

The Degradation and Miraculous Redemption of the Hoodlum Heir

First novelist Seth Morgan is a rich kid ex-con, and he looks like the contradiction in terms that he is: part aristocrat, part thug. He might be a trick picture that reveals different images at different angles. In one light, the face shows balance, poise, refinement; in another, it belongs under the ski mask of a stickup artist.

Morgan sits in the beat-up study of the modest Greek Revival house he owns a half mile from the Mississippi Bridge, in the Garden District of New Orleans; Chopin nocturnes play on the stereo. Seth wears jeans and a Georgia Bulldogs T-shirt that reveals powerful arms zippered with needle scars. He talks nearly nonstop for a few hours about his Orpheus-like descent into hell, then leans back in his shabby swivel chair and sums it all up in a voice both dry and uncompassionate. "I was a very sick guy, if you want to know the truth." Then the voice sweetens a touch. "But it makes good copy."

That it does. Trust-fund baby from Park Avenue. . . heir to the Sapolio-soap fortune of his great-great-grandfather . . . prep-school eject. . . Berkeley drug dealer. . . Janis Joplin's lover. . . junkie. . . armed robber with, by his own rough count, up to 500 hits to his credit. . . parolee with a three-year hitch in a California penitentiary behind him . . . cross-country desperado. It's quite a résumé. And it is probably apt that it should have led him down here to this genteelly seedy city at the bottom of the Mississippi. "This is where Huck Finn ran out of river," he points out. Morgan dragged himself into New Orleans with a friendly prostitute in tow in the winter of 1985. He was strung out on junk, a weary ex-con with no prospects, and he was intent on putting himself out of his misery. "I came to New Orleans to die," he says. Then he amends that: "I wasn't contemplating the straight-out eating of a gun, but a slow, spiritual suicide." He would drink himself to death. "The bars are open seven days a week here. I figured I'd be left alone in a honky-tonk."

Then, in what began as an almost idle gesture but quickly turned into a riveting obsession that surpassed

Seth Morgan was serving five

years to life in Vacaville.

This walk on the wild side may

help make him the Nelson

Algren of his generation

even his craving for drugs and booze, he started to write, to set down some of that "good copy" himself, in a novel. Now, more than two years later, at 41, he has emerged with a flamboyant crime novel called *Homeboy* that has New York publishing circles comparing him to Émile Zola, Ken Kesey and Nelson Algren. Set in a San Francisco netherworld where sex, drugs and violent crime converge (and where

