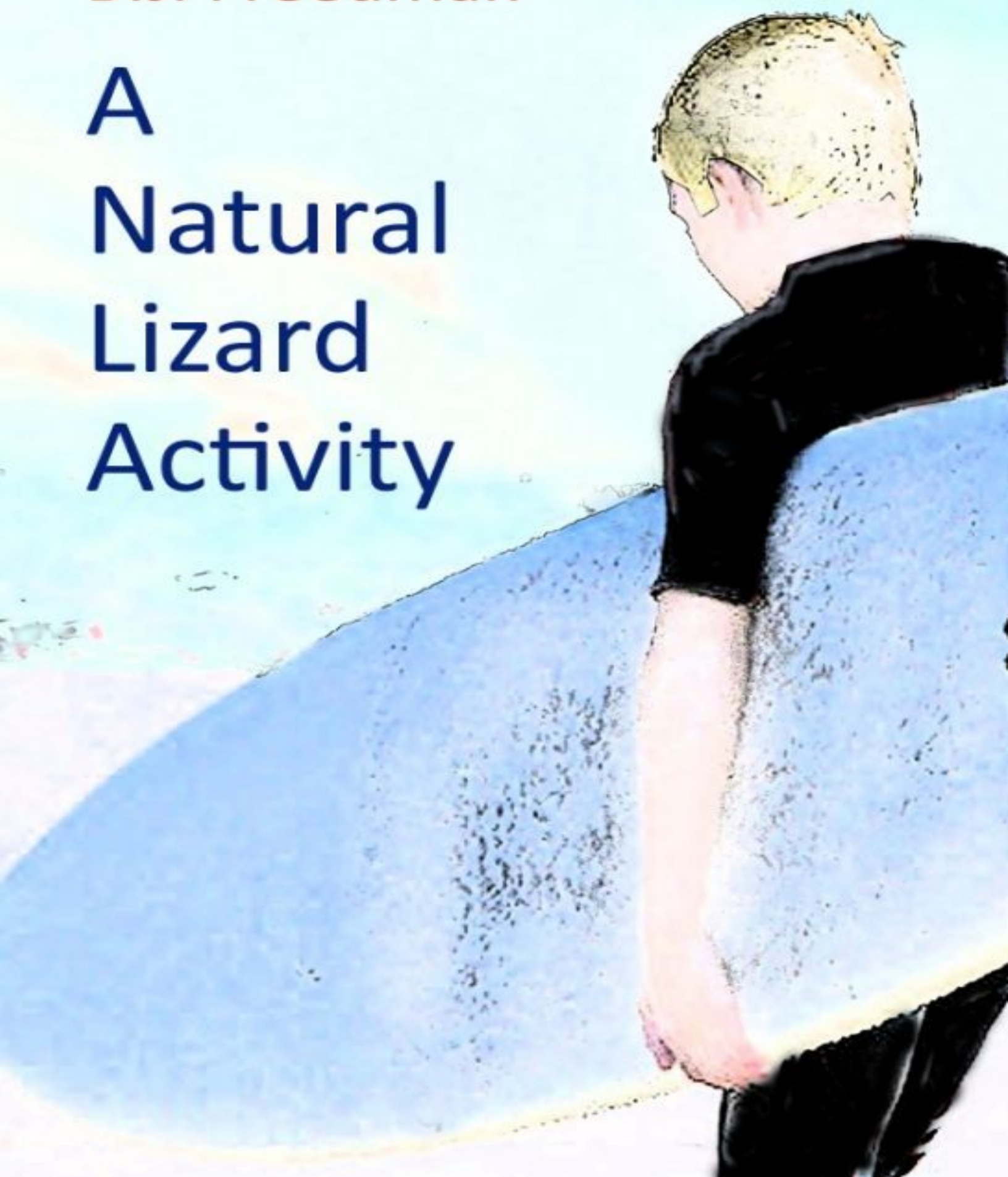


B.J. Freedman

A Natural Lizard Activity



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by

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One: Life in Venice

“Kimbo, you take care of your old Daddy,” my mother said, hustling us up into the Greyhound headed for San Diego, handing me the striped Guatemalan bag over Pop’s raggedy gray-haired head. The bag felt like it was full of bricks but it was only three or four sandwiches and Pop’s hardback I Ching, which we had to lug around with us even though he hardly used it since its predictions were never the ones he wanted.

“You’re a big boy now,” Mom added, which is a joke. I was practically thirteen, and I wasn’t even five feet tall. And Pop’s not old, he’s forty-six, even if he does look eighty or ninety just after he wakes up. But I got her message: after the mushroom thing she was pissed off but that didn’t necessarily mean she wanted the guy to end up crispy from dozing off with a lit burner. She just wanted Pop to get lost for a while out at the Dead concert, and she knew it was me that had to get lost with him, because ever since Mexico I was the only one who could more or less keep him from killing himself.

He was a pain in the neck the whole trip, talking his weird theories and then bothering me with idiot questions. “Kim, is this still Texas? When’s the bus stopping? Can we smoke when it stops?” and “Kim, where’d you hide that first album tape—the one with ‘Golden Road’ on it?” and “Kim, don’t you smell something funny?” This last one he whispered way too loud just as two old black women boarded the bus in Baton Rouge.

When he took a break from his whining, he started lecturing the other passengers. A fat girl from Dallas sat next to him and made the mistake of telling him she was on her way to a dig in Arizona. “I’ve always been blown away by archaeology,” he confessed. “And it’s my opinion that the mysteries of those ancient cultures, especially Native American cultures, are easily distilled into a single paradigmatic essence, although I have to admit I couldn’t tell you exactly what it is.” But he tried anyway, for four or five hours straight. The girl tried to shut him up by bringing out a book and pretending to read, but it didn’t work. She kept looking across the aisle and giving me the same is-he-nuts look his students used to trade back at the college.

Even though Pop was boring my pants off, it was better than staying in Florida, where we’d been living in a regular house, plop down in the middle of a dead-at-eight-o’clock subdivision. Only we had to stay awake all night, keeping Mom and the drug couple company while they sat up tooting, waiting for word that a ship had come in or waiting for someone to deliver money. Then they kept the curtains closed all day and sat around in the kitchen, the three of them, chugging herb tea and staring at the phone, trying to make it ring so that after the call we could finally relax. Meanwhile, I skateboarded around the neighborhood, my sister Lori hung out at the mall trying on makeup, and Pop sat out in the weedy yard, burning doobs while he watched the sun drop behind the television antennas.

So I wasn’t especially annoyed when Mom went ahead and kicked us out. I was burnt on the place anyway, and besides, I wanted to get to someplace I could surf.

We ended up in Venice, the beach where Los Angeles flushes its crap into the Pacific Ocean. It was the one place where Pop could get away with being nuts—people in Venice liked him that way—and I could spend the whole day half-naked and three-quarters stoned with no one hassling me. Aside from looking for dope, Pop passed the time fooling with an old bicycle, fixing it except for the brakes, and riding around the beach trying to sell off some tie-dyed T-shirts he’d talked off a vendor at the Dead

concert. We shared a stinky trailer with this creepy French guy—Gerard, the walking armpit. Gerard was another philosopher. He and Pop would roast a few numbers and then Pop would spin some stuff while Gerard nodded, mumbling in French.

I was outside all the time. I only dropped by the trailer for my basic needs—sleep, food, and dope—and to clean up after the two of them, hauling cans and butts across the Boardwalk to the litterbins. I'd go out surfing before the sun came up, and afternoons when a million assholes took over the waves, I buzzed around on the skateboard, barreling down the streets that slope to the beach. Or I'd cruise along the Boardwalk—which isn't made of boards, it's just the wide sidewalk between the beach and the first row of buildings—and try to sniff out some smokers. I wore old tennies and gray sweat shorts and usually nothing else except some Bullfrog to keep the sun from bringing out more freckles. The shorts were old, shrunk and then stretched out, and I felt almost as good wearing them as I used to feel down in Chiapas when I'd go for two or three weeks wearing nothing at all.

Which is how I ran into Bernie, originally—his radar tuned in on me when I boarded past him, on my way to the trailer. It was just after sunset, when the beach haze goes gray and the Valley people carry their towels and coolers back to their cars. I was boarding my way from the Pier and he was walking the other way, toward Santa Monica. I came around a curve and almost smacked into him, and then a second or two after I whizzed by, we both turned around for another look—he was so short, I thought he was a kid. He was with an older, Mexican-looking guy who walked like a faggot. I kept on going, and three or four seconds later I'd forgotten them completely.

Gerard's trailer was one of those little round metal ones you hitch up to a station wagon and take to visit Yellowstone. Gerard had it unhitched, the front propped up on a stack of old tires. It sat, slowly rotting, in a fenced-in lot right next to the Boardwalk and the beach, landscaped with windblown garbage and broken bottles. I knew it wouldn't be there much longer, though—a sign on the chain-link fence advertised two- and three-bedroom condos. In the same lot, there was another old trailer, too pitiful to live in, and a barely functioning blue Chevy Nova that belonged to Gerard.

Gerard was sitting on the hood of the Nova, smoking a cigarette, and watching the sky go red over the ocean. I swear I smelled him from half a block away. What pulled my chain was that he wouldn't ever use the showers on the beach, which were just across the Boardwalk, hardly fifteen steps away on the other side of a little grassy island. He had shoes on, so I asked him where he was going. "To get laid, I hope," he said, tugging on his stubbly chin.

"It's legal," I said. "A new one?"

"No, the same."

This was bad news for me, since any chick would forgive him one smelly date, but in the middle of the second he'd end up crawling back to the trailer. The week before he'd gone on a date and I'd rolled out my sleeping bag in the trailer's upper bunk, figuring he wouldn't be around until morning. But he woke me up at two or three in the morning with his loud pissing against the stack of tires. So I pretended to be asleep, and he crawled in next to me, and I couldn't escape the smell. Good thing there's a vent up there or I'd have suffocated. He had me trapped, and he even palmed my weenie, probably so stoned he thought it was his.

So I was thinking that maybe tonight I'd better go and crash in the Nova—lucky for me, I could pretty much stretch out in the back seat. I went inside the trailer and there was Pop, hunched over the tiny

Formica table, looking snappy in his pink and purple tie-dyed T-shirt. His gray hair was pulled back in a ponytail tied with a pink ribbon, and his white terrycloth headband said “Adidas” in pink letters. His eyes were pink, too, beside the cloudy blue centers, and they were sunk deep behind his long, pink-skinned nose. He was in a good mood, humming along with a Beach Boys song on his radio earphones and picking through a pile of fairly aromatic buds.

I squeezed in across from him and looked out the dusty little window at the tourists abandoning the beach; it was like we were in the world’s dirtiest, worst smelling submarine, observing an exodus of red-bellied, Ray-Banned fish. Pop hummed and smiled, showing me his old man’s teeth. He pushed the buds over to me, since I can roll a pinner better than anyone on the beach. I rolled up three and handed him one.

“What’s your trip?” he yelled, way too loud.

“You don’t have to scream, I’m not wearing phones,” I said, reaching across the bud pile and lifting one side of the phones away from his ear. “I’m taking one to smoke and I’m hiding the other one for tomorrow morning.”

“For me?” He looked worried.

“For both of us. Here, look, I’ll leave it inside your bag,” the striped one from Guatemala.

“They’re at it again,” he said. I guess he was listening to the news.

“Who?”

“What they don’t seem to understand,” he shouted, “is that the entire problem isn’t social, it’s metaphorical.”

I lit his pinner and stuck it in his mouth. He smoked it about halfway down in one long, smooth hit—his brain might’ve been going, but his lungs were still world class. He handed me the joint.

“You remember that weed we had in Barra?” he asked me. Sure, I thought, that was only about two years ago. “This stuff tastes the same. A touch sweet. Same effect, too, mildly introspective. You want a piece of bread?”

He was offering me the same stale sourdough I’d already passed on at lunchtime. On the shelf next to the bread was a tin pot with some vegetable petrified inside.

“Carrots and broccoli,” Pop recommended, exhaling a cloud. “You aren’t eating any vegetables lately, I noticed. Your brain needs the vitamins.”

What my brain needed was a quiet smoke on my little grassy island across the Boardwalk from the trailer. I left Pop to deal with the world’s social problems and walked over, kicked aside a pile of trash, and stretched out on the straggly grass, hidden from the coughing bums on the Boardwalk by a couple of dwarf palm trees and a gang-sprayed boulder. There was a sliver of moon straight up in the sky and even a few stars sputtering through the haze. When I sat up to fire the pinner, my back was cold and sticky—some asshole must’ve spilled Coke on the grass.

I took a long hit and eased down again and started thinking how dumb it was to come out to California for a Dead concert and almost a year later still be stuck here, scrounging for food and dope. I wondered what was happening in Florida—they’d moved and I didn’t have the new number. I’d written a few letters but I never got one, unless space-case Gerard had it buried under a pile of dirty socks. Maybe my mother was using her telepathic powers to send messages direct to my brain. She’d probably figure it’d be easier than writing a letter.

I closed my eyes and listened to the waves slamming the sand, and the black guys down on the

benches yelling and pounding on drums, a dead smacking sound, and bums banging into walls and dropping bottles, and dogs chained up on apartment balconies barking at everything below and my brain floated off into one of those quick, violent dreams that make you feel like you've been chased through outer space, barely escaping, but actually only last two or three minutes. I woke up all dried out and feeling strange, but I couldn't remember what all the excitement in the dream was. I shut my eyes again to try and recapture it, but all I got was a hot scene in the jungle, a bunch of hippies standing still around the van, maybe waiting for dinner. Was I supposed to be making dinner for everybody? I was the only one moving around, hurrying for something, while Pop was talking and passing out a joint I'd rolled.

After a while the bums and blacks got tired and chilled their noise; Pop doused the light in the trailer. Only a few of the worst dogs were still barking. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted the short guy I'd almost crashed into, and the Mexican, heading home. I thought about offering them a hit, but I was too wasted to get up. I lit the roach and had one last puff and laid back into the sticky grass. I was considering whether to risk the upper bunk or settle for the Nova.

Two: The Mushroom Thing

Truth is, the old fuck wasn't so nuts back in the early Seventies when he was a professor and only did the major drugs once or twice every semester, during his week-long final exams up in the Sierras or out at Point Reyes, where he'd pass around a canteen of psilocybin mixed with Calistoga water—"shaken, not stirred," was the joke—or brew up a peyote stew over the coals of the campfire. He fed most of it to his students, anyway, so they'd be in the right mood to appreciate a moonlit lecture on "Natural Periodicities" or "The Golden Road," or, if they were female, so they'd be in the right mood to appreciate his dick when he slipped into their sleeping bag in the middle of the night. Otherwise he just got loaded socially: a puff or two on the lawn in front of the campus cafeteria, for example. Back then, he was keeping it together to drive to class and answer the phone and fill out attendance cards and review topics for papers and sit on committees and listen to the adventures of nineteen-year-olds as they discovered The Truth. But after a few months in Mexico, when he realized he was free to do as much as he could handle, he'd fill up pipe after pipe with dark Oaxacan and swallow pulque, speeding flat out down his Golden Road, even in overgrown Chiapas, where we'd managed to drag our van five or six miles off the nearest dirt track.

We'd been camping out for seven or eight months in the jungle, old Mayan Indian country, green hills that hide half-buried stone ruins and thousand-year-old caves, pieces of an ancient culture preserved at random like the ashes of old turds at last year's campground. There's an occasional sunbleached town and once in a while a partly cleared rubber or cocoa plantation, or a meadow hacked out of the jungle and made into a cattle ranch. But mostly it's wild, dense forest, mountains and rivers and Indians and hippies, and a few miles farther south, near the border, Guatemalan rebel camps.

By the time we got there, we'd all turned into Indians, more or less. Back then, Mom was still skinny; she wore a long, embroidered skirt and a wide-brimmed straw hat to shade her freckled face. She was learning how to make bags and belts and she was usually in a good mood. Lori, who was nine, two years younger than me, let her hair grow long. I let mine grow, too, and I chased monkeys with a bunch of Indian boys and learned a hundred ways to fry a banana.

Mornings I'd hike down a trail near the van to bring up drinking water from a spring, stopping along the way to yak with the Indians in their village. After breakfast I'd go skinny-dipping with the Indian boys, lazing in the wide, shallow part of the river or cannonballing into deep pools up at the waterfall. Pop would show up later on, squat on a rock, and puff weed in his corncob pipe. He was blending his old college rap with new Mayan stuff, but I never actually heard that much of it—when he'd detour down some mystical side road, I'd get bored, jump in, and stay underwater for a while.

Of the six or seven Americans hanging out in our neck of the jungle, only one guy really liked listening to Pop. This was Howler, a short, furry guy we named after his pet monkey. Howler was knocked out by Pop's lectures, and he could smoke, too, matching Pop pipe for pipe. He'd lean back and watch the sky, his monkey asleep on his bare, furry chest, while Pop gave him the guided tour, sort of a chemical history of the world. Pop soon enough discovered that the little guy liked mushrooms—they grew all over the jungle—so one time, when Mom and Lori went off in the van for a week-long trip to town, Howler and Pop went up to the waterfall for a mushroom feast.

They must've started pretty early in the morning, because by the time I hiked up to the waterfall, they were both stretched out on a big flat rock, naked and stoned, with a big wooden bowl of fresh shroomers

between them. They were on their backs, staring up at the sky, both talking at the same time and not listening to each other. Pop was on a roll about the Mayan Sun God, his flavor of the month, and Howler was mumbling something that sounded like, “It was all so different in New Jersey.” From the river’s edge, I watched while they yakked and chomped down handfuls of bitter mushrooms, leaning over every so often for a palmful of river water.

After a while I slipped off my shorts and after a quick dip in the deepest pool I climbed out and sat next to Pop. Howler started crying, for no reason I could see, but Pop just continued with his lecture.

“The sun’s come up,” he announced, as if it hadn’t been burning down on them for at least two hours, “and, in fact, from the ancient waters, another son has indeed come up. It’s an excellent day for some solar searching, Kimbo, as you’ll notice if you look carefully at those monkeys hanging in the trees there, it’s what they’d call an auspicious day, set aside for the proper worship of the cosmic force, the giver of energy that shines above us, below us, and—had we the power to observe it properly—a power growing every minute on this rock, by the way—shines within us as well, along a Golden Road, possibly shining within us even more than it shines without—ha ha, I don’t mean without us, us not being here, I mean that’s Zen and not now, shining when no one’s looking. Kimbo, golden boy, do you do that? In the middle of the night, are you shining, or only now, when the sun blasts your golden hair with its rays?”—just then I looked over into the jungle and there wasn’t a single monkey to be seen, just the usual vines and leaves all tangled up with shadows, and in any case I’d never heard any Indian tell fortunes based on monkeys. But never mind—“And look, the herons flying above, ascending toward the life-giver himself, aren’t we really flying with them?” I checked out the sky and of course it was empty, blue, and birdless. So I tuned out on Pop and jumped back in the water and swam under the falls.

Pop was still talking as I crawled up and stood, naked and a little chilly, on a rock next to the falls. Howler had stopped crying and I watched as he chewed down a handful of mushrooms, slowly, zombied out, like an iguana. Then he leaned over for a handful of water but instead of drinking it he poured it all over his head and spit out the mushrooms and started jerking around like he had a wire loose and then he stopped and stared right at me. The sun was blasting down hard on me and the waterfall was splashing at my side. I knew that sometimes in the morning, if the time was right, you’d get a rainbow off that waterfall spray. I guess that’s what Howler was staring at—the crazy dark jungle, the blue sky, the waterfall, the rainbow, and me, lit up—when he froze up and let out a scream and tumbled, stiff as a stick, off the rock and into the water.

I was about to jump in and rescue him, but he came bursting up, spitting water, shaking his head and laughing like a maniac. He crawled back up on the rock and stretched out on his back, all of a sudden slowed down and rubbery. He stared straight up at the sun.

I swam over. “How long are you gonna do this?” I asked Pop. In my opinion, it was getting out of hand—and there were still enough mushrooms in the bowl to flatten a village full of Mayans. “You’re not eating all of ‘em?”

“Why,” Pop asked in a totally normal voice, “do you want some?”

“No, it’s just –”

“I didn’t think so. In that case, I’ll have another.” He popped one in his mouth and smacked his lips. This made Howler start cracking up again.

“Kim,” Pop began, chewing on the shroom, “did I ever mention to you the time the Great Woman of

Mystery appeared to us on Mount Shasta?”

“I heard it,” I said, giving up. I went down the hill to scrounge breakfast.

I was afraid to go back up to the falls, so after frying a couple of bananas for breakfast, I headed down the hill to fill the water jug. A couple of Mayan boys followed me and we chased monkeys for a while—not catching any, of course—and back at my camp we climbed into our big hammock, all warm and sweaty, and after a while we fell asleep all over each other. There were two little ones, around my age but smaller and skinny the way people get without hamburgers. They were both burned dark all over from running around mostly naked all day, and they had these kind of Chinese eyes that got round and white when they saw something interesting. One little guy was flopped across my chest and the other one was curled up down near my feet. When I woke up two or three hours later another one was asleep beside me, a boy about my size but probably a year or two older. His sweaty brown legs were all tangled up around mine and one of the little kids had stretched his feet practically up to my face.

I tried to nod off again, but the three of them all started squirming around and the next thing I knew the little ones had pulled down my shorts so they could all check out my dick, which had boned straight up to the sky, feeling the breeze, I guess, and the attention. The older one, like me, was pretending to be asleep while the little ones took turns rubbing on my dick. But his legs squeezed mine tighter. One of the little monkeys slipped off his shorts, doing this without falling out of the hammock, and climbed up on me so he could stick his little boner next to mine and compare. The two of them started giggling as they took turns poking their tiny brown sticks next to mine, which wasn't much longer but a little fatter, and so pink it was like a different species.

Then the older one sat up and the hammock started swaying and the two little guys watched while the big one tossed his shorts off to show them his boner, which was almost normal sized, smooth and skinny and dark, and curved banana style. He laid down on me and started rubbing up against me; I could feel his thing all slick and sweaty sliding up against mine and ten or fifteen seconds later I felt his legs shaking so I sat up a little and so did he, and I held him up by the shoulders and we all watched his boner jump like a pinball paddle and spurt out beads of creamy goo all over my dick and stomach. The stuff was almost alive, melting down my dick like hot candle wax and oozing into the creases between my nuts and my legs. The little ones kept spreading it over my nuts, tickling me and singing something Mayan I didn't understand, like they expected something to happen. But when nothing did we all flopped back to sleep, the hammock settling down in the thick jungle heat.

I woke up afraid, dreaming that Pop and Howler had turned into chattering monkeys. My shorts had fallen to the ground and the boys were gone. The hammock was almost in the shadows. Shivering, I hiked up to the clearing where Howler had his tent, about a half-mile from ours. His pet monkey swung by and crawled on my head and I fed it some bananas. The sun was behind the top of the hills by the time I got back up to the waterfall.

They were both out there on the same rock, with the mushroom bowl between them, but now they were sitting cross-legged, staring into each other's eyes and not saying a word, total lizard silence. I watched for fifteen or twenty minutes and they stared at each other the whole time, so I gave up, figuring they were so far gone that at that point God would have to take care of them. Anyway, it wasn't cold enough for them to freeze, and the moon would be almost full. I hiked back down to get some bananas; then I hiked up and

crawled over quietly and left them on a rock at the edge of the river. I was hoping there'd be enough light for them to see it was only bananas and not crescent-shaped creatures from Mars.

I slept in a hammock pile of boys down at the Indian village. They all seemed to know there was weirdness going on. The women fed me giant bowls of rice and beans and some kind of meat—it's my policy never to ask what kind, exactly—but no one asked me about Pop directly. In the morning I had an even weirder feeling, either from the nameless meat or the dreams I had. In one of them I really was the Sun King, sitting naked in a gold chair at the top of a pyramid. There was a long line of people climbing up the pyramid steps just to touch me, and I was totally bored with it—I kept thinking about ditching the crowd so I could stand in the shadows behind the pyramid and take a leak. I wanted to tell my dream to one of the boys, but I figured it would be useless; every time I'd done it before, they thought I was telling them some true story about the world I lived in before I came to Mexico. So I kept quiet, ate breakfast, and then hiked back up to the falls, with two or three boys tagging along.

The rock Pop and Howler'd been using was empty. The bowl was empty. We hunted around in the jungle and swam a ways down the river, but there was no sign of anyone. I was about to get really worried when I spotted the two of them standing behind the waterfall. The kids saw them, too, and they ran off screaming. I ran, too, figuring they'd seen something I missed. But I couldn't just leave the two of them up there; back at the village I gathered up some food and brought it up to the falls. I was hoping the two space travelers would be back to normal now that the mushroom supply was used up.

Trouble was, when I got back to the falls Pop and Howler were back on the rock in their original position, and the bowl was full of mushrooms. I heard a noise over in the jungle, too heavy to be a monkey—it had to be one of the Indians, who'd brought more mushrooms. Pop and Howler were chewing them up and laughing. I wanted to rope them in, drag them down the hill and get them to sleep it off, but I'd been around stoners long enough to know that you've got to let them come down easy or they'll sort of split open, like a dropped tomato. So I went back down the hill.

That afternoon I hiked up to Howler's camp to check up on his monkey, and when I got there Howler himself was there, passed out half inside the dumpy little shack he'd made from his tent and few poles. He was still naked; his hair and scruffy beard was all soaked and matted. He saw me coming and gave me a sad, tearful look, so even though I was anxious to hike up and check on Pop, I went over and sat next to Howler.

His eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks were sunburned, and he had tiny brown bits of mushroom stuck in his chattering teeth. He smiled at me; it was like a mushroom smiling. He was trying not to become a monkey, it looked like, and just barely making it. He stared at me like he wanted to tell me something but had forgotten all his words. He sat up and tugged at my arm, so I got down beside him and he hugged me, and even kissed my neck, not a sexy kind of kiss, just a slobbery smack you might give a cousin, or a monkey if he was holding still. I hugged him back and he hugged me tighter, and then he let go; I could see he'd suddenly remembered that Pop was still out there somewhere.

"At the waterfall?" I asked him. "He's there?"

Howler nodded and started crying, so I left him lying there and ran up the trail to the falls.

The sun was just touching the tops of the trees on the far side of the canyon and half the river was already in shade. Pop was on the rock, lying on his back with his hands stretched out. From the edge of the river I could just see his stomach rising and falling, but it seemed to be doing it pretty slow. I swam out to

the rock. Up close he looked terrible, sunburned and wrinkled, his beard tangled and full of mushroom pieces. His eyes were wide open, full of red, staring up at the sky with a wild, vacant look.

The mushroom bowl was empty, turned upside down. Pop opened his mouth and croaked, more a breath than a word, and then shook his head. Now I got freaked out—if he couldn't talk, he was definitely over the edge. I tried to lift him up, thinking I could help him swim back to the riverbank, but he was heavy, like a felled tree. He turned his head and stared at his arm like it wasn't even part of him. So I spread him back out on the rock and swam back by myself.

I got a few Indian guys and Howler and we carried Pop off the rock and down the trail, holding him over our heads like a canoe. At the village the Indians brought us to a hut where we put Pop down, flat out on the ground. One of the Indians brought a skinny old man out of the hut. The old guy looked like he'd graduated a long time ago from the school Pop was just enrolling in. The old guy started arguing with the man who'd gone in to get him, and after five or six minutes of pointing down at Pop and yelling in a wheezy mixture of Mayan and Spanish, the old guy spat on Pop's foot, shook his head, and went back into the hut.

Now I started getting angry at Pop. If he hadn't sat around chewing his brain up I'd be splashing around naked in the falls myself, swimming with the boys, or toasting corn over a fire or lying in the hammock catching the breeze. Instead I was wet and it was getting dark and I had a half-empty father flopped in front of me, speechless and useless. Now I started crying.

"Take him over to Casas," one of the Indians said. "There's a clinic, maybe they'll have something."

"An antidote," Howler said.

"We don't have the van," I said. The bus to Casas stopped on the road, but that was hour's walk, and it wouldn't come by until morning.

"Jesus Christ, okay," I said. "You got any clothes we can borrow?"

It was almost dark by the time we staggered off the bus in Casas. Pop still wasn't talking, but the truth is I was starting to warm up to the idea that he might not say anything for a while.

We found the government clinic; just a room in a school building, and lucky for us there was a doctor there that week. He was a regular Mexican, and he spoke some English, so it was easy to explain to him what'd happened -- of course, one look at Pop and you could guess. The doctor looked into Pop's eyes and right away crossed himself, and stepped back, looking at me like I was already an orphan. "He hasn't eaten anything in a month," the doctor said.

"Well, he hasn't eaten anything but mushrooms for three or four days," I said.

"Can you give us anything?" Howler asked.

"Let the time pass," the doctor said. He took my hand. "This man is not an Indian. In a few days, when he wakes up from this dream, be sure to remind him of that."

"But what can we do now?" I asked.

"Feed him. Rice is good. Plenty of water. And keep him out of the sun."

So we took a tiny room at a small hotel near the bus station. We found a cheap café nearby and Pop managed to eat some, though he still wouldn't talk. He wouldn't look at Howler, either; all through dinner, he kept staring at me, like he was trying to tell me something. It was worse than listening to him.

The room only had one bed, so we laid a blanket on the floor for Pop and I shared the bed with Howler. He hugged me as soon as we got in bed, and I think I felt his dick rubbing me a little, but I was so

tired I wasn't noticing, and I slept straight through until morning.

When I woke up, Howler was snoring away beside me. His shorts were off and his dick was rising out of a fuzzy brown patch like a palm tree in the weeds. It didn't get very big, maybe the same as the boy in the hammock. I thought for a minute about rubbing it a little, but Howler looked pretty happy sleeping so I laid off.

The door was open and I could see Pop sitting out on the balcony in the morning sun. He'd washed his face and straightened out his hair and tied it back. He was holding a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. I pulled on my shorts and walked out to him.

"You okay now?" I said.

"Let's pick up a sack of rice as long as we're here and take the ten o'clock bus back up the hill," he said, sounding more normal than he'd sounded in five or six years. But I could see he was holding something back, and I knew right away he was going to be crazy forever.

Three: Food for Thought

The day after I saw the short guy and the Mexican started up like a normal day with a morning surf session featuring mostly swells and my feet getting snagged in a hunk of seaweed. I checked in at the trailer at around ten or eleven. Gerard was still gone, but Pop was there; he'd finished his morning routine at the public restroom down the beach. He was carefully dressed in a blue-and-green tie-dyed T-shirt, faded Levi's cut-offs with ragged threads hanging down like unnoticed snot, a mostly purple Guatemalan belt, tie-dyed basketball sneakers with the toes cut out, a blue-and-white bandanna folded into a headband, and, flashing out from under his beard, a fake pearl choker he must have looted from somebody's trash can. He'd already smoked up the extra pinner; the roach was on the table next to a pint of milk and a package of stale Oreos: breakfast. I drank off the rest of the milk.

"Pops, you going someplace today?"

"I don't know. What day is it?"

"A nice, sunny day, either Tuesday or Wednesday. You know, I meant because you're all dressed up."

"Oh, I was just in the mood." He wiped cream-white Oreo crumbs off his beard. "Also, some guy came by yesterday, a photographer. He wants me for one of those postcards."

"Is he paying you anything?"

"I forgot to ask. I was getting off on the idea of being famous—it's worth it for that."

"Well, see if you can score off him. Something, anyway."

"It's good publicity, don't you think? Maybe some agent will see it and hire me for a TV commercial."

"For dog biscuits."

"You should have him do you, too. See if your personal magnetism survives the translation into mechanical imagery. You'll be around?"

I didn't know if he wanted me to get my picture done so he could stick it on the wall or if he really thought I could make us some money. "Not if I can help it," I said, figuring either way I wasn't going to get involved.

I went and sat out in the front seat of the Nova, behind the steering wheel. That was my usual daytime thinking spot. Between the three of us, actual thinking was generally up to me. Gerard was too lazy to make any plans beyond which side of his crotch to scratch, and Pop was philosophically opposed to it—he was always talking about not thinking, aside from talking about not talking. Gerard, since he was sometimes employed and French, handled mostly food and sex, and Pop was mainly in charge of music and drugs; any plan beyond the next two hours was my problem. Of course I'd rather have dealt with drugs, where I was an expert, or sex, where I hadn't actually done anything except rub boners with Mayan boys and Howler. I'd discovered four or five months ago that I could jack off, which had so far meant squat since I was so little any babe I ran into figured I was too young to do anything.

I was thinking about where we'd live after they started tearing up the parking lot to put up the condos. A couple of shirt-and-ties had showed up the week before, in a car with the name of a real estate company stenciled on the door, so I knew something was about to happen. Gerard'd have to move the trailer, and Pop would take the opportunity to start whining about finding a better place. I wouldn't mind that, either, I thought—a place with a real bed, a shower, maybe even some privacy in case I found a girl that likes midgets. If Pop could spread the word to his friends, maybe we'd score an extra room in someone's

apartment. Or maybe we'd go back to Malibu, if I could get Pop to chill his act a little. Also I was thinking it might help if we had some money.

