

Stained Glass

By

Joel Fawcett and

Michael Harper

Dedicated to
those who talk to
strangers

Joel Fawcett:

I have slept in old barns in the dark of the countryside. I've stayed up all night in the glow of the city lights. The story *Stained Glass* was inspired by a somewhat mishmash radical past. After several years of heavy drifting, with much of nothing to my name but a ratty old toothbrush that I kept inside an old red guitar, these tales, were stamped in my mind during some of the most interesting years of my life. This novel came from all angles of North America. I was tramping all over the countryside trying to make sense of anything. For years, my video camera was my best friend. I talked to it about everything. Together we were extremely fascinated in the people, creatures and the places outside my circle of knowledge. This book is a farfetched version of my diary.

Enjoy.

Michael Harper:

Joel had a story to tell, but needed it written. He couldn't write, I could. I couldn't type, he could. We put our disabilities together and 'penned' an entertaining adventure. We spent two years yelling and screaming at each other, and had a good time doing it.

I know you'll enjoy it

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FLATLINE SILENCE

1

Frank was out of his head with excitement as he stumbled up the stairs and burst through the door.

"Wake up, Joel, wake up!"

Joel had spent the night whimsically wandering the streets and by chance happened to have made it back to Frank's apartment. The last thing that he needed was his father trying to pull him out of bed at this hour, no matter what the reason.

"For God's sake, get up. My car just got hit by a deer."

"Have you been drinking, you fool? Deer don't hit cars." Frank unlocked the closet door and grabbed the rifle that lay stashed behind some clothes.

"Never mind that. Get dressed and let's go."

Frank had been on his way home from a social gathering and certainly shouldn't have been behind the wheel. On the side of the road, he noticed a glowing set of eyes. He wasn't a stranger to this glow; he had seen it before. He slowed down. It was just a deer minding its own business and Frank knew enough not to startle it.

You know that saying: "A deer in head-lights", well this deer wasn't hypnotized. It was spooked and the animal zigzagged its way into the ditch, turned around, and charged back toward the road. Frank hit the brakes. By then, the deer made full on contact with the passenger side door.

Frank pulled to the edge of the road and stumbled from the car. He trampled through the ditch in a drunken search for what had smashed the side of his

vehicle. After walking in a few circles, he tripped over the creature that lay hidden in the tall weeds. Frank jumped back to his feet and stared at the deer. It didn't move, so he stood still and listened. The rhythmical chirping of crickets was all that could be heard. He gave it a kick. Nothing. It lay still, motionless, so he grabbed it by the antlers, and pulled it closer to the shoulder of the road. Then he looked the car over.

"There goes my deductible," he cursed aloud.

The mirror was hanging and the window was smashed. The car was drivable and he only wanted to share his excitement. This opportunity fell to his sleeping son. After struggling to wake Joel, the pair were off to reap the benefits of this unfortunate incident.

Father and son hopped into the car. Joel was forced to sit in the back because the passenger door was jammed. After the short drive back to the scene, they found the animal lying exactly where Frank had left it. With its hindquarters still in the ditch and its head on the shoulder of the road, the two had some work ahead of them.

"Wow, you **did** hit a good-sized deer," Joel observed. Frank marched right up to his son until their noses were within an inch of one another. "No, **he** hit me."

Joel could only shake his head.

Frank began rolling up his sleeves. "Now, what we're going to do here is load the damn thing into the trunk and take it to Charlie's. We'll clean it there." Charlie was one of Frank's hunting buddies.

Joel, still slightly lazy-eyed from abruptly being woken, needed another moment to wrap his head around the situation. The idea of venison on the BBQ provoked a curling smile on his face.

Being the impatient man that Frank was, he sprung out of the car and started tugging at the deer, struggling to pull it out onto the road. He cursed and carried on alone.

"Good job", Joel chuckled aloud. "You'd look if it were only stunned."

No sooner were the words out of Joel's mouth, when the deer's eyes shot open and it started kicking wildly. Frank stumbled backwards and managed to miss the initial flurry. The deer was trying to deal with the situation as he saw fit. Now

alert after only seeing stars, this nocturnal creature with its 20/20 nighttime vision has its adrenaline pumping at full intensity. Before the deer could place all four legs on solid ground, Frank launched at the creature in an attempt to get the upper hand. At about the same weight and the same intelligence, the fight was on.

You'd think anything that wore a natural crown would be no match for a human. Frank didn't care.

Joel had been witness to plenty of craziness in his time, but this by far was the cherry on top. Frank now had his arms wrapped tightly around the deer's neck. All that could be heard were hooves slapping and banging against pavement and Frank grasping and groaning for air. Joel could only stand helpless and watch. The tighter Frank gripped, the more the deer struggled.

The battle was being lost and the deer managed to plant its two front hooves on solid ground. At this point, Joel ran to the car, popped the trunk, and grabbed his father's rifle. Frank was now in the unenviable position of holding the deer by the hindquarters.

Frank screamed. Joel could hear the terror in his father's voice. "Shoot, shoot, shoot!"

"I can't. You're in the way," Joel yelled back, levelling the rifle.

THUD, THUD, THUD. Joel had just heard the hollow sound of hooves hammering a man's chest. Frank hit the ground and lay silent. The battle had come to an end and the deer, now on all fours, darted toward the woods. It was as if Joel was in a dream, a bad dream. Panicking, he threw down the rifle and ran to his father's side.

"Dad, Dad!" No response. Joel was terrified. He could hear the thumping of his own heartbeat. So many awful thoughts raced through his mind. Joel's only option was to load his father into the beat-up car and race to the hospital. He quickly and carefully did just that. Upon his arrival, the paramedics took him in and within five minutes declared Frank dead. A flatline silence.

COLORFULLY FLAWED

2

Take a deep breath. It was time for Joel to step back and collect himself. A quicker process than one may imagine. This specific father and son relationship, although heavily flawed, would end up serving to help Joel deal with any eventuality. There was no shortage of love between the two men, and Joel was smart enough to avoid the negative side of his father's character. Those were footsteps that wouldn't be followed.

By now, you may have guessed that Frank wasn't without many unusual stories. He grew up the youngest of four boys. Being the low man on the totem pole, he was picked on relentlessly. Included in one of the many tortures, there was what they called 'ghost riding'. They would place Frank on a bike before he was even able to reach the pedals. They would then take turns running beside the bike at full speed and then aiming him at their mother's favourite hedge. When the bike got close enough to the hedge they would let go, sending poor little Franky into the bushes. When their mother noticed that her shrubs had been damaged, the brothers would all innocently point their fingers at the scuffed-up little brother in an effort to blame it all on him. Another torture was to tie Franky to their father's office chair. The three boys would then circle the chair and spin it. This was the torture that he hated most. On rainy days, they would do this for hours on end, and together they would claim that they were just getting him ready for the real world.

Huh, the real world, eh?

But in his case, it was the school system that failed him, not his siblings. On several occasions, teachers could be heard saying. "How many times do I have to tell you? Your name is Frank, not Knarf." His learning disability wouldn't be diagnosed until far too late. He had struggled all the way through school until he

met Nad. Dan had experienced much of the same as Frank, but knew what the problem was: DYSLEXIA. At the time, learning disabilities were very misunderstood. To many people it may not seem like a big deal, but Dan and Frank would have argued otherwise. They had each suffered a lifetime of ridicule and self-loathing, which led to Frank's search for an escape. This escape was conveniently sold by the LCBO. His downfall was well underway and everyone but Frank realized that this would eventually be an issue. Because of his dyslexia, Frank was forced to work like a dog in order to get around his problem.

He and Dan built a friendship based on these issues. Together, they made a pact saying that they would each quit school after grade ten. Knowing that they would have to work, they each secured employment on the loading dock of the local cheese factory. After the five o'clock whistle, they would head to the beer store, then to their favorite fishing hole where they sometime caught fish and always caught a buzz.

A murky, fast-running stream it was, and the two of them always sat on the same log, where they would talk trash.

"How fast do you think this planet is moving?" Dan always asked the most outlandish questions. He knew if anybody had close to an accurate guess, Frank would be the one.

"Oh, that's an easy one. 67,000 mph. I remember my father talking about this when I was a young lad."

"OK, smartass. When a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear it?"

"Ya', funny. Here's one for you." Frank tossed his empty can onto the pile at their feet. "If the earth stopped spinning would we catch any fish?"

"You don't catch any fish because you don't think like one," Dan snapped back. And so it continued. They talked nonsense like this on a regular basis. They were just a couple of dry-land suckers. It seemed like the boys had a story for everything. As they were having their conversation a cruiser slowly passed by them.

"That reminds me." Dan nodded toward the patrol car. "Remember last year when that cop car hit the river?" Dan tried to get them on an actual topic.

"Of course I remember," Frank said. "I'm the only one who had the nads to swim up to it."

"Ya', shriveled nads." Dan was always quick to interject some dyslexic humour.

"Once in a while, I still wear the cop hat and think about how I wish that I kept the cherries instead. You know me; I got paranoid and traded the lights to Eddy for a good-sized bag of green. He still hooks them to a car battery and lights them up for me when I'm there." Frank took a swig of his drink, sighed heavily and put on a mischievous grin. "In all honesty, it only took me a few minutes to get the light off the car. All I needed was a wrench, a few shallow dives, and the lights were mine."

These fishing expeditions would carry on for years. During this time, Dan and Frank would solve many of the world's greatest problems. Their friendship had stood the test of time off the leash, but as the boys grew older they realized that they were missing one thing: female accompaniment. This was the wedge that would eventually lead the boys to drift apart.

One night Frank struck gold. On the edge of town, there stood an abandoned house. No one knew who owned it and no one really cared. This was the place where everybody gathered after the bartender announced last call. Sometimes on the weekends, there might be ten people and sometimes there might be as many as fifty. At one particular impromptu hullabaloo, Frank found himself chatting up a pretty blonde named Joanne. Through the crowd, this gal really stood out. It was as if the candlelight followed her and her alone. Frank was winning his game of poker when he spotted her. He hadn't seen her before so he just assumed that she was from a neighbouring town. He laid down a full house and without collecting his winnings went off to catch the real prize. He talked her into stepping outside with him to take a walk to the old weathered rope swing.

She was a beauty with ocean-coloured eyes, long blonde hair, a dimpled smile, and an inarguable love for all that was alive. *She* was a real flower child. After gazing at the heavens for what seemed like an eternity, they silently agreed to go halves on a boy named Sue.

Nine months later, Joanne presented Frank with the eight pound result of their one-night stand under the stars. They both approved of the name Joel. It was a good thing that they were never officially married because it wasn't long before Joanne grew tired of Frank's shenanigans. For the baby's sake, they stuck it out for a few years, but Frank's habits were unbreakable.

He was more preserved than a jar of pickles. Instead of cereal in the morning, he would light up a smoke. Because he chain-smoked, he would only use one match a day. He was neither the one who would say please, not thank you. He's the guy who cuts you off, you honk, and he flips you the bird. This young lady made of silk was forced to abandon all of her maternal instincts just to escape this obviously dysfunctional living arrangement. She even left her son behind.

As a result, Joel grew up essentially free-range, just like a chicken. The father/son relationship wasn't all laughs. Frank would become bitter and it would sour Joel's tastes. He loved his father, but despised the actions and antics that came with a belly full of booze. There was a long list of events that Joel had to endure. Frank would swing his dick in windmill fashion and fire empty beer bottles at anything. He was the loudest guy in the bar, the craziest cock in the house. He would turn into a fall down, get up, and fall down again drunk.

Left to his own devices, Joel raised himself. He grew up fort-making, dog-riding, and creek-raiding. He was a real natural pirate, leaving no stone unturned. School was more of a pain in the ass than anything, but to his father's credit, he made sure Joel attended regularly. It was shortly after his high school graduation when Frank took the hoof to the chest.

The next trial in Joel's saga was to endure his father's funeral. This was not something that any child should have to deal with. Frank was a good-looking man with dark black hair and a dark complexion to go with it. There was no question that this would be an open casket event. In a morbid way, dozens of acquaintances would make the funeral a standing room only occasion. Joel was dumbfounded; in a room full of this many rowdy characters, he had never experienced an overwhelmingly respectful silence like this before. There were several rows of black suits and tears.

At the reception afterward, Joel ran into an old family friend, a lawyer by the name of Jimmy Campbell. Jimmy was a man who never left his office. The suit he wore to the funeral could very well have been the same one that he wore to work the day before. The man only bragged of one thing; his extensive watch collection. At least he was always on time. He was a curious, white-haired fellow and also happened to be one of Frank's oldest, most sensible friends. Sure, they had grown up in the same town, but their ideas of the future were completely different. One of them went off to get educated and the other was Frank.

Over the years of his childhood, Joel and Jimmy had developed their own relationship. Jimmy had bailed Joel out of jail a couple times before, so it was easiest just to leave the legalities of Frank's estate in his capable hands.

Frank's friends made this somber event more relaxed by recounting some typical tales from his storybook past. All of the stories were hilariously stupid, but one stood out and put a smile on Joel's face for the first time in a long while.

Picture this:

It looked like it took about seven pieces of road kill to make. It was brown and fluffy and had a flap hanging down each side. It looked like it was alive and Frank wore the goddamned this on his head. It was his favorite hunting hat.

"Look at you, Frank. Are you the hunter or the hunted?"

"Fuck you, dink hole. At least I'll be warm"

This was a standard comeback from a guy who had no standards at all. Frank and Charlie were about a half a mile apart sitting quietly in tree stands enjoying the contents of their individual wine skins. Neither of them had seen a thing all day. Now night was starting to fall, and Frank was restless, mostly because his wine skin was empty. He climbed down from his perch to go find his buddy and call it a day. The grass was almost five feet tall and he was quickly lost among the swaying sea. With no sense of direction, he staggered and stumbled and was immediately smacked in the head, blindsided. It scared the life out of him and before he could figure out what had just happened, in typical fashion, he went straight to yelling and screaming at the top of his lungs. He frantically emptied his rifle in all directions. To his partner, it sounded like a WWII battle re-enactment. Frank had been dive bombed by something that had been stalking his hat since he climbed out of the tree.

Now, if you were a raptor and saw this hat bobbing through your hunting territory, you'd probably react the same way.

After catching his breath and trying to get his mind around what had just happened, he gazed up and there it was. The victorious owl was sitting there on a branch, almost smiling, with Frank's hat in its talons.

As the story concluded with a round of chuckles, Joel reflected on good times, while remembering such a colourfully flawed character.

ONE MAN'S JUNK

3

A simple walk to the mailbox would determine the next course of events. Joel remembered his father jumping up and down while cursing the arrival of this bad news dressed in a manila veil. You must remember that even semantics have antics in them. Joel was glad that Jimmy Campbell had attended his dad's funeral. Not a very nice coincidence, but this was the time that lawyers did their work. He needed all the legalities of his father's will read and settled.

His father's will contained a deed for a piece of bush property in the middle of nowhere that Joel was never aware of. Not only was it willed to him, but much to his surprise his father also had an insurance policy. To his great satisfaction it was worth a cool one hundred thousand dollars. Frank started this policy when Joel was about five. Much to everyone's surprise, he had paid the premiums every month for the last thirteen years.

When the final conversation was had with his trusty friend and lawyer, all had been settled. Joel was left with a piece of land, some money, a memory of his father and nothing else.

There was one more place that he had to go. His next steps were actually a dozen of them up the stairs to his father's apartment. It was his first time back since the accident. The place was a complete mess. Even the door was off its hinges. Words couldn't describe the living conditions. You had to give Frank credit for paying his insurance premiums, because he most certainly could not keep house. With a piss-stained sofa and an overflowing ashtray, if Joel really wanted to clean it up he wouldn't know where to start. Most of the living room furniture was made up of empty beer cases and whiskey boxes. The fridge was bare except for a

handful of outdated condiments and moldy Chinese takeout. Joel had spent his high school years as a rambling man, spending the majority of that time couch surfing. It didn't take him long to realize that a change was necessary.

After a week of trying to live in his father's squalor, he answered a knock at the door. It was a couriered package from Jimmy, and a load off Joel's shoulders. Jimmy worked fast. In the package, there was a comprehensive insurance cheque and the location of his new property. He left the apartment and immediately hit the road in the direction of Vinegar Hill. It had a funny sounding name, but it held the keys to Joel's future.

"Now, what kinda' hillbilly, potato-pickin', fried-chicken, watermelon, crack Cadillac place am I headin' to?" Joel mumbled quickly under his breath as he was waiting for a ride at the side of a dusty back road. It didn't take long for him to be picked up by a friendly Dodge and the ride began. The farmer who picked him up didn't know much about Vinegar Hill, and the ride was awkwardly silent. Joel was trying to turn the page, and this would at least give him the opportunity to forget the unpleasantness of the past month.

"Here, son. I'm turning, so I'm gonna let you out here. Just follow this road for about a mile and just passed the dump you'll find the concession that you're looking for on your left. Good luck, kid."

For a guy who had spent his entire existence paying attention to everything, he had just spent an hour and a half with his head in the clouds. He didn't know where he was, but in this glazed, sedated state he realized that now was the time to move on. With a little headshake to bring him back to earth, he began his walk. After passing the dump, he was able to find an address that closely matched the one typed on the paper crumpled in his hand.

There it was. His property. It started with a long overgrown laneway that obviously hadn't been used in a coon's age. He walked the lane and surveyed the property. It was a nice chunk of land with a few mature oak trees and a good cluster of thirty-foot cedars. But what really caught Joel's attention was the half-acre of apple trees in full bloom. If he listened carefully, he could hear the bees hard at work. The buzzing was hypnotic. He didn't know who had settled this property, but it was obvious that someone, at some time, had taken good care of it.

The first half of the property contained the cedars, the oaks, and the orchard. It was surprisingly beautiful, and with many more acres that begged to be

explored, Joel had a new sense of being. This would be the first sight of something that he would come to love.

Even before arriving at the plot of land, Joel's intention was to camp out under the stars, so he put his pack down at the base of a tree and continued to explore. On the other side of the orchard, he found a fair-sized pond with a frayed and weathered rope swing. In its time, it was probably the source of much sought-after enjoyment. After skipping a few stones, it was time to move on.

He walked around the pond and there it was. It almost had a face of its own. The roof was rusty, the walls were tall, and the oak trees had stood guard for many years. The image came from the two haymow doors that looked as if they were keeping watch over the land. This barn held an overwhelming sense of attraction. Joel stood with his mouth agape while the structure was taunting him to try to get inside. He approached, looking for a way. The barn was sealed tightly, making entry nearly impossible. He scanned the outer perimeter looking for his prey's weak spot. Come hell or high water, he would get in. The north side of the barn was more heavily weathered, making it his best bet for entry.

Darkness was falling fast, so he decided to get back to the tree where his pack lay. He would try the mystical barn again in the morning. The moon was shining brightly, making bad medicine for the coyotes. He lay at the base of the oak listening for what seemed like hours. They yipped and howled, as if warning the barn of impending entrance. To the average kid, this would be a nightmare, but Joel knew that sleeping under the stars and listening to coyotes was much better than a piss-stained sofa, any day.

The next morning, the sun peeked through the stand of cedars, staring Joel in the face and making for a pleasant awakening. He had spent the night trying to come to terms with his present past. He was a good-looking guy with a bank full of money. The balance in his account was of no importance to him, but it would make things slightly easier. He thought about his absolute lack of support and his lack of family. It would take time to swallow this bitter pill. He didn't know why, but knew he would feel better once he got into the barn. He tried again.

He circled the barn a few more times looking for a weak spot. It was a very well built structure and was locked up tighter than Fort Knox. All except for the weak board seven feet up on the north wall. He rolled over an old rain barrel that he found tangled in a pile of weeds, stood on it, and started peeling the board back. After a few minutes of wrenching, he had made himself enough room to weasel his

way in. Unfortunately, he forgot to anticipate the drop on the other side. CRASH. In a cloud of dust, he fell into the barn landing on his back. He lay breathless. It was an old storage chest that had broken his fall. He, however, was okay. At least he had made it inside.

To Joel's surprise, the barn was a sanctuary for everything forgotten. Upon first glance, he noticed a couple of bicycles, books, trunks, and even an old jukebox. The list was endless and it would take him weeks just to itemize what he had found.

Most people would have thought of this as just a barn full of junk, but to Joel it was an unexplored treasure. He stood there with the knowledge that whatever he touched was his. He didn't know where to start. It was obvious that the barn was forgotten about and also obvious that nobody had been in it for decades. He had no idea where the stuff had come from originally, but it was a dumping ground for what somebody had deemed useless junk. Joel was thrilled.

