



# **Crazy Blue City**



**Gair Linhart**

# CRAZY BLUE CITY

*A Novel by Gair Linhart*

*Part I: Novel — The Emperor's Imperial Puppeteers*

*Part II: Play — The Joker Club — A prequel-sequel in dramatic form.*

Excerpts previously published in *REFLECTION* magazine  
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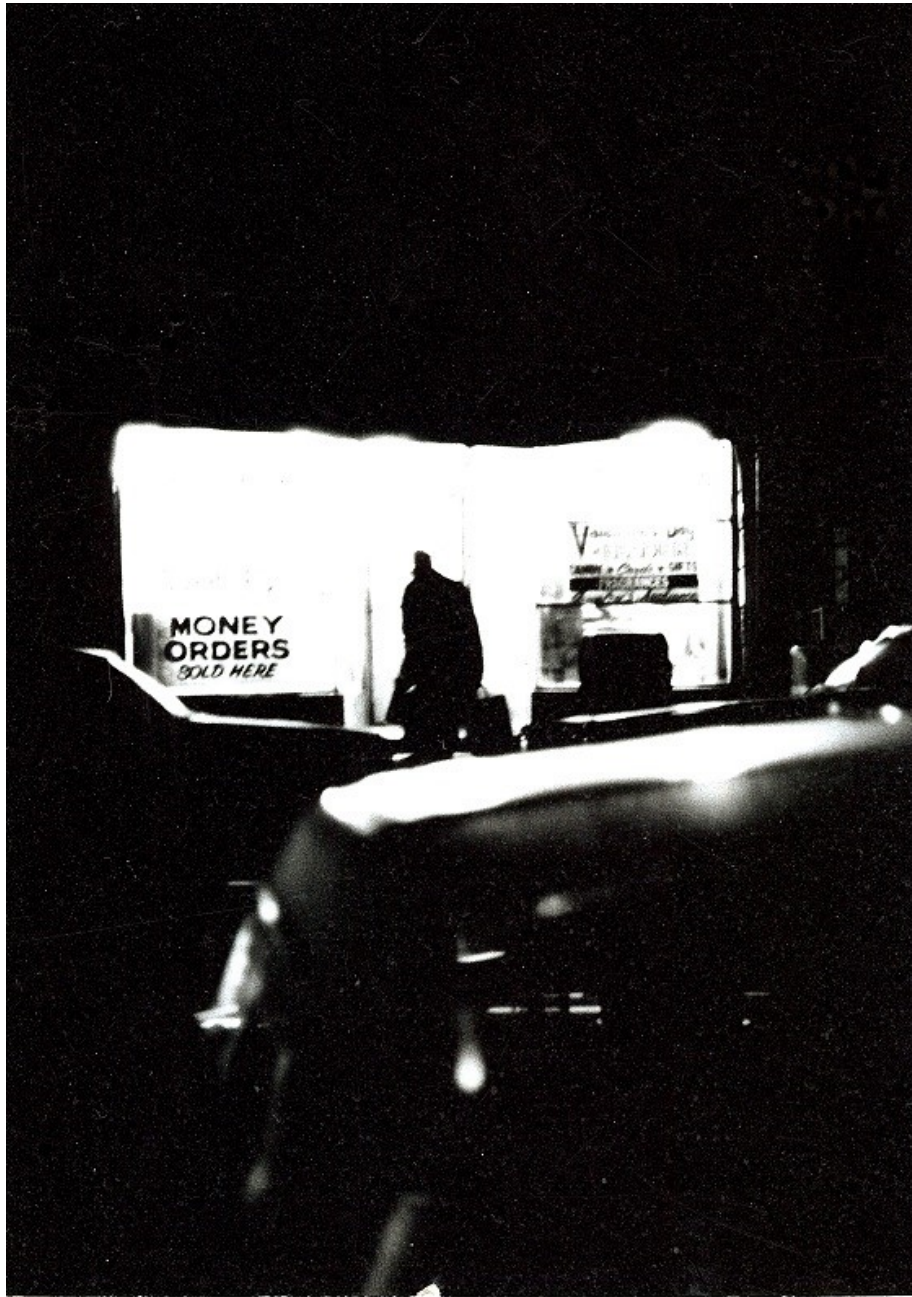
ALSO BY GAIR LINHART

## **DEDICATION**

*For: John, Laura, Jean, Doug, Ken, Elizabeth, Jim, and Dan.*

Thanks for your faith and inspiration during the tough years.

**PART I — NOVEL**  
**THE EMPEROR'S IMPERIAL PUPPETEERS**



*PHOTO: D.S. CATLIN*

## 1 — HOME

It is evening. I lie on my back, down at the end of our backyard, behind the sour gum tree. It is summer. My father has just finished cutting the grass; the smell in the air could make you drunk. I can hear him singing in his high thin voice at his workbench in the garage:

*...to wake up in the morning to the mockingbirds' trill...*

My mother calls out to him through the screen, asking what he'll have to drink with his dinner.

"I think I'll have iced tea," he answers like he does every single night.

Suddenly, my dog Shad is over me, licking and kissing. I rattle him down beside me, scratching his poor old ribs.

"Shaddy!" I cry. "You've come back to me! You've come back! I promise I'll never let you go again!" I prattle on in joyous relief that my dog, who has been gone for so long, has returned at last. A sort of glorious music is tinkling kaleidoscopically. How is it that he came to be apart from us? I know somehow that it was my fault for not standing by him—with my life, even—as he would have most happily done for us. With his life...Wouldn't he? Hadn't he?

I awake. Truth tears through me like fish hooks on a wire leader. It has been many years since my folks moved away from the old house and the trees my father planted. It is winter and I am in a foreign country four-thousand miles away. My dog is long dead. It is cold. Do I have a half-pound coin to drop in the gas heater?

For the first time, I open my eyes. I bolt upright. This is not London. A streetlamp steals in beneath a slatted shade...I *am* home! Or about as close to home as I get, anymore. Frantically, I grope on the coffee table next to the couch for a saucer of water I'd placed here, what must have been many hours ago. Gone! Someone has been here, straightened up, and poured my contact lenses down the drain!

I pick up the phone and it is as dead as my soul feels. I scratch a message, pull on my pants and coat, and run out of the apartment into a snowstorm. Down the road I go, past blurred liquor stores and pizza parlors. I enter a bar which I can barely see is called The Hungarian Cafe. It must have a phone...yeah, right here by the door.

“Operator, this is overseas collect for Justin Brumfield from Elbon...yes, E—L—B—O—N, and he’s at Raffles Hotel in Singapore...no, I don’t know what country Singapore is in...Yes, I’ll hold.”

Finally, he comes on, sounding sufficiently lushed. “Jack! How was the show?”

“There was no show!” I shout over the blaring jukebox, most of the American continent, and the wide Pacific as well.

“Oh, come on, it can’t have been that bad. Where are you? The Rising Sun? The Old Queen’s Head? Or are you still in Soho? What time is it there?”

“Justin, I’m in Cleveland and it’s—”

“Cleveland? Isn’t that a county way up by Scotland? How could you have—?”

“NO, DAMN IT! I’M TWO MILES FROM YOUR MOTHER’S HOUSE, IN SOME HELLHOLE BAR ON BUCKEYE ROAD IN CLEVELAND, OHIO!” Just as I am shouting the word “hellhole”, I realize the jukebox record has ended; now the whole place is listening indignantly.

“They evicted the ‘squat’ on Old Kent Road; I was there, and Immigration put me on a plane ‘cause my passport expired months ago. The flight was rough; I drank some bad rum with some Jamaicans, and the plane’s landing gear tried to fail. My little niece wired a hundred and fifty quid—I mean dollars—to me in New York, and I got a flight here. I’m blind because somebody poured my contacts down the drain, and it’s BLOODY COLD! WHY DIDN’T I GIVE MYSELF AN UNDERSTUDY? I just called to tell you that I’m sorry I spoiled the play and that when I

leave here I'm going to crawl under the *Rapid Transit* or jump off the Lorain-Carnegie bridge if the lake isn't frozen and if I can find it and—"

"Jack! You'll do nothing of the kind! It's not your fault—no understudy could have done your parts and led the band. Anyhow, I'd not have allowed it. When will they let you back into England?"

"Probably never."

"Well, it doesn't matter a fuck! We'll do it in New York in the summer! There were some refinements we wanted to make in the script anyhow. Why are you in Cleveland? Why didn't you just stay in New York?"

"Cause I'm broke, man. And my brother isn't there—where could I stay? It could take months just to find work."

"Why don't you go to Rio Verde?"

"Justin, I've got maybe twenty dollars left of my little pregnant niece's paycheck—I think her phone is disconnected 'cause she lent me the money. Out there I've got no car, no job—and the house doesn't have any electric or water, or even windows or doors yet. Only half of the roof ever got put on; it's cold in New Mexico now, too. I can't just ride the rails like Woody Guthrie—I'm gonna be thirty-three in a couple weeks. I'm just gonna have to stay here for a while and find a way to make some money."

"You're right Jack! How stupid of me! What time is it there?"

"I dunno. About eight in the evening, I guess."

"Good! Now listen; I'm going to tell you exactly what to do. You call for a cab this instant and have it take you to the Euclid Tavern. Call up Possum and Dolinsky—you boys tie one on and find some *shes*! I'll wire you two hundred dollars right now—you can go downtown and get it in the morning."



“Aw, Justin, you don’t have to do that.”

“I insist! Think of it as a loan if you like, and if I ever hear you blame yourself for this again, I’ll shoot you! It’s amazing it went as far as it did. To think that a play—a musical at that—which just last summer was playing in Anarchist nightclubs and Portobello Market, made it all the way to Drury Lane. I have to fly back to Cleveland to see *Ma`ma* on Wednesday anyhow; we’ll sort things out then.”

From the depths of my frozen soul bubbles a warm spring of gratitude. This isn’t the first time I’ve returned to this old hometown of mine a broke bum; I hadn’t been too sure I’d be able to survive it again. Also, I’d been afraid Justin would be mad and blame me as I blamed myself.

“Thank you, I—”

“Thanks, nothing. Thank you, Jack, for writing the play with me. London was just gonna be a warm-up for New York. Anyhow, English girls are such lousy lays! Iron mistresses, every one! I envy you the chance to spend some time in Cleveland. You can take some time, and we’ll compose another piece; then as soon as this one becomes a triumph we’ll have something ready for a follow-up. Then we’ll retire to Bali!”

I think to myself that Justin should have been one of the actors himself, based on the job he’s doing at hiding his disappointment, which I know is just as strong as my own.

“Now go and find Possum,” he says, “and tip a few mugs and show the Cleveland wenches a few of those pictures you took of that guy in Paris and your review from *Melody Maker*. You’ll be a hero. Then, when you get up tomorrow, go downtown to the Western Union station, and the money will be there.”

“God bless you, Justin.”

“Don’t be silly! See you in a few days.”

“OK... Justin...?”

“Yes, Jack.”

I realize I’ve selfishly forgotten to ask after him. “How’s your shoot going?”

“Oh, it’s been marvelous! There’s been nothing but this Monsoon, so I haven’t even had my camera out of its bag all week. The hotel has an old projector they let me take to my room with a pile of vintage films from their library. I’ve just been running them, drinking concoctions from the great old bar downstairs that Somerset Maugham hung out at, in the days of the empire, you know. I have some Nepalese temple hash but I daren’t smoke it. Singapore is a sort of a twisted city-state, Jack, and they’d probably cane me or something. There are some clapped-up-looking tarts down there too, that I’m trying to avoid. If I’m lucky, the magazine will fly me out soon. Call me next week.”

Visions of the Orient vaporize as I replace the phone into its cradle and turn my marred gaze back down the bar at the poor old Hungarian people staring silently into their shots and beers. I wonder how old the hard-boiled eggs in the basket by the cash register are and whether anybody would serve me one anyhow after I’ve been so insulting. I look out through the frosty window, the snow, and my myopia; I see a smudge of yellow under a blur of red.

In a trice, I’m in the back seat of a Cleveland Cab, and we’re bouncing like a springbok, over the chuckholes on Woodland Avenue, toward downtown.

What a rich man I am, I think to myself, to have a family and friends who take care of me this way! I haven’t even had to call and grovel to my old dad—now retired and living with Mom in Florida—for a loan. Tomorrow I’ll be able to repay Lucy, and maybe get some cheap glasses, and be back in business. Finding a business to get back into might not be so easy in frozen Cleveland in the frozen winter, but what of it? I’ve suffered enough the last three days. Justin is right—I must now meet my misfortunes like a man! Like a poet! Like a Dionysian!

I ask the driver to head downtown so I can recover a suitcase and an amplifier which I checked at the Terminal Tower early this morning. My arms had grown tired from carrying these items as well as my keyboard and another heavy bag, on the Rapid Transit, all the way from Hopkins Airport on the far west side. Getting to Gatwick, the London Airport, was easy since I had two congenial British Immigration agents helping me. They, unlike the “bills” who’d “nicked” the “Squatters Against Homelessness” concert and dragged me in, were not really bad sorts. While we were waiting for my flight to board, they helped me select the best kinds of orange peel marmalade to take home as gifts; I bought six jars. The flight, however, was a Stygian crossing. The landing gear malfunctioned, with terrified passengers carrying on and confessing; a stewardess fainted. After we were safely down, I was grateful for about five minutes before I realized I was stuck in Newark, an even grimmer vision of Gehenna.

I spent twenty-six hours sitting on my stuff, waiting for money from my niece and a stand-by flight to Cleveland Hopkins. From there, I heaved the stuff onboard the “Rapid”, which is kind of like a subway, only it doesn’t run underground. Deep in the bowels of the Terminal Tower, my arms finally turned into rubber bands; I had to check the bag and the amp before changing lines. By the time I’d ridden to Shaker Square and walked to my niece’s apartment, it had been eight AM; I caught her leaving for work. After taking a shower, I expired on the couch, having put my expensive gas permeable contact lenses into a saucer of water, since I’d left their proper case in the bag downtown.

Now we roll down dark and dire Woodland Avenue past what used to be, and I suppose still are, about the worst estates in the city—housing projects, I should say—they don’t call them projects in England, they call them estates. I lived in one; most people who live in cities in the U.K. do. Some of them are pretty grim, but I doubt that even the worst Limey tenements with

their teeming multitudes, could touch these. I remember the Cleveland Cop's Union refusing to let any patrolman set foot in any of them alone; there had to be at least two officers.

My driver must be psychic 'cause he says, "Man, I don't take no fares in there. A man's life ain't worth a nickel!"

"Don't you have to go where the radio sends you?" I ask. I had driven for the cab company for a brief period, years earlier; that had been how it worked then.

"Hail no," he answers. "Now we lease our cabs for sixty-five dollars for a twelve-hour shift, plus gas. We keep everything we make over that. We independently employed. We don't have to answer no fares they call out that we don't want to. Shoot, some days I never even turn the damn radio on. I just play the 'pote and the big hotels downtown."

By this, I'm pretty sure he means he sits in the long line of cabs at the airport awaiting his turn for arrivals.

"Hey, I'm looking for a job," I say. "Maybe I'll drive a cab! Are they hiring?"

"Sheeit yeah, if you know the city and you don't have too many points on your license."

"I've been in Ohio so little the last few years that probably all my points have dropped off."

"Well," he says, pulling up at Public Square, "you got to go to the main garage and take a street test, and an eye test, and a day of training."

"I know...I drove for a while back in the seventies."

"Was you fired?"

"Naw, I just quit 'cause my friend got held up, and I was making fuck-all."

"Say what?"

"Nothin'. I mean I wasn't makin' nothin'." Bits of British slang, which I guess I've picked up in the past year, undoubtedly sound as alien to him, as his accent does to me, so different is it from the West Indian and African inflections I've grown used to.

“Why hell,” he says, “that mean you still employed! They’ll put you in a cab right away. They always looking fo’ warm bodies! You’ll make money, too—much mo’ than when we was back on percentage. Just don’t let no niggas in yo’ cab downtown!” I thank him with a decent tip and he melts away.

The Terminal Tower was built back in the ‘20s when rail was king and Cleveland was maybe the fourth biggest city in the U.S. Trains from all over the continent rolled into its vast marble caverns. Tonight it’s lit up like a big candle. It’s still the tallest building in Cleveland, even though the new—to me anyhow—Sohio, turned British Petroleum, building across the square is nearly its size. I stand and admire the architecture of both, as best I can, through my nearsightedness; they seem to complement each other pretty well. I descend into the deep recesses and emerge with my things. Downtown is characteristically slow. Sometime, in the sixties I guess, the crowds that used to swell Euclid, Prospect, and Superior Avenues fled to the suburbs. Now, in 1986, unless there is a ball game, a convention, or a concert, it can be like a tomb.

Having already spent too much on the cab, I jump on a 6-A bus headed towards University Circle, some hundred blocks to the east. Memories, miraculous and holy, float like ghosts over every corner.

Down there on 9th Street, used to be the old Roxy Burlesque Theater, where I saw my first undressed woman. Around the corner, was the Theatrical Grill, where my father would introduce us to the likes of Bob Feller or Tony Bennett. It was his favorite place to take us to dinner on special occasions. He’d simply say: “Bob, I’d like you to meet my wife, my daughter Clair, and my sons, Robert and Jack,” just as if he’d been old Bob’s favorite catcher since the minors. Interesting conversations would ensue; it was not until years later that I realized that he had probably never spoken to them previously. Not that he was pretending he had; that’s just old

Dad, so absolutely self-possessed in the presence of anybody or any situation, that I doubt whether any of these luminaries ever questioned why they were talking and laughing with complete strangers. Much more of this quality rubbed off my older brother than on me.

Now we pass the opulent lights of Playhouse Square where, at theaters like the Hanna and the Allen, we saw musicals like *South Pacific*, *The Mikado*, and years later, *Tommy*, with The Who.

Over there is the corner where I tried to sell black velvet paintings during the desperate winter of '79. On down Euclid we careen—I am the only passenger far in the back of the bus. We pass Cleveland State University, of which I am a longstanding dropout. At this point, the once showy avenue begins to darken and deteriorate. On my right is the burned-out shell of Leo's Casino, where the likes of The Temptations and Smokey Robinson once performed. Way underage, in hiding between the cigarette machines, we heard Otis Redding, in his final performance, sing Sam Cooke's celestial, "A Change is Gonna Come":

*I was born by the river, in a little, old tent...*

*Just like this river, I been runnin' ever since...*

*It's been a long, long...a long time comin',*

*But a change gonna come,*

*Oh, yes it is...*

There may have been a dry eye somewhere in the house; I don't know. The next morning as the old man was hollering at me about cutting the hedge, I was reading the headlines: "Soul Singer and Plane Downed in Winter Storm".

At 55th Street, I see, still stands the old WHK auditorium and radio station, where Allen Freed mainstreamed the term "rock and roll". He didn't really invent it; he was just the first to apply it to the music as a whole, and it stuck. Teenagers like Clair and Bobby, my big sister and brother—my parents had me late in life—were mesmerized by what they heard on his

“Moondog” show, and the concerts he brought to this hall. I loved it too, what kid wouldn’t? But to a child, 50’s rock ‘n roll was largely a funny sort of world filled with Purple People Eaters, Charlie Browns, and Hound Dogs. It was often an awfully icky world too, with Pat Boones and Annettes, oozing and simpering out of every TV, far more than any of the more gripping rockers. My small boy’s sensibilities were soon offended by anything labeled ‘teen’, including rock ‘n roll. Of course, that all changed a few years later.

Here is the Drury Theater, part of the Cleveland Playhouse. I can just make out that it is surrounded by high fences topped with barbed wire so the little old ladies’ cars will be safe. My mom used to be an usher; she frequently dragged me kicking, from Browns games on TV, Sunday afternoons, to see plays by Eugene O’Neill, Noel Coward, or Oscar Wilde. Although I’d been loath to admit it, they’d often been as good as football.

The next few blocks are taken up by the Cleveland Clinic, a sort of hospital megalopolis where myriad cures—don’t ask me to name any—have been developed. Globetrotters and world leaders—mainly heinous dictators, it seems like—are routinely treated. The Shah of Iran was here once, I think.

Now we’re in University Circle, which to me has always been the best part of town. Having recently seen the *Tuileries* gardens, next to the *Louvre*, I can say that the lagoon and botanical gardens next to our own art museum are as lovely. The poor old *Thinker*—that longest-suffering of souls—must be shivering down there tonight. Across the water is Severance Hall, home of our beloved orchestra that is heard around the world.

At coffee houses and bistros like La Cave, Adele’s, the Brick Cottage, and others—flourishing through the years, under different names and roofs—poets and artists like Langston Hughes, R. Crumb, and Don Robertson drank, created, and loved. At La Cave in the sixties, you might hear

Josh White or Bob Dylan when they came through town. It is the Bohemian edge of the city; from the old gabled houses, you can hear the railroad whistles blow.

But La Cave is probably under the Clinic, the “Brick” is a parking lot, and it’s just nine o’clock on Euclid Avenue, on a weary old Windermere bus. The snow has, naturally, turned into sleet.



## 2 — POSSUM'S LAIR

There is a bus stop at the corner of East 117th Street, across from which sits the Euclid Tavern. The warm pink in its neon sign kindles an unholy, warm glow deep in my vitals. In truth, it has been a long time since I've seen such a sign since they don't exist in England. Even the most scabrous wharf dive is graced by a handsome wooden plaque swinging above its door. Both sides bear a fine, hand-painted illustration that somehow depicts the establishment's title. If one is wondering whether to enter a strange pub for the first time, it's impossible to go by the condition of the sign, because they are all supplied and maintained by the ale brewers. The name, which is likely to be something equally, non-committal like The Lord Nelson, The Cock, or the Trafalgar, won't be a clue, either. Back here, if you enter a place called the Brave New World or the Tiptoe Inn, you have no one to blame but yourself.

The Euclid Tavern, however, is not my next stop. At the end of a short dead-end street, some fifty yards behind the bar sits an ancient, ramshackle, gray house. Anyone bothering to look up would see that it is topped by minarets and widow's walks. Few people ever look at the house at all, however, because it is at the end of a cul-de-sac which is hemmed in by the Chesapeake and Ohio railway bridge, the far end of the University athletic playing field, the East Cleveland cemetery, and desperate ghetto. The lower floors have long been vacant. It is thus insulated from the world at large, away in the upper reaches of this queer old place, that the Possum has his lair. He and I were born exactly one month apart and have been friends since junior high school. As my step falls on the creaky porch, Daphne the hound sets up a howling far above. Footsteps are heard. Eventually, having been sighted through some network of peep-holes, I hear a great thunder on the ancient stairs. The door is flung back; Possum and Canine are before me—the former with a bottle of *Anchor Steam* beer, firmly in hand.

“Jack! You’re in the States!” Possum exclaims brilliantly, shifting his beer and extending a paw, looking resplendently like himself. Despite the fact that this closest of my comrades has plenty squirreled away in pet investments such as vintage guitars, hi-fi gear, and racing boats, he is wearing a pair of his dad’s or brother’s polyester trousers which either his mom’s too-short hemming or his own too-round tummy has caused to ride high up on his long Possum shanks. Completing the ensemble are mismatched socks, a pair of hush puppy loafers worn shiny, and a paisley shirt which I distinctly recall seeing for the first time, at a Methodist Youth Fellowship dance in the basement of our church, back in ‘71. Despite his well-fed profile and Martian attire, there still remain in his noble visage, flashes of the handsomeness of his now-waning youth. His black, Shetland pony mane, which he’s adamantly refused to have any more than trimmed for nearly two decades, cascades most of the way down his back. As elsewhere chronicled, Victor received his indelible moniker of Possum during an epic Ripple wine bender which occurred during our final year of high school. So stiff and unresponsive had he become, that alarmed observers wondered if he was dead or simply assuming the role of a deceased opossum.

The decor of the stairwell differs little from that of the expansive quarters upstairs. Among seemingly endless other talents, Victor Hoffsteader—Possum’s real name—has been, since childhood, a gifted painter in watercolors and oils. Periodically, he has been called away on spiritual sabbaticals in study of the female form and the brewer’s arts, which have kept him from his brushes. Nevertheless, he has managed to complete enough canvases in his time to cover nearly every available wall in this big place, while selling a good many as well. His forte is surreal landscapes—not like Dali—but a combination of exacting realism and startling variations of color and perspective. Most of the paintings have been framed by the artist himself, who favors carved woods and Rococo gildings.

The high-ceilinged rooms still pulsate with the original lavender paint job, left by the vegetarian cult which Possum years ago infiltrated and dispersed.

Even if one overlooks the paintings, the cavernous living and dining rooms house a collection that should be in the British Museum next to the Elgin Marbles. Every available square inch is occupied by a representative cross-section of twentieth century—and earlier—matter: Radios, fish bowls, revolving beer signs, power tools, pulp magazines of the “Strange Tales” type, band equipment—enough to start a music store—suitcases, motorcycle engines, rusty typewriters, unopened bills, welding outfits, tape recorders, potted plants—some flourishing, others dead but still standing—ancient cameras, stuffed moose heads, sculptures, Victorian floor lamps, weird light bulbs, roulette wheels, vacuum cleaners—obviously not suffering from overuse—gaily blinking Christmas lights, bong pipes, dog collars, horse skulls, electric guitars, beer bottles of a thousand labels, payphones with chiseled open coin boxes. Among it all, stacked on every horizontal surface, like teetering little skyscrapers, are packs of antique playing cards—most in boxes, some held together with string. As young teenagers, we’d collected Jokers—some of art-deco design, from the bridge era of the ‘20s—others from the Canasta craze of our parent’s time. Soon, Possum, voracious collector that he was, had begun acquiring—at the flea markets or estate sales which he frequented—much older decks of the sort that steamboat gamblers or Wild Bill Hickok had held. He corresponded with reclusive European—Belgian, mainly—collectors, trading up with his Yankee cards, for gilded transformation decks of great worth and beauty. Wild cards, first called “Best Bowers” then, later, “Jokers”, were American inventions, coming along at around the time of the Civil War. Such U.S. cards are much coveted, overseas.

But above and beyond all of these curiosities, there are speakers. Loudspeakers, woofers, tweeters, crossovers, speakers like used to hang in high school homerooms, drive-in movie speakers, speaker enclosures of bizarre modernistic shapes, antique speakers, blown speakers,

radio speakers, Leslie style church organ speakers, TV speakers, six-foot 1950's KLH9 electrostatic speakers which are actually wafer-thin panels in mahogany frames. A pair of five-foot Voice of the Theater cinema speakers, which likely handled the sound effects of the Chariot races in *Ben-Hur*, dominate visually, and, at the moment, audibly, as they peal forth with a thunderous movement from some modern symphonic composition.

Possum dashes off to turn it down and returns with an *Anchor Steam* for me; it tastes like a magical elixir to my parched being.

In the very middle of this splendor, sits the artist's easel and paints. A large canvas throbs with intricate, multiple imageries—twisting helixes, branches, waterfalls, corals, faces—obviously inspired by nature, but full of tricks! A young man and woman in their early twenties, apparently art students, gaze on it admiringly. Possum introduces them to me as Bryan and Miranda.

Daphne, who has always had a weak bladder, is so excited that she pees on the floor in my honor.

“How was England? When did you get back? Where are you staying?” he asks all at once.

I start to say, “Right here,” answering his last question first, but the phone rings. Possum snatches it up. “Good-bye?” he says smiling mischievously. It's our old friends, Brendan and Downsey.

Their band is playing down at the Tavern and they need to borrow, of all things, a speaker. We are invited to sit in. Begged, in fact, since someone in the band is absent, and they don't have enough songs. Possum can play any instrument that has strings, from the cello in the corner to the harp sitting in the window. Presumably, it's the guitar that Brendan has in mind. “I don't know if I'm in any shape to do anything like that tonight,” I start to say, but the doorbell rings; Possum descends, dragging a big speaker cabinet that is conveniently strapped to a refrigerator hand truck.

I excuse myself from his guests to head for the “bog”, as I've come to call the bathroom.

The decor of Possum's pad extends to his kitchen and bathroom. The sink looks remarkably like the one that the mechanics at your service station use to wash up in.

Emerging, I say, "You know, recent consumer studies show that it is OK to scrub porcelain once every year or so without seriously damaging the finish, what's more...Clair!" It's my turn to be surprised; it's my older sister who I thought was in Colorado. She's in a Navajo poncho with silver *conchos*. We hug.

She asks, "Didn't Lucy"—Clair's daughter, my niece—"tell you we were here? Oh, the goose! Yes, I know she's been working hard, the lamb. I flew in to take care of her. Anyhow, it wouldn't have mattered because we just got back. I sang down in Kent last night, which was fortunate or we wouldn't have had money enough for our flight tomorrow morning, and we absolutely have to...who's we? Oh, that's right, you've never met Jim. Jim...?" she calls in the direction of the stairs, from whence Possum's resonant baritone can be heard discussing outboard carburetion with another husky voice. "How did I know you were here?" she continues, "Where else would you be? Oh, I'm so glad you're home. Yes, she told me you had a hard time, you poor thing. Orange marmalade? You know it's my favorite! Covent Garden! My word, isn't that where the man met the little flower girl in *My Fair Lady*? My, those are pointy shoes, even for you. Have you had a haircut since I last saw you? Do you want me to give you one? Oh, Rachel, I'm sorry. Jackie, you remember Rachel, don't you?"

I realize that standing almost next to me, but obscured by debris including a speaker which hangs from the ceiling, is another person. "I'm sorry," Clair says, "I forgot he's blind. Yes, Jack, we found your note. You should have called me today; we could have gotten you some glasses. Now it's the weekend. Oh, phoo on the money! But here, I knew I'd seen these in the junk drawer at Lucy's. I brought them in case you might want them."

I shudder to see, dangling from her fingers like an odious reptile, a scratched and flattened pair of black plastic glasses, epoxied together rather artlessly, between the lenses. This I'd done after busting them in a fight at Shaw High so Dad wouldn't find out. Looping from the temples is a black, elastic, athletic band I'd worn to play baseball. The face I make, as I reluctantly take them, causes quite a pleasant laugh to bubble out of Clair's companion. Holding them a few inches from my face, I peer through the lenses in her direction. I know these gypsy eyes! They belong to Rachel Tozer who is actually Lucy's friend. I've not seen her since they were in high school a few years back. I'd thought her delectable then but knew full well that Clair would alter me with a hacksaw if I started to get ideas. Now she must be in her twenties, I think gleefully.

Possum and his entourage appear out of the kitchen discussing da Vinci. They've arrived presumably, via some ancient back passageway, up through slave or servants' quarters. The refrigerator dolly is still in tow, except that it now bears a case of *Carlsberg*—my favorite beverage—and another of *Guinness Stout*, which he begins stocking into a 1940's Coca-Cola cooler. Apparently, he has long since met everybody, but I am introduced to Clair's beau, who looks like Stan Musial; he seems like an amiable guy. The art students are introduced. Victor, moving with marsupial swiftness, shovels newspapers and pizza boxes from enough chairs and couches, that all may sit. He opens beers and finds a bottle of Vichy water for Clair. He vanishes into his room for a moment to throw on a compact disc of Vivaldi—*Trial of Harmony and Invention*—? He emerges with a small silver tray bearing herb of the sort which would make the seraphim float down from their heavenly perches. It is red and blue-green and covered with natural crystalline resins that sparkle like stars.

"I haven't even seen any reefer for almost a year!" I cry in delight. Possum and my sister look at me doubtfully.

“No, it’s true. All they have over there is horrible brown hash; the only way they smoke it is to warm it with a match and crumble it into their sickening cigarette tobacco. Then they roll it into these disgusting, three-paper joints, which they glue together like a ‘T’, then roll around a cardboard tube that they call a roach. You know I’ve never been able to inhale tobacco, so I never was able to have any unless I wanted to poison myself.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” says Clair, sardonically.

“We’ll have a few puffs,” says Possum, “then we’ll have to get that speaker over to the bar. Everybody grab some sort of an instrument or mike stand, so we’ll get in free if we don’t know whoever’s working the door.”

“I’ll call Lucy,” Clair says, “and have her meet us. She should be waking up from her nap soon. And then, everybody, we have a table reserved for us at Night Town for eleven-thirty! We’re meeting Bill and Nancy Shoffner.”

As she says this she rolls a rather dubious eye over my own and Possum’s respective raiment. Mine, while not as earthy as my friend’s perhaps, is not much better suited for a fancy restaurant.

“You needn’t look at me that way,” I say. “You know I’m not going to any Night Town.”

“Of course we are. We’ll stop at Lucy’s later to find shirts for you and Victor. Bill and Nancy—”

“I said I’m not going to fuckin’ Night Town!” Immediately, I feel sorry because of my sister’s hurt expression.

Seeming precariously close to tears, she says, “We haven’t all been together in almost two years, and who knows when we’ll all see each other again. You don’t know what I had to go through to arrange this and—”

“Please, Clair,” I say, jumping up and dragging her by her sleeve, through the swinging kitchen door. “You know Night Town is Janie’s old turf. I’m not ready to see her tonight.”

“Don’t be silly. You know Janie joined Alcoholics Anonymous, why, over a year ago. I’m sure she wouldn’t be at Night Town. I think she has a new man in her life, anyhow.”

My sister’s first revelation makes me grateful for Janie’s sake. Her second doesn’t surprise me but sends a rusty corkscrew twisting through a tender part of my entrails. How Clair manages, from Colorado, to know what’s going on thousands of miles away, is a wonderment to me.

Jane Bell was my girl, here in Cleveland, some two years ago. I callously—but not without shedding tears myself—left her to seek my fortunes out West, for about the umpteenth time in my life. She came to New Mexico and stayed for a while; I think she’d have stuck around if I’d asked her to, but I split for Los Angeles. This romance was about the closest thing that I’ve ever had to a “conventional” relationship with a woman. In an age where many seem to be working on their second divorces by thirty, I have never been married; in fact, I’ve never even shackled up with a girl. This might have gone differently, if not for early involvements with boy-eating Vampiras who had merely laughed at suggestions of matrimony while twisting my heartstrings like silly putty. After emerging from these gagging, tragic, obsessions, I had grown jaded. At the world-weary age of twenty-four, I determined that I would become instead, the consummate heartbreaker, devoted to wreaking my revenge on the female gender. This I pursued with patchy success for a number of years when suddenly I met Janie and for the first time, love was more than a matter of ream or get reamed. In the short year or so that we were together, I experienced about the happiest times of my life. We fought a lot, it’s true—not over love or jealousy—but stupid things like my getting lost in the car, or her being late. Janie is also five years older than I, which could have been why things did not work out. Was it the ticking of her biological clock or my greedy libido? Men are pigs, as we all know.



When we emerge from the kitchen, the place smells like a rope factory that has caught fire. Everybody in the room looks like a glazed donut, with the exception of Jim, who like my sis, probably isn't too interested.

Clair has had some wild experiences in her time, but now she's on a more spiritual plane. I have time for only two or three hooks from a meerschaum pipe carved into the head of a Medusa, but it's probably a good thing because I'm out of practice. With the likes of this stuff, I am fast feeling as if I've swallowed a keg of dynamite and have a lit fuse shoved up my ass.

"Look—" I exclaim, noticing a face, worked into a double image, in Possum's painting, "It's Creamface!"

"Who's Creamface?" asks Ruthie.

"Oh," Possum explains, "Creamface was a Joker out of a deck of art deco playing cards—early thirties, probably. Jack, and my kid brother, and I used to collect different Jokers, from different brands of cards, when we were young. We gave them names and magical properties. Let's see, there were Elf and Sharpie—who else Jack?"

"Creamface, Mr. Coot...and Smiley! He was evil—"

"Yes, they were just as bizarre, as children," smirks Clair.

"Yeah," says Possum, "and get this! We'd actually go ringing people's doorbells, telling them that we needed their old decks of cards, to send to the Veterans' home or the State Children's Hospital, and we'd hoard the rare ones for ourselves—"

"You guys were sociopaths from the start!"

"It's true," says Possum proudly, "by the age of fifteen we'd already sunk to Roman lows. Do you still have your Jokers, Jack?"

"Naw, they slipped away from me long ago."

"Well, Brendan and Downsey really need that monitor speaker...they sounded desperate."

So off we go—an absurd assemblage—each with some piece of musical equipment. Possum wheels the speaker; Jim, like a great smiling bear, totes effortlessly on a shoulder, a large trunk full of wires and cables. As we wind our way through the alley and a couple of vacant lots, we see that the snow has stopped falling. The clouds part a little; a callow new moon peeps through—delicate as a paring from a baby’s fingernail. A sense of giddy exhilaration surrounds us; it feels as if we’re on an expedition to the Great Wall of China to see a performance by the Emperor’s Imperial Puppeteers.

### 3 — NIGHT

During the sixties when Clair, my brother Bobby, and I—a bit later—were digging jazz, folk, and blues at nearby but now defunct circle joints, the Euclid Tavern was, to put it unkindly, an alchymy bar. It still has its shot and beer clientele during the day, but a couple of young ‘Nam vets bought the place in ‘79, while I was managing a rival joint—now an expensive French restaurant—a few blocks away. They painted it up nice and knocked out a wall, expanding it into the large store next door. Its nice old woodwork and ornate front windows attest to its having been, back in the thirties and forties, pretty swell. To me, this rather standard American saloon decor is refreshing; I’ve been choking on a forced diet of mismatched floral wallpaper and carpeting for so long, that certain pubs have started to resemble garishly decorated padded cells. By employing a few barbarians to maintain some semblance of law and order, they managed to make the place seem marginally respectable. Soon there were hordes, like tonight. Clair, holding my hand, helps me through the tightly packed crowd. We are squeezed into a table far back in a corner. A waitress brings a round tray with “Rocks”—green, long neck bottles of *Rolling Rock* beer, with white painted horses—for all. The music is biting loud. Noticing that everybody is turned away from me, facing the stage, I surreptitiously take out the old Steve Allen specs. Removing the elastic band and bending out the legs to accommodate my head—which has evidently grown or swollen—I balance them precariously on my nose to take a look.

The first thing I see is the dance floor. I am surprised to remember that young people at rock shows actually still dance with one another back here. In Europe the mob generally faces the stage; each body seems to move or jerk, if so inclined, with the band as its only partner. I’ve long since given up asking English girls to dance; they only stare uncomprehendingly, like stunned mackerels.

It also seems strange to see hardly a single outré haircut of the sort I've grown used to. Maybe about a third of the kids—at least at the sorts of places where I've been performing—have had part of their heads shaved or a razor cut halfway up. I found that it tended to make the she-males as sexually attractive as parsnips, but such styles lent to the prevalent “storm the Bastille” atmosphere. The music of my Cleveland pals, however, is somehow as revolutionary, in its soulful rust belt tradition, as the more overt musical proponents of class war that I've been hearing.

Now they grind into a favorite in their repertoire, entitled: “Burnin’ Up.” It was written by Norman Nardini, Pittsburgh’s Paleolithic Pan-God, Boom Boom Mancini of a rock ‘n roll classicist. No one can really do it like Norman; never the less, Brendan sends it over with chills and goosebumps:

(slowly)

*I've got a drink in my hand, and I'm waiting for  
my man, I'm burnin' up...*

(4 bars, instruments)

*There's a chick at the bar, and I think she wants  
to score, I'm burnin' up...*

(4 bars)

*I been feelin' like a BITCH  
'cause I ain't struck it rich,  
I'm burnin' up...*

(4 bars)

*Standin' in the welfare line is like doin'*

*CHAIN GANG TIME—I'M BURNIN' UUUUUUUUUUUUP!*

(double time)

*I'M BURNIN' UP...I MIGHT START A FIGHT...*

*I'M BURNIN' UP!!*

etc.

