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A Novel

A Desecrated Heart

1

A boomerang—the idea is you throw it as far as you can, and see if it comes back.

She hadn't noticed me at all, but it didn't matter. She wasn't that attractive—somewhere between skinny and trim—and no tits. Hers was a face that could be described as exotic, but not pretty or even feminine. Maybe a bit hard.

She moved around the diner efficiently. I sat on my counter-stool, swiveling for an occasional look, becoming more interested. Her banter with customers was crisp and friendly, no bullshit, and she was funny. She was easy fun. But she controlled the action—a formidable woman.

I did notice that under her faded denim there was a fine ass. That always, for me, made up for no tits. Even with my active reassessment of her, she paid me no mind. Many times I'd sat up to the counter at Buddy's, when she hadn't been here. Now, I needed to quit looking, so I honed-in on the menu while I waited for Percy to show up. The place was busy—I could see Buddy (Percy's brother who owned Buddy's) moving around in the back of the kitchen. It's interesting how two brothers can be that different. Buddy was meant for this place. Their parents had passed on and left them the cafe—and the dry cleaners next door. There was a sister somewhere who I didn't know, but the division of labor, not counting her, had been pre-ordained. Buddy had been running this breakfast nook, which had been cut into a small triangle of land where two roads met at a 60 degree angle, for as long as I can remember, and he wasn't that old.

It was the idea of Percy running a dry cleaners that defied reason. Percy was a quirky guy, who spent most of his time with Phil—they worked on an aircraft assembly line and they lived for motorcycles. Girls too, but mostly motorcycles. I'd been the main man in town on my new 65 Triumph 500, until that day when they came roaring up to Winchell's on brand-new 66 Triumph 650 Bonnevilles—with twin carbs and white tanks with orange racing stripes. These bikes weren't cheap, maybe \$1500 out the door, and the best there were. My single carburetor with the green tank reign was over, but I had two new friends.

Well, I sorta had friends—I was more curious about life that they were, but in other ways I couldn't keep up. They worked a five-day week, and on Friday, after work,

they would do something like a ride to San Francisco and back—800 miles. They had a theory that the cops travelled at 90 so they rode 95. But I neither wanted to ride north at 95 (that would have been pushing my 500), nor did I want to do that over two days. We were three motorcycle guys—but I was different. They would head out in the early afternoons to work, and I would hold court out front of Winchell's.

For me, life was paradise. Half the guys I knew were worrying about a coming draft for Vietnam, and I was living out my life in front of a donut shop. I had gotten out of the Navy, just as this IndoChinese bullshit was ramping up, so I figured I was fine as long as I got no mail from the government—which I wouldn't open if I did. All the government had was my folk's address. Other than that I was in the wind. With a GI Bill that paid me to go to school, I really didn't have to work. Well, I didn't have to work as long as I lived in Judy's grandma's little shed on the alley, more of a big dollhouse—just big enough for a twin mattress. I planned on going to school, but just enough to get my money, then laze about along the lagoon, or cruise up and down 2nd Street.

To live in the shed, Judy had to be part of the bargain. She hadn't been with a guy before, so anytime grandma was out, we went at it in her room or on the couch. It was late summer and living in the shed was fine; sometimes I'd meet a girl, take her for a ride on my bike, and along the way show her where I lived. This was 1966 when living in a shed along an alley was just bohemian enough for this little college town. But I didn't want to be with Judy, and summer would soon become the coolness of fall. I needed a change of lifestyle.

Percy finally showed up and slid onto the barstool beside me. I liked that his eyes twinkled.

'Sold the Triumph,' he said.

'What?'

'Yeah, I ordered a Sportster today; I'm gonna tear it down completely and make a drag racer out of it. I got it figured where I can triple the horsepower.' This was something that I had no feeling for. I was social; I loved hanging on 2nd Street. Dabbling in school. I liked riding, though I really hadn't done that much. And I liked the girls. The idea of tearing apart a brand-new Harley to race at Lions Drag Strip didn't do it for me. I take that back—I always liked the idea of those lake racers out at Elsinor—you know, build up an old flathead Ford V8 and transplant it into a model A. But that would be social; something to do with a friend.

And here was our waitress, calling Percy by name, which brought Buddy out from the back. I don't know Buddy that well, but he slapped me on the shoulder as Vel (her name tag) was asking Percy what he wanted to eat. He took a long time, asking questions of his brother and Vel (Vel. What is that, Velma?). I'd heard the name before but I think it was something from my mother's childhood.

The three of them, Vel, Buddy, and Percy, consulted over his breakfast until they came up with eggs Florentine (which was not on the menu), with a half order of slab bacon, a half order of sausage, home fires, and rye toast—and a large fresh-squeezed orange juice (I don't get how people go off to some boring job, every day, then into the night for overtime, only to blow the money on things they really don't need. Maybe they don't see the

jobs as boring). Once Percy's order was made, Buddy and Vel went their separate ways, until Buddy turned back to me: 'You not eating?' I'd been sitting there half an hour waiting for Percy, and I wasn't eating? I ordered a Number 2 with hash browns, and Buddy went back into the kitchen. Vel, passing along the business side of the counter, gave Percy a look—a look that maybe had more to it than breakfast—Percy who would be threading and torquing nuts later today at Douglass Aircraft, while I would be at the lagoon musing on the wonder that is life. Vel and Percy? There's a combo of names for you—then again, there may be the greatest love song of all time that came from a Percy.

And Vel, later today, Vel would be somewhere that the Vels go, but wherever that is, even for a prize of a new Porsche, she would not be able to pick me out of a police line-up.

Late in the afternoon, I rode down to Huntington Beach to visit my friends, Robert and Sid. Robert and I were watching 'Vertigo' on TV when Sid came in with a large pizza with everything on it. I was starving.

A few minutes later, Vel walked in, unannounced. It had been maybe seven hours since she had been my waitress. I didn't say anything—I just watched. I didn't want to consider her being here because there seemed no connection with reality that could explain it—and that was something to just be with. Sid was sitting on the couch, with the open pizza box between him and Robert (no plates or paper napkins—these were bachelors—but if you dropped something, Robert would let you know). So that Sid could sit down to eat, I had sat down between

them on the carpet, on a longish outdoor garden cushion, decorated in white bubbles and blue seahorses. Robert offered me a Pendleton blanket, which I accepted. It was getting cool in the evenings.

'You okay if we eat some pizza and finish this movie first?' Robert asked of Vel.

'Yeah, fine.'

'You want some pizza?' She did—said she hadn't eaten anything today. She took a slice and sat down, almost against me. Still nobody said anything. No introductions. I had spent some of my morning with, and now some of the evening with this woman and we had not made eye contact. We ate our slices and watched Jimmy Stewart be afraid of heights. There's something easy about Hitchcock films—they're thrillers, but you are not quite thrilled. Well, maybe when the bulk that is Raymond Burr turns and looks from the apartment across the way and sees Jimmy in his *rear window*; that was kinda real—kinda frightening.

Vel asked if she could have some of the blanket. As she pulled it over herself, her hand came across mine and I took it, and neither did I let it go, nor did she pull it away. We sat like that a few minutes.

'How was your breakfast?' She had seen me.

'It was good.'

'I'm surprised to see you here.'

'Me, too.'

'I didn't know if I would see you again?'

'I didn't know you saw me at all. It seemed you only saw Percy.'

'I didn't want to be looking at you.'

'Oh my god.' exclaimed Robert.

'What?' she asked.

'Nothin, I feel like this is where I came in.' She looked at me inquisitively but I didn't say anything.

'We gonna rehearse, Vel, or have you found something better to do?'

'I'm here to rehearse, Robert.'

Robert and Sid soon headed down the hall to the rehearsal space, but Vel stayed.

'Are you going to stick around while we rehearse?'

'Should I?'

'Yeah, maybe you should.'

2

A wool blanket, a pizza, and thou.

Over electric guitar and bass coming down the hall, I moved to the couch and ate the last slice. I could hear Vel singing. Not bad. They covered songs I knew, and some I didn't. Maybe originals.

I hadn't had much luck with women this summer: there'd been a few, but nothing that went further than sex, and those didn't last long. I don't know how to behave with women, so I steer away from the ones who seem out of my league. I only got involved where I don't have to risk because I don't want them anyway.

There had been one though... Riley Anne Ryan. A nurse, and somehow I ended up having the start of something with her. We were both going to Long Beach State,

and I somehow ended up at her place, with a dozen books from the campus book store, for a full load of classes having to do with literature. Books, that a couple of days later, I sold back to the bookstore and dropped out of school. Riley and I had a last talk—one of the doctors she worked with had had a phone installed in her bedroom, without her knowing, while she was at work, and how cool she thought that was, and would I be willing to support her? Riley, lovely Irish Riley (the doctor, Mats, told her she was built like a brick shit-house). Riley, with her little bug-eyed Austin-Healy Sprite. I could no more consider supporting her than could I envision her giving up a cool doctor who apparently would support her, and who had installed a telephone in her bedroom. Riding towards Huntington, I'd thought about Riley, with nostalgia, and the emptiness of having nostalgia about nostalgia. But at least Riley knew who I was.

I'd left, early in the afternoon, and headed down to Huntington Beach, a half hour south, to visit Robert and Sid. I needed a place for the winter and we'd talked about their laundry room, a warm place where I could live without Judy.

The beach cities were a splendor in the 60's—each distinctly unique. The coast was free of sprawl and each town was separated by distance. I rode out of Belmont Shore, across the bridge to Naples, which is all canals and watercraft, then a turn south along Pacific Coast Highway, down to Seal Beach, where my friend Jack worked the nightshift at the Standard Station.

Sometimes, I'd ride down to Seal Beach and walk the pier—or I'd just walk through town. The beach towns

were lush with plants that flourish in an ocean proximity. When I'd been in the navy, stationed in Sicily, I'd gotten used of species that grew in the kind weather patterns of the southern Mediterranean—the plants in Seal Beach were a little like that, compared with places I'd stayed in Oregon that had a hard winter. Here, lining the sidewalks were palm trees, and in planters in front of shops, were azalea and birds of paradise—with orange and black rooster profiles.

There's something about the ocean—it's never the same. Walk out on the pier a hundred times and each time it's different. Always the surfers, and Asian families fishing, but the ocean and the sunsets, are in constant flux.

Then down through Surfside, a gated community with inexpensive rents, through Sunset Beach where I would sometimes visit Tony and we'd walk along PCH after dark to Surf Liquor to get a frozen orange juice bar for five cents. There were no cars at night—a full five minutes could pass, and no car from either direction on the coast highway. Sunset Beach is also where my friend Jack lived, right on the beach, and where, each month, his landlady tried to sell him the rustic house he rented, for fourteen thousand dollars.

I kept along past Huntington State Beach that ten years earlier had been known as Tin-Can Beach, where hundreds of people lived in cardboard and thrown-together shanties. I don't think they were especially poor, (maybe they were), but they lived there, or they just lived there sometimes, and nobody bothered them.

