

## CHAPTER 6 - BLACK DIAMOND BLUES

Cool in the forest, the breeze soothing on Russ's face and upper body as he glided down the trail in a loose tuck, his dirty-blond mane streaming out behind him, switching across his bare shoulders. He was near bottom now and running out of snow. Rounding a bend, he straightened and did a little two-step, lifting first one ski then the other from the surface, trying to keep clear of a brown patch. The maneuver was not quite successful. A tooth of exposed rock clipped across the tail of his downhill ski with the sound of fabric tearing or a tone-arm needle ripping across a record.

He swore and converged his tips as he skied out of the dim woods into sunlight and slush, the trail opening up as the gondola cut came into view, the wet snow slowing him, bringing him to a stop near the crest of a little ridge looking down the cut to the base of the mountain a couple football fields below.

Ahead, the snow gave out completely. End of the line.

He put his head down and leaned on his poles, sweat running down into his eyes; then reached back for the T-shirt stuffed like a quarterback's towel in the rear waistband of his jeans. Removing his sunglasses, he mopped his face and neck and chest with it, feeling done in. Played out. His bad knee was aching, his new boots pinching and chafing, and he was feeling the effects still, as he had all day, of last night's alcohol and scant sleep.

Played out but at the same time wound-up and speedy. Thanks no doubt to the little lavender tablet, whatever it may have been. Some sort of upper probably. Preludin or some such, judging from his knotted gut and trembling hands. Certainly not the 'primo' mescaline Ritchie had made it out to be -- and in fact there had been very little in the way of psychedelic effects, not after that first little rush up top at least. Things had a bright, flat, cartoonish look, but not much happening otherwise. Not so far as he was concerned, at least; though come to think of it, Leo had

showed signs of experiencing something a bit more significant. Probably he should have done the whole thing, instead of splitting it with him.

When he caught his breath, he stuffed the T-shirt back in his waistband and reached down and unsnapped his boot buckles -- the pain in his feet that had been building through the afternoon eased a bit -- and unfastened his bindings and safeties and stepped out of his skis.

Then flipped the left one over and went down on one knee and had a look. A deep gouge scored the canary-yellow base near the tail where the central groove petered out.

Fuck. His brand-new Dynastars. Gift last month from his mother and stepfather on his twentieth birthday, together with the tortuous red boots, and so much more extravagant than usual that he had to suspect an ulterior motive. Probably to soften him up for a major push over the next few months aimed at getting him back to the university in September to finish the B.A. he walked away from at Christmas to join the band his cousin Kenny was playing in, then known as 'Boogie Chillen' and presently nameless...

Ruefully, he ran the ball of his thumb along the gouge, then turned the ski back over and rose to his feet, his bad knee twinging.

Meantime another skier had pulled up a short ways off. A big, tow-headed, Troy Donahue type outfitted with shiny red-white-and-blue-striped K2s and new Astrals and top-of-the-line accessories.

Russ nodded and raised a hand in greeting but apparently he was invisible -- the guy looked away without reacting and removed his shades and began polishing them on the sleeve of his snowflake-pattern Norwegian ski sweater.

"Got the time?" Russ persisted, holding up his wrist and tapping twice on back with a fingertip.

The guy glanced over now and a little snicker of disdain flickered across his tanned, bland, blond face as he took in Russ's hair and raggedy-ass jeans. He looked away again and buffed his glasses some more, then set them back on his nose and eventually pushed up his cuff and checked his watch and unenthusiastically allowed as it was 2:30.

Russ saluted him with his pole: "Fuck you very much, man." Big, friendly smile.

The guy gave him an outraged look but then doubt entered his pale-blue eyes as Russ grinned back at him innocently. After a moment he turned away again, uncertain as to whether or not he was hearing things; grimaced and muttered something and skied off.

Chuckling, Russ slipped his own glasses back on and squinted into the western sky. The sun was still high and now that he was out of the woods and had stopped moving the heat was intense, searing his face and neck and chest.

Tucking his chin, he glanced down at his shoulder. It was quite a bit redder than last he looked. He pressed a fingertip into the skin over his collarbone and held it there a moment, then lifted it and regarded the pale impression lingering on the cinnamon-red epiderm. He reached back again for his T-shirt and pulled it over his head, getting a whiff of his own sweat, and flipped his hair free and tied it back in a ponytail. Then shaded his eyes and peered down the gondola cut at the parking lot below, a tire-rutted field of toffee-coloured mud bordered on three sides by mounds of dirty snow and on the fourth by a melt-swollen creek running swiftly out of the woods and past the base operation -- cafeteria, day lodge, ski shop, gondola barn, etc -- that took its name from it -- Creekside -- and down a culvert beneath the highway.

A dozen cube trucks and Winnebagos and semi-trailers were strung out nose to tail at the far edge of the lot near the creek bank. He gazed down at them, puzzled momentarily, then remembered the pirate-biker crew guys at the bar last night and the movie that was shooting in the area. Now the driver's door of one of the semis swung out and a figure climbed down then turned back and pushed the door shut again, the sound of its slamming taking a moment to travel up the mountain to Russ's ear.

Shifting his gaze slightly, he scanned the rows of daytripper cars and vans and Land Rovers bunched up by the lodge until he spotted a familiar black ski-rack atop a tan roof. His step-father's Volvo. He wondered again, as he had that morning, how it was that Leo had been entrusted with it for the weekend. Such a thing would have been inconceivable just a few years ago, when he himself was sixteen and

newly licensed to travel the highways and byways. Alan sooner would have voted Social Credit or adapted the masterworks of world literature for Classic Comics or granted the merits of Coltrane's later, free-form stuff before he would have surrendered the keys for a whole weekend (a LONG weekend!), much less let him drive it up the Squamish Highway -- aka 'Sea To Sky' aka 'Ski To Die' Highway -- on his own.

Another instance of the rules and regulations going by the wayside second time around. Youngest-son Leo -- the son by blood -- being cut some slack where he himself -- eldest son, stepson -- had not. The old man must be losing his fire, mellowing in his golden years or something.

Looking down at the car, he regretted having left his apres-ski boots back at the A-frame -- his Killys, lined for maximum podiatric pleasure with the fur of bludgeoned baby harp seals or something equally comfy. Meantime his new red ski boots -- custom foamed with polyurethane to 'fit like feet' supposedly -- were chafing his heels and ankles and hurting like a bitch.

A pang of anxiety now as he spotted a decrepit VW microbus -- Ritchie's -- parked by the lodge and a scene from the night before came back to him unbidden and unwelcome, like psychic heartburn: Standing by the microbus post-gig in the freezing 2:00 a.m. parking lot. Next to it Phil Harmonic's Econoline, exhaust billowing like lavender-blue cotton candy from its corroded tailpipe. Ritchie and Phil humping equipment into their respective beaters, getting ready to head back to Toad Hall where they were crashing; and himself, half-pissed and fully erect, with his new-found friend Vicky, one of the purported stewardesses -- she had come back over to the bandstand after her friend left with an instructor -- rubbing up against his flank, her warm, winy breath fluttering at his ear as he passed off his instrument case and \$500 worth of brand-new tenor saxophone to Ritchie.

He marvelled at his stupidity. Even allowing for the doubly impairing influence of alcohol and lust upon his better judgement, how could he so carelessly have entrusted his new Selmer overnight to the care of Ritchie of all people?! -- a space case and fuckup of the first water with a long history of mislaying, being relieved of,

giving away, or otherwise parting with all manner of worldly possessions, both his own and those of others.

Again Russ saw the case swing in Ritchie's grip into the microbus and disappear as he himself, stupefied by drink, his brain having sunk three feet south and shut down pretty much, bid his grinning band-mates goodnight and reeled off with his prospective paramour across the frozen mud into the black mountain night, his arm encircling her soft waist, palm cupping her hip, her musky perfume wafting up his nostrils and visions of carnal delights on the water-bed in the back bedroom of his uncle's A-frame rising before his eyes -- high hopes that were dashed just a few minutes later when a red Mustang fastback roared past them as they wobbled down the side of the dark highway, then hit the binders and screeched to a stop and ground into reverse and roared back their way and again screeched to a stop, eight-track blasting Hendrix, V-8 revving up near the redline, the driver proving to be a very uptight boyfriend, hitherto undisclosed, who after a brief, tense exchange and several dire threats delivered against a disturbingly apt musical background ('Hey Joe, where you goin' with that gun in your hand / I'm goin' down to shoot my old lady, caught her messin' round with another man') whisked the now-tearful Vicky off into the icy, star-strewn night, leaving Russ high and dry, inebriated and unfulfilled and sans Selmer, to stumble on down the shoulder of the road and through the woods back to the A-frame and his lonely bed.

His only solace being the realization that probably it was just as well what with Alison coming up from the city to join him the next day...

He wondered now, looking down at the microbus, what were the chances that his tenor had survived the night unmolested. Optimism was not warranted. Ritchie was a loser in every sense of the word, including 'one prone to losing things'; and in fact just last month he supposedly had been relieved of his duties as regards equipment transport after Al's cherished Marine Surf Green Stratocaster -- he loved the thing like B.B. loved Lucille -- went missing in the early hours of a Sunday morning following a frat house gig at U.B.C. on the way home from which Ritchie and a slumming sorority sister had stopped downtown at The Green Door for Chinese food, leaving the equipment-laden microbus unlocked and undefended in

a dark rat-infested pissed-up alley less than a block from the intersection of Hastings and Columbia, ground zero of the heroin trade in a city boasting -- or at least admitting to -- the heaviest concentration of junkies in the country.

Ritchie simply could not seem to remember to push that little button down. And the Strat was only the latest of numerous such lapses, having been preceded into the pawnshops and junk stores of East Hastings Street by Jeff's pre-amp, Al's brother's Turkish hookah, Stevie B.'s modest but not readily replaceable collection of rare blues 78s, and no less than three of Ritchie's own eight-track tape decks...

Ten minutes later Russ was slogging through mud and slush towards the lodge.

