

NATURE'S TABLE

Stories and Interviews

By

Jeff Michel

Nature's Table
is
dedicated to
all those who have
been to Nature's Table

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Prologue

I stand in the kitchen as the sun beats down on my head, and stare at Nature's Table. Standing on the very tiles where I worked and played for ten and a half years, I am surrounded by a perfectly beautiful summer day. The building has been knocked down and hauled away.

In the thin air before me is an aluminum prep table. Behind me is the oven. And to its right the holy bread dough mixer - the Univac - the rotating beast Terry and I prayed to on numerous occasions. And the bread of life it created.

This is the back half of the kitchen, where tiles remain on cement. It comes not as a memory. But is as easy to see as the wind in the trees and this gravel lot. Surprised, I look across the kitchen. On the other side of the counter is the restaurant, the piano, and the front door.

I take in a breath. Feeling the tips of my fingers I close my eyes, stretch out my arms, and gather in the distance. People. Oh, but the people! Such things could never be. However, here they are.

Fine Wine

I'm washing dishes when there's a sudden outburst from the backroom. "FINE WINE! FINE WINE!" I giggle into the dishwater.

At the counter Jeff Machota asks, "Two percent, Arthur?"

"Yes, please. I'd like a little coffee with my milk."

Arthur is a regular. Robust, getting on in years, he is a gentleman of the old school: stately, genuine, private, always putting his best foot forward.

Jeff asks, "Anything else for you?"

"No," Arthur says. "That will be fine." He sets his spoon on a napkin. "Better tell Terry to lay off the stuff."

Jeff laughs.

Arthur lifts the cup to his lips. Sipping, he turns away. Jeff asks me, "Jeff, how soon will the soup be ready?"

I pull my head out of the sinks. Drying my hands on my apron, I say, "About twenty minutes, Jeff."

Emerging from the backroom with two bottles of wine in each hand is a deranged man with a twisted grin. It's Terry. He's come to work. Overripe, hair escaping in twenty directions above a bleary face, he raises the wine high overhead. "This wine is so fine." The words are enthusiastically enunciated with a precise and fervent urgency. The phone rings. Terry takes the beloved wine into the backroom. His family must have been up all night, again, with the flu.

Jeff answers the phone, "Nature's Table."

Walking past the combination sandwich making table and reach-in

cooler that Jeff is stocking against the lunch rush, I round the bread rack and spot a thoroughly bewildered deliveryman.

Jeff calls out, "Terry, it's for you."

Handing the deliveryman the bill of sale, Terry pats a bottle. "So fine, so fine." He starts forward with the curious eyes of the deliverer of said wine on his back. The puzzled young man exudes wonder, contemplation and caution: Who is this guy? Is he dangerous? Will he sign the check?

I open the top oven door. As I turn the wheat bread I look over to see Jeff in the doorway of the walk-in cooler. With logs of meat and cheese stacked up to his bearded chin in his left arm and an empty corn syrup bucket hanging from his right hand, he tries to finagle a cardboard box of produce over the rim of the doorsill - which he can't see - with his right foot, while trying to work the glasses dangling at the end of his nose back into place with his right shoulder. His back is thrust forward. He grunts. His chin juts, and discovering his right big toe to under a corner of the box he gives, steady of hip and with good knee control, a deft flip of the ankle, thereby spinning a bent pirouette back into the cooler. He oofs. Carrots, tomatoes, green peppers, and heads of lettuce tumble out of the box and waddle across the floor.

Letting the bucket fall he grabs at the meat and cheese. "Jeff," he tells me, "we're going to need tabouli and the pesto is low."

"Thanks, Jeff." I stop a fast tomato with my foot. "We're also low on hot salsa and I'm making chili. Should be ready about one." I push the tray of bread back into the oven. "You've got enough to last." I rub my nose with my forearm. "I'll get to the

garbanzo spread right before noon." I close the oven door. "You'll have hot wheat bread in about five minutes."

"Okay, Jeff." He lets the logs of meat and cheese roll down his arms and bunch up against the slicer.

Terry steps out of the office.

"That was Guido," he says. "He needs a bass player for tonight. Well," he sings, looking down at the floor, "what have we here?"

We stoop to gather vegetables.

Jeff says, "What about John Pennell?"

Terry replies, "He's playing at the Blind Pig."

I ask, "What about Raphael Garrett or Elliot Torez?"

He replies, "Elliot's got a concert at Krannert and after the other night Guido and Raphael can't be in the same room."

Jeff sets a log of Swiss cheese into the arm of the slicer. He's laughing. "What happened, anyway?" he asks.

Taking off his coat, Terry says, "I don't know. But I don't want blood in the egg salad."

This gets the attention of the deliveryman. He looks at me and there are questions in his eyes. I attempt to assuage the soul with banter.

I smile.

"Welcome," I say.

I smile more broadly.

"I don't believe we've met."

I extend the hand.

"My name is Jeff."

I am courtesy itself.

"Have you just started driving?"

Shifting his feet he draws a hand to the back of his head in a gesture designed and performed to rearrange patience. He looks down at the bill of sale.

"Yeah."

So much for banter. Can't blame the guy. To say Nature's Table is an alternative to hamburger is one thing. But this fellow is a local, and that means he drives to small towns and, in general, finds conservative opinion. He's a truck driver, not a university student. Often there isn't a lot to do in downstate Illinois. Our approach to business and this strange food are probably a natural repellant. He ought to hear the music at night.

Turning on the slicer Jeff pushes the sliding arm, now holding a log of Muenster cheese, across the circular, spinning blade. "It's Guido's birthday today, isn't it?"

I say, "I thought Guido already had a birthday this year."

Terry is firm. "He can have two if he wants to."

An ex junkie, Guido is the eternal hussle. A black American alto sax player, he is vitally drawn to Be-bop, a form of jazz Charlie Parker did a lot to make happen. Without doubt Guido lives the life to the hilt. The word is he's played with nearly everybody, and when Guido's hot nobody can touch his playing. It's magnificent. When he's not he hustles.

B-flat.

Jeff dodges a glob of Muenster cheese as it flies off the slicer blade. He

asks, "Anybody coming down from Chicago?"

"I don't know," Terry says. "Ask Guido."

I check my pots. The chili beans are just starting to fall apart. I stir a rounded tablespoon of ground white pepper into the lentil soup. It needs to simmer. The garbanzos have a long way to go. I need to get rice started and eggplants into the oven. Do I have refried beans for dinner burritos? Pulling open the top oven door I peek at the baking bread . . . a minute or two.

There's a steady din from the walk-in and reach-in coolers and from the freezer. Fluorescent light pervades the kitchen. Everywhere you go there is a new smell. Horace Silver's music quietly fills the restaurant.

Opening the oven door, I start to yell, "Hot wheat bread," when Jeff shouts. I look over.

Arms in front of his face, he back-pedals, defending himself against what appears to be a brilliantly maneuvered attack of Muenster cheese from the slicer. He ducks. A lot of sticky Muenster becomes unglued from the blade and guard. It is violently hurled. In a suspended moment the space around Jeff's head becomes all hair and cheese.

The silver blade keens, whirling.

In the lull Jeff advances to flip off the switch. The blade slows to a stop. Groping for balance Jeff laughs, his response to everything except politics.

Cheese is on the floor. Cheese mingles with his shoelaces. And his clothes. There are bits of cheese in his frizzy black hair. In his beard. There is even cheese behind his glasses.

He shimmies, hips and elbows gyrating. "There's a piece in my navel."

Untying his apron he leans forward so it can hang from his neck. Shoving an arm of his glasses into his mouth he pulls his t-shirt out from his blue jeans and swats at himself.

The deliveryman is reading Terry's shirtfront. The timeworn t-shirt bears the slogan "Eat it Naturally." He is visibly impressed, though mostly his face registers confusion united with the desire for flight. Terry writes then tears out a check. Handing it to him Terry asks if he'd like to take along some nice coffee filters. "How about some of these excellent plastic forks?"

Beside himself, the young driver can only look at Terry - a natural athlete with quick hands and apparently unstable manners.

"No?"

Reaching into the depths of the backroom Terry pulls out a plastic gallon of bleach and presents it to the man.

"It whitens."

The deliveryman says no thanks and Terry says thanks and the young man hurries out the back door banging it behind him.

Looking straight into Terry's eyes, I inquire, "Fine Wine?" He tries to strangle himself.

I take the wheat bread out of the oven and carry it over to the bread rack as Jeff puts a turkey breast on the slicer. He knows how to work. When he's through cleaning and stocking the walk-in cooler it's worthy of a photograph. Everything is in sight. And because he is a good organizer no space is wasted; if you were working you would find

the cooler completely accessible. What's more, he has a nearly inexhaustible amount of energy.

He takes on extra tasks. In short he is an employer's dream come true. Honest, smart, and tireless, he enjoys his work. And he's good with the customers.

He tells Terry, "We'll need ham and salami for tomorrow." I add, "Eggs, too."

As Terry goes around the bread rack three older folks come in the door. I follow him up to the front. He goes to the phone. Relating a story to what must be old friends, or perhaps even family, a woman steps up to the counter. "You shouldn't trust anybody," she says. "Nobody trusts anybody anymore. My neighbor said it was dangerous. But when this young woman and her little baby knocked on my door . . ." She loads on a full supply of life-giving air. " . . . and told me she needed a dry place to feed her baby . . ." She appeals to her friends. "I just said, 'Honey, come on in!'"

Hanging up the phone, Terry comes out of the office to help. We set them up with coffee and tea. Of the group of three two are women. One, quite on in years, guides her big, slow body with a stout wooden cane. Silent, she is completely aware of her surroundings. The man, like the woman telling the tale, is about sixty-five or seventy years of age. His estranged, skittish eyes neither hold nor give light. He also is silent. But he looks confused, defeated, as if his mind was wired to another world, and going terribly fast at that. Under different circumstances he would be a street person.

The woman speaking strikes me as especially strong willed. Dressed simply - no make-up or jewelry, except for a gold wedding band - she brings an honest face to the world. A face that knows suffering and joy. One that is composed.

Terry, always one to bring a little sweetness and light to those rendered human, says, "Our wheat bread has just come out of the oven. Would you like to try some?" he smiles pleasantly. "On the house."

Something completely feminine washes over her features.

"You are very kind," she says. "Thank you." And with the spirit of a thousand year old angel she beams at him, a study in compassion.

Nobody trusts anybody anymore.

Terry goes to the sandwich table and slices several chunks of wheat bread and a few of white. Both kinds are French style loaves, long, good for making gondolettes, our submarine sandwich. It's something we make a lot of around here. He puts butter in a bowl and wax paper on a tray and brings the mid-morning snack to the counter. Thanking Terry again, the woman relating the story brings her smile to her friends. Picking up the tray she says, "But I said, 'Come on in.' My neighbor called later and told me I shouldn't do that. I said, 'She needed to feed her baby!'"

Making their way down the ramp, off the platform in front of the counter, they settle in at a table by the big, black, upright piano.

I make my way back to the cook's station. Jeff slices ham. As I round the bread rack, he says, "Never seen them before."

"And you may never again."

He laughs and pushes meat across the slicer blade.

Terry's in the back room. He's got his big checkbook ledger open across a twenty-five pound bag of pinto beans. Stepping up beside him as he bends to write I put a hand on his thick shoulder.

"Must you scare the wine man?"

He lifts a bottle of wine into the crook of his arm. Caressing it, he leans close. His gaze is nearly dizzy with lack of sleep. And four children.

"You know," he says wagging a finger, "this wine really is fine."

Ancient History

Looking in through the big plate glass window at the Horizon Bookstore on Goodwin Avenue I spy titles. "Better Health Through the I Ching." "A Feminist Guide to the Male Ego." "Animated Film." "Financial Freedom in One Year." "A Biography of Louis Armstrong." It's closed. Lights are on.

The bookstore is one of three storefronts in this older brick building. The middle unit stands long in disuse. On the north end is a place called Nature's Table. Strange name. I walk there.

Since I'm a college student and it's Sunday morning I'm in search of a cup of coffee. Putting my hands up around my eyes I peer inside the windows. The tables and chairs are in tableaux: a quiet, motionless, dim portrait of potential energy. The unlit sign above informs me that this place is a coffeehouse and restaurant. Outside, flyers are tacked up against the autumn wind. They tell of music to come. I go over to see if I recognize anything.

Leaves blow across the sidewalk. Cars roll by. The low, bright sun reflects hard off the wide street. The abominable loneliness. How does one make a life? Go to college and learn how to be the best cashier at the circus? Rounding the corner of the science building a couple, arm in arm, approach me. Laughing, she bounces her head once off his shoulder. Smiling, the guy looks past me.

I'm hollow. A shell any energy can pass through. None of it stays. Nothing stays. I don't have the power to remain empty and I don't know how to get it. I look at the stuff growing in the cracks in the cement. At my shoes. Suicide never seems like such a friend. Jamming my hands into my pockets I make the legs walk.

Walking north from Treno's and a glass of beer I glance at the bookstore. It's after ten o'clock on an agreeable evening. They're closed. I'm out.

Jazz spills out of Nature's Table and onto the street. I check my pockets. Seven dollars and twenty-one cents. A sturdy man in shirtsleeves and blue jeans steps out to survey the night. He acts like the proprietor, with his hands folded behind him, and an apron around his middle. Assured in his movement, he takes in the street, and me, without pretension, and with care not to intrude. Perhaps he's an athlete. He goes inside. My eyes roam over the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, the university's millions dollar monument, rising across the street like a modern brick lie to house a myriad of performance hardly understandable. I'm lost. And I'm sick and tired of it. I walk in to listen.

