

THE YEAR OF THE



MAD JAG

“I’ll Sleep by the Creek”

A Novel
Based on a True Story

Jonathan Slator

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*This story is dedicated to the memory of Geoffrey King Green
and Martin Tomlinson, and Frank and Paddy Slator, whom
I hope would have forgiven me.*

*In my first thirty years of life
I roamed hundreds and thousands of miles.
Walked by rivers through deep green grass
Entered cities of boiling red dust.
Tried drugs, but couldn't make Immortal;
Read books and wrote poems on history.
Today I'm back at Cold Mountain:
I'll sleep by the creek and purify my ears.*

“Cold Mountain Poems, #12,” by the eighth-century Chinese recluse Han-shan, translated by Gary Snyder

Mad

adj. **1:** disordered in mind; **2 a:** completely unrestrained by reason and judgment, **b:** incapable of being explained or accounted for; **3:** carried away by intense anger; **4:** carried away by enthusiasm or desire; **5:** marked by wild gaiety and merriment; **6:** intensely excited; **7:** marked by intense and often chaotic activity —*Merriam–Webster Dictionary*

Jag

n. (informal) **1:** period of intoxication by drugs or alcohol; **2:** the state of being intoxicated by drugs or alcohol; **3:** a binge, a prolonged period of intoxication. (Late 16th century, origin unknown.) —*Encarta World English Dictionary*

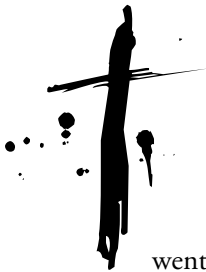
Mad jag

1: Rogue jaguar inhabiting the Mazatzal Wilderness of central Arizona. Most northerly sighting of the largest cat of the Americas. **2:** (cap.) Strain of sinsemilla (seedless cannabis) cultivated in the Mazatzal Wilderness of central Arizona, awarded Best Domestic Sinsemilla by *High Times* magazine, December 1980.

Britt
line



Into
the
Canyon



I



wenty-one years after we rode out that jag, I checked in on Geoff at the QE hospital in Birmingham, that filthy, fabulous nub of our once sceptred isle, as he lay dying. The emphysema had savaged him such that the 210 of his rugby days were now a withered 140, the broad visage now a Dachau mask.

“Eh-up, Stylor, you old sod.” His words rattled from froth-corrupted lungs.

“Eh-up, Geoffrey. How you feeling? You look like dog shite.”

“Count on you to gild the lily.”

“Actually, it’s ‘paint the lily.’”

“Ever the pedant.” He strained to raise himself. I hoisted him by the armpits, flinching at the soggy flaps of skin under the pecs. “Come back from New Mexico to get a grip of my wife again?” he gasped.

“If she’s willing. How’s she look these days?”

“Bollocks.” He groped for his fags on the nightstand, knocking them to the floor.

I picked up the pack, shook one loose, lit it, handed it to him.

“So, you chanced flying even though those loonies just knocked down the moneylenders’ temples in New York?” He locked me with a glare.

“They’ve got enough infidels to kill in Afghanistan right now.”

“Shame you didn’t book a flight on September 11th.” He held my gaze.

He took a long drag; his chest heaved feebly as a bout of coughing wracked him.

“Puffing yourself into an early grave?”

“Doctor says they make no difference. Emphysema is too well set. Basically, I’m fucked. Pretty soon you’ll have Emma all to yourself. Haven’t the strength to get between you two nowadays.” The listless eyes searched out mine. “Ever get the cactus out of your arse?”

The memory of the last night I’d seen him, twenty-one years previous, midwinter ’80, ’81, was vivid yet. I’d just made the long drive to Arizona from Oaxaca, where, in the southern Mexican highlands and in the company of Geoff’s wanton wife, Emma, I’d delivered fifteen thousand cannabis indica seeds to a cabal of Mexican marijuana smugglers and where I’d just got out of a rat’s arse of a Mexican jail and where his wife had left me after a lust-lined odyssey through some of the loveliest coastline on earth. Back in Arizona, I had found Emma at Michèle’s little wooden house in the arroyo outside Jerome, the ramshackle mining town where we’d all lived and loved and fought, and where we’d all changed forever.

“*Jean, Jean, tu arrives trop tard. Geoff vient d’arriver de l’Oregon.*” Michèle had leaped up and down in her excitement. Only the French could take such delight in a *scandale*. How this darling spirit could, twelve years later, drive out to a spit of land above the Verde River, jam a hose in the exhaust, and choke off her life is another story. That night, thrumming with life, she urged us, in scrambled *français*, to flee to Old Mexico, New Mexico, Tahiti (“Oh, those *plages noires*, so wonderful for the making love”) as I glanced up the gulch for headlights.

The headlights came; I walked out to meet them. Geoff slewed

the pickup to a halt and came fast through the cactus-strewn yard.

“Don’t think you’re fucking off with my missus, Stylor,” he barked, and came on hard, swinging wildly, backing me against the porch rail. I ducked under a haymaker and scarpered away. But he crushed me into the hard desert dirt with a kidney-bruising tackle. I twisted to fend off the fists.

“Don’t do this, Geoff, please.” Emma ran from the house.

Geoff, fist high, turned to his wife. We staggered to our feet, chests heaving. “It’s no good, Geoff. I’ve decided,” Emma said. “I’m going with Jem.”

He slumped, spent with the effort of the brawl and the realization of his wife’s infidelity. When Emma turned toward the house, his gaze followed her for a second before he came at me again and I went down under a hail of fists and crashed into a cholla cactus. Yelling with rage and pain, the chunks of cactus swinging from my back, I hurled myself at him and forced him down before Emma ran back to us.

“It took a while to get all the spines out, yeah.” I settled into the bedside chair. “But I had some help.”

“You don’t have to remind me, ya wanker. The missus had a soft spot for you even before you slipped her a length.” Geoff glanced over my shoulder. A doctor approached. The grimness of this dullard’s expression was not lost on Geoff.

“Morning, doctor. Looks like you’ve come to tell me I’ll soon be buying the farm.”

The doctor looked at me. “Good afternoon. Jonathan Parkin, pulmonary specialist for the QE.” No hand was outheld.

“This is Jeremy Stylor, Dr. Parkin. General ne’er-do-well and back-door man,” Geoff said. “You can speak freely in front of him.”

“I’d rather do this in private, Geoffrey,” the doctor pleaded.

“I’ll wait outside.”

“No, Style. I’d sooner have you here. Better you than no one.” He reached for my hand; his was cold, skeletal.

