

HOMEFRONT

304

by

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Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------|-------|
| Graduation..... | p. 1 |
| Nirvana..... | p. 10 |
| Safe House..... | p. 24 |
| Getting By..... | p. 39 |
| Critical Apparatus..... | p. 53 |

Graduation

We called Halstead the Bruiser. He was big and strong, and even in the winter he looked like he had just stepped off Malibu with a perfect tan. And there was something in the way Halstead carried himself, something in the way he smiled, with that curious mixture of innocence and self-assurance, that gave him an earthy sort of sex appeal. Everybody sensed it; he was the envy of a lot of guys in the Senior class of '68, and the girls all loved him. Brian Alston, a weasel of a kid, liked to repeat the story of how he had seen Debbie Case, the head cheerleader, and Halstead climb into the back of the band bus during half-time of the homecoming game. Alston said he nearly got a peek inside the bus, but Debbie started yelling before he could look in the back window. Debbie swelled up in the months after that and, about March, she left school. When she got back she kept pretty much to herself and never seemed too happy. And she was her old slim self.

Cathy Harris, who shared a locker with Debbie, spread the word that Debbie and Halstead were going to get married after graduation. Instead, Debbie went off to some university in the mid-west. Missouri. Or maybe it was Iowa.

I graduated when Debbie and Halstead and 356 other seniors did on a Tuesday night in May. Afterward I drove Rudy Samuelson and Peg Kern up to Daniel's Park for the huge woodsie. There were too many people crowded around the fire so I put my six-pack of tall Coors under my arm and went up into the rocks to sit. Bill Schmidt found me there and we sat together for a long time, and when I ran out of beer I started sipping from Bill's bottle

of scotch. When that was gone Bill left and I stood up too quickly and almost pitched over the edge of a rock overhang. I climbed down carefully, and decided not to drink much more for a while.

I wandered around for about an hour after that, sobering up. I looked for Rudy, but Bill told me he saw Rudy and Peg heading off for the Stone House about fifteen minutes before. I didn't want to go down and interrupt anything, so I found my way to the car and took off. I was driving down the dirt road when two cop cars sped past me, lights flashing and all. About a mile further a figure on the side of the road waved at me. I pulled over, and Halstead got in the car.

"Hi," he said, smiling. "Hey, you're Blanchard, aren't you?"

I nodded, surprised that he recognized me.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, "Where you going? Home?"

"Hell no!" he said. "It's graduation, buddy. Let's hit the town." He clapped his hand on my shoulder.

We drove all over that night, even into West Denver, hitting the 3.2 joints and one 21 bar down on Alameda. Both of us had fake I.D.'s that said we were 22. I don't think anyone really believed I was that old because I looked even younger than the 17 and a half that I was. But they were good I.D.'s--mine even had my picture on it--and nobody refused to let us in anywhere all night. Halstead only got carded once.

About three in the morning we pulled into the Pancake House parking lot to take a leak. We decided to get some coffee, and when we went inside we spotted Judy Lyons and Sherri Potter sitting in a booth. Halstead strolled right on over and sat down next to Judy. I sat on Sherri's side of the table. They had both been at the woodsie, and they told us that the cops had broken it up, confiscated some beer, but didn't arrest anybody. They said the party moved over to Jack Empson's house, whose folks were vacationing in Italy. Sherri said that the party was still raging, as far as she knew, but she and Judy had gotten hungry and left.

We all ordered omelets and coffee. When we finished eating Halstead rubbed his hands together and said, "Hey, let's take a spin up the canyon to Buffaloe Creek. The moon's out and we've got beer. Should be a nice drive." He put his arm around Judy and beamed at her.

We piled into the car and left. Halstead and Judy sat in the back seat

and made out. Sherri sat in the front seat, drinking beer and changing stations on the radio. I'd known Judy and Sherri all through high school. Or known of them. Judy went out mainly with jocks. Dale Blackman used to go with her, when they were juniors, and he would smile and wink whenever anyone asked how he spent his Friday and Saturday nights. And Brian Alston, who spent a lot of his time finding out these things, said he saw Judy and Larry McGivers disappear into a back bedroom at one of Empson's parties. I danced with Judy once, at a victory dance after a basketball game when I was a sophomore, but didn't have anything to do with her after that.

Sherri hung around with the same crowd as Judy, but I never heard the same stories about her that I did about Judy. Not even from Alston. She went with Blackman for a couple of weeks, once, but it broke off quickly, and Dale didn't like to talk about her to anybody. After that, she just dated around. I'd thought about asking her out, like I'd thought about asking a lot of girls out, but I figured she wouldn't want to date me. So when she told me, as we were driving past Conifer on highway 285, that she had been wanting to get to know me better, then sidled next to me, I was shocked.

It was almost 5:00 when I pulled off onto a jeep trail about five miles from Conifer. It was fairly warm outside, and when I stopped the car we all got out and laid on the hood, staring up at the stars that were beginning to wink out as the sky shifted from black to light shades of grey. Halstead and Judy walked off into the woods, and Sherri and I were lying on hood, our heads resting against the windshield.

She was pretty drunk. We started kissing and touching, but before long I was kissing and touching and Sherri was sleeping. I looked at her in the dim light and it occurred to me that she wasn't such a big deal, after all. Oh, she was good looking, but she passed out like anybody else, no matter how popular she was. She looked vulnerable lying there, and I remember thinking that, somehow, the past three years had been nothing but a game that everybody took seriously, one that depended a lot on who you ran around with.

I slid off the hood, went to the back of the car and took a blanket from the trunk. I covered Sherri with it, tucking it around her, and stepped back. I felt like Robert Mitchum in "Heaven Knows, Mister Alison," when he covered Deborah Kerr with his jacket as they hid in a cave on a Jap occupied island during World War II. Except I kept my light jacket, and Sherri was

passed out, not just sleeping. And Deborah Kerr was a nun in the movie.

I got a beer from the car, opened it, and wandered into the woods. As I picked my way along a game trail I heard ahead of me a noise, a low grunt, the kind I'd heard deer make when I'd been hunting. I stepped carefully toward the noise and stopped behind a clump of bushes. I peeked through the branches, and there were Halstead and Judy, naked in the morning light. I stared at them.

I'd had my share of fantasies about Judy, but whenever I did, I just used her face, maybe her legs, and the rest was a composite of Playboy breasts and ass. But there she was, sitting naked on top of Halstead, groaning with her mouth open, not really as pretty as she'd been, somehow, but certainly not ugly.

Halstead grunted a couple of times, then moaned and stopped moving. Judy opened her eyes and smiled down at him, wriggled her hips, then rolled off him. She lay back on the ground, looking up at the lightening sky.

Except for the black-and-white Polaroid shot Rudy carried around of his brother's girl friend posing nude in front of a '57 Chevy, I had never seen what a woman's pubic area looked like. So I stared at Judy's crotch, at her dark hair, and I almost came in my pants. I watched her for a long time, until she reached out and touched Halstead's limp penis. Halstead got to his knees, slid his hand along her thigh, then crawled atop her, and I heard her moan.

I turned away, trying not to make any noise, and hurried along the game trail, wondering if I should stop and relieve myself in the bushes before I made a mess in my pants. I stopped when I got to the road and tried to think of something--anything--else than Halstead and Judy screwing. I walked to the car.

Sherri was still passed out. When I saw her, I tried to imagine myself as Robert Mitchum again, of being the hero, putting the blanket around her, making her comfortable. I looked down at her. The blanket had slipped down to her waist, and I reached to pull it up. As I did, I remembered that she had kissed me first and that she had wanted to get to know me better, and I let my hand brush lightly across her cheek. She didn't move. I touched her neck, and my stomach and thighs went tight. My hand was trembling as I touched her breast, then put my hand around it.

A lot of guys thought Sherri wore falsies. Her breasts had always seemed

bigger than other girls'. Not huge, but fuller. I remembered that--I concentrated on it--as I squeezed her breast. It was an experiment, a test to find out if Sherri really was wearing falsies. I felt for something unnatural, something lumpy. Nothing. I realized that my eyes were shut, and when I opened them I was looking into her face. She was still out, her mouth half open, her breathing regular.

I thought about the movie "Rosemary's Baby," and I remembered that John Cassevetes had told Mia Farrow he'd made love to her when she was passed out after she ate drugged chocolate mousse. He hadn't, of course; the Devil had. But Cassevetes had told her that, anyway. And he'd said that necrophilia excited him.

Necrophilia. I hadn't known what the word meant, exactly, but it popped into my mind as I undid Sherri's blouse, ran my fingers across the smooth material of her bra and felt nothing lumpy, nothing that wasn't Sherri's. As my fingers slid along I felt her nipple, now hard, and my hand stopped as the other one dropped to the lump in my pants and my breathing became short. I could feel a wet spot on my jeans, and it was urgent that I do something soon.

I looked at Sherri's face, and briefly considered the possibilities. I could stop, and go into the bushes and take care of the pressure in my loins there. But Judy and Halstead came to mind, and I touched the breast once again then shot my hand underneath the blanket, and pressed my palm against the crotch of her jeans. Sherri stirred, and an audible sigh breathed past her lips. I pulled my hand from the blanket and buttoned up her blouse, my fingers fumbling against each other.

I lifted the blanket to tuck it around her; she was calm again, and I couldn't resist touching, just once more, that warm hard part down there. I slid my hand beneath the blanket again, and touched the seam of her jeans, then pressed it. Another spasm rushed through my pelvis and I had to concentrate on holding back the pressure there. I opened my eyes and stared through the windshield, at the crumbled cigarette pack on the dash, at the book of matches that was wedged in the defroster vent...

My hand was somehow inside her pants. Inside the zipper. My fingers were underneath the elastic of her panties, touching the wiry hair. My other hand was pressed on my crotch. My fingers kept moving, on their own. I heard my breath snort out my nose; my mouth was closed. Then, my fingers

wouldn't go any further; the angle was odd, and the zipper was scraping my wrist. I pulled my hand free and held it above the blanket. The morning air was cold against it. I looked at Sherri; she was still asleep. Her breathing was a bit shorter, not as smooth as it had been.

My hand hovered over the blanket, and the pressure inside backed off a little, replaced by a feeling of frustration. I looked again at Sherri, my hand lowering, my fingers resting lightly on her breast. The pressure returned. I closed my eyes.

My fingers found the snap of her jeans, pulled on it, felt it give. They found the elastic and wriggled beneath it, touching again the wiry hairs. They crawled through the hairs and down, finally pushing against soft flesh.

My grunt coincided with Sherri's sigh, and I opened my eyes, half expecting to see hers open too. They weren't, and I was glad. And my fingers never stopped moving. I couldn't control them; they kept sliding along and down, and whatever they came in contact with was transmitted to my crotch, missing my brain completely. I tried to think of what my fingers were doing but it was a blur inside my head. They moved, and I couldn't stop them from doing it, moving down along a ridge of soft skin, and my breath seemed controlled by my fingers too. The middle finger found something hot and wet. It stopped, then went on, bent at the knuckle, surrounded by wet heat. Sherri moaned and tightened her legs and I knew that I was inside her.

My other hand was on her breast and the pressure in my pants demanded attention. I leaned against the fender of the car, and the pressure was satisfied. My finger moved in and out slowly and my other hand squeezed Sherri's breast. She moaned again, and her hips twitched, but I hardly noticed it, just felt my finger, the wetness. And Sherri's breast soft and smooth. And the fender. I wanted to tear off the blanket and yank down her pants, throw open her legs, and the thought, the picture of it finally merged with the feeling of my finger, of the breast, of the fender and my hand left her breast, jerked on the zipper of my pants, and my thighs tightened and the woods across the road swirled in a grey blur and my hips twitched as the pressure drained from me.

I stood there for a long time. Finally, I withdrew my finger, then my hand from her pants, the blanket. They belonged to me again. I zipped up my pants and rubbed absently at the wet spot. I flexed my hands into fists; they were stiff. I looked down and saw Sherri's open jeans, her panties. They were blue. Her panties were blue. They hadn't felt blue. Not at all.

My fingers were still numb as I zipped up her pants, snapped the button.

They were blue. Her panties were blue. They hadn't felt blue. Not at all.

My fingers were still numb as I zipped up her pants, snapped the button. I stood back and gazed at Sherri for a long time. She was still out. And she was still pretty.

I reached into the car, took a cigarette from the pack and lit it. The morning sun filtered through the trees. I dragged deeply on the cigarette, exhaled a stream of smoke, and felt very tired.

I slept for about four hours in the back seat of the car and when I got up Sherri was still sleeping on the hood. I wondered for a moment if I'd dreamt the whole thing, then looked at my finger and knew I hadn't. I almost woke Sherri, but watched her sleep instead. I couldn't face her, not right then. I didn't really think I'd done anything wrong, but when I looked at her things seemed a little unreal, and I felt sort of confused.

Halstead and Judy came plunging out into daylight ten minutes or so after I awoke. Halstead smiled at me as they approached the car. Judy kept her eyes riveted to the ground, and went to wake up Sherri. Halstead and I leaned against the trunk smoking, and I opened a beer. It didn't taste too good, but I was thirsty, and I wanted to be a little fuzzy.

"What'd you two do last night?" Halstead asked.

"Sherri passed out," I said. "I took a walk up the road a bit, then came back and went to sleep." I sipped the beer; it was almost hot.

"Oh," Halstead said, then looked at me out the corners of his eyes and smiled. "Judy and I took a little walk too. Got to know each other better."

"That's nice," I said.

Sherri and Judy came around to the back of the car. Judy looked bad; her eyes were red and puffy and her mouth seemed to droop. She looked like she might be sick.

"We want to go home," she said, still not looking at me. "We're tired."

