

Cheesy Rider:  
A Wisconsinite Discovers America

by

Matthew Bey

Dedicated to my cousin Mandy

Thanks go to all the people I met on the road and in Austin. Both those I included in the journal and those whom I omitted.

A special thanks to all those who did me a good turn and gave me a kind word when I needed it most.

# Preface

My name is Matthew Bey, but please call me Ingvar. Even my mother calls me Ingvar.

This book is the detailed account of the approximately 10 months I spent on the road in 1998 and 1999. In that time, I left Wisconsin, everything familiar, and most everything I owned, to ride my motorcycle around the country.

The trip was a long time in coming. Like most everyone else my age, I was in the throes of a quarter-life crisis. By the time we reached twenty four, my generation had either completely missed career success, or we had found it and despondently asked, "Is this all there is?" I had missed success, and by my own criteria, made a horrible mess of my own life. After coasting through college and achieving almost nothing of note, I spent a year working a night-shift in a gourmet bread bakery. I lived in the most dismal apartment I could find in Madison, and I dated a woman who seemed to suffer bi-polar mood disorder. I had failed my own life, and I blamed only my own laziness and cowardice.

The trip was a sort of practical suicide. I wanted to sever my connections to friends and family, destroy everything that I had been. Of course I didn't quite succeed in doing so; the bonds of friendship and family are considerably stronger than the distance between Wisconsin and Austin, but I gave it my best shot. My self-hate made a lot of progress in destroying what I had been.

I left the bulk of this book as I wrote it; a day-by-day journal filled with the musings and uncertainties of a young man going through personal upheaval. From the

perspective of who I am now, the voice seems naive and clumsy. But it should have relevance for the curious reader.

## **Before the Road**

Monday, August 3, 1998

After karate practice, I stopped at a cafe to write in my journal and celebrate wearing my first black belt. The instructor loaned me an old one because he had left my permanent black belt back at his house. When he told me that I passed the test, I couldn't

quite wipe the smirk off my face. It had been far too long in coming. Shodan had taken on a quality of elusiveness, the black belt at the end of the rainbow. With my spotty attendance record and history of changing to a different martial art every year, I thought I might never achieve this rank. But I did, and I could take satisfaction in knowing that, just this once, I didn't do something entirely half-assed.

I tend to compare the black belt with my college degree. Like the black belt, it took me too long to get my Bachelor's of Science degree, a whole five years, but when I did I had two majors to show for it, one in Philosophy and one in Communication Arts, the University of Wisconsin's equivalent of a film degree. I like to think of myself as a film person, but I haven't had the money to do any serious film work since I started saving for the big trip.

What really shames me is that, after graduating, I spent an entire year in Madison, Wisconsin, doing scut work at a bakery while all my friends moved to the big city and began actual careers. I may be slow at leaving town, but give me enough time and I might just get it right.

Just after my sensei told me I got a black belt, I told him I would be leaving the club. In two weeks, I would leave town, possibly forever. My University of Wisconsin certified daily planner was penciled black for the next two weeks. After that I had nothing.

Ever.

If nothing drastic happened before noon on August 14, then I would have greater freedom than at any point in my life. There would be no plans, no obligations, no unfulfilled expectations. No lease payments. No debts. No job.

Many people go through their entire life without being this free of agenda. I don't blame them, it is an extremely frightening state of mind. I am 24 years old, and it is time that I took some pretty big risks with my destiny.

Motorcycle repairs will be greater than anticipated. My ex-roommate Adam sold me a bike with the exhaust broken clean in half. It had to be replaced but tomorrow it's due back from the shop. They haven't called about any further cataclysms that I need to deal with, so I presume I'm on schedule.

The guy in charge of the shop didn't bat an eye at my plan to take the bike out to the west coast and maybe beyond. He didn't like the state of the muffler, but long distance trips on motorcycles are likely a common enough occurrence. He did reassure me that if he were to take a cross-country trip himself with a motorcycle of that era, he would use that very same model.

“That era” means 1980. My bike is 18 years old, rapidly approaching the age of antiquity, but in good repair for the most part. She is a huge old beast, big and black, and filled with power. If you didn't look at her too hard you might mistake her for an old touring Harley, rather than the Yamaha XS1100 that she is. She may be fraying about the edges, but I'm behind her all the way. I might not have used a motorcycle at all for this trip. Until a few months ago, I knew nothing about bikes, but my old roommate Adam went through some financial straits and offered to sell her. Luckily she's big enough to be comfortable over long distances.

Now that it's coming down to the wire, everything is changing. My friend and

chief crony, Adam, has already left for Zurich. Sitting with him in his empty apartment the other day, I felt the poignancy that always accompanies sitting in apartments which are otherwise filled with memories. Normally I help in the emptying process, so a sense of satisfaction evens out the sentiment.

I feel confident that Adam and I will meet again. We both have E-mail accounts through the Web, so as long as we don't stay in Syria or Afghanistan we can keep in touch.

My little German friend Antje is in town again. She's deeply in love with her boyfriend back home, but she keeps me entertained now that Adam is gone. My bald friend Dave is enmeshed in school and full-time work, and my only other crony, Noel, has found himself an 18-year-old waif, so naturally he has no time for the rest of the world. They're not much of a social network, but they're all I have, and in a week and a half I won't even have that.

I gave notice at work, and my boss professed to understand where I was coming from. He would be sorry to see me go, he would be certain to give me a glowing reference should I need it, yadda yadda, etc. The manager Tom suggested that I work my way across the country via the 54 Breadsmith franchise bakeries. A compelling and terrifying idea. I filed it under "last choice scenario."

I missed the midget wrestling event at the Dane County Fair. A day later I went with Noel and wasted large sums of money on greasy food and bumper cars. Sadly there were no midgets, but I did see a farm girl with a prosthetic leg who could run at a fast



lope .

And I saw an alpaca.

Thursday, August 20, 1998

I don't remember much about moving out of my apartment. Moving day tends to devolve into a blur of last minute scurrying and bustling, which never seems to get everything done. I made the classic mistake of scheduling my last day of work too close to my last day in the apartment. I never remember that working 10 hours a day in a bakery leaves precious little time for sleep, let alone packing and cleaning. Nevertheless, I managed to put most of my belongings out on the curb for the rest of Madison to pick through, and the majority of the crud accumulated from a yearlong lease got scraped away with half an hour to spare.

If one turns a blind eye to the several dozen boxes I have stored in my father's basement, everything I now own can be strapped to the back of my motorcycle. I am living the American dream. I am free and unencumbered.

For the past year, I have been preparing for this. In his novel Generation X, Douglas Coupland describes the preparation as an "Anti-Sabbatical," spending a period, usually a year as in my case, doing something you don't like to get the money to do what you really like, in my case a highway-level motorcycle tour of North America.

It's about time that I pulled up my roots and tried to make something of myself and tried to find a little adventure. For the past 10 years, I have been living in Madison, Wisconsin. Madison is, by all accounts, an unusually cultured backwater in the middle of

Wisconsin, but I have nothing to compare it against. I have grown tired of the hordes of undergraduates who look more and more like children to me every year. I feel out of place amid the proliferation of bars and used bookstores.

More importantly, I am tired of being a baker. I wasn't trained to be a baker; it had started as a summer job that a friend had recommended to me. Then, to my horror, I remained a baker a year after graduation. I looked about me and I saw myself in the hordes of educated service sector employees who got trapped in the gravitational pull of Madison and never escaped. There are thousands of highly intelligent yet unmotivated Madisonians who never advance beyond a nine-dollar-an-hour job and a downtown efficiency. It's the old joke of the cab driver with a doctorate, but that's the price of living in a college town.

Determined to sidestep the fate that awaited me, I boned up on my motorcycle riding skills. I culled my clothing down to four all-black, identical sets. After my last shift at the bakery, I burned my flour-caked work clothes and boots in a park grill. I spent 20-minutes, patiently waiting for the denim to turn to soot, and the soles of the shoes to blister into little lumps of black goo. It was supposed to be a poignant, cathartic experience, but it got boring real quick.

Ready or not, August 14th arrived. On this day, every Madison lease expires, whether you are a student or a baker. Without looking back, I strapped my tent and my saddlebags to the bike and cruised slowly past the U-Hauls and the rented trailers and on out of town.

## **Adventure**

By the time I made it to Baraboo, Wisconsin, about an hour north of Madison by the back roads, I doubted the wisdom of taking my typewriter with me. Whenever I told people I would be taking a typewriter on the motorcycle, they looked at me and said "you're taking a typewriter with you?" in an astonished and appalled voice. This reaction insulted me because if I had said I would take a guitar with me, no one would have blinked. A guitar is a particularly bulky and fragile instrument, whereas the man who sold me the typewriter insisted that it was a portable.

Nevertheless, the typewriter seriously unbalanced the bike, raising the front forks and risking a wobble. It also filled space where I could have stored the focaccia I was taking to my Aunt Carol.

If I had actually taken time to do a dry run on my travel rig, as common sense would suggest, I might have left the typewriter behind. Unfortunately, with working at the bakery, packing and cleaning up the apartment, I just didn't have time. I had it planned out in my head how it would work out, but I didn't actually load it all on the bike until after I had checked out of the apartment.

On the rear rack, behind the sissy bar, I bungeed on my shoulder bag, which has all the literary equipment I couldn't bear to part with. It has my notebook, fountain pen, several folders of short stories I'm working on, North American road atlas, maintenance book and owner's manual for the Yamaha XS1100, typing paper, a plastic bust of Abraham Lincoln, a Yosemite Sam Pez dispenser, a Clifford D. Simak novel with a picture of a robot on the cover, and a copy of Yamamoto Tsunetomo's Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai. It also has some blocks of wood, should I feel like carving more of that chess set that never seems to get done. Underneath it I tried to secure the "portable"

typewriter.

Strapped to the sissy bar on the passenger seat directly behind me, I put the bulky but lighter camping items. I rolled up my little orange pup tent, mummy sleeping bag, and foam sleeping pad in a plastic tarp and tied them tight with yet more bungee cords.

The workhorse of the motorcycle baggage, the imitation leather saddle bags, hung on either side of the passenger seat, drooping down to just a few inches above the muffler. In them I packed my tool roll; camp stove and fuel bottle; bar of soap; toothbrush and toothpaste; dish towel (for drying me, not dishes); rubbing alcohol; first aid kit with topical antibiotic, Band-Aids, mosquito repellent, butterfly sutures, and surgical tape; a sewing kit with black thread and half dozen needles; mess kit with plate, pan, cup, pot, knife, fork, spoon, and a grapefruit spoon; a bread knife (in case I did have to work at a bakery I like to use my own); a paring knife; Ziploc bags filled with pepper, celery salt, and Italian seasoning; wool and raccoon fur glove linings; jacket liner; four pairs of socks, underwear, and T-shirts (all black); wool socks; two spare black bandanas; black thermal shirt; leather sandals; cut-off jeans; leather strop; three carving knives; a camping candle lantern; a large yellow flashlight; a portable reading light; and a lighter. The bags were big, but with all the gear I packed in, I had precious little room for food, only about four soup can's worth.

Under the bike seat, out of sight, I taped several pieces of sandpaper, two plumber's clamps, and my favorite silver daredevil on the chance that I might get the chance to go fishing.

In the tiny, lockable compartment next to the battery, I stored my important documentation. My birth certificate, folded typing paper with important phone numbers,

Social Security card, and various bank forms, I sealed in another Ziploc bag.

On the tank of the bike itself, I clamped my big black hat under a cargo net. I loved that hat, and I couldn't conceive going anywhere and doing any serious adventuring without it.

On my own person, I carried a black motorcycle helmet; my black, horsehide jacket in the euro-punk style; deerskin black gloves; black hiking boots; and my only pair of jeans (black of course).

Around the left rear passenger foot peg, I hung a roll of duct tape for emergencies that my other gear couldn't cover.

In choosing my gear, I had to balance the usefulness of an item with its weight and bulk. A lot of items I wished I had later had been just too big and bulky or too heavy, or just not useful enough to earn them a place with my gear. Camping equipment obviously got high priority because I hoped to spend most of my nights out of doors in cheaper facilities. But I also had to consider the likelihood that I would stay in a city for some time and require more civilized accouterments.

Much of my camping gear and notably the leather jacket were gifts of my father, who took my threat of riding around the country on a motorcycle seriously enough to ensure I had proper equipment. I don't think I could have made it without his help.

My plan was to ride from Madison to Red Wing, Minnesota, the first day and spend the night at my Aunt Carol's. I hadn't seen her for over a year because I missed the family get-together at Christmas. She is a favorite great-aunt who relishes the opportunity to dote on her nieces and nephews. I could count on a warm place to sleep

and several warm meals if I could just find my way up there.

I rode along in the bright sun, getting my arms sunburned, and enjoying not having to think too far ahead. I should have thought a little, because somewhere along the way, while watching the stunning cliffs and bluffs of southwestern Wisconsin, I lost the highway. It may have been in Hillsborough or maybe even earlier on, but I found myself heading south on an unfamiliar highway. The shadow underneath my bike confirmed my suspicion. Being too lazy to drag the map out of my bag, I decided to cut through the back roads until I found my original highway.

I went up and down the hills on a narrow gravel road. Against a rusty tin shed with broken windows, I saw a circular lumber blade, every jagged tooth dulled and corroded. When I shifted into low gear, I could see the serpentine tracks of a child's bicycle, where a farm kid struggled to pedal up the same grade that made my 700-pound bike wheeze and grumble. Eventually I found a highway heading west, although I had drifted several miles off course.

In a cute little river town called Genoa, little more than a four-block street between the bluffs and the Mississippi, I stopped to have lunch. All the video poker machines had squares of paper with black magic marker taped to the front: "This machine does not pay, please do not ask." Several customers played anyway, for what thrill I could not say.

I got service soon after sitting at the bar. I was clearly the only patron not on a first name basis with the two bartenders. To my right, one of the proprietors showed a kid and his dad pictures from a recent fishing trip to Canada.

"You caught a big one," the kid admired. "Do you remember this one?"

"Oh, yah. I remember that one," the bald man with the Wisconsin accent replied.

I had a cheeseburger with a glass of water for a grand sum of two bucks. Before I left, the bartender, having seen me ride up on the motorcycle, warned me about the weather to the north. "Be careful, there, guy. Looks like a bad thunderstorm up there."

And what do you know, I ran right into it. My first day out with an untested rig and I ride into the worst storm of the season. As I drove up the Minnesota side of the Mississippi, I could see the sky grow black in front of me, lightning streaking from the storm front. The onslaught came breathtakingly soon. One moment I rode into a warm, steady headwind, and in the space of one gust and the next, the temperature dropped 15 degrees.

By the time I cruised into Red Wing, I was wet from head to toe and battered by hail. I kept remembering the salesman's warning that my imitation leather saddlebags weren't waterproof. I met up with Aunt Carol, and she took me to supper at the local all-night Perkins. I sat in the booth with all my cold weather gear and a mug of hot chocolate and I couldn't shake off the cold. I hugged the mug of hot chocolate and shivered uncontrollably.

That night confirmed my suspicions, everything I owned was soaked through. Every pair of socks, every set of underwear, every shirt, and every thermal liner. The leather of my boots and jacket gained an extra 30 pounds of water. I hung as much as I could to dry in Aunt Carol's room, but it didn't help much. Walking around in wet socks for the next two days gave me a fungus infection on my right foot that took six months to clear up.

The next day, I spent with my old roommate Jer in the Twin Cities. With my mind still dulled from a year of third-shift baking and a week of hectic packing and a day of hard driving, we saw The Avengers movie at the Mega Mall and went on the ride that swings you around and around and upside down, only really slowly. Waiting in line for our turn, I couldn't help but laugh hysterically every time a load of passengers whizzed by upside down. You could hear their dopplered screams rise and fall with every pass. When they got to apex, you could hear the sound of pocket change striking the boulders down below.

Monday morning bright and early, I rode to the cabin that my mother's family owns in northern Minnesota, and set my tent up in the woods. I spent the next week testing out my camping equipment and recovering from a year of third-shift baking. I learned how to use the camp stove and mess kit, and found that my London fog parka stuffed in the sleeping bag sack made a passable pillow. For the most part, I am recovered from the old sleep schedule, except for a strong urge to fall asleep around two in the afternoon.

Monday, August 24, 1998

I spent way too much time in Duluth when I got lost trying to find a Mailboxes Etc. store. Because I only had a quick glance at the city map at the Duluth public library, I got pretty turned around. I got a strange look from a woman walking her dog as I passed her the second time on a dead end street. I later found out I was miles from where



I wanted to be, essentially as far as I could be from the Mailboxes Etc. and still be in Duluth. No city that far north deserves to be big enough to get lost in. Eventually I got there, and I mailed the three short stories I had worked on for the past week.

Grandfather, Ruth, and Aunt Carol visited with me for a few days at the cabin and fed me like a king. But the past few days have been quiet enough that I could pound away on my typewriter. Nobody was around to hear me scream every time I made a typo. The tent weathered some rainshowers, and I weathered life without a Fox affiliate. What sort of savages don't get the latest broadcasts of "The X-Files?"

It frightened me a little bit to find my way through the woods to my tent with only a candle to light my way. It made the shadows seem closer, and I kept worrying I would run into a bear. At night, the sounds of forest animals and the wind rustling in the trees sounds remarkably like something with long, skeletal legs stalking slowly but progressively toward my tent. The first night, I slept with my bread knife next to my sleeping bag. I would have preferred a sledgehammer, but why would an ex-baker be traveling with a sledgehammer? The only wildlife I did encounter was a screech owl, which woke me with its caterwauling, and a rodent of some sort, which I could feel crawling underneath my tent during a thunderstorm.

When I left, the typewriter stayed behind.

Tonight I am camped a scant 25 miles from the Canadian border at some state park called Judge C. R. Marney. It seems little more than a modest parcel of forest next to the highway. A good excuse for a campground and some hiking trails, some

bureaucrat thought. I got here just an hour or two from sunset and managed to hike through about half the trails before turning in. I'll do the other half in the morning.

## **Canada and Soulful Musings, eh?**

Tuesday, August 25, 1998

A day now in Canada and I have yet to hear anyone say "eh." Crossing the border one doesn't see a marked difference between the United States and this new country. Maybe more bugs, a weird system of determining speed and distance (the abbreviation 'm' doesn't stand for miles!), and they insist on having their own currency (I wrote Adam to tell him it looks similar to Monopoly money, only with pictures of the queen). That kilometer thing threw me for a loop when I arrived at Thunder Bay twice as fast as the road signs led me to believe.

In the morning I hiked the rest of the trails at Judge C. R. Marney state park. I did the park a disservice the other day, it does have some interesting waterfalls. The Devil's Kettle still confounds me. There the river splits into two parts, half of it pouring into a circular pit with no visible exit, never filling to the rim. Presumably the Devil takes the water. On my comment card I wrote "Where does the water go?" Then I packed up my tent, first shaking out the chipmunk that had got stuck in there.

I had worried that I would have some trouble at the border. The sign at the park billboard said that the border guards would ask for my driver's license and proof of insurance. My insurance papers had yet to catch up with me. As it happened, the

Canadians didn't bother because they had computer access to my records anyway.

The border guard was a really hot blonde with an oval face. The combination of her good looks and Canadian federal authority flustered me enough that I nearly left my glasses on the gas tank after putting on my helmet. "Don't forget your glasses," she reminded me as she waved me through.

Canada has a good deal of wide open spaces. I didn't think I would have any trouble finding a place to hide my bike for the night, but I stopped at a campground near Dryden. The rates were cheap, what with the currency slump following Asia's economic decline. I told the camp attendant I still had trouble with the currency. He had to confirm the coin I had was equivalent to one Canadian dollar. A lot of pipeline workers seemed to be staying here, living out of camper trailers and driving to work in the morning in their pickups. I annoyed one of them whose water supply was connected to my spigot. Every time I filled my canteen, I turned off the hose leading to his camper. Then he would stomp out and monkey with it, cursing under his breath. Wholly unintentional.

I stopped at a scenic overlook a few miles from the border near Grand Portage. It made me reevaluate my place in the universe. Looking out at the towering cliffs and the haze-shrouded island far out in the inland sea, I thought about who I was and where I was headed. I've come a ways to get here, but I have a ways farther to go.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to sail around the world in a small sailboat. In my fantasies I went with my-one-true-love, a woman I have yet to meet but who I strongly suspect is named Martha Stewart. I even went so far as to tell my

childhood friend Dan Bradley that he could take his one-true-love and come along with me. Since then, he has found his one-true-love and taken a path largely divergent from mine.

By junior high I wanted to travel in a DC-3 prop. I traced my intended path on a light-up globe with colored thread and sticky putty, planning my imaginary itinerary according to how interesting the names sounded.

Unfortunately these plans were concomitant with staying on my Master Plan, which called for a best-selling novel by my junior year in high school, and the secret to anti-gravity by the time I got out of college (incidentally graduate study has never been in any of my long-range plans, no matter how grand and unrealistic they might have been).

Then came college and effective poverty. Five years of living frugally, not necessarily being a good student, but living without frills at any rate. Every time someone talked about their trip to Europe or the trip to Florida for spring break, I thought to myself, just wait until I get there by my own power, then we'll see some adventuring. I still had some idea of long-term traveling in my own vehicle.

By the end of college and through the blistering object lesson in practical economics that followed as I spent a year as a baker, the dream changed a little. It became: Just get the hell outta there. The motorcycle was a stroke of good luck. It never would have occurred to me if my ex-roommate Adam hadn't run out of money and offered to sell his very large, very black cycle. It was the perfect solution to my economic needs and my spiritual need to have total freedom of movement. The cultural antecedents were merely a bonus ("Hi, I'm the modern cultural equivalent of a cowboy").

My biggest break came because the Dewey decimal system files books on

motorcycling right next to books on martial arts. While at the public library perusing the jeet kune-do selection, I looked up and saw the title: “The Complete Motorcycle Nomad,” by Roger Lovin. It was published in 1974, when the motorcycle nomad movement was an important part of the counterculture. For most of the book, the author waxes poetic about the importance of nomads in history and how they facilitate cultural exchange. In between self-serving rants are step-by-step instructions for doing exactly what I planned. He covers everything from the basics of motorcycle riding, to wilderness first aid, to finding a parking place in a city, to finding a free place to sleep. I could not have hoped for a better source book.

My route so far has been as random as the routes I traced on that old globe. It's been based on hearsay, convenience, billboards, and by whatever name sounds most interesting on the map. I went through Thunder Bay because I saw a commercial for a mall up there and someone in Minnesota mentioned it in passing.

Sadly I saw very little of the city. I just followed the highways at the outskirts and did all my money changing and necessary errands in a little town called Ignace. I even managed to E-mail my friends and family. Even a town of 2,400 in the Canadian backwoods has a library with a public Web browser. Those evil socialists and their public works.

Wednesday, August 26, 1998

I drove through Manitoba today. In the space of a few kilometers (wow! gotta love the local lingo) the craggy, ravaged forests of Ontario gave way to a dead ringer for

South Dakota. Vast fields of wheat and grain stretched uninterrupted to the horizon. I had hoped to spend this night in a stolen camp, but there was no place to hide the bike. The only vegetation more than knee-high surrounded homesteads. I had hoped that driving through Canada would alleviate the boredom of the Midwestern states, but no such luck. I did see, just past Winnipeg, the smoke of field fires. They jutted out of the flat country like towering mountains of soot. One burned close enough to the highway that you could see the tiny orange flames licking the base, a miniature tractor sitting nearby for scale. I could see the headlights of a car squeezing underneath as it drove along a windward road. I thought of going around to get a better look, but thought better of it when I rode through the periphery and the smoke set my eyes stinging.

In retrospect, I ought to have been more spontaneous. The quest for the serendipitous adventure is the whole reason I'm doing this. Well, it's a part of the fantasy at any rate. During the late part of college, I had hoped to do a tour of the gritty underbelly of America, just like all those beatnik artists. At the very least, I wanted a few good stories, at the most I wanted to be a better person. How am I supposed to get into some truly borderline situations if I can't even take an exit to look at a controlled fire?

At this point, it would be best to tell a little about the two sides of my personality. One side is eccentric and volatile, and the other is steady and quiet. When I'm being boring, I think of myself as Matthew, but the more exciting side gets the old high school nickname of Ingvar. Ingvar is who I always wanted to be, a personality prototype drawn from the ideals of pulp science-fiction heroes and adopted during the long personality experiment called high school. Matthew is the passive Scandinavian who even now is deathly afraid of being socially inappropriate, who can't deal comfortably with retail

clerks.

Before I entered Canada, I worried about presenting my proof of insurance. I shook off the angst by looking at it from Ingvar's point of view: imagine being turned away from the Canadian border! How humorous to be denied access to such a pansy-assed country.

The teen-age girl in the campsite next to me last night gave me an appreciative stare when she thought I wasn't looking. I got a good view of her in the mirrors as I was pulling away. And a tall, very thin blond in a trench coat, flapper dress, and black lipstick smiled at me as I made an impromptu tour of Winnipeg's ghetto. Sure, she was probably a hooker, but hopefully these are all clues to my much anticipated cross-country-motorcycle-nomad libido bonus. Part of the Ingvar myth is skill with the ladies, you understand. Matthew can't make head nor tail of them.

I have changed. A few days ago I saw myself in a mirror and barely recognized myself. My hair is growing out from the close buzz I've had for the past two years and I haven't shaved since August 14. A beard I never even knew I could grow is already covering my face. I even spoke with a couple of clerks without discomfort.

Less positively, the bug splatters on my jacket are attracting flies. The Canadian highway is covered with little yellow butterflies that insist on crossing the road right in front of my motorcycle. They stain my black leather jacket with the yellow of their wings and the green of their guts. Occasionally one of the thumb-sized grasshoppers will dart out from the ditch and collide with my faceplate with a sharp crack. When I walked

into a general store to buy a candy bar, the flies buzzed around me and crawled over my chest, licking up the goo.

Thursday, August 27, 1998

When you get up to highway speed and you're gritting your teeth into the wind, there's a part of you that just doesn't want to stop until you drop. That sort of inertia can get you into trouble. I rode for 5 or 6 miles today with the fuel light flashing red in my eyes because a headwind made me misestimate my range by 15 miles. Luckily I found a gas station where I didn't anticipate one. Since there may be 50 miles straight of nothing but godforsaken Canadian wasteland, transnational highway or not, a mileage error on my five-gallon tank could strand me at an inconvenient place.

But I keep passing gas stations even when it's safer to stop. Partially I hate to stop, but also every damn service station in this country is full service, and until two hours ago I hadn't thought of a good way to tip the useless little buggers. Why do I need someone to hand me the pump and then run in my Visa card for the three bucks worth of gas that fit in the tank? But I will be gracious when in a foreign country.

My sister Lindsey confirmed for me that the attendants need to be tipped when I called her from the Alberta border. It's her birthday today. My little sister's birthday and mine are the only two that I remember on a consistent basis. She got the plastic bust of Abraham Lincoln that I mailed to her from Beaver Springs, Minnesota. It's a little worse for wear, it got cracked when I carried it in my bag across a few states. I had first given it to her in the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. She gave it back. It's changed hands a few times since then, and I thought sending it as a birthday present from Beaver



Springs, Minnesota, would be a classy continuation of the tradition.

There are some truly vast stretches of uninhabited land out here. And still no place to hide a bike. I could have pulled the bike off onto one of the uninterrupted seas of pronghorn-infested pasture land, but local campgrounds remain dirt cheap. A short, talkative Asian woman gave me this campsite for about four American dollars, which is the going rate for a shower in the lower 48. I not only got a shower and private bathhouse, but I also got to sleep on the lawn of a motel. There's even a picnic table.

The two women at the credit union in some little town whose name I forgot gave me 55 cents on the dollar when I made another cash conversion. The woman in the sixties horn rims told me it was the lowest rate ever.

How can I afford not to be in Canada? But I won't be here much longer. I put in 550 miles today. At this rate, even Canada will take a very short time to cross.

I wonder what life is like in a small Canadian town like this. Thoroughly boring? I was the only person in sight on the main street, and the only grocery store in town was completely empty. When I walked in, I disturbed an incongruously young woman from whatever she was doing in the back room; pursuing her real life I suppose. A grubby man walked in after me and stood right next to her. She knew he wanted a pack of cigarettes even before he spoke, teasing him with it. When I asked if their town had a public library, she referred me to a city in the next province.

She and everyone else is politely amused by my confusion with the local currency. I have to visually confirm the denomination of every coin since I don't want to

confuse their one dollar “loonie” with a smaller coin. The woman at the motel / campground congratulated me on recognizing a 2-buck piece.

I have more light than I expected. I spent all day racing the sun and now it needs some time to catch up.

Saturday, August 29, 1998 ~7:00am Pacific time

I made a last minute push last night to gain ground before stopping for the night. Consequently I didn't find a campground until way after sunset. I only got the tent set up minutes before total darkness.

The rest of the campground is only now waking up. Due to my central time conditioning, I woke up just as the sun was lighting up the sky.

I came in late last night because I took a good 80-mile detour in a clumsy search for gas. Luckily my mileage improves measurably without the constant headwind of the Great Plains. Even so, the fuel light switched on the very moment I saw the Shell logo at the side of the road. Always a welcome sight.

I wouldn't say the detour was wasted. After days of immeasurable flatness, I got a good look at the Rockies. At one point, I got within five feet of a flock of bighorn sheep standing placidly in the middle of the road.

With my fuel reserves depleted by the trip back to the highway, I had to stop at the next town, Canmore. My first impression of the town came from the beautiful blonde in

khaki shorts trimming weeds at the side of the road. That may not be a terribly enlightened observation, but through most of Canada I went cold turkey on the young and beautiful. All through Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and most of Alberta, I didn't see anyone but crusty field hands and back-country yokels. The 18-30 demographic must not live out there. Then I see all these hordes of nattily dressed young people who come to Canmore primarily to visit the Banff national park area. Here the trucks dirty from driving on gravel roads give way to sport utility vehicles and Volkswagens.

I had to sit at an outdoor restaurant for a while and watch the locals. Quite the modern crowd, with punks and hippies and everything. It made me feel like I was back home in Madison.

Driving through Calgary, I made a half-hearted attempt to find a good Cuban cigar, but the liquor store had no tobacco products at all. You would think they would be more inclined toward smoking in Calgary, what with all the smog. A definite brown haze surrounds the city. A good Cuban would clean out your lungs after a day of city air.

As for serendipitous adventure, I saw a power line explode in Strathmore when I stopped at a service station there. It made a sound like a cannon going off, and I oriented to the noise just in time to see a cloud of sparks and smoke mushrooming into the air, the circuit breakers swinging madly. A guy with a white van crouched down looking wildly about, a windshield squeegee dripping in his hand. I thought of calling out to reassure him, but I was already at the stoplight. For about 15 seconds, all the lights were blank and people rushed through the intersection without slowing, miraculously avoiding

collision with cross traffic. Then the lights reset, and I drove on.

One of the kicks of riding a motorcycle is waving at all the bikers you pass. My old roommate Jer says the etiquette goes something like this: you wave if you see someone on the same type of motorcycle and you wave if you see someone where you wouldn't expect to see another motorcycle, like way out in the country or during inclement weather. Hard-core Harley riders won't wave to someone not on a Harley, especially when surrounded by their cronies. Jer says it's because they're jerks. Quite right.

The closer I got to the mountains, the more motorcycles I saw. I waved so much I rarely had my hands on the bars. But I'll never grow tired of that camaraderie.

Now that I'm on the western side of the mountains, the road has done nothing but drop. The highway does excruciating curlicues, clinging to the sides of steep mountains, helixing with train tracks. I had to flip up my highway pegs at one point because I was afraid they would scrape the asphalt when I leaned into a turn. At times, I could drive in a straight line just by changing lane position through the curves. Then when you ride through the shadow of a mountain, the temperature drops 10 degrees, all that mass of granite sucking up the heat. I'll give British Columbia credit, just like it says on the license plates, it's plenty beautiful out here.

In an effort to improve my spiritual health, I read the first passage of the Hagakure yesterday. It is an ancient samurai text, which supports, among other things,

the virtue of dying in a desperate and insane manner. In the past, I found it helpful to read the Hagakure whenever I started thinking I was immortal, not that a motorcyclist often has that luxury. I intend to read a passage a day and meditate on it while riding.

During college, the travel fantasy included me going from town to town preaching the word as a pilgrim or a prophet. This was back when I preached on a regular basis. After a while, it became clear that I had no idea what the word was or even how to find it. I have yet to find a spiritual epiphany to resolve the issue, nor have I preached in years. Too bad, I have never been as extroverted and lucid as those nights when I spat and shouted at a confused crowd. It may not have had much point but it was fun.

In summary, the first passage of the Hagakure says one must think out ahead of time what it means to be a samurai. The real question, of course, is what it means to be me.

I should be within a reasonable distance of Vancouver. Not that I know what I'll do when I get there. I'll follow this damn trans-Canadian highway until I get to the very last inch. Then I might stay in town for a while. Or I might move on, back down to the states. I need to get a number of things mailed to me from back home, so I'll either have to stay in one place for a few days, or arrange to meet it somewhere.

I wonder, will I know where I need to be when I get there?

Sunday, August 30, 1998

Back when I lived in Madison, doing laundry had been a calming, regenerative act. It was a time when I didn't have to do anything of importance, just sit around while

some machines did all the work. John Brown's laundromat on Bedford was particularly restful. He kept it immaculately clean, and he came through every half hour to greet the regular customers and wipe down the machines. Even when I lived in that apartment building on Wilson Street, which had laundry machines in the basement, I kept going to his laundromat. Of course, if I used the laundry in my building I might meet more of my neighbors, a skanky bunch the whole lot of them. Especially that naked guy.

The “Naked Guy” incident marked a low point in my life of the past year. It was shortly after moving into the Wilson Street apartment, and the first time I cleaned my laundry. It was in the afternoon of a bright, sunny day, and I was heading home with the laundry bag thrown over my shoulder when I saw the naked guy. He was about twenty, skinny, white, with a tattoo on his right shoulder, and curly, blonde hair. He walked up and down the sidewalk, talking to pedestrians, titillating a group of Asian exchange students across the street, and occasionally lying on his back in the grass, his pink testicles shining in the sun.

At this point, I'm thinking this is no big deal. I've seen plenty of naked people before. Madison has a reputation as a liberal town with a relaxed attitude toward nudity, and as a party town where people sometimes lose track of their clothes. In fact, I knew I was too jaded to live in Madison when in college I saw five naked guys on bicycles ride off a pier into Lake Mendota, and it didn't amuse me at all. This was the first time I had seen a naked guy in daylight.

As I walked closer, he got off his back and went into my apartment building. This made me very uncomfortable. A naked guy on the street is a far cry from one where you live. I followed him inside, to find him standing on the second-floor landing of the

narrow stairwell. Feigning nonchalance, and pretending that I wasn't averting my eyes (which I was), I climbed past him.

"Hey," I said, as if not addressing a naked guy.

"Hey," he said, as if not naked.

A woman was waiting at the security door to my floor. I figured she had already rang the bell, so I unlocked the door for her. At that moment, the naked guy came up behind us.

"Hey, Sally. I've been looking all over for you." Then he grabbed her from behind and put his hand up her shirt.

The woman began to scream and sob, and she took off running down the hall, the naked guy in close pursuit. He tackled her right in front of the door to my apartment. He wrestled with her, his white buttocks flashing in the air.

Sometimes you see conflicts between people, and you don't know if you should interfere, or pretend that you didn't notice. This wasn't one of those situations. I began to yell at the naked guy. I don't know exactly what I said, but I was loud enough that my neighbors told me about it afterward. As I mentioned, I have significant martial arts training, and I know a number of techniques that would have stopped him, but they all would have involved touching him, which I really didn't want to do. At least I could tell he wasn't armed.

Just as I was about to physically drag him off her, the naked guy lunged at me and screamed over and over, "You lose! Word of God! You lose! Word of God! You lose! Word of God!" His eyes flashed like a crazy, ranting naked guy.

He was so skinny that I could hold him at arms reach by pressing two fingers into

his chest. Eventually, everyone ran off, and I didn't have to touch the naked guy any more than absolutely necessary. In the following month I pieced together that the two of them lived on the floor beneath me, and they had been sharing a bad trip. It was the most colorful encounter in a series of unpleasant interactions with my seedy neighbors.

I'm using the laundry in the campground as a point of focus around which the rest of the world may revolve. Vancouver has me so shell-shocked I can do little else but stare into space as I listen to clothes spinning. Everything about this city seems oriented to either put you into sensory overload or take your money, usually both. They have shopping carts that require a deposit to use!

I feel entirely out of my depth here, just a country boy in his first big city. This is the first time I've been this alone. I came here by myself, and no one I know lives within two time zones. I've never even heard anyone mention visiting this damn town. So why am I here?

Ostensibly I am here because this is where Highway One ends. After taking the damn highway across the damn country, I would be damned if I didn't follow it to its conclusion.

After writing in my journal yesterday morning, I had hoped to reach Vancouver and the end of Highway One within a few hours and then take the rest of the day to find out what I wanted to do with my life and with Vancouver. Did I want to stay the night in a motel, maybe get a weekly rate? I've never even stayed in a motel, let alone checked into one by myself without a reservation or planning. Maybe I wanted to drive on through and leave the country? How was I going to get my mail delivered to me, including the vital insurance papers? I needed to solve half a dozen problems, and I



didn't know where to begin.

Unfortunately the road wasn't like it was through Manitoba and Saskatchewan: flat and straight. The road twisted nightmarishly through valleys and mountain passes. When I finally got to Vancouver and its own interminable traffic woes, it was already near dark. I fumbled through the ferry gates at the end of Highway One and annoyed the guard there by asking if there was somewhere I could stop for a while (I would continue to use the "play it dumb and ask for directions" ploy whenever I changed my mind about paying a fare or an entrance fee). She directed me to Horseshoe Bay, a clean little touristy spot filled with families and well-dressed young couples. My friend Maureen was right when she said that big cities are filled with people who look nicer than people in Wisconsin. Everyone here seems cleaner, as if they have a much better salary than anyone I've met as well as a better fashion sense.

