



# **The Angel and the Highway**

## DEDICATION

To my wife and soulmate, *Elise Ann*,  
who continually exceeds my ideal in every way.

This book was written for my son *Dylan* and for *his* children,  
so that they might have an idea why *Grandpa Pat* was so weird.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to the family, friends,  
strangers and *strange friends* who have picked me up along the way.

- Patrick Westfall  
June, 2014

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## Part 1- California

Andy was a reasonably good-looking kid at fifteen, muscular but a little on the short side. Life in the small California tourist town of Ojai had been kind to him and, for quite a while, it seemed that he was destined to lead an easy, charmed life.

His grades were nearly perfect and his social life was blossoming. He believed in the Protestant view of Jesus and the Bible with all his heart and this naive altruism governed his every thought and deed as he drank deeply from the fleeting cup of childhood. He was drawn to the smarter girls, who seemed to be attracted to his chivalrous tendencies, or at least enough of them were to help steer him away from the marriage to God that he had seriously considered not many months earlier.

The church bells tolled nostalgically throughout the town and reached his ears as he sat upon a rock in midstream. His ear was bent low to the guitar he was trying to tune over the gentle trickling of the creek.

Two hummingbirds, shamelessly in love, buzzed past his shoulder and hovered mere inches in front of him. He was struck by the simple beauty of the scene and felt the vague, bittersweet pangs of romance to which only poetic souls seem to hearken.

He began to fingerpick *Moonshadow* by Cat Stevens, which had been popular before he was born. His father had been in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division and had an impressive collection of LPs from the 60's and 70's. These classic rock and folk records had become very influential to the young idealist and he was enamored with the hippie era.

Suddenly a voice rang out from somewhere in the woods around him. "Shut up, Kid! All that racket is scaring my fish away!"

The boy cringed with shame and embarrassment but he swallowed them sufficiently to utter a weak, "I'm sorry. I'll quit playing." This seemed to placate the disembodied critic for he heard no further chastisement as he packed up to leave.

He slung the expensive guitar that his dad had given him over his shoulder with the resigned insolence that he supposed Woody Guthrie would have had and sauntered away. The Guild guitar had been his dad's first purchase after surviving the army. Now, gifted from father to son, it had become highly symbolic to the fledgling player whose skill upon it was certainly unequal to the fine instrument.

The boy quickly crossed the breadth of town which was only three miles, then hopped over a waist-high rock wall to cut through an orange orchard that surrounded his father's house. This, however, was technically trespassing; a crime for which he had been repeatedly warned. Yet he could rarely bring himself to go around because it meant nearly another mile of dreary walking.

The boy moved stealthily from tree to tree and avoided the small roads the farmer used for his tractor. He looked and listened like a frightened rabbit before moving to the cover of the next tree but finally began to relax a little as his father's house came into view.

Then he saw it, the little tractor that had once been painted red was idling in the road between him and the house. There was no way of going around so the boy decided to wait. It seemed that the farmer was also of a mind to wait although it wasn't yet clear whether he had even spotted the boy.

*Why does he even care if I walk through this darned orchard? I never pick the oranges or leave trash or anything.* The boy questioned the character of a man who would go to such great lengths to thwart a young neighbor who only wanted to walk through.

The breeze blew innocently and wafted the sweet scent of orange blossoms through the air. The farmer killed the motor and the evening grew very quiet. Harley-Davidson motorcycles could be heard rumbling through the valley far away. A pair of red-tailed hawks circled high above them and occasionally cried out to each other.

A squirrel, too, found himself caught up in the undignified human drama, for he appeared to want to cross the road between the opponents. He scampered a few feet out only to hesitate and retreat a few steps back. The boy could see the farmer watching it too but doubted that the innocent animal's presence occasioned the same inspiration that so captivated Andy. When the farmer spoke up at last, his crotchety voice startled both the boy and the squirrel.

"I know you're there, boy, but I can't wait for you any longer tonight on account of the missus. Tell you what, you come outta there and I'll let you pass. If you don't, I'm gonna shoot me that squirrel." He then produced a BB pistol and made a big show of cocking it aggressively.

The boy's heart both sank and raced at the same time, causing a lasting wound somewhere deep in his soul. He stepped out onto the road.

"I'm here, Mr. Morales, don't shoot him. I wasn't hurting anything, just trying to get home." He tried to sound polite but he was surprised at the foreign tone of anger that he detected in his own voice.

"I'm through warning you kid, next time I catch you in my orchard I'll have the police lock you up, or worse." Then he smiled grimly, raised the pistol and shot the squirrel. The small female fell over without a sound and the shiny copper BB could be seen partially embedded in her temple.

“That was all your fault, kid.” The farmer spoke the cruel words with relish, mocking the boy who had burst into tears. The boy felt an intense sadness well up within him. He wanted to do something about the injustice but couldn’t form an idea. Violence was never part of his nature and he didn’t know anyone who would care if he reported it.

As he ran home he internalized the scene and accepted the guilt as his own, just as the farmer had intended. As he approached the house he saw his father pulling weeds in the yard. He would often work all day for the local water company, then drive his work truck home and start working in the yard. Sometimes he wouldn’t come in the house for three hours. His father valued labor above all things and was a living example of his own philosophy.

The boy tried to run past his dad, who couldn’t help but wince when he saw his old guitar being bounced around carelessly. He failed to observe the tear-stains on his son’s cheeks and so chose that moment to re-instill the *code of ethics* upon the errant boy who was obviously in dire need of it.

“Quit running with that guitar! That thing’s worth more than you are, you know. You said you’d keep it in its case and take care of it.”

“I have taken care of it, Dad. I love this guitar more than anything.” The boy replied weakly.

“Well, you better start acting like it then.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Quit saying yeah all the time, the word is yes.”

“Yes, Sir.” The boy felt emotion burn within him. He wanted only to go to his room and be alone but this was not to be, for after

disengaging from his well-meaning father but before reaching the solace of his room, his stepmother caught him.

“Andy, would you come here please? The nice farmer called to complain about you. He says you’re raising hell out in his orchard again.”

Something began to break in the immaculate bosom of the boy, resulting in a confusion of emotions that were to threaten his soul and enshroud his mind.

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“Come on, Eric. It’ll be fun! I know you hate school too, let’s ditch the rest of the day.” Even though his attendance was poor, Andy thought he still had all *A*’s except one *B* in school because he still turned in his homework and knew how to ace the easy multiple choice state tests. He had also grown more rebellious of mind and began to ditch class frequently.

"We could see if Tony will drive us up the canyon. I think he's home building a new bike." Eric replied.

Though they were now sixteen years old and could drive, no one had a car that ran. The canyon held all the rugged majesty of hiking trails, cold swimming holes and hot sulphur springs.

Eric was still Andy's best friend but they had begun to grow apart as Andy pursued girls and Eric worked two jobs. Eric, who studied chess and trigonometry for fun, worked hard at everything, Andy thought, so that he wouldn't end up like his old man.

Throughout their childhood, Eric had opened Andy's eyes to the world in ways that no one else had. Andy would often read books that Eric recommended and would always remember that it had been Eric who first turned him on to classic rock by playing *Sunshine of Y our Love* by Cream and *Locomotive Breath* by Jethro



Tull. Young men tend to share jokes, games and adventures but not their innermost feelings, so Eric may never have known how much Andy respected him.

"What about grades, man? What about our future?" Eric said.

"What about it?" Andy retorted effortlessly. "What are they gonna teach you today? Let the mountains be your master, dude. We'll learn more there, or anywhere, than school."

"This is the last time." Eric said. "We're both going to flunk out by absences." At that time, truancy was ruinous to students, for as few as four unexcused absences, a student's grade would drop a full letter regardless of their knowledge of the subject matter, homework or test scores. Andy's 3.87 grade point average had already been reduced to a .60 due to these absences but he was still unaware of it.

"All right, let's do it!" Eric enthused.

Forty minutes later they reached Eric's house, which always held an air of mystery to Andy due to the ever present uncertainty of his parents. Andy never knew what mood he would find them in, or whether they would smack one of the kids around, or each other.

They found Eric's oldest brother, Tony, out back near the enormous mound of stolen bicycle parts. Tony and his band of merry men were five years older than Eric and Andy, and therefore, were an endless source of knowledge and wisdom.

Tony was nearing completion on his new *frankenbike* but couldn't find any brakes that fit the frame.

"Frickin' Yella! He stole my stolen brakes!" Tony said and smiled wryly, revealing his awareness of the cosmic irony in his

statement. He referred to one of his cohorts who had probably stopped by to grab some parts for his own stolen bike.

Tony held the frankenbike out to the boys proudly. "What do you think?" he asked. The boys used every ounce of their wit to berate the bike and its builder but Tony was unphased.

"Laugh all you want but I bet both of you beg me to borrow it within the week." They began to concoct outlandish situations where *anyone* might be reduced to borrowing such an abomination when Eric's middle brother Matt burst on the scene. Before an instant had passed, Matt had placed a well-aimed knuckle in Andy's mid-bicep nerve, which rendered his entire arm painfully useless for a few minutes. This technique was known as a *dead arm* and Matt was a skilled master.

"What's up, fags?" He said and snatched Eric's candy bar from his hand. "Why aren't you in school, little man? Don't make me kick your ass again."

Matt had red hair like Eric but was hot-blooded and, though only a year older than the boys, was unnaturally strong and often beat them up joyfully.

"Take it easy!" Eric feigned a rising temper, "Don't make me take you down." Eric attempted to inflict a dead arm on his brother but his blow was caught and his own arm was twisted behind his back. After extracting a cruel, demeaning apology, Matt relented. He took his older brother's new frankenbike without a challenge and pedaled off to get some action from his girlfriend.

"Wanna hit the hot springs?" Eric asked Tony through clenched teeth. Eric had once knocked Andy through an open window during a pillow fight so Andy knew that Eric was nearly as strong as his brother. Eric, however, adhered to *the code* and wasn't as tough-spirited as Matt could be. Andy was proud of his friend

who was inherently noble and self-effacing; two traits that Andy, for better or worse, had tried to develop in himself after observing them in his friend.

Tony smiled that half-sinister smile of his and agreed. "First, we have to make a quick stop."

Four hours later, the boys found themselves sitting in the cramped rear seat of an early 80's Honda CVCC microcar. They had been waiting nearly an hour for Tony to score some weed from *some people* and weren't considered cool enough to come inside.

"We could have stayed in school, man," Eric said in frustration.

"We'll get there," Andy replied encouragingly. "It'll all be worth it later."

Tony eventually returned with glassy, bloodshot eyes, "Are you two ready to go, yet?"

Tony and his cohort Steve, a.k.a. Yella, hopped in the front seats and they headed north out of town and up Matilija canyon.

The sun was setting red as they parked the microcar illegally on the side of the road and began the descent to the hot springs. The boys disrobed shyly and crept into the hot, sulphurous water which bubbled up in a large, natural pool. There existed an unspoken law requiring full nudity at the sulphur baths, to which everyone from stoners to cheerleaders adhered. Jewelry, too, was disallowed due to the mineral content of the water, which would render all silver or gold an ugly, dark green.

Once the moment was right, Tony told Eric to dry off his hands. Then he handed him a large joint. All the boys dried their hands in anticipation of their turn. This wasn't the boys' first experience with marijuana, but only their third or fourth, and they were enveloped by the potent smoke. Their simple *selves*, merely

existing underneath the darkening sky, was sufficient source for the conversation to last far into the night.

The high that the boys were seeking was not like the goofy, raucous stoners in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Marijuana was a subtle mood-enhancer for regular smokers that was capable of opening doors to new perspectives. Andy thought of Aldous Huxley's book, *The Doors of Perception*, after which the band The Doors had taken its name and thought *that* was what they were seeking.

"I think this is the *Crystal Ship*." Andy reflected while gazing up at the starry sky.

"Or the *Soul Kitchen*." Tony offered. The boys sang the song and considered the possibilities. The moon rose above the mountains and the small group of nude men felt isolated and as free as Burroughs's *John Carter* on Mars. They spoke confidently of the future and felt God's presence in their souls, for though they were truants, drug users and bicycle thieves, they still felt themselves innocent and good-natured at heart and worthy of admittance to heaven.

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Spring break brought Andy and Eric seemingly endless free-time and excessively hot temperatures. They had ridden their bikes up the canyon early in the morning with their best friends Lars, Bart and Robb (he insisted on the second b). The ride had been idyllic until about 10 a.m. when the sun rose high above the trees, eliminating nearly all of the shade.

"Seriously, no one brought water?" Robb asked. He was the athlete of the group and was by far the most fastidious. He was teased for folding his tank top and socks in a neat pile when he took them off to go swimming at the beach, yet he could bench-

press nearly three times his own weight and played varsity football as a freshman.

"Listen Ace, why do you even have to ask? You know there's no water!" Lars ejaculated. Lars had recently moved to Ojai from Australia but was of decidedly Nordic stock and prone to dominating anyone whom he deemed to be his inferior in height, wit or will. At 6' 3" he was also the only one of the small band who had been in fist-fights and Lars enjoyed the intimidating stigma that carried with it.

"My grandma's house isn't far away." Bart offered. "She'd let us drink from the hose, but we can't go inside." No one spoke for a few awkward moments while everyone considered the implications of his words and guessed at the poor relationship Bart must have had with his grandmother.

The boys had found a platform built in the middle of a small pool of water among the canyon orchards near Bodee's restaurant and were drying their skin lazily in the sun.

"This reminds me of *The Raft* by Stephen King." Eric stated gravely.

Lars looked around. "That's the one in *Creepshow*. The kids are out on a floating dock and an oily monster gets them." Despite his heavy physical presence, he was the group's most voracious reader and film aficionado.

"The day's only getting hotter, let's ride to Bart's grandma's house." Andy suggested. The boys were slow to act despite their thirst for they knew that they would have to pedal at least a mile through the 105 degree heat just to reach the first stopping point, which was an unwelcome reception with an estranged grandmother.

The ride proved exactly as tortuous as they had expected it to be but they eventually reached the grandmother's house and bartered with her for access to the scalding water from the hose that lay stretched across the dusty yard in the sun.

On the road home, each boy was forced to live his own private hell of heat, muscle-burn and over-taxed will. When Robb's turn came up in the affluent suburbs of Meiner's Oaks, he peeled off the main road looking very pale and headed home without a word. The three others shared a path several grueling miles further but Lars and Andy eventually saw Eric and Bart safely home downtown.

Now that they were alone, Lars seized the opportunity he had been waiting for. "Hey man, do you want to work this weekend?"

"Sure, doing what?" Andy returned.

"Setting up targets at the gun range in Rose Valley."

"I don't want to be a target!" Andy replied excitedly.

"They don't shoot at you, here's how it works. We spend most of our time hanging out in a shack and when they blow the whistle, we all come running out and set their targets up. Then we run back in before they start shooting again."

"Sounds kind of fun, it'll be so hot though."

"It pays 100 bucks a day. Come on, it'll be worth it." Lars knew that Andy probably wouldn't come if he had told him the truth, that the job paid a hundred dollars for the whole weekend.

Andy continued to act like he wasn't sure about going until the last possible moment then finally agreed to go. "Great!" Lars said, "We'll pick you up at 6 a.m." He pedaled off while Andy ranted about having to get up so early.

Andy was dressed and reasonably awake when the brown Datsun pickup truck with a dated racing stripe arrived at his house. The interior of the cab was full of beautiful blonde hair but Andy couldn't tell who the girls were. He piled in the back with Lars and four guys he didn't know very well.

They pushed and shoved each other around until the truck started up the winding mountain road, then centrifugal force did most of the work for them. The boys leaned mercilessly against the unfortunate fellow on the inside edge of every turn, who would complain loudly but was only too happy to reciprocate on the next turn.

When the truck finally stopped, they were all sweaty and thirsty and when they stepped into the incredible heat of the day they all regretted coming. It was barely 7 a.m. and already crossing into triple digit temperatures. Andy thought he was going to die but there was no way to turn back.

Lars, true to form, took off with the older guys right away. Andy was considering whether he should follow him when he saw three pretty girls get out of the truck. Lily was the only one Andy knew from school and she said, "I guess you're with us today." Her younger sister was there, too, with her friend Melinda. When Andy thought about Lars in that sweaty tin can with those guys he had to laugh at his own luck.

Throughout the day Andy flirted notoriously with the girls, who in turn, made him do most of the work. He would have complained ingloriously if they hadn't repaid him with accidental glimpses down their tank tops.

Andy had never seen boobs before and here, thinly veiled, were three pairs; small, medium and large. He would gladly have

endured the heat to remain stuck in the tin shelter with the girls all summer.

He was shy though, and too polite, which gave the girls ample opportunity to torture him with foolish dares in order to prove his manhood. He endured Indian burns, pinches, slaps and other foolish man-trials according to the transient whims of the young ladies and he loved every minute of it.

He felt himself drawn to Lily, for the prettiest girl with the largest bosom was also the nicest girl he knew. Yet, this opportunity to seek her hand passed, for her sister's friend Melinda, was the most overtly interested in him and made it clear to Lily and her sister that Andy was *hers*.

As they paired up to reset the heavy lead targets for the shooters, Melinda covertly arranged to switch places with Lily so that she could help Andy set up the heavier pig and sheep-shaped targets. This left the two sisters to set up the lighter chickens and turkeys while the group of boys got the heaviest ram and elk targets two hundred yards downrange. Melinda flirted shamelessly with Andy and they were going steady within a week.

By that Sunday evening when they were dropped off at home, however, the heat and dehydration had reduced them all to unattractive zombies who lusted for nothing more than respite from the tin hell that had cooked them all weekend.

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Andy knew everyone at the party, but no one knew whose house it was. It was an elaborate high school hookup and was working its magic on the youngsters.

Everywhere Andy looked, couples were kissing and there was a bottle or can of Coors Light and a Marlboro in almost every hand.



Some cheerleaders were dancing around in bras and bloomers while stoners passed joints around the room. Laughter was everywhere and it was a fine example of the august hedonism of youth in 1990.

Andy, however, was disaffected. He didn't like to drink beer upside down through the gravity bong or talk about bench pressing and batting averages. He didn't hook up with party girls either, so he soon felt out of place.

Outside, a group of older guys were huddled in a circle, clearly buying drugs from an ancient hippie in the middle, who was easily forty years older than anyone else.

"Maybe it's his house." Andy thought and moved closer to them. Tony was there with Eric and he joined them.

"What is it, weed?" Andy asked.

"Uh, sure." Tony snickered mischievously.

Tony said, "No, man. These are shrooms." Andy grew very interested and quickly grilled Tony about them. Tony was the resident drug expert and deserved the title. He claimed that his dad had him rolling joints when he was only four years old. "They had to be good ones too." He recalled jovially.

Once Andy had learned that mushrooms first seemed to kill you with nausea and abdominal pain, but then mellowed into what they called a *spiritual journey*, Andy was convinced that he had to try them. He bought an eighth ounce from the ancient hippie for an incredible \$60 and the boys piled into Tony's abominable micro-deathcar and left the party to take a spiritual journey together in the canyon.

"We have to pick up Lars." Eric said and they swung by the Ranch House, a swanky restaurant where three of them worked. At sixteen Lars was already a waiter and apprentice wine steward. Eric and Andy worked there too but as busboys and dishwashers.

The off-duty employees refused to go inside to get him as they both expected to be nagged by co-workers. Tony went in the side entrance that was usually only used by employees and customers buying specialty bread.

Ten seconds later he came running back out. The tiny Czechoslovakian chef had seen him and immediately attacked. She threw spoons, forks, hors d'oeuvres and loaves of specialty bread at him until she was standing red faced and breathless outside the door. Andy and Eric tried to duck out of sight but they were too late. While their eyes studied the floorboards of the tiny Honda, they heard her foreign cackle, "I seez you Ahreek. Yoo too, Ahndee! Yoo must beee comin fah Mastah Lahs. Why you did not come heen?"

The boys were so terrified that they could only giggle and stay low with the same idiot optimism of an ostrich on the Australian plains.

"Yoo silly boys, yoo not reel men lak Mastah Lahs. Bah! I gwan geet heem for yoo geerlymen. Haha!" She entered and shut the door loudly.

Bursts of poorly-restrained laughter echoed through the night. Soon Lars came out the door dressed up to serve picky, wealthy diners.

"You guys are so lame! Helga is really cool and you guys are out here messing with her. Not cool, man."

Tony explained their intent as they piled uncomfortably into the car and had a great time teasing *Mastah Lahs* about Helga, his older woman.

"Eric, you drive. I want to clean this weed." Tony instructed.

"Sure, Tone." Eric was the chess master, the most intelligent and sensible of the group, but his suicidal tendencies became apparent when he drove a vehicle.

"And Eric, take it easy." Tony's hands mimed as if pushing downward on a cloud.

"Of course!" Eric said with an unsettling grin as he drove the tiny car calmly up the mountain taking as many back-roads through town as possible. Tony separated seeds and stems from the bud and had rolled five joints. No one had seen the mushrooms since Andy had pooled his bag with Tony's at the party.

Andy said, "Guys, I have a problem. There's this terrible pain in my jaw, maybe a bad tooth."

Lars looked at it and burst out laughing in disbelief. "That's the biggest abscessed tooth I've ever seen! You should be in a hospital."

"You can get poisoned from those things, Andy. You could die." Eric affirmed.

Andy turned ashen and looked at Tony who nodded gravely while trying not to laugh. "Don't worry, we have enough painkillers to get you through the night." He assured Andy.

"You know what you need?" Eric asked as the car crested the hill.

"No! Eric seriously, no!" Lars objected menacingly because he knew what was coming. They all realized that, despite his earlier promise to drive carefully, Eric might now do anything he chose and they would be powerless to stop him.

"Run silent, run deep!" Eric yelled then he killed the engine and turned off the headlights.

They could see fairly well by the light of the moon but the hot springs lay at the bottom of the hill another seven miles further. Andy knew they would never make it.

This was Andy's first *run silent, run deep* but Lars and Tony had survived one before. Andy looked at the veterans to gauge the appropriate level of panic but their eyes were closed and they were holding onto their seats for dear life.

"Use the brakes, Eric. Please use the brakes!" Tony pleaded.

"Seriously Eric, use the brakes." Lars demanded while punching him repeatedly in the shoulder. Andy slowly realized that *run silent, run deep* was referencing the 1958 movie about a submarine without engine, lights or brakes.

Eric slammed them to the right on reckless, hard-left turns. Hard-rights were particularly dangerous as they hurled Tony over from the shotgun seat and into Eric and the steering wheel. Meanwhile, Eric feigned a maniacal laugh and opened his eyes alarmingly wide. Seven terrifying miles later, Eric parked the car safely on a small turnout along the road and took his beating like a man.

They could smell the sulphurous hot springs bubbling about fifty feet off the road and down the hill. They stumbled along the uncertain path in the moonlight, disrobed and slipped into the steaming water.

Andy's toothache had grown unbearable. He asked Tony for a painkiller, who in turn asked Lars for the backpack. From this he pulled a fifth of whiskey, the five joints he had rolled and the bag of shrooms.

The boys chewed the tiny dried mushrooms and chased them with shots of whiskey to kill their rancid taste. This ignoble scene did not end with the consumption of the mushrooms, for as they absorbed into the bloodstream, they also burned into the stomach lining causing intense cramping and nausea. The boys were all nearly doubled over in pain.

Tony, however, bore his suffering with dignity and firm resolve. After everyone's pain had peaked, he produced the joints and received cheers for his timing. The marijuana eased the nausea but not Andy's toothache. He imbibed shot after shot of Tony's whiskey and waited for the mushrooms to kick in.

Their talk turned esoteric and dreamlike. For several hours they were content but Andy never felt the mushrooms kick in and his tooth was still aching beyond anything he had ever felt.

"Hey Tony, do you have anything else in that bag of tricks? My tooth is killing me."

Tony smiled his impish smile, like a mysterious djinn granting loaded wishes. "I do have these little scraps of paper."

The acid, or LSD, upset Andy's stomach but soon allowed him to forget all about his body and its petty aches and pains. He now dwelt far above them and could look down with detached pity on the struggling mortals below.

The boys listened intently while Lars described how the cartilage would crumple when he punched someone in the nose. Later, he begged them all to hit *him* so that he could learn what it felt like

himself. None of the boys volunteered to appease him, however, because they feared his fierce retaliation when he sobered up.

The hours passed with immature hilarity and far out philosophy that cannot be documented here, for its folly as well as its wisdom was transient like the night itself.

"Thanks, Tony." Andy repeated throughout the night to his beloved, enabling benefactor.

"Glad to help my friend. Hey, did you guys hear the damkeeper's house burned down?"

"I didn't know there was a dam." Andy said in surprise.

"Or a damkeeper. Let's go check it out." Lars said.

They stumbled about a mile through the underbrush and found a small lake that was held on one side by a concrete dam, of which only a foot or two was visible above the water line.

"There's a ladder in the middle of the dam to get down the other side." Tony offered helpfully. Andy winced at Tony's eyes which were twinkling again with their mischievous gleam.

"How do we get out there?" Andy asked.

"Swim. Oh, and watch out for the razor wire." Tony enjoyed the unwelcome punchline as everybody groaned on queue.

"What's razorwire?" Lars asked.

"It's like barbed wire but the barbs are extra wicked. You'll see."

"The military uses them, you've seen it on TV. Like big old razor blades on wire." Eric added.

They swam out to the middle of the lake and found the razorwire fence and the ladder. Andy also found out that the ladder clung precariously to the side of a 100 foot sheer concrete face. Andy wasn't sure what he had expected the back-side of a dam to look like but he had definitely not been prepared for a *suicide-ladder*.

They crept past the razorwire and scaled the suicide-ladder in silence, for no pranks were appropriate at 3 a.m. while they clung to the backside of a dam loaded on whiskey, weed, mushrooms and LSD.

Everyone made it safely down to ground level and there was the charred skeleton of what had recently been the damkeeper's house. The concrete foundation and most of the brick fireplace remained intact but the blackened wooden beams and studs were hopelessly burned. The sight reminded Andy of over-cooked campfire hamburgers and he was saddened by the devastation.

"They made him live here? What if the dam broke?"

"I guess that's one way to make sure he does his job." Tony joked but they all shivered to think of living in the behemoth shadow of the old dam. Once they had thoroughly explored the remains, they turned their solemn attention to the ascent that loomed before them.

Had it been possible, it is likely that all four would have been glad of helicopter rescue. Andy thought of the folksong *Lonesome Valley* as he realized that each young man would have to climb the ladder himself.

They would have made a sight indeed, scaling that sheer height in the moonlight. Tony led and was followed by Lars, Eric and Andy. Tony and Lars reached the top of the dam and dove into the water. Eric reached the top and waited for Andy.

Near the top of the ladder, Andy chanced a last look at the cabin below but vertigo caused him to whip his head back around again. As he did so, he firmly embedded his nose into a one-inch blade of razorwire!

Andy stood on the second rung from the top of the ladder one hundred feet above the ground. There was nothing to hold onto except the top rung of the ladder, but it was down by his knees and he couldn't reach it because his nose had been impaled at a standing height.

"Eric! I think I'm stuck!" Andy's voice sounded like he had a stuffy nose.

Eric had almost reached the water but shimmied back to see what had happened.

"Oh, that's bad! That's really bad, man."

"I know it's bad, but what should I do?" Andy said with panic rising in his voice. If Eric didn't know what to do, Andy knew that he was lost. He would plummet to his death one hundred feet below and add his remains to those of the charred dwelling.

Eric weighed the moment, glanced at the wound in Andy's nose then at Tony and Lars. He turned back to Andy and said, "Pull up and back, really hard."

Andy obeyed and jerked his head up and back really hard. Blood and cartilage sprayed from his nose as he tore it loose from the sinister razorwire. He looked down, grew woozy and began to fall. Eric caught his arm and steadied him, then led Andy slowly toward the relative safety of the lake where he hoped the cold water would revive his hapless friend. Andy recovered from his swoon as the chilly water met his skin.



Eric said, "You'll have to swim, Andy." Eric told him gravely. The task was disorienting in the darkness and Andy was grateful that Eric knew where the shore was. Tony and Lars had already reached land but had guessed something was wrong and were swimming back out to them.

Once ashore, Lars stripped off his famous *Buckwheat* t-shirt and sacrificed it to Andy to staunch the flow of blood from his poor, gushing nose. The boys gathered around him with concern on their faces as he began to vomit. It was clearly Andy's time to pay the piper for his body convulsed terribly in its effort to purge the poisonous painkillers he had ingested.

"You'll be alright, man. We'll take you home." Tony said after Andy caught his breath a little.

"I can't go home. They kicked me out for smoking cigarettes in my room again." He smiled sheepishly, "I've been sleeping in Libbey Park for three weeks." That had been a costly cigarette. His friends were taken aback by the news but they already knew all about Andy's strict dad who called pot the *devil's weed*.

"We'll take you to our house then." Eric said like the stalwart friend he was.

"Ma might not be too happy about that, Eric." He looked over at Andy who looked pathetic, then said, "Alright, but I'm driving."

"What do you mean? *I'm driving!*" Eric argued as they walked the dark path through low chaparral that led back to the car. They were still bickering about it as they piled into the microcar.

Lars bravely endured the night's chill and admired his bare pecs in the moonlight. He punched Andy in the shoulder. "Hell of a way to cure a toothache, huh buddy?"

After dropping Lars off at home, Tony and Eric tried to sneak Andy into their house but their mother was waiting up for them. When she saw Andy's poor nose, her heart softened and she became the image of a nursing angel. She washed and cleaned his wound and even produced a clean cloth to wrap it in. When she found out that he was homeless, the kind woman insisted that he sleep in her own bed all weekend.

On Monday, Andy would have to slink back to his dad and ask him to see a dentist, but that weekend he was grateful for the respite, though he hated making Eric's mom sleep on the couch.

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Andy moved back in with his father and stepmother after the dentist pulled his bad tooth and for a few weeks his home life was peaceful. He attended Typing I, his first class of the day, then walked off campus and hitchhiked the fourteen short miles to the beach in Ventura. He read books like *Helter-Skelter*, *On the Road* and *The Electric Kool-aid Acid Test* on the sand, snoozed, smoked, played guitar and wrote songs lazily in the sun all day. He'd walk to the northbound onramp and thumb rides back to Ojai just as Melinda's school day was over.

She had joined a band, singing with two acoustic guitar players. One was her cousin and was about their age, the other was in his thirties. Andy didn't play guitar well enough to be in the band but he attended every practice and knew the words and chords better than the band did.

Most practices would start with a joint, followed by small talk. Eventually, the three players would remember what they were supposed to be doing and the conversation would turn to the music. Andy soaked up the creative environment but spoke little as the

band hashed out lyrics, chord changes and harmonies. After another hour of this they began to tune up and finally, to play. The guitars blended beautifully with one playing chords and the other a high double-picked lead. When their voices joined on the chorus, the band sounded better than anything Andy had ever heard.

The band played mostly original songs, written collectively after someone came up with a rough idea. As time went by they became very good and began to book gigs at the coffee houses. Andy would schlep the gear such as amplifiers, guitars, microphones, stands and cables but once it was all set up, there wasn't much for him to do.

As the band's popularity waxed, he began to realize that there was no real place for him there. Melinda's voice had elevated her to minor celebrity status and guys were suddenly everywhere she went. Sometimes he would see her laughing with an admirer or four, then roll her eyes toward Andy. It didn't take too many weeks before he understood that he would have to find his own scene.

One night, after closing a show with the band, Andy followed Melinda to a party on Villanova Road. She asked him to stay outside until she could find out if it was ok with her friend's mother if he came in.

"Why wouldn't they let me in?" Andy asked.

"Well," Melinda began with hesitation, "Her mom caught us with cigarettes and weed. I had to tell her they were yours." She smiled sweetly up at Andy and blinked twice.

"Oh yeah, I see. Did you two get out of trouble?" He asked, hoping that the sacrifice of his honor had at least bought the girls

something. He would have preferred to have been left out of the drama altogether.

“Sort of, but her mom practically thinks you’re the devil now.”

“Great. I’ll wait over there by the swing.”

Andy sat on the backyard swing and watched his friends party through the windows. As one hour passed into two, he began to understand his position. He walked sadly home, knowing that his girl had moved on without him. On the long walk, Andy recalled the report card that had been mailed home from school and wondered if his dad had received it yet.

Andy still felt confident that he was passing all six classes, yet he worried about the absences. He knew that his grades would be much lower than ever before, but there had been no calls home from school so he didn’t think it could be that serious.

It was 3 a.m. when he reached the low rock wall that surrounded the orchard. Tired and heartbroken as he was, he decided to chance the short-cut through the orange trees. Andy hopped over the low rock wall and trudged safely through the mud to his father’s house. He smoked his last cigarette outside, then climbed in his window and went to sleep.

At 6 a.m. there was a knock on his bedroom door. “Andy will you come into the living room, please?” His dad spoke in the hollow monotone that he used when he was around his boss or the church pastor, but Andy didn’t catch it through the closed door.

“Sure, Dad. I’ll be right there.” Two minutes later Andy walked into the living room half asleep to find a small group of people waiting for him. He recognized his pastor and two older ladies from the church. There was also a tall, burly guy and a smaller fellow with a kind face.

His pastor said, “Take it easy, Andy. Everyone here is your friend.”

“We just want to talk to you about your drug problem.” The kind faced man said. “I am Dr. Jackson and I run a 12-step program in Port Hueneme.”

“For drug abuse? Why? I only smoke pot.” Andy said. He looked at his dad who looked at the pastor.

“Denial is the first step, my son.” The doctor said. “I want you to come with me to the clinic where you can live until you get better.”

“What clinic? Dad, what is this?” Andy uttered in confusion. As fear entered the boy’s heart, so did anger. “I’m not going anywhere with you guys. If you wanted to kick me out again you should have just told me.” He said to his dad but as he moved to leave the room the big guy and the doctor grabbed him like the experienced jailers they were.

The boy grew infuriated when he found himself unable to move. He struggled against them as they dragged him outside by force. “I hate you Dad! How could you do this to me?” Andy screamed over the sounds of battle.

“Because I love you, son.” His father replied while looking at the pastor.

Andy was now screaming and fighting for freedom with all his strength and the commotion aroused the neighbor’s dog who started barking. Andy had often hung out with the collie and it loved him sufficiently to attempt his rescue. It barked and menaced the big man so that Andy almost broke loose. Suddenly,

two uniformed police officers who must have been waiting outside, crept up behind the dog. One of them raised a nightstick.

“No! I’ll go with you, don’t hit the dog!” Andy cried but it was too late. The club smashed into the dog’s skull and it dropped to the ground. Andy’s body slumped as his heart broke. He felt destitute and could not reconcile the policeman’s cruelty or his father’s betrayal. He allowed himself to be led into the back seat of the doctor’s car and the radio played a string of Motown hits from the 70’s as they drove away.

Andy refused to speak to either the doctor or Jenks as the big man was called. He was driven to a city he didn’t recognize but he could tell it was near the ocean. He filled out paperwork at a large in-processing desk and was admitted to something called the *day room*, where he was allowed to be alone with his thoughts for several hours. None of the events of the day were sitting right with him. *I don’t belong here*, he thought repeatedly.

Just after dark, some of the other troubled kids came in carrying a basketball and laughing. They saw Andy and perked up further. Andy sensed that a new arrival was a big deal when you’re locked up, but he just wanted to be invisible.

One of the girls came bouncing up to him. “Hi, you’re cute. Wanna see my scars?” Before Andy could reply she held two pale, skinny wrists out toward him. There was an ugly, jagged scar on each wrist. Andy supposed they were a sort of badge of honor among the institutionalized but he didn’t want to play that game.

He was standing at the screen door, which was made of reinforced metal mesh that was much stronger than the screens he had on his windows back home. *Home!* Andy’s mind spit the word out as if it were truly vile. He had been fingering the harmonica in his pocket for some time and had bent a sharp corner of the metal

upward. He placed this against the screen above his head and pulled down hard, tearing the security screen wide open. He stepped through and was gone.

The offshore breeze blew cold but it was some time before he felt it. He ran for nearly an hour through the unknown city and to him, the world had become his enemy. Every headlight was a police car, every pedestrian an undercover narc. Streetlights seemed to betray him by flickering as he passed underneath them. Distant sirens became proof that they were looking for him all over town. Andy was certain they had formed a dragnet which drew tighter and tighter with every passing second.

He found the beach but it was surrounded by a thick chain-link fence topped with razorwire. He heard the sound of an approaching engine and dropped to the ground but was too late. He held his breath but the headlights found him anyway. They stopped moving and flashed eerily on him and he knew that he was caught.

“Andy, is that you?” It sounded like his mother’s voice coming from the car. Andy had not seen his mother very often after the divorce. He had tried living in Ventura with her and her new husband by renting an old reclining chair on their patio. They couldn’t handle him smoking, even outside the house and had asked him to leave within the first week. Now Andy couldn’t believe that it was really his mother in the car. *How could it be?* he thought, *I don’t even know where I am, how could she have found me?*

“Honey, is that you?” She repeated, her voice choked with tears.

“Yeah, Ma. I guess it is.” He said as he stood up. “Or what’s left of me.”

“Oh Honey, I’m so sorry.” She said as her emotions burst loose and she ran to hug him.

Andy stiffened. “What do you mean, you’re sorry? You didn’t do this to me.” Then he realized that she must have been in on it too. “Did you know about it?” He asked her solemnly.

She nodded, “Your dad said that you were out of your mind on drugs. I gave him my permission but I told him I wouldn’t be a part of the intervention.”

In the dark hour before dawn, Andy’s heart sank further. “So you knew then.” He didn’t understand why no one had tried talking with him first. Yet, he felt that he had to let his anger and frustration go. His mother clearly felt terrible about the part she had played in the plot now. Besides, she had driven around the streets all night looking for him and he couldn’t overlook her unlikely but timely rescue.

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Andy’s hair now stretched down below his shoulders and the long days at the beach had tanned his skin. Those long afternoons of swimming, reading and hitchhiking had finally caused him to flunk five out of six classes due to absences. His first period typing teacher gave him a *D*, simply refusing to flunk him for any reason, saying, “He is the fastest typist I’ve ever seen! How can I flunk *him*?”

There had been no telephone calls or parent-teacher conferences that he knew of, yet he had flunked out of his junior year of high school so silently and easily that it was a little unnerving. He still thought there were safety nets out there to catch the good guys before they fell through the cracks. He thought of Donovan Leitch’s *Riki Tiki Tavi* and had a laugh. Truly there were no



organizations to kill his snakes for him so he would have to do it himself.

He was sufficiently concerned about his future to go see a counselor at the beginning of summer who referred him to Chaparral high school, where all of the misfit children of alcoholics and broken families tended to go. Andy fit right in to the work at your own pace structure and earned his high school diploma in six weeks.

Andy's dad allowed him to stay at home while he attended school as long as he had a job and paid rent. Now that school was over, Andy realized that there was nothing holding him back from pursuing his dreams.

He grew bored of his tedious jobs at hotels and restaurants and had already burned through seven of them. Andy was restless and he knew it. He felt acutely aware of each grain that fell in the hourglass of time and felt like he was wasting them. He remembered that he had become an outsider among his friends and wanted things to go back to the way they had been when he was younger, but most of all Andy wanted adventure.

His thoughts turned toward his heroes. Folks like Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger had hoboed around with guitars on railroad cars when America was still young. That was the life for Andy. Maybe he would meet some great people and have grand adventures on the road!

He possessed exactly \$101.00 when he made the decision to go on a cross-country road trip. He began to fill his father's large, green army duffel bag with items for the road. He packed one songbook of classic-rock songs and one he had started with his own writing, two blank notebooks, a Sony Walkman cassette player with four cassettes, an 8" all-purpose *Rambo* knife and some clothes.

When he finished packing, that is to say when the duffel bag was full, Andy realized that he would need food. He left his father a note thanking him for the bread and the cans of soup he had stolen from their pantry and informed him that Andy would be out on Interstate 10 headed for New Orleans.

New Orleans, pronounced *nawlins* on TV shows, was the most romantic city Andy knew of in the United States. It had an unparalleled musical heritage encompassing a broad range of folk music incorporating the styles of jazz, blues, Caribbean calypso and many others. African traditions ran deep and ancient, primal beats were assimilated with new lyrics during the slave-era. Everything about the strange port city of New Orleans was tinged with an air of mystery in Andy's imagination, no other city would do.

Andy considered taking the shortcut across the orchard but chose the surer path of the long driveway. The night was late and there were few cars on the road at Ojai's lonely east end. Andy walked until he passed through town and reached the big fork in the road that locals call the "Y". From this intersection, he could travel north into the Los Padres National Forest, east through Ojai to Santa Paula or south to Ventura and Los Angeles. He sat down on his duffel bag at the southbound shoulder to wait for a ride. He took the Guild guitar from out of its heavy case and began to play.

Andy had started to write his own songs but his repertoire consisted mostly of the songs Melinda's band had written as well as classic rock and old folk songs made popular again during the 50's folk revival. He was beginning to favor playing songs by the Kingston Trio over the Kinks and Bob Dylan over Led Zeppelin.

Andy had always wanted to be a writer but Bob Dylan had taught him that songs were even better than books because they were more *alive*. A well-written song was fluid poetry that could be *lived*. A songwriter wrote short stories that could be crooned,

screamed, growled and *experienced* in the present tense, whereas a book was a static, dead thing. Songs also had the advantage of repeatability, which Andy suspected was lacking in literature. *Who rereads Moby Dick?*

The composition of lyric, feel and melody, the *soul* of a song, could also be given new life with the voices of new singers, lyrics, instrumentation and arrangements. *Besides*, Andy reasoned, *writing novels was an old man's game.*

He started playing the old English ballad *Mary Hamilton*, which Joan Baez had taught to him on her debut album, and his poetic soul was in tune with the night. The moon seemed to know his name and to love him for his song.

He was glad that he had grabbed his old black fedora because it helped keep his head warm. He had originally bought it at a thrift store because he thought it made him look like a *bluesman*, but out on the road that didn't seem to matter so much.