Then up the hill and over the bluff into Huntington. I turned before Main Street and made my way through back streets to Sid and Robert's who weren't home, so I

plopped down on the old coach out front and watched the world go by—though not much of anything went by. Soon, Sid rolled up in his 1950 Plymouth wagon, which six or eight of us had painted by hand in the alley (some of it was a mural). Sid was the merchandizer for a bunch of records stores—Licorice Pizza, for whom he drove all over Orange County and Los Angeles with a Plymouth station wagon full of records.

Sid was a white guy with a big afro-natural, who dressed a bit wild (went with the record business), and he'd come home with albums of new releases, on which I remember hearing for the first time, music I loved for the rest of my life. One week it was 'Old 55' by a young Tom Waits. If you could play the groove off a vinyl—I'd a done it.

Sid went out to his other job, where he was the manager of a Pizza Man. He was a man of inexhaustible energy. When Robert came home, I was wondering if he would be pissed at me because the last time I'd been here, an old girlfriend of his was here, and I'd ended up under a blanket with her while we all listened to music—only she and I had the blanket over our heads. When she left my room the next morning, Robert came in and shook his fist at me—but good-naturedly. She was for sure not into Robert—you know how it is.

The music down the hall stopped and I heard some talking that I couldn't make out. Soon Sid came out, said he was tired, went into his room and closed the door. Robert pattered for a few minutes—he's a putterer, and without saying anything more, he went to bed. I sat a couple of minutes, then went down the hall to the rehearsal room

that looked out on the back yard, and used to be the living room. There was a big coach along one wall and Vel was sitting on it.

'How did rehearsal go?'

'Hard to tell—I can't get enough away from my ego to know. How did it sound?'

'Good. Were some of those songs original?'

'Just the bad ones,' she said with a laugh. 'Can you give more of an assessment than good?'

'Well yeah... The covers sounded good and I hadn't heard the others before, but at the other end of the house, I couldn't make out the words.'

'And what about me?' She was nothing, if not direct.

'You were good. When you started singing it sounded good.'

'You do say good a lot. But it doesn't tell me anything.'

'Well... Now you know something of how I felt when you were my waitress.'

'That was different. I didn't want to talk to you.'

I didn't know what to do with that so I let it go because I knew that saying the wrong thing or bringing up any question or doubt might make her think she should not have said I should maybe stay.

'Anyway, it sounded good.' We both laughed.

'Are you thinking of riding back to the Shore? Isn't it kinda chilly out there?'

'I was planning on riding back and it is kinda chilly out there.' I thought about my shed in the alley, with no heat source except Judy who might come a'knockin.

'Well, I'm staying here tonight,' she said, 'on this pull-out couch. I don't feel at all like driving and I already asked Robert. I was wondering if you maybe wanted to

stay with me? I'm not inviting you to anything more than that, but I was just wondering.'

3

Relationships between men and women have an infinitely better chance of success if both parties first admit to the seeming impossibility.

There was something I remembered about that living room that was now the rehearsal space. The windows faced due east, and the morning sun came streaming in. The windows were shut and by mid-morning the room was filled with dead, warm air—like waking up in a tent where you'd slept an hour too long.

I sat up and looked around; I was alone. No women's clothes strewn about. No sign of her. I got up and looked for a note. There was none. I put on my boxers and walked up the hall to where I could see the street. There were no vehicles in the driveway or out on the street in front of the house. Just my bike. Looking up and down the street, I quickly went out to the bike, and came back. Guess I was hoping for a note.

I went back down the hall and got dressed, ruminating: *We had been lovers, and it seemed good to me. Wouldn't that suggest a note, or a kiss on the cheek—a 'see you later.'* I remember getting a morning kiss and a goodbye from women I didn't want to see again, But not from Vel. Maybe she was in a hurry—no alarm clock—late for

work? That could be it, then again, maybe I was to her, one of those women who had kissed me on the cheek.

I wondered if because of what happened last night, would Robert nix the idea of me living in the laundry room. That's how it goes when it's about a woman. Robert probably wanted Vel. Of course he wanted her. For Christ's sake, she was the singer in his band and he wasn't exactly a chick-magnet. He wanted her and there I was, under a blanket for the second time, while he ate a couple of slices more than he would have if he had been the one holding Vel's hand.

But I hadn't intended for this to happen. She just showed up. I wasn't thinking she was interested in me. More than likely, there was a good chance I would spend a Southern California winter in Judy's dollhouse, without heat, while Dr. Mats was sleeping with my brick shit-house and I was doing my level-best to appear interested in Judy.

Maybe I could talk with Sid? He could talk with Robert. Probably not. This was one of those deals where they owned the house together but Robert ruled. Whatever Robert said, went, and now Vel might not even be in Robert's band and I would likely be sleeping out in the cold. R and S owning this house together could awaken a monster. In life, ya gotta watch what you do.

Outside, it wasn't as warm as in that living room. It wasn't cold, but the beach towns often don't warm up until early afternoon. I knew better than to eat Robert's food and I had no comb or toothbrush, so I washed my face, ran wet fingers through my hair, checked my luck in the mirror, and went out to my bike.

If you know anything about motorcycles, it's the English bikes that have that sound. The Harley's are loud but that masks a lack of class. With my eyes closed, from a block away, I can tell you if it's a Triumph or a Norton. Just like I can discern a Karmann Ghia or a Volkswagen from any other car. Or an Alfa Giulietta from a MGA. But, I go for the Triumphs.

Without thinking any of this, but anticipating what she would sound like, I kickstarted her, and she caught on the first try. I could hear her need for oil on the top end as she warmed up. I sat and listened. After sitting longer than I needed to, I shifted down into first, turned left from the driveway, then right on England Street along to Joliet where I pulled over and stopped. Across the street from where I sat, was a small, older house, sitting on two lots, on the corner of England and Joliet—and it was 'for sale'.

Early on, the whole of Huntington Beach had been laid out in railroad lots, which were 125 feet deep and 25 feet wide, what they called back then, encyclopedia lots, because they gave them to people, all over the country, when they bought a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica. And because none of those people had any thought to move to wherever Huntington Beach was, it was said that the town would never develop because no one knew who owned it. The city fathers dealt with the situation by approving townhouses that were 17 feet wide with six feet between structures.

But somebody owned these two lots and they were offered for sale, together, with a small house, and a smallish 'for sale by owner' sign, barely visible in an overgrown front yard. The house looked to be from the 40's,

with that asbestos siding that was popular during the war. The roofline showed a slight sag and the roofing was ancient—in need of replacement. I wondered who lived here? Maybe some character out of a Hitchcock movie, who kept the three filthy windows along the front covered with heavy brocade, without any suggestion as to when they were last opened.

Here I was, straddled across an English purring machine, at the corner of England and Joliet—England, the country where my bike was made and where my family came from, and Joliet, the next street over from where I was born in Montreal. I turned the key to kill the engine and walked across to the sign. Just the owner's name, phone number, and 18,000 dollars. Which to me was a lot of money. My dad kept telling me, that with more and more people coming into Southern California, prices would double or more. I didn't necessarily believe him.

So, what to do? I could ride up to Buddy's for breakfast and maybe be served by my *lover* (who at first paid me no mind, then left without a kiss or a note), or I could call this guy about the house. I know what my dad would say: *If there's any chance you might get rich, for god's sake, don't get married.*

Two blocks down Joliet there would be a pay phone at Surf Liquor, so I left my bike parked and walked. Across the street was an old woman working an extensive vegetable and flower garden. I said hello to her as I passed; she straightened up and gave a wary hello back.

'May I ask about the house across the street?'

'You may.' I smiled and introduced myself. She was Anna.

'I'm thinking of calling the guy; see if I can buy it.'

'There's two problems with that, maybe three,' she said. 'It's overpriced. Nothing along here sells for that much and it needs a lot of work—and it was no prize when it was built. Then there's the woman who lives there.'

'Has she been there long?'

'She was here when I came in 1949. I've talked to her once, and seen her in the yard maybe five times.'

'That's fifteen years. What about her groceries and going to the doctor—things like that?'

'Like I told you, I've seen her no more than a few times in all these years.' I thanked her and headed on down to Surf Liquor. On her side of the street, across the alley next to her house was a lime green building, like a little factory, with Chinese calligraphy painted on the wall in that Chinese red, and below it, 'Tea Company.' At that moment, maybe ten women, all in dust masks and smocks, came out onto the sidewalk for their break. Some had waxed cups with something to drink. A couple of them lit up. None looked to be Asian—but they did look to be Mexican. I could handle a tea company. A concrete building with a bunch of short women. How much of a problem could that be?

At the pay-phone I deposited a dime (I hear is going to twenty-five cents—what a bunch of crap that is), and a man answered:

'Hello.'

'Hello. My name's Bobby and I'm calling you from Surf Liquor. I just walked down from your house on the corner and I want to talk to you about it.'

'That's quick. I just put up the sign this morning.' I told him I'd talked with Anna and she'd given me some idea

about the neighborhood and the woman who had been there for so long.

'She was there when we bought it, and maybe she thinks she can stay after we sell it. But it needs work, and I'm getting too old to do it.' He was straight-up; didn't make it seem like it was going to be an easy fix or what it would involve to get the woman to move. He told me where he lived, over by the park and suggested that after I'd thought on it for awhile I could come by. I asked if I could come over now.

On the way back to my bike, I took a closer look at the house as I passed. From the back the property wasn't much different than the front, except for two things—two huge things. To the right side of the back door was as big a cactus as you could imagine growing at the back door of a small house. One of the things I appreciate—maybe love—about the beach cities is that cactuses grow here. But this was one I didn't recognize with its single shaft reaching higher than the roofline. The second thing was an even bigger bougainvillea vine, really more of a tree, in the middle of the back yard. In the spring bloom it would likely be the most beautiful thing in Huntington Beach.

Riding over to Ron's, I didn't know what I was in the grip of, but I wanted something I could count on. My relationship with school and my parents was iffy at best, and the night I'd just spent with Vel did not reassure me in the least. It was obvious why Ron and his wife didn't live in the little house. His home alongside the park was modern with flagstone and long, wide, horizontal, lapped hardwood siding. It wasn't at all a place I would want to live, but it was several steps up from the house he was

selling. We talked. He was a good guy and his wife said nothing at all. I told him I'd done some research in the area, and the house was worth 16,000 dollars, which I would give him for the house. He asked when I would be able to do that and I lied. I could give him four thousand within a week and the twelve when I secured a loan. He didn't want to make the deal until I had the money. I told him I'd give him two thousand within three days, and if I didn't have a secured loan within 60 days, he could keep 1000 dollars of my money. He asked if I'd put that in writing, which we did, and we all three signed.