He started snooping in a blue trunk. This trunk was one of several identical trunks, and it happened to be the one that broke his fall when he physically dropped in. Inside was a tackle box and all of the camping gear anyone could ever need. There were even a couple old oil lamps that looked to be in good working order. The rough-looking brown trunk, beside the blue one, was full of old quilts and in the bottom lay a couple of old pictures. One of the pictures had four people riding on a single horse. They all looked very happy except, of course, the horse. It was only a matter of time before Joel glanced over his shoulder and spied the fishing rods hanging beside an old Wurlitzer.

At this point Joel realized that he was getting hungry. It had been a few days since he had eaten a full meal. His eating habits just hadn't been the same since the tragedy of his father. Exploring, he decided, this couldn't wait till later. He gathered up all of the fishing gear and went to try his luck at the pond.

It took many attempts until he finally snagged a mud pout. He was very thankful that Frank had always taught him to keep a sharp knife and a flame in his pocket. The Zippo was a trusted friend and had yet to fail him. Coupled with the camping gear, Joel was pleased to note that it would be easy to stay fed. After his feed of fish and nibbling a few greens picked fresh from the land, he felt rejuvenated enough to continue rummaging. Crawling through the opening that he'd made, Joel immediately realized that before any more exploring was take place, he must get the barn door open. He looked around for a toolbox and found what he

was looking for. There was a smaller door in the rear, which he unhinged, giving him access to his very own personal address.

He then continued his exploration of the barn. The trunks were piled on top of each other. Other than the two that he had already opened, there were still maybe a dozen or more to explore. Whoever originally owned this stuff left a lot of themselves behind. The next trunk that was opened was filled with children's toys. It contained board games, stuffed animals, crayons, GI Joes, and a jar of old fireflies. It was obviously from a child's room. Perhaps Frank's?

The next trunk was fancy-looking with a velvety texture and an arch-style lid, but before he opened he thought he would look around some more. During his walkabout, he found enough music paraphernalia to start a band. There was a piano and several microphones. There were hundreds of pages of sheet music and even a steel drum. Near the workbench hung saddles, shovels, and ropes. Below the bench were all of the tools he could ever imagine. There was even a wooden wheelbarrow. By the birdcages, was a mahogany roll top desk. Under all the furniture, he even found a full-sized billiard table. It was getting late in the day and the sun was getting sleepy. He would eagerly get back at it after a good night's rest.

He scoped around the barn and found that one of the two lofts was empty. Each loft held its own window, simulating the eyes of the face. The empty loft above the pool table would make for a super crash pad and across from it under the loft was the mound of straw. He took some of the straw and carried it up an ancient wooden ladder. It was clean and would make for the king's mattress. He made several trips up and down. Combined with a trunk full of blankets, he made the perfect nest.

If you were about to lay your head down on this small fortune, as Joel was about to do, your eyes wouldn't be able to close either. Not even counting sheep could make that happen.

THE BARN CAN WAIT

4

Another trip to Frank's old apartment was in order. He hadn't slept a wink since the sun had peeked through the cedars and woke him the morning before. At least a sleepless night gave him the opportunity to think. The first thing on his *to do* list was to rescue a few possessions from his dad's hovel. It was a long walk to the main road and about a half hour wait before his thumb flagged a ride.

A beaten-up old pickup truck, driven by a scruffy old hillbilly, would do for a ride back to town. This plaid-wearing guy with a lazy eye and sum'er teeth (some are there and some are not) was the friendliest chicken farmer that Joel had ever met.

"Hey there, fella. Where ya headed?"

Joel was thankful for the ride and was used to bad English. "I'm going to town."

"On whooz dotter." The hillbilly snuffed and snorted like he'd just told the funniest joke ever. Joel tried to get comfortable on the duct-taped seat. "D'ja hear 'bout that poor Jacobson kidz dog?" The hillbilly almost screamed in a baritone voice. His hearing aid must have been broken. "Yup, three of those mangy coyotes circled and killed the thing."

Under his breath, Joel repeated: "Indoor voice, indoor voice."

"I rehklect my first mutt. A reel fighter' 'e was. Just like Ole Yeller. Good flick, eh?"

It was a super conversation and the passenger didn't have to say a word. At least it was a chance to think some more. There was a shopping list of things that

absolutely needed to be done. He needed to pick up some supplies and head to the bank, but first he would enjoy the excessively loud ramblings of this ride. Each new sentence would make Joel jump off the seat. Not with excitement or surprise. This man was just obscenely loud.

Under his breath, Joel pleaded again: "Indoor voice, indoor voice."

"I know ware thurz a four-whiller for sale. Ya don't gotta be hitchin' round here if ya got the coin. Thurz a machine at the graj in town."

"Where? Back in Vinegar Hill?"

"Yep!"

"How old and how much, do ya' know?" Getting wheels just happened to be on the top of his list of things to accomplish. This turned out to be a very fruitful ride after all.

"Far as I know, itz a couple years old, hazn't bin used much, and he only wants eight-hunnert for it."

"Sold. I've got running around to do first, but I'd like to pick it up sometime later on. I'll have cash then. So, where is this garage?"

"It's right in this middle o' town."

The back half of the twenty-minute ride was spent in silence. The hillbilly was finally quiet. Jesus, did he ever talk loud. Upon arrival into town, Joel gathered info from the driver on where to find the four-wheeler and considered it to be a very successful hitchhike.

The absolute first thing that had to be done now was to go to his bank and cash his father's insurance cheque. For kicks, he thought it might be fun to put about five grand in his pocket and the rest in safekeeping. Suddenly, he heard his name being called. It was a buddy from high school.

"Shane, what's shakin'?"

"Nothin' shakin'. You?"

"I'm just cashing a check."

"Sorry to hear about your old man."

"The crazy old bastard essentially had it coming in one form or another," Joel said philosophically. "In all truth, I didn't think that it would be death by deer."

Shane looked up to Joel. They'd grown up in the same small town and did the same small things. Except, where Joel had no parental influence, Shane had it all. His folks were cornerstones of the community. They were churchgoing, pencil-pushing, hard-working people whose only flaw was a nine-teen-year-old, underachieving hippie. It's funny how kids turn out. Shane had all of the advantages, but he chose not to be a stand-up citizen and instead chose to be casualty without a cause.

You know Shane. Every town has one. You could always find him on the street corner wearing a faded concert t-shirt and a ball cap covering his long ratty hair. Upon this chance meeting, Shane had a treat for sale.

Shane took off his backpack to show Joel what he had. This particular treat came in picture form. He had it hidden in a binder's plastic sleeve and was psyched about showing it off. We all know what it's like to have something special and want to show it. In this case, what Shane had to show could only be seen by a few people. It was a colourful picture of multiple mini-flowers separated by a network of perforations.

"Jesus Christ, Shane. There's enough acid here to kill a horse!"

Shane chuckled after receiving the response he was looking for. "There are one hundred and eighty hits here. My guy gave it to me on consignment last night. Pretty cool, eh? At three bucks a hit, I should clear about five-forty."

Joel wasn't entirely sure how to react. "Do you know anyone who might be interested in a couple a' hits?" Shane questioned. "Well, I'll tell ya'. I've got rent to pay and I've been hittin' the bottle pretty hard lately. I've been pissing most of my money down the drain. I'm really just trying to get on good terms with my parents and my girlfriend, but most of all, my dealer."

Joel's next response shocked even himself. He wasn't much into psychedelics, but he was always more than willing to help a friend. The wad of cash was already starting to burn a hole in his pocket, and he thought that sending some money Shane's way would be his good deed for the day.

"You know what, Shane? Today is your lucky day. Pay your fuckin' rent and make your dealer smile. I'll pay full pop for the whole sheet, if you throw in the binder."

Having only dropped acid a couple of times before, he was truly amazed at what a pocket full of cash could do. The perforated picture was very detailed in colour. It was psychedelic masterpiece and it held more attraction to Joel than the inevitable trip itself. He was pleased more by helping out a friend than being able to take a trip without even leaving the barn, so to speak. Besides, he had much more exploring to do.

Joel had to get back to business. Kitty-corner to the bank was the Co-op where he purchased a backpack and some survival supplies.

Across the road was McFoodLands where he filled his pack with some groceries. His *to do* list was getting shorter. Now he had enough supplies to last him a couple of weeks. In the meantime, he would be able to make a more comprehensive list of what he needed. Next, however, was a begrudgingly necessary trip to Frank's.

You know that feeling you get when, let's say, you're about to snoop through somebody else's dresser drawer and you get that light headedness. Ya, that's what it felt like walking up Frank's steps. Oddly enough, the door was now secure on its hinges. The only reason that he had come back was to salvage a jewellery box full of long kept knick-knacks and his lucky coffee mug. It might sound trivial, but he had had that mug for as long as he could remember. The box contained typical stuff that a kid would've collected over the years, including marbles, rocks, coins and hockey cards... When his key wouldn't work for the door, he broke the key off in the new lock and with mixed emotions stood motionless and stared aimlessly. Ironically, the only thing that occurred to him was that he'd lost his marbles.

Joel's book of life didn't start off that well, so he figured he should quickly forget about his first few chapters. He simply blew the dirty blonde hair out of his copper-aged eyes and thought about the barn. He hitched out of town and eventually made his way to Screw's Garage, the only garage in Vinegar Hill.

"Ya, this looks promising. Screw's Garage," he muttered with one eyebrow raised. "I wonder if they have t-shirts." It was a rundown building and the neon sign was missing some letters. It now read: "CREW RAGE".

Right away, this grungy teenager with a homemade haircut trudged up to him and immediately accused him of stealing. All Joel had done was rip the *FOR SALE* sign off of the four-wheeler parked out front. The teen kept accusing Joel and wouldn't lay off. Just then, someone from the back shouted, "Timmy, that's no way to treat customers." A round man with a cigar in his mouth walked out and Timmy stopped immediately. The man handed Timmy a rag so he could wipe the slobber from his chin.

"Sorry, I need to apologize for my son." The man jabbed a thumb in Timmy's direction. "He's as sharp as a Nerf ball."

"That's fine. I'm here for the four-wheeler. A farmer picked me up while hitchhiking and told me that your machine was for sale."

"Ya', well that blue one out there is a damn fine set of wheels. We only used it around the farm and it's only a couple years old. For eight-hundred bucks you'll get a machine that runs like a top." Screw leaned over and whispered, "Don't worry, Timmy never drove it."

Screw came across as a good guy, but still he had to question a guy named "Screw".

"So, why do they call you Screw?"

"Well, kid, I have the ability to turn a nickel into a dime. Now, let's have a look at this four-wheeler."

Joel hopped on and took it for a rip around the garage and down the road. It seemed to run just fine. He felt that there was a good bargain to be had. Upon his return from the short joyride, they made the exchange. There was a brief haggling session and the ATV was his for seven-hundred and fifty dollars. It didn't really matter how much it cost because he had a pocket full of cash. He needed to be able to get back and forth from Vinegar Hill, leaving him indifferent about the bottom line. Now, with his list complete, he loaded up and headed off.

PSYCHEDELIA

5

The lack of sleep had caused Joel to feel intoxicated. Today had been a successful day, even considering the fact that he'd lost his marbles. The sun was relatively high, telling him that it was about five in the afternoon. There was enough daylight left to make some improvements on the makeshift nest that he'd started nearly two days ago. With a quick fluff of the straw, he slipped in between the blankets and put his head down.

Just then, before entering a dream state, he was disturbed by a rustling in the straw beneath him lower back. With eyes wide open, he jumped up screaming with a frantic knee to chest, leg pumping circle dance. He quickly found himself cornered by a two-inch, four-legged creature with a curious set of beady eyes. He was truly happy that no one else had witnessed this spontaneous jig of fear. Joel wasn't afraid of mice, but the unknown gave him the willies.

"You scared the crap out of me, mouse," Joel scolded. "I just moved in and now, if you don't mind, it's time to share your place." The creature stared blankly.

Having never been subjected to a human before, the mouse stood up on his hind legs to assess the danger level that his new roommate represented. He twitched his whiskers. The little creature didn't seem to be afraid at all.

"Are you hungry, little fella?" Joel tiptoed around to where his backpack lay. He rummaged through the supplies that he'd just purchased in town and found what he was looking for. The mouse watched with its nose in the air, as if he knew exactly what Joel was up to.

"You're a brave little soul," Joel said as he pulled apart a piece of bread. "I hope you don't mind whole wheat." He placed the pieces on the floor with the intent

of luring the mouse away from the straw bed. Immediately, it moved toward the bait.

Joel was so exhausted that he didn't have time to play. He crawled back into his nest, and before he went to sleep Joel gave his new friend a name. Russell. Russell, the mouse.

A restful night gave him a fresh outlook on a new day. Now, he was ready to tackle the barn.

There were so many containers to go through that it could have taken him a whole season to get through it all. As Joel made his way down the ladder, to assess his new finds, he heard a rustling behind him. Russell was sitting on an old rusty gas can watching him intently. It looked like he had made a new friend.

"Good morning, little guy. Could you help me open this trunk?" Joel was essentially talking to himself. As if on command, the mouse scurried over to a stack of four trunks and disappeared. The treasure hunt continued until the mouse reappeared. The creature was beckoning him over to a particular stack.

"Do you want me to start over there?" Russell quickly scurried back to his hiding spot. Now engaged in a game of hide and seek, Joel decided to try to find out where it was hiding. He walked over to the trunks and spied the mouse again. This little animal was playing with him. He knew something that Joel didn't. Once again, the mouse popped his head out of a small hole in the bottom trunk.

"Gotcha', mouse. Is there something in there that you'd like me to see?"

He then moved the top three trunks in order to get to the one that the mouse obviously wanted him to open first. Rugged and pink, with a trim of gold, the trunk looked like an old drunk clown had made it. It didn't really matter what it looked like, this was the one that the mouse had singled out. He had a good feeling about it. As he lifted the lid, the mouse ran out and back onto the gas can and watched. The trunk was filled with newspaper dated almost forty years back.

"Thanks for the trunk of newspaper, varmit." Joel dug a little deeper. He felt something hard and there they were. He reached into the shredded paper, grasped his gift and couldn't get outside fast enough to hold it up to the sun. It was an overwhelming sight. The kaleidoscope of colour reflecting through the pane of glass was hypnotizing. For its size, it was the heaviest window Joel had ever

lifted. There were ten pieces of various sized stained glass windows that were obviously the remnants of an old church.

"Wow, thanks," Joel began, but the mouse was nowhere in sight. It had just shown Joel the most colourful find yet. He broke off another chunk of bread and left it on the barn floor beside the trunk.

"That ought to do you for a while."

He made his way down to the quarry with a rope that he'd pulled off the barn wall, with intentions to fix the old rope swing. A lot was getting done in a short period of time.

When he climbed up the old tree beside the quarry, he noticed that the water was so clear that he could count the fish. Being the daredevil type, he secured the new rope and jumped. SPLASH. All clean and refreshed, it was time to catch lunch.

There were plenty of dead branches lying about. Upon looking around, he found the perfect location for a fire pit, a big flat rock beside the quarry, which lay under the rope swing.

"This is the spot."

There were a few things in the barn that would make his new fire pit more comfortable. After a couple of trips to the barn and back, he had himself a fishing rod, an axe, and a trunk for a table. He lit the fire and was set.

Sitting cross-legged at the edge of the quarry waiting for the bobber to dip, Joel watched as barn swallows swooped to drink from the pond. He leaned back and poked the fire, thinking about the birds getting what they wanted from the pond. Then he wondered how long it would take him to get what *he* wanted. The bobber went under. Gripping tightly with both hands, he stood up and started to reel.

"Thank god for the short wait." It would keep his belly from rumbling. He reached out and grabbed the line, wrapped it around his hand, and lifted the fish out of the water. After gutting and filleting, the fish was clean and ready to be roasted to perfection. A king couldn't ask for a better meal.

After his home cooked feast, he decided to rack the balls on his new billiard table. It was obvious that at one point in time, this area had been used as a games room. A hideout for guys to get away and talk trash. There was a dartboard on the

wall and beside it was a painting of a topless burlesque girl sitting on a piano. It was nice to know that men's tastes hadn't changed. He chalked his cue, leaned over, and like an explosion of fireworks, left the table littered in the many colours of the various balls. Walking around the table, Joel sized up his next shot. It was perfectly lined up to the pocket on the other side. There was no question that he was able to put some stream into this next shot. He chalked his queue and leaned over. Just as Joel was about to unload, he noticed something; Russell had poked his head out of the pocket.

"Russell, what the hell are you doing? You could have been killed." It turned out that the mouse had been using that particular side pocket as a personal nesting ground. This sure did put a quick stop to the game.

Joel's day only ran as long as there was sunlight. When looking ahead to his evening activities, he knew that preparation would make his life easier. A blind man working in the dark would have no problem, but this was not the case.

In the supplies that he'd brought was a can of kerosene and a whetstone to put an edge on his axe blade. There were plenty of extra supplies that he wouldn't need right now, but also in the pack, laying untested, was a super fine piece of art. Some flower power, if you will.

With four oil lamps along his left arm, a fully stocked pack on his back, and rags to clean the lamps in his right hand, all it would've taken was a good gust of wind to knock this tippy-looking figure right over. It took more time than it should have, but making the trip only once was, in his eyes, better than three.

After cleaning, polishing, and topping up all the lanterns with kerosene, Joel was quite pleased that three of the four lanterns worked like a charm. His next task was to make a sizeable pile of deadwood. It needed to be done before dark because gathering anything in a black and unfamiliar land would be nearly impossible. The work was done and now he was prepared for whatever came next. The time had come to make introductions with the colorful artwork.

"Time for an excursion," Joel whispered as he opened the binder. Dropping acid wasn't something that he made a habit of, but he'd heard good things. He delicately pulled the sheet out of its plastic home and tore the top right corner, paying close attention not to damage any of the other squares. Thank God for perforations. If the trip went badly, he would be the only one to know, so there was no fear in placing just one piece of the blotter on his tongue.

"Let's see what happens." The base of one of the oaks looked like a good place to lay back and wait for the festivities to begin. It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes when he looked up and could have sworn that a bird had just flown past with a rainbow for a tail.

"Whoa... That was far out."

He gently closed his eyes. Even with his lids shut he could still see. It was as if someone had painted the inside of his eyelids. He glanced over to the hideout and once again, was stunned at the sight of a winking barn. It was hard to believe with a 5x5mm piece of paper, that fifteen minutes later he could be inside his very own fairy tale. Spreading his arms and howling at the dusk, he was one with the world. He danced with the trees and the bees in the land of milk and honey.

With a cloud of bugs in his face he yelled, "Watch out for the vortex," and sucked in the air around him.

Almost floating, it didn't take very long to get back to the barn. Peeking in with dilated pupils, he whispered, "Mouse, mouse. Are you there? I know you're in here."

The only response was the gentle cooing of the live-in pigeons, one of which he had previously decided to nickname Peckerhead.

The night before, the bird had been caught eating the mouse's food and was named on the spot. Well, it made sense for a beak-faced creature to be given such a name.

Having no explanation for what happened next, he reached inside the barn door and pulled down a strand of bailer twine. He tied it around his waist and slouched to take a seat on the nearby milking stool. Almost instantly, he fell backwards and stared up at the roof, of the barn, with a dirty look as if his topple was the chair's fault. He gripped the twine and looped it around the leg of the stool, knotted it, and sat back down. All he was capable of doing was sitting quietly and grinning.

The inside of the barn was coming alive. There were faces everywhere he looked. He was alone, yet the acid told him that the barn held a thousand eyes. It was wild. Staring at a pile of many cluttered tarps, a green one gradually stood out and slowly took the shape of what he could have sworn was a prehistoric creature. Reality was taking the backseat to hallucinations. Many people would have been

terrified, but knowing better was the only reason Joel was immensely enjoying himself. He stood up and took a few steps. Then he heard a noise behind him.

"Hey, mouse, is that you?" He spun to look around, but there was nothing there, so he took a few more steps. He was sure he heard something again. Things were getting weird and he figured that stepping outside could simply solve this. He moved toward the door and tried to block out the noise that seemed to be following him. When he finally got to the door, he started to sprint toward the pond. Something was behind him. It had been behind him since he had entered the barn. With arms flapping and flailing wildly, he ran like his hair was on fire, lost his balance and took a nosedive. Just then, the unknown brown blur caught up and bit him on the back. He screamed in terror with eyes closed waiting for the next bite. Nothing. He listened close. Still flat on his belly, all was quiet except for what seemed to be the birds laughing all around. Higher than ever, he slowly opened his eyes expecting to be face to face with his predator. Still nothing. Turning his head slowly, there it lay. It was the old milk stool, still tied to him. Joel chuckled.

"This is some good acid, Shane," he mumbled under his breath. What seemed like an hour's worth of fun was really about an eight-hour trip. With the tail end of the day's sun shining through the leaves, the trees were ablaze. Joel was left imagining a make-believe forest fire.

