

HOWARD WALDROP

Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance?

Howard Waldrop is widely considered to be one of the best short-story writers in the business, and his famous story "The Ugly Chickens" won both the Nebula and the World Fantasy Awards in 1981. His work has been gathered in two collections: *Howard Who?* and *All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past: Neat Stories by Howard Waldrop*, and more collections are in the works. Waldrop is also the author of the novel *Them Bones*, and, in collaboration with Jake Saunders, *The Texas-Israeli War: 1999*. Another solo novel is coming up. He lives in Austin, Texas.

Here he gives us a hilarious, high-energy look back at the '60s, a look as funny, poignant, and quirky as one would expect from Waldrop, who has been called "the resident Weird Mind of his generation."

DO YA, DO-YA, WANNA DANCE?

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The light was so bad in the bar that everyone there looked like they had been painted by Thomas Hart Benton, or carved from dirty bars of soap with rusty spoons.

"Frank! Frank!" the patrons yelled, like for Norm on *Cheers* before they canceled it.

"No need to stand," I said. I went to the table where Barb, Bob, and Penny sat. Carole the waitress brought over a Ballantine Ale in a can, no glass.

"How y'all?" I asked my three friends. I seemed *not* to have interrupted

a conversation.

"I feel like six pounds of monkey shit," said Bob, who had once been tall and thin and was now tall and fat.

"My mother's at it again," said Penny. Her nails looked like they had been done by Mungo of Hollywood, her eyes were like pissholes in a snowbank.

"Jim went back to Angela," said Barb.

I stared down at the table with them for five or six minutes. The music over the speakers was "Wonderful World, Beautiful People" by Johnny Nash. We usually came to this bar because it had a good jukebox that livelied us up.

"So," said Barb, looking up at me, "I hear you're going to be a tour guide for the reunion."

There are terrible disasters in history, and there are always great catastrophes just waiting to happen.

But the greatest one of all, the thing time's been holding its breath for, the *capo de tutti capi* of impending disasters, was going to happen this coming weekend.

Like the *Titanic* steaming for its chunk of polar ice, like the *Hindenberg* looking for its Lakehurst, like the guy at Chernobyl wondering what *that* switch would do, it was inevitable, inexorable, a psychic juggernaut.

The Class of '69 was having its twentieth high school reunion.

And what they were coming back to was no longer even a high school—it I had been phased out in a magnet school program in 74. The building had been taken over by the community college.

The most radical graduating class in the history of American secondary education, had, like all the ideals it once held, no real place to go.

Things were to start Saturday morning with a tour of the old building, then a picnic in the afternoon in the city park where everyone used to get stoned and lie around all weekend, then a dance that night in what used to be the fanciest downtown hotel a few blocks from the state capitol.

That was the reunion Barb was talking about.

"I found the concept of the high school no longer being there so

existential that I offered to help out," I said. "Olin Sweetwater called me a couple of months ago—"

"Olin Sweetwater? Olin *Sweetwater*?" said Penny. "Geez! I haven't heard that name in the whole damn twenty years." She held onto the table with both hands. "I think I'm having a drug flashback!"

"Yeah, Olin. Lives in Dallas now. Runs an insurance agency. He got my name from somebody I built some bookcases for a couple of years ago. Anyway, asked if I'd be one of the guides on the tour Saturday morning—you know, point out stuff to husbands and wives and kids, people who weren't there."

I didn't know if I should go on.

Bob was looking at me, waiting.

"Well, Olin got me in touch with Jamie Lee Johnson—Jamie Lee Something hyphen Something now, none of them Johnson. She's the entertainment chairman, in charge of the dance. I made a couple of tapes for her."

I don't have much, but I do have a huge bunch of Original Oldies, Greatest Hits albums and other garage sale wonders. Lots of people know it and call me once or twice a year to make dance tapes for their parties.

"Oh, you'll like this," I said, waving to Carole to bring me another Ballantine Ale. "She said 'Spring for some Maxell tapes, not the usual four for eighty-nine cents kind I hear you buy at Revco.' Where you think she could have heard about that?"

"From me," said Barb. "She called me a month ago, too." She smiled a little.

"Come on, Barb." I said. "Spill it."

"Well, I wanted to—"

"I'm not going," said Penny.

We all looked at her.

"Okay. Your protest has been noted and filed. Now start looking for your granny dress and your walnut shell beads." I said.

"Why should I go back?" said Penny. "High school was shit. None of *us* had any fun there, we were all toads. Sure, things got a little exciting, but you could have been on top of Mount Baldy in Colorado in the late '60s and it would have been exciting. Why should I go see a bunch of jerks making fools of themselves trying to recapture some, some *image* of themselves another whole time and place?"

"Oh," said Bob, readjusting his gimme hat, "You really should hang around jerks more often."

"And why's that, Bob?" asked Penny, peeling the label from her Lone Star.

" 'Cause if you watch them long enough," said Bob, "you'll realize that jerks are capable of *anything*."

Bob's the kind of guy who holds people's destinies in his hands and they never realize it. When someone does something especially stupid and life-threatening in traffic, Bob doesn't honk his horn or scream or shake his fist.

He follows them. Either to where they're going, or the city limits, whichever comes first. If they go to work, or shopping, he makes his move then. If they go to a residence, he jots down the make, model and license plate of the car on a notepad he keeps on his dashboard, and comes back later that night.

Bob has two stacks of bumper stickers in the glove compartment of his truck. He takes one from each.

He goes to the vehicle of the person who has put his life personally in jeopardy, and he slaps one of the stickers on the left front bumper and one on the right rear.

The one on the back says SPICS AND NIGGERS OUT OF THE U.S.!

The one he puts on the front reads KILL A COP TODAY!

He goes through about fifty pairs of stickers a year. He's self-employed, so he writes the printing costs off on his Schedule A as "Depreciation."

Penny looked at Bob a little longer. "Okay. You've convinced me," she said. "Are you happy?"

"No," said Bob, turning in his chair. "Tell us whatever it is that'll make us happy, Barb."

"The guys are going to play."

Just *the guys*. No names. No *what guys*? We all knew. I had never before in my life seen Bob's jaw drop. Now I have. *The guys*.

Craig Beausoliel. Morey Morkheim. Abram Cassuth. Andru Esposito. Or, taking them in order of their various band names from junior high on:

Four Guys in a Dodge. Two Jews, A Wop, and A Frog. The Hurtz Bros. (Pervo, Devo, Sado, and Twisto). The Bug-Eyed Weasels. Those were when they were local, when they played Yud's, the Vulcan Gas Company, Tod's Hi-Spot. Then they got a record label and went national just after high school.

You knew them as *Distressed Flag Sale*.

That was the title of their first album (subtitled *For Sale Cheap One Country Inquire 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*). You probably knew it as the "blue-cake-with-the-white-stars-on-the-table-with-the-red-stripes-formed-on-the-white-floor-by-the-blood-running-in-seven-rivulets-from-the-dead-G.I." album.

Their second and last was *NEXT!* with the famous photo of the Saigon police chief blowing the brains out of the suspected VC in the checked shirt during the Tet Offensive of 1968, only over the general's face they'd substituted Nixon's, and over the VC's, Howdy Doody's.

