

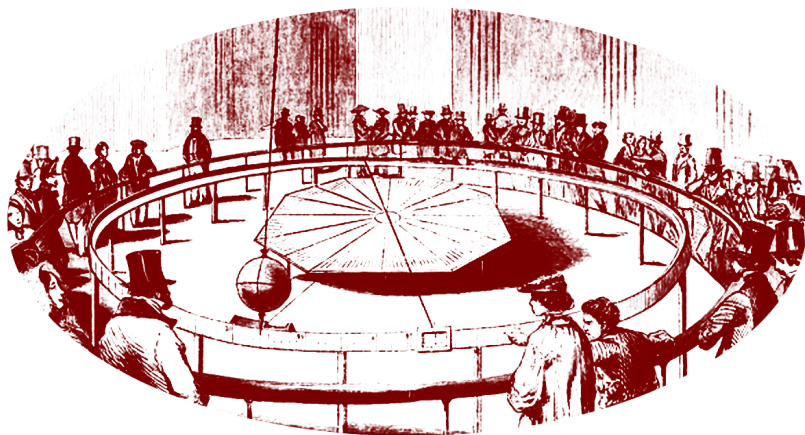
THE WAGON

ASTONISHING TALES OF THE EVERYDAY WORLD

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Containing works of fiction in serial form, the odd short story, and just about anything else we feel like throwing in. Eddie Mulnix: publisher and contributing author.

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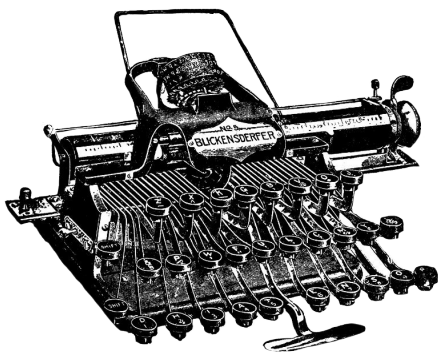
Highway 126, Part One

(from Smog City Magazine #2)

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A Wagons of Sin Press Publication

A Note to the Reader

Welcome to the first issue of *The Wagon*. I intend this to be the digital cousin of our flagship publication, *Smog City*—with stories reprinted from there to go along with new content. Since the format of *Smog City* doesn't lend itself to digital distribution, I figured this would be a better way to get my stuff out there into the hands of the “masses” (HA!). Eventually this may be a stand-alone publication— we'll see how it evolves.

Best,
Mulnix

“Highway 126”

The midnight-blue 1964 Chevy Impala pulled into the parking lot of the Oak Center Shopping Mall. The driver eased the car slowly over the yellow speed bumps—one hand curled around the steering wheel, one tattoo-covered arm draped over the driver side window. The other two passengers in the car glared out at the parking lot from behind wraparound shades. It was two days before Christmas, and Luis Huerta, otherwise known as “Sapo”—ex-con, drug kingpin of the Santa Clara Valley, and reviled member of the Mexican Mafia—needed to find a Tickle-Me-Elmo Doll.

Luis knew he didn’t belong at this mall, in this part of town—fucking *Thousand Oaks*. But it was his son’s birthday, and Luis had forgotten, and he made it a point never to forget things like that. It was part of the code he lived by, that even if the family at home came second to *la familia*, the one that had gotten him

through five years at Folsom, it was still more important than almost anything else. He thought of his father: orange electric cord tied around the wooden pockmarked puppet's arm, the gaunt face that was all eyes and mustache, the smell of heroin cooking up—a smell as familiar and haunting to Luis as the smell of his mother's cooking grease, a scent that came to him sometimes in his dreams. He could remember the day he'd found the old man—legs splayed out, eyes wide and glassy and surprised above the mustache, cartoons playing on the TV, works strewn out across the dirty green carpet like toys—and when Luis yelled at his son, made his son cry, he thought of the likelihood that he too would soon be dead, and what he felt was not guilt but the desire, somehow, to make things right in the ways he could. And so there were toys spread out all over the stairs and the living room floor, a kaleidoscopic day-glo plastic playland, a different living room for his son to grow up in, a living room without green carpets.

The other day that Tickle-Me-Elmo had come on the TV and his son's eyes had lit up. He hadn't forgotten that look. He knew at that moment that he'd get the boy that doll no matter what.

So here they were.

Luis got out of the car. Gabriel puffed on a Marlboro and posed. Luis loved Gabriel because he prized loyalty and fearlessness—and Gabriel had both. He was a funny motherfucker, too, always talking shit. And then there was Ruben, who was a different story altogether. Ruben was like a little brother to Luis and basically trustworthy, but the problem

was that he was unpredictable and strange. When he started twitching and moving his lips like he was talking to himself, Luis got annoyed and embarrassed and even a bit nervous. When you came right down to it Ruben was crazy, but not crazy in the way Luis needed him to be, not dangerous. He was straight-up fucking *weird*, and getting worse with time.

Luis closed the door to the car, locked it, and looked over at the other two.

~ *Incognito*.

~ *Orale*.

Gabriel finished his smoke and flicked it off into the darkness of the lot and the three of them walked towards the front entrance of the mall.

Incognito. That was the motto. Luis had served a total of eight years behind bars, and if you added up all the time he'd spent in the Lancaster Youth Authority before the age of eighteen you could go ahead and say he'd spent a full decade of his short life locked up. Ten years was enough. Too much. So now the idea was to move the cocaine and the heroin and the methamphetamines and the pills in a carefully circumscribed area: no contact with the outside world, no sudden moves. *Incognito*.

Which was why being in the mall made him uneasy. The three of them cleared a path through the Macy's crowd: Luis leading the way, every inch of his arms covered in tattoos of misshapen breasts and hypodermic needles and spiders and Mexican truisms in old English lettering—morgue blue, prison blue. Gabriel and Ruben hung back, Gabriel with his pants

sagging down below his knobby kneecaps, strutting, cracking his knuckles, nodding flirtatiously at the girls behind the makeup counter, Ruben with hands in pockets looking agitated. The three of them walked through Macy's and out into the scrum of the mall—the mothers and children, the teenagers, everyone happy and excited and white. All around were the bright lights and dull faux gold of Christmas. Luis watched the smiles freeze, the fear come into the eyes of the people around them. He liked their stares, relished their fear. He was everything they feared and more. They couldn't live in his world, couldn't even begin to *imagine* it.

They stopped on the edge of the food court. Luis looked around and up and said:

~ That's where we wanna go.

He pointed. High up above, on the uppermost tier of the mall, the letters stood out in glowing red: GAYBEE'S TOYS.

Gabriel shook his head.

~ We came all this way to go to a fuckin' *toy* store?

~ Chaco said he wants a Elmo doll.

~ We're here to get a doll? So you can get your kid a *doll*?

~ Shut the hell up and let's go.

They walked over to the escalator and got on. Luis looked back, knowing already what he would see. Ruben and escalators were a problem. Ruben stood there, timing his jump, his lips moving like he was saying a prayer. Luis wondered for the hundredth time why he kept watching out for the maniac. *You gotta cut this fool loose*, he told himself. *You gotta get rid of this*

motherfucker. Finally Ruben hopped on and grabbed the rail. Gabriel made a tsking sound and shook his head. Ruben looked at him and gave a sheepish half-grin and nodded as if to say *what's YOUR problem?*

The line at the toy store stretched from the register all the way outside the front entrance.

~ It's crowded here.

~ Don't care how crowded it is, man, I gotta get that doll. You don't like it, go sit in the car like a little *joto*.