A large engine was heard several minutes before he could make out that it was a tractor-trailer loaded with strawberries. Andy stopped playing and held his right thumb out hopefully. The truck zoomed past and an instant later the wind blew his hat off. It rolled down the highway in the direction of the strawberry truck. Andy smiled to himself as he imagined what he must have looked like, chasing a hat around the highway in the middle of the night with a guitar bouncing around his neck. Although laughed at himself, he still looked around to ensure that he wasn't observed.

Andy sat back down to play, his hat now pulled down tightly on his head, but he felt the previous song no longer seemed to have the right mood. He played one of his own called *Solution Circle*, which was a recent composition that had a beautiful melody but was poetically gruesome once the lyrics began.

Andy played at the crossroads for about three hours that night until finally a traveling salesman picked him up in a dark blue sedan. Andy made contact with him through the passenger side window and thought he had an honest face.

“I’m headin’ to LA, want a ride?” The driver asked cheerfully.

“That’s great, thanks!” Andy had a bit of trouble finding room in the back seat for his guitar but in a few moments they were on the road to Los Angeles. They drove south on Highway 33 for several miles before joining the larger 101 freeway.

“I’m Rick.” The driver said. “I sell plants.” He didn’t specify what kind.

“I’m Andy. I really appreciate the ride.”

“Where are you headed?”

“I’m headed to New Orleans but I’d just be happy to make it out of LA by tonight.” Andy said confidently.

“Whew! That’s gonna be a long walk, I hope you have some money on you.”

Andy’s senses sprang into high alert. *Was the bold salesman trying to figure out how much money Andy had or was he genuinely concerned about his welfare?* It was very hard to tell with a stranger.

“No, I’m broke. But I don’t get hungry very much. It’s the smokes that can get hard to come by.”

“Oh, you smoke do you?” Rick asked with something like a wink in his eye. Andy wondered what it meant.

“Yeah, do you?” he replied.

Rick didn't answer directly, but instead pulled the car off the freeway and rolled to a stop on the shoulder. Then he popped the trunk and got out.

Andy wasn't prepared for the ambiguity of the situation. *Was Rick just a weirdo or was he a killer? Maybe he hated smokers or something.* Andy's thoughts grew confused as he reached one hand into his duffel bag, grasped the Rambo knife and left it there just in case.

Rick came back and sat down. He wasn't carrying a knife or a gun, but a battery powered marijuana vaporizer. He stuffed nearly two grams of bright green weed into the chamber and turned it on.

"Gotta wait for it to warm up." He said as he pulled back onto the highway.

"I thought you were talking about cigarettes." Andy said, relaxing his grip on the knife and withdrawing his hand from the bag. He would have to learn to judge character and circumstances with a level head if he was going to make it the 2500 miles to the Big Easy.

The red light switched off as a green one came on. Rick stretched the tube out so that it could reach both of them and offered it to Andy first. "You take the green hit, pal."

"This is great, thanks Rick!" Andy drew the super-heated air over the dense nugget and inhaled deeply.

Vaporizers are expensive so Andy had never been around one. He didn't know that the vapor can be very strong. He felt the hit seize his lungs and drain the oxygen from the air. His eyes bugged a little while he panted shallowly for breath. Rick laughed heartily and took a long, slow draw that did not cause him to pant

ridiculously. Instead, Rick merely smiled ear to ear and put drops in his eyes to remove their redness.

Andy coughed hoarsely when he could breathe again but couldn't believe his own luck. *What a great trip this is going to be!* he thought, grateful for the buzz.

When they had smoked their fill, Rick stopped once more to put the incriminating evidence back in the trunk. This time he returned with a small bag of pot which he threw at Andy.

"Keep it, I have almost 100 pounds of it back there." Rick laughed but there was a tell-tale, stony gleam in his eyes that warned Andy not to try to steal his grass. Andy didn't need reminding and wouldn't have snuck a gram even if no one was looking.

"Thanks a lot, Rick. This will help a lot on the road."

"What is this trip for you, some rite of passage? Or maybe you killed somebody and are running to Mexico?" Rick was joking but there was something in his voice that seemed to have changed along with his eyes. It seemed that he now wanted answers to the questions that Andy had successfully parried all night. He hoped Rick wasn't getting paranoid.

Andy thought about it through his stoned haze, "Yeah, I guess it is. Native Americans used to go out into the woods alone to prove they were a man. Modern people cross the country with guitars, meet people and have adventures. I guess that's what I'm doin' out here."

"That's as good a reason as any, I guess." Rick stated. "But what are you really looking for?"

Andy smiled, “To meet the right girl, learn guitar from an old bluesman and start a family band with our kids.” This didn’t strike him as quite enough so he added, “And maybe I’ll write novels on the side.”

“You must have a lot of energy, kid. I’m too tired to even think about having that many goals. I’m glad you’re enjoying your youth though, too many of us waste it.” Rick lost himself in thought while Andy watched the road in silence. He wondered about middle age with the disbelief and detachment of youth.

“I wonder what it’s like to lose your dreams.” he thought. Although Rick seemed to be riding high in the weed business, driving to LA with 100 pounds of it in the trunk was bound to be a risky business at times. Andy suspected that it also paid well and thought maybe that was good enough for Rick.

Although he adhered to Lord Byron’s belief that *the path of excess led to the tower of wisdom*, Andy had always been an economist at heart. After reading Thoreau’s breakdown of living expenses in *Walden*, he became a minimalist. He could live rather well on the road for just five dollars a day and poorly on a buck. Though this was certainly more than Henry David had required, it was significantly less than most. Andy had once overheard his dad complain about his \$2500 per month mortgage and couldn’t imagine living under that kind of pressure.

Rick spoke up at length. “My exit’s coming up soon, where do you want me to drop you off?” There was a trace of sadness in his voice now and the intensity had gone from his eyes. Somehow discussing Andy’s youth and freedom had brought him down.

Andy saw signs for the Santa Monica Pier, Venice Beach and Interstate 10 which stretched all the way to New Orleans and beyond. He answered Rick, “Anywhere around here is fine, man. Thanks.”

Rick stretched his hand out and as Andy grasped it, he also understood that their ride together was over. This man with whom he had shared a few miles, a smoke and some laughs was about to pass irrevocably into his past.

“Goodbye Rick and thanks for the good time.”

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The sun rose early on Venice Boulevard as Andy walked the two or three blocks to the beach. Like so much of the world he had only begun to learn about, he knew Venice was famous for *something* but didn't know exactly what it was.

He remembered that his aunt, his mother's youngest sister, lived in the area and decided to call her from a payphone. As he dialed he laughed out loud to see a roller-skating guitar player dressed in Arabic robes and turban roll by. He played *Purple Haze* by Jimi Hendrix and the sound was amplified by a pignose clipped onto his belt.

His aunt answered the phone, “Hello?”

“Hi Aunt Lolly, it's your nephew, Andy.” He hoped that he wasn't interrupting her day.

“Oh, hello Andy! I heard you're going on a little trip.” Andy knew his Aunt Lolly fairly well because she had visited often before his parents' divorce. Although she was not as politically correct as his other aunts, Lolly was a quiet master of clever witticisms and understatement that always made him smile.

“Yeah, just a quick trip to Louisiana.”

“Where are you now?” She asked.



“Here in Venice at a place called Joe’s Smoke Shop. Want to hang out?”

“Sure, I know where that is, I’ll be right down.” She arrived twenty minutes later driving a champagne-colored Chevy Camaro T-top.

“Whoa, nice car!” Andy didn’t think grown-ups bought cars like that. He would have been surprised to learn that his Aunt Lolly was only eight years older than himself and was going through a particularly wild time in her own young life.

They spent the day riding the roller-coaster on Santa Monica pier, laughing and having a good time. Andy saw bikinis everywhere and tried not to get caught ogling them in front of his aunt. They laughed at the bulging egos at muscle beach and stopped to admire the work of the various street-artists who plied their erratic wares on the sandy boardwalk.

"Did you know this is the beach where Jim Morrison first sang his songs for Ray Manzarek?" She asked him as they sat down to a picnic of tacos.

"You mean The Doors were born *here*?" Andy looked around as if he was expecting to see the late Jim Morrison crooning uncertain poems to the awkward Manzarek. He didn't see them with his eyes, but his mind's eye conjured them readily and they flashed him a ghostly peace sign before fading out of sight. Sometimes it was fun to be a dreamer.

As the sun began to set, she said, “Do you want to crash at my house tonight? You can get an early start in the morning.”

Andy felt anxious to get on the road again but decided one more night on a couch might not kill him. “Sure, that would be great.”

She drove the few miles from the beach to her apartment, then dressed in her nurse's smock to go to work. Andy couldn't believe she was going to work all night after the long day they had had at the beach and told her so.

"Well, I have to make a living, y'know?" She wasn't excited about going to work but was diligent and resigned to her grueling routine. Andy thought that *he* would rather die than have to start a twelve-hour shift at that moment.

"Thanks for taking the day off with me." He said.

"I'm glad you called. Do you want some money for the road?"

"No, thanks. I have a hundred bucks!" Andy said as if that was a lot of money.

"Well, I guess I'll go to work. If you leave before I get home tomorrow just lock the door on your way out. It was good to see you again. Be careful on the road, ok?" They hugged and she left Andy to sleep on the couch.

In the morning, Andy brewed a cup of coffee then locked the door and rambled toward the corner of Venice Boulevard and the eastbound lane of Interstate 10. Hitchhikers begin to think differently than other people. Andy's thoughts focused solely on the facts of his situation at the moment.

Random issues to most people, such as freeway onramp design, could play an important role in the success of a hitchhiker. *Do the cars have enough room to pull over for me?* Nothing was worse than a willing driver without room to pull over safely. Andy had also learned to sit under street-lights so that he would be more visible. People might pick up a young musician but no one would pick up a shadowy figure they could barely see.

These and other efficiencies of the road passed through his mind as he set out his guitar case and sat on his duffel bag. He noted a difference in the faces that morning and thought they were of another mold than he had observed the previous evening at the Santa Monica Pier. Apparently, 5 a.m. was not the time for kindness and brotherly love. Hundreds of carloads of scowling people were heading off to work and would jockey for position at any cost and no one wanted to stop. Andy smiled and nicknamed it the *lemming hour*.

By 7 a.m. Andy was in the front seat of a work truck filled with friendly Mexican landscapers who treated him like he was comically out of place.

“What are you really doing out here, Holmes?” One man said. He had a tattoo of a dark-skinned angel on his chest and underneath that, in fancy script, *Daisy*. Andy smiled at the simple name of the common flower but considered it to be a trite and unlikely name for an angel. *But what do I know?* he reminded himself after a moment’s reflection.

“I’m just drifting around, meeting people and seein’ what’s up.” Andy replied honestly.

“Just don’t drift around *my* hood at night, essay. Them homies’ll show you what’s up.” They all laughed at the idea of *Whitey* vs. *the gangs of LA*.

Andy was grateful for the change in location but the ride didn’t amount to much on the map. As he was getting out, the guys in the back seat pretended they wanted to keep the guitar. Andy went along affably knowing that they were probably joking. The realization was unsettling though, that if they *weren’t* just kidding around then there was little Andy could do about it.

*That's what I like about all this, though. I put myself out there and people repeatedly prove to me that they're mostly good-hearted,* Andy thought as he walked away from the work truck with his guitar a few minutes later. He was too inexperienced to think about what might happen if he met someone who wasn't mostly good-hearted and probably didn't even believe they existed.

Andy was somewhere in Culver City and had barely set himself up on the eastbound 10 onramp when a black BMW pulled over for him. The driver, of Chinese descent, didn't ask Andy where he was going or offer his own destination. Rather, he merely said, "Get in. I need two for carpool."

Andy decided to obey the man and he placed his gear in the spacious back seat and buckled himself into the passenger seat. Andy had a love-hate relationship with BMW cars. They were extremely responsive, quick and fun to drive but everyone who owned one seemed to drive like an impatient, selfish fiend. Andy hoped that the Chinese-American driver would be different.

The driver shot into traffic without turning his head to check if it was clear. His eyes darted ceaselessly as he accelerated and began to tailgate the car in front of him while he waited impatiently for the carpool lane to open up. When it did, the BMW was rocketing forty miles an hour faster than the non-carpool traffic, which was often completely stopped.

Andy was grateful for the painted lines prohibiting lane-changing while in the carpool lane but also feared the occasional section where it was allowed. The murderous BMW would accelerate and pass as many cars as possible before the painted lines forced him to whip back into the carpool lane once again. When that happened, the driver would swear in Chinese and content himself with tailgating the unlucky car in front of him.

To help them survive the morning commute, Andy began to act as navigator. He occasionally called out when it was clear for a lane-change but mostly when it wasn't. They traveled many miles in this way when Andy began to wonder where they were going. Finally, the BMW slowed down and fell in with the regular traffic. In one wide swath he cut across all four lanes in time to exit the freeway in Pomona. He pulled into a parking lot, apparently chosen at random.

"That's it," he said. Andy offered no comment or complaint but quickly grabbed his gear as the black BMW sped off into traffic.

Andy wondered once again what it was about those machines that made people crazy. Perhaps it was perfection refined to a degree that man was not meant to wield that drove them over the threshold of safety and courtesy. Andy knew the adage, *absolute power corrupts absolutely* and thought it might apply to them. He also thought that big, fast and powerful cars might just be attractive to selfish, impatient fiends.

Pomona was part of a huge, sprawling suburb, subject both to Los Angeles and San Bernardino. The square houses and strip malls surrounded him for miles around without material variation. Andy was anxious to get farther east by nightfall because the endless low-rise shopping malls and the never-ending stream of rude drivers depressed him deeply.

A teenage girl in a white Honda Civic pulled over next to where he sat playing guitar. "Hop in!" she said then popped her gum loudly. *Take My Breath Away* was playing on the car radio as it had for the last five years. Andy hated the song but loved the *Metro* and another song from Berlin that had the odd title of, *Sex, I'm a....*

"Right on, thanks." He said as he stowed his gear in the back seats. There was little room in the front seat due to a pink makeup case and its contents which were scattered on the seat and floor.

Andy quickly arranged the mess to accommodate his body and sat down. The car smelled like a diva's dressing room but looked like a teenager's closet.

"Where ya headed?" She jammed the stick into first gear and let out the clutch too fast. The tires barked and he smiled when the car jerked hard enough to lock Andy's seatbelt.

"Heading east. Eventually I want to reach New Orleans." he said.

"Ooh, I want to go! That would be so romantic. You're going to thumb it the whole way?" she asked.

"Yeah." Andy said simply, but added by way of explanation, "I love old blues and jazz."

"Me, too!" She said emphatically. Andy caught the irony as her radio then played something by Cyndi Lauper.

"How far are you going?" Andy asked innocently.

The girl perceived an innuendo within his question and thought it would be fun to tease him.

"Oh, I go all the way." She smiled coyly while Andy performed the obligatory blush right on queue and though he sought for a clever retort, words failed him.

"Not with you, though. You're too shy to be any fun." She said at length. "I'll take you as far as Colton. That's where I get off." She clearly had wanted to have a fling with a fun, extroverted stranger and seemed thoroughly disgusted with Andy for clamming up, and with herself for taking a chance on him. Andy was frustrated at himself and the situation but decided just to keep quiet. The moment for action had passed and he didn't want to

make it worse. He had already learned that things could always get worse.

She talked about modern music until the forty awkward miles were behind them. Andy stood at the passenger door with his duffel bag and guitar. "Thanks for the ride."

"I would have given you more than that if you weren't so shy, you know. You're too boring." She jammed the stick into first, "See ya later handsome-shy-dreamer-boy!" The white Civic jerked away and Andy felt relieved to watch it go. *At least now I'm no longer missing an opportunity*, he thought, *I've already missed it.*

Andy thought about how the ride *could* have gone and sighed. He no longer clung to the abstinence until marriage view he had grown up with, but he wasn't sure he wanted to hook up with people he hardly knew either. He wanted to feel clean enough to court his true love someday and knew that he would regret feeling soiled by having known too many lovers.

*Not that I wouldn't have gone for her, though*, he admitted to himself, thoroughly in contrast to the austere philosophy he had constructed for himself mere seconds earlier.

The afternoon in Colton was very hot. Andy began to worry about crossing Arizona and New Mexico, which were bound to be even hotter. There was no shade at the eastbound onramp so Andy opted for the only shade available, which was a large elm over the garbage bins of a convenience store.

Andy ate his modest meal of cold chicken noodle soup and considered his position. He had covered about 200 miles in two days if he didn't count Venice. At that rate, it would take almost three weeks to get to Louisiana! He reminded himself to take it slow. "The journey *is* the destination." He repeated the words out loud like a mantra.

After rolling twenty Bugler cigarettes, Andy stepped back into the heat. There was a rectangular piece of cardboard in the recycle bin and it gave him an idea. He took it into the convenience store and asked if he could borrow a black marker.

“Sure, Man. Here’s one you can use.” The clerk, a young black man, watched with interest as Andy wrote *EAST* on the sign in big block letters. Then he spelled *please* in smaller letters underneath.

“I kinda wish I was you, Mister. All wild and free.” The clerk said.

“Right on, thanks. It’s a lot of fun sometimes.” It *was* a lot of fun to be himself most of the time.

“Me, I got two kids and a naggin’ wife.” The man paused then shook his head as if to clear an etch-a-sketch. “Thank you, Sir and have a nice day.” He spoke in his regular cashier’s voice again. He might as well have said, *it’s better not to think about it*.

Andy was happy with the sign. It might allow him to play without interrupting his song to stick his thumb out every time a car came by. He was also thinking about the clerk and wondered at the immense network of chance encounters that governed the world. *Was the clerk going to quit his job and leave his family to go on the road?* Andy didn’t think so but he wondered what other consequences the seemingly random, chance-encounters might have on people’s lives.

He felt that the answers to life were in these everyday experiences. Too many people failed to seek the wisdom that was floating around them every day. Andy wanted those answers and was willing to earn the knowledge and learn the real truth behind coincidence, religion and life itself.



He might employ his whole lifetime in its uncovering but life would reveal its secrets to him. He chose to follow no other person; to seek his own path as intelligently, spiritually and efficiently as he could manage. He would continue to question Man and God and Law and to form his own judgement when he had gained sufficient experience to draw upon; once he found or achieved that vague, aggregate experience level where he felt himself worthy of advancement, like leveling up a character in a Dungeons and Dragons role-playing game.

Andy needed this mileage to understand that there were few absolute truths in the world but rather a myriad number of perspectives. He was an enthusiastic and dutiful seeker but would have to be patient to achieve the answers to his questions.

Lost in his lonely reverie, Andy didn't realize that he had completely stopped strumming and that a horn was honking. He looked up and saw a couple of guys in a black Mustang 5.0 idling on the shoulder.

“Are you hitchhikin’ or what? Let’s go!” The shotgun passenger yelled. Andy felt a dislike for the guy right away but he knew that he couldn't be too selective on the road.

“Yeah, thanks. I'll be right there. Sorry about the wait.” He had to share the back seat with his gear, the loading of which had been very awkward. The car was a two-door hard top and neither one of the guys got out or helped make room for Andy to get in. While he gingerly navigated the bulky guitar case around the strangers' heads, they talked to each other as if he wasn't there.

“What are we doing, Steve? We can't take this guy with us.” The guy in the shotgun seat said irritably.

“Of course we can! There's gonna be three of them, right?” Dave answered. Andy wondered whether he referred to three hot

girls or three drug-dealing thugs. He questioned the wisdom of climbing in their car but remembered a quote from Dylan's *Like a Rollin' Stone*, "When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose."

On the road, Andy didn't feel the least bit depressed like he did when he had been stagnating at home. He enjoyed the thrill of the unknown, even though he knew it could be dangerous. So far, his worst experiences in life had occurred at the hands of his friends and family, not strangers on the road. He climbed into the Mustang.

The driver started the conversation. "Where are you going, dude?"

"New Orleans, eventually. As far east as you're going would be great."

"We're just going to Banning." The driver looked at his friend and they laughed nervously. "I'm Steve, this is Todd."

"Nice to meet you guys. Banning's fine, I'm just glad to get out of the big city tonight." Andy replied.

"You got any weed, dude?" Todd asked.

"Yeah actually, I do. This guy gave me some a couple of rides back." Andy handed a healthy two-gram nugget to Todd, who broke it up and rolled it quickly.

The mood in the car lightened considerably as the joint was passed around. Andy could tell the two guys weren't really the hard cases they wanted to look like and they grew downright silly once they were stoned. They started teasing each other and seemed to have forgotten all about the hitchhiker in the back seat.

“Man, maybe we don’t gotta do this at all.” Steve said.

“Yeah. I’m not really in the mood anymore either.” Todd answered.

Andy had been very curious the whole ride and now felt the time was right to ask some questions. “What are you guys talking about?”

Steve looked at Todd and they burst out laughing. “Should we tell him?”

“Sure, why not? He doesn’t know anyone out here.”

“We were gonna go pop these three guys and steal their weed.” Steve said simply and showed him his 9mm Beretta, while Todd lifted a Smith and Wesson .357 revolver.

“Whoa, that’s pretty heavy.” Andy answered calmly. “I had been hoping that you were talking about chicks.” Andy saw the sign announcing the Banning City Limits and wanted to get out of the car right away but he remembered that he had to take the situation nice and easy or it could get out of control quickly. He didn’t want them to think he knew too much or would squeal on them.

The black 5.0 pulled off Interstate 10 and parked at a McDonald’s in Banning. Andy was grateful to stretch his legs after sharing the cramped back seat with his gear but was dismayed to see a sign that read State Penitentiary - do not pick up hitchhikers.

“Thanks for the ride, guys.” Andy said as he walked off into the night but Steve and Todd were still joking around with each other like junior high school kids and didn’t even notice him walk away.

Andy wondered what would have happened if he hadn't had the pot that Rick had given him. *Would they really have shot three people that night? Would they have dragged me into it, too?* Andy pondered the chain-reactions that must happen all over the world, with the hits as well as the near-misses changing the course of lives for years to come. Perhaps this complex network of seemingly random circumstances was what mankind calls fate or even God?

He was still in his reverie when a big, white Cadillac pulled over for him. As he got in he noticed a police car rolling up behind the Mustang and thought, *Maybe it's for the best. I just hope they don't think I called the cops on them.* He was just glad to be away from them and the guns.

"Thanks for the ride, mister." He said to the driver of the Caddy, a big, black man wearing a gold watch and expensive clothes.

"My pleasure," he answered in a deep, pleasant baritone. "Where to?"

"As far east as you're going." Andy said.

"Alrighty, I'm going to Blythe myself. I'll drop you there, it's about sixty miles." He said.

"Sounds great!" Andy said trying to stifle a yawn. He always felt like he should be ready to talk if the driver wanted to, but it had been a long day and he was tired and showing it.

Andy was pleased when the driver put on a book on tape. After a few minutes, he recognized the book as *The Stand* by Stephen King. He smiled because he had just recently finished the new 1400 page unabridged version published the year before that superseded the original manuscript from 1979.

An hour later Andy was standing in the little border town of Blythe, California poised on the western edge of one of the largest deserts on the continent. He found some tall weeds and laid down to rest and to reflect on his trip so far.

Andy dreamed that he was *Trashcan Man* on the road to meet up with *Flagg* in the desert and realized several things upon awakening; that it was mid-morning and very hot, his guitar and duffel bag were safe but his face was caked with dirt and he found it difficult to breathe due to the dust in his mouth. Still, he smiled and said to himself, *Another day on the road. You gotta love it.*

He washed his face with his jug of water by pouring it over his hands then wiping them across his forehead. He also blew his nose into them and immediately regretted it.

Andy was amazed at the intensity of the dry heat and after setting himself up by the onramp, he pulled out his mapbook. His only guide on the road was a pocket atlas of the United States by Rand McNally. Every state was given just a single page to explain its geography and freeway systems but there was a two-page U.S. map in the center of the small book that showed the interstates.

He found Blythe in the fold of the book near the Arizona border. “Wow, I must be near the Colorado River!” he said to himself excitedly. “I wonder how big it is.”

His puny mapbook didn’t help him much inside of city limits, consequently, he didn’t know *exactly* where he was most of the time he was on the road. The eastbound traffic was largely comprised of semi-trucks. Andy had heard that these long-haulers would be sure to pick him up but he had yet to ride with one.

Andy felt like God was watching over him and was confident that He had assigned a particularly good guardian angel for Andy. He went to sleep on the cold ground with gratitude in his heart.

## Part 2 - The Desert

The hot morning turned into a scorching afternoon. Andy was letting his sign do the work while he played the guitar and harmonica for all he was worth. From his book of cover-songs, he sang *Eve of Destruction* by Barry McGuire, *Masters of War* by Bob Dylan and many others without so much as looking up at the cars. From his own songbook, he sang *Lost Angels* and *Hobo, Say Goodbye* and his newest one *Eighteen*, that he had written about the flighty Melinda.

He had to play loud in order to hear himself over the roar of the accelerating traffic. *That's the only problem with this job*, he thought smiling, *it's always so noisy*. He sat near a busy intersection but most of the traffic was heading west into California rather than east into the Arizona desert. He told himself to be patient and tried to enjoy the day.

He felt the burn of many eyes watching him warily as the cars and trucks rolled past. The children in the back seats would press their faces to the glass and gawk at him with unabashed wonder as if he was a circus freak. The women would seem to gaze longingly at him from behind dark sunglasses but would fidget busily at red lights to pretend that he wasn't there, or at least to make sure he didn't come too close.

Andy found that he liked the anonymity of his role. He was the dusty loner, rambling mysteriously from town to town. No one knew his secrets or, it seemed, wanted to get close enough to learn them. At a distance, he was their romantic icon, doing what their heroes had done but they themselves could not.

As evening began to fall, so did Andy's infallibility. He opened his map and looked at the seemingly endless stretches of desert highway spanning Arizona, New Mexico and most of Texas. The

1,500 slow, lonely miles that lay before him weighed heavily on his heart and he sighed accordingly.

Andy placed an A harmonica into his neck rack and began the long draw that opens Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*. He played it long and slow, feeling the sad lyrics to his core. As he bit off the last note from the harp he opened his eyes.

He had done it again; failed to notice that a car had stopped for him. There was a man leaning against his white Toyota Corolla who apparently had been listening for some time. He looked perfectly average in every way, from his hair and face to his build and dress. Andy's mind thought he embodied the pleasant blandness of a Sears catalog model.

"You sound great, Stranger. You have a lot of soul when you play." He said cheerfully.

Andy felt he knew pretty well how he sounded, which was akin to gravel being shoveled out of a pickup truck, but he appreciated the words all the same. It felt a little like coming out of a coma sometimes, waking from the mesmerizing, fully immersive self-hypnosis of the song.

"Thanks, Mister. I hope you weren't waiting too long." Andy replied, packing up.

"No, no." The stranger paused uncertainly. "I'm going home to Phoenix tonight if you want a ride."

"Right on, all the way to Phoenix? That's great!" He stowed his gear in the back seat and they were quickly on the road.

"How long have you been playing?" The driver asked him.

“About a year now.” Andy replied. “I’m about as good as I’ll ever get, too.” He added honestly.

“I’m John.” The driver said as he took his hand off the wheel to shake with Andy. The interstate was so straight he could probably have left the steering wheel unattended for thirty miles.

They had the *where are you going and why?* conversation which had the usual effect of perking Andy up. He found himself answering John’s questions candidly and guessed that he was a counselor or psychologist by trade.

He decided to quit guessing and asked, “What do you do for work?”

“I’m a psychologist actually. I work with troubled teens.” Andy stiffened a little in his seat and John noticed right away. He laughed and said, “Don’t worry. I’m off duty tonight. Plus, you’re out of my jurisdiction anyway.”

Andy relaxed, relieved that John knew he didn’t want any therapy. “Truth is, we get just as tired of dishing out unwanted advice as our unwilling patients are of hearing it.” He sighed heavily, as if he wished it were otherwise.

“Yeah, kids can be pretty hard to communicate with.” Andy knew that he was young but wanted to separate himself from the kids. John remained silent so Andy added, “Besides, I’m not too troubled anyway.”

“Do your parents know where you are?” John asked.

“My dad knows what interstate I’m on, that’s about it.”

“What would they do if you never came back?” Andy thought about the strange question and wondered if it was part of some



professional strategy or if the guy was just getting weird. Andy was always on the watch for clues to the character of his rides and strange questions like the one John had just asked were blood-red flags. Still, Andy decided to answer the question at face value.

“Oh, they’d mourn as if they cared, but they’d really be mourning the kid I never was. You know, the one they really wanted me to be.” Andy spoke with sad resolution but without bitterness, yet his words still caused John to wince.

“It makes me mad, if you don’t mind my saying it. Parents must ensure that their child feels loved and accepted, especially during hard times. A lot of parents don’t try hard enough.”

“Or maybe they don’t love enough.” Andy didn’t want the conversation to continue, so he asked, “Do you run into a lot of parents who are *Super-Christians*?” It didn’t occur to Andy that John might be a zealot himself.

John laughed, “What’s a Super-Christian?”

“You know, a hard-lined Christian Fundamentalist or Literalist. A judge of men, guardian of the one true path and condemner of all others.” A moment passed while John considered the psychiatric roots of Andy’s cynical term.

“Yeah, I do run into a lot of them.” he answered at length. “They push their kids too far in one direction while the abusive and negligent parents push them too far the other way. They’re like the two extremes of a pendulum.”

Andy thought of Edgar Allan Poe’s tortured prisoner *Pit*, who had narrowly escaped a tortuous death at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition. Andy had liked the fact that Poe’s hero had been saved by a *rat* and thought that real-life might be a little like that, too.

Andy thought about it more as the little Toyota ate up the miles and he daydreamed about a war of immense proportions between parents and children all over the world since time immemorial. On each side, parents hurled insults at one another while they played a colossal game of tug-of-war.

Each side was trying to convince the other that they were right and the other was wrong. Children began to spring up like flowers in the middle of the battlefield as in Pete Seeger's song *Where have all the Flowers Gone*, but most of them didn't seem to want to play their parents' game.

Andy heard the parents calling out to their children, invoking filial, national or racial loyalties and observed the effect their words had on their beloved sons and daughters. He saw the brightness wink out of their eyes, pair by pair, like headlights going out at a drive-in movie.

As the bright eyes dimmed, the children would reach for the ropes and begin to pull. Usually they pulled in the same direction as their parents, but not always. Andy thought the sad, useless struggles between people were terribly regrettable and largely avoidable.

"You're welcome to stay at my house tonight. I'm not married but I do have a dog. You like golden retrievers?" John asked as they drew nearer to Phoenix, whose lights had been visible from nearly a hundred miles away.

"Yeah, they're great dogs." Andy's mind raced as he thought about sleeping in a stranger's house. *Maybe the guy was a psycho after all and had a dungeon in his basement.* Yet, Andy's caution was tempered by the knowledge that his skin would need washing soon or people would be kicking him out of their cars the moment he got too close. The young hitchhiker had also learned that

maintaining personal hygiene was close-kin to dignity from the perspective of a hobo.

“That would be great, John, I could really use a shower.” He said at last.

Andy wasn’t prepared for the sprawling size of Phoenix and its suburbs. It looked very much like residential LA at night, except that it was flat enough to view the whole of its enormous girth. Andy tried to take note of the route as John left Interstate 10 and navigated through the strange city, but he soon gave it up and admitted to himself that he had lost his bearings. He still wondered if John might have something sinister up his sleeve but had little evidence against him and was, therefore, inclined to trust him.

After navigating the seemingly endless residential boulevards of suburban Phoenix, John finally brought the vehicle to a normal-looking house, pulled into the drive and slumped with the accumulated exhaustion of the long miles.

“Glad to be home?” Andy asked and wondered again why John had been in California in the first place. He made a mental note to ask him about it sometime.

“Oh yeah, it has been a long day. For both of us, I’ll bet.” Andy agreed then followed him inside and was relieved to see no overt evidence of perversion. There were no whips, chains or dungeon doors to be seen. A friendly golden retriever met them at the door barking enthusiastically.

“You can have the couch.” John said and indicated the larger of two red couches in the living room. “Over here’s the kitchen, eat whatever you want. Seriously, eat anything. Nothing’s off-limits.” He continued the tour but Andy knew that his host was tired, “Here’s the guest bathroom and shower. There’s soap and

shampoo in there, do you need a toothbrush?" He asked, seeming like a tired parent who wanted only to get his child through the routine of bedtime so he could attend to his own.

"No, thanks. I have one." Andy said, glad that he had packed his own.

"Ok, I'm gonna go shower in my room and I'll see you in a bit." He went off down the hall.

Andy took advantage of the shower as well and found the cleansing warmth of the water more intense than he ever remembered. He felt like a new man as he emerged from the guest bathroom ten minutes later, which proved to be only seconds ahead of John.

The generous, trusting host took a bottle of Michelob from the fridge and offered one to his appreciative guest. Andy was amazed at the wild variance of *right* and *wrong* among different people, thinking *one adult would crucify me for what another freely condones*. The young man then began to draw figurative lines in the sand where he thought they should lie, according to the man he wanted to become. Once again, he would draw from experience and follow his own idealistic code.

"Do you mind if I play your guitar a little?" John asked shyly.

"No, that'd be great! I didn't know you played." Andy said as he opened the case. The *G* string was out of tune again but John didn't seem to notice it.

"I learned three chords when I was sixteen so that I could serenade my girlfriend." He said with the gleam of her memory in his eye. "I sang her this." He played a simple but melodic love song. John seemed to be a cool guy but Andy sensed that he wasn't as happy as he once had been. *Was anybody?* he asked himself.

John drank four more beers and played Andy's guitar until well after midnight. He played estimates of CCR and Jim Croce tunes with a surprising passion. Then he sang an old calypsonian song that Andy had never heard from Louis Jordan called *Run Joe* that quickly became one of his favorites.

At length, John held the Guild out before him and bowed his head as if in reverent prayer. Andy was slow to realize that he was supposed to take the guitar from John but eventually did so.

"Can you play *Stairway to Heaven*?" He asked Andy somberly as if the song, as well as the guitar, was holy to him.

"Oh, man, that's a great song. I'm learning it by tablature but I'll never play it like Jimmy."

"No one will." John said as he lit candles around the room. Andy picked the high *A minor* that begins the song and was pleased that John sang when the first verse came around. Andy left all the singing to John, whose timbre and timing were far superior to his own. The song meandered lazily between the two strangers and for a little while they were happy.

When the song ended, it became clear that John had over-reached his limit of Michelob. His head bobbed up and down as he said, "Thanks Andy. I really needed that." He began to stumble down the hall to his room, then added, "I work at seven in the morning so I'll get you up at six, ok?"

"Perfect John, and thank you." Once John was gone, Andy helped himself to another Michelob and smoked the last cigarette of a long day under the starry Phoenix sky. That night, Andy found a deep, dreamless sleep while the golden retriever snored comfortably at his feet.

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The next day Andy hitchhiked the hundred miles from Phoenix to Tucson uneventfully with a few charitable commuters. He liked Tucson's smaller size a little better than the excessive sprawl of Phoenix but it was still dry, hot and almost utterly bereft of shade-trees.

Andy hadn't realized how far Interstate 10 bent to the south but now that he was a mere hundred miles from Mexico he considered taking a detour. He had taken one year of Spanish in the eighth grade and another of French in the tenth, but in both classes he had only tried to learn how to flirt with the girls who had been assigned as his partner. Now he wished that he had paid better attention and had attained at least some level of fluency in either language since he hadn't become fluent in flirting.

So he stepped across the big intersection near the airport to continue eastbound on Interstate 10 to Vail, Arizona instead of the southbound 19 to Nogales, Mexico. The traffic there was unbelievably dense so Andy didn't even pause to take out his guitar or deploy his sign.

Within twenty minutes he was riding shotgun with somebody's nagging wife, or perhaps a control-freak mother, probably both. She told him in no uncertain terms that he was living in sin and would surely die for his transgressions, probably in the next day or two. Andy endured her berations but held steadfastly to the belief that he might not be as bad as she thought.

As is often true of *mother hens*, once she had spoken her mind three or four times, she calmed down and displayed the softer side of the fairer sex.

"So here you are, then, Mr. Romantic, hitchhiking across the country like a rebel without a clue. What's your mother doing?"

She asked then answered herself immediately. “*Crying*, that’s what.”

“Nah, she’s keeping a journal of her thoughts while I’m on the road.” Andy countered.

“Oh, you wait ‘til you *read* them notes of hers and you’ll see she cried plenty. Oh wait, that’s right, you’ll already be dead and buried somewhere in the desert.” Although her words were harsh, her tone and countenance were growing milder, perhaps even playful.

“If it helps any, I’m trying to write songs the way they used to. You know, looking for inspiration out on the road with strangers, like you.” His bantering tone seemed to trigger a green light in her brain.

She stopped the minivan and suddenly kissed Andy as if she needed to. He kissed her back and could feel himself smiling as she began to use her hands on him. For once, he had seized the moment and found the right words to say, and for six or seven minutes it felt really good.

The minivan idled at the junction for Highway 90. There were no towns nearby but Andy was getting out anyway. “So I hope you’ve learned your lesson, young man.” She teased, although her body language now seemed tense and uninterested with what Andy hoped wasn’t buyer’s remorse. *He* had regretted the encounter as soon as he had climaxed and wondered if she had as well.

“I’ll never forget it, ma’am.” Andy tipped his hat and kissed her hand farewell. Then, before the moment could be ruined, he picked up his gear and marched off.

“Oh yeah, well I’ll forget you by next Tuesday.” She lied. He would live forever as a romantic, guilty memory deep in her soul.

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Andy realized that his own haphazard planning had brought him to Arizona in late August. He might as well have been in Egypt for the amount of support nature provided for the weary traveler. Andy bought two gallons of water in Wilcox, Arizona then thumbed on to San Simon.

It had been a very hot day for Andy but night was beginning to fall at last. He found to his dismay that temperatures did not always fall very much at night in the desert. Sometimes, however, they did and he could wake up with frost on his clothes even though the day had been in the triple digits.

An old Ford truck ambled toward the onramp then stopped. Andy ran to the window and saw an older guy with a ruddy complexion and deep lines across his face. His blue right-eye focused normally but his green left-eye seemed to wander aimlessly. Andy thought of the unfortunate victim with the vulture-eye from the *Tell-Tale Heart* and figured that the driver was equally harmless.

“Hop in.” The man grunted.

Andy checked his feelings for warning signs but decided that a ride was a ride. *That's what I'm doing out here. Getting into cars with strangers is the name of the game.* He climbed into the truck.

“My name’s Rusty. I’m a repo-man.”

“Hi, I’m Andy. What’s a repo-man?” Andy asked. Financing vehicles on credit was far outside his realm of experience and he mistakenly thought the term might be perverted.

“If people can’t pay for their cars, I get to repo ‘em.” Rusty replied proudly.



Once Andy gathered that repo meant repossess he was happier. “Do people ever give you trouble?” Andy asked interestedly. He imagined the job to be as romantic as an old film-noir private eye story like Raymond Chandler used to write.

Rusty turned his ugly mug toward Andy, who thought that he looked like a pirate when he smiled. “All the time!” He laughed hoarsely at his own witty answer. Andy listened with waning interest as Rusty told jovial tales from the job.

“One time, this low-life missed three payments on this great big van. I went to get it and got beaten into a coma by the family who was living in it.”

“Whoa, man. That’s crazy!” Andy said and hoped he sounded sufficiently impressed. His sympathies, however, were with the family living in the van.

“I came back, though, with a Louisville Slugger and drove that van home. Got me an extra thirty bucks for getting jumped.” He admitted to the multiple assault proudly, like a ten year old hoping to win his father’s affection.

“Sounds like they should pay more.” Andy suggested, knowing that higher rates of pay were usually a safe subject with most people.

“Course *you* want more, *you’re* a frickin’ bum! America don’t owe you anything, son. You hear that?”

Andy was alarmed at the hillbilly’s outburst but thought quickly. “You’re right, I meant for you.”

“Oh.” Rusty’s entire body paused while his mind ground its gears over his mistake. “Well you’re for god-frickin’ sure about that. I

should have got at least fifty bucks for the beating. Cost me three teeth.” He smiled again to illustrate his point while Andy tried not to flinch before the horrific mess in Rusty’s mouth.

“Do you like music?” Andy asked, hoping to change the subject.

“I remember when I used to repo them guitars. I had to break a big Gibson across this one low-life’s ribcage, but I got *it* back, too.”

Andy’s skin would crawl every time Rusty, of all people, used the disparaging term low-life. Like the “N” word, Andy didn’t use the term or like to hear it used, but this was eastern Arizona and it wasn’t his truck so he bit his tongue and offered no objection.

“How far east are you going?” Andy asked while secretly hoping it was only to the next exit.

“Oh, I’m going all the way!” Rusty laughed and joined the surprising number of folks who thought the innuendo was funny. To Andy it was just old and tired.

He decided to try a joke himself, despite the fact that they usually backfired terribly. “All the way to Florida, then? I’ll get off in New Orleans.”

Rusty grew flustered as if he had no clear idea where Florida or New Orleans were. “I don’t know about no Florida but I’m going to El Paso, Texas.” He said proudly, as if he held a rare and special ticket.

Andy wasn’t happy with the news. A long ride *would* carry him across New Mexico and into Texas but he really didn’t want to be around Rusty that long.

In order to deflect answering the implied question, Andy asked, “What’s in El Paso?”

“What isn’t?” Rusty snickered. “They got it all out there, boy. Just name any deranged human vice you can think of and I’ll show you.”

Andy tried to get off the hook without naming any deranged human vices but Rusty was insistent. Once, long ago, Andy had heard that people had sex using whips and chains to have sex somehow and so he let that be his guess.

“Sado, S&M, torture? Sure, they got that like rabies up there on Avenue A and Third. Talk to Elroy Robinson, tell ‘em Rusty sent you.” Rusty spoke with an element of conviction that truly alarmed Andy.

