

NOVEL 1: SEA TO SKY

CHAPTER TEN [TITLE TO COME]

It wasn't till later that Leo remembered he was supposed to have met Russ in the bar of The Highlander to fulfill his brother's unreasonable demand for a ride down to Squamish to pick up Alison.

Quite some time ago. Russ would not be happy about his impromptitude but Leo considered the prospect of his wrath calmly, as he had DiPuma's menace. Somehow it didn't much worry him just now.

For the past indefinite while he had been sitting dazedly on a rusty bucket turned over in the mud outside the ski shop at the bottom of the mountain, staring across the way towards the gondola barn, a hangar-like building with a mile or so of cable running out of it up the mountain via a series of pylons to the midstation terminal where Russ had his run-in with DiPuma that morning. Incoming gondolas disappeared into one end of the structure, while from the other emerged the day's last downloading skiers.

Ignited by the setting sun, the aluminum capsules burned with a warm golden light as they glided down the mountain on the braided wire. They were beautiful, and despite recent events and present circumstances Leo watched them with considerable drowsy pleasure. Hard to believe it was just this morning that they had entered the pale-green building and climbed into the cab with DiPuma and the girl. It felt like a century ago.

He was cold and wet -- his hair, his feet, the sleeves of his sweater -- and still feeling the drug, though less so than a few hours ago. Blue sparks zipped around on the edges of his vision, little peripheral tracers that he couldn't blink away. His eyes were tired and itchy but when he shut them his head teemed with strange scenes and manic animation. The phrase 'Retinal Circus' came to mind. There had been a club down on Davie Street called that, the city's premier psychedelic venue after The Afterthought on 4th closed a couple years ago and now itself defunct. It was a place Leo himself had been too young to frequent but which his brother's band -- a pre-Russ version of it -- played a couple times in the club's latter days.

Till now the name hadn't meant much to him but now he got it...

A big wind-sock fluttered faintly like a giant red Trojan from an aluminum mast atop the gondola barn. West of it the sun sat low in the sky, mellowed now from its scorching midday intensity. Dreamily, blinking and squinting, Leo watched it close the gap that separated its bottom rim from the blue-mauve ridge of a mountain to the west, watched it sink till it grazed the timber-serrated slope like a golden balloon courting disaster.

As if this conjunction of sun and planet were their cue, two ski patrolmen in red parkas emerged from the gondola barn, bearing between them a toboggan-stretcher. In it lay a bulky man with a trim grey beard and a red headband. He was swaddled in a multi-coloured Hudson's Bay blanket and strapped to the toboggan like an overgrown papoose. Only his head was visible but Leo recognized him as the man who had greeted DiPuma when they offloaded at midstation that morning.

Straight-backed, the stretcher-bearers walked him down the rampway, followed by a young woman in a maroon one-piece ski suit with a white headband and a short blonde ponytail.

Reaching bottom, they set down their load next to a bundle of bamboo slalom poles and exchanged a few words with the girl, then headed back inside the building, leaving the injured man in her care for the time being, flat on his back at the bottom of the ramp, his face a grimace of discomfort.

There but for fortune. Leo found it easy to empathize, having come so close himself to qualifying as a fellow casualty. The kind whose facial expression would not have been on view to onlookers when the rescue sled was brought down because the colourful blanket would have been pulled up over it.

Sobering thought, but here he was after all, cold and exhausted and in a strange frame of mind -- but alive. It was an outcome he would be able to appreciate more fully a little later probably, when he got some distance on the event. Up to this point though he had been too numb for joy or after-the-fact fear or other strong emotion. He was in a state of stunned serenity, one that he recognized as next door to shock, if not the thing itself. Even now, though, his zombie composure was beginning to slip. His hands had started to tremble -- with cold in part -- the sleeves of his sweater were frozen past the elbow -- but also with the jitter of thawing nerves. His anxiety level, too, was rising, specifically at the prospect of heading into the bar, underage and ID-less, for his belated rendezvous with Russ.

