

FREAKS by Mike Finley



FREAKS

A memoir of the 60s by Mike Finley

Kraken Press, St. Paul

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Note to Readers

This is a set of stories taking place in 1968 and 1969, the year a bunch of friends dropped out of college with the idea of living a groovy hippy life outside the system.

Taken together, they are a big fat cautionary tale -- Don't do what we did, kids. But they are also fond remembrances of how great it was to be young, and everything seemed possible.

I tried writing these stories at various times and couldn't seem to get them right. Either I made fun of the kids, or I tried to make them seem too cool, which they were not. Or I was explaining my youth to my own kids. Anyway, I didn't know how to write it .

Now I have metastatic cancer and I get one last swing of the bat. Ideally I will have time to do a sequel, which would be very groovy. I've had a fun life. You too - enjoy!

Mike

June 2018

Vicklebar

It was about 2 AM when the explosion ripped through my dorm room. I awoke, my ears in pain from the violent noise, the room full of smoke, and a weird minty smell.

I felt in the dark for the desk lamp, but it was gone. I found it on the floor, pulled the chain, and the room filled with light.

My room was splattered with broken glass and Colgate toothpaste. Members of the 5th Section had filled a Skippy peanut butter jar full of toothpaste, thrust a cherry bomb down the middle, lit the fuse, and thrown it through the sealed dorm window.

I surveyed the damage. I wasn't harmed. I didn't own much besides books and clothes, and my clothes were mostly in the closed closet, unharmed. There was some spattering of toothpaste on my book bag.

My roommate's stuff was another story. I roomed with a low prince of Morocco -- 147th in line to the throne, or

something. His name was Farouk Britel. We called him Peanut Britel, because he was like 5 foot even, but girls all called him Ze Bed, because he was always trying to talk them into surrendering to his powers.

He was very continental, very French, and a little plump. But he had made the terrible error of leaving his "UN wardrobe" hanging in the center of the room that night -- beautiful authentic lambswool and camel's hair robes that he would wear to groups to demonstrate what life in Morocco was like. They were ruined, torn by glass and riddled with toothpaste.

One last thing. I felt under the covers and found what I was looking for -- a two-month old kitten my girlfriend Clare had given me to take care of. His name was Vickiebar, German for honeybear. He was small, white and, like many white cats, congenitally deaf. He was unharmed by the explosion, but pretty frightened.

I had a terrific idea. I got on my slippers and a winter coat, and proceeded over to the Delta House.

Background. At Wooster there were no fraternities. Fraternities were cliquish. Instead they had sections or dorms designated according to Greek letters, and governing bodies who recruited members. In other words, fraternities. The jock fraternity on campus was the Delta Delta Delta house. They were all the football players, heavy drinkers, hot dates. I hated them.

During the first year I was at Wooster, I was offered the work-study job of putting out the overnight newsletter for the college. Called Potpourri, it was a one-sheet announcement of all that was happening that day -- who was giving what talk where, where the Bloodmobile would park, etc. Art Kellogg, a hippie in a leather coat he had made himself -- as huge as a covered bridge -- gave me the job when he got tired of it.

I was 17 years old, and immediately abused the position. I stole stationery from the student association and forged stupid letters from the president to the college newspaper, and did a number of other unethical things in the name of mischief making. One target was the Delta House. Every

day I did a crude cartoon of a Delt, as if by a Delt writing home to his mom. Crudely spelled and drawn, the message was that athletes -- poor scholars but social lions -- had preferential status at the school without being part of it in any academic way.

I was a terrible asshole.

The Delts didn't like my cartoons. After about a week of them they figured out who I was, and started bumping me off sidewalks, muttering vague threats, etc. After a while I was truly intimidated, but too stubborn to back off. Several times a Delta had pointed a finger at me and told me I was about to die, or something.

Then, this, in the middle of the night. It was indeed a strong response to my cartoons. I walked across the quad to the Delta House and entered their smoking lobby on the first floor. Entering their main lounge, I stood among a group of guys watching Johnny Carson. Seeing me, one of the group leaped to his feet and dashed out of the room.

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

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

"Gee, that's too bad," said 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. She didn't so much as blink. One of the boys gasped. Even Gene was unnerved.

"I just wanted to show you guys what you accomplished," I said. "This beautiful, harmless, innocent creature, deafened for life. What a brave thing you did!"

And I picked Vickiebar up and headed out the door. Halfway back to Douglass Hall, slogging through the slush, 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.

I laid out my terms -- they had to clean up the dorm room, repair Farouk's salvageable outfits or compensate him for the ones that could not be restored, replace the window -- which was leaded glass, which is expensive -- and leave me the hell alone for the rest of the year. In return I would leave them alone, too.

There was a general mumbling of assent. I left the building, and two Delts ran after me. One was named Bill Cosby, believe it or not, a varsity basketball player. The other I

forget. "We're sorry, Finley," Cosby was blubbering. "We didn't know about the cat, honest."

I whirled at them. "A bit late to be sorry, isn't it?"

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, then turned on my heels and strode confidently away.

But they all happened in dreams, or in fantasies just before nodding off.

But this one really did happen, and 50 years later it still makes me smile.

High on a Hilltop

In high school I got average grades, but I was pretty good at English. I scored super-high on some tests and won a national award. As a result, I looked like a hot property to admissions departments, even at places like Harvard, Princeton, Cornell and West Point.

So I was gold. But I blew it. I applied to these schools, figuring I would end up at one of them. But they they all rejected me. And right away -- I got the rejection letters like the same week I applied.

I asked myself, What did I do wrong? Years later, I think I know why.

My downfall was the biographical essay they ask you to write. "Tell us about your interests and aspirations."

It is not, as I imagined, an invitation to go crazy. It was the opposite -- see if you can write a disciplined, mature paragraph.

I could not.

There were no copy machines in those days, just carbon paper. I did not keep a copy of any of these stupid paragraphs. But I think they went a little like this:

Some say wisdom is simply the application of known knowledge. I know it to be far more than that. My goal is to devour life whole, as the poet and adventurer Arthur Rimbaud did -- through experience, through dialogue, and yes, through academic study.

It went on for five more fingernails-on-blackboard sentences.

Bear in mind, I skipped fourth grade, so I was among the least mature kids tackling that assignment.

I should also point out that I pronounced Ar-Ther Rim-Bawd. I now know it rhymes with Rambo.

Anyhow, that's how I ended up at a perfectly good liberal arts college, 90 miles from home, in Ohio's Amish country. The College of Wooster was a Scots Presbyterian college. Everything there was Scottish. The teams were called the Fighting Tartans. The cheerleaders were the Mcleod

Lassies. You could hear bagpipes every hour of the day.
Usually practicing alone, on the third floor.

It was a nice place, but a little square. Because its initials
were COW, disaffected students called the place
Cowtown.

As soon as my folks dropped me off at the dorm, a
recently built building lacking any kind of ivy, I wanted to
run away.

I needed to find some disaffected people to be my friends.

Fake Riot

We're coming around to Stickleback and the toothpaste bomb, keep your pants on.

At Wooster, I was like a dog let loose. Stuff I could not do in high school were not as forbidden at Wooster. You could smoke openly. Read Karl Marx. Tongue kiss in student lounges. Massage girls' backs in the union. Step behind bushes and get loaded.

And it was the perfect time for acting out. The war, the Kennedy killing, LBJ, Jim Crow, Berkeley -- these things lent legitimacy to all kinds of bad behavior.

Let me illustrate. Two weeks into the academic semester, the school got a curious request from the Ohio National Guard. They realized that student protest was a thing, and they wanted to train their troops for difficult situations that might arise. You know, riots. And they wanted to know, would a sweet hilltop college like Wooster be interested in staging a mock riot that their soldiers could quash.

All pretend, of course. No loaded weapons, no tear gas, no barbwire, no bayonets. Strictly for fun.

The school said yes, and then passed word through the student government dip wads that they should think of the fake riot as a kind of festival. Different sections (fraternities) could compete for cutest posters, most outlandish hippie attire, etc.

So we had the odd experience of seeing the straight fraternities dressing up bells and leather vests. Everyone practiced the peace sign. Some did face painting. A few guys bought ladies' wigs at Volunteers for America so they would look long haired. Long, platinum haired.

They planned to mass on the quad and wait for the Ohio National Guard to come to them and cheerfully surrender.

And then have BBQ sandwiches and ice cream.

Now, I have told this story many times, and I have stop and ask myself "Did this really happen that way."

For instance, I have told people that the commander of the Ohio National Guard outfit was the same guy who headed up the Guard at Kent State, and that our band of hippie irregulars, who tied up all the soldiers and confiscated their rifles, stirred up such hatred in the commander that he took it out on the kids in Ravenna.

But these events were two and a half years apart, and there must be numerous Ohio National Guard groups. I don't really know. But back before there was an Internet, you could convince yourself of something because there was no Wikipedia to tell you different.

I imagined it that way because it made it a better story. I will try to tell it just as it was.

First of all, while the regular sections were planning a fun fest on the quad, another group -- a group of disaffected pleasure seekers -- engaged with the soldiers down on the Wayne County Fairgrounds. There were no murderous rules of engagement.

This group consisted of hippies, dopers, revolutionaries, Vietnam veterans and townies who wanted to make a big fuss as an anti-war protest. Male and female were they. We figured the Wooster paper and radio station would pick it up, and maybe even the media from Cleveland and Columbus.

As we gathered in the empty hog barn, I looked around and there were the people I had been looking for. Longhairs with mischief in their eyes. A bartender. Boyfriends and girlfriends. My Intro to Philosophy professor. The girl who works for Smuckers Jams. That guy down the hall that played Highway 61 at three in the morning every night. The junior from New Zealand that you never, never, ever saw.

Everyone was the leader of this group. We were united in our desire to make a statement to these kids in the Guard that were really mirror images of ourselves, same age, same wide open eyes.

We all had tremendous animus toward the war, and how many kids were getting killed and maimed over there, and how we were all scared shitless about our own draft status.

Somehow, we knew that there was no bullets in their guns, no tear gas, no nothing that could hurt us.

So we decided to take out the Guard.

The war started around 11 AM and lasted until about 12:25 PM -- less than an hour and a half. There were 30 Guard members and they approached us in teams of three or four. We simply surrounded them and pulled their unloaded weapons out of their hands. The first teams resisted a little. But after a few minutes they were all abashed and often grinning as we tied them to whatever was handy -- a post, a gate, even a flagpole.

It was the hippie women who tied the soldiers up. They did so beautifully, and in a friendly way. There was a slightly kinky free love element to it. For some of the

soldiers, it was the best thing that happened to them that year.

The main harm that was done was a feeling of embarrassment. I think the sense of disgrace may have set in that evening, especially among the officers, as they rode their buses and considered what to tell their superiors back in Columbus.

The newspaper did NOT run a story about the war games in their town. Neither did the radio stations, or the print or broadcast media in Cleveland or Columbus.

We understood that the Guard asked our college's president for a rematch. But he couldn't guarantee we would act like civilized people the next time. And there was a sense that, if they did come back, they would bring more than ping-pong ball guns.

Meanwhile, look at us. There were about 50 of us at The Shack that night, gobbling down fried eggs and fries and regaling others with our wartime experiences.

We bonded in our determination to mock the system.

The Plot to Murder Me

I can't speak for everyone that took part in the fake riot -- what their motives were, whether they were purely political, antiwar -- or whether other emotions or motives drove them. There were people in those days who seemed quite pure to me, taking a stand because it was the right thing to do. Pursuing justice because justice was -- just.

But I can come clean about my own motivations. I rioted because it seemed like the cool thing to do. I attacked our armed forces, who were only doing their duty, because I liked the other people who were doing it. I did it for the same reason I smoked, and wore an American flag on the seat of my jeans. And because the girls I liked liked it.

Especially Clare. Vickiebar's Clare.

I don't know what drives other men, but for me the biggest thing in life, at 17, was to have a girlfriend. This gets real shallow real fast but I'm telling you the god's honest truth.

A good girlfriend makes you somebody. Without one, you probably wouldn't even go to an event or party. With one -- a really good one -- you enter any door proudly, your girlfriend on your arm.

Clare was the daughter of college professors in Athens, Ohio -- one a professor literature and the other a professor of art history. Accordingly, she was very bright, and could get any joke, even one told by an overeager college freshman.

One time, I overheard a guy I knew in high school -- the president of the National Honor Society, which passed over me for membership -- but had drifted away from at college, talk about me to his mom on the phone.

"Yeah, I see Finley around. He seems to be enjoying himself. He's got the most beautiful girlfriend in the whole freshman class.

Yes! Even now, fifty years later, I am doing fist pumps.

I loved Clare. She was a sensitive, kind girl who knew things about the world. She was fun to be with, not afraid

to make a joke on me -- but it was always loving. She got hives a lot, because she was so tenderhearted, and little setbacks really set her back until she sobbed on my shoulder -- then they cleared up. I did that! For the life of me I don't know how I did it, but I did.

She made an insecure boy feel like he ran the world, had all the answers, and most important had the key to her. I unlatched her and people gasped at how cool she was, with her long beautiful legs in her snug blue jeans.

Did I love her in a mature, balanced way that she could rely on into the future? No. But I could get her through freshman year, and I would never do anything to harm her.

So when I learned, again, fifty years later, that she had been raped in a horse stable the summer before, and had all that to deal with, while entertaining a goofy boyfriend, I wanted to kill someone.

But I didn't know that. I just looked into her starry eyes, and kissed her goodnight at the steps of Holdridge Hall,

and skipped back to my dorm with her deaf little kitty cat in my pocket.



So you know about the toothpaste bomb going off that night. And the weeks ahead were rough for me.

This is why the men at Delta Delta didn't like me.

As a freshman I was nevertheless honored with the job of mimeographing the school's daily news sheet, called Potpourri.

Every night I responsibly typed up the next day's meetings and events. Each day, however, I took a bigger nibble at the publication's style. No one seemed to care, and I took their indifference as permission to get wilder.

I started by adding my own little flourishes, like scratching a peace sign on the stencil or typing an antiwar quote or a primitive cartoon of my own drawing.

When you have power, as I did, and you harbor resentments you are not fully aware of, bad things can happen. In my case, my revolutionary fervor swiveled into dislike of the athletic section, the Delts or Second Section.

There was nothing special about them, except that they were bigger and stronger than other guys, drank more beer, and sweated up more car backseats.

But I targeted them as the source of much of the evil in the world, and I lampooned them every chance I could get. Like a crude drawing of a guy wearing a football helmet saying DUH. The Algonquin Round table it was not.

I admired Abby Hoffman. I wanted to pull stunts that made people laugh, made the bad guys mad, and made cool people admire me.

It never quite worked. Army recruiters were invited to talk to students in the lunch room at Kittredge Hall. I decided

to mount my own opposition to this, by setting up a card table with a punch bowl full of blood (KoolAid) and a satirical recruiting poster.

A number of Delts had brothers serving in Vietnam, and took deep offense at my shenanigans. I never dreamed my stunt would cost me anything. But it did.

The Delts began seriously plotting my destruction. It started as a game of “push Finley off the sidewalk.” Guys in red and gray starter jackets would shove me until I fell on my ass.

Sure, I was cocky by the dark of night. But getting pushed around by these crew-cut lummoxes in the daytime rattled me. They didn’t do it when Clare was with me. But alone I was fair game. I got knocked down maybe a dozen times. And they were these big men and I was this fair-faced freshman.

It wasn’t nice.

Then the bomb. Then a call from Bowie Long, the one-legged dean of men and a one-time drill sergeant with the Marines.

“Come see me, Mike.”

Long told me that one of the boys who was upset at my Punch Bowl of Blood had just been suspended from school that morning for conspiring to ...

Let me say this slowly and clearly.

For conspiring to kidnap me, put me in a gunnysack, load me into a car trunk, drive me 100 miles to the town of Barbecue, Ohio, break my legs with a baseball bat, and lower me on a kind of industrial dumbwaiter to an abandoned hall in a salt mine.

And leave me there to DIE.

I was dumbfounded. Bowie Long looked at me hard.

“Mike,” he said, “what’s the matter with you?”

The worst part was, I didn’t know.

“You know, Mike, I read a lot of psychology. It helps me make sense of the problems students have. One word sings out from my reading, and I think it may apply to you. Are you familiar with the word *masochist*?”

“Uh, sort of.” I pictured people who liked to be whipped, like in the Velvet Underground. I didn’t think I would like being whipped *at all*.

“Do you think that describes you?”

“No.” I didn’t. I thought he should keep reading.

“Fair enough. That’s all I have, Mike. Try and stay out of trouble.”

Dancing with Mister D

It was always about the music. The Beatles, the Velvets, the Doors. Because we crowded around the sounds like people in some other age would have gone elbow to elbow around bone-men and snake-handlers. Bob Dylan, the Experience, the Stones. It raised us up. It shook us till we rattled.

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 could 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.

There was nothing democratic about our decision. Nobody voted for Jerry Garcia. Yet there was a sense that he had been anointed, him and the others, to be ours and not

anybody else's. We were all war babies and we were part of this mighty wave and we knew we were part of it, it rippled with power, and from the first note I heard I knew I was going that way, and not the way of my family and their hopes for me. I knew I was going to sneak off in the night from my family's home, light out for the periphery first chance I got.

I was raised to think it was unholy and disreputable to love one's own self but love is what I went chasing, 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 splash of Lake Erie outside, even though I was raised a good boy, an ex-seminarian, I was gonna break hearts all round the world.

My mother, whom I loved -- I broke her heart when I lit out. That's how I thanked her for bringing me into this

world, and feeding me, and teaching me to read. My gift to her was sorrow. Had to do it, Ma. Sorry. Had to do it.

I date my story by music. It begins with Revolver, with the pen-and-pencil drawings by Klaus Voorman, and the song "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 on as a hippie because he owed it to the rest of us. David Crosby would make that sacrifice. It was the least he could do. Like he could do otherwise. Putz.

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, free even from the chains of the ego. We would rip it all.

We brimmed with the possibility of learning new ways. Genetics could not hold us back. We would be nothing like them. We blasted off one by one in atomic rockets to escape the gravitational pull of our parents' dying world.

But when we glanced in the command module mirror, there our parents were, hopelessly hung up on the old issues of politics, livelihoods, and dental therapeutics.

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 anything, really. But we gave it our assent, we let it be our flag, we let those skeletons describe us, because we knew we were more on the side of them than we were on the side of 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 for some rescue from the ordinariness that pressed in 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 some long dull life, 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 those choices, and not to have to dig my grave with my teeth like my father's fathers' fathers' fathers.

And to be perfectly honest, fifty years after our little debacle, I still feel that way. The tooth has not lost its ache to be free.

Life Artists

There was a faction of dreamers at our college in Ohio. We enjoyed hanging out with one another, getting high and creating our own little counterculture in that town in the Amish country.

Our counterculture never involved the Amish, which was a real counterculture.

Our dream, rather, was of a place like in the songs we listened to, where Suzanne took you down, where newspaper taxis appeared on the shore, where flowers of every kind were abundant, and no one had allergic rhinitis.

We alit on the phrase freak farm. It was a place where people could just be people and not go to class, or hold down a job. I imagined a beat up house not far from some shore, with people lollygagging 24/7, some of them playing guitars on the roof.

We were always blissful and goofy, like John Sebastian. We didn't yet look like what we wanted to look like -- but once we left our parents, look out.

Robin was this lovely tomboyish girl who wore terrific snug bellbottom pants. She radiated cool to me. Not sexy especially, just beautiful and eager - like Paulette Goddard in *Modern Times*. Rowf. She liked playing with the boys, and we boys were gogglestruck by her.

