

fldGits

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Warning!
Contains Adult Content and
Extremely Graphic Sexual Language

A D O L E S S O N S

Excerpts from *fldGits Book 1 Adolessons*

I am a human being. The preceding statement is simple enough. It conjures an expectation by the reader that the writer is the same kind of being as the reader, since reading is an activity, at present, limited to one kind of being, a human being. However, reading requires a written language, and the statement above is rendered in English, thus limiting its potential exposure to those human beings capable of reading – and understanding – English, only some fraction of the whole of human beings. Because this statement is now limited to a division of human beings, it is subject to the ignorance, prejudices, misconceptions, and unreasonable, even irrational, expectations of non-English speaking human beings (assuming, of course, that all English-speaking individuals are capable of understanding all English text – a very large assumption, indeed). It wouldn't matter in the slightest what the following pages would reveal; non-English speaking human beings would still be excluded; that statement, and all subsequent statements, would still have no meaning to them. The most interesting part of this argument, to me, is the *translation*, the rendering of the English language into another language, or of any language into any other language. The first sentence in this paragraph, for instance, would be easy. Yet, I have presented the translator with a dilemma concerning the rest of this paragraph: what should be done with the references to “English” as the language used for each and every word? Does the French-speaking translator simply change every “English” to “French”, which would make a meaningful connection to the French reader, but would forever change the context, perspective, and position of the English-speaking author? Worse, perhaps, does the French-speaking translator keep the “English” as the language reference, possibly leading to a lack of meaning to a French-speaking reader? Does a compromise consisting of rendering “English” to “Anglais” appeal more? From my perspective as the writer, there is no easy solution to this dilemma. Just in English, there are countless examples of books, documents, paragraphs, even sentences, where the context and meaning are forever subject to debate between two or more English-speaking readers. Ultimately, it is the reader who must be the final arbiter, especially since a motivated writer can use these devices endlessly.

Still, it is not my intention to befuddle, confuse, or place clever literary obstacles throughout this tome that cannot be easily negotiated. Far from it, this is meant to be a re-examination of the past, an honest reckoning of one life, one member of the tribe of human beings. I am reminded of human history when I state that I am a member of the tribe of human beings, since tribe usually denotes a subset of human beings, while the collective whole is often referred to as species. As I write this, however, I have come to the conclusion that when tribes possibly came into existence, it was the next great step in the evolution of human psyche; yet those thousands of years since have failed to accomplish any further evolution. This becomes clear when one accepts the notion that the concept of *tribe* has evolved instead; it can reasonably be applied to national origin, race, creed, gender, age, educational level, political persuasion, income levels, socio-economic status, language, sexual persuasion, employment, family, any division of like-minded, or like-looking, human beings. There really is no end to tribes today and there is no end to recruitment for tribes. One can go anywhere in the world and be recruited to a new tribe. And here's the best thing: no one even thinks of this activity, this human endeavor, as being ‘recruited for the tribe’. The *concept* has evolved but human beings have not. I like to think that I have truly evolved, though, because I recognize tribes, and recruiting, everywhere. While it is virtually impossible to disentangle from all tribal affiliations and continue to live and be productive today, it *is* possible to act in the interests of the tribe of human beings, even when it conflicts with the interests of the current tribal affiliation. It's possible. It ain't easy.

While I claim to be a member of the tribe of human beings and am, obviously, a member of the subset of English-speaking human beings – by virtue of having to choose a language, any language, in order to communicate – I can also claim past affiliation with many other tribes. As one reads, these affiliations will be revealed and soon. I have only limited my full meaning, so far, to my language subset; when each affiliation is revealed, I already know I will lose more and more readers, for the same reasons I stated earlier. This observation allows me to state my last position before I start my recollections. The only full meaning that can be conveyed safely to all readers *must be* anonymous and contain no revelations of the writer's tribal affiliations. (As each affiliation is revealed, if the reader is instantly reminded of this diatribe on tribes, at least I will have won a very small victory). The former is impossible in an autobiography (is it possible in *any* treatise?), but I *can* remain anonymous. If I must have a name, I'll take one that is consistent with my perspective. From the universal, collectively, we are insignificant; from the mass of human beings, I am insignificant; and wherever I go, I garner practically no attention. Call me *Non Descript*, for this is the story of one human being that you *do not know*.

– from *Introduction*, pages iii-v

Shootin' the tube for the best ride required knowledge of the pipe sections' various pitches. The first section of pipe is relatively flat; the water is deepest here than anywhere else in the tube and often has little carry so one would typically push off the bottom with one's hands two or three times and lift the butt to clear the first connection. From the second section until the last three sections, the pitch was consistent, perhaps three to five degrees; beginning with the second section, the water would now carry one. Still, the best ride required concentration as one approached the next connection, because one would arch the back crossing the connection or one's butt would bump it. The next two sections - getting near the end now - dropped the pitch even more, so that the last of these two sections was pointing downhill as much as ten degrees; if the water flow was adequate, one was propelled over these connections without any need to arch one's back. The last section was the most appropriate climax, with a pitch easily double that of the previous section; it had to be at least twenty degrees and twenty-five wouldn't surprise me, because when one reached the last section, stopping was not an option; one could be expelled from the tube at twenty miles per hour, easily, and the power of the discharging water behind one would send one to the opposite end of the pond in five seconds or less. Was it a rush? Re-read this last paragraph very carefully and emphasize your visualization powers; what do you think?

Necessity is the mother of invention and as the summer progressed it was becoming necessary to devise another method to 'manufacture' a ride besides depending only on nature; hard rains were fewer and the hotter temperatures evaporated the water more quickly. Somebody, one of our Reservoirtown buds as I recall, came up with the idea of using a board to clog the pipe opening to back up the water in the creek; when the water reached the top of the pipe, we would pull the board up and away from the pipe, discarding it on the bank above the creek, and 'manufacture' enough temporary water flow to make a decent ride, especially for the first two people. Soon, there was half of a four-by-eight, three-quarter-inch plywood board resting on the edge above the creek, our invention carried by two guys over a mile and a half. Now, however, order became a contentious matter. Fortunately, democracy would prevail, because once the debate was settled as to who would be first and second on the *first* ride, rotation took precedence; for the *next* ride, third through sixth moved up while first and second moved back. The rotations weren't always consistent but invariably everyone got a ride in first and a ride in last. The ideal number for total shooters was six; after six the ride could be very poor, even dangerous. With six the first and second didn't even touch the board; they stood before the board, one behind the other, ready to swing into the pipe once the board was cleared. Fifth and sixth held onto the board until it could be safely discarded, and third and fourth helped lift the board until it cleared the water, swinging into the pipe once fifth and sixth had secure command of the board. It was teamwork at its finest with nary a mishap; and it was eerie watching the board placed before the opening and the creek rising up along the banks; one passed the minutes watching the creek rise one, two, three feet as far back as its meandering path was visible and trying to imagine how much water - and force - was being held back by three-quarters of an inch of wood.

Two events remain fresh in my mind. One day, after a hard rain had cleared early in the morning, several of us walked down to 'the hole', having heard a rumor that something had happened to the board. While some of us confirmed that the board was now reduced to a couple of small pieces wedged between the pipe and embankment, another had maneuvered around the pond's edge to lay on the top of the discharge pipe and gaze into it; he thought that the water flow near the end wasn't as smooth as it should be and there was probably debris stuck inside. The water was flowing at a good pace and I volunteered to go in and try to clear the debris or at least discover where it was. There were some sticks in the first section, which I passed back to the others, but I made the mistake of not trying to slow my pace enough by pushing my feet against the wall until I got to the last three sections and spotted the debris. Two seconds later my right leg was pinned under the two large pieces of the board, while my body was pushed forward; I had enough control to twist my leg so that I could bend it at the knee - so I wouldn't break my leg - and I tried to pull the debris loose. I got some of the miscellaneous sticks free but my weight on the boards worked against me, so I struggled until I pulled my leg out and slid head first out the last section and a half into the pond. Limping back to the starting side, I filled Chuck in on the situation; he carefully braked himself by pushing his feet hard against the tube walls until he reached the obstruction, and smashed, pushed and threw it out of the tube. We spent the rest of the afternoon gleefully shootin'.

Others have claimed to be first but they're mistaken. My dog, Coco, was the first to shoot the tube, from beginning to end. And she had the ripped paw pads to prove it. She followed us to 'the hole' one day and climbed up the railroad trestle to the other side. She didn't seem the least bit intimidated by the rush of water or

the foreboding dark of the tube; after I had shot through twice and had climbed back to see her tale wagging with excitement, I induced her to get in the water, which she promptly did. I tried to hold her above the concrete bottom of the tube, unsuccessfully, as we slid through the opening and were propelled to the exit. I let her go when we splashed into the pond and she paddled out and danced around me, but she wouldn't climb back to the starting side and I didn't discover why until we were readying to leave. She seemed to be limping so I sat down and urged her to come to me. When I looked at the bottom of her paws, I was shocked to see that most of the pads on her paws were torn away, revealing very tender tissue; they weren't actively bleeding but I knew they must hurt. I carried her back home and we nursed her for about a week until they healed. I never took her through it again, though there was never another chance; she never followed us a second time. Since I don't recall anyone describing the same outcome when anyone bragged about their dog, I'm sure there was not another dog that went first. Most dogs would be able to reach the concrete bottom - Coco, after all, was only about twenty inches tall - and their natural inclination would be to stretch to touch the bottom for control. The speed of those paws passing over the rough surface of the bottom would easily tear the pads of almost any dog that went through.

Summer nearing the end meant back to school, back to Thomas Jefferson Middle School, more precisely, and back to the shit that invariably accompanied such a return. I know what you're thinking; you're remembering how awkward and boring and pointless school seemed, all of it, perhaps. But what *I* mean by *return* is that short period, near the end of summer and beginning of autumn, when I would be subjected to hay fever, an allergic reaction mostly to weed pollen; and that period, from middle of August to the first freeze, was true misery. Medication for it was inadequate, which is a mild way of saying that it had no effect on the worst days. My nose could run ceaselessly. I was embarrassed to carry much tissue to school because I could go thru mountains in short order and I would have to get up from my desk and dump them frequently into the trash - no way I was doing that - so I swallowed it; this would, of course, aggravate my throat and initiate a persistent cough; and if my nose was running full-tilt I frequently would wipe it on my sleeve, which would eventually stain them permanently. Freaked out yet? If you are - and you should if you have *any* imagination - now you have a pretty good idea what it was like to sit in a classroom with me for the first two months of school; and if you reverse your point of view, you might gather a sense of the anguish and personal torment I suffered, above and beyond the physical misery. What an impression I could make on a new kid! And every time I go back to school, it always starts at the end of August; allergic reaction and school are psychologically locked together in my perception. I hated that return, yet I always kicked ass in school. For me, school was not awkward and boring and pointless; it was a challenge I could easily meet. Learning is a process that ends at the moment of death.

- from *Act One End of the Sixties*, pages 3-6

As the boredom of unexciting studies coupled with the relentless cold gray of the typical Midwestern late winter laid its crushing weight upon me, a sudden burst of warmth rolled across the plains for a week. Our science teacher decided to conduct a class outside, after which I refused to return to school, having climbed a tree. Eventually I would receive three 'swats' from a paddle; days later I would call one of the music teachers 'Milo' and receive four more swats, or seven for the week. It was the first and last time I would be so punished, but gone was my co-operation, replaced instead by low-lying reluctance.

Soon after, peace fell, too. JT the bully pushed someone too far, this time Dave, who had become much taller and quicker than JT, though certainly not any bulkier. But Dave quickly put JT to the test, shouting, "Let's go right now, fat boy! Put up or shut up!" All of us being outdoors, Dave clenched his fists and lunged at JT; JT stepped back, declining the challenge. "That's what I thought!" exclaimed Dave, as he scanned the faces of those in the circle. Then he shoved his arm out and pointed his finger at JT, warning, "Your days of pushin' everybody around is OVER. The next time you mess with *any* of us, I'll come an' kick the *shit* outta you!" JT said nothing; he didn't even turn around. He simply stepped backward, reaching for the door handle; when he found it, he opened the door, stepped through it and walked out of our sight. It *was* over. It was in his face - not a smile, not petrification, just lost. Dave never became a bully and for that day, at least, he was the king, but he never became someone you could trust, either. As I think about it, though, all of us have our failings and maybe Dave's were a little too obvious. I suppose all of us have interacted with someone who has found us less than trustworthy in the end. It's that most of us refuse to admit it.

Spring arrived and the days got longer, sometimes gray, sometimes sunny, some days warm, then cold, dry, then wet. March gave way to April and April faded into May. I'm sure I learned knowledge here and there but the intervening years have obscured these educational triumphs - the Kalahari Bushmen stick out, for some

reason. The More Academically Able or MAA program was reaching its conclusion, whatever that may be, as it would not be labeled as such for our high school careers.

Girls were definitely becoming an attraction, the topics of our male conversations more often than not. Vickie was fine, as usual, and Ginger had filled out quite nicely. The usual claptrap followed the name of any of the girls; boys boasting of what they could do for her or her or her; how nice it could be if various articles of clothing would just pop off without warning, or, maybe, with a little help. Hormones were beginning to rage when May, 1970 lazily rolled into the present, but less than a week into it, a different kind of rage captured the nation's attention.

At the end of one particular day in May, four lifeless bodies lay scattered in various areas over the grounds of a small college in Ohio, shot to death by members of the state's National Guard. All were students of the college; ironically, one was an active member of the college's Reserve Officers Training Corps, or ROTC. An impromptu protest over the war scared someone enough to call in the state's 'regulated militia' (?), thus setting the wheels of destiny in motion. I guess the protesters forgot to tell each other one of my favorite sayings, "Cheese it! It's the cops!" Rage apparently influenced some of the protesters, because some started throwing rocks at the guardsmen. It was eventually returned by rage from some of the guardsmen, probably mixed with a good dose of fear and paranoia; triggers were pulled on guns, some kids were wounded, four died. These events were then followed by more rage; rage at the guardsmen who fired at unarmed civilians; rage at the protesters who showed such lack of respect for college tradition and property and who threw stones at those entrusted to keep order - let he who is without sin cast the first stone is a mighty powerful entreaty in the bible belt, in case you didn't know. The governor of Ohio and the President of the United States were en-raged; all the well-known 'anti-war activists' were out-raged. The war being fought 10,000 miles away had now claimed casualties of those who never left U.S. soil.

It was a point in our lives - in my life - where the events of the 'real world' were beginning to intersect with our worlds. If one goes to college, one receives a college deferment - they won't draft one still in college. What about after college? One can't stay in school forever. I read about David Harris - at the time married to Joan Baez - who refused induction into the Armed Forces after receiving a draft notice; he also refused to claim 'conscientious objection' - refusal to serve on religious grounds - because it was hypocritical, so he surrendered to the authorities and was sentenced to serve five years in prison. He served his time. He didn't run to Canada and he didn't dodge his responsibility, to himself, his conscience, his principles, even his nation. I decided that the most honorable course of action, if I should be placed in the same predicament, would be to do the same, but for me, not you or anybody else.

Rage against the faceless, virtually non-human contingent in far-away southeast Asia generated a new plan; while spokesmen for the government assured us that 'we will not engage in hostilities in countries neighboring Vietnam', American planes were routinely flying over Cambodia dropping bombs on 'suspected enemy targets'. It was the rage of Henry Kissinger; he may or may not have devised this plan, but he certainly made no effort to halt its enactment. I suppose what galls me the most about this is that the man concealed the truth, yet even today he is considered a respected statesman and diplomat. I wouldn't entrust him with a dollar to bring me back eggs from the grocery, even if I promised to scramble some for him, too. That's *my* rage.

- *from Act Two Into the Breach, pages 9-11*

Okay, it's ten o'clock in the morning, time to get up for school. Shocked? I told you high school was going to be different. Due to the baby-booming swell of enrolled students and no money for more schools - the justification for spending was tempered by the fact that ten years later there would be a third fewer students - our school district devised the split shift for high school. Seniors and juniors attended periods one through five from 7:30 to noon; sophomores and freshmen attended periods six through ten from 12:30 to 5. Those students who enrolled for six periods usually attended the period before or after their 'normal' shift.

The first day was short and chaotic. We had our class schedule and were assigned a homeroom, where we were to report, receive our locker assignments, school rules and procedures. That day would be close to the last that I visited homeroom; if the room was not in use during the half-hour for lunch - not guaranteed - then we could gather in that room before the start of sixth period, but it was not required and I and most of my acquaintances gathered elsewhere in the school.

....

We all made our way to school that Tuesday just like the other days and gathered in the hall near the music rooms, which was through a doorway from the main hall of the school and down a narrower corridor, which turned right before another set of doors were passed to reach them. We were beginning to establish the music room corridor as our 'staging area' before classes started at 12:30, but this day just felt more apprehensive and tense than the previous days. Instead, we lingered in the hall, sensing that something was going to happen. Only a few minutes had elapsed with the 'regulars' together when the doors to the gymnasium swung open violently and scores of kids rushed into the hall to the front entrance of the school and out those doors. Fear and confusion was evident from most of their expressions and the talk was equal; we soon discerned that there were gangs - plural - of four to eight kids walking around the school leisurely punching out random students, usually those with dissimilar skin pigment.

The 'regulars' now split up, Dallas, Jim, Charlie and I making our way into the gym while the others went their separate directions. We wanted to see what was going on and many kids had said that the latest was happening in the gym and directly outside. We squeezed past the multitude filing through the doors to the hall and we entered the gym. The school's gymnasium was a ring around a sunken basketball court with bleachers that rose to the level of the ring above; scattered on the outer ring were doors leading to locker rooms, weight rooms, storage rooms and offices; opposite the entrance from the hall into the gym were six sets of doors to the outside of the school building and we tried to look around or over the crowd in the gym, most of whom were slowly moving to the outside of the building. We could see that most were gathered at the sets of doors closest to us; instead of moving in that direction, we walked around the ring above the court to the far set of outside doors.

As we stepped outside - where a grass area of 100 feet separated the building from the parking lot fence, intersected by three concrete paths - there were students of all backgrounds meandering aimlessly from the parking lot to the school building in small, unorganized groups, clearly separating themselves from the two large groups to our left, one full of black faces, one of white. Each group contained two to three hundred students, separated by no more than twenty feet and the black vice-principal standing close to the white faces looking toward the black and the white principal standing close to the black faces looking toward the white. We walked slowly around the large groups, giving plenty of leeway, until we were squarely in the middle of the parking lot, safely observing the shouting, fainting, and gesturing.

As I remember this scene from a viewpoint of more than thirty years removed, it's clear to me that who said what and the exact words are irrelevant. It was a moment where several people were of one mind; a moment that one experiences rarely in a lifetime, yet a moment one remembers forever. We all knew what our eventual action would be; the conversation was simply a means to properly justify the inevitable action.

"Well, now we know what we have to do to get the principal and vice-principal out of the office."

"But nobody can say we're not color-coordinated."

"Yeah, black is clearly black and white is clearly white."

"Technically, black and white are the opposite ends of a total lack of color."

"That may be, but this event is definitely a show of color."

"And a show of hostility."

"What it shows me is that education for today is a secondary consideration."

"It could definitely be dangerous attending class today."

"Yeah, you wouldn't want to step out of your classroom and be confronted by a hundred hall monitors of a slightly different color than yours."

"Where's your hall pass, boy?"

"I think school is to be held outside the school building today."

"I think I just heard the principal say, 'Today, classes will be held all over the city in recognition of today, which comes but once a year this year.'"

"I just heard the vice-principal say that my house is one of the 'all-city' classrooms," lied Charlie.

"And, that's good enough for me. Let's all attend class at Charlie's house."

"We can't just leave school and go to Charlie's house...can we?"

"No, you're right. We should just stay in school, even though it's the scene of a race riot, where we'll all be safe and sound."

"And if we're lucky, sometime during our shift the gangs'll pull their knives and guns, kids will actually die, and if we survive, we'll get to go home early."

“Getting the picture yet?”

“Got it. So let’s get up and go.”

Away we went to the only one among our families’ homes which should be empty. To avoid arousing the suspicions of the local enforcement contingent, we deviated from the road a block from the school following the railroad tracks. When the tracks intersected with another set, we took the second set to the south. Soon we walked over Stevenson Drive on the railroad bridge, past the small shopping center that was directly behind Charlie’s house, and twisted through or climbed over private wire fences to the road where his house was located, a horseshoe-shaped court with two entrances. Emerging from between two houses a couple of doors away, we walked on the road to his driveway and moved along it until we were behind the house. From the ‘secret’ hiding place, Charlie pulled out a key, inserted it into the lock of the back door, turned it and opened the door. After replacing the key he then stepped inside the house and we followed.

Charlie warned everybody not to move anything other than the chairs at the dining table and our first item for discussion was to decide where we would go from here. Staying all afternoon at Charlie’s house was not in our plans. We sat down on the chairs at the table, barely beginning our discussion in earnest, when we heard a car enter the driveway, and saw a green blur pass by the side window.

“Shit, it’s Les,” Charlie cursed. Quickly, he organized the escape. “Go to the front door, open it when I say so, get out and head for the tracks.” Charlie ran to the back door, locked it, turned and ran to the front and said, “Out, now.”

Jim opened the door and we ran out, Charlie gingerly pulling the locked door behind him and keeping the screen door from banging. We ran across the yard and hurdled the ditch between the two yards; I fell in the ditch but got right up and scrambled away. Ten seconds later we were already between the two houses we had passed between before, fifteen seconds later we were through the fences, and within a minute we were all crouched or sitting on the ground in a bushy area near the railroad tracks.