GLINT

6

An overactive imagination led to a restless night's sleep. The next morning, while still lying in this bed, a sparkle caught his eye. It came from beneath a mound of straw that was piled high under the other loft. This was an unexplored area and he was curious and wondered if maybe he was still under the influence. He had dropped the acid the day before and slept all night, so it couldn't be. Climbing down from the loft, he grabbed a rake and poked at the glint in the straw. He hit steel. Curiosity now had a firm grip on him once again.

"Whatever is hiding under there, I'm coming to get you." He muttered, as he began clawing at the straw.

It was sky blue in colour and the glint had come from its shiny chrome mirror. Pulling straw down frantically, it didn't take long to reveal a 1964 Chevy van.

"Who in their mind would abandon this?" he thought.

After wiping the dust off of the driver's side window, he looked at the odometer. 150 084 miles.

The van needed to be pushed out into the light so he could get a better look at this veiled beauty and see if it was worth trying to get up and running. A path was cleared along the barn floor and it wasn't long before it was ready to be moved.

He jumped into the driver's seat, shoved the gearshift into neutral, made his way to the rear, and started to push. It took a little to start the initial roll, but once it started the movement was effortless. When the van was in full daylight, he stood back and admired his new find. Joel never had his own vehicle before, and considering the other finds, this was easily the best.

It was time to take what looked like a straw hat off his new toy and see what was inside. In the daylight, he was able to see the homemade dream catchers hanging from the rear view mirror and a lonely red guitar resting in the passenger seat. He also noticed a sticker on the glove box that read "Make Love, Not War." This was obviously an entity from a different time. Joel was receiving overwhelmingly positive vibes from this old hippie retreat. He opened the back doors wide and found road maps spread out all over. The whole floor was littered with spent beer cans of all flavours from across Canada. Looking at the steering wheel from the back, he noticed that the keys were in the ignition. He felt like a little kid on Christmas morning. The gas gauge read empty and a trip to Screw's was probably his best bet to get this drifter's dream up and running.

A few pulls were all it took to start his new four-wheeler and off he went. Screw's Garage was about ten minutes away. Joel pulled into the parking lot and there he was: Timmy running around in circles with arms spread wide. All of a sudden, Screw came marching around the corner. He walked straight up to Timmy and grabbed him by the arm. Screw looked to be at the end of his rope.

"Timmy, I've already told you three times today, put my goggles away and pick up the dog shit. You've done nothing but run around like an idiot. I'm going to sell your dog and trade you to the neighbour up the road for a handful of chickens if you don't smarten up."

Almost cowering, Timmy shot back, "Please, don't trade me."

He walked over to the garage, grabbed a shovel, and picked up the closest pile. The next mess was a steaming coil that made an outhouse look inviting.

"This is attractive," Joel mumbled under his breath.

On both occasions that Joel had been at the garage, he had witnessed Timmy *being* Timmy. Screw obviously had his hands full. This was a relationship that Joel certainly didn't want to get in the middle of. He had, as of yet, been unable to properly assess Screw's character because of Timmy's shenanigans.

"How can I help you today, boy?" Screw strolled over thankful for the distraction.

"I just found an old van that had been sitting for, I don't know, maybe thirty or forty years. It looks to be in great shape and I'm curious what I might need to get it up and running. What do you think?"

"Well, without seeing it, if it worked well when it was put away, the odds are good that it only needs a drink of gas, oil, a new battery... I don't know. I have all of that stuff here if you want it. How are your mechanic skills?"

"Well, not bad. If that's all it needs then I can do it myself."

Screw looked over at his son and his jaw clenched. Timmy was lying across the front step of the office. Joel could almost see Screw's blood boiling. It didn't take long for Screw to gather up what he thought might be needed for the quick tune up.

"Thanks for the supplies. I'll be back sometime today, hopefully with the van and we'll settle up then. Let's hope it works."

Screw helped Joel tie the goods onto the four-wheeler and off he went. Finally, grade ten mechanics was about to pay off. He had been tinkering for several years, but this was the first time that he was actually thankful that this was one of the classes that he hadn't skipped. Changing the battery was simple, as was the oil. The moment of truth came after $\frac{3}{4}$ of the gas can was emptied into the tank. His excitement was over the top as he jumped behind the wheel, crossed the fingers on his left hand, and turned the key with the right.

Cough, cough, groan, sputter, sputter, poof. The engine fired to life, belching a big, black forty-year-old cloud of smoke. Joel jumped out of the van and lost it; he broke into a dance like an animal. Not a rain dance, but a victory dance. Circling the van, he hopped on one foot waving his arms in the air like a creature of flight. Whooping loudly, he couldn't believe his good fortune.

He opened the side doors and began to clean up the interior. After gathering up all the different road maps and filling a feedbag with empty cans, the van was beginning to look presentable. During the ten minutes that Joel was picking up garbage, the van never missed a beat. It purred like a kitten.

It was time to square up with Screw. The tires were very soft, so the drive to the garage was slow. He pulled in and revved the engine. Timmy leapt out of the office ready to shoot the customer with his broom. Joel chuckled to himself. When the proprietor finally appeared and saw the van, his jaw dropped.

"What do you think, Screw?" Joel asked, proud as a peacock.

"Wow, how did you ever get your hands on a '64 Chev van?" Curiosity and amazement reigned for a moment.

"It's a long story, but now this piece of past is mine. I can't believe that it started up so easily."

"Do you mind if I check it out?" Screw walked slowly around the van, running his hands along the sides and back. "Hell, boy. With a little elbow grease and some air in the tires, you've got yourself a prize pig." Screw climbed inside and had a look around. "The only thing about this model is that there isn't much light in the back. GM must have been on a tight budget in '64 to not include side windows in their vans." The boys chuckled together.

"Pull it' round back. Let's get some air in those tires. You must have horseshoes up your ass, kid. I still can't believe that it even started." Screw stepped back and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I know a guy who lives a couple concessions over and he does great welding work. If you ever decide that you'd like to let in some extra light, he would be the man to talk to." Screw dug into his back pocket to retrieve his wallet. "Here's his card, if you're interested."

It read: Mr. Willard Best Welder Around.

"No phone number?" Joel asked.

"Na, he's a tad touchy about giving his number out." Screw shrugged.

Screw and Joel had engaged themselves in a deep conversation when Timmy interrupted them by beating the doghouse with a shovel while shouting the lyrics to Old MacDonald.

"Gimme a minute, kid." Screw walked into the garage and picked up a box. He came back out and passed it to Joel. "I don't have the heart to give away the boy's dog. I was saving these for Timmy to enjoy on Canada Day, but I'm tired of yelling at him. He hasn't been listening lately." Joel gladly took the box and placed it in the van.

On the trip back to the barn, the van handled great. The windows were rolled down and the summer breeze felt good. As he passed a field littered with round hay bales, Joel knew exactly what had to be done. He slammed on the breaks and visually chose a bale. What happened next was a spur of the moment decision. He swung open the back doors and grabbed a gas can. As he tromped through the field to the bale that he had singled out, his mind was racing with excitement.

He jumped up onto the bale and looked around. He didn't see or hear anybody, so he figured that it was safe. He quickly emptied the contents of the can

onto the hay and made his way back to the van. Digging into the box of fireworks that Screw had given him, he grabbed an eight shot Roman Candle and then searched in his pocket for his trusty Zippo. Aiming the candle at the freshly drenched bale, he lit the explosive and hoped for the best. A couple of anxious seconds later it spit its first shot. It landed about two meters shy of its target. Overcompensating, the second shot sailed way over. The third shot was a dud. "MAAN!" he yelled, gripping the firework that much tighter.

WOOF.

The fourth shot struck the bale, igniting the gas, creating an explosion so loud that Joel could feel it in his chest. The sky turned black with birds taking flight. The heat could be felt from the edge of the roadside, and as the smoke started to billow, Joel caught himself admiring his handiwork.

"Wow, maybe five gallons was a little much," he chuckled to himself. After a stunt like that, he knew it would be best if he flew too.

RUBY

7

Upon his arrival back at the barn, Joel decided to unbuckle the well-worn and obviously well used friend. The deep red guitar had a distinctive mark on the front that almost took the shape of a half moon. The mark looked like it had been created by many years of being a resting place for a bottle. Joel was instantly captivated by the instrument. He gave it a strum. "Yuck." What an awful sound. He was glad he had paid close attention in music class. It gave him the ability to at least tune his new find. The off key sound didn't stop him from doing further study. He flipped it over and found that it was covered in etchings. Short poems, maybe songs... Who knew? All of the writing had been carefully carved by what Joel figured was a pocketknife or a car key. He also noticed a name. RUBY.

"Wow, Ruby, what a great name. You sure are pretty and it's certainly obvious that somebody loved you dearly, old girl."

It all made sense now. When he first looked around the barn, he found lot of music paraphernalia, sheet music, and even that old piano. The how-to books might just come in handy after all. The rest of the day consisted of Joel sitting with Ruby on the edge of the loft and discovering a latent talent. His attraction to the guitar was almost immediate, and he knew without a doubt that he had found his true love. Everything that had been swirling around in his head now made sense. Like a light switch, the dreams, the reality, even the fantasies that had come from his experiences lit up. From mind to fingertips and then pencil to paper, the instinctive rhythms just magically fell out of his head. Primal chants poured from his mouth and in no time he had unexpectedly written his first song:

If I could catch MY Dreams Dreams Dreams Dreams
I would Have NO FEAR
IF I could only catch MY Dreams Dreams Dreams Dreams
Maybe Just one A year
Well there's this place that I call home
Out in the Middle of know where
It's built out of stone stone stone stone
With a little Red rocking Chair
If I could only catch My Dreams Dreams Dreams Dreams
I would Have NO FEAR
If I could only catch My Dreams Dreams Dreams Dreams
Maybe just one A year
Well there's this girl I know
And she has blond hair
She deserves A throne throne throne throne
But all I have is this RED Rocking chair
If I could only catch MY Dreams Dreams Dreams Dreams
I would have NO FEAR
If I could catch My Dreams Dreams Dreams Dreams
Maybe just one a year

Just laying down a beat, drew an unexpected audience. To his left, he noticed Russell sitting comfortably, and perched above was a head-bobbing and obviously approving Peckerhead. A new bird had joined Peckerhead making it look like he had seduced a fine-feathered friend.

"Good job, Peckerhead. It is spring time after all, eh big fella?" The bird then leapt off the beam and did some aerial acrobatics in an attempt to further dazzle this new dove. Joel chuckled to himself.

"Show off." After a few more hours of enjoying sheet music out loud with all his new friends, Joel fell into an uneasy sleep.

When the sun came up the next day, there was a lot of reflecting to do. The colours of last night's dream were an unclear sign that carried no rhyme or reason. It was a dream in Technicolor that Joel would have to figure out by himself. Kicking around his property for the day was very soul searching and as the evening's sun set, an owl swooped in. Was it to lend him an ear?

The owl landed on a branch that hung out over the quarry. How bizarre. Joel was intrigued by a creature that he had never seen in person before. At this first meeting, all he could muster was a measly "Hi." The owl slowly turned his head 180 degree, stared with big yellow eyes, and responded with "HOO, HOO, HOO."

The response punctuated Joel's frame of mind because what he really wanted was someone to listen and not ask questions. "I'm saying hi to you. You know who." Joel was put out by his first disappointing confrontation with an owl. So, he found a flat stone and skipped it across the pond. Mr. Owl spun his head around and enjoyed the ripples caused by the stone's movement across the water.

"You like that? I thought you might," Joel called to the owl. The majestic creature has clearly never seen a stone skip on water and Joel had never seen an owl, so they were now even.

"Beautiful evening, huh?" Joel began with small talk. "So, what's your favourite tree?" They both sat quietly and admired opposite directions. "Want me to skip another stone?" Joel did just that. Mr. Owl ruffled his feathers, thankful for the entertainment.

As the shadows of the trees stretched farther and farther, Joel leaned over to light up one of the lanterns. "I know you're nocturnal, but I'm not." Once it was lit, the small talk continued.

"How long have you been swooping around these parts?"

"HOO, HOO, HOO."

"You, You, You. What I've learned about owls is that they're supposed to be wise and here you are responding to a question with a question." Joel was merely playing with a creature that could only give him one answer anyway. "I had a cloudy dream last night and I'm trying to figure out what it meant. You know those dreams that are so vivid that you can't quite put your finger on it? Do you know what, Mr. Owl? Sometimes I wonder if I'm dreaming right now." Joel swatted at a mosquito. "Do you ever wonder if, when a log is burning, it's extracting all the sun that has ever touched the tree?"

"HOO, HOO, HOO." The owl turned his head and took off.

"Thanks for the ear," Joel whispered to the owl's receding outline. He still didn't have the answers that he was looking for, but at least he thought he had made another new friend. He grabbed the lantern and headed for the barn. Upon entry, Joel looked down and all of a sudden had a flashback to the dream.

It was the glass. Joel had dreamt about the stained glass. In his dreams, he had decked out the van and left on a journey. It was a huge relief to have the answers to the puzzle that had been clouding his mind.

He now knew what had to be done. Joel had always been known to follow his dreams and this dream might prove to be the biggest yet. That night he fell asleep holding the business card that Screw had given him.

STAINED GLASS

8

The next day Joel woke up still holding the business card. He had to make a phone call so he loaded up a couple of the glass panels, jumped in the van and headed off to Screw's garage. When he got there, the first thing he saw was Screw up on his roof with a tool belt on.

"Hey, Screw! What are you doing up there?" Joel yelled. Screw would've only needed a beard and he would've looked like jolly old Saint Nick.

"G'day, Joel," Screw sputtered. "Just takin' the satellite dish down." He sounded irritated and seemed to be on a mission. "Gimme a minute."

It almost startled Joel when he heard the list of expletives and then saw the dish flying off the roof. His curiosity was peaked.

"Hold the ladder, boy. I'm coming down." Joel walked over to steady the ladder. He stared up at Screw and watched as he slowly made his way down. When he finally got his feet on solid ground, he started his rant. Joel decided that it was in his best interest to step back and not say a word. Screw was obviously irked.

"I've only had this dish up for about a month and that imbecile Timmy found all of the wrestling channels. Because of that, he's been strutting around with a tablecloth tied around his neck pretending to be a champion. He found my spray paint and sprayed a 3 on his chest. The idiot, he even did it backwards. He's broken the legs off his bed and smashed the coffee table in the living room. I've had enough!"

Joel was immensely entertained by what was coming out of Screw's mouth.

"He's walking around elbow dropping everything in sight, and when I saw him yesterday with the dog over his head, that's when I drew the line. After almost choking him with his own cape, I threw him in the back of the truck and drove him to his grandmother's. Joel, I can't take it anymore."

"Well, you know what they say? Monkey see, monkey do." Joel was trying his best to keep a straight face, but it was difficult because the story was so ridiculous.

Screw caught his breath and lit up a cigar. He was wheezing and dripping with sweat. All Joel could do was shake his head and chuckle to himself.

"Sorry about the rant, boy, but I'm standing on the edge of a cliff. I've been dealing with shit like this for the past twenty years. Anyway, what brings you around?"

"You know what, Screw? You're right. The back of the van is too dark, and I've decided to call your buddy to see if he can install a couple of windows." The two men walked over to the van.

"Only a couple windows? Jesus. Willard could take apart your van and rebuild it blindfolded before breakfast."

"Is he really that good?" Joel was unaccustomed to that kind of handiwork.

"Yup. Mr. Willard's been my go-to guy for as long as I can remember. I have yet to be disappointed or heard any kind of negative feedback. If I didn't think you were a good person, I would have sent you to ol' Cecil down the road. Go into the office and just inside the door is the phone and Willard's number is on the wall there somewhere."

Joel stepped into the office to use the phone. He thought back on Screw and Timmy's bizarre relationship and was disappointed that he had missed the wild show.

There were lots of numbers on the wall, but one did stand out. In thick black marker with a circle around it, there was a seven-digit number with Mr. Willard's name scrawled above. He made the call.

"Hello. Hello." The man on the other line sounded irritated.

"I told you folk to quit callin' me!" His voice burst out. It sounded like he was about to snap. "You've got the wrong number, now lose it!"

There was a quick moment, then Joel broke in and put the man at ease.

"No, no. I'm not who you think I am. Listen, I'm looking for a welder name Willard. I have some work for him to do. Screw gave me this number."

"Oh, Screw, yes. He's sent people to me before," he responded in a calmer voice. He became apologetic and explained that he was being hounded by bill collectors with the wrong name and number. It turned out that his number was off by one. After Joel explained his idea, Mr. Willard was more than happy to take on the task.

Joel stepped out of the office. "How'd the call go, boy?" Screw asked in his usual rugged drawl.

"Great," Joel answered. "He said if I could get there by about ten, he'd have me out of there by three."

"Well, you better git goin'. You've got a little way up the road to go yet."

"Thanks for letting me use the phone and by the way, Screw, I hope things work out well for you and Timmy."

"Thanks for the thought," Screw mumbled as he scribbled down the directions. "Timmy and I will be fine."

On his way to Mr. Willard's, he passed the still smouldering bale of hay that he had torched with fireworks. He flicked on the radio and by chance the first song he heard was *Great Balls of Fire*. He couldn't explain it, but the coincidence was unbelievable. Chills ran over his entire body. He drove on a little farther.

"This must be it." Talking to himself was becoming a bit of a habit. "Screw told me that I couldn't miss the homemade mail box."

It was a work of abstract art with pieces of metal sticking out from everywhere. It looked like a comet had hit a spaceship. "Hmm, and this is supposed-to-be the best welder around. I wonder where the mail goes."

Joel pulled into the long driveway and noticed the gigantic weeping willow in the front yard. It was a beautiful tree, but under it was waist-high grass and rusted-out shells of more than a dozen old cars. He also noticed that on the other side of the driveway was a graveyard of abandoned fridges and stoves. Closer to the farmhouse was an old yellow swing set and perched on top were a handful of chickens. On the hood of a rusty old dodge truck, slept a mangy-looking Calico cat.

He stepped out of the van and walked up onto the porch. At the foot of the front door rested a friendly old dog.

"Hey there, mutt," Joel said as he reached out and knocked on the door. The dog stood up for a stretch, and it was only then that Joel noticed the dog was missing a leg. It gave him a good sniff and barked his approval. He knocked again and reached down to pat the dog. He stood listening until he finally heard the clanging of chains and clicking of locks behind the door.

"I'll be out in a minute." It sounded like Mr. Willard was unlocking a military defence system of sorts.

Finally, all of the locks were undone and the inside door swung open. There stood a short man behind a screen door. His brown, beady eyes were a little too close together, which made his bulbous nose stand out.

"Hey," he said. "One more second, just a couple more locks here on the screen door. You must be the fella' who called me from Screw's."

"Yep," Joel said. At long last, the rickety old door swung open and out stepped Mr. Willard with his hand extended for a shake.

"You know, young man. Not to talk money, but installing a couple windows won't be cheap. The two neighbour boys up the road are always here having me weld something new on their bicycles and they pay with their lunch money. I'll tell you one thing, time here is not cheap, nor are my welding sticks."

Mr. Willard walked to the edge of the porch, hocked a spit, and looked back at Joel. "So that's the van, eh?"

"Yes it is," Joel replied.

"Well, this won't be the first '64 Chevy van I've installed windows in."

"Okay, but," Joel interrupted, "I'll bet you've never installed stained glass."

"Say what?" Mr. Willard swung around to face Joel.

"Ya, stained glass."

"What have you been smokin', boy?" Mr. Willard questioned.

"My lungs are clean, man. I came across the glass in my father's old barn. I wasn't sure what to do with it and then the answer came to me in a dream."

"REALLY. Oh, you town folk." Mr. Willard chuckled. "Hop in and wheel her around back to my chop shop and I'll take a peek at what you got. Willy and me will meet you there. Come on, Willy."

The three-legged dog jumped up to his tripod stance and the two of them hobbled to the back. They looked remarkably similar. Joel hopped into the van and drove it around.

"You want me to back it in?"

"No, it's fine. Drive on." Mr. Willard invited Joel into his workshop with a simple wave of his hat.

The garage was like no other. It was spotless; so clean that you could eat off the floor. Joel wondered if Mr. Willard would make him remove his shoes. Every tool was in order, hung up in its own specific spot outlined with black magic marker. It was strange that his yard and shop were polar opposites. Joel noticed that Mr. Willard's actions in the shop seemed to be somewhat militarily run. Joel carefully removed the glass from the van. Then, all he could do was stand back and admire the man's handiwork as he started to measure the panes.