Feminism was still months away.

Ours was a very Midwestern vision. Our hippies might have been a little dumber than hippies in other parts. The world away from our hill ran faster, and had higher expectations of you. We were not especially cool.

Robin envisioned the freak farm on Cape Cod, near Provincetown, which was the coolest place she had ever been. No one else had ever been there, so it meant nothing to us.

Worth, who probably knew the world better than any of us, boosted San Francisco. Yeah, the Haight, where

everyone was groovy and in costume, and love reigned supreme. We all agreed that sounded pretty good.

The other Michael wanted us to go to New York, but that just sounded crazy to us. A freak farm among skyscrapers? Nothing good could grow in those shadows.

Robin, I suspect, pictured us all as a happy jug band, plunking and twanging and rocking on the front porch, with the waves breaking on an endless stretch of white sand, and the sun forever rising in the east.

Worth saw a group of people who would buy a lot of great records and see a lot of concerts, and stay up pretty late, perhaps discussing Mies van der Hoe or Buckminster Fuller.

Michael probably envisioned a lot of dope, and himself as the musician extraordinaire, and the poet of the group.

I held out for LA. I had a feeling those other cool places were already taken. And I did not know them. But thanks to a trip to see my dad that summer, I saw potential there. Palm trees, sunny skies, Venice Beach, the paradox of

living in a crazy house in a city that manufactured fantasies.

And, if we relocated there, I would likely have more cachet in the group, as the place chooser and tour guide. And, as I found out later, take the heat when LA turned out to be LA.

We didn't really know each other, what one another's dreams and tastes really were. But we knew one another's signs and we loved that we were together on this. We concocted a scheme to put an ad in the Saturday Review. I wrote it -- my first ad. We also alit on the phrase life artists. People who just hang around are are beautiful but don't necessarily create anything. Words were so great.

Our ad read:

Young life artists wish to house-sit, for growth, peace, and good vibrations. Urban/rural OK. Suburban, bad. Box 28763.

We sent it to the magazine with the \$40 fee, and high hopes of getting free digs from some dumb professor on

sabbatical in Crete. We even came up with a cool motto:
LIVE FREE. Forget the next part, *or die*.

But the magazine rejected the ad as unsuitable. They seemed to think we were panhandling. Which we were definitely not.

That groused us. This magazine saw itself as some kind of arbiter -- a word that to us rhymed with prizefighter -- as an arbiter of the arts, yet they failed to recognize our claim to be life artists.

Which we were, VERY much.

The Commons

As a runup to establishing a freak farm, we planned a trip to Boston. It was January 1969.

We took Michael's car up north out of Wooster toward Cleveland. Halfway up the brakes locked and the car slid into a drift. We walked to a nearby farm and the owner met us at the door with a shotgun.

While we were nominal hippies, we were really just college students, and our pathetic request for a ride to the airport seemed plausible to him. Plus, he was a Missouri Synod Lutheran, and felt he owed us this kindness.

We piled into his Travelall and paid our fare in the form of a lecture about living responsibly. He dropped us off at the curb to Cleveland Hopkins half an hour before takeoff.

We waited standby for half-price seats on a flight to Boston. As happened in those days, we got them, and roared down the gangplank. We landed an hour later at

Logan and took the subway to an apartment Robin had sublet on Beacon Hill.

It was not a fancy apartment, just a one-room walk down, separated from the Red Line by a thin membrane of brick. Every twenty minutes a train rattled everything in the place. Best thing about the place: it was vacant and the lock had not been changed.

We spent a couple of weeks buzzing like fruitflies in this basement apartment, scrounging drugs, negotiating the dog-shitty sidewalks, smoking dope and staving off hunger. Worth and I had about \$40 cash between us, plus checks. Robin had cash from a summer job selling donuts. The other Michael had nothing, but he was working on Robin. Every night we would send one of us down to Charles Street to buy a single large, super-drippy hamburger from Boyd's.

I located my friend Ray, who was living at his family's apartment also on on Beacon Hill but much nicer. His dad was a big corporate lawyer. I took him to see the Velvet

Underground at the Boston Tea Party. It was Thursday, freak night. We dropped mescaline and collapsed on the dance floor where we stayed through most of the evening, groping at the hardwood and shoe leather surrounding us.

Across America, there were a million young people standing in moving traffic just like we were. Astonishingly, some of us survived.

Another time the gang took psilocybin and walked down the Commons to a theater on Commonwealth. The movie was *Yellow Submarine*, and the four of us sat paralyzed as the absurd war for Pepperland danced on our faces in the theater's front row. When it was over we could not get out of our chairs.

I had the sensation of weighing perhaps 100 tons, like a beached whale. Ushers had to pry us out of the seats using long poles.

The experience bonded us. We staggered up Beacon Hill to our basement flat like four giggling Sisyphuses. We would spend the rest of this book together like this, tight with

one another, a family, justifying bad behavior on the grounds that it was a new age dawning, of Aquarius, and the old rules no longer mattered. From now on, we were it.

Robin had dealer friends who seemed incredibly glamorous to us. East coast hippies who didn't look like the hippies in Newsweek. They were more tailored, and more worldly. Tommy was a dealer who also worked for a brokerage. He owned a recent model car, which we thought was awesome. He was very urban and suave with dark eyes and a rueful expression.

Tommy had a girlfriend named Rose who was thin and pretty, and perhaps eight years older than him -- possibly even 30. We treated Rose like the queen mother, offering first tokes on every pipe, etc. She was coiffed, and wore European bells. I remember her gorgeous, sad blue eyes.

We drove around the harbor in Tommy's car one evening, before sitting down for a hash picnic.

One morning I awoke, and walked out and it had snowed. The entire Commons was blanketed with the kind of soft snow you associate with Christmas wrapping. The first footprints were being put there by the morning marijuana auction centered at the base of the statue of Paul Revere. Cops walked by unthreateningly, twirling their little bats. Dopers ran that part of Boston, directly across from the Capitol.

One night before we flew back to Ohio we all sat stoned listening to Brewer & Shipley. It was the record Down in LA, with various Sargent Pepper gimmicks, like flipping a coin and you hear it spinning on a hard tabletop for like a full minute a month of marijuana time -- before it finally comes to a stop.

"I never want to grow old," I suddenly said, as if it were the world's most original thought. I loved this vagabond life. I loved being poor at the top of this fine city. I was living virtually for free. I had \$300 in my checking account from running a fruit stand the summer before, That was enough to last a year, I calculated. A lifetime, nearly.

That was when I saw Rose, facing away from me. She was crying. I don't know if it was because I made the remark about being old -- she was 30 -- or if she was thinking her own thoughts. I knew nothing about Rose, really.

But it was my first premonition that there was a finiteness to these dreams, and mine was just beginning.

Mail Order Ministry

I had read somewhere, in the summer of 1968 -- perhaps in an issue of Paul Krassner's magazine *The Realist*, which is where I came by a lot of my convictions -- 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 know you don't get something for nothing. But in this case I did get something, for pretty much nothing. I never sent the

Universal Life Church a dollar or even 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, sweet lovers, and sin no more!"

I'm not saying I married anybody. I'm just saying I knew what I would say if I did.

I bought a black Roman collar dickie 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

In 1955, disappointed with the Pentecostal church, Reverend Kirby J. Hensley divorced his wife and decided to venture on his own to find his 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.

Whatever it was, it pissed him off so much that he started a bogus church for the sole purpose 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, fictitious individuals, 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.

What We Lacked

Our freak farm was supposed to be a place for mellow behavior, great music, and positivity abounding. We sincerely believed an age of Aquarius was just getting underway, and that the old world would melt away in the face of its conquering beauty.

We pinned our hopes on finding California hippies who had found ways to make that idea work. We would just do what they were doing.

No one knew how to clean, or cook, or make a living in the world. None of us was especially discerning, so when we opened our commune to all comers - people we met on the street or hitch-hiking -- we got exactly what we asked for.

There were tensions we had not counted on. Robin and Michael were a couple, and slept together in an oversized closet. This left worth and me alone and unloved. You would think the place would be crawling with free love, but we appeared to be the only hippie happening where

no one was getting laid. I have never asked Worth about this, but wouldn't it have been a shame if Michael fell off our roof? He was a signally unlovable individual, yet he slept with lovely Robin in his arms while the rest of us bit our lips.

What we didn't know was that most communes, especially the ones that were open-door, like ours, letting anybody that wanted in, in, didn't last long. We couldn't even figure out a way to kick the girl whose cat had diarrhea out, or stop it from having diarrhea. It was like dripping through the floorboards on the nice family living below us.

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" a lot, and smoke our pot. There was invariably something wrong with these people -- many of whom just went by a first name, like Christopher or Angel -- but we were at a loss how to screen them out. We needed a sergeant at arms.

Our ethic was psychedelic experience, total love, and zero guilt. None of us knew how to do this exactly. If you have been following our tale closely, you know that we were idiots. Nice, but, oh, wow. None of us knew how to cook, clean, organize, budget, plan, lead, discipline. None of those pre-Aquarian things. If we weren't young and strong and lucky, with a few bucks going into this catastrophe, we would probably have died.

In fact, someone did.

The Pickwick

The Pickwick Bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard, where I got a job as a shipping/receiving clerk in February 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. In my memory it was right next door to Graumann's Chinese Theatre, but in fact it was a block away.

It's not anywhere now.

The Pickwick was founded by Louis Epstein in 1931, during the worst days of the Depression – Scott Fitzgerald mentioned it in a New Yorker story – and the store met its end swallowed up in 1976 by the B. Dalton chain.

Even though I toiled way back in a back room, full of torn cardboard and packing slips, the place radiated glamour 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 Laughton, Bob Cummings, Peter Ustinov, Lionel Barrymore, Hedda Hopper, David Niven, Maureen O'Sullivan, Otto Preminger, Jerry Lewis, Eva Gabor, Timothy Leary, and Sam Yorty all dropped by during my shift.

A colleague once pointed out Paulette Goddard, examining a book in the science and mathematics section. I didn't know who she was, but -- wow.

I especially remember a self-help book by a man from Venice Beach, titled Keep Fit at 70. It featured a picture of the author on the cover, in training trunks, his hairy a silvery mane, and his arms and legs and chest all oiled and quivering with dynamic tension. He looked stupendous.

Problem was, he had written the book ten years earlier. Now, when he came in to estimate sales, it was clear time had taken its toll. He was now about 85, and his posture was sagging, his pectorals hollow, his shoulders rounded,

and that toothsome smile replaced by something forced and only falsely happy.

We had gurus and glamour queens, how-to's and hobos, every kind of writer dropping in on us. There was even a genuinely literary contingent -- screenwriters banking on a book of stories, poets and memoirists comporting themselves like film stars.

One of our own floor salesmen was a slender, reedy-voiced man named Landor French, a name he may have made up. His big claim in life was a sonnet published in the *Sewanee Review*, which he kept a laminated copy of on a wallet-sized card, in six point type. He whipped it out for me once -- it was the acme of his life among words. I remember the title, "Amphitreon in Memphis." It was all he had

Another salesman was Vincent Rossi. Small and dark-eyed and dramatic, half Heathcliff and half Davy Jones, he befriended me, seeing me as a vessel into which he could drizzle his most melodramatic thoughts. He told me he

intended some day to drive out into the High Mojave, crawl under his Ford Comet, poke holes in the gas tank, and stagger off into the colorless sands to die.

By summer, Vince seemed to have done exactly as he promised, driven into the desert, abandoned his car and disappeared. It wasn't for five years or so that I learned he had pulled off a nasty hoax, when, as editor of a poetry magazine in Minneapolis, I received a poetry submission from him.

I rejected it, and never told him I sussed him out. But I often thought of the wife and young daughter he abandoned, back in the San Fernando Valley.

Good Soap

There is not a speeding locomotive of capitalism inside me -- but, I have a faint tendency to think entrepreneurially. You know, thinking like an inventor, a problem solver, a go-getter.

Before I was a teenager, growing up in an Ohio small town, I was fascinated with getting free things in the mail. I sent off for hundreds of offers. Free Sesquicentennial histories of Geauga County. Crossword puzzles in the mail. Canceled postage stamps from many nations -- “on approval.” I found out what that meant.

But I saw starting a mail order business as a way to make more money doing less.

As early as 1962 I was asked to report to my little town’s post office, to explain why I was sending 200 drop-ship catalogs to residents of nearby Brownhelm Junction.

The business was, you bought the catalogs (offering notions for sale like hair spray, suspenders, pipe cleaners

and shower heads) for 10 cents each, you paid the postage and affixed address stickers and sat back and waited for the orders to roll in.

My thinking was that farmers were very isolated people, living out on their farms, and they never got mail and would be thrilled to discover they could purchase these products by mail. When orders did come in, you forwarded them to the factory and kept half of the money. Simple!

Picture a kid making the long walk several times to the mail box on Park Avenue every day, waiting for that damn mail truck, and you understand the thrill. I mean, obsession.

No orders rolled in but I still got a call from the postmaster. Turns out I used the phone book to obtain addresses and phone directories don't include zip codes -- a red flag for mail delivery, even in those days.

I wasn't charged with mail fraud, but the local postmaster used that phrase when he shut me down.

The name of my short-lived business: Beowulf Idea Studios,
My brain told me that it sounded sleek and contemporary.
I believe I was inspired by Spencer Gifts.

OK, fast forward to our story. Now I am 17, a young man,
and I am living in industrial Hollywood, trying to get my
head around the problems my chosen people -- hippies --
were having participating in the California economy.

Hardly anyone wanted to hire a hippie. Restaurateurs
found us unsanitary, smelly, possibly disease-laden. They
did not want to deal with hair-in-the-soup controversies.
Not many hippies wanted to have a straight job. Many
were content to beg, asking strangers on the street for
spare change.

We all wanted cool, low-paying jobs like bookstore clerk,
head shop clerk, record store clerk, cab drivers, taco truck
fry cooks, dishwashers, ocean-in-a-bottle manufacturers,
candle and beaded items sales and the like. Jobs that
didn't make you wear a uniform or hair or beard net. Jobs

that allowed you to remain what you were -- a hippie, but proud, not grody.

One popular solution was to be a news salesman for the LA hippie newspaper The Free Press. You saw hippies at many urban freeway entrances hawking the Free Press.

I may have been high when the idea occurred to me. Why not create 10,000 jobs just for hippies, working off the grid selling a product that -- far from encouraging the stereotype of dirty, foul, and tick-infested -- created a sense of cleanliness, friendliness, personal hygiene and sound health?

If they can sell Free Presses on freeway ramps why not sell this beautiful product, which I called GOOD SOAP.

Good Soap was a bar of unscented, natural soap with the word GOOD imprinted on both sides. It would be sold in mystical-looking wrappers containing information about astrology, did-you-know facts and perhaps quotations from Gurdjieff or Meher Baba -- amazing people, who

would change from week to week, as people wore the soap down and needed replacement bars.

It was like baking bread for the masses -- good, wholesome whole wheat bread that made everyone happy and full, and destroyed the bad rap hippies were getting. We would be seen as positive, life-affirming and generative, and definitely not unblinking long-haired psychos with sharp knives.

But unlike bread, our product was shelf-stable. It never got stale. See what I'm saying?

I wanted the soap to be 100 percent pure, no dyes or smell. But -- I also contemplated adding just a hint of patchouli oil in each bar. You know patchouli, right -- that mysterious, sexy, piney, leathery fragrance that makes you want to follow the smell into traffic.

I worked in a bookstore. So one day I bought, with my own money, a book called *Fortunes in Formulas*. It was a 1944 book by Gardner D. Cisco and it was for people who did not want to buy things in stores -- survivalists or crazy

people who wanted to make all kind of solvents and toiletries in their kitchen sinks. Proto-hippies. This book was an antecedent for the Whole Earth Catalog, which did not yet exist.

In *Fortunes in Formulas*, I found a very basic recipe for making soap. I had to find an industrial chemist shop on Melrose Avenue that was willing to deliver bags of fat and cans of lye to our place by truck.

I created a sheet of molds from plaster allowing me to make nine bars at a time. I placed the mold on the kitchen table. Should have done this outdoors but I did not want the neighbors to see me setting up what looked for all intensive purposes like a speed factory.

Now. You weigh your fats -- pig lard in my case -- and you melt them in a pot. Then you are instructed to take the pot of hot fat outdoors -- because something quite insulting to the nasal passages is about to happen. Don't skip this step -- you will surely regret it. I know.

Outside you pour your lye into a bucket of water. You are not to pour the water into the lye -- this is also important and a step I wish I had not skipped. Instead, pour the lye into the water.

Now you cook the pot -- a big soup pot in my case, which we got at Volunteers for America -- until it reaches 100 degrees. I used an anal thermometer. It worked fine.

Stir for about 10 minutes. No one wants lumps or bubbles in their soap. Now you ladle the mixture into the mold. You're done! Next day you turn the mold over, pound out the nine bars of soap, trim them with a paring knife so they are all the same size. It takes a month for them to harden and be really nice.

Except I was getting a headache from cooking the lye mixture inside and I tripped on the table leg, and the whole pot splashed across the kitchen floor, and a lot of it ran into the pile of clothes we kept in one corner. As many as five pairs of bells and tie-dyed T-shirts. Also, it took out the cat box.

Everything the hot soap touched, it destroyed. We did not use the kitchen after that. (Didn't use it much before, either.)

Many entrepreneurs have these kinds of events in the course of bringing a product to market, and they show great pluck and character in continuing to move forward toward success, no matter how negative a single day may seem.

I did not have that kind of pluck or character. My hippie family saw everything. They helped me chisel the molten soap off the linoleum floor, wearing T-shirts over their faces so they would not faint, and wondering aloud how we would present this new fact to the landlord. We wondered about the damage deposit, which was seventy-five dollars.

My friends didn't yell at me. They fucked up things all the time. It was what we did, right? Plus, they appreciated that I was earning money and helping feed them and

preventing them from becoming even skinnier than they already were, which was considerable.

But the die was cast, just as my soap molds were. The dream died with me. I never made another bar of soap, and because of this the hippies of Los Angeles continued their long and inevitable downward economic spiral.

Sorry.

Weigh the lye in a zip close bag and weigh your water into a plastic container. Go OUTSIDE and slowly pour lye into container of weighed water and stir with stainless steel spoon. Important!!! Don't pour the water into the lye.

Pour the lye into the water (more below)

Prepare mold (add wax paper if necessary)

Weigh essential oils according to recipe, set aside.

When fats and lye both reach about 100° F, pour lye into pot of oil and stir.

Use blender on 5 minutes, stir by hand 5 minutes, etc. on and off until trace.

Add essential oils and any natural coloring agents or textures, stir very well.

Pour into mold and incubate for 24 hours.

Remove from mold and cut.

Let air out and harden. Use after 4-6 weeks.

Read more at

<http://simplelifemom.com/2015/09/20/7-easy-steps-to-homemade-lye-soap-for-beginners/#3XDSrPROMPGc2FoT.9>

9

(This part will describe a plan to clean up the image of hippies by getting them to sell home-made hand soap on the street instead of begging for spare change or hawking the Free Press.)

The Creek Bed Glittered With Flecks Of Gold

Robin knew a classmate who had dropped out of Wooster and was living in a poor part of Hollywood. Her name was Suzy, and she was living with a man name Quittman.

Suzy worked for the phone company but at night she would come home to Quittman and get high.

I visited Suzy and Quittman several times. He was earthy and relaxed and bold with his talk -- everything we were not. He and I seemed to hit it off, because he was given to making pronouncements like, "You know what the trouble with blondes is? They think they don't have to fuck back!"

