grin. He glanced knowingly at Goodbrand, who grinned ever so thinly back. *Semper Fidelis*. Wearing a sunken expression, Army shuffled recruiting brochures at a side table while Lumpjaw clomped in front of the blackboard, grinding calluses off his palms as he explained, “Conscientious Objector status is granted to members of those very few religious groups whose beliefs prohibit them from engaging in armed combat...” He aimed his gunbarrel forefinger at me. “What *is* your religion, by the way?”

“Lutheran.” If I told him I was an atheist, I might really piss him off.

Lumpjaw nodded. “If the members of those groups can prove that they are *without question* sincere in their beliefs, we do not require them to participate in armed combat.” He started pacing again. “However, they are required to serve in the armed forces in a variety of other, equally dangerous capacities, such as medics and ambulance drivers. Moreover, as a Conscientious Objector, you are legally unqualified to hold any kind of civilian job...” His eyes blazed straight at me. A pregnant breath ballooned him to twice his size. His finger stabbed the air with a thrill killer’s fervor. “BESIDES, WHAT THE HELL GOOD ARE YOU IF YOU WON’T FIGHT FOR YOUR COUNTRY!”

He relaxed his rabid snarl and exchanged “Mission Accomplished” nods with Goodbrand.

Brod, Dale and I gloated. Even a halfwit could see Lumpjaw had just made an ass of himself.

GOOD

(Studio. Close-up of EDSEL.)

Of course, some people saw it differently...

(On the VGA monitor behind EDSEL, HUMP struts forward like John Travolta at the beginning of Saturday Night Fever. MACK WYLLIS, PETE

IMPALA, COOP DeVILLE, *the school's Varsity Squads and the greasers from Big Ed's Soda Shop walk a cocky wall of bodies behind him. An oldies-style background vocal plays:*)

*There he is, just a-walkin' down the hall,
biceps bulging, entourage on call.
To Goodbrand and DiCristo he's West Mannamok High's Ace.
He can launch a fastball into outer space.
To all the chicks that ogle him, this cat is mighty fine.
To get his affection, they all must wait in line*

to

*hump
with Hump!
Hey Hump!
Hooray Hump!
Yay Hump!*

"Hey, Relic. What the hell good are you if you won't fight for your country? Huh?"

I turned toward Hump's voice. Mack was strutting shotgun. Impala and DeVille moved a half-step behind them.

"Yeah," Mack piped in. "What the hell good are *you*, anyway?"

DeVille opened his mouth but closed it under my glare. Impala's grin seemed to screen him from the scene.

I stared into Hump's thick-featured scowl. "When I think of guys like you as my country," I said, "I don't see anything I want to fight for."

"You're a coward, Relic. You're a freakin' *coward!*"

I backed away from his rage-reddened face. No telling what this patriotic yahoo might do, particularly with Goodbrand looking politely away, toward an Old Glory unfurling over the dead gooks rotting on his mind's horizon.

"And keep your Commie butt away from Bambi, y'hear?" Hump yelled down the hall behind me.

"She says she's not going steady with you. It's her choice, not ours," I said over my left shoulder, then quickened my pace toward McBride's

classroom. Brod and Dale lengthened their strides alongside mine.

“I’ll break your freakin’ *back*.”

“And I’ll help him,” Mack calls out.

I spin on a heel of bravado. “You mean, two big guys like you have to gang up to beat a little guy like me?”

“Keep away from her, you *punk!*”

I pivot and push off my feet toward McBride’s classroom.

McBride clomps into the hall, removes the floor wedge keeping his classroom door open, then waits for us. Mr. Flowers, on hall duty, glances at McBride, then nods to us as we walk by. “Is something wrong, gentlemen?” he asks Hump and Mack.

“Why? You a freakin’ Commie too?”

Flowers rolls his chocolate eyes toward the teacher filling the doorway. Then, looking at Hump with a gentle grin: “The conversation seemed a little heated back there.”

“It’s none of your freakin’ *business*, asshole!”

“Now, Hump, I’m just asking a question.” Flowers’ hand raises to pat Hump’s shoulder reassuringly.

Hump’s mammoth left paw swipes it away. His roundhouse right twists Flowers’ putty face to one side. Flowers’ body buckles. He sags to the floor. While McBride rushes to Flowers’ side Hump glares at me.

“You say anything, Relic, and you’ll get one too. *Punk!*”

McBride raises his eyes from Flowers’ groggy face. “He doesn’t have to say anything, Hump. I saw it.”

“You fat fuck! You say one word and I’ll nail you too.”

McBride draws himself up, moves deliberately toward Hump’s tensed mass of muscle. He’s a pacifist, but one of the few teachers bigger than Hump. “I don’t know what you think hitting me will prove. But if that’s how you get your cookies off, go ahead.”

Hump snorts, stamps his right foot, then locks on McBride’s flat eyes. After a full-minute staredown he snorts again, stamps his foot again, spins on his heel and walks away with Wyllis.

Brod shakes his head, a gesture of sadness and disgust.

“Uh, when

ARE YOU

going out to

McBride's again?" Dale asks.

|||||

After a week's suspension Hump was back in school on probation: barred from all the extracurricular activities he never participated in, but allowed to play center for the varsity basketball team. The injustice made me hotter than the woodstove crackling and sputtering in McBride's livingroom. "I mean, why bother having laws if you're gonna enforce them selectively?"

"Always remember," McBride said, raising a forefinger of mock wisdom, "Hump's father *is* the Town Constable."

"Rico would get speeding tickets on the way to Mass every morning," Dale cracked.

"Christ! Anarchism is better than this. At least we'd know where we stood."

"My only problem with Anarchism," McBride paused to stake his rationalist's turf, "is when some All-American Psycho like Hump decides he wants to hurt someone who's a little different, let's say you or me. Times like that, I'm *glad* there are laws that keep guys like him on *some* kind of leash." His sawing guffaw hacks the air.

"The laws didn't help when Hump and all those other bastards put me through hell."

"Come on, Relic. You asked for it." Dale's accusing finger sprang forward. "You acted like a loon, so they treated you like one."

"I didn't deserve shit in my lunch or coats knifed up in my locker. Or fifty or sixty kids every day ridiculing me."

"You set yourself up."

"It got pretty bad for awhile there," Brod said. "For both of us."

"Each of you, uh, violated the norms." Dale tamped his tobacco, then lit his Dunhill. "Allen, you refused to shower. Relic, you tried to push your way into scenes where you weren't wanted. What I do is, I hold back and size things up. Once I know what the scene is, I act accordingly."

"That's just 'When in Rome,'" I said. "*The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. I thought you didn't agree with Goffman."

"You do what you have to do to get what you need," he said, the smoke screening his face. "Look. Pete Impala...guys like him don't know anything

about cummings or Coltrane. So I just relate to them on their own level. Get drunk, put the make on a few chicks...like that."

"But I'm *still* catching shit from Hump, this time for trying to get something going with Bambi."

"I told you, she's not *interested* in you. There are plenty of other chicks around."

"But she's the one I want."

"What I don't understand," McBride drawled, "is why you're so hung up on these cheerleader types when there are more interesting girls around."

"All underage," his wife Sharon added with a mocking schoolmarm's nod.

McBride's sloe eyes glittered in her direction. "For me, maybe, but not for Edsel." His laugh revved inside his belly.

I couldn't explain how badly I wanted Bambi to join me in an idyllic life, so strikingly parallel to McBride's, in which she would sit next to me while the next generation of geniuses waited for my words of precious wisdom. She'd offer her own perceptive insights, which would virtually mirror my own, of course. If she joined me soon I could blaze into the brave new world of my bohemia with the school's prettiest girl on my arm.

"I think the question of selective justice might make an interesting topic for a discussion group," McBride said, pointedly changing the subject. "In fact, I was going to ask if the three of you were interested in joining one. The Town Library is willing to let me use their upstairs room." He mentions Sid Silverman and David Wynn, the Official Best and Brightest, as other members. "It would be independent of the school. I'm thinking of calling it the Seminar in Contemporary Issues."

"Sickie!" I say, playing on its initials.

"Superior Intellects Communicating Intelligently," Dale says.

The Triumvirate nods at a chortling McBride.

|||||

DiCristo rants his latest Deathbed Bulletin from behind the gym's partitions:

"Ninety-nine percent of you are Leaders. The other one percent are Followers."

Are we all Chiefs and no Indians on Uncle Rico's little reservation?

“The Leaders are not the cause of the problems we face in our society today. It is the Followers who cause the problems, followers such as the atheists who would prevent us from praying to God in our public schools. It is the Followers who listen to those people who would destroy the greatest society in the history of mankind to achieve their own ruthless ends.”

Was Abraham Lincoln a Follower? Is Martin Luther King? The Negroes staging sit-ins at Birmingham lunch counters?

“And *this* is why Premier Krushev has made me his Number Two target for assassination, second only to President John F. Kennedy: because I intend to make all of you, each and every one of you, into Leaders.

IF YOU WON'T

demand leadership from yourselves, then *I* will demand leadership from you.”

DiCristo demands that we lead the Pledge of Allegiance, then starts the pledge himself. Usually Brod, Dale and I hold our hands limp against our chests and stand silently during the pledge. This time, Dale rises with the rest of the seniors, but Brod stays seated. I wait for some glint of a signal from the recesses of his eyes...nothing. No sign of rising. I'm still sitting, listening to the sheep bleat lies around me: “Under God?” What about the constitutional separation of church and state? “Indivisible?” We've already had one civil war, we might have another. “Liberty and Justice for all?” Not for the Negroes, not for me. Seeing no reason to rise, I stay seated with Brod.

All the faces in the room, some stunned, some indignant, turn toward Brod and me. The tense silence tightens the walls around us. The floor shakes as Goodbrand thunders toward us, his face a rage-boiled crab, his nostril hairs pincers clawing with desperate pride.

“THAT'S THE MOST DISGUSTING SPECTACLE I'VE SEEN IN MY ENTIRE LIFE! MAYBE YOU THINK YOU'RE SMART DOING WHAT YOU JUST DID, BUT I DIDN'T

FIGHT

IN KOREA JUST SO
SOME YOUNG WISEACRES LIKE YOU COULD GO AND DO SOMETHING
LIKE THIS! MAYBE YOU'RE TOO YOUNG AND FOOLISH TO UNDERSTAND
WHAT THIS COUNTRY STANDS FOR, BUT WHEN YOU REACH MY AGE,
IT'LL MAKE A LOT OF SENSE, BELIEVE ME. AND YOU PUNKS WILL HAVE
DEEP, *DEEP* REGRETS FOR WHAT YOU DID TODAY!"

The veins in Goodbrand's temple throb neon...red, purple, red, purple...till his complexion snaps from pious beet to patriotic gangrene. I'm waiting for the maniac to choke one of us.

A seething Mel Olds stops beside Goodbrand. "Don't waste your time on them, Barry. They're just...conforming to nonconformity."

Goodbrand nods. The floor quakes as he stamps out.

|||||

Uncle Rico's Mindscreen Theater turns the wall behind him into a Virtual Reality of Uncle Sam, Old Glory, Iwo Jima newsreels running doubletime, patriotic anthems playing cacophonous counterpoint...the works. His jowly cheeks tighten till he's as cragfaced, rawboned, lean and mean as Uncle Sam himself. A hint of white chinwhiskers bristles in the follicles below his lips. The flags in his pupils glare stars and stripes at me. "What you did today cannot be condoned," he hisses. His boiling oil of moral revulsion sprays my skin. "I will, however, give you the opportunity to explain yourself."

"I-I just c-c-c-couldn't say the p-p-p-pledge and m-mean it."

The bland grin of Uncle Rico replaces the dour glower of Uncle Sam. "But Edsel! This is your *country*. Can you honestly tell me that you don't feel any obligation—any obligation *at all*—to serve it?"

"To me, this *school* is America. And the way I've been treated here, well...I-I really can't s-serve a society I'm not p-p-p-part of."

"I understand that circumstances may have led to you to feel that way. But if a *Russian* did what you did a short while ago, the KGB would drag him out of his house in the middle of the night and send him to prison in Siberia."

My Newsreel Memories countered his Mindscreen Theater: stocky Russians with beady eyes who beat a bespectacled citizen with clubs as they drag him down a dark hall become Rico, Goodbrand, Hump and Mack

dragging me, a bony four-eyed dissident, in handcuffs down the school's shadowy corridor. "You pulled me out of class. That's what you say they do in Russia."

"But this...This is *America*." Scenes from 1940's newsreels burst out of his balding skull: battalions of marines in dress uniform marching in lockstep, fighter planes landing on aircraft carriers, veterans of all the armed forces marching in Veterans Day parades and Memorial Day parades, the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki billowing a thick-fingered Victory sign. "I'm not going to *punish* you this time, Edsel. I'm trying to *understand* you. Did you give any thought to the *appropriateness* of what you did?"

"Of course. In a truly free society, we have the right to express dissenting opinions."

A patronizing grin stretches toward DiCristo's sagging dimples. "What I meant by 'appropriateness,' Edsel, is that some of our young men and women are not as intellectually...sophisticated...as you are. They might not be ready to address the...challenges...you present to them."

"Regardless, we're supposed to have that freedom. Obviously, we don't."

"But you *do* have that freedom here, Edsel," he assures me through a lupine leer over folded hands. "You have complete freedom to do absolutely nothing

FOR YOUR COUNTRY

but I have the freedom to refuse to let you graduate if you *ever* do something like *this* again. Remember: we live in a Democracy. And even in a democracy there are consequences..."

|||||

One of the consequences was that our spontaneous act of civil disobedience became the *ad hoc* subject of the next meeting of the Studies in Contemporary Issues at the public library. The group had quickly become a symposium for the sober-faced. The Somber Individuals Commenting Intelligently made me rage inside my cage of emotional containment. When thought fused to feeling, I wanted to burst, not burble.

My caricatures of Goodbrand and DiCristo, I thought, launched the

session with elbowflapping, handwaving gusto. The rumors that Goodbrand had gone to the School Board to demand our expulsion and talked to Constable Lawless about arresting us exhilarated me almost as much as they irritated me.

“Well, you really stirred the pot, that’s for sure” McBride said. “In class last Friday, Hump was telling anybody who’d listen, ‘Relic’s a Communist.’”

“‘Why do you think he’s a Communist?’ I asked him.

“‘Cuz I don’t like him, and I don’t like what he did.’”

“‘That doesn’t make him a Communist,’ I told him. ‘If you don’t like him, why don’t you just call him a yetch?’”

“‘Cuz I know a Communist when I see one, and he’s a freakin’ Communist.’”

“Pete Impala said something about that last Saturday at Stone’s,” I said, replaying Impala, in gray dresspants instead of jeans, squinting at me through his Lucky Strike haze, the first time he ever went out of his way to sit next to Brod and me at Stone’s: a cool guy like Dale hanging with Brod and Edsel, maybe they’re not such creeps, hey. “He said Hump told Bambi I was a Communist. The way I figure it, Hump started dating Pete’s sister Debbie because he wasn’t getting anywhere with Bambi. He still wants to make sure I don’t. Meanwhile, Pete looks like he’s trying to get something going with Bambi. But Hump hasn’t threatened *him*. Anyway, I came up with a plan of my own...” Even I was tired of boring my friends with Bambi’s truly magnificent beauty...her blonde halo, her ocean-green eyes, her cherubic smile with little dimples when she pouted, her creamy telephone voice that never said yes to my weekly beg for a date but never told me to buzz off. Every day between classes lately I’d seen her leaning against Impala’s locker and Impala tilting his long tapered torso as if to pounce on her. She wouldn’t say she was dating him but she wouldn’t go out with me either. Fuck it! I decided with a loser’s perverse glee. It’s time I had a little fun. “And Brod agreed to help me. We set up my tape recorder at his house yesterday and made a few phone calls...”

Brod: (*faking British accent*) “Good afternoon. My name is Gardner Whitehead, and I am a Special Investigator with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Domestic Subversion Unit. According to information we have received, you are acquainted with an individual by the name of Edsel Relic. Is this correct?”

Bambi: “Yes...”

"It has come to our attention that Edsel Relic is a member of the West Mannamok Chapter of the Junior Communist League, an organization dedicated to overthrowing the United States Government. There are one hundred and sixty-nine such chapters in the state of Connecticut, one for each town. The impressionable, misguided youths who belong to this treasonous organization are required to undergo intensive brainwashing which indoctrinates them into the Communist belief system. The Federal Government would appreciate any help you, as a patriotic American, could give us so that we can eradicate this budding menace to our national security. Has Edsel Relic ever asked you to help him overthrow the United States Government?"

"No..."

"To your knowledge, has he ever expressed an urge to overthrow the United States Government?"

"I'm sorry. I can't help you."

"Thank you for your time. If you should become aware of any subversive activities by this deeply troubled young man, would you please contact me at my office in Washington, D.C.? The future of our nation may be at stake."

Bambi hangs up.

Brod turns to me. "I think she bought it."

An hour later I call Bambi. Moments of idle chatter, then: "Are you a Communist?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering."

"Actually, I'm an Anarchist."

"What's an Anarchist?"

"That's someone who doesn't believe in any government at all."

McBride's laugh split the air: "While you were giving her lessons in esoteric politics, I was playing Twenty Questions with the teachers." Now that Brod and I—the quiet kids—had rebelled, the teachers turned to McBride for explanations. A logical choice. Surely this misfit folkie, too snooty to go to faculty cocktail parties, could explain us to these good, hard-working, middleclass citizens. Someday Hump and Mack would stop bashing the boys from the next town and coming into class with last night's liquor swelling their brains. They'd knock up some chicks, settle into families and factory jobs. Easy enough to figure. But us.... "We know what they don't believe in,' Mel Olds was saying. 'But what do they believe in?"

“It’s hard to explain,’ I told him. ‘They believe in *different* things.’”

When the group stopped laughing, McBride tried to focus the discussion while he still had the chance to control it by asking Brod to give his reasons for sitting during the pledge.

“I just couldn’t see myself standing because someone told me we should declare ourselves superior to other nations,” Brod explained calmly, his green eyes glowing gently as they made contact with the faces circling the table. He raised his hands as if lifting a globe. “If we really want to have peace in the world, we have to look at ourselves as a world, and as equals in the world. Matter of fact, it seemed to me that we’d be supporting war by standing and asserting through a pledge that we, as a people, are superior to all other people.”

I huffed and puffed my way through the pledge line by line when my turn came...hands waving, elbows flapping, eyes dancing the tightwire of earnest faces...repeating my thoughts as they happened, hoping the other members would perceive my remarks as particulars that supported Brod’s universal. McBride must have perceived them as a personal digression because he directed the discussion toward Gandhi, King, Thoreau and their ideas on civil disobedience before asking the other SICIs to state their own views.

“I agree with civil disobedience in the South,” Dale said through a polite symposium grin. “I agree with civil disobedience here, too. I just didn’t want to be jumped by the townies.” He tittered.

David Wynn took an appraising pause. “I think civil disobedience might be appropriate in extreme situations,” he said, as if making a guest appearance on *Meet the Press*. “But I would question whether the situation we’re discussing was extreme enough.” The Class President’s well-phrased moderation no doubt would get him elected to public office.

Sid Silverman leaned back slightly in his chair, his left arm extended so that his hand rested on the round table as if on a lectern. “Civil disobedience has validity when performed from a reasoned perspective,” he commented with a political analyst’s measured resonance as his gaze settled on Brod. “On the other hand, it can border on anarchy when performed by the unreasoning elements of society.” The sunset blazing through the Library window bounced off the glasses of the aspiring Eric Severeid, tinting his laser stare blood-red as he aimed it at me.

“It’s like ironic that they teach us Thoreau, then call us in when we do

something Thoreau might have done," I blurted against the sharp burn of his dissection.

"You're supposed to *study* ideas, not *act* on them." McBride's laugh sawed through the premise. Our advisor couldn't even keep the lid on himself.

"If we do anything again, he'll expel us."

"If he hasn't done it by now, he won't. And if he did, you'd practically be guaranteed admission at Goddard or Reed." As McBride's eyes scanned the circle of faces his beefy belly rose with his breath, then settled. "But this brings us to the other question we have to ask in relation to civil disobedience: What constitutes a reasonable response to social protest?"

"DiCristo's response wasn't rational, never mind reasonable," I said. I told the SICIs about my visit to his office. "I mean, whatever its symbolic value, when you come right down to it, the flag is nothing more than a piece of cloth."

"It's important to bear in mind the attachment people have to the symbols that represent their strongest values," Silverman said through a glint and a grin disturbingly similar to the principal's.

"But they *aren't* their strongest values. Don't you see? The actions they've taken to defend their values have defeated those very same values."

"I think one point Edsel and I were trying to make," Brod said, "is that we have to look beyond symbols."

"Empty symbols," I spat.

"They can't be empty if they provoke such strong responses," Silverman countered.

"But by their actions, they've shown they don't support those values."

No, no. Silverman shook the suggestion out of his head. "Their actions show that they *do* in fact support them."

"Then, look at who's enforcing those values. Hump and Mack, the Swamp Yankee squadron. They've been following Brod and me down the halls. 'Freakin' commies! Freakin' cowards!' or 'What the hell good are you if you won't fight for your country!' We don't salute the flag, and we've got these assholes coming at us like we're the Soviet Invasion incarnate."

"In a democracy, you can't have freedom to act without freedom from consequences," he said, affecting a mature tone. "I'll grant that they're not the people *I* would choose to defend American values..."

"But they are the most vociferous," McBride said through his scraping

laugh. “Hump was going on and on about Brod and Edsel not standing to salute the flag, too. So, I asked him, ‘How many reasons can you think of to salute the flag?’ He huffed and puffed and said ‘One is all I need: It’s *my* country.’ I said, ‘Listen. You may not like what they did, but I’ll tell you this: for every good reason you can think of to salute the flag, they can think of two, maybe even three better reasons for not saluting it.’ He settled down pretty quickly, but not until he called me a freakin’ Commie too.” Another raw guffaw.

We never did reach a consensus. Although McBride struggled to keep the discussion within rational bounds, he seemed to sympathize with Brod and me more than with Wynn and Silverman. In defending us to the Bully Squad, though, the early anti-Bomb protester had received a reminder of the consequences of civil disobedience.

After the library closed, we stood on the sidewalk reprising the SICI meeting. Before going to his car, McBride said, “If I were you, I’d stand next time. You don’t have to recite the pledge. Just keep the assholes off your back.”

—It doesn't sound like they were ready for you in that little town.

—Well, we were doing this stuff four or five years before the Sixties really hit. And unlike some old farts, I don't repent the, ahem, folly of my youth—even though there are plenty of days when my memories make me blush. I did it, so I live with it.

—If you never had Tourette do you think you still would have rebelled?

—I think so. Without supercharged neurons, my reactions would've been less extreme. But I had it. I mean, it made me count the number of kids calling me names in the hall, just like it makes me count the number of steps to my car, the strokes of my deodorant stick...

—The precise head counts in the jazz reviews you write for my Features editor.

—All that. There were at least fifty kids ragging me on any given day in 9th and 10th grade. Hump became a short-hand for all the punks he empowered. And a symbol.

—Which might be why you have trouble seeing him clearly now.

—True. I remember Hump as a Brute Force and a bestial sexuality I was too timid to cope with. You have to understand, from the time we moved there in 4th grade I felt so isolated out there...my family fighting, no real friends...so alienated from the life around me that I probably couldn't see them as people any more than they could see me as a person. Even now, when I try to remember them or recreate them, they're more like apparitions, oppressive forces that change shape according to my perception of the moment. It's like I perceive them as fragments of myself attacking me from outside myself. No matter how hard I shake my head, I can't shake those perceptions loose. Maybe it's an obsessive-compulsive disorder. It started in external reality, as best I can figure—but it always comes back to me living

inside my own head no matter how much I try to get outside of it.

—Maybe you're going back to face your Tourette, as much as them. Only now, with the emotional distance, you might be able to see what was real and what was inside your head.

—Of course, it's from the vantage point of being inside my head, only at a better time in my life. I'm still obsessing about going.

—I've noticed.

—It's not an easy decision for me to make. I'm beginning to feel like a parody of Hamlet: "To go, or not to go..."

—Well, you don't have to go and if you do go, you don't have to write about it. We can always fill the space with another piece.

—I might not want to write an article about reminiscing with Hump or Goodbrand. But fiction I'm already doing.

—By the way, what's that you're reading?

—Thomas Wolfe. You Can't Go Home Again.

—It figures.

THE GHOSTS OF FLIGHT 1963

fly across phantom skies united American silverstreaks ephemeral memory faintly humming now flying closer closer close-up into the Mindscreen Theater Monitor data sifting data shifting 1234567 12345678 123456789 Tourette compulsive counting sequences counting down to landing counting down 1098 to countdown 1098765 counting down 1098765432 to 1 Airport Terminal passengers unload at the gate Dale and Brod stroll past Security Gates broadbrimmed gray State trooper hats sounds voices washing through concourse windtunnel hotdog frenchfry pizza smell carousel spinning suitcases and fruitcases to basketcases bumping hips butts and elbows Dale deftly dodging through to get his two Brod leaning against column amused chuckle till peopleclutter clears to collect his one "It's done" Dale says with a whiffy huff "I could use a drink to unwind" from the airport treadmill people floating to and from at the same pace same vacant faces as if they were walking stop off at wine-red carpet amber lantern ambience cozying off to one side of the concourse to catch a breath at black plate-sized cocktail table

Dale: "Whew! I haven't traveled this far in years."

Brod: "Really! In the 60's I think I crossed a continent or an ocean every year."

"Sooner or later you have to find a place to settle."

"It's unhealthy not to"

slides into the next stage of catch-up, how Dale found his place early, drafted after college, stationed in Thailand, a job with the American Embassy, then back to Bangkok at the first chance to transfer

from Germany, “the Land of the Living Robots hee hee.” To which Brod thoughtfully comments about the broadening effects of travel except for the trip to India aborted by his marital split, then having to start the Baroque Inn on a shoestring. “When I started it, I was literally broke.”

“But you married the waitress with the Rich Daddy,” Dale flips through a playful grin, then whips down a double bourbon.

Brod blinks at Dale’s uncanny knack for knifing to the core of a situation. It’s been years since he’s known anyone who could do it as well. But it’s hit a little too close to home, literally and figuratively. Head lowered, eyes peeking upward, he admits, “Matter of fact, she did have a trust fund. Are you still writing?”

“From time to time I’ll dash a poem off, but my, uh, priorities have changed.”

“I know what you mean. Running the Inn takes up most of my time. Making good food is an art in itself, I’ve found.”

“I realized I wasn’t going to be the next William Carlos Williams.”

“Maturity teaches us some rewarding lessons.”

“It certainly does.” Dale’s grin reflects the amber, then recedes to noncommittal. His deep blue eyes dart with a veiled trace of discomfort toward the glasses clattering in the background, then back to Brod. “All through this trip I’ve had a strange feeling...like I’m acting independently but I’m really living inside someone else’s head? Are you getting any feelings like that?”