"Hello," the man in the apron says. "Coming in for the music tonight?"

"I'm thinking about it." We turn to watch the band. Lately I've come to the decision that it doesn't matter what kind of music it is. What matters is that the players of it mean it. I look at a poster by the cover bucket. Mike Kocour at the piano. Dan Anderson on bass. And Jeff Stitely, with his mouth wide open, behind the drums. Bent over the piano, Mike is smiling. Dan works the upright acoustic bass with ease, even serenity. Jeff is not a big guy, but he's all over the drums, though it appears that his jaw hinge is sprung. The music is charged, their communication immediate, their improvisations confident. I don't recognize the music - modern jazz is something I know nothing about - but I know they can play it.

I ask, 'What's the cover?'

"Two dollars."

A nicely dressed couple come in, expectant, happy to be there. I move aside. The woman is taken by the music. Her companion gives the guy in the apron a twenty. He takes it through the tables and chairs, up between wooden railings, over a platform before a counter, and down into the kitchen. Back by the ovens the bartender chats quietly, yet amicably, with a tenor saxophone player as he puts together his horn. He who must be the proprietor comes back with change for the couple. They go in and sit. The place is empty for a Friday night. Some of the faces here are as seasoned as the wood paneling on the walls. Many are enchanted by the sound.

Jazz is elusive. Here and gone it brings the spirit fuel for joy. It provides for thought. And it can make you blue. It all depends upon your point of view.

I'm not sure I have one.

I'd better get down to Murphy's. Somehow within my extended family I can always drink my fill. Murphy's Pub is where we all eventually meet. It's within walking distance.

My studies consist of undergraduate work in science and math, in anthropology and psychology, in drinking and my guitar. I watch my friends. Bruce works at Nature's Table. He said to come on by. Crazy man. I met him a while ago when we were living in the university's dormitories. A little too alive for himself, he used to sit with his legs dangling over four stories of residence hall, playing his flute, in large part due to eternal boredom.

There have been a thousand nights of pinball. Bowling is no longer a sport. My clothes are old and I can't stop thinking.

I try living in a translucent house. A place where, come morning, you never know who would wake up on the living room floor.

I wonder what it is that I am learning.

Pulling closed what I imagine must have once been the screen door to an old farmhouse kitchen, I walk through an empty tomb of a restaurant. Mid afternoon. There's nobody here. I'm hungry.

Bruce sits behind the counter reading "Thus Spake Zarathustra" by Friedrich Nietzsche.

I ask, 'What's good to eat?' He doesn't move. I wait.

Resting the book on his lap, he says, "It's all pretty good food."

"Any recommendations?"

"No," he says. "Try the veggie pie." Charlie's veggie pie.

"Okay."

One of the things about Bruce that has always mystified me is that he can be still and restless at the same time. He gets up and goes around back to a steamer tray.

I ask, "Is Terry hiring?"

"He might be."

Adrenaline coursing through me, feeling distorted and distracted, I walk in for lunch. It's Tuesday. Homemade food smells fill the building. The people here are comfortable. Conversation weaves in with the din from the kitchen. Buying a bowl of soup, I find a seat and pull out a book to wait for an opportunity to talk with Terry. I need a job.

I've been walking around for days now, my head stuffed with nonsense and fear. I graduated and so they had to drop me from the staff at the university's bowling alley. No girlfriend. No prospects. No job. Palms up and into the void.

At least the soup tastes good.

Clearing tables, Terry winds his way through the restaurant, stopping occasionally to chat or give a greeting.

He walks by me. I have to ask. Now.

"Terry, have you got a moment?" Courteously, he stops.

I draw a breath from a place I've never drawn a breath from before. "Are you hiring?"

Shifting his weight he folds his left arm across his middle, raises his right hand to his chin, and says, "Can you come in Thursday?"

"Yes."

"You can serve soups and work your way into the rest."

"That would be great." I breathe out. "Do I need to bring anything?" "Just yourself. Can you be here by eleven?"

"Yes."

He gathers together the remains of a lunch on the table next to us. "Thanks, Terry."

"We'll see you then." He starts back to the kitchen.

My body gets up of its own volition and walks out the door. The street is different.

Kevin Kizer

Kevin plays saxophone. He has enthusiasm. His playing reminds me of Sam Buttera in Louis Prima's band and more so like Johnny Hodges, who played with Duke Ellington. We met with Devon, his eight-year-old son, and Sharon Haworth at the IHOP on Third and Green. The waitress was great, middle-aged and all the way down to earth. Devon was quiet, alternately interested in us and his drawings and toys. Kevin, too, has child-like ways.

He went to music camp in the fall of 1979 and even played a gig at Nature's Table. It had just opened. "I have a tape of it. I played with Lawrence Hobgood, Larry Beers, and Raphael--Rafe Bradford. Actually he couldn't play because the counselors wouldn't let him out. So I had to do a trio. He wasn't commuting to camp so the counselors wouldn't let him do the gig. It was a real drag. So I did it bassless. That was my first gig ever. I remember Joel Spenser was in there laughing at me, too, because I was playing some real corny T. V. themes in my solos."

Forthright about the music, at home on the bandstand, Kevin is one of those rare people who know what they want to do with their lives. He is a musician. And he has pursued it with all his heart. "I was in Champaign ... because I played in the U of I bands in high school. When I was a junior I played in Bill Overton's band, in 1980, the second jazz band. Then in '81 and '82 I played with Garvey. It was a surprise to me." I asked,

"Did you like playing in the big bands?"

"Oh, I loved it. I loved it back then."

One night, playing with the Bob and Jeff show, Bob and I started the second set with Hank Williams' classic "Your Cheating Heart." We had aimed the tune at rock and

roll. Kevin did a bass line on his tenor. Arriving late onstage he played with such a fury we had to gawk. After the set, I asked him, "Man, you sounded like barbed wire." He liked that. "What happened?" Apparently some guy was telling him he shouldn't waste his time on such "simple music."

Growth is important to Kevin. His ways can be at once countrified manners (he grew up on a farm) and existential dismay. He told me that as a child he was given a saxophone and the first night he had it he figured out how to play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" by himself.

He traveled to Korea and played every night for three months at a Westin Hotel. "It was terrible musically. I really wanted to quit music at that point. It was a bar gig. I was making \$875.00 per week. But at what cost. It just trampled my spirit."

K.K.: I discovered how to eat at Nature's Table, because I was eating so much junk. And Terry would show me the way really. I liked the soups. Mushroom barley. If there was any there I could fill up on it. Lentils. That was my big experience at the Table, though, 'cuz Terry would always chide me. And you, too, actually. You'd tell me a lot of the crap I was eating was pretty bad.

J.M.: Part of my job in the universe is to be a butthead.

S.H.: (Laughs).

K.K.: And I really took it to heart and I changed a lot of my diet, around the mid-eighties. Stopped eating beef. Well, I still eat beef a little bit. Cut off a lot of the high fat dairy stuff.

J.M.: That made a difference. .

K.K.: It made a big difference. Lost weight. I was almost tipping two hundred pounds.
Remember that?

J.M.: You're six feet though, aren't you?

K.K.: So maybe you didn't notice it so much. But that was my big experience there. I
always wanted to play there more.

J.M.: You played there quite a bit, didn't you?

K.K.: Did I? Well . . .

J.M.: Some of the bands were playing a couple of times a month and sometimes you'd
be off for a while.

KK: I'd be off. I'd usually get the off nights. The Tuesdays.

J.M.: You played a lot with Doc Scott, didn't you?

K.K.: No that wasn't until later, actually. Actually recent history that I played with him a
bunch. I wanted to be in John's band, but he had some other tenor players with him. They
all thought I was into playing old music. It's a stigma when you have roots.

K.K.: '85-'86 was the best year I had, when I had the organ. The four-tenor band. January
19, 1985. It was bitter cold out. It was the worst cold of the year. Oh, it was crazy. I have
it on tape. Scott Frillman. Jo Major, you remember him? He played in the U of I bands.
And Steve Broad. Remember him; he worked there for a while. Mike Kocour played
organ. We did a lot of organ stuff at that time.

J.M.: What were some of the tunes?

K.K.: Oh . . . "Very Saxy." "Sweet Georgia Brown" changes. That was when I was into
my Gene Ammons phase. And it was a good phase. It was fun. Bob McEntyre played

drums. You remember him? Doctor Bob? The big guy from Bloomington (Illinois). He's still in Bloomington. Crazy drummer. He could play that stuff better than anybody.

J.M.: How would you describe it?

K.K.: Oh. Just organ trio. Gene Ammons. Groove (Holmes). Eddie Davis. Jim Smith. I was really into that. But soon afterwards I started listening to a lot of Coltrane and Wayne Shorter and it was all over. I couldn't hang with that stuff anymore. Terry wanted to bring that band back a bunch of times because I had a good thing going in a commercial sense. But then I thought, I don't want to get stuck playing four-tenor music my whole life. There's so much more to learn, you know.

J.M.: Coltrane's way over my head. I can listen to it, but not understand it.

K.K.: Yeah, well. You can either say he ruined a lot. How can you chase ... I'm still chasing the Trane. How can you top that?

J.M.: I don't know that you can.

K.K.: You can't approach it from that aspect. I started listening to Sam Rivers back then. Joel Petersen.

J.M.: Mike Cerri turned me on to Sam Rivers.

K.K.: Yeah. Yeah. Whoa. Crazy. And then I met Raphael Garrett towards the end of the eighties. Bass player. He's on the Om album with Coltrane. He hung out with Coltrane. Coltrane loved him.

S.H.: We used to go hear Catfish and Carter (an organ trio that played faithful rhythm and blues) a lot.

K.K.: I'd check him out a lot sometimes, go down and have a drink. Who else? I'd come down when you had a show.

J.M.: (Laughs). That may have been a mistake.

S.H.: The Bob and Jeff shows were fun. You and John Lafond.

K.K.: I loved it when Guido assaulted the Brun-ites (Herbert Brun was a composer on staff at the U of I) one night. I was in the kitchen rapping with you, I think.

People were coming back into the kitchen telling people to be quiet. I know; I was washing dishes. Terry took pity on me a few times and gave me some work. (Puts on Guido voice): "Ya'all want to be unhappy. I come down here and I want to be happy." So he goes and turns on music right in the middle of the show. And it was true, you know. These people were really like. . . You couldn't even breathe in the kitchen and somebody would come back and yell at you, you know.

They really took themselves seriously. And they still do, I'm sure. But I thought it was interesting, what they were doing, but Guido came in and "Ya'all want to be . . ."

Well, they were pretty enraged, I think. They do. They really take themselves seriously. There's a certain threshold of seriousness where you can go too far with it. That's where they were at with their gig: this here telling everybody to shut up. They probably told Guido to shut up. That's why he got mad. "What are you talking about? This is a club." He was like, "This is a club." So he came in there. But then finally it settled down and the show got going again. Probably gave Guido an Old Style. J.M.: (Laughs). They were doing like theater - poetry and theater.

K.K.: Poetry and theater. They were ... I would go down and listen to a lot of that. They intrigued me. Or if Helgesen was playing, I'd go down and play with him a lot, or sit in. So I liked Jeff's band back then.

J.M.: You got to play with Danny (Deckard) quite a bit, too, didn't you?

K.K.: Um hmm. And Kevin Engels. They were my band for a long time until I started importing some guys from Chicago. Because I wanted something differently. And then I met Raphael. He moved down here. He was on his last legs, but I got him in there a bunch of times that summer of '89. And he just showed me a different direction to go. I didn't know a lot of tunes. I had pretty much been playing standards. But the treatment of the material . . . I was wanting to go freer. And he showed me that, yeah, that could be done. That some of the things I was hearing wasn't that weird. He could hear what I was playing easily.

I couldn't always hear what he was playing, but he showed me that there was another plateau to go, man. And he ruffled a lot of feathers, too, because he would challenge musicians that were here and say, "Look, man. This is old stuff. It's already been done." He wanted to push that threshold even. People didn't want to go with it. But I did. That's always the way I've been through.

J.M.: That was a good thing for Terry though - because Terry would always let everybody run an experiment up there.

K.K.: He would, man. He never interfered with what was happening. Of course when he had Dave Liebman there, or some hot cat - he would import these great players. Or Jack McDuff. I remember those gigs, man. I wanted to pop up there and play so bad, man. And I wouldn't but ... One time he had some cats from New York come by ... but they let me sit in with them. It was the only group. . .

Waitress: Let's see. You ordered two eggs, toast, and hash browns.

J.M.: That's right.

W.: What did you order? Two eggs ...

K.K.: Same thing.

S.H.: Easy to keep it straight there.

W.: A good thing you ordered something different. That's too boring for me. Do you want some ketchup for your fries? Ketchup, and I'll have the change and the milk. I'll be just a minute.

J.M.: Thank you.

K.K.: But, yeah, Terry wouldn't interfere.

S.H.: Napkins?

K.K.: It's an impossible job to keep everybody happy, but he probably came as close as any club owner that I've known. I think he would be good at running a place in the big city.

W.: Okay. Can you do me a big favor here?

J.M.: I can try.

W.: Can you take these and the water cups? We're almost out.

J. M.: Can I do what, please?

W.: Take it easy on the water or we're going to have to go and get it out of the Boneyard (Creek) if you drink too much.

S.H.: Do you milk the cow?

W.: (Goes).

