

Creation

Myth

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Dedication -

The ancients asked these questions:

Of the mystery of good and evil, the succession of life and death, the ways of things long forgotten.

For they saw Life as a mere dust mote, in transit between the vast cosmos and the bitter earth below.

So, to those caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, who look death in the face, smile, and leap.

Prologue -

The Traveller sat up suddenly in the darkness. Something was wrong, some sound out of place. Wait. No, it was the absence of sound, the absence of some certain sound, something. Sure, there was that soapy-splash of the rivulet waterfall tracing down beside his bivouac, gentle patter of an earlier rain still dripping from the branches above onto his taut tent fly, and the distant muffled roar of the alpine river breaking the felt blackness of night. It was something else. *Maybe it's the wind*, he thought, the wind blowing high up on the mountain, endlessly rustling the alder break, you could just hear it ghosting through the snow fields if you really listened. *That was it, the wind has stopped...*

He rolled out of his bag, pushing the bugscreen aside, and propped up on one knee. The rain clouds had passed on, clearing the air, and cold stars burned down like blue flames, whole rotating galaxies of stars. Nostrils flared, he breathed in the crisp spring air, his senses electric, thrilling to the mountain's inky dark, ethereal silence. *This is it, this is freedom!*

Now he had a secure lookout for a camp, a sweet waterfall for his drink, an old homesteader's farm below to pilfer from. Maybe some sunny spring afternoon he'd catch a steelhead down on the river, really feast. *They'll never find me here, never.*

The pale yellow glow in the sky behind the jagged mountain peaks told him it was nearly dawn. *Still have time to sleep*, he yawned, turning to lift the fly, ducking under. Then he heard it, a twig snapping. His head shot up and out, eyes wide open, just in time to be blinded by the hunter's torch.

"Son," the glare reproached, "what're you doing here on my land?" Holding a pump action rifle looped in the crook of his arm, a gray-bearded heavy-set man

moved closer, standing next to the tent now, and for a moment played his flashlight inside.

"Sir," the traveller mumbled, standing frozen, "I'm looking out for myself, is all. Just camping out up here awhile..." Words failed him. He stood, shivering.

The homesteader's flashlight paused its sweep for a moment, "That's a big duffel for a backpacker 'be carrying," then tipping his light toward the traveller's food stash, "and looks like 'twas you helping yourself to my root cellar, now wasn't it?"

Cold sweat dripped from his armpits, rolling ice water down his ribs, soaking his cotton longjohns. "Sir," he stammered, "I was just passing through, sir, didn't mean any harm," then he bit his tongue.

The homesteader lowered his Winchester, half-nodding, "'Son, in '32 so many folks came through here, there wasn't anything left to eat for any of us," adding with a soft chuckle, "Maybe that's why they call this here Lookout Mountain, see, 'Look out for Flatlanders!' Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Still chuckling, the old man swung 'round the way he'd come, playing the flashlight away from the traveller's face, "You're welcome to what you found, if you'll help me with a chore or two down the place."

He felt the throbbing pressure in his head explode with relief, then the old man swung back again, "but after...after you'd better move on, you hear?" He silently assented with a quick nod, not even looking up. "Good," the man ended, "we're agreed. Break your camp, I'll find you a place in the barn."

He rolled his gear up as quickly as he could manage, still shaking from the close call. *What if he'd seen the stash!* Teeth grinding, he checked the clasp on the duffel bag, his tortured mind tripping, *Strange, that much cash should feel so light!*

A just-dawning sun pierced the peach 'n pearl clouds clinging low on the mountain face, the roosters down below crowing the fog up off the river bottom. The traveller shouldered up his rucksack and duffel, and clambered down the path toward the homestead below. Emerging from the alder break, and skirting clumps of blackberry bramble that dogged his path, he saw for the first time in broad daylight the far edge of the farm he'd been stealthily poaching from.

The old man met him again, his wiry bluetick hound replacing the .22, a pair of work gloves in his gnarled hands. "I'll put you down in the hay barn," he repeated tonelessly, "you'll be warm and dry, and..." he paused and glared, "the Missus won't have to know where I found you, understand?!"

The traveller riveted the old man's gaze as he nodded, then nervously began to toe the loam with his boot, head down, his hair coruscated with dew and drizzle, feeling that shiver building in his gut again.