Brod leans back, ponders a moment, then bends forward. “Matter of fact, I *do* feel that the things I’m doing right now are beyond my control. It’s quite unsettling, actually.”

Dale nods. “Almost a feeling of *insistence*, a manic energy like Relic’s.”

“I felt it hammering at me, wearing me down. The way Edsel did when he lost his driving privileges.”

“Sometimes Relic used his energy to good advantage, though. I was surprised, like that, when he actually bought himself that bass. With no wheels to get around, I thought for sure he was just spinning in circles.”

“A good part of the time he was.”

“He sure spun in circles around Bambi Belair.”

“Too bad he didn’t put his energy to better use. I’ve never understood why he persisted in areas where he wasn’t wanted.”

“I do. When you’re not wanted as badly as he wasn’t wanted, you have

to be persistent to stay alive." Laughs. "Did you ever hear from him?"

Memories spin oak walls baroque violins counterpoint a hitching voice counterpoints Brod's resistance to the stammering persistence of the death-soaked voice dripping depression counterpoints his wish to wipe away the memory the unpleasantness of memory the insistent memory. "About twenty years ago he stopped by for dinner."

"It's been longer for me." Memories of downtown Hartford chance encounter rise from dust shake notes flutter to ghost streets smoke-smudged tavern windows. "I ran across him once, invited him to come up to Boston sometime. He never did." Dale raises his eyebrows, a "What more can you do?" gesture, then follows with a shouldershrug.

"He had some health problems. Cancer..."

"Our Boy hasn't had an easy time of it, I see."

"Matter of fact, I thought he might be dead. Then my brother sent me a record he found in a cutout rack in Manhattan, Edsel reciting odes to striptease dancers and other material in that vein, with jazz accompaniment, and a woman posing suggestively on a black-and-white cover."

"Relic went *noir!*" Dale's shoulders convulse around his snicker. "I always *thought* he'd wander off into the darkness."

"The record was pretty harrowing."

"I can imagine."

|||||

"I can't imagine why we're driving all the way up here," Coop says from the van's backseat.

"Bambi told me to drive up here."

"If you drive there, they will come," Pete intones with mock-prophetic reverb. "*Field of Dreams*, hey."

"*Field of Shit*, you mean."

Hump floors the van forward. Impala bounces against the headrest.

"Slow down, Hump. I don't wanna read my name in the obits."

"That was a long time ago, Hump," Coop says. "You've Come a Long Way, Baby."

"Yeah, you're right, Coop. But...if it wasn't for freakin' Goodbrand...I *had* the arm."

Coop grips the headrests of the front seats, then pokes his head between

them. It's water over the dam, Hump."

"I coulda made the Bigs, Coop."

"Name me one person who doesn't look in the mirror and ask himself, 'What could I have been?'"

|||||

"When I think about Relic—every four or five years—I see him as a mirror of what I could have been if I didn't have myself together." Dale crosses one spindle of leg over the other, rocks his wingtip up and down.

"Really! I always thought it was the opposite. Your writing talent, your musicianship, your success with women...I think he would have liked to emulate you, but couldn't get past his personal problems to do it."

"Some guys have it, some don't. I guess the answer is clear."

"We'd better start looking for a way to get to West Mannamok," Brod says.

"Something's telling me if we go outside, West Mannamok will come to us."

The minute they glide through the terminal's sliding glass exit, a metallic pink Dodge Caravan with *Pink Elephant Café* emblazoned in cobalt blue glitter swerves from the left lane to the curb, then screeches to a stop. Hellfire smell of burning rubber.

"West Mannamok's coming a bit too close to home," Brod says, thinking back to his father's nightly stagger into the house. Part of the distant past leading to a present of twelve-step programs slowly closing the space between them. But the memories... His lips purse uneasily as the van's side panel slides back, revealing the familiar faces, heavy with jowls and furrows, under unfamiliar hairstyles flecked with varying degrees of gray.

Dale eases into the "Great to see you!" camaraderie while Brod shakes hands cordially and eases into the far corner of the backseat.

"We're gonna have a *good* time," Hump howls.

"Yeah!" Pete says. "Like the party where Coop and me decided we were goin' to Mexico. We rode around afterward, drinkin', singin' Spanish songs and gettin' into donut fights. Dale, you remember that?"

"I wasn't there."

"You *weren't!*" A puzzled look shades his face. "You missed a *great* bash, hey."

“The time of our lives,” Coop adds.

Dale glances at Brod’s closed hand of a face. Then his words, but not the words he wants to use, squeeze through resistant lips: “We were, uh, making plans of our own.”

(In his studio, EDSEL watches the VGA monitor. Onscreen a camera pans a TV network newsroom, then stops on a medium-range shot of WALTER CRONKITE.)

CRONKITE

While the Ghosts on Flight 1963 continue to make their way across Edsel Relic's Mindscreen Theater to reunite with the other third of their artistic triumvirate—

EDSEL

Whaddaya mean, the Other Third!

CRONKITE

(Close-up.)—let us look back on those days in 1963, before the Shooting Star crossed over West Mannamok, with the valuable vantage of hindsight. *(Pause. Onscreen we see newsreel footage of events of the period while CRONKITE continues in a voiceover.)* The Sixties were an era of change. President John F. Kennedy had brought a new vitality to the White House. Martin Luther King's attempt to end segregation in the South had gained national attention. While prominent figures such as these worked to change the course of American History, the members of the generation whose consciousness they helped to shape were beginning and ending their own youthful journeys.

(Cut to interior. BROD's bedroom. BROD sits on the high, backless stool in front of his drafting table. EDSEL sprawls on the lower bunk. BROD draws leisurely on his sandblasted British briar while EDSEL puffs

frantically on his sleek Danish pipe.)

EDSEL

Wick—this hipster friend of Dale’s—just got back from Paris. I guess the Seers wanted to give him their own private welcome home party tonight.

BROD

(Car lights flicker across the tall window.) There’s Garrett now.

EDSEL

It’ll be interesting to see how Europe changed him. I mean, I never figured the cat would quit college. More like he’d get his degree, make a good living and never *question* anything, y’know what I mean?

BROD

Matter of fact, it wasn’t quite what I expected, either.

(Doors slam. Commotion in the diningroom, then kitchen. GARRETT, wearing European peasant gear, steps into the bedroom, shakes hands with EDSEL. Preliminary “Welcome home” and “How was Europe?” chatter, then:)

GARRETT

I heard this terrific jazz pianist in Paris one night. Ever hear of Bud Powell?

EDSEL

Bud Powell! *Yeah!* He’s on this Charlie Parker side, *Jazz at Massey Hall*. It’s one of my favorite records. Y’mean, you *like* jazz now?

GARRETT

I always liked *some* of it, Edsel. But I got to hear a lot of it over there. Classical, too. Just think, they’ve got a whole continent of longhairs and hepcats, just like you two guys.

EDSEL

I'd love to dig the scene over there. Hell, I'd love the Village. I'd love anyplace that got me out of here.

GARRETT

There's nothing here...nuthin' atall but the fahmas. (*Laughs.*) Come down to Brooklyn some weekend. You guys can sleep on the floor in my room.

EDSEL

Hell, if I came down, I'd be (*mock bass voice*): "The Thing That Wouldn't Leave."

(*Studio. EDSEL brooding on his stool like "The Thinker" on the VGA.*)

I didn't know *how* I'd get out of West Mannamok after graduation. Just that I had to, somehow. But City Lights Books and the Eighth Street Bookshop never answered my desperate letters begging for a job that would support me while I wrote my "brilliant, inspired, excoriating" (so said my mind's *Saturday Review*) novel detailing the Hell of smalltown life. At least my mother had given back my wheels. I could ride the Corvair away from her bitching and the retching noises Fat Boy made whenever I got within six feet of him. Some nights the car seemed more my home than the Ozzie and Harriet Dream House I'd begged her not to sell after she and my father split up. I needed to find a home at least a hundred miles away.

(*Newsroom. CRONKITE shuffles copy till the closeup.*)

CRONKITE

King's efforts to integrate lunch counters in the South stirred discussion across the nation, including the secluded New England community of West Mannamok.

(*BROD's diningroom. BROD, EDSEL and GARRETT move away from the table toward BROD's bedroom. MR. and MRS. ALLEN remain seated.*)

MR. ALLEN

If they wanna sit at the counter, let 'em stand in line like everybody else.

(GARRETT *seethes as he follows BROD and EDSEL into BROD's bedroom.*)

GARRETT

Every time I come back here, he's gotta say something like that.

BROD

It's John Barleycorn talking, not him.

GARRETT

I'd think my own father would at least cut me some slack with Yolanda.

EDSEL

It's amazing what you've got to put up with. I don't know if I could handle the hatred people dish out when they see an interracial relationship.

BROD

Oh, I think *I* could. It really comes down to how much you love the person. But it's amazing the way people are. The other night, at Sid Silverman's, he was telling me that Willie Wiggins asked Debbie Impala to dance. When they got out on the floor, everybody else stopped dancing and just stared at them.

EDSEL

That's weird. I mean, I thought they liked Wiggins.

GARRETT

When he's scoring points for the Varsity, they do. Otherwise it's, "Stay in your place."

BROD

Sid said Hump nearly got into it with Wiggins, called him a “coon.”

EDSEL

It figures. Christ! I'll be so glad when I can get out of this fucking town.

GARRETT

Where do you want to go?

EDSEL

Anywhere. San Francisco, the Village...Hell, if your friends ever need a room-mate, let me know.

GARRETT

Weeeeellll, Uh-hed-sel, *they* don't...

EDSEL

I didn't think so.

GARRETT

But now that you mention it, *I* do.

EDSEL

Really!

GARRETT

Really. The rent's twenty-five bucks a month. Think you can get it?

EDSEL

If I ask for cash graduation presents...

GARRETT

It's only for the summer. The guys are paying the rest so they can keep the place. They'll move back for the Fall semester.

EDSEL

Well, I'll have my own place in the Village by then.

(*Newsroom.*)

CRONKITE

If racial integration represented the era's dominant cry for freedom, the urge to personal and artistic freedom also contributed to the joyful noise of the times.

(*Studio. VGA monitor.*)

"You'll get boned like you've never been boned before," Dale said, lowering his stereo's needle to the opening groove of "Out of This World" on Coltrane's new release. "Wick smuggled in some dynamite shit from Paris. I mean, *fine* shit! We were riding home last night, *completely* stoned like that, and I hallucinated this red cow right in the middle of the road." He nodded toward the road at the end of his driveway, then rolled his eyes with controlled disbelief. While Coltrane's tenor sandblasted and swept away the boredom of everyday reality my imagination rode his pumping rhythm toward the night Wick, the legendary writer, hipster, pothead and Burroughs protégé, would initiate me into the overlapping realities of highpowered pot and Burroughs' fold-in technique at the Seers' jam session. Besides meeting Wick I'd get to play bass with the cats, this time knowing the instrument a little. I'd have more fun. The experience would help me get ready to play in the jazz clubs when I moved down to Brooklyn.

From the moment I picked him up at Dale's Wick was the roman candle I'd expected. In his black dustman's cap and Swiss leather vest he bounced toward my Corvair with a boppish energy that replayed Bird's syncopated rhythms. His hand dipped toward the passenger's door. Then, a flash of crystal blue eyes over a littleboy grin his only warning, he jerked his body to the left. His right arm and leg spazzed outward. His face contorted to a van-dyked gargoyle before relaxing to a satisfied smile. *Exactly like Dale!* I thought.

Dale wedged into the backseat with the bass and tenor, the only time I ever saw him surrender the front seat. Wick pulled a joint from his pack of Camels, lit it and passed it to me. While I followed the reflector on Brod's motorcycle toward Wethersfield the compartment swelled with gasps, coughs and sucks of air. "I don't feel anything yet," I said, when we parked in front of Rock's house.

"You'll feel it when you stand up," Wick says like a man who knows his stash.

While he gives Brod his virgin tokes I step into this Norman Rockwell streetlight scene invaded by intercontinental ballistic hipsters and laugh and laugh and laugh, laugh till my lips ache from stretching, laugh till my mouth puckers dry, laugh till...this pressure inside my forehead! Dizzy! I'd better...Jesus! I'm *ten feet tall!* "My feet look so...*small*...down there, like looking at cars from the top of the Empire State building."

Wick laughs. "You're boned, Relic."

"Tee hee! Relic's *boned!*"

"Boned and stoned."

"Stoned and boned."

"I moaned and groaned that I wasn't stoned. And now I'm"

"BONED AND STONED"

the three of us come in together, then scat at one another "BOOBEDOO-BWAAA" as we unload my bass and Dale's tenor. What a *gas!* But...the cops. What if they...No, Brod under the light, he's cool, he's looking...

"Hey, Brod! Did you get enough?" Dale stagewhispers.

"Oh...yeah," voice distant and mystical.

"You're so sensitive to everything, I knew you'd get it the first time."

"Oh, I got it alright. Matter of fact, I'm really grooving on this maple."

Dig it! Brod's using jive talk!

"That's Allen," Dale says with a salesman's sunny pitch. "The cat *loves* Nature the way I do."

Wick's giggle reminds me of Dale's. Dale's giggle reminds me of Wick's. Wick flashes me his Golden Boy grin. "Relic. You dig Nature too?"

"Relic's strictly City," Dale says. "He digs concrete, people and the night."

"You'd *love* Paris, Relic. The Parisian chicks, man, they are *fine*."

"I'll take the Village and a Beat chick for now."

"Relic's got a pad in Brooklyn after graduation," Dale says.

"It isn't the Village, but..."

"It's just a hop on the subway, man."

"As long as I can get my hop, it's groovy."

"Relic likes to crack puns," Dale explains.

"Puns are neat," Wick says.

"The Seers are neat," Dale says, then launches a kaleidoscope of jerks

and twitches that mimic Wick's introductory shtick. Brod eyes him with a look of mild amusement. I'm tempted to break into some Dadaistic gyrations myself. But Dale always tells me my humor doesn't click, so I don't.

The scene clicks into high gear the minute we step inside Rock's house. The wannabe Seers maul Wick with bear hugs and waterpump handshakes and bombard him with questions about making the scene in Paris. Black, Oink and Rock stand a step back from the crowd around Wick; the Seers have already given him their Welcome Home.

"You've got to be strong, man," Wick says, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "We're too *bright*, too *sensitive*, too *aware* to let the squares steamroll us, man. Dig it: *we cannot be stopped*." There he stands: living proof that the world *will* come to you on your terms. Dale mirrors Wick, grinning as though the world's come to him as well. Meanwhile, I'm wondering from the sidelines what happens if you hold your ground and the world doesn't come to you at all.

"Drums, man!" Wick rushes toward the traps, starts rumbling and crashing over them like a Holy Fool. Dale and Rock pick up the cue. So do I. We vamp into "Green Dolphin Street."

The music sweeps me into its surging current. Wick's thrashing drumming tightens Dale's whiteboy tone, drives it toward metallic hardness. Dale's long fingers ripple sheets of rumbling notes over the ratatat-ratatat-triplets spinning crisply off the snare. His tenor howls and shrieks over the sock and ride cymbals Wick bashes with tantrumlike insistence and tantric intensity. My bass strings snap on his rimshot accents then spring waves of sound into the sea swelling around me. I don't know what note's coming out of the instrument next but each one seems to fit. We're flying! Rock soars through his half-dozen choruses, airy runs racing to hammering octave climaxes, then chords very softly and nods to me.

I start my solo simply, working a few short phrases into double stops. Wick blurts a high-pitched "Yeah!" so I repeat the phrase a little faster, rising on the crest of his cymbals till I strum and slash a climax. Then Wick launches a one-man tidal wave.

After the tune Dale rests his horn on its stand and turns to Wick. "You must've been *shedding* in Paris, man."

"Thanks, man, but I didn't have time to play."

"You'd never know it," I said.

"That's 'cause Wick's got *soul*. Hee hee!"

Not to mention sex appeal. The minute Wick steps out from behind his traps the chicks...DeSoto, Little Theater and Hollywood...follow his lithe bounce into the kitchen that smells like a tea factory on fire.

"You sound good, man," Wick says, passing me a J. "Dale tells me you've come a long way in a short time."

Funny, I never heard that. Just doses of approval as carefully measured as the marijuana he taps into his torpedo butts. "Dale tells me you know William Burroughs. He's one of my favorite writers."

"Burroughs is a heavy cat, man. *Very heavy.*" To get in with Burroughs Wick had to prove he was heavy himself. He paid his dues smuggling hash across the French-Italian border in test tubes stuffed up his ass. Probably didn't sweat a bead when he walked through the Customs line, either. If I had night terrors from trying to smuggle *Naked Lunch* into the country by mail I'd be pissing guilt in buckets at the border.

Wick laughs at my smuggling nightmare. "If Customs has the slightest suspicion, man, they'll strip you down. You've really got to hold your cool with them."

Wick held his cool enough to impress Burroughs. They collaborated on some cut-ups and fold-ins. "Nothing published, though. Not yet, anyway."

"I've been trying to find magazines where Burroughs uses his fold-in technique. All I've done is read about it. Is he trying to explore new dimensions of reality?" I pause. Blush. Did I have to sound so corny? Christ! The post-rush ripple of the pot high spins my thoughts into the whirlpool of voices and bodies around me.

Wick's bopping on his toes, saying through his holding-court grin: "The new dimensions of reality are already here, man. You just have to be hip enough to see them, to dig how they flash *deja vu*, back and forth, into past and future, like that. Like, a Norman Rockwell streetlight scene invaded by Dale's whiteboy tone a tall Peter Paul and Mary blonde with stunning cheekbones over the keys sock and ride cymbals with tantrumlike insistence across the French-Italian Border. You've got to be strong, man. Dig it: *we cannot be form-fitting.*"

Did I just hallucinate a fold-in? Before I can ask Wick to elaborate a tall Peter Paul and Mary blonde with stunning cheekbones floats through the door, her pale crystal eyes streaming radiance on Wick. They embrace in front of the refrigerator. One of the form-fitting black leather boots that encase her calves up to her knees lifts off the ground and curls around the

backs of his legs. Her thigh-muscles stretch her skintight denims. They kiss, then climb hand in hand up the flight of stairs where Dale went with Little Theater a few minutes earlier. So much for reality checking. I look into the livingroom, spot Diane DeSoto. But she's talking to Hollywood. If her eye caught mine at all her gaze hasn't lingered enough to tell me she knows or cares that I'm there and (thanks to the buzz and the music) finally brave enough to approach her. Like Dale says, chicks get funny about things like that. But Wick...The cat didn't even have to talk! Sheer magnetism. If only I could do that! I wish as I approach the guys talking to Brod about his motorcycle near the kitchen door. For a guy who expressed only casual interest in Dale's invitation to party Brod's sure glowing. Usually people whose restless energy sends them questing at the edge of law and madness are my thing, not his. Brod likes theosophy, the *Bhagvad Gita* and the slow, wavelike crescendi of symphonic music. But tonight he's swinging with the scene. And so am I...or trying to. But I've heard the bike stories before and want to learn more about Wick and the Seers' scene.

"Who's that chick Wick cut out with?" I ask Black.

Black turns slowly, almost reluctantly, away from the talk of crosscountry motorcycle trips. "That's his chick from high school. She's always had the hots for him."

"I wish I could be that lucky."

Black lights a bone. "There's lots of hip chicks in the City, Relic," he says, a trace of regret riding his rasping outbreath.

The moment Black starts to turn toward the motorcycle conversation the reefer surge revs my mouth: "I've got it all worked out man listen like I've *really* got it all worked out man dig it Brod's brother Garrett and I are gonna split a pad down in Brooklyn it'll be a gas it'll be a groove I'll write my novel get it published write record reviews for *Downbeat* I'll dig Monk at the Five Spot Trane at Birdland Miles at the Vanguard I'll play bass in the clubs when I'm not writing I'll be grooving with the chicks in the Village yeah man then when my novel hits it's Tangier Mexico City San Francisco North Beach Venice West Paris living on free love and royalties and playing with Bud Powell for kicks I'm on my way I'm gonna make it I'm gonna miss you cats but I've gotta go gotta get out like I've got it all worked out man."

Motormouth pauses for breath. Mingus's vocal punctuates the rap: "Oh Lawd, it's ridiculous..."

"You've got to find a job first," Black says.

“Odd jobs man like Kerouac like Baldwin like Selby messenger dishwasher short order cook bus boy salad boy in a year it won’t matter because I’ll be published the reviews will be out the royalties coming in the tramp steamers will be taking me out of here you guys can say what you want but I’ve got it all worked out.”

Mingus intones: “Oh Lawd, it’s ridiculous!”

“I’m heading out of this poor excuse for a home movie to live some real dreams.”

Black shakes his head. “Relic, I don’t see how you’re gonna live in this world.”

(*Newsroom. Medium shot*)

CRONKITE

In contrast to Edsel Relic, the majority of West Mannamok High School’s Class of 1963 were more concerned with graduating than with living in the world. It was, if nothing else, the practical New Englanders’ way of taking first things first.

(*Studio. VGA monitor.*)

The Seniors hanging out in Big Ed’s Soda Shop chirped, whooped and clanged their enthusiasm above the pinball music clacking in the back. Except for Dale and me.

“You’re not going to *Graduation*?” Bambi asked me through a puzzled look. She shrugged Impala’s arm off her shoulders. He stretched it along the back of the oak nook.

“No, I’m not.”

The school colors glittered in Bambi’s pupils. “How can you *not* go?”

“Why should I? None of my friends are going.”

Impala looked across the table. “You’re not goin’, Dale?”

“No.”

Impala tried to draw Bambi to him. “Edsel and Dale, they march to a different drummer,” he said, lowering his arm onto her shoulders. She leaned against it.

“We’re not listening to a different drummer,” Dale said. “We’re listening to a different *band*.”

Next to Dale, Pete's sister Debbie drew on her Newport, posed with it alongside her right cheek, then streamed out the smoke. The chicks in Wethersfield did the Look of Sophistication better, I thought. "When *I'm* a senior, *I'll* go," she said.

"You really *should* go," Bambi insisted. "It's a special moment. It would really be a shame if you didn't share that bond with your classmates."

"Alienation and hostility are my only bonds with my classmates," I countered, goofing on my existential *angst*.

"But these are the best years of your *life*."

"That's why I don't want to spend them lipsynching Uncle Rico." To think I believed those empty-headed clichés of hers were home-spun wisdom! Now that my romantic fog had lifted it was obvious to me that Impala was more her type. If she'd had eyes for me, though, my pheromonic drummer would have jumped the tempo.

|||||

DiCristo's eyes stared past me as though he were speaking to a Sunday morning TV audience. "Graduation is a very important event in a young man's life," he said, then paused. His priestly grin radiated above his folded hands. "I know how proud I felt at my own graduation. If I had chosen, like you, not to attend the ceremony, I would feel a tremendous void inside myself today. As an educator, as a person, and as your *friend*, I would feel terrible if you were to have any lifelong regrets about this occasion."

Old Glory rippled above the stirring breeze of his concern.

"I don't see myself regretting something I haven't been part of," I said. Would my strength of conviction uproot the seed of doubt he was trying to plant? There was always the *chance* he was right. It didn't seem likely, but maybe the adults knew something I didn't. Maybe in twenty years Hump's threats and taunts and tricks would seem like crude gestures of camaraderie. I couldn't imagine it, but...

He leaned, grinning, over his desk, as if to share the confidence that would convince me he was right. "I can assure you, Edsel," he said with a warm tone of concern, "that if you're not part of this Graduation Ceremony, you will have lifelong regrets over not receiving your high school diploma."



DiCristo threatened Brod and Dale as well. Brod shrugged as if to say “What can you do?” Dale said, “I’ll pick up a nickel bag from Wick. We’ll get good and boned before we go, all three of us.”

It didn’t quite work out that way. Brod wanted to start his summer job at Indian Lake Lodge and build a nest egg for his trip to California. Dale, who worked to give the impression he lived independent of his parents, said he had to ride to the ceremony with them. He gave me one of the joints he got from Wick.

An hour before the ceremony I wheeled the Corvair into the school parking lot. Looked around. Nobody there. Good. Ducked low in the driver’s seat. Caught my buzz. When I skulked out of the car its creaking door crackled my paranoia. Nobody there. Good. Strolling toward the school I tapped at the maple leaves that seemed just beyond my reach. The glaze of the late-afternoon sun seeped through my skin. Its lazy warmth glowed inside me. After going through the motions of the ceremony I’d walk into a new life. It was just a matter of struggling through the cap-and-gown game.

While Brod and I struggled into our green ceremonial costumes David Wynn, dapper in tassel, toga and grin, offered Brod a hearty handshake. “I really enjoyed the way you presented your Philosophy of Life at the last Seminar. In a time when people are torn apart by their differences, it’s reassuring to hear a calm, unifying voice.”

Eyes widening graciously, Brod thanked him. At the final SICI seminar Brod explained that he tried to synthesize Eastern and Western thought in his search for a balance between their spiritual and our rational ways of knowing.

Wynn gave Brod his best wishes for a bright and prosperous future then glanced at me and caught my gaze sharp with envy. My turn to present my philosophy of life had come immediately after Brod’s near-perfect presentation. It felt as though someone had passed me a basketball but when I grabbed it, it turned into a half-dozen balls bouncing every whichway on the court. I scrambled to organize what I wanted to say but ended up ranting rage and hysteria and asserting that existence had no intrinsic meaning in the face of the Existential Void.

“And Edsel, I thought your presentation was...well, *interesting*.” Wynn’s even teeth planted a white picket fence between us, adorned with pansies,

petunias and little climbing plants. His hand stretched across the Suburban Divide. It seemed a long reach from his placid yard to my throbbing interior.

"Thanks," I said, then paused to contemplate how ambivalent the word—*his* word—"interesting" sounded. Was Mr. Clean patronizing me? Was he all corn buttered with sincerity behind that toothy barricade? If it *was* a barricade, how could he be, semantically speaking...or am I...yes, I *am*...being...yes, I *exist*...paranoid? Come on. Act straight. You've still got to get through the ceremony. All right. All shaped up now. Straight. "Actually, I wasn't satisfied. I had it more..." more what? Come on, you've got to direct some words at this grinning beacon of alertness..."*organized*," the accent sounding *straaange*, too emphatic, but too stilted too, almost robotic..."But when I s-started speaking, it..." it what?...*"dispersed"* (just like my thought). What was I talking about, anyway?

"It's always difficult to present your most personal feelings in front of a group," Wynn assured me.

I remembered what I was talking about. But Wynn had moved on to greener gladhanding pastures. Leaning toward Brod I whispered, "Did I sound okay when I was talking to him?"

"You sounded fine," he said.

"Man, am I *boned!*"

"Keep your cool. DiCristo's coming."

Nothing like the principal to bring you down. But there was Dale, a late arrival, walking two yards behind DiCristo's near-waddle and flinging his arms in mocking paroxysms.

"I'm so glad you boys were *willing* to attend. Has Dale arrived yet?"

Dale's spastic armsweep passed just behind the corner of DiCristo's eye. He was cutting it really close. "I'm right here, Mr. DiCristo."