Heading back towards the coast highway, I first stopped by *my* house and took the sign out of the ground. Old Anna was watching me as I did it. I waved but she didn't wave back. Me pulling the sign, an hour after we'd talked, was probably too quick for her. I looked around for where I could stash the sign and just laid it in the weeds and grass. Soon I was breezing up the coast, a landowner heading into his future.

I was thinking of Vel, and wouldn't she be surprised that I bought a house today? That fantasy lasted only until I thought about how many people who live in houses have troubled lives and unhappy marriages to go with them. And how I should do what Ian says: never run after them—let them find you. Great, she didn't know my last name, and I didn't live anywhere.

**Having nostalgia for nostalgia—depends on how de-
luded you are.**

Making the left into Belmont Shore, I thought about what I needed to do. I had the 2000 dollars I promised Ron, but that was about it. I needed another 2000 dollars for the down payment, and I needed a 12,000 dollar real estate loan. Sounds easy, but that's about ten of these bikes—new. I made a left towards Buddy's and then a right and parked out front, where my bike (in all its glory) would be visible from inside. Inside, there were few customers because they closed at two and it was already past one-thirty. Vel was there working the booths with another gal behind the counter who I didn't recognize, and who brought me coffee and a menu—she knew I always got coffee? Her name-tag said Lola—an overweight Lola with too much makeup and bright red lipstick. But she was nice, chatting me up. Maybe she knew about me and Vel, but I doubted it. I ordered the Number 2, as always—did that make me boring, with nothing to offer Vel?

Vel and I made eye contact but it wasn't much, she was busy being that woman at work who needs to concentrate on her almost non-existent customers and responsibilities. I saw Buddy back there, and wondered what kind of life that would be—was there something better waiting for him at home? Some opportunity to break-out. I hoped so because Buddy was going to die in that kitchen and there would be a plaque out front commemorating Bud-

dy, for his customers to remember him, but maybe only until new owners took over—looking for a fresh start.

I was enjoying my breakfast, the pancakes cooked just right, that pattern of darker brown over golden wheat, scrambled eggs all fluffy yellow, and hash browns, cooked to a white and brown, Idaho perfection. With three strips of bacon, flat and smooth. Real butter and plenty of it. But I didn't use the syrup. If it were maple syrup, I'd have it, but places like Buddy's don't have that, so I spread some jam over the butter on my pancakes.

I tried to see myself as a Buddhist, free from want. The breakfast is all there is. I was one with the breakfast. Which is kinda true with a good breakfast. But, even with that good breakfast, and taking the time to slow my breathing and heartbeat, it wouldn't last forever, and Vel would be there after it was gone.

But I didn't care. I watched her a bit, cleaning her last table. She knew I was watching her. When she had it bussed she went and got her til, sat in one of the booths where we wouldn't have to have eye contact, and began counting, sorting the bills into piles, and counting change, making notations on a small clipboard. After each notation, she made a cipher on the clipboard and put a rubber band around each pile of bills. Then she counted change, making more notations on the clipboard. When she had everything added up, she used a small calculator to tally her cheques. She must have done an efficient job because she didn't have to do the money or the checks again. She put the clipboard back on its nail by the kitchen passthrough, put her drawer back into the register, locked the drawer and gave the key to Lola.

Watching her, I'd forgotten to eat because, from where she was sitting she couldn't see me but I could watch at will. Then again, she could have sat in any booth, or on the stool next to me. She could have sat where, once in a while, she could look up at me. But she hadn't. That would have been too much like a kiss on the cheek—or a note.

She went into the back as Lola came by offering more coffee which I took, not knowing what else to do. There was almost nothing left on my plate when Vel came out of the kitchen (there must be an office or something back there) wearing the same light jacket she had been wearing when I saw her last night. She walked between the counter and the kitchen and out the door—without a glance in my direction.

I wasn't surprised but I was shocked. Reality can be shocking. I thought again on what Ian had said: don't be the pursuer—and I did my best to let her go. I sat there over my half cup of coffee and used my breathing to still my troubled heart. Vel was wearing the same clothes we had taken off her, together, last night. As she walked from booth to booth, the smell of me was rubbing between her thighs, but there was no sweet hello for me.

Sometimes you just gotta write it off. I asked Lola for my check, and I could see that there was no appraisal going on in her head. Vel had not mentioned my existence. The door opened to my right, and in came Vel. 'Can we talk?' I took my time, taking in her face and her eyes, that only saw me in flitting glimpses.

'Sure.' I motioned to the stool beside me.

'No, outside.' I followed her out. She stopped where Lola, or whomever, would be unable to see us.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'You don't deserve this. But I'm kinda like a guy, once the sex is over I'd rather be someplace else.'

'I don't know what kind of guys you know.' She didn't take that bait.

'I have a really dark side.'

'I imagine.'

'Doesn't that scare you? You don't need that.'

'It doesn't scare me unless that's all that's there. The dark side's the peat where the moss grows.' She gave me a look of incredulity.

'You're saying that but how'd that work for you when you came in today and I didn't want you there?' I was unwilling to go down that road with her:

'If you were my girl, at least I'd know that only a fool would try to steal you from me.'

'Go ahead and jive—you don't know how cold I can be—and what I do to men.'

'Vel, everything that matters is terrifying.'

'You got no idea. What you see as sacred space, I treat with violent disrespect.'

'I bought a house in Huntington this morning—wanna buy it with me?' She gave me a look that moved between malevolent curiosity, and utter disbelief, then she abruptly turned and walked away. I went back in inside and squared up with Lola—Lola who would appreciate a man who would try to kiss that lipstick off her face—but he was not me. I was Bobby Walbock—teenage idol. I would not be marginalized or made small by a woman with a dark side. If nothing else, I could make a riding tour and walk all the piers in California.

just let her go

I had a choice—I suppose. I could let this get to me, or not. I had been attracted to a waitress and that same night I slept with her. That was it, unless you count that she has grievous personal problems—unlike myself—haha. I had to do the buddhist thing, *shikan-taza*, where, when thoughts come across your mind, you disassociate from them—get back into the unity. I knew that practice but, unfortunately, I was beginning to fall for Vel.

Besides, I had other stuff going on. My parents had been living in Belmont Shore, on Appian Way, which fronted on my lagoon, but more in the high-rent district, and where the city or whoever held those Miss Bardahl type of high speed boat races, maybe once a month. Our neighbor, Tony, the football coach at Long Beach State, loved the races—he saw them as a monthly event for a barbecue with his coaching staff. But to my parents, they were excruciatingly loud and obnoxious. My mother was high-strung and when a madman busted into the house while my father was making a second nightly run to the liquor store, that was it, and they sold the house.

Now they were living in Huntington, not far from Ron, who I was buying the house from, and not far from the house I was buying. I used the pay phone at Buddy's to see when they would be home, which was later today.

I make it sound as though I spend my time hanging at the lagoon, contemplating the mystery of life, but I do have a job. I work, pumping gas, at Milton Smith's Rich-

field, on 2nd Street, in the heart of downtown Belmont Shore. I work there with Mark, from England, who works somewhere else, as a machinist of something with his brother-in-law, Ronald, but on the weekends Mark works with us.

I really like Milton Smith, my boss, and maybe not so much, his wife who we affectionately refer to as *hatchet-face*. Today I was hoping to just pop in and get my check (I work a few shifts and fill in if they need me), but Milton was out on the island with this serious look on him. He told me they had summoned Mark and their son Craig—who also worked there (and was a real mean piece of work). When his parents were home, on Sundays, Craig would get on the roof with a crank-up pellet gun and wait until an old couple were making their way along 2nd Street, then he would pepper them along the whole block—the older and slower they were—the better. Mark and I would laugh. It was sickening to me but I laughed anyway. And Mark, he was just a big kid, a nice enough guy, but one of those English street-fighters, who would insist you slap-fight with him, at which he was faster and experienced, and he didn't mind letting you know.

But this was different; I'd never seen Mrs. Smith this somber. She was no barrel of monkeys to begin with but today the air in the office had a body of its own.

'We have an intruder.' She looked at each of us. 'I've been watching for some time hoping to catch him but I've had no luck. So now I'm asking you—even though somebody here has to be letting him in so that he can sleep in the attic.' We looked at each other.

She walked to the closet with the storage shelves, where the cans of oil and whatever, had been moved to

the rear so the front of the shelves could be used as a ladder to the hatch that opened into the attic.

'Look at this; somebody has been climbing up these shelves regularly,' she said, indicating a legacy of greasy handprints. I couldn't look at either Mark or Craig, especially Mark with his devilish English eyes—were I to look at him I would go into uncontrollable laughter. Maybe worse with Craig who resembled how you might expect Batman's joker to look—eye contact with him might lose me my job. So I held my gaze on Mrs. Smith with a diffidence, more, an obsequiousness, until Mark came apart with laughter.

'What's so funny?' she demanded.

'Sorry, so sorry, Mrs H.' (he somehow got away with calling her that), 'It's all my fault. Sometimes when there's no customers I bet these guys they can't get up and down the shelves as fast as me, and they can't. I take their money Mrs. Smith, and I'll give it back if you say so.'

That changed our Sundays to: when a carload of inland girls from La Habra or wherever, drove in and asked if they could use the bathroom to change into their bikinis, your hands had to be clean before you climbed up to watch them through the fan vent in the ceiling.

I pulled up out front of my parent's house (one of those shared-wall condos that are all the rage?) after riding down the alley to see if my father's Dodge pickup was in the carport. Everything looked kept but not inviting. Whoever designs these places uses an architectural application that has to do with keeping any lifeforms hidden. At first glance, you can't tell how to get into the place, because the shared-wall down the center, forces the front

door off toward to one side, accessed by a small tunnel, entered from the side.

My mom answered the door. With my mom you never know what you'll get—so it's best to expect something less than fun.

'Look who it is,' she said, to no one in particular without looking directly at me, but moving aside so I could enter.

'Hi mom, how are you?'

'How am I? ask your father. He wants me out of college. Thinks it was a mistake to move here where I'm having fun while he's sitting around waiting to die. He wants me home with him. To slave over him. Wait on him hand and foot. I'm just a *scudge*. That's what I am.'

I went into the living room where dad was sitting watching television. But not drinking. I've never seen my dad go to bed sober, but never a drink until after the sun went down. The furnishings in the room were the same ones from Appian Way, but there they were the decor for the upper floor that walked out to a deck where sunsets moved in oranges and yellows across the lagoon, with small craft and people walking hand in hand or walking a dog—a bright expanse of life outside spacious windows. Here there was a sliding glass door out to a smallish backyard, enclosed by a six-foot decorative block wall, inside of which nothing changed unless someone made a change. My parents needed to move regularly; if they didn't have new place to fix-up or new neighbors to estrange, it was time to go. This next move would break my mother's spirit—more than that—her heart. My mother was a social person (the bearer of huge personal problems), but nevertheless social, so Huntington College and

her art classes, where she might occasionally run into me, or my brother or sister, was at the center of her life.