Then of course came the seclusion for six months, then the famous concert/riot/bust in Miami in 1970 that put an end to the band pretty much as a functioning human organization.

Morey Morkheim tried a comeback after his time in the *jusgado*, in the mid-70s, as Moe in Moe and the Meanies' *Suck My Buttons*, but it wasn't a very good album and the times were *already* wrong.

"I can't believe it," said Penny. "None of them have played in what, fifteen years? They probably'll sound like shit."

"Well, I'll tell you what I know," said Barb. "Jamie Lee—Younts-Fulton is the name, Frank—said after his jail term and the try at the comeback, Morey threw it all over and moved down to Corpus where his aunt was in the hotel business or something, and he opened a souvenir shop, a whole bunch of 'em eventually, called Morey's Mementoes. Got pretty rich at it supposedly, though you can never tell, especially from Jamie Lee—I mean, anyone, *anyone* who'd take as part of her second married name a hyphenated name from her *first* husband that was later convicted of mail fraud just because Younts is more sophisticated than Johnson—Johnson Fulton sounds like an 1830 politician from Tennessee, know what I mean?—you just can't trust about things like who's rich and who's not. Anyway, Morey was at some convention for seashell brokers or something—Jamie says about half the shells and junk sold in Corpus come from Japan and Taiwan—he ran into Andru, of all people, who was in the

freight business! Like, Morey had been getting shells from this shipping company for ten years and it turns out to belong to Andru's uncle or brother-in-law or something! So they start writing to each other, then somehow (maybe it was from Bridget, you remember Bridget? from UT? Yeah.) she knew where Abram was, and about that time the people putting all this reunion together got a hold of Andru. So the only thing left to do was find Craig."

She looked around. It was the longest I'd ever heard Barb talk in my life.

"You know where he was?"

"No. Where?" we all three said.

"Ever eat any Dr. Healthy's Nut-Crunch Bread?"

"A loaf a day," said Bob, patting his stomach.

"Craig is Dr. Healthy."

"Shit!" said Bob. "Isn't that stuff baked in Georgetown?"

"Yeah. He's been like thirty miles away for fifteen years, baking bread and sweet rolls. Jamie said, like some modern-day Cactus Jack Garner, he vowed never to go south of the San Gabriel River again."

"But now he is?"

"Yep. Supposedly, Andru's gonna fly down to Morey's in Corpus this week and they're going to practice before they come up here. Abram always was the quickest study and the only real musical genius, so he'll be okay."

"That only leaves one question," said Penny, speaking for us all. "Can Craig still sing? Can Craig still *play*? I mean, look what happened after the Miami thing."

"Good question," said Bob. "I suppose we'll all find out in a big hurry Saturday night. Besides," he said, looking over at me, "we always got your tapes."

The name's Frank Bledsoe. I'm pushing forty, which is exercise enough.

I do lots of odd stuff for a living—a little woodwork and carpentry, mostly speakers and bookcases. I help people move a lot. In Austin, if you have a pickup, you have friends for life.

What I mostly do is build flyrods. I make two kinds—a 7' one for a #5 line and an 8'2" one for a #6 line. I get the fiberglass blanks from a place

in Ohio, and the components like cork grips, reel seats, guides, tips and ferrules, from whoever's having a sale around the country.

I sell a few to a fishing tackle store downtown. The seven-footer retails for \$22, the other for \$27.50. Each rod takes about three hours of work, a day for the drying time on the varnish on the wraps. So you can see my hourly rate isn't too swell.

I live in a place about the size of your average bathroom in a real person's house. But it's quiet, it's on a cul-de-sac, and there's a converted horse stable out back I use for my workshop.

What keeps me in business is that people around the country order a few custom-made rods each year, for which I charge a little more.

Here's a dichotomy: as flyfishing becomes more popular, my business falls off.

That's because, like everything else in these post-modernist times, the Yups ruined it. As with every other recreation, they confuse the sport with the equipment.

Flyfishing is growing with them because it's a very status thing. When the Yups found it, all they wanted to do was be seen on the rivers and lakes with a six hundred-dollar split-bamboo rod, a pair of two hundred-dollar waders, a hundred-dollar vest, shirts with a million zippers on them, a seventy-five-dollar tweed hat, and a patch from a flyfishing school that showed they'd paid one thousand dollars to learn how to put out enough fly line to reach across the average K-Mart parking lot.

What I make is cheap fiberglass rods, not even boron or graphite. No glamor. And the real fact is that in flyfishing, most fish are caught within twenty feet of your boots. No glory there, either.

So the sport grows, and money comes in more and more slowly.

All this talk about the reunion has made me positively reflective. So let me put 1969 in perspective for you.

Richard Milhous Nixon was in his first year in office. He'd inherited all the good things from Lyndon Johnson—the social programs—and was dismantling them, and going ahead with all the bad ones, like the War in Nam. The Viet Cong and NVA were killing one hundred Americans a week, and according to the Pentagon, we were killing two thousand of them, regular as clockwork, as announced at the five P.M. press briefing in Saigon every Friday. The draft call was fifty thousand a month.

The Beatles released *Abbey Road* late in the year. At the end of the summer we graduated there was something called the Woodstock Festival of Peace and Music; in December there would be the disaster at the Altamont racetrack (in which, if you saw the movie that came out the next year, you could see a Hell's Angel with a knife kill a black man with a gun on camera while all around people were freaking out on bad acid and Mick Jagger, up there trying to sing, was saying "Brothers and sisters, why are we fighting each other?"). On the nights of August 8 and 9 were the Tate-LaBianca murders in L.A. (Charles Manson had said to his people "Kill everybody at Terry Melcher's house," not knowing Terry had moved. Terry Melcher was Doris Day's son. Chuck thought Terry owed him some money or had reneged on a recording deal or something. When he realized what he'd done, he had them go out and kill some total strangers to make the murders at the Tate household look like the work of a kill-the-rich cult.) On December 17, Tiny Tim married Miss Vickie on the *Tonight Show*, with Johnny Carson as best man.

The Weathermen, the Black Panthers and, according to agent's reports, "frizzy-haired women of a radical organization called NOW," were disturbing the increasingly senile sleep of J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI. He longed for the days when you could shoot criminals down in the streets like dogs and have them buried in handcuffs, when all the issues were clear-cut. Spiro T. Agnew, the vice-president, was gearing up to make his "nattering nabobs of negativism" speech, and to coin the term Silent Majority. This was four years before he made the most moving and eloquent speech in his life, which went: "*Nolo contendere.*"

We were reading Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or rereading *The Hobbit* for the zillionth time, or Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*. And on everybody's lips were the words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: That which does not kill us makes us stronger. (Nixon was working on that, too.)

There were weeks when you thought nothing was ever going to change, there was no wonderment anymore, just new horrors about the War, government repression, drugs. (They were handing out life sentences for the possession of a single joint in some places that year.)

Then, in three days, from three total strangers, you'd hear the Alaska vacation—flannel shirt—last man killed by an active volcano story, all the people *swearing* they'd heard the story from the kid in the flannel shirt himself, and you'd say, yeah, the world is *still* magic . . .