K.K.: But anyway, yeah. It's too bad Terry couldn't run ... There hasn't been anybody else that could make a club work, I don't think. There hasn't been anybody that's wanted to

stick to with it. Like Zorba's. They canceled music and had so much response from the audience that they brought it back.

K.K.: I liked John McNeil when he was there. Oh, man, he was something else and you never heard about him. He was awesome. I think he came with Rufus Reed. No, Todd Kulman, bass player. That's right. And Dewar would play there a lot. I used to like that.

W.: There you go. I got the cow all milked now. So if you need anything else feel free to ... (Laughs).

K.K.: Thank you.

W.: Got everything you need, for a minute?

J.M.: We're doing good. (She goes). I want her to come to my house. I want her to serve me eggs in the morning.

K.K.: Get you started.

J.M.: That's right. She's perfect.

K.K.: The Bob and Jeff shows were special for me.

J.M.: We used to try and get you to do them, if you had the time.

K.K.: And I would do them at the drop of a hat. And I'm still sort of that way. . . I grow tired of the jazz musician's attitude of "If you're not this than you're nothing." It's a lot of what you run into. I'm encountering that a lot in Chicago to a great extent and that's why I'm doubtful about hooking up with the musicians I think are great. It seems they have attitudes you can't get beyond. Whereas I wasn't into that. The spirituality thing that's lacking. It's such a competitive ... And it is hard to play the music really well. You've got to concentrate. You've got to be focused. You can't have a lot of extraneous things going on in your head except for the music. But, uh, spiritually I was finding the music to be

flat. And playing with you I kind of broke loose and did what I wanted. It was a rough time for me back then.

J.M.: The Bob and Jeff show was just meant to kick people in the pants.

K.K.: It was cool. Yeah. It was funny. It was just out there.

J.M.: It didn't really make any sense to us, so ...

K.K.: Yeah. Right. And I liked that about that, you know. Getting it across to people that it doesn't have to make any sense to enjoy it.

J.M.: What were the people like over there? (Korea)

K.K.: Oh, very nice. Very naive and very conformist. The culture itself is very ... Everybody thinks the same. It's very traditional. There's a lot of good things about that. But as far as free thinking goes it's not really encouraged. I mean, you think it's bad over here, but people have much more freedom of thought here in the states than they did in the east. But I loved it. I still loved the people. They're real nice, real beautiful people. Very mannered, very sweet.

They really could have used a place like Nature's Table over there, boy. I'm sure the people would have flocked to it.

J.M.: What kind of impact do you think Nature's Table had on the community?

K.K.: Well. That was a place where every artist, whether you were a poet, painter, sculptor- I mean there were always art exhibits there. There was always music there. Musicians hung out there. It was the place for ... It was a watering hole. You could go in and sit there in the afternoon and sit down and have a conversation and sit there till six.

You could go in at three and not leave until six because you'd run into somebody that's on your wavelength, you know. Everybody hung out there. That was the impact if you were lonely. . . God I don't know how many times I went down there in the afternoon, where you'd be hanging out, or Bob. I'd see somebody there and I could just sit and drink Coke or coffee, have a place to go, you know. When it closed up I was pretty much ... I was devastated.

J.M.: Where have all the musicians gone to?

K.K.: Probably Chicago. Or, like, a lot of them got different gigs so they could make money, start families.

I'd say Zorba's is about the closest place. But it still wasn't the kind of place ... Sometimes I'd show up at six in the morning when you were opening. I'd be like, I couldn't sleep. Go, Hey, man.

I just had a tough time of it, but I could always go down to the Table. I could just stand around and not say a word. I liked to perch myself up at the bar and just listen to people talk, 'cuz I needed it. That's why I would show up at six in the morning, because I'd be up all night. Bleh-eh-eh-eh.

J.M.: One night Scott Frillman showed up at my house at five-thirty in the morning. He was on a tear that night and decided he wanted to go to Nature's Table with me. So we hung around all morning long. (Laughs).

K.K.: Yeah, man. So that was really special. I never felt unwelcome there. And I don't think anybody did that went in there. Guido lived there.

J.M.: That's right.

K.K.: A place for him to hang out.

W.: How ya doin' here? Everything all right?

J.M.: It's perfect.

W.: I'm glad to see you taking it easy on the water. You took my advice to heart. (She goes).

J.M.: Yep. She perfect.

K.K.: Well, you know, the Table's never going to ... It's one of those flukes. And it happened for over a decade, which was a blessing.

Don Heitler

Donny plays piano. He probably knows thousands and thousands of tunes. The last c.d., record, or tape on his stereo: Chick Corea doing Bud Powell.

There's a force and a dignity about the man. He has "very poor eyesight." Born in Pekin, Illinois, Donny started at the University of Illinois in the latter fifties. He studied with Stanley Fletcher, earned two music degrees and a masters in guidance.

He worked with a lot of the early musicians at Nature's Table and many of the musicians throughout its tenure. For instance: "Ron Dewar- I'm not naming these in preference - with two of my favorites: bassist Kelly Sill, drummer Joel Spencer. Eric Schnieder. I played with Ray Suzaki there. Morgan Powell. We were doing basically standards and jazz tunes. Dan Anderson I played with there. Jeff Stitely. Bill French. Guido Sinclair ... Everybody did - played with him - I think."

As a young man he landed in court before a Judge Stillman due to his "driving escapades." He couldn't get a driver's license. "I got fined five dollars ... That didn't even cover the light bill ... Now in this day and age. . ."

Donny looks for the best in people. He has a matter-of-fact approach to life. Cheerful, his speech is eloquent, his voice melodious. D.H.: I heard Lawrence (Hobgood) there. He's developed nicely. I heard Joan Hickey play there. John Campbell. Bassist Rufus Reed with Rob Schiederman playing piano.

The Table was a wonderful experience, whether you were there as a player or just to listen to music. . . to enjoy the company. It was a wonderful place for the community. I was very sad to see it torn down. Progress, right.

They offered music every night. It's like any place. You get a hardcore following - I do believe that. You've probably noticed that. And I know people in the community who should have gone to the Table, and didn't, because the Table and what it offered was not only a wonderful experience - but if you were serious about music on many occasions you could learn from most of the people who were playing there. And the freedom of the atmosphere that was provided by the Masars, Terry and Shelley, was such that any sense of creativity was encouraged and not discouraged. So I think any time you kind of have a format like that for any community, regardless it's size, particularly a community that is supposed to be enlightened, the Table has an important niche to fill - and I think it filled it beautifully and since its demise, if I may, maybe hasn't been filled to the degree we knew it as and would like to have fulfilled in another spot.

There was a unique quality about the Table. But I think it had ... I think most who were lovers of music - especially jazz music - knew about the Table, and I'd like to think a lot of them came out. I do reiterate that probably there was a hardcore . . . whether it was geographically induced, you know, convenience, or whatever. . . Part of it. And I think a lot of people who ought to have been there for a lot of events just said, 'Well, we'll do it next time they come to town.' I mean, I think we all ... That's human nature.

J.M.: What did you think of that piano?

D.H.: Great. A lot of good piano players have played that piano. A lot of good piano players. It's a wonderful piano. Beautiful upright piano and they used to open it up and it would just sing. It would do ... It was wonderful. It felt very comfortable. The action was great. And Terry kept it up.

J.M.: Did you enjoy the food at Nature's Table, too?

J.M.: Oh, yeah. I made most of it. (Laughs). That's another one of my favorite questions to ask people. What was one of your favorite things to eat there?

D.H.: Um - Gondolettes. Love it.

J.M.: How about the room itself? Was it easy to play? Was it too big or too small? Did it have good sound?

D.H.: Oh, I think it was just fine. It was comfortable. Nature's Table. There were no pretenses there. And I hope people who prefer more pretense, and yet a love for music, wouldn't avoid a place like that.

I've played all of them. They're all right. They're okay. There's only one Nature's Table. Did you ever see Guido with kids? Kids loved him. There was a kind of a ... I don't know. He could tell a kid to do anything and he'd do it.

I always thought Guido should have a Saturday morning show. Uncle Guido. Oh, he could be like an Uncle Guido Mr. Rodgers. Only with a Guido spin to it. He'd get music involved. He'd talk to kids, too. And I think Guido could talk to millions of kids on a TV screen. Oh, yeah. I remember one time he was loaded. He came up to the Autumn Tree. I said, "Uncle Guido . . ." What'd he sing? ... sang one of the Christmas songs and scatted 'em. He could do that. He was one of a kind. Of course, he had that stroke, which debilitated him to some extent. I think his life afterward was bittersweet. He never fully got back to his former capacity; and of course when you slow Guido down he doesn't like that too much.

D.H.: Kevin Kizer. He was a good player. He had a fine set of ears. I think he's in Chicago. Oh! I'll tell you about a guy I played there with: Karl Lidral. Great player, wonderful guy, now living in Stillwater, Maine. Teaching at a college up there. His wife

Terri and their son Arthur. He was a great sax player. Played with Jack McDuff for some time on the road.

Art Davis is playing better than ever they tell me. I played with Rick Bendel at the Table.

I played at Krannert several times with various ensembles. I worked with Tom Birkner at Nature's Table. At Krannert, he and Jim Lyke (piano) ... And Tom would sing. We would do composer featured concerts: an evening with Hoagy Carmichael, an evening with Leonard Bernstein. Might do songs from "South Pacific" or songs of 1936. You could do a lot of different things, see.

J.M.: Do you like the new sound of c.d.s?

D.H.: That's an interesting question. That's interesting. I do. Some people who probably have better ears than I do seem to think that they like vinyl. I must say I do like vinyl. Is there some kind of warmth, an evenness in analogue, as opposed to the perfection of digital?

J.M.: But it breathes.

DR: It kind of does. I don't know how it does. But, gosh, and then talk to somebody who says, "Digital is digital. Everything is caught. Every response is gotten digitally." That's the argument you'd get from an engineer. "Vinyl can't be better. There's no way it can be better. We've gotten around it: the imperfections of vinyl." But, see, maybe it's the imperfections that make its character so good. I don't care if you can play all the notes in the world, but ... Music is your experience and if you can't communicate your experience you might as well get off the bandstand. You know it's true. When I appreciate music I get goose bumps.

J.M.: Did you play in any of the big bands?

D.H.: No. That was coming on when I . . . It was just starting. I played a concert with Garvey. He had J. J. Johnson come to town. I played that concert. A trombone player. He was famous in his own right. Played with everybody, really. But, you know, J. J. Johnson would be a feature at the showcase. Could be ... I think another part of that concert was the brand spanking new band. J. J. was soloist. Boy ... this was really just when it was in it's ... infancy. I'm thinking '58, '59, the jazz program. J. J. made up a quartet that had notoriety. We played a few numbers. It was a thrill for me ...

We played this concert at the auditorium, on the south edge of the quad. It was the only place to play - a venue of that kind. They never had Krannert or the Assembly Hall or anything. The university auditorium had some of the great names in the twentieth century: Carl Sandberg, Arthur Rubinstein, Rudolf Serkin, Yehudi Menuhin, violinist. Pablo Casals. For the great performances in pop music, George Shearing. I got to know George. Real friends. I recorded with him. We've got a couple of recordings out. I met him in 1956 at the Blue Note in Chicago. I went up there to do a demo for a friend's sister. I was going to Illinois Wesleyan at the time. My friend's sister was a singer. She was going to do an audition for a record company - Mercury Records. And so this guy said, " You want to go to Chicago?" I said, "Yeah, I'd love to." And we went to Dick Marks Studios. I think he was the one that kind of put it together. We finished up doing a few tunes and she says, "I want to take you out." I wasn't getting any money for it. She said, "Teddy Wilson's playing at the London House. George Shearing is playing at the

Blue Note." And I said, "I'd love to meet George Shearing." She said, 'We're going to go there."

So ... it was upstairs at Madison and Clark. I remember . . . I've been to the old one, too. That was at Madison and Dearborn. That was when I was in high school; but we went upstairs. But we went up ... There weren't too many people. It was a Thursday night. Toots Tilman - guitar player more famous for his harmonica playing - sitting there. We talked to him for a while, and I said, "is there any chance he's not too busy? Is George doing a lot of stuff?" He said, "Yeah, man. I'll bring him over." So we spent the whole night together. Breakfast. That began a friendship that lasts to this day.

I have to watch my time. What time is it?

J.M.: By the clock on the wall ... Five-fifteen. Tell me more, the first night you got to see George.

D.H.: Oh, yeah. He had his quintet there . . . Let's see. Toots was playing guitar I think. Percy Brice was playing drums. Al Mickibin was playing bass. The Latin player, Romando P , I can't spell that for you. The vibes player ... I believe ... was Emile Richards. He was a good one. Or was that ... no. It wasn't Gary Burton then. Although Gary Burton did play with George Shearing.

I'm not good at judging sizes, but it would hold . . . you know clubs, they pack the tables in there. They have a table this wide and four seats around it. I'm telling you ... It was that kind of deal. You expected that's how they had to make their money. And it was fun. They could probably do a couple hundred people. And I've forgotten whether you could eat at the Blue Note or not. I don't think you could.

J.M.: The Blue Note was one of the most famous spots in Chicago.

D.H.: Absolutely. Oh they had all the great bands. Basie. Oh they had all those guys: Duke Ellington, George Shearing, Errol Garner. When George Shearing came here, they used to give ... These people played in the auditorium Believe it or not, in those days - my college days - those people, among the student body were popular people. Dave Brubeck. Errol Garner. George Shearing. Miles Davis ... those guys had to do two shows. It was the only venue they had. There wasn't enough seating for one show.

J.M.: This was in the late fifties. There were no other venues in campus town at all?

