

COVER PAGE

Afternoon in Paradise

Wally Parker

~ 12,641 words

©1995 Wally Parker All rights reserved

Printed December 4, 2006

Afternoon in Paradise

I am sitting on the flagstone veranda behind my rambling white stucco house, on a flowery bluff overlooking the tropical Pacific near the little town of San Blas, roughly halfway between Guadalajara and Mazatlán. My years here have been peaceful, happy and bountiful.

Until today I had long since forgot

ten the past and the people who filled it. Even my own former self. But I have just now read a letter informing me of the passing of Pokey Anderson. And I am flooded with memories of another time.

* * *

It was the autumn of 1962. Malcolm Newell was in prison. A couple years earlier he'd sold pot to an undercover narcotics cop, the first of that species our little bohemian community in Pittsburgh had ever seen. In those days it was almost cool to smoke pot on the street. Most cops didn't know what it was. The only people who smoked it were beatniks and jazz musicians, university avant-gardists and an occasional radical escapee from the 1920s. There were very few such people, perhaps a hundred or so in Pittsburgh, and most people regarded them, to the extent anyone regarded them at all, as something beyond the ken of normal human life.

Malcolm claimed to believe that marijuana was the key to world peace and mankind's release from the slavery of convention. Certainly this made his business as a purveyor of the giddy weed existentially easier. On the other hand, he was not a man to agonize over philosophical niceties, so I suspect he truly did believe it. That would explain why, after the narc revealed himself one evening to Woody and Aldo, and cautioned them to warn Malcolm against further commerce with him, Malcolm seemed to make a point soon thereafter of selling the guy another lid.

Possession of marijuana in Pennsylvania in those days was considered to be worth ten years in a state prison. (In Texas of course it merited the death penalty.) We thought this prohibition perverse, considering that, until very recently, the stuff had been perfectly legal and readily available at any local pharmacy. But laws against things people find pleasurable, proscribing activities that have been part of the fabric of human society for tens of thousands of years, have always, to me at least, seemed sadly hypocritical, based on strenuous theories of morality within which humanity cannot be bound.

While Malcolm was being taken to his arraignment downtown he had managed to attract the attention of a newspaper photographer, for whom he did his best “they’re crucifying me” impression, which was pretty good because Malcolm was a lanky guy with long hair, a rusty beard and gentle eyes who looked a lot like the classical pictures of Jesus. And when he appeared next morning on the front page of the paper, his head tilted in acquiescent forbearance to one side, his eyes cast downward, his arms outspread like the wings of a crane on the rough cross of civil incivility, the judge had taken notice and umbrage. So Malcolm, who only wanted to bring peace and love to his fellow man, and maybe make some pin money on the side, was sent away to the forgotten gray world of life behind bars.

On this particular evening most of Malcolm’s friends were at The Cellar, a lively, noisy pub on Walnut Street, the center of beatnik life in the Steel City. The Cellar’s motif was kind of 19th Century England *cum* old German Rathskeller, with exposed brick walls, sconces of wrought iron cradling amber lights, cart-wheel chandeliers hung from huge beams, a floor of dark, heavy wood. Here we would gather in the evenings during the week, when there was no better party going on anywhere, and drink beer and talk, sometimes until two in the morning.

Man needs art. I don’t know why exactly, but even Stone Age people made art. So society has to make a place for artists. Artists, for their part, are inconveniently weird. Society needs lots of worker bees who are rather much alike, conformist and bland, to

animate society's structures, to fill the standard job slots and produce the 2.7 children and take out the mortgage and the garbage. Some artists do these things but many do not. Young artists almost never do. Artists, moreover, enjoy the company of other artists. Other artists are excited, and hence exciting, people. Other artists work, that is, make art, a great deal of the time, so they share one another's work ethic. Other artists are tuned-in, so it's easy to communicate with them. Consequently artists tend to congregate in neighborhoods. A few of these communities last a long time, like Greenwich Village; most disappear in a handful of years, like ours did. Along with the artists come their commensal parasites, the merely bizarre, who look – and apart from the fact that they produce no art, act – just like the artists themselves. I was one of these.

I'm a common man, simply a follower of the human caravan. I do not produce original and beautiful things. I find them. Therefore I am not an artist. I lived among these people because they accepted me. They accepted my penchant for young teenage girls. Fourteen or fifteen, usually – well beyond the age of Nabokov's *Lolita*, dangerously close to womanhood. The ripest, sweetest fruit of creation. The nectar of the gods. But the gods can get mighty bent out of shape if they find out you're sampling their fare. So I lived among people who by necessity had a broad view of moral choices, because art is truth and the discovery of truth requires a willingness to doubt even the most sacrosanct of beliefs. Artists have a strong predisposition toward freedom, because art flows out of a kind of inner freedom of mind, the freedom of imagination. They were as comfortable with me and my child concubines as we were with ourselves. They provided us a perfect cover. And they were fun to be around.

My current girl-woman, Chloë, was of course too young to get into bars so I'd left her at my place with a friend of hers, watching TV and presumably preparing herself for my eventual return.

Honey Rose was already at The Cellar when I arrived. Honey was a tall, slim, kinetic, fun-loving woman. Her shoulder-length auburn hair and seductive green eyes were rendered even more striking by the extravagant jewelry she customarily wore. She

made a lot of it herself; that was her art. She'd told me once that she wanted her baubles to say, "you can bed me, but don't try to brand me." I remember a gold waist-chain she'd made that featured a dangling hangman's noose. But perhaps it was instructive that she hadn't made it a guillotine. Honey believed she couldn't be mastered by any man, although it seemed that every man she'd wanted had mastered her handily.

My own affair with Honey had lasted for three years, until one morning I woke up and realized I was sleeping next to a ripened woman, almost nineteen years old, doubting and egoistic, no longer the worshipful sprite of fifteen I'd fallen in love with. This revelation stunned me, and I made the mistake – or maybe it wasn't a mistake – of telling her about it. She'd slapped me. Then she'd moved in with Aldo deNova, the painter, who soon thereafter had become Aldo deNova the fashion photographer.

Actually, I like to think I had something to do with that. He used to spend long afternoons at my place taking photographs of waifish young things we'd enticed into posing for us. He'd said he was fascinated with nudes, the female form, and crap like that. I was just fascinated with girls in their early teens – they're so immoderate! – and if they wanted to strut their stuff for a good-looking guy with a camera in my living room, well, that was fine by me.

But Aldo had decided after a year or so that he had to move to the Village, to take his shot at the big time. And Honey wasn't nearly ambitious enough for him. So she'd stayed behind. Now that Aldo was gone, she was living on her own, in an apartment in the same building where Woody Gardner, and Liz and Pokey lived. It was an old brick duplex that had been subdivided into four apartments.

Pokey and Liz arrived about the same time I did that night, and the three of us sat down with Honey. Pokey was a handsomely sculpted black man in his late twenties, like me a little older than most of the people in our group, who wore a silver earring and had an irresistably infectious smile, white as the finest piano ivory. He was originally from Louisiana. "I was a 'gator-wrassler in the bayou," he said once to someone who'd asked about his past. "The 'gators had teeth of diamonds and eyes of gold and tails of

stone. The trick was to keep 'em from seeing you. They don't see very well what's right in front of 'em, you know? Then you'd jump on 'em and pluck out a gold eye or a diamond tooth before they could swat you with their mighty tails. You could do it because 'gators are the loneliest critters on earth, and they'd really rather hug you than eat you. But it was dangerous 'cause no never mind, they'd eat you if they could. That's how they got lonely in the first place; they ate all their friends."