I wasted the rest of the morning on the skateboard, walking up and speeding down the long, steep road that bridges over from the highway onto the Santa Monica Pier. It's an original road, full of bumps. There's always a chance of hitting a pothole going forty or fifty miles an hour and either sailing off the side onto the pilings or flipping into the middle of the road under a Dodge van full of Mexicans. On weekends there's a crowd, and I used to get some applause when I'd make it safely to the bottom. Today no one was watching, and good thing, since for some reason speeding down the hill, my dick was hard the whole time. Maybe it was because I was only wearing those little gray shorts.

I still had a roach from the night before, so after a while I went under the Pier and had a smoke instead of lunch. It's cool and breezy under the Pier, but these days you have to stay on the bicycle path. Used to be you could wander around the old wooden pilings, even surf through when the tide was high, but the City put up a chain link fence. Too many homos were doing it behind the pilings at low tide, and Mexican gangs hung out waiting for blondes from Iowa taking a shortcut from the hot dog stand back to Mom and Dad on the beach. And black guys, standing in the shadows. One of them would walk up to you and say, "Gimme a dollah," so you did.

I was sitting on the skateboard watching seagulls flap through the pilings when my friend Junior came barreling down the bike path on his ten-speed. Junior had had the same extremely cool bike for three months without anybody stealing it, which must have been a record. Junior was eighteen, just out of high school, tall, really black, with incredible muscles from surfing and biking. When he was sweating his skin was blacker and shinier than my wetsuit. He wasn't a regular black guy; he was quiet. He smoked dope, but I never saw him drink. We shared my pinner without saying much beyond "Yo," and then he gave me some donuts he had in his bikebag, and rode off. The donuts were the old-fashioned, crunchy type, real sweet, and to make them taste better I remembered the flavor of the milk I'd had for breakfast and blended it in with the sugary taste of the donuts.

Most of the afternoon I boarded down the bike path or the Pier, looking at girls and trying to keep my boner down. I checked in at the trailer, but no one was around. I washed some dishes and scraped the carrot gunk out of the tin pot and set it in the sink to soak. I slept for an hour or two up in the top bunk, getting all sweaty; then, near sundown, I took a shower down the beach and sat over on my little grassy island waiting for my shorts to dry. I was getting hungry, for food or a smoke, or something. I wasn't thinking about the short guy and the Mexican, but I wasn't real surprised when I saw the short guy, this time without the Mexican. He was walking up the boardwalk toward the island, smoking something fat; I felt like I was pulling him in, like a kite. He stopped and looked at the trailer; then without really looking my way, he strolled over and sat down right next to me, like he'd known me for a million years, and without saying a word he handed me the joint.

Four: It's Legal

I took a big hit and coughed most of it out. The doob was done all wrong: too fat to begin with, and rolled up so loose it was burning too hot and too fast. Also, it was the kind buds and the smoke expanded in my lungs. My eyes went all watery and I felt like a total jerk, coughing and crying like I was a virgin at smoking. I even felt a tear slipping down my cheek as I handed him the doob and we looked at each other close up. The guy's hair is too short for this quality of weed, I thought. The T-shirt's too clean, and it's tucked in. He was a little guy, like Howler minus the beard and fur, maybe five or six inches taller than me at the most. I watched him while he took a quick hit. He blew the smoke out right away and looked down for a second at my wet shorts. He must have more where that came from if he's blowing it all out, I thought. He passed me the burner and looked out at the sand and the waves. "It's Hawaiian, be careful," he said.

"Strong shit," I said, inhaling and trying not to cough. "You should roll it tighter."

"I'm lousy at rolling."

I'll do it for you, I thought.

"You live in that trailer?" He was almost whispering.

"Sort of. I mean, when I'm not out I have to put the board somewhere. You live down that way?" I was imagining a one-bedroom condo with a beach view and a barbecue grill on the balcony.

"Half a block off. It's an old house, split up. It's crummy, but it's quieter than being right on the beach." He took another one of his tiny puffs. The roach was starting to fall apart from being rolled so bad and burning so fast, so when he went to hand it back to me I held his wrist while I licked my fingers, wetting them so I could roll the roach off his fingers and into mine without it dropping. I was hoping this old dooper's trick would make up for all the lame coughing. He stared right at me while I took a hit. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't look serious, either. It was like he was drinking me in, like I was some great movie he could only see once.

"Who's the Mexican guy?" I asked. The faggot.

"Oh, him. Mario. He'd kill you for calling him a Mexican."

"Why, he's not?"

"He was born in Covina," he said, studying my face close up again. Maybe there was sand on my nose. He had a watery, stoned look in his eyes and I probably did, too. "I share the place with him. Separate bedrooms."

The roach came apart on the next pass and some of the ash fell on my leg. Before I could do it, he reached down and brushed me off, which tickled. I was thinking, I'm toasted.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Kim."

"As in?"

"As in Kimberley. It's English." I was waiting for him to tell me it was a girl's name, like most people do, but he didn't.

"You know the book?" he said.

"Well, I heard of it."

"It's about this boy, he lives with the natives."

“That’s me. I lived in Mexico for a while.”

“Oh, that figures,” he said, like he already knew all this stuff and was just checking to make sure I was real. “How old are you now? Thirteen?”

“How’d you know?”

“I didn’t, I guessed. Two hits and I’m clairvoyant.”

“Whatever. I’m wasted.” What was he trying to tell me? “It’s just that usually people think I’m more like ten or eleven, I’m so dinky.” This was my usual explanation. He stared at me some more, and looked down again at my shorts. “No, really,” I said. “People tell me I should be a model, they’re always looking for kids that look younger.”

“That’s an idea.”

“We lived up in Malibu for a while, at Martin Sheen’s. The actor? It was his idea.”

“We?”

“Me and Pop. You didn’t see him last night? Gray beard, tie-dyed T-shirt?”

“I guess I wasn’t noticing anybody else,” he said, giving me that moony look again. For no reason he let a couple of his fingers ski down my leg, which gave me goosebumps and made my nuts tingle a little. “You’re cute enough to be a model,” he said. “If you want, I’ll take some pictures of you. Of your face. I’ll make you some, what are they, eight-by-tens.”

“You’re a photographer?”

“Well, not professional. You want to come over? We can smoke some more, or you can roll a few to go.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, even though I knew I’d go. I looked at him, but now he was avoiding my eyes, looking down at the sand or out at the waves. I must’ve looked surprised when he touched me. I was thinking, maybe I’ll touch him back, give him a little friendly punch, but he stood up, so I got up, too. He really was only a few inches taller. “Hey,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Bernie.”

“As in Bernard?”

“Hey, excuse me, it’s not my fault. I was too young to object, at the time. Go tell your old man where you’re going.” He stood kind of close to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Oh, fuck him,” I said, “he’s not around, anyway. Besides, he never tells me where he’s going.”

Bernie waited while I went into the trailer. I wrote a quick note and borrowed one of Pop’s hooded sweatshirts, one that opened all the way down the front to catch the breeze. My shorts were still damp so I put on some underwear and as I was pulling the shorts back on I had a feeling that Bernie was watching me, even though I knew he was across the Boardwalk, sitting on the island. I imagined his hand sliding down my leg again and my weenie, I guess expecting to be the next stop, stood up to say hello and shake hands. I wasn’t worried—even when it was stretched out to the max, once I had the shorts on it wasn’t really obvious.

At the last second I grabbed the skateboard in case I stayed late and had to speed past the weirdos on my way back.

Bernie started walking and I zoomed past him. He was casual, not hurrying to catch up with me. From a distance, in the fading light, he still looked like a kid in the T-shirt and shorts.

Bernie’s street was a normal Venice side street, with houses on both sides of a narrow cracked

sidewalk and alleys at the back for cars. They were all old wooden two-story houses with crummy front gardens and big old trees in front, except at the far end of the block next to the main road, where two boxy apartment houses were set in concrete and surrounded by a chain link fence. Inside the fence two angry black Dobermans were barking their teeth out. We walked up to a side door at one of the old houses and Bernie took out his keys. I was standing on the step below him so when he dropped the keys I picked them up.

“The fucking dogs drive me bananas,” he said, but I think he wasn’t used to being stoned in front of new people.

Inside, we went straight up stairs that led to a hallway. In front of us was a door, which turned out to be Bernie’s bedroom. To the left, down the hall, I could see the kitchen and a door I figured was the bathroom, and to the right was the front room, kind of small but with a big bay window and a color television and a giant brown Barcalounger. The whole place seemed small, like it was really just half a house made to rent out. Bernie showed me the Mexican’s bedroom, attached like an overgrown closet to the front room; it was so small the guy had to roll up his futon so the door would open.

“I pay more rent, so I have the normal room,” Bernie said.

“What’s the guy do?”

“He’s a patternmaker. For clothes. When you make clothes, it all starts with a paper pattern, you use it to cut the fabric.”

“Yeah, I’m aware. My mom used to make stuff in Mexico.”

We stood in the hallway for a minute, kind of listening to the house, then we went into Bernie’s bedroom, which wasn’t all that big. And it was too clean; I thought maybe he had a maid or something. Rows of books stood up straight on the bookshelf next to the double-sized bed, which took up half the room and was made up with a quilted bedspread and four matching pillows. There was a candleholder on the bookshelf, but no little wax drips next to it. In one corner, there was a desk, clean on top except for a beer mug with pens and junk in it. There was only one window, to one side of the bed, facing west toward the ocean. There was only one thing up on the wall, above the bookshelf next to the bed, an Indian rice-paper print, one of those gods with a thousand arms and legs riding on a tiger. The god was holding up a flaming sword, like she was about to slice your head down the middle.

Bernie leaned into a narrow closet next to the desk and brought over a Ziploc full of purple buds, a pack of Bambu papers, and the top of a shoebox. I sat on the bed, cleaning a piece of bud and rolling pinners, while Bernie brought out his camera, a tripod, and an old aluminum spotlight. He set it all up, screwed the camera onto the tripod, and looked at me in the camera. I was thinking, he’s serious about the pictures.

“They’re ready,” I said, holding up a pinner.

“Fire it.” He tossed me a lighter from the desk drawer. “Sit in the chair, I’ll check the light.”

I was so looped I nearly knocked the chair over. I turned the chair around backwards and sat down with my arms wrapped around the back of the chair. We had a few more hits. I was starting to feel silly, sitting there in that clean, warm room with Bernie staring at me through the camera and the Indian god sitting on the tiger staring at me. I took a hit and laughed, coughing out a cloud of smoke.

“Hey, it’s an ad for Hawaiian,” Bernie said. “‘Kids love it. And young boys need it special!’” He eyeballed me again through the camera. “Let’s try one.”

“Where do I put this out?” The doob was almost burnt.

“Here,” he said, leaping over and bringing a Denny’s restaurant ashtray from the desk drawer. I thought, the guy keeps *clean ashtrays* in a *drawer*. He went back behind the camera. I was starting to get used to him looking at me.

“Do I look okay?” I asked. I was so bombed I thought maybe my eyes were crossed.

“You look great, don’t worry. But wait a sec.”

He came over to me in what seemed like slow motion and pushed his fingers through my hair, lifting it back away from my forehead. I was getting goosebumps again. “Try to sit up straighter,” he said, so I did. He lifted my chin up with his finger and let the finger kind of slide up near my lips.

“Can’t you see my freckles?” I asked.

“Of course I can,” he said, touching a couple. “They’re cute.” Cute?

“My nose is kinda ugly.”

“Well, it runs in the family,” he said. I knew it was the oldest joke in the world, but it cracked me up anyway and I had a laughing fit. “No, really, it’s a perfect little turned-up nose. I wish I had one just like it.” He went back to the camera.

“It’s like a pig.”

“Don’t be crazy. Anyway, it looks good in the camera. Okay, smile, if you can.”

I smiled, but now that he was taking pictures, it felt like I was smiling all wrong. “Can’t you see my crooked tooth?”

“All the better to bite me with, young man,” he said. He clicked off four or five pictures while I concentrated on smiling like a human.

Then he said, “Why don’t you take off your sweatshirt?”

So I did. It was pretty warm in the room, and now I could feel the breeze coming in the window.

“Surfing muscles,” he said.

“There’s freckles on my chest.”

“Don’t worry, I can only see from your shoulders up.” He came around to fix my hair again, this time taking a comb from the beer mug and holding me by the shoulder while he combed. I was zoned, but I was pretty sure he was trying to touch me more than just by accident, and if he wanted to make my dick get hard, it was working. But I didn’t think I was poking out enough for him to notice, since he kept looking down at my shorts. And the more he touched me, the quieter he got, like he was waiting for me to do something. He started fiddling with the spotlight, so I got up on the bed and took a few magazines from the bookshelf. Inside a GQ I came across a Calvin Klein underwear ad, a big black-and-white photo of a bodybuilder guy, all muscles and tan, leaning back on white boulders in the sun, wearing only some white Calvin underpants. The guy had a big bone and the shadow was really obvious. It gave me an idea: a way to see what Bernie really wanted to do. “Look at this,” I said, holding the magazine open, and then I fell back on the bed, stretching out like I was relaxing on a big boulder, and I said, “Let’s take one the same way.”

Bernie stared down at me, looking kind of surprised and spaced, so I pulled my shorts down to my knees so he could see I had white underwear, like in the photo, and a bone inside, too.

“Well, if you want to,” he said. “But maybe we should smoke first.” He lit up a roach and passed it to me. I pushed my shorts the rest of the way off. Bernie couldn’t take his eyes off the little pyramid my dick

was making in my underwear. He was pointing his spotlight right on it when we heard footsteps on the stairs and a faggoty “Hello?” outside the door. I sat up.

“Ocupado,” Bernie said. “It’s Mario,” he whispered to me. “Don’t worry.”

“Well, enjoy yourselves, kids,” Mario sang out. Hearing a Mexican outside made my bone droop a little, but I was afraid to reach in and perk it up.

“Thank you very much, Mario dear,” Bernie said. He took another one of his quickie puffs off the roach and then stubbed it out in the ashtray. I flopped back on the bed and gave my bone a quick rub. It really was a nice bed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept in a comfortable bed, in a regular room. I was so spaced I almost fell asleep, lying there waiting for Bernie to get his act together. I shut my eyes, the same as the guy in the ad photo had done, and a minute later my little bone felt a hand pulling on it—Bernie’s, of course.

“It’s gotta be to one side, to get the shadow,” he said. He moved it around, letting his fingers wrap around it for five or six extra seconds while it got harder, and then he went back behind the camera. “It looks huge from here,” he said, and even though I knew he was bullshitting me, it did feel like it was getting bigger when he fooled with it than when I’d done it myself. I wanted him to do it again.

“What’d you expect, playing with it?” I opened my eyes and sat up.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Hey, it’s no big deal,” I said, “it’s only—” and then I fell back again. Bernie didn’t say anything but I felt like I was pulling him towards me again, like on the Boardwalk.

“Let’s just do this one later,” Bernie said, and he clicked off the spotlight and the room light, and then, in the same easy way he’d sat down on my island, he came over and stretched out next to me and put his arm around my shoulder and his hand back in my underpants. I was up real close to him, and he smelled okay. The room was totally dark and the ocean breeze was floating through the window next to the bed.

“Okay?” he whispered. I could feel him shivering a little.

“It’s legal,” I said.

I kept drifting off downstream, almost sleeping. I was lying on my back and he was above me, kissing my face and my neck. Then I felt his hand around my dick and I woke up all the way. I wanted to try kissing him. “I never really kissed anyone before,” I told him.

“Open your mouth,” he said, and his tongue touched my tongue—I got shivery all over. I had to get closer to him, so I pulled him down on top of me. I felt around through his shorts to see how hard his dick was getting. He reached again for mine; I started pushing my underpants down so he could get to it easier; everywhere he touched me it was like I was about to jump out of my skin. When he let go for a minute I wrestled myself on top of him and he laughed and let me lift off his T-shirt, but before I could unzip his shorts he had me down again and he leaned over and started kissing my dick, which I thought at first would be disgusting but was actually the best thing yet.

“I’m sorry I’m so little,” I said.

“It’s legal,” he said.

“You probably think I’m eleven, don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“I mean, no hair or anything.”

“Never mind. How’s this?” He was licking it slow, just around the top, and my dick was straining

practically out of its skin.

“Don’t stop,” I told him, but he did. We both laid back for a while, drifting off and dreaming and letting the breeze cool us down. Then we started in again, wrestling around. I managed to get his shorts off, and then his underwear—white Calvins, it turns out—and he let me play with his dick. I tried to make it come, but no luck. A few times, though, I could tell he was almost there, he was squirming around so much; I put my head down on his chest, listening to his heart pounding away. Then he said, “Easy, Chief,” so I let up and we just hugged for a while, lying in the darkness. He combed his fingers through my hair and I tugged at the hair down near his dick and we practiced kissing.

“You okay?” he kept asking me, and I didn’t know what to tell him, I mean—*obviously* I was okay—so instead of answering I’d put his hand down between my legs or kiss his cheek, and then instead of talking more, he’d tickle me. It was the same as wrestling with a kid, only we’d go on to the next step. Instead of hiding the boners we got from wrestling around, we were doing something with them.

After a while he was back to licking my dick, slow at first and then faster, squeezing my nuts with one hand, the other one open flat under my butt, lifting me up into him, and I was getting so totally stoked I could hardly stand it any longer. I reached up and put my arms around his neck and he pulled me up closer. “Watch out,” I said, and a second or two later I felt everything rushing inside me and I spurted out all over him. It was so much I didn’t believe it was me that was doing it. He set me down and I grabbed at his dick but nothing was happening, so I made him lie down while I played with it, and kissed him, and in a few minutes he popped, too, his dick leaping around in my hand until I was all soaked and sticky. “Thank you,” he whispered, while I wiped my hand on his stomach.

“De nada, Chief,” I said, sinking back down onto the bed. I was thinking about getting him to suck me again, but he pulled up the quilt and fell asleep so fast I didn’t get a chance. It was so dark and quiet and peaceful, the two of us under the fat quilt with the salty air breezing in above us, that there was no way I could wake him up. So I slithered up close and we curled together all warm and sticky. He still smelled pretty good.

Five: Make Yourself At Home

I woke up and looked out the window. All I could see was the brown-shingled roof of the house next door and a rectangle of empty fog-gray sky. A white cat trotted across the edge of the roof and disappeared down the other side. I had to admit this was better than waking up in the back of the Nova and watching some drunk barfing on the sand. Bernie was still asleep beside me, lying on his back, looking older in the daylight. I was getting sweaty, so I pushed the quilt down, and there I was: personally, I thought I looked kind of funny. Too small, for one thing, with freckles across my chest and my arms and legs tanned halfway up from wearing half a wetsuit. The dried-up remains of last night's doings, mine and Bernie's, were stuck all over my stomach like spots of old glue. Farther down, my little pink weenie was stuck up, smiling at me. I looked at Bernie, too -not all that much difference, really. I was skinnier and more tanned, and he had some hair here and there, but not much. As far as dicks go, we were pretty much the same banana, in terms of color and shape, but mine was like a junior edition. I pinched one of Bernie's nipples and he opened his eyes.

"How old are you, anyway?" I asked him.

"Me? Old. Good morning, Chief." He sat up and looked down at me and down at himself and then he ruffled my hair like I was a seven-year-old. "And older when somebody wakes me up. How old do I look?"

"Not so old."

"Guess."

He rolled closer and put his hand on my cheek while I looked at his face, trying to figure it out. No wrinkles. He needed to shave. "Twenty-three," I said. I was hoping he would be eighteen, but the apartment and buds meant he was over twenty.

"Okay, I'm twenty-three," he said, leaning into me, waiting for a kiss.

"Bullshit." For no special reason, I reached down and squeezed his dick.

"Okay, I'm not." He sat up and looked at the clock on the bookshelf. "Jesus, it's not even six." He started kissing his way down my chest.

"Wait a minute," I said.

"Okay, Chief, you win. I'm thirty-one."

"Really?" That seemed kind of old.

He circled a finger around on my stomach, like the earth orbiting the sun. "Hey, don't look at me like that," he said. "I know, it's more than twice."

"It's legal," I said. He acted younger, anyway. "Didn't you ever get married?"

"No. I had girl friends, if that's what you mean."

"No kids?"

"No."

"Yeah, I get you," I said. "You're a child at heart. That's what Linda, I mean my Mom, used to call this friend of mine."

He started in kissing again, but I was more in the mood to wrestle, so I rolled over on top of him and held him down. Then I discovered he was ticklish under his arms. He was getting desperate when the alarm clock went off—I thought, when was the last time I'd heard that sound?—so I let him go and he

reached over to turn it off but he knocked it down between the bed and bookshelf instead. I reached down to get it and when I came up he grabbed me and pushed me down and settled on top of me. I could feel his dick growing between my legs and his tongue wiped the back of my ear.

“I hate to say it, but I have to get up and go to work,” he whispered. “This child at heart has these adult car payments.”

“So get up, you’re crushing me.”

He sat up. Meanwhile, I was getting an idea. Why should I sleep in the stinky Nova if there was a better place? “Look, is it okay if I bring over my board and some stuff? Not a lot, like a little backpack is all.”

“Now?” Bernie tried to look surprised, but I’m sure he knew I’d think of it sooner or later. I reached over and pinched the top of his dick.

“Before you leave for work. Give me ten minutes.” I got off the bed and was pulling up my underwear when there was a knock at the door.

“Good morning,” a voice sang.

“Yes, darling,” Bernie sang back, but he was lousy at sounding like a faggot.

“May I come in?” Mario said, as he came in. Bernie covered himself with the quilt. “Oh, hello, what has the tide washed up?” The voice didn’t fit him at all—Mario looked like an auto mechanic. He was taller than Bernie, fat in the middle, with a rough brown face and a big hawk nose, dark eyes and dark hair that was turning gray and thinning out. He looked like a typical chunky older Mexican guy, except he was wearing a silky black robe with gold and red embroidered dragons on it. He smiled, sort of crooked.

“Meet Kim,” Bernie said. “Mario.”

“It’s the boy in the shorts, how nice to see you made it. Bernie couldn’t stop talking about you. I can see why, you’re cute as a button.”

“And hardly bigger,” Bernie said. “What were you doing out so late?”

“Wednesday. Shine Night at The Stud.”

“What’s that?” I asked. I felt stupid standing there almost naked, but Mario didn’t seem to notice. “It’s a bar, you know, for men,” Mario said.

“And?”

“And on Wednesdays there’s men that go there to lick your boots. Your leather boots. It’s a Western bar.”

“Yuck. Are you the lickster or the boot?”

“Oh, the boot, honey—don’t be fooled by my beauty. You haven’t seen me in my leather pants.”

“At the rate you’re gaining weight, he never will,” Bernie said.

“You only live once,” Mario said.

“So why not live it as a Mexican,” Bernie said.

“Bernie’s jealous,” Mario said. “He never goes to bars.”

“Too many faggots,” Bernie said.

“It’s the age limit problem,” Mario said.

“He’s thirty-one.”

“You told him,” Mario said, patting Bernie on the head.

“It’s not my age, it’s everyone else at the bar.”

“Oh, now I get it,” I said. I looked around, wondering where I’d tossed my shorts.

“Leaving us so soon?” asked Mario. “Stay for breakfast, at least.”

“I’m coming right back.”

“Do,” Mario said, and he went out.

“What’s wrong with his face?” I whispered.

“Oh, that. Some kind of muscle spasm.”

“From what?” I found the shorts under the bed.

“I don’t know. It’s Somebody’s Palsy. Your face suddenly drops down, half of it. It wasn’t always that way, it started a couple months ago. Mario says it’s because he drove down the freeway on a cold night with the window open next to his face.”

“Can he get cured?”

“One doctor said it’ll go away by itself, but he’s been going to a Chinese guy.”

I sat on the chair and slipped on my tennies.

“You’re really coming back?” Bernie said.

* * * * *

Pop was in the bottom bunk. He’d slept in his tie-dye costume. He sat up when I came in.

“Hey, kiddo, where you been?”

“At this guy’s house. I’m taking over some of my stuff.”

I started cramming my wetsuit into a Mexican bag. There was just enough extra room for a couple of T-shirts and some jeans.

“Who’s this?” Pop asked.

“A guy I met yesterday, we had a smoke. He’s all right.” I looked over at Pop, his beard all ragged and his hair, let loose from the ponytail, spread out beside his head. He looked worried. “Hey, I’ll be around,” I said. “The guy works every day. It’s just a place to crash. It’s right down the Boardwalk, like two minutes away. Besides, he’s got excellent buds.” I tossed him one of the big roaches from the night before.

He held it under his nose. “What job?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Something to do with clothes.”

“Like me.”

“Yeah, he’s just like you.” I sat at the table and watched as he laid back down and fired up the roach.

“There was Dead cassettes on the shelf.”

“Which ones?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. One was Europe 72.”

He sucked in a big hit and coughed. “Kim, you blow me away. A beach twenty miles long and you find a place with Europe 72 and buds. I always said you were a psychic magnet. You got a rainbow aura a mile wide around that little blond head.”

“Give me a break.” But I knew he was right.

“Hey, same as in Sonoma, in Chiapas. Remember all those Indian kids, and the old ladies, always following you around like it was your turn to be the Sun King? It’s all that sunlight you took in, beaming

back out.” He took a long hit and blew smoke up toward the top bunk. “Shit tastes like Rasta weed.”

“Bernie says it’s Hawaiian.”

“Smells more like Jah weed to me. To I and I.”

“Look,” I said. “I gotta get back before he goes to work. I’ll be back, I’ll bring you some breakfast.”

Bernie was sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee and reading the newspaper, wearing shorts and a tank top. Mario was at the stove, poaching eggs, so I sat down across from Bernie—the table was only big enough for two. I poured myself coffee from their thermos into a mug that was on the table.

“Make yourself at home,” Mario said.

“Thanks,” I said.

“There’s toast,” Bernie said, as if I couldn’t see it right in front of me. I buttered up a slice; it was that gravelly wheat bread, very organic.

“I take it you’re staying again tonight.”

Bernie looked up hopefully from the newspaper.

“Well, if it’s not a problem.”

“Hardly,” Mario said. “But we have to consider how you’ll get in and out, since both of us won’t be here.”

“I’ll wait outside until you get back. Don’t give me a key.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Bernie said.

“If you give me a key and my father finds out, he’ll want to come over and take a shower.” And eat everything in sight, and smoke up all the dope, and never leave.

“Hey, the old guy can have a shower,” Bernie said.

“He kind of gets moochy,” I said. “Speaking of which, can I take a shower?”

“Ah,” Bernie said. He took a swallow of coffee and stood up, so I got up, too. Mario sat down and started on his eggs and toast. I wondered if his face problem meant he could only eat soft stuff like eggs and toast, or if he ate a steak, did he have to chew it all on one side?

There was barely enough room in the bathroom for both of us, so Bernie stood in the bathtub while we took our clothes off. Before he pulled the shower curtain around, he peed into the toilet, which was right there, so I did, too. “Mario’s great,” I said. “It’s like having a mother around.”

“And I’m like having an uncle,” Bernie said. We kissed while we waited for the water to warm up, and then he wouldn’t let me do anything myself—he grabbed the soap and lathered me up all over. I closed my eyes and let the water fall on me while he soaped and tickled me. It was driving me crazy -my dick got so hard I could feel my pulse beating in it. I had to hold onto his shoulders so I wouldn’t fall over. He came up for a kiss and I felt around for his pole and I rubbed it a little.

“Easy,” he said. “Save it for later.”

I didn’t really want to, but I figured he didn’t want to be late for his office so I let go and we rinsed off and then I watched him shave. He didn’t look thirty-one once he was shaved.

Later, I walked Junior by and showed him Bernie’s bedroom window, leaving out all the details—for example that Bernie even existed—and told him to whistle up to me in the mornings if there was any surf.

Only the next day it wasn’t Junior’s whistle that woke me up, it was Bernie’s tongue, tickling my neck. “Wake up, Sleeping Beauty,” he said. “Some asshole is outside whistling and calling your name.”

“Aw fuck. It’s Junior.”

"It's five o'clock. Tell him to go away."

I stood at the window and yelled down to Junior that I'd meet him on the beach. Bernie, meanwhile, sat up on the bed behind me and slipped down my Calvins—his Calvins, actually—and skipped his fingers up my leg and along the crack of my butt, which he knew by now gave me goosebumps all over. "Quit it," I told him, thinking Junior could see me getting all turned on. Junior yelled something I couldn't understand and then split. I fell back on the bed. I guess I could've jumped up and put on the wetsuit, but I didn't.

"Two minutes," Bernie said. "Five minutes."

"Well, okay," I said, trying to sound bored, but truth is, I was more in the mood to noodle around with Bernie than to squeeze into cold rubber and paddle around the cold, stinky Pacific Ocean. We played around in the dark under the blankets; I pretended to fight back when he held me down and tickled me all over. My dick was just beginning to tingle when Bernie said, "Don't you need to get going?"

He was right. Junior'd be pissed if I didn't show, and maybe he'd start wondering what—or who—was suddenly making me too tired to go out in the morning. "I guess so," I said, lifting the quilt off.

"It's okay, Chief, you go on down. Maybe I'll get up, too, and go for a jog down the beach."

"Since when do you jog?" I'd never seen him in the mornings.

"Well, I started to once or twice. It's hard with no one whistling to wake you up."

"You're not gonna follow me around, are you?" The surfers would figure everything out in a minute, and I didn't feel like inventing an explanation.

"No, I'll just stop and pull down my shorts and wave my dick at you."

"Come on."

"No, don't worry. I'll just jog by." Bernie watched as I got into the wetsuit. "By the way," he said, "there's money in my pants pocket, if you need some."

"No, I'm okay," I told him, thinking: no wonder I want to live here.

At five-thirty in the morning you could be fooled into thinking Venice is a nice place. The Boardwalk is mostly empty, the dog shit's dried up and been kicked aside, and the City trucks have already come by to empty the trash barrels. Out on the sand and on the benches the bums are still horizontal, so mostly out of sight. When the first rays of hazy morning sunlight pull back the shadows of the buildings, the empty sand seems to roll on like a clean, white wave. The air is still cool; the bright heat that makes everyone stupid won't be around for five or six hours. And a breeze usually makes the air passably clean—you can take a deep breath without choking on it. I walked past the sleeping bums and the closed-up shops and I stood outside the trailer for a minute or two trying to decide whether to go in, but I didn't feel like seeing Pop, even for a minute—fuck it, I thought: he's old enough to take care of himself.

Aside from the sunlight blinking on the chop, the surf was garbage-colored and flat, with a dirty lace collar of white foam where it broke on the sand. Junior was paddling far outside, praying for even half a wave, along with two or three other locals. Their pile of towels and clothes was just up from the waterline. I put my board down there, waxed the front end, and sat down to have a smoke. The smell of buds and ocean reminded me of Mexico, and I started thinking about when I first learned to surf, in a sunbaked little village on the coast south of Puerto Vallarta. It was just a stop on the coast road, quiet and dusty. Forty or fifty crumbling houses with rusted cars in front, on a couple of red dirt streets between the highway and the beach. The weeded-over central plaza had an uncovered bandstand where the school

kids practiced music every afternoon, eight or nine ragged brown children all blowing different tunes on trumpets. The bay was wide and shallow, with soft white sand; it looked like a tourist brochure minus the girls and windsurfing. The water was always seventy or eighty degrees and so clear you could swim halfway out and still see fish swimming along the bottom. We parked our van next to an old whitewashed beach hotel, so we could eat in their restaurant and use their toilets. As usual, there was nothing to do but smoke and swim and wait for Pop to get inspired about where to go next.

I was out swimming one morning when some Mexican college students, out on vacation, paddled by. Ten minutes later they had me sitting on a board, and I was hooked. They let me borrow a board and I surfed like a maniac for two or three weeks. The waves were slow rollers, small and way out in the bay, but I didn't care—it was clearly the greatest thing since gummed papers. I was almost naked, I was in the sun and the water, I was away from everybody, and I wanted to stay there forever. Of course, Pop didn't. He was reading up on the Mayans, their weird language, so we had to head inland to explore the jungle.

The waves continued to be lousy, so I passed on them, paddling here and there just to stay warm and avoid the seaweed and plastic jugs that went floating by. Then I saw a bunch of joggers down the beach; I figured the last one in line had to be Bernie. I knew the jogging was only a joke—he probably hadn't done it for five or six months. Like the photo session—the film was maybe sitting in his camera for a year before I showed up. For all I knew his Hawaiian was the harvest of 1979. And there was dust on his Dead tapes. I couldn't figure him out: he wasn't totally a stoner, or a Deadhead, or a jogger, or even a faggot, really.

The other joggers went by, but I saw Bernie stop near the pile of towels and walk close to the water, his shoes sinking into the wet sand, his shadow dissolving into the white foam. He looked out at us, trying to figure out who was who. Junior was paddling to try and catch a ride, and the other guys were wandering around outside, not looking my way, so I sat up and waved, to let Bernie know it was me.

Six: The Cutest Little Thing in Venice

Four or five days later, I came back after an evening session, still dripping in my wetsuit, expecting to see Bernie as usual in the kitchen reading the newspaper, waiting for me so we could shower together, but he wasn't there.

Something in the kitchen smelled like a closetful of old socks. Mario was at the table, dressed in his work costume of jeans and white T-shirt, examining a little red cardboard box. A pot of something was boiling on the stove.

"Smells good," I said. "Where is he?"

