

I

“Bobby? Cindy? Karen? Randy? ...Sh ... Sheldon?” My kindergarten teacher, Miss Banner, looked around the room that first day. I raised my hand, excited to be acknowledged, but not before registering her struggle, the questioning tone of her voice. “Sheldon?” I had noticed people having difficulty with my name by then, which seemed odd, since it was clear to me at five that it was spelled phonetically, and I expected adults to be able to read. It certainly read easier than Michael, or even Thomas, but somehow it seemed enigmatic, as if I were from a foreign land. Growing up in San Leandro, a bay area suburb, I met no one who could recognize my name as the near lowest rung in the Jewish hierarchy of names, something slightly less nebbish than Myron, or Schlomo, but nowhere near as respectable as Abraham or Isaac, and perhaps that was a good thing. I was not exactly Jewish myself, my mother merely married someone who had been, probably putting her on the outs with her parents for the rest of time. “Sheldon” was, despite various rhyming insults like Sheldon Smelldon, indefinable to my neighborhood children. It had no cultural basis, such as Henry or Charles, which could be grasped and categorized. I enjoyed this sense of rarity, and cultivated it, from that tender age, into a proud sense of uniqueness.

I was a bright child, and my parents read to me often, when they weren't dealing with my older brothers, who also shared in the formation of my talents. The three of us were close as children, despite the gap of six years between us. Ivan and David had followed each other in the biannual spacing of planned parenthood, with plenty of time to themselves before I came along. Yes, I was a mistake, insofar as the universe makes mistakes, the unexpected fusion of sperm and egg in a time abortion pills were the idle dream of a not-so-idle mother. My parents had waited a long time to get married, and even longer to have children. They told me once that they were disturbed by their friends falling in love and rushing into marriage, and found that they were the only ones rational enough to maintain their sensibility. Eventually this led to the decision that they were compatible, and that raising rational children might be its own reward. Perhaps it was in reaction to such rationalism, solidarity amongst the oppressed class, which brought the three of us boys into alignment.

I loved my brothers more than anything in the world, despite their taunts of “Baby of the family,” and continued inference that I had in fact

been adopted. In my infinite trust I was subject to various wounds caused both by their mirthful trickery and my own mistaken expectation that they were looking out for me, but I always forgave them. I'd have done anything for them, to repay them for their guidance, but being so much younger, there wasn't much I could do. On some internal level though, I pledged my life to them, and to upholding their teachings. I followed them as much as our age difference would allow, but there were so many things I couldn't do until I got older. So I watched and listened as they played their pranks, saw them get into trouble, or not, and I learned.

I developed a stronger bond with Ivan, my middle brother, than with Dave, the eldest. When playing street football, my Fred Belitnikoff played slightly harder to secure the win for Ivan's Raiders than my Paul Warfield did for Dave's Dolphins. It wasn't that I didn't love Dave, it was just that Ivan was so—slick. From Ivan I learned how to feign attention, ignorance, remorse, how to lie boldly, how to fake out anyone, (mostly by being a sucker for his gags) and most importantly, how not to get caught. This was an important thing to know, considering the alternative.

My father was a rather sullen man, a powerful, brooding intellect of six feet in a 46 long single breasted, whose behavior toward us was as intimidating as his Hebraic nose was to the general populace. He had a great love for classical music, which was our dinner accompaniment every night. I can still hear the somber tones of Kodaly's cello sonatas whenever I smell spaghetti and garlic bread, and I feel the darkened wood emotional quietude the music brought with it. In '68, about the time I became cognizant, my father was disemployed from his engineering position due to an industrial accident on his shift, for which he was blackballed. It wasn't particularly his fault, and I realized later that his employers were probably looking for an excuse to fire him, due to his tendency to treat everyone like ignorant savages. Not even his elders were immune, for he couldn't stand the idea of anyone doing anything incorrectly, which was, in his view, how most people did everything. When an encyclopedia salesman came to the door one day, my father's desire to provide the world for his children took a turn for the literal, and being unable to afford the books outright, he began a career as an encyclopedia salesman. This gave my father, who had long had considered himself rather intellectual, an immersion into how ignorant people really were. He would come home completely baffled by people's low prioritization of their children's education, and decided that large segments of the populace were simply idiots. Perhaps this made him a less effective encyclopedia salesman than



he could have been, but I respected his air of condescension, and eventually employed my own with glee.