The old man led him into the clapboard gable-end structure, and as he had promised, the air inside was temperate. Old horse-drawn implements stacked in one corner, a pile of cedar bolts crowding the door, and the rear of the barn piled with an end-of-winter jumble of dry pea straw and alfalfa hay.

"Up there..." the homesteader pointed, "there's a window. Roof don't leak much. You don't smoke?!" He shook his head. "Good!" the old man sized him up. "Here, you'll want these," handing him the gloves, "get settled. I'll bring you some hot coffee and a roll."

He stood in the pale straw sunlight shafting down through the dusty loft window, then moving the duffel to his left arm, climbed up the ladder. Above, he found some old trunks full of '50's-style clothes, dishes in a small hand-made cupboard, some rusted barrel hoops, ropes, tack, and, after re-arranging, enough space to

roll out his gear. The barn door swung open and the old man called him down.

"Here's your joe," he said, handing him a steaming cup of black coffee and a fresh Danish, "the Missus made these." Then the homesteader fell silent, tinkering at his work bench while the traveller gulped down the hot liquid and savored the warm honey-butter sweetness of the cinnamon roll.

He'd worked him hard all that morning, the old farmer did, bucking hay bales, splitting up kindling, cleaning out the stalls, laying down new straw. Even replaced a termite-infested roof post in the barn. At midday, the old man's wife, a handsome woman with curly chestnut hair traced in gray, brought a pitcher of cold goat milk, slices of farmer's cheese, crusty bread sliced thick, and for each man, a large warm slice of cinnamon-apple pie. The man stood at his bench, the traveller grabbed a straw bale, and they ate in silence.

"You can leave your things here, strike out for work hereabouts," the man said, "take the afternoon, see what you can find over 't Rockton, across the river, they might be bolt-cutting the clearcut about now."

He stood up and brushed the dust from his jeans. "Much appreciate it," holding out his hand.

The old man looked away until he'd let his hand drop, then repeated, "Soon as you've finished with the chores..." he paused, "you'd best be moving on."

The traveller threw on a jacket in case he was out past sundown, and to carry a few things in, pencil, paper and a penknife, his wallet in the inside pocket. Then he strolled on down the drive to the road, and stuck out his thumb at the end of the fencerow.

A middle-aged woman picked him up, farmer's wife, and she cut right to it. "You staying up at the Paul's place?" throwing him a sideglance as they ran the road on downriver in her Plymouth.

"Well, sort of, he's got some chores for me until I can find work," he bantered, looking over at her. But she didn't speak again until they reached Rockton.

"I'll let you off at Myrna's, that's where I turn off," she suggested, pulling into the little corner store overlooking the river bridge. "You might could ask if there's any work 'be had around here, and they're still looking for tree planter's down in Woolsey."

He rolled out the door and then leaned back in the open window with a smile, "Thanks."

She waved at her hair, then added, "I'd watch yourself, the County Sheriff was up here today," her eyes piercing, then fluttering, wanting to know and not wanting to. Then the woman drove off. His knees wobbled a bit, standing there in plain view, the locals coming and going from in the store, looking him over. Waves of paranoia bit his neck, crosshairs settling on the base of his skull. *Sheriff's back up here again!?* The afternoon sun was too bright, like a searchlight.

The traveller ended up in the Rockton Tavern, hiding out more than anything, sharing a pool game and a few beers with a local Native Indian.

"My cousin rents out his land to them hippies," the man had laughed, "maybe you can find a place over to Illabot, get you one of them skinny women and make babies." He laughed again, a dark Indian smile.

It was a good idea. Find the hippies' place, hang out, build his own shelter, and lay low off the beaten path until May. He kept talking about women with the Native, and soon they were both laughing loud at each other's stories, you know, the ones you can't help laughing about?

The Indian bought him beers as they played, maybe to flirt with the gals at the bar and punch up his own songs on the juke. Said he'd been a trucker, now he just worked on diesel engines. The traveller boasted of

his stint in Viet Nam, work as a machinist, a season spent commercial fishing.

"Hey, man, you ever been in the service?" he asked, but the Native just jiggled around the pool table like a gandydancer, studying the shots. He figured him a local roustabout, short-hauler, a parts-change mechanic, *probably bummed around here his whole life.*

Later, pool table forgotten and talk about run out, the Indian looked at the traveller, speaking with a half-drunk voice from a dead-sober face, "You pretty well got things figured out, don't you, man?"

And the traveller allowed as he did.