None of us were mad; we all recognized the humor in the situation. I was almost laughing when I asked Charlie, “Shit, man, what happened to ‘he always comes home at 11:30 for a half-hour then goes back to work?’”

Charlie laughed before he answered, “This day would be the one where he had a busy morning and had to take a later lunch.”

“No shit!” Jim agreed and we all laughed.

A few moments later, Dallas uttered the legendary phrase spoken almost everywhere when the best-laid plans go awry. “Now what?”

– *from Act Three Staggering Through Last Rites, Part One, pages 16-20*

If I told you that precious little of the conversations, activities and events of these last few days before the new year are available for me to actually remember and recount, would it serve to temper your disappointment some if I reminded you that the past year had produced four students shot to death by national guardsmen and two huge musical counterculture figures dead by lifestyle? That all this came on the heels of Helter Skelter in LA? That the Manson Family was preceded by the murders two years earlier of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, which was preceded, in turn, by the murder of President Kennedy in Dallas, which still presents unanswered questions forty years later? All of this taking place before I could even say goodbye to fourteen. Would it matter to you?

If so, then you can understand the further shock when my mother hands me the newspaper on New Years Day. The previous evening my younger brother and I had spent a relatively quiet night at the ranch with nowhere to go, sneaking out prior to midnight to light off a few firecrackers to ring it in. All of our friends were ‘busy’ with their own ‘things’, so we had stayed home and whiled away the countdown together. My mother drew my attention to a short article about three inches in length, asking me if I knew the boy since it read that he attended our high school and was my age. I told her that I knew him and took the section of the paper she held before me so that I could read that Eddie was dead.....The article stated that he died from an accidental discharge from a shotgun while cleaning it.....When I returned to school, nobody wanted to talk about Eddie, or, at least, they would quickly attempt to change the subject. I did learn that his girlfriend had broken up with him shortly after Christmas and had spurned him by telling him that she was going out New Year’s Eve with another guy.....Fred, his best friend who was also in my gym class and lived in the same block, told me that he heard the commotion from the family and neighbors, so he snuck over to Eddie’s house. He knew that Eddie

would mess with his gun in the basement, so he looked through the basement windows until he found him. The right side of his head was missing, the gun was laying next to him with a cloth strip around his right foot and through the trigger guard of the gun. It seemed to me that very few of my peers considered his death accidental.

January, 1971 faded to February, 1971 with scarcely a whimper of protest from anyone, even from my own memory today. The dynamics of all my relationships with anyone and everyone were changing and I simply adopted survival mode, low-key, low profile, an attitude of “you’re not even worth my time to consider.” It was about this time, though, that the conversation at the dinner table one night revolved around the general discontent and violence in society and schools in particular. I asked my parents what they would think if I went to school one day and there were gangs of kids wandering around school randomly beating up kids and I decided to leave school to get away from all of that crap. Would that be a smart or foolish thing to do? My father then pronounced that he considered that a smart thing to do. But what if I had skipped school because of it and got caught the next day - that I was in big trouble. My dad then said that kids have a responsibility to attend school and schools have a responsibility to provide a safe environment to learn and when schools cannot meet their responsibility, then the kids’ responsibilities to the schools become null and void. I have to say that his remarks, with my mother’s concurrence, came as a mild surprise, but welcome none the less. It was now good to know that, should those many days of unexcused absence come to the light, the old man would be ready to defend me.

Two vacation days in February – a couple of presidents’ birthdays but not Groundhogs’ Day, my personal favorite – were breaks much appreciated, but winter’s stranglehold was always toughest during this month. February should be renamed National Depression Month. It’s, fortunately, the shortest month, a scant four weeks, which is followed by progressively milder weather – although Illinois has a tendency to be overcast and rainy during the early spring and that can be depressing, too. Mike had his birthday in February, his twenty-fourth, and I had mine in March, only a year removed from legal driving age. The previous summer I had commandeered both of my parent’s vehicles – at different times of course – and had driven at the highest speed, a hundred and fifteen miles per hour, that I still have yet to eclipse. I also had run a car off the highway that I had not seen coming up in the left lane on the interstate, so I had decided that my sneaky driving days were over and I stuck to that promise. Now I was fifteen and a little closer to manhood, yet, before March, 1971 yielded to April, 1971, a single day’s developments would dramatically change everything in my life.

That day started like any other – up late with Mom fixing me breakfast after taking Jeff to school, a shower, collecting my schoolwork, catching the bus, arriving at school, making my way to the music room corridor. It was when I made the turn at the hall leading to the music room corridor that the day began to be different, because Charlie was not where I expected him to be. When I asked where he was, one of the girls matter-of-factly replied that she didn’t think Charlie was going to be at school today. Jim added that he hadn’t seen Charlie get off his bus and one of the kids on that bus had said that Charlie was not at the stop where he normally caught the bus. As the day moved along, I heard from some people that knew Charlie but usually hung out with his brother, Mark, who was a year younger. They were all saying the same thing: the two had planned from the night before to run away. That information also changed my life dramatically; my best friend and I were certainly doing more and more things separately, but, if it was true that they had run away, his failure to tell me – my having to hear it from friends of his brother – was deeply hurtful. How could you be best friends with someone and never confide such a life-changing plan? I couldn’t, so I took the “rumor” as just that, unbelievable, until Charlie’s mother called our house and spoke to my mother to ask her if she would ask me if I knew where her sons had gone. It dawned on me that I knew why he hadn’t told me anything; he had anticipated his mother’s actions and my probable reaction. Since I had a tendency to refuse to lie to cover for somebody else, I would surely have told something, probably everything I knew, so he told me nothing. Still, I expected they would turn up soon, and it would be just like old times. Any day now.

– *from Act Four Staggering Through Last Rites, Part Two, pages 31-33*

Just like that we were back to old times. I rode my bike over to his house, where I found Charlie’s Mom and Les cordial, and Charlie being, well, Charlie. Charlie dominated the conversation, per usual, as he talked about what he did and where he went during his time away. He and Mark spent most of the time in Iowa in an attic with a bunch of young people in a house rented by some college age people who, apparently, sold dope for a living. He and Mark eventually made their way through Missouri and Kansas, where they split up. Mark headed further west and was in or near Seattle at one time. Despite all the regaling, the deepest impression I had when we left his house was how completely unapologetic Charlie seemed, and how accepting his Mom and Les

seemed. It was eerie.

Cool. My best bud was back, after we both had diverged in different directions, we were now back together again, just like old times. Well, not exactly. While we were usually together every day for the next couple weeks, Charlie, his Mom, and his Dad were negotiating. Those negotiations led to a phone call from Charlie; he just wanted to let me know that he was not attending Southeast High School next month, but instead would be attending school in Champaign. He was going to live with his Dad and he was packing up and leaving that day. He would give me a buzz with his new phone number later. See? Not exactly.

True to his word, Charlie called me a few days later. He asked, "What are you doing Saturday?"

"Nuthin'," I said. "I got nuthin' planned."

"You wanna go sailing with my Dad and me?"

"On what?"

"Dad's got a little fourteen-footer," Charlie explained. "It's fun, relaxing, you'll enjoy it."

"Where?"

"We've got a spot at the marina on Lake Decatur."

I groaned audibly.

"It's not bad," Charlie suggested, adding, for further persuasion, "It's better than Podunk, by far."

I wasn't in the mood to argue the merits of either, so I agreed to go. They were to drive from Champaign, pick me up and drive to Decatur, a total driving distance of about 130 miles before we even get to the boat.

Nevertheless, come Saturday morning, there they are pulling up in my driveway, right on time. Charlie's dad was at the wheel of an old Volvo, smiling and chiding like a maniac. I had known Charlie for five years but this boating trip was the first time I had ever seen his old man. I liked him right away. He had a constant sense of humor and the Irish gift of blarney; I could see which parent was most responsible for many of Charlie's character traits.

We drove straight away to Decatur but detoured south around the city until we reached the lake environs, driving around one of the inlets until we reached the marina. My groan when Charlie and I talked on the phone concerned my memory of Decatur from the few earlier trips there, and as we drove around the city with the car windows down, the reason was olfactory due to the old factory. The plant built on one end of the lake by the same owner who was the founder of the professional football team that eventually became the Chicago Bears simply spewed chemicals from its smokestacks that threw out a noticeable stench for miles downwind. I hated that smell but I have to admit that as the day wore on the stench became less pervasive; one just gets used to it.

After we parked the car we walked to the berth. It was a small sailboat, all wood, with one mast. Never having done much sailing since, you'll have to forgive me for my inability to remember some nautical terms, such as the name of the beam that runs perpendicular to the mast – can't remember it. That beam is where they tie the main sail for storage and Charlie's Dad hopped in to prepare the boat and sail for our little excursion. When it was ready he called for both of us to board, which we did, and I initially sat in the front. Charlie untied the ropes to the dock, pushed off and hopped in the boat; his dad steered the rudder to move the boat parallel to the waterway. Both maneuvered the beam and sail to catch the wind from the correct side and past the docks and out into the open lake we went. We steered clear of the local sailboat race, staying outside the course but watching it with fascination. Charlie's Dad knew many of the sailors and boats in the race, some of whom he obviously admired and some of whom he obviously didn't, with sometimes hilarious comments. This was also where I learned about a spinnaker, the second sail lifted at the bow after a turn to catch more tailwind to go faster. Still, I was left with the second dubious impression: the sheer number of small, dead fish floating on the surface of the lake. There were so many dead fish I wouldn't have wanted to count them all. Even so, we all enjoyed the afternoon and we did it again a couple weeks later.

A few weeks before school started for either of us, Charlie took a bus from Champaign to Podunk to spend the weekend at his Mother's house. He had called me during the week and we made plans to spend Saturday and most of Sunday together. Saturday morning, I called him and we decided that I would ride my bike to his house and we would take the bus into town and walk around. We eventually made our way to a pool hall on Fifth Street and played pool for about an hour and a half. We walked around some more, checked out a bookstore – Charlie bought a couple of magazines, but I just looked around – and walked through the library, went to the last department store left downtown – didn't buy anything – and visited the local 'head shop'. We caught the bus back to Reservoirtown and walked the couple blocks back to his house. His mother wanted him to eat with them so I rode my bike back home and ate with my folks. A little later Charlie's mother drove him to our house

and we goofed around for a while outside; we went back inside and played a game of hearts with Mike, pretty much destroying him, played a game of chess, which I lost, and we went to my bedroom to listen to some music and talk.

We jackjawed for a while when Charlie asked, “You think anybody’s gonna come in?”

It was after eleven o’clock at night, so I replied, “I don’t think so. It’s kinda late and the parents are getting ready for bed. Mike and Jeff wouldn’t want me for anything, so I wouldn’t expect anyone.”

Charlie plunges his right hand deep in the front pocket of his jeans and removes a baggie of chopped, green vegetable material. “I got some stuff, here,” he said, as he moved to his overnight bag he had brought, “and I thought I should roll one up and we’ll go outside and smoke it.”

“Cool, man,” I replied, with unexpected enthusiasm considering that I had never smoked pot before and hadn’t really wanted to.

Charlie removed a little box from his bag that contained a pack of rolling papers and some other items; he flipped the top of the box over, reached into the baggie and pinched some of the green vegetable material – marijuana – and spread it on the box top. Using the lid of the rolling papers he strained the marijuana with the box top tilted so that seeds and larger pieces would slide to the bottom and the smaller, smoother pieces would stay at the top. Once satisfied with the straining, he removed a paper and twirled it around the first three fingers of his left hand; with his right hand he used the lid of the rolling papers to scoop the strained marijuana and dump it in the twirled paper. He leveled the marijuana in the paper, held the paper with a hand at either end and spun it into a cigarette, quickly licking the glued side and running his fingers over the end to secure it. “Let’s go,” he said, standing up and walking to the door. Outside we went.

We walked to the very back of the yard and Charlie removed a pack of matches, put the cigarette between his lips, tore out a match, struck it and fired up the cigarette. The smell was distinctive, surprisingly sweet and thick; emitting a snorting noise to hold the smoke in his lungs, Charlie raised the smoking cylinder to me and I grasped it, put it to my lips and sucked the smoke into my lungs, immediately coughing. Charlie laughed, trying to control it in spurts, spewing smoke from his nostrils. With his body machinations, I started to laugh in spurts and spew smoke through my nostrils, too. We smoked the cigarette down to a stub, coughing in spurts and spewing smoke from our nostrils and mouths through the whole process. Charlie stamped the cigarette out in the ground, put the stub in his mouth and ate it – waste not, want not.

“Can you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“Feel that pot reaching your brain cells, the tetrahydrocannabinol?”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“No. Tetrahydrocannabinol. THC. The active ingredient in pot that causes pseudo-psychedelic reactions in the brain-”

“No pseudo-psychedelic reactions in my brain-”

“And enhanced sensory synaptic processing-”

“Nor enhanced sensory synaptic processing-”

“And a sense of ‘Wow, I can’t shut off my brain.’”

There was a brief pause as we both looked at each other. “Oh, yeah,” I said, and we both laughed. Once we gained control over our senses of humor, I observed, “I’m looking up at the stars and thinking how far away they are, some billions of light years away, and how some of them may not even exist anymore, having burned up or blown up in huge super-novas. We’re simply looking at a past that has no bearing on today or our future.”

“With that, consider how many civilizations have invested so much time in studying the stars, constellations, much of which may not have been in existence even back then.”

“The past is the future.”

“The future is the past.”

There was another pause. “What in the fuck are we talking about?”

“What are you asking me for?” protested Charlie. “You started it. I think you’re getting fucked up!”

“I think I *am* fucked up.”

Once again we erupted into uncontrollable laughter. With some difficulty, Charlie managed to say, “Did I mention that it also promotes euphoria?”

When I finally got enough control, I added, “More like goofiness.”

We laughed a lot that night and we were goofy beyond any acceptable convention. Everything was ex-

tremely funny. Thus my introduction to marijuana was sustained, inexplicable, virtually uncontrollable humor. I was now a full-fledged dope fiend. Isn't that funny?

– *from Act Five Is There Life After Your Friends Leave You?, pages 45-49*

“Somebody’s sweet sixteen,” I heard my mother sing out when she heard me stumble from my bedroom late in the morning on the Ides of March. I couldn’t help thinking just how sweet it would be...if I had my freakin’ driver’s license, but, *nooooo*, I was looking at several more weeks before I would even begin behind the wheel training. So today would be the same day like all the others before it – take the wonderful school bus with the wonderful school bus driver at the wheel and take the short way to school and the long way completely around the lake back home. How sweet it is!

We moved into April and celebrated Jeff’s birthday. When that became the past, we anticipated the next major event. We were going to London, Jack, for a week with a one-day diversion to Paris. It was going to be cool and I counted the days when we would board another charter and fly away from Podunk.

That day came in late April and we had our bags packed the night before because we would be leaving even earlier than the trip to Nassau. We would actually be taking off before the sun rose and, again, Mike would be staying at home. Just like last time, when we got to the airport, Dad was the travel organizer, keeping the tour agent honest. After the bags were loaded and the plane was checked, the tour agent announced it was time to board. We all got on the plane in our assigned seats, the plane rolled into position and off we went. Once we pierced the cloud layer, after a few minutes, we watched the sun rise above the horizon. We flew northeast, over Canada and Greenland, and about eight hours later, we set down in England.

Customs in London was more stringent and formal than in Nassau. We all had to get a passport and many of the group’s bags were searched, but it was all done very politely, very businesslike. Soon, we were out of the airport, in a taxi, and whisking through the London traffic to our hotel buttressing Buckingham Park and the princess’ palace. This time Jeff and I were staying in a room on the seventeenth floor with a third, Keith, who was Jeff’s age and lived in the same area of the reservoir. Both sets of parents were initially peeved that their rooms were not on the same floor and the hotel staff was very apologetic, but we convinced the parents, once the hotel confirmed that it would be hours and probably not until the next day when they could put all three rooms on the same floor, that we would be alright. We agreed that we wouldn’t leave the hotel without first coming to one of the parents’ rooms and they relented. Of course, as soon as we got to our room, it was party time. We’re free. Let’s party. Before we left England we broke both lamps in the room with a soccer ball. We were very sorry.

We scouted the park and the palace and interacted with the locals, while Keith’s parents bought him the infamous soccer ball. We made a day of it by grabbing a cab to take us to a restaurant for lunch, checking out Hyde Park, to dinner and back to the hotel. Most of the group took a tour up north to see castles and buildings, including the one where the architect built the columns two inches short of the ceiling to prove the point that you can design a ceiling structure that’s strong enough to hold up without columns every twenty feet. It rained most of the next day, Tuesday, so nobody really did much until the afternoon when everybody in the group was talking about the death of J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover, the icon of federal law enforcement, first and only director of the FBI, keeper of the files, died in his sleep. Some wondered if this was a sign that we would have ‘problems’ getting back into the country. I wondered which big, important person would die the next time I left the continent. I still haven’t left the continent since then, so all you big, important types can rest easy. I’ll give you a heads up when I do.

The following day most of us packed into some buses for a drive to the airport and the flight to Paris. Once on the ground, we boarded more buses to take a quick tour of Paris, including a drive through the Arc de Triomphe and Notre Dame, then to a section of Paris where we were to have lunch, exchange money, shop, be tourist-like, as though we weren’t already. The late lunch didn’t go off as well as the tour company had hoped – the restaurant wasn’t prepared and they didn’t expect as many, or so we were being led to believe. Dad just told the tour agent that nobody was going anywhere and the tour company needs to fix this little problem. It got fixed.

While the late lunch was being fixed, I set out to scope the neighborhood. Now that Hoover was dead somebody had to pick up the torch and develop their powers of observation. I rounded the corner and halfway up the block, leaning against a building flush to the alley, I spotted her, the Woman in the Light Blue Mini. I walked up to her and by her, glancing at her out of the corners of my eyes, and she smiled, so I smiled back. Quickly, her

gaze shot back up the walk and as I turned to look at her, she approached a man in conversation. He stopped briefly, shook his head slightly and walked away. Over the next hour or so I watched her approach other men, move to a different block, chat with some other fine-looking women dressed in a similar skimpy fashion, and walk back and forth down the block. Eventually, I was standing with the old man, occasionally glancing down the walk in front of the restaurant – we had just finished eating our late lunch – when I noticed she had moved to that side. One of the male group members stopped to talk to her, smiled while he shook his head in disbelief and walked back to us. When he got next to Dad, he told Dad to look down the street to the Woman in the Light Blue Mini, because Dad wouldn't believe what she asked him.

“She wanted to take you to her room, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, for a little intercourse, and we're not talking about talking,” he finished. Then he looked at me and asked, “Say, how did you know that? Did she proposition you, too?”

“No,” I replied, in disbelief that anyone would ask that. “I'm sure she knows I'm too young and don't have any money.” I paused and turned around in the other direction, and added, “But she has friends, like that one there against the wall.” I pointed to an attractive woman at the other end of the block, leaning against the wall across the street wearing a black dress. “And the one down there in white.” I pointed down the walk to the corner where another attractive woman wearing white shorts paraded back and forth. “And there's probably two or three on the other side of the block, too. At one time, there was six of them standing around talking until they split up again.”

Dad looked at me incredulously as he asked, “So you've known all along that they were prostitutes?”

“I got eyes. I see things and I love looking at women. When I see a woman hanging around, walking but not going anywhere, greeting every man that walks by, ignoring all the other women when they walk by, what else could she be? She's not sellin' athletic supporters.”

Everybody that was in earshot got a good laugh from that one. I walked away listening to some of the guys talking further about the women and me, but I joined up with Jeff and some of the other teenagers and we shot the shit until it was time to go. Back we went to the airport, back we went to London, and back we went to the hotel. The rest of our stay was uneventful, just seeing the sights and portraying the polite tourist.

On the flight back we stopped at the Gateway to the U.S. for all charter flights, Bangor, Maine. If you've been on a charter flying back from Europe, you know what I'm talking about, but for those of you who don't, it truly *is* the gateway. Almost every charter flight to the U.S. from the northern hemisphere crossing the Atlantic is going to stop in Bangor, Maine, for customs inspection. The international airport where the charters land is home to a wing of the U.S. Air Force and is closed to normal, commercial airline flights; it's strictly a military base combined with a customs facility for charters. We waited for an hour in its huge hangar-like building as everyone and everything was inspected. Finally, we were turned loose and we flew back to Podunk without further incident, although it just didn't seem the same with Hoover gone. Who could replace the vacuum cleaner of the Feds, anyway?

– *from Act Six They Call Me the Working Man, pages 60-63*

Back at school the English teacher assigned the term paper that she had promised we would have to write. We had only a handful of choices, although she did conduct a discussion of possible topics and added a couple of those suggestions. The paper was to be between ten and fifteen pages and we had to follow the standards of research papers with proper reference citations. My topic was an examination of the history and evolution of black American authors and their works. The next step was to gather research material, but I wouldn't have to do it right away. Hey, I had five weeks. No sweat.

At the store we had a new sacker. I was acquainted with Kerry from previous gym classes together and remembered him as a fairly easy-going, affable type. After working with him over the next couple weeks, that earlier impression proved to be correct in this new situation, also. Only later would I realize how much this event would evolve into the catalyst that it would eventually become. Before that realization, I soon learned how much his family knew my family and the reverse. Kerry was cool and we liked each other and started looking for the other at school, too.

