

1969

a memoir of the hippie days by

Mike Finley



The Year of Breaking into Pieces

It was always about the music -- the Beatles, the Velvets, the Doors -- because we crowded around it like people in another age would have gone elbow to elbow around bone-men and snake-handlers.

It wasn't democratic. Nobody voted for Jerry Garcia. Tet there was a sense that he had been annointed, along with the others, to supply

the images for something like a revolution.

And so we accepted the idea of dancing skeletons, holding thorned red roses in their teeth, as one of the runes that described who we were. It's not that we understood it. We didn't understand much. But we gave it our assent, we let it be our flag, we let it describe us, because we knew we were more on the side of it than with Dean Rusk or Fulton J. Sheen.

We each came to the music in our own way. I called out to the drifting spirits of Simon & Garfunkel and the twelve steel strings of Roger McGuinn from the depths of deepest Ohio for some rescue from the ordinariness that impinged me on all sides.

No, I did not want to be placed on a career track, no I did not want to finish in the upper quartile of my class, no I did not want to meet the right girl and hunker down on a quarter-acre lot for a long dull life, and no I did not want to head out to Vietnam any time soon, canteen clattering at my side.

I wanted a ticket, I wanted a way out of all these terrible choices, and not to have to dig my grave with my teeth like my father's fathers' fathers' fathers.

And to be perfectly honest, forty years later nothing has changed. The tooth has not lost its ache to be free.

When I listened to the songs at age fifteen in the basement of my parents' house in Amherst, with the nickel weighing the record cartridge down to prevent skips, and the Airplane's Signe Tolle Anderson crying out that it was no secret how strong my love is for you, and no one was home but me, and I would see my reflection in the darkened windows, with the fishflies massing by the streetlight outside and the shadows swallowing the hollows of my teenage face.

I was raised to think it was unholy and disreputable to love one's own self but that is what I did, because that was what I heard myself invited to, by the lonely reflection in the window late at night, and by the churning, swirling, scratchy guitars.

In the dark of that window with the flies banging against the screen, and the sour of lake erie closing in, that though I was raised a good boy, an ex-seminarian, I was gonna break hearts all round the world, just like in the lyrics.

I would break them by the hundredweight, that would be my gift to them, that sorrow and that disappointment that would be a beacon unto them.

The old rules were like the Hokey Pokey, you put your right foot out and then your their left foot in, but the Hokey Pokey was history, and in the fullness of time everyone with more than a splatter of brain cells would defy the rules.

Though it would break my mothers heart, and send her to an early

grave, I knew in that moment I was part of the wave and I would abandon that dance, and her little house by the water, and i would light out for the periphery the first chance I got.

I date my story by music. It begins with Revolver, with the pen-and-pencil drawing by Klaus Voorman, specifically "Tomorrow Never Knows," with its bird-whoops and monk-groans and falling-down-the-circular-stairs string arpeggios.

And it ends with "Déjà vu," and David Crosby's foolish "Almost Cut My Hair," in which he pledges to continue as a hippie because he owed it to the rest of us.

That poor, stupid man.

In between was concrete and fantasy, youth and death, good intentions and bad, together and forlorn, peace and love and worry and spite, speckled birds and choking dogs, friendship and disappointment, loneliness and love, free of the earth's gravity and bound by enslavement of the ego.

We brimmed with the possibility of learning new ways, but we were constrained by genetics. We e revealed. We blasted off in atomic rockets to escape the gravitational pull of our parents' doomed world. But when we glanced in the command module mirror, there our parents were, hopelessly hung on the issues of politics, livelihoods, and dental therapeutics.



Vicklebar

In high school I got average grades, but I managed to score well on a prestigious English test, which made me look desirable on paper to colleges, and so I was hustled by places like Harvard, Princeton, and West Point.

But I blew this great opportunity, ultimately failing to get scholarship help from any school. I think it was the biographical essays I wrote as part of my application. I don't recall what I wrote exactly but I think I went on about my philosophy of life, which revolved largely around me.

I finally got into the last place I wanted to attend -- the College of Wooster, a Scots Presbyterian college in the Amish country of central Ohio. Because its initials were COW, I found out, the students called the place Cowtown. I expected it to be ultra-uncool.

Once there, I fell quickly in love with a great girl named Clare, whose parents were cool university professors. Clare was beautiful and wise and arty and, best of all, she loved all my jokes. She was a modern dancer and once danced in a coffeehouse leotard act to "Venus in Furs." She was better than best.

Plus she had a little white kitty who lived in her dorm room, named Vicklebar, meaning "honeybear." The kitty cat was, as many all-white cats are, congenitally deaf.

Wooster was a place, in the late 60s, where all hell was slated to break loose. My classmates were part of a staged riot for the benefit of the same National Guard unit that would later open fire on the kids at Kent State. The mock riot was supposed to train the unit how to respond to campus protest situations. Since we were just Cowtown, they trusted us to play along.

But our mock-riot turned into an embarrassing disaster for that unit. Knowing it was just a game, and we would not be shot, we students took advantage of the soldiers, who were just kids like us, first taunting, then disarming them, and latching some of them inside a dairy barn on the Wayne County fairgrounds. Eventually the recruits lost their cool and lofted real tear gas at us, and a few kids, like my friend Julia, whose foot was bayoneted, got hurt and required medical care.

It was a painful experience for the Guard, and I think it explains why the unit commander (of mostly different Guardsmen) used live ammo a year and a half later at Kent State. "No more Woosters!" might have been the rationale.

The mock riot was a bonding baptism for about 150 of us at the college. Whether we were black, white, short, fat, skinny or tall, we fashioned a culture of kindness toward one another and deep-dyed skepticism about the establishment. Drugs and "pretty free love" -- loose but not without pattern -- were a part of this collectivity. By paying only token attention to studies and exams, we all broke our parents' hearts, not to mention the Wooster tradition of middle-to-high performance. Our real education in 1968-69, I like to say, was about one another. (Aw!)

I was the worst of them. I dropped out in midyear 1969, and left, not telling anyone what my plans were. I thought the real world was Out There, not in the dorms and classrooms and coffeehouse. Probably the dumbest thing I ever did, though U gave it competition.

Now, I had a roommate at that time who was an honest-to-god prince of Morocco, named Farouk Britel. He claimed to be something like ninety-seventh in line to Morocco's peacock throne. Not likely that he would ascend to power, but you never knew. He was a half-height

Lothario who terrified all the good Presbyterian girls with his predations. He frequently gave cultural talks to civic groups around campus and town. So the dormitory was hung with his remarkable native costumes -- royal gowns, and wild goat's-hair robes worn by nomads.

This is not an aside. The goat's-hair garments hanging in the room are essential to this story.

That semester, I spent much of my time being an obnoxious asshole. I sought attention campus-wide by making mischief and being a brat. In my own mind I was sort of an Abbie Hoffman type, staging outré anti-war protests, like manning a punchbowl full of cow's blood across from a Navy recruiter in a dining hall. A couple football players whose brothers were serving on ships in the Gulf of Tonkin tipped my table over, splooshing tomato juice everywhere.

Another time I carefully inserted 400 copies of a bit of doggerel I dashed off, "Old MacWooster Had a War" in the chapel hymnbooks on the occasion of LBJ's national security adviser MacGeorge Bundy giving an address at the school. I truly thought the assembly would open to that page and begin singing "with a moo-moo here, and a cluck-cluck there," and it would all reflect gloriously on me, and somehow the war would be shortened as a result.

The opposite happened -- everyone ignored my inserts and sang the Doxology beneath it, and despite my best efforts the war dragged on.

As a freshman I had the work-study job of mimeographing the school's daily newsheet, called Potpourri. Every night I typed up the next day's meetings and events, and it being 1967 I was allowed to add my own little flourishes, like a peace sign or an epigram or cartoon. At some point I began making little marginal doodles that made fun of the school's athletic fraternity, the Second Section.

The Second section were ordinary fellows, except that they were bigger than average, enjoyed full scholarships because they could run or tackle, drank lots of beer, and according to their reputation sweated up more car backseats. They tended to be very patriotic, and pro-war. So I

targeted them as the source of much of the evil in the world, and I lampooned them every chance I could get, with cartoons showing athletes to be, well stupid. In my mind they had no role to play in the 60s, and should be banned from a really cool campus.

In retaliation, the Second Section doofuses were plotting my destruction. They routinely bumped me off the sidewalks on the quad, and did other things that only egged me on. One of the boys -- one of the two who tipped over my ersatz bucket of blood -- was actually suspended from school for conspiring to kidnap me and take me for a terrifying drive up through his part of northeastern Ohio, possibly abandoning me in a salt mine in his home town of Barberton. But I was unaware of this at the time of this story.

One wintry night, after putting out the newssheet, I lay down to sleep. Farouk was out of town, and for some reason I had Clare's little cat with me, purring on my chest under the sheets. Suddenly, my dorm window broke, and I was rocked by a major KERBLAM!

I sat up in bed and my head was ringing, Vickiebar trembling in my hand -- even she felt the explosion. The light at my bedside was gone, knocked down and broken. Despite my vibrating head I could tell that the room was full of smoke, and the scent of peppermint. People outside the room were pounding on the door, and the housemaster was fumbling with the master key. When the door opened and flashlights lit up the room, and someone located a lamp that was not blown up, we saw that a bomb had gone off in it.

Taking the full brunt of the explosion were Farouk's native outfits -- they hung from a wire, shredded and splattered with something white. The splattering was not limited to the clothing, however -- it was everywhere in the dorm room, on the walls, mirrors, books, and bedding. And there were little bits of clear glass everywhere, too. The white stuff was what smelled like peppermint -- Colgate Dental Cream.

Still in a daze, I figured out what happened. Some guys from the Second Session, mad at the cartoons I was putting in Potpourri, had packed a Skippy Peanut Butter jar with toothpaste, inserted a lit cherry bomb in the middle, and hurled the thing through my dorm window.

This is the point in the story that bothers me, because I come off in it like a much cooler dude than i in fact was. But it is true. I put on a bathrobe and sneakers, slipped poor little traumatized Vickiebar under one arm, and crossed the snowy quad from my dorm to the building that housed the Second Section.

Entering their main lounge, I stood among a group of guys sitting around watching Johnny Carson doing Karnak. Seeing me, one of the group leaped to his feet and dashed out of the room.

"Hey, Finley," said one the guys, a crooked smile playing on his lips, "what the hell happened to you?" A couple of the guys giggled.

"Someone threw a bomb through my window, and it wrecked the place," I said.

"Gee, that's too bad," said a sophomore named Gene. "You should maybe like get blinds or something."

I held up my hand, indicating silence. Then I took Vickiebar out from the bathrobe and set her on a table, on a checkerboard. The kitty looked about her, disturbed and confused. I stood behind the kitten, extended my arms as far as they would go, and then clapped my hands together, a couple inches from her head.

The kitten didn't so much as blink. One of the boys gasped.

"I just wanted to show you guys what you accomplished tonight," I said. "This beautiful, harmless, innocent creature, deafened for life. I hope you're proud of yourselves."

I picked Vickiebar up and headed out the door. Halfway back to Douglass Hall, slogging through the slush, a group three Second Sectioners caught up to me, panting.

"Hey, Finley, wait up," one of them, a basketball player named Cosby said. Cosby was actually one of the few Second Sectioners that I kind of liked -- he had a kind of funny "Who, me?" style about him.

"We're really sorry, man," Cosby said. And I looked at the other two guys, and one of them was fighting back tears. The kitty-cat story really got to him.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" I asked. And I laid out my terms -- they had to clean up the room, repair Farouk's salvageable outfits and compensate him for the ones that could not be restored, replace the window, and leave me the hell alone for the rest of the year. In return I would leave them alone, too.

They happily complied, and I never told them Vickiebar was born deaf.

My life has been full of heroic moments in which I turned and said exactly the right thing and stunned and amazed people, and turned on my heels and strode confidently away. But they were all in my dreams, or in my fantasies just before nodding off.

But this one really happened, and 40 years later it still makes me smile.



Love That Dirty Water

Back at Wooster, there were perhaps a dozen of us who sat around and daydreamt about a lifestyle that was waiting for us somewhere outside those ivied walls.

It was Rennie, a boyish Baltimorean woman with slim hips and an impish smile, who coined the phrase *freak farm*. She pictured the farm being on Cape Cod, near Provincetown, which was the coolest place she had ever been. Rennie pictured us all as a happy jug band, a lovin'spoonful plunking and twanging and rocking on the front porch, with the waves breaking on an endless stretch of white sand. It was an appealing vision.

Robert, who was raised in Paris and Rome, liked the idea of San Francisco, the Haight. He envisioned a gang of musicheads who would buy a lot of great records and hang around the Fillmore, and stay up pretty late, perhaps discussing Mies van der Hoe or Buckminster Fuller.