~ I ain't no *joto*. Man I just don't wanna wait in no line.

~ Who said we waiting in line? Just chill out, motherfucker.

~ Shit, I'll chill out. I'll chill out over here and wait for you fools.

Ruben walked over to the railing outside of the toy store and leaned against it, looking down at the swarm of people far below. They were like maggots he'd once seen oozing out of a dead cat, spilling out of the hollows where its eyes had once been, out of its burst stomach. In the plaza four floors down there was a Carousel. It rotated slowly, almost in time with the nausea turning in his stomach, the top of the thing covered with awful Christmas lights and painted scenes of horses galloping in some faraway and long ago place as alien to Ruben as the surface of the moon. The mall made him nervous, made him want to count. He hated to count but he couldn't always help himself. He tapped the back of his right hand: ten taps, then five, then

two because two times five is ten. He tapped the back of his hand and watched the people swarming below. He hated to count but he couldn't always help himself, especially not in a place like this. *It's okay just this one time*, he told himself.

Luis ran his finger down the side of the box, reading, while Gabriel stood around. Gabriel always looked like he'd like to be someplace warmer—with his sleeves hanging low over his hands and his scrawny knees. He hated to wait around just about anywhere. Luis took forever reading the box—because slow and methodical was his nature, and because he wasn't gonna come all this way to buy the wrong goddamned doll.

~ Chaco says he wants the one you tickle. You know which one you tickle?

~ Huh? Fuck should I know?

~ Tickle it, man.

~ Tickle my nuts, bitch.

~ Ahh, come on, man. Tickle the doll.

Gabriel made a face and tapped the doll like it might bite him. The doll came alive, giggling and twitching in the box like a living thing. Then it screeched tinnily: *I LOOOOOOVE YOUUUUUUU!*

Gabriel laughed and covered his mouth with one hand.

~ What the fuck.

~ Yeah, this is the one. Gloria's gonna hate it, but that's just too bad. Maybe it'll keep her awake

when she's sitting on the couch watching her stories.

They walked over and stood there for a moment looking up and down the length of the line at all the people waiting to make their purchases. Then Luis walked to the front of the line and put the toys down on the counter in front of the cashier. She looked around uncertainly and took the box and rang it up and put it in a bag. Luis looked back at the people in the line.

~ I got a old war injury. Can't stand around too long. You gotta support your veterans, right?

No one said anything. One lady tittered nervously. Luis turned around and smiled at the cashier and leaned on the counter.

Nick Haraway was pissed off. Regina was pregnant and the baby was due in a couple of months and they weren't sure what the gender would be but as usual Regina was real impatient about everything so they'd driven in all the way from Encino and bought an assortment of stuff, hundreds of dollars worth of clothes in both pink and blue, toys both masculine and feminine, half the goddamned mall it felt like to Nick. He wouldn't be surprised if the edge of his credit card was glowing from all the swiping he'd done with it the past couple of hours. And with things at work uncertain, with the music industry in the shitter and him hanging on to his job by a thread, he felt like today was just the latest day in a long line of bad days, another day where people seemed like they were lining up to smear excrement on

his face. And Regina, she wanted him to *smile* through it all.

When the big Mexican and his buddy cut in the front of line he hit his bullshit limit. Regina didn't seem to notice or care. She was stoic in crowds of people, accepting of the long wait, the assholes. Accepting of everything. Hell, Nick was halfway sure she *enjoyed* situations like this, squeezing in with half the shits in the world to fight over a couple of Chinese-made hunks of garbage. And now standing in line behind all of them, everyone afraid because a guy has a couple of scary tattoos? Please. Who doesn't have tattoos? Nick even had one on his back, a big one of an eagle. He'd had his fair share of fistfights in college, he hadn't winced at all under the stinging stab of the tattoo needle, he'd come from a modest-to-bad neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley and worked his ass off and made something of himself and he liked most Mexicans, the good ones, the hard-working ones—but this guy wasn't one of the good ones. This guy was a thug, plunked down into the world Nick had made for himself. It was like Nick was back again at North Hollywood High, a scared skinny white boy in a long white t-shirt trying to affect a limp. Something in Nick was bitter and unsettled to think you couldn't ever really get away from them, even if you buried yourself in the safety and sanity of the toniest shopping mall in town...

When he realized he was himself again, a 30-year-old man with a mortgage and a family and a college degree and a tattoo of a screaming eagle on his back, he walked up to the front of the line without thinking twice about it, ready to throw down.

~ Excuse me.

Luis looked up at Nick.

~ Don't you think you should get in line with the rest of us?

Gabriel laughed and said to Luis without taking his eyes off of Nick:

~ *Chinga te*, holmes. You gotta get back in line.

Luis leaned toward the cashier.

~ You got a lot of faggots shop here?

She looked up and around the room at everyone but Luis, then back at the blue numbers on the cash register screen.

~ That's \$34.70, sir.

Nick stood at an angle to both of them, watching, thinking maybe he could take the skinny one, knowing he couldn't take both, not giving a shit either way. He had that feeling of no return that comes when anger goes too far, the excited terrified feeling you get in your gut when violence is about to happen, the closest thing to an orgasm you can have without doing the deed. It was time to deal with some stuff. Time to vent. Time to *go*.

~ I'm *talking* to you, motherfucker!

Nick stepped toward Luis and shoved him hard with both hands and was rearing back to take a punch when Ruben's fist came out of nowhere, a straight right shot that caught Nick on the side of his jaw and knocked him against the counter and to the floor.

They fell on him without hesitation, without mercy. People stood in line, frozen to the spot. It had all happened in the space

of two or three seconds. Regina Haraway had not even noticed her husband walk to the front of the line and for a moment, watching him being beaten, she couldn't understand what she was seeing. Then one of his ribs snapped under a hard kick and he screamed and it broke her paralysis and she started for the front of the store as they hit her husband in the face again and again.

~Oh my God what are you doing—

Blood ran down the side of Nick's face and spattered the front of the nice Izod shirt he'd gotten for Father's Day. There were white flecks of teeth on his lips and chin. He didn't think of himself as 'Nick', was no longer "Nick". He was an animal, a wounded animal being torn apart, his eyes stunned and glazed with shock. Hadn't he been standing there just a second ago with all the pieces of his world fitting together in a way that made sense? *I'm not dreaming, my God I'm not dreaming* he thought to himself as Luis picked him up from behind, hefting him up by his shoulders.

~Get his fuckin' feet—

Gabriel wrapped his skinny arms around Nick and they lifted him up and as they carried him out through the front entrance he realized what was happening and his wife realized what was happening and everyone realized what was happening and that's when the screams started, Nick's voice the loudest of them, pleading.

~*No no no no no no no no*

They stutter-stepped with him through the swarm of

pedestrians, Abercrombie and Macy's bags flying, boxes of cologne and candies and men's ties and countless other sundry items spraying out over the floor, an old woman crying out as she fell hard to the floor and broke her arm in three places.

Luis and Gabriel carried Nick toward the railing and paused. He tried to squirm out of their grasp, tried to kick his legs free, and there was a moment, just a moment, when the whole thing could have been left as it was, a long moment when they could have left Nick Haraway with his beating and run out of the place. Then Ruben ran over and grabbed one of Nick's thighs and nodded towards the railing and something about the way he did it, the urgency, the craziness in his eyes, decided the thing. They hefted Nick up over the rail like a sack of garbage and let him drop.