Then sitting there at the bar, the Native reached down and began to wrinkle up his pants legs, rolling them to his knees to expose gray, ashen wooden pegs. "Got these at Koto-ri," he intoned, "holding off the Reds in the pullback to Hungnam. You know? Korea?"

In so doing, he pretty much ended their talk-story.

"C'mon," the Native offered, "Give you a ride up that way. Walk over Marblehill bridge, there's a boarding house 'can stay at. Get you over to Illabot."

Yeah, give me something to do until it's dark.

So he climbed into the older man's pickup and they motored off on upriver, the narrow headlights dusting the fading gray day with gold. Then barely half-mile before the Paul place, he had a change of heart, suddenly skittish of his new-found friend.

What if someone recognizes me upriver!?

He told the Native he wanted off, walking up a sideroad until he was sure the man had driven on. By the time he reached the Paul's again, the light of their kerosene lamps and the pale moon rising over the mountains were all he had to guide by. The bluetick found him in the dark, snuffling at his hand, then trotted back toward the house, satisfied. The traveller followed, using his ears and feet to stay on the path.

The old man came to the screen door and stood inside, expectantly. The traveller'd been rehearsing a cover story, "Think I found work down in Wool'ey," he boasted, imitating the local Tarheel slang, then lied, "Get me a job on green chain," figuring that with the sawmill line, he'd throw off the old man's distrust.

Instead the homesteader laughed, "On green chain!? Ha-hee! Best you be bundling up shingles, boy, might get you a shawyer job, there, someone cuts off his thumb," and still laughing, turned away from the door. "Green chain..., good night, boy. Ha-ha-ha-ha."

The traveller stumbled his way to the barn, ears burning from the lie apprehended, his path just a lighter shade of pale blue alongside the dark moonlit garden. In the stillness, the river hissed and roared, and staring down like a specter, the rugged glacier-capped peaks stood silent sentinel high above him.

Should I hang out here? The Sheriff's back again, maybe they know I'm still around!?

Once in the barn, he lit the kerosene lamp and climbed slowly up into the dark loft. He folded his shirt for a pillow and slipped quickly into his down bag, exhausted, his mind scrabbling an agitation of unending streams of thoughts, words and images, of this day, and of others long past, there under the steady glow of that kerosene lamp.

Much later he dozed, tossing and turning in the cold drafts, dreams of friends and lovers haunting his sleep. Then, in the stillness of predawn, an owl hooted deep in the woods, sitting him bolt upright.

"Huh?...," he started up, sensation returning to his cramped limbs, and memory. He sat there in the dark loft, sweat-soaked, shivering. Alone.

But not yet awake. There's a place in half-sleep, that drowsy stage of eye-lidded semi-consciousness, when our dream-state overlays our normal reality, as though life's common bounds have been pushed back in space

and time, and ecce, our spirit soars weightless through brilliant skies, high over the mundane terrain of the life granted unto us.

For just a little while the traveller meditated that way, his eyes smiling at the edge of sleep, free of care, his body swaying left and right like some slender reed, until a scurrying creature scabbled past his hand and he awoke fully, dream fading.

The hours before dawn can sure be an evil time, when our illusions obscure reality, and fears replace bravery. Now, a hopeful man can wipe his callused hand across his face, brush back his hair, and slap his knees down hard to propel himself up into his day.

Whatever comes.

But driven from sleep with nothing to hope for, the traveller felt moved only by dark stifling panic as he dressed. Packing up his gear, he slid from the loft and stood, impaled by cold fear, his only thought, the only plan his mind could forge, *I'll hide the stash under the hay until I can come back for it!*

Working in silence, with fear's strength girding his arms, he carved a path between the stacked bales until he'd reached the back wall. Wedging the duffel deep between the rows, he paused. *There! All the evidence is hidden here! Even if they stop me, they can't hold me.*

Even so, deep nameless fear took hold of him again. *Go on! Get the hell out of here!!*

He eased out into the night. Frigid cold still gripped the air. The bluetick stayed curled up on the porch, head raised in the moonlight. The traveller made off down the drive, shuffling in the dark, then he began to trot, frost gripping his cuffs, his sleeves, his collar, as he reached the potholed pavement.

Can make Marblehill by dawn, spend a time with those hippies at Illabot, grab the stash, then catch a ride to Everett. Hop a freight over the Cascades, an' I'm gone!