"Not back yet," Mario said without looking up. "It's tea, it's medicine. You boil it down for twenty minutes. Think it smells bad, I have to drink it."

"Smells like rat's piss." I sat down across from him. "What the fuck's in it, anyway?"

"Rat's piss, as far as I know. I was afraid to ask Mr. Lee and the box is all in Chinese, except for these terrible translations, like *loquacia panacea*, Latin stuff." There was a sketch of a spindly weed from Mars alongside the Chinese writing, and a line drawing of a wrinkled old man that was either the guy that made the tea or the "before" picture. "But it's started to do something, don't you think?" Mario showed me his lopsided smile, but I couldn't really tell if the sagging half of his face was firming up or not.

"It looks better."

"Better than Bette Davis in *Baby Jane*," he said. "Within weeks I'll be restored to my youthful ugliness."

"Get off it. You don't look so terrible for a guy your age. I mean, it's hardly noticeable."

Now he gave me a crooked sarcastic grin. "Right. But thanks anyway, I guess." He got up to check on the tea; black steam escaped as he lifted off the lid.

"Where'd he go to?" I was feeling clammy, sitting in the wetsuit.

"Oh, we miss our new friend, do we, scrumptious beach boy?"

"Well, yeah, I was wondering if I should shower or wait for a while."

Mario went to the sink and poured the steaming, sludge-colored liquid through a metal strainer into a coffee mug. Then he took something out of the silverware drawer and brought it to the table. "Sweetie, I know how much you look forward to your little shower and all, but I think he'll be gone for a while yet. Here, to help you wait up."

On a shiny blue bathroom tile, four inches square, was a tiny white stone next to a single-edged art-store razor blade.

"Better you let me do it," Mario said. "You'll send it all over the floor." He chopped the rock into about a spoonful of white powder and then spread it into a thin line an inch or two long. I'd seen coke before, but this stuff was sparkling like sunlight on the waves. "The straw," he said, going over and finding it in the same drawer. He inhaled a half-inch of the stuff and passed me the tile. "Careful, chico, it's the real thing," he said, holding his breath like he'd inhaled smoke instead of powder. Dopers are nuts, sometimes.

I sniffed up about a quarter of an inch, trying to be professional and not blow the wrong way through the straw. It tasted cold and metallic, inside my head and down into my throat, like I'd swallowed Ajax and lemon juice.

“That’s where he is,” Mario said.

“He’s out buying coke?”

“He’ll probably kill me for telling you, but as long as you’re here all the time. He’s out selling coke.”

“Now I know why the place is so clean.” I stood up; I felt like running up and down the stairs.

“Doesn’t it bother your face thing?”

“Yeah, probably it does, but I can’t resist.” He sipped at the tea and puckered one side of his lips.

“Just a smidgen now and then, you know. It gives me a lift.”

“I better go take a shower.”

When I inhaled the steam from the hot water it raced through my throat and lungs like airplanes buzzing through canyons in a video game. My thoughts were jet-propelled, too, but they still seemed to be the same old thoughts. I was standing there soaping up, my weenie poking up pink out of a mound of Ivory suds, when I heard someone clunking around in the kitchen. Then I caught the smell of a lit burner as the bathroom door creaked open, so I pulled aside the shower curtain and aimed my little missile at what I figured would be Bernie, but wasn’t. It was Pop.

“I needed a shower,” he explained. “You were expecting Gracie Slick?”

“No, I was just thinking,” I said. I was hoping Mario had got the coke back in the drawer before Pop showed up. The doob was probably a decoy.

“Where’s your pal?” Pop asked me, from behind the T-shirt he was lifting over his head.

“Still working, I guess.”

He looked in the mirror and scratched at his beard. “You know, I haven’t seen you for a few days.”

“Well, you’re all right, aren’t you?” He looked the same as always.

“This number’s making me better.” He unwound the bandanna from his wrinkly neck. “I could use a chili fries after this, if you’re up to it.” He laid the doob down on the sink.

“Not tonight.” He pulled off his shorts and we traded places and I started toweling myself off.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said. I closed the shower curtain to keep the water from shooting onto the sink and soaking the doob. “Maybe we need another shot at the Dead,” he shouted above the splash of the water. “It’s been almost a year. That group energy. I need the charge.”

“There’s a zillion people on the beach.”

“Oh, not the same thing at all. It’s a matter of process. On the beach there’s no ceremony, no wizard at the helm, catalyzing the spiritual regeneration. The beach is just a bunch of people. A Dead concert’s the church. You know what I mean—the sacrament is passed around and we’re all resurrected. ‘This is my body, this is my blood, and hey, these are my brains,’ everything infused with spirit, and then we all dance and the spirit invades our bodies.”

“I thought it was just music and drugs.”

“I wonder if they’ve got one scheduled.”

“You don’t have any money for tickets.”

“Is this shampoo any good?”

* * * * *

Bernie finally showed up at around eight or nine. By then Mario was half asleep on the Barcalounger.

Pop and I sat on the floor next to him, smoking and watching a television special about the bombing in Lebanon. Bernie caught my eye as he came in and nodded in the direction of the street.

“Long day, Chief?” I said.

“I’m wasted,” Bernie said.

“Want a hit?” Pop asked, offering the joint.

“You probably want to hit the hay pretty soon,” I said.

“I’m really dead,” Bernie said.

“Not as dead as those two hundred Marines,” Pop said, missing the hints. He pointed the joint at the television screen. It was showing piles of rubble and blasted trucks.

“It’s bad news,” Bernie said. He sat on the floor next to me. Pop passed him the joint.

“Those are decent buds,” Pop said.

“Hawaiian,” Bernie said, taking one of his halfhearted hits. Pop looked at the TV and Bernie looked at me again like: get rid of him. Mario, completely asleep, snored loudly.

“I told you,” I said.

“Must be Jamaican seeds,” Pop said, handing it to me. “What color are the hairs? The buds must be purple.”

“More or less,” Bernie said. “I wasn’t noticing the hair color. Kim’s been rolling it.”

“Blue,” I said.

“Well, there you go,” Pop said. “Regular Hawaiian will tend to be brownish. Jesus, it’s awful.”

We all watched as they loaded bodies onto trucks.

“It was different when I was in the service,” Pop said. “We went into Lebanon and did just as we pleased. Well, I didn’t go. I was in North Carolina.”

“You were in the Army?” Bernie asked.

“Ike was President,” Pop said. “Lebanon exports that good red hash. Soft and dry, not too strong.”

“You ever go down to the Veterans Administration?”

“I never thought of it,” Pop said.

“Maybe you’re entitled to something for serving your country.”

“Hey, this is a good idea,” I said to Pop. “Bernie’s a financial genius.”

“As long as I don’t have to re-enlist,” Pop said.

We finally convinced Pop it was late. Mario woke up from the noise Pop made, bouncing down the stairs. He looked ready to pull his sombrero down and sleep for a week, but he wanted to go out. “I haven’t gone out hunting in ages,” he said, moseying into the kitchen and moseying back a minute or two later with the coke tile. “I told him,” he said to Bernie.

“We had a toot,” I said. “Before Pop showed up.”

“Well, shit, okay,” Bernie said. “I would’ve told you eventually, anyhow. But keep it quiet.”

“One for the road,” Mario said, sweeping the tile clean with one sniff. “Wish me luck.” Bernie pulled a thick envelope from his back pocket and tossed it to me. “That goes in the closet, Chief, under the carpet. Lift up the floorboard.”

“Money?”

“Dass it. Big Chief he be workin’ hard. He be bustin’ his nuts fo’ to git some dollah buy stuff fo’ de boy. Count it first, okay? Should be twenty-two hundred.”

I counted it in the bedroom. I hadn't seen so much money since Florida. It was like play money to me, twenty-two green things that I couldn't spend. It was cool of Bernie to trust me with it, and I decided I wouldn't ever take any from him. He was always giving me some, anyway.

When I came back to the front room, Mario was standing in the doorway of his little bedroom stuffing himself into his leather jeans—without underwear—while Bernie chopped a new rock on the tile.

“Kiddo, a walk,” Bernie said. “I’m in the mood for a yogurt.”

* * * * *

It was a dark night, no moon, and cold. Along the Boardwalk the apartments were mostly dark and the three or four streetlights that weren't busted had foggy rings of light around them, like sand was in the air. Backed up against the lampposts were piles of something dark, garbage or sleeping bums. I saw tiny yellow flares down the beach where bums stood over fires. We passed a few more bums searching through trash bins. Black guys in Gucci sweatshirts hogged the benches, taking turns jumping up and down, yelling at each other or at people and dogs passing by. A single siren whistled over on Pacific Avenue. The waves rumbled onto the sand, over and over, hissing like spilled club soda as they rolled back out. The dogs were popping off when we didn't expect it, like seeds in an unclean burner: dogs down on the beach, dogs behind fences, dogs penned up on balconies, all of them barking into the darkness at the shuffling parade of bums.

I jumped on the board and sped past Bernie and stopped to look back. He was hustling right along, maybe because of the black guys shouting “Motherfucker!” every two or three seconds, or maybe because he was only wearing a T-shirt and the breeze was cold. I sailed back and circled around him; watching him walk, I could feel his legs next to mine; I could feel my palm slide along the curve of his back and my fingers fit around his shoulders. I was thinking that since I'd been sleeping with him, I hadn't thought much about girls.

He caught up with me and I hopped off the board.

“The coke is excellent,” I told him.

“I know it is. I've got this old friend—well, never mind, but the stuff is fresh off the boat. In fact, if I don't throw something on it, my people think it's fake because it's so strong. Don't mention anything to you-know-who, by the way.”

“Don't worry.” I put my hand across his shoulder, the way Mayan kids did when we walked to the river. “When you did it with girls, did you like it?”

“What brings this up? Yeah, sure, I liked it. But—it's sort of hard to explain—girls, women, they don't drive me nuts anymore the way boys do. Certain boys.” He elbowed me in the ribs.

“So you're like permanently switched over?”

He stopped and put his hands around me at the waist and said, “Kiss me when you ask me that.” It was pretty dark, and there was almost nobody around that was conscious, but instead of standing on my toes to reach up and kiss him, I said, “No way,” and ran off down the sand towards the waves. Bernie yelled something and took off after me, so I doubled back, gulping in the moist cold air, and I started chasing him, and he must've twisted his foot because he fell down in the wet sand near the water. I ran at him and pretending to trip, I fell down across him, letting the skateboard go flying. We were out of breath and

tangled up in each other and it was dark and there was no one around, so we had a kiss and then Bernie fell back on the sand. I straddled him and leaned over for another kiss—his face was all spotted with sand—and I grabbed his hand and stuck it on my shorts so he could feel my dick stretching out.

“Hey, let me up,” he said, “I’m all sandy.”

“Oh, boo hoo.”

“The sand’s freezing. It’s wet.”

“Can’t you feel it?”

“Well, just barely,” he said, so I sat and bounced on his stomach. He coughed. “I mean,” he said between landings, “is that a Tootsie Roll in your pocket or are you just happy to see me? Ouch,” as I punched him in the chest. I got off and sat on my knees next to him and pushed down my shorts. He didn’t even try to sit up. He just flopped back staring up at the fog and stars.

“Look.”

“I know already, sweetie—it’s the cutest little thing in Venice.”

“Suck it, okay?”

“In a minute—Jesus, there’s grunion crawling down my back.” And the wind was blowing kind of cold.

“Okay, later,” I said. “What would be great would be doing this in the daytime, I mean, if no one was around.” I stood up, pulling up my shorts. Bernie sat up slow, pretending to be tired out, and grabbed at my leg, tripping me while I was looking out at the ocean. I fell backwards and Bernie got up on me and leaned over and in between laughing and punching each other we had another kiss. I felt around for his boner but he jumped away, and I was pooped out. Bernie sat on my ankles, pulled my shorts down, and started piling sand on my stomach and stuck-up weenie until he’d covered everything with a mountain of cold sand except the tip of my dick. He licked the tip and I thought if I shot off it would be like a volcano, but he didn’t give me the chance. He ran off down the beach, so I shook off most of the sand and pulled up my shorts and grabbed the skateboard and ran after him.

The last thing I wanted to see was Pop, but we had to walk right past the trailer, and there he was, in front of the trailer’s steps, fiddling with his rotten bicycle. He’d opened the door for light, but Gerard was sitting on the steps blocking most of it, sucking on a cigarette. We sort of hurried past. I was hoping it was so dark they wouldn’t notice us. But no luck. “Yo, bozo,” Gerard called out, so we had to stop.

Bernie hung back a few steps while I walked over to Pop, who was squatting next to the bike, fooling with something in the gears.

“What is it?” I said, squatting next to him.

“It’s this piece here, whatever it’s called, turns this other thing, it’s like a pin, it’s tiny, but it controls all this other jazz”—which was lying like a pile of metallic scrambled eggs on the ground beside the rear wheel—“and it looks like part of it’s been hacked off. See this shiny part, the little prong here, where it’s been sliced? I need to get a new one.”

“Hey, Kim, you got anything to smoke?” Gerard asked. Pop put down his wrench, waiting for my answer. I looked over at Bernie.

“We were kind of on our way,” I told Gerard.

“It’s this dinky little thing, but nothing works without it,” Pop said.

“That Jamaican stuff was unbelievable, if you have any more,” Gerard said, standing up.

“You’re in my light,” Pop said.

“You’ve got it,” Bernie told me, stepping closer. I had a big roach in the coin pocket of my shorts. I pulled it out, all wrinkled and damp, and handed it to Gerard. He lit it off his cigarette, flipped the cigarette off towards the Nova, took a long, loud hit, and passed the roach to Pop, who stood up to get it.

“Kind of piece only costs three or four bucks for a new one,” Pop said as he sucked in smoke and air. He held the joint out to Bernie, who waved him off. I grabbed it before Pop had time to wonder what kind of person would refuse to smoke his own dope. I took a hit, looking over at Bernie, and handed the roach back to Gerard. Meanwhile, Pop was eyeing Bernie, who was hunching down looking at the spread of greasy parts, like he was about to offer some advice on putting them back together, which I knew was nuts. Bernie was lucky he could make toast pop up.

“It’s crazy to wait around for just a few bucks,” Bernie said, standing up and pulling a bunch of money from his pocket. Pop was staring at the money and Gerard, taking another long hit, was looking at him, and me. This was completely the wrong thing to start up, but I couldn’t stop it now. Bernie yanked out a five, which he gave to me, for some reason. I handed it to Pop.

“I’ll pay you back,” Pop said to Bernie.

“Never mind,” Bernie said. Pop was smiling at him, not worried that he looked like a happy bum that just got a handout. Gerard sat there watching the whole thing, puffing down our quality buds. I didn’t even bother to ask him to pass it to me. Pop and Bernie were having a stare-and-smile contest, which ended only after I tapped Bernie on the shoulder.

“We were actually kind of on our way,” I said, walking backwards, trying to pull Bernie along.

But I bumped right into something behind me, which turned out to be Jane, one of Pop’s breezebrained girl friends. She lived a few blocks away in an ancient, ivied-over cottage with a hot tub and forty or fifty stray cats and dogs. “Hey, watch out, studburger,” she said, laughing, shoving me on the shoulder back towards Pop. She reached across Pop and his bike mess so Gerard could hand her what was left of the roach. She was dressed in black spandex shorts and a purple tank top. “I was jogging by,” she said, “and it was like, hey, smells good.”

Now we were trapped. I introduced Jane to Bernie as she was taking a hit and they traded raised eyebrows as she handed the roach to him. At least he was polite enough to take it this time. “Smells like Jamaican,” she said, twisting her skinny body in a stick-figure samba and snapping her bony fingers. “Lee-ga-lize it,” she sang, “and I will ad-ver-tise it.”

“Hawaiian,” Bernie said. He chucked the roach remains and took out a new pinner from his wallet and handed it to Gerard, who sat up like a begging dog to take it, then went into the trailer to find a lighter.

“We were really sort of heading out,” I said, but Bernie wouldn’t move. I couldn’t imagine what he was so fascinated about, standing around blowing words and smoke past each other, and besides, I was worried someone might ask Bernie who he was.

“I was gonna ask you something, but I can’t remember what it was,” Jane said to me. Gerard sat on the steps and fired the burner.

“Well, anyway,” I said. “Let’s go,” I whispered to Bernie. Gerard was sucking in smoke and Jane was scratching her thigh and Pop was squatting next to the bike and Bernie was standing above him and they were all looking at me like they wanted to tell me something they’d forgotten.

By the time we got to the yogurt place it was closed, so we ended up hiking down Main Street past the

yuppie bars, all the way to Pico, where there was an all-night Mexican place. The coke had worn off and I was hungry. I pigged out on soft tacos and a chili verde burrito. They had two burrito sizes—Niño and Señor. Bernie had a meat and bean Señor, and we both overdosed on salsa. We stopped at a liquor store afterwards and I waited outside with the muttering blacks and bums while Bernie went in to buy a beer and Bambu papers. On the way out one of bums panhandled him, so Bernie gave him a handful of change. Then we took the long way home to avoid the trailer, a cold walk along the dark beach next to the waves. Bernie wasn't saying much and I thought he might be pissed off at me, or at Pop, so I grabbed his hand while we walked. It was eleven or twelve when we finally got back to the house. As we ran up the stairs I noticed light coming from the front room.

I figured Mario had crapped out as usual in front of the tube, but when we went in we saw it was turned off and Mario wasn't just passed out in the Barcalounger: he was crammed in with some other guy. There were wine glasses on top of the television and an ashtray full of roaches on the floor. Before I could follow Bernie into our bedroom, Mario looked up at me. His eyes had the window shades pulled halfway down.

"Kim, this's Edward," he whispered. Most of Edward was smothered under Mario, but the guy managed to raise his head and mumble something before closing his eyes. I stole a big roach from the ashtray to go smoke on the toilet. Afterward, on the way back I peeked in the front room. The Barcalounger was empty, the ashtray was gone, and it was dark below the door to Mario's room.

"Well, it's better than nothing," Bernie said as we warmed each other up under the quilt. "At least I didn't notice a wheelchair."

"Hey, maybe there's a cane we missed. I think I only saw three legs sticking out of the chair."

* * * * *

I woke up late. I knew it was Saturday because Bernie was still in bed with me. He was reading a book and rubbing his toes against mine. "Jesus, I slept like a rock," I told him.

"The night air, Señor. All that noise didn't wake you up?"

"What noise? Hey, where's the lube?" The jar wasn't on the shelf next to the bed.

"Mario borrowed it back. I guess we'll have to get some of our own."

"We'd better—a giant jar. What's that music out there?" I could hear weird music—violins and stuff—coming from the stereo in the front room. And I smelled bacon frying, and coffee.

"That guy's still here," Bernie said. "That's the music he likes. I guess Mama M's in there whipping up breakfast."

"Jungle boy me hungry. You think there's enough for us?"

"Go ask."

I peeked under the kitchen table as I went in, and it was okay—Edward had both his legs. Aside from that, he was a real average-looking type. Brown hair, pale skin, sort of flabby and skinny at the same time, with shoulders too narrow for the size of his head. He sat holding a coffee mug with both hands while Mario, overdoing it in a flowery apron, went nuts working up pancakes and bacon and eggs. I figured Mario must've told him about me and Bernie since the guy didn't seem at all surprised to see a little thirteen-year-old walk in wearing nothing but white Calvins two or three sizes too big.

Bernie came in—he'd put on jogging shorts, to be polite—and we took breakfast into the front room. Mario had straightened it up and opened the curtains on the bay windows. Bernie asked about the music.

"Mozart," Edward said. "String Quartet."

"It's interesting," I said, but truth is it was kind of annoying—it went on forever and never got anywhere. And no drums.

"You're into surfing?" Edward asked me.

"Well, it's something to do. Also, I'm kind of looking out for my old man."

"His father lives down on the beach," Mario said.

"In a trailer," I said. "It's not that bad."

"Ed works in a music store," Mario said.

"Hey, get me a Van Halen tape," I said. Mario smiled his off-balance smile and Edward nodded. No one seemed to be much into talking. I went and made more pancakes and brought them in. With the sun starting to hit the windows and a breeze floating through the room, it was pretty mellow. Mario and Edward were acting like they were already married, and Bernie just kept looking at me and smiling. I was even getting used to the violins. I rolled some pinnars and we all had a smoke, and then it was time for Mario to drive Edward back to his apartment, so Bernie brought out the tile so Mario could have a toot.

After they left Bernie changed the tape to the Dead and I opened out the Barcalounger almost flat and jumped on. Bernie sat on the edge. "Dull but acceptable," was his opinion.

"It's nice anyway to see Mario in a decent mood for a change." I pulled down the front of the Calvins to see if I had any hair growing yet, but no luck. Maybe I'd never grow up. "Think it'll last?"

"Will you please put that away?"

"I was just checking."

"I have to go out."

"Dope?"

"Well, money."

"Take me."

"It's not a good time. Next time. We'll see my friend Vinnie in Hollywood."

"You gotta go right now?" I pushed the Calvins down around my knees and slid my hand up the leg of Bernie's shorts to see if he really wanted to stay for a while.

"Look, Chief, I love you, but I have to catch the guy before it gets late." But he just sat there and I could feel his decision being made. "Okay, you win. But watch where you aim, it stains the vinyl."

I hopped in the shower as soon as Bernie split. I was sitting naked at the kitchen table cleaning buds when Mario showed up, singing a song while he walked up the stairs. We smoked and cleaned up the kitchen. He was in such a good mood he went into the front room, turned on the radio to a Mexican station, and started cleaning up in there, too. I slipped on Bernie's sweatpants and went in to help. "So what's the story," I asked him, "are you falling in love with this guy?"

"Falling in love? Honey, I'm too old and ugly to fall in love."

"You're not too old."

"Oh, yes I am. I'm sinking into the grave, and not so slowly either. I'm like that banana, every day I get more shriveled and black." Two or three days before Bernie had taken an overripe banana from the top of

the refrigerator and stuck it in the stove, where it got black and wrinkled, but stayed dry and didn't stink. For some reason Bernie thought this was hilarious. "Because the Chiquita sticker stays the same," he explained to us, and then complained, "Nobody understands my sense of humor."

"Oh, crap," I told Mario. "Besides, your face thing's clearing up."

"No, it isn't. You're just used to it. I'm lucky the bars are dark and everybody's drunk. Otherwise, forget it. Anyway, at my age, who needs love? All I want is a nice place to eat breakfast and a little fooling around maybe once a week." He dusted off the Barcalounger, scattering dope seeds from its seams onto the carpet. "Maybe that's why I go for the Edward type. Not very demanding."

"So that's good, then."

"As good as it gets. You just wait, you'll see what it's like when you're my age."

"Thirty-five years from now," I said.

Seven: A Unique Case

Pop surprised me. He made an appointment at the Veteran's Administration, up in Westwood, but of course he wouldn't go there without me holding his hand. I told him I'd help him take the bus, but no way was I going inside. "Why not?" he asked me, so I had to explain that if I walk in there, they'll start asking me a million questions. What am I doing here? Where's my mother? What school did I go to last year? Do I get a regular breakfast? It's the government, I told him. And I said if they ask about any wife and kids, he should just say he's separated, which is almost true. Then he got nervous about having identification, but I told him he was probably in the computer somewhere. "It's their job to help you," I said. "Just smile and take the money."

We got to Westwood around ten or eleven. I talked him off the bus and all the way to the door of the place, a big white building in the middle of what I thought was a park but turned out to be a cemetery. Then I went and killed time down at Shipp's restaurant, four or five blocks away, in the middle of a bunch of shiny skyscrapers. I was wedged in at the counter between a football player in a shiny nylon jacket, the sleeves rolled up past curly-haired, beefy forearms and a Mexican-looking chick in a silky white blouse and a short dark skirt, probably a secretary from one of the office towers. She was wearing those black stockings and she let her shoes drop off while she ate. The football player was working on a fat patty melt and I was trying not to stare at the thick brown onions hanging down like dripping worms when he lifted the sandwich to his mouth. The chick was leaning into her salad, with her blouse open a few buttons, so I tried to be casual and catch a peek. Her tits were so close, I could almost lean over and lick them. The counter waiter was a young guy, probably a faggot, who caught me staring down the chick's blouse while he was filling up my water. "Would you like anything else?" he asked me, since I'd polished off my side of fries. I told him no thanks and he winked at me.

Afterwards I waited at the corner, sitting on the bench like I was waiting for a bus, but a half hour later Pop still hadn't showed, so I took a hike around the block, feeling like an insect next to the giant buildings. I went down the street, down a sidewalk in front of six or seven story apartment buildings. I felt like stretching out on their lawns, in the shade of those big trees, and having a smoke, but then I started imagining paranoid old couples sitting behind the closed first-floor curtains, squinting out at me. I ended up back on the bus bench, sitting in the sun getting hypnotized by the sunlight flashing off the traffic. I was only five or six miles from the beach, but it was like another city, another planet. What were all these people doing, stuck in their cars at red lights, all dressed up? Was I supposed to grow up and do the same thing? One thing about Bernie—somehow he could handle this other planet, and then come back to me at the beach every night, and be almost mellow.

It was all beyond me, all the concrete and noise. I was used to jungles and beaches and rivers. I got to thinking about Chiapas, those first few months in the jungle. Running around naked all day at the river, dark-skinned Indian women up to their knees in the shallow pools, washing clothes, while I splashed around with their kids out in the middle, in the green water. I remembered lying naked next to Pop on a rock up at the waterfall, kicking back and smoking after a swim.

One time, we're sitting and smoking and my dick, just a pimple back then, started to stretch out, slow like a movie of a sunflower blooming. "Heliotropic, the Greeks would say," Pop said, and I sensed a lecture coming on, but I was too wasted to get up. "Seeking the sun, bent, so to speak, on opening up to the

divine source of light and energy. You're a Leo, heliotropism is your basic nature," he went on, and I sort of drifted off while he droned on about how they'd stop me from crying when I was a kid by plopping me down in the sunshine with my clothes off, and how there's some story in Greek mythology; out my half-opened eye I spotted a fish in a deep pool out near the waterfall, so I jumped in after it, but it turned out to be just the shadow of a bird. So I swam back and crawled up on the rock. Pop passed me the pipe and sat next to me and put his sunburned arm round my shoulder while I lit up. I remember looking at his face: even back then it was too sunburned, with blue veins standing out against the red in his nose. His eyes sort of fogged up when he started talking again:

"You know, I've tried to stay on the road, really I've been trying, but it's so easy to get confused and take the wrong turn. I started so late—I was already solidified, you know what I mean? Petrified! A creature of habit, physical and mental." He was talking to the waterfall. "I don't think I had a smoke until I was almost thirty. The Dead already had two drummers when I first saw them. I was almost tenured before I took acid." He let go of me and took a hit off the pipe. "Those lucky kids—standing there, road wide open, heads all empty but they don't care. Everything in one backpack, pockets full of dope and seashells. Six units of independent study for getting high and fucking in the woods. And look at you, Kimbo, golden boy, pink-skinned and golden-haired, a green-eyed nature boy, you never had to go through any of this. You've always been on the right road and you don't even know it. Me," he said, taking another puff, "I'm still looking for the breakthrough, still reading the map. Is there a short cut? A switchback to make the climb easier? Meanwhile I'm carrying around this load of mental baggage, analyzing everything along the way. You don't know what I go through. And yet, in the end it's all so simple." This I recognized as the intro to his Golden Road to Unlimited Devotion lecture, which I'd heard a thousand times, a bunch of acid babble about the devotion you need to stay on the Road, the sunshine trail, blah de blah. There'd be a key word, like a flavor of the month that changed according to whatever was handy at the time. For a while, it was Humility, and then Clarity; after a summer of peyote circles it was Great Father, but the dykes objected and it became Godhead. A bald Tibetan billowed across campus in his orange robes and for a few months the road detoured through The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path, which I used to think was instructions on how to close up the map. Pop gave me a heavy stare and took another hit, but before he could say another word I rolled off the rock and headed for the waterfall.

Five or six minutes later he comes running up, all smiles. "You were right," he said. "I was in their computer, but it took a while. The first problem was, all I had was my old driver's license and the passport, which was expired. Anyway, she said she'd give me provisional approval, and follow it up later. I guess she thought I'm not the kind of guy anyone else would pretend to be. Then I filled out a stack of forms—you know, I'm not sure how to spell Gerard's last name? Then she sends me into the medical section, even though I wasn't complaining about anything. 'Have them look at your teeth,' she says—that bad, hey?—so I waited around, and then went in for a check-up—it's the Army, you know, you ask for a Kleenex, they take out a lung. The doctor was on the level, though, a young guy, went to school in Palo Alto, and we start talking about healing techniques and visualization and cultural differences in the perception of wellness, and then I felt like I ought to come up with a problem beyond the teeth, so I mention my back." Pop had a lower back problem, not real serious, that flared up in cold weather or when he lifted anything heavier than a bag of buds. "I told him it was leftover from my wilderness trips,"

Pop said, which was true—he'd twisted his spine, fucking so much on hard ground. "So I'm giving him the story, and I mention Mexico."

"You told him about the mushrooms?"

"Well, not everything."

"No, it was only for two hours. Here come the narcs."

"No, listen. The guy was cool. He was interested on a scientific level. He called in another guy, a shrink, and we talked philosophy. They said I was a unique case, they want me to come back for some tests."

"What about money?"

Pop said it was more of a medical trip—maybe the money part was in another office. They wanted him to come back in a few weeks and stay for a week or two, and they'd fix up his teeth and in between give him psycho tests.

"You sure you want to do this?"

"Hey, it's all free. And besides, they were listening to me. It got me thinking."

The Wilshire bus pulled over and we got on.

"You should come over once in a while," Pop said as the bus started up. "Gerard misses you. I miss you."

"Really? Are the ashtrays full?"

"No, seriously."

I looked out the window at the buildings, which seemed to be getting smaller the closer we got to the beach. Traffic was thinning out. I was wondering if I had time to get in a session before Bernie got home from work; and then, if he was in the mood, maybe we'd go to the video arcade or a movie. "I'm busy tonight," I told Pop, but even as I was saying it, I felt bad; I guess I missed him, too. And I was supposed to be watching out for him and he was about to go into the hospital.

"Maybe tomorrow?" he said.

"God, it's not like you're having a heart transplant," I said. "But okay, maybe tomorrow."

Eight: More on Page Six

That night Bernie took me along on a coke delivery, up to Hollywood. Before we left we had an especially excellent shower session; we filled up the tub and got all wrapped up in each other. Bernie was short enough to stretch out almost all the way, with just his feet up out of the water at the end of the tub, and I could squeeze in on top of him. The tub was deep enough so I could float a little, so I closed my eyes and floated and we kissed; I wished it was the river, so we could dive in, and swim, and fool around without banging our elbows on the sides of the tub. We kept making waves that splashed over the side of the tub, so towards the end we turned the shower on over us, and it rained down on us like a warm waterfall while we rolled around until we both spurted at almost the same time. Then we left early so we could stop for dinner at a fancy sushi place up on Sunset, a little cream-colored place with neon lights in the ceiling. Bernie did a line and I had a smoke in the car before we went in. I was so cleaned out and empty from the shower that two puffs made me completely hungry. There's nothing better than sashimi and wasabi on a stoned empty stomach. There weren't many tables in the place, and they were full, so we sat at the sushi bar. Of course, the Japanese guys all yelled at us in Japanese when we walked in, and everybody looked at us. My hair was still wet. "Arigato, shmarigato," Bernie said as we sat down.

"I wonder what these people think we are," I said, as we watched the Japanese guy slice the tuna.

"Who knows? They probably think you're Ricky Schroeder and I'm your driver, we're on our way up to Hollywood to meet some new starlet who wants to show you some secrets."

"I wish," I said. "Give me some of your sake."

"No, you're too young."

"Hey, you're just the fucking driver, Señor. You wanna go eat in the car?"

"You'll like Vinnie," Bernie said, pouring sake into my water glass. "He's crazy. He's famous, too; he cuts half of Hollywood."

"He's a faggot." The sashimi was so fresh it was practically still alive.

"Well, aside from that," Bernie said. "Besides," he whispered, leaning close to me, "I'm not a faggot?"

"Not really," I said. "I mean, you're weird, but if you were really a faggot I wouldn't stay with you, I don't think." But who cares, I thought. We stared at each other for a second or two; Bernie had that watery look in his eyes. I'd never really noticed that they were so blue. Then he turned away and ordered another sake.

We drove into the hills above Sunset on a steep, narrow street. The old brick-and-ivy houses were built up high, so they'd all have a view of the smog-filtered city lights. Vinnie's house was the same as all the rest, but you could tell it was his because of the pink Cadillac convertible parked in the driveway. We made a U-turn up the hill and parked at the curb behind a black Ford Bronco.

"Whose is the Bronco?" I asked as we walked down the driveway past the Cadillac, which was huge; I could look the tailfins in the eye.

"Vinnie's. On weekends he goes fishing."

"I thought you said he's a faggot."

"No law against faggots going fishing, I don't think."

Inside, there was white leather furniture and a wall full of black stereo equipment. Vinnie was in the

kitchen when we came in, dressed in black to match the cabinets, a black T-shirt and black jeans and pointy black boots that made him seem even taller than he was, which had to be over six feet. His Italian-style curly black hair was done large around his big-nosed, pale face; make-up covered spots on his cheeks. He looked like an old rock and roll star coming off stage. His eyelashes looked too long and I wondered if he took them off when he went fishing. Bernie introduced me and we sat on the sofa.

