

JUST THE PARTS I REMEMBER

by Sebastian Herstein, Xi / Colby '96

Have you ever been to Paris?

I mean have you ever really been to Paris?

If you don't know what I'm talking about, then maybe you haven't. If you've walked around with a camera and a guidebook, if you've looked at the Eiffel Tower and checked it off on your itinerary, if you've boarded or disembarked a tour bus, then I think you don't know what I'm talking about. As wonderful as it is to visit Paris just to see the sights, a closer inspection proves beauty is only skin-deep. Paris has the power to erase you in so many different ways. Not difficult, as you're invisible already, in the multitudes made up of the anonymous who concern themselves with their own invisibility. In Paris, everyone's got something they'd just as well keep hidden. 'Don't ask, don't tell' is the law of the street on streets where even the law seems nearly above itself, wary of drawing attention in a city where attention would appear to be coveted, but only to those who haven't really been to Paris. Only to those who just don't know.

You have to keep in mind that Paris has existed for over two thousand years. You have to remember that Paris is a city in the truest, most contemporary sense of that word. It may well be for lovers, it certainly is a city of lights, but you must accept that there is another side, devoid of conventional love, where the lights are dimmed by choice. The underworld of Paris is as seething, as seedy, as secure in its existence as any on this Earth, and the city upon which it feeds, beautiful and insidiously aware, creates a glaring contrast between the real and the imagined leaving a singularly imagined reality. Here is the most potent argument in the age-old debate between truth and beauty, seemingly separate yet inseparable, tightly intertwined with tacit complacency on both ends. Here are street side cafés whose very walls reverberate with the greatness of past patrons while proprietors keep a constant eye out for future genius while overlooking wanted terrorists who relax and ponder their anonymity with an almost gifted ease. Here, architecture of the highest order, mind-numbing in its beauty and its attention to detail, mates with the Virgin records Megastore, where a heroin buy is made. Here is the top in fashion, dictating what the beautiful people will wear the world over, and when those people go out they go to 'Le Bain Douche' where the booze flows and the cocaine is cut freely on the tables. Here one can walk the silent morning hours wrapped in majesty and history through the courtyard of the Palais du Louvre and understand why Vampire legends thrive, or ride a boat down the Seine full of people whose bacchanal overtures promote an impetuous existence that strives to fill an undefined void. Here is a place where wine is art, art is plentiful, and the drinking age - which is birth - only slightly precedes the age of sexual awareness. Here are the junkies who congregate in front of the Georges Pompidou Center of Modern Art hoping for a methadone handout. Here is life at every angle.

Here is Paris.

PART ONE

Getting There. Being There.

I arrived in Paris on an August Sunday in Nineteen-Ninety-Six. Staring from the window of a cab, my breath shortened with every passing street. Each click of the meter pressed the reality in a bit farther, and I could taste the excitement, the anxiety, the uncertainty of what had taken on the timbre of the first day of my life.

After graduating from college that May, suddenly summer was just another season. I couldn't let that

happen. Not this summer, the first summer, and perhaps the only best time to jump in, maybe almost drown before breaking the surface at the last instant, spinning arms and gasping for breath.

The opportunity to live in Paris for an undefined period of time was presented to me and I lunged at it the way a lioness might at a wildebeest, (only without the chewing and a lot less blood). Originally, my arrival had been slated for mid-September, but I went early because of a woman, that magnificent creature whom so many of us often find ourselves in pursuit. In my case unsuccessful pursuit mind you, albeit undeterred. It's pathetic really. The way a stupid animal repeatedly jumping from an electrical charge blocking its food is pathetic.

Jessica was her name, and things weren't serious before she left for a European tour, though they were close. I was hoping a week in Paris might make up for the things she had said to me before leaving. Things like: "You're such a nice guy," or "I wish every guy was as nice as you." Deathblow phrases, those. In my head, the response is always the same: "If you got your wish, then you'd never have sex." Ah! Sex! I'm no dynamo, and the act hardly consumes me, but I would like to have some more before I die. Where better to go, I reasoned, than to a place whose very language is love, a city named for a man whose only fame was seduction.

The cab stopped.

I had come to the right place.

I don't imagine I looked very Parisian standing at the door of number Fifteen Place Vauban, bags strewn about ankles that quickly lost patience with my legs as I was sweating, digging through my pockets to find the godforsaken code that would let me into the building. Sunday was the concierge's day off, so the code was the only way in. Nearly every single apartment in Paris has a corresponding code without which one cannot enter the building. If you went to visit someone, and they forgot to give you their code, you'd have to call from the street and ask for it. If, upon finding a telephone booth, you realize that you hadn't bought a phone card (public phones in France don't accept coins) and it's past eight o'clock in the evening, then pretty much you're shit out of luck. That's a bit how I felt, rifling through my bags. The heat was hot, as is often the case, and grew more so with every expletive I shouted - first at my wallet for being so full, then at the door for being so closed, and of course at the heat for being so hot. After thoroughly explaining to myself how much of an asshole I was, the slip of paper with the code written on it emerged, like a dank and mischievous earthworm revealed by an April rain, from a secret compartment in my wallet. Secret to me, anyway. After punching numbers on the console artfully embedded into the side of a doorway erected when the concept of punching numbers into a console would have had one hung as a witch, I made my way up to the fourth floor and keyed into my new temporary home.

The size of the apartment was compounded by its severe lack of furnishings. Three beds, two armchairs, one coffee table, a couch and a television. The kitchen, thankfully outfitted with a fridge, table and chairs, was missing even the most basic trashcan. It did have, unnecessary although very French, a built-in wine chiller next to the sink. Any complaints, however, were assuaged when I threw open the windows (French doors, really) and looked out upon the city. From the living room I could see L'hôtel des Invalides and Napoleon's tomb directly across the street. The tomb looks a bit like the Capitol building in Washington except smaller, and the dome is gold. It gave the impression of a huge all-knowing benevolent entity (wisdom?) turning its head to have a look at me. From one of the bedrooms, I had a postcard view of the Eiffel tower exhilaratingly close by. My introduction to Paris was impeccable, staring as the sun set behind the tower starkly defined against a Florida-orange sky. The first couple of days were a jet-lagged blur and I did little more than sleep and watch the few movies I had brought from home. On the third day, I received a call from Jessica. She had attracted me immediately when we first met, and somehow I wound up dating her over the next few weeks, in the lightest sense of that word. She was fun, and I'd say interesting mainly

because she talked so much, which is fine since it takes the pressure off me. And pretty. Cute as a button is the cliché that comes to mind, though I still haven't figured out what's cute about a button. Back home, we went out now and again, messed around, but she never invited me up to her place and never came up to mine, until now.

She came in with a big travel pack strapped to her back, slick with August sweat and breathing hard. She showered and we sat in the kitchen. It was Jessica who alerted me that the large container next to the sink, the one I'd taken to be a wine chiller, was in actuality the mysteriously missing trashcan. Having just gotten in from Amsterdam, she presented a bag of Northern Lights for our enjoyment.

Too tired to go out, the two of us smoked and watched 'Joe vs. The Volcano' (a shamefully under-appreciated movie) and relaxed. I'd been on long travels before so I know the oasis this presented. We talked about worthless stuff, or rather she talked, and when the words were done we simply went at each other. Kissing, touching, squeezing, rubbing. The floor kept getting in the way and it was more a question of comfort than desire when I asked if she wanted to go into my bedroom and continue on something softer. Her pained response was that she had to sleep. She needed to rest, you see, for her trip to Spain the following morning. I suppose it would be bad fucking form to be tired on a goddamn train. Though my teeth clenched in disappointment, the best response I could muster was:

"Spain is great. You'll love it there."

So the next morning she woke me and we went down the street for coffee and croissants. I put her in a cab and watched it speed off, leaving me to spit curses at a dwindling French tailpipe. Walking on a bit further, I discovered (the way Columbus 'discovered') Rue Clare. A conglomeration of indoor and outdoor markets selling fruits, fish, vegetables, cheese and wine, (the latter two presumably not quite as fresh as the rest).

I bought a cheap bottle of red at what would become a familiar shop before returning to the apartment where I planned to get drunk and bitter.

The first half of the bottle saw me lament the fact that things hadn't gone better with Jessica, and how easily she brushed me aside, used me for a shower and a comfortable bed.

As the second half of the bottle conceded the battle to my liver, the tune changed. 'I'm in Paris', I thought. This was great. So much to do, so much to see. It was time to go exploring, to discover what this legendary city was all about, to find out for myself if all the stories were true. The Latin Quarter, Montmartre, the Marais, museums, parks - so much. I was here! I ought to be tripping over myself to get out the door. Instead, I lay down and passed out cold. It was evening when I came to, my head clamoring to make a point. Too late to go far, no need to be lost in the dark with no idea how to ask for directions, much less have any. A good time to see the Eiffel tower, I decided, close by and certainly a decent initial visit.

When you go to the Eiffel tower, you've got to do it right. Across the street from L'École Militaire at the entrance to Le Champs du Mars you'll get an unshakable view. Directly in front is a large square where military tribunals were once held, and beyond begins a very long and wide median strip of softly manicured grass, greenly contrasting with walkways on either side. There's a break halfway down where a huge fountain spouts diamond water lit from below, and all along the outer edges the trees stand, disinterested. Roll your vision along the median and it seamlessly fades into a fairy tale distance where the tower stands in majestic circumstance. At first glance you may be shaken by the sheer size of the thing, being accustomed to those smaller tin models whose price rises exponentially the closer you get to the reality. Mouth agape, eyes speeding up and down this t.v. antenna gone massively, monstrously wrong - or right - the realization will dawn upon you that it was never bronze or gold, or old and dirty as you may have thought. (Unless, of course, I'm the only person who ever thought that). You'll see that in fact the very steel itself, the huge slabs

of elongated steel that twist and cross for what seems like ever are exactly the same color as when some psychotic visionary began putting them together. It could never be any other color. It's a place that forces you to feel. You cannot know until you've actually been there. It is a magical, majestic, sensual tower with more class than high school. What's below is an altogether different story.

Tourists.

Swarthy, half-witted tourists.

There's a huge difference between foreigners and tourists in the way there's a distinction between a guest and a family of skunks. The former is welcomed, offered food and beverage. The latter causes noses to wrinkle in disgust and breeds well justified maniacal hatred. I'm talking about big fat guys with hairy slipper-clad legs and overflowing guts pushing out an XXL T-shirt saying 'Paris University' over too-tight red nylon shorts. Or people unable to see the world unless they see it through the viewfinder of a video camera. Or varicosed women whining in English about how disorganized it all is, how they shouldn't have to wait on such a long line, and where can a person find authentic French fries anyway? These idiots and their piggish cohorts are tourists. The number of tour-buses rolling through this city is enough to boggle the mind. It's easy to understand the reputed xenophobia, what with the sense-numbing hordes of xenon's to phobe.

Despite the ugliness below, the tower persevered and I laughed at the hustle and bustle of human trash from a comfortable distance on the grass shared by groups of others like me, people who preferred to enjoy the spectacle from a disassociated position. Eventually, I got hungry and headed home, stopping for another bottle of wine and some food. I had the impression I could cook something.

The stove was a thing of beauty. Black, sleek, without a single raised surface - not even a knob. It was electric, turned on and off by a touch, designed to make cooking easy. I never had a problem with cooking. In fact, I enjoy it. This night was meant to be simple: Spaghetti and tomato sauce. I started pressing buttons expecting heat. Instead, the display began flashing. And then, the beeping started. A shrill, pounding, relentless sound. Two hours later, I was bemusedly intoxicated and the water was boiling, on the grill. Is it normal to grill water? Through it all, the miserably intrusive death throes of the stove continued. The beeping never ceased. That night, instead of dreaming about the beautiful blonde woman I'd seen under the tower wearing a silver short shiny dress and black cowboy boots, I dreamt of friends, old and new, and something about the extreme, exquisite importance of a comfortable bed. The next night, I cut a wire underneath the stove in order to silence its cries and protect my sanity. Two months passed before a new stove was installed.

I stayed off the sauce for a few days to allow for some clear-headed exploration of my new digs. I walked in Ghandi-esque proportions distinguishable only by not being a short, bald, scantily clad Indian hero who's been dead for decades. I was alone, completely, and spending too much time in an empty apartment compounded that sense. I carried two books with me always. One, a novel - 'Tropic of Cancer', 'The Stranger', or anything else that might make a specific mention of Paris. The other was a little red book full of maps and a list of every street in the city. The Jardins du Tuileries are fantastic gardens offering a spectacular view from their gates. La Concorde in front, a monument whose centerpiece is an obelisk that Napoleon sailed up the Seine all the way from Egypt. On its far side begins the Champs-Élysées, straddled at its end by the garish Arc De Triomphe. Looking behind, La Madeleine, an imposingly aged building in the distance, and beyond the garden's other side you can just make out the Palais du Louvre. Directly in front runs the Seine itself, on whose opposite banks sits the National Assembly building, an homage to Jeffersonian architecture, and keeping a constant watch, the ever-present Eiffel tower. Once inside the gardens, I'd sit at one of the carp-filled fountains and read until there was a mention or a description of a particular street somewhere in Paris, at which point I'd whip out my handy red street-book and look it up.

Once found, direction calibrated, I'd head off in search of the literary destination and reread the passage when I got there. This method worked well. It often took hours of walking in amazement through streets dripping with character, allowing me to see all sorts of Paris. The city is vast. I passed through areas resembling each other only by the sounds of the people around me, the musical language dripping from their lips as vanilla ice cream on a hot day. While just about every single French person smokes ceaselessly, apparently I was the only one in the entire city in possession of a functional lighter. I was asked for it repeatedly, though of course only older French men suffering through late-stage emphysema lacked this necessary tool, and never enthusiastic young French women named Monique who were not only incredibly excited to meet an American, but grateful to have met one with a lighter.

I don't mind being alone. I don't prefer it, but there are worse things. I have a lot of practice. Walking alone, aimlessly, for six or eight hours in a day allows dusty memories, important enough to hold on to, a chance to come up for air. On those days, my thoughts were of travels. And on that day, my thoughts were of a girl I may have been in love with once, who told me there is always a radiance in the darkness; that no matter how black the world may seem, a soul can always be bright at its core.

Alex in the Storm. Bamboozled in Mexico.

Lying in the transitory darkness of room number eleven at the Hi-Lo Motel just outside Minneapolis, I thought I might go crazy. Then, biting through the black, a dull pink neon glare splits the tiny abyss into jagged slices of light and dark, allowing me to see for the hundredth time: water-stains on the ceiling; my clothes draped over a chair; a three-legged desk nailed to the floor. Then, like teeth snapping shut on nothing, the darkness. In a bed somehow wider than it was long, I cursed the Hi-Lo Motel and its flashing neon vacancy sign, and the Indian woman who stuck me in the room directly below it. And again, doomed pink light radiated for a moment through the pitch-darkness of the empty room.

I left the Hi-Lo long before dawn or sleep, and checked into a Hilton in downtown Minneapolis that was more than a step above. It was a welcome change from roadside motels and the slow and steady drive from New York. I was about halfway, and already I'd seen so much. The tough part was seeing it all alone. I wasn't as used to it as maybe I should've been. The by-product of those past few weeks was thinking about things I guess I needed to think about. Decisions, exhumations, realizations, hopes, desires: these are all fodder for the lonely mind in its noble battle against depression. Or because of it. I could not keep my thoughts from frequent melees with memories - some good, some bad, some having to do with Alex. I remember seeing the mud in the shape of her bootprints. Staring at them, feeling them and knowing she was gone without having to be told. Knowing because it was just like her to track mud on my carpet on her way out forever, fully aware I would sit and stare. Knowing because I would know. Because I still could. I couldn't keep those thoughts at bay that Mid-western night, and even though the room was dark they kept me awake as effectively as flashing pink neon. She snapped off emotions, like a vacancy sign above a nearly empty roadside inn, only they never came back on. I can't say in which silent hour I decided to call her, but it was the same one I gave up trying to sleep. Alex is from Winnipeg, and I could still remember her address. It was easier than I feared, maybe easier than I hoped, to get her phone number. Before I could turn back, I dialed and simply stared at the woman on the other side of the booth's clear panel, drying glasses behind a bar with a cloth so bright I couldn't take my eyes off it. The bar was empty, far too early even for the alcoholics to begin, though I talked her into running my coffee through with a splash of whiskey, for courage. I almost forgot what I was holding to my head when I heard the voice through the receiver. The bartender's dexterous fingers danced the bright white cloth from one glass to the next without even looking. Such nonchalant perfection must come from countless mornings cleaning glasses in a hotel bar with no regulars, no one to talk to. She looked bored. Another sound in my ear, louder this time, and my brain snapped to attention only to find it had nothing for my mouth to say, so my mouth took over. "I'm in a hotel bar watching a woman clean glasses, but she's not even looking at her hands. She's like a machine, but

her fingers are beautiful. Have you ever felt like that? Separate from yourself?" It was the way I felt at that moment, and I know my fingers may have been as white as the cloth waltzing through the glasses just as easily as I might have dropped the receiver out of my hand. I was about to hang up. Then she spoke.

"It's you, isn't it? I'm feeling my body, I can feel my heart, my mind like I'm going crazy. Is it really you? Where are you?"

I was in Astounded, North Carolina. In Confused, Pennsylvania. In Whatthefuck, Kansas.

"I'm in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on my way west." I noticed then I had been squeezing my earlobe. I let go and it was numb. The bartender served a coffee, the cloth draped over her shoulder all the more radiant against her black vest. Alex spoke again.

"Can we meet? Can you make it to Grand Forks by tomorrow night? I'll drive down and we can meet, have dinner. There's tons I want to tell you."

That's it. I was going to see her again. She wanted to see me again. I wrote down when and where, and that was it. This person, once everything I ever knew or wanted to know wanted to see me again, two years after a muddy footprint, the signature of presumably permanent separation that left me in darkness. Vacant. Behind the panel, the bartender's fingers resumed their dance. I was spending the summer of Ninety-Four on the road, driving from New York to San Francisco where I would turn over the keys of a spanking new Montero to my Uncle in exchange for all expenses. It was his way of giving me a chance to do what I always wanted to do, if I had money or a car, or a father who wouldn't constantly remind me that some people actually had to work for a living. Everything was going smoothly. I had seen so much. In Ohio, there's a big red barn, solitary by the side of one of those flat, desolate Buckeye roads that go on for miles and miles without ever kidding you about having an end.

AT THE END OF THE ROAD I WILL MEET GOD.

That was painted on the side of the decaying barn in three-foot high white letters. I stood by that barn and looked as hard as I could, trying to see the end. I must admit, my eyesight - like my faith - is far from perfect. Further into Ohio, where colors began to slow the ride, I found myself in a field of yellow flowers that seemed, like the road, to stretch into always. Though I didn't know it at the time, today I wonder if it was a field of poppies I'd wandered into. I might have stayed far too long. In Wisconsin, there is a place that may or may not be called Wis. Dells, where apparently some sort of geologic phenomenon exists. I never saw it, thanks to the strip of highway approaching it, blanketed with all sorts of distractions. Go-carts, a Ripley's Believe it or Not museum, a huge mini-golf course where I played nine holes with a gaggle of girls on their day off from a nearby Dairy Queen who had difficulty believing people actually live in New York and don't just work there. People can be funny and kind without realizing they're being that way. Like Mark, the doorman at the Hilton in Minneapolis, who, after a late-night conversation about baseball, offered me a place to stay in Kansas City with his cousins if I was thinking of heading south. I was not. I was going to Grand Forks, North Dakota, and although I had a spring in my step and a smile on my face, I know the first was hesitant and the second forced. As I crossed the ubiquitous Mississippi for the third time that week I knew I was going to see Alex as well as I didn't know why.

I had been driving for five straight hours, periodically glancing at the clouds darkening the sky to the north and intently chewing on a stick of teriyaki beef-jerky that had become a staple of my cross-country diet, when I realized my gas gauge was dangerously close to resting on E. My mind, when it wasn't on the clouds to the north, was in them, and I thought back with a grimace over the two hours since I had last seen any sign of life at all. I turned the radio off so I might think more clearly and reason out my suddenly imperfect situation when the storm hit. The rain came down as if it despised the Earth, slamming my windshield faster

than the wipers could clear it. In no time at all, day became night. Above me, the black clouds were now and again pierced with blue electricity and the soulful sound of thunder. The situation was preparing to overtake me when I saw a light in the distance. The land is so flat here it was impossible to tell how far, but it was there. A sign of life, a beacon. It was slow going through the sudden storm. The terrain was in turmoil. More than once I narrowly avoided being hit by a flying bush or some such thing. Almost forty minutes later I limped the car into the parking lot of Monk's Corner Store, a place so far from any corner it was almost comical. Visibility severely limited, every step was a cautious one while remaining as quick as caution allowed. I had to walk around an impressive custom-built truck apparently without a single straight edge before getting through the door, and that was all it took to get drenched, almost to the bone. Bells clanged above my head as I ran the rain from my hair and behind me a voice full of amnesty resonated: "Welcome to dry land, young man. Here. Warm yerself up on ole Monk." Behind a counter overrun by various tobacco products and a revolving display of Zippo lighters sat an older man whose disarming grin contradicted his great size, holding out a cup of steaming coffee. I took it, thankfully, and inquired about gas.

"Yep, we got gasoline," he assured me. "Only I'm hopin' you won't mind bein' patient n'lettin' the storm pass us by." That was fine, and after using the bathroom I went to the pay phone. Before I picked up the receiver, the only other person in the store besides Monk and myself said:

"Don't bother. Phone's out." He must have noticed my expression because, pursing his lips and shaking his head, he said sympathetically, "I know. What a mess. My name's Trevor." He held out his hand and I shook it. I asked if the truck outside belonged to him.

"Yeah. Well, it's not my truck. I'm driving it for my boss. He's from Atlanta, but he's got a summer place up this way. I drive the truck up and back for him. Don't ask." Trevor was a middle-aged black man with a calm demeanor, and when he spoke his soothing southern drawl I felt comforted, lulled in a good way. We spoke for a time about the pros and cons of New York versus Atlanta, of southern hospitality and northern arrogance. He bought us beers and we stood in the back against the coolers, while Monk kept busy cleaning the big window up front. When Trevor asked what I was doing in North Dakota, I wasn't quite sure how to answer. I told him I was sidetracked by an old romance. When he pressed for more, I figured it couldn't hurt. I told him a bit about Alex, how the last image I had was her footprint, how I hated her for a time after, but during I loved her to the point of fooling myself into believing she would never leave. Over time, after she was gone, I realized that I always knew, somehow, she would disappear without warning. It never seemed right to talk about her before, but I suppose the fact that I was on my way to see her caused a logjam of memories and doubts and other nameless feelings. Trevor was a good listener, and I think he knew it was against my nature to talk about myself. Monk, too, was listening by now, both arms crossed over a sizable chest. I can't say how long he'd been there. Long enough. For a moment there was the kind of silence only a driving rain can create: a brilliant white noise that made me to feel truly present. At just the right instant, Trevor broke it.

"I'm gonna take a leak," he said.

I sat at the small table by the window and heard the pitch of the storm rise an octave or two as rain became hail that bounced off the parking lot asphalt as if it were made of rubber. My watch pleaded with me to believe it was just passed three o'clock, but the impenetrable darkness outside argued against. I was beginning to despair at my chances of making it to Grand Forks in time, or in one piece. That was when Monk sat in the chair across from me and began to speak.

"You know son, when I was young - younger'n you - I thought I knew which way was up." (This pit-stop could hardly have been complete without some life-lesson from the proprietor, I think.) "The way a man or boy can feel when he's got hisself a lady, and I mean really got 'er so she knows it and maybe gets him

back. A day like this one here, I heard what you were sayin', and I guess you maybe think you know what that feelings about. If you'll pardon my sayin' it though, you were maybe wrong. Thass okay, now. A man's gotta be wrong alotta times to really tell what wrong is, and that's how right happens.

"I used to live a few counties over from here when I was in childhood." He paused to spit a large dark pellet of chewing tobacco into an otherwise empty Snapple Iced Tea bottle. "And as I got to be older, alls I wanted was to get out of the Dakotas, go maybe to Chicago or even Out West cause back then I thought it'd make me a man. Got as far as Bismarck, moppin' floors up to the university there for a short time. That's where I started to notice that maybe what I thought was up really coulda been sideways, and I started to figure my wrongs and see what was right has always been so. Take it from a guy they call ole Monk, boy: this life's just too damn short to be movin sideways." And with that, he stuffed a handful of fresh tobacco in his mouth and smiled his smile, radiant in the darkness of a North Dakota storm, and I think Trevor saw it too. "You are a wise man, Monk, a wise man."

"Wise enough to know how to pass idle time. You two slickers know how to play cards?" Of course we did, though not as well as Monk who made out like a bandit in round after round of Scat. Until finally the hail stopped, and then the rain, and we all went outside together to smell the wetness and electricity, to feel the clean newness in the cool breeze, and to get our tanks filled with gasoline. Warm handshakes and we watched Trevor drive away in a truck with no edges, leaving Monk and I to share a smoke in the fresh of early evening after the storm and he said:

"I guess you know just about what you're gonna do."

"I sure do Monk. Absolutely."

He shook my hand and told me I was going to be okay, and either he knew all or nothing. I got in my car and drove south, back the way I had come. My last thought of Alex that day was if she still wore those mud-tracking shoes.

Eventually I found myself in the neighborhood of the Black Hills. I had a tent and some blankets in the back of the car, though I hadn't brought a sleeping bag, assuming I'd never need one. I set up the tent in a campsite with the help of some big German guys and covered myself with blankets. By the end of the hour, I was wearing just about every piece of clothing I had, tripled up on pants and shirts and socks, a cap on tight and shoes, fearing for my life. I heard my voice through chattering teeth: "I'm so cold. I'm dying." And it felt like the truth. Somehow in the height of summertime I experienced the most unforgettable bone-chilling cold of my life, somewhere in the Black Hills of North Dakota. I moved into the car and turned the heater up high, but still couldn't get any relief. Packing up the tent, I left the impudent mid-July freeze behind. I rented a room in Grand Rapids and got to sleep for a few hours at least. When I woke, the driving rain was back with a vengeance and outside it appeared to be taking its toll. I had hoped to be north of flood country, but when I saw the water flowing fast about a third of the way up my tires, I jumped in the car and drove, away and away. It seemed every mile was taking me further from, and closer, to my destination.

That night, somewhere in Montana and out of the storm, I pulled into a VFW post parking lot and slept in the car. The sun woke me early, and I stumbled to the truckstop across the road for breakfast. In the bathroom, I used two of the three quarters in my pocket to buy a condom from a vending machine for no particular reason. My last quarter went into playing one game of electronic arcade poker, and it was very well spent. That quarter won me a cool hundred bucks, and though the money was quickly gone, I determined to keep the condom for good luck. Unless, of course, I ever get lucky.

Driving through Yellowstone late the following night, I nearly ran into a buffalo steaming complacently in the center of the road. I mean literally, steam was coming off it. Dug in like a trench warrior, it stood staring

at me, maybe aware that I couldn't move and taking advantage, until finally as if insulted, it slowly strode off the road. The next day, I saw herds of these great beasts, but none held me in such awe as my late-night encounter with the smoking buffalo. It had stopped me, stopped the car with me in it, and a lightness rose in my chest. There was a life east of the Mississippi that waited for my changes, my revisions; a life north of the border that maybe waited for me still, in vain. Beyond the steaming buffalo, the west and south. For those, I waited, glad that the wait was nearly over. Soon, a whole new set of directions, of lives, would become lived and not imagined.

Ritzville is a town in the northwestern corner of Washington State where there is almost nothing. One main road, boasting an eatery whose grimy windows look out, as do most windows in Ritzville, upon the hulking metal casket of some long-dead large-machine industry that couldn't have been much when it was actually up and running. There was one motel, where I stayed for two nights because of the single claim to fame of this otherwise DOA town. A place called Zipp's. Zipp's is a fast-food style restaurant just off the highway ramp in Ritzville whose menu includes burgers, fries, and milkshakes. Now, I realize that this probably seems a hardly impressive culinary lineup to anyone who's never been to Ritzville, as it seemed initially to me. Until I ate there. The almost hallucinogenic delicacy that is a Zipp's meal is of such great consequence I spent a full two days in order to enjoy the maximum possible amount. Only when one of the servers recognized me as a regular did I realize my blurred judgment. Of course, there will be others, I thought. There never were. Ritzville may as well exist on a parallel dimension because no one seems to know what I'm talking about. But I know. Seattle seemed somehow saved for my arrival. I approached with the assumption that at least in this place, rain is the norm. All three days I spent there were sunny, cloudless. I tried water-skiing on Lake Washington, and discovered quickly why it never attracted me as a pastime. How come a wetsuit isn't called a drysuit? The image which most struck me was Mount Rainier. When I say I could see the peak, I don't mean I could see it the way one can see the peak of any old mountain. I mean the top of the peak stared full at me, as if the entire body of Rainier were jutting out at an almost ninety degree angle. I was sober, and I saw it for three days. Highway One is everything it's cracked up to be. The Oregon coastline might be the most beautiful stretch in the whole of the United States. About halfway down, there's a small coastal town called Port Orford, just as cute as can be. I could tell right away there was not an ounce of cynicism in the place, the kind of place I can't relate to because I grew up in a city where a healthy serving of cynicism is vital to survival. Not better or worse, just different.

Port Orford does possess a darker side, however. Darker, anyway, to those of us with a dark imagination. This beautiful, sunny gem of a town set along the flat top of a cliff overlooking Orford Bay hides a leprous cousin, the one locked in the basement that nobody talks about. Were you to approach the cliff's sheer edge, you would see another, much smaller settlement crowded between the cliff's bottom and the bay. There are no signs, no roads apparent to lead a traveler down. In a cute little luncheonette, I asked a cute little smiling waitress for directions. Her smile disappeared. "You can't drive there," she said quickly.

"Okay. Is there a road? I'll walk," I told her. She reached out for a passing man in greasy cook-whites and said in a hushed tone:

"He wants to go down. In The Heads." The man looked me over with a frown, head to toe.

"You can't drive there."

"I know. I can walk." For a while he simply stared, then pointed through the window at a spot across the road.

"Trail's over that rise there. Why you want to make such a long walk? I got muffins coming out fresh. Sit and stay. Nothing to see down there."

"Thanks, just ate. I could use a good walk, though. Over that rise, you say?" I was out the door and across

the street before they could try any other ways to convince me against it.

The walk down was too silent. The trail too narrow, winding through angled bushes just thick enough to hide whatever lurked behind. Each time I snapped a twig or kicked a loose rock my heart pounded, my head swiveled right and left expecting to see a psychopath with blade raised, or why not Bigfoot? Silence, to a city-boy in the woods, can be scary.

The foot of the path was a welcome sight, and a hundred yards further I could see the ... what had the waitress called it? The Heads.

Maybe a dozen or two plywood one-story buildings, all atop a raised wooden deck giving the unsettling impression of a fishing village lost in time.

When the voice reached my ears from fewer than ten feet away, I almost screamed.

"Can I help you?"

A man with a gruff mustache, shirtless and barefoot, walked towards me.

"Were you looking for something?"

"No. Well, ummm ... I was driving through Port Orford and ..."

"Not much to see, this part of Orford." He stood with hands on hips, examining me.

"This isn't The Heads, then?"

"Those're The Heads," he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

Somehow, The Heads are invisible from the top of the cliff, what should be the best vantage point. Rising out of the bay are three huge rocks, daunting, shaped like human heads.

"Wow," I said. "Wow," and meant it.

"In winter, sometimes they've got faces."

"How far out are they?" I asked, entranced by the sight.

"Bout a quarter mile. You can go out for a closer look if you want."

"How?"

"I got a canoe in the water right now. You ever paddled a canoe?"

"Yeah, sure." Not the whole truth. I'd been in one, years ago.

"Well, come on." He turned like a tide and caught me in the undertow.

The canoe sat with one end on the beach, the other in the calm water. He pushed until it floated comfortably while I took off my shoes and socks, rolled up my pants.

"Do you need a deposit or something?" I asked, lifting myself out of the cool water and into the boat.

"Well, I got your shoes." He pushed me off.

Orford Bay was tranquil and tame, perfect for the novice canoe paddler. With each soft and sure pull I was more and more confused by the subtle warnings from the cliff-top. Soon, it didn't matter.

I had reached The Heads.

Though much larger, they looked no different than they had from afar, and as I maneuvered through them, the sense that they truly did resemble human heads only grew. Setting the paddle across the canoe, I allowed the boat to drift. My mind followed, close behind.

Where does life go, from here? From now? College had a few years left before its uncertain air was sucked out with a final, useless breath. What would be my cushion, then? Graduate school? No. Not for me. Simply an expensive way of postponing the inevitable. There's the rub, though. How can a thing be inevitable while remaining entirely unknown?

Through Eureka, the northern bastion of the promised land, and down the Redwood highway - they really are big trees - and finally I crossed that monumental bridge, that cocky and fearless symbol of the best is yet to come: The Golden Gate.

Driving in San Francisco is a great deal less than easy, for a few reasons. First of all, most of the streets are either too windy, too steep, too narrow, or all three. Secondly, it's a stunningly beautiful city, making the road the last thing I wanted to keep my eyes on. Also, (this applies mostly to me), I had no idea how to get to my uncle's house. I found a spot to park the and took to my feet.

San Francisco is a city so pleasant I imagined it inside a glass bubble, the kind you shake to make the snowflakes fall. (Except it never snows in San Francisco, and the only things that fall when the city shakes are buildings and bridges).

My uncle is an airline pilot, taking people like me to and from wherever it is people like me go. After showing me the city, he stuffed a wad of bills in my hand and asked if my trip was over. Is it ever? I chose to go on.

With money in my pocket and no place in particular to be for awhile, I availed myself the luxury of not going home quite yet. I had a friend who spent summers with his aunt on Isla Mujeres, an island off the coast of Cancun in Mexico. She owns a restaurant there, in a hotel where Peter Daskaloff - subsequently to be known only as 'Dask' - stays for free. Before I left, he'd forced the phone number upon me, despite my assurances that chances of a visit were anorexicly thin. Apparently, Dask knew something I didn't, which is a very rare occurrence.

The idea of relaxing on an island whose name is literally woman was a stone's throw from perfect. Within ten minutes of mentioning it, my uncle secured me a seat on that evening's red-eye. At nine O'clock the next morning, I was stepping out of a Cancun cab, pissing distance from a small ferry that takes passengers to and from Isla Mujeres. The weight of my pack helped remind me, toot sweet, that the boundaries of immaculate weather end a few miles beyond the San Francisco city limits.

Summer in Mexico is hot. The absence of surprise regarding that statement is equal only to its surprising truth. I felt I could take a bite out of the very air itself, chew it like a stick of jerky. I couldn't wait to find Dask, to hear the look on his face in his voice when he discovered where I was calling from.

The moment I stepped onto the jetty, the no-longer waiting ferry pushed off its opposite end. I smiled, chuckled, and shook my head. These actions simply reflex, taking over whenever the mischievous snake of

bamboozlement slithers through the open fields of my plans. I am, begrudgingly, accustomed to expect something somewhere somehow to go wrong. You may, at first, view this as pessimism, the negative prophecy fulfilling itself. I know how it sounds, but it's not that way at all. I've simply been able, or chosen, to accept an impenetrable truth. Something, regardless of action or attitude, will and does go wrong. To get upset every time would drive me to pessimism. To run down the jetty in hopes of catching a ferry that had already left, a heavy pack on my back, through a thick unendurable heat half an hour after disembarking from a sleepless red-eye flight would drive me to become a sweaty, dizzy, wheezing pessimist.

I strolled leisurely to the end of the jetty, unflinchingly optimistic about catching the next ferry.

Dask is an odd bear, to say the very least. His heart of solid gold matches a head just as solid. He is dumb as the day is long, blessed with an ignorance of even his own ignorance. To Dask, all these are true facts:

- The sun is only as hot as a match, but much bigger.
- Depending on the day, there are between forty-two and fifty-eight States.
- Boston and New Orleans are both counted among those States.
- It's possible to drive to Jamaica. (Not the one in Queens).
- The Fourth of July is "just a day for fireworks."

The list goes on and on, but I'm sure you get the picture. For those who don't, I'm worried about you.

Dask and I became friends as a result of sharing the same two successive High School periods free, when he employed my services as shotgun in his most beloved open-top Jeep, equipped with the kind of sound system capable of breaking windows on a forty-third floor. He garnered never-ending pleasure from parking in front of all-girl schools and blasting 'Stayin' Alive' by the Bee Gees until some flustered educator chased him away. Dask loved his Jeep so much, that when he and I were visiting Colleges together in Maine, he'd lock the doors and secure 'The Club', even though the only other living creatures in sight were half a dozen cows and a rooster.

So you see, Dask is one of a kind, (a fact for which we should all breathe a sigh of relief), and as I got onto the ferry that would take me to Isla Mujeres, I was truly thankful for his most excellent insight regarding my unexpected acceptance of his altruistic invitation. (Dask, if you read this, that means I meant to rub your belly.)

The city of Cancun that I left behind is a breeding place for paradox.

Paradox number one: Technically, Cancun is not even a city at all. No lie. Check your atlas. The misconception - from which I was not excluded - runs rampant, particularly amongst college students.

This leads into paradox number two: Institutions of higher education fail to educate in the basic geography of arguably the most popular spring break destination of their student body.

The third paradox is more a subsection of the second, to wit: College students who sit in dorm rooms drinking cheap beer until they become stupid, annoying, dangerous excuses for humanity and wind up passed out three feet from a pool of unclaimed vomit somehow form a peculiar collective of disdain lasting only as long as their spring break whose unspoken, unwritten oath is to scornfully distort the very definition of 'vacation' by paying a lot of money and traveling - in some cases a ridiculously long distance - to sit in a

hotel room drinking cheap beer.

Paradox number four: Vast numbers of Americans go to this spot on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula where they spend their time surrounded by vast numbers of Americans.

The fifth paradox regards perception: During the nine months of Cancun's 'tourist season', (a longer season than Maine's interminable winter, whose unearthly freeze tends to discourage the majority of vacation seekers, making the state of Maine's official claim of being 'Vacationland' viable as paradox 5a), Cancun's thirty-eight thousand hotel rooms are filled to an average capacity of ninety-six percent, (are you getting all this?), and still a common complaint of Cancun's tourists is that there are far too many tourists.

Further inherent absurdities exist, but Cancun was not my final destination. And paradox cannot swim.

The breeze that blew off the ocean as the ferry gained speed was revitalizing and sensuous. My eagerness swelled, each kiss of surf urging I extend my visit by one day, and another, and another... I pulled out my overstuffed wallet and looked for the card on which Dask had penned the phone number. As I fished it out I had a momentary flash of a scene two weeks earlier in a small friendly town named Friendship, somewhere between Milwaukee and Minneapolis. In slow-motion, one frame played out: In a laundromat, I pull my warm pants from a dryer at the end of its cycle and anxiously grab my wallet, checking with a sigh of relief to slow my heart that all the cash made it through unharmed.

Now, staring at this card while all the saliva in my system broke and fled without a fight like France before the Nazis, my mind felt as though it were stuck on a rusty steel spike covered in lime juice. The phone number had been washed away as effectively as the Marginot line of my confidence and wellbeing. Only the last two smudged digits remained readable. My brain exploded in stabbing pain. The double-tongued duplicitous serpent of bamboozlement had lain hidden, waiting for the best - the worst - possible moment to strike. Its fangs, dripping venom, sunk into me then.

I chuckled, smiled, and shook my head.

Sitting, suddenly seasick, stuck on this boat, there were few other options available.

Panic. Panic is useless. No, worse; it's dangerous. I gathered myself, stuffed panic (mine's the consistency of warm oatmeal and honey, how 'bout yours?) back inside its black box.

What was I going to do?

Motherfucker.

Wait, wait, wait. Wait...

It's an island. How big can it be? If I just walk around, I'm bound to run into Dask sooner or later.

This was the first, breathlessly patched together scheme. As a means of maintaining the keel in my mind more evenly than the ferry captain maintained for his glorified wooden bathtub of a boat, I focused on it as nothing less than a plausible reality. The heat, well, the heat would suck tons of ass until I caught sight of Dask. Then I'd have my chance to laugh.

When Isla Mujeres expressed itself visually, I chuckled, smiled, and shook my head. This time, tectonic plate movement and geography itself turned out to be the mastermind culprit behind an impermeable counter-plot, a well-oiled conspiracy of bamboozlement now mounting against me. Had the weather been cool, and my heavy comfortless pack traded in for a sexy bike, I'd still be laughably far from even

considering an attempt at executing my farcical strategy of searching for a freak in a freak show.

Glad though I was to be off the ferry and standing on the solid ground of Isla Mujeres, I felt not an inch closer to Dask. The heat, however, was fast becoming intimately familiar.

Although I speak Spanish - the only attribute I held, as I would a golden egg, in my favor - I could not pass for anything but foreign. The population of Isla Mujeres has never had a need, nor felt a desire, to cater to the displaced tourist. It was a concern gladly left to their mainland brethren, recognizing non-Mexicans as travelers who had wandered (often drunkenly) onto the wrong boat from Cancun, perhaps expecting to wind up on Cozumel. I stood motionless for ten minutes at least, looking into the streets of a depressingly large town, debating the pros and cons of sleeping on a beach. It was the dribble of sweat making its determined way down the crack of my beleaguered ass that finally set me in motion.

My brain was boiled alive by the sun and the situation, screaming in pain-confusion-innocence like a helpless lobster whose claws are tied shut so as not to harm the humans intent upon its torture. There was nothing left. I possessed the mental means to handle only one single-sided thought process at a time, and the distinct sense that boulders were rolling through my empty skull was eerily akin to every tenth-grade geometry quiz I'd ever failed, (the sum of which is greater than my math skills can calculate). The first path I chose was direct description. Approaching people on the street, I described Dask with the bogus hope that someone might know him. Nobody did. After debasing myself in front of twenty or thirty people, I'd worked up a furious thirst. To celebrate the failure, I entered a nearby shop and asked for a Coke.

"For here?" queried the vendor in Spanish.

"For here? What do you mean?"

"I mean are you going to drink it here, or take it with you," he explained with a glaring lack of explanation. Another unexpected quandary. How nice.

"I don't know. I guess give me one to go."

Satisfied, he went behind a counter and returned with my Coke. I was flabbergasted.

Though we Americans pat ourselves on the back for our progressive efforts to ponder the abstract idea of recycling, it's a great deal more of a tangible reality in places like, for instance, Isla Mujeres. The vendor gave me a bottle of Coke, minus the bottle. It was poured into a plastic bag with the mouth wrapped around a straw. Fewer than ten paces from the shop, bamboozlement bit my ankle. While making an ill-advised attempt at rearranging the shoulder straps of my pack, unable to abandon all hope of comfort despite myself, my inexperience at handling bag-o-beverage proved costly. Staring at the sickening splatter of liquid frustration, I chuckled, smiled, and shook my head.

The thing about bamboozlement is that it feeds off itself. There can never be just one. If you turn down a wrong street and have to double back, wasting ten minutes looking for the right street, you've had a simple annoyance. If you turn down a wrong street and get completely lost, your car runs out of gas and you have to walk around until you find a gas station which gets robbed by a guy in a ski-mask who takes your wallet where you'd been keeping the phone number and address to the place you should've been an hour before, well, that is a bona fide bamboozlement.

There is no pattern, no method, and no defense. You can only hope it doesn't continue indefinitely, and try to remember - hard as it might be - that bamboozlement is often followed by (though rarely equal to) some measure of good fortune. Intent on quenching my victimized thirst, I walked on until I spotted a store that appeared it might offer drinks of the unbagable variety. Glancing at the posted menu, I was about to give up,

until the last item presented a heartwarming jewel of potential joy. It was even enough to beat down the snake, to put me back on track, to defeat this scourge of bamboozlement. 'Milkshake'. A ticket to straightforward strategic thought, so very necessary in my current situation.

Somehow, astonishingly, I was ambushed. I was bamboozled.

The word 'milkshake' was written in English, and while all the other words I used were in Spanish, I pronounced that one the way it was spelled.

"I'd like a milkshake," I requested simply.

"Que?" asked the woman,

"A milkshake. Milkshake."

"I don't know what that is. We don't have any of that," she said in Spanish, taking on an expression of the regionally common Mexican Perplexican.

No. Yes. Yes you do have it. Look, there," I said with mounting concern, pointing at the sign. After a moment of insecurity, she saw it, and when she turned around it was as the incarnation of the Devil.

"Ahh! Meel-Shay! Why didn't you just say? Meel-Shay we have." I could not have been more stupefied. Bamboozlement takes many shapes, many forms. My knees buckled, I nearly fell. Instead, I chuckled, smiled, and shook my head.

With a meel-shay as my only consolation, I sat on the street and gathered my overcooked thoughts. Regardless of what I read on my watch, it was miserably clear no time had passed. My mission to find Dask, in truth virtually every moment since leaving San Francisco, was a massive, astounding failure. It was over. I was too tired and too hot to mount any counteroffensive against the knavish battalion of vipers that had me under a bamboozling siege. I was indefensible. The primary reason I'd come to Isla Mujeres was to relax. Clearly, that wasn't going to happen. Painfully, I accepted defeat. There was nothing to gain from wallowing on this temperature-challenged island, save for achieving a level of crispiness normally reserved for a potato. The sooner I got back to the airport, the sooner I'd be home.

At the dock, another bamboozlement kicked my now apathetic soul when it was down. Tickets were sold at a store on the other end of the street I thought I'd left behind.

With head hung low I waited as the storekeeper wrote out my ticket. His counter was covered with stickers of surfing clubs, of moped rental shops, of restaurants, of ...

Hold it.

What had caught my eye?

There was a phone number below the name of a restaurant.

The last two digits matched the two still left of what Dask had scribbled.

When I looked up at the shopkeeper, he flinched and took a step back.

"How do I get here?" I asked, banging a fist on the sticker.

The heavy stench of bamboozelment lifted. The mongoose of fortune chased it off. Although I had failed, victory was thrust upon me. When I got to the hotel it was with a diminished sense of anticipation, a sense that had been dulled, beaten into a shamed submission by the series of recent events. Plodding along the wooden platform separating guest-rooms from a beach I had no interest in, I frothed with frustration, forcing a blockade against any triumphant thoughts. If this turned into another bamboozelment, I'd have no option but to sit on the beach and patiently wait to die. So effective was this blockade, even the sight of Dask splashing about in a pool was unable to lift it.

"Holy shit!" Dask yelled when he saw me. "You look like hell! What are you doing here? What happened to you?" His gleeful cackle did little to relieve my tension. It took ten days, each lazier than the last on an island whose bid for paradise would certainly have been realized if not for its proximity to Cancun before I could spell relief.

The Stones of Life. A Week in the Country.

Things change. Life changes so much. Sometimes it frightens me, amazes me, how a thing so certain and true can completely turn, ostensibly without effort. So much has happened to me, and around me, and though I'm still young often the one thing that keeps me going is curiosity. Even during the hardest, most depressed moments of my life, what stops me from diving out the nearest window is a desire to see just how the whole thing turns out. Have you ever felt that way? A wise man once postulated that taking the road less traveled made all the difference. I always wondered why he hadn't seen fit to build his own road, placing one stone in front of another without worrying which direction it might turn. I like to think that's what I've been doing. Someday, when all the stones have run out, I want to look back upon the road I've built and marvel at the twists and turns, at the varied stone selection and the grass growing through the gaps. Maybe then I can stuff my hands into empty pockets and stroll back, curiosity quelled, satisfied with ending.

For now, though, stones are plentiful.

Julie was in Lagnes, a town just outside Avignon in southern France with her family and friends at their summer home where I had been once before but kept almost no memory of at all, an amnesia understandable under circumstances I'll explain later. The first time I met Julie was years ago in New York, when she spent a few days at my father's house. Being of comparable age, he asked me to show her around the city, which I agreed to do with pleasure. I was young and impressed by her beauty and the fact that, being from France, she must really know how to French kiss. But I dropped the ball. I invited Nate out with us.

Nate is a constant. The best friend I have in the world, enough to call family. The one person I would take a bullet for because I know he'd take one for me. There is nothing unforgivable, nothing profane between us, and the only thing truly sacred is our friendship. Nate is effortlessly charming, and if I were a woman ... I'd be terribly confused. I knew I was lost when Julie paid more attention to him in the first twenty minutes than she had to me over the previous three hours. Hey, when you're sixteen, that shit's important. The following days the three of us hung out together, (rather they hung out while I chaperoned), and I was pissed at life the way a slighted sixteen year old kid is supposed to be. On the train from Paris to Avignon to visit Julie and her family I thought of that past with a warm rush and a concentrated effort to remember what really was important back then. She picked me up at the station with her boyfriend and another couple, and we all piled into one of those round, comfortable, deceptively small French cars and drove to Lagnes through authentic French countryside. Lush, aged with a wine-maker's patience. I was struck by the infinite difference in the feel and the look of this country as compared to the U.S. Modern though France may be, one cannot separate its oldness. Not old in a decayed, dirty, ass-pinching way. Old in a wise, regal and righteous way. I could feel it in the heat; taste it with every deep fragrant breath; see it in the dust that raised up behind us as we reached the house. That word, 'house', does an injustice to the history contained in stone

walls. Led up a staircase and down a long, narrow corridor, I was reminded of castles I'd never been in, to a bright and comforting room that all but guaranteed restful slumber. "We go swimming while Maya prepares the lunch, oui?" Julie said in an endearingly thick accent. "We wait for you there."

Happily, I donned my multicolored jungle trunks and walked around the outside of the house, allowing soft heat to knead me like the fingers of a skilled masseuse. I stood, feeling oddly victorious, at the lip of a stone ledge over which I could survey the entire valley below. Impeccable, dark green and inseparably combined with, and enhanced by, the constant low-pitched hum of beetles. It's easy to understand how a painter could become great simply by copying what he saw here, or a writer create with the clarity of thought and ease of breath afforded within such a canvasless masterpiece. After a time, I found the pool and jumped in.

When lunch was called hunger had moled its way into my stomach as a worm into an apple. I no longer possessed the culinary preconceptions I had held back home. Food, even basics, is not quite the same in France, particularly when one is without a stove. My meals in Paris had been lonely and simple. Eating in Lagnes was like chewing on dreams. What they called provincial, I called orgasmic. Fruity wine flowed freely, a huge bowl of chopped and seasoned tomatoes, all sorts of breads and cheeses, pureed lentils and peppers on garlic toast, and some things I couldn't even guess at. Soft, silky, filling and just right in every way. I spoke almost no French, and they almost no English, but enjoyment escaped from me as air from a punctured balloon.

Dinner was a cacophony of crepes: chicken, cheese, ham, vegetable, chocolate, banana, one better than the last and I could have sat at that table for hours. Days were made of relaxation, dozing under the shade of a tree, reading by the pool, strolling through the forest. Nights were for play. Ping-Pong under a perfect sky, hide-and-seek like school kids, bocce-ball by the light of an approving moon. I had forgotten everything, or at least forgiven. Cheap metallic wine to douse lonely thoughts was gratefully replaced by sweet, delicious nectars that made me laugh and dance and smile with every sip.

One day, we drove to a monastery. Hundreds of years old, it lay hidden at the bottom of a narrow valley, tall lush hills on either side. The heat outdoors was deceiving. Inside, the stone and shadows kept it cool. We took a trail up the side of a hill behind it and, out of breath, smoked cigarettes at the top. It reminded me just a little of Vermont, except that everyone but me was speaking French. It reminded me a little more of Italy, trudging up a hill to traipse on the remains of one of Apollo's temples. It made me think of El Cerro Pelado, The Bald Noggin, in Uruguay on my uncle's ranch. He would often take me up there, the two of us on horses, trying to steer me in the right direction on the path, maybe of life. My uncle Coco was one of the wisest men I have ever known and I can't forget those evenings staring out at an impossible number of stars and listening to The Truth in Spanish, on my uncle's ranch. Each of these places gave me a feeling, a rush of decisions I could never make. I could live here. That's what I thought. I could spend every day of the rest of my life in this place. I wanted to. But I know that can't be. I can never settle, never stop. Even if I lived five hundred years I'd never see all there is to see. I need to travel, to move from one life to the next. Staying in the same place, even for just a few years, seems like death to me now. It's the wandering, the curiosity, the ability to leave where I am that keeps me going. And I can't stop. I will never stop.

Needless to say, when the week in Lagnes was over, I didn't want to leave. The wonderful house. The town with the clear narrow stream winding through it and the big man at the bakery who gave us an extra éclair or two whenever we came in. Julie and her friends and a bond transcending language. Poolside chats with her brother who spoke enough English to tell me about being a judge in Tahiti. All these things I cannot forget. They have forever found a niche in the annals of my travel, and that's why I do it.

Eventually, of course, there was no other recourse but to make my peace as best I could. Inevitably, there must be a farewell. I returned to Paris.

That night, I experienced once again the nuances of French cuisine at Chez McDonald's on Saint-Germain. The guy behind me, a fiftyish Englishman who should have known better, stuck his head through the window (well, actually there was an opening for heads. He didn't smash through) and asked in English:

"Are your cones really just two Francs?"

Now, there were various posters alerting even the dullest of passersby that this was in fact the case, and yet here was this man asking a French woman in English if it was true, as though it might be a practical joke played at his expense. When she nodded at what struck me an infuriatingly insulting question, he proceeded to congratulate her.

"That's good." He said. "That's really very good." As if she had personally overseen the price reduction of all the fucking cold-condensed flavored-air cones herself. I always thought English people were supposed to be smart. Maybe it's just the way they come off. This asshole was as dumb as anyone I'd ever encountered in my life, and I shook violently, nearly spilling my beverage, disgusted at having been as near to him as I was.

One night, on my way back from the tower, a choir group began singing in the center of Champs du Mars. The sound and the view and the cool breeze compelled me to lie down and enjoy for awhile. Beside me, a couple in biker shorts named Manny and Amelia from Melbourne, Australia, kindly shared their melon. Someone, apparently in protest, had flung it at them earlier that afternoon.

The routine for those days was calm, smooth. Waking up late, taking long walks, reading voraciously. I usually don't drink alone, especially in bars where I understand nobody. To speak the language of love one must first make intelligible sounds in the tongue of really, really like. I was determined to learn some French.

As days passed like kidney stones I began to feel anxiety over the coming trip. A rare thing but justified, I think. It would mark the second time I traveled to Morocco. I'm lucky I survived the first.

A Deserted Past.

High school graduation, long awaited and joyfully accepted like getting out of prison early on good behavior, combines the best and worst of being a child of divorced parents into one exhausting event. Though I had to work overtime at the ceremony juggling my family and making certain they never came into close contact, my efforts were rewarded. Each parent tried to outdo the other in the gift department.

From my mother, a trip. She and I took a cruise around the Hawaiian Islands and I tell you it was pure decadence. The food on this floating five-star restaurant was spectacular. The entertainment was a little old for me, but I got to wear my white suit at the captain's dinner. And the islands! Every day something different. Paddling a royack down a prehistoric river on the garden Isle of Kauai, where I was everybody's 'cous'. Clinging to a horizontal root for my life off the side of a steep hill staggered by the gallons and gallons of water that begun pummeling me without warning from above on one side of Maui. Going down two hundred feet in a Plexiglas-bottomed submarine on the other. Speeding around on a catamaran, snorkeling in a lagoon until I saw a shark in Oahu. Beaches and boat drinks and eggs Benedict for breakfast and cruising around Hawaii was a damn lot of fun.

From my father, a trip. One month (with my brother in lieu of our dad) hopping through Spain, connecting cities and towns like dots in a game. Beginning in Madrid, we rushed off to Barcelona just three days after the closing ceremonies of that year's Olympic games. That's really a great time to see a city, if you can

swing it, because while the crowds have mostly gone, the trappings are still in place - the lights and the circumstance. Barcelona is a city of wide, rambling walkways, ('Las Ramblas' most notably), beneath the shadow of Montjuic, up which a climb will test your cardiovascular condition as well as your imagination as you look down upon a sparkling city by the sea that Dali knew well, albeit shimmering in reality.

My brother Diego and myself were doing our best to see as much as we possibly could in the time allotted. A poor travel strategy, I've found. What's more, we had to do it under a budget that was restricting at best, and which my brother saw fit to restrict even further so we could have money left when we went home. Against my overruled wishes, there were episodes eating bite-sized cubes of liver for lunch, and sharing a loaf of bread at two in the morning in a train station, hobo-style.

In Sevilla, we went to the Expo, the world's fair that I guess is a pretty big deal in some circles. My brother decided that once through the gates the soda machines would be too expensive. The vicious heat made readily available beverage an important concern. His solution: we each buy a case of soda to carry around in our backpacks beneath the sweltering sun. It took no time at all for them to become a warm antithesis to refreshment, and I stared longingly at what seemed thousands of vendors or pay machines that stood, snickering, at every corner. We easily spent twelve hours at the Expo, though not one of them was really easy. The midpoint of our trip placed us in an entirely unredeemable city called Gibraltar at Spain's southernmost tip. All we found to do was walk along the boat yards where every guy and his uncle offered to sell us hash. In retrospect, things may have gone smoother had we bought some. On one of these walks, my brother spied a ship that traveled back and forth from the boat yards of Gibraltar to Spanish Morocco, close to a Moroccan city named Tetuan. I made no arguments when he suggested we buy tickets and take a ride, and early the next morning we were on our way. Recognizing this non-sanctioned detour as our first chance for real adventure, I assumed no matter what happened, it would be memorable. Sometimes memory is overrated.

Once off the boat in the Spanish port, we got in a cab and gave the address of a hotel my brother had found in one of his books. Now, in Morocco, two white-skinned kids don't have a chance in the world of passing incognito. There is no option but to stand out. As we were about to ride off, a young Moroccan man ran towards us shouting in several languages that he would be our guide. Unsure what to do, we instructed the driver to drive while we looked back with concern at this would-be-guide who ran easily for three miles trying to keep up, knocking on our window whenever the cab slowed. Finally, we lost him. I was a bit rattled when we checked into the bare-bones establishment that passes for a decent hotel in Tetuan.

The few hours spent in Morocco had already worn us out. Forced to be ultra-conscious about our physical person made us tense, and as soon as we dropped into a bed, sleep was unavoidable. I awoke to my brother's curses. He can't abide wasted daylight. Wearing the clothes we slept in, we made our way down to the excuse for a lobby where, to our shock and dismay, the man who chased our cab through the diesel-filthy streets of Tetuan sat waiting. He jumped up, all smiles, and basically informed us he would be our guide. No money, he said, just the opportunity to show us his beautiful city. Clearly, there was no escaping this cat's persistent ways, so we conceded with a concerted effort to make like we knew exactly what we were doing. In retrospect, maybe it was interesting. At the time, it was miserable. The guide wouldn't shut up. The stifling, narrow, winding Medina streets were packed elbow to elbow with people who stared shamelessly, grabbed brutishly, and everyone was trying to sell something. I can remember turning my head in disgust from a freshly killed rabbit on a meat-hook dripping blood just in time to watch a chicken get its head chopped off with a cleaver. Realizing there was no way out, nowhere to hide, I felt every bit the stranger in a strange land, and I couldn't wait for it to be over. My brother and I were so discombobulated I doubt either of us noticed being led down an alleyway and up a flight of stairs until we looked around and discovered ourselves alone among hundreds of rugs. A salesman appeared and greeted our guide, who apparently worked for him on commission, and began in earnest to pitch his damn rugs. I couldn't tell you how many times we said 'no' before being disgustedly shooed from the shop but I think it's the one English

word Moroccan's don't understand.

Back at the hotel, I had no intentions of straying out after dark. As my brother studied his veritable library of guidebooks, (essentially useless, I've learned, if it's adventure you seek), I stared out the window and watched shades of blue grow black by degree in a sky whose darkness must have been a comfort for people to the east. I pictured them in countless caravans, atop camels, crisscrossing the desert, decidedly inexplicable in their reasons, entirely impressive in their actions. It was the desert I wanted to see. Not this dirty, unfriendly city of depressed existence.

That morning, very early, I was pressed awake by a sound I had never truly heard before. A sound I recognized immediately. A man shouting from the top of a Mosque tower, calling the city to prayer. The tower was visible from our window, though it was difficult to say how close, framed within a foreign sunrise. I woke my brother and we watched in awed silence this everyday occurrence in a culture so different from our own. Even then, we were both worldly but without aspirations of being wise and, trite as it may sound, I felt truly humbled. I travel to learn just how significantly insignificant I am on this unending globe that contains existence the way a balsa-wood cage might contain a hungry lion.

The sunrise prayer-call went far to dissipate our distaste for Morocco, but not far enough to keep us in Tetuan. Packs upon our backs, we trudged about a while, a bit more accustomed to the wily ways of the natives, hoping to find some direction towards the port. Along our way, we passed a bus station where one bus sat idle, apparently destined for Cairo.