Almost as much as I loved my brothers, I loved those books, which now took prominence in our house. I read the encyclopedia from cover to cover, and the dictionary as well, absorbing everything I could, like Gumby exploring the world page by page. Still, the encyclopedia provided no articles on developing social skills of boyhood, so I relied on my own gregariousness, and my brothers. My father's focus was on our cultural development; classical music, chess, museums, stuff that makes even bright kids feign illness. I guess we just had different ideas of what culture was. The bros taught me how to ride a bicycle, at an age my parents forbade it, one of their peculiar rules being that no child should have a bike before the age of 10. They taught me to spit, to climb a tree, to throw a baseball, a football, a newspaper, a Frisbee. Hell, I can put your eye out with a dirt clod. Most importantly, they taught me how to fight, a skill they knew I'd need, since they had been through the hurly-burly of elementary school already. Implicitly and explicitly, they taught me that fear was the killer, and that I should never back down.

Our father espoused a nonviolent stance, (when he wasn't beating us) but it was certain that actions defying rationality would be punished, if discovered. Discretion was never Dave's strong suit, since he believed, as we were told, that honesty would always protect him. I wasn't a liar, my sense of honesty as a characteristic of self-hood was well formed, but I learned through observation that honesty was no way to avoid my father's wrath. Perhaps I was too young for him to challenge my sense of self, but when it came to confronting my father directly I wisely chose the slippery path of avoidance and denial. This stylistic difference in dealing with our father was apparent early on, when my father caught us all in some anti-rational act, for which we were spanked. I fell upon the idea of screaming as loud as I could after a swat or three, in an effort to burst his eardrum, which proved quite effective. Prancing back to the bedroom, I was soon joined by Ivan, and together we laughed our escape. Dave, on the other hand, felt obliged as the eldest son to challenge the conceptual basis of the need for punishment, as well as our father's ability to dole it out. I remember watching out the window in bewilderment as he attempted to mutely defy the purposelessness of the beating until our father's hand fell off, which never occurred, although it was probably sore by the time Dave was retired to non-sitting. Despite the grudging pride that Dave may have maintained after suffering the loss, it was obviously a no-win situation.

Maybe it was our birthright, as brothers, to go about things so differently. Dave had always been the good child, the quiet child, the martyr. Our parents were so pleased with him that perhaps he was duped into thinking he should please them too. His middle name was Adlai, after Adlai Stevenson, great democratic statesman and presidential hopeful. Another shining light of America's political failure, it was a very liberal thing to name a boy. "Son, I want you to be a brilliant failure!" Thinking Dave was so great, and probably just to bug the McCarthyites, they named their next son Ivan. There is only one adjective that attends Ivan. Terrible! So our parents moved from one self-fulfilling prophecy to another. Ivan always cried, until he was old enough to convert his anger into antisocial behavior. It was pretty clear that I was the unplanned for child, and Ivan told me that I was named (in the Jewish tradition) after an uncle, who had (not in the Jewish tradition) committed suicide. I believed this for most of my life, "Son, if abortion were legal in 1962 you'd have spent your extremely short formative years squirming around in a dumpster." I suppose my prophesized death influenced my early yearning to become one with the universe, but maybe it was just me. (It turns out that Sheldon was my father's best friend from high school. He had become a doctor and mysteriously died of a morphine overdose. No karmic remnants there.)



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“I’m gonna be a jet pilot when I grow up,” my best friend, Jack, stated with clear intention. “What are you gonna be?” Astronaut flashed through my mind, but as exciting as Star Trek was, it was obviously a few hundred years away. Being an astronaut without meeting aliens would be too dull. The standard choices of fireman and policeman seemed far too mundane for me. Adventurous perhaps, but with a dozen years to go before I’d hear Frank Zappa’s, “Help I’m a Rock,” I still couldn’t imagine life in a blue uniform. A highly trained government assassin, that I could see, but really, I didn’t want to be anything. Being me seemed like all I could ask for. I did want to be a star of some kind, a movie star perhaps, but as much as acting appealed to me, I wanted most to live the kind of life that movies were made about.