“Very well.” The specialist wrung his pale fingers. “I have to tell you that the disease is too far advanced for us to treat it

further with any expectation of success. The antibiotic is not proving effective. We have advanced the dosage as far as we dare.”

“How long do I have?” Geoff’s hand had the strength and urgency of a frightened child’s.

“Not long, I’m afraid. A week at best.” The doctor, in his mid-forties, younger than both of us, was clearly not inured to this aspect of his duty. He shuffled edgily. “We’re all extremely sorry. We’ve done all we can and you’ve been a model patient, an absolute brick . . .”

“Yeah, yeah.” Geoff’s hand clenched mine. I knew that the flannel from the doc would piss him off at the best of times. “Thanks, doctor, for all you’ve done.”

The doctor, eager to take his cue, fled.

“Where’s Ems?” I said. “Should I get her?”

“She went to have a bath. She’s been here for days. Give her a bell, would you mate? And send the kids in.” He had sunk into the pillows and seemed scrawnier yet.

I scuttled out of the ward to the corridor where Geoff’s kids occupied themselves next to the nurse’s station.

Tessa, sixteen and surly, who would suffer most from her father’s death, threw me a withering glance before turning back to her books. Matthew, a stout twenty, who had his mother’s resilience, looked up at me as I approached.

“I saw the doctor go in,” he said, studying my face. “Is my dad dying?”

There was a snarky edge to his tone; I wondered if his mother had ever mentioned me.

“Your dad would like to see you both.” I avoided his eyes.

“How is he?” Matthew fixed me again.

“You’d better ask him yourself.” I tried to sound conciliatory, but I’d always been hopeless when called upon for sympathy and compassion; it seemed to elicit the antithesis: callousness, indifference.

They grabbed their things and slunk away to the ward. I moved to the pay phone and fumbled the unfamiliar coins into the slot.

While I waited for Emma to pick up, it dawned on me with horror that I was about to speak, for the first time in over two decades, to the woman who had cracked my heart; who had caused me the keenest pleasure, the greatest longing, and the longest agony; and against whom the conversation, the touch of the lips both upper and nether, the laugh and cry of every woman with whom I had had an affair since and any with whom I would, all would be compared, judged, stood against this woman and the profound bliss and deep misery I had experienced through, and after, my affair with her.

“Jem?” Her soft Yorkshire vowels stabbed across the years. “What on earth are you doing there?”

“I came over to check on my mum.” I felt my voice waver. “Thought I’d look in on Geoff.”

“That’s nice of you,” she said, and I searched for but found no trace of sarcasm. “And how is he?”

“Not so good, Emma. The doctor came while I was there.” I heard the snatch of breath. “I think you’d better come.”

“I’ll get dressed,” she said, and the pause that followed was rich. “Don’t leave. I’d love to see you. It’s been a while.”

“Yes, Emma. Twenty-one years.”

“My God. That long?” But I knew she knew.

I prowled the hall while I waited, tempted to flee, unsure where to meet her: just the two of us, here in the corridor, with the nurse glancing at us from her reports, or at the bedside amidst the family tableau, a family I’d almost fucked up before it started, and with my old mate ready to croak. Why in Christ’s name had I come?

If I stayed here in the corridor, could I trust myself not to collapse, a gibbering wreck, at her feet, or worse, to fling myself on her, gasping, ripping her clothes aside as I had in the past, a violation she had not merely condoned but abetted, many times, during our affair, her own urgency palpable. How the fuck were you supposed to reacquaint yourself with the lust of your life?

I opted for the bedside and skulked there like a spare prick at a wedding as Tessa wept and clung to her dad and Matthew rocked, back and forth, in the bedside chair. I prayed that their

mum had aged appallingly and now was as ugly as a box of frogs, eye-bags hanging like a terrier's testicles, a rake of fat warping that once sculpted arse into a slack cellulite sack.

The double doors swung wide and, despite myself, my head whipped round like a hawk's. "Damn you," I heard myself muttering, "damn you." In over twenty years, she hadn't had the decency to gain more than a couple of pounds. That gorgeous ballerina's five foot four, eight stone, was identical to the one that had lain naked before me on many Mexican beaches and Arizona creeksides in that warm winter. Not until she approached the bed did I notice some extra lines on her face and an added puffiness to her neck and cheeks. She hugged me quickly and turned away. Tessa, she, and Geoff were immediately entwined, wracked with sobs.

I crossed the ward to a chair at an empty bedside, where I tried but failed to force a recollection from my mind. As I stared across that hospital ward at the deathbed of my life's best friend, as his family wept in misery for the conclusion of a hideous five-year disease, all that came to mind was this: that the last time I had seen the woman, the wife, the mother, she had led me from the Spirit Room in Jerome, Arizona, to her marital bed. It was early spring 1981 and the husband Geoff was then in the depths of a jagged canyon seventy miles due east of town, tilling an infamous garden for another planting of a famous strain of weed, the incomparable, the mystical, the *High Times* award-winning, the *Newsweek*-featured Mad Jag sinsemilla of Mad Jag Canyon, grown, marketed, and sold at a gob-smacking profit, sweat equity excluded, of about 10,000 percent the previous year by yours truly and the brilliant, crazed Wiz, the original Wizard of the Mogollon Rim.

Emma had led me through the starlit streets and up the stairs her normally stunning figure swollen to a quivering voluptuousness by the onset of her pregnancy with the young man who now self-consciously stroked her shoulders. Oozing libido, as most women do when first pregnant, she had dragged my clothes aside and with those articulate lips honed the steel of a willing old chap and then rode me confidently and urgently,

abandoning herself to ecstasy, clenching my neck so hard in the crook of her arm that I was forced to free myself to avoid choking. As she lifted her chin from my shoulder, I watched rapt as her face contorted in a rictus of lust capped by a last keen of quietus that rang through the silent streets and out over the broad desert valley to the red rock cliffs above Sedona and beyond. I'd always loved the strength of her orgasms, but this one, perhaps heightened by the realization that this was her last time astride me, dwarfed any previous. She toppled as if pole-axed and lay panting beside me, her body arched away, leaving us connected like farmyard dogs until finally, with a delightful queef, she disengaged.

"Jem . . . JEREMY!" Emma's voice snapped me across the ward. "I'm taking the kids home. Geoff wants you to stay with him. Can you hang on for another hour or . . .?"