His body hung in space, hung there in the mellow golden wash of the holiday lights, tumbling end over end in a way that was slow and dreamlike and seemed to last a very long time. Then his head caught the railing two stories down and sent him spinning and pirouetting wildly all the way to the bottom, arms swiveling and reaching for purchase, something to grab on to, but there was nothing and nothing and nothing.

He crashed through the wooden roof of the carousel, his spine snapping over an elaborately carved wooden horse with a sound like a cue-ball hit dead center. He lay over the animals of the carousel like a broken marionette, arms and legs twitching, eyes staring up through the torn hole of the carousel's wooden roof, the screams and cries of the children all around him dying

out to a faint and insistent roar. His eyes stared sightlessly up and up at the cold emerald-green glass of the mall ceiling and the plastic plants and all the wan faces of the people looking down at him. And at 3:54 P.M., not even five minutes after he'd been standing at the back of the line, Nick Haraway was dead.

Sheriff Joe Ganley drove the patrol cycle up Highway 126, slowed, and pulled right at the gap in barbed wire that marked the beginning of the Dolan grove. He drove up the road, a long dusty lane flanked and shaded by rows of orange trees. At the end of the road the old yellow farmhouse peeked out from behind a copse of ancient oaks like an old woman grown wary of the world. It was a near-perfect day, the hazy purple-brown mountains just visible over the tops of the trees. As a child Ganley thought of the mountains as solemn sentinels, men covered in rocks and scrub brush that could not speak but watched over him. Now they were just mountains, and his mind wasn't taken with childish fancies. He was focused: on the next shot of cocaine, and on how much he hated the Dolan brothers—especially Billy Dolan.

Ganley had lived in the valley all 38 years of his life, and the Dolans had been a thorn in his side since the ninth grade. They'd all gone to Santa Paula High School in the late 1980s.

Back then Joe Ganley was a slack-jawed skinny geek who was bullied by everyone, especially his father, who sat him down in the bathroom one day and shaved his head and eyebrows for no apparent reason at all. Like most kids who grew up around in the Santa Clara Valley, Ganley was raised on a farm, and when he worked that summer baling hay the sweat ran down his fuzzy bald head and into his eyes and stung like a bastard. He'd reached up to rub at his eyes and felt the slick skin where his eyebrows used to be and it was a constant rejoinder that couldn't be argued with: he was nothing, a beast of burden at his father's mercy. When he thought of his youth he remembered only the farm and sweat and blurry years of unalloyed misery, of humiliation, of anger.

And then there were the Dolan brothers. In high school they had been a real big deal. The younger brother was Shane, a redheaded little loudmouth with big chipped teeth and a nasty attitude. The older brother was Billy: a smooth, affable, good-looking ladies man and well-known weed dealer. Joe watched Billy and envied Billy and the fact that Billy never knew who he was made Joe unaccountably miserable.

One day in gym class he tried to strike up a conversation with Billy and Billy didn't say anything at first, just kept on with his stretching exercises. Then he said without looking up: "Man, what the fuck happened to your *eyebrows*?" Joe sat staring at the little cracks in the asphalt, head numb with humiliation.

For whatever reason, with all that had happened to him in his life, Ganley remembered that day and that comment. It ate

at him every day for the next twenty years.

Not long after he graduated from high school Ganley had one last argument with his father and took one last beating. The next morning he packed up his stuff and left. He'd wanted to fight back but he couldn't, not yet. He wasn't yet ready.

He got a job at a gas station and rented a storage unit in a run-down part of Santa Paula. You weren't supposed to live in the storage units but he made friends with the night watchman and got the old guy drunk every once in awhile and he was left alone. The room wasn't much—a light, a mattress, a cracked red radio that only received AM stations, a hotplate. And, in one corner of the room, weightlifting equipment he'd picked up at a garage sale for twenty bucks.

He worked out two, sometimes three hours a day. He ate protein bars and thousands of hard boiled eggs. His focus was intense, maniacal. At night he lay on the mattress and listened to news radio as he seethed with hatred and sadness. He was motivated by...what? He didn't know. It was a feeling that followed him around like his ass. He was vastly and incurably depressed.

People started to notice all the muscle he was putting on. A couple of years after he left home he decided it was time to go back. When he saw his father again he shook his hand and squeezed it so hard he could see tears well up in the old man's frightened little weasel eyes. The thought that he'd come from this man's sack made him sick. He left and never went back.

After a couple of years he started working out at a gymrat

joint in Ventura where a lot of cops went to pump iron. He got to know a couple of the guys and he found many elements of their job intriguing: autonomy, power, and a uniform that looked great on a well-muscled body. Ganley took the tests, worked his ass off, kept lifting. And then he was a cop. Things were good, as good as they'd ever been.

Still, he could not escape the presence of the Dolans. After high school Shane Dolan carried on as a small-time drug dealer, which was just fine by Ganley. The kid had gone from high school badass to a desperate looking doe-eyed loser who scrounged up a living selling weed. All right.

But then there was Billy.

He went to Hollywood and started calling himself "Blake Williams" and before you knew it he was on a soap opera program called *All Tomorrow's Parties*. It was the talk of the town, and even when Ganley had done all he could to escape the way he'd felt about himself in high school, had encased himself in layers of sinew and muscle, had become a known and feared lawman, talk about Billy Dolan and how great Billy was followed Ganley around like the vague smell of dogshit on a shoe.

He started recording *All Tomorrow's Parties* regularly, feelings of loathing and longing gnashing in his guts when he watched, and every once in awhile when the wife and kids were gone he'd close the blinds and freeze-frame a shot of Billy and masturbate fiercely. It was an act full of anger and self-hatred, and often his penis would be sore for a day or two afterwards, a constant and bothersome reminder of his endless vanquishment

at the hands of someone who didn't even know he existed.

Ten years passed. Ganley watched Billy Dolan closely, studied the television screen for signs of incipient disintegration, the onset of middle age. Despite his hatred, Ganley actually got into the show for awhile, got caught up in the story. He was even a little disappointed when Billy finally got the boot. Still, he lit up a cigar in celebration the day “Blake Williams” disappeared from daytime television forever.

Meanwhile, Ganley had come to find himself a business associate of Shane Dolan. When he thought back to how it happened memory telescoped behind him and there were empty places and a drop-off where part of him left and never returned.

That was when the drugs took over.

It started with the pills—they helped him work, and his reasoning was: how can something that helps you do a better job be a bad thing?— but then there was that fateful day when he popped a guy driving 100 MPH out on the highway, a young kid who looked like a zit-covered Tom Petty. Ganley did a search of the vehicle and found a baggie of white powder underneath the driver's seat and when he smiled and held it up in the air Tom Petty started babbling and crying and Ganley put the baggie in his pocket and told the kid to shut the fuck up and get lost. Tom Petty had looked back at him so stunned he couldn't speak, pockmarked cheeks glistening with tears, and then driven away doing about 30 MPH.

Ganley got back in the police car on the side of Highway 126 and sat there for awhile trying not to think. Then he poured

a sloppy line on the back of the clipboard he used to write up tickets. He rolled up a twenty and snorted up the line and his head blew up and that was *it*, the stuff had its hooks in him forever.

He cultivated connections. He knew who ran cocaine in the Santa Clara Valley; everyone did. When he started doing little side jobs for Luis Huerta, he thought at first that it was to support his habit, to keep him well-stocked with the good stuff. He soon realized that he simply enjoyed breaking the law, the duplicity of living in both worlds, the freedom of violence in clearing out problems for Huerta, in keeping all of the assholes who worked for Huerta in line—one of whom, it turned out, was Shane Dolan.