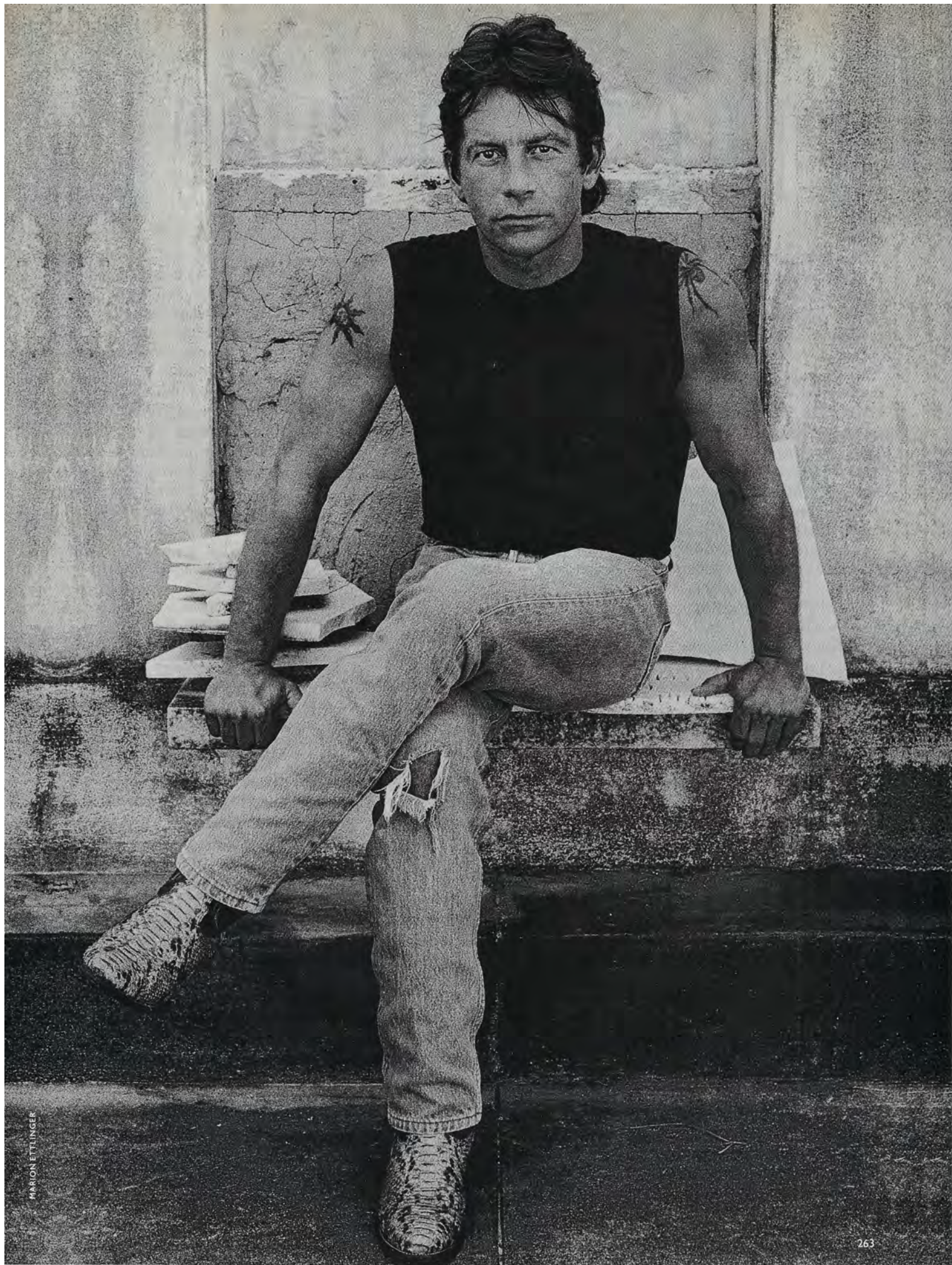
Morgan spent more than a little time), the book is crammed with enough plot twists and colorful Runyon-esque characters to fill a minimalist library. It primarily concerns one Joe Speaker, a strip-joint barker and a thief with a weakness for heroin who acquires the fabled Blue Jager Moon diamond, a hot rock that is much in demand—by the wayward judge who owns it, by the mobsters who stole it from the judge and by the police lieutenant who is trying to send the whole pack of them to jail.

"So much contemporary fiction sounds the same," says Jason Epstein, Morgan's editor and the editorial director of Random House, which is publishing *Homeboy*. "The issues are so personal and narcissistic. But Seth's a real writer. His novel invents an imaginary world out of the real world—just as fiction is supposed to do—and he does it with unusual power, skill and self-assurance."

It was probably inevitable that Morgan would end up a real writer, as long as he stayed out of the morgue. His father, Frederick Morgan, is a poet and the editor of *The Hudson Review*, a New York literary journal. His stepmother, Paula Deitz, is *The Review's* coeditor and a writer as well. Some of Seth's earliest memories are of Allen Tate, Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings and Robert Lowell arguing drunkenly about poetry in the living room.

Seth started out proper. He went to Manhattan's St. Bernard's elementary school and DeRham's dancing school, but then other temptations began to compete for his attention—he started to exhibit a demonic streak that can most (continued on page 300)

By John Sedgwick



SETH MORGAN

(continued from page 262) likely be traced to his mother. Constance Morgan, a beauty, turned alcoholic during her son's early childhood, in the Fifties. She was divorced from Seth's father in 1957, and, despite several trips to sanatoriums to dry out, she finally drank herself to death in 1964.

Perhaps in twisted homage to his mother, in his early teens Seth began to divert from the straight and narrow by snitching whiskey from the family liquor closet. He turned to something a little more fierce while in boarding school at Hotchkiss, where his schoolmates included Edsel Ford and William Scranton Jr. By his account, he became a "gangster," extorting money from the other students and then spending it on booze and \$10-a-shot sex with the townie girls who worked in the cafeteria, an activity that marked the beginnings of a nearly lifelong assault on the female sex. "There has been some confusion in my life about women," he admits. "I have abused them—not physically but in other ways that are worse."

Expelled from Hotchkiss while a sophomore, he was shipped overseas to the American School, a repository for rich misfits in Lugano, Switzerland, where, unrepentant, he took part in the weekly gangbang of a wealthy industrialist's daughter. "She'd take on ten or twelve of us behind a stone wall during the dance on Saturday nights," he recalls. The school nailed Seth as the "mastermind" and bounced him after six months. Finally, as a last resort, his father sent him off to a private school in Guadalajara, Mexico, where Seth then rounded out his education by drinking mescal by the barrel and smoking *mota* by the bale. But Morgan continued to plug away at his conventional studies and did so well on his advanced-placement tests that, despite his wild scholastic career, the University of California, Berkeley, accepted him with sophomore standing.