I glanced at Sherri, and she was watching me, almost staring at me. I opened the passenger door for her and she got inside. I slid in behind the wheel, and we headed back to town. Halstead and Judy were in the back seat, and by the time I turned onto the highway they were both asleep. For a long time Sherri and I were quiet. When she spoke, I tightened my grip on the wheel.

"I must have passed out this morning, huh?" she said, and lit a cigarette.

"Wow. I don't usually do that."

I nodded and said something like "Neither do I," and lit myself a smoke. My hand shook a little, and I didn't really want to talk about anything.

"You know," she said after a while, "I had some pretty weird dreams last night." She paused, staring ahead at the road. "I had a...well, a..." she blushed. "I've never done that before, but," she looked at me, right in the eye, "I think I had what they call a wet dream last night," she blurted. "Orgasm and all." She laughed.

I watched the road. The sun was just about eye level, and I squinted against it. I could tell she was still looking at me.

"Oh yeah?" My voice was squeaky, and I really wanted another beer no matter how hot, how bad it would taste.

Sherri sighed, relieved maybe that I didn't laugh.

"Yeah," she said. She sounded like she wanted to talk about it now that she'd gotten it out. "And, well, I just wouldn't go around telling you my private life and all, but, well, the thing is that you were in it. My dream."

I barked out a laugh. I pulled down the sun visor, but it didn't help; the sun was still too low.

"Yeah. Funny, huh?" she took a few quick puffs on the cigarette. "It must have been the making out just before I went to sleep. I kind of remember all these...sensations. And when I awoke this morning I knew right away that I'd had that kind of dream." She looked at me. "You don't think I'm weird, do you?"

"Weird? Oh no. Why would I?"

"Well, how often do you have girls you hardly know tell you that you were in on of their erotic dreams?"

Not often

"But," she went on, hurrying, "I just feel like I have to tell you. It seems like I should, since you were there, I mean in it, and all." She squashed the cigarette out in the ashtray. "Oh, and thanks for putting the blanket on me. I barely remember you doing that."

I nodded and was glad she didn't say anything for a while. When she finally did speak, it was to ask me if I was going to go to college in the fall. I told her that I was, and we spent the rest of the ride making small talk.

In half an hour we were swinging off 285 onto Santa Fe Drive, and were

almost home. I dropped everybody off at their parents' houses. Sherri was the closest to my house, so she was the last to leave the car. When she got out she smiled at me.

"I won't forget last night. I had a...well, an interesting time." She looked at me for a long moment, and I had to quell a sudden urge to lean over and kiss her. She smiled, and I smiled back. "See you this summer, maybe," she said, and shut the door

Nirvana

On a Wednesday night in February, 1969, Dean Dubretti left his parents' house in Englewood, Colorado. It was snowing, and he was wearing his parka, as well as the six-foot candy-striped scarf his mother had knitted for him the year before, for his sixteenth birthday. He didn't leave a note of any kind; he really didn't think he'd be gone too long. When he left the house, he was mad.

His father and he had argued all through dinner about first the length of Dean's hair, which led, of course, to Mr. Dubretti calling Dean's ideas subversive and his friends communists. Finally, Dean banged his fist on the table and his father grabbed his wrist and told him, in a slow, deliberate manner, that he had better just button up, or there'd be hell to pay.

"Bullshit," Dean made the mistake of saying, and Mr. Dubretti back-handed him across the cheek. In spite of himself, tears sprang to Dean's eyes; he held them back. He stared hard at his father, who stared back.

Mrs. Dubretti, who had sat quietly terrified, trying to eat her dinner, stood and hurried Marie, Dean's 14-year-old sister from the kitchen. When they were gone, Mr. Dubretti bunched his long fingers into fists and rested them on the table on either side of his plate.

"If you ever swear like that in front of your sister and mother again," he said, his voice low and steady, "I'll take you outside and kick the living shit out of you."

Dean had never heard his father use language like that before, and it

caught him off guard. He looked down at the porkchop and macaroni and cheese for a moment, then shoved the chair from the table, and went up to his room, slamming the door behind him. He knocked his algebra book off his desk, and flopped on the bed. He stared at the black-light poster of the Jefferson Airplane that hung on his closet door. He thought about how far-out it would be to go to San Francisco and lie around in Golden Gate Park and listen to free concerts by the Quicksilver Messenger Service, smoke dope, and screw.

Half an hour later his parents left for their bridge club. Dean stalked out of his room, went to the front closet, put on his parka and his scarf. He didn't have any gloves--he'd lost them sledding up at Indian Hills the week-end before, but hadn't told his folks; it was the third pair he'd lost since November. He spied his father's gloves on the top shelf--his good ones, with the real sheepskin lining--and grabbed those. As he drew the gloves onto his hands Marie came out of the family room.

"Whatcha doin?" she asked.

"I'm goin out for a while."

"Dad'll get mad."

"Tough." Dean wrapped the scarf around his throat.

"Are those dad's gloves?" Marie asked. "He'll get real mad if you take them."

"Oh, fuck him," Dean spat out, and immediately wished he hadn't said it in front of his sister. "Sorry, Marie," he said, and opened the door. "See ya."

He hitch-hiked to Dom's apartment on sixth and Grant, where he spent the next few days. He'd met Dom and his girl friend at a Mothers Of Invention concert the previous October; he was the only person Dean knew who had an apartment. After a week there, he moved in with Floyd Amchick on 11th and Pennsylvania.

He went back to his parents house just once, three weeks after he'd left, during the day while his folks were working and Marie was at school. They drove over in Amchick's '57 Chevy Nomad, and went in to pick up Dean's records and some clothes. Amchick, starting to crash off a smack high, wanted Dubretti to go through his father's dresser and look for money, and when he walked by the walnut gun case in the family room Amchick tried to talk Dean into taking the guns. Dubretti told him he was crazy.

"At least the pistol," Amchick said, staring longingly at Mr. Dubretti's

Colt .357. "I could get...a lot with that."

As they were leaving Dean saw Mrs. Chester across the street watching them through her front window. He knew she'd tell his folks she'd seen him, but it didn't matter. They still didn't know where he was living. And it was no use taking Amchick's license number; it was a stolen plate.

He hadn't been home since, and that was nearly a year, now. Once, though, while wasted on mescaline and killer hash he, Dom and Lily had composed a telegram to his folks informing them that their son, Dean Allen Dubretti, having taken employment as a deck hand on a Brazilian steamer, was washed overboard during a storm 50 miles off the coast of Peru and was, it is regrettable to report, presumed lost at sea. From time to time Dubretti remembered that incident, but it was a hazy recollection, and he wasn't sure whether they had sent the telegram or not. He didn't think they had.

Now, he was living on ninth and Pearl, right across from a King Soopers grocery store. It was an old house, a ramshackle building on a street of ramshackle buildings. It had been divided into apartments at one time, but was now being rented in its entirety by a Krishna Consciousness group. The house was referred to, by those who lived there, as "the Ashram", or "the holy place of repose." The ashram was rented by the leader of the sect, a former drug dealer and small time pimp named Atkins.

"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare, Hare."

Dubretti sat on the floor of the Sun Room--formerly Apt. 3--of the ashram. His legs were twisted so that each foot rested on the opposite thigh in the lotus position. Every now and then his left foot would twitch.

"Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare, Hare."

He fingered the string of wooden beads hanging around his neck, and chanted under his breath. His lips moved with each "m" in Rama, but except for the rise and fall of his chest and his occasional foot twitch he was otherwise immobile.

"...Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare..."

Dubretti opened his eyes to slits and slid them first left then right as his fingers squeezed the beads--one bead for each Hare cycle. No one was in his field of vision, but he heard muffled voices behind him, and a shadow passed across the floor before him. He closed his eyes, and sighed.

He was tired. He had been sitting in that position for nearly two hours.

His back was sore, his neck stiff, his fingers nearly numb from gripping the beads. He wanted to get up and stretch, maybe go for a walk, if it wasn't still snowing. Then he could go to the Seven-Eleven and grab a Coke, or something; he knew dinner was going to consist of some variation of brown rice, and he was a little tired of eating brown rice. In fact, he thought as he mumbled another Hare cycle, he was a little tired of a lot of things, not the least of which was sitting on the hardwood floor when he meditated. At least they could have some pillows for sitting on.

He caught himself falling into a bitchy mood, and he opened his eyes, searching for the poster that was tacked on the faded green wall of the Sun Room. A dark-blue human figure--it looked like a man, but could well have been a woman--stared coolly back at Dubretti with large oval eyes. Krishna's arms--all four of them--were out-stretched, and each hand grasped an object. Dean let his eyes close again as he recalled what the objects represented: the discus symbolized the mind, the mace stood for the notion of the individual, a conch shell, the creation of the world, and a bow, arrow and quiver represented "the causal power of illusion from which arises the universe."

Dean fingered the next bead and wondered, as he often did, just what a conch shell had to do with the creation of the world. The thought lingered, but he shook it away.

What does it matter, he told himself, as long as I have Him.

Someone behind him laughed--it sounded like Atkins--and Dubretti nearly turned to see. He stopped himself, and jerked his head straight. He shifted to the next bead, and wondered if it was still snowing. It had been earlier, when he was out soliciting contributions for the ashram. When he had come back the hem of his yellow saffron robe was darkened by water and was mud-stained. It had been miserable out, and he had not collected much money, either. Atkins, of course, was not happy with that.

"What the hell do you think you're supposed to do when you go out and get contributions, Dean?" Atkins had asked sarcastically. "You're supposed to be aggressive, like Ellen is. She came back with nearly twenty bucks, and you have, what, four? Be aggressive, not passive. Don't wait for them to come to you; they never will. Go to them, man, go to them."

Dubretti didn't like Atkins at all. In fact, there were times that he

hated the guy, but he tried to repress those thoughts as much as possible, as Krishna had taught. But Atkins was such a hypocritical bastard. He was the leader of the ashram, but didn't follow the same regimen as everyone else did. His head, for example, wasn't shaved smooth; there was a half inch of dark fuzz covering it, while Dean and the others in the ashram had shaved their heads, except for the top-knot.

But that wasn't all. Atkins, who had been a fervent devotee of Krishna when Dubretti first met him and was invited to join the ashram, had since become lax in his own devotions; he was rarely seen in the Sun Room, meditating. And he dressed himself more often in jeans and a flannel shirt than in the saris everyone else wore.

Dubretti resented Atkins for all this, but tolerated it, as did the others, because their faith in Krishna compelled them to. Atkins may have been a hypocrite and a bully, but he was still a man, and all men, Dubretti remembered Krishna's words, are "but the same beneath the facade of individuality; they are parts of the Whole." Dean believed this, and tried hard to live up to it, no matter how difficult it might be.

At times, though, it was quite difficult. More than anything Dean resented Atkins for was that, while there was a strict rule forbidding the use of drugs of any kind while a member of the ashram, and Dean had exercised great will power in obeying that rule, more than once he had detected the unmistakable odor of grass leaking from around the locked door of Atkins' room. And there was the required vow of celibacy that everyone knew Atkins was not keeping.

But, Dean would tell himself when such common, negative thoughts were in his head, Atkins is but a man, part of the Whole...

Besides, Atkins paid the rent, a fact worth keeping in mind.

"...Rama, Rama..."

His fingers shifted to another bead. He had lost count of the number of Hare cycles he had completed. That was good; his rational self was beginning to blur; someday it would fade out completely, and he would ascend to a higher level of consciousness.

He knew a guy who had done that--attained the tenth bardo on the transcendental plane. It had been in the previous May, up behind the Flat-irons above Boulder. He and Hal--a fellow he'd met at Dom's place--and Hal's girl-friend Karin had hiked up the Bluebell trail carrying with them

a loaf of French bread, some Monterey Jack cheese, and a bota filled with Paisano wine. They stopped for a rest beneath a rock overhang and Hal pulled a pill bottle from his top pocket and shook out 3 small black tablets.

"Black flats," he said. "Good shit. Some of the best acid I've ever done."

He offered one to Karin, who took it, and to Dubretti, who refused; he hadn't done acid yet, and had heard some pretty scary stories about it. Hal and Karin washed the tabs down with wine, and Dean watched them, waiting for something bizarre to happen. Nothing did--at least nothing that Dean could see. He was finally able to tell that something funny was going on when, about 45 minutes later, Hal said to no one in particular, "Lookit the bannanna on my lip," and he and Karin broke up laughing.

Three hours later, under that same rock overhang, Dean was alone with Karin; Hal had wandered off somewhere. The two of them were laughing over the word "spermatozoa". Karin had said it first, then began repeating it, giggling. Dean, working on a good contact high, giggled right along with her until he said the word slowly and looked at her and got a hard-on. He reached out and almost touched her when Hal came up the trail, smiling beatifically. He sat cross-legged on the ground between Karin and Dubretti and said nothing for a few moments, then:

"I've done it," he said, his voice soft, tranquil. "I've seen it, reached it. I've been there."

Dean looked at Karin, and was about to laugh, but her expression of understanding then awe stopped him. His grin faded.

"The tenth bardo, man," Hal whispered. "I've been there."

This time Dean did laugh. Hal must be kidding with this bardo stuff, he thought. But the more he listened to Hal's description of psychic bliss, the more he believed Hal had done it, had been there, wherever "there" was. And wherever it was, Dean wanted to go.

Shortly after that Dean did acid for the first time. He was anxious at the beginning, but Hal and Karin would be with him, and this time Hal wasn't doing acid; he was crashing off speed after a week-long run and was starting to nod off from smoking dope all day. Karin took only a half tab and told Dean that she'd guide him, not to worry.

Dean sat in a bean-bag chair for over an hour, waiting for a revelation, but he was just getting tired. Karin was beginning to giggle and say things

Dubretti didn't understand, and that was starting to get on his nerves. He watched her for a few moments, then, a little disgusted at all the hype about acid, he got up to get a drink of water. When he did, a weird thing happened--the far wall of the room changed from an eggshell white to a baby blue to a violent red and the edges began to melt. Dean sat back down.