'Do you have any new art projects?' I asked, careful to not give too much attention to her and not him.

'Oh, she's got projects. How can you not have projects when you spend every waking minute out there?'

That remark was enough to let me know I might be forfeiting a thousand bucks to Ron—or, at least, in for a long night. She was right about dad—he had a few things that he did; he liked to ride his bike around Huntington, fix up the yard, build model ships, and write about nautical things. Of the four, lately, I think the bike and drinking at night about covered it.

'You just try it, Al. Try and get me away from my school and you'll be moving all by yourself. You watch him, Bobby,' she said for my behalf. 'You just watch me Al. When you're gone a week, I'll have a new friend—a doctor—somebody with a *big job*. Like that lovely man I met in Egypt who wanted me to come over, and sent me that designer bag.' Mom had asked some guy they met in Cairo to send her a handbag that was out of stock. She gave him the money to buy it and send it.

My dad shook his head. 'That's enough, Mae. I want to hear what Bobby has to say.'

I was lauded in the family as being the one to listen to—but only until it mattered. What did matter was that when my mom and dad got going, they didn't hold back, and when they'd had a couple of drinks, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff' had nothing on them. I knew I had to tread lightly. They were my parents and I needed a loan to buy my house. I had every intention of repaying it, but if I walked out of

here without a promise of 2000 dollars, there was no way I would get that house. Could I do that without having this evening blow up in my face?

'What's going on with Vietnam, Bobby? Did you get out of the navy at the right time, or what? Back when we went in there was no getting out. Canada was in two years before the US., and we were there til it was over.' None of this felt as if it contained a question—not one I had to answer anyway because mom came right back into the conversation:

'I went to Dr. Markelis today. He's really helping me, Bobby. If it weren't for him I never could have gotten over Buckett breaking in—me and your sister in the closet—terrified—with him out on another booze run.' She made a head gesture in dad's direction.

'Mae, when I go down for another half pint...' She cut him off:

'I never drank before I met you. I only drink now because you have to—and sometimes I just go along to make you happy. That's all I do—go along to make you happy. If it were up to you I'd have no life. If it wasn't for your big *drouth*, *wee* BL and I would never have had to deal with Buckett.'

All of this, and today's drinking had not yet begun, though the shadows in the back yard were getting long. My mother launched in how much she loved her classes, and how she would like to live in the dorms, if Golden West had dorms. Then she popped up, and went into the back of the house returning was a kiln-fired rectangular vase that she had hand-formed and patterned by wrapping chicken wire around it—the dark-brown imprint of the wire wrapped around the beige vase.

'I made this for you, son,' she said, handing it to me and kissing me on the cheek. I had no idea if she made it for me or not, and I'd not venture a guess. But she did give it to me.

'This is one of those times,' I said, 'when somebody gives something to you and you don't have to act like you like it. This is beautiful mom.' She looked startled.

'Let me see that,' he said—he had no idea it existed.

'I think my ceramics teacher likes me,' she said. 'He's much younger but these days that doesn't seem to matter,' Looking at my dad, she said the words I'd heard so many times before: 'And he has such a *big job*.' So many times it had been said that my father may not have taken it in.

My dad got ready for a liquor store run and I offered to go along. We drove backstreets to the liquor store and went in together. He likes those big quart bottles of beer. Sometimes, Hamm's—*from the land of sky blue waters*, or Bergermeister (Bergie, they call it). I was thinking of an Los Angeles beer, Brew 102. Along the Santa Ana Freeway, just as you get into Los Angeles—this huge round storage facility, one of those huge metal tanks that store petroleum—but this one rose up out of the ground, or sunk down, depending on how much beer was inside. He got the Hamm's, two quarts, though tomorrow was a work day, and a half pint of vodka. I never understood why he did that, seeing he was coming back in two hours, and two half-pints cost more than a pint.

Back in the truck, I said: 'Dad, I made an offer on a house today.' He responded favorably until I asked to borrow 2000 dollars.

'For god's sake don't bring that up in front of your mother. We'll talk about it later.' There would be no fur-

ther mention of it tonight (at least from me), but I better hang in for the whole evening so it wouldn't look like I came over just to borrow money. I can imagine how that would go down.

The night wore on and it wasn't going too bad. The television was on (as my dad said), for background. Occasionally mom would get him to turn up the sound, when something interested her.

'When are you going to get a girlfriend, Bobby?' She had already spent my entire adolescence, up to my adult life, mortifying me in front of girls. When we both worked for Hiram's Market (she in the bakery and I as a box boy), she would bring girls over to me, who were just dying to meet me (I expect they'd said nothing to her about it). But the worst was one day out front of our house in La Mirada when Lupe Yopez was walking by and my mother stopped her and went on about how lucky she would be to go out with me (I didn't have a car), and how my mom knew she kinda wanted to. Unfortunately, if there was one guy in my class who was a psychotic killer, he was Lupe's boyfriend. And for what was going on now, or more likely, not going on, with Vel and me, there would be 'hell to pay', from both my parents. And, if they got to spend some time with Vel, they would like her even less.

We were well into the evening and nothing was stopping mom now: 'Time just goes, Bobby. Everybody your age has a kid, or at least a girlfriend, or they're married. You lost two years in the Navy, and now you're not doing anything. It's a shame because I had high hopes for you, and when Becky (mom's sister) asks how you are, I get so ashamed. Vinny's already getting going with the rail-

road—and I don't mean to embarrass you son, but they call him Mr. Metatsos, and he's only one year older than you. When I see Becky, I just hope she won't ask.' This was on drink number one and it wasn't eight o'clock, and though, in my mother's eyes, life may have passed me by, I was twenty-two years old.

'Stop it, Mae. Bobby knows what he's doing. Tell her about the house—that's something Vinny doesn't have in Montreal. Go ahead—tell her.' I couldn't tell if he was giving me a boost up, or dropping a bomb that would destroy any chance for the loan. She looked at me apprehensively, waiting to hear.

'Fix me a wee one, will you wee sweetie?' It was always a wee one, but I knew that half pint in the kitchen would be gone with this next round. 'So what's this about a house?'

I told her about it, described it to her, and then I laid it on about this young woman I was interested in and maybe that was prompting me to make the offer.

'But how can you make an offer? Do you have money?' I told her about the \$2000 and my job and the GI Bill, and how having the house would motivate me to move ahead (*move ahead* and *big job* were the phrases that counted in our family). My mother looked skeptical under a wrinkled brow. They were drinking steadily now.

'Why would you want a house now? You have no idea what you want to do. You flunked out of Long Beach and missed your chance of being an officer and having a career in the Navy (there was never an offer for me to become an officer), and now you're at a junior college; and in the middle of all that you want to buy a house—and borrow the down-payment from us. Maybe, I'm forget-

ting, what was it you ever did for us—what did you ever do for me?' My mother had crossed into inebriation.

'Fix me a *wee snester*, Al. Just a wee one before bed.'

'I'll have to run to the store, Mae. Bobby can stay and talk to you about the house.' Just what I needed—more opportunity to continue this talk with my mother.

He left and she launched. 'Why didn't you come to me. You know what it's like, getting money out of that old bugger. All three of you forget that I'm the one who was always there for you. I took you to Sunday School. Those Bibles for perfect attendance are because of me. When was the last time you saw the old bugger in church. I'll tell you when—he goes once a year—Easter Sunday. Hallelujah!'

This was part of her strategy of divide and conquer. She would act like she was on my side while looking for my weakness, which she would then exploit. Growing up, when my brother and I got into mischief, we would plead with her to not tell dad; we would do things for her and act real good for hours before he got home. But, as soon as he got through that door, she would deliver her indictment (usually far more robustly than was demanded), and my heavy-handed father would give us a beating. Not a spanking, more likely I got knocked down the basement stairs with the back of his hand. And here I was, looking for a loan to buy my first home. Maybe I'm over the top with my description of how it was—but not by much.

'Can't you find a cheaper house? Something you can afford without borrowing?'

'I don't think there is much in Huntington, and, even with my two and your two, I still have to find a bank to loan me twelve. But I would like to get it mom because I could get it paid off and I would still be young.'

'We never had that. We had three kids and he wanted to move so much that we always paid more (my dad was a draftsman and when there was no work in Canada, he made a good move to California where he worked as a draftsman/engineer for decades).

My dad came back in: 'I hope you two got this all worked out. I was thinking about it on my way back, if you owe the bank, how will you pay us back?'

'I could have roommates to get extra money to pay you back.'

'I thought there was this girl you were interested in? Where would she be?'

'If we work out, she could work and we could pay you back together.'

'You know, Al. I'm not sure there is a girl. I think that's a story to get our money.' In my family, with any luck you did not react. You were going to be called a loser and a liar, and you just went along. It didn't mean they didn't love you, but it was a bit hard to associate with family happiness.

'Enough of this, Al. He always wants something. All three of them are *buggers of hell* who want, want, want. They never give anything back. Al, get me another weester, before I tell this bugger of hell what I really think.'

It was difficult to think on any time we kids had asked for anything, at least since we had been kids. But this was part of the family process, mixed in with generous

amounts of drink that had the affect of taking them back into the cultures from which they had come. Each good drink seemed the equivalent of fifty years. Now, at about 9:30 we were walking the emotional cobblestone lanes of DH Lawrence, 'Sons and Lovers'—the dark years, and this was Lawrence with out any possibility for 'Lady Chatterley's Lover.'

If a film director wanted some good material, a couple of nights with my family would be worth the while. But tonight the pressing issue was my mother ruminating on her coming fall from grace, moving someplace my dad would find that offered her no choice but him. And the tragedy was, that she would pick up and go without a real fight. Tonight was her howling into the wind. But go she would, bearing another load of unhealed wounds that would add to the scar tissue of a long marriage that neither of them especially cared for.

They offered me to spend the night which I declined. The cool ride up PCH sounded much better. There was no further talk of the loan—I wasn't sure there would be. But riding north in a refreshing but cold onshore breeze, one thing was clear; I had to get my life going. The thing with Judy and the shed had to end. And I needed a woman in my life who would have my back like I would have hers. I had let Riley go without a fight, but even with what had happened this morning with Vel, there was no way that I was ready to give up on her.

6

plus tip

I would not avoid Buddy's just because Vel might be there—I would go because she might be there—without letting on that she had anything to do with my being there. And I wouldn't go there alone. Much better to pop in as a social butterfly. But first I needed a place to stay. A couple of blocks from Buddy's was the apartment of this guy, Jack, who had a vending machine route, mostly cigarettes. He'd asked me to move in a couple of times which I declined because I didn't see any commonality between us. But Jack could easily be better than wintering over in a shed on an alley.