The microbus was parked back of the lounge, straddling two spaces in the loading zone by the fire exit. If you had to assign it a single predominant colour you would say blue, but it was also heavily dappled with blotches of rufous primer paint and the front door on the driver's side -- salvaged from another vehicle -- was pale green. A tan band of dried mud girdled the van's rusted nether reaches. Finger-printed in the dust and dirt on the rear window: WASH ME NOW DIRTY HIPPIE! and on the back end a peeling bumpersticker: NIXON PULL OUT LIKE YOUR FATHER SHOULD HAVE.

Russ approached with rising unease, fearing for his instrument. As he got close a fat black Lab squirmed out from under the vehicle and bounded up and greeted him with immoderate and unmerited joy, yipping and yelping and wagging its tail ecstatically -- wagging everything south of its withers in fact -- and lapping at his hand with a long red tongue.

Ritchie's mutt, Jojo. A red bandana was tied loosely, raffishly, round his neck. Russ fended him off with a boot and backed away, grimacing. The dog reeked of something fishy and dead and vile, and brought vividly back to Russ the gruesome, scarifying image that the short silvery man had shoved under his nose that morning: a Polaroid photo of a bloody, battered, very dead Doberman Pinscher nailed by its forepaws to a cross of two-by-fours planted in an otherwise well-tended lawn.

Shuddering, he set down his skis and poles and picked up a foot-long piece of bamboo -- remains of a slalom gate -- from the mud at his feet and threw it as far as he could across the road, Jojo tearing after it.

Returning his attention to the van, he was troubled by the perfect sheenless transparency of the window on the passenger's side up front -- this in contrast to its driver's-side counterpart, which was clouded with grime.

Fucking Ritchie! Out to lunch, as usual. At least there would be no need to track him down for the keys.

A sinking feeling now as, moving ahead, he confirmed that the window had indeed been wound down all the way into the door. The door itself was locked however. Full credit to Ritchie for that much. As far as it went. You would have thought that basic security precautions would come as second nature to someone who spent his first eighteen years living on the West Side of Chicago, as did Ritchie before the Selective Service initiated a correspondence -- but such was demonstrably not the case.

With bated breath, he put his head in through the open window and looked around. On the ripped, straw-disgorging passenger seat, a tattered Zap comic with Mr. Natural and associates on the cover driving through the city in a jalopy. Beside it a Rolling Stone, John and Yoko looking saintly, two white doves perched on their peace-lovin' hands; and adjoining this a book: A Manual For Draft-Age Immigrants to Canada. Disraeli Gears was slotted into the eight-track. A wilted little metal bouquet of keys dangled from the ignition.

He shook his head in disgust. Bloody space case.

Peering into the back of the van, he spotted his instrument -- the case at least -- distinctively upholstered with cheesy plastic faux-gatorskin -- on the floor by the Coleman stove.

He let his breath go and unlocked the door and pulled it open and leaned in -- and nearly gagged. Despite the window being down, the van reeked of rotting fish. He grabbed the case -- noting with relief as he picked it up that it had the right heft to it -- and tugged the keys from the ignition and withdrew posthaste.

Jojo meanwhile had fetched the diversionary stick and chewed it to bits and dropped the beslobbered remains at Russ's feet and now was pawing at his shin, desperate to go again. But it was hard to throw splinters.

Russ ordered him to sit and, surprisingly, he complied. Keeping his distance, he confided to the reeking beast his misgivings as regards his master, his doubts as to the fullness of the cerebral deck Ritchie was playing with, his suspicion that the titular leader of The Band With No Name was several billion brain cells short a complement.

Jojo, for his part, listened attentively, panting and grinning and slavering and stinking, then suddenly threw his head back and let out a sharp yelp and whipped a limpid string of saliva off the tip of his long red tongue across the toes of Russ's still redder boots. Russ stepped back, returned to the van and wound up the window and pushed down the button and shut the door; then transferred his instrument case from one hand to the other and picked up his skis and poles and put them back on his shoulder and started again for the lodge.

Hobbled, that is; his feet aching in their red plastic torture chambers like those of a Qing Dynasty Chinese maiden returning from a visit to the footbinder.

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A big Harley hog was parked outside the lodge. Chopped and channeled and mud-spattered, with a little black-and-gold California plate in back. Russ docked his skis and poles in the rack by the entrance and hobbled up the stairs leading inside, Jojo following at twenty feet.

Reaching top, he set down his instrument case on the uppermost step, and himself beside it and eased off the tortuous red boots and peeled down his socks. His feet emerged red and steaming, blistered at the heels and ankles and imprinted with the herringbone weave of the heavy wool socks. They itched intensely, as if newly liberated from a six-month cast.

He took his ease on the top step awhile, rubbing and scratching his naked feet, gazing down between them through the iron lattice-work of the step they were resting on -- the third one down -- into the blue shadows below.

When he looked back up, two women skiers were coming down the ramped walkway of the gondola barn across the way, headed towards him. A tall blonde and a hefty redhead, both of them a bit long in the tooth -- late-thirties-and-holding - - but glossy and very well-maintained and -accessorized, both decked out in a small fortune's worth of ski gear and clothing. Clearly no effort or expense had been spared to preserve and enhance their looks, and the results were impressive -- in the blonde's case, spectacular.

Rich men's wives, he supposed. Or big-alimony divorcees, like quite a few Whistler women.

Arriving out front of the lodge, the women docked their equipment not far from his Dynastars then moved up the stairs toward him. The big redhead -- a heavily made-up cheerleader-on-the-brink-of-menopause type with a couple extra chins and a lacquered helmet of copper hair framing a puffy, discontented face -- came up first, giving him a disdainful look as she clumped up the steps toward him in her heavy ski boots; a look that turned flat-out hostile as she got closer. She was dressed to kill, in black and fur, and the look in her eye was likewise well-nigh homicidal. As she neared top she made a face, a wrinkled-nose grimace which Russ understood to express her disgust both with the way Jojo smelled -- the dog had followed him up the stairs and was sprawled out on his belly a couple steps below Russ -- and how he himself looked.

Plainly the idea of barefoot longhairs and their malodorous mutts encroaching on her turf did not sit well with her: *I mean, tolerance has its limits, hon, and if you can't lose the little creeps at Whistler, where the hell can you?*

Russ grinned and fondled his ponytail as she huffed past; then he looked warily back down the steps at her companion, anticipating more of the same.

But not so. The blonde woman was still at bottom, looking up at him with an odd but not unfriendly expression. She was tall and tan and striking. Stunning in fact. A mature but still explosive bombshell of well-tended, ash-blonde pulchritude,

radiating sex and glamour in a snug Pepto-Bismol-pink ski suit that gave her the look of a chic, statuesque lady astronaut.

She seemed familiar somehow, but he couldn't say from where. Or maybe he was thinking of that actress in Bonnie and Clyde, Faye Dunaway, a slightly older version. The resemblance was strong.

Now she started up the steps, her eyes fixed on his. Halfway up, she hesitated. He thought she was going to say something -- she was close enough now that he could see the crow's feet webbing the corners of her eyes, which diminished her beauty not at all -- but then she kept going, past him headed for the lobby.

He turned and watched her move toward the entrance, and she turned likewise to look back at him over her shoulder, flashing him a strange, pained smile as she passed through the door inside, a vision of bemused blonde glamour. He wondered if perhaps she was confusing him with Leo, as people often did, especially as he and his step-brother grew older. It was weird, their resemblance -- so close and fraternal (if not identical) -- and not a drop of blood in common.

Facing forward again, he pulled his socks back on and picked up one of his tortuous red ski boots and smacked the sole against the first step down from top, mud and slush sloughing off through the grating. Then the other one. Then he rose stiffly to his feet, his bad knee twinging. Jojo whined and snuffled abjectly at his feet but left without further fuss when ordered to.

Tucking a boot under each arm, Russ picked up his tenor and moved through the glass doors into the lobby.

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Inside, he paused a moment, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the diminished light. Amplified guitar noodlings and blues licks were issuing from the lounge beyond the foyer. Two men were conversing over by the entrance to the cafeteria. They were smiling but Russ sensed tension. He recognized one of them -- a small man with soulful dark eyes behind thick glasses -- from last night as the lodge manager, Freddy. Kevin's employer and, for the moment, his own. Middle-aged

and pear-shaped and conspicuously toupeed, the man didn't at all run to robust, outdoorsy Whistler type.

Nor did the other guy, though he'd have fit right in with the movie crew guys last night -- and in fact Russ had no doubt he was one of their number. And obviously the owner of the Harley out front too. He looked like he had just stepped out of Easy Rider -- more Dennis Hopper than Peter Fonda: the droopy moustache, the dark shades... he even had the buckskin coat with the fringed sleeves, though his, unlike Hopper's, looked like it had just come back from the dry cleaners.

He was a head taller than Freddy, over six feet, and mid-thirtyish, as best Russ could judge, lean and dark and weathered-looking with long salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a tight little ponytail like Marlon Brando in Mutiny On The Bounty. A red bandana, identical to Jojo's, was looped round his throat to piratical effect.

Russ moved a little closer. Freddy was saying something in a low, urgent voice but the other man cut him off: "What you talkin' about, man! What do you mean there's no rooms!?"

Freddy's smile remained in place but his eyes were anxious: "I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I'm not making myself clear, you don't understand. What I'm saying is--"

"Hey man! Don't be telling me I don't understand! You're the one's not hip to what's happening, man. Like, what is this bullshit?" The accent was American, southern, Texas maybe, with a hipster drawl: "I told you already, I'm with the movie, you hear what I'm saying?"

"Sir, I--"

"And I'm not some fuckin' gofer you can jerk around, dig? Like I'm a personal friend of the director, man. Dick and me we're tight, man... tight as twelve-year-old pussy, can you dig it? Like me an' Ricardo we worked on St. Valentine's Day Massacre with Corman, man, when Dick was still getting started, he was like a P.A... and we worked together on Wild In The Streets... check it out, man... and if you think you can fuck with me you are so wrong... that's a big mistake, like you don't want to make that mistake, man."

"Sir, I--"

"I'll have Dick on your ass so fast you won't know what hit you. Entiende?" A big mean grin: "You look like you might like dick in your ass but you don't want Dick on your ass, man, you better fuckin' believe it."

Freddy flinched as if slapped: "If you'd just listen to me for a--"

"No! You listen to me, man!"

