

COURTING THE KING

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Bodie Plays the King

Nicky Soros stood with his body hunched, his left leg stiff out in front of his body pounding out a rhythm, his right leg bouncing up and down as his hips shook and his arms flailed about wildly, the song rocking his head back and forth as his mouth gaped open and shouted out, "Please don't ask me what's on my mind, I'm a little mixed up but I'm feelin' fine" D.J. Fontana banged out a raucous rhythm, Bill Black's base throbbed through the room, and Scotty Moore cooked on lead guitar while the Jordanairs added the doo-wop and the song just exploded.

Nicky was soaring, on top of the vocals and the moves and the whole thing took off with him until the final "I'm all shook up!" The song came to a sudden end and he collapsed on the floor, laughing and twitching and finally shouting, "Just think what it's like to be Elvis fuckin' Presley!"

Bodie handed him a freshly rolled reefer. "John Lennon said, 'Before Elvis, there was nothing.' I think maybe he's right."

"Um," and an exhale, and Nicky said, "I don't remember nothin' before Elvis. Nothin' worth remembering. This is some good shit, hey" and passing it back.

Bodie took a long, deep hit, held it until a cough forced the smoke from him and he laughed, sighed, drifted with it for a moment or two. "The first time I heard that song, I was at Doug Allison's house. 1957. I was 10 years old and we were playing the radio in his bedroom. Man! All of a sudden, bam! Fucking Elvis! Just rocked us from out of nowhere. We were jumping up and down on his bed, pounding on each other and screaming like banshees. His mother about shit. Came

running in the room, kept telling us to turn it off, but it was so loud we couldn't hear a thing she was saying. She stood there with her hands over her ears and her mouth moving with nothing audible coming out. We couldn't hear her. We couldn't hear anything but Elvis. Never heard anything sound as good as him. Still haven't, come to think of it."

"Yeah," Nicky said, "until he joined the Army. Then there was nothin' again. Not 'til the Beatles and the Stones. Now it's just one good band after another coming up. Now it's like everywhere, man, Jimi and Janice, the Airplane, the Dead, the Doors. Shit, man, the 13th Floor Elevator! Fuckin' A, man, the Rainy Daze! I'm saving for the Rainy Daze!"

And he dissolved in laughter. "Oh man, this *is* good shit. I'm flying. You know what, though? I still like Elvis. People say he's nothin' now but a bad actor. But, shit, when you can sing like that, nothin's ever gonna make you straight, not even ol' Colonel Tom. Yeah, I still like Elvis even today. I'm down with him."

"No shit. I thought maybe it's the only song you know. So, how much you want?"

"If you can front it to me, I can move 10 pounds every couple of days."

"That'll work," said Bodie, "that'll work." And they did the soul shake on it, smiling, nodding, and red-eyed.

"I'll tell you something for certain," said Nicky. "'Her lips are like a volcano that's hot' is *you know* how those girls be when they doing the King."

Sean Flynn

Sean Flynn was a well-muscled 6 foot 3 inch tall middle-aged man with silver hair and ice-blue eyes. He was a cop and he looked every bit the part. In his crisp blue uniform with the captain's braids, his imperious manner, ramrod posture and piercing look, he was what the public thought of when they thought of the police.

"Guy looks like he should be stamped on a medal," Augie Mertz has famously said, and anyone who read the *FreeNews* or watched the local television news knew exactly what he meant. He was the face of the Detroit Police Department, its long- time rising star, and a cinch to end up chief, nobody had a doubt.

As head of Vice and the go-to guy for the moonlighting gigs DPD doled out, he had a deep stash of knowledge about where the bodies were buried and a larder of favors to dispense to the guys on his team. Rank and file gave him deference the current Chief never got.

It was a good time to be a cop. All hell was breaking loose. Race riots, draft dodgers, protesters of every sort, sex, drugs and rock & roll. End of the Sixties, the world was upside down, people were exhausted. They wanted somebody to do something about it. The police, and Flynn and his boys especially, rode herd on the insurrection that was playing out in the streets by day and on the news every night. All around them, people saw mayhem, chaos, degeneracy. They saw too the thin blue line that stood between it and them. It didn't take a genius to see the opportunity.

Flynn had the power and he used it brilliantly. He was a very good cop with an already distinguished career, but he was a master,

too, of the media. His nearly absolute control of the Department was rarely mentioned but firmly unshared. He told DPD what to do and they did it. He dished out cushy assignments to his guys and lucrative off-duty work to fatten their take-home pay. Every cop wanted to be part of his team.

But he worked the news just as effectively. He whispered in the ears of favored reporters and journalists, seeded the word he wanted to be spread. There was no shortage of crime in the fair city and every time it reared its ugly head in whatever grotesque fashion he was there to spin it to his liking when the notebooks came out and the cameras came on. The men behind the cameras, the men holding the pens, took care of him because he took care of them.

The city's gentry, its movers and shakers, the Fords, Gilberts, Donahues, knew exactly what to make of him. Power knows its own. He was useful to them as they were to him, a symbiosis so neatly designed and naturally evolved there was rarely a need to mention it.

He rubbed shoulders with the chosen and cracked the heads of the misbegotten. The transactions always seemed to be on his terms.

But this morning the Captain was not the picture of spit-polished success and power. He was standing on the front porch of his home in Grosse Pointe Park in his silk pajamas and robe, slippers on his feet, his face unshaven and his silver hair mussed.

It was 6:00 a.m. on a summer morning and the smell of brewing coffee drifted out from indoors, but Flynn hadn't moved since he picked up the paper and saw the story on the front page above the fold.

"Cop Caught in Stripper's Playpen!" it said in 30 point type. The sub-heading said, "To Serve and Protect: Another Tough Shift." Then

a picture of a squad car parked in an alley down the block from Ned Prince's nightclub, a strip joint distinguished by the exceptionally good-looking women it employed to take off their clothes and who knows what else the clientele could afford.

Harris Naylor, barely two years on the force and just recently a guy Flynn had brought aboard his team, was said to have been observed by reporters in the club for many hours at a time on at least three occasions. "Jesus," the Captain said to himself, "not even made Vice yet and he's banging the girls on company time." That was his first thought.

His second was, "When I get done with him, he'll be staking out toilets and shaking down queers in Rouge Park. About what this guy deserves. Give him a hand and he sticks it to you first chance he gets.

"What is it about these punks?" he said to himself, shaking his head in disgust and thinking about exactly how he'll lay the wood to him. "I have to cover his butt and dig the Department out of this hole. Then we'll deal with Naylor."

And, after a brief moment to consider how he might do that, his third thought was the new guy running the *FreeNews* and what needed to be done about him. He seems to be a loose cannon, likes making a lot of noise. "We don't want this to get out of hand," he muttered to himself, "because he's quickly becoming a pain in the ass and I big time do not need it."

With that and not the least glance around the neighborhood to see who among his neighbors might have seen him on his front porch at 6 in the morning with his face flushed and his ass kicked he turned and went inside.

Solomon Gold

Solomon Gold is a promoter. He books rock 'n' roll. Puts on concerts by the biggest acts in the business, shows that draw them by the hundreds, then the thousands and tens of thousands at \$5, \$10, eventually even \$20 a head.

In 1965, in Detroit, he put on a few shows. Drew a few fans. Made a few bucks. Made a few connections. Kept it up. Kept getting bigger. Now he's as big as they get. He's all over the Motor City, but Pittsburgh and Indianapolis, too. He controls the business in those towns. You play for him or you don't play. Simple as that.

Rock & roll is here to say. It was meant to be that way. Just needed the right promotion. Sollie was one of the guys who figured it out.

Sollie was a tall, lean, very bright and very driven Lebanese Muslim. His given name was Sulaiman Dhahab. But in a business dominated by Jews, Solomon Gold became his moniker. His face was sharp, his eyes large, his mouth fleshy and given to snarling. His appetites were large and, given the resources he had acquired, he might have become obese, but his metabolism burned fat as fast as he consumed it.

Food wasn't his only area of overindulgence; in fact, it was the least of his problems. In an era when drugs fueled the agenda for most of the people in the biz, the bands, the roadies, the fans, he never touched the stuff. No alcohol either. Those were not his issues. His addictions were elsewhere in the panoply of human faults.

He ate like a pig, yes, but he also was all about power and greed. He wanted to have everything in his control, especially the people he worked with and the fans he sold to, like a pasha with the caliphate. He wanted to make all the money, or most of the money, in any deal that came his way. He would fight you for every dime, cheat you out of anything he could just because if he could you deserved it. He squeezed the life out of every dollar he got his hands on.

"I never pay retail for anything," he bragged. Truth was he often didn't pay for anything at all. He bounced checks for pizza delivery, ripped off the local street vendors, would stare down a check at a dinner party until somebody else picked up the tab, not once, not often, but always. He was reverentially focused on making any and all costs in every one of life's endeavors *your* problem, not his.

He also had a taste for gambling, a big taste like all his others, and loved to boast about his underworld associates. He played the tough guy at a time when all the kids were preaching peace and love. He reeked of self-reference when the kids were saying, "Smile on your brother."

Sollie was conditioned for war. He loved the stress, the anxiety, even the pain, as long as he won the battle. He thrived on out-smarting you, out-toughing you, out-lasting you. Being the survivor when the others went under made him feel good, strong, alive. Lunch was always better if it was your lunch he was eating.

He was one of the guys who created the rock 'n' roll concert business and carved up the country, to each a piece of his own. He was very good at it. He packed a room, an arena, a stadium without fail. His string of successful shows ran on forever.

He had an uncanny sense of what was wanted when and where, and once he decided to book it, he never flinched in getting it sold out. “55 consecutive sellouts,” he was quick to tell anyone who'd listen, “and counting. Show me another guy in the business anywhere can say that.”

The Grand Caliph is what Sollie liked to call himself. He was searching for a title big as the man he was becoming. He was a Muslim by birth but religion meant nothing to him, wasn't a factor in his life. He just loved the language, the titles, the sound of it: Grand Caliph! He liked to think that he, too, held sway over tens of thousands.

It was a new business model, this concert business. The band managers and, to a lesser degree, the bands themselves were his customers. Concert goers were his minions. The Grand Caliph summoned and the caliphate came. Like that.

There were already a bunch of tough guys running the concert business, carving up the country to each a region he could hold. It was a new thing, bigger in scale than before, and Sollie was Detroit, like Aaron Russo was New York, Larry Magid was Philly, Don Law was Boston, the Belkin Brothers were Cleveland, Barry Fey was Denver, Bill Graham was California, and a few guys in Chicago were taking their piece.

That's the way Frank Barsalona set it up. Premiere Talent, his company, decided who played where and who promoted them. These were regional fiefdoms. It was like the mafia of rock. Like those other guys, Sollie was working hard and making money. Pretty big money. This was before Concerts West laid the wood to them all.

"He who screams the loudest, longest, wins!" was their mantra. To listen in on their business conversations, which you could hear from a block away, you heard every imaginable profanity and threat, woven into what passed for poetry in their profession.

"You cunt motherfucker!" Sollie is screaming into the phone, "I'll destroy you! I'll take you apart! You and your family and your staff and your acts and even your dog. Done! In a week, you fuckin' fuck, they won't even remember your name!" Then he said matter-of-factly, "Nothing. Just trying to impress a friend."

Jonathon Strawn, the reporter from the *FreeNews* was the friend who appeared at his office door. Friend in name only. He and Sollie didn't much like each other, in fact. The reporter respected the promoter's talent, what he was doing to bring music to town, but thought he was a bit of a pig. Sollie on the other hand treated him like a dog that might bite and so you might as well be nice until it does. Because it might not too, which would be better for everybody.

"Wassup?" he says to Strawn and then yells, "Sainty! Sainty, come 'ere. Sainty, I need a Pepsi." He whined, being cute, another performance. And in walked a tall, good-looking woman, who yelled at him, "They're right here in your refrigerator, you dumb fuck. Why don't you get them yourself?"

"They're better when you get them," he said, then to Strawn, "Want one?"

"I hear you're going to be managing Bobby Thierry."

"Who do you hear that from?"

"Never reveal your sources: the first rule of journalism. I don't. Is it true?"

"Sure, Bobby, Sly King, a few others maybe. Some of the local bands that Russ has been pushing at the Grande. Branching out a little."

"You're a promoter. What do you know about managing?"

Sollie looked at him with amusement. "Jonny, Jonny, I'm disappointed in you, you even bother to ask. I know about managing what I know about promoting: pick good acts, use your connections, work hard, work them harder and you'll all make money. What else do I need to know?"

"Business good?" the reporter asked. "Everything going well?"

"Great. Best year ever so far. Why? There a story in here somewhere?"

"Just wondering why the new gig. You haven't got enough headaches booking shows?"

Now Sollie is looking shrewd. He stares at the reporter, cocks his head to one side a bit, lowers his chin almost to his chest and looks up with hooded eyes.

"We've created a circuit now, all across the country. Peter Rudge wants to book The Who, the Stones, a few phone calls, a few contracts and it's a done deal. Great deal for him, the Limey fuck. Tour the entire United States, one end to the other, sell out every show and not a problem can't be solved along the way. We take care of it.

"Promoters get no respect from the fans. Bitching about the price of the shows, music should be free, all that bullshit. These fucking bands don't play for free. Just got a contract from The Who. Thirty pages of riders. Used to be we'd get some chips and a case of Bud for backstage. Now it's champagne, *French* champagne, the real stuff,

with ten brands of liquor, cases of the most expensive beer and wine, catered meals from the best chefs in town, Persian fucking carpets for the dressing rooms! You believe it?

"If these punk kids knew what we go through to kiss Pete Townshend's ass, they'd treat us better. They got no fucking idea what we've made possible. These bands are getting rich. I mean *really* rich. And the fans see all the best acts in the best venues. One show after another. We roll 'em through like shit through geese. It don't just happen on its own.

"So, we make a little now, and we're thinking maybe we can do a little better. Use some local bands as opening acts. Then we'll see what happens. You should write what a good thing we're doing for them. Major promoters booking local bands. Bill Graham's doing the same thing. Fey and Russo, too.

"All of us are independent. But we work together. I got this town, Indy, Pittsburgh. That's a lot of work. But a lot of exposure, too. We make those audiences happen. The big bands are killing it. Making a fortune. We're doing good, too, but you have to keep pushing. We see an opportunity to get smaller acts some serious face time here. Bump 'em up to the big time if we can and we'll all make some money.

"I'm going to plug in some local bands, opening acts to start with. Then we'll see. Those other guys, they're doing the same thing. You should write about what good we're doing for the locals."

"Different storyline with those other guys."

"How's that?"

"They don't gamble."

Solomon Gold became very attentive. "What?" he said. "What are you trying to say?" His face was flushed, eyes bulged, hands clenched into fists and his tightly wound body bounced on the balls of his feet.

"Say what you have to say, you cunt. But be very careful you know what you're talking about. 'They don't gamble.' And I do, is that right?"

"Sollie, you've been busted for interstate gambling. The prosecutor said it wasn't an isolated incident."

"Yeah, and I paid my fine and we're done with it. Why you bringing it up now?"

"It just seems like an expensive habit."

Sollie backed off and became very still. Quietly he said, "We're all gamblers, every one of us in this business. It's all a gamble. Some of us are good at it.

"I *make* money gambling. Not just the concerts. All of it. I *am* good at it. Keep it to yourself, asshole. Not for publication, not for attribution. Just telling you so you'll know. And you're a gambler, too, Strawn. Don't forget it. I know things about you that would get you attention you don't want. Your brother Bodie, right. Want to go public? We'll see who gets hurt."

Strawn left him standing there, threat thick in the air. What's there to say? Every addict tells you he's on top of it. Every drunk is just a social drinker. Every druggie uses just for inspiration. Every gambler beats the house. I only smoke for relaxation. Quit any time I want. That shit.

He never wrote much about the management piece Sollie was working. Barely a mention. Wasn't sure there was really anything to

say. Thought he'd wait to see how it worked out. Whether these guys could book bands *and* promote shows. He doubted it and his doubts proved out. After a while, it was clear. None of them was any good at it. They were promoters. They could sell the public. Couldn't sell each other. Did them no good. Made them no money except what they stole. Did the bands worse. Bobby worst of all.

Bobby Thierry

Bobby Thierry was a beautiful guy. That's all you could say about him. If you understood the ethic of the time, the new thing that was happening and all the young people shared, then Bobby was the image of what you imagined it was all about.

He was medium tall with the look of an Indian or a gypsy, maybe, something way more exotic than his suburban Indiana upbringing, a lean, sculpted face with big eyes, cheekbones and lips, and long straight hair near black and ribboned with stripes of red and blue to which an eagle feather was attached at ear-level and hung to his shoulder.

He wore embroidered shirts, woven sashes belted around his waist, beaded vests and bell-bottom pants that draped over his high-heeled boots. Like so many kids, he looked like a performer, but in fact he was one. A helluva performer.

There were many things he couldn't do well, including take care of himself. But when he got a guitar in his hands, the sounds he made would amaze you, pure and simple. When he played he was transported to another place and he took you with him. He was a musician of staggering talent and inspiration who looked and sounded exactly like we wanted our heroes to be when musicians were our heroes.

Strawn first heard him one night as he walked through an alley on the edge of the Historic District after dark. The city emptied out when the offices closed up for the day. The clean folks in their crisp clothes and new cars headed for the suburbs and nothing was left at

night except street people, bums, hippies, the odd folks who lived down there. It was a wonderful place in the dark.

Sly King was the band he was going to see. Nicky Soros' group. They rehearsed in a warehouse on Joy Road just off Grand River. There was a lot of good space to be had cheap and nobody to disturb. The church up the block was busy Sundays. Other than that, the neighborhood was quiet at night. Even the average bands had nice places to practice.

Sly King was better than average and the place they practiced was very cool, with high ceilings, thick wooden columns and walls of brick and stone that were the foundation of the building. There were cement and stone benches, lots of furniture, big screens strewn around and thick conduit of steel containing big time electricity.

From it right now was emerging a sound thundering and awesome. Strawn had heard all the bands, the best players, all those Brits, Hendrix, Bloomfield, the guys who defined the sound. This guitar was being played at an altogether different level than anything you heard locally.

"That ain't Sly King," he said to himself and hurried through the alley door, down the steps and across the big room just as the song ended and the players put down their axes. The kid with the Stratocaster was unfamiliar.

"Pretty good player," he said to Nicky, who was Sly himself.

"Yeah, and the moon is pretty high in the sky," said Nicky, who shrugged his shoulders and looked sideways at the kid. "He's the best player ever in this town. You better believe it. Be seventeen next week."

That was Bobby Thierry. They all were young, but seventeen was a memory. He was here and not back home in school because the music in him was just too powerful to hold back, even at that age. Some things are so obviously meant to be that all the details shrink away to nothing. Bobby belonged on the stage, the big stage, and that's where he was headed.

The Press

The news release said: Chief Seeley and Captain Flynn are concluding their preliminary investigation of the situation and will report to the public at a press conference at 10:00 o'clock this morning. Huerfano was there. Flynn was speaking.