I imagined myself becoming rich and famous, perhaps leading some secret double life as well, but it was more about doing than being. I figured I’d learn five, maybe seven languages, earn humanities and science degrees, travel the world, see everything I’d ever read about in the encyclopedia, and do whatever needed doing to make my millions. Mostly, I’d have adventure. I’d skydive and scuba dive, mountain climb and spelunk, cliff dive in Acapulco, trek Nepal, climb the pyramids and raft the Amazon. I’d see lava spewing volcanoes, meteor showers, eclipses, tornadoes, ball lightning and the Aurora Borealis, whatever there was to see. I didn’t yet know that I wanted to knock off women like James Bond, or James West, but I knew I wanted to experience life, the highest highs and the deepest depths, and whatever it took to do that, I’d do.

When I was eight years old, I answered an ad in the back of a comic book, and started my first job, selling seeds door to door for the American Seed Company. Young and full of patriotic Horatio Algerism, I took to the streets to provide my neighbors with the best in flowers and vegetables. “Good afternoon Mrs. Johnson,” I’d begin in my high pitched but confident tone, “I see you’ve been growing some Petunias here. I’m selling seeds for the American Seed Company, and I have quite a variety of flowers that could enhance your garden, perhaps Marigolds. I also have lots of vegetables, and if there are any seeds you’d like that I don’t have, I can order them for you.” Despite starting with the average mix of seeds, I was quickly able to parlay my small investment into the more lucrative varieties, by developing a knowledge of my clients’ interests. It was here that I learned the basics of sales, the satisfaction of finding a

need and filling it, and so became an agri-capitalist. I kept certain flowers and veggies for myself, and helped my mom grow them in our garden, which begat another facet of industry I would eventually call into use, but at the time sales looked good to me. Greeting cards, band candy, Mason shoes, you name it—I sold it. It shocks me to think that I must have been emulating my father, but I suppose I was young enough that his distancing behavior hadn't yet dispelled my pride in him. After all, he did teach me the salesman's adage, "Always sell a product that sells itself." Like encyclopedias?

Seed sales lasted a couple seasons, but greeting cards were even more seasonal, and fifth grade found me in a state of penury. I never had an allowance, for the simple fact that there wasn't money for it. I was out walking with a couple friends one day, down by the market, when this little kid walked up.

"You guys want five dollars?" he asks us.

"Suuuuure," we responded, as if there was anything else to say to a goofy five year old. He pulled a five-dollar bill out of his pocket, handed it to us, smiling like he'd made some new friends, and ran back home toward another neighborhood. We were incredulous! Five Dollars! We bought ten candy bars and still had a dollar thirty-five each! After gorging ourselves we split up and each took our loot home with us. The next day at school we discussed the thrilling event and what we might do with our money. A couple hours into the day, the three of us were called into the principal's office. I couldn't imagine what was up. Greg and I were pretty good students and did some extracurricular stuff, so maybe he wanted us to do something special, but Matt wasn't into that. We waited outside until he called us in, one by one.

Mr. Lee was an old Southern gentleman, I had met him many times, occasionally for fighting, but usually for some accolade, since I was a top student. I was surprised to see two police officers in his office. The old venetian blinds were turned down, bringing a closeness to the room. Mr. Lee looked sternly from behind his big oak desk, "Sheldon, these officers came in with a boy and his mother this morning. The boy looked through the class pictures, and identified you, Greg and Matt as having beaten him up and taken five dollars from him. Do you want to tell me what happened?" I was stunned, but I trusted Mr. Lee, and knew I hadn't done anything wrong. I told them exactly what happened, after which Mr. Lee replied in his measured drawl, "Now Sheldon, we know you're lying." How could he say that to me! I knew enough not to get caught doing things kids do, but I had never lied in my life. I was a straight A student! Hadn't



Greg come in and said the exact same thing? I just stood there, flushing with anger, wishing my gaze could burn a hole through Mr. Lee's head. "You obviously beat that boy up and took the money." His mother obviously beat him for giving away her cigarette money, dummy! That was what I wanted to say, but instead I was suspended and sent home to get the dollar thirty-five I had left. Needless to say, my regard for authority took a major hit.