A woman who had been approaching with a question-for-the-manager look on her face and a small girl in tow pulled up short ten feet away.

Curt aimed a finger at Freddy's narrow chest: "I'll run it down for you one more time, man: I'm with the movie. We got a reservation. And I'm not gonna be jerked around by some little four-eyed pansy. Dig?"

Freddy's face had turned bright red; his voice shook: "I really don't think I have to put up with this sort of--"

"Sure you do, man. That's your job. That's why they pay you the big bucks. Customer's always right, right? Principles of Hotel and Motel Management, right? And I'm the fuckin' customer, man." Another big grin; white teeth, surprisingly even, flashing in the dark, weathered face.

"Sir, I really must ask you to refrain from profanity." Glancing over at the woman and girl: "This is a family establishment."

Bark of contemptuous laughter: "Family establishment'... too much... Okay, tell you what: I'll endeavour to refrain from profanity if y'all'll refrain from this all-full-up, no-room-at-the-inn rebop and just find me one! Deal?"

"We're not full up! I'm not saying we're full up! I'm trying to tell you there are no rooms! They don't exist! WE DON'T HAVE ANY ROOMS!!" Then, in a more subdued voice, eyes darting around the lobby: "That's what I've been trying to tell you. We don't have any facilities for overnight accommodation. Your colleagues must be staying somewhere else. Did you try The Cheakamus? Or The Highland?"

Silence. Russ became aware again of his bandmates down the hall in the lounge tuning and riffing.

Sleazy Rider looked ever so slightly abashed for an instant, then scowled: "No rooms? What do you mean no rooms? You're supposed to be a ski lodge and you got no fucking rooms?"

"It's a day lodge!"

"Bullshit, man. I don't believe this! What kind of hick operation are you running here? What a fuckin' hick country, man. You try pulling that shit stateside and see what happens, man!" The guy glowered around darkly, taking in the woman and child for the first time. To the little girl: "What are you looking at, honey?" He scowled over at her mother: "Maybe you should teach your kid it's not polite to stare. I thought you people up here were supposed to put a whole lotta stock in being polite?"

The woman's eyes widened; the girl's were saucers already; her lower lip was thrust out and her chin trembling. Her mother caught her hand and drew her away and they walked off quickly.

Now the guy looked Russ's way and gave him a You-got-a-problem-with-that? sort of glare, which Russ reciprocated. A standoff ensued. For a long, fraught moment they eyeballed each other murderously. Exceptionally bad vibes beamed back and forth between them. Finally the guy looked down at Russ's unshod feet and sneered and turned away and sauntered off towards the exit.

Russ watched him go, breathing heavily through his nose. Lot of real assholes around the mountain today, it seemed. He flashed again on the short silvery guy and his grisly Polaroid and shuddered.

Now he moved forward past Freddy -- who, although Kevin had introduced them last night, avoided his eye -- and padded in his stocking feet along a clear plastic runner laid over a red carpet that led him round a corner and down a pine-panelled corridor up to a pair of jalousied swinging doors, the sort that unruly saloon patrons get tossed or socked through in Westerns. Here his progress was blocked by a red velvet rope suspended at crotch level between two chrome stanchions.

On the other side of the doors, inside the lounge, his bandmates had begun testing one testing two testing one two three. A big black-diamond trail marker adjoined the entrance. Above the doors, suspended from the ceiling by two lengths

of chain, hung a heavily shellacked cedar section into which was carved 'BLACK DIAMOND LOUNGE'. To the right, tacked to a corkboard behind glass, a hand-printed sign -- LOUNGE OPEN 3:30 PM -- and an 8x10 glossy of the band. It was the one they always used, with their old name trimmed off -- a grainy b&w fisheye shot in the manner of the back cover of the Grateful Dead's Aoxomoxoa LP showing Ritchie's microbus in a sun-splashed forest setting -- the parking lot at Lighthouse Park -- its space-cadet owner popping up through the sun-roof with a goofy smile on his face and the rest of them -- five skinny longhairs -- hanging out the doors brandishing their instruments in corny postures of youth-quakin' high spirits and bogus zaniness and phony bullshit: Hey Hey We're The Monkees!

He winced.

Above the photo a row of white plastic block letters proclaimed: NOW A PEAR IN G. He looked down and spotted the missing 'P' on the carpet at his feet impersonating a 'b'. Stooping, he set down his instrument case and picked up the letter and fitted it back where it belonged after the 'A' then nudged the sequence into proper alignment: NOW APPEARING.

Beneath the photo, hand-lettered in black Magic Marker:

EXCLUSIVE LIMITED ENGAGEMENT!!      FRI. & SAT. ONLY!

GET IT ON!

with

BLACK DIAMOND BLUES BAND

featuring

Ritchie ('Strawberry Integer') Watkins

BLUES!

BOOGIE!

R & B!

NO COVER NO MINIMUM!    TWO NITES ONLY!    FIRST AREA APPEARANCE!

'Black Diamond Blues' being their ad hoc name for the weekend in the absence of any other. And not too bad actually. Maybe it would stick now that 'Boogie Chillen' had been abandoned (Phil Harmonic had hated it for some reason) and Russ's own suggestion, the cleverly allusive and (to his mind) very hip 'Sick Dick and the Volkswagens', rejected by the others on the grounds of obscurity.

Now he looked at the photo again and again winced. So lame. The thing had followed them around from gig to gig for months now, outraging his sense of hip propriety anew each time he saw it. The 'concept' was Ritchie's. He had insisted on it and, despite unanimous opposition from the rest of them, had prevailed. Which wasn't surprising. It was after all his band -- or had been at least at the outset before they realized just how spaced out he was -- and he was the one with the rep, based on his status as a founding member of the semi-legendary Vancouver psychedelic band Strawberry Integer, now defunct, the surviving members scattered to the Gulf Islands and Kootenays following the O.D. of their drummer in '68 and the subsequent bust of the band house in Kitsilano. Ritchie, the last locally active ex-Integer, being heir by default to their legend, such as it was...

Russ, on the other hand, was the band member with least seniority and little other professional experience. Nor for that matter a true vocation for honking out the same old blues and R&B covers night after night to audiences of drunken boogie freaks. Certainly it was good times for the most part; he enjoyed the fellowship and camaraderie of the band (Ritchie was sometimes an exception) and it kept his chops up, but his real musical interest these days -- passion even -- was jazz. John Coltrane was his hero and his daydreams of musical glory featured himself soloing brilliantly in front of a small combo, blowing hard bop and Trane changes with intensity and masterful technique before discerning audiences of hip, deeply appreciative, reasonably sober aficionados and cognoscenti. Not that such audiences were to be found in these parts; plus he was overreaching himself, his ambitions running ahead of his abilities, which were real enough -- playing came easy to him, like many things -- but more potential than actual, and in fact probably

better suited at this point to bar-band honking than to the improvisational dazzlement he aspired to or at least fantasized...

The commotion on the other side of the doors was escalating. Someone had begun to play 'Hide Away' on Al's Gibson (his main ax now that his Strat was gone) though not very well so probably not Al himself. Someone else was bashing away at Jimmy B's drum kit.

Russ turned away from the uncool photo, resisting an urge to rip the thing off the wall, and picked up his horn and approached the red velvet rope; then hesitated a moment, bracing himself for the heavy ribbing he knew he was in for from his fellow No Names about last night and Vicky the soi-disant stew. Psyching himself too to go a few rounds with the sharp-tongued, ever-ironic Kevin. Then stepped over the rope and walked up to the doors and nudged open the one to his right with the end of his instrument case and passed through into a long narrow room done up with cedar and brass and black Naugahyde and smelling of last night's beer and butts and, faintly, burning cannabis.

The Black Diamond. It appeared deserted except for his bandmates down at the far end. The mediocre guitarist was his cousin Kenny. The place was decorated to an alpine theme, unsurprisingly, but too much of a good thing, cluttered with bric-a-brac and mountain memorabilia to the point that it looked as much like some indiscriminately curated Museum of Winter Sports and Alpine History as it did a place to get a drink.

Heavy wine-coloured drapes ran the length of the west wall, masking the big picture windows that, unmasked, afforded a view of the parking lot and gondola barn and surrounding hills.

At the moment, though, they were drawn shut and the lights were switched off and the lounge was almost as dim as it would be ten hours hence, at closing time, though emptier.

Even so, his arrival did not go unnoticed. As he started for the bar – it was up against the east wall, midway between the entrance and the bandstand in back, Kenny left off 'Hide Away' and launched into 'Hootchie Cootchie Man', complete with growly vocal stylings, which drew laughter and jeers from the others -- Russ

could make out their shadowy forms (barely) down by the bandstand, a low platform not much bigger than the back of a pick-up truck and better suited to midget solo acts than a six-piece band, as they had discovered last night.

He grinned and showed them his middle finger as he approached the bar, which, upon arrival, proved deserted.

He swung his cased horn up atop the counter and dropped his boots on the floor by the foot-rail. Then set his stocking foot on the brass tube and leaned up against the bar and attempted to ignore Kenny, who was persisting with his musical mockery -- an unaccompanied vocal rendition now of 'Strangers In The Night' in the slurry, half-crooked manner of Dean Martin, heavy on the doobie-doobie-dooos. This drawing renewed laughter from the others -- laughter with a hysterical quality to it that made Russ think it likely that the bandstand was the source of the cannabis smoke he had detected upon entering.

Love was just a glance away, sang his cousin, a warm embracing dance away.

Yawning, he shut his eyes and massaged the inner corner of each with the finger he had just displayed. Having stopped moving, he found he was very tired. Which was not surprising, considering that he had skied all day on minimal sleep and a hangover, and with some sort of crappy drug in his system.

He discovered he was also quite hungry despite the low-grade stomach-ache that seemed to be one of the few noticeable effects of the little lavender tablet.

Opening his eyes, he caught sight of himself in the mirror that lined the wall back of the bar. His face was red with sun. He glanced to his right and noticed a glass of dark beer full to the Plimsol line and a pack of Player's Plain next to a black glass ashtray down the polished oak counter a little ways from his horn. The top of the pack was flipped up and six unfiltered cigarettes were arrayed there, temptation in his path. He eyed them longingly, he glanced up and down the room -- but his hand was stilled by a deep, swinish grunt that issued from somewhere behind the bar further to his right. Leaning forward, he peered over the counter and down the dim aisle and made out a thick figure hunkered down by the beverage cooler near the beer taps.