Now Brendan and Clarence—the bass player better known as Downsey—are both looking a trifle too well-fed. Brendan doesn't dress so flashy as he did five years ago when the two of them had been in about the best band in the mid-west, running neck and neck with the big time. Of the trio, only Mario, tonight's drummer, who has always been with some very top recording act or the other, looks, particularly like a performer. But ten years of playing together, from empty rooms—like when they played with me, for example—to fraternity parties, roadhouses, big halls and stages, and being hailed as the next big thing, all the while contending with things like going to bed at three-thirty with the alarm set for six-thirty and work, families, kids, drugs, booze, girls, crooked managers, critics, and leeches, year in, year out—has given their playing a sort of supernatural transcendence. Mercy, if these guys were in London, they'd stand 'em on their heads! Or maybe it just seems that way to me, not having heard them for so long. But a certain glassy expression that I see in the eyes of Rachel and the little art student girl—I forget her name—as Brendan pours it on during his guitar solo, like Paganini playing on one string of his Stradivarius, tells me that this is the genuine stuff at close to its lighting and ozone best. Now they take it into something faster, in a different, more major key. Brendan sprays phrases, tendrils, and streamers against Downsey and Mario's austere, but throaty, cannonade. The chords sound somewhat familiar. To my utter horror Downsey steps over to a mic and, above the music, says: "Now we want to invite to the stage, just back in town from abroad—Jack Elbon." Those bleeding bloody wankers, I think to myself as I am pushed to my feet. A certain amount of applause follows my introduction, probably from people who think I'm someone else. I push my

way up there; Brendan smiles at me, then nods towards a mike stand and mike in the center of the stage. They want me to sing? They can't be serious. I'd assumed they'd just wanted me to play piano or something. I never try to sing after I've smoked the boo. Also, I've been doing very little singing at all lately, wanting to use more gifted *chanteurs* for the musical. I'd figured I'd have plenty of time before the set to explain this to them. But now they are really cranking it out; the mob is dancing and clapping with the music, and it's too late, even if I could shout at them loud enough to be heard. So inwardly I shrug my shoulders; outwardly I smile back at them. They're damn lucky I recognize the song they're playing; it's one we'd done when we were in a band together, years ago. Hard to believe we'd actually been performing Motown during that strange period of the seventies. So I resign myself. I close my eyes, throw my head back, and drain the entire contents of my beer, in one long, sweet torrent, which rains down, down, over the scorched desert of my essence, letting myself feel the plaintive emotion of the old Supremes' bijou, and the drums which make the one-inch plywood and carpet stage throb under and through me as if I'm standing on the epicenter of the whole world's longing. When I open my eyes, I find that I am sort of shimmying back and forth with the beat. Brendan and Downsey are very visual sorts of performers, and they bring out the exhibitionist in me. I give them the merest signal to drop the volume which they do with sudden and dramatic effect. Let's hope I can be worthy of such playing. From the first word, I know I'm okay. I use an old trick I learned long ago. If I'm nervous or unsure of myself, I start by sort of half talking, half-singing—with feeling—the first verse. This, hopefully, will rivet the audience's attention while giving me some idea what key these maniacs are in. The words are timeless:

*I been cryin' ... (for you, croak the boys)*

*'Cause I'm lonely... (for you)*

*Smiles have all turned...to tears*

*But they won't wash away...the fears*

By the time we get to the chorus, I am singing, and while not able to do anything fancy, it has presence, contrasted with the previously half-recited lyrics.

*No matter what you do or say,*

*I'm gonna love you anyway...*

*So won't you hurry; come on boy...*

*See about me...come see about me...See about your baby!*

In my unrehearsed state, I forget to shift gender in the lyrics; no one, I hope, notices. Brendan has apparently spotted my sis; Possum has fixed her up with a mike to the great benefit of the backing vocals.

Next, the ensemble winds into a steamy sort of blues which always used to knock 'em dead, and it's easy. The lights are too bright for me to see the crowd, but from the sound of the response, we're doing well.

By now, the Possum has gotten himself wired up like Sputnik and is playing a blonde fifties Telecaster—worth only slightly less than the Mona Lisa—through his Echoplex, as our assemblage goes into a long sort of voodoo calypso improvisation, sending the audience into greater and greater ecstasies. I've finally figured out where the keyboard has been hiding and I'm very relieved to get back out of the spotlights some. Gad! I realize to my mortification, that I never did remember to take off the ridiculous glasses. Oh, well.

Now the set is over, and before I can even start to say hello to my friends or anybody else, Clair, to my irritation, is rounding up our party, which seems to have grown, and is herding us towards the stage exit.

"Come on...the Shoffners are waiting for us," she urges. I refrain from giving my opinion of how long they can wait for all I care.

We all pile into a couple of cars that are conveniently waiting at the curb. Before my pulse has even returned to normal from the excitement of the music, we have flown up Cedar Hill to Cleveland Heights, and are being shown to two large tables in the back of Night Town.

Clair sings mostly folk music from Ireland and Scotland; occasionally Nancy Shoffner gets her bookings when she's in Ohio. Tom Shoffner writes music reviews for several publications. They have never taken it upon themselves to support my efforts much, though. While this doesn't bother me a lot, it's annoying the way they gush and fuss, as if they've lost sleep wondering about me.

"Describe the libretto from your opera, won't you, dear?" asks Nancy.

"Well, Nancy, I don't know if you could call the play an opera; the actors have lines, too. But it's about this Yank in London who's having trouble getting anywhere with the English girls 'cause they all revile Americans, at least the girls that he hangs around with. And the ones who might not be so prejudiced won't have anything to do with him either, 'cause he's a squatter and a penniless kook, sort of. So one night he's at this pub where all the Americans hang out, and he can't get anywhere with these babes either, 'cause they're all trying to meet English blokes. Out of desperation, he gets the brilliant idea of putting on a London accent, which he's gotten down pretty well, having been there for a few months. So he and his buddy, Alastair—he's the comic lead, my Mercutio—chat up these two posh Yankee birds from Rhode Island who are attending school over there. He starts showing one of them all of the museums, and sights, and everything, like he was a native, and soon they've fallen in love."

"Oh, a comedy! How delightful!" says Nancy, bracelets and earrings rattling like dragon's armor.

"Well, it's not a comedy exactly, 'cause meanwhile, Alex—that's the guy's name—has been busking, which means performing in the streets, with this English girl. She's recently escaped



from one of those horrible institutions over there, that jail eccentrics... they've been force-feeding her degenerative drugs and shock treatment. The cops are searching for her; they go to Paris and she falls in love with him, sort of. They know that if she goes back to Holloway—that's the name of the psycho prison—she'll never come out again and...LUCY!"

The arrival of my niece blessedly spares me the task of continuing. Clair's daughter was born when I was about eleven years old; thus we have always been more like brother and sister than uncle and niece. She has wisely spurned the call of the stage which has been the ruin of the rest of us, but she's not had an easy time of it either. At the age of sixteen, Lucy quit school and went to work supporting herself. She shares the universal family attribute of hard-headedness; when she discovered herself to be with child, some six months ago, no opinions could have influenced her. Now, although she is the size of a little barn with responsibilities just as big, it is hard for me not to still see her as my little Lulu, especially since she still wears her braids, beret, and round owl glasses. "David," she informs us, "said to say he was sorry he couldn't come 'cause he has to go to work tomorrow."

I too am sorry, 'cause I haven't had a chance to congratulate him on his impending fatherhood. Lucy's friend Rachel, who has been looking more and more fetching to me as the evening progresses, gets up, drains a cup of coffee, and whispers something into Lucy's ear. They both laugh. "I wish I could stay," she says, "but I'm picking up my sister at the Amtrak station at twelve-thirty, and it's midnight now."

"Bring her back here, or to my place," says Possum—the dickens. "We'll be up awhile."

"I will if I can," she says, cutely bundling herself into a bomber jacket and mittens. "She may be pretty worn out. Thank you all for everything, though. The music was wonderful."

As we consider our menus, Clair says to Lucy: "I imagine she'll be glad to get back to Chicago."

Lucy says to her mom, “Well, she went out with Lorenzo, David’s friend from work last week.”

“Oh, really?” I crash in like a “Dodgem” car. “Did he mount her?” Sometimes I can’t help myself—they’re so cute when they’re mad. It’s been so long since I’ve had the delightful opportunity of getting their feathers all ruffled. Also, I’m starting to feel a bit out of sorts, mostly from having not eaten enough. My question does not result in more than a few flared nostrils, however, so I forge on as if some demented, degraded demon has possessed me. “Do the old folks”—my parents—“know that Lucy is knocked up? Do they know that the dad is a colored guy?”

This apparently does do the trick, because I receive a pants-pissing blow to my ankle from a heavy hiking boot.

I recall one night in a restaurant in New York’s China Town, hearing my brother Bobby tell nigger jokes—no kidding—to Jimi Hendrix and Andy Warhol till both of them, and most of the restaurant, had literally cried with laughter. At the time he’d been performing in a Tennessee Williams’ drama; he was the old playwright’s favorite singing actor. I, however, am not so gifted; my leg feels as if it’s been broken. But since I’m in this far already, I continue—through tears of pain. “Well, if anybody wants my opinion—”

“We don’t!”

“I just thought I’d say...”

“Shut up, Jack!”

“—that the longer you wait to tell ‘em” (the new baby’s soon-to-be great-grandparents) “the harder it’s gonna be.”

Now that I’ve been disqualified, the general conversation progresses smoothly. The art students are still with us, looking even more absorbed than they had been with Possum’s

painting. The waiter comes; I order coffee and a salad since I'm not too sure who is paying for all this.

Tom Shoffner, possibly the biggest bore since Velveeta Cheese, gets going on the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra's fundraising drive. I try to concentrate on what he's saying, but my mind keeps wandering away. Clair looks like she's doing well. Her boyfriend seems like an OK guy. For a moment I can't recall his name. A few years ago, Bobby and I were talking about Clair; I'd confused a fiancé with her first husband. "I never can keep Clair's beaus straight," I'd said.

Without the slightest pause, Bobby responded: "It's when Clair's beaus can't keep *it* straight, that Clair looks for another beau!" Pushing my chair back a bit so I'll be able to dodge more kicks, I wait for old Shoffner to run out of gas so I can try it out to see if it's as funny as it seemed—oh, no! Through the scratched lenses of the old glasses, I see, entering the far end of the large dining room, Janie—my Janie! She's wearing the same dress coat that she was wearing, on the night I that met her; she is accompanied by a three-piece suit with a mustache. Her cheeks are flushed, and she is laughing.

Moving as unobtrusively as a ghost's shadow, I slip on my coat. I quietly mention that I think I've left something in Possum's car. Long, I suspect, before my absence is noticed, I'm out the back door and well on my way down the hill—hands deep in my pockets, face to the ground.

## 4 — AWAY TOO LONG

Now it's late at night; I'm behind the wheel of an antique Cleveland Cab. I'm rolling down Mayfield Hill, past the cemetery, into Little Italy. If you are ever in Cleveland in August, on the last night of the Festival of the Assumption, push your lover, or the nearest facsimile, and a bottle of red wine over the graveyard wall. A short walk will take you to Garfield's Tomb, an enormous structure with Gothic windows, flagstone terraces, and gargoyles. It sits high on a hill, from which you can see all the way to the mists of Lake Erie. Or you can look down into Murray Hill, and watch the fireworks exploding above the old brick streets. It was this way for me when I was young, but now I somehow feel like I no longer belong here; I've been away too long.

On through the night, I prowl like a centaur, from sacred spring to holy grove. I cruise past the pizza parlor on Coventry, where sometimes whacked-out girls hung around, late at night. One, in particular, I'd like to give a ride in this old cab, if I could find her. Something in her canceled eyes made my blood flush like molten lava; I knew that I could light them like candles, given the chance. But that was years ago. By now, that kind of chick would be dead or draped in diamonds.

The radio sputters: "Woodland 5, Hough 10, Greyhound," but I don't even hear it. Cleveland Cab keeps a high turnover of new drivers on the road as cannon fodder; enough of them are ignorant or hungry enough to take calls in those areas where human life can be a trifling thing. Even though it's my first week on the job, this is still the city that I know best of all cities. Hence, my survival instinct makes me hold out for something like a cab-stand call for Van Aken in Shaker Heights, or a Mayfield Three or a Noble Road, though I might have to wait an hour to hear one.

It works this way: the dispatcher announces that a fare in such and such a cab stand area is open, and the first cabby to pounce, by responding with the mike, is awarded the fare. For

example, the radio might say: “Shaker Square—open,” which means a cab is needed in the Shaker Square area.

If the driver is interested, and reasonably nearby, he will mash down on the cab mike, which he holds perpetually by his mouth, and answer, “059”—the cab’s number—“Shaker.”

Theoretically, if the dispatcher hears him first, and, allowing for luck and the graft factor, she will respond with something like: “059, take it on up to the Colony Theater for Sudberry.”

“Colony for Sudberry,” you confirm.

“Check and thank you, driver.”

Now the dispatcher says “Euclid 9,” which means a cab is needed in the general vicinity of the nine hundred block of Euclid Avenue. This is a tough one because of a crack alley and an after-hours joint that could mean passengers hazardous to the cabby’s health. But the Cleveland Clinic is also a Euclid 9, which could mean a fat hospital voucher. Fortunately, I’ve worked this scenario out in advance; I’m on the mike before she’s done saying the word nine. “059, is that a hospital, please?” I ask, which they don’t like. You’re supposed to take a call or leave it, and not pump ‘em for info, but you can usually get away with it once or twice a shift if it’s not one of the mean dispatchers. Push them too much and they won’t hear your number at all anymore.

Tonight’s dispatcher is nice, though, ‘cause it’s been dead; she says: “059, it is a hospital. Do you want it?”

“Yes, please.”

“Go to the ER and pick up Dixon.”

“Emergency room for Dixon.”

“Check, and thank you, driver.” Now we’ve got it made, assuming another cabby doesn’t beat us there and steal it. Stolen orders are pretty rare, though, and occur mainly in the summer when it gets slowest. Holdups can occur at hospitals, too, though. Last winter, I’m told, a guy pulled

off eight straight robberies, out of hospital waiting rooms. He wore a phony cast on his arm to inspire confidence, then would yank out a .32. He has, since then, been arrested and sentenced, so we don't have to worry too much about that, either.

My fare turns out to be a woman who might be anywhere between forty and sixty-five. She wears a bathrobe and slippers beneath a long winter coat. Her eyes are blackened circles like two burned-out fuses. Despite her sad appearance, her voice is animated and warm. "Ah'm a cancer patient, and then I had pneumonia. The doctah say, stop smokin', stop drinkin'—I asked him what else am I supposed to do? But Ah likes my beer," she sighs. "Ah know you married. How many children do you have?"

"I'm one of the lucky ones—single!"

"Ah, ha ha...shame on you!" A lively discussion on the pros and cons of marriage follows. "First beverage store we see," she says, "Ah wouldn't mind stoppin'. My mouth is dry."

I pull into a neon and fluorescent carry-out on Hayden Avenue; we both go in. As I pour myself a large coffee, I hear her ask the man at the cash register, "Where the Colt .45?"

"We ain't got none. We got The Bull, though."

"Say what?"

"The Schlitz Malt Liquor Bull."

"Well, Ah don't know...will it give me a boost?" On the word 'boost', her voice rises to a questioning falsetto.

"Yeah, it's pretty hip," he assures her.

Back in the cab, she says, "Ah was gonna drink a beer on ma way home, but sumthin' told me Ah should wait 'cause if it knocks me completely out I'll be at home. I don't think it will, though. Ah drink too much beer."

"Me too."

“You too? Oh, dear, we makes a turrable twosome!”

“I don’t drink anything else.”

“That’s me! Ah don’t drink nothin’ else either. Ah wasn’t always this away—Ah used to work, but Ah had to quit to go on suppo’t to get ma’ medicine. Otherwise, Ah couldn’t afford no doctah!”

“Yeah, those AMA bastards and the med schools let only a few people practice medicine so they can bleed the whole country and stay rich! The law of supply and demand doesn’t apply to them. If cab drivers could have a monopoly like those jackals, we’d have just a few taxis out there, and we’d be drivin’ the BMWs!”

“Ma daughta’ got to stay on welfare too, so she can get a doctah fo’ her keeids. She was workin’ at a restaurant when her boy got ill, and she would have lost him if she didn’t quit. Here we are. Be careful, Baybeh! Heah?” I drop her off and head back towards the Heights.

It’s late. I sit in front of Presties’ Bakery, gobbling donuts. I determine that I’ll take one more fare and then take the hack on in, even if it’s not been quite twelve hours. They always make new drivers work this late shift, for a couple of weeks at least, but this is my last time. After this, I’ll work noon to midnight, which will suit me better. Following a couple of misses, I get a fare.

“Mayfield three,” honks the box.

“059 Mayfield three.”

“059, go to 2737 Hampshire Rd. and pick up Shonister.”

“2737 Hampshire for Shonister.”

“Check.”

I help a thin guy with glasses and very short, brown hair—in his early thirties, maybe—down two flights. He’s got three large boxes, a suitcase, and a duffle bag. It all fits easily into the limitless vaults of the taxis’ trunk. The apartment he leaves appears to be empty.

“I’m goin’ to the dog,” he says.

“Where?”

“The Greyhound station.”

“Oh. Goin’ far?” I ask, throwing the meter and pulling out.

“Yes,” he says slowly, gazing into the deep night. “I’m going a long way.” So pensive and distant does he sound that I cease my prying. The truth is that I rather wish I were going on a trip myself.

There’s no traffic on the roads; I’m down to Twelfth and Chester in about ten or twelve minutes. As we pull up to the streamlined art deco curves of the old bus depot, he asks me to wait while he runs inside. He’s out in a couple of minutes.

“I gotta ticket,” he says, “but my bus doesn’t leave till five this morning. What time is it now?” I pick up the mike and ask the dispatcher.

“It’s three-thirty, driver,” she says. “Don’t you have a watch?”

“I had to pawn it to pay my lease last night.”

“Do you know anyplace open now?” my passenger asks.

“Well, I know a diner, sort of, down in the flats, that’s probably open if it’s food you want. All of the bars are closed, pretty much, although I know a speakeasy—”

“Do they have good food at this diner?”

“Oh, yeah, they have great food. It’s all homemade and—”

“Please,” he says, “I’d like to go there. You know the kind of places those buses stop at. If I eat well now, I won’t need to eat again till I get past the Mississippi.”

“That’s a good plan,” I agree. “Whereabouts are you headin’ out West?”

“I don’t know, for sure. I’d like to see the mountains again. Maybe the ocean, too.”



“Well, I wish I was goin’ with you,” I say. “I’m restoring a little house in New Mexico, on the Pecos River.”

“No kiddin’. Is that near Albuquerque?”

“No, but the landscape is similar—high elevations, mesas, and blue mountains—only I’m down in the river bottom, where it’s green. You can grow almost anything you want; my place was a vineyard, long ago.”

“No kiddin’. Man, what are you doin’ here?”

“Well, the house was a ruin, really, when I bought it three years ago, for eighteen hundred bucks, which is more bread than I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I was sick of poverty. I’m a musician, you know, but I took a summer and did nothin’ but work, doin’ adobe construction with my cousin out there. I was just lookin’ to buy some land mainly. But I got a chance to get an acre with some trees and a hundred-year-old adobe ruin...I tore the old roof off and rebuilt it some. I need at least about a thousand bucks before I can pound a well and finish it up, though. Then I won’t have to share the place with the owls and coyotes; that’s why I’m pushin’ this hack.”

“Only two thousand it cost you?”

“Yeah, the man who sold it to me—see—I knew some of his relatives, and the area is pretty remote. But you can still find deals if you look.”

“How’d you wind up out there?”

“Oh, I been goin’ out there since I was twenty when my cousin moved from back here. If you’ve got a map I’ll show you where it is, and you can check it out if you’re in the area. The people in Rio Verde are mostly Spanish and Indians, but after all these years, my cousin and I

have gotten 'em to where they won't automatically shoot gringos, especially not ones from Ohio."

"Really?"

"No, I'm just kidding. The people are real friendly. Hey, if mountains are what you want to see, you can camp there if you have a good sleeping bag. There're no doors or windows, and only part of it has a roof. I was halfway done when I got this chance to go to England—sometimes I think I should have stayed. But you can hike up in the hills in any direction. Just send me a postcard, and tell me what shape the west wall is in, would you? It's been a year and a half since I've seen it."

"Well," he says, "that's very kind of you to offer to me the use of your house—"

"Hey, it's primitive, I'm telling ya."

The man is silent for a spell.

"You ever been to Albuquerque?" he asks.

"Yeah, a couple of times. Why?"

"Oh, well, my friend and I stopped there once, a long time ago. We were fifteen years old, and we'd run away. We rode a train as far as Dallas; then we stole a car. We didn't have any money, just a big bag of S & H trading stamps like they used to have? You can imagine two kids in a big Grand Prix. They didn't have hardly any speed limits out there back then; we flew across Texas, and into Albuquerque like a rocket sled. When we got there it was about three in the morning and we stopped at this truck stop that was a honky-tonk sort of place. There was this big pink Cadillac parked right up by the door. We went in, and there was this guy who had on a pink shirt, a white cowboy hat and boots, and a string tie; he obviously owned the Cadillac. He was sitting with one of the ugliest girls I'd ever seen in my life. She had one tooth and a fat face—soooo-ee! And all the other cowboys were envying this guy, so we figured we were in the wrong place and

we flew on down to the border. But that ride from Albuquerque to El Paso, I'll never forget; the sun was coming up. When we got there, we hid the car in the desert. We were in and out of Mexico three or four times—back and forth from El Paso to Juarez. The second day we cashed in the rest of the green stamps. The third day we got popped. But that was after a girl blew my cherry for a lighter.”

“A lighter?”

“Yeah, a Zippo lighter. You could get a shoeshine for a nickel in the main square of Juarez. You walk around, and you get them all dusty real quick—‘cause it’s a shithole, you know?”

I laugh.

“And then you brush ‘em a little bit and they’re like shiny again—like brand new, you know? Like brand new...” he sort of drifts away again.

With all the windows rolled down, and the heater on full blast, we motor along the south coast of Lake Erie, a vast and transplendent freshwater sea. To its north sits Canada. Just to the west of downtown, the river the Indians called the Cuyahoga, twists its way from the south like a dancing snake. The first several miles of the river valley has, from time immemorial, been known as the flats. The landscape is kind of flat, I suppose, but it hardly seems that way because the eye is drawn up on all sides in wonder—to bridges, ships, and ore boats—colossal as Tritons and whales. There are arched Romanesque viaducts of great age, and stone and brick cartage warehouses that date back to the earliest part of the city’s history. Much of the best nightlife is found here now, as well, with clubs and restaurants right on the shore.

Farther south, the steel mills still blaze twenty-four hours, round the clock. Cutbacks in industry and improved environmental standards have cleaned things up some. It got pretty bad, with the river actually catching on fire, during the sixties. But they’re pulling up perch, white bass, and sheepshead (freshwater drum) again, down at the 9th Street pier.

Now I take my passenger to an old, working man's tavern. He asks me if he'll have any difficulty getting a cab back up to the bus station after he eats.

"I think I'm gonna have something too," I say. "If you pay what's on the meter now, I won't charge you waiting time or anything to go back up to Twelfth Street." He has a big, hot roast beef sandwich, and I have breakfast, washed down with oceans of superb coffee in heavy china mugs—alternating scalding black, with cups laced languidly with triple cream.

We're there for an hour, reading and debating every column of the early morning newspaper—so fresh that the smell of the ink could stone you. When we come out, dawn is just rousing the seagulls; pink splotches are spreading like paint in a watercolor. I take the lakeshore drive.

"Go slow, would you please?" he asks. "I want to get one last look."

"Cleveland ain't goin' nowhere, believe me," I say.

"Well, I found out recently that I've got just a few months to live."

"Are you sure?" I say, electrified. "They don't know everything, these doctors."

"No, my friend. They know this. There's no doubt."

We've arrived at the station. I help him carry his boxes inside. At the baggage check, he says, "Look, I've got five times more stuff than I could possibly use," and he thrusts a box into my hands.

"Oh, no, I couldn't—"

"Listen, I've got two cassette machines. Maybe you can use this one for your music. There're some tapes in there too. God bless you, my friend." Ignoring my protests, he zips off through the turnstiles and out the rear of the terminal.

I take it on in, wondering at Death, who again has chosen me as teamster to drive the sable horses of his hearse. Why, despite my reckless ways, should I have been shown so many years of favor?

## 5 — TURKEY RIDGE

I drive five, twelve-hour shifts in five days. I wake up and realize that it is one-thirty on a Sunday afternoon. Too late to go in and ask for a cab. No coffee here—I go out.

I had forgotten until last week about an automobile of sorts, which I owned before my journey abroad. I had signed it over to Possum, thinking he'd sell it for parts or something; but I discovered that it was still sitting out behind the house, exactly as I left it. "The Rustbucket" as it almost affectionately had come to be called, astonishingly still ran. After I found it a replacement battery and a couple of tires from Possum's endless reserves, it has been taking me back and forth to the hack garage. Today, I point it up Mayfield Hill towards trendy Coventry Road.

Soon, all I can think about is the eternal problem—getting laid. What a fantastic waste of time this results in. I can concentrate on nothing else. Do most guys go through life feeling like this as much as I do? I can't imagine. Now I'm sitting at this stupid coffee place pretending to be interested in writing this, while really I'm praying that I'll meet up with some female of any sort. How I loathe myself. With a world of miracles all about me, I choose to sit surrounded by effete booschwazees, as they swill cappuccino and blather on about what I imagine to be skiing, Portugal, and real estate.

In walks Roscoe. He's no parvenu. He's a genuine poet-saint, beatnik relic, of about the same age as my brother. He has no trouble at all distracting me from my writing since this is not writing at all, but human waste that I sling onto my black, "Peoples' Republic of China" notebook.

While putting my mouth on automatic pilot, I scan the room like sophisticated radar for a love angel. My spiel to Roscoe sounds to me more egocentric and self-absorbed than any social climber in the room could possibly choke out. It's not entirely my fault, though. Cleveland is so often (mis)perceived—the prefix is optional—from inside, and out, as being the anus of the

earth, that the natives want news of the outside world. Roscoe asks about my brother. He's one guy I don't mind discussing Bobby with since they really are old friends.

"I talked to Bobby, on the phone, just after I got back over here," I tell him. "He's doin' all right but he doesn't like California."

"Yeah, he became a real New Yorker."

"And it's hard for him to realize, at this stage, that he's never really gonna be the kind of matinee idol that he nearly was."

"Damn it, he should've been, too. How old is Bobby now?"

"Forty-three... ten years older than me."

"That's right. He's a year younger than I am."

Our talk turns nostalgically to the good old days and what seems now to have been very fine and exciting times. "Not many of the old faces," we agree. We wheeze sentimentally about our favorite hangouts and clubs, even growing maudlin about notorious old street types and flim-flam personalities.

"Did you ever know Jimmy the Buddha?" he asks.

"Boy did I ever! Not only did he steal some things from me one time, but I'm pretty sure he hoodwinked me into helping him burglarize a place and to drive the stuff away for him, although I didn't really realize that part of it till later."

"What happened?"

"He told me he needed to move some things out of a place where he'd been living. I must have been about twenty, I guess."

"How did you meet him?" Roscoe asks, peering intently from behind his big gray beard and tiny wire glasses.

"Well, I met him in jail—"

“You did time?”

“No, no. I was just in briefly, ‘cause me and my college friends got drunk and sneaked into the swimming pool at Forest Hills. We were splashing and yelling, and raising Cain—I remember singing “Winchester Cathedral” through the lifeguard’s megaphone before leaping off of the high dive.

We’d been slipping in nocturnally since we were boys, but since we hadn’t yet discovered the wonders of drink, we’d been careful and quiet, and we never got caught. We *were* just as antisocial, though, fifteen-year-old style. I recall Possum—ever the show stopper—dangling by his toes and fingertips from the lifeguard chair, then dropping a submarine-shaped turd into the deep end. For this he became anonymously famous; I heard other kids tell, with thrilled disgust, how the community swim the following morning had been held up for half an hour while a lifeguard was sent down to reconnoiter and apprehend the object with a net and pole.

But the noisy bacchanalia, of the college swim, disturbed the neighbors, resulting in the appearance of the cops. Before you could say ‘Bentley’, I was the occupant of my own eight by five foot world, on the second floor of the Cleveland Heights Jail. Next morning I was still there with the most violent hangover of my young career. There were these junkies in the cell next to me... the cops, in their enlightened wisdom, were letting them kick their habits right there in jail. One of those addicts was Jimmy the Buddha. A few weeks later, I was foolish enough to go into the C-Saw Café—a notorious biker bar—“because I’d had another fight with Pamela Dupree and it was the first joint handy.”

“Was that your little blond girlfriend?”

“Yeah, the one I was pathetically in love with for years. We’d quarreled because she was running around with guys with more money than me, but there was a recession on as usual, and I couldn’t find a job. So I went into the C-Saw to drink a beer and there’s the Buddha. We get to

talking and he says: ‘You need a job?—you got one!’ He said they needed a man where he worked downtown, cleaning all the offices in a big tower. He told me it was easy, that it took two guys only four hours to do the whole building, and that then, they just sat up on the top floor and smoked the executives’ cigars and relaxed for the rest of the shift. I should meet him the next night, at midnight, and he gave me an address downtown. Needless to say, I was overjoyed, and we drank more beer and some wine. By and by he told me he had a small problem. He said he was moving and had to be out of his place the next day—could I possibly help him take a few things in my car? I said, sure, I’d be glad to, and we went to this big house on Overlook, where obviously a few people were living, although no one was home...or maybe they were sleeping. I helped him pack some things up; he was telling me these hilarious stories the whole time, about being in the service in Germany, and his doings with the *frauleins*...he even had these gray, uniform shirts like cleaning men might wear, and he gave me a couple. But when I went to the address downtown the next night, there was no building. Then I discovered my microphones and some tools, that had been in my trunk, were gone and it gradually began to dawn—”

“Excuse me,” says a dapper young man who evidently knows Roscoe. “My Audi’s out front and won’t start. The fuel injectors have been misfiring. I’m double parked—I was hoping maybe you could take a look?”

Roscoe, who’s a mechanical genius, follows him out and so do I—queasy from too much coffee.

I stop by a payphone and call Lucy. Morning sickness has set in. Her friend Rachel, I’m told, has gone back to Chicago. Bah. I’m invited over later to have dinner.

To my self-disgust, I find myself entering a glitzy hooch-house, called Turkey Ridge. It has a restaurant on one side and an upwardly mobiliious meat market of a saloon on the other. I have



quite a history here; I was banned after I tried to pull a vicious bouncer off of an unfortunate patron whom he'd blind-sided. This happened three years ago and, hopefully, has been forgotten.

More importantly, it is here that I met Janie. On the plane to London I tried, not very successfully, to capture the occasion in a song:

*I used to have a girl—her name was Miss Jane Bell,  
I met her on a cold March night where sadness falls like arrows,  
Her smile cut through the steel gray and it touched me like a rainbow,  
She stood out like a bluebird at a party of sparrows...*

OK words for a pop song, I guess; but I was never happy with it, somehow. Compared to what really happened it seems over-romanticized.

On that particular night, Possum, Dolinsky, and I had—since the Browns' losing game, hours earlier—been punishing the joint's beer supply. The widescreen TV in the large back room had long since been put away; a dee-jay had arrived with lights and turntables, turning our surroundings into a disco fantasia. Still, we'd sat—gnarly and surly—our table a graveyard of long-necked soldiers.

As everybody knows, there are different types of drinking problems; mine has never been the addictive variety. Since the night of my return to Cleveland a couple of weeks ago, I haven't had or craved a drop, despite having taken up residence at Possum's den of sin. I'm more of a binger. Perhaps a main reason that I ever started is that it seemed to make me, in some instances, irresistible to women. Of course, it doesn't really; it's just plain old liquid courage that sometimes makes one more successful.

On that cold evening, an art student named Audrey discovered us—three blind mice—deeply into our cups. The previous summer I'd unsuccessfully tried to seduce her after she'd shown me her paintings in her studio. I swept, or wrestled her onto the dance floor during a slow number;

this time, she wasn't unresponsive to my hugs and caresses. I pointed out to her that since us guys obviously, were too looped to drive, I'd be forced to call the boys a cab. I, out of necessity, would have to spend the night at her place. To my surprise, she saw logic in this absurd supposition; soon we were cuddling and having a nightcap. I'd been going through a long period of involuntary celibacy—long enough to set a modern record—so I felt good that things seemed about to change. Audrey had pretty brown eyes and hair, and a cute shape, as I ravenously recalled from the previous summer. She excused herself, for the powder room; I settled my beer bill and pulled on my coat.

It was at this point that I noticed a couple of glamorous, somewhat more mature Cleopatras come in with Billy Henderson—a jazz musician who has been around forever. They looked like they'd just been to the ballet, or opera, or somewhere, with long dresses, gloves, and pearls. They seemed rather boisterous, but I paid them little attention. Then, to my surprise, I noticed that one of the ladies, with a fetching smile, seemed to be crooking an index finger—towards me!—of all people. I looked around to see if she was indicating to somebody else. Not being the case, I lumbered to my feet, tucked my shirt in, and made my way over to her. She was holding in one hand a martini glass, and it became apparent that she was a little tight herself—like Barbara Stanwyck in one of her tough, but vulnerable, roles from the thirties.

“My name is Jane Bell,” she said. “Your brother deflowered me.”

So that was it. Bobby, as I said, is famous and charismatic, and although I've always been proud of him through all his ups and downs, it's never easy for anybody who is related to fame. Due to this, and a very solid beer buzz, I replied, “Oh, really? Well, I'm a much better fuck.” From these indelicate beginnings, had emerged our love.

When it snows, it blizzards—in Cleveland, anyway. As Jane and I ran across the street, through the flurries, Audrey called after me, “Jackie, do you still need a place to stay?” Sometimes I should be gassed, down at the dog pound.

Back in the present I notice, as I enter, that the place hasn’t changed a bit—same brass plated cash register and brass plated espresso machine behind the same brass plated bar. I am collared by some old acquaintances from high school and am again dragged unwillingly down memory lane. Why didn’t I go to the museum?

I decide to take a leak and hit the road. On my way to the john, I look into the previously mentioned back room. At a table of people, sits Possum himself, with Derrick, my friend from East London. He arrived in town three nights ago. My friends Ryan and Celeste, who live way over on the far West Side, offered him a spare room. I’ve not seen him since his arrival; I picked him up at the airport, in the taxi. Ryan and Celeste don’t have a phone, so I’ve not been able to talk to him, but I caught a couple of his messages on Possum’s answering machine. They revealed that he’d been taking to Cleveland like “bubble and squeak” and had already “gotten him a bird.”

“There ‘e is,” he cries, spying me. “Oi been ‘round yer kip, a bit ago.”

“Yeah, I was up the street from here, drinking coffee.” Boy, I’ll say Derrick is taking to Cleveland. He has his arm around a dusky Venus so comely that lightning bolts race up and down my spine.

At the art museum down the hill, there is a painting by Gauguin of a woman with flaming orange hair. She is bathing in a sea that is the quintessence of green. The eyes of this demoiselle are that same shade. Her hair, however, is not red. It is as black as black coral and held up tightly in the back by abalone combs. Her dusky skin makes me think of the Caribbean. She smiles at me as I awkwardly explain to Derrick that I’d thought about driving across town to look for him,

but had known that he'd probably not be in. "I've worked twelve-hour shifts every day, for five days straight. Where was it that you two met?" Derrick jumps up and grabs me by the arm.

"Ere mate! Let's you and Oi go round to the ba' and Oi want you to show me the one laga' you was tellin' me about when we played in Brixton." Addressing Venus: "Mr. Possum will keep you company luv...we'll be right back..."

"Oh, right," I say, like a big cabbage, as he hustles me off.

Derrick is a short waif with a deep, growling, singing voice—surprising to hear coming out of such a terrier. He explains that he met his eternal soul-mate—apparently not this coquette—on the second night he'd arrived in town. He'd been down in the flats, jamming with local—via Mississippi and Chicago—blues idol, Robert Jr. Lockwood, whose fame has long since spread to Europe. The problem is that he's just met this siren, and he's got to "meet 'Gwen' in 'alf an 'our" at some restaurant. "So be a roit bloke and don't give us away like you just did, almost, till Oi can get me wits. Keep 'er a bit of company, for me, afta' Oi go. 'Ave you ever seen such a 'bottle'?" (Bottle and *glass*—rhymes with *ass*—in terms of Cockney rhyming slang—or 'ahss', as Derrick pronounces it.)

"You're gonna trust me with *her*?" I ask.

"Ho-ho, mate," he laughs. "It's me she fancies."

Possum has joined us. "Good luck to both you guys," he says. "That girl comes in here a lot. She's a mega-tease."

"But those 'Bristols', mate—it's them what worries me..." (Bristol *Cities*—rhymes with *titties*).

I am informed that Possum and Derrick both attended the aforementioned blues gig. It seems Derrick had called, looking for me that evening; they are already old cronies.

“Well,” Derrick says, “Oi’ve go’ta go and meet mi other birds’ folks. Oh, look here, Jackie... Victor and me reckon’ we could get us some gigs about this town if you’ll throw in with us. Wha’a ya sai?”

“Well, I don’t know—”

“Good!” they chorus. “Practice is Tuesday night.”

“OK,” I say, “but I don’t want any heavy commitments. I want to get out of this town soon if I can. Want to go out West, Derrick?”

“Wha’?! And see cowboys?”

“Yessir.”

“And Red Indians, as well?”

“Dern tootin’, podner.”

“Per’aps I could roid an ‘orse!”

“They run wild in the streets.”

“What do?” It’s Venus. Standing up, she looks even better than sitting down; my knees get the collywobbles.

“Look ‘ere, luv,” says Derrick to her. “Somthin’s come up and I’ve got’a go. I’ll give you a ring tomorrow night, a’ round eight, on the ‘bone’...dog and *bone—phone?*” I cringe as she laughs delightedly at the same slang that would have brought him only moans back in his old haunts. They wander off towards the door. I finally make it to the can and have my leak. When I get back, Possum and Derrick have gone and I turn my attention to trying to steal the affections of Sonya, which as it turns out, is Venus’ real name. She is so exotically beautiful, that I expect her to speak with a Martinique inflection or something. However, her accent is nicely rounded, un-Cleveland, American English.

“You don’t sound as if you’re from around here,” I say.

“I grew up in Albany.”

“Oh. Do you still have folks there?”

“My grandmother, who is the only folks I’ve ever had, is there,” she says.

I feel like I’m prying, so I say, “You know, there’s a painting by Gauguin at the art museum; the color of the girl’s hair—I mean of the sea—is the same color as your eyes.” My complicated conceit has fizzled; Sonya rolls her eyes and sips her drink through a straw. This makes the corners of her mouth go down in a way that is, to my way of thinking, entirely enchanting.

OK, I think—if you don’t want to talk about you I’ll be more than happy to talk about myself. So I tell her all about how Derrick and I met in an Irish Pub on the Old Kent Road, etc. I’d like to tell her about what he’s off doing right this moment, but even if I were that reptilian, I doubt that it would get me anywhere. So I tell her what a brilliant, gifted fellow he is, hoping some of the cheap gilding will stick to me.

“Have you lived in Cleveland a long time?” I ask.

“About six years.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Oh, I do temporary work.”

“Like typing?”