Over by the gondola barn the girl was kneeling beside the injured man, rubbing one of his hands between hers then bending to it to warm it with her breath. Now she reached under his blanket and brought out a pack of cigarettes and shook one out and put it in her mouth and lit it, then transferred it from her lips to his.

Leo was struck by the sexy intimacy of the gesture. She was pretty, at this distance anyway, with her trim body and snug snow-suit and blonde ponytail, and he envied a little the recipient of her tender ministrations, the man's present predicament notwithstanding. It put him in mind of an old war movie, the frontline nurse tending in the trenches to her wounded soldier-lover, like in that one he watched last Remembrance Day with his father and the deserter then resident with them, a chunky nineteen-year-old Latino guy from Saginaw, Michigan named Julio.

A Farewell To Arms. What was the actor's name, the one who played the ambulance driver? And the marshall in High Noon when he was older, and Lou Gehrig in that baseball movie that made Leo cry when he was a Little Leaguer back in California?

Gary Cooper. Actually Leo had nodded off near the end, maybe because he had no professional interest in watching it, unlike his father who was teaching it that term -- the Hemingway novel -- nor either a compelling personal interest as did Julio, one in a long line of young American war exiles -- draft dodgers initially, but in recent years just as likely to be deserters -- to stay with them upon first arriving in Canada.

As soon as the movie started, their house guest -- having kept up a steady nervous monologue since his arrival -- had fallen silent and watched it all the way through, looking to art perhaps to fathom and justify his own recent, rash farewell to arms (he was six days AWOL, four in Canada), the implications of which were as yet far from clear to him, judging from certain of his remarks. Such as: *So man you tellin me thees differen country up here? Not the States no more?* Which is what he said to Leo's father on the first day, surprising him some though not flooring him like he would have a couple years ago when they rarely saw guys like Julio, when the Julios of America still reported for induction and Vietnam when summoned by their local draft boards and when the Lovetts' house-guests were mainly well-informed, middle-class, white collegians, all of them fully cognizant that Canada was a separate, sovereign nation, and some of them Dr. Lovett's former students from Berkeley days, who delighted in keeping the good professor up till all hours talking literature and ideas and history and politics and social change and revolution and repressive tolerance and the Events in France and the Chicago Democratic Convention and what happened to S.D.S. and the question of revolutionary violence and so on, invariably trying to convince him 'round midnight to forsake his C.C. and rocks and join them out on the deck for a toke...

The light was changing now, ebbing as the last fiery edge of sun dropped behind the ridge, taking with it all the long blue shadows and the lovely golden veneers of light overlaying the western faces of the buildings and surrounding hills.

Beyond the parking lot a little creek ran out of the forest. The same creek, he was pretty sure, that he splashed down into a mile or so upstream this past hour and that came so close to filling his lungs and stopping his heart.

He shuddered. All over the lot thick white clouds of exhaust pumped sluggishly from the tailpipes of ski-topped late-model automobiles: Day trippers warming up for the drive back down to the city.

A dozen trucks and semi-trailers lined the far perimeter adjoining the creek's near bank. Leo stared at them, puzzled, then remembered Russ mentioning the 'bikers' at the bar last night and the movie that was shooting in the area.

Over by the gondola barn, the injured skier was puffing away on his cigarette. His billowing exhalations had the effect of awakening Leo's nicotine craving. For the first time since morning he found himself subject to a yen for a smoke.

Reaching down, he unbuckled his fanny pack and lay it across his knees and unzipped it – carefully this time but even so something fell out in the mud at his feet.

The Camus paperback.

He picked it up and wiped it off on the thigh of his jeans and examined the cover illustration. A drab portrait of a sallow hollow-eyed man. An Existentialist? Is that what they looked like? What exactly WAS an Existentialist and how did you get to be one? Something about freedom and choices and wearing dark clothing and hanging out in cafes -- Russ had explained it to him once but not very satisfactorily. He made a mental note to ask his father.

He flipped the book open to where his place was marked by several pale-pink sheets of mimeographed paper. Unfolding them, he saw that the top page was a stern directive from his Grad Committee serving notice to members of the Class of '70 that they MUST complete and return the attached personal form by the end of the first week of classes following Easter break in order to assure inclusion in the grad yearbook.