Kevin. Antipodean ski bum, reputed Vietnam vet, aspiring writer of some sort, and keeper of the Black D. bar. Also a major smartass. He was squatting on his haunches, facing away from Russ, thereby exposing a lower back pale as suet and two full inches of plumber's crack aka 'coin slot' as he tried to fit a case of Heineken onto a lower shelf already jammed with green and brown bottles,

Watching him, Russ racked his brain for a witty remark. With Kevin you always felt that ordinary talk wouldn't do – repartee was required, banter mandatory. Usually Russ enjoyed it, but sometimes it was a strain and this time he came up empty. "G'day, mate," was the best he could manage in a lame Ozzie accent.

"Who goes?" Kevin rising now, turning to face him, his ginger eyebrows arching in feigned astonishment and delight: "Ah," he said, smiling. "Young man with a horn. Jazz cat Russell from the 'burbs. Rustle me up some grub, I'm a hongry cow hand."

The idiom was American but his voice was tinged with the distinctive non-rhotic nasal accent of Down Under, though in fact the speaker had been born and spent his first ten years in the north of England -- Nottingham or Manchester or some such -- before his family relocated to Sydney. His smile was thin and enigmatic, like Mona Lisa's, though less enchanting.

Now he glanced down at Russ's instrument case and frowned: "Bloody thing looks like a pimp's overnight bag," he observed. Referring to the plastic fake-gatorskin that covered the exterior of the case.

Russ looked at him blankly. He had not previously known Kevin to be so fastidious about such things.

Twenty-five but looking a decade older, the Australian or quasi-Australian had turned up at the mountain a couple seasons back, a late-blooming immigrant ski bum in flight from a rash marriage and a pre-med program at the University of New South Wales. The marriage he had embarked on impulsively, it seemed, while under the influence of alcohol – the specific impulse being lust, his bride a Thai B-girl with no English; and the pre-med only because the tab was being picked up by the Australian federal Dept. of Veterans' Affairs by virtue of the tour

of duty he pulled as a medic in Vietnam in '65 or '66 when he was just about exactly Russ's present age.

So according to the grapevine -- though Russ had also heard another version to the effect that Kevin's stint in-country had been as brief as a month or two, that he had escaped the conflict almost as soon as he arrived thanks to million-dollar wound of some sort -- which may or may not have been self-inflicted. Kevin himself didn't much talk about it and it was a subject that Russ likewise was inclined to steer clear of due to the uneasiness he felt as regards his own relation to the military and the war being waged in that afflicted part of the world; specifically, the fact that placing him beyond the reach of the U.S. military and the war had been the main reason for his mother and stepfather's decision to move the family north from sunny California to the rainier but less drafty B.C. five years ago; Alan, after a decade in California, returning home to his native Canada to accept a job at the new university -- despite excellent prospects at UC Berkeley; and Julie leaving for the first time the country and state and city of her birth and his own. Hence his reluctance to get onto the subject of Vietnam with Kevin. Not that he had anything to be ashamed of -- it was an immoral and in fact criminal war and refusal to serve or abet was the honourable thing -- but he wasn't prepared to press the point with a vet, especially not Kevin, even though he apparently now opposed the war himself.

Now the Australian reached across the bar for the glass of beer next to Russ's saxophone case: "Looks like you got yourself a bit of a burn there, mate. Solarcaine time." Keeping his gaze fixed on Russ, he raised the glass -- it bore a decal advancing the dubious claim GUINNESS IS GOOD FOR YOU -- and quaffed a goodly measure in a single sustained chug, his large Adam's apple stirring the shells of his puka necklace as it ran up and down his pale, ill-shaven throat like a panicky rodent trapped inside a length of rubber tubing. When eventually he lowered his glass it was half-empty. (Or was the glass half-full?): "Looking a bit wasted, Russell. Sleepless night?" His enigmatic little smile, half smirk to start with, tightened and twisted to one side and became wholly that. Wagging his eyebrows suggestively, he again brought his glass to his lips. When he set it

back down on the gleaming oak surface a frothy fringe of white foam clung to his droopy ginger Zapata moustache.

Russ touched a fingertip to his own naked upper lip: "Foaming at the mouth again, man."

The Australian pushed the back of his hand across his lips, then gazed down at the residue on his forearm, a thick, Popeyeish appendage covered with orangutan-orange fur and blurry blue tattoos: "Slight touch of the rabies, I fear." He rubbed the stuff away with his fingertips and looked back up at Russ and smiled his sly little smile. His eyes were blue and merry and slightly bloodshot. "So. How'd it go last night with your new friend? Stewardess, was she? Did you fly united?"

Russ tried to ignore this but Kevin persisted: "Scenes of sensual indulgence and depravity beyond me wildest fantasies, I reckon?"

Russ rolled his eyes. "Like you would not believe, man."

"Whips? Chains? Forbidden love arts of the exotic east? That sort of thing?"

"That and much much more."

Kevin beamed. "Real hellcats, I hear, some of these stews."

"She wasn't a stew, that was bullshit."

"Just another run-of-the-mill groupie then, eh? One of the lucky ones -- I know you lads have to be selective. Can't possibly accommodate 'em all, can you."

"No way."

"And I expect she'd have wanted to take the opportunity to plaster cast you?"

Russ grimaced. "How'd you know about that? She swore it'd be strictly confidential."

"'The walls have ears and the night has a thousand eyes.' To quote Bobby Vee... or do I mean Bobby Rydell?"

"You mean Bobby Vee."

"Perhaps. Bobby Vee Bobby Rydell Bobby Whomsoever. One of those Bobbies..."

"Bobby Curtola."

"Bobby Vinton."  
"Bobby Darin."  
"Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans."  
"Bobby Taylor and The Vancouvers."  
"Does your mama know about me, baby?"  
"That's right."  
"Does she know just what I am?"  
"Right... so what are you anyway?"  
"Ozzie, mate, and proud of it."  
"Good on ya... Do you know what they used to be called before they were Bobby Taylor and the Vancouvers? What they called themselves?"  
Kevin elevated his bushy ginger eyebrows: "Do tell."  
"Dig it, it's really outrageous: Four Niggers and A Chink."  
"Jesus. Charmin' I'm sure."  
"Really, man... I'm not shittin' you."  
"Why ever would they have wanted to change it?"  
"They started out as Little Daddy and the Bachelors. Used to play Retinal Circus when it was still Dante's... and the Penthouse and stuff. The Elegant Parlour. Ritchie sat in with them one time when they had the outrageous name."  
"Hmm. So I suppose they'd have had to make it 'Four Niggers, A Chink, and A Burn-out Honky Space Case that night, would they?"  
"Actually for awhile they were Three Niggers, A Chink and A Wop, I don't know who the wop was... And you know what else?: Tommy Chong was their guitar player, like from Cheech and Chong. He came up with the name."  
"Chong from Cheech and Chong was the Chink?"  
"Check. He played lead and supposedly Jimi Hendrix played rhythm with them for awhile but Al says that's bullshit."  
Kevin rubbed his big, square, Bazza Mackenzie chin skeptically. "Hmm... you don't say... Fascinatn', I'm sure, but you're trying to change the subject on me, aren't you, you bastard, and it's not going to work. I want to hear about this Vicky harlot... or Nicky or Mikki or Kwikki or whatever her name was... this bogus stew.

Full disclosure, mate."

Russ pinched the bridge of his nose and put his head down and shut his eyes for a moment and let his imagination run free. Then looked up again: "Well, we headed back to my uncle's place, right? And we get there and step inside and hit the lights and it's like, whoa! They're all there waiting for me: Miss Pamela and Miss Mercy and Miss Cynthia... Marianne Faithful... all the ladies, man. Flew a charter up from L.A. 'specially for me."

"Hmm. Quite a surprise, I expect."

"It was wild! They were all over me in a frenzy of passion and, like, total abandonment."

"Mmm."

"Blew their minds when I dropped gonch, man. They told me afterwards that Jimi used to be their Mister Big but from here on they'll be calling him Guitar Shorty, can you dig it?"

Kevin chortled appreciatively. He looked genuinely amused for the first time.

Russ kept his face straight. "It was scary though, man... they were totally out of control... tore my shirt right off my back... shredded my clothes. I felt like Orpheus and those women... you know, the ones that ripped him up. The wild women. Like I felt totally violated."

Kevin laughed heartily and poured what was left of his beer down his throat. Then set down the empty glass, backhanded his moustache, belched forthrightly and made a face expressive of physical discomfort as he laid a hand on his abdomen over his bladder. "Gotta dash for a splash, Russell. Point Percy at the porcelain. Drain the dragon." His accent seemed to be thickening up, as it tended to do when he had been sampling his own wares: *Desh for a splash... drine the dregon*. Turning away, he headed for the gate down at the end of the bar: "Back in a flash, mate." *Flesh mite*. Sounded like something nasty you might have to visit the free clinic about if you weren't careful whose sleeping bag you crawled into at the crash pad.

Russ looked up at the clock behind the bar, a brown plastic Tyrolean-chalet cuckoo type thing. Three o'clock nearly -- sound check time -- but the tuning and

noodling had stopped a little while ago, the bandstand had fallen silent and -- he cut his gaze right -- now appeared to be deserted, though it was so murky down there that it was hard to be sure.

He looked back in time to see Kevin push through the swinging doors. When he was gone, he took the opportunity to help himself to a Player's from the pack on the bar. Placing the cigarette in the side of his mouth, he picked up the book of matches next to the pack and plucked one, then smiled crookedly when he saw the message that folded down into view when per instructions he closed cover before striking: SUCCESS WITHOUT COLLEGE!

Right. Tell it to Alan with his four post-secondary degrees, and Julie with her two and see what they'd have to say. You'd find them about as open to the idea as they would be to that, say, of the Domino Theory or the International Jewish Conspiracy or TENURE WITHOUT PUBLICATION! Russ's own decision to drop out of fourth-year arts at U.B.C. a few months ago and join the band and move into their communal house in Kitsilano had precipitated a major uproar at home, the worst since that night the roof caught fire in his and Leo's absence and for twenty terrible minutes Alan and Julie had feared his stepbrother -- or him -- dead.