"Yeah, sure. Of course." I spotted the lines of strain on her brow. The mascara of one eye had run into an LA gangster's tear, the crow's feet fanning from her eye sockets had furrowed—but goddamn, she was still gorgeous. Her strong mouth sought a smile but formed a pout and her turquoise eyes held my gaze again for the first time in twenty-one years. I'd always expected a tense reaction to this moment, but I wasn't prepared for the surge of disquiet and desire, like the after-rush of a close call in traffic with the danger passed and the adrenaline raking your hamstrings. I watched her walk away and try as I might could not stop my stare.

"You're a twat, Style. A randy twat." Geoff's gravel snatched my eyes away from her arse. He hauled himself up from the pillows. "I don't know why we were always such mates, you and I. I know you always thought of me as a Brummy yobbo."

"Which you were. And you had me pegged as a public school pillock."

"Which no fookin' doubt you were. A little alliteration and a bucket of bullshit make a public-school ponce." A ghost of a grin crossed his mouth. "We had some times, though. People always rave about the sixties," he said, "but you know it really kicked off here, in Brum, in England, in the seventies."

“As Lennon said, ‘The sixties were just breakfast time.’”

“Think of the bands we saw in the Brumagham boozers before they hit it big.” His chin came up and I glimpsed through the death mask the old fire. “Band of Joy, who became Led Zepp. ELO. Judas Priest. UB40 in the Hare and Hounds.”

“I remember Chicken Shack in the Arch Club under the railway track in Aston. With Stan Webb and Christine Perfect.”

“I’d rather go blind, boy, than to see you walk away . . .” His attempt at the song trailed off.

“Don’t give up your day job.”

“Bollocks.” He suffered a smirk to cross his face. “And they went on to form Fleetwood Mac.”

“Spencer Davis Group in the Elbow Room,” I remembered.

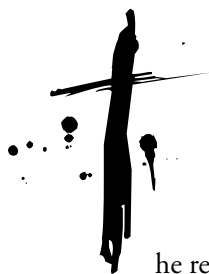
“Aaah, the Elbow Room, what a beltin’ club that was. Christ, did we pull some totty out of that joint, eh mate.” The jaundiced cheeks gained a hint of color. “What about Ozzy Osbourne and Black Sabbath belting it out up in some West Brom pub for a couple of bob. Aye, the Midlands had the fookin’ bands in those days. Now it’s all Manchester or the Smoke.”

He tailed off and welled up, and a tear started across his cheek. I reached for his shoulder and tried to clench it comfortingly. He shrugged me off.

“You know, I tried to forgive you, Style. But I could’na.” He grimaced with the pain of the words. “I know Emma went willingly, but at the time it was you I wanted to kill. I wanted to winkle-pick your goolies into the middle of next week. I wanted to . . .” He began to retch and flung the bile away with the back of his hand and reached toward me, guttering.

“Jesus, Geoff. Nurse! Oh Christ. Doctor,” I yelled over my shoulder as Geoff grabbed my wrists, babbling like a drowning man while his blazing eyes rolled upward.

2



he repetitive shriek of the stall horn in a Cessna cockpit is as welcome as the wail of an alley cat snatching you from deep REM.

“What does that noise mean, Wiz?” I shouted over the drone of the turbo engine.

“It means if it wasn’t me flying we would be auguring in!” The pilot grinned as his hands flickered over the controls, tweaking the pitch of the prop, angling the flaps to slow the plane as we hammered past the canyon walls. “Get that sack out there.”

Squatting in the spot from which we had removed the passenger seat and taking care not to foul the dual-control yoke with my back, I jammed my shoulder against the door and forced it open against the rush of warm Arizona air. The contents of the package, tools and grub for the crew, who were pruning—i.e., trimming—the marijuana buds, were tightly lashed in canvas and rope. I forced the package out on to the wing strut, fighting the slipstream, struggling to hang on to the bag and avoid pitching through the door myself.

“You set, man?” Wiz yelled.

“Set!” I shouted back and tried to reassure myself that, as I was hurtling at treetop height through a remote canyon in the desert mountains of central Arizona to drop supplies into a garden now blooming with over seven hundred mature female marijuana plants, there were few pilots in the world I’d rather have at the controls. With over five thousand logged hours, and god knows how many more left unrecorded flying dubious loads across the borders and deserts and oceans of Central America and the Caribbean, Wiz, my newfound partner, was the guy I wanted in the left seat.

“Hold it . . . hold it . . . okay, GO!”

I loosed my grip and leaned out to watch the bag drop, forgetting that the door, which had been held by the breadth of the bag, was now at the mercy of the slipstream. It slammed into my left temple and fired me across the narrow fuselage into Wiz’s elbow. My shoulder clipped the dual controls and I felt the plane lurch before he flung me back against the flapping door.

“What the fuck!” screamed Wiz, wrestling the plane, his face creased with concentration. “You dipshit. You want us to wreck down here? In our canyon.”

“Terribly sorry.” I tried my best Oxbridge and jammed the door handle down. Craning back as the plane yawed through the narrows and Wiz gunned the turbo to climb us into safe air-space, I caught a glimpse of a tall figure clinging to the branches of the white pine that marked our garden. This was Stilt, Wiz’s partner from the previous crop.

Wiz kept the yoke pulled in and we climbed toward the canyon rim. I looked across at the charming madman who had brought this sea change to my life. Thick lips pursed into a moue of concentration as he peered through the Perspex bubble; the dark mustache and pointed goatee jutting forward; the keen hazel eyes betraying the compassionate nature of perhaps the softest crook to ever grace the trade.

It didn’t seem like less than a year since we’d met in Phoenix, a few days before Christmas 1979, when the only people I knew in the States were Dali and his wife, Fiona.

In '73 I'd flogged seats in a van from England to Greece and the beautiful Fiona and Geoff, then her main squeeze and my main mate, had grabbed the last couple of spots. The van had broken down a couple times before we even made Dover. It took us ten days to reach Athens, by which time the paying passengers were ready to crush my knackers in a vise, Fiona and Geoff had split up for good, he having left the group late one night in Austria on the neighborhood postman's bike. On the volcanic island of Santorini, Fiona had met Dali and a couple of years later they got hitched.

Dali had a lovely adobe house in the oldest section of Phoenix, not far from Camelback Mountain, with a studio in back. Had he realized when I pitched up that winter morning that his house was about to become the major hangout for a stream of overeducated trans-Atlantic yobbos and tarts, he would probably have slammed the door in my grinning boat race. But in keeping with the generosity of his countrymen he threw wide the portal and I moved into the studio.