Dale's hands whipped tight against his sides. DiCristo turned into the mocking light of Dale's subservient grin, then scissor-stepped a quarter-circle between us to hand each of us our yearbooks. He wished us warm congratulations, then excused himself to look for David Wynn.

DiCristo had already inscribed my front page: "The Lord gave you many talents. If you use them in a positive, less bitter way, your future will be bright. God's Personal Blessings To You." Apparently he was his own Hotline to Heaven. When I reached my yearbook picture I saw that the caption under it made no mention of my interest in writing, literature or jazz, just: "Enjoys intellectual discussions and smoking his pipe."

“Looks like somebody made a Serious attempt to capture my essence and portray it in larger-than-life terms,” I said, booming mock melodrama on the “serious.”

“Impala told me Sid Silverman *insisted* on writing the blurb for you,” Dale said.

I spotted Silverman listening to David Wynn talking to three other people and nodding along with them. Why was he *still* paying me back for my treating him so badly seven years earlier? He’d already printed one of my free verse poems as prose in the school newspaper and told me it didn’t look like poetry to him. Wasn’t that enough of a slam? Was he trying to make himself less of an outsider by diminishing me? Did I really give a good fuck? *No!* I was going to Brooklyn and not looking back.

Through the valedictorian’s speech, the salutatorian’s speech, the essayist’s speech and DiCristo’s and various civic leaders’ half-mumbled clichés I looked out on the crowd packing the metal chairs on the school’s baseball field and wondered if I’d stumbled into Pothead Hell: spending Eternity sweating under a cap and gown, waiting for the endless procession of half-hearted wishes to end and sensing they never would although right there in front of me sat living proof that things do end: my mother and father six rows back. But seeing them sitting in civilized proximity to each other for the first time in seven years lightened the ceremony’s oppressive air.

Then: the chaos of new graduates jumping out of gowns and into party gear, yearbooks and pens popping into my eyes like camera bulbs...cloud-bursts of tears from Bambi and all the other cheerleaders forced into the future of Instant Nostalgia...weepy grins, maudlin messages bubbling in my ears...all the while I’m trying to catch Brod and Dale before they bob away from me on the saltswollen sea of sentiment. Dale’s blond bangs are blending with the beige and brown mops cresting and falling over gowns and yearbooks.

CRONKITE

(*Voiceover.*) And now our *You Are There* cameras return you to June 1963. Here, right in front of us, we have Edsel Relic. Hello, Edsel.

EDSEL

(*Stops his breakneck pace. Spins till he spots the camera. His head twitches, up and to the right.*) Hi.

CRONKITE

Tell our viewing audience: now that you've graduated, what are your plans?

EDSEL

I'm moving to Brooklyn, where I'll write a Great American Novel about this hick town. Then, when my royalty checks start coming in, I'll live on the Left Bank of Paris with one of my many mistresses. Excuse me. I've got to catch up with some friends.

CRONKITE

Certainly. Thank you.

Brod's near-kinks have carried out of view. I strain my neck to scan the reception area for him, turn to check the corners and complete the circle inside the square room face to face with Hump's heavy features grinning thick and wide. "Congratulations! We made it through," he says.

"Congratulations." My rush to find my buddies carries my inflection beyond my attempt to sound lukewarm. But then, why not wish him good luck and good riddance! Why not chisel clichés into the Class Rock blocking my view of Dale's head suddenly surfacing in the distance! We exchange yearbooks. My signature ends with a get-it-done flourish just as a VA-ROOOOM! winds out of the school parking lot.

"Who was that masked man?" Hump tosses his Elvis wave in mock amazement.

I hand Hump his yearbook. "Brod's as eager to bolt as I am."

"Listen. I'm havin' a Graduation Bash out t' my place tonight. I saw Dale a minute ago..." nods toward the crush of graduates and parents near the exit... "told him you guys could come by with him."

"We're going out to McBride's."

"C'mon over *afterward*. We're gonna have a good time. *All* of us."

"You mean, you want me to drive Dale over because he doesn't have a license."

"No, I want everybody to come. The whole class!"

"Come on, Hump, we haven't exactly been bosom buddies."

A stunned expression shades his face, then: "Whaddaya *mean*? I never did *nothin'* to you."

I'm not going to stand around arguing with him. I've got to catch up with

Dale. In my wake I hear:
“C’mon by later then.”

CRONKITE

(Offscreen.) Hump. Hump Lawless...

HUMP

(Gaping at EDSEL’s back.) Geez! *(Turns to camera.)*

CRONKITE

Now that you’ve graduated, Hump, what are your plans?

HUMP

Pitch or play right field for the Yankees. There’s a tryout in a couple weeks. My arm’s still a little sore from pitching in the Conference Championship, but I’ll be ready.

Maybe I wasn’t ready to respond graciously to Hump’s invitation. Too little, years too late. Fuck him! I’m going to Brooklyn...as soon as I can find Dale for tonight’s bash. Seeing his head bobbing near the exit I weave around the crush awaiting Uncle Rico’s final benediction and sentinel Goodbrand’s handshake at the Portal of Adulthood and catch up to him on the sidewalk.

CRONKITE

As you can see, the floor is about to erupt into a party. People are already out in the parking lot. Let’s call on our West Mannamok correspondent, Robert C. DeVille, for an update of the activity out there.

DEVILLE

(Graying, early 40’s. Styled hair, blue blazer. In the background, IMPALA, wearing a cowboy hat, waves a Narragansett Imperial Quart. The YOUNG COOP DEVILLE waves another) Thank you, Walter. This is a special moment in the life of West Mannamokian youth, a time when their years of hard work combine with their youth and energy and inspire them to—

YOUNG DEVILLE

RUN AMOK! (*Bolts in front of camera, bumps into DEVILLE, knocks him down.*)

DEVILLE

Freakin' punk kids. When *I* was your age...

YOUNG DEVILLE

Gowan, pops. You were *never* my age.

DEVILLE

(*A look of startled recognition, then puzzlement.*) Huh?

Before I can say a word to Dale, Impala rips the exuberant Woody Woodpecker laugh he gets when he's loaded. "Mexi-cooooo! We're goin' to *Mex-i-cooooo!*"

"We're gonna be Number One with a Bullet when we get those *señoritas*," DeVille says over a quick bump-and-grind.

"We can't give you the *señoritas*, but we can give you a little taste of Mexico," I say to Impala. Dale's turned him on before. Besides, we've graduated. There's no risk involved that I can see.

"Yeah, let's go in the van, hey."

We sprawl on the bunks they've bolted into the back of the converted milk truck. Impala pull beers out of a cooler large enough to hold a few cases or a week's supply of food and hands them to Dale and me. He says that in the spring, when State cops were screaming their sirens after his revived liquor operation, he shoved cases of beer out the passenger's side of his '55 Ford, then swerved off the road and threw himself clear while the car bounced on its roof, its wheels and its roof again. With their searchlights blinding him he screamed he was trying to kill himself. Instead of searching for the beer the cops took him to the bin for ten days' observation. "I didn't make out too bad," he says. "Got the van with the insurance money. And it's gonna get us to *Meeeeexi-cooooo!*"

"I wish I made out that well when I flipped the Corvair," I say, taking the joint he passes to me.

"We're leaving in September, as long as we...uh....make enough money," DeVille says, pawing his face with a cloudy expression as he looks from one

of us to the other. He's stoned and doesn't even know it.

"We're gonna get the money, hey. Y'know why? Cuz we're goin' to *Meeexi-cooo!*"

"You guys goin' to Hump's party?" DeVille asks.

"McBride invited us out to his place," Dale says.

"Think he'd mind if we stopped out, hey?"

"Let me ask him," Dale says. "Give me Hump's number. I'll call you there."

After I collect my congratulations and cash presents from my parents we head to McBride's, blowing what's left of the joint on the way. But it's graduation! We're out of the educational prison. Let's roll another. Take a toke for freedom! What the hell! My stoned swerve around a curve knocks Dale's nickel bag out of his hand and spills it across the floor. "Let's just leave it," Dale says. "McBride might get uptight if we bring dope on the, uh, premises." Giggling, he tucks the half-empty bag under the passenger seat.

"We had a bit of a spill on the way over," I say, bounding through McBride's front door. "There's half a bag of grass on the floor of my car, but...It's OVER!"

"*Au contraire*, it's just beginning," McBride says, raising a mock-pompous forefinger to preface: "The Real World is just high school on a grander scale."

"Oh no!" I blurt while Brod and Dale roar their laughs. Then I counter with: "You should know. You're still in high school yourself."

"You'll learn," McBride says. "You're out of it."

"Relic's always out of it," Dale says.

"It's better to be out than in. It's got to be better in the City. There won't be any cliques like there are here."

"The beatniks are as much a clique as any other," Sharon says. The predictable opinion of McBride's other half.

"You'll just have a better chance of fitting in," McBride adds.

I don't believe it. New York is *vast*. There are too many people for one small group to control the scene. Besides, I *hate* cliques. As much as I dig the Seers, they've tolerated me in their circle but they've never really accepted me. In New York I'd be myself, free of cliques.

"Speaking of cliques," Dale says. "Impala and DeVille, like that, I told them we were coming out here. They'd like to, uh, stop by."

"Am I the new Cool Professor?"

"With all the wide-eyed coeds ogling you," his wife says.

"All the jailbait."

"Sid Silverman and a few other people have told me they'd like to come out," Brod says.

"There's a line I think I have to draw here," McBride says. After an appraising pause, "I like having the three of you come out here because you're more stimulating intellectually than any of the teachers. A *lot* more. Impala and DeVille are nobody's fools, but I've found enough personal peace with Sharon"—tossing her a thoughtful and slightly lusty nod—"that I don't need to continue my college beer party with highschool kids."

"We have to be careful who we have out here," Sharon says. "Potter has to keep his job. And I'm getting my teacher's certification this summer."

"You don't have to worry about us. We left our pot in the car."

"You know, Edsel, you really talk about pot a lot more than you should," McBride says. "You've never been in trouble with the cops. Believe me, they're not nice people. I'd really hate to see you hurt yourself."

Maybe he's right. I've lived my life waving my heart from the end of my ragged sleeve. Regardless of how I'd acted in the past, though, my life in Brooklyn would be different. For sure. I was going to start a new life.

I had it all worked out.

—So, you boys had your own *Private Graduation Party*. Did you have your own *Private Prom*, too?

—Sort of.

—You didn't!

—Remember, my *highschool days* weren't like yours. Halfway through tenth grade I stopped paying *Class Dues* and participating in *Class Activities*. I didn't just take myself out of the loop—I fuckin' seceded.

—You didn't try to form a...ahem, reunion by asking Bambi?

—She was going out with Impala.

—I'm sure you could have found somebody else to go with.

—Yeah...I mean, I could've asked out a third cousin, like some of the other kids who couldn't get dates. But I didn't see the point. The three of us went to the City and caught Coltrane at Birdland. It was incredible. Trane was even more exciting live than on record. He played this incredible shit, going down on one knee deep in concentration, working through a tangle of squawking phrases, repeating them again and again, then when he rose with his solo's climax the bell of his tenor would twist and jerk, and his hips and shoulders would follow a split-second later as if he'd caught ecstasy by the tail.

At intermission I went up to him and asked him to play "My Favorite Things." I thought I was doing a really hip thing. Then last year I read this biography that talked about how often people asked him to play it. The song must've been his least favorite thing.

—Did he play it?

—Yeah, he gave it a perfunctory run-through.

—I can tell you're not going to give it a perfunctory run-through.

—Hey, you asked about my Senior Prom.

—*Let me ask about Brooklyn.*

—*Sure. You want to see my old Home Movies and Reel Dreams up close and personal?*

—*No. I just want to change the subject.*

—*As Art Baker used to say in the Golden Age of Television, “You Asked For It.”*

—*That’s what I was afraid of.*

EDSEL UNBOUND

(EDSEL and his fiance/editor lie on their king-sized bed. At its foot a 48" television screen rises like a monolith from a dresser cluttered with earrings, socks and spare change. The screen and the bed give the bedroom of EDSEL's starter home a cramped ambience. Multi-colored neon letters on the screen blare

“NEW YORK, NEW YORK!”

into the room. While young EDSEL reads in his hesitant, reedy voice over a Swing Band rendition of the tune, the screen flashes the images he describes:)

EDSEL

*(Voiceover.) “...to Times Square, the throbbing, pulsating heart of the City, with its throngs milling along its sidewalks and streets: the middle-aged women in bouffants on their way to *Tovarich* and other Broadway plays; the family of weekend tourists whose son tries a joy buzzer handshake on his father at a 7th Avenue Novelty Shop; the oily-haired hustlers standing in the 42nd Street shadows, squinting through their sunglasses to spot an easy mark...”*

(HUSTLER steps forward, falls into line behind EDSEL, lifts a wallet

from the back pocket of his job-hunting suit.)

—Are we supposed to watch you get picked clean, hon?

—Not that way. I had enough smarts to keep my wallet in my front pocket.

EDSEL

(Voiceover.) "...and the subways, the arteries that pump humans like blood to the vital organs of the city so vibrant with life..."

(Blood floods a subway tunnel, fills a downtown train with an "O Negative" destination on its front. Passengers gasp, gulp, gurgle and scream as the rushing red tide engulfs them.)

—Is this supposed to be your life? It looks more like a Slasher movie.

—A slip of the pen. I mean, my writing skills were just beginning to develop. The novel went into my trashcan ten years ago. I was only a kid...

—Who insisted he was an adult.

—An adult beatnik in

(flash onscreen:)

GREENWICH VILLAGE

(Washington Square. A coven of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan clones intones a cacophony of forlorn voices over three-chord guitar strumming. EDSEL, an Evergreen Review in hand, watches till a bored expression crosses his face. Then:)

EDSEL

(to camera) Folk music always makes me feel lonely. (Steps away from the pool, toward the crossroads at the center of Washington Square. A white soccer ball skips in front of him.)

—*Follow the bouncing ball, Edsel.*

—*I did.*

(EDSEL scoops the ball, one-handed it toward the hairy-legged college student chasing it in cutoff jeans. EDSEL's face lights with the anticipation of possible friendship. The STUDENT's bearded face grins with gratitude, until the ball bounces off his hands. EDSEL's expression dims as the STUDENT turns to chase the ball, which bounces over the words a black Drag Queen crows to "New York, New York" while posing in skintight pedal pushers and swishing a footlong cigarette holder.)

DRAG QUEEN

So sleek in my gown
I'll camp out tonight.
Oh yes, I'm hot to trot:
Miss Queer Dee-lliiight!

(DRAG QUEEN pinches EDSEL's butt. EDSEL jumps away, says to camera:)

EDSEL

The Southwest Row is where you find the hipsters. That's what Dale told me. *(Sits on a bench with peeling green paint, checks out the NYU chicks in tight jeans. As he begins to read his Evergreen Review, an owl-faced MAN in tortoise-shell glasses with cokebottle lenses stops in front of him, ogles him while he reads, then sits down on the bench next to him. The MAN continues to look at EDSEL. Closeup: the brown filaments of the MAN's hair twist to curly clowncones on each side of his balding crown.)*

MAN

Excuse me. Have we met before?

EDSEL

No, I don't *think* so.

MAN

With your looks and brains, it seems a shame we haven't. You certainly have some *interesting* reading.

EDSEL

I'm a writer.

MAN

How *interesting!* I'm in the psychic field, myself.

EDSEL

You mean, ESP, telepathy, things like that?

MAN

That's a part of it, yes. I elevate human consciousness by using the body as an instrument to enhance the gratification of the mind.

EDSEL

Uh, are you married?

MAN

No, to be truthful, I'm bisexual. That doesn't shock you, does it?

EDSEL

No, I'm heterosexual, myself.

MAN

Oh no, you only *think* you are.

EDSEL

I'm attracted to women, not to men.

MAN

There's so little difference, when you perceive it from a more *advanced* plane. Men and women have the same erogenous zones. You *must* get aroused when someone touches your breasts. Don't you? *Reaches toward EDSEL.*)

EDSEL

(Slides out of reach.) No, I don't.

MAN

(Another headshake, more pitying.) Some of us don't want to *admit* to our *true* feelings. *(Stands up.)* Excuse me, but I have to meet a dear, dear friend. I like to sit out here on nice days, so if you see me, *do* feel free to stop and talk. I'd be glad to help you with your problem.

—*So much generosity! The City just opened its arms to embrace you.*

—*Just watch the screen.*

(Closeup. EDSEL in his studio .)

If I needed help, it was from a chick. I looked around the Square, hoping to see one sitting alone. A few old men playing chess on the concrete tables near McDougal, a few young mothers pushing baby carriages on the east side of the Square...nobody around to even be *awkward* with...but halfway down the row I spot two black cats bookending a stack of vinyl on a bench. The cat on the left wears shades, a beret and a thick van dyke. The cat on the right wears shades and a blue polo shirt. Between them Miles Davis' shades brood through the redlight whorehouse haze of *'Round About Midnight's* cover.

"Wanna buy some sides, man?" The raspy, chestdeep whisper filters through Leon's thick van dyke. "I need bread, man. My *horn's* in hock."

"What do you play?" I say, sympathetic to the struggles of a fellow artist.

"Tenor." Said forcefully: a pronouncement.

He looks like he'd play with the restrained fire of John Coltrane on the Miles LP in the pile. The rest of the stuff I'm sorting through looks a little commercial. "I've got the Miles," I say.

"Miles is hip." Leon takes off his shades, wipes soft brown eyes bloodshot from booze, reefer or both. "You dig Miles, Jackson?"

Jackson's biceps ripple below his short cotton sleeve as his arm flexes along the backrest. His shades and flat nose give his profile a feline's aloofness. "Yeah, man. Miles is *deep*," he says slowly, his voice heavy with

assurance. He turns toward me. "You play, man?"

"Yeah, I just started playing bass a few months ago."

"You want a gig, man? I book this band, it's playin' right now at the Cafe Bizarre."

What an opportunity!...or is it? This is the City, baby. The cat's so big he could beat you senseless and run off with your axe. Better play it cool, man. "I'll go listen to it."

"You wanna come, Leon?"

"No, man. I gotta take care of business."

In the coffeehouse on the corner of McDougal and Bleecker, flute, vibes and congas blow a Latin jazz heavy on the beat but light on the solos. Dale and the Seers sound hipper. "It's groovy, but it's not what I want to play," I tell him.

Jackson grins. "Well, you into them *deep cats*...Lissen, man. You smoke?"

"Yeah. You got any?"

"Not on me. But I can *get it*." He gives me his phone number, then heads toward the West 4th Street subway. Solid, man. My first day here and I've already scored my pot connection.

I ride my head of hipness back to Brooklyn, where I start my Great American Novel. With reviews inside my head heralding "an alienation unparalleled since the orphaned protagonist of Norman Mailer's 'The Time of Her Time'" my opening sentence gushes onto the page: "My father is dead, and it's best to leave him that way."

Two thousand words later I stop writing. With the hi-fi blasting Mingus and the Clinton Avenue horns honking as though he's cuing them in I blow up my air mattress and set it on my canvas cot. Finished! Now I can go to the Five Spot.

—*This is your first night out on the town, all by your lonesome?*

—*Yeah. But I didn't want the guy at the door to know it.*

(*Onscreen. The Five Spot's brick alcove.*)

—*See that? It's a vegetarian restaurant now.*
—*The memories of your youth...up in tofu!*

(EDSEL shows his driver's license to a sandy-haired slab of a man with a silk sportsjacket draping the beams of his shoulders. The man nods. Before entering, EDSEL turns to the camera and points to his license.)

EDSEL

The cat checked the year, but not the month. (*Giggles, then goes inside.*)

Holy shit! I didn't know Monk was playing tonight. There he is, the cat in the cossack hat dancing like a 200-pound teenage girl grooving to her favorite record. He looks like he's off in a world of his own, but I've read in *DownBeat* how those shuffles and spins cue the band like a conductor's baton. Charlie Rouse rolls his eyes toward Monk, as if saying "I'm done, man." But Monk keeps dancing. And Rouse keeps wailing, but glares at Monk, scowls around his tenor's mouthpiece...finally plays a closing tag and moves off the mike. And there's Monk, twenty feet away from the keyboard. No way he'll get there before the top of the chorus. Wait! He's alongside the stool. On the first beat of the new chorus he plunks Rouse's last three notes standing up, then sits down to solo.

During the second set my waiter asked if a woman could sit at my table. She was Rhoda Zito, a pianist who wrote liner notes for Columbia records. A hot rap about the music fizzled when her lazy left eye rolled away from me. Maybe she just wanted to dig Monk. More likely she was annoyed with my asking her questions about musicians I dug. During intermission her one-word answers kept the table quiet till a black cat in a deep olive suit leaned over her shoulder. "Rhoda! You bring your fifth with you tonight?"

"Only my flatted one, Orville." She introduced me as a fellow bassist to Orville Ward. Orville Ward! Next to Mingus, he was my favorite on the instrument. I'd memorized every solo he recorded. "I'll be back," she said. "Hillie just came in."

"Put in a word for me, baby. Maybe Hillie can mention my card problem in his column."

She glided to the table on my left. Her flowery dress settled next to Hillie

Boxman, whose white crewcut and charcoal gray suit made him look more like a personnel director than a hip jazz writer. I turned to Ward. "You're having trouble with your cabaret card?"

"Yeah, man. I got busted for Possession of Narcotics Equipment. Ain't had a gig in eight months." He shook his head, then looked restlessly around the room. After a long gaze at Boxman's table he glanced back to me. "Listen. I better talk to Hillie myself. But wait here, baby. I'll be back."

Through the whirl of voices and the chinks of glass against wood I heard snatches of Ward's plea: "You got influence, Hillie, you got a *voice*...I need to *work*, man. *You* know I'm clean..."

When Ward sat down again he leaned into my face. "Listen, man, I got to *talk* to you."

The cat's sensed my passion for the music, I thought. He's struggled, he's paid his dues. A sensitive, perceptive—*hip!*—cat like him probably wants to help me get started. He probably wants me to study with him. What else could it be?

"You got two bucks, man? I need a place to stay tonight."

How could I refuse a great musician victimized by unjust cabaret laws? But when I handed him the money, I thought: This *is* New York. The cat could be conning you. "Just make sure you use the money for a room."

He stood up. "You don't believe me, man, you can have your money back. My mama didn't raise Orville Ward to be no liar." He waved the bills in front of my eyes so hard I felt a breeze.

My voice, small in the dark, pushed "Keep it" through the hot flush of my face. Ward's righteous stride carried him through the alcove into the street. Monk's music washed away my embarrassment.

At 3:00 A.M. I rode the subway to Brooklyn, high from three beers and making the jazz scene. It could only get better. I'd *never* go back home like the Seers.

—*It doesn't sound like such a great night to me.*

—*You never spent a Saturday night in West Mannamok. I mean, I was finally on the scene.*

—*And getting picked clean.*

—*Wait. It gets better.*

—*I'll bet.*

(Split 48" screen.)

VILLAGE VOICE

**Budding genius novelist
will write weekly column
for your paper.**

*A door slams on the laughter
behind a dejected EDSEL. The
laughter's undercurrent propels
him to:*

GROVE PRESS

**Literary prodigy will edit
copy, proofread, run er-
rands...anything!**

*"Sorry. Our Literary Prodigy slots
are filled for the foreseeable future.
We wish you the best of luck in
placing your career elsewhere."*

DUGOUT RECORDS

**Novelist/Bassist/Jazz Critic
will hip customers to your
really groovy sides, man.**

*"The manager's out right now.
Besides, I already know all the
groovy sides. You wanna buy
some?"*

*(EDSEL shuffles up 6th Avenue, his face a mask of incipient tragedy.
Without looking at the "DON'T WALK" signal he starts across 14th
Street. A honking taxi screeches its brakes, swerves, swears at him,
spins him around. A blinding light in the sky becomes a sign:)*

SALAD BOY—\$57/WEEK

*(The six-story brick building bearing the sign becomes a stairway to
heaven. EDSEL dashes two steps at a time to the top floor, enters an
office. Behind the desk sits an AGENT wearing Charlton Heston's
biblical grimace and a mane of white hair flowing prophetically in an*

eternal wind.)

AGENT

You don't want this job forever, do you?

EDSEL

Till the end of summer's fine.

(EDSEL's studio.)

Once I finished my day's work on the novel I wrote Brod a letter telling how I'd already scored a job at the Museum of Modern Art and a pot connection...how easy it is to make the scene down here. Before bed I relaxed with a Miles Davis ballad. Through its brooding mist I watched the latenight walkers stretch shadows under the light on the corner. When I turned to go to bed I realized: I haven't stuttered since I got here.

(On the VGA the 48" screen shows a still of YOUNG EDSEL sitting at the narrow dorm desk in his Brooklyn bedroom. In his studio the adult EDSEL speaks into a microcassette recorder while sitting on his stool.)

Every night when I get home from making anchovy salads at the Museum of Modern Art I write five, sometimes even eight, longhand pages on my novel and a long letter to Brod or Dale, then fumble through a bass method book and play Music Plus One with Miles, Monk, Trane or Mingus.

But it's Saturday night and Sonny Rollins is playing at the New School. While I'm frying burgers for a fast dinner Garrett thumps in, dumps his grocery bags on the kitchenette table. I keep stirring the grease till I know which end of the pendulum he's swinging on. He's either joking or moping at a wall, nothing in between. Worried about his chick? The B he needs in his drafting course? He won't say. Before his saturnine split last night I stayed out of his way. But tonight his Eskimo-broad face brightens as he unloads cans of kidney beans. "Uh-hed-sel," he says, adding a jocular syllable of Swamp Yankee, "did you know that Sonny Rollins—?"

"Yeah. You wanna come?"

"No, I've got other plans." Said through a grin so wide they've got to include Yolanda, who never comes here. "But I'm glad to see you're right on

top of the Village Jazz Scene. I'm sure you'll come home so inspired you'll practice till dawn."

"I wouldn't play when you're sleeping."

"Edsel, I can sleep through *anything*."

"Well, if it doesn't bother you...?"

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of your Rise to Greatness," he says with a saturnalian flourish. "Today the New School, tomorrow Carnegie Hall. Just leave me free tickets when you're famous."

I pay for my ticket at the New School and walk into an Educational TV production. After Sonny and his quartet wail through "There Will Never Be Another You" Paul Ober, the jowly critic, guides Sonny to a blackboard, then analyzes "Three Little Words," the band's next tune. Ober points to the chord symbols printed above the two staves on the board. "...For example, this top staff shows that the tune, as it was originally written, employs an Eb7 chord in this measure, whereas," pointing to the staff below it, "here it's been replaced by a C minor 7th."

Sonny tilts his head as if trying to understand the implied question. The beads of moisture on his forehead glitter pointillistic dots under the hot stagelights. "Uh, *I did that*."

"That's right, Sonny. This is *your own* harmonic substitution. Tell us why you put it there."

Sonny strokes his sweaty van dyke. "Well, you know, Paul, it sounded good."