I parked out front, and he was home. Like any good salesman he told me he already had two applicants, a guy and a cute Asian girl, students at Long Beach State, waiting on his call, but I was probably the better fit. And just like that I had my own room in a heated space with a living room, kitchen, and bathroom. With no time like the present we took Jack's truck over to my shed to get my mattress and my stuff, with me hoping Judy would not hear us. We had everything out of there in two minutes and we were gone. Before he went to bed he gave me a key and asked me to think about buying into the route with him. Going into business with Jack was not on any wish list, but if there was money to be made, I had to think about it. But Jack was too accommodating—he betrayed neediness—like meeting a girl with her mother at church and the mother asking if you like children.

In the morning I was hungry but I wouldn't go into Buddy's alone—not right now, so I rode over to the lagoon. But first I stopped on Judy's alley where I coasted to a stop with my motor off, unlocked the padlock, put it in my pocket, and stuck the note I had written on a small nail on the inside of the door where Judy would find it. All it said: 'Judy it's getting too cold and I have to move away and get an apartment. Thanks so much for the space and for being my friend. All the best.' A slipping away rather than a goodbye. I didn't want the talk that would come with my moving out. It was selfish and I didn't feel good about it but I wanted it to end with the note. I pushed my bike half a block before I kicked her over.

I rode to the lagoon in my canvas surfer shorts and flip-flops, with a towel bungeed on the back of my seat. I had no idea what time it was. It could be past noon. The sun was bright and warm on my shirtless back. Being a workday, there were lots of places to park out front of the houses across from the lagoon. I left my bike and crossed the street to the sidewalk and the short concrete wall between the sidewalk and the sand, looking for place to spread my towel.

'Hey Bobby.' It was Grace, a nurse I met when she came in for gas. Maybe once a week, she'd stop in, at night, on her way home from the hospital. The last time I'd seen her was at her place, one night when I'd been drinking and purposely ridden by her apartment where I watched this guy in a Jag, drop her off and kiss her good-night, I waited until he left and rang the bell. She answered the door expectantly, but her expression showed a letdown when she saw it was me.

She invited me in and before long I asked if I could kiss her. She was probably ten years older than me. She deftly parried me, telling me she liked me but she had a purpose—she had a mission—to marry a doctor while she still could (she had the same aspiration as my mom, but hers was for real). And the one she wanted, she had been out with tonight. But she didn't leave me with nothing. Her friend Susan was a good bet for me because Susan talked about me. She was also a nurse, cuter, without the formal stateliness of Grace. But, those formal gals are such fun to get it on with. Once you get them going... .

And here they were. Susan was beaming, and why wouldn't she be? She wasn't looking for no doctor—and she would actually be more fun than Grace as a girlfriend.

'How are you two?'

Susan was the one with something to say:

'You should have come earlier, Bobby. We've been here a couple of hours. I'm hot and starving.'

'Perfect! How about letting me cook on this sand for 5 or 10, and we go for breakfast at Buddy's?' Susan agreed for both of them. I lay on the hot sand on my back without a towel, bantering with two attractive nurses and hoping Vel was on shift. Which seemed another faux pas like the note I left at Judy's. But I let myself go on it because everything is allowed in love and war—and Vel was war.

I asked the girls to get us a table while I ran over to my flat for a t-shirt and some money. I had to remember to pay Jack after I got home from work tonight. I raced around the apartment grabbing at things, decided to stay with my surfer shorts, and flip-flopped the two blocks to Buddy's.

The girls were already in a booth. Susan was offering to treat until Grace gave her: *the dream does not come true if you give up too much* look. Percy was sitting at the counter. I asked them if he could join us—told them he was a motorcycle friend who owned this place and the dry cleaners next door. And he had some *big job* at Douglas Aircraft (he worked the assembly line). Grace took one look at his twinkling eyes, and the possibility of security that came with them, and gladly acquiesced. Best of all, we were in Vel's section and she was doing her level best to be uninterested in my existence.

Grace was showing interest in Percy, where there had been none for me last night. Susan, in her bikini and flip-flops, with her lovely breasts, was there for the picking (normally I would have been all in), but our waitress was Vel with whom I was someplace between infatuation and love. I had already alienated one woman today—and I was a first love for her. I sunk back into the naugahyde booth and said as little as possible to avoid saying or doing something stupid.

The energy from Grace to Percy came to my rescue. I hadn't seen Grace this animated and I wouldn't want to be that doc, making payments on that Jag, and thinking about any future with Grace. Susan shared knowing looks with me, but not about us. She could see the juices flowing between our booth-mates.

'Do you come in here?' Percy inquired. 'I haven't seen you before.'

'No, I'm usually working or on the beach at the lagoon.' (or plotting a future where she would no longer have to work). I had a hard time imagining Percy on the beach. He was a gearhead who owed a dry cleaners and

worked at Douglass Aircraft on the night shift. As the banter went on I mused on possibilities for these two. It wasn't unlikely because any woman who would refuse a kiss in the night from me, might just go for a good paycheck, and a dry cleaners.

'Is everybody ready to order?' I looked up to a new shade of red on Lola's lips. Vel had traded stations and was working behind the counter. Everybody ordered. I must have had an interesting expression on my face because, though Grace and Percy were oblivious to my state, Susan had the inquisitive look that something was up with me. I smiled back a lame smile.

Three of us ordered and I just went with coffee. I didn't say anything—I didn't want to be here. At the lagoon, I thought I was a cool dude, but my plan for partying over to Buddy's had now become a fool's errand. I drank my coffee and listened to the conversation. I avoided eye contact with Susan whose mood had slipped from a euphoria to a bewilderment—maybe even a consternation. I could see she wanted out of here. So did I. I thought of inviting her outside to talk but I couldn't do it. A couple of minutes later, when Vel had her back to us, I remembered something I had to do, laid down a two-dollar bill own the table for a fifty cent cup of coffee, made my apologies, and left.

Tip or *Tips* derives from 'to insure prompt service', The prompt service today was to get myself out of there. Vel had anticipated me and sent someone else to take care of anything in which I had meant to include her. There was no way she would play from the losing end.

She has a dark side that could pave over Arkansas.

I know this sounds stupid but I didn't want to live. Actually. The idea of watching television tonight with Jack and talking about a cigarette route was worse than death. So was running into Judy on the street. Or Susan—and that was an explanation I was going to have to make. Work, that might be okay, but I couldn't tell Mark what was going on because he would be merciless.

I might not see Vel again, anyway. I would never go into Buddy's, even with Percy. And worst of all would be my parents. There was just no way, with the way I was feeling, that I could play the game to keep up appearances under their hail of abuse. But tonight would be okay. I would relieve Milton at six and close at midnight.

But that was four hours from now and there was nowhere I could go where I might not lose it. I knew this was plain stupid; that it would pass—but it didn't feel like it. So I walked, on past the basketball courts and all the way down the peninsula, on the sidewalk between the private boat docks and the great houses along the water. Walking made me feel better. Why couldn't I be with Susan? It would be so easy. But no, I needed to tell her about Vel.

Coming back along 2nd Street, passing Hof's Hut, almost to where I would turn down to Jack's, where he would be sorting cigarette packs, with the TV on a background, my brother, Will, pulled up on a Triumph chopper—the kind of bike they used for Brando and Lee Mar-

vin, in *The Wild One*. Basically English 650's with the forks extended out to be cool. Take the baffles out of the mufflers and you got it.

Up to now, I haven't mentioned my brother Will; we're not close but then again we're not far either. Will got out of the Navy a few months before me, though he was scheduled to be there another couple of years. Like me he had joined in high school. He'd been stationed somewhere—Bainbridge—whatever that is? Some sort of A school for women in the Navy. There he had two jobs; he was a greenskeeper at the golf course and he pulled sentry duty at the entrance to the women's barracks. During the first month of the school, women were not allowed to leave the base, and most every night, some young woman whose biological needs were stronger than her discipline, would come to the sentry box, looking to see if she might find someone appropriate to deal with her needs.

But it was at the golf course that Will got into trouble. He was a surfer, as were the other two greenskeepers, and they drank, into each night, in the caddy shack, telling stories, until this one night, a new guy offered to give them blow jobs on the 9th green. Two mornings later, Will was on his way home to California, as the recipient of an undesirable discharge. Maybe because of that, and my honorable discharge, Will and my dad beat me up the night I got home from the Navy, knocking me over my eight-foot, car topper sailboat, hitting my head on a stucco wall and knocking me out. But that was months back and we were over it.

But here was Will, drunk again, riding his bike. In one motion he parked and slid off the bike and came towards me. Will's a tall kid, two years younger than me, fresh-

faced, life loving, always with a quip and a big smile. But tonight he brushed hard against two salesmen in suits and ties who were headed into the Hut. He didn't apologize—he went right past them—and they grumbled past him into the restaurant.

'Bobby, what is up?' he said, with his big energy.

'Not too much, but you gave those dudes in the suits quite a shove.

'Didn't notice,' he said, through god knows how many drinks. 'Lemme go apologize.' With that he was through the door and I could see him close in with the two guys at the counter. And then, though I couldn't hear, I could see the energy change and Will was backing out with the two dudes coming at him. He backed through the door and they were right on him.

'Fuck you jerks! I came to apologize. Fuck you!'

They both went for him and it moved out into the street. Neither or both were a match for my brother, who was a surfer and had the reach on them, but tonight he was drunk and the fight was on, in slow motion, with the three of them flailing about. The manager stuck his head out to yell that the cops were on their way.

It seemed silly that the cops would arrest anybody for assault since no one had landed a blow, but I knew they would. I saw my opening and stepped forward with a perfect left hook, knocking my brother to the sidewalk. I turned to the suits.

'Get the fuck out of here or you're next.' I was hoping they would just go. They didn't, but slowly they made their way back into the restaurant with the manager barring any return to the counter.

I made my way to a side street with my much heavier brother in a fireman's carry. First lawn I came to I set him down as gently as I could with his back against a tree.

'One of those guys got me a good one, Bobby.' I didn't say nothin. It was better that he didn't know.

'You okay to sit here while I go for your bike?' I was around the corner and halfway to Hof's when I saw there was more to contend with. Will's friend, Chopper Don (who was married with kid's but still played the role), had his bike next to Will's, and was being confronted by three high school football players who hung out at the *Jack in the Box* down the block. Maybe they were friends of the suits, but the suits were nowhere to be seen. One of them I had seen him before—he was always getting into it on 2nd Street. He had the reputation of a real asshole who relished beating the hell out of people. He was big, in his letterman's jacket, with letters for football and wrestling, and he was in Don's face. But Don, though not his size, was also a contender.

Without expectation, the guy hit Don in the chest as hard as he could, and down he went in writhing pain (Don carried his motorcycle tools in pockets sewed inside his jacket, including a large adjustable wrench). I took the opportunity to walk Will's bike to the side street and park it next to where Will was up and standing, leaning against the tree. I made sure he could handle things from there and I headed for the nightshift at Milton's.

Not much was going on—2nd Street was quiet tonight. Quiet night and quiet stars. I like it that the station is smack in the middle of town. That's something I love about America—it's all right there in front of you. When I

was in Sicily, in the Navy, there would never have been a gas station on the main drag—it just wasn't done. But here I was, enjoying the night life, and getting paid for it.