He drew the match-head across the striking strip and, squinting against the flare, dipped the end of his cigarette in the blue-edged flame and got it going and dragged on it; then, raising his head, blew a smoke ring at his reflection in the long strip of mirror back of the bar and regarded the many photographs collaged to the adjoining wall. Black-and-white shots mostly from the mountain's early days: Alpine vistas and forest and lakeside scenes populated by pioneer types and uneasy-looking woodsmen. Intrepid visitors smiling at trailside beside their packhorses; Twenties folk of Continental mien and costume: knickerbockers, knee socks, alpenstocks, and so on.

Mixed in were a number of more contemporary, colour images, notably one of a dozen conspicuously wasted-looking skiers of both sexes -- Kevin prominent among them - saluting the camera with beer bottles and botas and none of them wearing anything besides skis, boots, and smashed smiles.

Someone had rendered the shot fit for innocent eyes with strategically placed little rectangular bars inked in over the erogenous zones with a black Magic Marker in the manner of True Detective and National Enquirer. Kevin's bar was twice the size of the others, extending to his knees, the size of a cricket bat. Which made Russ think the Australian was almost certainly the man with the Magic Marker.

He checked the clock back of the bar. 3:02. Time for their sound check. Warily, he glanced down the room. The bandstand was still deserted, but the fire exit adjoining it was wide open now, his bandmates having repaired to the parking lot for purposes that were not hard to guess. Sunlight poured in, and he could smell their skunky smoke.

Frowning, he turned back and gripped the handle of his instrument case and drew it down the bar toward him, then sprang the latches and lifted the lid. Inside, cushioned on a bed of red velveteen rested his disassembled tenor sax. He let his gaze linger on it a moment, pleased, as always, by the sight: the polished golden body, J-shaped with its gleaming, curved surfaces and flaring bell, scaffolded with brass rods and key caps; and the mother-of-pearl keys, iridescent like the buttons on Kevin's Hawaiian shirt.

He loved the way it looked. A beautiful machine for the production of beautiful sounds. Ideally, the sounds of jazz, which he had come to by way of his step-father, surprisingly enough, Alan in turn becoming an aficionado during his mid-Fifties semi-Beat salad days as a grad student at Columbia when he was hanging around the Village and the clubs -- and somehow, despite their frequent strained if not adversarial relationship, passed on to Russ along with the used tenor he bought him seven years ago. Which Russ, once he got over his initial disgruntlement at the thing for not being an electric guitar, had taken to and come to love.

"Care for a coldie?" Kevin was back, headed for the cooler.

"For sure." Russ nodded eagerly.

Arriving, the Australian pulled open the door and reached shoulder-deep into the

wintry depths and came up with two Black Label stubbies: "Glass?"

"Bottle's good, thanks."

Kevin flipped off the caps with a church key cast in the shape of a naked woman with her arms held up to support the opener balanced atop her head like a lopsided tire. He pushed one bottle across the bar towards Russ and transferred lager from the other into his own glass; then, noticing the cigarette in Russ's hand, frowned over at the blue pack atop the bar: "Help yourself to a bloody Player's too, why don't you, Russell."

Russ feigned bemusement: "Bloody pliers?"

"Up yours, mate."

Russ grinned and dragged deeply and blew an insolent smoke ring across the bar. When he reached out as if to take another cigarette Kevin snatched up the pack and tucked it in the breast pocket of his cheesy palm-and-cocktails Hawaiian shirt: "Thievin' bastard."

Russ tipped the sweating amber bottle to his lips and let the icy brew ease down his parched throat. Which seemed in some mysterious fashion to stir his appetite. Suddenly he was ravenous. He realized that since morning -- pancakes with Leo at the Red Dog -- he had eaten nothing. "Anything back there to feed me?" he inquired.

Kevin's eyebrows went up. "Jesus!" he was heard to mutter. "Give the bastards an inch!" Even so, he turned back to the cooler and brought forth a plastic-sheathed mini-sub sandwich and tossed it bag and all into the strange new oven by the grill.

"One cubanette comin' up, you bloody ingrate."

Russ gestured at the big white-enamel cube-shaped appliance: "Hey! What about the baggie?"

"Not a problem, mate."

"It won't melt?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

Kevin shrugged. "Fuck if I know. It just doesn't. Miracle of modern technology."

"What do you call the thing? Looks like some kind of weird TV set."

"Microwave. Microwave oven." Kevin raised his glass and sipped beer, then set it down again and smacked his thin, slightly chapped lips: "So. Did you know you may have a celebrity in the house tonight?"

"Someone from the movie?"

"No no no. No celebrities in that lot. Bunch of lowlife Hollywood hippies. Straight off the Spahn Ranch, I wouldn't be surprised. Speaking of which, I hear you almost got your ass kicked by some of them last night."

"Not really... little tense moment... no big thing. I can't believe they were movie guys though. They looked more like Gypsy Jokers or something... And that Gnome freak actually makes movies?!"

"No way... his brain's totally fried... poor bastard couldn't work a Brownie camera if his life depended on it... he was just sittin' at their table, they thought he was funny, made him their mascot for the night." The Australian turned to the strange oven and pushed a couple buttons.

"I think I just saw one of them out there giving Freddy a hard time. A really hard time. Looked like that guy in Easy Rider, Captain America's buddy, what's-his-name, the one Ritchie sounds like. Dennis Hopper."

Kevin turned back around and and stared at Russ: "A big bastard? 'Bout thirty-five? Buckskin jacket?"

"Right. With a ratty little ponytail. Unbelievable jerk."

Kevin grimaced. "Jesus. Bloody Curt."

"Who?"

No reply. The Australian raised his glass and drained it then moved off down the bar, muttering.

Russ sipped his lager likewise and glanced down at the bandstand again -- still no sign of his bandmates -- then turned his attention to his tenor, gleaming gold in its fake-gatorskin case atop the bar like some strange, ornate sceptre.

Setting his cigarette on the lip of the ashtray to his right and his beer bottle beside it, he reached into the velveteen-lined case and came up with his neckstrap and slipped it over his head, then fished out the saxophone's steel ebonite

mouthpiece and uncapped it and checked his reed: Soggy still from last night, ragged and discoloured and smelly, overdue for retirement.

He loosened the ligature screws and slipped the splinter of cane out from under the brass ring and dropped it in the ashtray, then took a quick last drag on his Player's and butted it, hissing, against the discarded reed. Then fetched a pack of Ricos from the case and unsheathed a fresh #3 and slipped it under his tongue like a thermometer to moisten and limber up.

Kevin meantime had come back his way and was standing near the strange oven, looking disgruntled. The door was still open, the sandwich visible within. Russ removed the reed from his mouth: "Hey, what about that cubanette?"

"Oops. Slipped me little mind." Kevin pushed the door shut and punched the settings and the thing started up loudly.

Russ set the new reed down atop the mouthpiece and picked up his Black Label: "So. What were you saying about celebrities tonight? Not the movie people?"

"No no no."

"So who?" He took a swig.

"Your beloved, fluently bilingual prime minister."

"Trudeau? Really?"

"So rumour has it, mate. Apparently he's here for the weekend with some Ottawa buddy and a lady friend, staying up the road at some rich bastard's chalet."

"Isn't he going steady with Barbra Streisand these days?"

"No no no... it's not Streisand... some sweet young thing about your age... bloody old reprobate. He likes the night life, you know, Pierre does, so you may find yourself tootling that big brass donger of yours" -- he gestured at the tenor -- "for the quality tonight... crowned head of state."

"Crowned? What, his molars?"

"Philosopher king." The Australian smiled his enigmatic little smile.

Now the microwave buzzed loudly then fell silent. Kevin pulled open the door and reached in with a pair of stainless-steel tongs and brought forth the cubanette and set it down, still sheathed in plastic, on an Aegean-blue china plate atop the

counter by the oven: "There we go... forceps delivery... I told you, didn't I, that last time he was up here he popped in with a lady friend?"

"Yeah?"

"Maybe the same one, maybe not I dunno. Plays the field, Pierre does, he's partial to the ladies, very partial indeed... a well-known fact."

"So what were they doing in a dive like this?"

"Dive? What are you callin' a dive?"

"Actually, I read somewhere that he likes the low life, likes knocking around in the lower depths. His family was filthy rich but he went on the road after the war, bummed around, saw the world on five dollars a day, got arrested in Jerusalem and whatnot, hung out with the common folk... you know: the Broad Masses, the People. Salt of The Earth. All manner of riff-raff... Australians even, I wouldn't be surprised. He digs slumming... hangin' out in crummy joints like this... used to at least."

Surprisingly, Kevin directed his mock-outrage at the slur against his employer, rather than that aimed at his countrymen: "Up yours, you bastard! This is a quality establishment... very high-tone clientele... 'cept for certain snotty suburban musician types."

"Hey now. Mind how you talk. Don't be forgetting that tradition of yours."

"What bloody tradition might that be?" Kevin brought the cubanette over now and set it down in front of Russ.

"Bless you." Russ drew the blue plate toward him even as he directed the Australian's attention to a stack of glossy brochures set out in a wire rack down the bar a ways next to a jar of pickled eggs: "A Proud Tradition of Hospitality in the 'Pacific Alps of Super, Natural British Columbia."

"Piss on that, mate."

"Well, what about the Friendly and Helpful Staff?"

"If it's fuckin' friendly you're after, try Freddy. Little shirtlifter probably fancies you. Fancies all you downhill-racer types with your bloody Bogners going up your bloody cracks."

"Fuck that, man! I've never worn Bogners in my life!"

Kevin snorted skeptically and began to pace behind the bar, muttering darkly under his breath and doing a credible imitation of a man working himself up to a righteous rage.

Ignoring him, Russ picked up the cubanette and sniffed it like a big cigar preliminary to removing the plastic. Even wrapped, the sandwich's savoury aroma made his mouth water. Without looking at Kevin he raised a hand and snapped his fingers imperiously: "Garcon! Another beer, my good fellow, and be quick about it."