He begins "Three Little Words" wandering up and down and around the huge stage, playing away from the mike more often than not. Even when he's near it, the sound seems to carry over my front row seat to the rows behind me. Then Sonny vanishes into the wings. Returns onstage wearing a fishing hat. Plays a closing tag. The rhythm section stops. He plays a long unaccompanied solo behind the curtain. When he emerges the band joins in. Another vaudeville exit, this time stage left. He comes and goes three more times, then finishes in center stage.

The concert ends after an hour. What a drag! I thought it would last three, even four. I can't afford to hit a club, not till I get paid. Drifting out the door to West 12th I talk about the concert with some curly-haired, fish-eyed kid named Harvey. He found Ober informative, I found him boring. He doesn't like the music I like, either. Coltrane and Mingus are "too harsh." No bridging of tastes that I can see. He lives at home, has an eleven o'clock

curfew. I'm free to come and go as I please. When I look at the buttondown collar choking a neck as scrawny as mine I see a version of myself that never cut loose from the crap: he'll spend his life playing a game he'll never be allowed to win and gloss his frustrations with tame music instead of purging them with unrestrained passion.

At the West Fourth Street station he headed home. I headed to Washington Square, looking for the night. The next afternoon, though, I had second thoughts about Harvey. Stuck on a word in my novel, it occurred to me: I could use a friend down here.

—It wouldn't have hurt you to get his number.

—But we're talking 20/20 hindsight. I figured I'd have a lot more opportunities to meet people. I mean, I thought I was making it big.

—Did you ever wonder what he thought?

(48" screen. High-rise building with "JAZZBO MAGAZINE" etched in the marble above its revolving-door entrance. An elevator in the lobby rises to the penthouse. Stops. Interior. HARVEY, his curls now graying, a double chin drooping toward a still-scrawny neck, stares into the camera.)

HARVEY

Now that you mention it, I do remember...very vaguely...that some kid did buttonhole me after the concert. Maybe he did complain about Ober, but I got Ober to do a very interesting presentation at my high school. In fact, I remember meeting somebody quite a bit like the guy you described at a festival in Hartford. He was very intense about something...jazz and poetry, if I remember correctly...Maybe it was him, I can't say for sure. I was too busy trying to train my new photojournalist. *(He nods toward offstage. A BAMBI BELAIR clone, about twenty-five, steps into the scene, miniskirt first.)*

—That was a cheap shot. Smug little jerk.

—Why should she even bother you? You keep telling me your achy-breaky

heart got over her years ago.

—It's not her. It's what she represents. I mean, great! He's got his magazine, his stuffshirt connections. I wouldn't mind having my own penthouse office, either. But trotting out his little Status Chippie is just too High School for me. Especially after forty.

—Relax, hon. It's your mind playing tricks on you.

—You mean, I did that to myself? Christ!

(EDSEL in his studio.)

I tried to get my mind off my loneliness by throwing myself into my writing.

(The 48" screen appears on the VGA. While EDSEL writes at his desk in Brooklyn the incident appears superimposed over his image.)

EDSEL

(Voiceover.) "...but the overnight at Camp Mannamok wasn't the great fun I thought it would be. While the other kids were sharing pup tents and scary stories, I was odd man out, sleeping alone at the far end of the campfire. Or trying to sleep. The other kids' laughter made me feel so alone I wanted to go home. If I came home, maybe my mother and father would stop fighting for the night. Mr. Goodbrand, who ran the camp in the summer, drove me home in his big Chevy station wagon. I tried not to cry on the ride home—bad enough the kids laughed at me for leaving—but when Goodbrand's wagon turned into my long driveway bright with floodlights I cried with joy at being home again. I tried the door, but it was locked. We waited an hour, but nobody showed up. When Goodbrand took me back to camp all the other kids were asleep."

(Studio.)

Then I put down my pen and started thinking: sometimes I feel so lonely...this lump in my throat, this longing...*Shit!* Who ever heard of a homesick hipster?

I called home from the phone booth around the corner from my apartment, half-expecting to relive my lonely night at camp. But my mother picked up on the third ring. After assuring her that I was eating well and going to work (while holding back the tears) we argued for nearly an hour about racial integration. Her telling me that “God made white and God made black and didn’t intend for them to intermarry” made me long more for Washington Square than West Mannamok. Maybe Jackson would be there with Leon. Maybe Leon got his horn out of hock.

Boarding the A train at the Hoyt-Schermerhorn stop I spot this chick whose thick brown hair curves around a delicate olive face with brown eyes glowing gentle life, unlike the typical vacant-eyed subway riders. She’s hugging an Oriental Philosophy book against her chest. I sit next to her. Make small talk, that’s what you’re supposed to do. “That book looks interesting.”

Elaine’s even-toothed grin tells me I made a good opening. “It’s very interesting. I’m reading it for a course.” She’s a junior at Brooklyn College.

Obviously older than me. Better not tell her I’m seventeen yet. I don’t want to blow digging Monk together at the Five Spot and latenight lovemaking with an ethereal piano trio ballad misting the air. The subway ride’s a running conversation...Zen, Tao, Hinduism... all the things Brod and Dale and I have read...all the way to West 4th. I notice I’m still not stuttering. Haven’t in the week I’ve been here.

“Would you like to get a soda?”

“Sure.”

The Howard Johnson’s in the Village isn’t flashy but she says it’ll be fine. I don’t know the hip bars yet and don’t want to embarrass myself with a close check of my driver’s license. With Elaine it’s so easy to tune out the spoons and forks rattling under fluorescent lights and tune in the dream-haze of our budding romance. When I tell her I’m only seventeen she says “That doesn’t make any difference” through a grin that draws me forward to bathe in its tender radiance. Even though she listens to classical and folk she says she likes jazz too. “Would you like to go the Five Spot with me some night next week? They don’t check I.D.s very carefully there.”

Ah, the sincerity that emanates from her grin. Obviously the start of something wonderful. And the end of my lonely nights.

“Thank you for asking, but I can’t.”

“You going steady with somebody?”

“Sort of. But I really enjoyed talking with you.”

The tires of my desire roll punctured and flat into Washington Square. Leon’s there, at least, the Neon Hipster of the Southwest Row. Arms stretched across the back of the bench, shaded stare inscrutable below his black beret, wine stains on his T-shirt. As I approach, he’s talking to a couple on the bench next to him, his voice a low rasp. “Like I was sayin’, man...”

“I think you’ve said enough, Leon,” the collegiate cat hisses through sharpened features.

“You blasé, man.”

“After our little incident last week, I would use a few other words to describe *you*.” He grabs his chick by the hand and struts indignantly toward McDougal.

Leon turns to me, shakes his head slowly. “Jive motherfucker, man.”

“What happened, man?” No comment, so... “You get your horn out of hock?”

“What for? Ain’t nothin’ happnin’.”

“That’s a drag, man.”

“It’s blasé, man. Everything’s blasé.”

“You seen Jackson lately? “

”Lotta cats named Jackson. He spade or ofay?”

I’m surprised a Negro would use the term. “Spade,” I say, trying on its thrusting inflection and liking its arrogant comfort. “I met you with him last Saturday. You were selling records...”

“Yeah, I know the cat.”

“Maybe he can get you a gig, help you get your horn back.”

“I’ll get my horn back when I want it back, man. Ain’t nothin’ happnin’ nohow.” Leon tilts back his head to sun his face.

When I finish telling him about Elaine he straightens up, leans toward me. “When a woman want you, man,” taps my kneecap for emphasis, “when a woman *really* want you,” taps harder, “she gonna let you know. If she don’t, she blasé.” An emphatic sweep of his hand, then he settles back—a hip version of “I have spoken.”

What he says is true. But it doesn’t relieve my urge to talk Elaine out of my system. Well, I don’t want to drag the cat. In the lull when I’m searching for something else to talk about two Negro hipsters saunter past the bench. Leon calls out, “Wuz happnin’, baby?”

“Kezop gezood shezit, man. C'mon.”

“Later, baby,” he says to me, then weaves away with the cats. Watching Leon stroll toward McDougal I marvel at the way he seems to tapdance on an existential tightrope between advanced awareness and oblivion. Back to Elaine: that sweet smile and liquid brown eyes radiating ethereal mist, all the groovy scenes we could've made together... Enough. Back to Clinton Avenue to work on the novel. Trane's screaming tenor will get me through the night.

—*You made it through the night, obviously.*

—*It wasn't my worst crush. I didn't see her enough.*

—*But you saw her again?*

—*Later that week. She was talking to some guy curbing his dog on Bleecker. I walked right past her and she didn't even say hello.*

—*And you felt crushed.*

—*It was insult on top of injury. A few hours before I saw her, the Museum let me go. They only hired me to fill in while someone was on vacation. But the agency didn't tell me that when they took my fee. Just: “You don't want this job forever, do you?”*

—*So, what did you do?*

—*I tried to go to the Five Spot to hear Monk. But they had a different guy checking I.D.s, so I ended up drowning my sorrows at my place.*

—*You mean, you didn't look for another job right away?*

—*Dale sent me a letter saying he was coming down. I figured I'd start looking after he left. Meanwhile, I'd look to show him a good time.*

(48" screen. EDSEL on a Village streetcorner.)

*Shit! Where is Jackson? I've gone in and out of Howard Johnson's to look for him on the street. Last trip I forgot my favorite pipe. Walked inside to get it...Gone. It cost me more than the two nickel bags I'm supposed to score. Christ! Dale wants the cat to set us up with a hooker, too. I can't set *anything* up if he doesn't show.*

My shoulders shrug impatiently—one, two, three, four—till a hand grabs my right one in mid-shrug. I start to pull free. As I spin away Jackson's

teeth grin across my field of vision. “Man, I been watchin’ you for half a hour.”

“I didn’t see you.” I’m too embarrassed to admit I’d forgotten what he looks like. A big black guy with shades and a blue polo shirt.

We ride the A train to 145th Street. Jackson leads me up St. Nicholas Avenue, stops in front of the Pink Angel, a dugout bar. “Wait here,” he says. He crosses the street, disappears into to a row of five-story buildings. I’m standing alone out here, the only white kid in a six-block view—and a scruffy sight in the ragged red corduroy shirt I’d scissored to short sleeves. Police cruisers roll by every minute, slowing as they pass me. I try to look past the cruisers and the eyes patrolling my hands, my pockets, my soul ...Can they tell this is my first time scoring? Maybe I should get out of their sight. Down into the Pink Angel, where dark faces glare their suspicion at me. A draft and a drain and I’m back on the sidewalk, quivering neon till Jackson finally comes back. “The cat had to go cop the shit, man,” he explains before my lips can shape the question. At the subway he hands me the bags—right on the station steps. My heart drops to my knees, then bounces against my throat. *Anybody* could see us making the deal here. “You got twelve bucks, man? The cat sold me *oversized* bags.”

“I only brought ten with me, man.” You don’t travel with more than you need in rough neighborhoods like Harlem. Before I drop my token I ask Jackson about the hookers.

“They’re nineteen, twenty...All clean, too. We got friends come up from the Village all the time.”

Groovy. Dale will be impressed. Next week I’ll be back on track with another job.

Back at my place I load the Chinatown opium pipe I bought for the occasion. Four tokes whirl me into the world of Marijuana Mysticism and the Revelation of Ultimate Truth in (*trumpet flourish as the screen fills with*):

RELIC’S THEORY OF THE MULTICOSMIC UNIVERSE

We think we’re the only world, but microcosms exist inside of us and macrocosms exist outside of us. Every atom within us is a separate sun with planets orbiting it, and beings parallel to (or vastly different from) us living on it. We’re atoms as well, building blocks of a universe vaster than anything we can conceive.

Man, what a *concept*! It's as wild as the flashbulbs exploding behind my eyes.

Time to fly this head to Birdland. Dig sounds from the Gallery section. You don't need an I.D. there. But the headlights on Fulton run into the lights inside my head. I jump back to the curb. Fuck it. I'm too boned to go out. But it's good shit. Dale will be impressed.

(Port Authority. DALE steps off the Greyhound, a week of van dyke stubbling his chin, a corduroy jacket over denim shirt and jeans.)

EDSEL

(Walking through the terminal.) How's Brod?

DALE

I haven't seen much of him. He's working, saving bread for his move west. We've thrown the *I Ching* together a few times. McBride has me out at least once a week. He was supposed give me tips on writing poetry, but it's getting to be the other way around. *(Giggles.)*

EDSEL

Any sessions back there?

DALE

No, but Wick asked about you. I told him, "Relic's studying bass with Orville Ward and whoring in Harlem." He dug it. Hee hee!

EDSEL

Oh, man! Why do you run that shit?

DALE

We'll make the whoring in Harlem part come true. That's what he dug the most. By the way, Wick sent this along. You won't have to sweat an I.D.

EDSEL

Groovy! You want to dig Monk tonight?

DALE

I'm supposed to score a half-pound from this cat Givens. We're going to connect at the fountain in Times Square.

EDSEL

I've never seen a fountain in Times Square. You sure he didn't mean *Washington Square*?

DALE

He said *Times Square*. At eleven. Maybe you should set it up so the chicks come down here before we meet him.

(EDSEL in phone booth. Through the traffic noise roars the voice of)

JACKSON

Man, the girls ain't goin' all the way down *there*. Call me when you're comin' up *here*.

(Times Square. EDSEL and DALE circle the Square eight times. Each time an apparition of a fountain rises above them. As they approach it, the fountain becomes a hustler, a hooker, tourists on a family holiday. On the last trip the apparition becomes a clock that says twelve-thirty.)

DALE

Maybe he did say Washington Square.

(Washington Square. EDSEL and DALE zigzag down the walks between chicks in tight jeans, hipsters in shades and berets, and beatniks in beards and hornrims.)

DALE

I'd better call him. Why don't you, uh, call Jackson.

(EDSEL and DALE emerge from adjacent phone booths.)

DALE

He *did* say Washington Square.

EDSEL

Jackson was a little ticked off. I don't want to blow the only connection I've got.

DALE

(Shrugs his shoulders.) We got tied up with business. It happens. I'm supposed to meet Givens at Port Authority day after tomorrow, pick up the stuff on the way home. Nice and tidy, like that.

—So much for your good time.

—I know. I really wanted to get myself deflowered, but Dale changed his mind.

—Maybe he wasn't as experienced as you thought he was.

—He was more experienced than I was. But I was scared. I figured if we set it up, I couldn't back out.

—I hope the rest of his visit went better.

—It did. I mean, we smoked both bags of dope, spent every waking minute stoned. We could barely move. But we did catch Dizzy Gillespie at Birdland.

—Of course he made his connection.

—Of course. Watch the home movie.

(48" screen. EDSEL talks in his studio. Action takes place on his VGA.)

Dale pads uneasily in front of the Port Authority's 24-hour lockers. He's spent the last three-quarters of an hour looking at his watch and mumbling about bus schedules. Finally, this short Negro stretches a grin and a green suit-arm toward Dale's elbow-patched corduroy.

We follow him into the men's room. Givens and Dale squeeze into a pay toilet. I play Lady Macbeth at the sink, soaping and scrubbing my hands over and over and glancing into the mirror in case any blue uniforms or darksuited FBI types burst through the door, guns and badges drawn. Dale comes out of the stall first, then Givens, one grinning over his stash, the other over his cash.

Givens treats us to beers in the terminal's bar. Asks Dale about the Seers, talks knowledgeably about literature and jazz. "Have you played at the

Subterranean lately?" he asks Dale.

"Not since Edsel moved down here," Dale says, tossing a nod in my direction before raising his beer to his lips. "He's our bass player."

Givens' eyebrows raise to exclamation points. "You're the man that drives the band?"

"I've got enough trouble just keeping up. Do you play an axe yourself?"

He nods gently. "Alto. We should get together and play sometime."

We trade phone numbers, then he says he has another appointment.

Before Dale boards the Greyhound he fills me in on Givens: he's a fulltime dealer, lives with his mother, comes up to Trinity every now and then to sell a few pounds to some friends. Sounds like a good cat to know...somebody to play with and score from. I like his style better than Jackson's. Just before he boards the bus Dale says, "Call him."

—*Did you call him?*

—*Ten or twenty times, but I never caught him home.*

—*Then you went back to beating the pavements.*

—*I decided to spend another day in Washington Square.*

"Hey, man, what's happening?"

Leon shakes his head as if stirring himself, gives me a red-eyed glance somewhere between indifference and oblivion. Does he *really* recognize me?

"Ain't *nothin'* happnin'. You wanna cop some wine, man?"

"Well, I dunno..." I just got up a few hours ago.

"I'm a *man*," he says with a wobbly flourish. "You tellin' me you don't want to drink with a *man*? I ain't no jiveass wino beggin' you for a drink. I am a *free* man, I am above all this blasé bushwa ...conventions, mores...You tellin' me you won't drink with a *man*?"

I understand. Like Henry Miller, Leon's a Citizen of the World. He rejects the blinders Society would impose on him. Like Miller and Leon, I'm looking forward to the day when all people will stand above the stifling hierarchies of convention, the day that all of us will address each other freely, openly and as equals. So, what the hell! I'm not doing anything else today, I'll be sober when it's time to write.

In front of a liquor store a few blocks east of the Square his plate of a

hand spreads palm-up for money. It dawns on me that he's hustling me. But what the hell! I'm willing to go along for the experience. Experience is important if you want to become a writer.

Near the Judson Memorial Leon steps into an alley reeking with old meat, rotting vegetables and stale piss. He twists the cap on the Muscatel, tilts his head back so that his beard brush-strokes the skyline. His adam's apple bobs once twice three times and the pint's half empty. "Want a taste?" he asks, his voice a whispering gargle.

Even though it's sweet going down the wine leaves a blaze in its wake. I cough. Another swig. Hot, but not as irritating. I'm getting the hang of it. Leon takes another gulp, passes it to me. Two nips and I pass it back. He tucks the bottle into his back pocket. "Thanks, man. Later."

Huh! I thought we were hanging out. "Where you headed?"

"I gotta meet a chick, man. I make her put her books away." His lascivious laugh trails him around the corner.

Back in Brooklyn I work on my novel till dinner, then write my father a letter. How excited he'll be to know that I'm living the life I want to live! Pot! Hey, he made a metal pipebowl for a Swing band trumpeter to smoke tea in. Drinking wine with Leon! Why not have a swig or two with some hip cat? This is Real Life and I'm living it, I think as I drop the letter in the mailbox on my way to the Wednesday night sessions at St. Marks in the Bowery, where pianist Bobby Timmons blows lines more boppish than his gospel-funk reputation then lets the white chicks cling to his lean frame and kiss his dark handsome face while the New York Contemporary Five plays this wild freeform stuff with this young cat Archie Shepp brimless felt hat shaking screechysquawky sounds from his tenor. The music's good, the price (free) even better. But my conversations with strangers never get past the first few sentences. It's a swinging scene. I just need to make a few friends, a few cats to visit, a chick...But it's still Real Life.

—*Speaking of Real Life...*

—*I was out looking the next day.*

Christ! Will I ever find another job? Two fuckin' weeks since Dale split! Day after day I'm out in 95 degree heat, sweating through my suit, soaking

up the city grime that turns my hair into a grease mat and clots my nose with boogers big enough to scare off a rat. No matter where I go I'm either too educated or not educated enough, too young, too unskilled, the longest listing of my liabilities since my mother started pounding on me for looking like my father. What's wrong with me? Why can't I get a job? Dale assured me, "I could get *some* kind of job." I wish I had his confidence. Because I took college prep courses nobody thinks I'll stay stacking groceries in a store. How many people work those shit jobs all their lives? Maybe the butcher in the grocery on Myrtle Avenue where I shop on Saturdays, thick glasses and a baseball cap twisted off to one side. Maybe the checkout clerk who looks like my mother with a hangover. But kids my age...I can't believe these squares expect me to sit across the desk from them, my tie chafing my adam's apple till my voice, deep from strangulation, murmurs like an aspiring corporate executive: "Yes...I believe with heart-felt fervor that soup shelves should be stocked according to brand and flavor, and would place that priority ahead of my wife and family."

Same shit today. This morning an agency near the Brooklyn Navy Yard told me I wasn't old enough to operate machinery. Before lunch an agent on 42nd Street told me, "I don't care how precocious you are, you need a college degree." After lunch another said, "You'd help your chances if you got your hair cut." I was trying to hold off a few weeks before spending the bread to get one. At least the woman at the publishing house on 34th Street listened to me before she told me I needed a B.A. and wished me luck in a way that sounded sincere.

Maybe I should try the Salvation Army agency on 23rd Street. It's three o'clock. Fuck it, I'll walk down to the Village, stop at Howard Johnson's for a coke—more to the point, to use the Men's room stall. I'd better walk fast.

Oh Christ! Pay toilets. Forget it! I'll use the free one. Damn! The door doesn't close all the way. Oh fuck! My pantspocket's ripped. Don't want to lose my wallet...forty bucks: rent for Garrett, food for me. I hang my jacket on the flapping door, slip the wallet into the jacketpocket and sit down to brownbomb the bowl.

My intestines gurgle, blast gas explosions. Waves of reek rise around me like hellsmoke. Depth charges blast the bowl beneath me. Someone's squinting through the crack between the hinge and the door. No big deal, just looking to see if the stall's occupied. *What!* His hand's curving through the open crack. It fumbles near my jacket. My wallet's in there. I lean to my

left. This bird-faced cat...blue eyes bulging through thick-lens tortoise shells, fishmouth gasping for breath...pumps his little hard-on.

“WHAT YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING!” I slam the door hard. LOUD. Grab my jacket, pull up my pants, make a fist. If this guy—

But he’s gone. Not a sound. Light on his feet, the creep. Probably has a job, maybe a family. Can’t afford to get caught.

I don’t see him upstairs. Not that I’m staying around to find him. I just wish there was some beautiful, groovy chick waiting outside the door to hug me, kiss me, fuck me, reassure me that I’m more than fag bait. Unemployable fag bait.

—*You sound as though you were pretty frustrated.*

—*I was getting low on money. And I was hoping to have a surprise for my father, to show him how well I was doing. Instead he had a surprise for me.*

(48” screen. OZZIE reads EDSEL’s letter, balls it up and throws it to the floor. Wearing his green work uniform, a constant since EDSEL’s childhood, he jumps into his ‘55 Ford Wagon. As the wagon cruises down the Merritt Parkway, an idealized image of YOUNG EDSEL, all freckles and tousled hair, tosses his ice cream cone into a Bronx Zoo trashbarrel, then guzzles cheap wine till he falls drunk into a Bowery gutter. While he’s passed out, dope fiends puncture his arms with hypodermic needles. Cut to EDSEL’s apartment.)

OZZIE

What’s this about taking *dope!* What are you doing, drinking with *bums!*

EDSEL

Christ! If I’d known you were going to read me the Riot Act I never would’ve sent the goddamn letter. You said it was okay to smoke pot.

OZZIE

I said it was okay to *experiment*. But becoming a *dope addict*—

EDSEL

It's not addictive.

OZZIE

I don't know where you get your information from.

EDSEL

I researched it. Besides, you made that pipe bowl for that trumpeter.

OZZIE

He was a *bum*.

EDSEL

I thought he was your friend.

OZZIE

He got arrested for Driving Under the Influence of Narcotics.

EDSEL

That doesn't make him an addict, a bum or anything else. It just means he got caught.

OZZIE

And what are you doing, drinkin' wine with *bums*!

EDSEL

Leon's a musician. Christ! I only had a few sips. I didn't even get a *buzz*.

OZZIE

I still don't like you hangin' around people like that. I didn't raise you to be no *bum*.

EDSEL

What about the guys at Grampa Relic's shack? Most of them were half in the bag when I saw them.

OZZIE

They *worked*.

EDSEL

I worked when I had a job. When I get done working—or looking for work—I write and I practice. That doesn't leave me a lot of time to lie around in fucking gutters.

OZZIE

Let's go have some lunch, bub.

(EDSEL *in his studio.*)

Over roast beef sandwiches we settled into safe topics like the beauty of Ted Williams' swing, anything to dull the edge of the daylong confrontation. But all I could think was: Doesn't he *understand*? He's calling me back to a home that hasn't existed since I was ten. Maybe if it had, I would've been the All-American Boy. But it's too late for that. And I don't want to alienate him. If I can't find a job down here, maybe he'll spring for some night courses at NYU or the New School.

(EDSEL's *apartment.*)

OZZIE

If you're thinking about going to school, why don't you just come back home?

EDSEL

I'm not going back to live with my mother and Fat Boy.

OZZIE

I've told you all along, you can always come live with me.

EDSEL

There's nothing for me back there, no matter who I live with. I want to be somewhere where I'm *accepted*.

OZZIE

(OZZIE's *All American Boy* flashes onscreen. Voiceover.) I've always accepted you.

EDSEL

Look. I haven't stuttered since I got here. I'm afraid if I go back there, I'll start to stutter again. Don't you know how shitty it feels to have people make fun of you? Like fuckin' Mel Olds turning his back on me in the middle of History class when I tried to ask a question. He wouldn't even wait for me to get the words out. And the kids...they made him look fuckin' kind.

OZZIE

You've got to learn to let that stuff roll off your back, bub.

EDSEL

I *can't* let it roll off my back, not when it's slamming me in the fuckin' face.

—*Now we know why. The Tourette.*

—*A lifelong obsessive compulsive disorder viewed with 20-20 hindsight.*

(EDSEL and OZZIE enter EDSEL's apartment carrying grocery bags.)

EDSEL

You didn't have to.

OZZIE

Maybe I wanted to. (*Gives EDSEL money.*) Here. If you wanna get a job, you'd better get a haircut.

No work, not even with my cleancut trim. Every time I fill out a job application I feel sick. An hour in a roomful of dreary-looking people brings me to a crisp skirt or four-eyed suit. Grinning behind the Gardol Invisible Shield of self-assurance they pronounce me unfit for running errands selling

shoes washing dishes when I know I can do the work they're doing. I'll need money for a new place next month. I spend less time looking and more time thinking how I had it all worked out and everything still turned to shit. The hundred and some pages of first draft that gushed out of me like the spring thaw over Ingrams Falls has trickled to a stop. I can barely pick up the pen, never mind push it forward. The nights are a drag. No money to go anywhere. No friends. I stare stuporously out my window at the couples crossing Clinton. All I've got are my records and Old Bohemian beer at eighty-nine cents a sixpack. Courses at NYU look good. Nine credits, a part-time job, full-time status in February.

What's this? A letter from my father. The newspaper clipping inside says the University of Hartford is low on admissions for its freshman class. "Sounds like they'll take anybody who applies," my father writes.

The *coup de grace!* I'm too weary to stay down here. I could go back home for a semester, then transfer to NYU in February.

I write my mother a letter telling her I'll come home but he has to stop screaming at me swearing at me all the things that she's done since the divorce because I just can't live like that I'm not stuttering because I don't have that constant hatred hitting me in the face I can't live being told I'm no good no matter how hard I try. A week later I call home. When I mention the letter she says coldly, "I don't know what you're talking about. Those were *terrible* things to say."

