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BEERCANS ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

By

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ABSTRACT

BEERCANS ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

By

Kenneth Wachsberger

Beercans On The Side Of The Road is a picaresque novel of youth growing into adulthood and dealing with the age-old societal question of "Whadareyagonnado?"--meaning, what role will you select at an early age to define the rest of your life. Enclosed within these pages are the first eight chapters of the thirty-four that make up the entire book.

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Chapter One

HENRY READS THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

Mama gasped for breath suddenly, her face turning red as a result, and slumped back onto the sofa chair so that her head hung over its back and her arms drooped to each side. Tears came to her eyes. She pulled out her handkerchief from the front pocket of her apron and blew her nose. "My son, my son, where did I fail you?" She cried profusely before regaining her composure.

She shook her head in disgust then as she threw darts at me from the nail of her pointed finger. "And don't let me hear anymore of that talk about dropping out of school, Henry Freedman. Now, quickly, be off or you'll be late for Simchas Torah services."

In embarrassed silence, I kissed her cheek and left the home of my parents.

The streets were alive with suits and ties and mink stoles and crewcut treelawn and friends who knew what they wanted to be when they grew up and parents who had found

their niche in society. Shul-walking was a community activity now, and had been since the congregation sold the downtown building to a Black Baptist congregation and built a new structure on the Jewish side of town at the turn of the decade. Simchas Torah is observed, according to the Jewish calendar, on the ninth and last day of Succos. It is one of the most joyous holidays of the Jewish year.

But as I walked the six blocks to Temple from Mama and Papa's house, I was feeling glum. The future loomed ominously near and I didn't feel prepared. Graduation was three terms away. After twenty-two years as a dependent, I would be shot like a cannonball into the job market, where I would be forced to fend for myself, with only the love of my family and chutzpah to keep me grounded in my travels, and I was supposed to believe I had nothing to worry about because I had a diploma. The diploma was my ticket to the future, they said, and I felt like I was on the wrong bus. I still didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. For some reason, I had never outgrown my fixation with being a cowboy, but Papa said I should be practical, there were no job openings for cowboys in Midlincum Heights, Michigan. I thought seriously about being a writer because I kept a journal anyhow, but my guidance counselor told me I couldn't capitalize on my journal until I became famous, and I needed a major until then. When I had to declare a major, I chose Law because I thought I might be able to use my writing in a practical

way, but I didn't really want to be a lawyer. I continued to write in my journal because I thought better on paper than out loud, but I didn't know where to sell what I wrote, so to pay rent and tuition I took a part-time job at Eden Towers, where I worked as a secretary for an insurance agency. Between the job and homework, I didn't have much time left for writing. I thought of the early Hebrew nomads, in the desert for forty years, and I felt very out of tune with the spiritualism of my ancestors.

The service was held in the large sanctuary, where the far wall opened to a back room, equal in size to the first. The combined capacity of the two rooms comfortably sat the entire congregation, with one guest per family. I walked down the aisle looking for a familiar face next to an empty seat.

I recognized Mr. Ginslinger, Papa's card playing buddy, sitting in his usual seat in the front row next to the middle aisle. He was whispering back and forth over an empty seat with Mama's good friend, Mrs. Goldbladder. He stood when he saw me. "Well, Henry Freedman," he said, "it's so nice to see you. Do you know Mrs. Goldbladder?"

"Of course I know Henry," Mrs. Goldbladder said, as she brushed off my seat. "I've heard some wonderful things about you, young man. You make our community very proud."

"Yes, sir, he's a real nachas-giver to his parents," Mr. Ginslinger added proudly. "A straight four-point student from way back. How's school treating you, Henry? Still getting straight A's?"

"I got a B once," I said.

"Must not have been a very smart teacher." He winked knowingly.

Mrs. Goldbladder was a staunch liberal, the local chairperson of the Democratic Club. She had campaigned vigorously for every Democratic presidential nominee since Adlai Stevenson and in the 1968 Democratic primary campaign kept the books for the Eugene McCarthy Fundraising Committee. When McCarthy bolted the Democratic Party and started his own, after losing to Johnson in the primary, she switched to LBJ, but now, eight years later, she still felt bitter toward the antiwar movement on campus because the radicals there failed to cut their hair en masse and go Clean for Gene. Mrs. Goldbladder believed the pen was mightier than the sword and during the war she often wrote angry letters to Congressmen threatening to vote against them in the next election if they didn't vote to limit defense spending in Vietnam.

Mr. Ginslinger, our mayor, had been a Nixon man since Checkers and supported law-and-order like it was his idea. Running in a non-partisan election, he easily outdistanced his opponent, another member of the congregation, whose main issue was a demand that City Council not patronize industries who do any war-related business in Vietnam. Himself the owner of a highly successful liquor business, the mayor had contributed large sums of money to any national candidate who promised victory or jobs.

The 1970 Kent State killings were in local news again because just the night before a political activist from Kent had spoken at the high school on the issue of why Ohio Governor Rhodes and the upper echelons of the Ohio National Guard should be indicted for murder. Because of their own personal involvement with Kent State, both Mrs. Goldbladder and Mr. Ginslinger attended the meeting.

Kent State had shaken Mrs. Goldbladder noticeably because she was in Kent when it happened, managing a dress shop. She recalled that May as being the worst month in over eight years and added that the owner had to put his whole spring line on sale because all the students went on strike and left town. "I supported their goals but I didn't agree with their tactics," she said, gripping her necklace to support the courage of her conviction.

Mr. Ginslinger had also been personally touched by Kent State. His son, Gordon, a political science major, had dropped out of school in his senior year to organize the student strike on his campus. When he came home for summer vacation, his hair was down to his shoulders and he had a full length beard. As the mayor so sadly recalled, "I lost a son in the war."

"Frankly," he said to Mrs. Goldbladder, as he leaned over the armrest and winked at me because he expected great things from me, "I think if those hippies don't like it here, they should go to China."

"It's just terrible," concluded Mrs. Goldbladder, reflecting the war's continuing impact on the community.

"When is it all going to end? Why, only yesterday the Ableman boy with the beard was arrested at State for smoking marijuana. He'll have that blemish on his record for the rest of his life now. It killed his parents.

Mr. Ginslinger stroked his chin and shook his head in sorry agreement. "He was such a bright boy, too. He had so much potential."

I followed their conversation like it was a tennis match, then spaced them out and looked straight ahead at the Temple's new Chagall to rest my neck. I thumbed through the prayer book to see how many pages we had to read for the service. I wanted to be at Shul about as much as I wanted to eat a worm, but Mama had a weak heart and she was already worried about me because I kept threatening to drop out of college, so I went to keep her happy. She saw me as her only hope to succeed as a good mother and said if I dropped out she would hold a hot iron to her cheeks until she was blind in both eyes.

Mama and Papa were both first generation children of East European immigrants. Papa graduated high school, Mama didn't. Both worked for as long as I could remember, although Mama said she stayed home with me the first three years of my life. Papa never could run a business. Three attempts went under before I was born. He attributed it to lack of a college degree and always swore his son would not be a useless bum like him, which was synonymous with not having a degree. He earned a respectable living at Kil-Gro Chemical and with Mama's income as a secretary at Mount

Sinai Hospital we made the move to Midlincum Heights before I could ride a two-wheeler. Papa always said if I couldn't find a job elsewhere I could probably work at Kil-Gro, but he was sure I could do better. If Papa's other investments had caused him tsouris, in me he thought he had a winner.

"....Now take young Freedman here," the mayor said. He slapped my knee to make his point. "A fine example of America's youth."

"Mr. Ginslinger," I said to him, "I want to drop out of school."

The organist pounded a long harsh chord.

"Nonsense, Henry." He patted my knee. "You're doctor material. Don't disappoint your parents."

The congregation looked forward in respectful silence as the rabbi entered stage right. He wore a long black robe that had been handed down to him through four generations of rabbis and a fedora-like yarmelke that he wore to call attention to the plight of the Soviet Jews. The rabbi was a controversial addition to the Temple payroll. Mrs. Goldbladder said the rabbi was "way ahead of his time." Mr. Ginslinger called him "a damn Commie." During the war, he supported the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, and in his sermons, he often compared them to the early Zionists in Palestine after the First World War. Most everyone in the congregation had said they were against the war, but when the rabbi was arrested in front of the Washington Monument during Nixon's inauguration in January, 1973, many of them

called upon him to resign, saying it was unkosher for a rabbi to mix religion and politics. He smiled as he passed the four members of the Temple Board of Trustees, who occupied four honorary seats on the stage, and they smiled back.

"Now, what's this I hear about you wanting to drop out of school, Henry?" Mr. Ginslinger whispered to me as the rabbi adjusted his robe and cleared his throat. "I won't say I'm surprised, although I am. Never be too quick to take a stand, I always say."

I whispered back that I was thinking about it. "I'm tired of doing what's expected of me," I said. "I want to be free to do what I want."

"I think you would be making a tragic mistake. You need your degree," he said.

"Why, you don't have one." It was common knowledge. Everyone knew Mr. Ginslinger's life story because he was the regular guest speaker at the annual Junior Chamber of Commerce awards assembly and he told his rags-to-riches success story every year. The oldest of five children born to a German immigrant couple, his parents had both died when he was in the ninth grade so he dropped out to support his brothers and sisters....etc. etc. until he struck it rich. His moral always was: "With hard work, you too can all be successes." He never said anything about college, because it was assumed we would all attend.

"Henry, things were different when I was your age,"

he said. "We're living in a more specialized time. Nowadays, you need a degree if you want to make it in the business world."

"Why, a degree doesn't mean I know anything. A lot of people have degrees and look what shape the country is in."

"Yes, but people unfortunately think it does."

"Maybe that's why it's in such bad shape."

The service began with the rabbi's usual Simchas Torah greeting. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the two holidays which begin the High Holy Day season, were the only two days of the year when the entire congregation showed up, but by Simchas Torah, the sanctuary was half empty again, so every year the rabbi welcomed us with the same joke about how sorry he was that his long lost friends could only stay two days. Then he said, "Our service will begin on daf mayaw arbaw'im v'arbawaw, page 144," and the background noise resumed.

We smalltalked as we prayed, mostly polite Question and Answer conversation about school and courses and sports. We both seemed to avoid my area of concern, as if it were a clove of garlic on an empty stomach. But even "so what else is new?" has a way of sticking close to the underlying feeling of the moment, like a cat guarding its territory. He winked at a pretty congregant in the next aisle and in an aside asked if I was getting any snatch. I assured him I was getting a fair share and he noted that frustration in one area of one's life is often caused by frustration in

another.

"So stick it out, Henry," he said. "You may not think you need a degree now, but wait until you try to find a job. Interviewers look very carefully at your job transcripts and a degree looks good on your record."

"But that's unfair," I said. "It shouldn't be that way."

"I know it's unfair. Life's unfair. But that's how it is. You can't fight City Hall, Henry, so why try? Believe me, it'll open doors for you that you never knew existed."

We rose for the Shema.

"Look, Mr. Ginslinger," I whispered to him as we returned to our seats, "I haven't said I would never go back. Maybe I will finish school someday, I don't know. But right now I've got to see the world."

"Better to get it out of the way now, Henry, even if it seems hard," he said, "because it'll be a lot harder when you try to go back. It's like I always say, 'It's better to be safe than sorry.'"

"But what if I did it a different way. What would be wrong if I travelled for a few years and worked at odd jobs to survive and then finished my degree when I had a better idea of what I wanted to study?"

"What would your resume look like then if you went from job to job? Job stability is as important as that little piece of paper. Employers don't want you to be creative, just consistent."

We rose again and prayed silently.