“Something to drink? Milk?” Vinnie asked me.

“He’s not that young,” Bernie said.

“I don’t mean that. It’s what I’m drinking.”

“Ulcers?” Bernie said.

“Can we split a beer?” I asked Bernie.

“One day at a time,” Vinnie said.

“Oh, good for you,” Bernie said. “How long you been off?”

Vinnie brought us a bottle of Heineken; he had his milk in a wine glass. He sat in a black leather chair opposite the sofa, his long, thin legs turned to the side like a lady being interviewed on television.

“Eight days,” he said. “Eight alcohol-free, drug-free days.” He took a sip of the milk and licked some off his upper lip. His tongue looked extra long and thin and I wondered if it got that way from being a faggot for a long time.

“That’s a record,” Bernie said.

“It’s awful,” Vinnie said. “The coke part is especially tough. But at least I’m getting support—I’m going to meetings every night—NA, and AA, and yesterday I went to SA.”

“What’s SA?” I asked. I could figure out the other two.

“Sexaholics Anonymous,” Vinnie said. He unrolled a pack of cigarettes from his T-shirt sleeve and shook one out.

“You gave up sex, too?” Bernie said. “That’s hard to believe.”

“You don’t give up sex, you give up too much sex.”

“How can you have too much sex?” I asked.

“I’ll show you later,” Bernie said.

“No, that’s a good question,” Vinnie said. He thought for a minute, probably trying to remember some counselor’s rap from the night before. He took a hit off his cigarette and started smoothing his hand against the side of his chair, like it was somebody’s skin. “It’s when you’re wasting all your energy running after people to have sex, I mean just plain sex, with no relationship at all, and then you sleep half the day recovering from the night before and then five minutes after your work is done you have a toot and go out and start all over again. You’re drinking and tooting so you don’t care what you come home with as long as—well, in my case, as long as it has a big dick.”

“So you really cleaned up your act,” Bernie said.

“Swept the fucking floors, honey.” Vinnie’s voice was too deep for the faggy accent. He leaned forward over the glass-topped coffee table. “So what have you got for me?”

“Just two,” Bernie said. He turned to me. “Scale’s in the cabinet over there—behind the magazines.”

Next to the stereo stuff was an old wooden cabinet with drawers on top and door below. I opened the doors and looked in and wait a minute—on the covers of the magazines stacked inside were all these naked guys with giant dicks. Dicks so big they must have been pumped up, like balloons. This one guy

lying on his back—it was like there was a tree growing between his legs. I picked up the magazines on top and underneath was more of the same.

“Hey, Kim—behind the magazines,” Bernie said without looking up.

I reached back and got the scale, the same triple-beam style as Bernie’s, and brought it to the coffee table. “I never saw anything like that before,” I said.

“Thanks a lot,” Bernie said.

“You like ‘em?” Vinnie said. “Go take a look.”

“Actually, it’s a little scary,” I said. “Is it fake?”

“Well, they’re not really in love,” Vinnie said. Bernie took two baggies from his pants pocket and put them on the scale. Vinnie checked the weight, opened one of the bags, and rubbed a fingernail’s worth of powder on his gums. “This doesn’t count,” he said, “it’s business.”

“It’s the same as before,” Bernie said.

“You cut it again?”

“Who, me? Only about ten percent. I don’t want your people jumping off the roof.”

“Same price? I can only give you a thousand right now.” He pulled a bundle of twenties from under the sofa cushion and I counted them out: fifty, no problem. Vinnie asked Bernie if he wanted a hit.

“You do it,” Bernie said, so I chopped a rock for him right on the table while Vinnie looked at me and drank some more of his milk.

“Appetizing,” he said. “Kim, look—I’ve got something else for you.” He went over to the cabinet and flipped through the magazines, then brought over five or six. “These you’ll like,” he said.

On the cover of the one on top was a naked girl, butt up on a bed. It was a pretty blurry photo but you could see she had smooth skin and long blond hair and a cute butt. It said, “More on Page Six,” so I opened to page six and there was the same girl, turned over, and it wasn’t a girl at all, which I should’ve guessed. The boy was maybe twelve or thirteen; his little pink pole was sticking up out of about three strands of hair, and on the bed next to him was another boy, younger looking, sitting cross-legged looking down at his own weenie, just a baby thing an inch or two long but standing right up. I looked through the magazine and it was all the same: boys on a boat with sailor shirts and no pants; boys taking a shower, soaping each other’s little hard-ons and laughing; boys licking other boys’ smooth, pink dicks, a white come bubble at the tip; boys on beds pointing their rosy assholes up at the camera and smiling over their shoulders.

“Gross,” I said, but it was actually kind of interesting. Some of the dicks were even smaller than mine. “How come you never showed me any of these?” I asked Bernie, who was flipping pages.

“I don’t have any. I’m not really into pictures. I mean, after a while, they get old. I’d rather have the real thing.”

“Me, too,” I said, but Vinnie could see I wanted to look some more. The pictures of two boys doing it were especially affecting my weenie.

“Take some with you,” Vinnie said.

Driving back, Bernie was too quiet. I figured he was concentrating on totaling up the money he’d be making as long as Vinnie stayed sober enough to move the coke. When we stopped at traffic lights I skimmed through the magazines; at first, I was hard, but after you’ve seen fifty or sixty cute little dicks waiting to come, and you can’t touch them to help out, it gets boring.

“Some of those kids are older than I am,” Bernie told me.

“They don’t look it,” I said.

“I mean.”

“Oh, I get it. The pictures are twenty years old.” That was depressing. The guys that took the pictures were probably seventy or eighty, or dead.

I imagined Bernie taking pictures of me in the magazine positions—poking my ass up in the breeze, or sitting on the bed watching my dick stand up, like it’d never done that before. “You want to do some like this?” I asked him.

“No, I’d only get sad about it later on.”

“Just as a sort of record, maybe. I won’t always be this little, I hope.” I thought it’d be nice to have something to remember what I was like before I got big and hairy. At least hairy.

“No, I don’t think so,” Bernie said. “I don’t want to make you into a photograph, if you know what I mean.”

I didn’t, really.

Bernie pulled over and parked on Santa Monica, across from a gay bar and a row of shops. “There’s a place to buy lube next to the bar,” he said. “You better stay here. I’ll be two minutes.” He got out of the car and was waiting for traffic to clear so he could cross the street. I rolled down the window.

“I’ve never been in one, is it legal?”

“Probably not.”

“I’ll just peek through the window, then.”

Of course I went in anyway. The place looked practically empty, and the porno books and videos were in a separate room. The place was full of fag stuff—postcards, jewelry, greeting cards, T-shirts. It was like a head shop or record store—all you had to do was change the guys in the posters from hunky faggots to heavy metal stars. I walked up to the counter where Bernie was checking out different kinds of lube: Elbow Grease, Different Strokes, and so on. The guy behind the counter, a skinny moustache-and-button-down-shirt type of faggot, smiled at me and said, “May I help you?”

“I’m with him,” I said.

“Then you’re under arrest,” Bernie said. “Check this out, Chief: ‘Hot Rod.’ It must have chilies in it.”

“How hot is it?” I asked the fag.

“Depends where you put it,” he said, which made sense.

“Let’s try it,” I said, so Bernie got a tub of Elbow Grease and little squeeze tube of Hot Rod.

“Anything else?” the fag asked.

The counter was full of junk—weird ashtrays shaped like buns and naked postcards and all sorts of things shaped like dicks—mirrors, pipes, earrings, roach clips. “Not right now,” Bernie said, but I was thinking he could get me one of those roach clips for my birthday.

Nine: Chili Fries

I went looking for Pop the next afternoon, but he wasn't around, so I tried again the day after, but he was nowhere. I boarded down to the trailer two or three times and skipped the afternoon surf session so I could check out some of his other hideouts along the Boardwalk, but no luck. I figured he must have come across some dope or a woman or both, and was holed up in an apartment somewhere. When I got back to our place, Bernie was out, probably collecting, and David's car was gone, too—probably he was over at Edward's. The house was dead quiet, so I rolled a number, put on Bernie's tennies, grabbed a bill from the desk drawer, and headed for Tom's, the chili fries place, figuring I'd see if Pop was there; then I could come back and lie around watching television and digesting until Bernie got back.

Tom's is a seven or eight block walk from our place, through the back alley and down Pacific Avenue. A salty breeze was kicking up a cyclone of Styrofoam beans in the alley—someone must've bought a new stereo. Pacific was totally dark except for car headlights and the flickering blue light that spilled from Tom's onto the oil-stained sidewalk. I walked fast past the crummy duplexes on Pacific. They looked empty, but I could tell there was people inside—I could hear the televisions. The headlights lit up a big Mexican mural painted on the outside of a health clinic building: Carlos Santana fifteen feet tall, playing guitar left-handed like Jimi Hendrix. Below him, little brown peasants in straw hats picked lettuce and in the blue concrete sky behind him black eagles flew over coffee-colored mountains. The gang artists had mostly lettered up Carlos, but they'd left the peasants and eagles alone.

Past the clinic there was an empty lot, littered with beer bottles. Over on the sidewalk, a skinny bum was laid out corpse-style on a bus stop bench, his arms across his chest, his fingers linked around an empty bottle of mescal con gusano; the shopping cart beside him was stuffed full of crushed aluminum cans. Tom's, caddy-corner across on the next block, was part of a crumbly old building that must've been a railroad depot back in the days when Venice was an actual vacation spot. Now the building was empty except for Tom's in one corner and a skate rental place four or five doors down. The building's upper floors hung over the sidewalk, helped up by big round columns. Walking through underneath, I stepped over someone sitting against a door, a teenage guy too out of it to get up. He turned his head, squinting red-eyed to check me out, and looking back at him, feeling sorry, I squished my foot on a hunk of fresh dog shit and had to spend five or six minutes scraping Bernie's Nikes up against the curb, while the little bum watched me, staring like he hoped another act would come on as soon as I finished mine.

Halfway up on the sidewalk in front of Tom's there was a Dodge van, an East Los special, painted black with red and yellow flames. Three or four Mexicans stood around the van's open side door, chomping down chili burgers, their beer cans lined up like reserve ammunition on the floor of the van. To one side of the door, two giant Harley choppers rested, dripping grease, while their masters pigged out inside.

Tom's was cramped and hot, the plastic tables and greasy black stove lit up to the max by naked blue fluorescent tubes, not because anyone was interested in looking at the food but because with the lights blasting the cockroaches were afraid to crawl out of the cabinets. A narrow counter had four or five stools in front; there were small tables alongside a mirrored wall—the mirror was sprayed with black looping gang names—and a table in front of the window, where the fat bikers sat in their studded jackets and sunglasses, laughing and spitting out bits of chili and swallowing Pepsi from quart-sized cups.

Pop wasn't there, but I spotted Junior sitting at the counter with an empty paper chili boat in front of him. I sat down next to him and waited for the Filipino guy behind the counter to put down his comic book. I ordered chili fries and a Seven-Up, and since Bernie's bill turned out to be a twenty, I ordered another round for Junior. He was looking kind of off-center, nervous, tapping a foot.

"What's your story?" I asked him.

"Oh, fuck. Same old story. What are you up to? How's your old man?"

"Good question." The Flip whistled and I walked down to the cash register and got our stuff.

"So what's bugging you?" I asked Junior. "Pussy trouble?"

"I wish. I got fired from that rickshaw job." We'd seen him, Bernie and me, two or three weeks before, up in Westwood. After the movie we were taking a walk so Bernie could stare at boys and we came across Junior pulling tourists around in a high-tech bicycle rickshaw. He was pumping away in tight shorts, looking sleek and black and powerful. "I was doing good, too, but it didn't matter. The guy hired on a few women, girls, and they like started taking all the business, so he got rid of the guys."

"Too bad," I said, and we sat for a while crunching away on fries and scooping up goopy chili with our fingers. It tasted good, but it looked like we were eating out of the cat box. Mario called it dead food: the potatoes were probably older than me, frozen in some warehouse waiting to be boiled back to life in Tom's hot lard. Even the beans tasted too old, crammed into big tins ten years ago by underpaid peasants in some Peruvian packinghouse. But with a shot of ketchup they were all right.

Aside from losing his job, it felt to me like Junior was having a crisis, the kind you go through when you stop smoking buds for a few days. Worrying about the future, I figured, and sure enough he starts in: "Thing is, I don't know what the fuck to do with my life. I'm supposed to go to college, I mean, I want to go to college, you know, I'm planning to go to college, but now that it's time to go and do it, it's like I'd rather go down to Mexico for a while and rest up before getting all committed like that, you know, school, and then a job." He shoved a fry into his pile of chili, lifted it out, and licked off the brown mess. "It's like the end of everything."

"You could still surf sometimes, anyway," I told him. Besides, I was thinking, going to college couldn't be that much worse than hanging around the beach. But maybe college had changed since I'd been there.

"Maybe I'll just go on down to Mexico and think it all over," he said. If we were down there right now, I thought, we'd be half-asleep in a hammock strung up on a beach, sharing a pipe to sleep on, shooting the shit about the stars or the weather.

"Mexico's different," I said.

After we polished off the fries we took a smoke break outside around the corner, until we got hungry enough to go back in for another round. Lucky for us the little bum I'd stepped over was asleep, so we didn't have to share the doob with him. When we got back, the Mexicans were still hanging at the van, but they only had two bottles of ammunition left. The bikers were done with their fries and were sitting there jabbering at each other like speed freaks. We sat down and ordered, and then everybody turned around to look when two chicks came in, like visitors from an alien reality, young chicks in faded jeans and loose white blouses. One was blond and had on a short black leather jacket. The other was sort of half-black looking, with curly hair that looked dyed red; her pink cardigan hung down almost to her knees. They both had on white powdery makeup and tons of black eyeliner. The Flip walked to the end of the counter.

“Two orders,” said the leather jacket.

“Here or to go?”

“God, who could eat here?” the sweater said. The Flip slapped chili on fries and wrapped it. The bikers stared at the chicks, who wouldn’t turn around or look back. One of the bikers even took off his sunglasses, and they both wiped their chilied-up lips with the backs of their hand. But the chicks were totally tuned out—they probably had some guys waiting somewhere, or maybe they just did some guys, or each other. Or maybe it was just drugs. They walked out, not sassy but a little quick, and the Flip and me and Junior and the bikers and the Mexicans all watched them until they were lost in the darkness down the street.

“Not my type,” Junior said.

“Me neither,” I agreed. “That makeup, Jesus, it’s like death. I’ll take a healthy tan, myself—all over, if possible.”

“Mister Experience here,” Junior laughed. “You’re how old? Twelve?” Junior looked right at me, smiling like he was about to make a joke, but then he got quiet and looked down at the counter. “Not that I should even talk,” he said. “You know—oh, never mind.”

“Now what?”

Junior stared at his finger while he pushed ketchup around in the bottom of his fries boat. He brought it up and licked it off. He had a real pink tongue, like most black people. “Well, I don’t know, I never exactly told anyone this,” he said, leaning over close to me, and I was thinking, not *another* one. But that wasn’t it.

“I’m a virgin,” he whispered.

“Oh, come on,” I said, “it’s the Eighties, that’s impossible.” How could he get almost all the way to nineteen without getting laid? It was unbelievable.

“Well, fuck you, it’s true. I guess I just haven’t found the right girl at the right time, I don’t know. Maybe it’s me, or something. It’s definitely something.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. He was black, but so were plenty of chicks. And who cared anymore, anyway? He was smart, he had muscles, he was a nice guy. “If I was a girl, I’d let you fuck me in a minute. Didn’t you ever at least try?”

“I never exactly had the chance, I mean, living at home, there’s always people around, or I’m studying, or I’m out in the water.”

Well, now I knew what the Mexico routine was all about. I told him to forget it—the girls weren’t like that down there.

“How do you know? You were what, eight? Nine?”

“Hey, yo mama. I could see what was going on, and it wasn’t much.” I wished I could help the poor guy, but what could I do? I didn’t know any girls, either, except the ones that drifted by the trailer, which were all the older, spacey type—Junior was too cool for chicks like that.

“The worst part was working the rickshaw,” he went on, “all those chicks on the sidewalk, checking out my shorts.” So do something about it, I wanted to tell him, grab one, go share a joint, at least you’re old enough that they’d take you seriously. Anyway, I figured, when he was ready, it would happen.

Junior sat there staring at the counter. The Flip turned on radio, blasting, and suddenly we had that faggot singing “Chances Are,” and the Flip singing along with it. The bikers cracked up, but the Mexicans

couldn't stand it, and after turning up their van radio trying to smother the Flip with salsa music, they gave up and burned rubber.

"Let's smoke," Junior said, and I half expected him to ask me to go help him find some chicks down the beach.

"No, I gotta go," I said. I hated to leave Junior sitting there high and horny with nothing but a pile of chili fries to keep him company, but I'd started thinking about Bernie, who was probably back already, waiting for me. I didn't want to be late and have him get annoyed with me.

It was late, ten or eleven, when I got back to the apartment, but Bernie was still gone. Mario was crapped out in the Barcalounger, wrapped in his silky Chinese robe. The television was going, minus the sound, turned on to some beauty contest. Mario lifted an eyelid, on the good side of his face, held on to the chair and pulled himself halfway up, with the back of the chair automatically following him. He coughed. "Time for old Jose to hit the sack."

"Where's Edward?" I asked, the wrong question.

"The fuck, I don't know. Found someone pretty, I guess. Fell asleep reading liner notes."

"I thought you went to his place."

"We were supposed to meet, the asshole."

"Well, you'll talk to him tomorrow," I said, hoping it was true, since Mario had started getting kind of funky when Edward wasn't around.

"Fuck I will," he said, more sad now than angry. He fell back and the chair fell back under him and he stared up at the ceiling. "I'm sick is why he doesn't want to see me, in case you were wondering."

"What, your face? It looks all right to me, I mean, it looks the same," I said, because it did. I didn't even see it as anything weird anymore—just a part of his character, a grumpy little tilt to one side.

"Anyway, I thought the Chinese guy had it under control."

He sat up slowly, and the chair stayed flat. "Chinese guy's a bullshit artist. It's getting worse. And I've had a cold for three weeks, and today at work they forgot to wake me up from my siesta and I slept on the cutting table until almost four. I could barely get up."

"Take it easy, boss. Go find a better Chinese guy. A Korean. A Mexican—down in Mexico we had this old woman that cured people, easy. She'd give 'em a couple of old bones to stick under their pillow and two days later whatever they had would be gone."

"I had two old bones in my bed all last week, fat lot of good it did me."

I figured there was no arguing with him; if he wanted to be miserable, it was up to him. If he didn't want to get better, I couldn't do it for him, but it felt rotten seeing him give up so fast. It was funny—everybody had these sex problems, too much or not enough or none at all—it seemed like only me and Bernie were normal and happy. I asked Mario what happened to Bernie.

"Boy scout meeting," he said.

I helped him off the chair and watched him waddle down the hallway towards the bathroom. I heard him piss, loud, and blow his nose Mexican-style into the sink. He passed me on the way back to his room. "Anything I can do," I said. He stopped in the doorway, leaned against the door, and looked at me sad-eyed.

"I should've been like you when I was a kid," he said.

"Well, you were a Mexican."

“I don’t mean that.”

“Hey, I’m just like any other kid, anyway. A little shorter, maybe.”

“Oh, never mind,” he said, closing his eyes. When he relaxed, the bad half of his face sagged down like something was pulling on it. He opened an eye. “You ever let him fuck you?” he asked, and the good half of his face started a smile.

“He never asked me to,” I said, wondering why not.

“You try it some time. It’s a pain at first, but after a while you get to like it.”

An hour later I was in bed, under the covers, poking myself with an Elbow Greased finger to see if Mario was right when Bernie finally showed up. He put his stuff on the desk and came over to kiss my nose and then went through his usual ritual of stashing the brown bag under the closet floor, dumping wallet and keys on the desk, and putting loose change in a cup in the desk drawer. Mario was right, I was discovering, it *does* hurt, and that’s only my finger.

“Vinnie was in desperate need,” Bernie explained. “I have to see him again tomorrow—I’ll cut it first, in the morning. You can come if you want. We’ll get a haircut.” He got undressed and climbed in next to me. He was still cold from being outside.

“Mario says he’s really sick.”

“I don’t think so,” Bernie said. “He doesn’t seem like it. I think he’s just getting old, that and Edward not coming around enough. Faggots have this thing about exaggerating their symptoms. Dramatics.” We kissed and he wrapped his cold fingers around my dick and then felt the lube, warm and slick between my legs. “Hey, what’s this?”

“Nothing. I was only fooling around.”

“Chief, that’s *my* job.”

“Yeah, I know.” I put my greasy hand down between his legs. “Don’t you ever want to, you know, go inside?”

He thought it over for a second or two. “I can take it or leave it,” he said, but I felt his dick start to firm up. “Why, do you want to try it?”

“Didn’t you ever do it before?”

“Oh, sure, once in a while, back in the old days. It’s all right.” He took my hand in his and held it close against his dick so I could feel it stretch out.

“Well, you could try it sometime, I guess.” His dick was sure a lot fatter than my finger, though.

“Or you could do me,” Bernie said, reaching for the lube jar. So we tried it that way, after some warm-up kissing and the usual other stuff. I thought it was pretty cool, pushing up inside him to where I felt all connected and warm. I tried to go slow and really appreciate it. Bernie kind of squirmed, like he was helping me out, and coming way up inside was the best yet. I could feel Bernie’s butt tighten up as I was spurting and when I tried to pull out he told me to stay there for a while longer. I knew it must have hurt him, even a little, but after I slid out and he rolled over, Bernie hugged me and we kissed almost until we fell asleep. He was poking a finger around my butt for a minute or two and I wasn’t sure whether I was glad or not that he fell asleep before he could ask about putting his dick in.

Ten: Cutting

Next morning I helped Bernie cut the coke. It seemed kind of a shame to fool with it, it looked so nice, sparkling white and full of hard little rocks, but Bernie said it'd look just as good after we added a half ounce of cut, and it'd be worth an extra thousand dollars.

We set everything up in the kitchen. I worked the coke through a metal strainer into a Pyrex cake pan while Bernie unwrapped the cut—a cube of Italian baby laxative in Christmasy red-and-green foil. He rescued a few pure rocks before I was finished, and set them aside. Then he weighed out a hunk of cut and strained it into the pan on top of the coke. He mixed it up with a wooden spoon—it looked like he was doing an afternoon television show. I was getting dizzy from inhaling the dust and Bernie came over and sniffed some off my arm.

Then he went to the cabinet under the sink and brought out a tin of acetone, the same solvent I use to burn wax off my surfboard. He poured a cup or so directly into the coke-and-cut mixture and stirred it around. Of course my nose was all opened and the acetone was burning the air, like paint thinner.

“Did we worry, back in the old days when we did five kilos at a time in someone’s basement—did we worry about blowing up the stove? Yes, friends, we did,” Bernie said, “but the problem was the texture was never right when we used the microwave.” He stirred the mix some more. “Come on and help me, this is the fun part,” he said, and we both dipped our hands in and shaped big sloppy rocks the size of golf balls, and then Bernie popped the pan in the oven, leaving the door open halfway.

After a half hour or so, it was done, and it looked great. We strained the pure stuff he'd set aside on top, so the idiots who bought grams from Vinnie would be fooled into thinking the whole thing was pure. They never tested the rocks, figuring any cut would be in the loose, powdery stuff—in our stuff, it was just the opposite, so when they dropped a flake of powder into the Clorox, it would drift down in slow motion, like it was supposed to.

I guess it was good business, but sometimes I thought Bernie’s attitude was strange. I guess it’s because I grew up as a customer, thinking dope was special, that every time I smoked something it was a cosmic miracle that those particular buds, all the way from Jamaica or Thailand or Mendocino, ended up burning in my pipe. Like meeting certain people. But for Bernie it was just a business, just a product being moved to customers. Maybe that’s why he never used much of it, just those little puffs on my pinners and his quarter-inch coke lines—like he was afraid to get too involved, too close. It was like some nights when he’d tell me he wanted to read for a while even though I’d be practically poking my thing in his face, and then I’d fall asleep and we wouldn’t even do anything.

* * * * *

Vinnie’s salon was all the way across town, up beyond Hollywood, way off the freeway through old shopping centers with Korean writing on the signs and into a hilly area full of Salvadoran restaurants and auto upholstery shops. On the way up Bernie warned me the place would be full of faggots, but I told him not to get jealous, since I’m not attracted to faggots. “Not regular ones, anyway,” I told him.

Vinnie’s aircon was on full blast, chilling the square little building into an ice cube. The cold breezed all the way up my shorts, and I wished I’d worn some underwear. The stereo was blasting, too, loud metal

music that bounced off all the giant mirrors and the dark-tinted windows, making everybody move too fast and talk too loud.

Vinnie was in his usual tight jeans, the shape of his dick obvious against one leg. He was cutting a familiar-looking faggot, maybe an actor. Vinnie's fat assistant swept up, waiting for the right time to wash my hair. I sat in an empty barber's chair and Bernie sat like a regular customer on a black vinyl couch and picked up a People magazine.

The actor was screaming his sad story at Vinnie, shouting over the music. "How could he treat me like this, I want to know, when it was I who gave him everything? I introduced him to everybody. I tell you, the world's in a perilous state, if that's all the respect I'm due. I mean, after all these months, he wouldn't even listen to me, he just sat there calmly packing his old backpack with all my good shirts and socks, and then he's out the door. Vamoosed! Gone with the wind!" Vinnie snipped and mumbled, and then the guy started in about his agent screwing him—he meant, out of some money. I caught the guy's eye for a second and he winked at me, so I went over and sat next to Bernie, but the guy didn't take the hint; when Vinnie was finally done the guy winked at me again as he was going out.

Bernie followed Vinnie into the bathroom at the back and they did their exchange. Vinnie looked buzzed when he came out, so when I climbed in the chair I told him not to get carried away.

"I didn't do any," he said. "I'm still off. An hour ago I had some ginseng tea. You have such great hair. Reggie," he shouted, to the assistant, "look at this color. You'd get an award, I swear. And natural waves."

"You're still off it? Really?" I'd never seen anyone quit using drugs and be happy about it. "Yeah, it's great. It's like, oh, look, I can taste stuff, I can breathe, you know, I can actually wake up in the morning. I go to sleep when I'm tired, at some normal hour, instead of a half hour after doing a Valium or having half a bottle of tequila and knocking my head against the coffee table on my way down. And check this, sweetie," as he waved the scissors in front of my nose, dancing his hand around like it was a ballerina puppet, "see? My hand's not shaking, either." He started clipping at the back of my head. "Of course, on the down side, I've put on a few pounds, but it's like, well, honey, will it be figure or brain cells? Anyway, I feel ten years younger."

"So if I give it up, I'll feel like I'm three again."

"Do you want sideburns? Actually, you don't have much choice, do you?" He was staring at me, holding my chin in his fingers. "You oughta take it easy. Especially you're around it all the time."

"Bernie keeps it locked up," I said. "Besides, he doesn't do hardly enough to get stoned, anyway."

"Do I hear my name?" Bernie said, looking up from the magazine.

"Only spoken with reverence," Vinnie said. The phone rang, which we knew even though the sound was mostly drowning it out—there was a blinking red light on top. The fat assistant answered it and after a minute brought it to Vinnie and stood there holding Vinnie's scissors.

"What," Vinnie said, and then after a pause: "No, I don't think I can. Well, maybe, but last I heard he was out of town. No, there isn't anybody else...well, if you don't hear from me...no, I really doubt it..." The fat assistant turned down the radio and we all watched Vinnie as he listened into the phone and rubbed his neck with his fingers. Bernie said, "What?" and Vinnie put a finger to his lips. Then he said "okay" a few times and hung up.

"Guy wants six ounces," he said to Bernie.

“Can do,” Bernie said.

“I told him to forget it,” Vinnie said

“Why? What’s his problem?”

“Something was weird, the way he was asking me.” In the silent, cold room we stared at each other in the mirrors, waiting for the siren and a knock on the door. “Like he didn’t want to get off the phone until I’d say yes.”

“Oh, great,” Bernie said.

“And he kept asking for your name,” Vinnie said.

“Jesus. Did you hear any funny noises?”

“Well, I think Kim farted,” Vinnie said, and we all laughed, but Bernie was pacing around, wondering if we should leave right away or not. Was there someone outside the shop? Did they see us come in?

The assistant turned the radio back up. Vinnie started snipping at the top of my head.

“Now my hands are shaking,” he said.

Eleven: The Summer of Sixty-Eight

Nothing happened for a few days, so we knew Vinnie's new sobered-up instincts had probably saved us from getting busted. The guy who was trying to set him up never called back.

"They went to dangle their bait somewhere else," Bernie decided, and even though he decided to chill the business with Vinnie for a while and just collect what was owed, there weren't any strange clicks on the phone, so he went on selling as usual to his other people. He was still pulling in all this money—I knew, since I was counting it—and he told me it was my job to help him spend it.

So almost every night we started going out, doing our cousin act all over town, at the movies and in video arcades and buying stuff in department stores. He bought me a new skateboard, too, which I scuffed up some before Pop got a chance to check it out. Edward Better-Than-Nothing more or less came back to Mario, since it was the easiest thing to do, and the four of us went out a few times for Mexican food, with Bernie paying for it. Mario wanted him to treat us all to a day at Magic Mountain on the Fourth of July, but Bernie said it was forbidden for Jews to ride on roller coasters. He told me later what he really wanted to do for the Fourth was hide out for the afternoon at the hot tub place, away from the crowds at the beach. Bernie offered to treat Mario and Edward, too—in another room, of course—but Mario said the hot water and steam made him wasted for days and Edward complained that chlorine in the tub water always made his skin break out.

I managed to get Bernie to buy me a bicycle, too, one day when a black guy in a pickup truck full of obvious hot bikes showed up in the alley behind the house. Bernie went down to buy one; he paid with a hundred-dollar bill, which is stupid if the guy knows where you live. He chose the perfect bike, though: a black, fat-wheeled dirt bike with five gears and gold wire wheels. I had to tell Pop I'd borrowed it from someone. For one thing, if he knew it was mine he'd be jealous, and for another I was afraid he might wonder where Bernie got his money—and why he was spending it all on me.

On the morning of the Fourth I got up early, to go out for a morning session. I rolled up four or five extra doobs, to take to the hot tub place; then I left Bernie in bed, half-awake and halfway hard. The surf was crowded on the holiday, but it wasn't a bad session, considering the number of non-local assholes I had to share the waves with.

By the time I was ready to come back in, the morning fog was burned off and everything was all bright and hot and crowded. The sand was packed towel-to-towel all the way back to the Boardwalk; lifeguards raced back and forth in their orange pickup trucks, barking through bullhorns and barely missing blankets full of Mexican families. Little brown kids ran naked, pissing wherever they wanted, dodging the empty Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets that were tumbleweeding across the sand.

Of course, every lunatic in Los Angeles was spending the holiday selling some useless product on the Boardwalk, hawking predictions of the future, or just plain begging: singing black Sufis on roller skates, bearded astrologers from France, fat Tarot readers from Russia, sweaty palmists from Majorca, all these spiritual foreigners sitting on benches or on the sand under flimsy umbrellas, half of them dozing in heavy sweatshirts despite the heat. Skinny mimes stood like crows on a clothesline, motionless on high chairs, baking in the heat waiting for tourists to drop coins in a hat. Clowns in oversize bum clothes were sidling along beside dopey tourists, imitating their dumb walks until somebody threw money; orange-robed worshippers wearing Walkmans sat on boxes selling incense to support a Sai Baba temple; there were

squat, silent Koreans with tables full of fake Ray-Bans; braless, sunburned women peddling crappy household junk imported from Bali, Mexico, India, Greece; and once in a while, a disoriented, drooling hippie in his underwear, weaving zigzag through the flowing crowd singing acid nonsense.

And a zillion girls. Blond Valley girls with boobs stuffed into white bikini tops. Mexican girls in black one-piece suits under wet T-shirts, their nipples poking up through the fabric. Girls my size with little tit buds barely able to hold up their bikinis. Girls in groups of three or four, on parade, looking bored at the rows of Korean sunglasses, turning their heads to stare at skinny, sandy-assed surfers whose baggy wet trunks slid partway down showing an ivory stripe of untanned ass and in front a fringe of hair below their flat bellies, with the damp suits clinging around their dicks, showing the girls the shape.

The girls all stared at me as I walked by, the Midget Surfer still in his wetsuit, carrying his authentic dinged-up surfboard, and I stared back: let them think I was only ten! In my mind I was untying their bikinis, running my hands over their bodies, circling my tongue around the soft budding tits of the twelve-year-olds, sliding my fingers over a wispy mound, stroking a keyhole soft and childish and ready like me.

Young girls walked with their families, tourists, not even trying to look cool, staring at every part of everybody; their white-bodied, short-haired little brothers trotted along in their K-Mart nylon bathing suits, poking them out in the middle, the shape of their balls making a small, smooth sack below. There were faggot couples in Speedos and sunglasses: I could see them back in their Santa Monica apartments, holding each other in the shower as they washed off the sand.