Michael, Rennie's boyfriend, had his heart set on a big bushel basket of fine Hawaiian dope, with himself as

musician/poet/avatar of the farm.

I spoke up for L.A., because I had been there the summer before, to see my dad, and I thought the palm trees, ocean, and sunny skies were wonderful. And I figured we would have my dad to fall back on – if things took a turn for the worse.

For some reason my vision was the one that prevailed – it makes no sense, as I was in no wise the leader of our band – but thereby hangs a tale.

I guess we went there because our effort to grab a house on Cape Cod bombed. We had the idea that we needed a patron, that our farm was really an investment opportunity for some upscale person or persons who craved a foothold in the Aquarian upheaval to come. To this end we concocted a scheme to put an ad in the *Saturday Review* under the Personals section. I wrote it. It went thus:

**Artistic group requires digs on 'The Cod'
for growth, peace, and blist awareness.
Box 28763.**

We sent it to the magazine with the \$40 the ad cost and figured the offers would come rolling in, but the magazine kicked the ad back to us as unsuitable. That groused us -- to think the magazine portrayed itself as committed to the arts but was oblivious to new-age life artists like ourselves.

Lacking a stately mansion, our schemes looked westward.

After winter break we took Michael's car up north out of Wooster, toward Cleveland. Halfway up the brakes locked and we slid into a drift, and walked to a nearby farm, and implored the farmer to drive us all the way to the airport. Incredibly, he did -- we were to use this ploy ("Help us, we're inept!") at intervals throughout the history of the freak farm, with varying success.

At the airport, we waited for standby seats to Boston. We landed at Logan, and took the subway to an apartment Rennie sublet on

Beacon Hill. It was the least fancy place on the hill, a one-room walkdown separated from the Red Line by a thin membrane of brick. Every twenty minutes a train rattled every tooth and every bone.

We spend two weeks in this basement apartment scrounging drugs, negotiating the dog-shitty sidewalks, smoking dope and getting horrifically hungry. I looked up my friend X-Ray and we saw the Velvets at the Tea Party. We took mescaline and fell on the dance floor and slowly morphed into lineoleum.

Another time we all took psilocybin and watched *Yellow Submarine* at the Commonwealth, and sat paralyzed in our seats in the theater's front row. When it was over we couldn't get out of our chairs. I had the sensation of weighing perhaps 100 tons, like a whale on the sand. Ushers had to prod us out of the place.

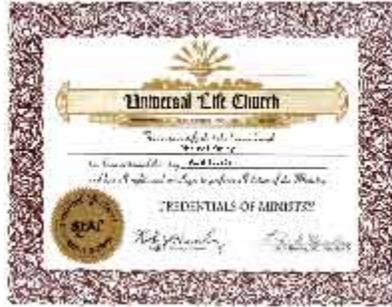
Rennie had dealer friends who seemed very glamorous to us, east coast hippies, not at all like the Newsweek hippies, more fashionable, more tailored, and swarthier. A man named Tommy had a girlfriend named Rose who was gorgeous and very thin, and eight years older than him, 30 or so. We treated Rose like Queen Wendy, first tokes on every pipe, etc.

One day around noon we woke and it had snowed the previous night. The Commons was blanketed with the soft snow from Christmas cards. The first footprints in the snow were being put there by the morning marijuana auction by the statue of Paul Revere.

One night before we flew back we were listening to Brewer & Shipley, the record where they flip a coin and you can hear the coin spinning on the table for about a minute before it finally stops. I piped up and said I never wanted to grow old, that this was the life for me, being one of the lost boys in Old Boston, living for free. "I hope I never get old!" I said.

Then I saw Rose, facing away from me. There were tears rolling down her cheeks. Was it my remark (she was 30) or was she

thinking her own thoughts. I never knew, but I think about that moment quite often. It was my first premonition that there might be a finiteness to dreams, and that this one was as doomed as any.



The Mail Order Ministry

I had read somewhere, in the summer of 1968 -- perhaps in an issue of Paul Krasser's magazine *The Realist*, of which I'm sure I was only the subscriber at my high school -- that there was an outfit in California, a cult you might say, that would ordain anyone to the ministry, and that thousands of draft age men were using these preprinted divinity degrees to maintain deferred status from the U.S. Selective Service. Having a vague plan in mind for freeing myself from the world of squares and transporting myself to a better, higher plane, I jotted down the address:

Universal Life Church
c/o Rev. Kirby J. Hensley
1769 Poland Road
Modesto CA 95358

And after a few months, I came upon the address and wrote to it. I was wise enough even at age 17 to think, You don't get something for nothing. But in this case I did get something. I never sent the Universal Life Church so much as a dollar or a return stamped envelope. But a week later I got a

letter with a divinity degree in it, stating that I was entitled to all the rights and privileges accorded a man of the cloth.

I was enrolled at Wooster by that time, in my sophomore year. I gleefully showed the document around to friends and requested that from that point on I was to be referred to as the Very Reverend Finley. I saw the degree as not only a useful tool in confounding my draft board, but also the antidote to my Presbyterian college's chapel requirements. How could they demand that I attend chapel services if I was already a minister in another faith?

I went down to the Wayne County offices in downtown Wooster and applied for a license to perform marriages. Later, I was to cross into West Virginia and Pennsylvania and get paperwork for the same privileges in those states, too, and when I arrived in California I sent off for the same forms, but never received any.

Just to have something to talk about, I made up a marriage ceremony. It was a simple thing. I simply waved my hand ritualistically over the heads of the happy couple, swigged wine from a jug, and proclaimed "Go, and sin no more!"

I bought a black Roman collar dickey from a religious supply store, and wore it under a wool suit while I went for long, deliberate walks around town. The idea was to get into a ministerial frame of mind. I wanted to approximate the gravity of a real minister, so I practiced thinking about the things I thought ministers thought about -- the fires of hell, the problems of wayward youth, the themes for next Sunday's homily. Now that I am older I realize ministers spend more time thinking about building

funds and career tracks than about hell. What did I know.

The joke was good enough that about 40 classmates were eventually ordained. I was pleased to see other people thought it was a cool idea -- but I secretly bridled at them stripping the exclusivity of the idea away from me. Also, obviously, when everyone was a minister, that being a minister meant less. The whole point of the ministerial joke is the solitariness of the spiritual leader tending to his flock, the intermediary to God. When everyone was a minister it was more like a Frisbee party.

But there was nothing I could do about that. After all, I got the idea from a magazine. And Kirby J. Hensley wasn't interested in my exclusivity. The more I found out about him, the more of a troublemaker he seemed to be. He was an old-time Pentecostal preacher in North Carolina, but something flipped him out. I hoped it was the war, or the way his church handled civil rights, or some struggle over doctrine.

It appears, however, that he was just dissatisfied with the doctrinaire attitudes of Pentecostalism. So his idea was to create a new kind of church in which people could invent their own beliefs. In classic American style, He divorced his first wife and decided to find a new improved religion. He inspected many religions, judging what each had to offer spiritually. After 5 years of studying, Hensley concluded that "the proper religion may differ for each man, and everyone is entitled to choose his or her own religion. No one should be criticized or condemned for wanting to practice the belief of his or her choice."

So Kirby Hensley started this bogus church with the primary goal of screwing the system up. To anyone at all, he was willing to confer the privileges which religion had zealously guarded over the years -- freedom from investigation, freedom from taxation, freedom to say the most outlandish things, freedom to worship in unusual ways and to ingest weird things as part of the ceremony, even the freedom of sanctuary from worldly authority.

Over the years, many movements would make their way to Modesto to take advantage of these glittering freedoms -- draft resisters, tax protesters, goofball cults, and grifters. Dogs, cartoon characters, death-row inmates and dead people are said to be among the ordained elect.

My fate was to use this tarnished vessel to launch a strike against my school, my society, my family and the U.S. Government by creating an unprosecutable religious enclave on the palm-lined streets of Hollywood, California.

My goal was sanctuary.

The Gohonzon



When I was 16 and in high school -- 1967 -- it was obvious we were in for a cultural pounding from oriental religions. I was reading books by Allen Watts and D. T. Suzuki, and books of haiku were popping up in ordinary people's bathrooms.

When I graduated from high school, my mom gave me a Japanese kimono and a hookah. I don't know why, but there it was.

I had a summer job at Cedar Point amusement park, and I lived in the employee dorms there. Most the of the other kids were pretty rich, and all were older than 17 -- I had a fake ID and got in to places I didn't belong.

I took pains to appear outside my dorm room as often as possible wearing my kimono, as if it were a smoking jacket. I lit incense and let the smoke filter down the hall, hoping people would either think I was meditating or getting stoned. The music that summer was Sgt. Pepper and the Velvets' pink banana album. Everyone was doing things that a year before would have seemed frighteningly standoutish. Looking weird -- what everyone had dreaded all through high school -- was suddenly cool.

At Wooster I studied comparative religions, and hung mail order posters advertised in Ramparts magazine, of Meher Baba and

Fritz Perls, and Laurel and Hardy in Arabia. Occasionally some swami would come to campus and tell everyone about the life within -- we were all eager about it, in a midwestern way. It was a "dress like a cowboy, be a cowboy" mentality, and I cast myself as externally peaceful and mystically languid, and hoped to become that way inside.

Everybody smoked pot. Friends talked about quitting school and starting a "freak farm" commune where everyone could just groove, and we could get by eating lettuce and berries, and strumming guitars, and smiling impossibly broad smiles. We believed we really loved one another, and who knows, maybe we did.

I worried about the draft, but I saw it as a trap. I believed that somehow, the draft was an illusion of fear, like a wall of flame, that if one got super mellow one could just walk through unsinged. If I truly has cosmic consciousness, that would continue in Vietnam. Maybe it would even end the war, if enough soldiers were like me, spaced out and ego-dead. Maybe.

By January I was in a strange state, reading poems on the quad where I would just scream at people -- angry stuff laced with death and retribution, which should have been a tipoff that all was not nirvana in my head. The dean of men called me in and read me the riot act about my escapades with the Delta Delta Deltas. He said there was something wrong with me, that in his capacity as a professor of psychology and from his 25 years of experience as an officer in the Marine Corps, before his leg got cancer and had to be cut off, that I was all messed up. He said I was a masochist, that I needed help, and maybe then I wouldn't act so goddamn cocky.

That unnerved me. I didn't want for there to be anything wrong with me. I wanted to be free and beautiful, undamaged goods, unmarked and indifferent. That was what the wisdom of the east was all about, transcending the physical plain to get to a plain where nothing could get you. That's what pot was about, too.

Sanctuary.

So a week or so later, my roommate Robert and I lit out. We packed our duffles and stole away. We hitchhiked all night in the direction of Cleveland, walking through the Amish country with William Blake stars careening above us, and the pigs and cows grunting and lowing from the pitched shadows of barns.

In Cleveland we crashed in an RTC shelter, then walked the remaining miles to my half-step-grandmother's house. (She was my stepfather's stepmother, and he had a half-brother, so I always called Elsie, a downy-haired happy woman who doted on me, my half-step-grand.)

She took us in, and this would later cause her terrible problems with my mom, who never forgave her for helping me run away. Because of this, she wouldn't ever speak to my stepdad again – my fault. But Robert and I were ebullient -- we slept that night in the downstairs bedroom, the one Elsie's husband Frank had stayed in the last weeks of his life, wheezing with congestive heart failure.

In the night, Robert and I both awoke to feel as if a presence were in the room. We couldn't see anything, but we sensed a weight moving on the floorboards -- a heavy weight. It seemed to be standing next to my side of the bed, and I felt hands smoothing the covers over me in the dark. I realized later it was probably Frank Konieczkowski -- letting me know he didn't approve of his half-step-grandchild using his home as a launching pad to the mystic east -- and then tucking me in to sleep.

In the morning Robert and I contracted to deliver a driveaway car from a ramp in Cleveland, where it had sat after falling into Lake Erie during some undisclosed incident, to an apartment building in Santa Monica, 2395 miles away. The sparkling waters of Lake Erie had clearly taken their toll on the Mustang's functionality. I figure the car was worth \$16,500 before it entered Lake Erie, and maybe \$250 when it emerged again, whether that was one minute

or two weeks later. After Robert and I drove it to Los Angeles, incurring over \$600 in repair costs along the way, even using used parts at every opportunity, I began to wonder about the intelligence of its owner, who otherwise was a brain surgeon.

We left at night, driving down through Columbus and cutting across toward Indianapolis. In Indiana it began to rain. Somehow, at Indianapolis, we made the wrong freeway turn and wound up on the outerbelt. Robert fell asleep and I drove on, on a blue highway, as we headed down toward southern Illinois. Wipers slashing, bright lights glaring into my eyes, the excitement of our escape all impressed themselves into my consciousness, until, driving at about 70 miles per hour about thirty miles outside East St. Louis, I fell asleep.