In a few minutes he'd reached where the river runs in up close to the roadway, the immense glacial rush of it filling his ears. Suddenly, around the bend up ahead, a pair of headlights shot through the river bottom mist. *Can't let them see me!*

The traveller stumbled over the steel guardrail, feeling out for the shoulder, just heavy-sloped rip-rap protecting the bank. Clambering down, the headlights nearing, his rucksack snagged a tree branch tangled in the rocks, and he mis-stepped, slamming down hard. Numb and shaken, he wobbled back upright then, as the headlights blazed in the darkness, blinding him. He stepped backward, dazed, but felt only void. His hand reached for the branch, and missed. With a last groan, the traveller pitched back into the deep eddies and fierce current of the bone-cold black water.

The passing car hummed on out of sight as velvet night closed back in on windless silence, only the swirling river, rushing toward the sea, some first glimmers of yellow dawn softly rippling its surface.

One - The Pencil Box

It's funny now, looking through my old stuff, the stories I used to read outloud to my grandfolks, the sketches I had started, never finishing, scribbled with a stylized "Nick Paul" I thought might make me famous some day. Oh well. So it's not too often that I reach down to the older keepsake cards from the past, some family portraits in silvertint and pale sepia, hand-penned letters, diaries, and that found journal.

Yeah, there it was, down at the bottom of the pencil box my grandfather made for me, one day long ago, out in the hay barn.... Me, watching him split shakes from clear cedar heartwood bolts, culled from stumps left behind by them loggers working high upslope. Him, seeing nothing but the endless rhythm and timeless beat of his work....

He smiled at me, his hands curled and barked like alder roots, gripping a splitting blade forged from a car's leaf-spring in one, a burl maul in the other.

Whoosh, thunk, ping, whoosh thunk, ping..., Grampa worked effortlessly, splitting thin flat slabs of cedar to roof the barn, a loose pile of the red shakes building in the straw at his feet. I had picked one up, smelling the acrid pungency of the freed-up cedar oil, admiring the clear golden-red of flawlessly straight grain, like a fine toothed chocolate comb dragged through coral sand.

"J.D.," I said (he liked "J.D.", his given name was Jesse DeRostiss and most people found a joke in that), "can you make me a carrying case, something to hold all my school papers in?" Me standing there dumb and gawky, a lanky towhead kid in green corduroy, just a fog's whisper compared to his ruddy rolling thunder.

"Son, whatever you'd like, I'll show you how to make it," he'd smiled, already shifting the burden back, teaching me even then about self-reliance.

He stopped, drew out his rolling papers and shag, and rolled himself a cigarette, the paper catching for a moment in a drop of scarlet blood welling from the cedar splinter that'd found a chink in his callus. I watched his match flare, paper curl and ash to a red glow. He drew in the smoke, pale blue tendrils rising.

"OK then, I need a box to fit my pencils and brushes and the pad of art paper Ma got me from the five-and-dime, you know, about this big..." and I'd stretched out my arms so wide that J.D. almost leaned backward off his stump bolt laughing.

But he helped me, then and there, stopping his work and choosing the tools carefully, letting me pick the shakes for my box. Then he planed them smooth, even, matching the edges, mitering the ends, cutting finger-joints by hand with an old Finn back-saw, and kerfing a spline groove so the gaps wouldn't show.

He leaned back, then lit another smoke, and instructed me how to melt the horsehide glue in the little beatup aluminum pot Granma'd thrown out, the caramel way it dripped off the brush, its warm aroma mingling with the smell of straw and cedar shavings.

"Go on, don't be shy, work that glue down deep in the joints, we'll wipe it off later," he'd said, and I'd made a pretty good mess of the job, but the sides went together close-fit. Then he took his ancient kerosene blowtorch and heated the joints, wiping the excess with a rag, sealing the edges tight as a drum.

"This 'ere's rift cedar," J.D. explained as he rubbed, "was more'n a thousand years old when the first settlers started breaking the swamp down in the Delta. So big, they had to clamber over the spreading roots of each huge tree. Men would chop springboards eight feet above the ground just to saw one clear through."

"Why look'ee here," he pulled out a carrot-slice he'd trimmed off the bolt, squaring it up for splitting. "These tree rings are maybe twenty to the inch, maybe

more, and the stump this bolt 's cut from was near to thirty-five foot around," he laughed, letting it sink in. "You've got a very old pencil box there Nicky m'boy. Why, it's Christ'ly old! You take care of it, hear?"