I realized that there was no easy money after that, and followed in the bros' footsteps by getting a paper route when I was 11. It was the San Francisco Chronicle, so I was up every morning at four A.M., and I loved it. I could go anywhere and do anything. I indulged in my share of delinquent behavior, but I was well trained by Ivan, and never got caught. There was something else about the morning though, something free. You could see the stars, and the blackness, and you knew that you were all alone, except for an occasional cat, and that was good. The chill morning air, turning your breath into fog below the street lights, as the flutter fluh fluh fluh pop! of a paper flying in to the porch broke the silence. There was an incredible power there, having the world to myself, and I basked in it. I suppose in some ways I began to crave it, this power of freedom. I had always been pretty independent. Even without my brothers I would go off adventuring in the creek or the fields, building forts and playing war, catching frogs or lizards or mice, staying out too late for whatever time I was supposed to be back. When I was ten I told my mom, because her concern for me wore on her, and that bothered me, "Mom, don't worry about me. Whatever I'm doing, wherever I go, I'll be okay. Just don't worry about me." My sense of invincibility had been clearly established, I just needed somewhere to take it.

Despite not playing an instrument himself, my father had expected each of us to take one up, which led to a somewhat noisy household. At the end of the chain, and needing to make as much noise as possible, I started on trumpet. By this time, the bros were getting a little older, into jazz and rock, so I got to hear a much greater variety than they had at my age. I could feel the power and the presence in that music, and it excited me. Not that classical is without its sensitivity, but even at its most powerful it doesn't exactly wail. We were into wailing. It's a process getting through enough years of band to figure out how music works, but I was definitely committed. I was into being on stage from the first time I got there, in second grade, and music was a direct road. It was different, in that acting or speaking opens you up to guiding a whole room, while music creates an organism that you all become part of. In either case,

there is a point where the definitions get blurred, and you find yourself in the flow of things, taking the audience along with you. The music in movies is amazing like that. It can be some dumb movie that's boring the hell out of you, but the right music can make you feel things that you don't even want to feel. Music is power, a doorway to another world, but it's a power that doesn't come without practice.

I had a driven need to know how these transient powers worked, and I developed a deep interest in esoteric subjects. Perhaps it was from watching all those horror movies on Creature Features and Chateau Noir, but I was intrigued by magic, not just sleight of hand, but real magic. I studied ESP and parapsychology, swamis and fakirs, the Bermuda triangle, aliens, Van Daniken, vampires, lycanthropes. I was prepared to head into a career in parapsychology, providing one could be had, because these things held an unbreakable grip on my consciousness. You see, with my parents religious division, we were raised as atheists. Not that it mattered, but it gave me room to study all these questions of superstition or science without any religious controversy. My mom and I had already been meditating with the Maharishi and his whole TM deal since I was ten, and I really wanted to ascend to some mystical guru state of consciousness, but you know how when you meditate you sometimes get stuck on something? I was at this group meditation, with my mom, in a room full of beaded, bearded, TM guys, and I just kept hearing this song lyric, "I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee," (which, in that space was deliriously funny) and I could not stop laughing. —Now I recognize that finding such humor in one's meditative awareness is probably a sign of enlightenment, but at the time they asked my mom to take me home. Still, I was intent on discovering every way to harness the power of my mind, or expand it.





I used to spend a lot of my free time in the school library, and it was probably sixth grade when the hip librarian let me see the dope paraphernalia kit. It was a big fold out binder, with inset areas for each drug, covered in plastic so no one would steal them. I spent a lot of time with it in the library, inspecting the “roaches” and joints, the dexies, bennies and meth, the “goofballs”—yellowjackets and reds, and of course the burnt spoon and needle. I studied it all, researched it, and bought the government propaganda hook, line and sinker. By seventh grade, when it was actually shown to the general population, I was giving presentations to my class on the dangers of drugs: the chromosome damage, psychological addiction, the smell of burnt leaves, the craving for sweets, not to mention the legal ramifications. Possession, sale, trafficking; two-to-five, five-to-ten, ten years to life in prison, plus fines. I was a hard core anti-drug crusader in the making.

Overcoated figures haunted my imagination; lurking in shadowy alleys, exchanging crumpled cellophane baggies for schoolchildren’s lunch money, but the actual insidious reality of drugs proved no further away than the breakfast table. As America was beginning to wake up to the dangers of coffee and caffeine, my parents decided it would be healthful and economical to quit. I’d never thought of coffee as anything other than the evil bitter black liquid that adults drank every morning, but I became aware, as my parents shuffled disconsolately between coffee substitutes, that they were now incredibly agitated. I remember my father complaining mercilessly about the horrid attributes of Kava, “This damn crap tastes like battery acid!” and grimacing his desire to spit it out. What I couldn’t figure out was why they didn’t just stop drinking it. If they wanted to quit drinking coffee, why didn’t they just stop drinking coffee? It hit me like a ton of bricks, coffee is a drug, and they’re having withdrawal symptoms. My parents are coffee addicts! I watched them very carefully after that, and I vowed, never, to drink coffee.