I reckon that we traveled about a quarter of a mile with Robert asleep on my shoulder in the passenger seat, and me equally asleep in the driver's seat, before we skidded into the ditch and did the two-second turnaround, narrowly missing being squashed by a huge semitrailer truck that said P.I.E. on its side.

We both stumbled out of the car. I knew I had fallen asleep, but I was too abashed to say so, so I told Robert I just lost control of the wheel for a second. We coaxed the car back on the road, and noticed the muffler and tailpipe was still back in the ditch. Robert dragged the torn muffler a hundred yards and somehow reattached it below with a leather boot lace. We started the car and headed out again. It was rush hour as we passed through St. Louis.

The next two days are a blur for me. The rubber on the corroded tires began to flap hideously. Driving along at 70 mph -- the only speed anyone drove in those days -- I felt I was on a bike with a baseball card in the spokes, making those bad-ass glass-pack-muffler sounds. I also remember feeling there was something mystical about a sign we saw at one point:

Buffalo

Our car was shredding. We lost our first tire around Joplin, and another in Oklahoma. We got off the road for repairs, holed up outside a little shop for the better part of a day while the owner scrounged up a suitable replacement -- only an inch smaller in circumference than the others -- and we were on our way again, lost -- driving down the dirt roads of a Cherokee Indian reservation. We felt halfway to the mystic east when, traveling southwest, we ran out of gas at the foot of a monstrous clay totem pole.

We drove the immense distance in to Los Angeles, marveling at the palm trees and freeway bridges greeting us with hosannahs. My dad lived somewhere in the Vermont Avenue area, which we decided to avoid, so we drove straight to Hollywood, drove up and down the Sunset Strip, with all the billboards flashing the latest promo. I remember I saw billboards for Van Morrison, Lee Michaels, Van Dyke Parks, and Engelbert Humperdinck. We got out of the car at a place called the Psychedelic Supermarket, and poked around. Immediately, a convoy of marijuana dealers converged on us. We must have looked like Midwestern Manna in our plain blue jeans and T-shirts. What had been our hippie uniform in Ohio looked made us look like Mennonites on the Strip, where even the poorest hooker and spare-change procurer wore enormous flared pants made of some glitzy kind of upholstery material with metallic thread.

We had a smoke, and got into a conversation with an amiable fellow whose car had had its roof sawn off. He asked if we were interested in the wisdom of the east, and we looked at each other and brightened. You're damn straight we are, we told him. We hopped into his topless automobile and drove to an apartment building in Beverly Hills -- the poor part of town. Robert and I looked at each and unbrightened.

Inside, it was totally suburban. Everything was painted antique

cream, with gold-plated doorknobs and those slatted French doors swinging into the kitchen. About twenty people were sitting on big pillows in the living room, set apart from the rest of the house by strings of beads dangling from the archway. Set before the double sliding doors of the balcony was a little, enameled black box, with odd things set on and in it -- a tomato, a ten dollar bill, a book of poems by Hugh Prather, and something that looked like a part of a dead animal, a tail maybe, and some costume jewelry and teacups.

Suddenly, everyone started chanting. *Na myoho rengue kyoh*, was the chant. The fellow in the car had told us that chanting was how people focused their karma and shaped their lives they wanted to go. People had wooden beads that they fingered, and they kept intoning the phrase in a droney sort of way. Robert and I looked at each other, alarmed, and slowly sunk to the floor and started making lip movements, but no sound.

I wasn't sure what was happening, whether this was bogus or not. I did so much want not to get caught up in anything cultlike or insulting to my individuality. The people here were talking about the little medicine cabinet, called a *gohonzon*, as if it were the repository of all their dreams.

One woman said she had chanted to relieve her aching joints, and it worked. Other testimonials followed. One man said he had chanted to get a girl to go to bed with him -- and it worked! Another was chanting for a better job -- and things were definitely looking up, he said. Another chanted to inflict terrible pain on his ex-wife and avoid alimony payments -- and she came down with a pretty bad bladder infection!

Finally, the guy we came with said that he had been chanting for a great new car, and that day, driving by a showroom, he had seen it -- a Buick LeSabre, 1967, cream colored, a real beauty.

That was Robert's and my cue to get up and leave. We smiled, bowed, and headed backwards toward the door.

We were startled by the materialism and the venality of the chanters. It was all about getting stuff, no different from Ohio. We had headed west to find east, and found ourselves right back where we started,



ABOUT A DOPE

What can you say about getting high? It's a lovely thing socially, to take a common drug, and see one's friends' eyes light up and know you are lighting up in the same way. If you are a lonely person, you no longer feel alone. If you are a person who has been dying to say a million things, it is freedom. If you are someone who needs to stay clear-headed in order to survive, it is not your best friend.

When I was smoking pot every single day, getting high competed with the notion that I might develop into some sort of writer. I was fortunate in my life to be related, through my mother's second marriage, to a poet of some renown, James Wright.

Wright was somehow connected to my half-step-grandmother Elsie's family -- he had lived with her sister Esther when he was a troubled teenager, or something like that, a guardian

relationship. Elsie had all his books -- *Saint Judas*, *The Branch Will Not Break*, *The Green Wall* -- in her house in Cleveland, and when I went to visit her I would sit on the window seat and devour them.

Wright elevated self-pity to spiritual levels. He grieved about his father, about Appalachian Ohio, about a horse he saw once by the roadside. Wright was a writer of great and soulful tenderness, and one of the grievingest writers who ever picked up a pencil.

One day Elsie drove me down to Martin's Ferry, Ohio to actually meet the man, and he and I walked in his cantaloupe garden and he talked about the German writer Theodore Storm, Herman Hesse (whom he had just translated) and others who had that same, heart-aching sadness and hypersensitivity toward life.

Hesse, of course, was one of the foundational authors for hippies, because his characters throw everything away to pursue their soulful dreams. I was already planning some kind of break, and this reference to Hesse fed into my rationale.

Wright had the softest voice. It reminded me of of the solicitous anguish of the computer HAL in the movie *2001*, which we discussed that day in the garden.

In my mind I saw myself becoming his protege. He would read my poems and tell me how great they were, perhaps

fixing a line here or there, and we would be like father and son. He and his second wife, Annie, were then fixing up a schoolhouse in Manhattan, where he taught at Hunter College, and she was a teacher. I fantasized about moving in with them, being their handyman, and being his amanuensis, a youthful muse who would astonish all of New York, much like the young Jesus addressing the elders in the temple. I would climb on a scaffold and paint this perfect white clapboard schoolhouse somewhere in midtown Manhattan, and become an avatar throughout the Lower East Side of the well-lived life.

But instead what happened was, I started smoking dope in college. Things became muzzy. My writing started to get complicated and weird. I lost whatever capacity I might once have had for the simple, graceful lines that Wright wrote, and started imitating what the teachers were teaching -- Faulkner, Woolf, Joyce. I was a catastrophe -- while teachers praised the great writers for writing virtually unintelligibly in horrendous endless unfathomable paragraphs, us kids weren't supposed to do that.

The only class I ever actually flunked in college was Thomas Clareson's creative writing course. "Whatever you're trying to do here," he wrote at the end of one story, "I wish you would stop it."

I was getting high when I wrote, and I was losing my bearings. I just loved the stuff. It was a springboard for me into Dumbo's drunken dream of pink elephants on parade. On dope, one lost a sense of there being a big picture -- instead one saw the very finite small picture, and saw it in rich, lovely, intricate detail. When you heard music, you could see the lines it etched, like a

story taking form in technicolor between the five black lines of the musical signature. Dope lured me into silly complexity, and left me there, sorting through stacked cities of pointless but interesting garbage.

I loved it, and for a while I was pretty good at it, offering up my gray matter as a blank canvass on which the sights and sounds of records, or the flame of a candle, or the whorls of my own fingerprints took on a character that was invisible to me when I was "normal." It was, like masturbation, a gift of the gods. Poor people like myself were never more than a dollar or two away from exquisite intellectual entertainment -- intellectual because it engaged the mind in marvelous, untutored ways, and entertainment because, in its confusion and bewilderment, the mind took many loud and unexpected pratfalls.

I was always laughing. Today I have crows-feet that I am convinced were burned into my face during my time with drugs in 1969. Things were funny. The pomposity of adults and politicians, the clear superiority of our generation over theirs, the linear stupidity of the military mind, the bureaucratic mind, the academic mind, the habits of any mind that had never flipped from their groove and lolled in the sunshine, bright crystals flickering from every aperture.

Being high made any experience transcendent. I remember walking across the college quad on a cold night in March, and being dumbstruck because the snow on the ground caught the light from the streetlamps in such a bewitching way. I remember laughing when an orange I was peeling squirted its orange rind-chemicals into my eyes. I remember being so full of appetite that a friend and I cooked unsalted rice on a

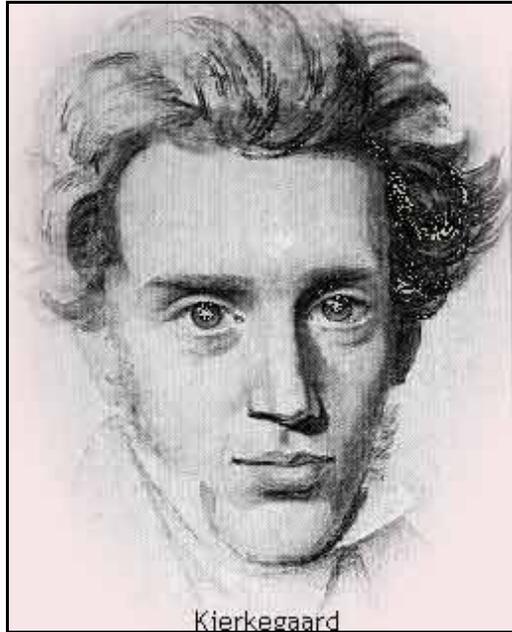
hotplate, spread it between two pieces of white bread, and we devoured the mealy mush with stars in our eyes, as if this were paradise, and the gunk in our throats was the meat of the gods.

We came to believe that experience while on dope was inherently superior to experience while not on dope. Why travel to England or Mexico or the Sudan when, for forty cents worth of reefer, one could have an intenser experience right there in the dorm room, with a wet towel stuffed under the doorcrack?

Never mind that, when it was over, it was impossible to retrace one's steps and remember exactly why the song by the Jefferson Airplane, "Coming Back to Me," was so tragically beautiful, or why the Eskimo Pie was sacramental, or why the words, "Why die?" scrawled while under the influence on a piece of paper towel and scotch-taped to the dormitory wall, struck one so forcefully and so unequivocally, as if it opened a window onto a possible world.

That was part of the mystery, and part of its honor. The challenge, after all, was not to sort these experiences into discreet memories, like a miser counting coins he cannot remember earning. The point was to to stay stoned, forever, to live that way, torpid, heavy-lidded, and voracious, and to imagine that the deeper one went into it, the deeper it made one, so deep inside, so deep outside, until in our stoned wisdom of decay we could barely think.

And I gave myself to to this stupid, mind-devouring herb, like an innocent child, as if it were the only thing in the world that I could trust.



What We Thought

Sometimes it hits me afresh what we actually thought about things on Vendome Place. Little snippets of conversation waft back to me, and I realize how hopeless our undertaking was, given the intellectual underpinnings.

“I have a new theory of the gamut of human expression,” Michael announced over a bowlful. “Boom, then squeak.”

“Boom, squeak,” we all repeated, as if it were handed down on tablets.

“It begins with a boom,” Michael said. “But it concludes with a squeak.”

I don't know what he was trying to say, but one could never be sure what constituted wisdom, or pith, or deep-in-the-hole satire. Either way, it might be profoundly valuable, a remark to

repeat for weeks, something shared, a rune scratched on the nighttime sky.

Rennie told us that Brewer & Shipley seemed like real mellow dudes, but when she lived across the hall from them, in Boston, they were speedfreaks who boarded themselves in a closet and composed until their first album was set.

We all nodded like that was a really useful insight.

We knew that speed killed, but was death really so bad? Not if it was your ego that did the dying. Ego was bad. Love was good. It was a disadvantage to be old, unless you were like an Indian. Politics was a bad vibe, unless you were for revolution. Clapton was God, who was also dead, which was maybe not bad. Things materialized, and took shape, and they were almost utterable, on the tip of your tongue – but when you tried to utter them, it was all gibberish. The beauty of the world turned into Mickey Mouse chomping a stogie. Keep on truckin'. All is bliss.

It was hard to synthesize it all into one solid thing, so instead we tended to fragment into different kinds of hippies. Different faces of the truth. Broken pieces of the whole.

