

A Life in the Day of . . .

by Frank M. Robinson

It was going to be a great party, Jeff thought, inspecting himself in the bathroom mirror, even if it had been a pain in the ass to get ready for. He'd had his sideburns professionally trimmed, but the mustache and beard he'd had to do himself, shaping the beard carefully so it curled under just *so* and working on the mustache literally hair by hair to get it to lie right. But the effect was worth it—far *out*, but not too far.

He smiled at the mirror and his image smiled back: long brown hair falling to his shoulders, with the bangs over his forehead curling away just above the eyebrows, blue eyes shining, teeth even and white, skin a smooth, healthy tan—say what you wanted to about WASPs, man, but they weren't hard to look at. He smiled again and the smile caught him and he tried a few other expressions. The Sincere look, which could move mountains or, at least, a chick from the living room into the bedroom; the youthful Anything Is Possible If You Only Believe look; the Help Me! look, for the older creeps; and, finally, the turn-off one of Irritated Uninterest. Not bad, not bad at all.

One last smile and he shook his head in pleased amazement. *Damn*, he was a good-looking bastard! God bless genetics or whatever.

He stepped back from the mirror and smoothed his togalike garment, carefully draped over his left shoulder and caught just above the ankle. *Great, just great!* He'd picked it up from the Hare Krishna people, but in another month or so it'd be the "in" thing, *his* thing. He splashed a little lime lotion on his face, flashed a congratulatory look at the mirror, then padded into the living room for a final check.

The stereo had been programmed for early Glenn Miller at the start—good for mood music as well as a laugh—then an old Beatles tape, plus some country rock around midnight, when everybody was stoned out of his gourd on grass or wine, and to finish up with, some harpsichord tracks when people wanted to make out.

Chips and dip, salami and cheese on the coffee table under the Saran Wrap (risky, but a great ploy—"It's just to remind us, man"—and *he* could get away with it). The new *Barb*, an old copy of *Crawdaddy* and especially Tuesday's issue of the *Times*. The one with the photograph showing him clutching his STUDENTS FOR FREEDOM sign just before the pigs waded in. The photographer had caught him just right—nobody could look at it without feeling for him—but he liked the caption even better. "*Youth in anguish.*" Youthful innocence, the hope of tomorrow (all summed up in himself) being crushed by the fascist state. What was the name of the kid who had really been hit? The ugly kid with glasses? He couldn't remember, but it really didn't matter.

And then the front-door buzzer was blasting away and he straightened up, smoothed the wrinkles from his toga, and let The Smile flood his face like light from the morning sun.

By ten o'clock, the party was going full blast, the stereo blaring, couples sprawling out on the rugs and couches, people rapping in little groups, a few huddling in corners, turning on—only God knew who had

brought what, but there were a lot of glazed looks floating around. Politically, it was pretty well balanced. A few old-line activists, but mostly second echelon, all of whom had seen the *Times* and really fell out when he flashed on them. Some over-thirties, but that only made for contrast, so what the hell.

And then a chick was plastered up against him and it took him a second to place her. How long had it been since he had done a number with Sue? Jesus, she had been forgettable. He wondered who she had come with; he sure as hell hadn't invited her.

"It's a great party, Jeff, really great," she breathed, and he felt like telling her to go brush her teeth. There was a brief lull in the music and for a moment, the background noises came crashing through—cubes tinkling in glasses, a chick giggling, some kid coughing, who hadn't been able to hold in the smoke, the overloud talking of people not yet adjusted to the sudden silence.

There had been a sticky moment earlier in the evening, when an older type had shown up, with a guitar yet; there was nothing for it but to accompany the square on a battered twelve-string Jeff kept hidden in the closet, then do a solo number before flashing a smile and saying, "This is a party, not a performance," and turning the stereo back on. Mr. Guitar Man was pretty well out of it by then and was now sitting on the big, beat-up couch by the window, staring moodily out at the night.