He looked it over. CLUBS & TEAMS and HOPES & DREAMS. The final category was 'PET PEEVES (OPTIONAL)', of which several sprang to mind. For instance: Elder step-siblings who despite major character flaws excel at whatever they try.

And: Teachers who fondly (or in the case of Roachfart, bitterly) recall the academic and musical gifts and ACHIEVEMENTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS (Category 3. -- somewhat redundant) of aforesaid step-siblings to step-siblings' younger step-siblings.

And: Coaches who fondly recall the athletic gifts and ACHIEVEMENTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS of same to same.

And: Teachers and coaches and bitter band masters who anticipate comparable academic, athletic and musical gifts and A&A in and from the aforementioned junior step-siblings, and don't bother to hide their disappointment when these are not forthcoming.

And: Younger sisters of Class of '68 grads who excitedly and flirtaciously demand to know if one is really Russ Anderson-Lovett's brother, then subsequently report themselves terribly disappointed with how one stacks up -- fails to stack up – against the golden boy.

Et cetera. The list could be extended but with just two blank lines available to him and his peeves it looked like abridgement was going to be in order, not amplification.

He refolded the pink sheets and slipped them back in the book, taking a moment to peruse a page or two of text. His eye settled on the passage he had been reading last night, in which the prosecutor reviews Meursault's activities in the days following his mother's death with a view to insinuating a callous indifference, a depraved absence of filial feeling, a soullessness and moral monstrosity.

He smiled crookedly. The guy'd probably feed the old lady psychedelics and abandon her on a mountain without batting an eye. He and Russ would hit it right off.

He shut the book and returned it to the pack, wondering if it was possible to live at home with your family in a far-west Canadian suburb, to frequent bourgeois ski resorts, to number among your associates several members of Demolay -- and still be an Existentialist? It seemed doubtful.

Now he raised his head and looked around, trying to remember what he was after. Over by the gondola barn the injured skier was still flat on his back, still puffing away on his—

Cigarette!

Quickly, he located his Gauloises but the package proved dismayingly flat. Empty.

A memory now from late morning. Riding up alone on the new Blue Chair... bringing out the blue package and shaking out the last one in his palm... getting it lit on the third match and immediately hacking himself half to death... giving up and snapping it down into the snow flowing past below like a white river... wondering what French lungs had going for them that they could abide the things. If it weren't his artistic obligation to smoke them he'd have switched long ago.

Now he recovered the glossy black folder of matches that was tucked under the cellophane covering the blue paper package and pocketed them and wadded up the package and dropped it in the brown-ochre mud at his feet.

A couple hundred pairs of skis were docked in the racks by the lodge, a laquered thicket. Looking over at them, he experienced another, stronger pang of apprehension at the prospect of proceeding inside to the bar in his present discomposed and ID-less state.

After a moment's reflection though a more palatable alternative suggested itself. Digging into his pocket, he retrieved the match folder and checked the back cover and confirmed the presence there of a string of golden numerals beneath the claim WHERE THE ELITE MEET FOR THE FINEST IN WHISTLER APRES-SKI FUN AND RELAXATION.

Relieved, he put the folder away again and re-zipped his pack and struggled to his feet from the overturned bucket -- he was stiff and his hip ached -- and strapped the cobalt-blue nylon bag back round his waist and stumbled in his sodden boots over to a row of phone booths across the way from the lift-ticket wickets.

He stepped into one of them, the middle one, and lifted the handset and dug out a dime and dropped it down the slot. Consulting the matchbook, he hooked the dial around seven times.

Six rings, then: "G'day, Black Diamond." A cheery Down-Under voice, loud and facetious.

Leo hesitated. Should he identify himself? No, he thought not. Kevin made him nervous at the best of times: "Uh hi. Can you page someone for me, please?"

"LOUDER, mate. It's NOISY in here."

"Can you maybe like page someone for me?"

"They got a name?"

"Russ Anderson-Lovett? He's in the band?"

"Ah yes. Russell. Angelheaded hipster draggin' 'imself through the suburban negro streets at dawn lookin' for an angry fix... which isn't all that easy to find in West Vancouver, is it... nor negroes neither for that matter... he the one you're after?"