Only once during that night did Dean think he came close to a transcendent state, and that was when he reached orgasm--finally--after screwing with Karin for what seemed days. The next morning Hal asked if Dean had been "there". Dean smiled, but said he really didn't think so. Hal laid a consoling hand on Dean's shoulder.

"Someday you will, man," Hal said in his new beatific voice. "Just stick with acid, man."

"...Hare, Hare. Hare Rama, Hare Rama..."

A cold draft blew over Dubretti and he shivered. Somebody left the damn door open downstairs, he thought. Then he forced himself to rid his mind of material thoughts. It wasn't easy; his right leg was asleep, and his butt was sore. And now he was cold. He wished whoever it was would shut the door. He let his mind empty. It wouldn't.

Dean tried acid a few more times, but never found that level of transcendent reality Hal evidently had. Each time he did it, there was a point at which some kind of plateau seemed just out of reach, as though if he were just a little more stoned, he could grab onto it and haul himself up to that level. But he never could, and had once tried too hard by popping another hit of acid when that feeling came over him. He spent the entire night walking alone in the Five Points area of Denver, terrified of being jumped by a gang of blacks and beaten raw. When he came down, he quit doing acid.

And he found speed. Now, that was a high. No frustrating reaching for a plateau that didn't exist. Dean would mainline some good crystal and power flooded through him, instantly. There were times he could see the world with a clarity of vision that revealed everything, from the scratched open pimple on Donna's face, to the real pleasure she tried to mask with objections and cries when he hurt her while they had sex; there were no secrets. He could read people's minds; he even got to the point at the end of one two-week run during which he had slept for no more than 48 hours that he could sense who his enemies were, and that they were everywhere. He was staying at Amchick's place on tenth and Corona at the time, and when it seemed

to him that his enemies were about to close in, Dubretti grabbed Amchick's keys off the coffee table, streaked out the door, and took off in the Nomad. He drove quickly but carefully up to Central City, above Golden, to the house of two gays he'd met at a party somewhere before. They told him he could stay the night, and showed Dubretti a room he could sleep in. Of course, he couldn't sleep; he spent the night staring in the darkness at the door, waiting for it to burst open. Just at dawn he heard one of the men leave the house. Dean went outside, and when the guy came up the steps half an hour later with a Rocky Mountain News tucked under his arm, Dubretti sprang from behind a hedge, grabbed the man by the lapels of his shirt, and held his Swiss Army knife to the man's throat.

"Where you been, motherfucker?" Dean demanded in a hoarse croak. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't jam this knife into your queer throat."

The man exhaled, then moved too quickly for Dean to realize, and he was suddenly on his back, the man's knee pressing into his chest. The Swiss Army knife was poking against his own neck, and Dean felt sudden terror; in that instant he wanted very much to be home watching Star Trek with his sister.

The man let him up, and told him to get the hell out of there. Dean hurried down to the Nomad. He opened the door and shouted "Cocksucker!" at the man, then ducked into the car. He peeled rubber from the curb.

When he got back to Denver he went straight to Amchick's, who was sitting on his front porch when he drove up. Dean parked the car, bumping into the truck in the space behind him as he did. He walked up to the porch smiling."

"Here's your shit," Amchick said, nudging a cardboard box with the toe of his engineer boot.

Dubretti looked at it; there were a few rolled up posters, a harmonica with a deep crease across the top, a kazoo, a copy of the Tibetan Book Of The Dead, a pack of Riz-la licorice papers, and his six-foot scarf.

"Take it and shove off, man," Amchick said.

"Hey, man, don't freak out," Dubretti said. "I just borrowed your wheels."

"My car, you sonofabitch. That's my car!" Amchick was mad. Dean didn't think junkies got man. "That's a '57 Chevy Nomad, man. That's my car." He kicked the box. "Take your shit and split."

Dubretti looked at the box. He pulled the scarf from it.

"Trash the rest, man. I don't want the shit." He walked away.

"...Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare..."

Both of Dubretti's legs were asleep, and he had a headache just above the right eye. He had no idea how long he'd been chanting, and didn't really care. His mind was wandering from one thing to another, from eating burritos at the Taco Bell on South Broadway after school, to the words of Krishna he had committed to memory during the past two months. It was getting dark in the Sun Room. He wondered what Mara was doing, then decided that she was probably with Atkins, downstairs in his room. She usually was.

Dean had lived with Mara for two months before joining the ashram. He had been living at Dom's place, but Dom's girl friend was getting tired of Dubretti's being there all the time, and she made no attempt to disguise her feelings. So Dean got a job down on Market Street unloading freight, and set about looking for another place to live. One day he was hitch-hiking home and he got a ride with a girl driving a '61 Karmann Ghia convertible. That was Mara. As she drove him to Dom's they talked, and he asked casually if she knew of any cheap apartments for rent. She told him that she had a two bedroom place over on 13th and Humboldt that she couldn't afford to keep by herself, and she asked him if he wanted to move in, share rent, food, and space. 13th and Humboldt was a much better part of town than Dean was used to; he accepted the offer.

They lived independent of each other--they didn't sleep together--which suited Dubretti fine as he was dabbling in speed again and having regular sex with Kookla, a 16-year-old runaway from Taos, New Mexico. But Kookla freaked out one night on DMT while listening to "Revolution Number Nine" on the Beatles' White Album. She ended up in the emergency room at Denver General, where she clawed at nurses and interns for hours, screaming that she was being attacked by purple crawdad people. Dubretti managed to get in touch with her parents, and he talked Rich Levine into dropping her off in Taos on his way to Tucson. Dubretti never saw Kookla again, and that really didn't bother him too much; she hadn't been working, and was maintaining an expensive smack habit.

In late October, two weeks after Kookla was gone, Dean turned 18. He spent the day unloading crates of lettuce in a cold rain at a Market Street loading dock. When he got home Mara gave him a bottle of Mateus, which surprised him because they hadn't really that much to do with each other in the six weeks he'd lived there. He didn't remember ever telling her when his birthday was, but he figured that it must have slipped out one night while he

was stoned.

They drank the wine and ate the cake Mara had bought him at the Seven-Eleven down the street. Afterward, they smoked some Lebanese blond hash Dean had been keeping for a special occasion, and they ended up having sex first on the living room floor, then in Mara's bed. The next morning Dean awoke alone; Mara had gone to work at five-thirty, as usual, and Dean hadn't even noticed. He lay in bed for a few moments, feeling sorry that he hadn't noticed; he recalled their love-making, and was ready to continue. He prodded himself to work, and by mid-morning he was convinced that he was in love with Mara.

Except for a short infatuation with a girl named Yvonne back at Englewood High--she was a junior, and he a freshman--Dean had never felt much affection for any woman. Since leaving home he'd had sex often, but he couldn't remember the names or even the faces of many of the women, and didn't care deeply for any of them. But now he couldn't get Mara off his mind. Throughout the morning as he unloaded crates of California grapes and Texas hothouse tomatoes from the long semis, he thought of Mara, and when he did his stomach would tighten like it did when he was rushing on speed. At lunch he hitch-hiked to the apartment, but she wasn't there, and he got yelled at for being an hour late back to work.

At five he collected his money and caught the number 44 bus to the apartment. As he dug in his pocket for the keys, he glanced up and saw Mara go by her bedroom window, pause, look out, and smile. Dean's legs went wobbly. He fumbled the front door open and took the stairs two at a time. Inside the apartment, he made for her room. She was packing a suitcase.

"I met the incarnation of Krishna, today, while I was working," she said. Her eyes flashed excitement, and a soft smile played on her lips. "He is willing," she went on, carefully folding her blue calico sundress and placing it neatly in her suitcase, "to instruct me in the way of the Vedas."

Dean stood in the doorway watching her pack. At first he stared at her slim body, wanting very much to make love to her. Only when she packed her tennis shoes did it come to him, fully, what she had been saying: she was going to leave. His heart seemed to flip over in his chest. He shook his head to try to clear it, as if clearing it would help him understand. Mara shut the suitcase; the click of the latches was loud in Dean's ears. He stared without saying anything as Mara went into the bathroom, returning with

her toothbrush. She lifted the suitcase off the bed and looked at Dean.

"I feel so much at peace," she said, and brushed past him.

"What about the apartment," he blurted, finally, "what about us?"

"Oh, don't worry about my half of this month's rent," she said, slipping on her coat. "You don't have to pay me back, or anything. Money and other material things are so trivial, in comparison to the more important things." She opened the front door. "You can keep my stereo and records, too." The door closed.

Dean walked across the living room, his eyes stinging. He looked out the window at Mara walking down Humboldt to 12th Street. She turned the corner at 12th, and Dean let the curtains close. He flipped the switch on the Philco stereo, and Three Dog Night's "One" filled the room. He didn't notice the significance; he sat heavily in the overstuffed chair by the window and stared at the far wall.

"...Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare..."

Dubretti's stomach gurgled. He tried to ignore it, but couldn't; it had been too long since he had eaten. From the kitchen he could smell something burning, and he knew Sami was cooking. She always burned the rice. Always. His fingers shifted to another bead.

It was dark in the Sun Room, and Dubretti was sore. He tried hard to concentrate on the chant, but he couldn't do that, either. He conjured a picture of Krishna sitting placidly on a fluffy cloud, but the image faded, and Krishna's face was replaced by Mr. Dubretti's. Dean opened his eyes.

"Damn it," he muttered, breaking the chant. He sighed, and began it again.

"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare..."

But it was no use; he'd lost the rhythm. Two hours plus of chanting, shot. He was mad for a moment, but that, too, dissolved into a more general depression. He thought that maybe it was the weather, so cloudy all the time, and getting colder day by day. He knew, though, what the problem was. He just wasn't getting out of his devotion to Krishna what he had expected.

He had entered the ashram on such a high. A week after Mara left, he'd tracked her down to the Pearl Street ashram, and when she refused to talk to him about moving back to the apartment with him, Dean told her he'd stay at the ashram until she acquiesced. She never did, but it didn't matter; Dean moved in as a devotee after two nights of sleeping on the couch and talking

at first with Sami--a 17-year-old Japanese-American from Des Moines--and then with Atkins himself about the wonders of Krishna.

There was much about Krishna and his philosophy that appealed to Dean at first. There was the serenity in his total surrender to the Lord Krishna, without which he would have been "an empty vessel, waiting to be filled," and would have passed from incarnation to incarnation, hopelessly attempting to "achieve one-ness with himself, with the world." And he was part of a close-knit group, a family of sorts, which contributed to his peace of mind.

And studying the Baghavad Gita had given him the opportunity to grow intellectually. He had, for example, never heard of the concept of reincarnation, and when he discovered it, was enraptured by it. What a boon to the soul of Man! To be free of the "shackles of traditional theological thought, where western man has, for two thousand years, been doomed to the inevitability of either heaven or hell." Now, Dean discovered, Man was free to fly from one life to the next, each better than the last, until he attained that level of purity which allowed him to alight next to the Holy Triad--Vishnu/Brahma/Shiva. Dean believed nothing to be impossible for him.

He quickly lost interest in not only Mara, but in sex altogether. As far as Mara was concerned, he found her a good deal less attractive with a shaved head and her body hidden by a shapeless sari. As for sex, one could not, he reasoned, attain a higher level of consciousness if he was always concerned with satisfying his physical needs. He took the vow of celibacy with pleasure, at least, he told himself, until he had reached a more elevated psychic plane, and then sex would be much more enjoyable, both for him and his partner.

But now, his legs were asleep. It was winter, which made soliciting contributions more difficult as well as uncomfortable. He was getting sick of the limited diet. And his vow of celibacy was growing weaker; two days before he and Sami had been alone in the house. He was meditating in the sleeping room and Sami was in the bathroom, preparing to bathe. She had left the door open and Dean, chancing to open his eyes, saw her strip off her sari. He didn't know she had such nice breasts. He came close to breaking off the chant and trying to get Sami into bed, but somebody entered the house, Sami shut the door, and he concentrated on the mantra.

The teachings of Krishna, too, were beginning to bother him. As he considered the notion of reincarnation, he wondered what would happen if his

next life would be worse than his present one. Then he encountered the idea of karma, and that helped explain the problem, but it also made it seem like a lot of work, too. Beside, he thought, wasn't karma like the Christian Golden Rule? He couldn't that there was much difference between them.

And, of course, there was Atkins. Even if Dean could forgive Atkins his faults, even if Dean believed ardently that Atkins, too, was part of a greater Whole, they guy was still a pain to have to deal with on a daily basis. And he never failed to give Dean a hard time.

"Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare. Hare Rama, Ha..."

Dean stopped. It was no good, not at all. He had lost the whole rhythm, and just could not concentrate. His shoulders sagged, and his fingers relaxed their grip on the beads.

Dammit, he thought, two and a half hours, wasted. Shit.

He unfolded his legs and stretched them; they cracked and began to tingle. His stomach growled fiercely, and his head throbbed. He massaged his thighs, then stood and hobbled to the door of the darkened Sun Room. He made his way slowly downstairs, and shuffled into the kitchen.

Sami was standing over the stove, stirring a pot of soup. Dubretti sniffed at it; rice and broth, with a hint of cabbage. How was he supposed to live on that kind of stuff?

"Greetings," Sami said, smiling. She always smiled, even while she was burning rice.

Dean turned and looked at her. He wondered if she had been pretty before she had shaved her head. He tried to imagine how long her hair had been, if it was curly or straight. But of course it would have been straight, he thought, straight and black; she was Japanese, after all. He tried to discern the curve of her breasts, but the sari covered them too well.

"Hi," he said, discarding the standard "Greetings" of the ashram; it suddenly sounded to him like something Mr. Spock would say. "When's dinner?"