“Sometimes. I’m a translator, really, but I’ve been doing proof-reading lately.”

“Wow! That takes a lot of brains.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she says, rolling the ice cubes around in her glass. “In fact, it’s best to have none at all.”

“Then I could do it!”

“No, you couldn’t,” she laughs, looking me in the eyes for the first time. “It doesn’t take an ounce of creativity.”

“So?”

“I’ve heard you perform.”

“Really? Where?”

“At the street fair—right outside of here. You improvised, I think, for a long time. It was pretty swell. I heard something else by you on the radio, but I don’t like rock ‘n roll very much.”

I am astonished and, of course, flattered by these revelations. I also despair, because the fact that she already knows all about me, indicates that I’m not getting anywhere. I’m feeling really frustrated by the time I arrive at Lucy and David’s.

“What were you doing all afternoon?” David asks as we’re sitting down to dinner.

“Trying to find some slutty little tarts.”

“I don’t wanna hear it, Jack,” Lucy objects.

“What?”

“Your sexist shit.”

“Sexist? I have the right to call women sluts because *I* am a slut myself.” (David laughs.) “I am! I’m a slut for women. Most men are, given the chance. Some say that a slut is lower than a whore, for giving it away, but I think that makes it the more exalted thing.”

“Well, nobody seems to want what you’re giving away,” says Lucy.

“True—it’s harder for men. But I’m not a sexist...I’m a feminist.”

“You a feminist?” she snorts. “The only kind of women you like are painted up bird-brains in high heels.”

“That’s not true. It’s you who’s too prejudiced to see that a secretary, or a housewife, or a prostitute even, can be just as autonomous and courageous as anybody. I have too much admiration for women who’ve humbled me at everything I’ve undertaken—from music to cab driving—to properly be labeled a sexist.”

“Oh, fuck you, Jack.” Lucy throws down her napkin and hoists herself, and her big tummy, to her feet. Ignoring my expostulations, she steams down the hallway to her room and slams the door. I’ve done it again.

“Never argue with a pregnant woman,” says David, cheerfully spearing the ribs off of her plate and onto his.

“I’m sorry, man,” I say and let myself out. Out of spite, I stop by Larry’s pad. My old college pal, Larry Dolinsky, really is the personification of the lascivious Don Giovanni that Lucy accuses me of being. I’ve seen him a couple of times recently because he’s been driving a cab himself. We take his car down to the flats.

Hours later, on our way home, he takes Prospect—through Cleveland’s red-light district—so that he can indulge in a favorite activity which he calls “window shopping.” The situation is high burlesque since he’s blown all his cash and can’t even honorably pretend to bargain.

“We’ll go to a nice place where they know us,” he says to a pair, “and we’ll do some drinkin’ and dancin’!”

“Baybeh... Ah do ma dancin’ on SHEETS!” shrieks the object of his overtures, as the whole street howls like coyotes, with Dolinsky’s cackle rising above the chorus.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Whassat!?” A very puffy and woozy-looking Possum has turned on the light in my room and poked me from my slumber. “What time is it?” I ask.

“It’s four-thirty AM,” he says. “Justin is on the phone—it must be long distance.” I follow him out to the dining room thinking that I’ll have to run the extra phone into my room.

“Justin, where are you? I thought you were coming here.”



“Jack, I’m in Zurich—I haven’t been here in fifteen years!” My friend—although a native Clevelander like myself—grew up well-to-do and took his schooling abroad. “I was going to come home, but I was captured by a beautiful witch, who I met in Malaysia. Here—say hi to Polka Dot.”

A voice sounding like Ingrid Bergman comes on. “Hellooo? How are yoo? Joosteen hass toold me so mooch about yoo.”

“Uh, oh,” I say. “I deny everything.” She laughs, sounding like Liv Ullman. “Are you Swiss, Polka Dot?” I ask, wondering if I might still be dreaming.

“My father is Sviss, und my Moother ees Thai, but I haf grown up mostly here. Joosteen, I sink, hass been sad because he veeshes to be szare veeth yoo writing a play. You vill forgeef me, Jack?”

“Never mind that. Do you have any sisters? When do I meet them?”

“Ja, szare ees Pilar, und Ia und—” Justin has taken the phone back. He apologizes for not being here, and I assure him that he’s missing very little. He tells me that Polka Dot is a sculptress and that they’ll be meeting his mother who will be flying to Paris next week.

Therefore, he has no reason to visit her in Cleveland after all. I tell him a little about the cab driving, and I answer a few of his questions about mutual friends, most of whom I’ve not seen.

He leaves me with assurances that he’ll be seeing me soon, which somehow leads me to think I’ll not see him for quite a while. Justin, in addition to being my friend, has also been my magical muse and patron angel, sort of—not so much in terms of money—but in limitless faith. Knowing I probably won’t see him for a while, leaves just another hole.

## 6 — UGLY AS IT GETS

Time to go to work again. I am kind of sore because, the last time I drove, I was given a pink notice which stated that I'd been twenty dollars short on my lease the previous night. At the end of each shift—usually twelve hours—the driver must, after gassing up the cab, place into a manila envelope called a waybill, cash or vouchers totaling sixty-five dollars for the lease, plus funds for however much gas he's burned up. Only he—the driver—sees what he puts in; then the guy behind the cage seals the gummy flap with a sponge and drops the envelope into a safe, through a slot in the top.

Everybody knows, from movies and TV, that the guys who work behind the cages in cab garages are rabid mastiffs of meanness. About once a century one of them can be an OK guy to a cabby if that cabby is a veteran—a twenty-year man—but otherwise, forget it. It's a sort of tradition. Whether or not this unending abusiveness is beneficial or detrimental to the complex ecosystem that is a cab company, I'm not certain. But it would probably be too great a shock for the drivers—Cleveland supports about three hundred each day—if it was suddenly any other way. I spoke about the short to my friend Dolinsky, who has been driving for a good many years. He has a degree from Ohio State in statistics. For a guy whose talents lie in such directions, cab driving can be too profitable to quit.

“Ya got four possibilities every time there's a shortage. First, the cabby goofed. Not likely, but it's gotta happen once in a while, due to fatigue after thirteen or fourteen hours. Second, there's the guy behind the cage. You figure if some of those guys sit there for thousands of hours, thinkin' about nuthin' but getting a sealed envelope out of a locked safe, and if Houdini could make elephants jump out of matchboxes, then that's certainly gotta be a possibility. I've heard it's been done with hooks. Personally, I think most of it happens when you get a bad apple in the counting room. The lady in charge has been with the company forty years, and I happen to know

that she is as honest as the day is long. But she's got assistants makin' low wages and she can't watch every single second. Did ya ever try palming a bill? A child can do it. Last, there's the ever-popular theory that the cab company rakes off a certain percentage periodically."

Larry is right about this being a much-discussed hypothesis, although each of the other arguments has its staunch advocates.

Those disciples of the "company rake-off" idea fall into complex subcategories:

- a). Those who believe the money goes to the mob.
- b). Those who think it goes to McAllister, the company's owner.
- c). Those who think McAllister IS in the mob.
- d). Those who think it goes to the union.
- e). Those who think the union IS the mob, etc., etc., etc.

Actually, there is no union anymore, per se, but some sort of drivers' association, which I know nothing about.

About the main evidence in support of some of these stories involving racketeering and syndicates is the fact that our cab company has, for all practical purposes, been the only one in town for years. It all makes for endless interesting debates in the garage, or in the slow-moving lines at the 'port, or on the cab stands. Whatever's behind the shortages, they tend to happen in cycles. A lot of drivers will be complaining at once; then you won't hear about any for a while—just like the hold-ups.

Today I'm driving noon to midnight. Burton, one of the meanest of all the cage guys, is behind the window. I suspected him of taking my money, but now I kind of doubt it. While I'm waiting for a cab, I hear him talking to one of the old-timers. His Midwestern, Cleveland accent makes his vowels flat as flounders—right out through his nose.

“My goddamn wife bugged me and bugged me until I had to buy her a new car. I knew it was gonna be a piece of shit, ‘cause they all are, these new ones. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore, so we went out to Al Hartz and I bought her a brand new Buick. Well, that night on the way home the thing threw a rod right through the goddamn block. It was towed in and I went into Al Hartz’s office and I told him I wanted a new goddamn engine and that I wasn’t gonna be interested in having the old one rebuilt. He said, ‘Oh, no, no, we don’t do that—they’ll send a brand new one down from Detroit, but it’ll take a couple of weeks. So three or four weeks go by, and I call him; he says the engine has come in and they are just finishing it up. So remember Gus Hurlinger who used to drive out of downtown? Well, I remembered that he was working in the parts department out there, and I called him, and he called me back and told me that they’d just finished rebuilding that goddamn engine!”

“No shit!” says the veteran cabby.

“So I went out there and I told Al Hartz: ‘you goddamn son-of-a-bitch, you either get me a new engine for that car or I’m gonna drive it through your showroom window!’ He knew I would have, too!”

The New York Metropolitan Opera is in town. I contrive to sneak in, or to at least get a star in my cab. They are staying at Stouffer’s Inn on the Square, Cleveland’s ritziest hotel, more or less. It’s a mild March afternoon; you can almost smell spring if you try. A shortish, slightly plump lady, perhaps in her fifties, gets into my cab. She’s wearing a clear plastic raincoat with red trim that looks like it’s from Woolworth’s, over an evening gown.

“We’re not goin’ too fah,” she says, in a Brooklyn accent.

“To the opera,” I say.

“How did you know?”

“‘Cause you look Italian.”

“Ha, ha, ha! You guessed it, Bubee. We’ll go to the stage door.” She looks over, in front of Stouffer’s Hotel, as we pull off. “Who’s in the stretch limo?”

“Who knows,” I say. “Beverly Sills, maybe.”

“No, no—she’s with the rival company.”

“Oh,” I say, “I’m an ignoramus.”

“Oh, no, you’re not! Don’t put yourself down that way!”

“When it comes to real opera, I am.”

“That’s alright. So are most of the people who go there!”

We both laugh. “I’ve always liked it,” I tell her. “I’m just starting to learn a little bit more about it.”

“Well, there’s some good stuff, and there’s some crap. I’m glad you finally got that building finished, over there. Is that Mobil?”

“No, it’s Sohio...British Petroleum, now, I guess.”

“I knew it was some corporation like that. It’s very interesting looking.”

“Well, they were supposed to put a sculpture by Claes Oldenburg, right there, in front.”

“Oh, really?”

“You know who he is?”

“Yep, he does all those sculptures of ordinary objects.”

“Yeah. This one was supposed to be a giant rubber stamp.”

“Ha, ha, like a desk stamp?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve got a great big beautiful thing at the Lincoln Center by Henry Moore. It cost a quarter of a million dollars; one day I saw a program on the way he did it. His dog had dug up a bone in

the garden, and he thought it was the most beautiful thing that he'd ever seen, so he enlarged it and made the sculpture. I'll tell ya'..."

"Well, ours was commissioned and paid for and everything, and then British Petroleum bought Sohio and said, 'No dice'."

"Oh, no."

"And everybody thinks Cleveland's such a cow town, but this foreign corporation is controlling the art on our public square—like we never fought the Revolutionary War."

"No kiddin'?"

"Yeah, and what's worse, according to something I read on the editorial page of this morning's paper—"

"Is that the *Plain Dealer*?"

"Yeah—"

"That's an excellent paper."

"—a students' organization opposed to Apartheid, comprised of kids from elementary and high schools, has requested several times to meet with B.P. representatives to discuss their oil wells and interests in South Africa. So far, though, they haven't even had their letters answered."

"Oh, the bastards!"

"Yeah, it's pretty much of an outrage, if you ask me, that they think they can waltz in and treat the home city of Jesse Owens, and the first integrated baseball team in the American League this way—"

"Yes, I know. Larry Doby and Satchel Page."

"Oh, you know about that?"

“Sweethaht, I remember it. My fathah loved the Yankees. I was a Dodgah fan, but I remember it was the Cleveland Indians who broke those damn Yankees string of five straight pennants in ‘fifty-four.”

“Yeah!”

“And I think they finished second, three years straight before that.”

“Right,” I say, “and we won the pennant in ‘forty-eight before the Yanks started the streak.”

“That’s right.”

We’re almost to the theater. “What are you doin’ tonight?” I ask.

*“Tosca.”*

“Who wrote that?”

“Puccini. It’s one of those big, lush things. Bye, Bubee!”

\* \* \* \* \*

My next passenger turns out to be an old friend. Years ago Katie Joyce was a waitress at the old diner where the art students hung out. I had quite a crush on this darling girl—woman now, obviously—but she, being a bit older, in a kind way turned down my unripe advances. We became good friends, though, and saw each other through many experiences. She seems to have trouble hearing me, so I stop the cab, and she gets up front. Today for some reason, there is an unusual tension about her, but she seems happy to see me; she insists that I tell her about my travels. She finds my accounts amusing and interrupts me several times with questions and laughter.

“So I’m just sort of stuck here,” I conclude, “till I can save up enough bucks to get out to New Mexico, or until Justin shows up.”

“And just what makes you think that Justin is going to show up here?” she scoffs. Katie knows my friend and his merry ways, as well as I do.

“He always does, sooner or later. Why I remember once, I was outside of Cardiff, playing at a labor-party bash when up putts this big black Rolls. Justin leaps out, as drunk as a coot, and he flies onto this horse that’s standing there. It was the ragman’s or someone’s, and he rides it three times around the square and—”

“Jack, pull in here for a minute, will you?”

“Sure,” I say, a little surprised that she wants to go into Bob’s Place—we’re in the Heights now—a favorite neighborhood bar. She’s never been much of a drinker.

Old Bob himself is behind the knotty maple bar. Katie orders scotch and water, and I—guiltily, since I’m driving—ask for a beer. She heads towards a knotty maple booth and downs most of her whiskey in one long pull. A little color comes into her pretty, soft cheeks.

“Have you seen Janie?” she asks.

“Oh, I saw her, soon after I got back. I called her up, and we went out and had coffee one morning.”

“Thank God that’s over with, at last.”

“What do you mean?” I say, hurt by her tone of voice.

“Well, I guess you’re aware that Janie nearly drank herself to death after you split on her—”

“I did not ‘split’ on her...I never promised Janie anything—”

“Not you. Your weapon is lethal honesty. But she wouldn’t even talk to a man for at least a year after you left; if she hadn’t joined A.A.—”

“Alright, Katie, you’re right. I should have stayed here in Cleveland. I should stay here till I drink myself blind some night and drive into a pole myself. I should stay here, and for the rest of my life have people say, ‘Oh, yes, he’s pretty good, but I suppose if he’d really been anything



he'd have been with a major label or made movies like his brother did before *he* went down the tubes'—"

"People don't say those things about you or Bobby, Jack. Now you're being silly."

"The fuck they don't! I'll show it to you in black and white, written by guys with less talent in their whole selves than Bobby's got in one toenail. But it's not just us. It's what's happened to every poet or athlete or singer since Homer—that you gotta be fair game for every gin-soaked trash in existence, as soon as you step onto that stage or pick up that pen or paintbrush. I can take it much better than Bobby, really... I never had any illusions about the world being a fair place. Of course, he's had much more to lose, but he's tough in his own way. Still, I don't see why you think I should've stayed here to rot. Janie had a drinking problem long before she met me—"

"OK Jack, I'm sorry! Calm down! I just wished it could have worked out, 'cause I know how much you cared about Janie, too. Anyhow, I wanted to tell you that I'm getting married this fall."

"Ah, well, congratulations. Who's the lucky man?"

"You don't know him. He's a teacher at Case. I want you to come to the wedding if you're here. We were supposed to get married a year ago, but I've been in therapy."

"Therapy?"

"Yes," she says, gesturing to Bob to bring her another one. "Jack, do you remember Oliver Price?"

A chill runs through me. Oliver Price was a hoodlum who used to come into the Coach House, a little tavern I managed in University Circle, a few years back. He was a large heavyweight, with a neck as big around as a Triceratops. He would come into the place early in the evening with his partner, Nestor—who since then was found dead in a garbage dumpster. They'd usually drink a beer or two and move on. Luckily, the place had only a beer and wine license, so I rarely had to contend with too much alcohol-related violence. They were always effusively polite and

courteous to me. As a musician, I've often been treated with a deference that the most wicked will sometimes extend to our tribe. So decent had they been, that I could scarcely believe some of the heinous stories that I'd heard about them, from others, including a couple of badly frustrated cops. These tales involved robbery, terror, and violence—committed again and again against the helpless and the elderly in the Circle area.

“Yes, I remember him.”

“Well,” Katie says, gazing into her drink, “one night, about a year ago, I was getting ready to close up the diner. It was raining buckets and Oliver offered to give me a ride. He'd always been nice and he'd been coming in for so long—”

“Yeah, I thought he was a nice guy, too.”

“I didn't know anything else about him, so I got in his car with him. Well, he said he had to stop somewhere and he took me to this house down on 105th and made me go in.”

“Oh, no!” I say, my veins starting to freeze.

“From what I can figure, he owed this man who lived there some sort of drug debt or something. To spare you the details, he let this man rape and beat me—”

“Oh, God!”

“—and both my eardrums got damaged, which is why I still can't hear very well.”

“Oh, Katie.” She looks up at me.

“I know it was stupid of me to go with him, but I...When the man was hitting me I kept pleading with Oliver to make him stop, and he just kept saying: ‘I can't,’ smiling and shrugging his shoulders like he had no control over things.”

“Katie, I'm so sorry. I should have warned you about him.”

“Well, I tried to press charges but got absolutely nowhere. It wasn't till just recently that I could even get any crime victims' counseling. That's where I'm coming from today.”

“So he’s still on the loose?” I ask, wondering if there was some way somebody might contrive to put a bullet in his brain.

“No,” she says. “He got arrested for a burglary and is in the workhouse.”

Bob’s front door opens. An older cabby with short-cropped gray hair and a blue and gold regulation cab shirt steps in. “Cab for Watson?” he calls, looking about. As he spies me, I am reminded that I’m breaking the rules, so I tell Katie that I’ve gotta get going. I drop her at her apartment around the corner, and we agree to get together soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in the garage, I start to tell the drivers about the opera lady, but before I can, they interrupt characteristically: “Those cheap motherfuckers! Them cheap sons-of-bitches! They jerk you off the stand, then they don’t tip worth a damn.”

## 7 — TOUGH GIGS

Now it's seven-thirty, and we're moving our amplifiers into Rick's Cafe, a ritzy restaurant in Chagrin Falls. I haven't the slightest idea why the "Wooly Mammoths" have been booked at such a place. The stage is about the size of a postage stamp; my stuff and Pete's drums are enough to take up the whole thing, with the rest of the guys squeezed in, down on the floor, in front of the diners. Playing here, I guess, is supposed to have some sort of prestige, and the pay is quite good, which was enough to make the mercenary Derrick and the ever parsimonious Possum cast their votes with Michael, the other guitarist, who's doing the gig for the aforementioned snob appeal. Me and Pete, who has to leave several of his favorite cymbals in the truck, are merely disgusted. It was a long ride out here in Possum's big old 1974 Marquis. The guy could probably be driving any kind of car he wants, but he prefers this ancient gas hog because his father got a deal on it from some old widow woman at church, and the price was just too good to turn down. My mood was not improved one bit by his taking advantage of the fact that in this particular car, he as the driver has complete control of the power window switches. This allowed him to level volley after eye-watering volley of lethal methane effluvium at us, his helpless captives. No amount of our flailing and bashing about the back and sides of his head, with drumsticks or knuckles, could make him refrain. "*Enjoy, enjoy!*" he'd urged us, and it was only when we swore we'd not allow him to collect his pay at night's end that he finally did abate. Even now, as he's tuning his guitar, I notice him chortling to himself, in memory of his barnyard antics.

Already I can sense a disaster in the making. The tutti-frutti manager is wringing his hands back by the bar, as we try a little bit of a sound check. There's no room for our stage monitors; they sit far below—pointed ineffectively at our feet.

Now it's eight o'clock and we've gotta play. All the tables are full, but everybody appears to be eating. Just my luck—with four singers in the band, I'm supposed to sing the first number. Pete counts us off with a rockin' beat, or as rocking of a beat as he can come up with, considering they've made him play with brushes. Bah! I pound out the intro to "Stagger Lee", but I can't hear myself worth a damn—my piano amplifier is way back behind the drums somewhere, pointed at the back of my legs. So I crank up the volume knob on my piano, close my eyes, and hope for the best.

*I was standin', on the corner,*

*When I heard my bulldog growl,*

*Stagger Lee and Billy Lyon were in the alley...*

*In a fearsome brawl...*

On through the second and third verses, I plow, trying to picture in my mind's eye the Mississippi cotton gin town, Stagger's five-dollar Stetson hat, and Billy Lyon's po' lovin' children and his darlin', but sickly, wife. It's not working too well, though; I can hardly hear the bass, and my voice and piano are tiny, distant sounds. I turn it up another notch and open my eyes to launch into my solo. To my unutterable anger, Frankie, our ever pushy sound man, is standing right on the stage, directly between the audience—if you can call them that—and me. "Turn down!" he's saying. "The owner wants you to turn down—"

I get my mouth as close to his ear as I can and shout, "GET OFF THIS STAGE, OR I'LL KILL YOU!"

"But the owner—"

"I'LL KILL HIM, TOO!"

Michael is looking at me angrily. Frankie shrugs his shoulders and retreats.

The Wooly Mammoths are primarily a rhythm and blues assemblage, mainly because blues, and rock ‘n roll are what we all have in common. Each of us, however, has other facets to our musical realms of experience. Michael has played jazz; Pete was most recently in a reggae band. Possum was classically trained, while I am best known, I guess, for my songwriting. This group performs only two or three of my compositions. The real reasons that we came together, I suppose, were money and breads—pretty pitiful for a bunch of talented guys, in their thirties. Nevertheless, we’d based our repertoire primarily on songs that we all could play with the fewest rehearsals; we had gotten out of Possum’s studio and into the regular joints after only a couple of practices.

Derrick, since childhood, has been an actor. He played *Oliver Twist* opposite Davy Jones—later a Monkee—as the Artful Dodger, in the original West End production of *Oliver*. He played the lead role in Justin’s and my play: *A Done Deal*. His long-accumulated stage savvy rescues us from our present situation. As we play through the final stanza of “Stagger Lee” instrumentally, he, with ineffable charm, welcomes everybody to the place, cracks a couple of endearing jokes, and with an eye cocked towards us, introduces the next number. Before the diners can hiss, boo, or throw things, he has skillfully led us into a soft, slow ballad that he normally sings later on. This he chooses, instead of “I’d Rather Be Sloppy Drunk than Anything I Know”, or some other rollicking tune, which he usually honks out on his plaintive harmonica at this point, to inspire the dance floor. This naturally brings our volume down a good deal and gives the rest of us a chance to rearrange our stuff a little with Frank’s help, probably saving us from being thrown out of the place.

During the break, Michael and the owner confront me in anger. “You’ve gotta understand,” they say, “People have to hear each other while they’re eating dinner.”

“You gotta understand,” I say, “that people have no business paying attention to anybody or anything else but me when I’m doing a show. If you expect me to play at this kind of place, then you’d better start lookin’ for another ivory bender.” Possum leads me outside, assuages my rancor, and we somehow make it through the rest of the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

I take a day off. I drive my car with no particular destination. The radio, given to me by the man I took to the Greyhound station, is tuned to the classical music station. I stop to inspect an old aquarium that someone has left on a tree lawn for the garbage man. It’s cracked too badly, I guess—still, it’s a nice big one. I load it into my backseat. Maybe silicone glue can fix it. It is raining gently. The radio plays *Scheherazade*. My mother had the record—one of the A & P store’s “World’s Greatest Music” series—years ago. She’d told me the story of the one-hundred-and-one nights, and I’d worn the record out; but somehow, today, it touches me in a different way. As I drive through the greenery of my old neighborhood, the combination of the sweet, sad music and the story of the little slave girl, whose only crime was that she was beautiful, reminds me of Katie and my eyes fill with tears. Where does it come from, all of this sadness?

\* \* \* \* \*

Since I’ve mainly, just been waiting my turn in line, out at the airport lately, most of my fares have been boring businessmen in their nooses—Possum’s term for neckties. Boring to write or read about, perhaps, but actually, they don’t seem all that bad as we drive along—talking about

places we've traveled, baseball, weather, insurance, blah, blah. I'm also cultivating the suckers for tips, although I prefer to think of myself as paid a philosopher, raconteur, reader, and advisor.

It works this way at the "port". All of the cabbies sit, parked in a long double line until they are signaled by the "starter"—a company man, usually an old cabby—who stands in front of the arrivals doors. When a passenger enters the cab at the head of the short line, parked in front of the doors, the starter signals with a wave, or a flashlight if it's night, for the cab at the front of the long, double line, some distance away, to drive down to the rear of the short line. When things are slow, mistakes and misunderstandings arise from boredom and frustration over the money nobody is making. Suddenly, two jets will land and things will get wooly. Tonight I see the flashlight blink me—at last—from my place at the head of the longer line, through which it has taken me an hour to progress. I pull around the corner into heavy traffic, moving carefully towards arrivals. I'm nearly there, when to my profound astonishment, I see, standing on the curb ahead and to my right, Herb Score. There is no real reason that I should be so amazed—Herb is the radio voice of the Cleveland Indians; he travels with the team and this, of course, is the airport. But he has existed in my mind's eye, since very early childhood, as an entirely different being; he is a certifiable baseball great—not a Hall of Famer, true—but a mythical figure of hardly less standing. I couldn't have quite seen him play, I guess, but somehow, affixed in my very early consciousness are images of him—absorbed through half-heard conversations of my father and uncles, perhaps—or from news accounts. Herb Score: the most promising rookie since Feller. Cleveland's return to glory! Strikeout king and record holder. Hit in the eye by a line drive. Holes drilled in his skull to relieve the pressure. Narrow escape from death. No one ever knew what greatness he might have attained. Thus, seeing Herb Score waiting patiently, there on the curb is scarcely less surprising than it would be to see Napoleon or George



Washington, clad in a houndstooth suit with a London Fog trench coat. To my surprise, I suddenly realize that Herb is looking at me! Why in the world would he—

“WHEN I SIGNAL YOU TO STOP THE GODDAAMN CAB YOU STOP THE GODDAAMN, MOTHERFUCKING CAB—DO YOU HEAR ME?” It’s the starter screaming right into my taxi, his face the livid color of worms too long on the fishhook. The whole airport watches and listens as he unleashes another cesspool of abuse.

I consider jumping out and hollering right back at him, but it seems like I’ve been doing that my whole life with some straw-boss or the other, and I’d probably just get my lease torn up. So for some reason, I just smile—though nothing could feel more unnatural—and say, “Gosh, Dan, you’re getting awfully excited.”

I figure this will probably be like pouring gasoline on a fire, but he stops shaking and says, “You try moving fifty cabs in five minutes.”

I sit fuming and embarrassed for a minute, in front of the doors that the passengers come out of. Should I have raised hell right back at him?

“All The Twos”, the driver who always drives cab number two-twenty-two, leans in my window and says, “Whoa, man, what did y’all say to Daniel? He was hot enough to fuck!” Before I can answer, two men emerge from arrivals. “All The Twos” pops my trunk open for me and helps them put their bags back there.

To my delight, it turns out that they are Tom and Lucky, two of the Indians’ coaches. Fortunately, they were inside during the debacle. I manage to horn in on their conversation. “I didn’t even know we played this afternoon. Who won?”

“We did.”

“Who pitched?”

“Philco went seven and Candiotti finished,” answers Tom with a West Texas drawl.

“Did you,” I ask, “read the editorial by Dolgren”—a cynical sportswriter who has been around since the ice age—“a few days ago, where he said Phil was washed up?”

“Yeah,” says Lucky, “since then he’s been three and 0.”

“And with a two-hitter,” I say.

“Way-ell,” says Tom, “he’ll get to doin’ too good and they’ll have to trade him.”

“Ha, ha!”

The conversation turns to the recently proposed mandatory drug testing of professional athletes, which they both seem to approve of. I am too much in awe of these guys, who have forgotten more about baseball than I’ll ever know, to take issue with them. But I point out that I feel it is hypocrisy for the owners to institute such testing, while at the same time sending the players out onto artificial turf, which is just as damaging and career-threatening. With this, they agree.

Like me, they are appalled at the notion, held by the mayor and a few other vandals, that the team should abandon its historic, eighty-thousand-seat coliseum of a stadium on the lake, for a dome.

“Can you believe,” I ask, “that the federal government tried to declare it a national monument and these geniuses refused, ‘cause they’re thinking about tearing it down?”

“Incredible,” they agree. “All to make a few fast bucks for a few developers.”

I try prying a bit of inside information about our second baseman, who’s been AWOL from a couple of recent games, for what the brass is calling personal problems. They aren’t talking about this, though. I drop them at the Hollenden Hotel, refraining from asking for autographs.

## 8 — BAD BEHAVIOR

It is now three-fifteen in the afternoon, on an off day. I am sitting in a driveway next to a farmhouse, which eighty years ago sat alone in expansive fields. Now it sits on a small wedge of land, located on a corner formed by the intersection of a main street and a side street. A large church is next door. It seems too bad, somehow, when a beautiful house is demeaned by being on a piece of land that is too small. Inside, the sound of power tools compete with a blaring radio.

My car won't start. For about three weeks it's been having problems turning over, once it gets hot. I haven't had it checked out and fixed at one of the many, nearby service stations for three reasons: 1.) I can't remember when I've had a day that I could possibly be without it. 2.) My neurotic subconscious is afraid it will cost hundreds. 3.) I was just up at the South Euclid City Court where I had to choke up two-hundred and forty-five dollars to keep myself out of jail; this left me with exactly five dollars to my name. I stopped at the aquarium store and spent that money on the two young firemouth cichlids—a brilliant species of territorial fish from the Yucatan—that are sitting next to me in a plastic bag filled with water and a diminishing supply of compressed oxygen. They'll go into the aquarium that I scavenged the other day. In any case, I now have no money to pay a mechanic.

Here comes Possum to get something from his van. I should go in and work with him for a couple of hours to let my spark plugs dry out. He bought the old house as an investment; he is fixing it up to sell. I ask him for a jump. As we hook up the cables, he points out that I really should replace the missing plate which bolts over the air filter and carb, or dirt will get into my engine. "This is a perfectly good car," he says. "You don't want to fuck it up. Stop at the junkyard and get one. It'll probably only cost four or five bucks."

“You’re right—I will,” I reply—guiltily reflecting that the same sum I’ve just squandered on the fish would have done it. I’m hopeless, I guess. Some people keep their auto in tip-top shape and their accident insurance all paid up. I doubt if such a person could ever understand me and my ilk. I’m doing well if I even have a license plate on my car.

When I went in to drive four days ago, I was informed that I couldn’t have a cab. It had somehow come to Cleveland Cab’s attention that in South Euclid, a largely defoliated Levittown, there existed a warrant for my arrest. I guessed, at first, that someone—perhaps a cop—had reported my cab’s number for something. Sometimes drivers are served with violations, after the supposed incident. But a warrant? As it turned out, I’d forgotten about a ticket I’d received, while driving some forerunner of the Rustbucket, three winters ago. It was for not having a license plate. I didn’t remember a thing about it, but there at their courthouse, I found that they had a copy of it with my signature on it. It was plausible; I had owned a car whose back bumper kept falling off. I nearly had a seizure when they told me that I’d have to post bond for two hundred and fifteen dollars to keep from going to jail. Two-hundred and fifty bucks was all I’d managed to save since I’d come back to town and repaid Lucy what she’d loaned me, and Justin his two-hundred. Also, Possum and I had just paid off some whopping heating bills accrued in February and March. Not having been in an American courthouse for a while, I’d paid up, thinking, with naiveté, that I’d get most of it back after appearing in court that afternoon and paying a reasonable fine. The original ticket had been for fifteen dollars.

So it was with chagrin that I heard the judge begin the session with justifying oratory—directed at us—the assembled felons, chiselers, and dead-beats. The central theme of the speech was how much is spent on tracking down those who fail to pay their fines.

The first case involved a pitiable old couple who’d owned their property, probably since South Euclid had been meadows and pastures. Sheaves of ordinance violations were read: old cars in

the back yard, unmown lawns, cracked sidewalks, etc., etc.—thousands and thousands of dollars of repairs. In Appalachian accent, the wife tried to cite medical problems, but King Solomon showed them the same amount of mercy that he was to show anybody else appearing in his court, who wasn't bald and wearing glasses like his, or who wasn't accompanied by a lawyer. Luckily, I suppose, there were enough cases before mine, that I figured out that I wasn't gonna get any of my dough back; I'd resigned myself to it by the time it was my turn.

The excuse he used, for keeping it all, was “contempt of court”, which I had learned was a term applied in this kangaroo set-up, for not paying one's ticket. But when he sentenced me to pay an additional forty dollars in court costs and to spend four days in jail—which he benevolently would allow me the option of working off in a community service “volunteer” program—I knew the guy was an obsessed lunatic. I limited my reply to a sullen glare, vowing inwardly to have my revenge through other channels.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's Friday night. Larry Dolinsky and Nitro, another old school buddy, drop by. They, like me, have grown kind of squaresville in some ways, but some of the things which I recall from our rollicking days of youth would scandalize a whore. We decide to go to the Club Illusion, which is a kind of comfortably tacky lounge, just a couple of blocks down Euclid. Its name, I guess, is derived from the mirrors which plate all the walls, making the place seem bigger. Being Friday night, it is very crowded. We find three stools at the end of the bar. We each have a beer, and Nitro tells us about his job and his wife and kids. Soon the place has gotten so packed, that we can't get the attention of the bartender; so I make my way to the other end of the bar to try to get us three more. Suddenly a girl I've never seen starts trying to literally wrench my wallet out of

my hands. She is young and slightly plump, with a very pouty lower lip. She has straight dark hair that falls just lower than her jaw; she is, I think, quite pretty. It takes me a couple of seconds to realize that she is very inebriated and that like a spoiled child wanting candy is demanding that I buy her a drink. I glance back down the bar at Larry and Nitro, who are watching, amused. I consider for a moment what lurid possibilities buying a drink for her might bring about. Because I'm being watched, however, and because I am not one who is favorably influenced by rude demands, I say to her, "No, I will not buy you a drink. Who do you think you're talking to, anyway?" To my astonishment, she immediately bursts into tears and begins carrying on in some sort of incomprehensible language that is partly baby talk, and partly of some white trash dialect.

"Now looka he done to Rhonda. I knew you ditn't like her, just like my sister and cousins ditn't like her, and I already committed suicide three times—"

I find this alarming and exhort her in what I hope is a kind-sounding voice to please calm down. In response, however, she snatches from the bar a plastic cup, three-quarters filled with icy liquid, and flings it towards some crowded tables across the way.

"Here now, you stop that!" I shout. She looks at me for a second or two, then throws back her head and begins to laugh. She hardly does begin, though, because a fist belonging to a tough-looking black girl in a stained sweater, lands with a rattling clout on the side of her head. She immediately begins crying and shouting again, but an apparent friend of her attacker deals a crippling kick to her shin with a high-heeled shoe. The escorts of these babes have ominously glided into the picture as well.

At some point, about a millisecond or so after the first punch, I, possibly out of some suicidal instinct, have positioned myself between my "date" and her platoon of adversaries. While shielding her from more blows, I begin to move us through the indifferent crowd towards the

door, all the while saying things like: “She’s terribly sorry—she’s had a bit too much.

ALRIGHT! You’ve repaid her...come along—a cup of tea is what we’ll make you—OK!!

YOU’VE REPAID HER!... Awfully sorry, etc., etc.” At some point, I catch a fleeting glimpse of Larry and Nitro watching the TV—oblivious—or choosing to ignore my predicament.

Finally, we make it to the street, our fan club still with us. All my endeavors as a peacemaker are made a lot harder by the fact that my darling girl has continued, throughout it all, to yell things too childish to be believed.

Luckily for me, the guys turn out to be reasonable enough and are doing their best to get their chicks back inside. At last, we are alone. “Come,” I say, “I live right around the corner. We’ll have some coffee and put ice on your eye.” She follows docilely.

“I’m Jack,” I say. “What’s your name?”

“Rhonda.”

“Oh, yeah. Rhonda La Rhonda.” She giggles like mud squishing between your toes. She tells me that she lives a few blocks away at a place I know to be some sort of Job Corps residence, for rootless young people. We pass the Euclid Tavern. “I play the piano, Rhonda. My band and I are playing at this place Thursday night. You should come by.”

“I ain’t allowed in there no more. These two niggers? They wanted me ‘n my friend Lily to go outside with ‘em? But they looked like a couple of rape artists to me, so I threw an ashtray at one, and it busted the jukebox. Now they won’t let us in.”

We are home. We climb the front stairs and I unlock the door. Daphne is jumping up and down like a kangaroo. “Ooh, da buppy! Hi buppy!” she says, delightedly, petting her on the nose. I put on the kettle while she chatters about the paintings and other oddities.

“Do you want tea or coffee?”

“I want some of this.” I poke my head out of the kitchen. She’s got a decanter of Possum’s Amaretto.

“Drink some tea first and see how you feel.”

“I feel fine,” she says, cracking the seal on the liquor and guzzling it like Pepsi.

“My piano’s in my room,” I say, hoping to distract her. “I’ll play you a song I’m working on.”

I lead her down the hall. She takes her coat off and sits down on the hassock in front of my aquarium, as wide-eyed as an angelfish. Although it hadn’t been my intention at first, something about the way her lipstick is smeared and the way her dress has ridden up on her tender white legs, makes me want her badly. It’s not that I am only attracted to females of low intelligence; I am also easily mesmerized by ones with lots of brains. Recently, I’ve been prepared to take whatever I can get.

So I pour myself a cup of the expensive hooch, slop it down, and uncork a boozy dose of that most potent of aphrodisiacs: Chopin.

The blood is pounding in my ears as I clumsily sit down—half beside her, half on her— and kiss her under her ear. To my unspeakable rapture, she closes her eyes and brushes her heavy, petulant lips against my own. Yoobawaza! Her small tongue flicks at mine. I am gentle. I am—  
“Ouch!” She bit me! “Cut that out, you!” The little she-devil giggles like farts bubbling up in a bathtub.

We lock again. I knead at her tender thighs. She grinds her spongy breasts against me. She plays with the hair behind my ears—“OUCH, DAMN IT! I THINK I’M BLEEDING! IF YOU BITE ME LIKE THAT AGAIN, I’LL SPANK YOU!”

“Will you?”

“Yes!”

“Rhonda wants a spanking! Rhonda been bad!”



“Well, then—take off your dress.” Mother of God! I feel like I’m in a porno movie!

I’ve encountered kinky tendencies before, but usually in women much older than this nymph.

Ooo, la la! She wiggles out of the tight gown.

“No fair,” she says, unbuttoning my shirt and nibbling at my pink nipples. “I just gotta, I gotta—where’s your bathroom?”

“Second door down the hall.” As soon as she’s out of the room, I start fumbling frantically through my things, hoping to find a condom. Rats! I thought I had some. Oh, well, I can always—Wait! Victor’s as phobic as Howard Hughes about these things. He’ll have a whole box! Half-dressed, I tear through the living and dining rooms, past poor bewildered Daphne, to Possum’s room. Good! It’s unlocked! Here! I’ll just—

“WHAWLP!”

“Oh, no!”

“HOOAWLP!” come the unmistakable sounds from the bathroom next door. It can’t be! She’s throwing up! My tawdry fantasia!