Dali's paintings, which adorned every wall, were an exuberant concoction of Rousseau, Courbet, Kandinsky, and Hieronymus Bosch elaborated by the influence of early Disney cartoons and heavy metal mags, and tempered with the occasionally sobering touch of Thomas Hart Benton or John James Audubon. The style of his painting and the extravagance of his mustache gave him his moniker.

"This one doesn't seem typical of your style," I suggested one day as we whiled away the hours in the studio. "Is it unfinished?"

"No," he said, grinning at the painting of a rampant jaguar, jaws flared, fangs bared, massive front paws held menacingly. "That's a graphic job I did for the Wizards of the Rim."

"Wizards of what?"

"Wizards of the Rim. The Mogollon Rim."

"Why are they called wizards?"

"They've built a scene around their adventures in the canyons of the Rim, the Carlos Castaneda gig, the growing trip."

"The growing trip?" I asked disingenuously.

"I'm sworn to a code of silence here." He daubed paint

lavishly onto a new canvas. “But what the fuck. You’re getting savvy to the scene. I’ve got a label somewhere. Here.”

The bumper sticker had the jaguar leaping from the left corner. Dominating the right side were the words “Mad Jag” and below, “Wizards of the Rim, Mad Jag Canyon, Arizona.”

“Rather vague,” I said. “What’s their business?”

“They grow sinsemilla.”

“What the hell’s that?”

“Seedless grass. The labels go with each bag. And the Mad Jag is the tits, man, primo.”

“Let’s puff some.”

“I’m fresh out. Tomorrow, though, the Wizards’ll be in town. We’ll be awash in bud. And you’ll be picking your brains off the rooftop.”

Next morning, a couple of characters strolled into the backyard and my life took the path less traveled by.

Stilt stood six seven and a half in his socks. A dentist by profession, laconic, soft-spoken, sharp-witted, and dry-humored, he soon became a favorite of our group of English expats. A head of tightly curled black hair framed the lean cheeks. Full eyebrows arched over lucid green eyes.

At six one, Wiz was dwarfed by comparison. Raven shoulders above a compact waist gave him a classic cowboy profile. Unlike the others, his clothes were pressed: a crisp green T-shirt and pale creases on his jeans, a throwback to his military days. Faced with the delights of the draft and a tour of grunt duty in the jungles of Nam, Wiz had taken the shortcut to a flyboy life through the warrant officer’s option and within six months was flying out of bases near Da Trang. Having fulfilled his obligation to flag and country by savaging the Asian natives from the skies, he’d parlayed the experience into a lucrative if dicey living flying bales of grass across the southern border. A wife and two daughters had put the mockers on the cavalier lifestyle and he was grounded, for the foreseeable future, to a more pastoral illegal existence: growing sinsemilla.

We shook hands and I studied the square face. Slightly flared nostrils gave him the keen, restless look of a man constantly

intent on some pressing scheme. Warm eyes had the purple tint of split juniper and darted among the three of us as we talked. Often he punctuated a comment to one of the party with a brief staccato burst of laughter and then caught another's eye with a mischievous glint. His hair had developed from the close military cut but retained that order. The 'tache was tightly shorn but the goatee had been allowed to flourish and was clipped into a roguish point.

Dali, a lean Dave Crosby at six two and 220, brought a solid third arm to this striking triumvirate. A receding hairline had left a widow's peak and shiny temples; gray-green eyes; a loosely curled afro framed the sun-beaten cheeks.

Often I look back to that warm Phoenix morning and regret accepting the demon weed and Wiz's offer of a partnership a few days later. The grass we smoked in Dali's backyard that December in 1979 was by no means the first taste I'd had of the product of the cannabis plant. But the smoking of hash, ganja, hash oil, and grass in England in the seventies was chiefly a late-night habit. Geoff and I would spend our evenings on a swing through the wine bars, downing a few bottles of plonk and laying the cursory hard word on a few bits of skirt, and then stagger back to the flat to tune in to John Peel, *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, and a five-skinned spliff of baccy and Lebanese. Occasionally we laid our mitts on some Afghani black, laced with white streaks of opium, and would become so fabulously stoned that if Murphy was there with his wisecracks, and fat Eric was up from the Smoke, and we had anything left in the Johnnie Walker bottle, we would get so wound up we risked hernia from laughter.

To smoke some gear straight after breakfast in the blinding Arizona sunlight was a new one on me. But I felt compelled to adhere to the local custom and took a few puffs on the wretched excuse for a joint rolled by the wild-looking Yank next to me. Christ, I had smoked Gauloises streaked with hash oil in Amsterdam, pulled on a chillum behind the blue mosque in Mazar I Sharif, and sampled the kif in Marrakesh. This little twist of dried grass shared between the four of us would barely cop a buzz for a high school jerk. Once the joint was passed, Dali

doused the hot tip in saliva pooled in the curl of his tongue and tucked the roach in the hem of his cap. Then he, Wiz, and Stilt rose, grabbed a football, and trotted across the road to the park.

A few minutes or maybe a few hours later—to this day, I haven't a bloody clue which—a shout from across the street snapped me away from the vitally important study of the dimples on the rind of a grapefruit that I had plucked from Dali's backyard tree. It was then that I realized I had just been introduced to new realm of indulgence. This wasn't the soporific high/low that I later learned came from oxidized cannabis and hash, but a brilliant, coruscating stimulus that called for action.

As I jogged across the street to join the game, all my drug experience convinced me that I could not remain upright for long, that in a couple of strides I would be sprawled in the grass creased with laughter. But the Mad Jag held a further surprise. Far from stumbling to the ground, I felt light on my feet, an illusion no doubt but no less delightful for that. As I made the grassy area of the park, the ball spiralled lazily in my direction from Dali's practiced arm, seeming to hang forever in the harsh desert sunlight. I accelerated under the parabola, deer-swift, goat-sure, arms extended, fingers splayed to cradle the ball, and continued the dream run into the end zone, little pigskin held ostentatiously aloft.

We flung the ball around the park for what might have been a minute or a day. Finally, we abandoned the game and lay in bliss under the shade of the locust trees. I squinted up through the leaves at the fierce, refracted light and tried to make mental notes, but of course it all faded away in slackness, overstimulus, and the terror and the ecstasy, the misery and the brilliance of the following "annus mysticalus," the year of the Mad Jag.

"Whaddaya reckon to this 'erb, Style?" Dali asked.

"Not bad," I said.