“Come on, name me another!” Rusty was having fun.

“Oh man, I don’t know.” Andy shivered. “What about big old orgies?” he ventured at last. He hoped Rusty would not ask him for a third deranged vice because he didn’t know any others.

“Oh yeah, now you’re talking.” Rusty acted like a winning gambler at the roulette wheel. “You go up Avenue A again but all the way out to 18th street. That’s the good uptown action out there, boy.” He nodded gravely as if he had just revealed the location of Atlantis.

“I don’t go for any weird stuff myself.” Andy firmly asserted.

“Nah, me neither. Mostly. But you need money, right?” The half-closed wink of his green eye and crooked grin once again reminded Andy of a pirate with a vulture-eye and begin to understand why the man had inexplicably killed him in the story.

“Not really. I don’t need much on the road.” Andy said.

Suddenly Andy felt a strong hand on his left leg and heard Rusty say, “I’ll give you twenty dollars if you let me--”

Andy slugged him hard across the jaw then turned the engine off and threw the keys into the back seat. Rusty was incensed and would have pummeled him but without the key, the steering wheel on the old Ford had locked up, so Rusty was forced to remain in his seat and hit the brakes or they would cross into the westbound traffic.

Andy grabbed his gear and jumped out just before the truck was at a stop and took off at a trot up the highway, against traffic so Rusty couldn’t follow him.

“If I see you again I’ll cut and skin you like a ‘coon, you dirty homosexual!” Rusty bellowed after him.

Andy thought he got off relatively easy when Rusty found his keys and drove off into the night without reengaging hostilities. “What did I just do?” Andy thought out loud. He had never struck a person before and hadn’t even realized that he was going to do it until he had already done it. He didn’t know where the idea to throw the keys out had come from, either, but he attributed his behavior to the gross sexual advance of the repo-man and tried to dismiss it from his conscience.

“I’m glad that I slugged him! I’d rather walk than ride with that psycho, anyway.” Andy said to the night as he turned around and headed eastward again. After four miles, Andy saw a sign that said *State Line Road - 2 miles*. He trudged the two miserable miles only to see another sign that said *State line Road - 2 miles*. Andy began to despair. He envisioned Rod Serling closing an episode while fading out on Andy, who must forever trek the final two miles to the *Twilight Zone*.

Andy whistled the familiar theme song. He remembered that Rod Serling had written nearly every episode himself and he was held up high with some of Andy's favorite writers, such as John Steinbeck, Robert Louis Stevenson and Edgar Allan Poe.

Andy walked on through the warm, still night. The muscles in his back complained louder than the rest which were by no means quiet, but courage and lack of options urged him onward.

Andy was surprised when he saw the sign reading, *Welcome to New Mexico - Land of Enchantment*. In noted contrast to the sign, Andy felt particularly disenchanted with the desert road at that moment in time, whether it be called Arizona or New Mexico. He walked resolutely across the state line as the sun began to lighten the flat, eastern horizon. Andy realized that he now feared the sun for its merciless heat and did not look forward to the new dawn.

At last he found a diner and opened the door. Rusty wasn't there but it seemed like some of his relatives were. The customers at the diner looked vaguely as sin-ridden as Rusty and they all stopped to gawk at Andy as he stood at the threshold.

"We done heard about you, boy, you better get!" The waitress said at last.

Andy's mind raced, fully unprepared for yet another surrealistic scene. He turned and walked out amid the sounds of laughter. At the highway, he stuck out his thumb and sincerely hoped for a quick ride out of the twisted, ethereal borderland. He thought of the strange hillbillies and of the UFO reports near Roswell, New Mexico which was not too many miles away, and wondered if there was a connection.

Andy's luck was average that day and he managed to reach Las Cruces, New Mexico, where the interstate once again veered far to

the south and temptingly close to Mexico. Night fell as it forever will, and his optimistic resolve began to fail with it. His thoughts turned morbid and he felt himself losing ground to them.

“What am I doing out here?” He asked the quiet, empty road during one of the long periods of time during which no cars used the interstate in either direction.

Suddenly a voice spoke up like Jiminy Cricket in his ear, “You know what you’re doing out here. You’re chasing your dreams, kid!” Andy smiled up at the stars and tried to feel happy inside. He soon fell asleep in a field but rested only fitfully. Two coyotes and a copperhead rattlesnake came to investigate him during the night but, luckily, he slept through their visit.

He woke suddenly from a terrible dream. He was in Rusty’s truck again but this time he held the Rambo knife in his hand when he had struck. After he had killed the perverted repo-man, Andy became a fugitive in his own mind, running from every sight and sound like he did that night in Port Hueneme. Only in his dream, he was truly guilty and that, he knew, could never be outrun.

Andy rose at dawn to find that he had camped near a construction site and learned that desert laborers work very early in the morning to beat the heat of the day. The workers had already seen him and two of them were now driving their small tractors in circles around Andy, laughing like bullies on the playground as he stood up with his gear.

As grumpy as Andy was inclined to feel at that moment, the ridiculous scene put a broad smile on his face and he laughed with them. “Buenos días, Senores! Me llamo pinche gringo!” he called out and clumsily walked back to the highway laughing at himself and enjoying it.

He thumbed a ride with a young married couple who were heading to Big Bend Ranch to lose themselves hiking for ten days. They drove parallel to the Rio Grande River for more than a hundred miles. The Rio Grande made Andy think first of John Wayne from *Rio Lobo* then of Duran Duran with their trite but catchy ballad of an exotic dancer. The ride ended in Fort Hancock, Texas at high-noon where the couple turned south onto the 192 and left Andy behind to catch Interstate 10.

### Part 3 - Texas

Andy found himself sitting next to a slobbering pair of Rottweilers in a big black Dodge truck. *Enter Sandman* from Metallica was playing on the tape deck and the couple in the front seat were singing along as they passed a joint.

The driver, Andrew, was older than Andy by a few years and had just married his wife, Josee, in Las Vegas two days before where they had worked together as accountants.

Josee was from Quebec and spoke with a decidedly French accent and vocabulary, which gave them all cause to laugh on occasion. One time, Andrew took a right-hand turn a little too fast causing Josee to put her hand on his arm and utter, “Prudence Andrew.” They found her use of the almost old-fashioned word *prudence* hilarious but it was a commonly used word in French.

Josee took the ribbing well, after all, she knew two languages while the men only commanded one. She, Andy thought, was probably more of a free spirit than her husband who liked to tell Jewish-accountant jokes, mostly because he was one.

Andy liked them both right away, feeling more like himself than he did around most people. Their chemistry was infectious and he wanted it to rub off on him.

“Where are you going, dude?” Andrew asked Andy after turning the stereo down a little.

“New Orleans first, then maybe Florida. I have a cousin out there in Cocoa.”

“He grows cocoa?”

“No,” Andy laughed, “that’s the name of the town.”



“What about you two?” he asked, then remembered to include the two big dogs. “Where are the four of you headed?”

“Exactly.” Andrew said and his wife burst out laughing.

“Uh, I don’t get it.” Andy said with confusion showing on his face.

“We’re going to Weare,” Josee reaffirmed mirthfully.

“Weare, New Hampshire. It’s the name of the town!” Andrew finally explained. Andy joined in on the laughter and they began making up new puns on the name.

“We’re going to live up there. We flew out about three months ago and bought a house. We’re taking the long way so we can see the country.” Andrew explained.

“Oh yes, I want very much to take this alligator tour.” Josee produced a pamphlet called, Big Joe’s Gator Garden. Big Joe offered airboat rides through the Louisiana swamps for *less than you might think*. This sounded like a punchline when Andy read it aloud and they had another good laugh.

"Have you guys ever heard the song from the Kingston Trio about the guy who's trying to book a ride with the railroad clerk? He wants to travel to the town of Morrow by the end of the day."

"He wants to go to Morrow, today? That's impossible, the train just left!" Andrew chimed in with a laugh. "I heard that joke in my uncle's bar in Philly. I didn't know it was a song."

They drove all night and reached San Antonio just as the sun was rising. Andy was having a lot of fun but knew that he couldn’t tag along with them forever. Their story was theirs, not his. When

he broke the news, they were surprised but insisted on taking him out for breakfast before parting ways.

As they sat down a waitress came over. “How y’all dewin’ this morning?” She drawled.

“We’re good, thanks.” Andrew said in his deep Philly voice. The waitress’ smile seemed to change as she realized they weren’t Texans.

“Know whatcha want?” She said curtly and smacked her chewing gum impatiently.

They ordered quickly so as not to further agitate her and turned the conversation back to Andy’s imminent departure.

“I feel like we’ve known you for years, right Andrew?” Josee said.

“Yeah, seriously dude. You’ll have to come see us if you ever get up into the Great North Woods.” Andrew agreed.

“Workin’ as a cook for a spell.” Andy quoted Bob Dylan’s *Tangled Up in Blue*.

“But I never did like it all that much,” Andrew continued the lyric then they ended it together, “and one day the axe just fell.” The two new friends found that they knew a lot of Bob Dylan lyrics and, rare enough, between them they could recite all of Arlo Guthrie’s *Alice’s Restaurant* from memory.

“So you’re drifting down to New Orleans and I’m headed up north to visit my Aunt Lee and Uncle Fritz near Dallas.” Andy said finally.

“Uncle Fritz!” Andrew laughed. “That’s what my family called the Nazis!” He explained through semi-restrained hysteria.

They finished their meal, Andrew paid and they walked out to the truck to feed the Rottweilers, Damian and Herra, the leftovers.

“Well, here’s our phone number in New Hampshire. Give us a call sometime.” Andrew gave Andy the number who placed it inside the guitar case under a flap, which was his most sacred place for storage.

“You two have been great. I really hope to see you again.” Andy felt sadder than he probably should have. He didn’t want to let these two out of his life but was forced to watch in silence as they drove away.

Andy strolled down the dusty streets of San Antonio for most of the day looking for the Alamo. When he found it, it had already closed for the day but he looked in the gift shop windows which were certainly not there when the Texans made their stand against Santa Anna for thirteen days in 1836.

Andy wondered, perhaps unpatriotically, how the United States could rally around the old mission whose brave soldiers had died to protect land the U.S. had stolen from Mexico.

*It’s better than the million Native Americans that we killed* he thought and sighed heavily. Andy often felt intense sadness and guilt for the sins of his countrymen and for the victims of their vision of manifest destiny.

Andy sat down on a crumbling wall and sang *The Alamo* by Johnny Cash and the old TV theme song for *Davy Crockett* as the sun began to set over the plains to the west. His heart was heavy as he walked down Main Street, found the onramp for the I-35 and sat on the northbound side which would take him to Austin.

He bowed his head reverently as he thought of the Texan musicians such as Stevie Ray Vaughan who had died the previous year. Roger Miller had been a favorite of his because of the quirky *Waterhole #3* that Andy had grown up with on vinyl. There had been so many great musicians out of the Austin area that Andy couldn't wait to get there. *Maybe I really will meet an old black man who will teach me the blues.*

Although traffic was heavy, he sat there playing for nearly four hours before anyone stopped. He thought about Janis Joplin and Big Mama Thornton, both from Austin. Waylon Jennings, who had sang the theme for the *Dukes of Hazzard* was a Texan, as was Willie Nelson, Buddy Holly, Leadbelly and Roy Orbison. Andy grew excited the more he thought about the fabled country and blues mecca that lay only one hundred miles away.

A new Ford F-150 passed him then pulled to the shoulder about fifty yards up the highway. Andy hurriedly packed his gear and trotted after it. He felt very comical as his harmonica rack bounced into his chin as he rushed toward the waiting truck but it was bad form for a hitchhiker to keep a ride waiting.

He was about to say "Thank you" when the rear wheels spun violently in the gravel, spitting rocks at his legs as the truck drove away. Teenage laughter pealed through the still night.

"Oh, that's a good one." Andy admitted, "You got me good that time." He laughed at the scene and felt his jaw to make sure the harp hadn't knocked a tooth loose. "Nothing hurt but my pride, as my dad used to say." He spoke cheerfully to the empty road.

The same old Ford came back about an hour later. Andy could see it was full of teenagers and he laughed again. They pulled over a little way up the shoulder and one of them said, "Sorry, guy. We were just messin' with you before. Come on, hop in back. We're going to Austin."

Andy was relieved because he didn't want to spend the night in San Antonio. He packed his gear and walked up to the truck, though, without his usual hustle. This time, they could wait.

He was only mildly surprised to feel gravel kick against his feet as they peeled out and drove away laughing again. "Ouch!" He smiled, "That was a real good one. I'll bet they joke about that prank for years!" He wasn't too disappointed by the joke except that he had really wanted a ride out of there.

Andy looked up at the pale crescent moon. His first thoughts were of Melinda, but as he sat musing he was surprised to find that they had turned quickly to Lily. He thought of her kind, green eyes. "I bet she would never play a trick like that on anyone." The thought bittered in his mind as he then considered all of the people who wouldn't hesitate to pull the *hitchhiker driveaway*. The percentage seemed overwhelming to him.

Andy felt justly vindicated soon, however, as an orange convertible Mustang Capri pulled up to him carrying four really pretty high school girls. Andy guessed the boys in the Ford would have loved to hang out with them but the fools were off terrorizing hitchhikers instead.

"Trunk's empty and you can sit right there next to little ol' Sara and Mary-Jane." The girl in the passenger seat said with an irresistible drawl. The two girls in the back seat moved over as much as the rear seat allowed but it was clear that their thighs would be touching his on the long road to Austin.

Andy stowed his gear and carefully maneuvered his body into the tiny back seat between the two girls. Conversation was impossible in the convertible Mustang due to the warm wind that whipped their hair around. All five souls on board had long hair that would smite both their own faces and those of anyone within reach. Andy was the worst offender in the back seat and felt

terrible whenever the girls would wince at the unwelcome lashing of his hair. He tried to tuck it into his hat but met with little success. *Little success*, Andy thought, *that sounds like me*.

The debut single from Wilson-Philips was playing on a high volume loop out of the speakers. Andy realized once again the great advantage a better man might wring from his position between the two girls, however, *he* felt powerless.

Just like he had with the girl in the white Civic near Los Angeles, he was blowing his chance to make a move. He knew he should at least *attempt* to charm them with clever jokes and stories but also knew that he couldn't hope to make himself heard above the wind. He closed his eyes and tried not to think of how his life would be different if he were an extravert or even a different person altogether. They drove ninety miles an hour in noisy silence through the warm Texas night and reached Austin in just over an hour.

Everyone looked wind-blown and tired as Andy retrieved his gear from the trunk. He had rehearsed a goodbye that he hoped would at least convince the girls that he had been worth picking up.

"Thanks for the ride, ladies. I never was in a car with prettier gals." The young girls perked up a little to taunt him as they drove away.

"Later Handsome!"

"Guess *you're* not getting any tonight!"

He was grateful to hear the playful jeering. To him, it meant that maybe they weren't sorry for picking him up after all, which was a little victory for the bashful traveler. Andy thought of the song by Matt Nathanson and smiled. Out there on the road, it was truly just his confidence and him, and *little victories*.

He looked across the highway in awe at the state capitol building in Austin, which is several times larger than the capitol in Washington, DC and was once the seventh largest building in the world.

It was lit beautifully at night and captivated Andy's attention until a car pulled up behind him and broke his reverie. It was a police car. Andy's mood fell dramatically but he felt innocent and wasn't too worried. He stood instinctively still until the officer gave him orders to move.

The cop wore the broad, round-brimmed hat and the reflective sunglasses of a Marine Corps drill sergeant. He had one hand on his revolver as he stepped out of the car.

"Good evening, Officer." Andy said in a friendly voice.

"Shut up, hippie!" The cop commanded through clenched teeth. "Get against the car, now!"

Andy did as he was told and the cop asked him, "You got anything in your pocket that's gonna poke me?"

"No, sir."

"I said, shut up!" The officer frisked Andy bodily but found he was carrying only a harmonica, cigarettes and a lighter.

The cop dumped Andy's duffel bag onto the street. The knife fell loudly to the ground while his small bag of weed fell silently. The cop picked up the marijuana and put it in his pocket.

"Let's see what you got in here, you little terrorist." He snapped over his shoulder viciously. He picked up the guitar case only to throw it down again. He didn't need Andy's help to open it either,

for he used Andy's own Rambo knife to pry the lock open. Andy watched in silence but longed to tell him that the switch simply slid open and didn't need to be pried loose.

Once the cop realized that there were no kilos of cocaine or machine guns in Andy's guitar case he said, "Get outta my town fast, hippie. You don't want to see me again."

Andy said nothing but nodded compliantly and began to shove his belongings back into the duffel bag, beginning with the knife. He didn't even take the time to check his guitar for damage because he knew the cop wanted to see him moving.

Andy needed time to think about what to do but didn't have it. He didn't want to aggravate the cop by setting up at the onramp a few feet away, but on second thought, maybe that was what the cop *wanted* him to do. Andy walked the twenty feet of sidewalk, starkly silhouetted on the arched overpass, and stood with his thumb out at the I-35 north onramp.

The cop immediately raced up in his vehicle and said through the public address loudspeaker, "One hour, hippie." Then he sped off toward the capitol building that didn't seem to captivate Andy as much as it had ten minutes earlier. He now wondered if he would be locked up there.

Andy squeezed his eyes tight against the tears that welled up from the injustice, loss and humiliation of his position, but a moment later he bucked up. *I can get out of here in less than an hour*, he thought confidently.

He watched far-off street lights turn green and tried to focus positive energy into the oncoming cars, some of which would be heading north. Many of them were but no one stopped for him. Andy felt his time growing short.



*I wonder what that dirty cop is going to do to me*, he thought as he tried to focus his fears and frustrations while he performed the difficult act of standing still. *What did I do? I was just walking along and now I'm run out of town as soon as I reach the Austin City Limits.* He remembered Mr. Morales and his orange orchard back home and his bitter thoughts turned to sadness within his heart.

Just a tiny portion of the pot that the cop had stolen would have been worth a great deal to Andy at that moment. *I can't believe he took my weed but didn't say anything about it, or about the knife. He's probably going to smoke it or sell it.*

Andy watched the distant streetlight that, when it turned green, gave new birth to his hopes, but this time he thought that he could discern a black and white sedan with lights on top. His heart raced as he realized that his hour was up and he had less than a minute to disappear.

He grabbed his gear and ran off across a field that was peppered with trees. He covered the distance quickly and threw himself to the ground behind a large sycamore to watch the road.

He saw the cop looking directly at him but knew that he was invisible in the gloom. *Just hold still, Andy. He can't see you*, he told himself intensely as his heart beat like a hunted rabbit's.

The cop waited for several minutes before he was convinced that the hippie had moved on. Andy watched him leave and decided to call it a night. Maybe he could get out of there in the morning before the cop came on shift again.

Andy walked through the dark, park-like grounds looking for a place to sleep and soon found a spot surrounded by trees. There was a sign announcing the *park* as the stadium for the Texas

Longhorns football team which had a capacity of nearly 100,000 fans. Andy thought he would be safe there for a few hours.

As he closed his eyes, he wondered if the cop would come looking for him while he slept. He felt vulnerable, powerless and hunted. He dreamed that he was the fearful rabbit *Fiver* from Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, who had seen ominous visions of his warren drowned in blood.

He then saw himself as the first of his kind, a rabbit-Adam who was cursed by the sun-god *El-Ahrirah* to be ever-fearful; to be hunted day and night. For him and his kin, the entire world had become an enemy. He thought he could see the *black rabbit* coming for him yet he chose not to run. Andy would meet it head on.

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Pain awoke him just before dawn and he thought his skin was on fire. His first thought was that the cop had poured gasoline on him like they did to the homeless Robin Williams in *The Fisher King*, but there were no flames. He jumped around, flailing wildly, then began to rip his clothes off.

He tore at the bare skin with his nails in an effort to ease the burn and began to find the tiny, red and black ants that were biting him. He smeared them off his body, heedless of whether the heads remained intact or not. He saw many hundreds more swarming his clothes and duffel bag. He scratched mercilessly at the bites, which he thought hurt far worse than those of wasps. Andy's body became peppered with swollen patches of red bumps from the bites but also criss-crossed with retaliatory fingernail scratches.

He felt a bite in his foot which still wore a sock and nearly panicked when he saw that it was covered with a small, hideous

swarm of fire ants. In a moment he had ripped off both socks and stood fully nude on a rock for safety a few feet away from his gear.

“What the hell is this? I’ve never heard about ants like this! You can’t even walk on the ground?!” He was mad at the ants but also angry at Texas for possessing the little demons in the first place.

Andy got a pleasant chill as the dawn wind blew across his poisoned and lacerated skin. He had bites, and therefore nail scratches, on his scalp, neck, shoulders, waist, thighs, knees, shins and even between his toes.

He wondered how the ants had choreographed their assault so perfectly. He had awoken at the first bite, but was wounded in so many places at the same time that he was sure they had coordinated the attack as well as storied continent-destroyers Napoleon and Hitler.

Andy saw himself for an instant as someone else would have seen him; some homeless, naked *Don Quixote* madman hopping around on a rock because he was too afraid to step on the ground or to go near his clothes. They would probably lock him up with Ken Kesey. *Maybe Jack Nicholson will play my character, too*, he thought as he laughed at the absurdity of his situation.

He steeled his resolve to its painful resolution and stepped bravely off the rock. He grabbed his clothes, socks and shoes and tossed them closer to the rock so he could reach them in safety.

Andy began by shaking his t-shirt vigorously to expel any ants that still clung to the cotton. He put it on and was very pleased when he received no new bites. He repeated the process for his pants but wasn’t so lucky. He found one biting his butt-cheek from inside his jeans. Finally, he ground his shoes and socks together to kill any critters that might still be inside before putting them on.

Fully dressed, Andy felt like a man again. The sun was rising and he could at least *see* his enemies on the ground. He found that they lived densely in little hills but were sparse everywhere else. He grabbed his guitar and carried it safely to the sidewalk nearby and returned for his duffel bag, which was inexplicably still swarming with ants.

Andy emptied the big, green bag onto the sidewalk much like the cop had the night before and began to pick through the items carefully. The ants were not interested in the can of pork n' beans, the knife or the rolled up dirty clothes. They were concentrated on the Sony Walkman and cassette tapes, which almost blew Andy's mind. Even the ants in Texas were fans of music!

He expelled the remaining vermin from his gear and packed everything away again, keeping the walkman on top. He would take it out and put it far away if he ever slept on Texas dirt again. Andy sincerely hoped that he would not have to sleep outside again soon but suspected that it was inevitable. He was homeless in the center of the second largest state in America which was as big as most of Europe.

He ambled back to the I-35 north and waited for a ride. He wondered whether it would be a friendly one with a commuter or a one-way ride in the cop's car. Andy still had two-hundred miles to cover in order to reach his aunt's house in Denton, which was a northern suburb of Fort Worth. He felt slightly bolstered by the realization that it was the morning of his eighteenth birthday and he had already hitchhiked halfway across the country.

Andy felt lonely and very exposed at the onramp. His alert eyes danced over the horizon, waiting for a sign of the evil cop's black and white. His ant bites itched horribly but there was little Andy could do to assuage the pain. He began a lifelong, diligent watch on his feet to ensure that he never stood on another anthill.

Suddenly, a white Dodge van with no side windows pulled to a stop on the shoulder nearby. Andy grabbed his gear and walked up to the truck.

The driver was an older guy, maybe sixty years old, with a heavily bearded face and small, black eyes. They gleamed brightly at him but Andy couldn't tell whether their source was kind and jovial or sinister and wicked.

"Hi, Mister. Thanks for stopping." Andy said. "Where are you headed?"

"I'm going home to Waco, about a hundred miles up the road. Hop in!" The man replied and the hitchhiker gladly complied.

The driver extended his hand to Andy. "I'm Vernon but my friends call me David."

"Hi David, I'm Andy."

"Whatcha doin' out here?" David asked.

"I'm headin' up to Denton to visit my aunt."

"You're not from Texas, are you son."

"No, sir, I'm from California. How did you know?" Andy asked just to make conversation. He wasn't in the mood for talk but figured it was required of him, like paying the fare.

"I'm from Houston, myself. I can always tell a Texan." He winked at Andy while he said, "No offense son, but God loves Texas the best."

“Do *I* have any kind of accent?” Andy asked. It was curious how he was often regarded as having an accent, though to him, it had always seemed to be the other way around.

“No, you just don’t have much Texas in you, that’s all.” The driver smiled and the passenger relaxed a little. Andy remembered his reflections on the brave Texans at the Alamo and was beginning to think that Texans would die fighting for almost anything. Andy had never known people to be so fiercely loyal to their home state.

“Are you a Christian, boy?” David inquired.

Andy didn’t attend church anymore, and would never again be a Super-Christian, but he still believed in god, so he answered, “Yes, sir. I was raised Wesleyan.”

David said, “That’s good. I run a church out of Waco called the Branch.”

“Like the olive branch the bird found after the flood?” Andy asked.

“That’s a good guess, but no. My church branched out from the Seventh Day Adventists. We’re students of the Seven Seals.” David said enthusiastically.

Andy didn’t know what the seven seals were, but he didn’t want to get into a lecture about theism so he didn’t inquire further. Instead, he changed the subject to the policeman who had threatened him and told David the story.

“Fascist pigs!” David erupted with startling vehemence. “God, please strike ‘em all dead!” He muttered the black prayer three times. Andy wasn’t sure *that* was the favor that he would ask of God and wondered at the soul of a church leader who would.

“Do the cops give you much trouble?” He asked David.

“Them pigs don’t like my church. They’re always coming out to my compound and trying to shut us down.”

Andy didn’t want to rile the driver any further so he tried to get him to talk about something else again.

“What’s your compound like?” He asked. David’s eyes sparkled with unusual intensity.

“Oh, it’s practically heaven on earth.” David replied. “There’s over seventy of us who live out there. We got everything we need, farms, cattle, sheep, pigs. Weapons.”

Andy thought it sounded like a peaceful place except for the weapons. He wondered what it would be like to live among what sounded like a doomsday cult.

“You know, we could use a new recruit like you in the Branch.” Andy thought about it but quickly decided against it. He was on his own path.

“I think I still have too much rambling left in me.” He said noncommittally.

“Hmmpff.” Was the evangelist’s gruff reply. Andy thought that David might pull over and make him get out.

Andy looked at the dead landscape rolling by and wondered why he seemed to squander chances to get involved. He considered the possibility that it could be his destiny to join the fracturist sect. Maybe he could actually feel like he belonged somewhere if he did.

David made a few more attempts to get Andy to try it out but eventually gave up. “Take my card at least. Maybe God will bring you to into the fold in the fullness of time.”

Andy took the card as he stepped out of the van. He hoped that Christians would leave him alone.

Andy wandered the dusty streets of Waco and found the railroad tracks where he sat down to play. The day was very hot and dry, so long hours at the onramp did not appeal to him at all.

Suddenly he remembered the fire ants and jumped up. He had not yet been bitten and there seemed to be none around him but Andy still didn’t want to risk sitting on the ground.

He found a lonely onramp with a shade tree and sat down on his duffel bag. A convoy of four big, white Ford Expeditions pulling horse trailers appeared and the last one stopped to pick Andy up.

“We’re going up to Fort Worth for a show.” Said a little girl in the back seat next to him.

There was another girl in the backseat who appeared to have Downs’ Syndrome. Andy looked into her eyes and said, “Hi!” The girl smiled broadly and the matriarch of the family who was riding shotgun made the introductions.

“I’m Mary and that’s Bill.” She indicated her husband who was driving. He struck Andy as the military-type. “That there’s Elijah, Ezekiel and Jacob.” She said, this time indicating the three ten year old boys in the second row of seats who appeared to be triplets. The boys’ heads were touching as they attempted to share one set of headphones.



“And that’s little Mary next to you and our special girl, Susie.” Andy wondered why Susie hadn’t been given a biblical name if they thought she was so special.

“Nice to meet you all.” Andy annunciated carefully, making a determined effort not to attempt their native *y’all* because he knew he wouldn’t pull it off. *Lazarus* from the Christian pop singer Carmen was playing on the truck’s seven speakers.

“We’re 4-H you know.” Said the girl named Mary on Andy’s right.

“Oh wow,” Andy said, “what’s that?”

“You don’t know what 4-H is? For real?”

“Um, no. What is it?” Andy asked. At that moment, Susie began making funny faces at Andy.

“Well it’s just this great big ol’ program where you get learnin’ ‘bout lotsa farming stuff and everything like that. Everybody belongs to 4-H out here.”

Little Mary was too busy twisting her hair around her finger to look at Andy while she spoke, so he took advantage and made a playful funny face back at Susie. Her loud squeal of joy brought her attention from everyone in the car but she didn’t seem to mind.

“What’s your horse’s name?” He asked Mary. Andy could tell that he had asked the right question because the girl began talking incessantly about her horse.

“She’s just the sweetest philly you ever knew! I named her Lily after my favorite flower.” She talked on and on like the teenager she was.

At the mention of her name, Andy's mind had no difficulty conjuring the sweetest Philly he knew. He could even recall the delicate color of her yellow hair and the shape of her lips when she smiled. He wondered what she was doing at that moment.

It was his turn to make a face at Susie, who was enjoying the game immensely. He pulled his eyelids wide and stuck out his tongue. Susie went into hysterics and they all looked at her again but this time Andy confessed.

"We've been makin' funny faces at each other." He admitted.

"Well, ain't that nice." Mother Mary said and turned her head back toward the road.

One hundred miles passed in this pleasant, wholesome way. Andy knew that he would miss Susie's smile and made one last face for her as he stepped out of the truck somewhere in the huge, sprawling mess that was the Dallas/Fort Worth metro area.

He set up on the I-35 north, knowing that he had only thirty more miles to go until he reached his aunt's house in Denton. He realized that he hadn't even called to let her know that he was coming. *There will be time for that in Denton*, he decided.

Andy's ride with the biblical family had cheered his spirits considerably. He felt less like the hunted criminal and more like his old self. He thumbed out of Fort Worth and quickly found himself near the small town of Denton.

His last ride had dropped him off on the shoulder of the freeway because he refused to stop in Denton where his ex-wife lived. Andy felt like a target as he was forced to walk almost a quarter of a mile down the long offramp. Andy knew that it was illegal for pedestrians to be on the highway. He had to get to the all-important sign that adorns every onramp in America but only

hitchhikers really take notice of; *Pedestrians prohibited beyond this point.*

The buckle on his duffel bag's strap chose that moment to break, leaving him with no way of carrying the heavy bag comfortably, or with dignity. He balanced it on top of the guitar case and put his arms underneath it all. Andy felt like Frankenstein's monster as he held the inert mass before him like a broken corpse.

A police car sped past him on the highway and he saw its brake-lights come on. He wondered how long it would take the cop to turn around and get back to him. Mild panic welled up inside Andy who began trotting the final thirty yards to the sign where pedestrians are once again allowed to exist within the law.

He thought about the irony of going to jail just when he was only one or two miles, out of fifteen hundred, from family. He heard a vehicle on the offramp behind him and vanity got the better of him. He ceased his misshapen trot and tried to look as if he had his act together.

The car that passed him was not a cop but the one that pulled up behind him was. Andy's heart sank again as he laid his burden down and made his hands visible. *Well, at least it's not the same cop*, Andy thought as he waited for the officer to make contact.

A big cop stepped out of the car. He wore the same hat and sunglasses but Andy noticed one subtle difference between this one and the last; this one had a moustache.

"Whatcha doin' out on my highway, boy?" He asked arrogantly.

"I'm going to see my aunt, she lives here in Denton, sir." Andy answered calmly and politely.

The officer paused as he weighed the validity of Andy's excuse. "Where does this aunt of yours live?"

“I’m not sure exactly. I was going to call her.” Andy replied.

“Where are you from, boy?” The cop asked, sounding like the good ol’ boy he was.

“California. I came here because my aunt has a job for me at Texas Instruments where she works.” It was at least true that his aunt and uncle worked there.

“You mean you hitchhiked all the way from California with that there guitar?” Andy nodded in assent and felt hope rising. Maybe the cop was a musician and he’d get off easy.

“And after all that way *I* find *you* walkin’ down *my* highway which you *know* is against the *laws* of the great state of *Texas*?” The cadence of his drawl made Andy lean forward subconsciously and bob his head on the downbeats like a charmed snake but the cop didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m sorry, sir. The last driver didn’t want to get off the highway to let me out.” Andy answered truthfully.

The cop thought about it some more then finally said, “I don’t like you California-hippie-faggots but I reckon you come all this way and I don’t want to take you in when you’re so close.” Andy felt hope enter his soul once again.

“You say you can call up this aunt of yours and she’ll come right down and get you off my highway?” His tone implied a warning that Andy had better not lie to him. Andy hoped that his aunt was home and regretted not calling ahead.

“Yes, sir. I just need to get to that payphone.” Andy confirmed. He sensed that the cop really did just want Andy off his highway and out of his hair.

“Alright, then. You get on up to that gas station and make your call. I don’t want to see you again, ya hear?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.” Andy said the words gratefully but choked on them inside. *Imagine calling a man ‘sir’ when he just called you a fag!* The officer spit tobacco juice on Andy’s shoes by way of reply. Andy struggled with his cumbersome load but soon reached the gas station. The cop remained watching him from his car.

Andy carried nearly ten dollars in coins because he knew how hard it could be to get change for the payphone on the road; stores always insisted that you buy something. He dialed the number that he had copied down from his dad’s rolodex.

“Hello?” Came a voice he remembered hearing a long time ago. His aunt had moved out of California when Andy was seven years old.

“Hi Aunt Lee, this is Andy.” He wondered if he needed to provide more information, so he added, “Your brother Doug’s son.”

“Well hello, Andy. Happy birthday. Where are you calling from?”

“Right here in Denton, at the gas station at Elm and 4th Street.” He replied, hoping she knew where that was. He had already forgotten it was his birthday.

“Oh, you’re just around the corner from me. I’ll come pick you right up!”

“Thanks, Aunt Lee. I can’t wait to see you again.” Andy gave a thumbs-up to the cop who lifted his middle finger in reply.

A tan Ford Escort arrived a few long minutes later. Andy remembered his aunt's face right away. She once had a farm with a pond, ducks and even a well that had especially captivated him when his family would visit on Thanksgivings.

She had short-cropped, pretty gray hair and looked very studious in thick, round glasses that magnified her already large, brown eyes. She struck Andy as a wise and friendly owl.

A tall, lean and dignified man stepped out of the car. This was Uncle Fritz, whom Andy didn't know because they had met and married in Texas. He, too, wore glasses but *his* appeared thin and delicate. He smiled warmly and seemed genuinely glad to meet Andy. If Aunt Lee was a wise, friendly owl, then Uncle Fritz was a noble, scholarly eagle. Andy like him right away.

Andy shared his story quickly, omitting all of the bad aspects of his trip. He took a shower and shaved in their guest room and was once again awed at the healing power of a hot shower. He emerged to learn that he was being taken out to dinner for his birthday and had to borrow a nice shirt from his Uncle Fritz.

They drove back into the metro area and navigated easily to a tall building they called Reunion Tower. The restaurant was at the top floor of a very large hotel and rotated in a slow circle, affording beautiful views of the city lights below.

Andy was very impressed when his uncle said, "You know, the drinking age in Texas is eighteen." There was a playful sparkle in his eye.

"I think I'll have a white wine." Aunt Lee said to her husband. Then she turned to Andy and asked, "What are you going to have?"

Andy had been drinking at parties for nearly three years and had even been in some bikini bars in LA, but he had never ordered anything more ambitious than a Budweiser.

“Scotch on the rocks, please.” He said, blushing at the cliché phrase.

Andy reveled in the open-minded conversation, the posh restaurant with breath-taking views, and the three glasses of Glenfiddich single malt scotch.

“This is great! My dad would kick me out of the house for drinking even a beer.” Andy said, raising his glass.

“He turned *me* in for that a few times, too!” Aunt Lee said laughing.

“Really? His own sister?” Andy shouldn’t have been surprised but he was.

“Are you familiar with Inspector *Javert* from *Les Miserables*?” Uncle Fritz asked.

“Yes sir, I remember him as the over-zealous lawman.” Andy replied readily. He loved the book but would always resent the boring one hundred page description of the Paris sewer system that Victor Hugo had placed in the middle of his book.

“That’s right.” Fritz said with pride at the young man’s answer. “He struggled bitterly with the compassionate act of releasing Jean Val jean and soon took his own life in despair of the charitable deed.”

“That’s your father, Andy.” Aunt Lee said to him. “He is a devout rule-follower and always has been.” She talked about her brother for late into the night, revealing hidden-nuggets of insight

along the way. Andy thought he understood his dad a little better after that night.

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Andy found yardwork a good way to make himself useful the following day. He mowed the lawn, trimmed the hedges and pulled weeds. That night they all sat in the quiet reading room that would have been a TV room in almost any other household.

“Do you play chess, Andy?” Uncle Fritz asked, putting down the book he had just finished. Andy saw the title was Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Andy knew his uncle must be re-reading the book and admired him for it.

Andy knew how the pieces moved but commanded little strategy. His friends, Eric and Tony, had played since the fourth grade and, though they beat Andy mercilessly, they had at least taught him the rudiments of the game.

“I know most of the rules but I’ve never won a game.” He said enthusiastically. “I love playing, though, even when I lose.” This seemed to be the right answer for his uncle grew animated.

“Great, let’s play then!” Uncle Fritz withdrew a solid-wood chessboard from a bookcase and a leather sack from his desk drawer that contained the pieces.

“These players were given to me by my dad, who made them in high school on the first lathe in Battle Creek, Michigan.” Fritz spoke as if he had heard the sentence a thousand times from his dad.

The players had been fashioned into the classic shapes, simple and without undue embellishment save for a notched band of



characters at the base of each piece. Andy looked closer and read letters in a language that he correctly guessed to be Latin.

Andy learned much from his Uncle Fritz that night and over the next three days they played almost constantly. Fritz took the time to reset positions on the board and offer Andy advice on how he could have played more wisely.

“Why do you call the wooden pieces *players*?” Andy asked during one game.

“Technically, the pawns aren’t pieces, nor is the king or queen. Only the rook, knight and bishop are pieces, but they’re all *players*. It was just something I learned from my old man when I was younger than you are now.” He said with nostalgia cracking his voice.

Andy understood the distinction and learned many more. One night, as they stayed up drinking scotch and soda while his Aunt sat nearby knitting, Andy surprised everyone in the quiet room with the eruption, “Checkmate!”

His uncle frowned but said nothing until he satisfied himself that Andy had, indeed, checkmated him. Then he smiled broadly and offered his hand to Andy.

“Congratulations on winning your first game of chess, Andy.” He said proudly.

Andy realized that he liked the quiet, studious life that his aunt and uncle lived and could imagine himself with his wife, reading or playing chess together. First, though, he still wanted to see the world and have adventures.

“Where to next?” Uncle Fritz asked when Andy told them he should be moving on.

“I think I’ll head to Monroe, Louisiana. My mom was born near there.” They studied the map together and discussed the route and its likely dangers.

Aunt Lee said, “Now you watch out for those fire ants, they get real bad east of here.” Andy had learned that his aunt had gone into anaphylactic shock when she had first moved to Texas and had met the ants on a picnic. If Andy had been allergic to them like his aunt, he would have died that night in the Longhorns’ Stadium in Austin.

“Did you know they kill over eighty people a year in the south?” Andy had not known and the news horrified him.

“And they kill a lot more livestock than that, too.” Andy steeled his resolve toward his goal; he would not be deterred by mere insects.

“And they’re attracted to electricity, you said? That’s so weird.” He answered. Uncle Fritz had explained that the peculiar insects were attracted to electricity and had followed it to the batteries in his walkman and the magnetic tape on the cassettes.

They drove Andy all the way to an eastern suburb of Dallas called Terrell, where Andy could catch Interstate 20 into Shreveport, Louisiana.

“You’re more of a dreamer than my brother ever was,” Aunt Lee said to him after they had said goodbye. Andy noticed that she didn’t specify whether that was a good or bad thing.

“You’ll make a fine chess player, Andy.” Uncle Fritz said.

“I’ll never forget this time with the two of you.” Andy said and felt himself choking up a little as he suspected that he would never

see them again. He felt the bitter pangs of goodbye as he watched their tail-lights disappear.

## Part 4 - Louisiana

Andy's warm, fuzzy feelings soon hardened into a sensible outlook for the road in front of him. He looked to the east as the sun rose above the horizon and looked forward to the day and its adventures.

Andy played his guitar and hoped the commuters could read his sign. *If they can't read the sign, they'll think I'm just some random idiot looking for attention.* He thought maybe a little part of him was.

A dark-blue Lincoln Town Car pulled up. "Where are you headed?" The driver asked after he rolled down the tinted passenger-side window.

"Monroe, Louisiana." Andy replied hopefully.

"You're in luck, kid. I'm going to Shreveport, that'll get you most of the way." The man said, then added, "You ain't no weirdo fag or anything are ya? If you are, that's fine, just don't get in *my* car." He spoke with an accent that sounded vaguely British to Andy, whose experience with the accent was limited to James Bond movies and the 80's MTV sitcom *The Young Ones*.

Andy told him wholeheartedly that he was *not* and soon they were on the road together. The driver's name was Bud and he wore the suit and tie of a Texas businessman but atop his head he wore the sort of golfing hat that Andy thought might be common in England. It looked laughably out of place with the bolo tie and gold *USA* belt-buckle.

"What's in Monroe for ya, then? Family, eh?" Bud asked. He was a lively fellow evidently used to talking.

“I’m hitchhiking to New Orleans and just saw some of my dad’s family in Dallas. If felt good so I thought I would surprise my ma’s family too. She was born in nearby Columbia.”

“Sounds like a good reason I guess. I came to America nearly thirty years ago. Ain’t seen my family since.” Bud said flatly.

“Where are you from?”

“Manchester. That’s the armpit of the United Kingdom,” he laughed.

“What’s it like there?” Andy asked curiously.