"We should take that bus," I said. "Come on, Diego, we have to get on that bus." I figured he would never go for it, which is probably what made it so easy to suggest. I like to travel spontaneously that way. If something comes up, just do it, as one fledgling company's ad campaign urges. No matter where you go or how you get there, you'll always be traveling, right? There's beauty in that, somewhere. My brother plans everything. Flipping through those damned books trying to find out what he should see rather than taking note of what he is seeing. He's older and, I'll admit, more responsible, so I had to defer. He stood, thumbs under sack-straps, figuring out loud.

"It would take us ... then three days there ... back to Europe by way of Italy or Greece ... leaves ten days to make Milan for the flight home ... " I thought he was humoring me, muttering about cushion time, about how we wanted to go to Rome anyway, etc. ... As soon as I had talked myself out of ever wanting to get on the bus, and realized it was a terrible idea to begin with, my brother said:

"Fine. Let's find out what time it leaves."

"Diego, wait a minute. Are you sure that's a good idea? I'd hate to wind up stuck in the desert, you know?"

"What's the matter? You're the one always talking about adventure this and adventure that. Here's the chance."

"Okay, well, that's just me talking. I think maybe no." "Come on. Cairo's supposed to be unbelievable. Let's go."

The discussion was over. I wish we had never walked past that station. I wish I had kept my fucking mouth shut.

Sitting in the back of the bus rolling through and out of the city, I wanted to close my eyes and be someplace else. We'd bought half a dozen sandwiches each and about as many gallons of water before embarking, unaware of the deal with food. I knew the sandwiches wouldn't be eaten the moment I stepped aboard. It would take a cyclopean effort to eat anything in the stink of this smoking-encouraged bus lacking

only a few goats pissing in the aisles. It was crowded and loud and I couldn't understand a word and I had visions of this hunk of shit overheating somewhere in the desert. I'm not of the mind that being adventurous means being stupid, though admittedly the two are often bound up in one another. I did all I could to try and fall asleep, to make the ride feel shorter. As I'm sure we're all aware, trying to sleep is futile. It makes you appreciate the option of being knocked unconscious with a shovel. Infuriating hours passed. My mood was grim and I could give two shits for a pyramid at that point. Now and again, the bus pulled over to the side of the road and all the passengers silently filed out. They each laid their own small carpet on the ground and, kneeling towards Mecca, they prayed. Of course my brother and I were the only two infidels, and we would quietly slink away in respect to their privacy. I realize I was too young then to truly appreciate the life lessons that knelt about me, but I can never forget. Memory is a large part of experience, and I'm grateful. All I felt at the time was misery and discomfort.

As the deadening sun made its much anticipated exit to clear room for ashy darkness, sleep cut me a break and let me drift into its domain. I dreamt of the Sphinx, laughing at what I felt confident was the answer to its riddle.

"No, little boy," it guffawed. "You're wrong. The answer is eleven. But I'll let you pass for a box of Cracker Jacks and some chocolate milk." Dreams are strange and dreamy.

I was rattled awake with what struck me as unnecessary force.

"What! The fuck."

Out the window was the desert beneath an early morning sun, like a titanicly humongous beach without water. I've hated the beach since I was twelve, when I nearly died off one. I was a great swimmer as a child, or so I thought. Good enough to swim in the Long Island Sound by myself. Until one day I was out pretty far when it started raining. The waves grew larger and more menacing, my only recourse to swim into them, under and through them. With the storm imminent I chanced a glance towards shore and was shocked by how much of it I could see. When I noticed the only other person still on the beach was the lifeguard walking away from it, I knew I was cooked. Somehow, I remembered my lessons and took off my bathing suit (red jungle scene), waved it over my head and began screaming like a constipated banshee. Next thing I remember, I'm having my stomach pumped on the beach, completely naked. It was the first time in my life that I felt death kick me in the ass with absolute certainty, only to run away like my brother used to after giving me a charley horse. The second time was in the desert, somewhere between Morocco and Egypt.

"You should be awake now," my brother said with a nod towards the other side of the bus. It had stopped, and though the passengers were restless, they weren't getting up for prayer. My first guess was that the small white stucco cabin visible through a dusty window might be a food or gas stop. Then I spied three men come out of it in green army camouflage suits, odd as there was nothing green for miles. To complete this already unsavory picture, each carried a very large automatic rifle. They boarded the now quiet bus, and I saw they weren't men at all but boys, maybe younger than I was.

The other passengers silently waved papers and passports for the soldiers to inspect and I silently wished we had never left Spain. It was impossible to circumvent our dissimilarity from the typical Morocco to Egypt bus passenger. One of the gun-toting kids approached my brother and I, expressionless until he held our passports, and his face contorted into the kind of disbelief that made me hitch my breath and will the barrel of his weapon to remain pointed at the floor. While he maneuvered his way down the aisle to his cohorts in arms still holding our passports, I turned to my brother.

"We're fucked," I casually mentioned, though by the pale skin, wide eyes, and shaking chin I guess he had figured that out on his own. The three youngins spoke to each other in heated Arabic, wielding our passports angrily as though they were pink slips. After a few excruciating moments and an awful lot of fingers

pointed in our direction, a decision was reached. The very wrong one, I think.

Two cubs rudely beckoned us from our seats while the third grabbed our bags. With what I had every reason to believe was a loaded gun in my back I was disbelievably led off the bus behind Diego, who had by now turned white as a ghost.

It was cooler off the bus than on. A soft breeze blew towards distinctly defined hills at an impossible distance and the first thing to really strike me about the desert was how the sand into which I half expected to sink up to my ankles was actually hard as tarmac. The first thing to really strike me about the back of my knees was the butt of a rifle, and in the blink of an eye I was on the ground beside my brother who knelt like he was trying to find Mecca.

Soothing, genuine calm overcame me as it often does in moments of great chaos, and I even felt a level of amusement when I heard the diesel engine roar and the bus take off, chasing the breeze toward the distant hills.

Okay. So things had gone poorly. We spoke no Arabic, and our captors - for lack of a better word - no English. Our bags were taken into the stucco shed and searched. Sweat trickled nonchalantly down my back. I could hear the two inside the shed, shouting in harsh tones into a radio identifiable by even harsher static. From the corner of one eye I saw the young soldier on guard light a cigarette and I geared my psychic powers towards forcing him to offer me one. My powers failed me, as they usually do, thus fulfilling my predictions. Both my brother and I were speechless, his mind locked into running silent scenarios, my eyes running races through the grooves in the stucco wall three feet in front.

We were in a shitload of trouble. Nobody knew where we were. Leaving Europe had never been part of the game plan. Now, in the desert, two sweaty, scared, confused kids at the whim of three heat-packing adolescents, our position could hardly have been much worse. Things were really, really bad.

Kneeling upon the tarmac sand for hours, the ebb and flow of hatred, confusion, compassion and boredom. For a time that seemed it would end in absolute darkness we were prodded, shouted at, pushed down and kicked. Later, I thought of action heroes faced with the possibility of imminent death who manage to restructure the situation to be the only ones left standing. Me, I'm no action hero. Forced to consider the distinct possibility of being shot in the back, I could only stare forward and will things to get better of their own accord, wondering if I would ever again taste the carbonara at Gino's on sixty-third and Lexington avenue in New York. My God! Gino's with its wallpaper of zebras chasing arrows, arrows chasing zebras, against a deep red background - what I wouldn't give to have been back there at that moment; to have been anywhere. The very idea of jumping up on aching knees to fight my way out never crossed my mind. If I were to die, it would be quietly, without fanfare. The survival instinct is severely overrated, particularly when semiautomatic weapons come into play.

The sensations are indescribable. I think I've blocked them out. We've spoken about it, my brother and I, and neither of us can find deeper meaning in any of it. He says it made him angry, having to die on his knees in the desert like an animal. Myself, I remember only the spectacular calm that soothed my whole being like a drug and the hope that when death happened it would be quick, and that it wouldn't hurt. I felt badly for my mother and father, losing the two of us at once. Literally losing us, not knowing where we were, or even where to look.

At some point our tormentors ceased tormenting us and spoke among themselves in what seemed a quizzical tone. I assumed they were trying to decide whether to kill us then, to kill us both or one at a time. Reservedly flabbergasted that I would come to an end like this one, I cleared my mind for any final thoughts as I waited - anxiously, I must admit - for my life to pass before me.

Then, something happened.

Two of the boy-soldiers pulled my brother up by his armpits and led him around the small building. I tried to keep my personal sentinel from hearing my tears, dry and painful beneath the uncaring desert sun. I desperately wanted to block out the sound of the gunshots, but before I couldn't figure out how, Diego came around the other side of the building with his two friends in tow sporting a large wet spot on the front of his pants. As I was forcefully hoisted to my shaky feet and led around the building on numbed knees, I weighed death against indefinite incarceration and found them both indisputably unpleasant. Imagine that. I was stopped, and a wooden cup was thrust into my hand, brimming with water. All else was forgotten. I drank deeply, breathing through my nose so as not to interrupt my copious enjoyment of the deliciously refreshing beverage. When the last drop was gone, breathing hard and unsure what to do, I held the cup out to be taken. It was filled again and - praise Allah! - a cigarette was proffered towards me. I took it, one of them lit it, and the first drag was the deepest and most decadent I have ever known. Only when they lit butts of their own did I begin to feel there was still a chance to end up with a story to tell. It felt like a ball of wax string unraveling in my gut, which for a moment had me worried I might throw up all over a guy with a really big gun, but that soon passed. One of them pointed out towards the hills at what may have been a cloud of dust from the wheels of an automobile. The look in their eyes and the tone in their voice lent credence to the idea, and gave the impression our fate would be decided by whomever was approaching.

With great sadness, I tossed the bare, burnt filter to the ground, slowly finished the water in the wooden cup, and allowed myself to be led back around and into the building. It was bare inside, our belongings strewn over a table in the back, and what resembled a Solid State radio in one corner. I was pushed into a room where my brother sat, head in hands, unimpressed at how air-condition cool it was inside as opposed to out in the desert. There was no door, but the tiny room was nonetheless transformed into a cell when one of the young soldier-dudes stood just beyond the threshold. After assuring each other we were begrudgingly okay under the circumstances, Diego and I resumed our silence.

Being off my knees and out of the heat went far to clear my head for more immediate considerations, such as 'what next.' I was sure the final decision would come from the man who approached across unknown miles of Sahara. It was impossible to make any decisive estimate as to how long that might take. The desert has a way of disturbing otherwise reliable perceptions. Frustration ate at my gut as I realized there was no time frame here in a situation where I really needed answers. I pined for a book to read, to tug me gently away from the debilitating feeling of utter helplessness that nibbled at my brain, making a hole to swim into so it could feast from the inside like a school of pirhanna, only without quite so many teeth.

Waiting sucks. Be it for a person, a movie, drugs, or a table at Gino's, it sucks. The waiter is absolutely powerless, totally dependent upon that for which he is waiting.

For a long while we were left alone, and time simply passed. Our three sentinels went about their abstractly normal behavior, which seemed to be not much of anything at all. The five of us were prisoners of this desert, we more so than they due to the unfair distribution of firepower. Diego had passed out in a corner, and I was left to ignore my hunger, and the fact that there hadn't been another bus out this way since our ill-fated arrival. I found myself chuckling at the situation as if it were already over, and had to remind myself of where I was. 'If nothing else', I thought, 'It'll make a good story.' I tried creating endings that consisted of deep apologies and drinks with the soldiers, laughing and comparing cultural differences over vodka gimlets and pigeon pie. Yeah, sure. Whatever.

The alternative ending was an interview on CNN ten years hence for a special program called "Hostages: Capturing Consciousness." It's a bit rattling to be in a situation where only the first ending was unrealistic. I shifted my attention to picking bits of sand and rock out of my knees. Somehow, almost alarmingly, I found that I was bored. I tried investigating this ludicrously misplaced feeling: how could I possibly be bored with

my life potentially hanging in the balance? How could I not be alert when three soldiers with hefty weapons only steps away considered me the bad guy? It made no sense. I suppose the tension at that point was like pie compared to the initial few hours when death by truncated firing squad was an all too distinct possibility. All my senses seemed dull. It became increasingly difficult to cohere thoughts and almost before realizing how mentally and physically exhausted I was, I had joined my brother, passed out in the opposite corner.

Some time later - not nearly enough - I was gently kicked awake, if a kick can be gentle. Darkness was broken by a halo-rim of illumination transforming the boy standing in the doorway into a silhouette belonging on a 'Soldier Of Fortune' cover. I wanted to cry. Fear, frustration, fatigue: these things threatened my groggy, depleted sanity. How could this have happened? The calm of earlier was gone, replaced by a dull panic, and a buzzing, flashing neon sign that read 'TROUBLE' chained to the pit of my stomach. It was strongly suggested we stand and follow the soldiers outside.

With our backs to the building's stucco wall, I managed a good view of the desert night sky, one I wish had come under different conditions. Glorious is a word that jumps to mind, with honorable mention going to mind-numbingly vast and otherworldly. If my powers of perception weren't clouded by the unshakable image of a three-foot semiautomatic machine gun, I may have imagined myself on the moon, having hiked up to this plateau from the banks of the Sea of Tranquillity to experience a sky made of dark velvet and diamonds.

Close enough to hear the sound of its motor, the jeep (I could see it was a jeep) approached with its headlights biting through the darkness. The five of us stood silently, squinting into the seemingly stationary headlights like so many deer on a country road, until at last the spell was broken by one of the boys who first shouted and then acted out the command to lock our hands behind our heads.

I have never been arrested. The closest run-in I'd had with police was in Westhampton when I was nine. A friend and I had walked down the beach a great deal further than we realized, and everyone thought we'd been kidnapped. This, well this was intimidating.

I closed my eyes. Shut them tightly.

When I opened them again, the jeep was upon us.

Two men sat in the car, and it was no secret who the boss was. His shoulders were broad, his gut protruded, and his red beret sat just so atop his almost friendly, almost black face. The khaki he wore suited the surroundings a great deal more than the forest green of our three friends, but I have the sense that you can't really be lost in the desert unless you want to be lost. You can get lost there, and I think that's a big difference. Without a word, the head honcho walked by, close enough for me to smell cologne beneath his sweat. An odd stench, here at the end of the world. One of the soldiers put a gun-butt to my shoulder and prodded me in. Alone.

His Yaphet Koto-like cat sat suavely smoking a cigarette, a whiskey-dipped Nat Sherman no less, behind the table. A lamp cast a grainy orange glow across the room, and I was forcibly offered a chair facing him. A sound of departing footsteps and it was just the two of us. From across the table, he pushed a camel-skin cigarette case towards me and just like that, I was saved. I realize it might mean little to you, but the camel-skin case, the Nat Sherman's, and the silver Zippo he lit them with were symbols to me. They symbolized a man interested in doing things the right way. Equally as important, he spoke English. "Do you know where you are?" he asked in a tone signifying full knowledge of my answer.

"Not exactly, sir. No."

"Why are you here?" leaning back in the chair, he looked too relaxed. Maybe because I never felt less so in

all my life.

"Sir, my brother and I took a bus from Tetuan, going to Cairo. Just for fun, sir, to visit. I honestly don't know where we are."

"I think you and your brother made a mistake." Like I hadn't figured that one out for myself.

"Yes, sir."

"This name," he had my passport now. "You are a Jew." I wanted to cry, or run full-tilt into a brick wall and end this. He took a pull from his cigarette and I could hear the paper burn like his eyes into me. Look, I thought. Look into me, into my soul. I am innocent.

"You are in Algeria," he said finally. "Near the border. The next stop for your bus was Libya. You understand now, why you have been detained?" Libya. Holy fuck.

"Sir, I don't know what to say." I had no idea.

"You are fortunate. There would be problems. You don't belong here. Go outside and wait." Gingerly, I stood, aware that I would be going without an escort, a thought carrying with it the insecurity of newness. Was it a good sign? Would I be shot as soon as I stepped over the threshold? There would be no time to react, and I threw caution to the stinging wind as all my overtaxed faculties dealt with shielding my eyes against the sand blowing towards them. I stood by my brother, who still held the back of his head.

"Are you okay?" he asked, trying not to move his lips.

"I guess," I told him, locking my fingers back into position. "Next stop was Libya."

Without thinking, he sucked in a breath, a gasp of disbelief. It was the wrong thing to do, because his breath was joined by desert sand and he started to cough and gag violently. I wasn't sure what to do. My first reaction was to help. He was doubled over, hacking. But the soldiers were watching, and they looked nervous. It was my friend with the camel-skin cigarette case who came to my brother's rescue, handing him a cup full of water and telling him to breathe through his nose. Soon, Diego stopped coughing and the man went over and spoke to our three guardians, along with the newcomer who still sat behind the wheel of the Jeep. Eventually, the big cheese turned towards us and said: "You will get in the Jeep. You will not speak unless to answer. You will follow orders. You will never enter Algeria again. If any of these points are not complied with, you will be taken into custody and your state department will be forced to intervene. I want none of this to happen. Make no more trouble." No complaints. I had to lean back against the wall, the one I'd thought might be the last piece of architecture I'd ever see, to keep from falling over. We gathered our things with numb fingers and shaking hands. I could not have made a fist to save my newly appreciated life. Consciously reminding myself to breathe in and out, I considered religion again. At best, I'm agnostic with a skewed and demented Buddhist sensibility, which is to say I'm not sure about everything in moderation, but I'm all for a moderate amount of excess. As a young kid, I would often look up at my ceiling and make deals with a god I really didn't think was there, saying things like: "God, if you let me find my Optimus Prime Transformer, I'll believe in you forever." I'd find it every time, but always had an excuse to renege on my end of the deal. After backing out once, then twice and three times, you'd think an almighty being worth its weight would have learned its lesson. If not, then I didn't want to believe in a god so gullible to fall for a bogus promise time after time. This particular situation was a little different, seeing as I had begged god for my life when I thought I might really lose it. Once my selfish needs of paltry physical existence were satisfied, I changed the rules. Of course I'd meant my life as a whole, and so until I was in my late hundred's I couldn't honestly base a belief, right? I suppose I don't really want to believe. I feel small enough already. Following someone else's ideas blindly seems plain stupid to me. Nobody knows dick.

Being in a Muslim country reinforces that. Even though people are separated geographically, socially, and economically, they remain inseparable as human beings on one single globe and yet they believe beyond any doubt that their specific God or Gods are the only ones who run the whole show. How can one religion send its followers to a bloody death for the belief that one defined deity exists when not so far away millions of people worship thousands of Gods every day, with just as much zeal? How can a God be religion and region-specific and still maintain a claim on omnipotence? If you become a Mormon, you can convert your dead relatives. Religion is fucked. Until someone or something proves differently, I will stick to that belief. Forgive my voracity. Usually it's a non-issue for me. I guess I feel a little guilty, is all, about breaking promises regardless of who I make them to.

There's only one thing I've ever been able to equate with getting into the Jeep, and it's sex. I can't think of anything else that feels the same - empowering, comforting, not a climax but a slip into safety and well-being, the sense that things are really okay at least for the moment. I waved good-bye to our guardians and they waved back. The Jeep began its ride and I closed my eyes. Cool air slid off my skin, sand tickled like a feather. I'd seen enough of the desert, and soon I was asleep.

It's impossible to tell how long I slept. It felt like a while, but we were still driving through the desert where light – or its absence, in this case - has no perceptible change to a visitor. I wanted a cigarette but dared not ask, contenting myself with watching the dark cluster of structures at the edge of my vision grow slowly into the semblance of a town, the first leg of our still uncertain destination. We never entered the town, but rather pulled up just outside by a small restaurant-like establishment where we were ordered out of the Jeep and onto a stone slab impersonating a bench. It was still dark out. Camel-skin went inside to requisition a bottle of water, and instructed us to wait there for a bus, chaperoned of course, by the Jeep's driver. The bus would take us to Algiers where we'd board a ferry back to mainland Europe. It sounded like a plan to me, and despite my sore ass I did my best to get comfortable. Sometimes, we find ourselves in the midst of a situation demanding our full attention, whether or not we want to give it. All senses and perceptions not directly required are drained in order to sustain the heightened position of those that are. For me, this was one of those times. The sight of a sunrise over a flat alien desert world should have inspired me. The colors, the darkness steadily retreating before a solid line of pure light should have amazed me as I watched it draw nearer.

Thanks to my currently disheveled viewpoint, what I actually saw was a bit different.

I saw a solid ball of fire the size of a planet tearing away the only meaningful bit of shade left.

It hardly mattered. I would have waited there until the rains came if I had to, if it meant the Real World was at the other end. The sky was clear and the ground dry when the bus pulled in about three hours later, half empty but filled with a stench that wafted out like it might from a crypt. Neither my brother nor myself were the least bit phased. We sat in the front seats as per direction, and after our guard explained the situation to the bus driver, he handed him our passports and the bus was off. It was a triumphant moment.

I don't know when it was that my brother decided to take over the world, but sitting on that bus he couldn't have taken over his shoelaces. He was asleep before I'd opened my book. I couldn't have been happier with my literary selection, 'Clans of the Alphane Moon' by Philip K. Dick, set in the future on another planet. I felt that close to home. With brains flattened like a penny on a train-track, we were ushered onto a cargo ship and spent hours staring silently at white foam-crested waves until finally disembarking in Marseilles. Salty air never tasted so sweet. We took a train to Avignon and called Lagnes from the station. Soon, we were gathered up and taken to a paradise of rest, relaxation, and food. Like I mentioned before, I don't remember those days much at all. I do recall something my brother said on the train, though:

"Don't ever mention a word of this to anyone."

Oops. Sorry, Diego.

Tripping Over Family.

Every summer, my father organizes a trip for that side of our family. Thanks to circumstance, hard work, and a touch of luck, those trips are never a drive to Wally World, or crowding onto Virginia Beach. Usually, they consist of a few weeks in the south of France, but this year, just before I went to Paris, he announced we would try something a bit more exotic. The idea of a sailboat, the Aegean, and the Greek islands came up, and I was happy with that. Riding a barge down the Nile was bandied about, and it sounded great. A push for a Kenyan safari was on the table and I backed it wholeheartedly. Finally, an eleventh hour proposition: a Jeep through Morocco. I'm sure I don't have to tell you the way my insides wrenched at the very thought of returning to Morocco. I was livid, but beneath my brother's glowering stare I couldn't express a good enough reason why I didn't want to see the desert. Like waking up from a bad dream to find you were never asleep, it was decided at the Legal Seafood's restaurant in the Prudential Mall off Boston's Boylston street, where the air got so thick I needed a whiskey to clear my mind, or to erase it. This decision came less than a month before I left for Paris, sometime in July. The trip was to take place about a month after I arrived in Paris, sometime in September, not commonly considered the cruelest month, save maybe by school kids. I did my best to ignore it, and set my mind on leaving that coming August for France.

Like history in reverse, the two weeks between returning from my second stay in Lagnes and departing for Morocco became a study in polar extremes. Justifiable anxiety and misguided bitterness were at odds with perfect late summer days and the sweet beauty of a city whose very vibrancy is a seamless mess of definable contrast. Anxiety was expected, with Morocco and the desert looming imminence like the gargoyle-shaped drainage system jutting from the buttresses of Notre Dame. Jessica returned from wherever she'd inexplicably gone to inexplicably avoid me and picked up her things. In a tearless farewell, I bid her good riddance.

Orange juice began to leave a bitter taste in my mouth, and I quickly found a much more Parisian substitute. Right across the street from my building is a restaurant and café called 'Le Vauban', which, among other delicacies, serves an unmatched cappuccino rivaled only by the view. I settled in each morning with a pack of Chesterfield's and a good book, imbibed the rich coffee and the sight of Napoleon's Tomb and played native. In no time, the waiters recognized me and I would scarcely have to order at all. Sometimes, I'd get a sliver of pie or tart on the house and watch the tour buses roll past, stuffed with the tourists, as I sat outside on a perfect day. It was a great way to get started, albeit late in the morning. My walks had become exhaustive. I visited every major section of Paris on foot, diligently exploring entire neighborhoods, and spent as much time as I could take in dozens of museums.

The museums in Paris maintain a well deserved reputation as being among the best in the world. Unfortunately, museums bore me to tears. I dated a girl in college who had a passion for art and museums, and I truly wanted to share in that. I tried, but it just doesn't click for some people. I respect art and artists to the utmost degree, and certain works do truly move me, but the majority of what I see would have the same effect with a text-filled bubble coming from the fanged mouth of a caped creature shouting something about fighting The Incredible Hulk. In high school I went on dozens of field trips to New York museums and suffered through lectures on what this image symbolized or what that color represented. Why couldn't just a single painting have been done because the boss came into the artist's studio and said: "Have it finished by Friday"? You understand, then, how a building full of paintings does not represent any great attraction for me, and the only museum I visited on multiple occasions was the Musee Rodin, where for five Francs I could sit outside and write under the pensive stare of The Thinker. As for some of the other museums, they fall short as points of interest, in my admittedly ignorant opinion. The Musee d'Orsay along the left bank of the Seine focuses on Impressionism. The best things about it are the sculptures of rhinoceros and horse right

outside the entrance, and the fact that the building itself is a converted train station. The view of the river and Sacre Coeur through the backside of a huge clock in the center of the building was more impressive to me than anything hanging on the walls. Then, there's the Louvre, of course. It is tremendous, but so is the Carrousel d'Louvre, a shopping mall below the museum, which has many more interesting things to see and do than its far more famous namesake, not to mention a food court. Sure it's great to see the Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo and such, but we've all been saturated with pictures of them in every possible form from movies to T-shirts that it really doesn't compare to, for instance, Sean Connery in person. As with Orsay, I found the Louvre more impressive from the outside where, among other things, it's free. A bit further up the road is the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris' modern art Mecca. Once again, it sparsely compares to the titanic underground mall adjacent, and again, its best side is out. The building is a rather offensive industrial structure built of steel and glass, with multicolored oversized exhaust pipes running along its sides, making it look almost comically (and one can only hope purposely) out of place. I had seen Paris from the outside. I had walked the major boulevards and inspected the architectural sights. One night, trying to enjoy an overpriced drink under an awning on the Champs-Elysee to escape a warm and driving rain, a mini (French word for embarrassingly small car) flipped over on its side and came to rest on the street directly in front of where I sat. Jumping up as though stung in the ass, I ran to the twisted hunk of metal, wheels now spinning like legs on a huge overturned turtle. I don't know what I could have done for anyone who was actually hurt, but thankfully the driver and his passenger looked unbroken, if not a bit shaken, stirred, and more than a little sauced. I pulled the passenger door open, directly upwards against gravity, and hoisted the guy out on adrenaline alone. After checking for wounds I asked if he was all right and he gave me a hug. By then the driver had made his own way out, and the three of us shoved the excuse for a car back on four wheels. As we pushed it towards the curb, slick now and drenched to our very souls, the drivers behind us laid into their horns and I realized that Paris is just like New York: You're always the only one who gives a shit.

That evening's heroism represented the most excitement I'd had for a while. Don't get me wrong, each day I woke up I loved the fact I was doing it in Paris, but I must admit being alone for such a long time with no one to speak to was taking a toll. I caught myself looking forward to the Morocco trip. Not because it would be different - it's not the place, not the city - but because there would be people there to speak with, to point things out to, to give perspective, to argue and fight with. Our family is not a close one by Beaver Cleaver standards, but then again - is yours? So after it all, I had to give in and admit some excitement as I boarded the plane in Paris and settled in for the flight to Fez. Putting that initial desert visit out of my mind was no easy task, but I kept reminding myself the worst that ever really happened in Morocco was that I didn't like it much. I really wanted to enjoy Morocco. This time around, I did.

Weinerschnitzel Wrongdoings. Scaly Souvenirs.

The cabs in Fez have no meters. You have to haggle cost before the ride, even though you are probably as clueless about a fair price as the driver will invariably seem to be. I was dropped inside the walls of a palatial hotel, and after doling out Drachmas and a final assurance that I did not need a guide, I walked into the lobby past a man wearing, appropriately enough, a Fez hat and sporting funky velvet Hammer pants. My father and stepmother were in the lobby. We greeted, and I made like I was really tired. This is a foolproof, age-old ploy used to explain just about anything. For instance, after smoking a lot of pot and running into my father:

"Est, why are your eyes so red?"

"I hardly slept last night dad. Let me get some sleep and then we'll talk."

For a smart man, my father is all too easy to fleece.

"Take a nap. In an hour or two we'll all go for a ride."

Diego was out on the balcony with my sister Anais and Gwillam, her boyfriend. After a few cigarettes and some catching up I requested nap time. Anais and Gwillam went to their room - an arrangement my dad accepted with clenched jaw - while Diego and I crawled into our respective beds. As sleep stretched its chalky fingers in my direction, I heard Diego from miles away.

"How does it feel to be back in Morocco?" he asked, an evil grin in his voice.

"About as shitty as you look." If he had a retort I never heard it. Sleep took hold.

Had the pounding on the door been any louder, I think the hinges would have quickly become shrapnel. My brother was gone, and my brain made no bones about being displeased by the noise.

"Relax! I'm coming," I grumbled and opened the door on my father, outfitted in exactly the wrong way, as per his trademark.

"Come downstairs in twenty minutes. We're going to the Medina." White shorts and boatshoes strike me as the antithesis to conscientious dressing when one pays a visit to a Medina, or most anywhere else, for that matter.

These smells, even in the darkness: Mint and rotting meat; Mint and wet dates; Mint and human decay; Mint and saffron, sage, cilantro, curry.

Through narrow, walled-in, maze-like streets - these sights: Mint and unshackled living; women without a place, without a voice; a mosque entrance, mysterious, blue, prohibitive; everything for sale; barely organized chaos of wooden goods, porcelain goods, jewelry, dates, meat, spices, medicines, Mint. I will never forget the man selling solid-state black and white television sets attached by lizard skins and hanging on a mule that couldn't have known it was alive.

None of us spoke. It was sensory overload. Every storefront burst with unique hypnotics. Stares and comments from the natives passed by unheard, unfelt. This was not Tetuan. This was spectacular.

I won't name names, but for some of us the Medina could only be tolerated in short bursts. I'll say only that I could have stayed for hours. I couldn't imagine what lay around a corner, under an arch, through a door and yet everyone who passed seemed to know exactly where they were going. I wanted to explore it all. My adrenaline was pumping as I drove bargains with merchants for merchandise I didn't need. For some ridiculously high number of Drachmas (about four dollars, U.S.), I bought some sort of instrument from the guitar family. I felt exhilarated, and again that same old double-edged feeling: So much to see and do. Too much. How could I ever experience it all?

Not until I lay on my bed did I realize how tense I had been in the Medina, same as my first visit to Morocco. Being so conspicuous, so different, so scrutinized really takes a lot out of you. I was asleep before my brother made it out of the bathroom.

This nap was short and sweet, like my first real girlfriend. Well, she was a lot shorter than she was sweet, and not nearly as satisfying. After a shower, I met my dad down by the pool for some mint tea, and if you haven't gotten the sense that mint is all too prevalent in Morocco, then I don't know what you're reading. Close by, the hills seemed carved out by hand as they shone under brilliant flashes of lightning, an electrical storm we were told was common for the season.

In Morocco, each city has its own specific corresponding color. You notice it inlaid on the walls of buildings and mosques, on plates and clothes, in artwork. Everywhere you look. In Fez, the color is a soft blue. The restaurant we ate in that first night was beautiful, with porcelain walls broken up by blue diamond-shaped tiles and a stage at its center where people I could only assume were Moroccans danced and played

on instruments I had to assume were native to the region. It was clearly a tourist-based restaurant, I thought at first, and then revised that because I honestly didn't have a clue how Moroccans might enjoy their dinner. I learned a little. Sitting on pillows and eating with the right hand (just the hand, mind you, no cutlery present) is traditional here. If a Moroccan sees someone's left hand in the food, they won't take another bite. You see, the left hand is used expressly for wiping one's ass. Toilet paper is only just recently catching on.

Later in the trip, thanks to the standards of food, my father had a terrible meat-whistling emergency walking through the Medina. Our guide for the evening diagnosed my father's plight: the suddenly pale, sweat-speckled face, the bulging eyeballs, knees slightly bent and pressed together. My father had no other recourse but to trust this man with his life. The two of them raced down the street, leaving the rest of us to take odds on whether we'd see them again that night. Of course we did, and reveled in the story of shitting in a hole, no toilet paper, and a bucket filled with nasty water used by that night's previous lavatory clientele to "wash" their hand - the left one. I'm happy to say I have a strong stomach, although mine tends also to fail me at the most inopportune times.

I'd like to recount a story about one of those times if you'll hear it, high on the list of the most embarrassing moments of my life, and the fourth time I honestly thought I might die.

The longest relationship of my life to date was with the aforementioned museum-obsessed girl named Margaret Myers. Sweet and inoffensive with all-American looks from the heart of Pennsylvania, she seemed to somehow unwittingly ooze sex from every pore. I was genuinely in love with her for a time, a time extended thanks to the fact she was scarcely around. She spent her junior year in Rome, where I went to visit for a month. While I was there, her parents and younger brother came to take us on a driving tour from Rome to Amsterdam, which turned out a lot less pleasant than it might sound. The trip was as much - maybe more - for her parents than the rest of us. It had been much longer in coming for them, the sort of people who wear matching two-piece sweat-suits for the plane ride. Whenever I went to visit Margaret in Pennsylvania, it was a study in frustration. If we were both in pajamas, we were allowed to brush our teeth together, so long as the door stayed open. I wasn't allowed in her room, ever. A Latino Jew from New York City as a boyfriend was many a middle-American parent's nightmare. Of this I am aware. It couldn't have been easy for them to take me along on their European trek. In retrospect, I will always wish they hadn't. Here's why: We spent a couple of days in Munich, Germany, a country with two strikes against it from the get-go. One night, we had dinner in a beer-hall whose menu listed German names for the food on one side, and illustrated pictures on the other. I pointed with reservations at a picture the large frau called 'Weinerschnitzel', which I'd heard of but never tasted. I didn't know what to expect when they brought it out, but I admit I was impressed. The first piece was delicious, and I was salivating, fully looking forward to the second. When I cut into it I thought: 'wow, that's really pink.' I decided the Germans knew what they were doing. Efficiency and all that. A disastrously erroneous decision on my part. I can never eat Weinerschnitzel again as long as I live.

The next day, we began the drive north towards Amsterdam in the rented Mercedes (this was Germany after all). I'd heard tons of stories about the super-fast Autobahn, like if someone forces you to slow down, you can take their plate number and report them to the authorities. I figured we would race through Germany at breakneck speeds and be in Amsterdam by the next afternoon, maybe sooner.

I figured wrong.

The Autobahn looks a great deal like I-95, and on this snowy day it looked exactly like a huge traffic jam. We stopped and went for awhile, and I was getting a little carsick, so I asked Margaret to open a window (getting stuck with the middle hump hadn't seemed like a big deal at the time) and lay my head back, tried to breathe. Soon, I felt much worse. The cold air on my cheek was like a thick ointment and my brain seemed to be collapsing upon itself, shutting down. Next to me, from hundreds of miles away, I heard

Margaret saying: "Es are you all right? Say something!" Without the ability to move a single part of my body save for my top lip, I groaned:

"I don't feel so good."

She immediately told her dad to pull over to the side of the road, a command he couldn't meet, hard as he tried, stuck in this maddening German traffic jam. I must have looked very, very bad, because Margaret began shouting at him to find a way.

Then, it happened.

I could feel each individual bead of sweat on the straining tendons in my neck. Sharp pain around my eyeballs as they opened far too wide, and then Margaret - bless her heart - put her hands over my mouth because it was all she could think of to do. It was futile, like laying a blanket over Old Faithful is futile. Nothing could have stopped what came from within me. An explosion of warm, slightly contoured light-brown sludge. I threw up all over the inside of the rented Mercedes, all over Margaret, all over her parents in the front seat, all over myself. I would have wanted to die at that moment were I not so honestly concerned that death might actually happen. Margaret's dad required no further prodding and risked life and limb getting over to the shoulder. I fell out of the car onto my knees and proceeded to empty my guts onto the virgin snow at the side of the Autobahn. At the time, I had no opportunity to think about how wild that was, or even to be as truly alarmed as I should have been at the sheer quantity of what launched, post-haste, from my mouth. Kneeling like that, I must have looked like a human fire hydrant. My mind had no room for those thoughts. All its resources were at work on the activity at hand, trying to cleanse my system of what must have been an almost still-living piece of Weinerschnitzel that had somehow managed to slip beneath my usually tight culinary standards.

After all too long a time, during which the others busied themselves with cleaning the car as best they could and Margaret inexplicably shoved snow into my mouth, I was done. I thought there was nothing left.

Back in the car, the stench began quickly to turn my embarrassment the way a Haitian Bruja might turn a needle in a voodoo doll. My body shut off and I passed out. I revived as the malodorous Mercedes turned into a gas station and managed enough strength to drag myself to a bathroom around back, where I washed up a bit. Four steps from the bathroom door, the bile barrage began anew and I couldn't believe I was throwing up so much, so violently. I had to kneel again because I was afraid I might pass out. Once it was over, I started to get worried. Things were not right and I possessed neither the strength nor the mental clarity to make them so. I began to sense I might be in real trouble.

My next bout of consciousness came in Köln later that evening, in the parking lot of a tremendous Holiday Inn. I felt better, and accepted Margaret's offer of water and a couple of Mentos to cover the taste in my mouth. Now, I don't know from the 'Freshmaker', but when we walked into the lobby I made a beeline for the bathroom where my desperation heightened. Within moments of having swallowed them, I vomited the mints. They floated, chewed but undigested, suspended in thick yellow bile. There were no rooms available at the Holiday Inn, and once I was able to walk we continued on what had apparently been a long search. Finally, we found rooms at a Best Western where the first thing I did was take a shower, cut short because I hadn't the strength to stand for more than a few minutes at a time.

A look in the mirror proved the severity of my condition. My eyes, sunken and red, broadcast debilitation. My drawn in cheeks, pale and slick, posed a convincing argument against this method of weight-loss (I lost better than ten pounds over a thirty-six hour period), and my stomach, painfully vacant and sore to the touch, was the stuff of nightmares.

When I stumbled from the bathroom, Margaret's father stood before me.

"We've decided to allow Margaret to stay in this room with you, in case you need help," he said in a clearly rehearsed tone. Normally, I shared a room with her brother. "I trust you not to do anything untoward." He was visibly uncomfortable, ringing his beer and sausage fingers, but he knew nothing from discomfort.

"Mr. Myers," I rasped out, "I can hardly stand up". The fact he felt compelled to warn me was insulting. It was partly because he said what he said that shortly after he left the room I had sex with his daughter to the best of my admittedly depleted ability, after which I went to the toilet and threw up. I spent the rest of that night in the bathroom, vomiting bile until I was dry, chugging water just so something would come up. Lying on the tiled floor of a Best Western bathroom in Köln, Germany, my dribbling chin resting on the porcelain lip of the toilet, I had a driving sensation and the knowledge that there was a real chance I would pass out and never wake up. Right then I hoped for it.

After hours of suffering, of welcoming death if it really meant to take me, I fell into a violent, heaving fit that wracked my entire soul and I knew this signaled either the death of the disease or its victory, my own demise. You can guess who won, I suppose. Fifteen minutes of unimaginable agony, until some clear mucus-like acidic fluid came out with three small round green fuzzy balls clinging to one side. I knew I had won. My body had managed to expel the poison that had caused so much misery, and I stared at the culprits, these three fuzzy balls that had taken control of my stomach and forced me to hope for death.

I've never been the same. I still have nightmares about that trip, that toilet. Ever since, believe me, I have a very strong stomach.

The second full day in Fez, we were all a good deal more adjusted. The Medina, while just as crowded and amazing as it had been the day before, was not quite as daunting. Our guide led us around the outskirts of the city and up a hill where we could see it from above. It looked a mess. The Medina, which represents the center in most every sense of most every city in Morocco and throughout Northern Africa into the Middle East, is a series of squat structures and winding streets that looks more like a stone heap than a somewhat organized chaos. These city centers, more often than not delineating the entire city, were built so long ago that no room was allowed for cars, construction, public transportation, or any of the other activities I normally equate with city life. Some things, however, are the same no matter where you go.

After parking the jeep at the Medina's entrance - a utility vehicle with poor Gwillam banished to the back like the family dog - we did another tour. Early evening was beginning to call out, and shadows dripped, elongated and grotesque, from a covered archway. We stopped in front of a completely indistinguishable door. Wooden and laid into the stone wall that permeates the Medina's architecture, drab and lacking in character. Our guide spoke to the man in front, and the door opened for us to enter.

Inside, my head spun. The contrast was so great it seemed a joke at first. The room was beautiful, regal, made huge by a ceiling I couldn't see, a sunken floor inlaid with the familiar blue diamond shaped stones, as were the pillars that stood in each corner of this vast inner space. We were ushered into an alcove off one side, exploding with colors - blue, red, gold - and a pillow-covered stone bench carved out of the wall. As soon as we were seated, someone held a tray of glasses filled with delicious mint tea, the last taken by a man who would obviously be running the show from that point on.

It was a surreal rug sale, and he a journeyman pusher. One after another, authentic handmade Moroccan rugs were rolled open in front of us, described, defined, dated. The tea was bottomless as the constant, apparently unending stock of government sanctioned rugs stacked like a heaping plate of flapjacks without the syrup. Any novelty that existed wore off after about the eighteenth rug, but I assure you this spectacle went on for hours. Long before its end, Anais, Gwillam, and I began to shift on our pillows, having seen

more rugs than any of us could ever want.

Hepped up on mint tea, we grabbed the guide and went out into the now dark Medina street where, at a safe distance, Gwillam asked:

"Do you know where we can get Opium?"

"Ah," the guide smiled, "You like this, yes? Follow with me please."

We followed with him through winding streets busting with movement before turning down a relatively empty alleyway to an unassuming little shop at its end.

Drugs are a tissue-thin yet ever-present global connector. Everywhere in the world, at the very least every city in the world, is home to a self-sustained substance subculture. There's always going to be people who use, and people who sell. Strange as it may sound, there's a sort of camaraderie among users, an accepted credo of assistance cemented by the knowledge that they might one day be in an unfamiliar city having to rely upon a native who shares this bond, battling a common enemy called establishment, secure in their addictions. And just as one gay man can tell another by certain movements and subtle ways of being that may be hidden to a straight man, so one drug user can tell another without ever having to ask outright. If you need it, there's always a way to get it. Even in a place where you know nobody. Even in Fez.

The store sold a jumble of articles, from knives whose workmanship belied their intended use, to exotic instruments, to hookahs of all shapes and sizes and jewelry that ran the financial gamut. Our guide said a few words to the stocky proprietor who immediately shot past us into the street.

"He is to find the man with what you want. For respect, you buy from his shop, yes?"

Not a problem. Gwillam's eye caught on a large drum with a pottery base. Presently the storekeeper returned with an even shorter man whose hair was a curly cubist work without the canvas. At the back of the store we huddled around the jewelry case as we would around a fire in the cold, and the newest arrival pulled two cloth-wrapped parcels from his pocket that looked covered in grease. I had done my fair share of drugs in college. The usual progression of pot, mushrooms, acid, Extasy. But I had never done opium. Later, I stepped up to try its most popular derivative, but never saw the pure thing. Like a cube of hash, only a lot softer. One piece was bigger than the other, and cheaper. We opted for quantity over quality since we were hardly connoisseurs, and after tasting it (a taste that would eventually become all too familiar) we paid the man who informed us we had become family. The drum under Gwillam's arm, we left the store, mission accomplished.

Dinner was quick and painless, then back to the hotel where Anais, Gwillam and I sat out on their balcony and did our damndest to get high off the stuff. First, we tried smoking it through a little ceramic bol I carried, a gift from Margaret. The problem was that the end of it, the part where you put your mouth, had been stripped of its ceramic coating, leaving only a small metal rod that quickly became hot enough to scald our lips. We tossed that idea aside and moved on to ingesting it outright. We didn't know how much to eat though, how much was too much or not enough.

I can't really say it got me high, unless the prime effect was to make me really, really tired. A little disappointed, I went to bed, looking forward to doing a lot more later on.

Gwillam conscientiously stashed the cube in an empty cigarette box that was promptly thrown away by the hotel cleaning staff the next morning, and, alas, I never tried opium again.

The next week or so was a wash, spending too much time on the road packed in like pickled fish, only not

as complacent. My stepmother had an inexplicable moral issue with keeping the radio soft enough to know it was playing, but not what it was playing. Frustrated, I would give up and put on my Walkman, which she would then demand I turn down.

"Leave me alone," I would tell her, and it worked for a while.

There was compensation, however, when we were set free of the jeep's suffocating tensions. One day, we rode camels in the desert for hours. Such a great pleasure, being able to live a life so full of experience. I mean, Jesus, how many people get to ride through a desert town on a camel? Here's some advice for the fellas: Before mounting any camels, be sure you're wearing a protective genital cup.

Finally we arrived in Marrakech, the ultimate stop on our Moroccan tour. We stayed in the heart of the Medina as guests in a private home owned by two homosexual French ex-pat interior designers. An espresso in the center of this cloistered inner sanctum was a nice way to shake off leftover sleep.

Outside, not far away, was the marketplace. A spectacular site, a huge open square packed virtually corner to corner with storybook life. That first night, a monkey grabbed my leg and startled me. It looked in my eyes as though I should know what to do. Nearby, a snake-charmer lowered his flute long enough to laugh at me, but kept his eyes fixed on the cobra whose head flared like a woman. I stood by a stand selling fresh orange juice to survey the throngs of existence.

How unimaginably huge this world is! Here was a place most people never think of, and it was teeming with life.

In the center of the marketplace was a long table buffered by some roasting animal, flames rising into the taciturn night giving off a shaky orange glow where dancing groups danced, snake-charmers charmed, and performers performed.

The central marketplace in Marrakech is a true-life spectacle of immeasurable proportions, a place where simply to stand and look around increases your life wisdom, changes your conceptions, your perceptions, makes you realize how beautiful and wide-ranging this world, this life, truly is.

I read once that to truly love Rome, you first have to learn to love its dirt. When I lived in Rome, few words held more validity. Truth is in the dirt, the ugliness, within Rome and beyond:

In a chaotic and disgustingly gorgeous marketplace in Marrakech.

In the ripples that vibrate behind closed doors in Paris.

On a sinful street corner far from the Time Square glare in New York City.

At Jae's coffee shop smoking a five Guilder joint by a canal in Amsterdam.

In the stink and disease that runs through the waterways of Venice.

No matter where, no matter when, no matter how or why, if the world were perfect it wouldn't be worth seeing. The unique beauty of a place, or of a person, exists within its own truth. That truth resides partially in its dirt.

Does that make sense to you? It's important you understand how I feel about this. It might ease things for us, later on.

While my father and stepmother slept away the final evening in this amazing place, the rest of us went foraging through the depths of the Medina for a singular souvenir, something altogether impossible to find anyplace else. I can't say that's what we found, only that we found something. And it was alive.

Lizards. Chameleons. Four of them. One for each of us, at the bargain price of six American dollars for the lot. The shop owner certainly made a great effort to sell them. The only problem would be, of course, getting them out of the country without being caught.

The chameleons complacently clung to a plant outside our room until we packed them in our carry-ons.

The airport outside Marrakech looked a great deal more suspicious than it had any right to look. We held our bags with soft fingers, doing our best not to shake the precious cargo. They would make great pets. Earlier, I watched mine - Ozzie Virgil - dart out a long pink tongue, lightning fast, and pull in an unsuspecting cricket.

The line to the X-ray machine was long and slow, each step forcing open another pore as I began to worry I might be shuffling towards a great deal of trouble. I wondered if there was some North African coalition that would have my passport number on file thanks to my previously disastrous visit to the region.

Nothing like that. The bag passed through the machine, and the operator grabbed it just where the lizard should have been before tossing it down the line. Relieved, I gathered it up and boarded the plane, leaving Morocco behind, much more impressed this second time around.

PART TWO

Anais and Gwillam. Educating Christine.

I returned to Paris very much looking forward to the days and weeks ahead, almost as much as my initial arrival to the fastidious capital of Europe, where very little is what it seems. New life was injected into this place that had managed somehow to take on the unique characteristics of a vast and beautiful open-air prison, where my mind and lack of language posed as guards who paced - as I paced - back and forth, back and forth along boulevards that lay like immovable bars, locking me in. Anais and Gwillam held the keys. That's what I thought. Living with them would be like freedom. That's what I thought. What I know now, what I will always know, is that I hadn't a clue just how impenetrable a prison-cell Paris, and my life, could truly become.

My father, in his infinite wisdom, had the forethought to hire a maid. A woman who would come in twice a week to keep the apartment clean. Three of us, he correctly assumed, would be hard pressed to maintain a level of tidiness to satisfy my stepmother. She's the kind of person who feels it inexplicably necessary to clean a house before the cleaning person arrives. That makes no sense to me. Anyway, I was expecting an old hanging-jowl type woman, with fat swinging from her bare arms and gout in one leg. Instead, we got Christine.

She was there when we walked in the door. Young, tan, dark hair, brown eyes, tight clothes that had every reason to be and a smile that wasn't. She was soft beauty. My breath hitched. When she spoke, I understood little but could almost see the sounds dripping, like the juice from a Golden Delicious, down her smooth chin. I was smitten, marvelously exited at the prospect of seeing her twice a week, not knowing at the time that I should have remained simply content watching her from afar, and only standing too close.

Paris with Anais and Gwillam was new. In the mornings, we made our own coffee and played backgammon tournaments on the kitchen table. My sister, master of manipulation, sensing defeat would make a one sided

deal:

"If I roll doubles, can I roll again?" Gwillam and I learned quickly to refuse, marveling at her ability to almost will doubles on that final roll.

Gwillam and I spent hours setting creative goals the way an obese person sets another diet. We became selectively deaf to the voice telling us nothing would ever come from it. We never stopped talking, though. He would learn to play a guitar or something, and one day we'd write songs together, when he was good enough. He never was.

Wouldn't it be great," he would say, "if fifty years from now people read the back of some café menu and tell their friends 'I ate where they used to eat'? Man, Paris was made for people like us." And he'd run down the street a ways, jump off the curb and spin mid-flight, unable to control his excitement. That was early on, when it was cool even though we kind of knew it wouldn't happen. And when Gwillam still thought the future could be exciting, when he still had a choice, when he still had the energy to jump and spin. It wasn't until later that he realized Paris wasn't made for people like us. People like us were made for Paris.

During the days we often went out together, (afternoons, to be precise. They slept like pet rocks), our first order of business to find the least expensive reptile tank in the city and buy boxes of crickets the lizards refused to eat. The bugs died right there in the bottom of their box. One day, at least fifty crickets in our care, we stopped to see a movie. As soon as the lights dimmed, the bugs went at it. An unrehearsed, unappreciated impromptu orchestra that garnered disparaging glares from the unhappy audience. Why they cared I don't know, what with the subtitles.

My sister and Gwillam had lived in Paris before. They'd been in school the previous year at the American University, AUP, and knew a great deal more than me about the city's undertow. Once, we sat on a stone in sight of the Pompidou hoping a guy they used to know would pass by and help us score some methadone.

"What'll that do for me?" I asked.

"It'll get you high," was the simple though satisfactory response. There was no scheduled meeting with this guy, we just literally hoped he would pass by. The area around Pompidou is a pharmaceutical junkie's weigh station, of sorts. Finally, tired of hoping, we left disappointed. It wasn't until classes started, where Nais and Gwillam managed to get a hold of Allan, that our twisted Parisian existence was kick-started.

Allan is a tall, mild-mannered Brazilian pretty-boy with long jet-black hair usually tied back in a ponytail. His smile was constant and his voice perpetually slurred. An ex-roommate of his, apparently a world-renowned glass blower, had a contact and was willing to work as the middleman. After a few days of planning and frustration, the deed was finally done.

The first time I ever did heroin was in New York, during the summer before my senior year of college. I remember it clearly. Coming out of the bathroom ready to go to bed and running into my sister, ready to go out.

"Where you going?" I asked her.

"Me and Liz are heading downtown to score some D."

"D? What's that?" In retrospect, I'm still not sure if I'm glad I stayed up or not. I just don't know.

"Dope. We'll be back in an hour. Do you want some?"

"Dope. You mean, like, pot?" How was I to know?

"No, like heroin. Do you want me to get you some?" My sister has never been one to talk around any issue, and maybe I was still processing when I said:

"Yeah, okay, sure."

"Liz is waiting in a cab. We'll get a few extra bags and you can have what you want."

She was gone, leaving a smell of leather in the air and confusion in my mind. I want to make this clear, though: I could have gone to bed then. I didn't have to stay up, sitting on my windowsill, staring at the entrance to our building, checking my watch and wondering what was taking them so long. I did it because I wanted to do it. Life's not long, and when there's opportunity for new experience, I think it should be taken. A simple argument to that might be blowing my brains out. That's an experience, isn't it? I hope you know what I mean when I say that death is an end to experience, and should be put off for as long as possible.

So, that was the first time I did dope - inhaled through my nose, which is the only way I've ever done it, or ever will. I felt a little more focus and a lot of puke going into a bucket, requisitioned for that very purpose. At the time, I was glad I had done it, because I honestly felt I hadn't enjoyed myself. All the hype, I decided, wasn't true. I wasn't impressed, and I was happy about that. I saw advantages of having had the experience without suffering the consequences. Now I see I had the experience but missed the meaning. And now I guess that I just don't know. The second time I did dope was a few weeks later, at Lolita's house. Lolita is an old friend of my sister's, and when I arrived, the session had already begun. I spied some needles representing my first opportunity for injection. I thought about it for a moment, but only a moment. All my upbringing screamed out at me and I just couldn't get around the idea of putting a spike into my vein. I'm glad now that I passed it up then. There were no problems with snorting straight heroin up my nose though, and I did that unflaggingly. I doubt I'll ever forget the instant, the flash of thought that pierced my brain and left me sweating and informed. In the time it took for me to get off my knees where I'd been clutching the sides of a toilet that was full of my own vomit, I thought to myself how surprisingly bad this drug was. I realized the truth of its existence then, when seemingly within the same thought, I knew I was having a miserable time and I knew all I wanted was more. Control was out the window. I was a preprogrammed machine. No matter how much my stomach and my throat hurt, no matter how much my head nodded, no matter that though I wasn't tired my eyelids weighed four tons. None of it mattered. My only concern in that instant was who would cut the next line. After that, it was about once a week or so for the rest of the summer. Going back to college in September, I knew I wouldn't be able to get it at all, which seemed a blessing. I figured it was over. And it was, for a while.

Christine, the illegally gorgeous maid, was impressed by my French. To be honest, so was I. One morning, while preparing coffee, I began speaking to her. It was the first time I had ever initiated a conversation with a French-speaker, and the surprising ease of flow with which I spoke is a testament to the hidden powers of the mind. Simply hearing sounds in French over all that time had given my language ability a level of buoyancy that forecasted an upward swing. I was well aware my time in Paris would be all the more fulfilling if I had at least a sweaty-palmed handle on the native language. She sat down with me, drank coffee, smoked cigarettes and laughed good-naturedly at my mistakes, doing her best to correct me where she could. Desperately, she wanted to learn English, she said. It was too good to be true, but her beauty clouded my judgment. I offered my services as a tutor, and we arranged to meet for a drink at Le Vauban later that evening to begin our lessons.

After a well executed first outing with Christine, (I sensed she was a little nervous, which is unusual as I'm not all that imposing, and often equated with a large teddy bear), I returned to an empty apartment and

turned on the television. We received two English-language channels. European MTV and CNN international. I have never been as on top of world news as when I lived in Paris, which seems as it should be. As soon as I began to wonder where Anais and Gwillam could be at such a late hour, they walked through the door with Allan in tow and big smiles on their faces.

"Where have you guys been?" I asked with a grin. Their expressions gave the impression it was a question I wanted answered.

"We got some D," my sister said. "We brought enough for you."

And just like that, it began.

Heroin in Paris is different from New York City dope. It's distributed differently. In New York, as in any American city, it's stepped on, washed through with certain chemicals to make it a mite more potent so a smaller amount of the actual drug is present in a greater amount of powder. And the powder is white. Because it's played with before hitting the streets, it's packaged uniformly in small, folded wax packets ten to a bundle. When you buy off the street, you can go individual, buy a few packets at ten or twelve bucks apiece, (although lately there's been so much heat in the city that dealers are loath to sell fewer than ten bags at a time). If you're using a delivery service, usually the call is for at least a bundle at the same prices, though protocol dictates you palm the delivery guy with a packet for his troubles. Also, because the addition of certain chemicals can act to infuse a given batch with a slightly different degree of potency, the packets are often produced with batch-specific markings. This way the user knows if they're scoring, say, Redrum as opposed to Black Tar. In Paris, it's a lot less complicated. The dope is brown, because there are no diluting chemicals. It's synthetically pure and therefore packaged simply, by the gram. A New York bundle is roughly equivalent to a Paris gram, and a gram of pure heroin wrapped in a little plastic ball is really a lot of dope.

That's how much they had brought back with them: a full gram for the four of us, liquidated before sunrise.

We sat in the kitchen, around the most convenient table surface in the house, and laid The Beatles 'White Album' CD case down for easy line viewing. Gwillam dumped it out, a huge mound of the stuff compared to what I'd seen before - about the size of your father's thumb, from tip to first joint. Allan pulled out a card and began cutting it, breaking up the larger pieces, while Anais worked on fashioning straws for each of us. Me, I simply sat, silently staring, stricken by the size and the girth of my desire. I couldn't wait to get high. Save for a handful of blips into sobriety, I didn't really come down for the next six months. The first line is always a big one. After that you hit bumps to maintain, and smaller lines to put you right on the edge. When I pulled that first line of brown dope, my nose immediately began burning. I had to stick a wet finger in to cool the fire, but it was the taste that made me dizzy. It's a singular, unmistakable taste. Harsh, soft, tangy, sweet, metallic. Like a handful of pebbles or sand at the back of your throat. Like a moist strawberry at the front. Heroin is like nothing else in the world. When that first line reaches your brain, you can feel your mind growing horns, wrapped around like a mountain goat's, fuzzy like a stag's. Excitement, focus, capacious soothing and the ability to be in touch with your circadian rhythms. Getting high on heroin is majestic, it's giving up the monarchy to marry a commoner. It's not a part of everything but a seamless envelope full of nothing, returned to sender. It's a feeling of unmatched capability. Not physical, but mental, intellectual. It's knowing that you know nothing and theorizing that maybe there's nothing to know, or worth knowing. It's a place and a time. It's a soft confidence and a love for the world, like a tiger without claws, like Superman saving the train by becoming the tracks. It's driving the H-train, and it's being the track. It's guessing without ever really knowing. It's feeling without caring, wanting without need, living without the fear. Above all else, heroin is good, and being high off it is like existing beyond the shadow of a doubt, doubting only the shadows left in its wake. When I'm stoned on dope I feel I'm not myself. Not outside myself but rather all the self I'd always wanted to be. Like all the fear, the anger, the nervousness of closed

life was stripped away and what's left - wet, shiny, voraciously alive - is what I am, what I wish I could always be. Though subtle and unassuming, heroin has more power than a Mack truck. It has the power of right existence, the power to toggle perceptions, inflections, and restructure thought. And like any substance, out of which heroin tops the list, there's always a price to pay. Was it worth it?

Yeah, I guess.

But I just don't know.

Three hours after the first line, nobody really cared. Allan was lying on his back in Anais's room, where the walls turned on and off, the flickering light of a candle the only source of illumination.

"Dude, I'm so fucking high."

"Allan," I said. "You're alive. Thank God. Pass the water." Not really interested, I noticed the cigarette I'd forgotten dangling precariously from between two fingers. I made no move to secure the situation, as my efforts turned to receiving the water bottle from Allan with the least possible of efforts.

"So fucking high," Allan assured me, as I took a rather ineffectual sip from the bottle, refusing to lift my head, allowing water to drool out one side of my mouth.

"Where's Anais?" I asked the ceiling,

"I told you man. The only thing I know is that I am so fucking high." At that point, Anais walked in smoking a cigarette, only marginally aware of the lizard crawling on top of her head.

"Where have you been?" She said. "We've got another line waiting for you in the kitchen. Didn't you ask me to make you one?" Confused. "I did? Okay. Pass the ashtray please." She got it under my hand just in time to save the rug, nearly tripping over Allan.

"Allan! You're alive! Do you want to come have another line?"

"Anais, uhnn, ..."

"He's really high, Nais."

"Are you high yet Allan?"

"No! I am so fucking high. I love this dope."