The festival of Succos goes back to the days before the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans. For this holiday, the ancient Hebrews journeyed to Jerusalem with the first crops of their final harvest and the first born of their flocks and offered them as sacrifices to God. Now, Jews celebrate Succos by erecting succohs, booths made of branches from fruit trees, to commemorate the tabernacles under which our ancestors slept during their stays in Jerusalem. During the Simchas Torah service, the cantor finishes chanting the last chapter in the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of Moses, and begins immediately to chant the first chapter in Genesis, the first. Thus, one complete reading has come to an end and a new one has begun. In this way, the rabbis teach us, we learn that if something feels good, we should do it again. In addition, we recall in symbolic form how the Hebrews prayed at one time to celebrate and give thanks for a successful year just ending and to ask God for a good year to come.

Simchas Torah is also the time when young Jewish boys and girls are called up to the stage to receive their own Torahs. Then they all parade around the sanctuary behind four of the men who are carrying the four Torah scrolls. As the rabbi explained, our ancestors in many different eras of our history often had to hide their Torahs. When we march now, it is not off to war but to rejoice for our freedom. I was one of those men who carried the Torah,

but I didn't feel especially free.

The service ended on a high note with the announcement by the President of the congregation that the Building Fund had reached its goal again for the fourth straight year.

"Mazel tov," he said to everyone.

"Mazel tov," they replied.

"Mazel tov," Mr. Ginslinger said to me. He looked sad like a puppy.

"Henry," he added, as we stood to leave, "I know it's corny, but, as you know, I never got that useless piece of paper and I've always felt like there was something missing in my life. You've gone so far, why don't you just finish?"

He smiled suddenly as the first of many voters came over to shake his hand. Mr. Ginslinger was a celebrity in the congregation because of his distinguished record as a community servant and it was rumored that he would run for state senator in the coming election. While he dismissed such talk as half truths and innuendos, he never expressly denied the allegation. I said I would meet him in the lobby and walked on ahead.

A message in the mensroom stall caught my attention. I caught my zipper on my pants as I read: "Give up your college education now before it's too late and you get sucked into the illusion of status, materialism, power, or fame. I sold Utopian Essays for 10¢ at a garage sale today. Shakespeare went for a quarter. On the other hand, my genuine velour and velvet horse picture went for five bucks. You college creeps are a bunch of schmucks who don't even

have the balls to write good graffiti--One who knows, The ghost of the Sixties." A religious flow relieved my insides as I read the handwriting on the wall.

I met Mr. Ginslinger in the lobby and we left the Temple together. As we walked up the street, the mayor explained to me why I should vote, as an expression of my faith in the democratic process, even if I didn't like either of the two major candidates, and he advised me to stay away from third party candidates because it was a waste of a vote. He illustrated his position by recounting tales of votes he made in council that made a difference. He asked how Mama and Papa were feeling and I said they were fine. I asked him how his wife was feeling and he said she had his vote.

Chapter Two

DR. LARENJITISTERN TELLS HENRY TO BE MATURE

We split up at the first intersection from the Temple. Mr. Ginslinger crossed the street and continued towards his home. I followed my feet through the adjacent parking lot to the sidewalk of Midlincum Shopping Center.

Midlincum Shopping Center was the last of the great local shopping centers to be built before the first enclosed mall was introduced to the area. Stately light poles were a reminder of the center's earlier dignity, but broken sidewalks typified its present state. The parking lot was grossly undersized for the local population and it was confusing in its layout, but the Cavemandelbaum family, who owned it, refused to modernize it because their cash flow was invested in the newer more profitable malls.

The Cavemandelbaums were powerful figures in the local community because of their wealth. They gave generously to all Jewish charities and Temple funds and were known equally

as philanthropists and entrepreneurs. They owned as many forests in Israel as they did properties in the greater Midlincum Heights area and Miami Beach.

When I was six, Mama and Papa surprised me with my first two-wheeler that they bought from Mr. Glick, the nice old Schwinn dealer who had his shop at the center. When Mr. Glick turned 70, he put up his shop for sale. One man agreed to buy it if he could take over the present contract. The landlord, an heir to the Cavemandelbaum fortune, insisted that any new tenant would have to renegotiate the contract at a higher rent. Mr. Glick couldn't find any other buyers so he had a month-long going-out-of-business sale and retired anyhow. His former shop was one of several empty storefronts on the block.

I walked aimlessly down the sidewalk toward the alley thinking of the advice Mr. Ginslinger had given me at Shul. Mr. Ginslinger was a successful man, I thought, and he had the perspective that comes with experience. I felt so unlike him now, except for our shared Jewishness.

"What does he know?" I said to myself, trying to dismiss all that he had said. I had to admit that I wasn't sure, so I turned and walked to the opposite end of the sidewalk. There, between the shoe store and the record store, I entered the only door that had a gate across it during working hours.

I never thought I'd see the day, but there I was at the shrink's office. It was laid out in a perfect square, and all the wallpaper was white. There was no dust on the floor. One straight back chair stood in front of each wall. One

faced towards the wall on its left, and one faced toward the wall on its right. The third looked right at the wall, and the fourth faced the enclosed upraised square in the center of the office.

The secretary sat behind her desk on the square facing the door to the office. She was obese and was eating one of the hard candies Dr. Larenjitistern gave to patients who suffered spasms due to unresolved oral fixations. She took my name when I came in, then dictated it into the machine that alone occupied her desk. A series of numbers appeared on the screen, followed by a wave graph that resembled an ocean at low tide. This was followed by random letters of the alphabet, streaks of light shooting wildly in all directions, and the countdown pattern. At blastoff, my name flashed suddenly on the screen amidst a field of rainbow explosions, followed by instructions to sit on the chair of my choice and think about why I was there. I sat down on the fourth chair. Ten minutes later, Dr. Larenjitistern came into the room.

"Henry Freedman," he called, looking to every corner of the room even though I was the only person there. "Ah, Mr. Freedman, come into my office."

He smoked a pipe and was bald and bearded. His fingernails were bitten down to his skin, and 1/8" of skin was chewed, calloused, and re-chewed. He wore one blue sock and one black sock and the knot on his bowtie was crooked.

"You look like a nice boy," he said, as he twirled his pencil with both hands and coughed to clear his throat. "I

know you make your parents very proud."

Two other patients were sitting on the floor, despite an ample supply of feather pillows. They were leaning their backs against one of the walls and facing Dr. Larenjitistern. Mrs. Malignan was a 32-year old divorcee with bright red teased up hair and a severe case of eczema that she covered with dimestore makeup. A drugstore bag containing a box of Carter's liver pills that she used as a dietary supplement was on her lap, and her polyester ski pants were torn at the side zipper.

Mr. Mavin was a 60-year old head of the Customer Service Department in the downtown department store. He wore black framed glasses around a flaky scalp and his eyelids fluttered like he was preparing for takeoff. His toupee blended perfectly with his fashionably streaked grey hair and he wore a neatly pressed grey suit with a red tie and a white shirt.

Mrs. Malignan welcomed me to what she called their happy family and Mr. Mavin gave me a firm handshake. Dr. Larenjitistern sat facing them on a chair in the middle of the room. Except for the chair and the pillows and a wiffle bat, the floor was bare, although mattresses covered the walls. I sat on a feather pillow next to Mr. Mavin.

I was surprised when suddenly Mrs. Malignan began sobbing uncontrollably and hitting her head with her fists. Then she reached for the wiffle bat and aimed it at her head.

"That is incorrect, Mrs. Malignan," the doctor scolded. He casually crossed his right leg over his left knee.

She turned the bat on me. I pressed back against the wall until I couldn't move. Mrs. Malignan was about a half a bat's distance away.

"Bad idea." The doctor stomped the floor with both feet.

I relaxed as Mrs. Malignan dropped the bat and fell face down on her knees sobbing and kicking. "She's learning anger," said Mr. Mavin out of the side of his mouth. The doctor looked at his watch for several seconds, then said, "That's enough," and she stopped.

"Mrs. Malignan, why don't you tell us how you were just feeling," he continued.

"I was angry," she said. She wiped her tears with a crumpled kleenex.

"You didn't look angry." He looked at me.

She whimpered.

"Why don't you tell us something about yourself, Henry?" the doctor began. They all looked at me. "What do you want out of life? Perhaps you might begin by telling us what three wishes you would make if you could have anything in the world? Mrs. Malignan did very good when she called us one happy family. I'm sure we would all like to know you better, wouldn't we?" Mrs. Malignan smiled. Mr. Mavin gave me another handshake. I gave the doctor's suggestion all the respect of a final exam question and asked for "all the money in the world, world peace, and to drop out of school and have no responsibilities."

The patients looked at me like I had badmouthed Moses.

"That's un-American!" Mr. Mavin exclaimed.

"Do you at least like Twinkies?" Mrs. Malignan asked.

Dr. Larenjitistern remained calm so I could feel the feelings that came to me as a result of their reactions.

"I feel confused," I whispered to Mr. Mavin.

"'Confused' is a thought, not a feeling," he whispered back.

"He's into his shit," Mrs. Malignan whispered to Mr. Mavin.

Mr. Mavin nodded in agreement.

Mrs. Malignan, who was sitting on her knees, began shouting again, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you." She looked at the floor and pounded a pillow with the wiffle bat. "You have to get your degree because it's next (pound), and then get a job (pound), the climb the ladder of success (pound), retire (pound), nestegg (pound), stay on schedule (pound), watery quiche...." She fell forward in tears on an upswing. The bat smacked the mattress behind her at about the same time her face hit the pillow. She pounded the pillow with clenched fists as she cried.

Dr. Larenjitistern took notes copiously as we interacted. His eyes darted from patient to patient to patient, but he never moved his head. He looked again at his watch as the conversation turned to silent pounding. "That's enough, Mrs. Malignan," he said, and she stopped.

He turned his attention again to me. Mrs. Malignan and

Mr. Mavin did the same. "Of all three of your wishes," the doctor said, "there's only one that concerns me."

He inhaled on his pipe, then looked away from us respectfully and coughed into a cupped fist. The door opened just then and the doctor's secretary appeared at the entrance, carrying a glass of water on a cafeteria tray. The doctor signalled for her to enter and she marched over to him. The doctor stared at his watch as he drank from the glass, then repositioned a half empty glass on the tray just as it was and wiped his beard. "That's enough, Nurse," he said, and she left.

"My boy," he began again, as he cleared his throat, "your first wish is perfectly normal. Wanting all the money in the world is a natural drive that satisfies the desire for material security." He smiled, obviously pleased with his analysis. "And as for your second, the reason you want world peace is because you really want inner peace." I thought of the great peacemakers throughout world history and realized then that they were all merely at war with their inner selves.

"But what really concerns me is your third wish." He looked visibly nervous.

"Henry, you can't go through life without responsibilities. You've got to have responsibilities. Everyone has responsibilities. It's part of being mature....It's the American Way....Mom....apple pie....responsibilities.... It's always been, therefore it always must be....Our fathers

and forefathers had them....therefore...."

"But, Doc," I interrupted, "you didn't ask me what I need, you asked me what I want. I want to be free. I want to blow like a leaf."

"But you've got to settle somewhere," Mr. Mavin insisted. He didn't shake my hand. "You've got to establish roots."

I said I wanted that very much. "But I don't want to establish roots in a swamp."

"Roots don't grow in a swamp," said Mrs. Malignan. She gave me the raspberries.

"That's right exactly. And everyone knows that, but most people establish roots in swamps anyhow. And you're right, they don't grow. And I'm scared that'll happen to me unless I just get away so I can think about what I want to do next."

"But how will you find a job without a degree?" Mr. Mavin asked.