“Oh, in the fall and winter it’s rainy, foggy and cold but then spring comes and it’s rainy, foggy and cold. Summer lasts three weeks.” Bud apparently did not miss his old homeland very much.

They drove in silence for a spell which afforded Andy the time to contemplate. He wondered what life would be like without his family. He thought of all the times his dad had yelled at him and kicked him out of the house.

He thought, too, of his mother who had cried when he stopped attending church, though it had been prefaced by her leaving his dad *and* the church for a young tennis player. *If I can get over that*, he thought bitterly, *then she can overlook whatever it is she thinks I’m guilty of.*

He remembered his mother’s ice-blue eyes, wet from tears as she said, “I love you, honey, but I just know you’re going to hell because you have rejected Jesus.” Andy didn’t feel like he had rejected Jesus at all. He was kind and honest to everyone he met. It may have felt a little like the Christians had rejected him but he wasn’t blaming Jesus for it, or condemning anyone to hell. That was apparently left for Super-Christians like his mother to decide.

Andy grew sad again thinking about how his family had fish-tailed before it crashed and pondered the living wreckage it had become.

“What sort of songs do you play on that box of yours?” Bud asked, jerking his thumb toward the guitar.

Andy broke from his melancholy thoughts. “I like a lot of old folk songs. I even know a couple of old English ballads.” He loved talking about songs, the older the better.

“Yeah? You’re a regular minstrel I guess!” Bud laughed. Andy thought of Monty Python's minstrel in *The Quest for the Holy Grail* and pictured himself clicking two coconuts together to simulate horses' hooves and singing songs like the tale of *Sir Robin* who bravely ran away.

“Do you know what a broadside ballad was?” Bud asked suspecting a negative reply.

“Oh yeah, they were songs printed like billboards in the old days, right? I think some of them also refer to the way ships would fight back then. Since their cannons were on the sides, they would have to maneuver broadside on to engage their enemy.”

The Englishman was impressed but refused to show it. “Do you know any?”

“I think *Henry Martin* was one. It’s about the three brothers who draw lots to see which of them would become a pirate to provide for the others.”

“Aye, lad, that be the one!” Andy thought Bud was imitating a pirate voice or perhaps his accent wasn't British after all, but rather Irish or Scottish. Andy wasn't certain but decided that either way, the man sounded like a leprechaun.

"Sing it to me!" He bellowed. Andy thought of *Treasure Island's Billy Bones* and how he had bullied everyone at the Admiral Benbow Inn into singing with him. Andy sang the lyrics while Bud joined in on the refrain as the dark-blue Lincoln ate up the miles.

Andy was amazed at the change in topography as dry west Texas plain began to give way to verdant green. As they neared the border into Louisiana, Andy could only recognize one new tree among the many species that covered the fertile area. It was the fragrant magnolia, which had appeared in every book and movie he was acquainted with in the south. He felt like he had arrived.

Bud grew silent after the singing had stopped and finally flipped on the turn-signal to exit the interstate. "I'll drop you off near the river on Market Street. You should be able to catch a ride over to Bossier City from there."

Andy got out of the big, comfortable car and was assaulted by the humidity outside. It was late afternoon and the temperature wasn't as high as the desert had been but he thought the humidity might be even worse than the triple digit temperatures. He broke a sweat by simply retrieving his gear from the trunk.

"You know, kid, you're all right. You might be the first American I've met who actually has the American spirit this country used to be famous for."

"Wow, thanks Bud. I hope I get to see Manchester someday."

"If you want to see Manchester, I'd suggest the one in New Hampshire!" Andy heard him laughing as the tinted power window rolled up. In another moment, the car was gone.

Andy experienced the thrill of being alone again after a long ride. That moment when he realized exactly where his two feet stood provided him with his greatest moments of clarity.

This was him, Andy from Ojai, standing on Louisiana soil overlooking the Red River. He was excited to see genuine paddle-boats adrift on the wide river and soon gathered that they were floating casinos. Visions of dancing women, card games and ragtime piano passed through his romantic imagination. He seriously considered trying to find work on such a boat but decided to press on. The Big Easy would be even better.

He decided to sing *Red River Valley* before putting his sign out and ended up playing it in *A, C, D* and *G*; all of the keys he had harmonicas for. He jazzed up the tempo or slowed it down as his whim dictated and he felt the poignant, exuberant thrill of freedom on the road.

Andy had inadvertently played through rush hour and was near to regretting it for the night had grown late. He had remembered to put his sign out an hour earlier but hadn't yet been offered a ride.

He watched bubbles arise from the depths of the muddy river and wondered what kind of fish had made them. The night-time sounds were mostly foreign to him. They were still crickets, frogs and birds, of course, but they sang their nocturnal songs as if in different voices. *In Louisiana*, Andy thought, *even Sinatra would have sounded like Elvis.*

A rusted, dented and failing International pickup truck came to a squeaky stop next to Andy. "Y'all going to Bossier?" He asked Andy who had actually heard his speech as, "Y'ah gwan t'Boza?"

"Yes, sir!" Andy said once his mind had performed the translation.



"G'tin thin bah, me'll tik yu ova t'rivah." Andy translated the loose Louisiana dialect slowly but finally understood him to have said, "Get in then, boy. I'll take you over the river." Andy found that almost everyone in Louisiana spoke a brand of English they didn't sell in California.

As Andy loaded his gear in the pickup, he noticed several sections of the bed had rusted clean through and he could see the ground underneath the truck. None of the holes were larger than a foot wide so Andy felt reasonably safe trusting his gear there.

The driver introduced himself as Lou but explained to Andy that one hundred miles west they knew him as Tex. "Get it?" He said, then elucidated as if the joke was complicated. Andy deciphered the lingo as, "When I'm in Texas they call me *Tex* and when I'm in Louisiana, I'm known as *Lou*!" Andy wondered why he needed two names to begin with.

Lou was a very small man, maybe five feet one inch tall in his boots. He was wiry, though, with forearms like *Popeye* and was probably a lot stronger than he looked. Andy thought a crawfish might be his spirit animal, or crawdaddies as he called the little ones he used to find in the creeks back home when it would rain.

"Thanks for the ride." Andy tried to make himself heard over the clanging din of the cab, which was utilized as storage for all manner of fishing gear. Hooks of many sizes, from small and harmless to over six inches and quite deadly, hung on every available inch of the cabin. Andy wondered what kind of fish Lou caught with an eight inch hook.

"Ink nu uffit." The driver seemed to say. Andy realized four or five seconds later that he had said, "Think nothing of it."

They crossed the long bridge and Lou eventually communicated that he was actually going to the twin cities which were a little

farther east than Bossier City. Andy found it so difficult to understand Lou that he encouraged silence between them whenever possible. He had nearly dozed when Lou pulled off the highway at an exit labeled Riverfront Street.

“Thanks alot for the ride, Lou.”

“‘Ink nu uffit.” He said, then added, “Jes witch ot fa dem o’coons.” Andy troubled over the enigmatic words long after Lou had driven off. He repeated them phonetically for a while so that he wouldn’t forget the way they sounded, then began to work them out in English.

He eventually came up with “Just watch out for them old coons.” Andy was finally satisfied that he had the words right but still didn’t understand what they might mean.

*Are raccoons dangerous?* Andy asked himself. *I don’t think so,* he answered uncertainly, *but I guess I’ll find out.*

The Ouachita River separated West Monroe from Monroe proper and he now stood on the western side of another long bridge. The night was far advanced and very dark. Andy looked around and saw only the black sky and the inkier shadows of the trees. There was no traffic for over an hour so Andy decided to sleep for the night.

He strode a few paces off the onramp and found a spot behind some trees using his lighter to see the ground and check for ants. He slept fitfully as he dreamed of them marching upon him like Amazonian army ants from an old Willard Price adventure novel.

In the early dawn, Andy was awakened by the sound of stealthy movement nearby. He stood up fast and looked around warily.

“I’m not gonna hurt you, brother.” Said a voice from the gloom. “I just saw you there and I thought maybe you was dead.” Andy

had never been mistaken for a dead man before and he kind of liked the idea.

“Maybe I am!” He replied and to his surprise, the excitable stranger yelped in fear and took off running. Andy considered letting him go but decided against it. “I was just kidding, I’m just a hobo.”

The man came slowly back to Andy, reminding him of poor old *Ben Gunn* who had been marooned for so long that he jumped, twitched and wrung his hands with anxiety.

“Me too, I reckon.” The stranger said. “I’m Bill.”

“Hey Bill, I’m Andy.”

“You got any food, brother?” Bill asked greedily.

“I do. Want to share a can of pork 'n beans?” Bill didn’t believe Andy *had* the food until he produced the can. Bill’s eyes popped and ravenous hunger was evident in his eyes.

Bill collected small sticks of wood and used Andy’s lighter to ignite a light green moss around them. Soon the can was warming in the center of the small fire and the two men got to talking.

Bill explained that President Reagan had closed down Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Louisville, Kentucky, the mental hospital he had worked at, leaving him homeless for several years. Andy believed him except for one detail, for it was clear that Bill would have been a patient, not staff.

“I heard about those hospitals closing.” Andy said, “It must have been hard on you.”

“Weren’t nothing, really. Lots of folks didn’t deserve to be locked up in their medical torture prisons anyway.”

They talked as they shared the scalding beans and the subject of marijuana came up when Andy told Bill about the Austin cop who had stolen his weed.

“I can score some if I had a little money.” Bill said.

“I’m broke but do you think your guy would take a trade?” Andy asked hopefully.

“Why, what you got? That there guitar?”

“No,” Andy said putting his arm around the case protectively. “I have an extra *C* harmonica.” He gave the harp to Bill for inspection.

“I can get a nickel or dime bag for this easy if you want.” Bill said after looking it over.

“That would be cool. Where does your guy hang out?”

Bill gestured vaguely over his shoulder then asked, “You sure you don’t have any money instead? It would be easier to score if I had cash.”

Andy reaffirmed that he did not so Bill left to go make the score while Andy waited. Half-an hour turned into an hour, then into two. Suddenly, from somewhere far away, Andy could hear someone playing a harmonica.

“Maybe his guy is just testing it out.” Andy thought.

Another hour went by with distant harmonica accompaniment and his opinion changed.

*He probably scored a bottle and is playing my harp! I hope he's enjoying his little trick.* Andy had to laugh at Bill's deception but was a little sickened by it as well. *I shared my beans with the guy, how could he do this to me?*

Andy moved on back to the onramp and turned his thoughts away from the loose morality of human beings and back to the road.

The river looked brown and muddy as he crossed it in the open bed of a midnight-blue Chevy S-10. He thought of Muddy Waters and his song *Got My Mojo Workin'* and sang it to himself over the sound of the wind.

He was happy to be in the land of the mojo hand, or root. Andy wasn't sure exactly what a *mojo* was, just that it had something to do with voodoo and most bluesmen carried them.

Andy knocked on the glass when he saw the exit for Highway 165 south approaching. The driver let him out and drove off with just a wave of farewell exchanged between them.

Highway 165 shares the title of Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive and Andy truly felt like he was in the south. Many cities around the country, including Los Angeles, had honored the great man by using his name for big, broad boulevards, but they weren't in the south and just didn't feel as authentic to young Andy as the one he was on.

This was the smallest highway Andy had seen on his trip and had just one lane in each direction. The scant shoulder was lined with dense trees and there were no streetlights to combat the darkness when it came.

Andy grew excited as he stood on the highway that would take him to his mother's hometown, which had always seemed impossibly far away when she would talk about it.

Andy stuck his thumb out for several hours without success. A brand-new Chevy Silverado drove by filled with exuberant high school football players. *Go Spartans!* had been written in soap on the glass.

When they passed him, one of the football players threw a half-empty beer can at Andy. Since it caught him squarely on the forehead, Andy was sure that it had been thrown by the quarterback. He looked at the can, which was all white with black letters announcing its contents as simply *Beer*. Andy had never seen such generic packaging before and he burst out laughing.

He knew it wasn't personal, the kids weren't disrespecting *Andy*, just the stereotype that he fit into at the time. *All the same*, he thought, *I'm glad it doesn't happen more often*. He rubbed the knot in his forehead where the can had hit him.

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Night fell early out on lonely Route 165 south. Andy could discern objects only by touch without the aid of his lighter. He put the sign away and brought out the guitar. He tuned the strings to an open *D* and put a glass slide on the ring finger of his left hand and was pleased with himself for doing it all in the dark.

Andy would never be a master guitar player but he played well that night in the utter darkness of northern Louisiana. Andy envisioned the ghosts of old bluesmen calling out to him as he played the riffs they had written long ago. Then he would ask them to teach him the secrets that had cost Robert Johnson his soul at the crossroads.

Headlights lit the road as a vehicle slowly rounded a bend from the north. Andy was standing with the harp and guitar around his neck but he stopped playing and stuck out his thumb.

*I probably look like a ghost out here*, he laughed to himself. The eerie scene grew protracted as it became apparent that the vehicle's speed was painfully slow. Andy wondered if it was being drawn by mules or had perhaps stopped altogether.

Andy waved and kept both hands visible so they didn't think he was a highway robber. Again he chuckled at the absurd situations that he put himself in.

The truck grew closer with time. Andy could hear the engine purring deeply with the rumble of power to spare and he thought the lion at the Santa Barbara Zoo had a rumble like that.

When the truck was thirty feet from Andy, it swerved violently and stopped. The engine idled while Andy stood blinded in the headlights. The shotgun door opened and a tall black man stepped out. Andy's gut reaction was to run but he refused the impulse.

Three more men stood up in the bed of the truck where Andy guessed they had been sleeping.

Andy waved at the men silhouetted in the harsh glare of the headlights. The scene appeared to be growing into an eerie standoff which he was particularly anxious to avoid.

"Hi guys!" Andy said to break the rising tension. For some reason, perhaps instinctively, he plucked a string and slid the glass up the neck, beginning the riff for *Crossroads* by Robert Johnson.

The vague forms continued to stare at Andy for a few tense moments when the tall guy finally said to his friends, "See dat? Y'all's some dumb motha's. It's just some cracker doin' his thang."

Another man spoke up, “Get George on outta that truck, he gots to see dis ‘un.” A short man with glasses slowly got out of the driver’s seat and ambled warily up to Andy. When he was fifteen feet away he suddenly recoiled backwards as if he had seen a ghost.

“Ah!” George cried, “It’s just a long-hair-guitar-cracker!”

“You nearsighted old fool! I done tol’ you t’ let me drive.”

Andy surmised that the driver had extremely poor eyesight and had apparently told the other guys he had seen the devil in the road.

“Is it *your* truck now? Hell no!” George replied defiantly. “Why would I let you drive *my* truck?”

“‘Cause you can’t *see*!” Two of the men said together. Andy was relieved that the tension had been broken but had never heard the term *cracker*. He guessed that it was pejorative but wasn’t sure beyond that. He had expected to be called a *honky*, which he had learned from *Mr. Jefferson* on TV, but what was a cracker?

“Can I ride with you guys?” Andy asked the tall man. “I’m only goin’ to the next town.”

All eyes turned back to Andy. *What did I say?* he thought worriedly.

“Did that cracker just ax us for a ride?”

“You must be outta yo’ damn mind, boy!”

“You don’t want no ride with us, boy.”

“No sir, you don’t.”



Andy was intimidated by the rapid-fire assault but was confident that his own innocence would see him through.

“What’s wrong, you guys don’t like guitar players?” Andy had accidentally said the words that were perfect for the moment. The men engaged in a small riot with their laughter coming out hearty, honest and unrestrained. Their loose-jointed antics reminded Andy of Jimmy Walker from TV’s *Good Times* and he almost expected to hear someone say, *dyno-mite!*

The tall man walked up to Andy and intentionally got into his personal space, “You ain’t scared, boy?”

Andy realized that he *was* nervous but not scared. He replied honestly, “Cops are the only ones who really scare me. You ain’t cops are ya?” He hoped that he sounded funny instead of like a smart-aleck and was grateful when some of the men laughed.

“Did you know a rich white boy like yourself got murdered out here a few nights ago? Tensions runnin’ high ‘bout now.”

“I don’t know anything about it, what happened?” Andy asked.

“Some cracker went messin’ round wit’ the wrong skirt, man!”

Andy thought he understood and said, “So her man killed him?”

“No, boy, *she* killed him! And she was *black!*”

“That doesn’t change anything, does it?” Andy asked naively. “Justice should be colorblind.”

“Listen to this hea’ cracker talk!” One man said to the others, then to Andy, “Sucka, just ‘cause you *on* Martin Luther King Drive don’t mean you *is* the man!”

“Damn straight!” Voices echoed.

“Color doesn’t matter to me, guys. I’m just hitchhikin’ to Columbia. I came all the way from Los Angeles and I’m almost there.” Andy spoke with the road-weary authenticity of two thousand miles.

“Whatcha really doin’ out hea’ white boy?”

“You come all the way from California? To Columbia, Louisiana?”

“You *is* crazy!”

“What n’hell for?”

“My mom was born there in 1949. She grew up on fourth street next to the train tracks.” Andy remembered because he had heard the stories from his mom his whole life.

“Boy, you got it wrong. If she was white, she was across the tracks on first or second street.”

“Yeah fool, third and fourth is our side o’ dem tracks.”

“I’m sure that she said fourth street but I don’t know one from another. Hey, you guys want to show me around?” They laughed again at his audacity but soon he was riding in the back with everybody except George, who still insisted on doing the driving.

“‘Bout seven or eight miles an hour, that’s ol’ Blind George.”

“On a good day, goin’ downhill maybe.”

“Make that about five at night with a white cracker in the back of his truck!” They laughed again. Andy could take a joke at his expense but didn’t like not knowing what it was.

“What does *cracker* mean?” He finally asked.

When the laughter died down again, the tall man named Big Jim spoke an answer like a whisper. “Cause your grandpappy done owned my grandpappy.”

“Cracked ‘dem whips over his head, they did.”

“Cracker-ass crackers!”

Andy looked down in shame and they rode in silence at seven or eight miles an hour for some time when Andy tried to say, “I’m sorry.” He wasn’t aware that he was sobbing and his words came out pathetically garbled.

The men laughed and teased him at first but soon their better natures awakened and they rose to the occasion. “Man, wasn’t *you*! What choo cryin’ for?”

“Quit cryin’ you California-queer-cracker!” He had meant it to be funny but no one laughed.

“What if I could buy your forgiveness with my blood?” Andy asked in a solemn voice. He would have forfeit his life then and there if he could have atoned for the sins of his race, which was an act that he often thought about as he tried to sleep.

“You ain’t *Jesus*, cracker!”

“We could bleed ya, won’t do no good though.”

“What’s *wrong* with you, boy? You sure you ain’t no white-devil come down to test us?”

Andy recovered his composure and said simply, "I feel so guilty for what my grandpappy did; for what humans do to each other." A moment passed and the distinction hung in the air like a hot-air balloon.

"Yeah, that's right, it's a *human* thing boy. We enslave ourselves." Big Jim said.

"Every damned day."

"Even back in Africa we was enslaved by our own brothers!"

Once the conversation died out, the unlikely group fell into another contemplative silence. The black men realized that they had found the compassion in their hearts to let Andy off the hook, even to defend him from his own guilt. They felt a calm overcome their racial hatred as their forgiveness became an instrument of their own redemption.

Andy realized that racial tensions were not something that sprung up here and there in big cities and universities in the sixties. It was a clear line of hate, of *sides*, that had been perpetuated rather than apologized for by the reigning whites, especially in small towns like Columbia, Louisiana.

"What was your mama's name?"

"Henry, Rena Lou Henry. Her momma was Imogene and her daddy was named Theodore Roosevelt Henry. He's been dead since 1973 when I was born." Andy paused, then added, "I think my great-uncle's dad had a funny sense of humor and named him Henry Henry. He's supposed to still live here with his wife, Oretha."

“I know the Henry’s! Shoot, we all do! They run the dairy up there on the hill on,” he paused, “4th street.”

“‘Dem’s your kin, boy?’”

“Dey *good* people, boy, you a’aight in my book.”

“‘Dem Henry’s are the best white folks I ever knowed.”

“Oh wow, that’s great to hear! I had no idea, for all I knew they were-” Andy had painted himself into a corner and they all leaned forward to hear what came out of his mouth next.

“crackers!” Andy said smiling.

They laughed and ribbed Andy about bein’ a Boy-George hippie from California as Blind George drove his seven or eight miles an hour through the humid Louisiana night. It took slightly more than four hours to make the 37 miles to Columbia. When they arrived, the sun was rising over a tiny, quaint town that had once known his mother.

The Ouachita River wound its way gently through the town. There were brick churches and a school that served grades one through twelve, just the way she had always described it to him. He pictured his mother walking to school barefoot with her books tied up by a string.

Andy had time to read the sign announcing the city limits and the population of four hundred. Andy shook his head in disbelief; his small hometown of Ojai had four hundred kids in the public high school alone. And that was it, even at seven or eight miles an hour, the town proper was quickly behind them.

Blind George crossed the railroad tracks then stopped at the crest of a hill where a driveway branched off. The mailbox read *Henry*.

“Do you want us to take you up there, to introduce you?” Big Jim asked Andy.

Andy thought about it. “That would be great. I don’t know them and they’re not expecting me.” Andy had already forgotten the race issue but the men knew the surprise would make for a fine introduction.

Andy had pictured a sprawling farm with green grass, beautiful black and white dairy cows, a huge grain silo and a milking facility. His eyes, however, saw only weeds bitten so low to the ground that they were almost dirt. He counted eight cows and a bull but they were all muddy brown. Chickens ran amok around their feet as they neared the house. Excitement seemed to be in everyone’s eyes as they got out to greet an old, thin man who was working in the milking facility, which was a dilapidated one-room shack.

“Good morning, Mr. Henry, Suh.” The tall man said.

Mr. Henry Henry turned around to greet the visitors who had snuck up behind him. Andy noticed that his eyes were the same color as his mother’s.

“Well good mornin’ fellas. It ain’t Thursday, is it? What are y’all doin’ here?” He said good-naturedly.

“You got any kin in California, Mr. Henry?”

He thought about it and remembered. “I had a brother who had a boy. Named him after Teddy Roosevelt he did. Teddy took his family to California some forty years ago. Had a mess of kids, did that boy.”

“Well Mr. Henry, meet ol’ Teddy Roosevelt’s grandson, Andy.” Grinning widely, Big Jim ushered Andy up to Mr. Henry and they shook hands a bit self-consciously.

The old farmer squinted, “You Teddy’s grandson, boy?”

“Yes sir. My ma’s name is Rena Henry. She was his oldest daughter.”

“One of you go fetch Oretha, she’ll be wantin’ to hear this.”

Blind George made a move toward the house but one of his brothers put a hand on his shoulder and said, “You stay here, George. Mr. Henry can’t wait all day for you to find his missus.” He ran off to the house while Blind George cursed him out like only a brother can.

“So how did you get here, son? And how come you show up in the truck of a negro?” The candid way his great-uncle spoke the word startled Andy. The black men were standing *right there*.

“They picked me up hitchhiking last night, just outside of Monroe.”

“Monroe! What I mean is, well, let’s just wait for the missus, she’ll sort it all out.” He spoke as if the confused scene had given him a headache. He squinted irritably and said, “I got to milk this old cow.” Then he fit the deed to the word. Andy had the impression that he did that a lot.

A rotund, capable woman was shooin’ away the messenger because he refused to deliver any details, merely the vague, “Mr. Henry asked for you, Ma’am.”

“I know he needs me, Jebediah, but I’m busy right now. What are you acting so foolish for?” she said.

“Uh, hello Aunt Oretha. I’m Andy, Teddy’s grandson by his daughter Rena.” He smiled sheepishly and was ashamed for not calling ahead.

“My heavens!” She cried.

“I’m sorry to show up like this.” Andy said apologetically, “I don’t want anything, just to meet you two.”

“My heavens!” She cried again and rushed to give Andy a hug. To her, the arrival of kin was a big event.

“So you’re Rena’s son? Well, I just got to get out the old picture albums. Do you want some tea or coffee? You must be hungry, do you like chitlins? Oh, look at your hair, why you look like a lady! Haha! Oh well, never mind that for now.”

Andy’s great-aunt Oretha would have fawned over him for days. Once he was safely in the hands of his kin, the men known to the Henrys as *the brothers* said goodbye to the Henrys and to Andy. They piled in their 1940 Plymouth half-ton pickup which purred like a big cat and drove off the farm at seven or eight miles an hour.

Aunt Oretha ordered her husband to take the day off, which put him in a very good mood. They spent the day with the photo albums laying open before them, talking about California in general and his grandfather and mother in particular.

“You know, I never got to know Rena too well when she was young. Seems to me that gal Teddy married made her work all the time to help raise the young’uns. Didn’t they have eight children?”



“Only six,” Andy corrected. He had learned that two or three syllables was all the time he was afforded before she would answer or ignore her own question.

“Well, Teddy was a ladies’ man when he wanted to be. His gal was the prettiest in the parish. Imogene, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am. She’s my grandmother. She lives in Newport Beach.”

“Teddy was nearly the best fisherman in the area, too. Probably why he tried his luck in California. Always too lucky for his own good.”

“What do you mean?” Andy asked, sensing a juicy bit of moralism that he might be able to apply to himself.

“Things came too easy for him. He didn’t have to try very hard to be the best and he would get bored and restless. Then he would do somethin’ stupid and get into trouble. Andy knew this to be true about himself and could now begin to identify its source.

“Remember the time Teddy drove your daddy’s tractor into the river?” Henry asked his wife. “Now that was funny as hell!” He laughed loudly at the memory.

“My mom never mentioned that story.” Andy said, imagining his mother’s stern reaction to it, although it must have happened before her time, too.

They talked until the fireflies came out and danced like fairies among the trees. The crickets and frogs were louder than Andy had ever heard them before. He felt a certain shyness around the couple but it was alright, they were family.

The conversation revealed that Andy's mother had been emotionally injured one night in her youth after a spring hootenanny. She had turned to Christianity to help her feel pure again. Andy saw the roots of his mother's piety laid bare in front of him and began to understand why his mother needed God so badly.

“So, where’s your truck?” Oretha asked.

“He come in with the brothers, Ma.” Henry said. Aunt Oretha looked at Andy, evidently deeply impressed yet she was frowning.

“You come in with the brothers?” She spoke with such doubt that her words sounded like a frown, too.

“Yeah, they picked me up in Monroe. I didn’t know there was still racial tension out here.” He said, “I think they thought I was crazy.”

“I know they did.” Great-uncle Henry said leaning forward eagerly. “You know they was kin to that little girl that white sucker done molested?” He asked angrily.

“He got to her once then came back a second time when the law didn’t do nothin’ about it.” Oretha said through tight, frustrated lips.

“That girl stuck him with a kitchen knife in his manhood and he died from the bleeding.”

“She called the ambulance for him but he wouldn’t let them near it ‘cause he was too ashamed; his pecker was all diseased from God only knows what.”

“Got what he deserved, he did.”

Andy gave the unknown girl a moment of silence before saying, "What's gonna happen to the poor girl?"

"Oh, she's in jail now. Gonna get twenty-seven years according to the newspaper."

"But she'll die in jail." Aunt Oretha smiled grimly as she spoke. "The white fella's kin will see to that sure enough. Those boys you rode in with, well, she was their baby sister and they're none too happy with white folk about now."

"You're lucky they didn't kill you, boy!" Great-Uncle Henry said vehemently as if to penetrate Andy's thick-headed naiveté.

"Well at least the bastard's dead!" Andy blurted out the words before he had contemplated them properly. He didn't like to swear around older folks.

They toasted to his words and shared other stories as they sat up late into the night. Andy thought about staying on and learning how to milk cows but knew that he had nothing to offer them but extra work.

"I sure appreciate your hospitality, but I reckon I'll be leaving in the morning." He said and laughed at himself for using the cowboy term *reckon*.

"I can drive you to the heights about seven miles south. It's busy traffic down there." Great-Uncle Henry offered helpfully and it was clearly a rare favor because Henry almost never left the farm. He reminded Andy of a *hobbit of the shire* who didn't like adventures.

Andy slept well on the fluffy, country couch and felt safe in the bosom of his family although he had known them only a matter of hours. Dawn came earlier to a dairy man than it did for the rest of

the state, so Andy was awoken at 3 a.m. for the ride into town. Andy said goodbye and was extremely grateful as they forced a thermos of coffee into his hands. He would like to get to know them better, but he didn't belong there and he knew it.

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The onramp at Columbia Heights was not the heavy traffic Andy had been hoping for. He calculated an optimistic average of only three cars per hour passed him on the lonely highway. He played guitar to fill the time and wrote one or two highway ballads that he carried with him for the rest of his life. He was in a good mood but looked forward to reaching New Orleans before sundown.

Andy received strange looks from everyone who passed him but no rides. He employed the long day by pacing around the highway wondering how long he would have to wait for a ride out of there.

Finally, in the early afternoon Andy caught a break. A well-dressed black man drove past him but changed his mind and backed up.

"I'm headed to New Orleans, son. Do you want a ride?"

"Yes, sir!" Andy said gratefully and climbed into the immaculate white Mercedes wondering why wealthy black men always seemed to drive white cars.

"Nice car, mister, and thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome, son. What brings you to Louisiana?" He could immediately tell that Andy was an out-of-towner.

Andy shared his story with complete candor born from the confidence that they would never meet again. Then the man told Andy his own story.

“I grew up here in abject poverty but moved to Chicago for school. Now I’m on my way to NOLA because I’ve accepted a position as professor of molecular biology at Tulane University. My name’s Bradley.”

“I’m Andy. That sounds like a great life. The folks I’ve met on the road haven’t been able to improve themselves like that.”

Andy said sadly, referring mostly to himself.

“It’s hard for poor folks to quit working long enough to get to a university. Most of ‘em are dog-tired after their first or second job and just can’t do it. So poor they stay.”

Andy thought about that for a while then asked, “How did you do it?”

“My momma. She worked three jobs to put me through school and I worked two between classes.”

“Wow, what a team you two are!” Andy was visibly impressed.

“*Were*, my friend. Momma done died the day I graduated. She had been sick about a year but I guess she was holdin’ on to see me through.” Bradley spoke stoically but Andy could sense his pain. He hoped that his own mother would learn to be proud of him before their time together was over. He also hoped to precede her into the great unknown.

“Oh, man. I’m sorry.” Andy said quietly.

“What are you going to do in NOLA?” Bradley asked once the moment of silence had passed. Andy had not heard anyone else use the apt abbreviation for New Orleans, LA but he liked it.

“I’m hoping to get a job somewhere there’s music.” He answered excitedly. “Maybe a bar or restaurant.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard. You ever been there before?”

“No, sir, just heard stories mostly. It’s supposed to be the most romantic city in America.”

“It’s also the murder capital of the south. You watch where you’re going down there, ya hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How well can you play that guitar of yours?” He asked.

“I’m ok. I’m a better songwriter than I am a player.”

“That’s alright, you can always find a better player than you in the Big Easy. Lemme hear some of your song lyrics.”

Andy shyly recited several of his highway songs as the Mercedes sped south. Bradley was an astute listener and patiently allowed Andy to expend his voice until he was out of words. Bradley switched onto Interstate 49 in Alexandria and announced that he would have to stop for gas in Baton Rouge.

Andy felt the thrill of excitement well up again. *Next stop, Baton Rouge Louisiana* he thought while shaking his head in disbelief. He remembered Kris Kristofferson's *Me and Bobby McGee* which was his mother’s favorite song. Andy preferred Janis Joplin’s version because of her screaming soul. Janis *lived* the words she sang.

“Those words are mighty fine, son, mighty fine.” Bradley said, returning with coffee and snacks but still thinking about Andy’s lyrics. He was feeling some pride for the young man. “You’ll do alright, I reckon.”

Baton Rouge came up quickly but Andy was disappointed; it looked as bland as Bakersfield. *Just another run-down small city. I hope New Orleans is better than this.*

When Bradley got back on the road, Andy found that he was once again on Interstate 10 and New Orleans was only eighty miles away.

“First thing you’ll want in the Crescent City is a map. Do you know why they call it that?”

“No.”

“It’s built in the shape of a half-moon following the bends of the mighty Mississippi River. The roads run in concentric circles and none of ‘em goes straight for very long. The city’ll be hard on you ‘til you get to know her.” He smiled.

Bradley handed Andy a pocket map of the city he had picked up at the gas station. Andy was very grateful and opened it to begin trying to make sense of the layout. This was the first city along the road where he actually planned to stay a while.

“We’ll be comin’ into the city on St. Charles Avenue.” Bradley explained while Andy found it on the map.

“Ok, I see it, and here’s Tulane University. Wow, I see what you mean about the streets. This is kind of crazy.”

“Yeah, the bus system is pretty good, though. You’ll get used to it. Maybe.”

“Is there much racism down there?”

“Son, there’s so much of it we don’t even call it racism. Down here it’s just *life*.” Bradley said sadly.

“Do the ladies really take their tops off for beads?” Andy inquired and hoped that he didn’t appear too interested.

Bradley laughed and said, “Yeah they do but only in the French Quarter.” Andy found it on the map and was dismayed to find it on the other side of the city from where Bradley was dropping him off.

They rolled down St. Charles Avenue and Bradley explained, “This is called uptown, the French Quarter is downtown. Most everything else is mid-town.”

Bradley pulled the expensive Mercedes to the side of the road and parked in front of the university.

“Well, here we are. I wish you luck, son. This city can be dangerous so take care of yourself. She can also be a whole lotta fun!”

“Thanks, Bradley. I really appreciate the ride and the map.” They shook hands then Bradley drove further into the campus.

Andy experienced the thrill of being alone again and was tempted to catch a downtown bus right away but he knew that he would need to clean up before he could look for work.

*I’m sure they have a shower on campus* he thought and walked in the direction of the sports stadium. He found the men’s locker rooms locked but the women’s were open. He pushed the door open shyly.

“Hello, anyone here?” He called out. Nobody answered so he quickly stripped and turned on a shower head. The water came out icy and never warmed up.



*I guess they have the water heaters turned off for summer,* he realized then stepped in anyway. The cold water nearly stopped his heart so he lathered up and rinsed off quickly. He had no towel so he was very wet as he donned his clothing and began to walk back toward St. Charles Ave.

“Hey you, stop right there!” A voice called from behind him. Andy turned around to see a uniformed security guard driving a black and white golf cart toward him.

Andy stood only a few feet from the sidewalk and hoped that any authority the guard had would end at the property line. He continued walking until he was off-campus then turned around and said, “Yes, Sir?”

“Don’t you ever come back here, you dirty vagrant!” He snarled. Andy was right, however, the guard seemed to have no authority off-campus.

“I won’t.” Andy flashed the angry guard a peace sign and walked away. The guard followed him to the end of the grounds, staring at him continually. Andy was glad to cross St. Charles and enter what appeared to be a very large public park.

There was a sprawling golf course and a long, green lagoon meandering through the trees. When he reached Magazine Street, he saw a sign declaring it to be Audubon Park and he sat down at the bus stop bench.

Andy had only seven dollars left including the payphone change, but he figured he could afford the fare. Andy climbed on and rode the gritty bus that was filled with people. He stopped counting the city blocks after eighty-seven but enjoyed the long ride immensely. He learned that he was on a route *around* the city rather than through the middle of it, just as Bradley had explained to him. In

fact, he couldn't identify any streets that ran straight east and west for more than a couple of blocks.

He passed through many neighborhoods of narrow, one or two story buildings. Poverty was prevalent as the trash, graffiti and broken windows seemed to be neglected everywhere he looked. He saw many old black men sitting on shady porches but none with a guitar. He saw a large group of protesters who carried signs demanding that Louisiana enforce the federal minimum wage of \$3.75 per hour. Andy had been certain that every state was supposed to follow the mandates of federal law and was surprised and saddened to find this not to be so.

*Welcome to the south, Andy he thought. After all, I didn't expect New Orleans to be perfect, just romantic.*

The bus passed underneath a sign announcing the Garden District. Andy looked upon the most gorgeous inner-city dwellings he had ever seen. They were not what he would call houses because they were connected to each other and very narrow. Yet they had lush vines, bushes and flowers blooming everywhere.

Fragrant jasmine climbed up city lamp-posts and street signs. Verdant green moss lined the cracks in the sidewalk reminding him of Ireland from pictures. Birdcages hung from pedestals in many of the porches. Ivy adorned even the power poles and electrical boxes.

The bus dog-legged up Jackson to St. Charles then continued under the Pontchartrain Expressway but turned before he could catch a glimpse of the Mississippi River.

Andy was glad to get off the bus at the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal. He thought that he was only a few blocks from the French Quarter and was ready to stretch his legs. The

ugly terminal was large and served both buses and trains. A group of men glared at Andy as he stepped out of the large bus depot.

Andy walked southeast on Howard to St. Charles where he saw the impressive tribute at Lee Circle. He saw St. Patrick's church and Lafayette Square but began to regret getting off the bus as he still had many blocks to walk.

He labored in the midday heat and was dismayed at the ugly hotels and business centers he encountered. *This isn't the romance the city was famous for*, he thought as he passed the tall Sheraton hotel.

Finally he crossed Canal and saw a sign for Bourbon Street. He was struck by the smell of urine and vomit as well as the amount of trash on the ground. The whole street appeared to have been the scene of a raging party the night before, the aftermath of which he had only seen in Isla Vista frat parties in Santa Barbara. Andy smiled, for this was closer to what he came for.

He wandered around the French Quarter marveling at the bright colors of the rowhouses and their second and third floor balconies with beautiful wrought-iron trellises. Hanging plants dripped water on his shoulders as he passed underneath and he wished that he had collected some beads from the ground in case he met a girl. Andy wondered again at the bizarre ritual of trading boobs for beads and he laughed out loud at the world's craziness.

The French Quarter was the real birthplace of jazz, though the entire city enjoyed the reputation, yet Andy heard only popular radio emanating from the bars and restaurants. He saw the Cat's Meow with its bizarre, mechanical whore's legs swinging out of the second floor window. He saw a nude mime painted black and white who entertained dozens of tourists with his banal antics.

Andy found the French Market and heard the first live music since landing in the city. A trio was playing dixieland jazz at a restaurant called *Voo Carre*. Andy knew the name was a poor pun on *vieux carre*, meaning old town but he chose to overlook it.

Andy tipped the trio a dollar which constituted twenty-five percent of his net worth and clapped loudly when they finished their set.

“You guys sound great!”

“Thank you, son.” The trumpet-player wheezed out the words so hoarsely that Andy wondered how he could still blow his horn.

“Do you think they are hiring here, maybe busboys, dishwashers or waiters?” Andy asked. He would love to work tables near the band.

The guitarist replied in a low, jazzy growl, “Maybe so, why don’t you go over there and ask for my gal, Violet. Tell her what you can do and see what she says.”

“Right on, thanks!” Andy strode up to the main ordering counter and quickly set his bag and guitar down along the wall where he hoped no one would guess they were his.

Andy heard a voice from the kitchen. “Can I help you?”

“Hi there, I’d like to speak with Violet please.”

“There’s no Violet here, sorry, just me-” She suddenly walked into view and they both said, “Lily.” Andy was speechless but Lily recovered quickly.

“Hi Andy, what are you doin’ here?” She said in the tone of an old friend and he was glad she remembered him.

“I just hitchhiked into town! The musicians told me to come up here and ask for Violet if I wanted a job.” He was all smiles to discover Lily in New Orleans.

“Oh, that’s Ralph, the guitar player. He says I look more like a Violet than a Lily.” They laughed together for just a moment before a party of twelve tourists sat themselves down at the outside tables.

“You said you wanted a job?” She smiled and retreated to the back room. Lily returned with an apron and hat as well as her big Cajun boss. He looked like a grumpy, old walrus and glared at Andy for a time before nodding to Lily and returning to the kitchen.

“That’s it, you’re hired!” Lily said triumphantly. “We can swap stories after work. Here’s a menu, you take the big table.”

Andy was dumbstruck for only a moment before he reached for the apron. “I’m so excited you’re here, I can’t wait to talk with you.” he said.

“Me too, now go. Start ‘em with ice water. It’s hot.”

Andy tried to memorize the menu as he filled twelve glasses of water. He had worked at many restaurants and the tasks were similar in all of them, so he wasn’t concerned about this trial by fire.

“Hello, folks. Welcome to Voo Carre. May I take your drink orders?”

Andy waited on another seven tables that night, barely making eye contact with Lily because they were both too busy. He kept an ear on the musicians who would shake their head and smile at his luck.

“Say, Lucky!” Ralph heckled.

“Yeah, Ralph?”

“What you want us to play?”

“Something slow with a mournful feel.” Andy replied from the hip.

“Luckiest damn kid on the planet and he wants us to play a funeral march!” The trio played *Sweet Lotus Blossom* and dedicated it to Andy and Violet. Andy hoped that it would become their song someday and could even envision spinning her during their first dance as husband and wife to its irresistible lilt.

Lily walked up to him and said, “I have to go. My friend needs a ride home. We can talk tomorrow at work, ok? Be here at eleven.”

“Sure, bye Lily, and thanks!” Andy said hesitantly through his shock and disappointment. He had hoped that she would take him home for the night and he wondered jealously who her *friend* was.

He closed the restaurant at midnight and counted his tips. “Wow, seventy-two dollars! I can rent a room tomorrow and I’ll be all set.”

He grabbed his guitar and duffel bag, which had remained where he had left them all night, but Andy guessed that Lily knew they were his anyway. He wondered what she thought of him showing up like that. Would she view him romantically or think that he was just a bum?

Andy was in high spirits as he went off in search of a park or similar place to crash for the night. He had followed his dream, hitchhiked twenty-five hundred miles and now the girl he wanted

to believe might be his soul mate had just given him a well-paying job in the French Quarter. He couldn't believe his luck.

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Andy found a small park nearby with a baseball diamond that reminded him of Sarzotti Park back home. He felt the rain coming and was grateful for the shelter of the bleachers. The heavens opened suddenly with a violent fury, but Andy just picked the guitar strings a little harder and sang a little louder.