"Not bad, he says!" Dali exploded. "Only a damn Limey could come up with such condescending bullshit about the best grass he ever smoked. You know who grew this righteous gear? Why, these two dudes right here. Up in Mad Jag Canyon. Under the Mogollon Rim."

“The Wizards of the Rim,” I said.

“I wish you’d keep our business shit classified.” Wiz glanced across at Dali.

“The man does have a tendency toward a loose tongue.” Stilt chewed thoughtfully on a blade of grass. As the one among us holding the highest academic distinction, he often strove, tongue in cheek, to confirm the fact in Conan Doyle idiom.

“And this year he’s looking for a new partner. Stilt’s been forced into early retirement. That’s the case, eh boys?” Dali peeled a grapefruit.

“Maybe.” Wiz shifted his gaze my way.

“Well, Jeremy Stylor here’s got nothing better to do with his summer,” Dali went on.

“Hang on a mo,” I jumped in. “I’m headed back to London. I’ve got a new contract starting in March.”

“I sincerely doubt the veracity of such a statement.” Stilt stared up into the branches of the locust. “I understand you’re partial to the boons of our part of the world: the climate, the mountains, the young maidens.”

“Not met many maidens,” I quipped, but I knew I was caught.

“He’s a backcountry man. Climber, sailor, traveler. Just the ticket for our game.” Dali handed round grapefruit wedges.

“How ’bout we take a hike in the Superstitions. I’ll show you where the crow roosts,” Wiz said, nodding rather too eagerly. “You can start on the way of the warrior.” I knew little of his Carlos Castaneda influences back then and wondered what the hell he was on about.

In February of the previous year, ’79, Wiz and Stilt had parked at the hot springs in the then unspoilt Verde Valley and set off downstream. After a couple of days’ hard trek, they had turned away from the main drainage and found themselves in the lower reaches of an east–west canyon that showed intermittent water on the maps. Their speculation that the surface water in this canyon would hold up year-round was proven, and it was here that they first encountered the deranged old cat that would leave his stamp on all our lives over the next years.

They had celebrated finding their spot in true Southwestern bohemian style—by imbibing some strong hallucinogens. As they sprawled around the fire chuckling, anthropomorphizing constellations, a nerve-splitting shriek rang out from the crag above them. They had stared into the darkness, jumping in paranoia at the slightest rustle or firefly glow, until exhaustion overcame their terror. No sooner had they bedded down when another roar, this time from the very edge of the clearing, had them scrambling for weapons. Their subsequent study of animal cries convinced them of the presence of an unlikely jaguar in the area, and thus the canyon, the grass, their whole operation got its name.

On a broad ledge above the stream, they prepared a garden and planted seed from the finest grass they'd smoked: a glorious sativa strain from the mountains of Oaxaca. Once they'd got the crop out safely, their success fueled plans for a coup the following year. Stilt, however, faced a not insignificant problem.

The stork-like fellow's wife, the tall, elegant Joan, was a U.S. Forestry Ranger. This held considerable advantages for the wilderness grower: prior knowledge of activity in the backcountry, such as raptor studies, boreal data gathering, and multi-agency busts of dope growers. When Stilt proposed a second year of his weekend trade, his wife welcomed the idea so long as it was accompanied by his signature on the divorce papers. Thus it was that my moons aligned and I alit in the Sonoran Desert in my thirtieth year to fill a job vacancy in the Mad Jag operation.


Over the next few days, I considered Wiz's offer and wrestled nominally with my conscience. The element that gave me most pause was the effect that failure and its consequences would have on my family. My father had worked like an ant on his beloved Devonshire farm. He abhorred even the concept of middlemen: estate agents, brokers, dealers taking a percentage of his hard-earned harvests. What he thought of downright criminals was unprintable. He shared none of his countrymen's love of the "decent rogue."

If I was nabbed, the treatment meted out by local law enforcement would pale in comparison to the slugging and ostracizing I

would receive from him. But time would heal, I reasoned weakly; and we weren't going to get caught, were we?

In the end, the lure of the adventure in this amazing terrain, the chance to make some serious dosh, the arguably harmless euphoria of cannabis, and the pusillanimous thought that I might even be able to convince my dad that I was following his profession outweighed any nagging doubts. A couple of days later, I drove up to Jerome and, over a bevvv in the Spirit Room, pitched in my lot with the Wizards of the Rim.

3



“Cratch me out a line.” Wiz spoke crisply into the microphone as he banked the little plane out over the mesa. “Need something to calm me down after you damn near put us into the canyon wall.”

I grabbed the thick navigation mirror and pulled the coke vial from my jeans pocket. Kneeling on the floor, I balanced the mirror with difficulty as the plane rode a stiffening breeze, and spread out four snowbanks with my clasp knife. I held the mirror up to Wiz’s chin and offered the rolled bill. He hoovered a line into each nostril and snapped his head back as the powder bit.

“How many more bags do we got to drop?”

“Two.”

“Good. I don’t want to be buzzing this canyon much longer or we might get some company out here.”

I snorted my dose from the mirror, savoring the pineapple flavor of the cocaine that had been flown directly from Colombia to the Verde Valley of Arizona only days before and for an ounce

of which we had traded our first pound of the early indica. And as it coursed through me and my heart started to race and sweat began to bead my brow and my spirits rose and dipped with the little plane, I cursed my inability to reject a drug that I'd always swore I would never touch, a drug that would fool and divide and fuck us all by the end of the jag.

We approached the rim and Wiz slid the Cessna over the piñons and down past the basalt cliffs into the upper canyon. I could see where the spring burst from the hard rock of the dry creekbed and from there the sweet water turned the canyon bottom to a lush serpentine copse of sycamores and cottonwoods and brought life to bird and mammal and reptile and provided the source for our wicked, victimless crime.

Our next two runs were uneventful. We climbed out of our canyon toward the little town that stood in the pines at the top of the Mogollon Rim, the huge escarpment that runs from northern Arizona to central New Mexico and hides hundreds of live-stream canyons like ours. We swept out over the shallow head of Mad Jag Canyon (we always called it that and never used its map name, even in private), and my heart took a belt as I saw the plume of dust and the vehicle crashing across the spit of land between our canyon and the next one east.

"Holy shit," said Wiz through the headphones. "What the frig's he doing out here?"

"Who is it?" I stared hard at the gas-guzzling four-by working hard along the bad road.

"The Gila County sheriff. And he seems to be heading somewhere fast."

"Fuck me."

"We better stay away." Wiz wisted the yoke to yaw the Cessna north.

"What in Christ's name is the sheriff doing out here?" I stared at Wiz.