"Uh yeah. He's the sax guy."

"Indeed he is. Was just having a full and frank exchange of views with young Russell. One moment puh-leez."

CRASH! -- the receiver hitting the bar.

When his ear stopped ringing Leo tuned in to the ambient sounds of the Elite meeting for the Finest: Boisterous voices and braying laughter... clink of glass-ware... Van Morrison in the background singing cryptically that he dreamed someone paid their dues in Canada and left him to 'come through'.

A full house by the sound of it, Saturday night gearing up, if not already in full swing.

Now, from the clamor and yammer at the other end of the line, one voice distinguished itself: A man's, loud and nasal, cutting through the babble, rising to the threshold of intelligibility and

pushing the occasional distinct word or phrase across to Leo's ear: *Maui... thirty-foot catamaran... go for it... this chick...*

Leo drummed his numb fingers on the coinbox and waited tensely, bracing himself for Russ and the heaping helping of aggrieved sarcasm that surely awaited him. The excuse of mitigating factors and extenuating circumstances such as near-fatal misadventure would not cut much ice with his brother, he knew. He almost wished he were still in shock or whatever it was, that agreeable, quasi-lobotomized, low-anxiety state of mind he had enjoyed until recently.

He stamped his feet, blew on his hands. He was growing colder by the minute. His teeth had begun to chatter.

Now an all-too-familiar figure -- black ski-wear, silver mane, short of stature -- emerged from the lobby of The Highlander and hurried down the steps and made for the gondola barn -- running almost.

The scene at the bottom of the ramp had destabilized drastically since Leo last looked. A newcomer had appeared -- the big redheaded woman he saw in the lift line with the woman from the pool and the pale girl, her daughter. She was standing by the bearded man, leaning down over him, berating him, really laying into him --on the verge it appeared of doing him violence as he lay helpless on his back at her feet. And now in fact she KICKED the bundle of bamboo slalom poles next to him. Kicked them hard with her heavy ski boots, breaking the string that held them together and scattering them. The man looked terrified. He tried to sit up, then fell back, wincing. His companion clapped a hand to her mouth in alarm then stepped forward and tried to intervene, laying a hand on the redhead's arm but the woman threw it off violently and rounded on her and gave her a hard shove, both hands to the chest. The girl reeled back, nearly going down.

Now DiPuma arrived, sprinting the last bit, and got between the women, facing the redhead with his hands held up palm out in a let's-be-cool-now gesture. She refused to be pacified though, waving her arms angrily and trying to get past him at the girl. DiPuma had to grab on and hold her back like a hockey ref restraining an enraged player -- possibly even saving his second life of the day. It was all he could do to contain her -- she was a head taller than him and a lot heavier.

Meantime the girl with the blonde ponytail turned tail and fled, abandoning her equipment and lover, stumbling across the half-frozen mud toward the lodge, casting fearful glances back over her shoulder every few steps.

The big redhead shouted and gestured after her but made no move to follow when DiPuma released her from his bear-hug.

Now a booming voice in Leo's ear: "Sorry, mate. Your party appears to've buggered off. Was here a minute ago. Been chatting with the bastard all afternoon. Gone for a slash maybe."

"Slash?"

"You know: splash the boots."

"Like... his ski boots?"

"No no no. I'm saying he's probably buggered off to the amenity to drain the dragon." *Drine the dregin.* Kevin's accent, thick today as his beer-swollen waist, thickened further as he assumed his Barry Mackenzie Oz bumpkin persona.

"Sorry?" said Leo, still not getting it.

"You know: point Percy... shake hands with the unemployed... strain the potatoes."

"P-potatoes?" Had he gone aphasic or whatever it was called?

Kevin's patience had its limits: "Jesus! Urinate! Make water! Have a bloody *piss*, for Christ's sake! HE'S GONE FOR A PISS!"

"Oh! Right! Okay! Sorry."