In the kitchen, Gwillam was slouched in a chair, nodding like one of those dogs attached by suction cups to the rear window of a car, so all the drivers behind can get annoyed at its little bouncing head. Gwillam's head bounced the same way, only much, much slower. At best, he'd be halfway conscious, and nearly without exception, there would be a lit cigarette dangling between his fingers. It's a small miracle the apartment never burned down. I don't think a single sheet was left without a burn hole. Gwillam wound up with a half-dozen raised pink souvenir scars to remind him of the times he burned himself. Fucked up to so great a degree, even the pain and the smell of his own burning flesh could not get through to him. Once, while attempting to read a fairy-tale to my sister in bed, his nodding was so pronounced that he kept obliviously brushing the flame from a votive candle on the night-stand. My sister caught a whiff of something gone awry and saw the hood of his sweatshirt in flames. He thought she was joking, until he saw the smoking evidence. It's enough to make a person sober. Sobriety is a perfect excuse for getting high.

When the dope is all gone and the only thing left is sleep, things become a bit more complicated. First of all, you can't urinate. You may have to piss so badly it feels ready to shoot out like a laser beam, and yet somehow wind up standing in front of the toilet, head nodding, frustrated by your bladder's sudden ineptitude for twenty minutes or more before capitulating. Then, lying in bed, sleep seems a joke. At times, I admit, I practice a little manual self-love to swoon off, but when I'm high I never achieve satisfaction though I'd try diligently for a long time. Not because I particularly wanted to – heroin is no aphrodisiac – I'd just try anything if it might help me sleep. Sometimes, I'd fall asleep with Notorious B.I.G. still in my hand. A junkie's rest is very sporadic. Every forty minutes or so, I'd wake up with the absolute certainty I'd slept for hours, only to realize with befuddlement how little time had actually passed. And the puking. While you're on the stuff, while you're pulling lines, the route to the bathroom must remain clear, as you will invariably have to kneel upon tiles repeatedly. It's not a bad vomit, almost silky really, and you feel much better for it. Going through the motions, the whole routine of the thing, is actually quite comforting. It was nearly a week before we did it again. A week fraught with frustration and waiting by the phone, being deeply upset when we had to give up and go to bed, another day without bearing fruit. It's funny, thinking about those days when I hoped so much that we would get the call to meet someone, to score. In contrast to a few months later, hoping to find a way not to score, hoping to find some physical barrier to keep me from shoving D up my nose, knowing if things were normal that's what I'd be doing ere the evening ended. I'd lost control. I knew that, accepted it.

But things were okay. In Paris, things were so fucked up they were okay.

That week wasn't all bad for me, though. I had the pleasure of spending some of it with Christine, who managed only to look better at each meeting. Thanks to her, my French was improving with alacrity, which is more than I can say for her English. And she was sweet as candy. Really, one of the best looking girls I'd ever known. Because I felt she was out of my league, I can only guess she saw me as aloof, standoffish. This was apparently enough for her to kiss me on a bench near the Eiffel tower. Very romantic. A deep, long, wet kiss during which I tried very hard to convince myself it was really happening.

"Tu es tres, tres mignon," she said, kissing my hand. "Je suis ta copine." It was a declaration. She was my girlfriend, to which I numbly answered 'Yes, of course.'

"Oui, bien sur." Ahhh! Paris! I thought of the cab driver who drove me to Kennedy airport in New York City. He said the best way to learn a foreign language was from a naked foreign woman, in bed. I hoped to test his theory.

So the week passed happily for me, more or less. I was unable to extricate myself from the circle of discontent in which my two housemates and Allan wallowed. Things started to get a little depressed at Place Vauban.

Then it happened.

A pickup had to be made. Allan was busy, so Nais and Gwillam had to go. This time there was no middleman. They would go to the source, a guy named Hugo. An indefatigable addict, Hugo supported his habit by selling to a small but steady group of users. He felt it was practical to personally meet those people with whom he shared his manna, to make certain they weren't the kind who might put him in a compromising position. Hugo had done so much D that good sized tufts of his hair had fallen out in places. He looked like a malnourished CHIA-head. I stayed home waiting for Allan while Anais and Gwillam excitedly sped off to their consequential conference. This arrangement suited me fine, as I've always held fast to a dope policy that never has me as the bag-man. If I don't know how or where to get it, then I have to rely on someone else who does. If there's nobody else around, then I've managed to create a lack of substance, which constitutes a barrier, tissue-thin but still a physical barrier, against getting high. If I

wanted to know how to get it, I could easily, but I don't want to know. If I knew, I'd be high right now.

They came back with a fat gram, and from there it progressed. With a steady connect, we worked it from a gram between four every fourth day, then every third, and so on. In no time, we were taking care of two grams or more every night. If you're curious as to how we managed that kind of money, the answer's an ugly one: dope is dirt cheap. Plus, we knew the night would more than likely end in vomiting, so eating real food was a waste. Our dinner, not unusually, consisted of a loaf of bread, maybe with some butter. Lunch was a bit more nutritious, but still cheap as our bodies, recovering from the previous sessions, couldn't handle much beyond what was necessary to keep from starving. Heroin chic was on all our horizons. Between September first and mid-October, I shed more than thirty pounds.

Aside from drugs, the only real money I spent was on beverage and the occasional dinner with Christine, with whom things were going smoothly. It became increasingly difficult, though, to keep up appearances with her. My mind would stray to the coming night's debauchery and somehow my attempts to speed her departure worked to attract and excite her all the more. Oh, what a tangled web we weave ...

Days were spent in a haze. Anais and Gwillam started school in earnest, where I audited a French language class that I attended when the mood struck. Gwillam was in the same class, and one afternoon after the roughest night of dope to date, a night that quietly leaked through into the late morning hours, he and I had to go take a French test. Within a block of the apartment, we both rushed to a trash can and threw up.

Problem: due to terrorist attacks in Paris, every public trash can is welded shut so nobody can hide a bomb in one. Of course nobody can throw any trash into it either, so there's a lot blowing around. And by no means can two strung-out kids vomit into one on a quiet, sunny street. I know this for a fact because I tried. Gwillam, too. Without a word, we spun on our heels and ran back home, French test or no.

We did our best to keep the Chameleons alive, but we were clearly fighting a losing battle. They wouldn't eat, even when we tried to force-feed them. The laughably empty refrigerator was a painful reminder of our poor judgment. Each time anyone opened it, maggots all but stared us in the face. Not crawling loose, (give me that much credit, at least), but in a plastic container, living nutrients uneaten. We received word from my brother in New York that despite all the best equipment, his lizard had already died. It was a cause of great distress, and I think we all caught ourselves at one time or another wishing they would just die so we could begin to put this stressful, selfish injustice behind us. Against all odds, they kept on keeping on.

As we spent more and more time with Allan, I began to learn about him. He was an incurable addict, an incorrigible booster of substance abuse with a serious problem regarding his own sobriety. If he wasn't high, he was drunk. Even if it meant drinking rubbing alcohol or snorting glue, both of which I caught him doing at one time or other. I also discovered he had a girlfriend, and a death wish. Rather, an ex-girlfriend he continued to sleep with and who continued to infiltrate his admittedly precarious existence.

Her name was Gabriela. She was moderately attractive and came from mythical wealth. It was rumored she received ten thousand dollars each month from her Brazilian family, and as a result was always immaculately dressed. Very rich men and women with an unrestricted international fashion sense are par for the course at the American University in Paris, which looks between classes more like an impromptu fashion show than a small campus. It fell upon my sister, Gwillam, and myself to shield and cover Allan from her unwelcome inquires as to his whereabouts. There was friction between them regarding a number of issues, but most notably the issue of drugs. She wanted Allan to give them up, but he wouldn't dream of it. She told him they were through because of that. A mother wouldn't have as much trouble sending away a son, which is more accurate than it sounds. She acted maternally towards him without reprieve, even picking out his clothes. So he would tell her he had given up the drugs, and she tried believing him. She knew about us, and whenever Allan didn't go home or call her, she would invariably call our apartment when, more

often than not, Allan was pulling lines off our kitchen table. Whoever's turn came up on the rotation when her call came had to gently knock her off the trail. "No Gabriela, I haven't seen Allan all day. I heard he was going to a museum with Gwillam earlier, but I don't have any idea where they might have gone from there. If I hear from him, should I have him call you? Okay, sorry Gabi! Bye!"

"Thanks a lot, dude," Allan would say once the receiver was cradled. It became part of the routine.

Further along down this road, when the twists and turns began to morph into the illusion of an Ohio-like straight, empty blacktop with no end in sight, the only way to break up the senseless journey was the occasional rest stop within each other's ethos. There's so much more to learning than the lesson, and sometimes it scared me when Allan laughed and smiled, because he taught the lessons he could never learn. A few years before I met him, when he had yet to begin a relationship with his girlfriend, a karmic wind began to blow. While she was still in Brazil, Gabriela had a surgical breast-reduction, and everything appeared fine. Over the next two years or so, things must have been great. She moved to Paris to go to college, and she met Allan. He read us some of the poems he'd written for her, and it was painfully clear they once shared a love of bottomless depth. But the winds of karma are inescapable, and grant no absolution. Gabriela discovered she was sick. It was HIV, and as you might expect, it changed everything. She and Allan had been having unprotected sex while the fickle winds searched them out. Allan was tested in every way. It was probably the only time he had a blood test that came out negative. Somehow, he had not been infected. But his emotions were incurable. His love and his commitment superseded every boundary. Nothing could keep him from this most amazing essence. He had, consciously or not, found a way to physically love death without the dying. Though he insisted, Gabriela would no longer allow him inside her until his need, his love, his desire proved her greatest source of life. So she conceded, under the strict condition he wear two condoms, and he agreed. He wanted to exchange his life for her death, but she didn't know. Nor did she know he always cut the ends off both condoms before putting them on. He wanted so badly to be sick with her, but despite all efforts, he failed. This failure led him to the embrace of a new love. Allan put just as much intensity into drugs as he had into Gabriela, gave all his love to death, never able to understand why there was no reciprocation, never knowing where his love was going or why it wasn't enough. Never knowing anything. Never learning the lesson. All he could do was keep trying, keep teaching. There's more to being than having been.

Soon, heroin was ever present. If you needed a line to settle your stomach before class, you could have it. If you needed to get high for an early-evening stroll, you could. When I had to get stoned to take Christine out, I did. I would smile a lot but wouldn't eat, I would listen but wouldn't speak, and the far-off look in my pinhead pupils made me a poor excuse for a date. I liked her, and she was beautiful, but she resided in an unsavory position. She was second tier to the drug, which had gone a long way to quell sexual desire on my part. Inexplicably, all of this seemed to increase her desire, and I convinced myself to enjoy what was laid before me. Each time we were together, there was a lot of making out at the door of my building, just enough to thoroughly peak my interests. Right about then, she would break away and beg off in time to catch the next metro home. At that point, I would usually go up to the apartment and snort myself into oblivion.

Until this one particular night when Anais and Gwillam had gone away on a mandatory school trip to look at old cave drawings or some such thing, and Christine came up to an empty apartment. Luckily, we'd been safe about keeping the dope well hidden, and she never had a clue. I kept mine in a cigarette box in the inside breast pocket of a jacket I never used hanging in a closet between the front door and the bathroom.

"Why don't you make us some coffee?" I suggested, and swiped the stash on the way to the toilet. A few moments later, focused and more secure, I joined Christine in the kitchen. The coffee never had a chance. After a lot of kissing and squeezing, touching and rubbing, she was fully naked leaning back on the table with my most lucky head between her legs. I have to say that when I stepped back and looked at her body,

taut, lean and sensational, I almost wouldn't have minded giving up the dope for her. Almost. Breathing hard, her perfect breasts defying gravity, moving up and down with her chest.

"J'ai froid," she panted. "The table it is very cold. Take me to the bed." Well, she didn't have to ask me twice. Savoring her smell and her taste in my mouth, I carried her fantastically fit figure in my arms as she feasted ravenously on my ear, my neck. She was amazingly light, and I could feel the contours of her muscles, tight beneath smooth brown skin. Thinking about that night and the few that followed in retrospect, I frown, my head aches. At the time, it was wonderful. Her inexperience was more than made up for by her playfulness and stamina. Making love to Christine was like winning the lottery. I kept the lights on so I could periodically step back and stare at her. All the dope in my system allowed me to go for a long, long time, which she took as virility. She was so beautiful, and I thought my luck was really beginning to change. Days and weeks whipped by like cars on a formula-one racetrack. Sobriety became a laughably forgotten state, a word spoken of in fondly reminiscent terms, the way one might talk about a favorite grandmother who'd been dead for years.

My life in Paris had made a perceptible shift.

Things can happen so fast. Time: that most complex and intangible of human creations, infused with more importance and intention than any other, beholden to nothing yet contained within itself like a firefly trapped in a jar the size of galaxies. Time passed in Paris secretly, as a hastily scribbled love note in a third-grade classroom when the teacher's back is turned. September came to a close.

Hangin' with Hugo. Hunter Arrives.

The following weeks were full of escalations. Hugo became friendly with us. He would come over to see Gwillam's record collection - well over two hundred records, most containing hard to find and utterly obscure stuff unavailable in our mainstream CD world. It really was an impressive collection, and when he could make the time, Hugo would flip through it after tossing us a markedly fat bag or two, our daily bread.

Allan's girlfriend, Gabriela, gave us vicious, nasty glares whenever we happened to pass her by. No doubt she blamed us for causing Allan to fall from a grace he possessed only in her own mind.

Christine and I entered - to my surprise and delight - into unabashed intimate relations, a brightness dimmed by the fact that taking heroin dimmed my desire to take her in.

The chameleons slowed. They stared at us, driving deep our guilt, but there was little more we could do for them. They were illegal, I had no visa, and at any given time there was between one and five grams of pure heroin in the house. Outsider involvement, you understand, had to be minimized.

My days were made of fornication and CNN International, my nights of frenetic inhalation and unmatched intoxication, bridged by a restless sleep. It was a desecration of life.

And into this fray stepped a friend from my past.

Hunter is all sorts of California. Blonde and pretty, with a face like a young Meryl Streep. Smart and dumb with an ability to reach deep and true, or to impress with an annoying pointless idiocy. Men desired her sex and she knew it, used it. In bed she was a screamer, a fact I became aware of when she often screamed in the room next to mine our sophomore year in college, driven to it by a psycho named Bram. After she broke up with him, he threatened to shoot any guy he saw her with. Not an empty threat, either. With men, her stupidity manifested itself in the choices she made. I once offered myself to her with a promise to treat her well, a promise I would have kept. But my kindness confused her and she ran to the next guy who

mistreated her, made her believe that sex was the only thing she had to offer until it nearly became the truth. And now she was in Paris, for a master's program in international relations. I was worried about her. The only relations she seemed able to manage - badly - were sexual ones, and the only things I ever knew her to master were pot and acid. At those, she was a pro. I say these things out of concern. She attracts scum, and for some reason, on some level, is attracted to them. Perhaps it has something to do with her estranged father, who spends his time traversing the U.S. on a quest to have his picture taken with every waitress of every Hooter's restaurant in the country. But hey, who am I to psychoanalyze? It was nice to see Hunter again.

She arrived early on a Tuesday morning when the warmth was making its final round of farewells to the Seine-cleft city of lights, and promptly called early enough to upset me, had I been sober. We arranged an early lunch at the Salon de Thé on Avenue Tourville, just down the street from me. She devoured a crêpe while I nibbled on a tomato salad and listened to her stories about working for a mobile petting zoo rented out for parties. I told her, in purposefully vague terms, what Paris was like and promised to show her around a bit once she was settled into her paper-bag apartment and prepared for classes she had yet to register for. While she finished her lunch, I excused myself and quickly retired to the luckily vacant washroom where a lot of tomatoes changed venue from my stomach to their toilet. Washing up, I returned to my seat. After ordering coffee, Hunter began eyeing me suspiciously.

"You just threw up. Are you sick?"

"What? No. How can you tell?" I checked myself for anything that might have given me up so easily.

"I can tell. I can see it in your face. You look like hell. Like you haven't eaten in weeks. What's going on with you?"

I knew I couldn't keep my state from her. I never expected to. I would have told her soon enough, on more solid ground. I was caught off guard, especially because it was so alarmingly evident that something was awry. Truth was the only option.

"Hunter, I ... I've become, well ... " I had no idea it would be so difficult to admit this to someone, especially a friend. "I've become addicted to heroin." There. It was out, and I was relieved. I knew Hunter wouldn't judge too harshly.

"You're what?"

"Dope. D. Junk. Smack. You know, 'the white horse'? Only it's brown here. I'm on it. I'm hooked, Hunter. I'm a junkie."

There was a time when those words, those thoughts, would have made as much sense as a Jewish American Pope with three breasts and an escort service, but now they seemed just a matter of course.

"You're doing that again?"

"Compared to what I'm doing now, I may as well never have done it before."

"Why? Are you shooting it now?" She watched as I unwrapped cube after cube of sugar and held it over my coffee with just one corner submerged, allowing the white cube to turn brown by slow perceptible degrees, inhaling the coffee the way ... well, the way one might inhale heroin. The coffee-saturated sugar cube was exactly the same brown hue as the substance that coated my days and my nights, whose taste had found its way into every facet of my being. I could taste that taste when I woke up in the mornings. When I stood staring at my sallow reflection in a dark Metro window. When I walked down Boulevard Montparnasse

trying to remember why I had left the house to begin with. I could taste that taste sitting across from Hunter on a warm early fall day, while I played with a cup of coffee I never intended to drink.

"No," the reverie was broken. "I don't shoot it. I would never do that, ever." The sugar bowl was empty.

"What's it like? To do it, I mean. Is it fun?"

"I guess that ... I just don't know. It's like Oz, yeah? Great and terrible."

"I want to try it. Can I do it with you?" It was a serious question. I mean seriously asked. Heavy.

"Look, Hunter, speaking badly about it would be like insulting my own mother, but that's me. I wouldn't wish this stuff on anyone, some days. If you've never done it, that's probably best."

"I really just want to try; please." I can't say I was surprised.

"If you want to do it, and you go against my better judgment, I don't want to keep you out, but I don't want to invite you in, either. Do you understand? I can't be responsible. I need to hear it."

She swore it was entirely her own decision, and with a heavy sigh I told her to be at my place that night. I took her money with a grimace. I couldn't help feeling like a dealer, and I hated that feeling. Things have to progress though, in life, in everything. It wouldn't seem right if it were always easy. Hunter took off to take care of her things, and I was left alone under a sky that was blue enough, and in a breeze that was sweet enough to win me over, to keep me outdoors. So I walked, and I walked, and I walked. It was good to walk alone again, to think alone again.

Day Is Night. Popping a Cherry.

Years ago, when I didn't know anything at all, I went to Costa Rica to study environmental ecology. That summer in the rain forests represented a major realignment of my life. In Marengo, at the tip of a peninsula on Costa Rica's Pacific side approachable only by boat - a fantastic and nerve-wracking voyage flanked at the end by an escort of dolphins - I was stung in the ass by a scorpion. We were there in Marengo, our group, partially to study the forest canopy but mainly to watch the total solar eclipse, that rare and most spectacular of astral phenomenon. When the day came, we walked along a stretch of sand, buttressed on one end by the cast blue Pacific Ocean and on the other, just a few feet away, by the thick and colorful living jungle. At intervals that seemed almost symmetrical, huge Banyan-type trees extended their arms as though frozen in the act of embracing something that had been gone for decades, for centuries, or that nobody else could see. Within these presumably empty alcoves, the white sand faded into plants and tree-roots. And from there into the deep, thick jungle colored an amazing array of green, red, gold. The sound of monkeys howling yet invisible in their environment, birds calling with voices as diverse as the regalia of plant life assailing every glance. The sun shone brightly for the time being, reflected off the top of infinite grooves on the ocean that lapped at each other in a never-ending chase. We each found our own alcove, stretched along this unbelievable empty beach, comforted and protected by the treelike arms poised to shield us against harm. For the moment, all was as it should be.

Then it happened.

Almost too slowly to notice, the afternoon sky began to darken. The sun hadn't lost an iota of its intensity, but rather delivered it in some new form. Behind me, monkeys howled with more conviction. As brightness patiently suffocated, I donned the glasses designed for the occasion and saw a thumbnail of purest black over the very edge of the once familiar sun. Before my covered eyes it grew. The birds had fallen silent.

Confused, their voices were replaced with a manic rustling of feathers and for a moment it seemed everything with wings chose the exact same instant to relocate. As the light of the sun was overtaken, scrupulous sliver by sliver, I turned to face the now eerily silent jungle and was struck by a startling sight. A tree limb directly behind me was dripping with shells that had not been there before. Upon closer inspection, they proved not to be simple shells at all but rather hermit crabs, hundreds of them of all shapes and sizes, struggling against nature, fighting to climb up the tree. It was as if the ground had suddenly become acidic, and the only way to save themselves from painful death was to do something they were clearly unequipped to do. It might have been comic, had their desperate resolve not seemed so doomed, so human. As darkness made its uncertain, tangible foray into the world of daylight where it crept its way like an unwelcome guest of the sky, like a cosmic party-crasher, the ocean below made its objections known. It thrashed and rumbled with a newfound and unsettling voracity. The moon had now swallowed more than half the once mighty sun, and as its powers of illumination began to acquiesce like a fallen hero with tacit consent, the chorus of monkeys rose to a vociferous crescendo of howls. Birds flew about in silent excitement, or fear. The hermit crabs climbed over each other to reach heights they could never have known before. And deeper in the jungle confused nature recalibrated itself into a skewed and totally unfamiliar revision of existence. Larger, unseen forms crashed through the dark underbrush and I forced my alarmed concentration back to the new disc in the sky. The sun was gone. An exceptionally bright halo of white light was all that remained around the perfectly spherical moon-thing in its place. The utter, all-encompassing, unblemished blackness was like nothing I have ever looked upon in my life. It was as pure as anything I have ever known, and the very thought that this uncompromisingly black disc had only the night before been the white benign moon seemed ludicrous. On that soft sand beach in Marengo I cried as I sensed all of nature turned on its head.

I couldn't say how long the black disc held sway over the Earth. I'm sure it's recorded somewhere. I can say it felt like hours to me, filling me with amazement to last forever. Eventually, light, and the sun, began to make a resurgence and triumphantly broke through the darkness. It was as if plugs had been pulled from my ears and my nostrils and I could hear the jungle again, smell the ocean. Drawn by a tidal magnetism I cannot explain, I walked without hesitation directly into the water. It was the first time I'd been in any ocean since the day my stomach was pumped on a Long Island beach, six years before. I was not surprised to see the other members of my group - every last one of them - wading, or preparing to wade, in the suddenly becalmed Pacific. The instant between escaping darkness and approaching light was unapproachable, impossible for my intellect to quantify. I can never forget. After a while, things began to normalize. Midday returned, the uncovered sun no worse for wear and tear. Just as strong, just as hot as before The Great Disappearance.

Our lodgings in Marengo were a Robin Hood-esque network of wood and straw thatch huts built into the lush landscape. I shared mine with two Canadians and Greg Manuel, from New York. One side opened onto a veranda, jutting out over a sheer drop into a soft jungle opening, leading beyond into the Pacific, eternally present and eternity itself. On the other side of the hut, out any one of three rectangular gaps least resembling a window at time of use, the jungle began in earnest.

As the sun took matters of darkness back into its own hands, I threw on my ratty jeans for some jungle exploration with the group. We all got good and wet. After all, they don't call 'em rain forests for nothing, you know. I laid my jeans out on the veranda to let the fresh night air dry them enough to wear the following day. When morning came to Marengo on the heels of a sun out to prove itself and reassert its rightful place, it was time for us to pack our things. We had to catch a boat - the only boat - back to an unmarked dirt road four hours away, where presumably a van waited. After a cold shower I went out to let the hot sun warm my skin for a moment before grabbing my jeans, dry now, and returning indoors to put them on.

Then, it happened.

I paused with the jeans around my shins, noticing something at the top of my calf. Too quickly, I made the assumption it was a twig, to be shaken out once my pants were fully on. I pulled them up the rest of the way and immediately realized I had made a most grievous mistake. At the very top back of my right thigh, torment exploded the way a Time Square new year's industrial-grade firecracker might in somebody's closed fist. It was absolutely unbelievable. Deafening, complete, driving. The pain astounded me. I wanted so badly to be dead. I couldn't have screamed any louder if my arm were being hacked off at the elbow with a salt and alcohol-covered bread-knife. More than loud enough to bring Greg racing in to see what the matter was. He found me on a cot, eyes wide with suffering and terror, shaking uncontrollably and repeating these words: "A wasp. Let it be a wasp. Let it be a wasp..."

It was no wasp.

Greg understood the situation at a glance and gently pulled my pants off. We both gaped in horror at the shiny black evil scorpion the size of a grown man's hand as it crawled from one leg of my jeans.

"I cannot believe I was stung by a scorpion; I cannot believe I was stung by a scorpion; I cannot believe ... " The pain was everything. I had to repeat the words simply to understand them. Greg sprinted out one of the 'doors' shouting for help, leaving me to stare blindly at this creature that had brought the world down around me in an avalanche of white-hot agony. A man appeared, grabbing my jeans and using them to scoop the scorpion into a jar. I recognized him as the resident biologist, and hated him for what he said.

"That's the biggest I've ever seen! What beast!" The black monster pounded its glass surroundings with lobster-like pincers. "It's not fatal," he said as though it was hardly important and ran off with his new prize. I was again left alone to contemplate. Had the detestable monster's stab been more potent, my chances for survival, all things considered, would have been less than slim. My mind continued to run in every direction trying to control the indescribable pain that quickly overtook my entire body, concentrated in the back of my leg. I was rigid; I couldn't move, and through eyes fluctuating in and out of focus, I caught glimpses of people gawking at me in my underwear, locked in place. At long last, the group leader broke it up and reminded everyone of the steep walk down to the dock. I was left with Greg, who packed my things while I slowly, excruciatingly went through the once easy motions of getting dressed.

On the boat, sweating from the effort of blocking out the pain, I learned that this would be no short-lived misery. You see, although that particular scorpion's sting is not fatal to humans, it is still venomous. Poison that would have killed a cat in minutes coursed through my veins. Before getting off the boat and for three days after, my fingers swelled up so I couldn't make a fist; my toes so I couldn't wear shoes; and my tongue so I couldn't speak. I was a miserable mute invalid, unable to do anything but seethe with hatred for that fucking scorpion. For years after the incident, the spot on the back of my thigh a constant reminder of when it had swollen to the size of a softball, I looked in every pair of pants, every sock, every shoe before putting them on.

I arrived at Sacre Coeur, the cathedral of the sacred heart that stands a constant watch over all of Paris, looking down upon even the Eiffel tower itself. Past the Opera, the walk leads you up and up along once barren hills to the highest point in the city. This area, called Montmartre, was the seat of the literary and artistic movement in early and middle twentieth-century Paris. Where painters and writers, Parisian and American alike, helped remold the world's definition of art. The birthplace of bohemian existence taking its cue from the sensational cathedral backdrop, the giant, silent editor and critic that has seen it all. The building is stark white and tremendous. A plethora of spires large and small give Sacre Coeur the appearance of God's wet-dripped sand-castle. Inside the cathedral itself is, bar none, the most powerful room into which I've ever set a humbled foot, and while I have no real religious convictions it is only in here that I can truly understand how others can be so moved. It honestly is a sacred sanctuary, inspiring awe and amazement, forcing one to marvel at the genius and forcing even me, with eyes open wide, to kneel and pay

homage to this place. I climbed to the top, up an almost endless set of stairs, narrow and tightly wound that left me gasping and enraptured by the view of Paris laid out like a living map below. Here I could see the sun gleaming off the glass of the box-shaped Pompidou, looking even more out of place from a distance and yet somehow paradoxically fitting into the context. Near it, the Louvre and adjacent gardens with springing fountains, so small they were almost imagined. The Champs-Elysee and the Arc de Triomphe sitting gruffly, like a pouty child after a tantrum. And on the other side of the river that runs through this city like fingers through a lover's hair, the Eiffel tower, the golden dome of Napoleon's tomb, and squinting with concentration, I could see all the way to Pláce Vauban and our apartment. It was time to make my way back there. Time to meet Hunter and the others where I would begrudgingly open a door that should just as well stay closed. Hunter is a big girl. It wasn't for me to keep her out. Her own free will was not as entirely uninformed as mine had been that first time, in Tortuguero national park, somewhere in Costa Rica. Walking back through the outdoor fruit and vegetable vendors I thought of Tortuguero with a grimace, a chuckle, and a melancholy realization of the spectrum my existence had straddled since then.

Tortuguero is a natural reserve where we watched sea turtles, graceful yet graceless, lugubrious and valiant, make their way up the beach to dig a hole and lay their soft eggs. It was in Tortuguero that I first learned what illicit drugs were. Mind you, I knew what they were in as much as I'd heard of them before, but I had never in my life actually seen marijuana physically, with my own eyes. In fact, I was so adamantly against the very idea of drug use back then that I would reprimand others for smoking cigarettes, and had only just been introduced to heavy amounts of alcohol earlier on the same trip. I would never do drugs. I was sure of it. I didn't need to. When a few people mentioned getting together late one evening to smoke pot, my first reaction was disturbed confusion: I thought I knew these people. They were good people. How can it be, then, that they would smoke drugs?

My next reaction caused further consternation: Can it be possible that good people take drugs as well as bad? Can it be that drugs aren't as terrible as I've been led to believe? Finally, I reacted with choice: Maybe I should try this marijuana thing, see what all the fuss is about. I'd always been taught never to speak badly about a thing unless I've tried it myself.

Winding through the streets of Paris at day's end, that choice seemed inconsequential compared to what I was on my way to do, but at the time it superseded all previous choices. I had been taught by my parents, by my teachers, by my television that drugs were BAD, and I believed them all. There never was any distinction between, say, marijuana and heroin. There maybe should have been. I wracked my soul that Costa Rican eve, and decided to do the wrong thing, to join the addicts in their den of despaired insubordination and smoke shwaggy brown pot through a toilet-paper casing. So the first time I smoked marijuana, really a huge issue, nothing happened. Not a god damned thing. Well, that's not entirely true. It made the second time a whole lot easier, and the third and fourth times nearly a matter of course. It took a while, but smoking the recreational herb eventually evolved into so regular an occurrence that I became bored with it. It was a huge step, though, in changing the kind of person I was and would become. For the better, I think. Society may dispute that. But it's a society that chose never to differentiate between pot and heroin and to that society I say: Go fuck yourself.

Once I began getting high, I began learning about and accepting some of the other illicit things people put into their systems, but I honestly had no real desire to try any of them. It was nearly five years before I took a harder drug. Let's be honest, a 'real' drug. I think Amy had something to do with the wait.

Queen of Hearts.

Sunlight filtered through the thin blue curtains and for the seconds before I fully woke I imagined myself under the sea. No octopus or garden remained as I became aware of my surroundings, the music wafting through the floorboards, the pressure in my loins. Throwing on a T-shirt identifying me as 'King of the

Castle' that I had won playing mini-golf, I stumbled to the porcelain throne and took care of business, dragged a comb across my head. The creaking of the stairs on my way down was no match for the music Amy had no doubt put on to rouse me from slumber in her bed. Clarification on that last bit: we slept together in the literal, platonic sense. She insisted on the close quarters as adamantly as the lack of physical romance thereof, an arrangement I had slowly but surely learned to deal with.

Sensing my presence at the foot of the stairs, she turned the music down.

"I'm the Queen of Hearts," she said, as though we'd been in mid-conversation. "There are four. Spades, Diamonds, Clubs and then me. I'm Hearts. Look here. I'll show you why." Her long brown hair was held back from her face by a barrette I had given her to replace the chewed up #2 pencil that used to hold it in place. I gave it to her so I could see her face more clearly. I wish I could see it as clearly now. Her small, sharp nose above the wry, knowing half-smile she warmed me with whenever I said or did something stupid. I miss her eyes. They were chestnut brown and alive. Pulling a book from the bookcase, she spun around to face my stare. (I'm not sure, but I think I stopped breathing for a second, watching her thin flowery skirt lift and wind itself around her legs. Her shirt, too small to begin with, rose up just enough, offering a tantalizing glimpse of bare stomach. I wanted to touch her there, to kiss that soft, smooth white skin). She gave me that smile, and I swallowed hard. Bringing the book, she sat down beside me on the couch.

"It comes from here," she said. "From one of the drawings in this book." She flipped through the pages, occasionally pausing to smile at one, until finally stopping.

"Here. Okay. This book is different artists' personal representations of their favorite Beatles songs. This one is why we called ourselves the Queens." It was a painting representing the song 'I've Just Seen A Face'. Four Bicycle playing cards of the Queens in a deck with only the ghost of a body, but very distinct faces. The Queen of Hearts had brown hair, deep brown eyes and a small nose. The resemblance was far from exceptional, but I could understand where the idea had come from. "This one," she said pointing to Diamonds, "is Ebe. See her hair? See how blonde it is? Ebe's hair is that color, only shorter. And her eyes are green, not blue. This one," (Clubs) "is Jenny. I've got a feeling you two'll get along. And this one here is for Tasha, who you met and you know doesn't look like this but she was the only one left so... Oh, Hey!" She exclaimed, slamming the book shut and putting a warm hand on my face. "Are you hungry, babe? You must be. You must be hungry. I'm starved. Come into the kitchen. I'll cook us breakfast." And she was gone. I could still feel the warmth of her palm on my cheek and I fell in love with her for the hundredth time that week. Sitting on a log that was more comfortable than it looked, sipping on a Long Island iced tea as if I were classier than I felt, in sight of the beaded doorway to 'Cucaracha's' bar, I could smell the smells, hear the sounds, and knew everything I ever was had ended, and all I would ever be was significantly not so. At the bottom of a hill known as 'El Paco', at the gateway to the cloud forest called Monteverde, in the center of a country named Costa Rica, I heard, smelled, and felt the jungle breathe. My eyes were shut against the erratic light from the bar's disco ball that spun like my head from the booze in my drink and the air - cool, clean, sweet - in my lungs. I was intoxicated. My senses, however, were so acute that I think I smelled her before she spoke and it didn't bother me because it was a sweet smell, the sort that brings lucid memory back to light. Like the smell of nuts roasting in a shallow steel pan at the corner of seventy-sixth street and Columbus Avenue on a cold New York November afternoon. Those nuts always smell fraudulently better than they taste. I kept my eyes closed so I could feel her voice roll through me like thunder made of sugarcane. "You don't have to hide yourself away," she said. "Why are you out here alone?" She knew why the moment she sat beside me and closed her eyes. I opened mine to have a better look at her. We had met briefly earlier that day, the first full day of this trip, but I hadn't been able to really look at her. She wasn't beautiful in a striking way, though her features were classic. The beauty came more from a sense about her, that she was just as she was, that she did not take it to be who she was, that she was perfect without a hint of pretension in the most sincere way possible. That though tomorrow may rain, she'd follow

the sun. At least until it burned out, which it did only after warming me and the other lucky few with a heat that would never abate, never die. As I suppose now she had to. When she opened her eyes I caught my breath loud enough for her to notice. I don't know if it was a shaft of runaway disco-light gleaming off her cheeks or if it was all in my mind, but for a moment her eyes were so impossibly bright there was actually illumination coming from within them. A hazy, emerald pool of light that disappeared when she blinked.

I never saw that light again - her eyes were brown - but I always look.

"Wow!" She said. "Now I get it. I saw you out here alone and I thought: 'He's a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land...' But this is...wow." She waved her arms to encompass the black in front and I knew she heard, she felt what I was feeling. Maybe for the very first time, I knew just what to say: "The earliest memory I have of being really scared was this one night my mom came running into my room sobbing. It was the first time I'd ever seen her cry. She grabbed me in her arms and said she was sorry, kept saying she was sorry I had to grow up in a world like this, and I got worried she meant we were in the wrong one. Like there was a choice of which world I could grow up in, but I was stuck with this wrong life in this wrong world when it could've been right. A few nights later, I found out the reason my mom had been so rattled was because someone shot John Lennon. But those days in between were terrifying. Even now, I can still feel that feeling. It's like a marker, a beacon of how much worse things can be." For the first time in years, I replayed those memories in the deafening silence that only exists in a jungle. "When I was nine," Amy said, "'Dear Prudence' came on the radio and my dad told me it was his favorite song. He said he'd wanted to name me Prudence, and that to him I'd always be. My dad was killed in a car wreck. Rear-ended by a tractor-trailer like Harry Chapin. I listen to that song so I never forget what he looked like." After a pause, she raised her glass and looked at me to do the same.

"We're going to be good friends." Steel, warm, confident.

"Amy, I think I believe you."

I knew I could never forget the time, the place where we met - really met - on that log staring into a Costa Rican jungle we both knew was staring right back.

It comes back to me, that life. Sometimes when I least expect it. Once, walking home from P & G's bar at five in the morning after drinking pitcher upon pitcher of beer with Nate on the first anniversary since he and his first love had parted. As I passed Fairway's, the vast fresh fruit and vegetable market on Broadway, the sidewalk beneath my feet became a pliable orange soil, packed tight. The lampposts curving overhead, as they winked out in anticipation of the breaking sun, became the tree-topped ceiling of a forest canopy. The occasional taxicab sliding past like the sound of running water and the cool air, somehow made of moisture, was the air of Costa Rica.

As the years pass, I may not always remember. But I will never forget.

Of the lesser Queens, I had met Tasha, whose tightly curled jet-black hair against pale skin made the blue of her eyes arctic. Perfect to match her biting and sarcastic humor, despite which she seemed solid as a person, as a friend. Later that day, I would have dinner with all four Queens, an event to which I looked forward with amused anticipation.

Amy sparked a joint and we smoked it while she read poems to me out of a Charles Bukowski book. 'I died without nails' and whatnot. I think what attracted me most to Amy was her intensity. I have never met anyone before or since whose flame burned as brightly. It's not that she was focused on anything. To this day I don't know what her long term plans were, and I like to think she never really had any. She lived in the present, and when I asked her once what she wanted to be in her life, she smiled her smile and replied

very seriously:

"Amy. That's what." I always believed her.

Observation mode in full swing, Amy and I strolled leisurely through Hazelton Lanes, Toronto's high-class shopping area, making fun of plastic women and stiff men carrying their plastic bags, comparing the real ones to their synthetic counterparts. The mannequins, in their detachment, seemed almost ashamed. In one store we spotted Huey Lewis of Rock n' Roll 'News' fame, and Amy laughed out loud as she was wont to do after pretending to be a reverent, breathless fanatic pining for an autograph. We bought sausages from a man behind a cart after a whole crew of shoppers returned to the serious business of overpaying for unnecessaries, hardly slowing down to chew their food. The sausage salesman wiped his forehead and smiled at us, motioning to his display of edibles. We each ordered one with everything, and while he was busily preparing them Amy asked: "Don't you feel out of place around here?"

"Well, young lady," said the man after pondering her question. "In this world, a working-class hero's something to be." He handed over our sausages, we our money, and with his words and his pork to digest we found a bench and ate.

The day went on this way. Flawless. We approached an older woman feeding pigeons and Amy worked her wizardry, pulling stories with ease and care, like pulling a blade of grass from soft ground without tearing the root. We heard what it was like to live in Baltimore during WWII, waiting for the return of a true love from the battlefields. When there was none, she raised their baby daughter to young-adulthood only to suffer as she ran off with some hippie simply because he could teach her to play 'Day Tripper' on the guitar.

"Try to see it my way," she begged. "Pigeons are like feathered bundles of unconditional love with wings. And no words." She sprayed bread-crumbs at the birds, who descended upon them with all the vehemence of a Montague on a Capulet.

On the subway, Amy danced to some tune none of the other passengers could hear. I would like to have heard. When we got to our stop, I had to laugh. The name of the street was 'Queen's Way.' She traced her fingers through the letters carved into the wall of the station.

"Queen's Way," she said. "This is our street. Come on, I'll show you." Cruising down the street, Amy never moved to avoid the people I seemed constantly to sidestep. Like commoners before royalty, they parted. I maybe should have noticed that Amy was living in her own reality. I think I did notice. At the time, there seemed to be no harm done.

When we got to the restaurant, 'The Palace Diner,' Amy waved and ran to a table at the rear. In the hot-pink crescent-shaped booth sat three regal women watched over by an Elvis lamp on one side, and a framed poster of four lads from Liverpool on the other. I hung back a moment to allow for hugs and the like, and then sauntered over softly so as not to impose my presence. As soon as I got close, my cover was broken. All four of them shouted my name in unison, which made my cheeks red, and got me hugs and kisses of my own. Not a bad deal. Any intimidation often projected upon a newcomer by a group, or vice-versa, was effectively dispelled before I'd even sat down. Of course, with Amy around, being yourself was never a problem. I was offered the spot next to Jenny, directly below the knowing porcelain gaze of the garish King.

When desert arrived, so did Morris Jamison, Jenny's ex-boyfriend. I hesitate to use the terms 'ex' or 'boyfriend' because apparently her choice in either matter had been swallowed whole by this tall, beer-bellied, long-haired, thick-bearded man wearing an overcoat with a quarter-full fifth of Southern Comfort poking from an inside pocket.

"Jesus Christ, Morris," Ebe spat, her eyes like spikes. "At the risk of being rude, why not turn around and

leave. Save us the pain of having to look at you."

Opting against this suggestion, he dragged a chair close and sat on it backwards, crossing his arms over the back-turned-front and lighting a cigarette the way a marksman might fire a Magnum in an accuracy competition.

"Call me Jim. I told you." Coldly glancing from face to face.

"Oh, right," Tasha chimed with a grin bleeding sarcasm. "Jim baby, can you light my fire?"

Unfazed, he ashed on the Formica table, never bothering to glance at the ashtray next to the ketchup and the sugar.

Jenny, with whom I'd been getting along exceptionally well, pleaded in a softer tone:

"Morris, you know it's over." On my other side, Amy sang under her breath: "My only friend, the end ..."
Noticing my confusion, she leaned over and whispered:

"A year back, a fortune teller told him he was Jim Morrison, reincarnated. He's a fruitcake."

As realization dawned upon his conspicuous appearance, I had to cover my mouth to stifle a laugh. I guess it wasn't that funny. The guy needed help.

"Who's the dog?" The Jim-thing demanded, raising his furry chin in my direction. "You screwin' this guy?" I hate confrontation. Particularly with a man so clearly out of his mind. Jenny squeezed my hand under the table to get my heart started again.

"What if I am?" Oh shit. I squeezed back, a little harder. It did the trick. "No, Morris. This is a friend of Amy's."

With a finality compassionate as it was unconditional, Amy said:

"Listen Jimbo, she's not the one. You're Pam is out there someplace. She's not here though, Jim, okay? Not here." Her tone sliced through what might have been almost comic tension were it not so damn volatile, so electric. In one motion, he stood and tossed the chair behind. Clearly a person extremely entrenched, even entranced, in the dramatics of his presence.

"Ames," he said pointing a shaking finger, "maybe I was wrong about you. Get your shit figured out and come find me. Unless I find you, first." With a timed sigh and a theatrical spin, he was gone. Fucking Canadians sometimes, I gotta tellya.

That night, the five of us went to 'The Castle Gate', a bar where we drank and danced to the retro acid-surf sounds of a band named 'The Eleanor Rigbyites.' Jenny and I were left alone. She looked at her shoes when she spoke, then at mine, or the shoes of people around us. I would wait for her to look away so that I could stare at her face. I know she caught me a few times, but I think I wanted her to. I could sense Amy smiling behind me. Jenny had scarcely let go of my hand since the incident at the diner. I didn't mind. Things between her and I ran their course that night, and though we stopped short of carnal investigation, those avenues were duly explored before my return home. It was an interesting, if not a great night, and when it was over I did feel fine.

On the morning I was to leave Toronto, I stood in the kitchen, King of the Castle, fixing breakfast for the Queen. As I set it on the table, she appeared and grabbed my cheeks with warm hands (they were always warm) and kissed me on the forehead.

"Oh Es!" she sighed. "If things were different I'd want you to grow old along with me." Her tone was apologetic, but when I pressed for a reason her cryptic response was: "You're old enough to know better." Now and then I wonder if I should have left it at that, but at the time it was my last day in Toronto with Amy and there were other things to talk about. I could not have known it was my last day with Amy, ever. It hurts way too much to think maybe I should have known.

"I want you to listen to something, okay? Sit down." She turned toward her stereo and put on the 'American Beauty' album by The Grateful Dead. I listened as 'Ripple' came through the old York speakers. We hummed the melody softly together. A minute or two into the next song, she put a finger against my lips and whispered in my ear: "This is what I'm going to play for my mom. When I go away." She turned up the volume to be sure I heard:

Fare you well, my honey. Fare you well, my only true one.

All the birds that were singing are flown, except you alone.

Going to leave this brokedown palace,

On my hands and knees, I will roll, roll, roll.

She never told me where she was going. I'm not sure I want to know anymore. I often wonder if she got there.

The trip back home was hard and sullen. I wish I could have stayed another week.

Two months later, a call came that cut through my thoughts like our breath through the air in Costa Rica on the night we met. It was Jenny and she just kept saying she was sorry. Between sobs she begged me to tell her that "life goes on, right? Life goes on?" Amy was finished. Her fire doused. Too much bad acid fried her brain. I arranged a trip quickly, quietly. As soon as the train left New York I popped a few sleeping pills, unable to bare the twelve-hour ride awake. They wore off long before rolling into Queen Victoria station in Toronto. Jenny was waiting to meet me. It was late. I was worn out from the ride and the restless sleep. We drove to her house. I slept in the guest room.

The next morning arrived with dread. I hated the reason I was in Toronto, and I wanted to go home right away. I definitely did not want to see Amy. Selfish thoughts, but I could not keep from thinking them. I liked the person Amy had helped me to become a great deal more than the person I had been before. What would happen if I just left? If I took the next train home, imagined I had never been up to begin with? Would I succeed in forgetting her, and still be able to stay the person I wanted to be? Of course I couldn't leave. The person I had become with Amy's help would never do that.

When Jenny came in and asked me down for breakfast, I was dressed and ready to go.

We drove to the hospital in shocked silence. There was nothing to say, even if I had been able to speak.

Queen's Medical Center is a nondescript building. Institutional gray with small dark rectangular windows like pockmarks contaminating its face. Inside, I had to squint in order to see Jenny against the ultra-sanitized whiteness of the walls, and the floors, and the ceiling. At last I reached her, standing in front of a cold white door, waiting for me to open it. I did, and passed through. I can't remember if Jenny followed.

Amy's brown hair seemed lost between the white sheets of the white bed, in the white room. Her face matched the walls. What I saw next was much worse.

I looked into Amy's eyes and they were empty.

I ran. I ran from the white. I ran until I could no longer see or feel the white. And I never saw the Jester Queen of Hearts again.

Life does go on. I don't think it has any choice. I realized then that maybe she had us, but we never had her.

I'm talking about Amy. I'm talking about life.

Nobody told me there'd be days like these.

I know over the course of a life, a person will be exposed to suffering and loss, the cornerstone of unjust probability. I know the life I've chosen to lead has and will invariably place me in a position to know people, or people who know people, whose similar living methods increases that probability. Encountering it has done more than simply wrack my days and nights with grief over the loss of a friend, of good people whose lives could have been even more spectacular had they not succumbed, allowed themselves to succumb. I know more than that. Remembrance has forced me to know more. I know that I am not exempt. Not only from suffering loss and the desperate pain when it seems the only person in the world who could truly understand is the one person who had so recently left the world. I know that doing what I do, though it may create the sheen of invincibility, actually promotes the opposite. I know there can be no good reason why I should suffer the loss of others, and not be in line to become lost myself.

It's impossible not to learn lessons when faced with that. To learn them is easy in the hardest way. To heed them, to apply those lessons to one's own life is more difficult. From Amy's unfair and untimely exit from a world that scarcely deserved her, I learned more than I can ever quantify.

Castrated by Christine. Hunter Savior.

When I chose to try chemicals - LSD and Extasy - it was from a much more informed and cautious standpoint, and though I enjoyed them fully, my experience of loss kept me from overusing. I've always had a justifiable fear of acid. I have seen what excessive overuse can do, and because of that I couldn't help feeling concern for Hunter, who in stark honesty I'd rather see doing heroin than fucking with her brain by dousing it in lab-built chemicals. You always know, give or take, what you're getting with dope - particularly the brown kind. Acid was a drug of the sixties and seventies and back then, it generally was LSD. These days, if you analyzed a tab, you'd be as likely to find that particular combination as you would be to find a pair of Levi's Dockers on an elephant. More often than not, it's a jumble of chemicals whose short and long-term effects have never and can never be analyzed. There's no way to tell, with the naked eye, what's on a little slip of paper the size of a pinky-nail before putting it on you're tongue. No telling if this one will be the right combination or the wrong one. Even the fatal one. I'd explained all this to Hunter in the past, but still she persisted. She had never dealt with loss, or acted like she hadn't, and I couldn't deal with losing her. I'd succeeded in convincing myself that exposing her to dope was actually a lesser evil. A junkie is forced to have a spectacular aptitude in the art of manipulation. So this night was different only in that Hunter joined us as we settled into the business of getting rip-roaring high, which we did with the determination of an athlete training for a decathlon. Hunter's reaction was typical. She threw up a lot and was, for lack of a better word, impressed by our tolerance. She also decided, as we all had our first time, that it was a worthless drug and not really much fun, which to her is the single absolute prerequisite for any illicit activity. Resolving that it would never be fun, and therefore completely pointless to do again, Hunter escaped its clutches with an ease I admired. It reminded me of my own anti-smack convictions once upon a time. Watching her nod off at the kitchen table stung me with dismay. When she passed her line to me it was more than just another line. It was the lead weight of guilt off my shoulders. She definitely got high, just didn't really like the view.

Our night of revelry continued, as usual, into the morning. Once all the dope was gone and just before leaving to figure out what that day's cover story would be and how to connive his woman into buying it, Allan tossed us a pharmaceutically wrapped package of little blue pills. Valium is over-the-counter medication in Paris, and Allan always had an endless supply. Hunter and I took a few, drank a bottle of wine, and wordlessly looked at *The Godfather*. All three parts. Serious movement wasn't possible until the next afternoon, when Hunter prepared for the metro ride back to her painfully small room of an apartment and I showered and shaved after a stomach-settling stash line to gussy up for my first ever visit to Christine's house. I had never been because it was a long trip, and because she had never invited me before. She was having a party and wanted me to meet her friends. It seemed a fine idea. Life had gotten a bit monotonous, though never boring. I was curious to see how Christine lived, what kind of people she hung around with.

She met me at the metro stop, almost the end of the line and not hiding the fact. The street I stood upon may as well have been in another country, containing barely the remotest hint of Paris. In the distance I could see the back end of a cluster of modern high-rises whose front end represented the farthest point I had ever approached. Whether or not those buildings are technically within Paris, I still don't know. Needless to say, *Place Vauban* was far, far away.

Christine greeted me lengthily. I had to concentrate on the image of a dead dog rotting by the side of a country road before I was able to walk comfortably. Her house was a small nothing-special beige house with only a number to distinguish it from those on either side. If this weren't France, it might have been New Jersey. The generic feel continued on the inside, with everything tidy and bland. The furniture in the main room had been moved to make a space for the crowd scheduled to show about an hour later. Until then, Christine and I had our own private party in her bedroom, where the Raggedy Ann sheets might have given me pause. I wish they had, but I suppose it was far too late for that.

I was teaching her some raunchy English words when the doorbell chimed. She jumped up to answer it, whereupon hugs and excited words were exchanged, and then Christine pulled her first guest over to meet me.

"My best friend. This is Marie." When I kissed Marie on each cheek, my hands felt bony shoulders and I thought she looked rather young. Like a little girl. Somewhere in my brain, a small man raised his hand. Before I could call on him, the bell rang again. This time, three more girls ran into the house and now the guy in my brain was waving both arms for attention. I told him calmly to shut the fuck up and relax. Shaking his head and sighing, he did.

I sat quietly, moving only to rub cheeks with each new entry as they skipped in. A few crewcut guys showed up and went straight for the canned beers in the fridge and stood amongst themselves, sipping. Somehow, drinking wine at this party made me feel old. As the evening progressed, the guy in my brain was twiddling his thumbs with a maddeningly complacent smirk.

Then, it happened.

Some girl turned the lights off and walked out from the kitchen balancing a cake whose candles illuminated the pimples on her face. Everyone started singing in French and in my brain I began praying to nothing. I didn't know it was her birthday, and more to the point I didn't know how old she was. I had never thought to ask. My guess, when I first met her, was twenty-five, or at least close enough that it made no real difference. But as I counted the candles, and re-counted them, and re-re-counted them, the guy in my brain began to cackle. My jaw became slack and dropped. I lost all feeling in my chest. My head began to ache terribly, and my stomach.

There were sixteen candles stuck in the frosting of Christine's birthday cake, and I stopped breathing.

Floating to the bathroom, my mind dull and blank, I threw up in the toilet. A lot. Maybe it was from the dope, but I doubt it.

Once my stomach eased, my brain found a line and held fast:

"My God! I didn't know!" I pleaded with the toilet. "I didn't know. I had no idea. How could I have known? How the fuck was I supposed to know?" It was the truth. It is the truth. I never thought to ask how old she was, and she never thought to tell me. In my wildest dreams I couldn't have guessed. Had someone told me she was twenty, I would have argued. I'd been railroaded. My head felt as though a train had run through it.

In front of the sink, splashing cold water on my face, I tried to snap out of the state of shock that had (justifiably, don't you think?) entranced me. My brain was abuzz with detailed replays of sex with Christine and I couldn't make it stop. I suppose legally speaking, I was okay. Statutory rape in France impressed me as serious an offense as jay-walking in New York City. The moral question, the issue of decency and principle, those were a bit shaken. Not so much because if had I known her age, nothing would ever have happened between us, (and I was certain I didn't know. If you're judging me now, fuck off. I simply did not know. There is no cajoling involved here either, which is to say I never tricked myself into believing she was older, I honestly to the bone believed it). What I did get was a little upset. How could she not have mentioned it? How could, in all that time, she never have even casually dropped a hint that would have prompted me to ask? She couldn't have, unless she meant not to. She must have known I would never have gone out with her, had the truth been told. She had consciously kept her age from me until it was a moot point. Well, it worked. The point was moot. The things I had done with her I could never undo. The full pleasurable enjoyment I had felt could never be unfelt. How did I get myself into this? Why must every facet of my life always be fucked up to one degree or another?

I left. I walked straight out of her house and left. What other choice did I have? She came out behind. When she called my name it felt like broken glass. She wanted to know where I was going.

"Christine, I'm sorry but I can't ever speak to you again. Maybe not so sorry." Her silence proved understanding, and guilt. "Which way is Paris?" She pointed towards the high-rise buildings, dark and further now in the cool evening. "Happy Birthday," I said, and began to walk. I walked. Through steelyards, I walked. Across highways, down tunnels, past dead and darkened streets torn from the sets of 'Escape From New York'. I was no Snake Plissken, though. Just a regular snake, slinking away from a mongoose named woman, wounded and looking for a rock under which to slither. I knew I'd been maliciously bamboozled, but I couldn't help blaming myself. I walked for an hour until the buildings appeared closer, then sat to smoke a cigarette until they looked far away again. Finally, I was under them. Looking up from the ground, the buildings seemed to curve in upon themselves, creating a plate-glass canopy. The early morning sun reverberated. In Venice, it's no illusion. The buildings really do curve in, and the sun shines from below, off the water. Out of the high-rise tunnel and back on more familiar albeit rarely visited streets in this city of decrepit love, I thought about maybe going to Venice for a few days, to forget. Anywhere, really. I had to get out of Paris, for just a few days.

Not that day though. That day, I would forget in a simpler, more direct way. That day, I would go home and liquidate my stash. That's just what I did. I got so high, in fact, that when I passed out cold, it seemed just fine.

Do you know that scene in 'The Deer Hunter' when they've been captured by the VC, and their only chance of survival is to play low-odds Russian Roulette against each other? One of these two life-long friends is forced to watch the other put a mostly loaded gun to his head and pull the trigger. Do you remember the look on Nick's face just before he pulls the trigger? Remember how his hand is shaking so much that when the gun goes off, it only opens a gash on his forehead? If you don't remember it, try to imagine how he

looked, how he felt, when he was forced to put the muzzle right back against his temple. He was trapped in a time, a place where life wasn't life at all, but rather some entirely unredeemable surreal other-thing. The place where escape was almost as impossible as it was imperative.

I know how he felt. I can imagine it, because that's how I felt, all the time. I knew I couldn't escape for long, just as Nick escaped that first game of death only to wind up replaying it forever. I accepted a hiatus as the best I could hope for. Just then it would be enough. Survive, escape, get strong. Live long enough to get high another day.

These thoughts, even when I could not think. Even when all I saw was the sun go down, and come up again. My face never lifted off the hard wooden floor.

Had I done it? Had I caused an overdose, caused my death? I didn't know, or care. All I knew, all I saw was Nick's face, his eyes globes of terror and disbelief. How could this be my life? My death? What happened?

A hushed sound. Rain, maybe. Cold. The heaviness of wet clothes against my skin. The wooden floor was gone. A bright white sweating network of tiles in its place. I wasn't lying down anymore. I could feel my kneecap pressing into my chest, and the driving water pelting the back of my neck, my head. I was in the shower. My shoes were missing, but otherwise I was fully dressed. How had I gotten in the shower? The last thing I could remember was the sun, sneaking its way slowly up the wooden floor like a cosmic spider into my static line of sight. Breathing had been forgotten, and now I took a breath. My head exploded. I threw up. The brown mixed with clear water and spiraled down the drain, escaping. How would I ever escape?

The shower door opened. I saw my sister's boots. "Es! Are you all right? Es, can you hear me?!"

Other sets of shoes appeared, crowded.

"What am I doing in the shower?" I sat up, my back against the tiles, and looked at them.

"Holy shit, dude," Allan slurred, reaching in to turn off the water. I felt light. I could almost float.

"You were passed out on the floor when we came in. You wouldn't wake up. We freaked out and brought you in here."

"You're joking. Seriously? Fuck. How long have I been in here?" "Like twenty minutes man," Gwillam said. "We were just about to call an ambulance. Are you okay? What the hell happened?"

"We'll be cleaning our own toilets from now on, I'm afraid." It struck me funny. Despite the situation, despite wet clothes and the raging pain in my head, the stinging in my nose, and the soreness in my chest, I laughed out loud. "Did you break up with Christine? You asshole," Gwillam said.

"Best we don't talk about it, yes?"

Allan reached a hand in. I took it. "Come on, dude, time to put on some dry clothes. There's tea in the kitchen. And no heroin for a few days, young man." That seemed all right. I had to go away, like an aborigine on walkabout. Had to leave this shit behind for a little while, get some perspective. But where could I go?

That day and the next were no fun. My body hurt, a lot. It shook, quivered like a tuning fork at the bottom of Lake Michigan. I carried a towel around to wipe off the sweat releasing from every possible pore. Even water seemed unappetizing, and my stomach was killing me. Sleep came with all the permanence of a

shooting star, in short quick bursts. Each time I woke, I discovered a new ache. My door stayed shut to keep out the sounds of my comrades' indulgences, but I could hear. I knew what was going on. I'd been there often enough.

"He's dead," my sister's voice wafted under the door sometime during the day, or maybe the night. "Gwillam, he's dead. We have to decide how to dispose of him." This decision had the makings of one that I should be a part, considering the concerns were capital. Hoping they weren't discussing me, I forced a painful exit from my dark lair and found Gwillam, utterly dejected, sitting in a corner of the master bedroom. "Gwillam, what's wrong?"

"It's Coochie." He pointed to something on the floor. "Do you think he's dead?"

I walked around the bed and saw the problem. Coochie, Gwillam's chameleon, lay lifeless, its once spectacular colors replaced by metallic gray, ribs poking through emaciated flesh. Leaning in for a better look, I was struck by the morbid finality of nature. Coochie the chameleon's eyes were exes. Literally, there was an X where once there had been amazing eyes and the ability to look in two opposite directions simultaneously.

"Gwillam, I'm sorry man. Coochie's dead."

"Shit. I really liked Coochie, you know? I never had a pet." His pain was real.

"I'm truly sorry. Do you want to be alone?"

"Yeah. Do you mind?"

"Sure. Hey, if there's anything I can do... He was a good lizard. We all liked him." "He was the best."

I can't remember the last time I cried. That night, I couldn't stop.

The next day, I felt better. Looking out on a bright rainbow: lime-green, piss-yellow, and the pinkish red of watermelon Jell-O that began behind the Tuileries and disappeared just beyond Montparnasse. Behind it, lightning intermittently flashed above Sacre Coeur and Montmartre while thunder yawned, disgruntled, somewhere above Pere-Lachaise. If I stayed in Paris, there was no way I could keep from doing dope. No way. That was clear because I had every intention of doing more. I was by no means giving it up. I just really needed a respite. The problem was that doing the dope left me without the financial means with which to escape the dope. I was stuck. There was no way out. And then Hunter came to the rescue. Poor, sweet, generous Hunter, who couldn't figure out how to help herself, but possessed an uncanny sense of when and how to help others. She called as the dark clouds retreated and proposed we meet for lunch.