“Rhonda! Are you OK? Rhonda? Oh, no!” She’s upchucked all over Possum’s expensive battery charger from Sears, which I’ve got hooked up to the battery from the Rustbucket. It’s crackling and sputtering blue ozone vapor from the copious vomit which has poured in through the vents on top! Just as I reach the plug, it gives a final pop and expires.

Daphne barks. There are voices.

“Hey!” yells Possum from the dining room. “Where’s my eighteen-dollar bottle of Amaretto? Who’s been in my room?”

“Rhonda!” I say. “Are you alright?”

She smiles at me from the edge of the tub. “Did you ever wonder if fish could fly in the air, but that their wings were taken away during the ice age?”

## 9 — PUSHIN' THAT HACK

“Where did you go with that *thing* last night?” Dolinsky asks the following noon in the cab garage. He’s filling out his lease.

I make him—and several nosey cabbies—privy to most of what had transpired.

“...so after I finally got the john mopped up, and Possum and Helen calmed down—”

“Helen was with Possum? Ho, ho!” Helen is Possum’s older sister, an engineer for TRW.

“Yeah, they’d been at the movies. When she interrogated Rhonda and found out a little bit about her, she seemed to think this made me some sort of a fiend or monster—”

“Ha, ha.”

“...so I wound up taking her home.”

“What!? You just took her home?” Apparently, the cabbies find this to be a very unsatisfactory ending; most of them turn away, cursing and muttering.

Today is the first time that I’ve driven on a Saturday. Saturdays nights are usually good for the band to play, and I try to drive Sundays ‘cause the airport is good.

Business is awful. The board has been clear, nearly the whole time since I’ve been out. I’ve only taken in four dollars in two hours.

“Adelbert,” squawks the box.

“059, Adelbert.”

“059... go to Lakeside, Old Main, for Bill.” Down to the hospital, I go. Bill proves to have some sort of disease or palsy that kind of causes him to hop along on his tiptoes. I carry his things to his back porch for him. Now I’ve got maybe seven dollars, and I’ve been out for three hours.

“Severance,” rasps the radio.

“059, Severance!”

“059... go to Diamond’s Restaurant and pick up Mrs. Weintraub.”

“Diamond’s for Weintraub,” I reply sulkily.

“Check, and thank you, driver.” The dispatchers seem to become the most maddeningly polite when the drivers are dying. Sure, they’re happy. They’ve got no phones to answer.

The routine with Mrs. Weintraub is long-established. First, the hapless driver spends five minutes waiting for her to come out. Next, not remembering, or choosing not to remember that she has ridden in his cab on several previous occasions, she proceeds to explain to him exactly what directions must be followed to her apartment building—exactly six-tenths of a mile away. He follows her instructions to the letter. He pulls into her driveway, gritting his teeth for the inevitable. Like a doomed Hamlet, he delivers his lines: “Two dollars and fifteen cents, please.”

Like an addled Ophelia, she seals his fate: “Wh...why, it’s never been more than a dollar and ninety-five cents before—”

“Mrs. Weintraub,” he ejaculates, “it’s never *been* a dollar and ninety-five cents before! Not with me driving.” I know that by pointing this out, I am only missing out on a twenty-cent tip; maybe this is her motive. So the release that I gain through the ensuing squabble seems worth it. Ever since she has gotten in, I’ve had my ear on the radio and my hand on the mike; so no time is being wasted, as both parties bitch merrily away. Some minutes of this and another five of door-holding follow. With passengers this old it’s not just a matter of politeness; if the driver doesn’t get out and help, they never will leave the cab! It is, of course, only at this point that a promising Fairmount 20 mockingly belches out of the radio. The call is snatched up and assigned before I can drop the groceries and leap. Bah!

After buying lunch and flashlight batteries, I discover that I have only two dollars and sixty cents to show for about four hours of work. The choice seems clear—start takin’ orders in the ghetto or forget it. I can’t understand it. I’ve always heard that Saturdays were pretty good.

So I take a “Hough 10” and wind up waiting at 1532 Ansel Road, in front of a crumbling building. I ask the dispatcher to please telephone and “call ‘em out.” All the cab’s doors are locked, and the windows are rolled up because it’s such a dangerous neighborhood; it’s hot enough to roast an ox. Why are they taking so long? I’m gonna throw the meter; I’m sick of this. I honk the horn again. I’m about fed up. Here she comes, a big old lady with kids.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“I had to throw the meter—It only went up forty cents, so far.”

“You had to do what?”

“I had to throw the meter.”

“FO’ WHAT?”

“For waiting time.”

“AH TOLD HER WHEN AH CALLED! SHE KNOW THE ELEVATOR DON’T WORK  
HEAH! AH RIDE THIS CAB EVERYDAY! AH HAVE TO COME ALL THE WAY, FROM  
THE THIRD FLO’ DOWN!”

I’m too worn out to argue. “Alright, alright.” I restart the meter. It’s not simply that I am a tightwad who enjoys badgering the poor and elderly for pennies. While I’m capable of being as cheap as the next guy, it isn’t the small change that makes us do it. It’s mainly to try to keep the general attitude of the public, towards cab drivers, respectful. Lots of times while waiting five or ten minutes for somebody, we’ll hear and be unable to answer trips that could save our whole day. We can’t try for them because we don’t know where the passenger that we’re waiting for will be headed. I drop her off.

“Hough 10,” the radio croaks again.

“059, Hough 10,” I answer, thinking that this one has gotta be a hospital—there are several in the area. It isn’t. Now I’m back on Ansel in the projects—not the worst in the city by a long shot—I’d never drive a cab again before I picked up somebody from one of them, but bad enough. I have some trouble locating the right address. Finally, I find the place. This poor old lady has some kind of affliction—not elephantiasis, but perhaps something similar—which has given her a huge rump on an otherwise fairly normal body. Of course, it takes her eons to get in and out, like every other fare I’ve had today; but by this time I’m resigned.

“Hough 10,” I hear once more as I’m delivering her around the corner. I try once again, realizing that I’ve heard no other calls on the whole east side of the city in the past hour. I am told to go to five-ten Newton, number six-o-seven. I thought I knew every street in the area, but I’ve never heard of this one. I find it on the map. When I get there, it looks like a little, cobbled street in Europe. A small girl comes out.

“She be right down,” she says. Good, it’s a she, I reflect automatically. I wait a few minutes. How come they always say they’ll be right out and then they never are? How come they always make you wait? Oh, Christ, it’s a male. Should I floor it? Too late. He wants to go to Shaker Square.

“How’s business?” he asks, just like a man once asked me, before shoving a chrome-plated cannon up my nose while I’d been selling black-velvet paintings in an abandoned lot, years ago.

“Terrible. I ain’t made jack-shit all day,” I quickly respond, hoping to convince him that I’m not worth sticking up. All the way up to Shaker Square, I watch the rearview mirror, waiting for him to whip out a piece. It’s a wonder I don’t drive off the road. I miss a turn and wind up charging him less than I should have, ‘cause I’m so shook. I can’t take it.

I shoot down to Coventry, pull up in front of the deli, turn off the engine and close my eyes.

“Hey, kid—wanna buy some drugs?” It’s Roscoe.

“I never allow any foreign substances to enter into the temple that is my body,” I quip.

“Well, what do you eat?”

“Hough 10,” the radio vomits.

“I eat only good books.”

“Hough 10.”

“You’d better answer the radio,” says Roscoe.

“Naw, I’ve been gettin’ the run around all day, drivin’ down there, and I—”

“354?” the dispatcher asks another driver. “Did you want the Hough 10? OK, take it down to the VA Hospital for Collins, and take the party to (the distant town of) Kent.”

“What’s wrong?” says Roscoe. “Calm down! Don’t have a stroke! What’s wrong? You’ll break the radio!”

## 10 — SATAN INCARNATE

Today I stayed in bed till two-thirty, exactly like a sloth. If my father were to be told that one of his sons had become a needle freak, a hophead, or a whoremonger, none of these things would upset him more than to know that he had raised a sloth. Dad, all his life, has been up with the sun. I like to see the sunrise—and I often do—but just long enough to let out the dog, take a leak, and admire the rosy light for about a minute before returning to bed. Or, on other favorite occasions, when I haven't slept at all, following an exhausting tryst of many hours with that most seductive and elusive enchantress—the piano. Alternately, we fight and fuck. She will, perhaps, begin our encounter as a taciturn and abusive strumpet, refusing her notes like kisses. It is sometimes only after hours of my coaxing, thrashing, and pleading that she will allow me to love her. On rare nights divine, she might make love to me. Following these rapturous occasions, the piano and I, like man and woman, may give birth to that most miraculous and beguiling cherub—a song. A song— perhaps not perfect—as no child can be, except in the adoring eyes of its parents. Still, somehow truly different from any other child or song that has ever been conceived. It is after these sorts of nights that I best love to have breakfast and a little coffee with lots of milk, as the sun rises, followed by a hot bath, then hours of sleep—phone unplugged—blankets over the windows.

This, however, is not what kept me up until the small hours last night. At about midnight, Lucy began to feel her baby show an interest in the outside world. David and I were more frenzied than she; we were both quivering tremblers by four a.m. when our tiny elf blinked smugly at us from behind the glass. Some newborn babies don't seem to show much gender, but ours is the essence of femininity, and her name is Lark.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now it's eight o'clock in the morning; I'm in a semi-conscious state at the VA (Veteran's Administration) Hospital. I've come in, to work off the second of my four days of court-ordered community service, stemming from the missing license plate.

The warrant on me was expunged right after my court appearance, so I've been able to drive, but I've had to waste one day a week playing this game. It's not been completely uninteresting, and it would even be enjoyable, in some ways, were it not for the bitter bile of injustice within me. Had I known where it was all headed, I think I would have just kept my money and cleared out of the state. I'm lucky I'm single; if I were a young married man with kids, like some of the guys I've met on this detail, and if I were making low wages at a job where I was supposed to be present every day, this sentence would have cost me my employment and what little security my family had.

Today they've assigned me to the escort department. We're all wearing red smocks with gold patches that say, VOLUNTEER. The nice lady in charge of the department, who really is a volunteer, answers the phone every few minutes or so and sends one of us off to wheel a patient on a gurney or in a wheelchair from one part of the mammoth hospital to another. Usually, we're going to, or from, Physical Therapy, or X-ray or some such place. This hospital is a heavy place for me since I used to come here to visit my brother, who wound up in the Psych. Ward for a while, following his discharge from the navy in the sixties.

It's early, and the phone is still pretty quiet, so we sip coffee and read the newspapers. I am a bit more relaxed in my position because I know one of my co-workers, Jimmy Harper, from way back when. Jimmy was a professional, light-weight boxer. He used to hang out at the Brick Cottage, where my little band played sometimes, years ago. It was kind of a rough place, and we'd been little more than kids. He'd always been supportive and protective of us. I don't know



under what circumstances he's come to be here, and I don't ask. For all I know he might be a real volunteer, but I sort of doubt it.

On the radio, Jerry Vee, the world's sickest and most degrading drive-time deejay ever, is baiting and abusing his callers. A man with a Hillbilly accent is on the line. He's called in to discuss crime on the near West Side. Before he can get started, though, asshole characteristically breaks in.

"Wait," says Jerry, dripping venom. "I can tell by your voice that YOU are a HOMO Sapiens."

"What?—"

"I said that I can tell that *you* are a limp-wristed, *Homo Sapiens*—"

"Why—"

"—and you probably go to the baths on West Third and spread diseases to all of us decent folks, like all of you disgusting Homo Sapiens do!"

"Why, Jerry Vee, I am not no Homo Sapien! I've been married for twenty years, and I resent your—"

But Jerry has cut to a car commercial. Mrs. Biggs clucks and shakes her head. "Ah declare, that may-an."

"Ah cold-cocked that foo' one time," says Jimmy.

"What?"

"Ah dropped him with one right to his jaw"—Jimmy's a southpaw; would that mean he'd used his jab? Or his invisible uppercut?—"fo' talkin' his racial sheeit. Ah told him Ah was goin' to if he didn't quit and Ah did—right outside the radio station."

I reflect that he had probably had done just as he said. The phone rings. Mrs. Biggs writes down a trip on a little form. "Mistah Ailbon," she says, handing it to me, "please take this may-an from ward seven-o-seven down to surgery." Off I go.

My mission completed, I return to the Escorts Office thinking to myself that this week my job is easy compared to last week's when I'd been put to moving heavy filing cabinets. I walk back in through the door and my veins freeze. There, in one of the chairs, in a too small, red smock, sits Satan.

Apparently, his devil's luck has not allowed Oliver Price to remain in prison for long. I stop in my tracks. He gets up, beaming like the sun, and extends a hand. "Why Jackie," he says, with all the con'pone sweetness of Huck Finn's Jim. "How have y'all been?" I hesitantly step towards him, but little Jimmy jumps between us.

"Jack been doin' just fahn, thank you, and he don' need to conso'te with the sorry lahks of you!"

Oliver fixes his now frozen smile on Jimmy. "One day it's gonna be y'all who's the sorry one, Jimmy Harper."

"I'll put you right in Hell, where you belong, Price," says Jimmy.

"Mistah Price," says Mrs. Biggs, holding out to him a hastily written slip of paper, "Ah believe they'll be needen' you down in Physical Therapy today...MISTAH PRICE!"

"Yes, Missus Biggs," he says without taking his eyes off Jimmy, "I'm goin'. Yo' sorry day might be comin' real soon Jimmy Harper," he says. "Real soon."

## 11 — SQUANDERED SUNDAY

Like I've said, when I take Sundays off, I get bored and agitated. If I take a day off, on another day of the week, I might take care of business or go shopping. But Sundays, the options are fewer and more complex. One can watch the game with the boys and get stewed. Or, one can go somewhere worthwhile, such as a park or to the library, and be driven to distraction by femininas that are there. Or, one can stay home and be driven round the bend by femininas that are not there. Today, choosing from these options keeps me in bed till eleven, curtains sinfully drawn.

I finally crawl out, with vague thoughts of procuring cards for my niece and for my dad, who have birthdays coming up. It is a rainy day and my windshield wipers aren't working well.

After buying the cards, I am drawn into a cliquish dram-shop near Shaker Square. I am walking innocently by and decide to just peek in. I am wearing a white shirt and my frock coat from London; I know that I am looking about as good, for me, as is possible. I intended to drink just one draft beer at the reasonable price of a dollar; but being Sunday, happy hour is in effect—the cost is only fifty cents. So I decide to have another before going on about my affairs. I sit, contentedly sipping, along with the other goons, looking at some basketball playoff game as if we know or care who is playing. If it really mattered, we probably would be with the noisy boobs who are hollering at the widescreen TV in the back room.

I am thinking about calling Lucy and asking her for her friend Ruthie's phone number. She is, I understand, home from school for vacation; but I am surprised to hear my own voice say: "Hello," when a delicious-looking girl, who has been drinking wine with a guy down the bar, spins herself towards me, on her stool. He has gone, presumably, to the john or to the phone.

"What's this?" she asks, tipsily grabbing at the bag which is in my jacket pocket.

"Birthday cards. Don't hurt them."

“Are you Irish?” she asks, looking meltingly into my eyes.

“No, I’m Scottish, at least on my mother’s side,” I answer regretfully, expecting maybe to have wine poured on me.

“Ooooh!” she squeals excitedly. “That’s the same thing!” I quickly agree that being Scottish is, indeed, one and the same as being Irish. I go on to tell her many other things about myself, herself, and the world, which would be likely to cause anybody overhearing to become violently ill.

Throughout this odious chatter, she is, to my delight, becoming more and more touchy—tossing with the ring that I wear on a chain around my neck. When her chump reappears, I sweep him into our conversation as if I am a regular guy instead of a poisonous viper. (I am entitled to call him a chump, being a grandmaster, myself.)

Soon, I deem it prudent to retreat—to think of an ingenious and subtle plan that will carry the day. I realize—like a West Point general—that with the battlefield laid out as it is, there really is only one plan. It is as brilliant as the Sicilian Variation that Bobby Fischer used to check Spassky, at the Reykjavik World Championship. The scheme has two phases. First, I march myself to the rear bar and order a Bloody Mary—it is still morning, after all. Then, with this concoction in hand, I proceed to stairs leading to the ladies’ room, where I judge she must sooner or later—quite possibly sooner—travel. At that point, I feel sure that the right thing to say will occur to me.

I am correct because soon she comes tripping along, wide-eyed. By now she knows not only my name but the story of my whole life, nearly. I seize her by the hand. “I have to go home and walk my dog,” I lie brazenly. “It’s been hours since she’s been out. She’s very sweet; won’t you come and meet her?”

“Why I’d love to,” she lilts, teetering towards me, “but I couldn’t possibly leave Allen. I mean, he’s just a friend from work, but his mother’s sick and—”

We have descended the stairs to the lower part of the place, which is supposed to have a sort of wine cellar ambiance. No one is down here and I lead her to a red upholstered booth. We sit and I grab a handful of her long chestnut tresses and pull her over next to me. Her little baby’s lips suck at my own like a nursing child. I pile her luxuriant hair on top of her head and hold it up there out of my way as I lick and kiss her ears...her neck...her throat. I do this, for a minute or two, then allow her to unbutton and unzip us both. Suddenly, a herd of hooting jocks thunders down the stairs. She presses herself to me, giggling. Her sweater is still covering her back, and they pass right by us on their way to the dartboards.

“I’ll pull my ride up ‘round front,” I say. “It’s the one that looks like a wrecked car.” She laughs delightedly. “I’ll be right out, my love,” she says. “I’ll just tell Allen.”

I fly up the stairs and down the street to my car. I’m so horny I feel as if a red hot poker has been shoved up my butt. I climb in and turn the key. Click, click, goes the solenoid. “Whore!” I shout, scrambling out and throwing up the hood. With my bare hands, I wrench and twist at the caustic battery cables. I try again. The thing fires up; I jerk it into reverse which causes the hood to slam down on its own. I gun it down the road to the bar, where I double-park across the street.

My heart is throbbing like it’s going to burst. My hands are burning from battery acid, and I fumble around in the back seat for a canteen of water I thought was there. Here it is. I flood my stinging hands, rueful that such delicate instruments should be treated this way. I fall back in my seat panting. What’s keeping her? Maybe she’s having a hard time convincing the guy to let her go. Oh, well, I don’t blame him. She’s—Wait! Doesn’t this place have a back door? How could I be such a weener! I leap from my car and stand, biting a fingernail bloody, as I wait for a procession of traffic to pass. Now! Across the street, through the front doors, and down the bar I

push. Here are their stools—empty! Two unfinished glasses are still on the bar. I shove through the crowded back room with the big TV screen, and on out the exit, just in time to see a gleaming German sedan pull out. Has this really happened? The look of love was in her eyes! I feel physically ill. Where did it go wrong? Why was I born?

## 12 — PRECIOUS TIME FOR LOW WAGES

I wake up and it's cold and raining, so here I go to drive a cab. First I answer a Fairmont 20 and get this old skinflint bastard from the old country, up at Corky and Lenny's restaurant. I help the old goat load his groceries into the cab.

"Every time you hit a bump the meter clicks," he whines, like the cab's power steering belt, as we drive along a newly paved boulevard to his fancy home in Beachwood. I unload the bags in hail and carry them to his porch, for which he gives me zilch for a tip. I didn't even throw the meter while I was waiting for him and loading him up. I should raise Cain, but I just walk away muttering.

So I poke around for a while and get a call for a lady in a fur coat, who's going downtown; the fare is fifteen dollars. I almost drop a ball loading and unloading her heavy suitcases. She doesn't give much of a tip either but tells me that she needs a cab to take her to the airport in an hour and a half. So like a bonehead, I say sure, and I do some shopping, eat lunch, and kill some time. I get back at least ten minutes early, and she never shows up. I wait a while longer, then drive off gnashing my teeth. When will I ever learn to listen to the old pooperoos who've told me a thousand times not to count on a "lockup" unless it's somebody you drive regularly?

\* \* \* \* \*

Now it's late; I've been out twelve hours, and I'm only thirty dollars over my lease. I'm stuck at the airport in a long line of taxis which are going nowhere. My stomach is a knot of dough from the lousy pizza I've been living on, out here. My balls itch. My own smells offend me. My young manhood passes fleetingly as I sell precious time for low wages.

I go inside. I pick up the courtesy phone by the luggage carousels and ring airport information.

I ask the sugary voice that answers, “Excuse me, when is the next flight due, please?”

“I beg your pardon?” she asks.

“When is the next flight due in?”

“When is the next flight due in?” Obviously, my question does not fit with the program.

“Yes, please.”

“On what airline?!” she huffs and puffs as if I were asking her bra size.

“Any airline,” I respond.

“Do you mind me asking why you want to know?” she sputters contemptuously. She’s figured out that I’m a cabby.

“Yes, I do,” I reply, slamming down the phone. The rude thing.



## 13 — WALKIN' IN THE SAND

It is Sunday. Lucy leaves the baby with David, and we drive out to Mentor Headlands Beach. It's a lovely place with sand dunes and a long rocky pier with a little lighthouse way out at the end. There also is a bird refuge which was always Janie's and my favorite place. I recall a day two summers ago. It was very much like today, with a light breeze, clouds, and perhaps this same pair of sandpipers that run before us, along the waves.

In the course of my generally small-time show-biz career, on those rare occasions when the critics have been so short of carrion that they've been compelled to turn their ghoulish attention my way, I've usually gotten off lightly. Maybe this is because, with me, they've never had to run the risk of writing something nice about someone or something that is already an unqualified success—something critics hate doing. For whatever reasons, my little recordings and shows have usually done well in the papers.

That summer, we had released our latest gem. It was an EP disc with five songs from a one-act operetta. The words and music were by Justin and me—there was little doubt that it was the best thing we'd ever done. It played on the jukeboxes and college radio stations all the time, but being a Justin Brumfield Production rather than that of a big label, it was off-limits to the commercial stations except, occasionally, late at night.

Justin, through his usual contrivances, had gotten the record some airplay in New York and into some stores there, too. We'd gone over and played a couple of gigs that spring. Outdoing himself in who knows what whoredom, he'd even gotten the thing onto the reviewer's desk of a certain publication—thought of as absolute gospel in nuevo rock 'n roll. The result was not only the vilest write-up ever, but the worst parts singled me out.

I'd locked myself in my bedroom, unplugged the phone, and read P.G. Wodehouse novels and the *Who's Who in Baseball* anthology of batting averages for three days. I was not only humiliated but convinced that I was, like the article implied, a pitifully deluded zero.

I'd been ignoring the doorbell. But on the third day, it started ringing and wouldn't stop. I went over to the window, to yell "go away" at whoever it was and saw Janie on the steps. I went down and unlatched the door. She convinced me to get up. Ignoring my poisoned, self-obsessed spirit, she'd gotten me into her car and had driven me to this beach. There were Ruddy Turnstones and Cormorants. There were even Phalaropes—all the way from Africa—blown off course by a recent storm.

"Listen to this," I teased her, reading from the bird book. "Wilson's Phalarope has the distinction of being one of very few birds—or, for that matter—species in the entire animal kingdom, the female of which, is more beautifully colored than the male. I guess that must be taken to include humans?"

"No," she said; "obviously humans, like the Phalaropes, are exceptions." She took me to a little lakeside restaurant; we had fried perch and beer and chips. Soon I wasn't unhappy anymore; I felt that civilization could be swallowed up in an earthquake for all I cared—just so we weren't in it. We watched the sun set over the water and fell asleep on her sleeping bag. The next day, all of the poison was gone.

Today I can hardly bear to look at these same waves and seagulls without wondering how I could have let go of, much less hurt, a girl like her.

"What makes me such a rat?" I ask Lucy.

"You aren't a complete rat. Don't forget, a big part of the reason you left Janie was 'cause you weren't what she needed in the long run."

"Oh, yeah? How do you know?"

“It was obvious. You didn’t want to inflict yourself on her.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“I mean, you didn’t want to string her along indefinitely, even though you could have.”

I’m not very good company, so she takes me back home.

She drops me off, and I go down to the Euclid Tavern. It’s practically empty ‘cause it’s Sunday evening, which matches my mood. I fill up the jukebox with quarters, playing my favorite songs again and again. I whale away at what is maybe the last pinball machine on earth, which haunts a dark corner, like a wraith from my youth, having neither the good sense nor decency to just lie down and die.

*Maybe tomorrow, maybe today...*

*Maybe tomorrow, maybe someday...*

sings Chrissy Hynde, from Akron—over and over—poignant and shimmering.

After five *Rolling Rocks*, I ring Janie’s number; but her phone just rings—distant in the night, like the far-off bell of a ship lost on the edge of the sea.

## 14 — MIDSUMMER DREAMS

It seems the summer is passing too quickly, with my goals little realized. Sometimes, being here in Cleveland, playing the same old songs, at the same old dumps, makes me feel like I've gone nowhere in the last several geo-evolutionary eras or so. I've given one of the firemouths, who was bullying the entire fish tank, back to the aquarium store. His poor little mate, who was on the brink of starvation—he wouldn't let her eat—now is happy and free. Her concave belly is filling out; tranquility reigns. Sometimes I can just lie for hours watching my aquarium. Sometimes I do; then I start to feel guilty for wasting so much time. There are times that I wish I had absolutely no ambition. How happy I would be! Suppose I had no notions about “doing my part” or “living up to my potential”. I would worry only about eating fairly well while living in a reasonably nice, rented place. I would work at the easiest job I could find, which would earn me just enough to be comfortable. I'd dedicate my spare time to watching my fish, reading, or indulging any nonproductive fancy.

The early evening breeze comes through my window. The Rapid Transit clicks by. I doze and am away, with my white cloud mountain fish, high in a mountain rill.

RING! RING!

“Whoisit?”

“Mellow greetings, my son.”

“Justin! Where are you?”

“I am in a castle, far above the Rhine,” echoes his voice over the transatlantic rattle. “Monday begins the festival. The villagers are killing the goats. You can catch a plane to London and be here by Sunday night. We'll drink the purple grapes and dance on the tables. Jack, you'll love the girls here. They—”

“Where’s Polka Dot?”

“Polka Dot is here. Not here, actually—she’s gone down to the village. Oh, Jack—we’re getting married.”

“Married? When?”

“Who knows? I’ll tell you all about it when you get here.”

“Justin, there’s no way I can—”

“I’ll lend you the money.”

“I’m just now finally out of debt. Anyhow, the band is booked. The next place I go, when I leave Cleveland—in a few weeks, I hope—is gonna be to New Mexico to finish my house. Plant some trees, maybe.”

“Jack, I don’t know where you get to thinking you’d like living way out there. You aren’t the rose-covered cottage type. Or, *mesquite* covered, should I say?”

“How do you know? Anyhow, look at who’s getting married.”

“Yes, alas. Tell me what women you have been ravishing lately.”

“None, really.”

“Jack, have you ever noticed that when people use the word ‘really’ as that kind of trailing modifier, they usually mean the opposite of what they’ve stated? Now that I am a chained soul, you must tell me all of your amorous escapades, so that I may live them vicariously.”

“Well, last Thursday night, the Woolly Mammoths performed once again—”

“Where?”

“At the Euclid Tavern, of course. I guess we’re improving, ‘cause it was a good night for a change, with a small but receptive audience. Katie Joyce was there.”

“How is Katie?”

I reluctantly tell Justin about Katie’s sad experience.

“Oliver Price!” he shouts. “I remember him from the Coach House. He and a fellow named Nestor helped me score smack for Willie (a junkie-poet friend of Justin’s, who’d once visited from New York). He did that to Katie, did he? I’ll shoot his balls off. Where is he now, Jack?”

Justin’s ardor reminds me that he, for a characteristically brief interval, had been Katie Joyce’s lover after I’d introduced them. While it had lasted, it had looked like it might be the big “L” for both parties. Katie had moved out of her apartment, held a garage sale, given away her cats, etc. These things she had done at Justin’s encouragement so that she might move to New York to be with him. Soon, however, she’d discovered that he was off trysting with a previous lover whenever he could, and that had been the end of that.

Everybody who knew Katie was pretty sore, including Justin’s mother, who wouldn’t allow him into her house for weeks. I’d been mad too, but a little more forgiving, I guess, because I knew Justin well enough to know that he truly had thought he was in love.

“Where is Oliver now? I’ll fly home.”

“I don’t know where he is now, Justin. I followed him to a house one day after we’d both worked at the VA Hospital. But a couple of days later, the place became obviously vacant. It was on a street I drove down a lot, in the taxicab. By then he’d finished his community service stretch. I don’t think anybody knows where he is.”

“Why did you follow him?”

“I don’t know. I guess it was because when I met up with him at the VA I didn’t have the *huevos* to tell him what I thought. I should have tried to punch his lights out.”

“He’d have killed you.”

“Yeah, but I should have tried to anyhow—I just froze up. Christ, I think I was actually gonna let him shake my hand; but Jimmy Harper jumped in—”

“Jimmy Harper? Is that rascal still around? We must get together with him for a drink, the next time I’m in town! I have an idea, for a film about a boxer like him.”

“Well, you’ll see him, I’m sure, if you ever condescend to show your syphilitic ass around here. I’ve got him running the band’s sound system.”

“Really? What about Frankie?”

“I fired Frankie, but he keeps showing up anyhow. Jimmy’s in charge, though. He’s really good, and he’s a reformed alcoholic, so—”

“Doesn’t he know where Oliver is?”

“He hasn’t got a clue. He thinks he’s left town. He knew Oliver when they were kids.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. He says his father and mother were honest and decent people; that Oliver was just a sort of a freak personality—born without a conscience.”

“Undoubtedly. So how is Katie doing, now? Did you warm your wiener in her bun? Is that who you said you’ve been ravishing?”

“No, you pond slime. I was telling you that Katie had this woman with her, from this advertising firm where she’s been working. The dim lights of the Euclid Tavern made me think she might be about thirty-five or so, but I found out later that she was actually forty-one.”

“Indeed!”

“But she was pretty nice looking. In fact, as it turned out, she was Miss Cleveland once.”

“Ho, ho, Miss Cleveland?”

“Really! In her room, I saw this trophy with the body busted off and just the feet left; it was engraved ‘Miss Cleveland’—nineteen sixty-something.” I asked her how it got broken and she said she’d smashed it when she hadn’t become Miss Ohio. She had a pretty good sense of humor,

really. Still, I know I'm not getting any younger, but I don't think I ever dated a woman over forty. Eight years is just too much of an age difference.

"Polka Dot's sister, Ia, is twenty-one."

"There are exceptions to every rule!"

"I thought so."

"Anyhow, it was a raucous night and they all danced themselves silly throughout our cacophonous renditions. At one point, the Possum walked along the top of the bar during his guitar solo."

"Did he? Weren't the patrons' drinks upended?"

"Naw, he bought one of those wireless gizmos."

"Electric talent, ha, ha."

"Right. So I was gonna try to ask this damsel—Elaine was her name—for her phone number, but before I could, Katie wrote it down and gave it to me. So I could tell she was more or less interested."

"Hmmm—"

"So I drove a cab all night Friday, and when I woke up at one o'clock Saturday, I figured I'd give her a call. I didn't really remember much about her, but I was sure she liked me—and why not? For once I'd been the star instead of the goat. So I rang her up and told her I had to go meet somebody playing at Turkey Ridge that night—would she like to come along..."

"A lie, no doubt."

"Well, yeah. She seemed happy to hear from me, but she'd already bought tickets to some event, for that evening. But, she said that she and some friends, right that moment, had a psychic at her house—why didn't I come on over? So I drove out to her condo in Lyndhurst; here are all these suburban babes, mostly housewives, all gussied up and knocking down doubles. They've



got this big, fat psychic up in one of the bedrooms; for thirty bucks a pop he was telling their fortunes.”

“Did you get the fortune of your Godhead or of your peckerhead told?”

“Yuk, yuk. So Elaine told me about this charity thing that she was going to. Do you remember that socialite from Shaker Heights, who had all those dumb theme parties like the ‘death of casual sex’ party? It was in the Plain Dealer? Oh, well—they had a funeral with a coffin into which people placed items like negligees and diaphragms to be buried. This one was by the same broad—Elaine wanted me to go with her, but I said ‘no chance’, and she said she’d leave it early just to be with me. So I said I’d meet her at the Euclid Tavern. Then, being too cheap to choke up thirty bucks, I stuck around for a while, trying to pump Edgar Cayce for info about myself—mainly trying to figure out if he was for real or not—but I think he was on to me, so I split.”

“So did you meet Miss Cleveland?”

“Yeah, she shows up at the Euclid Tavern; we’re dancing and she’s got a grip on me like a hammerlock. Then she drives me back to her place where she plays these Olivia Newton-John albums for a while, as I gulp down Jim Beam on the rocks—trying to get in the mood for mating. But that wasn’t working—I just felt edgy. Then I remembered that one of the bartenders had given me a reefer way back on Thursday night and it was still in my wallet. So for some stupid reason, I asked her if she’d like to smoke it. She said no, but to feel free, so I did. I thought maybe it would calm me down a little, but it made me have a fit of honesty, instead.”

“Horrors!”

“Yeah, it made me feel like kind of a worm—”

“You were able to see clearly.”

“Well, I’d just met her and already she was saying that tomorrow we’d go for a walk in the woods and all this ghastly stuff. So I said: Listen, you seem to be, sort of a...uh...sensitive type of person—it’s only fair to warn you that I’m a very solitary individual...”

“Ho, ho...Bravo!”

“Anyhow, after I’d warned her I pounced, but I guess I warned her too well, ‘cause she just wanted to cuddle and neck. So we went to bed, and I tried to rip off her pajamas a few times before giving up to a bleary slumber. But at least I’d warned her. The next morning, I used the old back rub ploy, and I got her bra off—she had very nice breasts which I fondled for a while; then, while I was supposed to be giving her a back rub—”

“Hang on Jack, room service is here...” Bottles and coins clink far away. “OK, I’m back.”

“At any rate, it was obvious that she wasn’t gonna let me do the evil deed till the second date, which I haven’t called her for yet; but the thing is, even though I tried to explain to her that she couldn’t expect the same from me as she does all the other goons she goes out with, because I’m nothing like them, she can’t understand that.”

“And what makes you different from all the other goons?”

“The fact that I am an artist, of course! Dare you ask, you cur? I am married to my work!”

“Ha, ha!”

“No, I don’t know what my problem is. Oh, well. That psychic was also a sort of hypnotist. He regresses people and tells them about their former lives. But I have a new hypothesis about these Taylor Caldwell types who can remember their past incarnations; some of them, I’m told, can even speak fluently in dialects from antiquity, although I’ve never actually met one. My theory is that this is all due to a tiny sort of computer chip in the DNA, or wherever, that gives them access to the memory bank and, possibly, the personality of a distant ancestor. This explains the real reason behind the human sex drive and the overwhelming maternal or paternal instincts most

of us feel; because the only way that a person can ever hope to live again, and have their soul—or consciousness—return is if, through their sperm or egg they can put out this little imprint. Then maybe, through that, their soul can actually come back. A condom-wearing bachelor like you or I, or an old maid, or a homo, would be societal mutants anyhow...hence the word degenerate which means to not generate, if you think about it...”

“Ha, ha, wait...this is perfect for my new film!”

“Yeah, see, everybody thinks babies are cute and wants to have ‘em, but they don’t know why, and guys like vaginas and girls like penises, but they don’t know why that is either...but it’s really ‘cause they want to procreate, so they can live again. Your only hope for life after death is through your offspring—otherwise, there’s no chance. So when Justin sees a voluptuous eighteen-year-old candidate, he gets more excited than when he sees an old one, ‘cause it’s his best chance to get his DNA into some offspring, who might have kids, carrying the memory chip that will give him his only shot at life after death!”

“Have you managed to get any DNA successfully out there, then?”

“There’s one possibility. The mom denies it, but I’m not so sure.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Timing. I think she was trying to make one.”

“So. How is life at the Possum’s?”

“Oh! I forgot to tell you what happened!”

“Spew!”

“Well, as you know, Derrick is here and has been singing with us...”

“He must be getting more pussy than God, curse his East End bollocks.”

“He’s settled down to a basic dozen or so. Anyhow, we’ve learned some new songs at last...”

“Yours?”

“A couple. Like I said, last Thursday night we were really hot; Victor invited the whole club over at closing time. Katie and Miss Cleveland had split, but people from the symphony and from the art institute were there; also Possum’s sister and her hubby—a surprisingly classy crowd for once. There were lots of fancy rides up and down 117<sup>th</sup> Street...”

“Slumming.”

“Yeah. Anyhow, Possum cracks open brandy and whiskey, and musicians are jamming, and poets are spouting, posers are posing, and the big moon is out and shining onto the upstairs porch and into the front room—it’s the midsummer night’s dream. Well, all evening, there had been this rather large chick—she works at the art museum gift shop—her name is Nora—”

“Sink me! That Amazon! She’s been working there forever!”

“Yeah, she’s a big heifer. Possum had been blasting music, more and more loudly, over the KLH9 panels in the dining room. Nobody had really noticed that he’d disappeared. Well, those big panel speakers have transformers on the back that are kind of temperamental? Occasionally they short out when the volume is really up there. Apparently, that’s what happened, ‘cause suddenly the music goes dead and there’s this tremendous pounding noise coming from Possum’s bedroom. The hefty Nora, who’s obviously in there, is hollering: ‘Come on! Beat me with that big thing, you animal—I’ll bet it squirts like a fire hose!’ and all of this other inane sex talk—”

“Ha, ha!”

“Some of the guests were pretty scandalized, but I found it mirthful, myself. Victor keeps the brains to the hi-fi there in his room, so I couldn’t do anything—”

“Jack, I can see Polka Dot coming up the hill. I have to dress, but please hang tough over there—I’ve got a strong premonition that our ship is going to come in soon.”

“How can you say that? We haven’t written anything new in a year; I’m degenerating into a pitiful hack.”

“Patience, my brother. All will be revealed!”

## 15 — DRIVE FAST

I answer a Shore 15. A young lady comes out and says: “She just going round the corner—she’ll be out in a minute.” An old, old lady comes out. She has some kind of stiffening paralysis; right away she turns out to be a doozy.

“You don’t he’p peoples no mo’,” she crabs, even as I’m in the very act of holding the door for her. As I throw the meter she commands: “Drive fast! I ain’t got much money!” Before I can start to explain or consider whether it’s worth bothering to try to explain that the meter turns over at the same rate, regardless of our traveling speed, the cab starts sputtering and stalling out. She immediately starts moaning and stewing away at me as if it were my fault. I try to manipulate the gas pedal in such a manner as to reach our destination, which as predicted, is just around the block. No way am I gonna wait for a tow truck with this old harpy in the cab... I’ll push it there first. As I help her out, she fusses and fumes like a nasty old radiator. She takes eons just to count out a dollar and ninety-five cents in very small change. As I pull away she cranks, “Why don’t you he’p me to my do’?” Three other old ladies have just come out as I am turning the cab around. One asks, “Why didn’t you help her?”

“‘Cause she’s an old pill—that’s why,” I respond, unable to think of anything more clever.

The cab continues to stall, and I have to call the tow truck and am down for two hours.

Next, while I am waiting in the lobby of the Austin Company to take some wheel to the airport, I see a brochure with one of those ads to “adopt” a starving child from the famine of my choice. I start to think about the selfish life I lead. I guess I’ll start to put aside the sixty cents every day to do it. I just hope the operation is legitimate and that all the dough goes to the right place.

Downtown, I pick up a young burlesque dancer—I should say stripper—that’s about all they do anymore, I guess. Her skin is as white as porcelain, and she moves like she’s walking on soft

boiled eggs. She says she's from Minnesota. It's hard to imagine an "exotic" dancer coming from there, but before I can question her more, we've arrived. I pull up on the sidewalk, just for effect, and drive her around a parked truck—right down to the stage door.