And then, would you believe? Billy Dolan came back to the valley, back into the fold, weathered and beaten by the excesses of Hollywood, his face like an old wallet.

Cocaine. It got him too, so now at long last Ganley felt them to be on an even playing field.

And now, every chance he got, he fucked with Billy Dolan.

He smiled a bit, then thought about the matter at hand. The smile disappeared.

Huerta had done something unbelievably stupid. In a fucking *mall*? Go figure that one out. Just like a Mexican to fuck everything up by losing his temper over something petty. Animals, all of them.

All Ganley wanted to do was get Huerta his money and get him the hell out of the valley before things went from bad to

worse.

And he thought for the thousandth time that morning about the next shot of cocaine—the euphoric flash, the escape.

Ganley pulled the motorcycle up to the farmhouse. The big German Shepherd ran back and forth behind the chain link fence, baying. Ganley walked up to the fence and patted the .45 Taurus on his hip and winked at the dog.

~You know that old saying, pup. Is this your day, boy? Huh? Is it?

The dog stopped barking and sat on his haunches and looked quizzically at Ganley. As Ganley walked up to the front gate Billy Dolan appeared in the doorway of the house. Ganley stood with his arms spread out over the top of the chain link fence. The shepherd stuck its snout through one of the diamond-shaped holes in the fence and sniffed at his crotch.

~Sheriff.

He was still in okay shape—tall, rangy looking, with that nice actor's tan and perfect teeth and longish hair, the whole impression offset by the way his eyebrows came together to give him a rather stunned look. Ganley had to admit, though, the son of a bitch looked pretty good.

~I guess you know why I'm here.

~ You usually only come out here for one thing: Harassment.

~How long you been back in the valley now, Billy?

~I don't know. Maybe two, three years.

~And you've pretty much been able to run things the way

you want. Haven't you.

~Sure.

~I mean, no INS problems with your Mexicans. You got runners coming in and out of this house day and night and no one ever says anything about it, isn't that right?

~ That's part of the deal. I pay for that.

~*You* may have paid someone, but you haven't paid me *shit*, and don't you insinuate that. Ever.

Billy said nothing. He drank his coffee and the two men looked at each other. Then Billy looked away from the Sheriff. He looked at the dog and then out over the rows of orange trees and smiled weakly.

~I don't pay you.

~Say again?

~I. Don't. Pay you.

~ Good. Now let me ask you a question, 'cause I've always wondered this.

~ Okay.

~ You seemed to be doing pretty well out there in Hollywood. Why come back here? It's not the kind of place you come back to if you can help it.

~You know why. I wasn't much of a success in show business. I had some bit parts and then I started to get older. They don't wanna know you when you get older.

~ Built up a nice little business to fall back on, though. Smart.

~Yeah, smart.

~It's amazing the way you brought this place back. Your dad really let the place go into the shitter. Not his fault, I know. Cancer's no fun, my own father died of it. Ate him up from the inside out. Hard for a guy to run an operation when he's shooting blood out of both ends.

~ Yeah.

~It's a different life out here, isn't it? I'll bet you almost forgot.

~ What did you want to talk about?

~ Going from that fast lifestyle to this. Must be rough. Real rough. You miss the pussy, don't you?

~I'm sorry?

~ The pussy. You musta been pulling down some unbelievable numbers, huh?

~ I did okay.

~ I'm assuming, you know, you're into that. Pussy, I mean. It's like this joke a guy at the station told me, you wanna hear it?

~Okay.

~You got three kinds of people in Hollywood: gay, straight, and actor.

Ganley laughed politely.

~Good, right?

~That's a good one all right. Not necessarily true, but...

~ Now listen, Billy. All joking aside. You and me work with the same people. You got shit on me and I got shit on you. Still, I know more. Remember the way your old man tried to squeeze everyone out back in the big freeze of 1987? You forget that? I

haven't.

~ What's that got to do with you?

~ It doesn't have much to do with me at all. It's just that I know who you are, where you come from. I know what your family's all about and what they've *been* all about. You can take that as personally as you want to.

~ I know you don't like me. Why don't we keep this to business?

~ Our friend got in a little trouble. Maybe you heard.

~ Yeah, I heard.

~ Said friend is collecting on debts, right? You're in about 40K deep with said friend, and said friend needs the money *yesterday*.

~ I can't come up with that kind of money. I've got plenty of product, but I'm having trouble moving it. Luis can't expect me to pull that kind of cash out of my ass. You're being totally unrealistic.

Sheriff Ganley turned with hands on hips and looked around the property, at the orange trees that came right up to the edge of the front yard, branches heavy with fruit. He walked to the tree closest to him and picked an orange off of one of the branches and held it in his hand. He smelled the rind and peeled the fruit and threw the rinds over the fence at the feet of the German Shepherd. The dog watched Ganley's hands and what he was doing with his hands. Then Ganley began to eat the orange and the dog watched him do that, too.

~ You can't come up with the money, fine. Then we'll come

tonight and pick up the shit.

~All of it?

~ All of it.

Billy inhaled and exhaled slowly, looking out over the trees, holding his now-cold cup of coffee. In that moment he looked old, deflated, a man with nothing left inside.

~You're leaving us with nothing. I invested in that stuff. Put up my own money. You don't have the right to just come in here and take it away from me.

~The *right*? Do you know whose valley this is, shitdick?

Ganley unclasped his holster and pulled out the Taurus and held it up. Billy almost fell on his ass, mouth opening and closing stupidly. Ganley laughed.

~I could shoot you right now.

His voice was soft, like a lover's voice.

~I could shoot off a hand—

He aimed to the left.

~I could shoot off a kneecap—

He aimed lower.

~Or I could be a real bastard and shoot off your *cock*. Wouldn't that be awful? What would life be without your *cock*?

~Ganley, don't fuck around—

Ganley swung the pistol downward and shot the German Shepherd. The impact of the bullet sent the dog spinning, its haunches a black mash of blood and fur and dirt. The dog writhed and convulsed and yelped, jaws snapping at the wound, eyes crazed. Billy stood in place, unable to move, eyes bulging,

lips moving noiselessly. *That's shock*, Ganley thought. *That's the name of THAT fuckin' tune.*

Ganley picked up the half-eaten orange and threw it at Billy. The orange bounced off of his chest, leaving a big wet spot in the middle of his t-shirt. Billy looked over at him. Ganley smiled and spoke up so Billy could hear him over the dog's screams.

~Maybe you oughta focus more on farming and less on dealing. Seeds like fuckin' boulders in that orange. Eight o'clock, shitdick. And don't try to shortchange us, either.

Ganley got on the motorcycle and started it up and pulled slowly out of the yard out past the rows of orange trees on to Highway 126. Billy watched the motorcycle as it rumbled slowly away and then picked up speed, a gleaming speck on the straight shot towards Santa Paula.

Billy stood there staring at nothing for a moment and then it was as if he'd come up from deep water, his breath coming out in huge ripping gasps, and he fell to his knees and got up and stumbled over to where the dog lie frothing and yelping and dying in the pleasant cool air of the day.

The air was hot and stagnant in the market and a fly kept lighting onto Freddie's forearm. He felt like an old piece of furniture. He liked working in the market, though, because it was his. He *liked* the feeling of being a piece of furniture in the market. He liked the low murmur of the cooler where he kept the soft drinks and beer and water; he liked the old floor with the black-speckled tiles that could always use a good cleaning.