"Who knows, man?" The ploughed-field brow of the seasoned smuggler did little to ease my fears.

"Think he saw us flying out of the canyon?"

"Doubt it. He's too far back on the mesa. Bow season starts

in a couple of days. Probably just making sure nobody's getting a jump on the best bucks."

I could see the truck clearly now, parked, and a large man walking through the junipers, going east toward the rim of the canyon next to ours. He stopped and looked up at the plane. Wiz cursed. The man pressed on and I watched him stand at the rim for a while. I saw him turn and walk back from the edge before he disappeared under the fuselage. Was he going to walk over to the rim of Mad Jag Canyon?

"Jeez, Jem. Pretty spooky seeing ol' Willard out here." His jaw was set.

It was sobering to think that someone of Wiz's vast criminal experience would share my concern.

"Yeah, mate." My stomach churned. "I hear he can be a bit rough on those he gets in custody."

"No shit. Three Hawks and some of his Apache buddies ended up in the Globe lockup once after a drunk. He beat the crap out of them. Three Hawks lost a couple of teeth and one guy got a busted arm."

"Let's make a pass south of the mesa. Make sure he doesn't drive across to Mad Jag Canyon," I said.

"Sounds boring. Got a better idea." The cheeks rose. The goatee, which was that day woven into a Hell's Angel's French braid, darted toward me; the mahogany eye glistened ominously beyond the ostrich-egg headphone.

I sighed into the microphone; only too well did I know of Wiz's antics at the helm of a skiff of the sky. The man loved to fly and, like all wild pilots, loved to have someone alongside him when he had a chance to show his skills, particularly when not burdened by a fuselage full of gage.

With a firm pull on the yoke and a kick of the rudder, he swung the plane into a tight bank over the Verde River. Craning our necks, we were able to spot the sheriff's Blazer over the port wing as it worked up the dirt road along the eastern edge of the mesa.

"Looks like he's heading back toward the highway," Wiz said.
"Excellent. Let's head home then."

“Let’s just give him a goodbye wave.” The grin was terrifying. “Are we okay on fuel?” I tried one last ploy to avoid the inevitable.

Wiz glanced at the instrument panel. “Sweet. Just.”

“Too bad.” I tried to find a way to brace myself between the door and his seat.

In answer, Wiz tilted the yoke forward and we pitched into the great rift to the east of our garden home.

“The Narrows.” Wiz pointed to his left. “A fine place to bid our fat friend a fond farewell.”

I looked across and cursed. The place of my partner’s choosing was a tight ravine formed by a huge volcanic dyke which jutted vertically from the rim and a secondary cliff on the mesa. The dirt road skirted the edge of the abyss before slipping through the constricted throat of the Narrows for maybe a hundred yards.

“What’s the wingspan of a 182?” I asked.

“Thirty-six feet.” He flung the little plane into a tight turn that had me lurching against the door.

“Least you’re strapped into a seat,” I whined as I realized that the slot holding the road, which we had often driven, was appreciably less than the wingspan of a Cessna 182.

The sheriff’s truck clattered along the jeep trail heading inexorably toward the little cleft. Gunning the Lycoming 240 HP power plant to an ear-trembling pitch, Wiz ripped the Cessna up to maximum speed. We flashed into the Narrows and, at the last instant, when it seemed both wings would be clipped by the sides of the ravine, the crazy bastard flung the plane perpendicular to the horizon and we hammered sideways through the tiny canyon, the echoed shriek of the tortured engine and the scream I was unable to restrain abetting the terror.

With all my weight slammed down on the pilot’s shoulder by the plane’s radical attitude, I strained to peer ahead. Just as we seemed to have escaped the confines of the rock walls, our exit was blocked by the sheriff’s Blazer, tires spewing gravel as it skidded to a halt.

“Fuuuuck!” I shrieked and felt Wiz’s triceps harden as he hauled the yoke back and the port wing bisected the gap between

the bonnet of the lawman's truck and the cliff. The wing tip tore through a mesquite bush; the plane lurched. In the instant before the Cessna spiraled into the void, I caught a glimpse of the sheriff's enamel-splintering stare.

"Whoa, baby!" Wiz yelled, wrestling the controls as we pitched headlong into the canyon. I don't have much of a clue what he did in those next few seconds that saved us from a fiery end in the rocks below. At one point, I had the view to the rim and clearly saw the sheriff training binoculars on me. When it seemed we were out of airspace and could not avert a cataclysmic meeting with the canyon floor, I felt the Cessna stabilize into a more or less controlled dive, and we hurtled out over the canopy of sycamores.

"He's got glasses. Think he can read the wing numbers?" I gasped through the spanking surge of adrenaline.

"Doubt it. Anyway, it's Crisp's registration." The goatee turned toward me and the great roaring laugh assailed me through the headphones.

"You're a complete wanker, you know that. A complete and utter wanker." But I couldn't suppress a pursed grin as the laugh reverberated and Wiz guided the plane into the welcome safety of the Verde Valley.

We had borrowed the plane from the most revered of all this coterie of Arizona villains, the reserved and mysterious Crisp. At the back of his house near Cornville, this godfather of the Verde Valley had improved a dirt road into a makeshift landing strip for his turbocharged Cessna. With studied and uncharacteristic restraint, Wiz made a standard approach and touchdown. We taxied to a worn clearing and scrambled from the cockpit.

Two men who represented the opposite ends of the criminal spectrum, Crisp and Norbert, joined us to inspect the damaged wing. As an international smuggler who owned the Cottonwood airport, Crisp was held in high regard by all the villains I'd met during my year in the Southwest. Our relationship was strained at first and guarded at best. He hadn't forged a successful career in his uncertain trade by opening his arms to every wannabe who turned up. But by the end of the year,

having proved myself a competent crook, he warmed to me in his reserved manner.

The other bloke, Nobby, we'd met in the Spirit Room in Jerome one spring evening as we slaked our thirst from the grueling hike out of the canyon. A cultured Swiss traveling through to who knew where, he'd blagged a job behind the bar. As it was Sunday, the Phoenix bikers were in town, many of whom holstered weapons, which, in any Arizona bar back then, had to be handed over. I watched in amusement as they unbuckled Smith and Wessons and Glocks and tossed them across the bar to the Swiss, who caught them cautiously and shelved them.

"Where to next?" I leaned on the bar as he tilted the glass to pour my draft.

"Où souffle le vent."

Maybe the wind can blow in our direction, I thought.