Oil was dominating the scene and the dollar. The days of gas wars and twenty-five cents a gallon were over. The fledgling Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries was flexing its newfound muscles by cooperating on limiting oil production; while the participating countries did not represent a majority of the world's total production, their cooperation sent oil, and consequently gasoline, prices soaring. Long before school would let

out for summer the price of gas in Podunk would see seventy-five cents a gallon. Our social studies teacher invited the owner of the station at the Fifth Street curve – one of the discounters that had been springing up over the last few years – who simply confirmed what most of us suspected; of the forty-six cents a gallon raise in his price in the last two months, forty-three went to the oil company, two to the state and he got one. The most impressive demonstration was his ‘subsidiary chart’ of one of the major oil companies, which was writing about a quarter-inch in height spread over a roll of paper that stretched over fifty feet in length. The list of foreign companies, especially those based in OPEC nations, was especially damning. The previous year, food – most prominently meat and dairy products – prices had nearly doubled and now gas prices were already tripling. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the emerging middle class in America, legacy of World War II, is squeezed hard. Can you say “Fuck the little guy?”

My English teacher had a couple of books that I could borrow for research on my paper; I asked for them and she gave them to me but I could keep them only for two days, even though my paper was the only one that would be submitted under the topic covered by her books. As things turned out, the books were compilations of various stories concerning different subjects and I didn’t have enough time to go over them and take notes with the proper citations. Before I turned them in, though, I went to the city library and found three or four books, and two of them had the same stories from the same authors but in different compilations. I kept the notes I already had but changed the citations to agree with the new books so I could keep everything consistent. I could keep these books for two weeks and renew for another two weeks if I wished. It was a better deal for me but a fateful decision nevertheless.

I was behind in getting started and moving through the term paper – it was the first extensive term paper I had had to write in my educational career – but the last two weeks I worked hard on it every night. The hardest part was actually putting together a theme to hold the paper together in order to reach a conclusion that satisfied me, but I did it, leading the reader to understand that the price for outspokenness as a black person in America in the mid-twentieth century, by being published, was an early death or exile, self-imposed or otherwise. The second hardest part was drafting the citations, ibids and opaits according to the writing guidelines and fitting them at the end of every page where they appeared. I never completed a rough draft; instead, I would write sections or paragraphs in longhand. When I was ready to commit a section to the typewriter, I would start up, sometimes making changes on the fly, but typing until the section was complete. I followed that pattern all the way to the last day and finished it that night. I was very pleased with it and was quite confident of the outcome.

Grades would not be returned for two weeks so that the teacher would have enough time to read each submission and properly contemplate each student’s accomplishments or lack thereof. We moved on and forgot all about it. The day finally came, though, when she carried in the stack of graded papers and passed them out. It was then I learned how that fateful decision had come back to haunt me. My teacher had written a big “D” on the front of my paper and in a paragraph composed in red ink accused me of plagiarism and improper reference citations, because I had clearly copied references from her books but they were not listed in my citations. It didn’t matter that the authors cited were the same; the references were *not* from *her* books, so I must have improperly copied them.

There’s a lesson to be learned from this and I think I know what it is: don’t borrow shit from your teachers. If a teacher offers you something, politely ask, “Is this mine to keep?” If the answer is a negative one, politely hand it back and politely, but firmly, state, “I can get my own. Thank you.” It’s a lesson you may apply in any situation in life. Don’t let anyone set unreasonable expectations simply because they’re “doing you a favor.” Decline the favor politely, but firmly, by telling them to fuck off. Be sure to be polite, though. You wouldn’t want anyone to mistakenly think you’re an ungrateful shit, now would you?

– *from Act Seven The Herald of Op. Cit and Ibid, pages 79-81*

I ran into Kerry in the gym as we were both heading to the parking lot after school. We shot the shit as we walked together to the gym doors and out into the yard between the gym and parking lot. Kerry stopped, turned toward me, and asked in a low tone, “You smoke pot?”

Smiling as I looked him straight in the eyes, I responded, “Thought you’d never ask.”

He started walking again, quickly admonishing me, “Come on.”

As we passed cars in the lot another guy started walking toward us from a row beyond and I thought I heard him say, “What the hell took you so long?”

Kerry shouted to him, “You just can’t wait for anything, can you?”

The guy said, "It's bad enough I have to come here every day. When that bell rings, I'm outta here."

Kerry laughed – that was a tendency of his – and when we got close to the other guy, Kerry introduced us and that was the first time I met Kent. We walked to Kerry's car, got in with me in the back, and we left school. We drove out around the lake and Kent pulled down the glove compartment and retrieved a couple joints. We smoked one as we drove, talking about anything that came into our minds, though as the tetrahydrocannabinol hit my brain I became more quiet. When we reached Center Park, Kerry pulled into the drive and we tooled around the park, firing up the second joint. While we cruised Kent expressed the desire to get a job – every teenager needs money – and I told him that the store was looking for more stock clerks and he should apply. Kerry agreed that it was a good idea and Kent ought to do it. A week later he went into the store, filled out an application, interviewed with Leroy, and started working at the store with us.

Let me explain a little about Kent. It wasn't the first time I had seen him. We had been going to the same school since seventh grade; we had never been in the same class before and we had only exchanged the usual "Hey" and "How's it going?" That's not unusual when you go to a school with many hundreds or even thousands of kids in attendance.

A couple weeks later, Kerry and I are outside after school chatting when Kent strolls up. In a conspiratorial tone, he confides, "I heard from two different people, so it's on. Tomorrow is senior skip day."

"I heard the same thing," Kerry agreed.

"I didn't hear shit," I added.

Kent looked over to me, smiled, and said, "Nobody's gonna tell you 'cause you'll turn 'em in."

"That's bullshit and you know it!" I protested.

"Gotcha," Kent and Kerry both said at the exact same time.

"Alright, alright," I said, calming down and smiling with them. I added, "So let's make a plan. What are we gonna do tomorrow?"

Kerry spoke up. "We should all meet in the parking lot before school, ask what's goin' on, where the parties are, and decide where we want to go. How's that sound?"

Kent had been looking back at the gym doors when he suddenly said, "There's Jeff."

Kerry and I glanced at the doors and spotted Jeff strolling toward us; we looked back to each other. "We should come to school first," I agreed, adding, "That's the smart thing to do. We'll be sure that it's still on and we'll get the latest on where things are cookin'."

"Yeah," Kerry said, "that's what I was thinkin'."

When Jeff was close enough to talk in a plain voice, without regard to the many who could overhear, he asked, "So, are we skippin' school with the seniors tomorrow?"

Kent chuckled, I lifted my eyebrows, and Kerry shushed him. Jeff stepped up to us and dismissed Kerry's concerns with a slightly lower tone, saying, "Like, people are going to be surprised that we're not in school tomorrow." Jeff was another of the old buds with Kerry and Kent and the three of them had befriended me and accepted me in a relatively short time. Now we were all going to skip school and party. We agreed to meet in the school parking lot the next morning and finalize our plans based on what we could find out from other kids.

The following morning the four of us gathered in the lot and exchanged what information we had managed to gather. We discussed our options and decided to drive out to the lake to East Cotton Hill Park, where we had heard from more than one source the seniors were going to meet for the big senior skip day bash. We slipped into Kent's big blue bomber of an Impala and drove out to the lake and our eventual destination. Minutes out of the parking lot, Jeff pulled out some stash and rolling papers and rolled a joint. He fired it up and passed it to Kerry in the front seat and we all were getting high before we even got to the lake. As we started driving the winding road around the lake, we noticed a few cars that acquaintances at school drove. They sure looked familiar. When we drove the long straight next to the golf course, a huge line of cars came around the turn heading toward us, many of them honking their horns and we recognized a lot of the cars and their occupants. Something's up.

The cars kept coming at us as we reached the turn into Center Park and noticed that some of the cars were turning into the park, so we turned into the park and pulled up next to some of the stopped cars with kids gathered around talking. While we were driving and schoolkids' cars passed us, we thought we heard them say that the cops had busted the park and to turn around. A friend of Jeff's came over – none of us even got out of the car – and confirmed it.

“What the hell’s goin’ on?” Jeff asked him.

“Man, you should’ve seen it,” Jeff’s friend said, excitedly, as he leaned into Kent’s car and continually glanced from one of us to the next. “There’s a couple hundred of us out there already. We got beer and pot and more and we’re all partyin’ an’ all of a sudden about six cop cars from the state police come from one direction and about six cop cars from the county come from the other direction and pull into the park and block it off and start arresting everybody they can get ahold of. They didn’t even have their sirens on, they just roared right in, and when I saw them scream into the park I just took off across the park and ran into the woods, climbed some fences, got out on the road and flagged those guys down.” He pointed back to the car he had walked from. “Told ‘em, ‘You cats better turn this mother around unless you’re bent on runnin’ into some pigs.’ They let me bum a ride here after they turned around.” He slapped his right hand on the door through the window opening and added, “Shoulda been there, man, it was like precision. The pigs knew what was goin’ on and had it all planned.”

Kent spotted another guy that he knew, shouted out his name and asked what happened. The guy walked over and told us that he and his friends had been at the park when the police busted the party but they had been allowed to leave, along with most everybody else. They searched all the cars and were looking mostly for drugs but confiscated any alcohol and arrested anybody who resisted or had drugs, including pot. The police took their beer but they had ditched their pot when they saw the police cars. When we asked him how many got arrested he said he thought it was about ten but the cops hadn’t finished searching all the cars and kids when they left. He asked if we had any pot since they had to dump theirs and Kerry put enough for a joint in the plastic wrapper of a cigarette pack and handed it to him.

The four of us began discussing our options, what we should do and where we should go. What we should do was easy; we were going to party and if we did anything else that was fine but partying was topmost. We soon agreed that hanging out at a public park was unwise; the police seemed to know that it was senior skip day and it occurred to us that they would probably be more interested than normal when they spotted any group of young people. I suggested that I knew where we could go and never be seen, where we would have privacy to drink beer and smoke pot; all we needed was the beer.

“Don’t worry about the beer,” Kent volunteered, “I’ve got that covered.”

Kent started up the bomber and we pulled away from the rest of the group, saying our goodbyes but not revealing where we were headed. We passed through the rest of Center Park, exiting the west end near the beach house, crossing the Vachel Lindsay bridge, passing a city police car coming the other direction. The officer looked at us suspiciously but we ignored him and Kent drove slowly around the lake while we watched behind us for the cop but he obviously decided not to chase us. We got back to Reservoirtown and to Stevenson Drive and Kent pulled into the small parking lot of an even smaller liquor store. In he walked and two minutes later he emerged carrying two six-packs of Busch beer (the beer companies did not package twelve-packs yet and, in fact, they only delivered cases consisting of four six-packs, with each can of a six-pack connected inside a plastic ring and each can with a removable tab). We wondered how we would keep the beer cold – it was a nice warm day for March – but we weren’t too concerned.

We drove to the party spot, of all places, the little pond where we used to ‘shoot the tube’. Kent drove the bomber all the way in and turned it into the grass and bush where it couldn’t be seen from the road. Out we all climbed from the car, around the pond, up the path to the railroad tracks, and down the path to the stream on the other side. Kerry and Jeff tested the water and deemed it chilly enough to keep the beer cold, so we all grabbed a beer, popped off the top and dropped them inside the beer—people supposedly swallowed the tops when putting them inside the beer can and that’s why the tops are not removable now—then put the rest of the beer in the water of the stream about ten feet away from the drain opening where the stream turned ninety degrees and the current was light. We smoked a few joints over the next several hours, drank all the beer, talked and laughed and wandered around the ‘Tub’ and just passed the time away without a care.

– *from Act Eight Senator, I Cannot Recall That At This Time, pages 83-87*

Mercifully, the end of August, 1973, marked the start of the final year, the senior year, of high school with: more math, more science, more gym, more social studies – civic studies, or government, for the first semester – and more English, this time with Mrs. K again, ready for round two. It had seemed a long ride, with bumps and bruises of setbacks and depression laced with satisfaction and reasonable accomplishment, but the journey had an end in sight. I had earned a composite score of 29 on the ACT and my enrollment at the University of Illinois was already assured. It almost seemed like the year might simply require ‘going though the mo-

tions’.

One Friday night shortly after school had started, Mike and I were working the late shift as the only clerks in the store after ten o’clock. I was working from six to eleven and Mike would be closing the store at twelve with the manager, Marvin. Marvin had transferred several months before and had the proverbial burr up his ass for me ever since he had arrived. He was short at about five feet and two inches and he wasn’t muscular but he wasn’t fat, either; he just fancied himself the equivalent of a grocery store drill sergeant, but for what reason I have no clue. I don’t think he was in the military. At his height, what branch would want him? What was so irritating about him in my case was his propensity to bark orders at me to perform some duty that I had just completed or was in the process of fulfilling. I suppose what irritated him about me was that I told him that it was already done or that I was doing it instead of just saying some inane, mindless, pointless, automatic answer like “Yessir!” It wasn’t just me who found him irritating since most everybody in the store complained about him; he had a very bad habit, as a manager, to berate you in public and praise you, if ever, in private. Ever had one of those managers? Take my advice and work with your fellow employees to get that kind of manager fired, laid-off or transferred, or you need to find another job. The worthy managers praise in public and criticize in private; the managers that do the reverse will sink a company faster than the Titanic.

The night was pretty normal. It wasn’t especially busy and it wasn’t dead, either. Mike and I kept everything under control along with the others, although I was senior man when I walked in at six. I flirted with some girls from school who were from the junior class that was just starting the early shift and that I hadn’t seen at school in a couple years – and were filling out quite nicely, I should say – and who also were friends with Cindy, one of the new checkers that had started a few months ago and was the sister of Rick, who was the number two man in produce and had worked at the store for several years. It was just a normal night, no big deal. When eleven o’clock rolled around, I punched out along with one of the other checkers. I walked toward the exit doors at the front but looked down the dairy aisle and decided to wait for Mike to come out of the cooler with his load of dairy; when he pushed the dolly carrying the crates of products and reached the aisle, I shouted to him that I would see him the next time, and I walked to the exit door, stepped through the automatic door after it opened, and glanced both ways but didn’t notice anyone or anything as I moved to my mom’s car in the back row. I unlocked the driver door, opened it, started the engine, looked behind me, backed from the parking space until I was clear, shifted the transmission to drive, and drove home through Reservoirtown. Ten minutes after I left the store, all those employees who may have had any problem with Marvin no longer had such, because Marvin got shot.

It was a robbery that didn’t quite go as planned for the robbers, in this case, at least two. First, the phone in the office rang and Marvin answered it. While the voice on the other end told him that a man wearing a ski mask would approach the office, in walked the man in the ski mask, and he proceeded right to the office window. The voice on the phone advised Marvin that he should take the money out of the safe, put it in a bag, come out of the office and give the ski mask man the bag and no one will get hurt. The voice also advised Marvin that the ski mask man was carrying a gun and was prepared to use it if he didn’t follow the voice’s advice. With the ski mask man watching, Marvin took the money out of the safe, put it in a bag and told the ski mask man that he was coming out of the office. He opened the office door and the ski mask man stepped away from the window, the gun now visible in his hand, so he could watch Marvin come out of the office. Marvin stepped carefully to the ski mask man until he motioned with the gun that he was close enough and hand him the money. Marvin stretched his right arm forward, handing the bag to the ski mask man, but in a moment of insane bravado, Marvin lunged forward and grabbed the gun, trying to wrest it from the ski mask man’s grip. For a few seconds they wrestled for control of the gun until the ski mask man simply pointed it at Marvin’s left leg and pulled the trigger. Marvin fell in a bleeding heap, the ski mask man ran out of the store waving the gun at anyone he spotted, carrying the bag of money like a football in his left arm, and the three or four other people still in the store just freaked. Mike had to get the office keys from Marvin so he could get to the phone and call the police while one of the checkers wrapped his leg with a towel to try to control the bleeding.

The owner spent every day the next week at the store reminding everyone what they should do during a robbery. “Please, just do what they tell you and give them the money. Don’t try to be a hero.” Later, when it was just the two of us, I reminded the owner that Marvin was Mr. GungHo, so the whole event didn’t surprise me. The owner confided, “The robbers got away with about twenty-five hundred dollars. My insurance carries a two thousand dollar deductible, so, in an attempt to save me two thousand dollars in deductibles, I’ll now have to spend tens of thousands for medical bills.” He didn’t sound very happy.

I met D'Ann in my civics class, although I had been acquainted with her for years. There was a spirited discussion during one class, to which I contributed mightily, and she liked my position and approached me as we left the room. We chatted for a few minutes on the way to our next class and continued the pattern for the next week or so. I thought she was interested in me and I asked her out and she acquiesced. We went to see the movie *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* with Paul Newman in the lead role. I liked it, she said she liked it, and, being the nervous neophyte that I was, I asked what she wanted to do next. She was a little tight and tense – at least that was what I sensed – but she asked if I wanted to take her home, come inside and meet her family. I had been wondering why a girl like D'Ann - who was just as tall as I was, well-endowed upstairs, thin waist, great butt, attractive face with dimples in her cheeks when she smiled, nicely styled brunette hair but nothing fancy – didn't have guys after her much and didn't seem to have any close girlfriends. When we got to her house and I met her father, that's when I figured it out. Her dad was like Marvin on speed and twice as loud, but almost exactly the same size. Being in her family, or just being close to them, would be like a permanent boot camp. She escorted me to the porch and I awkwardly kissed her and left about a half-hour after I got there. That was our first and last date.

I came out to Mom's car after school one day, started it up, backed up and turned, then shifted it to the Drive position and started limping out of the parking lot. I tried the other positions of the automatic transmission, and had some success in acceleration, but I still limped all the way back home. I told Mom about it and we called Les' service station – Les used to live next door to my mother's parents so he did a lot of car service for us for many years – and they came to tow it to the shop and repair it. When my brother got home from school, he wondered where the car was. Somehow, from this point to some point after Dad got home, my brother admitted that he knew what happened to the car. He was getting to school long before his classes started, while I was still in class. He would bring the extra set of keys and, usually, he, Roger, and maybe some others, would get in the car and go joyriding. While he was driving the car, Jeff would play 'racedriver' and shift to Low and Low2 and then to Drive and back and forth like a stupid idiot. He was always careful, though, to park the car in the exact same spot where I had originally parked it so that I would never know it had been driven. I don't know the exact sequence of events that led to Jeff's confession, but I suspect that Dad asked Les what was wrong with the car and how it could have gotten like that and Les told him it was the transmission and the most likely activity for that kind of damage was constant shifting. I think that because the first thing Dad asked me when he got home was if I shifted the transmission while I was driving. I said, "No. Why would I do that? It's an automatic. You put it in Drive and drive." He said, "That's what I thought." When Jeff admitted to me the little devious activity that he had been pursuing for months, I asked, "Just for the record, can we depend on you to be a stupid idiot or do you have even worse surprises in store for us?" As for his buddy, Roger, stay tuned, you'll read more about him later.

I had known Dana for about six years. Her brother had been in the Most Academically Able class a year ahead of me and she had been in the one behind me. She was always nice – and I mean that in the sense that she was not wild and crazy – but I never had much interaction with her as we were going through school. That was due more to our being of different ages than anything else, although if she had extracurricular activities, I didn't know about them and I certainly was not that interested in her to discover what they were.

She started coming into the store, ostensibly to visit her friend, Cindy. She also was friends with Kim, the girl in Dana's class that I liked to call, the Amazon. Kim was tall, blond, muscular, athletic, the daughter of a former major league baseball player. Kim was also somewhat rebellious, since all the rest of her family went to the Catholic schools, but she refused and attended Southeast High School. Kim and I had seen each other around for quite a while and she always treated me with respect; we liked to joke around and flirt harmlessly, and she actually laughed at my jokes. All three, it seems, were long-time friends, so it didn't surprise me when they would show up at the store and chat and laugh and flirt and try to embarrass each other and me. As things progressed, I began feeling attracted to Dana. She had a good sense of humor, both giving and taking, she was naturally attractive as she didn't overdo the makeup, and she was making a conscious effort to touch me more and more. All other things being equal, when a girl or woman consciously touches a man frequently, she likes and is attracted to that man. At least in my experience I have found this to be a true observation.

We would all meet at the park frequently, play softball, throw the Frisbee (which was just starting to get popular and decently made), just generally have fun. To be discreet, the guys would go off and smoke pot away from the girls, but we were pretty sure they knew what was going on. Dana and I never really went on a date but we did a lot of things together, even going to her house with her parents gone so we could neck. That night was

fun – I got my first French kiss – but since I didn't have the experience or confidence, I didn't feel comfortable moving from kissing to fondling to removing clothes to fucking. Okay, I feared rejection. Are you happy?

– *from Act Nine One More Year and This Too Shall Pass, pages 99-103*

Kerry opened the door, stepped inside, and immediately smiled and laughed, "What's up?" We all slapped hands and Kent advised him that he knew where the beer was, and Kerry stepped to the frig, opened it and pulled out a beer and closed the frig. Popping it open he asked, "So what's on the scope tonight?"

"You mean you're not hangin' with Patti?" Kent teased him.

Kerry laughed and said, "No, she's going to a party with some of her girlfriends from school and it's kinda run by the parents and the school. You know, no alcohol, no drugs, no excitement."

"Well, we've got alcohol, thanks to Kent," I said, and lifted my beer to toast the host, adding, "and speaking of drugs..."