The place had a mildly fetid smell that hung hazily in the air, and he liked that too. He even liked the people in the town. The Mexicans he knew all worked picking oranges and most of them left when the season was over and when they came around the next year he was very polite to them even though he didn't have to be. He had been the supervisor of the Dolan grove for decades and many of them had worked under him. He was polite to everyone, though; he liked to think of himself as well-liked, a man of the people, but a businessman through and through.

He awoke to the familiar sound of the bell on the door as it swung shut hard against the frame. He decided for the thousandth time that he would get it fixed the next weekend. He was groggy from his nap and the low droning sound of the TV and the fly kept hovering down in the hairs on his forearm and he was looking for the flyswatter when Debbie Ryan walked up to the counter. She was thin and had bad hair and bad skin but her breasts were the best breasts in Piru. It was possible they were the best breasts in the entirety of the Santa Clara valley—things of beauty for men old and young alike. That was the way Freddie felt about them, anyway. Even if she *was* Shane's girlfriend.

He yawned and scratched his belly. Judge Judy was doing her thing on an old blue-screened portable television. Debbie threw her purse on the counter and Freddie reached up for her daily pack of Winstons. She was even thinner than usual. He sometimes noticed her looking at herself in the plate glass window in front of the market, staring unhappily at the way her ribs poked through the skin, at the marks on her face. She didn't

think it was obvious she was on the shit, but it was. And not just to Freddie, either. Well, nothing wrong with a skinny girl, especially with breasts like that. But the face. The face showed the habit. And she was so young, maybe a little older than Shane, but not by much.

Freddie stared at the back of the Winston pack as if there were something there for him to read besides boasts of full flavor and less tar. He always had trouble starting conversations.

~I didn't come here for cigarettes, Freddie. I need your help.

~ With what?

~It's Shane. He's sick. He told me if he got sick to come get you. So here I am.

~ How bad is he?

~Bad. Bad like unconscious bad.

He looked her up and down, a perfunctory move, the last remnant of habit. He hadn't had a hard-on in five years. He sat down on the stool and watched Judge Judy some more. *Her* face wouldn't do it, that was for sure. He sat there and thought about Shane.

~It's been almost a year since the last time. A whole year.

~You've gotta come help him. He looks like he's going to die.

~Yeah, I know. I know all about it.

Freddie ran his hand over his face with his eyes closed and stood there for a minute, gathering himself. He snapped off the TV set, pulled his keys out of a drawer, flipped the sign in the front window from "open" to "closed", and they walked out into the bright afternoon light.

They drove up the street in Freddie's Chevy Silverado, a silver monstrosity with running boards along the sides and magenta pinstripes and bumper stickers that read BROWN. PROUD. VETERAN, OUT OF TOUCH BY CHOICE, and I SERVED MY TIME IN HELL: VIETNAM. He tooted the truck up Center Street past all the decrepit one-story bungalows with peeling paint and burnt-out lawns and small brown children screeching and playing in sprinklers, unaware of what it really meant to be poor because they were not truly poor, not really. Things were different now. Now if there was a freeze and the oranges died on the trees a pall of mild dread settled over the town, but it was not like it had once been, it was not like the old times when Freddie had gone many nights without dinner, those fearful nights in the dim and drafty shack where he grew up, where they'd slept four to a room under ragged blankets... and many nights there were only oranges and water for dinner, water that tasted faintly of the loamy soil from which the oranges had sprung. The goddamned *oranges*. No, it wasn't like that anymore. Not even for Mexicans. The government wouldn't let the poor starve, which was a good thing. He thought often about those days of his youth when all rooms seemed lit by candles and the night breeze carried the bitter smell of orange rinds...

~ So what's wrong with him?

Freddie looked over at her.

~Whatsat?

~With Shane.

~ He's sick, what else you need to know? He's got a illness.

~ You're just like him about it. Vague. What's the big secret?

Freddie reached in his breast pocket for his cigarettes, offered Debbie one. She took one without comment and waited for the lighter. They lit up and sat in the cab driving along the road as it crept up into the canyons at the foot of the sandstone colored hills.

~ We don't get outsiders involved under any circumstances. I don't have to tell you why, do I?

~ Because of the business.

~I mean the business. But I also mean something else. You know how long I've known Shane?

~A long time.

~That's right. Since he was a little baby. Me and his daddy were tight.

~You were in Vietnam together. He told me.

~And I ran his farm for him. Not like he was my boss, even though he was. But he trusted me with things you wouldn't trust *nobody* with but your best friend. And that includes his sons.

~ Shane's not okay. He's not even close to okay. If he was your son, you would know that.

~ What I do is run the family business, period. I watch out for the boys, but when it comes down to it, the thing between us is not fathers and sons, okay? It's more like Batman.

~I'm sorry?

~Batman. You seen the Batman movie?

~Yeah.

~ I'm like his butler. Alfred. Batman goes out in his dumbass tights and risks his life every night and when he comes home Alfred's there holding a napkin and a cocktail for him. He's there to get Batman's back and keep his secrets, and that's *all* he's there for.

~ You're Alfred?

~ In a way, yeah. A Mexican Alfred. *Alfredo*.

Debbie laughed softly.

~ They definitely have one thing in common. Neither one of them has a job. I don't think Batman ever sold speed out of the back of a Honda Civic, though.

~ If you love him you'll trust me. I know what's best for him, okay?

~ So you say.

~Men and women always think about these things differently. We may be using the same term, but we're having two different conversations.

~ I do love him. I don't know why sometimes.

~Love ain't gonna cure what Shane's got. What he needs is time. We'll get him out to the old place and we'll give him time to get better.

The road wound up and up. The dry side of Santa Felicia Dam was high above, a blank white concrete edifice that absorbed the sunlight during the day and radiated heat throughout the night into the dead brown brush below. Freddie pulled right onto a wide dirt road that led down into the valley a half-mile east

of the dam. Shane's ramshackle trailer sat at the bottom of the road, down there in the brush and the gnarled trees and the skeletal remains of some long-dead and unidentifiable crop. Freddie parked the truck and got out of the cab and walked up to the front door and knocked and looked back to see Debbie standing, smoking, with her elbow in her hand.

~I don't like to see him this way. It makes me nervous.

~I don't think what he's got is catching, if that's what you're afraid of.

Freddie knocked again.

~Shane? You in there?

Of course he's in there, stupid.

He opened the door and stepped inside. The living room was dark and smelled of old tobacco and dirty dishes and musty couch cushions. Freddie stood there and looked around at the magazines and dirty paper plates, the ashtrays.

~You're a woman. Can't you clean up this place?

~He's in the back bedroom. On the bed.

The living room abutted a small kitchen with dirty yellow tile on the floor and a green Formica table and a hallway that led back into the gloom. Freddie walked back there. It was hot and dusty and stale-smelling in the hallway. He sneezed and watched dust motes scatter in the meager light from the small hallway window. The door to the back room was ajar. He could hear the drowsy buzz of a floor fan.

He walked into the room.

There was a mattress on the floor. Beer cans everywhere.

Bedding bunched up at the bottom of the bed where Shane had kicked it off. He lay there in his underwear, skin fishbelly pale. He was *out*. Freddie felt a sadness, an aching affection for the kid. He looked a lot like his dad—the coarse features, the too-round nose, the kinky reddish hair that sat on the scalp, the stained and chipped teeth. He still looked like a little kid, the little kid that had gone on fishing trips with them up at the lake.

Before things got bad.