I believed that dropping out of college was a total plus for me, that there was zero downside to running away and playing house with friends. I truly and really believed that the Age of Aquarius was upon us, that the world was forever changing, that it was on the brink of being vastly for the better, and that liberal arts educations would be consummate hindrances, not helps, in the years ahead of us.

Back at college, on my occasional sober days, I had been a budding Kierkegaard scholar. I still had an Incomplete in a Kierkegaard course to work through -- if I could only bring myself to finish the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, or *The Sickness Unto Death*, and write a report.

But I could not do it. You can't read Kierkegaard if you are high. It is not possible. Kierkegaard is too hard, and too much of his time, Denmark, which was battling through its own peculiar Victorian Lutheran madness. Kierkegaard was Loki, a shape-shifter, hiding behind a dozen laughing personae. Instead of digging into him you got high and agonized at the uncompletable tasks piling up in an imaginary closet, books unread, notes untaken, languages unmastered. And you smiled and pretended to be post-intellectual, and all that stuff was behind you now, fluttering away in the rearview mirror of life, But in your guilty heart you've just slid a few rungs lower on the ladder of being. You've just tossed a few more books in the bonfire.

We believed the political system was doomed, that it would wither and die more or less like Marx predicted. Only we thought it would happen worldwide, to communist countries as well. The hippies were taking over the world with flowers, and if you didn't take our flowers, we would blow your ass up with a bomb, we would blow your university up, we would make retreat impossible by burning the libraries until black smoke ushered in the new age. People we respected, like John Lennon, were calling for world revolution. At least, he did on Monday; by Tuesday he was saying something else.

The fact that our ostensible leaders didn't agree on much of anything – what did Led Zeppelin even believe, for that matter? – was no matter for concern. The fact that they relied entirely upon our begged or borrowed spare change to plug in their amps and buy smoke-tinted windows for their superstar Rollses meant nothing. Never mind that they sounded no less confused or incomplete or unauthoritative than the stoniest, most full-of-shit knucklehead sucking on last night's pipe, who tried to say something to the point, something worth passing on in the oral fireside tradition that was still forming, still gelatinous in our generation, but busted down giggling and rolling on the carpet instead.

I had been to demonstrations, and I had cursed, and I had talked myself into hating the pigs -- I got my foot broken once at a Free Press concert at Mussel Beach, where the police walked right into us. But deep down I surely knew that all this talk of the power structure would melt away once a few of us acquired any meaningful power. The pigs would melt away like bacon. The new age would dawn and all those old encumbrances would slide off like discarded skin.

If everyone sat around and got stoned and got the munchies every day of their lives, who would be our doctors, architects, lawyers, etc.? Surely the people who stayed in school and got their degrees, and only smoked the pipe occasionally would have a tremendous leg up on the rest of us. But I couldn't think it through that way -- I imagined that a wave of benighted medievalism was overtaking our society and we would momentarily rid ourselves of all the awful technology, the ugly clothes, the color television, and over-the-counter prescriptions, and every family or commune would grow its own herbal medicines, and even those of us who had forsaken traditional dental care would not be asked to pay the price, bad teeth would be healed with eucalyptus and clove, and cancer spirited away by hot stones, banked against the flesh.

We believed that we were the first wave, the avant garde, the stormtroopers of an irresistible change, away from centralized, bureaucratized manipulation, and towards openness, simplicity and love.

And we honestly believed we were helping one another, when in truth I think I had but one friend through all of 1969, Robert, who would have walked through fire for me. No one of us cared enough to stop another of us in the tracks of his excess and say, hold on, friend, it's all right, or I'm worried about you, or I know that you're hurting, and I'm hurting, too.

We dreamed that we were shiny and new, that we were children of love, with no histories, no families, no baggage

from the ugliness that used to be real, but which was now no more real than the haunting geometric shapes that swam before our eyes.

We believed that the whole world that was described for us by eyewitnesses was a lie, and that all that existed was the visions that made us gasp, and grasp for, and then collapsed in our fingers the moment we tried to put them to words.

What can I say? We were young, and determined to have our good time in our own way, and we would brook no argument, and we had the power to make good on this leap off the cliff, until the year wore down, and we had splattered ourselves on the walls of the world.

Kierkegaard, I let you down, and I'm sorry.



The House on Vendome Place

In January 1969, Robert and I clattered into LA in the sunken driveaway car. We were the first wave of a group of four. Our assignment was to find a freak farm in LA when Michael and Rennie arrived a month later. We knew nothing of real estate, had no jobs and no money.

We rented a one-bedroom apartment in a building on Westmoreland Street in the Vermont District, about 15 blocks south of Hollywood. The building was mostly occupied by single old people. The furniture in our place was uninspiring the way it was, so we tipped the fold-out couch on its end, like a pillar, and then we slept on the floor.

We got jobs at car washes on opposite sides of Beverly Boulevard, about four blocks from home. I washed cars, mostly aircraft carrier-length Cadillacs, LTDs, and Lincolns. Robert pumped gas. We were paid at sundown every day, about twenty dollars apiece. We felt richer than Croesus.

I liked observing the scene, how the Mexican guys would show up indifferent combinations every morning, then drift away at the end of the day. The shift boss thought the Mexicans were mysterious, so he put me in charge of them, because I spoke some high school Spanish. It was a chore to not be seen as a tool of the man. I tried giving people power handshakes and the like, to achieve a sense of solidarity between their Mexican people and my hip ones, but these guys were too smart. I built no bridges at the Kwik Wash. I didn't belong. One guy, who spoke some English, asked me where I was from, "Ohio," I told him. He turned up his nose, as if I had arrived by culvert, on the end of a stick. To them I was the wetback.

We tried to be high all the time, except when we were working. It was easy to score on Sunset, and each time we ventured up there in our bluejeans we felt a little less intimidated by the scene. But we still looked pretty Amish to the Hollywood hippies. They snickered as they took our fifteen dollars and laid the plump baggies in our palms.

We scored some acid a few times, too. I was more into that than Robert, who was afraid of LSD – I guess he had had a bad experience. I liked being the braver of us, or the less sensible. I remember several nights of him sitting up and attending to me, a little nervously, as I sat in a puddle on the indoor/outdoor carpet and tried to touch the hallucinations with my hands.

At first they were exactly the kind of hallucinations I saw on M. C. Escher posters, back in the dorms – shifting geometric forms that hung in the air. Funny that, in that deracinated state, we tended to see things we expected to see. I tried to keep up a patter to Robert so that he would not feel left out, but after a while it became impossible to do a play-by-play.

The changes were so strange, and so personal. It wasn't just that I was seeing outlandish things with my eyes. I was feeling peculiar, poignant, not terribly positive emotions as well – psychedelic regret, psychotropic dismay, stroboscopic acceptance, deconstructed grief. I found myself going not to places of bliss and revelation, as advertised, but to rather more joyless, introspective places.

The place on Westmoreland was inadequate -- it looked nothing like a freak farm. For that we needed an actual house. We found an upstairs duplex on Vendome Place and moved in, promising the landlady and neighbors we were fine upstanding working guys. In a few days Michael and Rennie showed up. Robert and I were both deeply infatuated with Rennie -- she was our hippie princess, our female Huckleberry Finn, she was very pretty but utterly unaware of it, she just liked hanging with the guys, talking, like us, in a low, mannish voice.

But when they arrived, by plane, Rennie was already sleeping with Michael. The flat we rented was just a long hall -- an attic that had been refurbished, with several crawl spaces we could duck into to sleep. I took one of the crawl spaces, and slept on an old box spring. Every night we would smoke pot and listen to music and talk about our hopes of meeting interesting people. Then Michael and Rennie would slink off to their crawlspace and leave Robert and me biting our knuckles.

One of the first communal tensions was realizing that our musical tastes were not universal. Mine ran to Zeppelin and Credence and the Velvets. Rennie liked Ian & Sylvia and Brewer & Shipley. We cast about for a compromise and ended up playing a lot of *Nashville Skyline*, James Taylor's first album, and Buffalo Springfield's *Retrospective*. We played Leonard Cohen's *Songs from a Room*, the United States of America, and Captain Beefheart.

After three weeks I quit Kwik Wash and took a job as receiving clerk at a bookshop in Hollywood. Robert got a job at a hippie factory making oceans-in-a-bottle – jugs full of dyed glycerine and water, that you watched slosh back and forth when you were loaded. Every day he would come home tie-dyed from head to foot.

Interesting people began washing up on our doorstep. We put out word that we were a church, due to my ministry in the mail order religion. A girl named Paula with a cat that had perpetual diarrhea showed up and started living with us. We all hated her.

Two young men named Dave and Walt, who purported to be draft deserters, began hanging around. They were serious druggies -- speed, smack, etc. -- but unfailingly cheerful. Dave introduced us to nudism. He just took his clothes off one night when we were all stoned. It seemed like the thing to do so I did, too, and so did Robert. Rennie and Michael were grossed out and crawled off to their space. It never happened again.

Dave said that he was from Texas, and that he had been abandoned when he was in the third grade by his dad, his mom was dead, and he had had to raise his two younger brothers by himself. No one went to school, Dave fed them by shooting squirrels and picking berries. It was a hell of a story.

As the boys got older, Dave became a backwoods Jesus freak, began reading the bible to himself every day. The only people he saw out there in the west of Texas were his two brothers. He came down with a case of religious psychosis. One day, to hear him tell the tale, he came home and crucified his 8-year-old brother, nailing his hands to the door of their shack. His brother hung there for about an hour before Dave took him down, apologizing for the outburst.

A few years later, Dave was drafted. Dave said he was fine with boot camp, gung ho all the way. When the sergeant said Kill, Dave said Kill! Kill! He became the most enthusiastic killer of the bunch. One day in this state of extreme excitement – this is still Dave telling me his crazy story, I never saw and can't confirm any part of it – he leaped on another recruit and gouged his eyes out.

Dave was dragged off to the brig, shouting and crying and laughing and protesting that he was just doing what he had been told to do – the Nuremberg defense.

In jail, Dave began to review what had happened to him, and he concluded that the army was not the best place for him, and he began concocting schemes to get out. One plan was to act gay, and he even blew one of the guards a couple of times to seal the deal. But the psychiatrists weren't convinced. So he spent eight months behind bars, until he got the idea of bringing in drugs through his younger brother, the one he had crucified. The brother had become a bad actor at age 14, and brought in quantities of heroin and speed, enough for Dave to become an addict. Dave kept his kit safety-pinned inside his mattress. Periodically he would run out of dope, go cold turkey, then acquire more drugs, and start the cycle up again. He was in a terrible condition when he was reassigned to the prison at The Presidio in the Bay Area, teeth all gone, and brain all mush.

While being transported to San Francisco, he ducked into a restroom at a freeway stop, and escaped through the toilet window. A week later was when I met him, skulking around Los Angeles, scared witless by the FBI, which had an active file on him, and by the fact that the speed had rendered him a 100% raving, gibbering, bloody-gummed paranoid.

Worst of all, Dave had just heard that his younger brother was

looking for him, with the idea of blowing his brains out.

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“Because I taught him how to hunt,” Dave said.



THE PICKWICK

The Pickwick Bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard, where I got a job as a shipping/receiving clerk in March of 1969, was not a four-star landmark, but if you lived in Southern California and read books – that's hundreds of people right there -- you knew of its three stories of stories. It was founded by Louis Epstein in 1931, during the worst days of the Depression – Scott Fitzgerald mentioned it in a *New Yorker* story -- and was swallowed up by the B. Dalton chain in 1976.

In my memory it is right next to Graumann's Chinese Theatre, but in fact it is a block away. Even though I toiled way back in a back room, full of torn cardboard and packing slips, the place radiated glamor for me.

Writers were always dropping into the store to see how their books were doing. They went to the shelves and touched them, physically, for reassurance. Fading movie stars drifted in to see their spines exposed on the biography shelves. Personalities like Charles Bukowski, Jack Lalanne, Otto Preminger, Mason Williams, Eva Gabor, Timothy Leary, Tiny Tim, and of course, Sam Yorty.

I especially remember a self-help book by a man from Venice -- *Keep Fit at Seventy*. It had a picture of the author on the cover, in training trunks, his hairy a silvery mane, and his arms and legs and chest all quivery with dynamic tension. He looked great. Problem was, he had written the book ten years earlier. Now, when he came in to examine it on the racks, it was clear time had taken its toll on him. He was now about 85, and his posture was sagging, his shoulders rounded, and that toothsome smile was replaced by something tired and forced, and only falsely happy.

We had gurus and glamor queens, how-to's and hobos, every kind of writer dropping in on us. There was even a genuinely literary contingent. One of our floor salesmen was a thin, reedy-voiced man, whose name was Landor French, named after Walter Savage Landor. His big claim in life was a poem in the *Southern Review*, which he kept a laminated copy of, on a wallet-sized card, in like four point type. He whipped it out for me once -- it was very high-faluting and illusive. It was his high-water mark.