I'll really put 1969 in a nutshell for you. There are six of you sharing a three-bedroom house that fall, and you're splitting rent you think is exorbitant, \$89.75 a month. Minimum wage was \$1.35 an hour, and none

of you even has any of *that*.

Somebody gets some money from somewhere, God knows, and you're all going to pile into the VW Microbus which is painted green, orange, and fuchsia, and going to the H.E.B. to score some food. But first, since there are usually hassles, you all decide to smoke all the grass in the house, about three lids' worth.

When you get to the store you split up to get food, and are to meet at checkout lane Number Three in twenty minutes. An hour later you pool the five shopping carts and here's what you have:

Seven two-pound bags of lemon drops. Three bags of orange marshmallow goobers. A Hostess Ding-Dong assortment pack. A twelve-pound bag of Kokuho Rose New Variety Rice. A two-pound can of Beer-Nuts. A fifty-foot length of black shoestring licorice. Three six-packs of Barq's Root Beer. Two quarts of fresh strawberries and a pint of Half and Half. A Kellogg's Snak-Pak (heavy on the Frosted Flakes). A five-pound bag of turbinado sugar. Two one-pound bags of Bazooka Joe bubble gum (with double comics). A blue 75-watt light bulb.

It fills up three dubl/bags and the bill comes to \$8.39, the last seventy-four cents of which you pay the clerk in pennies.

Later, when somebody finally cooks, everybody yells, "Shit! Rice again? Didn't we just go to the grocery store?"

PS: On July 20 that year we landed on the Moon.

Now I'll tell you about this year, 1989.

The Republicans are in the tenth month of their new Presidency, naturally. After Cuomo and Iacocca refused to run, the Democrats, like always, ran two old warhorses who quit thinking along about 1962. ("If nominated, I refuse to run," said Iacocca, "if elected, I refuse to serve. And that's a promise.")

We have six thousand military advisors in Honduras and Costa Rica. All those guys who went down to the post office and signed their Selective Service postcards are beginning to look a little grey around the gills.

There are 1,800,000 cases of AIDS in America, and 120,000 have died of it.

On Wall Street the Dow Jones just passed the 3000 mark after its near-suicide in '87. "Things are looking just great!" says the new president.

Congress is voting on the new two trillion dollar debt ceiling limit.

Things are much like they have been forever. The rich are richer, the poor poorer, the middle class has no choices. The cities are taxing them to death, the suburbs can't hold them. Every state but those in the Bible-belt South has horse *and* dog racing, a lottery, legalized pari-mutuel Bingo *and* a state income tax, and they're still going broke.

Everything is wrong everywhere. The only good thing I've noticed is that MTV is off the air.

You go to the grocery store and get a pound of bananas, a six foot electric extension cord, a can of powder scent air freshener, a tube of store-brand toothpaste and a loaf of bread. It fits in the smallest plastic sack they have and costs \$7.82.

Let me put 1989 in another nutshell for you:

A friend of mine keeps his record albums (his CDs are elsewhere) in what looks like a haphazard stack of orange crates in one corner of his living room.

They're not orange crates. What he did was get a sculptor friend of his to make them. He got some lengths of stainless steel, welded and shaped them to look like a haphazard stack of crates. Then with punches and chisels and embossing tools the sculptor made the metal look like grained unseasoned wood, and then painted them, labels and all, to look like crates.

You can't tell them from the real things, and my friend only paid three thousand dollars for them.

Or to put it another way: And Zarathustra came down from the hills unto the cities of men. And Zarathustra spake unto them, and what he said to them was: "Yo!"

PS: Nobody's been to the Moon in sixteen years.

MY TRIP TO THE POST OFFICE by FRANK BLEDSOE AGE 38

I'd finished three rods for a guy in Colorado the day before. I put the clothes back on I'd worn working on them, all dotted with varnish. I was building a bookcase, too, so I hit it a few licks with a block plane to get my blood going in the early morning.

It was a nice crisp fall day, so I decided to ride my bike to the post office substation to mail the rods. I was probably so covered with wood shavings I looked like a Cabbage Patch Kid that had been hit with a slug from a .45.

I brushed myself off, put the rods in their cloth bags, put the bags in the tubes with the packing paper, and put the tubes in the carrier I have on the bike. Then I rode off to the branch post office.

I'm coming out of the substation with the postage and insurance receipts in my hand when I hear a lot of brakes squealing and horns honking.

A lady in a white Volvo has managed to get past two One Way Do Not Enter signs at the exit to the parking lot and is coming in against the traffic, and all the angles of the diagonal parking places. She has a look of calm imperturbability on her face.

Nobody's looking for a car from her direction. As they back out, suddenly there she is in the rear-view mirror. They slam on their brakes and honk and yell.

"Asshole!" yells a guy who's killed his engine in a panic stop. She gets to the entrance of the lot, does a 290 degree turn, and pulls into the Reserved Handicapped spot at the front door, acing out the one-armed guy with Disabled American Vets license plates who was waiting for the guy who was illegally parked against the yellow curbing in the entrance to move so he could get in.

She gets out of the car. She's wearing a silk blouse, a set of June Cleaver double-strand pearls and matching earrings, and a pair of those shorts that make the wearer look like they have a refrigerator stuffed down the back of them.

"Are you handicapped?" I ask.

She looks right through me. She's taking a yellow Attempt to Deliver slip out of her sharkskin purse. She has on shades.

"I said, are you handicapped? I don't see a sticker on your car."

"What business is it of yours?" she asks. "Besides, I'm only going to be in there a minute."

That's what you think. She goes inside. I shrug at the one-armed guy. With some people it was their own fault they went to Korea or Viet Nam and got their legs and stuff blown off, with others it wasn't.

He drives off down the packed lot. He probably won't find a space for a block.

I take my bike tools out of my pocket. I go to the Volvo. In deference to Bob, I undo the valve cores on the left front and right rear tires.

Then I get on my bike and ride down to the pay phone at the bakery

three blocks away, call the non-emergency police number, and tell them there's a lady without a handicap sticker blocking the reserved spot at the post office substation.

After mailing the rods and using the quarter for the phone, I have eighty-two cents left—just enough for coffee at the bakery. It's a chi-chi place I usually never go to, but I haven't had any coffee this morning and I know they make a cup of Brazilian stuff that would bring Dwight D. Eisenhower back to life.

I go in. They've got one of those European doorchimes that sets poor people's nerves on edge and lets those with a heavy wallet know they're in a place where they can really drop a chunk of money.

The clerk is Indian or Paki; he's on the phone talking to someone. I start tapping my change on the counter looking around. Maybe ten people in the place. He hangs up and starts toward me.

"Large cuppa—" I start to say.

The chime jingles and the smell hits me at the same time as their voices; a mixture of Jovan Musk for Men and Sassoon styling mousse.

"—game." says a voice. "How many croissants you still got?" says the voice over my shoulder to the clerk.

The counterman has one hand on the coffee spigot and a sixteen ounce styrofoam cup in the other.

"Oh, very many, I think," he says to the voice behind me.

"Give us about—oh, what, John?—say, twenty-five assorted fruit-filled, no lemon, okay?"