Whoever had asked him at this point expressed some irritation with the course of his response. "Well," Pokey had said without missing a beat, "actually I was a honky-tonk piano player in a whorehouse on Bourbon Street. That is, when I wasn't wrasslin' 'gators. No, really, I was a wealthy white man. I gave away my fortune to the poor. I dyed my skin brown to keep them from nominating me for governor. I even repudiated my Harvard Ph.D. But they were adamant. 'Anderson for Governor!' they kept saying. So I served two terms and afterward I moved up here to start my career as a hairdresser."

Actually, he'd told me once, his father had been a gigolo. When Pokey was very young, he'd occasionally been posted in a strategic location to act as a lookout on dicey assignments. But his mother had left this life and brought him to Pittsburgh when he was six. She'd made him go to school. She'd taught him a love of books. She'd worked as a domestic in some white family's home and he'd discovered he had a flair for cutting the hair of the women who watched after him while his mother was at work. By the time he graduated from high school he was cutting upscale models, high-priced hookers and well-heeled matrons, all by private appointment. He was invariably charming and punctiliously discreet. He dressed with slightly outrageous but always fashionable good taste. Women liked him, trusted him, and confided in him. He prized their friendship as highly as their business.

His girlfriend Liz was white—pink, he called it. She had brown eyes and straight, reddish-black hair that fell almost to her waist even when it was tied back in a ponytail. A few inches shorter than Honey, Liz nevertheless had more lavish physical assets. She

worked in some county office as a secretary. They'd lived happily together as husband and wife for as long as I'd known them, that is to say for three or four years.

I'd never really decided whether Woody was an artist or an anomaly, like me. He'd frequently read his poetry at the Black Bowler coffeehouse down on Ellsworth Avenue, a few years previous, before I'd met him. I never read any of it. He always said he was working on a book, in his mind, but I don't think he ever committed it to paper. He reminded me of the would-be author in *The Plague* who kept rewriting his first sentence.

During the summers Woody wandered around the country, hitchhiked up to Canada or out to the coast and met people and hung around with them. He'd be gone for a few weeks or months. Gathering himself, he said. He was on a quest for the simultaneous experience of knowledge and pleasure. Expressing it didn't really concern him; he was way too busy soaking up life. He liked to talk, but listening was his forte, engaging people and encouraging them to declare themselves, tasting their life's blood, exploring their private minds, blending their reality with his own. He approached objects and ideas the same way, as if he were trying to vacuum up the universe, which, he told me once, was exactly what he wanted to do. "I'm in the present moment," he'd said, "the totality of what is, and I slip along through time, gnawing away, devouring the future, the strange, the unknown, incorporating it all, and crapping out the past, the mundane, the passé."

I liked him. He was a kindred soul.

Woody lived in the same house as Pokey and Liz, he on the bottom two floors of one side and they in the upper two floors of the other. They'd lived there only a year or so, but he'd been there when I'd moved to Walnut Street three years earlier.

He was maybe an inch shorter than I was. He had blue eyes and a mop of wavy brown hair that hung down well past his ears. There were large gaps between his front teeth, so he looked like a jack-o'-lantern when he laughed.

Woody was a dedicated exponent of one of the community's more pervasive social

dicta, which was that one should never be less naked than necessary. He was probably one of the people who inspired the original “no shoes, no shirt, no service” signs. But tonight he had on an old white button-down dress shirt, sleeves rolled up, open at the collar, and levis. He was tan, muscular and barefoot. He wore a silver arabic puzzle ring on the little finger of one hand and on the other its gold twin, a near-perfect duplicate made for him by a local artisan.

I always thought, to be quite candid, that Woody had looked into a pond and fallen in love with himself. The twin rings seemed to me to symbolize his narcissism. But perhaps being true to oneself is inherently narcissistic.

Woody worked his way through the crowd, talking and shaking hands and laughing with people, until he reached us. “Can just anybody sit here?” he asked.

“Looks that way,” I said.

I was at the end of the table and Honey, then Pokey, and then Liz, were on my left, seated along the wall. Woody sat to my right and he and Pokey shook hands. “How are you, d’Artagnan?”

Pokey shook his head in mock distress. “My spear is bent and my quiver is empty.”

“Well, let’s quaff a pitcher or two and calm your quivering spear.” And we all laughed.

“No, man,” Pokey said, smiling, “really I’m fine. Fine as wine. Things are going good. I’m happy, the money’s okay, my momma loves me – don’t you love me momma? – (yes she does) – but, I dunno, maybe I got an itch, you know? I’m kinda strung out.”

“Yeah? What kind of an itch?”

“Jeez, I don’t know, exactly,” he said, looking down at his long, slender fingers and their impeccably groomed nails, down into the table, down through the dark earth. “Maybe to settle down, you know, do the white picket fence thing and kids and all...”

“And live in never-never land forever after,” Woody said.

Pokey looked up and laughed. "No, man. But you know I have some very loyal, very wealthy clients now. You know, ladies I been doing for years, and I do their daughters and granddaughters, and it's steady and very pleasant and hell, I don't know, I think it'll go on just about forever, you know, just cruising along, because these particular ladies like my services, and I treat them as art objects, which they are, and I give them beautiful hair and make them feel beautiful and why would they ever want to give up being beautiful?"

"So I've just been thinking, well, what now, you know? Should we go buy a farm and, ah, collect art, or move into suburbia and have babies, or buy real estate or what? I'm just thinking, you know."

"He's really not thinking about it at all," Liz interrupted. "I'm thinking about it for him, you know, to help him envisage it. But he treats himself like an art object, too. His image. And maybe that's right, too, because an image is something beyond us, it's not really us, and he has to nurture his image, you know? His image doesn't want to grow up. It wants to beautify itself, improve itself, expand itself perhaps. Not go to church on Sundays and have a mortgage and visit the inlaws."

"No wonder your spear is bent," Woody said.

"Hey," I asked before I could stop myself, "are you guys really married?" I'd always wondered and tonight my mouth just asked. So I smiled.

"Not on the books, man," Pokey said, leaning toward me a little, "'cause if her parents found out we were married, the weeping and gnashing of teeth would never end. They'd all have pictures in their minds of some big black dick nuzzling their little pink girl and makin' little brown grandchildren. They'd go nuts. We just don't want the grief. And they're the kind of people who'd try to find out. And they *would* find out because they've got money. So we just be cool, man, and keep our thing off the books."

"But Pokey, honey," Liz began, stroking the arm of his coat, "maybe you're right, but believe me, they aren't going to get to stuff like that. They're going to have fantasies of their friends whispering about them because their daughter married a black man, a

hairdresser, a social outcast, somebody decidedly not like them. You could be a fat Greek pipefitter with a fourth-grade education, or a space alien, or whatever; it'd be the same thing. It isn't personal. It has nothing to do with you. It's them. They're afraid of their neighbors. They're afraid their neighbors are as petty and judgmental and vindictive as they are. And they're probably right. Anyway, fuck them whatever they think. We don't ever have to go anywhere near them. Not ever."

"Yeah, but baby, it is personal to me," he looked at her and pulled in his lips a little and licked them. "See, because what if we had kids? And their grandparents and uncles and aunts for instance, wouldn't welcome our children into their home? And probably they wouldn't send birthday cards, or Christmas presents. That'd be pretty personal, don't you think? That's very personal to me, baby. Very."

Liz put her head on his shoulder. "I know, sweetie, I know."