There was another man who worked there named Vince Rossi. Small and dark-eyed and dramatic, half Heathcliff and half Davy Jones, he befriended me, sensing I was someone with whom he could share his deepest suicidal thoughts. He told me he intended

some day to drive out into the Mojave Desert, get under his car, poke holes in his gas tank, and stagger off into the wavering sands to die. He got great pleasure laying out this plan to me. He also told it to a skeptical fellow employee named Jaye, whose calves I greatly admired, always sheathed in taut white knee-high socks. Jaye and I put our heads together sometimes to do a Vince check, to see what latest depressed, monomaniacal ravings he had shared.

By summer, Vince had done exactly as he promised, gone into the desert, abandoned his car, and disappeared. It wasn't for five years or so that I learned it was a hoax, when, as editor of a poetry magazine in Minneapolis, I got a submission from him. I never told him I sussed him out. But I thought of the wife and daughter in the valley that he abandoned.

The manager of the store was a mutton-chopped gentleman named Stan, very jolly and intelligent, a Pickwick cartoon of literacy, rubbing his hands together as he walked among the workers, conveying with his hands the satisfactions of the low-margin book business.

And my colleague in the back room was a middle-aged black man named Albert. I was receiving, and he was shipping, which was harder to do, and where mistakes were more expensive to the store.

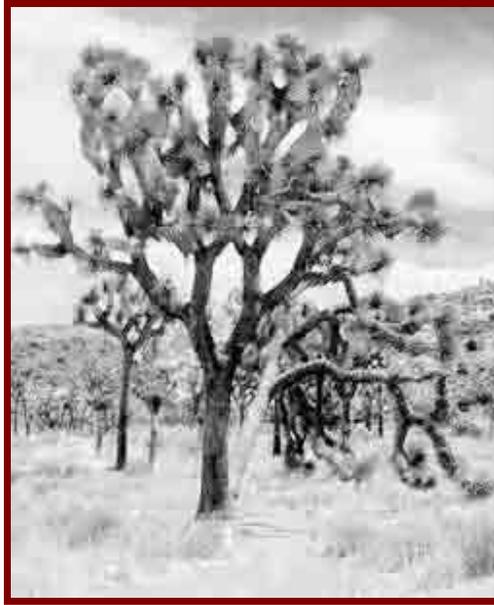
I was scared of Albert. He was big and lugubrious, and his eyes seemed impassive and cold. But he was very patient with me. He showed me where the bandaids were -- this job was paper-cut city -- and what to do when what was on the invoice simply didn't match what was in the boxes. You set it aside until the matter

could be resolved, sometimes for months

After my first month, Albert stopped coming in to work. He had stomach cancer, and was undergoing cobalt radiation therapy. He visited a couple of times, but he was very sick. He wanted to see that the department was running all right.

To me, I liked the work because of the books and the glamor. But to Albert, what mattered was that the packages were being dispatched in a timely fashion to where they went. That it was Shakespeare or Hardy in the boxes was immaterial to Albert. That's why he was the professional, and why I, who took off in a rented van the weekend that California slid into the ocean, would never be more than an amateur.

But that is another story.



Living on the Faultline

By the time we got to Los Angeles, I had a pretty intricate notion of what I wanted to do with the church. It would function as a screen for an array of illegal or questionable and even entrepreneurial activities.

I even went to the downtown Los Angeles Public Library to research the sanctuary laws going back to the 17th century. You will recall from such stories as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *A Fistful of Dollars* that civil authorities were forbidden from seizing individuals to who had taken refuge in the church. In the Mexican version of these stories the church was then surrounded by soldiers who played the dirge of death or "Deguello" while they starved the besieged individual out.

This isn't the scenario I dwelt on, however. My Los Angeles was the Los Angeles of Jack Webb and Sergeant Friday. My fantasy had the LAPD coming to our pad, responding to a complaint, and banging on the door. Inside, all manner of debauchery would be taking place. When I open the door, I point to the sign: "24 HOUR RELIGIOUS SERVICES." Stunned and sputtering, the cops would then withdraw,

and I would slink, chuckling, back into our den of smoky iniquity, I mean sacristy. It would be sweet.

Clearly, I was expecting the police to be like the Wooster police, or the Ohio National Guard unit we had disarmed, easily baffled, only 10,000 times more numerous.

Of course, LA was nothing like that. In the entire period we spent at the house on Vendome Street, no policed ever came to complain, about noise, or smoke, or whatever, despite the fact that we lived obnoxiously, insensitive to the needs of the Mexican-American family living just downstairs from us. It was not that we played music at airstrip deciblage at three in the morning -- it would have been rare for us to stay up that late, and we did not like our music especially loud -- but that there were a dozen of us at our peak, arriving at all hours, and acting like God's gift to the counterculture. I would have hated to live downstairs from us.

One weekend, Robert and I decided to make a pilgrimage to see Rev. Hensley, and we hitched up over the Grapevine and on to the Emerald Valley. We reached Modesto well after dark, and rapped on the reverend's aluminum trailer door. I expected a shining visage to come to the door, but Rev. Hensley looked irritated, as if people had dropped in on him like this before.

"Rev. Hensley," I said. "We're Mike Finley and Robert Frank, ministers of your church. We operate a storefront church in Hollywood."

"I ain't got no room here to sleep," were the first words he said.

What did we care about that. "Not a problem, sir," I said. "We just wanted to meet you and get your blessing for our set-up."

"Yeah, OK. Uh, there's a county park about a half mile down that way. Police leave people alone if they have proper ID."

It was clear the Reverend was taxed by the legions of pilgrims and

luminaries that made their way to his slab, so we thanked him for putting up with us, spent the night on a couple of picnic tables, and in the morning continued on our way.

The Big Bonito

Besides sanctuary, I had a hankering to play the theology card with my draft board back in Elyria, Ohio. I filed an application to be reclassified as 4-D, deferred for reasons of divinity, along with a cover letter written on stationery I created using a black-and-white linocut of two praying hands with radiating grace lines emanating from them.

Surely, I thought, no reasonable board member could fail to see the sincerity in the application. Or if they did miss the sincerity, they would be unable to articulate why it was insincere. In either case I was home free, along with all the legitimate ministers of the United States, who were exempted by Congress for reasons of national security that I have never understood.

I remembered reading (again, from Paul Krassner's *Realist*) that a ploy of ultra-tricky draft evaders was to take advantage of some Selective Service regulation requiring the local draft board to hold onto all correspondence with individuals -- they were not allowed to pick and choose which items they might put in the permanent file, and which they might toss out. The rule was promulgated to protect draft-eligible young men from the filing caprices of their local draft boards. But it constituted a loophole for persons like myself who thought they were put on earth not to kill for their country but to amuse other draft dodgers.

So I walked the 20 blocks from Vendome Street to El Centro in downtown Los Angeles. It's a fabulous indoor bazaar of several hundred shops, from every nationality -- fish, vegetables, meats, spices -- muy autentico, like you never see in the Midwest.

I went up to the fish vendor and purchased the biggest, reddest bonito fish he had on ice -- an 8 pounder costing me almost six dollars. I carried it dripping in paper the 20 blocks to the church, attached a

letter asking my local board to file this with my other materials, rewrapped it, plastered the butcher paper with stamps and dropped it in the corner mailbox.

I can't say how it played with my draft board, in Elyria, Ohio. They never sent me any statements to sign about my divinity status. My guess is that they had a bulletin board somewhere, with an article about Rev. Hensley's church thumb-tacked up where everyone could see it, and a note -- BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THIS!

That would have been the sensible thing, but there was nothing sensible about the draft. Their job was to winnow out the good kids who deserved to live from the black and brown and poor white trash kids, who deserved to come back from their tour in hefty bags, wheelchairs, and straightjackets.

Of course, none of any of this mattered. Two months after I sent in my deferment statement, and one month after I sent in my fish, I was drafted. The people on the board must have looked at the stuff I sent and decided I, perhaps especially of the many thousands of local boys they sent off to suffer, could benefit from the experience. They surely did not keep the bonito in the file cabinet for perpetuity, as had been my expressed wish.

But I didn't learn my lesson because I had already hit the road again, leaving no forwarding address. By the time I got my draft notice, I missed my physical and my induction, and was, for all intents and purposes, AWOL.

Thompson's Chicken Ranch

We had two other brushes with the Universal Life Church. We learned from people on the street that a sister congregation of some note existed out in the Mojave Desert 100 miles away, near Twenty Nine Palms. The first chance we got, we hitchhiked out there, to see if it made sense to align ourselves with the place.

Thompson's Chicken Ranch was a true desert commune, consisting of

a gutted main house, a machine shed, a couple of lean-to's and a water tower that had water when it rained, which it never did.

We went out there perhaps three times during our months on L.A. The first time was ecclesiastical outreach; the other times were just for fun. The desert was an incredible place for Midwesterners on holiday. The crumbling ruined mountains, that looked older than Sinai, and twice as forbidding, sat right behind the ranch. Everywhere were Joshua trees and the braided branches of their dead. Yucca plants exploded at every armsbreadth. And under every rock, something living -- a gecko, a Gila monster, hornytad, or a rattlesnake. It was Don Juan country, a fine, unforgiving place to surrender to the sun.

I have three main memories of Thompson's Chicken Ranch: one involving teenaged runaways, one involving mass murderer Charles Manson, and the third involving an earthquake that destroyed all of California, and us with it.

The core population of the ranch was a small handful of men in breechclouts, as lean as jerky and about half as verbal, who lounged in the shadows in the daytime, and ventured out only at night. It says something that in all our visits to the place -- where we were regarded about as seriously as the Partridge Family -- we never learned any of their names. Indeed, I can't recall even having a conversation with anyone. We communicated mainly with grunts and far-out's. People just arrived, found a corner to crash in, and did their thing. It was not just that they were nonverbal, but that they were incurious, as if the sun had baked all the inquisitiveness out of them.

These guys were hard-core in their habits, and I would guess wealthy in their background. They had no visible means of support, they never lifted a finger for any other human being, yet they were up to their ears in high quality LSD, California red wine and ganja, and for their delectation a kind of underground railroad arrived every day with three or four or five high school girls in it.

Every morning that we stayed by the ranch, the local police would show up and cart off the underaged girls that had been there the night

before. It was not a big deal. The police would arrive promptly around 8:30 AM, would go to the back door and call out "Hello?" and would then roust the groggy 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds and lead them away to the patrol car. In town, they would have the girls call their parents and arrange for their return. It might even have been the same girls each morning.

Had this happened back in Ohio, it would have been a screaming scandal, with banner headlines in the local Republican rags. Here in California, with the Age of Aquarius already growing dog-eared in the desert sun, it was matter-of-fact. Daughters didn't belong with their families in the new age. That they were sent home every morning was a weary formality of a changed world.

Charles Manson and the Sons of Troy

I remember one day's events very clearly and in chronological order. It was a weekend trip the six Midwesterners, plus Dave the deserter, and Sylvia, his girlfriend -- made to the Chicken Ranch.

This particular trip we traveled in a fairly new van that Dave had somehow come across. I say somehow, but it occurs to me now that Dave stole it. It looked bright and suburban and a little uncool that way, but it had a great tape deck. The album that spring was "Born on the Bayou," by Credence Clearwater Revival, and we had it on all the time. It was a record to get lost in, like a high-powered boat in a backwater swamp, especially if you were high and, well, lost anyway.

When we arrived we were even less welcome than usual. About thirty bikes were parked out front. So we drove past the house up a long skinny drive leading up toward the pile of rocks passing as a mountain range. We parked about 200 yards from the house, set up a lean-to

against the truck, and got out. Dave had a spy-glass, and he identified the bike group below us as the Sons of Troy, a fairly nondescript bunch of road losers. We went hiking through the rocks for about an hour, careful of rattlesnakes. When we returned, we could see that a second wave of bikers were arriving below us. Their jackets all said Hessians. I had heard of the Hessians, they were a large and unruly group, bullies, of the sort (they were called the Beetles) who took over that town under Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin in "The Wild One."

Just then a poky humpbacked school bus began churning down the drive. I stopped by the house and a man got out, looked around, and almost immediately got back into the bus, and drove up toward our camp. This bus was painted black, and about 25 years old, with psychedelic painted hubcaps and scarves trailing from the back window.

The driver was a goofy-looking man with shortish hair. Also debarking was a short, intense, brown-haired and brown-eyed man who looked nervously at us, and without nodding, walked to the back of the bus and untied the emergency doors, which were connected with a strap of leather. About six girls were inside. I can't remember their faces, except for one straw-haired girl with a horsey sort of look to her.

