



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.

“He'll never find you,” I reassured him.

“He'll find me in no time,” Dave replied.

“How do you know that?” To me it was a big wide world, with room for each of us to get lost.

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