He would howl and I would laugh along, like I had made the same observation about blondes. But mainly we got high and listened to records. I especially remember listening to Rotary Connection, the United States of America, and David Nesselrode "Songs of Innocence," which I maybe hoped would reconnect me to William Blake. But mainly because it was a cool, atmospheric, jazzy,

acid-drippy instrumental record, with a bitching bass line running through it.

Truth is, I treasured Quittman because he was black. I don't think I knew more than a half dozen black people in my life, growing up in a small Ohio town. And he was loud, and funny, and he honestly didn't give a good goddamn. He had placed his bet on the Aquarius Age, even though you suspected he thought it was bullshit, but it was good way for a guy like him to meet and fuck chicks.

And he was just so much fun to be with. He wasn't getting stressed out about Kierkegaard like I was. He wasn't guilty about not writing his mother, that I knew of. He was just enjoying life, as near as I could tell.

One time he took me and Suzy and Robin and Worth and the other Michael and me in his panel truck up to the San Pedro National Forest.

On the way up, the other Michael read from Timothy Leary's book *The Psychedelic Experience*, based on The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

“Who ah,” he said on the way up. “Listen to this:

You must remember that throughout human history, millions have made this voyage. A few (whom we call mystics, saints or Buddhas) have made this experience endure and have communicated it to their fellow men.

You must remember, too, that the experience is safe (at the very worst, you will end up the same person who entered the experience), and that all of the dangers which you have feared are unnecessary productions of your mind.

Whether you experience heaven or hell, remember that it is your mind which creates them. Avoid grasping the one or fleeing the other.

Avoid imposing the ego game on the experience. You must try to maintain faith and trust in the potentiality of your own brain and the billion-year-old life process. With your ego left behind you, the brain can't go wrong.

Whenever in doubt, turn off your mind, relax, float downstream.

That ... blew ... our minds.

We were all in pretty poor physical shape for teenagers from lounging about all the time, so the best we could all do was hike about three quarters of a mile into the forest. The other Michael remained back by the truck, finishing the book.

Winded, we paused by a running brook, coming down from the mountains. The sun was shaded by the Ponder pines. The air was a trip in itself. We stared into a still point in the brook and saw -- flecks of gold?

We weren't total dopes. We knew that there were such things as pyrites, fool's gold. But this stuff sure was persuasive. Scores and scores of flakes of purest gold glinting up from the sandy bed.

Robin and Suzy began collected the flecks in a pill jar -- just in case it was something.

We got super high in that altitude. We knew we were not going to climb any more. We were at the acme for the day. I decided to go for a very short exploratory walk. Who

knew, maybe I would come upon the mother lode.

Wouldn't that be a trip!

I walked perhaps a hundred yards from where we were encamped, and saw something that made my hairs stand on end. I stumbled back to the group.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but I think there's a large bear moving around very close to us."

Jaws dropped. Our hippie training did not include bears. Peace signs were of no use with them. Straight or hip, they ate you regardless.

Fearfully, we started to pull ourselves out of the fog we had placed ourselves in. Suzy and Robin had collected about 500 golden flecks. They were certain the pill jars were as heavy as lead. We hoped the weight of the gold would not slow us down from a marauding bear. We wondered if the other Michael were still uneaten.

Quittman stopped us in our tracks. "Excuse me," he said. "How do you know there's a bear?"

Quittman was the best thing we had to an experienced mountaineer. He had got high here many times before and never been devoured. His was a voice of reason.

“Because,” I said anxiously, “I saw the biggest pile of shit I ever saw, just up that hill by that big Ponderosa. And it had berries in it, Quittman. I think I saw berries. And it was still soft and steamy!”

“I hear you,” Quittman said. “But I don’t believe a bear left that.”

His assertion calmed us. What did he know that we did not know?

Robin spoke up. “Since when are you some sort of wildlife biologist?”

Quittman threw a stone into the trickling water.

“Just, please, take my word for it.”

Trucking

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

"I have a new theory of the gamut of human expression," the other Michael announced over a bowlful of wheat groats. "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 ends with a squeak."

Michael saw himself as a poet/songwriter. He knew perhaps four chords. He had recently been reading Brautigan. Boom squeak sounded a bit like not with a bang but a whimper. Something grandiose, followed by something pathetic. Drama, then irony. Was he saying that's what life was? I never asked, but I laughed, a little.

This was what we did. We took a phrase and just repeating it until it belonged to all of us, and meant something. Life artists, right?

We all nodded like book squeak was a useful insight, an answer to all questions. We would use it with outsiders and hope it caught on. To sneer at it would put the entire enterprise in question. We were fueled largely by things we agreed were true.

We knew that speed killed, but was death so bad? Not if it was your ego that did the dying. Ego was bad. Love was divine. But you had to love the one you were with, right?

It wasn't that we were hippies or counter-revolutionaries. It was that we were teenagers who thought we had to put up with one another, because that's what love called us to. We had to. we were family. A weird malnourished dysfunctional family.

It was a disadvantage to be old, unless you were old like a wise old Indian. Then it was OK. Politics was a bad vibe, unless you were for revolution. Love was all you needed --

but there wasn't that much to go around. Clapton was God, who was also dead, so maybe dead wasn't all that .

Thoughts materialized in your head, and began to take shape, until they were almost utterable, on the tip of your tongue – but when you tried to utter them, they came out gibberish. It was safer to rely on reliables - awesome, hey, radical, peace, heavy, solid, far out, far up, far down.

Too afraid to bring up the loneliness we felt -- I felt. How could one be lonely in a realm defined by love? All the answers were available if we just looked -- in the Tarot, in the I-Ching, in the prophetic pipesmoke curling toward the dangling lightbulb.

The beauty of the world morphed into Mickey Mouse chomping a stogie. Keep on trucking. All is bliss. Turn off your mind. Relax. Don't think.

I spent a year in Southern California without having a single curious conversation.

Big Bonito

So we established that our church was protected from police invasion by California's sanctuary laws. If we got a knock on the door, we would simply explain that we were in the midst of services, and we were not to be disturbed. Meanwhile, smoke would billow out the door.

And what could they do? They were the LAPD, bound by the law and a host of inviolable ethical standards. They could make peevish expressions, but that was it.

Pretty clever.

One additional legal problem required action on our part. The draft.

All of us at the freak farm were against the war. In 1969 the keys to the war were handed over to Richard Nixon, who, lucky for us, had a secret plan to end it. Anyone with plural brain cells could look at Nixon's face, look into his eyes, and you knew he was full of shit. He had no plan. But

America was bleeding out because of that war, and we grasped at the straw he dangles above us.

What did we know.

Ass much as we were against the war -- I attended perhaps a dozen protests, rallies, marches, vigils, mobs and the like -- we were really against the draft.

On the one hand, hippie dream, freedom, bliss, orgasm, love. On the other hand, trundling an M16 through a rice paddy, boots soaked, mosquitoes sucking your blood, shadows dancing behind the foliage.

It wasn't much of a choice. And yet I had dropped out of college, lost my student deferment, and despite my yearning for a tie-dyed life, was one hundred percent exposed to the draft.

I couldn't imagine a worse soldier than me. But that didn't matter. They needed bodies to shove out there, idiot or not.

I had a couple of ideas. If the Universal Life Church thing worked to keep cops away -- major if -- maybe I could use it to keep the Selective Service at bay as well.

My draft board was located back in Elyria, Ohio, a pro-war, pro-military stronghold. I remember thinking, "They'll never find me if I go to California and disappear off the grid." But, as you may have gathered from my story thus far, I occasionally was prone to naive thinking. It might take a week to hunt me down, but there I was. I was totally on the grip. We had a phone number. I was identifiable from my premature crow's feet, from dropping acid in the desert. War bait.

So 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.

I mentioned this before, but it bears repeating: I bought a kind of Roman collar dickie at a Pentecostal church supply

store. I had brought a brown wool suit of mine from Wooster. For several days, I dressed in the suit and tucked the dickie in. I looked somewhat credible. Then, I made a point of walking through the neighborhood around Vendome Place, tipping my hat and smiling at people in their yards.

I remember they returned my greeting with deep frowns. The sun might have been in their eyes. But who knew -- these people might end up as witnesses in case things got heavy.

“Yes, we saw him making his rounds,” they would testify. “He tipped his hat. He said, ‘Lovely day!’ He’s a man of God all right.”

This was a practice I couldn’t keep up, however. It is impossible to wear a wool suit in Los Angeles for more than ten minutes, any month of the year. It starts to swell and itch and then you are sticking to the cloth and sweating like a son of a bitch. You look like you are being interrogated by General Hershey himself, and people see a

guy with a preacher's collar running down the sidewalk ripping his dickie off and yanking his shirt buttons off.

People will say, That had to be a hippie.

I considered registering a conscientious objector. But to do this you have to pass this test. You're in your Selective Service office. A guy who has never spent a moment in the field steps up to you and puts his knuckles on the table.

:Here's the scenario," he says. "You come home, and there in the living room, Ho Chi Minh himself is raping your ma." Guy folds his arms across his chest. "Whatcha gonna do then, peace boy? Ya gonna stand back and let her get it?"

The presumed answer is "No way, give me a gun, I want to kill, kill, kill!"

Me, I would've just made a skeptical face. "Really, Sergeant Obermayr? Really?"

But I had heard that no amount of eye-rolling ever kept a man from serving his country.

Another question they ask on the form is this:

Do you advocate the overthrow of the United States Government by force or violence?

Around the hippie campfire, the right answer was “force.”

While I waited for word on the ministerial deferment, I had another inspiration. That is to say, I did what I read about in *The Realist*, an anti-war magazine put out by Paul Krassner. He said that it was a law that draft boards were not allowed to pick and choose what they put in your official file. They couldn't include your speech denouncing LBJ but exclude your letter saying how much you revered him.

Now, take that fact one step further, Krassner said. Send your draft board a fish. A dead one, not a Woolworth's goldfish in a bag of water.

My teeth hurt at this suggestion. If 100,000 men sent a wrapped fish to their respective draft boards, the war would come to a screeching halt. All those fish in all those file cabinets would start to decompose. The first day the smell would be annoying to staff. In three days the office

would be inhabitable. Ammonia would seep into the entire building and no one would set foot in it again.

My hands were tied in this matter. I had to take the bus downtown to the Grand Central arcade on Broadway, and picked out a nice six-pound fresh-caught bonito. I wrapped it in paper, attached a note ("Please include this in my file"), addressed it to my draft board in Elyria, plastered it with 10 cent stamps and dropped it in the mail box.

It would take five weeks, which takes us beyond the span of this story, but -- I was drafted. Induction notice, physical scheduled, the works.

This is what I suspect happened: The receptionist opening the mail immediately threw it in the trash, but attached my note, and her note, to my file. 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.

It was still pretty funny.

Deserters

People streamed through the Universal Life Church, protected as we were -- as we thought we were -- by California's Sanctuary Law.

Two young men arrived one night named Dave and Dane. They were young guys, in shape, with military haircuts. They had met Michael up on the Strip, and accepted his invitation to enjoy our freak farm hospitality.

They told us they were draft deserters. They just took off one night. They were caught, and were on their way to the Presidio, and escaped again. One of them, Dave, had a gleam in his eye that suggested that all this escaping was his idea. He was already calculating how our crash pad could benefit him.

Now, we at the Universal Life Church were anti-war, and I was waging a skirmish with my draft board -- but deserting the U.S. Army, that was serious business. By putting them up, even just for a night, we were aiding and abetting and

providing shelter, and all that felonious stuff. Were they worth this risk?

The first night with us, Dave made a power play. He and Dane took their clothes off and sat down, Indian style to smoke pipe. This was revolutionary and upsetting. Robin was quite modest. Michael was skinny as a skeleton under his clothes and didn't feel the need to advertise. Worth and I were open to the idea of experimentation, so long as it didn't get gay -- we were both terrified we might be that -- so we stripped down too.

It was awful. These guys were born to it, but Worth and me, forget about it.

Dave and Dane were committed intravenous druggies -- speed and smack. They had kids and injectors and lighters and everything. Dane looked like the drug life was starting to get the better of him. He had a sleepy, not quite together expression on his face.

But not Dave -- he was charming, and cheerful, and candid. He was like an eagle-- confident as anything. And one

great thing about him, he confessed his sins and shortcomings upfront, which made the rest of his story more believable.

And what a story he told. Dave said that he was from West Texas, son of an oil worker. His momma died when he was five, and his daddy got himself blackballed from the industry because of something he had done, or appropriated. Dave was in the third grade when his dad took off, to find work somewhere else. He promised he would return for him and his two little brothers before Christmas.

There were no uncles or aunts to take them in. The school district never came around. Child Protection had no knowledge of them.

But Christmas came and went. Dave stopped going to school -- it was a five mile walk and he had to fend for his brothers, rounding up food wherever he could. They collected rain in a barrel on the roof of their house. He plundered the cabinet for soups and canned things. He

shot squirrels and jack rabbits and wapiti for meat. He kept an eye out for berries, yams, nuts, ditch asparagus and volunteer vegetables. He planted corn from fallen seed he swiped from neighbors' fields -- field corn, but you could make cornbread with it but it was like eating sand cake.

Nine years old and he's doing all this.

OK, now the story gets weird. I believed it at the time because I was a dope. Believing shit was how I rolled. You get to choose for yourself if it's true or not.

As the boys got older, Dave morphosed into a backwood Jesus freak. He began reading his mother's Bible to himself every day. The words in the stories captured him completely, especially the stories of Jesus, giving everything he had for a sinful world.

Dave told me he got as little too intense, and one day attempted to crucify his brother Jerry. Dave told me he nailed his brother's hands to a door, against his will. The boy screamed bloody murder, and Dave snapped out of it

and let him down. Dave and his brothers stopped talking. All three of them just thought their thoughts all day.

Some time later Dave enlisted in the Army and was shipped to Fort Jackson. He was fine with it at the time, gung ho like so many young men. You just did what they told you. Sergeant said kill, Dave said kill. Kill! became a kind of chant for him.

The crazy was coming back on him. Kill was not what Jesus expected of him. He was called to something more thoughtful, more in line with the commandments. One day, one of the other recruits was giving him a hard time about being so country. Dave completely lost it, jumping on the guy and gouging both his eyes out.

Dave was placed in the brig, in solitary, crying out to the Carolina moon he was just doing what he'd been trained to do.

Now, in jail, he knew the army was the wrong place for him, and he began concocting schemes to get out. He decided to act gay, and even blew one of the guards to

clinch the point a couple of times. “I didn’t like it,” he made a point of telling us.

But the psychiatrists weren't sure. He spent eight months all total behind bars. Even in solitary, there are ways to get things. He started shooting up then, and it had been a part of his life ever since, until now, two years later. He shot heroin and speed, crashed several times, went cold turkey, started up again. By the time he was remanded to permanent incarceration at the Presidio in San Francisco, he was on fire for drugs.

In transport to prison, he met Dane, and talked him into climbing out the toilet window at a Stuckey’s.

And that was how we met him, just two weeks later, skulking around Los Angeles, steering clear of Military Police and the FBI, which had an active file on him.

I said to Dave, “That is the worst story I have ever heard.”

“But that’s not the worst part,” Dave said, his eyes flashing crazy.

Worst of all, he had heard that his younger brother had now also become a Jesus freak, and a heroin addict, and was looking for him.

“What is the worst part,” I asked him flatly.

“The worst part is, my brother Jerry is looking for me. He’s out to get me. And he’s a better tracker than the MPs or FBI combined.”

Larks in Flight

In the middle of the night, we became aware that strangers were in the apartment. I opened my crawispace 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 men in suits. They had Dave the Deserter in handcuffs, and were leading him toward the front steps.

"What's going on?" Robin 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. He was planning to use it."

"Are we in trouble?"

"We'll let you know."

And that was that. We spent another week at Vendome, till the month's rent was gone, scraping the cat diarrhea off the carpet. Then we threw in the towel. Robin and Worth arranged another driveaway, back to the Midwest, this time in a Cadillac Brougham.

We bought a carton of 100-millimeter Larks ("Then we won't be so hungry," was Robin's reasoning) and headed out across the great American desert.

Thompson's Chicken Ranch

We had several 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, hornytoad, or a rattlesnake. It was Don Juan country, a fine, unforgiving place to surrender to the sun.

I have three separate 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 anybody's name. Indeed, I can't recall even talking to anyone beyond a grunt or a head nod. Now these, I thought, were real hippies.

People just arrived, found a nook 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. They 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 highest quality LSD, mushrooms, 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 any of 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 just⁶ the way things were. Daughters didn't belong with their families in the new age. That they were sent home every morning was a weary formality of a changing 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 spyglass, 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 strawhaired 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 9 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 10 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 neighb

The Big Muddy

Worth was working four days a week at the ocean-in-a-bottle factory, making these cylinders with two shifting liquids in them, one water and one blue-dyed glycerin -- when you tip the bottle, a tsunami-like, Hokusai wave effect occurs, very slow-motion, very intricate, very stoned. They were selling like hotcakes.

This was in April, 1969.

So he had some money, and I had some money from working at Pickwick, and we decided to do something for once that did not involve drugs. We took our little dog Henry on vacation.

We went to an Army Navy surplus store on Beverly Avenue and bought aluminum-framed backpacks, of the sort that serious hippies traveled with in those days.

We tried the backpacks on. The frame wasn't comfortable so I took mine out. Regretted that later.

Worth decided he would carry all our clothes, and I would carry all the food. We wore our packs to the local Ralph's, and loaded up on cheap food -- crackers, potatoes, carrots, soup mixes, and bread.

Then we hit the road, walking from our place on Vendome Street to the nearest freeway ramp, off Beverly Boulevard, about a quarter mile away. Worth toted our underwear and blankets. I was already feeling the edge of cans of tuna and an 8-pound back of potatoes pressed against the small of my back. Worth also carried Henry. We stuck out our thumbs.

* * *

We got a ride east toward Riverside, and eventually, another one which took us to Palm Springs. There, in the windy valley where the rich people go, our luck died, and we stood in the hot windblown desert for several hours waiting for a charitable driver.

Hitchhiking was such a maddening business, Some days it was virtually impossible for cars to pass you by, other days

you felt you must be wearing an eyepatch and a knife between your teeth, the way people sped up when they saw you.

After the first half hour you become giddy, then you become hysterical, waving your arms in the wake of some huge empty station wagon passing you by. So much space -- but people were selfish. Sadly, they were consumed by Moloch.

Finally you become grief-stricken crazy, giving people the finger in their rear view mirror or shaking your fist at them and calling judgment down upon them and all their generations.

I have encountered mellow hitchhikers, but I suspect even they have dark moments.

Finally we got a ride in the back seat of a VW down Interstate 40 -- two men, two backpacks and a dog, that took us to the Arizona border. Seeing the sign "Colorado River," and being very tired, we chose to get out. We were somewhere near Needles. Needles to say -- we never

really discussed a destination. We figured this would do.
The river was right there.

We made our way down the embankment and walked along the swollen muddy river for about a quarter mile. Then we simply sat down, rolled out our bags, tied the dog to a tree, and went to sleep.

It seems never to have occurred to us that it was a bad or limited experience to camp alongside a river, with no tree protection, in 105 degree heat for several days, because that is what we did.

We tried fishing, but our gear was pathetic -- a line, a hook, and a box of raisins. We tried hiking, but the heat wore us down too soon. Finally we decided to do the one thing we seemed good at, hunker down in the heat and smoke pot. My back was still killing me from carrying all that Dinty Moore into the desert.

We let Henry go a few times. He was very small -- a Doberman/Labrador mix, I'd guess. His advantage in life, and it was slight, was a woeful look he always wore, and

which rallied support to his side. He fell in the river once and was nearly swept away. Worth had to dive in and fetch him back to us.