"Well, I just happen to have," Kerry started, shifting in his chair and plunging his right hand into his pants pocket, "a little bit of this weed, here." With that small fanfare, and Kent telling him to "spin one", Kerry pulled out a good size bag, opened it and pinched a finger full of the crushed leaf and spread it on the kitchen table. From another pocket he retrieved a pack of rolling papers and yanked one of the papers from the pack. He took the cover and scooped up some leaf and poured it onto the paper. He scooped the rest after removing any larger pieces or stems and poured that onto the paper, too. He spread the leaf evenly as he lifted the end and flipped it over the leaf, spun it quickly against the table to the glue end, lifted it to his lips and licked it like an envelope. He ran his fingers over it and showed it to us.

"Let's go," Kent said and stood up, moving to the back door. He opened it and the three of us went outside.

It was cold, even in the afternoon, barely into the twenties. Over the week that I was away it had never really gotten above freezing and many of the less-used roads had the snow cover beaten down to ice, which, of course, is a much worse driving condition than snow. Keeping all this in mind, we discussed what we would do or go that night while we smoked the joint. One of us – I can't remember which of us – thought that Tim, a guy from school that we were all familiar with but didn't really hang out with, was having a party at his house somewhere around the lake. Since he was more associated with the jocks and rich kids, we figured there would probably be lots of girls, alcohol, and guys throwing up. Perfect. Let's go there. How do we find it? We know, sort of, where it is, but if there's really a party, there's going to be a lot of cars parked everywhere. Let's crash it.

"How are we going to get in, in case somebody gives a hassle about it?" I asked, fairly naïve about these sorts of things.

Kent had it all figured out. "We'll just tell them Sandy invited us," he said, showing a rather devious smile, adding, "or, actually, Sandy invited you, and you invited us."

"I see how this works," I said, feigning disappointment, while Kerry laughed.

With that exchange, the plot was hatched. We would find Tim's party, we would park at Tim's party, we would gain entry through any devious method imaginable, and we would party at Tim's party. We would also try to find Jeff to tell him about our plot, but that would eventually fail; despite Kent and Kerry's efforts to contact some of his friends and acquaintances, nobody knew where Jeff could be found and all messages we left to contact us were ignored.

We spent the rest of the afternoon at Kent's house drinking, smoking, watching his sister prepare for her night out, get picked up and leave for the night. Kerry and I also left soon after to have dinner with our families and Kent fixed something for himself, but both of us were back at Kent's house in short order. Killing time we watched TV and drank more beer and smoked another 'doobie'. At about ten that night, we piled in Mom's car and drove out to the lake to find Tim's party.

We drove out West Reservoir Drive, through Center Park, on to East Reservoir Drive and heading for Pawnee Road. Kerry thought Tim's house was in one of the little subdivisions opposite the lake, so we decided to pull into each one until we found a lot of cars parked in front of houses. The first one we pulled into had a number of cars parked around a corner at the second, and last, road intersecting the road we turned onto. We slowed down and turned on the road and saw some young people milling before the second house on the right. Kerry recognized some of the kids and figured this was it, so I parked the car in an opening on the right.

We sat in the car for a few minutes watching the action and Kent and Kerry both fired up a cigarette. Kent didn't like the idea of hanging out with rich, smart people – one of his phobias – and Kerry and I spent the

time convincing him that it would be fun. "Think of it, Kent," Kerry tried to convince him, "we're going to crash a rich kid's New Years Eve party where we were definitely not invited. What could be cooler than that?" They finished their cigarettes and I opened the driver door and stepped out and told them to "Come on." They got out and followed me.

Before I even got up to the door, several acquaintances from school saw me, and greeted me by the nickname many kids had adopted for me, which was a shorter version of my surname. There were other kids outside smoking cigarettes or just chatting with others smoking cigarettes, but as we got closer, it seemed like everybody told me to go inside, there was plenty to drink. I told them I brought a couple of friends, but I didn't have to introduce anybody since just about everybody knew everybody else, at least by name. Nobody ever said we were not invited, not one single challenge, and we went right in. Kent and Kerry went to find the beer, which consisted of three kegs stashed in a back bedroom with thirty or more people crowded around them. They were charging for cups but somehow both got cups for free and filled them with no problem; meanwhile, I made the rounds of the house, chatting and jiving with kids from school, most of them significantly drunk or stoned already. I had decided before we left that I wasn't going to drink alcohol, so when I stumbled into the kitchen I found some soft drinks in the refrigerator and settled for a ginger ale.

I found a spot to stand relatively out of the way in a little den area and Kent sauntered up a few minutes later, asking if I wanted a beer but I declined. "Can you believe all the girls here?" Kent asked, somewhat amazed at the sight.

"Doesn't it blow your mind how being rich and showing it off attracts so much pussy?" I yelled back because the music was deafeningly loud.

Kent just looked at me with a blank stare. "No, I'm not amazed," was all he said.

Kerry pushed his way to us and immediately started laughing. "You shoulda seen it!" he yelled and laughed some more. "Some guy was trying to get to the bathroom, but he didn't make it and ralphed right next to me, just creamed some girl." He had to stop again he was laughing so hard. "And the girl started freaking, screamin' an' everything, and some guy, I guess it was her boyfriend, was going to punch the guy who ralphed, but I stopped him, and the guy was passed out about two minutes later, without even cleanin' himself up, what a fuckin' trip!"

"Think he drove here?" I yelled to both.

"Think he's drivin' home?" yelled Kent.

"No fuckin' way!" Kerry yelled.

Dana passed by holding hands with some guy. We caught each other's gaze, but I turned away, and yelled at Kent, "That's the girl I was seeing for a while."

"Doesn't look like you'll be seeing her any more," he replied.

I turned to Kerry and yelled, "You guys got your beer. Let's go outside and smoke one o' them doobs you rolled." Kerry nodded and started to move through the room and I turned to yell at Kent, "Come on."

"Where are you goin'?" Kent yelled back.

"Time for the lieutenant," I yelled in response, using the code I came up with to refer to marijuana while in mixed company. I took it from a popular TV show at the time, *Columbo*, whose main character was Lieutenant Columbo.

Kent reached for Kerry and stopped him. "Finish your beer and I'll get us a couple more." Kerry gulped the rest of the beer in his cup and handed it to Kent, who veered off to the left while we headed to the right and out the front door.

Kerry didn't waste any time once we were outside and pulled out the joints that he had rolled at Kent's house before we left. I knew he couldn't wait to fire up a joint at a rich person's house out at the lake. He selected one, put the rest back in his pocket, fired it, drew a long inhale, and passed it to me. I drew the smoke deep into my lungs until they were full and held it, coughing lightly. I could hear somebody say that we shouldn't smoke that here, but the guy standing next to me asked if he could have a hit. I looked at Kerry and he nodded so I handed it to the guy and he inhaled off of it. He passed it back to me and I passed it to Kerry and we started the next round. Another guy asked if he could have a hit and he would roll one and share with us, so Kerry passed it to him, and around and around it went. When it was drawn for the last time, Kerry took the stub and put it in with the other joints.

Kent finally made it outside bearing the two cups of beer and immediately became pissed because we had smoked a joint without him. The second guy finished rolling one, fired it up and started passing it around.

That pacified Kent a little. The dope wasn't as good as Kerry's and pretty rough, but as soon as that one was gone, the other guys left to go back inside. Kent whispered something to Kerry and Kerry pulled out another joint and just the three of us smoked. When we went back inside I asked Kerry what Kent whispered to him.

"He said that guy's dope sucked and he wanted me to light up some good stuff, one of mine," Kerry replied.

"And what did you say?" I asked Kerry.

Kerry laughed and said, "I told him, next time, stick with us or get your own."

We took breaks like that a couple more times before midnight. Kent came back after another beer run and told me that the guy who had been holding hands with Dana had thrown up all over himself. "Your girlfriend was pretty shook up about it, because now she didn't have a ride home," he added.

"She's not my girlfriend," I protested.

"Whatever you say, little man," Kent teased.

"And fuck you, too," I replied and Kent and Kerry laughed.

When midnight struck, Kent kissed the girl that he had had been talking with for the last five minutes. A couple girls kissed me, saying, "Happy New Year." Even Kerry got kissed, but that was the highlight of the evening. There were very few people at the party who still had any kind of 'light' in their eyes; most were dull and drunk and some were downright sickly. Slowly, people started to file out and by one that morning we decided to hit the road.

Mom's car, however, had very bald back tires and the road in front of Tim's house was almost solid ice. When we tried to leave, I managed to get onto the road from the parking space, but I couldn't get any traction to make it up the slight hill in front of us. I tried backing away from the hill but managed to stop the car before hitting any of the parked cars when I realized that I was not going to make the turn without some serious driving maneuvers. We now blocked any access past us and some people were starting to get loud and pissy about it. One of the guys I knew from gym class came out and told me that I needed to move my car. I told him that I couldn't get up the hill so he offered to push me up the hill with his car. He pulled up behind me slowly until the bumpers touched, and as he pushed Mom's car with his, I gave the car enough gas without spinning the tires. We made it up near the top of the hill and the tires on Mom's car finally caught and pulled away from the car pushing us. As I started to slow to thank him, Kent told me to just keep going so we don't get stuck again. We made it back to Kent's house without further incident, laughing about all the strange things that had happened, and I dropped them off and drove home. The next morning, I told Mom we really needed to get her some new tires.

Back at work the following day, I had the misfortune to be teamed with Manager Pompador. Pompy was the managerial replacement for Marvin, transferring from one of the smaller stores a few months before, and what a replacement he was. In a single move we went from gung-ho to ass-ho. Granted, he was smarter and had more marketing sense than Marvin, but he was also blatantly egotistical and arrogant, too. You had to do it his way or no way. He started riding me the first day we met and rarely let up. His biggest peeve was not having the store 'properly faced'; facing, in retail, is moving product on the shelves to the front and stacking so that a cursory, superficial glance down an aisle gives the appearance of fully-stocked shelves. In Pompy's mind, facing was more important for me to do than keeping the dairy case stocked – just face it – or sacking to keep lines moving, helping a customer with the bags to the car, or rounding up the carts when they got low. Face it, just face it. I hope you're not drawing the impression that I considered Pompy very superficial. He had substance, and what little he had was stacked and faced every half-hour. I'm almost sure of it.

This day was just more of the same. He assigned an aisle for me to do and when it wasn't done as fast as he expected or spots weren't filled the way he wanted it, it was public reaming and I needed to take my break right now and think about it. Later, in the back he would walk in and softly plead his case, but he would not let me go until I 'agreed' with him. The biggest bitch I had with his methods was his insistence that we fill *all* spaces, even where we were out of stock, with stock that was next to it. I thought that was stupid. Customers got pissed off because they expected that the stock that was really non-existent was simply behind the 'faced' stock, so they'd spend precious time looking for something that was nowhere in the store and then raise holy hell. No argument here. The night crew would get pissed off because they would have to move all of the 'faced' stock *before* they could even fill the previously out-of-stock items; if they had to grab milk crates to haul away the excess 'faced' stock, you did not want to be the first clerk in the store that morning. I didn't mind it, though. "You're preachin' to the choir, guys," I'd say, adding, "and your bitchin' is misplaced. But, you guys *know* who you need to bitch at." That was always as far as it would go.

– from Act Ten *Excuse Me While I Bail On Your Sorry Ass*, pages 114-119

I'm free [short musical interlude courtesy of the Who's *Tommy*] I'm free! Yet the questions remained: free to do *what*? Free to *be* what? Free to work 9 to 5 under the immediate direction – whim? – of an insecure power maniac who's been promoted one level beyond incompetence? Fuck that! Free to be unleashed and tethered to no one or no thing with no responsibility to anyone or anything, but with little access to funds and no real method of keeping up such a lifestyle? Fuck that, too! Free to pursue investigation of a higher education, in liberal arts studying sociology, to see if there really *is* a branch of human learning that can capture my imagination, my desires, my dreams? Perhaps. Or free to drink, do drugs, get wasted, goof off, sleep late, stay out late, and generally harm no one but maybe myself? Yeah, well, you got me there. I wanted to be that kind of free, at least for the next three months, and that's what I did. My first full day of newfound freedom, Saturday, after picking up my diploma Friday, started late, almost noon. I could put a check next to 'sleep late'.

....

The next week Charlie flew into town and we immediately got together. Suddenly I was at his mother's house for the first time in three years, and it was a completely different place. Charlie had a full-time job and it must have made an impact on his mother and Les, his stepfather, because they both treated him – and me by extension – like real adults, equals in fact. We had real conversations under properly reserved and respectful proceedings; just four years before, we were kids, juveniles, persons virtually unable to make any informed, valuable or thoughtful decision. The transformation of our respective positions in our families was not lost on Charlie; he was as amazed as I was, considering that we truly couldn't identify what had changed in ourselves other than a modest increase in age. To further reflect on this odd change in family life, we went to my house and cracked open a few beers and fired up some reefers.

Charlie was in town for the week but we didn't see each other every day. He hooked up with some of his other friends that were still in the area and I respected that; he made it easier by calling me early every day to either see what I had planned or tell me what he had planned. We went out to the park a few times to toss the Frisbee and he showed me some different throws, such as the two-finger toss, thrown with the first two fingers of your hand under the Frisbee and the middle finger providing most of the control; the reverse sweep, which is thrown with the hand over the Frisbee and the thumb under it, in a sweeping, stiff-armed motion from back to forward; and my personal favorite, the thumb toss, which is thrown with the thumb under the Frisbee and the fingers holding the edge tightly, with a slight tilt downward on the outer edge and a flick of the wrist and thumb. Over the years I've practiced the thumb toss so much that I can throw it with little effort, with great accuracy and with so much spin over all the other tosses that most people misjudge it and drop it or have it hit them with surprising force. We even spent an afternoon and evening with the rest of the new gang and everyone was on their best behavior but for most of the week Charlie and the new gang remained apart.

Charlie and I talked about the Vietnam war, in the context now of possibly being drafted and having to serve or make some other decision. We were both eighteen and legally required to register for the draft, so we decided to go to the local office of the Selective Service and register. It was painless, official, and took only a few minutes, but we were now legal; they couldn't come after us for failing to register. We would have to wait a few months to see what else would happen. Before most states created lotteries, there was a national lottery for the draft, which assigned a number to each birth date of the year; the lower the number for your birth date, the more likely you would be drafted – not as good as winning one hundred million dollars, is it? When the lottery numbers were finally announced months later, my number was 352. I figured if *I got drafted*, everybody was going. At the time no one knew what would happen in Vietnam; the conflict had dragged on for so long, the United States military and the corrupt officials from the south had hung on for so many years, it could go like that for six months or five years. Who knew?

....

"You gotta give it some gas as you let out the clutch, man" Kerry laughed.

"I know that!" Kent snapped back.

I was on the right side of the bike, so I stepped over and twisted the kick pedal out. Kent told me to get

away, but I just laughed and told him I was getting the kick pedal ready. Kerry told Kent to hold the clutch in, but the first kicks resulted in the engine firing, the bike lurching and dying, and Kent cursing. Kerry was almost going to take it away from him, when Kent held the clutch in, kicked it and it fired up, and he slowly let the clutch out while revving the throttle. When the clutch engaged the bike lifted up and Kent almost freaked, but he lowered the throttle, turned the bike, and slowly headed down the drive and out to the road. We were yelling at him to shift gears and we could hear the engine slow, and gear changing missing, then hitting, and finally we didn't hear the engine at all.

"Think he'll be riding or pushing it back?" I asked rhetorically.

"Well, I hope so," laughed Kerry, "because I'm thinking we might have to go out to find him and carry him back."

We all chuckled at the thought of that. "Here, Kent got you a beer," I told Kerry, picking up an unopened beer in the lawn and handing it to Kerry. "Let's go over by those trees and smoke some lieutenant."

"Let's go," agreed Kerry, and we went, Ed bringing up the rear. We smoked another pipe full of pot, walked back to the drive and waited about another five minutes and Kent returned, still riding the bike. Kerry came over and squeezed the clutch when Kent seemed to have a little trouble putting it in neutral; after Kent dismounted, Kerry clicked the shift lever into neutral and held it for Ed to get on. Ed listened to Kerry's advice, put it in gear and slowly eased away, until he had turned to the road, when he twisted the throttle for more gas, shifted, hit the road and the sound of the motorcycle rumbling faded away.

After Ed returned, it was my turn. Ed didn't try to put it in neutral, so I squeezed the clutch as I mounted the bike. Kerry started to tell me about it, but I rattled off all the items, one by one, pointing to each one as I said the name, then I finished with, "That's the front tire and that's the back tire. Think I should check the air pressure?"

"Get out of here," Kerry said, smiling as he walked away.

I spun the tires as I turned the bike in a complete circle, went around the house and around a tree about ten feet from the water, up the yard, across the front lawn, out of the drive and into the road, hitting fifth gear and flying across the pavement. I pulled off the road down some dirt paths between fields, taking them down to the dead end or when I felt I was getting too close to another house, and then back out to the road. About fifteen minutes later I returned to the farmhouse and turned the key to shut off the motor.

....

The next day started a little slower, as I waited around the maintenance building with the other laborers waiting for an assignment. One of the laborers came out of the building and said that he heard that one of the garbage details had just had an accident and they were headed back; one of the guys in the detail was hurt bad enough that an ambulance had been called. A few minutes later, one of the tractors pulled into the lot and up to the building. One of the guys in the detail was laying on his back with a bloody shirt wrapped around his head and two others limped out of the cart they were sitting in when it came to a stop. The managers helped the guy with the bleeding head out of the cart and checked his wound, applying some stuff from a first aid kit including a bandage, until the ambulance arrived.

The crew chief – a young man a year or two older than me with brown hair to his shoulders and a mustache – initially looked a little flustered, but after he talked to his manager, he looked around at the milling laborers with an intense, more business-like appearance. I had noticed the three guys who got hurt from the day before – they had impressed me as a group of hicks just off the farm or some carnies, guys who worked at carnivals, trying to pick up a few extra bucks. I had wondered at the time how they got the good jobs and we were the laborers. A few more minutes went by and one of the managers approached the crew chief, and the chief's appearance turned to anger briefly; he walked over to one of the trio, said something, and the guy, still rubbing his head, shook his head and the chief walked toward us. The manager shouted that they needed three guys for a garbage detail – with pay at three fifty an hour – and those who wanted the job were to gather around the tractor. I walked over to the tractor with about ten others and heard the manager tell the chief to pick his replacements. Immediately, the chief pointed right to me and said, "I want that guy right there." He pointed to two more guys and the new crew was set.

"Okay, you three go back inside and find a red jump suit," the manager said. "I'll get your new time cards and write in the start time so you'll get the pay as garbagemen for the full day. Let's go!"

When we got back we all introduced ourselves. There was the crew chief, Kenny, the lone remaining crew member, a fit and funny black guy who called himself, Johnny, the Hispanic wise guy, Jose, but we all called him Joe just to needle him, another black guy calling himself, Sammy, who was quick witted and quick tongued and fancied himself a singer and babe magnet, and myself. Next, the three new crew members wanted to know what really happened.

Kenny said, "Well, that's why we're going to go over the rules of operation, so that it doesn't happen again." The rules of operation were all common sense stuff, but the one wrinkle concerned driving the tractor with the carts in tow uphill. Since the tractors didn't provide enough traction on their own, one or two of the detail had to stand on the fenders above the wheels to provide the necessary traction, which was obviously not recommended by the manufacturer due to the danger involved. The three guys had been goofing off and one of them had his foot slip off the fender, catch between the wheel and the fender, which threw the tractor's front end straight up into the air, threw off both of the guys on the fender, and the third one got banged around in the lead cart. We asked Johnny why he didn't get hurt.

"I was in the back cart, expecting it to happen," he calmly explained, with noticeable disgust. "I stayed away from those morons."

Kenny hopped on the tractor, the rest of us piled into the lead cart, and out of the parking lot we sped, at a blazing three miles per hour. Kenny kept up his tough act for about a half-hour, while we stopped to empty garbage cans and put new linings in them, throwing the bags in the cart. After we made it up our first hill with Johnny and me standing on the fender and without incident, we were all laughing and carrying on, Kenny included, but sticking to business when we needed to. We took our lunch break down on the midway, flirting with the girls, and struttin' our stuff wearing our genuine, red jump suits, looking like escaped convicts begging to be re-arrested. Kenny had confessed that he was pissed off because the other two guys, who weren't hurt badly at all, didn't want to work anymore, so he was going to have to train almost an entire new crew the day before the fair started. At the end of our shift, I had Kenny agreeing that, not only was his new crew better, we also had more fun, too. I couldn't believe that I was tooling around behind a lawn tractor, telling jokes with the guys, flirting with girls as we drove past, and getting paid for doing it, too.

Kenny and I clicked right from the beginning. "When I saw you the first day, I wished you were on my crew," he said, "because, at least, I'd have somebody in the back I could depend on."

"Sometimes, things happen for a reason," I replied.

– from Act Eleven, *The Summer of Irony*, pages 138, 141-143, 146-147, 158-160

I walked down to Pete's room to see if he was ready to register. In his room were a bunch of guys shooting the breeze, including Barry, Pete's roommate and friend since childhood, Jeff the motorcycle enthusiast whose room was next door to Pete's room, and Bruce, a large but mild-mannered fellow with a love for the banjo. I announced that I needed to move my car so others could park close for unloading and I was going to register after I parked the car. Pete suggested that we could all *ride* in my car to registration and I could park the car *when we returned*.