D.H.: No . . . No (quietly). Nothing new. Well they had a jazz scene but it wasn't on campus. Actually it was up on the north end of Champaign. Black Am-Vets. Black Elks. They had a thing at the (student) union every Thursday night called Jazz You Like It. In the old commons. And different people would be invited to play there. . . different times. And the (musicians) union paid. But it was real popular. The students loved it. Oh, absolutely. Oh, they sure did.

We used to book a little combo a year and a half ... We'd be two years ahead at ... for dinners at sororities ... want this little combo I was in. It's 1957. "We want you for our spring formal in 1959." They used to do that.

Things aren't done that way today. They call ... kids call . . . I get kind of a kick out of it. You know they're scrambling. They gotta do something for their parents: Mom's Day or their Dad's Day. They kind of have a vague idea what it is and they damn well know I don't do a lot of stuff that they dance to and that's not what they want. But Mom and Dad are coming to town. Take your pick. Or they want to impress their sweeties. "Say, hey. We want to be kind of 'in' now. So, we got the D. J. We got the band taken care of. But now we're going to show you a little class" or something. So they'll call.

They want this thing for Saturday evening. They'll call me late Friday afternoon, less than twenty. . . I mean, you know, if I could do it I usually would, but that's the way they do it. Back in those days they used to book 'em way, way, way ahead. Well ... it's just change. But those were good times and there was a good scene in those days, too. It's a . . . There's always been a jazz scene of sorts. You talk to Mike (Kocour). He was a core of a nice jazz scene during Nature's Table. Or, Jeff Stitely would agree. Karl Lidral would agree. Ron Dewar would agree. Joel would agree. They played there a lot. Those were the heavies and they're playing better than ever. And they'd be the first to credit Nature's Table.

J.M.: Did you find in the sixties in this town there was a great separation between black and white?

D.H.: Well, we used to go down . . . When we used to go down ... There wasn't that many of us that did it ... But everybody there was cool. I mean they were great. Because they knew we weren't coming down to try and break any barriers, see. We wanted to hear the music, because we enjoyed the way the musicians who played there, who also happened to be black, and just happened to be playing their butt off... So we wanted to come down and hear them. And so they knew that. We didn't have any axe to grind. We weren't representing any libertarian movement to territorially push ourselves into or force any friendships out of political necessity. We just went down there because we enjoyed it. There was only an interest. And it was a wonderful, atmosphere, wonderful jazz music. And they'd pack the place. Wonderful musicians. It was good.

And, you know, you ever been to Po' Boy's? Well, they used to be open six nights a week. Late at night. We'd go there all the time. Got to know Arnie. Arnie held court in

back and if he liked you why there was always a little Cutty Sark in back there for you.

And old Count Basie .. . Course all the great athletes came back there. You'd get to meet anybody... J. C. Caroline and all those people. They still come back there.

J.M.: Po' boys is just Fridays and Saturdays anymore.

D.H.: Yeah, but I suspect a lot of them still keep in touch with Arnie. Jeff, I gotta go.

The Lunch Rush

“May I help you?”

No answer. No surprise, what with all the noise in here. I try again.

“May I help you?”

Eager faces look at me. People point at themselves. Hungry people. Thirsty people. The platform in front of the counter can only be eight by ten feet, but there must be twenty bodies on it – demanding, drooling, starving creatures, who all want me. Their ravenous fellows lay in wait behind them, frustrated, famished.

There’s a line out the door and it isn’t even noon yet.

Next in line is a man in a tweed jacket. He’s nervous, not at home in a crowd. Customers look on as he twists about trying to read the menu boards and signs. Turning, he spots me, and feeling the pressure of empty stomachs all around him he presses up to the counter.

“What’s the soup today?”

“It’s vegetable soup today.”

I lift the lid to the crockpot and he leans over the counter. Stirring soup is somehow soothing. Steamy, nourishing aroma wafts up as chunks of celery, carrots, cabbage, potatoes, and spices swirl around in a tomato broth.

He says, “Looks good,” and pulls back to straighten his tie.

Behind him a long-haired, young man smiles at me, politely acknowledging my plight. Maybe the man in tweed is an English teacher. Dishevelled, balding, in need of a haircut, uncomfortable in the society of others, he might be the kind of guy that would enjoy a good book. Right now he’s looking at all the things around him.

I ask, “A bowl of soup then?”

“What?”

He gets his glasses out of his coat and drops them.

“Um, uh, yeah, sure.”

I startled him.

Calling names, Bob Marion rushes out of the kitchen with to-go bags.

A bowl of chili goes around Terry’s shoulder and lands on the counter on the other side of the cookie tray between him and Ira.

Ladling out the bowl of soup, I ask, “Would you like the white bread or the wheat bread – both are homemade – with your soup?”

He blinks at me through horn-rimmed glasses “Um, what, please.”

“A fine choice.”

This man needs to sit. I hope there’s a table open for him. Terry grabs two quarter loaves of what bread from the edge of the sandwich making table and puts one on my customer’s tray. Following in his wake Lori sets a basket of soup bread by the crockpot.

Ira asks, “How does the music look for this weekend?”

“Ed Petersen is coming down from Chicago,” Terry says.

“Really.”

The man who might be an English teacher says, “Is there any apple juice?”

“Yes.” I reach to the service cart below the counter for the gallon jug.

Miriam slips behind me to pour a pot of cold water into the top of the coffee maker.

Ira gives Terry a five dollar bill. “Friday and Saturday?”

Hands working in the till, Terry says, “And Sunday.”

Ira gets a big smile on his friendly face, “I’ll be here.”

Terry gives him his change. “Thanks.”

With the help of several customers Ira manages to get the two empty water pitchers from the narrow shelf beneath the menu boards. Terry takes them to the sinks in one hand. He turns on a cold tap and puts his fingers underneath the flow of water.

I grab two glasses and put one on Ira’s tray. He smiles at me and there’s a mischievousness in it, as if he’s waiting for me to understand something.

My customer asks me, “Were the cookies made fresh today?”

I turn to the sandwich table. “Miriam?”

Keeping her eyes on the sandwiches that she is making, Miriam replies, “Yes. Except for some of the chocolate chips.”

“Thanks.” I pour apple juice.

Having filled his water glass, Ira gives the pitchers to the people who helped him get them in the first place and through a series of hands they make it safely back to the shelf below the menu boards.

Ira says, “See you later.”

Bob, a large guy, hurries across the platform, slowly weaving his way through the crowd. Ira raises his tray to his shoulders, making himself as small as possible against the wall between the bathroom doors, where customers wait for to-go orders. Loaded down with dishes, Bob squeezes under Ira – who raises his tray higher than his eyeballs –

squirming toward the kitchen and freedom. A young, blond woman, tall and built like a Viking, steps out of the small bathroom. It puts her at the entrance to the kitchen.

For a moment traffic stops.

Only slightly frantic, in full working mode, Bob looks to Terry for an answer. Catching a sign he lays several stacked trays of ex-lunches on the counter. In an attempt to be helpful a short woman with a small frame and a heavy backpack backs up and runs into the polite guy with the long hair. Bob motions to me for a towel. I squeeze one out into the bleach bucket under the draining board and toss it next to the trays.

He's off.

Using Bob's blocking, the big, blond woman follows him. Lori falls in behind with baskets of sandwiches.

Ira is like the eye of the storm. Up against the other customers, squished, jostled, and grinning, he, too, knows this will pass. Like the eye of the hurricane, he is still yet charged. This uncomfortable situation . . . what of it? He enjoys it.

Mr. Ira Feldman taught me ear training at the University of Illinois' School of Music. I was a slow student. He was an exceptional teacher: patient and knowledgeable, with a well balanced sense of the absurd. He gets a haircut every spring. Right now his head has that soft, bristly, half inch hair that sticks straight out.

The guy in tweed hands me two dollars and fifty cents, the exact amount of money for his lunch. He tries not to touch anybody as he takes his tray through the crowd.

Bob follows Lori back into the kitchen. The long haired guy who was behind the tweed guy steps up to me as the short woman with the small frame plops her heavy backpack on the counter in front of Terry.

We've flung the doors wide open on this first gorgeous day of spring. The blue sky is inarguable. Winter is over. Friday and gaiety abounds in bouncing step and bright chatter.

Humanity in the Midwest is taking a sun warmed sigh of relief.

Smiling peace and love at me, the long haired guy pulls his straight, fine hair behind his ears.

He asks, "May I have a tofu salad sandwich on wheat?"

I nod, writing out his ticket.

"Run it through the garden. Hold the mayo. Nothing to drink." He waits. "My name is Tom . . ." He watches my pen. ". . . and this is to-go."

"Any cheese on that?"

"No!" he says, emphatically.

"Mustard?"

"Yes!"

Putting the pen behind my ear, I say, "It should be about six or seven minutes."

"That's fine."

"Thanks, Tom."

Grabbing a handful of baskets from the draining board I turn and Terry puts a sandwich order into my hand, the same one that holds Tom's. Stepping behind Lori I stack the baskets on a shelf, then come back around to put the two orders at the bottom of

a pile two inches thick in front of her. I can't help but watch as her graceful hands build a sandwich. They are beautiful. She is beautiful. I try not to stare.

I try not to stare. Edging away, drifting – work calls – toward the counter, I run smack dab into Bob nearly knocking dishes out of his hands. He sniffs. With our faces only inches apart he goes left as I go right. I think this is funny. Inadvertantly, he goes right as I go left.

He says, “Stop!”

We do.

“We keep this up we'll be here all day.”

I ask, “How's your golf game, Bob?”

He ignores this remark. Often Bob is lighthearted – the dictionary makes him laugh – but he takes work seriously. Under his direction we inch to our respective rights in a tight turnstile-like movement. He gains the sinks with a sigh and I laugh and Lori smiles brightly at me and I go to the counter.

Terry says, only half joking, “What we need here are runway lights.” People watch as he does his own version of semaphore. Arms crisscrossing his body and head, it looks more like interpretive dance. “Then we could get a traffic controller . . .” He smiles broadly, hopefully, earnestly. “Then the kitchen patterns would be cleared up.”

Fishing in her backpack for her purse, the small framed woman hands him a ten dollar bill.

Giving her her change, Terry says, “Have a seat and we'll bring it out to you.”

“Thank you.” She drags her backpack off the counter. “Watch out for fog.”

He smiles. “I'll do my best.”

Ray Sasaki steps in the door. Micky Woolf enters on his heels. Ray seems gladdened, even refreshed, by the thirty-five people in line in front of him. Micky looks like he might have to leave.

When taking an order for a salami and swiss on white – a hybrid – with extra mayo, mustard, onions, and extra tomato, my attention is snared by a voice at the service window. Apparently sometime before Nature’s Table was here this place was a pizza place. My guess is people picked up their pizzas through this service window. Framed there, almost apologetically, is a small man of whom all I can see is his head and shoulders rising above the formica.

“Could I just get two cups of coffee?”

“Sure.”

“And,” he adds hopefully, “one oatmeal raisin cookie?”

“Yes. Just a second.”

I get a name for Mr. Salami and Swiss – he’d like a glass of milk, too – get money, make change, give Lori the ticket, grab two mugs, and go to the coffee pot.

“Half and half or two percent milk?” I ask.

“Half and half, please, and sugar.”

“That’ll be a dollar fifty.”

He reaches into his pocket. Miriam places a glass of milk on the counter then hands me the half and half.

I marvel at her. “How did you . . .?”

She just giggles and goes back to making sandwiches.

There's a short counter at the service window that runs ninety degrees to the regular customer counter. A post is set at the corner; the wall with the menu boards runs from it. Situated above the draining board the coffee maker straddles the two counters.

I grab a napkin, get the cookie, grab the sugar bowl and put them all by the coffee maker as the phone rings. Terry opens the wooden slatted door to the small office and answers it. Bob steps up to the counter, in his place.

Taking an order from a woman with a nose ring I wonder if she's a vegetarian. Her order: "Dairy free soup" and an "all vegetable sandwich." No mayo. No mustard. She won't partake of animal products, but she will install metal into her face. I can't quite get that. I can't reconcile being kind to animals while mutilating your own self. She's got tattoos. Don't they say your body is a temple? Is there a discrepancy somewhere? Her brown eyes are bright and she seems nice. Are the facial piercings – the rings, the studs, the unaccountable things in her ears – a matter of fashion? Or is it a protest? A personalized message – literally an embodiment – aimed at the human powers that be? Am I blowing things out of proportion? Maybe she just likes jewelery. I just don't know. I'm probably under stress.

Her voice is quiet. She is shy. "Is there butter or eggs in the bread?"

"No," I reply. "Just flour, water, yeast and sugar."

Ellen steps up to Bob. "Hi. How's it going?"

"Oh," Bob says. "Getting along, getting along."

She says, happily, "Where did all the people come from?"

Bob laughs. "I've been wondering that myself."

He hands me a tray, takes one for himself, and grabs a bowl. Turning to Ellen, he asks, politely, “A bowl of tabouli?”

“And wheat bread and water.”

I can tell she’s been looking forward to it.

Ellen has been experiencing health problems that are potentially life threatening, which is remarkable enough in a young person. But what is more remarkable is her strength, her persistently positive outlook, her eagerness. While going through what must be the scariest time of her life she remains a believer. Charged by the near presence of Death, she is upbeat, thoughtful in word and action – and whether she knows it or not, a great help.

Returning with her tabouli, Bob asks, “Are you writing on anything?”

“No, not really.” Ellen has a beautiful bashfulness. “Are you?”