For a country boy cheese-head who had literally come to the end of his road, I felt very lonely indeed.

To make matters worse, I couldn't access my account balances over the phone, maybe because I threw away the PIN number for the touch-tone system, assuming I would never need it. So, not knowing how much money I had left after bumming it across country and drawing willy-nilly from my checking account, I took off blindly in search of an ATM.

Sometimes the technique of driving randomly in search of something pays off, at others it turns into a grand fiasco, like when I tried to find a Mailboxes Etc. in Duluth. This time I got lost in a labyrinth of sea-view luxury homes. I had to follow a moving van to get back to the highway.

There I was, in a near panic, aimless, and the sun was going down. Miraculously I saw the symbol for a tent camp, and I followed it to what must be the worst camp in the whole world. I'm camped out in the middle of a playground. Children with cap guns are running past my tent, see-saws and tether balls flank me. On top of that, it's expensive, at least more so than the roadside campgrounds in the Canadian wilderness. A couple who came in after me put it into words: "This sucks." They set up their tent in the horseshoe pit.

The second reading in Hagakure yesterday said if you decide that your body is already dead, you will be fearless in your endeavors. The closest I came to that yesterday was when I fearlessly asked directions to see the movie Blade. After a few wrong turns, I found my way through this unfamiliar city with the camp clerk's directions. Parking was a disaster. I left my bike in a "parkade" that closed before I got out of the theater. I had to ask a security guard how to get in.

Luckily the movie took my mind off all my anxieties. As vampire kung-fu flicks go, Blade even surpassed The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires.

Today is turning out a little better. I went out looking for more paper, batteries, breakfast, and a reasonably sized box of laundry detergent. I found all within a relatively short period. The head-out randomly strategy even worked with the detergent. A friendly little Asian man at a corner laundromat cheerfully sold me a single-load box of Tide.

(evening)

I spent the afternoon in orientation, driving around getting the hang of the city. It's not that big and frightening after all, maybe the size of Minneapolis. I have the general map of the city in my head now. Quite frankly I can't imagine a more beautiful place. All day I didn't see anything resembling a ghetto. All the people looked really clean, especially the immigrants, every one of whom dressed better than me.

I found the city's promenade, where the interesting people went to walk and shop. I ate some cheesecake and drank iced tea at a sidewalk cafe while discreetly watching the crowds pass by.

Tomorrow morning, I will use the campground's pitiable fitness center and then head back to the states. For what people pay for the place, you would think they could find better equipment than a plastic and aluminum universal gym.

Tuesday, September 1, 1998

I got a nasty shock the other night when I looked at my receipt from the campground in Vancouver and noticed that the friendly counter clerk had completely misspelled the name of my hometown. She spelled it "Madicine, WI," which betrays how far I was from home and how little anyone cares.

I stayed up late that night watching anime and basically annoying the campground's children by hogging the TV with my own peculiar tastes.

Yesterday morning on my way out of Vancouver and Canada I stopped at an A&W to spend the last of my loonie funny-money. There I heard someone say 'eh,' for

the first time. They were two trucker/handyman types, and they spent their meal talking about the relative insulation merits of aluminum and wood doors.

The man at the border gave me even less trouble on the trip back in than I had getting out. He didn't even ask for my name, just where I was born. He must have figured that anyone claiming to be from Minneapolis really must be an American.

## **Unbelievable Coincidences**

In Washington the first coffee is free. I didn't drink any myself, but the lady at the tourist information booth gave me a whole bunch of maps and ferry timetables and told me the quickest way to get to Olympic National Park. If I hadn't asked, I wouldn't have known you could just cut across the whole damn sound on a ferry. It saved me a lot of time as well as the hazardous drive through Seattle.

The ferry itself was extremely well appointed for a 10-minute cruise. I parked my bike between a family minivan and an RV camper and left my gear to explore the rest of the ship. The passenger deck had a cafeteria, fast-food style seating, an observation promenade, and a brochure center. Like the rest of the trip, the weather was well-nigh impeccable, clear skies and calm seas. Isn't there supposed to be a lot of rain around here? Must be El Niño.

Port Townsend, on the other side of the sound, overflowed with hippies. They were everywhere, riding in their VW buses or walking with their backpacks, tie-dies, drums, and guitars. It's that West Coast counterculture.

I got to the park with a good deal of daylight left. Randomly I picked a campsite

in the darkness beneath 20-story Douglas firs and paid my fees. I don't really know why I'm here.

At the pay phone by the ranger station, I called my family. I talked to them for a little while, telling them about my travels. I admitted to my mom that I wasn't talking to people as much as I liked. For most of my childhood, I lived out in the country, miles from the nearest peer. I spent a lot of time alone, walking through the forest or boating in the Wisconsin River. I didn't mind the loneliness anymore than a fish minds the cold. Then during high school or college, I became an intensely social creature, actually seeking out human company. I would become despondent without daily interaction. I guess living with five roommates who share many of your interests will do that to you.

I'm getting back a little of the old introspective self-reliance on this trip. My mind is always buzzing and doing something on its own. That's how I tolerated living in the country, by turning inward and making my fantasy life my creative and social outlet. That must be a dangerous way to live. It makes it difficult to tell what is real.

I had a vivid dream last night. It started as a nightmare of sorts: I found myself at a Christian youth camp. When I rebelled from the ice breaker game and ran off down the pier, a young camper told me I had to stay to the left side of the dock because the nets only protect you from the sharks on that side. I lifted up a part of the pier and scooped the water with the net, catching a mermaid. She was a petulant child, only as long as my arm. I enticed her out of the net with promises of chocolate, but all I could find at the camp were a few chocolate chip cookies so I had to go downtown to a restaurant owned by the Greek pantheon. . .

That dream, for instance, is not real.

Thursday, September 3, 1998

When I tried to check my oil the other day, I couldn't find it. No matter how often I reread the manual and rechecked, no oil showed in the little window. This shook me badly. I imagined metal grinding against metal, tearing up my motorcycle's guts. I hadn't checked the oil since Saskatchewan, because the bike hadn't lost even a drop of oil before this. It just wasn't something that I thought I needed to worry too much about. I can only hope that the oil loss was only natural for the sort of high-altitude riding I had been doing and wasn't caused by a hole in my bike or a serious malfunction. That bike is my lifeline, my freedom, and my only home. A lot depends on it.

So the day I would have spent enjoying the park I spent running around satisfying my motorcycle anxieties. I didn't even get the appropriate grade of oil for this weather. But it was only a quarter of the oil volume, so I'm sure it won't seriously upset the performance.

Once I took care of the oil, I rode up to Hurricane Ridge which has a fantastic view. I saw a marmot that had to be practically kicked off of the path. A guy hiking in front of me threw little pebbles that bounced off its mangy fur, and it still wouldn't budge. At the visitor center, a perky intern gave a wildflower lecture and some other tourists said they were from Wisconsin. I probably would have talked to them, but that would have been a little too touristy.

Yesterday I hiked up to Lake Angeles, climbing higher than any point in Wisconsin, including radio towers. Then I tried to drive out to the most extreme

northwest point in continental United States, out in the Makah Indian reservation. With only a mile or so to go, I had to backtrack to the highway due to the unpleasant road conditions and falling fuel levels.

The good news is I have a valid mailing address for all the paperwork piling up at home. And I called my former employers about a check that hasn't arrived yet. Although when the boss will get around to it is anyone's guess.

At the public library in Clallam Bay, WA, a building little larger than a toolshed, I found three whole Internet computers, and no lines to use any of them. It reminded me of an Onion article about giving home pages to the homeless. Out here in the Pacific Northwest, which exists mostly in cyberspace, there is room for everyone in the Internet. Before the librarian kicked me out to close up, I caught up on my E-mail.

Last night, worried about my long-term finances, I used my first "found" campsite. Somewhere on a relatively uninhabited segment of the Olympic Peninsula, I pulled onto a side road and drove into the first gap in the trees. The Complete Motorcycle Nomad recommends scouting out the area before committing yourself to a campsite. Going in blind was not terribly bright. The bike sunk into a covering of pine needles a foot deep and stalled. A pile of rusted bed springs and ancient garbage kept me from going far enough into the woods to get out of sight. If someone were to look directly to the side while driving past, they just might see the tail end of my motorcycle.

So I uprooted a few weeds and stuck them in the entrance of my little hideaway.

Having rode in as far as I could go, I tried turning the bike around by hand so I could ride back out. While struggling through the duff, I managed to bend the handlebars down to the gas tank, making the bike unrideable until I could drag out the tool roll and make repairs.

The black bike and black wardrobe affords me relative safety at night, so I settled back to wait for dark. Every time a car drove by, I would crouch down behind the bike, hiding beneath the waist-high weeds.

Around dusk, just as I got comfortable and felt a little safe, I heard loud and masculine voices. I froze, worried that the crinkling of Little Debbie wrappers had given me away. Then I heard rapid gunshots, four or five in succession. At the first few, I was willing to discount them as locals practicing at the nearby gravel pit. Toward the end, no matter what my mind told me, fear churned my intestines. I felt certain the gunmen knew about me. I had visions of Deliverance-esque good-ol-boys out looking for someone to kill who wouldn't be missed.

I stayed very quiet from then on.

Sleep came in starts and stops. I would wake up every time a car would pass. Toward morning, a night bird flew slowly past that sounded very much like someone whistling to their dog. My sleepy, paranoid imagination worried that a dog might sniff me out and cause trouble. I lay very still and very quiet, reassuring myself that I had nothing to worry about.

Unable to return to sleep, I packed the bike, using my lighter sporadically to see in the pre-dawn darkness. Turning the motorcycle around got a lot easier after I realized I still had it in gear. Normally I put it in neutral when I turn it off, but it had turned itself



off when I stalled it.

The dawn was so dark and damp that the fog on my visor, eyeglasses, and rearview mirrors made it impossible to drive. I stopped often by the side of the road to squeegee my glasses on my shirt and warm my back against the muffler. The sky took an unbearably long time to grow light.

I saw the ocean for the first time through a dense fog that swelled inland. The tidepools are as I remember them, filled with all manner of crusty and slimy things attached to the rocks. Maybe I'm just a Midwestern hick, but tidepools could entertain me indefinitely. Every time I find a new tidepool and peek inside, the anemones, urchins, and crabs surprise me.

There is more driftwood here than in Northern California. A whole forest of wave-smoothed logs litter the high-tide mark.

Sitting at this overlook as the sun burns away the fog, I am surrounded by hundreds of huge banana slugs. It took me a few minutes to notice them. They seem to be feasting on the raspberry plants, about one finger-sized piece of slime per branch.

(Evening)

The only thing I remember from junior high, aside from the smell, is this short story where a man bets that years in a closed room with no human contact will make him a better man. It was one of those modernist morality plays that believed sufficient reason can overcome anything.

I'm in a similar situation, and I find it excruciating. After leaving the crashing surf at Olympic Beach park, I drove down Highway 101 with the intention of visiting the

temperate rainforest. Only a few miles down the road, I found a potential campsite so appealing I couldn't turn it down.

An old clear-cut lot with just enough vegetation to hide my bike had an ungated access road. Normally lumber lots either have a gate or the entrance is bulldozed away to prevent undesirables like me from camping there and starting fires. Trees had grown through the gravel, suggesting no one had visited for quite a while. I gave the lot two passes, once more than the last attempt, and dived right in.

I stopped about 200 feet in at a clearing made from the conjunction of several access roads. A thick blackberry bramble surrounded the gravel circle.

Pleased with what looked like the perfect campsite, I parked the bike and checked the map.

According to the map, I was trespassing in the middle of Quinault tribal property. Suddenly every snap of thistle and rustle of leaves put me on edge. I have no qualms about camping in a corporate forest, nobody working in the field would likely care too much about trespassers. The Quinault on the other hand, might not take kindly to the white man stealing their land again. My embarrassment might have prompted me to leave, but laziness trumps embarrassment any day.

So there I was, determined to have a peaceful and uneventful second "found" campsite, and it wasn't even noon yet.

I lacked the energy and the patience to work straight through on any of the projects I had on hand, so I puttered. I did some writing and revising on old short stories, my fountain pen scribbling on the clipboard. I looked at the map and charted possible routes and points of interest. I drew up lists of goals and accomplishments, budgeting my

trip for the next month. I tried carving chess pieces and meditating. I sampled the remainder of my food: four Little Debbie snacks and a bag of peanuts. I pooped in holes twice, but even that couldn't relieve my growing boredom.

Walking about the little clearing, I found animal droppings filled with blackberry seeds. From the size and shape, I guessed they came from a medium-weight black bear. It must be in the habit of feeding right where I put my tent.

A pair of quail broke the monotony late in the afternoon. They stepped down the overgrown logging trail in the shade of underbrush, ignoring me. They chirped and burred, their throats bristling outward.

For a few brief moments in the afternoon, when I completely exhausted my entertainment resources, I knew why I took this trip. There was a feeling of now, of immediacy. I stopped caring if anyone found me.

Friday, September 4, 1998

Last night I slept well and got out of my stolen campsite without incident, leaving no trace of my residence. The Quinault nation will never know the difference.

While it was still early, I drove out to the Queets rainforest. I would have thought twice about it if I'd only known I would need to drive down 13 miles of gravel road. Trying to make turns on loose gravel and an uneven grade made me tip the bike over twice. The first time, the front wheel slipped out over a steep ditch, sliding farther down every time I took it out of gear to push it back up. My motorcycle has no reverse and weighs somewhere around 700 pounds, so pointing it downhill with no room to turn puts

the solo rider in a bit of spot. Gravity wants it to roll forward, and it's too big to push by hand. I finally pulled it out using a method the owner's manual would have explicitly forbade if they ever thought someone might try it. I tipped the bike on its side and dragged it. Hopefully no real damage occurred to the bike, either from the long, bumpy ride through a dusty road or through my own clumsiness. Next time I take a cross-country trip, I'll either use an off-road bike or one light enough that I can carry it on my back when the going gets really rough. This 1100 is just too big to manhandle effectively.

All in all, the detour was worth it. I got to sample some blackberries to supplement my diet of peanuts and Little Debbie snacks. And I certainly couldn't have left the Olympic Peninsula without taking a look at the only temperate rainforest in the Northern Hemisphere. It looked like the postcards, everything covered in moss and ferns. The guidebook said to watch for nurse logs, fallen trees that new trees use to take root. When the nurse log rots away, colonnades of trees remain with log shaped holes imprinted in the roots.

I can't believe I didn't bring my nine dollar camera along on the trail, I missed so many picture opportunities. I even stumbled on the largest Douglas fir in the park, a tree literally as tall as Godzilla. If it could move, it would be qualified to topple the Tokyo radio tower.

On the drive back to the highway, I saw several dozen Roosevelt elk. Rangers told me several times that these animals were too shy and cunning for most people to see. When I stopped, they just stood and stared at me, a bare 15 feet away amid the ferns of the rainforest. Only when I stopped the engine did they scatter, bounding so powerfully it

looked like slow motion.

Going to the rainforest almost stranded me without gas. When I got back to the highway, I emptied my camp-stove fuel bottle into the gas tank for that little extra range. Even so I went nearly 20 miles on reserve with the warning light shining at me. By the end of this trip, I'll have burned out the fuel indicator, I just know it. The warning light must give me at least a 20-mile buffer, because the bike has yet to sputter.

The owner/headmistress of this campground broke the streak of cheerful people I've met in Washington. Everyone else here acts as if they never had a bad day in their lives. Maybe it's all the coffee.

So this crabby woman charged me 15 bucks to stay in the light industrial section of Tumwater, a suburb of Olympia. Maybe she was cross with me because I'm the only one in the campground under the age of 60.

Let's be fair. Although I didn't see anyone really unhappy, Aberdeen, Washington, was filled with the ugliest yokels you could ever meet. The first person I saw had slicked-back hair, tight jeans, a mangy service station attendant moustache, a gold chain necklace, and a peach polyester shirt unbuttoned to the navel. It only got worse from there, everyone being stupid, fat, poor, ugly, and poorly dressed. You couldn't imagine a town less like Vancouver.

Interestingly enough, when I was sitting in a park in Olympia, a kid approached me and asked if I had been in Aberdeen.

"You were at the Swanson's right?" he asked.

“You mean that, um, grocery store?”

“Yeah, I saw you there, and I was just wonderin’ if you were headed back that way. You see the bus is two bucks and I’m flat broke.”

“Nah, I ain’t ever going back to Aberdeen.” I began rummaging about in my pockets looking for two bucks to give him. I didn’t feel used despite being “spanged” because I really didn’t want to see that ugly little town again. And the serendipity deserved a little recognition. “Don’t look like there’s much in that town.”

“Yeah I know, but I saw you and I thought I’d see. And you were on a bike right?”

“Yeah.”

“Since it’s parked over there. . .” He searched for something to fill the awkward silence while he waited for me to produce some money.

“Nah, it’s over there, but close.”

“So what is this shit.” He referred to the Seattle-style rock band that was playing in the park gazebo. A bunch of hippies and counterculture youths scattered about the grass sat cross-legged and played subtle social games. He himself socialized with a circle of skater/hippie/raver hybrids who sat in a manner clearly relaying an absence of interest in the music.

“Hell if I know. I’m just passing through.”

“Oh, where you from?”

I had already found the two bucks and handed it off. He edged to make a break back to his friends. “Wisconsin.”

“Yeah?” He said in that particular blank manner that people get when you tell

them you're from Wisconsin. "Thanks, man."

I had wanted to ask him where and what Bumbleshoot might be. At a coffee shop, I had found an alternative weekly newspaper with obvious leftist leanings from Seattle that mentioned an interesting film festival going on at Bumbleshoot. It looked like the sort of thing that could keep me entertained until I rode to Eugene, Oregon, to get my mail that was forwarded to General Delivery. Only the listings in the paper didn't mention if it was a place or an event or even where I could find it, assuming that if you had access to the paper then you were damn well cool enough to know all about Bumbleshoot. I got the impression that it was a music/cultural festival of some sort and the films were just a part of the larger experience.

Overall I think Olympia is overshadowed by Seattle. It has an unremarkable governmental district and a picturesque downtown, but all the free newspapers lying around were from the Tacoma/Seattle area and didn't mention Olympia except in a political context.

But I had as much fun as can be expected of a stranger without a whole lot of money in a strange city. I had an iced coffee at a local nearly sidewalk cafe. Then I went to a local theater production that wonder of wonders, didn't suck. Some of the scene changes were segued awkwardly, but the characters were fresh in that post-post-modern David Foster Wallace-esque define your characters by their stigmata way.

Late that night, I found my way back to Tumwater where senior citizens in huge, white homes on wheels slept soundly under the watchful eye of a surly hostess.

Sunday, September 6, 1998

Just now I realized that I left my good fountain pen and my good notebook at a phone booth outside a gas station just north of Tacoma. I must have been pretty addled because I took a wrong turn getting out of the station and got lost in yet another labyrinth of luxury homes. I came out on the wrong highway, heading in the wrong direction.

I attribute the series of mistakes to the mental agitation following a near death experience a few minutes before. I had my feet up on the highway pegs, cruising along on the interstate, spending too much time watching my rearview mirrors and speedometer, when I suddenly noticed that the car in front of me wasn't actually moving. I didn't see any brake lights, just the rear end a of car getting closer mighty damn quick. With no time to get my foot on the rear brake, I clamped down on the clutch and front brake so hard and fast that the throttle stuck open. The engine redlined as I swerved through lanes without looking. Luckily whoever was in my right lane started slowing for the stopped traffic before I did, or I would have smeared across his hood. I swerved in a neat semicircle, braking to a halt directly in front of the car I almost hit.

There wasn't anything important in the notebook, but dammit, I loved that pen. Anyone can use a ballpoint, but who cares enough to use a fountain pen these days? The words just seem to taste better when you write them with juicy, black lines.

This new campground I've found doesn't have quite as many old people as the last one. The camp "ranger" was fairly young with a scraggly beard and a homemade tattoo on his left forearm that read "J.M." in really thick letters. When the other ranger came down we talked a little about the drive through Canada and he warned me about



loose gravel on the road up to my campsite.

Despite the warning, I wiped out twice trying to get my bike back down the hill. Going up hill wasn't too bad, but every time I tried to make a turn on the way down the wheels would scoot out from under me and I would find myself lying on my side with a huge bike on top of me. At one point, a guy had to help me push. This campground is so vast it was lucky anyone saw me at all. It's nothing but heavy forest and steep gravel roads. They chiseled the campsites into the bluff like rice-paddy terraces.

On top of that, the campground is within spitting distance of downtown Seattle. Using the "ranger's" instructions ("just head for the Space Needle") I found Bumbleshoot within 10 minutes.

Bumbleshoot is a huge arts and culture festival that fills the entire grounds from the Seattle world fair. The festival has every conceivable performance and exhibits in every conceivable medium. You just pay at the entrance and wander from event to event with all the thousands of milling Seattlites.

I was attracted here by the film, but I've been distracted by everything else.

First thing through the gate, I got lost, overwhelmed by the crowds and the noise. But as I wandered toward the film screenings, pushing my way through the mass of people, I saw a big, bald head that looked familiar. I turned to watch it, trying to place it in context. It turns out I actually did know him, his name was Matt, he was a friend of my friend Noel, and we had hung out at the same parties a few times back in Madison. He introduced me to his friend Anne, also from Madison, and we talked for a little bit about the unusually good weather here in Seattle and how friendly everyone is.

Midwestern acquaintances meet, and of course they talk about the weather.

Then I stood in line for the films. After some high-gloss, gimmicky, here-I-am-a-film-school-senior films, I went to see the Circus Ethiopia, a bunch of tumbling eight-year-olds who can touch the back of their head to their butt.

I ran into Matt again, this time with this guy named Dave who used to teach sailing at the UW student union. I talked some about my trip, and they talked about how they came to Seattle because they wanted to be where things were happening. They told me about the strange absence of bugs. Anne had asked her landlord if they had any screens for the windows, and she got a puzzled look. Apparently they have no need for screens because in this fairyland called Seattle there are no mosquitos who will fly into your home.

Then off to the classic burlesque film program featuring a drunk Marilyn Monroe and truly pathetic stripteases from the 1920s. Has anyone ever found a woman goose-stepping naked in a sailor's cap in the prurient interest? I walked out in disgust just in time to see most of I Stole William Shatner's Hairpiece: Not a True Story, about a trekkie geek who steals the toupee for its legendary sexual attributes. Afterward a digital ambiance jazz group improvised to experimental video, which was the only time I have seen an experimental, multimedia performance not suck.

As Bumbleshoot wound down, the Space Needle lit up with a blindingly bright moon shining through the joists. I could read the festival program by their light.

This morning I got up in time to do laundry before heading back to Bumbleshoot. The laundromat had a very serious looking sign announcing that no horse-blankets could

be washed there. Then I hightailed it back to Bumblehoot as fast as possible.

Seattle has the same damn hippies with the same damn drums.

Labor Day, Monday, September 7, 1998

I'd had just about enough of Bumblehoot. I hurried to get to there that morning, speeding along highways that crisscross through skyscrapers like the set from Metropolis. It took so long to find parking I worried I would miss the first event. In front of Bumblehoot, I started to cross the street three seconds before the traffic cop gave the signal. He strutted straight up to me, blocking me in the middle of the street. He wore an orange traffic vest over Kevlar armor, his head no higher than my collar.

“What were you thinking? Didn't you see all those other people waiting? What made you think you could cross?”

“I'm sorry. I should have waited,” I said bowing my head.

“Thank you,” said the cop, either vindicated for putting me back in my place, or amused by the insincere contrition.

I got to Bumblehoot in time to see Reds. But it wasn't a film, it was a goddamn play. I kept an open mind and watched it anyway since I'd already paid for the day-long pass and there weren't any films playing right then anyway. It proved an inventive if preachy story about Chinese opera during the Cultural Revolution. A brilliant performance from Hollywood's only Asian character actor won it a standing ovation.

After the play, I made a terrible mistake. I thought I would get a quick look around the Bumblehoot grounds. I looked at the hippies in their drum circles and ate

some pesto salmon. Then, with a good 40 minutes to spare, I thought I would get in line to see the premiere of Chicago Cab, a film with a cameo by Julianne Moore and a filmmaker Q&A following the screening. It was one of the principal draws that brought me to Bumbleshoot. When I got back to the theater, the line had already extended far past the arches of the theater mall.

The awful part was the suspense. For over an hour, we waited. The festival handlers would walk to a point about 10 feet behind where I stood and say anybody behind this line had no chance of making it in.

In the end, I missed the screening by a good hundred people, maybe more. But what really disappointed me was my failure to start a conversation with the pale and pretty blonde standing next to me in line. I managed a few comments along the line of “Is this the only screening?” And she made a few comments along the line of “If everyone else loses hope and leaves then we’ll get in.” She wished me luck after it became painfully obvious that neither of us would get in and left for other entertainments.

So I spent the next two hours in line waiting to see the shorts program. The old woman behind me talked, worrying out loud if the films were worth a long wait (Seattle, never to be outdone in irony, holds a youth-oriented culture and music fest every year and gives senior citizens free admission). I told her that the shorts I saw last night were quite well made. Which was true. Unfortunately the first 40 minutes of the shorts program dealt with everything from cannibalism to incest to serial murder. The old folks left sometime after the Dirty Baby Does Fire Island segment and before the selections got better.

I slept through the Labor Day breakfast at the campground, partially because I was pooped from the whole Bumbleshoot experience, but mainly I didn't want to see the guy who occupied a restroom I entered and who immediately pulled his pants down the rest of the way before I had a chance to back out.

My new campsite has only marginally better neighbors. Since Dave the sailing instructor guy told me that federal forests were free camping if you got off the road, I thought I would sleep there before going to the Tacoma Tortured Artist Film Festival. Because this is Labor Day and only a few miles from Seattle, the roads were choked with people recreating. I constantly waved to passing bikers. When I turned off on a national forest road, I passed dozens and dozens of vehicles, hiking, fishing, and camping. Just now, in the pitch black night, two brothers (I know this because they were shouting at each other) came down the trail on which I am camped. I could hear their pickup crashing through brush as they skidded down a hill three degrees short of a cliff.

For most of the afternoon, I relaxed, reading a trashy fantasy novel I picked up at a nearby Safeway. I listened to people target shooting in a nearby quarry. Just once I would like to camp for free without hearing gunfire really close by. Although having a legitimate right to a campsite really helps the nerves.

Having boiled most of my water into my macaroni, I thought I would seek out the nearby river and boil myself some new drinking water. With my camp-stove fuel bottle refilled with unleaded, I could theoretically sterilize enough drinking water to last me days. I set out in my sandals with the pot from my mess kit, and after stumbling through underbrush and a gravel embankment, I found that the river was at the bottom of a very steep ravine. I stood there, in the growing dark, blood oozing from the cuts on my feet,

holding a pint-sized pot and decided I could wait until morning.

Thursday, September 10, 1998

When I left my campsite near Mount Rainier Tuesday morning, my streak of cloudless Washington skies had been broken. A gray overcast covered the sky, reaching down to touch the tops of the hills.

As I drove to Tacoma I formulated my plan: find a sidewalk cafe, get juiced up on caffeine, get the location of the Tacoma Tortured Artist film festival, then find a good place to sleep for the night. I drive slowly through town, making a mental note of where I would find the cultural hub of the city, then I cruised along the waterfront. I found a fish'n' chips/bait shop by a fishing pier and got my breakfast and coffee there from a distracted co-ed. This particular pier had a whole troop of regulars who milled about pretending to fish and gossiping with one another and the girl at the baitstand. A very fat seagull sat at the peak of the shop's roof crying mournfully at the gray skies. A pair of crows gargled water from a spigot that poured water through the bait-shop's wall into the sound. One of the ubiquitous ferries, a white dot in the distance, crossed by the far shore.

On finishing my meal, I went through the yellow pages dangling from a nearby phone. The campground listing was painfully bare, but I thought I could find the place in Eatonville and get back in time for the festival. After about 40 minutes of riding, I decided it was too far or I had passed it already. So I turned around, headed for the KOA in Kent, but after asking for their rates I went "arrrr" long enough that the woman on the phone told me I should call back.

Which I never did, because I gave up on attending the festival and headed off

down the interstate. I figured I could continue on my journey to Eugene and just find a place to stay when I got too tired to go any farther. On my way south, after a lot of false turns, detours, and traffic jams, I made it to “Mother Nature’s Acres, a camping “club” just off I-5 and closer than any of the campgrounds in the yellow pages. I spent an entire day wandering about, fruitlessly chasing down leads and finally ended up with the campground I would have found anyway if I had just started riding in a logical direction. This was a vindication of my “educated guess” strategy of navigation and resource acquisition, which I had used to poor effect in Duluth but served just fine in this case.

Not that I wandered in vain. I managed to see the Tacoma Narrows bridge, the rebuilt and less flexible version of course. After seeing the footage of its oscillating collapse so many times in physics class in high school, it appalls me to think I might have passed through without seeing it.

I also had to refine my theory that people in Washington are so friendly because of the uncharacteristically good weather. Even with overcast skies, they’re pretty damn friendly. While looking at the Washington map in the parking lot of the Kent public library I was addressed by three people in close succession.

“Nice bike,” said the passing child.

“Thanks,” I smiled.

“Me and my brother really like motorcycles.”

“They’re a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, they really love ‘em,” inserted their father.

“So you going to let them have one?”

“Not yet,” he said with an aggravatingly indulgent parental smile. “It’s a little too

early still.”

Then when that family drove off, an elderly couple parked in their space.

“Can I help you with that map?” the old man boomed.

“Well, no,” I bowed my head and smiled sheepishly. “I don’t know where I’m going yet.”

“That would be a problem then,” he said taking the refusal in good humor.

“What do you need?” asked a tall cherubic computer geek/gamer type who just happened to be walking by.

“A direction,” I snapped flippantly.

“Well, that’s north, that’s east, that’s west, and I think that’s south.”

“Ahhh,” I moaned the standard response to all stupid jokes.

Never before had I been so aggressively targeted as an object of friendliness by complete strangers. Maybe it’s the bike. Not that everyone in Washington has been friendly. In their cars, they are the most ruthless and impatient people I have ever witnessed. Several times daily I get a chin flick for not pulling fast enough into traffic. And the gate warden at Mother Nature’s Acres continued the tradition of surly campground hosts.

“We’re 15 dollars a night, you know,” he snapped. When that didn’t discourage me he added, “Just don’t go riding around the park on your bike. Just go to your site and back.”

“What?” I asked, confused and struggling to take off my helmet and gloves. It didn’t occur to me that anyone would want to go joyriding around a campground, so I didn’t know why he would mention it. “You mean like off-roading or something?”



“No. Just riding around. To your site and back. That’s all we ask.”

After I set up my things in the camp and took off for the Tacoma Tortured Artist Film Festival, I could see him craning his neck over the guardhouse windowsill like the crusty old busybody he was. When I got back late that night, I was surprised, to find that someone was still minding the gate, an aging hippie type with long gray hair, a long gray beard, and an orange down vest. He held the gate up for me.

“You can go through. Tom said you’d be coming back. You wouldn’t happen to have a cigarette would you, guy?”

I got the film festival’s address at a coffee shop in Tacoma’s theater district. It had a posh lounge area, which it shared with an antique/vintage clothing store. On the sidewalk, black-clad youths with natty hair smoked cigarettes and drank coffee. Inside were a number of local weeklies and the complete film festival brochure. I had already missed the very first show, a collection of animated shorts, but luckily it repeated later in the evening.

Instead of asking where I could find the festival from anybody at the cafe, I practiced my “educated guess,” wander-around-randomly technique, with only half an hour to spare before the next show. Luckily Tacoma has a small downtown, so I found the theater after 15 minutes or so.

The theater, inappropriately named The Grand Cinema, rotted in a dilapidated old building, a converted storefront with a cash register set on a podium instead of a ticket booth. In fact there weren’t any tickets. The clerk just handed me a receipt, and the woman at the entrance simply took it. No ticket stubs, no tearing, I was in and they

assumed I knew what I was doing.

The best thing about the theater was the “lower lobby,” a lounge filled with movie posters of independent films from the past 10 years and folding tables with puzzles scattered about in various stages of assembly. In one corner, two bored women sold beer from a keg and wine from two-liter glass bottles. Behind the elevator shaft projecting through the middle of the room sat two curb-quality, imitation leather, reclining armchairs and an electric fireplace (turned off). When the rumor went through the lobby that the first screening was running over time, I decided I would have a plastic cup of cheap red wine after all.

The film festival itself had the nerve to be in video. The first film, or video copy of a film, was shot by a Frenchman in the desert Southwest for pocket change. Luckily, the heroine was beautiful, but the script suffered from no end of muddle. It started with a Sartre-esque “No Exit” scenario of three people who don’t like each other lost in the middle of the desert in a rusting truck. Then it petered out into extended anti-climax and clumsy symbolism.

The series of animated videos that followed entertained me, but I had seen them all before. I liked the Android Sisters segment, a spin-off of the classic ZBS radio characters, a pair of repetitively rapping android subversives. It was one of their less concise monologues about the perils of defense spending.

The next day, I set out as early as I reasonably could get going. My plan was to get out of Washington as fast as possible so I would never again have to cross and recross that same stretch of I-5 from Olympia to Seattle.

The side trip to Mount Saint Helens took longer than I anticipated. The highway went through more of those tortuous, winding roads that perched halfway up a mountainside.

The memories of the eruption are pretty vivid for something so early in my childhood. I was only 6 at the time, but I remember the anticipation as the scientists predicted the explosion, the mountain bulging out, the evacuations, and all those images of ash and rock exploding outward.

I didn't see much of the crater itself, only the barest hint extended beneath cloud cover. I decided that watching cloud wasn't worth paying the government eight bucks, so I began the long, cold drive back down the mountain. On my way, I stopped at the visitor center operated by the ultra-giant logging company Weyerhaeuser, which unlike the government didn't charge for entry.

Weyerhaeuser is the corporation that owns pretty much all of Washington state. They have signs marking their property every half mile, and they gate all their woodlots. The visitor center, as one would suspect of a corporate mouthpiece, had a biased view of Weyerhaeuser participation in Mount Saint Helens rescue efforts. But the three minute documentary video, with actual footage of the catastrophe, was one of the most moving experiences of my life. It is shown continuously in a room outfitted to look like a cross-section of the disaster scene. The visitors sit on fallen pieces of timber. A ragged concrete section of broken bridge is against the wall, and one corner is filled with an overturned Toyota 4x4 (the exact taxonomy provided by a camcorder wielding father of three). Everything is covered in a plaster mimicking volcanic ash. A strobe light above two parallel monitors flashed at dramatic (or loud) moments. I swear, only sheer self-

control kept me from sobbing right there in front of the thirty-something father and his family. Maybe it was all the childhood memories. I saw the torrents of mud thundering under an ash-blackened sky and the landscape down in the valley suddenly made sense. For miles, I rode next to blackened logs and a valley filled with ash without giving it much thought. Until I saw the video it hadn't occurred to me that the gray moonscape had been belched out of the belly of the earth.

## **The Oregon Road**

When I got to the Oregon border, the town of Rainier, I stopped for gas. No sooner did I get my helmet off than a cleanly uniformed gas station attendant stood at attention next to my bike.

“Oh, I'm sorry, am I on the full service side?” I asked. So dearly do I hate full service that I would have withstood the embarrassment of restarting the motorcycle and moving it 10 feet to the other side of the pumps.

He looked startled for a moment. “No, it's all full service. It's Oregon law that all gas stations are full service.”

I can't tell you how appalling I find that. When I asked him why that was, he said, it was to promote job growth. “If it was self-serve you could man this whole station with just one person.” Damn right. In Madison, with our near nonexistent unemployment rate, a law like that would close all the pumps in town for want of employees. He also said that this way people didn't have to get out of their cars in inclement weather (my words). I told him I had no sympathy, those pansies deserve to get wet every now and then. At least with someone else doing the fueling, I don't have to

wrestle with the clean air sheaths on the nozzle. They were designed with luxury cars in mind. When fueling a motorcycle, you have to hold them back with both hands before the pump will work.

The library in Rainier was no more than a single room in one corner of the town hall. When I wandered in, three adolescent girls dominated the space, one sitting in a chair reading, one shelving, and one checking out a huge stack of books for an old woman, using nothing but a hand stamp and file cards. How long has it been since I've seen an analog library? One man sat at the microfiche reader going over ancient back issues of the local newspaper, silently looking for who knows what. He had thick, black-rimmed glasses, a balding head, and a slight smirk.

The old woman asked if the two girls working were sisters, since they looked a lot alike. The girls replied that all three of them were sisters. The girl reading looked up from her book and smiled with her lips together in that way kids do when they're trying to be polite to their elders and they just happen to be good-natured kids from a small town.

"Do you look more like your father or your mother, do you think?" the old woman asked inanely.

I didn't hear if there was an answer, because I was trying to get the computer to dial into the network. Why did I bother when they were still using stamp pads and microfiche? The youngest sister, when pressed, said I should try the password, "password." But I still didn't have a valid username, so rather than fiddle with it or wait for the librarian to come back from her meeting with the mayor, I just left.

I didn't get to see much of Portland or Salem, although I drove through both.

Somewhere around Salem, I saw columns of smoke far off in the distance, and hoping for something dramatic drove out to look at them. It turns out they were just controlled crop burns. I did get some pictures that ought to turn out pretty good, provided I didn't get my big, fat thumb in too many of the pictures. By the time I got back to the highway it was already getting dark, forcing me to actually pay money for a campsite at a roadside KOA.