After the glue had re-set, part of a broken leather harness became hinges and strap, held on with shiny brads J.D. used to repair the furniture up in the house. Then he took down turpentine and linseed oil he kept on the high shelf, and we rubbed the box hard, inside and out, until the cedar had turned honey-brown and glossy warm all over. He smiled as he handed it to me without another word, and yeah, it still looks the same today, maybe darker with age at the bottom, although, like I say, I rarely dig down to this old journal.

Anyways, there it is, the edges of its leather cover turned powdery from mildew and earwigs, the papers faded brown on the edges and cracking, the pen faded to a gray wash, but still legible. The journal J.D. had given me when I went off to college nearly a decade ago, perhaps knowing it was the last time I'd see him before he'd died of the palsy's, still working on down by the creek when he stood up, I guess, and whirled around sudden. Granma'd found him scarcely breathing, and they drove near halfway down-valley before J.D. came to, made her drive him back home to get his reading glasses and rolling papers.

By the time I heard, he was stable, in treatment. Then, he was just gone. You can see his gravestone out on the edge of the orchard, right there, plain in the winter when the grass is beat down....

I held the journal in my hands, and cracked it open to smell the pulp, like a sigh of old newspapers found in the attic. Then I rubbed at the leather until the powdery mold burnished off enough to read the letters J.D. scrawled across the face.

'Lookout's Journal'. Nothing else, just that.

So this could be the journal of some free-wheeling beatnik from the days of Kerouac and Bruce, spending his summer on fire-lookout, all bongo's and Dada. Or even one of those weird-beard hippies, from endtime, when Tarheel loggers had stopped beating them up in the bars, and had let them work at the odd jobs, fire spotting and choker setting, tree planting and shingle packing, bolt cutting and, sure to, gangha running.

The first few pages are more like a diary than a lookout's log, devoid of notes a fire spotter'd make, lazy pen sketches of pinecones and spruce boughs and chipmunks that you'd have expected. As though the writer just daydreamed. I'd only glanced at the pages further on, feeling like a foreign film go-er, or a spring peeper listening to bullfrogs over on the next pond.

Maybe that was good, holding onto this journal all these years, 'til I'd become more mature, and non-judgmental. The way life will either break you or make you. Maybe my cedar pencil box was meant to hold only this one journal, to convey this account of a life long past, long before cell-phones and Wal-Mart.

Here, I'll read it for you. You be the judge.

Two - Truth Hits Everyone

"To the guy who follows me," the lookout's journal begins, "you'll find the marmots and the mice have chewed up most everything, and the roof frame will probably be in bad shape from the snow. Try and make the best of it. You're on your own now. You'll discover important truths, and then forget them! Hope you enjoy your stay, the view from here is fantastic, (when it is). Well then, good luck and hale to you."

It's signed Jay Gouden, and left as the journal for the next fire season, yet devoid of any radio logs and the lightning triangulations that you'd expect to find. The hard-scrabbled handwriting that follows after is different. That sure figures, but the story it tells isn't one of snow-clad mountains and forest fires at all.

"*Journal Null Point Zero*" starts off the first page in big block letters drawn with the side of a pencil, and then stenciled all around like a fine Western saddle. The cramped lettering begin to uncrab after that, as though his memories became an unstoppable torrent, high on that remote mountaintop. The passages become fluid, cursive, harder to decipher.

I'll just use 'Look' for his name, so that my own words don't get in the way, same as those Look writes about called him. Here's his story, from the beginning, as best as I can interpret from his journal.

Down in Springfield, after Viet Nam, when he'd gotten back Stateside riding the big C141 into Hickam, then on into the Bay Area and once again bound over as a civilian, Look was thrashing around, homeless.

Sure, he'd run on down to Puerto Vallarta with a surfing buddy, living on the beaches, riding perfect glassy breaks off Punta Mita, drunk and disorderly in the cantinas. That'd been all right, just decompression.

Later, they drifted to Reno, playing blackjack, craps table, roulette, winning enough cash for him to spend the winter over in Loveland, Colorado.

There, glissading over the long snowfields, and down the ivory breasts of snow bunnies he'd met and bedded, Look made up for the lost years. He stayed a ski-bum, meandering Loveland back to Big Bear on the SouthWest circuit, working as a roustabout for cash.

Then back down to Vallarta, and all over again. Seasons went by. Years.