Why don't they all just go home and fuck? I wondered—they were almost naked anyway, all hot and sweaty, paired up or searching, they had the day off work or school—why waste a day looking at cheap T-shirts and Venice oddballs? Why not go back home, go back to your condos, your apartments, your hotels, pull off your tight wet swimsuits, let your tits swing around and your dicks stretch out, why bother with this boring weirdos' parade? I slowed up for a minute, checking out a couple waiting for a palm reader. Their bodies were like photos on a magazine cover: her tits like softballs and his big dick lumpy and solid in his trunks below a tan, rippled stomach. The guy reached over and squeezed the girl's ass and they looked over at me like I was some exotic rubber insect, struggling across the sand holding up a crumb of Wonder Bread twice as big as its body.

"I won't even go out there," Bernie told me. He was still in Calvins and T-shirt, reading the newspaper on the front room floor, an empty coffee cup beside him. "It's bad enough," he went on, "I have to listen to the fucking boom boxes while the fucking Dobermans have a heart attack. Look at this," he waved at the open bay windows, "it's like, Manuel, bring on the mariachis! They keep on coming, every Mexican ever born. I swear, at least five hundred cars have tried to find a place in the lot. If one of those assholes double parks behind my car, I swear, that's it, buddy. Sledgehammer through the windows."

Bullshit, I thought. You're not really so angry—you're just waiting to go to the hot tubs. "Wasn't there any cute Mexican kids?"

"Well, I guess a few. Probably had switchblades in their swimsuits."

I grabbed his hand and pulled him up off the floor. "Come on in the shower and unzip me," I said. "Then we'll get out of here."

The streets were empty, once we got away from the beach, so Bernie let me drive for a few blocks on a side street near Olympic—I was getting good enough to shift by myself. The hot tub place was a converted motel in the middle of an old industrial area, a half block of jungle surrounded by gravel and

concrete. It was practically deserted, only one top-down cream 450 SL in the dusty parking lot, and then us, in Bernie's Toyota hatchback. The guy at the counter, a college student type, looked surprised to see us, even more so when Bernie told him we'd take a deluxe room for two hours. "My cousin just got back from South America, he needs a long soak," I said, which passed for a reason. Bernie left his credit card and we grabbed towels and the key before the guy had time to think of another one.

The room was pretty big, dark and woodsy; the round, sunken tub could have fit six people easy. Over to one side of the room was a small, glass-doored sauna and a plastic-sheeted massage table; on the other side there were tall windows that looked out on a fenced-in miniature garden, rocks and ferns and bansai pine trees and a few big boulders. There was a waterfall trickling down through the boulders; I could just spot the pipe that brought the water to the top. Along the wall near the door were the showers and clothes hooks and a high shelf with a stereo. Bernie said he'd read in the paper that there'd be a broadcast of a Dead concert from Denver, but we weren't so sure we could pick it up. We stripped and showered and then I went over and lit up a number and climbed into the tub.

I watched Bernie in the steamy shadows while I smoked; he laid a towel down on the massage table and went into the sauna to make sure the electric stove was turned on. He still looked like a kid to me, small and bouncy, his hair flopping over his forehead and his round, pudgy ass picking up light from the windows. I knew it was nuts, but looking at him I felt like we were really cousins, distant maybe, part of some old family tree so big and spread out we'd never know all the branches. Bernie sat on the edge of the tub, his back to the waterfall windows.

I handed Bernie the doob and watched as he took a decent hit while his dick stretched out and poked itself up in little jumps, like someone was turning a key. "I was here before," he said.

"I know, I was with you."

"No, before you, last year. I never told you about my friend Tony, did I?" There was something about smoking dope and pools of water that made older guys feel like talking. "You'd remember if I did. The guy was—well, it's better if I start at the beginning."

"The guy was a faggot, to begin with," I said. He handed me the joint.

"Well, yeah," Bernie said, easing down into the tub. He waded out to the middle and the tip of his cock floated like a peyote button in front of him, surrounded by foamy bubbles. I took a hit and got out of the pool to put the roach on a dry bench near our clothes.

Bernie kept talking. "This guy Tony liked boys. 'Like,' that's a joke—he was completely obsessed. When I first met him, he was thirty-seven or so, and he was the first person I'd ever met that right off the bat told me he liked boys, so between that and his nice apartment and good clothes and his business, I thought he really had it together. A wholesale gift business, a closet full of preppy clothes, this great apartment on Nob Hill—San Francisco—and a little white MG convertible. He was so sophisticated, really correct, he had a little trimmed moustache, the khaki slacks and striped Oxfords, an Italian coffee machine, satin sheets on a king-sized bed. Wiped his boys with a monogrammed towel."

I slid back into the tub and sat next to him, wrapping my hand around his dick. "And you were the hippie?"

"Well, compared to him. I had a ton of money, though, I was living with this dealer friend. Anyway, I'd bring over some toot and we'd get in his MG and go down to Polk Street, where the boys were."

"Doing what?"

“The boys? Waiting for us, I guess. We were customers, you know, they were for sale—for rent. Actually, they weren’t really boys anymore, they were already old, sixteen or seventeen. But Tony had this thing-”

“Yeah, just like you,” and I swatted it, splashing hot water on Bernie’s chest.

“No, worse than me. He used to tell me, seriously, he had to come four times a day, like he’d die if he didn’t. So on Polk we’d sit and drink coffee or just cruise by and Tony always picked one up, it didn’t matter how scuzzy. And he had a giant pile of porno stuff under his bed. There was this one film-”

“Okay, okay, so what happened?” Four times a day was a lot—I’d be completely raw.

“Hold on, I’m coming to it.” He went down under the water and came up shaking his head. “Boy, that’s good. See, Tony’s deal was that he always had to be the boss, the king, on top, in charge, everything had to be arranged exactly right. His cool clothes, the sports car, the tidy apartment. Boys when he wanted them, clean sheets, out of the apartment as soon as they were done, no phone numbers. I mean, he had ropes on the bed, you know, like restraints.”

“Sounds like he needed to smoke a little dope.”

“Yeah, maybe. He hardly smoked, but I sold him a ton of toot. Anyway, I almost never had any boys because I couldn’t take them back to my place, it was full of drugs and money. One time Tony insisted I take one and the kid and I ended up on Tony’s couch while Tony and his kid were in the bedroom.”

“So where is he now?”

“I remember one time I wanted to fuck this kid, I mean really fuck him, and he told me I could if I’d let him drive my car for fifteen minutes, so I did.”

“Knock knock. What happened to Tony?”

“And it was weird, too—I saw him the day before, I sold him a gram for the trip.”

“What trip?”

“Well, that’s the story,” he said, finally. I was getting broiled, so I sat up on the edge of the tub. “No one knows for sure, which makes it worse. He goes up to Seattle for a trade show, some business thing, and he stays in a hotel, he goes out cruising for boys—he used to tell me the parking lot at Penney’s after school was the hot spot—I mean, I’m assuming he went out looking around, anyway, I see him off on a Tuesday night and Thursday morning I get a call. Not from Tony, from another friend. Tony’s dead, murdered, in his hotel room, with his dick sliced off.”

“Just his dick?”

“That’s not enough?”

“I mean, his nuts, too?”

“Well, I don’t know, for Christ’s sake, I *imagine* his nuts, too, it’s kind of a package deal.”

“That’s what you get,” I said. My nuts shrank up just thinking about it. I looked at Bernie’s dick floating in the water and I wondered what it would be like if I suddenly sliced it off, all the blood spurting out, the Jacuzzi bubbles turning red. “Wait a minute,” it occurred to me, “what’s that got to do with being here?”

“Oh, excuse me. Well, last year, I happened to be on Santa Monica Boulevard, not cruising, of course, but anyway on the corner I saw one of Tony’s old boys, not much of a boy anymore by then, maybe eighteen or nineteen. I stopped and he got in, he recognized me and asked me, you know, how’s old Tony?”

So I told him ‘Dead’ and we got depressed, so I did it with him for old times’ sake, but I couldn’t bring him home.”

“Bags of dope and money.”

“So we came here instead.”

“But what happened?”

“Well, he swallowed it when I came, for one thing.”

Bernie reached over and fooled around with my nuts, which in the hot water felt especially good.

“No, I mean Tony.”

“No one knows. They never got whoever did it.”

“Figures. Probably his karma for being an asshole,” I said. “I mean, you can’t just grab any kid you see.”

“Yes, sir, Mister Sun God,” Bernie said, leaning over to kiss my knee. “See, you’re assuming it was some boy that offed him, or that whoever did it was pissed off because Tony was a faggot. Or that he even knew he was a faggot. Maybe it was just some crazed asshole who got carried away after stealing his watch. Of course, I have my own theory.”

“Which is?”

“Do my feet, will you?” He flopped backwards and I slid back into the water and grabbed his feet and started massaging one. His feet were the same size as mine, which meant mine would eventually get bigger as I grew up, along with the rest of me.

“It’s my idea,” Bernie said, “that he was in bed with some kid from Penney’s. They’re fooling around and in comes another guy, to rob him, or maybe it was setup with the Penney’s kid, you know, leaving the door a little bit open, and the guy shows up and they’re naked and Tony’s chomping the weenie, or vice versa, and the burglar goes bananas.”

“The whole thing is sickening. He should’ve just settled down with one kid.”

“Or maybe it was a plainclothes cop, following him, and he gets to the hotel, he opens the door, he’s about to bust old Tony—and it’s his son in the bed! The cop’s own son, twelve years old! The kids pulls on his pants, runs down the hallway still dripping, the father—the cop—strangles Tony...”

“Okay, enough. It’s the Fourth of July.” I spread Bernie’s legs apart and pulled him closer, until his soggy dick was in front of my face, and I gave it a little bite on the head to perk it up. “See if you can tune in the Dead,” I said.

They weren’t on yet, but Bernie left the radio on low so we could just barely hear it over the rumble of the Jacuzzi motor. He went and dried off his hands and had another toot, his patient weenie by now stuck up straight. Mine was getting impatient, so I climbed out of the water and went into the sauna, to make sure Bernie’d see what was up.

Bernie followed me in; I stretched out on the slatted wooden bench and he bent over and licked me for a while. “Opium would be the right thing in here,” he said, sitting on the floor in front of me.

“What for? On my dick?” Which was straining out of its skin -the heat and water and Bernie’s licks were really making me horny.

“No, here in the sauna, a pipe,” Bernie said, running his tongue on the underside of my dick and holding on to my little nuts. “The heat—it reminds me of doing opium, all crapped out but happy.”

“Makes me think of the tipi,” I said. In Sonoma, on this land. There’d be all these people, doing

peyote all night long. I was just a kid, so I'd go in and fall asleep on someone's lap. They all sang and chanted and whomped on this ugly drum, and I'm asleep in this woman's lap in front of the fire, some woman I never even seen before, and they're all singing and swaying back and forth and taking breaks to throw up on the dirt in front of the fire. I took like one bite of the peyote mush and I fell asleep and I was like dreaming there was a thousand people in there with me, and the woman was hugging me closer, I didn't even know her name. I was probably popping a bone out my shorts, too, not that anyone would care. I remember the big deal was about halfway till morning we'd all go out and piss in the woods—everyone off behind a different tree, and you'd hear someone laughing on one side, and then forty or fifty feet away another tree would start laughing.

I closed my eyes and felt the heat rising from the electric sauna stove and I listened to Bernie breathing. Then I felt Bernie's head, resting on my legs; he was still sitting on the floor next to the bench. I petted his hair with one hand and wrapped my other hand around my dick, which had flopped over next to Bernie's ear.

He turned around and started licking me. "Look at this," he said. "It's either a shadow on a drop of water or a hair."

"It's a hair," I told him. I'd only noticed the day before.

"Well, all things must pass," he said. "I think I see another one. And it's getting bigger, too."

"It is not," I said, but I looked down to check. Then I peeked over at Bernie's and tried to imagine what it had looked like when he was small. "When did you know?" I asked him.

"Know what?"

I sat and scooted forward so my nuts hung over the edge. It made it easier to lick.

"You know—about being a faggot."

"Well, it's like this, I mean, certain people—"

I cut him off. "Not the reasons. I don't care about why, only when, like how old were you."

"Since...good question. Since I was little, I mean, five or six, but it wasn't until later that I really knew, accepted it, more or less, and did something. I had these acid trips."

"Figures." And I waited for the story.

"The first one," Bernie began as I took a deep breath, "I didn't really believe it; it was subconscious, not that you've got any subconscious on acid, really, the whole universe is just there, sitting on a plate, but anyway I didn't do anything about it. I was in Big Sur, down in the forest, camping, it was summertime, real hot and dusty. I was eighteen, I think. A bunch of us hiked in one day and dropped acid the next—actually it was mescaline, or supposed to be, not acid, those big gelatin caps with purple powder. We did it early morning so we'd come on while the sun was coming up into the canyon, this river canyon with redwoods and pine trees, leaves waving in the breeze, birds buzzing, the river running through hot boulders...we were naked all day, three or four of us, college roommates, and scattered up and down the canyon were another twenty-five people or so, hippies. All naked, hanging around on the rocks in little groups. One guy with an out-of-tune guitar sat up on a rock, trying to play Neil Young songs, you know, some skinny bearded asshole shaking in the wind, drooling on the strings, trying to sing 'I Am a Child'...our own little Human Be-In, our naked village, and all the guys totally zonked and trying not to stare too much at the girls' tits, and these lesbians—well, maybe they weren't lesbians, but they were sitting on the boulders with their legs spread, sitting like a man, you know, and staring at our dicks.

“Well, anyway, I discovered sometime in the afternoon that I wasn’t staring at the girls, but there was a boy across the river—sounds like an old song—and I was tuning into him, watching him jump around, playing on the rocks. He’d look over at me, but who knew what he was thinking? I didn’t know what I was thinking, for that matter, not that I was thinking at all, I was just this breathing lump of sunburned flesh, floating in the river to cool off, alive for no reason.

“Anyway, the stuff wore off by sunset, so we smoked some hash, ate pea soup, and laughed until we went to sleep. Boy, I slept on that hard ground—no dreams, nothing. When I woke up, all I remembered from the trip, out of all the cosmic stuff that had rolled through my brain, was the boy. Just that image, like a slo-mo video, the boy playing on the rocks in the sun, his really cute dick, his smile...But I didn’t know why.”

“Bullshit you didn’t. When was this?”

“You mean what year when? Summer of, let’s see, sixty-eight—it was before Eldridge Cleaver, I think.”

“Chiefie, I got an idea. What day?”

“What day? God, I don’t know. August, end of summer. What’s the difference what day?”

“Chief, idiot, think! I was born in the summer of sixty-eight, in Santa Cruz, right near Big Sur.”

“Aw, it can’t be.”

He got up off the floor and sat beside me. The sauna heat was making me sweaty. He licked the drops off my lower lip and we had a salty kiss. I was thinking, why not? and calculating to make sure the dates worked out. I followed a few drops of sweat down Bernie’s chest until my fingers landed in the fuzz above his dick, but he was hardly noticing; he went on with the story of his other big acid trip, only it wasn’t acid again, it was psilocybin—some kind of pill.

“Somebody got it from a professor who had it in a freezer for ten years. I was living out in the woods, north, this was seven or eight years later, in the redwoods with all those people. I told you about it—the communal kitchen, growing dope, the longhaired boys.

“Anyway, I dropped this stuff with my girlfriend, my *old lady*, in her house down the road from the land I was living on. I remember we came on lying in the bed under all these dusty quilts. So then we walk the mile or so up to the land where I’ve got my little house, and we wander around in the trees, la de da, go down to my dope patch on the creek, watching the blue herons fly around, in this perfect little organic scene I’d been working on for a few years. But I started getting cosmic anxiety attacks, and she can see it in my face, after all, she’s tripping, too. She keeps whispering, ‘Tell me, sweetie, tell me what you’re afraid of,’ and she keeps looking weirder and weirder, and it’s like, uh-oh. I didn’t know what it was, some kind of mental cosmic disaster, the heebie jeebies, we used to call it, the trees suddenly turning evil on me.

“So it’s almost the end of the day, we’re both still buzzed like crazy, we’re hiking up the trail from the creek, and I’m kind of hoping seeing the other people up in the kitchen will answer this big question that’s stuck in my throat. So we go in, there’s maybe fifteen people, everybody’s stoned on local weed, making music, making dinner, flutes and brown rice, and I’m feeling like I’m trapped in some horrible Middle Ages scene, smoke and noise and people all sticking their faces in mine, like, ‘How’s your trip going?’ so I run out into the meadow to look at the sky before it gets totally dark, and guess who’s in the meadow, chasing a Frisbee?”

“Jerry Garcia.”

“Of course, it’s my favorite boy, the eleven-year-old with the long hair, the one that always wants to sleep at my place, I mean, mostly innocent sleep, so I run up into the meadow and I start playing Frisbee with him, chasing him, and we tumble around in the grass and we stop for a second all out of breath and we look at each other and it’s over—the thing with the girls friend’s dead, finished, in a second—and I look in his eyes, I mean all the way in, that acid drill, and he looks right back at me and he cracks up and it’s like, boom, the anxiety’s gone, the sky’s clear, the clouds are laughing, the trees are applauding, all that rainbows-dancing-in-the-grass type of stuff, and then he’s laughing again because he knows I’m totally gone.

“So we chase the Frisbee and we chase each other, feeding off all my acid energy, and when it starts to get dark we go inside, and everyone’s already sitting around eating and we walk in, we don’t even realize we’re holding hands, but then everybody looks at us and we let go, and everybody’s all of a sudden too quiet and she’s over by the wood stove, bending down to load it up, her tits resting on these big chunks of firewood, spread out like flat tires, and she gives me this look, like, ‘Weren’t we just on the same planet?’ and anyway I realize, I’m almost laughing about it, what I’m afraid of isn’t her, I’m just freaked that I might go all the way through this particular cycle of existence without ever becoming the person I’m really supposed to be, and I’m so happy to be finally figuring it out, but it seems like they’re looking at me weird because they’ve figured it out, too, and then I’m getting pissed, brought down, I’m thinking, fuck you people, this kid’s just set me on my true cosmic path in life and you guys still want me to go on some bullshit detour.”

“Typical hippie assholes,” I said. I noticed his dick was getting soggy so I started playing with it until it got stiff again. “One thing I don’t get, though. How come you’re not tripping out on God and enlightenment and stuff? I mean, that’s what Pop always gets into when he’s stoned. You know, it’s not like dicks are exactly God.”

“Yours is,” he said. “But really. I’d always go through that God stuff, too. Everybody does, in the first few hours. I mean, you sort of just dissolve, right? And we’re all one, and life goes on within you and without you, goo goo ka joob.

“But, see, after a while you start noticing the world’s not some abstract construction, a bunch of hallucinations in the sky. The world’s real, it’s physical, I mean, look, I’ve got a body, now what the heck am I supposed to do with it? When does it feel right? What’s my place in this big universe? Here’s the river, you know, flowing down from the hills, and the trees, and all, and somehow it’s like when I’m in tune, it’s when I’m falling in love with some boy, like it’s the job I’ve been given. The idea of God—that just floats away in the breeze, but a dick you can grab, you can hold onto it.”

“You could hold onto a girl, too.”

“Well, I tried that.”

The Dead came on a while later, and we turned it up loud, figuring the rooms next door were both empty. I was floating in the tub, feeling a little slimy, like I was floating in hot pancake syrup; Bernie was standing next to me, one hand flat under my butt holding me up, with a finger sliding its way up my crack; the other hand he had wrapped around my pole, and his lips were pecking and kissing at the little pink tip of my dick, licking it in sync with Jerry’s guitar solos. The tip of his tongue was tickling the little hole at the tip of my dick and it was making me just shiver all over.

It was getting hotter in the pool as the Dead got all heated up into a long, weird song, not even a song, really, so deep into weirdness it seemed like they'd never get out of it and back into the singing part again, it was all drums and cymbals and tinkling from the guitars and piano and stuff. Bernie started in kissing me every place he could reach and I tried to raise myself up to kiss his face and we both fell into the water, and I was holding him and kissing him, but it was way too hot so we crawled out of the tub just as Jerry gave up and gave the drummers some, all this loud gong-and-bells stuff run through a synthesizer or something, squeaks and honks and thumps, and we climbed up on the massage table, rolling around until I got Bernie down and I slipped myself inside him just as the Dead got back to singing and the beat got back to normal and in a minute or two, just as we were getting totally sweaty, I shot off, way up there inside and he wouldn't let me pull myself out for five or ten minutes, so we laid there and I looked up at the ceiling, following this beam of light from outside, the setting sun I guess, that sparked off on the sprinkler up there, making a slice of rainbow fall through the hot tub mist.

Then I did Bernie—licking him and fooling around—he got this strange satisfied smile, his face was as peaceful as I'd ever seen him, like he was walking down a cool country road without a care in the world, so I worked on him slow. I spread my hands on his stomach and felt his slow breathing, and he sighed while I ran my hands down along his legs and back up to his weenie, and then I held it and licked it, top and bottom and below, and I took it all in my mouth like I was sucking mustard off a hot dog. I put my finger in his hole a little ways and pushed kind of gently and used my other hand to rub his dick until he shook and sighed and I watched him spurt, up towards the light, a real rocket launch. I didn't want to say a word—the Dead were off into a real sweet “Morning Dew,” just those three lame chords over and over and the two of us were so dead, too—laid out from heat and coming and it was so peaceful.

We laid around, quiet, on the massage table, all creamy and water wrinkled, waiting for our time to be up. When the office buzzed, we showered and got dressed real slow, without turning up the lights. I couldn't bring myself to put on underwear, so I stuffed my Calvins in my pocket, but Bernie made me put on my tennies.

We put our cousin act back on with our clothes. We walked out into the half-dark courtyard not holding hands, not even talking, not looking at each other once we got into the lit-up entrance lounge. Bernie returned the key and signed the credit slip and took his receipt while a couple, a man and a woman probably thirty and married, looked at us, trying to figure it out. Five or six minutes before we were inside the same skin, but now I followed a few steps behind Bernie as he put his hands in his pants pockets and elbowed his way out the door; I heard the couple start talking as the door swung shut behind me.

Bernie's tennies crunched on the gravel. The air smelled like gasoline. We drove down the empty, dark streets, next to rusted railroad tracks under spooky orange lights, past chainlink fences where windblown garbage was stuck flush along the bottom. We were still quiet, holding our breath, like when you wake up in the middle of the night and try to hold on to your dream story while you piss, so you can get back into it.

Coming down Pico into Santa Monica we heard drums and car horns and up over the Pier we could see fireworks going off. I should've gone down to look for Pop on the beach, but I was too wasted and I didn't want to leave Bernie. Just in case, I asked him if he wanted to stop at the Pier for a while.

“No way, all those people,” he said. “Let's just go back and get in bed.”

“That’s okay with me.” I laid back in the seat and closed my eyes, searching for the dream to hold on to.

Twelve: There's No Denying It

A day or two later I was out bombing around on the new bike—the afternoon session was a waste, so I cut it short—and just as I was getting close to home I suddenly had to piss so bad that I left the bike outside, leaning against the steps, and ran up the stairs three at a time, pulling down my shorts as I charged down the hallway. I went back down to bring the bike in and it was right then I noticed a letter on the floor at the bottom of the steps, just inside the door. I'd run right over it. The little envelope looked like the invitation to a birthday party. On the back was some writing, in pencil:

This came yesterday. It's for you. Love, Gerard!

The letter was addressed to me and Pop, care of a friend of Gerard's, who must've dropped it at the trailer. The zip code on the postmark was from Miami. But why was it still unopened? Didn't Pop see it yet? I ripped it open and inside I found a single sheet of yellow lined paper torn from a pad:

Dear Breezebrains

I hope you're still in Venice, because we'll be out there (Jed, Lori, yours truly) in about a month, the middle of July. We're moving to a place near San Diego, so we'll come and find you on the way. Meanwhile, Kim, lay off the smoke and watch out for your old man. I hope you aren't so big I won't recognize you. Love, Susan

P.S. Jed wants to buy a boat.

P.P.S. Lori says hi (because I told her to)

No return address. No phone number. I figured they must be really paranoid, or in a hurry to get away from the chick who was the other half of the drug couple with Jed, and already on their way. I read it through again and it hit me—it was already almost the middle of July. She'd be here any minute. So why didn't Pop come running over with the letter? Was he that spaced out? Now I'd have to bike all the way back down to the trailer so we could work out a plan.

But when I went out to get the bike, it was gone.

I walked down the sidewalk in front of the house and looked all over to see if it wasn't Pop or Gerard joking around. I looked around back, in the alley, and then I gave up. I'd never be able to catch whoever did it, and besides, if I did it would turn out to be some monster black guy and forget that. Bernie would be pissed, but then again, I figured he knew it was a hot bike when he bought it, and what goes around, as they say.

I sat down on the steps in front of the door and read the letter a few more times. Jesus, it was way too soon for her to show up. I imagined her walking up the street right now, with that hurrying kind of walk like she was going back into a restaurant to argue about the change being wrong. And Lori slowballing it behind her, halfway down the block, pretending they weren't related. Jed, black-bearded and sort of heavy, comes up hauling a couple of old duffel bags full of half-finished woven belts and clothes that fit her before she got fat.

I knew what she'd think; first off, where the fuck is Pop, and second, what am I doing in this clean house with some guy and his faggot roommate? Well, she'd be mad as hell at not finding Pop, I knew that; I could see her turning right around and stomping off down the Boardwalk to hunt him down. She'd figure out my story with Bernie in two seconds, I was sure—it wasn't for nothing she'd had a job sitting on the

front of a coke boat sniffing out signs of the Coast Guard—but she’d told me a million times that it was my body and I could do what I wanted with it as long as nobody was hurt and I was having a good time, which was the case, so I figured that as soon as she actually met Bernie she’d let it slide. Truth is, I was more worried about her running into Mario, who was such a complete faggot. Mom wouldn’t mind me sleeping with a guy, if he was cool like Bernie was, but I didn’t want her to think I was turning into a faggot.

So number one I had to get Pop and the trailer decently clean—maybe even try to move him into someone’s apartment for a while. If he was a mess, she’d blame me. I wondered where else he could’ve gone to. It was around the time for one of his trips to the Veteran’s hospital; maybe he’d checked in for a few days. I went upstairs and searched through the pockets of all my shorts until I found the piece of paper with the number and after four or five transfers I ended up talking to some nurse.

I told her his name. “Probably came in for a mental problem,” I added.

“Are you a relative?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Just a minute, Ma’am,” the nurse said. I heard some chatter and the clicks and beeps of a computer. Then she said, “I’m sorry, Ma’am, we don’t show any record of his checking in, but he did have an appointment day before yesterday. He’s down as a no-show. You might want to remind him to contact us if you do talk to him.”

* * * * *

“Where is he?”

Gerard, pale and pimply in the late afternoon light, was hunched over on the steps of the trailer, smoking a cigarette and petting a young collie, a big-pawed pup that looked to me like it was in pretty good shape. I walked up and the dog gave me a big smile and a polite bark. So did Gerard. “I don’t see him,” he said.

“When, you haven’t seen him?”

“Three, four days now. He’s not with you?” He tossed the cigarette away. “You got something to smoke?”

“Yeah, okay.”

We went inside the trailer, leaving the dog chained to the steps. As usual, it was damp and stinky inside, an armpit used as an ashtray. Gerard squeezed in next to me at the little table, so his black-haired leg was shoved up against me. I could smell that he was two or three days away from the last shower.

“That’s a nice dog you got,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll keep it,” he said. He snapped up the joint I laid on the table and unrolled it, so he could roll two from it and keep the second one to smoke later on. Jesus, I thought, I’ll never go to France, but of course I wouldn’t anyway—there’s no surf. “I’m hungry for affection since you left,” Gerard said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He lit up and inhaled, looking at the ceiling of the trailer, where a long-legged spider was clinging to a dusty light bulb. “Nothing,” he said, exhaling as he handed me the doob. It was burning too fast.

“You have to feed a dog.”

“You like that guy, don’t you?”

“He’s okay.” At least he takes a shower once in a while.

Gerard laid a greasy hand on my leg. “Well, it doesn’t matter,” he said, “as long as I had you first.” Oh, stop, I thought. You were just lucky I couldn’t crawl out of the trailer through the vent. Gerard ignored the vibes I was sending out and slid his paw up into my shorts, inside which my stupid little dick was boning out whether I liked it or not. I guess it figured one hand was as good as another, the same as the pup outside would run along after anyone that rubbed it behind the ears. “Of course,” Gerard said, but I turned to him as I was taking a hit and I gave him a look and he took his hand off me. Then I looked above the window and noticed Pop’s propeller beanie, one of his favorite hats, wasn’t hanging there like it’d been doing for the past six or seven months.

“He took his hat?”

“His hats, his bag. Left me all those old T-shirts.” Now he started grinning at me, his teeth showing off pieces of lunch. The dog barked and scratched at the screen door. Gerard yelled at it until it shut up. Then he laid his hand up near my shorts again, but I hardly noticed.

I was thinking about Pop. He wouldn’t go far without telling me. Maybe he left a note in the door and it blew away. Maybe he was laid out in an alley too stoned to move.

“He left this, too. You ever see this?”

It was a paperbound diary, one of those Japanese rice paper books bound with a heavy string. It was all twisted and warped, like he’d dropped it in the ocean and dried it on a rock. Gerard gave it to me. Some of the pages were stuck together, and some of the squiggly writing was soaked through and ruined. Pop’s name was written on the back cover, next to a date—1981, so it wasn’t left over from Mexico. I guess he was trying to write it all down, and here it was, half a diary full of inky drawings and dripping paragraphs. About two pages in I found a poem written in fluorescent pink.

*Pink and purple, my passion Flower
Is growing Sweeter by the Hour;
Tho’ passing Time will turn it Blue
And with’ring while I wait for You.*

Say what? The next page had another one, in orange, bordered by little pink flowers and blue hearts. Flipping back to the front, I saw that the first few pages were ripped out, and now it made sense: the yucky poems weren’t Pop’s—he’d found the diary in a dumpster. I sat and read it, ignoring Gerard’s fat hand, which was still on my leg.

Around ten pages in, Pop’s stuff began, with a doodle of a big, radiating sun and in fat black letters THE GOLDEN ROAD (TO UNLIMITED DEVOTION); underneath, Pop’s name, and another, smaller title: “The Ethnomycology of Metaphorical Reality.” I skipped around, reading here and there. Gerard got up and took a paper bag full of restaurant bones and tossed them around outside for the collie. It was getting sweaty and a drop or two ran off my nose and spread across a sketch of a pyramid. On the page opposite, Pop had written:

*More to it than incense + sweaty armpits—reality—we were high and in love—ultimately real—
shivering universe embracing us—we embraced each other—unashamed, eating universe brain food of*

the earth, tangible as freeway traffic—our dreams also real—the source—all the petty arrangements of SPACE+TIME, things+money—needs and expectations—material world resources—sold, rented, eaten, cut up, destroyed, entire spastic enterprise a child’s tantrum, whining+loud stopped by overdose of plastic JUNK—toys—compare to primordial original blast of light+heat... deep unfathomable quiet—movement of CELLS + the visible breath we exchanged—same air breathed building pyramids, writing I Ching, sitting under Bodhi tree—people I love people who breathe same ancient vapors? !!! We were HIGH and in LOVE + there’s no denying it.

There was plenty more, too, and drawings that looked like maps or diagrams or scaffolding and towers, and then a few pages of lists of “Tangential Arteries Leading to the Main Road” and in his big block letters on the last page, THE MIND WILL BE RELEASED AT THE END OF THE ROAD, followed by a skinny cloud with writing inside: KEEP ON CHEWING!

Gerard came back in, leaving the dog chained outside. He sat down at the table and picked up the diary. “It’s not so bad, is it? But not as connected as his talking. His talk is better than his writing, don’t you think so? When someone is listening. For me he’s not the type to let his trees fall when no one is in the forest.”

“I guess not,” I said, wondering how far Pop had already gotten on his latest trip down The Golden Road. What did he mean, releasing his mind?

Gerard was staring at my shorts again. The dog wanted more bones and barked for them, and scratched at the door.

“I never made it come,” Gerard was saying, and without even asking he stuck his hand down in my shorts. I started to get stiff again. “Can it come now?”

“Can’t it wait?”

“I don’t know. Can it wait?”

“I’m not touching yours.” I stood up. “And shut the goddamn door at least,” and I went over to do it myself. I slammed it and the dog whimpered, then barked and scratched some more. I stretched out on the lower bunk; Gerard sat beside me and pulled my shorts down to my knees and started rubbing me, pretty much in the same rhythm the dog was using on the screen.

With the door closed, Gerard stunk up the whole trailer. The smell reminded me of those films they show on afternoon television, the cancer films, where some smoker is having his black, disgusting lungs removed in a bloody operation, and then they talk about research and show a machine that takes up a whole room smoking hundreds of cigarettes all at the same time, little tubes of glass puffing away, turning black and cruddy. I felt like I was hooked up to one of those machines, my poor innocent little tube getting stroked to death in the name of some weird experiment. “It’s faster if you use some oil,” I told Gerard. “You got any oil?”

“There’s this soft margarine,” and he took a break to bring a yellow plastic tub from the table. He scooped a fingerful onto my dumb pink thing, like he was smearing mustard on a cocktail dog.