"Why don't you just go visit them for a week?" I asked. "The Hindus have a thing called dharna, where if somebody offends you, you just go camp day and night at their front door until they come out and get right with you."

Pokey and Liz looked at one another and laughed. "There's a story," Pokey said, recalling it. "We stopped by her folks' house one evening on our way back from a sightseeing trip to Washington a couple years ago. We figured we'd just stop in and say hi and see which way the wind blew. They knew Liz was living with me but they'd never met me, and they didn't know, you know? So we figured we'd just say hi and if it didn't feel comfortable – and we were pretty sure it wouldn't, but we wanted to get the thing out in the open – and if it was a drag we'd just split, you know? And that would be the end of it. And if they wanted to be cool and deal with it, well, we'd have a nice supper and maybe spend the night."

"Boy, they would've had those fantasies then," Woody said.

"You ain't just a-whistlin' Dixie there," Pokey said. "When we walked in the door, her mother fainted, man. Swooned dead away. Crumpled up like a sack of laundry on the living room floor. Plopped over on her back like somebody'd poleaxed her."

“Then as the maid scurries into the kitchen for a damp towel the old man looks at me as though I’d smacked her with a right cross. ‘I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave,’ he says to Liz.” Pokey laughed heartily. “I said, ‘Well, sir, it’s been a pleasure meeting you all, but we really gotta be going.’”

Liz laughed. “Nuh-uh,” she demurred. “Wanna know what he really did? He looked at me as we turned to leave and said in a kind of stage whisper, ‘Won’t this be upsetting to the children?’”

“Anyway,” Pokey continued, “we left and got a motel and had a nice dinner and went to bed. Wonder of wonders, they actually invited us back about three months later. We stayed overnight. Left the children at home, of course. They made us stay in separate rooms, and her mother you could tell was on pins and needles the whole time trying to keep from fainting again. The maid was gone. Only the cook was there. A black woman. When we got there all the furniture was covered with sheets. Liz made her take ‘em off. I’m sure she wanted the dinner served on paper plates. And they probably hosed down the room I slept in, or sealed it up forever. I don’t know. It just wasn’t really loose, you know? I wanted to put my feet up and have a glass of brandy and a cigar, or maybe a joint, you know? But it just didn’t look like that was going to happen. It was stupid. So, we haven’t been back.

“Thing I want to know is,” he said as he sat back and put his arm around Liz, “how such a sweet, totally cool person as this could come from a family like that?”

“So what about your folks, Pokey?” Honey asked.

“Got no folks, babe. My dad’s long gone. My momma died two, almost two-and-a-half years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. So we’re all alone here, in the garden of life.”

“Adam and Eve didn’t get married,” Woody said.

“Then we’re all bastards,” I observed.

“Speak for yourself,” Honey said, and everybody laughed.

Woody lit a cigarette and Honey took one out, too. He lit it for her.

“Who’s that dark-haired guy’s been coming to your place?” he asked. She and Woody were next-door neighbors. She lived below Pokey and Liz, right beside Woody’s apartment.

“His name’s Abe,” she said. “Abe Lauritz. He’s from Chicago. I met him a couple weeks ago at Bennie’s. He liked my bracelets. He’s a metal broker or something. He knows a lot about metal—among other things.” She smiled.

“So he comes over to talk metal with you?”

“Sure, Woody.”

About that time the snow-blond and supremely self-assured Becky Hathaway sauntered into the bar. As always she was dressed for viewing, this time in red heels, black stockings, a white leather knee-length sheath skirt and a sheer black blouse. Her lipstick matched her shoes, her eyelashes were long and dark, her silken hair swirled in shimmering waves over her shoulders, her gold-flecked brown eyes shone with a hooded intelligence at once effusively gregarious and deeply secretive.

“I have seen better faces in my time,” she said by way of greeting us as she pulled up a chair and sat down between Woody and me, “than stands on any shoulder that I see before me at this instant.”

We all laughed. Becky, notwithstanding her career as a purveyor of inelegant pleasure to wealthy sexual pretzels, was also an aspiring actress whose persistent employment of Shakespearean lines lent a surreal dimension to any conversation.

“How’s Malcolm?” Woody asked her. Becky had recently terminated her relationship with Woody and, *mirabile dictu*, married the hapless Malcolm—now fairly comfortably serving time as the prison librarian. Being married would help Malcolm obtain an early parole, perhaps within a few months. Everyone admired Becky’s compassion but nobody could quite understand why she’d done it.

“A man may see how this world goes with no eyes,” she said, closing hers illustratively. “Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yon simple thief.

Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?"

"Yeah, but how's he doing?"

"Having nothing, nothing can he lose," she replied.

"I miss the stupid jerk," Pokey said sadly. "I hope he's doing okay up there. Man! It's spooky thinking of being in there, you know?"

"We went up and took him some cookies last week," Liz said. "I baked 'em myself. Chocolate chip."

"Man, I hate goin' inside that place, that's for damn sure," Pokey said. "I feel like they're going to keep me, you know? I think, well, maybe when it's time to leave they'll just decide not to open the doors. What a drag! I'd be trapped in there like some kind of animal in a zoo nobody goes to, know what I mean? Man!"

"Well," said Honey, "sometimes you can't tell the animals in the zoo from the animals who keep them there."

"Oh, that's easy," interjected Woody, "the prisoners are the ones in the cages."

"Well, I mean if society puts a man in prison – in a cage is what it is – for ten fucking years, for selling something no worse than (here she raised her mug of beer in mock tribute) this horse piss, then society must be in a prison of ignorance itself."

"Harp not on that string," Becky said.

"But there have always been a few," Woody rejoined, "witnesses, I guess you'd call them, who'll stand outside any particular prison in mute testimony, who've discovered its lie as it were. Know what I mean? And to the innocent they represent an opportunity to be free, and to the cynical they represent a threat, that the lie will be revealed and the prison emptied and its culture abandoned."

"And to most they represent nothing at all," Honey said.

"Well," Woody persisted, "Becky represents something to Malcolm, and to all of us, that's a lot more than nothing. She represents Malcolm's freedom. So there's a link that's been forged between someone on the inside and someone on the outside. She's

conveyed some compassionate truth to him. I think there are times in history – they have to be rare enough to preserve the general illusion of continuity, but there are times – when some metaphysical tide is at the flood, as Becky might say, and lots of these links are created at once, and pieces of chain are formed from the presence of so many links. And sometimes then you have a revolution, a quantum leap in the evolution of affairs. And you can't tell, really, whether you're carrying your truth toward some such gallant moment, when a critical mass of people will share in its realization, or whether you're just going to lug it around until they bury you with it."

"That's like Buber's story of the eastern and western sages climbing the mountain," I said.

"Yeah, kind of," Woody replied, "if you regard the fruit of your experience as baggage."

"But maybe it is," I said. "Maybe it's in your way. Maybe you'd be better off without it."

"Is your truth the state you've attained at this moment, the sum of your experience and analysis, or is your truth the equipment you now possess for perceiving the universe?"

"Jeez," Honey said.

"I'd think you can't rely on either one," Woody said. "I don't even know how to conceive of my equipment, my brain and my senses, absent history, including their own. Nor can I imagine historical knowledge without consciousness. So I would say that truth must be both of these, because if you leave out the equipment then your truth is frozen in time, and you have no way to modify it. And if you leave out history then your truth is innocent and has no context, although it may go thus blithely on forever. Truth isn't facts and it isn't faith. It's both. That's the messy truth about truth."