Now it was springtime and easy livin', the Illinois maples and pin oaks all pale green leaves, the crab apple and redbud exploding with blooms. Down in Springfield, because he didn't have the scratch to keep on for West Virginia, to keep on for home.

Look was broke.

It was a nice time of year to just walk around and not think about much. Not think about his Pap, who'd taken him out on his eighteenth birthday, down to the enlistment hall over in the old Sommerstowne armory, and told him, "You're grow'd now boy, it's time you be out on your own. Now hear, you can be a bum, and a damn drifter, or you can stay here and die a coal miner, broke like me. Or ... you can be a man. These fellah's here," he had waved at the recruiters, "will make sure you become a man. Now go on, git!"

Look had signed up Navy, put in for the Seals, then went on home, hugging his mother and his crying

younger sister, holding tight, breathing in their sweet scent of womanhood. He nodded to his stern-faced old father, all coal dust and pipe tobacco, then walked off toward the bus stop.

He'd never seen them alive again. Head-on crash. Thanksgiving truckload full of turkeys, dark road, rain. He remembered his C.O.'s sad face, his sorrowful voice. Then he stopped remembering.

Going back there in his mind meant blackness, animal fear, madness. They'd made him a muscled brute, navigating zero-viz with only a compass and depth gauge, dragging rubber rafts up on the beach, slinging heavy ordinance. Learning to kill, and to fear.

Always those dreams came back, metallic taste in his mouth, silent explosions in his ears, one gone near-deaf from the brownwater patrol boat's machine gun firing off right past his face, leaving a thin white scar along his cheek bone.

There were other scars too....

A red-haired girl in a tie-dyed tank-top and tight green velvet pants walked by, smiling, "Hi !"

His vision cleared, nightmare fading, but she was past him already, he only had time to hip-hop, spinning backward, an overly boyish "Howdie!" that made her giggle in her hand. Look kept on walking, up one street, down the next, sleeping at night on a park bench, police conspiring to let him be, seeing his duffel bag. Searching, moving, in travel mode.

One day he saw this guy sitting on the porch of an old house, dreadlocks long and tied back, goatee, a silver ring in his eyebrow. Yeah, an eyebrow ring!

The guy smiled at him, nodding, "Hey, man."

So Look stopped on the sidewalk and asked if there was a room he could rent. Next thing you know, he was sitting in their living room, feeling at home. The guy's name was Lou, and he invited Look to table, his

old-lady Dianne passing him a serving plate for the shared bowl of steaming broccoli, potatoes and green beans, all smothered with shredded cheese.

Down home folks.

Dianne was quiet, and plain in every way, a foil for Lou. She said plain things, thought plain thoughts, acted like an ordinary small-town woman. But Lou must have fallen on his head as a kid, he was the complete opposite. Couldn't stop talking, couldn't stop moving, when he wasn't pounding on his congas.

Sometimes food'd be falling out his mouth he'd have so many ideas going at once, leaning forward at the dinner table, gesturing with his fork. Well, they all had big ideas in those days after Viet Nam, kind'a like an old pressure cooker blowing off its load of steam.

Lou wasn't like other guys Look had known from school days, not like a Navy buddy with a quick joke and a smoke. He was more like an older brother to him, always watching out, listening to his late-night schemes, however wild, like they were as real as the sun coming up tomorrow.

Lou laid down a soft bassline to Look's blue notes, when he wasn't slapping away on a salsa solo. Their whole house was scattered with conga's of all sizes, djemba's, an old rosewood marimba. He was always in a calypso mood, drumming sometimes be soothing, sometimes maniacal, always compelling.

But Dianne kept after him, again and again, "Drumming doesn't pay the rent, Lou!"

So he drifted slow but sure to motorcycles and drug dealing, about the only other things a musician knows.

"Did I mention he was a biker?" Look's journal goes on. Well, sort of a biker, he had this old Norton he'd found in a garage, left behind by some G.I. gone off to war. Sure beautiful, deep purple and chrome, Lou had

rebuilt it himself, hard-tailed and fat-bob'd it, painted a Dead rose and scalloped flames on the tank.

Not a 'biker' per se, he was too stringy, and so smart enough not to throw a hog out on the highway, or slam a beer glass into someone's face in a bar. No, Lou was just your local dealer, MC'r, small change, a guy who could get by on the fringe of the action.

And as the sometimes hurt look in Dianne's eyes spoke, he had a damn good time doing it, too.