"*Probably.*" Kevin cut back on the accent and the phony outrage, slipping back into his somewhat more toned-down, sardonically cosmopolitan, and presumably authentic manner: "He's *probably* gone for a piss. Such is my conjecture. Pure speculation... Jeez, now you've got the customers lookin' at me... askance."

"Sorry."

"Is this baby brother by any chance?"

"Uh... yeah. Good guess."

"Weren't gonna say g'day to your old mate Kev, were you?" A wounded tone, phony as the bumpkin accent and outrage.

"Um... well I was but then I figured you'd be pretty busy. Happy Hour with the Elite and all."

"Jesus! Patch his head back together for him and the ungrateful little bastard doesn't even have the common courtesy to--"

"I was, really... How's it going?"

"Oh, just fabulous, just ever so *swimmingly*, thanks so much for asking... Big brother's pissed at you, you know. Fillin' me ear the past hour with bitter complaint, says you're unpunctual... not to be relied on."

"Uh I had this accident sort of."

"Yeah? I hear that Ian and Stu just brought some guy with a broken leg down in the body bag... wasn't you, was it?"

"What? No... that's another guy."

"So are you okay sort of? You sound a bit shaky. Nothin' new there, mind you."

"Yeah I'm okay. I think."

"Big brother mentioned something about drug abuse on the slopes?"

"I'm okay. It's getting super cold out here though."

"Out where?"

"This phone booth by the lift-ticket place. Like right outside." He glanced across the way. The curtains in the wickets were drawn, the money-holes plugged with plywood crescents, the cashiers gone home or to the bars.

"So why don't you come *inside* and we'll fix you a nice hot toddy? ... What sort of accident did you sort of have? You've not been chopping under the influence again, I hope?"

Leo winced. "No... no chopping."

The allusion, like the one to patching heads, was to an unfortunate incident that occurred the previous spring, the consequence of Leo's idle decision to split some kindling back of his Uncle Jack's A-frame in the woozy later stages of a long May afternoon devoted to suntanning and indolence and imbibing the beer and reefer laid on by Russ and friends.

His intent was unclear -- purely recreational perhaps -- there was no need for a fire, the day was warm and sunny -- but in any event, a self-wielded double-bitted ax wedged in a block of yellow cedar as fast as Excalibur in the stone -- or so it had appeared -- and then wrenched free with excessive, boozy force and surprising ease had trimmed Leo's fair bangs on the backstroke and cleaved his lightly pimpled brow. There had been blood, a shocking lot of it, streaming down into his eyes and spattering a trail of crimson drops like tiddlywinks through the kitchenette and down the hall into the bathroom, where he wound up with his head in the shower stall, watching the stuff drip from the tip of his nose and redden the shower water as it swirled round and down the drain like that of the mortally slashed Janet Leigh in Psycho.

Though half the skiers on the mountain that day likely were physicians he had been unable to find one immediately at hand, thus was obliged to turn in his hour of need to Kevin; who, whatever the source of his expertise -- the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps or somewhere less exotic -- had put things right in short order. And in fact when the gore was swabbed away the wound proved minor, requiring nothing more than a small butterfly bandage.

With this happy anticlimax Leo would have liked to have put the incident behind him. Kevin, though, seemed to consider it a wellspring of eternal amusement and was wont to re-open the wound (so to speak) with jests and anecdotes pertaining to head injuries, brain surgery, lobotomies, and ax murders, of which he seemed to have an infinite store, whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Now, for instance: "So, Lion Boy... did you see on the news 'bout that poor bastard in Alberta -- Lethbridge I think it was -- drove himself in to Emergency with the tire iron through his head? Seems he was--"

"Yeah I saw it." Untrue.

"Oh? ... well, it seems he's driving down the highway with the thing rattlin' round loose in back of his station wagon and a great bloody moose pops out in front of him and he jumps on the binders and goes off the road and the thing goes flyin' like a bloody javelin right through his cranium. Guys at Emergency when they first saw him thought he was wearing one of those thingies, those arrow-through-the-head joke thingies. Only a crowbar."

"Yeah I heard all about it."

"Ah, you did, did you?" A skeptical note. "Alright then... Care to leave a message for big brother?"

"Naw I think I'll just head over. Okay?"