"I don't know, I'll figure that out when I get to it," I said.

"See? You better listen to what Mr. Mavin says," Mrs. Malignan warned. She clutched desperately to her bag of liver pills and smiled caringly. "I'm responsible for the welfare of my four children," she said. Dr. Larenjitistern nodded approval.

Mr. Mavin wiped the piece of dust that was swept into his eye by the vacuum effect of his eyelid flutters and said,

"I'm responsible for answering our customers' complaints."
Dr. Larenjitistern nodded approval again, and then asked,
"What did your parents say when you said you wanted to
drop out?"

"Mama said she would hold a hot iron to her cheeks until
she was blind in both of her eyes," I said.

"See, and he's thinking about it." Mrs. Malignan
straightened the sleeves of her blouse.

Mr. Mavin cleared his throat, wiped sweat off the palm
of his hands, and scratched his crotch. Mrs. Malignan
blushed and looked at Dr. Larenjitistern for guidance.

Dr. Larenjitistern said nothing for several moments as
his pen caught up with his observations and conclusions. The
doctor was a learned man. He had studied under the greats
of Vienna and had diplomas to prove it. We waited in
silence for his wise analysis.

"Henry," he said finally. He tapped his pencil on his
knees as he searched for the next word. "First of all, you
have to be mature and act your age. Second, if you don't
like it, you'll just have to adjust, that's all there is to
it. And as for that ridiculous desire to drop out of school"
--he sprayed a mist of tobacco smoke from his mouth--"need-
less to say, you have a responsibility to your parents, as
a son, to allow your parents to fulfill their responsibility
to you, as parents, of making sure you will be able to take
care of your responsibilities as an adult. So forget it."

"See? You better listen to what Dr. Larenjitistern
says," Mrs. Malignan warned again. She covered her face with

her kleenex and scratched her nose.

Mr. Mavin fidgeted in his seat. "My son was a Business major," he said. "I told him that after he graduated, I didn't care what he did. If he wanted to be a beachcomber, that was okay with me, but I wanted him to be an educated beachcomber."

"But I'm not learning anything," I said. "What kind of education is that?"

"Just wait until your parents find out," Mrs. Malignan concluded. "They'll talk some sense into you."

Mr. Mavin offered a challenge with a pat on my back. "Cmon, Henry, old boy, you've got to attack those responsibilities and beat them to submission if you want to succeed in life." He pounded a mattress with a clenched fist.

"But what's more important, success or contentment?" I asked. "Is success contentment? Is contentment success? If I make it and I'm not content, have I made it, and will I know when I make it like I'll know when I get my degree? Why does fulfilling responsibilities lead to frustration?"

Only Mrs. Malignan knew the answers. She sat straight back without touching the wall and folded her hands against her chest so that her elbows stuck straight out. "It doesn't matter," she said. "Don't put off til tomorrow what you can do today."

"So then I should drop out of school."

"No." Mr. Mavin hung a fist firmly in the air. "You have to prepare for the future and the diploma will help you pave the way."

I saw a plush green forest--raped by a cement highway.

"But why can't I get it later?"

"Because it's your next step up the ladder of success."

A sharp pain attacked my gut then and I wanted to scream, but I didn't know what I wanted to say, so I held it in. I was still feeling the pain when I left the office because Dr. Larenjitistern interrupted the discussion at that moment to announce that this week's session was over. They all left without saying another word.

Chapter Three

HENRY TAKES A TEST RIDE

My alarm went off at 9:30 the next morning, which was Saturday. I was back home in Lansing at the time. The event found me lying on my side curled in a fetal position under four covers because the women in the apartment in the rear of the house controlled the temperature and they were trying to work off calories by shivering. I was at the time lost in a state of nocturnal frustration, trying to make love on a giant IBM Self-Correcting Selectric II typewriter with a faceless maiden who had an invitation to my Bar Mitzvah. Seated by the typewriter was the cause of my frustration, a demonic rainbow whose colors blended into a tarnished grey at his fingertips. He laughed hysterically as he typed, forcing us to dodge the attacking keys. Passionate love was impossible; even touching was an achievement.

"My B-B," I shouted from one end of the keyboard to the other, "R-U-O-K?"

"O-N-R-E," she pleaded, "I-M-N-E-Z. Comma-2 me."

"L-S," I cried, "Y-U-N-I? U-R-2-N-O-¢-N-I-2-M-T-, but R-N-M-E-S-N-V-S."

Frustration overwhelmed me and I screamed at this nameless nemesis, "I-8-U!"

"P-N's," he answered, "go to L."

At his command, we did.

He pressed "Return" and an ear-splitting "Brrringg" woke me from my ordeal. My left hand, limp and sweaty, reached for my alarm, as another "Brrringg" brought my pillows over my ears.

"Brrringg. Brrringg." I pressed so hard I thought it would break, but the cacophany clanged continuously.

My hand slid to the phone and I picked up the receiver. "H'lo."

"Hi, Henry, this is Ed Faller. Do you want me to bring the car over?"

Daytime consciousness descended upon my nighttime mind. "Uh huh," I stuttered, not sure what I was consenting to.

"I'll be there in half an hour."

He hung up and so I hung up and allowed my thoughts to guide me. As the day's haze began to raise, I remembered, I was going to look at a used car I had read about in the classifieds.

I rolled out of bed and stumbled to an at-ease. The circulation process that followed ignited a heat flash in my stomach that caused my awareness to refocus on the

effects of the potato chips and crab dip and rum and coke that had combined to nurse me to sleep the night before.

A glass of orange juice calmed my bellycose and a Dr. Bronner's gargle dissolved the pasty fog that involved my tasty grog. A slow deep breath opened up all my inner passages that were still refusing to trust my consumption gumption.

Now that I could think, I set about to devise a plan for the day. I decided first that if the car looked promising, I would get a compression test done on it. I checked the Yellow Pages to see who was open on Saturday. Sameday Auto Service was the first place I called, and they said if I brought the car in at eleven they could test it. Being not a connoisseur on compression tests, their availability was quality enough. I said I'd be in. As I was hanging up, there was a knock on the door.

The knocker was a short squat man with a broad chest and a flat face. This was Ed Faller, the early morning caller. Standing beside him was a tall thin lad with smooth skin and hair parted in the middle and combed neatly on each side. I immediately characterized them as a pencil and an eraser. It was apparent that Ed was a parent because he called the lad "Son."

"Here we are," he smiled. I knew that because there they were but I smiled in grateful acknowledgment of his explanation. "This is my boy. He's quite a boy. He's a fine boy."

"Glad to meet you," I said.

"He's the center for Central High. He was All-American last two years. Been to six colleges. I think he's gonna pick Michigan. They gave him the best offer. Free ride for four years, books included, and he's close enough to come home on weekends. Pretty good, eh boy? I'm proud of you boy. He doesn't have to buy any books. He never did like to buy books."

His son grinned sheepishly, as if the joke was on him and he didn't get it, even though Ed wasn't joking.

"Tell him about the girls, Dad," he said.

"Oh yeah, the girls. That's quite a story. Ya see, there was these two girls at Michigan. Sorority gals. One of the better sororities on campus...."

"Oh, so that's the car," I observed aloud. It seemed like a good opportunity to change the subject, seeing as he came here to show it to me. Ed was flexible.

"Yeah, that's the car. It's quite a car. It's my son's. Not this one, the other. He goes to Michigan, too. He's quite a guy. He's a mechanic. He really loved that car. But times change, ya know. He's gettin older now. He graduates this spring. He's gettin married when he graduates, so we're lending him the money to buy a new car. You know, new wife, new car. He's a man now.

"But, ya know, if he had his way he'd never buy anything new. Take this car for instance. He just had it tuned. Put in a new battery, too. So you're gettin quite the deal."

"Did he put those curtains in, too?" I asked.

"He sure did. His girl made them for him. He's really

proud of that girl. I'm proud of that boy."

They were the gaudiest looking curtains I had ever seen, being a faded brown mural of butterflies and angels which could have been symbolic of rebirth and immortality, connecting the steps in the process of existence which finds us not dying but instead being transformed to a higher level of consciousness that would find the stage called "death" not the end, as so many fear, but merely another step on the glorious ladder that leads to the heavens where we become angels, and perhaps eventually God.

But I doubt it because she also was the author of the poem which I found taped to the dashboard and which read:
"Here I sit all green and wary/Tried to fuck a giant canary/
Tried to lure her with seeds of sesame/The little pecker sure
made a mesame."

"Yes, she's quite a girl," he repeated. "He's quite a guy."

The sunlight in the windows reflected a lustrous shine not unlike that of Vaseline on the body of a weight lifter. Unfortunately, the dents on the hood could not be compared to muscular definition. The tires looked good, the gas tank was full, and the oil supply was adequate. I looked at Ed, Ed looked at me, Son was still waiting for Ed to tell me about the girls, and Ed said, "Wanna take her for a cruise?"

"That's the next step," I answered.

"Well, hang on, that was only Question Number One. Number Two's the big one. Seeing as we're just cruising

anyways, do you mind headin somewheres in particular?"

"No problem," I said. "Where do you want to go?"

"Austin," he replied. "My son's got a honey he wants to pick up down there. He's takin the little lady to Miami. I told him we could maybe drop him off. That is, if you don't mind."

I glanced at Son, who was still at the sorority.

"No, not this one, the other. I've got three. Three guys and a gal. Madge insisted. She would'a gone to twelve to get one. Good thing it only took four. Money don't grow on trees, ya know. He's at the house."

I'd never been to Austin before but I'd heard so much about it. The Mecca of Texas it was called. I'd always wanted to go to Texas, ever since Walt Disney introduced me to Davy Crockett. I knew a trip like this would be a dream to me.

I looked at the clock in the drugstore across the street. 9:45 it said--my compression test was at eleven.

"Sounds good," I said. "Hang on."

I ran inside the house, grabbed my blue Samsonite suitcase with the "Go State" decal and filled it with two pairs of pants, two shirts, two pairs of socks, and two changes of briefs. I hurried into the bathroom, because I didn't want to keep them waiting, and grabbed my jar of allergy pills, along with my pen and my journal that were on the floor.

In the kitchen, I grabbed a paper bag from underneath

the sink, and filled it with a gallon of apple cider, four apples, and four dozen homemade chocolate chip cookies.

"Something to nosh on," I said.

"Chocolate chip cookies--good work, Kid," Ed said as he grabbed a dozen. "We're gonna get along okay."

He gave one to Son, one to me, and said, "Onward."

Ed drove the first stretch, from my house to his. We dropped off Son, picked up Bill, and hitched up his trailer to the car.

My first impression of Bill was one of awe. I wasn't sure what it was; he was not his generation's Gable. But, like Ty Cobb sliding into third or Papa bluffing on ace high, I knew he had confidence that when he attempted something, he would succeed. Bill had lived, by Ed's count, a total of twenty-eight years from the time that Madge's first failure was officially confirmed. He stood an inch or two taller than average height, but he carried a much slighter frame. He wore shoulder length brown wavy hair that reminded me of a broom with a permanent and a thin mustache that resembled two false eyelashes tied together below his nose. Bill bought the trailer to live in because he spent a lot of time on the road. In the last two years, he had worked as a lumberjack in Alaska, a mechanic in Quebec, a ski instructor in Colorado, a fisherman in Maine, and a longshoreman in San Francisco.

"Yeah, if it makes you miserable, why do it?" he said.

"The trick is to do what you want to do anyhow and get paid for it."

According to Ed, "My boy's done his road time. Been everywhere. Chip off the old block. I'm proud of that boy."