Look, on the other hand, was a loner, a drifter, high school leaving him with more knowledge than he had needed, Navy Seals leaving him with more memories than he wanted, and his women usually just leaving him, period.

So he had settled in with Lou and Dianne, each a balance for the other, and then spring had turned to summer, indoors to outdoors. Look found a good job in a local machine shop, at Hansvedder's, over on the east side, rebuilding farm equipment parts, learning tool-making and tolerances to add to his skills with stockcar and diesel engines from back 'coal country.

Maybe work Daytona someday, who knows?

And he'd found a girl of his own, a waitress from over at Saltie's Tavern, that Frenchie Desautel's place in Little Osage, you know, on down from the Spoon, up near Havana? Where the Peoria bikers and Macomb frat-rats hang out for a rockabilly house band and wild loose crowd, until Desautel closes at 2AM, and then his after-hours cardroom opens to a better clientele of professionals and politicians from the State capitol.

Oh, Michelle is her name.

It was a couple weeks before, Lou came up to him one Friday night after work, "Hey, Look, let's go out to Saltie's, there's a guy I want you to meet, check him out for me, says he wants to deal. You're hip to shit, tell me if he's messin' with me."

They climbed in Look's '54 Ford shortbox, big 351 Windsor bored-out and stroked, a half-racing cam popping the glass-pack'd exhaust, and they cruised on out in the chill air and fog down along the Sangamon, heading towards Havana. He let the engine over-rev 'til it burbled, tires humming on the rain-damp road.

The "Saltie's Roadhouse" sign glimmered out through the trees, a winking red "BAR" neon over the front door, and they pulled off onto the gravel. The night air had that bottomland rosin and earth smell, that always perked Look's senses. An owl hooted as they walked to the door, and he paused to listen.

"Jack! Hey, how's it goin'!?" Lou shot up a leather-jacketed arm just inside the light. They strode into the smoky knotty-pine room, still mostly empty and quiet this early. Jacques Desautel looked up, mouthing a "Hey," as he readied the till. A wavy-haired smoky-blond sheila, sweet face and big eyes, sauntered over with a friendly smile for Lou. They made small talk while she cast side-eyes at Look.

"Coupla' beers," Lou said, turning to him, "Hey, you want something to eat?" He shook his head, acting boored. "This is Look," Lou remembered to say.

"A-a-a," he lifted a finger up off the table.

Then Lou went to use the head, and Look was sitting alone when the girl brought their beers back. Nobody else was around, 'couple old flies happy at the bar, so she paused. Look asked her to sit down. She threw an eye in Jacques's direction. He tossed back a "what?" eyebrow then a "whatever" shrug, and she set her tray down and pulled a chair over close.

"How's the band?" he opened, and at that she smiled like honey toast. He could smell her musk, and the subtle trace of her perfume.

"You a friend of Lou's?" she got straight to it.

"Yeah, live in their house," feeling his sack rise. He covered, "Worked here long?" opening his way out.

"I've been here long enough to know Lou's got an old lady, so he didn't come out for the food, and that you're not from around here." She'd left it open then, unconcerned, gazing around unfocused, not like she was bored, but like there was time to relax.

"Oh, my name's Michelle," she added after awhile, "or Shelley...Shell to my friends, 'Hey, you!' if you're not," she laughed softly, smiling at him.

Look thought, most women he'd known were quick to size things up, and then quick to pass if there wasn't any play. This girl wasn't counting time, she was just, well, open. *Southern Illinois*? He warmed to her relaxed drawl, her smile, licking his lips as he leaned forward towards her.

"So, you two get acquainted?" Lou came up on them then. Look lost his windup. Shelley's lips firmed as she rose, but she smiled once again at him, holding the gaze with her lucent blue-green eyes. Then she walked off, "see you" flipped over her shoulder.

"Think she likes you," Lou laughed, draping his leather jacket on the chair, slouching in his seat, eyes on the door. "That's good, Shelley's all right," speaking volumes. "She ask what we're doing here?"

"She didn't say. Guess she knows you though?"

"Yeah, I know her. She's a sweetheart."

Look sipped on his beer, his mouth gone dry, "She's a peach, all right, a real..."

"Hey, here he comes!" Lou interrupted, and a blast of smoky cool air blew across the floor as the stranger burst in, large guy, dark curly hair, lip 'tee, leather jacket, plaid shirt, black chinos, cowboy boots.

Glancing neither left or right, but clearly scoping the bar, the dude strode to their table and sat down.