Was this Charles Manson? I can only say that, in retrospect, he looked like the fellow who was soon in all the papers. The date was late March or early April, 1969. The Tate-Labianca murders happened the following August. He was supposed to be holed up somewhere near Death Valley, about 100 miles away. He drove a black schoolbus, according to Ed Sanders and Vincent Bugliosi. The goofy-looking driver before us now was a ringer for pictures I saw later of Tex Watson.

Their group asked if they could borrow our fire to make a fire of their

own, about 50 feet away. While we were enjoying hot afternoon tea, a third group of bikers could be seen approaching on Highway 16. The Sons of Troy had beaten a hasty retreat about two hours earlier, over some turf disagreement with the Hessians. Dave took one look in the spy-glass and announced this was the Hell's Angels.

What followed was a fight. From afar, our theory was that the biker groups were all on different drugs. The Sons of Troy were probably potheads -- we could almost imagine ourselves, under slightly different circumstances, riding with them. The Hessians seemed like downers-n-red wine types, surly and a little fat in the gut. But the Hell's Angels seemed like Valkyries, streaking down from the LSD clouds to humble the drunken pretenders.

We saw flying kicks, tire irons, fistfights, sticks -- it was like a scene from a Western street fight, with the sun setting over to the west. The Angels were in control. They smashed a few bikes, and somehow got together a small pile of tires from the Hessian bikes and lit them up. The fire, and the clouds of black rubber smoke, rose high up over the desert plain.

Then, way down by the horizon line, about four miles away, we saw a little oscillating red light. It was a pick up truck with a tank of water mounted in back. It had a little siren, too, that made it sound sort of like an ice cream truck. It headed down the highway, and finally turned down the dirt drive leading to the ranch. We could hear the tires grind to a halt on the gravel, and the door open up, and standing in front of about a dozen bikers was this enormous, blonde-haired man, wearing suspenders, a plaid shirt, and a chin which we could even tell from two hundred yards away was cleft as though by an axe helve. He looked like Paul Bunyan.

He smiled at the bikers, turned on his hose, and doused the pile of flaming tires. In about ten minutes the fire was out, and he said

goodbye, hopped back in his truck, and drove away.

It was an astounding performance, a triumph of a tiny water hose and a man of peace and great size over the armies of the night.

Manson's group was gone in the morning. They had packed up their black school bus and toddled off to their next destination. My recollection of them was that, for that day and that place, they seemed like OK neighbors.

Camping on the Faultline

As spring drew closer to 1969, rumors began circulating -- in the commune, at the book shop, on the street. A prophet named Edgar Cayce predicted that an earthquake would occur on Good Friday of that year, and it would wreak cataclysmic destruction on California. This rumor was repeated everywhere -- no one I knew knew which of Cayce's books it actually appeared in -- yet the corroboration from conversation to conversation was remarkable.

Rennie was the only person in our group who was scared at first. But since the other three of us were all in love with Rennie to one degree or another, and since we were all smoking pot and were extremely susceptible to frightening ideas, we began to invest in the principle of destruction as well. The capper came one night in March, when a traveling psychotic named Jedediah stopped at our fires, and told us, with dramatic, unblinking, unhumorous intensity, that he had seen a vision of our tattered paradise disappearing under the blue-capped waves of the Pacific.

We were stoned to the gills when he made this prediction, and we were never quite sensible on the subject again. I gave my notice to Pickwick. Rennie and Michael packed up our things -- stereo, records,

clothes, guitar. Robert finished up at the ocean-in-a-bottle factory, then the two of us went to U-Haul and rented a van for the upcoming weekend. Thursday morning we loaded everything up and drove east to the Joshua Tree National Monument.

We camped along a stony outcropping a stone's throw from the Chicken Ranch -- we didn't want to be there in case bikers returned, or another group like Manson's. We put up a lean-to shelter of some tent stakes and bed sheets, and crouched next to rocks through the afternoon. At night we started a fire, sang songs, and speculated on the time that the earthquake would occur, whether we would be able to hear it from 150 miles away, etc.

Morning came, and the sun began its slow ascent. By noon we were baking in the sun. By two in the afternoon we were dizzy from the heat. By three we were starting to wonder about our ability to survive through the quake. But after three, we decided it had probably happened, and that it was too far away for us to have felt. We walked down the outcropping, down to the highway, then walked another two miles to a filling station, and plunked quarters into the Coke machine.

A genuine desert old timer was watching us from the counter. He had a radio on, and it was playing something pretty square. I asked him if there was any news from Los Angeles.

"Los Anagaleze? I don't think so. What are you expectin'?"

"We heard there might be some sort of earthquake."

"Gee, not that I heard. Here, let's get a city station on for you." He spun the tuner and played a few seconds of several metro stations. Business as usual on the airwaves.

"Where'd you hear about this earthquake?"

"We heard that there was going to be a Good Friday earthquake, that the San Andreas Fault would come apart and California would slide into the ocean."

The old man laughed. "San Andreas, you say? Hee hee hee!" He pointed up toward the outcropping we had walked down along. "You see that line up there, going on up into the Monument? That's your San Andreas faultline right there. If there was an earthquake, a big one I mean, well, everything along that line'd probably just disappear. We'd be the first to know about it."

We all looked at each other. We had parked about fifty feet from the fault line we were fleeing from.

We drove back into Los Angeles with heavy hearts. Sure, there was probably a silver lining to the failure of the earthquake to destroy California and kill millions, but we couldn't see what it was, not yet. We had all lost our jobs, given notice on the flat where we worshiped, and had no money. Worst of all, now we would have to pay for the van rental.

Michael from Mountains

My second year at college was messed up by the fact that my girlfriend from the previous year was gone. Clare was a faculty brat; her parents Fritz and Mary Jane, remarkable people, cultured yet kind, taught art history and English lit, respectively, at Ohio University in Athens. Lost in the Appalachian hills, and blanketed in moonshine politics that resisted government intervention in anything and apotheosized the 180-proof attraction of weird ideas and strong drugs, Athens, Ohio was an established way-station on the psychedelic underground.

I visited the town with Clare once, for Easter. Where Wooster was “experimental,” Athens was drenched in the life. Drug dealers and tie-dyed fakirs in saffron robes roamed the hillbilly streets, and stereo speakers hung from dormitory windows and screaming Vanilla Fudge at airstrip deciblage proclaimed secession from all rhyme and most reason. “Set me free, why *doncha* babe.” Numerous professors went native, taking their students up into the hills to geodesic layabout academies for months-long symposia on Blake, Reich, Nietzsche, R.D. Laing, lysergic acid, and intergenerational love.

Fritz and Mary Jane decided it wasn't a fit place to raise kids anymore, so they took pay cuts and hightailed it north to Hamline University in Saint Paul, a much more Woosterish outpost, one capable of revolution but not likely to be especially good at it. Mary Jane retired altogether, while Fritz took over the local art history department. And because money was tight and tuition was an employee benefit, they scooped Clare out of Wooster and out of my life. We knew that as an item we were doomed, but we steadfastly wrote cute lovers' notes to one another all summer pledging our troth, half-handwritten, half typed, bursting with pet names and marginal protestations. Indeed, knowing we were doomed pushed us to go overboard a bit. I for instance thought Clare was slyly telegraphing an invitation for me to come to Minnesota and rescue her from her Nordic fate. She wasn't, though.

I tried to get on with my life without Clare, but I liked her, and unbeknownst to me, a great cloud of loneliness was just starting to form over me, it was the cloud of knowing I was alone, and it filled me with

grief and desire. And Clare was so smart and pretty and funny and decent, I would have liked her even without the cloud. She was hipper than I, coming from a college town and having two cool articulate parents. She already knew hippies, had dated some, even, while I was still working out the formula in my mind. She had a gift for being truthful and kind in the same moment. She could tell you you were being foolish, and in the moment of being upbraided you would also feel loved and appreciated.

She was an emotional girl. It was an unusual Friday night that she did not wind up sobbing in my arms at some point, about some misunderstanding, or worse, an understanding. She was compassionate and true to her bones. Where my politics bumbled up from self-interest, hers were rooted in what was right. I found out years later she had been abused as a young teenager at a horse ranch she worked at in Athens, by the owner. She never dared tell her father for fear Fritz, a small man of enormous and very masculine convictions, would murder her ravisher with his hands. She did not even quit the summer job, because the horses, so beautiful but so fundamentally helpless, were her consolation in her silent grief.

Many times, at Wooster, I felt Clare recoil from me when we hugged and a hand went where hands will go -- and did not understand her reasons for pulling away. It didn't matter to me, as I wouldn't have known how to proceed if we ever had got serious, being only 17 and projecting greater gobs of worldly wisdom than I was actually in possession of. Our relationship was only modestly sexual but it was unfailingly romantic, a swooning friendship of the heart.

Clare liked to skirt the bohemian scene without going the lifetime subscription route. One time she performed a modern dance interpretation of "Venus and Furs" at the local coffeehouse, *Zeitgeist*, and it was kind of horrible and kind of wonderful -- she couldn't have had any personal acquaintance with the sadomasochistic fetishism the song was about, but the will to portray it in black Danskins, that grim determination borne of sorrow, was so fervent and so delicately evil, like the woman prisoner in the movie *The Night Porter*, that it made me love my girl from the hills all the more. She was the best of all worlds for me -- innocent but knowing, beautiful but humble. I was never with

her that I didn't like myself. So when she moved to Minnesota, a part of me couldn't let go.

One morning at Wooster, I just headed down to the highway, stuck out a thumb, and headed for Minnesota almost 800 miles away. I didn't have a map, so I didn't know the best way to get there, but I had the power of tremendous stupidity guiding me -- put yourself in play, was the logic of it, and good things will happen, mostly. That's all hitchhiking is, really -- surrendering control and seeing where that takes you. The events that transpire once you do this are automatically magical, like a walkabout or vision quest -- if you can't pay attention to the lessons, you shouldn't make the journey.

My first ride, for instance, was with an old high school acquaintance who had become an over-the-road trucker. Bob Cook was in my sister Kathy's class at Amherst. As a teenager he seemed innocent yet adventurous, a Spider John sort of fellow, tall and gangly, and always wearing a red polka dot cap. We rode along in his cab all the way to Toledo, the two of us marveling at the diverging paths that had brought us back together. I think Bob was a head of some sort -- but he was so cagey and such an individual, I did not offer him my pipe.

After Bob Cook the walkabout took an unfortunate turn. The head of the refectory service at Kalamazoo College picked me up around South Bend and drove me into Chicago. He seemed decent enough, and as we approached the big city, which I saw as the capital of all that was repressive and bad since the Democratic Convention there earlier that summer, he suggested I spend the night with him at the YMCA rather than risk getting picked up and knocked around by the cops. I thought that right neighborly of him, but those of you who are smarter about these things than a 17 year old schoolkid know what happened next. We checked into the room, and there was only one bed, and as soon as the lights were out he made a beeline for my underpants. I was shocked, but I still found it pretty sexy. I could not bring myself to touch him, because he was a grown man with blue beardline. But I let him get me off, and when he tried to take me from behind I fended him off. In the morning we had a miserable continental breakfast where he wanted reassurance from me that he had not raped me, and I gave him that, but not without a schoolboy lecture on how to be nice to hitchhikers. He

offered to pay my bus fare the rest of the way to Minnesota and having already established that I was a whore I agreed.

In my whole life I have had three experiences that could qualify as homosexual. The others were a stoned night with a gay friend, and an altercation in video booth. This was the most disturbing to me, however, because it violated the terms of my vision quest because it was supposed to be about me showing up on Clare's doorstep like the risen Christ without any kind of advance notification and everything being OK after that. After all it was Clare who said Joni Mitchell's "Michael from Mountains," a meta-romantic song about a hyper-idealized man, might as well be about me, even though I felt all too ordinary and way too Lake Eriean, because she, like Joni, discerned poetic and precious attributes in me, a thought I'd have been better off if she had not planted it in my head like a hit of melt-in-your-mind acid.

Instead I'm sitting on a bus heading across the Wisconsin prairie wondering what kind of person I was becoming. I didn't hate the night before with the cook from Kalamazoo; did that make me a queer? I knew that wasn't the most progressive way to phrase that, but it was 1968, and we were not yet sure what the right ways to think about homosexuals and women were, we were only equipped to wage two revolutions at a time, and the war and voting rights in the south required all our righteousness just then. When I rang the bell and Clare came to the door to greet me and hug me -- would I still be the young man she had taken a shine too, would I still be Michael from Mountains? Would she still "love me very well"?