He was playing a spirited *House of the Rising Sun* when he heard a public address system shout, "Freeze! If you move, we will shoot you!" Andy was stunned into immediate compliance. When he chanced to move his head a couple of inches he saw four police officers with pistols aimed at him.

Andy was slow to realize the trouble he was in. He forgot that he was now eighteen years old and he also forgot about the tiny roach in his cigarette pack. The cops, however, found it and put handcuffs on him. He was led to the backseat of a black and white and still no one had said a word.

Andy thought they might take him to the station and question him. He wasn't too worried about that because he had done nothing wrong but hoped that he didn't fit the description of any wanted criminals.

Andy was driven to the small Orleans Parish Sheriff's Department and fingerprinted. This still did not arouse extreme concern because he had been fingerprinted every time the Ojai PD had picked him up for being out after the town's 10 p.m. curfew for minors. It was just part of the routine.

He was ordered to sit in front of a desk where the clerk wrote information from Andy's driver's license onto an official form, then she held the license up and asked, "Is this you?"

"Yes, Ma'am." It was the first time anyone had spoken to him since the public address had interrupted his song. He was hopeful that maybe she would explain what was happening.

She held the driver's license over the trashcan and dropped it in with a vindictive smile. "Cracker." she hissed under breath.

Andy slumped forlornly in the chair. Without the identification, he couldn't get a job, western union, cash paychecks or anything. He began to understand that they had him and weren't going to let go.

Andy was placed in a cramped holding cell for seven hours with sixteen other prisoners before they were prepared for transport. Deputies placed shackles on their ankles in addition to the handcuffs and led them outside. The doomed men filled two extended length vans with six rows of seats. Separated by heavy steel mesh, the deputies wore riot gear and carried assault shotguns.

Due to his nature of letting everyone else go first, Andy was the last to be shackled and, therefore, the last to board the second van and ended up in the front row. He could see the speedometer reach its limit at ninety five miles per hour as they sped up the interstate. The ride was very short, however, and the van turned off the freeway at the third exit.

Andy's heart sank further than he would have thought possible when the van was admitted through an electric fence and he read the words Orleans Parish Prison written on the side of an immense, grey-brick structure.



Inside, he was told to strip and was forced to endure a body cavity search and a shower from a fire hose. They dressed him in an orange jumpsuit and he was shackled to a long line of downcast men.

Andy wondered, not for the first time, *don't they have to read me my rights? What about the one phone call you see on TV?* He was issued rubber slippers and a clean but threadbare wool blanket and was marched into a large room with twenty-five bunk beds inside.

Andy saw a top bunk with no bedding on it under the only window and thought that it was a bit of luck. He threw his blanket on it, climbed up and looked out the window. It was raining and the window was thoroughly scratched on the inside, rendering it nearly impossible to see through. Yet, this pathetic portal was the only way to discern day from night in Ward Four.

The inmates near his bunk looked at Andy in a way that made him nervous. They had t-shirts tied like scarves around their heads but otherwise looked as mean and tough as anyone else in the room.

After a while, a short, muscular white guy with tattoos up and down both arms came up to Andy and said, "Why don't you take this bunk over here by me." It wasn't phrased as a question. Andy thought the small man reminded him of Humphrey Bogart but a lot tougher.

"I like the window." Andy replied coolly.

"Seriously man, you don't belong over here." Andy suddenly realized that the guy wasn't bullying him but trying to *save* him. He climbed down with his meager bedding and made up the bunk above the tattooed Bogart. It was then that Andy realized that he was one of three white guys in the whole prison ward.

“Those are the bitches over there, man.” He said to Andy but loud enough that everyone could hear him. He received scowls from the queers near the window but no one in the ward challenged him.

“I’m Joe. I kind of run things in here.” He said and lit his cigarette on the ever-burning wick, which was toilet paper rolled very tightly into a ten-foot long slow-burning rope. The ward, subsequently, always smelled like burning paper.

“That means he supplies the stuff.” Came a voice from nearby. “My name is Joe, too, but they all call me Dix, as in Dixie, ‘cause I’m from Alabama.” They shook hands.

“Thanks for the help.” Andy said then rolled over on his bunk and retreated far into his head.

Day after day, Andy helplessly followed the routine of prison life and survived only with the help of Joe and Dix. It turned out that Joe really did run things in their ward. He was a two-strike felon currently awaiting trial for his third and final strike, but he had the heroin connection. Andy had never dreamed that people dealt drugs in jail.

“Aren’t you worried about a third strike, Joe? Isn’t that life in jail?” Andy asked one night.

“Shoot, kid, my life ain’t never had any other direction. Only one place a guy like me coulda’ ended up.”

Andy thought about the hardcore childhood Joe apparently had endured but also saw a lot of good in the *bad guy* who was acting as a sort of guardian angel to him. Andy remembered that *Pit* had been saved from *His* inquisition by a rat, too, and thought angels might appear in unlikely forms.

One night Andy decided to take a shower but Joe stopped him. “You see those brooms criss-crossed in front of the john?”

“Yeah.”

“Means you turn around and hold your stuff ‘til they gone.” Andy didn’t fully understand but wisely chose to follow Joe’s instructions anyway. In the morning Andy asked him what the brooms meant.

“It means some poor sucker’s gettin’ his butt drilled.” Joe said calmly as he ate the bland eggs at breakfast. Realization dawned on Andy slowly. “Who was it?” he asked.

Joe pointed toward the guy who had just arrived the day before. He was real small, maybe one-hundred and fifteen pounds. He had looked like a child the day before but now Andy thought he looked like broken kitten after some kid had blown off a firecracker in its rectum.

Andy’s heart sank as he considered the poor boy. Andy was certain that he would have tried to help the kid if he had known what was going on. He also knew that he would have been beaten down by the rapists if he had tried. He was certain, though, that they would have had to kill him before they did *that* to him.

Andy was in prison for five days before he was given the opportunity to use the phone. He called his dad’s number, which he knew by heart. The phone only dialed collect calls, which he knew his father despised, and braced himself for the call.

“Hello?” Came the voice of his father.

“Will you accept a collect call from, *Hi Dad, it’s Andy*. Press one to accept the charges or two to disconnect.” Andy held his breath but his dad finally pressed one.

“Hi Dad, it’s Andy.” He repeated.

“Hello?” The line clicked loudly several times.

“It’s Andy, Dad. Are you there?”

“Oh, Andy, well hello Son. How’s the road treatin’ you?”

“I’m in trouble, Dad.”

“Uh-oh. What did you do?”

“I was playing guitar in a park.”

“Did you have any of the devil’s weed on you?”

“A tiny bit. I don’t know what they’re charging me with, yet. I don’t know anything.”

“And you expect me to bail you out?”

“Please, Dad. This is a serious place. I don’t belong here.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Call me tomorrow, I’m tired.”

Andy’s father hung up before Andy could protest. He would have to wait and hope that his dad would choose to help him. Who knew when he would be allowed to use the phone again?

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Andy was grateful that he had possessed the seventy dollars in tip money when they had arrested him but couldn’t understand why the police had turned it in. Instead of pocketing the cash, they had applied it to his credit and after the first week in prison, Andy was

able to purchase tobacco, peanut butter and chocolate bars from the commissary. Andy found that the cigarettes and peanut butter became more important to him than he would ever have thought possible on the outside.

"Thanks for your help, guys." He said as he handed Joe and Dix each a chocolate bar.

He wouldn't have given up the valuable candy if they had demanded it of him, but that's precisely what the two convicts *hadn't* done. They had exacted no tribute of any kind from him, so Andy's natural generosity rose to the surface and he offered the precious commodities willingly.

"You know, the day before you got in, they transferred the *Wolfman* upstate. If you was in here when he was, I wouldn't even have *tried* to help you." Joe said as they were making wine from the fermented fruit cocktail they had saved up.

"The *Wolfman*?" Andy asked reticently. In high school kids tell you bad jokes and you don't want to fall for them. In prison, Andy learned things that he wished were only bad jokes and wasn't sure he wanted to hear any more.

"Oh yeah, he was a bad motha." Dix chimed in. "He woulda' taken you for sure."

Andy wondered how long he could live in prison before he would rather be dead. If it got too bad, he figured that he could pick a fight that he would surely lose, and that would be the end of him. He knew that he could never learn to adapt to life prison. His love of life was already tenuous and was quickly weakening.

"Do you think anybody in here has ever killed anyone?" He asked Joe and Dix. They laughed at his naivete although the words they employed were far more crass.

“You can put me down for three.” Joe said coolly but offered no explanation.

“And me, but only once.” Dix said somberly. “I miss him, too.”

“Wow, I thought they separated the dangerous prisoners from the petty ones.” Andy blurted out. “No offense, guys.”

“None taken. They *do* and you’re in with the *bad* ones. The white collar stuff usually gets folks in Ward One or Two. That’s where they should’ve put you to begin with.” Joe said in disgust. “They was feeding you to the wolves, son!” Dix added vehemently.

Andy wondered why he had been placed in Ward Four. He felt utterly forgotten, which might have been even worse than knowing that his predicament was his own fault, just like Mr. Morales and the squirrel back home.

The days went slowly by, without access to the phone, while Andy withdrew further into his poisoned mind by the hour. All day and all night, asleep or awake, Andy found consolation in the pretty, trusting and faithful face of Lily. When he had first been incarcerated, he had hoped that Lily didn’t think he had ditched her and the job on purpose. Now that it had been two weeks, Andy wondered if she would even want to hear his explanation. He choked on the bitter luck that had landed him in jail when he had been so close to realizing his dream.

His father said one lucky day that he had hired a lawyer to investigate his case. Andy was grateful but thought of the police clerk who had thrown his license away and didn’t think he would ever be set free.

Andy received a letter from his mother which surprised him because he had asked his father not to tell anyone that he was in jail. Her letter began, "I'm so sorry that you did this to yourself..." Andy threw the letter away unread.

Andy's mind continued to reel during the long hours of confinement. He felt low and began to believe that maybe he deserved to be there after all. He wasn't some romantic dreamer-poet like he wanted to believe but just another druggie caught trespassing.

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"Why is it taking so long for my case to be heard?" Andy asked Joe and Dix one day.

"You know they get twenty-two dollars a day for each of of us? Do the math." Dix answered.

"Yup and you know who owns this prison and gets that twenty-two dollars?" Joe asked.

"The Sheriff! It's been in his family since they built it." Dix answered the question for Andy's benefit.

Andy had been told there were nearly 3,000 people incarcerated in the prison and estimated somewhere around \$60,000 per day was paid to the Sheriff to care for the prisoners. "That's a lot of scratch."

"But it's not enough. He plans on expanding it soon, too, so it'll hold even more of us criminals and to make more money for himself."

"So, Andy, if *the man* gets his way, you won't never get out of his system. Look around at your brothers." Joe swept his arm over

the inmates, none of whom concerned themselves with the three white guys. "We're all brothers in here!"

"You'll get out, soon as your daddy pays!" Dix laughed.

Andy had been surprised to see several chess boards painted onto the picnic tables that served the inmates for everything from dining to reclining. Andy was hesitant to play because he thought he might make enemies if he won all the time.

The prisoners adhered to all of the rules but played with the intensity of an underground boxing match or a cock-fight. The opponents would talk trash to each other incessantly and would invariably slam their players down with an exclamatory threat or boast.

One day, a big black man known as *the Brain* walked up and challenged Andy to a match. Andy would have chosen a nickname like *Bruiser* or *Killer* for the man who stood well over six feet tall and was missing most of his teeth. Poorly-healed knife wounds were apparent on his forearms and he had three teardrops tattooed under his left eye.

Andy had been feeling like he was losing his mind and wanted to get out of his head for a while, so he accepted the challenge.

"I got white! *You* try bein' black for a change, cracker." The crowd of coarse spectators laughed at the joke but Andy didn't want race to be an issue and said so. They laughed at him again and someone whispered something about the *cracker bein' a cop*.

"Bam! Take that, you stupid motha!" The Brain had opened the game by moving his queen's pawn out two squares. He jumped up and high-fived his crew as if he had just scored a touchdown. Andy calmly moved his knight.



"Boom, cracka! You done for now." He danced around like Andy had when the fire-ants had attacked him; he had advanced his pawn another square.

The game proceeded in that manner and the Brain enjoyed his bravado immensely. Andy was surprised to find himself losing to the behemoth who looked like an illiterate thug yet commanded a strategy that was superior to his own.

Andy lost the game and duly forfeit his bread to the Brain for the next two days. Losing a game of chess to a convict didn't improve Andy's self-confidence and he endured the taunts as he tried to go back to sleep on his bunk.

On the twentieth day of confinement, Andy was suddenly called for by the crooked door guard. Andy walked up and accepted the handcuffs and shackles, then they led him away. No one in the facility spoke as Andy wondered where he was going and if he would ever see Joe and Dix again. He would have liked to say farewell to the men who had kept him alive for three weeks.

Andy was led down a long hallway. At the end was a door. The deputy removed the cuffs and shackles, then said curtly, "You're free to go."

His father had succeeded! He was free! Andy was buzzed through the door and found his bag and guitar lying on the floor. He could get dressed and get out of the accursed building at last!

A clock on the wall read twelve-thirty. Andy was prepared for overly bright sunshine when he stepped outside but was instead greeted by the darkness of the witching hour.

The heavy gate was opened for him as he walked toward freedom then it closed with a heavy thud, leaving him in total darkness. He could tell that he was in an alley but had no idea where in the large

city the prison was. He considered checking the map but decided to get away from the prison first.

Once out on city streets, however, Andy felt very exposed. *Why did they let me out in the middle of the night?* He thought it was likely that he would be arrested again before he even knew where he was.

Andy found a small park with a playground for little children that sat across the street from what appeared to be an affluent college-bar. He climbed to the top of the plastic playhouse and lay down to wait the night out.

He could hear people his own age laughing, drinking and enjoying themselves and he had to admit that he was jealous of them. *They* were normal, whereas *he* was a terrified rabbit, hiding in a miserable hole and hoping the weasel didn't find him. It seemed that happiness was a thing that was going to be denied to him. Andy fought the bitter feelings down as a woman's laugh sounded above all others. He thought maybe it belonged to Lily.

Andy could not be accused of sleeping well that night and rose shortly before dawn. His plan was to go see Lily at the Voo Carre and convince her to fall in love with him. He walked the long blocks down Tulane then dog-legged over to Canal. He saw the Ralph-Trio Band and he waited for them to take a break.

"Hi fellas. Remember me?" He spoke without the confidence that he had demonstrated three weeks earlier.

"Shoot, hey y'all, it's Lucky!" Ralph yelled to the guys.

"Yeah, uh, maybe you shouldn't call me that." Andy said.

"What happened to you, man? The trumpet-player wheezed.

"How come you never came back?" The drummer asked while dancing his sticks across the skins.

"The cops locked me up that same night for playing guitar in the park. I just got out last night."

"Oh man, that's tough. They take you to OPP?" Ralph inquired. Andy thought the lilt in his voice sounded like a guitar riff.

"Yeah, Ward Four." Andy said and they all winced.

"Is Lily still working here?" He asked hopefully.

"Who?"

"I mean, Violet. Is she still here?"

"No way, man. She flew back home a week ago to start at some university."

Andy's spirits sank again as he realized the police had totally ruined the Big Easy for him. He didn't even try to get his job back, he just wanted out of New Orleans as fast as possible.

Andy looked like a homeless bum and was out of place among the French Quarter tourists. He decided to head back to the big bus terminal and try to figure out what to do next.

He walked the wrong way on St. Louis for many blocks without hardly looking up until he reached Basin Street and saw the St.-Louis Cemetery known as the *City of the Dead*.

The huge above-ground cemetery covered one whole city block. The crypts formed narrow, haphazard pathways that quickly disoriented the wanderer. Andy walked through the gate and saw the mold-stained tombs of politicians next to those of civil rights

workers and jazz musicians he had never heard of. He saw the ornate tomb of the famous voodoo priestess Marie Laveau, which was covered in graffiti that repeated a theme of XXX. Andy wondered what it meant. He strolled up and down the aisles until he felt sufficiently lost. Then he sat down on a low crypt and wept for half a minute.

“I was so close!” He growled through clenched teeth. Jail had been a bitter experience but the thought of seeing Lily when he got out had helped keep him going. Now that she was gone, he realized just how alone in the world he was and how much he hated New Orleans for betraying his ideal.

He took up his guitar, which he was grateful to be reunited with, and played Dylan's *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* to the spirits who hovered unseen around him.

He saw the single largest rat he had ever seen creep through a pathway beside him. It was the size of a mamma raccoon. Andy recalled the vague warning he had received in Texas, *Watch out for them old 'coons*, but he still didn't know what it meant.

He played through some of the songs he had written on the road and liked the way they were coming together. He felt they were connected, not only to himself, but to each other as well, as if they shared a common theme. The highway was beginning to influence his style of writing and he was glad to be writing something other than love songs for a change.

Andy had just packed up and moved a few aisles toward the gate when he came across a small group of men.

“What's in that case, boy?” One of the hoodlums asked.

“Play us a song, guitar man.” Another requested mockingly.

“How ‘bout you just *give* us that there guitar, boy.” Another demanded. Things were happening very quickly.

“Did you hear that, fellas? Guitar-boy here done gave that guitar of his to Tyrone. Wasn’t that nice of him?”

“No way! This was my dad’s guitar.” Andy began. Suddenly, one of the men who hadn’t yet spoken ran up to Andy, put an arm around his shoulder and turned him around. Andy was ready for a fight but held his tongue and walked a few paces with the guy to see what he wanted.

“You *got* to come with me.” He whispered.

“No, man! I don’t want to go anywhere.” Andy said and began resisting. The man’s thin, black face contrasted with his white eyes that were fairly bulging with emphasis. Andy thought for a moment and chose to continue with him. *One thief would be easier to fight than a whole group of them.*

“Where you goin’, Jimmy?” One of the group called after them.

“Where you taking that guitar, Jimmy?” There was an implicit threat in the villain’s tone.

Andy thought of the moment when *Long John Silver’s* crew had been on the verge of mutiny because of little *Jim*, and it struck Andy that Jimmy might be risking a lot to save Andy, too. He surely wasn’t making any friends out of the group of cutthroats by helping their quarry escape.

“Don’t say nothin’. Just get ready to run.” Jimmy hissed nervously.

Andy was far from convinced that Jimmy didn’t have a sinister plan of his own but continued to play along anyway. They zig-

zagged around crypts and eventually found an exit. Andy knew they were both relieved to find it unguarded, yet Jimmy still made Andy move quickly. They walked a block down Basin Street then halted at a bus stop.

“When the bus comes, you pay the man.” Jimmy instructed.

Andy reached into his pockets and found a few bills and coins.

“Okay, but you gotta tell me what’s going on.” Andy said firmly.

“I’m savin’ your *ass*, son, that’s what’s goin’ on! Didn’t you know we was about to rob you?”

“It looked a little that way.” Andy admitted coolly.

“They would’ve cut your throat and had that guitar turned into crack before anyone even went lookin’ for your cracker-ass body!”

Andy shivered a little, he didn’t think it had been that close.

“Where are you goin’ anyway, Guitar Man?”

“Orlando, Florida.” Andy decided then and there to visit his cousin if he could escape New Orleans alive.

Jimmy appeared dumbfounded for a moment but the bus arrived noisily and he sprang back to his nervous self once again as he boarded. Andy didn’t care for Jimmy’s paranoia but endured it patiently as he looked over his shoulder every few seconds.

“What are you really doin’ up here? You want crack, right?” Jimmy asked in a low voice.

“No, I’m gonna catch a ride east on Interstate 20 and get outta here. This city has just about chewed me up.” Andy said honestly.

“You ain’t got no bus money? You could pawn that guitar of yours real quick. I’ll take you over to Johnny’s on Dauphine and we’ll split the money.” Jimmy spoke convincingly but Andy didn’t like the offer as much as Jimmy had hoped.

“No way, man. I have to keep this guitar. It’s like my *friend*, you know?” Andy asserted.

Jimmy *didn’t* know what Andy was talking about. He had been raised in the city and had become a low-down weasel through the slow, painful mentorship of the heartless city. He had probably never known a true friend. Andy remembered how his buddies Eric, Lars and Tony had saved him at the dam and knew that he was lucky to have them.

“Man, I can fix you up. Oh, lawd, I can give you what you need and you don’t even know it.” It was Andy’s turn for confusion but Jimmy changed the subject quickly.

“So tell me your story, guitar man. We got an hour ‘til we get down to the Quarter.” Andy gave Jimmy a condensed but very candid account of his travels. Jimmy listened but refused to believe Andy’s intentions were as pure as he said.

“You a cop? Undercover maybe?” Jimmy asked.

“No man, just a hobo.”

“You *is* crooked though.” Jimmy said the words slyly, as if they both knew the same dirty secret.

“I smoke weed, that’s as crooked as I get.”

“Shoot, you ain’t no *gangsta*, I can see that.”

“Not even close.” Andy agreed and hoped Jimmy was beginning to believe him.

“I can give you what you need, man. The question I got to ask you is, what you got for me!” Unless Jimmy made a point to whisper, everything he said was an exclamation.

“I’m not sure what you mean. How can you have what I need?” Andy didn’t even know what he needed and it seemed unlikely that Jimmy did.

“I got me a ticket, man! I was gonna use it myself, though. Get the hell out of New Orleans for good.”

“*You* should use it.”

“I know! I shoulda been gone a long time ago, but here’s me with a ticket and here you is needin’ one. Well, it’s got me to thinking.”

“What ticket?” Andy asked still unsure of Jimmy’s great secret.

“I got me a train ticket, right here, going to Orlando, Florida!” He jumped up and lunged at Andy. “Gimme sixty dollars and it’s yours.” Andy didn’t believe Jimmy was anything but a swindler and didn’t feel it was prudent to get his hopes up.

“I don’t have sixty bucks. You should use it. Get outta this city.” Andy suggested again.

“Bah!” Jimmy turned away in disgust. “What else you got?”

Andy knew better than to reveal his possessions to *street-friends* too readily but he really didn’t have much to hide. He offered the Sony Walkman and the Rambo knife.



“What’s a Rambo knife?”

“It’s the big old eight inch survival knife that Stallone used in the movie. The handle has a compass, fish hooks, matchsticks-”

“Yeah, yeah, let’s see the walkman.”

Andy pulled the walkman cassette player out of his duffel bag while Jimmy looked greedily over his shoulder as if hoping to catch a glimpse of the gold and jewels he was sure Andy had hidden inside.

“There might be some dead Texas fire-ants in it, but it still works.” Andy handed Jimmy the headphones and pressed play. Bob Dylan’s high-pitched harmonica solo from *Hard Rain’s a’Gonna Fall* blared out of them.

Jimmy’s eyes bugged out. “I ain’t never heard no harmonica sound like that! It hurts my damn ears!” He exclaimed and threw the headphones at Andy.

“That’s straight harp. It can get a bit shrill if you’re not careful.” Andy said. “At least you know the walkman works.”

“Yeah, well, this ticket I got is worth eighty bucks or more. Let’s go pawn your guitar and get you on the road!” Jimmy was a tireless salesman.

Jimmy painted a vivid picture of Andy riding comfortably to Orlando in twelve short hours, smoking cigars and laying the concubines. As alluring as Jimmy made it sound, Andy wouldn’t even talk about the guitar anymore and finally grew exasperated.

“Man, if you saved my life back there, then thank you! Take ‘em both right now.” Andy was relieved to speak his mind for a change even if it was only to give away his gear.

“I ain’t gonna just take your stuff. You know, most days I woulda been right there with them others. I woulda helped ‘em jack you and stayed high as a kite all day.” Andy wondered at the intense strife that visibly waged within Jimmy’s conscience.

“But you looked *different*, man. Like you wasn’t white, you wasn’t black, you was like an angel in disguise!”

Andy didn’t feel like an angel at all and so he laughed reflexively. *Imagine anyone mistaking me for angel when I’m making my own work overtime!*

“I’m serious as death, man! You know what? I’m gonna *give* you that ticket and God’s gonna love me again!” Jimmy hooted and hollered then danced a softshoe inside the crowded bus, clearly elated in the belief that his salvation was at hand. Andy considered arguing with him but decided to observe Jimmy’s wild antics without comment.

The bus stopped at N.O. Union Passenger Terminal, the same big, ugly station that Andy had found on his first day in New Orleans. He found himself wishing he had just kept going right on past the unlucky city.

“Let’s see that ticket of yours. Are you sure it hasn’t expired?” Andy asked.

Jimmy frowned because he didn’t really know. They took the ticket to the counter where the clerk verified it as a one-way to Orlando, Florida on the Gulf-liner anytime through December.

“Thank you!” Jimmy said as if he had won the lottery. Only after the clerk had verified the ticket did Andy begin to get excited. A train ride sure would be a nice way to end the trip. It was truly a rare coincidence, or blessing, for Andy to be rescued by a

crackhead like Jimmy who had a ticket and a change of heart all in the same night.

Jimmy pressed Andy for the Rambo knife, a harmonica, a dollar-fifty in coins and the walkman but only took the two Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf tapes, saying "Y'all can keep them ones with the crazy white-boy harp on 'em. My ears still hurt!" When he was convinced that was all he was going to get out of Andy, Jimmy's mood became hardened again. Andy thought it was like watching *Gollum* wrestle with his conscience over the *precious*.

"You gonna take my ticket? You wanna take my salvation away from me?" Jimmy said growing angry. "Maybe I should just keep it and take that guitar, too!"

"I don't want to take your salvation! This has all been your idea, man, I'm cool either way. I already said you could have the stuff anyway." Andy was embarrassed for his outburst so he said, "You should *use* the ticket, Jimmy. Get out of here. This city's no good."

"Don't I know it." Jimmy scoffed and shook his head sadly.

"I'm gonna thumb it out of here. You want to go with me or use your ticket? I'll catch you in Orlando in a week." Andy said cheerfully. Jimmy thought about it for a while before taking off his hat like a coach after the losing game was finally over.

"You know, I haven't even *heard* from my conscience in a whole mess a' years. You know what I'm sayin'? When you come along, boy, I just knew I *got* to help you. Even though I got to go down myself."

Andy's heart felt like it started to bleed. "You don't have to go down, Jimmy. Use the ticket. Get on the bus." Andy calmly pleaded.

“Why ain’t you tryin’ to hustle me, man? What is your angle? I just don’t get you.”

“I’ve told you the truth, Jimmy. This is just who I am. I don’t see color, I don’t hustle, cheat or steal. I’m just a dirty-driftin’-dreamer-dude who’s a long way from home.”

Jimmy grew penitent as he realized that he didn’t want to lose his chance to perform the one truly selfless act that he believed would buy his forgiveness. Andy was curious if the sacrificial act might induce a monumental change in Jimmy’s life simply because he believed it would. *Maybe that was how faith and fate were tied together*, he thought.

“Here you go, Andy.” Jimmy held the ticket out to him.

“Are you sure, Jimmy? I’d rather you use it to get outta here.”

“Take it, man. I ain’t never leavin’ this city. You sure you ain’t got nothin’ else?”

“Wanna share my last cigarette?” Andy offered as he took the ticket. He felt like Charlie when he discovered the golden ticket in his Willy Wonka chocolate bar. Jimmy brightened up while they smoked.

“You know, what guitar man? I’m gonna make a new start. I can get my act together, get myself off the streets and into one of those free shelters. Maybe get to school, too.”

“Yeah, man, that’s it. Get a decent job and a perfect wife and you’re set!” Andy said, sharing his optimism but projecting his own desires on the born-again hustler.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’ll be Jimmy the insurance man or Jimmy the banker!”

“Or Jimmy the grocer, baker or cook.” Andy added more realistically. He perceived a clarity overtake Jimmy’s paranoid eyes. Perhaps his selfless deed really would prove to be his own salvation.

“Thanks a lot, Jimmy. I’ll never forget this.”

“Yeah, yeah. Well you tell God, or the FBI or whoever it is you are *really* workin’ for, to forget all them other bad things I done and remember this one.” He was whistling *Dixie* as he walked off into the Louisiana night to start his new life, free from the burden of guilt for the first time in a lot of years.

Andy felt very lucky but equally selfish as he boarded the Gulf-liner. The unlikely friends exchanged waves of farewell through the window. Andy knew that a small miracle had occurred between them and his heart was at peace with the Big Easy.

He thought Jimmy and Joe had been more like guardian angels to him than he had been to them but realized that his own presence had provided them with the chance to do something good for someone else. Maybe they *all* had been used by God, like chess pieces, as His angels for a little while. Andy laughed at the complex irony of it all as he fell asleep.

## Part 5 - Florida

Andy slept on the luxurious Gulf-liner through stops in Biloxi, Mississippi and Mobile, Alabama but awoke before reaching Tallahassee in the Florida panhandle. Andy felt amazed at the luxury of travelling by rail and had slept more soundly than he had since his Aunt Lee's house in Texas.

Orlando looked far more modern and friendly than New Orleans but he was dismayed that there seemed to be pavement for miles in every direction like Los Angeles and every other big city he knew. Andy placed a collect call to his cousin's house.

"Hello?"

"This is a collect call from *Hi Billy, it's Andy!*" Billy pressed one right away.

"Hello?" Billy repeated. Andy wondered why the connection was always so poor on collect calls.

"Hey Billy, it's Andy! I'm at the Orlando Bus depot. Can you pick me up?"

His cousin Billy was born only two weeks after Andy and they had spent much of their childhood together before Billy's had folks moved to Florida. Billy was a natural ladies' man and a hard worker but Andy knew that his parents were very hard on him and it affected his confidence.

"Wow! Sure, I can be there in an hour." Billy said.

"Thanks, cuz. What kind of car are you drivin'?"

"I have my parents' old van, remember the silver and red Chevy?"

“Yeah I do! I’ll look for you in about an hour. I’ll probably be the only longhair-hippie-dude with a guitar so I’m sure you’ll spot me.” Andy said.

“You have long hair? My folks might give you some trouble about that.” Billy said gravely. “I’ll see you in an hour.” They hung up.

Andy knew that his aunt and uncle were Super-Christians and could be very judgmental, but he planned to be so polite and useful to them that it would all be fine. Andy found the offramp that his cousin would be most likely to use and made himself visible. Seventy minutes later, Andy recognized his cousin’s van and flagged him down.

“Hey Andy! Good to see you!” Billy called out joyfully.

“You too, Billy! Thanks for comin’ to get me.” Andy told his story on the drive to Cocoa where his family lived.

“Wow, man. I can’t believe you hitchhiked all the way out here! I’m sorry to hear about the bad luck in New Orleans, though.” Billy said. Andy had hoped to keep it a secret and was stunned to learn that everyone knew that he was a criminal.

“That’s ok, now that it’s over.” Andy lied then tried to think of something positive to say. “What kind of work can we get out here?” Andy asked. His father had taught him that he wasn’t worth feeding or housing if he couldn’t pay his way, so that’s what Andy planned to do.

“I’ve been thinking about gardening. Mom and Dad bought a riding mower, so we could at least mow and edge people’s lawns. They grow really fast out here.”

Andy's father had once owned a landscape and gardening business with Billy's father and they had taught the boys to mow, weed and edge as soon as they could handle the equipment. Andy looked around at the tall, verdant grasses that dominated most of the front lawns and saw the opportunity.

"Do you like chess?" Andy asked.

"Love it!"

"How 'bout we call it Checkmate Lawncare, or something like that?" Andy suggested.

"Ooh, that's perfect! We'll be intellectual laborers." They both liked the sound of that.

As they neared the small town of Cocoa, Florida, Andy saw alligators lurking in the deep ditches that paralleled the roads. "There are gators where there should be sidewalks!" He spouted out.

"Look at them snappers, Ralph." Billy said quoting the movie *Romancing the Stone*. Then he grew serious. "They'll get you too, so no sleepin' on the ground outside. Ok, you crazy hippie?"

"Ok, ok!" Andy laughed. "Do you think your parents will be cool with me staying with you?" He was nervous because if the gators prohibited him from sleeping on the road, then he would have to avoid getting kicked out of the house at all costs.

"Well, they heard about New Orleans of course, and something about you breakin' out of jail a while ago?" Billy said without much hope. They both knew that his parents *weren't* cool with Andy's arrival.



“It was just a rehab my dad threw me in.” Andy pulled the lucky harp from his pocket. “So they think I’m a bad guy, huh?” He said with sad resignation. “I don’t feel like a bad guy.” Then he played the sad *Tom Dooley* by the Kingston Trio, which had been the number one single in America in 1959.

“You’re *not* a bad guy, Andy! You know how they are.” Andy wondered why his cousin chose to put up with so much from his parents. *It’s probably so they don’t kick him out to get eaten by alligators*, Andy thought.

“Well then, I just won’t do anything wrong.” Andy said with conviction, feeling his heart gain strength with the naive resolution.

“That’s the spirit! We will have to go to church on Sundays. All day.” Billy warned.

“All day?” Andy was a little scared of church and of its pious elders.

“Yeah. After the service we have bible study and then we have to mow the church grounds for free.”

“Ok, I can do that.” Andy wasn’t motivated by money and had no qualms about working for free. He just wanted enough to earn his keep so he could live like a man.

Not surprisingly for two young men, the conversation soon turned to girls. “Do you have a girlfriend?” Billy asked. Andy thought first of Lily but then remembered that he and Melinda had grown apart but they hadn’t officially broken up. She had been enamored with the idea of his iconic road trip and had promised to wait for him. Andy hadn’t asked her to and wasn’t holding his breath either.

“No, not anymore.” He said. “I’m as free as a bird now.” His thoughts matched the forthcoming lyrics as the first burning notes of the Lynyrd Skynyrd song came on the van’s stereo. The two cousins sang it together as they turned onto the street where Billy lived.

The house stood in the center of a lot that was very large by California standards. Andy could understand why they had bought the riding mower as he gazed upon several acres of emerald grass. Andy was struck by the futility of life; of growing up only to be cut down. He hoped to accomplish more with his own life but wasn't sure how.

“Is that a treehouse over the pond?” Andy asked excitedly.

“Yeah, it was here when we moved in. I used to use it but it’s kind of boring now.” Billy explained.

It was a fairly elaborate fort with three walls and a flat roof. A large marine rope provided the only method of ingress or egress so Andy felt he would be relatively safe inside from adults who could rarely lift their own weight. The missing wall opened out to the pond in such a way as to encourage diving. Andy loved the treehouse immediately and wanted to live in it.

They strode up to the front door and were greeted coolly by his aunt and uncle.

“Hi Aunt Sara Sue and Uncle Bob!” Andy said enthusiastically.

“Hello Andy.” They seemed to say in a monotone uniformity that reminded Andy of the automatons in the *iRobot* stories by Isaac Asimov.

They soon sat down to lunch and grace was concluded by Andy's Uncle Bob. "And Lord, please help Andy find his way out of the devil's darkness and into the holy light of Jesus."

Andy didn't feel like he was standing in the devil's darkness at all but he said Amen anyway. He wondered what would happen if he told them that *Amen* was part of the ancient name for the Egyptian sun god, *Amen-Ra*. He thought of the alligators waiting for him on the road and wisely said nothing controversial during lunch.

The next day, both cousins sat in the treehouse and planned their business, *Checkmate Lawn care*. They agonized over a black checkerboard logo with a yellow background and printed a few dozen flyers at the local print shop. They spent the day driving around the small town and placing flyers on the houses that appeared to need their services the most.

They began to receive telephone calls that very day and, therefore, had to obtain permission to use the lawn equipment that belonged to Billy's folks. This was procured, eventually, but Andy was not very pleased with the terms of the deal. "They get half of everything?" He cried out when they were alone. "After we pay the gas we'll be working for peanuts!"

"It's better than no work at all." Billy said without sounding very optimistic. He was disappointed but unsurprised by his parents. "They're always like that." He apologized. Billy's folks had never made the mistake of allowing their boy to feel too good about himself.

"That ain't right, Billy." Andy said gravely.

The two young men worked hard the next week and paid the rental fee dutifully. Friday night came and the boys went into town, which held few attractions for young people and, consequently, was nearly deserted.

They stopped outside of a grocery store. Billy waited in the van while Andy spoke to some guys who were standing around out front. Twenty minutes later, Andy came back to the van with a fifth of Jim Beam in a paper bag.

“Oh man, what is that?” Billy asked in a fearful voice.

“This, my dear cousin, is Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey.” Andy replied triumphantly.

“How’d you get it?” Billy asked incredulously. The drinking age in Florida was twenty-one.

“I paid a guy ten bucks extra to score it for us.” Andy had learned the trick from Tony and had tried it successfully at different liquor stores around the Ojai Valley.

“Oh, wow, I don’t know Andy.” Billy was hesitant but drove back to the treehouse after stopping to pick up his friend Jason along the way. Jason was the kind of guy who went with the flow. He would one day become a politician or a salesman and didn’t seem to have strong opinions about anything.

They drank the whiskey in the treehouse until well after dark. Whiskey is a strong drink at that age and they grew drunk very quickly.

“Andy, I have a surprise for you.” Billy said mischievously.

“What is it?”

“There’s a girl I know who wants to meet you. She’s cute, too.” Andy wondered what the girl had heard about him and what her impression of him might be. Based on his reputation as a criminal, Andy didn’t think it could be too good, but he remembered that some girls liked bad guys and she might see him as irresistibly romantic.

Andy was immediately interested but Jason exhibited a greater amount of curiosity. “Who is it, Billy? I must know her, who is it?”

“It’s Veronica.” Billy finally told them. Jason looked shocked.

“And you say she’s cute? What’s her personality like, then?” Andy inquired but knew that he would welcome a fling with the unknown girl regardless of her personality. *After all*, he thought, *I just got out of jail*.

“She’s ok.”

“She *is* hot, though.” Jason encouraged though he was obviously jealous. For all Andy knew, Jason may have had a crush on the girl since the fifth grade. Andy thought of Lily and wished that he had gone after *her* from day one so that his first girlfriend would also have been his last.

“She wants to meet you on the road tonight at midnight.” Billy said, pleased at the way the surprise was working out.

“We can walk there? Then let’s go!” Andy stood up and walked to the open edge of the treehouse. He threw his clothes down on the side of the pond below and jumped headfirst into the stagnant water. Neither of his buddies followed his example because they remembered the alligators.

Andy retrieved his clothes and got dressed. He was feeling young, drunk and unstoppable. The young men strolled down the empty country road shoving and teasing each other.

“I think I see a gator!” Andy said.

“They won’t get too close, not with three of us.” Billy said as Andy shivered. He did not want to get eaten by an alligator on his way to a romantic midnight rendezvous.

*Pop!* Suddenly Andy felt his kneecap catch fire but couldn’t tell what had happened.

*Pop! Pop!* Andy felt a BB appear underneath the skin just below his knee cap.

“Someone’s shooting at us!” Billy cried out in terror.

Panic seized the three boys and they performed comical gestures in their effort to evade the unseen sniper. BBs whizzed around them as they zig-zagged up the road and away from the rendezvous, which had been all but forgotten in the terror of the ambush.

They ran breathlessly back to the treehouse, now laughing at their cowardice.

“I bet you it was Drake!” Jason guessed.

“Yeah,” Billy agreed. “He’s the only one I can think of who’s crazy enough to shoot at us.”

“Who’s Drake?” Andy asked. He was ready to be angry if they knew that the mystery girl had a boyfriend.

“Her older brother. He’s twenty-three. He was kicked out of the army for bein’ a jackass.”

“And he’s a little overprotective of his baby sister. Sorry Andy, I didn’t know he would be waiting for us. Veronica must have told somebody and he got wind of it. He sure knew we were coming.”

“Damn!” Once again Andy thought about how the night *could* have gone and became withdrawn and moody. One downer in a small group of drinkers was sufficient to bring them all down. Soon, Jason stumbled home and Billy fell asleep in the treehouse.

Andy swam naked in the pond and tried not to think about snapping turtles or alligators. He remembered the time Melinda and several of her friends had caught him skinny dipping in one of their pools when he thought they had gone for the summer. He found himself hoping that Veronica would come to Billy's house to look for him.

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The hard-working young men had planned to sleep-in late on Saturday morning but were awakened by Billy's father who was evidently incensed at them for something.

“Billy! Andy! Get your asses down here now!” The ex-marine bellowed. The boys complied in a state of confusion and fear of the big man.

“Jason's mother just called. She found her son crying on her doorstep at four in the morning, drunk as a skunk! When she helped him stand up, he threw up all over her.”

The boys laughed reflexively when they should have held their tongues.

“Where did you get the booze.” Andy's uncle demanded of him, correctly assuming that his own son hadn't been the instigator.

“I paid a guy to buy it for me.” Andy answered truthfully.

“That's it! Billy, get in the house! Andy, you're not welcome in our house or anywhere near my family. Wait here.”

Andy heard a big family fight ensuing indoors and wondered why it was all happening. He heard his aunt and uncle condemning Andy and Billy to an eternity in hell for their vile transgression. Andy didn't think that was fair because *they* hadn't thrown up on anybody. He thought about John in Phoenix and his family in Denton who had offered alcohol to Andy. *What's the big deal?* he thought.

Uncle Bob returned shortly. "I knew you were going to be trouble so I bought this ticket the day you arrived. Your father will have to reimburse me for it."

He threw a Greyhound bus ticket and a five dollar bill on the ground between them. "And that's for food on the way." Andy looked up at his uncle bewildered but said nothing. Andy wished that he hadn't spent all of his week's earnings on the bottle.

"Now get in the van." Andy grabbed his guitar and duffel bag before complying with the order. He knew that he wouldn't be coming back.

One hour later, the van idled at the bus station in Orlando. "You're a lost, dirty sinner, boy." Uncle Bob said without looking at his nephew. "Get out."

Andy stepped out of the van with his gear and wept quietly after his uncle had driven away. Crickets chirped all around him but he could hear nothing but a rushing sound in his head. He tried to play one of his songs but the poetry and the music seemed rank and stale. He hoped they hadn't died in his heart forever.

He felt forsaken and ostracized. Once again, he had been judged unfit and unworthy, but once again he struggled metaphorically to his feet and tried to believe that he was not wholly worthy of the harsh punishment that seemed to follow him around.