"... been so long," Sue was saying, trying to sock it in. He was only half aware of her; all he wanted to do was get away, get a drink and rap with the little blonde in the living room who had been so awed by him earlier.

Accusingly: "You're not listening!"

Oh, God ... He peeled her hand off his shoulder and felt her stiffen. The light from the kitchen was pale, but he could make out the faint veins pulsing in her neck and the fine network of lines starting to firm up around her eyes. "I'm sorry, Sue, you were saying something?" Messy bit, but if he didn't let her know the score, somebody else would—you get to be twenty-five, man, you're a stone drag. Then he had pulled loose, mumbling a bland "Scuse, Sue, gotta fill my cup," and she fled past him into the living room, to fold up on the couch next to Mr. Guitar Man. Maybe they deserved each other, he thought. *American Gothic*, up to date.

And then he had refilled his paper cup from the jug of rosé on the coffee table and the party was picking up again and it was great, just great.

"Gee, Mr. Beall, I saw your picture in the *Times* with the pig clubbing you."

A freshman, the warm wine sweat glistening on his smooth cheeks—Jeff had seen him hanging around the edges of the sit-in at the Poly Sci lecture hall. "It didn't hurt—the pigs are all queer, they don't hit too hard."

"It must've been a really inside trip," the kid said sympathetically, then drifted off, while Jeff frowned after him and wondered uneasily just what the hell the kid had meant to say, and reflected, but only for a moment, how great it would be to be seventeen again. Then he started sipping at the wine and let the conversation in the room close over him like soapy water over dishes in a sink.

"... *the synthetics are really a bummer ...*"

"... *trustees are out to kill the third world ...*"

"... sure, but Dylan copped out, man ..."

"... soul food, that's an issue ..."

"Fuck the establishment," Jeff said amiably to nobody in particular, then ducked into the kitchen for a refill on the salami. The blonde was in a corner with a short-haired squeaky-clean wearing a Nehru jacket and beads—the poor slob had been stuck with hand-me-downs. He was also very stoned and the chick looked like she badly needed rescuing.

He picked up a couple of plates of lunch meat and said, "Hey, chickie, how about a hand?" and she slipped away and flashed him a grateful smile. She was maybe seventeen, with waist-long hair and green eyes—she *definitely* made the other chicks at the party look like old hags.

"Look, man, she came with me, she's mine!"

The Level, Reserved look, eyes slightly narrowed. "You some sort of reactionary, man? You don't own *anybody!*" And then he had shoved the chick into the living room and he was dumping the plates onto the table. Somebody offered him a joint and he took a toke and passed the roach on to the girl. Always take a puff for social standing, but never get stoned; too easy to let down the old guard.

The girl was looking up at him big-eyed and he nodded to himself; she was *the* one, all right. "Thanks," she said. There was just the right amount of quiver in her voice and he gave her the Sincere look and said, "The means of production belong to the state," which wasn't a bad line at all.

She sucked on the joint, coughed, then held her breath for a long moment. After she let it out, she nodded toward the stereo and said, "The All for One are really boss."

"Womb to Tomb," he couldn't help correcting. "On *Walkin'*. WSAN played it this morning; tomorrow it'll be all over the country."

She shook her head and looked serious. "Sounds like but isn't—the lead cimbalom's a friend of mine," and just for a second the world slipped sideways, because he suddenly wasn't sure.

Then he was off again, flashing her The Smile and squeezing her hand, saying, "Don't go home early—in fact, don't go home," and he knew she wouldn't.

There was an angry murmur rising above the background mumble, like smoke over burning brush. A little knot of Maoists had lined up against the Progressive Leftists, and somebody shouted over to him. "What do you think, Jeff?" and they were respectfully silent and that was more like it.

"You work with the pigs," he said automatically, "you're just playing into the hands of the establishment." A buzz of approval and the confrontation splintered a dozen different ways, then a rock number came up on the stereo and the heavy beat rolled over the room like a tide.