At the familiar Salon de Thé, whose pink and green neon lights were a soothing late-night sight from my sister's window, we sat outside despite the wind and she said:

"I met a guy named Frederick. He's an artist. He's old."

Like a comedian's faithful, I played along. "Oh? How old is he?"

"I guess he's around fifty."

"Fifty, Jesus that's old. How'd you meet?"

"I went out with these girls from my program. He picked me up in a bar. It was the day after I left your

apartment."

"You went home with him?" It wouldn't have been out of character.

"No, no. We talked for awhile, and he invited me to his house for dinner the next night. He lives in this great house with all these crazy paintings and sculptures and we had this awesome dinner. He kept trying moves on me, which kind of bothered me at first, but he's harmless. So then in his studio he had, like, a mound of cocaine and, well, I guess you could say we're going out now." She seemed more impressed to be with a fifty-year old artistic Parisian cokehead than by who he was, but I guess that's exactly who he was. "So, what have you been up to lately?" "Well Hunter, speaking from experience, you're lucky. At least you know how old he is from the get-go." I told her about Christine, how it freaked me out enough to walk six hours and o.d. I mentioned my desire to get out of Paris for a few days, to regroup.

"How about Amsterdam?" She asked with a grin.

"How about it? I just don't have the money. My dad has friends in Milan. Maybe I could stay with them ... "

"No, you don't get it. It's my birthday this weekend, and my mom's treating me and a friend to a trip. I told her I'd be going to Amsterdam, and I'd be taking you." Unbelievable. I was desperate enough not to fake an argument. I couldn't turn it down. "Amsterdam ... birthday ... really?"

"I guess it's pretty good timing, huh?"

"Pretty good, yeah. Amazing try."

It doesn't happen often, but every once in a long while all the floodlights will turn on, all the warmth will spread and for a moment my life and the world can make amends. I accepted Hunter's invitation. I was going back to Amsterdam.

St. Tropez Summer. Lolita on a Beach.

The summer before my last year of college, when life in Paris had yet to be lived or even imagined, I led a life I could scarcely imagine living. Granted, Paris was rougher than anything before or since, but the summer previous rates higher, or at least ties, on my personal scale of things I can never do again.

It began, opulently enough, with three weeks in a spectacular house overlooking St. Tropez, that most exclusive of beach resorts on the French Riviera, the Côte d'Azur, to celebrate my father's fiftieth birthday.

This amazing house afforded views from a stone patio onto the harbor and town below and over green hills that looked like a giant beach-bum's stomach. Down an ivy-covered path on the grounds was an alcove with an immense table at its center hewn from a single stone. You could never feel sure if it was out of place or not. I couldn't shake the image of Aslan, the great lion of Narnia, strapped to it, helpless. Directly behind stretched a vineyard, beautiful mainly out of respect for its prodigy. In the opposite direction, a tennis court and a pool, sparingly used since a swarm of spiteful wasps chose it as their summer haunt. The walk into town wasn't as long as it was dangerous. In some places, the road was too narrow for even two French cars to pass, and fraught with blind turns and insane twists that would pump adrenaline through a corpse. Apparently nobody dies in St. Tropez, because every asshole in a Mini or on a moped came racing down that road as if chased by a grizzly bear on a flying Harley. I ate French dirt on a few occasions.

Down at the bottom, the walk proves worthwhile. The town is livin', the life large. A car valued below sixty grand might be mistaken for trash and get towed away if you let your eyes wander. And there's plenty of

wandering to do. The women are all tall, and the ones who aren't naturally gorgeous are plastically so and they know it, they want you to know it. The men, well, they're all rich. Sitting in a café sipping drinks along the marina you can smell the movie stars, the Arab royalty, the stratospheric wealth. The yachts docked there are mythical. I remember one, 'Cujo', somehow fully encased in stainless-steel. The way it reflected light off the water transformed it into a huge floating disco ball. St. Tropez is a place without rival in the acceptance of astounding wealth as window-dressing. Like the people who spend their summers here, it's beautiful because it can be, and because it has to be. Stroll along the marina, away from the pier where the really big ships dock, and the soft curve of the road brings you to 'El Papagayo', a nightclub and disco frequented by the world's elite, or their kids. This place was off limits to us, the admission financially prohibitive, and we wore the clothes of mere mortals. I would often stand outside, or sit and have a beer at the bar across the street (the most expensive Heineken I've ever tasted) and watch in honest admiration the caliber of people who went in and came out of 'El Papagayo'. Initially, these people seem fake, look like posers, but they're not. These are the people fakes and posers try to emulate. These are the people whose wealth places them in a realm of existence completely foreign to outsiders. An elite class, an exclusive society whose manner of being and unique concerns necessarily set them apart from the rest of the world.

I had the opportunity to see it from the inside, thanks in part to Anais and Lolita.

On one of the exclusive beaches, a place called 'Club 55' where you pay a premium just to get in, Anais and Lolita met a young man and his father who had made a fortune - or so they claimed - selling bikini's to the ultra-rich. This business (if you prefer to call it a 'front' I can't blame you) consisted of walking along the beach peddling hardly existent strips of material off a wooden pole. Yet somehow, it had subsidized homes in Miami, Rio, and here in St. Tropez, as well as enough cash to invite a group of us to 'El Papagayo' at no charge. And a table, booze included. Now, I'm not really the dance hall type, but in here if you weren't dancing you were drooling, and there were enough people out on the floor with even less rhythm than I had. After a few drinks I was up and literally rubbing elbows with models and moguls while the real money reposed in the back sipping Screwdrivers and watching the parade. The whiskey made me dance like a champ and I spent the night going for broke and making eyes at a Scandinavian Goddess who had nearly a foot on me and who smiled in pity. That night I convinced myself it was desire because, hey, it's St. Tropez, and for a moment in time I was swingin' like a player. My night ended, appropriately enough, by puking in the vineyard.

The following afternoon, my mind not quite as sharp as the sun that shone with numbing brightness, my brother and I drove to Aix-en-Provence, the closest thing to a city between St. Tropez and Nice, to pick Nate up from the train station. When Nate and I get together, things can sometimes reach that loaded gun stage. When Nate and I get together with nothing to do in a foreign land, it's more like a loaded gun with the hammer cocked and on drugs. We always manage to find a great deal of fun or trouble while operating somewhat outside the accepted parameters of normal societally delineated behavior. In other words, we fuck shit up.

The first time Nate and I traveled together was way back when we were still in high school. Even then, we managed to go against the grain, to make our own fun when none was made for us. We went down to Argentina with my old friend Charlie to stay with my family and visit my ancestral digs. One stop was Iguazu, these unbelievable waterfalls in the northeastern corner of Argentina, seeping into Brazil. For reasons I'll never understand, a travel agent suggested we cancel our reservations at what we later discovered was a spectacular hotel in the heart of the falls and stay instead in Iguazu City, across the Brazilian border. She thought we'd have more to do there. Stupid woman, I will never forgive her. I had to bribe my way across the border, and the city was as bad as any in Brazil, a country boasting more disgusting cities than knife-wielding eight year old purse snatchers, a category in which it leads the world. We were sixteen, for Christ's sake, and terrified to go out, with very good reason. Unfortunately, the hotel was as bad as the city, and not surprisingly, it was virtually empty. Charlie was sick to an alarming degree, filling one

tall glass after another with thick and putrid phlegm. We wanted to get him to a doctor, but we were afraid to go outside. The best we could manage was a two-step to the corner newsstand for a few skin mags. Adjacent to the hotel lobby was a movie theater, the only promising aspect in sight. Promises, as you should know, are made to be broken, and this one snapped like a twig. It was a hard-core porn theater, apparently geared towards the whole family. I'm no supporter of American censorship and uptight bogus family values preached by men with no values at all, but I know I'd never take my very pregnant wife and three under-ten kids (the youngest in a stroller) to a hard-core nasty-nasty porn flick. Our only recourse was the hotel bar. One night, when Charlie felt a little better, the three of us got wasted. Well, I didn't drink much, but the two of them were out of their trees. They were running around and screaming and letting off a lot of steam. If not for my own relative sobriety and ability to beg the manager, we all would have been thrown out on our asses at three in the morning onto the streets of a city we couldn't survive at midday. "You will wake the other guests!" the manager shouted.

"What other guests? We're the only ones dumb enough to come here!" Charlie screeched in drunken response. Begging was the only option. Nate passed out cold on a toilet and I drifted off to the sounds of Charlie's phlegm-riddled snores and 'Spencer For Hire' in Portuguese. The only basic progress Nate and I have made over subsequent travels is that now, even begging wouldn't have saved us from getting tossed out of that hotel. Those waterfalls, though, are more than worth it. They're one of the most spectacular natural sights on Earth, guaranteed. If you go there, heed this advice: stay on the Argentine side. You won't regret it. Three days after Nate's arrival in St. Tropez was Bastille Day. Mainly because he knows the language, my brother heard about a huge sea side rave planned not too far away. It seemed a great idea and after a spectacular dinner on the patio lit by early evening fireworks above the harbor, we packed into a car that could have been bigger and went. Anais, Lolita, Nate and myself, with my brother at the wheel and a beautiful but - get this - too-young girl named Mila up front. After parking the car, we proceeded to walk a mile if it was a foot to the party's entrance, drawn by music, lights, and throngs of people. Our excitement lasted until we discovered the sensational cost of admission, which rudely reminded us all of exactly where we were. Just as determined not to pay as we were not to hike back empty handed, Nate suggested we sneak in. This elicited some disagreement from my brother, the responsible element of our group. I chimed in with a question that pretty well encapsulates my life philosophy, a question I ask all too often without knowing the answer: "Come on, what's the worst that can happen?"

It was like a special ops invasion. We sidled around, walked about two hundred yards (or the equivalent in clicks) to a grassy area a safe distance from the entrance. Once there, we dropped to our stomachs and crawled towards the first fence, cautious to keep our bodies below the level of grass. The fence was a tightly wrought row of thick wooden spikes, impaling end up, about four and a half feet high. Nate and I went over first, a bruising experience, followed clumsily by my brother. We helped the girls over and made our way, incognito, to the next row of spikes. We negotiated four rows in all, after which none of us were unscathed. The final obstacle cleared, we sat against it to catch our breath. On cue, a rave staffer ran over and shouted at us, told us we had to leave. Diego, on the fly, explained we were waiting for our friend who was just down the beach saying hello to someone, and that we would leave as soon as she returned. Easily satisfied, the staffer ran off to ruin other people's fun, and just like that we were in.

The stage was right on the beach, open air but walled in by a huge canvas, and I never actually saw it. We fought through crowds of people lying on the sand directly in front of the main area, apparently enjoying the grinding techno beat and the colorful flashes that made it over the canvas lip behind them. Off to one side of the mass of sweaty bodies shaking about was a somewhat more subdued environment littered with tables and chairs. Luck was the ladies who left their table just as we were passing by, and I didn't give up my spot there for hours.

Diego and Mila courageously made their way into the fray leaving the rest of us to conduct our business, unbeknownst to them. Earlier, we had discussed the probability that where there's a rave, there's bound to be

Extasy. Nate and I gave Anais some money and stayed to guard the table, with our lives if necessary, while she and Lolita went in search of love and happiness, Nirvana in a little white pill. As the hours passed, things didn't turn out quite that way. Anais and Lolita returned in no time with four hits of Ex and we happily took one each. For about an hour, nothing happened. We sat around the table and talked, mostly about whether anything was happening.

"Well, I feel a little tingly, in my fingers and like that," somebody would say.

"Really? You do?" The rest of us would look at our fingers, shake them about.

"No, I guess maybe not." Our hands would drop in disappointed agitation, and after a while we began to feel duped, that we'd taken aspirin with a symbol carved into it. When Extasy doesn't kick in, it's just about the worst feeling in the world. Well, not really; but it's pretty fucking crappy. You've psyched yourself up to feel so good and have so much fun that when it doesn't happen, it's like being robbed in the worst way.

But we hadn't been robbed. Not entirely. It was a while before any of us really felt anything, but eventually we all did. Something like speed, frenetic assertions: I could, I could do but simply don't want to. Sitting at the table became a bore. We moved onto the beach and somehow before time passed we saw the hundreds of sweaty ravers were gone, or going. The music had stopped. Here and there along the beach, small clusters of people sat as we did, watching the ocean roll and roll in and out, like money. Mila joined us, and Diego periodically suggested we go home.

Then, it happened.

Lolita started moaning, holding her head, writhing on the sand in obvious pain. Anais reached out and shook her.

"Lolita! Lo - are you okay? Lolita, what's wrong!?"

She was crying "Oh God! OW! My head! Oh fuck!"

Anais held her and sent Nate and I away. I looked at Nate, and he at me, both thinking the same thought: When would it happen to us? All we could do was stand back and watch Lolita in selfish resignation, vomiting now, and wait on the edge of our subconscious seats knowing we had all ingested the same chemical and that maybe it was just a matter of time before our own heads exploded in pain.

But I didn't feel it. I felt good, up, full of energy. My brother was trying to help, poor straight Diego out of his element. Anais ran over to tell us we were going back to the house. Diego and Mila headed up to bring the car closer.

"I'm not going," I said. "You all go. I'm walking."

"But it's like ten miles," Nate argued.

"I know. I don't care. I'm going to walk it." There was no question, nothing was going to keep me from walking back.

"Okay, then I guess I'll go with you." Nate knew I wouldn't budge. He can tell, and I knew he'd come along. Diego reappeared to help carry Lolita to the car. She was clearly in pain now but seemed to be coming around. Nate and I began our trek down the beach, me talking a hundred miles an hour about anything and everything that raced through my speed-laced brain the whole way. Amphetamines give you an uncanny, unparalleled focus, a clarity of thought transferred without hesitation into spectacular eloquence. It cuts out the hesitation, doesn't allow for it, and gives the user a directness and cohesiveness that we all wish existed

every instant.

Unfortunately, if the person listening isn't also on speed, they will probably have no clue what the hell you're talking about.

After hours that felt like not quite so many hours, we arrived back at the house and made a beeline for the pool, wasps be damned. In our boxers we jumped in. Our ruckus roused my sister.

"How's Lolita?" Nate asked.

"She's fine. She's sleeping. Hey, I want you to come see our room."

We immediately noticed the change. Anais had been as hepped up on speed as we'd been, only she didn't have ten miles to walk it off. Instead, she'd set to work cleaning and organizing every last inch of her room. Every article of clothing was folded tightly and stacked on shelves, GAP style. She had taken a Polaroid before beginning her unfettered quest for cleanliness, and asked us to photograph her in front of the finished work. We left her with a soundly sleeping Lolita and grabbed the car, drove it back to the beach and sat in the sun to let the remaining chemicals ooze out with our sweat. It had been an amazingly long night. Along the beach, on our trek, awed by the emptiness and the colors in the sky, Nate and I had fallen to discussing our upcoming travels. The plan had originally been to stay in St. Tropez until the end of July, and then do a tour, of sorts. We would first go to Vienna, and then Prague (Ah! Prague). Finally, after a stop in Berlin, we would terminate in Amsterdam where Nate would board a plane and leave me to travel on my own for a few weeks. Mind you, this was a plan we'd made in New York, over Chinese food. Now that we were both here and our trip soon set to begin, the logistics of the thing began to change. Instead of spending four or five days in each city, we revised the schedule to two days in each of the first three and the remainder, of course, in Amsterdam. This way we could include a side trip to Copenhagen, or even London. At the time, there was honesty in that plan. There really was. Nate and I don't do all that well setting plans. The next three days we were wiped out, understandably exhausted. Afternoons relaxing around the house. Nights by the stone table fit for that great lion, stretching and flexing our backs, sore from what felt like enough strychnine to kill a whole clan of rats. Occasionally, we busied ourselves by taking the car out for hours on end, driving without direction, anywhere we wanted.

At long last, our travels were about to begin.

Venice Trippin'. Vienna Vagrancy.

Anais and Lolita were traveling to Venice on a Tuesday. Nate and I chose the same day to begin towards Vienna, allowing a few hours during which the four of us would ride east together. We were meant to switch trains early on for one that would take us straight through into Austria, with a stop along the way where Nais and Lolita would switch again for Venice. Well, we missed that train. Speedy timetable checks showed all was not lost. Nate and I could go all the way to Venice with the girls and catch a one-thirty A.M. to Vienna from there, no problem.

Teddy the train-cabin was so hot and overbearing, we felt the need to name it. As we tried in vain to get comfortable, Nate and I looked at each other incredulously, trying to understand why we had fled from the French Riviera, from a pool, from beautiful women ... The place was too nice, too packaged, too predictable.

Off the train and through il statzione centrali in Venice, you step into a world of utter fantasy. I had been to Venice once before, and my jaw never shut the whole time. It's one of the few places that really is more amazing than words. Venice cannot disappoint. It isn't everything else. We all bought tickets and got on the water-bus for the first of what became many times during that unforgettable trip.

Lolita's mother, a woman of prodigious wealth and bitterness, had arranged for her daughter and my sister to stay in one of the best hotels in all of Venice. This place was the kind of high-class you see in the movies, the opulence of the lobby enough to make Nate and I laugh. We wanted to go up to the room and leave our bags so we wouldn't have to lug them around for dinner, but the guy at the front desk gave us a hard time. He was an Olympic-class asshole who took us to be random travelers the girls had picked up on the train, and used all the foofiness and superiority he could muster to inform us that Italian law forbade men to join women in their hotel rooms. Laughing in his face, we disdainfully assured him, correctly I think, that he was full of shit. I showed my passport to prove my relation to Anais, and the shifty-eyed son of a bitch wrote down the number. When he threatened to call security, Lolita asked he first call her mother and he suddenly fell silent. Begrudgingly, we were allowed up. We left him with a barrage of New York flavored insults he'd well earned in a case he had no right arguing in the first place. Nate and I, however, became marked men at that hotel, complicating things for us later.

The four of us ate dinner and we retrieved our backpacks. We gave hugs, wished luck and good times and parted company. Anais and Lolita went back to the hotel never expecting to see us in Venice again. Nate and I hopped onto the water-bus and headed back towards il stazione to wait for our train after buying a few bottles of wine to ease the ride.

We got to il stazione with a few hours to spare, and the first thing we did was make sure the train would arrive on time. It would, only the time it was meant to arrive was decidedly different from the time listed in our Eurail books. The one-thirty train was mysteriously absent from il stazione's timetables. The next available train to Vienna wouldn't in fact be leaving until seven-thirty the following morning. Well, shit goes down that way sometimes.

"Fuck!" Nate exclaimed, more amused than upset at how our trip was going, not yet even twenty-four hours from paradise left.

"Shit goes down that way sometimes," I countered with a shrug. It's true and important to accept when traveling that often the best times are had when one breaks from his or her planned route. Being upset about a missed train or, as in our case, a missing train is simply counterproductive. After checking our backpacks into il stazione's hold, our next action was clear: too late to find a bed, we sat on the steps of a nearby footbridge and commenced drinking. Nearby, a group of young men and women sat around a cat with a guitar singing songs in English with a heavy Italian accent, and I think it was then that Nate joked about how nice it would be to have some acid. Of course, he said it precisely because it wasn't an option. We sat and drank, and laughed and drank, and everything was chill. Until we started singing.

"You guys are American!" Excitedly observed a scruffy goateed bandanna-wearing guy who had been reposing on the bridge a few steps behind. He came and sat by us, taking a long pull from the bottle Nate offered. "I can tell because you're the only ones who know the words to this fucking song," he said, pointing his furry chin down at the dwindling group around the guitar player.

His name was Griffith, he was from San Francisco, and he was a fun guy. He'd been traveling for nearly six months, had recently come from Turkey and making his way west. I sprung for a couple more bottles of wine at a store down the street just before it shut down for the evening, and the three of us joked and told stories and everything was still pretty much okay. After a while, having lost the last of his audience save the three of us, the guitar player packed it up. We were left in a sweet, warm Venetian silence, the kind that gently laps up against the side of your mind.

"Listen," Griffith said then. "I haven't seen American dollars in weeks. If you guys can hook me up with like twenty, I've got three tabs of acid I picked up in Turkey." Nate and I looked at each other, eyes wide, and I

said:

"Griffith, you're not going to believe this, but we were just saying how nice it would be to have some acid, to pass the time and all." He told us to stay put and raced into il stazione. Nate grabbed my arm and shook it in delight and amazement and I tossed the last empty wine bottle - two points - into the trash can at the foot of the bridge.

Griffith returned, quick as a minx, with a plastic Ziploc in which three harmless-looking little squares of paper floated. I had dropped acid just a few times before, and had always enjoyed myself. Granted, it was under much more familiar circumstances, but I certainly wasn't averse to the experience. As the three of us stood at the banks of the Grand Canal chewing away, I looked around at this wonderland of a city, virtually empty now, and tried to imagine what it would take to be any more impressive than it was at that moment. I found out it took one pinky-nail sized square of paper coated in LSD.

In a little more than twenty minutes we were off, building and building and building for what seemed like ever towards an Everest peak hours upon hours longer than it had any business being. My memories of that night come back slightly askew if at all, but these are some of them in as chronological an order as possible. Please allow that time had shot past the abstract into the downright surreal:

We ran into four drunk tourists - two beautiful German women and a couple of Spanish guys. Nate and Griffith talked to the women while I distracted the guys, telling them to look me up if they ever made it to New York. As luck would have it, we were still somewhat able to communicate, but moments after we left the drunks that avenue was severed and for the next six hours we thankfully saw only three other people.

Feeling the waves crashing over and through me, I sat down in a spectacular spot. A canal at my feet, a cathedral at my back, and a labyrinthine complex of narrow streets extending like a huge stone spider's web on every side. Beside me, a Gondola, dark blue with a yellow stripe along its sides, gently floated on the water, up-down-back-forth, the way empty boats are wont to do. That is until Nate and Griffith jumped into it, which caused a different and much more alarming pattern of floatation. Griffith waved me into the boat. Taking care to balance myself, I heeded him and looked on with invigorating disbelief as Nate pulled his knife out and began busily cutting through the rope that held the Gondola docked in place.

"Imagine riding down the Grand Canal!" Griffith shouted, not bothering to hide the excitement in his voice.

Just then we heard footsteps and dropped to the boat's bottom as if it had fallen out from under us.

"Oh. Shit." Nate commented when he realized we were still in the boat. I lay there holding my breath, feeling the water lap the belly of the Gondola below my own, my heart prepared to explode from my chest. After a few unsettling moments Griffith checked the coast and jumped out. We followed, thoughts of riding down the Grand Canal replaced with thoughts of tripping our balls off locked in some Italian prison cell. We decided it would probably be a good idea to learn the language, and fast, just in case. From then on we taught each other Italian. For instance, Nate taught us the word for 'drainpipe', which was 'il drainpipo.' 'Wallet' was 'il walleto', and so on.

Keeping our eyes peeled for any movement, we sauntered around the cathedral and then just ran and ran, because it seemed the right thing to do. Two of us would follow whoever happened to be in the lead, turning as he turned like a flock of geese. I can't remember who led us down the street where the two policemen stood in an open doorway and I don't really care. We ran past them like lightning, though we all saw them as they, no doubt, saw us. We kept running, only faster now, until we nearly ran right into a twenty-foot high stone wall. The three of us pushed it in desperation, hoping it was an hallucination, and nobody wanted to mention the cops a few hundred yards behind. Satisfied the wall was actually made of real stone, we took

a collective gulp and Griffith proposed we "Just run," a suggestion to which my scattered mind could mount no argument. We just ran. And ran, and ran. We ran right past the cops whose backs were turned, we ran right past the cathedral and the Gondola - now floating further out towards the current than when we had first come across it. We ran until we had to stop and catch our breath, which, once caught was lost again in a fit of laughter.

"Almosto wento jailo," Griffith pointed out.

"Whasamadayou?" Nate inquired.

"We should scope out a place to watch il sunseto," I suggested.

"Don't you mean sunriseo?"

"Que cera, cera, man."

It was agreed and decided the best place to see the sunrise was from Piazza San Marco, or at least that's what we thought as we set off on our quest to find it. We never did.

You see, the streets in Venice are legion. They snake narrowly between buildings two or three stories tall that curve in at the top like a kind of ceiling. And if twisting, narrow, sparsely lit streets weren't enough of a problem, there were the canals - dozens of these canals, each one with a destination, apparently, and not one of them distinguishable from the rest. At least not to three American kids in the dark, on acid. In addition, the streets have no names, which would cause a disturbance even in sobriety. The sole directional feature employed here are arrows pointing the way to the city's most important sites. One would have thought this sufficient, particularly because there isn't a spot in all of Venice with more arrows pointing towards it than San Marco. The trouble was this: no two arrows pointed the same way. For the remainder of the night, whenever we saw an arrow for San Marco, we followed it. And because our perceptions were admittedly far out of whack we would follow it until running into another arrow pointing us back in the direction we had just come from. Yes, we followed that one too, until we wound up where we began and had to regroup. 'Refuse-o to lose-o' was our oft invoked rallying cry. We gave up on that motto after coming to an archway with two arrows above its entrance. As though the city were laughing at us, both arrows were for San Marco, and both arrows pointed in decidedly opposite directions. We sat and stared at these arrows in silence. Then Griffith started making noise. I couldn't tell if he was laughing or crying. I was trying to choose the appropriate reaction myself. Ah! Venice! It was ours, for a few glorious hours. The city was ours. We ran up and down streets, over bridges, going wherever we wanted, soaking in the majesty of this fantastical water-world. And we were alone. We could do anything. Venice belonged to us.

But then it was over. The night slowly, grudgingly acquiesced to the coming day. The air a bit warmer, a bit thicker, brought a smell to our noses we couldn't help but follow. The smell of freshly baked pastries. It would have brought us to our knees had the aroma not shoved cartoon fingers into our nostrils that dragged us towards its origin. We did not lament the death-throes of the night, nor did we take note of the signals pointing towards daybreak. All we saw-felt-heard was the smell of fresh pastry. At long last we found the open doorway to the bakery and stood there like zombies with a look of deepest desire, our hands held out in front, pleading. The baker saw us and smiled, sweet and knowing; we would have eaten from his fingers. He disappeared for a moment and returned with three parcels of loving charity, wrapped in paper towels. We each took one and laughed. Our expressions were of unadulterated childlike gratitude, and there was no need to say a word. We walked off then in silence, each of us intoxicated with a baker's kindness, imbibing the glorious warmth placed in the care of our trembling hands. There was truth in that moment. I know there was.

Once we had enjoyed our pastries - apple brioche - to as great an extent as possible, we spied an old man

sweeping the ground in front of his store with an old straw broom and we bought a bottle of water. With the transaction came the unhappy realization that the city would soon no longer belong to just the three of us, and we set out purposefully to find a good spot to watch the sunrise, having given up on San Marco's very existence. We found our spot on and near the Rialto bridge, which connects one side of the Grand Canal to the other with a typically Venetian flair. Nate and I leaned against the waist high wall at the top while Griffith, crazy bastard that he was, stood upon it. The color of the sky became lighter by degrees. Men in boats filled with fresh fruit and vegetables began unpacking their wares as a backdrop. Soon, we lost all desire to be where we were and ran off the bridge in search of a less pretentious locale. On a wooden pier jutting into the Canal itself, where the effort of getting to its end was nearly reward enough, we found it. We sat and watched in awe-filled silence as the sun rose on a perfect morning over the Grand Canal in Venice. I was overwhelmed by the colors, the soft sound of the water at my sides, the sensational beauty of this legendary city. So overwhelmed in fact, I did not notice the bottle of water had dropped into, and been fished out of the canal by Nate, who handed it to me. Without thinking, I drank. My lips burned. I wiped at them furiously, trying to spit it all back up through horrified gasps and groans. I could taste the disease lurking in those waters and I was more than a little concerned. So began the cursed day in Venice, the second portion of our memorable acid trip, and plummeted downhill from there.

After Nate and Griffith did a miserable job of making me feel better by assuring me that if I were going to die, I'd know it by noontime, we got off the pier and began looking for il stazione, where our trip had begun. We'd had enough of running miles through the empty city, and now that the sun was burning strongly we wanted it to be over. Absolutely no such luck. Once we found il stazione, we sat on a bench and watched in horror and silent defeat as what seemed thousands of the enemy, disguised as other people, swarmed from its doors and overtook our city uncontested. Griffith somehow managed to run in and get his bag while Nate and I just sat and stared like crazy people at the throngs of normal, sober humanity pouring down il stazione's front steps. When Griffith emerged like a pale ghost from the multitudes, he looked like we must have: certifiable. Criminally so.

"I gotta find a place to sleep, man," he said. "I'll come back and find you guys." And like that, he was gone, leaving Nate and I shaking in depravity. Us against the world. We'd been there before.

We decided to wait for Griffith where we sat for forty-five minutes. After about twenty we were thoroughly impatient, or more accurately we were freaking out. I was basting under the northern Italian sun. Sweat cascaded down my back, not an altogether unpleasant sensation, and it wasn't that bad to be sitting down for awhile. Soon these thoughts took a vicious back seat, however, to what I saw when I lifted my arm. "Nate, look at this." I showed him my inner left forearm and the four or five purple splotches that had appeared since I'd last seen that part of my body. "What the hell is that?" "Holy shit. I don't know what that is, guy. Maybe it's from the Canal water you drank."

I didn't even want to think about that. I was afraid of letting panic seep in while I was still not sane. I didn't even want to look.

"Shut up, man. I don't want to think about that. I don't even want to look. Just don't say another fucking word about it." Nate got my drift, as he always does, and we were both through with sitting in front of il stazione. Wishing the best for Griffith, we walked across the fateful bridge to a park hoping to find fewer people and more shade. It was so damn hot.

The park provided a short respite, but not much. The heat pervaded the very air itself. We inhaled rank dead humid fire with every breath. We used a water pump in the park as a makeshift shower, washing the grimy sweat from our hair. It refreshed us just enough to think a bit more clearly, and it was clear we weren't getting on the seven-thirty train to Vienna. Being on a packed train moving side to side in our present condition was no option at all.

When mothers in the park began herding their children away from us with that disapproving look mothers have, Nate and I decided it was time to move on. We trudged about, a little more comfortably anonymous amongst the masses, back to il statzione. I was worried because we were still tripping hard, and we had no idea what to do or where to go. At the time, under the influence, both Nate and I concluded independently that we had lost our bags. We were ruined. We felt ruined.

We began to feel genuine panic, real desperation. We were so far from home it made our heads spin, and they were already spinning for entirely different reasons. We started to get scared. The kind of scared that anyone who's taken acid might recognize. The kind that comes with the realization that we'd been tripping far too long, that it should have ended by now, that something had gone wrong. Our fear and panic escalated exponentially, and what had been one of the greatest nights of my life was transformed into one of the worst days of it. Then, Nate had a stroke of brilliance: "Anais and Lolita! We have to go there!" I hadn't even thought of it. Dinner with them might have been years ago.

"But it's too early, we can't ... "

"Es, we have to. If we don't find them, we are going to die." He enunciated strongly to hide some of the panic in his voice, but I could hear it. And he was right. Not about the dying, although at the time I had no real argument, but about having to find them. There remained, however, a few tangible problems with that.

a) We didn't know where the hotel was.

b) It was far too early.

c) It was difficult enough getting in the previous night.

d) We looked and smelled like psychopathic grave-robbers.

"Hold on, Nate. We'll never make it past the front desk. Remember how they almost called security on us last night? Now ... shit, we'll never make it. I can't deal with talking my way out from under security guards." There was no way. As good as the idea sounded on paper, it was paper that had gotten us in this mess to begin with. "Listen, let's try and find the place at least. Maybe we'll catch them coming out." Finding the hotel would give us something to do, anyway, and accepting the shaky reality that getting in was our only hope would have to wait until then. Maybe we'd be better before having to find out. We managed to find the hotel by retracing our steps from the previous evening, albeit in a much different state of mind. The beach, the swimming pool, the life at St. Tropez existed in a contorted other-world now, and our desperation persisted as another hour passed with no signs of relief from the chemical barrage we'd unleashed on our brains. We walked by the hotel and stopped a short way down the street to regroup, and reassess. Although we had yet to see for ourselves, the looks received from passers-by was enough to alert us there was no chance of passing for normal. The idea that walking up to the desk of this five-hundred dollar a night hotel and asking to wake one of their guests might garner us more than a forceful escort out the door was ludicrous. Our minds were so frazzled then that we could barely come up with even the semblance of a good plan. Finally, we set our attack. Standing as nonchalantly as possible outside the doors, we would watch for a rhythm, a method to the elevator's timing. As soon as it opened, we would quickly and quietly run through the lobby and into the hopefully empty lift hopefully split-seconds before it closed again. This plan, shoddy as it already was, revolved around the faith that the number corresponding to their room was the same one stuck in my head. With as much acid as I had in my brain that day, numbers have a way of becoming muddled. We stood behind a potted plant looking conspicuously inconspicuous, checking our watches to give the impression we were waiting for someone who was late, shooting flustered glances towards the lobby we hoped were interpreted as 'what's taking them so long?' We allowed two or three elevator opportunities to pass, hoping Anais and Lolita would miraculously come trotting out, until finally working up the balls to make a go at it. When the all-important moment came, we walked up to the door

talking heatedly to each other about whatever, a ploy to distract the doorman into not interrupting, and then into the lobby quickly yet sufficiently incognito with the stride a New Yorker learns after years of practice to give the impression that he or she is a guest at any hotel. (The best public bathrooms in the Big Apple can be found inside its numerous luxury hotels, as long as you know how to exude the appearance of someone who belongs there.) We were through, into the lobby and then the elevator. The plan had worked perfectly, somehow without a hitch, until ...

"Cuale piso, per favore?"

Panic flared in Nate's eyes, and as always in these situations, a soothing calm flowed through me like cortisone.

"Piso nove," I heard myself say to the ridiculous man dressed alarmingly like Deputy Dog. We had designed no contingency for an elevator man. Hadn't even considered it, in fact. My shift on the fly seemed to work. We were ascending with no further questions, and when the doors opened I even ventured a 'Grazie.'

Whith the doors shut behind us, Nate's fingers dug into the flesh above my elbow, a form of wordless communication that, however effective, seems to leave me worse for wear and tear. I always know what he's feeling by the energy in his hands. This time it was gratitude. He had nearly fallen apart in the elevator with our plans evidently foiled, and if I hadn't managed to come through things could have turned ugly.

We stood in the middle of a hallway that extended for miles, whose walls nonchalantly undulated with a steady wavelike rhythm. The trip was by no means over. In some senses it had only just begun. I think we were both coming to the terrifying conclusion it might never end, and that we had to position ourselves as best we could to handle the consequences. Shuffling down the hallway, taking some comfort at the soft carpet beneath our tired and sore feet, we came to a door we hoped with all our souls was the right one. If it was not, we were fucked, pure and simple. If it was not, I was afraid for what Nate might do - he's unpredictable even in sobriety. If it was not, I would hate to be on the other end, opening it upon the two of us this early in the morning. We were the antithesis of sane, normal looking gentlemen. If it was not, whole new avenues of suffering and anguish would open up for us as sure as the door. Needless to say, knocking required cyclopean effort.

I don't believe in God as such, but at that moment I thanked him. The look of mind-numbing relief and deflation of panic contrasted with that of amused surprise mixed with a dash of concern. I'm sure I don't have to tell you which look belonged to whom.

"What happened to you?" My sister asked. And with that, Nate shot past her, almost knocking her down, and jumped into her bed. I walked in silently and asked Lolita if I could lie down. She moved distractedly, laughing at Nate who was hugging a pillow, blubbing, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I can't even begin to say how high we were lifted right then, safe and alive and lying in a bed. It was a great feeling, and though we knew things weren't right, having the security of two sober people to take care of us was huge. We no longer had to fend for ourselves. The acid could now run its course (we hoped) without the added anxieties of a foreign land and no place to go. When you take acid, sometimes you feel as though you've lost yourself, and often that's a high point of the experience. That's because usually you're surrounded by familiar landmarks that are simply more interesting under the influence of discombobulated perceptions. But, if you're physically lost as well as mentally, the trip takes on a whole new dynamic. The displacement is complete, and you find yourself pining for the known. Anais and Lolita were like tethers, protectors and keepers of the reality we knew existed and desperately wanted back. Finding them was a sort of anti-chemical coup. They were the only ones who could save us now.

In bed we told them the story as best we could under the circumstances, and they enjoyed it fully. They told

us we had to leave the room and go sightseeing with them, since we weren't supposed to be in the hotel at all and waiting for the cleaning crew to walk in on the two of us was a bad idea. We protested, using as leverage the fact there was no way we could see Venice any better than we already had, but we gave in. Being led around was just fine.

Watching television as they dressed, we flipped furiously until we found a channel in English. No matter that it was an infomercial about some no-stick pots and pans, enough to actually lighten our mood when the host said, with comically undue seriousness and excitement: "Two eggs go in, two eggs come out!"

As we left the comfort of the air-conditioned room for the summer streets of our discontent, Nate and I were both feeling good about feeling like shit. We began to sense a victory. We began to sense the possibility that we would soon be coming down. It was folly to trust our senses.

The next few hours brought us pretty much full circle. Anais and Lolita treated us to nothing less than a gondola ride down the Grand Canal, and as we sat there sweating, we wished out loud that Griffith were with us. Anais refused to ask the gondolier what the penalty for gondola theft might be.

Thought imploded upon itself. My brain felt like a stale pancake. Peripheral vision was gone, and a complete sentence had no chance against the vise-like grip around my temples. I was hurting, but I felt it was with a purpose. It signaled the first stage of the well-received end to this remarkable trip. Nate was splayed out, face to the sun, hardly free of pain himself. Coming down from this much acid is like being kicked in the head by a horse.

Once our legitimate gondola ride was over, I only wanted to sit. The girls would have none of that. They dragged us down somehow unfamiliar streets and when I inquired as to where we were going, the answer nearly floored me.

"Piazza San Marco, just down the street." Through the heat I heard Nate moan.

San Marco is a pretty large square. Nate, Griffith and I may be the only people in the world who couldn't find it by design or mistake. That morning I estimated roughly seven billion visitors milling around. Negotiating our way through our once-enemies towards a museum at the far end, I gained weight with every step. Nate and I opted against going in. We had lost most of our sight to make room for pain, so we sat on a stone thousands of years old sweating LSD until, after what seemed three months, Anais and Lolita came to collect us. All around, most people were packed like sardines, but we had been given a wide berth. We were lepers. Neither of us could speak. He stared at a wall. I stared at my forearm and the purple splotches growing there without really seeing them. The dulling pain had expanded to fill every nook and cranny of my skull, and there was nothing else. The sound of thousands of shuffling feet and disconnected voices were a million miles away, and it required all my effort and more to simply stand up.

In a café, grateful at least to be out of the crowds and shaded from the sensational heat, we listened to the plan that was set for us. Anais and Lolita patiently explained that they had to go to a private island for hotel guests only, and while they were gone we had to make our way back to il stazione and reserve seats for the ten P.M. train to Vienna. Once done, we could return to the hotel at six O'clock and meet them, at which time they would take it upon themselves to see we made it onto that train with no further complications. As much as we just wanted to lie down, we had to respect their desire to make the most of Venice in a sober and normal way. The plan was agreed upon with no objections, firstly because we couldn't form the string of thoughts necessary to mount any kind of argument, and secondly because we accepted our pain as a harbinger of eventual reality. The end was near.

With heads hung low because they weighed six hundred pounds, we shuffled back to the water-bus and yet

another ride towards il statzione. As we passed beneath the Rialto bridge, Nate gasped.

"Fucking hell, man. I thought it was over. That bridge was a roller coaster. I want to throw up." He was white as a ghost, and scared. I hadn't seen the roller coaster myself, but no doubt it had thrown Nate for a hell of a loop.

"No way. Hold it in. Take a deep breath and don't draw attention to us. We look bad enough, and I can't deal with answering any questions. You'd better hold that shit in. Choke on it if you have to, just please don't throw up on this fucking boat." I felt badly for Nate right then. For the both of us, really. Stuck in a situation that may not have been this bad if we were in a forest, or my apartment. As it stood, we had no way out. Our minds were lost in Venice while our bodies were being looted like a Radio Shack during the LA riots.

At il stazione we ran to the men's room where Nate let it all out. An ugly sound, he exited the stall even whiter than when he'd gone in. We composed ourselves as best we could before braving the crowded main room. I urged Nate to sit while I stood on line, and he found a marble bench on which to lie. He really looked like shit. I can't say I felt much better, but at least I had enough strength to stand in line, for what became a very long time. At last, there was only one other person left in front of me, a short German man, and I called Nate to join me. He was sitting upright, holding the sides of his head, eyes darting in every direction. I was seriously concerned. He was far from being okay, and when I caught his attention and waved him towards me he fought to focus his eyes forward. I could sense his fear when he grabbed my arm, his desperation. I could hear it in his voice.

"We gotta go. Let's go, let's just go. Please."

"No, we can't. I'm one guy away from getting to this fucking window, and I won't be able to do it again." I wanted to help, but those tickets were imperative. I was close enough to overhear the idiot German arguing with the ticket guy about something so imbecilic I can't even remember what it was.

"The ceiling," Nate said. "The floor was on the ceiling. I have to go. Now." His pain was evident, and I'd had all I could take. I grabbed the German guy and spun him around.

"Can't you see my friend is sick?" I shouted. "Either buy your ticket or get the hell out of the way." One look at Nate and the German backed off.

The ease with which we reserved a sleeping car and paid for our tickets was so uplifting, if not for Nate's groans at my shoulder I might have been able to convince myself all could still be well. As soon as the transaction was complete, we left the building in search of fresh air. Unfortunately, the air outside was still hot and stale and we began to notice the extraordinary funk coming off our own bodies. Six o'clock was more than three hours away, an impossible length of time, and we quickly decided to return to the hotel in the baseless hope that the girls had made it back early. Again on the forsaken water-bus (this time Nate made sure not to look at the bridge) and soon we were at the hotel doors. This time around our brains were so flat we didn't even care what might happen, and just waltzed straight through the lobby and into an open elevator. In the hallway we ran into a guy wearing a hotel jacket, and I made like I'd lost my key. We pointed to the door and he smiled and joyfully let us in, a stroke of luck unparalleled that day.

The room was empty, and we each took a long shower. So good, regardless that the designs in the marble were involved in a highly choreographed dance number. I was still tripping. Real conscious thought was still unable to break through the thick clouds around my mind. We each got into a bed and may well have been asleep before our heads hit the pillows, too worn out to even get under the sheets. Anais and Lolita had the compassion to let us sleep, which we did as though dead.

About an hour after they began to wake us up, I opened my eyes to searing pain. Once I regained some sight, I noted that Nate was beginning to look close to human. Neither of us tried to speak. We simply allowed ourselves to be led to il statzione. Once there, we managed to thank the girls and assure them we'd make it to Vienna this time. They left us, laughing at our pathetic condition, which may have been laughable but by no means any laughing matter, and in the hour before boarding the train we went into every hostel, every pension in the area asking for an American guy named Griffith. We never saw him again.

Having retrieved our bags, (the girls helped us remember they were never really lost), we boarded the train to Vienna. Now, after being so elusive, it was fraught with new meaning. We left Venice behind, relieved to be escaping at least with our lives. As for our wits, the jury was still out.

The train ride to Vienna is virtually stricken from my mind. Hardly a surprise, considering said mind was actually stricken from acid. There's little to tell, anyway, since we slept the whole way.

Our arrival, too, would have passed unnoticed were we not shaken to unwanted consciousness by a guy who had - unbeknownst to us - shared our car. Thanking him in English was a good thing, because he was English. He and his girlfriend, both. We exchanged names, (forgive me for not recalling theirs and having a tough time with my own), and agreed to join them for breakfast. Nate gave me a nod, confirming he had gratefully left the snake's final wind behind, although he clearly felt as unrested as I did. The young English couple proved a timely set of guides to ease our transition back into the reality we had once feared lost forever. Vienna was our reality now, and it ultimately provided disappointingly scarce relief.

Outside the station we were greeted by stunningly bright sunshine. Our English guides squinted at the sky and rummaged for sunglasses. In contrast, Nate and I wore the look that had until that instant been reserved specially, in case a cinder block were ever hurled at us from close range by a playful dragon. If being awake in Vienna had a number one fan, neither of us was it.

Adjusting though never adjusted, we followed Adam and Eve across what may have been a multiple-lane high-speed thruway, and I say 'may have been' because it also may have been a calm, quiet street. Sounds were deformed in the worst way. Things I didn't want to hear were thunderous, while those I did were muted. To be honest, I doubt there was really much of anything I wanted to hear just then.

We chose a nice, quiet café tucked away by the ... No, I won't lie to you. They chose a shitty dump serving bitter coffee warmed by fumes from cars on the quasi-autobahn and it was here I learned an ugly truth: Vienna is disgustingly, despicably, disgracefully, disreputably expensive. Disillusionment came quick. Nate and I drank cups of muddy coffee, and our bill was high. Our English guides drank coffee and juice, and each ate a very poor excuse for a very bad omelet, and their bill was criminal. Something equivalent to thirty US dollars each. They argued with the waiter to no avail, then argued with each other. Nate and I took this as our cue, and we left our guides - their purpose served - to heatedly discuss who ordered what from whom. Braving the road alone, we returned to the station to store our bags and found a tour information desk. There was some guilt being in Vienna with so great a desire to be anyplace else that we felt compelled at least to try. I don't remember the cost for a basic tour because I simply refused to believe it. I remember laughing with Nate - not because it was funny, mind you, but because it was all we could do to defend ourselves against this staggering display of financial contempt. When we asked the man behind the desk what we could get for twenty bucks, it was his turn to laugh. As tonic for our weary brains, Vienna was a miserable failure. Whoever set the prices had clearly been on much more acid than we ever were.

Once more into the breach of thundering cars apparently training for a Grand Prix (no easy task when lacking peripheral vision, dear friends). Once more safe on the other side, we dragged our tired feet along a wide and widely unremarkable street. Hunger, for a time hidden like a doggish coward, reappeared the same

way, in full force. Knowing our turncoat stomachs would clench at paying more for lunch than for a new pair of shoes, we caught sight of those familiar golden arches and made our aching way towards them.

Two McDonald's value meals wrought havoc on our definition of the unfortunately relative term 'value', adding to a disturbing trend. This luxuriously priced fast-food meal served as the last nail in Vienna's coffin. Checking our Eurail timetable book with a tad less confidence than before, we chose an eight O'clock to Amsterdam. There was no discussion. The thought of going to Austria's southeast border and changing to a twelve hour train taking us to Prague where we'd have to secure quarters was, regrettably, discarded. As much as we truly wanted to visit Prague - whose reputed cheapness held even greater allure from the viciously expensive city in which we languished - it was too much to take. One missed train leading to one messed up night had seriously impeded our ability to travel at will. Amsterdam would provide the stability we needed to reacquire our lost souls. Granted, it would provide a great deal more than that, but first things first.

So we had a few hours to bludgeon and leave for dead. The sun punished us along our dispassionate stroll, eventually herding us into a small park. In a beautifully soft spot by a small pond where swans lazed, we lay on the grass and slept. Years later I learned it wasn't a park at all. We had unwittingly wandered into the Hapsburg Palace gardens. We'd have slept straight through the night, I'm sure, had a policeman not been good enough to kick us awake so he could kick us out. This park apparently was not suited for homeless vagabonds. Groggily, we stumbled off. On the way out, Nate bent over to pick something up off the ground. It was money. A bill worth roughly one hundred US dollars. Neither of us could believe it, and yet there it was. You know the feeling, right, of finding money? It's the best. A gift for no one but you. Not one person in their right mind passes up a bill lying on the ground. Not one. Finding it puts you, for an instant, ahead of all humanity. You found the thing everybody wants. It's a great feeling. There's only one place on Earth where that feeling is tainted. Wouldn't it make sense for that one place to be Vienna, Austria? A hundred bucks got us three stamped postcards, two bottles of water, and one crummy train-station sandwich. I'll never know why, but Vienna was very, very angry at us. Leaving was easy.

The ride from Vienna to Amsterdam lasted about fourteen hours. Our slumber matched up exactly. I never even used the bathroom.

The Dutch Method.

And so, for the second time in a year, I limped into Amsterdam after a harrowing, life-shaking experience. Nate and I planned far enough in advance to reserve a room in a place whose name we'd pulled from a book. Of course, we were significantly ahead of schedule, so it was a happy surprise to see Maura, who had described herself over the phone as a short and stout wiry-black-haired Canadian Jew waiting at the train station.

"Oh Yeah! You're those guys coming in from Berlin next week," she said when we introduced ourselves. "What happened?" Maybe to compensate for her striking lack of height, or maybe for other reasons best left unknown, Maura the short Canadian Jew bounced rhythmically with each word she spoke, like those dancing Coke cans that used to be so popular. "Um, well, we kinda got sidetracked," I offered as explanation.

"Blind sided," Nate added.

"Listen Maura, is there any chance we could ... you know ..."

"Absotively posolutely!" she bounced in reply. "I only come to the station when there's a free room. It's a double, so you guys are in luck. Well, sorry, no. You're in Amsterdam. You are lucky." Maura, it appeared, had been in Amsterdam a few tokes too long. Her energy was a tad disconcerting just then, but we gladly

followed her onto the tram and did our best to answer her questions, including the one about how long we intended to stay. "A while." What other answer was there? Our brains had only just begun to re-accumulate girth.

Early that cloudy midmorning, Nate and I arrived at the singular and never to be forgotten (sort of) pension, that subtly surreal home away from home, the Hotel Hortus.

We couldn't check in right away, so we dropped our packs and went for a sluggish walk. The Hortus could hardly have been in a better spot. Located on a quiet street directly across from a botanical garden of the same name, it was soothingly removed from the bustling city's center, and yet a walk into the fray never took more than fifteen or twenty minutes. (If you exclude the time spent sitting in Coffeeshops, that is). By the end of our extended visit to this legendary city of canals, (themselves a painful though beautiful reminder of our previous canal-stocked trip), we were journeymen. Street names meant nothing. We could scarcely pronounce most, but by following landmarks we could get just about anywhere. That first morning, however, was made of invigorating newness. We shuffled past the botanical garden, shimmied down an alleyway, and found ourselves in a small square which, oddly enough, was shaped like a triangle. One side, the side we were on, was covered in restaurants. Now, keep in mind that Amsterdam is and has for centuries been one of the great port cities of the world, illustrated by its service industries and variety in abundance. And, because marijuana is tolerated here, it makes sense for much of that service to be of the edible sort. I'd wager there are few places on this Earth where such a spectrum exists as to what one will have for lunch or dinner. So when I say one side of this square was covered in restaurants, I mean it literally. One restaurant stacked atop another, below a third and a fourth. The variety of food, the eateries representing every rounded corner of the globe, was so plentiful, so downright overwhelming, more often than not we made our peace and ate at good old predictable McDonald's or Burger King. Courageous, huh? One time, when we were firmly settled at the Hortus and into our routine, a group of idiot frat kids from Chicago passed through for a few days, making a big deal about tasting authentic Dutch food. No easy task amidst the Shwarma King's and Argentine steak houses. We asked them to please tell us if they ever found any, as we had never really looked and were mildly interested. Finally, after a number of abortive attempts, they returned triumphant, apparently having discovered the conspicuously elusive Dutch cuisine.

"Dude, it was like these small pieces of baked bread dude?" one of them described excitedly. "So good dude, some kinda chopped up tomato? ... I guess puree's what it was only warm-like? And then sort of crumbly, stringy cheese dude, melted on top. Dude, delicious, dude." Nate and I exchanged an amused glance, and then broke out cackling. How could we not? Dude?

"Dude? What's so funny dude?" Fucking idiots.

"My friend," (he wasn't really my friend, you understand), "you've just eaten a really small pizza." I thought I was done laughing until the sloth-toed realization eclipsed his already confused face, and it was enough to set me off again. That episode, one of many, came further along. On our first morning, in a triangular square full of restaurants, we spied our first Coffeeshop: 'The Greenhouse', which conveniently enough proved to sell the best pot anywhere in this city where you can buy the best pot anywhere. Trust me when I say we sampled.

The way it works in Amsterdam, for those of you who may not know is, give or take, this: Marijuana is not legal as such, but rather tolerated and decriminalized. Which is to say there is no allowance in national or local budgets for prosecuting perpetrators of a victimless crime. This provides a great deal of money to put towards far more rewarding civic works, setting Holland's quality of life well above and beyond that of most other comparable nations. There are rules, however. It can only be bought and sold at licensed locales, known as Coffeeshops, and can only be enjoyed in the same shop or in a private residence. You cannot toke on the street, in a restaurant, or in any other public venue. Also, these shops are bound by certain regulations

with which the owners must comply as far as quality and purity, so there's never any real danger of 'laced' pot. The basis of drug policy in The Netherlands is a separation of hard drugs, which cause real physical and mental harm, from soft ones which simply don't. Making soft drugs available keeps users from becoming a part of the same marginalized society as hard drug users, ensuring that all-important and honest divergence which may have meant a great deal to someone like me. Incidentally, there are far fewer heroin addicts per capita in Holland than in America, and the average age of users is significantly higher. The prostitutes in the famed red light district are not only tolerated, they're licensed, (they even have their own guild), and therefore subject to rigorous and frequent medical tests to insure the highest safety standards are maintained. The government of the Netherlands holds to a conscience that no other government seems to. They run their country with simple common sense. They know and accept people will do these things that ultraconservative kidding-ourselves 'liberal' Americans judge as 'immoral'. So they make the conscious effort to see all is done in a safe and clean environment. This way, the criminality of the act is stripped away, nobody gets hurt, and everybody goes home with a smile; (usually a much wider and more genuine smile than on the average 'enlightened' American). We're not enlightened, because we can't lighten up. In addition, the Dutch Reform Church (for those who look to a different sort of judge in matters of morality) also tolerates these so-called 'vices'. You may argue that many of the women in the red light district aren't selling themselves by choice, that they aren't necessarily happy, and you wouldn't be totally wrong. But you know what? The hookers in New York don't do it by choice either. Plus, they have to deal with uncontrolled pimps, psycho tricks, and unchecked diseases. There's a reason it's the oldest profession. It's going to happen. At least somewhere, someone is making sure it happens safely. What a country. Nate and I locked onto The Greenhouse and strolled in. We were presented a laminated menu listing about a dozen strains of pot and at least as many types of hash, each with a description beneath of taste and stoniness. We were like houseflies in a beehive, wide eyed with amazement. It's a bit of a shock to the system, I must say. We got over it quickly enough, though, and bought a bag of something called 'Master Kush', not too concerned about what it meant. With time and practice, we eventually learned how to tell the difference between, for example, Nagano Gold and Kali Mist. Nate rolled a phat joint and we sat there (it was nearly empty, being morning and I think a weekday) and smoked it gone. Our battered brains and beleaguered bodies took in the herbal medicine like a yellow school bus might take a sharp corner doing sixty and very soon we were, as Nate kept needlessly repeating, "WoooAYYYsssted".

When we felt able, we continued our walk, (much more resembling a sort of floating now), in search of sustenance. The road led us over a bridge at whose center stood a wooden billboard that wouldn't last one night in New York. A blue background bordered the picture of a cherubic bearded guy who looked a lot like Merlen Olsen. The only portion of text we could understand was his name: Rosti Rostelli. By his garb we deduced he was a magician of one type or other, and the billboard became a mainstay of our life in Amsterdam since most everywhere we went took us across that bridge past his savant-like smile and beet-red cheeks. His name was transformed into code for going into the city center. Nate might say:

"Hey Es, Rosti Rostelli?"

To which I'd answer:

"Sure. Let's go."

Once our room was prepared, room number eleven, US Marines couldn't have kept us from going to sleep. Walking up stairs in Amsterdam, or down them, can be quite an adventure. Particularly for those of us there expressly to ensure the loss of our motor skills. Most every building in the city was built long before the advent of the elevator, and there has of yet been no move to redesign. Widthwise, homes are extremely narrow, and the stairs ascend at such an astounding angle it basically felt like I was climbing a ladder. You have to walk sideways and very slowly to get down, quaint as it is dangerous. Natives, of course, fly down at breakneck speeds in a show of territorial overconfidence. Most buildings in Amsterdam have steel rods

with loopholes on the end that jut out a few feet, just below the roof. It's a trip to behold movers lifting a grand piano into a fourth floor window using thick cords and a complex pulley system, watching in suspense as the instrument swings like a pendulum thirty feet in the air, half expecting it to drop with a musical crash on the head of some unsuspecting cartoon character.

Number eleven was simple. Two beds close enough to almost be one, a bathroom with sink and shower but, annoyingly, no toilet. That necessity was at the bottom of the steps of death. Before dropping on our beds and falling into desperate slumber, Nate opened the window and although he slept closest to it, I woke that day and every other in a virtual blanket of mosquito bites. Damn my sweet blood.

When we cautiously made our way downstairs and into the lounge to buy a Heineken from the vending machine, maybe a couple bags of Northern Lights from Maura, we found her sitting on the couch with two odd looking fellows, sharing in a heartfelt belly-laugh.

"Guys, c'mere," she gasped. "You gotta meet our friends from Down Under." Thinking a bit more clearly - a rare state in Amsterdam - we introduced ourselves to the Australians, and they to us.

"You boys have a nice kip?" Matt, who looked like the soccer player Alexi Lalas, asked.

"Yeah," I said. "What's a kip?"

"Kip's a nap. You ever played Tens?" This question from Digby, who resembled a wallaby to such an extent it didn't even matter that I'd never seen one. Neither of us had played Tens, and over never-ending bong hits, we learned. Life at Camp Hortus had begun. Matt and Digby were fantastic guys. They both lived and worked in a small mining town in remotest north-central Australia nearly a full days ride from Darwin. They got paid well and spent next to nothing, so every two years they took three months off to travel the world. They had arrived in Amsterdam the day before us, and were planning to head south to Hungary to visit Digby's aunt. It became a running routine: every day, Nate and I would convince them to stay another night, and another, and another. When the pot crystals settled, we had successfully locked them in Amsterdam with us for a full three weeks. It took no time for the four of us to become close and entrenched into an everyday existence that boggles the mind. A typical day at Camp Hortus played like this:

Eight A.M., Breakfast, thankfully included. Once we'd had our fill of coffee, eggs, coffee, toast and coffee, we moved to the opposite end of the lounge, equipped with couches, a large table, a stereo, a television, and an old brown leather spinning chair I quickly claimed as my own. There we sat, the four of us snickering at the other guests intent on seeing the 'sights', playing Tens and smoking tons, until one o'clock when the lounge closed. At that point, we went on Walkabout. Visiting the city, stopping at every Coffeshop that seemed inviting, (which is to say, of course, every Coffeshop we happened to see), killing time by any means necessary until the lounge reopened at five. Often, Maura found us standing on the other side of the door, waiting for her to unlock it. We'd sit smoking pot, playing cards, watching t.v. and chatting until nine or ten, when we again ventured out for dinner and some drinks. From there, we'd usually stroll back to the Hortus and lounge out, light up, and watch a program that could only exist in Amsterdam. After Midnight, quality television tends to become limited. There's nothing like getting rip-roaringly high in the wee hours to watch 'The Driving Channel.' That's really what it is. The camera, a low-grade contraption delivering grainy picture, is mounted somewhere above the driver's passenger side shoulder, so all you see is the top of a steering wheel, and the road out the front windshield. It's always the same guy, and each night he drives somewhere different. It's filmed late at night, so there's never any traffic. The driver never speaks, never goes anywhere, never leaves the car. Basically, you're a passenger in his back seat, powerless to direct, and yet powerfully intrigued. We'd stare, drooling in stoned silence until someone broke the trance by shouting something like: "Okay, Jesus Christ! Where the fuck is he going?! Does anybody know where he's going?" Nobody ever did. After that, we'd retire to our rooms, wake up early the next morning, and do it all over again.

During the three weeks we lived in Amsterdam, Nate and I were dirty bastards. I mean filthy, physically. We showered every day, sometimes twice a day, and the weather was rarely sweat inducing, but we had arrived in Amsterdam toting sacks full of dirty laundry. Before we got there, we agreed a wash was imperative, but as soon as we realized how much good pot could be purchased for the price of one load, we ascertained that being a little dirty was a fair tradeoff. Plus, it was a lot cheaper and easier to just buy a T-shirt or a package of boxers each week than to clean what we had. You learn pretty quick how to budget in Amsterdam.

We weren't there to be clean, or to pay money to visit a room some girl once wrote a diary in, or spring for admission to stare at Van Gogh or Rembrandt paintings. We were in Amsterdam to smoke a lot of pot, simple as that. Early on, the four of us made a pact: no culture unless it was made out of wax. With the help of Conscious Dreams, our motto became reality.