"So, you're the guy on our floor who's always on the lookout for the easiest thing to do that will take the least amount of work," I stated, adding, "I was wondering who that would be."

"I'm just saying if you're gonna park the car anyway," Pete protested, among the laughs all around, "it would be useful for everybody to ride to the hall first."

"I've got a funny feeling that walking is a foreign concept to Pete," I said. Before anyone else could interject, I added, "But if we're all ridin', let's go." I turned and started down the hallway to the elevators. Suddenly, everyone in the room scrambled, with shouts of "Hold up! I'm coming." I checked with Matt but he wasn't ready to go register, yet, though he was done bringing his stuff up to the room. "Okay," I said. *Whatever*, I thought.

I waited at the elevator until everybody appeared, Pete, Barry, Jeff and Bruce. We went down to the car, piled in, and I drove to the Assembly Hall parking lot, where we climbed out and walked into a mob of thousands, with signs for virtually everything. I found my starting spot, waited in line for a half-hour, but got the classes I wanted: rhetoric, algebra, sociology, philosophy and Spanish. When everybody had their classes registered – some took longer than others because their desired classes were full and they had to choose other classes – and we all were at the designated meeting point, we discussed what to do next. I had planned to get some lunch at one of the restaurants nearer the main campus, but I had planned to walk since parking was extremely limited

there. Everyone else, except Barry, thought it was a good idea; Barry wanted to walk back to the dormitory, since he had some food there, until Pete offered to buy him lunch. We managed to find a decent parking space, found a restaurant we all liked, and had some lunch. When we were finished I drove us all back to the main parking lot at the dormitory.

....

“Did you smash into anything?” Mark asked, smiling.

“That’s why I wear a helmet,” I replied, holding up the helmet and smiling back.

Jeff got up and said, “Let’s see this puppy.” Everybody else got up and followed Jeff and me downstairs. As we all congregated around the bike, some touching it or sitting on it, all wanting to ride it while I rejected that idea for the time being, I eased up to Pete. I was curious what kind of a crowd was forming around me and I whispered to him, since I thought Pete was the most likely candidate, “Think anybody smokes pot around here?”

Pete laughed loudly and looked at Mark as he remarked, “Country boy just asked me if anybody smokes pot around here.”

“We should throw him in the pokey right now,” Mark replied, looking at me with mock severity.

Jeff turned to me while sitting on the bike and said, “I don’t, but you missed several sitdowns with those guys already today.” He smiled and added, “You shoulda invested in a trailer and brought your bike with you yesterday. That way, you wouldn’t have missed it.”

“Snooze, you lose,” Barry proclaimed.

“Can’t lose when you’ve got your own stash,” I advised.

“That settles it,” Pete announced. “You’ve twisted my arm so much I can’t resist.” He looked over to Mark and suggested, “Shall we have a taste of country boy’s weed?”

“We shall,” Mark replied and we all made our way back up to the top floor; and we did.

Finally, classes were starting and the cafeteria was open. I went downstairs with some of the guys to check out the morning’s offerings and that’s when I saw her: The Brunette. She was average height, sleek, ample curvature upstairs, an attractive, smoothly round butt covered by her tight jeans, long, light brown hair, and a face of such smooth and clear complexion, combined with her very attractive eyes, nose, lips and mouth, she could cause a car crash just strolling down the city street. That was just the surface but it wasn’t what really attracted me; it was how she moved, her attitude, the way she projected herself: demure, quiet, almost shy but, conversely, very poised, even confident. She had every reason to be poised and confident; she was, after all, one of the very few exceptions at the U of I, a beautiful woman with intelligence. Of course, all the guys noticed her right away, too. I kept glancing at her while she sat at her table with the other, more talkative girls, and the guys chatted incessantly about her and the other girls at her table. Once, she looked over at me while I was looking at her and I managed to form a weak smile and watched as her mouth formed an almost identically weak smile. I remember thinking, *no way! A girl with almost the same attitude and carriage as me? No way!*

....

Friday came pretty quickly and I hopped on my bike, strapped on my helmet and headed down the back roads toward home. I thought I’d give Kent a buzz to see if he had gotten back from his weekly paid excursion to Davenport and when the phone was answered it was Kent on that end.

“What are you doin’?” I asked.

“Drinkin’ a beer,” Kent replied. “You?”

“Not drinkin’ a beer.”

“College must be rubbin’ off on you.”

“Not that much. Got one for me?”

“More than one.”

“I’ll be right over,” I advised.

“I’ll call Kerry now,” Kent said, “and see if we can make it a threesome.”

Kerry was already at Kent’s house drinking a beer when I arrived. Soon, we were smoking a joint, laughing about anything except college life – which they obviously did not want to hear – and were planning to drive out to Center Park with an appropriate stash. We stayed there until fairly late, drinking beer and watching for the

cops; Kent told some wild tales about the bars and nude clubs – all nude was just that – and how he had met some woman that was now hanging out with him where he was staying.

When he heard about the other woman, Kerry shook his head and his usual smiling expression changed to seriousness. “Better hope Cheryl never finds out about that, man,” he cautioned Kent.

“She’ll never find out,” Kent replied confidently, “unless, somehow, she hears about it from somebody who knows.” He glanced severely at Kerry.

“Hey,” Kerry protested, “she won’t hear it from me.”

“It’s not you I was thinking about,” Kent said. “It’s your wife is what I meant.” Kent was referring to Patti, Kerry’s girlfriend, and, no, they were not married, yet. Might as well have been, though.

“I’m just saying, Kent,” Kerry said, “if Cheryl finds out, you know she’ll dump you in a heartbeat.”

“She’ll never find out,” Kent insisted.

“She’ll find out,” Kerry equally insisted.

“One of you is wrong,” I said.

“Shut up,” they both said. Kerry smiled and Kent added, “Drink another beer to keep your mouth busy.” He handed me another beer with the one in my hand still half full; with two beers in my hands, I gulped the first and threw the empty can in Kent’s car in the back.

The following night was the Joint Session gig at Podunk High for their Homecoming Dance. It would be sort of a homecoming for most of the band mates, since all but a couple attended and graduated from Podunk High. There was always a kind of attitude about Podunk High people versus everybody else in the city; maybe they had the best teachers, maybe they had the best educational facilities and extravagances, maybe they had the most money, maybe they got the most attention. Maybe, but I never started the conversations that would lead to this type of discussion. I always ended it, though. You can end most any conversation that accomplishes nothing but chest puffing. You say, ‘Blow me!’ You start to walk away and add, ‘Which reminds me, I think I’ll have another beer. I’ll get you one, too, if you shut the fuck up. Otherwise, I’ll drink alone.’ It works wonders. Try it some time.

This would be the last hurrah for the old roadie; he would be boogieing down the road of doin’ some-thing else after this gig and the band mates all expected me to pick up the slack. The lights were the only issue; I wasn’t really sure what the band expected so I needed to see just exactly what the old roadie would do with them. Running the mixing board was a piece of cake; the problem with all small-time bands and mixing boards is that not everything is run through them. Let me count the items that are *not*: oh, guitar, bass, keyboards, drums. Since those musical instruments are under the direct control of certain band mates, it can easily become a nightmare to keep everything in the same decibel ballpark. Um, did I mention that even small-time musicians have HUGE, BIG-TIME egos to boot? I didn’t? Slipped my mind, sorry.

....

With midterms behind us and one less student residing in our lounge, the twelfth floor denizens decided it was time to have our own floor party. We convinced the remaining three lounge residents to relinquish their room for this Saturday night and we prepared for the appropriate festivities, which would be mostly alcohol with some ‘lieutenant’ thrown in with the necessary discretion. Some of the floors had previously printed signs for their upcoming party and had received the expected and unwanted attention of the campus authorities, so we simply passed the word around verbally. We setup the tunes and voted on the selections and several put together a punch, which introduced me to ‘Everclear’, 200 proof alcohol, or as we liked to call it, ‘nothing but buzz’. There was a bucket filled with ice and a pony keg that we snuck in masterfully and several coolers of various beers. We were ready. Unfortunately, few of our fellow campus residents were as ready, so the party started very slowly, or maybe we started a little too early. After ten, though, the elevator got to working as we were filling the immediate air waves with cranking tunes and folks just had to check it out. I think I had a good time but I don’t remember anything after we had been going at it for a while; I can remember flirting with girls around midnight, but that’s as far as my memory will allow. The Everclear had caught up to me with a sneak attack and had wiped the brain clean, certainly destroying multiple brain cells in the process. Amazingly, it wasn’t until about nine-thirty the following morning that it wreaked havoc upon my intake and exhaust systems and sent me scrambling to the bathroom; I made it and left my calling card in the stool and discovered just how juvenile my fellow twelfth-floor denizens were, since most of the toilets were clogged with all manner of objects, including the ex-

pected human excrement, some inside the stool and some not. Even more amazing was that this discovery did not cause me to heave even more.

Practically nobody got up in time for Sunday breakfast and I definitely had no intention of eating for quite a while. As each stumbled out of a room, we gathered ourselves and started the clean up, persuaded by the persistent pleas of the lounge students, whose 'room' could have been designated a federal disaster area. Cans, cups, and other assorted trash was everywhere in the lounge, but we had it under control in a half-hour. Someone even grabbed a bucket and mop and we unclogged the toilets and mopped up the entire bathroom. I think we were motivated by the fact that we had escaped the attention of the campus authorities *so far*, and we liked the idea of keeping it that way.

Settling together with the usual cohorts, Pete started calling me Johnny the Wad, for John Holmes, a porn star. All the other guys thought it was funny and it fit; I thought they were making fun of the endowment, or lack of, of the appendage connected midway down my body. After the fifth or sixth such reference to 'the Wad', I had had enough and confronted Pete about it.

"Why are you callin' me that, man?" I asked, not so politely. "It's pissin' me off."

Pete looked at me dumbfounded. As I scanned the other faces, they looked back at me dumbfounded, too. Finally, Pete asked me incredulously, "You don't remember?"

"Remember what?" I asked back just as incredulously.

"The Brunette?" Pete asked even more incredulously.

"She was at the party?" I asked as the incredulity rose to an all-time high.

Immediate, deafening laughter erupted from the entire contingent. I could hear comments like, 'He doesn't remember!', and 'Where was he last night?', and 'He's so smooth, his memory doesn't stick!'. Finally, with great chagrin, I confessed. "I was so fucked up last night from that Everclear punch, I can't remember anything after about midnight."

"That would explain why he can't remember, Pete!" Barry shouted and a second, deafening laughter eruption ensued.

Starting to get it, I looked at Pete and asked, softly, "She came to the party, didn't she?"

Laughing, Pete looked about him as he asked, "Should I tell him?"

"No!" came the unanimous response.

Pete looked at me with a wicked smile and said, "Sorry, Holmes. The penis gallery has spoken."

Mark said, "Pete came up to me this morning and said he was going to call you Johnny the Wad from now on after what happened last night. I thought it was a good name because it fits, country boy."

"I take it I talked to her last night," I sputtered.

"Better than that," Jeff, motorcycle man, commented.

"Let me tell him, Pete!" Barry said, smiling.

"Why not?" Pete asked, laughing. "I want to see what he's gonna do with this since he can't remember a damn thing."

"Okay, here's the scoop, Wad," Barry said, squirming to a position of readiness. "The Brunette showed up after midnight with a couple of her friends and made it into the lounge. You were somewhere else. Anyway, she wouldn't talk to anybody and she refused any drinks and she looked out of place and fairly uncomfortable; we were trying to work with her friends to get her to loosen up. All of a sudden, you walked in, smiled at her, and the two of you started talking. You got another drink from the punch bowl, and the two of you stepped out of the lounge, went down near your room, sat down on the floor in the hall and talked and laughed and, apparently, had a good time with each other for about an hour. We would look out the hall from the lounge and there the two of you were, just going at it."

"So, Holmes," Pete said, "we were all extremely impressed with what you did last night. Hell, she wouldn't talk to anybody but you!"

"Of course, it's even better now that you know I can't remember that she was here," I stated, nodding my head with graven stupidity.

"The best!" Mark exclaimed and everyone laughed.

Pete asked, "So, tell us, Johnny, whatcha got planned?"

I shook my head slowly and mumbled, "I don't even know her name."

....

Lining up across from Mope, standing about five yards from me, I couldn't help but smile to myself. The ball was snapped back to Mark and I took off fast, sailing past Mope like he was standing still; before he could recover, I slanted across the field, looked back to Mark seeing me wide open, and he threw the ball in my direction. The pass was thrown behind me, so I had to slow and turn back to catch it. When I did, I saw Mope bearing down on me at full speed; I juiced in the direction of my momentum, and dodged in the other as I felt his ham hock of an arm slap me, causing me to spin, lose my balance and tumble to the ground. Being the short, skinny nothing that I am, everyone got on Mope about trying to kill me; while he argued that this was tackle, after all, I popped up, flicked the ball to the center of the field and said I was alright, let's play football. In the huddle, Mark looked at me and apologized for the pass being behind. I said the next one will be better. He called the same plays and to the line we went. Again, Mope lined up across me, five yards back. At the snap, I sailed past him, cut the slant, looked back to Mark and watched his perfect throw right into my outstretched hands as I leapt up to gather it under my arm so that the jarring of my steps wouldn't keep me from controlling the ball. Continuing the motion with fluid precision, I came back to the ground without breaking stride and ran untouched into the end zone, looking back at Mope who was gaining on me, thankful that it was only a hundred yards, because the big fella was pretty fast once he got it going.

Down only a touchdown, their side suddenly was in confusion and constant argument as we prepared to kick off; being the acknowledged ringleader, Mope was rarely subject to criticism from his floor mates, but they got on him pretty good. Their runback was unspectacular, but we had to figure out a way to stop their sweep. Mark had a hunch that they would run it to their right side consistently, so he pulled me aside and laid out his plan. On a sweep, the end gives it away; he starts up the field, stops and tries to lay a block to the inside to open the outside for the runner. My job is to spot that hesitation, come up the field to the outside and force the runner to the inside, hopefully occupying the end so that he can't block anyone else. Mark would line up to the inside, prepared to rush if it's a pass; if he sees the quarterback move to the right like a sweep, he'll come up and take the quarterback. Mark's hunch was correct; they did exactly as he predicted, but this time I suckered the end for his hapless block, which I dodged effortlessly, and came up the field to close the outside. Mope, surprised to see me cutting off his outside hopes and with no blockers in front, cut to the inside, when Mark slammed him to the ground for a loss. Mark got up looking at Mope as he struggled to his feet and said with an obvious lack of respect, "Bring it, big boy." I smiled widely as I approached Mark, who put out his hand and I slapped it and said, "Nice, *very* nice."

....

Change was afoot, though. When we started out in August, everyone seemed to be adamant against fraternities, but someone had met this fraternity member from Kappa Sigma and most of us had already been over to their house. It was more like dropping in on an endless dope-smoking binge, with plenty of loud rock and roll and beers every now and then. I never thought that I was being recruited, not even after I met Julie, the sorority sister who was a junior. She was quite the looker, though not a knockout, and as sweet and pleasant as you can expect from a woman. At first, she would hang with the fraternity guys and us. Later, she would come over to our dorm, which was closer to her sorority house than the fraternity house, and hang with any one of us. Something happened along the way, and she started asking about me if I wasn't with any of the other guys from our floor at the dorm or the frat house.

Julie was all of five feet four inches, with a deliciously curvy body, a delectable rear (a requirement), great legs, clear, smooth facial complexion combined with an easy, attractive smile (another requirement), soft brown shoulder length hair parted in the middle, and a pair of small but round breasts, certainly not big by any standard (and *not* a requirement) but pleasing to the eye anyway. Her personality was outstanding since her smile or even laughter was so effortlessly generated by almost anything I said or did that the boost to my inherently fragile ego was so compelling I couldn't keep away from her. That said, I truly didn't expect her to slink into a basement coffee house and listen to our amateur musical performance when I invited her.

Imagine my surprise and resulting nervousness when we were on the stage preparing our set and I heard a sexy female voice call out my name from the front of the stage. There she was, looking incredibly good and very out of place, wishing me well and pointing to a corner where a couple of her sorority sisters sat, bored and probably annoyed. I thanked her for coming and thought, *nothing like pressure*. Linda hadn't paid any attention

and still wasn't, but when I looked over at Bruce and Jeff, Bruce just looked down to the stage floor. Jeff, however, smiled in his little devious way to signal that we were about to slip into amusing strangeness and asked if I was ready.

I couldn't think of anything else to say except to make light of whatever absurdity may be stalking us. "I don't know about fraternities, but if I grow my hair longer and wear falsies, do you think they'll let me join their sorority?" I asked to no one in particular and loud enough that most in the front row heard it. Apparently, it was just enough to calm our jitters and we launched into our set without any concern. We made our share of mistakes, me included, but we worked past them and the set, condensed to twenty minutes, was better than most expected. The manager of the coffee house came over to congratulate us and offered us a return trip if we wanted it.

Julie came up to the stage as we started breaking down, which was really just my equipment, and congratulated us. Immediately, she apologized to me that she had to leave with her friends, who were standing anxiously at the door and probably still annoyed, but asked when I would be at the fraternity house again.

"I don't know," I replied. "Cap'n Jack is temporarily tapped out." Captain Jack was the purveyor of smoke at the frat house, by the way.

"I heard he might be refreshed Friday," Julie said, smiling.

"Maybe Friday I'll have to drop in on the good Cap'n," I said. "Course, I'll be around the dorm all week, too, and you can see us there."

"This week's kinda hectic for me," she advised.

I smiled as I replied, "I could come over to *your* house, but I'll bet you've got rules against that, huh?"

Julie smiled widely as she softly answered, "Yes, we've got rules against that."

Knowing that my eyes were twinkling, I asked, "Wonder what would happen to me if I broke that rule? Any of you girls packin'?"

Julie laughed as she commented, "You're so funny."

"Humor's all I've got," I stated.

– from Act Twelve, *Welcome to Massively Higher Education*, pages 166-169, 171-172, 179-181, 183-187

College football bowl games were not as prevalent then as they are now or I could have spent every day watching football. Instead, it was a challenge to discover things to do, though it was mostly playing music and watching television; the news on the boob tube featured the inevitable demise of South Vietnam. That debacle would soon come to an end without a negotiated settlement which Kissinger had been desperately trying to achieve. Now that I think about it, you never hear him talk about that finest hour, do you? On a personal note, they had released the order for birthdays during the fall semester, which would determine who they would call first if they re-instituted the draft; my number was 352, fourteen away from the end. I figured if they did bring back the draft and they called me, everybody was going. Jeff the motorcycle man, however, was in the top one hundred and had to fill out a form that Selective Service sent him to detail his current residence, phone number, main squeeze, whether he believed in UFOs, if he was planning a trip to Canada soon, and the like. I told him to carbon Henry Kissinger as it might be the key to end the deadlock in the Paris negotiations. Of course, if I got bored and horny, there was always the duffel bag; I wondered if they would let me substitute my duffel bag for their duffel bag if I was 'in the Army now'. You know morale would be high in *my* unit. "Outstanding, lieutenant! Your unit is consistently the highest in morale of any on the base. How do you do it?" "Sir, it's not me, sir. It's that short, skinny private over there, sir. He's a natural born leader!" True.

....

When it snowed, the neighbors and I thought it would be cool to break out the bikes and tool around the neighborhood slipping and sliding. This was mostly Chuck's idea. His motocross ambitions, eventually replaced with Enduro ambitions, were slowly giving way to the more practical realities of adult life, such as working for a living. Chuck was spending less time riding motorcycles and more time running the family's many farms with his father. Chuck was a real farmer, but today we were all crazy motorcycle enthusiasts, creating irritating noise pollution for our neighbors on the other side, and hapless, disbelieving stares from any motorist who would dare to drive down our back road while we darted in front, in back, and around any such vehicle. Go ahead. Call the police. "What motorcycle, officer? It's freezing cold outside and there's snow on the ground. Do you think we're

crazy?” If you don’t act obviously crazy, when you ask that question to police officers they usually give you the benefit of the doubt. Been there, done that.

A small letter with small lettering addressed to me from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign came in the mail the second week in January. I opened it to discover a small letter folded once; when I unfolded it, inside were my grades. The B in rhetoric, A in algebra, B in philosophy, and C in sociology were all expected; the D in Spanish was somewhat of a surprise, since I half-expected to be anywhere from a C to flunking. My father, though, provided the real surprise. He told me that a C in my major was not good. “It indicates you’re just average in that study, son,” he said. I should seriously consider finding another avenue of study, he further advised. In other words, we’re in the age of specialization and, if you’re just average in your specialty, well, then, you’re not very special, are you? I remembered the many times our sociology PhD would remind her students during a lecture how her college degree was worth three times more than ours would be, simply because only six percent of those her age received degrees compared to seventeen percent of those our age. Now that my introductory semester of college was concluded, there was something in this experience that bothered me ceaselessly, but I couldn’t identify what that something was, yet.

To avoid thinking about it, or anything for that matter, I just cranked the rock tunes on my little stereo, smoked a little lieutenant, drank some beer, perused through my collection in the duffel bag to select the appropriate pictures for an exploding sausage event, and met up with the boys to pass the time, shoot the shit and do anything but be productive citizens. It worked pretty well.

....