But Morgan never graduated: This was the Bay Area of the late Sixties, when Haight-Ashbury was Oz, cops were pigs, sex was love and a few tabs of acid were all anyone needed to attain spiritual grace. Morgan took to it all as if he were born to it. To bankroll a drug habit that had by now started to outrun his trust-fund checks, he exploited the disparity in drug prices between the coasts. In his own version of the triangle trade, he would fly California's cheap marijuana to New York City and return with a load of cocaine, which was still considered an exotic powder in San Francisco. He developed an identity for each terminus. In his native New York Morgan went for a Sgt. Pepper look and hung out with Jimi Hendrix and Ike and Tina Turner at the discos of Central Park South. In California he was a biker. He put his hair in a topknot, wore greasy clothes

and rode a panhead Harley-Davidson with the Hell's Angels.

The Hell's Angels led him to Janis Joplin. In 1970, at the end of a return trip from New York, Seth was distressed to discover that his cocaine, which he'd stashed in his cowboy boots, had somehow turned pink en route. There was no way he could sell pink cocaine to any of his regular customers, but a Hell's Angel friend named Blind Alvin knew Joplin's housekeeper and figured Seth could swing a deal with Janis. Her house was in the Marin County town of Larkspur, and it had "great cathedral-tall windows," Morgan remembers. He didn't even notice Joplin at first. Morgan was chatting up the housekeeper when "this crumpled shape" emerged from the couch. Joplin didn't have much interest in the cocaine, but she took a shine to Morgan. They went out for dinner at a Mexican restaurant, had a food fight and things went on from there.

Morgan remembers Joplin as a quiet, rather homely figure, imprisoned inside a rock-and-roll-goddess image. "She liked to read books, and she always was careful to lock the doors before we made love," he says. Morgan had never been a Joplin fan, and she seemed drawn to him for precisely that reason. "She liked my 'Janis who?' attitude," he says. "Plus, we were carnally compatible. The girl had a real fire. And I had a lot of sperm in those years."

There was talk of marriage, and Joplin went as far as calling city hall to inquire about a marriage license. "I was star-fucking, I'll admit it," Morgan says. "I might have been Mr. Joplin." And then, three months after the affair began, Joplin died of a heroin overdose.

The tragedy left Morgan strangely untouched; by then, he had OD'd on death. His brother had killed himself a little over a year before, jumping off the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge during a traffic jam after telling Seth that he'd never felt their dead mother's love. And his pal Jimi Hendrix had flamed out in London at around the same time. When Joplin went, Morgan was too numb to react. "I'd already had some stunning death blows," he says. "Mortality muggings. A string of them. And Janis's death was just one more. My feelings were simply dead."

If anything, he basked in the weird glow of his sudden fame. His name appeared in *Time* magazine and *Rolling Stone*, and he

became, in his words, "the status fuck of Marin County." He took up with a waitress who worked at the Trident, a trendy Sausalito restaurant owned by the manager of the Kingston Trio. Driving his Harley with her on the back one day, Morgan, dead drunk as usual, missed a turn and slammed into a house that, by a quirk, had once belonged to Jack London. The crash left his passenger's face partially paralyzed. He says he married her partly so that she wouldn't sue. The marriage fell apart six months later.

It was around this time that Morgan pretty much lost it. He became a heroin addict and, like the hero of his novel, started working as a barker at the strip joints on Broadway in San Francisco. It was a short step from that to pimping for the strippers who moonlighted in prostitution. Meanwhile, he got involved with a restaurant hostess, married her, then brought her into prostitution and set himself up as her procurer. After her customers had a go at her, he'd make love with her too. "I had a fascination with completely soulless sex," he says coolly. "Sport sex. Pornographic sex. This is an intimate revelation. I got very mixed up sexually. I didn't make love, I fucked. You know what I mean?"

Once the two had slipped over together to the far side of the law, they started to roam rather freely, like some latter-day Bonnie and Clyde. For example, Morgan would leave his wife off at the airport to entice a rich-looking elderly woman with a story of a nice husband who would give them all a ride to town. Then Seth would drive up, and they would take their victim to a lonely exit off the freeway and relieve her of all her money.

And there were impetuous crimes, too. He would roll homosexuals and women, boost cars. He started packing guns, strapping a Browning 9-millimeter on his leg and a Smith and Wesson Airweight on his belt. And he began knocking over local stores—grocery stores, convenience stores, camera stores—with abandon. He'd stride in with a sawed-off shotgun under his raincoat, fire a few rounds into the ceiling to get everyone's attention. Bodies would dive for the floor, and Seth would empty the cash register and the pockets of all the customers. "Armed robbery is a high-percentage crime," he notes. "It happens so fast, no one is a good witness, and nobody wants to get involved."