I was doing just that, taking in the late summer night, standing on the sidewalk looking up and down the street, when I saw Vel coming towards me, with a guy, holding hands. She let go of his hand but kept on walking with just a hello as she went by.

I felt as if I'd been hit in the gut. Luckily, no one was needing gas or anything. But before long, this woman I'd met at the station when she'd come in for gas, Doreen, drove up in her 57 Vette, asking for an oil change. When she'd been in for gas, I'd talked her up, and here she was. I'd been hoping she'd come in, but tonight I made an excuse and she drove off.

I was as down as I ever remember being. But why? I didn't have much going on with Vel; she wasn't mine. I thought that if she were interested in someone, it would be me, but now here she was holding hands with some frat boy.

I was done with Belmont Shore. Some bad blood had been made earlier in front of Hof's Hut. There would be trouble coming from Judy and, or, Susan. Maybe the cops were looking for me. And now the toughs associated me with Will and Chopper Don. And way more importantly, Vel was walking by holding hands with a frat dude.

Soon I was closing up, logging in the gallons sold—the 88 and the 98, when Vel came across the lot towards me.

'You didn't deserve that.'

'Seems like the only thing you say to me lately.'

'I know, but you didn't serve that.' She must know I'm way into her, or she wouldn't make a big deal about it.

'I wasn't even going out with him until you pulled that BS with those bikini moms. Can't you see how transparent you are?'

'They were hungry. We were at the lagoon.'

'And you suggested Buddy's. We'll all go to Buddy's, and if I'm lucky, Vel will be our waitress. But that didn't happen because I won't play your games. So when this guy asked me out, I went.'

'First date, holding hands, walking along 2nd Street?'

'Guys take your hand—it's common. Don't you know that if I were interested in someone it would be you?' With that she turned and walked away, and I didn't know what to do. Of all men I might be the one, if having a man mattered. Which it did not.

8

Home is where you hang your white hat—U.S. Navy

The next morning I quit my job at Milton Smith's Richfield. Mrs. H. was unhappy to see me go. I called and asked Sid about the possibility of living into the laundry room, but Robert had already nixed that idea. Robert and I were friends but he didn't want me living there. They had this ratty garage that dated back to the time of Dickens, and I asked if I could store some stuff there until I got situated. Sid said it wouldn't be a problem.

In the two nights I'd spent at Jack's, I hadn't seen him. And he wasn't here now. I packed my stuff into a backpack and a big laundry bag, leaving a note and some money. He could have my mattress—it was new—if he didn't want it I'd come for it.

Closure. This was good. I wouldn't have to see Jack. I wouldn't run into Judy. Outside, I walked up to the corner with all my stuff, to where I could see Buddy's, with movement inside. Maybe what I was seeing was Vel, and maybe not, but I had no desire to find out.

I tripped along to the bus stop with my unwieldy load, where I waited for the bus to Huntington. Finally it came and we made our way south through the beach towns, picking up riders and dropping them off. If you want another look at the world, spend an hour on the bus. I got off in downtown Huntington and walked the fifteen minutes to Robert's to stow my gear. I hid it behind some plywood just in case Robert didn't know it was coming. I'd thought about living in that old garage, but that would be worse than Judy's alley. I walked, lighter now, back to the bus stop, and rode back to Belmont. On the way to Jack's I walked right by Buddy's and didn't even look in.

Out front of Jack's, across the street, an attractive girl was moving in. I watched her. She wasn't tall but she had a presence—she had energy all over her lithe body. Maybe I could approach her, meet her, stay with her tonight, and marry her in Las Vegas two weeks from now. Maybe after a couple of months we would begin to unravel, leaving a legacy of a great rock drummer, our son, who we would not raise together. Maybe all of that was possible. I looked at her; she looked over at me. I straddled my bike, kicked her over, and didn't look back.

There's a purification that comes with leaving; you can pile the whole place into the same pile and leave it behind. It's there, but in the world of the physical, you may never have to deal with it again. You head south, and you are gone.

Now I was in Huntington Beach where the only people I knew were Sid and Robert, and I had no place to stay. Their place is where I went, and that's and where I was, on the old couch out front, with the sun was going down, when Sid pulled up.

'Bobby, I'm just here to get some money. A guy in Long Beach's has a heater that goes with this Plymouth, and I'm going to go get it! This tank gets also cold in the mornings on my way into LA' He was in and out of the house in a flash and backing out before he yelled if I wanted to go? I did want to go. When you have no possibilities and nothing going for you, you don't turn down opportunities.

'How mad is Robert?'

'I wouldn't say he's mad, but he maybe had designs on Vel, and he can hardly stand to rehearse with her now. And it's the same thing that happened with you and Karen—even the blanket thing. He didn't let on back then, but he was still into her.' I felt contrite about Karen, but not with Vel, I was in love with her.

I stayed inside my thoughts through Belmont Shore into Long Beach—how we might be passing so close to Vel, and how I might never see her again. And how I had left Belmont, come again, left, and now here I was back, all in the same day. Soon the terrain changed to a mile of bright lighted car lots on Long Beach Boulevard. Just

past Salta Pontiac, Sid pulled into a smaller lot and we got out.

While Sid headed behind the main building with the guy, I walked among the rows of cars and trucks. This was an older used-car dealership, without a brand, and without the prestige or the lighting of the newer lots. Between whitewashed 4x4 posts, adorned with red bicycle reflectors, there were wires strung with colored bulbs from a cut-rate Christmas. The lumens on this lot barely added up to what was left on next door at Salta, which was closed for the night. This was an anachronism, more than that, an atavism, but more authentic than the new dealerships that portended falseness. This place was like where I used to go with my dad in the 50's, where my dad bought a couple of cars. That lot was owned by two guys—the Wright brothers. It was the same sort of thing as this lot—even the bulbs. Except their lot was sawdust. I remember my dad getting a car with sawdust in the rear end, stuffed in there to quiet worn-out gears, and Charley Wright saying he had no idea how that could have happened. He took the car back and gave my dad his pick of the lot—with no hard feelings. At the time I was reading Huckleberry Finn and those brothers reminded me of the hucksters Huck fell in with on the river. I liked the Wright brothers.

Most of the cars here were a little older—from the early to the late 50's—which are some of my favorite cars ever. For the first time, looking at the enormous wingspan of a two-door, 59 Impala, I associated the car with the culture, and the question of what was going on that made that straight fin on the 57 Chevy, caused all hell to break loose in 1959. And it wasn't just with Chevrolet;

Cadillac gave Chevy a real run for it in 59 with huge, straight fins and multiple bullet tail-lights that looked like 50 caliber (no bigger) rounds. In 1960, the fins were still there—still prominent—but more subdued. What did it all mean? Then came a friendly outstretched hand extended to shake mine: 'Gus', he said, with a nod. 'You see anything you could see yourself waxing under an elm tree at the park on a Sunday morning?' I shook Gus's hand and kept looking, not taken in by the sales pitch.

'The problem is that I have a motorcycle and nowhere to live. The trunk on this Chevy is huge but I can't see myself living in it.'

Sid had walked up and he introduced the guy he was with—Pete. 'Heard what you said, and we may have just what you need.' Yeah sure. Gus had me waxing a car under an elm tree and now Pete had just what I needed, but I obediently followed him back to where he and Sid had come.

Behind the office was a van—no a bus—a VW bus. She was a faded light blue but she was all there. I walked around her twice. There was no damage I could see. I asked Pete if he had a flashlight.

'What's the problem? The light back here is pretty good.' I was careful to keep Pete on my side. He had no idea how much I needed this bus. I asked if there was a flashlight I could use to look underneath. While he went into the office, I opened both back doors. You open one by turning down the chrome handle outside, then you turn the plastic inside handle on the other door, 90 degrees, and voila! Well that's French—not German. Inside was a bit of paradise. I'd heard about these, with an ice-

box and a small stove, and the seats folded into a bed. These were just beginning to catch on in the States.

Pete was back with a flashlight big enough to make a cop proud. I climbed underneath and she was as clean—no rust.

'Can we start it up?' I didn't want to say her because maybe that would sound like I was caught up in this lovely vehicle.

'The keys are in it.' I went around, put her in neutral, depressed the clutch pedal and looked out through the split windshield. The dash was also baby blue and the shift knob was ivory white and it felt good in my hand. I moved the floor shift around just to get the feel of her. Then I turned the key and she started up. But there was a miss. She was running rough. She smoked some and I looked at the odometer. 39,000 miles, or was that kilometers. It was miles.

I knew nothing about these VW's but I know about Germans, and I knew that what they build is good, and we had been lucky to have won a war with them. I had a friend with BMW motorbikes, and when I opened the engine hatch in the back, that's what I saw, a really small four-cylinder, opposed head, engine—an engine about which I had serious doubts as to whether or not it could power this bus up a long hill.

But there was some much about her I liked. The bumpers were painted the same color as the bus. They were an even more simple design than Model A Ford bumpers. But not as substantial. It needed to be taken into consideration that there was nothing at all between the driver of this vehicle and a head-on collision—except that bumper—which didn't add up to much.

The motor kept running and missing and I let it run and talked over it.

I lied. 'This is quite a thing, Pete. Never seen one of these before. Got my doubts about that motorbike engine pushing this big old thing up a hill. Bet that's what's wrong with her—39,000 miles on a little motorbike engine pushing this big thing.'

Pete looked slightly offended and I raised my palms in a gesture to take back anything derogatory I had said.

'I only meant that I grew up on Chevy V-8's, and can't see any my friends swapping for one of these. What interests me, is even with the bad engine, I could find a place to park it and live in it for now. Why'd you decide to take it in as a trade?' Sid was looking at me as if I were an actor in a play. This was a side of me he hadn't seen, but hell I wanted this bus.

'Yeah, I'm wondering what they'll say in the morning. The guy did the same thing your friends would do—he bought a 56 Chevy coupe. Paid full price and took half of what he had in this because he said the engine needed work.'

'So, if you get back what you gave him in trade, and you sold a car a full price, would that satisfy the boss?'

'I don't think so. They like to make something on every sale.' I just stood there. I didn't want Pete to see how much I wanted this bus. I looked down and then back up at him with the best—*ah, I don't know look* that I could muster.

'I can show you what I paid,' he said, '600 dollars.' Which was good. I thought it would be more. Still I said nothing, looking at my bus with feigned indifference—maybe even shaking my head in an almost imperceptible,

no. 'If you give me \$700, you can have it.' Still I hesitated, then:

'I'm just afraid when I see what it costs to fix it, and the problem turns out to be that it's underpowered. and it happens again—I might regret it.'

'Okay, \$650 or we quit talking.' I shook Pete's hand to seal the deal. And I could pay him right now. That's how it is when you have nowhere to live. Your bank is always with you. I turned off the engine, put the key in my pocket, and followed Pete into the office as my heart skipped a crazy beat.