I met Cindy, the how, when, where, and what happened that first meeting forever lost in a shallow, unmarked grave that used to be an active region of brain cells which have since been mercifully destroyed or overwritten during some past clutter removal. You can bet your ass, though, that I remember *why* I met her, considering that she was blond – I was a sucker for blonds then – and she was incredibly cute, thin as a rail, about five feet five inches with an attractively round butt. Yep, that’s why. She was easy to talk with, had a gentle sense of humor, where she usually smiled instead of laughed, and she liked me a lot. She was from Palatine and she told her parents everything about us, so when they came down to see her, they insisted that I have dinner with them. The item I learned from that dinner and have never forgotten was the admission from her father that their very Anglican surname was the result of a name change from generations before; his Polish ancestors had decided to adopt a more Anglican – American? – surname and had changed it. The only thought I had was, *that’s cheating*. We could have done that. I could have done that. It would have saved me countless hours of spelling and pronunciation correction that I’ll *never get back!* They were cheating. However, Cindy’s ancestry or name change had nothing to do with our outcome.

That outcome was sealed one night as we lay on my bed in the dorm making out. We had gotten close enough to each other and comfortable enough with each other that we kissed often, and I would occasionally run my hands over her body, even her butt. This night, though, I moved my right hand over her left breast and squeezed it gently; she shifted uncomfortably but said nothing as we continued to kiss. When I tried to slide my hand under her blouse and up to her breast, she suddenly went ballistic. From the resulting tirade I captured the words, ‘Why is it that boys,’ and other incomplete and, in all honesty, incoherent ramblings from which I could not, no matter what I did, return her to a state of functioning reason and communication. Don’t get me wrong; I really did want to fuck her, so I can’t promise that I would have been understanding if she had just simply said, “I like you and I don’t want to stop seeing you, but I’m not ready for that.” The problem is, *she never, ever said that*. Frankly, I don’t know *what* she said, because absolutely none of it made any sense at all. I walked her back to her dorm once she had returned to some calm, despite her protests. After that night, though, she was consistently busy with her studies – you understand, don’t you? – so I only saw her twice, although we did get to kissing, again, but she would pull away after a short time. After I returned from spring break and the trip to Florida, I never called her and she never called me.

....

The troubles with the front tires had put a crimp in our schedule, until somebody discovered that a ticket for entry into Disneyworld after a certain time would be honored for the next day. That settled it. We would de-

lay our trip to Florida's east coast until the following afternoon and spend the night and part of the next day at the park. Sandy called her relatives in town and told them that we would all be coming to their house late and we drove off to the park.

After confirming with the ticket folks in their little boxes before the gate that today's ticket would be honored tomorrow, we bought our tickets and headed inside. Since it was a new park there was still some construction under way, but it was relatively uncrowded and we could get on rides with just a little waiting. Still, it was the usual Disney fare, with lots of walking. Despite getting to the park in the evening, we covered most of the park until it closed. Once we had all gathered back at the van, Sandy climbed up to shotgun and directed Jeff to her relatives' house in a quiet residential area of town. The man of the house came out and introduced himself and we all did the same; after chatting for a while, he offered a spot in the living room for two of us to make it a little easier for the rest of us to make room in the van. Pete and Barry took him up and they slept in the man's living room while the rest of us stretched out as best we could in the van.

The next morning, most of us were up by seven. Pete and Barry stumbled out of the house and woke the remainder stowing their stuff in the back. Sandy came out and told us that she and her friend were going to the park later with some of the relatives; she thanked Jeff for getting them to Florida in one piece, confirmed when we would be back to pick them up and if Jeff could remember how to get there – he had written the directions – and she walked to the back of the van and I followed her.

"Think you'll have fun without me," Sandy said as she stepped slightly out of view of the guys.

"Maybe not as much but I'll manage," I replied, adding, "though I might meet someone."

"That's not what I wanted to hear," she said, smiling, and threw her right arm at me with her fist doubled to softly punch my left shoulder. I grabbed her wrist with my left hand and held on until we both dropped our arms and she opened her hand. I slid my hand into hers and held it loosely as her fingers slipped around mine.

"What about you?" I asked. "Can you have any fun landlocked without me?"

"Of course," she replied wearing her teasing smirk. "Girls are different. We don't need boys to have as much fun, maybe more."

"Maybe we're obsolete," I observed, smiling.

"Could be," she said, still smirking. She stepped up to me, put her arms around me as I did the same with her and we hugged for a few seconds. As we separated, she kissed me softly on the right cheek.

Through the van, Pete yelled, "Let's go, Johnny. There's girls all over Florida."

Still smiling, Sandy said, "You better get going. Have fun. I know I will and I won't be missing you either."

Raising my eyebrows, I said, "Miss you? Never."

Sandy smiled briefly and gently pulled her hand away from mine. I watched her turn and walk toward the house before I opened the back of the van and climbed in. Jeff fired up the van and we drove slowly away as I listened to Pete critique my performance. That was the most affection we had shown each other since the concert months before, even during the drive we had just completed, when we had teased each other occasionally but never really touched. Now I missed her.

....

The week in Clearwater proceeded much like that. The majority of the gang would settle around the motel like nesting birds, content to just huddle together and do as little as possible. Occasionally, one or two or three would depart the nest to scour the immediate environment, to scope the vast beach and its visitors, to snare provisions of both solid and liquid variety, to break away from the nest, knowing that a return would reunite fellow nesters. Oh, there were the odd adventures and mishaps. The next day after we arrived most of us forgot that cloud cover has no effect on ultraviolet rays, so most suffered some degree of sunburn, Kevin being the worst. He was solid red for two days and completely useless for most of that time. The two sisters, Heather and April, and their friends checked in; no one was supposed to know that they were sisters but there's only so much deception that can remain successful when one discovers the weakest link, and that link was the youngest, April. She enjoyed flirting with me and that was the opening I needed; with my uncanny ability to project sincerity – which is not a trick, mind you – she confessed that they were sisters within hours after meeting them. I also received the explanation that Heather and April were and were not their real names. They were playing the game that many young women on vacation together play; they use some other name than their given first names. Men

don't seem to need to do that, so it must be a gender thing. Despite all that subterfuge, they liked us and we liked them. The seven of us and the five of them even went to a nightclub together, though we didn't leave together. April enjoyed the flirting but when she got a little tipsy one night and I pushed my advantage, she actually started crying. Her mumbling explanation had something to do with what she had dreamed would happen but now it scared her; if it was meant to get me to stop, it worked, because I never pushed it again the entire time we had together. It's a position I will defend until the day I die, for reasons that you will certainly discover later if not already, and not just in this narrative but in your own life and of those you meet. No means no, jackass. Sex is not a sales prospect, to determine the reasons for all objections and overcoming them with ruthless persistence. Sex between two people can only be beautiful and meaningful when undertaken with mutual consent; if that complete consent is lacking from one partner, I can guarantee that the other partner is committing sexual abuse. There's nothing funny about sexual abuse, nor should it be anything to boast, brag or be proud of, and if you are, you're sick, jackass. Go fuck yourself, literally. When your partner says no or does something of the equivalent, such as resisting, just drop it and explode your sausage later. It might just save your sausage in the end, since I have two daughters myself, and if I find out that either was sexually abused I'll cut off the offender's cock. I'm not alone in this sentiment either, jackass, so you've been warned... Did I mention during our week in Clearwater that we drank excessive amounts of beer and other alcoholic beverages, smoked pot incessantly and caroused about without rendering anything of productive value? No? We sure as shit did.

....

My next appearance at the frat house turned out to be my last, at least while I was still at the big U. I ran into Captain Jack at the Student Union and he was all excited about his latest score. He wanted me to come over as soon as my classes were done and sample some of the wares so I said I'd drop by about three in the afternoon. After my last class of the day I walked over to the frat house with my books and papers and rang the doorbell. Instead of answering, one of the frat boys opened the door and ran out, late for class, and told me the good Cap'n was downstairs and to just go on in because I knew the way, all true. There he sat on the makeshift couch, table and refreshment stand known as party central. Captain Jack was a short guy about five feet six inches and a little squatty, like Pete, even to the hair parted on the side and the beard. He was better looking than Pete, though, and funnier, too, with a very dry, sarcastic wit and an unflappability that was almost legendary. Equally legendary was his well-known prediction that he would complete his education on a six-year plan; he was definitely on schedule for that.

Inviting me to sit down as soon as he saw me and offering me a beer, which I declined, he wielded his bong filled with supposedly one hit and passed it to me. I lit it up and sucked the smoke down deep into my lungs and felt them explode into an uncontrollable cough while there was still half the hit left in the bong. The captain laughed but took the bong as I handed it back to him with my hand covering the top and he lit up and sucked down the rest of the hit. We took turns like that for the next fifteen minutes, after which I lit up a cigarette and the captain took note of that, asking me what the fuck I was doing. I told him I was destroying any of my lung cells somehow left untouched by marijuana and that one can't help but admire my thoroughness. He asked how the trip to Florida went and other particulars about it and we chatted like that for quite a while, completely undisturbed by anyone, which was highly unusual for party central at any time of day or night. Undisturbed, that is, until one of the frat officers – whose name is forever lost in the black holes of my memory – came down to speak with me, having heard from one of the other frat boys upstairs that I was 'in the house'. The officer wanted to speak with me in private, but the captain sensed that something was uncool.

"He's my guest and anything you have to say to him you should say with me present, too," Captain Jack told him, his eyes a bit narrowed. "I know the rules, though you big boys like to think I don't care about them."

The captain's sense was keen and accurate. The officer had come down to advise me that I could not come to the frat house anymore unless I made the decision to join. It's as simple as that, he said.

The captain reached behind the couch, pulled up the bong, loaded it, and passed it to me, as he said, "It's settled. We should smoke to that." He looked up at the officer and added, "Want some?"

As the officer shook his head and slowly walked backwards to the stairs, I took the bong, lit it and sucked the smoke down and coughed again. The officer climbed up the stairs and disappeared, but we smoked for another half-hour, getting quite spanked. The captain, though, was one of those cats who got frisky the more he smoked. He suggested that I head back to the dorm and get some dinner and meet him at one of the bars on

the strip at seven and get ripped. I liked the idea and that's exactly what we did. Somehow, I managed to stumble back to the dorm before midnight, vaguely remembering that most everybody else bought the beer, including several of the frat boys and some of the guys that went with me from the dorm.

– from *Act Thirteen, Spring Semester, Spring Break, and FLA, pages 191-5, 200-2, 205-6, 209-210*

Since the previous summer, the four of us, Kent, Kerry, Jeff – when available – and I, had changed quite a bit. We could get into any bar we wanted, well, everybody but Kerry. The other three all had full-time jobs, but I didn't. Okay, so I hadn't changed, but Kerry had some connections in the state job pool and Kent had landed at the Secretary of State's mailroom under the state complex. He worked across the street from where I worked but we didn't get to see each other very often during work hours; I was the office gofer in the Court of Claims, so I just did what they told me, including when to take a break and lunch. It was fun when I could get out of the office and hook up with Kent; he'd go on his rounds all through the underground complex connecting the state buildings in the blocks surrounding the Capitol building. You could start by entering the Centennial building from the street and come out of the State Office building two blocks away and never hit the ground floor until then. Until Kent started working there, I didn't even know the underground tunnels existed and I had lived in Po-dunk all my life.

The night life was heating up. Kent still had no steady girl, but he did alright, unless I was with him. Ya gotta figure that, right? He would go out almost every night and I wouldn't do that; hell, I couldn't afford to go out as often as I did, but I went anyway. When you're a young man, nightclubs and bars tend to attract women, too. For live music, we would go to a bar near where we both worked called the State Bar; I saw Cheryl from high school there once – her boyfriend was leading a band that played a cover of *I Just Wanna Make Love to You* from Foghat. That was the first time I could remember hearing that song and I would buy several Foghat albums later. Cheryl looked good, especially without her glasses – ah, the changes to someone's appearance through the magic of contact lenses, a relatively new development. She didn't pay any attention to me, however, didn't even say 'hi'. Kent and I pulled a stunt there one night, too. It was a contest to see how many women's butts one could pinch. I won the contest by pinching about forty butts; and that was forty *different* butts. Yeah, man, that place could be hopping. Only one caught me and I watched her walk through the opening all around the crowd to the other side, turn around when she looked at me and walk all the way back to tell me, "I know you did that." She was looking at me with mock severity. I said, "Me? No way." I smiled as I said it and she smiled back and walked back from where she had just come. I guess I had added a condition to the contest which Kent did not approve, because he came up to me and said, "You call that pinching? You're hardly doing anything." He waited a few moments for a particularly beautiful woman to walk by – oh, did I mention we were staked out in front of the women's restroom? – and, instead of pinching her ass, he literally grabbed her ass with his right hand and squeezed it so hard, she jumped off the floor. After her initial surprise, though, she looked at him smiling that little boy's devilish smile that Kent turned on at will and she smiled back briefly; still, modesty got the better of her after a moment and she slapped his arm. "Now, *that's* how you pinch a chick's ass," he informed me.

....

Ollie, on the other hand, was a regular, good ole white boy who liked to smoke cigarettes, pot, drink beer and alcohol and occasionally shoot heroin. Okay, so maybe that's not so regular or good, but he was an old white boy, considering he was nearly thirty and we were still in our teens. Oliver was his given name but no one ever called him that. He worked with Kent in the mailroom under the Centennial building. He was extremely laid back until some woman was unfortunate enough to stoke his interest, after which he would become boisterous, loud, and would laugh at anything he said, most of which wasn't very funny. About my height with blond hair to his shoulders but balding on top and a bit of a paunch, he was a likable bloke, easy going, although he really did think of himself as a ladies' man. We got a good laugh at that, because we knew the kind of ladies that he usually ended up with, although when we would remind him of that skank from last week he would often remind us about who we went home with, as if one skank is better than no skank. I dunno, you tell me. The one night that he shot heroin while he was out with us, he spent most of the time sitting at the table, his head bent back, his eyes usually closed or rolling slowly, his body slowly swaying from side to side. Sounds like fun, huh?

The General Assembly was the local disco bar. Yep, 1975 was the year disco took off and we could be found there most weekends, often both Friday and Saturday nights until three in the morning. Do that regularly

and you're gonna pay some price for it. I paid for it by usually leaving rip-roaring drunk and it was a definite good thing that I almost never drove there. Kent always drove, first in his big, blue bomber, that Impala, or the new car he bought that summer, a compact tan Chrysler. I always suspected that I might be getting rip-roaring drunk because of the constant strobe light activity, which is a misnomer since strobe lights are not constant by definition but you get the drift. It was probably due more to the fact that I was drinking from about eight at night until I couldn't keep my head off the table, whenever that was. Three in the morning? Shit, I rarely remember leaving the disco at any time I went there. At least I stood out, so that everybody could remember the short, skinny, white drunk. When one goes to a place with blacklights, one will usually wear some clothes that are solid white, since it turns a pleasing shade of violet, but not me. I found a solid red shirt – no pocket for my cigarettes, though – that I wore exclusively to the GA as we abbreviated it. Solid red in blacklight instantly stands out from everything else and I was exceedingly cool when I wore it. It even attracted the chicks, of whom I would dispatch with amazing consistency through my lack of 'pussy skills'. Of course, I had my own meeting with skankville at the GA one night when I took my Mom's car and parked next door in the heavy machinery business. I put the car right next to a yellow earth mover. I remember that much. Kent had to tell me about the skank part, which, as a blessing this time, I cannot remember, the memory having descended into the black hole of my brain and flushed for all time. Kent spared me certain details except to explain how embarrassing it was to sit at the same table with the two of us and watch me kissing a face full of pimples on top of a rather squatty body. Apparently, I came to my senses in a brief moment of lucidity when she went to the bathroom as I immediately got up, said goodbye and left. She was wandering around the disco looking for me at the same time that I was scraping the car along the yellow earth mover to leave a long yellow stripe on the car as a reminder of my stupidity from the night before. Yes, somehow I made it home without smashing into anything and I removed the stripe with car wax, leaving no visible scratches at all. There was the night when Jeff, Kent and I sat with three of the most beautiful girls in the building, which was a signal to get so drunk I couldn't keep my head off the table and Kent had to take me home while Jeff went home with all three girls; I should mention that they wanted to fuck us so bad that all three settled for Jeff and fucked him all night and the next morning. Sometimes it pays to have a third friend to attract three girls so that the third friend can't hold his liquor even though he knows he's gonna get fucked if he can just stay sober. What a loser! To say that Kent had a hard time forgiving me for that travesty is putting it mildly. On the other hand I provided Kent with a huge amount of humorous and unbelievable incidents, like the morning I woke up with blood smeared all over my pillow and my left thumb throbbing and torn. Another night at the GA with the usual outcome, Kent driving me home, though I was a bit belligerent. After pulling into our driveway, Kent watched me get out of his car and slam the door again and again without success. Following several attempts and noticing that the door was failing to close because I was holding myself up with my left hand inside the door rim, he calmly got out of his car, walked around his car, and pushed me away from the door, saying, "I'll get it. Go inside and get some sleep, little man." He closed the door and watched me stumble inside before he got back behind the wheel and drove home himself. To say that Kent had an easy time forgiving my belligerence and laughing outrageously every time he reminded me of that night is also putting it mildly. Honestly, I cannot say whether I had fun at the GA or not but I sure went there a shitload of times trying to have some.

....

Still, it was virtually impossible to bring the various camps together for sustained periods. The only thing that could actually bring them all together was inviting the lieutenant for a sit-down. For marijuana, everyone would put aside their considerable psychological and lifestyle differences, smoke a little and talk with each other civilly. Maybe that's what we need for every meeting between two or more hostile camps at all levels; imagine what might happen if the Palestinians, Jews and the other regional Arabs and interested parties all sat down together and passed around huge spliffs provided by the meeting's hosts, the Jamaican intermediary team. The Arabs might demand hashish but the Jamaican team would simply produce spliff after spliff in a never-ending spirit of ganja consumption. So many of these 'meetings' over the years have been called 'historical', yet have so little to show for it; you know a meeting hosted by spliff spinning Jamaicans will have no equal.

....

One of my first acts after I had registered for classes was to make my one and only visit to my college counselor. Maybe I should have recognized the probable outcome of my visit just by the strong resemblance of the counselor to my sociology professor, the aged sage who advised that her college degree would always be worth three times more than ours. Frankly, what did that have to do with sociology? I suppose it had something to do with a fragile perception of place in the world, some older woman at the age where contemplation of legacy - what one leaves to the world - is beginning to squeeze its grip on her. The question I have always formed when I think of her statement is this: will she always be worth three times more to the world than any of us, meaning me and all my peers? I can't answer it without exaggerating my true worth to the world, a defense mechanism to bolster self-esteem, which is exactly the motivation which prompted her to make her statement in the first place. Only the individuals, collectively and as a whole, scattered all over the world can vote on that question.

The outcome with the counselor was short and succinct. I wanted to transfer from the college of liberal arts to the college of business. What did I need to do? She pulled out her chart of minimum grade point averages needed to transfer from one college to another.

"Let's see," she began, scouring the chart. "To transfer from liberal arts to business you'll need a GPA of 4.4."

I felt my jaw drop but caught it before it hit the floor. "Four point four?" I asked in disbelief. I added, "If I had a four point four GPA in liberal arts I wouldn't *want* to transfer, since that's a solid A, not even an A minus!"

She pursed her lips as she said, "Sorry." Of course, she wasn't.

I left the counselor's office knowing one thing, if I wanted to stay at the University of Illinois I would be stuck in liberal arts. I also had three thoughts; I should have enrolled in general studies so I could transfer to a college I really wanted once I figured out what the hell I wanted to do, but I didn't know about that little loophole thanks to the whiz-bang counseling services provided by my high school; it was easier to get into the college you wanted if you were just enrolling at the university than it was to transfer, meaning they valued more and more bodies than the ones they already had, which was stupid, in my opinion; and I was stung, once again, by the bite of my peers, the absolutely enormous numbers of baby boomers. Yes, friends, I was born too early and too late, and my ass was beginning to hurt from all the bites.

....

The three girls were all attractive, but I really liked the blond and talked to her more than the others, though I didn't ignore any of them. Her name was Carolyn and she had a great laugh, too, because I had everyone laughing and having a good time almost until closing time. Kent was even in a good mood, despite his dislike of college women. When the girls said they had to leave, Kent and I decided it was time to go, too. We finished our beers and Kent asked me if I was okay to drive as I slipped on my leather flight jacket; smugly, and with a slight slur, I brushed his question aside. Of course, I'm okay to drive. Let's go. We walked out to the Opel and climbed in. I pulled out of the parking lot and turned in the opposite direction than Kent expected. When he asked what I was doing, I told him I was going to head out to the interstate, which was under construction and intersected with Chatham Road at a stoplight. He thought that was stupid but I said we could get home faster than going through the city streets and all the stoplights. I made the left turn at Chatham Road and started to speed up, since this section was more rural and the speed limit was higher. When the road converged from well-marked lanes to a standard two-lane road and grew narrower, I had already passed out. The Opel, though, faithfully kept on at forty-five miles per hour, into the ditch where the road had narrowed and right on to the first drive across the ditch to a business. When the Opel hit the drive, the force buckled the doors open; neither Kent nor I wore a seat belt so we were immediately ejected from the car. Kent headed toward the rocks and snow on the side of the road and I went flying in the opposite direction. Gravity eventually reclaimed its hold and, just like any tumble one takes in life, there were consequences to pay.