"Sharp," a voice said.

Old, middle-thirties, balding. Maybe a professor crashing the party to score on a chick. "It's the all-purpose answer," Jeff said easily.

"I'm Jenkins, Asian Studies. Saw the picture of you in the *Times*."

A nod. Wait him out, see what he wants.

Jenkins studied him thoughtfully for a second, then cleared his throat and said, "After class, I run the Free Tutorial Studies. We need tutors for the ghetto freshman—I saw you at the F.T.S. rally last week and thought you might like to help out."

There was no end to the freaky things people wanted you to do. "Sorry, man, that's not my bag," he said coldly and started to move away. The blonde was back in a corner with the Nehru jacket and it was time to break it up.

Jenkins smiled faintly down at his drink. "Not much press coverage, no guarantee you'll get your picture in the paper."

Why, the condescending old fart; you'd think he had never run into that one before! Jeff whirled.

"Heavy, old man! Look, *you* sit in, *you* carry the signs, *you* get clubbed! Think anybody's going to cry for *you*? Get laid, will you! I do my thing, you do yours!" Holier than thou, *bullshit*.

The mumble of the party again, somebody being sick in the john, the click of the lock on the bedroom door, a chick crying in the kitchen and somebody laughing hysterically in the living room, the sour smell of smoke and wine and too many people. Christ, he hadn't invited half that number—a few more cigarette burns on the windowsill and spreading puddles on the faded rug slowly seeping into the wool, the sweet smell of pot and he was getting a contact high and ...

Somebody was clutching at him and doing the heavy-breathing bit. "Want to ... see you alone, Jeff."

Old women, dogs, and Ann Polanski loved him. Yesterday's radical, the professional student, working for a PhD in sociology and she'd get it about the time of the Second Coming. Drunk out of her mind and probably feeling very sorry for herself because, at thirty, she was the last of the vestal virgins; love me, love my guilt complex, and who wanted that kind of package deal?

"Damsel in distress in the kitchen and all that rot," he said, trying to edge past. "Be right back."

She hung onto him and licked her lips and tried to get the words out without slurring them, and when they finally came, they were like pearls strung on a string. "Just want to say ... magnificent party." She closed her eyes and for a panicky moment he was afraid she was going to vomit down his toga. Then she was fishing a damp strand of hair out of her eyes and trying hard to focus on him. "Don't know ... how you do it, Jeff," she said, closing her eyes again. "Goddamn generations ... two years apart now ... can't figure out the right attitudes from one day to the nex'—next ... changes, everything changes so fast ... got to be a real phony to keep up with them."

He could feel the heat at the back of his neck. Overage and twenty pounds overweight and she wouldn't get her PhD, not in a million years, and *she* was putting *him* down. "Ever think about it?" she asked, suddenly wistful.

"I don't think," he said lightly. And then she was holding onto him again and it wasn't for support and he could feel his skin crawl—hot and sweaty and the monthly smell. He forced himself to hold her gently for a moment and nuzzle her neck, and when she was blinking with sudden hope, he murmured, "I would like

to help you, Ann, I really would, but it would be like balling my own mother."

"You're a stinking son of a bitch," she said calmly.

Then he was back in the living room again and Ann was fading into the background, like roses on old wallpaper, and the noises and the heat in the room were smothering him and he could feel himself start to drown in his own party.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the huge old couch by the window. Mr. Guitar Man, toying with a drink in which the ice had long since melted; Sue, sitting next to him, looking thirty-five instead of twenty-five, starting to shrivel right before his eyes; Jenkins beside her, his face a remote mask; and Ann at the far end, eyes closed, probably passed out. All of them with that odd, frightening, glazed look about them, like wax dummies in a museum.

He shivered, then was caught up in the party once more. He was the guy who made it tick, who made it go, the one who was with it. He was the mirror of people who wanted to check how the mustache lay, how the toga fit, whether the smile was right and the attitude was "in." He was the hero, the star, the winner, to be chaired through the marketplace.