“Go ahead,” I said, “get it over with.” I figured, let him pump it, I mean, what the heck—I had a lot more important things to worry about.

So Gerard stroked me with some kind of French rhythm my dick could hardly figure out, all the while leaning over with his mouth hanging open. I closed my eyes and considered where Pop might have gone. Towards the end Gerard started playing with himself; I turned and saw his fat paw gripping this big lump

in his shorts, but he had the courtesy to keep it inside. He got faster with both hands and when I popped he leaned over and licked some of it up, like a dog licking a sweaty leg.

I left Gerard standing at the trailer door, scratching his crotch. I stepped over the dog, jumped on the skateboard, and sped down the boardwalk; my idea was to start way down past Muscle Beach and work my way back up, towards the trailer, and then on to the Pier, until I found Pop. First I tried an old smoking spot in front of a graffiti wall between Muscle Beach and the bike path that ran through the sand, but I didn't see him there, or anyone else.

The breeze was too strong to smoke, but I sat down for a minute. My nuts felt gooey where I'd dripped all over them and my dick felt greasy from Gerard's margarine, so I went down to the water and waded out into the brownish foam and squatted down in it to wash myself and my shorts.

Then I went back to the Boardwalk, to the roller skate area. It was pretty thick with skaters, divided more or less into two crowds. The Olympic skaters sped in turns through an obstacle course of stolen traffic cones while tourists looked on, while the Musical skaters, mostly blacks, were dancing and screaming to giant boom boxes blasting disco music. I looked through the crowd, but no luck. Across the Boardwalk was a maze of tent shops, Koreans selling cheap electronic junk and off-brand clothes. I wandered through, but I knew Pop wouldn't be there.

I carried the skateboard and walked down the Boardwalk, looking in all the toilets and on the benches. It was getting to be a nice sunset, red-colored through the smog; if I'd just moved into a condo in Santa Monica, and gone out for a sunset stroll on my way to dinner at one of the outdoor restaurants, I'd like the place. Venice looked free and easy. Colored flags flapped in the breeze at vendors' stands; clowns turned somersaults; laughing three-year-olds chased cats across the cooling sand. For a few minutes I ignored the red-eyed drunks and the mental cases sleeping in alleys and the teenagers standing in the shadows of doorways. I just let the breeze cool off my wet shorts while the last few rays of sun warmed my face. Pretty soon I got as far as the trailer. Gerard was gone and the trailer was locked up. The dog was tangled in his chain, which was attached to the door handle of the Nova. I undid the knots, until the dog could crawl under the car to sleep, and then I boarded back home, through the back alleys—still no Pop.

Mario wasn't home yet, or Bernie, so I cooked up a big omelet, a three-egg special crammed with cheese and onions and Ortega peppers, and I toasted some of the chunky wheat bread, topped it with peanut butter, and washed the whole thing down with orange juice. One of the better things Bernie taught me was how to make a decent omelet. I was considering a visit to Tom's for chili fries, but I was already dressed for dinner—wearing only Bernie's new Calvins—so I decided to wait. I figured Bernie would be back soon, so I got out the coke tile and chopped a rock for him, and just as I was doing it I heard his hatchback pull into the parking lot next to the house.

I watched him from the kitchen window. I saw him take his briefcase from the back of the car and walk over to the house at the end of the lot, to check up on the obnoxious Dobermans, but they must have been inside. It looked to me like Bernie was a little disappointed he wouldn't have anything to complain about. He generally liked to do about five or ten minutes of complaining as soon as he got home from work. Now I was worried he'd have to complain about me.

So when he came up the stairs and into the kitchen and gave me a little kiss on the cheek, I tossed my arms around his neck and he leaned over for a better kiss. It seemed to work; he smiled and said, "Makes

me hungry.”

He took a pepper from the can on the counter and bit off a chunk. I sat at the table and he leaned over and kissed me again, sliding the pepper from his tongue to mine. We had more tricks than the monkeys in Mexico. “Nice underwear,” he said, putting his hand inside. “May I?”

“It’s legal.” The kissing had already made me hard for him.

“Any calls?”

“I haven’t been here.”

He gave me a last squeeze and went in to check the answering machine. I followed him into the bedroom, found the baggie of buds in the desk, and sat down to roll one. He returned a call to Vinnie, who wasn’t finished yet with the latest couple of ounces. Bernie told him he’d see him in a day or two. “He’s still off everything?” I asked, handing over the pinner.

“So he says. It’s funny—people do all that coke and think they have better sex, and then they quit and say they’re hornier than ever. Maybe the trick is to do it too much, and then all of a sudden stop.” After another one of his non-smoker puffs he handed me the joint and got up to change out of his office clothes. When he was down to his underwear, I figured it was the right time, so I took the letter out of the desk.

Bernie sat on the bed looking at it for a long time, like he was trying to scope out Susan from her handwriting. “Well, this could be a problem,” he said. His voice was kind of shaky. He looked up at me and for a minute. I thought he might even cry. I guess he really loved me.

“Yeah, it could be, but it won’t be,” I told him. “I mean, if we’re cool, she’ll be cool. I’m sure.”

“Oh?”

“Well, she’s a cool person. She’s your type, sort of, always up to something.”

“Meaning she’s dealing. I mean, Florida.”

So I told him about her job as a lookout on the coke boats. I told him she must’ve saved up enough money to get away for a while, and maybe Jed saved some too, and they’re also probably ditching Jed’s girl friend, and she’s got some kind of family fantasy running again, so she feels guilty about me.

“I can see what the problem is,” he said.

“You can?” I hadn’t even mentioned Pop. Bernie tossed the letter aside and all of a sudden pulled me down on the bed. I almost dropped the joint.

“Don’t leave me,” he said, with a fake boo-hoo in his voice, and then he started kissing my neck.

“Don’t leave your old Chiefie and live with the wicked witch.”

“Oh, that.” I was sitting up and he was holding me, resting his head on my chest and looking up at me. I hugged him closer. “No way,” I told him, even though the idea had crossed my mind. “But that’s not the problem. The problem is Pop’s not around.”

“Since when is that a problem? Where is he?” He sat up and reached inside my shorts again, stirring me up. He only had to touch it for a second and up it went. I could see he was getting hard, too. Here goes:

“Problem is, Chiefie, I don’t know where he is. If he’s not here when she shows up, she’ll murder me.”

“But I thought she kicked him out in the first place.”

“She did, but I was supposed to keep an eye on him, just in case. I mean, they were married for how many years. I’m doomed. She’ll cut off my balls.”

“Well, we can’t let her do that. They’re not ripe.” I couldn’t tell if he was really sad or joking to cover it up. I let him push me down on the bed. He pulled my shorts down to my knees and licked my balls for a minute or two. “See? Barely ripe, but so tasty.”

Well, now it seemed like he was joking around again, I guess because he realized I’d just promised to stay with him. He stretched out on the bed next to me. I reached over and put my hand in his shorts and held on to his boner for a few minutes. He held on to mine, too, and put his head on my shoulder and we rolled into a hug. It felt so perfectly peaceful and decent, the two of us all boned out together and happy. I guess I didn’t really want to leave him. But meanwhile, I was thinking, I’ve gotta get him to help me figure out this Pop problem.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” he said, sitting up.

“Me, too—I’ll get the lube.”

“No, not that. About Pop. Why don’t we just put a couple of joints out on the steps tonight and see what shows up in the morning?”

Thirteen: Looking for Pop

The next morning Mario yoo-hooed us out of our usual lazy Saturday morning bed. He wanted breakfast out and we had to go with him so Bernie could pay for it.

We walked down to an old diner on the Boardwalk, a grubby little café built into the bottom of a stained old apartment building. The café had windows out to the beach, but it wasn't all yuppies up yet. It still had red vinyl booths and swivel stools at a counter and a skinny black guy juggling pancakes and eggs in a smoky kitchen. It was cheap, too, and they didn't hassle the bums out of the booths, even after they'd fallen asleep over coffee and toast.

"Kind of place needs a Kwell dispenser in the bathroom," Bernie said as we flopped in a booth and Mario ripped a napkin out of the steel dispenser to scrape up leftover crumbs on the table.

Mario was in a funky mood and was hoping he could drown it in fake maple syrup and whipped margarine. "Fucking Joel wants me in this afternoon, some big emergency, please come fix his stupid patterns."

"That's because you're the genius," I said.

"Genius, shit—I'm a slave. He couldn't find anyone else who'd come in on weekends. And if he'd make up his mind on something instead of trying seventy patterns to get two lousy styles finished, I wouldn't have to go in anyway. It pisses me off, the way he works."

"Oh, you love it," Bernie said.

"I do not," Mario said. He looked out the big, greasy windows; a couple of Rastafarian skaters zoomed by, dreadlocks flying. "I could've been something, you know," Mario went on, waiting for our sympathy, "I could've been a designer."

Bernie hadn't shaved, which I thought looked kind of cute, but he kept rubbing his chin, like he was wondering if his stubble made him as bad as the scumbags sitting at the counter.

"Jesus, it's an asylum on a field trip," he said. "Now, gang, whoever gets through breakfast without letting their head fall down into an omelet gets a free hour to jack off in the soft room."

The waitress, a fat black woman who must have been the cook's wife, came over for our orders. Bernie ordered a waffle and an egg over medium, so I did, too. Mario ordered a big stack of pancakes with extra butter, and two eggs over easy, and hash browns.

I was trying not to get worried about Pop, but I also wanted to get going and look around, maybe find him asleep in someone's apartment. I couldn't help kicking my legs under the table. Bernie put his hand on my knee. "Calm down, chico," he said, "I know we got interrupted this morning, but we can always finish up later on."

"Oh, excuse me," Mario said.

"That chick at the counter is a friend of Gerard's," I said. She had on a greasy sweatshirt over a printed dress; she was holding a black canvas daypack, leaning over the counter into a cup of coffee. "Maybe she knows something."

"She knows how to make a straw out of a twenty-dollar bill," Bernie said.

I went over to her. She did look a little dizzy. She'd pushed the coffee aside and was rooting around in the little knapsack. There was a pile of small change on the counter; she must've been trying to come up with enough to pay her tab. She found a dime and added it to the pile.

“Hey,” I said.

She looked up at me. She had nice blond hair, but it was all tangled.

“I’m a friend of Gerard’s,” I said.

“Last one then,” she said, not smiling. “Tell him he owes me five bucks.”

“It’s not about Gerard. You know the old guy, lives in the trailer with him?”

“Guy with the bicycle?”

“Yeah, him. You seen him the last few days?”

“No. What for?”

“He owes me some joints, that’s all.”

“I could fill a fucking bus with the people around here that owe me joints,” she said. “Then I could drive it off a cliff. You got fifty cents?”

I gave her a dollar; she put it on the counter. “Big tipper,” she said. “Get it back from Gerard and tell him four dollars.”

Mario was alone at the table when I got back. “Where’s Bernie?” I asked him.

“Looking for love,” he said. He poured pancake syrup into a spoon and drank it.

“Jesus H.,” Bernie said behind me. He sat down. “I go into the stall to whiz and by God there’s some old guy asleep in a puddle of piss on the floor. No,” he said, looking at me, “it wasn’t Pop.”

“So did you piss in the toilet or on the guy?” Mario asked.

“In the toilet, but he’s probably still there if you’re interested.”

“Come on, you guys,” I said. The food arrived and Mario drowned his pancakes in syrup.

“Have some syrup, sweetie,” Bernie said. “If it’ll cheer you up I’ll give you a bindle for the office today.”

Mario’s half-fallen face seemed to fall some more as he chewed pancakes on one side. “If you insist,” he said.

Then Bernie offered to help me look for Pop, but I didn’t want to bring him along and complicate matters. “Never mind,” I told him. “I’ll just take a walk and look around.”

* * * * *

Around noon I went to the surfers’ apartment. I didn’t think I’d find Pop there, but it was one of the places he’d find dope, so he might’ve come by for supplies. It was a boxy, cheap one-bedroom in a boxy apartment building, up one flight of concrete stairs. The door was open, as usual. There were only two guys there, which meant four or five others were still out in the water or looking for drugs. The green nylon carpet was wall-to-wall; the only furniture was an outdoor chaise lounge and three plastic milk crates. Six and a half surfboards leaned against the living room wall, with surf magazine posters tacked between them. A stained, cream-colored sheet blocked the front room’s view of the filled-in swimming pool and some dying rubber trees.

Blond Jim was in the kitchen, frying up half a dozen hot dogs in an old aluminum frying pan. All he was wearing were these ratty jockey shorts, stretched out so much at the legs that they hung straight, like boxers. Someone else was in the shower; I could hear the water going full blast.

“Yo, bro,” I said. I sat on one of the milk crates.

“Happening,” said Jim. The dogs started burning, so he forked them onto a plate.

“Much.”

“Got a doob?”

“Hey.” I brought out a fresh one and lit it up. Jim pulled up a milk crate in front of me, balancing the plate of dogs on one knee. His dick, long and floppy and sunburned-pink, fell out of the jockeys when he sat, and I could see some blondish hair above it. Jim sucked in most of a hot dog, wiped his hand on his jockeys, and took the joint from me.

“It’s been slow,” he said, meaning either the waves, his sex life, or the supply of dope. Halfway through the joint, the bathroom door opened and Phil came out. He was twenty or so, two or three years older than Jim. He was short and muscular, with dark hair covering most of his Junior Mafia body. He had the towel over his shoulder so when he came to get a hit, his cock was hanging in front of my face. It was giant, really thick, considering the guy was only about five-eight. He scratched at it while he smoked.

“Looking for Pop,” I said.

“Oh, hey,” Phil said, passing me the joint. He flicked a fly off the end of his dick; it hopped onto the plate of hot dogs. “Yesterday, day before—down near Tom’s.”

“Came here after,” Jim said. “Borrowed a couple doobs. Gave him ten bucks.”

“Going?”

“Didn’t say,” Jim said. He popped in the last piece of hot dog. “Sorry, man, not offering, but I didn’t eat since, I don’t know, yesterday.”

Phil the Hunk went into the bedroom with the roach, so I followed him. The bedroom floor was almost totally covered with two king-size mattresses piled with sheets and sleeping bags and uncovered pillows. The mirrored sliding door of the closet was open; there was a pile of clothes on the floor and three wetsuits hanging up. Phil turned and examined his chunky pale ass in the mirror.

“Cut myself a little,” he said. “Don’t look all that bad.” He took a deep hit, handed me the roach, and leaned into the closet, tossing aside clothes.

“He didn’t say where he was headed?”

“Aw, shit, I don’t remember.” He found a T-shirt, put it on, and started searching again. I was staring at his pale ass, some stringy hairs around the hole, while he was bent over burrowing around in the closet. I imagined his ass was doing the talking, too; it kind of moved when he talked. “Who listens to the old fart when he gets going, anyway? No offense. Guy starts in with the roads and snakes and stuff, so I tuned out. Hey, Jim,” he yelled, still poking the mouth of his ass up at me. I went back in the other room.

“What?” Jim yelled back. He’d moved from the crate to the floor, leaning up against the wall. His dick had retreated halfway back into his jockeys. The front door opened and Patrick, Jim’s younger brother, came in. He had the same stringy blond hair and skinny body. He leaned his board against the wall and stood in the middle of the room, unzipping his dripping wetsuit.

“I smell food,” he said.

“Gone,” said Jim. “Sparky here’s brought us some dope.”

“Hey,” said Patrick. He stepped out of his wetsuit while I lit up a second pinner. He was still a kid, really, all bony and white except for his arms and face and a stringy little dick with a couple of hairs as blond as Jim’s. He took a hit and I could see he was starting to get a bone, like you do sometimes when

you peel off a wetsuit in front of a bunch of people; his dick was one of those uncut ones, and it started in pointing straight up. The tip, pinkish and wet-looking, was peeking out of the tube. Looked to me like a couple of quick strokes and he'd spurt right there in front of everybody. The other guys tried to ignore it, but Patrick noticed me looking and hurried into the bedroom and came out pulling up cut-off jeans and looking a little red in the face. I asked him if he'd seen Pop.

"You might try Jane," he said, looking down at my dick area. I was getting a bone from seeing his, I guess. He'd forgotten to zip up over his boner when he reached for the joint so it was still poking up out of the cut-offs. I was thinking what might've happened if Patrick had been here alone when I dropped by.

"Oh, yeah, Jane. He said something about Jane," Jim added. He stood up to take the number from his brother, and Phil came in, too. He still hadn't found any shorts, so everybody except me had their dicks out. I wondered if it would be my turn sooner or later. Jim took a hit and passed the doob to Phil.

I went into the bathroom to piss, and Patrick followed me and handed me the joint, staring at my half-bonered dick while I started to pee.

"Come around some time," he whispered. He opened his shorts a little and let his dick pop out. He pulled back the top so I could see the whole thing, red and shiny. Patrick's dick was kind of interesting—bigger than mine, but not that much, and sort of throbbing like it was ready to pop. I shook off my dick, which had stretched all the way out. Patrick smiled and gave his a quick stroke while I pulled up my shorts.

"Yeah, I might," I said. "But I sort of have to find Pop at the moment."

I went back in to the front room. Chunky Phil handed me the roach.

"If you see Lady Jane, tell her she still owes me half a gram," he said.

"See you around," Patrick said. "Maybe could happen."

Fourteen: Pointing in the Right Direction

Nobody was around at Jane's except forty or fifty stray cats clawing the screen door so I went home, and Bernie was gone, too. I was too tired to do anything else so I took a shower and ate some bananas and then I fell asleep on the Barcalounger.

Bernie pulled the towel off me to wake me up. I had one of those dream boners, but as soon as I opened my eyes I lost the dream; it settled back into my mind like a wave settling back into the ocean. I chased it for a minute, but no luck. Bernie shoved the coke tile under my face as I sat up. "Let's go," he said, and then I looked over at the windows and saw it was already dark. I passed on the toot, but rubbed a touch on the tip of my dick, which made it cold and tingly. "Where?" I asked.

"Out. Vinnie's complete, so we can celebrate. I don't know, a movie, or dinner, videos, whatever. The money's burning a hole in my pocket." I reached up and felt a big lump of money crammed into his front pocket. Bernie moved my hand over to his dick area and sniffed up the balance of coke and put the tile down on the television. "Come on, it'll take our minds off our problems."

"I went over to Jim's, the surfer," I said, and told him the rest of the story.

"The old guy'll turn up; he's not as crazy as he lets on," Bernie said. "Come on and get dressed."

He followed me into the bedroom and watched me pull on shorts and a T-shirt. "Jesus, Chief, you're so perfect," he said, standing there staring at me. You'd think I'd mind him staring like that, and telling me I was beautiful and all that corny stuff, but truth is it got me hard. He'd look at me and I'd start thinking about the two of us in bed or in the bathtub and I'd just stretch right out.

"Chief, put on some shoes, okay?" Bernie said, talking a little too fast from the toot. "We'll get a pizza. Oh, wait a minute—here, roll some," and I made up a couple of pinners from scraps in the shoebox top. I was still sleepy and the darkness in the apartment made me think I was still dreaming. But then I started in thinking about Pop. I couldn't help it. What was going on inside his mind? Why'd he split for no reason? I expected Mom to come knocking at our door any second, screaming at me about how I'd lost him.

We had a pizza, double pepperoni, and I started feeling normal again. I imagined Pop sitting on the steps of the house waiting for us when we got back. Bernie was in a good mood, too. Aside from Vinnie coming through again, there was a whole den of Cub Scouts at the next table dripping cheese on their neckerchiefs. We smoked a second number on the drive over to the video games arcade, finishing it up sitting in the car in the dark parking lot, listening to my tape of Van Halen. We got so ripped we had to stop for an ice cream cone before we split up—I went off to play "Pole Position" and "Roadblaster" while Bernie had coffee and read the newspaper at a donut shop next door. He didn't mind sitting there for an hour, since millions of boys were going in and out of the arcade and the movie theater around the corner. Bernie showed up just as I was getting another bonus on Pole Position, so I turned my extra games over to a little Mexican kid.

"The Mexican was cute," I said as we walked back to the car.

"I noticed," Bernie said. "I'll bet he's got the drop, too."

"Oh, not yet, he's too little."

"The one in the tank top, though. He was pretty good—a little elderly, but good. He was checking me out, too."

“What, the blue? He was watching you stare at the Mexican. What’s in the news today?”

“Same shit.” We drove out and pulled onto crowded, noisy Lincoln Boulevard. “One good one, though, in the second section. Some forty-eight-year-old guy, works for the State government, got eight years for having some twelve-year-old visit him every weekend.”

“God, that’s a long time.”

“It’s only a couple of days,” Bernie said. “Friday, Saturday.”

“The eight years, stupid.”

“And that was a reduced sentence, because he also agreed to take these hormones that kill off his sex drive.”

“How’d he get caught? Did he hurt the kid?”

“No, it was a neighbor, some old lady. She saw the kid go in on Friday and come out on Sunday, so she called the police. Joke was the parents supported the guy at trial, told the judge they approved of everything. Never mind—the old lady gets to put him away and make him take drugs.”

“This wasn’t Venice, was it?”

“Silverlake.”

“Well, we won’t move there,” I said.

Of course Pop wasn’t around when we got home. Mario was strapped into upside-down exercise boots, hanging by his feet from a bar in his bedroom doorway. “Doesn’t the blud roosh to yer ‘ead?” Bernie asked him in a terrible British accent.

“Very funny,” Mario said. Actually, his face did look pretty red.

“Your ankles are looking better,” I said.

“Drop dead. Vinnie called.”

“I just talked to the guy.”

“He needs more,” Mario said.

* * * * *

Next day I decided to try Jane’s again. I went by around noon. She lived two or three blocks away in a scrunched-up old one-bedroom bungalow sandwiched between new apartment buildings. A big avocado tree covered the overgrown front yard; the dinky porch had a million potted plants on it, most of them cactuses and aloe vera. Five or six dogs and few more cats were sleeping on the porch. Her door was half open, so I went in after jangling a cowbell hung on the knob. Two dogs followed me in. Just inside, I tripped on an old carpet in front of an audience of about a thousand stuffed animals that were lying around in her front room. I found Jane in the tiny kitchen, doling out Friskies to a monster orange cat. There were more stuffed animals up on the shelves between old glass jars with big, hand-printed labels. All the junk in the place was making my nose itch, but the only smell I was picking up was cat hair, dust, and a musty female kind of odor coming from either Jane or the cat.

“I saw him a few days ago,” she said. While she talked, she kept running her hand through her hair, like she was trying to make it blonder or softer. “He was here, we had a tub, we smoked a joint, you know. He like ate up everything except the cat food, as usual, and then he asked me for this old god’s-eye

thing he said he gave me for a birthday present. I had it in a box under the bed, so I dug it out and it was like weird, he wanted it back, so I gave it to him. It seemed like it was so important. Has he got a problem, or what?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. I don't think so. I just have to find him, that's all."

"Well, God, I wish I could like help you." She opened a cabinet and looked through all the junk. Then she turned around and looked at me while I was petting the orange cat. She smiled, real toothy, and said, "The tub's hot if you want to like sit for a minute. I got something rolled here somewhere." She shuffled a stack of papers on the counter until she found a little jeweled wooden box, which was full of joints.

The tub was the old redwood type with a noisy gas heater and a blue bubble-plastic cover. It was set up under another avocado tree in the weedy back yard, and even though the apartments on either side were three stories high, there weren't any windows looking directly on it. We sat on the splintery steps at the back door and smoked.

"I like your old man," she told me, "even if he is a little nuts. He's got a nice rap, usually, you know? Positive, not all anti this and anti that, all that world-owes-me-a-living kind of shit. He's like an intellectual, with a mind. You know what I mean? You ever listen to him when you're stoned?"

"Sometimes. This stuff's okay, what is it?" The weed tasted real green, but strong; the kind that'll give you dreams now and a headache two or three hours later.

"Oh, God, it's from here, if you can believe that. This other waitress grows it in her bathroom under those lights."

Jane started taking her clothes off, so I did, too. She was skinny, real white-skinned and bony. Her chest looked like my sister's at about age ten, which was sort of depressing. We dumped our clothes on the steps. She was watching me while I pulled down my underwear and walked over to get in the tub, but the weenie was behaving itself. The water was pretty hot, so I had to stand on the bench for a few minutes. Jane sank right in, head and all, and then sat on the bench and watched me while I lowered myself in. The bottom was all gooey and slippery. I sat on the bench and slid down and rested my head on the edge of the tub and stared up through the branches of the avocado tree. The sky looked bluer against the dark branches. I was trying to tune in on what Pop might have been thinking, sitting in the same tub, when I felt Jane's foot slide up against mine. "Want a back rub?" she asked.

I walked on my knees across the tub and turned around and sat in front of her, down in the water, and she did a number on my back and neck that felt all right. I guess bony fingers are good for something. I was expecting her to lean over and grab my dick, but I wasn't so sure I wanted her to. Anyway, she didn't; she started talking instead. "You ever get into astrology?"

"Not much," I said. I knew I was a Leo, which meant I did what I wanted.

"I don't mean only the newspaper stuff. There's lots of serious people into it, too." She started massaging my head, which felt great. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. "I mean, I was reading that this quadrant is like a good time for exploration and travel, you know, maybe your Pop was in touch with that change."

"I think it's probably more than that."

"Well, of course it is, human nature and all that, but I mean the tendency is there, you know? That's all the stars can do, sort of set things up and then it's up to us, we do it, or we don't. I've been reading this

great book, about predictions and cycles in history. You know Nostradamus predicted the murder of John Lennon?"

"More on the neck," I said.

After I'd had enough, I did her for a while, standing up next to her while she turned sideways on the bench. Her skin felt a little leathery. I guess I was doing it okay since she was breathing loud and kept on telling me to push harder. But touching her made my dick stand up, so there it was, all pink and eager, right in front of her face when she turned around and opened her eyes. She looked at it for a while, like she was checking to see if it meant anything. I sat down next to her. I wondered if she'd invited Pop to bang her in the tub or if they'd only smoked and talked. "Kim, sweetie," she said, laying her hand on my shoulder, "you know I'd like to, but it's probably against the law, doing stuff with kids."

I wasn't all that disappointed, but I didn't want her to feel bad. "That's okay," I told her, "I just came this morning, anyway."

So we dried off—I was still all boned out but we were both ignoring it—and I told her I'd come see her in a day or two. "You'll find him," she predicted. "I mean, you almost found him here. At least you're like pointing in the right direction."

* * * * *

That night, lying in bed with Bernie, I was pretty sure I had it figured out: the doobs, the ten bucks, the god's-eye. He really was out there trucking down his Golden Road again; someone must've slipped him a pill and off he went. And I'd have to chase after him and drag him back before Mom showed up. I was thinking his first stop would probably be Malibu, where he'd stashed a sleeping bag and some stuff that we never got around to picking up. After that, I wasn't too sure. With Pop, the sky's pretty much the limit.

Bernie was ignoring me, reading a Russian novel so fat he needed both hands to hold it up. I snatched it away. "What?" he said.

"There's another place we can try."

"I thought we tried every place," he said, reaching under the covers and poking his fingers down between my legs.

"Stop it. I mean Pop."

"Oh, he'll come back sooner or later. He'll run out of dope, or want a shower."

"I don't know about that. There's times I had to go and get him. Anyway, I think he went up to Malibu, where we lived last year."

"Give me my book."

"Take me there."

"Okay, I give up. Tomorrow. I'll leave work a little early." He sounded annoyed, but he kissed me on the cheek. "Now let me finish this one chapter—after two hundred pages the guy's finally about to murder the old man."

I couldn't remember the exact address, but we drove around for a while until I recognized the trail up from the beach and we followed it to the house. It was inside walls, like most of the other houses, big enough for six or seven families of normal people, surrounded by palm trees; the garage was as big as a regular house and had a huge white satellite dish on top. We pulled up in front of the gate and pushed a

button and when the gate buzzed I opened it. We parked in the circular driveway, right in front of the house; there weren't any other cars. As soon as we got out of the car, dogs started barking. The front door, blond wood and tall enough for a basketball team, creaked open two or three inches and a skinny brown guy wearing a bikini swimsuit peeked out.

"Who are you?" he said, with a Mexican accent.

"Isn't anybody home?" I asked. "Leo? Charlie?"

"Nobody here. You their friend?"

"Me quede aqui un ratito. El año pasado."

"Oh, okay, vente."

We went inside, following him past antiques, the big white piano, Persian carpets, and brown sculptures of bums on a bench.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Carlos. I watch the place when they go. I feed the dogs." He took us unto the kitchen. There was a pot of rice bubbling on the stove. Out the windows of the dining area was a wide view of the swimming pool, down the slope in back, and behind it, the ocean. "Listen to all that grito from the dogs. I don't have money for food. I gotta call New York. They go away, they forget to leave me money for dog food. I call them, nobody talks to me. All this nice stuff they got, they can't send me money for dog food. Now I spend my own money, and I only got twenty bucks."

"Listen," I said, "why we came—did you see an old guy lately, last few days, a hippie type guy, come here looking for a sleeping bag?"

"Oh, yeah, he was here, not yesterday, day before."

"I knew it. That's my father, I'm looking for him. Where'd he go?"

"Ese es su padre? No te parece." We opened our beers and sat at the table, looking out at the pool. The dogs, two shaggy Golden Retrievers, came sniffing around underneath the windows, so Carlos let them in and they slobbered all over our shoes. "Hey, you got a joint? Your papa had some nice weed."

Bernie took out a joint and Carlos lit it on the flame under the pot of rice. He took a big hit and shook his head, exhaling. "Ay, chebére," he said, and took another hit before passing it to me. He asked our names and I told him; I said Bernie was my cousin. Bernie took a polite hit and then Carlos hogged it for a while.

"How's the pool?" I asked him.

"I cleaned it today. You wanna go in? It's okay."

I looked at Bernie, who shrugged, bored with the whole adventure, I guess. Bernie and Carlos followed me out and sat on the lawn that sloped down from the house. I took off my clothes and jumped in; it was a deep, long pool, cold and clear, with a diving board at one end. I did a lap or two and climbed up on the diving board and stretched out on my back; with the sea breeze, it was almost too cold. I remembered the year before we'd broken this same diving board at one of Charlie's parties, a million people staggering around looped on champagne, half of them sitting naked on the diving board watching two drunk lesbians fighting in the pool.

I looked up and Carlos was standing over me at the side of the board. He handed me the roach and I sat up to take a hit. "You're a cute boy," he said. Then he looked up towards Bernie and whispered, "You excuse me, but maybe you come back sometime, okay?"

“Yeah, sure, maybe. My old man didn’t say where he was going?”

“Maybe he said, I don’t know. He talked a lot, but I don’t listen. You give me your number, I’ll call you if he comes back.”

“No, never mind. It’s not that important.” I chucked the roach into a flowerbed, waved to Bernie, and jumped in, feet first, making a big splash. Carlos jumped in, too, and after we came up for air, he tried to grab my dick.

“You know, I’m only chiquito like you, pero la pinga es mas grande,” he said, swimming after me.

“That’s great,” I said, treading water with one hand and covering up my little boner with the other.

“You can show me next time.”

We drove home down Pacific Coast Highway. I was trying to think where Pop would’ve gone next. Bernie was still quiet; he put a Dodger game on the radio, but I didn’t think he was listening. “You should’ve rescued me,” I said. “That guy wanted to suck my dick.”

“I wanted to watch.”

“Horseshit. Weren’t you jealous?”

“He said he only had twenty bucks. I wasn’t real worried.”

“Gee, thanks, I guess. You know what this means?”

“I’m waiting, Chief,” he said. I put my hand on his leg and rubbed. “Uh-oh,” he said.

“There’s only one other place I can think of.”

“I’m taking you to Mexico.”

“No. It’s that god’s-eye business, what Jane gave him. You ever been up near Mariposa? Near Yosemite? There’s a river, there’s this commune kind of place we stayed at, this old ranch near the river, about a million acres, it had a hot spring—and Indian burial grounds and all this sacred kind of shit. We used it for ceremonies.”

“Honeybunch, darling, sweetie, Chief, I’m a working person. I just took off half a day, I can’t take another two and drive halfway across the state.”

“She’ll kill me if I don’t find him,” I said, and I turned off the radio. “She’ll be here any *minute*, and she’ll *kill* me.”

“Besides, I just gave Vinnie something. I have to hang around until he’s done with it.”

“Aw, Chiefie, *please*.” I put my hand down between his legs. “Please?”

Fifteen: While the Poodle Barked and Whimpered

We went down to the basement to look through Bernie's old boxes for hiking gear. He was still bitching about driving up to Mariposa, but I didn't believe him for two seconds. I could see he was actually getting off on the idea of going on a long drive with me, and waking up at four in the morning to get an early start. I even managed to talk him into going up to Five on the coast route and then over the hill, so I could get in some surfing. It seemed like it'd be ridiculous to pass by and not get in the water. And I wanted to bring the surfboard along anyway, so once we'd found Pop we could drive to Santa Cruz or somewhere and I could surf there, too.

"Right," Bernie said when I gave him this idea, "I *like* driving halfway across California looking for a lunatic I don't even want to find and then sitting on a rock scratching my butt while you're out surfing."

"Oh, fuck you, Chiefie, you'll love it." We found his old high-top Redwings, with thorns still stuck in the Vibrams. He found a plaid flannel shirt with pearl snap buttons and a Swiss Army knife with broken scissors and khaki shorts with extra pockets in the front.