"I think truth is clean," Honey objected, "pure and simple, even pristine."

"Why? Are you Catholic?" Woody asked.

"Hey," I objected, "I used to be Catholic."

“Well, I mean isn’t that the zenith of dogma? One nice clean, clear, crisp, concise truth? Truth in a box? All truth in one consummate equation? $E=mc^2$? A mathematical model of the macroeconomy? Do you think truth is like that? God? I don’t. I think it’s complex and funky and tangled, like jazz, like love, like everything on this earth, in this life, because that’s where truth for living consciousness exists, in this chaotic, incomprehensible, inherently misunderstood life on earth. I think that Platonic metatruth is almost meaningless, almost like giving a name to your own experience. You call your experience Joe, and then you say, ‘Oh, Joe is the truth.’”

“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose,” Becky said.

“Exactly.”

“Can the devil order another pitcher?” Honey asked.

“I’ll get it,” Woody said. He picked up the two empty pitchers and headed for the bar.

I looked at Honey. Her green eyes danced mischievously. “How are you doing?” I asked her.

“Well, I’m brokenhearted, of course, not to be frolicking nude on the carpet with you and the children, but that’s okay, you can keep them.” She grinned at me. “I talked to Aldo a couple days ago. He’s got some jobs and seems to be pretty excited about things.”

“You going up there?”

“Am I coming by your house?”

“So what are you up to?”

“I’ve been making some jewelry, you know, with stuff I get from the antique auctions and shops here and there.”

“I hear you’ve taken up the spike.”

“Nah, just a little, with Beads. Just skinpopping.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I know.”

"It's a thing."

"I know."

"So how is Beads?"

"Okay. She's good. She's been balling some guy."

"Yeah, who?"

"I don't know. I haven't met him. I think he does something for the syndicate. I don't want to know about it, really."

"Yeah, I dig it."

"I don't dig it," Liz said. "I don't think she knows what planet she's on. She does amphetamines all the time."

"Well, darlin'," Pokey said, "it's no business of ours, is it, what she does? And she's cool."

"Yeah? How cool is it when she's sitting crosslegged out by the bus stop like she was the other morning, during rush hour, in a drenching rain, people standing around with umbrellas waiting for the bus, and she's writing poems on the sidewalk with alphabet soup noodles?"

We all laughed. "Well, at least she wasn't bare-ass naked," Pokey said.

Woody returned with two full pitchers of beer. "Hey, Honey," he said to her, "your buddy Abe just walked in the back."

"Man," Pokey said, "now there's a strange guy."

"You still doing him, Honey?" Liz asked. "I thought after the other night and all he was out the door."

"Well, you know," Honey said. "He's a nice guy really. Sometimes the arguments get a little wild. We, uh, get off on it, you know? It pumps us up. But maybe we overdo it sometimes. You know, we do all kinds of stuff together. He smokes, he snorts, he shoots, and," her voice fell to a coy whisper, "he's very acrobatic."

"An unlesson'd girl," Becky said, "unschool'd, unpractic'd; happy in this, she is not yet so old but she may learn."

“But you don’t always know what people are,” Woody said. “Did Aldo ever tell you he used to be a narc? They recruited him when he started art school at Carnegie Tech. He resigned one night after they crushed some guy’s hand in a door. The guy wouldn’t tell them something they wanted to know, so they stuck his fingers between the door and the jamb, you know, on the hinge side, and closed the door on his hand. Just like the Gestapo.”

“Which is apropos of what, Woody?” Honey asked, a little irritated.

“Well, Aldo is a dear, sweet guy. I’ve known him for a long time. I’d bet my life on him. I have bet my life on him, and I’d do it again. But for a while at least he was a guy who spied on people and betrayed them and even countenanced their torture. He had two disparate natures living side by side in his brain, like an attack dog. Each one hardly knew the other one was there.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m just saying people aren’t always what they seem. And Abe strikes me as somebody whose full face has never been turned toward the sun.”

“Well, I don’t know, Woody. He works for some steel company, he’s a salesman or something. I don’t know exactly. And he’s trying to get started in the music business.”

Woody looked over at Pokey and Liz. Pokey raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“Maybe you should ask him more about it,” Liz said.

“Well, we could do that,” Woody said to Honey. “I’m sure he’ll wander over once he gets a whiff of your puckering pussy.”

“He’d better,” Honey said.

“You know, Woody,” Liz said, “it could be you’ve got a hangup here. A girl has needs, you know. And he’s never looked cross-eyed at you.”

“Therefore think him as a serpent’s egg,” Becky said, “which, hatch’d, would, as his kind, grow mischievous; and kill him in the shell.”

Woody laughed and gazed at her with loving appreciation. Then he turned to me. “Have you read *Tropic of Cancer*?”

"Nope," I said. "I don't read. It's against my religion." Television was my medium. Watching TV while some nubile young thing pleased me was my idea of nirvana.

"I have," Liz said.

"It's such a paean to irreverent *joie de vivre!*" Woody exclaimed. "The world is gray and rainy and boring and mindlessly tragic but Miller is wailing, reveling in all its silliness, full of fun and laughter."

"Paris must've been a wild place in those days," Liz agreed. "It's like they all knew the angel of death was coming. Some of them did, anyway. But Henry wouldn't've had anything to write about if it hadn't been for all the great women he found."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far," Woody replied. "I thought the women were a vehicle for that tension between his pecker consciousness and his buddha consciousness, between hedonism and serenity. It's like lust is in union with mysticism in a woman's cunt. And may I say I think that's true, too."

"A woman is a dish for the gods," Becky said, "if the devil dress her not."

"You mean if Woody undress her not," Liz said. "Have you read Anaïs Nin's diaries?"

"Huh-uh," Woody said. "Should I?"

"Well, you're the world's foremost exponent of perspective," she said, cocking her head a bit so as to regard him skeptically, "even though you haven't any. She might give you a different perspective. Not that you need it, of course."

Becky turned and grinned slyly at Woody. "Small things make base men proud," she said.

At this moment Abe arrived with an exaggerated greeting that seemed more appropriate to a sales convention or a used car lot and that everyone but Honey pretty much ignored. Honey moved over toward Pokey and Liz and gestured for him to sit next to her. This placed him right beside me, and I found it disconcerting having him so close.

He was a swarthy, bulky man, with heavy eyebrows and vague dark eyes, a good

five years older than any of us, well over thirty, the age at which Woody liked to say people should set themselves adrift on an ice floe. He had thick, hairy hands and wore a diamond pinky ring. It seemed odd that Honey should be attracted to him. He didn't have Aldo's good looks or artistic temperament. He surely didn't have my panache. He did seem to have connections for an immense variety of drugs. Liz had told me that Honey's apartment looked like a pharmaceutical train wreck, with powders and vials and pills and needles everywhere. She'd mentioned too that Honey hadn't made any new jewelry for a long time.

"So what are we talking about here?" Abe wanted to know.

"*Tropic of Cancer*," Woody said. "Have you read it?"

"Um, nope, I don't think so," Abe said. "What's it about?"

"Oh, it's about this guy in Paris who fucks three or four different women every day, in doorways and elevators and subway stations, upside-down and rightside-up, in closets by lamplight, on park benches in the pouring rain, with his cock and his tongue and his toes, and once even with a carrot."

"Jeez," Abe said, "it sounds like my kind of book."

"Yeah. But now Liz says that a Frenchwoman, Anaïs Nin, who was one of Henry's liaisons, has a whole different take on things. You know, kind of a cunt's-eye view you might say."