To hell with it! I'll go back. If she starts in I'll move in with my old man. The Seers will be there, Wick's going back to Trinity, the Subterranean Coffeehouse still has jazz...I'll make it till I can get back to the City.

When Garrett comes home from work I tell him, "I'll pay you till the end of August, if you want. I'm really sorry things worked out this way."

"Don't sweat it," he says. He's got other things on his mind. His chick just dumped him. "She wants a life in Africa, not here," he says.

With a little bread left and a week before my mother comes to pick me up I might as well have some fun. I call Jackson.

—*Are you going to tell me what you did?*

—*As much as I've told anyone.*

Jackson shakes his head with disbelief. "Man, you mean to tell me you never got *laid*?"

"Never."

"That's deep."

"I'm a little nervous." Actually, my nerves have stretched tight on top of my skin. They throb unprotected in the Harlem night.

"Don't worry 'bout nothin', man." His deep voice resonates with masculinity. "Just relax."

Easier said than done when you're about to jump the Great Divide from Sexual Expectation to Sexual Reality.

Expectation: a seedy hotel room, yellow glare of bare bulb hanging from a frayed cord, or a dim red light for whorehouse ambience.

Reality: a bedroom just off a diningroom in a tidy six-room flat. Jackson introduces me to his wife, his sister-in-law and her husband, and two fat chicks, all chatting at the table.

Expectation: a bleach blonde, fortyish, peels off her fishnet stockings, spreads her varicose-veined legs on the bed and leers through too-thick lipstick, "Come and get it, Big Boy." Or: a lithe blackchick peels out of skin-tight jeans. Our Hero grows hard at the sight of her firm breasts, trim thighs and high ass. From her sultry pose on the bed: "Put in de bacon, whiteboy."

Reality: I stand near the table, trembling through the introductions.

"Relax, man."

"It's alright," his wife Dolores assures me with a sugary tone. "Our friends from the Village, they come up here all the time."

One of the fat chicks rises. "Won't you come with me?" she says, softly.

She leads me into the bedroom just off the diningroom. My God, I'm gonna do it with all these people in the next room!

(From this point on, as in most male tales of sexual encounters, the line between Fantasy and Reality becomes indelibly blurred, the line between Truth and Fiction moves till Truth nearly falls over the right margin.)

Fantasy: The old blonde/young blackchick grabs our Robust Male's massive cock, traces its throbbing veins with knowing touches that tug gently toward its huge purple head, sending shudders the length of his body. "I'm gonna give you the best you ever had, Big Boy."

Reality: "You wanna go 'round de worl'?" the fat girl asks, almost shyly.

"Eventually," I say. "I'd like to take a tramp steamer to Tangier. Then, I'd like to live in Paris for awhile, on the Left Bank."

“No. Tell me what you want to *do*.”

“I want to write novels, I want to travel, I want to live life to the fullest.”

“No. Tell me what you *want*.”

“I want to change the world through my work. The power of my novels will—”

“take all night. Just stick it in.”

Fantasy: She writhes around his rocklike rod, her hips buck against his rollicking pelvis, her legs wrap tight around his back. She moans with pleasure, thrashes her head against the pillow. “Ohhhh, baby! You’re the *best!*”

Reality: I feel the blush rushing through my body, fight my urge to flee. “Doesn’t *anything* make you hard?”

Fantasy: The sheer decadence stirs his long-denied urges. His member throbs a syncopated orgasm. Waves of ecstasy ripple through him. He rides the current to relaxation.

Reality: She guides my barely-hard cock inside her, then starts humping. Each heave of her hips nearly tosses me off the bed. I’m struggling to stay on her, struggling to stay inside her. There *is* something happening down there. When I’m not gripping desperately just to stay on top of her I can feel myself sliding in and out of something damp—a steamy, encompassing sensation that would be fun with Bambi Belair or Elaine...somebody I cared about. But *this*...this is like buying screws at a hardware store, only the screw just turned to rubber.

Fantasy: “I like you, Big Boy. This one’s on the house.”

Reality: She rings the register at the foot of the bed. “That will be fifteen dollars, please.”

I give her the money. The register clanks open, the sale rings up, the register clanks shut.

She goes to the diningroom. Laughter. Did they know what was going on? I’m supposed to be Norman Mailer’s White Negro, lifting myself by my sexual bootstraps to the existential edge of experience. God, how embarrassing!

Then Jackson comes in. “Here, man. Have a beer.”

I tell him what happened.

“You got to relax, that’s all.”

All the way to Brooklyn, I wonder what’s wrong with me.

—*Then you wondered what was wrong with you all the way back to West Mannamok.*

—*No, but I should have. My father's station wagon was idling in the driveway, the way it had every Saturday since my mother's barrage of china and wrought-iron candleholders shelled him out of the living room his first parietal visit.*

(48" screen. Interior. OZZIE's station wagon. BROD's motorcycle slants on its stand a few feet from the driver's side window. Closeup: OZZIE's perennial five o'clock shadow dims his face till it nearly blends with the twilight.)

OZZIE

I'm glad you decided to come back, bub.

EDSEL

(Looking at the motorcycle's skeletal outline.) I can hardly wait to go back there.

OZZIE

You've sowed your wild oats. It's time you buckled down. I don't know what got into you the last couple of years. This isn't the way I wanted you to turn out.

EDSEL

H-h-h-how did you *expect* me to turn out? The divorce, my mother, school...

OZZIE

I always told you, you could come live with me. Look, I want you to be a nice, cleancut kid. Go to school, get an education. And stop taking that *dope*.

EDSEL

It's not addictive. I *told* you that.

OZZIE

You've got your choice. Either that dope...or me. (*A long hazel stare, then gazes through the windshield. His fingers tap a ticking sound against the steering wheel.*)

—*He certainly laid out your options.*

—*Yeah. A life in which I had no place, or a place in which I had no life.*

(*EDSEL's studio.*)

Every Saturday we spent together the old man agreed with me when I said there was no point to playing a game I couldn't win. Every Saturday we spent together he bitched and moaned about the indignities the working man suffered, pretty much the same things as the kids outside the Primo Cliques. After seven years of those Saturdays the old man had decided this Sunday was going to be my Day of Repentance. I would atone for the sin of leaving the flock that had never considered me a member. Obviously it was okay to complain about your problems but not to *do* anything about them. If a letter sweater was the badge of Hump Lawless and the Future Leaders of Amerikkka, then reefer was mine. For all I know the old man saw my sobs as the first hellish symptoms of pot withdrawal. But they were the pain I felt when I realized he never understood what I'd been saying to him all those years. And my pain at lying.

(*Interior. Station wagon.*)

OZZIE

I'm glad you're finally gonna buckle down.

(*Closeup. BROD's motorcycle through driver's side window.*)

EDSEL

I've got to go. Brod and Dale are waiting inside.

(*Interior. EDSEL, BROD, DALE, HARRIET and BUBBA eat cake and ice*

cream at the diningroom table.)

Let's go for a ride.

HARRIET

You just got home, you've been traveling all day.

(Exterior. Corvair drives past Stone's Dairy, turns onto a backroad.)

EDSEL

(Voiceover.) Fucking sheep-eyed asshole! What did he think I was doing when I studied Latin instead of going out for soccer or when I stayed home so I could write?

BROD

Some things you just shouldn't tell your parents.

EDSEL

But, he always said, "Go ahead." I mean, everything I said I wanted to do, he said "Okay."

DALE

The less parents know, the better.

EDSEL

But I used to be able to *talk* to him.

DALE

Keep talking to him. Tell him what he wants to hear, then do what you want. That's what I do with Bill and Shirley. *(Nods slowly.)*

EDSEL

I don't like to work that way.

DALE

That's how he wants it. Give it to him.

EDSEL

I hope to hell I don't have to. (*Corvair stops in front of Ingrams Falls.*)
But I've got something to give you guys.

(*Closeup. EDSEL lights a joint.*)

—At least you got your *Slice of Life*.

—Hell, I only nibbled at the *Big Apple*. I meant to devour it. The *San Remo*, the *Cedar Tavern*...I didn't even find out about those scenes till ten or twenty years later.

—You can't try something if you don't know it exists.

—I wasn't there long enough to find out.

—So, you had a little vacation.

—I thought it was a *Big Adventure*. Back then, six weeks seemed like six months.

—Now it seems like six days.

—And working down to, ahem, a *New York Minute*. But I really thought I'd made *The Scene*. Watching reruns of my adolescence on *Mindscreen Theater*, though, it's excruciatingly obvious that I was an *Innocent in the Big City*.

—You're older now. You can see the difference between reality and illusion.

—I'm not so sure. I mean, reality changes shape with every new perception, the way a carbon chain becomes a different molecule whenever you add on another atom. *Edsel Relic*, the *Prodigious Bohemian Novelist*, was really a sheltered, traumatized kid who got hustled left and right and couldn't even see it happening. But something could happen tomorrow that would make the movie of my mind revert to the earlier script or play something entirely new. What's real to me is how I perceive my experiences as fitting together at any given moment.

—Your reality changes even as you write?

—Even when I'm trying to create a sense of immediacy by writing in present tense. *Create* is the operative word because whatever I'm writing

about has already become the past tense of my experience. Just by writing, never mind living. And no matter what tense I write, what the reader gets has already passed through my perceptions.

—So, you're saying that even the truth as best anybody can explain it is an illusion.

—Yeah. It's what's left after the facts fade from memory. I mean, I can't capture exactly how my mind worked back then. But maybe its fits and starts in the present hint at what I can't show about the past. And when I'm improvising on memories of people I haven't seen in decades and transporting them from the past to the near-present, I'm aware that I'm creating contradictions or inconsistencies. Sometimes they're failures of memory, other times they're intentional. Either way, they're all I've got to capture what I perceive as the essence of my experience.

—So, my Prodigious Bohemian Novelist and Middle-Aged Performance Poet, what do you see as the essence of your experience now?

—That I was intellectually precocious and socially retarded and thought I was living a helluva lot larger than I really was.

—Apparently someone else thought you were living large enough to be written about. Look at the screen.

—Jesus Christ! I mean, I realize that being in the first generation to come of age watching the tube affects the way I write. But this...this is fucking ridiculous!

...FROM EDSEL!

an oral history of Edsel Relic

by Robert C. DeVille

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Moral and Intellectual Bankruptcy

Relic wrote about his return to West Mannamok in *Relic's Reunions*, an underground novel which may suffocate before it ever surfaces:

The rural route carrier's station wagon rolls slowly away from the mailbox. Finally, the letter I've been waiting for. So the University of Hartford's a Dummy School—except for the Music Department. As long as I can transfer my credits to NYU, who cares! Certain of my acceptance, I open the envelope.

“...No applicant to the University can be accepted unless he has taken the Scholastic Aptitude Test...”

SHIT!

Now I'm really home. Stuck! Fucked up the ass with a rusty pipe! No way I can get back to the City...no place to stay, no money to start over. I call the old man. “Why didn't you tell me? I didn't take the SATs last year.”

“How was I supposed to know? *You're* the one who's supposed to know about college, not me.”

Shit! Now I'm not just an asshole who came home with his tail between his legs, I'm an asshole who came back with his tail between his legs and

should've known better.

Dale Hunter: “He came to the house, whining, twitching his head and shoulders, chicken-flapping his elbows and waving the letter. ‘Well, Edsel,’ I told him, ‘You should've known better.’”

Hopes dashed, plans in limbo, young Relic found himself unprepared for the changes that had taken place during his stay in Brooklyn.

Potter McBride: “That summer, Dale Hunter and I became very friendly. He was writing an *incredible* amount of poetry. He seemed to grow more certain of his technique, more secure in his philosophical stance, with each new piece. Our friendship couldn't possibly have blossomed with Edsel there complaining how people abused him, what cheerleader wouldn't go out with him, or calling attention to himself with word play that nobody found particularly funny. When he came back from New York, he seemed to be spinning his wheels, looking for...no, *demanding* reassurance. It was ridiculous enough just *seeing* this kid wearing sunglasses at night and talking about ‘gasses’ and ‘grooves’ in this whisper that sounded like a pre-Cancerous throat condition. One night I was telling Dale how one of the teachers had said what a waste his nonconformity was. ‘So I told him,’ I said, “‘In five years he'll be, at the very least, one of our best younger poets.’” Instead of laughing with Dale, Brod and my now ex-wife, Edsel gave me this cringing, pleading look. ‘Do you think *my* writing has improved?’ Now, what was I supposed to say? I hadn't seen a thing he'd written in six months. To tell you the truth, I thought he was stagnating. But I tried to be diplomatic. I said, ‘If you keep at it the way Dale has, you should get better.’ The way his face just hung there, it was obvious he was crushed.”

During Relic's stay in Brooklyn, Hunter and Allen devoured the *Book of Tao*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Alan Watts' books on Zen, and the *I Ching*, tossing its coins to gain insight into themselves. Despite his moderate curiosity about the *Book of Changes*, Relic's need for validation no doubt intensified the tensions developing between him and his friends. As Relic wrote in *Relic's Reunions*:

Brod and Dale and I stare at the coins on the table, crapshooters craving the 7-11 of Enlightenment. *[In a town with no convenience stores! R.D.V.]*

Brod turns toward me, eyebrows raised. “The messages that come out of them are so *attuned* to what you’re feeling at each moment.”

Dale tamps the tip of a Camel on Brod’s diningroom table. “It gives you a mirror image of the Now.”

Their nods mirror each other.

“Each of us is part Yin, part Yang, part active, part passive, dig it. Take Allen and me, for example: I’m passive, he’s aggressive. Together, we achieve a balance.”

“Do you think I’m more Yin or Yang?” I ask.

Dale leans back, lights the Camel. “Relic, I don’t think you’re Tao at all.” His insider’s laugh cackles through the demonic stream of smoke.

The day of their 25th Anniversary Reunion, the author interviewed Allen and Hunter as they rode away from the airport in Harley Lawless’s van.

Brod Allen: “Edsel threw the coins with us one night. He asked the *I Ching* if he was going to succeed as a writer. The hexagrams told him he wouldn’t succeed if he devoted himself to writing at the expense of developing himself as a human being. It’s sadly apparent how accurate they were.”

Dale Hunter: “The hexagrams gave him a much more diplomatic answer than I would have given.”

Although Relic was clearly disturbed by his friends’ growing apart from him, the only material available to document his state of mind is the following excerpt from *Relic’s Reunions*, in which his distraught stream of consciousness of 1988 attempts to recreate his distraught stream of consciousness of September 1963:

so I’m stuck stuck stuck stuck with my mother who’s at least keeping her mouth shut stuck with Fat Boy raging from the far end of the house the minute I turn the knob on the hi-fi next to me so I can hear a whisper of Trane above silence stuck with the fuckin’ old man never should’ve listened to his fucking siren song how could that Dummy School ah fuck I’m just an asshole who came home with his tail between his legs I wouldn’t have come

back or would I was doing so well down so down you couldn't even look for a fuckin' job come off it better to be there than here everything's changed here I'm on the outside looking in with Dale tight with Brod tight with McBride tight when anybody I see at Stone's downtown the library says "I thought you moved to New York" and what do I say do I say I ran out of cash true true I was getting low but I could've stayed so do I say I fucked up listened to bad advice or just "ran out of bread man" with a hipster's hoarse burr behind phrasing pushed off the tongue like the tough guys but with that implied awareness of something deeper something more deadly something a greater awareness of something something something I'm not Tao I'm not Zen I'm not anything just another schmuck watching Dale fill my void with his commanding presence McBride even gives him rides home something he never did for me when I didn't have wheels McBride loves his writing McBride's raucous belly laugh Dale's paroxysmal titter blend a soundwall I try to penetrate McBride drawls a long "Weellllll" that I'm afraid means no a far cry from almost a year ago when he liked my variety of styles my ability to create vivid characters have I gone stale what about my novel the one that died in Brooklyn or maybe I'm just not that good then why did he think I was good before and after I've come back everybody's down on me blasting me from all angles "just relax be yourself" but nobody seems to like my self anymore not Dale not Brod "so unobservant Edsel" I'm even under fire for not wanting pizza sauce turning wet then cold all over my hands my shirt my chest "I was thinking about the sensuality of eating with your hands and I said 'Knives and forks are evil people should eat with their hands' and Hump" (who works with Brod at Indian Lake Lodge cleaning the grounds lucky bastard to get a job when I couldn't in the City and can't even now) "thought about it a minute then said 'Yeah you're right'" Hump Lawless suddenly West Mannamok's Noble Savage suddenly celebrated for being the Neanderthal Brod and Dale and I used to laugh at they're getting carried away with this celebration of the Primitive "But I like using a fork and knife I don't like grease and tomato sauce running down my arm" "Then how can you experience the Now?" "You can't be Tao unless you live in the Now" Dale adds it's more important that they talk than that they listen like the way they talk about Hip the way they talk about The Way it's such an obvious Western interpretation of Eastern thought and I tell Dale because he's the one loading it on me not Brod who's content within his amalgamated placidity to raise his eyebrows and say "Really" or "That's interesting"

Brod Allen: One of the most interesting lessons I learned from throwing the *I Ching* that summer was that sustained contacts with negative people simply aren't healthy. If you're not at peace with yourself, you know, you can't be at peace with the world."

Dale Hunter: "Relic wasn't the only one with troubles. I don't need to play those tired old tapes, not the originals and certainly not, uh, twenty-five year old remakes."

Despite their developing tensions, West Mannamok's artistic triumvirate ended the summer with a binge of drug experimentation, as the following excerpt from Relic's underground novel indicates:

"There's plenty of pot around," Dale says, "but I'd like to try something new."

"How about ammonia?" I crack, then tell Dale and Brod I tried sniffing it at the Museum of Modern Art. "It's great for burning your nostrils."

"Relic the scrubwoman!" Dale cackles.

I lumber up from the bottom bunk in Brod's cell-sized bedroom, slump over like one of the old buswomen at the Museum of Modern Art, and klunk back and forth in the three feet between the bunk and the drafting table.

Brod puffs calmly on his pipe. "I don't think so."

"How about nutmeg?" I say.

Brod's eyebrows raise inquisitively. "Nutmeg?"

"I read about it in *Bird Lives*," Dale says. "You mix a tablespoon in a glass of water. I'll bet it tastes vile."

"But it might be an interesting high to explore." Brod goes out to the kitchen, comes back with the pukey colloid and downs it. An hour later: "This really is something. It makes you open to all kinds of suggestions. Everything you say I seem to become."

So, my spade hipster inflection: "By the way, man, I want to pull your coat to something. Dig it. That wasn't nutmeg. That's heroin. H, baby. And you're a junkie."

"Why, you nigger. You lousy fucking *nigger!*" he snarls through a face small with rage. Brod's always said he wasn't prejudiced, he was color-blind. The simplicity of his conviction always grated me. I believed everyone in this society, regardless of color, learns prejudice. Now he's raging racial

abuse from his drafting stool. The walls of his imagined addiction narrow around him. His hands scrape our shared perception of unpainted concrete. His curses become pleas for his next fix. "Come on, man...*Please.*"

Now that the truth is out, I don't want him to flip. "It was a put-on."

The muscles around his mouth relax. "I'm glad. That was pretty scary, you know?"

Then Dale says: "You're not a junkie. You're a condom. Feel that cock pushing through you." Brod's neck straightens, his head raises. "Now you're pushing and twisting into that hot wet pussy and it feels *fine.*" Brod's snub nose pushes toward the ceiling, his head and shoulders thrust from his seat at the drafting table like the head of a five foot-ten cock till we look at each other then at him and call off the game.

The end of the summer also brought a variety of sexual experiences to West Mannamok's triumvirate:

Brod Allen: "I went to the Mannamok County Fair on Labor Day Weekend and started talking to this girl who looked eighteen, you know?"

Pete Impala: "I seen you with her. She was tough, hey. After all these years I ain't forgot *that* snatch. Remember, Hump? You just about creamed your pants."

Harley Lawless: "I was smashed. I don't remember *nothin'.*"

Brod Allen: "Turned out she was only thirteen."

Harley Lawless: "Jailbait! Geez, Brod. I worked next to you that whole summer and I never figured *you* for a cradle-robber."

Pete Impala: "Get 'em while the meat's still tender. *Awright!*"

As the field research threatened to slip out of the author's control, Allen grew visibly uneasy, his tranquil demeanor threatened by the ghosts of memories rising from a troubled past. The author had to remind the subjects that his research was something to be taken seriously.

Harley Lawless: "Go-wan! Even your freakin' *friends* don't watch your Community Access talk show."

Robert C. DeVille: "In recent years, Edsel Relic's career has been gaining momentum. At midlife, our lateblossoming colleague is emerging as an Underground—"

Dale Hunter: "Has-Been still aspiring to Wannabe status."

Harley Lawless: "Cut the highfalutin' crap, Coop. Just 'cause you and my wife seen an article he wrote in the paper don't mean he's freakin' famous. Besides, you never liked Twitch from the time he punched you out."

Robert C. DeVille: "It was a sucker punch. And making money off him is the best revenge. Please continue, Brod."

Brod Allen: "I didn't find out her age until later. It was quite a night, though. Matter of fact, it was quite a weekend. When I got home, I found about a dozen messages from Edsel. I guess Dale met somebody that weekend too, so Edsel must have felt pretty left out."

Dale Hunter: "I didn't do too badly myself. There was a party at Impala's. I started talking to Nancy Capri. We made out for a good hour-and-a-half by Indian lake. I told Edsel, 'She's a good make. Give her a call.'"

In his underground novel, Relic describes the encounter:

Plain-faced and country-boned, Nancy's more an Earth Mother than a Love Goddess. I take her to a drive-in movie, the best place for making out, but when I put my arm around her shoulder she doesn't grin and settle in against my chest the way Dale said she did with him. She just watches the movie and I don't really know what

MEN DO

so I sit there trying to figure out what I'm supposed to say, what's the magic that will get me over my fear of the

TERRIBLE THINGS

that could happen if I don't do this right, if I'm too aggressive, not smooth like Dale (but he's made out with so many chicks) and this is my first date other than that

sundae at Stone's with Bambi and I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do

TO WOMEN

to
get them turned on. On the ride back to West Mannamok from the movie, I ask, "Want to take a ride around the lake?"

"I've got to get up early tomorrow," she says, a grin glossing her tanned complexion so that her cheeks shimmer in the shadows of my car's interior.

Well, I tried. I just don't know what I'm supposed to do to get women to be generous

WITH THEIR

affections,
to get them (in this case Nancy) to make out with me. I walk her to her door and kiss her goodnight—the way I'd kiss my mother. *Smack! Smack!* Her face flickers a smile that looks more like a smirk as she draws back from me into the shadows on the far side of her porchlight.

A few days later I see her with Dale and she gives me the same look. What a fool I am to be so inexperienced with chicks! Dale's got Little Theater falling all over him in Wethersfield and he's doing okay with Nancy too, judging by the one-up look he flashes at me

PRICKS

Morning Glory Seeds!

Dig it, man: *New doors to perception!* First, Alduous Huxley. Then, Leary and Alpert. Now, (*ta-daa!*) Relic, Allen and Hunter. To hell with Kennedy's New Frontier! We're flying beyond it...to the *Psychedelic Frontier!*...as soon as I can shake the Thought Police bloodhounds baying in the oilsmoke wake of my '54 Plymouth going *exactly* the speed limit. Ever since I split the hardware store downtown I've heard police sirens howling through my car window, open just a crack. I shouldn't have copped the shit in my Maynard G. Krebs gear: shades, grungy gray sweatshirt scissored at the elbows. I should've dressed square as the clerk in the hornrims and checkered shirt behind the counter who made me sign a State Bureau of Narcotics form before handing me my twelve packets of Heavenly Blues.

Turning into my driveway, I shudder a sigh of relief. The cops haven't come yet. I phone Dale to see if he needs a ride. No, he can get one. "I'm surprised you had to sign for them," he says.

"Me too. I told the clerk I was starting an indoor garden."

"You loon! You can't grow these indoors. You need *trellises!*"

Visions of cute little potted plants with cute little names...pansies, petunias, geraniums...winking under fluorescent lights in my basement surrender to the tornado of recriminations whipping through me: a sudden chill of anxiety...my naivete—make that stupidity—chiseled into The Record. The clerk must be dialing the State Police right now.

"There's only one thing to do, Relic: swallow the evidence—except for the ones we're saving for Brod."

"I'll go mash them for his Goodbye Bash."

But the seeds don't break, don't crumble, don't even crack, no matter how hard I hammer the cloth coinbag I've packed them in. What if the cops

pull in while I'm pounding my frustration into the porch?

In court: "Your honor, we caught the defendant *whacking his hammer!*"

Maybe a sledge hammer, coming down like the sinewy arm at the end of *Dragnet*, would work. No. Run my car over them. Nothing. Truly tough nuts to crack.

Dale arrives with a box of inch-long gelatin capsules, suggests using the meat grinder. It works.

"Uh, how many capsules do we take?"

"Wick says twelve."

"*Twelve!* Shit, man. We could gag on these." I down some powder, plain. Rotten walnut taste. Spit. "We'll gag worse if we *don't* use the capsules."

Dale flashes his winning grin. "That's what Wick said."

The first wave of nausea hits. While I glug coke to settle my stomach and Dale tugs at a Miller bottle, Trane's visceral tenor exorcises the demons of the everyday, brings us to the brink of linking our egos, our beings, to the carbon chain of the universe...But we're *already* connected to the Great Carbon Chain. We're already one with the many and...and, it's *beautiful!* The brownish crabgrass that always seemed to be dying isn't dying at all. That's just the way it grows, and the way it grows is...*beautiful!* It's so alive a green aura hovers above it like translucent morning dew. We could sit here in my knottypine living room and watch the grass in all its beauty evolve through birth, life, death and rebirth, all the way through infinity. Even if we don't live through infinity ourselves, someone else will appreciate this splendor. "But since Time isn't passing now, we're already in infinity," I say, uncertain of whether I'm talking or thinking. They seem to be one and the same.

Dale palms the side of his mouth, his "get a load of this" gesture. "Relic's high on Glory Seeds!"

I didn't notice at first. But now...the sky's so bright and crystal blue, the sun's spokes so defined you could pick them like stems and absorb their warmth through your fingers. The white birch trees hula to the lazy rhythm of the late-summer breeze. The nausea floats away on a zephyr. It's all beauty! You don't *have* to think about it. You don't have to think about *anything*... "My God! My mind was just empty."

"The first step toward Zen awareness." Dale's nod punctuates his point.

His phrasing words to imply he's beyond the step he sees me reaching seems too transparent to answer.



At Stone's Debbie Impala sets three small glasses of water in front of us.

"How's your brother doing?" she asks Brod.

"Very well. He's moving back here in a few weeks."

"Tell him I said hello." She grins.

I look dreamily at her. "You have such a lovely smile."

Her face glows around it. "Thanks."

My eyebrows arch in the mildly quizzical way Dale tried to teach me months back. "It goes with the sensitivity I see in your eyes."

"What a nice thing to say!"