Kevin walked back over and smacked a fist down on the countertop between them: "Bloody fuckin' Jesus!" Bogus outrage: "There's gratitude for you! Who got you this gig anyway, you ungrateful bastard? Hmm? Answer me that. The most prestigious and remunerative of your so-called career to date and such as it is, I think it's safe to say."

"Sife t' sigh, wot?" Russ grinned and put on a Barry Mackenzie way-out-back-on-the-outback sort of accent, which in fact he had picked up from Kevin himself, who was wont to put on the same voice from time to time, especially when in his cups: "Crikey, mate! Tie me kangaroo down, sport... stone the bleedin' crows!"

Kevin responded with an impersonation of a man more saddened than angered by the boundless ignorance and depravity of his fellow homo sapiens: "Right, Russell. If you can't refute a man, then you mock his national origins and manner of speech. That's it, isn't it, you bastard." The Australian's voice was weary, his expression sorrowful.

Russ made his eyes big and began bowing a tiny, indeed invisible violin: "Tan me hide when I'm dead, Fred," he remarked.

"Just like they mocked Our Saviour the Lord Jesus on the road to Calvary. This very day millenia past."

"Yesterday actually. Good Friday."

"Close enough, you bastard." Kevin darted his tongs across the bar and repossessed the steaming sandwich and brandished it under Russ's nose: "Bastard bites the hand what feeds 'im. Literally."

Russ made a grab for it, inflamed by the delicious smells of hot ham and

condiments, but Kevin easily whisked it back out of his reach.

"Come on, man. I'm starving."

"No way, sport. Not till I get a full fuckin' apology. And you can tell us too who it was secured you this engagement, this prestigious musical engagement."

When Russ said nothing Kevin turned his attention to the cubanette and began to remove the plastic: "My, that does smell appetizin', doesn't it? Naked lunch at the end of me tongs." He raised it steaming to his large, asymmetrical nose and sniffed rapturously: "Splendid! A superb vintage... zesty and mah-velously full-bodied... legs like Mitzi Gaynor and a fine, flowery nose... or perhaps just a bit fruity... like our mutual employer over there." He nodded towards the entrance, where Freddy had appeared and was talking to a pretty, dark-haired young woman, one of the barmaids...

Pulling the plastic-wrap off the sandwich, the Australian gaped python-fashion and deep-throated the thing and champed down on it.

"Jesus!" Russ jumped to his feet and reached desperately across the counter.

Kevin worked his big square jaw and swallowed and backhanded mustard from his moustache: "Mmm-mm! So delicious." He lined up the cubanette for another bite -- what was left of it -- then paused and turned to Russ: "So. Who got you this gig? Who chatted up Freddy for you? Who filled his poofy little ears with tales of the multitudinous felicities of the fabulous No Name sound? I ask you: Who?"

Russ shrugged, capitulated: "Yeah, okay."

"Say who."

"You."

"You withdraw your slanderous aspersions against this fine establishment?"

"Yeah."

"And regret your hurtful mockery of my homeland and manner of speech?"

"Yeah."

"Say it."

"I withdraw my aspersions."

"And...?"

"Regret my goddamn mockery!"

Kevin beamed: "That's what we wanted to hear. Wasn't so bad now, was it? Here you go." He made as if to surrender the cubanette but when Russ reached for it he pulled it back and ripped into it like a great white hitting a stuck, sea-going pig. Cheeks bulging, eyes a-twinkle, he held up what was left -- a tiny mustard-smeared heel of crust -- for Russ's inspection, then dropped it on the blue plate and served it up with a flourish and, having chewed and swallowed, a Franco-Australian accent: "Zloppy zeconds, I fear, monsieur. But I suppose you must have grown accustomed to them by now, n'est-ce pas?"

Russ snatched the pathetic crumb from the plate and fired it back across the bar at his tormentor, but it went high and wide, bouncing off the wall and splattering liquid condiments across both the Playmate calendar hanging there and the framed photo of Nancy Greene next to it.

After a moment Kevin rose from behind the bar, where he had taken cover: "Easy, mate. Get a grip. We'll just fix you another one. No problemo." He picked up a J Cloth from the counter by the microwave and wiped condimental spatters first from Miss March's taut, tan tummy, murmuring lasciviously, then from Nancy Greene's homely, smiling face. Then returned to his place opposite Russ: "Anyway..." -- a hearty, turning-the-page-on-the-whole-sordid-episode tone -- "like I was saying... he paid us a visit last time he was here."

"Trudeau did."

"Right. With a lady friend. Popped in for a pint and a pee. Sank a Heineken and pointed the Right Honourable Member at the porcelain."

"So did you put up a plaque or something?"

"Splendid suggestion." Kevin squared his shoulders and looked to the far distances -- that is, to a poster on the wall across the room depicting a joyful skier up to his ass in Alta, Utah powder -- and cleared his throat and intoned solemnly: "Across these stinkin' tiles splashed the beery micturition of the thirteenth--"

"Beery what?"

"Mic-tur-i-tion. Peepee to you, mate... of the thirteenth prime minister -- or fourteenth or sixteenth or whatever bloody eenth he is -- of this slumbering northern

giant, this vast frozen land of boundless horizons and opportunity and niceness and bloody politeness, this blessed young nation of borin' wimpy bastards--"

"Hey!"

--this overgrown idiot enfant with a reekin' load of poop fillin' its bloody nappies and snot streaming down its fat little face--"

"Hey! Watch it, pal. When yer runnin' down my country, yer walkin' on the fightin' side of me... like the song says."

--this puling, puking, ankle-bitin'... What's it to you, Russell? You're a bloody Yank, aren't you?"

"Uh actually yeah. Good point. But I love my adopted homeland... love my True North."

Kevin gave him a look. "Anyway... while Pierre was off havin' a splash his lady chatted me up. Very comely she was, very young... bit of a flower child, don't you know. Sittin' right over there." He gestured down the bar towards the cash register: "Very intimate-like it was. Smoky bistro, lights down low... a Monday night, right near closing time... just the two of us." Kevin grinned and waggled his ginger eyebrows suggestively then frowned: "Least if you don't count the two plainclothes Mountie bastards sittin' at the next table stuffin' their gobs with beernuts and salami sticks and breathing down our bloody necks." He downed the last of his beer and for a moment fell ruefully silent, then brightened: "Nattering on to me about Oz, she was. Cherished memories of watchin' the sun come up over Bondi after a wild night of impetuous romance and drug-eating and so forth back in the days of her wild, impetuous flowerchild girlhood. Which couldn't've been all that long ago by the look of her. Couple years maybe. Very young she was, half Pierre's age, if that... could pass for the old bastard's daughter. Jailbait practically. Bloody cradlesnatcher." He belched censoriously: "Quite flirtatious, I must say. Lots of smiley eye contact and so on. Favoured me with several glances that bordered on the smoldering. Thousand kilowatts of raw flowerchild sensuality and, like, tantric energy, man. Actually I think she wanted my body."

"Lucky you."

"Lucky Pierre. How's that joke go? The--" Kevin's eyes lit up suddenly as his

gaze shifted from Russ to a point behind him towards the bandstand: "But Good God Almighty! Lookie yonder! Look who's comin' our way!"

Russ turned, half-expecting to see his step-brother -- Kevin had the same sadistically gleeful glint in his eye as he got when toying with Leo -- but beheld instead a skinny longhair in a pink Nudie western shirt and stovepipe jeans tucked into cowboy boots. Ritchie. He was making his way past them towards the exit, looking distinctly wary, furtive even -- as he also had last night, Russ had noticed, when obliged to interact with Kevin. Distinctly stoned, too -- almost certainly he was just back from passing a joint outside with the rest of the band, who Russ now saw had come back in via the fire exit and were congregating on and around the bandstand again, plugging in, tuning, messing about, etc.

Kevin's ruddy, unwinsome features assumed an expression of fatuous delight: "Why it's the man the whole town's talking about..." A slick, phony deejay sort of voice: "Star of our show... our rilly big shew... the young man who's setting today's wild and wiggy music scene on its ear! Guiding spirit of the Band With No Name and their Big Bold Boss Nameless Beat! ... What's happening, Dickie!"

"It's Ritchie, man... not Dickie."

"Course it is, mate. My mistake. So tedibly sorry." Kevin attempted to wave him over but Ritchie shook his head: "Gotta pee, man." He pointed at his abdomen as if the urgency of his need were somehow plain to see and kept going, headed for the exit.

Russ cupped his hand to his mouth and called after him: "Got a bone to pick with you, Ritchie, when you get back. Two bones."

Frowning, Kevin watched him go through the swinging doors, then turned to Russ: "Shy thing, isn't he? Could it be my breath?"

"You make him nervous. Though it's true you could use a stronger mouthwash... 'Once in the morning does it'."

Kevin nodded: "Afraid I'll toss him out of a Huey or take his ear for my collection, is he?"

"That's right." Russ attempted to change the subject: "Hey what about that sandwich? Didn't you say said you'd fix me another one?"

"I did say that, di'nt I. Right you are." Kevin moved over to the cooler and pulled back the door and fetched another plastic-wrapped sub and tossed it in the microwave. As he was punching the settings the doors Ritchie had just gone through parted and a man shouldered through into the room: The guy in the buckskin jacket and red bandana who had been abusing Freddy earlier. He glared around till he spotted Kevin then gestured impatiently: "Hey, buddy. C'mere, man."

Kevin glanced at him expressionlessly over his shoulder then turned back to the microwave. The newcomer's scowl darkened. He inserted the tips of both forefingers in either corner of his mouth and whistled shrilly: "Yo, Rolf! Get your ass over here, man! Wanna talk to ya!"

Kevin continued to ignore him.

Cursing, the guy strode up to the bar. When he saw Russ he did a glaring double-take, then addressed Kevin's back: "Hey, Rolf. Are you fuckin' deaf or what? I wanna talk to you, man. Got something I need you to do."

Kevin finished doing whatever he was doing, taking his time, then hit the 'Start' button on the microwave. Then turned slowly to face Bert or Dirk or Turk or whatever his name was and gave him a long level look and spoke over the hum of the machine in a fair approximation of the voice of John Wayne: "Well fella, if ya wanna talk to me, you'll have to show a hell-uv-a lot more respect than that, won't you." Dropping the accent now: "I'm not your fuckin' doggie, mate. And I told you already, the name's not Rolf. It's Kevin. Get it right." He smiled brightly. "Are you bloody dense?"