I drove to Eugene the following morning, stopping only to get pictures of the dozens of whirlwinds that marched through the dusty Oregon fields like toy tornados. With my bike parked on the shoulder of the highway, I ran as quickly as I could through the loose dirt to a particularly large whirlwind. When I got within camera range, it died down to a nondescript breeze. By the time I got back to the bike, it had picked up again to twice its original strength. I had to settle for a long-range shot where the whirlwind appears as a tiny, orange blur.

When I got to Eugene, only one of the letters sent to me General Delivery had arrived. The important one, the one with the money.

Since I was in a post office anyway, I went around back to apply for a passport. When the clerk with his right arm in a sling looked at my driver's license he had to ask the senior clerk (the spitting image of Rhea Perlman's husband on "Cheers," you know the actor who played a cop alongside John Goodman in the last scene of C.H.U.D.) if it was okay that my Wisconsin driver's license excluded my full middle name.

"Tell him about the charge," the senior clerk quipped, "the, um, not-spelling-middle-name charge."

"Yeah, that'll be 90 dollars," said the clerk with the sling, "cash."

I stopped in Eugene because my father said he worked with some people who once lived there. They said Eugene and Madison were very similar. And I can see the similarities. Both are reasonably affluent college towns with a lot of coffee shops and bookstores. Eugene even has a state-street-esque promenade called Broadway (which appallingly closes at 1:00a.m. according to the signs, leading me to believe it isn't much of a party town).

While I was sipping a latte on the sidewalk, keeping an eye on my motorcycle (the latte hadn't been iced like I asked, but that's okay, I hadn't wanted a latte anyway) a kid holding a tape between the thumb and index finger of his right hand walked up to me. He had his hair dyed black and cut in a poofy, spikey hemisphere that came down to just above his ears. He asked: "Do you like music, like Nirvana, Green Day, or Verve?"

"No, I don't like music at all," I countered truthfully.

"I didn't think so."

Another kid, with a half-assed moustache, asked me for money when he probably didn't need it. Just like Madison.

Because the free weekly newspapers I read listed no events of interest, I assumed that Eugene has nothing even remotely akin to a night life or a culture (even less so than in Madison). I drove 40 miles out into the National Forest to wait for the rest of my mail to arrive. If this isn't a free site, it looks like I got away with not paying anyway. A small stream bubbles within earshot. Earlier in the evening, I heard semi-automatic gunfire coming from the other side. Are these people following me?

People have been talking to me more and more. Mainly motorcyclists. On the highway out to Mount Saint Helens I was overtaken by three bikes. All three riders were bearded, the skinny ones riding little imports, and the big guy driving a huge, shiny Harley. When we all stopped for road construction, the guy on the Harley pulled up next to me. “Did you really ride all the way from Wisconsin?” he asked. He told me he had driven up from San Francisco along the coast highway until it got stormy, then picked up his friends and had them “dust off their bikes.” They were going to camp around Mount Rainier, now that the Labor Day rush was over. Having camped there during the Labor Day rush I appreciated their strategy.

Later, at an interstate rest stop, after I called my dad, a guy on a Harley sportster started talking to me. He had just stopped at the rest stop because he had driven down from Canada that morning, 600 miles so far, and his “butt hurt.” He was entirely uninterested in my accounts of Bumbleshoot, of which I am still in awe, and could only talk about his recent participation in the Three Flags Classic, in which he was still in awe. From context, I gathered it was a massive weekend-long race/rally/sojourn from Tijuana, Mexico, up to Canada. All on bikes of course. “They all own Harleys but for this they rode ST[somethings],” he said, assuming I knew more terminology than I did. “Next time I’ll use a touring bike, not my sportster here.”

He wore a bright yellow, pocketed, nylon jacket, buckled up with a fanny pack around his waist, and a dusty pair of engineer boots.

He told me of the dangers of Tijuana, how the service in the restaurants was terrible. He could have “had a cigarette” in the time it took the waiter to get him a beer,



even though there were just a half dozen customers in there. The hotel lost his reservations, and a bus nearly killed his comrades when it ran a red light (“Green means go, yellow means go, and red. . .means go”). He said one guy got electrical problems twice and still made it to Canada under time because he was cruising at 120 mph. Another guy hit a bear and broke his bike in two. Yet another guy hit a rock slide just after it spilled onto the road and tore a huge side-wall gash in his tire.

He said he had an absolute blast and wants to go again. He thinks he can get one of the 300 coveted tickets because he knows the guy who’s going to be chairman this year. He told his fellow aircraft mechanics that he might not be back. His original plan was to take several days and ride down the coast highway. Instead he was going to ride hard and get home to Santa Monica the following afternoon.

This morning, a guy in a big, brown, barge like American car pulled up by my campsite at the KOA and started talking to me. I asked him if he rode, only to be polite, anyone could see he owned a Harley, what with being big, bearded, and wearing a denim vest. He was on his way to work as a mechanic in town. As soon as he graduated with his undergraduate Environmental Science and Chemistry degree, he was planning on going to Sturgis, even though it scared him that most of those folks didn’t know how to ride their bikes. The rallies attract a lot of amateurs, he said, and there’s nothing more dangerous than a bunch of incompetent riders in one place.

He said in his youth he did a lot of riding all over and reminded me that if I wanted to go without a shower I could rough it for a night to stretch the money. I took that to be his primary reason for coming to talk to me, the senior biker stopping to lend some advice to the youngster. He was right of course, the KOA is no place to camp, you

might as well just get a motel, for what it costs you, but I hadn't the time to find a better place the night before.

When I told him that I was a baker, he seemed surprised. He had a friend who was a butcher and rode but he didn't know any bakers. When I told him that he needed to know a candlestick maker to round out the equation, he said he knew one of those too.

Friday, September 11, 1998

An old dream with a new twist: I had forgotten my class schedule for my senior year in high school. I tried to look it up, but I couldn't remember the http: for the high school's Web page. I kept typing "Madison Metropolitan School District" into the computer, but I didn't know where to put the capitals or the periods. By the time I was awake enough to recall the address for a search engine, I also remembered that I have in my possession both a high school diploma and a college degree, rendering school-related anxiety dreams unnecessary. High school Web pages being a particular anachronism because Web-based reference didn't become standard until my junior year in college.

Sunday, September 13, 1998

The night before last, I had a thematic continuation of the last dream I recorded. An old junior high teacher, probably the same one who sent me to the vice principal's office for calling him "Stonewall Jackson," made my sister and me take a three-question history exam. I can't remember the questions themselves, but I do remember that my first and last answers were, "He wore the pope-hat upside-down," and "An explosion caused by bat-dung methane," respectively. I was sure those answers were right, but the

teacher gave me a zero anyway while giving my ecstatic sister flying colors. I protested, “You can’t do this to me, I have a bachelor’s degree!”

Friday morning, in the forest east of Eugene, a low-flying military jet compounded the tradition of gunfire close to my tent. I could hear it screaming through the valley and looked up in time to see its gray fins streaking by behind the trees. The sound of its passing lingered for a minute, throbbing between the hills.

That morning I went down to Eugene again, looking for my mail and something interesting to do. My mail proved to be the easier of the chores. Since my position at a different service window this time allowed me to see the postal clerk rifle through the general delivery file, I offered the obvious solution to the missing mail problem: “It could be oversize.” Indeed, the package containing my utility bills and insurance info had been there all along, just misfiled.

I got a good seat at a sidewalk deli, the closest thing I could find to a classic coffee shop, and dealt with my mail. Nothing surprising. The phone company got more of my money, and the insurance paperwork got dealt with only a little behind schedule.

I poured through the local weekly newspaper a couple more times looking for a reason to stay. Even with senses heightened by two iced coffees, I could find nothing.

So once again I spent the night in a national forest. I had enough time in the afternoon to read through most of my trashy fantasy novel.

Even though I got eight miles off the highway, I was disappointed in my choice of campsite. It was too easily accessed by gravel road. Twelve-gauge shells, albeit old and

rusty, testified to its use as a firing range. Several times during the night, vehicles woke me as they turned onto the gravel road that ran parallel to my little clearing. Then just as I was dozing off, I heard the sound of absurdly heavy footsteps pacing the ground near my tent. I was instantly awake, my eyes wide open, staring into the complete darkness. I imagined a forest ranger with giant concrete hiking boots coming to kick me out. I didn't so much as twitch a muscle, but lay entirely immobile inside my tightly wrapped mummy sleeping bag. My imagination raced, was this some sort of psycho prowling around in the dark and in the wild places, looking for an easy victim who wouldn't be able to even reach an arm out of his own sleeping bag? As I searched for reasons to panic, the thing outside made a noise. I don't think I could imitate it, I don't have the bellow like lung capacity. It sounded like a whale blowing its nose. The clomping and the snorting repeated twice more, then I was alone with silence.

In the morning I looked for signs of my visitor, but no prints showed in the gravel. My best guess is a large, hooved mammal like a moose or an elk bounded by on its nightly rounds.

I hit Florence early that morning, so I looked around for someplace to eat. Just about the only restaurant open was the Bliss Restaurant and Lounge. By the time I noticed the fifties theme I was too far inside to leave. Blue and red fifties era antiques covered the walls, and a bright red Ford convertible, with those goofy fins, sat in the center of the dining area. Someone had gutted the seats and converted it to booth seating. The waitress, probably old enough herself to remember the 1950s, wore a generic teenybopper dress from that period. She stood at the bar and conversed with several old-

timer regulars about how you're supposed to have one drink an hour to "drink it and get rid of it."

In Bandon, Oregon, I ran into the tail end of the cranberry parade. I had just enough time to park my bike before getting caught in hordes of Bandonites getting in their cars and all trying to drive away at once. I wouldn't have stopped at all, but I kept saying to myself over and over, "you know you want to, you know you want to." It's the first time in my memory that I used peer pressure on myself. But as I drove through throngs of people and united in a traffic jam of fire engines, parade floats, and tractors, a helicopter chattering by overhead, I managed to stumble across the ocean. So I walked along the beach and watched the waves and tasted the water. As a Midwesterner, the salt always astonishes me. Where did it all come from? I think of how many boxes of Morton brand iodized salt it would take to salinate an entire ocean.

## **A Loose Nut Rolls to California**

Just across the border into California, I stopped at a small tribal casino. It looked more like a roadside burger joint, it even had a glowing neon hotdog in the window. But it had "Casino" in three foot letters over the door, and inside every inch was crammed with video slot machines and crusty old folk. As I plugged two dollars into a random machine, without any apparent result, an attractive young Indian girl came up and asked me if I wanted a drink. I didn't, and I left before my fully laden and unguarded motorcycle tested the honesty of the local gambling addicts.

The next several hours, I drove back and forth across the Redwood National Park

complex, looking for a good campsite. All the sites in the California sister parks were \$16 a night, and the showers still cost money. I ended up in a far less crowded and far cheaper RV park next to and affiliated with the Golden Bears Casino. The proprietress greeted me in a friendly and confident manner, directing me to take any old site I found comfortable. There seems to be a couple dozen permanent residents here, mostly Yurok Indians living in ancient camper trailers that never go anywhere anymore. Children ran around the campgrounds, shouting, wrestling, and chasing any number of resident dogs. When I came out of the shower room, the handyman, presumably a resident who gets a discount off his \$120 monthly rent by cleaning the bathrooms, was talking to an urchin in that faux-authoritative manner of custodians the world over. She stared petulantly at him, her face smeared with mud, wearing a baggy T-shirt and baggy jeans, a relaxed mutt puppy hanging under either arm. Later I wished I had my camera with me.

Since it was Saturday night and I had spent Friday avoiding elk in the wilderness, I thought some celebration was in order. I walked across the highway to the casino, hoping they would give me free booze while I slowly lost a couple of bucks at the quarter slots. In a tragic case of bad timing, the casino had no liquor license on account of being brand, spanking new. To make matters worse, I left with \$9.75 more than I went in with. That paid for my first night sleeping in their RV park and put my lifetime net sum of gambling earnings at negative \$18.25. It was the first money I'd earned since going on the road.

I went back to my tent feeling slightly guilty for actually taking money from those hard-working Yuroks at the casino, only to discover I had oriented my tent so that the

five-story, blinking Golden Bears Casino sign shone right through the door. I made a pot of Macaroni and Mozzarella by its light. It's a good thing I took the extra time before going to sleep, because some of my neighbors were also celebrating Saturday night. At least one in the party was the sort of drunk who must howl at odd intervals.

Because I continually pack and repack my saddlebags, I had to develop a system for distinguishing between the clean clothes and the ones I had sweated into for a few days. My wardrobe poses a particular problem in this respect as most everything is identical, one black T-shirt tends to look just like another, dirty or not. A lesser man might just sort them by odor, but sometimes a close inspection won't reveal the extent of soiling. At the end of the day, I turn the clothes I wore inside out and stuff them back in the bags. When nothing remains right-side out, it's time to do laundry.

The laundromat in Klamath was the mangiest yet. Most of the machines had out of order signs rubber-banded to them, and a ready supply of more signs and rubber bands waited for when they would be needed. I probably should have put one on the dryer I used because two quarters didn't make my clothes any more dry or even warm. In one corner sat a pile of trash bags, filled with what I couldn't even guess. In the other, the change machine had been completely gutted, the husk left on the wall, with just a sign saying "change inside." On a positive note, the owner gave me enough soap to do a load of laundry. He was fat, wearing an untucked red plaid shirt, and a hat with something pithy written on it. When I asked if I could buy some of that soap that comes in the single load boxes, he scooped some detergent out of a box that he kept in his thrift shop next door, put it in a Ziploc bag and just gave it to me.

I think he also manages the mobile home lot. When he went through the gate in the chain link fence and the three or four big, friendly dogs tried to follow him, he said, “What do you think you’re doing? Goofy dogs. Yes, you’re goofy dogs.” He didn’t use the tone of voice of a fawning dog owner, he sounded like he was giving the dogs some important and heretofore unclarified information.

After a quick tour of Klamath, population 827, I got the impression that everyone here lives either in a mobile home or a camper trailer. Some of the mobile homes actually look clean, but most have the piled junk and dilapidated look you would expect from a town where the primary industries are a newly opened casino and the “Tour Through Tree.”

I had a strong inclination to pay the two bucks to ride through the “Tour Through Tree” (when I first saw the sign, plastered across the hillside, I thought it said “Tour Through FREE” which made no sense and of course wasn’t true at all).

When I last talked to my mother, she repeated her insistence that I spend my time looking for “another mustard museum.” By this I assume she means a hokey roadside attraction in the kitschy vein of the famous mustard museum of Mount Horeb, Wisconsin. Because of her advice I went into a big boat, dragged all the way to Oregon’s coast highway from the ocean so it could be a “Free Museum.” The museum part was a model schooner, three antique razors, and a framed photo and autograph of the only Japanese pilot ever to bomb mainland U.S.A. (The Japanese thought that randomly fire-bombing the coastal forest of Oregon would bring America to its knees, forgetting, as I now know,



that America is damn huge. Needless to say, nobody got hurt, and nowadays the attempt to trigger large-scale mayhem is considered kind of cute.). The rest of the very large boat was a giftshop, selling the usual postcards and toy rubber sharks.

You couldn't call the redwood forests a roadside attraction, but I'm glad I stopped for them. I spent some time in the groves today, running through the rest of my film by carefully taking pictures of my thumb. I sat and thought for a while, just being quiet. I walked down the bluffs to the beach and sat there for awhile. I had done the same thing two days ago in Crescent City, where dozens of surfers played in the waves. The water up here is so cold they had to wear full body suits to ward off the hypothermia. What sort of a life is it when you live for those few moments between the crest of a wave and its collision with the beach? If it wasn't so difficult to tie a surfboard to a motorcycle, I might take up the practice.

As I walked back from the beach to the Redwood groves, I found myself cornered where I would either have to backtrack or leap a wide, stagnant pool of water. I had misidentified the cloven hoofprints of elk as the tracks of horses, an error a country kid like me should never make, and had followed them until the trail became impassable. I thought I could leap the pool of water without a problem. When I took a running start, I found that the edge of the pool on either side was not the firm stretch of sand I thought it to be, but extremely soft, black silt. My first step, which should have been the foundation of a mighty leap, sank ankle deep with an audible sucking sound. The second step went right in the middle of the pool, and the third went knee deep into the muck on the other side. My first thought was, "You moron, you washed these pants this morning." Most of

the mud came off as I stood thigh deep in the surf. It was kind of like being in the middle of a washing machine's agitation cycle. I don't know how I kept my footing. I have my jeans and boots dried now, and they seem to be more or less clean, but my pants still have strings of algae glued to the crotch. Something I'll have to deal with later.

Tomorrow will be one month that I've been on the road. I wondered as I sat under the ancient trees, where will I go now?

Tuesday, September 15, 1998

The coast is besieged by fog. I spent last night riding through the twisting coast highway, wiping the condensation from my faceplate every hundred feet. The fog was so thick in places it crossed the boundary into rain.

Any road I've ridden so far seems straight in comparison to this. Most of the turns were posted at 15 mph, and one that I found along a particularly dark and wet stretch was marked at 5 mph. Nevertheless, for the most part I could keep ahead of the traffic, slaloming back and forth between the lines.

I drove so far in the wet and the dark, my visor lifted to improve visibility, wiping my glasses clear of water with the fingertips of my clutch hand, that I soon found myself willing to take any campsite, no matter how expensive or inconvenient. All I wanted was a safe place to set my tent and curl up within the soft warmth of my sleeping bag.

The campground I settled on, more out of desperation than anything, was Manchester State Beach. In the morning, I took a walk along the ocean, figuring if I was going to pay the state of California's exorbitant camping rates I might as well explore

some of its scenery before checkout time.

I got a fair way down the beach, thinking to myself, if life's a beach, then I want out. I was in just enough of a bad mood to be unimpressed by the ocean. Long tangles of kelp littered the beach monotonously. A little farther inland lay monotonous piles of driftwood. Walking back to the park trail, just about where I entered the beach, I saw a seal. It swam and dove just a few yards out into the surf. Standard seal behavior I presume. I sat and watched it a while. It made my morning much better.

Sunday night, I won more money from the Indian casino. I didn't intend to (he admits guiltily), I just wanted something to eat at the only place in Klamath open after 6:00. On the way to the cafe, just to look like I belonged, I plugged a buck into the video poker machine and ended up with 11 more. This brings my lifetime gambling deficit down to \$7.10. I looked so despondent about this that the waitresses at the cafe were all very nice to me. Every two minutes, they asked me how my meal was or how I was doing with a sympathetic friendliness bordering on smarmy.

I was tempted to stop by again in the morning, but I didn't have the energy and I was afraid that I might win again.

Ferndale, California, had an interesting exhibit documenting their annual kinetic sculpture race. Every spring, artists compete to see who can built the most outlandish man-powered vehicle. The museum had a tricycle with concrete wheels, a giant yellow school bus that the passengers had to pedal, and bicycles shaped like dragons and flying

saucers. I would like to participate in the race, just as soon as I can get my uni-skate idea patented. Well, get the uni-skates patented and figure out how to use them, which theoretically will open up whole new vistas of extreme sports.

Leaving Ferndale, I managed to get lost on the miles of dirt road leading down the coast. It took me 45 minutes to realize I got onto a dead end. The people at the entrance to the road smiled and waved as I drove past for the second time. “Tourist,” they must have thought, betting on how long it would take me to head back.

Point Arena must be some sort of artist enclave, that is unless everywhere gets more like this the closer you get to San Francisco. The downtown is only three blocks long, but every block has an espresso shop. The telephone poles are covered with fliers for bands and art exhibits. The coffee shop where I’m writing this has been painted so the walls resemble a sky (blue clouds, rainbow, etc.) and the floor a meadow (swirly green grass dotted with flowers). A swirly, multicolored poem celebrating “Beautiful Mother” Earth spirals on the wall near a window. In the main room near the entrance a bunch of twenty-somethings, one with a baby held to his chest with a purple-clothed babushka, discuss how they’ll make a movie with a video camera that doesn’t actually record.

Wednesday, September 16, 1998

I rode farther and harder yesterday than I really ought to have. Perhaps because I was running from two very real failures.

First, I missed a great opportunity in Point Arena. At just about any point, I could

have engaged the locals in some sort of conversation. They were my sort of people, film buffs and production fanatics, artists and deviants. But I left. When the library didn't have an Internet connection, I rode off down the highway looking for one. Before long, I was too far down the road to turn back.

I need to remember that I am not taking this trip as a relaxing holiday. I have to find what I ought to be doing for the rest of my life. I need to find a place to belong.

Then I rode right past the very house where that relative of mine lived without stopping to visit. True, I didn't have a whole lot of choice. I know that I promised Aunt Carol and the others that I would look him up, but I could never imagine myself being so bold and presumptuous as to intrude upon a relative whom I do not remember with all the obligations which my presence implies. If I had thought to get a phone number, then it might have been different. I'm sure someday we'll be introduced properly. None of this, "Oh, you remember Bob/Chester/Jean/Sherral, they stopped by once when you were little." I can't even remember high school, let alone when I was 6. I was too shy and tired and cowardly to deal with a lot of social awkwardness, so I just rode on.

And someday I'll go back to Point Arena and stay for a while, get to know the local scene. I stopped to get directions from a road construction flag lady and she told me to do just that. The whole area had a relaxed feeling to it, like someplace where you could get pretty comfortable.

Now Sacramento is a different matter. I drove through because I have disturbing associations with the city. Long ago, my stepfather had a running joke where he told my sister that if she could answer three questions correctly he would buy her a red Miata.

The first question was always, “What is the capital of California?” On the rare occasions when my sister got the first question right, the second would always be, “How do you spell that?” To my knowledge she never made it to the third.

Later on in college, before I learned to have a good time by drinking, my friends and I would go out on Saturday nights to play games with the drunk people. I would ask them for the capital of California and when they answered, never correctly by the way, I would declare them winners and get them to accept an unusual object, usually either a cookie, a can of SPAM, or a plastic trinket. I hope this visit to the capital of California will bring closure to that awkward phase of my life.

On the way out of Sacramento, I stopped at a gas station that had a little TV built into the pump right next to the credit card scanner. As I began fueling, it played a Shell commercial. Luckily the sound of gasoline spilling into my tank drowned out the sound of the gas pump pinging itself. Advertising has eliminated yet another space where people can find peace and quiet.

For a guy who grew up in the Midwest, the rapid climate change of California is disconcerting. In one day I rode from the cold, damp coast, to the redwood forests, to flat farmlands, to rolling savannah, to alpine forest, and all the way to high, hot desert. I talked about this with some nice folks from southern California who had moved there from Ontario. They reassured me that Wisconsin itself had some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. I think they were just being polite.

I met them at the scenic overlook for Mono Lake, a briny basin colored by

volcanic mineral sediment and the hellishly gnarled skeletons of ancient magma flows. Awe-inspiring scenic views litter the highway. Quite often while going south from Carson City, I saw vast, perfectly flat plains surrounded on all sides by towering mountains. The scale far and away dwarfs anything Wisconsin could offer. These little valleys are penned in by rock so high that it skims the clouds from the sky. It's poignant to see the tiny fields laid out in geometric patchwork, hemmed and clipped by the desert.

The Ontarian couple said Wisconsin has lots of trees and lakes and things. It's certainly more hospitable.

I surprised them when I told them that the Tahoe area was extremely cold that morning. Going over the mountain froze my fingers even through my gloves. I had to dig to the bottom of my saddlebags for my cold weather gear at the first gas station I got to. I could have gotten it out sooner, I suppose, and saved myself some unpleasantness, but I'm too damn stubborn. I got it in my head to make it over the mountain as fast as I could. But it kept going up and up.

They must have felt sorry for me, because the woman gave me a liter of store-bought water from their RV trailer and offered to make me a cheese sandwich.

The good news for today is that casinos really do take money from you, just as advertised. My deficit is up to \$13.10 now, after losing to the video poker machines in Nevada and the Paiutes' casino in Bishop.

Bishop, another resort town in the middle of the California wasteland, has a Yamaha service shop, the only source of four-cycle Yamaha engine oil for 500 miles. It doesn't surprise me too much, since the entire town is overrun by motorcycles and the

biggest industry is off-roading. The elevation may be higher than the population, but the Harleys and the Gold Wings are about three deep on main street. This campground even has special rates for bikers, but I would presume that the hard-core crowd would prefer to camp in the ample wilderness, just like the veteran in Oregon advocated.

I used the relative civilization of the campground as an opportunity to change my oil. After crossing Canada and riding over the Rockies twice, it was about time that I treated my baby properly. Every time I took it over 5,000 feet or so, it would lose a quart of oil and I would have to replace it with whatever oil I could obtain. I would feel much better knowing that the engine was filled with exactly the right weight of oil.

Never before had I actually changed oil in a vehicle. I spilled a bit on the campground's gravel, but the directions proved easy. I find the feel of warm engine oil on my hands distinctly pleasant. With a little effort, I also mended the tear in the seat vinyl, fixed the horn, and lashed the clutch cable out of the way so it would stop slipping around and resetting the odometer.

I'm beginning to feel aggressively affectionate for that machine. Last night, I drove into the Sierra Nevadas through pitch dark. Unable to see any of the landscape, I picked out a hiding place in the Eldorado National Forest. Once it got light, I found out that the entire mountainside, indeed the entire visible mountain range, had been clear-cut. I had parked behind the only bush within sight. Even with my black jacket over the chrome, passing motorists and the unbroken caravan of timber trucks could have seen me and the bike as plain as day once the sun had risen.

Nevertheless it was a wonderful night. Taking advantage of the dry climate and lack of bugs, instead of setting up the full tent and gear, I just bungee-corded my tarp to



the bike, making a crude lean-to, and laid my sleeping bag underneath. Lying on my back there, the heat of the engine warming me, one arm draped affectionately over the front fork, I felt toward that bike the way a cowboy must feel toward his horse.

Maybe it was just coincidence, maybe it was a summer meteor shower, but watching the clear mountain sky I saw over a dozen shooting stars. I watched them for hours, alone with my motorcycle. One meteor burned as bright as the moon for several moments as it arced overhead.

Saturday, September 19, 1998

A whole vanload of college-aged women camped right next to me in Bishop. There were men as well, of course, but who notices them? They all left in the morning, and I hadn't even so much as traded one word with them. And there I had been, doing masculine-type bike maintenance.

I asked the woman at the campground front desk the best way to get to Death Valley. The route I had planned was a dirt road through steep hills, precisely the sort of thing likely to get me killed. When she recommended I take Highway 190, she spoke with a projected and authoritative voice, not like a teacher, but more like a tour guide answering a well-rehearsed question. She spent five whole minutes warning me about the curves and the hills and how they keep picking bikers out of the ditches. As it turns out, the highway wasn't nearly as bad as what I've gone through already. I've been taking extreme road conditions with a surprising amount of grace for someone who has had a motorcycle license only since April. Wisconsin roads don't twist a quarter as much

as the ones out west.

After I checked out of the campground, I had almost the entire day to kill before my pictures would be ready for pickup. I would have to stick around if I wanted to see what my trip from Seattle to Klamath had been like, or at least what my thumbs looked like. In an hour I pretty much exhausted Bishop's entertainment value. Last night I had seen the only film playing in the town theater, the oddly named Halloween: H2O. I had a brief discussion with the concession clerk on the topic of hot dog condiments even though she lacked my passion for the subject.

I spent most of the day in the city park, reading the William Gibson novel I'd bought yesterday. The park had a public pool, a stream, and a pond filled with ducks that didn't quite look like ducks are supposed to look. A few tennis balls floated in the pond where the nearby high-school girls' tennis team had lobbed them.

I gave more money to the Paiute tribe, although this time not from gambling. I went through their lobby-sized museum at the edge of town. It described in minute detail the process of preparing piñon nuts and weaving baskets and left out anything that might actually tell you about the Paiute themselves. I also plugged some quarters into the video arcade within their casino. The Tekken3 game cost a mere 25 cents, and they set the difficulty so low that I got to the end. Unfortunately the machine would eat about every other quarter. I would have complained, but I was too embarrassed to go up to a casino employee and whine about how one of their machines kept taking my money.

That night, just about at sunset, I decided to make camp alongside the highway leading out to Death Valley. There really wasn't any place to hide the bike, because the

desert stretched perfectly flat with ankle-high vegetation for miles. But I got onto a dirt road, a piece of desert that someone had plowed to one side, and got far enough off the highway that I felt safe. I didn't think anyone would mind me camping on that godforsaken land even if they did see me.

Just as dusk set and the first stars came out, three motorcycles stopped by the side of the highway and set their blinkers flashing. They parked exactly perpendicular to me. Considering the vast amount of desert I couldn't believe they stopped right next to me out of coincidence. I assumed they had seen me and were investigating.

I sat on my bed roll, not wanting to make any more noise by unpacking. Their voices carried perfectly over the desert sand, and I could see their silhouettes move back and forth in the glare of the hazard lights. When they hadn't moved for a few minutes, I decided to grab my flashlight and say hi.

From their reaction, it must have seemed like I emerged from the desert like a wraith. They didn't see me until I called hello from only 20 feet away, and even then they must have seen only my flashlight.

It turns out they were from Denmark, on their way to a motel in the next town. They asked me if it would be cooler in the direction I came from. Having just crossed Death Valley in the heat of the day while wearing full plastic racing armor ensemble, they needed to stop to rehydrate. They sucked back bottles of store-bought water, as I tried to bridge the language barrier and make conversation. I tried to tell them about my relative and namesake from Denmark whose name meant "Matt the mudslinger," but my pronunciation of his name only confused them.

When I thought it an appropriate time to excuse myself, not knowing the proper

etiquette pertaining to meeting a bunch of strange Europeans in the middle of the American wilderness, I told them I needed to get back to my bike before it became too dark to find it. One of the Danes laughed, because it looked like nothing but darkness to him. With the help of stumbling English and hand gestures, he asked where I parked the bike. I shone the flashlight back the way I came, and sure enough, we could see nothing but sand.

As I left the Danes, a car pulled up, no doubt to see if they were doing okay, but too late to see me. Give it another few years and a little embellishment, and Denmark will have an urban legend about a ghost biker.

The walk back to my bike made me feel better about my hiding place. I almost missed it in the dark. I had to track my tire gouge through the road dust. I spent the very last vestiges of light figuring out the best way to drape the tarp over the bike and shelter my sleeping bag.

I awoke to a bitterly cold morning. I would have seen my breath if my mouth hadn't been so dry. As the dawn approached, a coyote howled to the light. I had my gear all packed and was over the rim into Death Valley before I saw another car.

Since I was riding through the valley of death and all, I figured I would stop to call my boss and harass him about not mailing my last paycheck. Predictably I only reached his voice mail. When I called the bakery proper, I got in touch with the replacement I had trained, a man ironically also named Matt. He asked me what I thought of Death Valley. I told him it was "cute."

At the rest stop with the pay phone, I noticed a line of ants crossing the parking

lot, a whole two lane highway of ants, perfectly straight and about half a foot wide. Half the ants carried tiny seeds with a halo of fuzz back to the nest. The rest ventured out to get more. Bending down to the nest, tucked between the parking lot and the highway, I could see the ants disappear down the holes with their minuscule booty. Other ants took the now empty fuzz and discarded it in a matted pile that ringed the nest. Even in the driest desert in America the insects feast.

## **An Old Tragedy**

I saw Las Vegas and the Hoover Dam all in the same day. What can I say? They looked a lot like the post cards. The bathrooms at the Hoover Dam impressed me deeply, set over the edge of the drop-off and decorated in Art Deco tile and brass. I had a bad moment careening along the road that led down to the dam. For once the highway department actually meant the 15 mph curve warning. Not until I was right on top of it did I see how sharp I would have to turn to avoid the minivan with the rather frightened tourist family. I managed to kill enough speed to avoid all the obstacles, but I suspect that in an adjacent universe shards of my helmet are still embedded in that minivan.

Driving through Vegas, I stopped at a Mexican fast food joint in the bad part of town (perhaps that's a redundancy in the context of Las Vegas). I was the only gringo there. The girl at the counter wouldn't wait on me or even look at me. I had to wait for an older employee to take notice. The menu looked far more adventurous than anything served in Taco Bell. The burritos came with your choice of such meats as tripe and head (cabeza). I took the tongue or lengua burrito, which was exceptionally good. The rest of Las Vegas didn't hold my interest, just chapels, casinos, motels, and different venues for

pornography. Not enough coffee shops for my taste, and I didn't have enough money to suit Las Vegas's taste.

I've just about grown tired of the desert. I had to ditch the Boy Scout canteen that my friend Jer had given me because it just didn't hold enough water.

This northern part of Arizona is much greener than either Nevada or the Californian desert. It almost looks habitable, with grasslands dotted with stunted juniper. I had to stop at a KOA in Seligman because it had gotten dark and I wasn't at all certain I could find a deserted stretch of highway. Barbed wire fences in everything.

In the morning, I discovered that Seligman, Arizona, is one huge wad of Americana. In the middle of the largest remaining stretch of the old Route 66, it has declared itself the route 66 capital of America. The downtown is just roadside cafes and junk shops. One main street resident had decorated his front gate with a dozen cow skulls. Harleys parked down both sides of main street.

Everyone seemed friendly, too. Two people who weren't even on motorcycles waved to me in that obligatory small-town manner.

I talked to a friendly old woman at a gas station just across the Nevada border in Arizona. She had at least a dozen scorpions encased in plastic paperweights on the counter.

"You have a lot of scorpions around here?" I asked innocently, thinking that I might have to deal with venomous arachnids as I lay on the ground, my hands pinned inside a mummy sleeping bag.

“We would if people wouldn’t keep killing them,” she said, going into a whole spiel with very little coaxing about how city slickers were killing anything they didn’t understand. “You just need to leave the scorpions alone then they won’t bother ya.” I didn’t mention that whoever made the paperweights probably killed the scorpions for no particular reason at all. I just stared in awe at her face and neck, not one square centimeter of which was free of the wrinkles that criss-crossed in a precise grid pattern. They give her an aura of regality and wisdom far and above what you would expect of a gas station clerk.

Then she told me that the city slickers thought the ground squirrels were rats.

Shortly after leaving Bishop on Thursday, I ran across Manzanar, the first of the Japanese internment camps from World War II. I wouldn’t have stopped, there are almost no signs marking its location, but the campground brochure mentioned it. Even so, I drove past it and turned around after figuring out what the tiny sign meant.

There’s almost nothing left there now, just the amphitheater, two sentry posts, and a lot of rubble and rusted nails. The grounds are used for cattle forage. The back of the first sentry post had a cursory description of the place, a brief apology, and the promise to develop the site into a national monument. I think it’s best left the way it is now; a gift shop and visitor’s center would be supremely crass. I walked among the old roads where the dormitories used to be, and I actually cried. There was no one there to see me, so I didn’t care. On the message board, they posted a glowing description of Japanese American war records. What a country this must be that people will fight and die for it even when it locks up their family.

Manzanar needs better documentation, but the rest should be left as it is, a crumbling reminder of the worst thing we've done this century. The last thing it needs is to be fenced in again.

Monday, September 21, 1998

I woke Sunday morning in the national forest between the Grand Canyon and the Navajo reservation. I don't want to ever mistake Indian land for federal again.

When I went off road to find a campsite, I just barely saw the outline of a red Toyota sedan. I gave it a good berth but didn't worry too much about it after that. Both serial killers and forest rangers are notorious for not driving Toyotas. By the time I had left, I still hadn't heard a sound from that area, and the car was still there.

The Grand Canyon itself wasn't quite the disappointment one would expect from all the hype and the foreign tourists. I arrived in the middle of the day, paid half as much as a normal family car would, presumably because I had half the number of wheels, and went straight to the South Rim. Half the people there were non-English speakers. The rest were bikers. Everyone milled around the rim, oohing and ahing, snapping pictures and pointing out squirrels. A woman with a German accent loudly proclaimed she wasn't afraid of the drop, while standing a good ways back and looking more than a little scared. Her family egged her on while teetering on the edge.

With the sun at high noon, there were no shadows in the canyon. My eyes couldn't really make sense of the red and beige stripes, all jumbled together at the limit



of my optical focus. It looked flat, like the sky at night. The distances were just too far to perceive depth.

Most of the afternoon, I spent out of the way in a picnic facility, reading and snacking on what little food I had packed. I ate an entire can of corned Brazilian beef with a spoon. I don't know why I did that, I even ate the congealed, waxy fat around the edges. It effectively killed my appetite for the rest of the day.

When I finished reading the William Gibson novel I bought in Bishop, the sun was close to setting. I thought I would get one more quick look at the canyon, thereby getting my \$10 worth, and then leave.

To my surprise, the low, burning sun transformed the canyon into a stunning vista. Long, red shadows fell down the canyon walls. There were some views so stunning I thought it would be blasphemous to try and capture them with my disposable camera.

On Sunday, I drove through the Navajo reservation on my way to Flagstaff and Phoenix. Since the sunrise woke me, I passed through before all the Indian trinket stands opened. Nevertheless I got to see some truly stunning landscapes of canyon and mesa.

On my way south through Arizona, I passed through a series of narrow canyons, at the end of which was a little town called Sedona. I stopped there to refuel. Looking at the city and the hills around me, I got the impression I had been there before, in that exact spot, looking in the same direction. It's entirely likely I stopped there on the 8th-grade science trip with Mr. Guenther. After four days of that trip, I lost all sense of where I was, and to this day I have no idea exactly which states we visited or even how long the

trip took. It was disorienting after so much alien landscape to find something familiar.

The landscape south of there lost most of its verdant quality and came to look more like traditional desert. It even had those giant, stereotypical saguaro cactus that look like they would fall over if you gave them a good kick, like a three-story stack of watermelons.