"And looky here," Bernie said, holding up a ratty nylon belt bag. Inside was a fat bud of five-year-old homegrown.

"It's a sign for sure."

Upstairs, we stuffed this junk and some sweaters into a canvas duffel bag. Cassettes, drugs, a box of Wheat Thins, and a half pound of white cheddar cheese went into a plastic bag we could throw behind the seat for easy access.

Then Bernie got all paranoid about leaving a bunch of money with Vinnie, so he called him, and it turned out Vinnie was going away, too, fishing up at Lake Fagsbottom or somewhere, so he invited us up for an early breakfast—eggs and sausages at five in the morning. It meant an extra drive, up to Hollywood and back to the beach, but Bernie was stubborn; he wouldn't leave without picking up the money.

At four-thirty in the morning it was still misty and dark and it was the quietest I'd ever heard it in Venice. Even the dogs were asleep. The bums were all passed out, down in the sand or in the toilets, and the doper assholes were done doping, nodded out in the back of old Buicks or on the sidewalk in front of a liquor store. It was a cold kind of quiet, not the swampy buzzing of a jungle, but a concrete, spooky quiet, the waves barely sounding and a sea breeze stirring up a smell of motor oil from under parked cars.

After a couple of tiptoeing trips up and down the stairs, we were all loaded up, and I was leaning on the car waiting while Bernie went to bring a pinch more coke, when I heard someone, a noise, in the alley behind the house. I got in the car and sat and watched and waited: of course, I was hoping it was Pop, coming to crash in the basement and save us a trip. Or maybe, I thought, it's some brain-damaged dopehead looking for money or a gang of drunk teenagers. But too bad—the shadow I saw in the alley turned into a bum, too fat to be Pop, shuffling down to the boardwalk, kicking a little cardboard box in front of him.

The sky was lightened up some by the time we got to Vinnie's. Down the hill we could see streetlights still lit and a long lump of blue haze stretching over the freeway to the beach. Vinnie's house was dark; the Cadillac, top down, and the Bronco were both parked in the driveway. We parked on the street and walked up to the front door, but no one answered our knock.

"He's still asleep, the moron," Bernie said. I followed barking noises round to the back of the house,

where a nervous poodle was tied up inside a square of chain-link fence. I banged on the fence until the dog shut up. Meanwhile, Bernie went around through the bushes to the outside of Vinnie's bedroom and knocked on the screen, but there was no answer from inside.

"This is ridiculous," Bernie said. We were standing at the front door hoping Vinnie would surprise us and open it. "I should've known he'd do this. I never met a dealer who could get up before ten. I knew we should've come over last night."

"Maybe he met somebody at his sex meeting and they never came back."

"Well, shit." Bernie knocked again. "I'm insane to let him hang onto money, but I guess there's no choice." He rang the doorbell but it didn't make any noise, so he slammed it with his palm and then leaned over to try and see into the window next to the door—but it had curtains.

"Don't get too loud," I said, thinking about the neighbors.

"It's only a couple thousand, I guess it'll keep." Bernie looked angry with himself, but he also looked like he was about to laugh—I think he kind of enjoyed having his plans fucked up so he had something to worry about on the drive North.

On the way back to our car I looked in the Bronco. There was somebody asleep in the back seat. "Hey, Chiefie, check this out," I said, opening the back door: it was Vinnie, flopped on his side. "He's in here."

"That's a new one," Bernie said, leaning in to shake Vinnie awake. "Jesus, he must've puked, it stinks." Bernie shook him, and Vinnie seemed sort of rubbery, with his head falling to one side, smiling, like a body does in a movie, and when one eye rolled half-open and he thudded halfway off the seat, we knew he was dead.

We closed the door and stood there looking into the car. "What a jerk," Bernie said, shaking his head.

"I wonder what happened." I couldn't help staring into the car window. Vinnie looked like something right out of a movie, all twisted over.

"Looks pretty much like he O.D.'d. Jesus, I must be crazy. I'll bet he went out and partied and you know—he'd been so clean, someone probably shot him up with something, some Hollywood combo, and it was too much for him. I don't know, really, but knowing Vinnie—that's what it looks like." Seemed to me Bernie wanted to explain it, and explain it again, kind of hoping that if he kept talking he'd wake up out of the dream.

"But why's he in the back seat?" I wanted to know.

Bernie opened the car door and pulled his shirt out of his jeans and started wiping off the places he'd touched, and then he wiped the car door handle and walked up to clean off the front doorknob, which he tried again, just in case. "I wonder if my money's still in there," he said.

"Chief, the guy's *dead*."

"He's still an asshole. I mean, this is just nuts." He raised his fist to slam the door, but decided against it. He looked over at the Bronco. "Let's go. I mean, it's better if we let someone else find him, anyway. Christ. I'll just have to kiss off the dough."

I didn't expect Bernie to do anything of the sort, at least not right away. "So we're still going?" I asked.

"Why not? It's actually better to get out of here for a few days. God, I can smell him from here. Let's go."

Bernie looked so bummed about the money, I half expected him to go and fish through Vinnie's pockets. He settled for kicking the Bronco's rear tire, which started the poodle barking, so we hurried back to our car. As we drove away, Bernie started mumbling about how he was glad to be leaving town for a while and he'd have to call Mario to see if anything happens at the house and then he started worrying about Vinnie's appointment books. While we were waiting at a stoplight on Sunset he turned to me and said, not so loud, "Christ, he's really dead."

I'd seen people all kinds of ways, but this was the first one I'd ever seen dead. I was thinking about the stupid smile on Vinnie's face when he rolled over. Like he was happy, like thanks a lot, folks, that last big hit was really a good one. I lit up a pinner as soon as we crossed over into Bel-Air; we could smell the ocean. There was a golden flash in the side mirror; Bernie slowed down and looked back, but it was only the sun coming up behind us. I took a decent hit and passed the pinner to Bernie.

"At least his dick wasn't cut off," I said.

Topanga was as funky as our mood, all fogged in and depressing. The waves were completely nonexistent, so mostly I just sat on the board and paddled around, remembering Vinnie's twisted head and wondering if we were going to come across Pop in the same condition somewhere up the road. I only attempted one or two rides in the entire hour I was out.

Bernie, meanwhile, sat on the beach pouring sand from one hand to the other, probably stewing about all his dead friends and lost money. We drove up to Leo Carrillo, which wasn't a whole lot better, but I figured I'd better go out anyway, since I'd made such a big deal about it. Bernie stretched out on the cold sand near the water and stared up at the fog. There was no one else out in the water, for good reason, and no one around when I got out, so I peeled off my wetsuit right on the beach without even a towel around me. I was feeling jazzed up from the cold water and for a minute I felt like running naked back to the water and splashing in, but Bernie had on a don't-go-away look, so I pulled on my shorts and we lit up a burner. We walked back to the car, with me carrying the surfboard and Bernie carrying the wetsuit across his arms like it was a body. He was in such a crappy mood that I wanted to grab his hand while we walked, give him a hug, but a van full of morons pulled in to the parking lot next to our car, so I didn't.

Just outside Oxnard we hit a McDonald's for breakfast. Bernie told me he always felt safe at McDonald's, since he could park his car where he could see it from inside, a habit left over from his old coke delivery job. I didn't mind—I could eat burgers and fries six or seven times a day. On the way in we saw a black Bronco parked just outside the main door, and when we walked past, we couldn't help it: we slowed down to look inside at the back seat.

We drove up out of the fog on the road to Five, winding through round hills covered with dry summer grass. It was all blue sky and yellow grass and patches of green down in the crotch of the hills where trees and bushes grew up around creeks. We rolled up the windows and cranked the air conditioning. At the top of a hill, on a gravel turnout, we stopped so Bernie could change out of his jeans. There was a big view: to the west, over the hot yellow hills, under a huge blue sky, we could see a long bank of purplish haze hanging over the ocean like a giant soft wave. When we opened the doors we caught a hot, dry breeze that smelled like roaches of low-grade dope. After Bernie got into his old khaki shorts, we sat in the car and had a smoke.

"It's all Reagan country," Bernie said, waving the joint around to paint the view. "Cattle, oil, tax deductions."

“Not my style. It’s too fucking hot and no river or anything. At least the jungle has shade. And anyway, what would you do all day out here?”

“I don’t know. Ride a horse. Fuck the wife. Phone in your stock buys. Plant dope.” Bernie took an unusually deep hit and held it for a long time while he looked out towards the ocean. I figured he must be thinking about Vinnie, but when he turned to me he said, “You think he’ll be there?”

“He sure as shit isn’t anywhere else. Anyway,” I said, grabbing the doob out of his fingers before it all burned away, “I got this vision,” which I did: on the way up the hill, I kept closing my eyes and seeing images—a wide, flat rock; somebody sitting on it, chanting, raising spirits; and laughing women.

“I don’t,” Bernie said. He leaned over the gearshift for a kiss. At first I didn’t know what he wanted, but then I leaned over, too. A truck came grinding up the road and we left off kissing to watch it go past us and over the top of the hill, blasting its horn and spilling a thin gray stream of smoke into the sky. I looked around, down the hill, for a place where we could go and lie down, but the grass looked too dry and was probably full of stickers. Bernie didn’t seem all that interested, anyway, even after another kiss. He sat up and slipped a bindle out of his wallet and scraped up a chunk with his fingernail.

We turned on to the Grapevine at eleven or twelve, and we were frying. The sun glared in on Bernie’s side, so we curtained off the window with my T-shirt. We flew down the hill and sped flat-out past a couple of GAS FOOD towns and then when the highway split we turned onto the old one, Ninety-Nine. We stopped in Bakersfield for a Quarter Cheese and fries; the parking lot asphalt was so hot I thought my rubber slippers would melt.

We lit up on the way out of town, and it was mellow; there wasn’t any traffic at all, and my T-shirt cut off the view from the other side of the road, so I let down the back of my seat and stretched out, pulling my shorts down and twisting the aircon vent so the cold air rolled over my sweaty little nuts. Bernie still wasn’t saying much, but he played with me some while we drove mile after mile past the farms and little Beanervilles, all hot and flat with dusty-looking hills off in the distance.

Every so often we’d pass rows of green stuff, and there’d be a farmhouse, or some silos stuck in the fields like beer cans in the sand, or a row of old eucalyptus trees alongside the highway. We passed a field full of cattle waiting to get slaughtered and the car smelled like shit for fifteen miles. I wondered if anyone had found Vinnie yet—was his car still closed up in the afternoon heat? I closed my eyes halfway and watched the trees blink out the glare while we zoomed past them. Bernie was being too quiet, not even singing along with the tapes or complaining about the potholes in the road, so I leaned over and unzipped him and tickled him and he laughed for the first time that day.

I lit up a joint, but he didn’t want any; instead, he had another tiny coke boost, just enough to keep himself on cruise control. As far as I was concerned, he was set too slow. The sun was beating down on my dick and he had his hand on the stick shift instead of me. I tried putting on some Van Halen, but he popped it out after two songs.

“Enough with the boner music,” he said, and he dropped in an old jazz tape—weird saxophone and piano stuff. “That’s Dexter Gordon,” he told me, as if it would make me like it any better. “Try to follow the lines, the melody he’s inventing, it’s kind of—well, it’s—God, I sound old. You know, all these old jazz guys were actually on better drugs than the Dead.”

We were both getting drier and hungrier as the miles rolled away, but there wasn’t a McDonald’s, or much of anything else. Bernie was buzzed from the coke, but still in a pissed-off kind of mood at the same

time, and I was sweaty and naked and asleep, except for my dick. We passed a couple of small places sitting just off the highway, but we weren't in any mood to stop. It would've been too much hassle to pull off the road, get dressed, walk dizzy from the heat into some dusty beaner joint and then swat flies off enchiladas while a bunch of sweaty lettuce pickers checked us out. Instead we broke out the cheese and crackers and pulled into a gas station in the middle of nowhere to buy SevenUps from a machine.

Afterwards, lying there with the seat down, listening to music with my thing waving in the aircon breeze I was almost able to forget that I'd seen a dead guy roll off a car seat before I'd had breakfast. I kept seeing his neck all twisted like a broken skateboard wheel. How'd he get home, anyway? Did someone else stick him in the car? Did he sit there and OD right in his own driveway, nod off and die while the poodle barked and whimpered? I tried to stop thinking about it, but I couldn't. Every time a big semi came down the other side of the road, I imagined it smacking into us, the windshield splintering, glass and metal flying across us, puncturing our necks and slicing off our dicks. I grabbed Bernie's hand and stuck it down around my dick, just to remind me that I was still all in one piece. I wanted to jump out of the car, both of us, and run into the bean fields and throw our clothes off and do it a hundred times before the truck hit us, and forget finding Pop—who cared if we found him or not, if we were about to get splattered all across the highway in a hundred pieces?

And what if Pop was already flopped over someplace, stretched out on a rock, his twisted face grinning a final silly grin, staring up at the sun?

Sixteen: A Natural Lizard Activity

Twenty or thirty miles outside town a million old billboards began laying out bullshit about the great upcoming Fresno, but the closer we got, the less we saw; this gritty, dusty fog swept in from nowhere, covering the afternoon sun until it wasn't any brighter than a street light. I stood and watched a bunch of little Mexican kids jumping around in the McDonald's playground while Bernie called Mario at the house. He was worried that the police would find something at Vinnie's and then show up at our place, but as we went inside he smiled as if he'd known all along there'd be no problem. "Mario's out in Covina, but Edward was there," he told me, "and he says nobody called, nobody came by, nothing unusual is going on."

"Ever since we left."

"Yeah, right—but it's only been half a day. For all we know Vinnie's still in the back seat of the Bronco and there's an envelope full of money with my name on it on a table inside the front door."

"Well, it doesn't prove anything," I said.

We went into the bathroom to wash off the dust.

"I'll feel better when nothing happens for a week." Bernie washed his face and washed inside his nose and pulled a Visine squirter out of his shorts pocket. It was only the two of us in there, so I pulled

down my shorts to look at myself in the big mirror. “Just put it away while we’re eating, if you can,” Bernie said.

“Hey, lighten up, Chief. Don’t you think it looks sort of pink? It must be these lights. Jeez, you know it’s been sticking up all day, too, with no relief.” Bernie went into the toilet stall to pee and I followed him.

“It’s always hard,” he said, flicking it with his finger. “It’s because you’re thirteen.”

I waited while he shook off a few pee drops and then I grabbed his dick and held it while it stretched out. “Yours is always hard, too.”

“That’s also because you’re thirteen. Let go.” He tried to sound angry but we ended up kissing again, standing in the stall with our shorts halfway down. Nobody came in.

“Maybe let’s get a room for the night,” I said.

“No,” he said. We zipped up and went out to get in line. “We can get up past Mariposa and find the place before dark,” he added, but I think he was just afraid to check into a motel with a kid. That seemed ridiculous to me. We weren’t any weirder than anyone else in line—a beefy blond guy wearing a baseball cap talking to skinny boy; a fat Mexican woman in shiny pants and a flowered shirt standing next to a slinky black-haired girl maybe sixteen years old; three buzz-cut teenage boys in dirty jeans and white T-shirts. In fact, the only unusual thing was I was the only person standing in line wearing sunglasses, wraparound mirrors I’d found under the seat five or six miles back.

Thinking about going to a motel reminded me of Bernie’s friend Tony, and I wondered if Bernie’s bad attitude meant he was thinking about him, too, looking at the tough-guy teenagers. “You think they cut his nuts off first?” I asked Bernie. He was just about to order.

“Perhaps we could discuss it over burgers,” he said, looking around to see if anyone was listening. So I thought about it myself, picturing the scene in the hotel room, imagining I was Tony—lying on the bed, looking over a porno mag, tender lumps in white underwear, maybe my hand’s already wrapped around my fat old pole, and I hear a noise and look up, and just as fast as the Mexican girl behind the counter is whirling around grabbing bags of fries, some homeless bum busts in the door and I’m too shocked to do anything. And then I see the guy’s got a knife, he’s crazy, so I try to get off the bed, but my leg’s all tangled up in the sheets and I fall down and bang my head on the night table and just as I’m pushing myself up the guy jumps me and there’s this awful pain between my legs.

“Large fries?” Bernie asked me.

“Yeah, okay.” And then the last thing I see is the bum smiling, blood’s bubbling up in my throat, and the jerk is smiling down at me, holding my own dick in front of me, waving it around like a baby’s toy.

The teenage assholes, bullshitting each other in mixed-up Spanish and English, sat at a table across from us. They made me think of a different scene: Tony’s brought one back from Penney’s, one of the scuzzier ones, a dooper with a blade in his pocket. So then I’ve got the lights off, the radio’s tuned in to Seattle’s easy listening station, and the two of us are naked on the bed. The kid’s got a tattoo on his neck and he smells like beer and puke and he’s sweaty and won’t say anything. His scuzzed-out jeans are hanging on a chair; his T-shirt and tennies and socks are on the floor, and on top of them is the hundred-dollar bill I put there after dropping my shorts and turning out the lights. Dust from Bernie’s gift coke is scattered on the desk top where he chopped a line. The kid only wants to fuck me, but I don’t want him to, so I suck him for a while, kind of a rotten taste. Now what I’d really like to do is get him out of here, but

it's late and it looks like he wants to spend the night. So I fall asleep with my hand on his dick and then I wake up—the pain! What're you doing? Oh, please! And then I guess I'd pass out from shock. "So what's your theory?" I asked Bernie.

"They cut it with monkey meat," he said, "and the fries are like white glue with potato flavoring. And there's something in the shakes that make you need to watch television."

"No, I mean Tony, what I asked you."

"Nuts first," he said, "to get the point across."

"The *point*?"

"Can't we talk about something else?"

"At least Vinnie was asleep when it happened."

"True. He was probably thinking he felt great, the best in years. Then oops—puke, choke, done."

"The burgers were way better in Bakersfield."

Bernie was unlocking the car when one of the counter girls, the Mexican, came running out after us. Bernie was looking at her like he was trying to figure out where the gun was. Actually, she did have something in her hand. "Sir," she shouted, "wait!"

"Como? Que quieres?" I said.

She looked at Bernie, but held her hand out to me. "Your son forgot his sunglasses," she said, all out of breath.

Half an hour later, on the road to Mariposa, Bernie was still pissed off. "My son?" he kept saying.

"It's because I look so young," I told him, so he'd feel better.

We got up near Mariposa, turned off onto a smaller road that looked right, then took the wrong road a few times, and then finally we turned onto a wide dirt track that seemed to me to have a familiar layout of trees and fences. "This is it," I told Bernie, "I'm positive."

"That's four times you said that," he said, stopping just as the road started to drop through a dry creek bed.

"No, really, this is the same creek," I said, and then, looking up, I was really sure: I saw the gate, and the tall pines that were next to the house, and off in the darkness a lighter spot that had to be the Indians' sacred rocks. We drove through the creek and up to the gate, which was just a thrown-together bunch of boards. All we did to get through was pull up a loop of wire nailed to the fence post and the gate swung right open.

Two or three hundred yards beyond the fence, we came to what we used to call the Ranch House, a big wood and stone building forty or fifty years old. The pine grove around it had grown taller since I'd seen it, and in back of the house they'd cut down some trees to let in morning light and a view of the river valley. The kid-sized geodesic dome—just for playing on—was still out front, next to the gravel parking spot, which was empty. The old swing chairs were still on the covered porch.

The house was dark, but I couldn't believe no one was living there in the summer, the prime season. Out of the hundreds of people who'd lived there, there was always someone around when the weather was good. We tiptoed up the steps and for a minute I imagined we'd find maggoty, dickless bodies lying around the living room and messages smeared in lipstick on the walls. But when we went in it was as peaceful as ever, and smelled lived-in.

It was a big place, with three or four bedrooms and a huge kitchen that opened out into a living room

big enough to square dance in, if you could move all the thrift-store furniture. There was a single bed with pillows on it, pushed up against a wall to make a sofa, two old wooden rocking chairs, stuffed bookshelves and side tables and an oval braided rug that was perfect for communal meetings. The kitchen had the usual glass jars full of grains and seeds, avocado plants sprouting over plastic cups, and dishes piled in the sink. It was pretty much the same as always.

I took a look down the hall, but there was nobody in the bedrooms. Someone had painted up the hallway, though, a whole parade of marching women, all different colors and shapes, all raising their fists, holding books and babies, looking angry. I went back to the kitchen and we drank some water and then Bernie went out to bring in the stash-and-cassette bag from the car.

By this time it was too dark to go tramping around the forest looking for Pop, so we decided to hang out and see if anyone showed up; I figured they might be visiting some hippies up the road or camping down by the river, eating peyote next to the hot springs. Bernie kicked off his shoes and sat in a rocking chair and we polished off our cheddar cheese along with some apples we borrowed from a box in the kitchen. Then we went out to the porch to sit and wait.

We sat in the swing chair, easing down in case it was broken. It was peaceful, after all the driving, to sit and rock in the cool air and listen to the bugs. We smoked half a joint, and I laid down with my head across Bernie's legs. He fooled with my hair and skated his finger along my face. I gave it a lick as it passed my lips. I was boned out again, of course, but still I could barely stay awake—the combination of mountain air and dope puts me right to sleep. Bernie was so quiet I knew he was tired, too, and I felt like trading places and letting him sleep on me for a while. The cicadas starting screeching all at once and a breeze came up from the forest, sending a piney smell across us.

“Let's just move in for a few months,” Bernie said.

“I wish. What time is it?”

“I don't know. Nine. We should give it a little while, I guess. You can sleep if you want—I'll have a toot to keep my eyes open, I'll read something. You want to sleep?”

The obvious place to crash was in the living room, on the bed against the wall, so I got a sleeping bag from one of the bedrooms and opened it up so we could use it as a blanket. “I've got something you can read,” I said.

I went out to get Pop's rice paper notebook from under the front seat. “Pop did it,” I told Bernie. “I stuck it in the car, I thought it might have some clues.” He sat in the rocking chair. “Read some to me,” and I took off my shorts and climbed in under the sleeping bag.

“So the old guy was getting it all down,” Bernie said, flipping the pages. He read for a while, then said, “Oh, it's good stuff. Listen to this: ‘Eating a blotter, swallowing mushrooms, peyote stew, we toss off our selves and leave it to the cleaver of Shiva—slices away May—a swift, silent thrust...’ I can't read it all. ‘...layers of dusty worn consciousness, piled-on fears—a something something skin around our true inner being. Cut to the bone, your naked heart beating...what do you do?’ Yeah, what, Pops? ‘You want something, you compromise, cover your self, layers, self-justification, politeness, morality, denial.’ Tell me about it! There's some drawings, too—oh, let's try this page, it's written better. ‘What's magic and what isn't, who can say? The dominant culture lies, magic's a vehicle for making money... and the drug-addled masses mistake simple coincidence for cosmic synchronicity...’ Hey, Pops, I've done that, myself.”

“Just read it, will you?”

“Okay, okay. ‘Christ could walk among us and we’d ignore him if he didn’t have a good press agent. Why deny, why deny, when magic is there in circumstances we don’t expect, with people we never thought we’d meet, in places we don’t even want to go. We know how to get on the freeway but not how to listen to magic—how did the Maya choose the boy that became the Sun King?’”

“Yeah, how?” I asked.

“Beats me.” He flipped a few more pages, and sat reading to himself for a while. I looked at him sitting quiet in the rocking chair and I wanted him to come over and get in bed next to me. The pine smell and familiar old dust was making me all cozy and I wanted to hug him and kiss his cheek and I wanted to feel his hands on me. I was almost dreaming, and I knew Bernie touching me would make me feel kind of floaty. Even with this day-old organic mountain boner I still had.

“Listen to this,” he said. “‘...and with children, we must realize that every time we delay gratification, ignore needs, we block out true human potential’—guy goes back to the Seventies, all right—‘and the child remains frustrated, a low level of development...’”

“Hey, that’s me. My needs have been hard all day, and ignored.”

Bernie laughed. “I think he meant spiritual,” he said. He read some more, but I tuned out, and started to fall asleep; I’d heard it all, anyway.

It was reminding me of the time we lived on this old farm, out in the country, when Pop was teaching college. It was the year before we went down to Mexico. I was nine or ten, everybody’s longhaired organic happy hippie natural child. When his advanced students used to drop by at night to listen to Pop and do some wine and weed, I got to stay up and add my squeaky voice to the conversation. And when one of his students told Pop he should let me “play the game” with them next weekend, I politely said “I’d like to” even though I didn’t know what he was talking about.

* * * * *

You had to play “the game” overnight, so the whole class showed up on a Saturday morning. Mom and Lori cleared out, staying with one of Mom’s friends on another farm. I was the only kid, of course, and Pop the only real adult; the rest were his college students, twelve or thirteen of them, five or six of them girls, all of them white and skinny and long-haired, dressed in jeans and hiking boots, carrying little backpacks full of books and dried fruit. It was springtime—warm and breezy all day, cold and damp at night. The grass in the meadows stayed damp until noon and the redwood branches would drip on me when I went outside in the early morning to pee.

We all sat around in a circle at the top of the highest meadow. Off to the west you could see a piece of the ocean, and all around for miles there was nothing but meadows and forests. Pop explained the game. He started off with a bunch of Golden Road stuff I didn’t follow, so I sat there braiding some grass into a little green bracelet. Then he got to the rules, so I listened: first off, we were supposed to start out by becoming one-celled organisms, then slowly work our way up through the evolutionary ladder, through amoebas to salamanders to apes, but we couldn’t go any farther than being cavemen—*cavepersons*, one of the girls said—so absolutely no talking for two days. Grunting and stuff was okay if whatever animal you had evolved into made those kinds of sounds. And no clothes, either, and no tools or food except what we found in the woods. One guy asked about toilet paper and Pop said to use leaves and watch out for

poison oak. We were all going to spend the whole night outside, like real animals. The idea was to get in touch with our animal self, our “cellular history,” and to form some kind of “primal culture.” For me there was the added attraction of two days’ worth of naked girls.

We smoked a few joints, sitting in the circle. Pop said it was okay to take something stronger, but not to tell him about it since it was a school project. Then we all took our clothes off and stood up and held hands and everybody said a prayer. I’d memorized one from an Indian book, about the Four Directions, and as usual it got some pretty sincere nods from the people who hadn’t heard it before. Pop prayed for a revelation of our true natures and for “clarity,” his Word of the Month.

Then we went to the house to dump our clothes. One guy took off his glasses and discovered his true nature right away when he fell down the steps on his way out of the house. I told him it might be a good idea if he evolved as far as a rock and then stayed that way for two days. We all split off in different directions, crawling through the meadows or into the forest. The farm was about forty or fifty acres, with two or three forests and plenty of hidden spots for evolving privately.

I headed down—walking—to the edge of the forest, near a big burned-out redwood stump, and decided to take my own advice and be a rock for a while. I curled up into a ball, my knees up against my face, and I rolled down the hill until I landed against the side of the stump. I was a rock for an hour or two, and then I figured if I was supposed to get all the way up to caveman—caveboy?—by the next day, I’d better start going through some changes. I spread myself out and waved my arms around and tried to feel slimy, like some sort of gooey, basic animal, one step up from the mud. The redwood leaves were dry and scratchy against my bare skin, so it was a challenge to feel slimy, but I didn’t want to go back and be a rock, because a rock would have to roll down the hill to the mushy little creek, which was full of mosquitoes. I tried to feel like I had big, cloudy, wet eyes, with a beady brown dot inside, and slimy stumps instead of hands. I pulled myself along on my elbows and got inside the tree stump; the leaves and bark scratched at my stomach and legs, but I imagined slime animals didn’t have pain receptors, so I ignored it.

It was pretty cool, inside the stump with the moldy smell of rotten leaves, watching beetles and worms as if they were more advanced than me. Every so often I caught sight of another person, but there wasn’t a sound from anyone, just the crackle of twigs breaking under a knee.

I decided to slink down to the creek, trying not to think in words, only mental balloons full of slime-colored thoughts. About halfway down the hill I realized I was turning into a lizard. I almost felt my tail growing. I narrowed my eyes and my tongue started jumping out of my mouth, looking for flies. I couldn’t remember lizards making any noise, so I stayed quiet, but after a while I began to hear grunts down in the forest from more advanced creatures. I figured lizards had to pee, anyway, so I did a push-up off my elbows and I peed down into the leaves. Some of the warm drops splashed back up on my stomach. Then I crawled off, skittering around lizard-style, stopping to stick out my tongue and do some more push-ups. I passed a girl who was still a rock, and a guy in the meadow who was turned over on his back like a dead beetle.

I liked this lizard stage, so I stayed in it until it was dark, even though I noticed that most of the other people had become pigs or bears or apes and had started hooting and scratching and growling at each other. I hid in the tall meadow grass and watched as five or six apes tried to get it together, socially—chasing each other around, boobs jiggling and dicks flopping up and down. I looked up to the top of the

hill and in the moonlight there was Pop, bent over like an ape, chasing after one of the girl students. He was grunting and hooting and his dick was boned out straight in front of him, pulling him along. The girl was shrieking and meowing, like she was trying to let him know she'd evolved into some other species that had a different way of making eggs.

I slithered back down to the creek bed, slinking along lapping up water from its muddy hollows. I was perfectly happy being a lizard, silent and stupid, and I wasn't in any mood to evolve any higher and join the apes, who were mostly tramping around in the forest trying to figure out how to get through the night without inventing fire and clothes. But after a while I knew I wasn't really a cold-blooded lizard, so I couldn't just crawl under a rock and fall asleep and wait for the morning sun to wake me up. I crawled up out of the forest, hiding from the angry apes, and slithered across the meadow, and even though it seemed like cheating, I headed for the sauna, a concrete cube sitting at the edge of the meadow, near the house. After all, I said to myself, a real lizard might crawl in there, where it's dry in the morning instead of dewy and damp. And besides, I'm just a kid, not a student—I'm not earning three or four units for spending the night in a tree stump.

I head-butted the narrow wooden door and it creaked open; inside, it was so dark I couldn't see into the corners, or beneath the wooden benches, or behind the tin stove. I kicked the door closed, but true to my lizard nature, I didn't stand up and throw the latch. I was all ready to stretch out and sleep when I heard a little scuffling noise, and then breathing.

There was some other half-evolved creature in there—was it the kind that eats lizards? Then I saw him, up on the top bench, a longhaired boy, half-asleep. He jumped when I bumped him with my head and licked the arm that was hanging down off the bench. He looked at me through half-closed eyes and smiled, and slithered along his bench until his face was right in front of mine, and then he stuck his tongue out, fast, and licked me, and smiled. We were both lizards. I tried not to laugh, and he watched me, real lizardy and weird, while I tried to slither up to the top bench without using my hands. Eventually I had to cheat, but only for a minute.

I slithered over next to him, snuggling up like he was a long-lost relative. I mean, I could see he was just some eighteen-year-old naked guy with shaggy blond hair and pink skin, but in my mind I imagined he was another lizard, as cold and blue-skinned as me. He looked me over, too, and we tried to hold our laughing, and then we touched tongues together, and got close. He was pretty warm for a lizard.

We could hear all kinds of grunting and yelling and screaming from outside, and I was glad I was still a lizard, and I was glad there was another one next to me, our own silent and peaceful lizard society. I fell asleep. Then sometime in the middle of the night we both got tired of sleeping on our stomach and turned on our sides, human-style, facing each other. The boy smelled like old leaves, and I guess I did, too. I put my hand around on his back and we got a little closer.

After a while I woke up with something crawling up my leg, and I reached down to flick it off, but it turned out to be the guy's dick, laying on my leg. It was unlizardlike for him to get a bone, I guess, and probably I was just as unlizardlike when I started rubbing it a little. The guy was staying asleep, and I fell back to sleep, too, but then I woke up again a while later when I felt something warm and sticky dripping through my fingers. I was old enough to know what the guy'd done, and to me it seemed like the same as when I pissed in the forest—just a kind of natural lizard activity. His dick was soft and soggy, but I held on to it for a while. I stretched out like a cat, shivering, until I felt the cold concrete wall with my foot,

and then I reached around the guy's waist and pulled myself as close as I could get. I felt his hand on my back, rubbing me gently. We were both half-awake and breathing right on each other so I stuck out my tongue and he stuck out his tongue we had what I guess was a lizard kiss. It was turning into a real interesting way to spend the night.

I woke to the sound of banging on the sauna's metal door. Grunting and hollering followed the banging and turned into chanting. It took me a minute to remember that we were lizards, hiding out; well, the apes had found us, and we'd be fried for breakfast. My lizard friend woke up, too, and we looked at each other, waiting for the door to fly open, which happened soon enough, sending a bright shot of cold light into our cave, followed by five or six college-age ape men, all carrying bundles of dry tree branches. They bellowed and grunted up at us, and hooted at each other, trying to decide how to invent fire. Then they turned their attention back to us, the strange species, glaring at us and hollering and beating sticks on the concrete floor. We just laid there with our eyes half-closed, sticking our tongues out and moving our heads around slowly, lizard-style. This seemed to make the apes angrier and they got louder and I was afraid they'd start in pounding us with their sticks, so I raised myself up on my elbows and said, "We're lizards, you assholes," and they all stopped hooting.

"You got any matches?" one of them said.