The clerk starts to put down the styrofoam cup. In ambiguous situations, people always move toward the voice that sounds most like money.

"My coffee?" I say.

The clerk looks back and forth like he's just been dropped on the planet.

"Could you sort of hurry?" says the voice behind me. "We're double-parked."

I turn around then. There are three of them in warmup outfits—gold and green, blue and orange, blue and silver. They look maybe twenty-five. Sure enough, there's a blue Renault blocking three cars parked at the laundromat next door. The handles of squash racquets stick up out of the blue and orange, blue and silver, gold and green duffles in the back seat.

"No lemon," says the blond-haired guy on the left. "Make sure there's no lemon, huh?"

"You gonna fill our order?" asks the first guy, who looks like he was raised in a meatloaf mold.

"No," I say. "First he's going to get my coffee, then he'll get your order."

They notice me for the first time then, suspicion dawning on them this wasn't covered in their Executive Assertiveness Training program.

The clerk is turning his head back and forth like a radar antenna.

"I thought they gave *free* coffee at the Salvation Army," says the blond guy, looking me up and down.

"*Tres, tres amusant*" I said.

"Are you going to fill our \$35 order, or are you going to give him his big fifty cent cup of coffee?" asked the first guy.

The ten other people in the place were all frozen in whatever attitude they had been in when all this started. One woman actually had a donut halfway to her mouth and was watching, her eyes growing wider.

"My big seventy-five cent order," I said, letting the change clink on the glass countertop. "Any time you come in *any* place," I went on, "you should look around the room and you should ask yourself, who's the only, *only* possible one here who could have taken Taiwanese mercenaries into Laos in 1968? And you should act accordingly."

"Who the fuck do you think *you* are?" asked the middle one, who hadn't spoken before and looked like he'd taken tai-kwon-do since he was four.

"Practically nobody," I said. "But if any of you say *one more word* before I get my coffee, I'm going out to the saddlebag on my bike, and I'm going to take out a product backed by 132 years of Connecticut Yankee know-how and fine American craftsmanship and I'm coming back in here and showing you *exactly* how the rat chews the cheese."

Then I gave them the Thousand Yard Stare, focusing on something about a half mile past the left shoulder of the guy in the middle.

They backed up, jangling the doorbell, out onto the sidewalk, bumping into a lady coming out with a load of wash.

"Crazy fuck," I heard one of them say as he climbed into the car. The tai-kwon-do guy kept looking at me as the driver cranked the car up. He said something to him, jumped around the car and started kicking the shit out of the back tire of the twelve-speed white Concord leaning against the telephone pole out front.

I heard people sucking in their breaths in the bakery.

The guy kicked the bike three times, watching me, breaking out the spokes in a half moon, laughing.

"My bike!" yelled a woman on one of the stools. "That's my bike! You assholes! Get their license number!" She ran outside.

I turned to the clerk, who had my cup of coffee ready. I plunked down eighty cents in nickels, dimes and pennies, and put two cents in the TIPS cup. Then I put saccharine and cream in the coffee.

Out on the sidewalk, the woman was screaming at the tai-kwon-do-looking guy, and she was crying. His two friends were talking to him in low voices and reaching for their billfolds. He looked like a little kid who'd broken a window in a sandlot ball game. People had come out of the grocery store across the street and were watching.

I got on my bike and rode to the corner unnoticed.

A cop car, lights flashing but with the siren off, turned toward the bakery as I turned out onto the street.

It was only 9:15 A.M. It was looking to be a nice day.

I got two-and-three-fourths stars in the 1977 *Career Woman's Guide to Austin Men*. Here's the entry: Working-class bozo, well-read. Great for a rainy Tuesday night when your regular feller is out of town. PS: You'll have to pick up all the tabs!

I'm still friends with about two-thirds of the women I've ever gone with, which I'm as proud of as anything else in my life, I guess. I care a lot, I'm fairly intelligent, and I have a sense of humor. You know, the doormat personality.

At one time, in those days before herpes and AIDS, when everybody was trying to figure out just who and what they were, I was sort of a Last Station of the Way for women who, in Bob's words, "were trying to decide whether to go nelly or not." They usually did anyway, more often than not with another old girlfriend of mine.

(It all started when I was dating the ex-wife of the guy who was then living with my ex-girlfriend. The lady who was then the ex-wife now lives

with a nice lady who used to be married to another friend of mine. They each have tattoos on their left shoulders. One of them has a portrait of Karl Marx and under it the words *Hot to Trotsky*. The other has the Harley-Davidson symbol but instead of the usual legend it says *Born to Read Hegel*.)

No one set out an agenda or anything for me to be their Last Guy on Earth. It just happened, and expanded outward like ripples in a pond.

About two months ago at a party some young kid was listening to a bunch of us old farts talk, and he asked me, "If the Sixties were so great, and the Eighties suck so bad, then what happened in the Seventies?"

"Well," I said. "Richard Nixon resigned, and then, and then . . . gee, I don't know."

Another woman I dated for a while had only one goal in life: to plant the red flag on the rubble of several prominent landmarks between Virginia and Maryland.

We used to be coming home from the dollar midnight flicks on campus (*Our Daily Bread*, *Sweet Movie*, *China Is Near*) and we would pass this neat old four-story hundred-year-old house, and every time, she would look up at it and say "That's where I'm going to live after the Revolution."

I'm talking 1976 here, folks.

We'd gone out together five or six times, and we went back to her place and were going to bed together for the first time. We were necking, and she got up to go to the bathroom. "Get undressed," she said.

When she came back in, taking her sweater off over her head, I was naked in the bed with the sheets pulled up to my neck. I was wearing a Mao Tse Tung mask.

It was *wonderful*.

Friday. Reunion Eve.

It was one of those days when everything is wrong. All the work I started I messed up in some particularly stupid way. I started everything over twice. I gave up at three P.M.

Things didn't get any better. I tried TV. A blur of talking heads. Nothing interested me for more than thirty seconds.

Outside the sun was setting past Mt. Bonnell and Lake Austin. Over on Cat Mountain the red winks of the lights on the TV towers came on. A Continental 737 went over, heading towards California's golden climes.

I put on a music tape I'd made and tried to read a book. I got up and turned the noise off. It was too Sixties. I'd hear enough of that tomorrow night. No use setting myself up for a wallow in the good times and peaking too early. I drank a beer that tasted like kerosene. It was going to be a cool clear October night. I closed the windows and watched the moon come up over Manor, Texas.

The book was Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*. I tried to read it some more and it began to go *yammer yammer yibble yibble* Twain, *yammer yibble* Hemingway. Enough.

I turned the music back on, put on the headphones and lay down on the only rug in the house, looking up at the cracks in the plaster and listening to the Moody Blues. What a loss of a day, but I was tired anyway. I went to bed at nine P.M.

It was one of those nights when every change in the wind brings an erection, when every time you close your eyes you see penises and vulvas, a lot of them ones you haven't seen before. After staring up at the ceiling for an hour, I got up, got another beer, went into the living room and sat naked in the dark.

I had one of those feelings like I hadn't had in years. The kind your aunt told you she'd had the day your grandfather died, before anybody knew it yet. She told you at the funeral that three days before she'd felt wrong and irritable all day and didn't know why, until the phone rang with the news. The kind of feeling Phil Collins gets on "In the Air Tonight," a mood that builds and builds with no discernible cause.