We got horribly sunburned. It hurt to take a single step. The tops of our feet were burned, our scalps, even our eyes seemed red. On The third day, Worth and I ventured into the water to cool off. The current was strong. We took our pants off to freshen them up a bit -- think about it. Then Worth, horsing around, dunked me -- and sent my pants my only pants -- spinning down the big muddy.

I looked on, sunburnt and naked, as my pants headed toward the Rio Grande. Henry barked from the shore.

Perhaps it was the tenor of the times, or perhaps it was my personal panache, but we had no trouble at all hitchhiking back to Los Angeles, despite the cold which Henry had developed, which caused him to cough up little bubbles around his lips -- the first signs of distemper, I'm sorry to say -- and despite the fact that, as I stood beside the freeway, thumb extended to oncoming traffic, red as a

lobster and in pain, I was also naked from the waist down.
Strange days.

That was the extent of our outdoor experience in Southern California. We were kinda stupid, but we meant well.

The Great Earthquake of 1969

As spring drew closer to 1969, rumors began circulating -- in the commune, at the book shop, on the street. A prophet named Edgar Cayce had, it seems, predicted that a terrible earthquake would occur on Good Friday of that year, and it would wreak cataclysmic destruction to California. Like, the entire state would slip into the sea.

It would be cool to watch California slip into the sea -- not taking into consideration the deaths of millions of innocent people -- but that raised a question: Where do you stand? Where are you safe from this holocaust?

This rumor was repeated everywhere, even though no one I knew -- a very well-read group -- knew which of Cayce's books the prophecy appeared in. Still, everyone we ran into seemed to know it.

I thought it was hogwash, but as a valued employee at Pickwick Bookstore, I had an investment in Southern California. You don't like thinking about your stuff being dragged to the bottom of the sea.

There was a joke circulating that Howard Hughes was buying up real estate in Nevada. The reason? Beachfront property.

Robin, who believed in everything -- astrology, Tarot, palm reading, the works -- was the only one in our group that took the prophecy seriously.

But you know how it is. If you hearing about something dreadful you start making room for it in you head. If you get high a lot, as we did, and you have a tendency toward paranoia, as we did, you become credulous in a hurry. Add to that the fact that everyone was in love with Robin to one degree or another, and it did not help your chances if you dismissed her concerns as poppycock.

The capper came one night in March, when a traveling psychotic named Jedediah -- remember what I said about people with only one name -- stopped at our place, and told us, with dramatic, unblinking, unhumorous intensity in his eyes, that he had seen a vision of our tattered

paradise disappearing under the blue-capped waves of the Pacific.

We were all stoned to the gills when he made this prediction, and we gulped hard. After that we were never as sensible on the subject again.

I gave my notice to Pickwick. Robin and Michael packed up our things -- stereo, records, clothes, guitar. Worth pulled his last paycheck from Ocean in a Bottle, then the two of us bused down to Pico Boulevard to rent a U-Haul van for the upcoming weekend. Wrote a bad check to cover it, but it didn't matter, right?

Thursday morning we loaded everything up and drove eastward into the High Mojave, stopping at the Joshua Tree National Monument.

We camped along a stony outcropping near Thousand Palms, a stone's throw from our old desert commune at Thompson's Chicken Ranch -- we didn't want to be there in case bikers returned, or another group like Manson's. We erected a lean-to shelter of some tent stakes and bed

sheets, and crouched next to some shaded rocks through the afternoon.

At night we started a fire, sang “Wooden Ships,” and speculated on the time the next day 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 just too far away for us to have felt it or heard it. We walked down the outcropping, down to the highway, then walked another two miles to a filling station, and plunked dimes into the Coke cooler.

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?" That's how he talked. "I don't think so. What are you expectin'?"

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

"Gee, not that I heared. 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 Fault, 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 the San Andreas Fault right there. If there was an earthquake, a big one I mean, well, everything along that line would probably disappear. We here at the station'd be the first to know about it."

We all looked at each other. We were parked about fifty feet from the fault line -- the cool rocks -- we had just left.

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 our apartment, and had no money. Worst of all, we would have to pay for the van rental.

Death of a Freak Farm

One night Robin invited in a big-bellied biker named Rowdy Yates. She met him at the donut shop, and he said he needed a place to crash. For some reason we regarded this as an opportunity to show off our love and hospitality ethic.

Rowdy had a young girl with him named Gloria Gonzalez. It was clear she was in immediate need of medical attention. She was nodding in and out, and hemorrhaging vaginally. Blood was running down both of her bellbottomed pantlegs.

There was also, we could see, something wrong with her face. Her right eye was inverted, so 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 a half-moon of eye-white. The girl was so sleepy, like the Doormouse in Through the Looking Glass.

Robin walked her to a bus stop and bused her to the Free Clinic up on Melrose. At the clinic, Gloria told Robin her

story. She had met Rowdy Yates that morning. It was he who made her bleed, from rough sex. She seemed to bear him no ill will. His treatment was just what she expected.

Robin offered her sanctuary in our church, and we let Rowdy know his presence was no longer needed. He and we said our respective fucks yours and he roared away into the night on his Harley, making that potato-potato sound.

The bleeding having stopped, and the sleeping pills taking effect, Gloria slept curled on a braided rug, like a cat. To me she was the maximum picture of wicked abuse. At the same time, I thought she was beautiful.

In the morning we served Gloria some granola, which she regarded dubiously. She spoke Spanish and pretty good English. She was second generation, 13 years old -- though we had to argue her down from 18, which she swore she was at the hospital.

She was 100 percent blind in her right eye -- the ugly one -- from beatings her father had given her at their home in Rosemead, about 20 miles away. The left eye had only 20

percent vision, but the doctor at the ER said it could probably be restored.

Gloria had run away from home, and had been on her own for over four months. She tried to make herself sound like a gypsy, but it sounded gruesome to us, not having a place to call home, going from man to man, downing downers, which were her favorite. She made several disparaging remarks about our place -- the cat shit, the way we dressed, the crappy furniture. She picked the raisins out of the granola.

Nevertheless, she sounded us out on the possibility of her staying with us, as our criada, maid. "This place could use a little sweeping," she said.

So we let her sweep the floor, which was indeed disgusting and needed sweeping. But because she could not see, she was not a good sweeper. She made no effort to use a dust pan -- which we did not have, using a shirt cardboard instead. When she was done dust hung in the air throughout the room.

This blind girl was nuts, I remember thinking. But kind of cute.

The four of us -- me, Worth, Robin and the other Michael -- 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, being Chicana, holding our freak farm ethic in low regard. We didn't exactly relate, as we said in those days. But we felt she was our responsibility -- something we had very little experience with -- so we said sure.

Gloria was a terrible maid. Some days she would do nothing. Other days she would have a weird attack of work ethic, and she would blindly sweep everything into a cloud of dust and debris -- including the dope. This caused great consternation among us and we sprang into action to convince her to relax and be groovy and stop messing things up.

A few times we yelled at her. She could be very rude, and she called us hippie names like dirty and unambitious and

stoned -- only two of which were true. (We loved baths.) We cautioned her against putting us down, on account of our revolutionary values, to no avail.

"You guys are weird," Gloria said.

After a couple of weeks Robin took Gloria her to a social worker for LA County and arranged several things for her -- a job doing light assembly work, an apartment at a building run by the Society for the Blind, and best of all, eye surgery to restore the good eye to full vision and to replace the ugly dead one with a prosthetic glass eye. All for free -- just the way we liked things.

Gloria was ambivalent about this upgrade. She didn't want to be a good little disabled girl. She wanted to rock and roll. 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 by strangers, then raped or mauled or beaten up, and dumped when they were done with her. Always, she reported these events as dates with fiancées.

She had fantasies that each night the rapist 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 dropped her off in Twenty Nine Palms, 125 miles away 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.

As the day for the operation drew near, she informed us she was definitely engaged to be married. No one believed her. By this time we decided she was crazy and uncontrollable. I felt sorry for her, but blown away by the scope of her problems and by her strange responses.

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

"Take this," she said, and handed me a couple of reds. I had never done downers before. We smoked a joint, then began to cuddle. The cuddling led to playful touching. The touching led to us taking our clothes off.

As we undressed, she called me Jesse. Throughout what followed she called me Jesse. I was Jesse.

This was not my proudest moment by a long shot. I had tried to meet other girls in LA, but all the good ones seemed to be taken by cool hip guys. I think they looked at me and saw an Amish person. This was the knock on the hippie generation -- it was possible to be very lonely and very rejected, even with the best intentions. So many of us were.

Our sex was awful. Midway through I was overcome by guilt and my ureter began to spasm, causing me exquisite pain. It felt like my penis was being gripped by a gorilla. I looked at her in great alarm. "Come here, Jesse," she cried.

I pulled away, weeping. I became very ashamed of myself. "I'm so sorry," I sobbed.

"It's OK, Jesse," she said.

I dressed quickly and ran out of the house.

I was so lonely -- but this had to be the worst sex I or anyone in Southern California would ever have. The ex-seminarian in me would not let me go through with it.

Gloria was a blind, abused, underage barbiturate addict, and I had taken awful advantage of her. I was the worst person there was.

Be that as it was, I was terribly moved by Gloria. She was a child so she engaged my protective big-brother instincts. I also sensed soulful new opportunities for myself. I would be her big Anglo brother at 17, clearing obstacles from her path, helping her get her life on track. I would escort her through her surgery and rehab, and on the other side she would be beautiful, and poised, and serene.

I wasn't a statutory rapist. I was a wonderful benefactor.

It was the hippie dream, just slightly altered. And I would get credit for wisdom and compassion. That would be great. But I couldn't tell anyone about fucking her.

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. What an ass he was. 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. 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 I wasn't a family member.

"But we are her family," I explained. "Her real family was mean to her. 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 had been run over by a moving van about a block from where we lived. She walked right in front of it. She fought for two days in the hospital, but her wounds, to her head, and spine, and internal organs, were too severe. Her parents had come from West Covina and identified her.

Here is the strangest part. At the time she was killed she was wearing a raggedy secondhand wedding gown she had

picked up at Volunteers of America. Like she was going to get married. She had been wearing it for days.

Was she coming home to us and got blindsided by a bad driver? Had she committed suicide? Was she just too high, or too blind to see what was coming at her?

Was the promise of a new life just too much to bear?

It was too much for me to bear. We quit our freak farm that afternoon.

Coming Back to Me

It was always about the music -- the Beatles, the Velvets, the Dead, and the Doors -- because we crowded around it like people in a humbler age would have gone elbow to elbow around bone-men and snake-handlers. And the beauty of it was that 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 while no I did not want to go to Vietnam any time soon 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, thirty years later I still do.

And when I listened to the songs at age fifteen in the basement of my parents' house, with the nickel weighing

the record cartridge down to prevent skips, and the Airplane's Signe Tolle Anderson crying out that it's no secret how strong my love is for you, or Paul Simon perforating his intestines for the mawkishness of his young lyrics (within those very mawkish lyrics!), and no one was home but me, and I would see my reflection in the darkened windows, with the fish flies massing by the streetlight outside and the shadows swallowing the hollows of my teenage face, and 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 guitars.

And I knew in the dark of that window that though I was raised a good boy, an ex-seminarian as far as that went, I would break hearts in future by the hundredweight, but that would be my gift to them, that sorrow and disappointment would be a beacon unto them that the times were definitely a changin' and the old rules were like dance patterns where some would continue to place their

right foot out and their left foot in, but that old hokey pokey was history, and in the fullness of time everyone with more than a smattering of brain cells would abandon it, but I was determined to be part of the first great wave and abandon it *right away*.

I date my story by music. It begins with the Beatles *Revolver*, the one with the pen-and-pencil drawing by Klaus Voorman that was mind-openingly psychedelic, specifically John Lennon's "Tomorrow Never Knows," with its intimations of a world beyond the folds and flaps of this one, a world of bird whoops and monks groaning and dizzy falling-down-the-circular-stairs string arpeggios, and ends with Crosby Stills Nash & Young's "Déjà vu," the one with the picture of the group as an old mountain family, specifically Crosby's "Almost Cut My Hair," in which he promises to continue being a hippie because he felt he owed it to others. (The moment you feel obligation to the idea, the idea has run its course.)

In between those two songs was a world of fantasy and reality, 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 were brimming with the possibility of learning new ways, but constrained by the probabilities of ordinary genetics. 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 up on issues of compromise, dental therapeutics, and other faces of mortality.

I went to a high school (class of 67) where about everyone was pretty square, even me. I only grew my hair long in my senior year, and then it was to portray the Marlon Brando role of Sakini the Okinawan interpreter in our school play *Teahouse of the August Moon*. The dean of men asked why long hair was necessary for a play set in post-World War II Japan, and I told him we were updating it to focus on Sakini's role as the trickster. Later, he gave my friend

Tom Warhola and me a million detentions for handing our wrapped sugar cubes at a school dance. Sugar cubes were the standard medium for LSD in those days. Word spread that we were heavy into drugs, but we weren't, unless you consider buying a pound of Heavenly Blue morning seeds at the local grain elevator, boiling them to wash the poison off, mashing them with a rolling pin and gobbling them down with orange drink, then busing to Lorain to see a matinee of *Psycho* on poor man's psilocybin. Nothing happened, apart from our puking up morning-glory mash in a lobby ashtray-- I hate to think of the effect seeing *Psycho* on actual LSD would have on a person's actual psyche.

Tommy and I both came from troubled families. My folks had just divorced, a couple years after my teenaged sister Kathy died suddenly, of a strange heart ailment. I ran off to the seminary the year after that, and now I was back in my home town, trying to make up for lost time. I chose Tommy who was likewise angry and alienated, as my partner. His father ran off with a younger woman, leaving

him alone with his mean, demented, muscular dystrophied mother. She was a shrieking, heartbroken bitch, and she took out all her miseries on Tommy. He withdrew to his room to play Rolling Stones records with me ("Under My Thumb" was our favorite because it implied a reversal of power), to plot drug simulations, secession from the United States (we founded a nation named Pludonia, whose economics derived from toll booths set up to permit passage beyond our two yards), and to steal things.

We mainly stole comic books and 45s, and we stole them from mom and pop stores right in our little town of Amherst, Ohio, stores that must have been struggling to make ends meet. I never, even when we were caught, felt "guilty" about harming the merchants -- in my mind I already lived in a post-capitalist economy, where theft was a gift, and an insistence on "property" was the true crime. My only regret was when my mother went ballistic when the police called her to pick me up.

"How could you do this to me," she said. "Do I have to take you to a psychiatrist, is that what you want?"

I love my mother now, but I only felt sorry for her in those days, losing a daughter and a husband in such a short time. She was a creature held together by sorrow alone. And I knew in my heart that before long she would lose a son too.

I bought, I didn't steal, "Revolver," and it was on my turntable for months. Indeed, it pulled me out of Tom Warhola's orbit, for he felt sure the Beatles were the sort of people he despised most in the world, winners. I never thought of it that way. I often dreamed I was one of them, and they would pull into Amherst on a tour and I would join them on a leg of it, playing tambourine and shaking my suddenly long hair. I know, the group had stopped touring by then, but my dreams didn't know that. I admired their sense of endless enterprise. Every song was different from every other. And nearly every one contained a moment that spanked the existing regime. I wanted that sense of upheaval.

Since I couldn't play an instrument, I began writing beat poetry, and published in a red-orange day-glow 8x14 mag in Cleveland called *Weed*. The editor, a cultivated young man living in Pepper Pike on Cleveland's east side named Peter Nodin whose father ran White Motors, a heavy-duty truck maker, was very complimentary, and led me to believe I was a major talent. Peter and I corresponded a lot, mainly because it was an enormous treat for me to spar verbally with such a lion. I lapped up his hip references to Geoff Muldaur, Eva Braun ("The Original Adolf's Meat Tenderizer") and our local lowercase poet, d. a. levy. (Levy was the city's punching bag, constantly being arrested for obscenity or corrupting the young. I remember a snippet of courtroom dialogue. The judge asked levy how much he made writing poetry, and levy said, about eight cents. To which the judge replied, "You should charge more.")

Weed was denied area arts funding when a poem in it cited the image of "old men masturbating with leaves." Prurient, it was not. Allen Ginsberg came to Oberlin, just a few miles south of me, and read the offending poem in

support of us and asked what the big deal was. "That's not bad, you know" he said. "It's not good, but it's not bad." For years I told people the controversial poem was mine, but it wasn't. (If I thought stealing was value-neutral, how high-minded could I be about lying?) I didn't even have a poem in that issue.

But I did get to visit Peter one day, and it was country mouse and city mouse all over again. My tastes (Simon & Garfunkel and the Beatles) seemed quaint to him, whereas I marveled at everything he played for me -- a sonorous, swooping John Fahey guitar LP ("The Great San Bernardino Birthday Party"), an anthemic collection of songs by a fellow with a bottle cap over one eye, Tim Buckley ("Hello Goodbye") and the first Jefferson Airplane album ("Takes Off"), a raving set of folk blues with the Signe Tolle Anderson screamer "It's No Secret." I immediately loved the Airplane, they were raw and smart and passionate, and they seemed to have a new definition of *love* that went beyond boy-girl-backseat, it was a code for a new way of living, it was communal in character.

By the end of Peter's day, I suspect he rolled his eyes at the stammering bumpkin he had entertained. By the end of my day, I had photocopied his taste in rock and roll and made it my own, along with his bohemian, long-haired vision for living, that he called by a name I had never heard before, *hippie*. I may have looked uncool to him that afternoon, but I was damned if I would ever look quite that uncool again.

The Trip to Alaska

Fleeing from the death and failure of my L.A. commune, I sought refuge in St. Paul with my second family, the Jones. Whenever I was quaking with doubt, I turned to them, and they made space for me in their crowded house. I think they thought of me as a kind of artist, a poet in the making.

Carol Ann liked talking up local poet John Berryman -- whom I knew nothing about, but made a note to read. I responded with my stories about James Wright, also of Minneapolis, also a famous alcoholic poet, and who hailed from the Jones' home zone of the Ohio River near West Virginia.

I loved sitting at supper with their family -- even as I gave my own family back in Ohio the shaft. I found out later Carol Ann was in touch with my mom, and let her know I was in good hands, and eventually I would work out this walkabout in the world.

But this stability would not last. Clair's brother Evan, a year my junior, who had been raised on loudspeaker from J.R.R. Tolkien, had a magnificent dream. It involved the creation of a team of hobbits and elves, composed of friends from his boyhood back in Athens, Ohio, and taping an epic trip from Minnesota to Alaska in his dad's International Travelall, which already sported almost 300,000 miles.

At the last moment, he made room in the Travelall for me. I think this conformed to Clair's wishes that someone take me away from her to some other place, and maybe, me being the senior member of the troupe -- none of the others were 18, as I was -- I would keep an eye out for the others. This was a curious judgment on their part, as I had only thirty dollars in my pocket, one set of smelly clothes, and a spiral notebook to jot notes in.

Evan was the common connection for the boys in this group, beloved for the many adventures he had had with the others on back in Ohio, including goat hunting in the hills up above the Hocking River. Evan was beloved precisely because, of all the boys, he retained a boy's heart.

He was almost cartoonishly determined to experience wondrous adventures, to extract riches from life experience, to obtain wisdom from the wilderness.

We did not quite see that, just under the Tom Sawyer affect, Evan was emerging as a furious eccentric -- lovable as the day is long, but rigidly fixed on his own ideas about the trip we were embarked on. It required that we learn the same wisdom as he learned. And he quizzes us on this frequently, while he drove the Travelall, to make sure we were reading from the same mystical page. The task before us was to uncover our true Bodhisattva natures through yoga, reading and LSD. None of us got to vote on this agenda. Evan dictated it to us.