"We shall eat when Krishna grants that we all gather at once," Sami smiled.

Dean sighed. That meant he wouldn't eat another hour or so, until everybody returned from soliciting. He'd known that before he'd started meditating, and had planned to continue until someone fetched him to dinner. But now, he had to wait. He went into the sleeping area, and sat on his mattress. He was hungry, and considered dashing down to the Seven-Eleven and grabbing a

Snickers and maybe a quart of chocolate milk. He pulled back the corner of his mattress and withdrew an envelope. He opened it, and pulled out a ten dollar bill he'd stashed there weeks before, when he'd had a good day soliciting. He folded it, and wrapped his fist around it. Then he stood, and headed for the door.

Just as he passed Atkins' room, the door opened, and Atkins stepped in--to the hall, bumping into Dean. Dubretti stepped back, said "'Scuse me," and moved on, head down. Atkins stopped him.

"Where are you going, Dean?" he asked. "I thought you were upstairs, meditating."

"I was," Dean mumbled. "I'm done." He looked past Atkins, into the room. Somebody hurried across the room, to get out of sight. It was Mara, and Dubretti saw she was nude. He briefly considered being mad about that, but let the thought die.

"If you're done," Atkins said, "you should go out and solicit some more contributions. In fact," he added, "you need to come up with some more money for the food fund, if you want to eat at all tonight."

Dean let his eyes fall on Atkins, on the man's face. There was the wisp of a moustache on his upper lip, and the black fuzz on his head was perceptibly longer than it had been the last time Dubretti had noticed. Atkins was wearing his sari, but Dean could see the collar of a denim work shirt peeking from beneath the yellow material. Dean closed his fist, and felt the bill crinkle against his palm.

"Well, come on, Dean," Atkins said. "Either go out and get some money or go back up and finish your chant, and maybe somebody will come and get you for something to eat later."

Dean looked once more past Atkins into the room. He wondered if Mara had meditated that day. Then he wondered if he would see her again, and decided he would. Denver was really a small town, once you knew it. He went to the closet, put on his parka and wrapped his scarf around his throat. He reached into the pockets for his gloves--the ones he'd taken from his father--and remembered with a twinge of regret that he'd traded them to some black guy for a bag of speed. That was too bad, he thought; it was cold out.

As he twisted the knob on the front door, he turned to Atkins.

"Hare Krishna," he said. "Hare Goddam Krishna."

He slammed the door behind him.

Safe House

The place was a mess.

Lovejoy stood in the middle of the gravel driveway. Scraps of trash blew across the yard and piled up against the low picket fence. Over by the barn three plastic garbage sacks were ripped open, and empty cans, bits of paper and food spilled from them. Lovejoy wondered what animal had ventured from the forest to get into the trash. A fox? A mountain lion? He wondered why Levine had let the place get so messy.

Maybe Howard was right, he thought, lighting a cigarette.

"Levine's gone bananas," Howard had told Caron and Lovejoy earlier that day. "He's freaked out altogether. I was up there this morning. He threw the telephone at me."

Lovejoy hadn't believed Howard; the bastard was always exaggerating. But Caron did, of course; she'd been worried about Levine ever since she'd left.

"You'd better go up and see if he's okay," she said as soon as Howard was gone. They were sitting at the kitchen table next to the window, and Lovejoy glanced outside, saw the grey clouds hanging low. Snow clouds. He shivered.

"Go see if he's okay, Scott," Caron said. "Please. If he's having a hard time, being with you will help. It always has." She reached across the table and slipped her hand into his.

How could he refuse?

But on the drive into the mountains in Caron's mini-bus, on the way up highway 285 to Indian Hills, through Turkey Creek Canyon, the tape deck blaring "Foxy Lady," the snow clouds scudding from the north, on the dirt road that Levine never did get graded--all the way up to the house Lovejoy wondered how Levine was reacting to the note, to Caron's leaving.

He dragged deep on the cigarette, then tossed it away, and walked toward the house. He heard music; Led Zeppelin's "Dazed And Confused" floated on the wind. He looked up and saw that the small window in the corner of the kitchen was broken out. He hurried to the back door.

He made the back porch and had his hand on the screen door latch when his peripheral vision caught a slight movement over by the corner of the house. He turned his head and saw a black ball of fur pressed against the stone foundation. It was Crystal, the cat Caron and Levine had found in front of Bill Conrow's place in Arvada the previous July. Now she was outside; she was never outside alone. Caron was always worried about the predators lurking in the woods surrounding the house.

"Crystal," Lovejoy said, stepping off the porch. "Crystal, c'mere, kitty." He approached the cat, hand extended. The ball of fur writhed and as Lovejoy knelt, his fingers touching her head, Crystal mewed softly and turned, exposing raw flesh that had been her back leg. Lovejoy's hand jerked back.

"Jesus Christ!"

Crystal looked up at him. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Lovejoy stared helplessly down at her. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to carry the cat inside--she was too much of a mess--but he couldn't really leave her there, either. He considered putting her out of her misery, but how would he do it? Use a big rock? Wring her neck like he would a chicken's?

He took a step toward the porch. The wind blew cold, right out of the north. A sheet of newspaper wrapped itself around his leg; he kicked it from him. The music was gone. The whole scene reminded him of a bad acid trip, and a vague panic rose for a moment in his chest. He stepped briskly to the porch, opened the back door. He looked once more at Crystal; her eyes were closed. Maybe she's dead, he thought. He went into the kitchen.

His feet crunched on broken glass. The floor was littered with shattered Mason jars and their contents--the green beans, corn beets and pickles Caron had canned that summer. The cabinet above the sink was missing a door; it

lay across the room, next to the refrigerator, which had several finger-sized holes punched in its door. Lovejoy inspected them, and realized they were bullet holes. He reached for the back door knob.

"Who the hell's out there?"

Levine's voice came from the living room. It sounded strong to Lovejoy, not like that of someone wounded, dying from gunshot wounds. He picked his way over the glass and vegetables to the living room doorway. On the floor next to the oak dining table lay a black telephone; it had been ripped from the wall. Lovejoy peered into the living room.

Levine was lying on the couch in the middle of the room. He was wearing only a pair of cut-off jeans. A bottle of George Dickel whiskey rested between his legs. On a cushion next to his leg lay the .357 Blanchard had traded for an ounce of speed. When Lovejoy stepped into the room, Levine grinned.

"Hey, Scott," he said, his voice slurred. "Wow, am I glad to see you, man." He pointed at the t.v. in the corner of the room; the news was on, and Nixon's face filled the screen. "Turn that shit off, will ya," Levine said, and Lovejoy did. He moved to the center of the room.

The living room was messed up, but not as bad as the kitchen. There was a layer of dust on the furniture, and the bookcase against the south wall had been cleared; the books lay in a heap of angles on the floor. And the east wall--the oak wall and staircase--was splintered in four places where bullets had impacted.

"Sit down, Scott." Levine gestured loosely toward the old armchair facing the couch.

Lovejoy hesitated a moment, then sat heavily in the chair. It was a relief to get off his feet. He looked at Levine for a reading of how the man was feeling, what he was thinking. He saw nothing, and his own anxiety lessened. He stared at the east wall.

For almost a week in August he'd worked at stripping three layers of oil-base paint from that wall with a thick jelly that burned when it got on his skin. When the paint was off he had hand sanded the oak. He did a hit of speed, and spent 13 hours straight rubbing the wood with double-ought steel wool, then oiling, then rubbing it again, oiling and rubbing, until it was done, and the wall had a rich satin finish that warmed the room. No one had helped him, not Levine, not Caron. It was his wall; they all acknowledged

that, even Levine.

But now it was ruined. The bullet holes and splintered wood could be patched, but the finish would never be as smooth, as consistent, as perfect. Lovejoy felt a rising anger. He quelled it.

Levine drank from the bottle and coughed. Lovejoy watched whiskey spray across Levine's chest. He lit a cigarette. When Levine quit coughing Lovejoy asked him if he was okay.

"Sure, buddy," Levine said, and smiled. "Great. Couldn't be better."

"Come on, Rich," Lovejoy said, "don't give me any shit. What's happening? What have you been doing around here?"

Levine leered heavily at Lovejoy.

"Jackin off, mainly," he said. He raised himself on one elbow and shoved a stack of magazines across the coffee table at Lovejoy. They were porn mags, and Lovejoy recognized them immediately.

"Wow, I haven't seen these in years," he said, thumbing through one.

He and Levine had stolen them from Levine's step-father while the old man was drunk one Sunday in March of '63. Then they rode their bikes over to the new housing development behind the Safeway store and in the basement of one of the buildings they broke open the Winstons Levine bought and they gawked at the pictures and smoked, each making lewd remarks they only half understood. Lovejoy smiled at the memory.

"It's the best sex around," Levine was saying. He held up his hand and wiggled his fingers. "Old Rosie Palm and her five sisters. They give you the best fuck in town, and they never screw you around." His grin drooped, and he let his hand fall. "Besides, what the hell else do you do for sex when your old lady walks out on you?" He looked at Lovejoy as if expecting an answer.

Lovejoy lay the magazine back on the table. He dragged on his cigarette, and glanced quickly at the pistol on the couch, then up at Levine. He shifted in the chair, and tried to think of something to say to change the subject.

"Crystal's outside," he said. "Her back leg's shot off." He saw Levine wince. "What the hell happened, man?"

"Goddam cat," Levine muttered. He sighed, and picked up the pistol, pulled back the hammer, spun the chamber. He aimed it at a point on the east wall, said "Bang," then lowered the hammer back gently in place.

"Goddam cat. The stupid thing kept gettin in the way. She was buggin

the hell outta me, y'know, kept wantin to be fed, to go outside. She kept meowin." He worked the hammer back and forth. "I just got pissed, y'know?" He frowned and faced Lovejoy. "Is she dead?"

"I don't know, Rich," Lovejoy said, shrugging. "She's not in good shape."

"Shit. I didn't mean to shoot her," Levine said. "I just shot at her. I was pissed, y'know?"

Lovejoy nodded; he understood about Levine when he was mad. Once, in the summer of '67, Lovejoy had hitch-hiked over to Levine's place on Humboldt Street to do some acid Levine was supposed to have picked up the previous night. When Lovejoy got to the house, the first thing he saw was Levine's VW bug--the one Levine had paid cash for new two weeks before--parked next to the curb, covered with dents. Lovejoy stood in the street for a full minute staring at the car. The roof, the doors, the hood and trunk lid, all four fenders, even the hubcaps, were dented in. And some of them were deep, as if made by powerful kick, or a big hammer. Lovejoy hurried up to the house and when Laura let him in, he went straight to the back room where Levine always handled his dope.

"Hey, man, what happened to your car?" Lovejoy asked.

Levine was sitting at the oak library table, a plastic sack filled with tablets of acid to his right. He held up a hand and finished counting the tabs.

"Car?" he said when he was through. "Oh, yeah. I was over at Walters' place last night, picking up the acid. At two in the morning, I left, pretty stoned. It was raining, and half-way through Cheesman Park I ran out of gas."

Lovejoy waited for more, but there wasn't anything left to say, and Lovejoy realized what had happened.

"You beat up your car," he said, and Levine nodded. "Why?"

Levine shrugged.

"I was pissed," he said.

So now it didn't surprise Lovejoy that Levine had beat up the house, that he'd shot Crystal; he should have expected it, really. But he hadn't wanted to think that Levine would be as mad about everything as he was. Lovejoy smiled thinly, thinking about the VW incident, and he tried to think of something funny now, some joke to crack. But he couldn't, and he sat in silence, and lit another cigarette.

It was a situation Lovejoy could not have imagined seven months before,

when everything was working smoothly, when the three of them co-existed peacefully. Then, their roles were well established and recognized: Caron was Levine's woman, and Lovejoy lived in the same house because he and Levine had been friends forever. It was seven months ago that Levine had finally listened to Caron, who had threatened to leave him if they didn't move out of the hot house on Sixth and Grant in Denver. So Levine bought the house in the mountains.

It was the safe house, he had told Lovejoy when the two of them visited it just after Levine made the down payment. The safe house, a place to live where Levine could conduct his dope peddling without too great a fear of being busted, where he was not under constant surveillance. The house was supposed to keep the paranoia to a minimum, unlike the Sixth and Grant place, which was raided at least twice a month.

When Lovejoy had first seen the house, though, it hadn't looked too safe at all. It was an old place--Levine was told by the real estate agent that it was built around 1910--and while it was structurally sound, it needed a lot of work on the floors and the interior walls to be livable. But it was a good deal; the house and fifteen acres--five cleared and ten wooded--for sixteen thousand dollars.

The three of them moved up to the place in late May and lived through-out the summer in an old army tent with a pot-bellied stove to cook on. Lovejoy had learned a little carpentering from his father before he'd left home, so he did all the wood working. Caron planted the garden, sanded and painted woodwork and chose the wall-paper and drapes. And when he was not in town on business or on a dope run to Tucson, Levine toted materials, hammered an occasional nail, and paid for everything, from lumber and nails and dry wall to food and beer and the speed Lovejoy found himself strung out on. When Levine did take off for his monthly run to Arizona, Lovejoy and Caron stayed at the house and worked.

"How's Caron?" Levine said, taking a drink.

The question took Lovejoy by surprise. He sat up quickly, knocking the ashtray off the arm of the chair. As he bent down to pick up the mess he glanced at Levine, who was fiddling with the stack of magazines on the table.

"Where is she, these days?" Levine asked.

"She's okay, Rich," Lovejoy said. "She's pretty bummed out, man."

Levine snorted.

"Bummed out, huh? She doesn't know what the hell it means to be bummed out." Levine ran his fingers through his thick black hair. "I mean, shit, Scott, I'm bummed out."