It was a feeling like in a Raymond Chandler novel, the kind he blames on the Santa Ana winds, when all the dogs bark, when people get pissed off for no reason, when yelling at someone you love is easier than going on silently with the mood you have inside.

Only there were no howling dogs, no sound of fights from next door. Maybe it was just me. Maybe this reunion thing was getting to me more than I wanted it to.

Maybe it was just horniness. I went to the VCR, an old Beta II, second one they ever made, no scan, no timer, all metal, weighs 150 pounds,

bought at Big State Pawn for fifty bucks, sometimes works and sometimes doesn't. I put in *Cum Shot Revue #1* and settled back in my favorite easy chair.

The TV going *kskkssssssssss* woke me up at 4:32 A.M. I turned everything off. So this is what me and my whole generation come down to, people sleeping naked in front of their TVs with empty beer cans in their laps. It was too depressing to think about.

I made my way to bed, lay down, and had dreams. I don't remember anything about them, except that I didn't like them.

I've known three women the latter part of the twentieth century has driven slapdab crazy.

For one, it was through no fault of her own. Certain chemicals were missing in her body. She broke up with me quietly after six months and checked herself into the MHMR. That was the last time I saw her.

She evidently came back through town about three years ago, *after* she quit taking her lithium. I got strange phone calls from old friends who had seen her. Her vision, and that of the one we call reality, no longer intersected. Having destroyed her present, she had begun to work on the past and the future also.

Last I heard she had run off with a cook she met at a Halfway House; they were rumored to be working Exxon barges together on the Mississippi River.

The second, after affairs with five real jerks in a row in six months, began to lose weight. She'd only been 111 pounds to begin with. People whispered about leukemia, cancer, some wasting disease. Of course it wasn't—in the rest of the world, dying by not getting enough to eat is a right, in America, it's a privilege. She began to look like sticks held together with a pair of kid's blue-jeans and a shirt, with only two brightly-glowing eyes watching you from the head to show she was still alive. She was fainting a lot by then.

One day Bob, who had been her lover six years before, went over to her house. (By then she was forgetting to do things like close and lock the doors, or turn on the lights at night.)

Bob picked her up by her shirt collar (it was easy, she only weighed

eighty-three pounds by then) and slapped her, like in the movies, five times as hard as he could.

It was only on the fifth slap that her eyes came to life and filled with fear.

"Stop it, Gabriella," said Bob. "You're killing yourself." Then he kissed her on her bloody, swelling lips, set her down blinking, and walked out her door and her life, and hasn't seen her since.

He saved her. She met another nice woman at the eating disorder clinic. They now live in Westlake Hills, raising the other woman's two boys by her first marriage.

The third one's cat ran away one morning. She went back upstairs, wrote a long apologetic note to her mother, dialed 911 and told them where she was, hung up and drank most of an eleven-ounce can of Crystal Drano.

She lived on for six days in the hospital in a coma with no insides and a raging 107° fever.

Her friends kept checking, but the cat never came back.

"Yo!" said Olin Sweetwater. He and two or three others were standing outside the community college on the cool Saturday morning. He had on a sweatshirt, done up in the old school colors, that said Bull Goose Tour Guide. We shook hands (thumbs locked, sawing our arms back and forth). He was balding; what hair he had left had a white plume across the left side.

The two women, Angela Pardo and Rita Jones when I'd known them, were nervous. Olin handed us sweatshirts that said Tour Guide. We thanked him.

I looked at the brick facade. The school had been an ugly dump in 1969; it was still a dump, but with a charm all its own.

(One of the reasons Olin asked me to help with the tour is that I'd lived with a lady artist for a year who had worked part-time as a clerk in the admissions office of the community college. I guess he thought that qualified me as an Expert.)

The tours were supposed to start at ten A.M. Sleepy college students who had Saturday labs were wandering in and out of the two-and-a-half

story building or some of the other outbuildings the college leased. Olin had pulled lots of strings to let us guide people without any interference, or so he kept telling us.

Around 9:45 people started wandering up, trailing kids, shy husbands, wives, lovers. God, I thought recognizing a few here and there. We're so fucking normal looking. We look like our mothers and fathers did in 1969.

(Remember in 1973 when you saw *American Graffiti* for the first time and everybody laughed at the short haircuts and long skirts, then when you went back to see it in 1981 those parts didn't seem so strange anymore?)

I was talking to one of the few women who'd been nice to me in high school, a quiet girl named Sharon, whose front teeth then had reminded me, sweetly and not at all unpleasantly, of Rocket J. Squirrel's. She was now, I learned, on her second divorce. She introduced me to her kids—Seth and Jason—who looked like they'd rather be on Mars than here.

Sharon stopped talking and stared behind me. I saw other people turning and followed their gaze toward the street. "Jesus," I said. A pink flowered VW Beetle pulled up to the curb as a student drove away. Out of it came something from Mr. Natural—the guy had hair down to his butthole (a wig, it turned out), headband, walnut shell beads, elephant bell pants with neon green flash panels, a khaki shirt and wool vest, Ben Franklin specs tinted Vick's Salve blue. There was a B-52 peace symbol button big as a dinner plate on his left abdomen, and the vest had a leather stash pocket at the bottom snaps.

Something in the way he moves . . .

Seth and Jason were pointing and laughing, other people were looking embarrassed.

"Peace, Love, and Brotherhood," he said, flashing us the peace sign.

The voice. I knew it after twenty years. Hoyt Lawton.

Hoyt Lawton had been president of the fucking Key Club in 1969! He'd worn three-piece suits to school even on the days when he didn't *have* to go eat with the Rotarians! His hair was never more than three-eighths of an inch off his skull—we said he never got it cut, it just never grew. He won a bunch of money from something like the DAR for a speech he made at a Young Republicans convention on how all hippies needed was a good stiff tour of duty in Vietnam that would show them what America was all about. Hoyt Lawton, what an asshole!

And yet, there he was, the only one with enough *chutzpah* to show up

like we were all supposed to feel. Okay, I'm older and more tolerant now. Hoyt, you're still an asshole, but with a little style.

By about 10:10 there were a hundred people there. Excluding husbands, wives, Significant Others and kids, maybe sixty of the Class of '69 had taken the trouble to show up.

Olin divided us up so we wouldn't run into each other. I started my group of twenty or so (Hoyt was in Olin's group thank god) on the second floor. We climbed the stairs.

"You'll notice they have air conditioning now?" I said. There were laughs. Austin hits ninety-five by April 20 most years. We'd sweltered through Septembers and died in Mays here, to the hum of ineffectual floor fans. The ceilings were twenty feet high and the ceiling fans might as well have been heat pumps.

"How many of you spent most of the last semester here?" I said, pointing. Two or three held up their hands. "This used to be the principal's office; now it's the copy center. Over there was Mr. Dix's office itself." Lots of people laughed then, probably hadn't thought of the carrot-headed principal since graduation day. He'd had it bad enough before someone heard him referred to as "Red" by the Superintendent of Schools one day.