"Officer Naylor is a two-year veteran police officer who was working undercover on behalf of my division when his assignment was compromised by this newspaper story. The consequences are still to be determined but it was unfortunate to say the least and we're assessing the damage.

"I'm reluctant to expose the investigation he was carrying out to any further attention, except to say that the officer was doing an excellent job and had made significant progress in rooting out the key players in a criminal operation here in the city. "In spite of this set back, and the new caution it will inspire in the people we're after, we still have hopes of putting them under arrest. Questions?"

"Captain, Sartison, *FreeNews* here. How is it that you say Naylor was undercover when he was in uniform and driving a black & white? Was he hoping to sneak up on somebody?"

"Officer Naylor was portraying a cop going bad from a weakness for women, the kind of women that work that establishment. We have had information for some time that certain people there were looking to bribe a cop for criminal purposes I won't discuss here. Our man was in place and doing what we asked him to do when your news article, Mr. Sartison, your paper blew his cover.

"We are working to repair the damage to the investigation and Officer Naylor for his own safety and protection has been reassigned. We have nothing further to say in the matter at this time."

"Chief Seeley, Bell, Channel 7. Do you have any concerns about Captain Flynn's leadership of his division in this matter?"

"No, none whatsoever. The Captain does an outstanding job in service to this community. I and the entire department hold him in the highest regard. One more question and then we're done here."

"Chief, Captain, McNeely from UPS. I have a sworn affidavit from two of the women at Prince's that Naylor gave them cocaine and marijuana in exchange for sex on at least three separate occasions. Was that part of the investigation?"

Flynn could hear explosions in the back of his head and he felt the eyes of the Chief shift toward him with less than subtle concern but he never flinched. He drew himself up, puffed out his chest and gave the reporter his hardest stare for more than a few seconds before he replied.

"That is completely and utterly false, and we will prove it so beyond any doubt. This department would never engage in such behavior in order to secure an arrest, and in this particular case, it does a real disservice to a fine young officer to slander his name in public here on the say so of a couple of prostitutes."

"Prostitutes, Captain? How do you know that? You don't even know who they are."

"It doesn't matter who they are, McNeely. They claim they accepted drugs in exchange for sex. That's prostitution in my book. Prince's place is run by people with ties to organized crime and any

woman who would make an accusation like this is one of the prostitutes that work for them.

"They and the drug dealers they run with are more than happy to tell you guys these kinds of stories because you want so badly for it to be true. Great press, isn't it? That's all that matters.

"But the truth is, McNeely, all you're doing here is making it harder for us to get the bad guys. They tie us up with investigations into this kind of nonsense while they go their merry way selling drugs to our kids and sex to anyone with a buck. I think this meeting is over."

Flynn left the podium without waiting for the Chief and Seeley to his credit followed immediately behind him, ignoring the volley of questions the reporters tossed at him. Affidavits! Jesus Christ! Naylor is going to be working the restroom at the bus station when I get through with him and feeling lucky just to have the job.

New King in Town

“Captain,” David Walker said, smiling broadly as they shook hands, “a pleasure to meet you.”

“Good to meet you,” said Flynn, looking him hard in the eye. But the younger man deflected the intensity easily, gesturing toward an easy chair and inviting Flynn to have a seat.

“Very good of you to come by. Of course, I’ve heard a lot about you in the short time I’ve been here, one of Detroit’s finest, a man of respect, exactly as it should be for an officer of the law. What can I do for you, Captain?”

Flynn sat, removed his hat, ran a hand through his silver hair and gave a brief nod to the compliments. “Two things I want to cover, and thanks for taking time to hear me out. I mentioned to the Chief you could help us in our efforts to find work for off-duty officers. He suggested I brief you.

“We’ve worked hard to raise the stature of our department and attract good people, in part by getting better compensation for our best officers. A cop’s pay isn’t much, never will be, and the best guys we have sure aren’t in it for the money. Still, everybody has to make ends meet, so we’ve always fattened up the paycheck a bit by moonlighting.

“It used to be catch as catch can. Plenty of people can use a cop in their business, somebody to keep a lid on the crowd or an eye on the till, make the bad guys think twice about trying to knock ‘em over. So our guys would snoop around until they found a place that would hire them and pretty much took whatever pay they could get.

"We've taken a more orderly approach, which works out better for everybody. We make sure the businessman knows we want work and we get 'em the right guy for their needs. Pay is \$50 an hour, no exceptions. I personally supervise our people and make certain the customer is happy. They have a problem with one of our guys, they come to me and I straighten it out.

"It's made a real difference in the Department, taken some stress off the city budget and extended the police presence in town. Our guys can bring in a grand or two extra every month, which brings us better applicants. Everybody wins."

Walker listened with hands folded prayer-like under his chin and nodded when the Chief finished. "I understand," he said, "and the Department's come a long way back in the past 10 years."

"None of us who lived through that needs to be reminded," Flynn said, sourly.

"Of course not. And I meant no offense, Captain. I just wanted to note how much the Department's improved. If this program of yours is a part of that, I fully support you. What can I do to help?"

"Prominent people need security. That's who you deal with. Put in a word for us. Let them know the paper supports the concept. Hell, you might even try it yourself."

"Me?" said Walker, with the polished casualness of one who isn't easily caught off-guard, "how would that work?"

"You sponsor public events, hire some of our guys to work the crowds. You need backup for your night watchmen or your guys that man the doors, use my people."

"That makes sense. For a minute I thought you meant a bodyguard."

Walker smiled and Flynn smiled back, meeting and holding the younger man's eyes for the first time with his cop's hard gaze. "That might make sense, too. You're a powerful man in a crazy world. Lots of mayhem out there. Wouldn't hurt to have a professional watching your back."

"You said two things." Sayles said, disengaging from the Captain's cold blue eyes and glancing at his watch. "What else?"

"Your time is valuable so I'll be brief. When we're wrong, we're wrong and we'll clean up our mess. In private. Cops screw up like everybody else, but we live in the crosshairs. It's not for everybody. Morale is critical and it suffers when the local paper smears us all over the front page. When we lose the confidence of the public, a difficult job becomes damn near impossible."

"Captain," Walker said with just a hint of patronizing surprise in his voice, "please, it's important that we understand each other. You have your job and I respect it. My job is to uphold the responsibility of the free press. In the news business, we consider it a nearly sacred obligation."

"You mean muckraking?" Flynn said dryly.

"I mean the responsibility to speak on behalf of the community in knocking the powerful down a notch or two. Burke said, 'there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all.' More important because they have the means to keep things honest, to level the playing field just a bit. We take that very seriously."

"Mr. Walker, forgive me. I never got to Harvard. I became a cop right after a tour with the Marines. But I do read a lot. I recall Oscar Wilde had something to say about your Fourth Estate. He said, 'In old

days men had the rack. Now they have the Press. That is an improvement certainly. But still it is very bad, and wrong, and demoralizing. We are dominated by journalism.' That's what he said. Of course, he was known to exaggerate a bit."

"Touché, Captain. I'm impressed. Let's leave it at this. You do your job and I'll do mine. Wherever I can support you, I'll be in a ton. I'll hire your cops every chance I get and tell my friends they ought to do the same. I'll even think about a bodyguard, god forbid. But you can count on this: as long as I run this paper, we won't stop digging for the truth. We'll tell it like we find it and the chips can fall where they may. Agreed?"

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Walker. I'm glad we had this little talk. We will appreciate any support you send our way. And I certainly wish you a lot of success with your paper. Your first time as Publisher and no doubt your family's counting on you. The entire town will be watching to see how everything works out."

He stood, nodded; they exchanged dim smiles and parted, not shaking hands.

The Catt

Jackson Catt was a very tall, very muscular, very black man with an attitude. His face was lean, sharp-featured and handsome enough if you looked past the scars and the bad teeth. He had close-cropped hair, a high forehead and cheekbones, a chin that looked like it could stop a truck, a large mouth with thick lips and sometimes a big smile, which didn't necessarily indicate that he was happy.

His eyes had that sleepy way of looking you over, sizing you up, weighing just exactly what you represented in his life and precisely how he was going to deal with you. His body carried him with strength and grace, cold composure and a coiled power that he could unleash with devastating results.

He grew up in a military family so he'd been around. He was a martial artist, very good with his hands and his feet. He liked to fight. It gave him the means to express himself with skill and pleasure. He was good at it, so good he never pushed it. He let it come to him.

If they were needed, he was comfortable with weapons, liked the way they felt in his hands, the danger they threatened, the heft they conveyed. He did two tours in the DMZ in 'Nam and never said a word about it unless you happened to ask. Then he'd say little more than, "Yeah, I was there," but the aura of it surrounded him and added to the foreboding he provoked.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, his manner hip and sly, his words well chosen, as often as not expressed ironic conclusions, casually showed his smarts. Not just street savvy, although he was that, but thoughtful, insightful and sophisticated, too. He'd been

around and he'd paid attention. He wasn't intimidated and he wasn't out to prove anything, but he clearly was somebody you didn't want to fuck with.

Jackson Catt was physically imposing and intellectually surprising. But nobody offered to pay him to think. Unless you paid close attention, you might not notice how smart he was. But his size, his attitude, the way he carried himself, the sense that he could physically destroy anything that got in his way was impossible to miss.

He was big, black, tough, unafraid, a helluva fighter and handy with weapons. That was his image. It also became his profession. Bodyguard. Protection for hire. It suited him.

The times suited him, too. Rock 'n' roll was exploding, the bands were getting around, making money, being celebrities, in need of guarding when they're on the road, somebody to look after them, somebody tough but hip, too, not some fucking ex-cop but somebody who knew how to get down and still keep an eye on things, keep everybody cooled out. Jackson Catt was the man.

It wasn't long before he was getting more offers than he knew what to do with. Shit, it was great. Traveled first class, even private planes, suites in the best hotels, good looking women, what's not to like?

He'd done the biggest stars, Mick, Pete, Stills, cute little Linda Ronstadt, cute little Peter Frampton, Stevie Winwood, hell, him and all the other high heeled boys. If they could afford it, he was the guy they wanted. He just had a way about him and the word got around. He was in demand.

It wasn't long though before the promoters took over. They were taking over everything. It was more efficient. They scheduled the

bands anyhow, so it made sense that they scheduled him, too. When the show went out on the road, he went along to keep things in order. Less scattered that way.

Plus, they usually had other stuff that needed doing in between tours. He moved cash around, collected old debts, placed bets, sometimes sent a message that needed some heft behind it.

But the best part of working for them, rather than the rockers, was that the promoters had the cops wired. The Man knew who you worked for, he left you alone. Hell, half of them padded their take-home pay big time moonlighting the concerts and so they cut the promoters a lot of slack. That meant they cut him a lot of slack, too. A big advantage when some of what you're doing is illegal.

Fact is, all that cover he was afforded made him a little too cocky after a while. He was apprehended in Chicago as he stuffed a guy into the trunk of a car. The plan was to take him for a ride, talk to him about the debt he owed and come to an understanding about exactly how it was going to be repaid.

Who knew the guy was a snitch in an undercover drug deal? Who knew the feds had him under surveillance? Who knew they would charge Jackson Catt with felony kidnapping?

It took a lot of pull to get that one straightened out. Sollie Gold had to call in a lot of chits to get it done. Put Catt deep in the guy's debt, which wasn't a good place to be. All of a sudden, the pay got worse and the jobs got dirtier.

The Boys

"Sainty," Solomon said, "What're you doing?"

"Working," said Sainty from the reception room, "like what you pay me to do."

"You work too hard."

"Yeah, and you pay me too little. What's your point?"

"Why don't you take off? Call it a day."

"And leave you here by yourself? You might not survive."

"I'll be all right. Go ahead. I'll close up."

"What's going on, Sollie?"

"Nothing. I just want to sit here by myself. Think about things while it's peaceful like this."

"You're not gonna kill yourself or anything, right?"

"Good night, Sainty. See you tomorrow."

She left, took the elevator to the lobby, saw the indicator on the other elevator stop at their floor, felt the lobby phone still warm to the touch, thought about what a sneaky son of a bitch she worked for, shrugged and headed home, early for a change.

Markey came in first, followed by his brother.

"The famous Dice," said Sollie, extended a hand.

"I wanted to see for myself the guy been taking my little brother for such a ride," said Dice, looking from Gold to his brother and back.

"I've had some luck," said Gold.

Susan Park

Susan Park was a photographer. She wanted to take pictures of what was happening: all these exotic people on the streets, in the studio at the radio stations, and especially when they were up on stage. She wanted to capture the moment.

The security team at the Grande was not cooperative. She grabbed a few photos here and there before they'd run her off, and they flat out refused her ask for backstage access, to get some shots when the bands weren't performing, the stars just doing their regular people stuff before the show.

She had better luck at the radio stations, especially ABX, where freeform took hold. Susan had a small studio down the block from the station and worked out a deal to trade her photographic services for ads. She shot group photos of the staff, individual photos of the different deejays, and every once in a while she'd get a heads up that one or another of the rockers was coming by to do an interview, tout their album, maybe play some tunes. They were looking for access to that vast audience that was growing up around the new music. She was looking for access to them.

Mostly though it was catch as catch can. Not all the staff liked having her around, but she became more aggressive about inserting herself into the day to day operations there and after a while, like it or not, she was accepted if not welcomed. Everybody liked having their picture taken, especially when celebrities dropped by, so Susan was able to work her way inside even if for most of them she was a pain in the ass.

The concert scene was a tougher nut. She cozied up to Sollie Gold every chance she got and made no progress worth mentioning until fate finally intervened.

Susan was Asian. Her given name was Soo San Park. Her family was active in the Korean community in the city. They ran a couple of restaurants that mostly served the locals. Soo San, like the rest of the family, put in lots of time there cleaning, bussing, and cooking when she was growing up.

Sollie asked her one afternoon if her family might keep one of the places open late to feed a band and its entourage. "We're talking probably thirty," he said. The Who were playing what Townshend advised was to be a very long show at the Grande. They were debuting their new work, *Tommy*. They wanted something to eat when they were done. McDonald's wasn't going to cut it.

"I'll take care of it," she told Sollie. She and her cousins set up a steam table and arranged banquet tables in the dressing room backstage, each of them covered with a table cloth, set with China and silverware, and flowers as centerpieces. They brought an entire van of food from the restaurant, specialty dishes of every sort to complement the Korean ribs, entire slabs perfectly prepared and generously spiced.

It blew the band away. They ate everything Susan brought to the feast. Keith Moon even ate the flowers. Pete was happy so Sollie was happy. The meal went on until 3 a.m. Susan got a few pictures while her cousins served the food. It was a start.

Augie Mertz

"Ah, Mr. Mertz," said Captain Flynn, standing and reaching across his desk to shake hands, "how's my favorite police reporter?"

"Fine, Captain, fine. Thanks for seeing me."

"Always have time for our Department's personal contact with the city's great unwashed."

Mertz sat, smiled and said, "Oh, most of our readers wash, Captain. It's just the hippies we wonder about and most of them don't read."

"Well, we appreciate your efforts to keep in touch with us. There seems to be some elements over your way who publish first and ask questions later."

"New publisher wants to make a splash, Captain. Drive those circulation figures to impress his family. He's not a bad guy, but he's sure as hell ambitious."

"Nothing wrong with ambition, but it's good to keep in mind who your friends are, going forward. He's not making any friends over here. But that's a discussion for later. What can I do for you?"

"I have an idea for a series I wanted to run by you. I finally got to Europe last month. First time and it was a great vacation. London especially impressed the hell out of me. Very well run city, that one."

"I've been there. Has its moments, I suppose."

"I'm thinking about an article comparing police tactics in London and Denver, how the departments are organized, how they deal with the public, how they do their jobs in keeping law and order. All that sort of thing."

"And?" said Flynn, meaning get to the point.

"And it will pivot around the concept of police carrying guns, you do here, they don't there. Why the difference? I asked the Chief the other day if he thought it would be possible to police the city without being armed? He put his hand on his gun before he answered, shook his head 'no!' and left it there the rest of the conversation."

They both laughed.

"Mr. Mertz, you are a character. I like your style. Chief probably hasn't slept since, wondering if you're going to get the public worked up about taking away his .38 Special. Best friend he's ever had."

They laughed again.

"So what do you think?" Mertz asked.

"About?"

"About the story, the series? Would you cooperate if I wrote it?"

"Oh, I'm a big believer in cooperation, Mr. Mertz. The longer you know me, the clearer it will become. I give it and expect it, both. If you write a fair and balanced piece on the subject of guns in police work, I have no problem with it.

"But, of course, the subject is apples and oranges. Different world over there. No right to keep and bear arms, no wild west mentality, not many officers ever confronted with a gun, let alone shot and killed by some cowboy in the commission of a crime. The criminals are unarmed, the cops can be, too.

"Not the case in the good ol' USA. Never will be. It's not the way things are oriented in this country. People have a passion for their guns and they aren't about to give them up. That means we can't either. In fact, over time, they'll be trending our direction rather than the other way around. That would be my guess."

"But then," said Mertz, "there's the fact that the same firepower, or at least the potential to carry the same firepower, is brought to all the victimless crimes and the non-violent crimes that our cops cover, too."

"Well," said Flynn, with a very smug smile, "that is a whole other discussion, isn't it? Victimless crime? Is there really any such animal?"

"You, for instance, Mr. Mertz," he said, suddenly leaning forward, his hands clasped together in front of his body with one finger pointing at the reporter's chest and a look on his face that was suddenly far less than friendly, "are your crimes victimless?"

"What?" said Mertz, sitting up and making something of a choking sound in his throat before speaking again, "my crimes? What are you talking about?"

The stillness in the room was complete, the throbbing of his pulse in his ear deafening, the pace at which his mind was racing and the Cheshire cat smile on Flynn's face absorbed his every breath as Augie tried to regain his composure.

"Let's be real, Mr. Mertz. You've been shacking with Chloe McClain for several months now. Beautiful girl, but she has a helluva coke habit. Gram a day, sometimes two, maybe an eight ball on the weekends. Expensive.

"We might wonder: is Augie Mertz keeping this girl on a reporter's salary? All that and European vacations, too. Can't be, can it? No way! No, he's doing what everybody does when they're confronted with that kind of expense. First, you buy enough to peel off a little to sell to friends, and then a little more, and pretty soon you're in the business.

"You're moving enough to cover her habit and soon enough you're moving even more. Making a few bucks, more than a few bucks, and it

happens so fast. Best of all, it's a victimless crime, am I right? No harm, no foul. Until you're found out, that is. Then somebody will get hurt. Watch and see."

Augie was frozen in place. Every muscle in his body ached. He barely breathed.

"Relax," said the Captain, leaning back in his chair and softening the ice in his eyes. "Your mouth is hanging open. Very unattractive. These things can be unsettling, Mr. Mertz, very unsettling. But you'll find that sometimes when the sky falls in, a whole new opportunity opens up for us. Cooperation is the key."

He stood then, towering over the shrunken reporter and said, "You sit tight now. Somebody'll be with you in a minute." And he left the room.