The trip was a crawl. There were no Interstates at that time. We drove into the wind every mile of the way. It took us two days just to get to the Canadian border. The Travelall was getting about 11 mph -- bad even for that gas-gulping era.

We made it to Winnipeg, where we scored drugs in a park by the university, then hung a left, out onto the Canadian prairie. Along the way we picked up an American draft resister named Mike, who told us tales about how Canada had accepted him, and how he was thriving at Simon Fraser University in Barnaby, which sounded like a training academy for Aquarian revolutionaries. We all accepted Mike. He fleshed out the group politically. We were a merry band and now we were a relevant one as well.

Personally, I had contemplated leaving the U.S., in the event I got drafted. I knew I was exposed to the draft, having dropped out of Wooster and changed my status to 1-A. I contemplated claiming Conscientious Objector status, too -- but I never did. I figured, How could I know I would do if Ho Chi Mich was raping my mother? You can't know these things until they arise -- unless you are a Seventh-Day Adventist or Quaker, which I wasn't. I was on my own. When the actual situation presents itself, that's when character asserts itself. I just might try and make Ho

Chi Minh stop -- which was violence, which would exclude me from CO status. I mean, he was raping my mother.

We took acid in a Buffalo Pound Provincial Park, in Alberta. Locusts in the tall grass rustled and raised a hullabaloo. We did all the usual acid stuff, staring at each other and telling what we saw, getting distracted by our hands and wondering which of us we were. We stood on a place where the buffalo roamed in fantastic numbers for thousands of years, now reduced to maybe fifty head. The handful of bison stood on the ridgetop looking down on us, noble and inscrutable. It seemed like a holy place. We tripped our brains off.

At one point, at our campsite, however, I lazily tossed a stick of firewood at a fat squirrel and -- to my horror -- hit it and killed it. It shuddered a moment and then just pitched forward, blood exiting by its teeth.

I was bereft at what I had done -- me contemplating pacifism just hours before! -- but we still roasted and ate it.

No salt, no ketchup, just the burnt flesh of a fellow being.
One plump rodent split six ways.

But the band of hobbits was getting bored going to Alaska.
It took us seven days just to get to Alberta in the Travelall,
and all we had achieved so far was getting high
periodically and burning a lot of gas. None of us brought
cold weather attire. According to the map and the truck's
speedometer, Alaska was still about 14,000 miles away.
And I was getting old.

The group mutinied. We held a meeting with our leader
Evan and announced that Alaska was too far, and didn't
the Southwest sound better, with the mesas and horned
toads and whatnot. None of us wanted to show up in the
Klondike on the first day of winter, wearing only bluejeans
and tie-dyed T-shirts. So we turned south, with the
intention of achieving satori in Arizona or Utah instead.

Alaska would always be a myth for us. The Shangri-La we
opted not to visit.

Now we had the wind at our back. We crossed near Anacortes and camped at a state seashore. We were tired of eating Rice A Roni and thought we would try our hands at seafood.

The beaches were littered with oyster shells, so we dug around in the water and pulled out a dozen of them. Paul managed to snag a red snapper with a line. And Doug plucked several banana slugs from the plants growing alongside us, comparing them to shelled escargots. I was the chef, and I boiled some butter water and began to cook a pot of beggar's bouillabaisse. It smelled good, except that when we dropped the slugs in the stew, and they opened their mouths in a silent scream, and extruded some weird goo out of their underpads.

"I'm not eating that," said Paul. Everyone wrinkled their noses.

"Maybe if we added some Rice A Roni it would absorb some of that gray slime."

That was when the game warden arrived and informed us our soup was a felony. Sure enough, he pointed out a sign:

FEDERALLY PROTECTED OYSTER BED. Violators Will Be Prosecuted To The Full Extent Of The Law.

So much for supper.

Our trip continued southward, but I was planning to exit the group. When we got just below the Bay Area, I had my brothers of the Shire drop me off in a town called Cupertino, where a woman lived who wasn't my aunt, but was my stepfather's stepmother's sister, lived. Her name was Elizabeth Esterley.

I had never met her, but I felt impelled to make her acquaintance, which I will explain in the next chapter.

Spoiler: It did not go well.

The Potemkin Riot

At Wooster, I was like a dog let loose. Stuff I could not do in high school were not as forbidden at Wooster. You could smoke cigarettes openly. Read Karl Marx. Tongue kiss in student lounges. Massage girls' backs in the union, right down to their buns. Duck behind bushes and get loaded.

And it was the perfect time for acting out. The war, the Kennedy killing, LBJ, Jim Crow, Berkeley -- these things lent legitimacy to all kinds of bad behavior.

Let me illustrate. Two weeks into the academic semester, the school got a curious request from the Ohio National Guard.

They realized that student protest was a thing, and they wanted to train their troops for difficult situations that might arise. You know, riots. And they wanted to know, would a sweet hilltop college like Wooster be interested in staging a mock riot that their soldiers could quash. A war game.

All pretend, of course. No loaded weapons, no tear gas, no barbwire, no bayonets. Strictly for fun.

The school said yes, and then passed word through the student government dip wads that they should think of the fake riot as a kind of festival. Different sections (fraternities) could compete for cutest posters, most outlandish hippie attire, etc.

So we had the odd experience of seeing the straight fraternities dressing up bells and leather vests. Everyone practiced the peace sign. Some did face painting. A few guys bought ladies' wigs at Volunteers for America so they would look long haired. Long, platinum haired.

They planned to mass on the quad and wait for the Ohio National Guard to come to them and cheerfully surrender.

And then have BBQ sandwiches and ice cream.

Now, I have told this story many times, and I have stop and ask myself "Did this really happen that way?"

For instance, I have told people that the commander of the Ohio National Guard outfit was the same guy who headed up the Guard at Kent State, and that our band of hippie irregulars, who tied up all the soldiers and confiscated their rifles, stirred up such hatred in the commander that he took it out on the kids in Ravenna, 50 miles away. .

But these events were two and a half years apart, and there had to be scores of Ohio National Guard groups. I don't really know. But back before there was an Internet, you could convince yourself of something because there was no Wikipedia to tell you different.

I earnestly believed Rock Hudson and Gomer Pyle were married. Like Rock Hudson could be gay!

Of course, I imagined the story that way because it made it a better story. I will try this time to tell it just as it was.

First of all, while the regular sections were planning a fun fest on the quad, another group -- a group of stoned

misfits -- engaged with the soldiers down on the Wayne County Fairgrounds.

Our group, which really did not know each other well yet -- the school year was young -- consisted of hippies, dopers, revolutionaries, Vietnam vets and townies who all wanted to make a big fuss as an anti-war protest. Male and female were they, and of every level in the four-year program.

We figured the Wooster paper and radio station would pick it up, and maybe even the media from Cleveland and Columbus.

As we gathered in the empty hog barn, I looked around and there the people I had been looking for. Longhairs with mischief in their eyes. A bartender. Boyfriends and girlfriends. My Intro to Philosophy professor. The girl who works for Smuckers Jam. That guy down the hall that played Highway 61 at three in the morning every night. The junior from New Headland that you never, never, ever saw.

Everyone was the leader of this group. We were united in our desire to make a statement to other these kids in the Guard that were really mirror images of ourselves, same age, same wide open eyes. But our souls were psychedelized.

We all had tremendous animus toward the war, and how many kids were getting killed and maimed over there, and how we were all scared shitless about our own draft status.

Somehow, we knew that there was no bullets in their guns, no tear gas, no nothing that could hurt us. There were no murderous rules of engagement.

So we decided to take out the Guard.

The war lasted 40 minutes. There were 30 Guard members and they approached us in teams of three or four. We simply surrounded them and pulled their weapons out of their hands. That was pretty much it.

The first teams resisted a little. But after a few minutes they were mostly all abashed and some of them grinning

as we tied them to whatever was handy -- a post, a gate, a flagpole.

It was the hip women who tied the soldiers up. They did so beautifully, and in a playful way, calling them "naughty boys." There was a slightly erotic free love element to it. For some of the soldiers, it was the best thing that happened to them that year.

The main harm that was done to the Guard members was a sense of embarrassment. They lost to a bunch of longhairs. I think the sense of disgrace may have set in that evening, especially among the noncoms, as they rode their buses and pondered what to tell their superiors back in Columbus.

The newspaper did NOT run a story about the war games in their town. Neither did the radio stations, or the print or broadcast media in Cleveland or Columbus. It was NOT a cute feature. It was damn disturbing and the less said the better.

We understood that the Guard asked our college's president for a rematch later that fall. But the president couldn't guarantee we would act like civilized people the next time. And there was a sense that, if they ever did come back, they would bring more than Nerf guns.

Driveaway

There was about 50 of us at The Shack that night, gobbling down fries and regaling others with their wartime me experiences.

Wooster did not get much credit for it but we were a kickass protest school. We were represented at every antiwar event throughout the 60s. One of our students immolated himself at the Pentagon -- the only American until 1980 to do that.

But for now we hippies bonded in our determination to have our way with the system. Our disaffection was melding into affection.

I was at Wooster a year and a half. By my second year Clare and Vickiebar left me. Clare's parents, wanting to escape the drugged out scene in Athens, Ohio, took significant pay cuts to relocate far away to a podunk place called Hamline University, in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Because of the pay cuts, they couldn't afford to keep sending her to Wooster, not while they had free tuition at

Hamline. When I returned after summer vacation, I was alone, and I missed her. Twice I made woebegone hitchhiking trips to Minnesota to see her.

But I returned to Wooster, drifted into another group, dope-smoking hippies who dreamed of a better life than being students in a dorm in a Presbyterian college in the Amish country. At one point we tried to place the following in the classified ads in the back of Saturday Review:

Artistic tribe seeks patronage and a place of residence, preferably on Cape Cod, to enjoy the beautiful vibes of creation, and to respond in kind. Send offers to Box 6272.

The magazine rejected the ad as being too slummy. How were we to know?

But the die was cast, as we say before setting out across Rubicons. Within a few weeks our band of gypsies summarily quit Wooster (without telling our families) and migrated via driveaway cars -- not to the hip scene in Boston or San Francisco, but to Los Angeles, because my

dad lived there, and I had witnessed the Sunset Strip scene on a visit there, and thought it would be just as good.

It wasn't.

My friend Robert and I went out first, driving across Route 66 in a Ford Mustang that had spent a couple nights into Lake Erie, and had spent a year in a parking garage in Cleveland drying out. As we drove west, the car began to shred -- tires, floormats, upholstery, and roof. By the time we got to Santa Monica, there wasn't much Mustang left.

We hung around the Strip for a few days. A man picked us up hitchhiking and took us to a Black Buddha session, where everyone chanted nam myoho renge kyo and prayed for new cars. We noticed a continuing theme of materialism in the L.A. version of the Aquarian age. All the hippies had hundred dollar pants and had taken screen tests or were prostitutes.

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 sort of 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 cute, the commercial center for Amish people living nearby, Athens was drenched in the disregulated 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 proclaiming 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, acid and intergenerational love.

Straight-arrows 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, capable of revolution certainly, 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 burbled 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 grief, 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, like in my fantasies, I saw a shadow 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 new 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. Redding." 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.

The Mystic East

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 little books of haiku were becoming popular in ordinary people's bathrooms. Oddly, when I graduated from high school, my mom gave me, among other things, a Japanese kimono and a hookah -- I'm sure she thought it was purely ornamental, and maybe it was supposed to be ornamental, but you still don't give your child a hashish pipe for graduating in the top quintile of his high school class.

I had a summer job at a nearby amusement park, and I lived in the employee dormitories there. Most the of the other kids were pretty rich, and all were older than 17 -- I falsified information to be allowed to live there.

I took pains to appear outside my 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 Sergeant Pepper's 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 Friz Perls, and Laurel and Hardy in Arabia.

Occasionally a 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.

Driveaway

We packed our duffles and stole away from Wooster. 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 rested in an RTC shelter, then walked the remaining three miles to my half-step-grandmother's house overlooking the metropolitan Gorge. (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 lifelong problems with my mom, who never forgave her for helping me run away. Also because of encouraging Robert and me, she wouldn't ever speak to my stepdad again – all my fault.

But Robert and I were ebullient -- we slept that night in the downstairs bedroom, the one Elsie husband Frank had stayed in the last weeks of his life.

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 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 Sta. Monica, 2395 miles away. Seemed like a good idea at the time, though the freshwater had taken its toll on the Mustang's functionality. I figure the car was worth \$1500 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	89
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Springfield	71
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Our car was shredding. We lost our first tire around Joplin, and another in Oklahoma. In both cases the tread seemed to rot and fall off. 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 tire 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 fell 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, This was it! We hopped into his jalopy 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 the 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 -- an things were looking up. Another was chanting to inflict terrible pain on his ex-wife and avoid alimony payments -- and she had come down with a bladder infection!

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

That was Robert's and my cue to get up and leave. We bowed politely, and backed out of the apartment.

Upon This Rock

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 Place, 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.

Dope

Back when I was smoking pot every single day, I was also entertaining the idea of becoming a great writer. I had met a famous poet the summer before, James Wright. He was writer of great and soulful tenderness, with a voice that reminded me of the anguish and sensitivity of the computer HAL in the movie 2001. 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 has all his books -- Saint Judas, The Branch Will Not Break, The Green Wall -- in her house in Cleveland, and she encouraged me to read them. One time she took me down to Martin's Ferry, Ohio to actually meet him, and he and I walked in his little garden and he talked about the German writer Theodore Storm, Herman Hesse (whom he had translated) and others who had that same, heart-aching sadness and hypersensitivity toward life. 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 moving in with them, being their handyman, painting this perfect white clapboard schoolhouse somewhere in midtown Manhattan, and being a part of their beautiful, romantic, artistic life. But instead I started taking dope in college. I lost whatever capacity I might have had for the simple, fluid, humble lines that Wright wrote, and started imitating what the teachers were teaching -- Faulkner,

Woolf, Joyce. It 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 flunked 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 smoking pot with friends, and in the process I was losing my bearings. I was a sucker for dope -- it was like 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. I loved dope, and for a while I was very 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 was wonderful because it made any experience transcendent. I can remember walking across the quad on a cold night in March, and falling on my knees and crying because the snow on the ground caught the light from the streetlamps in such a magical way, like it must have on the night the three ghosts came visiting Scrooge. I remember laughing when an orange I was peeling squirted its strange 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 believed that experience while on dope was vastly superior to any experience while not on dope. Why travel to England or Mexico or the Sudan when, for fifty cents Robert of reefer, one could have a much intenser experience right there in the dorm room, with a wet towel stuffed under the door crack? 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 on a piece of paper towel, struck one so forcefully and so unequivocally while under the influence. 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 stay stoned, forever, innocent, heavy-lidded, and voracious, and to imagine that the deeper one went, the deeper one became, so inside, so outside, until in our stoned wisdom of decay we could barely think.

Haight Ashbury/Berkeley

Tom Hayden, Cosby,

Good Soap

(This part will describe a plan to clean up the image of hippies by getting them to sell home-made hand soap on the street instead of begging for spare change or hawking the Free Press.)

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 hope less our undertaking was, given the intellectual underpinnings. I believed, for instance, that dropping out of college was a total plus for me. I truly and really believed that the Age of Aquarius was upon us, that the world was forever changing, vastly for the better, and that liberal arts educations would be hindrances, not helps, in the years ahead of us. I guess that was an early intuition of what has come to be known as deconstructionism. In any event, that thought more than any embarrasses me today -- it was so naive, so dumb, and worst of all, it was so traitorous to an impulse I truly loved, which was reading and learning. Up until Vendome Place, I was a budding Kierkegaard scholar. I still had an Incomplete in a Kierkegaard course to work through -- if I could only bring myself to read a couple more books, on the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, or Sickness Unto Death.

But I knew I would not do it. You can't read Kierkegaard if you are high -- it is impossible, and very rude. Instead you get high and agonize, a little, on the fact that you have these uncompleted tasks piling up in an imaginary closet -- books unread, notes untaken, languages unmastered -- and you smile and pretend to be post-intellectual with your friends, but you know that in your heart you've just slipped a few rungs on the ladder to ex-intellectual.

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. There were people we respected calling for world revolution -- John Lennon, Mick Jagger -- people whose opinions you wanted desperately to respect, even if they sounded as confused and incomplete and unauthoritative as the stonedest, most ignorant person at last night's pipe.

I had been to demonstrations, and I had cursed, and I hated talked myself into hating the pigs -- I had even got my foot smashed 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.

If we all sat around and got stoned and got the munchies every day of our lives, who was going to be the doctors, architects, lawyers, etc. for our country? Surely the people who stayed in school and got their degrees, and only smoked the pipe occasionally would have a tremendous leg up on us. But I couldn't think it through that way -- I imagined that a wave of medievalism would overtake the country and we would rid yourself of technology, ugly clothes, television, and over the counter prescriptions, and every family or commune would grow its own medicines, and even those of us who had forsaken traditional dental care would not be asked to pay the price.

We believed that we were the first wave, the avant garde, of an inevitable historic change, away from centralized manipulation, and towards openness, simplicity and love. We saw no contradiction in the fact that our so-called leaders didn't agree on anything -- the Beatles, Joni

Mitchell and Led Zeppelin represented such different views of the world -- and that they relied almost entirely upon our begged or borrowed cash to plug in their amps and buy smoke-tinted windows for their superstar limos. These guys were charlatans just as much as the preachers and politicians of the old age stumbling toward the exit signs.

And we thought we were helping one another, when in fact I don't think I had but one friend through all of 1969, Robert, who I really believe would have died for me. No one cared enough to stop another person in the tracks of their excess and say, hold on, friend, it's all right, or I'm worried about you, or I know 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 geometric shapes that swam before our eyes.

We believed that the whole world that was described for us by eye-witnesses was a lie, and that all that existed was the visions that made us gasp, and grasp for, and then collapse in our fingers as soon as we tried to put them to words.

Gohonzon

When I was 16 and still in high school -- 1967 -- it was obvious we were in for a true cultural pounding from eastern religions. Western thought always wanted to go somewhere, to earn salvation, to grow in grace. But in fact, few of us got anywhere that felt very satisfactory. This lack of progress was depressing. The wisdom of the east, by comparison, was happy just to circle in one not-terribly-hopeful place. It obliterated disappointment. It was a stone groove.

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 she did that, but she did it. 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 -- Hugh Hefner East. 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 the very thing you had to do. 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 puffing on a hubbly-bubbly in Arabia.

Occasionally some swami would come to campus and tell everyone about the life within -- we were all eager about it, in our 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. As the Beatles commanded us to, everybody smoked pot.

We yearned for a situation -- a "freak farm" commune -- where everyone could just groove and be our beautiful selves, 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, we probably did, a little. We sure were pretty.

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 the carnage unsinged. If I truly had cosmic consciousness, that would continue even in Vietnam. Bombs would miss me on purpose. The Cong would forget about national pride and the suffering capitalism had caused them, and greet me with big smiles. Maybe it would even end the war, if enough soldiers were like me, spaced out and ego-dead. It's possible.

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 space. Howie King, the United States Marine and 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 an adjunct professor of psychology and from his 25 years of experience as an officer in the Corps, before his leg got cancer and had to be cut off, that I was just classically 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, right, transcending the physical plane to get to a plane where nothing could get you. That's what pot was about. And friends. And hippy kiss-up authors. And long hair. And peace.

Sanctuary.

Ghost Story

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 89 Springfield 71 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 other 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 the 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,

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 Vickiebar, 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 Cowntown, 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 Morrocco, 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 newssheet, 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 newsheet, 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 tittered.