"That used to be the only office that was air-conditioned, remember? At least you could get cool while waiting to be yelled at." I pointed to the air-conditioning vents.

That there air duct I didn't say is the one that Morey Morkheim got into and took a big dump in one night after they'd expelled him one of those times. Only in America is the penalty for skipping school expulsion for three days.

Mr. Dix had yelled at him after the absence, "What are you going to do with your life? You'll never amount to anything without an education!"

In seven months Morey was pulling in more money in a weekend than Dix would make in ten years—legally, too.

We moved through the halls, getting curious stares from students in classrooms with closed glass doors.

"Down here was where the student newspaper office was. Over there was the library, which the community college is using as a library." We went down to the first floor.

"Ah, the cafeteria!" It was now the study room, full of chairs and tables and vending machines. "Remember tomato surprise! Remember macaroni

and cheese!" "Fish lumps on Friday!" said someone.

Half the student body in those days had come from the parochial junior highs around town. In 1969, parochial was the way you spelled Catholic. Nobody in the school administration ever read a paper, evidently, so they hadn't learned that the Pope had done away with "going to hell on a meat rap" back in 1964. So you still had fish lumps on Friday when we were there.

The only good thing about having all those Catholic kids there was that we got to hear their jokes for the first time, like what's God's phone number? ETCumspiri 220!

"Down there, way off to the left," I said "was the band hall. You remember Mr. Stoa?" There were groans. "I thought so. Only musician I ever met who had *absolutely* no sense of rhythm."

Ah, the band hall. Where one morning a bunch of guys locked themselves in just before graduation, wired the intercom up to broadcast all over school, and played "Louie, Louie" on tubas, instead of the National Anthem, during home room period. It was too close to the end of school to expel them, so they didn't let them come to the commencement exercise. In protest of which, when they played "Pomp and Circumstance," about three hundred of us Did the Freddy down the aisles of the municipal auditorium in our graduation gowns.

We passed a door leading to the boiler room, where all the teachers popped in for a smoke between classes, it being forbidden for them to take a puff anywhere on school grounds but in the Teachers' Lounge during their off-hour.

I stopped and opened it—sure enough, it was there, dimmed by twenty years and several attempts to paint over it, but in the remains of smudged-over day-glo orange paint on the top inside of the door it still said: *Ginny and Ray's Motel*.

Ginny Balducci and Ray Petro had come to school one morning ripped on acid and had wandered down to the boiler room and had taken their clothes off. My theory is that it was warm and nice and they wanted to feel the totality of the sensuous space. The school's theory, after they were interrupted by Coach Smetters, was that they had been Fornicating During Home Room Period, and without hall passes, too!

After Ginny came down, and while her father was screaming at Ray's parents across Dix's desk, she said to her father, "Leave them alone. They didn't have *their* clothes off!"

"Young lady," said Dix. "You don't seem to realize what serious trouble you're in."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ginny, looking the principal square in the eye, "Castrate me?"

I answered some questions about the fire escape that used to be on the south side of the building. "They fell on a community college student one day four years ago," I said. "Good thing we never *had* to use them." We were outside again.

"Over there was the gym. World's worst dance floor, second worst basketball court. Enough sweat was spilled there over the years to float the *Big Mo*.

We can't go in, though, they now use it to store visual aids for the Parks and Rec department."

There was the morning when Dix had us all go to the gym for Assembly. His purpose, it went on to appear after he had talked for ten minutes, was to try to explain why the Armed Forces recruiters would be there on Career Day, along with the realtors and college reps and Rotarians who would come to tell you about the wonders of their profession in the Great Big World Out There. (Some nasty posters had appeared on every bare inch of wall in the building that morning questioning not only their presence on Career Day but also their continuing existence on the third rock from the sun.)

He was going on about how they had been there, draft or no draft, war or no war, every Career Day when a small sound started at the back of the ranked bleachers. The sound of two stiffened index fingers drumming slowly but very deliberately *dum-dum-thump dum-dum-thump*. Then a few other sets of fingers joined in *dum-dum-thump dum-dum-thump*, at first background, then rising, louder and more insistent, then feet took it up, and it spread from section to section, while the teachers looked around wildly. *Dum-Dum-Thump Dum-Dum-Thump*.

Dix stopped in mid-sentence, mouth open, while the sound grew. He saw half the student body—the other half was silent, or like the jocks led by Hoyt Lawton, beginning to boo and hiss—rise to its feet clapping its hands and stamping its feet in time—

DUM DUM THUMP DUM DUM THUMP

He yelled at people and pointed, then he quit and his shoulders sagged. And on a hidden passed signal, everybody quit on the same beat and it was deathly silent in the gym. Then everybody sat back down.

I think Dix had seen the future that morning—Kent State, the Cambodian incursion, the cease fire, the end of Nixon, the fall of Saigon.

He dismissed us. The recruiters were there on Career Day anyway.

I'd almost finished my tour. "One more place, not on the official stops," I said. I took them across the side street and down half a block.

"Ow wow!" said someone halfway there. "The Grindstone!"

We got there. It was a one-story place with real glass bricks across the whole front that would cost \$80 a pop these days. The place was full of tools and cars.

"Oh, gee," said the people.

"It's now the Skill Shop," I said. "Went out of business in 1974, bought up by the city, leased by the community college."

Ah, the Grindstone! A real old-fashioned cafe/soda fountain. You were forbidden on pain of death to leave the school grounds except at lunch, so three thousand people tried to get in every day between 11:30 and 12:30.

One noon the place was packed. There was the usual riot going on over at UT ten blocks away. All morning you could hear sirens and dull *whoomps* as the increasingly senile police commissioner, who had been in office for thirty-four years, tried dealing with the increasingly complex late twentieth century. *Why, the children have gone mad*, he once said in a TV interview.

Anyway, we were all stuffing our faces in the Grindstone when this guy comes running in the front door and out the back at two-hundred miles an hour. Somebody made the obvious stoned joke—"Man, I thought he'd *never* leave!"—and then a patrol car slammed up to the curb, and a cop jumped out. You could see his mind work.

A. Rioter runs into the Grindstone. B. Grindstone is full of people. Therefore: C. Grindstone is full of rioters.

He opened the door, fired a tear-gas grenade right at the lunch counter, turned, got in his car and drove away.

People were barfing and gagging all over the place. There were screams, tears, rage. The Grindstone was closed for a week so they could rent some industrial fans and air it out. The city refused to pick up the tab. "The officer was in hot pursuit," said the police commissioner, "and acted within the confines of departmental guidelines." Case closed.

"Ah, the Grindstone," I said to the tour group. "What a *nice* place." A wave of nostalgia swept over me. "Today, shakes and fries. Tomorrow, a lube job and tune-up."

I was so filled with *mono no aware* that I skipped the picnic that afternoon.

The Wolfskill Hotel! Scene of a thousand-and-one nights' entertainments and more senior proms than there are fire ants in all the fields in Texas.

A friend of mine named Karen once said people were divided into two classes: those who went to their senior proms and went on to live fairly normal lives, and those who didn't, who became perverts, mass murderers or romance novelists.