Lovejoy didn't answer. He stared out the window, at the lawn that rolled away from the house for 20 yards or so, down to the stand of pines just beyond the stone retaining wall. It was dormant, now, the grass brown and covered here and there with dirty snow. In August the lawn was splendid, nourished by the inevitable afternoon showers. It was a sod lawn; Levine bought it and had the turf farm deliver it to the house and lay it down. The day it was installed Lovejoy and Caron sat on the porch drinking margaritas and watching the laborers--mostly Mexicans--work in the summer heat. Levine was in Boulder for a couple of days, waiting to score a pound of hash. Lovejoy mixed a pitcher of drinks, using by far more tequila than was called for. By mid-afternoon the pitcher was drained and Caron was slumped in the porch swing, giggling. The laborers were in the shade of the tall pines, going at their work much too slowly for any real progress to be made. Flies buzzed lethargically around the rims of the margarita glasses. Lovejoy, leaning against the railing, watched a drop of sweat roll slowly down Caron's jaw, along her neck, and disappear into her halter top. The air was thick and moist and smelled like ripe fruit, like vanilla.

"I mean, what about me?" Levine asked, not really of Lovejoy, but of his hand, the whiskey bottle, the pistol. "Shit, I'm bummed out, too, y'know."

Lovejoy thought he saw a tear spill from Levine's eye, but Levine turned his face from the light, and Lovejoy thought, no, not a tear. Not from Levine, not the tough guy who had made fun of Lovejoy for days after John Kennedy was shot and Lovejoy had broken into tears without really knowing why. Levine, after all, was the guy who said that only pussies cry.

No, Lovejoy thought, Levine's too cool, especially under pressure. Like the time the narcs were pounding on the door of the Sixth and Grant house, when Lovejoy was pressed against the living room wall out of fear and paranoia while Levine was in the bathroom, shoving baggies of grass and acid into the toilet and flushing it continuously. As the front door burst in Levine swallowed the four hits of acid he'd told Lovejoy to wash down the sink. Lovejoy was paralyzed by terror of the bust, of jail; he was immobile, nearly unable to breathe. And Levine was lipping off to the narcs--John Gregg, that

sonofabitch who had nailed Paranoid Al in an entrapment scam and shot Al in the throat when he went for the bag of speed in his pocket--Levine was tough-talking John Gregg as the narcs tore up the house:

Gregg: "Why's your shirt sleeve wet?"

Levine: "Took a bath. One arm was dirty."

Gregg: "Flushing your dope, huh? What was it, acid?"

Levine: "Shit, man, good shit. Lots of it. Yards of turds."

And Lovejoy was still trying to blend in with the wallpaper, his sphincter threatening to relax if one of the narcs came near him. But none did, and Levine wise-cracked them out the door and Lovejoy slumped to the floor and Levine grinned.

"Man, this acid is some pretty good shit."

Lovejoy shifted in the chair while Levine snuffled, wiped his nose, swigged from the bottle. As he watched Levine, noting the unwashed hair, the deep set and the bleary redness of his eyes, the vacant stare, Lovejoy couldn't help thinking that Levine wasn't always the tough guy, despite the man's attempt to appear so. Whenever he had dope, he gave it away. And money. Phil Atkins was into Levine for over two thousand dollars, and even though Levine would swear he'd make Atkins pay--swear he'd put a contract out on the guy if he didn't pay up--whenever Atkins would show up empty handed Levine would get him stoned and say, "Hey, man, that's cool. I don't need the bread. Take your time."

And there was Laura, who Levine lived with and supported while she was pregnant with some other man's child. For two months Laura lived with Levine at the Humboldt house and Levine paid for everything. Whatever Laura wanted Levine let her have. Once he spent three hundred-fifty dollars on a music box Laura had seen in the window of Zale's downtown.

And Levine was faithful to her. Lovejoy remembered asking Levine one day if he'd had sex with anyone else, since Laura's condition prevented him from sleeping with her. Levine looked up in surprise.

"No," he said, as if the idea struck him as odd.

After the baby was born and after it was surrendered to the state adoption agency, Laura recuperated at Levine's for another month, until she told him that she was moving back to her parents' place in Oregon. Levine bought her plane ticket home.

Laura's staying with Levine mystified Lovejoy. When Laura was gone, he

asked his friend why he'd lived with her for as long as he did.

"She needed me," Levine said.

Now Lovejoy eyed Levine through a haze of cigarette smoke and suddenly felt sorry for him. Sure Rich is bummed out, he thought; who wouldn't be? He relaxed a bit, sinking deeper into the chair.

"Caron's worried about you, Rich," he said. "She always has been. Everytime you went to Tucson, or to Al's or even over to Blanchard's to smoke a joint she wondered if you'd come back. There were times she would sit here watching t.v., listening for the phone. She was sure that if it did ring, it would be somebody to tell her that you were busted, or dead. She sat around--we both did--waiting to hear that your luck ran out."

Caron was always worrying, and mostly about Levine, especially when they lived at the Grant Ave. hot house. Both Lovejoy and Levine told her she worried too much, and Lovejoy did his best to console her while Levine was out. But Caron only worried more, the longer they stayed at that house; the paranoia was driving her crazy. Lovejoy was sure that if he hadn't been there to provide moral support, Caron would have left Levine long before she finally threatened to.

"Man," he said, "she was worried sick about you." He smiled over at Levine, who shook his head.

"Bullshit," Levine said. "She got tired of me." His voice was low, but Lovejoy could sense the anger in it. "She got tired of me and of my cock. That's all. A typical chick."

Lovejoy straightened in the chair, the warmth he'd felt a moment before gone now. He cracked his knuckles, and wondered if it was getting hotter in the room.

"That shit about bein worried," Levine said, "is just a goddam excuse, a way of making her feel better about leavin me." He drank from the bottle, emptying it. "The bitch just used me and my money and my dope and my house. You think I don't know that? I know a whole lot, now, than I did before. Here," he sat up and snatched a piece of paper from beneath the stack of magazines on the table. "This is a note she left for me. Listen to this shit. 'Dearest Rich'," he barked out a laugh. "What's this 'dearest' shit? But listen: 'Dearest Rich. I hate this. It's like killing a part of myself'." Levine sneered; Lovejoy pressed himself into the chair. "'But I can't go on living with you any longer. You made too many promises I now know you can't

keep.'" Levine looked up at Lovejoy. "What the hell kind of promises did I make?" he asked. "What the hell promises did I break? I don't get this at all. I don't know what thehell she's talking about, Scott." He tossed the paper from him; it floated by the coffee table and settled on the floor. "Dearest Rich my ass."

Lovejoy picked the note up and stared at it. He didn't read it; since he'd been with Caron the night she wrote it--helped her write it--he knew what it said. He remembered how Caron felt that night, how broken up she was about finally having to make the break with Levine.

"I really do still love him," she told Lovejoy as they drove down the drive in the mini-bus, on their way to the apartment Lovejoy had rented the day before in Aurora. "I want him to know that I still care. I hope the note will help."

Lovejoy looked at the note, at Caron's fluid, sensual handwriting, and he was mad, really mad, at Levine, at the mocking tone with which he'd read the note. Caron had meant what she'd written; and she really did love Levine. At least part of her did. Just three months before she'd told Lovejoy that she and Levine might get married. But that was before she found out about the 16 year-old runaway, or the woman at 14th and Lafayette St., or the one out in West Denver.

But even when she found out about that, she still cared for Levine, although Lovejoy couldn't understand why. He never really took care of her, Lovejoy thought, not like he should have.

"Dammit, Rich," Lovejoy said, "don't come down on her like that. She really does care for you. A lot. It's just that the whole business of dealing dope, and those dope runs, scared the hell out of her. And after all, you told her you'd quit..."

"Goddammit, I told her I'd slack off," Levine shouted. His fists were balled tightly at his side. "I told her I'd take it easy. I never said I'd quit dealing dope. What if I did? What the hell then? Shit, man, no job I could ever find would make me the kind of bread I get each time I come back from Tucson with a load." He swept his arm in front of him. "Everything here, everything I wanted and she wanted and everything she had was due to those trips south. She'd be livin in some scummy place on Capitol Hill, workin at some mindless job, screwin morons, if it weren't for me and how I make my living."

Lovejoy nodded, but he was only half listening. He was watching Levine, taking in the man's appearance. Levine looked wasted to him, dissipated, strung-out. And even though Levine was angry, Lovejoy saw it now as a toothless anger; Levine was mad, but there was nothing he could do about it, now. And it came to Lovejoy that Caron wouldn't want Levine now, not like this, so unattractive both in appearance and temperament. He wondered if she had ever seen him like this, like Lovejoy had seen him, and he decided that she probably hadn't; surely if she had she would have left him much sooner than she did.

The more Lovejoy sensed Levine's impotence, the more he resented the man, his mocking of Caron's letter, his general self-assurance, his cockiness. And the more he resented Levine, the more angry Lovejoy became, at Levine's way of dealing with people, of his general insensitivity. For the first time since he'd come into the room, Lovejoy was mad--and confident--enough to challenge Levine, to let him know the score.

"I don't think it would have mattered much to Caron where or how she lived, Rich," Lovejoy said, choosing his words carefully. "As long as you and her were getting along together, in a solid relationship, she would put up with a lot for you. It didn't matter what you did for a living, really, as long as she could just love you." He paused, and took a breath. "She did love you."

"What?" Levine said, stiffening. He glared at Lovejoy. His mouth was a tight line; Lovejoy's confidence withered. He struggled to believe in Levine's anger as essentially impotent.

"Love," Levine said. "What a bunch of shit, man. You call this love?" He snatched the note from Lovejoy's hand. "You call leavin me cold, without talkin about it, without even tellin me to my face--you call that love? Shit, man, she ran out on me. She doesn't love anybody but herself." He sat back in the couch. "All she wanted, Scott, was a piece of ass, and the bread. When she got tired of the sex, the money couldn't keep her. And man, that's women for you; she probably found herself another cock to jump on." He paused, then looked at Lovejoy. "Did she, man? You've talked with her. Did she find someone else?"

They locked eyes for a moment, Lovejoy maintaining the gaze while his stomach churned. Finally Levine waved his hand, and broke off the stare.

"It doesn't matter, I guess," he said. "I should expect it, really."

She's probably screwin someone else, maybe right now, huh? Right this moment. Great though, huh?" Levine chuckled; it died in his throat. "But why shouldn't she? Everybody else does. That's what love means now, right? It means get laid and get what you can." He poked idly into the stack of magazines, and produced a joint. He lit it. "Scott, Caron doesn't love me. She doesn't love anybody. Nobody does. You don't. I don't. Nobody."

Lovejoy didn't answer; he was afraid that he would blow it and start screaming at Levine for being such an insensitive son of a bitch. He held back, sitting stiffly in the chair. The room seemed to close in on him, and he considered smoking some of Levine's joint to help relax himself. He decided against that; he wanted to be in control. But, he needed something. He stood.

"Got any beer?" he asked.

"In the fridge, man."

Lovejoy stepped quickly out of the room and into the kitchen. There, he looked out the window; it was growing dark and the clouds were hanging low. He felt like leaving. He didn't want to drive home in a snowstorm. Caron would worry.

He found a beer that hadn't been blown apart by the bullets Levine had pumped into the refrigerator. He opened and sipped; the cold liquid made him shiver, and he had a sudden desire to run out the back door, to get the hell out of the house. He leaned against the counter, and lit a cigarette, and in a moment the urge dissolved. He was staying, if for no other reason than he had told Caron he would see that Levine would be okay. But more than that, there were some things that Lovejoy had to say to Levine, that were important for Levine to understand, finally. He'd been playing with people's feelings for too long, Lovejoy told himself; he needed to be told that it wasn't right.

He sat back down across the couch and Levine turned his head to look at him. The anger had drained from Levine's face, and his eyes were listless.

"You know, Scott," he said, his voice no longer hard-edged, "it wouldn't surprise me if Caron is sleepin with someone else. And that's okay, I guess. I mean, if she really wants to, what can I say? I guess the bad part is, y'know, somebody else sharin with her, sharin the little, kind of private things about each other."

Levine was looking at the floor, his hands flexing, his knuckles popping each time he made a fist. Lovejoy watched him, struck again with how miser-

able he appeared. And Lovejoy was sad. They'd been friends a long time, and Lovejoy had never seen Levine like this. He began to feel sorry for Levine, and for the fact that their friendship was over. The end to that had come some time before, he realized as he sipped beer, but he couldn't have said when that time had been. But that was not as important as the fact that Levine had gone too far when he hurt Caron. Lovejoy had seen it, had been there practically the whole time, watching Caron believe blindly in Levine, trusting him when Lovejoy knew--and then had the proof--that Levine could not be trusted.

And now Levine was lamenting his loss, complaining to Lovejoy that he'd been wronged, that he couldn't understand what had happened. And this was what Lovejoy had been dreading since Howard had left earlier that morning, when he knew he'd have to face Levine and explain things to the man because Levine never was very aware of how his actions could affect--and hurt--others.

But I could leave, Lovejoy thought. He really didn't owe it to Levine to tell him anything. He might leave, and get home in front of the storm.

But he stayed; if he didn't owe it to Levine, he had to tie up loose ends. Caron would want him to make that kind of clean break, so they wouldn't be haunted by Levine's ignorance.

He stood, gripped by an urgency to say it and get it over with. The muscles in his back drew tight.

"The whole problem, Rich," he said, "is that you blew it with Caron. You know you did." He lit a cigarette and drew deeply on it. "I mean, you can't walk all over someone like her and expect her to just accept it, to just keep taking it. Not Caron, at least."

Levine cocked his head and looked hard at Lovejoy.

"What the hell do you mean, man?" he asked. "I never walked on Caron. I never did anything wrong by her."