Mertz sat in a stunned silence, trying to make sense of what had just happened, how a simple conversation with a dangerous man unraveled so quickly and with such devastating force.

Then the head narc, Rob Fabio, appeared, clapped him on the back and said, "Augie, it's time you and I had a little talk."

Sainty Germaine

Letitia St. Germaine was a tall, handsome, very shapely, very proud and capable young woman with dark eyes, high cheekbones, plump lips and caramel colored complexion, straight black hair that may or may not have been processed but you'd never have the nerve to ask her, and more than enough smarts and attitude to get a good looking black woman through the racial hurdles of the Sixties.

She hailed from a middle class family in upstate New York that knew her as Lettie, but everybody from the time she first arrived at Wayne State called her Sainty. She did a lot of painting, a little modeling, some socializing, and soon enough assumed a leadership role among her peers. She was somebody everyone wanted to know.

Shortly after enrolling, she met Cody, a pretty good sculptor and bartender who happened to be a white boy. He did his posing as an artist but made his living pouring drinks. Their relationship had a certain veneer of in-your-face hipness that the racial politics of the time made volatile, at least in many circles.

Cody unfortunately was also a lush in a profession where partying hearty was the norm of every shift and liquor obviously was handy. He drank to excess at a time when everybody celebrated getting high, getting off, letting it rip and making no apology. He skated as long as he could, getting a long ways down the road on good looks and charm, but could barely hold a job after a while, so severe was his drinking.

It was a drag, dealing with a drunk night after night and soon enough during the daytime too when he often was shitfaced by noon. Sainty loved him. She was loyal by nature. But she was inclined too to

take no shit and make no excuses, nor accept them, and soon enough she realized that if there was to be any stability in their lives, she was the one who would provide it. There by chance came the music business.

Strange place to find stability, rock 'n' roll, but she did. She, Cody, their peers to a greater or lesser degree were at the nascent stage of embarking on a career, finding a way to make a living other than dealing pot, the common commercial inclination of choice among the underground hipsters then. Many of them finally were taking those first tentative steps toward legal enterprise, showing a vague but earnest semblance of being responsible adults. She would make her way. He would sink or swim.

Sollie Gold promoted a small show at the college with Baby Huey and the Babysitters, the perfect venue for a happening dude like Huey, who weighed about 300 pounds and played his gigs wearing nothing but a big diaper around the middle of his very large, shiny black body and about his fat fingers a dazzling array of rings, many of which popped open with the flick of a tiny lever where the bezel joined the shank for access to the ample piles of cocaine they contained beneath the semi-precious stones. Huey might snort four or five fingers a night. His shows cooked.

He was cooking that night when Sainty and a large crowd of her fellow artists gathered at the show. Performance was happening on stage but it was taking root in the audience, too. A small klatch of taciturn, long-haired and bearded boys, denim clad troublemakers from the lefties on campus who thought themselves activists and mostly were just dweebs with big mouths and the willingness to get

arrested. Young People's Social League, YPSLs as they were called, were going to "Tom" Huey. They said they were making a statement.

It was one of their latest stunts, calling out the brothers who weren't radical enough for their taste, were too close to their white oppressors, were maybe making money instead of suffering the black man's fate in capitalist Amerika. Black man ought to sing the blues, protest songs, not this "soul" shit, dressed up like a fool, entertaining the white folks. These young radicals thought they owed it to their black brothers to show them the error of their ways. They were generous that way.

They had a bucket of paint and were weaving through the audience toward the little stage with every intention of dousing him with their whiteface stunt, call him out as a lackey of greedy Solomon Gold, when Sainty got wind of it.

She called *them* out in the middle of the show, in front of Huey and Sollie and the audience and god himself if he was watching. She stopped the show dead in its tracks, unleashed a torrent of expletives and a tirade that made her reputation in the early days of rock 'n' roll and instantly cemented her relationship with Sollie Gold, who thereafter would tell anyone who'd listen, saying with great admiration, "I mean, the mouth on that woman! That is one bad bitch!"

"You sad little pieces of shit," she yelled at them, pointing them out where they were advancing on the stage, "you worthless, washed up pussies. Who the fuck do you think you are, busting into this show?"

The band was still playing, the crowd mostly not yet aware of the commotion near the stage, but Huey had his eye on it, watching it go down.

She was in their face now. "This man here," she screamed at them, pointing at Huey, "got more soul in his little finger than any you shrunken little pricks got in your entire ugly being. Get the fuck out of here, you know what's good for you! You think you're gonna Tom him? Take your sad socialist shit back to your cribs, you pathetic little white boys, before I kick your ass."

The music was very soft now, sotto voce, like a little rhythm accompaniment to Sainty's tirade, the musicians digging her moves, vamping behind her, the drummer high hatting her best phrases, kicking the bass drum to put an exclamation point on her every sentence. Huey was snapping his fingers, rocking back and forth from one leg to the other, a smile on his face, raising his hand just once to his face and inhaling deeply, stealthy as a 300 pound man on stage in a diaper can be.

The YPSLs reacted first with attitude, then confusion, then a growing panic as the crowd began to surround them, increasingly hostile as Sainty's denouncement took hold. She had cred with the crowd where theirs was clearly questionable.

There were no security details in those days, no bodyguards, no off duty cops except maybe a fat old campus cop back stage somewhere eating donuts. Maybe none was needed. Sainty Germane was a one woman wrecking crew that night.

She won over the crowd, many of whom never really knew what happened except that this babe shouted down a group of YPSLs so effectively that she pretty much drove them off campus for good,

never to be heard from again. She won over Huey and the band, who loved every minute of her performance, like an unscheduled guest appearance by an unknown artist who rocked the crowd.

And, for better or worse, she won over Sollie, who noted that uniquely among women he knew she spoke the language of the profession. He immediately hired her. "Ninety bucks a week, and all the Pepsi you can drink," he said. "Make it a hundred!" she said. He looked at her for only a moment before saying, "Done!" It was the first time in his life he shook a woman's hand on a deal.

She became the gatekeeper. From that time on, if you wanted something from that office, needed a piece of Sollie Gold, something for his attention, his consideration or his blessing, had some action that might make the grade, some bitch to lay out for apology or restitution, some anything that was going anywhere, you went through Sainty or you didn't go at all.

The egos in the business were huge, the level of maturity minimal, the energy high and the profanity proficient. Sainty rode herd on it. She could sweet talk a difficult customer as easily as she could bust his balls. Always a diplomat when it was effective, she never hesitated to lower the boom on the overly pompous, the needlessly difficult, the too cute, the too crude, the too full of themselves to notice who they were dealing with. It was an oversight they only made once. When you pissed off Sainty Germaine, you quickly learned what wrath was all about. More than once it was said by people in the trade that like a dying man they saw their life flash before their eyes when she was in their face.

While she took no prisoners she succeeded because she also was unfailingly loyal to the people who did their job. Humility was rare in

her business. She rewarded it accordingly. She was a fierce enemy, but you couldn't have a truer friend.

Augie Mertz and Chloe McClain

When you're 5'6" or maybe 5'7" on a good day, you don't attract a lot of attention from the ladies. Not the ones you want to attract. You're smart as a whip and you've got a good job and for 25 years old you seem to be pretty happening, but you find out fast enough that it doesn't mean shit if you're also a short, pudgy guy with a face maybe a mother could love but nobody else and the chicks who matter have their sights set a little higher and you're not there. Augie Mertz wasn't.

So that night at the club when a tall, gorgeous and barely dressed young woman threw an arm around your shoulders where you're seated at the bar of the Twenty Grand, which is full of great looking women none of whom ever gives you the time of day, and this woman pulled you toward her in a way that planted your face right between her rather awesome breasts and said, "I was hoping you could tighten me up and maybe we could have some fun," you looked her in the eye and said, "Wait right here," and you cornered a known drug dealer who hangs by the restroom and you said, "Um, I need to make a buy."

He looked at you for a minute and said, "Am I mistaken or are you that police reporter for the newspaper?" and you said, "That's a fact but it's not the matter at hand and if you will take care of me right now right fast I'll do everything I can to make sure your name never finds its way to my typewriter."

"That could be taken as a threat or a promise," he said, and you said, "Please, this is absolutely no hassle. I have a chance to score this

awesome chick and I need some coke to get it done, and this is too good to pass up, so you gotta help me."

He looked at you and said, "Have you done this before?" and you said, "No, but I want to do it now," and he said, "This must be some chick," and you said, "She's sitting right over there," and he looked and nodded and smiled and said, "Ah, Chloe." And he put his arm around your shoulders, said, "Come with me," and took you to a stall in the men's room where he sold you an eight ball for \$500.

"Can't I just buy a gram?" you said. "That's an entire week's salary."

He said, "This is what you're going to need. Believe me when I tell you."

Sollie and Strawn

"Why are you so down on Strawn?" Sainty said. "I don't get it. He seems like a good guy to me."

Sollie shrugged, tucked his chin into his chest and then thrust it toward her, shaking his head "no," said, "Don't trust him. He's careless sometimes. Says things in his column makes me think he's overreaching. Like he doesn't know who he is, what he really wants. It makes me nervous, a guy like that, he might say anything, you know?"

"I know he's a good guy," Sainty said. "His heart's in the right place. I think he's just trying to fit in, you know, be hip, make all this shit fit into the idea he has of it. His brother is so cool and Jon's just trying to catch up. That make sense?"

"Yeah, well, I wish he'd get hip to what's what. Wrote the other day our shows don't work 'cause we make the audience sit and listen when they want to get up and boogie. Just what I fucking need, him encouraging more trouble with the crowd. I got every goon in town working security for me, trying to keep a lid on the crazies, in their seats, keep 'em from rushing the stage, stomping all over each other.

"We got 10,000 people smoking dope, rocking to the best bands, freaks outside trying to break down the doors, screaming 'music should be free, let me in, whee oop, whee oop.' We're always about a cunt's hair from flat out riot conditions and he wants 'em dancing in the aisles. What the fuck? This ain't a club we're running, it's a concert business, for Christ's sake."

"I can tell you where the disconnect is with the guy, Sollie. He's a true believer. Really! Everybody's talking about being real, don't sell

out, free the people, down with commercialism, getting past the almighty dollar, having some kind of artistic integrity, social integrity, something besides whoever makes the most money wins, no matter how they get it. That stuff, yeah, sure, you laugh, the smart guys all laugh their asses off in private, everybody knows better. Except Strawn. He really believes it. That's where he's coming from."

"He's a schmuck. Peace and love and five bucks'll buy you a burger. I don't need him fucking with my business over some fantasy he wants to sell his readers."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Sollie. It's not a fantasy to him. He believes it. Besides, you know you need him, just like he needs you. It's symbiotic, right?"

"Yeah? What, you sweet on him or something? Maybe it's you needs him. He finally get in your pants?"

"Fuck you, Sollie!" All of a sudden, Sainty took off. Sollie pushed her buttons and he was about to feel the wrath. They talked shit to each other every day as a matter of course and more than once he'd seen her lower the boom on one or another of the pompous assholes that came calling. But now it was his turn and it rained down on him with the same force she showered on all the others.

"Him and every other guy walks through that door has hit on me, everyone 'cept you and that's 'cause the only dick you got's in your wallet. And not one of them gets anywhere with me. None of 'em.

"I've got to ride herd on this cluster fuck of yours, all these little boys with their big ideas, these rock & roll studs with their high heels and eye liner. Fuck just one of 'em and they'd all know about it like that! Then I'm done for.

“No,” she said, shaking her head and looking at Sollie like he needs to hear this, needs to know why she’s able to do what she does, run this fucking madhouse while he’s pissing away his money on football games and race horses, make the nuts and bolts of this business happen day in and day out for next to no money in a world that doesn’t give a shit for women, who they are, what they need, what they do, let alone a black woman in the rock ‘n’ roll circus, this lily white gangbang where even the few and far between brothers be quick to tell you ‘sisters just don’t have it together yet,’ tell Sollie this shit so maybe he’ll get it for once, “no, I don’t sleep with any of ‘em and that’s why they jump when I tell ‘em what to do. They’re afraid of me. And that’s how it’s gonna be. You can count on it. But they’d laugh in my face if they knew I could be had. Then I’m just another black bitch with attitude. Dig it. Ain’t gonna happen.”

Sollie just looked at her, amazed as always by the woman’s balls.

Bodie Again With Feeling

"Bobby's opening for Cream at the Grande tonight, man. Can you believe that?" Bodie said when Nicky answered the door. Hendrix was playing in the background.

"Lotta good players coming to town," Nicky said, nodding over his right shoulder at the tune soaring in the other room. "Come on in, man. So Bobby's gonna be on the same stage same night as Eric Clapton. We played there last week. Small crowd but we absolutely killed it."

"Yeah, man, sorry I missed it. Tied up elsewhere unfortunately."

"Sollie had us open for a band called Aum. They should have opened for us."

"Aum, yeah, that's what I heard. Maybe that's why I was elsewhere."

"Whatever. No big deal. We're booked there again in a few weeks. You gonna see Bobby tonight?"

"I think I will. Jon tells me Cream is awesome live. Said he hopes Bobby can hang in there. Tough to play when the crows just wants to see the headliner."

"Well, you know what. He'll do just fine. He belongs with those guys. God himself might even learn a few new licks if he isn't nodding."

"Bobby's got the talent for sure. But he's only eighteen. Very young, man."

"Hey," Nicky said, handing him a freshly roller reefer, 'tell you what. I met Stevie Winwood a while back, playing with Spencer Davis.

Dude was fifteen and get this. He'd already been with 'em for a year. These are kids making serious music."

"You got that right. How are we doing?"

Nicky handed him a fistful of cash, said, "I can do ten more."

Escape Velocity

Bobby took off. He jammed with all the local hotshots, the best players at the smoky clubs, played lead for a while in a damned good local band, making enough of a name for himself that the big guns around the country took notice. It took a few years but he started getting some serious attention.

He was offered lead in several bands, Chicago, David Bowie, groups of that stature, and turned them down. There was even a rumor the Stones auditioned him before they choose Ronnie Wood, but Bobby said it wasn't true and didn't matter. He wanted to do his own thing his own way. But the offers to record with jazz cats like Herbie Hancock, Weather Report, even Miles Davis, those he accepted with pleasure. Word got around.

Finally got his own record contract. At 24, he signed a three album deal with Atlantic Records and a series of tours to promote them. The first record he called Public Hair. The cover is a shot of the back of his head, his hair, ribbons, feathers and all, in miniature, superimposed on the groin of a naked woman. It's selling okay, not great.

The tours will help. Another one kicks off tomorrow. He's opening a few of the Stones' shows, a half dozen Pink Floyd gigs, about that many Crosby, Stills & Nash, arena and stadium-size shows, great exposure that should grow the fan base. That plus a dozen or so small venues where he can headline and fill the room. Half the crowds at those small shows are musicians, come to hear him work his mojo. The kids love him, but the musicians respect him, what he can do with

an axe. They know the difference. He's got serious chops. Like Hendrix, Clapton, Bloomfield, Jeff Beck, he's a natural. Professionals come to pay their respects.

Kelly and Strawn

Bobby and Strawn are long since pals. He and Strawn's cousin Kelly have been an item for years. Strawn introduced them. He hears from her and he hears from Bobby, maybe more than he wants to know. More than he'd ever write about. There's a fine line there: what's personal, what's the public's interest. Self-censorship based on integrity. What feels right, what feels like it would compromise their friendship. Sometimes it's hard to know.

Kelly and Strawn were sitting in her home, a small, comfortable cottage in the University District that she shared with Bobby. It was afternoon, they were having a late lunch, Bobby was still asleep. Kelly was a beautiful girl, third generation Irish, pale, freckled, red-headed, medium height, well built, and Catholic. Amidst the usual hippie décor, the posters and tapestries, were iconography of saints and Madonnas.

"I never imagined a musician for a boyfriend. But Bobby is so sweet. Even my parents like him, though they won't say so exactly. Don't like us living together. 'In sin', you know. They pretend he's just a phase I'm going through. This whole hippie thing. Rites of passage. Coming of age. 'Pretty soon she'll settle down, marry a boy from the neighborhood. Have a half dozen kids.' Well, maybe, but I don't think so."

She was a hippie only in the minds of people straight enough not to know the difference, exceedingly modest by the standards of her peers. Christ, she even wore a bra. She might smoke a little reefer and shack with a musician, but it was the traditional side of her that

drew Bobby, it seemed, a touchstone to Midwestern standards, a sense of something stable and familiar in the midst of the rock 'n' roll chaos.

Strawn and Kelly had known each other since they were kids. In spite of the difference in their age, he had always been fascinated by her. Even as a child, she was striking, not only her looks but her poise, the way she carried herself, dignified and yet casually sexy. She had that allure about her that got plenty of attention, especially from the boys. Strawn remembered his surprise at the jealousy she provoked in him when she began to return their attention. Truth was, he'd always had a thing for her, first cousins or not.

Not that it would go anywhere. Five years between them was too much difference. No playing doctor as kids, no such luck. But they remained close through their teenage years, and even when he was away at college they managed to see a lot of each other at the holidays and over the summer.

Looking at her now, she was still the object of his affection, but it had long since and always after been platonic. The boys had come and gone, a few that were serious and plenty that were just a date or two, and Strawn was all right with it. Maturity, maybe. He was good with being her friend and her confidant.

And now there was Bobby. Her lover. His friend. He was happy they had found each other, that he had a role in bringing them together. They were a beautiful couple, so hip, so happening, so exactly what he believed the times were all about. Different, but traditional, too, in the ways that still matter. And solid too, at least so far, despite the pressures of the road, the shifting mores, the challenges Bobby's odd combination of blazing ambition and naivety

presented. She was the safe harbor, he the sailing ship that managed to return to it.

"I believe in family," Kelly said, "just as strongly as my parents do. Marriage, too. But there are things I want to do that are different than the way they do them. I value what they taught me, the values they gave me, but there are things they believe in that don't work for me."

They were sitting on the front porch, the air warming with the coming Spring, the breeze off the lake gentle, the sun just beginning to set out west. A few puffy clouds drifted past, picking up some color where everything for months before had been grey. A scene ripe for reflection.

"I know they wonder what it's all about, all these changes that are roaring through their lives. My friends don't look like any kind of people they ever knew before. All the costumes, the hairy legs, nipples sticking out. Skirts so short you know the color of their underwear. It's really a challenge for them to accept it all. Much easier to criticize all this flaunting it that they see. But they don't, not much. I know they think it will all pass away soon enough, after we all grow up."

"Yeah," Strawn said with a shrug, "lots of changes. The sexual revolution alone is a lot for them to absorb. Pretty different world since the Pill."

"Hmm, better too, I suppose. Better for you guys, for sure. All us girls supposed to break free of our inhibitions, put out for you any time you ask."

"Peace and love, you know. No complaints here."

"Maybe no complaints from the ladies either. You ever think of that? God makes all of us curious. Nice to play around a little without getting knocked up."

“Still, you can’t help but notice it’s the woman has to take the pill. Still up to us to take the precautions. Think there’ll ever be a pill for men?”