"Though she be but little, she is fierce," Becky interjected brightly. I never knew where she came up with these things, and of course nobody knew, half the time, what the hell she was talking about. But now and then they seemed just right for the occasion, especially if you let yourself look at them through her kaleidoscopic mind. In this case I had the distinct impression she was talking about herself, and she spoke these words directly at Abe.

"Hey, I hope you don't mind me asking," Abe said to her, as if he'd just realized it, "but don't I know you from somewhere?"

"Your mind is tossing on the ocean," she replied.

“Ah, yes,” Abe said uneasily. “Could you speak English?”

She laughed indulgently.

“Shakespeare is pretty close to English,” I observed.

“No, I mean it,” he said persistently, as if racking his brain to remember her.

“Hey, Abe,” Woody interjected, “I hope you don’t mind my asking, but what is it you do for a living?”

“I deal in scrap,” he said. “Scrap metal. Brass mostly.”

“I thought it was steel.”

“Well, yeah, but brass is much more valuable. You can make a lot of money in brass. You know, it’s kind of like smack – small volume, big price.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Woody said. Woody was clearly displeased with Abe’s attempt to draw Becky out.

“Oh, I’ve heard that you might,” Abe said.

“Well, I might, but I don’t. Not personally, anyway. But where’d you hear that? Some brass monkeys been talking to you?”

“Nah, black monkeys, man.” A little buzz of electricity went around the table but nobody flinched. “Hey, I talk to all kinds of people. You know, the boys chop those bronze statues off their pedestals in the parks and bring ‘em in for money to feed their habits – wine, or booze, or whatever.” He leaned forward to look down the table at Pokey. “No offense, man,” he said offhandedly. Pokey just looked at him until he’d settled back again in his chair, then glanced at me as if to exclaim – I could almost hear it aloud in his eyes: “Man, this honky is some kinda fool.”

“I guess you can hear whatever you want,” Woody went on. “In fact, we were just talking about that earlier, you know, that you can find a theory to fit every fact, an endless number of theories for every set of circumstances, know what I mean?”

“No, what do you mean?”

“Every why hath a wherefore,” Becky said. She often delivered these bon mots with a slight dramatic flair, directed at everyone and at no one in particular. She was like

a Greek chorus, not so much engaged in the conversation as delivering a commentary on it.

"Hey, I know," Abe said, glancing at Honey as he spoke to Becky, "you work downtown, right? I must've seen you downtown someplace. In a club, maybe?"

"She's an actress," Woody said. "You probably saw her in a play. Have you been to the theater lately?"

"Sorry," Abe said, pretending to be at a loss over the whole thing. "I haven't been to a play since high school."

"Hm," Woody said. "Well, it's a mystery then."

"Hey, guys," Honey protested. Her voice trailed off.

"But, listen, I keep hearing these rumors – I'm sure they're not true – that you're a secret agent of some kind."

"Is that what you think?" Abe said to him.

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure of it," Woody said. "But what do I know? Maybe you're a Jesuit missionary posing as a junk dealer. Maybe you really are a junk dealer. I don't know."

"I'm a scrap broker. There's a big difference."

"Huh-huh!" Woody chuckled. He had a way of saying huh-huh that somehow clearly conveyed his utter contempt for whatever you'd just said. He picked up a pitcher and filled all the mugs, beginning with Abe's. "Whatever," he shrugged, smiling at him.

"Okay," Abe said, "what do you do for a living?"

"I make it up as I go along."

"I notice you seem to have lost your shoes."

"Oh, I have shoes," Woody said. "I just don't wear 'em if I don't have to. I prefer walking in my bare feet."

"Don't you worry about stepping on glass or something?"

"I can walk on glass. I've been doing this for years now. My calluses are like leather."

"But getting back..."

"I work in wood. Walnut, teak, ebony, padouk, amaranth, stuff like that. And sometimes I travel around."

"Honey tells me you're a writer."

"Well, that's another one of those rumors."

"So?"

"I'm interested in epistemology, you know? So I can't say whether it's true exactly. It depends on—hey, wait a minute..." Woody turned to Liz. "What do you mean I don't have any perspective?"

"Nothing, just that you're the most opinionated person I know," she said.

"Well, see?" he said, turning to Abe again. "Can a person have opinions and perspective too? Can a person be a writer and not write? I mean, writers don't write all day long, every day of their lives. In my case, I haven't written anything for the past year or so, so I don't know really whether I'm still a writer or not. That's why I travel around, I guess—to find out. But, hey, maybe I'll write about you."

"Ah, no thanks," Abe said. "That'd be pretty boring. But you don't make any money at it, do you? Have you ever been published?"

"I don't make any money at it. I'm not interested in money. I could care less about money. I've had a few things published, but mostly I seem to labor in obscurity. Why is that, I wonder."

"Could be you're just kind of obscure," I said.

Pokey picked up the pitchers and went to the bar to get more beer. Woody got up and headed that way, too. They were gone a little while.

"That your boyfriend?" Abe asked Liz.

"My, you are the nosy parker," Liz said. "Maybe he's my cousin."

"Hey, just asking."

"Black men are pearls in beauteous ladies' eyes," Becky said, smiling at Liz.

"Can't you talk in your own words?" Abe inquired testily. "That crap's a pain in

the ass.”

Becky was not a woman to be intimidated by a mere man. Not too many nights earlier the unofficial tavern gladiator, Iron Mike Casey, who was somehow a close friend of Woody’s, had deliberately provoked her as she’d walked in the door, with a loud remark to the effect that she looked like a two-bit whore. She’d been dressed, as I recall, in black French spikes, black lace-patterned stockings, a billowy black blouse unbuttoned almost to her navel, and a red miniskirt that ended about an inch below her crotch—nothing unusual for her. With her long blonde hair and painstakingly perfect makeup, and these outfits, she always looked like a million bucks to me. That mightn’t have been too far off her net worth, either. Her clients paid truly serious money for an engagement with her, because her specialty was scatological sex—she was, in the trade vernacular, a mud queen—and the men who sought her services prized them greatly. Her mother of all people, who lived in New York on the upper East Side, managed the business, which by design was always conducted up there. Among her friends in Pittsburgh she was an actress and that was all there was to it.

Anyway, Iron Mike was drunk and he’d hurled this provocation at her, punctuating it by holding up a quarter in his fingers, and she’d just grabbed a beer bottle and slapped it against the edge of a table, sending shards of glass skittering across the floor. “You want to eat this?” she’d challenged him, the jagged and razor-sharp bottle neck in her hand, sparks leaping from her eyes. Fortunately, Woody’d defused the situation, because Mike was all set to go for her and neither of them would’ve backed down until one of them was on the floor dead.

So now it seemed Abe was trying to have a go at it, too, even though to her he was obviously nothing more than an impotent annoyance.

“So,” he said, “you never answered me. Do you work in a club?”

“Must I hold a candle to my shames?” she asked mockingly.

“Abe, honey...” Honey began again.

“’Tis my vocation, Hal,” Becky said, now almost sneering at him, “’tis no sin.”

“What?” Abe asked, clearly aggravated.

“Honey, I have to get up early,” Honey said earnestly.

“Hey,” I said to her, “no haps, you know? We’re just joshing around, you know, nobody means anything by it, so be cool.”

“This chick is fucking nuts,” Abe said.

“No, baby,” she tried to calm him, “she’s just different. We’re all nuts, aren’t we? Let’s go up to my place and get nuts ourselves.”