"Oh, come on, Rich," Lovejoy said. He was a little dizzy, and he stepped over to the picture window. Outside, the first few flakes were falling. "We know all about it. That chick from New Mexico. Andrea over on 14th and Lafayette. And Lindsay Meyers who lives with that lady coke dealer out in West Denver. Shit, man, what do you mean, you never screwed Caron around?" His hands were trembling. "Jesus, Rich, at least Caron let you know how she was feeling about you." He gestured at the note. "At least she was up front about it."

Levine was staring at Lovejoy, his mouth half open, his eyebrows furrowed together.

"Chick from New Mexico," he said. "You mean that stupid little runaway junkie that Dubretti was ballin, the one who got stoned on DMT and freaked out at Denver General?" Lovejoy nodded. "Kookla?" Levine was incredulous. "Jesus Christ, man, that's all fucked up. Who the hell...all I did was take her to Taos. Dubretti talked me into dropping her off at her folks' place on my way to Tuscon. I never touched her. Who the hell said I was doing anything with her?"

Lovejoy opened his mouth, then shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't...I think..." he paused, and drew on his cigarette. "Caron thought you were, I know that." He leaned against the window sill, and noticed that his hands were still shaking. He stared at them. "Dammit Levine," he said, and all the air seemed to rush from his lungs. "I saw you and Andrea over at her place that day we scored the mescaline, the way she looked at you like she wanted to screw you more than anything else in the world. And I saw you go back that night, right back to her apartment, and you didn't come out until the next morning." He stopped for a breath. He was still dizzy. "And Lindsay. I watched you and her play footsies enough times. And then you went with her up to Hal's in Boulder, for two days, man, and you told Caron that you were just up there on a deal. So don't give me that 'I'm innocent' bullshit."

Levine was looking at Lovejoy like he'd never seen him before.

"Andrea? I went over to her place to score that pound of speed I had from Griff, that flake she lives with. He had five hundred dollars of mine for front money. The bastard didn't show up until nine the next morning. The crank wasn't very good, either. Besides," he said, making a sour face, "I wouldn't get near Andrea. She fucks almost anyone; there's no tellin how many diseases she'd give me." He fingered what was left of the joint, as if trying to decide whether to relight it. "And Lindsay," he said, and smiled thinly. "She's a nice looking chick, man, but she'd never screw me, although it would be nice. She and the chick she lives with are dykes, man. Goddammit, I was up at Hal's waiting to score some coke. I told you that, Scott." He looked hard at Lovejoy. "Man, have you been watchin me? Spyin on me? Why, man?"

Lovejoy drained the beer; it was warm, and left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Sure. Levine. sure," he said. "New Mexico, you bet. And Andrea was just

another dope deal, and nothing else, sure. And Lindsay's a dyke. Right. Innocent, sure, you bet." And he was thinking that, no, Levine couldn't be telling the truth; he did do all that, he did screw Caron around. Lovejoy had seen all, for such a long time.

But he knew, too, that Levine was somehow right, that his stories fit. And he sensed--was certain of it--that somehow he'd made a wrong decision, somewhere along the line. He had the sickening feeling for a moment that he'd blown it. But that passed as he told himself that he hadn't really been wrong, not completely.

"You never stayed around her, man," he said, "you always stayed away. You never talked to her, Rich. All you ever cared about was yourself, your house, your dope runs, your money and your power trips. That's all you've ever given a shit about, your stupid power trips. Caron needs love, man. You can't love, you said so yourself. She needs gentleness, sensitivity, and you come in here and shoot the damned cat and blow the hell out of this place because you're pissed off, for Chrissakes, and dammit Levine you did too screw her over for two years, and I watched and I wanted her worse than you did, ever."

He was facing the window again, and he looked out. The lawn was white, now, and the snow fell softly. He was still shaking, but felt calmer, and a little nauseous. He had the vague feeling that he should be aware of something, but he didn't know what. He watched the snow fall.

Damn, he thought numbly, I didn't want to drive home in the storm. Caron will be worried sick.

He was only dimly aware of the sharp click behind him, but he tightened his shoulders reflexively. The room was quiet for a long time, until Levine stirred on the couch.

"Aw, fuck it, man," he said, and Lovejoy heard him light the rest of the joint. Lovejoy sagged against the window sill.

I told him, by God, he thought. Now things are clear.

The snow was falling heavily, and Lovejoy wondered if Caron was watching it fall as well, if she really was worried about him.

Getting By

As Paul awoke, the sun rimmed the window frame across the room then peeked through the glass. A shaft of light burned against his eyelids, and the throb in his head increased. For an instant he had the disorienting yet vaguely pleasant sense of not knowing where he was. He turned on his side and opened his eyes to slits. The slim overnight alarm clock read 7:23, and he knew he was in his hotel room. He burrowed under the covers, but it was no good; he had to get up. He would be late for work.

He sat up a little too quickly, swinging his feet onto the gritty linoleum floor. There was the iron taste of blood in his mouth. He stood--slowly--and shuffled over to the sink, splashed water into his face. He glanced in the mirror, pushing his hair from his forehead, and saw the cut over his right eye, an inch or so long, and fairly deep. It was crusted with dark blood.

There had been the party, a big one, somewhere up by the Capitol. He hadn't known anybody there except the host, a guy named Blanchard he'd met at Eddy's Bar a week or so before. But there was a good supply of booze and dope, and he'd spent the evening smoking grass and washing a colorful assortment of pills down with beer while he wandered from room to room with an idiot smile, babbling to anyone he encountered.

He toweled his face dry and fingered the cut, and then he remembered the girl. She was short, with long, dark hair. He couldn't recall her name and didn't try to. They'd left the party sometime around midnight, and had ended up in his room. He recalled the savagery of the girl as she tore first at --

her clothes, then at his, while he lay on the bed, too stoned to move. She'd wanted to go at it; he had wanted to go to sleep. That's when she hit him. Right across the forehead, with a shoe. His shoe. And then she got dressed, swearing viciously at him, and when she left the room she called him a name he'd never heard before.

He left the sink and sat on the edge of the bed. It was 7:31.

This is a drag, he thought, and wondered what the girl's name was, then where she lived, until he finally got around to thinking about what was happening back home. It was 8:31, back home.

Dad's at the store, by now, probably bitching at Ernie to keep the floor clean, or straighten the Revlon display. Mom's home. Maybe she's having coffee, listening to that Muzak station. Or maybe she's getting ready for another Fine Arts Society meeting. Or working in the garden. Jackie's at school--no, school's out. She's riding her horse, down at Tippetts' stables, or lying outside, getting a tan; it's got to be hot enough there, by now.

He was suddenly hungry, but it was 7:43, and he had to get down to catch the bus. He pulled a clean pair of socks from his backpack by the bed, put them on, then hurried into his jeans, shirt, and boots. Then he grabbed the fatigue jacket off the chair, slipped the alarm clock into a pocket, and scanned the room for anything else that was his. There was nothing; he picked up the pack and left the room.

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He squinted his eyes against the light and slipped on his shades as he stepped from the hotel door and walked to the bus stop. It was the sixth of July, and hot, a lot more so than he'd thought Denver got. While at Ft. Benning he'd met a guy from Denver who told him all about the weather in the city.

"Climate capitol of the world," Walters would say. "A terrific place to live. Never too hot, never too cold. And none of this stifling Georgia humidity. In Denver, it's dry and cool, man."

So as soon as Paul had left the base that night in early April, he made his way toward Denver. And when he arrived in May, the weather was just as Walters had promised. But now it was July, and too hot. And muggy; he wiped a dribble of sweat from his temple as he waited for the bus.

His job didn't help. He worked at a metal plating shop out on 46th and

Steele. He was on the zinc line, spending his shift putting steel parts on a rack, carrying it to the soak tank, pulling out the other rack, rinsing--twice--then placing it in the zinc tank while he went back for yet another rack...over and over for four hours in the morning, a half-hour break for lunch, then four more hours in the afternoon. And it was hot in the place; according to McCloy--the day foreman, a short man with one good eye and a bald spot on the top of his head that was always red from his scratching it--according to McCloy, the tanks MUST BE 185 degrees at all times, except for the zinc tank which MUST BE 135 degrees, no more, no less. In the winter, that's great, Paul thought; in the summer, it's a bummer.

The number 15 bus jerked a stop and Paul climbed aboard, not really wanting to at all. He didn't know why he was going to work, other than for the money, which wasn't that good, anyway. He didn't much like the job, and he hated McCloy. He reminded Paul of the D.I.'s in basic, those chickenshits who gave orders for the sake of being obeyed, not for any real reason. Except McCloy was worse. At least a D.I. would back up a command with physical force; McCloy had to resort to threatening to fire anybody who didn't do what he wanted.

The bus took on passengers at the York Street and Colfax stop. The time and temperature sign across the street read 84 degrees at 7:58.

Paul would be late by at least 10 minutes, and the rest of the day would be lousy, he was sure. His head still ached, and the cut throbbed a little. He felt raw. He thought about the night before and wondered why he hadn't been able to stay awake long enough to get it on with that chick. It was the third time that had happened recently--a sudden lack of interest in sex. Was his sex drive diminishing? The idea frightened him; that was about the only release he had left.

He got off the bus at Steele and 45th, walked the block to Rocky Mountain Metal Plating, and went inside. Steam curled up from the tanks and merged with the acid fumes, creating a fog that hung just below the ceiling. Paul punched in at 8:12, and made his way to the zinc line. There Al Vigil, the graveyard shift foreman, was putting parts on a rack. Paul stepped onto the catwalk, stowed his pack and jacket beneath the workbench.

"You're late, man," Al said around a cigar. "McCloy's pissed. I'd stay on his good side. He says he's had it with you."

Paul shrugged, and lit a cigarette.

"So?" he said. "I don't care, not today."

"Bad night, huh?" Al grinned. He pointed at Paul with his cigar. "I see you got yourself a nice cut there. What happened?"

"I got hit with a shoe."

Al laughed. He was just like Paul had imagined all Mexicans to be when he was a kid--fat, with greasy hair and a good sense of humor.

"Okay, man," Al said. "If you don't wanna tell me what really happened, you don't have to." He gathered up his lunch bucket and stepped off the line. "Take care, man. Steer clear of McCloy." Paul nodded, and Al left.

At 10:20 Paul joined the rest of the shift in the lunch room for morning break. He sat at the redwood picnic table, munching a jelly-roll he'd bought from the machine. McCloy walked into the room. It was the first time Paul had seen him all day.

"Hey, Weston," McCloy said, and Paul looked up without hesitation; he was getting good at answering to that name.

"Hey, you ain't gettin enough parts out on the zinc line," McCloy said. "You're fallin behind. You gotta move faster up there. Don't day dream so much. What's wrong, you high on somethin up there?"

"Hung over," Paul muttered, and stuffed the rest of the roll into his mouth.

"I didn't think you was supposed to get hung over from dope," McCloy said, smiling at the rest of the crew; a few of them smiled back. "I thought all you hippies smoked dope 'cause it don't give ya no hangovers. That's what ya say, ain't it?"

Among other things Paul had learned in basic was a move that called for a quick thrust upward of the hand, into the opponent's throat, the fingers digging into flesh and yanking out the windpipe.. As he chewed, he tried to imagine doing that to McCloy. He swallowed the roll, washing it down with the rest of his Pepsi.

"I don't know what they say about pot, actually," he said, and pushed past McCloy, out into the shop. He heard McCloy and a couple others laugh behind him.

The early afternoon went better than the morning. His headache was gone, and the joint he'd smoked behind the building at lunch made the routine less dull. In fact, the job wasn't too bad, when he was stoned. There was nothing to think about. Just mechanical actions to be performed. He could

space out all day, and at the 3:00 break he could duck out back, smoke another number, and actually feel good about things until quitting time.

But as this afternoon wore on even the dope didn't help. It was just too hot on the line; every 15 minutes Paul was at the drinking fountain splashing water on his face. And Bobby, the big dumb kid from the middle of Nebraska who worked on the chrome line and who didn't like Paul much seemed to play "Okie From Muskogee" on his portable 8-track continuously. Paul was sure Bobby was trying to get on his nerves.

And the zinc tank was all screwed up; the parts kept coming out spotted. Paul cleaned the cathode bar twice, added cyanide to the solution and turned down the thermostat, but nothing worked. He was falling behind his quota.

"Goddammit, boy!" McCloy yelled as he stormed up the catwalk. "Can't you do anything right? Jesus Chri...."

Paul moved before he thought about it, so quickly that it surprised him as much as it did McCloy. In an instant McCloy lay on his back, his hands clutching at his stomach where Paul's fist had landed. Paul stood over the man, his arms and legs trembling.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice almost a whisper. When McCloy didn't answer Paul was afraid he'd hurt him badly.

"Wha...what," McCloy gasped, finally. "What...the hell...was that?"

Paul frowned, then shook his head as if to clear it. He stepped around McCloy, over to the bench, where he retrieved his pack and fatigue jacket. He left the line, went over to the time clock, punched out, and carried his card into the office. He told Jane, the secretary, that he was quitting. Jane bent over a form, and Paul could look down her blouse at her breasts. He turned away.

"Do you still have your P.O. box?" Jane asked, and he nodded. "I'll send you your check," she said, and he left the building

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Paul sat in Eddy's Bar, nursing a beer, watching t.v. Walter Cronkite was reading off the day's Vietnam body count: 4 dead, 22 wounded for the Americans, 147 dead, 209 wounded for the Viet Cong.

"We're still winning," Paul said to Eddy, who nodded.

"How come we always have fewer dead than them?" Eddy asked, drawing Paul another beer. The question was meant to be sarcastic, but Paul answered any-

way.

"Magic," he said. "They do it with mirrors and wires." He sipped his beer. "No, really, it's like this: the American soldier is a superb fighting machine, conditioned by months of training to strike quickly against the enemy, hit him hard, and withdraw before the enemy knows what happened."