- *from Act Fourteen, Gravity, pages 217-220, 224-226, 231-232*

Now I wore it crumpled and twisted and bleeding and torn in the middle of a tar and gravel road, dark and barren from the revolting elements, with the many resting for the revelry they hoped to enjoy two nights later on New Years Eve. Lying there with little sign of life, my body oozed the only sign I could give, the warmth

of the red liquid slowly flowing through the lacerated openings of my exposed body; and there could have been more openings, but that leather flight jacket had performed its admirable job well. For all its reaches, not a single injury would be discovered. It would forever display the scrapes where it had collided with the road behind the right shoulder—the force of that collision snapping my collar bone—but it nevertheless had protected my fragile body. All my other injuries lay outside its scope. And the sign of life dripped irrepressibly, staining the tar that had already tattooed my right hip.

....

The live version of Commander Cody and the Lost Planet Airmen's tune called *Hot Rod Lincoln* ends with the hero wrecking his car and being investigated by the po-lice; they missed the six tons of hash in the back seat and the ten illegal Mexican immigrants he was smuggling into the country, among other assorted sundry, typical seventies items any self-respecting stoner would carry. In my case, the po-lice did *not* miss the half-bag of leaf now scattered all over the interior of the totaled Manta and they reasonably assumed that I was drunk since they could easily smell the alcohol on Kent's breath with little effort. As the ambulance whisked me away in its futile attempt to save my worthless existence, they had to charge me with something, because one has to have fractured *some* law to end up with a totaled vehicle in a ditch and the driver's body laid out in the road. The state trooper responsible for filing charges wrote me a ticket for illegal lane usage, an infraction with the untested outcome of a twenty dollar fine. They also presented my father with a bill of eighty dollars to replace the sign the Manta destroyed on its path toward the telephone pole. If the po-lice *hadn't* missed all that, why didn't they charge me with it? As Kent so aptly put it later, "They were reluctant to charge you with anything, because it meant paperwork and follow-up, so what was the point? We all thought you were dead."

....

I awoke some time in the late afternoon the following day, plastic tubes descending from a portable arm above me and slowly, drip, drip, dripping into a vein of my left arm. Everything was white and bright, I was alone, and I thought, *Great! Now I'm on an alien spacecraft where they're going to perform probing experiments, only to discover how horrid an example of humanity I truly am and sail me above Lake Michigan where they will hover and slowly lower me into the water without even the benefit of a raft. I'll bet the water will be freezing. Hello hypothermia.*

A woman in a simple white dress down to her knees soon entered and if she was an alien this next part might not be so bad after all. "You're awake," she said. "Good. We were all worried about you when they brought you in last night."

Ah! So she's a nurse, I'm in a hospital lying in a hospital bed and Kent and I must have had some terrible accident. I wonder how Kent is faring. I dared not ask, though. I didn't want to hear bad news. "What's on TV?" I inquired. "Anything worth watching?"

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked. "Do you have an appetite?"

"Sure," I replied, "but it's on vacation. I think it's in Texas, today."

She laughed. What a relief! At least the mental meltdown currently taking place in random areas of my brain was skirting around the various pockets of humor I had stored over the years. I needed that humor. If you've paid attention so far, you're in complete agreement. That's about all I had.

She checked the liquid in the bottle and the tubes and my arm. She tucked up the sheets under my neck and smiled. "So, you're not hungry?" she asked again. "It's no trouble. I can get you something from lunch right now." She proceeded to tell me what was on the lunch menu, which did not convince my appetite to return from Texas any time soon.

"Orange juice would be nice," I replied, politely. "Thank you."

She reached for the TV remote on the stand next to the bed. Looking sweetly down on me, she said, "What do you like to watch?"

"Anything but doctor shows," I replied, looking back at her sweetly, and sensing that my appearance was ghastly. "I don't think I'm in the mood."

"It's still early in the afternoon," she advised, still looking sweetly down on me, and I was thinking, *man, she has got to have one hell of a stomach to look at me like that.* She added, "I know there's soap operas on."

She raised her eyebrows in anticipation.

"Yeah," I agreed, now suddenly feeling uncomfortable about my expected appearance, "backstabbing, lying and cheating will make me feel better."

"Which ones do you like?"

"Pick one," I told her. "They've all got it in abundance."

....

When I awoke later that night, I had a lot more energy and a lot less pain. I managed to get out of the bed, unhook the cable from the stand dripping into my left arm, and make it to the bathroom to relieve myself. Yep, I took a long, hard look at the face staring back in the mirror. Non DeScript's hair was wild, stringy, unkempt and particularly unattractive; his face was patched, sewn, clipped together, bruised and blue. Hardly non-descript. As I looked at the image in the glass, I didn't seem to have any feeling at all about it. Another day, another obstacle, another ugly truth revealed. It didn't even matter to me whether my fellow cousins anywhere else on the planet had similar experiences or whether this was uniquely mine. I just didn't care at the moment, and when I was done with my bathroom exercise, I trudged back to the bed, hooked up my drip cable and slept through the night and into New Year's Eve day.

When a different nurse came to check on me in the morning, I was already awake, though I was hardly active. I was just daydreaming about nothing significant and becoming more self-conscious about my appearance. She tried to cheer me up, so I nodded and glanced in the opposite direction. She asked if I wanted breakfast and I wondered if I already had consumed my morning morphine allotment, but I was hungry now, so I said I would try and eat some eggs, toast, and whatever else. She didn't return for quite some time, but I ate most of what she brought me. There wasn't any point in starving to death now.

A doctor came in later that morning to check on my recovery and filled me in on all my injuries, all of which I had deduced, anyway. He asked me if I remembered what happened. For some reason, the jester remained in hiding and I told him that I couldn't remember anything.

"Well, apparently," the doctor began, "you were thrown out of your car and landed on the road and took a pretty good beating. You had lost a lot of blood and when they brought you in, your initial assessment was less than fifty-fifty. You're lucky. What do you think kept you alive?"

I had already checked the closet and the only item in it was the leather jacket dangling from a hanger. I pointed to the closet and replied, "That leather jacket in the closet."

The doctor glanced over at the closet knowingly and nodded. "Normally," he said, dryly, "we cut off clothes from accident victims, but leather's tough to cut, and based on your injuries, everyone thought it was worth saving." He paused and looked down at me from the foot of the bed. "Why were you wearing it?" he asked.

"It was cold that night," I replied, nonchalantly. He asked a few more medical questions and left, so the moral of this exchange is: if you're considering being thrown out of a moving vehicle at forty-five miles per hour, and you want to survive, invest in a thick leather jacket.

....

I spent New Years' Eve in a hospital bed sound asleep. Happy New Year! Welcome to 1976.

One of the first acts performed for me in 1976 was the removal of my IV butler. The nurse left the connector in my left arm "as a precaution, in case you need it later." That case would be, for example, if I should take a turn for the worse and be, once again, tossed into the grip of deathly throes. Ye of little faith. C'mon! Go for it!

The family stopped by, providing some company and chit-chat. I could manage to clean myself by then, so I got the usual compliments about how good I was looking. Skipping a couple days of showers or baths has a tendency to reflect poorly on one's appearance. Once you take that plunge, everyone notices how good you look.

....

Manic-depression is an elegant and descriptive term. Bi-polar disorder possesses a poetic resonance, but

it lacks the former's descriptive power. I don't know what it's meant to explain. Does it mean that mania originates from the North Pole and that depression originates from the South Pole? Does it, instead, mean that mania races around a pole clockwise and depression races in the opposite direction or vice-versa? Hand it to the medical establishment to muck up what was a perfectly fine, descriptive diagnosis to make it more antiseptic, clinical and devoid of any human connection. That's what we pay them big bucks for, right?

I should have been reading myself and recognizing the symptoms by now but I didn't. The mania should have been easy to spot and the depression, with its dark and ugly components, should have been easily distinguishable, but I thought I was just moody. And everyone else thought so, too. "Are you in one of those moods?" was a question I heard directed toward me frequently. I must be moody, then, but I wasn't. Instead, I was riding the soaring flippancy of a 'natural' high interspersed with fighting the dark and ugly 'truth' of those around me. They were responsible, I would think, and wouldn't they be sorry when I'm gone. The plunge would last for hours or, during particularly bad episodes, days at a time, with the ugly thoughts repeating over and over and over. To see anyone, to hear anyone, to speak to anyone was dreadful and avoided. Just let me lie in bed interminably. Leave me alone.

As slowly as I would descend into my private mental hell, I would pull myself out just as quickly. Help was never available except in the gray matter between my ears. No one understood and I could not explain nor did I ever really try. I'm just moody.

The mania was not as soaring as I began one more semester at the big U, but the depression was deepening and lengthening and spreading like a three dimensional form growing exponentially. Freezing rain carpeted the twin towns a week after classes started and I fell on my sling-borne right arm. Seering pain shot through my upper body and I cursed my fate and those around me, silently, of course. Hours later I was deep in my hole with escape foreboding and even light dimmed to specks, but it's just a mood swing, nothing more. I'll swing out of it. I always have. Unless I move to the exit before I can climb out again. I managed to avoid the exit, though, and Eddie helped me. You remember Eddie, don't you? The one everybody had forgotten, who had rendered himself insignificant. *I'm not insignificant*, I thought, *and you're gonna fucking remember me. I'll never let you forget me like Eddie*, I would think as I climbed out of the hole once again.

....

We headed to the interstate, the first leg of our journey, and we'll leave it at Litchfield and start moving east. We hadn't even reached Sixth Street and the smell filled the entire car.

"Jesus, man," I asked in astonishment as I rolled down the window to my right, "which one of you farted? I need fresh air *bad!*"

Kent started snickering, as he gulped his beer. "This is definitely helping the hangover, but I think we're gonna be ridin' with constant farts for a while!" He laughed heartily as I slid over to the left side and rolled that window down too.

Jeff laughed a little too merrily. "Think I'll join you," he said, between laughs and beer gulps.

"Holy shit, that's rank!" Kent exclaimed as he rolled down his window and stuck his head out.

"Great!" I shouted. "I'm locked in a car for the next twenty-two hours between dueling fart boys." Kent and Jeff laughed uproariously and tipped their beer cans together. Having snagged my own beer from the cooler in back, I sucked a draft and asked, "Well, who's gonna spin one? At least, let's add a little sweet smell to cover the foulness coming from your asses."

Jeff opened the glove box, pulled out a baggie with about a dozen joints, withdrew one, and handed it to me as we merged onto the interstate. "Fire it up, little boy," he said. "You can take a couple of drags to catch up, if you want."

I pulled my lighter out of my shirt pocket and fired up the joint, taking one long drag and coughing a bit. Passing it up to Jeff, who took a big suck, he passed it to Kent and around it went until we extinguished it. Finally, we were on our way, with the occasional fart smell permeating the rolling vehicle, followed by uncontrollable laughter from the perpetrator.

What should have been barely three hours in Illinois seemed to take forever. We stopped to piss. We stopped to eat. We stopped for gas. We stopped for minor groceries. We stopped for cigarettes. We rolled into Indiana around five in the afternoon and I wondered if we would just have to turn around and come home once we got to Florida, assuming we actually made it. Once we could find a place to stop in Indiana, Kent announced it

was my turn to drive. *Good, I thought, now we'll make up some time.*

....

The night scene in Clearwater was better. It was less crowded, there was good music and dancing, and we all had a good time when we went out, but the whole endeavor had already been poisoned and there would be no antidote unless Jeff and Kent and – me???! - got laid. That was not to happen.

We didn't venture from Clearwater the rest of the week and we stuck it out for the entire time planned. We explored the beach and enjoyed the scenery—girls—and we enjoyed the weather, which was quite good the entire time we were in Florida. It wasn't enough. When the following Saturday after we left Illinois rolled around, both of my companions were ready to leave. Jeff got up and was spouting off about leaving from the moment his feet hit the floor of his room. We packed, stowed the bags in the trunk and drove away, not even making a pass through the town or along the beach, just straight out to the highway leading out of town. We bought enough beer to last us to the border, because Jeff was so pissed off at Florida he didn't want to spend any more money in the state than necessary. He was even willing to drive us clean out of there and he did, as fast as he could make that Duster go without risking the attention of the Highway Patrol.

Maybe it was the negativity of both Kent and Jeff. Experience with those who normally display negativity has convinced me that it almost always encourages disaster to befall. That's another story, but it seemed to hold true on our way back.

Before we could exit Florida, Jeff was complaining about feeling sick. He even pulled into a rest area to throw up, but he was bound and determined to drive us out of there. As soon as he could find a place to pull over in Georgia, he did. After Kent took the wheel and I sat shotgun, Jeff laid down in the back seat all to himself and slept, fighting whatever bug, or self-induced 'infection,' had taken up residence. He had driven a good seven hours and now it was Kent and me. Jeff's shift was over and maybe he would be quiet.

Kent was doing fine, although he was bitching frequently about the construction and the detours and how slow the going was. I didn't notice anything, but it might have been that he had too many beers during the drive out of Florida and he was a little tired and the construction delays and detours and jogs around pylons and gates and lack of shoulders was wearing on him. We were still quite a ways from Atlanta, crawling along yet another construction area with no shoulder, when Kent lost his concentration with the tight lane, drifted to the right and off the pavement and slammed into a series of potholes which were so jarring they woke Jeff up. Kent heard an earful from both of us and blew off the steam back at us, but twenty minutes later and still twenty miles from the Atlanta bypass, the right rear tire blew. Kent and I were pissed, but the only one who wasn't pissed was the sickly Jeff. Instead, he jumped out of the back seat, yanked all the gear out of the trunk once Kent had opened it, set everything up next to the stricken tire, whipped off the bolts, pumped up the rear of the car, pulled the stricken tire off, slapped the spare on, whipped the bolts on, pumped the rear down, and tightened the bolts in fifteen minutes, tops. If Kent or I tried to help, we just got in the way. Kent simply carried the stricken tire to the trunk and I cleared the area so he could lay it down. We put away all the gear, set everything back in the trunk, and Jeff announced that it was my turn to drive. Kent's eyelids were droopy and he offered no resistance. He tossed me the keys and I took my place behind the wheel, signaled to get back into the driving lanes and on to Atlanta.

It was easy then, and it still is now, to drive around Atlanta and find one's self at any time in the wrong lane going in a direction one didn't intend. It didn't help that it was already dark as I started around Atlanta from the southern end. Eventually, as we progressed around the western edge of the town, I found myself in the wrong lane going in a direction I didn't intend. I knew it pretty quickly when I noticed a sign for a town not on the route and the traffic moving with me had significantly dwindled. I heard from my companions a few choice words of ridicule, but I turned around, re-connected with the bypass and we were soon free from the clutches of Georgia's largest metropolis.

Since my car mates slept most of the time I drove, there was little stopping, except for gas and a rest room foray, which I would combine since I can hold it for a pretty long time. We entered Tennessee and the first toll road and my attitude became “drive fast. You're paying for the privilege.” There were no police vehicles anywhere in sight except at toll booths, nor were there many vehicles in either direction. At times I was cruising upwards of ninety miles per hour with a complete sense of calm and justice.

....

The course was laid out on the side of a hill that rose some 200 feet above the bottom with lots of turns and burms scattered all over. The longest straightaway, the length of the course, was at the bottom of the hill, negotiated from the top of the hill, straight down, to a ninety-degree turn to the right followed by a quick 180-degree turn to the left. There were four burms along the straightaway, a left turn leading up the hill, with more turns, then twists down into the middle of the course, back up to the top and over to the turn leading straight down. We stood, for most of the race, in line with the course leading down to the bottom and the two turns before the straightaway. One could see all of the course from there except parts of it out of view at the very top.

Once the race was underway, the styles of the two main competitors who we followed could not have been more dissimilar. DeKoster attacked the course with such smoothness that it seemed like he, his bike and the course were all one and the same. While all the other riders would slow or stop and bump through the turns, DeKoster sailed through each and every one so slickly that it seemed the course controlled his deceleration and acceleration itself. There was no herky-jerky motion from him during the entire race. The American on the Husky, Brad, was a different story. He made his way to the head of the pack, well behind DeKoster, through sheer brute force, willing his motorcycle through ruts and slams and burms and turns by muscle only. DeKoster was so smooth, I watched him come down the hill toward me with three riders in front, the farthest rider closer to the turn than from the top of the hill. DeKoster flew down the hill and spun through the 90-degree turn having passed all three riders with such effortless motion that I was stunned and awed. He lapped everyone in the race. No one could even finish the race on the same lap as DeKoster and watching how smooth and consistent his riding style was, none of us were surprised. He had no real competition that day.

– *from Act Fifteen, The Great Depression, pages 233-236, 238-240, 242-243, 247-248, 251-253, 258-259*

The local truck rental dealership rented me a pretty big truck for a reasonable price, cutting a check for deposit. I also rented what I call a two-wheeler, for stacking boxes on its bottom lip and rolling up the ramp into the truck. I had already boxed most of my stuff, so when I rolled up to the street in the truck, Jeff and Roger with me to help, I knew it wasn't going to take very long to stow it in the truck. Hell, I had far more truck than I needed, but I wanted that ramp to make it easy.

Moving day in the seventies, for me, was setting up tunes. Nobody back then cared about TV on moving day and I didn't even have one. Tunes were necessary, though, because moving is boring, whether coming or leaving. If one is leaving, the tunes equipment was the last thing packed and stowed. If one is coming, the tunes equipment is the first thing removed and immediately unpacked. Tunes were the way to go and I had them, though I had to borrow Mark's receiver. I had a tuner given to me by Steve, Mark's friend. I suppose I shouldn't be cynical, since it was an excellent tuner when one connected a long antenna, but I don't know why he gave it to me. Maybe it was stolen? Especially since it came with a green cloth bag. Who buys audio equipment in a green cloth bag? At least he gave it to me. He never wanted money for it.

....

Later that week I was in the basement going through some of my stuff that we had rushed down there to get it out of the rental truck, and I noticed the old dumbbells and weights Dad had bought for Mike years before. Suddenly, I had this notion: what if I lifted weights for the summer? What would happen? Would I notice any difference in my strength or my body composition after just three months of weightlifting? I didn't know the answers, but I had never lifted weights before and I wanted to see if I could change my scrawny appearance. Next, I had to decide what lifts I would do, since there were a lot to choose from. I finally decided to do the easiest, the simplest, since this was all a test and I wasn't certain anything would come from it. This would just be recreational weightlifting, like Chuck, my neighbor, used to do to build up his stamina for motorcycle riding competition. The easiest was curls, so I took the bar and placed two 10 pound weights on either end, tightened the screws holding them in place, and curled 35 pounds as many times as I could in one effort. I could do twenty, pulling the bar up to my chest and slowly, deliberately lowering it for the maximum effect. The following day, determined to do better, I curled twenty-two, and the next day, I curled twenty-two, again. I remembered hearing exercise advocates saying one should rest the day after a workout to let one's muscles develop, so I skipped the next day. When I curled the day after my rest day, I did twenty-five and it seemed easier and more productive. That sold me. I decided to curl four times a week, preferably Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and Sunday, but I

also decided that it didn't matter if I stayed on that schedule as much as I didn't skip two consecutive days. I kept that promise and before the end of the following week, I was curling 35 pounds more than thirty times. That's when I made the next crucial change. It was taking too much time with the same weight, but if I added five more pounds, could I curl at least twenty? When I bested twenty the next time, that was my routine. Once I could curl thirty times with the current weight, it was time to add five more pounds. And I stuck with it, because I could see the difference and, perhaps more importantly, I could feel the difference. With this change, came a change in my attitude, too. I was confident and I didn't put up with any shit from the guys, Jeff especially. Even they were seeing the difference.

Jeff had a friend who needed help moving furniture into a new apartment, which was the upstairs portion of a house. Kent and I agreed to help for beer and smoke. I deliberately took some of the more difficult tasks, like the bottom end of a couch. When anyone said that they should help me with that, I just advised them to get that top end moving. The owner of the apartment stopped by and he turned out to be Mister D, my gym teacher from high school who was a casual acquaintance of my dad. When he saw me move furniture in my scrawny appearance with as little effort as I seemed to show, even he was impressed. This was a guy with pretty damn solid biceps and calf muscles himself. He was no physical slouch and he was praising me and giving the bigger guys, Jeff and Kent, shit about their physical prowess. But it was true. Lifting weights in just that short of time, about a month, had made me physically stronger in my upper body while my legs were always strong and I didn't get winded like my companions.

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Jeff and I had a dilemma. Having finally moved to a house with cable access and having it rigged in three rooms including the bedroom we shared, we had no TV but we didn't want one. Cable could pick up radio stations far away and 'broadcast' them through the wire, but you needed a tuner and an adapter which connected to the cable on one end and split into left and right channels for connecting to the tuner. We had all that after the cable guy installed the rooms. He just gave us the adapter when we asked. Jeff had a pair of jerry-rigged speakers that worked pretty well. What we didn't have was a receiver/amplifier and we couldn't use Mike's. I scoured the paper over the next week or two and finally saw what I liked, a Harman Kardon receiver with excellent specs and wattage output at a more excellent price, less than four hundred dollars. As a bonus the same audio gear company was offering a very reasonable Dual turntable for ninety-nine dollars. Since I had saved a little more than that just from working that summer, I skipped on down there and landed both. I took them home, carefully opened the boxes, removed the gear and all the accessories and hooked them up. I had grabbed some extra RCA audio jacks, what are called composite cables now, and connected the tuner to the receiver. I turned on the tuner and the receiver, tuned it to KSHE in St. Louis and was listening to decent live FM rock for the first time in a long time. It was Jeff's idea about the cable and radio, but he was definitely impressed with the setup. Not only could he listen to decent music from radio stations, he could even play his albums. Now, all he had to do was get a tape recorder, preferably one that could record his superior medium of choice: eight track. That's where he and I disagreed. The future of enthusiasts' tape recordings would be cassette, I predicted, and the only proper 'superior' recording mechanism would always be reel-to-reel. One of us was right. Got a clue which one?