It got so hot that in Phoenix I had to take off my jacket. Can't say I care much for Phoenix. The entire town looks like it was built yesterday, all by the same contractor. The city has grown outwards so fast they haven't even bothered to fill in the gaps, so you're left driving through an unending sprawl of one-story, spanky-clean luxury condos.

It was getting dark by the time I found Coronado National Forest. It's beautiful country, and my campsite is fairly secure. I haven't bothered to put up the tent, just put the sleeping bag on the sand with the tarp wrapped around the bike and bag just on the off-chance of rain.

I'll be growing bored soon with no book to read. Plus the bugs are pestering me, and the plant life all seems designed to hurt me.

When I stopped at a "roadside table" and looked at some plants, a plant with long, innocent looking leaves arranged in a sphere poked me so hard I started to bleed. Later I picked one of the red fruit that grow off the cactus that look like a whole lot of plates glued together at the edges, and got all sorts of fine hair-like needles stuck into my fingertips that I didn't notice until later when I tried to put my gloves on. A bunch of insects looking like ectomorphic crickets had been feeding off the fruit. There's one very spindly-looking cactus (when it dies the needles fall off in clumps revealing a mesh tube

like fibrous chicken wire rolls) that I swear has barbs on the end of the needles. I keep bumping into it at night or when I'm just not looking. The needles even stick through my jeans and cling to my skin when I pull them out. Good thing they're not venomous or I would be in serious trouble.

The bottom of my saddlebags are a pincushion of cactus spikes. When I went off road to hide the bike I must have ridden over a few native plants.

This morning when I woke up, a thumb-sized beetle with long, black legs, each the length of its body, lay on its back near my sleeping bag. Its segmented limbs curled upwards, motionless. I tried to flip it over with a nearby blunt object, but it just rolled back into a supine position, ignoring me and the curious proddings of ants. After a while it flipped itself over, standing crouched with its abdomen high in the air. I watched it as it scooted off. As it crossed a tiny rise in the sand it tripped and fell face first, scrambling with a tiny rustling sound to right itself. I've never seen an insect actually trip before. You wouldn't think it would happen when they have so many legs.

(Afternoon)

I climbed the bluff overlooking my campsite at Coronado National Forest. It was a short hike up a jumble of granite rocks and alien-looking vegetation. One plant had a stem growing out of a short bush of leaves. The stem's base, as big around as my thigh, tapered to a cluster of fruit about 25 feet up. Another plant, almost as tall as the last, was a cluster of a dozen spiny branches. The leaves were only fingernail size and budded between the thorns. Any number of tiny lizards, a black stripe running down the sides of their bodies, scampered away across the rocks at dizzying speeds as I approached.

Bumblebees clung to cactus, buzzing as they sucked cactus juice through strawlike mouths.

Once I got to the top I just sat and thought for a long time. Not about anything in particular, I was just amazed to find myself where I was. I felt at peace.

As I broke camp and rode back to the main road, a little lizard scampered in front of my tires. I could see its little lizard legs and little lizard butt kicking to get out of my way.

I stopped back in Safford and got some new cartridges for my fountain pen at the town office supply store. The owner had never seen the type of notebook that matched my two now useless pads of filler paper, much as I would suspect. Then I went looking for an Internet connection. The public library didn't have one, but the librarian suggested I check with the EA. This I found to be the Eastern Arizona University, a fabulously dinky little campus that nestled invisibly into the small town. The students looked at me funny as I investigated their library, probably recognizing me instantly as a stranger. Unfortunately their Internet machines in their media center were well supervised. I probably could have talked my way into using one, but my need is not yet that urgent. As I pulled out, I saw two men, one black, one Hispanic, doing landscaping work on the immaculate EA lawn. They were wearing bright orange pants with ADC in black letters going down the leg. From what I understand, the Safford area is booming with the economic runoff from at least two Arizona Department of Corrections facilities. College students and prisoners, the two biggest wards of the state, brought together at last.

On the road to Lordsburg, I got caught in an excruciatingly long construction delay. The androgynous flagger was so lazy she didn't even hold the stop/slow sign, a device equipped with an extra long handle so you can rest it on the ground and thereby expend no energy at all. She just stood there, shifting from one foot to the other, staring into space. This was the first time I've seen someone goof up what has got to be the cushiest job in the world.

I got stuck behind a pickup with Arizona plates. The owner had painted it with red-and-white stripes that curved around the bed and tailgate. A blue field with white stars crowned the hood. The tailgate had "proud to be American" printed in yellow gothic script right above the Chevy logo. On the rear window, he had two bumper stickers. On the right side, it said "Buy American. . .while you still can," with a picture of a partially torn American flag with the Japanese rising sun peeking out behind. On the left side was a Pepsi logo. I could see he was a young man in his mid-twenties, wearing wraparound black sunglasses straight from an eighties music video. He had a curly length of blond hair sticking out from under a cap with the Nike swoosh. I wonder if he's read the label inside the cap, which says it was made by a 14-year-old Indonesian girl, or if he's given up on buying American

I have camped for the night in Gila National Forest. You wouldn't believe it, from the desert just below the hill here, but there are trees in this forest. I set my tent at the first sight of clouds. The eroded gulleys beside the road suggest frequent deluges. Storms can strike quickly in these desert climes.

Tuesday, September 22, 1998

I woke in the morning to the sound of trucks backing up. Fearing that my entrance had become an active construction site, I quickly dressed. I imagined the access road with its rickety cattle grate replaced by an impassable gap and a suspicious road crew.

As I burst from my tent, I startled an entire herd of deer that grazed on the hillside overlooking my site. I could see their bounding leaps here and there through the brush, the white tails flashing, the huge bodies crashing to the ground after a disconcertingly long interval. The stag, a huge rack of antlers on his head, stood on the peak of the hill, staring at me impudently. I could only see his head and shoulders, lit with the first yellow rays of the sunrise, held proud and erect. As soon as I turned my back to ignore him, he bounded away leisurely.

When I spend time in the field away from shower facilities, I use my bottle of rubbing alcohol to give myself crude baths. The theory is that unpleasant odor is caused by the bacteria that breed off sweat and not the sweat itself. By routinely sterilizing my upper body in this manner, I stay as fresh and as clean as if I didn't just sleep on the ground in the middle of a forest. But then I wouldn't be the one to ask; luckily no one has been getting close enough to me to test the practice of that theory.

American consumerist hygienic products always seemed like a self-created need; I never could have justified the space for a can of underarm deodorant. The alcohol at least doubles as emergency antiseptic, making it an indispensable part of my gear.

There were no construction workers when I emerged onto the highway. Anyone

who did see my exit took no particular notice. The two pickups that drove by as I got on the highway pulled into the forest themselves a little later on, presumably on business of their own.

Just beyond my campsite, the forest gave way to a strip-mining operation, relieving my conscience. In comparison, camping for free is a far more innocent use of federal land.

I'd been craving waffles since the Grand Canyon, where I stopped for this European waffle joint. I actually walked in before someone told me it went out of business. Geronimo's, the first diner I found in Silver City, had some interesting breakfast burritos, but one must eat what one craves.

A laundromat was just two doors down, presided over by a matronly old Spanish speaking woman, who apparently owns a piece of everyone in town. While I was there, at least two people came in to discuss loans with her. The majority of customers also spoke Spanish, slipping in and out of English. A flier for a gringo running for district judge hung on the bulletin board. Someone penned next to his picture: "I hang everyone!"

At the self-serve carwash across the alley, a young woman is polishing her turquoise blue GMC pickup. She is wearing skin-tight purple nylon pants and shiny clean reebok sneakers. She has that slight poof to her hair just above the forehead that brands women as rural, no matter how attractive they might otherwise be. It has taken her 10 minutes to rub down every surface of the vehicle.

On the laundromat's billboard is an advertisement for Dogstar, Keanu Reeves'

band. It'll be in town on October 4, long after I'll be gone. Sigh.

## The Cult of the Rocket

Wednesday, September 23, 1998

I made a large, back-tracking detour yesterday after doing laundry. A ways down the highway, I saw a sign warning: "No gas for 48 miles." Knowing this to be about 20 miles farther than the gas in my tank, without looking at the map I took the other fork. Turns out that direction had no gas for nearly as far. I had to use the unofficial spare fuel in my stove bottle, and the red fuel light stayed on much longer than I would have liked.

A man at the pump initiated conversation. He said he planned on taking a long haul like me (I assume he meant on a bike, I prefer to assume the best of people). He needed to visit his family in California and Oregon, thereby making a cruise up the coastal highway the preferred route. He was so intent on talking to me that he overflowed his tank and spilled gasoline all over his truck.

I'm glad I retraced my route after I filled the tank. The highway wound through some beautiful scenery in the western branch of the Gila National Forest. It was one of those hill country areas in the Southwest that was inexplicably less arid than the plains surrounding it, huge conifers shading the highway. There were some treacherous turns, but I wondered why the highway department set the speed limit at a mere 25 mph until I rounded a turn and saw a herd of cattle standing in the road, chewing their cud and placidly watching the traffic swerve around them.

I stopped at a roadside vista overlooking the two local silver mine ghost towns, neither of which had a gas station, hence the "No gas for 48 miles" sign. Just as I saddled



up to leave after micturating in the bushes, an old woman walked up and asked where I was from and where I was headed. I'm not certain what it is about roadside scenic views that encourages strangers to get together and talk. I suppose that normally you're separated from all these other people, all on a unique mission, but sharing the same highway. Then you meet at a cramped parking lot, and if you're a naturally talkative person you're probably just about ready to burst.

I told her I didn't have many specific plans, but I wanted to stop in Roswell, New Mexico, UFO capital of the world. Did that ever get her started. She said she had gone down there before, but they didn't know what she had seen.

At this point it would be best to spend some time describing this woman. I regret that although we had a remarkably candid and enjoyable conversation for two strangers who met at a rest stop, we never exchanged names. She must have been pretty old, her teeth weren't very good, giving her mouth a sunken aspect, the lower lip and chin jutting out and moving in too great an arc upwards when she talked. Her voice had an archaically wry cadence, giving an understated drama to her stories. Although it looked like she had a handicap permit hanging from the rearview of her capped pickup, she still seemed healthy and limber, though frequently she would cough a dry, hacking cough, and cover her mouth with the same hand that held the Taco Bell cup. She had long, silver-grey hair, which she tied in a ponytail and covered with a battered old cowboy hat. The hat was black, made of felt, bent so badly it resembled a tricorn and had a brass button on the front with a symbol I couldn't identify. She wore a plaid shirt tucked into faded jeans and a pair of glasses shaped vaguely like butterfly wings.

I gathered she was from south Texas by way of Connecticut and Florida. She

claimed to be a wildlife ecologist and an avid birdwatcher.

Her first UFO sighting was with her family in western Florida. A small cylinder, too small to hold a person (but they can always operate them by remote control, “we’ve got those now,” she told me) floated in from the everglades and out into the gulf. A nearby forest ranger and a fisherman hadn’t seen a thing.

“I see these things because I’m always looking up. People are always looking down,” she said. “Looking for pennies, I guess.” I agree with her completely: Arthur C. Clarke said exactly the same thing when I watched “Arthur C. Clarke’s Mysterious World” as a kid. When I was young and filled with wonder, it seemed like a perfectly logical explanation. Now that I’m old and cynical, I find the sentiment pleasantly nostalgic.

The next sighting was while counting hawks from a canal embankment. She described the UFO as being the size of a hawk but black and thin like tar paper. It fluttered in the air and floated in a way that tarpaper shouldn’t.

The third time was at dusk. She saw two bright stars near the horizon, “one was probably Venus. But they were moving back and forth like this. I thought it was just me, but no.” The light started getting brighter and closer, rushing toward her. She yelled at it, telling it not to take her away. She had read the abduction stories, and she liked it just fine here on Earth, thank you. The yelling seemed to do the trick because the light started to recede and was just Venus again.

Her son also had an experience. He was out riding his motorcycle when he saw something that looked like “one of those triangular supermarket balloons” that was floating but it wasn’t attached to anything. When he got off his bike to investigate (a bad

idea she thought), the thing shot up in the sky and disappeared.

I told her about my own family's experiences with ghosts and the supernatural. I told her about the nisse of Norway and how the little people might be behind her missing keys. I told her about my experience in Oregon with something stomping around my tent. She gasped, clutched her hands and said, "You think it was bigfoot, don't you?" It does make a better story that way so I told her the truth, that whatever it was it certainly sounded bipedal.

She told me she belonged to a spiritualist church. They would hold seances where things would appear and disappear. She's skeptical, suspecting fraud since they built a special room to do these seances. Nevertheless she wouldn't discount the materializations and dematerializations out of hand.

Then we got off the subject of the paranormal and talked about the touristification of the Grand Canyon and those annoying flatlanders in all their guises.

When I left, a doe and two fawns were standing in the middle of the road. The doe was very small, the size of a small dog, and the fawns were shedding their mottled pelt in shaggy clumps. I got quite close, a few feet, before they could identify me as a danger and then they ran off into the woods.

I took a rural highway that parallels the interstate down to Las Cruces. The Rio Grande Valley is irrigated by a network of ditches and antique pumps, which sit in the fields and on the roadside. I saw lush fields of alfalfa, chili peppers, and cotton.

Las Cruces is yet another of those booming Southwestern cities that seems to be nothing more than a concentration of strip malls and condos, as opposed to the other form

of Southwestern city, which is trailer park and curio stand.

A librarian directed me to a commercial cyber cafe, where I logged on to discover that nearly a week without checking my mail accumulated nothing more than junk mail and a cursory note from Adam. I took the extra time on my brand new cyber account to investigate the Austin Film Festival, which turns out to be a major event and majorly expensive. I'll have to look into getting tickets when I get to Austin.

On the way out of town, I passed the White Sands Missile Range. A tall sign close to the base said, "Welcome to White Sands Missile Range, Birthplace of America's Missile Activities." If that wasn't grim enough, the bottom said "Come visit our Missile Garden, Museum and Gift shop." Well, I couldn't very well pass that up. The road into the base was littered with signs declaring entrance to the base automatically nulled all those pesky little civil rights. No cameras allowed, and everything was subject to search and seizure at any time. There was a little way station nearby where trucks loaded with explosives could stop and be searched. It was used often enough to warrant a portable toilet.

The officer at the gate looked at my bike like he was seeing a hearse drawn by camels. When I pulled up he asked for "Driverslicenseregistrationproofofinsurance," all in one breath as if he had said it often enough he didn't want to bother with using more than one tone or pausing between syllables. I didn't want to go through the compartment under the seat to get it all out, but I didn't have to when he found I didn't have a reflective orange vest. Apparently the Army can test bio-weapon antibodies on you, but they can't let you ride a motorcycle on base without an orange vest. Well, I'm a black-clad biker type, I don't need no stinking crossing-guard vest, thank you very much. He

made me park outside the gate and walk in to see the missile park.

The museum was closed, but I did get to walk around where they had a whole bunch of missiles sticking up at various angles like, um. . . words fail me. I learned that the small white domes scattered about weren't astronomic observatories like I'd assumed, but telemetric missile observing stations with a long name I can't remember. Apparently they had been lobbing ballistic missiles and whatnot between here and Utah. The range is so huge that even if a transcontinental test shot went awry, it would still land out in the middle of nowhere. I also learned that the fancy-schmancy Gulf War technology had been developed way back in the 1970's. Lord knows what they've got now. When I rode back to the highway I found myself humming "The Hall of the Mountain King."

That night I took a cheap motel room in Alamogordo, my very first motel room ever. The Indian (South Asian, that is) proprietors were eating something that smelled really good when I used all my spare change to buy a Nut Goodie bar and a bag of circus peanuts at their vending machines. I spent the evening watching cable and lying around. Just like I remember it, cable is 90% commercials, 9% utter crap, and the rest I've seen before. I finally gave it up around three in the morning when there was nothing but infomercials and HBO was showing Escape from New York, which falls under the category of crap I've seen before. I did manage to get a long shower with actual shampoo to wash the actual hair I've been growing for the past month. Then I slept in an actual bed under an actual roof.

I can see how a life spent in motel rooms could get terribly tedious and lonely for those who travel for a living. The furniture was circa 1950, and the painting on the wall

wouldn't have sold at a garage sale. The whole room had the smell of institutional cleaning chemicals.

In the morning, I didn't know if I was expected to check out, motel room etiquette is new to me. So I left the key and the remote control on the dresser and closed the door behind me. I figure they can find it.

As I drove off, I had an acute sense of not-belonging, as if the world was too big and too alien to let me stay in it comfortably. The White Sands Missile Range had something to do with it, it shook me badly. Top-secret government projects have almost no presence in Wisconsin. There's the ELF, a miles-long submarine communications antenna, but it's buried out of sight under the north woods. You wouldn't know it was there, if not for all the Madison anti-war protestors chained to it. Even the Badger Munitions Plant near Baraboo is just a picturesque relic from the Second World War. In this part of the world, colossal government monuments to technology and the modernist age are commonplace. No wonder there is a UFO mythology and a conspiratorial paranoia like the one the old woman told me about. If science is veiled behind cabalistic secrecy, what are the people going to believe?

I see the remains of several jackrabbits who fell victim to traffic. Under repeated punishment, the flesh and bones of the jackrabbits turn to paste, but their wide, floppy ears stay intact, the smeared skull gluing them to the pavement. In the draft of passing trucks, the ears flutter like butterfly wings.

Writing this journal has helped to settle my spirit. It usually does, it gives my

thoughts order and my anxieties substance.

As I was sitting here at the rest stop, working on my journal, a man in a tan pickup, wearing a pony tail, cheap sunglasses, and a scruffy beard, came up and started talking to me. He babbled something like, “Did you ever wonder how much killing’s been on this land? Land’s bathed in blood. \$12 a saddle.” I studiously ignored him, being both busy and in a bad mood. As he left, he pulled up his shirt and showed me a scar running up his belly. “Always watch out for the other guy. See this? Lost my spleen. Harley and a pickup, dead-on. Pow. Remember, you’re invisible. Always watch for the other guy.”

I should reach Roswell in an hour or so. The old woman says the museum takes a couple hours. They have two shows or something. When she was there, they had a special crop circle display.

Friday, September 25, 1998

So I spent two days in Roswell, UFO capital of the world, sleeping in a cheap motel that sapped my financial resources to an unjustifiable degree. Like the last motel, this one was also run by Indians (South Asian). I’m beginning to understand, but not approve mind you, the signs proclaiming motels to be “American owned.” They’re probably there to lure in the guy with the red-white-and-blue pickup and the Nike hat.

Roswell actually has a downtown, the first I’ve seen of a Southwestern city. Of course, half the storefronts downtown have model UFOs on top. Aside from being one huge, alien tourist trap, it seems pretty conservative. There’s a military-style prep school and an unusually large number of recruiting facilities. There’s only one coffee shop, or

Shoppe rather, and it's inundated with pictures of Elvis and Marilyn Monroe. Clinching the sheer good taste, the Shoppe has set a table and two chairs out on the sidewalk.

Roswell has fully two Sonic drive in restaurants, which even have the little speaker that you talk into to order your food.

My first night in Roswell, I went to see a matinee of the new Jackie Chan film, Rush Hour. Then I rushed across the street to the mall theater to see the new Jean-Claude Van Damme film, Knock-Off. I had enough time to spare to get something to eat at the "Corndogs Plus" stand. The kid at the counter made me a jumbo corndog right in front of me, putting the giant hotdog on a stick, dipping it in a Tupperware bucket of corn mush, and dropping it in a deep fat fryer fitted with 10 special corndog holding clips. The menu informed me that the Jumbo Corndog weighed a full quarter pound.

The woman at the theater ticket counter tried to talk me out of seeing the Van Damme movie. I convinced her that I knew what I was getting into, that I fully expected it to be a cheesy martial arts flick. Nobody else got by her warning, I was the only one in the theater, the first time that has happened to me in all my years of film obsession.

The next morning, I stayed too long in my motel room watching Chain Reaction on HBO. It was filmed partially in Madison, so I watched primarily to see little snippets of home: a Badger cab here, a scene at the national capitol building that was obviously shot in the Wisconsin capitol. The real national capitol is far less garish; there is no colored marble, gold leaf, and Greek-themed mosaics. "Supreme Court" was clearly visible on one of the walls.



After another tour of the UFO museum, I tried to drive out to the crash site. I'm pretty sure I found the road that turns off the highway, but I was blocked by a really scary looking cattle grate. There was a gap between the bars big enough to snag a foot and strips of twisted, rusted metal crowned the peaks. It was too bad to come all this way without seeing the actual site, but I didn't feel the novelty was worth breaking my leg.

To make up for the disappointment, I staged a UFO photo in the parking lot of the International UFO Museum and Gift Shop. In three tries, I didn't quite get it right. Every time I threw my hat, it tipped onto its side, losing the classic saucer shape.

After two days of touring the museum, I'm convinced that the damn crash was just a weather balloon.

## **A Cheesehead in Texas**

Saturday, September 26, 1998

It's raining here in Austin, so I'm disinclined to go looking for a place to spend the night. Lord knows I should, I need a nap and a shower. I rode through the entire night, moving on at every opportunity to bed down. I got maybe a few minutes of REM at one of the ubiquitous picnic areas that litter the highway out here. I lay down on the cast iron grating of a picnic table, using my leather gloves as a marginal pillow. Even on a surface designed, I can only assume, for its discomfort value, I could have slept if not for the sporadic traffic. For a rural highway in a state composed entirely of wide-open spaces, it saw way too much coming and going.

Unfortunately all the open spaces in Texas are privately owned. There is no public land, only ranches, barbed wired off from the rest of the world. I wouldn't have

minded camping on one of them. I dislike the stress of being where I'm not supposed to be, but it hasn't stopped me before. The trick is finding a location where I wouldn't be shot.

Sometime after midnight, I got so hungry that the can of ravioli in my saddlebags couldn't stop the gnawing pain in my gut. Because nothing else was open, I stopped at an all night convenience store with an attached fast food joint. The fast food joint had a name I had never heard before and a wide display case with various brown crusty things under heat lamps. I pointed at one of the cardboard baskets of brown lumps and asked the old woman behind the counter what they were.

"Those are chicken gizzards," she told me matter-of-factly in a thick Texas accent.

"Aren't they chewy?" I asked. In the past I have bought styrofoam trays of raw chicken gizzard from the discount bin at the local Asian food market. I used them as catfish bait, the prospect of eating the tough little monsters not having occurred to me. Even the catfish wouldn't eat them.

"Are they what?" asked the old woman, squinting in an effort to understand what I was asking.

"Are they chewy. Are they tough to eat," I repeated.

"What, the hell, are you talking about?" she asked in exasperation.

Finally I just bought the things, assuming that if they were popular enough to be left out under heat lamps that late at night, then they must be edible. I took them outside to my bike and took a bite. Sure enough they were chewy. I had to spit out that mouthful of pure gristle and stale breading and throw the rest of the gizzards away.

The first thing I saw coming into Austin at three in the morning was a burning McDonalds. Is this a sign, like a burning bush? Firefighters swarmed over it like ants, climbing up ladders, crawling along the roof. The engine lights flashed as smoke leaked placidly from the building and filled the road with haze. I stopped and watched for a little while, but in the absence of drama, even with nothing better to do, I moved on.

I rode aimlessly about, ate at a Denny's, bought some local papers, got a tank of gas for a stunning 85cents a gallon; but it took me until daylight to find the campus, a hip coffee shop, and a cache of free weekly newspapers, the primary publication conveniently running a "best of Austin" issue. Later I would discover I had missed the truly lively parts of Austin by about two blocks.

The rainshower, my first real rain since LaCrosse, Wisconsin, has let up, but the humidity is making my cup of iced coffee sweat puddles onto my journal paper.

An hour or two before last night's sunset, I stopped at a picnic area to let the feeling get back into my butt. Shortly afterward a man in a 1980's model maroon sedan pulled up and peed in the bushes right in front of me. He wore a three button red-and-white striped shirt with several well-worn holes, khaki shorts, a haircut that consisted simply of gelling his hair and combing it straight back, and oval, wraparound sunglasses. He came over and started to talk as he smoked a cigarette. His name was Ernie, and he sold siding all around Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. He made a few comments about long-haul biking, the necessity for a windscreen, and a bike with power. He mistook my sleeping bag/tent roll for a back cushion. Jimmy Buffet came up in

conversation, and I confessed my continued ignorance of even the most basic elements of the Jimmy Buffet phenomenon, aside from his habit of publishing ghost-written autobiographies. Ernie loves him. When he learned I was going to Austin he gave me a whole string of traveling suggestions, all of which I forgot.

A little while ago, a young hippie man with a beard even more ill-kept and perfunctory than mine asked if I had a light. Being a camper and requiring easy access to fire, I gave him one. He offered me two cigarettes in return, the American Spirit brand, the same kind smoked by David Lynch. Now with a system filled with nicotine and caffeine and a night without sleep, adrift in a town where I hope to make my future, I feel almost like myself.

## **No Home on the Range**

Sunday, September 27, 1998

Here I am, back at Mojo's cafe, and I feel a little calmer now. What wonders a night of sleep will bring.

Yesterday, I decided that because I was in a strange city, knowing no one, blitzed on caffeine and bone tired that the best thing to do would be make a lot of calls to strangers and try to convince them that a jobless wanderer needed to stay in their house. I got the phone number of the campground and the promise of the people at the front desk to contact me if anyone called. I also got a pocketful of change for making calls at the pay phone near my campsite. I made nine calls, going down the roommates listing in the local paper and calling anyone who offered a place to stay for under \$300 a month. I kept

careful notes in my pocket memo book and got two showings arranged for that night.

The first showing was with a woman named Kelly on the far north side of Austin in the suburb of Round Rock. I had talked with her for at least 10 minutes on the phone and she told me she was from San Francisco by way of New Jersey, or maybe vice versa. When I told her that I had done a lot of camping in national forests, she told me she had slept in a camper in the national forests all the way out to Texas. When I knocked on the front door, I was surprised to see that she was at least 35. Coming from a city where all the renters are undergraduates, I was expecting someone younger. Kelly was one of those Southern women who, no matter how old they are, they keep the body and the wardrobe of a 20 year old. In contrast with an aged face it is disorientating.

She was doing needle-point on the couch, apparently taking the day off due to a sinus infection incurred from extreme allergies. She was the first person to say something negative about Austin. Apparently sometime in February, the cedar trees leak enough pollen that you can see the yellow explosions when the wind blows. Sooner or later, everyone develops an allergic reaction to it. She also said that it got cold here, last winter there was some freezing rain, and Austin did have mosquitos.

She has a big, friendly and fuzzy cat, and two dogs. She confessed that one of the dogs has panic attacks during storms. If it's just raining it goes in the garage, if there's thunder it gets sedated.

I talked with her for a little while on her couch, being perfectly calm and moderately witty considering I was completely out of my mind at the time. I told of my motorcycle travels and we said that people need to travel a lot to broaden their minds. She thinks that in elementary school or the last year of high school kids should be driven

around the country for a month. Not a bad idea, I think.

I felt the interview went well, but I don't have much hope that she'll be calling me back to take the room. I have a little bit of competition, and I am unemployed. That counts a lot against me.

Monday, September 28, 1998

How can I do justice to the second place I looked at that day. I don't even know how to say this, I'm still in a state of shock. When I got to Mike's place, he was waiting at the front step, shirtless, shoeless, and wearing a pair of green shorts, unbuttoned and partially unzipped. He wasn't wearing any underwear. He took me in and happily showed me about, perhaps a little surprised that I found my way there. He showed me the living room, which contained a curb-quality beige couch lit by a wooden schooner lamp with brass sails, and several Victoria's Secret catalogs on an end table. He showed me the garage, filled with construction equipment he doesn't much use anymore what with the government disability he gets after those six heart attacks. There are three dogs in the garage, one so skittish it runs into the backyard not to be seen again, another a white poodle with its curly hair so thin you can see the scabs on its pink skin, the last a mutt resembling a golden retriever that cowers, its tail wagging furtively between its legs, its muzzle lifted cautiously to my hand, one lip snagged on a fang. It has the trembling demeanor of a dog frequently beaten. "Don't pet that one, or you'll have a friend for life," Mike says.

"I'll be sure to only be cruel then," I reply.

The backyard, surrounded by a chain-link fence, has a horseshoe pit, a barbecue

made from a steel drum, and a smattering of mismatched lawn furniture, both plastic and metal. Mike proudly shows me the floodlights wired to the only tree. He and his buddies (two of which he insists on calling ZZ Top, as if that would amuse me) use the backyard for late-night drinking parties. The neighbor on one side is a co-worker crony, and the one on the other is deaf, so he doesn't get any complaints no matter how loud the brouhaha. He brags about this several times; he considers it a major selling point of the house.

Behind the yard are a series of transformers. Mike says that after a while the humming gets into your head and you don't notice anymore.

He says he likes to keep the kitchen clean, a dirty kitchen is one of his pet peeves. If he weren't such a straight forward kind of guy I would have taken it for a joke. He kept the clothes dryer in one corner of the kitchen, and a pan of burnt meat soaked in the sink. The decorative theme was cracked yellow formica.

He tried to wake up the primary roommate by banging on his door as we passed through to the other end of the house, but to no luck. The roommate's name is Rooster.

The empty room he advertised had a couple of blankets tacked over the windows. The yellowed overhead light compliments the yellow wallpaper, reinforcing the generally phlegmatic ambiance. He proudly points out the air conditioner sitting on the window sill, humming away and missing the rear grate so you can see the freon tubing.

I am told this room formerly belonged to Rooster, but when Mike's daughter moved out to college, or "got her wings" as he put it, Rooster moved into her room. I was there to fill up the space and help pay for the daughter's car. She has an expensive red sports car which takes the constant efforts of both parents to support. Whenever she

stops by, Mike takes time out to wash it.

Mike says he's glad his daughter moved out because it was a constant stress (I suggested that choice of wording). She kept on nagging him to quit his drinking and gambling and whatnot.

We pass through the room occupied by a college student Mike claims to never see. There's a clutter of unpacked boxes on an unmade bed. He shows me the attendant bathroom, the guy's bath, although with his daughter gone I was welcome to use either one. He stands inside it, pointing out the different cabinets and their various uses, a long and cabalistic explanation. Use of certain shelves I understand to be taboo. I paid no attention, because by this point I had no intention of staying at that house. Although a twisted part of me, still curious about the seedy underbelly of America, entertained the prospect.

He sat me down in his own personal space, an addition he built himself a few years ago. It was accessible only from the yard and the room of the mysteriously absent boy. He complained about how his brothers kept storing their stuff in his space. Half the room was stuffed with couches set on end, filing cabinets, and boxes. The other half was more curb-quality lounging furniture facing a display of five televisions, all playing football or the news.

He brags about losing \$60,000 in the past year to gambling. He won \$57,000, so through the convenience of bookies, most of the money didn't change hands. He's in a good mood because he hasn't lost a game yet that Saturday. Ever since he legally died, passed out for nine hours and lost 70% of his heart tissue, he hasn't had much to do other than feed his football gambling obsession. "I don't play halfway," he tells me proudly,



looking over his stat sheets arrayed on the metal trunk in front of his couch.

After half an hour, I told him I needed to make it downtown for a movie. Not strictly true, but I'd stayed far longer than courtesy dictated. Only a morbid sort of curiosity and Mike's genuinely friendly manner kept me there past 10 minutes.

I had told him it looked like a quiet neighborhood (he had bragged twice about how his uncle had designed the whole subsection) and he said it was quiet except "for the niggers and the spics" who drive through with "the thumpers and the bouncers. You know what I mean."

At the beginning of the interview, he had said no drugs were allowed except "beer, pot, and cigarettes." He recited the three like they were a witticism and a mantra all in one.

"What, no vodka? No gin?"

"Aw, vodka's the same as beer." He waved a hand to dismiss the differences.

A friend of his, a co-worker, had gotten into crack, and it had made him go bad. The only time they'd had something stolen, the crackhead had just walked out with the college kid's TV. Luckily a nosy neighbor from across the street noticed and told them about it later. When Mike asked the college kid what he thought the TV was worth, the kid said \$300. So Mike gave the kid a month's free rent, and the kid went and bought a new TV. Since then there have been locks on the doors to all the rooms, to which Mike keeps a key.

I finally found an opportunity to slip away, although Mike gave me the impression he wanted me to stay until "ZZ Top" arrived. I told him I was staying at a campground, and he offered to let me stay on a foldout for the night since he "does things for people."

I got out of that by saying I'd paid for the next couple of days. He said I should call him on Monday or Tuesday, but I won't.

I was already out the door when he said, "Wait, I'll try to wake up Rooster. He's been sleeping all day."

"Ah."

"Now, wait just a second." He darted into the house, leaving me on the front step wondering if I should have been less friendly to this man. Luckily Mike came out a few minutes later, unsuccessful. He and Rooster had been drinking that morning, and apparently Rooster couldn't quite keep up with Mike.

Mike told me I looked like a pretty clean-cut kid (ignoring my month and a half of beard), and now that I think about it, I'm sure he was right.

That evening, I spent a little time at Mojo's coffeehouse before walking down "the drag," the alleged teen hangout with its plethora of cheap video arcades. One of the video arcades has a change machine with a sign that reads: "Quarters are for games only." A statement that I have believed for years now. The arthouse cinema in the same building features the film Six String Samurai about a Buddy Holly look-alike who wanders a post-apocalyptic landscape with a Fender Stratocaster and a samurai sword.

While killing time by browsing through a Wal-Mart just off the interstate, I happen across the gun counter. Four men are leaning there. Two are employees, and all are listening to an old Texan redneck, drawling slowly in an authoritative manner. "As I understand it," he says, "as long as you're in fear for your life, then you're in the right."

“But if someone gets onto your property?” asks a Wal Mart employee.

“If someone gets onto my property. . .” It takes him at least twice as long to spit out a sentence as someone not from Texas, like he’s thinking carefully about the significance of each and every vowel.

A Wal-Mart employee gets impatient and has to finish the thought for him.

“They’re not getting out.”

“That’s right.”

The next day, I made some more calls and got showings at two more places. The first with this guy named Sam in a centrally located apartment directly underneath the airport approach patterns. His house was messy; for some reason the kitchen had a big, green, wheeled garbage barrel filled to the brim with trash and sealed tight with a transparent lid. In the living room, a projection screen blocked sight of an unused treadmill. All in all it looked more lived in than dangerously filthy. Piles of books stacked in odd locations go a long ways to giving an apartment a quaint charm.

I told him that I was trying to get my cultural bearings in Austin, and that I was pretty sure I found the “cool” district, that stretch of Guadalupe that borders the university. Sam seemed visibly disappointed that I could be fooled into thinking “The Drag” was cool. “The Drag is for high schoolers. Sixth street is for adults. That’s where all the bars are,” he told me. I made a mental note to find this 6th Street.

The next showing was on the far northwest side of the city, no more than five blocks from the city limits and tractless Texas wasteland. At the door, I watched a gray moth, dappled like bark, trying to blend into the wood paneling. A blonde opened the

door and introduced herself as Janet. “You are the biker, aren’t you?” she said seeing my black-leather jacket, black pants and shirt, black boots, and black helmet in my hands.

“I like to think so,” I said smiling.

The living room had several Garth Brooks posters and a skinny, balding man with a dirty T-shirt and one of those straggly upper lip mustaches you only see on teenagers and gas station attendants. Janet introduced him as her best friend in the world. He smiled pleasantly and meekly in greeting while watching a Natasha Richardson movie on the FX channel.

After a quick tour of the house, Janet offered me the room. I told her I would have to think about it, I would call her back. I still needed to make some more calls, I said.

I went back to Mojo’s again, then took some time off to watch Your Friends and Neighbors and the midnight show of General Chaos: Animation, all at the Dobie, the theater made famous for introducing the world to “Slackers.”

Today was my day for looking for jobs. I called Great Harvest Bread and got an interview time and an application. And I called Texas French Bread, talked to a crushingly serious guy named Murph who gave me a few more numbers to call the next morning and the impression only delivery jobs were open.

Wednesday, September 30, 1998

Tuesday may very well have been the worst day of my life. I woke up early and went down to the front desk of the campground to renew my campsite for one more night

when the snaggle-toothed woman at the front desk, grinning up a storm like a professional telemarketer, told me that tenters could only stay for three nights. This was the first I'd heard of it, and a sinister, suspicious part of me suspects that this rule specifically applied to me.

“I'm sorry, but I can't change the rules without talking to the owner,” she said.

“Aw, so I've got to move out?” I let a whimsical sneer into my face. Her smile faltered.

By itself, I wouldn't have thought twice about this. Sure, it was the nicest tent site I've ever seen. I had my own quadrant of a wooden gazebo, with a locker for my valuables; a picnic bench; a power outlet on a shelf that the campguide told me was for my television; a water spigot; a wide, clean bed of sand for my tent; and a short hedge for privacy. A legion of elderly campground workers in blue shirts (I saw at least 20 distinct employees) drove around the park in silent little golf carts. I would hear the crunching of gravel and there would be another cart, scooting past with the lone-star flag whipping from the awning.

But it was also the most expensive campsite; they charged me as much as an RV. Even the site in downtown Vancouver, before currency conversion, cost less. And during the day, I had to listen to the announcement speakers of the used car lot next door. Every 30 seconds or so some secretary would shout over the P.A. “William H., line one. William H., line one.”

I quickly packed and found a reasonably cheap, but still exorbitant, motel room in time to be offered a job. I got the impression from the shift manager at Texas French Bread, a caffeinated woman in white bakery clothes, that I could have a crappy third-shift

job for meager pay whenever I wanted. I told her, in a melancholically modulated voice which for some reason wouldn't take the breezy and conversational tone I wanted it to, that I was having trouble finding lodging, so could I call her tomorrow?

I didn't call her the next morning because I was still stuck in an ill-fated morass of apartment hunting. An energetic young man at an apartment locating service, who either really wanted to boost his commission or was taking amphetamines, confirmed my suspicions that the housing scene in Austin was truly absurd. He bounced around in his chair and tried to show me listings for \$450 a month, then told me that San Marcos was a cool town with pretty reasonable rent and a bunch of good bars.