"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 Vicklebar 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.

Founding The Church

Thirteen Trips

The first was in my college dorm. I was 16. Friends thought I was reckless and brave, gobbling down that 1000-mic blue barrel. I listened that night to Steve Miller Band's Sailor. Deep into it I imagined I was Chaplin, and did his waddle walk across the quad -- the clownishness of life. I imagined that I could do anything I wanted, or needed to do. At one point, a guy named Malcolm came into the room and, envious of my trip, summoned an acid flashback of his own. It was extremely dramatic.

Later, friends Worth and Robin invited me on a trip to Boston. I emptied my checking account to buy the ticket. We holed up in Robin's basement flat on Revere Street on Beacon Hill. We dropped psilocybin and watched Yellow Submarine. The drug made us feel like we were mountains weighing millions of tons, unable to stand when the show was over.

I dropped again with my girlfriend Donna, on a tiny island in the middle of Miller's Pond, joined by a tiny bridge. We

did not know each other well. I did not want to fuck, just to be close, to touch, to merge with her. An hour in, we believed someone with a rifle, hiding in the bushes, was firing at us. We heard the bullets tear through the willow leaves.

A month later I ran away to LA with my pal Worth. We got jobs working in car washes. In our Vermont Area apartment I dropped acid and sat on the floor while Worth watched. I saw the hallucinations the magazines said you would see -- computer-created quadratic equations hanging in the air. I spent an hour trying, in my mind, to exit from a freeway cloverleaf.

When our college dropout friends joined us in LA, we rented an upstairs on Vendome Place, four blocks from my dad's apartment. One day, without telling anyone, I took another hit, and sat nervously with everyone watching me. Then my dad showed up, in his synthetic pants and shirt. I greeted him on the porch, and showed him around the place. He didn't know what was going on. I was terrified

and ashamed. I don't remember anything good coming from this trip.

LA didn't work. A hippie girl's cat shit on all the rugs and floors. Two LA acquaintances, one of them a 13-year-old girl, died. A guy I worked with faked his death to leave his wife and daughter.

We took a driveaway car, a Cadillac Brougham, back to Ohio. The campus had morphed. Acid was everywhere. Even the Amish were taking it. People held a tripping party in the woods, fixing mirrors in the trees, and called the event Beggar's Banquet. We were greeted as returning role models. I tripped in the piney woods, crouching under a tree. I had a vision, a voice in the treetops saying, Throw it away.

A puppy we adopted in LA got distemper. Worth and I took it to a vet in Wooster, who wanted \$15 to put it down. We didn't have \$15, so we strangled Henry in the parking lot, and we did not speak to one another for several days.

I caught a ride with Dirk and five friends from Athens, Ohio, bound for Alaska. I had no money but I was the oldest, and people honored that. In Winnipeg we scored some drugs, and at Buffalo Pound in Saskatchewan we dropped on the prairie. Bison stood on the hill, wind moving their manes. Locusts in the tall grass raised a noisy hullabaloo. I threw a stick of firewood at a fat squirrel and killed it. I was bereft but we still roasted and ate it.

I ditched the boys in Vancouver and hitched down to Cupertino, to see James Wright's high school English teacher. They ran a duck and chicken farm, selling 1000-year-old eggs to Chinese New Year celebrations. They showed me a duck that had transformed from a male to a female. I called my dad in LA and found out I had been drafted, and was on a list of people to be hunted down.

In Inglewood I delivered Fuller Brush products for my dad. I borrowed his car one day and, after dropping off some hair spray and nail polish, visited my friend Susie and Quittman in Pasadena. We dropped and spent the day on a mattress listening to David Axelrod and talking about

peace. When I got home my stepmom tore my sweater off and hit me with her shoes for being high.

I hitched to the airport and flew in a flannel shirt to Minnesota. It was snowing. Worth was there and let me in -- "just for the night." He was off drugs and I represented danger to him. I took a job in an auto parts store, and rented a room by the university. I started playing with a reel-to-reel machine and made mix tapes of electronic music. I lay on my bed and tripped to Morton Subotnick.

Worth took me for a trip out west in his Volvo, with his dog. We visited Wooster friends at a commune along the Rio Grande. They fed themselves working for the national forest, gathering up discarded fisherman's fish guts. We took acid while we worked. The road was seriously rutted from water erosion.

When day was done we bounced along in the '51 Ford pickup, lying on the sacks of rotting fish. I saw that the sunset was a coverlet of rose and aqua, that the rose was for wanting, and the blue for acceptance. When darkness

was complete, we headed down mountain from the fishermen's lake, staring up at the splattered Milky Way. Patty Miner -- the only hippie I knew who wore a cashmere sweater, so beautiful, so womanly, nestled warmly in my arms.

We sped on to California, picking up hitchhikers, including a girl from Brooklyn, Debbie Greenbaum, who claimed to work at a massage parlor, bringing guys off. She began to bleed in LA and we took her to UCLA Hospital. While we waited, Worth's dog shit all over my dad's Inglewood apartment. Worth thought my drugs were the danger. My dad thought Worth was.

In Oregon we heard of a rock festival called Vortex. Everything there turned out not to be true. Santana did not perform. Neither did Chase or Buddy Miles. The festival was a fraud, set up by the mayor of Salem, who wanted all the hippies out while the VFW had their national meeting. The only bands were local bar bands.

Debbie and I shared a tent, and we dropped and made love. Worth slept in the grass. Around 10 PM a helicopter landed not far from us. Still high, we saw Spiro Agnew, who had spoken in Salem, stepping out of the copter, and start shaking hands. Weird.

In Saint Mary's in Glacier Park, Debbie paid for a tiny room in a log hotel. We were falling in love. Worth slept in the Volvo.

Back in Minneapolis I dropped in my apartment and keyed in on "Sister Morphine." I stood at the mirror and looked at myself, at the crowclaws around my baggy eyes, at the graying hair, the bewildered expression on my face. Mick Jagger was dispensing an awful truth. The hopelessness of hoping. It was the closest I ever got to a bad trip -- a sad trip. I was 22.

I stopped dropping. One last hurrah was in 1996, visiting my friend Dirk, who led the Alaska expedition in 1968. He lived in a house in Cornucopia, on Lake Superior. He had made it a habit to take small doses of acid every now and

then. A hundred mics, as opposed to a thousand. He left me alone and went away to draw. I plugged in a guitar in his garage, and began to play. I'm not a good player, but that morning, with the speakers pointing out into the trees, and the volume turned up, I seemed to know where everything was. There was no wrong note, just a stately pattern of marching forward, into life, as far as a person can go.

There were times, tripping, when I saw into people's faces and hearts and was tremendously moved at the courage of us all. There were times when I glimpsed the generosity of the universe, offering us one lesson, one vision after another -- we only needed to be receptive to it. It often ended embracing my friends, heading through the same shivery insights, grateful tears rolling down our cheeks.

I was young and reckless, and it may be that I harmed myself with acid. I know people who definitely slipped a few rungs tripping. But that wasn't clear to me for many years. I'm grateful now that it did me as little harm as it

did, and that I can still recall the bands of rose and aqua,
and all that might mean, blanketing our days.

When I left Cornucopia that day, Dirk gifted me with a
sheet of the mild acid. I have it around here somewhere.
Maybe, when the time is right, I will come across it and
have another stab at the universe.

Goodbye Tim Hardin My Friend

When you are young, there are songs that just knife through you. In 1965, Bobby Darin had a hit with "If I Were a Carpenter." It was thick, but such nakedness of emotion. Would you marry me anyway? Would you have my baby? I was fifteen, and it went through me like sharp scissors. The composer was Tim Hardin, and in college I bought his second LP, and would listen to it with my roommate Ripley, who owned the first. In turn I played both for my girlfriend Jan, a faculty brat who knew more music than me, everything from Judy Collins to the Fugs. Hardin was categorized as a folksinger, but really he was a singer-songwriter, like Jackie deShannon or Paul Simon. What was striking to me was his ability to nail the feeling of a song in a few notes. In one, Hardin addresses Hank Williams, who dies before Hardin can hear him perform: Goodbye Hank Williams, my friend. I didn't know you, but I been places you been. In another, he begins: I remember our first affair. All the pain, always rain In our lives. It'll never happen again... That last line, repeated three

heartbreaking times, was what threw me: It'll never happen again. Could there be a more sobering thought, implying severance of love, and therefore severance of life? But isn't it true of everything sweet that ever happens to a person. It never can happen again. Because that's how life is. I thought of the sorrows of my own life – my sister's death of a leaky heart when she was 15, and I was 11, and my father's coming round to the empty house a year later, to tell me he was going away, and shake my hand under the Chinese elm. I dreamed at least every week that Kathy had come back, and it was all a big mistake somehow, or that my dad did. But they never did. It never happened again, just like in the song, and how keenly I felt those losses. During Christmas break that year, Rip got tickets to a Hardin concert in Greenwich Village, and he and his mother Nancy drove up from Princeton to see it. His dad was in the foreign service and his mother was an artist, so Rip's dorm room was full of paintings she had made of interesting people she had known in Khartoum and Rome. So Rip figured she would be open to Hardin, and he never dreamed Hardin would make him regret the choice. But

that is what happened. Unbeknownst to Ripley, Hardin was an addict and he showed up at the concert frantic and repulsive, grabbing his crotch and talking Lenny Bruce-style to the audience about cunts and cocks, and flicking cigarettes into the front rows. And the songs weren't the tender ballads of our records, but jazzed-up going-nowhere heroin crotch songs, during songs, now much more electric than acoustic, songs you wouldn't want to take your mother to. Nancy was cool with it, but for Rip it was an evening of embarrassment, disappointment, and a wasted thirty dollars. How could that foul-mouthed hipster be the tender guy who sang "Misty Roses" and "Reason to Believe"? We continued to listen to him that spring, but more as a conundrum than a fan favorite. My girlfriend Jan and I had a good thing going. She was the kind of girl anyone would like to know, beautiful inside and out, tall, hip, kind, and willing to laugh.. She had small features, faint eyebrows and an indistinct mouth, and a face that was a litmus of her emotions – her complexion could go haywire at the drop of a hat. But her eyes were kind and beautiful, and it

wasn't just me that said so. A school friend of mine told another school friend that I was keeping company with the greatest looking-girl on campus. When I heard that, I looked at her with blood in my eyes. I was a virgin, but Jan thought I was witty and a poet, which she considered as good as not being a virgin, and we would walk around our college town for long afternoons in the warm October light, talking about everything and nothing, my arm around her waist, resting on the cool bare skin above her belt. She reminded me of my sister, except that I was hot for her, and the news that she would be pulling out of school and going to a place up in Minnesota instead, where her dad Ned taught art, distressed me no end. But what could I do? I had no intention of being a carpenter; I'd be a terrible carpenter, because I was no good with measuring things, and tools don't fit in my hands, I am always dropping hammers on the floor. Still, I yearned for her like the man in Hardin's song. I yearned for Jan, and I yearned for her family. The few times I visited with them, I joined them at the dinner table and exulted in the conversation, which managed to be both unselfconscious and intelligent. Jan

was the oldest, a regal daughter. Her brother Will was an abrupt, opinionated prince. There was a mom and a sister and another brother involved, too. Aces every one of them, the family I wished I had. The centerpiece of the family was Ned, the art professor. He was a small man, but red-headed and ferociously clear about what he believed. He'd been a Navy pilot in the Pacific in World War II, and I understood that got the idea that he came home against all odds and married his sweetheart from school. That was something I could get my mind around. Ned's hand almost always cradled a warm pipe bowl, which like him was a survivor of wartime action. He was a man who was tempered by flame, and just naturally more serious and sensible than other men. Most unlikely of all, he respected me. I acted better around him than I did around anybody. I liked who I was when I was with him, just like with Jan. Ned liked the energy of the sixties, but not the predation or the laziness or the bullshit. He despised faculty members who fooled around with students. He despised shortcuts of any kind. "Do the work," was the advice he gave everyone. Ned told Jan he liked me a lot – it took me

by such surprise I blinked back tears. One remark stands out. Ned was recounting a conversation he'd had with other faculty members that day. "Fred, you hold onto that pipe of yours like it's a friend," one teacher joked. "It's my only friend, Charlie," Ned said ruefully, "my only friend." Several times, trying to call Jan back to me, I hitchhiked to Minnesota and bombed in on her and her family. Each time was a disaster. Her mom and dad were patient and kind with me, but Jan had outgrown me. She had new boyfriends, older boyfriends, artists and actors, and they were more neurotic and therefore more ready for life than me. Gradually, it sank in that the thing we had at the college in Ohio was over, and it would never happen again, just like in the song. A year later I dropped out of school and made one final effort to get Jan to see my way, flying into Minnesota without a winter coat on a cold night in November. We talked, and became friends again, sort of – we described it as "going unsteady." I took a job at a parts warehouse, and after work she reintroduced me to her life and to her friends, like Maddy, an artist who studied under Ned. But in the end Jan shut me out. On the last day of the

sixties, she told me she was engaged to marry a Vietnam veteran from her home town who had got shot up and shipped home. They never actually got married, but it was convincing enough to send me away again, this time to an apartment a half mile away. One day, as I was lying on my mattress on the floor of my upstairs apartment, Maddy came by to look in on me. Maddy was five years older than me. Her husband, a chiropractor, had been in Vietnam for a year. She was blonde and attractive without quite being pretty. I don't think they were in love. When I looked at Maddy I saw an asymmetry that made her seem tentative. But she was smart and serious about painting, and she gave me fair warning when she pushed a sketchbook of self-portraits in pencil into my hands. In each picture, there was something disturbing about her. Her face would be ready to cry, or the sun would be in her eyes, or her cheeks would be sallow and aged, or a shadow would be passing over her, a shadow of depression and doom, like March in Minnesota, the season of ice and obituaries. I told her they were great. She relayed to me her sympathies regarding Jan dropping me, and something in

her eye led me to kiss her, and we made love on the raggedy mattress. A part of me just wanted to be loved by someone, anyone, and this was great on that level alone. But a vengeful part of me savored the idea of doing it with a friend of Jan's and a student of Ned's. Maddy and I were only together for a couple of months. We never lived together, but we often spent the night together. Because painting was what she cared about, she set me up with an easel and paints, and encouraged me to paint ripoffs of pictures from her art books. I did what I thought was an OK version of a spooky landscape by the Nazi painter Emil Nolde. But my very first painting was a copy of the photo on Tim Hardin's "Greatest Hits" album. Thinking back, it seems weird to have painted a picture of another man in front of a naked woman. But something about Hardin hooked into me. He had a knack for sorrow, and I was starting to have one, too. I wished I could express things the way he did, that reduced all life to a blubbing, heaving heap. Maddy and I didn't really work. Before we split, I took her to visit a friend of mine, a black cop I knew in Minneapolis named Roger. He and Maddy exchanged

glances, and as we were leaving, Roger took me by the arm and asked if I would mind if he called Maddy, because he sure liked what he saw. It was like that moment when I heard that my old high school friend thought Jan was beautiful. Like the dog in the manger, I suddenly valued what I could no longer have. I saw Maddy slide into her VW Bug and drive away forever. I didn't want to be part of this attachment any more, or any attachment. I was ashamed that I was sleeping with the wife of a man in combat. Ned wouldn't go for that, I knew. It was sleazy and zoot-suitish. It was ignoble and wrong. I was drifting into a decade of solitariness. Jan married and soon had three children. My old roommate Ripley moved to Minnesota, and we resumed our friendship as grown men. We still loved music. We spent hours listening to the same songwriters – Tim Hardin, Leonard Cohen, Tim Buckley, Nick Drake. Lonely men listening to lonely men singing lonely songs. We sometimes traveled together with our dogs on canoe trips and car trips, and trips to folk festivals. For a time we were even in business together, collecting glass jars from people's alleys and using them as candle

molds to make candles we sold to knickknack stores. It wasn't a good business. I was just helping him to have something to do. Over many years I began putting a life together, meeting and marrying Rachel, a freckled foundling from Indiana and a lovely girl, and having a daughter in 1984 with her, and in 1988 a son. As a father I wanted to model my life after Ned, honest and clearheaded and unstinting in love. My life was not as heroic as his was. I was just a harried dad. I ate the crusts from the kids peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and gained weight. About that time Ripley was going with a nurse named Eve. He and Eve and Rachel and I and our kids would sometimes get together at our place for a cookout, and to push the children in the backyard swings. As they had been serious for over a year, Rip indicated that if she got pregnant not to worry, that he would take care of her. But there was a misunderstanding, because Eve did get pregnant, and instead of marrying her Rip broke it off, and, in particularly cruel fashion, marrying another woman, the daughter of a local surgeon, all in the space of a couple of months. I went to the wedding, which

was quite a toney affair after our dumpster-diving, pickle-jar days. I toasted their happiness, but I was troubled. Eve had the baby, but Rip never visited the hospital. Eve took the child home and set about to raise him, but Rip never came around. He agreed to pay child support on the side, but on the condition that he not be the boy's father. His excuse was that he was a married man, and needed to focus on the life he had chosen, not this one that was trying to trip him up. But it was hard for me to be my best friend's friend, because I had little kids myself, and I knew how important having a father was, and it tore me up to visit Eve and hear the little boy asking about his dad.

The odd thing was, Rip's parents, back in Princeton, knew about their grandson, and came visiting every year with gifts and games. His mother Nancy, whom Rip had taken to see Tim Hardin at the Village Gate, took the boy into the family with all love and honor. Rip knew about this, and permitted it, but he could not bring himself to be a party to it. Little by little, I stopped seeing Rip. I still loved him,

but our friendship crashed over the problem of his son, who I knew would grow up hollow and hunting – just the way I did. The following year I got word from Will, Jan's brother, that Ned was dying of lung cancer. His best friend the briar pipe had taken him down. I went to the funeral, and saw Jan and her husband and family. At the reception afterward, at the house, a woman came up to me and asked if I recognized her. "It's me, Maddy," she said. "Maddy Anderson." I nearly choked at the need to reprise in a moment our relationship of a decade ago, but she put me at ease with a smile. Jan came up to me, too, and told me once again how fond Ned had been of me. On the back porch was Will, sitting in a still glider. I sat beside him on the top wooden step and swigged from a bottle of beer. "After the war," Will said, "Ned spent nearly a year in Idaho in a mental institution. He didn't speak during that period. People who knew him gave up on him ever coming out of it."

"What happened?" I asked.

"The plane he was flying, with a crew of about ten men, was shot down by Japanese anti-aircraft fire. They went down about 500 miles from Midway, and he and four crewmates floated in the ocean for almost two days. Ned's head was injured, and he was a small fellow, but he kept the plane's navigator, Les, who was unconscious, afloat with him the whole time. The ocean wasn't rough, but it was challenging. But Ned held onto Les all that day and into the evening, talking to him, encouraging him to hold on, help was on the way. Les talked for a while, moans mostly, but as time passed he just spit saltwater out. "Around nightfall a rescue ship arrived to pull them out of the water. One of the two other men was plainly dead by this time, floating face down. Ned and Les were still upright together, and Ned insisted that Les be pulled aboard first, clambering up the riggings after him. "But just as Ned reached the top, the rescue team kicked Les overboard, because he was obviously dead, and there was no time in the midst of battle for a formal burial at sea. Ned watched as Les' body toppled back into the waves, and something inside him broke." Will looked at me. "The

part I don't get is what happened to him in Idaho that year. He was empty and useless all that time. But at the end of the year something happened and he became who he would be for the rest of his life. Not just a healthy man, but a strong one, strong enough to raise us all, and be a decent artist, and a good man, besides. I wish I knew what he did to heal himself."