The summer of 76 seemed to fly by at a time, for me, when summers were especially fun. I had played a little softball with the boys, but quite often I would call Rick and meet him and some of the guys from State and other friends and we would throw the frisbee, drink beer, and smoke cigarettes and cannabis for hours and hours out at the park on the lake. Charlie, still in Massachusetts, had flown into town for a week and had taught me quite a few frisbee throws that I was still learning, but my favorite, and the one I can still throw better than anybody except a real frisbee pro, was what I call the thumb toss. With my hand palm side up, I put my thumb under the frisbee and hold the edge pinched between my thumb and index finger. With just a flick of my wrist, I can spin the frisbee with such rapid RPM that the recipient has to concentrate on squeezing it hard or it will just bounce off the hands. And it hurts, too. There are tricks to controlling it when you throw it like that, such as keeping the outer edge of the frisbee dipped slightly to the ground so that it cuts through the air with its quicker rotation instead of the air catching it and sending it sailing far away from the intended target. With more practice, I could launch the thumb toss fifty or more yards high in the air and have it seemingly drop from its heights right to the recipient. Whenever anybody sees me throw a frisbee with the thumb toss, they always want to know how I do it. Even Rick and his friends wanted to know, but when I show people, they try it, it goes badly and they quit

and never try it again. Still, they are always impressed when I snap one that sails in a virtual straight line right to them, while they have to loop their tosses and they never have the same velocity or rotation. Even Charlie can't throw the thumb toss like I can.

The allure of the State Fair, beginning the second week of August, had waned for me and I skipped attending it. Instead, it signaled the rapidly approaching end of the summer for college students. Our supervisor at DMV took the time to check with all the summer help for our expected last day of work and the address where DMV should send our last paycheck. I intended to work right up to the day before I would leave for Normal, which is exactly what I did. Barely a week after the fair closed down until next summer, I worked my last day at DMV. I said goodbye to cute little Candy and all the others that afternoon. Candy wanted me to look her up at Western Illinois if I ever got over there and I said I would, but I knew that I probably wouldn't make it.

All of the stuff that needed to be packed was already in boxes and ready to move. The next day I got up and drove down to one of the national rental shops and rented a small trailer. I had a hitch installed on the Torino, so I hooked it up and drove back to the homestead. Jeff helped me load up the furniture and I carried all the rest of the boxes and set them in the trailer, kissed Mom goodbye, said goodbye to Dad and Jeff, fired up the muscle car and drove off to Normal.

For those of you too young to know or were somewhere else experiencing nirvana outside the realm of the real world, there was no interstate between Chicago and St. Louis in 1976. Sure, maps showed it existed, until you looked real close and saw the designations between 'controlled interchanges' and 'four-or-more-lane highways' flip back and forth on the map. Lincoln was one of those places where the designations would flip, because Interstate 55 disappeared at Lincoln and merged onto US 66 at the outskirts of town, with speed limits of thirty miles per hour and traffic lights. They were building the bypass around town that would eventually be Interstate 55 but it wasn't completed then. Hell, there were still places south of Podunk toward St. Louis where the local road still intersected with the 'interstate;' they hadn't built those bridges, yet, or cut off the intersection with a frontage road. The Eisenhower Interstate System was still a work in progress, and going through Lincoln was a major pain in the ass with its many railroad tracks, traffic lights, stop signs, and grandmothers traveling to the grocery store on the highway at thirty-five miles per hour in a fifty-five miles per hour zone. Ahhhh! I hated it.

After what seemed like an eternity towing a trailer behind my muscle car, but what was really less than an hour and a half, I pulled into the driveway of 405 Normal Avenue in Normal. Yeah, that's right! I was going to live on Normal in Normal. That's a lot of normal, maybe too normal. If I was truly *abnormal*, would I be able to exist and function under and in conditions *too* normal? Only time would tell. I had unpacking to do and I didn't think about it too much, especially when I walked in the door and was greeted by the sweet pungency of cannabis smoke.

"You just missed it," Rick said, looking up from the couch already set up in the living room. Two other guys shared the couch with him and the other Rick was sitting in a chair next to the couch but at the corner of the room. You'll easily get confused if I call both by the same name and even more confused when I write that both were about the same height, both had blonde hair parted in the middle and both wore glasses. That's the end of the similarity, because the other Rick didn't party as much as we did and he had been dating Kris since high school and would marry her soon after college, while the rest in attendance at that moment had never really dated any girl steady. Because he was more serious, I'll call the other Rick 'Richard' from here on.

I just smiled and pulled out a joint I had rolled for the end of the trip. "It's times like these," I replied, as I displayed the joint, "when it pays to be prepared." I whipped out my lighter and lit up the joint and passed it to the guy sitting at the end of the couch next to me, a good looking guy who would soon be introduced to me as Brad, or Brad the ladies' man.

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Over the course of the next two days, the rest of the house mates made their entrances. Eric, with his fashionable mustache and John Lennon glasses, pulled in from Quincy before I had finished unloading. He had met Brad the ladies' man first but was closer to Rick and Steve and he was the first cool person I had ever met from Quincy, not slighting Kerry's relatives, since I had only met them once and had only spent part of a day with them. Eric was just a laid-back cat. Nothing seemed to rattle him and he was always smiling. He was rooming with Richard.

My roommate, the other Brad, wandered in from up north somewhere. He had curly, red hair, and a laid-

back, low key demeanor. His tone was usually very low so that sometimes you couldn't hear him. Immediately, he became Brad the Red, though I never called him that. We discussed the room arrangement and we moved my bed into a corner and I helped him move his stuff into the room. One of the first things he told me about himself was that he was a homosexual and would that bother me? I said that it wouldn't and it didn't. Then, he said that if I had somebody stay overnight, just tell him and he'd make arrangements to sleep in one of the other rooms, probably with Brad the ladies' man downstairs, since they were old friends and he didn't share his room with anyone. I told him the reverse holds, too. I'll find a place to crash. I liked Brad the Red. He was quiet and accommodating.

Drifting in the following morning, Saturday, from the nether regions of the northern Illinois tundra came David and his little brother, Lance. That this should bode for the typical expectations one would have of both, I'll save one the time which only experience can yield. Yes, they would both be fashionably late and often. We would wait for them, usually, though there would be times when we simply would not wait. Getting seats at a concert which is strictly general admission would be one such instance where we would not wait. In that context, it's 'you snooze, you lose.'

David and Lance were likable blokes, though they could display a little temper, too. David had the added burden of having to take his little brother under his wing and skirt around the requirement for freshmen to live in a dorm. Lance, to his credit, understood that and made just about every effort to be out with people he would meet that his brother didn't know, to take care of his grades on his own, to fix his own meals and generally take care of himself. Lance was a little looser than David, but I think a lot of that was his age and desire to belong. Other than that, they were eerily similar in approach, demeanor, reaction and temperament. They were almost identical in height, though David's hair was already receding. Lance liked to remind him, too. Hell, we all did.

Bringing up the rear after the sun had already set, Fu Manchu Steve pulled in, carried all his belongings from his car, with the generous and unsolicited help of some of the others, into his room downstairs while the rest of us watched in the living room, and introduced his fiance, Susan, and left. *Nice meeting you, Steve. Hey, bring that fiance of yours back any time. She's a looker.* I call him Fu Manchu Steve for fairly obvious reasons, since he had a very thick fu manchu. Come to think of it, he had very thick hair just about everywhere. Everywhere, that is, except for where he shaved so he could have his fu manchu. Steve was easy going, too, though you would have had a hard time being able to tell. He was almost never around.

Assuming you were counting and assuming you counted correctly, that's ten of us sharing one house with six bedrooms, one and a half baths, living room, dining room, tiny coat closet and a basement. With about seven cars and a drive that would park three deep from the garage—which we never used—to the road, we had to figure out a way to get cars in and out of the drive. The initial solution, which we changed later after a severe setback to the Torino, was to leave a set of keys in the dining room so that one's car could be moved at any time. It worked for a while.

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Wednesday I would attend my other three classes, along with Business Organization and Management, which was a four hour class with an hour every Monday through Thursday. My first class was at nine in the morning, so I was up reasonably early and ready to walk to campus and my class on time. I had my materials for the next class, too, scheduled at ten. I got to the building for my nine o'clock class and found the room easily.

The room had a foyer from the door about six feet in length where many students were standing as they decided where they would sit. From the foyer I could only see the last two rows at the back of the room, but immediately I spied a beautiful little blond, her hair falling over her shoulders and ending just above the mounds of her ample breasts. I squeezed past students until I could survey the entire classroom. There were three or four other attractive females, but my gaze soon returned to that cute little blond wearing a soft pink blouse with thin straps over her shoulders and loose white shorts failing to cover her thick, smooth and shapely thighs. As I watched her setting her materials on her desk, I noted that she sat in the back row. *Oh, that's a good sign.* It means she's not a goody-goody who's compelled to sit in the front row craving the constant attention of the instructor. The seat next to her and closest to me was unoccupied. *Oh, that's a good sign.* She was clearly the most attractive woman in the class and I thought I should get to that seat. That's where I want to sit. I stepped deftly around the students already sitting in the back row and the next row of seats until I stood before the empty seat next to her and calmly asked, as I looked down at her face, "Is this seat taken?"

She glanced up at me with her round face practically glowing, and her mouth opened with an inviting smile as she replied, “No.” *Oh, that's a good sign.*

I smiled awkwardly and asked, “Mind if I sit here?”

With no break in that infectious smile, she said, “Not at all.” *Oh, that's a good sign.* Immediately, she glanced down at her desk and reached into her purse on the floor to retrieve a pen and set it on her desk.

I slid into the seat next to her and set my books on the desk. I pulled out the notebook and text book for the next class and slid them under the seat on the tray. Pulling the pen from the ring binder of the notebook, I opened it and set the pen on the first blank page and tried to avoid staring at the physical features of the fine-looking woman now sitting next to me. It was hard. The top of her blouse came down below her breasts and I could see the soft white curves at the top. Her thighs were smooth and succulent and the skin of her visible body was tanned and fit. As the instructor strolled in and sat down at the desk at the front of the room, I wondered how I was going to be able to sit next to this beauty for the next class period Friday.

“Okay, for the next five minutes,” the male professor commanded as he began to organize his desk, “look around the room and if you're not happy with where you're sitting, get up and find a better seat because after five minutes I'll call the roll and make my seating chart here,” and he lifted a sheet of graph paper, “and that's where you'll be sitting for the rest of the semester.”

Nervously, I glanced around the room and watched a few of my fellow students get up and change their seat, but with my peripheral vision I waited for that beauty next to me to get up and move. After five minutes of five separate eternities, the professor barked, “Okay, settle down for roll call.” The cute little blonde sat calm and poised next to me as I glanced at her and she flashed a confident smile. *Oh, that's a good sign.* I smiled back at her as calmly as I could, knowing that I was going to be sitting next to her not just the next class period but the whole semester. *Oh, that's a good sign, too.*

....

Back to class the following day, as it would be after *every* weekend, I would eventually be sitting next to that fine little blond girl with the oval face, big eyes, and full-sized, adult features. What a chore to be forced to face that at the beginning of every week?

There she would sit in the desk next to me, always seemingly wearing just enough to cover her sensitive, secret areas and avoid arrest for 'public indecency.' Who came up with that term has some buried issue with determining what's decent and what is not. I had an unshakable sense that, should I be confronted with an unobstructed view of Desiree's sensitive, secret areas, I was *not* going to consider that view 'indecent' in any possible application of the word.

When class dismissed, I was up first but I didn't have to wait for her since she was right behind me out the door and next to me almost immediately in the hall. She asked about the party and I told her where I thought it was and that I enjoyed it and that we were all there pretty late. She claimed that she knew the people at the house where the party had been and asked how I knew them and who did I go there with. I told her their names and she seemed to recognize them. She asked where I was staying and I told her about the house on Normal Avenue with the nine other boys.

“Does Rick and Steve and Eric live there?” she asked, now greatly interested.

“Yeah, they do,” I replied, starting to think how small this world really is.

“I was wondering where those guys were staying,” she remarked, “since they said they weren't going to be in the dormitory this year.” She paused and looked in my eyes warmly, smiled, and asked, “So how do *you* know Rick and Steve and Eric?”

I smiled back as I told her that I had gone to high school with Rick and we were the same age and I had transferred from the Big U. Rick had discussed with the other boys about whether they would have room for me and they all agreed that I could stay with them, so that's how I ended up on Normal in Normal. She remarked that I must have a good sense for friends because she had known those guys for quite a while, and she knew they liked to party, but they took care of their business, and were decent people. So I could depend on them to not be 'publicly indecent,' I thought, and smiled briefly at the inside joke. She made a comment about how she'd like to see them again and I ought to let her know when we planned having our own party at the boys home. I promised I would let her know and I left thinking that this was a really good development. She knew some of the boys staying at the house and they could certainly vouch for me. I liked that idea.

....

There was something about that little blond girl in my Marketing class that wouldn't let go of me. I loved her appearance. Her body was everything I wanted in a woman. Her breasts were full and round in proportion to her size, which was also attractive. She wasn't real short but she wasn't challenging me height-wise, either. Her waist was thin and her thighs were just fantastic, smooth, clear, thick and muscular. Her arms were strong, too. She said she used to work horses, even traveled frequently to Kentucky for the stables and races. Her long, straight, blond hair was sexy, and framed in that hair was an oval, clear, smooth face and complexion and a smile which was warm and inviting. Her eyes were big and hazel, though they seemed to change color sometimes, and I thought I could see green one time, or light blue the next, or gray another time. Then, of course, there was that round and conspicuous bubble butt that was hard not to look at when she walked away. Actually, I could follow that butt anywhere. No way was I getting lost or distracted. It was in perfect proportion to her body, meaning it wasn't wide, it just stuck out prominently from the side. Her only blemish, if you could call it that, was one of her top front teeth was discolored, the result of a car accident and having it knocked out. They saved it, but the tooth had lost some of its nerve connections and the enamel had turned a bit yellow. She wasn't outwardly self-conscious about it, until you pointed it out to her. It was obvious to me that it was a sensitive subject to her and I avoided staring at it and never talked about it again.

Desiree was hard to figure out. We had a party the second weekend of school and I told her about it, but she was evasive. Finally, after Friday's class, she said she was going home for the weekend, again. Something pushed me and I asked if that boy who was only a long-time friend from high school was coming to pick her up, again. She said that he was and asked me if it mattered to me. I scoffed. Why would it matter to me? Isn't he just a long-time friend from high school, who only enjoys driving you back and forth from school to your family's home like a dutiful chauffeur and nothing more? He just drives away out of your driveway until duty calls, right?

If looks could kill, I wouldn't be writing this since I would have died at that very moment. Undeterred and quicker than she could come back with anything, I displayed even more bravado, when I casually said, "Anyway, you have fun in Heyworth this weekend, okay?" Immediately, I turned away from her to walk to my next class, already regretting that I was losing another opportunity to watch that beautiful bubble butt in motion. However, I didn't think this long-time friend from high school was *just* a friend.

The following week when we would see each other in the only class we shared, we were civil with each other, but we both showed the other the cold shoulder. Monday and Wednesday, I fiddled around after class was dismissed so that she would leave before me and I made no effort to catch up with her and she made no effort to slow down. Doing it that way, though, I got to watch that butt.

Friday, I walked into class and she was already sitting at her desk. I said, "Hi," as I sat down and she suddenly smiled and wouldn't look away. She watched me sit down and get situated and wouldn't look at anything else.

"Goin' home this weekend?" I asked as sweetly and innocently as I could muster.

"No," she said, smiling. "I don't know what I'm going to do this weekend. I might go to a party or two. I might stay in my room. I might go to a bar. I haven't decided."

"I'm going to a party tonight and another party tomorrow," I said. "Maybe you'd like to go?"

Desiree smiled convincingly as she replied, "Oh, I probably know which parties they are. Maybe I'll see you there."

When we left class, she waited for me. She said I should know about her long-time friend from high school. Yes, he was more than a friend. He had been her boyfriend in high school and occasionally they would still go out together. She insisted that it was more what he wanted, that she didn't feel very close to him but she had such a long history with him and it was hard for her to just forget about that. He was, after all, a decent boy and treated her well. Suddenly, she asked what time I was planning on going to the party tonight. I told her we wouldn't leave the house until sometime after ten at night and I asked her why she wanted to know. She smiled and said she just might surprise me.

Abruptly, she turned and walked away and I stood there unmoving, watching that butt bounce, my eyebrows furrowed, wondering what that all meant. She turned her head back and I raised my gaze to her face a little sheepishly. Certain that she had caught me staring at her butt, she flashed me a wickedly beautiful smile, turned her head forward, and kept on walking toward her dorm. Now I really was confused.

....

Just before ten that night, we heard a loud knock at the front door, and Lance got up to see who it was. When he yelled my name and said there was somebody asking about me, I got up to go to the front door while the rest of the boys just looked at me with that natural male curiosity. That cute little blond girl stood on the porch and smiled, big and bright, when she saw me in the hall.

“I think we should let her in, bro,” Lance advised.

“You better have a beer for me,” she advised, still smiling comfortably.

As I stepped around Lance to hold the door open and motioned for her to come in, I said, “We've got beer and smoke and entertainment.” I paused a moment and added, “And Lance. What else could anyone want?”

As she stepped in and passed me, she said, “And Lance is nice and polite, but I did come to see you.”

I peeked at Lance with my eyebrows raised and he shook his head and mouthed, “Mmm.” I didn't reply at all but just followed her into the living room and introduced everyone. Once that was done, I gently nudged her waist toward the kitchen to get us both beers. She admired the house and when we returned to the living room, some of the boys and she renewed old acquaintances. As we sat on the sofa close to each other, she whispered, “See, I told you I knew them and they knew me.” When I turned to look in her eyes, she was already looking in mine and she wrapped her left arm around my right arm and leaned against me.

Except for trips to the kitchen for more beer or to the bathroom to drain it, we sat on that sofa close to each other for hours. It had turned a bit cooler that late September night, and she had worn a light jacket, which she immediately removed. Wearing jeans and a long sleeve blouse open to the top of those luscious mounds of her breasts, she was soft and sensual leaning against me. During a brief time when everyone left the living room and we were alone, her left hand, casually laying on my right leg, starting rubbing my thigh. I lifted my right arm over her head and placed it gently over her shoulders and pulled her closer, looking in her eyes and down to her mouth and admiring the fullness of her lips. When I looked up into her eyes again, her eyes were cast down, but she lifted her gaze and stared into my eyes unblinking. I leaned my head toward hers and pushed my lips against hers and she pushed back. I could feel her hand squeeze my thigh, and she lifted her arms and slipped them around my arms as we shifted our positions to be more directly opposite. As we moved our lips and mouths against each other, I could feel her mouth open slightly. I pushed my tongue between her lips and felt her tongue greet mine and, immediately, we moved our lips and mouths and tongues with more energy and passion and I could hear her soft sighing. Two of the boys returned to the living room and we separated and looked at each other. Unashamed and lacking of apology, our separation was the only acknowledgment of the others returning. Instead we just stared in the others' eyes, smiling and squeezing each other.

There were more moments like that until it was after midnight and she said it was getting late and she should go back to her dorm. I offered to have her stay for the night and she smiled, squeezed me, and said she couldn't do that tonight but maybe some other time soon. I believed her.

– *from Act Sixteen, Variable(s) Plus Constant Equals Change, pages 262, 264-265, 270-277, 284-285, 288-290, 293-294*

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*I*n a Midwest town a man goes missing. All he's left are floppy disks from a memoir, but the early files have a password. His wife is frantic. With the loss of his income, the family faces financial ruin. She enlists the help of local publishers, who hire a security expert to crack the password. Now the whole intriguing story of a young man coming of age in the raucous Seventies and Eighties can be read by someone other than the narrator.

Book 1, *Adolessons*, begins with the statement, "I am a human being." From this humble truth come introductions to family, friends and enemies, and the town of Podunk, through the senses of a boy gathering experiences to form the flawed man he will become. From "shootin' the tube" to the exits of Joplin, Hendrix and Morrison, race riots amid the background of Abe Lincoln, peering through open windows, "skip week" and a high school diploma, admission to the big U, the face of Nixon resigning in a hog bam, two trips to Florida, drinking and smoking excessively, the rear fatal car accident, to the beautiful young woman whispering, "Let's go upstairs," *Adolessons* unfolds in a deliberate, brutally honest and open fashion, revealing an America between the coasts from the last days of '69 to the autumn of '76. Frequent rants are raw, crude, profane and occasionally sublime, commentary derived through the loss of the familiar and the arrival of the strange, the observations of "the man with no description."



Gregory R Schussele was raised near the corn and bean fields of central Illinois. A rural setting is his preference and he currently resides in Umpqua, Oregon, miles from the town center with its one building for the post office and bakery/convenience store.

Advised never to pursue a career as a writer, he has served as a part-time sportswriter for a daily paper and wrote his first novel, *Midnight Blue*, in 2007. Choosing fiction, he engages a reader with the irony of revealing a larger truth by telling a lie. This is his second novel.