"By all means, mate. We'll fix you a nice hot toddy. 'Course we'll need to see three pieces of photo ID notarized by the Bureau of Vital Statistics. That won't be a problem, will it? ... Okay, gotta go... the Elite's thirsty. *Ciao, bambino.*"

Click.

Frowning, Leo docked the handset in its chrome-plated cradle and flicked the coin-release lever a couple times, as was his habit. What to make of that last bit? Joking, obviously, but that didn't mean he wouldn't follow through. Leo believed his antipodean nemesis capable of demanding ID upon his arrival, making a big, loud, joky show of carding him, denouncing and even ejecting him from the premises -- all in a spirit of rowdy good fun, tongue-in-cheek.

Across the way things had calmed down. The small crowd that had been drawn by the fireworks was dispersing. One of the ski patrol guys had come down to see what was going on and DiPuma was talking to him while the redheaded woman puffed furiously on a cigarette and looked elsewhere. The bearded man likewise.

Now a guy Russ's age in a midnight-blue toque stepped into the booth next to his and glanced Leo's way and looked away again -- then came right back at him, his eyes wide and startled then

narrowing and crinkling at the corners as his lips pulled up in an incredulous grin.

Leo turned away and picked up his handset again, as if to place another call. What was so funny? When the guy finally looked away and started dialing he dipped his knees and tried to see himself in the coinbox but his reflection was blurred to abstraction in the scratched chrome.

Meanwhile, an ambulance was making its way towards the gondola barn, moving slowly, siren and flashers off. DiPuma was down on one knee now beside the injured man, talking to him; also, Leo noted, keeping between him and the woman, who still appeared far from calm.

When the ambulance pulled up, the ski patrol guy met the driver and conferred with him awhile and passed him some paperwork then helped load the injured skier in back. When this was done DiPuma approached and spoke to them then beckoned the big redheaded woman over and put a hand on her shoulder and said something to her and then climbed in back. She hesitated, looking glowery, then tossed her smoke and followed suit. The driver (who looked nothing like Gary Cooper) shut the door after them and walked up front and got in and started the engine and turned the vehicle round and headed back the way he came towards the gas station and the highway, tires crunching across the now-frozen mud.

Leo watched them go, no longer envying the bearded man even slightly. He wondered again what DiPuma had shown his brother, and what he said to him. Wondered too what had become of the woman from the pool and the girl... her daughter. His startling realizations from earlier in the day returned to him now... the woman from the pool, here at Whistler these years later... the girl from the gondola revealed as her daughter... the over-age 'boyfriend' turning out to be DiPuma, who apparently was the girl's step-father... and the dead brother, her twin... the woman's lost son... It was boggling, dumbfounding... he hadn't even begun to take it in yet...

He thought of the scars on the girl's forearm and remembered her saying something on the lift about her father -- her real father presumably -- that 'his movie' would be on the Late Show tonight. And that he too was dead.

The guy in the next booth was looking over at him again with amused eyes through the plexiglas separator. Little white puffs of condensed breath wisped from his lips as he spoke into the black plastic mouthpiece.

Dismayed, certain that he was himself the subject of the conversation, Leo replaced his own handset and backed out of the booth and made for the lodge's cafeteria entrance.

A wave of warm air, redolent of cheeseburgers and Coppertone and burning tobacco embraced him as he pushed through the innermost of the two entrance doors and stepped inside.

When he got his bearings he started across the room through the ruddy, Ovaltine-swilling throng, headed for the far side and the exit leading to The Black Diamond.

He hadn't gone far though before he sensed that he was drawing more stares. A table of pre-teen girls midway across the room -- they were the age of his twin half-sisters -- went silent and Saucer-eyed as he approached, like a gaggle of Keane waifs, then wildly giggly in his wake.

When he got some distance on them he looked back to confirm that they were laughing their dizzy teenybopper heads off at him, which indeed they were. Uproariously, uncontrollably, pee-your-pants hysterically.

But why? What was the joke?

Reddening, he stepped up his pace and fled the cafeteria, clomping in his leaden boots past the cashiers and out the exit through the lobby and round a corner, fetching up out front of the lounge.