Even that wasn't the low point. The low point came when my ride finally made it up Snelling Avenue, which was ringed with eleven year old Republicans holding up placards and urging me to vote for Nixon ("Nixon's cool!" one kid insisted) to her house on Escher Avenue and I jumped out and rang the bell, and when Clare came to the door, instead of hugging me and jumping up and down with delight, I saw a distinct cloud of dread waft over her face. I was not part of her present as she was for me; I was a part of her past. And it was rude and presumptuous and stupid of me to impose myself on her present. She had a boyfriend. She hugged me for a miserable, tearful moment that told me everything I would ever need to know about our future together. Clare was a

wonderful girl, but it wasn't in her to wait until I showed up on her porch like a protein lightning bolt. She had enterprises of her own underway. I should have called.

I spent the night at her house, trying not to upset people. "The green beans are wonderful, Mrs. Leach." I slept in her brother Clete's room -- the two of us got along pretty well. Clete was two years younger, and just emerging from the Tolkien phase, a little elvish for my tastes, but intense and interesting in his own right. In the morning Fritz and Clete drove me to the Greyhound station and put me on a bus back to Wooster.

And even that wasn't the low point. The low point was that I was destined like Sisyphus to make this trip over and over again, and it would be years, a dozen or more, before I learned you just did not do that. You call first. You communicate. You don't parachute in in the dead of night and expect to be welcomed, and expect people to alter all their plans to fit your sudden appearance. Hard lessons. Eight months later I would make the identical hitchhiking trip, even pulling into Saint Paul on the gas of another hopeful homosexual who picked me up and drove me north, on the chance that my heterosexual quest would pay him a tiny dividend on the side. Another time I rang the doorbell of a grad student whom I'd known at Wooster and who was now at the University of Chicago, and who I honestly expected would be delighted to see me. He was horrified and indicated without a hint of ambiguity that his feelings for me were limited to hate and annoyance. I slept on his fraternity's kitchen floor, my head against the dog dish, and wandered off to my next destination in the first rays of dawn.

But for now I had to ride that long bus back to Ohio knowing I'd made an ass of myself and that my girlfriend was through with me, and thinking of the man from Kalamazoo, doing me a favor then expecting a reward, that the world was more dangerous when you were alone. It put me in mind of a different way of life, one that trumped these occasions of embarrassment, rejection, and exploitation, where there was strength in numbers, and individual heartbreak was absorbed and digested by the whole.

Michael from Mountains

My second year at college was messed up by the fact that my girlfriend from the previous year was gone. Clare was a faculty brat; her parents Fritz and Mary Jane, remarkable people, cultured yet kind, taught art history and English lit, respectively, at Ohio University in Athens. Lost in the Appalachian hills, and blanketed in moonshine politics that resisted government intervention in anything and apotheosized the 180-proof attraction of weird ideas and strong drugs, Athens, Ohio was an established way-station on the psychedelic underground.

I visited the town with Clare once, for Easter. Where Wooster was “experimental,” Athens was drenched in the life. Drug dealers and tie-dyed fakirs in saffron robes roamed the hillbilly streets, and stereo speakers hung from dormitory windows and screaming Vanilla Fudge at airstrip deciblage proclaimed secession from all rhyme and most reason. “Set me free, why *doncha* babe.” Numerous professors went native, taking their students up into the hills to geodesic layabout academies for months-long symposia on Blake, Reich, Nietzsche, R.D. Laing, lysergic acid, and intergenerational love.

Fritz and Mary Jane decided it wasn't a fit place to raise kids anymore, so they took pay cuts and hightailed it north to Hamline University in Saint Paul, a much more Woosterish outpost, one capable of revolution but not likely to be especially good at it. Mary Jane retired altogether, while Fritz took over the local art history department. And because money was tight and tuition was an employee benefit, they scooped Clare out of Wooster and out of my life. We knew that as an item we were doomed, but we steadfastly wrote cute lovers' notes to one another all summer pledging our troth, half-handwritten, half typed, bursting with pet names and marginal protestations. Indeed, knowing we were doomed pushed us to go overboard a bit. I for instance thought Clare was slyly telegraphing an invitation for me to come to Minnesota and rescue her from her Nordic fate. She wasn't, though.

I tried to get on with my life without Clare, but I liked her, and unbeknownst to me, a great cloud of loneliness was just starting to form over me, it was the cloud of knowing I was alone, and it filled me with

grief and desire. And Clare was so smart and pretty and funny and decent, I would have liked her even without the cloud. She was hipper than I, coming from a college town and having two cool articulate parents. She already knew hippies, had dated some, even, while I was still working out the formula in my mind. She had a gift for being truthful and kind in the same moment. She could tell you you were being foolish, and in the moment of being upbraided you would also feel loved and appreciated.

She was an emotional girl. It was an unusual Friday night that she did not wind up sobbing in my arms at some point, about some misunderstanding, or worse, an understanding. She was compassionate and true to her bones. Where my politics bumbled up from self-interest, hers were rooted in what was right. I found out years later she had been abused as a young teenager at a horse ranch she worked at in Athens, by the owner. She never dared tell her father for fear Fritz, a small man but one of enormous very masculine convictions, would murder her ravisher with his hands. She did not even quit the summer job, because the horses, so beautiful but so fundamentally helpless, were her consolation in her silent grief. Many times, at Wooster, I felt Clare recoil from me when we hugged and a hand went where hands will go -- and did not understand her reasons for pulling away. It didn't matter to me, as I wouldn't have known how to proceed if we ever had got serious, being only 17 and projecting greater gobs of worldly wisdom than I was actually in possession of. Our relationship was only modestly sexual but it was unfailingly romantic, a swooning friendship of the heart.

Clare liked to skirt the bohemian scene without going the lifetime subscription route. One time she performed a modern dance interpretation of "Venus and Furs" at the local coffeehouse, Zeitgeist, and it was kind of horrible and kind of wonderful -- she couldn't have had any personal acquaintance with the sadomasochistic fetishism the song was about, but the will to portray it in black Danskins, that grim determination borne of sorrow, was so fervent and so delicately evil, like the woman prisoner in the movie *The Night Porter*, that it made me love my girl from the hills all the more. She was the best of all worlds for me -- innocent but knowing, beautiful but humble. I was never with her that I didn't like myself. So when she moved to Minnesota, a part of

me couldn't let go.

One morning at Wooster, I just headed down to the highway, stuck out a thumb, and headed for Minnesota almost 800 miles away. I didn't have a map, so I didn't know the best way to get there, but I had the power of tremendous stupidity guiding me -- put yourself in play, was the logic of it, and good things will happen, mostly. That's all hitchhiking is, really -- surrendering control and seeing where that takes you. The events that transpire once you do this are automatically magical, like a walkabout or vision quest -- if you can't pay attention to the lessons, you shouldn't make the journey.

My first ride, for instance, was with an old high school acquaintance who had become an over-the-road trucker. Bob Cook was in my sister Kathy's class at Amherst. As a teenager he seemed innocent yet adventurous, a Spider John sort of fellow, tall and gangly, and always wearing a red polka dot cap. We rode along in his cab all the way to Toledo, the two of us marveling at the diverging paths that had brought us back together. I think Bob was a head of some sort -- but he was so cagey and such an individual, I did not offer him my pipe.

After Bob Cook the walkabout took an unfortunate turn. The head of the refectory service at Kalamazoo College picked me up around South Bend and drove me into Chicago. He seemed decent enough, and as we approached the big city, which I saw as the capital of all that was repressive and bad since the Democratic Convention there earlier that summer, he suggested I spend the night with him at the YMCA rather than risk getting picked up and knocked around by the cops. I thought that right neighborly of him, but those of you who are smarter about these things than a 17 year old schoolkid know what happened next. We checked into the room, and there was only one bed, and as soon as the lights were out he made a beeline for my underpants. I was shocked, but I still found it pretty sexy. I could not bring myself to touch him, because he was a grown man with blue beardline. But I let him get me off, and when he tried to take me from behind I fended him off. In the morning we had a miserable continental breakfast where he wanted reassurance from me that he had not raped me, and I gave him that, but not without a schoolboy lecture on how to be nice to hitchhikers. He offered to pay my bus fare the rest of the way to Minnesota and having

already established that I was a whore I agreed.

In my whole life I have had three experiences that could qualify as homosexual. The others were a stoned night with a gay friend, and an altercation in video booth. This was the most disturbing to me, however, because it violated the terms of my vision quest because it was supposed to be about me showing up on Clare's doorstep like the risen Christ without any kind of advance notification and everything being OK after that. After all it was Clare who said Joni Mitchell's "Michael from Mountains," a meta-romantic song about a hyper-idealized man, might as well be about me, even though I felt all too ordinary and way too Lake Eriean, because she, like Joni, discerned poetic and precious attributes in me, a thought I'd have been better off if she had not planted it in my head like a hit of melt-in-your-mind acid.

Instead I'm sitting on a bus heading across the Wisconsin prairie wondering what kind of person I was becoming. I didn't hate the night before with the cook from Kalamazoo; did that make me a queer? I knew that wasn't the most progressive way to phrase that, but it was 1968, and we were not yet sure what the right ways to think about homosexuals and women were, we were only equipped to wage two revolutions at a time, and the war and voting rights in the south required all our righteousness just then. When I rang the bell and Clare came to the door to greet me and hug me -- would I still be the young man she had taken a shine too, would I still be Michael from Mountains? Would she still "love me very well"?

Even that wasn't the low point. The low point came when my ride finally made it up Snelling Avenue, which was ringed with eleven year old Republicans holding up placards and urging me to vote for Nixon ("Nixon's cool!" one kid insisted) to her house on Escher Avenue and I jumped out and rang the bell, and when Clare came to the door, instead of hugging me and jumping up and down with delight, I saw a distinct cloud of dread waft over her face. I was not part of her present as she was for me; I was a part of her past. And it was rude and presumptuous and stupid of me to impose myself on her present. She had a boyfriend. She hugged me for a miserable, tearful moment that told me everything I would ever need to know about our future together. Clare was a wonderful girl, but it wasn't in her to wait until I showed up on her

porch like a protein lightning bolt. She had enterprises of her own underway. I should have called.

I spent the night at her house, trying not to upset people. "The green beans are wonderful, Mrs. Leach." I slept in her brother Clete's room -- the two of us got along pretty well. Clete was two years younger, and just emerging from the Tolkien phase, a little elvish for my tastes, but intense and interesting in his own right. In the morning Fritz and Clete drove me to the Greyhound station and put me on a bus back to Wooster.

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G-L-O-R-I-A

The freak farm was to be a place for only mellow behavior, stone grooves, and an accent on positivity. We went to California thinking we would learn about beauty from the hippies who were already there, because we took them to be authorities on the topic. We believed an age of Aquarius was just getting underway, and that the cruddy old world would melt away in the face of its cool. Our guiding ethic was deep experience, unbridled love and zero guilt.

But there were unanticipated tensions. Rennie and Michael slept together in one closet, leaving Robert and me to fend for ourselves, lovewise. None of us knew how to clean, or cook, or make a living. None of us was especially discerning, so when we opened our commune to all comers -- people we encountered out on the street or hitch-hiking -- we got what we asked for. The scum of the earth.

Every day, seedier, less-connected people would find their way to us -- dealers, dreamers, sociopaths, acidheads, addicts. They all did the

necessary beautiful things to get in -- make the peace sign, say "oh, wow" and "far out," and smoke pot. There was invariably something profoundly wrong with them, but we never figured out how to screen them out.

There was a drifter named Gabriel – no last name – who told us wide-eyed stories of the end of the world, which was only five weeks away. There were some dyed in the wool druggies who taught us how to tie plastic bags together and set them on fire (the hot plastic makes a cool science-fictiony dripping sound.) There were young whores who dealt blowjobs on Vermont Avenue, who thought we were adorable. There were runaways and dealers and the mentally ill and criminals and hipsters looking for action. It was a reptile bazaar.

One night Rennie invited in a big-bellied biker named Rowdy Yates. He had a young girl with him named Gloria Gonzalez who was in need of medical attention. She was hemorrhaging vaginally, with blood running down both of her pantlegs. There was also something wrong with her face. Her right eye was inverted, so that you could only barely see part of her iris, up along the top of the lid. The rest was the red of her eyelid, and the half-moon of the eye-white. And she was so sleepy, always nodding off, like the Dormouse in *Through the Looking Glass*. This was either the effect of the reds she had taken, or her loss of blood.

Rennie walked her to a bus stop and bused her to the Free Clinic on Melrose. By the time they got back, after midnight, Gloria had told her her story. She had not known Rowdy long, but long enough for her to hemorrhage. She was from Rosemont, east of L.A., she was an illegal and had eleven brothers and sisters. We offered her sanctuary in our commune, and let Rowdy know his presence was no longer needed. Gloria slept on a throw rug with a yellow tabby cat.