There was a row of safes on the top of a shelf, and towards the back of the shop was what looked like a homemade incinerator.

"Hey, Mr. Willard. What with the safes?"

"Oh. Well, I've been cracking those tricky bastards for years now. Once word got out people from all over been askin' me to open them. They get their stuff back and my payment is the safe. Good deal, eh?"

"Any that you couldn't open?" Joel was trying to gauge how talented this interesting character actually was.

"I can open probably nine out of every ten. The only problem with being good at what I do is that every time there's a crime involving a safe, the cops come to my door first."

All of the measurements were soon finished, and Mr. Willard announced that he could have the glass installed in under three hours. Joel was tickled pink.

"Can I just kick around your shop while the work gets done?"

"Ya, but don't touch anything," Mr. Willard warned, though in a friendly enough manner.

Joel plunked down on a nearby office chair, reached down and patted Willy as he watched Mr. Willard turn his dream into reality.

His new van was a psychedelic trip. It was everything he'd imagined and then some. Before he left the shop, he happily overpaid Mr. Willard and assured him that their paths would cross again. On his way out, Mr. Willard stopped Joel. He walked over to his bulletin board and pulled something off it.

"This sticker has been pinned on this board of mine for almost thirty years and I think your van deserves it." Mr. Willard passed it through the window and Joel gladly accepted the gift. It was a sticker that read: "DROP ACID, NOT BOMBS". They laughed together and shared another solid handshake.

WHERE TO GO

9

Joel's next move was to board up the barn and collect his belongings, which didn't take long, because he didn't have much to his name. He gathered all of the useful camping supplies, buckled Ruby back into her seat, and the van was ready to go. Joel found himself with some spare time before he would leave, so he sifted through the road maps that had been left behind. The one that struck him most was a map of Nevada. He'd never seen the desert before and the mixture of snakes and tumbleweeds was curiously appealing to him. He had finally picked a destination. Now only an ocean could stop his wanderings.

Just then, Russell scurried out from underneath the piano and stopped in front of him.

"Dance for me," Joel suggested. The mouse stared blankly as usual and didn't offer the jig that he was optimistically hoping for.

"I've decided to go on a road trip. You're obviously not gonna' be of much help to me on my travels. So you can stay here and keep an eye on the barn. Oh, and, Russell, watch out for Mr. Owl." Russell ran off, probably to continue to do whatever it is that mice do.

Outside brewed the first storm of Joel's stay. The limbs of the oak trees whipped the barn walls. The light show was magnificent. The clouds lit up like a jar of fireflies and the land shook more than he's ever felt before. His father had enjoyed watching storms and Joel wondered if this could be a sign.

He walked over to the piano, hit a B natural, a C sharp, then said, "*adios amigo*," as he pulled a blanket down over the instrument. He walked over to the roll-top desk and covered it as well. Joel was excited about the adventures of the days

to come. As he continued to put the barn to sleep, he was unaware that he was working on a new song and mumbling its words:

I buckle my boots and I'm on my way

Clouds are coming, but they ran out of rain

Look past my dirty Hair and ripped up jeans

Ring Ring I have no telephone

Hip Hop and then off I go

Knock Knocking to the freedom of the west coast

Joel was so high on the impending excitement that he awoke before dawn. He did one final walk around the barn and locked it up with a lock that had been given to him by Mr. Willard. He rolled over a big pink stone that lay beside the back door and placed the key underneath. He looked up to the towering the oaks and said: "Keep watch just a little bit longer, Super Guards."

The first stop on his new voyage would be the border crossing at the Ivy Lea Bridge in the Thousand Islands. Joel pulled up to the customs booth, and because of the appearance of his vehicle, a burly, hard-faced woman bombarded him with a slew of questions. One of the many questions was: "How long will you be staying?" Not even Joel knew the answer to that. Think fast, Joel, think fast.

"One day," Joel replied. He lied right through his teeth.

"Oh ya', and what's your business down here?" It was obvious that the woman in the booth had asked the same question many times already that morning.

"I'm off to visit a friend in Syracuse. I'll be back sometime tomorrow."

Joel was thankful that he had studied the road map before heading out. It gave him a believable alibi and an easy crossing. A little geography knowledge would never hurt anyone.

Once the booth at the border was out of sight, he put the pedal to the metal. It would be a two-hour drive to Syracuse landing him there at about the right time for a bite to eat. At around eleven o'clock he pulled off the highway and decided he was hungry enough to eat at Denny's. The brief stop would at least give him time to figure out how to get to where he was going.

Joel ambled through the front door of the family restaurant and stood patiently as he waited to be seated. He never would have figured that a Denny's just off the highway could be that busy, but he'd wait just the same. Five minutes later, a young lady approached Joel and directed him to a booth by the window.

He sat down and his waitress greeted him. "Would you like a coffee?" she asked in a small voice. The young waitress was timid and shy. It could very well have been her first shift.

"Sure, I'll take one. A coffee would certainly hit the spot. Is this an Interstate that'll take me south?"

"Uh-hum, you're on the 81 south." She quietly answered. "Where ya' headed?"

"Truthfully, I'm not sure."

She nodded, smiled and walked off, leaving Joel to admire her red hair and girlish figure. He wondered if the carpet matched the drapes.

She returned quicker than expected and he found his senses. With a fresh cup of coffee under his nose and a USA Today in front of his face, Joel was looking forward to meeting new people and seeing new places.

Over the course of his breakfast, the waitress made several unnecessary stops at the table before she brought the final bill. During one of her stops, he was able to get some of the directions needed and now knew enough to go south until North Carolina and then head west.

Like the restaurant, the parking lot was very busy. Lucky for him, he had parked beside a babbling old man sitting in a big brown station wagon. He was holding a bible with one hand and crossing himself with the other. He was in such deep prayer that Joel startled him by simply walking up to the van. Normally this wouldn't be an issue, but startling this particular stranger prompted a rant of unparalleled insanity.

"Look up at those clouds," the man barked out, pointing to the sky. Joel couldn't tell whether or not the crazy old man was ranting at him or at himself. "Every time they send a man to space, they screw up the weather. It may look nice now, but the end is near."

Joel rolled his eyes.

"Look up at those trees, the birds, and the sun." The man now had both arms flailing wildly. "It's all funny. The boats may be doing circles right now." In a complete change of topics, he fired off a question. "Do you have a dog?" The old guy was clearly out of his mind, but Joel wasn't in a hurry, so he humoured him.

"Nope. No dog."

"Ya' know. The average dog only lives for only fifteen years. If this is the case a human should have about four dogs in a lifetime. Five if they stay off the road. I'm working on my third. If it's rainy, then my dog stays in the car with me."

Well, at the very least, Joel thought, the old man takes care of his animals. It was on this premise that Joel was willing to give the old man his full attention.

"Did you know that if you stand on your head three times a day for eight minute intervals, you'll increase your thought process by 10%?" The old man was nuttier than an Oh Henry bar, and Joel was entertained.

"Ya, and if a bird taps on your window, it's *me* talking to you," Joel said to the man as he hopped into his van. The only way he could extricate himself from this conversation was to simply drive away. After topping up with gas, he was back out on the long ribbon of highway.

As I went walking,

That ribbon of highway,

I saw above me that endless skyway,

I saw below me that golden valley,

This land was made for you and me.

- *Woody Guthrie*

Fantastic song, it was the perfect soundtrack for the adventure that he was on. A couple dozen miles down the road came a decision that he had about three seconds to make. On the side of the road, there stood a sign with two legs. He'd hitchhiked many times before and he knew that picking up a drifter, or in this case, a sign with two legs, was good karma because he would want someone to do the same for him. His decision was made, and this free spirit was as good as picked up.

In every hitchhiking scenario, the vehicle drives past the hiker while slowing down and pulling safely off the road. The key to this is to leave only a short distance between the stranger and the car. This gives the driver time to assess the potential passenger using his mirrors. If the driver doesn't like what he sees, he could simply then pull away and continue driving. This time, however, when the hitchhiker lowered the cardboard sign reading RALEIGH, Joel saw something that he didn't expect to see.

A NAMELESS PEACH

10

She walked up to the passenger window and in a slow southern drawl said: "Howdy. Thanks for the lift. It's hotter than a Billy goat in a pepper patch out here."

Joel wasn't ready for this observation and almost choked because of it. She had on short cut-off jeans and a red and white checkered blouse that was hand tied at the waist. Her straight Brunette hair fell down past her shoulders, framing the face of an innocent teenage girl.

"Well, it looks like we're going the same place. Hop in." He was thankful for the company.

She slid open the side door and loaded in her bags. When she spotted Ruby, she excitedly commented, "Oh', you play too. I just came from New York, I was there visitin' my aunt Sadie and checkin' out the music scene. I spent most of my time buskin' around the subway, and when my aunt was free, we would people watch. The thing that I noticed most was the sheer speed that the city moved. They're nuts."

"Ya, I've never been there. I hear it's a crazy place." Joel put it into drive and pulled back out on to the highway.

"This is an awesome van. Do you live out of this buggy?" the stranger questioned curiously, as she observed the dream catchers hanging from the mirror.

"Well, I guess. I never really looked at it from that point of view. This is my first actual road trip in this van. I just found it. You can unbuckle my guitar and take a seat in the front if you'd like."

"Safety first," she said, as she looked over to him. She broke into laughter. The big part of the joke was that Joel wasn't wearing his belt and his instrument was.

"You must really love music. How long have you been playin' your ditties? Your guitar looks like it has a story to tell, you know, with the etches and all," the curious stranger noted, running her hands over Ruby's fine features.

"Well, truthfully, when I found the van it was on the seat strapped in right where it is now."

"Lucky. Do you write your own music?" the girl asked.

"Sort of," Joel answered.

"That's why I went on up to New York," the girl continued. "I was curious as to what the other folks were playin'. I was curious cuz my pappy keeps tellin' me I've got talent."

"Nice. I listen to all kinds of music. Well, except for that opera stuff. I'd like to hear you play."

"Well, there's still a little ways to Raleigh. If you want, I know a lake along the way that we could stop at. Pappy and I used to camp there when I was younger. We could stretch our legs, maybe eat some lunch, and if you're up for it we could even play some tunes."

"Ya, ok. That sounds like good fun." Joel was always up for a swim, plus it had been a couple of days since his last dip in the pond, and he was starting to smell ripe.

The next five hours consisted of good story telling and conversation. Joel learned what it was like to live the life of a Nameless Peach. He was completely captivated by her accent, and she also seemed to be experiencing some similar vibes. They talked like they'd known each other for years.

Finally, they arrived at the lake that she'd told him about. Yes, the long trail was rough, but was well worth the trip off the interstate. It was a remote spot that had the word skinny-dipping written all over it. The bumpy trail led to a smooth, stone-covered shoreline with a fire pit just up from the water's edge.

"Wow!" Joel said. "You weren't kidding when you hinted at the seclusion of this spot."

"I wouldn't fib 'atcha."

He jumped out of the van and made his way around back to grab his fishing gear. No sooner did he have the doors open when he noticed her short cut off jeans lying on the ground. When she resurfaced, she let out a squeal and turned towards Joel.

"Come on, boy. Whatcha' waitin' for?" If there was ever an excited invitation, this was it. A drop, hop, and a double kick later, Joel couldn't get his shorts off fast enough. He wasn't a shy man, so he stripped right down and joined her. There was no hidden agenda, and it wasn't long before the two strangers found themselves entwined, splashing, laughing, and just simply enjoying their newly found friendship. Sort of like a couple of kids on a blind date.

As naked as she was, when the frolic was over she still chirped for a towel. Unfortunately for her, Joel had neglected to bring any with him.

"You'll need to put your clothes back on if you are concerned about showing off what the good Lord gave you," Joel teased.

"I don't care." She proceeded to march unabashedly toward the van. "Joel, do you have any food?"

In her backpack, she knew she had left New York with a couple of apples and a package of saltines. She also found three lint-covered Lifesavers in the bottom. As she was scrounging, she remembered that she had an unopened bottle of Peach Schnapps lying wrapped up in her sleeping bag.

"Hey, boy, do you wanna' try some of my old grand-pappy's favorite cough medicine?"

"Absolutely. I'd love to have a snort of that," She laughed.

They stood there beside the van drip-drying as they passed the bottle back and forth. Joel reached inside the van and pulled out a half loaf of bread and a few stale cookies.

"Is that all ya' got? I know a drifter packs light, but you got wheels. I'm surprised you're travelin' 'round and have no food."

"I didn't think I'd be attending a pot luck. I do have some fishing tackle in the back. I'll try to catch us some dinner if you can start a fire."

No sooner were the words out of Joel's mouth when he looked over and she already had an armload of firewood. This was a well-grounded lady. Just then, he had a mental image of exactly where the tackle box was. Unfortunately, he left it back at the barn.

"Shit. I was so excited about leaving yesterday. When I packed my van, I forgot to load my fishing gear."

"Aw well, that's too bad," she commented. "I was looking forward to having fish." She continued to gather wood.

"Don't worry. I'm a pretty industrious fellow. With what I have laying around the van, I should be able to rig a little something up. I'll be fishing in no time. Just you wait. If you come across a long straight branch that would work as a rod, I need it." He reached into the glove box where he knew there was a safety pin. He also remembered seeing a spool of thread under the passenger seat. After crafting the pin into a hook, with the help of a pair of pliers, he attached it to the thread. The easy part would be the bait and the weight. He looked over and noticed that her fire pit was also looking good. After a few minutes, she crept up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder with the stick that he'd been hopefully waiting for.

"Thanks, doll. Score me another swig off that bottle." This was great: a makeshift fishing rod, a naked stranger, no set agenda, and a full bottle of booze. Game on, baby.

"I'm happy the skitters aren't out. I'm naked as a jaybird and there's nothing out here biting me. Maybe after a couple more swigs you can bite me." She was getting very playful.

"Say what now?" Joel sputtered, choking on the Schnapps.

"Oh nuttin', I'm gunna' finish up the fire pit. You take your funny-looking pole down to the water, and I'll join you shortly with my guitar and play you some tunes, maybe serenade some fish."

As the evening wore on, the issue of the missing tackle box disappeared, and the two eventually did end up getting what they were wishing for; a tasty fish fry. It was the beginning of a perfect night spent playing music around the fire and sharing the bottle. She also taught Joel a few new tricks on the guitar, for which he was thankful. The stars must have been aligned that night because they laughed and danced the whole night through. Together they wrote this:

*Well I know why
Fire Flies are on Fire
Because I'm Hot blooded
Baby For you
And I know why
I keep on getting Higher
Because your love's
So tender and true
Everytime I Look around
Your eyes are always
Checking me out
You're young in bloom
So when your up and
On the run you're
Always out there having Fun
Making old things NEW
So I know why
Fire Flies are on Fire
Because I'm Hot blooded
Baby For you
And I know why
I keep on getting higher
Because your Love's so*

Tender and true

They woke up groggy as the sun rose. Neither of them had any recollection of what really happened the night before. They lay tangled up beside each other. Joel had lipstick smeared all over his face, making him look like a three-dollar clown, and the other had a head of messed-up hair, full of mustard and leaves. They sat beside each other on the back bumper and stared out blankly at the sparkling lake. The fire was smouldering and the fishing rod was in two pieces.

"What in the world happened?" She smirked trying to disregard her hangover.

"I have no idea, but the drumming in my head is telling me that it was probably a good night."

The two packed up and silently made their way to Raleigh.

GRANDMA HERBAL

11

He brought the nameless peach right to the front door of her uncle's house. She seemed to be tracing her roots. Joel was grateful for the company, and he'd made a new friend, a good-looking one at that. It took two hours to get the van started after dropping her off. Her uncle suggested giving the started a good smack with a rock. Joel took the advice and it worked. He then asked where he could find highway 40, so the uncle pointed him towards the turnpike and he was on his way. He continued travelling across the U.S. and was eager to see how the rest of his journey would unfold.

The van had caused him some grief, but for the time being was running just fine. Somewhere between Knoxville and Nashville all that would change.

Not just a Cling, Cling, Cling, but his bad luck also came with a hiss of steam and a wicked bad smell. Sure enough, it was the van. Joel looked down at the dash. "Great," he sputtered in a sarcastic voice. The gauge read OVERHEAT, which was pretty well obvious from the smell of the really old Prestone, which might have been mixed with a little antique pond water too. The stream seeped out through the engine cap and fogged up the windows.

The '64 Chevy van was a poorly designed vehicle due to the motor's location; in between the two front seats. This was a bad idea because all that was between you and the oncoming cars were two headlights, a steering wheel, and a piece of tin. To make matters even worse, on a hot summer day you would be more or less straddling a six-cylinder engine and on your way to some pretty comprehensive heat exhaustion. After letting the old van cool, Joel lifted the lid to the engine. The van needed a little work. He poured all of his drinking water into the rad to help cool it down. He hoped that it would be enough to get him to the next exit ramp so he could find a house and use the phone.

Luckily, just up the road was a hand-built cabin and behind it a dense hardwood forest. When Joel pulled up to the place, he spotted a woman enjoying a book, while swaying gently on a porch swing. Colourful flowers surrounded the house, a welcoming sight to any weary traveller. If Joel were going to find help anywhere, it would probably be here.

A fluffy little mutt came running out from under the porch. It yipped and barked, trying its best to scare the stranger. It seemed like every country home he visited had a dog. On this occasion, Joel simply tried to play nice. He acted scared for the dog's sake, when really, he just wanted to kick the yipping fluff ball.

"GLORIA! Oh, Gloria. Don't worry, she doesn't bite," the woman said.

"Sorry to bother you. I'm having a little car trouble. Please can I use your phone?"

"I have a phone for anyone who needs one. I've just squeezed some lemons for lemonade. Would you like a glass?"

"Sure, I'd love a cold drink. The van drank the last of my water."

"Your accent tells me that you're not from around here," she commented as she put down her book and rose to her feet. "My husband is probably just finished up his morning walk in the woods."

This lady was very friendly and approachable, which made Joel immediately comfortable. Hippies have that sort of effect on people.

"Ya, I've been on the road for the past couple of days. I'm a north of the boarder voyageur."

"Oh, Canada?" she guessed excitedly.

"My van is starting to showing its age. The radiator is dying out too fast and I need to have it looked at."

"Oh, my husband will love you. He's still playing with a VW bus that he's been driving since high school. If anyone can point you in the right direction, it's him. Now, grab my arm and we'll go find him. By the way, what's your name, young man?"

"Joel. And yours?"

"Well, my name is Helen," she spoke in a soft sweet voice, "but everybody calls me Grandma Herbal." Joel chuckled to himself and quickly deemed it unnecessary to know why they even called her that.

He gently hooked arms with madam Herbal and went in search for her husband.

Eli had just finished his daily walk in the woods, on his usual hunt for holes. When he came across one, he would reach into the leather pouch that hung happily at his side and would choose the appropriate sign and hang it or post it. These well-handcrafted signs would be displayed near the possible critters' nests. The signs read: VACANCY/NO VACANCY. He believed that by creating an easier forest for wildlife to live in they would in return not eat Grandma Herbal's garden.

Another one of his hobbies was building an endless supply of birdhouses and other folk art. His skills would find themselves in local craft stores where they were always in high demand. The man would say that he's been walking the bush for the past fifty years, making friends with all that was alive. His good deeds had been bettering the land, and Grandma Herbal's gardens were as healthy as they would get. As Eli popped out from behind a row of corn, he started shouting.

"Danny. Hey, Danny. Danny, my boy." Joel had no idea who the old man was yelling to, but he assumed that this was Grandpa Herbal.

"No, No, No, Eli." Grandma Herbal spoke. Then explained, "Sorry, his eye sight is a little off."

"Oh, that's fine." Joel had an empathetic heart, so it didn't matter to him that the old man thought he was someone else.

He wore pop-bottle glasses that were circular shaped, just like John Lennon's, and a red bandana tied tightly around his head, poorly hiding a two-foot long loosely braided ponytail. This man couldn't hide in a crowd even if he tried. Eli and Grandma Herbal were the most descript couple that Joel had ever met. A vision of peace and love. The positive vibe that he picked up from her was unmistakable. It may have been the flowers in her long white hair, or maybe the tie-dyed dress, but he knew that this was a perfect opportunity to expand his personal wellbeing.

"Eli, I wold like you to meet Joel," Grandma Herbal said. "He's travelling from Canada."

"Oooh, I thought you were my son Danny. Sorry, boy. My eyes are not as eagle as they used to be."

"Hey, that's fine. I know how things work."

"Our new friend Joel here, is having a little van trouble, and he'd like to use the phone to call for some help."

"Van trouble, you say? Well, let's just take a little peek at it. Between the two of us we might just be able to doctor it right here. Don't fuss about callin' someone in."