He still wanted to feel like one of the good guys but didn't know whether he deserved the title anymore. *Maybe I really am just a low-down, dirty sinner*, he thought sadly, though he knew in his heart that he wasn't.

## Part 6 - New England

Andy didn't feel like he could just get on the bus and go home. The Greyhound would take over three days and he was practically penniless and out of cigarettes. He also didn't think that *home* would be any better. Then he thought of the couple with the Rottweilers who had picked him up in West Texas. He thought, too, of the strange Englishman named Bud who had recommended Manchester, New Hampshire over Manchester, Great Britain.

He walked into the station and up to a clerk. "Excuse me, Ma'am. Can I change the destination of this ticket?"

"As long as it's for the same number of miles or less." She answered routinely then looked at his ticket to California. "Yours is good for just about anywhere but I can't give you a refund if you take a shorter trip. Where do you want to go?"

Andy grew excited again. "Manchester, New Hampshire please."

He loitered around the seedy bus station impatiently. He didn't want to talk to anyone and avoided their eyes. The bus rattled into the station, its engine idling loudly and echoing off the greasy concrete walls.

Andy sighed once again over what Florida *could* have been for him as he boarded the bus and waited to begin the long trip north. In his mind, he repeated the same question, *why can't I get along without trouble?* Andy still wanted to believe that only bad guys got in trouble.

Andy saw nothing of Georgia or South Carolina as he slept but dreamed that he was a rabbit, running desperately from enormous weasels who wore the faces of his aunt, uncle, mom and dad. A big, black and white bear wearing sunglasses and a drill-sergeant hat blocked his every exit.

He finally gave up and quit running. His rabbit-self rose onto its hind legs and spread its arms out like Jesus on the cross. He let the weasels gorge themselves on his body and found that his heart and brain were all that remained of him when they were finished. Perhaps that was all he needed.

Andy woke sweating and found himself apologizing to the woman sitting on the seat next to him for touching her foot when he awoke.

“You’ve been sleeping all day.” The black woman next to him said with a frown.

“I’m sorry. That’s kind of embarrassing.” He said sheepishly.

The woman smiled more warmly and asked, “And who is Lily?”

“Oh wow. I didn’t know I talked in my sleep, too. Aren’t you glad you sat next to me?”

“Mm-huh.” She refused the rhetoric and waited for him to answer her question.

“She’s a girl I know from back home. I saw her in New Orleans but we didn’t get a chance to talk.”

“So you’re goin’ home now to find her?”

Andy swallowed the lump in his throat. The woman's guess sounded like good advice to him but he knew that he couldn’t go home yet. He answered, “No, Ma’am. I’m going to ramble up north for a while yet.”

She scoffed and scolded him a little harshly for a stranger on a bus, which led Andy to surmise that there was someone in her own life who she wished would quit ramblin' and come home to her. "What's bummin' around on this bus gonna do for you that a good woman can't? You should get your butt back home to her before she meets a real man." Andy remembered himself as a rabbit in his dream and closed his eyes. He couldn't even provide himself with food and knew that he had little to offer her or anybody else. At eighteen years old, Andy began to feel beaten already.

The woman was gone when he awoke. The bus was navigating through the streets of a strange city the way it did when there was going to be a transfer. Andy noticed that bus stations were always located in the old historic downtown area in the middle of the city. They also tended to be the center of high-crime neighborhoods. Andy wondered if it was coincidence or if the often forgotten old town and its low-rent districts attracted and perpetuated crime.

Andy transferred his bag to the new bus bound for Virginia Beach, Virginia and Wilmington, Delaware. Desperate-looking men lurked in the shadows as Andy strolled around the neighborhood that bordered the station. He thought that his guitar grew hot in his hand from the many greedy eyes that seemed to be staring at it but the feeling could have been caused by his own blood pressure. He gave up looking for a place to play and got back on the bus.

Virginia Beach looked like a fun place to live but Andy decided to stay on the bus and he continued up to Maryland and Delaware.

His uncle had given Andy only five dollars to support himself on the four day journey back to California and he had already spent the pittance on cigarettes. He was hungry and out of smokes for the first time on the trip and he wasn't happy about it.

There was a six-hour layover in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania so Andy decided to do something drastic. He decided that he was

going to play for tips like a street-performer. He claimed his guitar from the baggage guy and walked downtown.

He stopped at the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, which evoked memories of elementary school book reports and classroom discussions about patriotism. Andy had tried to be the class-clown while Lily had been the smartypants. Andy could still remember the way her voice sounded as she cut down clowns like him with her superior wit.

Andy found that he couldn't even name *one* band from Philly and he thought that was strange. The buildings were so beautiful that Andy guessed the city was more interested in architecture than music. He also knew Philadelphia was the seat of early American politics and felt duly awed at the grandiose history around him.

Andy tuned his guitar and began hoping that some of the tourists would throw quarters into his open guitar case. He wanted to play something appropriately patriotic but realized that he didn't know very many patriotic songs. *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* wasn't appropriate because it was a civil war song. Andy knew *The Patriot Game* but it was cynical *and* Irish so it didn't work either.

Andy finally settled on *Eye of the Tiger* by Survivor because at least the movie *Rocky* had been set in Philly. He was playing it energetically with a spirited harmonica accompaniment when a young boy walked up and dropped a dollar bill into his guitar case.

"Thanks, little man!" Andy said to the boy then looked up to see a woman watching them.

"Thanks, Ma'am." He said and tipped his hat. She nodded but didn't say anything. He played Tom Paxton's *Going to the Zoo* and the boy caught the melody right away. He sang along and

soon Andy observed other children pulling their parents toward him. They actually wanted to hear him play!

Dollars and quarters fell into Andy's case as he entertained people for the first time in his life. He played the melancholy *Puff the Magic Dragon* then contrasted it with the spirited ballad of *John Henry*, the steel-drivin' man. He slowed down again to close with *Kumbaya* as his final tune. He wanted to quit while he was ahead and also didn't want to miss his bus. The crowd sang it with feeling then dispersed a bit solemnly as he put his guitar away.

It had only been a few moments in time but they had served to invigorate the boy's soul. He had felt the immaculate kindness emanating from the crowd and it had given him a sense of belonging that he realized was rare in life. He thought it was ironic that he had assumed Philly wasn't into music but they had paid him well in more ways than one.

Andy bought a loaf of wheat bread and three packs of cheap tobacco with the tips he had earned busking then found his way back to the bus station with thirty minutes to spare.

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The bus turned north just before the Benjamin Franklin Bridge and he caught glimpses of the Delaware River. He found himself thrilled to be in the original thirteen colonies and once again thought of Lily in fifth grade. She had always behaved in a way that he respected and he wondered again why he hadn't tried to date her before. He realized that his girlfriends tended to choose him rather than the other way around and considered that Lily was probably as shy as he was.

He remembered that she had worn different clothes than all the other girls. In 1983 it had been spandex and big hair but he recalled Lily wearing denim skirts and peasant tops. He knew that

he was in danger of falling in love with the *idea* of her, but the more he thought about her, the more she fit his *ideal*.

Andy had been on one Greyhound bus or another for the greater part of three days but his eyes were still glued out the windows at the countryside. His nostalgia-bone tingled as he passed the picturesque farms of Pennsylvania and the simple, hardworking values they seemed to imply. Growing up in suburbs, Andy had not been exposed to that type of work ethic and he wondered if he could ever learn to enjoy that kind of hard work.

The bus crossed the Delaware River into New Jersey then turned north after an ugly network of highways onto the 295. The New Jersey turnpike took him first to Newark then to Jersey City. Andy thought of Tom Waits' cover of Springsteen's *Jersey Girl* and caught a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty just before the bus rumbled into the Holland Tunnel toward Manhattan.

The bus navigated the empty streets of the Big Apple at four o'clock in the morning, affording Andy the chance to glimpse the city while she slept. He could not reconcile the impossible heights the mad builders had attained. The closed-in atmosphere they caused aroused a feeling of being cornered, trapped by the city itself. Andy knew that he could never live there, although he thought he would have liked to check out the poetry and music scenes in Greenwich Village.

He had read some of the books about *the village* and its legendary venues like the Gaslight Cafe, Gerde's Folk City and Cafe Wha? He thought the virtually unknown Dave van Ronk was about the coolest, hardest-working of the hipsters on that scene, though the already-famous Joan Baez was a close second. The whole scene had always seemed so romantic to him.

The bus found I-95 in the Bronx and turned onto the Northeast Thruway. Fall was blooming across all of New England but

Connecticut was the first to truly exceed Andy's imagination. The trees were turning their fabulous fall hues spanning reds and plums to yellows paled nearly white.

At New Haven, Connecticut, Andy changed buses for Hartford. The stark, whitewashed city struck Andy as the epitome of the regal white businessman in all his power and pomp. Everything was so clean and orderly that it looked like no one so much as spat on the street. Andy was certain that he would be arrested if he lingered there for any length of time.

The bus took Interstate-84 northeast into Boston, Massachusetts where the bus pulled into the busy station. Andy transferred onto what he hoped would be his last bus ride for a long time. It rolled slowly on the smaller highway. Tall, narrow walls of pine, maple and sycamore trees encroached upon the pavement from the narrow shoulder.

Andy knew that his friends lived in the small town called Weare that was northwest of Manchester. He wondered if he should call to warn them that he was coming but decided to leave it up to chance. *If they get weird about me showing up, then I'll just split.*

He got the chills for some unknown reason as they passed Lowell, Massachusetts but they subsided as the bus turned northwest toward Manchester, New Hampshire. Andy wondered what might have happened in Lowell to give him the creeps like that.

Andy had struggled to comprehend many strange accents in his travels. The Texans' drwal had been relatively easy to understand but the New Orleans dialect had hardly sounded like English at all. In New England, Andy noticed the tendency to pronounce the letter R as an Ah. He heard people utter statements like *my cah broke down* or questions like *how much fahthah to Woostah?* Andy found it a lot of fun to imitate them.



Andy realized that he had just travelled thirteen hundred miles north because he had felt a vague camaraderie with a pair of stoner-accountant-metalheads. He hoped that his instincts were not wrong as he stepped off the bus in the biggest town in the small state of New Hampshire.

There was no one in sight once the bus continued northward to the capital city of Concord without him. There were no all-night ticket windows at the humble bus station either, but there were plenty of shadows where Andy could hide until morning.

He didn't realize that he had already begun to think in terms of skulking among the shadows like a criminal. He didn't realize that he was turning into something he was not meant to become. He averted his eyes from his fellow human beings whenever possible. He felt hunted and guilty for simply existing. Andy couldn't hear the devil laughing as he was slowly becoming the frightened rabbit of his dream, like poor Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

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The ground was far colder at night in New Hampshire than it had been in Louisiana, so Andy wore all the clothes that he possessed. He wore three t-shirts and a flannel Pendleton. He had long-john underwear and two pairs of Levi's, four socks and his shoes. *This sure doesn't feel like September back home*, he thought as he tried to sleep.

Andy gave up trying to sleep about an hour before sunrise. He rose to look around the smallest big city he had ever seen. He walked up the downtown section in five minutes and hadn't even finished his first cigarette when he found the small onramp for the 114 to Weare. Instead of hitchhiking west to Weare, he decided to wait on the offramp for a black Dodge Ram with Metallica license plates.

Andy treated himself to the luxury of a coffee across the street and was stricken by the quaintness of the couches and decorations. The coffee shop was called *Perk Up!* and had posters advertising folk-duos and open-mic nights. Andy didn't ask questions or take any flyers but he remembered the name of the place for later.

Andrew was on his way to work like any other day when he noticed a guy playing guitar on the offramp and grinned broadly. He was surprised to see Andy on the freeway exit, apparently waiting for him. He pulled over while Andy was immersed in a mean rendition of Gershwin's *Summertime* and hadn't heard him drive up.

Andrew took the advantage of surprise. "Freeze! You're under arrest!"

Andy froze and thought of New Orleans. He looked up to see Andrew smiling down at him and knew immediately that he had made the right decision in coming to New Hampshire.

"Hey Andrew!" Andy cried out.

"Yo, dude! It's good to see you." Andrew said in his tough but honest Philly accent. Andy had learned that Andrew could sound like he was about to beat you up when he said anything in the accent Andy had dubbed *thugsspeak*. Andrew was the kind of guy who couldn't lie to you or maneuver behind your back and was a far cry from the often shallow and superficial personalities that California tended to nurture.

Andy smiled as he recognized the cab of the truck that had carried him in Texas.

"Dude, listen. I can ask for the day off so we can hang out but I gotta make an appearance first." Andrew said as he pulled into a

nearby parking lot reserved for employees of Slate and Drexler, Inc.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I can wait ‘til you get off work.” Andy said but thought it would be perfect if Andrew could swing it without any trouble. Andy had come to fear trouble like children fear the bogeyman.

Andrew dropped a twenty dollar bill on the seat. Go get whatever you want and I’ll be back in,” he estimated the time, “in probably no more than ninety minutes.” Then he straightened his tie and went to work.

Andy was stricken with admiration for his friend who had also left Andy the keys to the car in case it rained. *My dad would have made me grovel for twenty bucks and never would have left me his keys.* He laughed at first but found himself soon reflecting that his dad had just paid one hundred times that much to bail him out of jail. *Sorry, Dad, I take it back,* he said to himself shamefully.

Andy determined not to abuse his friend’s generosity or trust. He would have liked to give the money back but was almost out of cigarettes again. In Texas, Andy had observed the husband and wife to smoke only one or two cigarettes just after a joint. They weren’t the two-pack-a-day smokers that Andy was. It would be ridiculous for him to bum that many of their expensive Quebecois cigarettes everyday so Andy used the twenty dollar bill to buy some cheap Bali Shag tobacco. He also bought a pack of Andrew’s brand to surprise him if he ever ran out.

He had carefully locked the car and put the key in his front right pocket but when he looked for it again he could not find it. Andy searched frantically for the single key and began to regret accepting it in the first place. He didn’t want to bring a problem like a lost key on Andrew because he feared it would stain their

friendship forever. Andy breathed a sigh of relief when he found the key in his rarely used left-rear pocket.

Andrew returned an hour later grinning. “I got today and tomorrow off, dude. It’s gonna be a great weekend!”

Andy smiled too and said, “Man, we have to stay up late and tell stories, get to know each other.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

“It’s beautiful out here.” Andy said looking out the window at the fall foliage.

“Yeah, and so much of it is open land without so many rules about how you can use it and where you can go.” Andrew and Josee had experienced a lot of hassles for assuming that their dogs could accompany them on nature trails and beaches in California.

“Fewer rules suits me just fine.” Andy wondered if he should mention his imprisonment but decided to wait. Andrew was in a good mood and he didn’t want to bring him down. There quickly developed an unspoken courtesy between them; a respect that neither one wanted to break.

“We have plenty of room and, you know, as long as we all get along with each other like we did in Texas, you can stay for a *while*.”

Andy wanted nothing more and said so. He was enthused about getting a job and it was decided that Andy would type some resumes and hitch a ride into Manchester when Andrew went to work. Josee worked in Concord which was a little farther away in the other direction.

Andrew pulled off the small highway and a sign in front of the library read, "Welcome to Weare, NH. Population 6863."

"I don't see seven thousand people here, Weare are they?" Andy said sarcastically.

"Don't let it fool you, Weare is the second largest town by area in the state." Andrew smiled.

"It feels nice and small. I like it." Andy said.

"Oh wait, don't blink. Here's the main drag." Andrew joked.

Andy marveled at the quaint town with several churches, one bait store that doubled as a poorly-stocked convenience store and a few other small establishments that didn't add up to much.

Andrew pointed out the graveyard on the side of the country road. "That's East Road Cemetery, it means you're getting close."

"Close to what?" Andy said taking the bait.

"Close to our street." He laughed and quoted Pink Floyd, "And one day closer to death."

"I love playing in graveyards. My guitar sounds better out there at night. Sometimes, I'll pray when I play and the ghosts probably dig that." Andy said, trying to fulfill his self-assigned role as the penniless-drifter-poet by speaking random esoterica.

They drove a few miles through large lots and small farms, when Andrew pulled up a steep driveway and parked in front of a beautiful colonial house. An ancient sycamore grew on the enormous expanse of lush green grass that surrounded a large home with ornamental peaks and arches. There was smoke rising from the chimney.

“I guess you guys smoke more than I thought.” Andy quipped.

“Josee gets Thursdays off so she’s probably rocking out to music and cleaning the house. Let me run ahead and make sure she’s wearing clothes.”

“I hope she doesn’t mind me being here. Just give me the sign and I’ll split if there’s a problem.” Andy said, wanting to take his friend off the hook right away.

“Oh, thanks dude, but I think she’ll be happy you’re here. Just don’t try anything funny or I’ll have to kill you.” His tough Philly accent drove the point home.

She greeted him at the door and seemed to recognize Andy in the distance. Andrew kissed her then waved Andy forward. She clapped her hands and spun in a circle then walked over to the stereo and turned it up.

*Nothing Else Matters* from Metallica played and Josee said, “Andrew, they’re playing our song!” They danced to the heavy, powerful ballad while Andy watched. He knew that he was witnessing love as he had only hoped it could be. These two accountant-rockers were madly in a love that would endure. Andy saw them as one person though he was always a little shy around Josee.

“This calls for a joint.” She said and proceeded to roll one on the kitchen table while Andrew showed Andy around the house. Hardwood floors and open-beam ceilings made it feel like a cabin but stone tiles and rock walls gave it the impression of a castle, which was furthered as he saw relics of the medieval era upon every wall.

Candleholders in shapes both profane and elegant lit the room. Rich velvet tapestries adorned the larger walls and a suit of armor

stood guard near the front door. Two four-foot long broadswords crossed each other on the wall above the table where Josee lit the joint.

They smoked and talked a little about music and a lot about passion, which Josee asserted was more common in Quebec than it was in America. Andy hoped so.

The trio shared their histories and found common threads throughout, though rarely in perfect parallel. Andrew had grown up in the north end of Philly and though it wasn't as bad as downtown, it was still a pretty tough area at times. Andrew was a tough guy as a result but his nature, and his charmed marriage to his soul mate, had kept him on the straight path.

Josee was from a small town outside of Montreal, Quebec called Sainte-Agathe. Her family spoke French but Josee had learned English in Las Vegas where she had met Andrew. She used to drive a black *Poontiac* TransAm like Burt Reynolds in *Smokey and the Bandit*. Andy appreciated her candor and respected the grace with which she comported herself. She was a strong person made stronger by her love for Andrew.

Andy was shown to the upstairs bedroom which they graciously insisted on calling *his* room. He showered and shaved in the hardwood bathroom and dried the moisture from the wood afterward.

Andy finally had some time alone to think while he showered and just had to smile. He knew that the ill-conceived but fateful friendship was the greatest reward the highway could have given him.

*This couple will be friends of mine for life*, he thought as he lay down for an afternoon nap on their comfortable guest bed. He

wondered what they might be whispering about him downstairs as he fell asleep.

He awoke in darkness from an unremembered dream. Night had apparently fallen for the windows were dark but Andy had no idea what the hour might have been. He was disoriented by the act of waking in a strange house but his heart lightened as he remembered his endearing, energetic hosts and went downstairs.

“C’est Bon!” Josee declared from the table where she sat rolling a number of joints. She had a peculiar style that included a small strip of cardboard cleverly rolled up and inserted as a filter. She insisted that it was very common in Quebec.

“Yo, dude! We’re glad you woke up. Pour yourself some coffee and let’s hit the road.” Andrew’s eyes were red and alive with an excitement that was infectious. The dogs joined in as Andrew and Josee cocked their heads back and howled like wolves, or if they could have had their way, like werewolves.

“Right on, I’ll go get dressed!” Andy reacted with a parallel enthusiasm and returned fully-dressed in forty-seven seconds. He poured a half pot of coffee into the thermos that the Henry’s had given him in Louisiana. His cigarettes and lighter were in his pockets and he felt ready for anything.

They walked out the front door with Damian and Herra, the hundred-plus pound Rottweilers, on short leashes. They walked past the truck and turned toward town.

Andy marveled at the utter darkness in rural New England and the sense of space and elbow room. The nocturnal life hummed, buzzed, croaked and chirped loudly. The dogs slathered and drooled grotesquely as they pulled hard at their leashes. Andy grew to love the dogs but they never stopped reminding him of the living gargoyles from the movie *Ghostbusters*.



“There’s a lot of room for ghosts out here.” Andy had ventured the foolish statement the moment it had entered his mind, which he did not like to make a habit of. His friends laughed and replied that they were forced to accept his statement because it was impossible to refute.

“It’s funny that he should mention that, eh Andrew?”

“Yeah, yeah it is. Hey dude!” Andrew emphasized his Philly thugspeak, “What’s wrong with you? You haven’t even asked us where we’re taking you.”

Andy smiled and stumbled over a rock in the darkness, which he frequently did in the Granite State.

“What if we were vicious murderers, lo?” Josee asked in a spooky voice.

“Yeah dude, what if we took you to a graveyard and, I don’t know, like chopped you up or something? You gotta ask questions!” Andrew scolded.

Andy’s mind generated no warning signals, partly due to Andrew’s Italian pizzeria voice, so he said, “I would be pretty surprised if you were. Now if you said you were gonna feed me to these hellhounds of yours, then I’d be scared.” He quipped back and they all laughed easily as only kindred spirits can.

The quiet road soon took them to the graveyard. They hopped the low rock wall that surrounded the cemetery and walked quickly into its shadowy depths.

“Let’s hang out under the trees.” Andrew suggested.

“Yeah, I don’t want anyone to see us out here at this time of night.” Andy agreed.

“Except ghosts.” Josee said hopefully. They all smiled. Very often it was her impetuous drive that fueled their adventures together.

They found cover behind a large crypt that was half-buried under the gnarled roots of a large oak tree. They sat respectfully near some very old gravestones and lit their joint.

“This one, Jonathan Stone, was a schoolteacher. He died in 1877 when he was forty-one years old.” Josee said with an element of awe in her voice that was both reverent and nostalgic.

“That’s pretty young to die.” Andy said, wondering if it was true.

“This one!” Andrew burst out laughing. “This one says, Huck McAndrews. 1819 to 1832 and then underneath in quotes it says *Damned Horse!*” The trio found the epitaph hysterical and mused freely on the deadly behavior of the damned horse.

“I bet the horse threw him off just as a band of Indians were chasing him, lo?” Josee guessed.

“Yup.” Andrew agreed with his wife and was rewarded with a kiss.

“Or maybe it kicked him. When I was in Florida, one of my cousin’s horses kicked another one right in the head. Its skull was partly open and you could see the brains inside but it was healing!”

They laughed at the absurdity of Andy’s remark as stoners often do but quickly grew serious again.

“Was the horse ok?” Andrew asked, concern mingling with mirth in his voice.

“Yeah!” Andy said. “He didn’t seem to mind it at all.”

“That is so weird.” Josee said.

A rustle in the leaves nearby brought their attention back to their grave setting.

“Was that a ghost?”

“Rising from its grave.”

“One or a host?”

“Mortal skin to crave.”

They laughed at the result of their spontaneous, turn-based group-poetry technique. A chill wind arose from nowhere and the grove of tall, narrow and leafless trees suddenly began to sway and creak eerily in the wind.

The conversation turned morbid as Andy ventured one of his new poems, *The Man Upon the Moor*, then changed the subject before they could comment by asking, “Does anybody know any ghost stories?”

Andy mimed behind his wife as if to stop Andy’s question in its tracks.

“Andrew!” Josee said and slapped his knee playfully. “Just because you’ve heard all of my stories doesn’t mean Andy doesn’t want to hear them.” Together, they wove a chilling tale of lovers whose car went off a nearby cliff but who were still seen on the anniversary of their marriage, which of course, was that very night!

“I think love is most important, lo? That bond that cannot be broken.” Josee said while clenching her fists passionately. Then

she surprised everyone by sucker-punching her husband playfully. “See Andrew? It’s all about trust!”

“Yeah, and I *trust* that won’t be the last time you remind me, either.” He said, feigning pain for the rewards of her sympathy.

“I like graveyards.” Andy said stupidly. “I used to play in Nordhoff Cemetery at night in Ojai. I’d just fingerpick softly and try to break through-” he paused uncertainly, then remembered the Doors song and said, “to the other side, I guess.”

“Even the smallest part of the other side.” Josee said mystically.

“Maybe if we called out to them.” Andrew let his suggestion dangle on the breeze that creaked the trees loud enough to silence the frogs.

“We should be careful, lo, not to summon any evil spirits.” Josee said.

They chose the grave of young Huck McAndrews who had died in an accident with a damned horse. They sat on their knees and held hands around the grave, remaining perfectly still and silent for some time. Andy could feel Andrew’s thick, coarse fingers contrast sharply with the soft, feminine hands of his wife and thought of the perfect balance of yin-yang.

“Oh spirit of young Huck McArthur,” Josee began in a strange voice that seemed reverent but far away and succeeded in startling the two men.

“McAndrews.” Andrew quietly corrected.

“Oh spirit of young Huck *McAndrews*,” she continued, “rise and appear before us, who are your friends. Let us be your link to the material plane.”

“Reveal yourself to us, oh spirit.” Andrew chanted three times.

“We wish to learn your story.” Andy said not feeling at all foolish. *With these two*, he thought, *anything is possible*. Andy truly sensed magic in the spirited duo.

“Try it in French.” Andrew suggested to his wife who repeated the entreaty in her native language. Nothing happened for a long time until a rustle in the woods caused Damian to uproot the sapling he had been tethered to. Andrew called after him as they watched him bound away into the forest, dragging the small tree behind him.

“Damian, heel!” Andrew commanded and the dog, wisely trained at a young age, reluctantly obeyed him.

“The ghost tried to get Damian, Andrew!” Josee had a knack for instilling fear when it was least expected.

“Maybe he hates animals now.” Andrew offered.

“Maybe he hates the living.” Andy said with a poorly affected Bela Lugosi imitation.

They settled back down and talked about life. Andrew was a graduate of Temple University and held the esteemed accounting title of *controller*. Andy thought the narcissistic job title was hilarious and found ample opportunities of ribbing Andrew about it.

Josee was certainly the dreamer of the two. Whenever she could, she would bring up conversation topics like reincarnation, ghosts and spooky places she wanted to explore. She confessed to Andy that her glove box and two kitchen drawers were filled with destination flyers from all over America and Quebec.

They had once rented a house in Ventura, California for a summer and had seen more sights in the area than Andy who had practically grown up there. They told him stories of bungee jumping, skydiving, kayaking, helicopter rides and hiking all the trails that Andy had lacked the motivation to attempt, though they dwelled in his own backyard. He resolved to change that if he ever went back.

Andy began to sense a duality in the husband and wife pair who he would already name as his best friends. Andrew was mostly pragmatic and sober-minded but was balanced by following his wife on roads that he wouldn't necessarily have chosen for himself.

Josee, on the other hand, though a professional accountant herself, preferred the mystical, spiritual and creative sides of life over the banalities of business.

Andy detected a kinship between them that closely fit his own ideal. Perhaps Andrew, without his wife's eager push, wouldn't have been in a graveyard at two o'clock in the morning. Perhaps Josee would have been there all day. What mattered was their bond.

Andy was a left-handed Virgo and often felt a contradictory pull between his analytical and creative sides. These, he believed, dwelt in perfect harmony not in any lone individual but in a pair joined together to complete one whole person.

They walked home laughing as Andy described some of his songs to them.

"Oh, tomorrow we are both off work and we expect you to play us every song you've ever written." Andrew demanded in thug-speak.

“We’ve never known a famous Californian songwriter before, eh Andrew?” She was being kind.

“No,” he answered, “we haven’t. It’s kind of fun. Just don’t write about us and the pot or I’ll have to break your legs.” He threatened jovially.

“You two are great!” Andy blurted out. “I feel like I’ve known you two for a long time.”

“Yeah, us too.” Andrew asserted as they said goodnight for the evening. Andy heard them making love in the quiet house and hoped to find a love like theirs someday. Even with his daytime nap, Andy fell asleep before the virile couple had finished.

Andy dreamed of a faceless angel of feminine form who led him through the universe. He saw her chamber of secrets and fell in love. He could almost see her face but it blurred into a shadowy secret before he could tell who she was. She began to turn, in another moment he would see her face.

There was a loud knock on the bedroom door. “Yo, dude, you should get up. Josee is making bacon and eggs. We have a big trip planned today.”

Andy forgot his dream, met them downstairs and was served a twelve dollar breakfast.

“You two are incredible.” Andy said.

“What do you mean?” Andrew asked.

“Not everybody is like you two are. You’re like,” as he hesitated he remembered the moment where he had painted himself into a corner with the brothers and had pulled out a winner. “You’re

like *perfect people*.” He finished. Andrew and Josee laughed but took the compliment to heart. They didn’t feel superior to others but they knew what he was talking about.

“Who knows which religion is really true?” Josee asked later that day.

Andy remembered his Wesleyan pastor poking fun at Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics and especially Muslims. He couldn’t begin to answer to her question.

“Probably none of them.” Andrew said.

“Or maybe all of them.” Josee countered.

“I just wish people would follow the spirit of their religion, which are all rooted in behavior that is honorable and just, tolerant of others and noble in deed. Jesus was that. Most of the Koran taught similar ideals, too.” He was the only person he knew who had read both the Bible and the Koran.

“Yes, but people believe because they are blind.” Josee lamented.

“Blind.” Andy repeated hanging his head low in sadness and began to write a poem about the painful awakening from the blind-faith of Christianity that eventually became his song *Eyes No Longer Blind*.

Andy had been intrigued with occult knowledge since junior high school, especially voodoo, although nearly everything he knew about voodoo had come from reading *The Serpent and the Rainbow* by the ethnobotanist Wade Davis. He believed in something beyond himself that he couldn’t identify, yet he was sure that he had felt it stronger when he was a child and he wanted it back.



“You know what?” Josee sprang up out of her chair. Andy looked at Andrew who gazed at his wife expectantly.

“We’re gonna go commune with the dead and maybe we’ll learn their secrets.”

“I hope so,” Andrew joked, “because the gas on this trip is gonna cost a fortune!”

They listened to *Kill 'Em All* and the songs grew on Andy. He learned most of the words but lacked the anger in his voice to sing them properly. Andrew and Josee knew them all and sang them loudly, impassioned, fierce and free. Andy hoped that he would never have to overtly confess to them that he didn’t listen to heavy metal music. His hosts, however, had already guessed and were on a mission to convert him.

They drove to nearby Kenner, whose sign proclaimed it to be the *only Kenner on earth*. The small group of friends had a good laugh at the dubious claim to fame of the quaint small town.

Josee tried to make contact with students of the small, respectable literature and arts university which dominated the small town. Andy found a rope swing hanging over the Pascataquog River and launched himself over the water, then into it. It was very cold and his cigarettes got wet but Andrew’s reaction when he jumped in was well worth it; people didn’t jump into rivers in the late fall in New Hampshire.

The trio and two dogs might have resembled *Mystery Inc.* as they visited spooky old bookshops with cranky owners who would practically run them off when they would ask questions. The group wondered what they were hiding but couldn’t find any clues. They invented dark histories for the villains that Josee termed *le mal l’histoires*.

They drove to the small cemetery in Goffstown and found it to exist in a wonderful state of decrepitation which led them to believe it was likely to be haunted. Sometimes, the gravemarkers would be made of wood but most of the New England headstones were granite and featured a little, winged death's head at the top. The soil absorbed so much moisture that all but the newest headstones tilted at crazy angles.

"What do you think it means?" Andy asked, pointing to the death's head.

"Death has flown." Josee ventured.

"I don't know, maybe they're angels." Andrew guessed.

"It's beautiful, depicting the finality of death with the winged-freedom of an angelic afterlife." Andy mused. He thought of the real-life angels who had helped him out of trouble and smiled.

They looked up at the stars and the pale, crescent moon. The weekend passed in a magical mystery tour for Andy. They visited most of the old graveyards within a two hundred mile radius and grew closer as friends along the way.

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Monday morning found Andy dressed in his best jeans and a borrowed shirt and tie. "I'll drop you off about 8:15 and pick you up at 5:30. Try not to get arrested, ok?" Andrew joked.

Andy laughed. "No, I'll be ok. Maybe I'll find a job on my first day like in New Orleans."

"Let's hope it goes better for you here than it did in New Orleans." Andrew said. Andy had told them his whole story and they had

agreed it was highly unwarranted, but still jested about his criminal background.

Andy was dropped off at the same offramp where he had lain in wait for Andrew the previous Thursday. This time, however, Andy was not an aimless drifter but a job-seeker with resumes, an address and telephone number, although he was still worried that he couldn't replace the California driver's license the cop had thrown away in New Orleans.

Andy walked into Perk Up! but found they were not hiring. He tried all of the restaurants and coffeeshops in the downtown area but found no leads. Finally, it started to rain just as Andrew got off work. Andy met him at the car.

"Yo dude, any luck?" Andrew asked cheerfully.

"Nothin'." Andy said dejectedly. "Is there another part of town I could try tomorrow?"

"Sure and we can look in the newspaper tonight, too." Andrew said encouragingly.

The next week followed the same pattern, with Andy taking rides into town to look for work in the daytime and joints in different graveyards with his friends in the evening.

One night, Andrew checked the phone messages and told Andy, "There's a Frank from Goffstown Golf Club who left a message. He says he liked you and wants to offer you a job as a waiter."

Andy was happy but a part of him was still disappointed. This was the part that had to pedal Josee's bicycle seven miles to the resort in the cold New Hampshire weather.

The golf resort had recently closed its course for the winter and very few guests went there just for meals. Andy was surprised

that *anyone* did but apparently a few older folks who lived nearby dined there year-round.

Andy worked five 12-hour shifts that week and five the next but received only a couple of dollars a day in tips. Finally, the payroll period was over and he looked forward to the minimum wage paycheck that was coming.

“Here you are, Andy.” Frank said as he handed the check to Andy who opened it immediately. The amount of the check was \$128.75. Andy’s heart fell and his manager saw his reaction.

“You were expecting more?”

“Yes, sir. It’s only about a dollar an hour.”

“What did you expect? All tip-based jobs in the state pay \$1.50 per hour.”

“Oh? In California they pay \$4.25 plus tips.” The manager grunted something about him not being in California anymore and began to walk away. Andy knew that he couldn’t wait out the winter at the resort at \$1.00 an hour.

“Frank, I’m afraid I’ll have to quit.” Andy said gravely.

“Ok, leave your apron on the counter when you leave.” Frank said indifferently. Andy was surprised at the speed at which he made decisions sometimes. *Car accidents happened that way, he thought, one moment you’re cruising, the next you’ve crashed.*

He rode Andrew’s bike home from Goffstown for the last time. He had looked forward to paying his own way and the miniscule paycheck was a bitter disappointment. He didn’t look forward to telling his friends about it or that he had already quit the job. Maybe a dollar an hour *was* better than nothing but Andy knew his time was worth more.

Andrew took the bad news in stride, "Since you don't have to work this weekend, let's go on a real trip."

"Yes, we have a 3-day weekend, us." Josee sang happily.

Andy had been prepared to leave if they had been too disappointed in him, so their optimistic reaction brightened his mood immensely. "Where to?" he asked.

"We were thinking about Quebec." The couple spoke together in unison. Andy was thrilled even though he didn't yet know what to expect in that magical, walled city.

Twenty minutes later they were driving past the East Road cemetery rocking out to heavy metal. They had three hundred and fifty miles in front of them but it would fly by in energetic conversation.

Andy saw a tall, lone moose cross the road near the *Old Man of the Mountain* and marveled at the countryside along the way. They smoked cigarettes in the car to mask the scent of the marijuana just before they reached the Canadian border in Newport. They were waved through without incident and took Highway 10 west into Montreal.

Andy had never seen a more beautiful big city and gazed at its wonders like a child at the zoo. They found the ancient cemeteries at Mont-Royal and passed much of the night there. The graves were adorned with statues and other monuments and the foliage was permitted to intertwine with the stones romantically. Andy found himself wishing to be buried there, then realized that he was still alive. The grave would have to wait for him.

They walked around the city for hours until they finally reached the truck again. Andy drove them north while the couple tried to sleep. Highway 40 paralleled the Saint-Lawrence Seaway, or the *Fleuve*, as they called it in Quebec, all the way to the province's capital 250 kilometers north.

Andrew woke up and took the wheel as they neared the city and found the *vieux carre*, or old town. He rented them a room in a small chateau and they slept soundly for several hours. When they awoke, Andy made coffee, Andrew saw to the dogs and Josee rolled the joints for the day.

"It feels good to be on my native soil again." She said, smiling contentedly.

Andy loved Quebec at first sight. The city was one-hundred years older than New Orleans and seemed to evoke all of the romance he had been searching for in America. There were cobblestone streets with old-fashioned gas lamps lighting them. The four-hundred year old walls protecting the city were open to the public and they walked up and down them like children on a field trip. Andy posed for some pictures on an enormous cannon that still held its vigilant watch although it could no longer fire.

They smoked in narrow alleyways and pretended the tourists up on the wall were sentries on patrol. Andy thought that most people seemed to be just that; behaviour and thought-police like Orwell described in *1984*.

Andy thought that he had been transported to medieval Europe and marveled at the rounded corners of the buildings, joking about the drunken masons who couldn't pave a street in a straight line. They mused upon life in the medieval days, wherein Josee loved the clothes and the honorable use of strength by the knights. Andrew lamented the poor hygiene and fare while Andy longed for the old folk music. If life in the olden days wasn't perfect, it could at least be so in the fantasies of the three friends.

They walked for nearly twelve hours. Andy was awed by the stately castle-hotel Chateau Frontenac and the nearby Plains of Abraham, blood-stained during the Battle of Quebec. They soon found their way into beautiful Saint-Matthews cemetery, one of the oldest in the city, where all of the tombstones were written in French.

Horses drew carriages all over town and their hooves echoed off the narrow alleyways and stone streets. They caught the somber changing of the guard at the Citadel but found themselves laughing at the excessive display of pomp and ceremony. They left before the 35-minute event was over because they had drawn frowns from the more patriotic tourists.

Andy was not unaware of the beauty of the women of Quebec, who he believed were the prettiest he had ever seen. Yet, he found that when he met their eyes, he did not immediately sense a connection with their souls. Perhaps he was asking too much from the universe, but he had only the one night to fall in love and was looking for his soulmate, not a fling. Andy had long ago taken to the notion that if he put his body in the right city and state at the right time, he would meet his eternal soulmate. He knew that he would find her if she was there in Quebec.

Andy spoke often of Lily and the couple had been amazed at the rare chance of him meeting her in New Orleans. As he beheld the beautiful women, Andy found himself hoping that his *soulmate* wasn't among them. He wanted to believe that she had taken a flight home from the Big Easy a few months earlier.

They returned to the hotel to find their room inexplicably locked. They spoke to the innkeeper who smiled and said, "You must pay for another night, Monsieur."

“But I checked in at two a.m. this morning, it’s still the same damn day!” Andrew countered but neither his logic nor his tough Philly accent were of any avail.

“I’m sorry, Monsieur. That was technically yesterday and today is today. Check in is at 5 p.m. and checkout at 10 a.m. That is hotel policy.”

“So, my first night ended at ten a.m. this morning? That’s crazy!” Andrew laughed incredulously. “Since when is a day only eight hours!”

“It’s like playing *Who’s on First!*” Andy said but only Andrew was familiar with the old Abbot and Costello skit. Josee and the clerk merely looked at him in confusion.

Andrew paid the smiling clerk but mumbled some words about highway robbery under his breath. They slept until nine o’clock the next morning, showered and left quickly before they were charged for another night.

The road home is rarely as much fun as the road out of town but Josee attempted to combat the subtle melancholy by pouring through her brochures for a diversionary adventure.

In spite of Andy's efforts to be light-weight on their wallets, they had fed him, bought him cigarettes and shared their joints with him. Andrew had paid for all of the hotel and parking expenses as well. Andy was acutely aware that he was dead weight.

“I found an old bookstore, Andrew!” Josee was excited again and the energy in the cab changed immediately.

Andrew smiled, then frowned in affected disapproval. “We got bookstores all over the country! Want a book? Go to the library.



Why, Benjamin Franklin-” He couldn’t maintain the ruse any longer and burst out laughing.

She punched him in the shoulder then said, “But this one in Keene is haunted, lo!”

Andy read the pamphlet and was impressed with its little back story. The bookstore’s French name translated to the *Lady of the Lake*. Andy knew her only as the enigmatic sorceress of Arthurian Legend but perhaps there was more to her tale.

They drove I-55 out of Canada and southward through most of New Hampshire. In Brattleboro, they turned east on a tiny road called Highway 9 and were glad to be in a sturdy truck due to the massive potholes in the road.

They found Keene and looked for Old Farm Road, whose lack of specificity gave them another laugh. They passed Robin Hood Park and suddenly Andrew’s keen eyes found it.

“I can’t believe it, Old Farm Road.” Andy laughed at the title but it proved to be an apt one. A narrow, dirt road almost hidden by bushes led off from the main road just after the property line of a large farm that once must have owned all the land around it.

Excitement grew as they bumped down the uncertain road. They came upon a cabin that appeared to have been handbuilt with rough-hewn lumber. There were no vehicles or signs of occupation to be seen.

A chill wind swept upon them as they approached the front door and a small sign announced it as the *La Dame du Lac - le vieux Grimoires*. The door was unlocked when Josee tried the knob. The room was dark where the light from the windows failed to reach.

Andy tried a light switch and several small lamps came on, each next to a large, overstuffed reading chair.

“Hello?” Andrew called out to the mute room. They began to look at the books but found that few of them bore titles on their spines and fewer still were printed in English.

There were titles in French, Italian, German, Greek and Latin which they could identify but many more volumes were written in languages no one could even guess at. Some contained only pictographs.

“It’s like they were written by druids, no?” Josee guessed.

As if summoned by her words, an elegant woman was suddenly in the room with them. Her perfume blended well with the musty odor of the ancient books.