Conscious Dreams is a specialty shop we stumbled upon (stumbling was par for the course in Amsterdam) when we were lost in nothingness. I mean it was the only store in the empty, gray and uncharacteristically lifeless area in which we had quite suddenly and unaccountably found ourselves. After first obliviously bypassing the storefront, it took us a moment before snapping back as if we'd reached the limit of an invisible rubber-band. The doorway was hanging beads, the motif tie-dye. It was difficult to decide whether the smoothness was effortless or forced, but either way it was effective. Smiling the way a sly, nefarious medieval wizard might have done, the man behind the counter beckoned in a soothing voice:

"Come. Let me help you." We shuffled towards him, hypnotized, allowing ourselves to become the flock to his shepardry. The counter itself, his plate-glass pulpit, was covered in bottles, in powders, in aerosol cans, each claiming to cause some sort of reaction from euphoria to a harder hard-on.

Digby, unfazed by the wizard's spell, lay his hands upon the counter and said:

"So, what about mushies, then? Do you sell 'em?"

PART TWO (continued)

Without blinking an eye, the man - if man he was (doo-do-doo-do, to the tune of Twilight Zone) pulled a red box from below the counter. Inside were about a dozen brown paper bags.

"Each bag is an ounce. Primo, friend. Fresh." An ounce. I had only ever eaten an eighth at one time. Well, okay, certainly never more than a quarter.

"So," I said, "that ought to cover us all, yeah?"

"No. An ounce for each person. These are fresh, maybe different from what you're used to." His voice, his smile, seemed to say 'trust me, ... come on, trust me...'

I had myself taken a modest share of mushrooms, a quarter-ounce being the largest single amount I'd ever done, and it's safe to say it fucked me the hell up. They kicked in and I was lost, completely. I had been sitting on a couch in a friend's house, and then as if an entire scene had simply been edited out, I suddenly saw myself represented by the burning tip of the cigarette I held in a sea of darkness that I intuited as the northern Maine forest. I really mean I saw my physical self from above, from out of my body, and heard myself moaning, "Where am I?" Then, all the more alarming: "Who am I?" It was an amazing, a humbling, a frightening experience. Then there was the tale Matt and Digby told about Fiji, where the mushrooms are blended with water and chugged like a laboratory elixir.

"It was great," they said. "For a solid hour, we were retching on the street. Felt like being kicked in the ribs by a steel-toed work boot!" Twisted fucking bastards. They really were.

"Hey, you twisted fucking bastards, being kicked in the ribs for an hour doesn't sound 'great' to me." "Well, sure, that part wasn't so nice. But after, we were wracked up for a good twelve hours, mate."

It was on the line and everyone else had bought their paper bag full of fungus. Better to join them than take care of them, I decided. Solid logic, right? Almost Spock-like, I know.

Back at the Hortus, we started chewing. The wizard was right. They certainly were fresh, and full of flavor. Unfortunately, about the most repugnant flavor I have ever known. Digby ran across the street to get us all ham sandwiches, which masked the taste adequately enough, and I'm happy to say an ounce was just about right. Nobody freaked out, and though we were all affected, we could still function to some degree. It was a happy high. We walked around awhile before finding a place to sit and smoke out in front of a bar playing loud music. One song, a big hit in Amsterdam that summer, blared an infectious chorus: 'Wanna be a hippie wanna smoke maraaa marijuana!' It was fun. Eventually, our judgment pretty well impaired, we wound up in Damrak square and couldn't help but buy tickets to Madame Tousaud's wax museum. Culture was served. Satisfied with our initial product, we returned to Conscious Dreams a few days later to peruse their wares further.

"So, was an ounce enough?" the benevolent pusher asked soothingly. Had he lifted his arms palms out, I may have run screaming.

"Absolutely. What else ya got?"

"Maybe you'd like to try CB2?" like he was suggesting cheese.

"What's that?"

"CB2 is a designer drug," he answered, with all the patience of a loving parent to a hyperactive child.

"Never heard of it. What's it do?"

In lieu of a direct reply, he pulled a huge book from under the counter and turned it towards me. Confused, I read:

YYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYCHAPTER SEVENYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

And from the astral Heavens, through the latticework and pre-structured congealment that was physical representation of Good Steven's ceiling, Amarr descended with her trademark flash of blue and silver, a neon announcement of arrival. Good Steven moaned, AUM, within his semi-consciousness and then, as a sleeper, awoke.

"Goddess! You have returned! What shall you have me do?"

"Good Steven, Elm-Child, I have selected Eokanifads nectarine as the symbol of celestial appreciation and ... "

I closed the book.

"Fuck that shit. Give us four."

At the Hortus, unsure what to expect, we swilled each down our pill with a glass of water and hung around the lounge waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. Maura walked in with another girl and asked if we were high yet, to which Digby answered, for all of us, no. At least not from the pill. The two women wanted to play Euchre, so Nate and Digby made up a team to face them, while Matt and I busied ourselves with the television.

Although I don't know how to play Euchre, I know that it's scored in two games of seven tricks each, and I also know it's nearly impossible for a team - even were it made up of two people who had never played - to be shut out in a round. Nate and Digby were both experienced Euchre players, yet somehow managed to lose both games with a combined score of fourteen to nothing. Later, they realized that for the duration of the game, they were only able to concentrate on the space between the cards, and nothing else. While they were being lambasted at the table, an area punctuated by the vocalization of Maura's mounting suspicion at their uncanny ability to keep from scoring even one lousy point, Matt and I were entranced by the television set, and both deeply confused. With all my heart, all my being, I believed I was watching a John Lennon retrospective and I know Matt saw the same, because we discussed how very odd it was that we had somehow missed all the reggae songs John had done. Every tune Lennon played was really good reggae. Hours later, it was brought to our attention the show we'd been watching had not a thing to do with John Lennon, but rather was a retrospective of Bob Marley's career. It took a while, even then, for Matt and I to believe that. Maybe I should have read the rest of the passage in the book. Maybe it would have mentioned how CB2 makes the user dangerously stupid. Bliss of absolute ignorance in a little white pill. Go straight to hell Amarr, neon goddess.

Now, I've already mentioned Matt's amazing likeness to the American soccer player Alexi Lalas. In Europe, soccer (okay, fine, 'football') is a way and means of life. Amsterdam's team, Ajax, has always been amongst the front-runners for European bragging rights, and without a doubt, the Dutch know their football. Simply for laughs, Nate and I bought a jersey of the American flag with armholes, and took it back to the Hortus while Matt and Digby were having a kip. When Matt awoke, we worked on getting him ragingly high and then, easily enough, convinced him to put on his blue soccer shorts and tuck the jersey into them. Gladly, Matt agreed without too much fuss, being as he was generally a gladly agreeable type of guy. We didn't make it back by five that day. The fun simply refused to stop. From every side of the street, cries of "LALAS!" or "Aye, Alexi!" rang out, to which Matt would obligingly raise a hand. Digby, Nate and I played the role of entourage, and a couple of times had to stiff-arm somebody who got too close. Most everyone we passed would snap their heads around, and say - be it English or Dutch the tone was clear - something to the effect of: "Did you see ... was that ... was it!? Hey Lalas!" When we stopped for drinks, they came courtesy of the house, and Matt was enjoying himself so much he even signed a few autographs, which turned out to be not so good when a hoodwinked fan thanked him. "Cheers, mate! Good on ya!" Matt gleefully replied in a very heavy not-American accent.

By the end of the first week, the four of us had become a sort of ad-hoc Hortus welcoming committee. Our circle was tight, it was closed, we were together for the long haul, and this made it easy to meet the fresh and short-lived new arrivals. I've already told you about the boys from Chicago and their frenetic search for what was ultimately a Dutch pizza. But there were others, just as clueless, whose often unfortunate situations and pathetic circumstances proved a never-ending topic of congenial discussion. One guy, Larry from Deep South, USA, was just about the most ignorant person I've ever met. I'm talking really low-class trash a breath removed from the Klan type of ignorant. When this guy said 'nigger', and he did say it, he warn't whistlin' Dixie. Every day he spent in Amsterdam was a portrait of misery, which is about what he deserved. The four of us took it upon ourselves, as a duty to decency, to make things never easy for him, though Larry did most of the work. The worst decision Larry could have made was coming to Amsterdam. You may judge me as harsh. Don't judge me. I'm a good person, and had you met Larry, you would applaud our treatment of him, I guarantee it. We gave him an honest chance, as we did all the guests at the Hortus. The only things we had against him were the things he freely chose to display. "So, I read one time it's easy

to buy hookers 'round here," he commented one morning, surprising us all with his admission of literacy. "Yeah Larry, in the red light district. You should go out there," Nate said, displaying his knack for instigation.

"Well, I wouldn't know where to look," he snorted. "I mean, are they cruising, like out on the streets?"

"Hey, Champion," (pronounced cham-pee-yuhn, Digby's pet name for anyone he didn't like), "if you wait a few hours, we'll take you." "I suppose I can wait," Larry responded in a nasal voice with an ill-advised attempt at suaveness. Wearing stone-washed ball-huggers clung tight around his ankles above bright white eight dollar sneakers, topped off by the facial expression of an idiot-savant with no math skills where a peach-fuzzy little shit-brown 'stache rested just off center made suaveness something of a stretch for Larry. One O'clock rolled around and Maura shooed us from the lounge. Larry the loser stood outside waiting in his clearly rehearsed tough-guy stance, looking like it was an honor for us to be seen in his company.

The red light district derives its name from the long red lamps above endless rows of tall windows that light up to indicate a woman is available. The streets in this district are lined with these red lights, along with an occasional sex-show (all live) and the appropriate shops. Visitors will invariably pass the Sex Museum and the irresistible naked mannequin outside its entrance, ecstatically riding a bicycle that thrusts a dildo through a hole in the seat into the hole in her with each turn of the pedal.

I always assumed the women being leased would be dirty and unattractive, but I was dead wrong. Most of the scantily clad prostitutes behind their glass, beneath their red lamp, were undeniably gorgeous.

We did the once around with Larry, who stared and salivated with an even more vacuous expression than usual, the face of someone who's done far too many whippits. He finally stopped in front of one woman in black lace sensuously brushing her blonde hair.

Myself, I don't go in for that sort of thing. I can't handle taking an active role in what I feel to be the denigration and objectification of a fellow human being for my own selfish purposes. Neither do I enjoy imposing my own admittedly questionable morals and principles upon others, and so when Larry felt the urge to hire a sexual experience he could never have gotten for free on his own merits, I wasn't about to stop him. The regulated cost to get your rocks off those days in Amsterdam was fifty guilders, which at the time equaled roughly twenty-five bucks. Larry knocked on the door. The woman opened it and immediately demanded payment, which Larry ineptly forked over, flashing a full wallet in the process. She led him inside and closed the door, leaving the four of us to laugh, and wait.

"Fuck 'im," Matt said after a few minutes. "Let's go smoke some grass." We all agreed it was a fine idea, and had barely made it to the corner when Larry the loser came running up behind us, demanding to know just where we thought we were going. "Champion!" Digby shouted.

"That was quick." I said. It would have been hard enough to peel his asshole jeans off, much less take care of anything else in the time he'd been gone.

"Those bitches. Fucking whores," Larry spit through clenched brown teeth, jaw muscles working overtime.

"What happened to ya then, mate?" Digby feigned concern.

"Fucking bitches robbed me."

"Whaaaat?! Are you serious?" Nate asked, unable to hold in a loud laugh. Talk about getting what you deserve.

"I thought there was only the one. Larry, honestly, what the hell happened in there?" I really wanted to know.

"I said to her, you know, I want your friend in here, you know, so I could watch. She's like, 'that's two hundred extra' so I, you know, I gave it and her friend came in and said I had to pay her three hundred, too, and then, well, you know..." I'd never heard him talk so much, and was thankful.

"No, Larry, I don't know. I don't have the first fucking clue. What happened then?" The others were already rolling with laughter.

"Well, they, you know, they pushed me out the door."

"So, Larry, you're out almost six hundred guilders on a fifty guilder proposition, huh?" The guy was unbelievable.

"Fucking whores. Fucking whores 'n niggers all over this dirty city. They'll burn like the Sodomites. Dirty niggers everywhere, like they own this place, like it's black nigger Africa or somethin'. Filthy nigger drug addicts, nothin' but criminals. Filthy sinners." I could not take him any longer. "You are truly an asshole, you know that Larry? A real moron. A complete fucking idiot. What the hell's wrong with you?" I couldn't keep from laughing with the others. You had to be there, I guess, to see the look on his bright-red face. I bet you'd be laughing, too. Larry left soon after, which was certainly best for everyone, especially Larry.

The void was filled when Mark and Victoria came to the Hortus, all smiles and sticky sweet. They proved slightly more benign pathetic morons than Larry had been, despite their initial clean all-American countenance. He was in his fifth year - not his last, either - at UConn. She - blonde to a stereotypical T - was just starting the nursing program. A pitifully cute couple, or so at first they appeared. Until the spitting started.

We hung out with them at a bar (no one else seemed quite as happy about bottomless bongos as the four of us were) and they passed as nice enough people. Barely a brain-wave between them, but at least somewhat regular. That's why the problem was so startling.

One morning, it was late because the four of us were deeply involved in a set of Tens, Mark and Victoria bounced into the lounge with their own set of cards and began dealing out a game of spit on one of the breakfast tables. They hadn't smoked any pot since their arrival, at least none we had seen. It all appeared innocent enough. Shortly, the only sounds from where they sat behind me were palms slapping cards, getting progressively more and more vehement. Then, sudden as a lightning bolt on a clear spring day, Victoria let out a mind-piercing squeal:

"NOO!! You CHEATED! You're a CHEATER!"

"What? Am NOT! You were too slow."

"I can't BeLIEve you! You used the other PILE!"

"Stop being such a baby. You're always such a baby."

"Am NOT! You're always such a CHEATER!"

"FINE. Forget it. Let's go see that thing where that girl was hiding from those Nazi people." And they were gone, cards and all, as if there hadn't been anyone else in the room, as if we hadn't all stopped to stare in shock and disbelief. "Oh my god," Nate said finally. "They're fucking nuts."

Every morning, every evening, a variation but always the same theme, from playing spit to spitting adolescent insults.

One night, while I was waiting for the rest of the crew to finish their showers, my t.v. time was imposed upon by these two loons and their hostile game.

"You can't DO that!"

"Can too, sore loser."

"I did NOT lose. You CHEATED!"

"So-oh-oh-re loooooo-ser."

"NO! That's so unFAIR!"

"Tough. I win."

"You ASShole. You ASSHOLE CHEATER-CHEATER-CHEATER!!!"

Victoria stormed out of the room, shouting all the way, leaving me alone with Mark. I felt compelled to speak.

"Hey, Mark, buddy, " I began with friendly authority, "don't mean to impose here but, Jesus. Don't you think maybe you should chill out with the cards?" "Why? She lost. She's the baby." I was speechless. Two minutes later, a mollified Victoria walked back into the room.

"Fine. We'll play again, and this time no cheating."

The best thing about them and most of the other guests who passed through the Hortus were their coupons. At Burger King, each time you bought a Whopper, you'd receive a coupon. Seven coupons got you one free Whopper, fries, and a drink. Since nobody but the four of us were in Amsterdam long enough to care, we would send everyone who passed through to get a Whopper and bring us their coupons. Most people were more than happy to comply, as we usually packed a nice bol welcoming them to this great city. The Greenhouse, too, had a coupon system. For each gram of pot, they affixed a sticker onto a card. Twelve stickers equaled one free gram. We filled those ourselves.

Here's an inexpensive way to get wasted in Sin City East: At eleven guilders admission, the Heineken brewery is a fantastic bargain. The trick is to get there at least an hour before their first tour, because at the end you get fifteen minutes of free beer. If you're on the first tour, they sit you in the free beer hall until the last tour finishes their fifteen minutes. We stumbled from the brewery and passed out back at the Hortus, just after eleven O'clock in the morning.

Later that same day, coming to with the painful reminder that free beer, after all, isn't, we made a pact to ease our pain by biting the hand that fed the hair of the dog that bit us. We went to a bar away from the city center on Maura's suggestion. It's a bar inside the stump of a windmill. A real local place, as much as any place in Amsterdam could ever be 'local', where we sat on stools and drank Adelscott's and jawed with the bartender. An ambiguously great afternoon, it heralded the coming end of our never-to-be-forgotten existence in Amsterdam. I was nearly out of money, Matt and Digby had left an aunt waiting far too long in Hungary, and Nate's flight was scheduled to leave all too soon. Before parting, one final quest remained. A piece of Amsterdam lore. We'd heard rumors about a houseboat that was once owned by a wealthy widow with a habit of taking in stray cats. When this lady passed, she left the houseboat, along with loads of money and specific instructions, to over three-hundred cats, and there they live still...

That, well, that's Amsterdam. A place where people are people no matter what they do, no matter how they look, as long as they're good. The city is amazingly beautiful. Canals lined with narrow red brick homes, crisscrossed by bridges; cafés spilling out onto streets, open squares like the Damrak, always abuzz with one type of performer or other. Further from the center, quiet parks and botanical gardens, soothing mellow streets where you can lean against the corner lamppost and have a smoke on a perfect summer evening in a world built of flowers and fantasy and deep happy sighs. Like molasses, Amsterdam is slow, thick, and sweet in the best way. I will never forget.

And yet ...

I had to go home. It was a full three weeks before the scheduled return date on my plane ticket, but the last ten dollars in my wallet screamed out at me: You have to go home! Now.

A little direction was necessary, seeing as I had arrived in Amsterdam nearly a month before, and my few remaining brain cells were gasping for any kind of air. I had partaken in the city's tolerance policies with all the passion Rowdy Roddy Piper once displayed in his legendary bouts with Jimmy 'The Superfly' Snuka. My mind was a brittle piece of toast, the kind that crumbles into a thousand jagged pieces if you try spreading butter on it. I had to go home, and that's all there was to it.

Grounded by De Gaulle.

Of course things are never that easy, they never run smoothly. My plane would depart from Paris, not Amsterdam, and as I mentioned, not for another three weeks. These facts may have deterred lesser men, or more accurately: lesser men with credit cards and/or more than ten dollars to their name.

After doing away with the final remnants of my brain activity during a farewell sesh, I boarded the train to Paris in a haze. With great sadness, I handed over my Eurail pass for the last time, this trip over whether I liked it or not (Oh! would that it were the truth!) and tried to get some sleep.

When I disembarked in an as yet unfamiliar Paris, I was down to eight dollars after buying a can of soda. The three dollar Metro fare to the airport dug deeper.

So, the situation was this: Five dollars, or about twenty-five francs, no credit cards, not enough money to buy a phone card to call parents who were both traveling and unreachable at the time anyway, in Charles De Gaulle airport three weeks prior to my actual date of departure. Add the fact I had smoked countless ounces of high-grade cannabis over the past three weeks while recovering from an explosive hit of LSD and you can begin to intuit my position as nothing if not precarious.

That first night was a wash. Too late to do anything but find a quiet spot and hope for sleep. I didn't want to chance the floor, since being thrown out of the airport would do little to improve my situation, so I negotiated comfort and finally compromised on a steel-wire chair. Somehow I managed to catch a few hours of rest after setting up a plan in which I felt mistakenly confident. As soon as the Air France counter opened in the morning, I'd get them to change my ticket and hopefully make the early flight. 'I'll be home by this time tomorrow night' was the mantra I used to lull my useless senses.

Waking up was an altogether unhappy experience, particularly for my kidneys. I stretched and rubbed as best I could and started out to find the Air France counter. Charles De Gaulle airport is huge, maze-like. I had to take a bus to another terminal before I finally found what I was looking for. When I did, I had a little spring in my step, placed there almost sarcastically by the hope of getting things straightened out.

"I'd like to change the flight date on this ticket for today, please," I requested pleasantly to the woman

standing behind the counter. Her hair was pulled back so tightly, it looked poised to tear the skin clean off her forehead. She flipped through my ticket, punched her computer, and said in a thick accent:

"Zayre ees a flight wiss rum today." Oh Glory! "To shange zee teeket ees fie hoondred francs, or wun hoondred dullarz." Hope fell, my heart dove to the fourth or fifth level of hell. I was cooked, and my brain, well, my brain was fried.

"I haven't got it. No money." I gave her the universal open-armed-palms-out gesture for 'broke', and I'm certain my look was significantly pathetic. No acting required, there. "Please. I just want to go home." Desperation crept up my back with an ice-pick.

"Zee plane eez for fief oh clock. Beefore, eeef you hafff zeee munay, you go." She spun away with a finality that snapped my spirit to handle the next customer who could not have been in as much trouble as I was.

I chanted the slang of a sexual act under my breath all the way to a seat where I forced my mind to think. Things were fixing to become truly ugly, especially once I added the peripherals. I didn't have enough money even to catch a Metro back in to Paris, much less find relief once I got there. I was decidedly stuck in this airport. Making matters so much worse, it cost two francs to use the damn bathroom, and I had my eye on a bottle of water that would liquidate the larger part of my few remaining funds. Food was well past being an option, and trouble - like a black cloud or a heavy pungent beer - was brewing. With head in hands I could only lament my luck, my very existence. Nothing is ever easy, which I can live with. But does it always have to be so fucking hard?

The best part of that day was spent reading a Phillip K Dick novel called 'A Scanner Darkly,' an inspired work of speculation about drugs and identity set in the future, except Dick's present was in the past, and his future was my present. Time past and time future perhaps are contained in time present. Sitting in the twelfth hour at Charles De Gaulle without comfort, thinking without thought, I believe I could have argued Eliot's point with anyone. All time is unredeemable. Nobody could have convinced me any different. Not then, not there.

At some point during the day, I caved and bought that small bottle of water, leaving me a grand total of four francs (roughly ninety cents). I rationed sips as from the only canteen on a wagon-train stranded in an interminable desert wilderness with no hope of food or water and whose only other passenger - some fruitcake named Donner - was getting a strange look on his face and licking his lips each time I shifted. To sum up: Things were looking really, really bad.

Late in the afternoon, I went back to the Air France counter. It's funny, how even though it would appear I had nothing but time, I was still annoyed at having to wait in line. At the counter, I was face to face with the same woman, forehead skin a bit more stretched. Recognizing me, she asked for the money which, as we're all aware, presented a grave problem.

"No...No money. No food," here I rubbed my belly, Buddha-style. "Nothing. I just want to go home. Please just let me go home." I did my now famous-desperate-pathetic-kid-stuck-in-an-airport-with-no-food-or-money routine, but I guess she didn't buy it.

"I aploshize, buut zees eez de rule. No munay, no teeket." Not a very understanding woman. If only she loosened her hair.

"But look, I have a ticket, just want to change the day?"

"Non, zees wass poorshast wis miliage award ans so eeet cannot be shanged wisout won hondred dullars. Pardon. Guud bi."

Defeat. Bitter, crippling defeat. I plodded dejectedly around the airport, searching for a decent spot to curl up and die in peace, wincing as the day's last flight left for where I wanted to be. Finally, I sat down, slumping against a nondescript wall in this would-be tomb, and took a nip of water.

For hours, I sat there, leering at other travelers anxious to get on their own flights, unaware of their good fortune having taken it for granted. I watched flustered parents shout at impatient children more interested in riding the baggage carts than riding the airplane. I watched young couples - some happy, some not, depending on whether they were arriving in Paris or departing. I watched businessmen who drifted along with the aura of having done all this a thousand times before. I watched them all and cursed the fact that I had to be the pathetic one huddled in the corner, lost and alone.

I was almost grateful my brain was working on a depleted level, because really thinking about my situation would cause far too much distress. I managed to drift into fitful sleep and dreamt I awoke in my own bed, in my own home.

That was just a dream, shattered when my eyes opened upon the sterilized cleanliness of an airport in the far-too-early morning. The frowning, red-eyed sanitation crew meandered passionlessly through the halls like a uniformed group of mute free-floating apparitions. I watched them for a time, until one gave me a soundless, expressionless nod of recognition that forced my aching body off the floor.

I wandered aimlessly, almost deriving some pleasure from my barely qualified enforced solitude. Were I able to push aside my desperate situation, silence the rumbling in my stomach, I may have felt invigorated at my presence in a building as vast as it was empty. Gazing down wide, high-ceilinged hallways without a hint of movement, the airport was mine. My shoes echoed off the Formica-like floor as I made my way to the food-court, where a small man was intently filling racks with bread and pastries. Although my French was nonexistent, I had to try. I approached him, and when he looked up and smiled I knew I had a chance. I acted out my quandary for him - two days, slept here, no food, no money. He hesitated, glanced around to be sure we were alone, and handed me a loaf of bread. I loved the French at that moment for making their bread so big, and I adored this small man for his kindness.

"Mercy. Mercy. Mercy," I repeated breathlessly, clasping my hands together and doing the best I could to show my gratitude, to show that mercy said it all. Content, I slunk away with a laugh and a wave from my new best friend. I ate some of the bread, careful not to eat too much. There was no telling how long I'd have to survive on that one piece. I lead a full life, don't you think?

Managing to slip into the bathroom without paying, I took the opportunity to refill the water bottle. Afterwards, I walked around and watched the airport come to life, slowly, quietly, powerfully. The beginning and the end of travel. Sallow faces and dragging feet gave the employees the look of people who felt chained to this place. They didn't know. At day's end, they would go home, have dinner, maybe watch some t.v. They had no idea what it felt like to really, to truly be stuck here. My head ached, my body felt like dry kindling, and in my mind the home fires raged with all the heat in hell. And I was caught in purgatory with no coins for the ferryman.

I waited outside the Air France office as they got organized, relieved to see a different woman at the counter. I was not glad to note that she looked somehow even more annoyed with life than her predecessor. Pursing my lips, I pressed forth with plan B.

"Good morning," I said curtly. "I was supposed to be traveling for a few more weeks, as you can see on this

ticket, but there's been a serious family emergency and I need to change for the next possible flight." She took my ticket without a word and played around with her keyboard and finally said those words that drove the ice-pick through my soul.

"Won hodred dullarz."

"I don't have any money," I replied with resignation.

You can payeet wiz carte du credeet if you like."

She was unshakable. I never even had a chance.

"I don't have a credit card," I said, unable to hide the anger and frustration mounting in my voice.

"I sink deez eez dee emershansay, no?"

God damned self-important bitch, how I hate you.

My anger, my desperation, my situation had overtaken me as I stormed away from the desk. God! The maddening white floors, the ridiculously high ceilings, the people all speaking different languages, the sickening squeal of baggage carts, the plastic P.A. voice. It was all too much. I had to get the fuck out of this Christ-forsaken madhouse before it dragged me into its swirling depths.

Fuming, I walked out of the airport and directly onto a bus whose doors stood open. There was no charge (small favors) since it never went anywhere except around in circles. For the next eight hours I simply sat in the back and stared out the window. When I had to get on a different bus, I did. When I had to use the bathroom I found a way. Sure, the scenery was all the same, but it was infinitely better than spending another day in that damn airport. Like a prisoner volunteering for field work, knowing the day will be as hot as the asphalt he's mixing, but worth it just to see the world from outside cell walls.

That night I slept in a different part of the airport. Variety, if you can call it that, is the life of spice. And as we all should know, the spice is life. Sleep, however, is maybe too strong of a word. Doze is more like it. I had finished the last of my bread that evening, and my stomach wept. I wished I were dead.

Day Four.

The Air France counter. My old nemesis, Stretch, had returned. There was no plan C.

"Listen, I do not have any money. If you don't let me go home, I will die here. I will. You have to let me go home. Please. I'm begging you now." The tone of my voice may have given the impression I was prepared to fight this out, and it would have been the correct impression. My mind was made up to refuse anything less than a flight home. Noting the momentary flash of recognition in her eyes, I could almost hear her thoughts: 'mon dieu, poor kid. He's been here four days and looks at the end of his honest, kind, decent rope. To say nothing of how handsome he is, despite not having showered in nearly a week. That sunken-cheek, unshaven look really turns me on. I think I'll bend the rules and let him on a flight.' Of course you might say I was delusional from hunger and lack of sleep, and you would be dead-on right. Her actual thoughts: 'this asshole again. Why won't he just drop dead?'

"Non. Pardon monsieur. No munay, no flight."

"Look," I glowered, digging in. "I have no money and I have to get on that flight. Either you do it or you let me talk to somebody who can. I've been here four days now and I am starving to death. I refuse to take any

more of this shit."

"Do nut speak to me deez vay," she exclaimed, one hand on her bosom and a look that said she was having a bad enough day without my problems. This served only to infuriate me all the more.

"Listen, if you don't get me on a flight there's a whole lot more than my fucking language you'll have to worry about, pardon my French."

"I must speak to zee agent who sold dis teeket in America."

"Fine. Do it now, please."

"Eet eez nut hopen. Come back een seex howers."

"Six hours! You people are worthless! You couldn't have thought of that the first time I was in here, three days ago?" I was losing my usually un-loseable calm, glad no one else was around to watch. She was getting pretty flustered as well. Smacking something onto my ticket she threw it back at me, shouting:

"I can do nossink for seex howers. Pardon. Go away."

There really was no further to go with this, and six hours would maybe make the difference. I tried to retain hope. With a Gestapo-like turn, I marched out of the office.

Before putting it away, I flipped through my ticket to see what she'd done. There was a yellow sticker affixed where there hadn't been one before, but at the time I was unaware of its significance.

To calm myself, I went outside for some semblance of fresh air, maybe bum a cigarette from somebody. I caught sight of three young women who were all smoking and, just as important, speaking English. Sucking up the fact I looked like a dead guy in a George Romero flick, I walked over to them. They fell silent as I got near like crickets at approaching footsteps. They shifted uncomfortably, looking at each other for guidance.

"Hi. I don't mean to bother, I was just wondering if any of you could maybe part with a smoke?"

People say I have a soothing way about me, and it certainly comes in very handy at times. This time, it got me a cigarette, a light, and smiles all around.

"You goin' home?" One of them asked; she didn't know. "I'm trying. You have no idea how hard I'm trying."

"Where's home?" Asked another. I told them.

"We're from Houston. We were meant to be on a flight two days ago that we missed? Our train got stuck underground because of that bomb that exploded on the metro? You heard about that?"

"Actually," I said, "I haven't heard. I haven't been paying much attention to the news lately. What happened?"

"There was a terrorist attack. Well, not really an attack? Someone put a bomb filled with nails on a train in the tunnel behind us, so we're all stuck. By the time we got to the airport? we missed our flight."

"So, what did you do?" It was nice actually speaking to a person again.

"We had to pay to change our ticket? Can you believe that?"

"I can believe it. If you don't mind my asking, what'd they do to your ticket? Once you paid, I mean?"
Could it be ...?"

"They just put this sticker on and ..." I stopped her with my hand,

"Is it...what did it look like - the sticker?" My eyes closed as I listened to the sweet southern sound of her voice.

"Just a round yellow sticker? Why?"

"It's just that I think I got a sticker like that, but I don't know what it means. I've been trying to get home, and this might be the best news I've heard in, well, ever."

"They told us to go to the check-in to get on standby? It's right there through those doors?" She had no need to point. I knew where it was. My breath hitched.

"Listen, I've got to go."

My feet got ahead of my body, and I had to run in order to catch up with them. There was no line and the man behind the counter took my ticket. He flipped through it, wrote something down, messed with a computer, and handed it back.

Just like that. My first, best chance at going home.

An hour later, another line. At the end of this one - maybe - a most abundant pot of gold, worthy to replace the pot of green whose abundance had helped put me into this situation to begin with. At the end of this one - maybe - a flight home. There had to be enough room on the plane, you see. Only then would names of standby wanna-be-passengers get called. None, I guarantee, wanted, needed, or deserved a seat more than I. If necessary, I'd be willing to stand in the aisle, sit on a toilet, help with distributing wet-naps.

When the first standby was called, it was Pavlov ringing his bell. Salivating and alert, I cursed each unfamiliar name. When enough of them passed for my now well-trained despair to kick in - and kick hard - a bone was at last thrown my way.

It was: castle gates falling open in capitulation before a most noble siege. It was: a Chicago blues-man reunited with the six-stringed love of his hard life. It was: the first spark to jump in the Reichstag. It was always and it was forever. It was my name and it was mispronounced. It was me, and I was going home.

Shanti! Shanti! And another motherfucking Shanti!

On the chariot of amazing grace I never minded for a second sitting beside a foul-smelling old woman speaking expressive Italian to her malodorous son standing in the aisle. And when he asked if I would switch seats, it was no problem whatsoever. A seat is a seat is a seat, right? Wrong. At this late hour, Charles De Gaulle was making feeble overtures of apology. My new seat was in business class. Well, better late than never, I suppose.

Airline food never tasted so good. Airplane slumber never rested so well.

I was free. Like a prisoner from a holy war, I was free.

And I was going home.

Sleeping in Hunter with Amsterdam.

There seems to be a definite trend concerning my visits to Amsterdam, seeing as all three times have come on the heels of an intense and frightening experience. The first time after a raw Weinerschnitzel crash diet in Munich, the second after Turkish acid and a canal-water cocktail in Venice, and this third after an attempt to escape a mind-numbing affair with a too-young girl and mind-numbing fear in a nose full of dust. Amsterdam had managed to become a sort of twisted safe-house whose medicinal herbs served to recalibrate my senses, allowing me to forget - to a point - the devastation of the days and weeks preceding. Like coming home, the city accepts without judgment, without threat or retribution, with love and warmth and a bed to rest in.

Ostensibly apropos, then, that the pension I stayed in with Hunter on this third visit to Amsterdam was called 'My Home', and the room itself was very little more than a bed to rest in.

We found it after some difficulty. It was in a part of the city that I knew only in general. The Hortus had been packed tight as a bol on the end of a bong-slide. Maura had recently returned to Canada to get married and maybe to stock up on Reese's Pieces, oddly unavailable in the Netherlands. 'My Home' was recommended, and after the harrowing trek up familiar steep and narrow stairs, we got to the second floor lounge and met the proprietor who gave us keys and sold us pot, which we took directly up to our room, a small and bare unit with one bed and little else. Hunter, giddy as a pot-smoking school-girl, rolled a joint as I found a spot for our coats. It was cold in Amsterdam. Soon enough though, our room was toasty, and we toasted in it.

We laughed a lot, about how we were finally going to sleep together after all this time, about how our addition to the room was my walkman that, when turned all the way up whet our appetites with some squawks of music to enjoy.

Nice and high, we ventured outside where I excitedly took over, trying to remember once familiar haunts visited in a state of un-memory. In a fit of reminiscence I ignored the cold and had a banana milkshake at New York Pizza. It was great. Just what I needed. For a few days my mind and body could relax, rest, enjoy itself. When the first evening ended Hunter and I found being in bed together less funny in practice than it had been in theory. What happened was as much a function of placement and circumstance as anything else. We found ourselves close together, entwined for warmth. We took comfort in each other those nights, a soft and sweet connection between friends.

The morning after, when we awoke in each other's arms, Hunter started uncertainly. "Es, ummm, wow. About last night, I..."

"Hey, we're friends. We should leave this in Amsterdam, don't you think?"

"Yeah. I'm glad you said that. It's best. Are you upset?"

"So far from it, Hunter. You know me. This won't change a thing."

"I totally know it won't. But, I guess if ... well ... if we're going to leave it here, we might as well leave a lot of it."

Just what I needed. Hunter is a good friend. Nothing changed, except that maybe it brought us closer. As if it was something that just had to be taken care of, like finally getting those old shoes resoled, knowing you

did the right thing with every step.

Lost at Pere-Lachaise. Between Worlds.

My sister and Gwillam were together the first time they ever did junk. Without really knowing how or where to get it, they went down around thirteenth street and second Avenue in New York where they saw a line and got in it. An orderly, single-file line with junk at the other end. Honestly. Give or take, that's about as complex as this stuff gets. But it makes no difference. We're all the same. Like them, I was a junkie primarily because the junk was there to do. I just had to get in the back of the line. Anais and Gwillam were sleeping soundly when I returned to the apartment in Place Vauban, feeling not quite as trapped as before my indispensable sojourn. Late the next morning, I was informed that the surviving two chamelons had stopped the whole survival thing and joined Coochie in lizard heaven while I was away. I thought a long walk might distract me and keep death off my mind. Alas, my mind apparently failed to receive the memo.

It's a striking construct of our society how the one common denominator is infused with so much shocked individuality. How the worth of a life, in many instances, is judged by its death. When a great man or woman often in the public eye passes at eighty-six, a legend is put to rest. When a great man or woman often in the public eye dies at twenty-seven, thirty-five, forty-nine, legend abounds. If J.F.K. had died an old man of natural causes, would we be subject to the conspiracy theories that permeate our lives? What about Elvis? We might be spared those damned impersonators, at least. These questions were musing justification to busy my brain on the long, long walk to Pere-Lachaise, the cemetery where Jim Morrison presumably lies buried.

Cemeteries themselves are enigmatic places at best. Physically symbolic and often celebratory representations of the one great, terrible, and mysterious fear that is as prevalent and as inexplicably certain as the very life it terminates. I have never seen anything like the cemetery at Pere-Lachaise. It forces one, as cemeteries often do, into a real consideration of mortality, but on a scale so detestably huge that breath is lost, stolen away. Turn after never-ending turn, grave after endless grave. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Death after anonymous death. The cobblestones weaken the knees, the atmosphere weighs on the back. Until finally, bent over and dragging, I found a bench on which to sit, to rest. Glancing around I realized, with a panic as strong as it was surprising, that I was completely lost in this unbelievably vast place of rotting corpses. As big a place as I have ever seen. Wishing I wasn't alone. Hoping I was.

Even the birds are silent at the heart of Pere-Lachaise.

The quiet chill of a dwindling October day served only to drive the icy-hot panic even further, towards my own heart, and all I could do was look up into the trees, dark and in a place so dead confoundingly thick with foliage. If I continued to stare at rows and rows of tombstones and crypts I believe I would have gone mad, that Maupassant himself would ask for a cigarette and sit beside me, smoking it, on the bench. I tried to control my senses, to grab hold of my thoughts as they raced past, but I could not. I was lost in every way, fear and panic mounting like mercury on a thermometer.

Voices.

Fuck.

Voices.

I looked down the death-flanked walkway, first in one direction, then the other. I saw them. Two people with a map. A goddamned map. I did not realize I could have gotten a map. No matter. I ran to them, ignoring the cobblestones and the pain in my knees and started blubbering in French.

"S'il vous plait! Morrison - connaissez-vous ou est Morrison?" "No fran-say. Pardon." Shit.

"Do you know the way out?" Now the most important concern. They showed me on their map, which meant little. They pointed in a general direction, which was good enough. Thanking them, I left, cutting corners whenever possible. It had taken well over an hour to become entirely lost, and I had never seen or felt an end.

Jukeing through tombstones, coffins in effigy, a crypt here and there, I came to a drop-off and looked, despairingly, upon a never-ending network of the very same. I was beginning to worry whether I'd ever get out, or eventually drop and wait to become part of the morbid scenery. It was getting late. The main doors would be closing soon. I flashed on a time, long ago, when my friend Charlie and I hid in the Museum of Natural History in New York. We thought it might be 'neat' to spend the night. When the lights went out and we found ourselves locked in the darkness of this huge building full of dead animals whose eyes shone as we crept past, every last drop of fun effectively drained from the prank. Screaming for help, we were finally let out with an admonishing lecture and a true and honest promise to never do it again. Here, in Pere-Lachaise, I was afraid to scream. I didn't want to wake anything. Something, though, had to happen. For fuck sake, there had to be a way out.

I stood staring at the side of a crypt defaced by names of a series of people who claimed that they, indeed, had been here in nineteen-ninety-two, and that they would be certain to break on through to the other side, should the opportunity ever present itself. I followed the graffiti around the side of the crypt where a large red arrow that looked for an instant as though drawn in blood sat complacently below three letters making a name:

JIM.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked the dead.

A rhetorical question, thankfully answered only by the wind in the trees.

Cautiously, I followed the direction of the arrow along a curving walkway, stopping periodically to read the graffiti that became thicker with each passing tomb. I can stop and pontificate here on how much of a disgrace it is, how the families of buried parties hold some level of belief in the sanctity and symbolism of these death-stones even if I don't, and that as a human being I would never infringe upon another's grief regardless of how many years had passed. But I won't. That's a great shortcoming in this world - basic consideration. Plain old decency. The ability to do the right thing even when everyone around you is doing wrong. Desecrating the grave of a man or woman at rest for two hundred years in order to point the way to the tombstone of a guy who'd driven himself into the ground and just happened to die in Paris not thirty years ago proves a great shortcoming in this world. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to champion the burial institution, and I certainly have deep respect and admiration for Jim Morrison. I'm just saying the graffiti is unnecessary. More than that, it's conformist, which strikes me as being at odds with the man himself. More justification, I suppose, as that particular day I couldn't have been happier to run into these markers leading me - albeit circuitously - to Jim's grave site. To be completely honest, the graffiti is a good deal more interesting a spectacle than the thing it celebrates. Morrison's grave is distinguishable only by the police person who stands on guard behind it, and the unsightly yellow plastic tape unsuccessfully keeping visitors from any further desecration. I just don't get it. Three feet of dirt and a name carved into a small stone. In light of all I had been through to find it, a somewhat depressing anticlimax.

As I stood there having a smoke, maybe hoping to discover there was more to it, two young American girls, 'Paris University' sweatshirts pressed against the chunky folds of their bodies, came loudly crashing through, snapping pictures on disposable cameras and squealing.

"Oh My God!! It's HIM!!!"

It's not him, I wanted to say. It's three feet of dirt and a stone. How that's worth a picture, I'll never understand. Especially from two girls whose only knowledge of Jim Morrison was probably that he looked a lot like Val Kilmer.

"This is, like, soo-oo incredible!"

I was overcome with pity.

Walking on down the cobblestone path I stumbled upon - not without a healthy serving of irritation - the way out. On the other side of the wall, through the wrought-iron gates that are the entrance to the cemetery at Pere-Lachaise, I felt my breath return.

The greatness of a city lies in its layout. I don't mean architecturally, although one is certainly a function of the other. I mean how all kinds of life happens, crowds of people congregate, in dozens of separate parts throughout. My first eighteen years in New York, I visited SoHo and the Village maybe two dozen times, and still felt New York was the biggest place on Earth. A great city would seem to have cities within. Long walks provide a chance to move between worlds. From the festive and fast-paced Bastille area where hidden guilt lies dormant just beneath celebration to the somber and reflective Marais whose narrow winding streets promote melancholy introspection. Through the rambling perversities of les Halles where warmth and understanding are offered with a grin, a wink and a snicker. Passed the late-night loneliness of the Louvre where a veil of amnesia is draped like a silk tablecloth before a dinner party. Across the arrogant river and into the Latin Quarter where time is a four-way intersection without traffic lights scrambled with jazz and a suspicious souvlaki invasion. Down Boulevard Saint-Germain whose café culture exceeds any other in the world. Through the solemn beauty of the Septieme where silent safety is wrapped as a warm blanket beneath the vigilant stare of The Thinker and finally to Place Vauban. And Home.

The whole way thinking: If these people knew what I was on my way to do, would it change a goddamned thing?

Trouble was brewing in Yugoslavia. CNN was live, documenting the eighth straight day of strained yet peaceful protest marches against Slobadan Milosovic and his oppressive government. My jaw hung in amazement. Yugoslavia. Over one-hundred thousand people in this day's march. I know there are more than six billion people on the globe. Hell, I was at Paul Simon's concert in Central Park, so I know. It's just that sometimes it's easy to forget. One life, my life, takes up all I know. To see a hundred-thousand people marching in Yugoslavia, crowded together, each with their own lives and their own troubles, never for one second considering mine as I don't consider theirs, well it's really humbling. Individuality is bunk. It's simply a tool of survival. Of sanity. We all need to hold tight to that because somehow, somewhere, everybody's insane. Everybody's a junkie, hopelessly addicted to being alive.

Sometimes, for some of us, that just isn't enough.

I never really thought of stopping, of changing my lifestyle. That would have to come later. For now, I simply accepted the fact I had no control. In its place a superfluity of desire and need. A hundred-thousand people marching through the streets of Yugoslavia, and not one of them blinking an eye in consternation at my actions. I ask you why, then, should I?

Hearing the elevator clang open, the key turn musically in the noisy lock, I tensed and took a deep breath in anticipation.

"Hey, hey Es, welcome back," Gwillam said, giving me a shake with one hand, lighting a smoke with the

other.

"What happened with Christine?" Asked my sister with a grin.

"I'd really rather not talk about that, Nais."

"Dad called this weekend. Said she's working at a shoe store somewhere. Another maid'll be coming in."

"Someone old and gross, I hope."

"So, do you want to get high with us?"

"Yeah. Yes, please."

Hard habits die old.

Lights that flash - strobe, I mean - at a specific pace in a disco or anywhere can send an epileptic into a seizure. Sometimes, people who never knew they were epileptics could go to, say, a rock concert where some techie set the strobes at just the wrong frequency and - Whammo! - you're dancing to your own private tune. That's fucked up. It's how I was in Paris. Not epileptic, just fucked up. Like falling out of a raft in the rapids and realizing you're stuck underneath the boat. Fucked up in a frightening way, but almost too quick to comprehend, so you go about the frantic business of swimming, not really paying attention to the raft above because your mind blocks it out. It doesn't matter. If it stays, you die. If it moves, you're wet. Either way, you'll never stop swimming.

The heroin was back again. Every day, every night. I couldn't remember what it was like to be sober, and I didn't care to. Sleep came only with Valium, crushed up and snorted, cut with dope. I went out when I could, to see Paris through the pinpoints my pupils had become. Usually we got high together, because doing it alone seemed pathetic, but that never stopped any of us. Once in a miserable while, there would be a couple of days without D and without Valium, and the pain was just south of unbearable. Lying in bed, tossing and turning, sweating, shivering. Pain in every muscle, every joint burning, on fire, on fire. Wishing for death. Squeezing, rubbing, scratching, trying to put out the flames. Those nights I would have cut my own balls off for just one great big line, big enough to knock me the fuck out. I learned to keep an emergency stash of Valium, in case. You see, it was day to day now. We couldn't keep a secret dope stash because going to bed before every last powdery bit was gone seemed senseless and proved impossible. It kept us going. It gave us a mission, something to do, to hope for, from one day to the next.

We tried once to get Gwillam a job. There's a nightclub/restaurant not far from the Opera called 'American Dream' whose hook is celebrity impersonators. Tina Turner's serving drinks, Madonna's at the coat check. You know the place. We dressed Gwillam up and sent him in as Brad Pitt from the nut house in 'Twelve Monkeys' but they sent him back to us. Too thin, too sickly. I guess we all were. Allan, I think, was the worst. He seemed really afraid of sobriety. He was junked out most every day, and when that failed he'd be glassy-eyed and blanked out off Valium and booze. When his body had to rest he'd find klonopin's or rohipnol's. When he had to go out he'd pop Extasy or speed. One morning I found him in the kitchen sucking on fumes from an aerosol can filtered through a dirty sock. Through it all, he somehow managed to convince his ex-girlfriend/mother he wasn't on anything. People believe what they want to believe.

I was driving myself into the ground. I've always figured my life wouldn't be long, but I never expected to insure that. It stung sometimes when Hunter took me to lunch and forced me to eat more than just tomatoes and told me I had to be careful, that my eyes had begun to sink into my skull, that my tiny pupils made me look half-dead.

"Let me introduce you to Jonothon," she would say. "I've told him about you." I had no interest in meeting

Jonothon, a guy she'd met through the long-forgotten decrepit cokehead painter. Nor was I happy about his being told of me. I wanted to be left alone, to stay within my closed circle with the people who understood me and felt my pain. I wanted to continue guessing and most definitely, without question, I did not want to know.

Then there were nights, walking alone along Boulevard Montparnasse, when I watched other people going about their business. Talking, laughing, shouting, scowling. And I thought: what makes me different? What makes me do what I do? It's impossible to say what brought me to where I was. I knew I hadn't hit bottom. I had a roof over my head, food if I needed it, friends and family to take care of me if necessary. I would be dead myself before I lost all of those things. I suppose the reality of that option struck me. I know, I know there was a time when heroin wasn't even a thought in my head. I used to know I would never use it, much less become addicted. The fact it happened before I could do anything about it left me conscious I didn't really know anything. What had once seemed impossible had become reality. All bets were off. From then on anything was equally possible, and impossible. It's all a matter of paying close enough attention, to never allow a thing to slip by. In life, in love, in death, maybe it was easier when I only thought I knew. In Paris, I knew only that I knew nothing. And nothing is so overwhelmingly huge.

I had become an addict. A junkie. I'd allowed myself to become dependent. Allowed. No, that's wrong. I doubt many people allow an addiction. It happens underhandedly. It's an ambush. I never saw it coming. Rather, I tricked myself into believing it could never happen to me. Too often, people don't understand. People who say they have or don't have an 'addictive' personality. It's not the person, not the person. It's the drug. The drug makes everything that once seemed real, maybe everything that once was real, unreal. It could never happen to me. I knew that. Well, it happened to me, and I guess that I just don't know anything. On one of those long lonely walks, when I had to leave the apartment and all it stood for just for a little while, something in my mind - not a conscience but the very voice of existence itself - at long last spoke up from the corner where it had been for so long lying dormant, beaten into submission.

This Has To Stop. It Cannot Go On. Whatever It Takes, The Heroin Must Stop. Devastation is waiting camouflaged, just around the next corner.

I knew it was true. It wasn't the first time I'd felt serious misgivings concerning my less than prudent actions. Until then, though, they had been simple, coming from the different, academic side of me. Every day, in fact, I asked myself just what in the hell I thought I was doing. This time, well this was different. Just like that, I knew. I finally truly knew something. I knew I had to stop. What I did not know, at least not yet, was how.

The Methadone -- Morphine Exchange.

In the following weeks, I nervously finalized plans hatched before I even arrived in Paris. Before all of 'this' started. Three friends of mine were coming to visit. Straight friends, all three. Straight not in a sexual sense, though it applies, but in a non-smack sense. A lawyer and two bartenders. Their drug of choice the much more morally and socially acceptable alcoholic beverage, a drug in which they indulge with almost hopeless vigor. They didn't know my current state, though the lawyer - being a lawyer - had a rough idea. These were old college friends who had accepted my invitation, planned and set aside time from their jobs and so forth, so it was not really copacetic to back out regardless of how concerned I was having them in the house. On the other hand, I could use their presence to help take my mind off the junk. Getting high in front of them would be a bad idea, and plain rude, so I was looking at ten days worth of booze and Valium. Not a bad first step towards potentially softening the habit.

Rehab was far out of the question. That option stood only as a very last resort, after all else failed. It would entail my problem being discovered by people who did not need to discover it, and I honestly don't think I

was that far gone. Hardly an uncommon thought amongst addicts. But there are other ways. Although currently defunct, when I was in Paris the pharmacies still had a policy that forced me to seriously take stock, to awaken that voice of existence. If you went to a pharmacist and admitted your addiction, they provided you - free of charge - with a methadone regiment. There's a catch, though. You have to show track marks. I had no marks. I had never injected heroin. Ever. I never really wanted to. Hugo alerted me to the methadone policy, and how it put him at a loss because he'd never shot up, either. Together one day, without anyone else's knowledge, we devised a plan. A customer of his had recently left, as collateral for payment, a few grams of pharmaceutical morphine. Injection was the only way to take it, (if you discount the oral way that its pill form suggested as the original intention). At least, it was the only way to create believable and actual track marks. Hugo confided that he had been considering the idea of injecting the morphine in order to pass the marks off as made by needles full of heroin. This way, he could get the free methadone to help with his actual addiction without ever actually having to shoot up. It really is an important technicality. He didn't want to try alone. For some reason, he thought I might agree to make the test run with him. Good reasoning. He was right. Hugo's apartment was small, made more so by the shocking amount of clutter. Newspapers and magazines stacked in one corner; in another a stunning quantity of CD's, most still wrapped. When Hugo wasn't selling dope or picking it up from his supplier - an Arab guy named Karim who'd spent the better part of his life in a German prison for manslaughter - he spent his time and energy pilfering CD's from the Virgin records Megastore on Champs-Elysee. A few times, Anais bought bags from him in the classical music department. The sheer number of discs in his apartment was evidence of a special talent. There was just enough space for a large round table in front of a ratty blue couch, both with random bits and pieces of shit floating about. The kitchen, part of the same main room, had a sink full of dishes that may have been there for weeks. As an added bonus, the unmistakably rank odor of cat piss permeated every fiber of the room. Hugo did not own a cat. Behind a door was his bedroom and bathroom, and they could have existed in a different universe. Impeccably clean and organized. The bed was military tight; the sterility of the bathroom was deafening. I had never seen such contrast within so small a space. I laughed out loud.

"Touts choses, pardon, all sings important I leave for here." I wish I could say the stench respected Hugo's barriers, but I won't lie to you. There was a chair in the bathroom in front of a counter installed against one wall. Hugo motioned me to sit while he rummaged about in his bedroom. Returning with another chair and a small travel case, he pulled out a packet of pills - the morphine - and two spoons, one bent flat at the top. He pointed to a drawer below the sink and I opened it. Inside were maybe half a dozen sterilized, separately wrapped hypodermic needles; barrels on one side, needle points on the other. With shaking fingers, I selected two of each and passed them to Hugo, watching as he set about his business. First, he opened each package carefully, inserting the back of the hypo onto the front of the barrel. Next, he pulled a small, sparkling-clean prescription pill-bottle cap from the case and filled it with water from the sink. Then, he fished out a morphine pill and crushed it between the spoons in one quick motion. With the smaller of the two spoons he measured out a bit of the fine white powder into the flat bol of the larger one. He filled one of the needles with about thirty cc's of water from the cap and slowly depressed it into the bol of the morphine-filled spoon. Powder and water swirled softly together. The heat provided by a lighter I held underneath the spoon turned it into a silty solution. The thick, sweet stench of opiates served as incense. Back to the case, Hugo came up with a ball of cotton, placing it in the morphine-filled spoon and waiting as it soaked up the heavy liquid, turning it a light shade of orange. Now, he put the needle through the cotton's center and slowly, patiently, he filtered the liquid through. With a few delicate flicks to the needle's end, the liquid slid down to make more room. Twice more, the needle slid through the cotton before Hugo was satisfied. Placing it gingerly on the counter, he repeated the process with the second needle and there they sat, filled and staring at us, and we back at them. When Hugo grabbed a rubber strap and wrapped it around his upper arm, I felt life rush past. My mouth was dry as desert sand; my lips pressed together tight enough to hurt. Hugo picked up one of the needles and looked at me. I could tell he was as nervous as I was.

"It's for stopping," he said, maybe trying to convince us both.

"Are you sure? Are you sure it's safe?"

"Safer than the other." It's true. He found a vein, blue and bulging. Aligning the needle, he softly pressed it in, just below the skin. Pulling first, I watched his blood mix with the solution, and then all of it, slow and steady, pressed its way home. Releasing the rubber strap from his teeth, he pulled the needle out and put a hand up to his face. His jaw, like mine, dropped.

"C'est bon. Tout va bien," he said after a moment, and passed me the rubber strap.

"Aw, fuck. Fuck, Hugo." I could barely feel.

"C'est facile. Easy. Good," his words slurred, his eyes lost focus.

Wrapping the strap around my upper arm, holding the needle I was meant to inject myself with, I still hoped - half expected - some sort of catharsis, some clarity and understanding. But there was nothing. My brain filled with white noise. No process of reasoning, of justification. No argument, no voice imploring me to be strong, nothing. Nothing. So I pulled the strap tight, holding the loose end between my teeth. Involuntarily, my tongue touched it for an instant before pulling back, like licking the head of a nine-volt battery. I saw the vein in my forearm. I felt it pulsing. Following Hugo's lead, I pressed the needle in softly. There was no real pain, just a prick, and as I watched the blood mix acceptingly, I had a momentary flash. What if I pressed hard and fast? What if I shot it all into me with one violent thrust? Would I die? Before I could think of an answer, I was pushing slow and steady, staring from another set of eyes as the liquid escaped its tight quarters in the needle and transferred to a vein. My vein.

The strap slipped from my mouth, and I sensed the loss of pressure. For the first time, I really felt something new coursing through my body. Almost immediately, my skin came alive, itching. Not the kind I wanted to scratch, but some new form of itch, a warm one that I'd never known before. Everywhere. It was everywhere.

A while later, shooting into the other arm, I was no longer there. My body remained seated on the same chair in the same dizzying sterility that was Hugo's bathroom, but I wasn't. I was about five feet in front.

"...good?" Hearing the faint voice, I was a witness as my head lifted slowly to face its origin. My lips moved, and I waited to hear what I had said.

"Whaaaat?" Oh yeah, that's right.

"Errreeeing goood?" Slurred Hugo. My lips moved to say 'fine'. A short time later, I heard myself say it.

At some point, we moved to the couch in the other room. I was at least ten feet tall, and floating.

The ceiling was off-white. Somehow, somewhere, a bell rang. On the ceiling, a crack ran.

The phone stopped.

"Allo, Est," came a slur in my direction. "It is your sister."

With spectacular effort, I turned. The receiver lay on the floor, below Hugo's limp fingers.

"My? ...My sister? ...Fucked up." Rolling off the couch, I dropped like a lump and lay my head on the phone.

"Umm...hello?"

"Es, what the hell are you doing over there?"

"Dunno. What're you doing there?"

"I was calling to pick up some D. Are you coming back soon? Can you front?"

"Umm...well, I think, ...I dunno. Can you?"

"What's the matter? Are you high?"

"Am I? Well...are you?"

"Est, what the fuck is your problem?"

"No, it's...I think maybe I'm dying...I dunno. What's yours?"

"Stay there. I'm coming over."

"You are? Umm ... okay. Bring me a glass of water." "Just stay there." She hung up.

"Hugo?" I couldn't move.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing...well, a glass of water. Anais is coming."

"Okay. Merci."

Something approximating an hour passed when Hugo's buzzer, loud and very disconcerting, sounded. It found us in much the same position as the hour previous. Hugo lying limp in a chair, my head still resting on the telephone receiver. It had started sounding its 'off the hook' signal some time before, but when I announced to Hugo I would be replacing it back in its cradle, he asked I leave it alone. We had been listening to the rhythmic sound ever since a few moments after my sister had hung up on her end. Now, this new sound and she was right outside the door. That was fucked up.

"Hugo man, that's fucked up," I pointed out from the floor. In a series of separate deliberate steps, I made it to my knees, joined there shortly after by my mind and stared quizzically at the phone where my sister had been, then at Hugo making sloth-toed overtures towards the door behind which she now was.

"That's really fucked up," I reiterated.

"Yes, I think so, too." As Hugo neared the door, it rang again.

"Putain!" he shouted.

"Merde!" I said.

"Open up!" the door demanded.

Finally, Hugo turned the elusive knob. The door flung open and Anais crashed through.

"What's going on here?" she demanded to know.

The thickest cobwebs encasing our brains for the past few hours began to loosen. Coolly, calmly, in slow and broken English, Hugo did his best to answer Anais' question. She laid into us both.

"What's wrong with you? Are you crazy? Are you stupid? I can't believe you would try something like that. What if it was bad? Or you took too much? Have you been drinking liquids? Did it work?"

It was this last question that truly struck home. Hugo and I looked at one another, realizing at the exact same moment that we had managed to get so ruinously fucked up that we forgot why we had gotten so ruinously fucked up to begin with. Quickly rolling up my sleeves, I saw what he already knew.

"Nothing. Son of a bitch. Not a fucking thing."

One night of Amsterdam mosquitoes could have passed for better track marks than the pinpricks on my arms now. I began to feel less than good and quickly retired to the lavatory. The bright-whiteness of Hugo's bathroom was like a slap in the face, hard enough to induce vomiting.

Back in the main room, Anais was helping Hugo collect a few things, dope included, and I was informed we were all going back to Place Vauban where she could watch us both, with Allan and Gwillam's help. Arguing with my sister is a questionable endeavor at best. Arguing with my sister while caked out on morphine is just plain never going to happen.

Nearly a full half-hour passed simply getting down the two flights of stairs from Hugo's apartment, on account of our having to sit and rest every third step. Anais made a run to the store for a bottle of water, which our dehydrated bodies took in like a fish takes air, with those huge pained and spastic gulps. At long last we made it into a cab, and eventually to the apartment at Place Vauban, where we were ordered to undress and get in bed. Different beds of course, in different rooms, separated like difficult third-graders. I can therefore only assume Hugo was treated as I was, periodically brought water and a damp cloth to lay on his forehead. My brain, as my body, had gone almost completely limp. There wasn't a deep thought to be had. Morphine had transformed me into a stoned Homer Simpson, perking up for water, excited by the shaft of light slithering under the door. Drooling and stupid.

