

David Shetzline

Country of the Painted Freaks

The first time Avram went over the bar everywhere he looked emerald Pacific Ocean was working, except for the sky—firm above all that motion and the cast of blue he imagined one would see on a television set just before its tubes shattered. Hundreds of feet below the raft on which he squatted with Biggest Ron, lay the continental shelf, another solidness where incredible things scuttled. Avram had already queried the local science center: cabezon and ling, hake, Irish lords, moray, wolf eel, great flat halibut the size of Volkswagens, variations of teeth and stomach enveloped in muscle and fin, all outrageously pigmented. In the middle waters cruised the commoner designs the fish markets consumed: salmon and sole and snappers. But from time to time through the Oregon coast waters the true monsters surfaced: great whales and basking sharks, dolphin and sunfish and sea lions, all passing in their season, rare to landsmen, but respected by each generation of fishermen. On hands and knees Avram followed the sunlight downwards through zillions of plankton where jellyfish wafted and miniscule lives glistened. He was at his very edge, having eaten one of Biggest Ron's smallest orange pills just before they lost control of the raft. Yet looking deep within the surge he felt himself drawn through terror and awe towards the peaceful understanding he could drop himself into that soup and after the initial pain of his bursting chest, sink on forever, disintegrating.

"Trouble with most those town people, they aint got no sense of humor." Ron leaned over, offering sweet ripple wine, the fifth dwarfed in his hand while his tendons bulged against the ocean chop. "Sorry about this rotgut, Av. I shouldn't have packed it along. But now we got it out here..." He showed large white teeth in a wide mouth under a straight nose between two ex-



tremely large brown eyes. Biggest Ron's eyes were much like a deer's with swept eyelashes that often tangled in his shingle of blond hair. He had large,

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thin ears and tied his hair with tuna line in a queue hanging to the small of his back.

Avram was about to sip just to be polite, then realized he did not have to be polite, ever again, to Ron. If indeed they ever came down off of this trip, why for a long time they'd have things very straight between them. Terror gurgled up through his center, blossoming over his face, itching. Ron distorted, limbs lengthening like cudgels, blondness radiating chestnut energy lines in which his wide brown eyes bulged, a Spanish Monk gazing through a Viking mask. Avram felt his teeth exposed to the salty air as his flesh cramped upwards in an acidic grin. Of course, he realized, Ron was slightly mad, the fishermen in town also, all fishermen always had been somewhat mad. Snug little boats—lines all shipeyshape and coppery bottoms drum tight for sailing the salty sea—seldom existed; such were landmen's tales, the sort of treacle mothers fed into the porches of their sons' ears to insure their sons Bought all the possible worlds dull space, and so went dutifully to fill the place behind fathers' dentist chairs. Of course —Avram understood, looking into Ron's wild wet eyes—Ron probably felt They and Us all his life. Walls shifted in his while distances yawned, distances on which thoughts as butter under time horizons raddled with gal-of possibilities. The mystery of danger—the palpable danger in so much of man's work—glowed on Avram's landscape and his muscles stiffened to it. I must, he knew. *I must break my mold.*

Ron withdrew his bottle, staring as if he were about to fall into Avram. "It's sort of a sense of humor, you know? I mean if any those guys had lent us a boat for a percent of clamming... but they're so used to renting them for money...can't see...the shift. The humor." He turned his face at the beaches from which they floated southwest on a driftwood platform woven together by pieces of nylon rope.

They had bobbed along the shores of the bay higher than the gulls above them, paddling at the mud flats to dig clams, when the outgoing tide sucked them over the bar atop the Pacific surge. Now the ropes showed wear and a mile out they could see no boats except tiny dots far to sea or shore. *Full fathom five my father lies. Of his bones are coral made.* Avram felt his mind shutting itself from panic so he looked again where Biggest Ron was studying his bottle, but not as if he was going to throw it away.

"Av, I watched dial jetty going by with us in the rip and I never

even thought of swimming. Shitman, I could have made that swim. Never draught of it I never should mix acid with wine."

"Maybe you just shouldn't take wine out over the bar."