For him, it was a double high, getting the money to support his \$200-a-day habit but also seeing the fear his gun induced. "I'd go back to my flophouse room and shake out the big sack and go, 'Wow, did they ever give it up!' The power of the gun! They were terrified! Armed robbery—it's a great rush." He terrified many, but he actually hurt only one of his victims, he says:

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SETH MORGAN

During a robbery, one man tried to grapple with Morgan, who stabbed him through the hand, pinning him to the floor.

After almost three years of nearly non-stop crime, his luck ran out when a woman he'd robbed was able to pick him out of a lineup and agreed to testify against him. The cops had him cold on that one case and had strong suspicions that he was behind half a dozen others. By now Morgan had gotten sloppy, returning again and again to the same stores. He did the sensible thing: He pleaded guilty in a pretrial hearing and received a term of five years to life in California's Vacaville prison.

Vacaville was the home of the mass murderers Charles Manson and Ed Kemper and a slew of less-celebrated killers. Morgan learned to recognize a certain freeze-dried look in their eyes. "A heatless light," he calls it. Still, he didn't worry. "Their biggest problems are already taken care of," he says. Morgan remembers Manson as a "harmless idiot" who would send cigarettes to new inmates—via a line of thread transported by a cockroach—just for the pleasure of finding someone to talk to.

In some ways, Vacaville was the best thing that ever happened to Morgan. He notes that Hotchkiss had prepared him well for institutional settings. "I need to be governed," he admits. "Hotchkiss just didn't have enough sanctions. They've got sanctions in the penitentiary—7.5-millimeter sanctions." And in a sense, Vacaville was the perfect graduate writing program for him. It kept him away from drugs, and it gave him time to read and write. He won a PEN prison writing award for his account of the last days of Janis Joplin. He finally began what he terms "an intense and meaningful correspondence" with his father, which marked a turning point in their relationship; it had taken Seth nearly two years to admit to his father where he was. And there was a storytelling tradition in the penitentiary that encouraged his fiction. "Prison is a house of stories," he says. "It's mostly tall-telling stories that suspend truth and falsehood. It's the human spirit at its most inventive, because it is at its most desperate and lonely. You're alone with your cellmate and it's 'Tell me about your wife. Tell me some stories.'"

Of course, prison imposed some constraints one rarely encounters at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. The rules are strict, and for the first time in his life Morgan learned to abide by them. "You don't mess with homosexuals or queens. You don't gamble. You don't borrow money, and you certainly don't lend it, because if the guy can't pay it back, you have to collect. It's an affair of honor. It's either shit on your dick or blood on your blade." Morgan learned to walk tall and keep to himself. "Basically, you do your own time. You

mind your own business. You don't play the hard-rock convict, but you convey the idea that if anyone fucks with you, they'd better be ready to kill you. See? And then you're left alone."

He did well. Because Morgan was obviously bright and had good clerical skills, he was given the sensitive job of keeping track of the guards' hours in the requisite psychology courses and on the rifle range. So it was in his power to grant or deny them a favor. "I controlled them," he says in wonderment. "The animals were running the zoo. It was Kafkaesque." He also conducted a writers' workshop and lectured high-school students on the perils of addiction.

He got out after three years, on a special-circumstances parole. Then he set out on a cross-country spree with a prostitute friend, a whore since her teens. She supported the two of them by turning tricks. They slept in cheap motels, railroad yards, pool halls. He still hadn't kicked his drug habit, but he lacked the money to pay for it. He squeezed the alcohol out of Sterno cans with cheesecloth and learned to take the day's first sip of synthetic wine through a straw so that he didn't break his rattling teeth against the glass.

Finally, he ended up down in New Orleans. He holed up in a tiny apartment—paid for by the trust-fund checks that still

came to him month in, month out—and started writing. Days went by without his talking to anyone except the newspaper vendor at the corner store. "I got a little squirrely," he says. He'd always had an addictive personality; in writing, he'd found a mind alterer more alluring than drugs. "I'm a write-aholic," he declares. "When I'm writing, my life is a fascist state. Everything becomes subordinate to my need to write." After four months, he emerged with an 1,100-page manuscript, which, with Jason Epstein's help, he then spent two years boiling down by more than half.