In the morning we got to know Gloria. We figured her for 13 years old, though she swore she was 18. She spoke Spanish and pretty good English, but slurred from a minor hairlip. She was blind in one eye -- the obviously injured one, from knuckle-beatings her father had given her at their home in Rosemont -- and had only 20% vision in the other. She ran away from home, and had been on her own for over six months, going from man to man, taking downers, reds. She

offered to live with us and be our *criada*, our live-in maid.

We didn't know what to say. Our idea was to have a free groovy society, not take in indentured servants. She seemed all right, but she was so young and unhip and Hispanic. It was alien to us. But we worried about her, and thought if she felt she had a role she would stay around the place and start to stabilize, so we said sure.

Gloria was a terrible maid. Most days she would do nothing, and no one gave her any direction. Other days she would have a work-and-worthiness attack, and she would take a broom and begin blindly sweeping everything within broom's reach into a cloud of dust and debris – sometimes including the dope. This caused considerable consternation when everyone was laying around spaced out, and suddenly had to spring into action.

Sometimes we yelled at her. She could be rude and low-class, and she didn't like hippies. She was there the night Dave introduced nudity into the routine. A couple of the fellows, myself included, lounged around the flat in our altogether. But we were very stiff in our lounging – stiff meaning awkward – and no one except the neediest of us took part. It was sadder than it was free.

"You guys are weird," was all Gloria said.

After a couple of weeks Rennie took Gloria her to a social worker and worked out some plans for her -- a job doing assembly work, an apartment at a building run by the local Society for the Blind, and best of all, according to the social worker, eye surgery to restore the good one to full vision and to replace the dead one with a glass eye, so she didn't look so godawful.

Gloria seemed ambivalent about this news. She started going out in the mornings and coming home very late or not at all. We would learn that she was going out to get picked up, then raped or mauled or beaten up, and dumped when they were done with her.

In her regaling us, the rapist each night was the same man, a beau ideal, and he was courting her. She called him Jesse. One day she didn't come back at all -- three guys had had sex with her, kicked her,

and thrown her out of a car in Twenty Nine Palms, way out in the Mohave. We had no car so there was no way for us to collect her even if we'd been in the mood. A couple mornings later she dragged herself into the place and slept for a whole day.

As the day for the scheduled eye operation drew near, she told us she was engaged to be married, to Jesse. No one believed her. We had decided she was just too crazy for us to try and control. I felt sorry for her, but blown away by the scope of her problems and by her extreme responses.

It was at this juncture that Gloria came home one day, and crawled into my crawlspace.

"Take this," she said, and handed me a couple of reds. I had never done downers before, but I was grateful for the attention. We smoked a joint, then we began to kiss. As we undressed, she called me Jesse, and kissed me on the face and neck.

It was not my proudest moment. I had tried to meet other girls in L.A., but I didn't seem able to strike up a conversation with anyone outside the basic group. I had passed the point of being social. I was so lonely, loneliness was all I was any good at. I would like to say that was a knock on the whole hippie idea. Someone should have loved me somewhere along the way. I should not have been allowed to get this bad.

As we made love, I began to see opportunities for myself in the relationship. Maybe I could be her big Anglo brother. At age 18, I knew the ways of the world, I could clear obstacles from her path, help get her life on track. I imagined myself holding her hands through the surgery and rehab, and on the other side of all that she would be beautiful, and poised, and healed, and serene. It was the hippie dream, with a Mexican twist.

So while I was having sex with a disabled minor, there I was, thinking what a good guy I was.

After we were done, I became very ashamed -- Gloria was a blind, abused, underage addict, and I had taken unfair advantage of her. I

was the worst person in the world.

I dressed quickly and ran out of the house.

I spent the night at my dad's house, a few blocks away drinking Brown Derby beer and watching the Tonight Show -- Joe Garagiola was the host that night, and John Lennon and Paul McCartney were on. It was awful. Garagiola asked how they could stand their hair that way.

In the morning I drifted back to Vendome Place, but Gloria was gone. She didn't come back that day, or the next day, or the day after that -- the day she was scheduled for eye surgery.

A girlfriend of Gloria's came by on the fifth day to say she was in a nearby hospital. Rennie and I went to a pay phone on the corner of Beverly and Vermont to call the hospital. But the switchboard refused to divulge any information, since we weren't family..

"But we are her family," Rennie explained. "We're her friends. We took her in and tried to help her."

But it was no good. The girlfriend came by a week later and told us the details. Gloria was dead. She was hit by a Mayflower moving van around ten in the morning on Pentecost Sunday, just a block from where we lived. She walked right in front of it, bing. She fought for two days in the hospital, but the damage to her head, and spine, and internal organs, was too severe. Her parents came from Rosemont to sit with her, and they saw her out.

At the time she was killed she was wearing a raggedy secondhand wedding gown she had bought at Volunteers of America. Was she coming home to us and got blindsided by a bad driver? Had she stepped in front of the truck on purpose? Was she just a little too high, or low, and too blind to see what was coming at her? Was the possibility of a fresh start just too much to handle?

It broke our hearts. We sat around the duplex that night and the next night dispirited and unable to speak.

In the middle of the night, we became aware that strangers were in the apartment. I opened my crawlspace door and saw two pairs of legs walk past me in the dark.

“Ah!” I called out. “People are here!”

We turned on the lights and we were surrounded by four men in suits. They had Dave the Deserter in handcuffs, and were leading him toward the front steps.

“What's going on?” Rennie asked, her hands over her small breasts.

“FBI,” the last of the men stopped and said. He showed us his badge.

“Where are you going with Dave?”

“He's wanted for desertion from the United States Army.”

“But he's our friend.”

“You're lucky we came tonight,” the G-man said. “We caught his brother on the front porch, with a machete in his hands.”

And that was that. We spent another week at Vendome, till the month's rent was gone, then we threw in the towel. Rennie and Robert arranged for another driveaway, back to the Midwest. We bought a carton of 100-millimeter Larks, and headed out across the great desert.

Deserters

It would be nice to say that life at the Life Church had its own set of looping rhythms, except that it didn't. Because we didn't have a leader or a constitution or even a set list of players, every day had the potential to be unique to itself. One of the few constants was that I worked every weekday at Pickwick Books. But the flat on Vendome Street that I bused home to every day was never the same place.

One night I came home to find two new fellows named Dave and Gus, about our ages, but with very short hair and military T-shirts. Dave was clearly the leader of the two -- he was handsome and quick. Gus was a sour sort, who looked like he would do just about anything. Gus worked with Worth in the ocean-in-a-bottle plant near La Brea, and Worth told them about our venture. They had come pledge allegiance to the venture and be a part of our group. They didn't want to move in exactly -- they shared a one bedroom apartment somewhere with a mile's radius, which none of us would ever see. Their hope was to be "day members" of the church, and to use the other place for crashing only. Since we had no policies for reviewing such declarations, all we could do was shrug our shoulders and welcome the two into our circle.

Dave and Gus altered the chemistry of our group. First, they brought amphetamines into the place. I don't think any of us took more than one or two uppers total, but the experience was enough to convince us there were more dimensions to getting high than out there and in there. Speed was so American you felt you not only could do anything under its power but that you really ought to. People on speed attempted much and accomplished nearly as much.

I never became Dave's confidante, but I liked him from the start. He provided just what our woebegone group needed -- electricity and confidence. He was incapable of being lukewarm or "measured" about anything. He liked my idea about getting all the hippies on all the freeway ramps in California to sell homemade soap instead of the Free Press or jasmine incense. It was his idea to take us out to the desert to Thompson's Chicken Ranch. It was his idea that the unattached guys in the church should link up with some Mexican girls, and proceeded to

link us up with some, including the lovely Sylvia, a very cool girl who worked for one of the picture studios. It was his idea to rent a van and head out to the high desert to avoid the end of the world on Easter Sunday, 1969 -- but it was up to all of us to pay the van rental when the earthquake failed to materialize.



This Yeast Has Flown

Usually, you have the dream; sometimes the dream has you.

I think of all the fantasizing I did in my young life, projecting the future that was waiting for me, just around the bend.

The cornerstone of hip thought was that heartbreak was avoidable, that community and good vibes could lift us up and transport us across this ragged crevasse – that peace and love would save us from sadness and even from death. No more tears. No more Vietnams. The freak farm would vibrate with the laughter of a thousand doobies.

It was a dream of being high, and seeing and hearing everything, the outline of every twig, the throb of every tremolo.

It was a dream of love, and generosity, and open-heartedness, and helpless stoned laughing at one another's humanness. Love was all we needed.

In my heart I wanted to take all my friends and stuff them in a bag, and live with them forever, and roll in their ecstasies, and never do dishes.

And no one had to get a job. And no one had to be gone all day at work.

And no one had to come home grumpy or misunderstood or underappreciated, and start drinking.

Everyone would get it. Everyone would be glad.

All that was gone, wiped away, by a bunch of dumb kids with long hair and bells in a driveway car, cruising on a borrowed credit card through the high desert night.

But the freak farm turned out to be hell. The pop-bead bracelet of friends came apart at the first tug. We cried and we lied and we died, just like the straights. The loves of my life popped into view and popped out again. The man I envisioned becoming never came to be. I remained the fellow I was. At the heart, at the core, at the bleeding center, unhip.

I came to Minnesota and for two months I lived in the same house with Clare and Clete. After being thrown out of my own parents' house, and after two stupid drop-in surprise visits from me, each of which ended in tears and silent drives to the bus station, the Reddings were so hospitable to me, so kind, taking me in as one takes in a wounded bird, and nursing me back to strength.

In the weeks that I lived there, Clare began seeing me with fresh eyes. One night I walked her home from her boyfriend's pad and she turned and buried herself in my arms and her tears soaked us both through, and she confided to me that I was the best friend she had ever had, and she was sorry to have hurt me.

I took this in stride, as if it was my due, as if it had been coming to me a long time, and now I collected it with no great satisfaction, a victory without celebration. I was less boyfriend to her now than godfather, and I stroked her long hair and told her who she really was, what her true name was, and where her destiny lay, out on the star-lit plains of South Dakota, without a hint of me.

I remember our last kiss because I knew my life would never be the same.

I felt clear-headed for a moment. I began to think I could reverse all the losing I had done in the previous year, that it could all go away, all be a learning experience. But what was that lesson? In what way was I wiser?

On the last day of the sixties, December 31, 1969, Clare got engaged to marry a high school friend who had been shot up in Vietnam and needed her more than I did.

It never happened, she never married the guy. But it was enough to untie her from me. I heard the scrape as we parted. And I let her go, and she floated away.

I took a job in a motor parts warehouse, stacking tailpipes for a hundred dollars a week. One day a pipe way up on the highest shelf slid down and hit me in the forehead and knocked me cold.

Thirty years later, when I was diagnosed with a brain tumor in that same location, I could not help thinking of that as the moment the tumor formed inside me, like the touch of a magic wand on my brow. And the word for the instrument of my brain-waylaying became the sound effect of my undoing - *bong*.

I moved out of the Redding house and rented a room in Minneapolis for fourteen dollars a week. The other boarders were truckers and day laborers. The landlord spied on me when I would toast bread in the common kitchen. If I left so much as a crumb on the counter, he would write me a note ringing with exclamation points and pin it on my door. When I gave notice after a single week, he refused to refund my deposit, and we had a shoving match on his porch, which he won, I left the place, brushing the dirt from my feet.

I rented a room in a houseful of college students, curiously all ex-seminarians, close to the university. My parents disenfranchised me at my

request, so I could qualify for in-state tuition in Minnesota. (I made a \$45 down payment on a gravesite, so I could show the Board of Regents evidence I planned to reside permanently in the state.) I knew no one now, and my back ached, and my teeth ached, and the room was so hot and suffocating I could not sleep.

Since the house had a kitchen, I took up baking. It seemed to me that life could be empty but if you made a loaf of whole-grain bread every day with your own hands, you could stay centered and sane. Every day I rose at dawn and began a loaf. With the kneading and the rising and the punching and the kneading, a loaf of bread took about four hours, but when you pulled it from the oven the roasted smell filled the house and made everything seem possible.

But one day, the bread wouldn't rise. I don't know why, perhaps the yeast, which is a living thing, had died. I let the dough sit on the radiator for two hours, but it remained a brick. I punched at it and punched at it to get it going, but it was no good.

I took the dough in my hands and walked out the back steps, and it was snowing, the kind of big, conglomerate flakes when the weather is still warm, but the seasons have decided to change. And I whirled that loaf around and around until it elongated and flew up in the snowy air, like a bola from a gaucho, spinning end over end, and it landed on the roof of the garage, where birds would peck at it for the next six months.

And I went back inside the house and cried for two days for the dreams of hippiedom that had died, and for the people I had let down, and for the love I was going to have to learn to live without.

Most of all I cried for myself, because just like in the words of the song, I knew I would be carrying the weight of this vain and feckless year for a long, long, long, long time.