He touched the kid's shoulder. He was cold, clammy. Little beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and on his pale torso.

~Shane. Can you stand up?

Shane's eyelids fluttered; his lips moved. He looked to be in the throes of a particularly awful dream. Then he sneezed, four quick explosions, tendrils of snot erupting from his nose like Silly String. He moaned. His head lolled from side to side.

~We gotta get you outta here, kid. I'm gonna lift you up, but you've got to help me.

Shane's eyes opened a little and then closed again. Freddie leaned forward and put his arm underneath Shane and got him up into a sitting position. The kid was about as skinny as Freddie had ever seen him. It was about as bad as it had ever been.

Freddie slapped him a couple of times on the cheek.

~Hey, you're gonna have to help me out here. You gotta help me out, Shane.

The eyelids fluttered again.

~Uncle Freddie, it's bad, it's real bad...

~I know it is. That's why I'm gonna get you out of here. We're

going out to the grove.

~I'm sorry, I didn't know it would be like this, it just jumped on top of me.

~ I know. It's a good thing your girlfriend came out to get me, that's all I can say. Now listen. You gotta try to stand up. I'm gonna walk you out of here and I'm gonna put you in the truck. Okay?

~You don't know how bad this feels.

~ I'm gonna lift you up and get you out of here and we're gonna go right to the house.

They'd made calls and packed up their guns and a few other things for the road and tried to tie up loose ends as quickly as possible before leaving. Luis had hugged his son and knew it was probably for the last time. He didn't want to think about that anymore. Now as the three of them drove in silence up Highway 126 he sifted through memory for something else to think about. When they passed the motel where the thing with Chuy Hernandez had happened ten years earlier, he thought back and marvelled at how such a terrible thing could seem like nothing now.

Chuy Hernandez: Luis didn't like him to begin with—he was loud and stupid, with a shiny bald head and a bad mustache stiff with wax, everything about him getting on Luis' nerves. He wouldn't even have made Chuy a runner, but Chuy was his wife's

cousin, and Chuy needed help supporting three different kids and three different mothers...so there you go.

When Luis found out Chuy was cutting his shit, that he in fact had a nice side business selling the cut-rate coke to white boys and Armenians in the Valley, it gave Luis the excuse to do what he'd wanted to do for some time: teach Chuy a lesson.

Chuy was always on guard, always carried a gun, so Luis had to get inventive, and decided to use a white girl named Jennica to set him up. Her parents were dope fiends who had given her to Luis when they couldn't come up with money owed. She was thirteen then. He used her for awhile, treated her like a science project, sticking things into her—beer bottles, hypodermic needles, his dick. By sixteen she was a full-blown addict who would kill a baby for a taste. Luis liked to lay in bed with her and hold up a baggie of heroin and watch her eyes follow it, deadened eyes beneath eyebrows plucked down to nothing and repainted, eyes with faint flashes of light still flickering inside—not life, really, but what remained of it: the part that wanted to get high.

He promised her a generous supply if she'd help set Chuy up, so one night at a party a few days before Christmas there she was: sticking her tongue in Chuy's mouth; driving with him twenty miles out of Santa Paula to a motel on Highway 126; sticking her hand down Chuy's pants and whispering dirty fucktalk in his ear; running her hands over his chest and belly and cock as he fumbled the key into the lock of the motel room door.

Ten years ago, and Luis could still remember the way Chuy's face looked when he saw Luis and Ruben and Gabriel there in

the dark of the room holding tire irons and chains and sawed-off baseball bats. Luis remembered how he'd run out of the room, how they'd caught him in the parking lot, how he'd reached for the gun and had his forearm shattered by a tire iron, how they'd beat him nearly to death under the cold blue arc-lights.

Afterwards they went back to the party and when Jennica asked him for the dope he laughed and told her to fuck off. The way she looked at him had been strange, and she'd gone out into the night, and he wondered right away if she was going to the police. He came close to stopping her, but then shrugged and decided to let the cards fall where they would.

And then something crazy happened.

What happened was that Jennica was murdered, and not just Jennica: fourteen other people in the Santa Clara valley were also killed that night, and not just killed, but so savagely torn apart that a much younger Joe Ganley never forgot what he saw when he responded to the first frantic phone call. He found Jennica: parts of her strewn in the culvert along the road, entrails tangled up in the dead brush, torn limbs littering the side of the highway like mannequin parts.

A few weeks into the media frenzy that followed, Luis was brought in as a person of interest. He was questioned. His alibi was solid: a couple dozen people had seen him at the party, had seen Jennica leave.

Detectives trying to make sense of the murders eventually, and reluctantly, let him go, and no suspect was ever named in what became known as the Lake Piru Killings.

As for Chuy? He lived, though there were scar-covered places on his head where the hair wouldn't grow back, and though he would spend the rest of his life as a "slow" adult. Still, brain damaged or not, he knew enough to keep his mouth shut about who beat him, and he went on with his life. He ended up working as janitor at a local elementary school, last Luis heard.

Sometimes you got lucky. One person dead, the other alive. If God had decided to flip-flop the fates of those two he'd be in prison right now; but no.

Luis was in the unlikely position of having been bailed out by a mass-murderer's one-night rampage.

As he tooted the Impala down Highway 126 toward Piru, almost ten years to the day after what happened at the motel, Luis was pretty sure that if he'd ever had any luck at all it must have all been used up on that one strange night.

Continued next issue



“Techoca Mountain”

I sat there at the diner looking out the window at the mountain, pretending to the waitress that I didn't know its name, but I did—I just wanted to hear *her* say it. But then she looked at me funny and walked away and picked up the club sandwich the cook had just set up on the hot line. The man sitting next to me at the counter stared at her rear end. All of this went on as we sat there in the mountain's shadows, in the ceaseless hum, everyone talking over that hum like it wasn't even *there*.

A kind of blasphemy.

I looked back out the window at the strangeness and wonder of it. Sat there and finished my coffee and left.

Out in the parking lot I took out a joint and was about halfway through it when Bill Hendrickson drove up in his golf cart.

“Hey Gus, what is that I smell?”

“It is what it is,” I said.

“Marijuana, it is. Pass it.”

I handed it to him. He looked half-guiltily around and then took a big drag. We sat there in the parking lot and got high.

“Security,” I said. “What kind of security guard are you, exactly? Getting high when you’re supposed to be guarding the mountain.”

“I’m not a security guard, Gus. I’ve told you that a million times. I’m a landscaper.”

He shot a thumb at the back of the golf cart. He was right: two rakes and a shovel and a bag of potting soil. I’d seen it and I hadn’t seen it. Known it and hadn’t known it. I began to feel a bit strange, and it wasn’t just the weed.

“The energy is high today,” I muttered. “Can you sense it, Bill? Can you *feel* it?”

Bill looked at me as he held in the smoke, then let out a blue gust and coughed and looked around the parking lot.

“Well,” he said, “I gotta go. I’ll see you around, Gus.”

“Later.”

I got out of the golf cart and watched him drive away. The sun was cresting, was about to disappear behind the mountain. I stood there and listened. You could hear the hum sometimes and sometimes you couldn’t. Lately you could hear it all the time, though. Things were picking up.

I took the blue snot-hardened handkerchief from my back pocket and covered my mouth with it. I was having a hard problem breathing. Like breathing in smoke, but I wasn’t. The cloth crackled against my parched lips, like the feel of soft sheets on

feverish skin.

The mountain was powerful...too powerful...it was in me, around me, in everything...

Time has come, I said to myself.