The intense manner of the stocky Swiss with the professorial look had amused us. Glaring at us through pebble-lens specs, he'd told us about his background in the Zurich art world and how he'd come to the West to see "zee vide spaces through new eyes." Within a fortnight we'd signed him up and he had joined us on the hard trek into the canyon.

Crisp shook my hand. He had the rugged face of a good-looking bloke in his early forties who'd been around the block as far as any and farther than most. His skin was pockmarked and leathery, a tad Redfordesque. From the left eye socket to the bottom of his earlobe a livid scar creased his cheek. His eyes had a yellowish cast, a legacy of a tropical illness.

"Steady flight?" he asked as we walked in front of the plane. He stroked the damaged leading edge.

"Bit of a wobble here and there."

"No shit." He and Wiz checked out the buckled wing.

"We'll take care of the repairs," Wiz said.

"We will?" I began my usual banter but added, after Wiz's scolding glance and an even more sobering flick of Crisp's eyes in my direction, "Course we will. Trade or cash?"

"I'll take some of that fine bud of yours. Top colas, yeah?"

"Top colas it is," I replied.

“Vee keep the best vur you, pal,” Nobby said to Crisp without a trace of sycophancy; the two had become unlikely friends and remain so. “Sativa or Kush?”

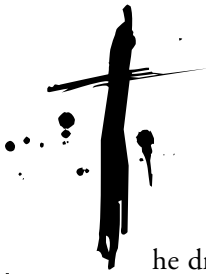
“I could go for some of the Mad Jag for sure.”

“The sweet-smelling sativa for a man ov taste.” Nobby flicked the tip of his nose with his forefinger. “Can we vly zis crate to San Francisco?”

“Sure.” The master smuggler showed his usual brevity. “You guys fix the seats. Wiz, help me get the Leb.”

As Nobby and I finished bolting down the seats the others came back, laid two suitcases on a wing, and flipped the catches. We all gave grunts of admiration at the serried array of kilo bricks of blond Lebanese hash, each embossed with a stamp in Arabic. The cases, along with a satchel containing a couple of pounds of our recently harvested skunk, were stowed in the luggage compartment at the rear of the Cessna. Ten minutes later, Crisp roared the little plane down the dirt track and up into the cobalt Arizona sky, and as we watched the plane I reflected again on the unlikely concoction of our gang of crooks: Wiz, the former military pilot; Stilt, the reluctant dentist; Crisp, the career smuggler; Dali, the eccentric artist; and Nobby, a literate and urbane fop from the sophisticated quarter of Zurich.

4



he drive in the old International Scout back to Jerome was plagued by worries. Why was that fat fart of a sheriff creeping around our canyon on the day we dropped supplies for the final phase? Had he heard the plane and driven out to check? Were we under surveillance? Was a posse combed from multiple agencies waiting for us all to hike in before springing the trap?

As I crossed the Verde River, I span the radio dials and picked up an FM station out of Phoenix. The jock spieled the news.

“National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski today argued against President Carter’s decision to use his brother, Billy Carter, to enlist the help of the Libyan government in securing the release of the Iranian hostages. Fifty-two Americans have been held in captivity for more than three hundred days after Islamic militants seized the US embassy.

“President Carter’s rival in the upcoming presidential election, the GOP nominee Ronald Reagan, took a break from the rigors of campaigning to visit Henry Kissinger at a Virginia

estate. The former Secretary of State denied the talks had anything to do with a job in a Reagan administration.

“A Delta Airlines jet carrying 81 passengers and seven crew was diverted to Cuba last night. This was the third such incident in a week.

“In what is described as ‘the largest one-time seizure in the Western U.S.,’ DEA agents seized twenty tons of marijuana and two boats in San Francisco on Thursday.

“U.S. crude oil supplies reached a record 391.4 million barrels, more than 100 million barrels above the accepted minimum level. The average price of gas in August was \$1.23 a gallon.

“In sports, John McEnroe outlasted Björn Borg in a five-set thriller to retain his U.S. Open crown.”

I shut off the radio and my thoughts returned to a personal conundrum: how the hell was my affair with Molly and the increasingly intolerable tension between Geoff, Emma, and myself going to be resolved?

Our lives had been agonizingly intertwined since 1975. That year, for three thousand quid and change, Geoff and I had bought a two-up-two-down in Moseley, a suburb of Birmingham destined to become trendy. At the end of our road stood the Moseley Arms. One evening we strolled down to said pub for a couple of pints of the landlord’s finest and ran into two girls from the local college. It was my round so I bought the drinks while Geoff homed in on the gorgeous Emma like a rat up a drainpipe and I was left with her charming but plain pal. A couple of months later, I asked Geoff when he was going to put Emma back on the open market so the rest of us could take a crack at her. He replied, pretty testily, that they were going to get married. Geoff, married? Christ, I was appalled. We’d been best mates for years. We shared the house. Who was I to go out on the piss with?

But married they were, with me as a last-minute best man, and Emma moved in. I had the back room upstairs, which adjoined the bathroom. I would lie there at night cuffing a guiltless tumescence to a coughed anticlimax while they gasped their way to satiation. Often on her return trip from the bathroom she would whisper good-night and I would fake sleep. Emma

and I would often spend nights around the coal fire discussing Chaucer, quoting Wilfred Owen or slagging Melville. She was the first and last woman in my life I fell in love with before I shagged. Perhaps it was the strain of leaving their jobs in England, perhaps it was the worry of the project, whatever, something had clouded their marriage since I had encouraged them to come out to the Southwest; and I sensed Emma drifting away from Geoff, and closer to me.

Once I was through the shopping mall and lines of tract homes that passed for the town of Cottonwood and made the turn up the hill, my paranoia, as always, started to ease. Soon the tumble of houses on the mountainside which formed the town of Jerome hove into view.

At the bottom of town, I glanced across at the little tree-house where I had lived for my first spell in Jerome. It was up in those branches that I discovered that the hippie girls of the warm climes of Arizona had the morals of the sluttiest British barmaids but were wonderfully lacking any of that Anglo-Saxon guilt. Unlike their sisters across the pond, they were not content with a wild thrash under the sheets in the darkness but preferred to cast aside their clothes in the bright sunlight. One in particular who helped me rock the paradise trees was Annette; she climbed to the nest with me one spring night and we read from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* before elbowing poetry for more prosaic matters. She joined me several times in the hot spring days to discuss Sufism, solipsism, and Shepherd's Bush, to serve psilocybin mushroom omelets, and to demonstrate consummate oral skills. It was not until I was confronted one afternoon by her husband ordering me into his pickup, one arm stretched back to finger the stock of the racked hunting rifle, that I had the slightest clue she was married, but that's another . . .