I came home from school one day and went through Dave’s desk drawer. I don’t know what I was looking for, but it sure wasn’t what I found. A bag of weed! I flipped! I had to tell my folks, who knew what kind of filthy degenerate he was gonna turn into? But they weren’t home yet, so I waited nervously until Ivan showed up. Ivan was the level head of the family, he’d know what to do.

“Ivan, Dave’s got weed in his drawer.”

“What are you talking about,” he says.

“C’mere, I’ll show you.”

“No, you’re supposed to go trim the hedge before mom gets home, hurry up.”

“Okay, but check it out.” So I go outside and trim the hedge, and I come back in to show him. I open Dave’s drawer and there it is, a bag of... pencil shavings???

“Do you mean this?” Ivan asks, inferring that I’m an idiot.

“No way, I swear to God it was weed, why would he put pencil shavings in there?”

“To remind you to stay out of his drawer you stupid little asshole!” Man that freaked me out. I swear it was weed. And Dave was getting to be more of a hippie, too. Going to Cal, wearing that greasy leather headband and shit. Ivan and I were pretty merciless about hassling him, even though he was the oldest. One time I cut off some of my hair and got up early on Saturday morning, while Dave was still asleep. I crept across the room and worked the scissors by his head while dropping hair on his face. He popped up so fast I almost accidentally put his eye out, then he proceeded to blacken mine. That hippie peace shit only went so far.

I guess he had to retaliate somehow, he certainly took enough punishment from my dad. Since the spanking incident Ivan and I had noticed Dave’s pattern of suffering through my dad’s abuse. We just couldn’t understand it. It would have been equally pointless to fight him, yes, but anything was better than simply enduring it. It turned out that my dad was at his worst when he’d take you for a drive and demand that you explain to him why you did whatever it was that was not rational. You never had any idea why you did these things that were driven by a situation, an emotion, an impulse, or a reaction, but Dad would be glowering at you,

“You’re going to tell me why you did this!”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You did it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What do you mean, you guess?” It was hard to be certain of anything in that situation, your head began to feel like a balloon attached to a tiny little body somewhere in the distance. Those interrogations were fucking unbearable. It seemed that my father was worried that any non-rational act on our part would reflect poorly on his stature as a rational man, and that would not be tolerated.



Stealing his most bizarre punishment from an old Star Trek episode, he once took Dave into our room and demanded, "Slap yourself." Dave didn't really respond. So he repeated it. "Slap Yourself!" The first one was pretty weak. "Harder!" he yelled, and Dave's slap made some noise. "Harder!" Dave didn't slap himself as hard as Captain Kirk did, but he wasn't being controlled by aliens, or acting. Ivan and I watched through the keyhole and it was unbearably funny for a moment, the idea, and the fact that Dave would do it, but it got to a depressing sign of what might lie ahead for all of us.

In the summer after sixth grade my buddy from across the street convinced me to cut my typing class and come to his creative writing class because the teacher was so cool. It was the first time I ever cut class, and it probably cost me my secretarial career, but this teacher, Mr. Ching, was unlike any I'd ever had. First of all, he was Chinese, and not much taller than we were, but he carried himself like no one I'd ever met. Some of the kids in class thought they were pretty tough, but he had them worried that he knew kung fu, because he was Chinese. When a kid told him he would bring his gang over to beat him up he said, "That's alright, but you know I always carry my .357." He was totally bullshitting these guys, but he could lie to them so well that you could almost see their brains spinning. The amazing thing about him was that he asked us to talk about whatever we wanted, and to write about it too. We'd go out to the park by the school to sit on the lawn and talk about what was up with us. There on the nervous edge of adolescence we had a free place to talk about school, our parents, whatever. He also expected us to think about things, to look at our reactions, and try to understand what they were based on. He definitely opened some doors for people trying to express themselves, but he also clarified to me just how to examine people's motivations, to know when they were lying, and question why. He got dismissed from his teaching position after a girl told her parents that he had allowed us to talk about sex in class. It wasn't a big problem for him, since he was the principal of an independent school, but it alerted me to the fact that something was fucked up in the general educational system. The first teacher I ever had who spoke to us honestly and intelligently was being terminated. Hmmm. That was about the time that Ivan, who was working as a teacher's aide, found out I had been cutting and told my mom. I was shocked that he'd do such a thing, but maybe he thought Mr. Ching was some kind of weirdo. I guess he thought he was looking out for me.