Chapter Four

BILL GIVES HENRY CREDIT FOR NOT BUYING ON CREDIT

We made one stop before cutting loose on the main highway, at Caveat's Department Store, so I could buy a strap for my sunglasses. Bill and I went into the store, while Ed volunteered to guard the car. He also made himself protector of the cookies. As we left the car, he was storing them in a safe none could enter, his stomach.

Caveat's was the largest department store chain in the free world, having stores in every major city and most of the minor ones. Its slogan, "Where Urban Blight Is Out Of Sight," was a public relations jingle that encouraged towns to pave the way for new additions in the name of providing jobs and boosting local economies.

This particular Caveat's outlet was like every other Caveat's outlet in the world. It was an imposing structure in the middle of a twenty-five acre lot and it was located

off the uptown exit of the city's main highway. Fifteen adjoining acres of plush forest are still available for Caveat's to purchase for expansion, according to the agreement Caveat's made with the city.

On the west end of the parking lot was a Caveat's gas station and a recycling center for glasses and newspapers. On the south end was a pants store that advertised itself as a competitor to Caveat's but that was actually owned by the Caveat's chain. In the store, they sold clothes for all sexes and ages. They sold household items for every imaginable purpose. They sold equipment for all sports and tools for all crafts. They repaired all makes of vehicles and sold parts for the do-it-yourselfer. For the ladies, there was a beauty parlor where they could get their hair done while their cars were being fixed in the auto repair garage. For the men, there was a bar. For the children, of all ages, there was a daycare center, an amusement park, and a drive-in theatre.

If anyone would have whatever I wanted, I knew Caveat's would have to have it, and I didn't want to drive all over town just for a strap. So it made sense to me that we stopped there.

I couldn't help noticing, though, as I watched a security guard directing traffic by the front entrance to the store, that something was making Bill appear tense. I wondered if I had offended him. I glanced over my shoulder to see if someone was distracting him. A high school employee was gathering stray shopping carts, and the parking

lot was bustling with anonymous shoppers, but no one else was in the vicinity. But, no, I knew he couldn't mean me. Nice Henry they used to call me, much to my manly embarrassment, until I won my first of six high school elections. After that race, I made niceness my trademark. "Vote Nice." "Nice is a 4-letter word." "I Like Nice." I even had a slogan for the politically corrupt: "Vote Nice Twice." I shook hands with a firm handshake, not like a fish, when I was introduced to someone. To Bill, I had even offered a chocolate chip cookie.

So, no, I couldn't imagine why he was mad at me, but just to check it out, I said, "Bill, did I do something to piss you off?"

"I hate Caveat's," he said, as if he had been waiting for permission to express anger. "This place is too big. It's taking over the world." Then, in a speech like I would have expected to hear from the angry lips of flaming revolutionaries who burned banks and threw rocks at cops during the Vietnam war and then disappeared from TV News, he launched into a spontaneous critique on Caveat's "involvement as a reactionary force in world affairs," listing "examples of decadence and of complicity with the oppressor" like I would have listed activities from my yearbook.

Archibald Agnoo Caveat, Sr., the founder of Caveat's and President of the Board of Directors for the entire Caveat's chain, had been an influential fundraiser in the

last presidential election, he began. A.A. Caveat, Jr. was promised ambassadorial positions from both presidential candidates and Caveat's stockholders contributed generously to both campaigns.

In world news recently, during the liberation struggle that took place in one of the white-controlled sections of black Africa, guerrilla leaders rallied poor Blacks around the revolutionary cry to nationalize Caveat's holdings. Caveat's responded with alarm and stock prices plummeted. The CIA assassinated the king and put in a black Catholic who had studied in a French university to serve as dictator. The Communists called him a puppet of the imperialist forces and nicknamed him the Caveat Emperor. On the day of his coronation, ten thousand political dissidents were arrested. The next morning, Dow-Jones showed a nine-point gain amidst heavy trading. Caveat's stock split three for one and had high volume for the day.

Meanwhile, on the local level, Bill said he practically grew up at Caveat's. He told me that Ed was a member of Caveat's Health Club. Ed used to spend Saturdays there while Madge and the kids shopped, then they'd all spend the night at Caveat Quarters and leave Sunday morning after breakfast. They brought in the New Year with Guy Lombardo at the Caveat Ballroom.

In addition, he said Ed and Madge bought Caveat stock for all their children when they were born. During his high school years, Bill worked Saturdays and summers as a cashier.

He quit his job and sold his stock when he discovered that Caveat's exported, to outlets in developing countries, chemical fertilizers that were found to be carcinogenic and were outlawed in the United States. During the grape and lettuce boycotts, he picketed there with the United Farmworkers because Caveat's sold scab lettuce in their grocery department. He was arrested for trespassing and conspiracy to violating the rights of customers and spent the night in solitary confinement because he refused to sign his fingerprint card. He hadn't been to Caveat's since the boycott ended.

"I'm here now because you're here and I'm with you, but I don't like it--so let's move fast, okay? And let's drop the subject."

He marched angrily to the curb like demilitarization depended on it. I fingered the souvenir "I Like Nice" campaign button in my coat pocket and followed him.

Inside the revolving door, we were greeted by the lady at the information center. With her help, we flagged down a Caveat Mobile. The Caveat Mobile, according to Bill, was actually no more than a renovated golf cart but since completion of Caveat's modern sixty-lane bowling alley, activity on Caveat's golf course had slackened. A lady in the Caveat-Hannibal, Missouri furniture department suggested the carts might be used more efficiently if they doubled as sit-down shopping carts. In order to implement the program, management raised prices on all domestic goods by 2%. They

justified the increase on the grounds that they were providing a service to customers and, after all, nothing is free. In the first two quarters of the year, profits rose 27% over profits of the year before. Management doubled its fleet of shopping carts and the manager of Caveat-Hannibal was promoted to Midwest regional director. For her suggestion, the lady was awarded five dollars and had her picture taken sitting next to her store manager on a Caveat Mobile, for publication in the Caveat employee newsletter.

We directed the chauffeur to the hardware department. As bad luck would have it, as soon as we got into the Caveat Mobile, the tire went flat. The Repair Mobile was busy charging a battery on a Caveat Mobile by the body protection department where they sold deodorant, so we were told it wouldn't be available for another fifteen minutes.

Bill looked resignedly at the chauffeur's watch.

Oh well, what the hell, he suggested, the walk would do us good. I agreed. "Where is the hardware department?" we asked.

"It's six aisles up on the northbound aisles and three more to the east, south corner on the intersection where Pennsylvania and M come together." Nine aisles. I looked in the northbound direction and discovered that I couldn't see where the sixth aisle ended. With three more to the east, then, it looked like a day's journey. Luckily,

we flagged down a ride from another Caveat Mobile heading our way. The passenger was short and chubby and probably wore Huskies as a kid. He was dancing in the Caveat Mobile as he pointed at Bill.

"Yip, yip, yip," he cried, like he was a coyote with a toothache.

Bill looked at this passenger in surprised disbelief. "Marit, I can't believe it's you."

He was Bill's old organizing buddy from the war. "The guy's nuts," Bill whispered to me, with not even a trace of detectable malice. "You've gotta meet him." They exchanged backslaps and traded addresses before any more words passed between them. Then Bill commenced with the formalities. They met, he said, while working with the Youth International Party in Miami Beach during the summer of 1972 when the Democratic and Republican Parties held their nominating conventions there.

"Well, not exactly," Marit cut in. Actually, he explained, although there was only one party that called itself Youth International Party, the anarchist party was divided into two factions that year because of ego-tripping competition between rival leaders, a political contradiction that caused both Bill and Marit to remain on the outskirts of both groups. Bill joined the Yippies because he happened to meet them before he met the Zippies. For the same reason, Marit joined the Zippies.

Nevertheless, on the outskirts they were on the day

they met in front of the Fontainebleau Hotel the afternoon of the Yippie Puke-In.

According to Bill, it didn't work quite like they planned it, "but then again, none of us had previous experience in synchronized puking."

The week before the Puke-In, he said, an undercover Yippie had infiltrated the Republican organization and ripped off their schedule of activities so the Yippies knew the Republican National Committee was holding their platform meeting at the Fontainebleau that morning. Immediately afterward, they were to have a reception. "We thought it would be a righteous act to make them as sick about eating as we were of their existence."

He pointed to a small box on a shelf in the drug department as we passed it by. "That's the stuff we used," he said. "Ipecac."

Ipecac, he explained, was a non-prescription medicine that doctors gave to patients who drank certain poisons to make them puke it out. A pharmacist said it usually took about five minutes for the Ipecac to take effect, so nine Yippies bought one bottle apiece. For lunch the next day, they ordered a coke and a large pizza with green pepper, sausage, and extra cheese to make sure the Ipecac worked. Then they drove to the hotel. The Zippies were already there, having their own demonstration, so the Yippies thought they could sneak around the back without being seen.

"Weren't they being devious?" said Marit, speaking

for the first time beyond our introduction. He was quieter than Bill and had a wry sense of humor that delivered obvious sarcasm with a deadpan expression. "They were the only ones in the hotel who weren't wearing suits or dresses . The Secret Servicemen couldn't figure out what they were up to so they just trailed them from behind."

Bill waited for Marit to elaborate. He didn't, so Bill continued: "We divided into two groups and snuck around the back, walking along the beach and meeting by the tennis courts. We took one gulp apiece and moved in. In the five minutes it should've taken us to puke, we were upstairs outside the meeting room. Alas, no nausea, just a guard. 'Do you people have room keys?' he asked.

"'Well, actually, Pal, it's like this....,' I said. We started fumbling around in our pockets trying to act like we couldn't find them. Then we saw the cops and one of us split and the guard started shouting, 'Out, out, out,' and so we all split out the front door and joined the Zippies."

A woman by the candy counter cursed the chauffeur for almost hitting her and longed out loud for the good old days before the advent of the Caveat Mobile.

Marit said to Bill, "The guard stopping you guys was the best thing that could have happened to you. If it had gone like you planned, no one would have ever known about it."

Bill agreed. "It's true. The whole summer was a media game. Nixon was telling the country he was winding down the war and bringing our boys home. He wanted everyone to believe that everyone else was satisfied with his

performance in the hopes that no one would want to be the lone dissident, so he tried to cover up our activities. We wanted to get media any way possible to let people know we were down there so it was just as well we got kicked out. The original goal of the Puke-In was to gross out the Republicans, but if that had worked, we would have had to spread the news ourselves. This way, we were led out to where sixty Zippies were rallying in front of cops, fat cats, old people, and all kinds of media to do the work for us."

Still, although five minutes had long since passed, the Ipecac had not yet taken effect. Bill, however, figured it wouldn't be long, so he borrowed the megaphone.

Bill straightened his back against the seat of the Caveat Mobile. "This is what I said." He cupped his mouth with his hands and cleared his throat.

"'People, I have an important gut-level statement to make. We're from the People Uptight about Killings Everywhere (PUKE) and we want to talk to Richard Nixon and to Double-A Caveat and to all you Republican Fat Cats. We want to tell you that we're tired of your lies and your deception. You promised us jobs and you gave us the wage-price freeze.'"

Bill paused and said to me, "The cameras were on me the whole time I was talking. Meanwhile, I kept looking to the side to see if anyone was looking nauseous. Everyone was just looking befuddled, so I kept talking."

Again, he spoke through cupped hands: "'You've wired all our phones so we can't even make a private phone call.

And now you've just finished your National Platform Committee meeting where we all know you made plans to bring us more CIA heroin, more bombed dikes, more drowned babies, more napalmed innocent citizens.'