"Well, let me fetch you boys some lemonade." Grandma Herbal smiled and strolled toward the house.

Eli nudged Joel with a little elbow to the ribs. "Hey, you haven't had lemonade until you tried my Herbal's lemonade." They walked over to the van in the afternoon glow and both squinted their eyes as it reflected off their faces.

"It's the radiator," Joel explained.

The two acquaintances gathered close to take a look. "Well, that's the problem there," Eli pointed. "Look, the rad hose has a split in it."

"Good eye, old man. And you said you had bad eyes. That's an easy fix?"

"Yeah, with the things I have lying around here we should be able to muster up a little something."

Joel was happy. He wanted to get back on the road, although not in a hurry to get anywhere.

"I'll give you a flat screwdriver and you can remove the damaged hose. I have an old replacement hose, which will fit just fine. You're lucky, kid."

Before Eli and Joel walked to the garage to make the easy fix, Grandma Herbal showed up with her liquid refreshment. As the men sat quietly enjoying the drink, there started a melodic hum, which came from the left of Eli.

"You smoke, Joel? I grow my own tabaccy, fresh, straight from the land." Eli reached into his leather pouch and pulled out a couple of pre-rolled cigarettes.

"No thanks, never really had the urge."

Just then a red squirrel sprang out from under the shed door, ran across the driveway, and right up Eli's leg to his shoulder.

"Well, well, Joel. Meet Red-a-Ted-Ted. RATT for short. I rescued this little bugger a couple of years back. Ever since, he hasn't left my side. He's very well trained." Eli patted RATT's head, to the delight of the light rodent. "There's something that I'd like you to see. We'll go for a walk after we fix the van. If you have time, that is." He reached in the pouch again and set a few pistachios on the porch for his friend.

The part was replaced in no time. Grandma Herbal received thanks and made her way back to her book as the two men walked off toward the woods. RATT rode proudly on Eli's shoulder. This was an entirely entertaining creature to watch. The squirrel had somehow managed to stuff its cheeks with so much grub that Joel thought another nut would make it explode. RATT would occasionally glance over at him with a goofy look. He appeared to be making fun of him.

"Eli, does that little rat always carry that much attitude?" Joel questioned.

"Ya, but he only displays it to strangers. He'll come around." Eli gave RATT a little scratch under the chin and walked on.

Joel looked over, and it was no surprise to see the squirrel waving its flamingo orange tail in what appeared to be a signal for Eli to giddy up.

Curious about Danny, Joel asked, "Do you see your son much?"

"Well, Danny my boy... He's a funny man... He usually shows up when he's hungry and eats all of our food." It was grossly obvious by the way he trailed off that he was uncomfortable with this subject. "When he's not in the clink or fleeing from the cops at high speeds, he's huntin' with the motley crew from down the road. Man, do they ever drink a lot of beer." Joel understood Eli's sore spot."

As the boys continued to follow the leaf-littered trail, Eli went on to tell a story about chicken thieving. "It all started with the neighbour; he owed me money for a dozen chickens. Herbal and I were into raising birds before we took up gardening. Anyway, these folks were lacking a few basic morals, sort of like my son Danny. Now, a dozen chicks may only be worth a few bucks, but this was far, far, far from the point. Our son was fourteen at the time and a tad overprotective. When he caught wind of the fact that they owed me money, he lost it. It turned out to be the straw that broke the camel's back. One night, Danny just went nuts.

Seeking his own brand of vengeance, he grabbed my shotgun, hopped into the farm truck, and took off in a cloud of dust down the road."

The two stopped for a rest at the base of Eli's favorite giant oak. Under the tree was a bench where they sat and he continued with the rest of his story.

"There was an old Dodge Duster, up on blocks, at the end of the neighbour's driveway, just waitin' to be restored. When Danny spotted it, his trigger finger started to itch. He pulled over and grabbed the gun. He must've circled that bloody car about five times dumping bullets into it from every angle. He felt that bullet holes weren't enough, so on his way out the little bugger backed my truck right into the side of the car and knocked it off its blocks. The talk of that stunt still lingers in town. You know what, Joel; it was hard to punish the boy because I wanted to do the same thing. But that was just the first of his encounters with the police.

As they wandered deeper into the woods, Eli became a true tour guide.

"Look up to the top of that maple," Eli pointed.

"Eli, how in God's name did you get that up there?"

At the very top of the ancient tree hung a birdhouse the likes of which Joel had never seen before. It had a copper roof and a wraparound porch. It was finer than most homes.

"That there is a piece of my latest artwork." Eli was deservedly proud. "These days, I have to get Danny to hang my work. He complains, but deep down, I know he enjoys it."

They walked a little farther and finally came across what Eli had wanted to show him.

"Check this out." Eli puffed out his chest giving the signal. Red-a-Ted-Ted scrambled down his arm and made a beeline for the nearest tree. It was a pistachio tree. Underneath it sat a bunch of small bushel baskets.

"This, Joel, is where the magic takes place. All I ask is for you to stand still and watch." Eli reached into his leather pouch, grabbed a pistachio, and placed it on a large flat stone near the base of the tree. Next, he walked over, grabbed a basket and placed it next to the nut. He gave a sharp whistle and the show began.

"What you are witnessing is the beginning of the best pistachio pudding you will ever taste."

RATT started racing up and down the tree. Every time he came down, he had a new cluster of nuts, which he dropped into the basket. Then he would disappear back up into the foliage, rustling around and carrying on. The vigorous little squirrel did this for the next little while, and it wasn't long before the basket was full.

"In my younger years, it used to take me hours to pick this tree by hand. Now, with the help of my little friend here, it can be done in minutes."

Joel picked up the basket and the two were off. Eli reached down and gave RATT a victory nut and a little scratch. Then they made their way out of the woods and back to the cabin.

SIMPLICITY

12

Eli reached down and grabbed an onion by the greens and reeled it out of the ground,

"Joel, come close. Do you see here how the peeling on this onion is thick? Eli wiped off the dirt.

"Yeah, why?"

"That means we're in for a rough winter, but that shouldn't bother a Canadian like you."

"That's a good one Eli. I like to hear old wives' tales that I haven't heard before." Joel was always eager to hear and do things that he hadn't heard or done before. He believed that this was what made a person a real person. He always paid attention.

As they walked passed one of Grandma Herbal's pepper plants, Eli reached down again and pulled one yellow pepper and one orange, placing them both in the leather satchel that still hung happily at his side.

"Look, there's a hummingbird," Joel pointed out. The two men grew smiles.

The little bird was smothering its slender beak into a pink trumpet flower. All of a sudden, Grandma Herbal stepped onto the back porch and the old spring-loaded door swung shut. Joel and Eli watched as the bird darted away.

"I was wondering when you two wanderers would be back." She happily greeted them with indifferent curiosity as she wiped her hands on her apron.

"Hey, Grandma," Eli shouted. "Red-a-Ted-Ted picked us some healthy pistachios. Can you make us some pudding?"

"I figured that's what you were two were up to. Will you be sticking around for dinner, Joel?" Grandma Herbal questioned. "I've been roasting a chicken all day."

"That sounds delicious. I'd love to." He was anxious to spend more time with these folks. The air just seemed to be clearer here.

"Grandma, I snagged a couple of peppers for a garden salad." The men continued to nose around.

"You boys be careful in there, and, Eli, no steppin' on my squash." She wagged a finger at him.

"Aw, shush, Grandma." Eli looked slyly at Joel and whispered, "Isn't that why they call it squash?"

"Don't you shush me, old man," she snapped back with authority. Joel looked over and all he could see was Eli's rear end, with his patched overalls, pointing towards the sun. He was tapping out a rhythm on his worn outfit while he spoke in rhyme:

Plant it

Grow it

Pick it

Pack it

Pickle it

And share it with

A few

Plant it

Grow it

Pick it

Pack it

Pickle it

And share it with you.

"Here, this watermelon is ready," Eli announced triumphantly as he stood up straight.

"How do you know that?" Joel asked.

"Well, if you tap on a melon the looks ripe, you can tell for sure from its hollow sound." Eli was more than happy to share what he knew. No matter what the subject, he was always willing.

It sure was nice, Joe thought, that he had the time and ambition to meet as many people as possible. This unexpected trip had given him the opportunity to earn his PhD in life. So far, he had encountered a few colourful characters, especially the unforgettable Nameless Peach. He continued to follow Eli. This wasn't his garden, but he was more than willing to lend a hand in harvesting a good meal. With the good in Eli's pouch, the two men made their way to the temperamental screen door. Proudly, Eli handed over the bounty that he and his new friend had picked.

"You guys have picked me some real nice veggies. It'll take some preparation, so you two go off and play, and I'll call you when it's ready."

"Are you sure, Grandma?"

"Ya, I'm sure. The last thing I need is you two under my feet." Herbal was gentle with her husband, but even he knew that was her domain and he didn't belong in it.

"Come with me, Joel, and I'll show you Grandma's favorite flowers."

The two made their way out of the kitchen, down the steps, through the gardens and back to the chicken coops. Beside the coop there was a mound of manure and the start of a padlocked, eight-foot-high, fenced enclosure. The fence wrapped around the rear of the little red barn and obviously served some sort of purpose. Joel was curious as to what it was. Eli stepped up to the padlock and proceeded to start digging through his leather pouch in search of the key.

"Here we go. Got it." Eli unlocked the gate and they walked in. Joel's jaw dropped to his waist. This was the first time that he had seen such rich-looking pot plants. They stood almost as tall as the roof of the coop, and the pungent aroma was unmistakable. Joel had a million questions, but he knew not to ask any of them.

"They'll be ready to harvest soon. I like to call this strain, Endless Sky."

Joel was dumbfounded by the size of the stalk. After finally finding his voice he said, "I'll bet you probably need a chainsaw to take these down."

"Yes, yes, good eye. When they're ready, I'll need some sort of saw for sure." Eli was happy to show off the plants. They continued their walk around the property. "There is one more thing that I'd like you to see."

The pair walked over to the garage. All of a sudden, RATT ran out from under the door with his cheeks full. Eli figured that he had gotten into the bird seed again. It wasn't easy to have a squirrel for a pet. He swung the garage door up, revealing his pride and joy. It was a forest-green VW bus that looked absolutely immaculate.

At about one hundred and forty thousand miles, it was obviously a seldom-used piece of art. Originally produced in the late sixties, this van epitomized everything about a specific time period. Although Joel had missed this entire generation, even he knew that this was a very well cared for 'blast from the past'.

"I noticed the stained glass in your van. What a fantastic idea. I can't, for the life of me, believe that I never thought of that. It's exactly where it belongs." Eli was genuine in appreciation of where the glass had found its new home.

"Thanks for noticing what most people don't. I had the image in a dream."

"A dream, huh?" Eli smiled. "A good dream. This van of mine has more memories than I'll ever remember." Eli patted his van warmly. "Herbal and I made many trips, but we never went very far. Thirty years ago we sniffed out a good deal, bought this plot, and parked the van in it. Slowly we built our homestead and the memories came during the first years as we were getting established. We were young and in love and these were easily the best times in our lives. I'm thrilled to see that someone your age can take appreciation in a nomadic lifestyle. Eli turned to Joel, dazed with memories in his eyes, then said softly, "Simplicity, my friend, is the secret."

PISTACHIO PUDDING

13

The dinner bell rang and the boys pulled themselves back into reality.

"Eli, come and carve the bird," Grandma Herbal instructed. She had just finished tossing the fresh garden salad and mincing the nuts for their dessert.

"Wow, this smells great," Joel thought aloud. The waft of scents from the kitchen made his mouth water. Joel had never been exposed to this type of mealtime luxury. As far back as he could remember, he had never participated in a sit-down meal. He had come from a lifetime of TV dinners and takeout. He wasn't sure how to show proper gratitude, hold a fork, or cut with a knife. This was going to be a great learning experience given to him by a couple of aging hippies. Too bad this dinner came a couple decades too late.

It may have been the mint-glazed chicken or the peaches and cream corn drowning in butter, but when he entered the kitchen, Joel was exposed to senses he didn't know he had. With a little bit of guidance on how to use the proper utensils, all three of them sat for a lengthy meal and some lively conversation.

Eli then fell into his nightly routine. If Joel thought he was satisfied now, fifteen minutes later he wouldn't be able to form words. Herbal had just introduced him to a way of dining that he was sorely unfamiliar with. He needed to hone his skills in the art of cuisine.

After dinner, there were two treats. They had the same colour and delivered about the same satisfaction, but to two different areas of the brain. This was the first time that he had ever eaten this kind of desert. Heck, he didn't even know that you could use nuts to make pudding. This old couple definitely had unexpected tricks up their sleeves. Thanks to Eli's friend, Red-a-Ted-Ted, Joel had been exposed to one of the tastiest things

in his entire life. Eli led the way to the living room. Once there, he threw his feet up and grabbed a homemade corncob pipe.

"I whittled this at about the same time that your van was being built. I've been smoking with it ever since. Would you like to try some Endless Sky?"

Eli reached over and picked up a four-string banjo. As he showed it to Joel, Grandma lit the pipe. He then told Joel about the band he was once in. They would attend festivals all over the land calling themselves "One Horse Town". They were a sought-after group, playing a mixture of folk and roll tunes written mostly by Eli himself.

Herbal stroked the pipe, passed it along, and went off to do the dishes. Joel went to retrieve his guitar from the van before he became too comfortable. He knew this would be a great opportunity to learn some techniques that only a lifetime of entertaining could give. Eli continued with his story telling. He figured that even the most talented musician wouldn't be enjoyable if he didn't have something good to say. He placed the tambourine under his left foot, the banjo across his lap, and began to share his song:

She was a Carolina Chickadee

And I don't know her

So won't you introduce me

Because I'd like to meet her

She wore red beads for luck I guess

So I carried clover

Time I life can be a mess

And then she looked over

I have a small house she claimed she lived by the river

I'm not match she gives me quiver after quiver

I finally broke her she smiled

I said I broke her she stayed for a while

MAC MAN MAC MAN I'm NO MAC MAN

I'm just a drifter with a red tan

And she's a girl from the city

As a matter of fact she's a

Carolina Chickadee

Joel sat quietly while Eli played the catchy tune. He didn't realize that by the end of the song he was on the edge of his seat. "My God, Eli. That was one of the most eye-opening things that I have ever seen." It was the blend of banjo, tambourine, and his calming, deep voice.

Joel enjoyed the fact that Eli didn't seem to be in a hurry to belt out his own brand of folk n' roll. It was the quiver in the old man's voice, the truth of his tale and experience that swirled throughout the song. It was the source of goose bumps. During the song, the pauses were louder and more captivating at times than the actual music. It was incredible that a split rad hose would prove to be the reason for these strangers to unite.

Still hazy when Joel awoke, his mind was all over the place like the flight of a butterfly. It was time to hit the road. He's had a marvellous experience with the two old hippies and a squirrel named Red-a-Ted-Ted, but there was more to be learned, and in all honesty, he was interested in learning lessons as he wandered. After saying his heartfelt goodbyes, both Eli and Herbal handed him a parting gift. He politely declined the bag of Endless Sky, but eagerly accepted a piece of paper from herbal that read:

Homemade Pistachio

Pudding

1 ounce pistachio paste

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup maple syrup

2 tablespoons cornstarch

Pinch of salt

2 cups milk

2 egg yolks

2 tablespoons butter

1 teaspoon vanilla

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup pistachio butts, finely chopped

Pistachio Past:

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup pistachios

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup powdered sugar

2-4 tablespoons water

The van had trouble starting. It was a good thing that Eli was close by because he immediately knew what had to be done. A rock on the edge of Herbal's garden would prove to be the answer. He reached down, picked up the rock, and gave Joel's starter the same smack that the Peach's uncle had done just days before. Only this time, it had only cost him two minutes, instead of the lost two hours in Raleigh. Another lesson learned.

CAVE ART

14

In between the Nameless Peach and the Colorado River, Drifter the van had been a nuisance. (Although, he didn't mind being stranded outside of Graceland.) While he was twiddling his thumbs waiting for a tow truck, he crossed paths with a man travelling on two wheels across the country.

"Neener, Neener, Neener. My bike works and your van sucks." Joel couldn't believe it. The man was poking fun.

The bicycle man wasn't young and the grey beard told all. He mumbled suck talk as the ditches were filled with nickels and dimes, and he also claimed he was an ex-weather man, so he wasn't scared of clouds.

"Peddle on, Soldier. Peddle on." Joel insisted as he rolled up the window.

It had cost him close to the price of a new van just to keep this one running. On his voyage across America, he had almost rebuilt the entire vehicle, from headlights to tail lights and everything in between. The van had left him stranded in different places for the last eight hundred miles. All he wanted to do was pull over and camp, sleep beside streams, or do whatever. However, the van's problems left him sitting in service station chairs and sleeping on beds of cement. This made for some very long, very uncomfortable nights.

Now, a leaky gas tank left him just outside of the Hualapai Indian Reservation, south of the Grand Canyon. What a wicked view. The Colorado River was in sight and it made for a magnificent place to be stranded. While his van was in the shop again, on a whim, he went to a pawnshop and picked up a 35mm Nikon. It came with a telephoto lens, which would come in handy. He didn't necessarily know how to use a camera, but hell, it's never too late to learn something new. All he had left from his first eighteen years were

memory clips instead of photographs. When he looked back on the people that he had met along the way, he lamented about the photos that he didn't take.

He took the opportunity to fire off a dozen black and white photos. He captured a magnificent shot of a native man fly fishing a fast-running stream and a few shots of the fisherman's daughter playing on a big, flat, red stone. He captured the photos of things that were inspiring. He thought, "Why hadn't I done this before?"

Suddenly, a crow swooped in and landed beside the child. In itself, this was no big deal, but in this case the bird seemed to be running interference for his murder mate. First, he spooked the child by hopping closer than expected. When the child got up to shoo the bird away, another crow swooped in and stole the tyke's sandwich. Because of teamwork, the one crow's distraction had resulted in a fine meal for both of them.

Joel thought about the van and wondered when it would be ready. In the meantime, he would enjoy a midday snack at a tearoom called the Whoo Whoo Kanoe. When he finished, the van was ready for pick up. He paid for a new gas tank, as well as a starter, and was off through the winding roads to Nevada. On his way out of town, he passed the same father and child that he'd photographed earlier at the river. Something told him to pull over. On the passenger seat was a bag containing still warm muffins from the tearoom. He knew immediately what he should do. He stopped the father and child and offered the little girl the bag. She seemed to still be pouting about the crow's nasty tricks. She happily accepted the offering. The father took the rod off his shoulder and engaged Joel in a spirited conversation. To his side he held a string of trout that he was taking home for his wife.

"Join us," he said, as he displayed the fish.

Joel didn't know what to expect, but eagerly accepted the invitation. Until now, the only Indians Joel knew of played baseball in Cleveland. This would be a wonderful opportunity to look inside tribal culture.

As the pulled up to a ramshackle shack, there was an old leather-faced man sitting on an old weathered chair. This Native American had outlived his jet-black hair. His eyes said that he had earned each strand of the now silver mane. The elder was the little girl's grandfather and appeared to be telling tales around a fire to about half a dozen youngsters. The odd thing about this was that the children were each holding a long stick. A squirrel skewer if you will. This was the same way that Joel had been taught how to roast a marshmallow. When the spirited father's stories came to an end, the kids started

squealing and shouting "Sa-Lo-Li, Sa-Lo-Li," which meant roasted squirrel. They cooked the squirrel to their own desire. Some were on fire, and some were rare and still held their fur. Above the front door hung a sign that read: "Bless the work of our hands." Everything about this place was just surreal.

After a brief introduction, the father told the girl's mother about the crows and Joel's offering of muffins helping her forget her sorrow. The mother felt badly that a stranger had to step in and help. She winked as the father reached for his headdress. Both parents then started flapping their arms impersonating the crow. They were re-enacting the thievery. Joel was confused. It turns out that one of this tribe's animal gods was the crow, and they were merely letting their daughter know that this event was actually a blessing, not a curse, a learning lesson.

The meal was fresh and entirely from the land. He had to smile as he remembered Grandma Herbal's meal from so many miles ago. When the trout and corn bread were finished, the children scattered leaving Joel at the table with the old man. After helping him outside, they took a seat around the dying fire. When he spoke, one couldn't help but listen. Grabbing one of the skewers, he gave the fire a poke and drew a small circle in the sand.

"This is what **I** know," he began. Using the skewer, he then drew a second circle around the first. "This is what **you** know."

"Huh?" Honest to God. This was the cleverest response that Joel could come up with. "What do you mean?"

The old man went on to explain. "Because I've never been off this piece of land, my knowledge is only as big as I can see. Because you look like a travelling man, your eyes have seen more. My father's father told me that if you don't travel, you only read one chapter. Those who travel read the entire book."