But what really demoralized me was my return call to the first roommate I interviewed with, Kelly. I don't want to recall the conversation in too much detail, short as it was, because it was extremely wrenching emotionally. She told me she had taken me out of the running because she found my "lack of a job and transience. . .unsettling." She seemed to find it charming before. What hurt was the aggressively bitchy tone of voice over the phone in contrast to her congeniality in person. When I went to her place for the interview, I felt that I actually opened up to her. I was a stranger in a strange town, I was alone and vulnerable, and I had spoken with her as I would to a friend. It made the curt rejection over the phone all the more personal.

After that I actively considered leaving Austin. I wrote a long E-mail to Adam about what a tough time I was having, but either the server or my computer crashed and I was still trying to upload the message when a pretty woman with what looked like surgical instruments stuck up her nose came for her turn at the computer. I told her I thought it might be crashed so she might have to reboot. I left the library then, my feet

dragging, my jacket dangling at the end of my arm, the message still impotently suspended outside the Web. I wonder if she read it.

Today I forked over another princely sum of cash to the motel and against my gut instinct began one last try at finding an apartment. I found myself that afternoon in a generic Austin mall, sitting at a bench with the echoing hallways, shell-shocked. It was like any other mall anywhere in the world, but this one was in the middle of Texas, and I was inside it with nowhere to go. I had just looked at an apartment that must have been in the most godawful neighborhood in Austin. The building itself was cracked and desolate, surrounded by decaying cars and discarded patio furniture. There was no one about, just a man in a pickup truck trying to look inconspicuous, his business uncertain. He kept averting his eyes when I glanced at him. But the door to the apartment stood open, so after knocking a couple of times I went in. Admittedly it was big, but everything was cracked. The bathroom fixtures hung out several inches too far for the tile and linoleum. When I turned them on, a suspicious drizzle leaked out. And it had that smell that I remember from being a custodian at an affordable housing project. I never figured out if it was cigarette smoke or urine, but whatever it was it forced me to rip out carpet on a daily basis.

The other apartment I looked at today, although nearly affordable, was in some sort of gated compound. The courteous assistant manager, a stocky blonde with a black, bird-of-paradise print dress showed me around and then told me about their 30-point system for admittance. At first I thought she said “dirty point system.” She laughed politely at that, as if I had just made an off-color joke about the pope, before continuing

her consciously polite recitation. It turns out a 30-point system is the mechanism that gated apartment complexes use to weed out unrespectable people like me. Rather than fill out the form, which had a two-day clearance procedure, I told her I would call her back.

I drove about a little randomly after that. I tried to find a pay phone so I could call the slumlords who owned the derelict building I saw that morning and wound up at the mall. I called twice, but no one answered, probably busy signing someone to the lease. I spent the intervening time sitting on the mall bench, staring at the floor tiles, knowing in the pit of my stomach that I had no place to go. A dozen roads led off from where I was sitting, and I could see the dead end sign before them all. I E-mailed Adam, asking if he needed a roommate for the hypothetical possibility we would both wind up back in Madison. I looked up airline rates in case I wanted to go to Taiwan and teach English.

When I got back to the motel, I was fairly certain that what I really wanted to do was ride up to Chicago, stay with an old friend for a few days, and get a job in one of the eight Breadsmiths in the Chicago area. In the middle of watching Dragonball Z, the motel phone rung and I picked up the handset before the plastic stopped shaking from the first ring. It was Sam, the third potential roommate who interviewed me, and he wanted to know if I still wanted the room. I could move in the next morning.

He had always been the first choice. I liked the man, he seemed like my type of guy. That he would take enough initiative to call me, that he found me acceptable enough to live with him, radically boosted my spirits. His call was the only thing that could have kept me from leaving Austin in the morning. It came with only hours to spare.



I felt so good I went to Culver's, the infamous custard and burger franchise from Sauk City, Wisconsin, and treated myself to a double bacon butterburger deluxe with fries and a butterscotch malt. It was a little taste of home. If ever there were such a thing as Wisconsin cuisine, Culver's would be it. When I saw the sign emerge from the side of the highway, I had to purse my lips to stifle the sentimental burst of emotion. Just another dip in the roller coaster I've been riding lately. The girl at the counter seemed rustier than those at Wisconsin Culver's, and there was no denying the clientele was much less obesely overweight than their Wisconsin counterparts. She told me this Culver's had been open for a year and she confirmed the chain started in Wisconsin, but she didn't seem particularly impressed that I came from there. People around here don't take Wisconsin too seriously. Just a place for beer and cheese.

After the meal I felt very heavy. I don't think I'll have to eat again for a few days.

The motel manager referred me to a laundromat on the city's Southeast side in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. On one wall hung the following sign: "Remove your clothes promptly. If you are absent and another customer is waiting then an attendant will remove them for you." I feel this sign to be just one of the many advantages of living in a multicultural society.

I might just make a good show of Austin. On Monday night, I went down to Mojo's to work on my journal and started talking to this guy named Drew. It started by my commenting on his choice of cigarette brands. "Does everyone around here smoke

American Spirits?" I asked. I didn't even have to follow up with my David Lynch factoid. Turns out he is in the UT film department, he gave me a blow-by-blow of his last two films, although the traffic going by was too loud for me to remember them clearly. We talked for a while. When I asked him about local color I should check out, he told me I should keep my eye out for thriving Austin porno culture. Having seen the signs for all the strip bars and lingerie modeling studios, I have a good idea what he's talking about. He's also heard that the local sadomasochist bondage scene is short on eager dominators.

At least I can now cross off "contact local film community" from my list of things to do.

## **Pop-Culture**

Friday, October 2, 1998

I wrote on Wednesday that I wouldn't have to eat for a few days after that bacon butterburger deluxe at Culver's. Oddly enough, it nearly worked that way. The next day, I only ate a 5th Avenue bar, a Nestle iced tea that I got at a gas station, and a glass of iced tea that Sam offered me as I signed into his apartment. Only after midnight, thinking back and feeling obligated to digest something, I bought a pint of Ben and Jerry's and ate it on the floor of my room.

It wasn't until 2:30 that I moved into my new home. Most of the time before that I spent trying to get \$390 out of my credit union account in Madison. The ATM's wouldn't dispel quite enough money, and Sam had made it clear that he would only accept cash, so a check was out of the question. I finally had to go to a strange bank and withdraw cash off my VISA card.

The room wasn't entirely empty. Sam had said he was cleaning it out for me, but when I got there, it still had an ambient level of clutter. A home entertainment cabinet faced the wrong way into the corner. The top shelf had two empty boxes, one had contained aquarium gravel, the other fresh beef. The next shelf down had two matrushka dolls, male and female, and below that a plasterboard globe circa 1940, which had lost whatever stand had supported it. Kmart-style barbells, of the plastic and cement variety, leaned against the opposite corner. In the closet were a window screen, a long metal panel with curious plastic windows, and a shelf unmatched to any closet or cabinet in the house. Someone had tacked a map of Austin to one wall. In the months to come, I would use that map to mark the locations of all the movie theaters in town.

I suspect Sam has lived there for several years, the slip of paper in the mailbox had the crossed-out names of two other roommates. The apartment has a layering of clutter like geologic sediment. Some of it is pleasant and even clever, like the troll doll grinning from the soap shelf in the shower, the flower-print bean-bag frog blending into the tropically colored cover of One Hundred Years of Solitude (although why either has to be on the toilet tank, I don't know), and the stereo under the bathroom sink, which murmurs the classical music station day and night at a barely audible volume (it lends a certain drama to bowel movements to have Wagner playing in the background).

The kitchen I find troublesome. Most of the cupboards have plastic grocery bags just lying around between home brewing equipment long gone to sludge. At least a dozen "fun-size" Hershey's chocolate and Crackle bars sit in the fridge. At some point they had melted and refrozen with half the chocolate now on the outside of the wrapper. Two bags of garlic cloves of indeterminate age sit in far corners of the fridge.

But I'm making do. This wouldn't be the first time I've lived with someone of questionable cleanliness. I once lived with five other guys, and the pile of dirty dishes would occlude the kitchen counter and grow two feet high. Visitors, on entry to the apartment, would comment on the stench of rotting food. But that was college.

I made it to the Austin Heart of Film Screenwriter's Conference, getting entrance to Austin's premier old movie palace, The Paramount. It's a beautiful building; the theater itself has all the old gold-leaf trimming and multicolored mosaics. My festival pass authorized me to go to the front of the line instead of muck around with all the boobs who had lined up around the block. Turns out all those boobs showed up because of the scheduled appearance of Sandra Bullock, screening her self-directed film short. Just as I pushed my way into position to the front doors, Sandra Bullock herself pushed out of a black sport utility vehicle; within spitting range, yet I did not spit on her! Makeup caked her face like a clown (from the balcony it would look more natural), the black paint around her eyes squinched grotesquely as someone within the throngs of fans won a kiss on the cheek. Before she could breeze her way inside, a man three rows back from the security perimeter turned around and shouted: "It sucks! She's short!" A more ambitious man than I could make that the first line of a successful haiku.

At the Paramount I saw Rushmore, an unscheduled but rewarding film about an eccentric high schooler at a private boarding school. I identified with the protagonist, who spends so much time with overly ambitious extracurricular activities that his schoolwork and his personal life suffers. I also saw this fall's feel good film, Pleasantville, about modern teenagers who get transported into a 1950's family sitcom.

As the teenagers poison the minds of the TV characters with nineties-style cynicism, the black-and-white people become colorized. The movie's gimmick conditioned me to be sensitive to the basic concept of color, so when a projector malfunction caused the theater's lights to come up, the sudden kaleidoscope of color from the movie palace's ornamentation came as a visceral shock.

This morning I shaved most of my ratty beard, leaving a goatee. I hope no one tells my friend Ulrich about this, because he once told me that he hates everyone who has a goatee. I understand his feelings, far too many smarmy jerks wear goatees for no other reason than fashion. Personally I like the way it looks. It completes the bad-ass biker look.

On the way out to the grocery store this morning, I ran into a couple of Mormons. Both were women, one black and the other Asian; unusual because until recently the Mormons officially considered nonwhites to be the soulless sons of Ham, or something like that. But I heard the Mormons were being a lot nicer about that sort of thing lately.

I lied to those poor girls. I said I had faith in Jesus and that my mother was a Presbyterian minister.

"How has your faith helped you?" the prettier of the two asked.

"It's a big support. It's a comfort to know God is always out there."

She relapsed into a partially memorized soulful confession about her reliance on God. For delivery she gets three stars.

"So you take Jesus to be your personal savior?" she asked.

“Yes, Presbyterians usually do. We’re Calvinists and all.”

She tried to get me to accept a Book of Mormon, but I told her that my mother would be upset if I shopped around behind her back. They had been impressed by my admission of faith and my mother being a minister, but they were obviously dissatisfied that they hadn’t made a sale. I feel bad about lying to them, but my other strategy for dealing with Mormons is to either try to break their faith or gross them out with some of those things that unbelievers like me do in our free time, and these two girls seemed too nice for the big guns. Surprisingly I kept eye contact and never smirked: The old beliefs haven’t died so thoroughly that they seem like ridiculous lies, in fact I easily convinced myself otherwise. Maybe the sophomoric skepticism is leaching away and I’m coming to find my own sort of faith?

Friday, October 9, 1998

It’s a testament to the grim malaise of my life right now that it’s been this long since I’ve written in my journal. There’s not a whole lot to update. I’m getting no satisfaction from my job and precious little money. As if I were a prisoner, the highlights of my life have been the mail from home ( as if I had a home, he comments bitterly). First my father sent me two black T-shirts he had got from a catalog outlet store for flawed merchandise, a very fatherly and astutely tailored gift since I never wear anything other than black T-shirts. One of the shirts has a left sleeve only barely big enough to accept my arm. In the accompanying letter my father expressed optimism that I could find better work arrangements if I should so desire. A properly supportive father-type letter if ever there was one, and certainly much appreciated.

Then my mother sent me a package containing my film demo tapes, Girl Scout cookies, and a Ziploc bag filled with shelled walnuts. I have since devoured the latter two items, those being the only ones which were edible.

My first two days at work have been uneventful, characterized by drudgery of the most agonizing sort. When I took the job, I was under the impression that the bread was of a much higher quality, and in this matter I was mistaken. But I'm not spending much time making bread anyways, the majority of the evening is devoted to scooping slimey muffin batter into grease-blackened muffin trays. Some of the bread trays have stalactites of grease three inches long. It is likely they have never been washed.

I get the impression that I'm not crucial to the operation of the bakery in the slightest. My presence only seems to give the regular employees greater opportunities to stand around and go outside to smoke. I never thought I'd be sentimental about the bakery in Madison, but there I knew I was the only one who could do the job as well as I could. And I always had the motivation to strive for excellence: the job could be done adequately or very well, depending on the effort and skill brought to bear. Here in Austin, there is just doing the job or fucking up. The bread will look and taste like wet flour unless you happen to make a serious mistake. Of course those goddamn muffins require no skill at all. Not muffins, mind you, GODDAMN muffins.

The people at the bakery are nice enough. The night crew bakers are divided into two camps: Hispanics near to middle-aged, and young white kids. The white kids are clearly at the nadir of bakery power structure, used exclusively for the least glamorous work.

The morning bakery crew, from what I've seen, are mainly 30ish white women, the polar opposites of this crowd. I can see why I was channeled into the shift I'm working. I was typecast, so to speak. .

Work made me miss a lot of the film festival since I was working nights during most of the showings, but by Sunday I had pretty much OD'd on films anyway.

To fend off boredom and desperation, I divide my free time into two projects: learning Mandarin and writing a resume. With a resume, I just might find myself with a better job, although a job doing what I couldn't say. If I could get an internship position at a film production company I could conceivably coast for a little while on the money my old boss finally sent me.

Otherwise there's the Mandarin. The rock-bottom safety net to my adventures in the real world is the abiding fantasy of going abroad and teaching English. My passport finally came in the mail, and I checked the price of airline tickets. Nothing really stands in the way of moving to Taiwan and earning money with my most basic marketable skill: my native grasp of the English language. I have a friend from college who did it, why can't I? He spent a year and a half in Taipei and came back with a wife, a fistful of money, and a drinking problem. Sounds like a good idea to me. Theoretically I could earn enough that way to come back to America and fund a low-budget movie, or live for a while working on my writing.

So I've spent a little time every morning and every evening practicing Chinese script. As soon as I get more money or a clear idea of my future plans I will invest in



more learning tapes, some textbooks, and a tapeplayer. Which means learning another language will cost over a hundred dollars, but it's about time I scrapped this whole monolingual thing.

Saturday, October 10, 1998

At this point, I ought to describe a little of what my life is like. My alarm goes off at 8:30a.m. I bought the cheapest alarm clock I could find at an all-night H-E-B grocery store, and every time it goes off the first thing that goes through my head is "fire alarm!" For four bucks, it makes the most godawful metallic clatter. It brings me bolt upright in my mummy-sleeping bag to shut it off. Then I sleep for another two hours. One might wonder why I even bother setting the alarm if I never actually wake when the alarm goes off. Simply put, every night I go to sleep with the fanciful notion that I will be extremely productive the next day. On some levels, I am aware just how ridiculous this hope is, but every night I suspend disbelief for just one more day.

When I finally do get the energy and the motivation to get off the floor, I immediately turn to my Chinese character practice. I have a low table I've fashioned from a plasterboard shelf and eight plastic discs from the weight-training set Sam left in my room when I moved in. I'm using the entertainment center to store my camping equipment and what few books I own.

After about an hour, I have done two hundred repetitions of two new characters. Then I drift around town, buying groceries, running errands, puttering around the main branch of the Austin Public Library, checking my E-mail, and just generally looking busy until 4:00 runs around and I have to go to work.

It's an axiom of modern life that all time spent prior to work is time of impending work. There's a sense of dread and anxiety, an underlying awareness that anything you do will have to be over by clock-in time. In my case, I couldn't give a damn if I lost this particular job or not, but that damn work ethic of mine has to take the whole thing seriously.

After work I drive home (or what passes for home) and eat the crappy bread due me for a night of baking while squatting on the floor of my bare room. Maybe I'll practice more Chinese, then I fall asleep.

Two weeks here and I already have a bleak routine.

## **Pop-Fashion**

Wednesday, October 14, 1998 (very early morning)

While we're pounding out more flavorless bread, Polo the night manager begins reciting the locations of all the strip joints in town. The song "Roxanne" playing on the radio brought up the subject. Polo seems truly enthusiastic about the topic. Judging by the abundance of strip clubs and their close cousins the lingerie modeling studios, most of Texas is also enthusiastic about the topic.

"Every strip joint I've been at they play that song," Polo, my boss says. "All the girls they know how to dance to this."

"Which is funny, because it has an anti-stripping message," I say, realizing as I say it that it is precisely the suggestion of tarnished innocence that makes the song so appealing to the stripping clientele. I heard once that the song was written in honor of an

actual stripper whom the band considered liberating from her lifestyle of pandering and exhibition. They, of course, did not and continued complicitly supporting lifestyles of pandering and exhibition.

“You can go home, listen to the song, and imagine all the girls.”

I had already decided that Polo’s manner was avuncular, but this interchange firmly fixed his similarity to my uncle who once described to me the correspondence between playing the harmonica and cunnilingus.

Whenever something goes wrong in the bakery, the boss smiles underneath his bristly Stalin moustache and stares with his eyes frozen at the peak of an ironic roll. He had that expression when he told me that our co-worker Carl hadn’t pre-oiled the muffin trays the night before because he was “wasted.”

Carl, whom all the Latinos call Carlos because he’s the only white guy in the bakery with a grasp of Spanish, seems constantly wasted. He wears a hernia-belt with shoulder straps and snow-camouflage fatigue pants tucked into his combat boots. He’s been working at the bakery for five years, taking long breaks, burning the bread, and from what I smelled after Polo left for the night, smoking chiba like a chimney. He has that good-natured slur to his speech that all stoners have, laid over a smooth Carolina drawl. When he grins, which he does frequently, you can see rows of snaggle teeth decayed from a combination of backwoods hygiene and daily whiskey-induced vomiting. His physique resembles an anorexic spider monkey, apparently because a previous crystal meth dependency had dissolved 50 pounds of muscle mass and he never regained the weight.

There’s a friendly guy who just started working here named Jason. He drives an

old VW bus that leaks through the steering column whenever it rains. He tells me he's friends with some folks at a local tattoo parlor which is why, even though he can't afford to get his driver's license renewed, his arms are one solid mass of blue and red ink disappearing into his T-shirt. His tattoos have had years of progressive accumulation, images and pictorial styles layered and interwoven, obscuring the skin itself.

Saturday, October 17, 1998

I made contact with some guys who are trying to make an Onion clone, a satirical newspaper with a free distribution, right here in Austin. The Onion is probably Madison's biggest cultural export. Somehow a bunch of collegiate wiseacres with access to desktop publishing cultivated a USA Today parody into a national humor phenomenon. Most of the comedy is based on the confusion caused by writing up banal events or obvious lies in a headline format. A classic example would be: "Gubernatorial Candidates Caught in Love Tryst with Lowland Gorilla." At first I wasn't certain that I had anything notable to contribute, the Onion is an extremely tough act to follow, but the idea sat in the back of my head and fermented quietly. I finally got the bright idea of drawing the most minimal comic strip possible, its title: "The Adventures of Circle and Almost Circle."

The call didn't go terribly well, the guy in charge didn't know how to deal with my Ingvar moniker. Well poop to him. I've been Ingvar for 10 years now, my mom calls me Ingvar, my friends call me Ingvar, if I had enemies they'd call me Ingvar (or quite possibly "that one guy").

Whatever else happens, if the paper folds or if it takes off, it ought to be worth my

while. Even as resume padding, it would be worth my time. I left Madison in order to find bigger and better opportunities out in the real world, this seems like exactly that sort of challenge.

Having told me where to find the strip clubs, Polo has also told me where to find the gay hangouts. On Sixth and Red River he told me. Although I was there last night, I didn't see any blatant candidates. Those sorts of rumors are always exaggerated.

I had finally decided it was time to dip into the live music/ bar culture of Austin. Austin brags at being the live music capital of the world, it's about time that I saw for myself. Sometime after midnight, I went down to 6th Street, or "The Strip" in the local tongue, and tried to find the Atomic Cafe, the supposed goth club and most likely place for me to find people I could get along with.

My first pass past the club, I swear I couldn't find the entrance. It looked like a warehouse, barred up and nearly silent. I would have taken it for a derelict building if it weren't for the black-clad hipsters out on the sidewalk and the stenciled radiation symbols all over the front. I kept on walking, as if I hadn't intended to go in there in the first place.

With nothing else to do, I gave myself a quick tour of the bar district of Austin. I must say I was impressed, the level of drunkenness easily surpassed anything we've ever seen in Madison. The police had cordoned off the street, so people stumbled hither and yon without danger of being run over by a car. From what I saw of the bars, people were packed in rump to rump, and out on the street it wasn't much better. Cops cantered through the crowds atop huge draft horses, wearing cowboy hats nearly as large. A

platoon of college football types walked in formation, pinching the butts of drunken women and jeering at their protests. A man walked past with a beautiful blonde woman in a blue dress and four Hispanic men stopped in their tracks, craning their necks to watch her pass, much in the same manner as myself.

Almost as numerous as the music clubs were the piercing and tattoo parlors. After all, what goes better with binge drinking than self-mutilation? A second story tattoo shop blared a pre-recorded side show harangue. The barker promised the full range of titillating piercings and extreme body art.

When I got back to the Atomic, I found the only door with a handle, though it was otherwise unlabeled, and gave it a pull. As it turns out, the crowd wasn't nearly the goth, black and vinyl crowd. There were a few regulars scattered about, more out of habit than anything else, but everybody else were fans of the two bands of the evening: "Rage Against the Machine"-style angry punks.

Although goths and punks are both society disdaining subcultures who sport combat boots and tattoos, neither mixes well with the other, which made it somewhat odd that Austin's premiere goth club would sport a punk double-bill on the weekend. You can recognize a goth by the jet black or blindingly white hair, black or purple clothes, and a tendency toward anachronistic style combinations like 18th century lace and vinyl pants. A punk will wear whatever cheap T-shirts and jeans they can, so long as the colors are black or muted. More importantly, a punk listens to fast, angry music, and a goth listens to melancholically-slow, angry music.

I had a Guinness and a cigarette and tried to get into the mood for dancing, a somewhat difficult proposition as the first band really sucked. It was tragic to see four or

five angry young punks dancing and stomping and screaming with their strange hair and tattoos while another four goths stood right at the stage and watched the band, motionless and expressionless. The lead vocalist gave it the old college try though, leaning out and screaming over the heads of the spectators at a crowd which wasn't there and begging the people at the bar to come and dance.

While the headline band, "Gash," set up I smoked a cigarette off to one side. A pretty young goth chick with her hair all in cornrows came and asked to bum one off me. She was the second one that night, and I still don't know if she really needed a cigarette or if she was trying to initiate a conversation. It's a social situation entirely unfamiliar to me. Like nearly every social situation, come to think of it.

The second band did a bit better. They actually succeeded in charging the audience with some measure of passion. I and about three other guys actually got a primitive sort of mosh going. The first time it started up, it was like a tub of water that just started swirling by itself. It was a chemical imperative. The ingredients for the mosh were there, the solution just needed a catalyst, just needed to reach a boiling point. For a few songs, we bounced off each other, spinning and careening, limbs twirling. Afterward, we all clasped hands and clapped shoulders, proud we had figured out how to release the steam. To the uninitiated or someone who has only seen a mosh pit on TV, it looks more like a brawl than like actual dancing. In actuality, it requires a certain etiquette and respect for others that makes it the social equivalent of a playful jab to the shoulder. The violence is always controlled, and the dancers are always looking out to make sure no one is getting hurt or trampled underfoot.

Only punks mosh. Goths don't mosh. Goths don't like to be touched when they

dance.

At this time, an overweight goth was having her birthday party. She and her friends drank and caroused at the front of the stage. She wore vinyl shorts, fish nets, and a black corset with a pair of dollar bills wedged between her ballooning breasts. She had a bad habit of leaning forward and shaking her shoulders, her mouth gaping like an inflatable sex toy. As if anyone really wanted to see that.

The band patronized her, alternately allowing her to climb up on stage and dance like an inept stripper and telling her to “get the fuck off the stage.”

Sometime during the mosh, she started a fight or was the principal victim, I didn't see which. As I remember it, an androgynous Asian punk accidentally moshed right into her. There was some shoving, some words were exchanged, which I didn't hear although I was only a few feet away, and then the punk rushed at the fat goth. I could see hands locked against heads, and two bodies rolled against the stage and across a monitor amp. I was trying to decide in that moment whether or not I should get involved. In that crucial instant, I thought both that I had better do something and that it was a chick fight so I should stay out of it. I felt a deep revulsion about touching either of them. As I was standing there in indecision, I felt someone trying to get past me. I thought it was someone with more decisiveness than me, but when I looked I saw that a guy with a beard was shoving people toward the fight. I caught a glimpse of malicious glee spread behind his whiskers, clearly hoping that the fight would blossom into a full-scale brawl.

By this point, several people had grabbed at the grappling duo. The lead vocalist and the lead guitar both dived off the stage, their arms around the fighters before their feet left the boards. The rest of the band kept playing the song without missing a beat,



and I think the singer actually continued the chorus in the thick of the melee. Some security showed up and joined the mass, and soon the fat goth was off to one side of the dance floor, surrounded by security and admirers arguing her case, and the punk was off with her friends, bragging about her part in the scuffle. The goth was thrown out, birthday and all. The band returned to their positions and finished the song. I had stood clear the entire time.

“If you don’t know how to dance, don’t dance,” screamed the lead guitar. “Don’t let people who don’t know how to have fun ruin a good time.”

“You people think you’re 10 feet tall, but you’re nothing but a bunch of fucking pansies to me,” sneered the lead singer as if it were the intro to the next song.

The band tried to get the spirit back, but it didn’t work. The intimacy necessary for a mosh pit had left. The bouncers came around a little while later and told everyone they had three minutes to finish their drinks. I don’t know if that was because it was bar time or if the cops were making them do it, but it was clear the evening was over.

On the way out I saw security throwing out some women who I assume were friends of the fat goth and were there for the birthday party.

“But I didn’t hit anyone,” whined the girl. “I didn’t hit anyone.”

“That’s nice, have a nice night,” said the big bouncer, pushing them firmly behind the shoulder blades. “Goodbye.”

I passed the bald guy who, along with me, had been the principal mosh proponent during the show. We clasped hands in that overhand/underhand sequence that people sometimes try with me but that I never quite seem to understand. “It was good moshing with you,” he said.

“Yeah, for a while.”

The cute goth chick was standing by the cashier’s cage, smoking a cigarette as I went out. She didn’t notice me.

I entered my film, Dead Things, in a local film festival today, sending in one of the demo copies that my mother mailed to me. The deadline is on Monday. Hopefully I can get in and make more contacts. I need to do more schmoozing with the local film scene.

Tuesday, October 20, 1998

I saw a new flier for the Texas Rawhide newspaper down at Mojo’s. The editor explicitly directed interested writers to leave a message on his machine along with “their real name,” a transparent dig at Ingvar. I swore right then and there that the editor will never, ever know my “real name.”

The other day, as I rooted through my pockets to find my keys and unlock my apartment, I stepped on one of those ubiquitous land snails. It had crawled off the lawn onto the doormat. It made a sound exactly like an extremely wet lightbulb exploding.

I saw a man in a big white cowboy hat and high-heeled boots at a construction site just off The Drag. He was leaning on a utility pole cable, his feet crossed and his hips cocked way off to the side like a supermodel. For some reason, cowboys can stand like that when anyone else would look effeminate. It must have something to do with riding

horses.

## My Cousin Mandy

Friday, October 23, 1998

My father called yesterday morning to tell me that my cousin Mandy had been murdered. The first time he called my alarm had already gone off twice and I was lying mostly asleep between the sheets on top of my sleeping bag. I thought I heard his voice talking to the answering machine, but I didn't bother to get up and answer the phone. Usually when the phone rings early in the morning, the caller hangs up before I can get out of my bedroom, and when I do catch them the call is almost always for Sam.

My father called again about an hour later without leaving a message. When I finally got up and heard the message, I puzzled over why he might have tried to reach me so early in the morning. He had called less than a week before to say hi, and I had no mail due from him either. A family tragedy hadn't occurred to me.

I reached him just a few minutes before he left for Minneapolis to be with my uncle Larry. I gathered that while visiting the old neighborhood in Minneapolis, Mandy had been stabbed by one of her boyfriends, and her babies, both born and unborn had been caught in the rage. I didn't know what I felt right then. Like a true Minnesotan, my thoughts went immediately to what I should be feeling. Was I properly sorrowful, what should I say?

My sister apparently had not shown any emotional reaction to the news. But then my sister has been estranging herself from the Bey family ever since the divorce, just like

Mandy did after Larry's divorce. Luckily my sister had two relatively stable families on the maternal side to attach herself to, while Mandy found comfort in a disjointed mother and a community that provided her with gangster boyfriends, HIV, and a couple of children out of wedlock.

I went to work that night distracted. I accidentally put a pan with about 50 paper pan liners into the oven. This got repeated laughs from Polo and Jamie who loved pointing it out and asking me if I wanted to keep the pan clean. They meant it in good humor so I smiled and laughed at myself.

I realized that I had very few memories of Mandy, for the most part she was a quiet, sometimes sullen, sometimes shy shadow at family gatherings. At Christmas, I would give her the same poorly thought out, crushingly cheap presents in crumpled wrapping paper that I gave to all my relatives back when I was a dumb kid. The memories I thought I had, stopping for an afternoon at her mother's and watching episodes of "Casper the Friendly Ghost" in the basement, were actually from somebody else entirely.

At the same time, I came to think it was important to go to her funeral, no matter the inconvenience to my work schedule and finances. My father said the Hennepin County coroner still had possession of the body, so no date had been set yet for the funeral. Even so, he said, no one expected me to come.

I want to go to the funeral for three reasons. One, because I was no help to Mandy in life, at least I can show her some honor in death. I feel a little bit of guilt for not having done more to prevent what anyone could have seen was a relentless descent toward tragedy. She lived in a different state, and I didn't know her well enough to offer

decent support, I didn't even know what support I could have given, but the guilt is still there. She was blood, and now she is gone.

Mandy was the cousin nearest to my age, and she has died way too young. That leaves me the next in line to be the black sheep of this generation. All of my cousins have a sort of creative/competitive exuberance about them. You can practically see them arrowing toward success and responsibility. I, on the other hand, am living out of my saddle bags in the middle of Texas. I need to go to the funeral to demonstrate that despite being a transient without a career that I am not on a downward slope.

Finally, I need to go because I am alive and I wish to exercise my will and my mobility to prove to myself that I am alive; to do the right and proper thing despite the inconvenience merely because my conscience compels me.

(evening)

I feel like a fake for thinking about the family tragedy with Mandy in terms of artistic revelation. No, that's not quite it. I've become a voyeur in my own life, clinically recording my feelings and the reactions of my loved ones to add drama to my journal and entertain a future readership. Mandy's murder is chapter three in a book not yet written.

On the other hand, if I don't reduce these feelings to words quickly they might chew me up from the inside.

I spent today preparing for my trip to the memorial service. I called through all the airlines to get the best deal. Normally this would be a traumatic event for me. Phones are artifacts of antagonism that I try to avoid whenever possible. But I made travel arrangements within half an hour, weathering silly hold music, number pad menu

hierarchies, and flight agents whose voices were as empty of affect as mine.

I rode down to work especially to tell Polo I would be gone for a few days, but he wasn't there so I had to call him at home. I couldn't see him over the phone, but I'm certain he didn't even blink when he granted my request. When I hung up and tried to open my paycheck envelope, my hands and voice quavered. Breaking off a promise to my employers in order to satisfy this duty to the family clarified the immediacy of what was happening. I sobbed inside my helmet as I rode off.

I talked to Larry briefly when I called my father to tell him when to pick me up at the Minneapolis airport. He sounded exactly like you would expect a man to sound like who was burying his second child. His voice whispered scratchily through tears. When I asked after him, my father said he was having a "bad day." I don't know if the understatement was meant facetiously or if it was the most extreme analysis of which a Minnesotan is capable.

My mother called to check in to see how I was doing. She has been receiving newspaper clippings from a maternal aunt in Minneapolis. I guess that even in a city like Minneapolis, a young white girl stabbed to death by her black boyfriend along with her son and unborn child would make headlines. This can't be making Larry's life any better. I know that it infuriates me to see sensationalist journalists exploiting our family's suffering to sell more newspapers.

Here I show just how I had neglected my cousin in life. I can't remember if her child was a boy or girl, or even how old it was.

I'm on my third or fourth cigarette. I'm sitting at the counter at Mojo's coffeehouse, drinking bitter coffee, wearing black, scribbling in my notebook, and

consciously projecting the image of a tortured artist. Some of it is real, the pain I mean. But most is prop. I'm not even smoking this cigarette, just letting it burn in my hand, its predecessors have made me too queasy to suck back much more soot. I'm hoping that the cute, barely four foot Asian chick with the horn-rimmed glasses notices me. I have something to complain about, to get pity for. She walks back and forth in front of me, mixing coffee, not even glancing in my direction.

Never mind, this is a particularly passive bid for feminine attention, even for me.

It's too bad this all came up, I had more positive things to put in my journal this week. Like how I'm talking to my roommate now and how my co-worker offered me weed on a break and then used eye drops to hide the effects of his own use.

I've been in touch with a capoeira group that meets in the community centers in town. Capoeira is a Brazilian fighting system that is designed to look just like a ritual dance. It is unspeakably beautiful, and I've always wanted to learn. I'm intending to attend a capoeira practice just before taking the flight up to Minneapolis.

I've packed pictures of my motorcycle trip in case anyone will be interested or needs to be distracted.

Saturday, October 24, 1998

I didn't go to capoeira. It's too bad, I couldn't bring myself to get up. Next week.

Last night, buzzed on the caffeine and nicotine I consumed at Mojo's, I went to the Atomic Cafe for late night goth fun. Nobody was bothering to dance by the time I finished my Guinness and another three cigarettes, bringing my evening total up to six or seven. While sitting at the bar, I lit the cigarette of a goth chick (cute, but they're all cute

to me) and suavely spilled Guinness all over my lighter and pack of American Spirits. I've been getting the impression that there's just not much of a goth scene in this town, only barely enough to support the club. There was practically no one around, and for almost half an hour I had the dance floor to myself. I dance at goth clubs because their standards are so low I don't feel like my lack of dancing skills stands out. I can never quite hide the martial origin of all my moves. Of course, goth dancing resembles tai chi for fops anyways. They just totter and pose and wave their hands slowly in the air, carefully spacing themselves on the dance floor so as not to risk actually touching another human being.

That night I had plenty to work out. I danced my anger and frustration over the short, sordid life my cousin Mandy led. Shifting and shaking and thrashing my arms across the empty, fog-covered floor.

After a while some goths joined in. The women in their vinyl and velvet were quite stunning, and I almost had to change my opinion about goth dance standards. The men at least were still pretty damn goofy looking. Everyone gave me a wide berth, so as not to catch a blindly flung elbow in the eye. By last call, sweat ran in rivers underneath my motorcycle jacket and I had worked out of my system most of my sorrow and angst.

I slept late this morning, missing the capoeira practice I planned to attend. I had time to pack, buy Chinese learning tapes, and look fruitlessly for an appropriate dress jacket to wear to the service.

I parked the motorcycle far off in the economy lot, shouldered the saddlebags with my sleeping bag and everything I will need for a few days in Minnesota, and took the shuttle to the airport. At the last minute, I remembered it would be a good idea to



hide the pocket knife on my keychain before going through security. I still had to go through the metal detector three times before remembering the huge hunk of steel on my belt buckle.

I haven't flown on airplanes so often that I'm cynical about the tedium of the whole affair. Every part of the routine still has a novelty and magic to it, from the shops by the gates to the rush of take-off. Even passing through security is a thrill, I always anticipate an overreaction to my less explainable gear, but just like the police, airport security never gives me a second glance. At least I got past the phase where I experimentally pushed every button and lever and nozzle near my seat.

Monday, October 26, 1998

I took a flight out of Minneapolis the day after the memorial service. Taking off at night, the city looks like a cheaply rendered computer animation. Just like a grid of yellow dots rotating in geometric precision.

My uncle Larry saw me to the airport after we spent the day together. He seemed in a better mood than when I first saw him Sunday morning, before the service. I had arrived late the night before, so I didn't see him until I woke up. He was seated at the breakfast table on his porch with my Dad and my common-law stepmother Jan. When he saw me, he burst into tears, his shoulders hunched and shuddering. Awkwardly I squeezed around the table and gave him a bent-over hug. He thanked me for coming.

It was painful to see him that way. He always reminded me of a bear or an ewok, his body compact and his face broad, fuzzy and with a snub nose. He radiated the sort of cuddly, languid ease you see in animals like grizzlies or chimpanzees who could splinter

your femur without really exerting themselves. Now his face was flushed, and he would stare out the window as he talked.

He told us of his relationship with Mandy leading up to her stabbing and the stabbing of her son Jereau.

“She called me at work,” he began, “to tell me she was pregnant. I took her out to this place we would go to for burgers called Mac’s. Then I gave her conditions, that’s what she didn’t like.” I didn’t think you could blame a father who felt uncomfortable about sending money to his daughter and becoming complicit to the dysfunctional environment where she came into close contact with “gangsta’s.”

From there, the news kept getting worse for Larry. He found out his daughter had HIV, but he never got to see her from then on out. The last he saw her was in February of 1996, when she refused his terms.