Bob says, “No, not really,” and they laugh.

Terry comes out of the office. Ticket book in hand, he announces, “We have an order for eight whole gondolettes to be picked up at twelve-forty.”

I ask him, “What should I charge for a half sandwich that has only vegetables?”

“Seventy-five cents.”

The woman with the nose ring hands me money. As I give her her change I realize her hair is a brown I’ve never seen before. All her costume, upon further inspection, seems to be designed to hide or alter her features. I get the feeling that if she wanted she could invent an altogether different appearance – another personality – and I’d never recognize her.

As Sly Stone once said: Different strokes for different folks.

My next customer would like a bowl of curried rice. Food in a bowl we get immediately. And drinks. The sandwiches take a few minutes more.

Bob sends Ellen on her way then takes an order for soup. My customer gives me two dollars. I go to the till at the same time Bob reaches for the soup pot. Our arms weave through one another's. He lifts the lid and ladles soup into a bowl. I make change. Bob pulls away spilling nary a drop. I put the lid back on and give my customer a quarter.

Miriam arrives with a bowl of curried rice. Dumbfounded, I stand with my mouth hanging open.

"What are you?" I ask. "Clairvoyant?"

She laughs – my customer is as baffled as I – and goes back to the sandwiches.

Tommy Flanigan steps in past the screen door with Mike Cerri. Two trumpet players. Between the two of them they can play just about anything. Mike leans more toward new music and electronic tape while Tommy leans more toward jazz. Both have played in chamber ensembles. Both are music students.

Lori and Miriam bag several sandwiches. Calling names, Bob takes them out.

Terry steps up to the counter. We say in unison, "May I help you?"

A gaunt, very tall fellow steps up to me stating a hankering for a gondolette. His short and plump wife asks for pesto with the French bread. Their nametags bear the names George and Celia. Perhaps there's a convention in town.

"Sir," I say. "Would you like the works on that sandwich?"

"What's the works?"

"Mustard, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato, sprouts, and onions."

“No sprouts.” Reserved, he looks respectfully to his wife. “Anything else, honey?”

She turns almost primly toward me. “May I try a small salad with your mustard vinaigrette dressing, please.”

“Certainly.” I ask the tall gent – who looks like he’d be much more at home in overalls than a suit – if he’d like the whole gondolette or a half.

“What’s the difference?”

“A whole is about fifteen inches long – a whole loaf of bread.” I demonstrate by spreading my hands and holding my fingers about four inches apart from my thumbs. “A half is half that.” I chop the imaginary sandwich in half.

He considers. “Can you wrap half that to go?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. That’ll be fine.”

My best guess is that there is some kind of farming convention in town. His hands are rough with work. His face weathered. And his wife, who is resplendent in a flowered print dress, appears to be enjoying herself in a way that is far from the humdrum of daily affairs. I wonder if she picks out his dress wardrobe. I put their ticket in the pile on the sandwich board.

“Would you like anything to drink?”, I ask.

“I’d like a beer. Honey?”

“May I have a glass of white wine, please?”

George gives me a twenty as Miriam arrives with Celia’s pesto and salad.

Decorum requires that I refrain from comment.

“Thank you, Miriam.”

She says pleasantly to the couple, “It will be about five minutes for your sandwich. We’ll bring it out to you.”

I say, “I’ll get your drinks.”

Getting a wine glass from over the sinks and a beer glass off the draining board I go to the taps built into wall of the walk-in cooler and pour George an Old Style. A beer. Setting it on a corner of the sandwich table I crouch and sneak between Lori’s and Miriam’s legs into the reach-in cooler. Opening the left side door I pull out the gallon jug of white wine.

“No room here, Jeff.” Miriam knees the door shut.

Standing up, wishing I had a third arm, I take the jug and glasses to the back prep table and set them by the slicer. Filling the wine glass and leaving the jug behind for now, I wait for Lori to stand up from getting more sliced tomatoes out of the reach-in.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen this place so packed, unless it was on a night with Sorgum. A very funky organ trio, they can get the people hanging from the rafters.

Up at the counter Celia asks me what our hours are.

“We open at ten a. m.,” I say, “and close at one a. m.”

“Oh, good.”

“And we have music nightly.”

“Oh.” She brightens. “How interesting.”

I inform her that there is a schedule of events by the door.

“That’s super. Thanks.”

“You bet.”

A young couple beam at me as George and Celia work through the crowd. I like that. Arm and arm they step up to the counter.

Stirring the soup, I say, “What’ll it be this fine day?”

She hugs his arm. “We’re starved.”

They are so in love it approaches the tender and the ridiculous.

“We have an excellent vegetable soup,” I say. “One of my favorites.”

She leans over the counter. “Mmm . . . smells good.” She turns to her companion. They look into each other’s eyes as if they can’t believe they are real. She jabs him in the side. Joyfully recoiling he makes a try at ordering.

“How about we start with a bowl of soup?”

“Yes,” she says.

What must be new love has made this young woman glow with beauty. The thin man that Terry waits on seems to find this a bit disturbing. She leans her head on new love’s shoulder and closes her eyes.

Any port in a storm. Especially one that harbors love.

He touches her face. “What else should we have?”

When her eyes open, I’m directly in her view. Smiling angelically, she sighs. I wish I had a girlfriend. Surreptitiously the thin man gives her the once over. Unseeing, her boyfriend looks to me for suggestions.

“What can you recommend?” he asks, politely.

For reasons I’m not sure I can explain I do my impression of an expansive French maitre-d.

“Monsieur. But all of it is so very good. The French bread . . .” I kiss my fingertips. “One must experience it only to believe. Et madamoselle, zee pesto, with zee garlic, basil, pine nuts, and olive oil . . . It is exquisite. C’est fantastique!”

Smiling at me she says, “Zut Alors!”

My accent may need repair.

Terry’s customer lifts the lid to the cookie tray. Skittish, he bounces it off the young woman’s elbow. Looking at her through the plastic lid he turns beet red, breathing loudly. Grabbing a cookie, excusing himself a lot, he replaces the lid askew and hurries away, bumping into people as he goes.

Does this woman know her own power?

I set the cookie lid straight. The new boyfriend looks after the shame-faced thin man with a compassion seemingly greater than his years. His new girlfriend senses this and is surprised at first. Then, slowly, admiration unfolds and her eyes show a new appreciation.

I reintroduce the matter at hand, without the accent. “Our sandwiches are great. We make our own bread.”

He smiles at me. “Nice.” He smiles at her. “Would you like to split a turkey sandwich?”

She shies. “Well, actually, I’m a vegetarian.”

“Oooops.”

I help. “How about a tofu salad sandwich with swiss cheese on wheat bread with all the fixings?”

Glad for direction, she says, “Yes.”

His embarrassment begins to abate. “Sounds good.”

“You guys are easy,” I say, writing out their ticket. These two have a chance together. “What’s your names?”

“I’m Sam.”

“I’m Jessie. Who are you?” She seems to really want to know.

“I’m Jeff.”

“Hi, Jeff. It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It is.”

Lori puts another basket of bread by the soup pot and takes their ticket from me.

I implore, “Make it good, okay.”

“Anything for love.” Turning on her heel, she smiles her way back to the sandwich table. Lori has a way of flirting that is a real pleasure. It’s because she’s not actually leading you on.

Jessie asks Sam, “Would you like to split a bowl of curried rice?”

“Sure,” he says, though I can see he doesn’t know what that really is. He looked a little concerned about the tofu salad, too.

“I would like to take this time,” I say, “to inform you that things in a bowl come with wheat or white bread.”

Sam says, judiciously, “Some of each, please. You know, I want to try the chili.”

My eyes grow wide. “Where do you plan on putting all this food? Got a hollow leg?”

She hugs his arm. “We didn’t have breakfast.”

She's so sweet, I say, "Who needs breakfast," and toss my pen over my right shoulder. "It's good to see people with a healthy appetite."

Bob sticks the pen in my back pocket. I go into the cooler to fix up a bowl of curried rice. As I have a free hand I grab a six pack of natural orange soda. Always bring something into the cooler. Always take something out. Kitchen awareness. On the way out I encounter Terry coming in.

"Nice weather we're having," he says.

Miriam takes the six pack from me and gives me a bowl of chili. Someone has set a tray on the counter for me. Putting the bowls on it, grabbing chunks of bread, I ask, "Would you like anything to drink?"

"Apple juice," says Sam.

Jessie fairly chirps, "A plain mineral water for me."

As I figure out the cost of their meal Miriam shows up with an apple juice and a mineral water.

I backstep, befuddled, "Miriam?"

She shines her big, brown eyes at me.

I ask, "Do you have a hot line to the restaurant gods . . . or is it just clean living?"

Walking away, going back to the sandwiches, she replies over her shoulder, "No. Good ears."

I look across the counter to witness Sam and Jessie in the pang of a fervent kiss.

"Have you two met?"

Leaning her head well back within their embrace, she looks up at him.

"Apparently we have."

They disengage long enough for him to hand me a twenty. She hands me a ten. Giving him the change I let them know that we will bring out their sandwich.

“Enjoy.”

“We will.” She smiles at me. “Thanks.” Jessie takes their drinks. Sam picks up the tray and some of that “guy” stuff passes between us.

“Thanks,” he says.

Looking him full in the eye I say, soft enough so that Jessie won’t hear, “Walk true with that one.”

Receiving my message, he says, “Yes. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

As they pass through the crowd I can only shake my head. Love in bloom in springtime. Catching my thoughts, Morgan Powell smiles at me. A good guy, Morgan. A fine musician and composer. He teaches at the university. One of his areas of study bridges the gaps between jazz and the other performance arts. In his forties, with unkempt hair and beard, his experience has brought him strength. Students like him.

Stepping up to Terry, he says, “What’s happening?”

Terry says, “You sounded great at Happy Hour.”

Happy Hour. Hot music. Dixieland and red beans and rice for a dollar a bowl. Morgan played trombone in the band.

The man in front of me is nothing if not morose.

“May I help you?”

Dispirited, he can’t even lift his head to speak to me. He orders soup. I can’t imagine what’s happened.

I wonder after people. The young couple so newly in love. This man so glum.
Morgan so easygoing.

Terry asks, "Will you be playing anytime soon?"

Morgan can be elusive. "Ray and I are working on some things."

I point the soup ladle towards the door. "Ray's just come in."

He turns and they wave across the restaurant at each other.

My customer digs out two dollars and says, "Water."

I give him a glass and a quarter. Considering the shape this guy is in I decide not to ask him if he wants wheat or white bread. The question might be more than he could bear. I give him both.

People shuffle in line. Bob puts dishes on the draining board. There's something inexplicably curious about Terry and his restaurant. He's put together like a brick house. And with this buzz saw haircut he could pass for a marine, or a football player, or a truck driver. Yet he's opted for a health conscious restaurant replete with nightly jazz. Someday I'm going to have to ask him why.

I'm pulled out of my reverie by a big, middle-aged woman in a blue serge suit at the service window with a desire for a coffee refill.

"Half and half or two percent?" I ask.

The phone rings.

"One moment please."

As I go to answer it Bob grabs the coffee pot. In the cramped office – really no more than a glorified closet – I take the red phone off the wall.

"Nature's Table."

A cheerful female voice asks, "Is it vegetable soup today?"

"It is."

"Oh, good."

"We have it every Friday."

"Oh, good."

We hang up. Back at the counter I call out, "Step right up. Who's next?"

He comes at me all of a quiver. Of all the people I've seen today he is easily the most affected by the weather. Positively vibrating springtime he can hardly contain himself. Dropping a pile of what looks like brand new books on the counter he asks, "How long on a sandwich?"

I look at the stack of orders. "Oh, maybe five six minutes."

"Too long. Okay. Let's get a bowl of your chili – to go – white bread and a Pepsi."

"Let's."

He looks at me and a wry grin works its way across his face.

"Sure." His grin widens. "Let's."

Bob says he'll get the chili. I follow him. Stopping at the shelf behind Lori and Miriam I pull out a paper bag – we'll need more soon – then turn to the reach-in cooler. A can of Pepsi sits waiting for me on the sandwich table.

"Thanks, Miriam."

"It was me," says Lori.

"You have good ears, too?"

I do." She cocks her right ear at me. "See?"

I think, good grief, even your ears are beautiful. “You’re right,” I say. “A perfectly good ear.”

As Bob approaches I open the bag and put the soda inside. He slides the Styrofoam cup of chili in next to it. At the counter I put in bread, a napkin, and a plastic spoon. Eyeing the bag with something like lust the guy that springtime has assisted so much gives me seven quarters.

“Raid the piggy bank?” I ask.

He laughs. “No. I figured you could use the silver.”

“You’ve worked in food service before.”

“Yep. Thanks. Bye.”

And he’s gone. Knowing how to move around people he winds out the door in no time flat.

Terry waits on two middle-aged women. The best of friends these two like to come in for lunch. He talks with them about the weather and other light topics, a method of conversation used by the elder generations. Out of respect and common courtesy one doesn’t speak of matters of a personal nature until a friendship is securely formed.

The phone rings and Terry starts for the office. But Lori, in an impressive burst of speed, beats him to the door. Already working on three turkey sandwiches, Miriam picks up Lori’s tickets for two unfinished gondolettes. Wishing a final word with the ladies, Terry steps out of the kitchen. Drying his hands on his apron, Bob steps up to the counter.

In unison, we say, “May I help you?”

A brown haired young man asks Bob, “May I have a tuna sandwich?”

A black haired young man asks me, "Can I get an egg salad?"