Joel watched the old man get to his feet and walk to the back of his chair. He proceeded to walk around the perimeter of the fire area, dragging the stick behind him. When the huge circle was finished, he sat down, leaned towards Joel, and said in a dark whisper: "This is what we don't know."

Just then, a flock of youngsters stormed the fire pit. "You're right, Grandpa, you're right. Spiders do build their webs facing south."

Following the flock of youngsters was a healthy looking young man who turned out to be the eldest grandson. He had a long braid of hair hanging behind each shoulder. He wore a fairly long scar across his chestnut-coloured cheek. He had a rough and tumble appearance that spoke of his dark side.

Joel knew immediately that he wanted to get to know this fellow. He walked over to the grandson and introduced himself. Before they shook hands the eldest grandson made a subtle, yet obvious glance over to his grandfather. The old man nodded his approval and the handshake was completed.

"Joel is my name. I am just passing through and was invited for dinner."

"Jesse." Leary of his new acquaintance, he was slow to put out his hand. Jesse had a side that wasn't displayed in front of his grandfather. The scar was from a knife fight that he had a few years back. Although he tried to keep his wild side hidden, the scar gave him away. Jesse was like a junkyard dog. He was the black sheep of his tribe, and he revelled in the notoriety that came with such a distinction. With eyes as dark as coal and shoulders as wide as moose antlers, Joel couldn't imagine what kind of crazy bastard would pick a knife fight with this impressive looking beast.

"Jesse. Why don't you take our new friend and show him our landscape," the great father sternly suggested.

The two new acquaintances headed off to see what kind of trouble they could get into. Jesse led Joel to the outskirts of the settlement.

"When was the last time that it rained in these parts?" Joel had never seen such a parched landscape. The cracks in the earth made the ground look like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. A hundred thoughts sped through his mind and one of them happened to be, of all things, about the ants.

He figured that a crack this size would look like a canyon to an insect that small.

A rustle behind a small thorn bush prompted Jesse to look for a stone. The wild man immediately threw up a hand, which told Joel to stop dead in his tracks. Joel had no idea what his new friend was up to, so he stood quietly and watched. The bush rustled again and Jesse crouched low like a lion stalking its prey. A strange wave of excitement ran through Joel's mind. The movements happened one more time, igniting Jesse to start running. Seven quail popped out from behind the brush and Jesse started firing his rocks. They left his hand at such a speed that when they connected with the birds they made an

eerily hollow sound. He then straightened up out of his pounce position, walked over, and collected his lunch.

"Two birds with three stones." Jesse marvelled at his own abilities.

"That's a new one." Joel had never seen birds stoned this was before.

Jesse tied both birds to his waist, and without saying another words, continued to walk. The three o'clock sun was painting them red and at the end of the trail was a forty-foot drop into a canyon.

"The only way to my sanctum is off this cliff."

"What?" Joel asked. Jesse started to run. When he jumped and disappeared over the edge, all Joel could hear was Jesse yelling what sounded like "see you at the bottom."

Joel was now alone and stunned. He walked to the edge and looked over. There was no way in the world that he was ready to make that leap. All of a sudden, he heard a muffled and echoey yell for his attention. His heart rate jumped as he took another look over the edge. He spotted Jesse in the water beckoning him to follow.

"What the fuck? I'm not making that jump," he muttered to himself, giving his head a shake. He kept trying to wrap his mind around what Jesse had just done. There hadn't been too many times in Joel's life when he was afraid to do something, but this was entirely different.

Jesse called again, "The water is deep, Pussy. Jump!"

"For Christ's sake, this is suicidal!" Joel yelled back.

"Get a good run and you'll be OK," the Indian prompted him again.

A million thoughts ran through Joel's head, and the vast majority ended with him crashing to his death at the bottom. He had planned this trip with adventure in mind, but this might be too much for him. Joel kicked the dirt in anger because he couldn't decide what to do. He finally settled on jumping. He then yelled to Jesse, "This is stupid!"

He turned his back to the canyon and took ten paces. Turning again, he sped to the edge of the cliff and took a leap of faith. The time between when he jumped and when he hit the water seemed like forever.

SPLASH.

When his head had finally emerged, he looked towards the shore and spotted Jesse clapping and laughing.

"You fool. I could have died."

"I've done this a thousand times." Jesse stood tall. "And here I am. Now don't you feel alive? If anything, you should thank me."

Joel grinned with accomplishment as he swam to the water's edge. "You're right," he agreed. "I feel more alive than I ever have, but that was still the most dangerous thing that I've ever done."

Joel dragged himself out of the river and shook off. Standing on a small sandy bank, he looked around. The eyes of many animals looked back at him. Speechless. Shades of indigo, crimson, yellow, black... unlike the urban art expelled from a spray can, it did not reflect the disrespect of graffiti. It was cave art, covering the walls for as long as the canyon would allow. It was incredible. Somebody had obviously spent a great deal of time drawing pictures of life and the world.

"Hey, Broken Shell. Whaddaya' think?"

In a whisper, Joel stammered, "Who did all of this?"

"This is how I while away the hours. I feel like I was sent here for a reason, so I've been working on these walls for a long, long time."

One of the things that struck Joel was the detail in every single figure. His new friend's obvious talent had made him forget about the leap of faith not three minutes earlier.

"My God, Jesse. How many people have seen this?"

"Only the people who were willing to make that jump have seen my drawings."

"How do we get out of here?"

"We float."

THE TEASE OF THE GLOW

15

"Sput, Sput, Boom." Joel mocked his lousy van. It was early the next day, and he hadn't driven very far at all before it failed him again, leaving him with another vending-machine sandwich. It took the better part of a day fixing what would end up being a three thousand dollar transmission. OUCH. This sojourn was turning into a very expensive trip. Now he had a chance to play with Ruby. The material at his fingertips was extensive. He had been jotting down lyrics the entire trip and now could match some chords to the tale:

Let me tell you about the bicycle man

With two wheels he likes to travel the land

So let me tell you about the bicycle man

Well, he's a grey-bearded, key-collecting weather man

He licks his finger when its dry then holds it up into the sky

Oh he's the bicycle man

He leaned over and picked up the newspaper and held it above

His head to keep him dry

He reached over then grabbed me by the shoulder

Then stared into my eyes

He said, look, son, the ditches are overflowing with

Nickels and dimes and beer bottles

So, if you don't worry, get there in a hurry and you will

Be on time

Joel patiently waited on an outdoor bench, just outside the service station. He stared down the setting sun. There was a growing glow in the distance; it seemed to be getting brighter as the sky darkened. He had never seen this phenomenon before and couldn't quite figure out what it was, so he asked one of the grease monkeys.

"Are you kidding?" The grease-covered man erupted in a jolly ole' belly laugh. "If you weren't headed toward the lights, kid, then where were you headed?"

Joel sorta' just shrugged his shoulders.

"Tourists." He chuckled to himself. "That's Vegas, man. It'll take an hour to get there. Your car'll be ready in less than that."

To a creek raiser from a small town, Las Vegas looked like a wild new planet. As he headed in, he was guided by a path of neon and billboards. Temptations were everywhere he looked. He parked the van on a back street just behind the Flamingo Hotel, two streets away from Las Vegas Boulevard. A very fast city, built strictly on crooked money. Long line-ups for shows and beautiful women everywhere. A true haven for all that was taboo. As he cut through the Flamingo, he found that Bugsy Segal's parlour was no place for clowns. He learned that the city was built around this hotel, and it would eventually cost Segal a premature death.

So, have a drink on Joel. He was just another Vegas vagabond who was awaiting a four-figure hangover. The one thing that surprised him the most was the willingness of women to wear nothing. All you had to do was collect one of the countless business cards handed out on the streets. These cards were complete with picture, price, and phone number. You know what they say about the oldest profession. Being a professor for a few days would be a pretty good gig, Joel concluded. It seemed the only rule in this city was that you weren't allowed to jaywalk.

Everywhere you looked there were remnants of a party. People dancing here, people tripping there, women dressed as peacocks, and men dressed as pimps. It was like five gallons of gas, on a round bale of hay, ignited by a Roman candle. The place was on fire.

After filling his pockets with a couple of Miller roadies, he was fortunate enough to be distracted by an explosion of water and sound. The fountain across the street was dancing to the song "*Rain Drops Keep Falling on My Head*." The erupting water shot at least forty stories high. No joke. The Bellagio Hotel was a spectacle. There was almost too much to explore. Inside, Joel discovered several displays of hand blown glass, which decorated everything including the ceiling. It would have been the perfect place for his '64 Chevy van, with stained glass windows, to park for all to see. It gave him a lot of mechanical problems, but it, in itself, was also a spectacle.

His journey continued up the street to another hotel. New York, New York had, of all things, a rooftop rollercoaster. This poor country boy had never even had the chance to ride a coaster.

The only way he figured that he would be able to calm his nerves back down, after a ride like that, was to sit at a piano bar for a drink. Also at the bar was a burlesque dancer in costume. She was one of those strutting, full-feathered peacocks, sitting there calming her nerves before her show.

"Could I buy you a drink?" Joel asked sheepishly. Without answering, she turned away to practice a step from her upcoming show. He wrinkled his brow and thought she was extremely rude.

"Sorry ma'am. I just wanted to buy you a drink. A 'no' would have been fine?" Joel wasn't going to be ignored. He finally had her attention.

"Sorry, sweetie. Were you talking to me? I didn't hear you. I'm just a little uptight right now. A drink is probably the last thing I need."

"Ya, I just got off that bloody rollercoaster. What a ride! If anybody's uptight, it's me. So, what's your story Morning Glory?"

Just when she thought she had heard every pickup line, she figured at least this one rhymed. The peacock was taken by his country-boy charm and good looks. "I'd love a shot of Tequila."

"Excuse me, sir." Joel caught the waiter's attention. "Two Cuervo Gold." Then he reached into his pocket and found a surprise. He had forgotten that there was a thick wad of bills left over from the transmission job. It did not go unnoticed.

"Are you staying for the show? I'll be on stage shortly."

"I have no other plans," Joel replied.

"Well, if you're not, I'm done in half an hour."

She smiled, winked, turned and walked toward the stage.

"Nice. Welcome to Vegas," Joel mumbled to no one in particular, as he ordered a victory shot and then turned to watch as her feathers disappeared into the crowd. He decided that this was another opportunity that just shouldn't be missed. Picking his way through the crowd, he spotted a table right in front of the stage. The only hinderance with the table was a very noticeable reserved sign. This was an easy problem to solve. He was able to walk right up, grab the sign casually, put it on the floor and take a seat. Moments later, the curtains slid aside, revealing a rainbow of colour and sculptured legs kicking in unison. The peacock he had met earlier was one of a couple of dozen in this particular extravaganza. The show was something that he could only dream of. They didn't have entertainment like this back in Vinegar Hill, he thought, as he sipped an ice-cold beer.

When the show was over, the peacocks circulated and coloured the crowd. Flash bulbs took pictures of the poised ladies and flawless smiles. After the glad-handing was finished, Priscilla approached with her stilettos hanging off a finger over her shoulder. Joel couldn't look away from her emerald eyes.

"I gotta' get outta' this garb. Let's go," she said, as they hooked arms and lost themselves in the crowd. "I'm staying just upstairs. New York, New York blocks off a section of rooms for the entertainers." The two of them headed toward the elevators.

It stopped only once after it had travelled forty floors. With a ding, the doors slide apart. They laughed their way down the long hall to her room. This is where she started the lengthy process of taking off the costume.

"This will take a while, so go make a drink for yourself, then take a look out the window. You'll like the view." She pointed the way. Her feather costume was like nothing he had ever seen. He had trouble keeping his eyes off his long-legged, dark-haired dancer of the night.

Joel poured himself a glass of champagne, then walked over to the window and looked up the strip. From four hundred feet in the air it was simply amazing.

"Wow." He was hypnotized.

"What do you think of that, country boy? I'll bet you've never seen a city on fire before? It's like that 24/7." She was almost blasé.

The lounge was non-descript, but the view more than made up for whatever the room didn't have. There was a vinyl-clad headboard just waiting to have lipstick pressed and smeared all over it. It came with a full fridge, a red Jacuzzi and a couple of mirrors positioned at just the right angles. He'd been bitten by the "Vegas bug" and was entertaining thoughts that even he knew he shouldn't be having.

"Could you unzip me please?"

She stepped out of the washroom, walked over to him and turned around. Joel was presented with the zipper. As he reached for it, she arched her back just enough. He grabbed her hips with both hands and boldly slid them up to the nape of her neck. She didn't resist as she pushed her buttocks towards him. She playfully jumped up on the bed shaking her tail feathers. Without saying a word, she invited Joel to join her. He pounced. After only a few moments, feathers of green and blue covered the room.

The night was still young. With Joel rolling in cash, the two lay on a white bed sharing a bottle of red wine.

"Reach in the top drawer of my night stand. I have a treat for you." Joel pulled open the drawer and found a little vile with white powder in it. He wasn't at all surprised.

"Priscilla..."

"Shhh, just pass me a bill, country boy."

He reached down to the floor, grabbed his pants, then from his pocket he pulled out a hundred dollar bill and handed it over. She turned over on her stomach and rolled up the bill.

"Sprinkle a line of that on my ass." She passed him the bill and he spoke no more.

A half hour later they were cruising the strip. She knew all the right places to go. There's nothing like having a local show you the town. The two of them tail-ended shows, hopped from cab to bar and bar to cab. Fancy drinks with umbrellas, floating cherries, and fresh fruit seemed to be the theme of the night. They made

their way to old Las Vegas and found themselves at the foot of Freemont Street. This famous street was a covered archway strip. Projected on the ceiling with light and sound was a tribute to Freddie Mercury's Queen. The light show was world famous and mesmerized thousands at a time. Street performers and musicians littered the streets filling their shoes with dollar bills. Joel had never imagined such a sight.

The next stop was a bank machine to refill his pockets. It's amazing how quickly money can be spent when you're not looking at the bottom line.

"Hey, look. Want to go and check out David Copperfield?" Priscilla suggested. "The next show starts in half an hour."

Instead, they walked toward the distant sound of drums. It turned out to be an old washed-up street performer sitting at the mouth of an alleyway. He was beating on an old high-hat and bass drum with his hands while yelling, "KEE-LER, KEE-LER. KEE-LER, KEE-LER." He paused to quickly vomit and then continued his chant. On their walk, they saw things that would open Joel's eyes to the decadence that was Las Vegas. It was almost overwhelming to a country bumpkin to be exposed to what was essentially the tail end of a tornado. They made it to a street stage, which was surrounded by hundreds of visitors lively playing it up. A local man dressed in a three-piece pinstriped suit was twirling his pocket watch to the beat.

Joel couldn't believe it, how available everything in this city was. At a nearby corner store, Priscilla found a bottle of champagne that had their names written all over it. They entered a neighbouring casino where she quickly pulled Joel into the ladies' room where they locked a stall and exploited her vile. That was the last thing Joel could remember.

GETTING OUTTA DODGE

16

The nine o'clock sun started to cook him in his van. His teeth were wearing sweaters. He was the only turkey in his oven; Priscilla was gone. Lying naked with his eyes open, he tried to remember, "Oh, no. What happened last night?" With absolutely no idea, Joel just rubbed his forehead, trying hard to remember anything.

"My, oh my, I'm still drunk. Now, where did I put that water?" He fumbled around for a bit and then found what he was looking for. It would take a little more than water to get over this one. All he could hear was the buzzing of neon, or so he thought.

"I need out of this van," Joel grumbled, opening the back door to a lively crowd. People were still partying in the streets. "Doesn't anybody ever sleep around here?"

He continued his mumble for a good long time while he was still trying to piece together what had happened. Bits and pieces would become clear over time, but he was certainly never going to remember the whole night. One of the things that did come clear to him was the number of times that he hit a bank machine. One more night like that and he would either need an undertaker or bail. He had to get out, now.

Staggering across the busy road, he reached into his pocket and pulled out what remained from a rock-star of a night. "Forty seven bucks. Jeez Louise." He was drier than happy hour at a Betty Ford Clinic. To soothe his soul, he popped a couple of coins in a vending machine. It spat out a can of Coke, which was quickly replaced by another. Joel took a seat on a nearby bench and was awoken by a policeman tapping him on the foot with his nightstick.

"You okay, kid?" The cop asked with genuine concern.

By now Joel was sober and had nothing to hide, so he responded with a tired, "Doesn't this town have an off switch?"

The cop laughed and threw another question at him. "Do you have a place to stay?"

"No, I'm just passing through. That's my ride over there." Joel pointed to the van.

The two men talked for a while and then went their separate ways. Ambling back across the road, he was wary of what the cop had told him about jaywalking. This seemed to be the only law enforced in this city of debauchery.

To Joel's pleasant surprise, the van started up right away. Nice, considering what it had already put him through. It seemed like Drifter was raring to go. Affectionately slapping the dashboard, Joel commanded, "Giddy up, ole' girl." He slammed it into first gear and pointed west.

The sun was to his left and he was sailing smoothly, smiling while reminiscing about his luck. He had only been in the city for a few hours before he had picked up a peacock and plucked her till she clucked. At the very least, lady luck was on his side. Or, maybe not.

On the highway out of Vegas, Joel pulled over to take snapshots of all that was unfamiliar. This landscape was so much different than he was used to. He walked off the highway and found some sagebrush and brightly-coloured, wild flowers. Many of the cacti had unmistakable red tufts on the top. It looked like the prickled plants were wearing shower caps. Now he understood why people sought out this barren wasteland for its arid beauty. A quick glance would only give you shades of brown, but an open mind would give you the rainbow. You just had to look for it.

Joel was a fan of tromping around in no particular direction; he walked deeper into the desert. Hours passed as well as any lingering effects of self-inflicted flu from the previous night. Dripping with sweat, he felt strangely alive again. The last time he felt like this, he had just taken a successful leap of faith. He was quickly burning through his film, capturing shots, pretending to be a photographer for the *National Geographic*.

The most amazing thing that he was lucky enough to see was the tail of a scorpion curl over itself and sting a grasshopper. Joel also had the opportunity to see tumbleweeds in motion and the bluest sky that he could have ever imagined. As the van came back into sight, he took the chance to reflect on his continuing adventure. It had been a wild ride in a short-lived time.

The blue/yellow aura circling Drifter gave the indication that the old girl had had a heat stroke. Sure enough, when he turned the key, the van let out a death moan and never made another sound. Staying calm, he came to the realization that this machine, which had essentially fallen into his lap, was about to leave him stranded for the last time. He gathered what was important to him, took off the license plates and stuffed them into his duffle bag. There was a long rubber tube curled up under the driver's seat. He wasn't sure exactly what it was for, but it would make for the proper tool to get gas out of the tank. Pushing the tube down into the gas tank, he sucked, creating a vacuum, which emptied the contents into a couple of left over styrofoam coffee cups and an old windshield washer fluid container.

With the containers now full of gas, he opened the side door and doused the interior. It might have been a shame to destroy the van this way, but there was absolutely nothing telling Joel not to do it. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his trusty Zippo.

"I'm the drifter now."

WOOF.

THE SHOE-LEATHER EXPRESS

17

With Ruby over one shoulder and a duffle bag over the other, he began the next segment of his adventure by taking a ride on the shoe-leather express. There was no anger or resentment toward the old van because she was the sole reason that he was able to stand where he was right now. Sure, he was in the middle of the desert, but he was optimistic. After walking for what seemed like miles, he looked over his shoulder and could still see the smoke.

A plane flew over and a car drove past, but his two-inch thumb, fishing at his side, still couldn't catch a ride. He had joined the ranks of the tumbleweed and all he could do was sing:

The sun painted me red

I can't shake these thoughts

From my head

It's the color green

Good bye, sexual friend

For what used to be new

I wore the bottoms from my shoes

I have tricks up my sleeves

To prevent me from being used

He looked like well-worn freedom. He had grabbed an old straw hat from the back of the van, now very thankful for what he had initially deemed crap. His old

denim Levis were taking on the appearance of their drifting owner and were in need of a couple of patches.

The big ole sun was starting to disappear in the heated haze making his day shorter by the second. Joel thought he'd caught a glimpse of a structure, but it was hard to be sure considering it could have just been a mirage. It took another hour of walking to be sure it really was a building, and not just another billboard. As he approached the sign read Dew Drop Inn.

"What a great name," Joel remarked at the clever title.

He was in need of water more than ever before. A door swung open and music poured out of what looked like a little pub attached to the hotel. A fat man wearing black leather chaps walked over to his Harley, threw his stubby leg over, and fell across the top of the bike.

"Goddamn," the dusty, drunk biker yelled.