"You cabbies are such wild drivers," she laughs.

"Beautiful women make me drive crazy," I answer—cleverly I hope. She tosses me a five and is gone.

Almost every single day at about four-thirty, a call will come out for a Fairmont 20. Usually, this is an excellent cab stand, and several drivers normally respond, but around this time it's a gamble because of Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith is a fragile little lady of about eighty years of age. She is very sweet and bird-like; however, every day at this time she rides from a nursing home on West St. James, where she visits her mother, who is close to one hundred, to her own apartment which is only two blocks away. So there's always a chance about this time of day that you'll get Mrs. Smith. Today, I do. "How is your mother today, Mrs. Smith?" I ask.

"The doctor says she'll never walk again," she answers sadly. "I hope you never have any kind of illness."

"Well, it's probably part of life," I say, thinking that if I live to be as old as Mrs. Smith—let alone her mother—I'll be doing well.

"Do you think it is?" she asks with painful earnestness.

"Unless you're very lucky."

"Huh...yes, I guess you're right," she agrees as if I've said something very profound. I help her to her door.

Next, I pick up a character I've driven before. His name is Dorsey Fears, and he has to take cabs everywhere because he's had several DWI's. He went to Shaw High School, same as me. He was disastrously married to a Mafia Princess the last time I drove him. Now he tells me he's

been renting a room in Mayfield Heights, from a friend and his wife. Pulling out, I notice an old Jaguar in the backyard.

“Where did your buddy get the XKE?” I ask.

“It’s the broad’s—like most broads pick up everything else—who’d you fuck? Then they talk about how HARD they work.” We drive a little farther and he sees a woman waiting for the bus. “She’s kind of cute,” he muses. “Looks like she’s well taken care of. That’s what fuckin’ trips me out, ya know? Fuckin’ whores tryin’ to act like they’re not really whores. I mean what’s the difference between you and a broad who works Prospect? ‘Cause you got a ring on your finger and a guy’s putting a roof over your head, and clothes on your back, and food in your stomach, and all the spending money you want, and you don’t think you’re a whore. OK, well how do you distinguish between your price and the whore’s? Tell me how you distinguish it, ‘cause I’m always interested in learning, ha, ha, ‘cause I’m so ignorant, you know?”

“Hmmm,” I respond, thinking to myself that he’s possibly right but mistaken for not mentioning men.

“I just can’t handle the stupid shit all of the time, ya know?” I think he’s referring to his beloved ex-wife. “At least that’s the way I feel about it. I mean the constant shit. At least a kid learns. A dumb broad can’t never gonna learn.”

We drive a few more blocks. Now he says: “I can’t believe I hired three fuckin’ niggers the other day, and not one shows up. I hired them at canvassing, you know? They wanted jobs, and I explained to them how they could get a good crack at making some money, right?”

“What kind of canvassing?”

“Just knock on doors. They don’t have to bust their balls or nothin’.”

“For home repairs?” I think that’s his business.



“Yeah—the motherfuckers say OK. The guys are working minimum wage jobs. All they gotta do is pop one or two deals a week, and at the price tags I charge, you’d be fuckin’ rich. I don’t understand these fuckin’ people, they just...fucked up. Ya know?”

“Mmmm—”

“Why don’t you come to work for me?”

“Well, uh—”

\* \* \* \* \*

Now it’s pretty late; I’m out way after midnight, trying to make a half-decent profit over my lease. Our bass player is going to be away for a while—I need to ask Downsey if he can fill in for a couple of dates. So I park the hack outside of Peabody’s café on Lee Road, where he and Brendan play every Tuesday night. Everybody is leaving—I guess they’re through playing. I slide into the back room that is used as storage, and by the band, to change and tune their instruments. A rather giddy group of revelers including the club owner, some giggling girls, and Mario the drummer are consuming cobalt blue cocktails.

“Hey Mario,” I say. “I need to talk to Downsey—” I am interrupted by gales of laughter from the women, who are quite flushed and exuberant. Did I say something funny? Maybe it’s my cab company jacket and hat.

“Well, he’s back there Jack,” he says, indicating a closed door, “but why don’t you join us for a ‘volcano’? I’m sure he’ll be out soon.”

“Thanks,” I say, starting for the door, “but I’m working, and I’m double-parked. I just need to ask him something real quick.”

“Hey, I don’t know if you want to go in there—” he says, but I push on through the door.

In another room, that is stacked to the ceiling with beer and wine crates, there is a high round table with bar stools. A female, wearing a scanty leather outfit, sits facing away from me. Brendan and Downsey, who are at the sides of the table, sort of bent over, look up at me startled—like boys caught in the jam jar.

The girl, whose long hair is down in her face, turns some. As I walk nearer, I see that her breasts are spilling out of her open top, onto the table—oh, I get it—they’re actually whiffing coke off of this chick’s jugs! I’m not easily shocked, but I feel like a Methodist minister who finds that he has stumbled into one of the cities of the plain!

“Oh—er—hi Jack,” they stammer.

“I can see I’ve been playing at the wrong venues,” I say, hoping to hide my abashment while backing towards the door. “We don’t get these fringe bennies at the Euclid Tavern. Hey, call me, Downsey—if you want a couple of gigs. I’ve got a fare waiting...”

Somehow I get out of there. If Katie Joyce does not want to wish me good evening, then I guess that’s all right with me.

## 16 — SIN AND REDEMPTION

I wake up and it's one-thirty in the afternoon. My brain feels like a crusty, old, dried-up sponge; every bone in my body aches.

The phone rings. It's Lucy.

"Do you have a phone book there?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Maybe you can help me look somebody up."

"Who?"

"Oh, I broke a window last night."

"How'd you do that?"

"Well, I punched it—"

"That sounds like enlightened behavior. What happened?"

"Call me back in fifteen minutes, would you?"

I use the john; then I hold my head under the cold faucet, carefully avoiding my reflection in the mirror. I deserve to suffer, but that would be cruel and unusual. Armed with a pot of coffee, I'm ready when she rings back.

"What happened?"

"Well, to start with," I say, "I had a three hundred and fifty dollar cab fare—"

"What!?"

"Yeah, I used my car, but it was a connection I made in the cab—let's see, what's today?"

"Thursday."

"Yeah, it was Monday, I guess. See, there's this big two hundred pound lady, from Denmark, with long blonde hair. Some of the other cabbies have had her for a passenger too, and they all said she's crazy—she always was afraid to ride in the back seat for some reason, but I thought

she was a pretty nice person. She's a converted Jew, and I would drive her out to Fairmont Temple or pick her up there, usually. Even though she'd sometimes be spouting this religious clap-trap, she would always tip well, so I was glad to get her in the cab.

Anyhow, two days ago—it seems like a year—on Monday, I was driving her somewhere, and she said she had to get to Washington, D.C. with all her belongings—did I know anybody who could take her? I said, I didn't—we aren't supposed to take the cabs out of the state, why didn't she take a bus or a train? She said she was afraid of strangers and I knew that was true 'cause she was always talking about her fears of people and cities and stuff. Then she said she would pay somebody three hundred and fifty dollars, plus gas, to drive her, and I started getting interested. I asked her how much stuff she had and she said very few things—a few bags and boxes, so I said I had a small station wagon; possibly I could do it. Then, to my surprise, she said she wanted to go the very next morning if she could, and I said, yeah, I guessed that would be OK. But she seemed like a religious person, so I was kind of inclined to trust her.

So I took the cab in early and changed the oil in my car and found a muffler for it. I called people, so I'd know the right way to go and everything, then I called her and confirmed things. I stayed up half the night working on the car.

Next morning, I got to her house at eight, and it turns out that she's got enough stuff to fill a step van. I took one look at all these crates, and baskets, and suitcases, and boxes, and plastic garbage bags full of clothes, and heavy stuff like books and crockery, and I tell her there's no way that all of it would fit into my little car. But it's like she hardly hears me. Then this little guy in a business suit and glasses appears and introduces himself. He says: 'There's always more room in a station wagon than it looks like,' and I say 'Wait a minute, you're goin' too?' It turns out he's the lady's ex-husband and he lives in DC, and he's come to get her. I didn't find some of

this out till a few minutes later when I was talkin' to the landlady who owns the house which Elsa—that's the Danish woman's name—has been renting the downstairs from.

I told him, 'I don't know; maybe if we rope a tremendous amount of this stuff on the roof...' and he says, 'sure, sure, I'll help you.'

Well, the way Elsa was acting seemed different than she had Monday, somehow, and I was feeling really nervous about the whole thing, and I said that I was gonna have to get paid some cash up front, and he said he'd been planning to pay me with a check. I said, no, I didn't think I could do that, 'cause I'd been planning to come straight back. But he said that he had an extra room down there and that we could go straight to the bank on Wednesday morning, and he'd get the check cashed for me.

I was in an agony of doubt, but I said I supposed that would be OK if they could get everything in or onto the car, which I really didn't think they could. So he set about running back and forth, loading things up, while I was tying stuff on top, while she fussed at him through all of his efforts, to be careful with various things that looked like junk to me.

As I was standing out by the curb watching this burlesque, the lady who was the owner of the house, backed her car over to me and rolled down her window. She said 'Honey, I'm sorry, I meant to call you and warn you, but she wouldn't let me see yo' number.'

'Warn me?'

'Yes, I was gonna warn ya'll to be careful, 'cause she is crazy as a crap-house rat!'

Lucy laughs at my portrayal.

'What?' I said. 'Will she pay me?'

'They honest, but you might have to wait on yo' money, and they'll get to fightin'—it's awful. I shouldn't tell you this, 'cause 'ahm glad she goin'. Be careful, Babeh.'

Finally, most of the stuff got loaded, but there's still more, so the guy gets into the backseat and she starts literally piling heavy things right on top of him, until soon he's nothing but a mass of boxes and stuff, with a little nose and glasses poking out. She amazingly refused to have any sort of baggage around the area of the front seat where she'd chosen to ride like a Queen, and I'd insisted from the get-go on having a reasonable amount of room to shift gears, but still, I was more cramped than she was. She even had to have her seat back, as far as possible, with the poor guy right behind her. So I head out towards the freeway, but she says she'd like to make a stop. Poor Don—that was the guy's name—started to protest, but she unleashed a volley of caustic language at him, and we waited twenty minutes while she went into some Jewish bookstore on Lee Road. I was so embarrassed, by this display of sadomasochism, that I just stood outside the car drinking coffee. I finally went inside and told her we should go, and she said OK, but she needed to make one more stop. I said, no way, we were leaving right now or the whole thing was off.

So we're finally on the turnpike and I burn straight down to DC; we get there in about ten hours. The whole way, the guy never gets out of the back seat once, not even to take a leak. We went through some beautiful country—past civil war battlefields. But I was much too miserable, wondering if I'd get paid, to enjoy any of it. As predicted, they did start fighting pretty bad a couple of times, especially when Elsa decided to go into a Howard Johnson's and order a meal instead of getting something to go—even then the guy never got out!

When we got to Washington it was about seven o'clock. The traffic was real heavy; they started arguing about which way to go, 'cause she incredibly wanted to stop and see someone. Her shrieking outdid his whining, and I just wanted to get out of the traffic which was scaring me. I wound up waiting for her again at another Jewish bookstore like the one in Cleveland...the poor guy's bladder must have been ready to bust.

So eventually, we made it to an apartment building that didn't look too awful, and naturally, she left unloading and trucking the stuff several flights upstairs to me and the guy, who must've felt like a pretzel. They did have a bedroom for me, and it wasn't particularly unclean or anything, but the whole experience of being with strangers made me feel so weird that I just laid down on top of the covers with all my clothes on and went to sleep, even though I was still afraid I wouldn't get paid. I could hear them, fighting and bickering, with her carrying on about various conditions under which she'd agreed to move back to Washington, including that he get her, her own apartment. It was so embarrassing that I had to stick cotton in my ears. Next morning the man went out and came right back with my cash, confirming once again my amazing skill at judging character."

"Hmph," says Lucy.

"I went to the Vietnam Vet's Memorial Wall which is new since I was last in DC, and I made sure my old buddy Ted Klonz's name was on it."

"What was it like?"

"Not bad, but it made me feel sad, so I jumped back on the road and tore straight home. I got back at about eight last night, and I felt good 'cause it came out alright, and I'd made over a week's wages in less than two days.

But I was still all tense and wired from the driving and coffee, so I decided I would have a few beers to celebrate and unwind a little. Me and Possum walked down to the Club Illusion, and I ate two bowls of their superb chili; then we washed down a pitcher or three with no problem at all. Since I knew I wasn't gonna have to drive anywhere, I figured there'd be no harm in getting a little soused, and then I could go home and get about twelve hours of sound sleep.

So by the time we rolled out of there and into the Euclid Tavern, we were both pretty limber; and since it's Wednesday night, the Mr. Stress blues band is playing, and it's real crowded. We

drank more beer and I started actin' a fool, dancing with all these various dames I knew or didn't know, including married ones and fat ones, but I didn't care; I was just having a good time."

Daphne barks; a door slams. Possum thunders up the front stairs like a Brahma Bull and enters the dining room. He cracks open a Heineken and with beetled brow, studies his latest creation which throbs on the easel. As he sets about attending to clouds in the El Greco sky, he can't help hearing my conversation with Lucy.

"So then this one girl comes in...Sonya is her name. I don't know if you've ever seen her around or not. She's this beautiful chick, of sort of a coffee with a lot of cream color and stunning green eyes. She has a reputation of being quite a tease; I tried to woo her, up at Turkey Ridge last winter, when Derrick first came to town, but I didn't get anywhere. But last night, I'd drunk just enough that I was a whirling vortex of animal magnetism" (Possum snorts) "and the moment I saw her, I swept her onto the dance floor and was able to just sort of overwhelm her. I had a lot of money on me too and fell at once to plying her with spirits. Between dances, I was pointing out all my accomplishments, in such a way that actually sounded humble."

"How do you do that?" asks Lucy.

"Some knowledge, my child, is ineffable. So we're playing pinball, and we're out on the back patio by the fire, and we got a date for Saturday, to go to the Art Museum, and she's written down her phone number for me; the look of love is in her eyes. Mr. Stress is playing his last set and they're doing this slow blues number called 'Early in the Morning'...it's real erotic, you know the one? Buddy Guy and Junior Wells? There's something about it that puts girls into a cataleptic state; we're double clutching like two kids in Junior High. Then he gets to the second verse:

*One glass of wine, one drink of gin...*

*A pretty young baby's what put me, in the shape I'm in...*



We're embracing and necking right there on the dance floor, creating a spectacle. By the third verse, I'd dragged her out the back door onto the patio. About that time, I guess the alcohol hit me pretty hard 'cause I only remember fragments. But the gist of it is—"

"The jiz of it is," interjects Possum, impishly.

"—that she wanted to go home with the friends she'd come with. She said she had to get up the next morning to go to work, but I absolutely wasn't gonna take no for an answer, and when we went back in it was closing time. All the lights were on, and her friends were ready to go, and she said, "Call me! Call me Saturday!" But I took her phone number, and crumbled it up, and threw it on the floor while the whole place watched. It seemed kind of funny at the time, but I think her patience was starting to wear kind of thin—"

"You were singing 'It's Now or Never'," says Possum.

"Gad. I'll need to wear a paper bag over my head, to go outside. Well, I dragged her back out onto the patio and, when we got back in, her friends had gone.

I can only guess at what happened next, 'cause I have another blank in my memory. But it's not too hard to reconstruct, 'cause the next thing I can recall is that we were up at Irv's Deli on Coventry, and her attitude towards me had REALLY changed."

"Oh, Jack," responds Lucy, dismayed.

"Yeah, I'd parked my car, earlier, down at the very end of our street. So in order for us to have gotten to it, we had to pass the house, at which point I'm afraid she probably had to take me on in a bout of wrestling and fisticuffs. Shoot, I was doin' so good—I haven't driven drunk since I've been back in Cleveland. But that's the thing about being drunk. Once you are, you aren't afraid of doing something crazy, like driving—even if you didn't plan to. You aren't afraid of anything.

At any rate, now we're up at Irv's, and she's ordered a sandwich, to take out, and she obviously wants me to go away. But instead, I followed her right out of there, around the corner—just like a bulldog trying to hug a hound—to an apartment on Hampshire Road. I was clamoring for an invitation in, but I think she'd told me several times that she hadn't been staying at home, wherever that is, but with some 'people'. She rings the doorbell, but nothing happens. So she goes around back, and she starts to knock on a big storm window and to call some guy's name, which I guess didn't suit me, 'cause I punch the glass with my knuckle, and it smashes. I think I was even surprised myself, for an instant, 'cause I'm there long enough to see this poor guy sit up and turn on his light...I caught a glimpse of his face and he looked really scared."

"Ha-ha," laughs Possum.

"She yelled something at me, and I took to my heels. I'm lucky I didn't get shot or arrested or wreck my car."

"Jack, the baby's crying," says Lucy. "I'll call you back later."

"Victor," I ask, "would you please look up that girl's address for me in your phone book? Sonya Williamson is her name."

"You think she's really gonna want to talk to you?"

"I know she isn't gonna want to talk to me," I say, "but I feel bad about the window and want to pay for it."

"Ho-ho, you gotta be kidding."

"No, I'm not kidding," I say, annoyed. "Just find me the phone book, would you? I'd need a search party to find it in your room, and my head hurts too much."

"Here's an S. Williamson on Glenmont," he says after a minute.

"That's it," I say. "Just gimme the address."

I take a shower and gag down some eggs. I find an envelope and put into it twenty dollars and a note saying I'm sorry, and I head out, thinking I'll drive up, stick it into her mailbox, and be done with the whole shameful affair. On my way down the stairs, though, I again encounter an unhappy-looking Possum. The starter on his old chariot has gone out. I wind up spending most of the afternoon helping him to locate and install a replacement. So it's about five-thirty by the time I get up to Glenmont Road.

As I drive along, looking for the right address, I think to myself that I've probably screwed myself out of the best thing that has come to me in a long time. Last night and on that Sunday we'd met last winter, there had been a very strong magnetic field between us.

Her place is near the end of the street; I park on Superior. I make my way up a long front walk, up cracked stairs, and into a rather dingy and poorly lit hallway. Here's her name on a box with two other names. Females? Hemales? Who cares. I'll never see her again, although it's too bad, 'cause her eyes, and her voice and laugh, had really gotten to me somehow. I shove the envelope down the slot. I step outside the building. Is that an Indigo Bunting, away up in that tree? Or just a Blue Jay? What is it about the psychology of these late twentieth-century women, that the only stimuli which they seem to respond to, is to be dragged into the nearest bush? Obviously, I went too far last night, but why does a guy have to turn himself into a wolf-man, howling through the streets if he wants to get anywhere? I've tried it both ways, and believe me—

“YOU!”

Oh, no! “Hi, Sonya. I—”

“YOU! YOU GET YOURSELF AWAY FROM HERE OR I'LL CALL THE POLICE!”

“OK, I'm goin'. I just wanted to pay for the window and say I was sorry. I left twenty bucks—  
I hope that's enough; I—”

“DON'T YOU LIE TO ME! DON'T YOU DARE LIE TO ME—”

“I’m not lying. I—”

“YES, YOU ARE! EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU IS A LIE! YOU ARE A LIE!”

There isn’t much I can say to this, and I watch dumbly as she turns, runs up the steps, and into the apartment building. Wow! I think, retreating to my car. I know I was bad, but I didn’t think I quite deserved that. Oh, well, I probably did. Leave it to a hysterical female to go right for the jugular, though. I start the engine and wait for the traffic to give me an opening. I start to pull out. THUMP! I hear on my back fender. Did I hit something? No, it’s her again! What’s she doing, attacking my car now? No, she’s telling me to wait. She has my torn envelope in her hand. Cautiously, I roll down my window.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t believe you. You were telling the truth, though, and I’m sorry. Can we go somewhere?”

We drive down to Chinatown on Rockwell. We enter a favorite place of mine—a cheerful little room with tiny carved red booths and woodwork. I order tea, egg rolls, and shrimp chop suey. She eats like someone who has been famished for eternity. The cups of hot ginseng tea magically unknot our twisted-up insides. Her cheeks take on some color, and her eyes begin to shine again, too.

“I wasn’t completely honest with you, either,” she says, looking into her teacup. “I have a little girl who’s living with her grandmother.”

“What’s dishonest about that?” I ask. “Who said you had to tell me all about yourself?”

“Well, you sure told me everything about you last night, or don’t you remember?”

“Please don’t remind me. What’s your baby’s name?”

Her eyes take on a look of such longing, that a heart of tool-steel would be softened. “Her name is Dorothy, and she’s in Albany. Don’t you want to know why we’re not together?”

“No, I don’t want to know anything at all, unless you want to tell me...but if you’re in some kind of trouble, or if I can help you—”

“No,” she says. “Nobody can help me but myself.”

Our food comes. Conversation turns down country lanes; we are, once again, away in some rose-tinted land. We go back to her little place, which isn’t unlike a tearoom itself. I ask her if she has roommates, remembering the names on the mailbox. She says no, she’s just been taking mail for some friends.

She lights candles and we listen to an old recording of Dvorak’s *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. When it has played, we make love—kneeling before each other with the ardor of cripples—come at last to the shrine at Lourdes.

## 17 — OILED VANITY

“I don’t know,” I remark to Larry Dolinsky, who’s always been nosey about my love-life. “She’s a mystery woman. Something about her makes me not want to ask questions. She knows I’m leaving town soon, so...”

“Well, Jack...I think that girl is likely to bring you a lot of pain.”

“She’s a female, isn’t she?”

“What’s this?” he asks, picking up from my briefcase of cab-driving stuff, my application to “adopt” an orphan for sixty-four cents per day.

“You can read,” I say.

“Ho, ho,” he laughs, doubtfully.

“What’s wrong? Do you think it looks like a racket or something?”

“No, I really don’t know. Maybe the kid will get all the money. I was just laughing about how the rich try to save the poor without it really ever affecting things to any degree.”

“Well, I ain’t hardly rich.”

“No, no. I don’t mean you. I mean the industrialized world. Every time any of us in the US or Europe, or wherever, consume anything like sugar or coffee or aluminum, we’re supporting the concentration camps that produce that commodity.”

“Well, if sixty-four cents a day is what it takes to buy off my conscience, I don’t see how I’m harming anybody.”

“You’re right, Jack!” Larry agrees. “Hey! Maybe we can adopt a couple of older children—girls maybe—in their teens, and—”

“You’re a sick boy, Dolinsky...a sick, sick boy.”

\* \* \* \* \*

To my happy surprise, Sonya shows up at the Woolly Mammoth's Monday night performance. My vanity is lubricated beyond all reason as she sits holding hands with me, between our sets; she even helps me carry my stuff out after the show. I delight in the envy that she creates among the guys.

“Cor, Oi shoulda grabbed ‘er last wintah, while Oi ‘ad me chance,” Derrick says to me as we’re packing up. “Of course, Gwen wouldn’t ‘ave stood it by ‘alf.”

## 18 — BREAKDOWN

A convention of dentists has been here this past week, which has been fortunate since it's gotten me back on my feet some. I made a hundred and ten dollars on Tuesday night, in fourteen hours, and one-fifteen on Wednesday, in twelve hours. I've enjoyed being the one to make the dentists nervous, for once.

It is early afternoon out at the 'port, and I am talking to a few cabbies about the convention. One driver says that all the dentists are lousy tippers. Roy, a young-looking driver, says: "All them professionals are lousy tippers." He pauses. "Of course, cab drivers are professionals, too."

A wizened old cabby squints at him. "Cab driving is not a perfession—it's an art."

A delectable young brunette with a curvy bosom bounces past us in tight jeans, high heels, and a sleeveless shirt. Roy whimpers softly. I repeat a phrase I heard many years ago from some greasers I'd known in high school, which I'd always felt to be about the most crudely raffish and original thing that one could say under such circumstances: "I'd drink her bathwater."

"*I'd* drink her piss," says Larry Dolinsky, without blinking. A veteran airport cabby is pretty hard to outdo at this kind of rhetoric.

I luck out and get a fare going to the Heights. I realize that I'm on Sonya's street; I decide to stop by.

The only space I see to park the taxi is a few houses up the block from her building. I am on the sidewalk, heading in that direction, when I see her, in her white jacket, come out of the front doors. She runs down the steps, turns down the walk, away from me, and opens the door of a long, dark-blue Oldsmobile which sits by the curb. My first impulse is to turn around; but I'm nearly to the car, which hasn't moved. To go back would seem childish, so I walk up and rap on the window. As soon as her startled eyes meet mine, I know I should have trusted my instincts.

"Jack," she says, rolling down the window. "I was just going somewhere."



“Oh,” I smile casually, “I just stopped by ‘cause I was on your street...no biggie. Gimme a call—”

“Is that Jack Ailbon?” asks a familiar voice from behind the wheel.

I’ve never thought of myself as being a particularly brave man. As a boy and a teenager, I’d sometimes walk a mile out of my way to avoid a bully. But even the most craven dog, given just the right combination of stimuli, has the potential of losing all regard for personal safety. For me, such a combination exists in the wide, ingratiating smile of Oliver Price, and in the obsidian centers of Sonya’s eyes, which I realize are drastically altered from their usual circumference. My sudden absence of fear is accompanied by a like departure of diplomacy. “You aren’t going anywhere with him!” I shout.

“Who are you talking to?” Sonya says, anger flushing her cheeks.

“I don’t let my friends near rabid animals,” I say, pulling open her door, “and that’s what you are, Price—AN ANIMAL!”

I expect this will bring him after me, and I glance about for a brick, a bottle, or any sort of weapon. But Oliver only shakes his head, still smiling, looking at his steering wheel.

“I know what you did to Katie.”

“What I did to who?”

“Katie Joyce, you *scum*.”

“Ah saved that girl’s life after she got loaded and tried to—” but I can hardly hear what he’s saying because Sonya is now assaulting my ears in a loud voice, quite different from her usual polished tones.

“Your autonomy isn’t the issue!” I yell back at her. “He’d sell his mother for fish bait!”

The car leaps forward, and I nearly get my hand slammed in the door. “Damn it all,” I shout into the wide eyes of an Oriental lady and her two little children, who’ve come along the sidewalk. “GODDAMN IT ALL!”

I make my way back to my cab. Could I get to it, soon enough to follow them? Fuck it. Fuck them. Fuck her. But she tried to tell me. I hadn’t thought anything she could have had to say could be this bad, though. Nothing could be as bad as Oliver Price; but if she’s so twisted around that she can’t even take care of her little girl, she sure isn’t gonna change for me.

I realize that I’ve taken in just enough money to cover my lease. I’ll take it in and get a case of beer. But the thought of any more stupid lobotomized escape fills me with revulsion, so I grimly finish out my shift. I stop by home after a few hours and ask Possum to tell the other guys in the band, that as soon as they can find a replacement for me, I’ll be leaving town.

## 19 — RATIONAL FEAR

Cab driving grows more and more risky. A new gang has been operating out of the hospitals. These guys have another car waiting when the cabby drops off the phony passenger. One of our guys had his jaw busted by a tire iron two nights ago.

I am really behind tonight, though. On a call for Mt. Sinai Hospital after midnight, it will usually be a nurse going home. But now, as I walk into the lobby, a male is waiting. He is a slim, almond-skinned man in a jacket, which is slightly frayed at the sleeves. Some of my better clothes are in worse condition. But to the woodland beast within me, who cares only about seeing another sunrise, the worn cuffs and the dark complexion brand this man as a likely predator.

“Were you a patient?” I ask him, hoping to confirm his legitimacy at the desk.

“No,” he says.

“Were you visiting somebody?”

“No.”

“Do you work here?”

“No, the bus quit running, and Ah called from in here.”

“Well, I can’t take you.”

“What?” he says, looking dumbfounded, as do the ladies behind the admissions desk.

“I nevah heerd of that,” says one.

I explain about the recent violence.

“Ah got to get home somehow,” he says.

“Well, I really hate to ask you to do this, but if you’ll let me check your pockets for a weapon...”

“What?”

“It’s nothing personal, and I apologize for having to ask you, but I can’t take you otherwise.”

He agrees reluctantly; I feel through his coat pockets and pat him down. So repentant do I feel, that I only charge him three bucks to go all the way up to Kinsman.

The following morning, I have stopped by Lucy’s for coffee. I am relating the incident. “It probably wasn’t a very good search, and I’m lucky I didn’t miss anything. After something like that, he might have used it on me if he’d been the wrong type of guy, even if he hadn’t been planning to. Hope he doesn’t complain; he might get me fired.”

“Wow, you really are getting paranoid,” she says.

“That must be the most misused word in the English language.”

“What word?” she bristles.

“The definition of paranoia is irrational fear.”

“So?”

“So...Stuart had his pretty little face busted in like a pumpkin by a guy he picked up at the same hospital, just the other night. I’d say my fear is highly rational.”

“Well,” she says, “worrying about it isn’t gonna do any good.”

“To the contrary—it’s the best thing I can do.”

“What?”

“Haven’t you ever noticed that the things you worry the most about in life are the things that usually never happen? That it’s always something unexpected that comes along and screws you up?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So if there’s something bad that you’re afraid will happen, the best thing that you can do, is to fret and worry yourself to death over it. Then it probably won’t.”

“You’re nuts,” she says, throwing a shoe at me. “Now you’re getting me really worried, too.”

She makes me promise to see about driving the day shift for a while. I don’t tell her about the little twenty-five caliber automatic that Dolinsky gave me to carry, after last night. I was reluctant to take it because, with most cab hold-ups, having a gun is useless. The passenger gets the drop on the driver from behind. Larry has recurrent dreams about being strangled in this manner, with piano wire. He convinced me I should borrow it, though, since these new thugs have been playing smash and grab through the driver’s windows. It is now in my briefcase, with my maps and flashlight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Last night, on my old TV, I watched *Grand Hotel* in its entirety. I remember seeing parts of it years ago, but never the whole thing, I don’t think. I’ve been in a sort of daze ever since. I think Greta Garbo is the woman I’ve always wanted as my own; in that film, she plays the performer that every performer in his or her most fame-crazed dreams, wants to be. We all wish to be swirling through those big revolving doors followed by our enormous entourage, with reporters rushing to wire off our every word as we travel from city to city, from Grand Hotel to Grand Hotel. From Berlin to Paris, to Vienna we go, until being at last so choked and strangled by fame, we beg just to be left alone.

“Who are you?” she asks John Barrymore. “How do you live, and what kind of person are you?”

“I’m a prodigal son—the black sheep of a white flock. I shall die on the gallows.”

“Really?”

“Really. I haven’t a bit of character. None at all.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I sit here in Forest Hills Park where I played as a boy. Gentle humans with soft brown skin, walk in the sunlight. A father with a hat and sunglasses plays football with his small sons. How contented they look. Does he ask for much?—A house, and a job, and a park to play ball with his kids on a luminous autumn day. He was possibly the poor guy I left waiting up at Woodland Bar & Grill on Friday night. Probably got him in trouble with his missus and maybe started a fight; maybe not. Maybe I just left him waiting in the bar, tired and hungry and anxious to get home ‘cause he was drunk, or because his old clunker wouldn’t start. Maybe the bartender was looking at him mean, ‘cause he didn’t have enough for another beer and for cab fare, too. Very possibly he’d known, in the back of his mind, that the reason he’d been waiting was because it was a colored place, and he was a colored man. Not his fault—not my fault—nobody’s damn fault. It just makes you want to go somewhere to grow your own food, and chop your own wood, until they finally come to take you out.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is a hot afternoon. I am driving the Rustbucket up Woodland when the radiator overheats. The thing conks right at a red light. While I am putting water in, some drunken genius hits the back end of the car. The hood falls down and cracks me right on top of my head. It is the pointed part of the catch that hits me, and I see white light for a few seconds. Then my head clears, just in time for me to see the old, wet-brained bastard wave with sort of an apologetic gap-toothed smile

as he drives on around me in his car which, unbelievably, looks even more syphilitic than the Rustbucket.

Blood is all over me like red paint; I give Lucy a terrible fright when I ring her doorbell a few minutes later. “You’ll need stitches,” she says.

“The only things I’ve ever seen stitches give a person are little dots on either side of their scar and an expensive hospital bill.”

“That wouldn’t have anything to do with the top of your head,” she points out.

“I guess it wouldn’t, unless I go bald, which I’m sure will happen soon.”

“It’s already started.”

“What?—No way!” I yelp, leaping for the mirror against her peals of laughter.

My car is leaking gas, so she takes it around the corner to Roscoe who is my mechanic. When she comes back, she insists on driving me down to the Free Clinic to have my cut looked at.

I’ve not been here since 1971; to my surprise, they find something on me in their files. It’s a comment, I guess, on those times. On the card were spaces to be filled in: “SIGN”—(meaning astrological) and “WHO”—(referred you to the clinic). To these, I’d replied respectively, NEON and BUDDHA.

Roscoe wakes me early the next morning with a phone call. While The Rustbucket was parked by his curb, some chug trying to drive a big rent-a-truck ran into it, more or less destroying it. I spend the whole day waiting on the appraiser from the truck’s insurance company. When he finally comes, he writes on his form, that in his opinion the car is not even worth junkyard valuation.

“That fucking automobile was my means of getting to my job, and my livelihood, too!” I snarl malignantly, “and my attorney—”

“OK, OK,” he says, and he writes me a check for \$300, which he tells me, I can take or leave.

Bah.



## 20 — NEW DEAL, OLD FLAME

The fellers are sitting around Possum's dining room table after practice. Perhaps, sensing an air of expectancy, he addresses Michael and Downsey: "Hey, do you boys want to sample a little bit of *nose candy*?"

The aforementioned respond, very much to the affirmative—nasal orifices atwitch.

"OK, you asked for it," says the Possum impishly. He leans to an acute angle in his creaky chair and loosens a protracted noise that sounds like a rotten old canvas being slowly ripped.

"OH, MAN!" protest his victims, profoundly outraged.

"*Enjoy, enjoy*" urges the mischievous marsupial. "I'll tell you what," he conciliates. "I'll roll you a joint of my best boo...Practically sacred!"

But his dupes only mutter, unassuaged.

The red phone rings. It's Justin in New York!

"We're doing the play here in November," he says. "We need to do a couple of performances in Cleveland to warm up."

"When?"

"In five weeks."

"Impossible. We'll never book it in time."

"It's booked. I've got the Allen Theater."

"You're crazy! It would take that long to hold auditions!"

"We have all our principals."

"What?"

"Derrick's in Cleveland, right?"

"Yeah."

"He knows his lines. I'm flying Angela over."

“Yeah, so that leaves Alastair,” (the comic lead—my Mercutio).

“I’ve found a perfect Alastair. He’s learning his lines now. I sent him a script yesterday.”

“Nobody could learn those lines that fast. Who did you get?”

“Jack, I’ve got an appointment—”

“WHO DID YOU GET?”

“Jack, you said you always envisioned your brother—”

“You bastard!”

“He—”

“Forget it.”

“You’ll—”

“FORGET IT! HOW COULD YOU PULL THIS ON ME, JUSTIN? You know me’n Bobby nearly strangled each other the last time we came close to the same stage.”

“He’s sorry.”

“Of course, he’s sorry. I’m sorry. But his or my being sorry has got nothing to do with it. Bobby’s whole life is driving people to their absolute limit so that he or someone else can apologize—it doesn’t matter who. I think the whole process is a dramatic exercise he goes through, over and over, to keep himself emotionally raw enough to act and sing so well. But I ain’t gonna bend over and—”

“Jack, you won’t have to. I can handle him. Oh, we want you to get Brendan and Downsey.”

“WE? WHO IN THE HELL IS WE? I HAVEN’T EVEN SAID I’M DOING THIS! AND I THINK Possum can play Brendan under the table at this sort of music.”

“Of course we’ll have Possum. He can play violin and cello as well, but we have to use Mario on drums. Bobby was very specific about that.”

“OH, WAS HE?”

But I know I'm licked. I ask Downsey to ring Brendan and Mario with the good news.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week passes. Justin has wired me funds so that I can devote my time to auditioning and rehearsing. For this reason, I've taken to driving the cab only a few hours a day, earning little more than enough to pay the lease, keeping it for my personal use. Since the demise of the Rustbucket, the hack has been my only vehicle.

It is about nine-thirty at night; I am down in the yard beside our old house, playing Frisbee with Daphne, under the street lights. It is a warm October evening. I have the cab's radio going, just for fun. Rehearsals are going pretty well. I've got all our players selected, and they are learning their parts from tapes I've given them.

The dispatcher pleads for a cab to pick up New York Yankees who are stranded at the stadium. Fat Chance! After all, there is tradition to think of. According to baseball historian Michael Gershman: "The only people who could stop Joe DiMaggio in 1941 were a cab driver and a traffic cop, who gave him a speeding ticket on the way to spring training. With his (hits in consecutive games) streak at fifty-six and the Yanks in Cleveland, DiMaggio and Lefty Gomez took a cab to League Park. As they were leaving, driver Bill Kaval told DiMaggio he thought his luck was up. Gomez bristled, believing the cabbie had jinxed DiMaggio, but Joe tossed off the comment. That night it ended. Joe twice hit line drives that Kenny Keltner, the Indians third baseman, turned into outs. Philosophical but still disappointed, DiMaggio commented, 'I wish it could have gone on forever.' Then he hit in another sixteen straight."

"Circle," says the dispatcher. I run to the cab and somehow get the fare which is at Severance Hall. I take Puppies upstairs, find my cabby jacket, lock up, and am on my way.

Apparently, there's been a concert—there are quite a few cars in the lot. Up the granite stairs a door opens, and an usher waves. Out come two women. One is very elderly. She is supported by a younger woman with short hair, gloves, and pearls. I should have known!

“Hi, Janie. Hi, Cora.” I'd forgotten that Janie frequently attended weeknight concerts with an elderly friend of her deceased mother.

“Jack! I thought maybe you'd have left Cleveland by now.”

“Naw, I kind of got stuck here, and then Justin got us a chance to do our musical next month—”

“Don't forget to turn on the meter,” says Cora.

“No, I wasn't even working, so I can't charge you. What did the orchestra play?”

“Some awful racket. What was it, dear?”

“It was Stravinsky, Cora,” says Janie, “and it was not a racket.”

Cora lives in a retirement tower just a couple of blocks away, and I wait nervously while Janie sees her inside. Back in the cab, I ask her, “How's A.A. going?”

“Oh, I haven't been going much, lately. I mean, I haven't been drinking or anything—the last thing I'd want to do would be to take a drink, but—”

“I don't blame you. Most of those A.A. types have black lung disease from all the cigarettes they smoke; then they come across with bumper stickers that say “Clean and Sober,” as if everybody else was somehow dirty—”

“Oh, Jack. That's not why I stopped going. I...well...we were afraid somebody was going to see Don and I together, and that his wife would find out—”

“THAT BASTARD IS MARRIED?” I yell, swerving the cab. “YOU DIDN'T TELL ME THAT!”

“Why would I think you’d be interested? I’ve only seen you once or twice in almost two years.”

“Well, I am interested! Why would you waste your time with a married man when there are a million guys who’d crawl through broken glass for a girl like you?”

“Yeah, Jack, just like you did,” she says, her bottom lip trying to pull down and her eyes filling with tears. “You’d have crawled through glass if that’s what it took to get away from me, and you did, too.”

“Aw, Janie, that’s not true,” I say, stopping the cab.

“Don’t you touch me. Just take me home.”