"I like to say nice things to nice people, especially when they're true."

"I've always thought of you as a very nice person too," said through a near-blush. She glances around the room, then raises her pad. "I'd better come back for your order."

Even though she turns to the customer who came in right after us, her smile seems to hover over me. Ooooh, do I *want* her! Her cinnamon eyes and sultry smile could transport me to an intimate Xanadu. Too bad she's wearing Hump's ring around her neck. Too bad Hump's so jealous. In the ebb and flow of the infinite universe nobody possesses anybody or anything. We're all part of the flow, whose torrents could send me vaulting over the counter to make love to her on top of the stainless steel ice cream bar, savoring her beauty as I peel off her white waitress outfit and kiss every inch of her voluptuous body.

"You're really coming on to her," Dale whispers. "She's digging it, too."

"You think so?"

Dale gives a long nod. He knows more about these things than I do.

Making it with Debbie would be a truly ecstatic experience. With my arms hugging her wasp waist, her massive breasts heaving breathless against my chest and her perfect legs coiled around me in love's embrace we could create our own Xanadu on any spot we chose. I'm flattered that she would consider me, but then again, why not consider me? I'm a part of this vast, beautiful universe, and just as deserving as any other male who gazes at her with admiration and affection.

Still, there are practical matters...I lean across Dale to ask Brod, "Are you sure you want to eat? The nausea could hit anytime now."

"I'm already feeling it a little. But the food might help settle it, you

know?"

"Allen's got a cast-iron stomach," Dale says.

"You said something to Debbie about Garrett moving back?"

"Yeah." Thoughtful pause. "He didn't get the B he needed to get into Pratt."

"First his chick dumps him, now this...How's he *really* doing?"

"Holding up. He'll do alright, I guess."

"As long as we flow with the universe," I say, watching Debbie flow toward me with her palm-sized order pad.

After we order, the flow of the universe transports me to the lavatory. The reflection I see in the mirror over the sink is me becoming my own first cousin: a confident, swinging version of myself. Brod and Dale will want to know about this.

"Interesting insight," Dale remarks. "Like Wick says, 'There's more to ourselves than our selves.'"

"That's true." Brod's eyes brighten. A grin swallows his puffy cheeks. "Did you ever stop to think how much we limit ourselves by the way we define ourselves? Matter of fact, instead of defining ourselves, we should just *be* our selves."

"That's *hip*," Dale says.

"It's common sense," I say. "We are everything, including everything we aren't."

"There's Relic, waxing profound."

"Think about it. What we see as contradictions..."

dissolves the minute Debbie brings us our burgers and fries. "Your beauty gives me as much sustenance as the food you've set down in front of me," I tell her in a half-ironic tone.

"Is that from a poem you studied with Mr. McBride?"

"No. It's my honest feeling at this moment."

"Edsel...Have you been *drinking*?"

The Glory Seed Three passes ironic looks back and forth.

"I'm only drunk on your beauty," I say, intrigued by the glibness gushing out of this newer, more transcendent me.

"Don't let the Constable see the bottle." Her over-the-shoulder beacon sways away from me.

Lawless and Hump clomp into the corner of my eye. The paunchy old man with the big cigar bulging out of the left side of his mouth wouldn't be

a problem; he's probably never even *heard* of hallucinogens. But Hump's jealousy...I don't want to drag my groovy high by continuing the karma of continual confrontation that comes of our wanting the same girl. How pointless it seems! Instead of confronting, we should share.

"The chick is really digging your come-on," Dale says. "I didn't know you had it in you."

Hump's standing over Brod's stool, making small talk about Indian Lake Lodge. "The guys say they're gonna miss you."

"Matter of fact, it was an enjoyable experience."

"I still remember what you said about knives and forks being evil. But Debbie..." Hump nods toward the curves weaving along the counter under her radiant face. "I'll never hear the end of it if I eat like that. Broads..." He shakes his head.

"Are you going to stay on at the lodge?"

"Till next spring. There'll be another Big League tryout then. I'll see how my arm feels." He shrugs his beam of shoulders.

Listening to their exchange of good luck wishes, I feel sad a team didn't sign Hump this year. Two State troopers march over my first-ever flush of warm feelings for Hump, grunt hello to the Constable and plop a few stools down from him. They may not suspect anything, but their presence narrows the pastel green walls till they threaten to brush our shoulders.

I leave Debbie a generous tip.

"Did you feel the atmosphere change when the Staties walked in?" Dale asks in the parking lot.

"Yeah," Brod says. "Now I know what it means to '*make a new scene.*'"



"You notice how natural our movement seems, like that?" Dale glances over his shoulder at Brod in the back of my beatup Plymouth. "We're flowing from Stone's to Trinity, like the flow of a river. Dig it?"

"Like the flow of Life." Brod's resonant tenor relaxes toward the baritone range.

"It's so natural the car feels like it's driving itself." I'm grooving on the lavender strokes of sunset brushing across the windshield. "Like, if I just took my hands off the wheel— "

"*Don't!*" Dale and Brod shriek in unison.

"I wasn't going to. I know I'm high."

"Just keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel," Brod cautions.

I sense a one-to-one relationship between the driver and the road, but I don't sense a corresponding unity between the driver and the driven.

|||||

In Wick's dorm room Black's kneeling on all fours, hammer in one hand, lunchbag of Glory Seeds on the brown tile floor.

"They're a tough nut to crack," I say.

Black twists his thick features to one side. "Ticky-too to you, Relic. You're a loon."

"In September, but not in June."

"You've got to use a meatgrinder," Dale says.

"A monkeygrinder!" Black springs up, makes a cranking motion and strange piping noises.

Wick strokes his fine-haired van dyke. Even though he doesn't say anything, I hear the subliminal "hmmmm" of his thoughts. "I think I know who's got one." He goes into the hall.

Despite the blissful timeless state I'm curious: "Has Wick been gone very long?"

Brod, stretched across Wick's bed, raises his head to say, "Just think of Time as existing only in the present moment."

"I'm just trying to get a feel for—"

"There you go, Relic," Dale snaps. "Getting hung up on clock time."

"I was just—"

"Forget it. We're in the *natural* universe now. Just relax, dig the flow."

"It's a good thing I wear a watch, Hunter," Black says from his spot on the floor. "I'd hate to ask you for the time. *Geez!*"

I'm wondering why Brod and Dale want to direct my thinking—it's all part of the flow—when Wick comes back with a meatgrinder. He clamps it to his desk, then grinds the seeds till their powder sifts onto the newspaper underneath it.

Black stuffs the gelatin capsules. "These things are *huge*. How many do we have to take, anyway?"

"Twelve," Dale says.

"Twelve! A horse couldn't swallow twelve of those things."

Brod stretches, then yawns, his open mouth suddenly the size of a horse's. I picture flies buzzing in and out of the massive cavity, but swallow my laugh.

Time seems measured only by our motion, I think, waiting for the high to hit Wick and Black. The shadows from the lamp grow shorter, the light brighter. When Wick and Black rise from their stomach pains into the high, we spread ourselves over the bed, the desk chair, the armchair and the floor, run our fingers through our hair and marvel at everything we see.

Black turns away from the mirror. "I don't look like myself."

"That's what happened when I looked at *my reflection*."

"Yeah, man." Wick catches a glance at the mirror with the corner of his eye, then turns toward us, the balls of his feet bouncing to the pulse of his inner music. "You're going beyond yourself by looking into yourself. Dig it, man: Burroughs talks about 'hallucinations that *sharpen reality*.'"

Brod's face lights with interest. "There's something to that, you know. We're not escaping *from* reality. We're escaping *into* reality."

"All this serious talk!" Black rolls his beef across one end of the mattress. "I feel like an old junkie, drooling in a furnished room, just grooving on a lightbulb hanging from a frayed cord. Completely ecstatic."

"Black's got a point," Wick says. "We're *talking* about the experience, instead of *experiencing* it."

"We're experiencing it, alright," I say. "But we're talking about it, too. It's *part* of our experience."

Wick's blue irises brighten around his dilated pupils. "That's hip."

"Except for Black and Allen, we're all verbal people," Dale says. "I'm starting to get beyond that, though. I'm seeing and feeling things there just aren't any words to describe."

"Hunter," Black says, "you've *always* got words to describe things."

The pitches of our laughter blend to ring a phantom tone above us.

"Wow! That sounded like the Laugh of the Cosmos," I say, musing on my private vision: at the core of the universe, the essence of light or dark or both, is a laugh that reverberates through the Existential Void as it mocks our attempts to explain it. Everything isn't just Absurd; it's Ridiculous too. Including the present conversation: "Something inside of us has moved outside of us to laugh at us only it's still inside of us."

"Relic, you're a *loon!*" Black's tone sounds more appreciative than

reproachful.

"We're *all* loons," Dale says.

Wick dances forward. "That's what I mean about being verbal. Relic has to postulate the existence of the Self and the Other— "

"I'm saying they're part of the same thing, man."

"But by saying that, your words erect a barrier between the Self and the Other," Dale says. "It blocks the unity you want us to see."

"I'm hip to what Relic's doing, man," Wick continues. "He's using language as a *sign*, you dig, that points us toward what he wants us to see. Where *you're* hung up, man, is in thinking that what he's saying is the thing he wants you to see."

"That's the way Relic is," Dale says puckishly.

"That's because you're looking at his words and not what his words are pointing to," Wick says.

"That's true, But I, Edsel Relic, *am...ahem...part* of the message as well as the sign pointing to it."

"See what I mean?" Dale says.

"It's *all* part of it," I insist. "*We're* all part of it. The Yin, the Yang...it's all there."

Brod's face flashes neon. "*God is the gray between the Yin and the Yang!*"

"Now that's *hip!*" Dale declares.

Envisioning the Yin-Yang sign undulating between white and black I say, "It's all just shades of gray."

"That's what I mean," Dale says. "Relic's always punning, always cracking some kind of joke."

"But that's the *relationship*," I insist.

"It's, uh, just a verbal construction based on what we're experiencing in the Here and Now."

"It's part of what we're experiencing because it was *said*. It adds another layer—a mocking level—to the reality we're experiencing." Can't he see? Even the conversation we're having is part of the dynamic of the all-embracing flow of the universe.

"But don't you see? Words are a hang-up," Brod says.

"We're trying to use words to get beyond words" dances over Wick's inner rhythm.

"All this ticky-too nonsense!" Black snorts. "There's more than one way to get at what this whole thing is about." He fumbles through the debris

around the unpacked suitcases in Wick's open closet. Turns. Waves a ouija board at us. "Right here...*this* is the quickest way to cut through the crap."

"Oh no! Black wants to have a seance, call forth the Ancient Spirits."

"Go ahead, Hunter. Laugh. This is no more ridiculous than everything we've been talking about. You wanna try it, Wick?"

"Sure, man. Let's see what it says."

We huddle a tight circle on the floor around this magnified white tick. Black grips the board, follows its potato bug twists and turns to arrive at a "T" then a "U" then another "T." I'm wondering if he's latched onto Tutankhamen, live from the celestial realms over Egypt. No. The board wiggles out "TUTTI," a musical term, then continues till it reveals the Ultimate Message:

TUTTI FRUTTI

"Uh bopbopaluma balop bam boom!" Black announces. "There it is. The ultimate truth revealed! And you didn't even need the *National Inquirer*."

(VGA. EDSEL's '54 Plymouth sits on the Somerville street in front of DALE's dormitory. The Shooting Star blips across the screen.)

DALE

(Voiceover.) What do you *mean*, “miss him!” You should be *glad* he's gone. (Closeup. DALE's tightened upper lip quivers above the narrow gap between his front teeth. He glares out his dorm window at EDSEL's car parked on the Somerville street. Sound of ivy rustling along the window's edge.)

EDSEL

(Sitting under an interrogation lamp.) I am. But, like, you know, he's a friend. We've been through a lot together.

DALE

(Whips around to face EDSEL.) You're just hung up on yourself, Relic. A Hip person *knows* what to feel. If you're *really* his friend, you should be *glad* he's out of there. And he's gonna *make it* out of there too. (The cold blue spears of his stare jab their points at EDSEL's face.)

EDSEL

(Closeup. EDSEL's fingers drum his kneecaps. Voiceover.) It's not like I didn't try. The letter my father sent—

DALE

You were *looking* for an excuse to come back. You know, man, the apples in the barrel go to the cats who are tough enough—and *hip*

enough—to go after them.

EDSEL

It's not easy to make friends in the City. I mean, I really *tried*.

DALE

You spent nearly two months in New York and you didn't make a single *friend!*

EDSEL

What about Jackson?

DALE

Those spade hipsters, they're not *Hip*. If I'd spent two months down there, I would've had the whole Village scene down.

EDSEL

It-It-It's not like I-I didn't *try*.

DALE

I never had any trouble at Birdland, the Village Vanguard, the Village Gate, the Five Spot or the Half Note. (*As he speaks, the white dot on his Dunhill whips a vapor streak under each club he names.*) The trouble with you, Relic, is you're too *thin*. Just like Black, Oink, Dauphin...all the Seers except Wick and me. None of *them* could make it away from home, but Wick and I *can*. Like, those Emerson hipsters that blew Black's mind? I'm already into a thing with them. They're not blowing *my* mind. People always want to talk to Hip people, you dig.

EDSEL

You mean, I'm not Hip?

DALE

You've got a ways to go, Relic. (*Pause.*) I know what you're thinking behind that moping look of yours. Yeah, I'm *ugly*. Yeah, I'm *obtrusive*. But what is, is what it is.

(*Stone's Dairy*. EDSEL, going in, nearly collides with IMPALA, going out.)

IMPALA

I *heard* you came back from New York, hey.

EDSEL

Yeah, man. I ran out of bread.

(EDSEL *in his studio*.)

It wasn't much consolation to learn that Impala and DeVille didn't make it out of town, either. The State police busted them again for selling liquor to minors. Impala had sold his van to pay for a lawyer who told him the charges might be dropped if he enlisted in the Army. DeVille had enrolled in broadcasting school to make himself look like a productive citizen for the trial. After we commiserated in the parking lot Impala told me, "Dale came down from Boston last weekend, had these two *wild* guys with him."

"I didn't see him." But I knew where I stood with him now.

"He tells me you're lookin' for work, hey."

"Looking for work has practically become my job."

"You want a job"

lugging cement bags almost as much as I weigh 130 the 97 pound weakling of Charles Atlas comicbook ads throw sand in my face anytime soaking ceramic tiles for this lean craggy Yankee \$60 a week tired at night too tired to write night courses at University of Hartford too tired to study man I'm pooped those cement bags never had to work like *this* before just enough steam left to sit in my bedroom chair reading this book and flipping this baseball here oh *shit*

BOOMP!

"I'M NOT TELLIN' YOU AGAIN, CUT THAT OUT!"

Fat Boy's stubbly jowls rage in the doorway. Bad as I feel about waking him up, it's hard to keep from laughing at his billowing gut nearly bursting through his T-shirt and his boxer shorts flapping over his bear-hair legs as

he stamps the floor. I swallow the blurt, lower my eyes to look at the red stitches spiraling to a stop on the oak floor. "I'm *sorry*. I mean, it just slipped."

"DON'T YOU *EVER* MAKE ANY NOISE HERE EVER AGAIN!"

He turns, slams the door.

Christ! It's not like I dropped the ball intentionally. And I can't play my records, not even at low volume. The minute he hears the slightest noise he stamps in and screams. Fuck it. I'll go to my father's. Should've gone years ago.

|||||

Dear Oz,

I've tried my best to go along with Edsel living here, but I just don't think I can. For a number of reasons:

I didn't have any part in raising him, so I don't feel comfortable with him living here. Besides, I think he's made his own troubles.

Don't you?

He's too independent in the kitchen. If he wants a sandwich, he should ask me instead of going and making it himself. I've always felt that the kitchen is my domain.

His late hours are just too much. Some nights when you're sleeping I want to go and do my exercises in the living room, but I can't go out there in my nightgown while he's awake.

I'll go along with whatever you decide, Oz. But I have to let you know how I feel about this.

Goddamn! Three October nights on the porch reading till midnight and I've worn out my welcome. What did I do wrong? Other than live, that is. Jesus Christ! I was trying to save his wife work by making my own snacks. My father could have said the same thing about raising her two kids, but he didn't. I'd go to bed earlier but the tile contractor ran out of work for me. If she'd told me she wanted to exercise in private I would've closed the door. Why didn't she say something to me instead of leaving a note on the old man's pillow? When I asked him what he was going to say to her, he bit his

nails and stared straight ahead. "It's up to you, bub."

"You know, you've told me ever since the divorce that I could always come and live with you," I said. Christ! If I'd hung on a few weeks longer in Brooklyn I might've gotten the job that would have let me stay in the City ...my own place, a walkup on East 3rd, the Village life...Instead I folded under the weight of my own weakness and the feather of my father's assurances. Now I was broke, sitting in a gravel parking lot in the boon-docks, and trying to figure out which place I was the least unwelcome.

"I can tell you this, bub: it'll never be the same between her and me."

The churning in my gut told me things would never be the same between him and me, either. "I'll be out of here before she gets home."

|||||

Mother: "That's your old man for you."

Dale: "What did you expect? He's got a whole new life, he doesn't need you."

|||||

(Onscreen. YOUNG EDSEL sits in the chair in his cellar, smoking a pipe and reading his English 101 text. Upstairs, FAT BOY slouches in a livingroom chair. Ashtray crowning the peak of his gut, he chainsmokes Marlboros while gazing stuporously at "The Rifleman" on the Magnavox. HARRIET paces between the living room and the cellar door, where EDSEL's pipe-smoke curls under the bottom crack. She opens the door.)

HARRIET

Jesus Christ! You and that friggin' pipe! You stink up this whole house.

EDSEL

If I was still in Brooklyn, I wouldn't have to.

(The door slams. EDSEL sputters, resumes reading. HARRIET resumes pacing, then opens the door again.)

|||||

after Wednesday night English Comp the squint-eyed prof ranting about the Communist conspiracy to fluoridate water a night at the Subterranean good idea dig some

Teenage Popular(ity) Music

some people maybe even a chick but the storefront's empty wax swirls on the windows sounds meet

I

"got no got no got no"

no sounds no people no chicks no new address

"You got no friends"

WANT

"No friends, Edsel"

Wick's dorm he's dropped out bolted to Tangier Wethersfield Black's flipped out Oink's split

"got no got no got no"

visits no

Dale's just desperation

FRIENDS

no money no way out no

|||||

SAN FRANCISCO!

||||

Dale: Allen's not going to do anything for you. He's too busy making it himself.

||||

"Why don't you just buckle down and get yourself that education," the old man says to me in his station wagon on the shoulder of a side road. I haven't gone back to his house since his wife's note.

"Brod just wrote back. He says I can stay at his place till I get a job. I can apply to San Francisco State for the fall."

"Y'know, bub, the longer you're out of school the harder it is to get back into the old routine. Why don't you just buckle down, go to Mannamok State and get it over with?"

"Because there's nothing for me here."

"What do you mean, nothing? You've got *family* here."

End of discussion. His wagon fades into the gray Saturday afternoon. Thick clouds, threat of rain. The downpour hits as I climb inside my car. My fists pound the steering wheel. The tears run over my face like the rain over the windshield. I can't take it anymore. Nobody understands what I want out of life how hard I try to make my life work it's all my fault if it doesn't can't they understand can't my father can't my mother understand they broke the Ozzie and Harriet reel I tried to patch it I tried to live it for them with them without them and none of it worked none of it and now I'm trying all I want is to live my life the way I want to live it not the way they want me to be not after what I've been through I'm not the same haven't been for years but when I try to be what I want they go against it everything goes against it and now all I want is

"...to be committed?" a voice says, completing my thought.

Was I talking? I'm so fucked up I don't even know.

"Have a seat, please. Someone will speak with you shortly."

I slump on the lime naugahyde sofa. Endless wait.

"You being committed?" another voice asks as if speaking through a fog. A girl, maybe nineteen, moon-faced from medication, sits next to me. "You'll

like it here. We have movies, we have dances..." Her disembodied tone tells me she's a shell, except for the tongue of sexual hunger that licks her lips. This chick's "crazy" isn't my "crazy." She enjoys her life here. I'm just trying to get away from mine till I can figure out how to get to a better one. I inch away from her.

Before she says another word a man with bifocals and a Vitalis slickback leads me into his office, listens to my desperate pleading, then says, "As troubled as you may feel at the moment, Mr. Relic, there's nothing I can do for you. Since you're under twenty-one, your parent or legal guardian must sign the papers to authorize your commitment."

I can't believe it. So many years people have told me I'm crazy. Sent me to shrinks, social workers...Now I try to commit myself and can't get in. All the way back to West Mannamok I cackle the laugh of the truly mad.

|||||

(Onscreen. EDSEL sits in his basement chair, smoking his pipe and reading a letter from Brod. The college texts sit on the floor next to him. Upstairs, FAT BOY slouches in a livingroom chair. Ashtray crowning the peak of his gut, he chainsmokes Marlboros while gazing stuporously at "The Rifleman" on the Magnavox. HARRIET paces between the living room and the cellar door, where EDSEL's pipesmoke curls under the bottom crack. She opens the door.)

HARRIET

Jesus Christ! You and that friggin' pipe! You stink up this whole house.

EDSEL

When I'm in San Francisco, you won't have to worry about it.

(The door slams. EDSEL sputters, resumes reading. HARRIET resumes pacing, then opens the door again. Cut to EDSEL's bedroom. EDSEL grooves his head to the jazz whispering in the background. Cut to BUBBA, closeup.)

BUBBA

I'M NOT GONNA TELL YOU AGAIN. YOU CUT THAT OUT!

(Closeup. EDSEL's hand turns the hi-fi's volume knob from one to zero.)

HARRIET

Don't you talk to my son like that, you goddamn fucking sonofabitch!

BUBBA

Don't you talk to me like that.

HARRIET

(Closing EDSEL's door.) You fucking bastard! I'll talk to you any way I please. (EDSEL opens the door.) Stay in your room! (EDSEL closes it.)

(Thud. Grunt.)

EDSEL

(To himself.) Fat Boy must've nailed her.

BUBBA

Don't you hit me again.

HARRIET

Just get the hell out of here, you goddamn fucking sonofabitch. And take your shit with you.

|||||

Just before Thanksgiving I found a job for the Christmas season at D. Funk in Hartford, taking inventory on the Women's Department's brassieres, lingerie, bathrobes...and my own sex fantasies. But I was more concerned with dashing off my daily brainstorms to Brod. When I wasn't working out a new plan to get to San Francisco I was telling Brod how badly my friendship with Dale was deteriorating.

At Tufts Dale was fusing Zen, Tao and Hip into a profound clarity of perception about himself and others. He was *beautiful*. Everyone else was *ugly*. According to him I wasn't Zen, Tao or Hip. But I was ugly. When I suggested he was just practicing one-upmanship he told me I was rationalizing my own inadequacy, based on his summer's reading of the complete

works of Sigmund Freud. I tried to understand his overbearing arrogance as a projection of Eastern thought filtered through a Western mind. Maybe he felt my problems were dragging him down when he needed to succeed in school to stay away from home. Maybe my depression about coming back had exhausted his patience. I bore the brunt of his brutal pronouncements, but he didn't spare anyone, not even McBride. "McBride's fooling himself with teaching," he said. "He thinks he's living the 'Truth,' but he isn't."

"Maybe he's working from *his* Truth."

"I don't fool myself. That's why I can see that he is."

"McBride did a lot for you last summer."

"So, what are you going to do? Tell him what a rotten abusive bastard I am, like you've been telling Brod?"

When he wrote back to me Brod never mentioned what I'd written him about Dale. Obviously, though, he'd mentioned it to Dale. "Well, that's what you've been."

"All you do is whimper and complain. If you can't take the truth about yourself, don't come around."

|||||

(EDSEL's Plymouth. Behind it a "MASS PIKE" sign recedes into the darkness. The Plymouth cruises down Main Street, West Mannamok, where a banner hanging from the trestle proclaims, "WELCOME TO WEST MANNAMOK, HOME OF THE LEFT-BEHINDS.")

EDSEL

(On phone.) Mind if I stop by tonight?

GARRETT

I'm leaving for Daytona in the morning.

EDSEL

Hope you win.

GARRETT

Thanks. Call me next week.

|||||

(EDSEL *in his studio.*)

Except for dropping in on Garrett every few weeks I went to my part-time job and my Wednesday night classes, then holed up at home, reading. I tried to write, but couldn't focus enough to finish anything I started. The pain of my failure in New York ached badly enough. Now Brod was selling pipes and tobacco in San Francisco—just the kind of job I would've liked but couldn't find in the City. And Dale, who'd helped me make my way into the bohemian life, had hammered me out of the Hip scene he was making in Boston. I felt so lonely and miserable that high school almost looked good.

With Fat Boy gone my mother took out her frustrations with making ends meet on me—just like she did when she and my father split. One night she picked up a loafer I'd left on the floor and hit me with it. A few days later she whacked my knee with another misplaced loafer once, twice, three times, four...The memory

HARRIET

I work all day, then I have to come home to *this* friggin' mess! You're a fuckin' slob! (*Hits him in the face, back, ass and legs with a belt as she screams:*) YOU GODDAMN FUCKIN' HOOR! YOU'RE NO FUCKIN' GOOD! JUST LIKE YOUR FATHER! JUST LIKE ALL THOSE GODDAMN FUCKIN' NO-GOOD RIVERRAT BASTARD RELICS!

of every welt she raised on me burned through me, along with my rage at my father for backing off from his promise of a home. I had nowhere to go. *Five!* My friends didn't count for shit, my family did me more harm than good. *Six!* I jumped up, my right fist cocked.

"How dare you threaten your own mother!"

"I don't give a fuck who you are. Don't you ever hit me again."

I *had* to split. *Somewhere*. But with my job ending at Christmas my prospects for getting to San Francisco looked more nonexistent than bleak. Mannamok State University looked like my last option.

Earlier in the fall I'd talked to my parents about attending NYU, my first choice.

Harriet: "You think I'm *made* of money? I'm scratching my ass just to pay

the friggin' bills now."

Ozzie: "You're a poor man's son."

So much for getting back to the Village in February. Compared to staying at home Mannamok State looked like a low-level paradise. I wrote Brod to tell him I wasn't coming out, but the issue was academic. My letter reached him in Big Sur, where he'd rented his own pad in the hills overlooking the skywater Pacific and got a job at an Inn where the owner played classical music on his stereo all day long.

Playing jazz on my hi-fi all day long didn't sound like a bad way to spend the month till Spring semester started, but my father pressed me to look for work.

"What for? It'll take me a month to find a job, I'll have to tell everybody I want to spend my life there, then leave right after I start."

"You need money, bub."

"I've saved enough to carry me till school starts."

I'd saved enough money to hear Mingus at the Five Spot, my last spree before burying myself in schoolbooks. After spending what I could afford for books and records in the Village I went to the club an hour early. Mingus sat at the piano rehearsing the introduction to a tune called "Peggy's Blue Skylight" with Illinois Jacquet. "You play it like a solo. You dig?" Mingus played the notes. Jacquet repeated them on alto.