Joel watched as the biker picked himself up to try again. This time, when he tried to throw his leg over, he didn't lift high enough and he kicked the bike right over.

There were a few people standing outside the office laughing at the man's foolishness.

"I'll slash the tires on your fuckin' house," the biker slurred.

On his third try, he successfully did what he had done a thousand times before. Revving the engine with one hand and flipping the bird with the other, he carelessly peeled out of the parking lot, leaving a trail of dust in his roaring wake.

If Joel had learned anything during his travels, he learned that there were hillbillies everywhere, and that they all acted the same. If riffraff like this were coming out of the bar, he couldn't wait to get inside.

He opened the screen door and peered through a haze of blue smoke. The place was dimly lit, and the first thing that caught his eye was a pedal steel guitar, located just inside the door. Gathered 'round were a collection of bikers and road warriors, dangerous-looking fellows. The tables were covered with copper sheets full of bottle-slamming dents. Joel weaved his way to the bar.

"Water," the dehydrated traveler croaked.

"We don't serve water here," a dry voice popped from the shadows. Everybody laughed at the weary stranger. The straight-faced bartender with a frosty-gray beard cracked a smirk out the corner of his lipless mouth. Joel put his head down on the counter top.

"Don't listen to them dusty old bastards." The bartender looked again to Joel with really light blue, almost white eyes. "You look like you just walked here from Vegas."

"I did," Joel answered. He looked around and instinctively plunked down his duffle bag beside the only woman in the place. Never far out of his reach, he leaned Ruby against the bar. "I've just spent half of the day walking up this freakin' road. Does anybody pick up hitchhikers around here?" He was irked, but overjoyed when the bartender placed a pitcher of water in front of him. "Thanks." He couldn't get it into him fast enough. Water never tasted so good.

"Where are you coming from, Wanderer?" The voice came from a prickly desert man.

"I'm from north of here."

"You need to be drunk to run these roads."

Joel looked around to acquaint himself with the room. He questioned the rattlesnake skins that hung above the bar.

"It's my work," the bartender replied. He was surprised that someone was actually interested in his work. "Check this out." He reached under the bar and pulled out a box of what looked to be baby toys. "I drive up and down this road looking for road kill. When I find a snake, I cut off the rattle. If the snake is big enough it goes on the wall behind me."

"Get that box over here." Another curious onlooker with a traveller's voice chimed in. She reached into the box and grabbed a couple of the rattles, jumped off the bar stool, and did an impromptu Flamenco dance. She whipped her long black hair around and clicked her heels. This woman was spun like a bad doob. Joel had to know more.

The entire bar watched her until she finally tired and sat back down. She was more entertaining than the guitar player practicing up front.

"Whoo!" she hooted. "Excuse me, boys. I had to let that out. I've been cooped up in a cockpit for way too long." She put the rattles back in the box and the lipless bartender smiled broadly.

Joel thought to himself: "I can't believe the people who find their way here."

"What were you doing in a cockpit? Are you a stewardess or something?" Joel asked.

"No. My plane is out back. Now, what brought you here?"

"I'm just covering some ground and funny enough my travels brought me to this little hole in the wall."

"Here, from where?" She didn't want to appear to be too nosey, but it was a practical question.

"I'm actually having some trouble piecing together the past couple of days, but essentially I drove down from Canada."

"So, you're Canadian, Eh?" the women looked at Joel as she asked; they froze, locked eyes, then burst into laughter because they said it at the same time. They even had the same sense of humour.

"My name is Joel." He extended his hand.

"I'm Elena. Which part of the country are you from?"

"I'm from the East, on an adventure of discovery in the West." Joel was pleased with himself for coming up with such a good combination of words. He was frank about his situation and really just wanted to know more about this girl.

"I'm an islander from the west coast. Have you heard of Happy Valley, in Courtney, B.C.?" Elena opened a vintage travel bag and pulled out what looked like purple rain. It was salted seaweed. "Try this. It's a piece of my home." "How was your flight to Nevada?"

"Smooth sailing. I only landed here a couple drinks ago. I was having trouble with my altimeter, and it finally forced me down on the strip out back."

"I was having a little trouble too. My van died on the highway a few miles from here." Joel's voice turned to a whisper. "So I burnt it."

"What?"

"SHHH. It wasn't out of anger. It just needed to be put down. It was old and tired."

"Oh, my God. You are not lying, are you?" She took a large swig of her drink. "I flew through black smoke on my way here. So it was you who painted the sky."

"Did you like the painting?"

"You're crazy, but I like it."

Just then, the front door opened. A state trooper walked through causing everyone's head to drop. It appeared that everyone in the bar was guilty of something. Elena calmly grabbed Joel by the arm. As the cop polled the crowd, a few fingers pointed in their direction.

At the same time, a rowdy bunch fell through the door, giving them the opportunity to sneak out the back.

"Grab your stuff, Drifter, let's go." Then without delay, they quickly made their way to the plane.

"Huh. You weren't lying." Joel thought she was full of shit and didn't expect to actually see a plane. "But you told me it was broken."

"Well, I made it this far, Canuck. C'mon, let's go." She unlatched the door and they both climbed in.

After making a clean break from the small hotel and the questioning cop, they carelessly flew throughout the night. If it weren't for the full moon, a broken altimeter would have made it impossible to fly. They were able to gauge their height by looking at headlights and porch lights. It wasn't long before Joel was asleep from exhaustion.

OH CANADA

18

"Charley, Gulf, Lima, Echo, X-ray. I'm requesting landing. Over."

They had already fuelled up once just west of the Rockies and were now swooping down for the second fill up that would finish their trip.

"Four hundred bucks!" She kicked the gas pump and cursed her father for giving her this white elephant. "Sweet sixteen, my ass. Gas was cheaper a decade ago, that's for sure."

Elena's father had been collecting planes for as long as she could remember. As a young man, he had been a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force and was now a respected commercial airplane pilot. It was only natural for her to follow in his footsteps. With his financial success, he was able to easily afford a gift of such extravagance.

"Wake up, sleepy head. We're home." She tugged at his sleeve. Even she was surprised that she had been able to keep her eyes open for the entire trip. "Those little pink pills really did help."

After a long flight, they were finally back in Canada. Elena's house was close to the airfield and her Jeep was parked nearby.

"I'm sorry Joel. I need to go home and sleep. You can come with me if you want. *Mi casa es su casa.*"

He accepted the invitation and she threw him the keys. It was a mustard-coloured Jeep with mud splashed up the sides from the bottom of the wheels to the top of the roof rack. On those racks, were a neon-coloured surfboard and a

pair of skis. In this part of the world, you could do both sports in one day. This girl was an outdoorsman, or a rather an outdoorswoman.

Happy Valley wasn't far from the airstrip, so the drive to Elena's wasn't long at all. When they arrived at her place, she immediately crashed on the couch. Joel poked around and easily compared her living conditions to the outside of her Jeep. She was obviously not about to win any Martha Stewart awards. The one thing that struck him most was the quality of the mess. This girl had obviously come from money somewhere along the way.

Joel snooped around for a little while, looking for signs of a roommate and found nothing. In the living room, there hung many pictures of her on mountaintops. He read the descriptive plaques, telling him she was also a world traveler. He walked around a little more looking for the facilities before choosing the best of the three that he found. The house was huge. After a shower, he checked the fridge, smelled the milk, grabbed the keys, and left a note. It read:

Milk Smelled funny

Took Jeep to the store

be back soon

Joel

Elena woke to the smell of home-cooking and the sound of Joni Mitchell playing on the radio. Peeking around the corner, he was caught practicing the windmill.

"Where did you learn to cook?" She was thrilled.

"A lady named Grandma Herbal showed me this one. The rest I picked up along the way. I hope you're hungry." Joel searched through the drawers 'till he found the cutlery.

"I haven't eaten since yesterday morning. I'm so hungry, I could eat Bambi raw."

"Oh ya." Joel was surprised; he hadn't heard that one before. "Well, I could eat the asshole out of a skunk."

"Ewwww. We're going to play that game, eh?" She paused for a second to think, then reached into her bag of tricks. "Well, I'm so hungry that I could eat the berries out of bear shit."

"You're awful," Joel chuckled. What a fantastic verbal duel and he was thrilled to be a part of it. When they finally put fork to mouth, both of them sat in silence and ate the flavourful meal. Simply out of curiosity, they would occasionally look up from their plates just to check each other out.

Even though they had just flown for hours together, they were still essentially strangers. Elena couldn't, for some reason, get her mind off the black plume of smoke, which turned out to be coming from his van. She wondered if he was a pyromaniac who might burn her house down. At the same moment, Joel was trying to figure out what **she** might be thinking of **him**. In all fairness, she had only seen the rough, not the diamond. This meal would go a long way swaying her over to his side. She counted to three and then spoke.

"So, why did you burn your van?"

"I knew you were thinking something along those lines. I told you already. The van was tired and I was just putting it out of its misery. Every time I jumped in and turned the key, there seemed to be something new wrong with it."

"Don't be offended. It was a question that needed to be asked." She was simply looking to understand just who she had flown over the border.

"Oh, I'm not offended. It seems that our thoughts aren't that different. I think that we'll just have to trust the fact that we're not going to kill each other."

"I blame Hollywood." They both laughed.

After she was done washing the dishes and he was done drying, the awkwardness had completely dissolved. Elena spoke at length about the people who were squatting on the land behind her house. It was an assorted bunch from every corner of the country. Some of them were simply down on their luck, some were artists, and some were farmers. They all believed that Happy Valley held a mystique that needed to be explored. They also believed that dropping off the radar was the best thing for each of them. Deep amongst the ancient red woods, in an uncharted area, there lived friends without consequence. She loved their way of life.

Elena and Joel went for a walk in the woods. As they got closer to the back of her property, they started to see signs of life. He saw rope ladders, tree dwellings, and a maze of trails. Suddenly, there was a hoot, a holler, and a snapping of branches. A large figure jumped out of a tree directly in front of them.

THUD

"Jesus Christ," Joel cried.

Elena, on the other hand, seemed overjoyed. It was her friend Banjo Ben. With no greeting, but what seemed like a mish-mash of words,

You better run dog

Run little doggie

Run dog run

You better run dog

Run little dog

There's three men

Under the sun

First ones on horse back

Second's got a gun

The third boy's a big ol' bastard

You better run

Keep on howlin' moon dog

Moon dog

Moon dog he's on the run

Keep on howlin' moon dog

Moon dog

Moon dog he's on the run

Joel's introduction to this motley crew was one that he would easily remember forever. By the time Banjo Ben was done strumming his tune, a wild looking group had gathered around. A lanky red-head held the beat with two bongos strapped to his chest, while his all-natural girlfriend played the spoons.

Ben was the centre of gravity for the whole group. He was a big, tall man with a huge scruffy beard, and if you looked closely enough, you would spot twigs, seeds, and such tangled amongst it. His appearance put Joel in mind of the Lord Almighty, though if his face were shaven he would probably look like Pee-Wee Herman. After he jumped from the tree and his song was finished, he brushed himself off. Introductions were made. Joel was wowed with the ways of these people of the trees.

Elena reached into her bag and made her usual exchange with a kid named Judd. The boy had a bowl haircut making him look like he belonged to Ed Sullivan. Slung over his shoulder was a handcrafted bow with no arrows.

"Hey there, Elena. You haven't been out to visit in a while. We've missed you." The redhead with the bongos seemed overjoyed to see her as well. His eyes were dancing more than his feet. They obviously had some sort of connection, which ran deeper than Happy Valley itself.

"I've been flying the friendly skies. You know me." Elena was a drifter herself and knew she didn't have to elaborate. "I picked up this guy in a bar outside Las Vegas. He was running from the Cops."

"You're making me look like a criminal."

Everybody laughed.

The smoke of the evening fire rose straight up and everyone gathered around to tell stories. They all wanted to hear about Elena's latest adventure. The story about Joel and the burning van was a hit with all who had plunked their ass down on God's good land. They played the one line game. It was a new game to Joel and it made absolutely no sense, but it didn't matter. He wasn't about to question the rules.

"I don't want to be an ant," one of the many drifters offered up this gem of a comment.

Up spoke the next. "I don't want to be farmed by the government." They believed whole heartedly in *whatever* they believed.

"The rainbow was a mushroom fire," one of the congregation shouted out.

"What?" Joel just didn't get the utter randomness of this one.

"Next!"

"Ok, ok. I've got a good one." Banjo Ben was eager to share. "Never trust a fart." This was a fantastic nugget and everyone burst into laughter.

"Don't piss into the wind," someone hollered from the shadows.

"I learned that the hard way," a voice fessed up. There had to have been twenty woodsmen gathered around.

"Don't stand too close to the fire or it'll pop your kernels."

"Have all you fool's been tiptoeing through Mushroom Merle's pasture?" Elena questioned.

Off to the side there were a couple of young women wrapped in what looked like burlap bags. They were dodging sparks from the fire, their pupils dilated as large as a smiling cat's.

"Our friend psilocybin has come for a visit," one of the burlap girls admitted.

"Hey, is there any left?" a curious bystander asked eagerly.

"Yeah, but you have to be careful Merle's been getting more and more senile with time. The last time we were there, he shot at us," one of the burlap girls answered back, now hopping on one foot.

"Ya, the crazy old bastard opened fire," another concurred.

"He's trigger happy," another yelled. "Luckily, he hasn't hit any of us yet."

"Well, let's go and push our luck." Together they grouped and all started to chant.

I pick a lot of this

I pick a lot of that

I dance around

The fire

I dance around

My hat

Im going to pickalota

What

I pick a lot of

Berries

I pick a lot of that

MUSHROOM MERLE

19

Everybody gathered their overnight gear and started the trek to Merle's farm. The reason they needed the gear was not for sleeping, but for harvesting the mushroom. It was a three-hour hike to the promised land. A group of flashlights in the middle of the night would cause a stir, so they got down on all fours and put their sleeping bags over themselves. Underneath, they crawled around the field shining the lights in search of the preferred fungus.

When the mushroom in question was found, it would quickly find itself in a backpack and sometimes in a stomach. Because they grew naturally, this group of vagrants believed that they were for anyone who could get at them. Merle believed differently.

The giggling started and the party was on. Banjo Ben claimed that he didn't need his flashlight anymore. He swore he could see in the dark. Because he had such a glow on, all of his perceptions were skewed and the stupid fucker started to sing:

Half on the left side

And pass the second field

Happy valley in Cortney

Is the place that will heal

*It is North East of Tofino
It has no rain before shine
Soon enough they will pop from the earth
You just have to give a little time
It's tripping season
The season of giving
Who oh
1st of October
It's a star lit night
Throw a blanket over your head
And grab your favorite spot light
Because it's the moment of truth
Between the farmer and you
So take what you can carry
And head back to your sanctuary
Morning comes job well done
Trees are dancing and birds
Are having fun as the river
Sparkles in the sun light
I'm hitchhiking with the
HELP OF the MOON light
Hears a lighter so start a little fire look to the
Stars a watch them
Get brighter*

I'm just a stranger

JUST A NEW GUY with

The product of danger

Picture this: a baker's dozen of free-spirited adults crawling around randomly, under glowing sleeping bags, in a dark field, at four in the morning, bubbling with laughter, and uttering muffled shushes in an attempt to get Ben to shut his mouth. Eventually he provoked one of Merle's hunting dogs to start barking its face off, in the distance. Moments later they all heard old Merle yelling.

"Ethel, grab my gun. Those freeloaders are back."

The porch light flicked on and the door swung open. Merle jumped off his deck and started running with the gun in hand. He fired off a few rounds in an attempt to scare off the crop raiders. Scattered erratic flashlight beams were everywhere; it looked like a light show. The group was running frantically trying to get away from the man who just happened to own the field where the mushrooms grew. The reason that this particular field was contested was because all who were involved know what magic the mood-altering blue caps could make.

Merle wasn't trying to produce a crop; these kids were just being a nuisance. He lived up there in an attempt to minimize human contact. His life had been a roller-coaster of emotion that created a litany of issues, but he was sick of the kids and their incessant pursuit of a look at the other side.

"What's that smell?" someone asked.

"Ya, what stinks?" another called.

The group had successfully made it across the field to the tree line and gathered around each other. Luckily, nobody was hurt in the raid. They all knew the crazy old man probably didn't even have a licence for that gun, but the new smell was pungent to the point of being more of a threat than Merle.

"My God, man, I've never smelled anything so offensive."

Then Ben spoke up, "Hey, who shit my pants?" This astute observation came from a man who, jut literally, had the shit scared out of him.

"Good job, Ben. I mastered that bodily function when I was three," someone called in the darkness. He'd hear about this one for a long time.

One of the gang couldn't let the opportunity pass. "And you said to never trust a fart."

They laughed and laughed right through the night. Most of the laughs would come at Ben's expense, and even though he had soiled himself, he was at least happy that he could be the entertainment.

The next day started with fresh morning fog, making the light seem extraordinarily bright. Joel and Elena crawled down from one of the many tree forts and were immediately confronted by Banjo Ben.

"So, did it run down your legs?" Joel couldn't help but ask.

"What?" Ben swung around.

"Nothing."

"Did you two sleep well?" Ben asked, with froglike eyes. He was still wearing the same pants from the night before. "What in hell happened last night? All I remember was gun fire." Ben was still obviously dazed and confused.

"Yea, we had a great sleep," Elena thankfully replied. "Are your chickens laying?" Ben nodded his head, yes. Elena grabbed Joel by the sleeve and they all headed off to the coop to gather eggs.

As one member of the commune was fetching water, another was milking a goat. One was picking berries while another was keeping the beat on his bongo. It may seem like an unusual existence to some, but Joel appreciated its purity. For posterity's sake, he took pictures of everything that was new to him. These were people with tremendous respect for Mother Earth. It was an entirely established community that was a link in the circle of life.

Joel stuck around to help them with their newest project: a new tree house. These people didn't have a timeline, and all their buildings seemed like make-work projects, but that was okay because these people were at peace. A trait so rarely felt in this world. It put him in mind of the native people in Nevada. Man, does this planet ever give off positive vibes.

He learned the art of building tree houses and more about the art of subsistence. During this time, he was also able to connect a lot of his recent experiences.

After a few days with the hippies, it was time for the true trippy hippy to keep on keeping on. Elena had to get back to her minimal responsibilities and it was time for Joel to catch a train.

CHASING THE TRAIN

20

He made it back to the mainland into the heart of Vancouver and walked east down Hasting Street, heading toward the train yard. One of the scruffs pointed him in the right direction; it was then just a case of waiting for a shunt.

He eventually found a good spot to hop a train and settled down in the brush just beside the tracks. He wished that Drifter were still alive. Every boxcar he saw reminded him of the van. Even the clouds took its shape. Through the noise, he picked out a sweet sound, a harmonica coming from down the way. It was an opportunity for Ruby to get out and take a stretch.

Tom Train was a thirty-five year old professional train hopper with yellow hair and heelless rubber boots. He peered through tired, puffy eyes and whistled through a face full of crooked teeth. He wore a checkered engineer's hat with a feather sticking out of it. What a character.

Joel learned that Tom had been hopping freights since he was twelve and only knew a few things; playing harmonica just happened to be one of them. His sound was unique. If it got airplay, people would instantly know who it was. Was it his teeth that gave him such a distinct sound?

Instead of choosing to be a professional musician, Tom Train had chosen the life of a hobo. He preferred to walk to his heartbeat and wrote tunes according to it. He was the poster child for a jack-in-the-box. The teardrop tattoo underneath his left eye told of his tortured existence, and that was all the explanation needed.

Joel never found out much about Tom's scarred past and that was just fine. But man, could he play the harmonica.

"I hope you have water in your pack. I remember one of the first times I hopped a train, I almost passed out going through Saskabird," Tom warned. "If I had a camel I would have cut him open and drank from its hump." Tom had a good twitch in both of his eyes, but Joel looked passed it.

"Yeah, I brought water, and I'll take all the tips that you want to give me." Joel was eager to learn. There was only little problem; his new friend wouldn't shut up.

"So there were three men in an asylum, right. The doctor walked into the first room and noticed that one of them was swinging an imaginary bat, so he asked the patient what he was doing. The crazy guy said, 'Well, I'll be out of here in a couple weeks and I'm getting ready to be the new homerun king.'"

"Is this a joke?" Joel questioned. He sat back and listened.

"Ok," Tom continued, ignoring Joel. "So the doctor walked into the second room. Here,there was a man swinging an imaginary golf club. Curious, the doctor asked, "What are you doing?"

"Well, I'm getting out of here in a week, so I'm preparing to be the next golf champ.'"

The doctor walked down the hall to the third room, now face to face with a man who had a peanut lodged in the tip of his penis. 'What the hell are you doing?' the doctor asked," and Tom's voice squealed, "I'm fucking nuts and I'm never getting out of here.'"