Strawn looked at her sideways, a smile on his face. She loved confrontational, intellectually challenging conversation. Putting you on notice. Always ready to show she’s nobody’s fool. Not by a long shot.

“For me,” he said, “peace and love grew out of the civil rights movement. All that ugliness down South. Every night on TV, the Klan, the cops and their dogs, the fire hoses. This is how we treat people? There has to be a better way, right?”

“I was a little kid then,” she said, “but it seems like it’s still happening. Look at the way the protesters are treated. Like Chicago in 1968. Democratic National Convention. Lincoln Park was like a war zone. Brought to you live and in color, no less.

“All these years later, has it really changed? Still Nixon, still Vietnam, still us and them. I focus on optimism, believe our better angels will triumph, but it’s a struggle.”

She stood up suddenly, grasping her arms around her, pacing in a circle before coming back to her seat, punching the cushion two or three times, and sitting again.

“What a world we live in. All that pain, the suffering. Why shouldn’t we want it to change. You wonder how long this will go on. Will we ever say ‘enough?’

“Then you meet somebody like Bobby, beautiful, child-like, gentle Bobby. All he wants to do is play his tunes, entertain you, get you high. Make you feel like your life is a dream. The world is a playpen. You can float on a bubble of love and peace. Like drifting through a

Parrish painting on a magic carpet. Why wouldn't we want to have it that way?"

Strawn stared out the window while she spoke. She had to wonder how much of this moment in time they really shared. He had always been like a big brother to her and now that age gap was noticeable in a different way. He was of an earlier generation, the tail end of his and yes, they were philosophically attuned. He was plugged into what was happening like very few his age were; still, he was an observer and a tentative participant in ways where she, his brother Bodie, Bobby were deep in the rituals and the mojo. That age difference made her wonder if he got it.

"People still find a way to excuse the meanness," Strawn said, "the phonies, the money grubbing. They say, 'it's always been like this.' Like it's human nature to devour each other.

"Money and power, play the poor against the poor. That's the game, right? Hippies, Yippies, Black Power, Chicano Power, rednecks, gooks, Catholics, Jews and Muslims, you name it. Put them in their corner, slap a label on them, give them reason to hate each other. Like Dylan says, we're only a pawn in their game.

"That's what's so powerful for me about this scene. This place between the generations. I've got to believe it's an inflection point, Kelly, a chance to change the culture. That's what keeps me going. Like, maybe we can actually get it done."

Now he was up and pacing. The porch wasn't large, so he was walking in circles. She couldn't help but smile at his fervor, the passion he felt for what he said. It occurred to her in watching him, hearing what he had to say, that they shared that passion for the

ideals, but she came at them from a spiritual longing where his was political.

He was rubbing his hands together, bent forward from the waist, looking a bit maniacal. He stopped, looked at Kelly, laughed at himself.

"Maybe we're just fools, you know. All of us believers. Like in the Tarot. Walking to the edge of the cliff, dog nipping at our heels, ready to take that step into the beyond. Guess we better *hope* for a magic carpet. Otherwise, it's gonna be a long way down."

Park in Focus

"What's with the chick with the camera?" Ric Grech asked a roadie. "Who told her she could be shooting back here?"

"She's the one who's feeding us. I guess that's part of the deal."

"Who made that deal?" Ginger Baker said. "I don't remember anybody asking me about it. Probably Clapton gave the okay. He loves having his mug on film, tall, dark, and handsome fuck that he is."

"Well, the food's great, so no complaints there. A well fed bass player is a happy musician."

"Yeah, but you wonder where those pictures end up, know what I mean? Me walking around backstage in my skivies, playing with my pud 'stead of my drums."

"You weren't complaining when we sat down to eat," the roadie said. "Best food by far we've had on this tour. Any of 'em for that matter."

"You got that right," Baker said. "Food's good. She's not much to look at and I sure don't know about those pictures. Not sure I like having gooks back here."

"I believe she's Korean."

"All the same to me," Baker said. "She oughta stick to cooking, maybe do the laundry, too. I'd have no complaints." He shrugged and walked away.

"Nice guy," said the roadie.

"Yeah, I don't know what it is about those drummers," Grech said. "Bonham's the same way. Mean son of a bitch. You'd think they get that anger out beating on those skins every night."

Susan Park did stick to cooking. Spent several years backstage at Sollie's concerts feeding the bands. That's how she got all those photographs she's been showing lately. A couple times as featured artist at local galleries, even a big deal opening when Russ hosted an effort at the Grande one night to kickstart a Michigan Music Hall of Fame initiative. A dozen of her large format photos on the walls.

Everybody was there, even Barry Gordy, Smokey Robinson, Aretha Franklin, Mitch Ryder, most of the MC5, Iggy and the Stooges. It was wild. Susan was firing off shots as fast as she could shoot and reload. By the time Diana Ross made her entrance, crap, Susan was out of film.

The King Undercover

"Remember what I told you the last time?" Fabio said to the Captain.

"The last time when?"

"When we worked Elvis."

"If I remember correctly, you said he had the hard fuzzies for you."

"What I said is: he'll be back."

"Because he's got the hots for you?"

"He's got it for cops. A groupie. Likes those uniforms, the badge, the gun. Take it to the bank. He wants to hang with us."

"Stop me if this is something I don't want to know. And I know you will, Mr. Fabio, because you know how I feel about protecting the Department. Just like I know how you have the hots for courting the King. So let's be perfectly clear when you tell me what you have to say. Hang with you how?"

"He wants to play narc. Says he has a thing about drugs."

"A thing about drugs? That's the truth! Last time he was here, the guy was a pin cushion. Pharmacy on the hoof. He's got a thing, all right. His doctor sees to it."

"True that. But he wants to go after the bad guys. Hates those hippies, he tells me. Hates all that illegal drug trade."

"Are you telling me he wants to go on a drug raid?"

"That is the message. Nixon made him honorary DEA when they met. Gave him a badge and everything. Seems like Elvis thinks it's for real."

"Here is my official reply to a query from Mr. Presley about an upcoming visit he plans to pay our fair city. We are pleased to present Elvis Presley with the position as Honorary Captain to the Detroit Police Department in recognition of his support for law officers and their work to serve and protect. Get him a Captain's uniform and have our guys get some photographs. That's all, understood."

"Yes, sir!"

"And, Rob, anything else you and your boyfriend cook up is something I know absolutely nothing about. Understood? This discussion is ended."

Backstage Pass

Strawn is backstage. Another gig, another review. Gets to be a blur. He loves the music, but the business is mean. Culture clash, up close and personal.

Coming in to the arena, he sees the cops working the doors, shaking down the hippies, feeling up the chicks. No bras, sometimes no underwear, a lot to check out there. And busting heads if anybody gives them lip. \$50 an hour each they make. All hail rock 'n' roll. Deliver me from the days of old.

The narcs are in plainclothes, nosing around the audience out front. They bust very few of the dealers at the shows, just watch them working the crowd, keeping tabs. Penny ante stuff, lids and bindles, but it adds up. Plenty of time to catch them off site, drop that RICO bomb on them, bam! Take everything they've got.

The cops know Strawn and he them well enough to nod hello and give each other room. Like Sollie, who employs them, they're wary of the reporter to the degree they fear the press. Not that they'd hesitate to frame him if he fucked with them, but until he does and he hasn't yet, they keep an uneasy truce. Sleeping dogs and all that.

He sizes up the crowd, looks over the stage, the wall of amps at the back, the drum kit on the riser, the baby grand, the racks of guitars tuned and ready to go. Above it, the canisters of lights high in the arc of the roof of this cavernous hall. Before it the rows of seats stretching off into the dim distance. Used to be he'd catch the shows from there, the nose bleed seats, just to write a review of the show *they* saw, the fans who loved the music but couldn't afford anything

closer than the \$5 ticket. His readers. But the crowds are too rowdy now, or maybe he's just too old. Safer backstage, where the comforts are found.

He watches a tall, thin man ease past the guards. No backstage pass, but the roadie who's been waiting for him gives them the sign. They let him through. Long, flowing hair and Poncho Villa 'stache, hipster suit, salmon colored corduroy, thread of kings, you know, wide lapels and bell bottoms, red cowboy boots, embroidered shirt, loosely knotted bright blue tie with red fingerprints on it. Carrying a lizard skin briefcase. Expensive gear, hear?

He and the roadie walk through the crowd of hangers-on, groupies and cops, stop at the dressing room. Have a word with the cop who's working the door. Stands aside and lets them in. Looks the other way. Another deal going down. Now the band can play.

Bobby and Kelly

Bobby appeared, sleepy eyed and barefoot, a cup of coffee in his hand. The March sun was just beginning to set. "Good ...what, afternoon?" he said, laughing a little and looking from Kelly to Strawn. "Seems like I slept in."

He kissed Kelly on the cheek, hugged Strawn where he sat, found himself a place to settle. "How're you doing, brother?" he asked.

"Doing well, thanks. Kelly and I were just talking about how you're going to save the world."

"Yeah? What, beat it to death with a Stratocaster?"

They laughed. "Something like that. Maybe shine a little light in dark places."

"Must be talking about the business again. Mighty dark place, it is."

"Sort of like the world itself, huh? Business first, last and always."

"I guess that's true, but what do I know? I'm just a guitar player. Having a great time, you know, pickin' and grinnin'."

"He's always smiling," Kelly said, "like everything's okay. He won't show you the pain. He won't say so, but all the ugliness brings him down. Bobby is a sensitive guy. He feels things deeply. 'S why he's such a great musician. But the business can be so mean. People like Sollie make him sick. Literally sick to his stomach. Playing stadium shows and his checks bounce? He can't understand why they do it that way."

"The thing about Sollie," Strawn said, "is that he's very good at what he does, but he squeezes every drop of blood out of the rock,

makes it miserable for everybody. You think about it, the way he operates, you wonder why. He's very smart, hard, proud, even charming when he wants to be, but I don't think he likes himself very much. It's like anxiety drives him and he wants you to feel it, too."

"I don't think he's a very nice man," she said. "Somebody must have hurt him bad when he was young."

"You wonder," he said. "Thing is, he's very funny, quick as a cat, and every once in a while, from out of nowhere, he shows some real empathy for somebody, almost like he's human or something."

"Yeah, sometimes," said Bobby, "but only the really helpless. Unless you're totally powerless, he seems to take you as a threat, always wants to put you in your place. Sometimes you wonder where that place is."

Deep

"It's like this, Sollie. We can't carry you any longer. You asked us to raise the limit and we did. But what did Dice say? Said, don't get in too deep, Sollie. Don't get in too deep. Here we are, you're down a hundred large and you can't pay? A week goes by, you want another week. It's no good, Sollie. This is our business. You're making us hurt."

"Markey, come on. I make that much with one show. You know I'm good for it. Just squeezed this month. I've got a big show coming up later this month, sold out, I've got you covered, swear to God I do. It's not a problem."

"Big show end of the month? That's over 3 weeks away. By then the vig is going to eat your ass, Sollie. I come around for the money, you'll scream like a stuck pig, used to be friends, how can you do this to me?"

"Well," said Sollie, looking up at Markey from his desk with hooded eyes and the beginnings of a smile, "you want to go easy on the vig, 's okay with me."

"The vig is the vig, a bet is a bet. You win, I pay. You lose, you pay me. You can't pay, there's the vig. You still can't pay, I don't want to go there."

"Markey, come on. *That's* nothing needs to be said. I'll pay you! I'll *pay* you! In fact, you want to double down on the games this week, I know I've got the over-under nailed. We can wrap this up real quick, you know?"

Markey looked away, shaking his head slightly, trying to hide his disgust.

"I'm a bookie, Sollie, not a gambler. You got to the end of the month, a hundred large and the vig. Please don't make me ask you again."

Shot in the Dark

Bodie and a couple of his friends were partying one night, smoking dope, snorting a few lines, swapping lies. The room took on an edginess.

A fellow he maybe didn't know had joined them. His arm was in a sling, hair shaved very short, and one of the guys said, "Oh, man, we heard you got busted. One of them shot you, is that true?" He lifted the arm in the sling, grimaced, said, "Yeah, what a drag. Put a bullet right through my chest, just under my collar bone.

"Guess I was lucky 'cause it went clean through, didn't hit bone, just nicked my lung." He snorted a derisive laugh, said, "Lucky, right? Some kinda luck." And the talk went into the whys and wherefores, the whos and the whats.

At a point well into the conversation, which ebbed and flowed with the drugs and the various levels of enthusiasm for hearing about it, he finally said, "This is the part that's really weird! We're talking about 10 pounds of really good pot a guy fronted me," and he made sure not to glance at Bodie when he said it. "Ten pounds of Mexican colas and these guys came through the door like Marines after Hitler."

He shook his head at the memory, felt a little more unsettled than he expected, and the others looked away while he composed himself.

"You're gonna think I'm crazy. I can hardly believe it myself. But I swear to god, when the bust went down, all these narcs with guns came busting through the doors, screaming at the top of their lungs and the guns shaking in their hands they were so amped. Like this is

such a big deal, right. All these cowboys gonna put an end to this hippie shit once and for all.

"Here's the really weird thing: the guy who drew down on me, waved a .38 right in my face and sneered at me, looked me right in the eye while I was doing nothing but trying to raise my hands, he sort of smiled at me smug-like right before he shot me, the dude looked exactly like Elvis Presley. Exactly! Swear to god, he did."

Strawn's Beat

Strawn wanted to write about the music. Instead, he mostly wrote about the business. It was always in your face. The music was more elusive.

"Writing about music," Duke Ellington famously said, "is like dancing about architecture." He wasn't trying to be funny, just saying what is difficult about describing the arts. Like literature in translation, all those arguments about what is lost. Strawn got that same feeling when he talked to musicians about their music. What's there to say? Just listen! That's the attitude they put across.

Some of them like to talk about their work. Some are well spoken, a few even eloquent. Mick Jagger sounded like the prime minister selling the budget to the voters.

But most of them are borderline incoherent, hard pressed to string together a comprehensible couple of sentences. They're like beached fish when they start talking, flopping uncomfortably through their answers, their mouths opening and closing in the indigestible air, and wanting more than anything to return to the unspoken, sound-riddled deep from whence they come.

Yeah, but they need the press and they know it. So they do it. Concerts and radio play sell records. Newspapers and magazines, too, in a different way. In spite of all the skepticism this age has generated, especially in the young, people still believe that what they read in print, if not necessarily true, at least is what's happening. And everybody wants to be happening. Sollie, the bands, Strawn, the paper, the radio, hell, even the cops, city government and the

Chamber of Commerce, they need each other. All of them are in it together, like it or not. They're all on the make.

So all of them, the bands and the rest when their turn comes, they make the effort to explain themselves and guys like Strawn make the effort to translate. He knew they thought he was a jerk, but he did what he did. They paid him the respect due the newspaper's stroke, the power of the word. Everybody wants to look good in print. That's why they kissed his ass, a little anyway. Otherwise, most of them wouldn't give him the time of day.

There was so much to say, even if the players couldn't say it well. The world was deep in the throes of change. The evidence was everywhere you looked, in everything you heard, in the quiet moments of the soul. There was so much going on and music was its anthem. An entire generation was marching to it, shaking the foundation their parents built, and all the players were reacting.

Even the hard cases like Strawn could feel the ground moving beneath him, the old ways falling apart, new ways forming. Skeptics were everywhere, but day by day they were proven wrong. This isn't a momentary aberration. It's change. The old ways were being buried. They ain't coming back, seems like.

"Look at it this way," Strawn is saying to Abe Stongel, his editor, a tough old Polish Jew, WWII vet and hard bitten newsman, who needs convincing. "We've had the President assassinated, the entire civil rights movement, Bobby Kennedy, MLK and Malcolm X shot dead, a war that drove LBJ out of office and day by day is making liars of his generals, Nixon and his gang of thieves run the show, get run out of office, crowds of hundreds of thousands protesting, and the thing is:

it's all playing out in our living rooms every night, live on TV. Never happened like this before, the way it's right in your face in real time."

Stongel sits in a heap. Too many years bending his body to the shape of a chair pushed up to a battered metal desk. He is bald, rumped, his glasses smudged. His old white shirt is wet under the pits, the sleeves rolled up, an anchor tattoo showing from his days in the Navy. Smoke rises from his cigarette in an ashtray smothered in butts. The desk is covered with typewritten pages, the stack to the left awaiting his edits, the one to the right covered with red pencil marks. Barely visible is the thin film of printer's ink and nicotine in which they sit.

"We've had people marching in the streets before, don't kid yourself," he said. "You got this idea this is something historic. It's just life. Report it, but don't make it more than it is. How many times I got to tell you?"

"Tell me as often as you want, it won't make you right. This is it, Abe. Signal change. It's happening. These kids want to kickstart a different world. And there's enough of 'em to take a real shot at it. They might fail. I'm not kidding myself about that. It might not work out like they plan, but the world is going to be different, either way. You may not like it, you may not know what it is, but you can't pretend it isn't happening. Much as you might wish it was different, you can't hide your head in the sand."

Strawn's cut a lot of slack for somebody a generation younger than most of his peers at the paper. He'd hyped an event in New York to his editors, demanded to go, told them it was the story of the decade. They laughed at him, said, "In your dreams." Then woke up one morning and the story broke. Headlines all over the world. For

three days and a long time thereafter. Woodstock. The *FreeNews* missed it. Now he had a column three times a week and carte blanche to cover the stories he wanted. Not to say there wasn't resentment.

"Yeah," said Stongel, handing him the edits, "that's why we got us a hippie sympathizer like you on the paper. To tell us ignorant hacks what's what. Make sure we don't miss the momentous events of our time. Man on the moon? Who cares? We got dope smoking kids gonna change the world. Fix everything us old-timers fucked up. Am I right? BS, Strawn! Gimme the rewrite before you leave."

Bobby's Tunes

When Bobby talked about music, it was full of the excitement he felt when he made it, the identity it gave him, some of the trouble it caused him when he first began to play.

"It's all I ever wanted to do, playing music," Bobby said. "I heard sounds in my head ever since I can remember. Never knew what it was until I got a guitar. Then it all lined up. It was magical. It saved me, you know. Gave me a sense of myself. Like something rose up out of the goo of being a kid, took shape, came together. Like the Creature from the Black Lagoon, a monster was born. Once I got that guitar in my hands, look out! The whole world changed."

It was still the studs, the jocks, the frat rats who got the girls, ran the show in high school. But all that was beginning to change. These runty little guys with long hair and a guitar were all of a sudden *what it is*. The girls, even some of the happening babes, they were lining up.

"My friend, Terry, and me, we couldn't believe it. He played the piano. Another guy played drums. We got a couple of gigs playing birthday parties in Indianapolis, stuff like that, some school dance parties and stuff, all of a sudden we were stars. The girls couldn't get enough of us.

"Even the jocks, 'stead of wanting to kick our ass, started talking to us a little, telling us to hang around, show 'em a few chords, like that. We started out playing 'cause we liked it and because it was basically about all we knew how to do. Then, a couple of gigs and we started to see the possibilities."

He laughed at the memory, what it was like to suddenly find a place for yourself that seemed to solve all those questions a kid has when he's trying to imagine how it all fits together and where in it there's a place for him.