9

When it's just you and your chariot

It's funny how things go. I was sitting on that old couch in front of Sid's, without any kind of a plan, and here I was, a few hours later, following Sid's Plymouth along Pacific Coast Highway in my 59 VW Bus—with an engine that was a mix of running and missing, but it was getting me back to Huntington Beach. Once we arrived, in another stroke of luck, Robert liked the bus and offered to paint something on her small rectangular panel below the window on the rear hatch, and pretty much suggested that I park and stay in back of the house. After borrowing a flashlight and rooting around in my stuff behind the plywood in the garage, which I had been wise enough to put in sealed plastic trash bags, I found the pil-

lows, blankets, clothes, books, an extension cord and a lamp—everything required for a new age life.

Later, in bed, with stars in the windows (some of which I left open), and a salt breeze on the air, I pondered my good fortune. I had a motorcycle that I loved and now a bus that was a home. I had a place to stay (dependent of course on future good behavior), and I had friends. I had my own gypsy caravan, and I didn't have Judy to deal with, nor did I own half of a cigarette route with Jack. And, as I was heading out to my rolling home, Sid told me that Vel had quit the band. On one level I felt responsible, but at least I wouldn't have to see her.

During the night, I woke up once to go out to pee. The air was still and cool on my nakedness and I could hear the rhythm of the swell breaking along the beach. It had to be more than a quarter mile away but it sounded as if it were across the street. The ocean is a terrible thing.

In the morning I woke up to Robert's black cat meowing and circling the bus, so I opened the side door enough to let her in. She jumped up on the bed and traded meowing for nuzzling me as long as I lay there. There was just enough space that I could sit up by the doors and get dressed. It was warming up so I put on a Towncraft tee shirt and a pair of long shorts, with flip-flops, and stepped outside.

I'd only been in this yard once or twice, and like the house, it was old and overgrown. If I was going to make my habitat back here, I needed to work on the yard. The grass was so long that Robert's old Austin Healy 3000 convertible, had grass growing up from the inside, and out over the doors. Other than that, it looked as though it might run.

I went into the house with some trepidation as I wasn't convinced that Robert was totally okay with my being back here. Neither of them were home, so I took a quick shower and made a plan. First, I would refuse to think about money, which I needed badly. Which included the two grand I hoped to get from my folks, of which I had no assurance, and there was my two, which was now closer to 1300. I was in a mess, one where I would likely forfeit a thousand bucks for the house. But, if I didn't think about it, it wouldn't be real—at least not until the day after tomorrow.

Right now the main issue was with my gypsy caravan. She wasn't running well and she needed help. How to deal with that was almost as daunting as dealing with raising the money for my house, but I reminded myself that I was not the first guy whose engine had a miss.

I remembered something along Beach Boulevard, close to Robert's, and decided to head over there. I made a small detour past my house, where all seemed in order. I couldn't see the *For Sale* sign in the grass, so Ron had probably come and picked it up because the house was sold (oh boy). Anna was out in the garden and she didn't look up as I sputtered on by. The tea company was the tea company and Surf Liquor looked just the same as it had the day before. I turned left and merged with traffic heading east.

On my left I saw the destination so I signaled (I liked the design of the thin, longish, gray-clay, colored signal lever), and turned into Karl's Kars. Karl's was three bays and two guys working on cars, neither of which were VWs, but both were German. The guy who looked up at

me, I liked immediately. He was in his late 40's and he looked German.

'Hey, are you Karl?' I told him the whole story, even about the backyard, and I almost told him of the circumstances under which I left Belmont Shore.

'These are good. But they now come wid a bigger engine, is still too weak. What happens is up a long hill, the cylinder number three gets hot because eez next to the oil cooler, and sometimes it sucks valve into the cylinder. So... if you have lost power on a hill, if you hear racket, a valve got loose in combustion chamber, you turn off zee engine right way. Even then too late.'

'You think it was a mistake to buy it, Karl?'

'No, it's slow. Takes maintenance, but eez gud. Do you know engines?'

'A little. I had a 1950 Ford. I did a valve job on.'

'How you did it? That's flathead, and you need machine shop for grinding those seats.'

'I had this tool, Karl; it was like a hand drill....' He stopped me:

'And you seated das valves by hand with grinding compound?'

"I did."

"It take forever.'

'It did, but I had two months before I got my license, I was 15 and a half, so what was time to me?'

'Come in zee office. I show you something.'

In the office he handed me a book; it was a white book with a coil binding—a black-line drawing of a bug on the cover. It was big and kinda thick. *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive—for the Complete Idiot*, by John Muir. Must be a different John Muir.

'This is all you need. This and zum basic tools get zat bus running. And when motor is used up, you get zee big one. We call that transmission zee *crash-box*; same zat they used in the war, last forever.'

I bought the book but I didn't want to leave. 'Karl, can I help out here and work on the bus out back? I need it to run because I'm buying a house and I only have until tomorrow night to raise the money.'

Karl smiled benevolently. 'Zat's it. You need to trade work to buy a house?'

Karl let me work out back and I could use some tools if I didn't bother him. And that the list of tools I would need to maintain my bus was in the book. I pulled the bus up the side and out back where I began reading the troubleshooting section of the *Idiot's Guide*. As instructed, I pulled out each wire from the distributor and sanded them and put them back. I did the same at the spark plug end. I got a spark plug wrench and took out a plug, which looked bad. The electrode was almost gone. I showed it to Karl and he got me four Bosch plugs. I could see the other guy, Willie, who wasn't looking too fond of me taking up time, so I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible.

'Zee plugs, zee are the best, and already zee are the right gap.' Karl gave me some anti-seize to put on the threads and I went and put them in. I could have used a torque wrench but I didn't want Willie seeing me again, so I just snugged them without stripping the aluminum block. I knew that from *Triumphs*.

I pulled out the points and they were pitted. Before I went to Karl, I read how to change them, three times. Changing them was a bit tricky the first time out because

I kept getting the gap wrong, but I finally figured it out. Just as I was getting ready to start her up, Karl came back and knelt down to listen before I turned her over. She started right up and she ran smooth—real smooth. Karl signaled for me to turn her off and leave the key in the on position with the handbrake on. He looked through the bus for something he couldn't find, and went back into the office for what looked to be a crank, which he inserted through the bumper, then he gave it a hard spin clockwise, and she started right up. Over the noise of the engine:

'Karl, I had one of those for a Model A Ford, but I had to be careful because it would kick back and break a wrist.'

'The Germans, zae are too smart. The crank goes only one way—zer is nothing to grab on zee return.' He had me turn it off to show me one more thing. 'These window, this is special. They open out and up, 90 degrees. Zo you can let air in. Is aire conditioning for the volks—lieber aire—free aire. And zis model didn't come with it—eez in the combi-bus. But you got it so you are lucky.'

I couldn't wait to get back to Robert's and read up on my new home, but I owed a debt of gratitude here. 'What work needs done around here, Karl?'

'Sometime, ven Willie and I have da time, all that mountain of engine and transmission has to go on that trailer. But that is sometime.'

I couple of minutes later I interrupted his work again for a pair of gloves, and two hours later when Karl came back to see what I was up to, he went back in and got Willie. Everything was on the trailer. There was so much

weight that I worried for the tires and the axles, but it was all there, and I was as tired as I ever remember.

10

The biker makes a turn—inward

So here I was, safely ensconced in Roberts's back yard. I'd dealt with the weeds and generally cleaned up the area. I'd paid the \$2000 on my house and sorely needed to go back to my folks to see about the \$2000 loan. \$500 of my \$2000, I borrowed from Sid to replace what I'd spent on the bus. But I had a good feeling that things would work out. Which sort of included Vel quitting the band, and I wouldn't have to see her. Besides, maybe she quit the band because she couldn't deal with me. Somehow I would make that into a compliment.

And this was Southern California in early autumn, with beautiful girls everywhere. And Huntington Beach, south to San Clemente, was the epicenter for beauty. I didn't need Vel, or any one woman for that matter. I could just have some fun.

In the morning there was a note from Robert that he was at Huntington College, suggesting I ride out. Which I did, in my motorhome, because he said I should I bring my guitar. I'd been playing since I was 13, when I'd hitchhiked up to Hollywood and bought an old Stella guitar that I'd seen in a pawnshop. As with everything else, I learned on my own, watching players who knew what they were doing. Robert was one of them. After the

breakup of my non-relationship with Riley, I treated myself to a guitar, and Robert helped me find it. We must have played every Martin D-18 in SoCal. Up to Westwood, where the Eagle's guitars and cases were sitting out, tagged for maintenance. Robert looked at them with lust and envy—wanting for himself what was not in the cards.

We found the guitar I wanted in Lakewood—both of us thought it had the best tone of the lot and I bought it. It had seemed like such a fortune—more than \$300.

I found Robert by the college library, off by himself playing his Gibson, and I joined him. We weren't there long, when this trim fellow, in a two shades of brown, houndstooth sports coat approached us. Robert knew him—a little.

'Do you gentlemen have time to entertain a question about existence, or is it just the muse that pulls you?'. I liked the entrance. He didn't wait for a reply.

'Okay, it's like this: are beautiful women beautiful because they are beautiful, or is it because they somehow participate in the idea of beauty?'

'Assuming there is an idea of beauty?'

'Could be. What do you think?'

'Dunno. Does it implies denying the real world for a world of ideas. I'm too young for that—there's too much beauty just walking around.'

'But too much beauty that it robs you of your mind—robs you of a question? And, why are you so sure that this world around us is the real world?'

That was my introduction to Anton, who obviously taught philosophy at the college. Later, after Robert

headed home, I went to the administration building and signed up for all of Anton's classes on this, the last day of registration for the fall semester. On my way back to the bus, I walked through the quad, and there was Anton, surrounded by acolytes, holding court. He was one of those guys who likely spent more time asking questions over coffee than in class.

He saw me and motioned me over.

'We are well-met,' he offered to his host. 'by a visiting philosopher, with whom I had the pleasure of a dialogue earlier, and now he has come to to share his insights and wisdom with us.' He motioned to the one unoccupied chair and I reluctantly sat down.

I was no philosopher and I was not wise, but I had more going than this bunch of nerds. You could see it in the way they dressed—especially the men. Men's clothing should be wear-dated, thrown out by statute, past a certain date. This was the height of geek-dome.

There were probably a dozen students there—it was one of those Greenwich Village, almost beatnik things—admixed with nerds. Anton obviously drew from both; hangers-on who needed to get a life, but more serious students, some of whom looked to be too old for a SoCal junior college. The meeting on the quad was one of those come and go things, where a couple of them left, probably headed for class, and another showed up. it had the look of something that could go late into the afternoon.

'So, we're wrestling with a difficult one—one that I hope you can help with. Are beautiful things loved by the gods because they are beautiful, or are they beautiful because they are loved by the gods?'