He could feel his ego expanding and filling the room like Styrofoam, and he knew he was getting *very* stoned, but it felt good, good, good—the music was as sharp as diamonds and the food was ambrosia and everybody ... everybody loved him.

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It was two in the morning when, suddenly, above the roar of the party, he heard the door buzzer and instinctively knew it wasn't the police and, just as instinctively, that whoever it was shouldn't be let in. Then there was laughter and shouting in the hallway and a pounding on the door and the party around him froze—it was like watching a film where they end up on a single frame and hold it. Dancing, laughing, shouting and then sudden silence and the living room was filled with plaster statues.

Somebody stepped to the door and he wanted to shout *Don't let them in!* and then the door was open and the laughing crowd outside tumbled in like a bushel of leaves driven by the wind. They pulled at his party like so many human magnets and the movement in the room started to quicken and, within seconds, the party was roaring again.

Jeff didn't know any of them.

He was standing in a corner all alone, with the party swirling about him but never touching him, like waves breaking around a rock, and then somebody was standing in front of him. "So you're Jeffrey." He hated the full name and he hated the tone of condescension.

The stranger was dressed in black and had a drooping black mustache, like an old-time cowboy villain, and something within Jeff whispered *That's sharp*, and he was wearing a FREE LEONARD button and who the hell was Leonard, anyway?

"Name's Lee," the stranger said in a deep bass voice, and Jeff guessed that he had really worked at it to pitch it that low, and then he was fingering Jeff's toga and the people around them were suddenly silent and tense and the stranger said, "Too bad it spots so easily," and somebody laughed and Jeff couldn't think of anything to say, and then a chick he didn't know came up and said, "I saw your picture in the *Times*—you looked cute," and a lot more people laughed and then they all drifted away and Jeff caught himself staring down at the wine in his paper cup and noting that the cube he had dropped in to cool it had almost melted.

He fled into the kitchen and bumped into the blonde and she dropped a plate of sandwiches on the floor and he almost skidded on them, then blurted, "You're going to stay over, aren't you?" and she looked at him as if she wasn't quite sure who he was and said, "Did you ask?" and ducked under his arm into the living room.

He turned back to the party, trying to quiet his panic, and ran into the kid who had been at the Poly Sci sit-in. *The goddamned toga*, he was thinking furiously, *goddamned asshole toga*. He tried to start a conversation, but the kid snickered and said, "Later, man," and wandered over to the group that had gathered around the cowboy in black.

"*You can't trust the dogs*," the cowboy was saying, "*they'll gut the proles every time. On the other hand, the police are predictable.*" There was a chorus of agreement; the crowd grew. Jeff didn't have the faintest idea what they were talking about.

He reeled over to the open window and tried to suck in some fresh air and stop the room from spinning. There was singing and shouting in the street below and he leaned out to see what was happening. Some stoned students were lurching down the street, singing a pop song—but he couldn't place the tune, *he couldn't place the tune*, he couldn't remember ever having heard it. Farther down the street, beneath a street lamp, a small army of workmen was painting over storefronts and changing signs. He squinted his eyes, but he couldn't find the familiar Me and Thee coffee shop; the sign that swung out over the sidewalk was gone and in its place was something called The Rookery. He didn't know the street anymore, he realized suddenly; all the "in" spots, *his spots*, were gone, and he had never heard the songs, and he couldn't keep his groups straight, and he didn't know the people, and ... *who was Leonard, anyway?*

Every two years, Ann had said. And faster all the time. But you never noticed the buds until the day they blossomed.

And then he was sinking down into the sofa by the window, still clutching his paper cup, to sit next to Mr. Guitar Man and Sue and Jenkins and Ann. He could sense the glaze creeping over his face and felt something very light and feathery on his neck and shoulders.

It was, he imagined, the dust settling gently down.

The End

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