Students, freshmen probably, with short hair and good clothes, it's my guess that they come from the suburbs of Chicago.

I hand Bob a pen. We say, "Wheat or white?"

Tuna says, "Wheat."

Egg salad says, "White."

We say, "Mustard, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato, sprouts and onions?"

They laugh at the chorus effect.

Egg salad says, "Hold the mayo."

Tuna says, "No mustard or onions, please."

Looking at both customers, I'm sure I speak for Bob when I say, "Anything to drink?"

Tuna says, "How about a cup of coffee?"

Egg salad chuckles. "Make it two."

I hold out two mugs and Bob pours.

Egg salad says, "Do you guys rehearse or something?"

Bob says, "We're trained well here."

"It's true," Terry says, stepping back into the kitchen. "Just like at MacDonald's Hamburger U."

Belching eloquently, a hand pressed to his stomach, he makes a face like Stan Laurel might.

"Have a seat," Terry says. "We'll bring the sandwiches out to you."

They pick up their coffees and go. Two young women step up to me, a fat man up to Bob. One thing about working here is you get to meet a lot of women. I try not to act too desperate or too lonely.

A cute blond with clear blue eyes asks, “What’s in the egg salad?”

Her friend, who possesses lovely, flowing auburn hair, looks over the menu boards.

I say, “Mustard, mayonnaise, eggs, celery, onions, parsley, carrots, um . . . white pepper, and salt.”

“Could I have one on wheat bread, but no mustard?”

“Is the mustard in the egg salad okay?” People are on diets. There are allergies.

“That’s fine. Just no extra.” She turns to her friend. “What are you going to get?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Flustered and amused by it, she looks at her friend. “You know. I think I’ll get the same.” She turns to me. “Please. On wheat. With lettuce, tomato, and . . .” She turns back to the menu boards and her bouncing hair follows. “And sprouts and mustard.”

“A fine choice,” I say, exuberantly. But they don’t notice.

The cute blond has a sudden inspiration. Grabbing her friend’s forearm she exclaims, “Let’s eat outside!”

“Oh! What a good idea.”

“We’ll sit in the sun and have a picnic.”

“And no bugs yet either.”

Slinking through the line somebody lifts the lid to the cookie tray. Putting a peanut raisin in his mouth he sets the lid back down, puts two quarters on it, and points.

I nod and ask the two young women what they'd like to drink.

"I'd like a root beer," says the blond one.

Looking back from the menu, her friend asks, "Do you have the cherry soda?"

"We do."

Getting their names I take their orders to the sandwich table, sneak between Lori and Miriam into the reach-in for the sodas, avoid Bob as he takes a load of dishes to the sinks, take a sandwich order from Terry and put it on the sandwich table, go to the counter, give the women their drinks, and ask them to wait off to the side.

They both present me with five dollar bills.

"Oh. Right. Money."

I give them change. They go and I have a question for the next customer.

"May I help you?"

It's crazy. Amazing. The people just keep coming. Like we're some sort of lunch magnet. By law the fire department allows eighty people in here at any one time. Other influences prevail, however, and the line goes out the door and along the sidewalk.

We would be packed for a riot if it weren't for this delightful weather.

The sinks are full to overflowing. Dishes are everywhere. On the waist high freezer between the sandwich table and the sinks. On the floor. On the counters. In the office. On the back prep tables. But not on the sandwich table – it's got its own mess.

Reduced to filling orders on the fly – to washing bowls and silverware, to chopping vegetables and slicing meat and cheese for nearly every order – we are, in a word, swamped.

Meanwhile the sun beckons.

Miriam, one of the steadiest people I've ever known, assists the cheerful Lori with the final touches for the twelve-forty gondolette order. Earlier in the morning Bob had volunteered to do dishes. Little did he know. Terry steps down into the kitchen with more. Unflinchingly, he lays them down on the floor by the big, green plastic garbage can.

"Be elastic," he coaches.

Spirits are high and the customers, gratefully, are willing to give us the benefit of the doubt. In the office – temporarily away from the madness of the rush – I fish through stacks of paper to find old music schedules. Their backs are blank. We've run out of ticket books. I flip the cassette tape. Ripping the schedules into ragged squares I step out of the office. Terry takes a handful from me.

Bebop from Guido's alto saxophone fills the building.

I take an order for a ham and swiss and a large Italian salad.

As his customer turns to talk to somebody behind him, Terry shouts, "Bob," at a whisper.

Bob lifts his head out of the sinks.

"Can you give me a tray?" Terry makes a hand gesture that means quick-quick.

"Sure."

Four people work their way through the crowd. As they approach the counter the people in line shift, making space. I warn Lori.

“The party for the gondolettes is here.”

“Okay.”

Whirling to the shelves behind her she grabs a handful of brown paper bags.

“Miriam,” I say. “Can you make me a large Italian salad with mustard vinaigrette dressing?”

As the cook, Miriam has been here since around six this morning. She slices a sandwich in half then sets down the serrated knife. Flicking her fingers off her thumbs at me, she says, “Poof! You’re a large Italian salad.” She giggles and it’s a little out of kilter. “With mustard vinaigrette dressing.”

It must be fatigue – this is not Miriam’s usual behavior. Generally she keeps her thoughts to herself. There’s something mysterious about her . . . as if she knows things other people don’t. It’s made her sharp. There’s a moment where I look at her with a good deal of uncertainty, and because the flow is being held up, a little peevishness.

She takes a step back from me.

I scared here.

“Thanks, Miriam,” I placate. “I needed that.”

Lori asks her, “Can you make some garbanzo spread?”

“Are we out of that, too?”

“Almost.”

Miriam’s composure returns in full. “I’ll put it on the list.”

Lori adds, hopefully, “Lettuce and tomatoes, too?”

“No more back-ups?”

“Nope.”

Bob leaves the dishes to help.

Loud enough for all the workers to hear, Miriam calls, “I’m making tuna and egg salad.”

I lift the lid to the soup and call back to her just as she’s about to step into the cooler. “Soup’s past half.”

She calls forward. “Soup and chili are on. Eggs are boiling.”

I take an order for a bowl of chili and a half of a tuna salad sandwich. Terry hands me a tray and I go. On the prep table by the slicer is a cutting board of unknown composition. Certainly it is not wood. On it and around it are vegetables in various states of choppedness. A can opener lays on top of a can of tuna.

Exiting the cooler, arms full with lettuce heads, tomatoes, carrots, and cucumbers, Miriam goes behind me to the cook’s prep table to unload. Taking the lid off the chili, and putting it on several stalks of celery, I pull the tureen out of the crockpot. She takes it from me and scoops out the last of the chili into a bowl I hold for her.

“No chili,” she calls. “For five minutes.”

I have no time to help. She doesn’t need any and if she did she’d ask for it.

Terry calls out, “No more sald.”

Miriam calls, “I’ve got it.”

Picking up a serrated knife Bob begins to slice tomatoes.

Lori laughs.

“What?” Bob asks.

“Oh, nothing. It just seems funny.”

“What does?”

“Everything.”

“Oh,” Bob says matter of factly. “That.”

“Yes.” Lori slices a sandwich in half and smiles. “That.”

At the counter I can only estimate the cost of my customers lunch: chili, apple juice, and half a tuna sandwich.

“Three-fifty, please.”

It seems like a good number. Perhaps a bit on the low side. But that’s okay; he’s had to wait for it.

“We’ll bring it out to you.”

He’s all smiles. “Take your time. I’ve worked a few kitchens myself.”

“You, sir,” I say, “are a prince among men.”

He rotates a finger around his ear: Crazy.

Lori loads up Bob, Terry, and Miriam with the eight gondolettes. They go out of the kitchen single file, Lori in two with a six pack of Pepsi in one hand, a six pack of diet Pepsi in the other, and a six pack of root beer under her arm.

Hand reaches bread. Apple juice streams from a gallon jug. Soup hovers in a ladle.

Knife severs onion. Ham. Bread. Yellow mustard.

Pen wriggles over paper.

Shoe squeak on tile.

Knees bend. Spring air. Fresh bread.

Splash of water.

Wrist bounces over chopped celery. Sweet basil and apple cider vinegar. Elbow hinge.

A brown paper bag opens with a pop.

Hips bump. Fingers sprinkle chopped onions. A bowl of chili floats to the counter.

Coordination.

Coin dropping on coin.

Ray Sazaki plays trumpet so well he is sought after. Also on the music staff here, he can play anything from Back to modern jazz and most -things in between. Interpretation may be his forte. Condition Blue , a jazz group he fronts plays at Nature's Table now and again. Mike Kocour, Dan Anderson, and Jeff Stitely, three young players, make up the rhythm section. One thing about Ray: he's soft spoken. With his quiet dignity and observer's eye you may find yourself feeling stupid if you overspeak in his presence. His pleasant smile and nod can be disconcerting; but don't be fooled. This quiet guy is a monster with a trumpet.

Micky Woolf beams at me from the other side of the counter.

"God," he says. "What a beautiful day. I thought it would never get here."

Micky loves the sun. It is not unusual to find him on the quad – the great open space at the heart of the University of Illinois' campus – throwing a Frisbee, or playing in a conga drum group, or in earnest conversation. He loves people. Another in the large

extended family, a graduate of the Murphy's Pub School of Drama, Micky has opted for a healthy lifestyle. Lately he's been exploring things like vegetarianism and yoga. I don't know that it's made him any less restless.

The quadrangle – the quad – is several grassy acres encompassed by big, old, ornate school buildings. And since there are very few swimmable lakes or rivers nearby people flock there as they would to the beach.

"The quad is nuts," he says, barely able to contain his enthusiasm. "It's like people are risen from the dead or something. Everybody's out."

"In a little while I will be, too."

"Spoilsport."

"What can I get you?"

"Ah, yes. Down to business. You should get out and enjoy yourself more often."

"Mick?"

He laughs. "Okay, you know, I get excited. It's nice out."

"You're also one of the most accomplished eaters I've ever known."

I hand him a piece of wheat bread to tide him over.

Somebody should write a book about Murphy's Pub. It's a funny thing, but most of us who met there, in our cups, have more or less stayed in touch. In Murph's you might be talking about women one minute and higher math the next. Or great literature. Or baseball. Or music. There were casualties, of course, but for the most part you learned things from people who wanted to learn and had a good time doing it. Some of the these people come by Nature's Table.

Writing down his order for curried rice, I ask, "What to drink?"

Through a mouthful of bread Mick says, “Got the lemon mineral water?”

“Yep.”

Behind Micky and Ray, Mike Cerri and Tommy Flannigan talk animatedly; or more accurately Tommy’s wholly absorbent as Mike raves, waving his hands and making big faces.

Miriam arrives with Micky’s curried rice. It has raisins and garbanzo beans.

He asks, “It’s vegetable soup today?” Micky used to work here.

“Is it Friday?”

“Yes. Better give me a bowl.”

Glass breaks somewhere out in the seating area. At that same instant Mark Stryker strolls in through the back of the kitchen. Without a word he slips past us into the office emerging a moment later with a broom, a dust pan, and a big, happy smile.

Terry announces, “Stryker Force is here.”

Mark laughs. He greets Ray, Tommy, and Mike. A jazz lover and a player in his own right, Mark works here part time. A good way to describe him would be eager. Clean-up tools in hand, he disappears into the crowd.

I put Micky’s soup on his tray. Mick wants something badly, something he can’t quite put a finger on. It’s here somewhere; you can see him striving for it, always. Desire has done him an intricate deed. Exasperation comes out in his humor. It’s as if he’s been asked to unravel life’s mysteries and given a nameless faith to do it with.

“More bread with the soup?”

“Sure,” he laughs, chewing. “Gotta fill the hole.” He pats his stomach.

Ira slips through the crowd to return his lunch tray. Handing it to Terry, giving hellos all around, he lifts the lid to the cookie tray and selects an oatmeal raisin cookie.

Turning to Ray, he says, “Great performance the other night.”

Ira speaks of a recent concert at Krannert featuring new music for chamber ensemble, the trumpet, and Ray Sazaki.

New music. One way to look at it is it’s the classical music of contemporary times. Beethoven and Stravinsky were once new music composers, furrowing more than a few brows. Present day new music can involve any of the past musical techniques, or it might involve car horns and kitchen appliances.

One tenet for today’s new music is: if it makes a sound it can be used to create music.

Imagine a traffic jam. Car horns, motors, oaths. The commotion of the street. Write it down, find musicians to reproduce the sounds, advertise, and put it on stage at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts.

It can be odd stuff. Musician’s music, maybe. To the impartial ear it may be unfamiliar yet powerful. Or abstruse, silly, and distant. Often difficult work, even bizarre, it leaves an impression, though specifics might be hard to recall after the episode has retreated from the boards.

I was at the concert. So were Tommy, Mike, and Mark. Tommy and Mike were in the concert. Each of us has contributed to like performances, though the caliber of this one was well beyond my own. It doesn’t stop me from going to the show.

Ira continues. “It was good to actually see the pieces instead of just hearing them on recordings.”

“Yes,” Ray smiles, not one way or another.

On the program that night was a piece by Morgan Powell for two pianos. They were tuned strangely. Notes were too sharp and too flat. And the pianos were tuned differently from each other. For a while the whole thing just sounded wrong. But it did hold the audience. Musicians, mathematicians, and thinkers over the years have proposed the octave (do re mi fa so la ti do) to be divided into twelve equal parts (what our ears are accustomed to) nineteen, fifty-three, and one hundred and eighteen. Someone invented a device that could divide four octaves into six hundred and seventy equal parts.