The guy looked first astonished, then as if he were contemplating mayhem, but then thought better of it and threw his head back and brayed with harsh and mirthless laughter. Turning to Russ, jerking a thumb in Kevin's direction: "Dig it, man! What a guy! Can you believe this cat?" Then, to Kevin: "Okay, man. Cool. Real fuckin' respectful this time. Dig it: I need to talk to you, there's something I need you to help me with, like I require your assistance. You are working for this enterprise, are you not? Okay? How's that?"

"Vast improvement."

"Well, alright!" Grinning, the guy went into a boxer's crouch and did a little bob

and weave and threw a right jab across the bar into Kevin's bicep, pulling his punch just enough for it to qualify as 'playful'. He pointed a finger-gun at Kevin's beer-belly: "Five minutes. Over by the creek." Smirking, he turned away and headed for the exit.

The microwave buzzed loudly then fell silent. Kevin and Russ watched him go through the doors, then looked at one another. Kevin shrugged: "Somethin' special, isn't he. Curt Bloody Vile. World-class A-1 Grade-A prick. None bigger."

"What was that about you working for some enterprise?"

"Yeah I have to work with that maniac."

"He works here?" Russ looked round the bar.

"No no no... not here. On the movie. He thinks he's my supervisor, if you can believe it. He's the 'construction coordinator' supposedly." A contemptuous snort. "Bastard couldn't coordinate a two-man crew to change a 40-watt bulb if his life depended on it. No fuckin' clue. He's an amateur carpenter and a bloody bad one at that. Calls himself an actor too and can't do that either. What he really is is a crazy old beatnik layabout."

Russ swigged from his bottle of beer then set it down again: "So you're working on the movie too?"

"Affirmative."

"What, writing something?"

"Actually, no. But you needn't look so bloody astonished, you bastard. I do write, believe it or not."

Russ looked down at his Black Label. Truth was, he did tend to discount or at least forget Kevin's claims to literary activity and aspirations, his occasional mention of short stories and screenplays and a novel-in-progress. Maybe because the Australian bore such little resemblance to Russ's idea of what a writer looked or sounded or acted like, not at least the elbow-patch-and-meerschaum types he had had occasion to view firsthand at his parents' departmental dinner parties.

"O ye of little fuckin' faith." Kevin wagged a reproving finger. He sighed. "But no, no writin', nothin' like that. Just humpin' equipment around, tossin' stuff off trucks, that sort of thing. Beast of burden. Bit of carpentry here 'n' there, but mostly

just navy stuff."

Russ reached for his beer and swigged: "So how'd you manage to get hired? Don't you have to be a Teamster or something?"

"On a real movie you prob'ly do. This one's pretty fly-by-night. They pay cash under the table, off the books, which is probably good 'cause I hear they were having big trouble with their financing, the original backers pulled out, thing almost went tits up... No actors you've ever heard of, crew's a bunch of Hollywood freaks. Director's reasonably impressive but he's 'bout eighteen years old... well, eighteen and a half maybe." Kevin smiled. "I exaggerate... but only a little."

Russ looked over at the microwave: "Hey are you ever going to bring me that sandwich?"

"Sandwich! Right! Comin' right up!" Kevin pulled open the oven door and fetched Cubanette #2 and brought it over and set it down in front of Russ along with another bottle of Black Label: "There ye be." He sighed heavily: "Guess I'll go see what that bloody lunatic wants." He dropped his J Cloth in the sink by the cooler and came out from behind the bar and started for the exit, but then changed his mind and veered off towards the northwest corner of the dim lounge where the drape-shrouded room-length picture windows met the far wall by the cigarette machine.

Walking up to the cords controlling the drapery pulley system, he reached out and took hold of one and turned to the bandstand and shouted: "Let there be light, you degenerates!" -- and yanked down. The drapes jumped open forty feet to his left in the middle of the room and sunlight blasted in through the plate glass like a hundred megatons on a moonless night, provoking a chorus of bedazzled yelps and 'Oh-wow's' from the photophobic No Names on the bandstand.

Laughing, Kevin kept pulling the cord down hand over hand until the drapes were open all the way, then turned and made for the exit.

Russ pushed his sunglasses down into place and turned his attention to the sandwich before him, stripping off the miraculously unmelted plastic baggie in which it was sheathed.

The aroma was heavenly. Suddenly ravenous, he raised it to his mouth and

opened wide, precipitating a little premature salivary ejaculation, a hair-trigger parotid at the back of his mouth jetting a line of limpid droplets across the gleaming oak countertop just before he sank his teeth into the thing and a piquant condimental compound of hot mayo and mustard and pickle juice burst flavourfully against his overwrought taste buds.

When he looked up, Ritchie was back. He appeared much more at ease, whether for having taken care of his bladder's demands or because Kevin was gone.

"Whoa, man... bright in here!" The skinny longhair squinted covetously at the steaming sandwich: "How 'bout a little hit off that, man? The kid's like ravished."

"Famished."

"Huh?"

"'Famished' not 'ravished'. Like if the kid gets himself diddled when the kid doesn't feel like getting diddled then he's been ravished. But probably the kid's hungry, so probably he's famished!"

"Far out, man... Can I have a hit?"

Grudgingly, without surrendering possession, Russ held out the cubanette and Ritchie bit off a mouthful and chewed and swallowed, then prodded his molars with a nicotine-stained, guitar-string-calloused forefinger.

Russ meanwhile drew the keys to the microbus from his pocket and dropped them on the bar.

Ritchie regarded them bemusedly and withdrew the finger: "Where'd those come from, man?"

"The ignition."

"No way!"

"Yes way. And you forgot to lock up again. With my horn sitting there in plain view." Russ removed his sunglasses and pointed down the bar at his saxophone case, then raised his hand and tapped his right forefinger twice against his temple while subjecting his spaced-out interlocutor to a sternly reproachful look.

Ritchie frowned down at the keys: "Bummer, man. Like that is so weird 'cause I 'member locking up! Like I 'member looking at your ax 'cause it was on the floor in

back, right? ... an' then like I'm thinkin' how you'll be super-pissed if I forget to lock up again, right? An' then like... pushin' that button down, man!" A beseeching look: "Like I'm not shittin' you, man!"

"Yeah well that's great Ritchie but you didn't roll up!"

"Roll up? What, like a doobie or something?"

"The windows! And you forgot the damn keys!"

"Oh wow, man!" Ritchie bounced the heel of his right hand off his bang-draped forehead: "Now I 'member! Like I 'member rolling them down this morning 'cause Jojo was playing with this dead thing up at the lake yesterday, this dead fish, like this dead trout or whatever an' he got real funky, man, like major stinky, like he was chewin' on it and rollin' around on it and stuff... like, dig it, he was even tryin' to ball it, man... what a pervert!... an' then he crashed in the van last night, like he, you know, slept in it so this morning I get in an' it's, like, whoa! -- ultra-putrid, man. This ultra-putrid dead fish trip, right? So then we truck up to the rez, to Mount Currie to see this dude I know, this Billy Six-toes dude... far-out name, man... this Indian dude from Walla Walla or Yakima or somewhere in Washington state, man... amazing dude, man... like I know him through the Committee, right? The dodgers-deserters thing... Committee To Aid American War Objectors... like we used to take up after the meetings an' rap an' shit... like he's permanent AWOL, man... deserted... nervous in the service, man... actually he sucker-punched this DI who was hassling him at boot camp, at Pendleton, like this real redneck asshole, man... total Nazi, always on his case, screaming at him, calling him 'maggot' and 'faggot' and 'little girl' and 'Tonto' and shit... like that whole fucked-up Marine Corps fascist racist militaristic trip, man... so anyway he put the fucker in hospital, like he busted his jaw... so they throw him in the brig and they're gonna court-martial him and shit, like really nail his ass, man, but then he busts out somehow and splits for Sweden or Norway or somewhere -- like wherever the hell Copenhagen is, man -- but he ends up in Montreal instead, right? Don't ask me how..."

"I won't!"

"An' then he decides to head out west 'cause he doesn't know French and there's no Indian people there and uh... like uh..." Ritchie frowned again, his train of

thought evidently derailed, as was that sorry vehicle's wont.

Russ grimaced: "Get to it, Ritchie. The punch line."

"So uh anyhow, me and Jojo trucked up to the rez this morning to see Billy and your ax was in the van from last night, like from when you split with that chick after the gig, right?" Ritchie pushed the hair out of his slightly bloodshot, hazel eyes and peered hard at Russ: "So uh how'd it go with that chick anyway, man, that stewardess chick?"

Russ gave him a look.

"Okay." Ritchie leaned back again and held up his hands, palms out: "That's cool, man."

"The window, Ritchie!"

"Right, right... the window... so anyhow it was really far out up there, man, really beautiful... all these far-out Indian people and these cute l'il kids and these very far-out old people and stuff, man... like there were some very high people up there, man, and like um... like so anyhow when we get back I'm like super-careful to lock up, right? But I guess we got kinda wasted behind this weed, man, this really heavy weed this chick laid on me... 'member that chick, she was crashing at Slug House last month? She was in town from the islands, like Lasqueti or Hornby or somewhere?"

"Sara something."

"The one with the yeast infection? She--"

"Sara."

--freaked out when Jojo got into her pack and chewed the crotch out of her jeans? Dude is such a pervert, man. 'Member?"

"Yeah I remember. Sara."

"She was Juicy Lucy's friend from T.O., like from Rochdale, she was --"

"Sara!"

--into massage therapy and TM or scientology or some kinda weird shit? Phil thought she was like coming on to him but she wasn't?"

"SARA FOR CHRIST SAKE! S-A-R-FUCKIN'-A! SARA!"

Ritchie gave Russ a stunned, oh-wow-what's-with-you sort of look: "Well you

don't have to get uptight, man... Like now I forget what I was rappin' about."

"The goddamn window!"

"Right... the window... right. So anyhow, to make a long story short--"

"Too late for that!"