"No, man." Mingus played them again, Jacquet repeated them again. The accents came out sharper, more emphatic, just the way Mingus had played them.

Then, the melody itself. "Like this," Mingus said.

"No, man. Like *this*." Danny Richmond rat-a-tatted the phrasing on his snare. Richmond was my height, five-seven, but looked twenty pounds thinner than my one-thirty. I couldn't believe he'd tell a mass of muscle and beef like Mingus how to direct the band. When they got to the bridge, Mingus stopped Jacquet again. "The bridge, man, it's a combination of 'Tea for Two' and 'A Kiss Is But A Kiss.' You dig?" I could hear it now. So could Jacquet.

Playing jazz obviously required paying a lot more attention to detail than I'd realized. When the quintet played the melody I could hear Mingus' restless questing in Jacquet's precise phrasing. In the solos that followed I heard the echo of my own questing and understood that by its nature it could never be fulfilled.

||||

(Exterior. Stone's Dairy. The Allen family's Volkswagen in parking lot.)

GARRETT

(Voiceover) Well, Uh-hed-sel, tomorrow afternoon you'll be leaving this little shit town.

EDSEL

You'll be out of here again, yourself.

GARRETT

(Interior. Dairy. Closeup.) Not if I don't start finishing higher than 20th. Listen, what do you know about Debbie Impala?

EDSEL

She's going steady with Hump. Why? You thinking of asking her out?

GARRETT

Not for anything serious. She's a little young...But with your charming presence gracing the campus of Mannamok State, I need somebody to kill time with till I split. And she does look a lot prettier than you.

EDSEL

I remember she said something about you to Brod the night before he left. But I'd look out for Hump, if I were you.

GARRETT

She told me she's been looking to break off with him.

(HUMP and MACK stagger through the door.)

EDSEL

Speak of the Devil. I thought he'd be with Debbie. I mean, she's not working here tonight.

GARRETT

Like I said...

HUMP

You see Debbie again, Allen, I'll fuckin' kill you.

EDSEL

(Whispers.) You mean, you already went out—?

GARRETT

A movie here, a party there...

HUMP

You hear me, Allen? I'll break your freakin' back.

GARRETT

Let's get out of here.

(HUMP and MACK follow GARRETT and EDSEL into the parking lot. HUMP grabs the door of the VW but GARRETT backs out of the lot. 60 mph chase down Main Street, HUMP's Pontiac on the VW's bumper. Interior. HUMP's high beams bounce off the rearview mirror.)

EDSEL

The guy's fuckin' crazy.

GARRETT

Don't you worry, Uh-hed-sel. I'll lose him on the back roads.

EDSEL

If we get that far.

GARRETT

I'm a racer, remember?

(GARRETT's VW makes the curves better than HUMP's Pontiac, but HUMP still rides its bumper. At the last possible second the VW

swerves onto the dirt road next to Ingram's Falls. The car goes up on two wheels.)

EDSEL

We're gonna flip over!

(The Pontiac swings wide of the turn, plows through the wooden rail on the bridge and splashes into the stream. The waterfall drenches the hood, douses the engine. HUMP gets out of the car, shaking with rage and winter water.)

HUMP

I'LL GET YOU, YOU FUCKIN' BASTARDS!

—Going to college got you away from people like Hump, anyway.

—Unfortunately, it didn't. Near the end of my first semester there was a drug bust. I spent an hour in an interrogation room with Hump Lawless and his schoolyard bullies, all turned forty and packing heat.

—Not a great way to start college.

—No. I should've paid more attention to what McBride had to say. I'd talked too much and the cops had wired the Rumor Mill.

—It must have really gone over well with your family.

—Well, my father said, "You're turning into a bum."

—Definitely not what you needed in the way of support.

—True. But when I told my mother the cops might try to bust me on trumped-up charges, she said she'd stand behind me. It was like the first time in years I felt she was on my side.

—That must have made you feel good.

—It did. But what really made me feel good...Every month the college folkies had this hootenanny. One of the hip prima donnas busted at the raid launched into "Cocaine Blues." The audience nearly broke their hands clapping. Then I went on with some jazz musicians. We did a lowdown blues that sent the joint jumping. If I ever had any doubt about what I was doing with my life at that point, the solo I took and the applause I got roared it away.

—Then, you had more creative satisfaction in college than you did in West Mannamok.

—Some. But college was just High School played with a few more I.Q. points.

—Life is High School, you know.

—Yeah. I discovered Vonnegut's Law too late in life. McBride was right about that, too. But I was learning other things besides course work that first

semester. Brod wrote me a long letter raving—as much as a reserved guy like him ever raved—about Zorba the Greek. The gist of it was that I should be spontaneous, live in the moment. Like Zorba. Like him and Dale. He'd even taken up dancing the way Zorba did, to express himself. When I read the book, though, I didn't identify with Zorba. I identified with the narrator who lived in the moment by writing about Zorba.

—What did you expect? You're a writer.

—What did Brod expect from a writer? Or Dale? With Brooklyn in the background and a semester of college under my belt—not to mention some hot playing—I felt more confident about pursuing my own direction instead of trying to connect with Brod's or Dale's. Of course I was still trying to keep my connection to Brod. I remember when he came east that summer. I'd come home to do my laundry. There was the nasal rip of a motorcycle revving up the road. Next thing I know, Brod's swinging a wide arc near the mailbox and circling into the driveway. I rushed toward him and gave him a brotherly hug. "How was California?"

"Bitchin'," he said, introducing me to West Coast slang. Then he told me all about Big Sur and the people who lived there, like the guy who came out there for a weekend, and decided to live the woods and run around naked playing a pan flute. Henry Miller, Robinson Jeffers, Christopher Isherwood and other writers in the area went to the Inn for dinner and evening-long conversations with the owner. Dale must've been home for the summer because he was visiting McBride when Brod and I stopped out there. Dale greeted Brod with a handshake and hug, then looked at me and said, "Well, Edsel. How's your love life?"

—And I thought only women were catty!

—He always knew what nerve to prick. The bastard! Shannon, the Bambi Belair of my college years, had dumped me for the folkie prima donna two weeks after the hoot, and Dale opened the wound just as it was starting to heal. I spent the night on the outside looking in, the way I did the previous fall, so I said fuck it and never went back to McBride's. And my friendship with Dale was over. I didn't see him again till we crossed paths in 1968. Instead of the bourgeois bohemian he'd played in high school, he was presenting himself in everyday life as a Fine Young Man: well-mannered, charming and phoney. We talked about music. He said he respected jazz for what it had taught him but that now he enjoyed the more complex harmonic development of classical music. After an hour, he said he had to be some-

where. "I'm in the Cambridge phone book if you're ever up that way."

—He made the offer.

—I wasn't about to accept an offhand invitation to replay themes that had become, in their own way, classic.

—Ohhhhhhhh!

—After Brod got home that summer, we didn't see much of each other. I got the feeling he was avoiding me. Like, when his California friends came east, I stopped by his parents' house to meet them. He gave me a quick introduction, then a serene grin as he ushered me out the door in less than ten minutes. A few weeks later he wrote me at my apartment...let's see how well I can remember it:

Dear Edsel,

I know that you felt taken aback when my friends were in to visit, and I hope you take what I write to you now in the spirit I intend it: as a friend. The truth is, you're not a pleasant person to be with. When you come into a room, you're in constant motion. Your elbows flap up and down, a twitch here, a jerk there. Sometimes I find your laugh grating, and your voice shrill, in a nasal kind of way. You're so intense about whatever is happening in your life that I find it impossible to relax and feel comfortable with you. And you dwell so much on negative things, instead of the positive that is all around us, that I've come to think of you as The Bearer of Bad News.

I know this sounds harsh, but if our friendship is to continue, I hope you will consider what I've said in the spirit that I intend. We have been close friends, but I feel the need for peace in my life, and I would hope for the sake of our friendship that you can learn to be a more pleasant, peaceful person.

—I'm sure that made you feel good.

—I was hurt, I was angry, but I thought he might be right. I agonized over it for a month before I realized I couldn't change the way I was. It was like he was saying, "If you want our friendship to continue, you have to be like me." And I wasn't. Now, with the diagnosis, I know there's no way I could have been. I didn't see him again till 1969, when I dropped out of grad school. I was in San Francisco and the whole thing was a bad scene. I'd just finished

cobalt therapy for Hodgkins disease. After my first day of classes, I went for my first three-month check-up. The doctor found a swollen lymph node under my left armpit. While I went for tests I was too busy thinking about dying at twenty-four to concentrate on my course work. My health was okay, but grad school turned out to be a drag. I dropped out after a month of classes, depressed, and drinking hard and heavy. Before I started to wend my way back east, I dropped him a postcard telling him what I'd been up to. When I called him from Monterey, he sounded hesitant, downright uncomfortable, about having me over, but finally agreed to it. I spared him my personal frustrations. We had a nice, polite time talking about the Sixties over dinner at the Inn.

"There is a revolution going on in this country, you know," he said.

"I don't know that it's a revolution," I said, "but whatever it is, we got in on it early."

We spent the evening celebrating the way life had turned two outcasts into a culture's advance guard. Before I left, he said, "You know, Edsel, I wasn't sure I wanted to see you, you sounded so bummed out. But I'm glad we got together."

We agreed to write. And never did.

—And that was it?

—Yeah. Ended with a whimper, not even close to a bang. Over the years I've thought of him and Dale—more often than they've thought of me, probably. The grapevine tells me they traveled a lot more than I did... Europe, Asia...and some nights when I think about them, I flash back to the night they saw the Shooting Star and I didn't.

—The way you've been writing about that star...

—It's not a Tourette obsession, like counting the number of strokes when I brush my teeth. Hell, it's just a symbol: the flight of Icarus or something like that. My wings melted and I crashed back into a town of hayseeds. I don't always think about it the way I'm writing about it. Look. There's a whole mishmosh of things that are too complicated to ever straighten out completely. When I was a kid, I started on the Fast Track. I was supposed to do all kinds of great and groovy things. Some of that...you know, you get older and learn to settle for less. I don't feel cheated about growing up. If anything, I'm getting better with age. But I do wonder where I'd be if my life hadn't gotten blown apart when I was ten. Or maybe it was the Tourette all along. I mean, I can play chicken-or-egg forever and with my very own choice of

traumas. But it keeps coming out the same.

—We've lived together for three years. Believe me, I know when you're obsessing and when you're not. Between what you've written and what you've told me, I'm beginning to think this reunion is more like a potential psychodrama for you.

—I dunno...Maybe it's like that Eighties thing about Having It All...

—Well, you know you can't have it all. Not back, anyway. Your mother's dead, you haven't seen your father in what, twenty years?

—Eighteen. A few years after my mother died, I figured out the split was part of a process that I just couldn't see happening. My mother gave me the beating she wanted to give the old man. His losing a son became my payback for taking it. If there's a tie beyond memory that connects me to that town, back to that Ozzie and Harriet dream house, I might find it at the reunion.

—If you find it, you'll definitely have an article I can print.

—If I don't like it, I'll come home early. You said I didn't have to write about it, so that's good. I'll bring along some copies of my record. Maybe I can piggyback performance poetry onto the boomers' nostalgia market. I'm prepared.

It'll be different this time around.

What a head! This new smoke is some whoopee shit! Lookit the maples reaching over Lake Road, skeletal fingers turning pages of Destiny back in the night. The resort on the right...what was it, Lakeside?...jumps with tourists from Long Island whose teenage daughters in white short shorts and red haltertops snag rides in the townies' convertibles. Turn the scrapbook 25 years forward. Even the boards across the shattered windowpanes are weathered gray, their grainy surfaces raised and roughened. The others...Indian Lake Lodge, Bayrest, Crescent Cove...look like they nailed the shutters the season after I left for college—except for...what's this one over here, what was it called? Can't remember. Now it's a condo where a bigtime coke dealer got busted...and downtown...the boarded-up Big Ed's Soda Shop where the hoods used to hang like the falling shingles, the old five-and-dime turned antique store same with the hardware store where I scored Glory Seeds all those years ago. Funny how time passes. Like now: the certainties once nailed down now boarded up. But with *this* herb any time is slow going. No point to arriving early. The less time there, the better. Why not drive by the old homestead, indulge the passage of time some (not me, particularly) are celebrating on this night.

Lookit this place. Gone Upscale Suburban. Raised ranches sit where quarries waited to swallow unsuspecting kids. Neighbors within hearing distance...where's the solitude, the isolation?...never mind seeing Speed Limit signs...I used to go 60 where 30's posted...*Street Numbers!* ...We used to say the brown ranch house on the right behind a colonial stone fence and a bank of white birch trees...now, it's...what's this glow-in-the-dark name on Sandstrom's old mailbox...*H. Lawless!*...Too close to home, way too close ...next box: B. Goodbrand, Jr....all the way to the gravel bank where signs advertising Xmas trees have replaced the white birches, and the Xmas trees

themselves replaced the field where Fat Boy's oxen used to graze...No way I'd want to reunite with Brod and Dale on *this* version of the old homestead. How would it play out if the road were still rural? Brod in from Toronto, Dale from Bangkok, me from...well, let's see...

(Interior. Knottypine living room. At rear, near kitchen, is a round antique diningroom table. EDSEL, DALE and BROD sit at the table, where a champagne bottle rests in a bucket of ice.)

EDSEL

...so I thought my grandmother's table would improve the ambience by adding memories from a better time.

DALE

I'm sure we've all had better times, hee hee.

BROD

Really! I'm surprised you even *thought* about coming back here.

EDSEL

Success mellows you, changes your perspective. After my novel made me the youngest writer ever to win the Pulitzer, I used my first royalty check to buy the place back. It's a good getaway spot. None of the townies know I come here. When you're down in the City as much as I am, you need a place like this.

BROD

Really! When I was composer-in-residence with the London Symphony, I found the city became so oppressive that I absolutely *had* to go to the Swiss Alps for solitude. I prefer my present situation, where I fly in for premieres, then go back home, where I can compose and paint in relative tranquility.

DALE

Tokyo was a marvelous city, like that. The, uh, women are the most beautiful I've seen except for Thailand. Bangkok is a great place for tickie. That's why I moved there (*Titters*).

EDSEL

I was in Tokyo once, myself, on a promotional tour for a book. I enjoyed the women there.

DALE

Even though I'm partial to Bangkok tickie, like that, I've done pretty well with the ladies in Tokyo, Rome, Paris, Copenhagen, Beirut, Tangier, Istanbul, Athens, Toronto, San Francisco, even Palo Alto. There's some *fine* tickie in Palo Alto, almost as good as Bangkok, in fact. Just this fall, I started there as poet-in-residence. Harvard was getting a little tiresome. After I won the National Book Award, Stanford gave me an offer I couldn't refuse. (*He flashes his copy of Can You Trust the Narrator?*) By the way, Edsel, I heard that when you were there you gave the chicks plenty of offers they *could* refuse.

Typical Dale! Even after twenty-five years, nothing would change with him. Probably not with Brod either. Let's replay the scene in my funky starter home twenty miles north of here.

(Exterior. Tract home in a bluecollar neighborhood. Cut to interior. The studio of EDSEL's house: dark paneled walls, a computer at one end piled with manuscripts, its printer spitting sheets of paper onto the floor. EDSEL'S bass stands in a corner, squeezed between ceiling-high shelves of books and records. Even though the room is large, the towering shelves create a cramped ambience.

DALE

Well, Edsel, this looks about right for you. I always thought you'd end up a middle-class commuter.

EDSEL

Look, man. I tried free-lancing in my twenties. If I wasn't living here with my mother, I would've fuckin' *starved*. Unfortunately, you can't make a living in the arts.

DALE

If you're *good*, you can.

EDSEL

I'm good. I'm just not *lucky*.

BROD

Really! I came to the conclusion back in the 60's that I wasn't a very good artist. So I looked for something that gave me satisfaction, but allowed me to take care of my family too. Support payments are difficult to make, especially when you've got three children.

DALE

I looked at my karma and realized in this life my own work wouldn't get me where I wanted to go. So I downsized my goals and concentrated on translating other poets' work.

EDSEL

And here I am, three novels in my drawer, manuscripts backlogged and piled up all over the place. Working all day, writing all night. All for an occasional letter of acceptance from some editor who pays two contributors' copies. But the performance poetry...who would have thought I'd be doing that?

DALE

Not me. I always told you your poetry sucked.

EDSEL

It's ironic that I'm the only one of us who's tried not to settle for less. You're the guys who saw the Shooting Star, not me.

DALE

What star?

EDSEL

The one you guys saw the night we did the Glory Seeds.

DALE

I was so stoned I don't remember it.

BROD

I'm afraid I don't remember it, either. It was such a long time ago.

EDSEL

You mean, I'm the only one who remembers that star, and I didn't even fuckin' see it?

DALE

We told you a long time ago, Edsel, you're not very observant.

That's more like it, this second scenario. Typical of them: make a big deal of something, sandbag me for not seeing what they saw, then fluff off the very thing they made significant. To think I bought into that shit! I really thought they saw something I didn't: the star they hitched for the fast-track to Destiny! To think I associated that trailing vapor with the second-hand stories about their travels! Meanwhile I bombed out in West Mannamok, Brooklyn and San Francisco, then settled into the general home area as the guy in the corner of the bar who never fits in anywhere and rages through life with his mind screaming its unrealized potential. Star or no star, we shared a *satori*. Or, at least, a moment that revealed character. And now my phantom grip on the wrong end of Destiny's fulcrum is slipping off a long-gone trail of vapor.

Maybe it's just as well. Truth, symbol or self-made myth, Brod and Dale vanished on that vapor trail twenty-five years ago. I held onto it only because I persisted in the foolish dream of being a writer. Persisted beyond the putdowns and personal doubts of Dale, of Potter McBride, of Christ knows how many others. Including Bambi, who invited me on this wild ghost chase.

Toking my way across town to the VFW Hall I picture the parking lot packed with '58 Impalas, '55 Fords, Hump's red '59 Pontiac convertible, pickup trucks, or their modern gasguzzling counterparts. But Nissans, Toyotas, Mazdas, Subarus and Volkswagens grab tread on the gravel lot. The hicks have gone upscale. Economically, anyway. Intellectually? Better take a few more tokes. This isn't a night for the sober-minded. One more for luck and across the shifting pebbles, looking for a door. Never been *here* before, swore I'd never come back to this town again. But life has its twists and turns. What if Brod and Dale actually *did* show up? Beyond my running

Mindscreen Theater fantasy, that is. No, impossible. Well, here's a door open. Back door. Good. Inch your way in, test the waters. Check out the sagging breasts of the women, sagging chests of the men...my vision fading to fuzz, their faces framed with hairdos from a new era...all of them barely recognizable in the distance from the tightassed days of our youth, all of them clomping around with plastic glasses in their hands, a groupdance of cheery grins on the front side of the Art Deco jukebox of red yellow and blue tubes pumping Golden Oldies toward the dancefloor and toward the back door and me

Teenage Popular(ity) Music (Reprise)

I

“got no got no got no”

“You got no
friends”

WANT

“No friends,
Edsel”

“got no got no got no”

FRIENDS

screeching to a Frankie Valli highnote ending that rings in my mind racing spacing no pacing toward the back of the jukebox spacing on the reefer riff mind racing as you come face to face ACT STRAIGHT with the thick layered flesh of Coach Goodbrand: “Good to see you, Edsel.” The slab of hand stretches toward mine. My bassplayer’s grip matches the coach’s crunching shake. “I haven’t seen you since...have you come to any of the reunions?”

“No,” I say, succumbing to the Mindscreen Theater’s onrushing panorama:

Doctor’s office, 1969. Close-up: test tube. In the bottom of the tube, deformed red blood cells tear ravenously at white blood cells. The shredded white cells float lifeless to the top, scum on plasma.

“See those cells?” the Doctor says. “They could be you.”

Flashes of nuclear holocaust. H-bomb clouds mushroom above the cobalt machine. Phantom races of people scream burning death through my teeth and my hair follicles.

A notice from the draft board: "We wish to re-examine you." My hair an unraveling shag rug I hand the Body Snatchers my oncologist's letter knowing they can't take me wondering if I can sue to change my one-year 1-Y to a permanent 4-F.

My father: "I don't see why losing your hair should bother you."

Doctor's office, 1971. "The Cancer has invaded your spleen."

"What are my chances this time?"

"Fifty-fifty, I'd say."

"So, you gonna cut out my spleen?"

"Well, there are trends. Removing the spleen seems fashionable at this point in time. However, given your reputation as a writer, musician, nonconformist and general whacko, we believe it would be artistically appropriate to leave in the spleen and to utilize alternative procedures."

Close-up. The needle stabs the arm. Vinblastine Sulfate. Slowly my veins turn to red ice. Sulfur steams above smoldering flesh. Pop Art movie: the protagonist writhing in bed, face a grimace-mask of blinding pain. Every three hours swallowing a double dose of pain-killers breaks the expression.

Cut to Main Street USA. March snares. Patriotic anthems. Succession of presidents...Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush...Headline:

GOODBRAND APPOINTED HEAD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Coach, his white crewcut approaching NRA prototype, struts behind the presidents in Marine dress uniform.

Well, I guess I'm not the only one on the move. Who would've thought old Coach would parlay four years of active duty and a monthly reserve check into a politically-appointed sinecure! Life has its twists and turns, its climaxes and codas, mine as much as anybody's. And I'm not sure which is coming next. But I know I'm sparing Goodbrand the details and me the clichés. If learning I have Tourette has put a spin on my life I don't want to put the spin in Goodbrand's mind. Time to stop handing the fools the tools of ignorance. Besides, if I get through this night I've got an article and a few record sales.

"I've enjoyed reading your articles," Goodbrand says. "Is that something

you do full time?"

"I wish it was."

Have I heard from Brod or Dale? I tell him what I know. While he's nodding his head, absorbing the information, I say, "Listen. Is Mr. DiCristo here tonight?"

"He passed away last year. Cancer..."

Do I launch my war stories through this window of opportunity? The opportunity to say that only Cancer is worse my than my life in this town? My headshake of indecision must look like a gesture of regret for the dear departed armchair anti-Communist. "I want to circulate. Catch you later," I say then stumble into the fountainglow of multicolored lights and streamers sparkling

"Well, Hello, Edsel.
Remember me?
Mack. Mack Wyllis."

**W
E
L
C
O
M
E**

sure, the dumpy body the
rolling gait attacked me

the first day of school I
landed a wild hook
nailed the fucker

"Hey, Edsel! Man,
you look in pretty good
shape. Don't he, Mack?"

shit in your own mouth
Hump, your fat gut burst-
ing your red luau shirt

"Edsel's the best
kept up of all of us,
y'know?"

"I hit a heavy bag
every night to keep
the flab off"

"I better not mess
with you," Hump says

**H
O
M
E**

too fat, too slow,
I could dodge his thunder
right all night, stick and
move, stick and move

"Hey, you remember
my wife, Bambi Belair?"

with blushing memories
at my prodigious blend
of persistence and
stupidity

“Hello, Edsel. It’s so nice to see you again.”

E

“Same, Bambi,” though not as good as it used to be

“Ever hear from Brod or Dale?”

D

“Not in a long time”

S

“Y’know, I’ve been reading about your work in the paper. I always knew you’d do it.”

E

“I’m glad to hear it”

L

I always knew I’d show you, Coop

or its figurative equivalent on through the Virtual Highschool Yearbook to the pages where the primary characters break down into their constituent parts, the anonymous faces from the classroom’s middle rows then leaning toward the frontrow propriety of David Wynn or the backrow malice of Hump now caught bent over in the muddle of the middle: nondescript as ever, sagging with the weight of their maturity, shrinking in the face of mine (how *big* they used to seem to me! how smart! how strong!) and not a coach or a captain they can turn to for distinction or direction in the High School of Real Life. The handshakes, the praise! All the while working my way through hearing and telling life stories quickly forgotten (I assume) on both sides. Heady stuff! Until I realize that despite a half-dozen record sales most of these Blasts From The Past want to hear about my boring day gig in a bureaucracy not my performance poetry gigs in the City or my publications in obscure zines. Like the night, the glad-handing is something to get through on my way to somewhere else—in this case the bar to wet my pot-dried mouth with a club soda. And who turns, double whiskey in hand, but, “Pete! What have you been doing all these years?”

The familiar grin spreads, but not quite as wryly, weighted as it is with creased flesh at the corners and a second chin. “Selling liquor. You might say I found my calling at a young age.”

“You married?”

“Twice. Got two kids from my first marriage, one from my second.” Impala joined the Air Force to beat the liquor bust that cancelled his trip to

Mexico. Made a career of it. When he got his pension he started a liquor distributorship with Coop DeVille. They also rent Art Deco jukeboxes—including the one now blasting Del Shannon’s “Runaway”—to highschool reunions. “Coop does some DJ work too, but not tonight. You seen his TV show, hey?”

“A couple of times, yeah.” Once was all I could stand.

“Real opinionated, ain’t he?”

“From what I saw of it, I’d say he’s found his niche.” The safest place for a kid who couldn’t back up his big mouth is a show that features him running it on a channel hardly anybody watches.

“Coop tells me you been playin’ jazz up around Hartford.”

“When I’m not gigging in New York or Boston, yeah.” Might as well pile on the Reunion Hype. It’s what everyone seems to expect.

“Where you sittin’?”

“Nowhere yet.”

“Come join us, hey.” Impala leads me back through more gladhanding to the large round table where a thirtyish woman in a mini flashes classic leg as she turns to face me. He introduces me to his second wife. “I saw you the minute you walked in, the way everybody came over to you,” she says. “It’s like you were the *star*.”

Is that what it’s all about? Getting the Glory Gladhand from people who used to put me down? Am I still just a Lonely Teenager at forty-two? I settle in at the table—surprise!—next to Laura Dodge, my gradeschool sweetheart. Her makeup pancakes a purple bruise. My fantasies of her getting ready for this night were just a little too accurate, I think, watching Mack Wyllis, a grayhaired bull with a boiled face, drop his paunch into the seat next to her. As he guzzles a beer the table fills: Hump, Bambi, Coop and his wife, Felicia Ford, long since returned from the Senior-year scandal of Hump’s gangbang. Hump leans back in his chair, his gut poking the tails of his luau shirt outward. Tough to believe this guy was a star jock! Even tougher to believe: Flowers, the teacher he punched out, coming over to shake his hand. “I thought you and he...” My voice trails off.

“I made my amends,” Hump explains. “Early in the 70’s I realized I had a problem. It didn’t take a freakin’ genius to figure it out. I don’t know how I made it through school, drunk to classes...so one night I went over his house, and I apologized. Flowers, he’s a Class Guy.”

And what about Goodbrand, circling the table with handshakes but

pointedly avoiding his former Star Athlete? He ordered Hump to pitch the conference title game on two days' rest. Hump tore his rotator cuff in the seventh inning. "We won, but it killed my chances for turning pro. I could hit pretty good, but I couldn't throw from first base to the pitcher's mound, let alone pitch."