“No, I won’t. I love you, Jane, and I’ll marry you right now if that’s what it takes to show you. Where is that son of a bitch? I’ll tear him a new asshole! Thinks he can do that to my sweetheart! Where’s the Justice of the Peace? That’s how you do it at night, right? What the hell is so funny?”

“You, Jack. You’re really funny.”

“You think I’m not serious? Wait a minute,” I say, throwing open my door and running around to her side. I get on my knees on the sidewalk. “Please Jane, take me back. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Jack,” she says, pulling me back in beside her. “I’ve always loved you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I awaken, next morning, at eleven-forty-five in Janie’s rose and peach bedroom. MY rose and peach bedroom! I’m never leaving it again and will never have to, I think to myself, hardly able to believe that my happiness is not just a rapturous dream. My reference to this particular bedroom is figurative since we decided, last night, to move to New Mexico to finish the old

house right after the shows in Cleveland and New York. It will be winter, but we'll still have enough hours of sunlight, most days, to make adobe, and to hack timbers from the *bosque* for our *vigas*. In the meantime, if necessary, we'll sleep on my cousin's floor by the woodstove—like young Kerouacs!

My perfect dream is even more so, due to the agreeable fact that Janie, two weeks ago, split with Mr. Mustache. I grind my choppers like the primal ape I am, and I hope that he just tries calling on the phone once, so I can threaten to kill him if he dares to ever again even think about seeing my WIFE! That boy.

Janie *is* my wife from this time on I reflect, as I find the newspaper and pour the coffee she left me, although she'd declined my offer to try to do the ceremony last night.

"I want us to get married in the spring, in Rio Verde, when our house is finished and the swallows are coming home," she'd said, leaning alluringly over the steaks she was broiling at three AM. It's just like the old days, except there's no big bottle of Rock and Rye for us to sip over ice.

"Yes, but we could also get married in New York at the Plaza Hotel if you like."

"No way. We'll need all our money for the house."

"Yes, boss. I'll earn the money, and then you'll be in charge of it."

"Mom left me a little something, too, and her big car you always loved so."

"What, the Pontiac?"

"Yes, it's at the garage, getting the oil changed. That's why I called the cab!"

"Well, thank God for the internal combustion engine! Thank God for the big corporations who've forced electric transport off the roads, so we could be together! Thank God for the depletion of our earth's natural resources! See? There is a right for every wrong!"

“Don’t worry,” she’d said with a sly smile, intended to be, I suppose, the quintessence of women’s intuition. “It would have happened anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I think when you get home, if you play Possum’s answering machine, you’ll find that an invitation was left for you, at about four-thirty, to hear the Orchestra last evening. Cora was not my first choice, as a date.”

“Janie, I adore you.”

## 21 — BIG BRO, BIG DAD

“In any case, Dad wanted me to sweep out the garage like we had to every Saturday... remember?” It’s Bobby, long-distance from California. I’m lying flat on my back in bed because it’s one-fifty AM.

“My friends were outside or something; I guess it was just a culmination of seventeen years of the old Dad routine, but I wound up standing out in the middle of the driveway—not too close, mind you—yelling: ‘Take that broom and shove it up your ASS...till it comes out your MOUTH! OUT YOUR MOUTH!’ Of course, I had to disappear for a couple of weeks, but the funny thing is, Jack...looking back, I can’t understand why I didn’t just sweep the garage—it never took that long—or why he didn’t say: ‘Your friends are here; do it later.’ But he mellowed—believe me—after Clair and I paved the way for you.”

“MELLOWED? BALLS! After you got busted and Clair married a pyramid-scheme grifter” (I’d have made black sheep in most families, but in ours, the competition’s been stiff) “the old man decided he’d blown it with you two and decided it was his holy duty not to let it happen again. He became ten times as tough! I wasn’t allowed to read *Mad* magazine or watch Ghoulardi— and my art lessons on Saturdays at the art museum?—you know, where all the kids took their little boards around and sketched the masterpieces?—I wasn’t allowed to go to them anymore, either, ‘cause it would somehow warp me. Then he had a massive South Bend metal lathe moved into the garage, where I was supposed to learn to be a machinist, so I would have SOME trade to fall back on, even though I had no interest or talent for the math you gotta know to run one of those things. But that was after Elbon Sales and Service (Dad’s company) had pretty much gone under, and he had to go to work at the G.E. lamp factory on the night shift, on a milling machine. Going through that at the age of fifty-five—him a master toolmaker and salesman no less—must have been an unbelievable trial for him; and the thing that I don’t



understand, looking back, is how I could have been so dumb and blind not to have had the slightest sensitivity for what he was going through. We thought he and Uncle Phil were just money-hungry, hard-hearted, nigger-hating, bible-belting hypocrites of the first degree.”

Bobby sighs reflectively. “I was doing summer stock a few years ago in Pittsburgh and Uncle Phil and Aunt Mil drove in from the farm. Uncle Phil told me a story about Dad when they were boys. They’d been swimming on a Sunday afternoon, which was like being in league with Satan back then. Apparently, Dad jumped into a lake in an abandoned quarry and hit some old farm machinery. It tore out a big piece of the soft part of the muscle under his kneecap.”

“Wow! He does have a scar there!”

“And they were scared.”

“I guess!”

“About Granddad, I mean. They made it back to the old spring house and washed that piece of flesh in the ice-cold water. Then they found some electrical tape in the barn, and they poked the missing piece back in the hole, wrapped it all up, and it grew back together! He said Dad had to wear long pants all summer just to hide it.”

“I guess Grandpa was even tougher than Dad!”

“Yes, he might have horse-whipped them or something. Then, Uncle Phil told me how when the depression hit, Dad had to quit high school to go to work in a dirty, freezing grain warehouse just so the family could eat. He worked a twelve-hour shift for thirty cents an hour, removing burned cereal pieces off a conveyor belt with a vacuum tube. He caught pneumonia and was exposed to pidgin fungus; that’s partly why his breathing is so bad today.”

“Jeez,” I say, “no wonder they moved down south when they retired. Once I was complaining that I couldn’t find a job. He told me how every day he’d wait from before sunrise, with three-hundred men, outside the Ford assembly plant at Shadyside. Every other day or so, when the

boss would step outside, they'd all hang on the chain-link fence like animals, just in case the man might say: 'You, you, and you' to maybe three guys."

"You know the irony," says Bobby, "about his being so opposed to our going into the arts, is that when he met Mom he ran off with her Chautauqua troupe. He told me that he would have liked to stay with it forever. But his dream was that we would go to college like he never was able to; from his perspective, we only shit on that priceless opportunity."

"I had a dream the other night," I say. "Dad was whaling on me with his belt, and I was screaming at him: 'HIT ME! COME ON, THAT AIN'T NOTHIN'! *HIT ME!!*'"

Click—Click—goes Bobby's call waiting. "Hang on," he says and is away long enough for me to start to doze, then—

Click—"Jack? Manny (Bobby's long-suffering agent) is on the other line...I've gotta go, but please remember that every one of us had to beat ten million other sperm to the egg, so we're all winners, AND to have a continuous, chortling, creaming, clawing, convulsing, climaxing, clutching, cumming, crapping time tonight—"

"Bobby, it's late here—I'm not goin' anywhere."

"AND, that I love you—inflambulafluxably!!! Without a rubber! Bye!" and he's given me the old L.A. fade before I've spoken to him concerning an unpaid-for car rental and a two-hundred and fifty dollar phone bill—residuals of a Colorado visit that I'd promised a crying Clair I'd talk to him about.

## 22 — PLAN OF ESCAPE

I let myself in the back door. “Janie? Janie? Where’s my sweetie?” It’s been about a week since our reunion.

“Back here.” I walk through the living room and down the hall to the bedroom. Jane is lying on her bed, fully dressed. Her old, black and white TV is on, which is strange, ‘cause I’ve never seen it going before ten-thirty at night when we sometimes watch old movies or the *Tonight Show*, or something.

“Hi, sweetie. We’re not even married and you’re watching soap operas already?” She gives me a smile, but it’s too quick and forced, and I know something’s wrong.

“Oh, I wasn’t even watching. Turn it off for me would you? Jack,” she says, looking into my eyes, then down at her feet, “I went to the Doctor today. I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant? Wow, that was fast! You mean—” But her shadow-blue eyes, which are again intently on my own, tell the story.

“Don is the father,” she says, the corners of her mouth fighting to stay up, then losing the battle as the tears break through.

“Why are you crying?” I say, throwing myself on her, kissing her wet eyes and cheeks. “Why is my honey crying?”

“I wanted to have your baby someday, and—”

“You still can! This is wonderful, really... You didn’t even know for sure that you could still have kids, and now you do! Or, we can still adopt some, too, like we talked about—”

“Oh, I know Jack, but I didn’t want to ever have to deal with him or even see him again. And what really makes me mad is I was getting a new diaphragm, but—”

“Spare me the details, please. Does this guy have other kids?”

“Oh, yes, and that’s the worst thing! He never wants to have anything to do with them! He sent the two boys away to military schools. I could have an abortion—”

“No, Jane. Would it be safe for you, physically or mentally? Janie, I swear, I could love any kid the same as my own, especially yours. Maybe I could become the legal father.”

“No, you don’t know Don. I thought he was so wonderful just ‘cause he didn’t drink, but he’s mean. He’d—”

“Then we won’t tell him. We’re clearing out of the state, anyhow. He’ll never know.”

“Oh, Jack, we couldn’t!”

“Oh, yes, we could!”

“Really?” she says, hope fighting to break through.

“I promise you, sweetheart. He’ll never find out, and if he did, he’d have to fight his way past every caballero in Rio Verde, all of whom are heavily armed, and past our pack of wolf-dogs, which we’ll have roaming the grounds—”

“Wolf-dogs?” she giggles.

“Yeah. We might have to be a little careful about who we send news and pictures back to, for a few years.”

“We won’t even take any pictures. We don’t need pictures!”

“Well, we’ll see if there’s any resemblance. The baby’s mom is so overwhelmingly pretty, that I’m sure it will take after her.”

“Oh, my darling,” she says, through eyes most poignant when refracted through the diamond prisms of tears. The eyes—sweetly puffy with tragedy—which I have made this way, too often. The sea-gray eyes that I’d do anything for—even to lie a little and put on some bravado that I’m not too sure of—just to see cleared away, like the pure rosy air after a summer storm, as she pulls herself to me as tightly as a seahorse to a bit of coral.

## 23 — ROLICKING RECKLESSNESS

Possum and I drive up Kenilworth to the stately home of Justin's mom. Mrs. Brumfield is in the kitchen cooking, as usual; she pours us each a glass of wine and sends us up the back stairs to Justin's accustomed rooms.

Angie—our play's ingénue—red Yorkshire hair like a wispy halo, flits out of the shower in naught but a towel, which she allows to dip in a not uninteresting fashion as she plants a big kiss on my nose.

"Oh, Jack," she says in her northern, almost Scottish accent, "Your city is loovly! You made it sound so wretched, and it isn't at all!"

"Have you been rehearsing your lines?" I glower.

"Of course I remember me lines," she says, taking a big swig of my wine. "Justin says he's taking us to a poob tonight! Oh, hellooo," she says, turning to Possum whose trouser cuffs have dropped about three inches, he's got his gut sucked in so tight. Angie's kind of a big lady herself, not fat or anything, but a lot of woman nonetheless, and Possum, who stands just the right height above her, introduces himself. He extends eloquent welcomes and gallantly offers her his own wine glass.

"I didn't ask you whether you remember your lines, but if you've been rehearsing them," I say, but I am ignored, as into Justin's room we spill. Justin sits cross-legged on the teal carpet next to his favorite low, carved ebony table. His dark eyes are glowing and his hair falls in pirate ringlets around his petulant, ever-boyish face. On his shoulder is an azure tattoo, a recent acquisition I surmise. On the table are a cut crystal flask of some distillation, his I Ching coins, and a German Luger which belonged to his grandfather. Grandfather Brumfield, a professional skeet-shooter, founded the family fortune on his carefully invested winnings. Hence, the household has quite a traditional familiarity with all manner of firearms.

“Victor! Jack! Good to see you! Sweetness, will you twist one for us please?” he says, handing Angela a small box. “I promised Angie we’d take her out tonight. Where shall we go?”

“Justin, we have rehearsal at ten o’clock tomorrow morning. We—”

“Oh, come on now, Jack—you know I have a liver to feed. We’ll show Angie around tonight, and from then on, we’ll be all business.”

“I hope so,” I say. “We only have five days.”

“Your brother will be here the day after tomorrow.”

“He’s the one guy I don’t need till the last minute.”

“How’s the music coming?”

“The music’s fine, only the chorus is still rough as hell, the lights aren’t working yet, and the stage manager is a jackass—”

“Relax, Jack. The I Ching portends a smash. I have a mobile unit coming to film the whole show. You have an interview tomorrow, on channel five.”

“But they—”

The phone rings—Justin snatches it: “Polka Dot, where are you? With who? What’s he doing there? I’m asking you for the last time to stop this and get on a plane and—hold on—” He asks us if we’ll please wait in the kitchen—he’ll be right down.

Soon we are flying down Cedar Hill in Justin’s mother’s Silver Cloud. The rear speakers are ripping out with *The Best of Dave Edmunds*, our old favorite tape for prowling. How Possum and Angie can hear each other in the back seat, I can’t imagine, but it doesn’t look like they mind having to huddle closer.

Justin has passed around *Budweiser* tallboys and there is a six-pack of *Carlsberg* on the front seat, between us. He uses the cigarette lighter to kindle the fat muggie that Angela rolled at the

house. He sucks the smoke in deeply, then exhales languidly out his mouth, taking the smoke up his nose. He hands it back to Possum and takes a sip of his brew.

“Funny,” he says, “how these Yankee beers all taste alike when you come home—like a weak soda pop.”

“I quite fancy them,” says Angie. “We have Boodweiser at the Hand and Marigold, now.”

“Jack,” says Justin, pointing at a stone apartment building on Edgehill, “tell Angela about the time we seduced the twin sisters, who lived in an apartment, over there.”

“I’m sure she’s heard the story,” I say.

“No, I haven’t. Do tell me, Jack!”

“Well, there’s not much to tell, except that Justin peed on their floor in the early morning hours.”

“Never!” gasps Angie against Possum’s guffaws.

“I’d forgotten that part of it!” says Justin. “We’d taken several quarts of Colt .45 (malt liquor) up there, hadn’t we?”

“Those girls required several quarts. We’d been trying to get them canned all night, but had only gotten ourselves drunk.”

“And apparently,” Justin continues, “I had a dream that I made it to the loo, but I was actually in their dainty living room—”

“Yeah, the next morning, both of these Amazons—”

“Oh, they were great huge women, were they?” asks Angie.

“About your size—”

“Jack!” she says, cuffing my ear, “I am not an Amazon!”

“No, but they were tall. Anyhow, they started hollering at me about what Justin had done. They’d gotten up to go to work, and I couldn’t figure out what the problem was— partly because

I felt like someone was hitting me on the head with a ball-peen hammer. They were trying to put us out, but Justin wouldn't get out of bed. He wouldn't even wake up. In fact—"

"Wasn't that the time," says Possum, "that you lost your contact lens while you were throwing up?"

"Oh, God, I'd forgotten that."

"Yes," says Justin. "When I came out the front door, there was Jack, down on his hands and knees on the tree lawn, for the entire world to see. He was examining his own puke to see if he could find his contact lens!"

"Oh, no, I wasn't! And you didn't see me doing it! You wouldn't have even known anything about it if I hadn't told you about it. You only think you remember seeing me doing that, and your memory has embellished—"

"No, Jack, I remember it vividly."

"Well," says Possum, between tokes, "Jack's been quite a different sort of boy this summer. Aside from maybe one or two incidents, he's been so listless and dull that I've been worried about him. All he ever seems to do is drive a taxi or sit in his room and stare at his fish."

"Is this true, Jack?" asks Justin.

"Possum has smoked too much weed, and it's softened his brain. I wish I had time to sit and look at my fish, but I've been too busy trying to get a lot of spoiled actors and decadent musicians to give my musical properly."

"And, as you can see," continues Possum, "his temper's been absolutely foul. Actually, it started when he—uh, had a bad experience with a girl he'd set his sights on several weeks ago—"

"Oh, ho!" says Justin, "So that's it! One might have guessed. Aren't women to blame for all of the sufferings of this world?"



“Shut your gob,” says Angie. “Who was she, Jack?”

“Nobody. Possum is a pudhead.”

“A poodhead!” she shrieks, laughing hilariously.

“She was this luscious Creole babe, with green eyes,” says the Possum, who’s getting pretty charged up from the brew and boo, “but he was much better off being quits with her. And then, when he got back with Janie—”

“Janie?” asks Justin, to my dismay, ‘cause I know his finding out about us, will make him say something tactless like: ‘She’s too old for you, Jack,’ and that it might make me hate him long enough to spoil dinner.

“Yeah, when he first got back with her, he seemed happy for a while; but she’s been away these past few days, and his temper’s been completely insufferable. Why, at rehearsal yesterday, he threw and smashed a perfectly good—”

“If Possum can’t shut himself up,” I say, feeling a bit euphoric in spite of myself, “I’ll tell you about the time that he told the joke about the hot buttered corn, at a dinner given for his sister’s future in-laws—”

My very mention of this piece of history puts him into a state of such uncontrollable, wheezy, stoned laughter, that between him and the Blaupunkt speakers, I am drowned out.

“What is the joke about hot, buttered corn?” asks Angie.

“Oh,” says Justin, “it’s perhaps one of the sickest jokes of all time, that boy scouts with hair between their toes tell one another, in their tents at night.”

“I want to hear it,” says Angela.

“I can’t recall it exactly, but I’m sure Possum will oblige you if he survives his seizure back there. But here is the restaurant. Hurry on in—we’re late for our reservation.”

To my relief, Justin is a complete gentleman when I am made to confirm that Janie and I are engaged. He orders champagne and grilled octopus and offers several toasts. I make a few to Polka Dot, whom I've never met, except on the phone.

"To honor!" booms the Possum, loud enough to make the other diners cluck in disapproval. "Get on 'er and stay on 'er! Hoo-Haw!!!"

I realize that Justin is delighted that he is not the only one who'll be a married man, and he keeps our waiter on a steady trot, to and from the wine cellar.

"Where is your Janie now, Jack?" asks Angela.

"Oh, she had to drive to Maryland to look after her aunt, who had an operation."

"And when will I get to meet her?"

"Well, she called yesterday and said she can't be back in time for the show here. She'll be in New York to see us, though."

"And you actually intend to make the poor thing live in the desert somewhere?"

"It's not desert—it's chaparral. She's been there; she loves it. Possum's visited out there, too."

"What's it like, Victor?"

"Well, it's on the river, so it's lush and green, with antelope and quail; you can grow anything if you irrigate. In fact, when I was out there, Philip—that's Jack's cousin—was growing the wicked weed in holes dug in the ground; but then one day, while we were in town, one of the neighbor's prize bulls broke through the fence. The thing tried to walk over the glass covering of one of the underground greenhouses and fell in. When we rolled in that evening, the sheriff was waiting with his deputies, and they threw us all in the can!"

"Horrors! Were you treated badly?"

"Naw, they fed us fresh tortillas, pinto beans, and chili, like you'd pay seven bucks a plate for up at—what's that place up on Taylor called?"

“Lopez and Gonzalez.”

“Yeah, only better. After a couple of days, I had won too much money off them at cards, and they had to let us go. Phil eventually beat that rap, didn’t he, Jack?”

“Yeah, he just had to pay the vet bills; that was all.”

During coffee and brandy, Derrick and Gwen arrive.

“Oll roight, moitey? Oll roight moi’ dahlin?” he says, tousling Justin’s hair and giving Angela a pinch, then dodging her ensuing slap.

“Well, Derrick,” she says, assuming a more “posh” accent than usual, no doubt to emphasize a more marked delineation of caste. “You appear to be sober. Are you ill?”

“No, Ducks. Oi ‘aven’t touched a drop in what? Four months, Oi reckon’?”

“Yeah,” says Possum. “After Derrick almost got neutered by a bullet down in Collinwood—”

“What?!”

“Yeah, he found out it’s different over here—”

“What happened?”

“Well, Oi ‘ad a bit of a difference with a barman one evening, when me wallet turned up missing. Oi still think the bloke knew where it was, but he took offense, somehow—”

“You called him a thieving bastard,” says Gwen.

“Well, Oi suppose Oi did, but Oi nevah reckoned ‘ed toik a shot at me. ‘E followed me into the road and ‘ad at me with a small pistol; the bullet actually passed through me trousers—just benoith the family jools—”

“No!” says Angela.

“It certainly did! Gwen was there, and Jack and Possum saw the ‘oles. It sobered me dead up, you know, and Oi knew if Oi were to stay aloive ova’ ‘ere, Oi’d ‘ave to choinge me ways, which is exactly whot Oi’ve done, innit?”

“Yes, he’s been a credit to his queen and country.”

“Well,” says Justin, “is Mr. Stress at the Euclid Tavern tonight?”

“Yeah,” says Possum, “but I think we should take Angela down to see the flats. The steel drum band is playing on the river.”

“Oh, do let’s, Justin—please,” she begs. “I’m calypso mad.”

“The Mellow Harps, is it?” Justin asks.

“Yeah.”

“Perfect! We can all fit in my car. All aboard!”

As we fly past the Allen Theater, Angela notices the Marquee which reads:

**Two Nights Only**

**BOBBY ELBON**

**In**

***A DONE DEAL***

“Joostin! Why aren’t our names up there as well?”

“Because you don’t sell tickets over here, yet.”

“Yes, but what about Jack?”

“All Jack wants is a warm place to shit, and a loose pair of shoes.”

“That’s right,” I say. “I’m on an existential plane. Be`ere now, my children. BeEr now! And make sure it’s a cold one!”

Justin, Derrick, and Angela fall to arguing about Northern Ireland. As we roll past D’Poos on the river, we see a long line out front.

“Maybe Dick’s around,” says Justin, referring to the owner.

“Dick’s never around,” says Possum. “Follow me.” As the debate about Ireland rages on, with Angela and Derrick, for once aligning as they lambaste Justin’s incendiary viewpoints, Possum wordlessly leads us on a most curious course: under a pier, over a barge and a tugboat, and onto an aged arched viaduct, which overlooks the whole of the twinkling river harbor. The weather is strangely warm for November—maybe it’s the “lake effect” or something.

“Sophomoric, nothing,” rants Justin. “If the Northern Irish would strike in ten British cities on the same day, they’d be made independent; it would be over with and save lives in the long run.”

“Bollocks!” shouts Derrick. “‘E’s a roit croizy, roiving nutter ‘e is! ‘E needs a stroight jacket, ‘e does!”

“Both of you, shut up,” says Possum, “and hit this joint. It’s got red Lebanese hash mixed in.”

The sacrament goes around a few times. The girls sit and kick off their heels. The breeze in their hair, the fairy harbor lights, and the stars make them look like the most delicate, elfin maidens. The boys have become Puck, Pan, and Bacchus. I’m not sure what sort of an oaf I am—Nick Bottom, with transformed donkey’s head, maybe. Possum leads us down and around, through a fence, and now we are in the swanky, enclosed patio of D’POOS on the river. The West Indian—Trinidadian, mostly—band is throbbing, and the women around me are in tight dresses, with bare shoulders. Justin orders up a pitcher of Sangria’ with floating fruit and limes. Soon he and Angelina are dancing about in a quite *outré* and impressionistic manner.

“Cor, look at the birds in this place,” says Derrick, as Gwen runs to powder her nose. “That one nearly popped out o’er dress!”

Possum and Derrick crane to look, and I do too. *Uh-oh, is that Pandy (Janie’s ever-gossipy best friend), at a crowded table in a far corner?* I hope she doesn’t notice me; I’m probably too canned to talk.

To the amusement of the crowd, Justin and Angela have taken to dancing on a table that is adjacent to the dance floor. However, a pair of large bouncers materialize, and they ask our friends to stop. The music swells louder, and I can barely hear Justin's voice above the turbulence.

"Of course, I must dance while I can! Soon I'll be a married man and what of dancing then?"

We hurry over to mediate, and it looks like it could get ugly for a second, but Justin eases up.

"Never mind," he says. "We'll leave. Dick will hear about this tomorrow. I'll pull the car around."

"Let me, Justin," says Possum. "You're pretty soused!"

"Nonsense. Meet me out front."

"I'll drive," I say.

"Yo're more drunk than 'im!" says Derrick, "let me!" But Justin has pushed away.

Angela runs to find Gwen; we drain the pitchers and gaze regretfully at the orgy we'll be leaving.

"Jack..." I turn. It's Sonya, in a crimson satin dress that crosses in the front and has no back.

"I've been trying to reach you," she says.

"Bullshit!"

"I have! Didn't Victor tell you?"

Possum looks uncomfortable and says he'll meet us out front. Derrick joins him.

"I'm with my friends," I say. "I have to go."

"You won't even talk to me?"

"I'm getting married."

"I heard. Where's your fiancée tonight?"

"That's none of your business. I have to go."

“Well, all right, Jack. Go then. I guess I did something really unforgivable to you. Did I lie to you? Was I unfaithful to you? Did I steal from you? I thought we were friends. I wanted to explain.”

“You didn’t try very hard.”

“I ran away from this city, Jack—home to Albany. I stopped using the stuff, and my baby is coming to live here next week. I found out why you hate Oliver Price, but he’s a distant cousin of mine. Believe it or not, I never knew him very well.

“Where is he now? Outside?”

“No, soon after that day, he got a big dose of religion and has been preaching down at the rescue mission—”

“OLIVER PRICE A PREACHER?” I shout, “NO CHANCE!”

“It’s true! You can ask Jimmy Harper, or we can go down there. But what does Oliver have to do with us, Jack? I’ve got a new job, and I was just waiting till everything was all right, to see you—I came `round your house several times, but you were never home... and...I’ve missed you so badly—”

“Oh, God, don’t cry. I’m not worth it, really. Anyhow—”

“Come on, Jack. Justin’s out front,” says Derrick. “We’ve got’a loive roight now!”

Something about Sonya’s candy red lips and exquisite eyes, and the oceans of wine make my head whirl, and I start to say, “You guys go ahead—I’ll catch a cab,” but Derrick hooks me under the arm and tugs me off through the crowd. As we burst out of the front doors and into the street, Sonya is somehow attached to my other elbow. As I am trundled into the crowded back seat, she barely has time to sit her unbelievably sultry rump right on my lap before Possum slams the door.

Justin turns and gives us a moment's appraisal. "*Here's our Jack,*" he says, with a sly smile. He makes a universal gesture to the bouncers who are making certain of our departure and roars off.

Apparently, there were, even more, doings between him and the door thugs before he got outside. "You were entirely childish in there, you know," Angela says to him reproachfully.

"I was entirely ready to leave, then the one cretin started it up again!"

"Yes, but you didn't need to pour wine on his shoes. If Victor and Derrick hadn't been there, they'd have killed you."

"Well, he had it coming. I hope they were suede. I think they were, weren't they?"

"LOOK OUT!" shout the car's passengers as he flies around a downtown corner much too fast, jumps the curb, and clips a fireplug with a glancing bash to the right front of the car. To the riotous consternation of all, he does not even stop or slow down but keeps tearing along, minus a headlight, with the loud screeching of metal rubbing against the tire.

"We can't stop along here," he says. "It's not a safe neighborhood. We'll be home in ten minutes."

"Let us at least straighten the fender!"

"Not here. I'll turn up *la musica*, and we won't even hear it!"

Hendrix peals forth with the apocalyptic but delicately ephemeral introduction to "Castles Made of Sand". Sonya's got a terrified grip around my neck. I start to apologize for the embarrassing situation—but her lips are on mine somehow—and I am long gone.

By and by, I am pulled from the sweetly insane world of whirling sparks; the cacophony of music, noises, and voices has stopped.

We stand dumbly in a parking lot near the Euclid Tavern, staring at the damaged car. It's a miracle we got here.



Suddenly a Cleveland city cop car whips around the corner. He takes one glance at us and pulls into the lot. “What’s happened here?”

“What’s happened here?” asks Justin. “Well, obviously, someone has hit my car.”

“This is your car?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll need to see your license and title.”

“What for? Someone has just damaged my car. Why aren’t you trying to apprehend them?”

The cop’s jaw sags in amazement. Then he noiselessly turns and walks to his car shaking his head.

“7-33, 7-33,” he says into his radio. “Hey Bill, you wanna hear a good one?”

Eventually, after more cops have arrived, with Derrick producing his American driver’s license, claiming he’d been driving, breath tests, and much more hubbub, Sonya and I—so deeply into each other’s arms that we are invisible—vanish around the corner to home.

## 24 — WHEN THE WHIP COMES DOWN

It is now eight-thirty AM. I've driven the cab all night and have gone into extra hours so that Possum and I could come out here to the airport to pick up my brother. We're a little late.

As we hurry along the corridor towards the gate at which his plane was to land, we can hear his voice echoing and resonating away off down the terminal.

First, it's laughing like Falstaff, then yodeling like a lake loon. Now he's burst into an aria from Gilbert and Sullivan:

*...And it is—it IS a glorious thing, to be a PIRATE KING!*

We breathlessly round a corner, and here he is, eagle-eyed, bigger than Zeus, with his customary beguiled audience in tow. Possum and I are each bear-hugged. Assuming the squeaky, funny, high voice of a dolphin or porpoise, Bobby introduces us to his newest friends and fans, accumulated no doubt, on the airplane.

"This is Myra," he says, putting his arm around a smiling creature, statuesque and lovely as a Grecian obelisk. "She grew up on Lownesdale, just three blocks from us, can you imagine? And we never knew her!"

"No, Myra certainly didn't go to Shaw or Heights High," beams Possum. "We'd have remembered her!"

I inwardly reflect that she looks like a product of Hathaway Brown, an exclusive girls' school, attended by a few from our neighborhood whose folks had been able to afford to send them away from the social turbulence of East Cleveland. My fleeting eye checks for a wedding band, dreading any antics on Bobby's part which could potentially interfere with my show. I see nothing on that finger—only discreetly enchanting emeralds on another, deep green as freshly minted bills.

“This is Peter,” he says, introducing a gawky, bespectacled, curly-haired young man, who has “backer” written all over him. “Peter is friends with the Shoffners. Hey, guys? Myra and I have to run down to the TELEX machine. Could you do me a really big favor and wait for my bags? Here are the claim checks. Peter can ride with you. Where will we have breakfast? Captain Frank’s?”

“Why would you wanna eat there? They don’t have your type of food.”

“Yes, but ...er,” he says, giving me a big wink, “doesn’t Patty”—doubtless one of his myriad femme-minions—“still work there? We’ll meet you. Myra’s car is upstairs. Hurry now, so somebody doesn’t get to my luggage before you do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Now it’s two-thirty in the afternoon. The entire company, with the exception of my brother who is forty-five minutes late, is in their places, here at the Allen Theater. We have a rehearsal this afternoon, a complete run-through this evening, and dress rehearsals tomorrow. Friday’s the show.

I am standing at my keyboard, facing our little orchestra on the raised platform I’ve had erected, over stage left of what is normally the orchestra pit. This puts us nearly level with the main stage and allows for frequent verbal and musical dialogue between the actors and the band itself—four of us sing. This rounds out the chorus. We’re able to get away with this set-up, through the simple usage of stage lighting. This allows us to be bathed in darkness, for dramatic sequences during which we are not visually required. The first things I’d done were to unplug the computerized lights and to exile the nerdy guy who ran them, to a distant flyway.

“I don’t give a flying fuck about any advertising!” I shout at Justin. “Seth”—Bobby’s talented understudy—“knows this play, like the end of his pud and is giving a marvelous portrayal. Go find Bobby and tell him that I warned him—”

“Jack, I think you should try to show some cool. Bobby said he might have to see his chiropractor—”

“CHIROPRACTOR, MY ASS! He’s with that TROLLOP he met on the plane, and either we start his rehearsal right now, or I WALK.”

Loudly our bitching echoes through the theater, but the players and orchestra members pay us no heed, so accustomed are they to our childish ravings. They merely chat among themselves and smoke cigarettes, thoroughly bored—even Seth.

Yesterday’s row had dwarfed this one, as I had physically motivated a media person I’ve never been able to stomach, out of the hall, with Justin doing everything in his power to block my efforts. For a guy who disdains football, he’d done a fair imitation of an offensive lineman protecting his quarterback.

“PLACES EVERYBODY,” I holler, turning my back on Justin.

“Really, Jack, give him five more minutes—”

“PLACES! We’ll skip the overture—first scene—one, two, a-one, two, three—”

*CALEDONIA, ON THE HILLCREST...*

*You’re the school we will always love BEST...*

booms Bobby’s lavish baritone, singing our grammar school song, from away up at the far end of the theater. Thank God.

*Girl and boy days, all are joy days;*

*you have taught us the way that is TROOOO!*

As he perambulates his way down the aisle, unwinding his scarf, he continues to sing with more and more volume and passion—our school’s song has a rather nice melody, come to think of it. He tosses aside his cap, revealing the pink and hairless, but not unhandsome, top of his head, with his remaining hair brushed forward on the sides, kind of like Napoleon. The entire cast breaks into delighted applause.

I crack open a new bottle of aspirin, wishing it were a quart of beer.

The cast crowds about their idol, asking him questions about everything from his sparse, but distinguished film career, to his well-known diets and health foods.

“Bobby,” asks Doreen, a cute seventeen-year-old, the youngest participant in the show, “is it true that you gave R. Crumb his first hit of acid?” This gets a wave of hilarity out of the Thespians, partly because it is no doubt true, being a Bobbyish sort of thing to have done; also, I guess, because it’s common knowledge that my brother hasn’t touched any alcohol or drugs in fifteen years. Flipping through my score, I wonder how Doreen would know anything about Robert Crumb, or acid, for that matter.

Her question has him off on a social dialogue: “...so even though it’s maybe not good to use drugs, the government’s so-called ‘war on drugs’ is even worse, because it keeps people suspicious and afraid of each other. It serves the same function that witch hunts did in the dark ages—keeping everybody blaming all the problems on the witches and on one another, instead of on the King and the Pope. Keep the people suspicious of each other, and they won’t suspect you.”

As I listen, I am proud of my big brother—even of his theories that he’s always trying to stuff up the butts of his fans.

Regardless, I reassume the scowl which has been my usual mask of late, and I interrupt him in mid-sentence. In a voice as nasty with sarcasm as I can muster, I say: “*Mister Elbon*, how good

of you to *favor* us by taking time out of your busy day and *dropping in to visit*. Could we *possibly* entreat you to give us your *interpretation* of a *particular role* that we've been waiting an hour to rehearse?"

I really am pissed off, and I wait with bated breath, along with everybody else, to see if this is going to escalate into Hiroshima. But to my relief, Bobby's professional side comes through; he just looks at me, wide-eyed and repentant. "Sorry man...I'm ready."

It can't be easy being dressed down by a younger brother—I only know how hard it is to take it from an older one. Bobby's tongue is as lethal as arsenic and as quick as Johnny Carson's when he wants it to be. So I feel grateful to him for not loosing it on me now, making me look even more like the ogre that I probably am.

I play through the entire overture, just for his benefit. He's never heard it before, except on the tapes from London, and I want him to hear how good the band sounds.

The guys know this piece of the music perfectly and are also intent on impressing Bobby. Hence, my conducting—which I usually pursue with my left hand or sometimes my right, depending on which is least needed on the piano—is at the moment a superfluous ornament. My mind drifts. The Sonya/Janie problem, now into its third day, has been so shocking and unfathomable to me, that I've had to brick wall it into a corner of my mind, in order to concentrate on the thousands of details involved in the final preparations for the show. At the same time, the scarlet fires of guilt and the agony that I feel in the realization that one way or another, I am going to hurt Janie again, has enveloped my consciousness like a mist of crimson blood.

How could I have known myself so little? What made me think I could ever live a normal life? Regardless of Sonya, wouldn't it only be a matter of time before I'd stray again? I could quit drinking and the stage, and become a teacher or something, but wouldn't there always be—a few

months or years from now, perhaps—another silly wench of the sort that takes an interest in jerks like me?

The idea of being a cheating husband, living lies, I find repugnant. Maybe I could be honest with Janie about the whole situation, and we could work something out—but how? She’s the jealous type and so am I. Wouldn’t it be best to call things off now? But how can I hurt her again? Especially, not after I’ve offered to be her child’s father. No, I can’t do it.

But what about Sonya? A man would have to be blind, crippled, or crazy to turn his back on a woman like her. She’s the type that wars get started over. Janie is bird watching and bed and breakfasts; Sonya is the racetrack and Rio. Jane smells like Lilies-of-the-valley, Sonya like a field of mesmeric opium poppies. Why do the deities of love have to set the stage this way every time?

Now, in spite of my lack of concentration, the guys are escalating my overture to a blood-boiling climax. Jeez! Rollover Rossini and Mozart, too! *La Gazza Ladra* or *Così fan Tutte* got nothin’ on us today.

The thing swells to its ending; blue and red lights flood the stage, and we’re into the first number which takes place in the brick courtyard of a vast tenement in Bermondsey, South London. It’s a dance piece comprised of leathered, spiked, pierced, and chained squatters in one faction, and nattily clad—but tough—Cockneys in the other. The Cockneys wear faddish sweaters, and they taunt the anarchists, calling them traitors and lazy baggage. The squatters sing back accusations that they are the dupes of Thatcher and the rich.

As the tumult rages, Alastair (Bobby) saunters to the front of the stage, appraises the fray, rolls his eyes, winks at the audience—about thirty people that Justin has let in today—and goes into “I Didn’t Make the World”, his contrapuntally sung theme song. His genius is like a lightning rod that drags electricity in from the cosmos, down through him, and into everyone present in the old

hall. He, like any of the great ones, is a medium who lets us feel ourselves, our lives. No matter that they can be vain and selfish beyond belief. We don't care; we love them because we're sure that they somehow feel far beyond our puny passions and because they *never* hold back.

So suddenly, with just his presence, all the roughness becomes smooth, all the mistakes become improvisational gems, and our rifts, squabbles, and rivalries are behind us. Our patchy script seems like Shakespeare. All of the Cain-Abel conflicts brought about by both brothers being asinine enough to subscribe to the folly that the younger should be like the elder, seem to melt away; our destinies are, at last, here to reach out and pluck like grapes—blue and sweet. The has-been and the never-was would own the world, after all. We blow straight through to the intermission, without a single pause.

I head back towards the dressing rooms. Hanging on a wall next to an iron ladder that runs up to the catwalks is an old black phone with a dial. Not knowing quite why I pick up the receiver and hear a tone. In my wallet, I find a card with a phone number... now it's ringing. "Hello?" says a tiny voice.

"Hi, are you Dorothy?"

"Yes, I am."

"Is your mommy home?"

"Yes, she is... MOMMY," she calls as the receiver clunks to the floor.

"Hello?"

"Sonya, it's Jack—"

"Jack! I've been trying to reach you—"

"I'm at the theater. Sonya, you know, it was fantastic being with you the other night, and believe me, part of me wishes we never got pulled apart last summer, but—"

"You're going to marry Janie."



“How did you know?”

“It was in your kiss, Jack, plain as daylight. And you *usually* try to do what’s right; maybe that’s why I like you so much. I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry I tempted you and that whether you know it or not, you’ve been a big help to me.

“Well, do you know what, Sonya, I’m inspired by your getting off of your habit, and I’m gonna try to stop drinking—maybe completely. It seems to be a common denominator in most of my disasters.”

“We’re coming to see your show, Dorothy and I—”

“I want to meet her!”

“Maybe someday, but for now just remember that, even if you don’t see us, we’ll be in your corner, no matter what you do or where you go. Bye, Jack.”