If you were a guy you got maybe your first blow job after the prom, or if a girl a quick boff in the back seat of some immemorial Dodge convertible out at Lake Travis. The hotel meant excitement, adventure, magic.

I hadn't gone to my senior prom. A lot of us hadn't, looking on it as one more corrupt way to suck money from the working classes so that orchids could die all over the vast American night.

There were some street singers outside the hotel, playing jug band music without a jug—two guitars, a flute, tambourine and harmonica. They were fairly quiet. The cops wouldn't hassle them until after eleven P.M. They were pretty good. I dropped a quarter into their cigar box.

You could hear the strains of the Byrds' "Turn! Turn! Turn!" before you got through the lobby. The entertainment committee must have dropped a ton o'bucks on this—they had a bulletin board out front just past the registration table with everybody's pictures from the yearbook blown up, six to a sheet.

It was weird seeing all those people's names and faces—the beginnings of mustaches and beards on the guys, we'd fought tooth and nail for facial hair—long straight hair on the women—names that hadn't been used, or gone back to three or four times, in the last twenty years.

I paid my \$10.00 fee (like in the old days. Dance Tonight! Guys fifty cents Girls Free!).

Inside the ballroom people were already dancing, maybe a hundred, with that many more standing around talking and laughing in knots and clumps, being polite to each other, sizing up what Time's Heedless Claws

had done to each other's bodies and outlooks.

Bob and Penny were already there. He was in a bluejean jacket and pants and wore a clear plastic tie. Penny was stunning, in a green velour thing, beautiful as she always is early in the evenings, before alcohol turns her into a person I don't know.

I was real spiffed out, for me: a nice sport coat, black slacks, a red silk tie with painted roses wide as the racing stripe on a Corvette.

There were people there in \$500 gowns, \$300 suits, tuxes, jeans, coveralls. Several were in period costumes; Hoyt had on another, much better than this morning's nightmare, but still what I describe as Early Neil Young. He was, of course, with a slim blonde who had once been a Houston cheerleader, I'm sure.

I saw some faculty members there. They had all been invited, of course. Ten or so, with their husbands or wives, had come. Even Mr. Stoa was there. It hit me as I looked at them that most of them had been in their twenties and thirties when they were trying to deal with us on a daily basis, much younger than we were now. God, what a thankless job they must have had— going off every day like going back up to the Front in WWI, trying to teach kids who viewed you as The Enemy, following along behind everything you did with the efficient erasers in their minds! Maybe I'm getting too mellow— they had it easier with us than teachers do now—at least most of us *could* read, and music was more important than TV to us. Later, I told myself, I'll go over and talk to Ms. Nugent who was always my favorite and who had been a good teacher in spite of the chaos around her.

There were two guys working the tapes and CDs up on the raised stage. I didn't recognize the order of the songs so knew they weren't playing one of my tapes. On the front part of the stage were a guitar and bass, a drum set and keyboards.

So it was true, and seemed the main topic of conversation, although as I passed one bunch of people I heard someone say "Those assholes? Them?"

Barb showed up, without a date, of course. She took my hand and led me toward the dance floor. "Let's dance until our shoulders bleed," she said. "Yes, ma'am!" I said.

I don't know about you, but I've been hypnotized on dance floors before. Sometimes it seems as if the tune stretches out to accommodate how long and hard you want to dance, or think you can. The guys working the decks

were switching back and forth between two cassette players and the music never stopped—occasionally songs *only* I could have recorded showed up. I didn't care. I was dancing.

(I've seen some strange things on dance floors in my life—the strangest was people forming a conga line to a song by the band Reptilikus called "After Today, You Got One Less Day To Live.")

"Ginny's here," I said to Barb. Barb looked over toward the door where Ginny Balducci's wheelchair had rolled in. One weekend in 1973 Ginny had gone off for a ski weekend with an intern, and had come back out of the hospital six months later with a whole different life. "I'll say hi in a minute." said Barb.

We danced to the only Dylan song you can dance to, "I Want You," "Back in the U.S.S.R.," Buffalo Springfield, Blue Cheer, Sam and Dave, slow tunes by Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke, then Barb went over to talk to Ginny. I was a sweating wreck by then, and the ugly feeling from the night before was all gone.

I started for the *whizzoh*.

"You won't like it," said a guy coming out of the men's room.

The smell hit me like a hammer. Someone had yelled New York into one of the five washbasins. It was half full. It appeared the person had lived exclusively for the last week on Dinty Moore Beef Stew and Fighting Cock Bourbon.

A janitor came in cursing as I was washing my hands.

I went back out to the ballroom. Mouse and the Trapps "Public Execution" was playing—someone who doesn't *dance* recorded that. Then came Jackie Wilson's "Higher and Higher."

"Dance with me?" asked someone behind me. I turned. It was Sharon. She must have Gone Borneo that afternoon. She'd been somewhere where they do things to you, wonderful things. She had on a blue dress and seamed silk stockings, and now she had an Aunt Peg haircut.

"You bet your ass!" I said.

About halfway through the next dance, I suffered a real sense of loss. I missed my butthole-length hair for the first time in ten years. The song, of course, was "Hair" off the original Broadway cast recording, Diane Keaton and all, and Joe Morton's wife Patricia, who had never cut hers, it grew within inches of the floor, suddenly grabbed it near her skull with one hand and whipped it around and around her head, the ends fanning out like a giant hand across the colored lights above the stage. Joe continued

his Avalon-ballroom-no-sweat dancing, oblivious to the applause his wife was getting.

Then they played the Fish Cheer and we all sang and danced along with "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die-Rag."

Then the lights came up and the entertainment director, Jamie Younts/Fulton, came to the mike and treated us to twenty minutes of nostalgic boredom and forced yoks. The tension was building.

"Now," she said, "for those of you who don't know, we've got them together again for the first time in nineteen years, here they are, Craig Beausoliel, Morey Morkheim, Abram Cassuth, and Andru Esposito, or, as you know them, *Distressed Flag Sale!*"

It was about what you'd expect—four guys in their late thirties in various pieces of clothing stretching across twenty years of fashion changes.

Morey'd put on weight and lost teeth, Andru had taken weight off. Abram, who'd been the only one without facial hair in our day, now had a full Jerry Garcia beard. Craig, who came out last, like always, and plugged in while we applauded—all four or five hundred people in the ballroom now—didn't look like the same guy at all. He looked like a businessman dressed up at Halloween to look like a rock singer.

He was a little unsteady on his feet. He was a little drunk.

"Enough of this Sixties crap!" he said. People applauded again. "Tonight, this first and last performance, we're calling ourselves *Lizard Level!*"

Then Abram hit the keyboard in the opening trill of "In-a-Gadda-da-Vida" for emphasis, then they slammed into "Proud Mary," Creedence's version, and the place became a blur of flying bodies, drumming feet, swirling clothes. The band started a little raggedy, then got it slowly together.

They launched into the Chambers Bros.' "Time Has Come Today," always a show stopper, a hard song for everybody *including* the Chambers Bros., if you ever saw them, and the place went really crazy, especially in the slow-motion parts. Then they did one of their own tunes, "The Moon's Your Harsh Mistress, Buddy, Not Mine," which I'd heard exactly once in two decades.