"Sure," Eddy snorted. "That's a buncha crap. I got a nephew who went over there. ~~He wasn't no~~ fighting machine. He was scared shitless," Eddy punched the cash register, put Paul's quarter into it, slammed it shut. "Now he's over here at Fitzsimmons. He ain't got a right arm and half his face is burnt. And he's still scared shitless."

Paul nodded. Horror stories like Eddy's made him sick, but when he heard one he listened attentively. Such stories always helped convince him that he really had done the right thing.

"Say," Eddy said, pointing at Paul's head. "Looks like you're bleeding."

Paul touched the cut and saw blood on his finger.

"You oughtta get that covered up. Here," Eddy reached under the bar. "Here's a band-aid."

Paul took it, slid off the bar stool, and went into the restroom. He carefully washed the cut, and applied the bandage. He splashed water on his face, dried it, then sat heavily on the toilet lid. He wondered if McCloy was okay, and felt bad that he'd hit the guy, even if he had deserved it. Then he wondered what he'd do for a job, but immediately put that idea aside. He looked at his watch: 4:45. 5:45, back home.

By now Mom will be picking Jackie up from her piano lesson. I wonder if the squirt plays any better than she used to. I wonder if she's still taking lessons.

He pulled himself to his feet and left the bathroom. At the bar, he tossed off his beer, considered ordering another, but decided to get something to eat. He asked Eddy if he could leave his pack and jacket at the bar for a little while, until he'd gotten some food and maybe a place to stay that night. Eddy said okay, but just for a while. Paul stowed his gear and left.

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At a Taco Bell on Colfax he ate the usual burritos with green chili, enchilada, and a coke. He speared the last bite of enchilada with the plastic

fork and ate it, staring blankly at the styrofoam container. There was a ripple running diagonally across the container lid, a defect in the material. It looked vaguely familiar to him; he wondered if all of Taco Bell's enchilada containers had the same flaw. He repressed a strong desire to ask the girl behind the counter if he could examine a few of the boxes. He sipped his coke and jabbed the burrito.

Dinner time. Mom's in the kitchen, Dad's reading the paper, Jackie's probably watching t.v. I wonder what's for dinner. Meatloaf? Boiled potatoes and string beans. Dad's probably reading the editorials, agreeing with old man Simpson's idiotic attacks against war protesters. "Bunch of ungrateful bastards," Dad's probably saying, and Mom'll nod and put the butter on the table and ask Dad to say grace.

Paul drained his coke and got up to leave, but he was still thirsty. He went to the counter and ordered another drink.

"20 cents," the girl behind the counter said. She smiled at Paul, and he appraised her. She was slim, with a round, almost oriental face. Her dark hair was shoulder length. He figured her to be no older than 18. His line was automatic.

"I'll bet it gets boring in here, working all night serving this stuff," he said, digging into his pocket for change. "Must be a real drag."

"Sometimes," the girl said, sliding the soft drink across the counter with her fingertips. "Yeah, it is a drag, most of the time."

"It'd be a real trip doing this stoned, huh?" Paul said. "Ever sold burritos stoned? I'll bet it's kind of fun."

"A couple of times," she said, brushing her hair back off her face. "It can get real wild, y'know, when you're stoned."

"I can relate," Paul said. He picked up the cup. "Look, I have some pretty far-out weed, some gold. What time do you get off?"

The girl swiveled her head around to see if anyone had heard him. Then she looked at Paul; she frowned.

"Hey," he said, "if you can't, I can dig it. Your parents are probably expecting you home after you get off, anyway."

"My parents don't control my life," she snapped, and Paul knew he had her. "I haven't smoked any gold for a long time; sounds good. I get off at 7:30."

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Paul dragged deep on the cigarette, then tossed it onto the sidewalk, squashing it with his boot heel. He stood across the street from the Taco Bell. He looked at his watch; it was almost eight. He considered forgetting the whole thing and going back down to Eddy's, where he could watch t.v. and get drunk. But he stepped off the curb, and crossed the street. He went around to the back of the building.

The girl was waiting just inside the back door, talking to a kid with a severe case of acne. When Paul rounded the corner, she smiled, and looked relieved. She was still wearing her orange and brown uniform and her name tag that said "Hi, I'm Allison!"

"Hi, Allison," Paul said and grinned as Allison looked at him, startled, then down at her name tag.

"Oh, hi." She fished into her purse and withdrew a pack of Salems and lit one. "I didn't think you'd make it," she said. "I was almost ready to leave."

"I got hung up," Paul said, and sighed, thinking that the girl was going to try to be hard core all night. "Do you have a car?"

She did, a '68 Malibu with air conditioning. Paul guessed that it was her parent's; there was no way Allison could afford a two year old car working at a Taco Bell. She drove. They stopped at a liquor store and Paul bought a half gallon of Paisano wine.

"What's your last name, Paul?" Allison asked as they headed east on Colfax.

"Meyers," he replied, using the name he'd had in Nashville.

"Mine's Lodge," Allison said. "Y'know, like Veronica Lodge in Archie comic books." She giggled, and Paul shot her a sidelong glance.

They listened to the radio and drank wine as they drove. Paul didn't feel like talking, and there was an awkward silence underlying the rock and roll. Once, as Allison took the big bottle from him, the car weaved across the center line.

"Steady hon," Paul said. "You want me to drive?"

Allison glared at him.

"Are you kidding? I've been driving long enough to know what I'm doing. Besides, nobody drives this car but me." She drank; wine dribbled down her

chin, and that struck Paul as being one of the more erotic things he'd seen lately--Allison's smooth adolescent chin dampened with red wine. The night suddenly had promise.

"Hey, let's swing off onto a less busy street and get ripped," he said.

Allison turned off Colfax and drove through a residential area. Paul lit a joint, sucked on it, and handed it to Allison. She held it between two fingers as she would a cigarette, and took short puffs, hardly inhaling. Paul rolled his eyes and took the joint when she passed it.

"You know," he said, trying to think of a kind way of telling her that she didn't know how to smoke dope, a way that wouldn't reveal that he knew she'd had little, if any, experience doing so. "I really dig inhaling this stuff pretty deep. With ordinary pot you don't really have to do that; with this shit, though, you only get the best effects if you inhale deep, and really yold it in."

He took a hit, passed it to Allison. She dragged deeply, coughed it out, took another, smaller, hit. This one she kept in.

When they finished the number he lit cigarettes for them both, and they drank more wine. Paul felt better than he had all day; the dope had mellowed him out and the drive was relaxing. And Allison was turning him on. She was talking most of the time--about her job and how much of a jerk her boss was and how she and another girl would steal taco shells and industrial-sized cans of refried beans from the place all the time--and as she talked Paul leaned against the door, watching her in the dashlight. She was a good-looking girl, he decided, and watching her face, her slender neck, her breasts, hips and legs turned him on. He slid across the seat next to her. She fell quiet when his hand went to her knee and squeezed it gently.

"What are you doing?" she asked, and giggled.

"Let's go somewhere," he said. His hand crept along her leg, slipping under the hem of her dress.

They made a series of quick turns, Allison driving a little too fast. Paul pulled away and told her not drive too crazy; getting busted for reckless driving would be a drag, he said. Finally, they were driving through a suburban tract. Paul watched the houses slip by, illuminated by the strong street lamps. For an instant he experienced a strong deja vu, but it went away. They took another turn, and Allison stopped the car.

"We're almost there," she said, and Paul looked at her, puzzled. "At my

folks' house. There," she said, and pointed down the street. "Don't worry; they're not home. They're gone to the mountains for a week. They left yesterday." She gave him a seductive smile.

"I don't know," Paul began, but he did know, and he let Allison interrupt him.

"Oh, Paul, it's okay. Really. But the thing is, see, you have to crouch down, now, before we get onto my street. Just so nobody will see you, okay? And then I drive into the garage, shut the garage door, and we go inside--there's a door to the kitchen inside the garage. Okay?" She looked at him hopefully, and even if he wasn't horny he'd have said okay, just so she wouldn't feel bad. He crouched on the floor, as low as he could get.

When he heard the garage door close he sat up and got out of the car. Allison had the kitchen door open.

"Come on," she said, her voice low as she stepped inside.

Paul grabbed the bottle of wine and followed Allison into the house. Inside, she flicked on the light, threw her purse on the counter, and unclasped her hair.

"Well, here we are," she said. For a moment they stood in the middle of the room silently, then Paul hoisted the bottle.

"You got any glasses?" he asked, and Allison produced two tumblers. They went into the living room and sat on the couch.

That sense of familiarity still clung to Paul, like a bad odor clings to clothes. He looked around the room, at the console stereo in the corner next to the bookcase filled with the Encyclopedia Americana and a dozen volumes of Popular Science. On the wall to the right of the fireplace was a stylized oil of the Golden Gate Bridge; on the mantel was an array of Hummels flanked by tall candles in antiqued wood holders. In the fireplace was a gas log set-up.

Paul reached into his pocket and withdrew a joint.

"Can we smoke this?" he asked, and lit it, sure that Allison would not object. She didn't, and they finished it. When they did Allison moved close to him and tentatively touched his leg. They kissed.

In moments they were on the floor, Paul's hand pressed against Allison's breast. He tried to unzip her dress, then ran his hand along the inside of her thigh. They broke apart and Allison hurried to pull off her clothes while Paul unlaced his boots. And as he did, he could feel his desire

draining.

"Hurry," he said, unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it off, tearing at his pants.

When he was naked he helped Allison slide her panty-hose down her legs, and he flung himself at her, pressing close to her, letting his hand roam at will. But it was no good; he was losing the urge. He felt his lust slip into listlessness.

So did Allison. She lay beneath him, breathing hard, her face a mask of concentration. Then she opened her eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't...nothing," Paul said, and sat up. It was the room, that was it. He just didn't feel right doing it in the living room. He needed a bed.

"Let's go somewhere else," he whispered. "A bed."

He pulled Allison to her feet and she led him from the room and down the hall. In the dim light he watched her bare backside, her slim thighs, her ass, and he grabbed her, ready now to do it, to take it all the way. He pushed her against the wall, spread her legs with his knee, and pressed close.

"No," she said, "I can't, not like this. It hurts." She pushed him away. "In here, come on."

She pulled him into a bedroom and laid down on the bed. Paul followed, letting her hands tug him to her. Her breath was hot in his ear. She spread her legs and Paul thrust and she groaned, locking her legs around him. He pushed, and opened his eyes. In the faint light from the living room he saw, there, in the corner, a tall, slender ceramic cat, with a slot in its head for depositing coins. Paul stared at it.

Jackie has a cat just like that, in her room, in the corner. A white one, just like that. Dad bought it for her at the state fair two years ago, good God, a white cat just like that.

He felt himself go limp but pushed hard anyway, his breath ragged. Beneath him the girl tensed and tried to move from underneath him but he grabbed her wrists and thrust his hips against her pelvis with a rising violence. When she called his name he wanted to tell her to shut up, that it wasn't his name at all, and when she brought her heel down hard on his calf he wanted to hit her, to smash her face, like he'd hit McCloy, like he should have hit that bitch the night before, like his old man ought to be hit. He wanted to slug this dumb, naive suburban chick in the mouth then fuck her

hard until...

She screamed. A short piercing scream into his ear that made him close his eyes and cringe against it. But when it was over, there were no more, and she was still beneath her. For a moment he was afraid he'd somehow killed her. Then she moved, and he released her wrists. He climbed from the bed and left the room.

An hour later he was sitting on the couch. The room was silent except for the whisper of a hidden air conditioner. He wasn't aware of Allison until she was almost next to him. When he looked up, she took a step back.

"Don't hurt me," she said.

Paul shook his head slowly.

"I didn't mean to," he said. "Look, I didn't mean to hurt you at all. It's just...I just freaked out, y'know?"

"I know," Allison said, "I understand. I'm sorry." She sat on the couch, wrapping her robe tightly around her. "I...I'm sorry I'm not...enough for you."

Paul heard her voice break and he glanced over at her. He wondered how old she really was; she looked much younger now than she had earlier.

"Hey," he said, "don't cry. It's not your fault. Really. It's just that I..." He stopped. He felt sick; when he moved his head he almost threw up. "Everything's caving in," he muttered. "It's all gone to hell, all fucked up. Jesus, I can't even keep it up long enough to get myself off."

Allison was watching him closely. When she leaned forward, he turned away.

"Fuck it," he said. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes," Allison said, and then added, hesitantly, "it does matter. What's wrong? Tell me."

Paul leaned back in the couch and lit a cigarette, blowing smoke into the room. His neck muscles were tight.

What could he say to her, he wondered. Did he tell her that when he got up every morning and looked in the mirror a part of him wondered who that guy was there while another part said that whoever it was, he sure was an asshole? What would she say to that? Or if he told her he walked around all day trying to feel good about everything, about himself, but never really did. How could he say that he never really felt good about himself?

Allison was still looking at him. He dragged deep on the cigarette.

"Look," he said, waving his hand. "I just had to leave, okay? I had to get the hell out of there. They were going to kill me."

He'd been sure of that. More than once he'd duty unloading the shiny metal caskets from the transport planes. He knew that if he went they'd be unloading him in a few months. He was sure of it.

"Kill you?" Allison asked.

Paul didn't answer. He was thinking that even if he somehow might have managed to come back alive he would undoubtedly return wounded, maimed like Bill Willey, the kid down the street that Paul had played basketball with in high school. He'd come back with no arms and one eye. Paul was sure that if he wasn't killed he'd take shrapnel in the legs, a bullet in the spine, get his balls shot up, have his face burned off.

"Man, I had to leave," he said to the floor.

The room was quiet; the air conditioner had switched off. Finally, Allison spoke. Her voice was small.

"Where were you?" she asked. "I mean, where did you leave from?"