"And then I looked at Phil, the skinny kid everyone thought was a cop."--Bill looked this time at Marit--"He might have been, but he was the hero that day. He was getting pale and was starting to gag, so I led into my conclusion." He cupped his hands: "'And now you celebrate. Feast. Banquet. Eat all you want--you can afford it. After all, it was paid for with our tax dollars. But don't ask us to join you; we've eaten enough of your shit.'"

To me now, he said, "The cameras were still on me, watching my every move, so in my last paragraph I pointed my finger at the focal point of the whole camera crew and said....," and he pointed straight down the aisle, "'We've had enough, Richard Nixon. We've had enough, Republicans. Your obscene acts are more than we can handle. And all I can say is'--my finger drew an arc from where it was to the stooping figure of Phil; the cameras followed--'We're just sick about it.'

"'Ulbleeeh!'--perfect!

"At least four spectators turned white. Another Yippie lost it, and the cameras turned to her. Then another. Then another. Between the nine of us, we puked for a half hour, and everytime someone heaved, someone else grabbed the megaphone and gave another reason why the Republicans made

us sick. We all had time to say everything that came to our minds, and the cameras had a field day. But then their editors got hold of their film and censored the whole thing. The Miami Herald mentioned it in one word--'disgusting'; one point for us. But the rest of the straight media wouldn't touch it. I couldn't figure it out"--he shook his head in sarcastic confusion--"as hard as we tried, the world's first media-oriented Puke-In was no match for any given day's worth of obscenity by Nixon and Company and he got extensive coverage for everything he did."

Marit concluded, just in time, because the hardware department was directly ahead: "So it remains for the people's media to tell the story of the Yippie Puke-In of the Summer of '72."

In my heart and my notebook, I vowed to include the story in my first book.

We all got out at the hardware department. There, while Bill and Marit continued their reminiscing, I asked the salesman if they sold straps for sunglasses. He said they only came in the package with the safety glasses. I asked if maybe they might have a defective pair of glasses that they were going to mail back to the manufacturer that maybe had a strap that they were just going to return anyway that I might have. He said he couldn't do that because it was against the rules, but he suggested I check with the salesman in the optical department, turn right at the photography department.

The section of the store that housed the optical department also contained windows for IRS, a loan department, the credit department, and the employment department. I asked the clerk at the optical department for a strap. He showed me a size and shape assortment of black straps and asked if I would be paying with cash or a credit card. I said I was low on cash and I didn't own any credit cards but that I had valid identification and planned to write a personal check.

He said they didn't accept personal checks anymore and gave me a Caveat's Credit Card Application Blank. "Shopping's No Fuss When You Shop With Us" was their slogan. On the back of the application, I was informed that my Caveat's Credit Card could be used in all fifty states to charge anything Caveat's sells in any Caveat's retail store and from the Caveat's catalog by phone or mail. Also, starting this year, Caveat's credit cards would be as good as cash at most banks and insurance agencies. Below that enticement were the hard facts in the form of my Caveat's E-Z Buy Charge Account and Security Agreement.

"Just what you need," I heard Old Uncle Albert say, as he threw the cash on the counter and helped me pay for my first electric train, "a credit card so you can buy things you don't need with money you don't have. It looks so easy until the bills come and you don't have the money to pay them. Better to pay cash, you're always safe."

I ignored the form and gave the clerk a dollar. Bill

saw I was ready to leave so he said goodbye to Marit and joined me. He saw the agreement on the counter, then he looked up at the clerk. The clerk's tie was held neatly in place with a Caveat's tie clip that he won for being the rookie of the year employee forty years ago. With the grace of a bulldozer, Bill picked up a pen that said Caveat's and wrote on the Caveat's application blank, "I'm sick about it." I was glad I paid cash. Thanks, Uncle Albert.

"You thought I'd sign, didn't you?" I asked.

"I'm proud of you, Boy," he said.

He waved his thumb at the first Caveat Mobile to drive by. It stopped, we got in and headed toward the exit. "And they say unions cause inflation--bullshit," he said. "It's those damn credit cards. Folks buy what they don't need with money they don't have, and then they have to raise the prices in their stores to make the money they'll need for when the credit card payments are due. Then their customers get their bills, and they can't pay them either because the other guy's prices are higher, so they have to raise their prices to make their payments. And we've got the upward inflationary spiral."

He shook his head to evaluate the state of humanity. "It's daffy," he said. "The whole world's daffy. I'll tell ya, when we burned draft cards back in '70, we should've burned credit cards, too. That would've stopped the war. And receipts. Receipts are the foundation of America. They

prove that we exist. It's all there in accounts receivable. 'Stop the Daft,' we could've said. We still can, but we won't. Everyone's having too much fun buying things."

At a red light, the chauffeur stopped, and so did Bill.

"This place is too big, that's another thing I don't like," said Old Uncle Albert.

I was only seven but I understood anger. Caveat's moved into the neighborhood that year after a controversial and stormy three year court battle that pitted irate citizens' and environmentalists' groups against the Caveat Corporation, whose main offices were in New York.

The land had been zoned, previous to Caveat's interest in the property, as a wildlife preserve area, and it was located in a non-business district. The site was a favorite spot for campers and a retreat from the city for residents.

One year, Mrs. Elsie Bradley, a lifelong resident of the district, who was known countywide for her award-winning petunia and daffodil gardens, requested permission to sell flowers from her home. City Council turned down her request on the grounds that they wanted to preserve the district's non-business purity. Then Caveat's bought their first ten acres with an option to buy thirty more and City Council, by a close vote of three conservatives to two liberals, voted to re-zone the entire district.

The citizens protested, saying the shopping center would upset the ecological balance of the land and diminish the already scarce water supply, but Caveat's countered with

their plan to create a park on one acre and name it Caveat Gardens. Small businesses and other shopping centers protested their inevitable loss of profits, but Caveat's promised jobs for everyone and a higher tax revenue for the city. Two of the conservatives were among the three Councilmembers who retired at that term's end one month after the decision to re-zone.

Mrs. Bradley became a cause celebre because of the obvious injustice she had suffered and she was a landslide victory in the next City Council race, far outdistancing the conservatives who finished second and third. Running a one-issue campaign, she promised to raise hell or die trying until Caveat's was chased out of their neighborhood. Unfortunately, by the time the liberals were in the majority four years later, construction was already underway.

Mrs. Bradley continued to raise hell and was eventually made chairperson of the Zoning Committee. Everyone was stunned when she suffered a heart attack and died during a dramatic takeover of Caveat Gardens that she compared to the Indians' takeover of Alcatraz. In death, Mrs. Bradley became a cult goddess because of her self-fulfilling prophecy and her grave became a soapbox for ambitious liberals. Her husband, a university professor, wrote a book about her life and called it My Wife: The Great Caveat Preemptor.

Old Uncle Albert didn't know Mrs. Bradley from beans seeing as he lived on the other side of town and he didn't read English, but he shared her hatred of Caveat's, especially

after he was forced to close his downtown shoestore, which he had operated for the past thirty years, since coming over from the old country, because Caveat's shoe department was the largest shoe department in the free world and they offered free parking. Uncle Albert didn't know who to blame for his plight, the department stores that drive the family stores out of business or the people who let it happen because they prefer the convenience of a department store to the personableness of a neighborhood store. "Places like this choke out all the neighborhood folks and their family businesses because people are in such a hurry," Uncle Albert continue. "Now back home"--he paused to blow his nose with the handkerchief he inherited from his father. "Ach, but they're in such a hurry. No one wants to listen."

The light changed. Bill spoke again: "Places like this don't have merchants, they have clerks, and the clerks don't care what they sell you. They're just getting paid on commission or slave wage. They've got to work so they can pay their credit card bills. Either way they lose. So do we, but it's convenient. I'm choking on convenience. There's no law against big in this country, gut we don't have to support it. Americans vote with their wallets and mine's staying in my pocket until we get out of here."

When we got back to the car, Ed was beaming from an expression of happiness that extended well beyond the reasonable limits of chocolate chip satisfaction. "Whadaya think?" he grinned, as he pointed to a box on the back seat.

"Bought it on credit. Twenty dollars down and twelve months to pay."

With that, we hit the road: me, Bill, Ed, and Ed's new portable color TV.

Chapter Five

RUBBER DUCKIE LULLS HENRY TO SLEEP

Ed was still driving. He was five miles past the I-69 entrance on Logan Street, the point at which he said I could take over, when the irony of him driving when I was the one who was out for a test ride suddenly struck him as absurd. He asked if we had already passed 69.

"About five miles back, Ed," I answered. "I just figured you knew what you were doing."

"It's the road, Kid. Does strange things to my head."

We were in Dimondale by that time. Ed kept the wheel until we found another I-69 on-ramp. It took us thirty miles to get there from the time we left the house. Then I took over while Ed retired to the back to catch some sleep.

This first day on the road was a perfect day for driving. Outside, the temperature was chilly all day, but I was in the car the whole time so it became an asset rather than a liability. The sky was a clear sheet of blue satin until we discovered clouds toward nightfall.

I glanced at Ed's TV through the rearview mirror and I thought I saw a typewriter. I was reminded of one thousand form letters I had to type by Tuesday to escape the wrath of my boss, a tall gangly stringbean with an Adam's apple whose protrusion required him to wear size 16 pinstripe dress shirts that coordinated with his two-inch wide paisley ties only because his wife bought his clothes for him. Then my eyes were directed to an apple tree with a flat top that had been downed by a flash of lightning and I felt strangely liberated.

Most of the scenery was barren plains going through Michigan. After some two hours on the road, we crossed into Indiana where we were given the Hoosier welcome by Governor Bowen, then further enlightened to find that "Hoosier Hospitality Is No Accident." Finally, as an afterthought, we were warned to "Watch Your Speed--We Are."

And we were in farm country.

The car was a '67 Chrysler Station Wagon. The tape deck played static in stereo, so we were usually without music, and the shocks recorded every bump in the road. The right turn signal clicked when it was turned on, but the light didn't work. However, to compensate for that, the amazingly bright red light above the oil gauge was always on. The gas gauge didn't work perfectly either. Basically, it was fine, but, as Ed described it, "When I fill it, it registers full for about four blocks and then it drops to 3/4. But when it falls to Empty, I've still got 1/4 left."

Other than that, Ed said the car was in good shape. He was a little concerned about the tires on the trailer, but only because the trailer was weighted down. Also, he told me he had just recently installed a new master cylinder.

My own driving took us all the way south on 69 to the 465 innerbelt, which circled Indianapolis and led us onto 70. While I was driving, we made two stops for gas and coffee, once ninety miles north of Indianapolis and once in Terra Haute. When I got us onto 70, a distance of 267 miles, I let Bill take over. I was still going strong, wide awake, alert, and high energy, but I wanted to write before coming down.

In the back, I discovered two added bonuses: The mattress in the back section of the wagon and the overhead light by the tailgate enabled me to set up my own office and write even in the dark of the night.

One hundred and forty-three miles after giving the wheel over to Bill, I took over again, in Illinois somewhere, ninety-five miles short of St. Louis. Ed was still asleep, and Bill, after checking the map, soon followed. So I pulled an apple out of my paper bag to keep me company--I wasn't much of a host, I ate it.

And I drove on, solo, into the great unknown.

I counted the rest stops and coffee shops in Bond County. In Madison County, I memorized their names. After Staunton, I turned onto 270, where I noted my options heading west.

But I chose none of them. Instead, I trudged on,

eyelids heavy, trailer swaying, until I crossed that border into Missouri.

Meanwhile, the window was becoming more and more caked with the splatterings of dead flies. I felt like an astronaut guiding my spaceship past billions and billions of hot flashes, quick with my reflexes, knowing that one late move and it was all over.

Only I couldn't dodge the flies.

WHOOSH-SPLAT--a red one on my right.