"I been on many trips, Av. Wine's always a friend."

Some of Ron's trips eased through Avram's head: foster homes, reform schools, biking, palling crabpots, taking his woman Jo from an Iron Horseman cycling out of Seatde. Not so untypical, Avram thought. Then most recently, taking in Avram as a boarder. That was not very typical, maybe it explained the ripple wine somehow. For Avram, Ron's most impressive trip was at reform school when they were considering sending him on to the juvenile wing of the state penitentiary. One of the guards said: *They've some big guys up there'll tip up your ass and hide their sausage in it unless you swing on them... They like young stuff. It's switch or swing.* Ron had ripped off a batter knife and spent a full week sharpening its edge. But Jesus Ron, Avram had asked, they weren't bigger than *you*. were they? *Yeah. You see I grew up slow. Didn't put on much weight until after I made up my mind I wasn't going to switch for no one.* Of Ron's feats, that one lodged in Avram's head because he guessed it came closest to Ron as Ron saw himself: a skinny fawn-eyed kid with a weakness for sweet wine. And as long as Avram kept that in mind, they got along well, while the unenlightened could not see past Biggest Ron's bulk and if there was any real violence in them they tended to drive themselves up the wall scheming over what equipment they would need to control him.

Avram's own trips: Tremont Avenue, Bronx High School of Arts and Sciences, Harper College—certainly typical. Yet for Ron—that Avram could have lived such things and then split to the west coast of Oregon—truly remarkable. *Stoned*, Ron had said. *Far stoned out, man.* Ron sensed in Avram everything of the East: its street cunning, technical agility, its quick city way. And Avram recognized Ron from the movies: big, innocent, clean. Together they could make a huge success of something—whatever—and as much as this sent Avram up, its responsibility sometimes profoundly depressed. He was not sure he was ready yet for all that work.

Leaving the East had actually wasted him, the East being, after all, his home country where he could swing among the subways, surfacing here and there at one apartment or another, gathering up scenes like keys on a ring. But then Avram had seen his Purple Elephant Purple Ele-

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phant grinned at Avram, Avram grinned back, and when he came down, he knew he could do just about anything to which he put his mind. Expansion was all And Habit. He would expand his environments and change his habits. Besides, almost all his fends were either going into the Movement or splitting for the country, except for a few like his cousin, who had been a teenage patient at Bellevue and was determined to practice psychiatry. So telling his parents he was off to query graduate schools, Avram hitched the southern route, moving steadily across the first half of the continent and finding that even outside of Manhattan Island there seemed to be two Americas, each with a separate loyalty and language. He saw the war first in New Mexico where Spanish-Americans had turned against the head folk with predictable results: bracero night-riders shot down one in his own living room and raped a number of hippie ladies. A lot of the folk had split—except for the Texans—hog farmers and tree frog people—who sent home for their hunting rifles. The Jesus people remained, of course, digging the apocalyptic vibes. But much hair came off and many rings were eased from holes in noses and ears as many nice young couples backed off into the woodwork after painting their mailboxes battleship grey. Still, Avram might have stayed in that harsh, dry, beautiful country but it was so anciently new worldly he felt it was not, after all, white man's land.

He suffered his first wound in Flagstaff, Arizona, where he was busted for hitchhiking one hundred feet inside city limits, spent three days in jail, was fined every cent of his visible money and had his hair and beard barbered. While he read a Gideon bible, trying very hard to stay mellow, he realized he might not be able to kill the cop who shaved his head and took his money, but neither would he lift his tongue to intercede if one of the brothern or sistern did. That sort of thing he decided to discuss with his cousin, who might understand. Flagstaff depressed him terribly, but he figured it had shown him the face of the enemy and he had good luck: they found neither his invisible money nor the old mangled beer can of New Mexico grass laying up the road from where he hitched. When he came out of the slammer he kicked that old can over the city line and let it lay until he scored a ride, whereupon he scooped it up and rolled a bomber to share with the students who drove through to Los Angeles.

There he saw his first rich folk: leathered acidheads chauffeured in a pre-war Mercedes staff car, sending off show business karma. The rest of the town

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