About this time Woody and Pokey returned with two new pitchers of beer.

“We’re gonna split,” Honey said. “We have to get up in the morning.”

“Don’t worry,” Abe added as he arose, looking at each of us with a smug, disingenuous smile, “I’ll figure you guys out yet.”

“Whatever turns you on,” Woody said with a shrug.

Becky drank from her glass and regarded Abe carefully over its rim. “Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,” she said, “show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, whiles, like a puff’d and reckless libertine, himself the primrose path of dalliance treads, and recks not his own rede.”

“Jesus,” Abe said wearily.

“Oh, I promise not to wreck his reed,” Honey laughed.

We bade her good night. Abe nodded but said nothing further.

“Kind of an asshole,” Liz said when they’d gone.

“He really doesn’t seem all that scintillating,” I observed.

“He’s a narc,” Woody said. “Fuck him.”

“Maybe we should get going too, babe,” Pokey said to Liz. “I’ve got an eight o’clock at the King George.” Pokey worked out, in his clients’ homes. He coifed women with heavily moneyed pedigrees from the banking, steel and mining trades.

“I don’t know, man,” Woody said wistfully. “Things are going downhill. I was walking over here a couple evenings ago and two little kids, boys, maybe eight or nine years old, accosted me and wanted to know why I didn’t have any shoes on. I told them

I liked to walk around in my bare feet. I asked them why they did have shoes on, being young boys on a hot summer day and all. They were just incredulous. They thought I was completely insane. They just couldn't fathom the pleasure of being shoeless. This means that no one has a clue what we're doing. Now we've got guys like Lauritz snooping around. It's the beginning of the end, man, I'm telling you."

Perhaps it was. "Remember the time Jack went out for the Sunday paper in his underwear?" I asked. "When was that?"

"Oh, just after I got here out of the Army," Woody said, "in the olden days. Nineteen fifty-nine." He laughed. "That was a comical picture. This big old hungover Irishman shuffling down the street in his sandals and his BVDs. He got pumpernickel, too, at the bakery. No way could you do that anymore."

"Freedom scares people, man," Pokey said. "In '59 nobody knew there even were any weird people. Nobody'd ever heard of Little Richard or miscegeny or boo or beatniks or even sex for that matter, and if they had they wouldn't've believed stuff like that was real. And I think the shit's going to hit the fan when they find out how we've really been living."

"You must be jiving me," Woody said. "How are they going to find out?"

"Uh, they'll listen to Dylan—not that they listened to the other Dylan, but they had to read that—and they'll read *Playboy*, and *On The Road*, and now that there's birth control they might have sex themselves, and maybe even blow a little pot. It's already happening, man. Even the blue-haired old ladies know something's going on. People aren't going to hide in the '50s forever."

"Jeez, that's fucking depressing."

"Really," Pokey smiled. "Well, man, we got to split. Y'all have a good evening."

"Good night, good night," Becky said.

"I love you, baby," Pokey said, looking at her, drawling the words out and grinning broadly. We all smiled. We were pretty fond of him, too.

"Well," I said after they'd gone, "why worry, eh?"

“Not me,” Woody said. “Honey’s a big girl. And the probability that the whole world will become seekers after truth, sojourners on the frontiers of life, wanderers in the wilderness, acolytes of carnal passion, is, oh, about zero.” Then he laughed. “More likely they’ll hang us,” he said gleefully, looking at me. “And you’ll no doubt be the first to go.”

Woody and Becky and I talked for a while longer. Then we walked outside together into the cool night. It was about one in the morning. The street was still aglow with lights from sleeping shops and bustling taverns and automobiles on many missions. People plied the sidewalks, going home or taking one last fling at the chuckaluck wheel of vague romantic fortune.

“I hope Chloë is ready, bathed in lavender and clear of mind, for her master to return home and lovingly ravish her,” I said.

“She’s probably lying demurely in the virginal bedchamber, wearing something cool and diaphanous, her child’s heart beating out your name in Morse code,” Woody speculated.

“Well, good night you two,” I said. “Enjoy the evening.”

“You, too,” Woody said.

“Show him no mercy, Beck.”

“I fear he will prove the weeping philosopher,” Becky said as they walked away.

“A little pot and soon hot,” Woody called back over his shoulder.

“Am I your bird? I mean to shift my bush,” Becky said to him.

“True, though, isn’t it?” Woody rejoined.

* * *

The Christmas season came and went. We visited one another and wandered through crowded parties languid with pot and wine and pleasant conversation. The New Year came. January 1963 dawned cold and gray.

Then one day there was awful, troubling news. Pokey and Liz, by any measure the

straightest, certainly the least flamboyant, of all the people in our little coterie, had been busted. At home, in their apartment. More shocking, the cops had entered with a key, waiting in ambush until shortly after they'd come home from a party, then unlocking the door and sneaking up the stairs to catch them in flagrante delicto, as it were, in the performance of some sexual act not approved by Cotton Mather nor commended by Emily Post. They'd then been arrested and charged with sodomy and possession of a small amount of cannabis, the vile progenitor of reefer madness.

I heard about it from Honey, who called me just after ten in the morning. She was downtown. She'd already talked with Liz, who like Pokey was still in jail. They had a lawyer, but the bond was very high, high enough to keep them there. We agreed to meet at Woody's to talk about what, if anything, we could do. I got there first because Honey had to go home and call Liz's parents in Philadelphia.

Woody and Becky were having breakfast when I arrived. We sat around Woody's big circular oak table in the kitchen and drank coffee and had English muffins and scrambled eggs.

"Fucking unbelievable," Woody said. "Where were they? How'd they get the key?"

"I don't know," I said.

"They caught them in bed?"

"Yeah."

"Sodomy?"

"Ten years, Honey said."

"Sodomy? Has anybody been arrested for consensual sodomy since the eighteenth century?"

"Well, now, yes..."

He looked at me. "It had to be Abe."

"Of course," I said.

"He hates it that Pokey's sleeping with a white woman. He thinks that pussy

ought to be his.”

“Maybe it was her folks.”

“Nah,” Woody said, “that wouldn’t make any sense, would it? Why would they do that? Why would they bust her?”

“Why would anybody do it?” I asked.

“I already told you,” Woody said. “Man, what a drag.”

“All hell shall stir for this,” Becky said softly.

After a few minutes Honey arrived. She’d been home, next door, and washed up a little and changed clothes, but she still looked pretty haggard.

“You okay?” I asked.

“This has all been unbelievable,” she said. She told us five cops had come to her place around midnight and ensconced themselves there. For three hours they’d waited, basically ignoring her. She’d been afraid to do anything because her apartment was full of drugs and they’d told her she’d be arrested for interfering if she made any trouble.

“Where was old Abe in all this?” Woody wanted to know.

“Nowhere,” she said. “He was nowhere around. See, you don’t know everything. He’s been out of town since yesterday morning. He isn’t coming back until next week.”

“How convenient,” Woody said.

“How did they get the key?” I asked.

“Nobody knows for sure. But Liz said they’d been stopped about a month ago while they were driving over in Squirrel Hill. The cops had arrested them for some bizarre reason, suspicion or something. The stuff they had on them, including their keys of course, was taken away when they were locked up. After an hour or two they got out on a thousand dollars’ bail or some such thing, and their lawyer eventually got them off. But Liz thinks that while they were in the slammer the cops copied their keys.”

“Sure,” Woody said, looking at Honey. “And your friend Abe engineered the whole thing. A month ago.”

“Woody, I really wish you’d lay off. Look, why would an undercover narc set up a

sodomy bust?"