Then, I slept. And slept and slept. Something like fifteen hours, and when I awoke I had the distinct impression a bodybuilder had been standing over my bed the whole time, beating me with a frying pan. My brain did that 'Invasion Of The Body Snatchers' feedback screech (I'm talking about the Donald Sutherland remake, none of that stinkin' black and white, mind you) as I tried sitting up. On the night-stand was a full glass of water and some pills - two Valium, five aspirin. As soon as I was able to reach that far, they were gone. For as long as my bladder would allow, I remained in bed. When I finally did make it to my feet, my head weighed a thousand pounds.

I minced my steps through the early-evening emptiness of the apartment, crushed by the sensation of being alone. Hugo was gone, not one to spend much time in the company of others. Anais and Gwillam were also absent, but had thoughtfully left a couple of chicken salad sandwiches in the fridge, both literally bearing my name. I took them with a bottle of water to the living room where I sat and watched movies. I felt miserable. A feeling compounded by the fact that, for all intents and purposes, I was suffering from what had ultimately been a worthless endeavor. Before too long, I fell asleep on the couch, thankful my abortive bout with pharmaceutical morphine was over.

Apartment Hunting. My Dinner with Auberbach.

Late the following morning, my mind felt a bit more at ease with itself and the world, though my body was pretty pissed at spending a night on the couch. I joined Anais and Gwillam in the kitchen for coffee and

aspirin.

"So, what was it like?" Gwillam asked.

"Like playing chicken with a Mack truck, on a unicycle."

"Sounds like fun."

"Sounds, my friend, can be very deceiving. Never, ever again."

A few rounds of Backgammon put me back in the swing and I agreed to join them for a stroll. It was a cool and crisp sunny day and Gwillam had an appointment to look at an apartment near Les Halles, his welcome beginning to wear thin at Place Vauban. Not with us but with my father, who could turn only so much of a blind eye upon the actions of his daughter. Gwillam had already looked at a few places, though none seemed reasonable for the taking. Having been to Hunter's room, I knew he could do worse. She lived in a chambre de bonne, a maid's room. Tons of apartments in Paris have an entirely separate room, set off but near the main apartment itself, a throwback to the days when people had servants. Today, most of these barely-livable closets are rented out to students and the like so they don't collect dust. I hadn't seen Hunter for a few days. I assumed she was traipsing about with this Jonothon cat, and telling him more about me. That made me uneasy. Not that she was with him, but that he apparently had a suspiciously strong desire to meet me.

On our walk, we stopped at a supermarket on Avenue Bousquet so Anais could fulfill a sudden craving for ice cream. Gwillam had brought a paper cup of coffee that he finished while we waited outside the market for Anais to get her fix. Standing against a wall minding our own business, we were approached by an older woman in an expensive overcoat. She extended a fashionably gloved hand and dropped change into the empty cup Gwillam innocently held out. Without slowing, the woman continued on her oblivious way.

"What the FUck??!!" We exclaimed in unison, our tone a mixture of shock, disbelief, insult, and humor.

"Hey man," I said, "twenty francs. Not too shabby."

When Anais stepped from the market eating frozen chocolate off a stick, she found the two of us roaring with laughter, peering into a paper cup. It wasn't until later we realized how miserable we must have looked to induce such unsolicited charity. Christ, we were half-dead and didn't even know it.

Pretty strung-out himself, Allan met us in front of the Pompidou and joined us the rest of the way. In a building off Boulevard Sebastopol, Gwillam left the three of us outside and went in to meet the landlady. Directly across the street was a black iron gate. Allan made a connection.

"OH! You know what this is? This is Le Bain Douche." The awe in his voice intrigued me, since 'bain douche' means shower or bathroom in French.

"Really? That's here?" Anais, too, seemed unduly impressed.

"What's the big deal?" I was clueless.

"Dude," Allan said, hands out to impart the elusive truth, "Le Bain Douche is like the most well-known nightclub in Paris." Not to me it wasn't. "They once turned Robert DeNiro away for wearing sneakers. This place is like the inner sanctum."

"Yeah," Anais concurred, caressing the gates. "I've heard about it, but I never knew where it was ..." For a moment I thought they might fall to their knees and clasp the gates in worship. "It doesn't look like much," I

said, maintaining my stance as the unbeliever, the heretic, the pagan.

Leaving Anais and Allan to wait for Gwillam I made my way leisurely back home to prepare for dinner. I was invited, via my father, to dine with the Auberbach's, friends of his who lived on the opposite side of Place Vauban. It was necessary to keep up appearances. What I was dreading as a thoroughly uncomfortable experience whose initial inquiry would surely be along the lines of 'so, what have you been doing in Paris?' turned out to be so surprisingly great a pleasure that Mr. Auberbach and I met for lunch regularly from then on. He is one of the greatest men I have ever met.

I took care and time to wash, shave, splash cologne, dress well. All modesty aside, when the mood hits I clean up damn nice. They were already seated when I arrived, with full hearty smiles behind glasses of good wine.

Mr. Auberbach, Julian, is in his late sixties with a face full of teeth. He seems always to be smiling. His generosity is the stuff of legend. The waiters at Le Vauban, having noticed me with him, approached me later to be sure I was aware of just how great a man he is. Legend. Truly, truly so. Never would I have expected to befriend a man who had done so much to shape our society, to shape our whole world. His wife, too, was class incarnate. I could only guess her age, and at that, she wore it better than anyone I've ever known, man or woman. The dreaded question ("so Esteban, what ARE you doing in Paris?") never came. Instead, Julian said with an angelic smile: "I hope you are doing nothing in Paris except taking it all in." We talked of travel. They had recently returned from Julian's hometown near Vienna, so I took a chance and told them my story, and how the only thing I remembered about Vienna is how comfortable the parks are to sleep in.

"How wonderful!" they laughed - I mean really, genuinely laughed. There was not a shred of judgment in these people. Julian can tell a story like a pro, putting his hand on my arm as he builds the tension, the best part being the complete and evident enjoyment in his tone, his face. His wife smiled and shook her head. She'd heard them all before but couldn't keep from feeling his infectious joy. He was, he is, spectacular. The truth, the modesty, the unmatched beauty that springs inherent in this man goes way, way, way beyond the power of any words to quantify. Trust me.

That night I fell asleep content, my faith in life somewhat restored.

The next day, my father called for a full report. All went well enough, I told him. Julian and I planned a lunch in the coming week.

"Ask him about Elvis Presley," my father said. An odd request, particularly from my father, but I promised to ask.

Between the first dinner and the first lunch, these things happened:

Following a short and unpleasant hiatus, heroin returned with a vengeance. Gwillam loved the apartment across from Le Bain Douche - with good reason - signed a lease and was preparing to move in. I confronted Hunter about my uneasiness that Jonothon know so much about me while his secrets remained undisclosed. And I'd made and received several phone calls solidifying the imminent and nerve-wracking arrival of my three booze-loving friends. Beyond that, the status remained quo.

Flash to Le Vauban, Julian and I and two portions of creme brulee. As promised, I asked the question.

"Julian, I'm not sure whether or not my dad was being serious, but he said I should ask you about Elvis."

"Ahh, yes. The first time I met Elvis Presley was in a small music hall in Canada. It was nineteen" The

story lasted almost thirty minutes, and through it all I did little more than periodically lift my jaw back into place and wipe the drool from my lower lip. There is no way I can reproduce that story. I wouldn't ever want to. It belongs only to Julian Auberbach, and only he can tell it. Don't worry, though. I'll give you a summary.

Julian and his brother, long ago, started a music publishing company. Among the first of what became an accomplished list of artists to sign was the King himself. Elvis fucking Presley. The man with whom I shared desert, for all intents and purposes, discovered Elvis Presley. He literally introduced the King to the Colonel, and for the sake of my worthless fucking life I swear to you this was the man who bought the Cadillac Elvis gave to his mother. The man who bought me lunch had literally shaped the very fabric of the very culture of our world. I will die having known this man. But wait. Like a Ginsu knife, there's more. The single song that grosses him the most money each year is - get this - 'Frosty The Snowman'. Frosty the motherfucking Snowman. He owns that shit, swear to god. Now, listen to the story of the one that got away:

Julian and his brother have to take off for an emergency meeting, so they leave their manager in charge. They tell him a group of young musicians is coming in, an unsigned band, and they should be put up in the company owned flat and asked to wait until the Auberbach's return. Give them whatever they want, they tell the manager. Keep them happy. Two days pass and the manager hasn't heard a thing from these lads in the flat, so he heads over to see how they're doing only to find the place trashed. Infuriated by their apparent lack of character and respect, the manager tears up the as yet unsigned contract, insures this band of ruffians they will never amount to anything, and kicks them to the curb. Slighted, the band heads down the road, and a few days later they sign with another publisher. Of course, the band turned out to be The Beatles. Some years later, that manager shot himself in the head. An impossibly amazing life.

In some ways, maybe too amazing. The following week, we met again for lunch at Le Vauban where, after spinning out some more of his stories, he became uncharacteristically somber. His hand turned heavy on my arm.

"Let me tell you something. I have one child, but I once had two. One of them died. Of heroin."

Speechless. I did not, I could not know what to say.

"Julian I...I don't know what to say."

"There is nothing to say, Esteban. This is between you and I. I know what you do. I know what it is to be young. You are not the first, you won't be the last. I see it. I have seen, in my life, enough to know. Do I despise it? No, not of itself. I have watched people blossom because of it. Also, seen people ruined and killed. One must respect with fear as well as understanding to be warmed by a fire in the cold. One does not stand inside the fire. You think I have led an incredible life, no? Because I never stood in the fire." I was stunned. Of all the people in the world, it was this man who spoke to me. A man who altered the course of history, who had a say in creating the very world I had grown up in. This man knew. I had to listen. When Julian Auberbach speaks to you, it is impossible not to listen. His voice was louder in my head than any other sound I had ever heard.

To stay alive, I had to turn my back on the heroin.

To stay warm, I had to turn my back on the fire.

It wasn't some kind of secret, a revelation that suddenly shed light on everything. He wasn't trying to impart information that I didn't already have. It wasn't about that. Of course I knew what he meant. Of course I'd figured it out myself long before. But simply knowing something – or not knowing – doesn't make it true. Somehow, maybe because I was ready to, he forced me to listen. On the day my three guests were

scheduled to arrive, it took a while to get out of bed. I was definitely anxious. Very excited to see them, and very nervous. Glad either way the day had finally come. The crux of my anxieties had now shifted from them onto me. Four days had passed since my meeting with Julian. That same morning was the last time I did D. My diet was heavily supplemented with Valium and sleeping pills, but no dope. I was more nervous about how I might react than anything else. Would I break down? The initial thirty-six hours had been fraught with cravings. They were huge. My only defense: a few Valium and a bottle of red wine in the Champs du Mars below the Eiffel tower, and a book to stay awake. After that, the cravings abated a bit, though not entirely, and my body took on a deep ache. This morning, as the previous three, I awoke slick with sweat, shaking uncontrollably. My hands, my head, shook until I spent twenty minutes beneath a scalding-hot shower. It needed to be that hot, so I could feel it. The bathroom transformed into a hothouse, a steam-room like the one I helped build in Putney, Vermont during summer camp, in another life.

This was my life now. Staring towards an invisible bathroom mirror in Paris, waiting for the steam to clear so I could catch a distorted glimpse of the thing my face had become. Ending the hour-long bathroom stint as I had these past few days, by throwing up in the sink and vigorously brushing my teeth, fighting to wash out the bitter taste that lingered, as wisps of steam lingered, in my mouth.

Bathroom to kitchen, where a tall glass of orange juice eased down a handful of aspirin followed shortly by a hot cup of coffee, strong and black. Then ice water with a couple of Valium, a bite or two of bread, and a glass of wine - red - to settle the rest. Maybe not the best way of going about it, but it seemed to work okay. Willpower, I suppose, played a role, along with the fact Anais and Gwillam were breaking in his new apartment. Not having them around helped relieve temptation. I did try and make a point of not taking Valium and booze simply to get high and was successful, more or less. The park below the Eiffel tower reemerged as a favorite spot, mainly due to its proximity. Straying too far made me nervous. I didn't know for certain what effects to expect from an extended withdrawal. I did not want to discover new ones too far from home. I'd run the gamut of usual symptoms - intestinal flu-like pains, hot and cold flashes, pyloric spasms. I just didn't want any surprises. Taking it easy seemed the prudent thing to do, under the circumstances.

The Three Wise-Asses. Ah! Prague.

On the window landing having a smoke, feeling pretty mellow and maybe even ready to make longer forays with my visitors, I watched them pile out of a cab. Chris first as usual, sun reflecting off his Maui Jim's and ultra-white teeth. Chris Masterangelo is a lawyer and he acts like one who's always drunk. Sharp as a tack, always ready with a funny or scathing rib or rebuttal, and an ego that could swallow you whole, if you let it. His mind always works for the advantage, sly and conniving, the wheels constantly spinning. If you're his friend, you'll never doubt. When it comes to that, there's nary a more generous and concerned soul to be found. He will do anything in his considerable power, use any and all means available, to help a friend and I feel lucky to be one of those. Enemies though, find themselves in an unenviable position, his vengeance capacious and uncompromising. He's vain, taking care of his appearance excessively. He likes nice things, beautiful women, and he loves sex. Not simply the verb, but all things connected. Plus booze. But once you get to know him, Chris is, after all, just an overgrown mama's boy. Next out of the cab, like a clown in the circus, came John Freeman, Boston bar-back and part-time house painter. Same as Chris, he fits his profession like a glove. John has a good heart and he means well (usually). A benevolent gorilla (usually) in a cheap rayon shirt, John is just a tad too thick and narrow-minded to really fit in anywhere but Boston and its surrounding townships. To his credit, he does like a good time. And he loves to drink the hootch.

Last, showcasing his trademark gait of indifference, suavely sauntered Scott Sanel, pretty-boy bartender, smooth and cool as an early fall morning. He's quiet in as much as he says little, but when he speaks, people tend to listen. He has a power, a way to say a word or word a phrase once or twice before everyone around him repeats it for weeks. Scott's commentary about any particular thing is always succinct, unleavened and

true. He, too, is an avid fan of the alcohol.

Stubbing out my cigarette, I shouted and waved, pointed to the entrance. A few moments later, they were at the front door. Taking a deep breath, I steeled myself and let them in.

Hugs and a bottle of whiskey for me as they dropped their bags.

"You're almost not fat. Are you on a diet?" Scott said. "So what are we doing first? I'm ready to go! What've you planned for us first?" Excitability is one of Chris' character traits.

"I thought we were gonna sleep for a while," John suggested, a motion I was prepared to second.

"Nooo, dude," Scott explained. "You gotta stay awake. Otherwise your whole time-frame'll get fucked." They looked expectantly to me, their tour guide by process of elimination. What choice did I have?

"Well, eh... maybe, umm... Oh! I know! We could walk up to Sacre Coeur and you guys can get a view of the whole city from there," I uttered, hoping I hadn't uttered out loud. Mentally, I kicked the shit out of myself. Too late. "Giddiup," Scott said.

"Good," Chris clapped, "let's go. John, sleep if you want, ya little pussy. We're going with Es."

"Guys, actually, it's a pretty long walk, you know. Maybe we ought to take it easy today, go see the tower?" I was attempting to dig myself out of the gaping shit-filled hole I'd thoughtlessly dug and then jumped into, a hike to just about the furthest place I could have come up with this side of Germany. What was I thinking?

"Fuck that. We'll see the tower later. You coming, John? We're going to 'sack-the-coon'." I was cooked.

"That's... Chris, that's 'Sacre Coeur'." "I know. But if John thinks he'll get to sack coons, he'll come with us, won't you, John?" "Fair enough. I guess we'll go then." I had made this bed, and now I would have to burn in it.

Through les Invalides, down the Esplanade, across the river, past la Concorde, around la Madeleine, over to the Opera, then up and up the hills of Montmartre until the spired heads of the cathedral, eternally unfazed, reared above us.

Sound like a nice walk? Try it while coming off smack, then get back to me on that. Just before the final push, at the very top of one of the last hills, there's a bar. A nice, small, quiet bar, where the Adelscott is on tap and the atmosphere is...well, who gives a shit? After walking from the center of Paris, the best thing about this particular bar is that it exists in the first place. It was empty, no great surprise. I shoved my three guests into a booth by the back wall and told them to order me one of anything.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I declared, and before anyone could raise an objection, I was well into vomiting in the toilet. When I was done, I popped a few Mentos in my mouth.

Fantasy flash to those commercials. Imagine this one:

Kid with his friends, snorting heroin. Out the window, he spies a cute bartender girl from the club across the street. Next time his friends offer him a line, he turns it down. Cut to the kid trying to get into the club only to run right into the bouncer. Kid makes vomit faces until the bouncer lets him in. Men's room is locked, so the kid runs into the ladies room. Cut to the kid on his knees in the bathroom, drool and vomit dripping from his chin. The door opens and the cute bartender walks in, shocked. Kid pops a Mentos and holds the

pack out. She shakes her head and smiles.

The Freshmaker!

Groggily, I stumbled back to the table where my friends were already into their second round of beers. Gratefully, I took a seat.

"Jesus Es, what are you on?" John said, only not really meaning what he meant. Chris shot me a reproachful look, and I wanted to tell him I hadn't done D in the bathroom.

"It's not what I'm on, John, it's what I'm off," I said mostly to Chris, hoping he'd catch my drift.

"Drink your beer," Scott said indifferently.

The beer was warm and not very good. Before leaving the bar, I popped a Valium. Just another one of those fucked up things we do in order to find out whether life is really all they crack it up to be. It's not long, you know, life. Monk told me that. Sit down and have a cup of coffee with me sometime. I'll tell you about it... From the top of Sacre Coeur, I showed them the city. Rather, they saw it while I sat down to catch my breath and stop my head from spinning.

Inside the cathedral Chris knelt and did the religious thing.

"He's probably praying to get laid," John said.

The descent back into Paris was a lot easier, prompting me again to muse on how heroin is one of those few things in the world for which getting up is easy, but coming down is so damn hard. After putting some food in their bellies and some tomato salad in mine, we returned to the apartment to relax. Gwillam and Anais were there.

"So what're you all up to tonight?" Anais asked. We had no definitive answer.

"Want to help me and Gwillam get these records up to his place?" Could I have wanted a thing any less? My guests, being guests, felt compelled to accept and before we could even catch our breath, our plans were set.

Allan and his whatever she was, his Brazzilionaire quasi-girlfriend-warden were set to come by in her car to drive them and the records to Gwillam's place, where the rest of us would take over and carry the damn things five flights of stairs. Just what I needed, right? Of course there was no room in the car for all of us, and riding the Metro made me sick, so under the pretense of seeing more of the city, we walked.

Through Les Invalides, down the Esplanade, over to the National Assembly, across the river, around la Concorde, into le Tuileries, past the Louvre, up Rue de Rivoli, beyond Les Halles, behind the Pompidou, along Boulevard Sebastopol and finally to the street where Anais and Gwillam stood surrounded by boxes and boxes full of records. Grabbing the largest one, John the Gorilla led the charge, with Gwillam and myself - strung out and wheezing - bringing up the rear. As soon as I angrily dropped my box, I ran to the funky little bathroom covered top to bottom in graffiti and threw up in the toilet, adding some new color. By the time I was back out the door, John was already on his way back down to grab a third box. Outside, Anais relished the tough job of delineating who was to carry what. Soon enough, (not really soon enough) everything was up and Gwillam raced down the street (not really raced) to buy a few bottles of wine. We sat around drinking, joking, and then Anais pulled me aside.

"We're going to do D, if you want some. Are these guys cool with that?" "I'd rather not find out. Wait till we leave, okay?"

In the main room, Gwillam was thumbing through his records, playing some old favorites. Shouldering the hated role of tour-guide-by-default, I rounded up my troops and all but pushed them out the door. I wanted to stay. I wanted to end this day by getting high with Nais and Gwillam, but of course that could not be. Could it? I had to attend to my guests.

It was late, nearly midnight, and they hadn't slept yet. Dying to get home myself, I led them in the direction of the Hotel de Ville, a gorgeous building with a face coated in detailed stone-carved character. Each time I look at the facade, I'm amazed at how much time, how much effort and skill must have gone into making this municipal building such a sight. It would be hours before we made it that far.

"What's that?" John asked, pointing to a sign that read 'Guinness Bar'. "It looks open."

"Giddiup," Scott concurred, and they were off. I could do nothing but grit my teeth and follow. I hadn't brought enough Valium with me, and my skin was starting to itch.

nal wooden tables in front of a stage where a band played loud covers passably well. We took a nook at the edge of one crowded table across from Mr. France himself. A young, fair complexioned guy wearing a red and white striped shirt, blue bandanna round his neck, lacking only the beret worn slightly askew. At the other end of the table was a drunk Arab. By evenings end, my friends and Frenchie had a great time despite the Arab's wretchedly annoying, idiotic antics. The asshole would reach over and steal the last gulp of their beers, so they began hawking lougies in the glasses. So inconsiderate was this piece of shit, that at one point I grabbed John and said:

"Freeman, kick his ass." John liked that. I knew he would. Not actually doing it, but having me ask.

At last - somewhere in the vicinity of four in the morning - we made our way home. I'd managed to keep my stomach under control while we sat in the bar, but it wouldn't hold any longer. My friends accepted it, having seen their own insides on the street at the end of many a long and drunken night. The next day, more walking. A few deadly hours at the Musee d'Orsay where I saw things for a second time I hadn't been dying to see the first. After, we went to Notre Dame, no match for Sacre Coeur but at least a lot closer. We dawdled about in the Latin Quarter where Scott stopped at a postcard rack, looking for something to send to his girlfriend. "Hey Es," he called. "What's this?" He showed me a postcard of half-naked women dancing on a stage. The caption above read 'The Crazy Horse'. On the back was the address, Avenue Georges Cinq.

"Do you know where this is?"

"I know the address."

"Hey Chris, we're going to the Crazy Horse tonight."

From home, I made the call. Reservations for the late show, at the bar, proper attire requested. In the next few hours, we got ready. Mixing and matching, we managed to properly attire ourselves, all but John. That proved a challenge. You can't really stuff a gorilla into a suit and expect him to look well dressed. Somehow, we achieved the feat as best we could and then, dressed to the teeth, hopped in a cab and were off. VIP style, the cab drove us right up to a cul-de-sac entrance where a large Canadian Mountie (honest) opened the door and ushered us into a waiting area. Soon enough we were down and into the classy looking theater, the kind with covered lamps on every table, crushed red velvet on all the walls. I would never have come here, never have even suggested. Sex places, strip clubs and the like, don't sit well with me. No different than in Amsterdam's red light district, I always feel as though I'm objectifying the women. People argue they don't feel objectified, but that's neither here nor there. Also, those trashy places where unattractive women spread their legs wide enough to show you their kidneys definitely does not turn me on.

The only time I ever had a lap-dance, incidentally paid for by Chris, I can't say I hated it. But I did feel badly, after.

The Crazy Horse, though, is different. Nothing nasty, no interaction, genuine class. I mean that. Really classy. Gorgeous women performing tightly choreographed numbers, singing, dancing. Yes, sure, erotically, but the good stuff. The audience was filled with an initially surprising number of women, many of them apparently with their husbands or lovers. And they were not unhappy to be there. I must give credit where it's due. The Crazy Horse is a first class establishment, worth a visit.

When the last big number was over, we were all nicely buzzed. Hopping up the steps singing the finale, ('You turn me on. You turn me on. You bang my heart just like a gong just like a drum! barr-umm-ta-tum!'), we were pretty visible. Stepping outside, putting on our coats, the doorman - the Mountie - called over to us.

"You gentlemen having a good time?" He wasn't French.

"Great! What a show!" Something to that effect.

Would you like to keep it going? Can I suggest a place around the corner?" He enticed, pulling a card from his inside pocket. Scott grabbed it and we gathered around to look. 'Le Baron', it said. A nightclub, a cabaret.

"It's right around this corner here," pointed the Mountie. "Just show them the card at the door."

It seemed a fine idea. Around the corner we went and quickly noticed two tuxedo-wearing doormen a great deal less subdued than the door itself. Scott marched up to one and presented the card.

"What does this card get for us? Free drinks? What?"

"Ah! This card is a passport. Welcome! Welcome to Le Baron. Come in messieurs, enjoy yourselves!" We moseyed in, losing the judgment feeling important takes away. Passing through the bar where large well-dressed men sat smoking cigars, we were greeted, to our glorious excitement, by a veritable room full of beautiful women in cocktail dresses, tight velvet bodysuits, provocatively short skirts, exposed midriffs. Our intoxication was perpetuated by a whiff of perfume. The maitre'd led us to a table. Women reached out to us, smiled, said hello. The flash from our exploding egos served to temporarily blind us all. Clearly, we were the best looking group of men in a joint full of beautiful women. Our smiles gave away our thoughts: 'damn! I must be looking fine tonight! I should dress up more often. Chicks really dig me!'

From our table, we were provided a good view of the small stage area where some idiocy or other took place. No need to pay attention because, almost immediately, a gorgeous woman sat down beside each one of us. A bottle of champagne was popped, and eight glasses filled. As you may have already guessed, I'm no astro when it comes to women. I seem to always be a bit too 'nice', at least enough to cover over any sexual appeal I may possess. Amazingly, it seemed exactly what the woman by my side was into.

"So, what do all of you do? Are you on business?" A blonde Russian girl rubbing Chris' leg asked. Scott began to have some fun.

"Well," he grinned, "Chris over there, he runs an international legal consulting firm. I produce feature and porn films and John, well John is next on the card to fight Mike Tyson. Have you ladies heard of Mike Tyson?" The women ogled, and I still don't know if maybe they didn't believe, a little. Scott knows how to play the game.

"What about him? What does he do, the quiet one?" She pointed at me, and before I could come up with anything, Scott finished things off with a sparkle in his eyes.

"Es? Es does nothing. He owns countries." It seemed a little much. The women accepted it though, which I guess is good policy. We went on like that for awhile, quickly finishing off the first bottle of champagne and watching, maybe with a soft tickle of concern, as the waiter opened a second bottle just as quickly. It makes me chuckle now that I was bumming cigarettes off the woman next to me. All was good fun until one of the girls, maybe out of pity, decided the time had come to let us in on the 'secret', if you can call such an obvious display secret. Each of them, she informed us - meaning each of the women - cost six hundred dollars for a night. And each bottle of champagne ran a tad over three hundred bucks.

Upon becoming aware of this ugly truth, all our eyes widened, all our brows furrowed. Freeman proceeded to spit a mouthful of champagne back into the bottle, and shouted at us to do the same.

"Spit it back! Spit it back!"

"Aw FUCK!" Chris cried. "How are we getting out of here?"

"Hey, Garcon!" Scott called. "Le check."

Nearly eight hundred dollars. The instant Chris whipped out his credit card, the women disappeared. Lipstick on emptied champagne glasses and a lingering smell of perfume the only evidence they had been there at all. Moments later, in shocked disbelief, we were back out on the street.

"I cannot BeLIEVe I just spent EIGHT HUNDRED DOLLARS for two glasses of shitty CHAMPAGNE. fuck. FUCK me. Nobody else! This shit only happens to me! My life is so FUCKED UP!" Chris was justifiably livid, seeing as he'd footed the bill. It took all my strength to keep from screaming laughter. Fucked up shit like that happens, all the time.

The next couple of days were spent trying to lose Chris's credit card. Consummate sweet-talking lawyer that he is, he had immediately called the company and reported it lost. Actually losing it was the tough part. The initial attempt came on our way to dinner after a day that had already irked Chris to no end. After a rather late start - which I didn't mind but Chris got all pissy about - we finally went to the Louvre only to find it closed, for which I was silently thankful. He felt the day could be salvaged by at least seeing the Bastille. Now, Chris expected to see the historical prison site, maybe some chains and even a few torture devices. Somehow, he'd forgotten his French history, though. The actual Bastille was destroyed during the uprising, and what remains is no more than a marker to show where it had once been. Chris decided there was some sort of vacation harassment squad notified each time he left Boston, and I can't really blame him. The trouble continued with almost conspiratorial ardor after he purposely dropped his credit card on the floor of a taxicab. Three minutes later, out of the cab and glad at least to have taken care of that, the comedy of errors continued. Running and shouting, wheezing and waving his arms, the cab driver puffed up behind us with the cursed credit card and a look you'd expect upon a hero who's wits alone had averted disaster. My stomach had now begun to hurt from laughing. Better from laughter, I suppose, than from heroin. My guests wanted to travel. In spite of all that had gone wrong, and partially because of it, they were having a wonderful time in Paris. Traveling somewhere else for a few days had been the plan from the start. They chose Prague, that capital city in the Czech Republic which Nate and I had honestly meant to visit before being sidetracked in Venice, so long ago. We found a cheap flight on our way back from Pere-Lachaise, a site I made a point of not mentioning until they brought it up.

"I'd be happy to show you guys how to get there," I begged one late morning, doing my best to keep that day's shaking under control. I was definitely glad they had come all this way to visit me, but I was dying for

a few hours alone. Maybe to sit in the tub, allow some of my physiological miseries a chance to run their course. But they insisted I come along, and with the help of a few Valium, I managed.

They bought tickets to leave the following afternoon, a Thursday. An early Friday morning flight was substantially less expensive, plus there was a test in the French class I'd barely attended on that Thursday which I felt inclined to revisit. Both these points made for a pretty good excuse to have some time to myself. I would meet them in Prague on Friday morning.

Thursday came (at least something in this world is consistent) and I walked them to the cab-stand on my way to French class. As I stood across from L'Ecole Militaire I breathed in the sensation of being on my own again, as if I hadn't been for months. It was my vacation from their vacation, and if I thought it would be a restful one I was either being stupid or flat out lying to myself.

The test went fine. I can't say how well I did, only that I'd learned a great deal more French outside of class than in it (though admittedly I spent very little time in it). More importantly, I saw Gwillam there for the first time since we'd helped move his records in. We walked together down Rue de Grenelle, stopping at 'The Real McCoy', one of the few stores in Paris that sells Dr. Pepper, as Parisians apparently have no interest in being a Pepper, and we maxed it.

"So, they went to Prague today. I'm going tomorrow. What're you and Nais up to tonight?" I'm honestly not sure what I was thinking when I asked that. I couldn't say whether or not I had a plan of action were Gwillam to suggest the plan of action I knew he would suggest.

"I've got to meet Anais and Allan at your house, around six. They're on some museum trip. Probably then we'll give Hugo a ring." He suggested it.

"Well, here's my thinking: my flight leaves DeGaulle at seven in the morning, so I have to be up by five at the latest to catch the bus out there. I can't really see getting to sleep before two so ..." "So why not stay way, way up all night?" he prodded, grinning.

"This is what I'm thinking." It made sense, dammit.

Don't judge me. Unless you've been there yourself, you shouldn't judge me. It was no longer a case of need. It had become a question of desire. I didn't want to go back to the way it had been, of that I was certain. What I did want was one last blowout, whose very lack of sense provided finality and the closure I felt was necessary in order to put the whole sordid business to rest. An ultimate all-night farewell-to-dope-fest, with my comrades in arms to see me off to a weekend in Prague. To a new start. I know that's easy to say. It's easy to convince myself that really, honestly this time will be the last time. I'd said it before, convinced myself it was true. Only before, one part of my brain would actually flat out lie to the other part, which was obviously aware of the lie from its inception, yet nonetheless believed it. This time, I knew. I mean I truly knew that it was done. Because it had to be. I cannot, I will not explain how I knew. Some things lose their meaning on paper.

"Okay then Gwill-doggs, here's the deal: I'm going home now to get some sleep. My money'll be in the drawer of the night-stand by my bed. Get a lot, and see if you can't talk Hugo into coming over. Wake me when you score. Is that cool?"

"Cool shit. See you tonight."

I wanted to sleep not because I was tired but because it would make six O'clock arrive sooner. It was all too easy. Nothing to it. Like if you fall out of an airplane at thirty thousand feet, you hardly feel like you're falling at all. It's the ground that does all the real work, rushing, speeding up towards you, voraciously,

passionlessly waiting for the inescapable opportunity to turn your insides out.

Smack!

Smack was the ground for me, waiting there to break an unfelt fall. Dust to dust, waiting with the malignant complacency only gravity can have. And heroin.

To start is to be finished, I guess.

No. That is not so.

I know that. I know.

Somewhere between my leap and the land, I remembered how to know. The memory was a ripcord to the parachute I had forgotten was strapped to my own back. Grabbing the cord that had been dangling in front of me this whole time, I pulled.

Landing on my feet would have to do for now. I could not steer my way out of danger. That would have to wait.

Six O'clock came and went. Seven and most of eight, too, while I slept. At last, I heard my name called from a distance and felt a hand on my shoulder, shaking me.

"We're in the kitchen. Come on," my sister's voice came from far away before my eyes adjusted. When I was ready, dressed, I followed where her voice had been, to the familiar others waiting for me in the kitchen, like soft mother Earth.

Allan was there, smiling. And Gwillam with an arm around my sister. And perched on the counter by a bowl of wax fruit, Hugo. For a perfect moment I felt warmed. How they had all gathered in my honor. My friends, my family. It made me terribly sad because just then I knew, I mean I really knew with a certainty beyond expression that it had all been worth it. And that it was over.

To exist, to set the stones of existence in their place and rummage for the next ones, to stamp down on the stones in the path of existence and find them secure, settled in their environment - this is the apex of life itself. In my end is my beginning, and the realization that sometimes, most times, you have to guess before you can ever truly know.

And then, well then it's time to lay the next stone.

There really was a lot of heroin on the table.

"So, Es, are you hungry yet?"

"Allan, I'm fucking starved."

"Bon," Hugo said, jumping off the counter. "We eat."

And we did. It was a feast.

From the kitchen to my sister's room where the glow of votive candles enticed stories while waiting our turn to receive a cold-cream facial mask in the spectacular bright white of the bathroom. Then, our cheeks atingle, to the living room, where we listened to the stereo, had long drawn out discussions about anything

at all as periodically one of us got up and sauntered to the kitchen for another line, or ran to throw up in the toilet. Anais relayed a message from Chris with the name and address of their hotel in Prague, prodding me into packing some clothes for the all-too-soon trip. I found myself - I think we all found ourselves - ragingly high at three in the morning, around the time Hugo drew three more bags from his pocket like rabbits from a hat. Back to work, and I was beginning to forget my own name when Allan, who had passed out hours earlier, lifted his head to say:

"Es dude, shouldn't you be getting out of here?"

I did the line I'd been leaning over and checked my watch for the first time in a while. Quarter past five in the morning. Fuck! I thought. "Fuck!" I said. Threw up, drank some water, called the cab dispatch, "vingt-cinq minutes", did a line, threw up, did another line and another, found Anais, Gwillam, Hugo and Allan all sorts of strewn about in various places and positions around the apartment, said good-bye and slowly, shakily made my way downstairs and out into a cold, damp Paris dawn to stand on an empty street. As the cab rolled towards me, I felt a twinge of regret at what I was leaving behind, along with some disconcertment at my current level of inebriation. I was far too junked up to have any business being outside, much less on my way to another country. I could barely stand under my own power. Purpose was served, however. What was to be my final foray into the field of powdered poppies was supplemented, made to seem all the more final in it's flair, it's style, it's stupidity, and the memorable situations by which it was surrounded.

The cab stopped.

I fell in. The sound of the meter as it ran pounded the brain inside a head I couldn't keep up. Soon we were at Etoile, the Arc De Triomphe. Unsteady though my legs were, I forced myself across the road and stood beneath the arch itself. My pinhead pupils danced along the length of a wonderfully empty Champs-Elysee in time to catch the sun, like the head of a cosmic lollipop, stuck to the top of the obelisk in the center of la Concorde. I will never forget.

Snapping back to the hypocrisy misidentified by most as reality, the sound of the first bus got me moving. I passed out for much of the ride, arriving at the massive conglomeration of structures I knew all too well a full forty-five minutes prior to flight time. Smoking a cigarette outside the terminal where sunlight fought to penetrate, all was quiet save for a lone janitor at the opposite end, emptying ashtrays. This was for the best. My stomach conceded, gave up trying to pull a fast one over on my brain and I proceeded to throw up in front and to the left of the revolving doors leading into terminal B at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. France, that is. Like a coal-miner locked in a linen closet, I wrapped myself in the coolness of the coming day and lit another smoke.

Somehow, I managed to make my way through the terminal and onto the plane, cursing my state the whole way, unable to remain oblivious to the looks shot at me by the flight crew and the other passengers. On the plane, though I did not actually secrete anything, the only word I can come up with for what I did was 'ooze'. I skipped in and out of a bogus sleep, that kind of just-below-the-surface doze where you're not really sure you slept at all when you're awake, and seriously doubt it when you're asleep.

An unknown period of time passed during which, conscious or not, my body went through stages of not altogether unpleasant dizzy weightlessness, until I was jarred to sluggish attention by the plane's landing gear meeting the tarmac of a new airport, a new old city. In theory anyway, I finally made it to Prague.

The airport in Prague is a step above a common marketplace, distinguishable only by the steel and concrete built around and over the rows of shops selling dirty magazines and cheap trinkets (bravo, capitalism). I changed some money and bought a ticket on a van headed for the center of town. I pleaded with the driver

to wait as I sprinted to the bathroom to throw up. Not long after, I was on my feet and strolling in the direction of Prague's city center. The unflinching confidence that I can find my way around any city is at its strongest when I take those first steps. I love that feeling. Prague was no different. The city's impressive architectural layout and style was new to me, but I never doubted my abilities. Equipped only with the name of the hotel and the street, I knew I had sufficient information. I've made do on less.

Roughly thirty minutes passed, full of that great old warmth of being somewhere completely new and different, before I all but stumbled over the hotel, on one of the main thoroughfares bustling with Friday morning Czechs intently going about their foreign business.

I knocked patiently for better than ten minutes before the door swung open. In his underwear, Scott stared in my direction for a moment before he saw me. Grunting recognition, he turned and walked back to bed. They all looked like I felt.

"I always say," came Chris' voice, muffled under covers, "that if you're gonna get drunk, you may as well get completely shit-canned. That way, when the alcohol poisoning wears off, there's no hangover."

"Jesus," I said. "What the fuck happened to you guys?"

"Freeman managed the first full-sprint vomit I've ever seen. It was incredible. Threw up all the way down the hallway of this bar, with bouncers chasing us. Hey, will you go buy some aspirin?"

"Right. I'll be back."

On the street again, I felt relieved that they were too ruined to notice my own visibly lamentable state. A few corners turned and I found a pharmacy, employing the universal 'ouch-my-head' sign to buy the aspirin. Back in the room I doled them out with a container of O.J., taking a handful for myself. Retiring to the bathroom, I threw up quietly, swallowed aspirin and Valium, and brushed the shit out of my teeth. Freeman barreled past me as I came out, wrapped in a towel as a pig in a blanket with a glazed look in his eyes.

Now that we were a party of four rather than three, the hotel's management cheesed us for two double rooms. Chris and I shared one on the fifth floor, Scott and John on the third. Although much more than tired, I appreciated my stay in Prague would be a short one. It made no sense falling into opposing sleep patterns with my fellow travelers, so I resolved to supersede exhaustion and managed an excellent impersonation of an energetic wide-awake kid. Prague is spectacular. Packed full of character winding down streets teeming with isolation and full of exquisitely clean, fresh architecture. We slowly and joyfully made our way to one of the main squares, leaving our physical pain behind with each step. Either side of the this square is approvingly judged by amazing Nordic buildings, with delicious streets leading to and from. A row of cloth-covered artisan stands soften one side where you can watch a sword being made from scratch, or more functional items like candlesticks or lamps.

And then there's the clock.

This great clock whose hundreds of separately moving pieces have been ringing into action every hour for centuries, give or take. In America, we've got this 'Liberty Bell' deal. A bell that rang once before the damn thing nearly split in two. Draw your own conclusions. Nighttime in Prague chases day as a mongoose does a snake, and after stepping out of a café we found ourselves in a Rikki-Tikki-Tavi darkness. The city seemed lit from the ground up. We made our way back to the hotel and prepared for Friday night on the town. At this point I was coasting on the fumes of my fourth or fifth wind, and I think I was still high. A questionable time to get acquainted with the nectar of madness, the beverage called Absinthe.

Prague, gratefully saved from being bombed out of existence during WWII, is the only major city in the

world where Absinthe remains legal. It's what Hemingway used to drink when he needed inspiration. Absinthe is what drove Van Gogh out of his mind; it's what he was drunk with when he performed surgery on his ear. Absinthe, as Bram Stoker was fond of saying, is the key.

Some doors are meant to stay locked.

That night in Prague, we smashed straight through.

Visually, Absinthe is very attractive. A unique shade of turquoise somewhere between a Caribbean lagoon and winter-fresh Scope. The taste, alas, leans further towards mouthwash. There's a ritual that goes along with this drink, imbuing it with all the more exotic circumstance. It's served in a tall, thin champagne-like glass, along with some sugar and a small spoon. Fill the bowl of the spoon with the sugar, then carefully dip it in the Absinthe enough to saturate. Once done, light the damp sugar on fire and hold it over the glass (not too close, its contents are flammable). Wait as the flame, amber surrounded by royal blue, builds then abates. As soon as it extinguishes, (try not to think about white powder and liquid melting together in a spoon with a wince as I did), drop the spoon in the glass, stir it up, and drink it down.

We sat in a bar for hours drinking round after round, with background music graciously provided by a lounge lizard on electric piano and a woman doing what I guess you might call 'interpretations' of current top-forty tunes. It didn't matter. Mozart could have been playing the banjo and it wouldn't have mattered. We drank as though it was manifest destiny, our newfound mission in life.

During the course of that evening we met a group of Austrian cats sharing in our outlook and vigor for intoxication. A great deal of roaring laughter and broken glasses ensued, the latter due to Freeman's repeatedly failed attempts at spinning a glass in his palm, a trick managed with relative ease until the fourth or fifth round of Absinthe. It was made clear soon after that we were not preferred clientele. Scott and John agreed to leave cordially as soon as the frightened musicians played 'Suspicious Minds' by Elvis Presley, which they were simply not capable of doing. John's solution entailed grabbing the microphone and singing it himself. Although the woman looked like she might cry, and John sang about as well as a two-car garage, nobody was stupid enough to stop him. Eventually, to the delight of most others in the bar, we stumbled out into the supposedly cold night. Our warmth remained secure, inside. Joined by the Austrians, our fun continued up a dark street when shouts from behind called for us to halt. At first I feared someone had called the cops. No cops, though. One electric piano player, cheap suit and all, shouting:

"STOP! Give back my book! You stole my book!"

In a flash, the poor man found himself surrounded by eight or nine decent sized guys. His tone, understandably, became somewhat less accusatory.

"Please. That book, it has all my music. Please." He looked pathetic.

"What book?" one of the Austrians asked. "Nobody took your stupid book. Does anyone have his book?" We all shook our heads while the pianist continued pleading, almost to tears, to just please give his book back. Scott and John were off ahead. Chris and I leaned against a doorway and laughed and laughed.

"This shit only happens to me!" Chris screamed. "My life is so fucked UP!"

Finally, the Austrians agreed to go back with the pianist to help find his damn book.

Chris and I, far too drunk to care, caught up with Scott and John as they were getting directions to a dance club.

F/X is a classic example of the European dance club. Beautiful women, flashing laser lights, sweaty dance-pits, long bar, and a techno beat. An Extasy addict's wet-dream, we straights had booze and booze to ebb the tide. For the remainder of that night I drank the Devil's Brew, a mixture of Absinthe and Red Devil energy drink, whose name fit the infernal flavor. Being drunk on Absinthe makes you say things, do things, that you wouldn't normally. After a few glasses, I couldn't make out the music any longer. It was little more than a vibration somewhere in my head, like the sound of a light-saber, or a fly against a window. I'm that fly, I thought. A junkie trying to get off junk is like a fly trying to reach the sunlight behind a window. Unable to understand why it cannot get there, unable to comprehend what's keeping it from getting there. Without thought, without judgment, the fly will continue its asinine attempts to get through a window it doesn't even realize exists until finally, from trauma, exhaustion, or something worse, it drops dead on the sill. I walked into a brick wall.

I mean that literally. As if sleepwalking, I was shaken to consciousness by a distant dull pain in my knee, and found myself face to face with the masonry-work of a maddeningly beguiling and unforgiving brick wall. It was time, I decided, for me to go.

Carrying a nearly full drink I could not recall ordering, I searched around for Chris. At the bar, I found him.

"Chris. I'm going," I declared.

"What? No, stay man..." His head - a trademark of shit-plowed Chris - had become far too heavy for his neck to support. "Shame on you, Chris, for trying to argue with a kid so far out of his tree. I will go home. I decree it." Chris grunted a response with a head that lolled like a rag-doll's, to and fro.

The instant I stepped out into the cold, I left my body. I remained hovering some four feet above myself for an alarmingly lengthy period of time. From F/X to the hotel is roughly a thirty-minute walk at most. On this night it took more than twice as long because I stopped along the way and spoke with several people. Rather, my body stopped and spoke with several people. I was, as I mentioned, four feet above. Being pretty much awake since ten A.M. the previous morning, along with having inhaled insane amounts of heroin, then traveled to a different country whereupon I imbibed a criminal volume of a mostly illegal, quasi-hallucinogenic beverage all on a virtually empty Valium-coated stomach tends to induce some very strange sensations. Believe me. I watched my own body talk to people. Not in simple grunts, either, but actual conversation, with absolutely no idea at all what was said, by or to me. My hovering mind took it all as a joke, and although I was watching with my own floating eyes, I honestly did not believe it was happening. I refused to believe, fully aware it was impossible for my body to have an intelligible discourse while so clearly severed from my mind. I spent the time arguing with myself the very reality of the situation. Absinthe is the coal that burns to power the engine of psychosis. In a sense, it literally made me fly.

My body seemed to know the way to the hotel. Following a painfully surreal chat with the woman behind the front desk - whom I think spoke no English at all - I was finally in bed. In a matter of seconds, my body shut itself off completely. My mind, though, continued to hover until at last it grew tired of staring at the sleeping figure lying still as a stone. Or a corpse.

My mind was roused where it lay dozing at the side of the bed a few hours later by the loud ruckus belonging to Chris stumbling through the door, singing. I saw him, heard him, (it would have been difficult not to), and wanted to talk to him, to find out how his night ended. Of course that activity required the use of my body, which my mind furiously tried to wake. No such luck. My body remained comatose, absolutely paralyzed. My mind was fully alert and expressly displeased with my body's mutinous refusal to cooperate. It would not so much as lift a finger. Outgunned, my mind gave up and listened to Chris sing in the bathroom. Soon, it found a spot under the covers where it curled up by my body and joined it in slumber.

Bram Stoker was right.

Waking up late the following morning curiously refreshed, the first thing I did was make certain all my appendages were exactly where they belonged. Confident I was still in one piece and after a shower, I left quietly while Chris slept, and went down to Scott and John's room.

As soon as Scott opened the door he informed me:

"I've never been so fucked up in all my life. We lost you, dude. These American guys, they own a strip club here, started buying everyone shots. You should've stayed."

"Scott, what the fuck happened to Freeman?" I asked, holding up John's shirt. It was torn to shreds, and I despairingly noted the blood that John - who slept like a baby - was caked in.

"Who knows? We left without him. He was like that when I woke up. No wonder Absinthe is illegal."

"You're not concerned about why he's covered in blood?"

It conformed to guidelines of a question crying out for an answer.

"Well, the last thing he said to me was if he ever thought I didn't love him, he'd kill somebody. That Freeman, he's all about heart."

"Scott, Jesus Christ. His shirt's a bloody mess, his knuckles are bleeding, and he said he'd kill somebody? Don't you think we ought to wake him up and find out what the hell is going on?" It was way too early to deal with shit as heavy as this.

"Do you want to be the one to wake him?"

"I see your point."

"Maybe Chris'll wake him."

Scott and I went upstairs where Chris was getting dressed. We explained the trouble with John.

"He left with these six German guys. They were all wasted, having a great time. I wonder what happened," Chris said. I was beginning to wonder what happened to the Germans.

There's strength in numbers (not always true) and we all went down to see John. We found him, a vacuous expression on his red face, sitting up in bed.

"Did you get in a fight with those Germans?" Chris asked.

"Yup."

"Did you fuck 'em up?" Scott pried with a grin.

"Yup."

"Why John? What happened?" I'm no fan of violence, even against Germans.

"Absinthe, Est. Absinthe is the key." How can you argue with that?

It took a great deal of poking about before piecing together as much of the story as we could out of the rubble and debris that was Freeman's splotchy memory. The Germans invited John up to their room in the same hotel, where they all continued drinking. Sometime in the early morning hours, a fight broke out. We never discovered exactly why. Freeman spoke not a word of German. All we did know is he'd done a great deal of damage. John is a big and powerful kid. Even six Germans trying to bring him down might run into trouble. And that's just what they did. Ran into it like an airplane runs into the side of a mountain. In the lobby, we were detained. The girl at the front desk nervously catalogued the destruction: two flowerpots, a glass table, a door, etc....

"Jesus Freeman, what did you do?"

"You know Es, I think you're gonna find out..."

There were voices on the stairwell. German voices. We all exchanged pained glances. Things were doing their very best to turn ugly.

The belligerent Germans all congregated in the suddenly suffocating lobby. Six large young men and one old. Silence again proved it can, indeed, have mass.

Somehow, John had succeeded in beating them all. Badly.

One wore a bandage around his head, another appeared to have lost part of an earlobe, a third sported a bloody wrap on one misshapen hand. The rest carried a grab-bag of black-eyes, fat lips, and a variety of scrapes, cuts, lacerations, and gashes. All in all, John had given a great deal more than he'd taken. The losers, respectfully taking their lumps, agreed to cover the cost of damage done to the hotel. The four of us, doing our best tough-guy impressions, puffed up our chests and strode out, leaving the Germans, broken and battered, to lick their considerable wounds.

That day was spent marching, each to our own cadence of pain, across the wide brown river far more timeless than any city. A steep and winding cobblestone road, much easier on the eyes than the knees, leads to the top of a hill dominated by a fairy-tale castle and a durably distinguished cathedral. The sort of place designed to astonish beneath a bed of virgin snow, its architecture exuding a shadowy cold warmth unmatched by anything I've encountered. The long and - in our case painful - hike became both completely forgotten and entirely worthwhile at the instant its wintry apex was reached. Standing at the castle gates in Prague, commanding a panoramic view of the entire city, I felt exactly as I had surveying a lush valley in Lagnes, a thousand years ago. Wonders in this world are legion, and I can count eight before breakfast. Even in this day and age full of campaign trails and political pragmatists, it's still damn good to be the King.

Late afternoon found us in our beds sleeping soundly, mustering energy for the coming evening's hijinx. They began, innocently enough, with a few glasses of Absinthe, the flammable aperitif that strips innocence the way turpentine does paint. Soon enough we were at the entrance to a sex show whose persistent proprietor guaranteed was the only one of its kind outside Amsterdam and maybe, though he couldn't be certain, Bangkok as well. Personal hesitations were set aside in homage to my compatriots enthusiasm, and I wound up sitting amongst other men in a room that may have doubled as a university lecture hall, complete with movable desks hanging at the side of every chair, ready to swivel up in case notes be required on the subject. Sex 101 began with a rattle, and believe you me this was no Crazy Horse. Three women, each separately on the verge of being unattractive, shook about for a time. They'd come down among their unwashed audience and shake about some more. I was elected to rub lotion on one woman's chest, which was kind of pleasant, I must say. Chris was pulled up on stage and, to our unadulterated delight, stripped down to his boxers. The grand finale consisted of a man and woman having passionless sex on stage. So boring was their display that all I thought was: 'wow, my unit's bigger than that guy's, and he's a

professional.' Hardly the lesson in humility I'd been expecting. Overall it was harmless, even uplifting, and once the act was done our next stop was inevitable.

Goldfinger's is a Prague strip-club built in a hall where KGB once held Vodka-chugging contests. The two Americans who owned the establishment were the same ones who'd been buying rounds at F/X the night before while I was floating to the hotel. My enterprising friends managed to score complimentary passes for what turned out to be an upscale club where beautiful women were constantly in the act of removing their clothes across various stages in front of varied clientele. Moments after sitting at a table, the owners sent drinks our way, closely followed by three women. Holding onto the former, we watched in glee as the latter jumped onto our sturdy table and performed an erotically gyrating, scantily-clad dance for our copious enjoyment. All this sent Chris and Scott into a discussion about what it might cost to open their own strip joint in some former Soviet satellite. The fun only dampened when the battered Germans slouched into the club. On our last legs anyhow, we used their appearance as an excuse for departure.

We turned in easy and without a fight, still within our own bodies, still roughed up from the night - in my case weeks and months - before. In the morning we awoke in this city with the feeling that we'd spent a great deal of time. Our bags packed, we searched around for liquid memory, conveniently contained in a bottle of Absinthe. Then back to Paris, that city where beauty and sin share the same toilet.

It seems an unfair fact of life that when you own a lighter, losing a pack of matches is so trivial and insignificant they may as well not even exist. But when you lose that lighter there don't seem to be enough matches in all the world. The first thing I thought about when we returned to Pláce Vauban was heroin. The second was Julian Auerbach.

Picking up the phone, I dialed.

"Julian, hello. Prague was great ...my friends loved it...they leave tomorrow...huge Elvis fans... Really? You'd do that? Wow Julian, they'd never forget...yes, fine...okay, we'll see you then." What a wonderful man he is.

"Hey guys, pack your things tonight. Tomorrow we have breakfast with the man who discovered Elvis. Swear to god."

They invited me to dinner at a restaurant of my choosing, within reason. I chose, reasonably, I think, 'Au Gamin du Paris' on Rue Vielle du Temple, in the Marais. A raving success, it was the best meal they'd had in weeks, and the best I'd had for as long as I could remember. The evening was pleasantly topped off with a drink along the Champs-Elysee, watching a mime mimic people as they passed unaware. A nice way to spend the last night of their visit, and while I was sorry to see them go, I admit I was also looking forward to the quiet days to follow when I could slouch body and mind like the scarecrow in that bad acid-trip of a movie about a false wizard. Did they lie down in a field of poppies in that one? Or was it Alice? Oz, Wonderland. Same place, really.

Julian sat at one of the outdoor tables in front of Le Vauban despite the grayness of the sky. Paris has a catalogue of roughly forty-two different shades of gray, each with a given potential for rain that can be flawlessly gauged by a longtime resident. Dropping their luggage, my friends remained understandably skeptical concerning the verite of my claims as regarded the man they were to meet and his most intimate relation to Royalty. After introductions were made and cappuccino's ordered, I sat back and watched Julian work his magic. In no time, the expression upon my friend's faces left no doubt their initial amused suspicion was washed away in a flood of awe and wonder. They hung, as their jaws hung, more and more on each word. I was the only one at that table who drank a hot cup of coffee.

When Julian's story was finished and all their breathless questions answered, the time at last had come for them to make their way to the airport. Hugs and handshakes, warm words and promises to get together soon, I was glad to see them leave on such a high note. Grabbing their bags, much lighter now, they headed for the cab-stand, leaving me alone with Julian and his glow.

"That was really great of you. They'll be talking about this morning for a long, long time."

"It is a great pleasure for me. Young people are the reason I am here at all. So, how are you?"

"I'm fine."

"No, no. I mean, how are you?"

"I know. I'm done. I mean, I think I've started to be finished. I want to be done."

"If you want something, you can make it so. You have been taught this, no?"

"It's over, Julian. I know it."

Behind me, I felt the benevolent stare from the golden dome of Napoleon's tomb. A silent witness.

Paris gray number nineteen is the one that absorbs all the sounds of the city below. I forgot where I was. I suppose it didn't really matter.

November was coming to Paris.

[>>>> Next](#)

PART THREE

Jonothon Joins In. Whiskey and the Time of Tikko.

Once, I tried to quit smoking cigarettes - by a very long way the most addictive drug on the face of this Earth - by smoking a pipe. I figured that, as you're not meant to inhale a pipe, it would fulfill my cravings for tobacco and nicotine as well as the need to blow smoke while being infinitely less damaging to my health. Today, I smoke both cigarettes and a pipe. But I still believe the basic idea is a fair one. The idea that, if it means taking up a less damaging vice in order to eradicate the one that's most damaging, then in a sense it's a victory. A small steppingstone, a pit-stop halfway to the checkered flag on the long and winding road to recovery.

In the days following my visitors' departure, I did my best to fill the void, doing all I could to keep from reverting back to what had once been such a trusted standby. My ploy was to be out of the house as much as possible, away from the telephone that beckoned each time I passed. I found homely caf es where I sat and read for hours off the chilled streets. I walked, watching people pass like scenery from the window of a moving train, with the sensation that I was cruising through them as though I were a sort of ghost. To walk through a city not my city is, for me, something like being in love. I am a part of nothing, yet everything is a part of me. In Rome, all I wanted to do was walk. Just walk by myself and stop at every single church - there are literally thousands - and see if I could discover its secrets, its treasures. Sometimes, behind the most unassuming facades, I found sights true enough so that I could forget time itself. And no matter how many times I traversed that great city on foot there was always the chance of becoming hopelessly, deliriously lost. One time, I had to be somewhere in Rome at two o'clock, less than an hour's walk from

where I stood. Not even noon, I had two hours at least to make it there. Knowing that if I kept the river to my right it would be a cakewalk, I decided to take an unfamiliar path. Three hours later, the river still very much to my right, I was walking down streets that may well have belonged to a different city, altogether. It remains one of the purest moments of my life. Never presume to know where you are, particularly if you think that you know where you're going. The architecture of Paris, ironically enough, isn't quite as laissez-faire as that of Rome, so becoming as lost is not as easy. The walks themselves, though, never lack for soothing enjoyment. Returning home to a warm and empty apartment, when the cold evening brushes against the windows and the comfort of bare and tired feet on a soft couch begins to seep in, the day took on real fulfillment. After an hour of CNN, the telephone began to wield much greater amounts of gravity than physically possible. It took a great deal of willpower not to simply walk over and make the call.

At the end of that fourth night, it began to ring.

Like speed-zoom on a hand-held video-camera or the surf crashing over the sides of a boat far too small to be going so fast. A hypnotist's watch swinging a pendulum at the end of its chain and the odd fact that every damn thing tastes like chicken. Like rust flaking on a screen doorknob I knew there was something much, much louder on the other side of that ringing and I tried so hard not to listen.

The phone stopped.

A low hiss and the answering machine sprung into action, the sound of fingernails on Teflon, a disembodied voice filled the apartment. It was Hunter. My trance lifted. I ran to the phone and grabbed the all-too-heavy receiver.

"...oh, you're there. Listen, me and Jonothon just finished dinner a few blocks from you. Can we come up?"

"Yeah, okay. I'll be here." So I was finally going to meet the enigmatic Jonothon. Believe me, I had no idea.

The doorbell sounded and I opened it upon a red-cheeked, milky-skinned Hunter. Behind her stood a man who looked to be in his thirties, stocky build, black tight-curved wiry hair, and an aura of almost palpable intensity on his oval face.

"Esteban," he said, pushing passed Hunter. "Finally. I meet you." As I shook his hand, wincing at the hard squeeze, I tried to place his accent. Not French. Not Spanish. Something more guttural. Not sharp like German or tight like Nordic, but certainly Western. I soon learned a lot more than I should have about this man. I invited him in as I rubbed the soreness from my fingers.

"Hunter says much of you. Do you like some Tikko?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. I looked cluelessly at Hunter for help, and there it was.

"I told Jonothon you wouldn't mind if we did coke here."

"Aha. Tikko. Yes. Fine." I tried to figure out what I had missed, and when I had missed it.

"A plate to chauffage?" Jonothon asked. Again, I looked to Hunter for interpretation, and again she was on the ball.

"Do you have a plate we can warm up?"

"Okay, well, I can put one in the microwave." My brow thoroughly furrowed as I placed a plate in the microwave, wondering what in the hell was going on.

Back in the living room, Jonothon took the warm plate and pulled a package from his inside coat pocket, a beaten leather coat he almost never took off, and poured out a significant mound of cocaine.

Inside the apartment at Place Vauban, it began to snow.

I thought of that great hobbit Bilbo Baggins, and asked myself the same question:

Don't adventures ever end?

Well, if there was ever anything that could take my mind off heroin, I guess it would have to be cocaine. We spent the next few hours doing lines and lines, and lines. It was great fun. Like never-ending Extasy without the edge. Power, confidence, clarity of mind, sensational focus. I knew what I knew. I knew how to know it. I didn't know what it was. Answering Jonothon's barrage of questions with ease and attitude, always finding the exact right way to word my responses. Now and then, I'd run to the kitchen and toss the empty plate back into the microwave (coke doesn't stick on a warm surface) and refill our glasses with ice for the whiskey they'd brought along. In no time, I was accustomed to Jonothon's accent, and we bantered back and forth like old friends.

Through it all, the telephone sat silent and forgotten. I had won a victory. Pyrrhic though it may have been, it was still a victory.