WHOOSH-GUSH--a yellow one on my left.

I could handle the ones to my side but there came one directly toward me. It splotched a deep green right at the point on the window where my eyes, looking independently out at the world, first come together to focus on a common object. That common object became the dead green fly. I couldn't see the road so I had to pull over and wipe the window.

Twenty-nine miles later, I had semi-circled St. Louis, still on 270, and come, at last, to I-44/US 66, where I headed south towards Oklahoma City.

We were headed due south when the sun became lost from view. At the time, it appeared as a bright orange ball on the right hand corner of a canvas that was streaked red in the background and hilly green in the fore. It was splendid.

After twenty-four miles, we finally located an open Standard Oil station, where Ed could use his credit card, so I pulled off the road and into the station. There, in the town of Fenton, while listening to Rubber Duckie on the radio

for the third time in twenty minutes, I let Bill take over so I could sleep. I was hyper from a frantic combination of driving, writing, and seven cups of coffee, but I dozed off in about a minute.

Outside, the only lights were from cars passing us going north.

Chapter Six

THE SECOND DAY

Sleeping on a damp mattress for the better part of four hours with my head resting on a thick dirty pillow and my body protected from the chilly wetness of the night by a beat up old army green sleeping bag produced the anticipated results: my clothes were sticky and smelly and therefore so was my body, and my hair felt greasy and slick, like it might feel if I went for two weeks without washing it.

As I awoke to the tune of "Fill 'er up," I imagined that to be a classic circumstance of the seasoned Roadie of the morning. I fantasized myself a man of the world. It's tough being free, I thought.

We were at a Standard Oil station in Springfield, Missouri, eighty miles north of Joplin, which was just north of the Oklahoma border. Bill was still at the wheel, looking tired but alert. Ed hadn't budged all night. His head still rested against the left back window and he was still snoring.

I coughed, stretched, rubbed my stiff neck, and yawned. The yawns had it, I was still tired. My head protested the early onslaught of morning, but the car's front shocks convinced me that I wouldn't be falling back to sleep for a long while, so I climbed into the front seat with Bill. In the transition period, I noticed that the ground was damp. The attendant said it had drizzled all night in Springfield.

"So tell me," I greeted Bill through the buzz of the backseat baritone, "what kinda shape's the car in?"

"The car," he smiled as he veered slightly to the left to avoid what looked from a distance like the body of a brown striped cat but what was in actuality a Davy Crockett coonskin cap. "Yes, the car."

"First let me tell you about Dad," he began. "He's quite a guy. He's been through a lot. His dad grew up on the east side of downtown Cleveland. Gramps was pretty happy-go-lucky as a kid. He used to go to the ballpark everyday with his buddy Ray. What a scene that must've been. The drunks were there in their Sunday best. Or their Monday worst--Gramps said it was all the same. You could smell em from deep left field. And the hawkers. Everybody had a ticket to sell. 'Buy two, get one free. Best seats in the house,' they said. They charged four times as much--never could tell how they lived. He said the funniest guy he ever saw was a guy they called Toof because he didn't have any teeth except for the rotten one in front that he saved for show. And the photographers who flashed their cameras at

you and handed you a ticket so you could send in your money to purchase your pictures--Gramps said they never used film.

"He and his buddy Ray used to walk to the Stadium every morning to collect autographs and souvenirs for their scrap-books. They'd stand outside the gate and wait for the players to arrive and then they'd follow them into the Stadium as far as they could before a guard caught em. They got caught nearly every time, but they kept trying and every now and then they'd make it. The players thought they were pretty funny because they were so persistent so they went along with it and didn't warn the guards. They got to know Gramps and Ray pretty well and one day the club trainer asked them if they wanted to be batboys. Gramps nearly cried he was so thrilled.

"He spent the next four summers at the Stadium, two with the visiting teams and two with the Indians. Those were the days when the Stadium on Sunday was the place to take the family. Celebrities dropped in for visits when they were in town. He got to know everybody. Not just baseball players--Tom Mix, Red Grange, everybody.

"But his favorite was Ruth. They used to go out drinking at night when the Yankees were in town. Whorin, too. They were out drinking together the night the Babe ate himself into what the newspapers described the next day as the world's worst stomach ache. Gramps said that was all a p.r. lie to save the Babe's image. He really had syphilis. Gramps caught it, too, that night. The lady became his wife. My Gram. She was a good woman. Not too

bright, but, then again, neither was Gramps. But they loved each other and they got married at home plate. The Babe was Master of Ceremonies. Gram was four months pregnant with Dad. Gramps became a housepainter the next year to support his family.

"Then the Depression came and Gramps couldn't find any jobs, so Gram went back to whorin. Gramps went back to the Stadium and started working the concessions. Dad grew up selling peanuts and popcorn.

"Dad doesn't talk about that period of his life but I know his memories hold a lot of pain. They didn't have much food to eat and Gramps' boss was a crook. He used to short-change them on food and supplies, but Gramps was so scared for his family he never said a thing. The pressure broke him and he died. Gram shot herself six weeks later and Dad hit the road. He spent the next six years travelling anywhere a job would take him. He must've lived in every state at least once. He rode the trains, built houses, washed cars. Had to steal, too. Hunger does that. He served time in a dozen states. It fucked his head.

"He met Mom at a pool hall--she was a waitress, he was a hustler. They fell in love, had me, and got married. Mom settled him down more than he had ever known and he got his first steady job on the line at Olds. By this time, though, he was pretty hungup about money. He hated cops, too. Having a steady job didn't change that. Poverty's a state of mind, ya know. He'll never go hungry again, but he still

worries about it. He's an honest man and he'd never deliberately cheat anybody, but he's been known to exaggerate."

"Is the car gonna get us back to Lansing?" I asked.

"It's hard to say," Bill answered. "The brakes'll hold but not for much longer. You'll have to replace the shocks then, too. But watch out for the transmission. Better check the front suspension, too. We'll make it to Austin okay, but not much further."

As we talked, acres and acres of orange-brown colored grass that I had never seen before connected Springfield to cities within the next fifteen mile stretch. From there, the land became hilly and barren. I saw Missouri to be the kind of land that had enough scenic beauty to make me want to travel through it, but not enough to make me want to stay. In at least one stretch, I was reminded of a golf course. The land is unfit for farming, so the farmers there raise cattle.

Governor David L. Boren welcomed us warmly as we crossed the Oklahoma border and found ourselves headed towards the Will Rogers Turnpike. He informed us that we were now guests of one of America's Bicentennial States, which, coincidentally, was true of every state through which we had travelled during those first twenty-eight hours and which was probably true also of all the other states in the Union.

Directly behind him were a handsome cowboy with clear skin and a fierce looking Indian chief who looked as if his

daughter had eloped with a white man. They shared with us their warmest greetings by saying, in unison, "We're glad you're here."

Not long after that, I pointed out the first Indian souvenir stand. The voice in the back mumbled, "Did you say 'Indians?'" Reminds me when I was a kid. Yeah, those were the days." Then he fell back asleep.

Chapter Seven

HENRY GETS HIGH WITH A BEERCAN ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

I was driving alone going through Muskogee in the early hours of the morning. Ed and Bill were both sound asleep in the backseat, and goosebumps were stampeding like a herd of buffalo on my arms. Ed was using my coat for a pillow so he could rest his head against the door handle without busting his head, which meant I had to keep the windows closed and the heater on high to keep warm. With the windows closed, I couldn't hear the natural sounds of the morning, so the only sounds I heard were those of the squeaky tape and the fan. Oh yes, and the snoring.

The lamplights were still well lit and so when I spotted a hitchhiker up the road, standing underneath a lamppost, I could almost read his sign. But not quite.

I pulled off the road and stopped a hundred feet past him. He grabbed his pack, which had been leaning against a

road marker, and ran to the car. I opened the door and he jumped in, pulling his pack onto his lap.

"It's about time someone stopped," he snapped, as if I alone had been passing him all day long.

Then, with a sudden force equal to his disgust but opposite in direction, he threw open the door, tossed his pack on the ground, tore off toward the marker, which was still visible by its red reflector on top, halted, ran back and inspected his pack for possible careless damage, then raced back toward the marker. He bent down and picked up something that I knew was small because he put it in his pocket, then he jogged back and got into the car once again with the pack.

"Thanks for waiting," he said as he untangled the knots of his long black hair with his fingers.

"It's cool," I said in return. "What'd you forget?"

"My dope," he answered.

HIS DOPE! Dope: the word itself goosed my goosebumps. Dope--Hope--Grove for the truth--Nope, I can't do that. What would the folks think if they knew I smoked dope? What would happen if I got caught? I'd never get a job for that evil misdeed--Weed--Freedom's just another word for nothin left to losers are the ones who never try anything new. And I knew I needed a change because being a typist was a drag. But if I took one drag off his marijuana cigarette, I'd never again be able to say that I'd never smoked marijuana. It would be a permanent blot on my perfect

record. I hoped he wouldn't even ask me so I wouldn't have to deal with it.

"No kidding," I said. "How'd you do that?"

He told me how when he hitchhiked, he usually walked facing traffic with his thumb out, but when he was hitching with dope, he stood in one spot and hid his dope in the grass or the bushes next to his backpack. That way, if a cop stopped and hassled him, he didn't have any weed on him.

"When a ride stops," he said, "I just stuff my stash in my pocket and split. The trick is you can't forget you left your weed there."

Papa was pointing to the weed that was hidden between two shrubs and partly covered by a leaf. "You left that weed there," he repeated. "I pay you \$2.50 to weed the lawn and look at that. A weed. My son the artist. So good with his hands he can write poetry, but he can't pick up a crummy weed."

He positioned his asthmatic body behind the driver's wheel of his new Cadillac and wiped his forehead with dust-powdered hands. He was a foreman at Kil-Gro Chemical Company, a conglomerate that produced chemicals for killing bugs and making animals grow faster. The chemical manufactured at the plant where Papa worked was invented, according to the advertising slogan, "by Dr. G.S. Gorington, noted scientist, to kill the weeds in his own backyard," so Papa was especially sensitive to weeds in his own backyard.

Papa was also an obsessive gambler. This is the bedtime

story he used to tell me: "Once upon a time, a little boy was in such a hurry to go play with his friends that he didn't clean up the pile of leaves that had a million dollars hidden under it that he could have spent on anything he wanted, including a college education, if he had found it." The moral of that story, which incorporated character development, plot development, tragic flaw, just reward, and guilt trip into one sentence so Papa could tuck me in and go out for his cardgame, was "A clean yard is a wild card." His favorite saying was: "Life is like a pair of deuces-- ya win some and ya lose some, but don't bet on it."

I pulled the weed from the ground and threw it, and the leaf that had concealed it, into the trash barrel.

"Jesus Christ, Papa, it's only one weed," I said.

"Did you see what the yard looked like before I started?"

"What do I know about before? I'm just seeing after."

He rubbed the left side of his head but it was too late, the pain was already unbearable. The pain was like the kind you get on the side of the nose when you eat ice cream too fast, only Papa got them all over his face and head whenever he was tense.

He laid his head against the headrest that Ed had installed to prevent whiplash and then he took off his shoes, crossing one leg at a time instead of bending over. "Shit-kickers" he called them, black leather army boots that may or may not have been comfortable but that certainly held in an odor that shook the car when his boots were off.

Ed grunted but didn't wake up. I nonchalantly opened the window, as if because I was warm.

"Pretty bad, eh?" he asked. "First time in two days."

"I guessed a week," I said.

"It's the second time this week I nearly forgot my weed, though," he continued, as he recalled the first time. "Sometimes it just doesn't pay."