"Narcs and vice cops are pretty much cut from the same purple cloth, don't you think?" Woody asked.

"Then everything includes itself in power," Becky observed, "power into will, will into appetite; and appetite, an universal wolf, so doubly seconded with will and power, must make perforce an universal prey, and last eat up himself."

Woody raised his eyebrows and nodded. "That says it all," he said.

"Becky," Honey said, "how about *et tu, Brute?* I mean, don't you think I know what I'm doing? Don't you think I know him a little better than you guys do? He was nowhere near here, and he would never do anything like this, I just know."

"You speak like a green girl," Becky said sympathetically, "unsifted in such perilous circumstance."

"But why do you say that? It just doesn't make any sense."

"I have no other but a woman's reason," Becky said; "I think him so because I think him so."

"You have to look at this possibility," Woody said. "If he is a narc – leaving the truth of it aside for the moment – he got in through your back door. What's more, it seems from what you say that he's still there. So I wonder if the risk he represents to me, just to take a selfish view of it, weighs anything on your conscience."

"Conscience is but a word that cowards use," Becky said.

"Okay, well, I really don't want you to feel guilty about it, Honey," he said, "but at least consider my interests as your neighbor, and as your friend, and your own interests for that matter."

Honey looked down at the table for a long time. Then she addressed Becky.

"How's Malcolm doing?"

"Eating the bitter bread of banishment," Becky replied. I found myself wondering how on earth she could continually do this and what it might've been like for Woody to live with it day in and day out.

"So are Pokey and Liz," I said. "How much is the bail?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," Honey said.

"She-it," Woody exclaimed. "Why?"

"Sodomy's a felony. It's ten years in the joint," Honey said. "Ten years. I can hardly grasp what ten years is." She seemed suddenly depressed.

I found myself gazing out the window, at the bare black branches of the trees, stark against the pale gray sky.

"If you're wrong about Abe," I said to her, "this is going to happen again."

"I'm not wrong," she said. "Abe is not wrong. What if I said Chloë, innocent little Chloë, was an undercover vice cop trying to get you for contributing to the desecration of the innocent or whatever it is. You'd say, 'What's your evidence?' And I'd say, 'Why, exactly nothing. I have none. Nothing. Zero. Nada.' You wouldn't be too impressed, would you? You wouldn't be inclined to conclude your little swan was really a duck."

"No, probably not. But Abe strikes me as more like a hawk than a duck. And a bomb hasn't gone off in a place where Chloë's recently been spending time."

"You know," Honey's tone changed from combative to conciliatory, "all of you listen: I'm in love with this guy. He's never showed me anything but good times. We've had a few verbal fights, over him not being there when he's supposed to, mostly. But he's always been warm and caring and loving toward me. And we like a lot of the same things: jewelry and picnics and jazz and sex and drugs and taking walks. He's never said anything bad about any of you, except it frustrates him because he can't understand Becky when she does that Shakespeare thing. He likes you guys. He even said once he thought Liz was very intelligent. I just have no reason to suspect him of being something totally different from the Abe I see every day, or almost every day. And you don't, either. So let's drop it, okay?"

"Okay, babe," I said. "No haps. No haps."

"What!" Becky asked incredulously, "Wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?"

Woody sighed a big sigh. "Pokey must be miserable," he said. "I'd be scared shitless if I were him. He hates jails. And he obviously knows somebody's out to get him, and now they've got him, whoever it is."

"And Liz, too," I said. "That's what would kill you. Knowing they had your woman. Especially for him. Whatever they think about him, it goes double for her."

"It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear," Becky said, almost wistfully. She began refilling our coffee cups and clearing the dishes off the table while she ran water into the dishpan.

"When all those cops — ah, how many were there?" Woody asked Honey.

"Five, I think."

"Well, while the five of them were in your place all night do you think they saw stuff?"

"Incriminating stuff you mean? No, I don't think so. It was all put away. They stayed in the front room most of the time, and they were pretty quiet because they wanted to be sure they heard when Pokey and Liz showed up and they didn't want to tip them off, so they mostly sat and talked in whispers. I stayed in the kitchen where I could kind of see what they were doing. One of them came in and sat with me for a while, just talking cop banter, you know. Trying to make sure I didn't freak out, I guess."

"What did Liz's parents say?" I asked.

"I talked to her mother. I didn't tell her everything, you know, how it happened and all. She was pretty upset. Especially when I told her what they were in for. But she said she'd call Liz's father and that they'd get hold of another lawyer. That was about it."

"Well, they need to get out," Woody said. "That's all that matters right now."

"Yeah," she agreed. "But what can we do? Liz's lawyer said to just sit tight."

"Crazy."

"What are you guys going to do," she asked Becky, who was now finishing the

dishes, "when Malcolm gets out? You going to live together?"

"I think they have to for a while," Woody said. "He wants to leave town, and they have to get permission for him to do that. A job somewhere else, at the minimum. And that'll take time."

"You're going to go with him then?"

"Hasty marriage seldom proveth well," she said, "and I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face."

"I think it's kind of up in the air," Woody said.

Honey looked tired and pale, a lot older than she'd seemed a day earlier. "You should get some sleep," I said to her.

"Yeah."

"Listen, Honey," Woody said earnestly, "I don't know. I don't. I just don't like the guy's looks maybe. I don't know. Maybe he's a saint. Maybe he didn't have anything to do with all this. But be careful, will you? I mean, keep an eye open, okay?"

Honey rose to go. Becky turned away from the sink and wrapped her in a long, tender hug. Tears ran down Honey's cheeks. I gave her a kiss on the forehead and told her I'd call her later.

Nobody said anything for a few long moments after she'd gone. We just sat at the table and looked at the walls, into our coffee, at each other. We were all pretty exhausted.

"I wonder what she's thinking," Woody said. "She must know. She just doesn't want to see it."

"Would it not grieve a woman," Becky replied, "to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust? to make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl?"

"Assuming she found out about it," Woody said.

"Better to be bewitched by love," I supposed.

"Unless it cost your friends their liberty, or their dignity, or their reputations and the natural order of their lives. Then maybe it'd be better to be smitten by the truth."

"It would be, though," I mused aloud, "a hard truth to be smitten by."

"Ah," Becky said, "cursed be my tribe if I forgive him."

Liz's parents posted her bail later that day, and one of Pokey's clients posted his. Then, a few days later, Abe Lauritz returned.

* * *

It was easy to feel vindicated somehow by the next turn of events, but at the same time it was difficult to absorb the emotional savagery of it. The night after Abe returned to Honey's trusting hearth, and besported himself richly no doubt in her garden of lusty treasures, he busted her. The cornucopia of drugs, spoons, syringes, pipes, roach clips, laboratory flasks and other arcane paraphernalia was so extensive that a photograph of it, all laid out neatly on a large table, appeared in the paper the following morning. That was how we found out. Pokey and Woody showed up at my place around noon. A storm had blown in from the Great Lakes, and it was snowing furiously outside.

Becky and Liz were at the jail trying to see her, but they couldn't get in. I called a lawyer friend of mine who checked around and then called back to say they were hiding her, moving her from place to place every few hours, and evidently planned to keep her under wraps for several days. I asked him about Abe. "Oh, he's gone," the lawyer said. "You'll never see him again."

"I'd like to kill the motherfucker," I said.

Woody shrugged.

"Man, I gotta get out of here," Pokey said. "They're going to feed my black ass to the piranhas."

"I think they want us all out of here," Woody said.