We were dancing, all kinds, pogo, no-sweat, skank, it didn't matter. I

saw a few of the hotel staff standing in the doorways tapping their feet. Andru hit that screaming wail in the bass that was the band's trademark, sort of like a whale dying in your bathtub. People yelled, shook their arms over their heads.

Then they started to do "Soul Kitchen." Halfway through the opening, Craig raised his hand, shook it, stopped them.

"Awwwww," we said, like when a film breaks in a theater.

Craig leaned toward the others. He was shaking his head. Morey pointed down at his playlist. They put their heads together. Craig and Abram were giving the other two chord changes or something.

"Hey! Make music!" yelled some jerk from the doorway.

Craig looked up, grabbed the mike. "Hold it right there, asshole," he said, becoming the Craig we had known twenty years ago for a second. He leaned against the mike stand in a Jim Morrison vamp pose. "You stay right here, you're going to hear the god-damnedest music you ever heard!"

They talked together for a minute more. Andru shrugged his shoulders, looked worried. Then they all nodded their heads.

Craig Beausoliel came back up front. "What we're gonna do now, what we're gonna do now, gonna do," he said in a Van Morrison post-Them chant, "is we're gonna do, gonna do, the song we were gonna do that night in Miami . . ."

"Oh, geez," said Bob, who was on the dance floor near Sharon and me.

Distressed Flag Sale had gone into seclusion early in 1970, holing up like The Band did in the *Basement Tapes* days with Dylan, or like Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys while they were working on the never-finished *Smile* album. They were supposedly working on an album (we heard through the grapevine) called either *New Music for the AfterPeople* or *A Song to Change the World*, and there were supposedly heavy scenes there, lots of drugs, paranoia, jealousy, and revenge, but also great music. We never knew, because they came out of hiding to do the Miami concert to raise money for the family of a janitor blown up by mistake when somebody drove a car-bomb into an AFEES building one four A.M.

"It was a great song, man, a great song," said Craig. "It was going to change the world we thought." We realized for the first time how drunk Craig really was about then. "We were gonna play it that night, and the world was gonna change, but instead they got us, they *got us*, man, and we were the ones that got changed, not them. Tonight we're not Distressed Flag Sale, we're Lizard Level, and just once anyway, so you'll all know,

tonight we're gonna do 'Life Is Like That.' "

(What changed in Miami was the next five years of their lives. The Miami cops had been holding the crowd back for three hours and looking for an excuse, anyway, and they got it, just after Distressed Flag Sale made its reeling way onstage. The crowd was already frenzied, and got up to dance when the guys started playing "Life Is Like That" and Andru took out his dong on the opening notes and started playing slide bass with it. The cops went crazy and jumped them, beat them up, planted heroin and amphetamines in their luggage in the dressing rooms, carted them off to jail and turned firehoses on the rioting fans.

Everybody knew the bust was rigged, because they charged Morey with possession of heroin, and everybody *knew* he was the speed freak.

And that was the end of Distressed Flag Sale.

It was almost literally the end of Andru, too. What the papers didn't tell you was that, as he was uncircumcised, he'd torn his frenum on the strings of the bass, and he almost lost, first, his dong, and then his life before the cops let a doctor in to see him.)

That's the history of the song we were going to hear.

Notes started from the keyboard, like it was going to be another Doors-type song, building. Then Craig moved his fingers a few times on the guitar strings, tinkling things rang up high, like birds were in the air over the stage, sort of like the opening of "Touch of Grey" by the Dead, but not like that either. Then Andru came in, and Morey, then it began to take on a shape and move on its own, like nothing else at all.

It moved. And it moved me, too. First I was swaying, then stomping my right foot. Sharon was pulling me toward the dance floor. I'd never heard anything like it. *This* was dance music. Sharon moved in large sways and swings; so did I.

The floor filled up fast. *Everybody* moved toward the music. Out of the corner of my eye I saw old Mr. Stoa asking someone to dance. Other teachers moved towards the sound.

Then I was too busy moving to notice much of anything. I was dancing, dancing not with myself but with Sharon, with Bob and Penny, with *everyone*.

All five hundred people danced. Ginny Balducci was at the corner of the floor, making her chair move in small tight graceful circles. I smiled. We all smiled.

The music got louder; not faster, but more insistent. The playing was

superb, immaculate. *Lizard Level's* hands moved like they were a bar band that had been playing together every night for twenty years. They seemed oblivious to everything, too, eyes closed, feet shuffling.

Something was happening on the floor, people were moving in little groups and circles, couples breaking off and shimmying down between the lines of the others, in little wagging dance steps. It was happening all over the place. Then *I* was doing it—like Sharon and I had choreographed every move. People were clapping their hands in time to the music. It sounded like steamrollers were being thrown around in the ballroom.

Above it the music kept building and building in an impossible spiral.

Now the hotel staff joined in, busboys clapping hands, maids and waitresses turning in circles.

Then the pattern of the dance changed, magically, instantly, it split the room right down the middle, and we were in two long interlocking linked chains of people, crossing through each other, one line moving up the room, the other down it, like it was choreographed.

And the guys kept playing, and more people were coming into the ballroom. People in pajamas or naked from their rooms, the night manager and the bellboys. And as they joined in and the lines got more unwieldy, the two lines of people broke into four, and we began to move toward the doors of the ballroom, clapping our hands, stomping, dancing, making our own music, the same music, more people and more people.

At some point they walked away from the stage, joining us, left their amps, acoustic now. Morey had a single drum and was beating it, you could hear Andru and Craig on bass and guitar, Cassuth was still playing the keyboard on the batteries, his speaker held under one arm.

The street musicians had come into the hotel and joined in, people were picking up trash cans from the lobby, garbage cans from the streets, honking the horns of their stopped cars in time to the beat of the music.

We were on the streets now. Windows in buildings opened, people climbed down from second stories to join in. The whole city jumped in time to the song, like in an old Fleischer cartoon; Betty Boop, Koko, Bimbo, the buses, the buildings, the moon all swaying, the stars spinning on their centers like pinwheels.

Chains of bodies formed on every street, each block. At a certain beat they all broke and reformed into smaller ones that grew larger, interlocking helical ropes of dancers.

I was happy, happier than ever. We moved down one jumping chain of

people. I saw mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, dinosaurs, salamanders, fish, insects, jellies in loops and swirls. Then came the beat and we were in the other chain, moving up the street, lost in the music, up the line of dancing people, beautiful fields, comets, nebulae, rockets and galaxies of calm light.

I smiled into Sharon's face, she smiled into mine.

Louder now the music, stronger, pulling at us like a wind. The cops joined in the dance.

Up Congress Avenue the legislators and government workers in special session came streaming out of their building like beautiful ants from a shining mound.

Louder now and happier, stronger, dancing, clapping, singing.

We will find our children or they will find us, before the dance is over, we can feel it. Or afterwards we will responsibly make more.

The chain broke again, and up the jumping streets we go, joyous now, joy all over the place, twenty, thirty thousand people, more every second.

As we swirled and grew, we would sometimes pass someone who was staring, not dancing, feet not moving; they would be crying in uncontrollable sobs and shakes, and occasionally committing suicide.

The End