"That's a lousy break."

"The pressure of competitive sports may build character," Coop says, leaning his perm into the conversation, "but at what cost? What's the cost?" He tosses down a drink and waits for an answer.

"Relax, Coop. The pressure at those tryouts..."

"If it happened to someone nowadays, there'd be multimillion dollar lawsuits."

"If I made it to the Bigs, I wouldn't have what I got today." His slab of an arm wraps around Bambi whose eyes flicker a trace of their teenage glow.

"Which is why I think there are too damn many frivolous lawsuits clogging the courts nowadays."

"If I sued every doctor who missed my diagnosis—" What are you *doing!* Don't come out of the Tourette Closet with *this* clown. No need to say anything more; DeVille's a master at filling Dead Air:

"People get a simple hangnail, they— "

"Come on your show and talk it to death," Felicia snaps.

"I need a refill," DeVille grumbles. He stumbles to his feet.

"That's a quick comeback," I tell Felicia, watching DeVille sway toward the bar. "It reminds me of the time I tried to hit on you during my White Negro phase."

"Your what?"

"My White Negro phase."

"What's that?"

"Well..." No, it would take too long to explain the reference. "The summer before Junior year I was sitting across from Big Ed's in a pair of shades. I said, 'Hey, baby,' trying to act real cocky, you know, and you just said, 'Hay is for horses' and kept on moving."

"I did?" Under her nervous laugh, Felicia's hand flutters against her breast. "I don't remember it."

"I remember it because I had a crush on you that spring and summer. It took all the courage I could summon to do that. Not to mention a pair of shades to hide behind."

Her hand flaps dismissively. "Oh, Edsel! You were *always* doing things like that."

Always! Hell, it was the only time I remember talking to her one-on-one. My memory is selective, I guess, but not as selective as I'd like it to be. Fuck it. Change the subject. "So, Hump, what do you do?"

"I own a motorcycle shop here in town. Love it. On weekends Bambi and I ride dirt bikes out back of our place. Right near where you used to live."

"I took a ride by. The place sure has changed."

"We got six acres. You ever ride a dirt bike?"

"I fell off Brod's bike twice. I don't even get on them anymore."

"Don't tell Coop," Pete says. "He'll have Hump and Bambi wearin' suits of armor."

"You got that right," Hump says. "Freakin' guy'd do *anything* to make a show. Say, Edsel, you ever hear from Brod?"

Other than in my stoned fantasy an hour ago? "Not in a long time."

"I tell ya, Brod was quite a guy. That summer I worked with him..." effected Hump's miraculous transformation from Schoolyard Bully to Noble Savage in Brod's mind. Funny, the effects experience has on memory... "How about Garrett?"

Not since the chase that landed you and Mack in Ingrams Falls, I'm tempted to say. Either he can't remember what I remember or doesn't want to. "Last time I saw Garrett, he was racing in Daytona."

"Wow! I guess you *ain't* seen him in a long time. He moved back up here for a while. Stayed a few years, then packed up and headed for Australia. Before he went, he helped me get my shop going."

Well, more twists and turns. Hump's probably replaced the chase with better memories. It's easy enough to picture Garrett, graying and grizzly, jeeping or dirtbiking over the outback of my imagination. It's harder to remember how I fell out of touch with him. Maybe getting caught up in the first semester of college, maybe we just never got that close...so much water over so many (ahem) dams, who knows...

A passing glance at Laura Dodge drags me out of memory's quicksand into a possible DeVille special on domestic violence. "You still hustling marbles?" I ask, arching my eyebrows.

Laura's pancaked face angles slowly toward me, her right eye linking with mine. The pensive set of her mouth makes me want to apologize for hitting her when I was a kid. Christ, what a shitty thing to do to her! Maybe

her memory will fail her and spare me from mine. The moment a shy smile starts to raise the part of her lip that isn't puffy Mack tilts his head back to start a seated swagger. His eyes deaden as they stare at a downward angle. "She's a housewife," his deep voice growls proudly.

My Mindscreen Theater fantasy about her selling antiques was a better fate than this voice of nineteenth century manhood with bare knuckles to match. Better humor him, don't scratch him on his mean streak. "What do you do for a living, Mack?"

"I'm Chief of Police."

"They've got a *police force* here!"

"Surrendered to Creeping Suburbanism," DeVille says, sloshing his refill as his butt plops hard into his seat. The cat's smashed. He really has found his niche, I've got to say. Who else but Community Access would air that stone-gray 70's perm and that sunken paunch poking through the campy white sportcoat and pink carnation?

"I figured *you'd* be the Chief, Hump." Or a drunken bartender.

Hump shakes his head. "*Nah*. I saw how tough it was on my old man. Besides, I got busted a few times."

"You mean, it's not like the old days, when the biggest, baddest guy in town just stood up and said, 'I'm the Boss?'"

Impala's eyes sparkle mischief. "Mack had to take the Civil Service exam three times before *he* could stand up and say it."

Mack holds his thin scowl, then lets a gummy grin crease it. He leans back, puffs out his chest.

"I've always said there's too much emphasis on bureaucratic credentials," Coop says.

"And not enough on food," Felicia says, rising at the caterer's signal to load up plates at the buffet table.

Over helpings of baked chicken, ziti and other buffet staples the conversation turns to the Good Old Days. Not a comment about my not saluting the flag or the night Garret dumped Hump into Ingram's Falls. Or the endless ragging...maybe they feel as bad about what they did as I feel about hitting Laura. Or maybe they just don't remember. But how can they forget what I can't? Well, I certainly can't remember the things they're talking about...Bambi and Impala crowned King and Queen of the Senior Prom ...Hump and Mack and Pete and Coop dragging down the flats near the town line late on Saturday nights...the Senior Class trip to the United

Nations and Laura's party the following night...because I wasn't there for *their* Good Old Days. No matter how much good will they gush over me I'm still an outsider, welcomed...for what? A desire to dull decades of guilt? A delayed-reaction respect? The article I haven't said a word about writing? Or maybe just the urge to stage as big an event as possible? I don't have any answers. Especially when Coop clinks his drink against the table, blinks his sodden purple eyelids, then asks, "Say, Edsel. You still in touch with Sid Silverman?"

"Christ, no. We stopped being friends in the fifth grade." I roll my eyes away from Coop's persistent stare to search for the conversational clique Silverman would pretend to be part of. "I heard he became a shrink."

"Nobody's seen him since his folks moved to Florida twenty years ago," Hump says. "We were kinda hopin' you'd know where we could get ahold of him."

Well, Silverman finally figured out where he fit in. I thought he'd be here, sitting on the outside like I am, only not having as good a laugh. Hell, he's probably having a *better* laugh...wherever he is. But I won't look in the APA listings to find out.

Through dessert Hump looks at his watch. Again, and again. "Geez, where is he?"

"His flight probably got delayed," Bambi says.

"Whose?" I ask.

"Dave Wynn. He's coming in from Cleveland."

Cleveland? Not the greatest place to live. D.C., Philadelphia, Detroit...I figured he'd end up in one of their suburbs. Maybe Mr. Have-It-All fell off the Fast Track somewhere between All-American Boy and All-American Adult. "I'm curious to see how he turned out," I remark. Nothing like the venom of envy to inflame your curiosity.

Hump gives a prolonged squint at the entrance, a searching scan of the room and a decisive glance at his watch. "We're running late here. We're gonna hafta start without him."

Coop follows him to the jukebox, nearly trips over the cord as he unplugs it.

"I really hoped Dave Wynn would be here by now," Hump opens. "His flight was supposed to come in from Cleveland about 5:30. Maybe the Class President got bumped..."

Laughter.

“Looks like I get to play Class President. For one night anyway...”

In his Everybody-Have-a-Good-Time spirit Hump reads letters from classmates on the west coast and in Hawaii—people I never thought would cross the West Mannamok line—and does a better job than I would’ve expected. But he’s looking around. A long pause, a deep breath, then: “I’ve been hoping Dave would show up, because the Committee voted to give him this special plaque for—”

In comes Wynn, teenage trim, the eternal toothpaste grin... The one guy who has *everything* going for him...looks, brains, personality...riding First Class on every Fast Track...hasn’t changed in twenty-five years—except for a theatrical dash of gray at the temples. In this age of receding gums and incipient gravity it’s enough to make you think of Icarian crashes, wings breaking loose to sever heads, torsos and the long strings of luck that make success out of ability.

“Dave, the Committee voted to give you this special Best and Brightest plaque for your work with computers. When you showed up, that is.”

“I’m sorry. My presentation ran over, my flight got delayed...”

“But you got here. Talk about timing!”

Talk about luck! Circumstances run against him and still parlay themselves into the perfect entrance. Here comes the acceptance speech: “Thank you. I’ve always felt that we were fortunate to come of age at the time we did, when our resources matched our enthusiasm and allowed us to open ourselves to new experiences and people. At every reunion I’ve seen us grow, individually and as a group. Even now, in this time of shrinking resources, I see us as a special group, one uniquely situated to lead a new generation—the generation of our children—toward a growth appropriate to their era.”

Applause. Handshakes and hugs as Wynn wends his way down the rows of tables till he stops in front of me. “I’m glad you could come, Edsel. I’ve always wondered what happened to you.”

“I haven’t gone very far,” I say, thinking my house is five exits away.

“Don’t believe this guy,” DeVille says, his diction soggy but not yet slurred. “He’s the Class Writer.”

“And musician,” Impala adds.

“It’s good to know our class has representation in the arts,” Wynn says. “Do you play locally?”

“He plays in New York, hey.”

Wynn asks where. I tell him. "I can't say I've heard of them," he says politely.

"If you're not into performance poetry, you probably wouldn't," I explain. No big deal.

"I've heard of them," DeVille says. "Everybody here but you has heard of them."

Wynn's face shades pink.

"We heard about them because Edsel *told* us about them."

Now I'm blushing in the swirl of laughter. Is DeVille trying to put me down or give me a good-natured roast?

He's a really good writer," Bambi says, pushing her face forward. "He writes for the Hartford papers."

"Just free-lance. So, I hear you're living in Cleveland."

"No, I was just giving a presentation there. I've been in Seattle for the past five years.

Amazing! The man with everything has landed in the country's trendiest city. As usual, the conversation turns to Brod and Dale. As usual, I haven't seen them.

"I still remember Mr. McBride's seminar."

No doubt he remembers Brod's great presentation of his philosophy of life and my unfocused followup rant.

"It was a wonderful opportunity for getting exposed to new and different ideas."

It's hard to disagree with this most appropriate of statements. "When you're seventeen or eighteen, everything seems new and different, even midriff bulge."

"That's very true," he says through a laugh. One last gladhand and he's gliding past our shared past to the next table. Hump, meanwhile, is winding up the ceremonial matters. "The floor's open for dancing..."

so I scan the table of one gradeschool girlfriend and two teenage crushes, one of mammoth proportions, in case I feel the urge, then flash back to my stag-drag appearance at the Sophomore Hop: no date, no dancing. Luckily, my days of Lonely Blue Boy are over. But none of the guys are asking their wives to dance.

Impala's fingers flick a toker's V. "Let's go outside, have a smoke," he says.

"I'm coming too," DeVille says. "I want to talk to Edsel about some-

thing.”

What? A drunken retaliation for bloodying his nose in tenth grade?

In the shadows a hundred feet beyond the yellow light glaring through the now-open double doors Impala taps a J out of his Merit Slim pack. “I figured you still smoked, hey.”

“You’re one of the guys that started the Sixties dope scene down here,” DeVille says. “You really were ahead of your time.”

“A few years ahead in a small town,” I say with a shrug of my shoulders. Mindless doping wasn’t what I had in mind.

“I’d really like to have you on my show sometime...talk about your work. You’ve gotten yourself a real reputation as a regional alternative culture artist.”

“It was my only alternative.”

His knees buckle as he digs a business card out of the depths of his pocket. “Call me next week and we’ll set it up.”

A talk show on community access? Not exactly a career move, but it won’t hurt.

Impala breathes out a pungent jet of smoke. “So, you’re not in touch with either of those guys, huh?”

“Not in decades, never mind years.”

“You guys were such good buddies I really figured you would be. Especially you and Brod.”

My shoulders shrug. “While I was in New York, Brod and Dale got tight. When I came back, it didn’t seem like there was any room for me anymore. I dunno...Looking back on it, I was pretty unbearable. Depressed, lonely...”

Impala shakes his head. “Don’t blame yourself, hey. Hunter was like that. Had to worm his way in on everything...the shit.”

Hmmm... “He did something to you?”

“Yeah. He moved in on Bambi while I was in basic training.”

“You mean, he put the boots to her while you were in boot camp?”

Impala’s Woody Woodpecker laugh blasts in from the past. “That’s about the size of it. He come into town on Christmas vacation. Next thing I know, she sends me this Dear John letter. I wasn’t even gone a month.”

“How long did it last?”

“Just enough to keep his cylinder greased till he got back to Boston. She wanted to get back with me, but...‘once burned,’ y’know?”

“Well, you’re sitting at the same table...”

“Every five years, who’s it hurt? Besides, it was a long time ago.”

“It was a long time ago that we came out here,” DeVille says thickly. “We better get back in before our old ladies shut us off.”

“Before *your* old lady shuts *you* off, hey.”

Impala hands me his card before we head in. “Let’s keep in touch, hey. It’s really good talkin’ to you.”

“Sure. You call me, I’ll call you,” I say, scratching my phone number on the back of one of his cards.

Inside, the dance floor’s crowded with aging bodies shaking the rust off their bop steps and creaking their hips to the Twist. The wives snatch up Impala and DeVille. Alone at the table my not *having* to be here allows me the luxury of reflecting from a distance. Bambi and Dale? Not your most likely couple, watching her shake in front of Hump’s rattling roll. Obviously not your longest-lasting, either. Says something about how long mine would’ve lasted if we’d dated long enough for my hormone haze to wear off. And puts a nasty spin on Dale’s “How’s your love life?” His knife-quip hurt for different reasons and a different woman. It came long after my lust for Bambi faded, but not long enough to stop a slo-mo Mindscreen Theater replay. What did Dale really want from me? A geek he could upstage to assuage his upstart ego for not having quite as much charisma as Wick? I hooked onto Dale for *his* charisma, not to mention his ability to bring me into the bohemian underbelly of the cultural world Brod had exposed me to. But underneath Dale’s confident, experienced exterior was there some part of him that fed off me the way he fed off Wick? Not that I was a Burroughs protégé but I did cop a writing award that he didn’t. Even though I flopped I made a bold move down to the City whereas he backed into the college his father and grandfather had attended. Fine. We used each other and got what we wanted, though I probably got the worst of it at the time. Now, who knows? Out in the lot Impala added another carbon onto the chain, changed the molecule of memory yet another time. This time, though, I’ve got the comfort of distance...which closes with “Twistin’ the Night Away” and the dancers’ return to the table.

“How come you’re not dancin’?” Hump asks, his tone beefy with Everybody-Have-a-Good-Time.

“I didn’t bring anybody to dance with.”

“Don’t be a freakin’ wallflower, Edsel. This class got plenty of divorced women. Just look around.”

“Really, Hump. It’s okay. I’m having a good time just talking to people.”

“Hey, Bambi. Why don’t you dance with Edsel? He didn’t bring his girl.”

“Really, Hump! You don’t have to. I mean, everything’s fine.”

“And now,” the DJ intones, “a Ladies Choice!”

“Come on, Edsel.” Bambi tugs my hand. I follow her onto the floor, puzzling over the Ladies Choice from the girl who wouldn’t go out with me and the gesture from the last person I expected to suggest it. Santo and Johnny drone “You’re miiiiine” while Bambi’s body presses against me for the first time, fleshy, and her eyes look up at me, their green a flattened glow. The thrill of it all! Moreso, the irony...

“This is the first time we’ve ever danced together,” I say.

“You’re kidding!” She pokes my back.

...of the Magic Moment finally coming true...

“No. I stopped going to dances after the Sophomore Hop.”

“Maybe you should’ve kept going.”

...twenty-five years too late for maybes.

“It just didn’t seem like there was any percentage in it. You know, the girls I asked out all said no. The guys ragged me so badly I figured nobody liked me, so why bother?”

“I saw what they used to do to you. And Brod, too. But I guess most of us were so busy with whatever we were doing that we didn’t even *think* how much it hurt.”

“It hurt enough for me to not want to come back.”

“We talked about that when your name came up at one of the Committee meetings. We were going down the list. Hump and Mack started laughing about what they used to do to you. I told them that with their attitude it was no wonder guys like you wouldn’t come back. Hump felt really bad. He doesn’t like it when he slips back to the way he used to be.”

“It’s too bad somebody didn’t tell them years ago. Everybody’s nice to me tonight, but when you sit around the table reminiscing...well, I went off in a different direction, so I still feel like a stranger.”

“I hope you won’t be a stranger anymore. I’m really glad you came.”

“I’m glad you invited me. But...why would you, of all people, even *want* to invite me? I mean, I was such a total creep the way I called you every week for a date.”

“You look at things a little differently when you grow up, I guess. One day a few years ago I remembered you and, you know, I really felt *flattered*

that somebody would like me enough to be so persistent.”

“That’s really nice.” This isn’t the time for me to expound on the role the obsessive-compulsive component of my Tourette played in asking her out. Her belated appreciation nearly squeezes a gush from my tear ducts. My right hand cradles the small of her back, draws her tighter against me. She’s attractive enough at forty-three. When her eyes meet mine, though, my past reflects as distant as my face on the mirroring sea of her irises. I’ve got a groovier lady waiting for me at the end of the night.

Which winds down with our swapping war stories: my gigs, my Hodgkins...but not my Tourette. Their cruelty, my over-reacting...who knows what was really the case? Let them think what they want. But before I split, one last request:

Hump buys a copy of my recording, with the radical feminist camping as a stripper on a noir jacket. “If the guys at the shop don’t like the music, they’ll still *love* the cover.”

“Oh, *Hump!*” Bambi swats his wrist.

When I get up to leave, Hump shakes my hand, says he’ll see me at the next reunion. Bambi thanks me for coming with a gush of homey warmth.

Scraping over the gravel onto North Main Street, I start to sum up the night, not to mention the agonizing beforehand: no way I’d live in this town again, but it’s nice to know I’m welcome when I visit. It’ll actually be fun playing catch-up with Pete. Coop...well, his show’s a venue. I sold eight records and feel good about writing the article. As nice as it feels to achieve acceptance in West Mannamok on my own terms, though, it’s not my main concern. Nostalgia is just another vapor trail we chase. I’m chasing something more important.

As long as I’m chasing it here, let’s wind down the back roads to McBride’s...a few more tokes...even take his long dirt driveway to the top of the hill. The place is probably boarded up. McBride went off to live in the woods of New Hampshire, last I heard. No, there’s a light on in there...a porchlight and...hmmm...a paved parking space. When I pull into the space to turn around the door opens. Who’s standing on the front porch steps but Walter Cronkite himself!

Like I said, this is some whoopee shit!

“Come in, Edsel. I’ve been expecting you.”

The Most Trusted Man in America leads me into a living room twice the size of McBride’s cottage. “You must’ve added onto this place,” I say, dis-

concerted by the difference.

“No, I didn’t change it one bit.” Walter motions for me to settle into one of the black leather recliners near his picture window as he settles into the other. This isn’t exactly McBride’s Salvation Army chairs and sofa. Heat ducts and a huge fireplace with a glowing electric log have replaced McBride’s ancient Franklin wood stove. “What’s the matter, Edsel? You seem...well, disoriented,” Cronkite asks in his bottom-range tenor.

“Well, I, uh...I didn’t expect to see *anybody* here, never mind you—and you were *expecting* me.”

“That’s true.”

“How did you know—?”

“Even retired journalists have their sources.” He winks.

“The reunion, sure. I bought the ticket. But, how did you know I’d be coming out *here*?”

“You’ve done enough reporting to know about confidentiality of sources.”

“That’s right, man. You’re protected by the Constitution.”

“True, Edsel. But the Constitution has nothing to do with this particular source.” He clears his throat. “As it happens, *you’re* my source.”

“Why? Because I’ve been thinking about that night years ago?”

“Partly. But more because, as I’m sure you’ve learned from your own reporting experience, fact is nothing more than an interpretation of perception.”

“True...” But what’s he getting at?

“There was a perception that you would be coming down here to attempt to resolve some issues of your past. To oversimplify a bit, you would be looking for answers, even though you don’t believe there are any.”

“That’s a fact. But how did you know all this?”

“Who do you think I am?”

“Like you said, I came here to get answers—not questions.”

“Then, I’m *not* who you think I am.”

“Well, that’s an answer...syntactically speaking. But everything I see tells me you’re Walter Cronkite, the Most Trusted Man in America.”

“That’s true, insofar as facts are interpretations of perceptions. However...”

He reaches behind himself, as if scratching his back. At the end of a zipping noise his trustworthy features flatten to a mannequin’s pasty stillness. Out from behind the still-life steps a corporate clone in a three-

piece charcoal pinstripe suit, wavy hair brown almost black, a neatly-trimmed beard graying at the chin.

Holy shit! It's my hip-cousin reflection from the night Dale, Brod and I ate Glory Seeds.

"You mean—!"

"If the Network had truly intended to cover your last night together, it wouldn't have revived a canceled show to do it. Face it, babe, the demographics just *weren't there*."

"So, the Network didn't know? Or didn't care?"

"Again: demographics, babe. How many middle-of-the-road tube viewers do you think gave a damn about three teenage druggies out in the boonies who thought they were the latest improvement on sliced bread?"

"So, it was our conceit, pure and simple. I pretty much thought that was it."

"Now, Edsel. You've been around long enough to know nothing is that pure or that simple."

"Well, what you're telling me is that I was myself interviewing myself, and then putting myself down for not seeing the Shooting Star that didn't exist in the first place."

"No, Walter Cronkite did that."

"But that night, *I* was Walter Cronkite."

"Yes, you were. But then again, you weren't."

"You're beginning to sound as jive as the bureaucrats on my day gig."

"That's not fact. That's interpretation of perception."

"That's semantic quibbling."

"Listen: Who is the Most Trusted Man in America?"

"Walter Cronkite."

"And if Walter Cronkite couldn't be there, or didn't exist?"

"I wouldn't trust anybody more than I trust myself, even when I screw up."

"In that respect, Edsel, each of us is his own Walter Cronkite."

"So, I had to dress myself up as him—just like you did—to confront myself with Dale and Brod's harsh truths and my own doubts about myself."

"You couldn't have done it without my—that is, Walter's—help."

"But what does it prove—other than my ability to hallucinate vividly?"

"For one thing, it proves that you're not as alone as you think."

"We're talking Existential Terror here."

"We're also talking reassurance. Many people have called on Walter Cronkite just the way you have."

"Really!"

"Really. When Walter retired, the Network considered cloning or robotics, just to keep the ratings up. But the number of people who called Walter out of themselves...it was just *too* Public Domain. We could never collect the royalties. Even now, let me tell you, all those Elvis sightings, they're nothing compared to—"

"So, what sense am I supposed to make of all this?"

"If you still think you need help outside yourself, Edsel, Eric Sevareid just *happens* to be in the next room..."

"No, but thanks anyway."

Dealing with fantasies is one thing. Dealing with realities is something else. Either way, I know weird things happen at two in the morning. As I climb into my car a faint trace of light rockets across my field of vision. The Mindscreen Theater Mobile Camera shows Brod and Dale sitting in their flight seats, laughing with reunion cheer. After years of wondering how seeing or not seeing the Shooting Star's call to Destiny affected the way our lives turned out I conclude: same level, different location. Let them go. You got your writing and music from them. They got whatever they got from you. It's time to move on.

The light trails west from the International airport. As it dims, angel glitter from *It's a Wonderful Life* tinkles against my hood.

—THEY USED ME! *THE BASTARDS USED ME!*

—*What happened?*

—*Well, Pete Impala said to call, we'd get together. So I called. Five times. He never returned 'em. Finally I catch him at home. He gives me this blow-off tone: "I'll have to call you back, hey. I'm busy right now." He's not gonna call. And this other guy, Coop DeVille. He wanted me on his talk show. When I call him, he tells me the show's "taking a different thrust." I feel like I got suckered into writing the article. The bastards!*

—*I'll bet Bambi didn't want it to happen that way.*

—*No, I think she was sincere.*

—*Even if she wasn't, you did better this time around.*

—*Yeah. This time, I made a few hundred bucks playing the old Peer Group game: get what you can from the geek, then fuck him. I suppose I turned it around a little by getting my money for the article and the Sex Queens. Fuck them!*

—*Is that all you can think about. Fucking?*

—*Well, you can't sell a novel without a sex scene. And this one hasn't had one. You ready?*

—*I'm really not in the mood.*

—*You've never let that stop me before.*

—*Fine.*

—*You are.*

After a performance poetry gig in Hartford this tall guy with a creased face walks up to me. “Edsel Relic! You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Sure I have. I’m older, fatter, grayer and grouchier. It may not be progress, but it *is* change.” I stop packing my bass, search past the guy’s wrinkles, but find only rust on my so-called steeltrap memory. “Where do I know you from?”

“West Mannamok High.” He tells me his name.

Photo flashback of highschool yearbook turn page to a crewcut overgrown spikey fifteen years before spikey hair became a youth culture thing. “Yeah, I remember you...a little, anyway.”

“After all these years, you’re still out in front.”

“Thanks. In front of what I’m not sure. Mostly I feel like I’m falling behind.”

“No, not at all,” he says. “You’re putting yourself on the line artistically, you’re not playing it safe. Like in high school. Even more.”

“I remember getting hung out to dry somewhere around ninth grade, but I don’t remember putting *myself* on the line.”

“Oh, you did. Many times. I remember when you and Brod Allen didn’t stand up to salute the flag.”

“Yeah. Actually, I think it was more Brod’s idea than mine.”

“But you did it too. And a lot of us talked about it for months. You guys were our heroes.”

“We felt more hassled than heroic.”

“Anyway, I just wanted to come up and say thank you because you were the first ones to show us that it was okay to be different.”

“Yeah, man. It’s hip to be weird.”

We laugh and shake hands. It’s lonely out front and always nice to know

that every now and then someone catches up to you. I consider saying "Keep in touch," but I've learned things don't work that way. Instead, I watch his back as he walks into my past and his future.

There you have it, straight from the latest literary maverick to piss in the mainstream of American literature. The aesthetics aren't any more complete than the reality. There are still unresolved matters, even as each spin of the wheel spits dust onto memory and spins me into the future. True closure remains impossible so long as time and memory exist. What did you want from me, anyway...Art?

Hell, I just poked my head through the slushpile to tell you what my life down here is like: the graying ranter with his withered adam's apple bobbing up and down under sagging jowls, his long smoke-yellowed teeth clicking as they snap the latest reality at you.

Now, you other mavericks can have your pantheon back. Give me a corner if you want. If not, just squeeze back together. I've said my piece...for now. I'm burrowing back down to the bottom and looking for the nearest subterranean exit.

I've still got vapor to chase.