"Liz's lawyer filed a motion to separate us," Pokey said. "To separate our cases. They figure they can get her off and leave me dangling in the wind, not to evoke an image or anything. I guess I really can't object, I got to be happy she's going to be okay. But once they get me alone I think they're going to grind me up for dog food."

I went for a walk later in the park, over by the library where Woody's idol Henry Miller was still hidden under the desk, behind a facade of public shame. The falling snow seemed to soothe the city to a peaceful hush, but it only provided ironic contrast with my dark realization that Pokey was right, that by the time Malcolm was getting out he would be going in, beginning a long nightmare in the shadowy dungeons of hung-up America.

Something really ugly had happened here. A handful of free-wheeling people had taken it upon themselves to look life right in the eye, to see it however it appeared, as it actually was I thought, but certainly not as the country's gray masters of illusion wished it to be seen. The weakest and most vulnerable among us had been chosen and shot, like partisans of the resistance, as a lesson to the rest.

I sent Chloë home that night.

* * *

One fine spring afternoon a couple of months later I ran into Woody and Malcolm at The Cellar.

"Man," I said, "it sure is good to see you. How long've you been back?"

"Three days," Malcolm said.

I wanted to ask him what it'd been like, but I couldn't. "So what're you going to do now?"

"Becky's got a gig lined up for me in L.A.. If they approve it we might be leaving in a couple weeks."

"Great! Well, but, damn, I'm going to miss you. And who'll be quoting Shakespeare around here anymore?"

"It won't be the same," Woody said. "That's for sure."

"What are you up to these days?" Malcolm asked.

"Ah," I said, "don't ask, man."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"I'm in bad trouble," I said. "Serious trouble. I'm leaving town myself. Soon. Maybe today."

"What?"

"Yeah. Remember that little nymphet who stayed at my place last summer, the one from the convent school who painted the little scenes on marbles and guzzled John Henry under that table back there one Saturday night?"

"Who could forget her?" Woody said rhetorically. "She had the biggest, softest eyes I've ever seen. Like a fawn. Bambi? Was that her name? Man, she was a little jezebel, that one."

"Nikki. Nikki D'Angelo. Ring a bell? Her father's Sonny D'Angelo. She got so twisted after I kicked her out of my house he sent her to a psychiatrist. She told the shrink everything and he told Sonny everything and now I hear there's a contract out on me."

"Could you maybe sit somewhere else?" Woody asked.

"I'm not kidding, man," I said, "my lawyer told me they've been shopping it around."

"Why'd you kick her out?"

"She was crazy. She was making me crazy. She was trying to get pregnant. She wanted me to marry her."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm getting out of here," I said. "Listen, do you think I could fake my death somehow? What do you think? Really, I mean."

"Mafia guys are not all morons," Malcolm said. "And faking your death is a tricky business, you know, 'cause you're still alive."

"Can you get out of the country?" Woody asked.

"Sure, I guess so."

"Aldo and I went to Vera Cruz once, maybe you heard..."

There'd been rumors that the two of them had scored a ton of marijuana once in

the Yucatan, a few years back, but nobody'd known anything about it really.

"Well, the countryside's basically lawless. I figure you could drive down there, take your car up in the mountains someplace, open the doors and push it off a cliff. Nobody'd even climb down to see if there was a body in it. Probably you could walk out, grab a campesino bus and disappear into the jungle or the mountains. Most likely they wouldn't even look for you. People disappear down there all the time."

"Think it'd work?" I asked Malcolm.

He shrugged. "I like the bus idea, but the car-over-the-cliff thing won't fly. They've seen it before," he said. "But your real problem is to disappear, isn't it? Forget about the car. They know your car. A powder-blue Austin-Healey is not a getaway car. Leave it parked where it is right now. Becky and I have a car. I'll have her come by and pick you up, out back in the alley. Then she can take you to a bus station somewhere, out of town maybe. Go through Laredo to Mexico City. Buy some Mexican ID. Then just keep hopping on buses 'til you're far away."

"They have little shops," Woody said. "You just go in and say, 'I lost my ID, I'm Jesus Jones,' or whatever, and give 'em twenty bucks. You look enough like a Mexican, I guess. Use a Mexico City address."

"They'll never quit looking for my ass." I hated the idea of leaving my Healey behind.

"Have faith in incompetence," Woody suggested.

"Sonny may not really care that much about it," Malcolm said. "This is just personal stuff, you know? He's a businessman. You can only represent a money loss to him, especially once you're out of sight. He might just forget about the contract. She wasn't pregnant, was she?"

"Huh-uh." God, I'd never even considered that possibility. "But you think it would work?"

"Beats having some teenage hit girl stick a bullet in your ear," Woody said with a shrug.

"Thanks for the picture."

"Sure, why not?" Malcolm said. "Just remember what you're doing. Be cool. Lie about everything and smile while you do it. And maybe I'll run into you down there someday. I've got a connection in L.A. who's interested in moving stuff up from Panama, so maybe I'll be doing some travelling."

"Are you kidding me?" Woody asked, dumbfounded.

"No, listen, man," Malcolm laughed, "the money is excellent and the risk is, like, nothing. He's been doing it for more than a year. He did dry runs for six months. In all that time, nothing. No haps, as Homer would say. Not even a raised eyebrow. It's foolproof." He looked at us with wide-open eyes and a big innocent smile, as if to say, "Ain't it amazing?"

"You're both insane," Woody said.

* * *

The white sand beach arcs away to the south forever. The palms rustle softly in a gentle offshore breeze. The sky is a rich cerulean blue, the puffy clouds white as Egyptian cotton, the sea a clear pale aquamarine that ripples and sparkles along the shore. I've taken on a new identity as a modeling agent. I've only ever had one client, a fashion photographer for *Couture*. Looking critically at all the vibrant graces of young women is now my profession. I pursue it genteelly.

It's hard to recall the rough edges of my life in Pittsburgh. As delightful as things often were, they were on some few occasions wrenchingly painful. As natural and significant as they sometimes appeared, just so foreign and irrelevant do they seem anymore. Liz moved back to Philadelphia. I don't think anybody ever heard from her again. Pokey's case was eventually thrown out of court. Malcolm has been on the run for most of his life, since they busted him again, in an airport with a suitcase full of cocaine. Last I heard, ten years or so ago, he was cooking in a logging camp in Montana. Woody hit the road in search of whatever it was he never could find. Honey moved to San

Francisco after doing a year or so in a rehabilitation program and became a small-time torch singer. And what ever really happened to the pathetic but venomous Abe Lauritz? Rumor was he'd been found handcuffed to a bed, half-naked, with an oozing black hole between his eyebrows, made, they said, by his own gun. Wish fulfillment, I guess. Who knows? Maybe he's only dead like I am. I didn't see the body.

I smell her lilac fragrance in the zephyrs for a moment before I feel her skirts brush against my bare shoulder. She's wearing a pale blue silk dress and white leather sandals. "Pokey died," I tell her, looking up. "Last week, in Miami Beach. Liver disease they say." I pause with a sigh. "I was just thinking about all that. And wondering what really happened to that asshole Lauritz."

"His cares are now all ended," she says.

I'm about to ask her who she means when she speaks again.

"Golden lads and girls all must," she says with a wry grin, "as chimney sweepers, come to dust."

I ponder this little wisdom as I refold the letter and put it back into its envelope with all those ancient memories.

"I think I'll take a walk down the beach," I say. "Want to come along?"

She smiles and reaches out her hand. Her heart and mine are in it.