* * * * *

When I woke up Bernie was asleep next to me. I looked across his face into the sunlight blasting in through the back windows and glaring off bottles in the kitchen. Dust from the rug drifted in the air, floating in the sunlight. It was still cold, and quiet except for some birds in the trees outside. Bernie was completely dressed, except for his shoes. I rolled over close to him and poked him in the side until he woke up. "Jesus, I gotta pee like a motherfuck," he said, rolling out of the bed. He stumbled outside, and I rolled into the warm spot he left in the bed. After a while he wasn't back, so I followed him outside.

He was sitting on the steps, looking down the road. Ours was still the only car parked out front. I peed into the weeds off the side of the porch and sat down next to him. About fifty or sixty little gray and blue birds landed on the ground right in front of us, pecked at the gravel, and flew off chattering. It was a real farm scene, like a coffee commercial—even more so after we borrowed some instant from the kitchen and sat out in the swinging chair drinking it.

"Tex, there ain't another living soul in these here parts," Bernie said, scratching his leg. "Best we mosey down the canyon yonder and see what we can see. I reckon ole Ratty Dan done absconded to the crick."

"He's probably out on the old burial grounds, near those flat rocks. I don't know, it's like I can smell him."

We locked all our stuff back in the car, saving out a few joints and a bindle, and had apples for breakfast. We started off along the hill behind the house, looking for the trail that led to the flat rocks, up on another hill not too far away. We hiked under pine trees and then the trail went out in the open and narrowed through a hot patch of tight, twisted manzanita bushes.

After fifteen or twenty minutes the big rocks were in front of us, huge slabs sticking out from the side of the hill like they'd been stuck into it by some prehistoric helicopter. We walked out to the end of the

biggest one, and we could see down into the canyon, and up the river for miles, and across to the hills on the other side. There was nobody—not a house, no smoke from a campfire or chimney, nothing but a huge clean planet full of hills and forest and blue sky. Bernie walked to the other rocks, to check for the remains of a fire, or a body.

“Zero,” he said, sitting next to me at the end of the rock.

“Shit. Well, I’m wrong, I admit it.”

“It was a nice drive, anyway.” He picked up a stone and threw it down into the canyon.

“I’m a little spooked that no one’s around,” I said.

“Maybe there was some kind of silent bomb, and we’re the only people left on earth.”

“That’d be fun.”

“But there goes the human race,” Bernie said.

We hiked down to the river to look for the hot springs. We lost the trail halfway down and had to slide down part of the slope and land in some stickery bushes. We jumped upriver on rocks until I decided we’d gone too far, so we sat and had a smoke and cooled our feet in the water. Then we hopped on rocks downstream until we found it, and it was just as I remembered it, a hot-tub sized concrete-and-rock pool built into the rocks at the side of the river. Some crazy hippies had hiked down with bags of cement to make it; they’d channeled the hot water that bubbled up ten yards away into the pool.

We got naked in about two seconds and splashed around in the cool river to wash off the dust. We sat on the rocks for a few minutes, just long enough for my dick to start smiling up at the sun, and then we climbed over the rocks into the hot pool. The water was oily and had a sulfury smell, but it was as hot as any hot tub. There were stones inside, for sitting; Bernie sat and I sat on him, like a kid on Santa. All around there was nothing but trees and tall grass and white rocks and the shining water and the sun beaming down on all of it from the middle of the huge blue sky. We kissed, long and slow and wet, and then we stood up and kissed some more, pressing closer, both of us realizing that there was nobody else around for miles, no office to rush to, no phones ringing, no Junior whistling outside the window, no Dobermans squealing. I forgot about everything else except the two of us; Bernie rested his head on my shoulder and I buried mine against his neck, listening to his breath, feeling his wet skin, and I was thinking, well, I evolved this far, I guess it’s my true nature.

“It’s so perfect,” he said.

“It’s definitely something,” I said.

We had another few kisses while Bernie ran his finger down my spine and pulled me up on my toes so he could reach down and grab my butt and pull me closer to him; then he was holding me really tight, but it seemed like he was trying to pull me back down into the water.

“Visitors,” he whispered.

We turned around, forgetting to let go of each other, and there, practically on top of us at the edge of the pool, were two women, one sort of fat with dark hair and the other a freckle-faced redhead. I remembered their faces from my visit years ago.

“Howdy,” I said, trying to smile. I had my hand on Bernie’s butt, so I let it drop. But I was still boned out hard as a rock.

Bernie let go of me, too, and I noticed he’d wilted as soon as his dick saw the women.

“Howdy yourself,” said the fatter one. They were both dressed in jeans and flannel shirts and high-top

boots. “Do we know you?”

“I know you guys. I mean, I don’t remember your names or anything, but I was here a long time ago, with my family.”

The redhead said, “Is he your family, too?” She had a look in her eyes like the angry women in the hallway painting.

“Yeah, we’re, you know, cousins.” So Bernie and I let go of each other and stood there cousin-style.

“We came up to look for his father,” Bernie explained.

“Now I remember you,” said dark-hair. “That was a long time ago. Well, you missed him. He was here yesterday, but he’s gone.”

“He was really here! I knew it!” I jumped up, and my half-hard dick wiggled and slapped Bernie’s stomach. Both women looked down at it like it was snake under the kitchen table. Then Bernie gave it a little pinch, which wasn’t a real good idea, but I don’t think he could help himself. So everybody was staring at my perky little boner, for a change.

“We were just taking a little dip,” Bernie said. “We’ve come a long way.”

“Where’d he go?” I asked.

“With everybody else, to the concert,” said red-hair.

“Concert?” said Bernie, and we looked at each other about to scream. Jesus, it was so obvious, they hardly had to tell us.

“The Dead, down near Ventura,” dark-hair said. “Now do you mind getting out of our river?”

We stared at them.

“On Fridays the river is reserved for women,” the redhead explained.

“I guess that leaves us out,” Bernie said. “As you’ve noticed.” But the two women didn’t seem to think that was funny. As for me, I was still standing there with a boner.

Bernie tugged at my elbow and we climbed out. The two women watched while we got dressed. I had a feeling they regretted not having a Bowie knife handy so I was kind of relieved to get my shorts on.

We followed the women up the hot trail. I asked where they’d been the night before.

“Down in town,” said red-hair. “I go in for my Balkan Singing group.”

“And then we both volunteer overnight at the Child Abuse Hotline,” black-hair added.

“Chiefie, I wonder if we can make Ventura by tonight,” Bernie said.

Seventeen: Dead Music

The lobby of the Ventura Holiday Inn was full of loud, middle-aged Deadheads, ex-hippies gone straight who could afford to stay in a clean hotel room instead of camping out across the street in the dusty Fairgrounds parking lot. It was like a party with a Sixties theme, old guys with wooly gray hair wearing torn jeans and tight tie-dyed T-shirts and long-haired women in flowery dresses down to their ankles. The college kid at the counter probably figured half the credit cards he was accepting were bogus; how could this bug-eyed freak in an orange tie-dye and rubber slippers be Doctor Millstein from Santa Monica?

Bernie, dressed like a beach patrolman in his khaki shorts and clean white T-shirt, joined the noisy crowd at the counter while I sat on a beige vinyl couch watching our bags. After ten or fifteen minutes he came back, smiling, with our room key and tickets to the concert the next day. “The magic of credit cards, Chief,” he said. I did the cousin routine and picked up the duffel and our stash bag. “Room 1331,” he told me.

“You bullshitter,” I said, “there’s only eight floors.”

We were on the eighth, and the elevator was empty after the fourth, so we got to have a kiss on the way up.

We could hear Dead music all down the hallway and the smell of expensive buds floated up from under the doors. I waited while Bernie tried the key in both door locks until he figured out which one it opened. He looked to me like some kind of obvious undercover agent, too young and clean and normal to blend in with the freaks.

The room was cool and beige and full of mirrors: a big, wide one on the wall above the built-in desk; tall ones covering the doors to the closet; another one, round, on the wall beside the sliding doors that opened out to the balcony. Another one covered half the bathroom wall, so I watched myself whiz while Bernie unpacked the dope and the lube. I stepped out of my shorts as soon as I was out of the bathroom, opened the curtains across the sliding door, threw all the pillows to the center of the king-sized bed, and watched myself in all the mirrors, jumping up and down. Bernie tried ignoring me while he carefully unhinged a bindle and chopped some of the slightly damp coke into a line on the desk.

He did his usual pinch, then called the house in Venice while I bounced around on the bed next to him. He talked to Edward and tried to punch me in the ribs at the same time; he missed, and I fell over backwards and got a finger poked at my butt. There was no news from Edward—no calls, no guys in sunglasses cruising in vans in the alley behind the house—but Bernie told Edward where we were, just in case.

I took a break to roll a few doobs. Bernie took his clothes off and stretched out on the bed. He looked tired from all the driving. I lit up and stood at the sliding glass door; out beyond the hotel pool, across the side street, hundreds of cars and busses and vans squatted in a ragged city.

By now it was almost dark; tiny lights flared from flashlights, Coleman lanterns, twelve-volt bulbs in buses, candles stuck into the ground in front of tents. Deadheads were milling around, dark little shapes like worms in mulch. On the other wing of the hotel, Heads had hung six or seven sheet-sized skull-and-roses Dead flags from their balconies, to let the campers know that the hotel was conquered. I could make out, directly below, a few dark shapes against the yellow light of the swimming pool. I sat on the bed next

to Bernie and handed him the joint, but he wasn't interested. I kissed his flopped-over dick until it jumped up.

"Let's go down and do the Jacuzzi," I said.

"Later, Chief. I'm too wasted to move."

"Maybe I'll go find Pop."

"You're sure he's down there?"

"Hey, does the Pope shit in the woods?"

"Then let's wait on it. We'll see him tomorrow." He reached up around my waist and started playing with my dick.

"I'll just go and look. I mean, I'm not bringing him back here or anything."

"You're too horny to leave now," Bernie said, raising his head so he was in position for a lick.

"Hey, I'll be worse when I get back." For some reason I kept picturing Pop laid out in the back of a dirty old Volkswagen van with his head bent too far to one side and his tongue hanging out while a bunch of longhairs danced outside, ignoring him. I got up to look for my shorts.

"Look, be careful," Bernie said. "Don't take any pills off anybody. You know what I mean."

"Don't worry, Señor," I said, pulling a T-shirt over my head, "it's not like I'm a virgin at this Dead business."

I looked all over, I wandered and smelled and listened, but I just couldn't sniff out Pop. About a thousand times I thought I saw him, or smelled him, or heard him discussing types of weed, but it always turned out to be some other red-faced old guy. I tromped around past all the vehicles, which were parked every which way in the street and in the big unpaved parking lot, I walked past all the young and old beards and young and old tits showing through tank tops, past bandanna'd bikers and naked three-year-olds eating dust while a bare-chested mother changed tapes in her cassette player. I was forced to take a few hits here and there; there was a burner in every hand, and if I accidentally stepped on someone or cut through the middle of a group that was having a smoke, I had to stop and be polite for a minute or two. One girl, maybe sixteen, pretty even with her unfocused eyes, gave me a spaced-out smile and dropped a strawberry tab in my hand, but I kept on walking and let it fall into the dust.

An hour or more of dust and Dead music and I still hadn't found Pop, so I figured he must be curled up in some lady's tent, and I hiked back to the hotel. One of the bellhop guys in the lobby gave me a look, so I told him, "With my cousin on the eighth floor," and got in the elevator.

Bernie was sitting at the desk, reading the phone book, already wearing a bathing suit—a faggy bikini type I didn't know he owned. I changed into my old gray sweat shorts and we headed for the pool.

Outside the elevator we met two dripping Heads who told us the pool was closed.

"No way," I told Bernie, pulling him down the hallway, and sure enough, even though all the lights were turned off, the gate wasn't locked. It was cool and dark all around, a fogged-in thick darkness that blurred the lights of the hotel windows above us. The skulls on the Dead flags grinned down at us from the balconies and bursts of trebly Dead music leaped out of open windows. We walked slow down the pool steps. No one else was around.

We swam out to the deep end, not talking, swimming smooth and easy so no one would hear us. We sank under water, swimming around each other in the darkness. I could see where Bernie was, but not his exact shape; he was a blurry lump of blue darkness and a few flashes of light, which changed when he

moved. I swam in his direction and it turned out he was closer than I thought; we hit into each other and he grabbed my hands as we came up for air, and we kissed. It was a hassle treading water and holding onto him and kissing all at the same time, so we drifted—stuck together at the mouth—into the shallow water. We stopped at a place where I could just barely keep my head out of the water, so I stood on my toes and Bernie held my head in his hands.

I stuck my hand down into his swimsuit.

“Take these off,” I said.

“Hey, it’s a hotel, not a river.”

“Mine’s down already.” I grabbed his hand and pulled it and held it against my dick. “I got a boner so bad it hurts,” I said. Then I dove under and pulled his swimsuit down to his knees and for as long as I could hold my breath I had him in my mouth. I came up for air and told him, “I been like this for two whole days.”

Bernie didn’t say anything to that at all; he lowered himself into the water and I stood there and felt his warm mouth around me, just like I wanted, just like I knew he would’ve done at the river, if we’d had the chance. He came up for air in a rush of bubbles. “I bet the Jacuzzi’s still hot,” I said.

It wasn’t as hot as the hot springs in the river, but it was warm enough so we could sit in it without shivering from the cold. We sat on the step and kissed some more; there was a fake palm canopy and bushes all around so no one could see us. We slipped our shorts down and I squeezed my hand around his boner and he kissed me around the ear for a while and then whispered, “Forget about Pop.”

“Not yet.”

“Just stay with me.”

“I am staying with you.”

“No, I mean after.” Another kiss on the ear. “After this thing with your mother.”

“Hey, don’t worry,” I told him. “She’ll breeze through and then we’ll be back to normal,” and I turned and started a kiss to let him know I was serious. He reached in and started rubbing me, real slow, and I slid off the step and floated out, on my back, in front of him in the warm water and he was rubbing my dick and kissing me without holding me anywhere else, so I closed my eyes and let myself float; after a while he stopped rubbing me and just kissed me, kissed me for a long time and I was shaking and then I just completely couldn’t stop, I was jumping and twisting and spurting, and trying not to scream with happiness.

Just as my last few drops were shooting out above the water I felt his hand close around my dick and he pulled me close and kissed me some more. What are you worrying about? I thought; of course I’m staying with you! And I realized I’d already forgotten about Pop anyway; I only wanted him back so I could turn him over to Susan, and then maybe we could move somewhere else, just me and Bernie. I was thinking Bernie could easily get some job and I’d go surfing as usual and we could do this stuff every night, like regular people; I wanted to talk but we kept on kissing so I kept quiet and reached down to grab his dick but it was only in my hands for about three seconds before I felt it swell up and shake and he was shooting off so I kissed him some more.

Back in the room we tossed our wet stuff on a chair and without smoking or tooting or turning on the lights we collapsed on the bed. In two or three minutes I was almost asleep, but I didn’t want to let go of him, not for one second; I was holding him like I expected some biker to come in and rip off his nuts and

this would be my last chance. When he got up from the bed I thought I was dreaming that he was about to jump off the balcony, but all he wanted to do was open the sliding doors so we'd get a breeze.

The Dead music floated in with the air. "Sleep," he mumbled, falling back on the bed, but I told him, "Not yet," and reached for the lube. He just laid there while I got him ready and slipped myself in. After I was done he held me inside for a long time and we almost fell asleep that way, but after a while I rolled off and we just hugged each other. I was so completely tired out I couldn't even dream.

When I opened my eyes the sunlight was burning in through the open sliding door; Bernie was pulling the curtains open even more, until the light was slanting all the way across our bed. He pulled back the sheet and climbed in next to me. I got up to take a whiz break; Bernie didn't move an inch, so when I got back I jumped on him and started tickling him and we wrestled ourselves onto the floor, laughing so hard we had to stop for a while and rest. He chased me back up on the bed and I wondered what time it was and whether it was time to go over to the Fairgrounds, but he wouldn't let me stop and think, not for a second; he kept on tickling and kissing until I was all out of breath again. I was lying on my back waiting for his attack, taking deep breaths and waving my fists in the air; he fell on me, laughing, and instead of pounding him I hugged him and he poked a finger down between my legs. "Lube," I said, all of a sudden feeling completely ready. The sun bounced off the mirrors and lit up my dick, and then outlined Bernie with a red shadow as he worked the lube inside me and then followed it.

"That hurt?" He was putting the tip of his dick in slow and easy and I was moving around, lifting myself up to help him, but it still hurt. I didn't want to make a big deal about it, though, since I'd felt so good going into him, so I just breathed real deep and when he pushed himself a little farther in and asked me again I just said, "Yikes, Chief," and closed my eyes for a couple seconds and let him go in deeper. "It's okay?" he asked again.

"Go for it," I said, and I was thinking, this is really it, he's all the way up there inside me, and sure it hurts but it also feels exactly right, it was so natural, I wish we could've done this out in the river! I wanted a kiss so I pulled him closer, down on me, and he went in deeper, he was hitting some magic spot, making my whole body buzz and shake like just before I spurt only it was my whole body, all at once, right *there* and I wished I was big enough to hit that place inside him, I didn't want him ever to leave. Just the two of us, stuck inside each other in two or three places at the same time.

And then I couldn't believe it, the fucking phone rang, so we slid over near it, staying together, and he answered it and moved the phone off the night table and put it down on my stomach.

"Florida Medical Board," he said.

"Who is it?" I asked him.

"Edward."

Then he listened for a second or two. "It's Mario," he said, and mumbled some stuff into the phone about being back tomorrow and thanks for calling and yes, he's right here.

Then he hung up and tossed the phone on the floor and fell on me, hugging me, still stuck inside but not feeling as hard as before. He turned his face away from me, toward the sun coming in through the open door, but I could hear the tears in his voice.

"Out at his parents' house. He goes out after breakfast and lies down in the sun on the fucking lawn and doesn't get up."

"Oh, man, it's not fair," I said, pulling Bernie close again and kissing him and I was thinking Mario,

you're right. I was crying too, looking over Bernie's shoulder at the sky through the open sliding door. My vision was getting all fucked up, the teardrops hanging in my eyes clouding the sun's rays into shiny wet stars and I closed my eyes and felt Bernie getting hard again, pressing deeper, it was like all of him was all the way up inside me, and I wanted to hold him there forever, I was crying for Mario dead in the sun and it hurt but I loved Bernie and I loved me and I could feel sunshine from outside on my face and I never wanted it to stop.

Eighteen: Speakers As Big As Caves

Walking over to Denny's for breakfast, I felt completely mixed up, hoping we'd find Pop, but pissed off at the old fuck for making me chase around looking for him, and totally in love with Bernie, hoping Pop wouldn't show up at the stupid concert, so I'd never see him again, or Mom either, or anyone else, and at the same time I was all sad about Mario but now that he was gone I wanted it to be just me and Bernie, and fuck everybody else. I was even thinking we should just bail right now, forget the Dead, and go back home. There were all those people—I didn't want to lose Bernie in the crowd.

But all in all it was also pretty hard to stay pissed off at a Dead concert. From up in the room the Deadheads had looked like a bunch of dusty insects swarming over all over dead bodies, but up close they were cool, all mellowed out, walking like they were dancing, stoned out, smiling at each other like, as long as we're on the same planet we may as well get high and have a good time. Plenty of long hair and sparkly blue eyes and black guys with embroidered vests and blond old ladies.

We walked to Denny's along a side street, passing people on their way to the Fairgrounds, and every time a shaggy Deadhead smiled at me it was like he was saying, "Take it easy, Chief—your trip's as good as mine." We sat next to a couple of hairy, polite bikers at the restaurant counter, and the faggot waiter had a "Jerry Garcia is God" button on his shirt. We gave our tickets at the Fairgrounds gate to a fat, smiling security guard who had a flower stuck in his chest pocket, like it was still Woodstock or something.

The Fairgrounds was packed by the time we went in, even though the Dead wouldn't start playing for an hour or two. We walked around looking for Pop, getting hot and dusty until we must've looked as fried and crazy as everyone else. Well, almost everyone else—there's always a few professional Deadheads who are beyond help, for example the two guys we saw up on the stage dancing to the taped music, one really fat and the other skinny, both of them completely naked. I remembered there was a naked fat guy at the San Diego concert—was it the same guy?

Me and Bernie tied our T-shirts around our waists and hiked out of the crowd into the bleacher seats so I could stand up and scan the whole area. But no luck.

"He's absent," I told Bernie.

"Maybe he got his directions mixed up."

"Impossible," Bernie said. He'd watered some coke into a nasal spray bottle, and now he took it from his shorts pocket and did a couple of squirts. Two longhaired guys next to us noticed him doing it. "All this hemp is playing havoc with my asthma," Bernie said.

"Well, I don't see him anywhere. Let's give up."

I stood on a bench behind Bernie, and I guess without thinking he started rubbing my legs. I didn't

even notice it until I started to get hard and I saw one of the longhairs looking up at my shorts. “Gee, Dad, I hope Mom finds us,” I said to Bernie, pissed off that I had to put on a show just because my leg was getting rubbed for two seconds. I jumped down and lit up a doob, which we shared with the longhairs.

“Did you make New Mexico?” one of them asked us.

“Sonny Boy had his Little League All-Star game,” Bernie said.

“Let’s go look again,” I said, and we left a big roach with the longhairs and went back down.

The crowd was getting juicy, firing up thousands of joints and starting to dance around to the taped music. When the sound check guys came on stage, people hurried back to the water fountains to swallow pills, so they’d come on to their acid or psilocybin or whatever just as the Dead got going. Bernie and me, holding hands, weaved through the crowd. Everybody was standing up so I was down at armpit and jiggling boob level, so after a while I gave up thinking I’d see Pop and started checking out chests to see if there was a pair I liked. Bernie looked around, too, and a few times he stopped to stare at some longhaired, shirtless boy. We kept our hands together, breezing through bunches of people, smelling their sweat and smoke and hearing them talk:

“I think they played ‘Morning Dew’—I can’t remember, I did one of those green ones—oh, man.”

“I had a shitty lawyer and he got ‘em both.”

“We’ve done six corneas since April.”

“No, they don’t do a weave—it’s a transplant.”

“Yeah, I joined, but I never go.”

“We should’ve brought the kids. I remember, back in Golden Gate Park, when -”

We pushed our way to the edge of the crowd, near the entrance to the bleachers, just as the Dead drifted onstage, drummers first, and the crowd kicked up a big dust cloud. One minute after the Dead started playing, everybody was dancing and singing along. After three or four minutes Jerry was already going into one of his solos, the squeaky high notes tickling the pumped-up pineal glands of the Deadheads. A million more joints got lit up, babies and balloons got thrown in the air; I was jumping up and down getting armpits shoved in my face. I’d never seen Bernie dance, and I didn’t know if jumping up and down was as far as he’d get, but anyway he looked like he’d decided to stop worrying about everything so I did, too, and we hopped into each other and stopped for a hug, which we turned into a long kiss, with everybody jumping up and down all around us. The place was all dusty and getting hot and girls were kissing boys and mothers were dancing with their babies and that kiss Bernie and me did was just as natural as anything else. Jerry got louder in the middle of the kiss, it seemed like, and with the crowd getting all feverish, I felt like the whole world was spinning around the two of us. Even after we were done kissing I didn’t want to let go of him. I just held him and thought about Mario being dead and almost started crying again.

I was looking over Bernie’s shoulder while we hugged when I saw, pushing through the crowd, this familiar-looking Guatemalan dress, stretched to the limit of its bright ikat weave, straining to hold in a hustling, bold-eyed woman who was staring right at me: no shit, it was Mom! She was barreling right for us, with Lori dragging behind, stumbling and pouting as usual. “Oh, boy,” I said, and I gave Bernie a squeeze on the arm and let go of him. He was still holding on to my hand when he turned to see what I was oh-boying about. Mom stopped right in front of us, stuck her fat fist on her hip, and smiled.

“Hi, Mom,” I said, smiling back. Lori looked at me and then looked at Bernie and then smiled this

witchy smile like she was really happy that everything was going to be my fault for a while. “This is Bernie, my friend.”

“Susan,” Mom said, and they shook hands.

“I know,” Bernie said. He sounded like a regular person, but they’d seen the hug and I could tell she’d already figured everything out.

“You see him?” Mom asked me. The music was getting louder so he had to shout.

“He’s not here,” I shouted back. I looked down at my feet. “I’m really sorry, I mean, I tried.”

She grabbed Lori and turned around and barked, “Get over here,” and the three of us followed her as she pushed her way through the crowd. The music was getting even louder and people were jumping higher and sitting on each other’s shoulders or dancing in little circles holding hands. Every so often a bunch of balloons flew up to the sky.

Lori pulled at my arm while we were shoving people aside. “Who’s the guy?” she whispered.

“Just a guy,” I said. “Your tits are getting big.”

“Shut up,” she said. Bernie was trailing behind me, looking nervous, so I waited up for a second and grabbed his hand.

“Don’t worry, she likes you,” I told him. The Dead went from a drum solo into “Turn on Your Lovelight,” with Bob singing the old Pigpen part. The crowd was going completely nuts.

Mom finally dragged us to a spot near a group of security guys who were keeping a space clear in front of the bleachers. I knew they were just Rent-A-Cops, but seeing blue uniforms got me nervous. It turned out she only picked that place because from there we could all see the stage.

“Look up,” Mom said.

The stage was full of amplifiers, extra guitars, cords and wires and microphone stands, two or three roadies crawling around on their knees fixing cable connections, and, off to one side, the naked fat guy dancing with his rolls of fat jiggling around. The drummers’ hands were flying around above their cymbals and the rest of the band was standing around like they were talking to each other, but out of the big speakers behind the stage the music got louder and crazier.

“On the side,” Mom said.

On either side of the stage, up thirty or forty feet on metal platforms hung with flapping Dead banners, there were two huge speakers as big as caves. And curled up like a baby inside the left speaker was a familiar tie-dyed old guy with a straggly beard.

Nineteen: Downnear Escondido

Last week Bernie called, the first time in a month or two, and now he's here, visiting. His call sort of surprised me, since I figured he'd be forgetting about me, the way I'm starting to forget about him, as an actual person. He's been fading away into a kind of memory, like a movie that'll play in my head when I'm about to fall asleep. And sometimes in the middle of the night I'll wake up and feel his head resting on my stomach, or I'll think about him in gym class, when I'm looking at skinny Mexican boys that remind me of Mayans.

But I really had to bail from Venice for a while. Bernie was acting weird, so depressed about Mario he'd look all wet at me and start thinking. So even though Mom told me it would okay if I decided to stay with him, I ended up here.

The bunch of us—Mom, Lori, Jed and me—are all settled down here near Escondido, a real typical American happy family in our three-bedroom house. Even Pop shows up every couple of weeks, a kind of unscheduled visiting relative, but we sort of have to keep him chained up in the back yard so he won't eat up all the good stuff in the refrigerator. Mom's particularly bitchy about her fresh orange juice. She's at home all the time, cooking and eating and sewing up bright striped Guatemalan cloth into bags and purses, which I help her sell at flea markets every weekend. She laughs at the pissy little bit of money it brings in, compared to dope, but says she'd rather haggle with some suburbanite than get an Uzi shoved in her face fifty miles off the Florida coast. Jed's working, painting houses and doing plumbing, which brings in decent money. I'm helping him fix up an old motorboat some guy traded him for a sprinkler system. Lori, the little cunt, is in school, hanging around with her eyeliner-and-downers crowd. She's got real tits by now and she hangs them practically out of her T-shirt, so last month Mom put her on the Pill and gave her a box of Trojans, which stopped the nightly argument about her sex life.

The house isn't too bad. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, carpeting in the living room, a big den Mom uses for her bag workshop, a three-car garage—currently full of motorboat junk—and a huge fenced yard with no grass and two scrawny trees. All the other houses in the neighborhood are exactly the same; the developers ran out of money halfway through, so there's nothing green anywhere and some of the driveways aren't finished. At least I've got my own bedroom, so I can shut the door and tune everybody else out when I want to listen to tapes and stare up at my surf posters, young blond guys in tight wetsuits riding through impossible huge tubes.

I'm back in school, too, a grade lower than my age, but at least I'm not the only one. There's six or seven surfer guys who flunked last year, so they're back a grade, too. And it doesn't really matter, since I'm still one of the smallest kids in my class. I don't mind the schoolwork, and at school I take it easy—joking with the Mexicans, talking shit with the surfers. But I'm quiet a lot, too. I don't know—to me, most of the other kids seem kind of immature.

Today everybody treated Bernie pretty good. Mom's been friendly, trading old dope stories and talking business and making jokes about me, like Bernie's an uncle I was on loan to for a while, and there's all this cute stuff only mothers and uncles would know about. Lori stares at him funny, probably wondering how big his dick is, whether his come tastes salty, all that stuff, but this morning she went out with some other sluts so she wasn't back to bother us until after dinner. Jed isn't saying much to him, but he doesn't say much to any of us, either. Bernie's been really cool, polite but not serious, making jokes

and acting perfectly regular. In the afternoon we went down to the beach and he watched me surf, and it was like old times for a while, smoking and talking.

Of course the big question was where will he sleep. So he ends up on the couch in the living room, like an ex-husband in a television show. I sit up with him for a while after everybody else goes to bed. It's weird sitting in the darkness next to him in the middle of a room full of dusty furniture and Mexican junk, sitting on the couch in my shorts and T-shirt without touching him, without him pulling off my shorts and starting in.

"It's a nice scene down here," he says. He can't help himself and he starts rubbing his finger on my bare leg. I let him do it, of course, and I open my legs a little.

"Yeah, it's livable."

"You miss me?"

"No. Well, sometimes."

"I miss you." He's looking at me, sliding his hand along my leg, waiting for a kiss, but I'm not in the mood to start if we can't finish.

"Aren't there tons of boys in Venice?" All of a sudden I'm all ready to kiss him, but he takes his hand off my leg and looks the other way.

"I guess it's not such a great idea, me coming down here," he says.

An hour later, I'm still not sleepy. I'm lying in bed looking at one of the boy magazines I never gave back to Vinnie. A couple of the kids are not so bad; there's one shot where the older boy and the younger boy are holding each other's dicks and looking at each other, happy, and it looks pretty real to me. Probably they were really lovers—I mean, not just for the photograph. Just when I'm thinking about reaching under the bed for the baby oil, Lori comes in, without knocking. She's like a junior witch—long black hair, dark eyebrows, pale skin, and a pointy nose. She's got on her see-through purple robe, hanging open in front so I can see her tits poking out and her tiny red panties. "I know what you're doing," she says, "I can hear you from the other side. Let's see," and she makes a grab for the magazine, but I manage to stuff it down the far side of the bed. She stares at the lump I'm making in the middle of the blanket. "Hey, let me see it," she says. "I really ain't seen it since we used to take showers together, and I can't remember that far back."

"You can't remember lunch."

"Hey, fuck you, let me see it."

"Get out, will you? I know it's the only cock in the whole neighborhood you haven't inspected, but tough shit. Besides, I don't ask to look at your snatch."

"You could if you want to."

"I'll pass." I don't mention the thousand times I've already seen it when her robe blows open.

She gives up on my dick and shows me an almost human look on her face. "Why don't you let him sleep in here with you?" she asks me.

"The bed's too small."

"Oh, your dick's too small. That's why you won't let me see it. You know Dave? The senior? I never did anything with him, honest, but I saw his once at a party—God, it was like this huge thing, I thought it would never end. Yours is probably more like what Jeff has, like a pencil you keep breaking off in the sharpener until it's just a little stub."

“Never mind. For Christ’s sake, go back to sleep.”

“Maybe I should visit your boyfriend on the way,” she says, throwing me a little smile and raising her black-penciled eyebrows. She takes one last glance at my weenie lump. “I won’t say anything if I hear him come in,” she says on her way out.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, after I’ve decided not to squirt and I’ve got the lights off and I’m almost asleep, Bernie comes in, opening the door too slow so it squeaks. He tiptoes over to the bed. I pretend to be asleep while he slides in next to me and grabs my dick, which got hard as soon as the door opened.

“Jesus, it’s really getting huge,” he says.

So I turn over. “It is not,” I tell him, and he starts kissing my neck, so I lean over and find his lips.

“Oh my, and what’s all this fuzzy stuff down here?”

“Stop it. Kiss it.”

“You sure?”

I feel around for his dick and grab it and it feels just like always and I give him another kiss. “Quiet, though,” I tell him.

It only takes us four or five minutes. Afterwards, we have one more tired, wet kiss and then he says he’d better go back to the living room. “I wouldn’t want to blow your trip,” he says, leaning back against my arm. We both stare up at the walls, at the dark shapes of the surf posters.

“They all know anyway.”

“No use shoving it in their faces.”

“I guess not.” Now I wish he’d take me back up to his place in Venice so I can wake up with him and run around naked. “You know, Pop was here last week. He’s got all this Vets money—don’t tell Susan. He wants me to go back to Mexico with him.”

“So go.”

“No, I did all that jungle stuff already. I think I’d just as soon hang out in civilization for a change.”

“Well, I guess it’s lights out for the territory ahead, then. You’ll survive down here?”

“I can handle it.” I curl up into him and reach down to mush our soggy dicks together until mine starts to get hard again. “I guess I do miss you,” I tell him. “But, you know.”

#

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