"But what really made it happen is the way it made me feel when I played. There's a place inside there's no other way to reach. It's like there's electric wires dangling inside you, giving off sparks, making you jumpy, but you don't know what to do with them. Then, you pick up an instrument - I know it's the same for a lot of other musicians 'cause we've talked about it - you pick up your axe and the whole world changes. Those wires get connected and the surge of energy is so powerful and so pure, like purely *you*, you know? You all of a sudden have this realization that you aren't just playing it, you *are* music. When you play, you know who you are. And you like it.

"And then you start plugging that sensation into an audience and it gets to be another thing entirely. Like you and the band and the crowd, you're one body and the music is your nerves. You hit a certain note, bend it a certain way, and you can feel the crowd hear it, bend with it. It's hard to explain, but you grow this connection with the people in the crowd and start getting plugged together, and then the energy explodes.

"People talk about how music takes them to a different place, a higher place. But the band gets taken there, too. The crowd is jamming just like the players are jamming. We're all making it happen together. The energy's flowing both ways. It's like you all become one organism and that being, that creature, is the music. That's how it gets made, or at least how it grows into something magical and god-like.

“Once you’ve had that feeling, it’s all you want to do. I couldn’t imagine any other kind of gig, like anywhere I would fit except playing music. It’s just me.”

Bobby was like a lot of kids who were looking for a new way to do things, a way to live without genuflecting to the dollar like their parents did. Trying to take stock of themselves, find what mattered to them, what gave them a thrill to get up and get after, that feeling of being alive and soaring. Peter Pan for adults.

“Being a musician, getting to play for a living, seems like such a gift. But it’s not like I thought it would be. Not so far. It’s a lot of work to get above the business end of it, just to clear your head enough to play as well as you can. It’s so cool when you get there, to make that music with the band and feel the audience lift off with you. Getting there is brutal sometimes. I wish we could just show up and play. I’d do it for free if I didn’t have to support myself.”

He paused for a minute, looking at Strawn with a sly smile, flicking his eyes briefly at Kelly, who was reclining on the sofa across the room. “But I do. Unless some rich woman comes along, decides to take care of me.” He ducked too late to avoid the pillow she threw, which smacked him alongside his head.

“I really am thankful for this talent I have, for getting to play. There’s nothing to complain about, I guess. I think of the guys working construction, digging ditches, standing in the line at the factory. They pay good money, hard earned money, to come to my shows and you *know* they think I’ve got it made.

“And I do, I do. But it’s not like they think. Not like I thought it would be, either. The business end of it takes up a lot of time and

sometimes it just sucks the oxygen out of the room. That's when it seems like just another job."

He was quiet for a while then, looking off into the distance, thinking about what was said, how he felt, wondering probably if he'd made himself understood. He and Strawn understood each other as much as any two people do. Far more than writer and subject, musician and fan. They were friends, colleagues of a sort. Witnesses, too, of this seismic shift that was happening.

"My father was an athlete," Bobby said. "Then manager of an insurance company. Pretty straight. I think he was ashamed of me at first. Long hair, the hippie thing. Hard for him to believe we could talk about rejecting all the things he cared about, the stuff he worked so hard for. Money, success, security. They were a mistake?"

"He was a vet, World War II. The war protests pissed him off. Korea, Vietnam, to him it was just another battle between good and evil. Us against the British, the South, the Nazis and Japs, the commies, it was all the same. Who would question our role in the world? He still believed in the US of A, my country right or wrong, love it or leave it, that stuff.

"Now he's got this long-haired kid who can't catch a ball or get a job at the bank, all he can do is make a racket with a guitar. I'm sure he was wondering, 'who is this guy?' It took him a while to get it. 'Music is a job?'

"I guess when he saw some write-ups in the local paper, he started to realize that some people thought I was pretty hot. This might be something more than just his son being a derelict and wasting his life.

"Music was maybe a profession, huh? Maybe even a respectable

one, do you suppose? It was a place he'd never been, this world I was working. Wasn't what he wanted for me, but better than he feared, I guess."

King Sized

David Sayles Walker is leaning forward from behind his massive desk trying to enunciate a point to the gentlemen who are calling on him, but he is drooling and therefore his enunciation is less than he had hoped, his point not well made. These gentlemen gathered here aren't sure what to make of him but they are giving him the benefit of every doubt, for David Sayles Walker is a rich and powerful son of a bitch, even if he did just recently arrive in town and even if he is a 30 year old smart ass with a big broad silver spoon stuck sideways up his ass and even if he these days is frankly strange as hell. He also is the Editor and Publisher of the *FreeNews* and nobody wants to get crossways with him.

So they are falling all over themselves in being gratuitously deferential as have all the others who've come calling since he landed here at the helm of the city's preeminent daily and called upon him to offer his opinions on a variety of important civic matters and he is more than willing to do so.

He's been groomed for this position and higher ones to come since the days of his New England childhood thru the prep schools and Harvard undergrad and MBA and Yale Divinity, too. He's been honed like surgical steel for any number of years now and this is the moment and now is the time and his audience is keen to genuflect at all the appropriate instances of endowment, but inexplicably he is drooling and they don't know what to do.

"I met him the day he arrived here," said one, "but I don't remember him acting like this."

"Maybe you know him better now," said another.

Walker looks at Rob Fabio his bodyguard who is standing near the wall to the left of his desk and looking at the floor almost imperceptibly smiling and vaguely shaking his head and Walker immediately is pissed. Fabio is a cop, a real cop, Detroit Police Department vice squad in fact and a smart son of a bitch but Walker didn't hire him to get smart with him. He hired him for what, to do what? He couldn't remember exactly what he hired him to do. He couldn't even remember hiring him exactly.

"Gentlemen, good of you to come, do it again soon, I'll keep you posted certainly but I've got another meeting to attend and that's all I can do for now. See yourselves out can you? Thanks."

He composes himself and turns to say something to Fabio, something precise but before he can his secretary is speaking to him standing there with big lips and tits and hips and her very short skirt saying something about Mertz wants to see him, did he want to see Mertz now and Walker blankly stared at her longer than he meant to before he said of course I want to see him Mary always do you understand?

And then she was gone and Augie Mertz was there. They said hello to each other and smiled a lot and then with as much business-like manner as he could muster Walker asked Fabio to give them a moment a confidential discussion they needed to have and Augie being my police reporter its better we not discuss this information in front of you who knows might even be even a lead article might not so maybe have yourself some coffee and Fabio left them alone.

"Do you have it?" he asked and Augie looked hesitant and his voice was louder when he asked again, "do you have it?" Now Augie was

smiling broadly, slyly, laughing at him and reaching in his briefcase, removing a very large bag of pink flake cocaine, which he held up between them, allowing it to swing brightly back and forth, glimmering seductively in the afternoon light.

Touring

It should have been great, this latest tour of Bobby's and the ones that followed, but it was a grind. The shows were solid, but the road was brutal. Far worse than it needed to be. The advance work was shoddy, the hotels second rate, the transportation commercial.

"The band was pretty good about it," Bobby said. "They just want to play the tunes and go get high after the show. Knock off a couple of chicks. Live the life. It was new enough to them, the younger ones, they were surprised when they *did* get paid. 'All this and money, too? Wow!'

"The older guys, especially the roadies, they'd been through it too many times already to pay much attention. They knew enough to make the most of whatever good came their way. The bullshit you learn to ignore it because it just keeps coming.

"Hard though, sometimes, watching the stars come and go. The Stones have limos, one for each of them. Pink Floyd, too. We show up in a school bus. You think to yourself, 'Hell, I can play as good as them. I want my limo, too.'"

The tour reached a low ebb one night in Florida when the credit cards were rejected, overdrawn the desk clerk said. The road manager threw up his hands and disappeared into the night, swearing, saying he quit. Couldn't take it anymore.

Bobby looked vacant, wandered around the lobby for a minute and then headed back out to the bus. He looked at the band, all these long-haired, happy to be gigging guys, some of them older than him and somehow not surprised.

Music and the music business are two different things in their mind. On stage, playing the music, feeling the crowd revving up with the riffs, life is beautiful. It's hard to imagine anything better. Then the gig ends, the crowd goes home, reality returns.

Catt reached Sainty at home and she tracked down Sollie, got him on the line. "Man, this is bullshit," Catt said. "We *know* Atlantic put up the money. Where'd it go?"

"Hold on a minute," Sollie said, and dialed a number on another phone. Catt overheard the conversation. Christ! Asking his wife to put it on her personal card. She swore a blue streak at him before giving up the number.

"This can't go on, Sollie. Bobby's getting down, this crap is wearing on him. Supposed to go out there every night and be a star. We can't even pay for his room. What the fuck, man?"

Deeper

"We got ourselves a situation, Sollie. Bad situation. My little brother gave you too much slack and now maybe you hanged yourself. Know what I mean?"

"Dice, lookit. There's no helping it. The show got cancelled, singer's sick. They'll make it up. I'll make it up. Just a bad break, 's all."

"No, you lookit! I don't like being fucked with. Period. I don't like guys who don't pay. Period. That means I don't like you, Sollie. And when I don't like people, it makes me want to hurt them. Just like you're hurting me, only worse."

"I understand, believe me, Dice. But you hurt me, makes it even harder for me to get you paid, am I right? Let's think about how to solve our problem."

Dice bristled visibly, looked like he might explode, but said, "Like what? What's the solution when a guy don't pay? Only one I know."

"There's some money in the mail now. Check from a record company. Tour money. Big company, money's good. Be here tomorrow. Soon as I cash the check, it's yours."

"How much?"

\$25K. It's a start."

"It's a hiccup. You owe us \$200,000, case you need reminding. What else?"

"Dice, let me step in here a minute," said Markie, looking at his brother with deference.

"Why not? You done a great job so far."

"I'm thinking, Sollie, you must have insurance. Am I right?"

"Sure, show gets cancelled, covers the losses, pays the vendors, that stuff. Nothing to me. No insurance on lost profits."

"But what about this tour money? How much more is coming?"

"None," said Sollie, "this probably wraps it up. Records aren't selling, so they may drop him. Bobby Thierry Band. I manage 'em."

"How's that work? They got a contract with the kid. They pay for his tour, the motels, the planes, all that?"

"Yeah, the band, expenses, it's how they promote the record. 'S where the money's coming from. Record don't sell, the tours ain't worth it. They quit paying, drop the act."

"What about accidents, somebody gets hurt? Plane crash or whatever?"

"They insure them. Big investment they have in these bands. They cover their ass big time."

"And what about you? You manage the band. They making you money?"

"The shows break even, if we're lucky. Like I told you, the record ain't selling. I got a piece of that, and there's nothing there. Nothing but headaches so far."

"What about the insurance?"

Sollie looked at Markie, whose eyes were narrowing, and then at Dice, who was suddenly all ears. It was like three cars reaching an intersection all at the same time, concentrated energy and terrible expectation.

"I've got a small policy on the band in case something happens to Bobby. Injures his hand, loses his voice, can't play some shows, like that."

"How much?" Dice asked, leaning in toward him so close he smelled his breath.

"Varies with the incident. Max is a quarter."

"Million?"

"Yeah."

Dice and Markie looked at each other, then at Sollie. Markie turned his back and Dice walked to the big window looking out over the District and out toward the lake.

"Nice view you got here, Sollie. Though it makes me nervous, such a long way down."

He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, audibly cracking his knuckles and quietly shaking his head.

"So, Markie here is picking up the 25 tomorrow," he finally said. "We give some thought to what to do about the rest. Don't be going anywhere, Sollie, you don't let us know first. And you be certain any other money comes your way you see it gets to us first thing. We understand each other? Before the groceries, before your mother's birthday present, before the doctor takes a splinter out of your ass. No matter what, we get the money, right?"

With that, he turned and looked hard at the promoter, his look disdainful, taking his measure, like he was sizing him up for a suit. Then with a nod to his brother, he brushed past him and they left without closing the door.

Creep

Kelly called Strawn. "I've left Bobby," she said.

"Should I ask why?"

"Are you surprised?"

"No, I guess not. Just disappointed."

"Then don't ask why. You know why. Ask what you can do to help."

"You know I'd do anything for you."

"Then help Bobby."

"Help him how?"

"Oh god, Jon, I don't know. Just help him. Straighten him out. He's going down fast. Now he's been sleeping with that Italian girl. The bitch! She won't leave him alone."

"Everybody sleeps with everybody these days."

"Not me. And not anybody I'm living with. I don't need someone else's diseases."

Besides, this isn't a roll in the hay. It's an affair. Shit! I hate it!"

"Kelly, I know it hurts. And I don't want to make excuses for him. But Bobby's a star. It's rock 'n' roll. These girls throw themselves at the musicians. Rock is cock, the saying goes. Forgive my French but that's how it is. And the girls love it. They expect it. Hell, they demand it. Becoming a tradition. The new standard."

"Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, don't you mean? She gives him drugs, too, you know. Hard drugs and lots of them. He's really a mess. I'm afraid for him."

"So you leave him? After all these years?"

"That's unfair, Jon. You know it. I've done everything I can for him 'all these years.' Everything! I'm like his mother, his sister, *and* his girlfriend. But *one* of his girlfriends I'm *not* going to be. I told him so. Not one, not number one, the *only* one or nothing. He just doesn't care anymore."

"That's not true."

"Oh, yeah, he says he does. Begs me not to leave. Swears he'll clean up his act. But the minute he's back on the road, it's the same shit all over again. She gets more of his time than I do, and better time, too. Christ, Jon, he's gone a week and when he gets home, I can smell her on his clothes when I wash them! How's that supposed to make me feel?"

"Where'd she come from anyhow? You know?"

"Who knows where these sluts come from? She just showed up at a gig a while back and never went away. She calls him here! On our phone! 'Hi, it's Carina,' she says to me, 'is Bobby there?' Sweet as can be. Can you believe it? She's shameless and I'm ashamed. And Bobby just acts like a little boy who can't keep out of the cookie jar. You tell me, Jon. Is that the way love's supposed to be? Is it different just because it's rock 'n' roll?"

There wasn't much else to say. Strawn held on to the receiver after they hung up, thinking about Carina Manetti. He'd only seen her once, the night last week when Bobby blew through town, played a gig at a little club off Cass Avenue, just him and some black dudes cooking up a storm. She was all over him at the break, cooing, cuddling, looking like she owned him. He looked higher and higher as the night went on.

She struck him as a little old for this stuff, closer to his age than Bobby's. Sources said she was related to some gangsters from Cicero. Gambling and loan sharking money. Of course, every guinea in the country is suspected of criminal ties, so who knows? Whatever the truth, her fixation on Bobby was curious.

Playing groupie for some hippie rock star. What's her angle? Maybe working. But working what? For whom? Where did she come from? What's her story? What's she all about?

It'd be worth finding out if he knew who to ask but nobody seemed to know her. Just appeared one night from out of the gleam and the gloom of rock 'n' roll.

Ringers

Stongel grabbed Strawn as he passed his desk. "You know about this?"

"Elvis Gifts DPD," the headline said. The story below covered with edits tried to explain the generosity of the King in providing the city's vice squad with new Cadillacs and Lincoln Continentals, one for each of the two dozen narcs.

"What do you make of it," Stongel asked him. Strawn just rolled his eyes.

"Here's another one I was working on. Don't suppose they're related, do you?"

It announced that Officer Harris Naylor had been cleared of shooting a drug dealer during a bust. His actions were justified because he feared for his life when the suspect appeared to reach for a gun. No weapon was discovered at the scene, but the glint of light off the victim's Zippo lighter was ruled as sufficient reason for Naylor to discharge his weapon to protect himself and his fellow officers. It noted the victim survived and was suing the city.

"This the same cop that was caught at Ned Prince's a while back?"

"One and the same," Stongel said. "Keeps making a name for himself."

"Augie Mertz told me back then there was no evidence Naylor was Vice, that Flynn was covering his butt. Wonder when he was promoted to ride with the cowboys."

"You mean *if* he was? So you're saying these stories *are* related?"

Strawn looked at the old man and smiled. "In my world, everything's related."

Stirring

Typical after the show party. Room is packed with chicks, hot ones, ready for anything, pairing off with the band, the roadies, any other male who might be part of the show. They aim high, chase the stars, the Stones, Zep, the Eagles, whomever, and failing that, take what they can get. The Bobby Thierry Band is definitely lower rung if you're a groupie, but here they are in spades.

It's something about the music, balling the people who were up on stage. Failing that, balling anybody who helped to get them there. They want to get next to the magic, take it between their legs. Or maybe they're just here for the drugs. It's definitely about the high, wherever it comes from.

Catt gets his share of attention. Not many "persons of color" on this tour. Not ones as imposing as him. White girls want to go black, see if it's true you do, you never go back. When Jimi was alive, the Plaster Casters made him a legend for an instrument not his guitar. Big Jimi. That good, no wonder it's forbidden. Jackson Catt is glad to help them come over.

He digs it, but keeps an eye on Bobby, too. Dude has been dragging of late. Bummed by the money hassles. Every night it's an issue, or if not tonight, the next night will be. The anxiety. Hearing too the albums aren't selling like Atlantic expected. Might not pick up the option on the third album. Might be dropping him. Humiliating to be dropped by your label. Means not only you don't sell but you don't rate enough as an "artist" to keep you on board for the prestige. All that and going through the usual shit that rears up between the

leader and the band when they've been on the road too long. The grind of a low budget tour.

But he seems upbeat tonight. Hanging with a couple of local musicians, swapping lies and laughing about the road. Same crazies seem to visit every band in one form or another. Whether its New York, Chicago, Miami or L.A., it's pretty much the same. Same chicks, same dealers, same hangers-on. Stories to tell. Digging the little ripples of difference, the high tide of similarity. Makes the grind less personal, knowing it wears on everybody.

The drugs help too. Sometimes. The perpetual party, let the good times roll. On and on. Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, that's the formula. Money for nothin' and the chicks for free. Screaming youth. Living in the here and now. No thought for tomorrow. Just rock the Casbah and give thanks for another night at least you ain't a clerk at the gas station. Punching these cute girls instead of a clock. Sometimes it works out that way.

Feels real. Tonight seems to be one of them.

People are out on the lanai smoking big reefers, people are bent over the coffee table snorting long lines of blow. Everybody has a beer or tequila, vodka or wine in hand. The talk is flowing, the laughter peeling, the girls showing ever more skin and the sexual tension beginning to build. What it's about.

Carina Manetti sashays by, her tight ass swinging underneath a very short skirt, long, shapely legs riding very high heels, her long-strapped purse hanging from one shoulder. Catt grabs hold of it, stops her in her tracks.

"Problem?" she says, her eyes wary but not the least intimidated.

"Want to see what you're bringing our boy here, sweetie. Mind if I take a look?"

"Keep your hands off my purse, Catt. I'm bringing him a little something so he can sleep, couple of 'Ludes is all."

"Yeah, couple of 'Ludes, huh? Well, that's okay. Just wondering though, what is it with you, girl? You been here, what, couple weeks now? And it's like you're running the show."