Walking down the street I was the only person without a car. A bum. The tourists gawked at me as they cruised by on the street that led to Fat Creek. That was the big tourist attraction. They were fools, all of them. On the entire planet there are surely only one or two places like Techoca Mountain. I could sense it behind me as I walked up the street, could feel it watching me. It knew that I knew. I was afraid of the mountain, sure. No one wondered how or why the scrubbrush on it pointed the way it did—west instead of east, sideways instead of straight up. No one could explain that away, could they? In fact, they had simply come to accept it. Botanists shrugged their shoulders and mumbled something about the soil. Fools.

The Tongva Indians, who named the mountain, could have told them the truth.

I arrived at Herb's Bar and opened the front door. It's a trendy place, a dull place. Sometimes at night there are good looking college girls with their breasts jutting from silly little sports jerseys. In the daytime, though, it's a dead scene—with golf on the big flatscreen over the bar and a jukebox that's either blaring or silent.

I sat down at the bar and Josh, the bartender, walked over.

He's the kind of guy that always has a superior little smirk on his face. I could feel him looking at my dirty dreadlocks, my beard, my missing teeth. He sees the town bum. That's all he knows. I gave him my trademark reckless grin and nodded amiably.

"How about a beer, Josh?"

"And what fine product are we having today?"

"Ramrod Brown, my friend."

"You got money?"

I reached into my pocket and found six grubby, crumpled little bills.

"How much is a schooner?"

"Happy Hour. Three bucks."

"Pour it."

He poured the beer and sat it in front of me and I looked at the little bubbles, the creaminess of the head. My stomach started to growl.

"I'm going mountain climbing today," I said. "I need fuel. How much is the burger and fries?"

"Six bucks."

"You got anything for *three* bucks?"

"Hummus platter. That's it."

"No thanks."

He shrugged and walked over to the end of the bar.

I sipped the Ramrod Brown Ale and felt it course down into the emptiness of my stomach. Breakfast was coffee and weed. This was lunch. And what would I do for dinner?

"Techoca," I said, "have I angered thee?"

Josh looked over from the end of the bar.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Say, have you ever climbed the mountain?”

“Here we go again...which mountain would that be, Gus?”

“The hell you say. There is only one Mountain here, my friend. Only one that matters.”

He walked over. Dead eyes, that smug look like he'd been kicking ass his whole life and didn't expect the ass-kicking streak to end any time soon. My stomach did a slow turn.

“You come in here every day and sit here and talk about this mountain and you know what? I don't know what you're talking about, nobody knows what you're talking about. If you wanna sit there and sip your beer, fine, but I don't wanna hear anymore of your *shit*— all right?”

I sipped the beer and sat there with a beer foam mustache, waiting. He wanted me to do something, say something, so he could hit me. When you're a bum you're either a ghost or a target.

His eyes were cool, brown, dead, patient.

“You shouldn't talk about Techoca that way,” I whispered. I downed the last of the ale and walked out.

Most of the locals live in little bungalows along the bottom of the foothills. I never wonder about the people inside or what it is they do. They are as invisible to me as I am to them. But high up at the crest of one street there's an abandoned house

that's old and creaky and unreal looking, like something out of an old Disney cartoon, sitting there under the moonlight in all the hues of blue and purple. In the backyard of the place there's a weed-covered hill and an old California live oak with a tire stuck to a rope and a perfect view of Techoca. That's where I meditate.

I let my eyes go sort of half-lidded and felt my astral self reach out toward the spirits of the mountain. I hadn't eaten in three days. Coffee and marijuana and beer and now my money was all gone. Techoca, I shall starve if you desire. But if you would grant me food...money...shelter...how grateful I would be!

I meditated for four hours. I fell into the mountain's hum, became one with it. Then suddenly my eyes snapped open, my spine straightened, my penis hardened and shot juice into my dirty jeans, my asshole clenched and unclenched of its own accord, my soul screamed: SAMADHI! SAMADHI! SAMAD—

One in the morning and the town was quiet, just the occasional dog barking and a gentle breeze coming off the foothills. I looked for a house that seemed empty and when I found one I walked around the side and into the backyard. The lock on the shed wasn't much; I had it open in about three minutes. Inside I found what I needed: a wheelbarrow. Some rope.

And an axe.

I waited in the alley next to the little market across from the bar, watching. It was a slow night. A few twenty-something hipsters with expensive clothes and tiny rear ends milled around out front, smoking and laughing.

I waited in the shadows, feet growing numb. I didn't care. The post-meditation glow was in me, a feeling of complete serenity. Techoca had revealed in one shining flash what I must do.

And then there he was, locking up the bar. A girl was with him. I hadn't foreseen that, but no matter: I waited to see what would happen next.

I watched them as they embraced, kissed. The girl was young, very young, her legs long and brown. I'd transmuted desire years before, those energies kindling for the spiritual bonfire within. I looked at the girl like I'd look at a piece of furniture. I was beyond all desires of the flesh.

Josh kissed her. She leaned up against him. The moment went on and on. Finally she walked away from him and to the parking lot. He had his hands in his pockets and that smug look on his face. Everything in life was coming to him. Everything was owed to him. The girl started up her car and drove away and he began to walk down the empty sidewalk.

I followed at a pretty good distance, keeping in the shadows of the trees. The sidewalk was old and cracked in various places. The evening wind blew leaves and bits of debris and small twigs over the street.

He was walking into the wind. He never heard me coming.

I hit him in the back of the head with the blunt end of the axe

and his legs went out from under him and he fell face-first into the sidewalk, his teeth shattering with a sound like a handful of marbles being hurled against the pavement. I rolled him over: he was a real mess. Out cold. Mouth a mangled mess of blood. Looked like his nose might be broken, too. I realized at that moment how young he was, just a kid really. Too bad.

I hefted him up over my shoulder. He wasn't as big as he looked; I was able to lift him up without all that much of a problem. I tell you I was gentle with him, even. I lifted him up and lay him down tenderly in the wheelbarrow like a baby in a bassinet. I'd already hurt him too much, more than I'd wanted to. This was the only way, though. I didn't like the kid, sure, but I didn't hate him. There was no hate in my heart for anyone.

I picked up the rope and tied his legs and feet together and then I pushed the wheelbarrow along. He moaned a little bit, his head lolling around from side to side. "Mom? Mommy?" he muttered. "I'm hurt, I'm hurt..."

The path to the top of Techoca is a gently sloping grade that criss-crosses the face of the mountain, engineered to allow tourists a comfortable hike to the top. I know that path better than anyone, and it's a good thing, because this particular night the side of the mountain was darker than the inside of a cow. I mean, it was pitch black up there, which was sure comfort to me. No witnesses. Josh moaned again. I had the ax resting between his legs. I sat the wheelbarrow down and picked up the ax and waited. I didn't have anything to gag him with and I'd hit him again if he screamed. I hoped it wouldn't kill him, but it might.

And that would mess everything up, wouldn't it? I needed him alive.

Alive would be better.

I stood there, waiting. He passed out again. I lifted the arms of the wheelbarrow and pushed onward.

At the top of the mountain there was an empty parking lot and a long, flat promenade that led to the Dome of the Ancients. This is what all the tourists come to see, but they know not the truth of this place: who really built it, what it is here for.

The Dome of the Ancients was dark, locked. There had once been a night watchman but he'd been fired. Budget cuts. So they relied upon an outdated security system to keep the place safe.

I sighed and took out the lock-picking kit. In a couple of minutes the door was open. I propped it open and wheeled the kid in.