I sat alone with Larry for a little bit out on the porch. We had just gone for a walk, my father, Jan, Larry, and I, around the nearby golf course. It was still a little while before we would leave for the service. I sat in the plastic lawnchair across the table from him, uncomfortable in my borrowed shirt, tie, and herringbone sportscoat. I had combed my hair for the first time in several years; up to now the hair was either buzzed too short to the skull or under a bandana. A strange wavy crest, an artifact of the bandana, mussed the top of my head and refused to straighten no matter how many times I dragged the borrowed comb through it.

“I want you to stick real close to me during this thing,” he said. His voice was quiet, shaky, and undeniably serious. His eyes, bloodshot and bulging from lack of sleep and marathon crying jags, stared out at some point well beyond his yard. Couched in that

delivery, I had to take it as a sacred duty to stand by him and watch over him. My father had already told me that Larry didn't know if he could stay standing during the service, that he might need me to lean on.

As it turned out, I was needed more for moral support than physical. So many people turned out that the crowd stretched to the parking lot. If the newspaper publicity had a positive side, it brought a lot of people to the service; a lot of acquaintances and friends, who might not have otherwise heard.

Larry walked among the crowd, greeting friends and relatives with hugs and tears as they arrived. I stood always a pace or two back, dour as a bodyguard. An old lady friend of my grandmother mistook me for my uncle Randy.

Larry had an affectionate reunion with the family of his ex-wife. Although the friction between him and his ex-wife bordered on overt hostility, he seemed genuinely pleased to see her brother and father. During the marriage, he would routinely spend weekends with her father at their northwoods cabin, doing manly maintenance projects and bonding.

Mandy's mother gave me a hug when we met. I barely remember her from when she and Larry were married, I must have been only 8 or 9. She feigned shock to see me as the hulking adult I am today: one of those social conventions that never fails to make me uncomfortable. She had heard from Mandy who had heard from Aunt Sara that I was going on a motorcycle tour of the country. So Mandy remembered me enough to talk about me.

On a corkboard easel, someone had pinned a dozen recent photos of Mandy. She looked exactly like I remembered her; a stranger could easily mistake her for the actress

Juliette Lewis. In one picture, she supported her back with her hands to balance a vast pregnant belly, smirking sardonically at the camera. In another, she cuddled Jereau. Larry broke into tears again at the sight of it. It was the first time he had seen his grandson.

Mandy's mother had made arrangements for the service out of the police victim's fund. The orator used the term "domestic violence" several times and with gusto. As if to give evil a name makes it more containable, easier to tolerate. If Mandy died because of domestic violence rather than because she hung out with moral and mental cripples, then the problem is neatly categorized and we no longer are complicit in the network of mistake and decline.

After the service, I drove my uncle home. It may have looked like selfless generosity, but he had a hard time just walking across the parking lot to his truck. His knees wobbled and his vision blurred with tears; I feared for my own safety should he be allowed in the driver's seat.

Larry's friends flocked to his house, bearing armloads of food and drink, doing their best to raise his spirits. In particular, Jackie and Joel bent over backward to offer Larry wit and sympathy. During the course of the conversation, I gathered that they were both blues musicians and radio hosts who lived on a houseboat on the Mississippi. They wouldn't leave until Larry had promised to have dinner with them on Tuesday. I envied him having such persistent friends.

The whole family went to Grandma's for dinner, assuaging the pain with food. I ate as much as I could. Afterward I showed my pictures of the motorcycle trip, doing my best to regale the family with tales of high adventure on the highway, trying to take their

mind off the tragedy. A week's worth of stress and sorrow caught up with Larry, and he fell asleep in the other room.

I couldn't get hold of anyone on the maternal side of my family. At any one time, there is a good chance that my grandfather and his wife are out of the country. My father and Jan both left for Madison in the morning, regretfully returning to their life, so Larry graciously offered to spend the day with me and drop me off at the airport in the afternoon.

First we stopped in Dinkytown, the University of Minnesota's interpretation of Madison's State Street or Austin's "Drag." We had beverages at a sidewalk cafe watching the people as they passed by. A truly beautiful blonde with cutoff army shorts and combat boots and black horn-rimmed glasses walked by twice. I admired her like a thirsty man admires an Evian factory. There aren't enough women like that in Austin.

Then we stopped by the Mall of America, the largest mall in the U.S. and pretty much what passes for culture in Minneapolis. Mandy used to have a job cleaning the toilets that the Japanese tourists soiled there, but neither of us mentioned that. Larry bought me lunch at a sports bar, then we toured by the Hooter's ("How does she fit into those shorts?" Larry wondered) before he treated me to the new Kurt Russell movie Soldier. It turned out to be an amusingly schlocky movie, even if the super-soldier with a heart of gold premise is older than laser targeting. Larry enjoyed it. It was his kind of movie.

We walked by the photo-op line for some pro wrestler called Stone Cold Steve Austin on the way to see "UnderSea World" in the Mall basement. Most of the "UnderSea World" attraction featured fish that I've actually caught in Minnesota lakes.

But we oohed and aahed at the seahorses and the sharks and the sturgeon and the other creatures they had on display.

Larry dropped me off at the front of the airport with plenty of time to spare. I gave him a hug and told him I would see him at Christmas. In my estimation, he had recovered significantly from the violent loss of his daughter. The entire day we spent together, he only broke into quiet sobs three or four times.

I wandered around in the airport, got a bratwurst at a shop run by Pakistanis because I had the erroneous idea you can't get bratwursts in Texas. I ate it in a bar that played a local news program on the overhead TV. A traveler would get the impression that Minneapolis is non-stop murder and mayhem. Fortunately there was no further mention of my cousin Mandy. The ghouls have gone on to new titillation.

The media did have some good news though. I read through the Mira Sorvino interview in Mademoiselle. She's broken up with Quentin! Hurray!

On the flight to Dallas, an old man with a huge cowboy hat, a silver beltbuckle the size of my hand, and a pearl-buttoned shirt sat behind me. First he told me my bag went under the seat in front of me (mea culpa) and later, as if in a conciliatory gesture, gave me his sandwich from the snack service. Oddly enough, that professional wrestler from the mall, Stone Cold Steve Austin, is seated up in first class. I've been watching the back of his fat, bald neck the entire flight. So pro wrestlers ride in first class now?

(continued)

As it happened I rode in the same Dallas Airport tram car with Stone Cold Steve Austin. Just me and him, no one else. The tram was taking a particularly long time getting to the

other side of the terminal, I think we were circling around all the parking lots to get there. If you've ever been to the Dallas Airport, then you are aware that the parking lots stretch all the way to Waco.

"What gate you goin' to?" Stone Cold asked me.

"33."

He grunted, and nodded in a mannerism that for all the world made him look like a 300-pound, goateed Nick Nolte. "You been to this airport much?"

"This is my second time," I replied truthfully.

"Sure taking awhile."

"Yeah. It's circuitous."

"What?"

I waved my finger in the air. Although he seemed like a nice guy, I needed to remember he was a professional wrestler. I rephrased the word. "We're going around in circles."

"Yeah. Like in "The Twilight Zone."

A reasonably cultured reference, I thought, maybe he just hadn't heard me the first time. Being in a really poor mood, my enunciation suffered. "I think I saw that episode."

He snorted under his breath like a bull. When I got off, I showed him the map on the wall listing the gates and which tram stops served what, since he apparently hadn't arrived where he needed to be.

"Good luck," I told him as I walked off and a gaggle of passengers pushed their way on.

"Thanks," he called back.

I bet the guys at work would be impressed by that.

## Halloween Sin

Friday, October 30, 1998

I was sitting in the library, reading the last novel in Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game series, determined to chew my way through the entire pedantic trilogy, when a large black man in second-hand clothes started piling books on the other half of my couch. In itself not worth noticing, but I got the impression that he had a different mandate than the rest of us when he started writing notes to people not physically present. He would hold up a piece of paper and run back and forth behind the people sitting at the reading table, displaying it to someone who must have been standing behind a blank, white wall. Well, the people at the table left, and the man took their place, allowing me to witness over the next hour a stunning performance of cryptic rituals.

He collected a variety of media about him, the local paper, a dictionary, several encyclopedia volumes, a smattering of government periodical binders, and a book titled The Nubians: a History of Peoples of the Nile. A King James Bible he carefully balanced on the arm of the couch facing me. He would page through these sources, taking simple notes or writing messages on pieces of paper and then holding them over his shoulder for the invisible person standing over his table. He would make broad, forceful gestures, grunting or subvocalizing under his breath as if he were making an important lecture in the back of his throat, but he didn't want to shout it out in the library. From time to time, he would stab pointedly at whatever he was reading, then strut off in to the stacks to return later with more material.



He seems to be a regular, so I don't think he's come to the end of his researches yet.

I haven't been entirely honest about my feelings regarding Mandy's murder. One thing that appalls me, that my mind keeps reeling back to, is how something like this could happen to such a nice family. We're middle-class, educated Minnesotans. This sort of thing is supposed to happen to people you don't know in the big city. I had to stand and watch my family, people I've known all my life, break apart into little pieces because this horrible and brutal thing has happened to our flesh and blood.

The man accused of murdering my cousin Mandy is black, one of several black boyfriends who impregnated my cousin and gave her HIV. It feels improper to notice that and to mention it here. I feel like I'm bridging the implied contract I approved when I signed up to be a card-carrying liberal. I don't worry about the impropriety, the social stigma, I can't imagine anything more trivial, but I worry about the unfair associations and judgements I've been making since then. It makes it harder to maintain a state of ideological innocence and an attitude of racial goodwill. For now I will be content to assume that the man who murdered my cousin is personally responsible for his crime and try not to gloat that the justice system is biased toward making him pay.

Friday, November 6, 1998

The day before Halloween, the last time I wrote in my journal, I was sitting out in the lawn at Mojo's when a caravan of young people on bicycles rode past blowing horns and yelling at the top of their lungs. Most wore masks or silly outfits. Many of the

women wore paper bags over their heads and went topless. I turned to the man sitting next to me: “Undergrads,” I said by way of explanation. He smiled in understanding.

That night I went to the Atomic Cafe, again to see an industrial/goth/geekshow band called “Clown Porno Circus.” Most of the band wore thongs and fishnets, but the real show was the bondage acts they had on stage with them: three women in corsets and garters and fishnets who would strut around stage, tying each other up and pretending to suck each other’s blood and exact minor pain. A girl in a chain-mail halter-top that you can only get from Society for Creative Anachronism supply catalogs beat another girl in a white nightgown shackled to a crude cross. She swung the multi-corded whip in slow, exaggerated gestures to make it clear that she was indeed engaging in taboo, sexually charged rituals while not actually causing the other girl discomfort.

An additional, nonmusical band member, in a nineties take on the tambourine player, wore a jester costume; the jester mask worn as a codpiece. He went about offering and requesting paddlings with a flat, fraternity-style paddler. He shaped his mouth in a sex doll ‘O’ while making more esoteric mime gestures with his grinning crotch.

All in all, it was a painfully kitschy take on the whole sexual depravity sub-culture. Maybe there are people who are still shocked and entertained by that sort of thing, but quite frankly I entirely failed to be titillated. You’ve seen one elaborate fetish, you’ve seen them all.

Eventually they finished their cacophonous posturings, last call was given, and everyone danced till four a.m. A vinyl goddess I had seen before was there, showing utter contempt for the rest of the dance floor with every sinuous turn. She wore an off the

shoulder vinyl dress of royal purple, her fishnetted legs snaking out of the hip-high slits and undulating on the tips of wickedly-pointed shoes. A man in a Lugosi-style Dracula cape tried dancing up near her, but she didn't so much as glance in his direction. I couldn't tell the pattern of the songs she would dance to and those she would sit out, but I suspect she only participated in music that was as cool as she was.

Of course there was no point in admiring her too closely; like in any clique the women with the highest sexual currency always go to the highest bidder, in this case the D.J. This would be the last time I went to the Atomic just for the scene. In my several visits to the club I had completely failed to connect to anyone. My primitive social skills are mostly to blame, but I doubt if I could ever be more than a tourist with that particular crowd. Back when I was in college, the goth scene was at the very edge of my social circles because most of the members were computer programmers or science geeks of one flavor or another. In the intervening time, a metamorphosis of sorts has occurred, the conventions have become more arcane and complex, and many of the people involved in the scene are genuinely cool. Even my terminology is dated, the real goth subculture ended in the late eighties.

It would be really nice if I could figure out which clique I belong to and where the club is located.

Somehow I managed to get up the next morning and attend capoeira practice, the advanced class like the Mestre recommended. I won't lie to you, it was entirely over my head, and although the class was all very polite and friendly, I felt I had nothing to contribute to this group. I spent most of my martial arts training with the austere

Japanese styles, the ones that stress conveying the greatest amount of force to the most defenseless body part as simply as possible. It left me unprepared for a martial style that was as much dance as killing technique. It left me terribly envious of this style. There are high school kids in the advanced class that can jump five feet in the air, twist onto their backs, execute a spinning kick, and then land on their feet and gracefully twirl out of reach. I'll have to get Polo to reschedule me so I can go to more of the capoeira classes.

It felt good to get a little activity. When I stretched out before capoeira class, it was the first time I had done that since I left the Shotokan club in Madison with my crisp, new black belt. Stretching notwithstanding, the next three days brought gasps of pain whenever I tried to walk. The tendons between my legs in particular burned at every motion. Man, I love that feeling.

Halloween night, I worked to make up the day I missed to go to Minnesota. You can see the University of Texas clock tower from where we take our breaks in front of the bakery. For the occasion, the UT had lit the tower pumpkin orange, like they do after every football victory, so it glowed on the edge of the horizon like a rising moon.

On Wednesday, I finally got ahold of Ben, the editor and publisher for the Texas Rawhide satirical newspaper. He told me to drop by his work at the Spectrum Cycle, but if a crotchety old man was sitting behind the counter, I should say I was looking for a bike. He hadn't told his boss yet that he's quitting to work on the paper. When I dropped in, sure enough, there was this crotchety old man. The young man behind the desk asked "May I help you." Having only just seen the old man I stifled a smirk, "Oh, just

browsing.” When the boss left, Ben came up to me, “Ingvar, right?”

He liked the comic I guess, he told me it was in, but he needed cleaner copy. So this month I’ll be redrawing all my previous work. It’ll be pretty tedious, but at least I’ll have something to do.

Side note: I swear, two or three times every day people ask me for directions. Do I look Texan or is everyone here new? One woman came into the bakery asking for the Barker library, but both Jason and I were new to the area so we had no clue.

## **Violence**

Saturday, November 7, 1998

For the first time since I arrived in Austin I feel as though I’m alone. This is probably the first time I’ve allowed myself the idleness to really get in touch with myself. I’ve been filling my time with idle chores, learning Chinese, writing a comic strip, and jaunting down to the library every day to check E-mail and read silly science fiction. It just underlines the fact that I have no friends here. Not a single person in the entire state I could call a chum. I’ve gone to two movies already today, something I never would have done alone when I lived in Madison. I would let a good film run its course without me rather than suffer the embarrassment of telling the ticket girl I needed only one ticket. Once I paid for Adam and his girlfriend’s ticket just so I could see Deep Rising.

On top of all that, I’m growing bored with Austin as a city. There’s too little here to really interest me, especially considering the limited nature of my budget. The real

problem is I just haven't fallen in with the right crowd yet.

And I am not entirely as Ingvar as I ought to be. I've only caught a few flashes of the manic energy that I remember as Ingvar's hallmark. Maybe I'm getting too old, slowing down, losing that vitally important sophomore sense of humor, or maybe it's this alien environment, keeping me from getting comfortable, making me self-conscious and timid.

When I was young, I had a fire in my belly. And it made me do stupid things.

Friday, November 13, 1998

The other day, I released a small school of goldfish into a drainage ditch near my apartment. I had hoped that they would thrive on mosquito larvae in the perpetual pools of stagnant water, with luck growing large enough to consume some of the neighborhood dogs. When I walked to the laundromat today, I didn't see any goldfish. The odds are against the little guys, but I was hoping to catch at least a glimpse of orange. The goldfish were a rather muted attempt to recapture the old Ingvar glory.

My luck with women may be on the upswing. On Sunday, I arrived at work and went upstairs to grab some carbonated beverage as usual. There was a new girl in the office and she turned, startled when my foot hit the steps. I'm pretty sure she assumed the "there's a cute guy/gal and I don't know what to do with my arms" stance. You know, the one where your mouth hangs a little open. I have plenty of practice with that myself. A little while later, she stopped by the bakery and stood by the bench watching me cut the cracked rye dough into two-pound wads.

“Is that the seven-grain?” she asked.

“No, it’s the cracked rye.”

A confused pause followed as she just stood there and I just cut. What sort of a follow-up am I supposed to have to that sort of question? Like I’m good at small talk.

“Don’t mind me, I just think the dough’s neat.”

“You can wash your hands and join us,” I replied, desperately trying to remember how one flirts.

“No thanks. I’m off,” she mouthed as if whispering a secret.

Not a terribly suggestive interchange, but when I turned around to watch her leave, she was already watching over her shoulder. I probably won’t do much more than flirt with her in the future, she’s too young and I heard she’s leaving the country at the end of the month. The important thing is that having spent so much time being stubborn and dour, I’m remembering how to smile.

Over the bench the other day, Jason told me how he went to Houston with a bunch of friends over the weekend and they got into a huge fight with another drunken motel guest. The guy got mad when somebody pissed off the balcony onto his car, then Jason’s friends started throwing beer bottles at the guy until the cops came. One of the punks, worried about getting a parole violation, hung out the bathroom window. While interviewing Jason and his friends in their motel room, the cops could hear the guy lose his grip on the window ledge and strike a succession of protruding aluminum vents before he hit the ground. Jason described the sound it made with accompanying hand gestures, laughing sweetly.

Wednesday started out pretty good. I got my resume written. After about a five year delay, all it took was about 40 minutes on the computer at the local copy shop. But there seems to be some sort of cosmic balance ensuring that if I do something productive and important early in the day, then later in the day I make a truly horrible mistake with ghastly consequences.

Let me take this moment to describe some of the equipment I use every day at the bakery. We use rack ovens for all of the baking, which are steel rooms about the size and shape of a coat closet. The pre-baked product is loaded on big, greasy racks that are rolled inside these 400-degree rooms, the huge iron door is swung shut and locked, then the oven picks up the racks and spins them around until the searing heat blisters everything to a deep brown. Every night I load or unload the ovens about a dozen times.

Halfway through the evening, I was struggling to get a rack of bread into the clips on the oven ceiling when the door swung shut on my arm. It touched for only a fraction of a second before I shoved it away, but in that instant it burned a patch of flesh the size of two dollar bills. The door was so hot that 10 minutes after it touched me, a patch of charred skin just peeled right off in one sheet. This wasn't the first time I've been burned by an oven at work, my forearms are a crisscrossed jumble of red lines, but this is by far the worst single burn. I will no doubt get much closer to my lifetime goal of solid scar tissue up to the elbow by the time it heals. I haven't mentioned the accident to anyone at work out of embarrassment, and nobody's made a comment. But I have no doubt that most people have noticed it already. It's pretty obvious.



Friday, November 20, 1998

I finally got the writer's packet for the Texas Rawhide. Ben Smith (not the one from high school) had me come into the bike store twice. The first time I had to leave without even making eye contact because his boss was there and he still hadn't told him about the paper. From the looks of things the paper is going to be a crushingly obvious imitation of the Onion.

The burn on my arm is completely scabbed up, but the part with the worst burn has been giving off the precise odor of a wet Chesapeake Bay retriever. I can smell it whenever I move my arm.

My roommate Sam and I have been staying up to all hours watching cable. When I come back from work around midnight, he's usually lying on the futon in the living room, sucking back a beer and watching "Animal Planet." For an additional two or three hours, we watch the programming available on the higher numbered stations. The content at that hour isn't nearly as enjoyable as heckling it.

I've officially joined the capoeira club, which is filled with a lot of extremely friendly young people. Most of them have lots of tattoos in that pseudo-tribal pattern like urban savages.

My friend Ulrich called from Chicago, and I talked to him for an hour or so. We talked about our lives, and I caught up on the gossip about all our old roommates. I told Ulrich about my cousin Mandy, and he scolded me for not giving him a call and unpacking earlier. Ulrich is a good friend, I couldn't appreciate him too much.

Saturday, December 5, 1998

When I walked into work on Wednesday, my co-worker, Jason, immediately noticed my lack of a goatee. "Hey, who is that sophisticated guy we got in here," he said. That Jason is kind of odd. He's been telling me more stories about himself, reciting a litany of atrocities. No doubt many of the anecdotes are exaggerated in an effort to freak out the straight; in comparison I am the most stalwart and law-abiding citizen to ever visit Texas. But at the same time, I feel that he genuinely opened up, that my reticence to either freak out or judge him has given me the role of father confessor.

Jason told me he killed a 4-year-old girl at the age of 15. He was drunk and joy riding in a stolen car at the time. He didn't elaborate too much, he just mentioned it in passing during a cigarette break. To be fair, he seems genuinely sad about killing that girl. Only in the past year has he recovered enough from the trauma that he felt he could drive a car. He had to make do with riding Harleys since they had fewer unpleasant associations.

During Jason's subsequent stay in juvenile detention he set fire to a girl's hair, because she was, he said, "a real bitch." Then on work release as a janitor for a grade school, he stole their stereo system. He also told me that he stole a 50 pound box of hamburger meat from a Wendy's that left its back door unlocked. And he tells me that he gets particularly wild when he drinks, that he just hits people for no particular reason.

I remember a conversation one night over the bakery table where both Jason and Carl admitted to brewing crystal meth and selling it to college students eager for a buzz. Apparently the process is not at all difficult, involving a couple of easily acquired compounds. They compared brewing techniques: One of them did the actual brewing in

a stove top sauce pan, the other used a coffee pot.

Somewhere in all this hoopla Jason picked up an ex-wife and a son that he only sees for one night a week. And even though Jason's only a year younger than me he has a barely contained ulcer. I've even had the opportunity to see his nervous shiver. Back in high school, while tripping at a Led Zeppelin concert, Jason thought he was caught in a crystal bubble, everyone about him distorted as if viewed through a fish-eye lens. The acid rewired his nervous system so that ever since that experience, he has an uncontrolled shivering episode about once a day. I've seen it hit him without warning as if someone dumped a handful of ice cubes down his back.

What is most striking about Jason's confessions is the sweet, sardonic smile that comes with them. You don't get the impression that this person is a dangerous criminal, just a regular guy with a wild side. The smile seems to say that he recognizes how awful it must sound that he's committed vehicular homicide or theft, but that he wants you to know about it anyway. Sometimes he justifies crimes by saying "they were a real asshole," and smiling.

It strikes me that recently I have watched my family suffer from precisely the sort of meaningless violence that Jason himself has perpetrated. The family of the girl he killed must have wanted him put away for the rest of his life just like my family wants Mandy's murderer dealt with. I feel no such animosity by proxy toward Jason. Perhaps in the larger scheme of things there is a place for people like Jason. It reminds me of a Harlan Ellison story in Dangerous Visions where Jack the Ripper gets accidentally transported to a future utopia. Ellison strings together images of complete carnal brutality, of men in scented spring-fed pools screaming as their severed legs bleed into

the water. In the end, Jack the Ripper is allowed to run free because a society based on comfort is empty without a few monsters here and there.

I suppose everyone has a character flaw that may be visible to others but rarely oneself. I've come to realize recently that my overriding flaw is an indulgence in fantasy. I don't think I have too much trouble differentiating fantasy and reality, although my behavior is often colored by fantasy models, rather I use fantasy as a more entertaining substitute for reality. In my mind, I am Ingvar the grim and terrible, while in reality I am this guy named Matthew who until this week had a goofy-looking goatee. No wonder I prefer fantasy.

It started when I lived out in the country and had little to distract me other than my own imagination. I had no friends closer than a mile and a half, and my parents wouldn't let me watch television. I consumed the bulk of my time with daydreaming. Now, even at work I follow those old mental habits, daydreaming in a far off land while my hands repetitiously scoop muffins.

I need to watch how much of that I do. How far have I fallen behind because I preferred to imagine myself doing great things rather than actually doing anything?

When I still had the goatee, I looked in the mirror and I saw a vision of myself as a normal human being. I had no goatee, I had styled hair and contact lenses, my smile was broad, open, and spontaneous. I was called Matt, and strangers felt comfortable around me. Under no circumstances will I allow that vision to come true, that is not who I want to be. I took off the goatee certainly, but only because it had become undeniably straggly.

I was at the writer's meeting for the Texas Rawhide, and when I stood up to leave I saw myself reflected in the window, standing among all these other people. I caught a glimpse of how other's must see me, the unkempt goatee, the bandana barely hanging on my head, the nondescript, badly decayed black clothing. I know I can do better than that.

The writer's meeting actually went pretty well. I think I made a good impression, actively participating in the discussion. Ben, the editor/publisher, shared his wish list for the paper, how he wants to get a writing staff and a loft/warehouse office with computers and an air hockey table for them to hang in and goof around in the pursuit of comedy. It might be an empty dream, but an intriguing enough one to tempt me to stay in Austin longer than I planned.

Ben gave me a glass of water in a Dotty Dumplings glass, proving that he indeed had lived in Madison for a while, although he seemed reluctant to talk about it, as if he were unimpressed by the city in general. He complained about the winters, the sissy.

When I showed him my "clean" sample of "The Adventures of Circle and Almost Circle" he again told me to use darker ink. If there's anything certain to irritate me it's insulting my pen.

So it looks like I'll have to find new writing implements. It's not something I had really thought about before; I don't know if I have the skills and knowledge necessary to do professional ink illustration. I don't know why I bother, the scanner we're using is a domestic-grade desktop Mac scanner that has a low enough resolution to leave noticeable pixilation. But if the man wants clean copy, I'll give him clean copy.

While at the bakery, I came up with the tightest, most brilliant news short you can imagine. So far it has received across the board approval. Hopefully future satirical

efforts will deviate from bakery-related topics:

## Baker Discovers Anti-Batter

Hibbing, MN - The food science world shook last week as baker Dan Flemmish announced a practical technique for producing anti-batter. Long considered to be a purely theoretical foodstuff, Flemmish has succeeded in creating anti-batter under the controlled conditions of his bakery/lab in the Northgate food court. Says Flemmish: "The next step is to harness the tremendous energy released in a batter/anti-batter explosion. Truly this is an awesome responsibility for those of us in Baking." Flemmish is famous for his previous research efforts to create a man out of gingerbread and to ascertain a precise value for poundcake.

The bakery has about four employees who spend the wee hours of the morning sorting the bread and pastry products for delivery to wholesale accounts. They stack huge piles of plastic bakery racks and paper bags all night long and then drive off with them before sunrise. Considering the complexity of their task, it always amazes me that there are so few mistakes, that nearly all the bread gets where it needs to go before nine in the morning.

One of these routers is a pale little red-headed boy named Joel. He's incredibly sharp and feisty, but he has a self-destructive side that has kept him away from formal education. And a little bit of knowledge can be a terrible thing; one night we had a long, nasty argument about the racial characteristics of the Sumerians. He claimed that his "research" revealed them to be white. Taking the side of reality, I argued that they were in fact Semitic in appearance and that speculating on the whiteness of a people who lived

5,000 years ago smacked dangerously of eugenics. Joel wanted to know where he could learn more about this “eugenics.” For a while after, until it became clear that it insulted him too much, I called him “Whitey.”

Joel’s racially biased suspicions served some positive function when it clued me in to Polo’s most amusing speech habit that I might not have noticed otherwise.

“You know that word that Polo is always using?” whispered Joel conspiratorially. “It means ‘white boy.’”

Up until that point, I hadn’t really paid attention to the Spanish jargon bandied about the bakery. But now that I listened, Polo seemed to say guero every single time he addressed one of the white employees. He would say, “guero, do the ciabatta,” or “guero, what are you doing?” Whenever he saw a job done half-assed or an uncleaned mess, he would shake his head and say, “gueeeerro.” Several sources since then have assured me that guero isn’t a slur, it’s just one of those foreign ‘g’ words that means a white American like gringo, goy, gentile, gwi-lo, and gaijin.

And for his part, Polo honestly used the term in good humor. Guero was just part of the ambient Spanish background chatter that went over the heads of all us gueros.

The bakery has quite a lot of Mexican culture that goes over our heads. Whenever I show up to work after one of the Hispanic mixers, the radio is already tuned to the Tejano station, playing that particular mix of popular country-western and traditional Mexican music that you can only find in Texas. And whenever I’m the only guero in the bakery I’m essentially excluded from the Spanglish conversation that races at breakneck speed, slowing down only for English terms like “Ford truck” and “Hardees.”

These conversations were so animated that it took me months to realize that the other Spanish speakers in the bakery didn't particularly like Polo. Polo's management style is to do every possible bakery chore himself, even the ones you thought you were doing. Since many of the bakers take pride in their work and invest a fair amount of personal identity in their job, they find Polo's meddling unspeakably annoying. The only advantage to Polo's attitude is that he's privately happy when someone can't show up for work because that means more work for him.

Tuesday, December 29, 1998

I dreamt last night that my mother shot a man. Your comments, Dr. Freud?

Last week while flipping through cable channels late at night, I ran into a cable-access program called "cock talk." It's format was two slimey, goateed guys talking to callers while pornography played behind them on the blue screen. That this sort of thing plays on the non-premium channels here in Austin is impressive enough. What really impressed me, though, was intercutting the porn with sumo tournaments.

I had to watch a lot of cheesy horror videos like Return of the Living Dead 3 and Darkangel: The Ascent because the three days off I had for Christmas were too cold to go anywhere on the motorcycle. Unfortunately the only video store near my apartment was of the remarkably boring corporate franchise variety.

The night before vacation, I went to see the movie Elizabeth as a midnight movie after work. When I got out, the cold had killed the battery on my bike. I tried pushing it down a hill to get some clutch-popping action going, but the hill wasn't steep enough. I



ended up pushing it up an extremely steep hill right under the UT clock tower. It took me 20 minutes, stopping every four feet to rest, holding down the brake with one hand so it wouldn't roll back down the hill. When I finally got to the top I felt like puking. Imagine my surprise when it actually worked and got the damn thing started. In all honesty, that sort of over-the-top desperate physicality is precisely the sort of thing I live for. As embarrassing as it was, I loved every moment of it.

Jason tells me that if you push the motorcycle in second gear, that spins the alternator enough to build up a charge. I have yet to get that to work, but it would have been easier than pushing a 600-pound hunk of steel up a sharp incline.

My old roommate Adam is coming to visit this week. We'll have to do some partying on New Year's Eve. As luck would have it, I have the film print of Dead Things and a 16mm projector in the apartment. If I can only find a cheap take-up reel, we have ourselves a film festival.

I rode out to a discount store and bought absolutely the cheapest tape player I could find so I could listen to Chinese language tapes. I've been pretty disciplined about following the lesson plans, making flash cards, and practicing every morning right when I get up. Every night I wind down by mouthing Chinese phonemes in the dark.

Friday, January 8, 1999

Shortly after finishing my last journal entry, I got back from the laundromat to find two new messages on the answering machine. One was from Ben Smith informing

me of a writer's meeting that I wouldn't be able to make because I had already scheduled work for that evening. The other was from Adam, informing me he would be in Austin a day early, i.e. in a few hours. I'm not certain how it managed to work out, but somehow it did. Adam and Peter found my apartment from directions, got Sam to let them in, and called me at work. Then I told them to go entertain themselves with the long-running Hands on a Hard Body while I finished work early, in time to get a bunch of booze and meet them at Mojo's coffee shop.

That night Adam and I got pretty drunk, gabbing like women and telling road stories while Peter looked on. I showed off my pictures, and Adam talked about Europe. Then we wandered off to the high school bleachers to chain smoke the rest of my American Spirits and finish off the last of the cheap red wine.

Adam spent the night vomiting. I don't know if it was the cigarettes or the cheap wine, but he kept me up with the hollow drumming of bile filling my plastic bucket. We got up early the next morning, both of us suffering from various degrees of hangover. Peter, who doesn't drink, slept in. I fixed Adam some plain white rice, and we took a walk to try and find some movies to rent. Sadly the nearby corporate video store was closed that early.

That day we drove around, went to the "Corner Shoppe Mall," which had nothing but products based on dead animals, including taxidermied items I'm certain were highly illegal to own (zebra, lions, etc.). I can't imagine a more Texas-like shop. Now I know where to find some cheap spurs once I get my boots.

Then I waited in line at the post office for a package that UPS had tried to deliver the previous evening, having mistaken the UPS note for its similar Postal Service

counterpart. The postal employee smirked when she saw the delivery note for the competing system. One might think that sort of mistake happens all the time, or then again I might just be really, incredibly dumb.

We saw the Stevie Ray Vaughn statue down by the river, Adam and Peter snapping pictures from every possible angle. An old woman came up and asked Adam why the bronze shadow element of the statue had a different pose than the upright part. Adam was clearly pleased to give her an off the cuff answer about the “essential nature” of the artist being yadda yadda yadda. “Since Peter has the fancy camera, she must have thought we were the local guides and Peter the tourist,” Adam told me smugly.

The only other highlights I thought of including on the tour that day were the Charles Whitman clock tower massacre site, a cafe on the Drag, Einstein’s Arcade, the scientology center (where a very surly cult member glared at us and reluctantly gave me some pamphlets; clearly second rate recruitment techniques), and a matinee showing of The Faculty which you wouldn’t know was a local film aside from a cameo by local Web critic Harry Knowles.

That night we had SPAM sandwiches for old time’s sake, and crackers and cheese from the gift pack my mother sent and which UPS finally delivered without my inept help. We watched From Beyond and Slumber Party Massacre 3, on video. Sam stopped by for some of it and seemed to interact comfortably with Adam and Peter, contributing wisecracks to the general hoopla.

Everyone went to sleep early that night. But first we tried to hang out at the Flightpath coffee shop, which like my apartment sat directly underneath the airport approach patterns. We sat out on the patio and watched planes roar by directly overhead,

low enough that you could bounce a tennis ball off their fuselage. In a few months the airport is moving to the south of town, and then the coffeeshop is going to lose a lot of its charm, so I felt it important to visit the Flightpath while its name still made sense.

New Year's Eve we killed time until the night's festivities. I made spaghetti carbonara, primarily because Adam begged for it. Back when we lived together the spaghetti, egg, and bacon dish was a staple of both our diets, because it was stunningly easy to make and offered a vital opportunity to consume bacon grease. "No trip to Ingvar's is complete without spaghetti carbonara," Adam said.

Then we bummed around, went to the library and worked the Web, went to the art museum, and saw the Capitol building. I was somewhat astonished to find that the rotunda floor in the Capitol had a mosaic spelling out, "Republic of Texas." According to a display case it had originally said "State of Texas," but they had changed it to better make the point. In another startling display of Texas mentality, a little down the Capitol Hill there is a monument commemorating the South's break with the Union.

Inspired by this bit of Texas, I talked the guys into cruising through South Austin and stopping in pawn shops. I bought a straight razor, which I have since sharpened to the point where it removes a lot of the hair on my face and some of the skin. But I'm persistent, and I have plenty of skin left with which to practice.

We ate at a South Congress diner/grill called the Pit. The salads were served on cafeteria-grade plastic bowls, and the appetizer was two slices of wonder bread in a cellophane wrapper. For all that, the steak was utterly delicious. Adam and I finished all of it, a herculean task considering the sheer volume of cow involved. In a spontaneous gesture of friendship, I picked up the tab.

That evening I made a terrible mistake. I suggested that we hole up at Shakespear's pub. Not only was there nothing going on there other than the usual collection of Texas pinks getting drunk, there was an eight-dollar cover at the door, I presume to pay for the plastic leis. We probably should have gone to the Atomic instead, the 20-dollar cover notwithstanding. Although we would have been just as out of place there.

We made the best of what our cover provided, sitting in the very back, drinking conservatively, and acting like the Midwestern geeks we are. Adam and Peter would randomly break into verses of "Carmina Burana," because they had listened to it non-stop the entire drive down from Wisconsin, and quoted Monty Python.

Every time the jocks two tables up the courtyard from us would break a balloon, I would inflate another one from the bag I had bought that evening for practicing with my straight razor. Giving strangers black balloons is not the most common display of hostile animosity, but everyone seemed to get the point.

"Take care of this one," I told them, "you're only allotted one per table."

"That was so sincere," said the already impressively inebriated youth with the marine haircut. "I would really think you're some sort of leather jacket, bandana-wearing sincere guy." It was one of the most nonsensical comebacks I had ever heard in my life. But it confused me long enough to prevent my own comeback.

When they broke that balloon, I blew up another and placed it on their table. "What, do you think rubber grows on trees?" I asked. That wasn't entirely off the cuff, but it drew applause from one of the other tables.

As the evening progressed, we got to know our annoying waitress, Wendi (the 'I'

is presumed). Working off the Texas lone star bandana that my roommate gave me and that I was wearing that night, she told us how distinctive the Texas flag was, and how people from other states are much more likely to recognize the Texas flag more than any other state flag. I found it easier to nod than to tell her that Midwesterners have virtually no cultural associations with the Texas lone-star flag, and if pressed, most identify it as either an extremely simple abbreviation of the U.S. flag, or as the flag of Puerto Rico.

She went on to tell how she had never left Texas in memory, and a long story about how she got free drinks last New Year's Eve. "So that's how I got people to buy me drinks," she said.

"Maybe I'm not wearing the right pants," I sneered, referring both to the pair of tight leather pants she was wearing and her habit of sitting in patrons' laps.

"Oh, he made a pants crack," she said rolling her eyes and briefly dropping the Texas waitress mask. At that precise instant, I almost didn't not like her. Looking back on it and realizing that she might actually have been a human being, I feel bad about needling her.