It happened, he told me, while he was hitching through a town near Denver. A hitchhiking referendum was on the ballot and the cops were being especially tough because they relied on hitching busts to meet their quotas.

"I leaned my pack against a sign and hid my stash in the grass like I always did, and I was lucky because a cop stopped, frisked me, and kicked me off. Unfortunately, he watched me until I was off so I had to leave it there."

To get to the next freeway entrance, which was in the next town, he had to hitch down two main streets and a couple side streets. His first ride on the freeway took him to an intersection that split into three roads.

"He was going one way, I was going another, two freeks were hitching by the other. We started talking and I told them about how I had lost my weed. One of the freeks whispered to the other, and then the second pulled the bag out of his pack and said, 'Is this yours?' I couldn't believe it, they had arrived at the same spot five minutes after I got kicked off. I was lucky they were honest. Unfortunately, when my next ride came, I forgot the weed again."

He shook his head the way Papa shook his the time the check for the mortgage payment bounced.

"Oh well," he continued, as he straightened up and looked my ear in the eye, "it's like taking out auto insurance. When you forget it you kick yourself and wish you had been less paranoid and just packed it, but the next time, when you pack it, you get busted. Do you mind if I turn on the radio?"

I said sure, but he was turning it on anyhow. "Thanks," he said, as he traded the squeaky tape for an AM station. "All I've heard the last four hours have been passing trucks."

He was surprised to hear what sounded like a passing truck on the radio station, but it was only an ad for CB radios that sold under the name of "Smokey Detectors."

Then a song came on. The singer was a young white crooner from the Bronx who sold records because his company had poured a lot of money into making him a sex symbol and it was working.

He sang: "I feel happy when you're happy/I feel crappy when you're crappy/I feel hate and I feel love/And blah blah blah and God above."

He switched the radio to another station: "....I feel love/And blah blah blah and God...."

Switch: "....I feel crappy...."

Click.

"He feels crappy? We have to listen to that shit," he said as he turned the squeaky tape back on. "That guy's

the number one reason why the government oughta ban saccharin."

Talking relieved his anxiety. I could tell because he was beginning to mellow. Watching his mood change gradually from tense to relaxed, I imagined myself following an electric burner from High to Off. I rolled up the window because his feet were aired out and the cold air was displacing the stale.

He unfolded a AAA road map on his lap and tapped onto it some marijuana from his plastic bag. Then he rolled two joints. If moods were hairstyles at that moment, he was a surfer and I was a princeton. I tried to change the subject.

"By the way, what's your sign say?" I asked. Joe Cool.

He showed me one side of a shopping bag that looked, from its creases and wrinkles, like it had travelled across the country in his back pocket. Four bright colors of Magic Marker were smeared across the page, reminders of a hitch in the rain, but the letters still clearly spelled out the words: "Home To Mama."

He laughed and for the first time I saw a gap, where his front teeth were crooked, that was hidden by his long untrimmed mustache. "I always talk to the cars when I hitch," he said. "Ya gotta do something to get their attention or they don't even notice you."

He said he first started carrying signs with slogans three years ago. "It's not like it used to be," he began. "Used to be every longhair and every VW van meant a ride, sure thing, but times change. People were passing me by

without even noticing me."

At first, he said, he took it personally, but he soon realized they didn't even see him. "No, they saw me," he said, apologizing for his use of poetic license. "They just didn't want me to know that they knew that I knew that they saw me and were still passing me up, so they would try to act as if they didn't see me. Most of them become so good at it they really don't see me. I'm like a beercan on the side of the road.

"Then one day, I was hitching through this town where a young high school couple had been murdered and the girl raped by a guy they picked up hitching. The town was paranoid about hitchers and citizens' groups were lobbying to get the City Council to pass stiffer anti-hitchhiking laws. The cops were on the lookout for any longhairs. I just wanted to get out of that town. But I figured while I was there, I'd better have something to say to them while they were passing me by so they didn't throw beercans at me. My sign said 'FREEPORTR' and I didn't figure that was enough, so I made me another one that said 'I AM UNARMED.' I figured I better let em know I was innocent so they didn't kill me."

He took a drink from the jug of water that was on the floor by his feet. Then he continued:

"So anyhow, I used that sign. I was just lucky I was using a grocery bag for my signs or I'd'a never had enough room for another one. When I used that sign, everyone noticed me. Some of them even pointed at me and laughed. Most of

them still didn't pick me up, but at least they didn't shoot at me, and I made it outta town in one piece. Some of the ones who stopped even said, 'Hey, I liked your sign.' It got me to thinking. I realized that people were stopping because they thought my sign was funny. People like a sense of humor. Most of them still don't stop, but at least they notice me. I become a beer can on the side of the road with a sense of humor."

"Are you on your way to your mom's?" I asked.

"No, but anyone who's hitching across the country to see his mother can't be all bad. It's getting me rides."

He lit one of the joints and I saw my perfect record go up in flames.

"Wanna get high?"

He directed the joint toward my mouth so I could accept his offer without taking my hands off the wheel.

Ed snored and then Bill snored. My eyes glanced in the rearview mirror from one to the other. Ed was still leaning against the window, Bill was asleep with his arm on Ed's portable TV. A commercial came on and I was presented a 30-second silent film sequence wherein a young man with curly hair and a long nose drops out of school and in spit-fire rapidity he smokes a joint that is given to him by a Puerto Rican junkie; he murders a high school couple while hitchhiking; his father has a heart attack and dies; his mother leaves him a note that says, "After all I've done, you should know from. Don't forget to wash behind the ears,

Love, Mom," and commits suicide; and he goes on to harder stuff and jumps off a bridge while high on heroin. The last picture showed a Mexican boy with one front tooth, standing in the middle of a field of Acapulco gold, saying, "Ya don't have to be Jewish to know why they call it dope."

Zoom--a beer truck passed me on a curve. My grip on the steering wheel tightened. My salivary glands spoke for me. "Yes."

Papa was pointing his finger at me. "No son of mine would ever take drugs," he said. He gave me a dollar for my straight A report card and patted my brain. "But why should I waste words? I know you would never disappoint me like that."

"No."

Momentum planted the joint in my mouth. I gasped and inhaled. "Hwew." I coughed. My eyes turned red like electric pimentos. I got the hiccups. My God, what have I done? My throat was a desert cactus. My brain was a rainbow balloon. My stomach was a double bean burrito. I felt guilty.

The hitchhiker inhaled off that same joint. A ghoulisish laugh blew smoke through the gap in his front teeth. He looked at me like he was a fart in church.

My God, I thought, he wasn't even high yet. Or was he? What with chromosomal damage and all, maybe he was always high. He might kill me to get a fix, and not even know it. I almost screamed, but I didn't want to wake Ed or Bill.

He took a long ominous puff. I looked away and unrolled the window. "What are you worried about, your chromosomes?" he asked.

I denied his allegation emphatically, then felt my nose to see if it had grown.

"I suppose you don't have to escape reality then."

"That's right," I said. I sat firm. I felt proud of my morals. "My folks worked hard to make me a man and I don't want to disappoint them."

"Well good," he said, "a man of his convictions. Society needs more people like you." He took another long breath of smoke, then exhaled. "I, however, am one of the deviants. Surely you've read about me."

I stuck my neck out the window to ensure my lungs some fresh air. I thought of fleeting fame and fetid fumes. I asked what I must have read.

"My mind," he answered, with the determination of an insurance salesman. His eyes were on fire. "Mind. Your own business. Your business is to know what's on my mind."

He took another breath, a slow one this time, with his lips sealed tightly around the neatly rolled burning square of paper. I counted to ten before he stopped. His eyes were bloodshot red by seven. I ducked my head out the window for fresh air at eleven. He coughed and hacked and wheezed beginning at twelve and he didn't come up for air until twenty-three.

"Good grief," I shuddered. "He's tripping."

"Allow me to introduce myself," he resumed calmly. "I am Artie Fishel. And you"--he pointed his finger menacingly at my temple--"are a secretary."

A reflex action akin to orthoneurological rigor mortis jolted the gas pedal. The car jerked forward, then stabilized at 80. I regained my composure and resumed the proper speed limit. "How did you know?" I asked.

"Because I am reality," he said, "in all its spontaneous majesty. And you are my uptight carbon copy. I am everything you were and everything you can be, but I am nothing like what you are now. I live for the moment, you live for everyone else's. I am your real present, you are a holdover from your past. And I owe it all"--he inhaled once again, held it for a quick three-count, then exhaled it effortlessly --"to drugs." His voice pitch fell two octaves.

There was silence. It wasn't easy to pretend I wasn't part of that drug-oriented conversation but I tried. I turned on the radio: "I feel crappy."

Click.

"Oy, I feel crappy."

"Of course you feel crappy," he said as he rolled a third joint, "because you're so uptight. I was like you, too, until I took"--he did it again, an inhale, a three-count hold, an effortless exhale, and a two-octave voice drop-- "drugs."

"And now I'm free."

Aunt Clara was chanting loudly enough for passersby

to hear as she sprinted down the center of the town's main street, from the hospital to the park where she had sexually assaulted an orthodox rabbi in a field of roses at high noon six months ago. "I'm free! I'm free!"

The arresting officer testified in court that she was screaming "Roses are scarlet, violets are green, I am a harlot, and you are my queen" at the time of the arrest. The psychiatrist who examined her testified that she had probably lost her sanity well before the incident in the park and he spoke for his profession in apologizing that no one had detected any early warning signs.

To Aunt Clara, the answer was more involved but she was unable to explain it that day. "I don't know what got into me," she sobbed. "I don't even like beards."

Poor Aunt Clara. All she wanted in life was to sit alone on the riverbank behind her house and paint nature scenes. Aunt Clara taught me to tame my youthful chatter during the summer picnics we shared together in her favorite spot. I learned to appreciate silence then and I grew to crave the solitude that enabled me to gather and organize abstract thoughts on paper for the first time. Aunt Clara's paintings hung in museums and galleries but no one wanted to buy them, so she was forced to contract her talents to local businesses. Everyone agreed she hadn't been the same since Insipid Greeting Cards Company hired her to paint floral scenes for love poems. Her fellow workers praised her and she was promoted to art director within a year, but

by that time she had already taken to frequenting gay bars as a fag hag, trying to pick up young boys and straighten them out. It was around that time that Uncle Alex left her and took the children with him. Aunt Clara closed down more than one bar but she never missed a day of work.

Two attendants in white coats chased after her, calling to her to stop at once. She met me at the park and embraced me, burying her face in my arms. "Oh Henry, my darling nephew, I'm free." She downed two white pills and tore apart the hospital gown she still was wearing.

The attendants were breathless and sweaty by the time they arrived. "Be careful, Son, she's dangerous," warned the first as he grasped her by the arms. The second shot a tranquilizer into her veins and she collapsed on the ground, whispering, "I'm free."

I looked at the naked figure passed out before me and sympathy replaced sap in my family tree. "If you're free," I said out of philosophical pity, "then freedom is a bad habit, and you're addicted."

The longhaired hitchhiker next to me was insulted personally. He turned to me angrily and demanded, "Who's addicted? And to what: You punch a clock, which I don't. You go in hock, which I won't. You work late, which I hate. I'm addicted? You kiss ass. You're a puppet. Gives you gas."

"Now stop it."

"Everyday is the way I've depicted. In a suit and a

tie, you look cute."

"I could die."

"But you have no choice, they tell you how to dress. You won't toke, but you drink. It's no joke, don't you think?"

"Yes I do, and it's true, my life's a mess. But my company has promised me a very nice promotion if I stay with them until I'm 65. I've insurance and a pension."

"What does that do for your tension? You may not even get out of there alive."

"And my company will honor me and give me a gold watch."