I slowly replace the receiver, wondering why women even bother to let us think we’re gonna have any influence on the outcome of anything.

Turning, I see a table set with catered food and wine. “What’s this?” I ask.

“Jack,” says Justin, “don’t get mad, but we’ve got to do that interview now. We really need you, but if you absolutely refuse, Bobby says he’ll do it alone.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

“You will?”

“Sure. Just let me wash up a little bit.” I head off to my dressing room. But before I can push into the little cloister that Possum and I have been sharing, I am set upon by a stumpy guy in a white trench coat with a tape recorder.

“Jack,” he says without bothering to introduce himself, “what makes you keep doin’ it year after year? I saw you play up at Peabody’s a couple of weeks ago and no one was there. It can’t be for the money.”

Who is this guy?’ I think. He is so blindingly rude that I am somehow stunned enough to answer. “No, it definitely ain’t for the money.”

“Is it for fame that you keep trying?”

“Money or fame might be nice but I sure wouldn’t know.”

“Is it for the women, then?” The guy has a pawky, teasing glint in his eye that strangely keeps me going.

“That certainly was a factor when we were startin’ out, but I’m engaged to be married. Hey, can I get in here?—”

“Is it for the sense of artistic accomplishment? The thrill of creation?”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess it’s that some, and all those other things too, but mostly it’s that it’s the most powerful magic there is; once you’ve stood next to it, it’s very hard to walk away from. Sometimes it’s too hot to hold and it can burn you bad—like the hobbit with the ring—but most of all, it’s just knowing the world needs that magic and remembering the times that it’s saved your life. It doesn’t matter who’s doing it, just so somebody is, and if I can make someone feel good for a little while, I’m sure going to. Now, EXCUSE ME!”—I push past him.

As I brush my hair in the paint flecked mirror that has likely been used by Cagney or Springsteen, there are rapid knocks; the door to the room flies open. Possum and Justin push in. What now? Possum’s brow is deeply furrowed and Justin looks pale. “What’s with you guys?”

My friends look at each other for a moment, then Possum says: “There’s been an accident, Jack. Pandy is downstairs—”

“Pandy?”

“Yeah, Janie’s friend Pandy. It seems Janie ran her car into a bridge abutment late last night—”

“What? Janie’s never had an accident in her life!”

“Apparently, there was a very high level of alcohol in her bloodstream, and she’s in critical condition in the hospital in her aunt’s town—”

“But she wasn’t drinking at all—for a year, at least! Why would she have started...?”

The boys look away uncomfortably.

“SHE told her, didn’t she? Pandy saw me with Sonya, at D-Poos, and she told her!”

“Jack, you’d better sit down.”

“What about the baby?”

“Sit down Jack! You should—”

“WHAT ABOUT THE BABY?”

“She lost the baby—JACK!”

The old mirror explodes into a million flinders of glass and wood, as I slam my fist into my reflection. Before I can strike again, I am wrestled to the floor. Life, as I have known it, is over forever.

**END PART I**

## **PART II: THE JOKER CLUB**

**A prequel-sequel in dramatic form**



## A LETTER TO JUSTIN

Rio Verde  
New Mexico

January 2, 1991

Justin Brumfield  
Hotel Avenida  
Rue du Colisee  
Paris

Dear Justin,

Good hearing from you! Received your excellent letter this morning. Seems like your name is everywhere these days. May this new year bring you continued success!

Hard to believe that more than four years have flown by. I agree that our blowup after the shows in '86 was childish. I apologize too. I've wanted to call you, but there are still few phones in Rio Verde. It would be great to see you again, although there is little likelihood that I will leave here at present.

It's interesting that you should inquire about Possum. I've just finished a highly autobiographical—self-obsessive, my students tell me—play about us when we were boys. It will never see Broadway or Hollywood, but the whelps that I teach at the tribal school, heard that I used to write a little, so I said I'd try to do something for their show. It's lucky for you that we weren't friends when we were kids, or you'd likely be in there too. I wonder which of us was more wicked as a child?

I haven't gotten around to changing the characters' names yet, so please don't show this to anybody who's likely to sue me—not that they'd get much. Hey! I *could* write you in 'cause there's a time machine involved and—oh, well—you'll see.

I wish you could see the sunset I'm watching as I write this. I'm by a little post office, down the *camino* from home; they're gonna close in about five minutes. So I've gotta wrap this up quick, but this is one of those sunsets that makes you ache and feel joyful right at the same time—I hate to miss any of it—there, it's gone now, behind the hill, where the mission once stood, and where at Easter, I'm told, they still nail themselves to crosses.

So I'll send this play, off to you now, even though it's gonna take most of my chump change to send it clear over there. I'll try to write a longer letter in a few days.

Your pal,

Jack

# THE JOKER CLUB SCRIPT

A Play in Three Acts

by Jack Elbon, 1991

General Delivery

Rio Verde, New Mexico



(Elf, Time Joker, Creamface, Smiley)

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jack Elbon: A fourteen-year old boy.

Possum (Victor Hoffsteader): A fourteen-year-old boy.

Todd Hoffsteader: Possum's nine-year-old brother.

Reverend Fletcher: A Methodist minister.

Bill Downing: A fifteen-year-old delinquent.

Dorsey Fears: A fifteen-year-old delinquent.

Sally Fears: Dorsey Fears' fourteen-year-old sister.

Elfie (Elfstone): see cover illustration, left. A well-bred British Joker.

The Time Joker: see cover illustration, second from left. Not a speaking character, the Time Joker is a noisy, blinking, flashing time machine which may be mounted on hidden wheels, and moved by ropes or poles. Or, it can be represented, via light and sound projections, and pantomime by the actors.

Creamface: see cover illustration, third from left. Not a speaking character, the Joker Creamface is best brought to life via a shimmering, light or slide projection, possibly holographic.

Smiley: see cover illustration, right. A raucous Cockney Joker.

Jack Elbon: A thirty-seven-year-old man.

Possum: A thirty-seven-year-old man.

Reverend Fletcher, Miss Hunter (voice), the soda jerk, Bill Downing's girlfriend, the old man, coffee house patrons, Skeeter, guards, courtiers, and the boys' fathers, may play multiple roles, with the help of costuming disguises.



## ACT 1, SCENE 1 — NEIGHBORHOOD BLOCK

In front of a house in East Cleveland, Ohio.

Possum: Look, you guys, we'd better try another street—somebody might have called the cops and we'll be gone geeses!

Jack: That's geeses, pudhead. Let's try this house—it looks OK. (The boys head up a path to the front door).

Todd: Where's the doorbell?

Possum: Here! (Rings bell) Now just shut up and I'll do the talkin'.

Jack Elbon: Naw, I'll do the talkin'!

Deep, raspy voice: Yes?

Jack Elbon: Please sir, we're collecting old packs of cards and other games for the Children's Home—

Voice: What? Cards?

Possum: Decks of playing cards, sir, for the State Hospital...

Voice: He said the Children's Home! Get out of here, you young knaves, or I'll set the dogs on you!

Jack Elbon: Our church group, sir, is doing this—

Voice: Tyge! Jimbo!

Vicious sounding dogs: (Recording) Woof-Grrrrr-Roof! etc.

Boys: (Taking to their heels) No!—Help!—Run! (The boys run off, stage right. The set darkens, then the house reappears, as a different house, with different bushes, front door, etc., and more brightly lit windows. The boys enter, from stage left, still running. Panting, they stop in front of the “new” house.)

Jack Elbon: Whew! I think he was on to us!

Possum: No kiddin', pudhead. Let's quit for tonight!

Todd: No way! You guys got your cards already. I was supposed to keep all the Jokers from the next house!

Jack Elbon: We'll split the ones we got already.

Todd: No chance! You guys'll gyp me just like you did with Elfie! You didn't tell me he was rare!

Jack: Possum, how come we had to bring this whimpering little brother of yours along?

Possum: We didn't! And I think we should find an open sewer to put him into—

Todd: You did have to bring me! You let me into the Joker Collector's Club and I'm gonna tell Dad about how you stole those Jokers out of their cellophane from the Hallmark store, with Uncle Dick's penknife, and about this whole scam!

Possum: Relax, Toddie! We told you we'd send the cards to charity after we take the Jokers out!

Todd: Oh, sure! What about the Monopoly game, and the dartboard, and the poker chips that lady gave you last week?

Possum: Well, that's club property!

Jack: We didn't ask her for that stuff; she just gave it to us!

Todd: Yeah, sure! To the orphan's home, you mean! Boy, Dad's gonna grill your buns and he's gonna call Jack's Dad, and his'll get grilled too!

Jack: OK! OK! We'll send that stuff too, but if you even think about squealing, the curse of Smiley will come after you. That was in your initiation.

Todd: Oh, bull! I'm not afraid of any dumb card, even if Smiley is the scariest looking Joker...anyhow I own him, so he can't hurt me! I'll use his powers against you guys!

Jack: You *did* get some good Jokers in that suitcase you got out of that old house. Hey, Todd! I'll trade you Sharpie *and* Mr. Coot for Smiley.

Todd: No way! You're never gettin' Smiley!

Possum: I'll trade you one of my nudist camp magazines—the big one—

Todd: Ferget it!

Jack: All right, you guys. This looks like a good house. There are lots of lights on. (The boys walk up the path to the house and ring the bell.)

Man's voice: Yes?

Possum: (Stage whisper) Is somebody there? I can't see through the screen—

Jack: Shut up. Yes, sir, our church is gathering old playing cards and games to send to the Children's Hospital.

Voice: Which church is that?

Jack: The Church of the Cross, over on Caledonia. We're—

Voice: I think I know where that church is...

Possum: (Louder stage whisper) Whoa! It's Reverend Fletcher!

(Jack Elbon leaps into the bushes)

Rev. Fletcher: (Stepping out onto the porch, clad in a bathrobe and slippers) Come out from behind that bush, Elbon!

Jack: (Reluctantly emerging) Er, just checking the sprinkler system, sir—

Rev. Fletcher: Who are these heathens, Elbon?

Jack: Why, these lads have agreed to help us in our scavenger hunt for items that will help the needy, sir. Those kids less fortunate who—

Rev. Fletcher: (Thundering) Crap, Elbon! Crap and corruption! I'll see that your parents are told of this! Cards are toys for the devil!

Woman's voice behind the door: Who is it dear—I mean Reverend?

Rev. Fletcher: Uh, no one, Miss Hunter—I'll be back in, in a moment to continue our, ahem, ablutions. (In an unctuous voice) Er...listen, boys, I think you've learned your lesson. Let's just let it go, at this, and we'll not say anything to anyone, hmm? Not a word!

Jack: Sure, Reverend!

Possum: You bet!

Rev. Fletcher: All right fellas, heh-heh...you're fine boys! Fine boys! Run along. (The boys head back down to the sidewalk.)

Todd: Wow, that was close!

Possum: Gosh! He sure calmed down quick. I wonder why?

Jack: I dunno. I'd a thought he'd-a-been home, at the parsonage, with Mrs. Fletcher at seven o'clock at night. I think that lady is the church secretary. I wonder how come he had that bathrobe on?

Possum: Who knows? Let's go back to your basement and split these up. I'll bet we got some good ones before our luck started going sour.

Todd: (Hotly) Wait a minute—!

Jack: Don't worry. We'll take turns and give you first picks, every round, just like the football draft.

Todd: Really? Wow! Here's a street lamp! Can't we just peek and see what we got in those old Canasta decks?

Jack: No! That's bad luck. But we must have twenty boxes in there, and a few in rubber bands. Maybe we should go to our cave in the ravine!

Possum: We've never been there, all night, before. It's not really very cold—we could build a big fire!

Jack: Hey, are you guys sure your folks think you're staying at my house tonight?

Possum: Of course they do! We had to have a big fight with ‘em to get to do it.

Jack: If I called and told my mom I was stayin’ at your house, instead of you guys coming over—

Possum: There’s a phone booth over at Miller’s Drugstore!

Jack:—we could stay out all night! She’ll be goin’ to sleep soon. She’ll never hear the phone if your parents called, and she won’t call them ‘cause she’ll be sleepin’. She said she worked hard all week.

Possum: Won’t your dad be home?

Jack: Naw, he’s workin’ all night at the lamp factory.

Possum: Well, all right then! We’ll go home and get sleeping bags and supplies, while you go to Miller’s and call your mom. We’ll meet you at the cave in half an hour.

Jack: I sort of hate the idea of lying to Mom...

Possum: Aw, come on! We’ve been wantin’ to stay all night in the cave forever! It’ll be a ball-buster!

Todd: Yeah, a golden gasser!

KABOOM!!! (The boys are interrupted by a loud explosion, equivalent, perhaps, to a couple of cherry bombs. A flash of light accompanies this sound.)

Possum: What in the holy crap was that?

Todd: The sky lit up as bright as day!

Jack: That was Downing and Fears!

Todd: Those racks from down the hill, that Victor’s a chicken of?

Possum: Toddster, the whole Marine Corps or Cassius Clay, even, would be scared of those guys—if they were smart...

Todd: I ain’t afraid of ‘em! Rocky Colavito wouldn’t be either.

Possum: That's because you're too much of a pipsqueak for them to fool with.

Jack: They're out blowing up windows again, with echo powder bombs.

Possum: What's echo powder?

Jack: They order flash powder from *Popular Mechanics*, add saltpeter that they swindle from the drugstore, and Kabloolie!

Possum: How do you know all this?

Jack: I sit behind 'em in study hall. Downing gave Miss Reznor a feel job in the broom closet.

Todd: Wow!

Possum: Jack has a huge crush on Dorsey Fears' sister!

Jack: You lie!

Possum: As if she'd go out with a flat like Jack.

Jack: She would!

Possum: Ha, ha! You admit you're in love!

Todd: Jackie loves Sally! Jackie loves Sally!

Jack: Well, she talked to me all the way home from the Collinwood game, on the bus, two weeks ago.

Possum: So? She was probably bored stiff.

Todd: Yeah.

Jack: Yeah, but at the dance, after the game, she let me double-clutch, on the last slow song.

Possum: Wow! Does she have little tits?

Jack: Yeah, I could feel, right through her dress...

Todd: Well, how come I saw her with Wilson McGruder, down at Miller's, and they were holding hands?

Jack: He might have been holding her hand, but she wasn't holding his.

Possum: Ha, ha! Yeah, sure!

Jack: Dorsey Fears fixed her up with that creep, 'cause McGruder's father owns the car-parts store. McGruder steals parts for Fears.

Possum: What creepy greaseballs!

Jack: Well, his sister's a doll—and she's smart too.

Possum: Don't go soft on her!

Todd: Yeah! Fuck 'em and ferget 'em!

Possum: (Shocked) Todd, you're too young to say those things. Where did you hear that?

Todd: From you guys! As if any girl'd even fart in your direction, hee-hee!

Possum: Hey, it's a car!

Todd: (Shielding his eyes) The brights are on—

Possum: It's them! Downing and Fears!

Todd: Run!

Jack: No, we can't. How do those guys get to driving when they're only fifteen?

(Car doors slamming, stage left. Enter two slick, J.D. types. The smaller of the pair, Bill

Downing, speaks with a flat, hard Midwest or Chicago accent. Dorsey Fears leans more towards an Italian, New York City manner of speaking.)

Bill Downing: Hey, you children are out too late. Me'n Dorsey are enforcing the curfew.

Possum: You don't own the street, Downing, and there ain't no curfew—Hey! (Dorsey Fears has sneaked up behind Possum, and grabbed the shoebox.)

Dorsey Fears: Hey Bill—ca'ds! Are you boys lookin' to have a game? Open a casino maybe?

Huh- huh!

Bill: Awww, and without invitin' us.

Jack: Give 'em back, Fears!

Dorsey Fears: How can I give ‘em back when they’re mine? (Jack Elbon steps towards Fears but is doubled over by a swift right shot to the belly. Possum rushes, rather ungracefully, at Fears, but the hoodlum all the while easily holds onto the box, under his left arm, and dances aside like a matador. As Possum passes, Fears turns and deals him a vicious kick with a Cuban heel, into the back of his knee. Possum goes down hard.

Dorsey Fears: (Viciously) Now, if we see you flats out here again tonight, you’ll be playing marbles tru’ your teeth! (He flips the box towards a rain sewer; a few card decks splash into the depths below.)

Todd: Hey, you jerkoff! (He rushes at Fears, only to be thrown roughly away. The two bullies saunter away, towards their car.)

Dorsey Fears: (Stupidly and incredulously) Ca’d’s.... Ca’d’s!

**CURTAIN**



## ACT 1, SCENE 2 — DRUGSTORE

Inside a mid-sixties drugstore. From stage right to stage left, are: a soda fountain, a magazine rack, a payphone, and a front door. The door need not be seen, but suggested as actors, except the soda jerk, enter, and exit from stage left.

Jack: (on phone) Yeah, Ma... Yeah, I realize that it's breakin' Dad's heart that his company's goin' under and that he's gotta work at the factory. But I don't wanna be a toolmaker and he really embarrassed me, having that lathe hauled into the garage, so I can learn a trade when he knows I wanna play the piano... (pause)... Well, see you're just like him—you believe anything the teachers tell you and that all I'm good for is being a slave, but I'm as smart as any of them, and you can tell Dad, that the next time he hits me...Ma? ... Mom? Aw, Jeez."

Sally Fears: (Entering from stage left) Hi, Jack.

Jack: Sally!

Sally: I guess you didn't go to the game either.

Jack: Naw, I don't care much.

Sally: Me neither.

Jack: Uh... do you wanna have a coke or something?

Sally: I'd love to! This magazine is gonna cost me my last penny but I just gotta get it—it's got Paul Revere and The Raiders—

Jack: Yeah, they're cool. They recorded "I'm Not Your Steppin' Stone" before The Monkees did, only way better. They did a good version of "Louie Louie", too.

(Jack and Sally sit down at soda fountain) Let's see—who else... Here's the Rolling Stones—I like them...

Sally: Do you? They're so ugly!

Jack: Their music is great, though. But I like soul best, really.

Sally: Me too—The Supremes and Smokey Robinson—

Jack: And Sam Cooke! He was the best there ever was!

Sally: Didn't Albert Gutswiller's getting in trouble have something to do with that song "Louie Louie"?

Jack: Yeah, he had the words to it, written down, and he kept them in his wallet. But he was showing them to somebody in English class...Mr. Shumer caught him and read it. He got three swats.

Sally: Three?

Jack: Yeah, but Shumer doesn't hit very hard. Mr. Breen hits hard.

Sally: Have you been paddled by Mr. Breen?

Jack: Once—I had welts on my legs for a week. He drills holes in his board to make it burn worse.

Sally: Heavens!

Jack: Look at The Beatles... (in the magazine)...they all have mustaches now...

Sally: My cousin just got their new album—Dr. Pepper's Lonely Hearts or something. But it's not much good to dance to.

Jack: I want to hear it. Hey—have you heard this guy yet? Jimi Hendrix?

Sally: Yes, and I think he's a lot of racket.

Jack: I thought so too, at first, but there's a radio station on FM that plays his album every night. I'm starting to think he's good.

Soda Jerk: Can I help you?

Sally: I'd like a cherry coke, please.

Jack: Me, too.

Sally: Jack, why don't you ever come to the dances? That one after the Collinwood game was the only time I've ever seen you.

Jack: Aw, I don't know. Guys are always fighting after those dances; I hurt my hand just when I was getting good enough at playing the organ to be in a band, maybe.

Sally: That's terrible! My brother, Dorsey, is always fighting.

Jack: (Looking away, coughing and rubbing his belly) Oh, is he?

Sally: Yes. Is your hand better now?

Jack: Yeah, finally, but my father won't let me take lessons.

Sally: Why?

Jack: Oh, I don't know. I've been doing lousy in school. And after my brother got into trouble, he doesn't want me to get deep into music like him.

Sally: Why are you doing badly at school?

Jack: I dunno. I'd rather read what I want to read, than their books. When I go to Swimming, guys try to drown me, and when I go to Gym, guys try to use me instead of the ball.

Sally: It's not easy being a freshman.

Jack: And the teachers are all down on me. Even Mr. Cherubini, in Orchestra, which I used to like, swatted me last week with a cello stick.

Sally: You play the trombone well, don't you?

Jack: Who in the world wants to play the stupid trombone? That was the dumbest thing that ever happened to me in my life, taking it up in the third grade. When I got kicked out of marching band and Mr. Cherubini told me I was the worst marcher he'd ever seen, I didn't even hardly mind.

Sally: Oh, yes, weren't you one of those boys who made them have to get the band picture taken over?

Jack: Yeah, but it wasn't even my idea, and I didn't even know that finger meant anything different than any other finger, especially. I just did it 'cause Claunch and Panuska were doing it—and boom. *They* didn't get booted out.

Sally: Why you?

Jack: Oh, I had demerits for forgetting my uniform, and like I said, I was not a good marcher. I'm sure it's much easier for you as a freshman, being a girl.

Sally: It isn't, Jack; it's hard. In September, I didn't know anyone 'cause we'd just moved from Murray Hill. I didn't go to Kirk, for Junior High, and I didn't know anybody.

Jack: You aren't Italian, are you?

Sally: My grandmother is, so I'm about a quarter Italian. But my first week at Shaw, these two beehives, in my homeroom class, had arranged for me to fight a colored girl. After going through, like a whole week of being scared to death—it was supposed to happen on a Friday—I wrote the girl a note and it turned out she really didn't want to fight either, and we became friends, which made me poison with most of the white girls. At least the ones around where I live.

Jack: Wow!

Sally: Yeah, They're all terrified because of a few Negroes moving into their neighborhood.

Jack: Yeah, my dad and uncle are the same way. They do tend to ruin the streets they move onto, though. There's one family, that just moved in down the road from us, but I guess they're OK. My friend's brother plays with their kids. Anyway, you finally must have made some friends—there're always lots of older guys trying to steal the ninth-grade girls away.

Sally: Well, my brother Dorsey's always trying to fix me up with his scrungie friends, but they're creeps mostly. He's so protective.

Jack: No kiddin'. Uh, Sally, I was wondering—(Horn honks, stage left.)

Sally: Oh, gosh, there he is now. Nice to see you, Jack. Thanks for the coke!

Jack: Sure Sally—Have a nice weekend. (Jack moves to the magazine rack, takes a magazine, and begins to read.)

Soda Jerk: Hey kid, this ain't a library. If you ain't gonna *buy* that Mad magazine—

Jack: All right, all right. (Jack grudgingly takes one last look at the magazine and then replaces it in the rack. He takes his gloves from his pocket, contemplatively puts them on, and then starts towards the door. As he gets there, however, it opens from the outside; Bill Downing blocks his way.)

Bill Downing: Well, well, what a small world, Elbon. How marvelous to see you again so soon!

Jack: Excuse me, Downing—

Downing: Whoa, whoa, whoa, my youth. (Easing Jack back inside.) No need to be in such a rush. I've got a proposal for you.

Jack: (Incredulously) A what?

Downing: You seem to be quite taken with Dorsey's sister, Elbon...and why not? She's a very lovely girl. A lovely girl. Believe it or not, I'm a romantic at heart.

Jack: (Snorts)

Downing: Now, the way I see it, there are just two things that stand between you and Sally Fears. Those two things are Dorsey Fears and Huron Road Hospital, which is where the last poo-bah who tried to go out with her wound up.

Jack: I remember—Freddy Hastings.

Downing: Right. His casts come off next month.

Jack: Well, I guess I'm just out of luck again. Anyhow, she's probably not interested in a freshman like me.

Downing: She is, Elbon. I know these things.

Jack: Well, that's good to hear, Downing, but I'd sort of like to keep the use of my limbs. So if it's OK with you, I'll just be running...

Downing: Relax! Relax! Your uncle Bill has it all worked out for you!

Jack: Oh, does he?

Downing: Sure I do. Now whether you know it or not, Dorsey Fears, for all his other marvelous attributes, is not an intellectual giant.

Jack: Oh. I thought he stayed in the 10th grade, two years in a row because he enjoyed his teachers and the curriculum.

Downing: No, he did not. He failed every course last spring. Such minds, Elbon, are easily swayed, especially by persons in positions of influence. Fortunately for you, it happens that the most influential person in Dorsey Fears' universe is myself.

Jack: Why's that?

Downing: I am his mentor, and if he listens to me, even he could be less than a social dud. (The door to the drug store swings open. A very shapely young blonde girl steps in.)

Girl: Come *on*, Billy, the show is gonna start!

Downing: I'll be out in just a minute, Kitten. (She departs.)

Downing: See? I know of what I speak! Now, Elbon, at exactly ten-thirty tonight, I want you to be at the corner of Lownesdale and Selwyn and I want your dopey friend—what's his name?

Hoofbladder?

Jack: Hoffstader.

Downing: Right. I want Hoofbladder to be at the corner of Winsford and Selwyn. After you see us drive by in the T-bird, get back in some bushes or somewhere, and for the next ten minutes, if any cars or anybody comes along, I want you to whistle real loud.

Jack: Are you breaking into houses now, Downing?

Downing: No, no, just some neighborhood improvement.

Jack: Well, there's no way—

Downing: Fine. I'll just tell Dorsey how you were getting out of line with Sally just now. Or you can be smart and help me out with this little favor, and I'll make sure he'll be pleased to have you take her out. You decide Elbon! You decide. Ten-thirty sharp!

**CURTAIN**

## ACT 1, SCENE 3 — WOODED RAVINE

Jack: Throw another log on the fire!

Possum: OK! (He does so, resulting in a shower of sparks.)

Todd: Whee! It's so hot we don't even need our coats on!

Jack: (Puffing on a lit object) These grapevines taste just like cigars, almost.

Possum: (Also puffing) yeah. Whose deal?

Todd: (Shuffling cards) Mine. (Todd deals two cards each to Jack and Possum.)

Possum: Gimme a card. (He is dealt a card.)

Jack: Hit me. (He is dealt a card.)

Todd: Hmmm... I guess I'll stay.

Possum: I'll pass.

Jack: Me too.

Todd: Well, I got nineteen!

Jack: I got twenty!

Possum: Too bad, 'cause I got Blackjack!

Todd: Oh, no!

Possum: Guess you've gotta do a consequence!

Todd: Well, I'm not gonna drink or eat nothin', like the last time we played this game. What was in that stuff you gave me anyhow?

Possum: Nothin'—just Tabasco Sauce and Bosco—

Jack:—and castor oil, and Milk of Magnesia. Let's see, what should he have to do now?

Possum: How 'bout if he runs down Taylor Road in just his undies?

Todd: No way!



Jack: Nah, it would take us too long just to hike up out of this ravine. What if he had to do the duck walk around the fire three times, balls naked except for his sneakers?

Todd: (Outraged) What?!

Possum: That's too easy! He's also gotta have a card between his buns while he does it, and if the card drops, he's gotta start over!

Todd: No dice! How come I always get all the hard consequences?

Possum: Hey, last time, I had to wrap masking tape around my pud, and it almost skinned me, remember?

Jack: Yeah, I almost died when James Patterson called you purple dick, at the church retreat...

Possum: Yeah, and there were girls there, too. Something like that could ruin my career!

Jack: You never had a career to ruin. Why don't we just let Todd look for more firewood when this runs out?

Possum: OK. He can cook breakfast too. I guess this game is kind of immature anyways.

Todd: Let's see what new Jokers we got, now!

Jack: Yeah! Where's the box?

Possum: Here it is. Let's see. Here's a fabulous blue Elf! Aunt Mati's bridge cards have this Joker, but in yellow; this version of him is blue!

Stage Direction: Large display of four Jokers lights up, one by one, as each is viewed by the boys; in this case, the blue "Elf". The display should be above the stage or in another prominent place. (See illustration on play's cover page.)

Jack: Wow! He's sort of an iridescent, cobalt blue!

Todd: I get him! I need him.

Possum: Uh, well... You might see one you like better...

Jack: First we get 'em all out, then Todd gets first pick in every round.

Possum: OK. Here's a really old looking deck—

Jack: It's got gilt edges.

Possum: Look at this guy!

Stage Direction: "Creamface" illustration lights up.

Todd: Wow! That's the Joker I want...He's my first-round pick!

Jack: Man! I never saw him before...he's got a smile like the sun!

Todd: Or the man in the moon!

Possum: That looks like the sunrise behind him!

Jack: He's got a long robe, like a Tibetan Monk! And funny slippers!

Todd: With pom-poms....I want him! He's mine!

Possum: I thought you wanted Elfie.

Todd: There are three Elfies now, but only one Creamface!

Jack: Only one who?

Todd: Creamface! That's what I'm namin' him!

Jack: Creamface! His face does look like the color of cream...Uh, Todd, why don't we look at all the Jokers—maybe you'll see one that you like better—

Todd: No, he's mine and so is the whole deck! (Shouting) GIVE IT TO ME!

Jack: All right! All right! Jeez!

Possum: Look at this! Here's another version of Todd's Smiley!

Stage Direction: Illustration of "Smiley" lights up.

Jack: Yeah, but it's really old, too. Look! A.A. Buggins, London. This deck was made in England!

Possum: The colors are different. His face is white, like a ghost's!

Todd: Or a dead man's!

Possum: Well, the tax stamp says 1902. I pick this one!

Jack: Who said you go next?

Possum: Well, you already said you liked the Elfie deck—Who wouldn't covet a blue elf? Maybe I'll pick *him*—

Jack: OK, OK—I'll take the blue Elfie—you get this rare, white Smiley and the old Buggins deck. He sort of gives me the creeps, anyhow.

Todd: Hey, look at this Joker!

Stage Direction: Illustration of the "Time Joker" is illuminated.

Possum: What a strange design—

Jack: It looks like a kaleidoscope—

Todd: Or a pinwheel—

Possum: It looks even older than the other ones.

Jack: It doesn't have any clowns or jesters—

Possum: If you stare at it, it looks like it's really spinning and moving...

Todd: Wow, you're right!

Jack: Or is it just the flickering of the fire?

Possum: Wild!

Todd: Well, that's the last old or rare Joker left in the box. We probably lost a couple of good ones down the storm sewer, thanks to Dorsey Fears, the goon. Who gets this one?

Jack: Let's have a Joker battle for it. We'll each put one of our Jokers into Todd's hat and whoever's gets pulled out wins pinwheel.

Possum: Elfie will represent me! (He puts a card into the hat.)

Jack: Smiley will win it for me! I'll throw pinwheel in too. If he gets pulled, we'll double the stakes. (He puts two cards into the hat.)

Todd: Come on, Creamface! (Putting a card into the hat. The stage begins to rumble and shake—smoke billows forth from the hat, filling the entire stage.)

Boys: Help! Whoa! Yow! etc. (The ensuing cacophony sounds like an entire symphony orchestra is bashing random notes, combined with a demolition derby, and a fire in a circus tent. When the smoke finally clears, the three boys are seen peeking out from behind a rock. A tall, rather nattily clad, blue elf stands by the fire, stretching, and brushing lint from his jacket. On the other side of the fire, a little distance away, is a queer sort of device with odd wheels and blinking lights.)

Jack: Who are you? (The elf is startled and does a backflip [or he may simply jump]. He speaks with a posh British accent.)

Elf: Dear me! You gave me a fright! Thank you, however, for liberating me from that card. I've been on it for decades!

Possum: What?

Elf: Yes, ever since Mr. Buggins, the designer of the royal playing cards trapped me there. He wasn't a painter really, but a magician. He's dead, thank goodness—taken by gout in '23. He hoped to come back by means of that machine over there.

Todd: It... it looks like that strange Joker we just found!

Elf: Yes, you see, among other things, it's a sort of machine for traveling through time.

Jack: What? Is that possible?

Elf: I'm here, aren't I? Its gages tell me that this is 1967. Is that correct?

Todd: Of course it is. This is 1967.

Elf: I say, lads, what about a drink of something? I'm frightfully parched.

Possum: Sure. Gosh, all we have is root beer. (Possum opens a can, with an opener on his belt, and hands it to Elf.)

Elf: Aye, lads—cheers! (Drinks deeply, and then looks curiously at the can.) Yoiks! A queer elixir, and decanter as well!

(Some of the riotous noise, that took place in the explosion, seems to echo and rebound, away off through the trees.)

Jack: What's that?

Elf: Oh, that's Rizenthriapadees scrapping with Drikuthacrus.

Todd: Who?

Elf: Don't be dense lads—the other two bally japesters whom you chucked into the hat with me and that flashing parabola—what were your names for them? Saucer of Milk and The Smiling ghost?

Possum: Creamface and Smiley! You could hear us in there?

Elf: Exactly lads! Those times, during which people have had us out of our boxes—while playing with us, generally—were the only times that we've been conscious these many years. It was in Buggin's spell. So it's really only seemed as if I've been trapped, for a few days. I say, when the ribald Duchess of Winchester left the pack laying out on her vanity, right there in her boudoir, why, ho, lads! A frisky wench, she, and me, right on top of the deck!

Jack: Could we use that time machine?

Elf: At a slight risk, lads! It is a Joker too, you know. We're all Jokers, and are consequently, capable of tricks. It can only be driven by another Joker. I shouldn't, however, trust Smiley as you call him.

Possum: He looks wicked!

Jack: And Creamface looks kind.

Todd: Like the Devil and God!

Elf: Well, I shouldn't put it precisely that way, boys, although Jokers do in a way concern themselves with good and evil. We flirt with that fuzzy edge where the two meet—that narrow area where good and bad aren't quite all one or the other. Have you ever noticed, lads, that much of the world's laughter is inspired by either our own misfortunes or somebody else's? Where those misfortunes aren't *too* terrible, is that zone which we inhabit. But Buggins, who was a madman, was in the most hellish mania of his existence when he created the smiling one. Though he'll be willing and full of promises, he'll bite cruelly lads, trust me!

Possum: Our favorite book is *The Time Machine*!

Jack: How about *you* takin' us?

Todd: Right now? Please?

Elf: Very well, lads, but not till I've eaten! This thing also whizzes about, if I'm not mistaken, here on the physical plane. Jump on and let's see if I can lift us up and out of this wooded defile that you've carried me off to, heaven knows why. (Elf boards the machine.)

Jack: OK. First, we gotta put out our fire. Todd, get us some water from that creek down there.

Todd: I ain't going down there!

Possum: How come? You skeert?

Todd: Well, they say there's a naked wild man who lives in this ravine, and he catches kids and eats 'em!

Possum: (Pensively) I've heard that, too! The naked man! That's what they call him!

Elf: Ho, ho! Trolls, then, are we on about, lads? I'd hardly thought such things would exist in this century. Still, don't worry about the fire—I think I can manage that! (The Blue Elf gives the fire a bit of a squint; it dims and goes out.)

Boys: Wow! Gee!

Elf: Ho, lads! A little time in the deck hasn't worn me out! You boys, are much better company than Queens and Knaves, I must say!

Todd: Hey, what's that? Up in the trees?

Jack: It's Creamface! (Image or projection of Creamface materializes above)

Possum: He's coming down!

Elf: He never says much lads; he just floats like a Cheshire, beaming and shimmering that way!

Jack: What colors!

Todd: What vibrations!

Elf: (Mounting the Time Joker and fiddling with controls) Oh, yes! I've heard that one! It was when I was brought out at a young girl's slumber party recently! "Got to keep those love good vibrations, happening with her—" I say, lads! Do you know where these Beach Balls and Beagles and Pelvis blokes perform? I say, what with jazz and these rolls and rocks, you Yanks and your Negroes certainly seem to have tied up the musical arts this century, haven't you?

Jack: You mean rock and roll and Elvis.

Possum: And the Beach Boys—

Todd: And the Beatles! They're English like you!

Elf: British? Never!

Possum: They are!

Elf: Well, what little I've heard has made me simply mad for more!

(The machine starts to vibrate and shake.)

Elf: Leap on, lads! Adieu, Rizenthriapadees!

Possum: Won't Creamface come?

Elf: Perhaps, but not likely! He only drops round under the most singular circumstances! He approves of you, though! Otherwise, he'd not have come atoll! Bee-bop-a loola...Shake it! Rattle it! Roll it! And aw-aaa-ay!

**CURTAIN**



## ACT 2, SCENE 1 — STREET CORNER

On the corner of a neighborhood block.

Possum: Well, Mr. Elfie sure seems to be at home back there at the pizza bar, in the bowling alley!

Jack: Yeah! Who'd've thought he could just get rid of his blue color like that, and change his clothing into that wild mod outfit, that way!

Possum: But I don't think we should have left him alone in there. What did you drag me out here again for anyhow? He was gonna buy us pizza! We might lose him!

Jack: He isn't goin' anywhere. That waitress lady who was serving him the beer was nuts about him, and he seemed to like her, too!

Possum: No kiddin'! Did you see them big torpedoes? When I get to be a famous portrait painter, I'll have nude models like her. She liked it when he asked if Blatz was a local ale and if all the Ohio birds were as lovely as she was! He said his name was James Elfstone. I wanna go back! I'm not takin' one more step till you tell me what's goin' on!

Jack: Oh, Jeez, quit whining! We're here! All you gotta do is stand here for (checks watch) fifteen minutes!

Possum: Not till you tell me why!

Jack: I don't know why! All I know is Downing told me he'd fix it with Dorsey Fears so I could ask Sally to go out with me.

Possum: What?

Jack: Not that I believe him, but it's worth a try and it's probably the only chance I'll ever get.

We're supposed to whistle real loud if anybody comes by, but I don't think we'll have to—this is a really quiet street, and nobody ever comes by. Now I only got five minutes to get down to Winsford—

Possum: You're crazy if you think—

Jack: Come on! Who fixed you up with Eileen Armbruster?

Possum: They're probably blowing up people's gas lamps and mailboxes and stuff. Hey, isn't the house where the colored people just moved into down there?

Jack: Who knows? Anyhow, our families' houses aren't gonna be worth anything if they keep movin' in.

Possum: Yeah, it'll get like down in Hough!

Jack: Do you want there to be riots up here, and trash all over?

Possum: Well, we'll probably get caught for it...

Jack: Naw, those guys always use cigarettes on the fuses to make 'em time delayed. We'll be long gone! Anyhow, you know they'll do it whether we watch out or not! Now listen, you've almost made us too late. You run faster than me. Won't you please run down to Winsford and take that corner before they come by and see nobody's there?

Possum: Well, all right. (Possum jogs off stage left.)

Jack Elbon moodily paces for a few moments. He peers up and down the road. Finally, he shoves his hands into his pockets and with his shoulders hunched up, stands facing the direction opposite which Possum ran. Suddenly, a rather fantastic-looking smiling character pops from behind a mailbox that is behind Jack. He is wearing a three-pointed hat with a ball on the end of each point. He has a very large ruffled collar and a harlequin's outfit (see illustration). A unicycle is slung over his back on a strap (optional). Unlike the blue elf, he speaks with a broad Cockney accent. His first words cause Jack to nearly leap out of his skin.

Smiley: Oll roight matey? (Pronounced moi-ey, dropping the t)

Jack: Yauaugh! (Coming back to earth) Who in the holy crap are you?

Smiley: Ho, ho lad, don't you know?

Jack:—Yeah! Of course! You're Smiley!

Smiley: Ha, ha! Roight! Smiley! I like that Oi do! Now listen 'ere, me sunshoin; Oi'd a come 'round to express me gra-i-tude earlier, but Oi 'ad to get round that blue 'un. Never the less, groitful Oi am to yer fer gettin' me ou' a that blouden' wee box, and Oi' wish you to know that Oi am entoierly at yer service.