“You have found us.” She said enigmatically.

“I hope it’s ok that we came in.” Andrew started.

“Of course. You were *meant* to, young knight.” Her words oozed from her with an overstated grace and elegance that caused Andy think of stars like Greta Garbo from the golden age of Hollywood.

“The door was unlocked.” Josee added.

The enigma drifted toward Josee. “And you, his betrothed. The fair lady whose hand he won in battle, no?” Josee smiled, perhaps feeling a little woozy as the Lady of the Lake encircled her as she spoke.

Then she broke her own spell and said, “If a book finds you, then you may leave your gold on the counter there. Only *one* is

permitted, mind you.” This last she spoke in a warning tone seemingly addressed toward the ancient grimoires themselves.

“Thank you.” Andy said hoping to get her attention and maybe a medieval nickname too but her eyes washed over him and she left the room. He wondered why she had ignored him.

Josee pulled a book from the end of the long bookcase. As she did so, a book on the other side fell out and Andrew caught it reflexively. “It’s in French!” he called out then looked at his wife who said, “That’s the one.”

The book was thin but heavily bound and rather expensive at \$53. There was no one to make change so Andrew was forced to overpay by seven dollars. When he dropped the money, the lamps turned off suddenly and the bookstore grew cold and uninviting to a degree that bordered on sinister. The sun had set outside and they were surprised to find they had spent nearly two hours in the strange cabin. They opened the book expectantly in the truck.

“It’s blank?” Josee said, looking at Andrew for explanation.

“No, it’s in French.” Andrew took the book and rifled its blank pages. “I don’t understand.”

“Maybe the words can only be read inside her realm.” Josee suggested. No one offered a better guess so that was how they remembered it for years to come. Andy thought it was just a little strange that Andrew had been the only one to see the mysterious writing but never pressed him on the issue.

They arrived home and went to sleep, grateful for the long weekend but beginning to dread the work week ahead. Andy wondered if it would always be that way.

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Andy took rides into Manchester every day to dutifully seek employment but had no reassuring interviews. *Maybe it's my long hair, or my accent.* He thought to himself one day. He had been caught in the city during a sudden snowstorm for which he was bitterly unprepared. Penniless, he crouched in an alley and tried to write under the sparse cover of an awning.

An old man approached Andy as he huddled miserable and cold. The old man extended a weathered hand that held a five dollar bill.

"Thanks, Mister!" Andy said but the old man just ambled his way down the alley heedless of the rain or of Andy's grateful words.

Andy was stricken by the gesture and remembered that the bible warned its adherents from seeking payment or notoriety for their charity as it would then be its own reward, rather than accumulating on their behalf in heaven. *Maybe that's why the old guy didn't even acknowledge my gratitude.* he thought.

Andy used half of the timely boon to buy coffee which allowed him to remain indoors as long as his coffee lasted. He sipped it slowly as he read.

Andy had a copy of the *Canterbury Tales*, written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the fifteenth century, as well as *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by Edgar Allan Poe in 1839. He began writing more formal, literary poems that sounded as if they had been written in an era long dead. An era of romance, mystery and adventure whose formal speech and eloquent phrasing Andy found particularly exciting and romantic.

The story-poems he began to write were becoming increasingly morbid and paranoid, but Andy liked the cadence of the words and the way they sounded when spoken aloud. He began to wonder if they could be turned into songs and listened for a melody within

their utterance. He separated them from his highway and love songs and nick-named the new, formal portion of his songbook *Through Morbid Eyes*.

At five-fifteen, Andy left Perk Up! and waited at the truck for Andrew, who arrived at five-thirty.

“Yo dude. Any luck today?” His voice was bereft of judgment or ire.

“Sort of.” Andy replied lamely. “I wrote most of the day. The snow made it hard to get around.” Andrew had offered Andy the full use of the truck while he was at work but Andy had declined when he remembered misplacing the key on his first day and didn’t want to risk doing it again.

“That is good news! Let me hear one.” Andy recited *Cold Rain* and *The Missing One*.

“Whoa, dude. Those are good. Josee’s going to like them, too. We like things that are really spooky and depressing.” The he laughed and added, “No offense. I hope that’s what you were goin’ for.”

“Oh yeah, exactly.” Andy was pleased at his friend’s encouragement.

“Maybe you could turn them into songs even.” Andrew suggested. Andy liked the idea of turning his old-fashioned poetry into folk songs and realized that they could be similar in feel to the olde English broadside ballads and even older minstrel songs from the medieval period that he had learned in Quebec.

“What’s up for this weekend?” Andy changed the subject, which he almost always did when *he* was the subject of the conversation.

“I don’t know,” he smiled, “but chances are pretty good my wife has something big planned for us.” That weekend they toured Searles Castle in Massachusetts but were spotted smoking a joint in the dungeon and asked to leave. They played hide and seek in the graveyard in Salem until well after the witching hour had passed. They saw the graves of the men like *Giles Corey* who had fallen victim to the deadly whims of the children during the *witch trials* recounted in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*.

As they drove north, Andy saw a sign for Lowell and he mentioned the odd chill that he had experienced on the Greyhound.

“Maybe it’s haunted, lo?”

“I know there’s an old mental institution near there that was closed in the eighties.” Andrew said.

Andy related his story of *Bill the bum*. The one who had been displaced when Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Kentucky suffered a similar closure. He told them how he had shared his pork n beans with the guy only to have his harmonica swindled and they spoke for a while about the shortcomings of human ethics.

Andrew returned to the subject of sinister, eerie asylums. “I grew up in North Philly, not too far from Byberry State Hospital. It was supposedly one of the worst for conducting the terrible experiments on people.”

“Did they use torture therapy?” Josee asked. “Most spirits who linger are tortured.” They could tell she really wanted to see ghosts. They all did.

“Yeah, electro-shock therapy, sensory deprivation and overload, lobotomies. Pretty horrible stuff.”

“And there’s one in Lowell?” Andy asked hopefully. He made a mental note to investigate Camarillo State Hospital if he ever went home.

“Yeah, I think so.” Josee checked her vast store of flyers without success.

“Maybe we should try a library?” Andy suggested. Andrew followed street signs and soon found one. At the counter, Josee asked the librarian, “Is there a haunted insane asylum here in town?” The boys snickered but quickly grew quiet under the librarian’s admonishing glare.

The librarian turned her frown to Josee and said, “There’s old Danvers State Lunatic Asylum but it’s closing up now. It was the birthplace of the pre-frontal lobotomy, you know.” She seemed almost proud but Andy couldn’t tell if her pride was civic in origin or simply because she had produced the little-known fact from her vast memory. Either way, Andy and the gang were impressed. “Oh, wow! We didn’t know that.” Andrew replied honestly.

“Where is that located?”

“Up north, just before the state line in Danvers.”

They followed her directions and soon found the forbidding, immense shape looming out of the darkness. It was closed just as they had been warned it would be, but the trio decided to check it out anyway. Although Andy had recently been jailed for trespassing, he offered no objection to repeating his crime.

They climbed over a chain-link fence and through several acres of mud before nearing the behemoth fortress itself, which sat heavily atop Hathorne Hill. The four-story hospital had been summoned into existence with red-brick in a hauntingly gothic style. The tall tower in the center seemed to watch them like the *eye of Mordor*.

They tried every doorknob but they were all securely locked. “Even the windows are all boarded up!” Andy said. Suddenly there was a rustling in the bushes and they all froze.

“What was that?” Josee asked in alarm.

“I think it was your ghost!” Andrew said in excitement.

Andy realized that the courtyard they were exploring was a dead end. “I think we cornered it by accident.”

Someone got too close and spooked the cornered buck into action. It performed the terrible combination of scream and moan that is unique to bovines, which chilled their blood. The frightened animal then sprang high over the brush between Andrew and Josee and bounded frantically off to freedom.

They drove back to Weare still laughing about their *ghost* when they approached a strange house they had frequently passed but had never stopped to investigate properly.

“There’s the Harvester’s house.” Josee said ominously. She had once witnessed a man digging in the yard in the middle of the night and had dubbed him the *Harvester of Sorrows* after the Metallica song.

“Maybe we should check it out.” Andy said, still not wanting to end the weekend without one last adventure.

They pulled over and watched the house but saw no evidence of tenancy. The grass had grown tall in the summer but only the dead tips were seen proceeding out of the patchy snow.

They found an old barn and looked inside. It smelled rank and they soon discovered the reason. A large table held the bones of



several dozen small mammals, still red with blood that flowed down a sink into a bucket on the floor.

“They look like weasels.” Andrew noticed.

“Maybe he’s a trapper.” Andy suggested.

“Maybe he’s a mass-murderer, lo, and when we saw him digging he was burying bodies.” Josee said with her knack for divining ghostly and sinister plots that others might miss.

“Let’s go peek in the windows of the house.” Andy suggested and ran ahead. He found an alcove and hid from his friends with the classic intention of jumping out and scaring them. He looked in the windows and saw a tidy house with needlepoint pictures on the walls and lace doilies on the tables. There was a reading chair and lamp within arm’s reach of the open window near Andy. He heard his friends coming and prepared himself for the big scare. A split-second later the lamp on the table came on and he saw an old woman sitting in the armchair reading.

Andy’s blood ran cold and he surprised his friends by running past them crying out, “There’s someone in the house!” Andy was scared more of the possibility that she would call the cops than of her being a ghost but enjoyed the thrill regardless.

They had a good laugh about it but Andy grew less certain of what he had actually seen. The next day, Josee visited the County Clerk’s office in Concord and looked up the ownership deed for the address.

“The owner, Abigail Potts, was born there but died two years ago at the age of seventy-five. The house fell to her son, Joe.” She told them excitedly that evening. Andy felt a thrill course through him as he wondered if it had been the ghost of old Abigail he had seen through the open window.

The winter passed slowly while Andy continued to look for work during Andrew's long work-week. On the weekends, they continued to tour New England. Andy began to realize how they had accomplished so much that summer they had rented a house in Ventura, California. *They never got tired!*

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A warm spell broke the climactic monotony of winter and the unemployed dreamer decided to take the day off and have an adventure by himself. They had found an inflatable raft in the hay loft above the garage while cleaning Andrew and Josee's new house. Andy had always wanted to raft down a river like *Huckleberry Finn* and *Jim* did but there weren't any rivers where he had grown up.

According to Andy's mapbook, the Pascataquog River that trickled near the house in Weare, joined with the Merrimac and proceeded all the way out to the Atlantic Ocean. Andy joyfully loaded a backpack with a 12-pack of Andrew's Quebecois ale, named *Le Fin du Monde*, the end of the world. He left a note asking Andrew to pick him up in two days in Portsmouth, where Andy believed the rivers emptied into the Atlantic Ocean.

Andy carried the raft to the river's edge and began to blow into the air nozzle of the twelve-foot raft that Sevylor, its manufacturer, had dubbed the *Deerhunter*. Andy thought of quite a few more names for it as he finally succeeded in blowing it up to only seventy percent of its capacity, and this was accomplished by sheer will alone. Andy's cigarette-stained lungs ached and he felt woozy but he continued to exhale his life's essence into the seemingly endless black hole that was the vinyl raft.

Andy felt sick, light-headed and ready for death as he climbed into the buoyant but clumsy craft. He felt the exhilarating thrill of

shoving off from shore and entering the current of a river. The Pascataquoq River only flowed four miles an hour so Andy was forced to paddle if he wanted to make any real progress. They had found only one paddle in the attic and he used it to propel the cumbersome raft like a canoe.

As is often the case with mistakes, the first few miles were comfortable and easy. Andy drank the strong beer and smoked cigarettes as he lay on his back in the raft. He floated freely in the feeble current and stared up at the treetops as they passed above him. He saw a bright red cardinal flit from branch to branch.

Suddenly, a large number of avians that he couldn't identify swarmed the trees around him. They flew as a unit and he knew they must have been communicating with each other, for they alighted in perfect unison. Andy looked into the amber-colored water and thought it looked exactly like the color of his ale. Small schools of fish huddled in the shadows of trees which were growing longer and longer.

Andy felt at one with the living nature around him and wrote some of his musings as poems that later became song lyrics. The morning idyll passed gently into a hot and humid early afternoon. Andy enjoyed a euphoric 45-minutes as he finished his eighth *Le Fin du Monde* and a new poem at the same time. He closed his eyes with the intense satisfaction that even average writers can achieve, and fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Andy awoke with a dehydration headache that could have killed a horse. His raft was precariously snagged on a small island of floating debris that it had struck in mid-river. He pushed against the fallen tree that still carried the uprooted soil around its immense roots, and eventually succeeded in freeing his raft.

He vomited over the side from the hangover and the exertion. He only began to wonder where he was as night began to fall. Andy

realized that he had failed to pack a flashlight, so he docked on a sandy spit on the right-side of the river as it flowed to the left.

He donned all of the clothing in his possession as he had in Manchester but shivered as the wintry air grew into a biting cold. He endured the long, lonely hours with a stamina that surprised him. *I can beat this*, he thought.

Andy's nostalgia-bone guided his thoughts to the idealistic road he had chosen for himself, which had led him to circumstances that were presently less than ideal. *Why am I so unwilling or unable to conform?* he introspected. Andy knew that he was growing tired of his chosen role as the original vagabond from Joan Baez' *Diamonds and Rust*. He was tired of trying to become the hero of some vague love song.

He knew that he was ready to get a job, marry and raise a family as long as he had access to a creative outlet that transcended the everyday crap inherent to the rat-race. He wanted a wife and children in spite of the poor examples he had been shown. He wanted to love and to be loved. Andy thought of his eternal soulmate and realized that she now wore Lily's fair visage in his mind. If she would sing with him and make love to him, then everything would be alright.

Andy had grown feverish from the beer, exertion and the cold. He dreamed that life was merely a test, that nothing was real. The only thing that mattered was his character. He knew that God was watching him but he also understood that He was not the god from the Bible exactly. He was entirely benevolent and truly wanted Andy to succeed but was powerless to aid him directly.

Instead, He assigned an angel from His vast, willing army to place opportunities in front of Andy. They could not kill his snakes for him but they could provide him with the means to kill them himself. Andy knew the answers to his quest lay within himself,

but he also knew that his mortal body lay shivering on the bank of a river, quickly dying.

Andy awoke to discover that a dangerous numbness had spread through his extremities and he wondered if he had misjudged the temperature by thirty degrees or more. Maybe he would die there like he had in the foggy memory of his dream.

Andy turned his mind to his goal of rafting to the Atlantic but dismissed it immediately as out of the question. He knew that he had to get up or he might really die there, a victim of his own folly. He climbed stiffly into the raft and shoved away from the shore. Andy's painful, semi-euphoric stupor was the perfect high to enjoy the surreal pre-dawn hours on the oblivious river.

He paddled ceaselessly to keep warm and was surprised that his will to live was as strong as it was proving to be. He dug deeper into his task than perhaps ever before and won from it a confidence in himself that he would carry forward into his life. He had won another badge of courage just by staying alive.

Andy felt like the *Pied Piper* of Hamelin as nearly a dozen ducklings began to follow him downriver. He had earned their eternal trust by sharing crumbs of bread. Andy thought that his own affections, too, could be just as easily bought. He watched sadly as the agile, greedy ones grabbed most of the food without apparent consideration for their hungry siblings.

Andy wanted nothing more than harmony with the world. He no longer wanted to be a lost, half-educated intellectual guerrilla fighting a war he couldn't hope to win. He would never identify with the megalomaniac personalities who sought wealth and power and he considered outlandish schemes in order to avoid them in life.

He knew that he was strong and could overcome his oppressors just as easily as he hit home-runs at the field, but he reasoned that none of his own heroes, none of the people he truly respected, had been warriors. Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lennon had all spoken words of peace and tolerance to which Andy chose to adhere at all costs. Even through his acute delirium, Andy realized that nice guys might finish last but was determined to remain one anyway.

"Oh my god, Andrew!" Josee screamed.

"Yo, dude! Are you ok?"

Andy opened his eyes to see his friends' kind faces backlit by the mid-day sun as they looked down upon him. He smiled.

"I knew you two were angels!" He said deliriously.

"Yeah, and Mohammed was Jewish." Andrew answered testily.

His friend's voice had grown sterner with concern than Andy liked to hear it and realized that it was his fault and he tried to collect himself so that he wouldn't let them down any further. The reality of his situation whooshed into perspective with the surreality of a David Lynch movie. He lay on his back in the mostly-deflated raft thinking about the *Portrait of Dorian Gray*. Through his fever he was trying to draw a parallel between the raft, which was his portrait, and his physical body, which now resembled the deflated craft.

Andrew waded chest-deep into the cold Pascataquoq to pull Andy ashore yet had no inkling what Andy was murmuring about.

Andy was slow to surmise the extent of Andrew's sacrifice as he opened his eyes once more to behold his friend standing over him with clothes that were soaking wet. Andy had the vague

recollection that Andrew didn't know how to swim and realized the sacrifice his friend had made for him.

"I'm sorry, guys. I didn't mean to cause you all this trouble." Andy apologized. He felt like the survivor who had eaten the last of the food and now had to face his friends.

"Why is he apologizing, Andrew?" Josee asked her husband. Andy had never heard her terrified voice before and felt sorry to have been its cause.

"I think he's delirious. Let's get him up and into the truck." Andrew's quiet strength became evident as he hoisted Andy's body into the truck like a strongman at the circus.

Andy awoke twenty-seven hours later and seemed to recollect only a wet-dream of Lily that embarrassed him. He looked around at his room and slowly recalled his timely rescue.

Andy held perfectly still and tried to commune with that part of his conscience that he had met with during his delirium. He wanted to be strong and noble but was forced to admit that his decisions and actions pointed otherwise. He began to think it was time to grow up.

He met his friends who greeted him merrily and they all sat around the warm hearth while Andy tried to remember the best parts of his epic attempt to raft to the Atlantic.

Andrew soon revealed that he had known that the Pascataquoq and the Merrimack rivers both emptied into Newburyport, Maine and that Andy would never make it to the Atlantic Ocean. They had employed nearly two days looking for him.

Andy was relieved by their forgiveness but felt like he would rather die than put them through that kind of work again. He

thought once more of his father who had paid \$2500 to get him out of New Orleans and his Uncle who had kicked him out of Florida. It was definitely time to grow up.

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One day, Andy decided that he had been enough of a burden. He broke the news to his kind hosts at the end of a particularly fruitless week of job-searching.

“Well, guys, I’m gonna have to ramble on soon.” He began sadly. “I just can’t seem to get a job out here.” The sinking feeling he felt in his stomach reminded him of how he felt when he ditched school, quit a job or broke up with a girl. Like butterflies in your stomach before school on Monday morning.

“It’s ok if you stay with us longer, even if you don’t find a job.” Andrew said but they all knew that he personally, wouldn't have leached as long off anybody for any reason.

“Well, let’s make this weekend special then.” Josee said but Andy knew that all of their weekends had been special to him. They toured more old graveyards at night than *Dracula* that weekend as they zig-zagged all over New England in search of ghosts.

In southern Maine, they found a tall lighthouse on a rocky coast. Its beacon cast a slow, alternating blood-red light first over the violent waves then over the windblown trio who tried in vain to communicate over the sound of nature in mid-fury. The offshore wind blew full upon them as they sat on the rocks and looked out over the cold Atlantic and it seemed to Andy like they stood at the end of the world, not just the edge of a continent.



They grew nostalgic on the ride home Sunday night while they listed off all the places they had seen together during his stay with them. “Where will you go?” Josee asked.

“I think I can take Highway 9 out of Weare all the way to Vermont, right Andrew?”

“Yeah, you’ll only hit a small sliver of Vermont then it’s New York or Massachusetts depending on which way you go.”

“Maybe I’ll try to see Niagara Falls.”

“But you are going back to California?” She pressed.

“Yeah, I think so.” Andy *was* sure that he was headed back west but wasn’t so sure that was where he wanted to go. In fact, he really wanted to stay in New Hampshire with his friends, yet he had drank all of the booze in their house over the course of his stay and felt terrible about leeching off the magical pair for everything from cigarettes to soap. He simply had to leave or they would lose respect for him. *It was remarkable that they had any to begin with*, he thought ruefully as he packed his few belongings into the road-worn duffel bag.

“Are you going to find Lily?” She asked.

“I don’t know what I could hope to offer her,” he began then smiled, “but yeah, I’ll look her up as soon as I get into town. I hope she’s there.”

They said their final farewells at the awkward hour of 7 a.m., just before Andrew and Josee left for work. They had grown very fond of one another and the parting was difficult. Andy hoped he was doing the right thing as they drove away and if he wept, at least there was no one around to see him.

## Part 7 - Homecoming

For the first time in nearly six months, Andy felt the exhilaration of being on the road again and sang the Willie Nelson song for the thousandth time. He walked past the East Road cemetery for the last time and recalled a song he had written there in the rain one night. He began to sing *Lover Long Drowned* as he walked.

His guitar felt heavy in his hand but Andy found that he had missed its heft. The heirloom-guitar had remained well-protected for several months on the road and he would be proud to show his dad how well he had taken care of it.

He walked to the end of town where he could catch Highway 9 west toward California three thousand miles away. A white GMC Jimmy two-door came tearing around a corner narrowly missing Andy who was playing his guitar on the shoulder. The last thing he would have seen if the Jimmy had struck him would have been his own sign reading *WEST*.

The Jimmy stopped with a screech and backed up to Andy.

“Where are you going?” The driver asked breathlessly.

“California!” Andy laughed.

“Sounds good to me, hop in!” The driver looked like a stereotypical hillbilly replete with bad teeth and overalls. His scrawny arms bore the scars of a thousand bad decisions. He was also sweating profusely and breathing as if he had just been running for his life.

Andy felt alarm raise the hair on his neck and realized that his time of luxury and safety were over. Once again he was forced to make split-second decisions and must live or die by the consequences.

“I’m Ernie.” The driver said.

“Hi, I’m Andy. Thanks for the ride.”

“No problem. Hope you can roll joints.”

Andy smiled broadly and said, “Oh yeah!” Andy rolled very well, although he never could master Josee’s Quebecois filter technique.

“Good, you can get started with that bag.” He pointed to a large ziplock bag nearly filled with dirty brown weed. Andy started cleaning it right away.

“How far are you going?” Andy asked.

“Don’t rightly know. Maybe I’ll take you all the way to California. I always did want to see Hollywood. Do you live in Hollywood?”

“Not too far, about forty-five minutes north of it without traffic,” Andy answered but added, “but there’s always traffic.”

Ernie slammed the steering wheel. “Perfect, ha! If she could only see me now.”

“Who’s that?”

“My old lady back in Weare. An hour ago she tried to kill me with a carving knife. Now I’m heading to Hollywood!” He laughed victoriously.

“Whoa, she actually tried to kill you?” Andy figured he was exaggerating.

“Oh yeah. She’s a crackhead, son. What can you do?” Ernie’s resigned shrug demonstrated to Andy how comfortable the man was with situations of that nature.

Andy was pleased with himself for never trying any of the hard drugs like methamphetamines or opiates. He had made a lot of mistakes in his life but at least he had never invited those particular demons into his life.

They drove out of New Hampshire and across the tiniest corner of fair Vermont before reaching Massachusetts where Ernie had to stop for gas. Andy hopped out and cleaned the windows while Ernie paid inside.

“How about you take the wheel for a while.” Ernie said yawning. Andy felt better. He had often found that he trusted people who placed trust in him. Ernie slept loudly as Andy drove through New York, Pennsylvania and pulled over in Youngstown, Ohio for gas.

Ernie was still snoring happily so Andy stepped out to stretch his legs before waking him. There was a creepy XXX shop sitting opposite the gas station. Andy turned away from it in favor of the nearly full moon. He wondered where Lily was and who she was with then laughed at the jealousy growing in his heart for the girl who was still unaware of his affection.

Ernie soon awoke and proceeded with a waking ritual that attested very well to his coarse upbringing. He belched, farted, smacked his lips and hocked vileness from his throat before acknowledging Andy or asking where they were.

“We are low on gas in Youngstown, Ohio. Do you know the Springsteen song?”

“Ptew!” Ernie coughed, spat out the window and ignored the question. “Is that place open?” He asked gesturing toward the sex shop.

Andy looked at the sign that said *Open 24 Hours* and said, “Yeah I guess so.”

“I’ll be right back.” Ernie sauntered toward the seedy establishment.

Andy sang the Youngstown night its namesake song while he waited. He was happy to be on the road again and it showed in his music. He had written dozens of songs on his trip and he thought one or two of them might even be pretty good.

Ernie returned in a sweat that repulsed Andy, who of course said nothing about it. It was his turn to sleep. Andy pumped the gas after Ernie paid to fill the tank once more and he fell asleep shortly after Ernie pulled onto I-76 west for Columbus, Ohio.

Andy awoke to hear Ernie swearing while steering the truck to the shoulder. He looked behind them to see a huge piece of the car lying in the road.

“That was the transmission.” Ernie said irritably.

“Oh, no. I’ll go get it.” Andy offered helpfully.

“Well it ain’t no good *now*, that’s why it fell off!” Ernie grumbled further under his breath about the road to Hollywood having been a huge mistake.

“I have to hitchhike into town to order some parts.” Ernie stated after spending nearly an hour under the truck determining the damage.

“You can actually fix it?” Andy asked in genuine amazement. Engines weren’t his thing at all and, like all of his ilk, believed only wizards could fix them.

The hillbilly looked at Andy like he was a moron. “Of course I can fix it. I just need the parts.”

Ernie then grabbed a bag from the back seat and walked down I-40 towards Clinton, Oklahoma. Andy found it on his map just west of Oklahoma City and couldn’t believe they had already covered 1500 miles.

He remained in or near the Jimmy all day and his primary amusement, beyond songwriting, was watching the patrons entering and exiting the dirty bookstore.

Andy had fun inventing stories and fabricating excuses the guilty fellows might give to their wives and family if they were ever caught in such a disreputable establishment. Andy’s biggest secret was that he smoked pot and he was surprised to observe so many customers arriving in suits, which he thought was far worse than smoking weed. *Respected businessmen*, Andy scoffed inwardly. He was the criminal street-urchin, the scared rabbit, but he felt superior to the polished back-biters and perverts wearing the misleading suits of normalcy.

Andy thought of Pink Floyd’s song *Another Brick in the Wall*, specifically the schoolmaster’s wife who *thrashed him within inches of his life*. Perhaps these men had women of that mold waiting for them at home, too.

This realization caused Andy to remind himself to favor tolerance in others over a stern judgment of them. He might not want to go in the store himself but he wouldn’t condemn the customers with a sweeping wave of his hand the way he felt himself judged by the Super-Christians.

Andy felt a maturity rising within his youthful soul. He felt that he had gained sufficient mileage to handle himself on the road and maybe even life back home. He began to understand the conflict that existed between him and his parents and their new spouses. He felt that he would coexist with them better if he relied on them for little except an occasional family BBQ. He had hoped for a closer relationship with them but could learn to be content with a lesser one if he had to. He thought it was sad that they were all so different from one another but was certain that they could find reasons to stay in each other's lives. After all, they were family.

Ernie returned late that evening with a loaf of bread and three boxes of parts. "They had the sucker in stock!" he said proudly. Andy was sure that Ernie's day had been no picnic but could also tell that he was stumbling drunk.

"I'll put it in tomorrow." He threw the parts under the truck and crossed the street. Andy thought about hitchhiking on but decided to stick it out with his strange road buddy. After all, he would still be in New England without him. Andy just hoped that Ernie washed his hands after doing whatever he was doing in there.

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The next day, Andy played gopher for Ernie who spent the majority of the next day swearing from underneath the Jimmy. Andy held parts, grabbed tools, shined flashlights, got lunch; whatever Ernie needed but he still felt useless.

Ernie emerged, hoarse from swearing, and began to calmly put his tools away. Andy assumed that he had given up in frustration.

"You ready to drive?" Ernie grinned.

"You mean it's fixed?" Andy had trouble believing it.

“Sure it’s fixed. Try it out yourself.” Ernie smiled triumphantly while Andy shifted gears and found them to operate smoothly.

“Wow, that’s incredible.” Andy was very impressed.

“Let’s hit the road then!” Ernie clicked the radio on to hear Hotel California playing as they took to the highway, westward out of the dust bowl, just as the sun began to paint a dramatic red in the windshield. Ernie had worked hard and slept the sleep of the just while Andy drove them westward into the Texas panhandle.

“We’re well over halfway to Cali.” Andy said to his sleeping friend. “Your transmission is working great by the way.” They switched seats at a gas station in Albuquerque, New Mexico and the road quickly lulled Andy to sleep.

He awoke to hear horns honking angrily around them. He opened his eyes to see the interstate passing at the pace of a handicapped dog. He asked Ernie what was happening as he saw the shoulder was strewn with concrete dividers that forced all of the traffic into one lane behind them.

“We’re almost at the top, baby, come on!” Ernie coaxed the poor truck which was already laboring at high rpms. Andy wondered how long he had been driving it in that condition and how much longer it could last.

Andy looked behind them to see an endless stream of vehicles forced by the bottleneck to follow the failing Jimmy at its lame-dog pace. Andy cringed as he tried to estimate the number of angry drivers who had accumulated behind them in two hours' time on a busy interstate.



“Compression’s shot.” Ernie explained. “No power on these hills. Nowhere to pull off the road for the last twenty-seven miles.”

Andy looked at the speedometer which measured fifteen miles an hour which struck Andy as a little generous. He felt like he could jog faster.

They turned up the radio and sweated out the feelings of ill-will from the masses accumulating behind them until there was an opportunity to pull over. Nearly everyone that passed them aimed an expletive at them but the pair of highway hooligans just laughed it off. All the same, they were glad the highway construction was over.

“Are we gonna keep going?” Andy asked.

“Sure, why not?” Ernie said as he lit another joint from his seemingly endless stash.

“Do you think she’ll make it?” Andy asked skeptically.

“Oh yeah, might be a little slow on them hills, though.” Ernie offered his broad, nearly toothless hillbilly grin once again.

They could begin to perceive a storm brewing far off to the west and marveled at its fury from the distance. The miles passed slowly by and they beheld the massive storm storm for nearly two hours in the misfiring truck before it was upon them. Peculiar lightning struck from the ground *up* to the clouds that Ernie called *heat lightning*.

Andy couldn't believe how slow the vehicle was capable of travelling. Ernie guessed that the poor Jimmy was running on only two of its six cylinders. It was Andy's turn to drive and he was very uneasy. He was afraid of getting pulled over for driving

an abomination on a busy interstate. He estimated their average speed to be only thirty-five miles an hour for hours at a time. Andy would go to jail as an interstate drug courier and be sentenced to twenty years of sodomy and torture until it ended with his inevitable suicide.

A police car pulled alongside the Jimmy. Andy smiled and waved then pointed at the smoking hood. The cop shook his head and sped off. Andy felt a little like a Jew who had narrowly escaped a Nazi shakedown.

Andy realized that his own luck was like the pendulum John had spoken of in far-distant Blythe, California. His life on the road had elicited the best and the worst that people, that life itself, had to offer. There was ruin or redemption at every turn and the Virgo in Andy howled in protest at the disorderly life he had chosen for himself. The creative, left-brain side of himself felt strangely placated, however, which allowed Andy to feel harmony in his soul and a clarity in his thoughts.

Andy realized that he had been running around the country looking for ideals that didn't exist; or if they did, he now knew that they must be earned through diligent labor and the cultivation of good times with great people. He turned his gratitude to those who had been instrumental in his salvation; to those who had served, for a short time, as his guardian angels.

There was stalwart Eric who had helped him free his nose from the villainous razorwire, and good ol' Lars who had sacrificed the shirt off his back to catch Andy's own blood. Tony, of course, had been there to provide the painkillers.

Andy thought of the many horrors that *Heroin Joe* had saved him from. The man himself was all but hanged but had retained sufficient humanity to save Andy at no particular advantage to himself, although his charity had been largely motivated by racial

loyalties. Andy thought of the *Wolfman* and shivered behind the wheel of the failing Jimmy.

Andy knew that something special had occurred between him and *New Orleans Jimmy* but wasn't convinced that it was entirely supernatural. The coincidence of the ticket to Orlando had not been a factor in Jimmy's brave rescue. Jimmy had simply been confronted with an opportunity, a moment of truth, and had chosen sides. He had chosen to save an innocent, or in Andy's case a soiled innocent, at the cost of his own personal salvation. Yet, once the die had been cast and the deed was done, Jimmy knew that he had discovered his own salvation after all.

Andy smiled and felt the mildly nostalgic sensation of emotions threaten to overwhelm him. He remembered the Mexican laborer with the dark-skinned angel on his arm named Daisy and the mute benefactor on the cold day of the blizzard in New Hampshire. Andy hoped that the man truly had a reward waiting for him in heaven.

*We're all part of a disharmonious symphony*, he thought, feeling the contradiction in his own words as he spoke them. Somehow, despite the apparent contradiction, they still rang true to him.

Andy remembered the soul-fulfilling scene at Independence Hall in Philly, where he had successfully played the entertainer for a few moments. He thought of Susie in the 4-H club and made a face for her. *Perhaps she could see it*, he thought.

Andy realized that he had to follow the rules if he wanted to feel like a free man and not have to look over his shoulder all the time like New Orleans Jimmy.

"A conscience can be a wise friend or a relentless enemy." Andy said to Ernie who slept in the shotgun seat with his hairy feet hanging out the window.

Andy's thoughts returned to the magical mystery tour that he had received in New Hampshire from his generous friends, Andrew and Josee. Andy missed them already but knew that he would see them again in the fullness of time. Against the backdrop of romantic failures in Andy's own life, the deep affection he had been lucky enough to observe between them solidified what Andy was looking for in his own soulmate. They had helped to define his ideal and to keep his dream of true love alive.

Andy began to remember all that he had learned about his parents and just knew that he would manage himself, and the relationships with his family, better when he returned home. Andy thought, *We're all just animals reacting to stimuli and are merely a product of the aggregate coincidences and decisions we've made along the way.*

He understood now that his mother clung stubbornly to the letter of the bible because she would feel utterly lost without it. She had been severely wounded and needed the cosmic, spiritual assurance that someone cared about her and that her existence would improve someday. Andy hoped that she would learn to love him the way he was and to yield the doomsday judgment to her God.

Andy knew that his father and his stepmother both cared about him and simply wanted him to grow up, get a job and follow the rules. He thought of *Get a Job* by the Silhouettes and *Yakety Yak* by the Coasters, both released in 1958 when his father had been an impressionable eleven years old.

Yet, Andy knew that there was more to his father's parenting style than simply *get a job* and *don't talk back*. His father was old-fashioned and had been trying to instill *the code* into his son, at least as he understood it himself.

Andy laughed at the same instant that thunder pealed through the flat desert night. He had recalled New Orleans Jimmy suggesting that he, Andy, had been Jimmy's savior. Maybe that was as close as Andy was ever going to come to understanding the cosmic wonders of the universe and the unanswerable questions of youth.

He was startled out of his reverie by the red and blue lights in the rear-view mirror. Andy held his breath as a police car sped past them with its siren blaring. Ernie mumbled something about pigs that reminded Andy of the totalitarian bovines of George Orwell's *1984*.

When they drew close enough to feel the wind, cold rain and hail accosted them and made visibility very poor. The weather-beaten highwaymen pressed on and averaged thirty-five miles per hour through the long desert night. Andy thought of the little engine that could and hoped it really would.

As they approached the California state line, Ernie told Andy that he couldn't take him to Hollywood with him. "I'm gonna have to do *stuff* to get some money and you don't want no part in it." He said enigmatically but in the familiar tones of one criminal to another.

Andy nodded but wondered what *stuff* Ernie might be capable of. "That's ok, I can hitchhike out of LA when we get there." Andy said, then added truthfully, "It has been a great ride."

"Oh, I'll take you up to Ojai first. I want to see it after all you've been telling me. I'll drop you off, look around for a bit, then I'll split." Ernie seemed to have a plan so Andy simply thanked him again. If he had connections of any kind he would have used them to help get Ernie a job in Ojai, but he had no such help to offer.

They exited I-15 in Victorville, California for the Pearblossom highway which had the proud reputation of being the most dangerous stretch of highway in the state. Andy felt the chassis lift off the ground as they caught air on the endless peaks and troughs of the perilous desert road. The Jimmy passed other cars dangerously and in turn was passed by other maniacs on the narrow road that rose and fell like waves on the ocean.

They drove through Lancaster to Interstate 5 and Ernie's eyes bulged as he beheld the rollercoasters at Magic Mountain in Santa Clarita. Andy navigated the Jimmy to the exit for the 126 west and the final approach to his hometown. He realized that he no longer blamed the town for its limitations and peculiarities and he found himself looking forward to his homecoming.

Ernie gagged at the sulphurous fumes between Santa Paula and Ojai but marveled at the domed-church and antique library of Saint-Thomas Aquinas College. Andy remembered that Lily's father had erected the library's ceiling from ancient tile that he had imported from a monastery in Spain.

Ernie gaped at the tall Topa Topa Mountains whose equal he had never seen. His astonishment reminded Andy of the *country mouse* visiting a big city but in reverse. Ernie gazed up at the imposing mountain range in precisely the same manner as Andy had gawked at New York's skyscrapers.

Andy realized that he needed to think of a concrete destination, somewhere to park the truck and say goodbye, but he didn't feel prepared to greet his father in a mere matter of minutes.

"Let's go downtown first, I'll show you Libbey Park." He pulled the road-weary but stalwart Jimmy behind the picturesque post office tower and led Ernie into the park which was shaded heavily by ancient oak trees.

The two men had just shared 3000 miles in four days but shared little emotion as they shook hands in final farewell.

"I'll never forget you, man. You took me door to door across this big old country. That's a lot of dirt." Andy hesitated, before adding, "Maybe I'll write about you in my book someday."

"So which way is Hollywood?" Ernie replied, ignoring Andy's sentiment. He was unimpressed by Ojai's subtle charms and anxious to get on the road. Andy pointed toward the sunset and Ernie drove away forever. Andy was glad that Ernie hadn't been carved up by his wife in Weare but couldn't help but wonder about his future welfare in Hollywood.

"Good luck, Ernie. I'll never forget you." Andy said to the wise, silent oaks who had witnessed thousands of similar goodbyes.

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Andy stood alone on the familiar ground where he had once *made it* with Melinda in public under the cover of her sprawling hippie dress. The same park where he had often lived when his parents had kicked him out. He walked the three miles east toward his father's house feeling the thrill of returning home after a long journey. He would find a way to pay his father for the bus ticket and for the expensive lawyer in New Orleans and he wouldn't ask for any more favors. He was a man now and had to begin to provide for himself.

He hoped that his folks would be glad to see him but wouldn't have bet on it. He had called them twice, from Florida and New Hampshire, to thank him for his help in New Orleans but it was going to be a big surprise to show up without warning.

Andy was prepared to make changes in his life and was eager to get started. He walked the long way around the orchard with the

manner of a child who has grown too dignified to play with an old toy. The temptation of the shortcut had lost its allure for him, the threat of trouble being his single worst fear in life.

Andy's father was pulling weeds in the yard, still dressed in his work uniform when Andy approached the house and he felt pride well up within him for his father who worked so hard every damned day.

"Hi, Pop!" He cried out. Andy held his breath while his father's eyes adjusted to the sight of his prodigal son returning home.

"Well, Andy. Welcome home, kid." He said the words warmly and they partially assuaged Andy's fears of rejection. The two men embraced awkwardly before walking up to the house together.

"I can't wait to hear some of your stories." His father seemed to be more interested in him than ever before and he found that he liked it. He hoped to say the right things so that his father would be proud of him, or at least less disappointed in him.

They stayed up late into the night exchanging horror stories about the New Orleans fiasco. His father could not understand the dialect of his own lawyer, who he claimed had been uncooperative and impossible to motivate. Andy saw that it had been a hell of a time for his dad and regretted his own, immature feelings of entitlement.

"I'm sorry to put you through all that, Dad." Andy looked into his father's eyes, remembering the boy who had once turned in his own sister for drinking beer and said, "Thank you for getting me out of there."

"Your hair's pretty long now." His father diverted the conversation without realizing it.



“Oh, his hair is just beautiful, what conditioner do you use?” His stepmother teased. He laughed at her humor but had been struggling with the upkeep and overall vanity of his growing mane for some time.

“I think I’ll go in for a business cut tomorrow. Long hair is too much work.” No one said anything but Andy knew that they both liked the idea immensely. Andy wondered why everyone hated his long hair in the same way that everyone wanted his guitar. Andy was seeking only to *be*.

“I have some good news for you.” His father said as he rose from his chair.

“What is it?” Andy wondered but couldn’t begin to guess. His father handed him a tax return check from the previous year for seven-hundred and fifty dollars. A yellow sticky note that was carefully attached to the envelope caught Andy’s eye.

The date that was scribbled on the note was the day after he had been arrested in the park. The telephone number had a Louisiana prefix but there was no message written down to accompany it. The caller’s name *was* written, however, and it thrilled Andy’s blood with excitement.

Lily had somehow called his father in Ojai to inquire about him when he didn’t show up for work in New Orleans. He hoped she would forgive him. He called the number which rang at the Voo Carre and he hung up sadly when the Cajun walrus answered the phone.

Andy looked in the white pages for her home number and found two numbers listed. One was for Charles and Kathy up on ritzy Foothill Drive and the other was for a private line at the same address registered to the initial L. He dialed the number and held his breath with the same fervor as if the cops were coming for him.

"Hello?" Answered a young voice that Andy recognized as Lily's younger sister, Kristen, who Andy had known fairly well when he was dating her friend, Melinda.

"Hi Kristen, it's Andy. Is Lily home by chance?"

"Sorry, you're the third too-late suitor to call for her. She's up in Berkeley studying molecular biology or something like that. Do you want to leave a message?" Kristen hadn't intended to crush Andy's spirit, but the knowledge of *suitors* who were doubtlessly more qualified to ask for Lily's hand, deflated the fragile aspirant's confidence.