"Which you're buying with martini, gin and whiskey, rum and scotch. And with Maalox for your ulcer, not to mention Bayer and Bufferin. And you tell me I'm addicted?--Buddy, you're the one who's sufferin. Give me weed to ease my tension, light my joint to get me by. I don't need your mind depressants. No, I much prefer to fly. I can travel to the moon and back. It's one small step for freekness. While you're puking in the corner, I'll be winning in the Preakness."

The Mexican kid in the TV ad stared over the bridge the curly headed man with the long nose jumped off of while high on heroin and sang, "Jews or goyim, what's the dif? Smoke weed and end up a stiff."

The folks lay in traction on the hood and sang, "It's okay we slave for you. We'll even go to the grave for you."

Old Stretchneck, my boss, dressed in leopard skin,

stood by the timeclock beating his chest as the employees punched in and chanted, "You peon, me exec. I see neon, you see dreck."

And my fellow employees, what a bedraggled lot, lining up behind their typewriters and filing cabinets singing in four-part harmony, "Yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, sir. No, sir."

Ed and Bill sat, arms locked, eyes glazed, in the back-seat, heads bouncing in unison from left to right like a typewriter, four beats to a line, chanting, "Drugs. Drugs. Drugs. Drugs."

As Artie handed me the second joint. "Freedom means being able to choose your own drug," he said.

"I want to be free," I cried.

"Go for it, Henry."

"Hwew."

A powerful flash of sunshine dissipated the grey clouds that still lingered from the five-inch rainfall of the previous night, leaving in their place a sky of crystal blue. The trees were just beginning to bud, and scattered among the browns and rusty reds of early morning late winter were splotches of a stunning purple.

I drove and drove, onward, past the two hundred mile mark, energized by what was happening inside the car, loving what was Being outside the car, wanting to be out there, wishing I could be, and then I was struck with the question, "How come I'm not out there?" I couldn't think of any good reason, nor could Artie, and since Ed and Bill were both

asleep the vote was unanimous, so I pulled off the road and stopped.

A small incline led down to the lake named Eufaula. Being a hill of loose rocks, it was easy to descend. My pen began to swell with subjects and predicates so I sat, facing the water, to relieve it, but I breathed in so much energy, I had to run--in the water, back up the hill, across the street, to the other side. I memorialized the moment as I ran:

I'm scared to be a hippie in Mississippi
 Afraid to be a freek in Flat Rock Creek
 We'll take anything to beat the doldrums
 'Cause in Redneck Country, things look pretty bleak

Yeah, it's tough being white in the town of Kite,
 boy
 The same is true about being a Jew
 Down South it ain't easy being different
 If you were here, you'd feel the same way, too

I'm going back to Boulder, Colorado
 Lansing, Michigan or Sebasco, Maine
 Ain't no way I'm staying down here with you
 To live Down South I'd have to be insane

'Cause they'll beat you if you're lippy in
 Mississippi
 They'll try to make you meek in Flat Rock Creek
 But they've got some pretty potent marijuana
 I'll meet you in Muskogee in a week

I smelled the flowers, tramped in the mud, felt the cold water pouring out the irrigation pipe in the side of the mountain. When I returned to the car, I felt strong enough to transport it.

Ed and Bill were still snoring in unison. "Ed! Bill! Bill! Ed!" I splashed water in their faces to bring them to. "Get up, I want you to meet someone."

From a deep sleep, they emerged to a state of partial consciousness and surveyed the surrounding area.

"Kid, you been dreamin?" Ed asked, rubbing his eyes.

"What are you on?" said Bill, through a muffled yawn.

Confusion saw nobody standing beside me. A joint was in my hand. I slipped it into my shirt pocket. Disbelief looked at the VW van across the road. A bearded hitchhiker bent down by a nearby marker with a red reflector on top, put a small package in his pocket, then jogged to the van. As it rounded the corner, he was untangling the knots of his long black hair with his fingers.

Chapter Eight

HENRY MEETS PEGGY AND PASSES OUT

And then came Texas.

To show you what kind of place Texas is, we visitors weren't even met at the border by a real person. Instead, private enterprise welcomes us: "Johns-Manville Welcomes You To Texas: Just Ahead Is Our Denison Pipe Plant."

That monstrosity, which tends to upset the sensitive individual at the same time that it is blatantly raping the red clay of the legendary Red River, was only the beginning. The situation progressively worsened until this environmental affront to our senses culminated in Dallas. What began with an annoyance of oil wells here and industries there was now a carelessly designed mass of oil wells, businesses, plants, and shopping centers. I kept expecting to see the old west everywhere in Texas, and whenever I got an iota less, I became disappointed. I was disappointed often. According to Bill, Texas is where the businesses from the north relocated when they realized they could make more money here from

cheap labor. He called it "progress"--"to some it's a watchword, to others it's a euphemism. The dividing line is an economic one."

On the right of the line, he explained, are the oil magnates, those who control the money. Their wealth now and the nation's need for oil is making Texas the healthiest state in the Union. They're making so much money from their oil they don't know what to do with it, so they're turning to the open country and developing it--with additional aid from money interests in New York--by building houses and shopping centers and industries, thereby making more millions off their investments. They justify their millions by pointing to the fact that this growth, the statistics show, has given Texas the lowest unemployment rate in the country. Money for them, jobs for the poor--that to them is "progress."

On the left are those people with no power, "the realities behind the statistics," he called them. They recognize that employment is high but they also know that so many people are looking for work, employers can pay minimum wages. They also know that, while the builders can always find a good reason to construct something new, those same builders don't need reasons to do as they please because their power is reason enough. The people also know that the result for them is always the same: their land is raped, their rivers are polluted, they still have barely enough money with which to live, and they have absolutely no power to change things. "Progress" for them, then, is growth for growth's sake, a

statistical game where the rich always win.

The three levels of highways gave Dallas a Futuristic aura. Driving onto the ramp that led to the top, I imagined myself being launched into outer space, but once I exploded from the barrel, I found myself driving right through Dallas, traffic lights and all.

Not all of Texas was true to my initial impression. I appreciated the fact. The color green first appeared on the scene almost immediately upon leaving the outskirts of Dallas, where yards replaced buildings and stores in the suburbs. Continuing south past the whole Greater Dallas area, the sky opened up all around us revealing the deepest richest blue I had ever seen. The plains were pretty because they were natural, and the cacti were wondrous in their simplicity. What I reacted to most strongly was the absence of all the oil wells.

But I didn't get to see much because, by this time, the evening dusk was giving way to total darkness, and whatever scenery was beyond the reach of the city lights was no longer visible. That, then, was all I saw of Texas during our ride in.

69 teamed up with 75 somewhere in Oklahoma and they split up in Denison, Dwight Eisenhower's birthplace. We took 75s to 635e, which became 35e a half hour after Dallas. I got us onto 35e, and then we pulled over for dinner at a truck stop.

After dinner, Bill, well relaxed from a long lazy

day, relieved me in the driver's seat. I took over on the mattress and was out in no time.

My first impression of Austin, then, wasn't "So this is Austin," but, rather, "Huh, wha, ya mean we're here already?" We were at a service station, where Bill had stopped to call his lady. The interior of my head was like London on a dark chilly evening, but Ed was coming alive, showing the first signs of life since he fizzled out in Dimondale.

"Hey, you'll like Peggy, Kid," he said to the first flutter of my eyebrows. "She's quite a lady. A little on the plump side but she's got blue eyes that'll drive ya wild. Hair's gold as a haystack."

"Where'd he meet her?" I yawned.

"Girl next door, ya know. Me and Madge, we always knew they'd do it, just takes awhile. She's like one of the family. I always did like her. I said to Madge after three, 'Hey, Madge, why don't we take Peggy for a daughter?' Madge wouldn't hear of it. She wanted her own. But Peggy's all right. Yes sir, like one of the family."

A mockingbird, the state bird of Texas, chose that moment to drop a huge white turd on the window. "What is the symbolism of that act?" I wondered.

"Look at the size o' that one," Ed laughed. "Reminds me when I was a kid."

"But seriously, Son," he said as Bill emerged from the night, "I'm proud of you. Yes I am. Chip off the old block."

We were ten miles from Peggy's, who lived in Taylorville, a small town to the east of the city. Bill drove with the accuracy of a sewing machine, weaving in and out of traffic at a constant speed. I couldn't help but notice his silence. Ed caught it, too. "A little nervous, eh Son?" he asked. "Been quiet since we left the station. Yes sir, who said times change? I couldn't talk for a week before I popped it to your mom. I was never so happy to get the finger in all my life."

Ed laughed and I laughed. Bill's expression made Locke's tabula rasa look cluttered as he gazed at the boards that sealed the door to the storefront at the end of the deadend street. Peggy lived alone in an apartment above the empty storefront. Her apartment was similar to any other storefront apartment: kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, front-room, dining room, porch. The only difference was that at Peggy's, the atmosphere was more mellow. That was why the local folk gathered at Peggy's and not just any house with a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, frontroom, dining room, porch.

Music could be heard coming from the porch, so we followed our ears in that direction. Standing by the doorway, we looked out into the darkness. Six singing figures could be seen improvising on a folk song that recalled the hills of Kentucky. Singing lead, I could tell not from her voice, for I had never heard her sing, but from the golden sunshine of her hair, was Peggy.

Bill watched her as she sang. She was, in her own way,

a local celebrity because she had made it out of Taylorville and performed in a coffeehouse in Austin. Still, any time someone was organizing a worthwhile fundraiser, she could always be counted on to lend her name and her talents. The local folks loved her and claimed her as their own.

From her seat at the far end of the porch, Peggy glanced away from her guitar and saw us. With a twist of her neck, she flung her soft flowing tresses far behind her head and whispered hoarsely, as if to address only us without disturbing the musical surroundings, "Bill! Papa Ed! You're here!"

"Hey," Ed blushed, feigning modest embarrassment at the sudden attention, "sorry to keep ya waitin, Beautiful."

We walked to where Peggy was sitting so as to relinquish the spotlight to the music. Reaching up without standing, Peggy hugged Bill. Then Peggy hugged Ed. She nodded at me and I smiled at her as Ed continued, "We would'a been here sooner but we stopped to help a couple cops."

"You? The perpetual cynic?"

"Sure, whadaya think? We saw a cop car pull up to a house and two cops jumped out. I ran up to them and said, 'Citizen Faller at your service, Men'--I was doing my patriotic duty--'What's the problem?' I thought maybe someone was hurt. They said they was lookin for a bank robber. So I says, 'Hey, that's too bad, but I can't help you.' They said, 'How come?' and I says, ''cause I hope he gets away.'"

Peggy's laugh was that of a daughter.

"Hey, this is quite a place ya got here, Gorgeous," Ed rambled as he scanned the room and discovered the six musicians to be only a segment of the whole scene.

"Oh, we have these get-togethers all the time," she explained to Ed's back as he vanished into the crowd and she re-focused her gaze on me. "Everytime I practice, someone seems to always drop in to listen. Next thing I know, there's a huge gathering and everyone is either listening or playing."

A black fly buzzed by Bill's face and landed on his right cheek. Bill swatted it and the fly retaliated by oozing guts into Bill's eye. Bill wiped the result with the index finger of his right hand and transferred it to the seat of his jeans. Next, he pulled up the legs of his jeans and knelt down so that his knees and the tips of his toes were touching the stone floor and his eyes were level with Peggy's.

"Join me for a walk?" he asked. She nodded and rose.

I watched them as they disappeared into the dining room. My ears followed them down the stairs and into the street. I watched them as they walked down the street and rounded the corner.

Then I spotted a keg behind me. I passed out long before they returned.