Here he hesitated, facing the black-diamond trail marker and the swinging saloon-style doors leading inside, trying to get up the nerve to go through them.

Again the buzz of conversation and laughter reached his ear from within, borne on a tantalizing blue haze of cigarette smoke.

He took a deep breath and stepped gamely forward -- then froze as the doors parted and two Beautiful Whistler People bore down on him, all teeth and tan and *apres-ski* elegance.

Again the double-takes and hinky looks and crooked grins as they went past, and a lisped over-the-shoulder wisecrack from the male half of the duo, who resembled Troy Donahue: "*Fabulous hair, sweetie. Love it!*" This provoking throaty blonde laughter from his companion.

Flustered, Leo backed away from the entrance.

On the wall to his right was a poster advertising his brother's band with that lame photo of them all hanging out of Ritchie's microbus. Beyond, a tributary corridor led to the restrooms. He walked down this toward a pair of black doors, each displaying a rectangular metal plate at chest level. On one, the silhouette of an impossibly bodacious female skier performing a knock-kneed snowplow. Bunny ears sprouted from her head. On the other, a male figure in the tuck position -- hunched way forward, knees to chest, butt out. Thin white lines trailed from the baskets of his poles, signifying velocity and reminding Leo, with a pang of unease, of his brother and their imminent rendezvous. He pictured Russ at the bar, grim and surly, scowling up at the clock behind the bar as he nursed a pint and a grievance.

Pushing the second door open, he entered a cruelly fluoresced, heavily tiled environment -- walls as well as floors -- that smelled powerfully of Pinesol and hash smoke. Music had been piped in and Jim Morrison was asserting that people are strange.

Squinting and blinking, he clattered across the white porcelain tiles toward a row of white porcelain sinks. In the strip of mirror above them a ridiculous individual was coming at him. A clownish version of himself with a strange coiffure and a bewildered look on his face, changing now to a wince. His eyes were severely bloodshot, his nose burnt and shockingly red. Big pale sunglass circles round his eyes accented this nasal-ocular inflammation. Glassy black pupils, fully dilated, swam in the middle of the rosy orbs.

Most startling, though -- and clearly the reason for all the hilarity -- was his hair. Soaked in the creek, it had frozen into a Medusan mess. With his Charlie Manson eyes and icy eight-inch dreadlocks he looked like some kind of deranged hyperborean Rastafarian.

The ice was starting to melt now, trickling down the back of his neck. His right eye was twitching, his stomach was knotted, his hands itching with chilblains and trembling worse than ever.

He looked away, down at the sink -- and experienced a moment of overwhelming confusion, unable to recall its function: Ablutions or urination, but which?

Groaning, he reached down and unzipped his fanny pack and fumbled through it till he located his comb; then re-confronted the fool in the mirror and combed ice out of his hair and tied it back and inspected his reflection again. He didn't much like what he saw but nothing more could be done about it. At least the sunburn de-emphasized the monster zit that had been developing below his right nostril the past couple days.

He turned away and stumbled over to the urinals, where a red Magic Marker arrow directed his attention to several deodorant piss-pucks grouped like porous white biscuits in the bottom of the basin. 'Have a mint' suggested the accompanying graffito.

Unzipping, he struggled with the buttons of his longjohns. The object of his fumblings took some searching, having retracted like a nervous mollusc, shrunk to a mere nubbin. He peered down at the American Standard grill covering the drain, noting even as he desecrated it that it did indeed, as his brother once had observed, resemble the seal of the President of the United States, specifically the shield covering the breast of the E pluribus unum eagle.

When he was done he re-zipped and moved back over to the sinks. A condom dispenser was mounted on the outside of an adjoining cubicle. Scrawled across it in red marker: 'This gum tastes bad.' Leo

regarded the message blankly for a moment, then reached for a tap, avoiding the mirror. As he turned the handle, he raised his eyes to where wall met ceiling. In the far corner, below the stereo speaker, the same red scrawl cautioned against eating the yellow snow. The Lizard King was chanting:

'When you're strange
When you're strange
When you're... strange."