He looked her up and down with what? Interest? Suspicion? Disgust? Couldn't tell with this guy.

"What's your point, Catt? You got something to say, say it."

"Just wondering with the pills and all, you gonna be tucking him in, too? Wouldn't want to walk in on something I shouldn't see. 'Cause I will be checking on him, you know. Real close."

"You do that. Happens that I'm seeing a friend in Santa Monica tonight. Haven't seen her in years. Soon as I get him put to bed, I'm outta here. Bobby'll be sleeping alone. I know you'd rather Kelly was back in his life. Maybe she can catch the redeye and tuck him in herself. That make you happy?"

"Now, Miss Manetti, that's not my concern. I don't care if Bobby sleeps with syphilitic sheep, long as he wears a safe, stays clean, all the same to me. But I'm here to protect him, make sure he don't get hurt. So I'm telling you, keep the junk to yourself, hear? He don't need none of that shit right now."

Her eyes narrowed in anger and suddenly she was not very pretty at all.

"You've got some mouth on you, Catt! Syphilitic sheep? You prick! I don't have any diseases. Never have. Never touch heroin

either and I don't know where Bobby gets it. Not from me. So, watch how you talk to me, big man. You're not the only tough guy in town."

She turned away and headed through the crowd to Bobby, the big smile back on her face, all of her seductiveness reconvened and working. You'd never know it could be any different.

Bodie and Jon

"Brother Jon! To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Hey, Bodie. Good to see you, too."

"Come on in, man. I got your message. Actually got up early just to straighten up a bit. Don't often get to entertain celebrities from the local press."

"Funny you should mention it. My celebrity. That's a thing I wanted to talk about."

"Your celebrity? What, you up for a Pulitzer now or something?"

"All bullshit aside. Let's talk straight. Got a cup of coffee by any chance?"

"Not made, but I can do it. Got a reefer ready if you'd like a toké or two."

"Not my thing, little brother. I think you know that."

"A fellow can hope. I keep praying that enlightenment will come your way."

"It's illegal. That's my objection."

"Yeah, I keep hoping enlightenment will dawn in the legislature, too. You may think it's never gonna happen but Legalize It! is a movement that will have its day."

"Not any time soon would be my guess."

"You might be right but we're gonna keep pushing. Meanwhile, a whole lotta folks are enjoying the herb, legal or not, and more are getting with the program all the time."

"With your help I hear."

"Oh, that what you're here for? A lecture for your little brother?"

"No lecture. Just an observation. That's our business over at the newspaper and I'm not the only one there that knows you're selling pot."

"That so?"

"If we know it, I have to wonder if the cops don't know it, too."

"Yow, inject a little paranoia into my morning. Even better than coffee to get the nervous system humming."

"Not my intention, but I don't think denial is the right posture either."

Bodie boiled some water, put some coffee in a French Press. Jon looked around at the rock posters, leafed through the shelves of record albums, another bookcase full of first edition fiction and art books.

"No milk. Hope black's still okay."

"Perfect. Thanks for this."

"Thanks for your interest in my well-being. Just wondering what brought it up."

"A few different things got my attention. Covering the rock scene gets mixed up with all the stuff that surrounds it. I mention it in passing but really try to stick to the music, the politics, the social consciousness. You know what I mean."

"Sure. That's the part where you and I see eye to eye. I get it that you're older, the rituals aren't your scene, but the essence of what's going on I know you agree with, like we all understand the change that's gonna come. Have to be blind not to."

"A lot of people do turn a blind eye to the problems. I'm not one of them. I love what's going on with the young people right now. I totally agree with most of what this whole movement is about."

"But not the drugs?"

"Not what's illegal. That's where I draw the line."

"What's illegal isn't always so easy to define. Like people getting arrested for demonstrating. Is that breaking the law? Cops try to make it so. Civil rights movement would still be picking cotton if nobody broke that law."

"You know what I'm talking about. One thing to be marching, another to be peddling dope."

"Well, Jon, there's an entire rationale I could lay out for you about this black market of ours, the underground economy that supports people who don't want to play the game. What I do is a fundamental part of the resistance, whether you like it or not. It allows a lot of people of good conscience to give the Man the finger, go their own way. They don't want to be part of the system, but they still have to eat, pay the rent, put a little gas in the jalopy, and buy those concert tickets so you have something to review."

"So thanks to you I've got a job?"

They both burst out laughing. Took the edge off the conversation just a little. Each of them smiling, sipping their coffee, a little relieved for the levity.

"You might say so," Bodie said. "Just trying to make the point there's a lot of different components to this movement that's happening. Herb is the sacrament. I'm just part of the distribution system. Like a priest with the Eucharist."

"I'm not trying to debate right and wrong with you, Bodie. Legality is my issue."

"And what are the 'few different things' that brought all this to your attention."

"You know my editor, Abe Stongel? No? He's a real hard case. Absolutely straight arrow. Asked me the other day about a couple of different stories that might be related, might not. One was rock 'n' roll, one was drugs.

"Was curious what I knew about them. Not much. Was curious what I thought of them. Told him in my opinion everything is related. He just nodded when I said that, gave me a long, hard look, asked me how you were getting along. Underlying question was why I wasn't digging into these stories. A roundabout way of asking if anything was compromising my coverage."

"You take from that he knows I sell marijuana?"

"What do you take from it? His job is to know what's going on in this town."

Bodie sat there for a moment, looking off into space, said, "This is just between us, right?"

"Of course!"

"Because I could tell you and your friend Mr. Stongel a few things about what's going on in this town."

Dropped

It was Kelly calling. "Jon, Bobby just told me the label is dropping him."

"That's what I heard, too."

"Why? I don't understand it. This is the last thing he needs right now."

"Yeah, it's tough. Records aren't selling, so they don't want to spend any more money promoting him."

"I know that Jon. But why aren't the records selling? Everybody loves him."

"Yeah, live he's a monster and everybody gets it. But the records don't resonate for whatever reason."

"But why Jon? He's so talented."

"Yeah, he's talented, but his songwriting may not be strong enough to carry the records. When you see him in concert, he blows them away. Everybody gets it. Hell, Bobby could make 'Jingle Bells' scream. But albums are different. Know what I mean?"

"Maybe I'm too close to him. I think it's all great. I love his songs."

"Maybe you are. There's a noticeable difference between the quality of the music and the quality of the lyrics, is what I'm trying to say. Instrumentals rarely make for a top 10 album. It's lyrics and melody people remember when they hum it to themselves, not the solos. Song writing is tough."

"Here's an example. One time I asked Keith Richards, 'Who are the really great guitar players today?' He said, 'I don't know their names,

but they're all 15 years old.' Meaning there's a lot of awesome players out there and a lot more coming up.

"But if you ask who the great song writers are? The names jump out at you because there just aren't very many of them. Start with Dylan, who is way out ahead of everybody else, and Chuck Berry back in the 50s. Then start ticking off the rest. Brian Wilson, of course, then and now, Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Springsteen, John Fogerty, Carole King, maybe you can name 10 or 20 tops. At least in rock 'n' roll."

"So Bobby isn't a strong enough writer to sell his records?"

"I think that's the problem. Too many of his tunes seem to me to be just a framework to get him to the solos. Nobody can argue with his playing, but the song writing is pretty rough in places, maybe more places than not. The lyrics? Well, they don't really come to mind and I've heard his songs a hundred times."

"Not memorable, huh?" She thought about it. "Maybe so. It's different for me, because I identify with what he says. It's personal. Maybe not so much for people who don't know him."

"He's not the only one. Most of the really good songs are collaborations. Composer and lyricist in some combination or another. Going clear back to the Tin Pan Alley guys, the show tunes, Rogers and Hart, those guys, and the old pop writers like Dozier and the Hollands, and now Mick and Keith, Elton John and Bernie Taupin, I guess maybe Glenn Frey and Don Henley, above all Lennon and McCartney before the Beatles broke up. There aren't many like Dylan, who put it all together by themselves.

"Part of Bobby's problem, I think, is that he's never really ground it out in a band to get to where he is. He was pretty much a star from the get-go and his bands were put together to showcase him. The

tunes were like an afterthought. Great players but no writers of note. So the albums suffer.

"Another example of what I mean. I met Bob Dylan one time at a party. Gave me the limp handshake and started to move away. You can't interview the guy 'cause he just plays with you. But I had something I always wanted to ask him, and he got into it.

"I said, 'Somewhere I read that you said you have thousands of songs you haven't written down yet. How is that possible?' He said, 'The way I think is in verses, so when I see something that gets my attention, it occurs to me like a song.'

"He thinks like a song writer. He's written hundreds of great songs and has thousands more rattling around his head. Bobby thinks like a guitar player. The lyrics are sort of an afterthought."

"Well, I'm sorry for him," Kelly said. "He wants it so bad, and he's worked so hard to do it his way. This is like big time rejection."

"You and Atlantic both send him packing. He's gotta be hurting."

"Why are you so in my face about it?" she said. "It's the last thing I wanted, to break up. You know that Jon. I hoped it would slap some sense into him."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, Kelly. You or Atlantic, either. It's just what is. His scene is very different now from when he started, better in some ways, I guess. He's a lot better known. But he's been on a downer mentally. Like he doesn't want to own up to the truth.

"The drugs are affecting his judgment, about you, about the company he keeps. Dragging down his playing, too, sorry to say. Learning to be a star can be a very hard lesson when they pull the rug out from under you. You have to know to know how to get up again."

“Yeah,” she said, choking up a little, “maybe he’ll come around, learn something from it. There’s a lot of big name bands that still want him, so he’s always got that. Maybe there’s still time for us, too. I don’t know. I guess it isn’t the end of the world.”

What Bodie Knows

"Let me tell you a couple of stories. Then you can put them together yourself, being the brilliant newspaper man, and see what you make of it all. When you tell me your colleagues know what's going on around town, maybe they just ain't saying."

Jon shrugged, refreshed his coffee, settled back in his chair, raised his arm, palm up to say: have at it. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to hear what was coming but the barn door was open and the horse was getting ready to gallop.

"Maybe they do know and maybe they don't, but if they do, the question is: why aren't they saying and whose butt are they protecting by keeping quiet? My preference would be that we all just mind our own business. Live and let live. But if you think they are nosing around me and what I do, here's what I'd be asking about if I was nosing into their business.

"You see that photo of Elvis a while back, sporting a DPD captain's uniform."

"I think everybody saw that. Guy is a big time cop groupie it appears."

"You got that right. Next thing, and remember, this is between us, right? Not for attribution, not for use, just FYI and this particular discussion.

"We have a friend - he, she, it, let's say he - at the Clerk of Court. Good cat and has his priorities in the right place. Doesn't think much of all these pot busts and has been known to give us a heads up when the cowboys come by for a no knock warrant.

"Warned us recently about a bust that never happened. Involved a friend of mine but the warrant was withdrawn. Those things are time limited, have to be executed on a specific day. This one was pulled. They reissued it the same day Elvis came to town."

"Coincidence?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. You know about the guy that got shot in a drug raid, right? They exonerated a cop named Naylor."

"Yeah, Harris Naylor. Said it was justifiable."

"I met the guy that got shot. It wasn't Naylor that shot him."

"You know that how?"

"He saw Naylor's picture in the paper. Cop looks nothing like Elvis!"

"Are you saying? Holy shit, that would be a story!"

"Yeah, there's your Pulitzer. 'Course they'd have to give it to you posthumously."

Jon stared at his brother with his mouth hanging open, thinking a dozen things he wanted to ask. Bodie held up his hand.

"There's more. I said a few stories, remember?"

"They can't be as good as that one, true or not."

"None of us knows for sure what's true. I just know the guy told me the guy who shot him looked exactly like Elvis. Naylor must be carrying somebody's baggage, whether or not it belongs to the King. Anyhow, like Paul Harvey says: now the rest of the story."

"I'm all ears," Jon said, shaking his head with a startled look on his face.

"You know Augie Mertz."

"Sure. Smart guy and a pretty good reporter."

"You know his girlfriend?"

"Chloe. Met her once. A real beauty. Kind of odd but charming, I guess."

"Coked out is what she is."

"Yeah, even I could have guessed that. The time we met, I told her a joke and when she started laughing, she collapsed in a heap on the floor. Literally piled up like all the air went out of her doll. For real."

"Her nervous system is a little tweaked, I think."

"You don't ...?"

"Jon, I'm telling you again. I pass out the sacrament. Cocaine is evil. Some of us dance with the devil a time or two when we're partying. Selling that shit is something else altogether. Bad karma, pure and simple. Not my thing."

"But to return to the scene of someone else's crime ... Augie invites us to dinner at this little Vietnamese place downtown. Pretty classy, white tablecloths, silverware, candles, the whole deal. It's Augie and Chloe, me and Bella, very small table and great food. So, one dish after another arrives and we're feasting and yakking and having a great time, and soon enough Chloe is running her bare foot up my leg. Way up my leg."

"Augie is rattling away about whatever, Bella is scarfing down the food and looking at me a little quizzically, and I'm wondering what's next. What's next is she's got one arm under the table cloth, talking and laughing and running her hand up my thigh until finally she's got hold of my joint and I've got a hell of an erection."

"Just then, a fat bindle slides across the table to me and Augie smiles and nods toward the restroom and I'm thinking there's no way I can stand up from the table with this raging hard on, but hyper-aware

Chloe suddenly stands up and starts making a helluva scene, singing and dancing and shaking her cute little butt, which gets the attention of most everybody in the room and I very casually ease my way to the john.

"Place is empty thankfully so I make my way into the stall and crack open the bindle when all of a sudden the stall door opens and there's Chloe. She scoops up a sizeable bit of the flake with her long lacquered nail and then another one for the other nostril, then she proceeds to pull down my pants and gives me a hellacious blowjob."

"Yow! Was that the start of something more or did you two ..."

"Jon, you're missing the point. It was Augie who coughed up the coke."

"Yeah, he buys it for her, right?"

"No, not right. He *deals* it so he can keep her in toot."

"Are you sure about that, Bodie? I mean, lots of people mess around with cocaine these days. It's the calling card in certain social circles, am I right? What makes you think Augie is dealing it? He's the fucking police reporter, for Christ's sake."

"That's exactly the point, Jon. He's the fucking police reporter and he's selling coke. Let me tell you another story about Augie. I'm not here to bad mouth the guy. Just talking about what really goes on in this town, aren't we? So, let me tell you one more and then one more quick one after that and then I'll shut up and you can draw your own conclusions about who knows what about who."

"Whom."

"Whom. Well, whom we are talking about is Mr. Mertz, and he recently took a little trip to Europe. Went by himself 'cause Chloe couldn't be away from the blow that long, so he left her a generous

stash and spent ten days in Paris and London. Had himself a great time, one imagines, but when he got home his gun was missing. The piece he kept hidden in a false bottom of his bedstand and one Chloe knew nothing about because she's afraid of guns. He knew it wasn't her 'cause even if she found it, she'd never touch it.

"Somebody stole his pistol, which meant somebody had been in his bedroom. There was no point asking Chloe about it because she can barely tell you what day it is let alone anything akin to the truth. But because of his profession Augie knows about surveillance and he knows the apartment house where he lives has cameras at the entrance and each hallway, so he gets the landlord to give him the tapes so he can see which one of his friends came to visit Chloe while he was gone.

"Turns out that every single guy he sells to paid a visit and chances are good that most or all of them spent a little time in the sack with his girl. One of 'em stole his gun.

"The moral of this story is that Augie isn't just peeling off a gram here and there for friends. He's a cocaine dealer with a coke whore for a girlfriend and he's the police reporter for this city's daily paper. You tell me, Jon, that you and your colleagues are in the business of knowing what's going on in town, and you tell me that some of them seem to be interested in what there is to know about me, and whether your sordid little brother and his marijuana empire is somehow compromising your career."

Jon started to interrupt but Bodie put up both hands palms facing him, and said, "One more story, Jon, and then we can let it lie. You came here to question me and this is what I have to say. Here's

the last twist to this tale and it's a pretty big bow to put on the package. A very pretty package it is, too."

Bodie stood up, walked to the window, pulled aside the curtain and blinked at the morning sunshine. The streets were peaceful, a few cars passing, a jogger or two, some folks walking their dogs. The face of the city in the light of the day. He returned to the table and sat heavily, exhaled, shook his head.

"A police reporter works with the cops and in this city in this day and age he mostly deals with narcs. That's where the action is in big city police work and that's where the cowboys are riding herd on the town. On people like me and my friend who got shot.

"One of those narcs, the number one narc, in fact, and Elvis' lapdog by the way, spends a lot of time at your paper. A guy named Rob Fabio. He's supposed to be the bodyguard for the guy who runs the place. Walker, isn't that his name?"

"David Sayles Walker. Scion of the family enterprise. They own a half dozen of the biggest papers in the country."

"Have you met him?"

"Once, when he first took over. Seemed like a pretty solid guy."

"Back then. What about recently?"

"I can't say. I hear things but I don't know."

"Let me tell you what I know. David Walker has recently developed a world class cocaine habit and it's happening right under the nose - so to speak - of Rob Fabio. Your boss is conducting meetings with snot running from his nose and drool dripping off his chin. And do you know who's selling him all that coke? One guess, brother."

Sainty Says Goodbye

"You can't quit. Nobody quits on me."

"You watch me Sollie. I'm done."

"But you know too much. How can I run this place without you?"

"You'll have to learn, because the truth is, Sollie, I know too little. I don't know what goes on here anymore but I don't like the vibe. I don't like the feeling I get around here these days and you don't pay me enough to suffer."

"If this is about money, let's talk. We can pay you a little more."

"This is about you, Sollie. It's about you and the creepy feeling I get there's a lot more going on in this business of yours than good old rock 'n' roll. I don't expect to know everything you're up to and I sure as hell don't expect you to change, because we both know sure as hell that ain't gonna happen. I'm out of here. End of story."

"You're breaking my heart, Sainty."

"It's your balls I'm breaking, Sollie. For what It's worth, I love you, too, but all good things, as they say. And lately this hasn't been all that good."

Sleeper

"Bobby, darling, take these now, help you sleep. It's nearly 4 o'clock. I need to get across town before the traffic gets rolling."

"Yeah, I'm beat. What are these, 'Ludes?"

"Yeah, two is enough."

"Give me a little taste to go with it."

"I don't have any with me, Bobby."

"Damn! Can't you get some before you go?"

"Not tonight, darling. Catt's already on my case. I told him we're clean. Let's keep that way for tonight. Speaking of which, sounds like him now."

"Let him in, will you? I don't want to get up."

"BT, my man. Anything you need?"

"Not unless you got some smack. Just kidding, Cattman."

"Ha, ha, brother. Best stay off that shit!"

"You say so. Don't seem like I've got much choice tonight."

"Hell, you look to be nodding already."

"Yeah, these 'Ludes are kicking my ass. 'Bout beat anyhow. Catch you in the morning."

"What about you, Miss Manetti?"

"Just about to head out myself. With your permission, of course."

"Give a knock at my room when you're ready. I'll walk you out."

He smiled slightly and left.