4

Having survived our family for 20 years, it was no surprise when Dave eagerly moved to Berkeley at the end of that summer. Ivan left soon after, to USC, and in a sense, I was alone for the first time. About a month after Ivan left, Dave asked me if I wanted to go out canoeing at Lake Chabot, cuz he had wanted to talk about a few things. Ivan had been his kid brother for all the years before I came into the picture, and without him around, I guess Dave realized our need for each other. We were having a great day, just paddling around the lake, when Dave says to me,

“You know, I’ve been smoking pot for a few years now, and I thought you should probably know about it.” I just about jumped in the lake.

“Don’t you know what that stuff does to you!”

“Man, that’s all government bullshit, me and Ivan have been smoking pot for years.”

“What! Ivan smokes pot?”

“Oh yeah, we’d smoke-out in the bedroom after you were asleep sometimes.” There I was, a reverse Bill Clinton. I’d been inhaling it without ever trying to smoke it.

“What about that weed I found in your drawer?”

“Oh yeah, good thing Ivan caught you, he went out to the garage and sharpened all our pencils, then filled a bag with it. Fooled you, huh.” I couldn’t believe it. My brothers, dopers! The guys who taught me to ride a bike, play football, crap in a plastic bag and leave it on someone’s porch,

“You guys are smokin dope?”

“Yeah, I’ve been taking LSD too. It’s pretty cool, but you’re a little young for that. If you ever wanna try pot though, we can get high together.”

I knew at the time that some of my classmates were throwing away their lives by smoking weed, but I didn’t have any preparation for my brother’s admission that he was “a filthy dope smoking hippie!” All that time in the same room and I had never known. I was mortified. But I started to think about it. The kids at school who got high were the same assholes I had to fight every year cuz I was too smart. They all smoked pot to be cool. I didn’t really feel like I wanted to be cool, if hanging out with them was cool. But my brothers were smart, and they were hanging out with smart guys and getting high. And weren’t they the one’s who had always told me the real truth about things? I was in a quandary. I had always felt like my life should be some kind of incredible adventure, and this was a scary question. Could weed unlock some part of the mind? With my



background, adventures of the mind seemed like the ones to have, so one Saturday I told my mom I was gonna go visit Dave at Cal.

I took BART out to Berkeley, and got out at the bubble, that landmark of urban architecture. I remember all the vendor carts parked there, selling smoothies or coffee & donuts, back before Odwalla and Starbucks were even a dream. Dave met me there, and we walked back to the co-op where he lived, the infamous Barrington Hall! It was an amazing place, a playground for big kids. All the hallways were painted in murals. So were most of the rooms. Dave took me up to the top floor, the 3rd floor, where we went to his friend's room. He put "Mars Hotel" on the stereo, and got out some Thai weed. He had this poster on his wall of a corner in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where these two streets cross, Nixon and Blumett. They fired up a pipe, passed it to me, and I nervously took my first of a lifetime's worth of hits. I don't think it quite affected me the way I was expecting though. I still felt pretty clear. I wasn't tasting the music or seeing trails, but I had the most curious sensation going back downstairs, like I weighed 300 pounds, and it was kinda cool. Dave and I talked about LSD too, and he promised to take some with me when I turned 21, but that was a long way off. I started making weekend jaunts to Barrington every month or so, smoking pot, and hanging out with Dave and his college buddies. What more could you ask for in seventh grade? I kept it together at home though. I realized I couldn't tell anybody what I was doing. My friends were still completely straight, and the cool kids who smoked dirt weed had me pegged for a narc, which was fine by me. The one decision I made about smoking weed was that if it ever affected my health, I'd quit.