The writing has been therapeutic. Drugs are finally out, and he has settled down into a rather quiet domestic life with a court clerk named Verna Ann Morel and her 11-year-old daughter, Tanya. A yuppie-come-lately, Morgan is even fixing up his house, and he recently added a lap-swimming pool off the patio in the back. On his trips to see his New York publisher, he stays at the tony University Club. He says he feels like the prodigal son. Stable now, he hopes that the many victims of his crimes will not see his book as a second harvest from his robberies. "I would hope," he says soberly, "these individuals will accept my redemption as an atonement to them for the fear that I am sure I instilled



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SETH MORGAN

in them and I hope still does not abide in them."

Now that the first book is finished, Morgan is working on a second. "I think of it as 'La Traviata in the Big Sleazy,'" he says. It will be a crime novel like the first, on a larger canvas, with as much of the New Orleans local color as he can slather on the page.

As part of his research, he hit the strip joints on Bourbon Street just last night.

When he got back to his car, he discovered that somebody had smashed in the back window with a baseball bat. That somebody might have been himself in his younger, wilder days. What would Morgan have done if he had caught the guy? The answer comes without hesitation: "I'd have shot him." ■

John Sedgwick, the author of three books, is a frequent contributor to GQ.

CHINESE 'RITHMETIC

(continued from page 269) pleasantly shared perhaps his only conviction unattached to a penal-code number: "You want something for nothing, jerk-off."

Cleveland One turned to Cleveland Two. Between the two, a fresh resolve was forged. Goddamnit, they weren't just fifty percenters but U.S. citizens as well, with God-given rights! "You can't just rob us..." "We're getting the police!" "Fuckin' A."

"No you ain't, I am," Bermuda volunteered. She jammed two fingers in her mouth and split the night with a whistle that belonged on a steamboat.

"You callin' the cops?" the Clevelands harmonized in horror.

Bermuda read them the law west of Oakland: "You've been soliciting for prostitution, which carries six months and \$5,000, buttbreaths."

Across the street, Patrolman Daniels was cajoling Hubert into moving his ministry off the Strip, suggesting other neighborhoods equally hungry for the Word, while Hubert likened him to Pharaoh and called down all manner of loathsome plagues on his head. At Bermuda's summons, Daniels abruptly wheeled and nearly fell off the curb. Yet he wasn't so drunk he couldn't read the situation in front of the Blue Note. The Manager gave him all the free bourbon he could guzzle and, if he could still get it up, some Oblivious backbooth skull, just to discourage the likes of these two Clevelands from filing complaints.

This time Daniels's help wouldn't be needed. The Clevelands knew when the deck was stacked against them. Off they grumbled, with Bermuda's vilifications raining on their bowed Dacron backs: "Twistos, weenie wavers, pantie sniffers... Show up again 'n' I'll break yer faces!"

Passing back into the club, she palmed Joe a twenty, his cut of the mурhy, as any

bunco prostitution game was called. The variety Joe and Kitty played was the simplest and most common. When she was too sick to turn a trick, she'd just pick one up, take him to a motel, drop the keys out the bathroom window for Joe. Waiting an appropriate interval for the mark to get naked, he'd bust in and impersonate an undercover vice officer willing to take all the john's cash and valuables to forget the matter.

At that moment, a flatbed truck cruised by the Blue Note. People crowded to the curb, waving their arms, clutching at whatever a gang of blackrobed women were tossing from its rear. A banner strung between the stakes read "SISTERS OF PERPETUAL INDULGENCE, Latex for Safe Sex, Make Love Not Death." But wait, these weren't women but men, bearded mostly, in whorish makeup and nuns' habits with obscene décolletages flashing flabby, hairy titties squeezed in push-up bras. And the foil-wrapped objects they tossed were hardly devotional aids but Ramses-brand prophylactics. The Egyptian trademark seemed a fulfillment of Holy Hubert's biblical maledictions, and, indeed, a handful showered on Officer Daniels's besotted head. What more fitting plague when frogs are scarce, Joe sniggered, than rubbers?

On Joe barked beneath the neon stars and honkytonk moon, promising humiliations to match any guilt. The music throbbed, the neon fried, the lights cartwheeled across waxed hoods and spun in chrome hubcaps. He downed a few more balloons, hustled another dozen rubes into the Blue Note. Intermittently, he dreamed that instead of standing at the center of a blue-neon cloud he was alone in the subaqueous gloom of Steinhart Aquarium, within its soothing liquefactive geometrics, where often he went secretly to rake the ashes of his junked soul.

But now his nose was flowing and skin squirming. The writhing lights needed his eyeballs; his bowels ground like broken glass, making him fart abjectly. He touched his cheek, clammy and unalive. His reprieve from feeling was running out; the Big Hurt was coming home to be fixed once more. ■

*On Joe barked
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