--I guess the kid got kinda wrecked behind this weed this Sara chick laid on me and wound the window down to blow the stink off Jojo and like forgot to wind it back up again." Ritchie shrugged and grinned his gappy, goofy grin: "What can I say, man? It was primo, man. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well I guess that's why they call it that."

"Call it what?"

"Dope."

"Huh?"

"Forget it." Russ regarded his feckless bandmate, nominal leader of The Band With No Name, and wondered, not for the first time, how he would fare on an IQ test. Double digits for sure but were we talking low nineties? High seventies? Or what?

Sighing, he reached for his instrument case and drew it toward him down the bar: "Just try to remember next time, would you. Not that there's gonna be a next time. I mean, it's a Selmer, for Christ sake. It's a Mark VI! You know what these things go for? I'll be paying Long & McQuade fifteen a month on it forever, man, and I really don't want to see it ripped off like Al's Strat."

"Sorry, man." Ritchie looked contrite for a moment then brightened and attempted to change the subject: "So anyway... how'd it go today?" He tucked a wing of lank brown hair behind his ear and subjected Russ to another penetrating, or at least unblinking, look.

"How'd what go?"

"That stuff the Gnome laid on you last night. You did it today, right? I can tell, you look wasted."

"Pot calls the kettle black."

"Your eyes are all pupil, man."

Russ shrugged. "Maybe so, but it was really wimpy dope... totally dud... like

Preludin or grape Pez or whatever. Definitely not mescaline, that's for sure. I barely got off on it... teeny little buzz but mainly it just tied my gut in a knot and gave me the shakes... I can get that from coffee, man. I thought it was supposed to be so great, you said."

"Bummer, man. I could've sworn it was that stuff I did with your cousin at Long Beach that time and it was super-fine, like we really got off on it. Ask him, why don't you, man." Ritchie turned towards the bandstand and cupped a hand to his mouth preparatory to shouting down the room at Kenny, who was hunched over the keyboard of his portable Hammond, head down, sunlight glinting off his steel-rim John Lennon glasses.

Russ put a hand on Ritchie's forearm: "Don't worry about it, man. I believe you. Maybe I shouldn't have split it with Lee, maybe I should've done the whole tab."

"You split it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then what do you expect, man?"

"I guess."

"Kenny and I did two each!"

"I guess." Russ glanced down towards the bandstand. It was getting noisy down there again: bass thumping, drum rolls, Phil Harmonic huffing and sucking on his Hohner.

Kenny was looking their way now, trying to get their attention, his lips moving as he waved and pointed at Ritchie's Marshall.

Ritchie made reassuring, be-right-there gestures; then, turning back to Russ, raised his voice above the escalating din: "So where's your bro?"

Russ shrugged, pointed skywards: "Still up top probably. He'll be along later."

A blast of feedback now, then a thunderous voice -- Kenny's -- booming over the P.A.: "Ritchie, get on down here toot sweet! It's your amp that was sick last night, man."

Ritchie again signaled assurances of imminent compliance then turned back to Russ: "So how was he doing? Has he skied high before?"

"No, but he was alright once he got moving. Far as I know."

"You didn't ski with him? His first time?"

"For awhile, then we split up. He said it was cool. It's not really that hard, skiing when you're tripping... like it's not really much harder than walking when you're tripping. Not if you grew up with it, and Lee's been skiing since he was in diapers practically... our grandparents had this place at Squaw Valley... plus he's cautious as an old lady."

Ritchie looked doubtful: "I don't see how you dudes do that. Don't you like crash into trees and shit?"

Russ patted his bad knee: "Not since I had to quit downhill."

"But wouldn't you rather just be somewhere mellow, like go to the park or lay up in the crib and watch the wall movies and groove on The Dead or Trane or whatever?"

"Naw, that's east coast. West coast you do stuff. You know that."

"I guess."

"Anyway, it was wimpy dope, like I said. Though Lee did seem like maybe he was getting off on it a bit. More than me at least."

"Maybe all the zap was in his half?"

"That can happen?"

"For sure, man. Like if they don't mix it up right before they tab it." Ritchie shook his head soberly: "I don't know, man... no way you'd catch me trying to ski on psychedelics. Like I'm too young to die, man."

"Yeah, well you wouldn't catch me dropping three hundred mikes at that Kubrick flick and then jumping out of my seat when the astronaut dude goes through the black hole or time warp or whatever it is and wakes up in the white room" -- the reference was to 2001: A Space Odyssey -- "and running smack into the screen and getting myself sent to the psych ward for the weekend!"

Ritchie looked sheepish: "That was some rilly heavy acid, man."

"And you wouldn't catch me doing it again like a month later at that festival, that Paradise Valley thing, and then climbing up on the stage right in the middle of the set 'cause I felt I had something very important to say to Taj Mahal and then falling off and getting covered in mud and dogshit and spraining my wrist and not being

able to play my ax for a month!"

Ritchie reddened: "Yeah well that's what I mean about not doing stuff like that, man. Like sometimes you can learn from experience, right?"

Now the voice exploded over the P.A. again: "RITCHIE! GET YOUR ASS DOWN HERE RIGHT NOW OR AL'S GONNA KILL YOUR AX! YOU TOO, RUSS YOU BIG STUD!"

Guitar Guy Al was lurching around the bandstand brandishing Ritchie's Les Paul above his head like Pete Townsend on the rampage. Thereby getting Ritchie's full attention. His eyes grew large and he jumped up and double-timed it down to the bandstand. As he approached, Phil Harmonic picked up a mike and greeted him with a mocking little ditty sung to the tune of 'Chattanooga Choo Choo': "Like pardon me, man. / Is this the Marrakesh-a Ex-press? / I got some kif in my bong / I copped along the Mekong." This in a dopy Cheech and/or Chong sort of voice closely approximating Ritchie's own. Al meanwhile continued to stagger around the stage swinging the guitar wildly with one hand.

Russ laughed and caught Kenny's eye and held up a forefinger -- 'one more minute' -- then redirected the digit down at his tenor, which he now lifted from the velveteen-lined case and set across his lap. Reaching down the bar, he fetched his mouthpiece and fitted the fresh reed he had pulled earlier under the ligature and nudged it into place with a fingertip and tightened the screws. Then looked up again as Kevin came slamming back in through the swinging doors, looking grim. Seeing Russ, he held up a hand -- "Don't ask... fucker's out of his mind" -- and kept going, headed for the cooler behind the bar, from which he extracted and opened another bottle of Black Label, muttering to himself as he poured it into his glass.

Russ returned his attention to his instrument, retrieving the gooseneck from the case and pushing the mouthpiece onto it, then fitting this unit to the body of the horn. He hooked his neck-strap to the little ring midway down the sax's spine and adjusted it for length and swung the instrument into position, the underside of the bow brushing the top of his right thigh.

Now Kevin came back down to his spot across from Russ, muttering still. Russ decided to take him at his word about not asking, at least not about Curt Vile: "So

tell me again how you got hired."

"Lady friend of mine's workin' on it, she told me about it."

"Lidy frin'?"

"Woman I did some work for couple summers ago, she and her hubbie had a place up at Alta Lake. Before they split up."

"What sort of work?"

"Some drywalling, flooring."

"Any romantic involvement? While you were drying her walls and laying her floors?"

"Nonono, nothin' like that. Wouldn't have minded but she was married at the time..." Kevin sighed heavily. "And now that she's not, she's 'seeing' that lunatic Curt, believe it or not. Great lady, terrible taste in men... you should see her ex, he's nearly as bad."

Russ tightened his neck-strap slightly, then looked up and gestured round the lounge: "So what about this place? Do you quit or what?"

"No no. Little leave of absence, that's all. It's just a few days work, the movie. Two days here then one more up the road near Pemberton. Then they head back down to the main set Tuesday, apparently it's in West Van or somewhere near West Van. Isn't that your neck of the woods? The boojwa enclave?"

"Uh yeah. My family lives there."

Now another thunderous ultimatum booming over the P.A.: "RUSS! PRESENT YOURSELF IMMEDIATELY OR FACE IMMEDIATE DISMISSAL AND POSSIBLE EXECUTION!"

He turned toward the bandstand and again signalled intent-to-comply; then, turning back to Kevin: "I better get going. But I wanna hear more."

Kevin nodded and gave him the thumbs up and moved off.

Russ pushed his shades down into place and swung his tenor back up and fitted his right thumb against the rest a little ways down from the strap-ring and settled the fingertips of both his hands over the clusters of keys lining the front of the horn. Leaning back against the bar, he filled his lungs and took the mouthpiece between his lips and closed on it and tipped his head to the angle that felt right -- the Lester

Young angle -- and blew into the instrument, warming it without yet trying to summon forth any sound.

After five or six long, slow exhalations, he fingered a middle C and tightened his embouchure and sounded the note. It emerged sluggishly, raggedly. Closing his eyes, he smoothed it out and held it awhile, then rolled his left thumb onto the octave key and, blowing harder, hit his high C. Then took a breath and sounded the middle one again, and tried taking it down an octave but produced instead a deep, plangent clinker, a quavering moo as of haunted plumbing. He got it right on the second try, and began moving up and down among his three Cs, slowly at first, then faster as the instrument warmed and thawed and awoke. He ran a few scales then the head for "Blue Trane", working over into "Song For My Father". Then, satisfied, left off and shut his instrument case and drained his beer. Stooping, he fetched his torturous red boots from the floor and lifted the case from the counter and, still in his stocking feet, padded down the room towards the bandstand.

Halfway there he glanced out the floor-to-ceiling windows recently undraped by Kevin and caught sight of the blonde woman in the Pepto-Bismol-pink ski suit quite a ways out in the parking lot. He stopped and watched her unlock and climb behind the wheel of a white Mercedes, remembering the intense look she gave him on the stairs and wondering what that had been about and where he had seen her before, if in fact he had.

Now a little puff of exhaust from the car's tailpipe then the Mercedes backed up and turned then moved slowly forward out of the lot towards the turn-off for the highway, hanging a right onto 99 and heading off in the direction of Pemberton. Russ watched it till it had disappeared from sight, then looked over towards the gondola barn at the ascending and descending cabs. He wondered in passing how Leo was faring.

—END 1.6--