I was still pretty civic minded in those days, so I took on a volunteer position with the rec department that next summer. My weed smoking was limited to occasional excursions to Berkeley, but that was fine. I ended up working at the Watson Elementary School, which was a couple miles from my house, but right next door to the junior high where I took summer school. The rec leader was a woman, which wasn't what I was expecting, but she was cool. Her name was Pam. She had a great sense of humor and a classic old VW Beetle, classic in the sense that it had the original worn powder blue paint and cracking vinyl upholstery. Pam took care of most of the art stuff and games while I kept an eye on the playground sports. Being summer, there were hours and even days that no kids would show up. We'd sit around talking, to the point that we became fairly intimate. Pam wanted to know if I'd had any girlfriends, and took it upon herself to introduce me to the concepts of sex. I was

already leaning toward perversion, having scoped out Matt's dad's porn mags and bought some filthy newspapers on the streets of Berkeley, but I hadn't ever discussed it with a girl. We started with simple question and answer sessions, where she would answer my inquiries, but one day after we left the playground, she suggested we just go sit in the field. She pulled out a copy of "My Secret Garden," a collection of women's sexual fantasies that was popular at the time. Every day after we were done on the playground we would take turns reading those fantasies to each other. It was pretty exciting. We went out for ice cream cones one day and she stopped me when I started eating mine. She suggested that I should practice licking it, as if it were a woman's tit. Fudge Ripple Nipple became a favored flavor, and as usual, I displayed great academic prowess. At the end of summer we had a day trip planned to Chabot Park. I don't think we were trying to vibe the kids out, but none of them signed up, so it became a picnic for the two of us.

It was a weekday, so the parking lot was almost empty, and without even looking we found a site devoid of human company. There was a picnic table in a small clearing where we put our stuff down. We sat on top of the table, the summer sun warming us from above despite the protective ring of forest that secluded us. We were talking about what had transpired over the summer when Pam looked at me intently, "Is there anything you want to do?" I was not so conscious of the physical sensations of lovemaking that I thought about kissing her. I was more directed toward actually seeing the tangible monuments to feminine design which were constantly obscured by garments. At that age my only glimpses of real tit were occasional exposures of my mom as she scuttled toward the bathroom. Pam was twice my age, but she was a far cry from my mother!

"Take off your shirt," I told her, nervously navigating the boundary between asking for a present and taking one that's offered. Her fiesta patterned bikini top prevented my eyes from resting on the objects of my desire, but her well-tanned skin and smile of anticipation emboldened me. I felt her smooth belly while my mind raced through the possible approaches to garment removal, but quickly realized that the nexus of freedom was a knotted string beneath her shoulder blades. I climbed around her on the table, held her arms, grabbed the string with my teeth, and pulled my head away until the knot released with a pop. I worked my way back around, nuzzling her skin until I could lift her top and reveal her breasts. They were fabulous! Although lacking sugar sweetened flavor or chocolate chips, they were a temperature sensitive taste treat, with their own textural gradient, moving from the smooth skin to the bumpy



areola to the ever-hardening nipple. Far from any inanimate training device, they had responses all their own. Sucking on Pam's hardening nipples beat the hell out of any Maraschino cherry I had encountered, which despite its ability to elicit gleeful squeals from children, has no effect like the moaning that Pam was beginning to exhibit.

I savored them for a long time, but eventually, as their largess is only a physiological reminder of other things, I got tired of them. I sat back, to inhale them visually once again, and pride myself on my work. "Is there anything else you want to do?" she asked seductively. A glance at the fringe of thread on her cutoffs, making a white contrast to her tanned thighs, was all the symbolism I needed to realize that she wanted me to fuck her. How many times I've relived that day, trying to wash away the stark terror that struck me at the time, a time at which **I hadn't yet started puberty! Fuuuuuuuck!** World is my oyster and me without a shucking knife! Damn!

As close as we had become, it was still far too embarrassing to tell Pam this, and I could feel her incredulous disappointment when I sheepishly told her "No." She put her top back on, we had our picnic, walked and talked, and my decision was never questioned. Before we left though, she asked me to do her a favor.

"Anything," I told her.

"You're going into junior high now, and I want you to promise me something."

"What's that?"

"Promise me you won't try smoking pot." Of all the things we had talked about and done together that summer, I guess we hadn't talked about pot. How could I keep such a promise? Pam obviously cared about me, and I had certainly had more intimate discourse with her than anyone ever, but that was treading on my secret life with Dave, my brother! Here, in the same park that he had told me that smoking dope was cool, the person who was trying to reveal an equally adult factor in life was telling me that it wasn't. I had to assume that she didn't really know the score, since there was so much misinformation floating around, and she seemed so earnest in her concern for me. I suppose I equated it to mothering, on some level, because it left me with only one choice. I hated to do it, but I lied to her. "No, no, don't worry about me."