"Fort Benning," Paul replied.

Allison straightened up.

"You were in the army?" she asked. "And you left?" He nodded. "Wow," she said. In a moment she added, "There's nothing wrong with that, Paul."

"Yeah," he said. He'd kept telling himself that, but there was something wrong, really. Bill Willey was in pieces, but he went. So did everybody else Paul was with in basic; they all went.

He faced Allison and wondered how she could ever understand it, the isolation. How could a teen-age chick who works part-time at a Taco Bell and who wants to be hip so badly that she'll have sex with any guy that can promise her dope ever relate to the guilt? She was just like her father in that sense. All he knew was that his son had deserted, that he'd run away. The old man could never understand the reason, and he would never believe how Paul felt now.

Paul shivered, suddenly aware of his nudity. Allison got up and left the room, returning a moment later with a robe. She handed it to him.

"It's my brother's," she said. "He's still up in Boulder, going to summer school." She sat down. "He's been in school for nearly five years now, and isn't a lot closer to getting through."

"Probably keeping his student deferment," Paul said, and Allison asked

him what that was. Paul explained it to her.

"I never really thought about that," she said. "But it makes sense. Dad and Roger get into fights about the war and politics whenever Roger's home. When that happens, I leave. I don't want anything to do with it." She lit one of Paul's cigarettes.

The picture in Paul's mind was vivid; every time he and his father would argue, Jackie disappeared. She was never around when there was shouting. He squeezed his eyes shut against that memory, against all of it, but the familiarity lingered, like an after-image. And when Allison slid closer to him he wanted to pull away, to get as far from her as possible.

"It's okay, Paul," Allison said. "There's nothing wrong with leaving if you think you were going to get hurt." She put a hand on his arm. "I don't think you're any less of a man because of it."

Paul faced her and quickly put his hands inside her robe, her skin hot on his. He parted the robe and gazed at her breasts, then looked into her face. He withdrew his hands and closed her robe.

"What's wrong?" Allison whispered.

Paul stood. He was completely turned off, but this time he understood. It was the house; the place was just too familiar. And it was Allison. He was relieved, in spite of the physical frustration, to understand.

"It just won't work," he said, "not tonight. It's not you, Allison. It's just that I'm tired." He leaned against the fireplace. "Man, I'm real tired. Can I stay here tonight? I can sleep on the couch."

Allison opened her mouth to say something, then sighed.

"You can stay in Roger's room. Come on."

Paul followed her downstairs, into a bedroom. He lay down on the single bed. Allison stood over him for a moment, then went to the door.

"Don't worry," she said, then turned off the light.

Paul lay in the dark, letting his muscles relax. He could hear Allison's footsteps above him, then the muffled sound of the t.v. He wondered if Eddy had tossed his pack, and if McCloy was okay. He wondered what the bus schedule was for the next day, and it occurred to him that he didn't need to leave right away. The weather was bound to turn cool. He let that thought take him into sleep.

Critical Apparatus

Homefront is a collection of short stories set in the late 1960's and early 1970's dealing basically with growing up in the Vietnam war era. Each story is set in Denver, Colorado. Although Homefront is a collection of stories, the themes, setting, and time serve to unify the work, and the stories can be considered chapters of a loose-knit novel.

"Graduation" is the first in the collection for a number of reasons. The most obvious one is that "Graduation" takes place in 1968, and therefore is chronologically correct as the lead story. But its position in the collection is based on other considerations as well, the most important of which is that the story introduces Ron Blanchard, a character who appears in all the stories--if only in name--and who is featured in three of the stories (two of them do not appear in this collection, but are a part of a larger work in progress).

Blanchard's story serves to identify a character who is representative of members of the counter-culture in the late 60's. He comes from a middle-class household, attends high school in the Denver suburbs. He is not at the forefront of the school's social milieu. At the time of his graduation he is not preoccupied with drugs, nor is he overly concerned with the Vietnam war. He is trying to come to grips with himself socially and, certainly, sexually. His need to define himself is what compels him to do what he does in the early morning hours following his graduation.

Blanchard's search for identity and self-definition is typical of the

characters in the collection, as well as of members of the underground movement in general. Yet there is more here than merely overcoming an identity crisis. Blanchard's sexual gratification occurs almost in spite of himself. He knows that, according to the way he has been raised, what he is doing is wrong, but he cannot stop himself; at one point he withdraws his hand from between Sherri's legs, only to put it back again, to "touch, just once more, that warm, hard part down there." And of course, once he commits himself to that act, he cannot quit until he is finished. Blanchard's moral sense is altered--indeed, he has altered it consciously--so that he may receive satisfaction.

This is not unique to Ron Blanchard; ethical codes are constantly altered so we may accommodate a pleasurable experience. And while Blanchard's actions may be reprehensible, they are by no means criminal. But his penchant for rationalization, coupled with the desire for gratification of some sort or another, dominate the lives of the characters in the collection.

The compulsion for rationalization is most apparent in Scott Lovejoy, who with Rich Levine inhabits the "Safe House." These two men, neither older than 22, have been friends since boyhood. As is common, however, a natural ascendancy of one over the other has emerged through the years. No doubt at one time in their friendship Levine and Lovejoy were equals, but that time has long passed, and probably neither of them remembers it. Levine is, and obviously has been for some time, the stronger of the two. When they were kids, it was Levine who bought the cigarettes.. They ogled pornographic magazines Levine had stolen from his step-father. When they grew up, Lovejoy stayed at Levine's house, got high on Levine's dope, drove Levine's car, coveted Levine's woman. And through the years Lovejoy grew to despise Levine, but rationalized staying with him, telling himself that they were, after all, friends.

Finally, Lovejoy talks himself into believing that Levine's woman is in love with him and that Levine doesn't deserve Caron's love and support. And, Lovejoy comes to believe his own lies about Levine to the extent that he is able to persuade Caron into accepting them. Yet Lovejoy is not evil, certainly no Iago, though at times he does appear to be consciously trying to ruin Levine by pretending to be a friend and stabbing him in the back. Rather, Lovejoy acts the way he does because he has to, for self-preser-

vation; he cannot face himself as what he has become--a hanger-on who has lost the ability to think and act on his own. His defense is compulsive rationalization.

What makes it all the more easy for Lovejoy to succumb to his compulsion is the times. Lovejoy has used the mores of the era--the "free love" philosophy that Levine himself admits to following--as a means of getting close to Caron. At the same time, Lovejoy holds Levine as guilty for violating the rules of monogamy and fidelity. There are two sets of ethical principles at work here, and Lovejoy like so many of his contemporaries, unable to fully commit themselves to either one or the other of them, uses both sets to his advantage. Basically a weak person, Lovejoy exploits a confused situation to help convince himself that he is strong. And in the end he cannot see, or cannot bear to see, things as they really are.

In many ways Paul in "Getting By" is like Lovejoy in that he, too, has become a great rationalizer. Paul's rationalizations, though, are neither so obvious nor so odious as Lovejoy's. And unlike Lovejoy, Paul does ultimately feel their effects on him.

Paul is a deserter, gone AWOL from basic training. The time is 1970, the war is raging, and we can look back now and say that Paul was right for having done what he did. But, of course, Paul has no sure sense of that. He has made himself a coward in his father's eyes, has become a fugitive, and has such crippling guilt feelings that he must listen to horror stories of Vietnam war deaths and mangleings to convince himself that he did the right thing. His inability to come to terms with his running away is the motive behind his rationalizations, which manifest themselves sexually. He picks up women not because they are all that appealing to him--and certainly not because he feels anything for them--but because they are a means of venting his frustrations and of re-affirming his manhood. In this respect, Paul is compelled to act without even thinking. Like Lovejoy, who at the end of "Safe House" automatically tells himself yet another lie to avoid facing what he finally knows to be the truth, Paul acts automatically, almost as if to avoid some ugly truth to begin with. When he first appraises Allison at the Taco Bell, he goes to work immediately on seducing her: "his line was automatic." Paul has told himself so often that sex is the remedy that he reverts to it almost instinctively even though a part of him knows he is unable to perform the act. In the end, however, Paul does come to the real-

ization that he has been living a lie for some time. The ending of "Getting By" suggests that Paul is able to accept at least a part of his problems; the last line is intended to be upbeat.

So, too, is the ending of "Nirvana" upbeat. Like Blanchard and Paul, Dean Dubretti goes through his world making excuses to himself for what he is doing. And like the other characters--and Lovejoy as well--Dubretti seems to act out of compulsion, not out of level-headed thinking. He has left his middle-class home and its comforts for...what? Drugs. Sex. Religion. Through-out his wandering from one to the other he uses excuses. He uses the excuse of political differences with his father to leave home. He tells himself that using LSD will help him ascend to higher level of spirituality, then that methedrine will help him to see life as it really is. He talks himself into loving a woman he knows it is ridiculous to love. He hates Atkins, but rationalizes tolerating the man for vague religious reasons and because "Atkins paid the rent." Dubretti does all this rationalizing, this excuse making, almost as if it were the natural thing to do. Like Lovejoy, Blanchard, Paul--even Levine--Dubretti never makes any choices. He just goes along with what's happening, rationalizing his involvement.

What makes Paul and Dubretti different--and their stories ultimately more positive--than Lovejoy and his is the fact that each of the former finally decides to do something; they make a choice. Paul comes to realize the root of his sexual and emotional problems, and he decides in the end that there really isn't anywhere else to go. That he wonders about the next day's bus schedule does not mean that he will up and leave, as he done in the past. Indeed, the suggestion in that last paragraph is that he will not leave Denver at all.

Dubretti, too, chooses, and does so more overtly than Paul. Dubretti finally realizes he's been kidding himself about, among other things, his love for Mara and his involvement in the religious sect. He leaves, slamming the door on Atkins, Mara, Sami, Krishna and, presumably, that more immature part of his life. What lies ahead for both Paul and Dubretti is not clear, but whatever it is, at least each has made a decision to move ahead with his life. For Lovejoy, there must be just more of the same.

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Every writer, whether of poetry or fiction, is influenced by a predeces-

sor, someone who inspired the writer to imitation or pointed him in the direction of originality. Among those who have provided a foundation for my own writing, and the structure of this collection, is Sherwood Anderson and his Winesburg, Ohio. Just as the stories in that volume are connected by place and character, so have I attempted to unite Homefront. Ron Blanchard is my George Willard; like George, Blanchard is a part of the environment of the stories. If not on the scene, he just out of it, on the periphery. Everyone knows him, and he knows all the principals. And like George, Blanchard learns from those around him, hopefully to leave the scene sometime and go off to apply this knowledge to more fruitful endeavors than getting high and looking for the ultimate good time.

I am certainly indebted to Hemingway and his economical style, as well as his realism. Of his works, probably the Nick Adams stories have influenced me the most, because of the vivid, yet succinct portraits presented in those works. And of those stories, easily the most influential is "Big Two-Hearted River." With it in mind I have tried to get across as much about a character as possible without saying much directly about his nature. As a psychological study, very little in fiction approaches that story in authenticity and power.

Joseph Heller's Catch-22 has for a long time interested me, primarily because of Heller's deep investigations of his characters. The stories in Homefront are oriented more to character than to plot. So it is with Catch-22. While Heller examines the absurdity of war, he does so by studying the people who both made war absurd and who endured the absurdity. I have attempted to do the same sort of thing in studying the domestic scene in the Vietnam war era.

HOMEFRONT

by

Dan S Safford

B. S., Utah State University, 1975

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

Homefront is a collection of four short stories all of which take place in Denver, Colorado between 1968 and 1971. The stories are: "Graduation," "Nirvana," "Safe House," and "Getting By."

"Graduation" is the story of Ron Blanchard's sexual initiation. Following high school graduation Blanchard attends a party at a park south of Denver. The police break up the party, and Blanchard leaves, taking Robert Halstead, one of the most popular boys in school, with him. They bar hop all night, finally ending up at a restaurant where they meet two girls from their school. The four of them drive up into the mountains where Halstead and one of the girls--Judy--go off into the woods and have sex. Blanchard is left with the other girl, Sherri, who passes out. Blanchard wanders into the woods, sees Halstead and Judy making love, and returns to the car. There he has sex with Sherri while she sleeps. The next morning on their way back to Denver, Sherri tells him that she had strange feelings while she slept. Blanchard says nothing, and in the end keeps the secret to himself.

In "Nirvana," Dean Dubretti leaves his parents' home following a heated argument with his father. He wanders into the dope scene in Denver, living with various people in a number of different places. He experiments with drugs, trying all the while to achieve the ultimate high. Finally, he joins a Krishna consciousness group, giving up drugs and sex on the assumption that religion is the best high. The leader of the cult, though, is a phony, a tyrant who delights in giving orders and Dubretti, by the end of the story,

can take no more. The story comes to a close with Dubretti leaving the house.

"Safe House" is a story of two men who have grown up together, who have lived together and shared their lives with one another. Levine is the stronger of the two; for years Lovejoy has lived off Levine's successes as a drug dealer, a ladies man, and a respected member of the underground in Denver. As the story begins, Lovejoy shows up at Levine's house with the intention of telling his friend that Caron, Levine's woman, is living with him. The story chronicles the confrontation between the two men.

In "Getting By," Paul is a deserter from the Army during the Vietnam War. The story opens with Paul waking up in a cheap hotel room, and follows him through his day. He gets into a fight with his supervisor at work, quits his job, and ends up eating dinner at a fast food joint. There he picks up the girl working behind the counter. They go to her folks' house in Aurora where they attempt to have sex. Paul, though, is impotent. He realizes, finally, that his impotence is due to the guilt he feels from having deserted the Army. Once he understands this he sees that running from city to city will not solve the problem. His day ends with him falling asleep more satisfied with himself than he's been in months, though his problems are not entirely solved.