Turning the hairpin and driving back along the hillside opened up the view to the Verde Valley laid out two thousand feet below, to the crimson sandstone cliffs of the Mogollon Rim and beyond, floating like a white-sailed schooner in the pellucid sky, the snow-dusted domes of the San Francisco Peaks, sacred

to Hopi and Navajo, skier and snowboarder alike. Up here in Jerome, where the chief of police accepted a couple of top colas from the local growers for his silence every fall, where the mayor wore a ponytail down his back and where the town hovered like a hawk above the maddening crowds of blue-rinse, superannuated dolts choking the gorgeous valley, I felt safe.

My shoulders seemed to lift as I entered the town and some of the old lightness of living returned. The lightness that had swept me and the lads through our twenties, through those roaring years of exciting work and travel and climbs and almost uninterrupted inebriation—that lightness was now tempered by the weight of our project, the celebration of my thirtieth year, and the delight and strain of living with a smart, beautiful, decent, educated, demanding young woman.

I parked and walked to the head of the steps that led down to the house I shared with Molly. I paused as I heard the steady beat of Steel Pulse and leaned over the rail to see her work through her yoga asanas. Watching her pretzel that lithe figure did wonders for my mood.

I trotted down the wooden stairs into the yard—a poor word the Americans use for, in this case, a delightful lawn and flower and veggie terrace that commanded a fabulous view from the bulk of Mingus Mountain to the San Francisco Peaks.

“Welcome home,” she said when she heard me, and held the Cobra, back arched severely, head tilted to touch the soles of her feet, and waited for attention. Deluded by Valentino pretensions, I started below the Adam’s apple and kissed up across the stretched skin to the chin and lingered at her mouth.

“D’you bring me a prezzie?” she asked, switching to the Eagle, balanced on one leg.

“Two,” I said, pulling *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* from the pocket of my backpack.

“I hear that’s a great read.” She slowly unwound and arched into a backward bow, her entire weight resting on her pelvis, legs held high behind her head. “And what’s the second?”

Against her feet I was able to ease the swell at my crotch that the kiss had aroused.

“Ooh, lovely. I’ll get into that as soon as I’ve finished my stretch,” she said, wiggling her toes against me. “Wanna go up to the disco tonight?”

“Sure. Saturday night’s always a good one.”

“Wiz and Peggy are going. And Geoff and Emma said they’d be back from Phoenix.”

“What are they doing in that hellhole?”

“Looking for a truck. And dealing with some visa problems.”

“Really?” I tried to keep a neutral tone. “Are they planning to stay in the States?”

“I haven’t a clue,” she said testily.

I settled into the swing seat in the corner of the garden and watched Molly run through her poses. The bell of black hair shifted across her face as she changed poses. A white halter top clung to her slim, modestly breasted torso. The perfect hips and fine thigh muscles were partially covered by baggy and torn khaki shorts. Aah, beautiful, complicated Molly. Why couldn’t I accept her and her eccentricities, why didn’t I marry her and settle here in Jerome for a spell? Her shop could provide a steady living; all being well I would have a few bucks from the crop; I could attempt to write the great Anglo-American novel; the marriage would solve the residency problem; I had fallen for the American Southwest, its land, its skies, the warmth of people and climate; and, despite claims to the contrary, I knew I wasn’t going back to the sycophantic turmoil of the London TV world. But restlessness still tormented me, and Emma’s shadow passed across my future; in a few hours the die would be cast.

“Jem, honey.” Molly joined me on the bench. “Your friends from England have been here awhile now. Almost a month.”

“Yes, love.”

“Well, I was wondering . . .”

“Yes, darling?” God, that public school upbringing makes such disdainful twats of its products.

“You know things haven’t been quite the same in our house since they moved in.”

“It has been a little crowded.”

“I mean, between you and I. We had such a wonderful summer. Just the two of us hanging out here. Lately you’ve been distant, spaced out.”

“I’ve been a bit preoccupied with the crop.”

“Things just haven’t been copacetic for me. I think it’s time they found their own space.”

I knew she was right. We had put them up for a while. And things had been different. I was distant because I was beginning to fixate on Emma. The last thing I wanted was for her and Geoff to move out.

“You’re right, love,” I said, which wasn’t a lie. “I will talk to them about it tonight,” I said, which was. “It was brilliant being here, just the two of us, these last couple of months.”

“Oh, Jem, thank you. I knew you’d understand.” She turned her face to me and we kissed in the languid fashion she liked to begin a session.

“Do you have any of that brilliant grass-↵ of yours?”

“It’s not even noon,” I said, consciously adopting the American usage.

“It’s not for me as much as you. You know you stay up forever on that stuff.”

The aphrodisiac properties of the Mad Jag were becoming legend in our circle. I slipped a joint from my wallet and we shared a few draws. The foreplay resumed.

“This swing seat is goddamn dangerous for this,” she said, leading me to the hidden niche of the garden between the bougainvillea and the fence above the drop. “I’ve always wanted to do it here. I have the best things in life: sunshine, a view, and a wonderful penis.”

She leaned against the railing and arched her bottom toward me. I reached to the crotch of her shorts and discovered a rip in the seam. Sensing I wanted to get them off, she started to unbuckle them.

“Hang on,” I said. “I’ve got a better idea.” And I grabbed the legs of the shorts and wrenched outward. They gave easily, in a rasping tear.

“You asshole! Those are my favorites.”

“I’ll sew them up.”

“Liar. You know I’ll have . . . Aah.”

Her protests subsided into a moan. Despite the staying power the Mad Jag endowed me with, I was soon moving happily toward a climax. Molly sensed it.

“Be careful,” she gasped. “It’s not safe. The other place.”

“We haven’t got the jelly. It’ll hurt—both of us.”

“Over there,” she said, “Aloe vera. Well known for its emollient and lubricant qualities.”

I reached for the succulent in the pot beside the swing seat, broke off a leaf and handed it to her. She slid a fingernail down its length, scooped a full gob and reached back to gel the head of John Thomas.

“Now you lube me,” Molly said, and offered the splayed leaf. I dug out a generous blob and slid my fingers between her cheeks. She giggled, leaning her shoulders on the fence, and clutched her buttocks. I applied the gel generously and inched forward. Molly let out a squeal of delight as a vulture swept up the canyon on the rising afternoon air and banked near the fence to check out the source of the cries of the oddly melded humans.