"No, well, I guess not." He stuttered.

"Sorry to have to be the one to give you more bad news, but I should tell you that Melinda quit the band and went up to the Bay Area, too. She left right after you hit the road."

"Oh, that's ok. Her and I weren't meant to be together anyway. Thanks for tellin' me though."

Andy hung up the phone and felt like he had thwarted his own destiny. Lily would never want an aimless drifter like himself. She was up at UC Berkeley with people of her own caliber. Andy went home and wrote a song about his sorrow that he named, *Death Upon the Ocean*.

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Andy received a haircut after visiting all the relatives and friends he still had in the area. He was the hero of the day among his old friends Eric, Lars, Bart, Robb and Tony but found that he could provide few iconic stories that would please the crowd. Instead of

comical punch lines, Andy's stories of the road tended to end as minor tragedies.

Andy was hired at the local pharmacy downtown but he soon knew that he couldn't stay there long due to the petty infighting between the two part-time pharmacy technicians who clearly hated each other. He politely gave his two weeks' notice and began to look elsewhere.

On his last day of work, Andy wasn't thrilled to be told that he would be giving an old employee a refresher course in some of the new procedures. When she walked through the door, however, Andy almost fell down. There was Lily's angelic face, perky and ready for her first day back at work.

"Well hello, *Andy*." She said in a tone of mock admonishment. "Lily!" He said feeling like John Travolta when he saw Sandy at school for the first time in *Grease*. Once again, they had only moments for pleasantries before the pharmacists' brows began to frown at them.

As they began to discuss the new procedures, Andy relished the day ahead of them. He was prone to losing his concentration when Lily bent over and inadvertently provided glimpses down her blouse, which she often had occasion to do while they were stocking the medicine shelves.

Lily wore a subtle jasmine perfume that made him want to smell her skin, kiss her lips and more. The Louis Armstrong version of Lenny Sanders' song, *I Get Ideas* came to his mind, as did scores of other love songs by the soulful, gritty crooner like *A Kiss to Build a Dream On* and *La Vie en Rose*. He had never felt the instincts of love or lust as irresistibly as he did while showing his soulmate the new UPC codes.

“I can’t believe you work here!” Lily said. “I’m on Christmas break, but I’ve worked here off and on since the tenth grade.”

“Now that *you’re* here, I’m really sorry I quit!” He blurted out, then blushed. “Today’s my last day.”

Andy discussed the new procedural changes to the already veteran employee while secretly agonizing about how to approach her for a date.

“Do you want to go out after work?” Lily asked frankly. It had never occurred to him to ask so concisely. He was overjoyed.

They walked together to the parking lot. Andy was happy to see that Lily still drove the yellow VW convertible that she had driven back in high school. “Didn’t I pick you up hitchhiking once or twice in the old days?” She reminisced sweetly and the knave caught another glimpse down her blouse as he reached over to open the door for her.

“Yeah, you did. A few times, I think. Thanks.”

“Too bad you couldn’t get your job at the pharmacy back. That’s the second time we’ve missed each other.” Andy felt like he’d been missing her his whole life, but was sufficiently composed to say only, “Yeah.”

Lily drove them to Ojai’s east end where an overlook provided them with a romantic view of the town below and the stars above. The sweet fragrance of night-blooming jasmine wafted through the air as they sat side by side like the schoolchildren they once were.

Her green eyes met his brown and he began to say, “Lily, I-”

Lily interrupted his words as she surprised them both by kissing him; delicately at first, then more passionately as she realized that

she had always loved the boy but had been too shy to catch him. She wasn't going to let him get away again.

From that first kiss, Andy was sure that Lily was the soulmate he had hoped she would be. He had put her high up on a pedestal yet she had exceeded his most romantic ideal of true north. Kissing Lily felt like coming home.

## **ANDY'S SONGBOOK**

### Part 1 - Highway & Love Songs

1. American Highways
2. At Play in the Fields of the Lord
3. Before You Get Old
4. Blue-Skied Head
5. Brandywine
6. Chardonnay Afternoons
7. Eighteen
8. Everybody's Everything
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12. I Remember You
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14. Living with the Chain
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23. The Long Road Home
24. The Road is King
25. Time Slips
26. Travellin' Song
27. When I Said, I Love You
28. When the Last Leaf Falls
29. Who's to Say?
30. My Dear Lily

## American Highways

Across the lonely, American Highways,  
a boy and his guitar share the road.  
The trees surround him and the wind bites through him,  
every town is different but they're all the same.

Cars and trucks pass him, angry drivers' horns.  
Romantic and free, he is his own.  
Lights a stogie, finds a lonely tree  
and holding back the tears he finds a song.

### *Chorus*

*Say goodbye, boy. She's not comin' back.  
Say goodbye, boy. She's not lookin' back for you.  
You're growin' older and the times are changin',  
and she's not lookin' back your way anymore.*

Through Austin, Texas, New Orleans and New England,  
songs guiding his way, away.  
The ants and the rain now, a field is his home tonight,  
but what's she doin' and where is she tonight?

She's up in Berkeley, maybe 'Frisco,  
but that doesn't seem to matter now.  
Try to look up for the stars are out now,  
and they'll shine forever even if you don't.

Well life's a cold night and a warm day,  
best that you can do to keep along.  
Find a niche boy, and maybe someday,  
you will belong.

### Bridge

Tonight's just a night son,  
it'll soon be over,  
but you keep on cryin' that same old song.

### **At Play in the Fields of the Lord**

When the days of my life have all gone their way,  
and the ship of my soul is forever moored,  
know that I am forevermore  
at play in the fields of the lord.

*And when you remember the man I was,  
and all I've ever had to say,  
understand that I held true to my cause  
and pursued my heart to its end, every day.*

Though I be gone from your mortal days,  
passed forever across that unknown fjord,  
know that I am forever at play,  
at play in the fields of the lord.

*And forgive me for the pain I knew,  
for the demons were forever at my door.  
know that I now have clarity anew  
and will play on in the fields of the lord.*

Let me now pass into the immortal gates  
and I ask that you not look upon me with pity,  
for I know that a harsher judge awaits  
far beyond in that golden city.

*Let He, not you, pay me what is due  
as we're forever told that He must.  
Suffice yourself with the man you once knew  
and allow me to find peace in the dust.*

And finally if all I've ever sought  
was always upon the wrong door,  
remember my life as a favorable lot  
for I now play in the fields of the lord.



### **Before You Get Old**

Well Johnny busted out in seventy-nine,  
I quit my job on the county line,  
We hit that highway runnin' free,  
I-40 to Tennessee.

We hit some trouble in the midwest dust,  
Johnny got time for makin' a fuss.  
I took that van and made a stand,  
with a pretty little lady from bibleland.

*You've got to rock and roll,  
you've got to sell your soul.  
Buy yourself before you get sold,  
gotta be young before you get old.*

We knew this girl when we were sixteen,  
we both loved a girl who was young and mean.  
He played his game, I did the same,  
she left us both standing in the rain.

Now some folks say you gotta live right,  
live by their words or die by their knife,  
but guys like me we're doin' fine  
livin' life outside of those lines.

### **Blue-Skied Head**

Went down to the lake for rebellion,  
closed my eyes and wandered  
in my blue-skied head!

Your eyes looked so inviting,  
your eyes were filled with torture.  
Those vice grips between your thighs,  
get me outta here!

#### *Chorus*

*'Cause I'm runnin', far away.  
To a place I know, 'cause I just can't stay.  
Runnin', though love might be dead,  
runnin' to a place in my blue-skied head!*

And I remember you swallowed in moonlight,  
the way it caressed your soul.  
And the song you sang to me,  
why couldn't you just let me be?

### **Brandywine**

Brandy said that she might sing with me  
and I'd really like to know that lady,  
because if we can sing in time,  
maybe we can have good times, Brandywine.

This song's for you before I even know your tune,  
and please don't let these words frighten you,  
because if love, we cannot find,  
maybe we can just pass some time, Brandywine.

#### *Chorus*

*Brandywine,*

*is it time?*  
*Your fragrance fills the air*  
*like a long-unanswered prayer.*

*Brandywine,*  
*is it time?*  
*You linger on my mind,*  
*like some misbegotten rhyme.*  
*I want to get high on Brandywine.*

Your eyes tell me only what I can already guess,  
please don't make me guess at the rest.  
For my heart burns, bright and hot,  
cool it with a song and a shot, of Brandywine!

Behind your pretty face you may be frail,  
though your eyes try hard to hide the tale.  
What secrets they reveal!  
I hope you're not too hurt to heal, Brandywine.

What does your beauty really mean to you?  
Do you trust it to see you through?  
Maybe we could last the years,  
love forever through the tears, Brandywine.

My own infamous sad and broken heart,  
was afraid of you from the start,  
yet if love for us is wrong,  
at least we'll have this song, Brandywine.

And if on our first date it rains  
and our chance at love is ne'er regained,  
on that morning when it ends,  
we can part as friends, Brandywine.

But if we never even meet  
as more than strangers in the street,  
this song with you, honey, and the kiss  
will be a treasured near-miss, Brandywine!

### **Chardonnay Afternoons**

I sit alone in my lonely room,  
and think about my life.  
About all that I've had,  
and all that I've lost.

I remember you laughing in the sunshine,  
and taking long walks through tall fields,  
finding love under the cover of the moon,  
and those chardonnay afternoons.

#### *Chorus*

*What happens to memories to make them so sweet?  
What happens to true love that once was complete?  
I want back my innocence I gave away too soon,  
I want back my chardonnay afternoons.*

I remember casual romance romance,  
drinking wine from borrowed glasses.  
I'd throw a sheet over a table,  
ain't it funny how time passes.

Precious gifts of teddy bears  
at the airport where we'd part.  
Better were those gifts of tears  
and of secrets we locked inside our hearts.

Then I would drink too much

and you would talk too much,  
as the sky above us crumbled to its end,  
we found in each other a friend.

We were in love then  
and to romance we were tuned.  
How did we lose touch  
with those chardonnay afternoons.

### **Everybody's Everything**

We all have our lives,  
we all have our truths.  
I can about me,  
you care about you.

We all love different people  
and sometimes you don't fit  
into my own dream,  
what I call my everything.

We live inside a bubble  
of everyone we know.  
But there's gonna be trouble,  
if everyone can't go.

A choice will be made  
about whose life to save  
when our everthings  
are not the same!

### *Chorus*

*Everybody's everything,  
means everything, to everyone.  
Everybody's everything,*

*is not the same for everyone.*

Sometimes our circles meet,  
and sometimes they don't match,  
but we all choose our own  
fly balls to catch.

But sometimes we exist  
our circles out of place,  
and we just can't persist  
in each other's space!

### **Eighteen**

You step out of your child's body,  
start wearin' clothes that are so gaudy,  
searching for ways to find yourself,  
into life you begin to delve.

There's a woman bursting out of you,  
so many things you want to do.  
And no one understands your sighs,  
leavin' your home as a butterfly!

#### *Chorus*

*You are eighteen!*

*Oh, what does it mean  
to be eighteen?*

*So young but yet so old,  
still doin' what you're told,  
oh, what does it mean to be eighteen?*

Just a child with adult-size worry,  
you make your mind up in a hurry,  
kind of stuck on those in-betweens,  
too high or low when you're in your teens.

So you change your makeup and your hair,  
well hold on girl, you're almost there.  
You'll never know what you meant to me,  
you broke my heart when you were eighteen.

So we hide our love behind our friends,  
just waiting for it all to end.  
But this promise I will make to you,  
when it's full I'll look up at the moon.

Say goodbye, I hear footsteps nearing,  
say the words that are endearing,  
I hope to meet you in some foreign land,  
make love to you down in the sand.

### **Everything Decays**

Everything decays,  
even the sun will lose his rays  
in time,  
but until then he will shine.

Life is fraught with tears,  
we live too many, many years,  
I guess,  
death will bring us rest.

*Chorus*

*So God thunders!*

*Why does God thunder on man?*

*Still He thunders,*

*while we're doin' the best that we can.*

Though there will be more pain,  
and yesterday's shadows still remain,  
I'm torn,  
with hope for tomorrow's born.

And though the rains will come,  
soaking everyone,  
I know,  
from it the flowers will grow.

Someday our lives must end,  
but take peace in that, my friend,  
it's true,  
there won't be another you.

Outtro  
Everything decays,  
but Momma said it's supposed to be that way,  
she said it'll be okay.  
But will it be okay, this time?

### **Hobo, Say Goodbye**

Railroad cars rattlin' and a' thumpin'  
down that endless track.  
Leavin' your family and your friends,  
and you ain't never comin' back.

Midnight fires out in the yard,  
burnin' trash just to keep you warm.  
Always watchin' your back,  
ain't it hard out on the track.

*Chorus*  
*So hobo say goodbye, say goodbye!*



*Hobo say goodbye, goodbye.*  
*Hobo hit the rails, his the highway!*  
*Hobo hit the rails, goodbye.*

People call you a rambler and a drunkard,  
farewell to all you've known but driftin'.  
But what is it you think about  
as the night sands start shiftin'?

Is there a woman you remember,  
from times long ago?  
Back before you hit the highway,  
before you became this old hobo?

Outtro  
Now some folks are born to raise a family,  
others stay in school all their lives.  
Some folks work themselves to death,  
others just take to the road.

### **I Remember You**

I remember you,  
you died in the war for me.  
I remember you,  
although now you're just history.

You were but a child,  
sent to fight for your country.  
You were but a child, saw some things  
Man was not meant to see.

*But I, for one, am shamed by this!*  
*And if I could, I'd change it all.*  
*I, for one, am shamed by this!*  
*And if I could I'd bring an end to it all.*

And when you came back to your land,  
scorn and shame we hurled at you.  
And when you came back to your land,  
we tried you for crimes against mankind!

Though war is never black or white,  
it doesn't take a bible to tell me it's wrong.  
Though war is not black or white,  
if life was just you would live to hear this song.

Outtro  
To follow one's heart,  
wherever it might lead him.  
To take, in life, a part  
and find one's own freedom.

That is what I want,  
however difficult it may prove.  
And I will find a way,  
or myself, from this world, remove.

### **If I Could**

If I could paint,  
I'd paint the sea,  
and warm river waters  
flowing past me.

If I could hear,  
I'd hear the voices,

of those behind me  
and of those still dear.

If I could watch,  
I'd watch the past.  
Feeling and yearning,  
it goes so fast.

If I could speak,  
I'd speak to the children  
of liberty  
and of what can build them.

If I could walk,  
I'd walk the land.  
Travel all over,  
help where I can.

If I could fly,  
I'd fly o'er the mountains,  
between the valleys  
and under fountains.

If I could pray,  
I'd pray for the sinners,  
for the bitter and old  
and for the beginners.

### **Living with the Chain**

The street is empty and cold tonight,  
the last car just faded out of sight.  
Wind-blown girl all night she roams,  
lots of wind-blown people can't find a home.

Out here on the street there ain't no peace,  
so you take a drug, man, for release.  
It ain't as easy as it seems,  
bein' a dreg of humanity.

#### *Chorus*

*And ain't it hard to find,  
that next high sometimes.  
And don't it break your heart to see,  
a junkie in misery?*

Man it's a low-down affliction,  
when you can't feed your addiction.  
And once you're hooked, you're not the same,  
ain't it hard livin' with the chain?

We don't work so we don't get paid,  
so into other people's pockets we raid.  
Can't keep yourself from shakin' all day,  
you know it's wrong but there's no other way.

#### **Outtro**

There ain't no peace  
when you've got the DTs!

### **Lost Angels**

*We are the lost angels,  
we are the children of the night.  
We are your lost angels,  
we are the children of the night.*

You see us sleeping together in alleys,  
you see us sharin' our food.  
You see us sharin' a fire to keep warm,  
you see us sharin' our booze.  
Yet you don't really see us because...

We, who have nothing, share all we have.  
You, who have it all, hoard it to yourselves.  
Yet, for as many reasons as there can be,  
we are the ones who can truly see.  
Yes, we can really see you because...

You hide your children from our sight,  
as we hide ourselves from the daylight.  
Your pulse quickens as we draw near,  
too late! We're already here.  
We're always there because...

### **No One Around to be Saved**

Preacher man goes down to the river  
with Baptisin' all on his mind.  
Preacher man goes down to the river, good lord,  
but there's no one around to be saved.

Hard-workin' man he goes down,  
alone to his own lonesome house.  
Every hard-workin' man, goes home at night, good lord,  
his life is passin' away.

Young man walkin' down to the crossroads,  
young man just walkin' down that road.  
There's a young man standin' at the crossroads, good lord,  
his soul, for to sell.

Young lover's on a warm summer's night,  
gazin' deep in to each other's eyes.  
There's two young lovers on a summer's night, good lord,  
there's trouble down the road they're not seein'.

There's a big, black casket bein' made for me,  
six foot by three is she.  
There's a big, black casket bein' made for me, good lord,  
inside, I'll soon lie dead.

### **Once**

Once when we were young,  
we would walk through the sun.  
Life was so simple then.  
Now those days are gone  
and I must carry on...

#### *Chorus*

*Oh and I love you.*  
*Oh, I miss you too.*  
*Oh, woman where,*  
*did your love go?*  
*Oh, I miss you so.*

Once when fate was kind we would,  
walk hand in hand.  
Make love down in the sand.  
Now your love is gone  
still I must carry on...

Once we thought we would be lovers 'til we died.  
When that dream ended how I cried.  
Now these years have passed and I see at last...  
I have already lost you.

### **Here**

Time passes slowly here  
and the wind we cannot feel.  
Memory sends us a tear  
and brings our minds to reel.

We live in darkness here,  
yet are warmed by the sun.  
Of pleasure we seek now only rest.  
Our sadness is what we've become.

#### *Chorus 1*

*We all wander here,  
a morbid crowd.  
Never speaking of our fear,  
lest we speak too loud.*

Our pestilence is our loneliness,  
yet it claims us all.  
But our cure, we need not guess,  
for we deny solution's call.

#### *Chorus 2*

*For we shall never part,  
or ever look away.  
Though it would free our heart,  
we shall die this way.*

## Hard Times

Lost in lonely reverie  
in a crowded, hazy bar.  
Watchin' a man teasin' his wife,  
tryin' hard to make his buddies' par.  
Man I don't know where I'm goin',  
or how I ever got this far!

*So goodbye blue sky,  
won't see you anymore.  
Hello, hard times,  
hard times down on this killin' floor.*

Want to believe that I'm the same,  
as everyone I meet.  
Want so much to believe,  
this madness doesn't start with me.  
Why's it always so hard,  
for a dreamin' man to be free?

Trouble started in a corner of the bar,  
couple of bikers pushed their luck too far.  
Bartender, give me my keys.  
Whaddya mean I can't drive my own car?

Call a cab and have another drink,  
I'd tell you a story but wouldn't know where to begin,  
about a guy livin' his whole life  
on the outside lookin' in.



### **Time Slips**

She said, "I think I want to run.

Things are too strange I want to have some fun."

I said, "Baby, I've had too much sun,  
and don't you see fun's already bein' done?"

She said, "I like the motion of the waves."

As the warm wind, blew past us.

I said, "If we were to run away,  
do you think they could catch us?"

*Time slips away from you,*

*Baby, don't forget it.*

*But love fades away, babe,  
only if you let it.*

She said, "I like bein' naked in the sun."

I looked at her and said, "Baby, you're the one  
I spent my life lookin' for."

She said, "But I still want more!"

### **The Road is King**

The road is king, the road is king,  
those lonely highways, keep a' callin' to me.

I know I should stay, try to behave,  
but the road is king and I its slave.

Ramblin's what I do, ramblin's what I do,  
under the wide, open blue.

I have a dream, gonna find it too,  
but until then, ramblin' will have to do.

You know that travellin' bug, that travellin' bug,  
pull those walkin' shoes on with a tug.

Beat feet on down the road, adjust that load,  
yeah, you know that travellin' bug.

Hear that lone whistle whine, hear that lone whistle whine,  
movin' on, so fast, down that line.  
Haulin' long, heavy freight,  
a lot of cars full of hate!  
You know it's time  
when the lone whistle whines

### **The Long Road Home**

There is a home, I know,  
one day I will find.  
A home someday,  
with ties that bind.  
A home someday,  
way up in the sky.  
I'll fly, Lord, I'll fly!

I hear someone pickin' an old banjo,  
playin' some old tune.  
There's a woman playin' juice harp,  
jawin' it nice and slow.  
And it ain't gonna be long, Lord, 'til I get home,  
'til I'm home, Lord, 'til I come home!

#### *Chorus*

*Push me down that highway,  
gettin' there mile by mile.  
Down that highway,  
I'll be home in a little while.  
Been travellin' round on my own,  
Lord, far too long but I'm gonna make it,  
the long road home!*

Now I've been some places,  
where most folks don't want to go.  
I've learned some things, Lord,  
that a man should never know.  
But when I hit the highway,  
I just go and go,  
and maybe I'll get home!

I have walked not a step less,  
than thirty-thousand miles,  
done some things, Lord,  
that a man ain't oughtta done.  
But each mornin' when I rise,  
wipe the tear stain outta my eyes  
'cause I know I'm goin' home!

### **Poor Boy**

Walked into Texas to see what I could find,  
walked in, a poor boy.  
Big Sheriff John Brown ran me out of town,  
kicked out, a poor boy.

Took to the highway guitar across my back,  
hitchhike, you poor boy.  
With the wind upon my face and sunset on my back,  
headin' east, you poor boy.

Knew a girl once would drive you crazy wild,  
with blonde hair, green eyes.  
A knife can't cut you so deeply as her smile,  
a broken-hearted poor boy.

In Louisiana mosquitos and flies,  
in the bayous, poor boy.  
Workin' for the man who'll bleed you bone dry,  
so move on now, you poor boy.

Daddy and Mamma both left this old world,  
all alone now, you poor boy.  
Was raised by phrases in an old folk song,  
the times are changin', you poor boy.

Now I've been around this country, some crazy things I seen,  
lyin' and cheatin', poor boy.  
but none scares me so much as what I seen in me,  
in the mirror, a poor boy.

### **Sailor Man**

Once there was a pretty little maid,  
who fell in love with a sailor man,  
but ever on the sea he stayed  
and never-ever did touch land.

She wrote letters to her love  
and counted the days gone by,  
and wept the tears of a pretty little maid,  
but ever on the sea he stayed.

When up there walked a handsome prince  
with a wedding ring in his hand,  
"Oh no," she said, "for I love a man,  
who never-ever does touch land."

"How long, how long, has it been since,  
how long" again asked the handsome prince,  
"since you have seen your sailor man,

who never-ever does touch land."

"He's been gone these seven years,  
seven years he's been away.  
I've called to him on many a night  
but ever on the sea he stays."

"But what if he has died, drowned in the sea,  
and to him you're a memory?  
What if he has found another maid to love,  
and with the maid he stayed?"

"Well if he's dead a thousand times,  
or found another maid to love,  
I'll stay true to my sailor man,  
who never-ever does touch land."

He picked her up all in his arms  
and placed the ring upon her hand.  
"I am your long lost sailor man,  
finally come to land."  
And with the maid he stayed!

### **So I Weep**

Soldiers march their way to freedom,  
a freedom that can never be.  
A freedom that nobody wants.

The critics teach you not to try  
while the parents teach their children not to cry,  
I want to know why.

*Time slips away so quickly,  
passing into the hands of destiny.  
I'm tired of waiting for the peace,  
that they say will come someday.*

Well, maybe I'm lookin' too deep  
but the price of our souls is gettin' way too cheap,  
so I weep.

And the century's comin' to its end,  
if we died today what message would we send,  
still I weep.

### **Take Me Home**

Take me home, to that kingdom in the sky!  
Take me home, into that by and by.  
Take me home, this poor boy's bound to die!  
Take me home, take me home, take me home.

### *Chorus*

*Take my hand, Lord. Catch me if I fall.  
Take my hand, Lord. Lead me from it all.  
Take my hand, Lord. Someday I'll hear your call!  
Hear your call, hear your call, hear your call.*

Hear my prayer, Lord. I'm down on bended knee.  
Hear my prayer, Lord. Close my eyes to see.  
Hear my prayer, Lord. And give me what I need,  
what I need, what I need, what I need.

### **The Bed of Another**

Melinda and I were close once, soul to soul.  
But everything we worked for, she sold.  
Just gave it away one winter's day,  
we always swore it wouldn't end that way.  
Oh Melinda, why did you let go?

*My Melinda, is gone.*

*The friend I thought I had, now is gone.*

*My Melinda, is gone, long gone!*

Melinda broke our sacred vow,  
like a woman will do but a man don't know how.  
But tell me how can his touch warm your skin?  
Don't you want me back again?  
Oh Melinda, who's bed are you in now?

Melinda took another lover,  
took me a while for this to discover.  
I looked around to find my friend,  
didn't know it was already the end.  
Melinda's in the bed of another.

### **Travellin' Song**

I had a good job, gettin' paid okay,  
workin' all night, stayin' up all day,  
but lately it seems like, I can hear  
that freight train whinin' in my ears.

I have a good woman, she stays at home,  
keeps me from feelin' all alone.  
We've been together now, about a year or so,  
It sure is gonna break her heart when I go.

*But a rollin' stone keeps rollin',  
as the workin' man's life gets stolen.  
If a hard workin' man goes ramblin',  
hard lesson learned, you can't go back again.*

Always wanted a family, came close but never did.  
Always comin' close to things but I always hid.  
Always one step behind, kind of on the run!  
If things had been different, who knows what I mightta done.

Yeah, it looks like I'll be travellin' on,  
tune up that guitar, sing a travellin' song.  
Got to be movin' down that road one day soon,  
followin' on the heels of that next full moon.

### **When I Said, "I Love You"**

We met one day on a sandy beach,  
you wore flowers in your hair.  
I took your hand and kissed your lips,  
I knew you then and there.  
When I said, "I love you," you let fall a tear.

I took you home and made you whole,  
a woman you became.  
You wore my ring said you would marry me,  
and we kissed in pale moonlight,  
You said, "I love you," then you said "goodnight."

We courted in spring where the young birds sing,  
together hand in hand,  
but the powers that be said we could never be,  
we promised to wait and see.  
When I said, "I love you," it was meant to be.



But the days did pass and you grew cold  
like a woman tends to do.  
A star burns bright but fades from sight  
like the love of a pretty girl.  
Now I say, "I love you," and you don't even care.

Now the years have come and the years have gone  
and I never took a wife.  
When I think about you, wonderin' who's loving you,  
I break down and cry.  
But I said, "I love you," and I'll love you 'til I die!

### **When the Last Leaf Falls**

(Written with Marina & Doreen Munoz)

Late in the year, when little ears hear  
the comin' of the snow.  
They know where to go because they heed the call,  
when the last leaf falls.

Dreams were suppressed as the years progressed,  
and we just watched them go.  
We protect what we can but cannot save all,  
when the last leaf falls.

Laughter appears whenever you are near,  
and they all send you their love.  
But in the dead of the night, to whom do you call?  
When the last leaf falls.

In bygone days, they suffered in ways,  
that we will never know.  
But if we don't come together and listen to the call,  
only then will the last leaf fall.

### **Who's to Say?**

Two children walk, down that empty street.  
Two children look, for something to eat.  
Parents yell their secrets, out in public streets!  
Two parents as distant as you and me.

Two soldiers fight, they're on the same side.  
Two soldiers fight, 'til one of them has died.  
Two soldiers fight, a war that isn't theirs,  
born into a world and hate, they are heirs.

#### *Chorus*

*But who's to say, it will ever change?  
But who's to say, that we even want it to?  
Dreamers still dream, of a better way,  
never goin' to come but who's to say.*

The poor and the rich, the guilty and the lame,  
there but for fortune, we're all the same.  
But Mankind only points his finger the other way!  
Seems like it'll never change but who's to say.

## **My Dear Lily**

(Written for my wife, Elise)

My dear Lily, I hear you know.

I hear you softly cryin'.

I think you gave your love away,  
though your heart, you knew, was lyin'.

I think I heard you long ago,  
but I failed to hearken.

A kiss I missed, a whisper soft,  
'Twas then I saw skies darken.

*And I'm here, standing beside you.*

*I'm here, been tryin' to find you.*

*I'm here, with my heart in my hand,  
extended to you.*

I heard you laugh so long ago

I heard you fall to sorrow.

I saw you hurt yourself inside,  
but I'll hear you laugh tomorrow.

My dear Lily, I know you now.

I know you as a dear friend.

I know you as only a lover knows,  
and I'll love you 'til the end.

## **ANDY'S SONGBOOK**

### Part 2 - Through Morbid Eyes

1. Cold Rain
2. Death Upon the Ocean
3. Eyes No Longer Blind
4. Lover Long Drowned
5. Sad Mortal Pain
6. Sad Sabbath's Past
7. So Suddenly Stained
8. Solution Circle
9. The Beast
- 10 The Man Upon the Moor
11. The Missing One
12. The Will of the Walls
13. Two Slender Eyes

### **Cold Rain**

From the darkened, polished wooden floor  
to the heavily stained locked wooden door,  
I hear and see and feel the rain  
and wonder how it has found me again.  
Oh, the cold rain.

Impossibly high the roof must be strong  
for it never does rain on those who belong,  
but upon me always the rain  
and I wonder at how it has found me again.  
Oh, the cold rain.

Into the dark, starry night sky,  
I burst through the crowd as if I might die  
but there ahead, all around, the rain  
laughing out loud as it drives me insane.  
Oh, the cold rain.

### **Bridge**

Never will it stop, the rain. Never will it stop the rain.  
Ever will it fall, the rain. Ever will it fall, the rain  
the rain the cold rain has found me again.

So I fall to the earth's moistening soil  
and consider how I may end my toil,  
but I fear that in death where darkness doth reign,  
always the cold rain will find me again.  
Oh, the cold rain.

## Death Upon the Ocean

As I listen to the full-force gale  
slapping the waves at full sail,  
I begin to ponder in awe and wonder  
how many like ships has she sank under?

Falling prey to the wild breeze  
of some devil or god taking life as they please.  
And wondering aloud as madmen do,  
whether she'll choose to sink this one, too.

Well if I be carried away, ever and on,  
into the deep which I sail upon,  
May I fall into a cove or a knell  
and within its darkness continue to dwell.

*And if you, my love, hear nothing of this;  
of my fate down in the abyss,  
May your sorrow not last long,  
but write and sing of me in a song.*

As I consider the merciless tides,  
it occurs to me and I shudder inside.  
That you will not see the tears I have cried  
and will not even know that I have died.

You may think that I have sailed away  
to another, to a brighter day.  
But then you will know for you knew me better  
and one day in a bottle you'll find this last letter.

O! Woe is me as another wave crashes  
and splinters and tears my sail and sashes,  
I am tied to the mast with the tightest of lashes  
that perhaps I will not be returned to dust or ashes.

*Remember, my love, that I was true to the last,  
and while speaking your name overboard was cast.  
Nothing feebler could keep me from you.*

*May we meet in heaven when your time comes due.  
And then you will know that my love was true  
And in eternity I'll still love you.*

### **Eyes No Longer Blind**

Cast away all doubt from you now  
else your reason, my tale, disallow.  
Forsake the comfortable truths you have known  
and listen to a tale heard on winds blown.

My tale begins as all great ones do,  
in the darkened forest of impenetrable gloom,  
the night sky's light cannot reach the ground  
and the swaying of limbs above creates not a sound.

But there is life in the forest, to be sure  
and for their lives death can bring no cure.  
Myriad eyes, unblinking, will see  
anything that traverses through the trees.

*How can they be, these devils now I see?  
How can they be, these devils now I see?  
Who hid behind my faith in God.  
Will I, from them, be free?  
Oh how can they be,  
these eyes that now can see?*

Iridescent and clear, they see and they hear  
and spook from the traveler the faith he held dear.  
For in their eyes; their unholy life  
meant for him a soulful of strife.

For they could not exist in the world he had known,  
and he therefore must be in another one shown.  
Far from his mentors and biblical minds,  
the traveler navigated through eyes no longer blind.

Could they all have been wrong at once?  
Could the scholars have been taught by the dunce?  
For whose god above can reason these  
who live so secretly behind the dense trees?

Uncertain in mind and equal in step,  
the faithless but wizened traveler crept  
but was lost through the knowing and despaired of recovering  
from the truth that his god had never been hovering.

*How can they be, these devils now I see?  
How can they be, these devils now I see?  
Who hid behind my faith in God.  
Will I, from them, be free?  
Oh how can they be,  
these devils now I see?*

*I'd rather hide behind a god!  
Close my eyes and mind.  
How can I see God,  
with eyes no longer blind?*



### **Lover Long Drowned**

While once wandering in an English wood  
with no path to follow even if I would,  
I moved in awe of everything that stood  
or crawled, flew or died, or wished that it could.

Drawn ever deeper into the swirling mist  
whose beauty was fed by angels' kiss,  
but as night drew near and the day was dismissed  
its sight I feared as the serpent's evil hiss.

Once lushly nurtured in moistening fog  
the woods now became a dying bog.  
Perfumed breeze changed to hideous smog,  
living sound replaced by a howling dog.

All green turned to a morbid grey  
and the song of the wolf was heard to say  
that night reigns tyrannically over the day  
and death comes quickly to those who stay.

Terror struck and seized me fast  
when a voice arose from the far-distant past.  
I broke free and raced to the sound at last  
as if the Devil's own wind blew at my mast.

Rushing onward over squishing ground,  
wildly pursuing her siren sound.  
Memory reaching out to unknown bounds,  
pairing the voice to a lover, long drowned.

My reason slept as I willfully believed  
that I glimpsed the figure for whom I grieved.  
But ever drawing near to the shape I conceived,  
she would draw further into the leaves.

Never did she cease her mournful song  
as I chased her through night everlong.  
Would that a man could right a god's wrong  
and allow her again, to the living, belong.

I followed her to where only devil's rule  
and knelt to weep the old tears of a fool,  
but as dawn began, her memory, to cool  
I saw her again in a rainwater pool.

Where water collects she waits for me there,  
and gazes at me with forgiving stare,  
Nevermore shall I chase her ethereal glare,  
nevermore shall I hear her step on my stair.

### **Sad Mortal Pain**

I would not believe I was there,  
locked within a tomb in the earth.  
The soil was wet with poisonous air,  
a dark womb that would never give birth.

Into the dirt I attacked with my nails,  
as a low sound issued from within me.  
But I soon knew that my efforts would fail,  
the land above, nevermore would I see.

A higher sound came now from my throat,  
as the livingman's air started to wane.  
And I fancied myself rising, now fully afloat,  
oblivious to my own sad mortal pain.

I fell from the earth to the sky,  
and smiled down on faithful dear friends.  
I leave it for them to ask why,  
for my tale now lies at its end.

### **Sad Sabbath's Past**

The lonely priest sat quite still,  
in God's own mansion upon the hill.  
And in his melancholy took his repast,  
pondering the memories of sad Sabbaths passed.

To his god he had given of his days,  
awaiting always sight through the haze.  
Yet as he sat alone with the cold wintry chill,  
he feared the burdensome bore of more Sabbaths still.

Will they always upon his shoulders fall?  
How can one man be made to bear them all?  
With a cry then, going unanswered and for unwept,  
so died the priest while another Sabbath slept.

And in God's lonely, heavenly throne,  
He looked out upon the world that was no longer home,  
and awaited the end of His folly at last,  
to deliver Him from the sins of sad Sabbath's past.

### **So Suddenly Stained**

The mirrored glass could not lie,  
so he knew that he was to die.  
Could such a blow, to kind mortals fall?  
Must he so soon hear the Reaper's call?

For minutes into hours, he thus remained,  
stricken at his face so suddenly stained.  
Yet dark despair was not his to know,  
until he saw the home to which he no longer could go.

For the brothers would kill him if he but tried,  
to again venture without, into the outside.  
Nor of his own will would he have them share,  
the horrors he beheld in his own unerring stare.

Behind him his wife, slept on as before,  
hereafter hidden by an impossible door  
she would have him open knew she the fate,  
that would so swiftly steal her life's only mate.

He watched as his eyes gushed gory red,  
inhuman and foreign were the tears he now bled.  
And the near-bursting crimson that now filled his cheek,  
brought him to despair and a brief death to seek.

So it was upon the vile morn  
when between light and dark the world was yet torn.  
That the wretched widowed wife, woke to the day,  
to find that her friend had died of the Plague.

### **Solution Circle**

Release yourself, thy god is beside thee.  
Release yourself, to He who hath made thee.

Come join the circle, the circle is life.  
Come join the circle, the circle brings life.

Come kneel beside us, directly behind.  
Come kneel beside us and be of our mind!

Grasp the one in front and in back.  
Grasp the one who never looks back.

Complete the circle, which lies beyond fear.  
Complete the circle, your path becomes clear.

Here are the daggers made of gilded stone.  
Here are the daggers of ebony bone!

Close your eyes, the light we have shown.  
Close your eyes, we're all going home.

A horn will blow to signal the start.  
A horn will blow take aim at the heart!

Complete the circle, no cross for to bear.  
Complete the circle, you're solution lies there!

### **The Beast**

From the cauldron of wicked love  
I serenade the night,  
and if I chance to look above  
bedazzled by the height.

I see stars of men shooting by  
and rays of dawning fear,  
and from this fear I should fly  
before the shadow passes near.

Look away lest I fall  
and cast not another glance,  
and listen not to the call  
as the whores of heaven dance.

For who has lived and felt not the stare,  
of the religious carrion bird?  
And who escaped what was not there  
when first the beast had stirred?

### **The Man Upon the Moor**

Sitting in my study, drawing upon a pipe of clay,  
Simply sitting, smoking softly I endure the remaining day.

Harder still, fell the rain against the glassless pane;  
Louder still was heard the rapping, tapping of his cane.

As I rose to bid him in I reeled at the sight,  
he was already there, beside my chair and he brought with him  
the night.

"Sir," said he respectfully, "if I may speak free,  
a scotch and smoke in trade for tale this night I'd share with thee."

His manner calm as he sat upon the moistened floor,  
and as he lit his pipe, I gazed out upon the moor.

Not a word said he for at least an hour more,  
"Speak up my man, out with your tale, this I do implore!"

But when he spoke aloud and ceased his muted way,  
his tale chilled both my bone and blood and stole my breath away.

"Joseph Craig Dobler, employed me but a year,  
I took his life, and then his wife as my own to love so dear.

But alas! She knows the truth at last, it is so she screams,  
Dobler's ghost has come to her, he speaks into her dreams.

His spirit shall haunt and spook, wherever I may be,  
already twice this night, upon the moor was he.

Such is how I came into your house so free,  
for when next he comes I'll surely die but with sin confessed to  
thee."

*Will he ever leave? The man upon the moor.  
Or will he, always be rapping, tapping at my door?*

The wind did gust and blow through the glassless pane,  
and it seemed we both could hear the rapping, tapping of a cane.

The man stood up as if to leave but could not find the nerve,  
and as he looked into the night I watched his body swerve.

Then we both grew chill as the knob into my dwelling turned,  
"What demon from Hell, had arisen, its body blackened, burned?"

But the knob it stopped and then was heard upon the door so plain,  
louder, louder came the rapping, tapping of his cane.

"No more! No more!" he cried with palms upturned.  
I could not bear to see its face and body blackened, burned!

The man turned in horror and fell out through the glassless pane,  
nevermore to suffer the terrible tapping of the cane.

Oh how I loathe, even now, the sound of rain upon the plain,  
for now I always seem to hear the rapping, tapping of a cane!

## **The Missing One**

The hours pass slowly now  
and I'm coming undone.  
Marveling at the wonder of how  
I can live without the missing one.

### *CHORUS*

*The missing one, the missing one, you're gone.  
You're the missing one, the missing one, you're gone.*

Man cannot long live,  
on but three parts of a whole.  
And that, to me, she cannot give,  
half-mast on ragged seas I roll.

There are a thousand aching perils,  
from which a man cannot run.  
Chief of all is a heart gone sterile,  
pining the loss of the missing one!



### **The Will of the Walls**

The pattern in the walls both repels and enthralls.

Through the time it has yellowed, through the years it has mellowed.

Take it away from my sight, for I cannot upon my own might,  
look away from the walls, for to their will I am called.

Inside the pattern are the bars, from these grow the scars,  
for from inside, they are quite strong and for escape, I have tried long.

When I hear I must obey the potent will of the walls.

For I know what they say, and I know when they call.

From inside I only see through, but I cannot see you,  
for I do not think you are there when I'm locked within the walls.  
Do you leave me to my cell; from behind these bars to dwell?  
Is it you that I hear; this mocking in my ears?

I shake to the core as they open the door.

Look away from the walls for to their will I am called.

I shake to my core as they open the door.

Surrender to the call, and to the will, the will of the walls.

## Two Slender Eyes

The image before the two slender eyes turned,  
as a guillotine falls fell the terror as it learned.  
The image opened its mouth to utter a plea,  
but its throat was torn and it died silently.

A mortal day has passed and a child trembles,  
eerily aware of what the image resembles.  
Crying out, not for help but in primal fear,  
as the two slender eyes coldly draw near.

A second mortal day and a crowd has gathered,  
two corpses lay; in blood they are slathered.  
Feeble attempts are made to learn why  
the two young beings were chosen to die.

Watching all this through two slender eyes,  
the creature was present though safe in disguise.  
Hearing the oaths that were sworn at the scene  
it knew, if discovered, death it would mean.

The blood between the eyes pumped as before  
and it knew that soon it must rush for a door,  
quit the vile scene it had again made,  
while its identity remained cloaked in a shade.

One night before it then peace for twenty-eight,  
or to die as a martyr of supernatural fate?  
A single day more and the moon would wane,  
but to merely exist would mean another one slain.

Steal away now while over the victims they wept  
and creep away it did and for the long day it slept,  
but dusk falls again as it forever will  
bringing lastly for the month the desire to kill.

Its redemption would wait for Mankind to take,  
for conscience alone could not a martyr of wolf make.  
An image arises as another life dies;  
the sight of the prey through two slender eyes.