It's funny how things come around. Thirty years later I remain friends with Jan and her brother Will. This past summer she invited me and Rachel and my kids out to her horse farm. All her family made it, even Will, who drove all the way from New York with his son Victor. It was a hot day, and we sat in plastic chairs out in the yard, under an oak tree so big and so spreading that no grass grew underneath. The ponies cantered in the enclosure, and the kids of all the families climbed the corral planks to watch them, except for the babies who sat in their mothers' laps. Everyone was there, except for Ned, and we didn't have much to say, but we sat and grinned and told teasing stories about the old days, and I felt I belonged as much as

I ever did, like I had been a secret family member all that time, like a love child that had to be kept secret. But the feelings were still there. In time even Rip and I became friends again. His marriage to the surgeon's daughter came apart after a couple years, and he suffered like a man in a parable, having created two families but being welcome in neither. In time he married again, and was a good father this time around, staying home with his two daughters and loving them modestly and with all his heart. He never reconciled with the little boy he abandoned. But he changed in his heart, and I think some day, maybe. One night the two of us went out to a steakhouse, and over meat and red wine I told him how sorry I was to have pulled away from him all those years. Poor Rip looked at me with dumb surprise. "I thought you were just tired of me," he said.

"I was always your friend," I said to him. "But every time I saw you, I thought about the boy. And living the life I've lived, I couldn't choose you above him." It was about the time of Ned's funeral that Tim Hardin died of an overdose.

Rip told me about it on the phone. Obituaries stressed that things went downhill for him early, starting about the time of his night at the Village Gate. A woman left him, and took his son with her. Tim Hardin made other records, and they had their moments; I especially remember a tune called "Shiloh." But none ever resounded with people the way his first two did. That was a heady swirl of youth and nerve, and because he was young he must still have had hope, no matter how sad the songs. He wasn't finished yet. There would be other opportunities. But there never were. The moment of sweetness never came round again. And when I hear him today on CD, I sometimes still cringe with embarrassment, seeing myself in Maddy's apartment, painting Hardin's face instead of a naked Maddy. I know Ned would have understood my dalliance. Everyone has to heal, in Idaho or Minnesota, or wherever you may be – we are all of us sanatoriums for one another, if we take the best we are offered. And look what happens when you do. My babies are grown, and in the fullness of my years I bask in the grace and love of so many. But when the wind inside blows chill I can still summon up those old feelings of

bereftness, when you sense that everything has been stripped away, and your sister died in the night and your dad is upstairs packing his things. That's when you are alone in your soul, and your only solace is knowing your shout of surprise could not have gone unheard, and that look on your face, in acrylic or in oil, is all that will be remembered. Goodbye, Tim Hardin, my friend. I didn't know you, but I been places that you been.

(1994)

Reunion Tale

I was drunk. I was 30 years old, at my 15th year high school reunion in a small town in Ohio. And I was angry. Most of my classmates stayed close to home, but I had moved away – not just geographically but in my state of mind. Where they all took regular jobs, I became a writer, and put myself in the path of every weird experience I could. I was finishing a first novel, I had Alex Haley's agent, and my future looked impressive and dangerous. I had left this town feeling defeated by it, bullied by it, underestimated by it. And now I was coming back and I felt fierce as Elvis Costello's second album. And I wanted to run people's noses in it. I danced with a couple of girlfriends, and I could really dance just like the guy in "Do You Love Me?" (I can do the mash potato...) I pushed just a little too far with both of them, just to see the looks in their husbands' eyes. I told tall tales at my table, tales that subtly reflected my worldliness and hipness, and subtly hinted at how lucky they were that I came back to the little quarry town by Lake Erie. I was buying my fourth or fifth

drink, and tipping the bartender conspicuously, when I bumped into him. It was Jim Mussina, all right. The same brutal eyes I remember from grade school. That leatherneck haircut. The wide-spaced nostrils, like a mean pig. The cinderblock chin that could shatter an anvil. But what the hell, Jim Mussina was no threat to me. Any more. I nodded at him, Humphrey Bogart style, a combination of “hello” and “what the hell do you want?” But Mussina looked at me like he didn't know me. “It's me,” I said to him, “Mike Finley.” I swear a look of fear came over his face when I said that. Which was great. I would have paid \$50 to see that look. You see, Jim Mussina tormented me in the 7th grade. I don't know what his problem was, but he sized me up that year as someone to brutalize. Every day it was a different assault. Getting pushed to the ground, having my arm twisted behind my back, throwing books in the bushes, slapping me on the face and laughing at my tears. One time he stopped my bike with his hands, lifted the handlebars off the ground, and threw me down, with the broke landing on top of me, wheels spinning. He enjoyed seeing me cry, and though I tried to hold back the

tears, I gave him lots of pleasure. My rage and frustration were total. I had no cool in me that year, it had all been pounded out. And now here was Jim Mussina, 20 years later. He wasn't so big now. We were the same height. I had filled out, I ran, I was in pretty good shape. I felt that, if push came to shove, I could hold my own with this guy in the parking lot. In fact, I was desirous of 351 the opportunity. He and I stared at one another for just a moment, and I decided to take a chance. "Jim can I ask you a question?" "Sure." "What did you have against me back in sixth grade?" His eyes fluttered and looked away. "Look, man, I did a lot of creepy things when I was a kid. I was crazy, and rotten. I'm really sorry." Interesting, but I wasn't having any. "No, I'm serious," I said. "Nobody else ever treated me the way you did. Every day you take after me, and made my life hell. I used to stay up at night wondering why me? Did I have LOSER stamped on my forehead? Really, I want to know why you chose me out of everyone at St. Joseph's to beat up on." He flushed. I felt great slapping him with that question. It felt wonderful to have a fearful impact on him for a change, instead of the other

way around. I pointed at him, violently enough that some of my drink spilled. "What the fuck were you thinking?" "I was a messed up kid," he stammered, with the look of a man who has had to apologize before. "My home was nuts. My mom was nuts. My dad beat on me. I was out of control." "Yes," I said icily. "But why me." 352 He looked up at me and our eyes really met for the first time, and I could see from the yellow sclera that he really had been through something, some kind of conversion experience, and he was not the same creep I knew in grade school. What I saw in his face was grief. But what he said blew me away: "I hated you because you smiled at your sister's funeral." Everything seemed to freeze around us. The band playing "Hang On Sloopy" faded into the background. The blinking lights, the flashbulbs popping, the roar of chatter arising from the folding tables all dwindled, as I remembered that day. May 8, 1961. I had a sister named Kathy, five years older than me, born in 1945. She was born with a broken valve in her heart, that leaked blood and kept her from getting the oxygen to her lungs and body that she needed to be strong. Because of this defect

her skin was a pale bluish color, and her condition was known as “blue baby syndrome.” If you were a bluebaby in 1945, your prognosis was poor. Five years later, relatively simple surgical procedure would be developed that reversed the defect at birth. But we lived in a quarry town, far from an academic hospital. We never knew of such a thing. 353 Kathy was not supposed to live long. My parents' marriage was a mismatch. My father was a drunk and a party-goer, and my mother was lots more complicated. The family story is that their first date was to another couple's wedding in the final days of World War II, and to steal the wedding couple's glory they announced their engagement at the reception. They never bothered to examine one another to see if they could bear to spend a full day together, much less the rest of their lives. When Kathy was born, they agreed to stay married until the little girl died, so that she would have something like a loving home. No one figured she would live fifteen years, but she did. No one figured she would emerge as a very bright, very talented girl, good at drawing, a huge fan of Elvis Presley, and a participant in horse shows. She put on plays

that she wrote herself, in our garage, with a boy named Brian. I have a picture of her at age 13, astride a pinto pony, wearing a turquoise rayon cowgirl shirt, and a sash that for some reason said "Gay." It must have been the horse's name. Kathy was kind of the town ripple. Lots of people felt sorry for her and were very kind. Lots of kids were mean to her, excluding her from things, even though she was very keen to be a part. Her friend Brian, who went on to be one of the voices for the Muppets, seemed to know just the right note to hit. "Look out, Kathy," he once joked. "Here comes the Purple People Eater!" She loved that. She lived to be fifteen years old. She would have lived even longer, but for a dental problem. Because her body did not get enough nourishment from her blood, she didn't develop like other girls. Puberty came, and that was all right. But unlike other kids, she never lost her baby teeth. There was not enough blood in her to hasten that normal development. So instead her little baby pearls lived longer than they are designed to, and they began to rot. Her dental infections threatened to cause abscesses, which could be life-threatening. So to forestall that, we

signed a waiver with a dentist who lived four doors down from us. He removed her teeth, she went into shock, and died about 72 hours later, in our little 12-bed quarry town hospital. That was May 5, and it was an impossible day for me. I was 11 years old and painfully self-conscious. I had skipped a grade in school, and was surrounded by kids older and bigger than me, who taunted me for being immature. But it was worse than that. There was something in my personality that set people off. I was very bright verbally. I was a clown. I loved to tell jokes and make others laugh. I sometimes disrupted class with some attention-getting shtick that made the other kids laugh, but annoyed the nuns who taught me. The word they always used for me was flippant, which I understood to mean unserious and trivial. To me, I was just lively, and irreverent. They were attributes of the people I enjoyed – people like Mark Twain and Bill Cosby and Soupy Sales and the Marx Brothers. They were weisenheimers. They knew how to have fun with their minds.

And it was the part of my personality I retreated to, for safety's sake, when my sister lay dying. "Hey Finley," kids would ask me on the playground, "how is your sister doing?" And God help me, I could not match their solemnity. Maybe I grinned and promised she would be fine. I don't know what I said. But I did not act sufficiently grave, because Phil Gallo, a big tall kid in my class, bent over and said to me: "You don't seem very sad." In truth, I didn't know how serious the situation was. Kathy had been in the hospital before, and always come out. And this was just a trip to the dentist's. I remember when the ambulance came, and they carried her down our stairs on a stretcher, and she was already slipping into unconsciousness, and she touched my arm on the way out, and asked me to fetch her scapular, which I did, the kind with the plastic sheathing on the flaps, that sticks to your skin on hot days. So my friends were telling me it was serious, but my parents were telling me nothing. They loved Kathy. She was the only thing holding our family – I also had two brothers, an older and a younger – together. I desperately wanted to escape from the trap I felt closing

around me. So I must have told jokes, or been jokey, or kidded around with people. And it must have seemed unseemly. And here was Jim Mussina blowing me away at the American Legion, telling me that the reason he attacked me like a savage every schoolday for a year and a half, until I graduated from the eighth grade, was because I grinned at Kathy's funeral. And my uncles and aunts had driven down from Michigan for the funeral, and they stopped at a turnpike toll plaza and bought some consolation gifts for my brothers and me – those enormous swirly-colored lollypops, maybe 10 inches in diameter. And also a pair of cheap straw hats, the kind Sam Snead might wear, only painted in a gaudy patent-leather white lacquer, and with a big fake, fluffy turquoise feather sticking out of the band. It was hideous, but I loved it, and while the family huddled I disappeared to the nearby woods, wearing the ugly hat. I was trying to escape the vise. I could not think of Kathy's being dead and what that meant. I could only think about how it affected me, or might affect me. My thoughts were a jumble, but one thought I remember after all these years – I wanted to

live my normal life, of playing and enjoying the jokes and anecdotes on the back page of Boys's Life and in Reader's Digest. I walked through the woods, hoping to be distracted from the commotion. I tiptoed on a log that had fallen across the creek. I scrambled through some briars and broke an old jug on a rock. But at some point in the woods I was suddenly unable to breathe. I realized that there was no escape from what happened. In fact, by being in the woods I was in great danger. I felt that a ghost was following me on the path, blowing like a chill wind despite the beautiful day in May. I ran home, not crying – I was unable to cry, and I wondered if that meant I did not love Kathy. No, I just ran. I remember the funeral. I had already had a blow-up with my mother. When the limousine from the funeral home arrived at our house, I took my place on one of the pull-up seats in the back – wearing the stupid white and turquoise hat. It was everyone's saddest moment, and there I was wearing that hat, and complaining bitterly when it was taken away, as if the hat were all that mattered that morning. My mother gave me a look of such scorn. Years later, I still feel terrible

about being a punk that day. But I think, too, that it would have been nice if one of my parents had been able to talk to me, and explain what it all meant, and how we would go forward together. The reason, of course, is that we would not go forward together. This was the last mile for us, but I did not know that then. I just wanted my hat. The church was not really a church. Our parish didn't have money to build a church, so it built a school first, to educate us baby boomer kids. Until the church was built, ten years later, we attended mass in a gymnasium. The pews were bolted to the hardwood, so basketball also had to wait for the new church. Jesus hung from the cross at the far end of the gym, flanked by high walls of polished locker-room tiles. It was a curious effect. The funeral was a major town event. Everyone came, from both the Catholic and public schools. Everyone knew Kathy, and everyone was touched by her death. The family filed in after everyone else was situated. Even the choir loft was full to bursting. It was excruciating for me. All my life I had one instinct – to smile at my friends when I saw them. I couldn't help it, it was wired into my being. I think it was

an act of submission that I did to feel safe among all the bigger kids. Smile, be a clown, maybe they won't hurt you. I struggled through the service, thinking how much easier it would be if all the people just went away, so I could feel some feelings beside embarrassment. The worst moment was when the casket was rolled down the aisle, and the family was asked to follow it out, and face every single face in the church. I looked around and saw everyone I knew. And everyone was either ashen with grief or uncomfortable with having to be there – it was compulsory for the kids. It was like I could read all their thoughts, the thoughts of an entire town. It was like listening to a hundred radio stations at once – so much information, so much to think about. My mind hurt. And that was the moment I sealed my fate. Marching toward the sea of familiar faces, I felt myself blushing through to the bones of my face, and huge hot smile overtaking me. I didn't want to. I couldn't help it. It happened. What can I say. So I'm standing in the American Legion looking up at Jim Mussina, and I don't feel drunk anymore, and I don't feel like such a hotshot any more. "You hated me because

I smiled ..." "Yeah, I thought it meant you didn't care. So I decided to make you care about something." "You know, Jim," I said, "you can't possibly know what I was feeling." "Of course I know. I was an asshole. I'm still an asshole. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry." I felt tears coming, the tears I couldn't show 20 years earlier. Mussina had trashed me because he, too, loved my sister. That bastard asshole sonofabitch loved my sister so much that he made my life miserable as a token of his love. He was showing his steadfastness by breaking me down, day after day after day. Things happened quickly. I forget what the signal was. But suddenly we were hugging, and it wasn't a standard 5-second, two-slaps on the back man to man hug. It was deeper than that, and longer than that, and I could feel myself sobbing in his arms, my tears running in greasy streaks down his leather jacket.

(1989)

The Alien Corn

It turned out to be nothing like that. I was invited to Worthington by a very interesting man named Paul Gruchow. Paul had actually hired me for my first reporting job at the University five years earlier – which he didn't remember, because I lasted all of three days. Since then he had become a Congressional aide, a farmer (a very bad one – he once plowed under an entire field of planted corn in an effort to weed it), and now, a newspaper publisher. He was also a well-known regional writer about the prairie and other rural issues. He saw an article of mine that he liked, about the sinking of the ore-ship Edmund Fitzgerald in a storm on Lake Superior, and offered me the news editorship on an impulse. Alas, Paul didn't do his homework. Worthington already had one homespun author-journalist, himself, and neither it nor he required a bumptious younger applicant for that position. So when I showed up for work, the two of us were chagrined at our inability, despite good intentions, to work together. Basically, the problem was that I was too young and too

eccentric. I was good – the Daily Globe, always a good newspaper for photos and stories, also became a well-designed newspaper under my regime. But my judgment was impaired by too many years of surrealism. My first week, a wire story came in about a family in Parma, Ohio, near where I grew up. The kids in the family paid a neighborhood bully \$50 to kill their father, because he wouldn't let them watch TV after 7 PM. The bully proceeded to kill the father. I knew this town, and I felt I knew this situation far from the prairie. And I thought that entitled me to lead the page one story with the following snide headline: Don't Like Your Dad? Do What These Kids Did So it was that during my first week on the job, the adult readers of Nobles county, afraid that their children would pitchfork them to death in their sleep, clamored for my removal. Things got better after that, but a cloud of suspicion hung over me. It was as if a surrealist poet was running the daily operations of a small town newspaper. It put Paul in a dicey position, and the comity that existed between us dwindled. But I loved the town, and I loved the stories that Paul and other people told me – stories of

courage and pain and devotion. One involved a very well-known stringer on the paper, who wrote a biweekly "what's happening" column. Let's call her Marge. Marge told this story to Paul, and he told it to me. It seems Marge was put up for adoption as a baby girl by her mother. But this mother, instead of disappearing, hung around. She found out who adopted the little girl and moved in next door, and proceeded to become best friends with the adoptive mother, and "neighborhood mom" to her own daughter. As Marge grew to adulthood, she was very close to her mother next door. When her adoptive mother died, her real mother became even closer. When Marge was in her thirties, she stumbled upon information in her birth records that revealed that her good friend was her real mother. But it was too late – much, much too late – for the two Lutherans to acknowledge they had been living a loving lie all these years. So they maintained the fiction for another twenty years, even after the mother's health failed, and Marge took her in 363 and nursed her through her final illness. It's a beautiful story of commitment and cowardice. I hesitate to tell it here, even in disguised form,

for fear of causing inadvertent pain. But it's too good not to. Another story involved the gargantuan 6'10" prairie novelist Fred Manfred of nearby Luverne. Fred was a wonderful character who couldn't quite write a genteel English sentence to save his life, but wrote forty novels about the locale he called "Siouxland" anyway. His book *Lord Grizzly* won a National Book Award, so he had qualities of scope and message that belied his prose style. His books never sold in any number, but he lived a glorious life, building a frontier writer's home overlooking the Blue Mounds of Luverne, with a captain's tower of the lichened bluffs to write from. And his generosity was boundless – in his 60s he deeded the property to the local parks system, with a understood gentleman's agreement that he could reside in the place so long as he lived. But the parks system betrayed him, and seized the property for park purposes while he was still alive and kicking. He protested, he sued, he bellowed for justice – and was denied. So Fred Manfred packed up all his belongings and moved to the opposite lip of the river gorge and built a second house with his own hands. And this time he built it facing away

from the parklands. And his many boxes of books, he buried in Hefty bags deep in his back yard, as a sign of his betrayal. I uncovered a few stories of my own. A local pastor told me over lunch that a problem in his parish was the phenomenon of "prairie patriarchs" – incestuous households on the grasslands, isolated farmers who see their daughters as akin to his cattle, subject to their stewardship. A story this juicy could not be left alone, so I proceeded to write a three-parter, heavier on suggestion than on specifics, describing the challenges pastors and counselors had dealing with this Neanderthal issue. It was a topic that no one wanted to see on the front page of their newspaper, it being an extremely Christian community. Again, I looked outside my office window to see mobs lifting flickering torches. This was the last straw for Paul, who suggested that I stick to editing, and leave reporting to the staff. Despite my surrealism, I adapted quite well to rural life. Rachel and I rented an acreage from a wonderful farm couple, two miles outside the nearby town of Kinbrae (pop. 15). Every day I would rise at 5:30 and drive the 16 miles to the newspaper to start

assembling the day's paper, column inch by column inch. During our two years in Kinbrae, I had the opportunity to show that I too had prairie grit. Rising at 5:30 meant I was up well before the snowplows. And it was imperative that I be on hand each day – our staff was too small for someone else to fill in for me on an emergency basis. So I became adept at getting to work in all kinds of weather. I drove to work once with a slim, sinuous tornado dancing in a beanfield beside me, perhaps 400 yards away. In the winter, it snowed, and worse, the prairie winds never ceased blowing the snow in new shapes and depths. One morning I awoke to a snowfall of, on average, six inches of depth, but occasionally, up to 14 inches of drifted depth. I fired up my 1969 Chevy Nova, automatic transmission, and began the 14 mile trip down dirt roads to the paper. The trip took me just under two hours, because the car kept breasting the snow and grinding to a halt. In the city this would be the end of the matter. But I needed to get to the office – my readers, for perhaps the only time in my life, needed me. So I devised a technique for getting the car through these drifts. Every time I stopped, I would take the

jack from the trunk, and lift the front end of the car about four inches over the snow. This put all the weight of the car on the rear wheels, where the torquing action was. Then, with the car still raised, I would drive forward onto the jack. It was like releasing a spring – the rod of the jack would go sproing! and fly off into the snow somewhere. My job was to simultaneously move the car forward through the drift, and watch to see where the jack parts flew, so I would still have them for the next drift. I stopped about a dozen times between home and the first plowed road, about nine miles away. On the very last push, the jack rod flew about eighty feet into a ditch and disappeared. I found it the following spring, standing upright amid a stand of cattails. More importantly, I arrived at the newspaper before 8 AM, red -faced and drenched in perspiration, and ready to kick ass. Needless to say, rural life prompted many book ideas. I immediately began compiling a book of poems called *Borrowing from Minneapolis (to Pay Saint Paul)*. This was breakthrough writing for me, because none of the poem in the book were about me, and nothing was weird or dreamy or

surrealistic. In fact, I was doing the writing Paul Gruchow forbade me from putting in the paper – and some of it was awfully good. I dug up an oral history about a mean man from Hector, in the 1910s, who tied dynamite to his dog's tail, and slapped her to drive her away, but instead she came back to the house and dove under the bed, and blew everything and everyone up. Another was a portrait of my yoga teacher Dr. Arya, and what I imagined the arc of his life must be, to be raised a proper Brahmin in India, and to emigrate to the US, where his only marketable talent was to teach meditation, and how he succeeded, and bought a big brick house in Minneapolis' northeast neighborhood, and an Irish setter dog, took up scuba diving.