Jack: (guardedly) Well, thanks, but we didn't even know you were in there so—

Smiley: Tut, me boyo, tut! Oi got yer drift from behind that letterbox, Oi did, and if it's blowin' things up that we're after, whoi, Oim a regular bloomin' Goi Fawkes (Guy Fawkes) Oi am, Hee Hee!

Jack: No! Please go away! They'll see you here with me—

Smiley: Not a chance, lad! Oi've only to blink me ois like this (blinks) and Oi'm invisible to all, except to you, and meself, and them out there (points at audience).

Jack: But—

Smiley: (Looking stage left, towards sounds of a car motor, and doors slamming) 'Ere then! 'Oo's that comin'? Unless O'im mistaken, that'll be yer moits!

Jack: They aren't my mates! And—

Smiley: Now you just remoin 'ere, on yer sentroi post, while Oi nip down and 'elp the lads with the foier works a'bit, unbeknownst to themselves, naturally! Hi, Ho! Just loive it to me!

Smiley zips away on his unicycle (optional) stage left. A small scooter would be another possibility.

Jack: No, wait! No! (Jack chases Smiley off stage, but comes back after few seconds, visibly agitated.) Holy Jeez! After about 20 seconds, there is the sound of the doors slamming again, and of the motor driving away. Jack Elbon starts to exit again, stage left, but stops and turns, because coming from stage right is the unmistakable whirring, whooshing sound of the Time

Joker. Jack shields his eyes and steps in that direction. The time machine glides in from stage right, with only Mr. Elfstone aboard.)

Elfie: (Calling to Jack through a small megaphone or speaking tube.) Ho, there laddie!

Jack: How did you find me? (The sound of the machine is reduced to a hum.)

Elfie: I merely spoke to this winking Yule tree, and it lit out in this direction unerringly. A canny lot, this beast! Now, then! Where is master Possum, sir?

Jack: (Turning) Oh, he's right up the street. He should be along soon.

Elfie: Splendid! I've had my grub and my suds also, as one might put it over here in Yankee-land. I was also able to chat up lovely Paula the pizza waitress, with whom I have an engagement tomorrow evening at five o'clock. So I'm entirely at your service, until that hour. (Possum runs in from stage left.)

Possum: Hey, where's Todd?

Elfie: Master Todd met with one of his school chums who was bowling tenpins with his family. He asked me to inform you that he'd decided to spend the night at the home of these folks—I seem to have forgotten their name—but his motive had to do with something called Ghoulardi, on the late telly.

Jack: Oh, no! There goes our alibis!

Possum: Maybe not. Todd wouldn't have done it if he didn't think he could get away with it. Leave it to a dopey kid, though, to go watch some dumb movie when we got this chance to travel through time!

Jack: Yeah! Let's shoot off to the distant future and see if man has probed the universe, and if the Indians ever do manage to win the pennant again!

Possum: Nah, let's go back and see what color the dinosaurs really were!

Elfie: Hold on, lads! Hold on! We'd better start out conservatively till I become adept at manipulating these controls! Let's see. I believe that by carefully rotating this gizmo to the right, and by speaking into this tube—I say, there—we wish to proceed forward one year, let us say...

Boys: Aw, come on!

Elfie: No lads! I don't wish to get too far from Paula until I'm sure of how to operate this bally jape. It is a Joker too, and capable of tricks, you know. (The time machine has begun to shake and blink and make noises. The rest of the stage scenery dims. This continues about ten seconds, at which time the machine's noises abate, and the stage lights are restored.)

Jack: We haven't gone anywhere.

Elfie: Haven't we? It's much colder, and it's snowing!

Possum: Won't the controls tell you?

Elfie: They're fogged up. I believe we have to take it on faith.

Possum: That newspaper stand!

Jack: Gimme a nickel! (He runs to the vending box) Whoa! It costs a dime!

Possum: It didn't this morning! Here! (He flips Jack a dime; Jack pokes the coin into the vending box and takes a paper.)

Jack: Wow! October 14th, 1968! It's a year later!

**CURTAIN**

## ACT 2, SCENE 2 — COFFEE HOUSE

In a coffee house circa 1968, complete with Day-Glo paint and black light enhancement. Seated at one table are Possum, Jack, and Elfstone. A couple of tables away are two men in their late thirties. One is a bit on the large (two hundred lbs.) size. He has a long ponytail, is very casually dressed: untucked paisley shirt, too short corduroys, white socks, old loafers, and he could stand a shave. His companion is less paunchy, wearing tight black jeans, pointy shoes, and a well-worn leather jacket. His hair is long and curly, and he is wearing sunglasses.

Ponytail: Look at all these hipsters! I told you long hair would be in style again someday!

Curly: That's because we're twenty-two years in the past, you pudhead! I don't think it's right that we should be enjoying ourselves, instead of trying to find a Joker who can help us to get to 1986, to help Janie before she had her accident.

Ponytail: Well, I still think the Time Joker was trying to take us back just four years, from 1990 to 1986, like we wanted it to, so you could have kept Janie from driving into the bridge. But Smiley screwed things up and that's why we're clear back here in 1968. Why did we have to bring him?

Curly: 'Cause we needed him to drive the thing. I'm glad you still had your Smiley card; we had to have at least two of the magic Jokers to put together, so they'd come off their cards. But he's marooned us here and given us the slip! If I hadn't lost my Joker collection, back in college, I could have made the trip, right away, in '86, after Janie's accident, instead of having to search antique stores, for four years, before I found the Time Joker.

Ponytail: (Reaching into a paper bag under the table and taking out two cans) Well, back here in '68, at least beer's only a buck fifty a six-pack. I'll bet we can score a four-finger ounce for twenty bucks and meet some hippy chicks who have never heard of AIDS. I might just stay here!

Why, it's been so long since I've made love to a woman without wearing a raincoat, that my pud thinks it's a stuffed sausage!

Curly: It's been so long since you made love to a woman period, you mean.

Ponytail: Well, look who's talkin'. Listen, man, I know how much you loved Janie, even though you did treat her kind of lousy, but I really think it's time you accepted her death and get on with your life. Since she died back in '86, er—should I say up in '86?—Well, whenever—all you did for four years was to blame yourself and search for the old Jokers. We were just starting to do well with the music and everything, but you let it die with Janie. Now we're back here in a simpler time, where it's easy to see what's fucked up, and when people are at least trying to care about each other a little bit, before everything turned to pure greed. If we're really stuck here, maybe we can use our music and art to make some little difference. At any rate, you've suffered enough and—

Curly: My God!

Ponytail: What?

Curly: (Taking off his sunglasses) It's him! Without his blue skin!

Ponytail: Who? Where?

Curly: There! (Pointing to a table across the room.)

Ponytail: Yeah...! It is! That's Elfie alright! Maybe the time Joker *did* have a reason for bringing us back to 1968! The blue Elf should be able to drive us up a few years, to 1986, to just before Janie had her accident—but who are those two snotty-looking boys with him?

Curly: They're strangely familiar—what is it about them?

Jack (boy): Hey, who are those two shifty-looking old guys staring at us?

Possum (boy): Good question! They've got long hair like everybody else in this place, but they're really old!

Jack (boy): Yeah, thirty or forty—about your age, Elfie.

Elf: Well, thank you very much!

Curly: I'll tell you why they're strangely familiar...those snotty-looking boys ... ARE US!! (By this time, the adult Jack Elbon (Curly) and the adult Possum (Ponytail) are on their feet. They both are a bit wild-eyed, and Possum's chair tips over backward as he stands. Beer is knocked from their table. They carelessly push their ways through whatever people are seated between, to the table of Elfie and the boys. As they come, the boys leap to their feet and take shelter behind Elfstone, who remains seated and nonplussed. The men arrive breathlessly in front of him).

Jack (man): Mr. Elfstone, I believe!

Elf: Indeed. Have I had the pleasure?

Possum (man): Don't you know us? (Pointing at the boys) We're those guys right behind you... I'm Possum, and he's Jack, only we're from 1990! I guess the Time Joker brought us back to this year 'cause it knew you'd be here. We'd only asked it to take us back four years, from 1990 to 1986. But we had to have Smiley drive us, 'cause we couldn't find your card or Creamface's.

Elf: There was only one card printed of Creamface as you call him.

Possum (man): Yeah, Jack lost his Jokers in college...

Jack (man): I don't really remember losing them...

Elf: More likely, we wearied of your sophomoreic society, and went our own ways.

Possum (man): Yeah, it's kind of a funny thing, but Jack and my brother and I, kind of forgot all about that night, in the ravine, in '67 when we put you all into the hat and met you and everything...

Jack (man): Yeah, it sort of faded from our consciousness...like a dream!



Elf: Oh, that's very common. People more than fourteen years of age, rarely have much use for clowns. Very like dreams, which are vivid in the morning but forgotten by evening, memories of such experiences die with adulthood.

Possum (man): Yeah. Then in the eighties, Jack had a misfortune and I—um—got into a little scrape too, and we remembered you. We thought that maybe if we could go back just a few years, we could make things right—

Elf: Well, I say, lads! I should be gratified to be of any possible service, excluding Saturday evening of the morrow, one year previous to this one, when I have an engagement with the most lithesome creature! Paula's her name—perhaps you know her? She puts one in mind of a fair-haired Clara Bow, you see? And—

Jack (boy): WAIT A MINUTE! (Jack [boy] and Possum [boy] have been listening to all, with gaping mouths and bugging eyes.) JUST HOLD THE HECK ON! How do we know these guys are really us? (Pointing at Possum [man].) How come he's got those old clothes on, and you (addressing Jack [man]) aren't doin' much better?

Possum (boy): Yeah, by the time I'm as old as him, I'm gonna be a famous painter, or cellist, or architect!

Jack (man): Well, you never were a very classy dresser. (Unzipping a leather pocket) Here's our Time Joker. Smiley—along with his card, I guess, has slipped away—

Possum (man): Good riddance!

Elf: (Squinting towards card): Yes, it's genuine. (Hands it to Possum [boy] who examines it and returns it to Elf.)

Jack (boy): So you're trying to tell us, that we can exist as both men, and as boys, in the same time and place?

Elf: Certainly lads! Jokers often transcend such mundane boundaries!

Possum (man): Uh, here's my union card.

Possum (boy): Cleveland Musician's Union, 1988! Expired! So you kept up with the cello all these years! You must be in the orchestra by now!

Possum (man): Uh, no. Actually, I started playin' the guitar when I was fifteen, so I could play with Jack, who got so good on the piano. We've been at it, off and on, for all these years—

Jack (boy): And you're still stuck here, playing in Cleveland?

Possum: Well, hey, we were in L.A. for a coupla' years and we've played in N.Y. and London, too, but...

Possum (boy): But you're a couple of washouts, is what you're trying to say!

Possum (man): Well, hey!

Possum (boy): How many paintings have you sold this year?

Possum (man): Well, I sold a watercolor—er—well actually; I gave it away for Christmas...

Possum (boy): What!? Are you painting at all?

Possum (man): Uh, well, I've been working on a large canvas for some little while, uh—

Jack (man): Yeah, for two years, ha, ha!

Possum (boy): Two years?

Jack (boy): (Pointing at Jack [man]) You should laugh! You need a shave! And those shoes!

Where'd you get them? The Salvation Army store?

Possum (man): He did! He's real proud of 'em too! Genuine Regals!

Jack (man): Shut up! Uh, see, in 1990, it's considered chic to wear vintage clothing...

Possum (man): He's not such a bad guy! You've got nothing to be ashamed of!

Jack (boy): I know *I* don't! It's *him* I'm ashamed of.

Possum (man): But he's you!

Jack (boy): Oh, no, he ain't!

Possum (boy): You said you went to college. Even if you are artistic failures, didn't that provide you with successful incomes?

Possum: Well, er, we didn't say we actually graduated...

As Jack (man) unzips his jacket to replace the Time Joker, another card drops to the floor.

Jack (boy) pounces on it at once.

Jack (boy): (reading) Chauffeur's license? Cleveland Cab Company!? You guys are cab drivers?

Possum (man): Well, sometimes...Cab driving's an honorable gig...You gain a lot of wisdom—

Jack (boy): I'd a' thought everybody'd be riding around in rocket ships by 1990.

Possum (man): Not hardly! Some of the cabs they give us to drive in 1990 are probably out on the street, here in 1968!

Jack (man): Hey look, maybe we ain't perfect, but at least we don't suck up to sleazy punk racists, who set bombs to terrorize people!

Possum (man): Tell 'em, bro'!

Elfstone: (Reproachfully) I say, lads, is that what you were doing back there?

Boys: (Guiltily) Oh, er, you know about that?

Possum (man): Know about it? Well, if you think we're messed up, it's probably at least half because of the stupid things you punks did, for us to feel guilty about.

Jack (man): Yeah! You emotionally scarred us!

Possum (boy): I didn't do nothin' but stand on a corner, and only 'cause Jack asked me to.

Possum (man): Yeah? How old are you now? About fourteen? Well, it must have been just last year that you squealed on this guy (pointing to Jack [boy]) and your own brother, concerning that egging incident—

Jack (boy): What?!

Elf: I say! I do wish this show would commence! I am anxious to hear those blues and rhythms!

Jack (boy): That's rhythm and blues, Elfie!

Possum (boy): Yeah! We heard these guys influenced the Rolling Stones!

Jack: Blind John and Woody? Heck, we played with them when they were in town back in—I mean up in '81, was it?

Jack (boy): Really?

Jack (man): Shoot, yeah. We've opened for all kinds of acts who come through this town and jammed with most of 'em too. Possum even recorded with 'em. I'm sure they'll let us jam with them tonight.

Possum (man): Yeah, but they don't know us yet!

Jack (man): Oh, yeah.

Elfstone: What a pity! We'd have loved to hear you lads boogie-woogie! (Pronounced: boojie woojie.)

Possum (man): Well, that never stopped us before!

Jack (man): Damn straight, bud! We'll raid the stage! Good thing we brought our axes. (From under their table, the men retrieve a keyboard and a guitar case.)

Jack (boy): (Scornfully) You can't do that!

Jack (man): Oh, yeah?

Possum: (Pointing) Hey, isn't that Blind John and Woody's drummer? What's his name?

Skeeter? Look how young he looks! Dig the processed hair!

Jack (man): Sho 'nuff! Let's check him out. Hey, Skeeter! Hey man! I played with your brother!

This here is my partner, the Possum, and he plays guitar like you never heard it played!

Skeeter: Ah hear you, baby! Come on, let's jam!

**MUSICAL NUMBER:** *Can be performed or can be replaced by recorded music played during*

**INTERMISSION**

## ACT 3, SCENE 1 — ON BOARD THE TIME JOKER

On board the Time Joker in Cleveland, after the show.

Jack (man): We didn't know that you can cruise around on this thing in normal space, without changing time!

Possum (boy): It's like a floating car.

Elf: How far away is this Corky and Lenny's place?

Possum (man): Oh, it's up the hill and out the road a ways. Wait'll you taste their corn beef sandwiches!

Elf: Yes, I should hate to embark into time on an empty stomach! That music and dancing made me ravenous! Truly smashing lads!

Jack Elbon (boy): No wonder you're still playing after twenty years! What a feeling you must get, while you're doing that!

Possum (man): Yeah, it's better than anything!

Possum (boy): How in the holy crap did you know all those fancy changes that Blind John and Woody threw at you? You must've practiced with 'em forever!

Jack (man): No way! We never practice.

Possum (man): Yeah, it's against our religion!

Possum (boy): You must have studied all their albums.

Jack (man): Nah, we never heard most of those songs.

Jack (boy): Then how could you do it?

Possum (man): We just could. There was a period of a lot of years, though, when almost all we ever did, was play. You'll find out. Hey, Elfstone, what if the cops see us cruising in this unit?

Elf: Oh, I'll just toss this switch—there! Now we're invisible to all, excepting ourselves—and them out there (gestures towards the audience).

Jack (man): (Squinting towards the audience) Who, out where?

Elf: Oh, I've forgotten; there are realms which you lads can't perceive.

Possum (man): Your English cooking's the only thing, we can't perceive. We almost starved over there, except for the fish and chip shop. My arteries are still clogged.

Jack (man): So is your liver!

Possum (boy): You guys were over there?

Possum (man): Of course we were. It's like a rule. All American artists have to go to Europe and be scorned for a while.

Elf: Yes! They come over so that we can remind them, that they are barbarians—

Possum (man): —Until out of exasperation, we begin to act like barbarians, so that no one is disappointed.

Jack (man): And while we're over there, wondering if we'll get out of the pub alive, the limey ponces, like this guy, are over here, fighting off the *shes*. It's disgusting.

Elf: Really? I say!

Possum (man): (With English accent) Whot about a point, 'old 'orse?

Possum (boy): (Critically) How come you guys drink so much beer?

Possum (man): Well, uh—Hey! There's the Art Museum and the lagoon! Zoom down in there, would you Elfie? I wanna see The Thinker before he got blown up.

Boys: Blown up?!

Elf: Are you referring to a casting of the Rodin masterpiece?

Possum (man): Exactly. See? There it is, perfectly intact!

Boys: Who blew it up?

Jack (man): We always suspected your friends, Downing, and Fears! It happened in the early seventies, I guess.

Jack (boy): They aren't our friends. Hey, do we—er—I ever wind up getting anywhere with Sally Fears?

Jack (man): I'm not givin' away anything more about your futures. You'll have to live out your lives and see for yourselves. Hang on to the trombone, though. Why, just last week, I could've made sixty bucks, in half an hour, if my lip was together and—

Jack (boy): Screw the trombone! Only geeks play the trombone!

Possum (man): Well, if you don't like the idea of drivin' a cab or painting houses, you better stay in school like we didn't.

Jack (man): Yeah, we've seen guys we've worshipped—Blind John for instance—die in the charity wards.

Boys: What?

Jack (man): Yeah. See, everybody is so greedy by the 1990s, that only the prosperous people get decent doctors.

Elf: Surely he had royalties from his records!

Jack (man): Naw, the lawyers, who are even greedier, have figured out how to get artists' money too. Everything goes to hell.

Elf: Surely lads—motion pictures, sound records, and the telly must have put a lot of us jesters, actors, and players out of business, this century.

Possum (man): Yeah, it's like sports. Millions and millions of kids hang all their dreams on being in the big leagues, and there aren't but 3,000 professional ballplayers in the whole country.

Possum (boy): Wow, you'd think that, out of all those millions, the Indians could find three pitchers!

Elf: Now correct me if I'm wrong, gentlemen. You want us to drop you off in 1986?

Jack (man): Yes, sir. The summer of '86 would get us there in plenty of time.

Jack (boy): How come you wanna go there?

Jack (man): Uh, well like I said pal, I think it's best that you guys just live your lives naturally without it all being given away.

Elf: I think the boys have a right to know! After all, there are certain risks involved with time travel. It shouldn't upset their lives *too* much. Like you said earlier, they'll have forgotten most of this in a few years, in any case.

Possum: Well, you see, in 1986, Jack was engaged to get married but his fiancée had a bad accident—

Jack (man): It was completely my fault. I didn't treat her right and she ran her car into a bridge.

Elf: But this is tragic!

Possum (man): Yes, this happened, late in 1986, and for four years, until 1990, Jack searched antique stores and flea markets, till he found the Time Joker, to be driven by my Smiley card. All we were trying to do, was to get back to 1986, to prevent the accident, but for some reason, we got yanked clear back here!

Elf: Say no more, lads. Just as soon as we've eaten, we'll buzz you up to 1986. Then we'll be on our way.

Possum (boy): Yeah, Elfie's takin' us to see Bob Feller pitch!

Jack (boy): And the Civil War and stuff.

Jack (man): (Pointing) Hey, could we take Selwyn, and then head out Noble? I'd like to see our old house like it was back then—er—now.

Elf: Certainly, my friend!

Possum: (Following a pause of a few seconds) Wait! Over there! (Pointing) Something's wrong!

Possum (boy): It's the colored people's house!

Jack (boy): It's... it's *gone*!



Jack (man): Well, that doesn't add up, because it was still here in 1990—

Possum (man): Yeah!

Jack (man): I used to drive the taxicab past here all the time!

Elf: Here comes a neighbor, possibly, walking his dog. Perhaps I can make inquiries. Remain quiet and he'll not know you're here. (Elf dismounts from Time Joker, and approaches a man who has entered from stage left, walking a dog.)

Elf: Good evening sir! I say, I notice the sign says that this lot is for sale. Don't I recall a house standing here in the past?

Old Man: Why, yes, that house burned down—oh, it must be about a year ago now. A bomb was set which blew out the valve to the gas line, and the family—Negroes they was—got burned out. They'd just moved in and their home insurance hadn't quite gone through. They were out on the street—still are mebbe. Price was their name, and they had the nicest little boy—Oliver they called him.

Jack (man); OLIVER PRICE?!

Elf: Were the perpetrators apprehended?

Man: No, the FBI was called in and they suspected the Ku Klux Klan, but so far, they haven't hung it on anybody.

Elf: Was anybody injured?

Man: No, the family was away when the fire started. But it was ruination for them.

Elf: Pity. Well, thank you, sir, and a good night to you.

Man: Good night to you!

Jack (boy): The FBI? Holy Jeez!

Possum (boy): (Close to tears) We didn't know they were gonna burn the house down! We just thought they'd blow up a window or a bag of shit or something!

Jack (man): But the house was here in 1990! I'm tellin' ya!

Possum (man): Yeah! Something's strange here!

Jack (boy): SMILEY!

Elfstone: WHAT!?

Jack (boy): Smiley showed up when Fears and Downing were setting their bomb! He said he was gonna help 'em!

Elf: Great Scott, lads! I told you he was a rummy article! He perpetuated this wrinkle in time, and now a family is homeless! In light of this, we'll forgo our late supper, and shift directly to a year and one day ago. (Rapping on the time machine) I say in there—did you get that? Three hundred and sixty-six days into the past, please! (The stage lights are darkened and the Time Joker switches to its time-traveling sound and light modes. The craft is pointed towards stage right, with Elfstone at the prow, facing forward. The other men are facing the audience. The boys are in the rear, looking backward, or stage left. They, therefore, do not perceive the appearance of Smiley, who boards the craft like a pirate. There is a brief struggle during which he subdues Elf with his jester's scepter. He heaves Elf over the side of the machine, into the darkness. He glances back at the others, who are still unaware, smirks, and begins to madly fiddle with the machine's controls. The machine's sounds and lights respond, somewhat violently. A few more seconds elapse, during which he continues to manipulate the controls.)

Jack (man): This one-year trip is taking longer than our twenty-three-year trip!

Possum (man): Yeah! (Turning forwards) Hey, Elfie, how come—HEY!!!

Jack (man): (Looking) It's Smiley!!

Boys: Oh, no! etc.

Smiley: Roight lads! Smoiley it is! You're all in for a troit because I've decided to take us back to me roightful ploice in 'istory! Me 'eyday, so to speak, as jester to the court of Duke William!

Jack (man): Where's Elf? What have you done to him?

Smiley: Oh, 'e 'ad to attend to business elsewhere. You'll be enchanted, mates, to see the age of castles and dragons—

Possum (man): You turn this thing right around or I'll—

## ACT 3, SCENE 2 — MEDIEVAL THRONE ROOM

Smiley: Can't do that—we're already 'ere!

The machine slows and its lights and sounds die. The stage lights are brightened, revealing the interior of a medieval throne room. On the throne, slouches an indolent Bill Downing, dressed in royal garb, his crown at a rakish angle. In chairs, lower than his own, sit: Dorsey Fears, other lackeys, and ladies in waiting. Smiley springs out of the machine, and bows deeply to "Duke William". The boys and men, slowly and incredulously, step from the machine, as well.

Possum (boy): Holy Crap! The boys and men are roughly prodded to their knees by guards with spears.

Dorsey Fears: Kneel before the Duke!

Bill Downing: Well, well, I thought you'd never arrive. (To Smiley) I told you to bring me just Elbon and Hoofbladder—

Possum (boy): That's Hoffstader!

Bill Downing: Whatever, whatever. Who (gesturing to Possum and Jack as men) are these reprobates?

Smiley: That's them, as adults, yer 'oiness. They was along for the roid. They can be gotten rid of easily enough if yer 'oiness desires—

Bill Downing: No, not at this time. They may be of some use to us.

Smiley: Very well, 'oiness.

Bill Downing: Here's the way it is boys. Mr. Smiley, here, was able to set me up with this Dukedom in—what year is it?

Smiley: Twelve-sixty-six, 'oiness.

Bill Downing: Right. Twelve-sixty-six. It's a pretty sweet deal, but we aren't restin' until I'm the King, see? The emperor of the world, in fact. Now you boys did all right, on your last job, so I'm

gonna give you a chance to serve me again. I'll need you to go back to the 20th century with Smiley. You'll bring back weapons and things we'll need to take over here. Bazookas and A-bombs and—

Jack (boy): We ain't doin' it, Downing!

Possum (man): Not a chance!

Downing: Sure you'll do it. You'll wind up knights, maybe. I'll tell you all about it, but first, it's time for my court jester to amuse me.

Smiley: (Striding to the center of the gathering) Just as you wish, 'oiness! You know, 'Oi was down at the lake the other day with me girlfriend—

Dorsey Fears: Oh, Erie?

Smiley: Well, yes, she is a li'ul stroinge at that! (Pauses for laughter from Duke William and his court.) But lads, let me tell ya—the birds I saw at that beach—Woi, Oi seen girls, Oi did, what wuz *just loik this!* (Here Smiley, with fingers outspread, and with palms held several inches in front of, and facing his chest, indicates a busty woman.)

Dorsey Fears: Oh, big torpedos, hey?

Smiley: No, no. (Turning palms of hands outward, fingers still stiffly spread) Arthroitus, they 'ad— in both 'ands!

(Laughter, from “Duke” William, Dorsey Fears, and the court, only.)

The time travelers have been herded and repositioned, a little way towards stage right, where there is a long banquet table. Possum (man) has surreptitiously picked up a pie, or some manner of large, squashy pastry, which he holds behind his back.

Smiley: What do you call a one-legged wop, yid, woolywog, slant, bohunk, frog, paddy, or any other unBritisher (beaming at Downing and Fears) exceptin', 'o course, our esteemed American cousins?

Bill Downing: Uh, what?

Smiley: SHIT ON A STICK! (As the courtiers guffaw, Possum slings the pie at Smiley, who catches a load in the face. The other prisoners are quick to catch on; more pies score hits upon the “Duke” and his court.)

Smiley: SOIZE THEM! SOIZE THEM! (The four are subdued by the guards.)

Bill Downing: Take them to the dungeons!

**CURTAIN**

## ACT 3, SCENE 3 — DUNGEON

Inside of a dimly lit stone dungeon.

Possum (boy): The light is getting dimmer. Night must be coming again.

Jack (boy): How long have we been in here now?

Possum (man): About a day and a half, I would think (looks at his wrist). Shucks, my watch stopped!

Possum (boy): You forgot to wind it?

Possum (man): It's got a battery in it. It doesn't need winding.

Jack (man): Till it runs out, you mean! See? They started making everything for shit, towards the end of the century.

Possum (man): Will you get off of that stuff? I'm sick of your negativity. Don't listen to him guys. We've seen a lot of good things happen in our lifetimes, too.

Jack (man): Like what?

Possum (man): Well, we aren't enemies with Russia anymore, and there's no more iron curtain—

Possum (boy): Really?

Possum (man): That's right, and it's amazing that the world made it to 1990 without anybody using atomic weapons on anybody else. Now they're starting to scale back on them, too.

Jack (boy): Yeah, I thought the world would've gotten blown up, way before then.

Jack (man): Well, tell 'em about how we're turning the third world into our slave labor colonies and cesspools! Tell 'em about the race riots in Los Angeles!

Jack (boy): That's no big change.

Possum (boy): Yeah!

Jack (man): I guess not. Ya see, after Janie's accident...I mean it was my fault for not marryin' her, years earlier, when I had the chance, and for cheatin' on her too—Oh, God, Possum's right. I'm just bitter and guilty and worthless!

Possum (boy): No, you're not! We're gonna save Janie, and we're gonna get those peoples' house back, too!

Jack (boy): We need a plan.

Jack (man): We can't even try to jump the guard, 'cause they push our food under the door.

Possum (man): It's my fault. I should never have thrown that pie. We should have pretended to go along with their scheme. Some of us could have gotten back to our time, and then rescued the others somehow.

Jack (man): And that's exactly what we're gonna do! It was brave of you guys to stand up to them and refuse to go along, but we're gonna just have to *pretend* to play ball with them and, then, sabotage their plans. We—

Possum (man): SHHHHH! (Whispered) What's that?

Jack (man): (Whispered) It's a key in the door!

Possum (man): snatches up a heavy chamber pot and hastens to a position behind the door. He holds the item above his head, with both hands, prepared to bring it down on the head of whoever enters. He holds back in mid-strike, however, upon perceiving that their visitor is:

Sally Fears: (Dressed in a robe with a hood, which she allows to fall back) Jack? Possum?

Jack (boy): Sally!

Possum (boy): What in the holy crap are you doin' here?

Sally: Oh, I don't know why I let myself get dragged along to this God-forsaken century. I thought it would be fun, but the only thing they've been interested in has been waging war. I



came as soon as I heard they had you down here, but now things have gotten really bad. The time machine is missing!

Men and boys: What? Missing? etc.

Sally: Yes, and they're all blaming each other—oh, it's awful! But come on—we've gotta get out of here—there isn't a moment to lose! (The company hastens towards the door, but two guards with swords bound into the cell. They hold their weapons to Jack's (man) and Possum's (man) throats. Smiley enters at their heels and snatches the keys from Sally.)

Smiley: 'Ere now! The only ploice that you lot are 'eaded is to Dragon Mountain! Oi reckon you'll make a tasty dinner for that old worm!

Sally: William will have your head for this!

Smiley: William and Dorsey are already being served up as appetizers. You lads will be the main course, and you, Ducks, Oi should think he'll quite fancy as desert! (Bellowing) Toik them awoiaaaaaaaaaay!

**CURTAIN**

## ACT 3, SCENE 4 — DRAGON MOUNTAIN

On Dragon Mountain. Chained to one tall tree stump or post, are Dorsey Fears and Bill Downing. Chained to other dead trees, are Jack and Possum, (men and boys) and Sally Fears. On a high outcropping or cliff, to extreme stage right, stands Smiley, his scepter in one hand, and a torch in the other. It is night; there is possibly some thunder and lightning. Smiley is making weird circling gestures with his torch and wand. He is chanting some strange sort of incantation (adlib).

Dorsey Fears: (Crying and blubbering) Oh, please Mr. Smiley—please don't feed me to the dragon—I'll do anything you ask me to—

Bill Downing: (Whining and whimpering) Let's talk about this, can't we? We don't know where the time machine is...

(Smiley continues chanting, obliviously.)

Jack (boy): I can't understand how this could be the end for us—you guys (Possum and Jack, men) are proof that we live plenty of more years.

Jack (man): Well, look at the bright side. At least you kids won't have to suffer through the disco era!

Possum (man): Hey, that's right! These lucky guys'll miss out on Madonna!

Jack (man): And Salad Shooters!

Dorsey Fears: (Sobbing) I don't wanna die! I'm too young and too handsome!

Possum (boy): Have you looked in a mirror lately?

Dorsey Fears: Well, I'm too young—

Sally: Oh, stop blubbering, Dorsey. There's no such thing as dragons.

Jack: (boy): Well, somebody'd better explain that to that one!

A roar is heard, off of stage left; a red glow is seen from that direction, also.

All: Adlib: general consternation.

BANG! BANG! (Loud shots ring out, off stage left).

Possum (boy): (Looking) It's Elfie! And Todd....and Creamface...

Jack (boy): And...and...OUR DADS!

Jack (man): Our Dads!?

Entering from stage left: two fiftyish men with short-cropped gray hair. They are wearing WWII bomber jackets. One is brandishing a German Luger, the other a shotgun.

Mr. Hoffstader: Nice shot, Bob! You winged him! He's on the run now!

Mr. Elbon: (The dad with the Luger) I haven't got to use this baby since I acquired it in '44!

Following the dads are Elf and Todd. Creamface descends from above and shimmers towards Smiley who has been madly leaping and gesticulating while directing a string of nearly unintelligible gibberish towards the former (adlib). Suddenly, part of the cliff that Smiley stands on gives way; he falls, out of sight, stage rear, with a blood-curdling scream that echoes for several seconds from far below.

Mr. Elbon: (Surveying the captives) Well, well! What a pit-i-ful crew we've got here, no Carl?

Mr. Hoffstader: I'd be inclined to leave 'em right here, Bob, only the old lady would never let me hear the end of it.

Mr. Elbon: (Kindly, looking at Sally) Let's get this poor thing's chains off first.

Mr. Hoffstader: I should've brought my bolt cutters—

Elf: Excuse me, sir, I think I can manage. (Elf closes his eyes and concentrates. The chains of all the prisoners fall to the ground.)

Mr. Hoffstader: (Taking a canteen from his belt and handing it to Todd) Give her (Sally) some water, son.

Mr. Elbon: (In a loud voice) DOWNING? FEARS? FRONT AND CENTER! (Bill and Dorsey, heads hanging, come forward). I've spoken with your fathers. Arrangements have been made for you to spend the next twenty years at the Ohio Industrial School for Delinquent Boys. Your cars have already been sold.

Bill Downing: But—

Mr. Elbon: You can go there or stay here.

Dorsey Fears: We'll go! We'll go!

Mr. Elbon: Mr. Creamface will deliver you directly to that institution now. The time machine (pointing stage left) is right down there. (The two boys shuffle off, to stage left. Creamface drifts off in that direction as well.) JACK! VICTOR! Front and center! (The boys fall in.) Mr. Elfstone has explained to me that you need to return to the Friday night in 1967, when all of this started, to amend certain wrongs. You will do this, and you will then report to your respective homes, to which you are confined until further notice.

Possum (boy): Well, hey—

Mr. Hoffsteader: One more word, budzo, and you'll not only be grounded, but you'll spend the rest of your life, scraping and painting the garage.

Elf: (addressing Jack and Possum [men]) We shall also deliver you gentlemen, as arranged, to the summer of 1986, I believe it was...

Jack, Possum (men): Hooray! Finally! etc. (adlib).

Elf: ...so that you may reverse your misfortunes.

Mr. Elbon: Now, we've decided to stay here for a couple days, to see the sights.

Todd: Yeah, *we're* gonna see the sights!

Mr. Elbon: Very well, then. Straight home! (He, Todd, and Mr. Hoffsteader, tramp off—stage right.) Let's find a couple of Budweisers, Carl.

Mr. Hoffstader: Lead on, lead on!

As he follows the dads, Todd turns and sticks his tongue out at Jack and Possum (boys). Possum (boy) shakes his fist at his younger brother.

Elf: You lads can thank Master Todd for your rescues. It was he who informed Creamface when we turned up missing. Creamface then summoned the Time Joker on its peculiar wavelength—

Jack (man): So that's where it went!

Elf: Exactly! They then trolled the depths of time to recover yours truly, who, as you recall, was left adrift in the ages by the, presumably, late Smiley.

Possum: Wow! What was that like?

Elf: It wasn't all bad, lads! I washed up in the year 1379, in a Persian Harem! I was forced to disguise myself as one of the maidens, but in the evenings, after the eunuchs had retired—well, lads, you can imagine! One hundred lonesome concubines! But then, the Pasha began to cast his gaze in my direction, so you can well understand my relief at being rescued! By that time, Master Todd had seen fit to inform your parents of all the particulars, and your governors were adamant about accompanying us back to this century. Fortunate fellows, you are, I'd say, to have such fine families. Ah! Back already!

The Time Joker, empty, slowly drifts in from stage right. Elf takes over the controls, and the others climb aboard also. Creamface has also reappeared.

Sally: Thank heavens! I just can't wait to get back to see Wilson!

Jack (boy): Who?

Sally: Well, you know Wilson McGruder, don't you? He asked me to go steady with him at the dance that you didn't want to go to, and I said yes!

Jack (man): Wasn't he the solo trombone player in the school dance band?

Sally: Yes. Daddy always played me Glen Miller and Tommy Dorsey records when I was little.

Trombone music always makes me go all squinky inside!

Jack (boy): Well, holy rubbers! Who can figure girls?

Jack (man): Get used to it, boy.

Possum (boy): Well, we're really gonna miss you guys!

Jack (boy): We sure are! I feel like we're losing our big brothers!

Possum (boy): You too, Elfie!

Elf: Well, I suggest that we take care of our respective errands, then rendezvous with all of them (gestures towards the audience) for rolls and rocks and blues and rhythms, directly following the curtain!

Possum (man): All of who?

Jack (boy): I thought we were grounded!

Possum (boy): What curtain?

## **FINAL CURTAIN**

## A PHONE CALL FROM POSSUM

I'm outside, by the *acecia madre* (irrigation ditch) when the new phone rings. I run inside.

Where is it? I'm gonna have the accursed thing taken out, I swear to Christ—destroying my serenity. “Hello?”

“You rang?”

“Possum!”

“So there are finally phones in Rio Verde.”

“Yeah, I was teaching at the reservation for the last two years, but I got busted by a new reg. that says you that you've gotta have a college degree to teach, even if that means the kids don't get taught. I had to have this damn phone put in, so I could start being a substitute in the public school system in town, maybe. Last week, I enrolled in the community college, down there.”

“Well, I just finished reading your play...it's not too bad—how did you dream it all up?”

“I don't know, really. Dream is a good word 'cause, when I write, I don't use my conscious mind much, beyond asking: what if this or that might have happened? See, after Janie miraculously pulled out of her coma, it seemed like such a miracle, that I've felt, since then, as if something magic could have been involved.

“And after all of that, you and Janie couldn't even stay married for two years!”

“Yeah, well, I've just got a crippled personality, I guess. But she got to always being concerned about car insurance, nutrition, twelve-point programs, spiritual development, credit cards, medical coverage, and all of those types of things that basically leave me cold.”

“I heard she even had you wearing boxer shorts.”

“WHO TOLD YOU THAT?”

“Your niece, Lucy.”

“That tapeworm! I'll have my vengeance! I'll neither eat nor sleep until—”

“Well, Jack, never mind. Maybe it’s a good thing you’re unemployed. I’ve been in touch with Derrick and Angela, who’ve been living in Chicago.”

“Wow, I almost fell over when I heard that those two were getting married.”

“Yeah, she carried him over the threshold. Anyhow, I’m going up there, and we’re going to get a thing together to go on the road in the spring. They’ve got it booked through Canada, and who knows? It would be great if you came along...I know they’d like to have you—can you come up next week?”

“I’d love to man, but I just paid all kinds of money for tuition and these books—”

“Oh, brother—the college boy.”

“I’ve gotta eat you know, and I’ve gotta see a dentist too, somehow...hang on, would you?... Victor, there’s a damn goat in my winter garden and he’s gonna destroy it—I’ll call you tomorrow.”

\* \* \* \* \*

In the evening, I flip through my new thirty-two dollar textbook titled: *Psychological Perspectives in Childhood Exceptionalities*:

*To classify a newly observed child according to the multidimensional system, the child’s raw syndrome scores are converted to T scores through the standardized Bristol Social Adjustment Profile (BSAP; McDermott, 1983) shown in Figure 5.2. The youngster is classified to whichever typology in tables 5.3 and 5.4 the child’s profile most closely approximates...*



I slowly close the mighty volume. Away down the river comes the whistle of the 9:05—a high-ballin’ flyer to some promised land. Kingdoms glow among the cedar coals in my woodstove. I reach for my new telephone and push 0.

“Operator, I need long distance to Chicago, please.” A telephone rings.

“ello?” answers a singular voice.

“Yes, sir. I’m told that you might be in need of an experienced ivory bender...”

**THE END**

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