Why not tune a piano askew?

Salvatore Martirano, another composer at the U of I, performed on the Sal-Mar, an electronic machine, I guess you’d have to call it, for sound production. Looking jerry-rigged it emitted sounds not normally heard in the world. Larajen Hiller, a former teacher was represented by a computer generated piece entitled “Algorithms.” Herbert Brun, currently on staff, had a piece on the program. It was all done on tape. Vocal sounds were manipulated and spliced together. Electronically produced sounds were interspersed between them.

There were several works by students that featured Ray Sazaki.

The new, experimental, and electronic music community may be small, but it is global. A greek, Iannis Xenakis was represented at the concert by way of thunderous percussion pitted against a pre-recorded tape. The percussion department here at the music school is brilliant. They play, with precision, an amazing array of instruments

from drums to piano to bells and blocks and things I still can't identify. Some instruments must have been invented for this particular piece of music.

Scott Wyatt, the head of the university's experimental and electronic music studios, had a piece for tape only – just three box speakers and dimly focused light light on stage.

A lot of the people that play the new music play jazz at Nature's Table.

Holding a pen, Bob steps up to the counter. Situating himself between Terry and I, he uses the lid to the cookie tray as a writing desk.

Tommy greets him with, "It's a beautiful day."

Mike looks like he's going to start dancing. In an earlier, less enlightened time – oh, say, the Middle Ages -- Mike would have been burned at the stake. His executors would have stormed past the cruz, the point. Too full of life Mike doesn't know if he's going to run up a tree or invent outer space. This month alone he's written twenty studies for the trumpet. His heart large, his love of life larger, if he appears loopy it's because he can't get enough. Tommy, his lunch partner, comes from a large family of Flanigan's, all nicer than the last, most of them musicians.

Micky says, "Nice day."

"Nice!?" Mike is beside himself in disbelief. "Nice is hardly the word for it."

He sings loud and clear:

I'm just too good to be true

Can't take my eyes off of me

I must be like heaven to touch

I want to hold me so much

At long last I have arrived
And I thank God I'm alive
I'm just too good to be true
Can't take my eyes off of me

Mike goes for the chorus and people join in.

I love me baby
And if it's quite all right
I need me baby
To warm these lonely nights
So let me love me, baby
Let me love me . . .

"Bob," Mike breaks. "You could do that at the next Bob and Jeff show. It's perfect for your persona."

"Persona," Bob says. "Perfect."

"We're playing at Channing-Murray on Friday," I say. "Nine o' clock."

"I'll bring my new peckhorn."

Tommy looks at Bob. "I'll gladly be there then if I can get a turkey on white now."

Bob pulls an envelope out of his back pocket and puts it on the lid to the cookie tray. "Everything on that?"

Tommy is over polite. “Yes, please.” All the Flanigans are. It makes you wonder what their homelife is like.

Mike actually looks famished. His cheeks are getting more sunken by the moment. “Gimme a whole gondolette on wheat with everything but no lettuce.”

“Okay,” Bob says, putting pen to envelope. “So that’s a half gondolette on white with only extra lettuce,” thereby confirming the order.

“No lettuce,” mike says, his hands and voice rising. “Absolutely no lettuce. I hate lettuce.”

Micky picks up his tray. “Bob,” he says, shaking his head. “No lettuce.” And walks away.

Bob hunkers over his pen. “Okay. That’s a lettuce sandwich on a blueberry croissant.” He marks the envelope once, then looks up. “What would you like to drink with that?”

I can see Sob has things well in hand so I go out to help Mark.

Over in the front corner of the main room of the restaurant two preschool kids who look like each other pound happily away at the black, upright Mason-Hamlin piano. It sounds a lot like new music.

A table of four rise. One of the group, a smiling woman spots my apron and comes over with a question.

“Do we bus our own tables?”

“No. That’s my job.”

Her smile widens over straight white teeth. “It was all very good.”

“Thank you.” How nice: she meant it. “Enjoy the lovely day.”

“We will.” She turns to go. “Goodbye.”

Making their way past the short wheelchair ramp that leads up to the platform from the main room they walk through the square arch and confront the line.

I commandeer their table. It being the only one open in the whole place it is very valuable. People at neighboring tables hand me their finished lunches. Mixing and matching sizes and shapes I soon have the table top filled with dishes as well as the seats of two chairs.

The main room is long, stretching from the front of the building to the store room wall. The walls are wood paneled. Maybe sixteen or eighteen tables.

Mark stands by the piano talking to the parents of the musical children.

“It’s okay,” he says. “Let the kids play for awhile.” With his big delighted-to-be-alive smile and his attentive manner they know he would have been more pleasure than pain to raise. But I can also tell that he’s loving the children’s unschooled, unfettered music. The kids plug away, calling to their parents, delighting in being center stage. And nobody around them seems to mind.

Sam and Jessie share a single chair. They feed each other.

Against the store room wall (cinder block, painted white) is a church pew. College kids have pulled together several tables making pathways narrower, confused, and non-existent. Their arm and hand movements as they reach through, around, and over each other, make me think of a many headed best in a feeding frenzy.

Mark comes by my table.

“Hey, man. Do you want some help?”

“I’d love some.”

The problem is he’s got a dust pan full of broken glass and a broom. I telescope several glasses. He shifts the dust pan to the broom hand then puts out his open palm low by his pocket. I lean the stack of glasses against his shoulder. He waits as I lift a heavy and awkward stack of trays and we make our way toward the kitchen.

Mark has volunteered to do dishes and words fail me in the light of that kind of generosity.

Bob helps Lori with sandwiches; Miriam and Terry work the counter. I’m slicing iceberg lettuce.

Bob and I have a plan.

Since we like Mike – he’s been an unswerving supporter of the Bob and Jeff show – a word about that: The Bob and Jeff show is a forum for performance of any kind by anybody. If someone wanted to demonstrate the blowing of a nose we would feature this act. One night a student opera singer gave us an aria acapella. There was a gentle oriental man who could barely use English that silenced the crowd as he bowed a stringed instrument known as a Pi-Pa. People who have seldom, even never, been on stage come up and juggle, sing and dance, recite poetry, tell a story . . . The Bob and Jeff show is committed to songs and sketches. For instance: a kabuki commercial for soap flakes. Or a country lament entitled: If People Knew How to be People (Like Dogs Knew How to be Dogs). Sometimes a performance is drivel; occasionally it finds brilliance. Fond of

drivel and brilliance we try to make every show as new as possible. We did beat poet Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" with Mike – and since he hates lettuce we have decided Mike needs a nicely sliced head of it with his lunch.

Delicately slivered to enhance the relish of the eating experience with just that right crunch, that precious and savory aroma, the perfect coordination of colors green, faded green, and off-yellow, I drop the lettuce onto wax paper inside a red basket.

Walking up behind Bob, I say, "This'll be good."

He slices Tommy's and Mike's sandwiches then nestles them on waxpaper in yellow baskets. "Presentation counts," he says. "Let's go."

"Wait." I stop him. "Let's do the maitre-d thing." I drape a damp towel over his arm and one over mine. We take a moment to study the effect and Lori laughs at us. Bob's in bluejeans and boots and a green t-shirt. I wear bluejean cut-offs – my legs are sunlessly white – sneakers and a black t-shirt. We both sport exotically spotted aprons.

"Let's go," Bob says.

Terry looks unquestioningly at my basket of lettuce as I follow Bob out of the kitchen. Our goofy energy builds as we move through the crowd and step down into the front room. Mike and Tommy sit at the halfwall that separates the front room from the main room. Bob places the sandwiches before them and their eyes go to the food.

Tommy licks his lips and says, "Yum." Mike grunts. Stepping out from behind Bob, I present Mike his basket of slivered lettuce.

Flourishing his towel, stepping back a pace, Bob says, "Sir. Your lettuce."

Mike takes a handful and throws it in our faces.

"What is this?" he yells.

“Your lettuce,” I say. “Sir.”

He throws more at me and I crack up. He throws some at Bob. He ducks and the spew lands on the table behind us. Three pair of eyes look up.

Tommy is somewhere between agape and a laugh. Flipping a hand in outrage, Mike says, “Get rid of it.” He turns to Tommy. “There’s no real nourishment in iceberg lettuce. It’s just a way to put water on a sandwich.”

Tommy is unequipped at this moment to respond.

“Waiter!” Mike is imperious. “Take this . . . this . . . stuff away. It is unfit for human consumption.”

I grab the basket before Mike can throw it at me and Bob and I laugh our way into the kitchen.

“Knife,” Miriam says, as she goes to the sinks to wash one. This announcement is an implementation of Terry’s new Kitchen Awareness Plan. Tell your coworkers when you are moving about the kitchen with a dangerous object.

The restaurant is working at capacity. An owner’s dream. A worker’s nightmare. Terry is both. We are going to run out of bread. So far as I know that’s never happened before at lunch.

Terry and I reach into the till at the same time and I say, “At least there haven’t been any deliveries.”

Holding Tyson in her arms, Shelley, Terry’s wife, comes in though the back. Their daughter Seredy, who must be three and a half or four now, saunters in behind her.

Another woman, infant in arms, and a little girl who can barely walk follow. Apparently buoyed up by the fine weather – and the prospect of not having to make lunch – they ventured out to Nature’s Table. Unfortunately most of the eating community seems to have had that very same idea.

Terry gives Shelly the pen from behind his ear and a piece of paper and she leads the group back to the ovens to figure out their order.

Bending down, reaching into the reach-in cooler for a mandarin orange soda, I hear Lori say, “I think this one needs mustard. Don’t you think so, Bob?”

Working well is important to Bob. When he concentrates he concentrates hard, almost with severity. Distraction will loosen his hold on his work. I can imagine his thoughts: Sandwich . . . just make this sandwich – and smile over his dilemma. As I reach for the lever-handle on the walk-in door I can’t help thinking Lori is a treasure, an original. The handle flips out. The thick cooler door rushes open and Miriam steps into me.

Two people cannot be in the same place at the same time.

Though not what might be considered a modern beauty, Miriam is more than attractive with her dark coloring and clear features. She is strong and short with a healthy handful of curly, wavy – and some ringlets of – brown hair.

There’s one of those too-close-for-comfort moments where we mumble courtesies and all over each other as we try to get to our destinations.

I get inside the cooler and take three breaths. Cool, quiet, air. Bob steps in looking for something that apparently I’m in the path of. The cooler is not large. He tries to reach past me. I dodge the wrong direction. Getting out of Bob’s way is an energetic

proposition. Bullish, and a bit like a single-minded bloodhound, Bob just goes for what he needs. But the way the cooler has been worked over today he can't find it and I keep being in the way.

Flustered, he stops and sighs.

"I know the feeling, Bob."

Pulling a can of Old Style from a six pack I pop the top and hand it to him.

Would Terry mind? On a day like this? Should we drink it? Yes! He pours some beer down his throat then hands it to me. I drink, he drinks, I drink, and it's gone.

He sighs again.

"World's fastest beer, Bob."

"Beer-Bob," he says. "You know, Lori is making sandwiches any old way no."

"So I noticed. Grand, ain't it."

He looks around the shelves again and scratches his head. "Why did I come in here for?"

"Why don't you go back out? Maybe it'll come back to you. Then you can come back in and forget what you came in for again."

"Right." He points at me and turns. "Good idea."

I hand him a six pack of Pepsi. Kitchen awareness. Bob goes out and Lori comes in.

I'd like to kiss her. But I can't tell if she wants me to. Bob comes in and reaches for a cellophane wrapped packet of sliced ham. Miriam opens the door, surveys the situation, decides in favor, and steps in. Stretching her whole length over the beer kegs to the vegetable boxes . . . she can't quite reach. And Bob, who I'm beginning to think is

sweet on her – something about the way he keeps his distance – leans over to help. In doing so he inadvertently hips Lori. She falls into me and I catch her and in doing so get pinned off balance against a shelf. I don't mind. And Lori makes no effort to get away. It's good to hold her, a good feeling.

“All right,” I say. “Everybody grab any two things and go out the door. Whatever it is, I'm sure we'll need it.”

Terry opens the door.

“Well,” he sings. “I wondered where you all went to. I was getting lonely.”

Giggling a high silly giggle he steps in and somehow gets the door shut. Personal space has been obliterated; the lunch crew has become one.

Miriam is looking claustrophobic. Terry says, “May I have this dance?” and bows and everybody laughs. Laughter at this ridiculous predicament, the endless rush, at ourselves?”

“So,” Lori grins, “who's minding the store?”

Terry butts the big, round handle on the inside of the cooler door and we tumble out, still laughing.

The people on the other side of the counter look at us curiously. Shelley turns from the counter, glad for reinforcements. Tyson, sitting in her arms, stares past the coffee maker into the main room unconcerned by the goings on around him.

Miriam checks all her pots.

Shelley lays down her food order on the sandwich table. She manages a quick word with Terry, then, with her dancer's mobility, slips between us, holding Tyson, into the back room.

Loaded down with dishes Mark steps down into the kitchen and we return to full strength.

A loud laugh carries across the restaurant from the front doorway. It can only belong to Brad Weeler. I look up and see him elbowing Mike Kocour and Jeff Stitely.

Using his shoulders Terry grips the big, green garbage can under the counter to the floor. Twisting the bag closed I yank it up. It doesn't budge. Resetting my feet and using both hands I pull up as Terry pushes down. The bag gives. But there is a lot of resistance. Am I creating a vacuum? Bending my knees more I push to the ceiling. It gives then slides out with a little whoosh and I guide it to the floor.