The party at the adjacent table begged Adam and Peter to pose for a picture with their feet behind their heads. I can't remember quite how the subject of their mutual contortionist ability came up in conversation, but I have the impression that they volunteered the information quite proudly. They had been in the same class in a rural high school where their contortionism played a significant role in their lasting friendship. Being merely very flexible as opposed to obscenely flexible, I felt left out during the picture-taking event.

After the Lone Star rose to the top of the crane, celebrating the new year, we

drove back to my place, Adam playing “Carmina Burana” at deafening volume on his Saturn’s stereo, while Peter sang along through the open window and I shouted to the pedestrians: “You have one year before the Hundred Years of darkness, and the whore shall ride from Babylon upon the beast of darkness, supping from her cup of abominations,” and whatever other silliness came to mind.

Adam said it was his most memorable New Year’s in a while. Could have been worse, certainly, but most of it left a bad taste in my mouth. It was too similar to the unadulterated displays of geekiness I remember from when Adam and I lived on the honors floor of the college dormitories. Now, as then, I have the feeling that someone, somewhere was holding a really cool party and that we weren’t invited.

The next morning, I woke up with the beginning of a two-week flu. That, along with other factors, including laziness and foul Texas weather, accounts for why I haven’t gone to capoeira practice in nearly a month. I’m beginning to find the class and the style pretty obnoxious. Most of it is plainly useless motion, too circular and flowery and slow. I saw another student bounce his shoulders up and down rhythmically in some sort of dance improvisation and it just gave me the heebie-jeebies. It wasn’t martial arts; it was just plain girly.

When sparring in the circle, or rhoda, I had to stifle my karate training to make contact with the opponent. The karate impulse to block and retreat from an incoming technique is precisely counter to capoeira evasion movements. At the end of the practice the same guy with the creepy dance movements tried to scissor me between his legs and throw me to the floor. In confusion I kept backing away, and he kept chasing me with his

butt. He performed the technique ineptly, and if I thought I could have gotten away with it, I would have happily emasculated him.

It could be that all these years of studying diverse martial arts styles has left me too muddled to learn anything new. Or it could be that I'm just too uptight to dance well.

This morning I got up at a truly ungodly hour to make pastries at work. There's been a shakedown recently, with a woman named Stephanie replacing the old manager and a general dearth of hours available for everyone.

During one of my shifts, Carlos wandered into the bakery to find his name crossed off next week's schedule. He went to the phone to call Polo and complain, but he was either too drunk or too angry to dial correctly. It took him two tries to actually get the manager, who explained that there just wasn't enough work to go around.

"Well, he sure did me over one. But I'll toast his ass," Carlos said. He was so fed up with being slighted, what with his back problem and drinking problem, that he went and took a job at another bakery.

The good news is the bakery's computer system is now Y2K compliant. The bad news is the new computer system is now too arcane for anyone to actually use. Which is unfortunate because the bakery does most of its business through wholesale accounts and computer records. The day after it was installed, I stood in the office while Polo and Johnny tried to make sense of the menu hierarchy. Not that I was any help, but they were at the point of panic and thought it might help to have a college-educated guero in the room.



Jason told me the best drug story I've heard yet about the second time he overdosed on heroin. At the time, he lived on the second floor of an apartment building. When the paramedics came to take him to the hospital, they had to walk him down the exterior stairway. Unfortunately they weren't paying too much attention to him, so they didn't notice when the IV tubing got caught on the railing. Jason was drugged beyond the capacity for speech, so he could only look around in panic as they pulled him down the stairs and eventually tore the needle right out of his arm.

Sunday, January 24, 1999

There was a long line of cars waiting to use the automated carwash this afternoon, brown dots speckling their hood and roof. A meteorological event had occurred Saturday morning called mud rain. When it is really dry, a dust storm will carry dirt into the air, and if it collides with a thunderhead, it falls from the sky as drops of mud. I have the little brown dots on my bike as well. It sounds like Armageddon weather, a precursor to two-headed goats and rivers of blood. My roommate Sam says he's even seen ball lightning send green flashes scaling along the ground. Give me a good old fashioned Wisconsin blizzard any day.

I've been putting off writing this entry because I was ashamed of what I would have to write down. My nose has been clean for so long that I'm ill prepared for a serious fuck-up. But it does make me feel alive to have such brilliant feelings crack my psychic shell, even if I'm only feeling shame.

I remember that the Tuesday before last started really well. I was in a productive sort of mood. I worked on writing the "thank-you" letters I owed my relatives for

Christmas presents, well ahead of the traditional four-month lag time. I even visited the post office and got one-cent stamps to counteract the Postal Service's nefarious plan to make my stockpile of 32 -cent "Classic Movie Monster" stamps obsolete by raising the postal rate. It mars the effect of Bela Lugosi's vampiric leer to stick a one-cent chicken right next to him, but having the letter delivered takes first consideration.

Even Sam seemed to be in a good mood, hanging that silly eight foot by six mirror on the wall, albeit crooked, and corralling his clutter into something resembling order. It was when I was writing a letter and he was organizing the living room while Bloodstone: Subspecies II was playing on the Sci Fi channel that he mentioned something about rain and the open window by the plants. At the time, I thought he was asking me to close the windows should it rain later. Indeed the sky was looking somewhat gray.

A little while after Sam left, I ran off to the Texas Rawhide meeting. The meeting was unusually productive, and afterward I was invited to attend the air hockey tournament next door at the Ritz. Prior to meeting serious air hockey competitors, I had thought I was pretty good at the game just because I could hit the little plastic puck hard enough to break the skin of an opponent's knuckles. Goofy, the head official of the tournament, who only plays while wearing a bell-tasseled jester cap, tested my ability in a short match. I did well enough that he gave me a handicap of '1,' the second best air hockey ranking. The regular competitors proceeded to thrash me mercilessly, quickly eliminating me from the tournament. Even so, I stayed until the rest of the Rawhide staff lost so I didn't get home until after midnight.

I was in a good mood when I walked in through the open door of the apartment.

Sam was standing in the living room, the usual gloom and dark erased by a heretofore unused light fixture. I said hi and breezed through to my room, still in a good mood, mostly oblivious to the ugly look I got from Sam. I assumed he was still cleaning.

On the floor of my room was my cheapo tape player, covered in dirt, and my headphones mangled on the floor. I picked it up and turned it over in my hands trying to sort out what was amiss.

That evening we had been robbed because I had left with the windows partially ajar. The police had left only a few minutes before. The thieves had stolen the TV and VCR and tried to make off with my tape player before dropping it and mangling it on the ground outside.

Sam was reasonably upset and more than a little angry at me, more so because I didn't get angry back. He spent the night drinking and haranguing me, and I sat and took it because I felt something I hadn't experienced for a long time. I could feel the shame burn across my face and between my shoulder blades and down the back of my neck. Sam made numerous comments to the effect that I neglected details like locking up thoroughly in a bad neighborhood because I was white, that really a whole lot of involvement shouldn't be expected of a white boy, and I have to admit that it hurt. He oscillated between joking in a nearly friendly manner to spitting out mean things that came to mind while tipping back beer. We played three games of chess where his strategic thinking progressively declined. It ended with him laughing with hysterical bitterness, clasping me on the shoulder, and asking me what I was thinking.

The next morning, I bought him a new TV, putting to rest his comments about spending the next two months working for a new one: "Working for you, Matt!" He

upgraded the one I got of course, not that I could really tell the difference, but it wasn't my TV. When I told him I wanted to replace his VCR as well, he reached for his calculator. Money is Sam's weakness in the same way that being a space cadet is mine. He sometimes is too polite to mention it, but it is always on his mind. He's the sort of person who will never forget and may never forgive a debt owed. He told me to hold off payment until the Texas victim compensation fund comes through. I'll give him the money tomorrow rather than trust the government with it. He won't be able to turn it down if it comes in the rent envelope.

Today I'll probably start prepping the homebrew apparatus. It's something that has always interested me. The day before the "window incident" Sam had handed me an archaic beer brewing book from an English writer and told me that if I wanted to learn how to homebrew he would buy the supplies and I could use his moldering equipment. He had bought all the supplies a while ago in an effort to reduce the expense of his nightly beer habit and never got around to using it. I swiped a few buckets and jugs they would have thrown out at work and fitted them with makeshift yeast locks. As soon as I get everything sterilized, we'll be in business.

Paying Sam back for the television and VCR that I let get stolen has pretty much ruined my chances of going overseas and teaching English. My finances just won't hold up to it anymore, and I haven't studied Chinese even once since the theft. I don't particularly regret it, I could probably still make the plan work if I wanted, but after a great deal of introspective analysis, I decided that I just don't like people enough to work closely with them. I can't imagine that foreign people would be the exception.

When I showed up for work the Saturday morning after the “window incident,” I was treated to another of those “guess the terrible event” dioramas. Joel and Jason who both shouldn’t have been at the bakery that late walked down the sidewalk between the bakery and the office, shuffling and stooping their shoulders. I made eye contact with Jason, and we were moseying to the intersection, when Stephanie scooted around Jason to get between us and addressed me through clenched jaw, “Could you help Ben with the rolls? We’re running a bit late tonight.”

When I got inside I learned that Jonathan, Joel’s friend, the deaf-mute router had been fired by Stephanie that evening. When that had been communicated to him, he punched out the filing cabinet and then hurried downstairs to attack Joel, the very friend who got him the job and who had later lobbied to get him fired. Jason had to intervene several times to haul Jonathan off. Once again I arrived on the scene minutes after the cops had left.

What is most interesting about the incident is the change of roles. Jonathan seemed like such a quiet, even-tempered guy, it’s difficult to imagine him being senselessly violent (of course he had to be quiet being mute, but I never had a glimmer of hostile intent from him). And Jason, the convicted felon and casual criminal, became the heroic knight. Of course in another time Jason would have been a superb commander of fighting men, he has the requisite qualities of loyalty to friends and a reckless unconcern for his well-being or others’. An important principle in martial arts is the willingness to close distance and breach the personal space of someone who is trying to hurt you. Often a contest will fall to the less squeamish.

To communicate, Jonathan had scribbled messages on any surface that would take

a magic marker, like torn paper bags and scraps of bakery parchment. One would think that a deaf-mute would prefer to carry with him a more reliable medium of interface like a notebook or a slate, but he seemed to prefer scrounging for whatever was available. I've been finding little scraps of his conversations about the bakery, like echoes of his lost voice. The night he got fired and went berserk, he wrote on a boxtop, disconcertingly eschewing formal grammar: "he think I do mistake, I show him I real good."

There were some problems with the paper, I got a call on Tuesday morning from Ben, his voice, normally authoritative and statesmanlike, cracking with stress. At the last minute, Ben had changed the printers due to contract difficulties, and this spawned a whole host of problems. The staff spent most of that night reformatting the paper to the new requirements.

I am annoyed that the editors took my story about Texas buying Oklahoma and massacred it. It no longer makes any sense to read, individual paragraphs have lost their coherence. Sigh. It is, however, the lead article of the very first edition of the Texas Rawhide.

Thursday, February 25, 1999

Sam and I are getting along much better. Once I paid him back for what he spent on the TV and VCR that got stolen, he brightened up pretty good, much as I suspected he would. And starting that batch of homebrew improved our relationship immeasurably.

Last week Ulrich came by. It was the first time I'd seen him since he graduated

almost three years ago. Hours after he arrived, we both came down with a truly awful three-week flu that's been going around. Most of our time together consisted of lying in the living room, watching cheap movies and coughing.

We did get to see some of Austin. I showed him Hands on a Hard Body, the obligatory Texas movie. And I finally got to see "Tower Massacre Musical" which I found disappointing mainly because I expected it to be as good as The Delicate Art of the Rifle, a feature film which also played off Charles Whitman's killing spree. Ulrich liked it, primarily for its vulgarity and gore. At one point, a pair of pregnant, protesting hippies get shot by Whitman and their bellies burst open to reveal fetus hand puppets. One of the fetuses rips off his own phallus and beats the other fetus to death before succumbing to loss of blood resulting from his own emasculation. Ulrich's shirt got stained from one of the many plumes of blood that arced over the audience. The high point for me was the member of the chorus, dressed as a grackle, who climbed over three rows of chairs to give me a big hug. She smelled nice.

We also saw Spike and Mike's sick and twisted festival of animation, which was more sick than clever. The high point was the beautiful dreadlocked lesbian sitting next to me who coughed on me. Odds are I already had what she had.

I'm growing more and more to despise my work. Although for the moment I have the good fortune to have a little variety. I work three evening shifts and two days of morning pastry work with Stephanie, the wacky daytime manager.

Jason says to me last night "You know Stephanie thinks you're the man."

"I've been getting that impression," I reply.

“Maddy told me she asked her who is that really hot guy who works downstairs. The one with glasses. And Maddy says, ‘Joel?!?’”

This clarifies why my pregnant manager has been flirting with me and telling me to go see some movies with her husband. She said, “If I can’t date you then at least I can set you up with my husband.”

It also illustrates Maddy’s mono-focused awareness of the bakery employees. She’s a goth-attired assistant manager from the retail side of the bakery who has developed a fascination for Jason that crosses conventional clique lines. The nights that Jason works, she finds several excuses a shift to bug him. She bursts through the doors, already talking a mile a minute, and walks right up next to Jason like a Siamese cat chewing on a bulldog’s ear. At first Jason was politely distant, but her persistent stalking has paid off. They’re hanging out and he’s openly calling her a friend, despite their divergent aesthetics. Jason tells me he saw her with a stack of CD’s and he loudly bet that she had copies of Morrissey, The Cure, and Nine Inch Nails, three bands stereotypically associated with suicidal high school girls. Maddy just blushed and refused to answer.

I got to see Jason’s friend Zoltan when he stopped by the bakery. According to Jason, Zoltan is a Czech national hiding in Texas because he killed a Gypsy back home. Normally I wouldn’t believe such an outlandish story, but seeing the man blew my doubts away. He is a huge, toothless man, who radiates violent stupidity. When Jason talks to him, he stands right next to him, looking up into his eyes and speaking gently like you would to a skittish mastiff.



The other weekend, while sitting outside a tattoo parlor near 6th Street, an unusually drunken woman approached Jason and Zoltan. While she was partying with her friends, the bouncers had singled her out and thrown her onto the street, violently enough that she lost track of her location in respect to the aforementioned bar. When this woman passed out at their feet, Zoltan grinned his big toothless grin and announce that he wanted to take advantage of her. Jason wouldn't allow Zoltan to do this at his apartment to avoid any complications should she cry rape. I pointed out that, legally and ethically, it would indeed be rape. Nevertheless, Jason called a cab and instructed the driver to take the two to the nearest motel. The cabbie voiced his opposition to letting the unconscious woman vomit in his back seat, but he gave them a ride anyway, this sort of thing being perfectly normal on 6th Street. Even the woman didn't object much when she woke up the next morning in a strange motel room; dressing matter-of-factly and worrying that her fiancé might call before she could get home. As usual, Jason laughed in sardonic amazement as he told this horror story.

Zoltan was going to turn himself in to the authorities because he was tired of running, but he couldn't find a Czech consul anywhere near Texas. Instead his grandmother paid for his ticket back to Europe, where presumably he paid the fine for killing a Gypsy and is living comfortably.

## **Friendship**

Wednesday, March 3, 1999

Stephanie, my manager, finally talked me into seeing Quentin Tarantino with her husband. I waited for a couple of hours in line and paid 30 bucks to get in. The guys

standing just in front of me had read about QT-fest the night before in the Houston newspaper. They dropped everything to drive non-stop to Austin, sleeping in a public parking lot until the morning. This is a pretty cool happening, worthy of extreme behavior like that. For the past week, Quentin Tarantino has screened films from his extensive collection of film prints at the already pretty cool Alamo Draft House Cinema. The advertisements assert the opportunity to drink beer with the legendary director and watch eclectic films in an informal atmosphere. I could only afford to attend this one night. Stephanie's husband, Rick, had bought the super-duper VIP pass that comes laminated on a nylon necklace and allows you first seating and access to all the behind-the-scenes festivities.

Rick is actually a neat guy. His film geek status is even higher than mine, although he primarily specializes in exploitation and horror. Over the previous couple of years, he had co-produced a film about Charles Manson that was currently wallowing in post-production financing, or the lack thereof. Of the six slasher movies Quentin screened that evening from 8p.m. to 8a.m., Rick had seen all but one and owned the posters for most. I had not seen any and can't really recall having heard of them.

Quentin was impressive as well, giving a concise and scholarly analysis of the slasher genre and the recent respectability it has received from the movie Scream and the book Men, Women and Chain Saws by Carol J. Clover. Closer to morning, he showed signs of the hyperactive geek we've all grown to expect, standing on the stage and making rambling, drunken speeches while a fawning Richard Linklater looked on.

I've been planning to leave Austin by the end of April. I haven't told anyone here other than my managers. I ought to let the Rawhide folks and my roommate know soon

enough. Maybe I haven't given Austin enough time. The guy standing behind me in line for the QT-fest told me how he was inserting himself into the film scene to further his music career. Maybe if I just put down more money, became a member of the film society, made my presence known, kissed a few butts, I might just get somewhere in the Austin film scene. Maybe I could even get a job.

I have considered going back to Madison. It would be good for my short-term finances, but I question how helpful it would be from a career standpoint. There aren't many opportunities in Madison, that's why I left there in the first place. But I could always spend a year working a McJob while working on my writing. In the meantime, I might even have a few friends living in town.

Thursday, March 18, 1999

I have my hands full with the South by Southwest (SXSW) festivities. All of my waking moments are spent either at work or attending a film screening. I seem to have contracted a sore throat from waiting in long lines out in the cold and eating nothing but cake leftover from the bakery.

I've met a few people at the festival. There's Stephanie's husband, Rick, of course. He's usually off somewhere with his VIP badge fraternizing with the high and mighty, and I've struck a few acquaintances in line. Since most people are attending alone, they're willing to talk. "Have you seen anything good?" seems to be the perfect conversation opener in this situation; it's timely, appropriate, and you just know that everyone shares your obsession with film.

Last weekend was the most white knuckle ride in recent memory. Thursday night

I only got about two hours of sleep because I had to go to work before dawn the next morning. Then I went to the Desert Blue premiere and immediately afterward saw “Nashville Pussy” in concert. Jason has been going on for the past three weeks about the seven-foot, blonde, fire-breathing lesbian bass player that gets naked on stage and kisses this other girl. “Nashville Pussy” was all that and more. The mosh pit alone justified the cover, although comparatively little of the audience partook. During the show, the pit coughed me out into the static part of the crowd. A guy there nodded in the direction of the flailing bodies and said “Some rowdy people here tonight.” I grinned and gave him the thumbs up. I don’t think he got the point.

There was one girl, only half my size, who threw herself around in the pit with utter abandon, giving as good as she got. Once again, I was impressed by how everyone there looked out for each other. If someone fell, there were eight hands stooping to pick the person up. None too soon, considering all the broken glass on the floor. A couple of times, fights broke out, and I helped separate them just as quickly as anyone else. I now have a better idea of how to deal with that sort of situation than I did the last time.

The couple of times that I was too exhausted for the pit I stood a little to the side and watched that Valkyrie bass player. She spat flame over our heads, the explosion of heat washing over my exposed flesh. When somebody in the audience sprayed her with beer foam, she spat at him with vigor and ferocity, only not with precision. The goober arced five feet above the culprit and landed square in my eye, where it stung for a good five minutes. Can’t say I minded though. It was a good pain.

Moshers whacked me a couple of times in the mouth, hard enough that I worried about losing the false teeth I have in place of my upper incisors. After the show, a

concerned sounding guy asked me if I got hit in the mouth. I don't know if he asked because he saw me clutching my jaw earlier or if I was bleeding. If there was any blood it washed off in the rain as I rode home.

I saw Jason and Maddy toward the beginning of the show, but I didn't say much to them. Not only were the opening bands too loud for conversation, but I didn't feel like intruding on their privacy. Maddy would lean in real close to speak in his ear. It was kind of cute.

I'm fairly certain I saw the acclaimed independent film critic and media personality, Elvis Mitchell, during a break in the opening act's set. It's hard to miss the guy, he's black, he dresses like my step-father, and he has dreadlock braids all the way down his back. He looks like Boy George, but with a better nose. I did a double-take through the crowd, and Elvis glared at me. I figured Elvis had a life of his own, so I left him alone and went back to the pit.

So that night, I only got two hours of sleep before once again going to work before dawn, my ears still ringing. I sailed through the day on caffeine, bragging to everyone about the spit in my eye. That evening I watched the experimental/animation show at the Dobie. I was so scattered by that point that I defended the grindingly tedious, 30-minute experimental short where this Japanese man explored every possible permutation of "camera views monitor views Japanese man." It had nearly caused a riot, the audience screaming and actually throwing things every time they realized that the director had no intention of wrapping things up. I told the art student from San Francisco that the video explored the formal epistemological interface of a media culture, which would make sense if you needed sleep as badly as I did.

By then the caffeine high had crashed, so I skipped the midnight show that night. Like a zombie, I stumbled back to my motorcycle and rode home.

After more than a week of sitting in darkened rooms with strangers, I felt bitterly disillusioned about the state of film in America. To be fair, you see in theaters only those films that make it through the filtering process of festivals like this one. So at SXSW you get the outright duds as well as the ones that get distribution. During that entire week, I saw only one movie that I would recommend to anyone else, Man of the Century, about a reporter in modern day New York who possessed all the character attributes of a 1920's movie hero. It was twice as clever and original as anything else at SXSW, but it was destined to never see wide release because it was filmed in black and white. Every other film was either about yokels on a road trip or a sexual menage. Sometimes both.

On the way back from a screening, riding through a midnight rainshower, I saw a flash of white along the side of the road. As I slowed for the turn, the indistinct white shape resolved into a barefoot woman in a white formal dress, lying on the curb and wailing mournfully. I stopped to make sure she was all right, something I guess people living in Austin are disinclined to do, but for someone born in Minnesota it's considered a part of the social contract. Before I could figure out what was happening, she had hopped on the back of my motorcycle, hugging me fiercely, her bare feet perched on the passenger pegs. Luckily we were only a few blocks from my apartment, so I got her home before she tipped off in a drunken stupor or went into hypothermia.

While waiting for the cab to arrive, I made her some tea, and she told me a little of her story. She had been at a wedding, and something bad happened. She mourned

how lonely she was, and how old, although she was only in her mid thirties. I didn't know what to say, it was a socially awkward situation to say the least.

Eventually the cab came and took her away. I never told Sam that I let a strange woman into our apartment.

Every year or so I meet a charismatically sleazy fellow who might as well be a clone of all the other charismatically sleazy guys I've met. They're always tall and skinny with wild, poofy hair, and a permanently fixed used-car-salesman smile. As a rule, they love to party, they have a huge group of friends, and they can talk anyone into doing anything at any time. One of these guys that I knew in college managed to talk his boss's wife into posing topless in a student film. They're sort of a cross between Eddie Haskell from Leave It to Beaver and the guy from the Swingers poster.

Dan, a new bakery worker, is exactly like that, and he's been smoking me up on the front stoop after my shift. He has a system worked out where he buys twelve ounces of pot or "chiba" and then sells ten ounces for a slightly inflated rate. That leaves him two for personal use and sharing with friends like me. He calls it smoking for free. I call it drug dealing, but only because it flusters him.

While dragging some particularly potent shit from Dan's one-hitter, we discovered our mutual love of monster movies. He particularly liked what he called the post-modern Mothra flicks during the seventies.

"You know, the ones where Mothra fights Batra."

"Batra?" I asked in confusion.

"Yeah, the big bat, with the long, curly horns."

“There’s no stinking Batra. You’re totally high. There’s not such thing as Batra.”  
I’m still upset that he would try to foist that Batra-nonsense on me.

Dan eventually had to get back to work, and I had to walk home, because I was in no condition to ride the bike back to the apartment. I even had trouble pushing it across the parking lot where it would be out of the way.

I took my time getting home. I spent some time lying in the golf-course, watching the stars and enjoying the high. The dark residential streets of Austin were filled with cats who tailed me through the shadows, running silently at the edge of my vision. I looked behind me and saw one sitting in a pool of street light, motionlessly watching me, wondering what a human would be doing out in the kingdom of the cats.

I stopped for a while in the parking lot of a grocery store to drink a soda from their vending machine. A flock of bats swooped through the cloud of bugs that swarmed around a halogen light. None of them were Batra.

Tuesday, April 13, 1999

Women seem to taste different during the summer. During the winter, all their surfaces are crusty and cold. But in the summer, you lean your face toward them and inhale the fragrance of sweet, damp skin and their moist lips fold around yours.

Her name is Stef, and I’ve been seeing her for a little more than a week now. The courtship was painfully awkward and sordid, but as inevitable as the relentless pursuit of a terminator cyborg.

I saw her first in the office at work. The Easter season swamps the bakery, so they hire short-term employees to help squirt frosting on hundreds of egg-shaped



cookies. One of the regular mixers had recommended Stef to Stephanie the manager. I just happened to walk in during the interview process. She was slumped in a chair, looking as if she wanted to be elsewhere, looking trapped. I only got one glimpse of startling, black horn-rimmed glasses framed by a chaotic tangle of mauve-brown hair. That could almost be red, I thought to myself, and then, so quickly it could almost be one thought: don't look at her again or she'll think you're staring. For her part, she told me later that she assumed I was a jerk because the cute ones always are. That was very generous of her; most people assume I'm a jerk because I scowl all the time and I wear all black, even in a bakery.

The next day, Saturday, I had brought some of my homebrew to show Ben, the ex-hippie mixer. When work was finished, I invited Stef to join Ben and me outside for a cold one. I had spent the previous eight hours standing across the bakery bench from Stef and giving my best and most charming performance. In my effort to impress her, I stopped just short of standing on my head and demonstrating karate techniques. As I recall, I did try singing and juggling simultaneously. Three hours after the beer was gone and Ben had gone home we still sat out on the front stoop. Stef had heard at least three quarters of my amusing anecdotes and laughed even at the dumb ones. I decided that she must desire me to some extent to stay that long. Forget this high school crap, I thought to myself, and with the pretense of getting together for a movie I gave her my phone number.

She had to call about four times to get hold of me to set an actual time for the date. And the Saturday before we went to see The Corruptor, we sat on the front stoop of the bakery until 7:30 at night. This was when I was getting to think that something was

wrong, because even though she went out of her way to be with me, her body language discouraged further contact. She would tell me later that as the day of our movie date approached, she became more and more frightened, not of riding on a motorcycle, but of sitting behind me on the motorcycle with our thighs nestled together.

As we watched The Corruptor, we whispered conspiratorially between ourselves, never quite touching. At the coffee shop, we sat together at a couch, separated by our mugs and a good six inches. She invited me back up to her apartment, gave me a mouthful of tequila, and then studiously knitted a scarf, not looking at me. She got a phone call, which she answered, becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

“Yes, we’re back,” she said.

I took this as my cue to leave.

The next week, I worked with her for three days straight. Unable to help myself, I did my best to charm her while she iced Easter cookies across the bench. She had yet to allude to her boyfriend, but the way things were going I had resigned myself to being just a friend. It was only during The Talk that she admitted to consciously avoiding the phrase “my boyfriend.”

Then on Friday, she suggested we have a Dr. Who fest at my house. After watching Logopolis, the pinnacle of Tom Baker’s performance as the Doctor, we had The Talk. She admitted to having a boyfriend and to leading me on for two weeks by not mentioning him. I had been right from the first day, only an ongoing relationship had curtailed the initial attraction. I had trapped her between desire and loyalty.

Perhaps I could have stolen her from her boyfriend right then and there. Only the habit of respecting monogamy and indecision stayed my hand. The chess player in me

worried about the repercussions of prying Stef from a long-standing relationship, only to leave her alone when I left town in a month.

We stayed up all night, just talking, careful not to touch each other. Then I went to work before dawn, crabby, sexually frustrated, and tired beyond reason.

The next day, Stephanie the manager held a party at her house. Both Stephanie and her roommate had graduated from culinary school, so they prepared a truly obscene cook-out. Besides the usual bakery crowd, Harry Knowles the Internet movie critic had showed up. Stephanie's husband, Rick, officially lived in Tennessee, but he commuted in to Austin to see his increasingly pregnant wife and to attend all the film events. One wouldn't care to speculate which had higher priority, but either way he had made good use of the past two months, deftly inserting himself into the intense film-geek crowd that orbited around Harry Knowles.

I waited expectantly for Stef. And when she finally arrived I made certain that I was always within easy flirting distance. In the time-honored tradition of parties everywhere, a group of people coalesced in the kitchen. At this party, the kitchen crowd had the added advantage of first dibs on the many mouth-watering delicacies as they emerged from the oven. I was fairly drunk and just a little high when Stef, only three feet in front of me, said to Joel, "So, Joel, don't you want to know how my day went?"

"So, Stef, how did your day go?" Joel replied in his usual tone of bored sarcasm.

"I broke up with my boyfriend." Of course I knew, and probably most everyone in the kitchen knew, she was really talking to me. A big fist squeezed my guts and gave them a three quarter turn.

When none of our co-workers were looking we arranged to meet at her place that

night. We both knew what had to happen next, but it still took me two hours of lying on the floor really close to her before I worked up the nerve to just kiss her. She is a glorious kisser.

In order to avoid workplace awkwardness, we chose to keep our relationship a secret from Stephanie our manager. More likely than not, it was entirely unnecessary. Stef and Stephanie had grown to be friends, and Stephanie's habit of flirting with me was a matter of form that nobody took seriously. Nevertheless it wasn't something that could stay secret for very long. How could Stef and I hide the looks we gave each other over the bakery bench? Sometimes we would find ourselves alone in the walk-in cooler and our lips would meet in the frigid air.

We weren't the only ones who used the walk-in as a romantic rendezvous. According to bakery gossip, one of the married employees would meet in there with Rosa-Lupe, the kitchen steward. And if you were willing to pay her utility bills, she would meet in there with you too. By the time I started working at the bakery Rosa-Lupe's exploits were legend. At least once a night, Jamie would hold a bag of pastry frosting by his crotch and squeeze it rhythmically while moaning: "Rosa-Lupe, Rosa-Lupe, Rosa-Luuuuuupe!"

Before I connected that nightly performance with an actual person, I asked my roommate if Rosa-Lupe had any meaning in Spanish. Sam thought that Lupe might be a local slang term having something to do with the de-flowering of a virgin. It turned out that virginity had nothing to do with it.

I've taken the GRE, the entrance exam for graduate school, and I don't think it went very well. For the past week I've suffered under a particularly wretched illness, the precise details of which I will not share but suffice it to say that my entire body aches. I think the illness may result from drinking directly out of the same water pitcher for five months without washing it. Luckily I didn't tell the testing service which institutions to send my test results, thereby making the entire experience a \$100 exercise in filling circles with #2 pencil lead.

The GRE was really just part of a backup plan, a last resort. I never gave up the possibility of film school, but I was never keen on the prospect. I hope I don't burn out all my other opportunities, because every year makes it more and more difficult to put together the materials that would get me accepted. And makes it increasingly unlikely that I would fit in.

A new guy at the bakery asked me where I was from. I told him Wisconsin. For a moment he looked serious, then he brightened up. "Oh, yeah! Cheese and beer!" he exclaimed.

I told him, "That's it exactly."

## **Austin Wrap-up**

Wednesday, April 28, 1999

I have only two days before I leave my apartment and Austin with it. The pressure doesn't seem as great as it usually does this close to moving day. I don't have as much to move or clean this time because I took pains not to buy anything that wouldn't

fit on the bike or that I wouldn't feel too bad discarding. For the past seven months, my apartment has had a distinct temporary camp feeling; I slept on the floor and wrote on a desk made from an old shelf and two cinder blocks. Despite the reduced packing, I took a clue from experience and allowed myself ample time off work to get everything done.

My experience in Austin has shown that it takes about six months for me to build up a good social network. Maybe a more outgoing person could do better than that, but for a shy guy from Wisconsin I don't think it's too bad. Now that I've made friends here it makes it that much harder to leave. Things with Stef, my girlfriend, are to the point where my imminent departure is a painful subject. We've had some good times although we've been dating for less than a month.

Like me, Stef has eschewed the post-college career route. In the past few years she has worked a series of jobs of either low pay or high unpleasantness, never doing anything for very long. I know this bothers her, because once at work, while we were still pretending we weren't dating, she confessed that her father never expected her to amount to anything. Before I could reconsider I shot back, "You sure showed him, didn't you?" She looked at me like I'd slapped her. I got a good scolding from Stephanie, and I apologized, but it was a double-edged barb: It's not like I had a better job.

Stef has other accomplishments more impressive than working in a bakery. She let me hear her cello. At one time, she was in a community orchestra and an avant-garde quartet, and when she played for me I could feel the deep, pure tones vibrate the soles of my feet and pierce my heart. She also showed me her computer paintings, a dozen megabytes of stunning images. With a low-end illustration program, she overlays

primitive stick figures with colorful, organic landscapes. Looking at them the first couple of times, I found it hard to believe that she made her work through an entirely digital medium, since they have the blended, mottled look of watercolors.

We have an unspoken agreement that every day possible is spent together. After seeing all the movies worth watching in this town, we usually go out to eat and then go back to her place to spend quality time together.

Sometimes, late at night, she'll demand that I tell her a story. Put on the spot like that, I weave absurd fairy-tales about three little pigs that live in houses made out of dairy products, or a plumber who built a bed out of water pipes, or a 10-foot traveling cellist who plays her cello by holding it under her chin, or a wandering fool who fell in love with the queen of the stars. I could never repeat these stories to anyone. They simply wouldn't have the same sincerity and spontaneity they had when I gave them to Stef.

One night we went out to eat at a fifties diner where I heard a woman at a nearby table say in complete bewilderment "Wisconsin? Isn't that near Minnesota?" Afterward we walked back through the Central Park condominium complex. We came across a tree with long overhanging limbs that stretched down to the ground. In the half light we could see a sign, a blurry symbol followed by the phrase "tree climbing." "Don't mind if we do," we thought. Only after a prolonged interlude did we climb down and notice that the sign actually read "No tree climbing." A vandal had scratched out the "No." They would be thrilled to know that someone was fooled.

The other night we raced to get to the Marimont cafeteria before it closed. Commercial cafeterias are virtually unknown in Wisconsin, the institution of rural "supper club" fills that social niche, so I needed to see what it was like. Stef had regaled

me with promises of meat loaf and funeral Jell-O. With my motorcycle in the shop, we raced to get there before it closed by taking turns riding Stef's bicycle. I had read about a horse posting event where one person rides on a horse while the partner pursues on foot. The first person leaves the horse tied to some object and starts walking while the second person catches up to the horse and rides it ahead of person number one. That way your effective speed is the average of the distance you travel on horse and on foot. It makes no sense to explain it, but in practice it actually works. We got to the cafeteria in record time. We talked until the cafeteria closed and all the lights turned off. They must have forgotten about us because we had to shout at the front counter for several minutes before somebody came to let us out.

Amy's ice cream shop on Guadalupe imitates the sushi bar format, only instead of a performance with knives and raw fish, the counter worker uses ice cream and spatulas. When we went there, he chopped strawberries into Stef's ice cream, smooshed it into a rough ball, and tossed it over his shoulder. It would have been much more impressive if the ice cream had landed anywhere near the dish he held, instead of sailing across the shop and landing behind the cash register. He had to make another one, which he refrained from tossing.

My motorcycle has been broken for the past week or so. I tried to go on a road trip with Stef up to the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, but we never made it past Martin Luther King Boulevard. Halfway to the interstate, the bike started shaking and sputtering. I assumed I had a spark plug electrical problem until all the gas in my tank leaked out through the air filter and into the street. The folks at the shop said that my



carburetors were all too clogged to function. I had to remove them myself in the middle of Stef's parking lot, dismantling most of the bike to get to them, and taking them by bus to the shop. Now everything is put back together and in working order just in time to leave. Luckily this problem popped up in Austin and not while I was in the field and miles from nowhere.

Stephanie my boss threw me a going away party last night. She grilled brats and burgers and baked a raspberry/cherry cobbler. Did I mention that I need to have more friends who graduated culinary school?

Ben, my old-school-hippie co-worker, gave me a book by Bruce Sterling, a local author, so I would have something to remember Austin by. I showed everyone my films and videos that my father had mailed to me in Austin. In a little ceremony, I gave away all the silly things that I had acquired in Austin that I couldn't take with me. Stuff like envelopes, pencils, useless wrenches, and the steel ruler I used to draw "The Adventures of Circle and Almost Circle." The gifts were only partly tongue in cheek, I felt guilty about throwing away so much stuff that might still have use.

Today I discovered that nothing on my bike had the correct air pressure. Then I spent all afternoon playing that stupid "War" arcade game.

## **Leaving Austin**

Saturday, May 1, 1999

I left Austin at six this morning, just in time to catch a cold spring rain. I pulled

off the highway to wait for it to pass, taking shelter on the stairs of a strip mall pet shop. As I sat, I perused my map. Not that I really knew where I wanted to go. My rough plan is to circle around the eastern half of the United States, visiting the Deep South, Florida, and my friend Burvil in Washington, D.C. If I play my cards right, I can be back in Madison in time to catch the Star Wars premiere with all my friends. But if I'm really lucky, something will distract me and I'll never make it back to Wisconsin.

I've had a fun time in Austin. True to the hype, the winter wasn't too bad. It got cold enough a couple of nights to kill my motorcycle battery, but I never missed work because of a failure to commute.

It seems appropriate that I left Austin the same way I arrived: under cover of darkness. I would have slept in, but I was squatting for the night in Stef's apartment. She needed to leave early for work. Today she takes over the job I would have done if I hadn't left the bakery, so she can't skip work just for my sake.

Our last day together was just about as sweet as you could imagine.