She packed the last few things in her suitcase, then removed a bundle from the hidden pocket in her purse.

"Bobby?"

"Umm?"

"You asleep?"

"Umm, fading."

"Here's a little taste, just one."

She helped him sit up in bed, held a spoonful to his nose, watched him inhale it, lie back in bed, go into a nod.

"Good night, Bobby."

He didn't respond.

She gathered her suitcase and bag, left the room and walked down the hall, knocked at Catt's door. "What do you want?" she said when he answered.

"Just going to see you to your car."

"Not necessary. I can find my way."

"How's our boy?"

"Just dozed off."

"No need to check on him again?"

"You want to wake him? Suit yourself. I'm out of here."

Creeper

Jackson Catt eased his way into the room, closed the door behind him, flicked on a pen light and crossed the dark room. Bobby was sound asleep, breathing slowly, 'luded out. Finally felt like his work was done for the night. He crossed the room again to the door, eased his way out, returned to his room, washed his face, brushed his teeth, undressed, climbed into bed and was sound asleep shortly after his head hit the pillow. He had a dream. A bad one.

Carina Manetti turned away from him and headed down the hall. She seemed to float, ghostlike, to the elevator, rode it down to the lobby and walked out the door, across the parking lot to her rental car. She left the lot and headed east for two blocks, then north for a block to a Denny's, where a dark blue sedan with Nevada plates was waiting out back. She pulled alongside, lowered her window and handed a room key to the driver.

"828, end of the hall," she said. "Catt's in 810."

A man of medium height in a wide brimmed hat pulled low on his brow, a dark colored rain coat and flesh-colored latex gloves let himself in through a side door of the hotel, entered the stairwell, climbed to the third floor and emerged into the hallway. Room 302 was across from him. He walked the length of the hallway, taking note of 310 and 328, to the stairwell at the opposite end, entered it and climbed five flights to the eighth floor.

He waited to catch his breath, listening carefully and hearing nothing but his own breathing and the dim whirr of the air conditioning in the near dawn quiet. He opened the stairwell door,

looked down the hallway, and seeing nothing that caused him concern, walked directly across the hall and slid the plastic card through the lock, entered the door quickly and held it so it quietly clicked closed.

He could hear soft snoring, the hum of the mini-refrigerator and nothing else. He flicked on his pen light, scanned low around the room, then again a little higher, saw the tiny beam of light pass over the figure asleep on the bed, pointed the light at the floor in front of his feet, and moved silently to the bedside dresser.

He removed a plastic bag from his pocket, withdrew a small hypodermic needle and a bindle of powder, a plastic cigarette lighter and a flame burnished spoon showing residue in the cup.

He returned the plastic bag to his pocket, set the room key on the dresser, the spoon and lighter on the bedside table and dropped the bindle on the bed covers. He drew them aside, shook the hypodermic needle and squeezed a drop from it, slipped the needle into the large vein near the ankle bone of the naked man on the bed and plunged a quarter gram of pure heroin into his bloodstream without ever waking him up.

He withdrew the needle, pressed the plunger against the man's right thumb, touched the chamber to his fingers in several places, then dropped it on the floor. He touched the spoon and the lighter to his fingers, too, and replaced them on the dresser.

He stepped over the needle carefully and exited the room, walked quietly down eight flights of stairs and along two city blocks to where his car was parked, and saw not a soul. He was having a late breakfast in Las Vegas before the body was discovered.

Jackson Catt awoke with a start. He was soaked with sweat and his heart was pounding. He was shaking. It was only a dream, and he was the baddest dude that anyone knew, but he woke up afraid.

Behind the blackout curtains, he could sense the sun was shining. The clock said nearly noon. It was time to get up, time to go to work, time to walk down the hall, knock on the door and quiet the fear.

Time to be again the guy that keeps the boogiemani away, the guy who is steady and fearless. Time to shake off the night sweats and regain his cool. Time to confirm it was only a dream.

Stupor

"You got a minute," Stongel said to Strawn. "We got a problem."

"Something I did?" Strawn said and sat down at the old man's desk.

"I wish it was you. You I can handle. This is way above our pay grade."

"I'm listening."

Stongel shuffled some papers on his desk, wiped away donut crumbs or the remains of whatever it was he'd had for breakfast, made a little pile at the corner of his desk and swept it into his wastebasket. He exhaled deeply, leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, seemed suddenly aware of the acrid smell from his sweaty armpits, lowered his hands to his lap. They twisted nervously as he spoke.

"Managing Editor just called us in. All the editors. He got a call from one of the TV stations. They're getting ready to run a story on David Walker. Tonight's news. Seems he pulled a gun on somebody at the Rattlesnake Club last night. Threatened the guy in front of a roomful of witnesses. One of his bodyguards wrestled him away, got him out of the restaurant. He called in sick today."

"Wow, I hardly know what to say. I'm sorry for him, for us. I guess I'm wondering why you're telling me. This is way above my pay grade."

"They say it's drugs."

"What's that got to do with me. I never touch the stuff."

"Yeah, but you're around it all the time. I mean, do you think he's smoking that marijuana, making him act like this?"

Strawn stared at him, wondered for a moment if the guy was serious, realized he was. Drugs are drugs as far as Stongel knows. Weed with roots in hell. That nonsense.

"I don't know Mr. Walker and I have no first-hand knowledge what goes on with him, but it isn't marijuana that's the problem. I know enough to be sure about that."

"Does that mean you have second-hand knowledge? Something we should know. If so, now's the time to clue us in."

"Have you asked his bodyguard? That cop? He's a narc. Maybe he has an idea."

"Fabio tells us he's noticed Walker has been acting strange. He wasn't there last night. It was one of the other guys. Name of Huerfano. Fabio, he's not sure what the problem is. Maybe the stress of the job."

"And this is a guy who testifies in court he can tell a drug user just by looking in his eyes. Is that the same Rob Fabio we're talking about?"

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm? Tell me about it."

"Like I said, I have no personal knowledge about Mr. Walker."

"So noted. Now tell me what you know."

"What I hear, what they say on the streets, is that David Walker has a serious cocaine habit. Whether it's true I don't know. But it fits with episodes like last night."

"Cocaine. Shit, that's bad stuff, isn't it? I mean really bad stuff."

"I can't say from personal experience, but from what I've seen it doesn't do anybody any good."

Stongel hunched forward over his desk. He looked like he was about to be sick. He shook his head from side to side, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, struggling for composure.

"What in the hell is going on in this world, Strawn? Have you got any idea? Because I sure as hell don't know. I've been around in my time. Seen some stuff but nothing like today. It seems to me the entire world is going crazy, like everything is coming apart. I just feel sometimes like nothing makes sense anymore."

Strawn did something he'd never done before, reached out and put a hand on Stongel's shoulder, said, "I feel the same way, Abe, maybe just for different reasons."

Dues

Local Rocker Bobby Thierry Dead of Overdose. The headline in the paper. Page three, above the fold. The news staff wrote the story. Asked Strawn to write a sidebar. An anguished week later, he still hadn't been able to do it. Couldn't find the words, didn't know what to say.

Kelly was shaken, but unsurprised. "I was so afraid for him," she said. "I could feel the change, the recklessness, more and more these last few months. The drugs were out of control. He was hurting pretty bad, the way everything was going. He finally got what he wanted, but it wasn't what he expected. All those stardust melodies were out of tune. God, I'm so sorry for him. For his family. It never should have happened."

Strawn wanted to comfort her, but he couldn't say what he thought to be true: that Bobby never would have hit bottom like that if Kelly was with him out there on the road, never would have sunk to the depth of depression he was suffering. Never would have fallen under the spell of that skank, Carina Manetti.

Be interesting to see if she shows up at the memorial service. No lack of nerve, but still. Catt says she's the source of Bobby's smack. Doesn't understand how it went down, but she's in there deep somewhere, he knows it. Bobby was alive and sleeping when he checked him after she left. No sign of all that drug debris. No naked corpse on the bed with a spike on the floor like they found him the next morning.

A whole lot of junk in his system, but only one needle mark. Signs he'd been snorting it, too, but still, it didn't hold together. Not for Catt. Not for Strawn, either.

The cops were okay with it. Another OD, another dead rocker. Not uncommon in Los Angeles, hardly worth noting. They checked the scene, the night staff at the front desk, checked with the band. Checked out Manetti, too, nothing to report. No priors, no evidence of drug use, no prostitution, no nothing.

Of course she has an alibi. Friend she stayed with swears she arrived clear across town about the time the coroner says he died. Of course the boy started using heavily after she arrived on the scene. And of course she just happened to duck out the night it happened, when too much of no good did him in. All a coincidence, no doubt. Like dying at 27. Bobby Thierry's dead. File closed.

Payment

Two more weeks, the check arrived. Sollie walked it to the bank, took the \$250,000 in cash. The bank handled lots of his money, cash from the shows, from the promotions, from who knew where. People bought tickets with cash, the bands were always paid in cash, bookies probably paid him in cash, although nobody knew that to be true. Nobody at the bank thought much at all about the transaction, although it was a lot of money to carry around.

He didn't carry it far. From the alley down the block, a large man with a pock-marked face stepped forward. "For Dice," he said, reaching for the attaché case and grasping it with a large hand, the knuckles deeply scarred. Without another word, he turned and walked away.

Sollie expected to be relieved. Instead, a funk came over him that left him shaken. He felt a hollowness within him, a large, empty place from which the world around him looked distant, strange and menacing. He was light-headed, had a sense of drifting, of falling, of a pulse pounding madly in his temples.

People passed him on the sidewalk, some nodding hello, most hurrying past, rushing on their way through their private lives. Sollie was oblivious. All he could see was the vision of the boy in the casket, his parents weeping, his friends shaken. The worst day of Sollie's life, sharing the sorrow, the sense of loss, the weight of a death that came way too soon. He alone among them knowing why.

He wasn't guilty, was he? He never wanted it to happen. Got caught in a terrible jam, a run of bad luck, a fix that got away from

him. The bad guys took control. Once they knew about the insurance, there was no stopping them. Then it was Bobby or him. What choice did he have? None. Bobby was going down either way. They called the shots and he just held his breath. Handed over the cash when the time came. Lived to play another hand another day. Bobby didn't.

He still couldn't catch his breath, now that it was done. Until he gave up the money, settled his debt, he imagined it wasn't real, wasn't happening. He felt the pain with the rest of them, spoke from the heart to the family, to the press. The terrible loss, the awesome talent, the scourge of drugs. Felt the anguish of knowing nothing can be done, the door has closed once and for all. Nothing can change the script.

He was there at the wake, the grieving, an abstraction in which he gave his all. But always and only with a blind eye to the truth. Now that truth slammed him, hit him in the chest like a bullet, left him badly shaken and afraid.

All the tough guy talk, the casual stories about guys being knee capped, legs broken over gambling debts or other wrongs, a spiral fracture of the thigh bone that takes six months in the hospital to heal and on the day the guy's released, they grab him in the parking lot and break it again. So he doesn't forget. Gangster lore. It's just business. It's about the money. What comes first.

It makes him nauseous now. To have been through it, deep in the maw of the underworld, where people are ground up and spit out, an animal gnashing bones to get at the marrow and gristle, the fat and the muscle, then to pass deep into the entrails of crime. And you, Sollie, when you emerge, you are shit! How he feels, like nothing he's ever felt before. At least not in a long, long time.

There was a time when a little boy got beaten more days than not on the way to school, at the playground, in the alleys near home. "Raghead, Haji, Mulla." He heard it all while they pummeled him, again and again. And he got tougher. And tougher still. Until a time came when nobody tried him anymore, because he was tougher than they were, than any of them. Whatever they said about him then, it was behind his back, never again to his face. Fuck with him, he'd eat their lunch.

He couldn't remember a time since then when he'd been afraid. Until now. Until the shame returned.

His wife kicked him out a few days later, sick of his shit, she said. Got himself an apartment near the office, 14th floor, on the alley. Lonely place to spend your time. Too many hours watching TV late into the night, wandering out to the balcony, back inside, restless, sleepless, worn out at work. A few shows coming up, nothing too exciting, just the routine. Waiting to come back online, get it up again, get back on top. Waiting.

Then back to the apartment again. Get some chinks, watch the game, the late show, the late, late show, drift off in the chair. Bleary in the morning. Start all over again.

One night like all the others, he unlocked the door and walked inside, a bag of ribs in his hand. Door didn't close behind him. The man with the pock-marked face and another guy came in behind him.

"What?" said Sollie. "What is this? I paid him."

He looked at the pitted face, the cold eyes, the scarred knuckles.

"Not enough," the man said. "Didn't pay him enough. You made him do something awful, something he never should have had to do."

He and the other guy each had one of Sollie's arms. They were walking him across the room. They took the ribs from him and set the bag on the table.

"Nobody should have to pay another man's debts for him. Nobody should have to do what he did to get paid. You think he can just forget it?"

They walked him onto the balcony. He never thought to resist. They were making too much sense, these henchmen, these bad guys who came to settle the score. There was a gentleness in the way they guided him, a soft, hypnotic timber to the hit man's voice. Something in the way it was unfolding brought an equilibrium to the scene, a sense of rightness, a peace he hadn't felt in weeks.

"Make it easy on yourself, Sollie. From this height, you won't feel a thing."

They reached the railing and he began to back away, wanted a minute to gather himself, to consider what else might be said, what was left undone.

But a calm came over him. He relaxed, nodded almost imperceptibly, and felt for the first time in his life a weightlessness as they tossed him into the night.

Aftermath

Strawn sat on a park bench by the lake. The wind was soft, the afternoon warm. Boats far out on the horizon appeared to be motionless and boats nearer by bounced in the chop. Big white and brown gulls drifted on currents of air, motionless but for the long stretch of shore that passed beneath them, and sometimes they flapped frenetically, landed with a flourish and attacked the garbage wherever it was found.

It was the last day of April 1976. The morning's news played in his mind. One year ago today, he sat on this same bench. The headlines: America Leaves Vietnam, Fall of Saigon: Disgrace, Ignominy. Operation Frequent Wind Evacuates Thousands. No headline for the tens of thousands of our allies left behind, shoved from the walls of the Embassy as they tried to climb inside, kicked in the face from the skids of the helicopters they clung to in flight. But one story after another of the chaos, horror, terror, shame. All from our perspective.

Today was an average news day. Nothing earth shaking. Nothing like 'Nam. Nixon reflected on Watergate. Said it was a public relations problem that needed a public relations solution. Tricky Dickie: how do you know he's lying? His lips are moving. Norman Mailer said Nixon lies as naturally as most men chew meat.

President Carter's First 100 days. Already he's wearing thin. Peanut farmer and nuclear physicist with that goofy smile, wearing the cardigan sweater, turning down the heat and easing us through the energy shortage, cars lined up down the block trying to buy gasoline. Sorry Out Of Fuel!

Just the usual stuff. On page 5, another headline, Solomon Gold: Suicide.

Strawn sits for a long time before rising, stretching, walking off toward the paper. On the way, he decides to go see Nicky Soros instead, drop by, say hello. Time for a friend. Some conversation. Something that makes sense. Maybe a summation.

The Sly King himself answers the door, greets him warmly, says, "Wow, man, you never look good but today you look like hell. Yo! You got a bit of bird shit on your shoulder there." Stands aside and ushers him in.

His place was a small cottage just west of downtown, funky and clapboard but nice inside. It was draped with tapestries, Navajo rugs on the floor, scarves over the lamp shades, shelves piled full of books and record albums, with a dozen or so really nice guitars leaning against the walls. There were posters of Dylan and Jimi and Miles, a few prints by Chagall and Miro, and a stereo with speakers the size of a small truck taking up one end of the room. The smell of marijuana was pungent.

He handed Strawn a sheet of paper towel, watched him wipe the white splotch off his shoulder, held out the waste basket for him and rolled his eyes at the scene. "Having a rough day, brother?" It was a question and statement both.

"You heard about Sollie?"

"Yeah, ol' Solid Gold. Who'd a thunk it? Must have put a helluva dent in the pavement."

"Not funny, Greek."

"Hey, it's a shock, but you guys weren't exactly friends, right? What's bothering you about it?"

"No, we weren't friends, but... I don't know, Nicky," Strawn said. "Him and Bobby, I guess I'm just trying to make sense of it all."

Nicky pulled a finger-sized spliff from his shirt pocket, struck a wooden match alight with his thumb nail, lit the number and offered it to Strawn. The reporter stared at it for a long time, as though he was seeing it in a different light. He finally reached out and took it, held it to his lips, inhaled, and after a moment coughed spasmodically.

"Sense of it?" said Nicky, and took the joint back from him, and had a long slow hit. He didn't cough, Strawn noticed. "Well, brother, that just might be your problem. You think it's like writing one of your reviews, or a magazine article. Who, what, where, why, when, then a nifty conclusion in the last 'graph, tie it up with bows and you got yourself a neat little package.

"It don't work that way, Jon. That's my observation from out here in the cheap seats. Not in real life. Not out here where the shit goes down, day in and day out. Out here, none of this stuff makes sense."

Strawn felt like he was seeing him from a distance, that his voice had an echo, and as quickly as he came to terms with that perception, it reverted to normal. Near normal, anyhow. He had a sensation of floating.

"Maybe the yokels believe the shit they read in your paper, but the rest of us had way too much experience with the official line. All the way back to JFK, King and Bobby Kennedy, Malcolm X. Those assassinations got everybody's attention, but for me and my people, it was the explanation you guys handed us that put us on guard."

Clouds of smoke punctuated his diatribe. The joint when he handed it back to Strawn was noticeably shorter.

"LBJ, Tricky Dickie, Ford, that endless parade of political bullshit. Five or six of 'em in a row telling us: why are we in Vietnam? The Domino Theory, right? Most of us don't even know where the place is, let alone why we're there fighting and dying. Then one day we just pull up stakes and go home. Let the Commies have it."

He shook his head in disgust, maybe just hopelessness, walked across the room to the turntable and put on a different album. The sweet sounds of Albert Ayler. *Music is the Healing Force of the Universe*. Apropos. Like this was performance art and Sly was on stage.

"All that time we been handed the shit and sooner or later it dawns on anybody's paying attention, it's all BS. The news media is part of the problem, not the solution. They're just selling the politician's version of the story. And the politician's just pimping for the corporate big shots. A circle jerk's what it is. All the power brokers just stroking each other. Makes the world hum.

"It's all about money, Brother Jon. Money and power. And pure greed. The trinity!

"So, my question is, Mr. News Reporter, what makes you think it should be any different with you?"

Strawn's head was buzzing a little. He was holding the joint in front of his face, surprised to see it there, in his hand, didn't remember Nicky handing it back to him, but he took another hit, a small one this time just to be polite. If nothing else, it tasted good.

"I never smoked one of these before. Does the rant come with the high?"

"Smoke has a philosophical bent. The rant is about trying to make sense and the fact we can't make sense of all this stuff. It really raises the question of why bother?"

"With the rant or chasing the sense of this stuff? Maybe because I'm trying to get at the truth." It sounded hollow when he said it.

"That right? The truth? Well, the problem I see is it's damn hard to get at, and if you do, it's damn hard to say anything about it without getting stomped on real fast.