It was a set-up, but an interesting one. The same question he brought earlier, but now it was decked out with gods. I looked around, quieting my breathing and my heartbeat—the way one would do before a fight. That's how it is with my self-worth; my ego is always there, ready to react and crush me. Just to survive, I need to slow it down—see the whole thing as play—fun.

'You know, I was just thinking about that: whether this world in front of us is anymore less or more real than the world we encounter in our mind, or in our dreams. Whether there be gods or not, some deny this physical existence as real, while others deny the world of ideas as real. Which may be among among the biggest questions.'

Anton was beaming. He saw promise in my reply, and I wondered how to get what Anton offered and not become a nerd in the process—keeping in mind that charismatic figures oftentimes bring a level of character you do want for yourself. But in all fairness, I didn't know this man, and he had my interest. And another thing, several of the women were quite stylish and beautiful, unlike the guys. So Anton had an attraction beyond what drew the men. I wondered, was it him the women wanted or, in his questions, did they see a path to a self-worth that women in this culture lack—even more than the men?

'I'm good with the question—without assuming the existence of the gods. I like the poetic quality. I think you are asking about the relationship between the world of ideas and the physical world?'

'You see, I told you,' he said, giving a nod to the listeners. 'We have been waiting for this man.'

So I was the first coming, was I? It was as if Anton were talking out of a book, but there was authenticity to it. Wherever this had come from, he had embraced—embedded it—he had become it.

But now began the pecking order wars. I could see at least two, maybe three guys, with their hackles up at Anton anointing me. One, with red hair, with a flat face and nose (a historical remnant of someone that I couldn't place, was chomping at the bit to come after me as an interloper with no business in the discussion. Without introduction, he went right to it, speaking, partly in deference to Anton while directing the rest at me, 'The question is obvious, but without having done the work to contrast the early dialogues from the middle period, what good is it? If one has not *done* Euthyphro or Theatetus, and doesn't know the historical significance of either, the question lies fallow—without Platonic structure.' There was no question in any of this. I wasn't worth a question.

I watched him in great wonder—for one—then two reasons: until he said Platonic, I hadn't gotten the connection for his flat face. For all the world, he resembled the depiction of Socrates that has come down to us. And he was postulating—that without Platonic structure there was no grounds for meaningful questions. And that bit about one having not *done* the Theatetus, which was one of Plato's dialogues that I sold back to the Long Beach book store, and I was glad I did because whatever was going on here was going to be far more interesting than Riley or a lecture series on the hill at Long Beach.

Done had to be the highfalutin version of read—*done* implied a depth that reading could never achieve. I took some time before getting back into the conversation,

wondering if Anton would jump in, which he did not. I thought he would not. He enjoyed this dharma combat, as the Tibetans call it, but alas this was not that. This had nothing to do with any dharma, or even combat. This was just another kiss-ass bitch, kiss-ass-en up to Anton, with no regard for me, and more importantly, for the ideas or the discussion.

This fellow saw me as the enemy, but he was not worth enemy status.

'Anton, am I to understand that before Plato there were no questions?' The implication being that Platonism is a religion and not philosophy. That actual questions are not as important as the period in which the dialogues were written, and whether or not one has *done* them.

Anton betrayed just the corner of a wry smile. I thought he was seeing this for what it was, but was he? The same questions I had about Percy and Phil, in regards to being my friends, given lifestyles they chose, applied here. Anton was surrounded by a geek squad, many of whom were incapable of doing anything else. Did Anton draw them in by design, because he needed them, or was this guy and some of the other hangers-on, the Greek version of an American historical remnant—kinda-like those *hang around the fort indians*?

Anton seemed sincere, but definitely an example of the set—*charismatic*. Who and what was this group? And did I want any part of it. Until I could see whether or not Anton was for real, I needed to assume that he was. The best view of that would be from the inner circle—without becoming part of the inner circle. But, it wouldn't be easy: Anton was formidable and obviously competitive. Who was he? I wanted to find out.

My adversary had said nothing—so far. It was as if he had chanced into a ring and laced up the gloves without being invited, and right off he was down on one knee from a hook to the liver. I wasn't going to wait for him to get his mojo back:

'I want to read those dialogues and see what Plato was up to, but asking my own questions about mind and body.'

My critic was again ready, but Anton headed him off:

'Answer me this: does one see through the eyes or is it the eyes that see?

'It's a good question. If the eyes see, then the eyes are beings, which would be absurd.' (*not a bad answer for a biker who lives in a camper*). 'On the other hand, if one sees through the eyes, one is what is behind the eyes—the intellect'

'I call it *psyche*, which in the Greek translates to the actual breathe—the life force.'

I liked that. Anything that brought poetry or the actual force of life to the discussion pulled me in.

'Okay, *psyche*. But that breathing, it seems to not be something like the eyes. The eyes are a kind of mechanism, but that breathe, that's the thing itself—or something close to it. And that makes me think the question of whether or not we are the breathe or the thing that breathes may be a shallow breathe of a question, something that takes us away for the actual experience of what it is to live.'

Anton's eyes shone. 'All enlightenment experiences have to do with a rush to unity—without separation—separation forgotten. When the early Christians talked about atonement, it was about an experience. The was at-

one-ment. The Biblical gibberish has nothing to do with the mystics. For that we need to get into the one and the many—into Eastern thought—into Parmenides. But that's for another day—the dean awaits me on the tennis court.

Anton walked off and I was hooked—for now. Whatever else Anton was, he had my curiosity.

11

In a fight, unless you obviously control the outcome, you play the long game, absorbing some shots to the body or head, but you can't afford many of either. Amidst the pain, you find your way.

I was feeling good and I needed a loan, so there was no better time to visit my folks. I knew I was in for a fight but it was one I could not avoid.

It was coming on night; just about time for the drinking to commence—I might just get into drinking with them. Without looking out back to see if they were home, I parked my bus on the street and went to the door with my guitar.

My mom answered and I brushed by her with a kiss and a 'Hi, mom'. Dad was in the kitchen pouring a glass from a quart of beer. I asked for one.

'How about we have a couple of beers and you break out the mandolin and we play?' Mom chimed in:

'If you think a couple of songs is going to get you our hard-earned money, you best think again.'

'Mom, don't start off thinking badly. I'm looking for a loan, not a gift. And it's for something worthwhile. If you don't want to loan to me, and I can't get it from somewhere else, I'll forfeit the \$2000 I gave Ron yesterday.' There was one thing I didn't want—to get love or money for going along with the program—for being good. It would be better to get nothing. But it would suck.

'I don't know why I bother, Al.' This was a saying my mother was known for. Without having to attach anything to it, it functioned to cover any situation having to do with her three offspring. As would an Aikido master, I sidestepped and let it go right on by.

'C'mon outside, I want to show you something.'

They reluctantly followed me out front to my blue bus in all its resplendency.

'I got it to save money. It has a camper in it and until I can get my house fixed up I'm camping in Robert's back yard.' Which brought:

'You could stay with us and not put out money for this beer-can you're sleeping in.'

I tried to imagine how it might be to stay with them: they both smoked, and my mother couldn't make it five minutes without taking a shot at me.

'This is better, mom. I can save money, not impose on my parents, and I have a home on wheels.'

'You've had some dumb ideas but this is the worst. It's like that house you want to buy; you need a house like a hole in the head.' Out of the blue, my dad came in:

'I've been thinking about these, May. The VW bug looks interesting to me. They put a bigger engine in it this year.'

'Al, honey, what the hell are you thinking? These things are toys. Didn't you get your fill with the Renault?'

'It's different, May. That was French. This is German. German engineering and the reports on the bug are good.'

'There you go—going along with this bugger of hell. Let me tell you something, I would rather burn in hell than loan this one \$2000—especially this one. Everything that ever comes out of his mouth comes to no good.' All this before the first drink.

'Stop it May! He came to visit and show us his car. He hasn't done anything to warrant that.'

'You just side with the bad bugger, Al. He pits you against me. You two play your little music and talk about your little cars—I'll go in my room.'

'Mom, how about we don't talk about money tonight, We have a drink and play some music. Maybe you have something left from dinner?'

'We haven't even had it yet.' She was mollified, at least for now. She carried a big past with her. Likely, she and her sisters had been sexually assaulted by their father, and if that were true, it may not have been possible for her to deal with. She could be okay, even funny, until something touched her off—say like a loan to buy a house.

So could my dad. Last year I hitched down to Central America on a whim, mostly because he said it couldn't be done. Down there I met a couple of black guys from Surinam, who eventually ended up at my dad's door, and

for whom he found jobs and an apartment in Long Beach. Later he had unkind things to say about them, probably in deference to Alabama Governor George Wallace, whose autographed picture was prominent on the TV cabinet.

'How many horsepower is that bus?'

'36.'

'That's not enough.' He was right about that—it doesn't power up a hill. And I'd been forewarned that every ten thousand miles it would need the valves done. Too much weight straining too little power.'

'That's the 1200. Even the bug this past year had 1300, and now they've gone to 1500.' My dad's an engineer; he knows this stuff.

'Are you really going to buy one?'

'I think I am.' He must have been feeling pretty good about things because he went into the bedroom and came back with his mandolin case. 'I think I'd like to hear you do some Hank Williams. Which was just fine with me. I could spend more than one night on Hank. Hank lived to be what, twenty-nine years old, and left the song-list of a man who lived to be seventy.'

Dad and I went at it like a couple of journeymen. We played, or at least tried, a couple of dozen songs. It was one of those nights when the train kep' a rollin, when a new song would appear to follow the last one. I didn't even know I knew that many Hank songs.

Mom came in on some; she loved music. And she was quite funny—like Lucille Ball. She even looked like Lucille Ball. But now she was projecting all over the place and I knew why: there was an inevitability to my father taking her away from Huntington Beach, and her beloved Golden West College, out to the badlands of wherever.

When we were done my dad walked me out. 'I'll loan you the money. You make sure you pay it back or I'll have hell to pay with your mother.'

In the late afternoons these days, I would hang out with Anton and his acolytes at an apartment complex from the 40's called Palm Court, where most of the apartments were rented by students and post-students from the philosophy group. It was pretty cool, with everybody crowded into kitchens talking about existential reality and unreality. Anton ruled the roost but that was okay. What we were getting from him was a way to think, which did us some good. The rest of Anton, whatever that would be, was yet to come.

My dad knew where I spent my afternoons and agreed to show up one afternoon with a check. I sat out on the lawn and waited for him, for a long time. My anxiety heightened as the minutes ticked by because my family so often let me down. Then I saw his truck and there he was. He looked good in his Harris Tweed and slacks. He didn't get out, just handed me the check with a comment that he wanted to sometime come to the Friday night philosophy meeting and see what Anton was about. I wondered about that because my dad had told me that when he was a young man he was into philosophy but as he got older he saw that it went nowhere, just circled back to where it started. I watched his truck disappear in the distance and there was no time when I felt better about my dad.