Early in the morning I moved the last of my stuff out of my apartment. In anticipation, my roommate had already moved his futon into my room and left me a gift of my rental deposit and a dozen Camel matchbooks, presumably for use during camping. Since Sam tends to sleep in past four in the afternoon, I never actually saw him before I left.

That left the rest of the day to spend with Stef. We had the worst spat of our relationship over whether or not we should go to Hamilton Pool. I mistakenly believed that it was some sort of public pool filled with noisy kids and fat housewives in ugly

swimsuits. Actually it was a magnificent grotto about an hour out into the countryside. Cold springs tumbled down the cliffs and collected under a hemispherical overhang of limestone. A few local youths showed off their girlfriends and lounged on a brief beach. Catfish as long as my arm sunned lazily in the shallows, moving slow enough that I could touch their slick, muscular tails.

Stef and I frolicked in the water for a few minutes. She told me it would take half an hour of incremental submersion before she got all the way into the freezing water. I abbreviated the process by picking her up and dunking her.

The day before, we visited the dam at the end of the lake. A couple of kids near the sluice gates fished with battered rods and a tin can of worms. As we dangled our feet over the wall, we peered down to the murky water. Every minute or so, a different baby turtle would swim to the surface, take a breath, and dive back down to the rocks. Snapping turtles, painted turtles, and even a softshell, one after the other furiously wiggled their little turtle butts to sink faster. Stef and I leaned against each other, barely saying a word, until the sun set and we could barely see the ripple of snorkeling turtles.

Today was pretty cold. I had to wear my London Fog parka underneath my jacket to keep off the chill as I rode through rural Texas. First I drove up to Waco, more to say that I was there than anything else. The Dr. Pepper museum was closed when I got there, and I didn't feel like asking around for the location of the Branch Davidian compound. I don't think the locals would have found that a pleasant line of questioning.

By midafternoon, I decided I had made enough progress and took a campsite on an old logging road off the highway in the Davy Crockett National Forest. I spent the

afternoon reading the book that my co-worker Ben gave me as a souvenir of Austin. To keep the sun off me, I slung my tarp over the top of the bike and secured the other end with my tent poles, stakes, and a couple of bungee cords. When I got bored of reading, I listened to NPR news and Garrison Keillor while stitching my bike seat.

The sun is setting, and I'm feeling melancholic. It's the same story, a sense of aimlessness and desperation. I've left friends and a home that I might never see again. Stef I miss especially. I wonder how long we would have made it as a couple if I hadn't left. I don't feel the aching, painful loss that I felt the last time I got dumped, but I think most of that was wounded pride.

Tonight I think I will write Stef.

Monday, May 3, 1999 (morning)

I must have been deeply agitated Saturday night because I woke up sometime after moonrise. Seeing that incredibly bright moon, bright enough that it masked all but a few stars, I thought it was nearly dawn. Having no way to confirm the time (I haven't had a watch for months), I began to pack my gear. I had everything loaded save the sleeping bag and tent, and I had climbed back into my riding clothes when I decided that it was best to lay back down and wait for sunrise.

Since it was only a little after 10p.m., it was a long and fitful nap. I kept hearing what I interpreted to be screen doors slamming just beyond the edge of camp. Every passing truck dredged me out of deep sleep and I had a dream where self-righteous baby-boomers kidnaped my tent with me in it and put me in an enclosure with a Bengali tiger, just to prove a point about camping where you're not wanted.

Nevertheless it was a good campsite and well hidden. It was right next to a meadow cleared for high tension lines. When I looked down the long row of pillars, I saw a deer bounding into the cover of woods. And I saw what had to be an American anole chameleon just like the ones I had as pets as a little kid.

I made camp quickly that morning, having packed most of my gear the night before. On the way to the Texas, border I passed a local grocery and bait shop where two fat men in overalls and cowboy hats reclined and shot the breeze on a front bench. All the rumors are true, the South is just like that.

I nearly ran out of gas seven miles from Louisiana and had to sidetrack to a lake resort where another old man, this time in a feed cap, sat out on a front bench. When I asked him if the bridge over the lake led to Louisiana he told me I would have to backtrack some other way: that bridge just led to the other branch of the lake. With a slow, careful drawl he proceeded to recite all the ways you can cross the river in his recollection. I thanked him and drove off before he could finish.

## **The Deep South is not Like Easy Rider**

For the hell of it, I stopped at the Las Adaes Spanish fort site, where a large and friendly woman in 18th century dress gave me a long, rehearsed speech about the trading habits of Spanish soldiers stationed on the frontier. There was no one else there, so I suppose I got the personal tour. I asked her for the names of the lizards that crawled all over the deck, inflating ruby throat sacks at one another. They seemed like American chameleons to me. “Just regular old lizards,” she said. I’ve paid as much as seven bucks

for those regular old lizards. As I recall, they never live more than a week and a half in captivity, but out here they're as thick as flies.

I took a lazily winding course up to Natchez, Mississippi. Louisiana is flat and green with frequent stretches of swamp. On the back roads, there were no thriving businesses. I passed rows and rows of boarded ruins, punctuated by sagging huts of ancient, corrugated metal sheets.

Near the Mississippi border, I stopped at a place that advertised catfish-to-go. I had a catfish fillet dinner, a pile of curling, corn-breaded fish strips served with fries, slaw, and two spherical, deep-fried cornbread balls. It came in a sectioned styrofoam box and tasted far better than the presentation would lead you to believe. The woman who ran the kitchen and cash register seemed on an intimate basis with half her customers. In the back of the restaurant, a thin closet held three video poker machines and just enough room for three stools.

A little earlier, I had given a \$1.75 to similar machines at a crossroad attraction. The outside looked vaguely like the downtown of an Old West town if the Old West had been designed by Disney. The inside looked exactly like a convenience store with a gambling parlor addition. A security guard who had beautiful blue eyes and the biggest hair of any woman I've seen outside of rural Wisconsin sheepishly asked to see my ID. She told me she thought the Wisconsin license looked neat.

On my way to the national forest, I stopped in a little town called Roxie. The main street looked like little more than a clearing in the woods with a few paper thin

buildings facing the gravel road. In the central park, across from the medical center, a makeshift stage and tents stood. Some women stood on the stage singing, surrounded by milling children, while the men disassembled the sound system. Old folks sat under the tent, talking and visiting. Whatever it was I had missed it. Someone had once told me about the long, slow rhythms of life in the South. This is what he must have meant, a backwoods gathering lasting until the sun went down.

I drove south toward the national forest, Homomoth or something, but I never made it. I saw a road leading back into a clear-cut that seemed disused enough, so I made camp there, reading Ben's novel until sunset.

From the sound of things, nobody lived for miles around. Every now and then, a logging truck would pass, but mostly it was quiet.

I broke camp at dawn and left with only one witness. On a back road, I took a couple of U- turns to get a photo of a kudzu forest. The sheer weight of the kudzu had crushed the trees, leaving a rippled topography of stumps and logs covered with a thick blanket of kudzu leaves.

Nearby a dozen or more young black kids stood at the top of their driveway, waiting for the school bus. They looked at me with uniform curiosity. I nodded to them as I passed and a dozen hands reflexively rose in greeting.

Thunderheads narrowly avoided me as I headed north onto the Natchez-Trace Parkway. The parkway is a historical route that hides the poverty-stricken Mississippi

countryside from the view of the motorist. All you see are trees, historical markers, and an incongruous lawn stretching 50 feet from the shoulders on either side.

It's not yet noon, and I've gotten into two conversations already. At an Indian burial site, I met another cross-country Yamaha enthusiast. He had a moustache, a cap, and a Yamaha dealership T-shirt. In a relaxed Georgia drawl, he told me how he had owned the same model of bike and put over 100,000 miles on it before a tornado hit the garage and crushed it. It makes me feel better about the reliability of my bike if it takes an act of God to break it.

He had 20 years of biking behind him, then last year he had his first accident. He hit a bear. The bear was fine, but he got a little road rash and had to put \$3,000 into his bike to put it back together. What is it with bears? This is the second time someone has told me a story about hitting a bear with a motorcycle. Do deer only lunge at vehicles with two headlights?

Just now, as I was journaling next to a Civil War battle marker, a guy from Cleveland came up and started to talk. He wore circular sunglasses, a toothpick pinned behind the ear bars, shorts, a Cleveland Indians T-shirt, and kung-fu slippers. He told me about his family in Louisiana, his time in the military, commuting by motorcycle through the Italian monsoons, how he used to travel with "The 'Dead," and how the worst cops in the world are in Ohio.

When the army had him stationed in Taipei, he went out once to get a haircut. The first barbershop he came to had that colored spiral out front and three women sitting in the barber chairs. He asked the proprietor how much he charged for a haircut. Fifty bucks he was told. Thinking that was too much for a haircut, even a good haircut, he



went out to find another barbershop. The next shop had the same deal, three women sitting in the barber chairs and an outrageous price for a haircut. After about the fourth barbershop one of the proprietors knew enough English to explain that in Taiwan all the barber shops are fronts for whorehouses. I don't believe he actually got a haircut that day.

Before the guy left, he offered me some granola bars.

(Evening)

As national parks go, the Natchez-Trace Parkway is pretty lame. The primary purpose seems to be to separate you from the unsightly portions of Mississippi while making you read insipid historical markers. I just took a hike along the smarmiest nature trail I have ever seen. At odd intervals vaguely naturalistic aphorisms were posted like: "Boredom: when you are bored minutes must seem like hours and hours like days. Consider the life of a butterfly which may live only one season. Every moment must be precious for it. There is no room for boredom." Honestly.

I have seen some pretty interesting wildlife today. This morning, there were two wild turkeys, and on the cypress trail I saw several frogs, turtles, and an alligator sunning itself on a log. Then there are all the lizards, which scamper about everywhere.

Tonight I have camped at one of the park grounds. I had my heart set on a shower tonight, but what the hell, the campsite is free. Tomorrow I head east.

Wednesday, May 5, 1999

I slept in at the free campground on the parkway. All but one of the elderly RV

campers had left by the time I packed up. I must have needed the sleep, I had slept soundly despite the old folks in the bus-sized camper who ran a 70 decibel generator every five minutes.

I headed east in the morning, zigzagging through the Mississippi back roads. I stopped on the main street of one small Mississippi town to get supplies. As I sat on my bike eating Little Debbie snacks, two old men came up and started conversations. One had a big, purple nose, an engagingly droll manner, and hair dyed jet-black like Roy Orbison. He told me a couple rambling stories about the “big Harleys” he used to ride. In one story, he was going 100 mph down to Mobile, and his girlfriend was fixing her face or something so forgot to lean into a turn. In the ensuing mess, she got thrown clear but he got internal injuries and nearly lost an arm when the nurses worked on resetting a broken bone. He had broken the arm previously so it already had a crook to it. No matter how hard they pulled, it wouldn’t work out the crook. He quoted himself speaking to the nurses: “Stop that. It hurts.”

In the other story, his brother tried to ride a bike with a sidecar and failed to make a turn because you can’t really lean with a sidecar, so he rode through a picket fence and a woman’s garden. The accident dented the sidecar, but the dealership took pity and offered to give them a replacement.

The other gentleman came out of the hardware store, put his hands on his hips, and declared “my word!” when he saw the bike. He mentioned the bad weather coming my way and told me to be careful. All in all, Southerners seem pretty damn friendly. I have yet to meet a stereotypical xenophobic redneck and nobody has mentioned the war.

While I was on main street, people greeted each other and joked left and right. Exactly like Mayberry.

In Mississippi, I got a shrink-wrapped styrofoam tray of something called Pork Cracklins. Conceptually they are a synthesis of pork rinds and bacon. Each strip has both the hard, crunchy fried skin as well as the chewy fat. The whole thing is deep fried and saturated in salt. I'm not certain if I'm intrigued or appalled. As I waited out some bad weather in a park shelter, I ate most of them.

The night before last, I stayed in a motel close to the Florida border because I worried about the weather and I really needed a shower. There's something particularly lonely about sleeping in a cheap motel. It's more than just the cheap decor. I think it's the prominent position of the television and the certain knowledge that people other than you have had tawdry sex on the bedspread, an item you can be certain has never, ever been cleaned.

## **Florida: Where the Sun Is**

I drove straight through the Florida Panhandle today. I don't think I had a single conversation with anyone. There was the kid who leaned out of the school bus window to yell, "hey, guy on bike!" but that was about it.

I checked my E-mail at a public library near Tallahassee. There was a brief note from Stef. It made me a little sad to think of her, but not so bad that I curled up and cried. It makes me feel bad, I really wish that I couldn't live without her. I really wish I was in

more pain than I was.

After passing up a state park and a great number of cheap motels, I have opted on yet another national forest. I rode the bike farther from a road than it ever has been. I can just barely hear trucks in the distance. I rode a way along a dirt track and then went even farther along a game trail. It wasn't easy to turn a 700-pound motorcycle on a 10-inch trail, especially considering the ankle deep duff of dead pine needles, but I did it. A year ago, that very maneuver would have confounded me.

Pine trees stretch in straight lines as far as I can see, spikey palmetto underbrush covering the ground. I should be pretty safe here despite the penitentiary about a mile down the road.

Churches are the only institution that outnumber the prisons. Most have pithy slogans out on their billboards. One had a sign saying: "Our schools: when the prayers stopped, the killing began." No doubt linking the recent Columbine massacre to all those godless educators.

The best road sign I've seen yet was on the top of a hill in a small Florida town. "Caution: Blinding Sun," it warned. Apparently Florida has a bigger, better sun than the rest of the country.

Thursday, May 6, 1999

South Florida is an unspeakable hell hole. The coasts are nothing but golf courses, gated communities, and gated golf communities. The streets are littered with old

people. The interior is nothing but failing and failed motels. I made a tactical error by taking Highway 41 down the coast, thinking it would be more intimate and picturesque. What I got was stoplights and urban sprawl. You've seen one sign for Popeye's Chicken, you've seen them all. Without the constant headwind of freeway driving to keep me cool, the blistering Florida heat melted me inside my jacket.

The national forest where I camped last night harbored a disconcerting quantity of vermin. I've picked two ticks off me in the past day. I haven't found any sucking blood yet, but there's always the possibility that one or two has gone through my defenses. I hate the feel of little tick legs scratching my skin on their way to my scalp.

While driving through Tampa, several hours after breaking camp, I felt something tickling my ear. The sensation became more acute, and then something stung me. I assumed a bee flew inside my helmet when I had the visor up, because on two separate occasions bees have found my neck, the only gap in my leather, and stung me. Impressively, the insects managed to land and sting after the 40-mph collision. On many other occasions, mosquitos and various other flying vermin have flown through my open faceplate and wiggled insistently against my ears.

I stopped at a stoplight and whipped off my helmet as fast as I could, considering I was wearing gloves and had to undo the chin strap. I looked inside, and there was the biggest centipede I have ever seen. It was as long as my longest finger and nothing but wriggling, yellow legs and pincers. I hesitated to grab it even with my deerskin gloves. The light changed, and the little bastard scurried deeper into the helmet. Hanging the helmet on a rear-view mirror, I pulled into a car dealership and searched the helmet to no

avail. Assuming the beast had fallen out when the helmet was upside-down, I re-donned it and drove on.

The crawling sensation returned a block later. I told myself it was only my imagination and a strand of hair brushing against my ear. It was not. It was a big ass bug pulling a Chekhov on me. The centipede had been hiding behind the chin-strap padding, where it had been staying since it crawled into my helmet the night before. Never again will I leave my helmet hanging on my bike overnight. It goes into the tent where the screen will keep out the larger vermin.

It took the tweezers from my Swiss army knife to extract the creature. After knocking it to the burning hot pavement, I went to check the map. When I looked at it again the heat had paralyzed it from the waist down, a catastrophic occurrence for a creature that is all waist. I picked it up and carried it to the shade of a nearby leaf pile, where hopefully it could find its way to a cooler habitat. Whether it recovered or not, I couldn't tell you.

I stop to micturate in a truly filthy gas station bathroom. A lizard, technically named a "regular old lizard," crouched beside the toilet, his scales mimicking the dirty gray of the tiles.

Tonight Florida treats me to yet another exotic life form. I pitched my tent in a free campground near the tip of Florida in the Cypress preserve. In the middle of the campground is a stone-lined, perfectly rectangular and presumably artificial lake in which float about a dozen alligators, most of them about three or four feet long. They seem to be

lethargic enough, floating on the surface of the pond, only nostrils and eyeballs showing. It took me several minutes to realize that not only were there alligators in the pond, but a whole flotilla, plainly visible.

An old couple in a pickup truck who introduced themselves as the camp hosts came around a little while ago.

“You going it solo tonight?” asked the old man.

Indeed I was the only one there. “Just me and the gators.”

They told me the gators wouldn't bother me, but under no circumstances should I go in the water. As the sun sets, I saw the silhouette of a gator cruising as placid as a ferryboat. I have an active imagination as it is, but to have actual carnivorous reptiles prowling my campsite might just put me over the edge. I unfolded my camp shovel and set it within easy reach, just in case.

Friday, May 7, 1999 (morning)

I slept pretty well, despite the alligator presence. In the night, the gators woke me with throaty growling near my tent. No doubt it pertained to some nocturnal gator business I wouldn't need to worry about.

The rising sun shines off thousands of dew sparkling spider webs. The everglades prairie is thick with spider webs for as far as the eye can see.

This lake is teeming with life. Turtles constantly surface among the gators, and big fish sun themselves near shore. I saw a whole school of gar-like creatures and a pair of bass chased a school of skipping minnows.

Not bad nature watching for a free campsite.

Sunday, May 9, 1999

What with doing laundry and developing my roll of film and getting repeatedly lost in the urban sprawl of South Miami, it was nearly sunset by the time I found the campground at Flamingo Beach. As might be expected of a National Park at the southernmost point of the United States, everything was expensive, including the campsite. What was surprising was the sheer quantity of mosquitos. Despite the stiff wind coming off the ocean, they congregated by the hundreds of thousands just outside my tent. By nightfall, they were positively unbearable. Around midnight, I went out to remove the tent fly since its flapping drove me crazy. I couldn't see them and I couldn't hear them through the gale, but I could feel them as a continuous burning pain throughout my body. When I got back inside, the itching discomfort kept me awake for an hour. In the morning, I killed dozens of blood gorged mosquitos that got trapped in the tent.

Then there were the raccoons, screaming and hissing at each other all night and pawing at my tent. The leader of the college canoers at the other end of the campground said the coons actually ripped into some of his group's tents.

The next day I tried to find a good place to read my new book, but everywhere I went the mosquitos hounded me. No amount of repellent, even my industrial strength ultra-carcinogenic brand, kept them away. With the multiple discomforts of mosquitos, sunburn, and heat, I finally just gave up.

On a positive note, the park was swarming with osprey. There were vultures and hordes of those white marsh birds that were either ibises or egrets, but it was the ospreys which impressed me most. I spent weeks in the Pacific Northwest and only saw one



osprey. I ride into Flamingo, and the first thing I see is an osprey flying overhead with a fish twitching in its talons.

All in all, I think the Big Cypress preserve area was more impressive as well as free. I had thought the gators and thick concentration of fish in the canal near the visitor center were some sort of trick or display. So I stopped at a random point along the highway and checked the ditch. What do you know, gators, turtles, and gar packed in so tight you could walk across the canal on their backs.

I'm glad I got my fill of gators in the parks because there was no gator wrasslin' and clog dancin' to be seen at Alabama Jacks. There were plenty of bikers and skin-like-leather old people, but nothing to indicate I ought to stick around for gator wrasslin'. I sure as hell wasn't going to ask "do you wrassle gators in these here parts?" I think that would be plenty embarrassing all around. For the past six months, I've been looking forward to gator wrasslin' and clog dancin'. I'll just have to live with the disappointment.

With no good incentive to stay, I rode up the coast as fast as I could to avoid that whole Florida thing. I still had to deal with toll roads and crazy Miami drivers, but theoretically at 75 mph you don't have to deal with them for very long. The bumper sticker of a car passing me at about 90 mph summed up the Florida attitude: "When I grow old I will move north and drive slow."

I only made it about an hour past the vulgar Miami sprawl before the thunder storm hit, so I pulled off the highway and went into the first motel I saw. I wonder if my heart stopping showed on my face when the clerk told me a room cost \$50 a night. Admittedly an expensive motel room is less depressing than a cheap one, but they didn't

even have HBO. And the sweet roll in the morning was only marginally better than Little Debbie grade. It even had the cellophane wrapper. I'm going to be kicking myself for weeks for actually paying that, but hey, any port in a storm. The clouds had been doing some pretty funky twisting and roiling that reminded this Midwestern boy of twister weather.

To supplement the meager breakfast roll, I stopped at a diner/doughnut shop near town. There were senior citizens there who were such regular customers they brought their own coffee mugs.

I went by the Kennedy Spaceport visitor center without paying for the tour, but I did shell out the \$10 for the Ripley's Believe It or Not museum. After about an hour of looking at the six-legged cows and the London Bridge made of match sticks, I felt I had my money's worth.

Tonight I camp in a Georgia state park right smack dab next to a U.S. submarine base. At least I'm out of Florida.

## **Heroism**

Wednesday, May 12, 1999

I ended up getting that campsite in Georgia for free. I wish it was entirely by accident, but there was a bit of conniving on my part. I knew if I got up at dawn as I usually did, there would be no one there to take my money. If ever a campsite was worth \$15, this would be it. It had every hookup, including what looked suspiciously like cable jacks, plus hot showers, soda machines, and a washer/dryer set. I felt just a bit guilty as I

rode off into the dawn mist.

I did pay the entrance fees at the Okefenokee Swamp parkway, despite the absence of a gate guard. It was there that I had to make my promise not to take any more gator pictures. It was tough, the ditches were filled with these little dried up mud puddles, and they all had a lonely little gator lying in the middle of them. I feel sorry for the poor things.

Maybe it was karmic balance for skipping out on my camp fee, but my left turn signal wouldn't work. I presumed it was just some morning dew making a short, but when the problem persisted throughout the day, I finally opened up the lens and found a burnt bulb. I found a new one at a gas station that I had to alter slightly so it would fit in the socket, but that signal works again. It blinks much faster than before, but it works.

Near Eatonton, Georgia, it took me a while to find a portion of the national forest that hadn't been privatized and posted, but I did eventually. A little road with a barrier mound of dirt and a sign saying "foot traffic invited." The mound posed little hazard as I rolled over it and pulled the bike out of sight. Before the sun set, I finished reading my cheesy science fiction novel about vampires resisting alien invasion and had a meal of hot ramen noodles and pudding cups. When it got dark I retired to the safety of my tent, watching the fireflies and heat lightning while listening to AM radio. It was one of those nights when even distant stations come in like buzzing ghosts.

I took a picture of Madison, Georgia, on my way north. It seemed to be even

more picturesque than the Madison I'm used to.

By early afternoon, I made it to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. At the model farmstead, local school children ran around in period costume. I cornered the pretend blacksmith and made him answer questions about metalworking that had been bothering me, although I didn't get to the one about the Hittite two-fire method.

With my campsite all set up and hours left of sunlight, I decided to capitalize on the natural beauty around me and take a hike. It was so pleasant that at the first signpost I took the branch that promised the largest mileage. Hawarongh Ridge, or something like that, 4.1 miles. Little did I know then that it was not the name and length of the trail, but the name of the destination. I was walking for quite some time, my hunger and thirst becoming acute, my legs aching, when I noticed the trail had been going up for quite some time now, without looking like it would end. That's when it began to rain. At first my hat kept off the drizzle, but the downpour that followed drenched my shirt and sent a stream of water down my back into my underwear. I had time to mentally congratulate myself on stoically withstanding such unpleasant weather before it started to hail. I was cold, wet, tired, thirsty, hungry, and in pain when I finally got to the top of the trail. The sign at the forks told me I could either go 5.3 miles back the way I came or 7.3 miles in the other direction. Well I hate backtracking as much as anyone, so I opted for the extra 7.3 miles.

I won't go into much detail. The scenery was beautiful, mountains stretching off into the distance, pocketed by clouds of rising mist. I got so thirsty that I tried to squeeze some moisture out of my sopping-wet shirt. I barely extracted enough to wet my tongue,

and it tasted like cotton.

My cowboy boots were proving to be a poor choice for cross-country footwear. They had little traction when I climbed the rubble-strewn path up the mountain, and going down they had no cushioning. My toes were hurting from bending the wrong way, and my knees were hurting from absorbing the repetitive falling.

Somewhere along the line I lost the path back to camp. Maybe that was why there was a sign post, uprooted and thrown across the path, that said the path was closed. Maybe I should have backtracked after all.

I ended up on a gravel road running along the side of a nearby valley. It went past rows and rows of what I took to be private summer cottages. It led me to believe I had wandered a way out of the park. All the while, it led me farther and farther from the direction I wanted to go. It was one of those situations where you know you're getting yourself in deeper but you're too tired to go back. You can only hope that by going forward you'll end up on the other side.

After what must have been miles, without seeing another soul and with the sun setting, I looked down the hill and saw a road with actual pavement and beyond that a paved road with an actual yellow line going down the middle.

Not bothering with the path any longer I cut down through the woods, bruising my knees on the steep descent.

It was a cute little community with lawns and sheds full of junk. One shed sheltered an old model A, dusty and faded, but still in one piece. The sign farther down the road said "Welcome to Towrope Community."

I was having trouble walking by then, squatting down by the road every couple

hundred feet to let the blood back into my joints and tendons.

Luckily this guy named Dewey stopped by to pick me up in his truck.

“Just shove these away from your feet,” he told me referring to the passenger side detritus of collapsed paper milk cartons and old receipts.

He was middle aged, wore the ubiquitous farmers cap and smoked a pipe which he would slow the truck occasionally to relight. He said he had told his wife when I passed by that I didn’t look familiar so he ought to see if I needed a lift. Apparently, I had wandered onto the Cherokee Indian reservation, the entrance to which was only a mile or so from the campground.

When Dewey told me I had been on the Cherokee reservation, I didn’t know what to say. My mind flashed through a number of conversational tidbits I had gleaned from the mandatory ethnic studies course I had taken on North American Indians back in college. I considered asking about the division of the Cherokee nation between the Appalachians and Oklahoma, the trail of tears, or the rumor that Cherokee women annoyed men from other tribes by being too emancipated and opinionated. I discarded all these topics as being too forward. In the silence, I felt myself saying absolutely the most dumb-ass white-guy response imaginable.

“Cool,” I said.

He dropped me off right at my campsite, just as light faded. All by itself, his act reaffirmed my faith in humanity. As I recall, the last time I found myself on an Indian reservation, I promised never to mistake Indian land for federal again. Having done so again and been caught, is embarrassing, but hardly fatal.

When I made my dinner of ramen noodles that night, my legs hurt so bad I

shuffled and stumbled to fetch the water. I still limp a little this morning but it ought to be manageable for bike riding.

I'll never call the Appalachians pansy mountains again.

Saturday, May 15, 1999

Although beautiful, the Blue Ridge Parkway proved miserable. The road twisted up and down and around in circles while rain and mist occluded my visor. After about 50-miles, I had to give up on my plan to go all the way to D.C. on the parkway. I ended up taking the interstate east to Statesville, North Carolina, where I got a motel. It was a luxury intended to pamper my still smarting knees. I'm going to avoid motels from now on. I just end up lying around in my underwear watching cable and thinking how much it's costing me to do that.

Thursday brought another day of hard driving through the back roads of North Carolina. I ate at a little ice cream place. Then I stopped at Pettigrew State park about an hour from the coast, where a talkative redheaded ranger showed me the facilities. For 12 bucks, I got a hot shower and a campsite with leftover firewood. I used about a dozen of my precious typing sheets to get the damp sticks to catch.

On Friday, I had the entire day to find my way up to Washington, D.C., where I would visit my old roommate, Burvil, so I drove through the Outer Banks. There I saw America's largest sand dune, the lost colony of Roanoke, and the Wright Brothers' monument, using up most of my film in the process.

Crossing the bridges between the coastal islands took a good deal of my strength and skill. The spray-laden wind would whip across the bridge, bouncing me within the

lane like a ping-pong ball. I had to crouch over the handlebars and grip them like the horns of a bull.

It was early afternoon before I rode into Virginia. The weather got worse, wetting me and the road under a constant drizzle. I kept myself warm by yodeling. Don't knock it, it worked. I couldn't move around a lot so I had nothing but my voice to warm me. By the end, I got pretty good at a Tarzan yell. If any of my fellow motorists heard anything, it must have confused them.

I stopped at a 7-Eleven for gas and to call Burvil. The store sold five different hot dog variations. They had the classic hot dog, the jumbo hot dog, a hot dog made of taco meat, a spicy sausage hot dog, and a cheeseburger meat hot dog. I had the hot dog shaped cheeseburger meat. It tasted okay, but it looked exactly like a turd.

Burvil's apartment looked about like you would expect if you knew Burvil. His roommate was obsessed with his fish tank, running off frequently to get more supplies, then sitting and staring at the fish for a long time.

Burvil and I went to see The Black Mask at a local D.C. mall, where we ran into a couple guys Burvil knew. At the theater, a couple college-aged kids were playing the Tekken3 game in the lobby. One kept bragging that he had the game on Play Station so he was really good. I couldn't take that lying down, so I challenged them, playing the part of Tiger, the capoeira pimp. It's always satisfying to have an opponent who doesn't stand a chance against you, and it's even more satisfying to totally cream them with a character in an Afro, disco clogs, and a leisure suit. I couldn't get them to play me more than once each.

I left D.C. in the morning after getting a quick motorcycle tour of the Georgetown



area with Burv in the bitch-seat. It was good to see Burv again, I'm glad I bullied him into letting me stop by.

I've spent the last few hours looking for a laundromat and one-hour film processor in Winchester, Virginia. It's a cute little colonial town, once the home of George Washington, but the people in the laundromat are complete rednecks. The laundromat TV plays TNN and the patrons watch Shania Twain slack-mouthed.

My wander-around-aimlessly navigation technique worked exceptionally poorly this time. When I finally managed to find a film processor, after about five passes through town, I had to ask the clerk where I could find a laundromat.

Sunday, May 16, 1999

Highway 50 leading west out of Winchester, just kept getting more and more picturesque. The road twisted through scenic canyons lined with shade trees and mountain villages. About every mile or so, I would pass a friendly biker who would do the passing salute thing no matter what kind of bike they were riding. It must be a biker's dream, a back-roads highway that twists like a roller coaster through the Appalachians. I checked the map. Highway 50 runs across the entire country from D.C. to S.F. As far as I know, it's the only American route to do that since 66 got plowed under.

I made camp last night in the Tygart Lake State Park in West Virginia, built around a lake with an impressive array of picnic sites and boat launches. There was a Young Life Christian youth group camped just down the road from me. The high-school

aged girls kept walking back and forth, passing my campsite and saying hi. In the morning I actually heard them singing “Kumbyah.”

I talked briefly with a guy visiting with his family from Pennsylvania. He seemed impressed with my travels, but when he asked where I was from, I didn’t know if I should say Wisconsin or Texas. It’s a problem I’ve been having a lot lately. Wisconsin would be more accurate, but Texas has more prestige.

Now that my travels are winding down, I’ve been wondering how I’ve changed. My personal appearance is different: I have a goatee, my skin is weathered, my leather worn and rugged looking. But more importantly, I think I am bolder now. At least socially. I’m not afraid to make small talk. And I have a confident sense of peace. Last night, I went out to look at the stars and I felt entirely secure with my future, wherever it might take me.

I stopped at Doddridge County Park, West Virginia, this morning, to see if I could get in contact with my friend Ulrich in Chicago. We were roommates with Burvil during college, and I promised I would stop by if I went through the Chicago area. I used the pay phone to send him pages and left messages on his answering machine. After an hour of reading a cheesy science-fiction novel about stopping a killer meteor, which was exactly like every other science-fiction story on the subject, right down to the self-sacrificing use of nuclear weapons, Ulrich still had not returned my call.

Now I’m stalling in a college cafe in Athens, Ohio. A few years ago, this was one of two towns that my film, Dead Things, played. I wanted to stop by and see what it was

like. The town consists of exactly: The University of Ohio, a coffee shop, two bookstores, and a very large culvert. I trust that the hand full of undergraduates who saw my film enjoyed the experience. Most likely they were just completely confused.

## Homeward

Tuesday, May 18, 1999

Driving through Indiana on Sunday night, my visor became occluded by the smeared guts of hordes of bugs. I lifted it in order to see, but that just gummed up my glasses. The insects that didn't die instantly invariably scurried behind my ears where I couldn't reach them. There they would squirm around in the manner of a certain centipede.

With relief, I found a camp sign leading to "Browning's Adventure Camp." Even in the dark, I could see the place resembled more a down-home resort than one of the franchised campgrounds. Permanent residents had their campers surrounded by gardens and fences and flowerpots. Many were augmented with lean-to sheds filled with bunkbeds. In the morning, I saw that it stretched forever across the fields and into the woods. Enough people lived there for the camp to incorporate. It even had a diner at the very center.

The old lady who signed me in grinned wickedly when I mentioned the profusion of bugs on the highway. "You know how to tell a happy motorcyclist?" she asked.

"From the bugs on their teeth?" I answered. "Yeah, I heard that one."

Spoiling her punch line didn't dim her spirits any. She relished every opportunity thereafter to call me the "happy motorcyclist." "Could you show the happy motorcyclist

to the primitive campsite,” she would say, or “The happy motorcyclist is up pretty early this morning.”

I dodged storms on the back roads of Indiana, and while it was still early I followed signs that lead to the “Wilbur Wright Birthplace Museum.” It was operated by an old couple and their family who lived on the premises, a farmhouse well out into the middle of nowhere. For a \$2 fee, I got a personal guided tour of the house, the smoke shed, and the museum annex. The short old man who led me pointed out various items of interest, such as the wood-burning stove, the lard press, and the kraut masher. He told me the kraut masher was a way to preserve cabbage in those days. He spoke with a quiet, sing-song voice, occasionally hugging himself in nervousness. He said the museum gave regular tours to schoolchildren. I would have paid to see him field their questions. He would have done so with the same thoughtful patience with which he threaded the gyroscope while I perused the giftshop.

Among the features of the museum was a working model of the original plane, a collection of autographed astronaut postage stamps, and a collection of wooden screwdrivers, hatchets, hammers, and crescent wrenches carved from wood salvaged from the old Wright house. After the house had a fire, the next-door neighbor stole whatever he pleased off the wreckage and carved the pieces into replicas of metal tools. Everybody needs a hobby I guess.

I got up to Chicago just as the sun was setting. Ulrich’s apartment was every bit as dirty as prior experience would lead one to expect. We ate at an Italian restaurant near his house, then had coffee, displaying pictures and swapping stories.

As I prepared to crash on my friend's futon for the night, it struck me that I looked like a complete wreck. Not only did I have the shaggiest, greasiest hair you could imagine, but my arms, nose, and cheeks were burned bright red from the Florida sun. The past year of motorcycle commuting and the unlimited supply of bakery food had combined to fill out a pair of love handles I never knew I had. And the left side of my ribcage sported a bright red rash that looked to my Midwestern eyes suspiciously like a Lyme's disease tick bite.

Appropriately I drove through foul weather as I returned to Wisconsin, storm clouds hanging low and pregnant in the sky in a way they never seemed to do in Texas. Madison seems about the same. There are a few new faces on State Street, but all the old ones are there, even the redhead who never leaves the coffee shops. I hadn't got more than two minutes away from the motorcycle before I ran into my old high school accomplice and Madison personality, Ben Manski. He gave me a flyer for the next anti-war rally.

It's beginning to feel like I never left. A frightening feeling considering all the trouble I went through to not be here.

Now I sit on my Dad's stoop waiting for him to return. He's promised me a mattress in the basement to sleep on until I figure out what to do. Hopefully he'll come back soon because my friends have already bought me tickets to the Phantom Menace premiere.

Now what?

# Afterward

Day to day, I look for direction. Over the past 25 years, I've completed nearly everything on the itinerary. I've done school and college, and now I've done the optional tour of America's gritty underbelly (although let's face it, it isn't the underbelly until you get hooked on something).

I've heard a little of events in Austin. From what I understand, Stephanie has given birth to a beautiful baby girl and quit her job at the bakery. The Texas Rawhide folded shortly after I left due to a lack of advertising revenues. Sam, my old roommate, has also taken up home brewing, and we have exchanged a few bottles through the mail. And a couple months after I got back, I talked to Stef and told her that I loved her and that I wouldn't be going back. Sometimes, late at night, sitting in my cramped apartment, I think of it as the worst decision of my life. My only comfort is that I didn't realize my love for her until she fell out of my reach. Maybe to someone else it would seem tragically romantic, a lost love left behind on the highway, but to me it is a constant weight.

On the day I returned to Madison, I saw The Phantom Menace with all my friends just as I planned, and it was the most perfect, most exciting cinema experience right up until the moment the movie started. Someday in the future, Lucasfilm will release an "audience cut" of Star Wars: Episode I that will completely exclude Jar Jar Binks.

It's winter now, the lakes are frozen, and my motorcycle sits in my father's driveway with a canvas tarp keeping off the snow. When the weather gets warm again, I'll take it out and give it a complete rundown, fixing, lubing, adjusting. Sometimes I

fantasize about going back to the road. I look down at my boots, and I have a clear memory of what they looked like, covered in road dust and with the left toe smudged by the gear lever. I know I will have to leave someday, and when I do, I'll have to find new places to go. I'll have to be crazier.

The Minnesota legal system, in fits and starts, finally convicted Michael C. Stewart of killing my cousin, Amanda Carlson-Bey. The jury gave him two consecutive terms of seven years, two months for the first degree manslaughter of Mandy and her unborn baby. For stabbing his own son, Jereau, the jury gave him life in prison. Michael C. Stewart will be a very old man before he is even given a parole hearing.