"And I gotta wonder how much of it is just illusion. The truth, I mean. No offense, Jon, but you work for the guys. Makes it seem you're at least part way bought in to all the crap they're peddling."

It was tempting to argue the point, but Strawn felt like he was a long distance from the discussion and the two people having it. He had the distinct sensation of hovering above it all, watching Sly and himself sharing a joint and shooting the shit. He wondered in passing whether he'd later feel bad about breaking the law after all he'd had to say to his brother, Bodie, about the matter. For the moment anyhow, he was rather enjoying it.

"You really telling us big-eyed readers what you know about the music business? That's the question I would ask a seeker of truth like you. With all that power of the press you have at your disposal. You telling us about what truly rocks in the business? Them *entertainers* we all be worshiping at the concert hall? For very big bucks, of course, just so we know whose side they on.

"They're no different than the politicians, I would submit, telling us what we want to hear, laughing all the way to the bank. The melody is better but the song is just the same. Makes it more pleasant to be robbed, I suppose, but it's just another form of larceny. All this hippie

shit sells papers, but is it real? Peace and love? The Aquarian Age. I mean, come on, man. You really believe it?"

"Yeah, I do," Strawn heard himself say, like a sound emerging from far down an echo chamber. "I think there's a better way to do things. Doesn't have to be dog eat dog, survival of the fittest, all that sick shit, over and over again, that's what I think it's about. At least for me."

"Hope you are right, Brother Jon. I do hope so. But I have to think you're dreaming. Hippies were done for the minute all you guys started writing about them. Summer of Love? Yeah, I remember. A very long time ago. Monterrey Pop. Woodstock. All that good stuff. Ended with Altamont, didn't it? I think the whole thing ended with Altamont. Death by Angels. Now all these long hairs are just posers. Celebrities, at least in their own minds. They've all been commoditized."

"Well, what about you, Greek? What do you believe in?"

"See, I try to keep things in perspective, Jon. Just living and loving life, you dig? Got this beautiful pad, some sweeties drop by now and then for fun, a few gigs with the band every now and then, and a lot of good music to keep me high, what I play and what I listen to, both."

"Like when Sollie was trotting us local bands up on stage. At the Grande, we killed it. Opened for Jeff fuckin' Beck, do you believe it? And we held our own. People were calling for him but him and Carmen, those guys, they sat a full half-hour before they came on, just to let the crowd settle down after our set. That was a compliment."

"Oh, man, but those arena shows. We did two of them. Opened for Fleetwood Mac. Another time for the Eagles. The fuckin' Eagles, man. Before they were really big, but still. For us it was huge."

He took a last hit, started to offer it to Strawn but thought better of it when he looked in his eyes and saw them spinning, dropped it in an ashtray and picked up a guitar, a beautiful pre-War Gibson Sunburst, held it lovingly but didn't play. Not yet.

"Truth is, it was too huge for us. Sly King got lost in that cavern. Didn't have the sound to fill the space. It was sad, but it was us, who we are, as people and as a band. Had no business there. Sollie took us where we didn't belong.

"We're a club band and I'm good with it. I like to look the people in the eye when I'm playing. Like it when they're looking back at me. We're on the same wave length. Eye to eye, you know? Face to face. They're inspiring me just like I hope the music is doing them. You don't get that in those arena shows. Different gig altogether.

"That's what I learned from those days, what I held on to. Plus this," he said, gesturing with a fresh joint as he took another hit. "I don't need much to get by. None of us do, but sometimes it takes a while to get the message."

Transits

Elvis Presley died of a massive heart attack at 42 years of age. The autopsy revealed at least ten different drugs in his system, including levels of codeine ten times greater than a prescription dose. He had been healthy for most of his life but his last few years were made grotesque by addiction to prescription drugs. No proof was ever established that he went on raids with narcotics officers, nor that in doing so he shot someone, but the rumors persisted.

Rob Fabio retired after 25 years at DPD and supplemented his comfortable pension with consulting fees from corporate clients who paid him to root out drug users among their employees. He still drives the Cadillac convertible gifted him by the King.

David Walker was quietly replaced as publisher of the *FreeNews* by his family and entered into addiction rehabilitation care at a facility in Long Beach, California. After lengthy treatment and his release, he suffered a relapse and eventually submitted to an experimental program of intense therapy for cocaine addiction, which allowed him finally to achieve sobriety. He teaches journalism at a private university where a chair was endowed in his name.

Augie Mertz resigned his position at the paper and left town for Los Angeles, reportedly with the understanding he would never again show his face in Detroit. He was said to be working topless as the doorman at an S&M club downtown, where his newly ripped, liberally pierced and tattooed if still short body was vividly displayed.

Chloe McClain married one of Augie's former clients and moved with him to the Bahamas, where she is said to be beautifully

preserved, better tanned, and a seemingly no less erratic version of her former self, definitely older, perhaps wiser, but still prone to collapse in a heap on the floor or the beach when she laughs, which is often.

Abe Stongel retired from the paper after forty years of good news and bad, mostly bad, and enjoyed a few relaxing years in Destin, Florida sunfish sailing on the placid waters of the Gulf in his sleeveless t-shirts and baggy shorts. It was a becalmed version of the days of his youth when he rode big ships over big waves to the big war. It was finally a peaceful place where he napped one warm afternoon on a lounge chair at the beach and never woke again.

Letitia St. Germaine became a successful small business consultant and manager while raising two beautiful children as a single mother. After she quit Sollie Gold, she sent her husband, Cody, packing when he was unwilling or unable to give up the booze. She never looked back after she left the rock 'n' roll business, and refused comment when the reporters came calling after Sollie's death, but she was always willing to tell hilarious stories to friends about those wild and crazy times when classic rock was being born and she was the baddest broad in the business.

Kelly did indeed meet a boy from the neighborhood who worked in social services, went to church, wanted kids, and only smoked a little reefer on the weekends. He was solid, sweet, traditional, poetic in his outlook and practical in his ways, and he loved her completely. Her parents approved of him, and when the time came, they threw the couple a big Irish wedding where Kelly was the classically beautiful bride and he the handsome husband. Tradition had a day.

Susan Park ran out of steam eventually. Returned the steamtables and the utensils to the restaurant. More and maybe better chefs came into play in the business of feeding the bands, so she was less in demand and competition made it possible for the promoters to lower the pay for services that suddenly were more readily available.

By then, though, she had shot a lot of pictures and earned a certain recognition as a photographer of merit. What that merit was exactly took her some time to realize. Like so many people, she wanted to be recognized as an artist, to be respected and paid like someone at the top of the game.

Her large format photographs on archival paper sold for many hundreds of dollars each. The few that sold, that is. Some of them were very good. Many of them were interesting but not exactly great art. Mostly they ended up traded for whatever or given to the Hall of Fame and the Grande for the visibility they offered. Like so many artists she learned that for whatever reason her work didn't garner that level of respect. What she did realize eventually and others did as well is that she showed up when it mattered and her pictures were a vivid history of a fascinating period of time.

Captain Flynn continued for many more years to consolidate power and influence as the city's and the state's most powerful cop. He never became chief though. He had to grudgingly yield that honor to a hand-picked subordinate after his stellar moonlighting management sideline ran afoul of the IRS and he was forced to take retirement as part of quieting the potential scandal.

His iconic visage continued to be featured on radio and television, where he was a frequent guest of news and talk shows that

plumbed his insights into crime and punishment in the urban environment of the late Twentieth Century.

A few years before he died, he was featured in a documentary about the heyday of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll in the city, where he allowed that a lot of people back then learned a hard lesson about the power and reach of the police "who could do a lot more than people thought they could" in riding herd on the undesirable elements in town.

One of them, unfortunately, was Bodie, who was broadsided - literally - at Buffalo and Charles one evening when he was moving some weight. The guy who hit him was a more than slightly inebriated off-duty cop, go figure, who was immediately hostile about "you hippie fuck" even though he was the one who ran the light.

Bodie suggested "since you've been drinking" he was willing to walk away and take his loss, but the cop drew a gun, arrested him on the spot, spreadeagled him on the hood of his badly dented car, patted him down and actually dropped the bracelets on the ground twice before he got him handcuffed and called in reinforcements, who searched the van and - hooray! - found the pot and that was that.

Flynn himself came by the cell where Bodie was held overnight, said this had escalated beyond his ability to make it go away, but as a gesture of respect for his brother, Jon, whom he knew to be an honorable guy, they were going to cut Bodie some slack. That and in consideration, no doubt, of the fact that a drunken cop broadsided him at an intersection and then arrested him, searched his van without probable cause, and basically made a messy situation messier, the arresting officer was willing to charge him with simple possession,

a wink and a nod to ten pounds of pot, if he would agree to plead to it and let bygones be bygones. Probation was the sentence.

"Except, of course," the Captain said through the bars, "you would be wise to find a new means of supporting yourself because we would not look kindly on another run in with you with an illegal substance in hand." Bodie got the message.

He got a weekend gig at WABX, which eventually became a fulltime gig, doing the all-night shift for many years thereafter, where he became one of the city's best known and respected deejays, played great music, and had plenty to say about social justice and abuse of power. The situation changed but the song remained the same.

Jackson Catt continued to find work where he could, doing the bodyguard thing with a broken heart and a body that began to fade with age. His reputation suffered from the accusations that came his way over his failure to protect Bobby, but he carried on.

He carried his grief at the death of somebody he loved and his role in it. He had ever after his belief that it was a hotshot that killed him and nothing of Bobby's own doing, and that there were so few people he could tell his story who didn't take it for an effort to excuse his own failure. He failed, yes, because someone outflanked him and not because he didn't take care.

One day he told Jon Strawn his story. Strawn listened, thought about it, tried his best to check it out. He tried to check out Carina Minetti, who disappeared and never was heard from again. She disappeared so thoroughly, in fact, there was no evidence she ever existed. He could never prove Catt's story but neither could he disprove it. Finally out of respect for the man he wrote it down as the fiction it was or it wasn't.

The Boys just continued on their way. They were all about equilibrium, keeping things in balance. The thing they learned was there always were people who came down on one side of an issue and people who would come down on the other side of the issue. A surprising number of them were willing to bet they were right.

Why people were so interested in proving themselves was as complicated as the human condition itself, but the fact was that a lot of people got some sort of satisfaction from winning a bet and a lot of them too when they lost were even more determined to take another shot at winning. Making book was like being a fulcrum that balanced those forces. Marky and Dice knew that serving that powerful inclination people had to be in the game and skillfully covering those bets when the odds for the bookies were always eleven to ten in their favor was a nice way to make a living.

Unless someone upset the balance. Then it was essential to correct that situation and do their best to make certain it didn't happen again. When someone lost a bet and couldn't pay, the interest they charged until the bettor scared up the money was steep.

Vigorish discouraged the rational man, and for whatever reason most bettors were men, from that mistake by making the cost exorbitant. Anyone who understood math or simply knew how to count was dissuaded from defaulting on the money due when a bet was lost. When you couldn't pay a booky, the debt grew geometrically and it became an all-consuming matter to get it paid as soon as humanly possible. Or else.

Like all business people, Dice and Marky hated it when basic business practices were knocked out of whack by someone's failure to honor his obligations. They did what they had to do to restore the

equilibrium, to bring things back into balance. Sometimes people got hurt. Badly. Even fatally. They hated that part of the corrective process but knew that it had to be done. The guy with the pock-marked face did it for them and they paid him well.

Order in business was everything. When things slip a little they will soon slip a lot more unless they are immediately put right. It had nothing to do with anger, vengeance, teaching someone a lesson. It had to do with consistently setting an example of how a good business worked by making certain everybody followed the rules of the game.

Timeless

The smoke was thick. The room was cool. Sly and the Family Stone was vamping, playing in the background. Great band. Great song. Thank you (Fallettinme Be Mice Elf Agin). Back before the deviated septum.

"Come on man. Take a load off. Haven't seen you in forever and you don't even get to sit down before I'm busting your balls. *Come in to my inner sanctum,*" Nicky said, mimicking the radio voice. Must say it is a rare pleasure to hump a joint with you. This really your first time? Like a virgin, huh!"

They moved into the living room, sank into beanbag chairs, lying back, nearly lying down and rising only to pass the joint back and forth, saying nothing. Everyday People Sing a Simple Song. Dance to the Music. Just listening, in that sweet groove.

The Greek was quietly strumming the guitar, playing along with his namesake. "Got to weigh on you, though. Man, I do sympathize. Bobby and Sollie, back to back like that. Very weird."

A while passed before Strawn answered. This marijuana high was pretty damned enjoyable he had to admit. A guy could grow to like it. They'd smoked enough that time was suspended, whole worlds floated by between breaths.

He wasn't sure if he could say what he suspected, the story he'd been told, without being reckless, defaming the dead. He didn't know anything for certain, maybe not anything at all. Just the thick vapor of suspicion lingering from barely glimpsed facts.

"I guess what keeps coming back to me is they were as different as two people could be. Other than music, they had nothing in common."

"Maybe," Nicky said after a pause, "maybe not. Both were very ambitious. They wanted to be on top. Similar in that way."

"Hmm? Not sure I follow you."

"It's like I was saying earlier. What I believe in: lying low. Keep your head down. Stay out of the crossfire. I've got a nice life here, Jon, 'cause I fly below the radar. Keep it simple. Don't need those stadium shows to be happy. A little club and a little success is fine by me. I can just go my own way."

"Bobby, now, whole other matter. Much more talent and burning with that desire, you know, wants to be heard, wants to play with the best, wants to *be* the best. A lot of visibility and a whole lotta pressure."

"Bobby was a beautiful soul. Told me once though, now you mention it, that he wanted his limousine, too."

"Indeed, a truly beautiful soul and gentle as the breeze. One very fine guy, rest his soul. But maybe not tough enough to play in that arena. Sollie's arena. Know what I mean?"

"Those guys chew you up and spit you out. It's what they do. It's why they do it, for the power. Because they can. Why a dog licks his balls, you know?"

"All those gate crashers, all those years, yelling 'music should be free.' They don't know what they're messing with. I'll tell you what, if you took every dollar in the world and distributed it equally to every person on earth, guys like Sollie would have it all back in six months' time. They *want* it more than we do. That simple. They're willing to do what it takes."

“What I said about the hippies, Jon, it ain’t like a lot of us don’t have those sentiments. Gentler world, why not? Peace and love, sign me up. Makes me think, though, about a friend of mine. Said to me once, ‘Yeah, the USA is the greatest place in the world to be *if* you’re competitive. But if you’re not, look out below. The herd will run right over you, never give it a second thought.’

“Always makes me wonder if all of us soft hearted fucks, us hippies, maybe just want to lie around smoking and joking, banging the sweeties and making music, lions with lambs, being *peaceful*, you know. Maybe it’s because we’re just not competitive. Maybe we just can’t cut it in the big time, don’t want it bad enough.

“Never would have left the cave in the old days. Say what? Saber tooth tigers? I ain’t going out there. No fucking way! Staying right here by the fire where it’s warm.”

Nicky chuckled to himself, amused with the image. Strawn just stared, stoned. The question was right there, tip of his tongue, ready to be asked.

“You’ve always been the philosopher, Greek. The Sly King. So tell me. Nothing ever going to change? Just grab what you can and screw the next guy? Art, music, all of it just a farce. Nothing matters but the money?”

“Hey, Brother Jon, you know I love the music, love the beauty. Never would say otherwise. Just trying to make the point about what it takes. I hear the Beatles, Stones, The Who, Dylan, and my man Sly here, all those cats that made the soundtrack for our time, I love it. But I also know those guys are tough.

“Those little llmey fucks don’t weight 100 pounds apiece and they’re bad as Muhammad Ali. Same with Dylan. They’ve got the

talent, but so do a lot of folks. Difference is, they've got the cojones, too. They found out what it takes to get there and they did it. More than I could ever do.

"Maybe you can make art, make change. But if you can't hang in there with the big boys, you're just trying to live in a world that doesn't exist. The big boys run the show. Want to make it, you got to make something for them, too. You can't deal with Sollie Gold, how you gonna handle Ho Chi Minh or Joe Bonanno, hell, Walt Disney, some of those cats that wield the real power?"

"So that's it?" Strawn finally said. "Just another rumble in the jungle? Every generation just choosing its poison, how they're gonna dance with the one that brung 'em? Nothing changes except at the top. Discouraging.

"Well, now, some things do change. Looky here. My man, Jon Strawn, finally stoned on his ass and still a soulful dude. The gentleman has come over and that's reason to celebrate. That's change, brother. For me, it's invigorating."

The record ran out, the room was quiet. They sat there saying nothing, feeling the buzz, the disconnect between what they felt and what had been said. When you get high, you want to float on big fluffy clouds and see the world's effervescence in hyper technicolor like a beautiful movie rolling out before you. Instead, sometimes, the pit bull bites you in the ass. What can you say? Finally, Nicky picked out a mournful blues.

"Look, we both know something weird happened to Bobby. To Sollie, too. No telling what, but the one thing for sure is they got in over their heads. Each in his own way, but you cross into a power zone where your circuitry can't handle the amps and boom! Maybe

you OD, maybe you jump to your death. Maybe something else entirely happened. Who knows? Result's the same."

The Gibson was crying out, blues in a minor chord. The resonance between the sound it made and the feeling they shared was palpable.

"Brother Jon, I don't doubt your sincerity. Just your good sense. Like freedom being nothing left to lose, I think the same can be said about truth.

"Everybody wants a story they can be comfortable with, something that sits easy on their conscience. There're a lot of good ones out there, starting with the bible and running on down to the daily news. That's the story. But the truth? Pretty elusive stuff, Jon. I don't think much of it gets told. Most of us have too much to lose.

"That's the way I think it really is, brother. The big boys do their thing and you guys chase around with 'em on the pretext of telling us the story. But that's all it is, is a story, a fairy tale for the schmucks to cuddle up to like a teddy bear, so they think they know what's happening and it's all warm and fuzzy. You tell us what they want us to hear and any truth that sneaks in there is just an accident.

"So she's got her Jesus and he's got the Buddha and those folks got the Magna Carta and them others got the American dream, and people all over the world burn their candles to their idols. You and me? We got John Lennon and Imagine and we burn this good herb and genuflect to the cause. That's what gets us high, keeps us cozy at night.

"But 'make sense'. I don't know that it makes sense, Jon. Any of it. Don't seem to be any nice, neat ending to these things. Bobby, Sollie, you and me. We come and we go. We write a few stories, sing a few songs, play a few tunes, make a few bucks, try to make a life. Some of

us chase the big time, want to hang with the King. Some of us just do our thing and make the best of it. Who's to admire, who's to blame? I don't know.

"Every generation tries to make sense of it, I suppose. Got them a philosopher, a sly king like me, stretching clear back to the beginning of time, and nobody's been able to explain it yet. So much for evolution, right?

"No matter how pointless it is, though, you know a hundred years from now, two guys like you and me will be sitting around, getting high and trying to fit it all together. I just hope there'll be another cat like Bobby to make that sweet music while they talk."

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