Untold hours later, during which Jonothon proved to possess an imperishable stash of powdered confidence, he glanced at his watch and said:

Merde! I must go now. It's all right to call you?"

Of course, I told him. Of course he could call me. At the time, I never truly expected him to.

The next afternoon, I set out with purpose to Place des Vosges, a small park in the Marais. It was not lost on me that, from head to toe, I felt better than I had for a long time. Stronger, more alert. There was no wondering why. Had you told me two years before, even one, that I'd gladly be accepting cocaine as means of controlling heroin cravings it would certainly have led me to concerns for your grip on reality. Now, it was my own grip in question, and my own reality sliding down a slippery slope, proving life can turn on a penny and a nickel before ever reaching a dime.

Place des Vosges is enclosed by a tar-black steel fence and surrounded, almost as a courtyard, by a three or four-story building colored one step away from pink. Victor Hugo lived in this building, which is little more than trivia to me. Thanks to time's eternal assault upon fragile human anatomy, Victor Hugo hasn't 'lived' anywhere for many, many years. I didn't go there because of Victor Hugo. There was no real reason for my being in Place des Vosges. I was simply overcome with a desire to be outside, to stroll past shops and look in their windows. Despite the chill and the gray skies, I detoured through Ile Saint-Louis to buy a few scoops of Berthillon, world-renowned ice-cream. Of course they'd long since shut their doors against the fall, but I wasn't bothered. On this day there was nothing to upset me much. I tell you I was feeling good. Almost (do I dare and do I dare) human. Almost. Some of it residual from what I'd done the night before, some of it from the cautious realization that I was actually on the road to beating the once unbeatable junk. That I was simultaneously well on my way to fostering an entirely separate dependency didn't fully cloud my thoughts for a while yet. My thoughts became overcast, however, later the same evening when I found a message from Jonothon on the answering machine at the apartment. It said he would drop by at around six O'clock. It was half-past seven when I heard the message, and I was deeply disappointed to have missed him. Later, as I got to know him better, I learned to accept his Island time. Any appointment with Jonothon requires a minimum two-hour radius, and his watch - if it even works - is pure jewelry. At quarter to nine,

he rang the bell.

This night, he came alone, unless you want to count the two bottles of J&B that entered the house an arm's length ahead of him. After microwaving an empty plate we began the inhalation in earnest. He taught me a form of taking Tikko that I miss terribly. If you lick the filter end of a cigarette, you can mop up a little bit of coke and effectively enhance the entire smoking experience. Sometimes, I imagine I can taste the cool, tangy, tooth-numbing taste when I light a butt, and until I die of lung cancer, I can never forget. As we took our communion by pulling lines off a warm plate, we communed by pulling lines off each other's souls, and though neither of us are French, it was nothing short of a fully satisfying tête-à-tête. When Jonothon mentioned he had - very briefly - worked as the penis end of a live hetero-sex show in Budapest (making the guy who talked us into the Prague show either misinformed or a flat-out bullshitter) our discussion shifted, naturally I suppose, to the subject of the opposite sex. He couldn't understand my shyness, my naïveté, my inexperience in this arena. Not surprising, as he had once picked up a paycheck for actually doing it inside an arena. Once I'd recounted summarized versions of my less than savory history with women, (and yes, okay, with 'girls', too), Jonothon quietly formulated a theory that was all too easily on the money.

"All these women," he said, "have no souls to you. Because you are blind to yourself, so they may as well not exist. Only when you find your own soul will you see a woman's. Because she will show it to you." He smiled then, and squeezed the back of my neck. It was real. Wisdom hides out in the weirdest places. Would I ever see my own soul? Will I ever see it? Have you ever really, truly looked?

I tried my best to explain how impermeably deep-rooted the differences were between the American women I knew and any other kind. Why, Jonothon wanted to know, did so many American women try to separate from their own femininity? Why did so many American men have such a fucked up sense of what being a man was? I had no answers for Jonothon then, and I haven't got any now. The only way I could respond was this way: In America, our society teaches us that sex is bad, that it's dirty and sinful. At almost the same instant we learn this lesson, (only much later to discover our society had, yet again, lied to us), we learn that this demonic act is the very reason we exist at all. I'm no psychologist, but it's hardly a great leap to understand how those lies create and perpetuate a sadly repressed and a generally twisted view of the act itself, an act which the French - and the rest of the educated world, give or take - consider a beautiful, satisfying, integral part of life.

Through all our discussions, we managed to get good and drunk, not to mention coked to the gills, and it was an excellent time. Over the next couple of weeks, Jonothon came over almost every night, now and then sleeping in Anais's room since she usually slept across town at Gwillam's place, and we became good friends. You know when you meet someone, and you instantly get along as though you'd known each other for years? When even those things you keep from people you see every day are easy to confide to a person you've known for hours? It's a really good feeling, and to be true it has to be entirely reciprocated, benevolently harmonious. That feeling existed, immediately and inarguably, between Jonothon and I.

So a few weeks after we met, I began slowly to piece together some of his understandably secretive story. What I know is certainly not the full tale, but it's more, I think, than most people knew about him.

Jonothon was born in Brazil and grew up in Israel, where he eventually settled and accepted a compulsory spot in the army. Quickly, he moved up the military ranks and became a member of an intelligence unit. He never told me much about what he did there, but I gathered there were more than a few skeletons rotting in his closet. Dealing with covert types fostered contacts in the world of big-time narcotics, and at some point, (I've never been clear if this was before or after he'd left the special forces), he was orchestrating large shipments from South America into Europe, where he became a sort of golden-boy for a huge-scale French distributor. By way of turning up dead, this distributor stepped aside, allowing Jonothon a chance to run the Paris show, which he'd been doing ever since.

Once I learned what was what, I got nervous. Maybe a little scared. And, as during previous times of Parisian crisis, I wound up sitting in one of the pews at Sacre Coeur doing all I could to hold the throttle on my sanity. It all comes down to sanity. This, well, this was insane. Through a chance third party meeting, I had somehow become a trusted friend of the Dude-Man of Paris cocaine distribution. I never had a phone number, never saw an address other than a small black unassuming car. Jonothon would call me, come to my place. He trusted me as much - as little - as a man in his profession could trust anyone. Quick and true, relying on honed powers of judgment that have to be ultra-refined to succeed in such a line of work. Lines were his work. His were the big counts, and he wouldn't dream of taking my money. It was insane.

In the soft and shuffling silence of Sacre Coeur I decided to waive sanity and see where this life might take me, knowing that once refused, the experience presented could never be found again. It was insane. What does that make me?

The walk back from Montmartre wasn't easy. I was losing my sole. Soon, I'd have to think about a new pair of shoes. Stopping at the Luxembourg Gardens I sat on a bench and tried to ignore the running in my nose, accepting the cold with impunity since it kept the gardens empty. Soon, I'd have to think about ... about what? Was that my problem? No ability to think ahead? Never knowing what I'd be doing that very night, much less a month, a year, down the road? Was it a problem at all? No direction, no knowledge of who or where I might be in the future, knowing just barely who I had been in the past, and who I'd become in the present. Jonothon was right. I felt like a blind man in the pitch dark. Even were I able to see, how would I know it? So I just laid the life-stones down, and followed wherever they led. Eventually, I suppose, the path will be well lit, and maybe I'll see where I'd been once I got there. It would have to be enough.

An Empty Circle. The Black Man.

Back at the apartment, a message from Jonothon saying he'd call at seven. At nine, the phone rang. He asked if he could bring a friend along. Half an hour later, they arrived.

This time, Jon's buddy brought the booze. His name was Frank, and it fit. A stout, smiling Australian with bright red cheeks and a bushy mustache. I liked him almost immediately.

Three glasses were filled with ice and whiskey. Two plates were warmed in the microwave. Dozens of cigarettes were smoked. Countless grams of cocaine disappeared. One great time was had by all. Frank had a silver Tiffany bean lighter upon which I innocently commented.

"You like this one, hey?"

"Yeah, it's really nice."

"Take it," he said, shoving the lighter into my shirt pocket.

"What? No, Frank, come on. No, I only meant it's nice. I didn't mean I wanted it. I can't take this..."

"Friend, it's yours. I'm happy to give it to you. Tell you what, trade me your lighter. Now we're even." And there was no more to say. Jonothon and his friends were my kind of people. There can never be black and white. Everyone's a shade of gray. They could never be my kind of people, even though it's what they were. A person's story is as real and true as any ambiguity. No matter what mom used to say, you're not what you eat, you're not what you do. You're who you are, only and always. William W. Story said this: "It was dirty, but it was Rome; and to anyone who has long lived in Rome even its very dirt has a charm which the neatness of no other place ever had." He was right on. To truly love a place, you have to love its dirt, remember? Well, the same is true for people. Those who judge at face value, at the first signs of dirt, are the

ones afraid of revealing their own. We don't like those people, do we? We're all dirty, somehow. If we don't show it, well then, aren't we simply cleaning up the house before the cleaning lady arrives?

When Jonothon went out to buy another bottle of booze, Frank and I moved into the kitchen. He wanted to teach me how to make corn fritters.

"So, how do you know Jonothon?" I asked.

"We served in special forces together. Didn't think I was Jewish, didya?" He chuckled. "We're everywhere, mate. Even Australia. We're all over New York, isn't that right? I've always wanted to go to New York. You got a measuring cup for this flour?"

"Just by your knee. You should just buy a ticket and go to New York, then."

"Tried to, once. Walked off the plane at Kennedy and half a dozen Feds were waiting. Said they could either escort me onto the next plane back or escort me to the nearest prison cell. Easy choice, yeah?" he said with a laugh.

"Whaaaat? Feds, Frank? Don't tell me if you'd rather not, but what the fuck are you saying?"

"Got ratted out by a group of assess bombing buildings in Germany. Can opener?"

"Drawer under your wrist. Did you blow up buildings, Frank?"

"Let's say I won't be going back to Germany for a while." "Holy cow. I mean, shit. That's nuts."

"Not really. I barely had anything to do with that. Here's one for ya, though. The most fucked thing ever happened to me was back in Israel, bout ten years ago. Hezzabolah killed some of ours, but we weren't sanctioned to hit 'em back 'cause they came straight out from a Palistinian camp. Fuckin' politicos. So I took it in my own hands and went in to lay some hurt, and just when I'm in shifty territory, I hear somethin' behind me, like I'm being shadowed, you know? Fuckin' hell, I thought. They got me. I drop and recon, and there's this kid just made the band not three months before, crackin' along like a sitting duck takin' a shit. So I go grab the dumb little cunt, put the scare of three lives in 'im. 'What's your fuckin' game, shithead?' I say. 'You tryin' to get us killed, ya fuckin' little cunt?' The bastard followed me, thought he'd get ranks or some horseshit. Course, the Pallies seen him, and now all the lights come on, and I'm sayin' fuckin' fuck, you know? We're fuckin' fucked, no cover, nothin'. They start shootin', and you don't know life 'til you seen orange tracers comin' right at'chya. The little fuck starts runnin', blastin' away like a stupid cunt, and I know they haven't made me yet. So, fuck. I make like a gazelle back to cover, waitin' for the bullet in my back the whole way. Shit. Never shook like that in my life. Where do I find a fryin' pan, hey?" It took me a moment to find my voice.

"Uhh... Under the stove there. Jesus, Frank. Jesus. So, did you learn anything? I mean, is there a moral to your story?"

"Yeah. Don't ever follow somebody else. You're bound to get the both of you killed."

For a few moments, the only sounds came from a frying pan.

They were really good fritters.

When Jon returned with another bottle of whiskey we wound down, or more accurately finished winding up, to the sounds of 'Soma, L'Annee du Brasil' which was Jon's favorite disc. He put it on every time he came

over, until even I could sing a song in Portuguese.

The next friend of Jonothon's I met was Fabrizio, the Italian Ferrari-driving playboy/restauranteur. Each time Fabrizio came over, he had a different beautiful woman along with him. It certainly made for more interesting scenery than a couple of guys. Soon, I was on the comp list at his restaurant, and some nights Jon and I would head out there late for a good meal and a visit to the wine cellar. Fabrizio would pull out a bottle of good wine, and the three of us would go to town with the indirect assistance of some Columbian farmers. I learned a lot about wine those nights. Fabrizio loved showing off his collection.

One evening at my place, I nearly shoved the whole of my stinky foot down my throat. Fabrizio came over with a gorgeous black woman, and when we greeted I said:

"Yeah, we met already, right? Weren't you here once before?"

"No," she said, "I've never been here ..."

"This is my fiancée," Fabrizio spat, giving me the universal 'shut the fuck up right now' look.

"Oh, right, right. No, it was a friend of Hunter's. I'm sorry, you just look similar." And thank god, she bought it. You see, Fabrizio had come by once with another gorgeous black woman, and please don't start about how I think they all look alike. I don't think that at all. Well beyond their skin color, these women truly could have been sisters. Later, I apologized.

"Fabriz man, I am sooo sorry. I can't believe I said that. I hope I didn't ruin shit. Fuck, man, I'm such an asshole," and I felt like one.

"Don't worry. It's nothing," he said with the grin of a professional to a novice. Womanizing, cheating if you want to call it that, is not something I'm familiar with. I don't approve of it partially because I have a tough enough time handling myself with one woman, much less two. It would be interesting to know how I'd feel if Fabrizio's shoe were on my foot. I had almost forgotten all about heroin. Surely some credit is due to the thousands of dollars worth of pure cocaine that found its way on and off warm plates at Place Vauban each week. Another reason might be the transference of heroin headquarters to Gwillam's place off Boulevard Sebastopol. His was one of the few buildings in Paris that didn't use a code console to get in, employing the presumably more simple intercom buzzer method. Gwillam, not surprisingly, is the type of kid who shares Jonothon's disregard for punctuality. Occasionally he and I arranged to meet and grab a bite, (I was eating a bit now, though Gwillam was near anorexic). I always arrived pretty much on the dot. He rarely did, however. To pass the time I'd pop into a pub right around the corner called 'The Frog and Rostbif'. It's an English pub just off Rue St. Denis, a fine street in its own right, littered with peepshows and sex shops where you can buy a bottle of amyl nitrate, known to most of us as 'poppers', for a cheap and legal (and pretty harmful) high. The pub serves as an occasional oasis for English-speakers who are tired of, or who just can't, speak French. And they brew pretty good beer. I'd pound a couple of blondes (I mean beer, you understand, not women) and then go check for Gwillam. Usually I'd have to check three or four times before having any luck, during which an odd thing happened. Somehow, all the complicated building codes in my brain interfered with its ability to remember what should have been the simplest code of all. Invariably, inexplicably, I would entirely wipe clean any memory of what floor Gwillam lived on. Though I could easily find my way in by scrolling through the catalogue of a dozen four-digit codes, (mind you, four digits that change every other month), I could not recall that one single number necessary, managing to squander the ease afforded by this once familiar and preferred buzzer setup. As a result, I'd be a slightly tipsy guy at nine or ten in the evening standing almost directly in front of the gates to Le Bain Douche with hands cupped around my mouth, screaming: "GWILLAM! GWILLAM! WHAT FLOOR ARE YOU ON? GWILLAM! HEY! ARE YOU THERE!?! YO, GWILLAM!"

This would continue until he either popped out on his ledge and told me, or until one of the bouncers from Le Bain Douche strongly suggested I shut the hell up. In the latter scenario, I'd stagger back to the Frog and Rostbif for a few more rounds of liquid confidence before stumbling out to try again. I can't remember a single dinner meeting between Gwillam and I where any dinner was actually involved.

The occasional lunch at Le Vauban with Julian Auberbach remained one of my great pleasures. He would comment on how much better I looked, and never pressed with probing questions about heroin. It was a closed subject. One look at me before and one look after was more than enough to ease any fears that I was still junked. I never volunteered any information regarding the dizzying heights of my new form of self-medication, and I regret it. I don't regret his not knowing, rather my own inability to confide in a man I trusted implicitly. He was right, though, about how I looked. I looked a lot better, a lot healthier. Not even my swift and continued weight loss gave me away. Especially since Julian witnessed my appetite, now back with a vengeance.

Hunter noticed the improvement in my appearance as well, and I noticed her not-so-subtle signals. We were always straight with each other, and while she assured me I hadn't been unattractive before, she confessed that in my healthier state I had achieved the level of being desirable. Flattering though it was, I explained my fear of falling into a deeper relationship with her, nice as it sounded. I was leery of my issues relating to women that kept me from giving what I had and from taking what they gave until nothing was there but blackness. I'd begun to realize it was my own shortcoming, not someone else's. Rather than throw in the towel and wait for the next ultimately doomed relationship, hoping it would unveil whatever I was looking for, the time was well past ripe to hold off until I knew what I actually was looking for, and that meant learning how to see. With a great deal of willpower and the least amount of rejection, I sadly declined the opportunity to alienate Hunter by becoming blind to her. I don't regret that. I still have a great deal more to learn. I met Phillipe on one of Jon's assisted visits to Pláce Vauban, and again made a fast friend. Phillipe was also Brazilian, and though his English was shaky at best, we found a common language in music. Jonathon put on such a sour puss when we suggested a change from his beloved Soma disc that Phillipe and I agreed to spend time alone. About twice a week he came over with a few selections of his own and we'd sit around sipping scotch, smoking cigars. Cubans, of course. I've never been a huge fan of cigars, and enjoyed the idea of a Cuban more than the flavor, but it fit the context perfectly. I never saw Phillipe do coke. Neither of us found it necessary to struggle with speech, our judgment of one another based on silent vibes. I had the sense that Jonathon was introducing me to an inner circle, person by person. They never had to worry about me. Being awarded Jonathon's trust was endorsement enough.

Things were moving forward fast. Where exactly they were going, I didn't know and didn't care. I was having fun. I was meeting people who were as interesting as they were decent. Not decent on the same scale our society has constructed out of fantasy, using tools of outdated belief, but decent on a much more real level. If they were women living a few centuries back in Salem, Massachusetts, they'd be burned as witches by a society whose decency was never questioned. It was exciting. Compared to the relative normalcy of my college years, this was like being in a movie. I watched, a perpetual outsider, rubbernecking my life to see what theirs was like. In the side-view mirror of my existence, things suddenly became much closer than they appeared. Even then, I could not comprehend how deep this character had gotten into a world where he didn't belong, and I still couldn't see the character was me. I still couldn't see there had to be consequences, and I didn't want to look. I felt too good.

I lost all conception of days and dates. Blessed and cursed with the foresight to rarely see three hours into the future will do that. Without Anais and Gwillam around, the house lacked even the schedule a school week provided. Waking up to the sensation that it could be a Saturday as easily as a Tuesday is equal parts invigorating freedom and concerned despair. Sure, I could do almost anything I wanted, but I didn't know anything I wanted to do. The life-stones beneath my feet were jagged and slippery. A crushing fall was inevitable, one to scrape the knees of my soul. But I couldn't see it coming. The stones I lay down I can

never pick up. The path is the only path. The walk is life.

I stubbed my toe.

The phone rang.

Like a wilted tinfoil flower in soil of beer-bottle glass. Like the armrest on an airplane that vibrates as you squeeze it to ensure safe landing or the teardrop of blood from the nose of a dead white baby seal. Like the twisted tire-marks on asphalt after a hit-and-run. Did you get the plate number? Did you?

The phone stopped.

I picked up the receiver before accounting for the unexplained shivers crawling up my spine like hermit crabs up a tree. It was Jonothon, telling me to shower and shave and put on nice clothes. In an hour, he'd come get me.

The heat and steam of the bathroom could not ease my mind or stop my heart from pounding. I felt more concerned about being so perplexed, so confounded by the reasons behind my undefined doubts than about the doubts themselves. When Jonothon rang the doorbell, I was feeling better and looking good. He wore the same leather jacket as usual, a necktie the only change. After a glass of whiskey and a power gram, he slapped his knees and said:

"We go."

"Where do we go?" I asked on our way downstairs.

"Do you know Le Bain Douche?"

"Yeah. I know they'll never let me in there." We were in his car now. Two guys in a banged-up mini, and my shoes falling apart, we had little hope.

"No problem. You are my guest. We see Fabriz there. Maybe you find a nice woman tonight," he laughed.

"Okay, Jon. Whatever."

Down the familiar street we rode, passing Gwillam's building on the left, the foreboding gates to Le Bain Douche on the right, stopping to let a six-and-a-half foot drag queen cross in front with a gait that seemed to say 'what's the big deal? So there's a huge silver flying saucer on my head. So what?.' Though the street was jam-packed with cars, Jonothon pulled into a perfect sized spot ten feet beyond the club's entrance. I stayed alongside as Jonothon walked right through the line of people who had probably been waiting for hours, through the gates and down the steps to the door. These bouncers were lords of the Earth here. They possessed all the power. If it amused them to let you pass, maybe they would. If they felt like watching you squirm, you're in for a really long night. Even standing in line here all night without getting in holds more weight, status-wise, than dancing till the wee hours somewhere else. Le Bain Douche is a slightly subdued French version of Studio 54, and I was curious to see what would transpire between the lords of the manor and a couple of mediocre-dressed guys with the nerve to walk right up to the door. Apparently, my sense of hierarchy was a little off.

"Jon!" The bouncers yelled, each with a hug. "We heard you might show. It's been too long! Who's this?" I tried my best to put a cloaking device on my shoes, with no luck. "This is my good friend Esteban, from New York. He's with me," Jon said, putting an arm around my shoulders.

"Wait a minute, I know you," said the larger one. "You're the guy who stands outside screaming in English." My face could have been a radish with eyes. I figured I was about to get bounced.

"Shit, I never knew you were a friend of Jonothon's. I'm Arturo," he shook my hand. Crushed it, really. "I'm terribly sorry about ..."

"Don't sweat it, Art. Glad to meetcha." No kings, these.

"That's Jean-Michel," Arturo said, pointing at his taciturn counterpart who stood holding the door open. "He doesn't like speaking English. Go on, have a blast!" As we walked passed Jean-Michel, I heard Arturo speaking into a two-way radio:

"Jonothon and his guest are on their way ..." The rest was drowned out by moans and groans of anger, protest, and shuffling of high heels and wing-tips as the crowd tried to get a better look at us. The only people with such easy access to Le Bain Douche, I'm told, are big-timers with serious clout. I wanted to turn and give a wave, but I'm glad I didn't. That night at Le Bain Douche was the beginning of the end.

What makes Le Bain Douche so special, so exclusive and set apart from other Paris hot spots is, well ... not much. I hope you misunderstand me correctly. It's a great place. But the club in and of itself is not what makes it special, not what makes everyone want to go. It's the people who give it the atmosphere. The thing is, these are people who go all out, often wait on line for hours, mostly because they've been programmed. Ninety-nine out of a hundred places that try the ploy of not letting people in, telling them to try again after buying a new wardrobe, going to the back of the line to invite a woman but not her boyfriend, or any other tricks to give potential guests the impression that simply being allowed inside is an honor without equal, will fail. Ninety-nine out of a hundred times the response will be akin to 'fuck this. I know a place down the street.' But for some reason, there's a flaw in the human condition that makes occasional humiliation and complete loss of free will necessary. Not often. Just enough so the one spot in a hundred is arbitrarily selected as a place to relax pride and ego by leaving them at home. Once chosen, this cantina of lost confidence will never lack for clientele, subconsciously hoping for defacement and the slim chance to rediscover self-reliance in exchange for admission. Needless to say, Le Bain Douche is that place, and it is always packed.

At the end of the hall a smiling slickster gave us both a hug and led us along the wall of the pulsating room where the crowd was thinner. Lights flashed, balloons floated, a glimpse of two people crammed in a nook who may have been fucking but I couldn't tell. I lost the view through the crowd. Despite the number of people partying with desperate abandon reserved only for the last night on Earth, (or making it through the gates into Le Bain Douche), we had no difficulties finding a table. Of course, it wasn't just empty. It had just been emptied. Clearly, Jonothon was no average guest.

The table was up against a wall, affording us full view of the dance floor. And ohmygod! What a fucking view! Truly, it was life affirming. A disproportionate number of women, scathingly gorgeous and outfitted to exude the highest possible content of sexuality. I was thankful to be sitting at a table. Were I to stand up, well, I would not be standing alone. There was no point in keeping my eyes from feasting on this gyrating, buxom buffet. I'd nearly forgotten that Jonothon was with me when he shook my arm and dragged me back to reality; or a smudged facsimile thereof. While I was busy staring, the table had been set. Two glasses filled with ice and whiskey from a bottle whose other purpose was to serve as a figurehead screen for six long white lines. Jon handed me a straw and three were gone. When I popped my head back up, a case of the too-late-nows hit me. Coke is illegal, even in France. What was I thinking, pulling lines in a crowded club next to a guy whose very presence would add thirty years to any sentence? Then again, this might be the one guy in Paris I was safe with. When I offered him the straw he refused it, saying he'd pulled already, while I'd been hypnotized. "Jon, is this safe?"

"Why not? Everyone has Tikko," he said, nodding towards a nearby table where I saw one head bent over in the act next to a guy boldly cutting lines with a razor. Oh well. In for a penny ...

A short time later, long enough for us to plow through another couple grams and well on our way to killing the bottle of whiskey, the evening managed to become even more interesting. The dance-floor provided comic relief, parading garish drag queens in eccentric and inventive evening-wear, one post-sixty year old man with no shirt jiggling saggy skin to a techno beat. Overall, though, the main draw remained the same. I've always been impressed, even a tad envious, of the incredible stamina women possess at dance clubs. Me, I can go one song, maybe two if they're short, before I'm covered in sweat and wheezing. Given, I'm a pack a day smoker who's been known to sweat in December, and hardly a pillar of fitness, but still ... These women are amazing. And why do beautiful women always dance with each other? It's a rhetorical question, so I'll accept a rhetorical answer. Is it because they don't want to dance with guys, pigs that we are? Okay, if the women are gay, sure, no problem. But that's not always the case. Maybe it's because so many guys sweat and wheeze after two songs and just can't keep up. I guess I can live with that. I bring this up because that night at Le Bain Douche I couldn't help staring at two women in particular who were dancing with one another directly in my line of sight. Granted, my line of sight was wherever these women happened to be, but it was pretty direct nonetheless. And dancing is too light a word. Grinding, maybe. If they were lesbians, I couldn't care less. More power to 'em. It was enough simply to stare for aesthetics sake. These women were as beautiful as any I'd seen, bodies to die for - let's say to kill for - and the kind of groove to light all the colors of a rainbow, in my pants. One was a blonde in a tight shimmering dress, the other a brunette wearing a fitted wife-beater not even trying to reach her bellybutton, highlighting the ring she wore there above a black skirt. Both of them, as they moved, found ample opportunities to lift already short hemlines high enough to make me feel like crying. Please don't see this as disrespectful. I'm a straight, young, hot-blooded male. All I wanted to do was look, and plus - they knew people were watching them. I mean, shit. If I had heat-ray vision, they'd be charred lumps of ash in a minute.

When they looked in my direction, I froze. When they smiled and waved, I melted. When they began to walk towards me, I nearly fell off my seat. I had no plan for this contingency. What had been a lighthearted fantasy suddenly became a nightmare as reality. This wasn't supposed to happen. They were breaking the rules. They're not meant to speak to... "Jonothon! Mon amoureux!" Oh. Well. Fuck me two times.

They spoke in French, too quickly for me to understand over the music. I smiled, I chuckled, I shook my head. Before disappearing into the crowd they kissed me on each cheek and I died happy.

"They like you," Jon said with a grin.

"How? I never said a word. I just sat here like an idiot."

"They told me. We're invited to a party next weekend. You'll speak then. More Tikko?" I did my lines and when I looked up Jonothon said quietly:

"Don't talk. Be silent. Not a word." Before I could ask what he meant, a thick black man with bulging yellow eyeballs and a shining bald head sat down at the table, facing us. The goatee did nothing to help him look friendly.

"So," he said. "You are the one. Now I see." His accent was thick, and I could feel his eyeballs probe me, like he might stop my heart from beating. Maybe he could. Speaking was impossible, regardless of Jon's request. I had no idea what was going on. All I knew is I was really scared.

"You see nothing. You look at me. What will you say, eh? What will you say to me?" Jonothon's eyes went black. If anyone had heat-ray vision, it was him. His face changed to stone, the face I see in nightmares. I tried to push through the wall. My stomach hurt terribly.

"Not now," breathed the newcomer. "Later. Alone." He took another look at me, another chance to stop my heart. I felt it losing speed. Then, slowly, he stood and backed away, swallowed by the hungry crowd.

When I dropped my eyes I caught a glimpse of a gun in Jon's hand under the table. Then it was gone.

"Jonothon, what the fuck is going on? This is bullshit. I'm supposed to be your fucking friend. Don't do this to me. Holy fuck." I was terrified. I've never slept in sheets as white as my skin had turned.

"What? No, it's nothing with you," he laughed. "You go to the cinema too much. That one and me, we have problems, but it's nothing. Have a whiskey, don't worry." He kissed me on the forehead.

Not thirty seconds later, Fabrizio emerged from the crowd.

"Hello, Esteban," he said before turning to Jon. "Aye, what happened? He sat down for a whiskey? Why did he come like this? Is he an idiot? What did he want?" Fabrizio spoke fast, all in one breath. It was the only time outside the restaurant I'd seen him without a beautiful woman on his arm, and in a club full of beautiful women it struck me suspicious.

"He wanted to say hello," Jon said with the slightest indication towards me, expecting I wouldn't see. But I saw. Fabrizio looked down at his clenched hands on the table for a moment, then at me, and back to Jon. None were happy looks.

"I'm here with Amelia," as if a name could help the nameless. "Later we go to Sandro's. I can wait here if ..."

"No, no. Go on. We're fine." My mind was on the whiskey for fear of wandering any further.

It took a lot more than one drink to calm my fears.

Have you ever seen 'Scarface'? If not, you really should. If yes, remember the scene in the dance club where there's a big shoot-out and all the mirrors bust and Pacino dives under the table and blows off the other guy's ankles? Well, this table was way too small for any cover, and I'd prefer not to be in a cocaine-related bullet-fest if it's all the same to you. I was pissed off. Then I was piss drunk. Then I was passed out. I woke up in my own bed, and after the initial confusion wore off even the pain in my head couldn't sour my relief. Jonothon was nowhere to be found. After a shower and some food, I hit the couch, tossed in 'Goodfellas', and waited for his call.

"Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to be a gangster," Henry Hill says at the start of the film.

If he knew how it was going to turn out, do you think he'd feel the same? I wonder.

A Woman's Eyes. Giving Thanks.

I didn't hear from Jonothon for three days. In fact, I didn't hear from anyone at all. The days went by like cigarettes, one after another without a single thought until it was time for a new pack. I'm not sure why, but I spent one of those days in the Louvre. For a few hours my troubles with museums took a break and I found myself actually appreciating the art. Staring at portraits of men and women who posed for them before this world existed, I tried to imagine what they might have been thinking. Certainly, thoughts along the lines of 'hurry up! My ass is asleep,' or 'should I mention how badly I need to take a leak, or just piss my pants?' have to be discarded. Posing for a photograph is uncomfortable enough. Holding a clearly uncomfortable position for hours is plain madness. But I'm glad they did. Scrutinizing the portrait of one

woman, hard face, constricting clothes, I looked for something in her eyes to define a view of existence that has since been sandblasted to make way for an entirely revised social psyche. The woman staring back at me held her position for a portrait in a world where position was already set in stone. Where even the softest whisper of equal rights was a rumor at best. She looked out upon a world where her very manner of perception was as vastly different as any difference could be. And still she looked. I don't think she's found it, whatever it is. Because standing in the Louvre that day staring at this portrait, I could see my eyes reflected in hers, and we were both still looking. I wanted so badly to know her thoughts, to find out if she knew what she was looking for. Maybe we could help each other. Maybe she could teach me to see.

When I returned to Place Vauban, I found Anais in the kitchen, slicing potatoes. It had been so long since I'd seen her, or at least felt like it had, I was thrown at first.

"Nais, what are you doing here?"

"I live here, remember? Nice to see you, too."

"Sorry. I'm just not used to, you know ... What are you making?"

"I'm cooking Thanksgiving dinner," she said indifferently, unaware of the shock caused to my system by the date's revelation.

"Thanksgiving? Seriously?" My brain made frantic calculations, trying to conclude whether time had sped by quickly, or tortoise-slow.

"Yeah. Gwillam's bringing the turkey in a few hours, and Webster's coming over with his girlfriend. Have you met Webster? He's a friend of ours from last year. Allan and Gabriela are coming, too. Oh, and I left a message for Hunter."

"Thanksgiving. Okay, then. Were there any calls for me? Any messages?"

"No, nothing. Will you help with these potatoes?"

"Sure. What am I doing, just peeling them?"

For the next hour, I peeled potatoes while Nais prepared all sorts of sides, and we talked like brothers and sisters do. Admittedly the subject of our conversation wasn't the average everyday fat-chewing you might recall having had with a sibling, but hey, life is for the living. I had mentioned Jonothon to Anais before, told her about how much fun we had together, but now I told her about more recent events like how I had the feeling I was being introduced to other industry bigwigs, and about the tense situation at Le Bain Douche. She listened with her back to me, stirring something on the stove.

"Well, that's drugs for you," she said cryptically.

"What do you mean?"

"They just keep getting bigger and bigger. It's a separate life for us now. We're not in the regular world anymore." "Okay, obviously a lifestyle is a twenty-four-seven commitment. But if not for Jon, I'd probably still be hooked on dope."

"A few weeks ago, Gwillam and I met this girl who sold morphine. I went into a bathroom with her - one of those public bathrooms - to make the score, and she gave me a hit. She had to do it, because I couldn't find a vein. It was a clean needle, they were my own works. But then I got really dizzy and blacked out."

"You what?" I stopped peeling.

"Yeah, so Gwillam told me the rest. He said he got nervous it was taking so long, and when he came around the corner he saw me lying on the sidewalk with this junkie girl slapping my face and shit to wake me up. He says the girl freaked out on him and took off. Poor Gwillam. When I woke up, he was on top of me, crying, 'Anais don't die. Please don't die.' I had totally no idea what was going on. I was like 'Gwillam, what the fuck is wrong with you?' And he told me I passed out. So then we heard sirens and he starts saying 'we have to go, Anais. Come on, we have to go' and we ran back to his apartment. The fucked up part is that once we got home, I shot him up." My sister pretends to be a woman of steel, never happy unless she's got the upper hand, unless she's giving the orders. It hurt to see her fighting tears.

"You got high off the morphine?" She lost her fight. A few tears made their uncertain way slowly down her cheeks.

"I can't believe it. All this. It's out of control. Gwillam and I are thinking about taking a trip for like a month. We have to get away from this."

I didn't know what to say. The kitchen was silent. This was my sister. Somehow, all the bullshit I'd been going through since coming to Paris had kept me from making sure she was all right. She needed a brother like never before. Nothing has ever hurt more than knowing I couldn't be it. I had lost the ability even to see what should have been brightest. My descent into black, my blindness, was complete.

"Shit," she said, wiping her face dry. "We've got to work on this dinner. Listen, don't mention this to Gwillam. We promised we'd never talk to anyone about it. Finish those potatoes."

By dinnertime, the mood had lightened considerably. Even Allan's kinda-date Gabriela was pleasant. Webster was a tall guy in black leather pants with a Morrisonesque mane of thick shoulder-length brown hair making the profession of musician an easy guess. His girlfriend also wore leather pants, only hers were red and super tight. My eyes kept floating, like an old car on a hilltop with no emergency brake, to the undeniable camel-toe she must have been aware of. Of course, I'd snatch my trouble-making eyes to attention before any serious damage was done, but they simply wanted a look. For no other reason than it was a sight they didn't see every day. I never used to think of women like I did during the cocaine period. Chris used to say that he'd think about having sex all day and all night. Every woman he looked at he thought about having sex with. Even the gross and disgusting ones, he said, because then he thought about how gross and disgusting it would be. Since coming off heroin and getting on cocaine, I'd noticed a definite change. Where once there had been a balance of sorts on which sex held far less weight as an animalistic act, now it had become SEX and things were knocked out of whack. Ironically, I began to notice this change at roughly the same time as I began to question my own poor management vis-a-vis dealings with women. Whether or not one induced the other, I don't know

On Thanksgiving night, Paris nineteen-ninety-six, I saw more food than I had eaten in months, combined. The wine, too, was plentiful. By evenings end, food-coma had overtaken us all and I felt sorry for Webster's girlfriend. Her pants were so damn tight. As impressed as I was at how much I'd been able to eat, I was amazed by Anais, Gwillam and Allan. Compared to the rest of us, they did little more than pick, but it was substantial considering their state. I've no doubt they puked most of it up later the same night, but the effort was appreciated. When the turkey settled, everyone got sluggishly to their feet and shuffled around collecting coats and saying good-byes. No kisses or handshakes, only the familiar and more meaningful sign of complete satisfaction: a hand on the belly, eyes rolling, halfcocked grin. A 'wow' optional. Only Hunter stayed behind, curled at one corner of the couch, sipping a glass of wine.

"Do you mind if I stay for a bit? I'm not ready for the Metro yet."

"Why would I mind?"

"Well, I don't know. Before, when we talked about... you know, you and me? I was afraid you'd be uncomfortable." "Don't be nuts. I mean, you know how I feel about you. And you must know how attractive I find you. But so far, you're the only woman I've slept with and not fucked things up. If I only saw you as sex, then I'm no different than the guys I used to think I could save you from." "So you don't know who you are yet? You still have to learn? Well then, don't waste time on learning what's not true. Trust what other people say about you, and trust yourself. Stop looking for reasons to contradict, because there are none." The phone rang.

Like static on a t.v-set at full blast or the sight of your last silver dollar spinning its descent through the steel of a sidewalk subway grate. Like a pair of blunt nail clippers and the frantic search for the penny on a railroad track after the train. Like the corner of a bright red candy-bar wrapper sticking out of the white sand on a virgin beach there was ugliness and uncertainty behind the glare but it blinded me, it blinded me, and I still couldn't remember how to see.

The phone stopped.

"Aye, Esteban!" It was Jonothon.

"Jon, where have you been? I was worried."

"Are you dressed? I'll be there in an hour to pick you up."

"Pick me up for what, Jon?"

"For this party of those girls you met at Le Bain Douche, remember?"

"Tonight? Shit. Hunter's here."

"Hunter can come with us, it's great! I see you in one hour." He hung up. Whose life was I living? Did these stones I walked upon belong to me at all?

"Who called?" Hunter asked.

"Jonothon. He wants us to go to some party. He'll be here in an hour. What do you think?"

"I think yes, let's go. Why not?" I had relinquished my vote, allowed someone else to decide a course of action because I had no answer for why not. And because the stones can never belong to anyone but me. And because I still had to follow.

Wet Party, Wet River, Wet Bar. Reflections Behind a Mirror.

I spent a while getting ready because I figured, hey, if I'm gonna go, I'm gonna go big. When I got back to the living room looking as cool as a watermelon on July fourth, Jonothon had joined Hunter on the couch.

"Ooh-la-la! Look at this one," Jon said and stood to give me a hug. "Tonight you don't even have to speak, eh?"

"Es, look what Jon brought for us," Hunter said with a smile and a gesture to a plate full of coke like it was a washer/dryer prize on a game show.

"Some Tikko for you, then we go," Jon said. I cut two big lines and nearly choked on them. When I stopped coughing and Jon stopped laughing I was feeling way, way up and ready for whatever might come.

"Okay, I'm ready. Let's go. What's funny, Jon?"

"This Tikko you had, it was for all of us," he laughed some more.

"Oh fuck! I'm so sorry! I figured you had some while I was getting dressed. Shit. No wonder. I almost threw up." All I needed was a heart attack to cap off thanksgiving. At least I was wearing clean underwear. There's something to be thankful for, huh? Jon was already splitting up another pile for he and Hunter, chuckling.

"No problem, no problem. It's nice to laugh."

The streets of Paris were quiet. Two A.M. approached as Jon parked the car near Quai d'Orsay. We walked towards the river, which made no sense. We could have driven to the other side.

"Jon, where are we going?"

"To a party."

"Yes, fine. But where?" We walked down the steps and stood on the river bank.

"Right here," he said, pointing at the Seine.

"In the river? Are you sure you took the right directions?"

Just then I heard the unmistakable sound of a party in the distance, getting louder, coming closer. I didn't need to see the barge to figure it out. We were going to a floating party.

"So, how do we get on the boat?" Hunter asked before I could.

"We swim. You know how to swim, yes?"

"You're out of your fucking mind, Jon. I should be in a fucking bathing suit, not my best clothes. You're nuts. I'm going home."

"No, no, no! I joke." Not to say it was a bad thing, but Jon had always been reserved since I'd known him. Tonight he seemed different. He waved at the river with a smile. A light came on, illuminating a small dinghy whose small motor, about a hundred yards ahead of the slow-moving barge, had rendered it invisible on the dark Seine. Moments later, we stepped in. The driver waited for us to sit before looping back towards the center of the barge where a rope ladder hung with a purpose. It was a pretty sweet way of getting to a party, I must admit. Easily enough we climbed up to the deck. Jon and I each got a glass of whiskey, Hunter a glass of wine, from the bartender at the other end of the ladder. Clearly this was partying as high art.

Jon and I stood by the bar to drain our first drinks and take our second, and when we moved past the nautical entrance we found Hunter chatting with an older man. Damn but she does work fast.

"This is Andree," she said, "We met once before." After making introductions, Jon and I left Hunter to her own devices. A moment later a woman's voice called out Jon's name and we spun to behold the dark-haired angel of Le Bain Douche looking even more sensational. The tight shirt she wore was clearly designed to fail at hiding anything beneath, and her black pants made it easy to notice at a glance the complete lack of undergarments. She was still barefoot, and still stunning. She kissed Jon on each cheek and then tackled me

with her brown eyes.

"Esteban, this is Camille. She wants to practice her English," Jon said with a wink. I'd heard that one before. The look I gave him may or may not have given away my thoughts: I have never in my life been so far out of my league.

"Camille," I stammered, once aware Jonathon meant to offer no assistance whatsoever, "thank you for inviting me. I've never been to a floating party before." She stood still for a moment, hands clasped behind, and stared at me with a grin. I had no clue what to do. Her eyes paralyzed me. Then, she grabbed hold of my tie and said:

"Come, Esteban. Let's make a tour," and off she went, with me dragging behind like an anxious dog on a short leash. I didn't mind one bit. I would've barked, had she asked. As a tour-guide, Camille left a lot to be desired. More accurately, there was no tour, which left Camille to be desired, a lot. She pulled me past a room full of people without slowing, then down a flight of steps and through another identical room, then down a narrow hallway where any concentration I had left was broken by the distinct sounds of sex behind a door and finally into a small chamber where she let go of my most lucky tie. Soft music played, two short couches sat against opposite walls, a mirror-top table in between. And at the far end, behind a bar, stood a blonde goddess, Camille's dance partner. It would have been the right moment to swallow hard, if there were any saliva left in my body. I tried to remember how this particular dream turned out, because I was certain I had dreamt it at some point in my life. When feeling came back to my fingers, I felt the drink they still held and I drank it. Camille lifted the emptied tumbler from hands I knew were shaking by the sounds of ice cubes against glass. My whole body had gone numb. Naive I may have been, but not stupid. Even before Camille closed the door I knew what was up, other than me. With a stride that was part schoolgirl, part cat, she floated to the bar where my drink was refilled by her long-lashed friend who brought it to the spot where my feet had cemented themselves.

"My name is Anne. I'm happy you could come to the party."

"I'm happy you invited me," I somehow managed to say.

"Please, sit down," she suggested, lightly pushing me towards a couch. Camille sidled around the bar and sat next to me, close enough to hear the fabric of her shirt expand and contract with each breath she took. Anne sat across from us and lit a cigarette, and I could feel her eyes painting me blue. Everything still seemed okay, not impossible. Camille put her hands underneath the tabletop and lifted the mirror to reveal a space the size of a cereal box in length and width, upholstered in velvet, red as Merlot. There were no corn flakes here. Tidy and organized as a rich girl's vanity set I saw all the class in cocaine. Four straws made of glass. Two small spoons, silver. One little vial with a tiny dipper attached by a chain, also silver. One tool I'd never seen resembling a very, very small garden hoe. One large ivory box packed full of highest-grade cocaine, not silver. These last two she pulled out, along with three straws, before shutting this most corrupting case, covering it with the mirror.

Anne and I watched silently as Camille poured some of the white powder onto the table where she cut and separated lines for each of us. Clearly, they'd done blow before, once or twice. Anne pulled first, and the very low cut dress she wore was no match for gravity. I was aware of staring, but it no longer mattered. The place I was at that moment put me outside boundaries set by other people secure in their authority and their bogus right to impose limits on a reality they could never know existed. One year earlier, I was drinking Natty Light out of a keg in the corner of a room whose floor stuck to the soles of my shoes, surrounded by the stench of big-guy toughies in baseball caps bearing football names who'd sooner grunt than speak, sneaking glances at the occasional girl whose oversized sweatshirt hung over torn and baggy jeans tapering to wool socks and Birkenstocks and I was happy then. Don't get me wrong. I was. It was my life,

imperfections and all, and I liked it just fine. This ... well, this was not my life. It was somebody's, but not mine. Have you ever wondered, in a day-dream, what it would be like to live someone else's life, just for a little while? At first, I thought maybe that's what I was doing. The night of the floating party, the night of Anne and Camille, I had a disturbing thought: What if someone else was living my life?

As I bent over the mirror-topped table to pull my line I knew I'd crossed the boundaries that mark the reasonable from the wholly unknown. Stone pillars of reality turned to sand and for the first time (it must always be the first) I looked from the other side. Bent over the glass straw, I glanced for an instant up Anne's dress and then quickly at my own shoes. In lightning succession I saw this:

Anne was not wearing any underwear.

I was losing my sole.

In no time at all, the three of us were ripped. The whiskey loosened me up, relaxed me. The coke sent my confidence crashing through the ceiling, not unlike the great glass Wonkavator at the end of that drug-trip movie passed off as a children's film. Yeah, okay, sure. If those chocolate bars weren't laced with PCP and the never-ending gobstoppers hadn't passed through a cauldron of LSD then I'm a goat in lingerie. Oompa-loompa-doompa-dee-doo my mutherfuckin' ass. You best keep those little blue-skinned white-haired dwarf-mutant slaves away from my kid, pal. I know what kinda secret buttons you've been pushing, you psychotic fuck. Sorry. Sorry. A little residual bitterness from double-standard society where I learned at a young age the best candy was the kind that got you so high you could float up and touch the roof-beams. Say no to Wonka , kids, trust me. He's the savviest pusher of them all.

"Jonothon says much of you," Anne said. "He says you are a good person, very kind." Camille cut more lines like they were butter.

"Well, maybe. We get along." I pulled again, looked again.

"He says you sometimes think too much. He says you are very shy and anxious with women."

"Jon told you that, did he. I see. I'll have to thank him, later."

"I know you like women. You are not gay." I needed some more whiskey for this.

"Can't fool you, eh, Anne." I was a bit rattled.

"Don't be insulted. You see, Camille and I are used to French men. We go to dance a lot, and the men look at us. Okay for looking, we are not bothered. I love to look sexy. But sometimes men want more than to look, you know, and when I want more it's okay. When I don't want the man to grab me, I don't like it. No, I am not a little girl, I know how to make a man go away, but then Camille and I stop dancing. At Le Bain Douche, you looked very much at us." My face turned the color of the velvet coke vanity. For a miserable moment I was sure they had brought me here for a lecture on respect. Were it the case, you'd never have heard this story because I would have promptly found a gun and shot myself.

"No, no cheri. Do not be ashamed. We let you look. We danced there for you."

"What are you talking about? Listen, Anne, with all due respect, I'm not an idiot. You came over to say hello to Jon, and I have the feeling he asked you to make me feel, I don't know, let's say 'really welcome'." Wow. The coke was talking, now. I was shocked. How could I have said that? How could I have insinuated the hosts of this party belonged to Jon? Insinuated to their face, no less. It wasn't like me. An early and very wet exit was all I deserved. Instead, Camille laughed.

"I love how he speaks," she said.

"No, you don't understand. Alors. I try again. French men, they are sometimes dirty with women. Italian men, Spanish men. It's true, we came to see Jonothon. It's true. I thought you were a French man. I thought you look at us dancing so much, when we sit at your table you will want to speak, to say we look sexy, to grab me or Camille. But it was okay. We see you and Jon, maybe we go out together, you know. When you turned your face and were shy, I know you're not a French man. Camille said to Jonothon 'who is he?' and he said you are his friend Esteban. We heard before you're name, and I made, you know, a photograph in my head, completely wrong. I was surprised. I thought you are wonderful, you are not a French man. More like a child. Your woman is very lucky."

The classic French accent gave Anne's voice a cadence of honey through a strainer, and though I've never been to New Orleans, I thought of wetness on a calm street reflecting the sight and the sound of a jazz funeral so sublime it steals memory without a single stick. Calling upon the depths of all my wisdom I offered Anne this gem:

"The grass is always greener." My eyelids closed slowly to allow my pupils a chance to look at the brain supposedly in control with a glare that said 'you asshole. Who let you in here? Bet you slept your way to the top, dumb fucking chimp.' I'm thankful my eyes can't speak.

"What grass do you mean?"

"I mean many American men would trade American women for French ones like you, except then maybe they'd become like French men." Conversation stopped for a coke interlude.

"Don't they like their women?"

"Well, that's just it, Anne. Over in the States, nobody is 'their' anything. Women don't belong to men that way. It's strange, confusing for American men. To us, a French man has it easy. He can grab a woman he wants. In the States, you could get tossed in jail for that. And if nothing else, you'd be looked down upon. So American men have to be very careful. They can't try too hard for what they want." Fuck. The Tikko was talking through me again. I had lost touch with my audience. They looked at me smiling.

"It was too fast," Camille confessed. "I don't understand so fast, but I like to listen."

"Never mind. I'm trying to figure things out for myself. I'm probably not the best person to talk to right now." Hard to say if it was the booze, the coke, or the two of them that made me feel so at ease. All of the above, I'm sure. The fact remained the same, which is good. We all loosened up a bit, had more fun. Camille can do this great impression of Jonothon. Hard to believe, but she had it down. After another round of whiskey and cocaine, she looked at me, lower lip tucked under top teeth and a beauty in her eyes to make me dizzy.

"Do I look nice to you?" She asked, raising her eyebrows as though she were bracing herself for the ugly truth. It wasn't ugly.

"Oh my god, Camille. Are you kidding? You look way more than nice. I can hardly believe I get to be on the same planet as you." I admit, I sugared for effect. She laughed. It was worth that.

"Why did you ask me? You know how good you look," she and Anne had some private optical conversation before letting me in on the scoop.

"Well, it's a little embarrassing now, but I want to tell. Jonothon did not ask us to do anything with you, we asked him. He was concerned, you know? He said you were shy and we would frighten you or something. Anne and me brought you here on purpose. We thought maybe to have a little romantic time, you know?."

"So, what happened?" It wasn't a secret at first, but something had changed.

"Something changed. Talking with you, I see different. You are very nice." Again, this bane of my life did its damage. This twisted bizzarro virtue whose only reward was to keep me from having sex with not one but two beautiful women. So how come it didn't bother me?

"For a long time I hated hearing a woman call me that. Nothing was worse. I used to think being nice was like a curse. I used to wish I could be an asshole, that I could treat women like shit."

"No, no, no. Why did you want this?"

"Because if I weren't nice, we might be having sex now. Because the French men you don't like, the ones who grab and throw themselves on you, they have sex. I always felt like there was something wrong with me. Maybe it's true."

"Is sex all you want?" Anne asked. "Is sex all you see?"

"No, Anne. That's what I thought my problem was. Not seeing or wanting enough. Or having, for that matter. I thought women could pick up on it somehow, and they'd become more comfortable, let me know them better because I wanted to know them and not, you know, not have sex with them. I thought it made me less of a man, having girlfriends I never slept with. So I started thinking about it more. But just thinking, not doing."

"And? Are you more happy now?"

"No. I'm not. I don't know what I am now."

"If you can see your opposite, you can see yourself. The reward for being decent will come one day, and bigger than all rewards before. I make it a promise." Anne came over and sat by me on the couch. "You know, I wanted it to happen, and in my dreams I know it will. But I'm glad it didn't. I'm glad. Because it's just not me. Not my life."

"Be careful, Esteban. I thought you were different, from what I was told about you. But now we meet, I see it's not true. You don't belong in this."

"What do you mean? Belong in what?"

"Don't you know?" She looked at me with a mother's eyes.

"You mean Jon. His profession, right? I know what he does. I know he's been introducing me to people. Listen, just after you left our table the other night, this man sat down. He was bald, a black man. Do you know him?"

"You have to talk to Jonothon. He likes you very much. But it can go too far. Maybe he doesn't see. Talk to him, he wouldn't ..."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Talk to him tonight," Anne went over to the bar and poured three new drinks, while Camille cut more lines.

For a short while, the coke had gone unnoticed, almost forgotten, and two gorgeous women without a stitch of underwear to speak of became Anne and Camille. For a short while I had the impression I could feel my own life again. I had the impression I could see.

"Here, in case. If you need anything, don't be shy," Anne handed me a slip of paper with a phone number scribbled on it and though I never saw her again, it was a great comfort. Then, we got a little high and then we got a lot.

On the Seine with T.S. Eliot. The Green Man.

Rejoining the party a long while later, it appeared little more than the scenery had shifted. Anne and Camille were eager to return to their neglected hosting duties and they left me on the front deck. The air was crisp, a cold breeze blew off the river. Most of the remaining guests were somewhere inside. Slowly, the barge moved forward. At it's bow was a stationary spotlight, a white light still and moving, illuminating one building, one empty street at a time, before it slid backwards. Between the insatiable darkness behind and the dubious black veil ahead, I set my vision on this still point of light and saw where past and future gathered. And in the light was the still point of the turning world, and I could see. I could finally see the dance. I wish I could speak with T.S. Eliot. I wish someday, when I approach my own unimaginable Zero summer, the compound ghost I meet is mostly his. Until then, I'll find the way.

"Here you are. I thought you maybe went for a swim," Jonothon stood next to me, arms over the railing, looking out. "Tel Aviv is the only city in my blood. But my heart is for Paris. You understand, I think. Paris is in you, too. The tourists, they only look at the city. They never know this city has eyes, too. Paris can see. You understand, I think. Come, it's cold. Follow me."

For tonight, it was still easy to follow.

Jonothon led me to the same room I'd been dragged earlier, though it felt much different.

"Did you see this?" Jon asked, lifting the mirror off the table.

"Yeah, they showed me. That's what I call being prepared." I went behind the bar and poured drinks while Jon cut lines.

"They're great girls. Did you have a good time?"

I told him I had a great time, which was the truth, and let him smirk with the belief he chose. We pulled our lines and I set myself to pull some information.

"Jon, I need to know what's going on with me. I feel like you aren't telling me the whole story. I like being with you because you're my friend and we have fun. I'm not interested in learning the business."

"The business learns you, Esteban. I need people I trust." And there it was. No denials, no reassurances. It threw me, this straightforwardness. I'd prepared myself to push until some truth came out. Now, all my questions were lost. I caught one, trying to slide its way through a crack in my mind.

"How come people I've never met know who I am?"

"If you work in an office, and somebody you don't know is spending all day in the director's room, you would want to find out who he was, yes? With a business like this, it's even more important. You know something about them. It's natural they want to know about you." Finally, a sensible response. Clearly, I had every intention of thinking about the situation, about the hole I'd dug myself into and about how I wanted to

get out, or if. I would have to think hard, but not yet. The lines of coke on the table and the whiskey in my glass hardly made this night conducive to such thoughts. So I kept drinking and I kept snorting and an hour later, when the sky over Paris had eschewed pitch black for dark blue, the party approached its end for us. The barge floated in the opposite direction when Jon and I made our way to the rope-ladder exit. Apparently Hunter had gone home with Andree while I was busy. Down the rope and into the dinghy, we jumped out onto the same piece of land we'd left hours earlier.

"I'll walk home from here," I said when we were back on the street. It was a short walk.

"No, no. I'll drop you. I need a hand with something before, very quick." Jon was already walking towards his car. Well, after countless dollars of free coke I could hardly refuse him a favor. After all, what are friends for? The sun began to finalize preparations for its rise slowly, maybe ashamed of its weakness. Before the car's heat geared up I could see my breath.

"So, what do you need me to do?" I asked as we sped towards the twentieth, the area of Pere-Lachaise.

"Just a drop-off, while I go take care of something. Then I pick you up and we go home." Jon pulled up to a curb and left the motor running.

"In the trunk are two boxes. Take the smaller one and go to the door there," he pointed out a black doorway. "Ring the bell and give them your name. Someone will let you in and tell you what to do. Very easy. They know you're coming."

"So what's in the box, Jon?" I asked, even though I knew.

"Wine," he said.

"Wine, huh? How many bottles?"

"Three bottles of very good wine."

I nodded in resignation and stepped out of the car, went to the trunk.

(At this point, those of you who think I could have simply said 'no, I'd rather not do this Jon, if it's all the same to you' might as well stop reading and go for a walk or something). "I ring the bell when I come back," Jon said, and drove away.

Morning was with me, but the city was quiet.

I knew what was reality only because the weight in my arms forced me to know, whether I believed it or not. I knew I was standing alone in the middle of the sidewalk holding a box filled with three kilos of pure cocaine and I wondered if my life-stones would have any effect after thirty years in jail. This was not my life. I had to start looking. I had to find it.

I had to get rid of this fucking box.

At the door, I rang the bell.

"Allo?" Came a voice from the speaker.

"I'm Esteban. Jonathon's friend," I said, solid as possible.

"Moment." It felt like more.

Hearing the dead-bolt slide I took a deep breath and searched for fear. I found none, which scared me. The door swung open and a large man waved me in. As he bolted the door shut I noticed with passing interest the gun tucked in his belt.

"Floor," he said, meaning the box. "Arms," and I lifted them. Though conventionally a man of few words, his hands spoke volumes. The search was so complete he knew better than I did how much change was in my pockets.

"Open," he pointed at my package. I opened it and saw sacks of clear plastic stuffed with cocaine and though I've never walked out of a movie I wish I could have walked out of this one. When he was satisfied with his search he handed the box back.

"Come."

The pounded sheet-metal covering the walls of this long, narrow hallway gave an illusion of disconcerting size while remaining a tough spot for claustrophobics. At the end was another door, upon which my tacit guide knocked. It opened a crack and he said my name. It flung wide to reveal a short man in late middle-age wearing a green suit never meant for this hour of the day. I stepped over the second threshold and the door shut behind me. Another overdressed guy lifted the box from my arms and the Green Man gave me a hug and shook my shoulders with a smile.

"Good boy! Good boy!" he said, leading me to a table where we sat. The room looked as though it might double as a small nightclub in the evenings, but now it was empty and quiet. The box was placed in front of him and he asked what I drank, but gave the answer himself.

"Mario, a whiskey for my friend," and then, cutting open a bag from the box he said, "let's see what you bring." With a finger he put some on his tongue, concentrating the way a connoisseur of wine might, before slapping me on the back and laughing.

"Good boy! Good boy! Ah, your whiskey, salut!" I took the glass from Mario and he took the box. The Green Man and I touched glasses and drank, and as the warmth reached my stomach, Mario returned and whispered in the Green Man's ear.

"Jonothon waits outside. Soon we drink again, yes? Mario, show my friend out. Good boy!" When I was back on the cold street with the black door closed behind, I realized I hadn't spoken a single word on the other side of it. I was glad about that. I would rather not exist in that world.

In the car, Jonothon asked if everything went well.

"Fine. How come they didn't give me any money?" It struck me as a curious omission.

"Old customers. Better not to have cash and Tikko exchanged directly. Less problems." I left it alone. Didn't really want to know, anyway. I was never going to make another delivery again. The rest of the ride home was in silence. Paris had begun to awaken with no rush. The shopkeepers rolled down their awnings, filled their fruit stands, swept their doorways, all of them exuding a sense that this was just another day. Paris has seen better than two-thousand years worth of mornings with no signs of throwing in the towel. Like any other city, every day in Paris is a new day, but if past is prologue, and matched with the present is contained in the future, then a day in Paris is nothing like a day anywhere else. As this day found its legs, we pulled up to Pláce Vauban and Jon shook my hand.

"I'm glad we met," he said.

"Me too, Jon. Me too."

I never saw Jonothon again.

Destroyer and Preserver.

The apartment was cold. I'd forgotten to close the windows. In bed I pulled the comforter close, wrapped it around me. I wanted to sleep for ten years, wake up rested and new, removed from these actions perpetrated while living a life that was not my life. Though well short of ten years, I did sleep a very long time.

Looking in the mirror I saw the same person.

"When are you going to leave me alone?" I asked my reflection. Astonishingly, my reflection answered. Not literally of course, (I hadn't taken that sort of drug recently). It came in the form of a phone call. I assumed it was Jonothon, but I was wrong.