Joel laughed, "Good one, Tom. That was the best joke that I've heard in a while."

"You never know when these damn things will come to a stop. I have been traveling this land for free for almost twenty-five years. I know the ins and outs of every station in the entire country. From sea to shining sea, driftwood and pearls, clam." Tom was a pro, but Joel realized quickly that his new friend had a short attention span.

"Clam? What the hell is he talking about?," Joel thought to himself.

It was good to be back in Canada. It had an entirely different feel from its southern neighbour, and his thoughts quickly turned to his barn and the treasures that were his. In the last few days, he'd been reminded of how lucky he was to at least have a sanctuary that he could return to.

He and Tom traded notes beside the rails for a while before they heard the explosive sound of a slow-running engine. They looked up and there was a train plowing down the eastbound Canada wide tracks. Joel was thankful that Tom had taught him some tricks about train spotting. As soon as Tom strategically chose the proper boxcar to hide out in, they were on their way through the Rockies. Uncontested, this was easily the most scenic leg of any journey in North America, all the better, as a vagabond in a hide-away boxcar.

EAGLE VS GOAT

21

After the first tunnel through the mountains, the train was coming to a stop when Tom and Joel were treated to a pleasure of nature rarely witnessed.

"Tom. Look, look up." Joel pointed to the clear blue sky.

"What?"

"That eagle, it's just hanging out at the top of the mountain."

"No, man. He's circling. He's after something creeping around on four legs," informed Tom, now also watching the eagle closely.

"What do you mean?" Joel was confused.

"Just look close. There must be something up there on the mountaintop. Scan the rocks and see if you can spot what he's after. There's trouble on the horizon."

"I think I see goats up there. Ya, he's after a goat." Joel couldn't believe the bird was stalking such a target. "Good luck with that."

"I hope the train stops or we'll miss the show. Wanna' place a bet, young lad?" Tom was leaning far out of the boxcar to get a better look.

"Don't fall out for the sake of a bird," Joel said, a little frightened.

As the raptor circled, the train came to a stop just outside of Banff. The backdrop was stunning. You couldn't have painted a better picture. These were snow-capped mountains surrounding a lake, and colouring the water were fields of golden rod. Joel snapped a few shots with his camera. The air was fresh to the point that one's nostrils could almost freeze shut.

"If it was any colder out here, I would freeze my nut sack. Bolts and all."

"Tom, what the hell are you talking about?"

Just then it happened. The bird swooped down at the goat. This was one of the most amazing things that either of the men could have anticipated. The eagle came down so quickly on his prey that it created a cloud of fur, feathers and dust when it made contact. Emerging from the cloud was a six-foot wingspan. The eagle struggled to take off with one of the younger goats gripped tightly in its talons. When it dragged its prey off the sheer side of the mountain, just as quickly as the bird came down on its target, it dropped at least another hundred feet. When the eagle finally found its stability, it glided out from the cliff's edge and then purposely let go, dropping its prey to death.

"Tom, did you see that?" Joel was vibrating with excitement.

"Survival of the fittest, my man. That was flippin' beautiful." Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a red bandana.

"Hanky?" He then loosely tied it around his neck.

The two couldn't believe their eyes. They'd just witnessed a spectacular display of Mother Nature at her best.

"Not many people can say they've seen goats fly." Tom smirked as he motioned his hand and made a check off his imaginary list.

They lounged around as best they could in the old boxcar. When Tom's stories started to ramble, Joel knew enough to kick back and listen.

"The sky, yep, a descriptive map of the stars. I look at them for hours while I bicycle kick my legs in the air." Joel looked over and the crazy bastard was doing push-ups. This guy was off his rocker. Tom continued spewing nonsense into the evening.

"I used to live up north, hunting polar bear. I caught crab on the east coast. I fruit picked in the Okanagan, peas in Richmond, ran a chip stand in Winnipeg, and

when I was sniffin' glue in Ottawa, the idiots threw me in the drunk tank. The drunk tank, can you believe that? They left me there for a week. What a stainless steel hell that was. When they gave me the ticket, I wiped my ass with it in front of them, and they threw me back in for another week, I wasn't even drinkin'. Unbelievable."

Joel was entertained by his ramble. Tom Train's next topic was about the birds and the bees. They had already witnessed one of the best stories of their lives, which also consisted of birds. Now, all that was left was to talk about the bees.

"For a little while, I was hooked on stealing honey. Look at my arms." They were covered with dots, old scars from bee stings.

"Jesus, Tom. I thought you were talking about stealing from stores." Joel examined Tom's arms with disbelief.

"Yep, I had to quit because I became an-ana-an-anaf, whatever they call it"

"You mean anaphylactic"

"Yeah, that's what they called it. Anyways, it put me in the hospital. Those stinkin' dragons, I had to give it up."

The verbal diarrhea continued all the way through the prairies. Sometimes good stories, most times bad. The train came to a halt at a grain elevator. Joel had to get out. T was the perfect opportunity to say goodbye to Tom, and his stories. Interesting, yes, but they were hard to swallow.

Joel hopped out of the car, over a fence, and started his walk through an endless field of wheat. He thought the desert was bleak, but this was just a big flat with endless fields in all directions. At least he didn't have the droning of Tom in his ears. The train started its slow chugging again. Joel looked over his shoulder and questioned his decision to exit in the middle of nowhere. He couldn't believe that there were still such wide-open spaces.

Joel should have turned back to the tracks because he slowly found he was lost. It all looked the same and the land was soon playing tricks on him.

SADDLEBITE

22

Joel curled up in a ball, preparing himself for a long cold night. When daybreak finally came, he walked through field upon field until a service road appeared. He figured that this route might be a path to civilization. He'd been hoofing for the entire day and now all he wanted to do was get out of the sun. A dust storm swooped in as quickly as the eagle hit the goat. With sand particles whipping him in the face, he tried his best to hide under the brim of his hat. With no shelter, no trees, and with no cover at all, he wished he could get another earful from Tom. At least he'd be out of the elements while on the train.

Continuing on, his tongue was turning to jerky, and his head was starting to spin wildly because his brain was desiccating. Even though Tom had warned him about the effects of dehydration, he had foolishly tapped the final drops of water into his mouth shortly after jumping off the train. This, he decided, was the worst mistake he'd made so far. He now felt something that he'd never felt before: vulnerability.

He trekked on, and before long, he could take no more. He stumbled and hit the ground at the edge of yet another wheat field. He was on the verge of needing medical care. As sick as he was, Ruby never left his grip and his mind gently swirled him to sleep.

Afterward, the birds of peace popped up from the tall grass. They chirped their songs while the dust storm settled, as if they had signalled Mother Nature to stop what she was doing. There must have been an angel looking over his shoulder because he was awoken by what felt like velvet on his cheek. When he opened his eyes, the velvet was attached to a horse with wings.

Oranges, yellows and pinks shone around the beast, and with wings flapping, it picked Joel up and threw him on its back.

They traveled through what must have been the heavens. All he needed was the secret to life. Water.

SPLASH

Thrashing madly in about three feet of pond water, he spit and gagged on what he needed most. Joel peered through his dirty pond hair at this brown blur that had just saved his life. On one of its four legs, it wore a red sock. It must have been a polo pony. The pile of horse manure enabled Joel to realize that he wasn't having an acid flashback. He found himself sitting at the bottom of a watering hole with only his head sticking out. He couldn't explain it, but he should have been dead.

"You saved my life, Horse." He and the animal stared blankly at one another. The horse turned its back end to him, swung its neck around and just continued to stare.

"Well, go then," Joel waved at the horse in a dismissive motion. "Giddy on, go." The horse didn't move a muscle. It whinnied and blinked its big doe eyes. Saddlebite must have been magical because all of a sudden Joel was on his back, galloping down the service road. Honest to God, they didn't stop for a thousand miles.

It took two days and two nights to end up where he was now. He felt like hell and the entire lower half of his body was numb.

"Too bad you don't have a saddle, Saddlebite."

The horse had taken Joel to the front door of an old blue Victorian house. On the front lawn, there was a sign: BED AND BREAKFAST. These were the top two things on his wish list.

How was Saddlebite able to read the sign? This reminded him of the hand-made "VACANCY/NO VACANCY" signs from Eli's bush. He rolled off the horse and found that he couldn't stand. He tried again with the same result. Lying on the ground in a heap, he gazed over to the house and noticed the curtains moving in an upstairs room. Hallucinations were still a possibility after such extreme dehydration. Dried-up tears were sticking his lids shut and his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. He couldn't focus on anything. His mind was a strobe light.

He tried yelling, but nothing came out. He heard a door open and that was it. That was all he could remember.

Yellow curtains were blowing in the breeze, and a young child was peeking in the doorway. It took him a few minutes to try to get his bearings.

"You've been sleeping for the past seventeen hours," a soft voice came out of nowhere.

"Justin, my boy," the lady spoke to her young son. "Can you be kind enough to run downstairs and put the kettle on, for our guest. and bring up some porridge? He's probably quite hungry."

"My name is Stephanie. My husband and I picked you up off our front lawn yesterday. Don't worry about your horse. He's tied up and taken care of."

"I'm Joel." He tried sitting up in the bed a little. "And I have absolutely no idea where I am."

"Well, you still remember your name. That's a good sign." She grinned kindly. "You're twenty minutes away from the Ontario border."

Joel looked under the covers and then looked back at Stephanie. She laughed.

"My husband put your clothes in the wash. They smelled sour and looked even worse."

"Thanks." Joel was mostly concerned about only one thing. "Where's my guitar?"

"It's right there beside your bed." She pointed to beautiful Ruby, standing tall in the corner.

"Thank God," Joel said immediately relieved. "I've carried her across the country. It sure would be a shame to lose her now."

Joel spent the next while at the Victorian home regaining his strength. Stephanie nursed him back to health with the patience and knowledge of a true mother. When he was ready, he would continue his journey. This time, though, with enough water and supplies to last.

Joel threw his leg over Saddlebite, still unsure of where his hero had even come from. He waved goodbye. The family of three stood in line and waved back.

"Happy trails," the father yelled.

"Goodbye, Joel." Justin squeaked.

Stephanie stood beside him and just waved in silence.

The day was full of sunshine as he rode to the nearest stable in a place called Kenora. He made a deal with the farmer in charge. The deal highlighted the care and comfort of the horse until he could send for it. Joel needed a guarantee that it would be looked after extremely well because, after all, it saved his life.

"Saddlebite, goodbye for now, my friend." He reached up and tightly hugged the horse's neck.

Joel initially had thoughts of riding his new pal all the way back to the barn, but the stable keeper explained to Joel that the horse had swayback and it was more or less just a pet to look at. He then mumbled something about glue and wasting hay. Joel didn't care what the farmer had to say. He would do whatever it took to take care of Saddlebite, because he owed his life to this magical creature. As he walked he sang:

As the loons called out an echo

The Native man chants ya yo

I'm on the road through On, Ontario

A good place to go

From Kenora to Agawa Bay

The Great Lakes is where

I paddle my way

The syrup's sweet he said

And in the fall the maple trees red

I'm on the road through Ontario

A good place to go

*Through the rainbow mountains
Of might
The wheat fields way just right
Up here you can see the stars
And out back the farmer's in the
Barnyard
I'm on the road through Ontario
A good place to go*

SUMMER SCHOOL

23

Joel hopped back onto Highway #1, heading east. As he was walking around the bend swatting at the black flies that were trying to eat him alive, a passing car slowed down. Through the passenger window, the driver shouted.

"Are you a killer?"

"Nope, just a musician," he answered. "We don't get along with killers."

"Well, in that case, jump in, stranger." She seemed like the flirtatious type, the way she giggled and the way she peered over her dark sun glasses to examine his lean stature. She probably enjoyed the danger of picking up a complete stranger. Now that he thought about it, it was kind of hot. The woman looked to be in her early forties, wearing a floppy-brimmed hat that matched her short summer dress. It turned out that she was a schoolteacher on summer vacation and driving from Winnipeg all the way to Sudbury for her youngest sister's wedding.

Just before hopping into the car, Joel reached down in the long grass and picked up a wild flower for his new wild friend.

"Here, for you."

"Well, boy, you sure do know how to pick up someone who is picking you up."

The two of them drove on, making small talk big. She was an entirely different woman than Joel was used to. Along the way, he's met many, many characters, but this bizarre wildflower offered a strange combination of maturity laced with a streak of taboo. She seemed a bit skittish, like she was on the run. Joel knew that everyone had his own baggage, just in varying amounts.

She reached into her purse and pulled out an invitation.

"Sooo," she casually purred, "it says here I can bring a guest, and I believe in spontaneity. Would you like to be," she paused, "...mine?" She pulled down her glasses revealing her dark brown bedroom eyes and winked.

Joel smirked. "Christ, will there be food?"

"I was told Elvis would be singing."

"Isn't he dead?"

"Apparently not. This'll be my sister's third wedding that he's been at."

Jeez, you'd think after that many marriages she'd skip the ceremony and get right to the honeymoon." They laughed.

"I think she does it for the party."

"Well, I'll need a suit if I'm going to be your date. I look like a rat," Joel confessed and rhymed.

Magic shirt with

Magic sleeves

Magic pants with

Acid knees

It was late when they got to Sudbury. She looked over at Joel.

"We could go to my sister's house, or we could grab a hotel. The hotel would be more fun."

Joel pumped his fist in the air excitedly while chanting: "Ho-tel, Ho-tel, Ho-tel."

"Plus the ceremony doesn't start until four tomorrow, so that will give us enough time to sleep in, and we'll find you a suit later."

He'd had a good go, and his appearance showed it. Although his stubbled face was relatively clean, his hair had grown wild and his eyes had sunken in a little, along with his waistline. After an educational night in a cheap hotel, Joel was refreshed and the two of them left to hunt for a suit shop. His thousands made him look like a million bucks. She, a wild schoolteacher, and he, a ragamuffin in disguise, were ready for Elvis.

When they walked into the seating area arm in arm, all heads turned. She leaned over and whispered in Joel's ear.

"I give you an A++."

It was the age difference, the energy and the excitement. Joel and his new lady friend fed off these forbidden innuendos. Whispers were heard from all directions.

"Is that her new husband?"

"Look at her boy toy. Do you think he's one of her students?"

"He's a little young, don't you think?"

"She's old enough to be his mother."

From the front of the room, "Good for her," came from a couple of old ladies.

It was undeniable they were a hot couple. Somewhere between the appetizers and the main course, a groomsman approached Joel.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" he questioned.

"Well, that depends on where somewhere is. I've been to a lot of somewheres."

"So, where are you from?" the man in the tux asked casually.

"A small town east of Toronto," Joel replied.

"Really? I'm from east of there too."

"Really. Where?"

"Oh, you know, east of there, closer to Ottawa. I wonder where I've seen you before."

"I don't know. I've been everywhere, man. I've been everywhere." The two were continuing their lively discussion when Elvis broke out into *Blue Suede Shoes*, and the crowd rushed to the dance floor. Joel spotted his date boogying, laughing and having a great time.

"I saw you come in with that woman. Is she your mother?" The groomsman continued.

"No." Joel laughed. "She picked me up at the side of the road yesterday."

"What? You were hitchhiking and that's how you met."

"Strangely enough, ya," Joel smirked candidly. "You never know what will happen on the road."

"You lucky fucker. Where you off to next?"

"Well, when I'm done dancing with her, I'm gonna' find the rest of my way home."

"Hell, I'm on my way to Ottawa in a couple hours if you need a lift. Work called me in."

Joel's eyes lit up. "you gotta' be shittin' me."

"The names Landon. Meet me back at this table in two hours and you got yourself a ride," the groomsman said, drifting back to his table. Joel grooved over to the packed dance floor to give his date the good news. She admired his good fortune and bid him good luck.

GREEN

24

After leaving the cougar of his dreams, Joel hopped into a small, sad-looking, little red car. Landon claimed the only reason he drove it was because it was good on gas. The two of them found the closest Tim Horton's; they had a long drive ahead of them, and it would take a belly full of coffee to get there.

Their lively discussion continued, and it was during these animated exchanges that they found out how many similarities they had. The one fact that put them on the same page was their common understanding of independence. Both of them believed very strongly in self-sufficiency. Over the past two months, some of the best characters Joel had met also believed in many of the same things. He had gleaned enough new information to write a book.

It all started with a sign wearing cowboy boots. This sign enhanced Joel's social freedom. Eli and Herbal had taught him the tricks of nurturing his green thumb. The lessons from them alone, would allow him to see the Endless Sky. The elder native in Nevada made Joel aware of all that he didn't know with simple circles in the sand, which allowed him to understand his constant thirst for knowledge. The people of the trees were the best example of folk living wild and free. From them, he learned new building techniques. It was with Tom Train where he'd witnessed the beauty of nature and the survival of the fittest with the eagle and the goat. He gained new understanding of the circle of life. Now, if he were ever lost, he would know how to keep his head up. Without seeing it coming, he was quickly made aware of the fact that he and Landon seemed to share the same brain. What Landon did for a living would turn out to be the best piece of knowledge yet. It was the feather in his hat. His new friend distributed solar panels and wind turbines all over Ontario. Joel listened intently, making mental notes on the latest models and methods of maintenance and repair. This went on

for most of the drive. The two of them got along so well that Landon offered to give Joel door-to-door service. At last he was home.

The break of dawn brought a new sun that shone through the leaves of the mighty oaks. They had most certainly done their job, making the tear at the first sight of the barn's face. It was the face of peace and serenity.

"You live in a barn? Wow." It was Landon's dream to take a barn off the grid and make it his own. Joel gave him a tour of the land, showing him the pond, the orchards, and the oaks.

As the late summer turned to fall, he exhausted all of his father's life insurance pay out. The barn slowly became retrofitted, and the leftover panes of stained glass found themselves as both eyes of the barn.

Cleaning out the stalls and patching the holes in the old fence was a must. When everything was ready, he sent for his saviour, Saddlebite.

Next, what Joel needed was an old lift-top freezer, a storage compartment for his horse's barley and oats. He knew that Mr. Willard's was just the right place to find it. It would keep Russell and his friends from partying in the feed. When Joel broke the news to Mr. Willard about the death of the van in Nevada, Willard pointed to a couple of cars in the front yard that he had suffered much the same demise.

"If you ask my insurance company about those fires, they will tell you that both were electrical." Mr. Willard nudged him and confessed, "I actually torched the suckers."

Throughout the summer Mr. Willard and Joel shared many stories, and a unique friendship was created. Anytime work was needed, Joel would zip up to Willard's and pay with anything but lunch money.

After a vet checkup, Joel was told that Saddlebite was in perfect health. The man in Kenora was a liar and probably wanted the horse for himself. This meant that the animal was rideable, and from then on, it wasn't uncommon to see the two of them in town picking up groceries. Still, to this day, Joel wondered where the horse had come from.

He spent most of his nights making love to Ruby and making small talk with the wise Mr. Owl. Russell and Joel had become great friends, and now Russell would voluntarily leave the barn, but only in the relative safety of Joel's front pocket. He

pruned all the trees in the orchard and set up hives for the hardest working insects alive. Peckerhead was now the alpha male of his own new family. What was left of the mystic sheet of perforated patterns was hung framed on the barn wall. It seemed everyone and everything had been doing quite well in his brief absence, though they were all clearly glad that he was back.

Now that he had returned to the barn, he couldn't stop thinking about his travels. The authorities never did catch up to him for burning his van. He decided that it would be a good idea to write down all he could remember; he could tell his family in years to come. He had learned enough along the way to turn a barn into a home.

Joel saved the best for last. Screw and his colourful offspring, Timmy, had been on his mind since his return. He decided to pay them a visit. He rode Saddlebite to the garage, so he could show off his newfound friend. Nothing had changed. Screw still with a cigar in his mouth, ambled over to the horse and enthusiastically welcomed him home.

Screw showed off the new addition to the shop and the two chatted for a while until they heard the dog yelping. They ran to the back yard to find that Timmy had taken the saddle off Joel's horse and put it on the dog. "TIMMY, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?" Screw yelled.

"But, but, dad, I wanna' be just like Joel."

This is the noise of a careless voice

And it slipped out on Sunny day

The only way to survive in this world

Is to find the words to say

HEY

Chickadilly chickadilly I come stickadilly dumditte do ya HEY

I was flying through the air

Charlie gulf lima echo x-ray

I picked up the C.B. and yelled out MAYDAY

HEY

Chickadilly chickadilly I come stickadilly dumditty do ya HEY

Queen Charlotte Island it was a beautiful sunny day

I bent down to pick myself a mushroom

And I think I heard it say

HEY

Chickadilly chickadilly I come stickadilly dumbditty do ya HEY