I wrote about how my artist friend Ray visited from Boston, and I showed him the lay of the land, leading him to a special scene only I knew about – an abandoned barn, in the back stall of which a cat was mummified in the classic arched-back, defensive posture. Every muscle of the cat's body had shrunk and clung to the skeleton beneath. It was a harrowing, horrifying, and yet strangely beautiful artifact,

and Ray loved it. Years later, he would invite me to an exhibition of his sculpture and charcoal drawings in Manhattan, and the last item in the exhibit, hanging from fishing line in thin air, was the mummified cat. He had snuck back later that night, on the farm, and absconded with the found object. I even wrote a poem about the grassfires that used to rage across the prairie, roasting cattle where they stood in the fields – from the perspective of the cattle, and their dread of high winds. A friend found this gruesome story hilarious, because the poem uses "thought-balloons" to convey the animal's internal

Everything was a story for me, and I was the poet-reporter. It was one of the most thrilling periods in my writing life. And it was the beginning of the steep decline in my publishability. Maybe it was the fact that the offset revolution, in which printing was cheap, was coming to an end (printing remained cheap, but paper prices rose). But I think it was the fact that my writing was now adult, was now about something – and editors found that less

appealing than my anything-goes earlier work. Borrowing from Minneapolis was the first book poems in the 1970s that I could not find a publisher for – and of course, it was the best. I also spent months mapping out a colossal novel, a satirical Brothers Karamazov about the rarest of crimes, a small town murder. It ported to the prairie the true story of a Coast to Coast hardware store owner in the river town of Winona named Donald Howard who fell in love with his cashier, a high school cheerleader, and accordingly decided to kill his wife. He hired his best friend Bruce to do the deed, on the sole condition that he make it look like an accident. Bruce, not being too bright, shot her instead. For two months, the hardware store owner worked assiduously with police to find the murderer – the whole town was on his side, as he wept for the TV cameras that came down from the Twin Cities. Then, as clues increasingly point back to him, he bolted, taking the cheerleader with him. He disguised himself as a riverboat gambler for several weeks – this was in 1975, not 1875. Finally he was apprehended in New Orleans and put in jail, but escaped, for about a day, when the cheerleader

smuggled a file into his cell embedded in a cake!

Eventually, the murderer was tried and sentenced to many 368 years in Stillwater Penitentiary. It was determined, during the trial, that his motive for the murder was not lust for the cheerleader – but anxiety over his wife's demand that he expand his business and open up a second store. What made the story so great for me was not just the cartoonish actions of the main characters, but the reactions of the people of Winona. I remember a letter to the Minneapolis Tribune from a Winonan, saying, in effect: "You city people experience murders routinely, so it has lost its power to affect you emotionally. But here in Winona, this is very new and very disturbing." I may be getting some of the details a bit wrong here, because I immediately began fictionalizing the story to fit into a prairie, not a river setting, and doing so meant changing details in my own mind. But the essence of it is 100% true, and I truly believed it could be as big a dark comedy as, oh, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. I would cram all my Worthington stories into it, too: the mother-daughter story, the Fred Manfred story, even the prairie patriarch

story. I would tear the sod roof off that whole sick rural lifestyle. But I found I couldn't write it. Donald Howard had two school-aged daughters at the time, and I learned that the foolish crime of their father took away their mother, whom they loved, and their father, who was their sole surviving parent. His story was not, as I imagined, really a comedy, but rather a funny tragedy. So I let the idea slip away. The villagers with torches, who I knew would gather if I ever made another joke at their expense, talked me out of it. 369 Shortly after I arrived the paper hired a reporter named Russ Vogel, who was raised a few miles away. He returned with his new bride Mary, a spirited girl – I would call her a wise guy if there were a feminine equivalent for that, because she had a mouth and a wit and she wasn't shy about using either – from somewhere in the regular Midwest. They were both younger than Rachel and me, and very bright and decent, and we took them under our collective wing, like younger siblings. Russ reported on area news, and Mary tended bar at the local Holiday Inn. A few months after their arrival, Mary learned from a medical exam that a mole on the small of her back might

be cancerous. The doctor excised it, biopsied it, and gave her a clean bill of health. But a subsequent blood check indicated that the mole had metastasized. Mary was told she had no effective defense against a notoriously fast-spreading malignancy. In small towns, everyone knows what is happening to everyone, and there is always family or neighbors to help people in trouble pull through. But Russ and Mary had no local resources except the newspaper, and newspaper people are famous for being standoffish. I would like to say that Rachel and I stayed with Russ and Mary to the bitter end, but in fact we were inconsistent, losing track of them for weeks at a time. Now, driving the endless township miles to and from town, my car radio would seek out religious stations, and I would listen in amazement as crazed radio preachers, from stations below the Mason Dixon line, aided in their transmission by the flukish miracle of solar flares, called out Satan and exorcised sin. I asked our landlords, Bob and Lucille, if I could accompany them on Sundays to their Presbyterian Church. I attended, and communed, 370 and sang, and ate cake afterward. One time Rachel and I ran

into Mary tending bar, and the light that used to pour from her eyes had all poured out, and all I saw was worry and despair. I sat with her for an hour as she narrated her stations of the cross, how one doctor said one thing, and another said another, and her hopes rose and fell, and shot back up, and then crash-dived. I hadn't felt so helpless since my sister was hauled out of her bedroom on a stretcher, in 1961. A few short weeks later Mary lay dying in the local hospital. Rachel attended her during the last week, when Mary was so sick she vomited tumor. It wasn't Love Story; it was a gruesome, wrenching, awful death for such a powerful, beautiful young woman. At the funeral, attended mainly by the news staff – Mary's mother, from whom she was estranged, never came to Worthington, either before or after her death – the minister asked if anyone wished to testify. No one moved, and rather than have the moment slip away, I stood in front of the people who worked with me, and began blubbering about Mary. I asked what we could possibly know about a God that permitted such a thing. I knew that life was perilous, and our chances of being spared are slim.

I talked about my sister, and how I missed her, and how sharp Mary was, and how badly I felt for her and for Russ. And while I was blubbering it occurred to me I was feeling something else as well – a kind of ecstatic gratitude for even the horror of this death, because the horror told us the truth that the rest of our lives hid from us, that we are all on a hellbound train to death and dismemberment – but our minds shield us from this simple truth of being alive. Tears were rolling down my face as I turned to Russ and blubbered a paradoxical thank you. No wonder the guys in the newsroom, the beat reporters, showed me so little respect. I was too weak for the business I was in. I was an emotional tourist. And I shudder to think what good my demonstration did Russ, who came around to our house the day after the funeral, handed over to us his album of pictures from his wedding, for us to hold onto – they were his only pictures of Mary – and then he vanished. We ran into Russ again ten years later. He spent eight years brooding, and then began to ease back into life. He remarried a woman named Cindy, and they were caretakers of a apartment building in suburban Saint Paul.

One night, I drove to the complex, and slipped the pictures of Mary under their door. But back in Worthington, our Wobegon experiment was coming to an end. And when Rachel got word, in our twenty second month on the prairie, that she was accepted for graduate study at Yale, I thought, one door closes, and another opens. And I was glad I didn't get trapped, like the other reporters, in that tiny city.

(1993)

About Dreams

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 under-appreciated, 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 driveaway car, cruising on a borrowed credit card through the high desert night.

The freak farm, that happy idea, 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 straight folks.

The loves of my life popped into view and popped out again. The man I envisioned becoming never came to be. I was the dude I was born to be. At the heart, at the core, at the bleeding center, unhip.

This Yeast Has Flown

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 that keeps flying into the picture window, 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 shit, what was that lesson? How was I any 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 a signal to me to untie the ropes that held her down. 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 Mopar

tailpipe/exhaust pipe combo pipe way up on the highest shelf slid down and hit me in the forehead and knocked me off a ladder and onto the filthy hardwood floor.

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, the landlord refused to refund my deposit, and we had a shoving match

on his porch, which he won, and 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 baked a loaf of cracked wheat bread every day with your own hands, you could stay centered and sane. A hippie remnant -- wholegrain bread.

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.

Then, 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, fluffy flakes when the weather is still warm, but the seasons have decided to change.

And I whirled that sucker 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, for the people who 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 song, I would be carrying the weight of this stupid year a long, long time.

but I am sure I was very full of myself. I was seventeen and -- I am probably still doing it right in this paragraph -- I wanted to impress people.

My mom never looked at these materials, so I could have snuck in something extremely self-destructive. I was a year younger than other graduating seniors because I skipped fourth grade -- so I am relying on the immaturity defense. Sounds better than the insufferable asshole defense.

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, students called the place Cowtown. On an aerial infrared map of the United States, it would have been one of the patches of ultra-uncool blue.

So I went there, quickly fell in love with a great girl named Clare Redding, whose parents were professors at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio to the south. Clare was beautiful and wise and she liked my jokes and was a modern dancer and even choreographed a pretty disturbing coffeehouse act to the song "Venus in Furs" by the Velvet Underground, my favorite group. Rowf! How could I not love her? Plus she had a little white kitty, named Vickiebar, meaning "honeybear." The kitty cat was, as many all-white cats are, congenitally deaf.

It was a place, in the late 60s, where all hell broke 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.

What Kent State scholars might like to know is that our mock-riot, a kind of anti-protest war game, 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 our uniformed brothers, 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 -- "No more Woosters!" It was also a bonding baptism for about 150 of us at the college. Whether we were black, white, short, fat, skinny or tall, we were all exceptional friends throughout our stay there, fashioning a culture of kindness toward one another and deep-dyed skepticism about the establishment. Drugs and what I would call "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 was about one another.

And I was the worst -- 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 there is competition.

I can see why some readers will find my "greatest generation" repulsive and wrong. A part of me is likewise aghast at the ignorance and naivete and narcissism that fueled our passion. But at the time it felt necessary and right, a developmental passage, the '60s version of a walkabout. CBS came out and did a documentary about the crazy goings-on at the old Scot school. At the New Mobe antiwar rally in Washington in the fall of 1968, our school had more representatives, oddly, than any other college in the U.S. We were either spoiled brats or prophetic messengers -- pick your politics. But we could be fearless, and we were all in thrall to one another.

I had a roommate who was an honest-to-god prince of Morrocco, 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 goats-hair robes worn by nomads.

Meanwhile, I was doing my best to antagonize people. I enjoyed making mischief and being a brat. I styled myself as 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.

No time left for you

Because there's something in the air

Chasing the moonlight

Thing got bad, things got worse, I guess you know the tune

And I will walk and talk In gardens wet with rain

If I ventured in the slipstream

I hear you singing in the wires

Strange days have found us, strange days have tracked us
down

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 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. He 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 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 loved something about 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 its mystery, and 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 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 this stupid, mind-devouring herb, like an innocent child, as if it were the only thing in the world that I could trust.

Chopping Down a Tree

I have a friend, Dirk, and we have a storied past. In the 60s he and I and four other lads made a celebrated trip in an International Travelall to Alaska. When we realized we had not brought warm clothes, we took a left and headed for the Grand Canyon. Later, finishing college, Dirk and I we were roommates.

We argued a lot, yammering at one another and ignoring one another for extended periods. Then we always glide together again, because we're brothers who didn't find one another until we were young men, and once we did, we stuck like regular brothers.

I'm a journalist, making a living on the edge of art and commerce. A weekender, doing art when it is convenient or the spirit moves me. Or just for fun.

Whereas Dirk is serious. He is the real thing, a poet-yogi pen-and-ink-artist, living a life like Vincent Van Gogh's, greeting every day as an opportunity for enlightenment, filling his journals, dashing off illustrated 20-page William

Blakeian letters depicting what's going on between his ears that day.

Dirk had a penchant for a while of starting Socratic conversations with strangers at the university sauna room. He'd ask a line of naked sweaty sophomores what they thought the meaning of truth was, and my part was to hush him up and get us out of the steam room before these guys decided there was something not right about us that needed fixing.

Sometimes he splatters, sometimes he lights up the night sky like a tracer. Then he seems as right as anyone I know.

I sometimes feel guilty about our friendship, because he puts so much more into it than I do. At my worst, I am a discourager: "Don't be absurd, Dirk." "Don't you think that's a bit half-baked?" "How do other people fit into your scheme?"

One time I was on a car trip up north with another friend and his two kids, 250 miles from St. Paul, and his car -- a P120 Volvo Amazon -- lost its tranny. We were in trouble. I

didn't have anyone else to call, so I called Dirk, who jumped in his car -- also a P120 Volvo Amazon, with a failing muffler -- and he drove the 250 miles to us, engine unmuffled -- and heating up our butts alarmingly under the car seats -- and carted us safely back home.

So Dirk is the heroic half of our friendship, and for years I have wanted to reciprocate somehow.

Last summer [1999] I got the chance. Dirk and his son Dane invited Jon and me to spend some time at his sister's second home, in the tiny town of Cornucopia on the Wisconsin Superior shore. We sped up in our van, not sure what to expect, but toting along an electric guitar and standard poodle, just in case.

In the morning, Dirk announced we were going to fell a tree. A significant sycamore standing by the bunkhouse had been struck by lightning. One huge limb was already draped on the ground, and the rest of the tree looked like it would keel over any moment. It was a major tree,

measuring nearly five feet in circumference at the base and weighing about eight tons.

One look at it and I mentally backpaddled. No way could the two of us bring that mother down. "It's too much," I said. "It'd take two days."

"Then we'll take two days," Dirk said, nodding emphatically. "We got nothing better to do." He underscored this point with a finger. "There's nothing to do in Cornucopia!"

"Dirk, have you ever brought down a big tree? It's really hard with just an axe."

"It'll be really hard," Dirk agreed.

I began to get the idea. We were cutting the tree down one way in order to prevent it from crashing the other way onto the bunkhouse, possibly killing our sons as they slept.

But something else was really going on -- an exertion of effort that was both epic and ridiculous, a vision quest to

put two paunchy middle-aged men in mind of bygone times.

So I acquiesced. We studied the situation, and determined that in order for the tree to fall away from the bunkhouse, we needed to focus our attack on the trunk opposite that. And so we began hacking and hewing.

If you have not hoisted an axe in twenty years, it is a surprise how heavy it is, especially on the metal end, and how few swings you take before you are panting and sore. You have to hit the wood square, and not let the blade wobble in mid-swing. You have to be sure the axe is strong, and the head will not slip off and embed itself in your son's or anyone's son's forehead.

We had the boys stand off to a discreet distance. Their interest in the chopping ran strong at first, but as they realized it would be a long day, it waned noticeably.

Dirk and I took turns chopping, encouraging one another with stories about Paul Bunyan and John Henry, Samson and Babe Ruth. Working for us was the fact that the wood

was soft, so the chips flew from the base of the tree at an encouraging pace.

When we came to an especially hard, green spot, we heaped coals around it, and let fire do our work while we rested up for the next assault. We made coffee and wrapped rags around our blistered stigmata as we let our power return to us.

Then the woods rang again with the steady smashing of wood by hardened steel, and the boys drifted away to play board games. Dirk and I kept hammering. We chopped around the trunk from all sides, narrowing its girth the way beavers do, careful not to alter the direction the tree would fall. At one point, we were heartened to find a section of deadwood in the trunk -- you could chink it out with your hands, it was so soft.

By the third hour the huge tree was no bigger around than my leg, and the boys returned for the coup de grace. The weight of the already-fallen limb now became our enemy, as it functioned as a kind of crutch holding the weakened

tree up. But on we chopped, trying new grips with our stinging hands, trying at one point to wrap the axe with just our fingers.

Finally, the tree began to make shuddering, groaning sounds with each blow. We cautioned the boys to stand back, as Dirk and I took turns taking individual blows at the whittled trunk.

With a whoosh, the old tree collapsed onto its crutch-limb, which bent and threw the tree back at a right angle. It was a big bounce, changing the tree's direction from nine o'clock to Noon. There was much residual trashing as the tree settled into the high grass pointing away from the bunkhouse.

Dirk and I looked at the tree, then looked at each other, and embraced, laughing, and clapped one another on the back.

I learned later that Dirk's sister was alarmed that we had laid a hand on the tree. Had we miscalculated, the tree could easily have destroyed the bunkhouse and the garage

attached to it. She had even told Dirk, point blank, to leave the tree alone, and let a local handle it. This was the problem with Dirk in a nutshell, she said; he didn't listen to people, and took risks that weren't his to take.

She didn't get it, but I got it. The tree was Dirk's gift to me. The gift was the blisters on my hands, and the sweat running down my back. Just what I needed after a summer of licking envelopes. Dirk in his funny wisdom was challenging me to cast off my nagging big-brother role and roll up my sleeves and actually do something.

We spent the rest of the weekend reading and singing, and photographing the boys as they tiptoed through an elaborate treehouse -- a sort of castle parapet eight feet off the ground -- that Dirk had been lashing together all summer. I still have the color pictures Dirk blew up on oversized 8x14 Xerox paper, of my son Jon looming like a morose prince in the angular August sunlight.

In the summer of 1998, Dirk and his boy Dane were up at Cornucopia once again, and it was been my sincere

intention to go up with Jon and have a great visit. But things came up. Writing deadlines, a family trip, and a computer camp for Jon all made it impossible for us to head north. And now August is winding down, and we have been unable to visit.

So I am writing this to you, Dirk, so you will know that I got it about the sycamore, and I am sorry to have come up short again. But in my mind, and in my heart, I am thinking of you, and stronger for the chopping.



Kraken Press

St. Paul, MN