"Allo, Allo, Esteban. All goes well?"

"Phillipe, how are you?"

"Fine. I buy a new disc to hear. Are you busy?"

"No, not busy. What time is it?"

"Almost four." He meant the afternoon. I had no idea whatsoever if it was four on the same day I'd gone to bed or the day after. Hardly important.

"Yeah, come on over, Phillipe. I'll be here. Or someone who looks exactly like me."

After a quick shower I brewed some coffee and stood drinking it in the kitchen, looking station to station where memories hid, like lifting a rock to see the bugs underneath scurry away as if caught naked. The trash can first, its lid level with the counter by the sink. I'd thought it was meant for wine bottles, until Jessica set me straight. I wondered where she might be, but not too much. Next, the stove, and the way its predecessor died horribly, screaming and wailing until I almost went crazy. My threshold for madness has since expanded greatly. And there was the table, where on a night long, long ago, all my troubles began. I missed heroin the way I miss friends. The sound of a doorbell cut short remembrance. The disc Phillipe brought was live Coltrane and it was nice. Once we'd lit our cigars, the walls started to crumble.

"How are things going with Jonothon?" He asked.

"Well, to be honest, I don't know."

"Have you done anything for him, any favors?"

"Just last night, or maybe the night before. Actually, it was early in the morning. I'm not sure how long I've been asleep. Yeah, he asked me to do something."

"A delivery, yes? You can tell me," he leaned forward.

"I made a delivery, yes. Somewhere in the twentieth." He sat back and took a long drag off his cigar, rolled it around in his fingers before exhaling a pungent cloud of thick white smoke.

"Listen to me. Jonothon is in trouble. He was in trouble before you met him. This business is complicated.

Where you live, in New York, it's less complicated, because it's run by animals. Jonothon is not in charge. In this business, there are rules. Jonothon does not respect the rules enough. He has broken too many. The drugs have gone to his head, made him forget."

Phillipe sucked on his Cuban again, and I asked:

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because it is not your problem, and you don't want it to be. I tell you this because you don't know, and this makes things worse."

"Okay, now Phillipe, this has gotten way out of hand. I never asked to be any part of it. At Le Bain Douche, there was a black guy, bald, with a goatee. I thought he might kill me right there. Fuck, I don't know anything about this shit. I don't know how to deal with this stuff. It never occurred to me that it would ever go this far." I could sense tears behind my eyes, and it wasn't from the cigar smoke. One summer, years and years ago, I tried rock-climbing in Vermont. It was something I'd never tried before, because I knew it would be terrible. I thought if I gave it a shot, maybe overcoming the fear would be a great experience. Not a very good thought. Tied up in the most uncomfortable way and starting to climb, it seemed doable. About halfway, the fear kicked in and I felt it would explode out of my stomach like a gestated alien. Instead, it turned my body into stone, as hard and cold as the one I clung to. There was no way I could move. Not down, certainly not up. The utter hopelessness that overcame me was startling. The fear, as it took hold, devastating. My mind lost all ability to reason, concluding the sole means of escape to be inevitable death. There was no way out.

"It never should have gone so far." Phillipe agreed. "The man you ask about, he has lost because you have gained."

"But I haven't gained anything," I nearly shouted. "You know that." "I know, which is why I'm here now. He does not know."

"What do I do? Help me, Phillipe. I don't know what to do."

"Go away for a while, a few weeks. I'll talk to Jonothon, get this fixed" "Go away? When? Where?"
"Anywhere. Tonight, if possible."

"Tonight? Jesus, Phillipe. This is a fucking joke." My voice cracked. Tears fell. Always, I let things happen to me. Now, I had a few hours to change my whole way of thinking. I was really scared.

"I offer my advice. If you choose not to take it, I cannot protect you. Too many people know who you are, and where. If they get to you, they can get to Jonothon. And if they get to Jonothon ... Give me two weeks, or better, three. This has not yet gone out of control. The blame is not yours. If you go now, there is a chance all will be resolved."

"How? How can I go? I have no money. I can barely afford a god damn cab ride for fuck's sake. How did this happen? What happened to my life?" Coltrane riffed, a sound alone. Smooth-sided implications slid under the door. The golden dome watched intently through the window and the smoke hung in the air like a lie. Phillipe pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket. The distinct shape immediately gave away its contents.

"Two thousand dollars, US. Not a loan," he said.

"Phillipe, why are you doing this?"

"It's not about you. I like you, but that is second. If you refuse this and don't go away, the trouble could easily last longer and cost more. Take it, and go. And when you come back, don't contact anyone. Pretend it never happened. Bon chance."

I was the voice that cried from a saxophone in a crowded room without walls. I was myself. I was where all my memory ended and I was never who I had been. And I was alone. Who held the stones, now?

Phillipe was gone. A stink of cigars and a sound of Coltrane stayed behind. When I opened the envelope he'd tossed on the table, there was no chance to stop the tears. I was so tired, so lost. This past year had been spent running from my life. Now, I had to start running for it.

Making an Escape. Conversations with a River.

It's hard to pack when you don't know where you're going. Back to New York was the wrong place just then. Tossing responsibility and jumping a plane would require too many answers to too many questions. More importantly, there were no available seats for the next week. I checked. Amsterdam was a thought. I had run there before, to escape. But I felt my mind should be sharp. There was too much to deal with, and Amsterdam burned thought. Going south, maybe Venice or Rome, seemed almost to fit the criteria, but something was missing. I had been there before. I had memories. It should be someplace new, but where? The pressure to decide was stifling. Pacing through the apartment, I found a week-old copy of the Herald Tribune and started to flip through it to calm my nerves, hoping to ease my mind enough to figure out a destination. Unable to concentrate on the articles, I just turned the pages. Midway through, I stopped cold and stared at a full-page ad and the one word that saved me.

'EuroStar'.

The sound of a life-stone skipping across the English Channel is nothing like the sound of John Coltrane.

I was going to London.

After calling the number listed on the ad and making a reservation for that evening, I called Gwillam's house.

"Hello?" Anais slurred into the phone.

"Nais, listen, I'm going away for a few weeks."

"When?" I could hear the heroin in her voice, and felt bitten by my failure to help her.

"Tonight. Is everything okay?"

"Fine. We probably won't be here when you get back though. Gwillam's mom invited us to Greece. We both really need some time off this shit. Why are you going?"

"Same reason. I'm glad you can get away. Try and clean up, okay? And if I don't see you back in Paris, I'll see you soon." If my situation were different, I'd be less helpless. Right then, I knew I couldn't save anyone if I couldn't save myself. Soon, the running had to stop. Whether the finish line was the end of this race or the end of me was incidental. One way or another, the end was coming.

I left a message on Hunter's answering machine to tell her I was going, but not where. It seemed better to keep the destination to myself, avoid the stress that someone might come looking. When I finished packing,

I took a last look around the apartment.

"How come I had to fuck this up?" I asked the empty rooms. They couldn't tell me, or wouldn't. The smell of cigars still lingered as I walked out the door.

The EuroStar, a train that runs from the center of Paris to the center of London in just a few hours, was still a pretty recent achievement when I embarked. Inside, it looks a lot like coach-class on an airplane, with a little more leg-room. When we pulled out of Paris, it wasn't even half full. The reason, I felt sure, was that we'd be getting into Waterloo station somewhere around four in the morning. Arriving in a foreign city at four AM with no place to stay is not something I'd recommend. Actually, there's very few of my travel strategies I would recommend. Leaning back, I tried to sleep, aware that the reality and the reasons behind my trip would not fully sink in for a while. Who's face would I find in an English mirror?

Waterloo station was understandably empty. After a quick slide through customs, during which I breathed a sigh of relief that I'd remembered to bring my passport, I stepped onto the streets of London for the first time.

It was cold, and dark. I had no clue where to go, and no money to get there. All the currency exchange booths were closed at this hour, adding some extra spice to my story. There were a few cabs parked in front of the station. English cabs are a far cry from the eyesores that paint New York City streets bright yellow. And, amazingly, the cab drivers in London actually speak the same language as the majority of their passengers. One of them called out to me.

"Lookin' for a ride, sir?" I walked over, noting he actually sat where he was supposed to be sitting, and not on the passenger side as my unaccustomed eyes had first thought. I defy you to see this in practice without at least an instant of confusion the first time. "Well," I said, "I am looking for a ride but I don't think I can get one."

"Now, why's that?" "I don't have any money. I mean, I have money, but not the right kind."

"In forty-one years I have yet to see any money that's wrong. Whatcha got, American?"

"Yeah, American. But only big bills. Maybe you can point me in the right direction to walk into the center."

"You're a long walk from the center of anything, here. If you're lookin for a hotel like, probably around Victoria Station's the place. Lotsa younger people stay over there. Cheap but decent."

"Sounds good. Which way?"

"Make a left outta the station, then you ... you don't want to walk it. I know a hotel, fancy one, not two minutes from the street you're lookin for. I bet they'll change money there. Come on, get in."

"What if they don't change? I'm not a guest." I wanted terribly to accept his offer.

"Hell, if they don't, you can send it to me."

There is so much space inside an English cab that the thought of setting up a table for lunch came to mind every time I rode in one. No need to dine alone, either. The partition separating the spacious passenger compartment from the driver is equipped with a pair of fold-out seats.

"So you're from America, that right, then?" the driver asked.

"Yes. New York."

"Ever been to London before?"

"Nope. First time. Any suggestions?"

"Sure. London's the place. But if you got some time, Edinburgh's worth a visit. Lotta Yanks go up there." We chatted like this for awhile, until he pulled up in front of a swanky hotel where they wouldn't change my dollars into pounds but I convinced them to give me five twenties for a c-note. One of those went to the cab driver, the extra tip for his kindness, and he pointed out the street where I might find a bed.

This was one of those streets lined with one hotel after another, without a single feature to distinguish them except for a name that seemed purposely selected to be forgotten as quickly as it was read. 'The Paradise', 'The Three Moons', 'The Two Sisters', 'The Full Moon', 'The Paradiso', 'The Four Brothers' and so on. All of them, however, were booked for the night. Except one, about three blocks down, two up from the corner. I walked in and saw a Pakistani guy watching television, nodding towards sleep. Though I felt bad about waking him, I felt worse about not.

"HI," I said loudly, snapping him awake. "Sorry to come in so late. I was hoping to find a room." Clearly disturbed, he got up and sluggishly went behind the desk, rubbing his eyes before checking the ledger.

"Only double room, okay," yawned the man. "If you are wanting it, I am giving you single room price plus ten percent. Breakfast including. Okay?"

"Okay, sounds good." I filled out the card quickly.

"You are paying now for first night, okay?" his eyes wandered to the t.v.

"You take dollars?"

"Okay, you are making deposit and tomorrow changing for Pounds, okay?"

"Okay."

The room was on the fifth floor, the top floor, and my breath was short when I keyed in. It was good enough, on the low end. No toilet, but it had a sink if I didn't feel like walking down a flight. Sleep came like a forgone conclusion.

Sunlight through the small window woke me to an English afternoon, and after a shower I dressed and went out. It was the right call, coming here. Not just London, but somewhere unknown. The newness of this place, like others before, got me high with discovery. A particular sight, a building or museum I should visit simply for reputation's sake, meant nothing. Every single step was a new step, unfamiliar and important not because it was in London, but because I was in London. My history is now and England. Here on this island where T.S. Eliot found the beginning in his end I found his words amplified in my head: "In my end is my beginning." And with each step a velvet rope pulled aside allowing my life and my self to come together at this point where I had no past and no real future, and I knew things were not done. I knew I would go on, that I had not come to the absolute end but to the uncertain limbo that felt like it could be the last lunge of an ordeal I once feared I'd never escape. And the knowing was a way out, or a way back. The perpetual outsider knows there is a place where the fire burns warm for a moment without time. Here, at the river Thames, I found it. Here, the intersection of my timeless moment was England and nowhere. Never and always. The Tiber twists through the center of Rome, slicing it in two. In Cairo, the Nile brings life. A castle in Prague is worthless, its tenant's royal claims puerile, without an unobstructed view of the Vitava flowing thicker than blood. The Danube ascends to all-importance, literally splitting Buda from Pest like an uncrossable battle-line where both sides of the same city swarm its banks and stare each other down. This

list, like its subject, goes on and on. Nothing in North America comes close to the matchless eloquence of a river that can speak with a thousand voices. They run through cities explicitly built up around them, a process begun when no other form of commerce was realistically viable. These are cities whose very existence can truly be credited to the rivers flowing through them, and no matter what changes technology has wrought, the gratitude and the respect is a debt that will always be paid. Certainly, American cities have rivers as well, just as endless, just as powerful. But it's not the same. It never can be. The part they play is a different part. The Hudson river and the East river in New York are scoffed at, mentioned more for the preposterous tons of waste and garbage they carry than anything else. The Charles river in Boston doesn't run through the city, but rather separates it from Cambridge, and it's too damn wide. Sure, there are others, I know. Mark Twain might argue violently for the Old Man River, if he weren't dead. It doesn't matter, though. An urban river is much, much more than that. Siddhartha found the absolute within a river. Atop the list of the worlds greatest, in a dead heat, are the Seine I ran from, and the Thames I ran to.

The river is wide, and where I stood wrapped in a coat there wasn't much else to cloud my vision. The cold was perfect. It chiseled my mind, focused my thoughts. It woke me. And the river sang. I could hear its voice. For so long, there have been too many voices. Voices telling me what to do, where to go. Voices telling me how to think, how to live my life. But the voices were not my own. I listened to the voice of the river that day. It said I should stop letting the journey take me, and start letting myself take the journey. It told me to listen to nobody's voice before mine, and I could hear. In the birthplace of my language, I listened to the river speak in the only voice I could have ever heard. I listened to my voice in the river.

The stones on the path of my life led me to the bank of the river Thames in London before I remembered just who had been laying them down in the first place. For a long time, I had forgotten. For too long, I had been throwing the stones rather than placing them, seemingly more intent on lightening my load than on building a road.

Somewhere in Paris, maybe even before, the road I walked ceased to be. The stones remained beneath my feet, but they were slick and less secure. I used to believe the road had some destination, some purpose. I used to think I could simply follow where it led and reach whatever end it steered me towards. Here at the river I realized the stones were just stones, inanimate, thoughtless. No judgment, no fear, no understanding inherent within. All these had to come from me, if I meant to continue the walk. And I had to continue. But my feet were so tired, and my shoes so battered that black rubber hung loose from the left one. I was losing my sole.

Turning my back on the Thames, I walked in pain and silence for miles before realizing where I was going. In the latest part of afternoon, I reached Camdentown.

Like Paris, Rome, Tokyo and New York, London is one of those cities that even the poorest goat-herder in Bangladesh has heard of, no matter that he's already eaten all his goats to keep from starving to death. One reason it's so great is the sense of neighborhood. The distinction between one area and another is so pronounced it's more like voluntary segregation. From shops to restaurants to the people on the streets, the separateness is eclipsed only by language, and even that just barely. Camdentown is a neighborhood where the sidewalks overflow with people, blue-collar and dog-collar, peering into shops lining the street, setting the tone of a summertime flea-market. Although the December chill made summer seem the product of an overactive imagination, most shops kept their doors thrown defiantly wide. Strolling by one after another, an unmistakable motif became apparent. Nearly two-thirds of the shops sold shoes. The time had come, at long last. Picking a shop at random, I took a deep breath and entered

You must understand, buying a new pair of shoes constitutes a momentous event for me. The shoes I wear enter into a most special, even sacred, relationship with my feet and everything attached. They are the instruments, the actual link, to the path of life. It's not that I have an obsession with shoes. I don't spend

hundreds of dollars or search for a specific or flashy pair. At any given time I own one pair, and I wear them until they simply give up. It takes a while, a year or more, so an attachment is solidified to the point where I push them further than I should because somehow I feel I owe it to them. The shoes I wore then were shoes I'd bought before going to Paris, and they'd been through so much with me. It was time to put them to rest, and maybe it's hard for you to understand, but it hurt.

As quickly as I could manage, I chose a pair and wore them out of the store. I always buy virtually the same shoes because it's one of the few areas of my life where I know what I know, and I like what I like. With my old beat-up friends packed into the box of their younger and stronger replacements, (an arrangement that always seems unjust to me), I found a bus stop and soon enough, I was back in my room.

Evening was tossing pebbles at the window, and like an obedient lover I went out to meet it. A new pair of shoes can be like romance. First, the courting, when both parties are blinded by love and how great life is. With every step, I felt I was walking on air. But like every romance, the courtship that seems as if it should go on forever never does. Invariably, there is friction; there are painful, stinging blisters. And finally, if all goes well, two feet and two shoes can accept and grow into one another. I know. I've been through it. With shoes, anyway.

The comfort of walking goaded me to continue on and on. I passed Westminster Abbey and a warmth filled my belly despite the cold. I was so grateful to find I hadn't lost that warmth. It put an additional spring in my already springing steps. Nor had I lost my spider-like city-sense, the one that gives me confidence to find my way in any urban environment. There was never any doubt about which direction to walk. That came later.

Trafalgar Square would look impressive to a blind man. Entering through a freestanding archway, it's like passing through a portal. A light switched on, I could almost hear a crowd of people shout 'surprise!' and disclose themselves as the bright lights at the core of London Town appeared before me proving they had been there, all along. Crossing the raucous road I came face to face with the giant majestic lion that keeps watch, constant and stoic, over all who pass. Behind it is the National Gallery, a huge museum where, later, I spent more consecutive hours than I have in any other. And around one side of this building, the London I looked for was found. Covent Garden was full of people that night, as most every night, and the atmosphere was excellent. The cold had not yet reached an unacceptable level of physical discomfort, so strolling outdoors was still a leisure activity. I sat on a bench by a musician playing a pretty good acoustic set and watched English men and English women enjoy the English evening. I was an outsider, but I didn't mind. I guess I've been one all my life, and I've learned to make the most of my perspective. Whether an outsider in a foreign city, or in my own mind, the lessons make me whoever I am. Outside looking in is not such a bad place to be. Next to me, the musician stopped to put on gloves, with tips cut so his fingers could still play. They played Robert Johnson, and though they played well the cold prompted me into motion. I tossed a few Pounds into his tattered guitar case and moved on. I needed a drink. Alcohol is a drug whose appeal has always been inconsistent. Were it illegal, expensive, and difficult to come by, I would've had my phase and been done. But since we live in a world where certain drugs are legal and certain ones aren't very often for no good reason, there comes a point when trying to figure out why the system is so fucked breeds nothing more than frustration and contempt. If you can't beat 'em, you can join 'em and never feel guilty about fuckin' em right back. But when I say I'm not a drinker, I don't mean I never drink. Let me tell you a theory I have to explain my use of Babylon's number one depressant: There's an imaginary conveyor belt running from the center of my liver to the center of my brain, spinning round and round. It's not constant, this spinning. Sometimes, it doesn't spin at all. And there's no specific speed. Its machinations defy even the best attempts at prediction. This conveyor belt carries nothing except a single, narrow, slightly raised band that I call the 'Drunk-o-Meter'. Additionally, there exists an enigmatic transparent rectangle, termed 'the Window of Bombosity', that appears without warning above any part of the conveyor belt at any time. This Window works in an entirely random fashion, presenting no pattern for where or when it might show up

next, and gives no clue how long it intends to stay. If I drink alcohol when the Window is not open, it feels like swallowing glass. If the Window is open over an empty section of conveyor belt when I drink, I quickly get a headache and wish I hadn't started drinking in the first place. But, every once in a while, the Window of Bombosity will open directly over the Drunk-o-Meter, and then, look out. I can drink booze like it was water and become ecstatically drunk with nothing to stop me but sunrise. When everything clicks and matches up, I never question. No matter the time or place, I find myself some liquor and pour it down my gleeful gullet, because there's no telling how long it might last. For reasons I can't explain, the Window of Bombosity opened over my Drunk-o-Meter on my first full night in Great Britain and it didn't close until my last. Call it a whiskey intervention, if you like. For the next few weeks, I was totally shit-canned.

It started in a bar called 'Belushi's' near Covent Garden where I got entirely inebriated on Jack and Cokes with a couple of guys who recognized my accent. They were friendly guys, and funny, and we drank the night away. By the time we were all kicked out, I was walking rather unevenly and they were shouting gibberish at the street. Around a corner, we stopped at a phone booth so one of the guys could make a call while his buddy and I swayed on the sidewalk. I walked to the corner and had a smoke, and, to my amused befuddlement, Michael Palin of 'Monty Python' fame walked by. I stumbled back to the phone booth where the one guy was still chatting away, and I said to the other guy:

"Hey, that was Michael Palin." His eyes got huge, he was overly stunned by my information.

"What!? Where?!" he shouted, grabbing me.

"Down the street there, in the overcoat." With a speed unusual for a man so drunk he tore into the booth and spun his surprised friend around.

"Michael Palin! Michael Palin! Come on!" and the two shot off like a flash, running down the street in pursuit. I was left momentarily hypnotized by the receiver in the phone booth swinging from its cord like a man who'd just been hanged. Turning in the opposite direction, I walked away with a chuckle.

At a now empty Trafalgar Square, I decided to find my way, on foot, back to my shoddy little room near Victoria Station. Taking a butcher's (from 'butcher's hook', Cockney slang for 'look'), I noticed an unfortunate fact: the archway through which I'd entered had three possible directions leading away from it, and in my current state I had no idea which one to take. Relying upon the well-documented axiom that a drunk can always find the way home, I put my faith in my internal homing device and just went. About half an hour down the first frog (from 'frog and toad', Cockney slang for 'road'), it became evident I had chosen poorly. Half an hour back and I was in Trafalgar Square again, armed now with far better odds. Forty minutes later I took my lumps and turned around a second time. With amused frustration I came again to Trafalgar Square, not quite as impressive as it had been the first three times that night. My comfort came in knowing I was at least seeing the city, albeit in the dark and in a state of mind guaranteeing I'd have no memory of what I saw in the morning. Here at this historic spot in this historic city - birthplace of a language I seemed to have forgotten - I felt sure the stone lion was laughing at me. With only one option left, I marched off. Just under two hours later I turned down the street with more hotels than many small countries and began to search for mine. After two or three abortive attempts, I triumphantly found the right one and dizzily dragged myself up the five flights of apples (from 'apples and pears', Cockney slang for 'stairs') to my room. After attending to my duties in the bathroom (I'd call it a 'loo' if it weren't really the sink in my room), I turned on the telly, stripped to my knickers and socks and fell into the moderately comfortable bed. The last twenty minutes of 'The Odessa Files' was on, which I mention only because it's become an eerily coincidental twenty minutes. I have never in my life seen any other part of the film, but since the first time I saw those twenty minutes in London, I've seen the exact same twenty minutes on nearly a dozen subsequent occasions. When it was over, and I was through pissing and moaning about the lack of a remote, and I was through pissing and pissing in the sink, I cursed myself for not having canceled the wake-

up call set to disturb me in just a few hours. None of these things, however, kept me from dropping like shit from a moose into a hard-alcohol slumber. I was painfully torn from that slumber with all new curses for the wake-up call and for the mythical hangover pervading the whole of my existence. My eyes stayed shut, quickly deducing that if my ears exaggerated the sound of the phone to so a great an extent, then daylight would rip through my brain like a twenty millimeter cannon shell. That I was unusually sweaty - soaked, in fact - was a thought without a chance in hell against the dull pounding threatening to implode my cranium. My God, the ringing! The murderous fucking ringing had to stop! Reaching over blindly for the phone doing all I could to move as little as possible, I lifted the receiver (it was rather slick, but I managed to hold on) and I slammed it back into its shit-eating cradle, stopping the vicious sound with authority.

Problem:

The ringing continued.

Insipid, no good, dumb fucking sound. Why do you persist? Answer me, dammit!

Somehow, over this all-encompassing noise, through a hangover capable of beaching a whale, the 'use in case of emergency' portion of my brain switched on, coordinating aspects of the situation beyond the scope of my dulled senses.

Ringling ... wet ... hung up phone ... still ringling ... still wet.

Receiving the dreaded call to open my eyes and see just what the fuck was going on, I braced myself against the inevitable searing pain and reluctantly cracked my lids. It seems odd, but it wasn't until my eyes were open (halfway was as far as they got, override or no override) that my skin came to life. I was soaked to the point of concern, and as realization slowly dawned upon me, my mind struck back with an officious nuclear-powered blast strong enough to put a lesser man down on the mat. But not me. No, I had to stand up on shaky knees and hold my head to make sure it wouldn't fall off to better assess my situation. For some reason, this new perspective was necessary to allow for verification. The ringling was a fire-alarm, and what I had initially taken to be my own sweat was actually water from the sprinklers that had been running for an unknown period of time. At this point, I asked the relevant deity the irrelevant question:

"Oh. My. Fucking. God. Can you believe this SHIT?"

I paused a moment in case there was an answer, and then sprung into action. Well, 'sprung' is maybe the wrong word, in the same way that 'active' would be wrong in describing a dead person. I reached for my wet T-shirt on the floor and put it on. It was actually more suction than anything else, reminiscent of the sound you make biting into an apple, or bare skin lifting off hot vinyl in summertime. With my hand on the doorknob, I had the feeling I think everybody knows: hesitating almost for the sheer act of the hesitation, like your body's telling you there's something you forgot but your mind's as empty as an Ethiopian kid's lunch-box. Cigarettes, of course, right there by the sink.

Stumbling down the apples, I half-expected to run into a wall of flames around each turn. No such luck. Not even smoke. And when I dropped out into the cold of early-morning London in December, my brain doused me in more punishment. It elected that particular moment to inform me that I was standing in the frog wearing a wet T-shirt, socks, and a pair of boxers.

I began whispering under my breath.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck ..."

Taking a butcher's to see if the flames had reached the top floor presented a whole new set of problems for

my hangover, both in physical movement as well as the deafening realization it brought. As I stood there on the frog without any pants, the wreckage of my brain chose to produce and direct a new series of potential horrors. Everything I had was in my bag, which was in my room, which would surely be on fire. So, to take stock, I would be alone in a foreign land with no money, no passport, no identification, no shoes, and no pants. I did possess an Olympic-class hangover and half a pack of cigarettes, though. I took one out and could only stare in devastated defeat. It was soaking wet. Dazed and stunned, I tried to figure out how I would make it to the US embassy without getting arrested and convince them there was a legitimate reason for being in my underwear when the fire truck appeared. The sound of its horn pounded my head the way a croquet mallet might pound a grapefruit, leaving me precious little ability to hear what the gruff fireman explained to the ragged crew of boarders loafing about outside hours earlier than they'd planned. Apparently, after having a butcher's down the apples, the fireman concluded that a grease fire had started in the basement kitchen, and before anyone could put it out, it managed to set off the sprinkler system. He asked everyone to wait in the frog until he gave the all clear. I couldn't Adam and Eve it (Cockney slang for 'believe it'). A lousy fucking grease fire, and how do you like them bangers and mash? Grateful at least that the lacerating alarm had fallen silent, I trudged seethingly up to my room, each step squeezing more water out of the old and dirty carpet for my socks to absorb, and threw on the driest pair of pants I could find. Then, my bag over a shoulder, (a bag now thirty pounds heavier than it had been the night before), I left this nameless hotel hoping that next time it burned to the ground. Finding a room further on down the street, I called it done and slept for hours.

Even so, I spent good days in London, breaking in a new pair of shoes, reading Philip K. Dick novels, eating Indian food, drinking lots of booze, learning how to walk. Most nights ended in Leicester Square, (pronounced 'Lester') where the bright lights and the eclectic crowd provided a great deal of entertainment. I went to the theater a few times, spent hours in the National Gallery with a headset-guide, bought a pair of gloves on Saville Row, and I was alone. It wasn't perfect, by any means. There was no way to ignore the reasons I was there. But I didn't crave it. The cocaine, I mean. I never felt any serious withdrawal. I missed doing it, sure. But I didn't wish I were. To this day, I still have moments when I think 'it would be great to have some heroin right now'. Not coke, though. It felt like an escape without having to gnaw my foot off to get out of the trap.

One day in London, I had an urge to call my brother. He always seems to know people all over the world, and I thought it might be nice to play house-guest for a night or two. Sure enough, he arranged for me to stay with the family of a friend and early that evening I walked through their gate and rang the bell. The house was on Camden Hill, clearly high-class. Standing on the stoop I had an overwhelming sense that I had seen this place before, and quickly figured out why. The street looked identical to one in the movie 'Hook'. You know, the movie about Peter Pan grown up? The front door swung open and a friendly voice said:

"You must be Esteban. Come in! Welcome!"

"Thanks," I said, shaking his large hand. "This street reminds me of 'Hook'. Have you seen that movie?"

"Sure. They filmed it here. Would you like a beer?"

"Yes, thank you. No wonder it looks so familiar." As I dropped my bag on the floor and took the offered bottle I felt immediately at home.

"Actually, James Barrie lived two houses over, so this is definitely the place."

It definitely was. After dinner I strolled through the neighborhood, quiet and residential, subdued and classy in all the ways I would have expected from this city. I wound up getting drunk in a local pub called 'The

Winston Churchill' where an old-timer told me a story about Churchill's character. Apparently, the Prime Minister had been stumbling around the house at eleven Downing Street one evening when he ran into a woman with some kind of royal title.

"Mr. Churchill," she said appalled, "you're drunk!" to which he replied:

"Yes, and you're ugly. But tomorrow, I'll be sober." Whether this happened or not, whether he said those words, is irrelevant. It was worth a good laugh with an old man in a London pub. I had begun to lose interest in being who I wasn't.

City of Garlic. The Edinburgh Recourse.

A stone wall surrounds the city of York, built before my distant ancestors' ancestors were born. There's an ordinance there, unrepealed, which I think defines the city pretty well. If a native citizen of York sees a Scotsman inside the city walls, he can shoot and kill him without technically breaking any laws, provided he does so with a bow and arrow. It's an interesting place. One night I took a guided tour of the 'haunted' city, getting a look at about a dozen buildings where ghosts purportedly make their eternal home. According to the tour guide, York was once known as the city of garlic, due to the stench from hundreds of cloves hung outside nearly every door to protect against unwanted visits from the undead. After my ghost tour, I popped into a pub and had a few drinks near a group of thick men who'd clearly started boozing much earlier. Not long after they left, I did as well, though I didn't get far. Just across the street was another pub where I heard live music with an inviting twang played by, according to the chalkboard sign outside, David Bowie's former guitarist. When I entered, the same group of drunkards from the previous pub were working out their issues, and one of them turned towards me.

"Are you following us around?" he asked amicably.

"I thought you were following me," I replied, giving away my nationality.

"Aye!" he shouted at his friends. "A Yank!"

"Where from?" one of them asked.

"Well, New York, actually," I admitted. He turned towards the bartender and bellowed:

"An old York welcome for the New York Yank!" A drink was thrust in my hand and I was surrounded by people asking questions and telling stories and giving advice. My head spun. I never paid for another drink in York.

The next night, after spending the day visiting the city, its marketplace, its three torture museums, and walking along the top of the sensationally old wall, I went to another pub (surprise). I was intrigued because the pub itself had existed and operated as such for substantially longer than the United States. As soon as I walked in, people recognized me as the friendly Yank from New York and started buying me drinks. It got to the point where I had six full glasses in front of me, each drink I emptied immediately replaced with a fresh one. Luckily, I remembered the name of the bed and breakfast where my things were. Someone helped me back there, evidently. The people of York treated me well.

I slept off the hangover on a train bound for the northwestern edge of Scotland and a city called Edinburgh, the shining star - if you will - of the Scottish world. The city, while very beautiful, is neither shining nor star-like. Rather, you might be reminded of Gotham City from the sets of the first 'Batman' movie. (I mean the nineties version, not the original where Batman disengages a Styrofoam shark from Robin's leg with the

aerosol can of shark-repellent conveniently stashed on his belt while dangling from a ladder hanging from a bright orange helicopter hovering above.) Edinburgh is a striking city of dark stone slabs and gothic bridges stretching over streets screaming out for a sheen of moisture from a soft rain. It's the only place I've been where black and gray weather actually accentuate the architectural experience.

As for the Scottish people, their demeanor seems directly inverse to the daunting and stoic surroundings. They're fantastic people, supremely secure in their existence. The single most important thing, the thing a Scot wouldn't trade for absolutely anything else on this or any other world, the thing that persists with such unadulterated fervor, the thing setting a Scottish person apart from anyone else, is being a Scottish person. There is nothing and nowhere they'd rather be. The good fortune they feel just to have been born Scottish pervades the city's atmosphere and makes every day a festival of identity.

At around four O'clock I arrived at the boarding house I'd chosen at random, and though it was perfectly nice it was also completely indistinguishable from the one in York. While I was in London, I stayed in two hotels and a private home. There was no attempt, on my part, to designate this place with any unique characteristics to set it apart from all the others.

My plan was to have a shower and a shave, stroll down the road for some dinner, then come back and figure out my itinerary. Planning, as you know, has never been my strong suit, and as I walked further and further, turning back became much less savory an option. After about an hour's march, marveling at my surroundings while being entirely unaware of my place in them, (not an uncommon paradox in this city, I'm sure), the rumbling in my stomach died down. When I saw the entrance to the Scotch Whiskey Heritage Museum, I decided a little history might be in order.

The museum itself is mildly interesting, mainly due to the reverence and the pride asserted in producing what apparently passes for the nectar of the Gods here in Scotland. After a technical demonstration, there follows a somewhat half-assed Disneyesque tour in a mechanized whiskey barrel through great moments in the history of Scotch whiskey. At the end of the tour, we were treated to a tasting. Now, I don't know if it was the time of day, or if December is the slow season, or what. All I know is that our group consisted of four people including myself and all our eyes grew wide when we saw the lady at the finish line holding two trays filled with dozens of half-shots of Scotch. We were none of us willing to let free top shelf Black Label go to waste, and it took virtually no time at all before the last drop was drunk. After sharing some laughs, we all went our separate ways, each of us with a heavier step and redder nose than when we'd entered this most excellent museum.

Thoughts of dinner were all but drowned. When I stumbled upon an area known as the GrassMarket, I knew my holistic senses were working overtime. The GrassMarket is Edinburgh's answer to Bourbon Street, lined with wall to wall pubs. When I say wall to wall, I mean each pub shares a wall with its neighbor. It's safe to say this place is thick with drunkenery, and my sense of judgment thick with Scotch. I resolved to drink.

The end result of my resolution came some hours later, drunk to the point of blindness. I walked out of the last pub and directly into a wall, which was a good thing. It kept me from falling onto my face. For a short spell, I lost hold of my entirely simplified consciousness there against that wall. It came back with some of my missing eyesight, and I began stumbling towards home. It took me half an hour of bouncing off walls like a pinball before losing the game. Standing still, with one arm locked against a stone slab for support, I accepted that I had less than no idea where 'home' was. When I caught myself looking for a medieval wall surrounding a city I was no longer in, there was nothing to do but accept it. I was lost. After dropping my bags in the non-descript room of the non-descript B&B, I had left with the intention of going straight back. Countless turns and labyrinthine twists later, I doubt I'd know where I was going even if I knew where I was. Utterly lost and completely shit-faced, I asked directions of no one. For some reason, maintaining my non-Scottish identity secret at two-thirty in the morning in a neighborhood that may be good as easily as

bad seemed of tantamount importance. I resigned myself to staying awake until daybreak, hoping the sun would shine through the Edinburgh gray long enough to provide me something recognizable.

Around three in the morning, my holistic sense kicked into gear again. Moments after throwing up on six or seven hundred years of history, I stumbled around a corner and came upon the place that would eventually save me. There exists a particular movie theater somewhere in Edinburgh, a beautiful theater with a huge screen and over two hundred seats which, at the time of my visit, was dedicated to playing, twenty-four hours a day, the movie 'Braveheart'. Scottish people really, really love being Scottish people.

Attempting to appear sober and failing miserably, I careened to the box office aware I'd have to reveal myself as a foreigner to at least one person. I asked when the next show started.

"Twenty minutes," the girl said with a compassionate and understanding smirk. "Would you like a ticket?" "Hells YES I'd like a ticket!" I answered with drunken glee. "In fact, give me two tickets, in case I lose one of those little bastards."

"You can go in right now, if you want," she angelically offered.

"Even better!"

After buying a large nonalcoholic beverage, I entered the theater and found a seat near the front. Oozing into it with all the zeal of a news reporter knocking down one more innocent role model, I looked around. At three in the morning there were two hundred piss-drunk Scots surrounding me, hanging from rafters, screaming things like: "I am William Wallace!" It was an absolute madhouse. As soon as the theater got dark and the film began, though, everyone was silent. That didn't last too long. When the battle scenes got going, it was easy to get caught up in the cheering, the congratulatory pounds on the back, the high-fives at each fatal head wound. A fun time it was. When the movie was over and the cheers died down, I left the theater with a group of about fifteen guys who'd been sitting around me, feeling a bond after our shared cinematic experience. We walked around for a while, kicking a soccer ball. The whole time, I did my best to conceal my unScottishness. I achieved this by playing to the very fact. Each time anyone in the group said something to me, I would drunkenly hesitate before raising clenched fists above my head and shouting:

"Scotland!!!"

By the time all of them finished cheering, shouting it back, rubbing my head and shaking my shoulders, they'd forgotten I never answered the question. I'll never know if they wised up to my innocent duplicity, because along the way we turned down a suddenly familiar street in the gray dawn where I could see, as if by magic, the boarding house I'd left so long before. Silently, I slipped away from the group unnoticed, and soon slid into an almost inspired slumber.

The rest of my visit in Edinburgh was, thankfully, a bit more organized, and though it's almost impossible not to get lost there, I kept a running list of landmark bread crumbs. Paris was close, always on my mind. Heroin and cocaine sat, stiff-backed and legs crossed, waiting. Waiting for a decision. They were parasites, intent on stripping any chance to decide, feeding on whatever was left of choice and free will, until there was nothing but flesh and bone. And then they'd take those, too. Paris was close. But I was not. Traveling north, I felt Edinburgh was just beyond the ravenous, seductive fingertips of my life's extortionist. Its hold was weak here, in this city of gray stone. I could tread water, without the lead weight of narcotics hanging from one ankle, addiction from the other. I could drown, if I wanted to. It would be easy. But I would drown in the sea. Eliot says the sea has many voices, and maybe he's right. I say the sea has only one voice, and it is desolation. I've always been an outsider and will always be. But I don't have to be alone. I don't have to drown. Time had not yet run out, if it ever could.

After four days in Edinburgh, I checked out of the boarding house and filled the few hours before my train to London with five consecutive tours of the Scotch Whiskey Heritage Museum. I would have taken a sixth, but they adamantly refused me admission. I'm certain that's the only time I'll ever get cut off by a museum. Though I cursed them then, I certainly can't blame them now. Well, I can blame them for letting me through the fourth time. Undoubtedly, I offended the sensibilities of a few passengers on the train, and it would have upset me, too, if I was conscious.

Christmas in London. Talkin' 'Bout my Generation.

The cold had begun to dig out its trenches and settle in when I returned to London, and I was glad. It seemed like years since I'd last felt winter's sturdy press. It was far from arctic, but relevant preparations were being made. A quick check of remaining funds proved what I already knew: there was still a lot left. Enough, anyway, so I didn't need to worry. I resolved to find a room where the toilet and shower came standard. As it turned out, this was more difficult than I anticipated. The first hotel I entered actually had a lobby, and doormen, and bellhops. It seemed like the right place. I asked for a room.

"Sorry, sir. We're all full," the desk clerk said.

"Full? You can't be serious." For some reason it seemed fishy.

"With the holidays and all," he explained.

"Holidays?" I asked, obviously still drunk.

"Well, yes. Christmas, you know."

"Of course. Christmas is ..." I paused, hoping he'd take the bait.

"Is tomorrow. Always heavy this time of year, sir. If you'd like, I can find out where rooms might be available."

"Yes, that's very kind. Thank you." In a daze, I shuffled to a nearby seat where I could more comfortably contemplate my scalding obliviousness. I was more than a little concerned at the ferocity of my temporal occlusion. Christmas, for Christ's sake. I was still picking bits of turkey out of my teeth. The night of the floating party. The night of my first and last delivery to the Green Man. The last time I had spoken to Jonothon. Two or three weeks, Phillipe said. Everything could still be okay if I disappeared for two or three weeks. If I left a day or two after Thanksgiving, and this was the day before Christmas, then maybe it was safe to go back. But here's the thing: I didn't want to go back.

The desk clerk gave me the address of a hotel somewhere in Kensington Square. He wished me a merry Christmas and I got into a cab. I tried to listen to the sound of its meter but I couldn't hear. I couldn't think. A blind had been pulled down over the window of my life and the room was dark. The window was open, just a crack, and the blind shook softly. I listened to the shaking, because everything was darkness. There was only the shaking. London, Christmas day, nineteen-ninety-six. The streets were empty. Metropolis purged. The city was silent. Despite a comfortable bed, sleep had business elsewhere the night before. Early on Christmas morning I gave up and left. I'd been walking for hours, unsure if I wasn't actually dreaming this deserted London. A faraway sun kept the worst of the cold at bay and I stopped in front of a large, dark Harrods window to study my reflection. It looked small, standing there alone. The face drawn, the skin tight and pale, the eyes black as the vacant store behind. But there was something else. Something familiar reflected in the window. I was there, somewhere. Not on the surface, but just below. Hanging back was a person I knew well, regardless of all the doubts, the unanswered questions, the lack of directions and

connections, the apathy, the blindness, and the never-ending search for something to search for. In my head, the reflection spoke: "I am what I've always been, not knowing who I am, or where I am, or what I know, knowing only the opposite. I am that." In the hushed stillness and tranquillity of this city I heard the voice, and I did much more than listen. That was my voice, my reflection. Not Monk's voice, or Nate's; not Frank's or Anais's or Gwillam's or Julian's; not Jon's or Hunter's or Amy's or Chris'; not Phillipe's, Anne's or Hugo's; not my mother's or my father's. Not the voice from the Thames or the Seine, but from the river within me. It has always been me. It has always been my life. I can never forget.

I wasn't dreaming on that Christmas day. I was wide awake. Was I the only one?

Of course the question has no right or wrong answer to transcend every plane, but on the purely physical one (lets face it, I'm no mystic; I know as much about transcending a plane as I do about flying one), the answer is, obviously, no. The citizens of London hadn't suddenly fallen into a mysterious deep sleep. I wasn't on my way to confront the Sandman and demand he release them or face my wrath. No, come on, you know what I mean. If you've ever been in London or Rome on Christmas, you know. It really is disconcerting. Here's this city, so huge and so incredibly loud for three-hundred and sixty-four days out of the year, but on this day... Imagine this: You're hanging out with Darth Vader for three days straight, and suddenly, he starts holding his breath. It might not be until that moment where something in your mind would click and you'd ask yourself: "what the fuck am I doing with Darth Vader? He's not even real. I have to get back to real life." And you'd be right. When something you've taken entirely for granted is suddenly interrupted, there's a chance to realize maybe you shouldn't have been taking it for anything at all. The crowds of people and the sounds of London were not gone, they were simply taking the day off. Same as the heroin and the cocaine. They weren't gone, I was. Whether or not I'd return to them like normal life to London on December twenty-sixth was not relevant then, just as deciding whether or not to spend another week with Darth Vader wouldn't be the issue when his heavy breathing stopped. The response you might have to that situation is interchangeable with mine, to wit: "what the fuck was I doing snorting heroin and carrying boxes full of cocaine? I have to get back to real life." And like you, I'd be right. But since the response is mostly philosophical - which is another way of saying any real and logical response simply doesn't exist - I chose instead to give an actual response to a question which may have existed in the past or may well exist in the future. "Yes," was my answer to this unasked question. "I am thirsty, come to think of it. A stiff drink sounds great. Thanks for not asking."

As you may have noticed, the lessons on theory and practice of self-manipulation have, unlike calculus, been both remembered and useful. My professor, Ivana Getsohi, deserves the credit.

Despite the lack of movement on the street, I couldn't help feeling somewhat self-conscious staring at the window of a very much not open store. Even in the short time I'd stood there, my reflection and I had built a strong psychic bond. The very instant I turned away, so, too, did this handsome figure turn. Certainly in most ways, I was him, and he me. But here's the main difference: he can never break out of his glass asylum.

I've never had to break out of glass. Right at that moment I felt it would be more prudent and desirable to drink out of one. More than one, to be honest. More than ten, to be brutally honest. A few blocks down the street of this international city turned ghost town, I spotted a sign of life hidden under an awning like some pocket of huddled resistance. An exceptionally well funded resistance, behind the gilded doors of The Ritz Hotel. Leaving the cold and quiet street, I stepped onto a thick carpet and was immediately blanketed in high-class warmth. Tuxedos and evening dresses floated past, and somewhere, somebody was playing a harp. Not a blues harmonica, but an actual harp. I sat down and started running a tab. Though I scarcely moved, it was a long run.

A few whiskey's later, I finished 'The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch', a Philip K. Dick novel about

corporate marketing the devil with drugs. Funny, sometimes, the things we learn to call fiction, don't you agree? Sipping a drink I watched the movements of the Ritz lobby, lulled by an indifferent harp. Its solemn sound was a sedative in sotto voce, high society's opiate. Shoes made no noise, voices - even children's voices - were muted by the thick carpet. The world is ruled by money, not people. The people with the money choose what's right and wrong for them, and those without the money must abide as if they have some. But maybe you can try, as I do and as I did at The Ritz, to think of money in a different way. An extravagant and imaginary way, yes, for certain. Ridiculous and moronic, okay, maybe. Romantic and visionary, well fuck, if I can't push my own luck, whose am I gonna push? Tell your disbelief to take five, and just hear me out.

First off, I'll take for granted you can accept the concept of money being the ruler of the world. So I'll go from there. Technology is progress, and progress is really expensive. While I don't think we've gotten wherever it is we're going, we've surely chosen the road. And it seems, once chosen, there's been inordinate amounts of money put into perfecting a sort of cosmic cruise-control to free up our collective feet. Now, it's time to free our minds, and it should be up to my generation, the children of the eighties, to meet this end. During the global economic boom of those years, millions of people discovered a newfound financial security they'd never known before. A lot of those people were parents at the time, and so for a while, it was their children who reaped the benefits. Since much of it wasn't old money, a healthy respect for it was maintained, and those of us beginning the formative years of our young lives were encouraged and able to make the most of it. Rather than being pressured into learning a pre-chosen trade, we were allowed an unprecedented freedom to find out just what we were and what we weren't, supported by a sense that maybe we really could be whatever we wanted. Here's where things got a little complicated. The facilitators of this awesome freedom, almost exclusively our parents, the people who saw it as a chance to give us everything they never had, couldn't help us. Placing us into a situation they themselves had never experienced left them without meaningful advice to give. We made a lot of mistakes. Mistakes they didn't make mainly because their youth wasn't as radically different from the youth of their parents as ours had already become. We were trying to find answers to questions that had never been asked before, and our parents weren't sure what to do. Money eventually became an issue again thanks to its diminishment, casting some doubt on once doubt-free decisions. Of course it's not their fault at all, yet they chose - with the best of intentions - to intervene, to help us in the only way they knew how. By taking away our freedom, or at least capping it, and forcing us into a place where all the questions - or so they thought - were ones they thought they could answer. But it was far too late. This came as no surprise to us, and served mainly to further confuse and complicate their lives as much as it did our own. We found ourselves with no fewer unanswered questions, but with a vastly smaller allowance of the freedom we knew was necessary to ever find the answers. A new question that surfaced quickly drowned out most others: would there even be an answer? While our exceptional freedom had initially presented the possibility of one day finding a deeper truth - a possibility for which we had money to thank - a tide had turned. No longer assured the security of time, (and time is, after all, money), we were caught with our pants around our ankles. Almost overnight, we went from appreciating money to resenting it, not simply because we had to earn it for ourselves, but because it was the primary instrument in allowing our freedom in the first place. Faced with the sudden realization that it was too late for us to so greatly overhaul our entire way of thought, all the perspectives and triumphs we'd gained in a tight embrace, many of us lost direction. Some panicked. How could we be expected to survive in the world of our parents, and their parents, when all our efforts had always gone towards setting the stage for a new world? What the fuck were we supposed to do? The stock answers made available to us meant nothing. The questions could hardly have been more irrelevant. It was like offering half a sandwich to a man who'd just died of starvation, and then being offended by his silent rejection. The disconnection was complete. We could not unlearn everything we'd already learned. However powerful a ruler money is, there will never be enough to fund a technology that can un-live life. And so, many of us lost faith in its sovereignty, even saw it as viciously tyrannical, a despot in possession of sentient evil. We'd be far better off, was a common thought, without ever having had any freedom at all. Then we'd at least have answers instead of only questions. Questions like why? Why were we being punished for accepting an offer to be

free? How could we be held accountable at the age of eighteen or twenty-one for a way of life we'd been encouraged to follow fifteen years earlier? These questions produced nothing but despair, and still the once trusted ruler was not satisfied. Twisting the dagger of betrayal even deeper, we learned the sudden loss of our freedom - the tool entrusted to us for building something better - came at a time when the world had no use for us. Money still ruled, but there wasn't enough. It seemed the only jobs available required an aptitude in the very types of thought we'd been spared. What our freedom had taught us, what we held dear, was not viable, not marketable, in the economic wasteland we were thrust into, good as naked. The money that had once anointed us ushers of the next age had failed us, lied to us. We had trustingly held up our end of the bargain, using our freedom to seek our humanity, but money had reneged on its unspoken promise. We were prepared, but the world was not ready. What our freedom always defined as progress had - in that sense - ceased. Even worse, it seemed to be moving in reverse. And we were the only ones who knew, because we could not forget what we'd learned. Our first response was to shift the blame. We'd done nothing wrong, so clearly someone or something was against us. Maybe those people with the money did make the rules, after all. It made sense. Realizing that, given the chance, we might actually achieve some real change, they wielded their considerable power to make sure it wouldn't happen. If things changed, after all, the rich and the powerful - and they are one and the same - had no guarantee their positions would be spared. Shifting blame is easier than chewing food, and the signs showed up everywhere. "Kids these days" sounded from glen to glen like a rallying call for the status quo. We were the kids, whether or not we were already older than they'd been when we were born, because being kids relieved them of any guilt and gave them the right to keep us in line. We were kids particularly These Days because it allowed the blame to shift back onto our no-name generation, after X but before W, the one sometimes called 'thirteen,' maybe to account for poor luck. It carried the assumption that the kids of their days were nothing like us, which is a fact we already knew and they were afraid of. It gave them, and us, the impression we had abused the privileges specific to our youth to such an extent as to leave them no other choice but to take it all away for, what they implied, was our own good. Seeing us as kids made it their duty, doing it for our own good saved them from admitting the good was theirs. But it was too late. It only forced the chasm to grow deeper, wider. They were succeeding to insulate themselves from us, while unwittingly insulating us with everything we'd learned, all the knowledge our freedom had allowed. And here's what they forgot, and we seem to have forgotten, too: Knowledge, not money, is power. They forgot because they didn't really know, because the knowledge we had was nothing like theirs. We forgot because they were still stronger, and pelted us across the chasm, debunking our way of thought, making us doubt everything we knew. Making us doubt ourselves. The period of blame shifting came to an end, and we had lost ground. Our defenses had weakened. We began to accept the blame as our own. We began the terrible era of fulfilling their prophecies. The rebellion was mounted, and when it came, it came hard. But we did not rebel against them. We rebelled against ourselves. Not by accepting their rules and becoming what they wanted us to become, but by viciously twisting the lessons our lost freedom had taught and using them against ourselves. With an all too simple restructuring, the way of thought that had once given us a hope of improving our world now worked to turn those dreams into nightmares. We saw a world without progress, a world both unable to accept, and scarcely deserving, our help. We understood the scope of the freedom, the weight like gold placed in our upturned palms and we began to sense that maybe we had squandered it. The loss was greater than simple freedom. It was a loss of the greatest opportunity. How, why did we piss it all away? We'd let everybody down, and the guilt weighed as much as the Earth. But when guilt comes, she is never alone. Close behind follows resentment. Against the money, against the power, against the entire world. Many of us lashed out, often in violence. Others traversed the globe, unsure if they were escaping something or if they were trying to find it. We were lost, to ourselves and to each other. Most of us are lost, still. There can never be brothers in arms, because there can never be others like us. There has never been any other generation so inextricably caught in the maelstrom, faced with coming of age during an age that was coming of age. We are, and always will be, as different as we are alone. Therein lies our strength, dormant. But maybe not for long.

I tell you this now because it was at the Ritz Hotel in London, watching the wealthy strut their stuff only

days before nineteen-ninety-seven when I came up with my amateur manifesto. Some of the credit, I admit, goes to the whiskey intent on finding its way down my throat. And it was then and there I decided that finding out what was on the other side of the millennium wall was worth more than simply waiting. It was my duty to pass through those gates. My whole life has been preparation. I could not allow myself to die. Not now, when I was so close. For a long time - years of my life - I had succeeded in forgetting to remember. In Paris, the possibility of dying had gotten so close that I hadn't really seen it until it was almost too late. On Christmas day in London, I was just far enough. For the first time I think, I felt truly, honestly, deeply afraid. I saw that the person who had been one wrong step from real death the whole time was me. And the sight was terrifying. I stumbled drunkenly up a dignified and dizzying spiral staircase whose spins were child's play compared to the ones in my head. In the bathroom I found a private stall and threw up. There was more than vomit in the toilet here. There were memories, too. Memories of how throwing up after snorting heroin actually used to feel good to me, in a life not far removed, a life where death was an equal participant. Suddenly, it felt as if all the anxieties, the apprehensions, the dangers and the actual true gravity of my actions had been locked up, waiting for the moment when they could all burst free at once. The moment came while I was kneeling in a stall at The Ritz. The stunning fear that stoned me then went directly for my weakened stomach, and I threw up again, and again. When it was over and I cautiously got off my knees, I felt almost sober. Scrubbing my hands and washing out my mouth in the sink, I looked up at the mirror and grimaced. I hadn't realized I was crying. I held my hands under the scalding water until they stopped shaking.

An Elusive Liberation. Caught by Winter.

I can't say how long it took to get myself under some control, but it was long enough to make a decision. I had jumped into a black and angry sea months before, and very nearly drowned. I could sense that now I was treading the hard water, barely staying afloat, but it would not last. Going back to Paris without an escape route was suicide. I was committed to taking advantage of the distance London offered.

In the spirit of Christmas, I convinced the man at the front desk to help me out even though I wasn't technically a Ritz guest. As he spoke to the airlines over the phone, I felt the same blank emptiness of emotion as I had the moment before injecting myself with morphine. Though academically, I realized the enormity of my decision and how, once solidified, there was no turning back, it failed to elicit a comparable emotional response. There was no debate as to whether I was making the right choice, no concern for consequences. Not like I didn't care, but like something was blockading my cares, and even though I could hear their shrill screams of ramification, I could not make sense of them. As I waited passively, calmly, for something to break through - some signal to stop the desk man's phone-call - all I felt was nothing. And all I heard was the untroubled sound of harp-strings. Pulling ... pulling ... pulling.

Then I heard something else.

It was the man behind the front desk at the Ritz, speaking.

"There's a seat available Paris to New York direct for tomorrow evening's flight. Next isn't until four, January . Shall I make the reservation?"

Shall he? Should he? My mouth, though dry, seemed to know.

"Yes, that sounds fine," I heard my voice say. It was only a voice, though.

"Will you be needing a flight back to Paris, then?" Asked the desk.

"EuroStar, actually. Tonight, if possible." I spoke in profile. My eyes fixed on a staircase at the opposite end

of the lobby, not really seeing anything. After a moment, I heard:

"You're reserved on the eleven o'clock, arriving Paris just before five tomorrow morning which gives you ... about four hours to get to the station. Departs out of Waterloo, and I suggest you give extra time to purchase the ticket. Can I arrange a car?"

"No, thanks. I have to get my bag, but thank you."

"Not at all, sir. Have a safe trip, and a merry Christmas," he gave me a little smile and a nod, and I could tell it was out of pity. Desperation shows like a sunburn.

I had somehow been in the lobby of the Ritz hotel for nearly four hours. I had one last drink before paying the exorbitant tab. The only reason I was conscious, or at least the best one I can think of, was the ironclad verdict I'd accepted. Beyond revelation, it translated smoothly into the physiological sensation of a 'sobering' situation. As I trod upon the cloud which must have fallen a long way before coming to rest in the lobby of The Ritz Hotel in London, I was grateful for the alcohol in my body, because - for a little while - it nullified the fear and uncertainty attached to my decision like a parasite. Soon enough, it would find the way out, and when it did, my mind would become its next host. But not then. Not on Christmas. Not in London.

Time inside The Ritz and time outside had agreed to disagree. London was dark, and when I stepped out a chill dove through my chest and into my heart so fast even the booze couldn't keep me warm. Winter, although late, began to rattle the bars of its cage. The crisp vibrancy of the cold night air had an electricity in its flavor and in its connotations. The gears in my brain shifted, not into high, but at least out of neutral. I was able to hold off the future, to concentrate only on the steps in front of me to be sure each was secure. Cabs were sparse, but I had London figured out. Walking back to the hotel where I'd left my bag lifted spirits I wasn't sure even remained. Breathing the winter made all my motions distinct. From the hotel I arranged a cab, and the drive to Waterloo station was silent, inside and out. Except for the meter. Each snap pressed the reality in just a bit farther. I was leaving London, and going back to Paris. And I was afraid. Not afraid of returning, though it was a reasonable fear. I was afraid because I was returning as a different person. Because it wouldn't be the Paris without end I'd come to know. Because it was the place I was going in order to leave, and while my life there was uncertain at best, it had somehow become the only life I really knew. I was afraid because I still didn't know. But I did understand. I understood that the lessons I'd learned would carry over to the next life. And then there would be new lessons, and different teachers. I'd like to answer Bilbo Baggins' question this way:

No. Adventures don't ever end. Only adventurers.

The cab stopped.

The same train that had orchestrated my escape from Paris now sped me back. I stretched out over two seats and, despite my fears, fell fast asleep.

Learning to See.

The city has eyes. Jonothon was right when he said that. The train had been running smoothly, but suddenly I was ripped awake with a thrashing jolt. I looked out the window and understood why sleep had fled with such an explosion. It was dark, and anything close up I managed to make out was gone the same instant. The scene in the distance didn't move, though. I saw Paris, and you might find this difficult to believe, but Paris saw me, too. Like it was looking for me. I felt the energy. I felt Paris, and Paris was glaring at me.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" I imagined the city asking, the voice pounding my brain.

"After all we've been through, you still don't have a clue. It doesn't matter where you go. I don't watch, I see. And I have seen you from the inside. You will always belong to me." It was my voice I heard, of course. But the words, in a way, belonged to the city. And you know what? They were true words, every one.

The rest of the way, I watched this tremendous, stunning, wondrous city transcend its singular renown with a supercilious smirk as easily as its buildings and its dignified spires eclipsed even the night's mighty sky.

Or, to put it another way: if you haven't really been to Paris then you just don't know. But if, after seeing Paris, you allow Paris to see you, then maybe you do know what I'm talking about.

Have you ever been to Paris?

I mean have you ever really been to Paris?

The train arrived at Montparnasse on schedule. It was a short walk to Place Vauban, and I took it. Five AM in Paris is different than in most other cities. I've taken countless five AM walks in New York, because I love to see so preeminent a metropolis rendered deaf and mute. I know places where the streets are totally quiet, and the buildings whisper secrets to one another. But there's a hitch in that almost-but-not-quite pristine emptiness: Doormen. In Paris, there are no doormen, and much fewer lights, so a five AM walk crosses a line which it cannot cross in New York. It's the line separating emptiness from solitude, and the simple difference is huge.

Turning onto Boulevard des Invalides, the golden dome of Napoleon's Tomb reminded me that the eyes of Paris are not all necessarily sinister. The floodlights, which cost more in electric bills over one week than the gross national product of many developing nations, had long since gone out. Lit from behind by the iridescent indigo of a sky preparing a surrender to daylight, the dome would have glittered whether it was gold or not. It was ephemeral time, and interminable, the instant when the world's breath holds to gather a sigh. Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception, the future futureless, before the morning watch when time stops and time is neverending. The dome remained in my sight until my neck craned to hold it there. Like it was keeping an eye on me, making sure I got home safe. Making sure I remembered where my real home was. I had forgotten. Over a short time that lasted forever, I had forgotten I didn't have to stay.

I was surprised by the sound of birds inviting morning into Paris. It was cold, and I assumed they would have gone to a warmer place by now. Maybe these birds were packing up to get out of town, like I was. The thought made me smile, and from behind, I felt the dome give a wink.

"It's about time you figured this out," it said in my voice. "You're the only one who can leave. We were here first. And don't worry.

Paris IS here."

Paris has always been here....

COLORIN COLORADO,

ESTE CUENTO SE HA TERMINADO.

October 15, 1998