He was moaning again. No matter: now we were in the rotunda. I closed the door behind us and set the axe on the ground. He could scream his head off now and it wouldn't matter—he might as well be on a raft in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

His eyes fluttered a bit as I began the Great Prayer:

“Oh Techoca, how we thank thee for your bountiful gifts, your divine wisdom, your everlasting kindness. How our hearts jump when we see your hills, the brush growing sideways, the sun cresting over its ridge. And now we open the doorway so that your people might commune with us.”

“What...what happened? Where am I?” said the kid.

I ignored him and went on, stepping towards the portal. A metal ball swung back and forth, back and forth, suspended from the ceiling over a wide pit. They call it a “Foucault Pendulum.” It is that, but it is also something else. In the dim light I could make out the Mural of the Ancients on the ceiling above, regarding me with their knowing eyes.

“Techoca, I offer you this small sacrifice, this gesture of my appreciation, this young man, virile and full of simmering blood.”

“You crazy mother fucker! What are you doing to me? Untie me you freaking nutjob sonuva—”

“Silence, heathen. You are in the presence of the Gods.”

“YOU CRAZY FUCK, THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS TECHOCA MOUNTAIN! THIS IS HOLLYWOOD, YOU UNDERSTAND? GRIFFITH PARK!”

I held up the axe. He got the idea and shut his mouth and started to shudder and sweat. The sweat made little streaks in the dried blood around his mouth.

“You are moments away from beholding your Truth,” I said quietly.

I sat the axe down next to the wheelbarrow and walked over to the edge of the pit and stepped down and when the pendulum swung toward me I grabbed the rope and pulled the heavy metal ball to a stop.

There was a grinding sound from somewhere in the building, a whirring of gears. I climbed back up out of the pit and reached

down and with a grunt I pulled Josh out of the wheelbarrow. He was heavy and he was thrashing around a bit, trying to get free, but it was happening now and I could feel the energy shooting through every vein and capillary in my body—liquid flame, liquid life. I sat Josh down on the edge of the pit; his legs dangled in; I pushed down on his shoulders to hold him in place and whispered into his ear:

“It begins!”

The hum grew louder and louder. A glow that seemed at first to have no source filled the room. It grew brighter and brighter until everything was bathed in neon purple light and the base of the pit was a disc of white-hot energy and smoke. The humming was a roar now. Josh stared into the light. His eyes bulged. He screamed; I laughed.

And then I saw them.

The Techocans.

They rose slowly up out of the pit, four of them. They were tall and hairless with limbs like sticks and huge insect eyes staring out from ashen, expressionless faces. They rose out of the circle of light and smoke and at their feet were dog-creatures with dripping teeth and liquid-black eyes. Josh screamed and, giggling with delight, I pushed him into the pit. He slid shoulders-first to the bottom and the dog-creatures pounced and he looked up at me and in the millisecond before they ripped him to pieces I saw the terror and realization in his eyes—the eyes of a man about to disappear over the edge of a waterfall.

All the while the Techocans watched me impassively. I kneeled,

my face to the cool tile floor, and waited. I could hear the dog-creatures feeding on whatever was left of Josh the Bartender and I waited. The hum went on and on and I fell into a reverie where time lost all meaning. They communed with me, snippets of image flashing in my mind.

“You’re only here to feed your *pets*?” I whispered. “But there is so much I want to ask you before you go.”

Then a voice rang in my ears. It said:

“Thanks a million!”

Tears streamed from my eyes. I sobbed—was it with joy, or at sorrow that I was little more to them than some cosmic pet store employee? I waited and waited as the purple glow ebbed and faded, until finally the room was dark, and it was a long time before I looked up to see the pendulum swinging again.

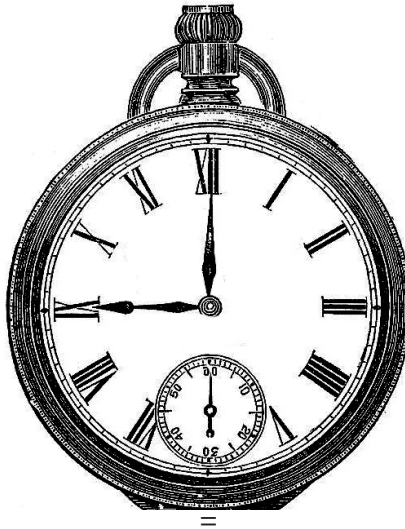
On the edge of the pit, sitting there as if it were left by some unwary tourist, was Josh’s wallet.

My tip.

I walked out into the cool night, counting the money. Sixty bucks. To a bum like me, a fortune. My stomach growled. Oh, how I wished I had a good schooner of Ramrod Brown and some steak fries!

I walked back down the mountain and into the town.

DON'T WASTE TIME



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BORAX HILL COLLECTION

This collection of four short stories tells the tale of desperate exurban youth lost in a high desert hell. Sometimes funny, sometimes moving, always perverse. This is a limited edition with letterpress-printed covers and once they're gone, you'll cry knowing you've been assed-out yet again.

SMOG CITY NUMBER ONE

The first issue of this our magazine appeared in 2009. Sure, the writing can be embarrassing, but you have to realize that when this one came out we were living in a different time, a time in which we were still at least two years away from time travel. Things are different now. *Limited quantities available.*

SMOG CITY NUMBER TWO

You'll get your money's worth with this. The central piece, "Highway 126", is pretty much a novella. Think about that kind of value. "The Night Snacker" continues; also, Dick Wegmans (author of the *The Cleft*) offers up a few pages from his "Smog City Diaries." Highbrow graphics come along with tales from the low life. Worth a read, motherfuckers.

SMOG CITY NUMBER THREE

What can we say about this that hasn't been said before? This shit is totally fucking awesome. Period. This issue features part three of "The Night Snacker", "The Continuing Adventures of Fozz Pinkies, Punk Rock Paradise!" and "Malady". Fun, games, violence. Isn't life awful? Yes, but not when you've got SMOG CITY in your gubby little hands.



SMOG CITY NUMBER FOUR

We take a break from our usual glut of short stories to bring you a foray into non-fiction: *History of the Eichelbaum Studios, Part One*. Don't you hang up on me, what are you doing in my house? I'm having something to eat. So, he calls me a turd huh? Call him back. What do you want? What do you mean?

THE CLEFT

This book, now generally recognized as an underground classic, is the tale of a man on the razor's edge of the ultimate forbidden fruit: female as fuck. After meeting up with a fellow reprobate named Arcadia Slim, a cross-country "huffing" spree takes place that truly sends our heroes into the hard of darkness. One well known website even listed this as "recommended reading" while snubbing JG Ballard and Graham Greene. We're serious. *Limited quantities available*

STRIP MALL

Mulnix's second novel is a real doozy. It's *Planet of the Apes* meets *Flowers for Algernon* meets *Death Wish* meets *Journeys to the End of the Night* meets *Deliverance* meets *Paul Blart, Mall Cop 3*. Sound nuts? It is. *Available Fall 2016*

MY LIFE IN RADIO

By Dusty Klugman

Long thought to be out of print, a stack of Mr. Klugman's autobiography was found in a box at Four Points Swap Meet in Palmdale, California. Detailing his youth as a hungry young disk jockey, and culminating in his ascension to the top of the late-night conservative talk radio market, this truly is a Horatio Alger story of perseverance—yet tinged, too, with tragedy. Recommended. 100 pages, paper-back. Extremely rare. *Limited quantities available*

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