The green plastic bag is packed so full I can barely tie it. Getting a good grip I take the awkward garbage behind Lori and Bob through the back room up the rickety back step and outside.

The sky is blue as blue can be. Stepping into the sunlight – it warms the top of my head – my lungs fill with good, new, fresh, Spring air.

I have always doubted the capacity these plastic bags have against breakage, I think, as I swing mine up onto the left side lid of the dumpster. The parking lot is lumpy, undulating asphalt. A modern science building rises many floors, its red brick, metal, and glass contrasting sharply with the blue sky.

Flipping over the right hand side lid, I let it fall against the back kof the dumpster with a metallic bang. Pushing around its contents I make space for the new bag. Dumpsters smell.

I bang the lid shut.

Stepping back into the shadows of the building I pick up loose debris and return to the dumpster. I pick up stray cans and bottles off weed spotted gravel and drop them into several fifty-five gallon drums. All along the north side of the building vines grip the dark, old brick; the sprouting greenery will usurp it in time.

Standing still for the first time in hours I take stock of myself and my head spins. Balance totters. I walk along the wall using the fifty-five gallon drums as walking sticks. Movement is better. It's stopping that's the hard part. Maybe Bob and I should consider not staying up half the night writing songs and dreaming up things. Or maybe I should . . . Some great songs and things though. I walk to the front of the building. Nature's table faces onto Goodwin Avenue, which runs north-south over a shallow basin extending north to University Avenue and south to Gregory Drive. Except for a block of shops south of Krannert and Dale's bookstore almost all of what can be seen is under university authority.

A late sixties model Galaxy 500 sits in the parking lot in the space bordering the sidewalk. It's a car that really seems to hold up, though it's about as glamorous as a shoe box on wheels. Sitting on a curb with their backs to it people chat and eat, enjoying themselves. I catch a snatch of conversation about traveling in Russia.

The front stoop is something of a curiosity. The sidewalk, starting at the entrance to the parking lot (we have a few spaces against the north wall, but mostly the lot serves the science building) heads toward Nature's Table then splits in two. Part of it follows along the street (no grass in between) and the other part slopes gently up forming a wheelchair ramp. It gives access to us, the empty storefront next door, and the bookstore.

Rising enough for a step to be put in from the lower to the higher sidewalk it becomes the ideal place to sit: a stoop. People spread out all along the sidewalks and past the bookstore to the lawn in front of a house the university has taken over for office use. People walking by have to skirt around the newspaper dispenser boxes, some going into the street around parked cars.

As I crane my neck around the corner of the building my left knee bumps the back of a guy sitting crosslegged on the cement. Raising his right knee he sits up on his left haunch and squints at me.

“Sorry,” I say.

He spots my apron and says, “Oh, I see,” and scoots over closer to the building.

“Thanks.”

I take a breath and step into a maze of hands and feet, backpacks and coats (not everybody has dressed for the weather), trays and paper bags. There’s a lot of pale skin in the new sunlight. Maybe we should sell suntan lotion. I’ll ask when I go inside.

Micky sits under the front windows talking with people I don’t recognize. Shelley and her group have set up on the grass beyond the bookstore. I grab a crumpled bag off the sidewalk. As if that’s a signal people start handing me their finished lunches.

I make a run inside to the big, gray garbage can with the red top. In bold white letters on the red it says: Pitch In!

I go back out.

The trees flutter in the breeze across the street in front of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. Taking up a whole city block Krannert is huge, angular, modern housed in red brick, its theater rigging spaces lurch into the sky. Two wide stairways –

an expanse of dense evergreen shrubbery between – lead up to a terrace before two sets of glass doors. An open-air amphitheatre is set in between and in back of the doors. Occasionally on a nice day classes are held outside. It's odd to look up from the street on all this opulence and see the formal art of fencing being learned, or stage fighting, or sword fighting, and sometimes in full dress.

Running to the lip of the terrace Debbie and Jenny bound down the steps. Shelley waves at them. Keeping one eye on their feet they wave back. At the street they look both ways then dart through traffic. As they skip across the curb Seredy hops up and jumps on Jenny. Talking a blue steak to the adults Jenny reaches out to play. Seredy starts to climb on her so Jenny devotes her full attention and soon they've developed a new game involving making faces and stomping one foot then the other while going around in a circle.

Jenny and Debbie used to work here, almost from the inception, I think. Debbie's a dancer, so she's at Krannert a lot. I'm not sure what Jenny's doing these days though I can't imagine her idle.

South of Krannert is a block of shops. Treno's, a restaurant we've gotten friendly with, sits on the corner. More than once I've had to make the mad dash there for quarters or singles. I've even made it back a few times before the customer has left the counter.

Farther south are women's residence halls and sororities. Beyond that more university. Then there's South Farms. It must be Spring because there's just a hint of livestock in the air.

A metal framed chair with black vinyl seat and back props open the front door. A half brick holds music flyers to the seat. Customers fill the vestibule waiting for their lunch. I get in line behind them.

Nature's Table actually takes up two lots: 509 and 511 S. Goodwin Ave., Urbana, Illinois. Sections of the wall between these two spaces have been removed so that there is a half wall – waist high – leading from the entrance to a post, then an open passage and a wheelchair ramp, then a full wall separating the kitchen from the main room. On the full wall hangs the menu blackboards.

The line weaves slowly; moltenly, for those who are too hungry or impatient. Looked at from a distant perspective the line becomes a single entity; hungry head to tail it moves as one, a snake, rippling here, coiling forward there. A slow, shifting brute it will suddenly decapitate itself and sit down and eat lunch, the tail ever replenishing it's numbers with new customers.

By the front windows, his back to the big garbage can with the red top, a guy more beautiful than a young Tony Curtis, Paul Newman, and Marlon Brando combined sits courting an equally beautiful woman with dark features and far too much makeup – even more than would be necessary for the camera.

Beyond them four college age women sit looking out the window at something I can't see. At the next table over a large older woman, under a black diamond shape piece of artwork, and a young man sit reading. Something about the older woman reminds me of a house.

Wearing slacks a woman steps between the railings that guard the platform in front of the counter. Edging around Mike Kocour's tall, slim frame she touches his elbow. He reaches for his opposite shoulder.

She holds up a bag.

"Excuse me," she smiles. "Gotta run."

Jeff Stitely and Brad Wheeler move over so Mike can let her pass. "Excuse me," he says.

"No problem. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Yes," Mike says. "It is."

What she has is good with people. Giving eye contact, nudging those standing and doing her best by those seated, she flirts harmlessly with the boys and chats brightly with the girls on her way to the door. As she passes me the line moves forward and I step into the front room.

Able to get a better look now I plan a busing strategy. A guy who looks bored watches me size up the room. I raise my eyes to the artwork on the wall behind him.

It's inexplicable. Some kind of neo-post-modern surrealism, or something. I mean it's great that people do it – try for art – but I'm left wondering that I don't get it.

Fine. I don't get it. But what is it? Jazz is a lot like that for me. In modern jazz the "head" or principal musical idea is presented, then the soloists move off into the land of improvisation. Now I know my musical ability is not what it needs to be but there are times when the band is playing and I haven't the faintest idea where the downbeat is, or should be. It's as if the players are purposely trying to hit all the off notes. It's weird. Once the solos start the melody is always modulated, transformed or just plain tortured.

What do I know? I like rock and roll.

One art piece, a descendent of Dali in a three-d sort of way, sticks halfway off the canvass on three penny nails. Tattered burlap there holds the image of a digital display wristwatch as does the canvass beneath, and the images shift perspective as you do, splintering through the fabric. In another painting – oils – a stream barrels down a mountainside fusing into and becoming a silver locomotive. Yet another, approximately the size of a record album and mounted diamond-like on the wall over the head of the woman who reminds me of a house, is all black. The paint is layered so thick – acrylic, I'd guess – that it is countoured, ridged and valleyed, with a small diaphanous redbird feather trailing off the bottom point in a tail. It looks like the landscape you'd see from a plane over Montana.

What do I know? I like rock and roll.

As I go to bus the table where the four women sit the older woman next to them asks, "Would you take these things?"

I say, "I should probably take care of this table first," and point behind her.

She gives me a look as old as the hills. A well lived-in house. I store the thought and cast off the image.

I turn to the table of four young women and they burst out laughing. The one nearest me rears back in hysterical ecstasy. Her teeth are perfect.

"Everybody," she shouts, "has a short black skirt."

What I have walked into is completely feminine. No boys allowed.

"I know," says a short, brown-haired girl. "And we wear them so seldom that they never get washed."

Great peels of laughter run around their table. The woman with perfect teeth has tears streaming down her cheeks. I just stand there as the laughter subsides around me. One by one they notice my presence. It's thrilling to be around all this excitable female energy. A little scary, too.

"May I take some of your things?"

The short, brown haired girl by the window gets huffy. "Certainly not."

There's more laughter and I say, "Sorry. Poor choice of words."

With good humor they hand me up their trays. On my way to the trash can I hear the first one ask, "Why do we have them if we only wear them once every two years?"

I think – and I don't know why except it's been in my head forever – I wish I were in love. Then my life could begin.

On my way back to the older woman and her young man with their books I'm stopped by a very proper black man with a hard paunch and salt and pepper beard and hair. His party – and he is clearly in charge – consists of eight or ten people who have pulled together two tables in the middle of the room.

"Please, young man," he requests, "would you attend to our table?"

"Certainly," I say, "I'll be glad to. I'll be back in a moment."

"Thank you."

The people in his group are diverse, a nice mix of age, race, and sex. They wear nametags. Earlier, George and Celia had nametags. Maybe there's a computer convention in town. But George and Celia seemed like farmers, or rural folks anyway . . . However, this is no time to play detective. Pulling in my stomach I slip behind the black guy's chair and go over to the large, older woman. There are people you meet that

you don't recognize or care about as the natural course of events. And there are people you are naturally drawn to, who you immediately respect. She is one of them. Like a well lived in house. Her young friend has a book open on his knee and his face buried in it. At the very top of his head is a cowlick. Several books are stacked open at the table on their spines. Two more – showing drawings – are held open by coffee cups and a bowl. Their lunch tray is pinned to the wall behind a mineral water bottle holding flowers and the salt and pepper shakers. As I walk up to her she is inspecting a half finished line drawing of Teddy Roosevelt. Her body turns slowly to me until at last she can pull her eyes off the page and look at me.

A solidly built house is revered for its strength. Proving comfort and shelter it is a place out of the uncaring elements, a place where long thoughts can be developed and cherished.

She's like that.

I imagine the house she lives in has a brick fireplace and high ceilings and sunlit furnishings. And lots of plants. There would be enticing cooking smells.

"We're trying," she says, "to trace the origins of the cartoon."

Her gaze, unblinking on mine, is almost reptilian.

"Oh," I say, surprised. I pick up their lunch things. "Didn't cartoons – I think they were of the political variety – start to appear around the turn of the century?"

"That's one of the things we're trying to find out. People have always drawn, and for newspapers. One of the things we're trying to sort through is where cartoon starts and political comment ends. A fine line." Her companion has not raised his head throughout this interchange. Also, he hasn't moved, so I know he's listening.

Up in line Brad Wheeler lets out an ear-splitting laugh; the braying cuts through the lunchtime din. Standing on the edge of the platform between the two four by four posts that hold up the railings, Brad looks down on Mike and Jeff standing on the faded, dark red tile.

If I've got my information correct Brad is a music composition major and Jeff is a percussion major. Mike is a resourceful piano player. I don't know what, if any, schooling he's had, but he is a good guy and people like working with him.

Brad loves a spectacle. He may be a spectacle. He would have been the class clown: spit balls, love letters, fights at recess. He can play saxophone though. Secretly I think he would have made a great hell for leather rockabilly player (he'd cringe at the thought) because he pulls blasphemy from his horn.

"Bugs Bunny, too."

I turn to the sound. "Pardon me?"

"Friend of yours?"

"Who?" I look in her unblinking eyes and finally get it. "Oh. Brad. Well, we've had a few run-ins."

She hadn't missed my little thoughts.

"Bugs Bunny may not be without political impetus."

"Yes." With some people, whether you've met them once or a thousand times, you wish to give a favorable impression.

"Perhaps your friend needs an audience to thrive."

"Perhaps." I can't think of anything else to say. I hope that leaves a good impression.

I look back toward the line, considering her words, when Bob emerges from the main room. Dancing a bar towel in his hands he looks intently throughout this side.

Little does he know there are five people behind him trying to get out.

He gets tapped on the shoulder.

The young man looks up long enough from a book illustrating the making of the Disney movie “Fantasia” to hand me his glass and say thank you.

I use it as an exit line.

Bob leads the train of five through the line. They get safely out the door and I ask, “Help me with these two tables, okay?”

“Okay.” He says. “Then I’ve got to get outside for a break.”

The two tables that have been pushed together in the middle of the room have already been mostly cleared. Bob hands me the remaining tray and puts some glasses and silverware on it. Grabbing up napkins he wipes down the tables while I go to the garbage can.

Bob joins me there.

I say, “Let’s take a load into the kitchen.”

“Sure.”

I give him a stack of trays with silverware in the glasses and about fifteen baskets stacked in an oval column. I grab a stack of trays with bowls on top and we start for the kitchen.

“Bob?”

“Yeah?”

“Nobody watered the plants.”

“I’ll get to it after we clean up from the rush. Say . . . sometime in June.”

That’s probably why the plants hanging by the front window look so thin and ragged. Chanting the “Excuse me, Pardon me: song we work through the line, passing the speaker on the half wall by the post. People at the table there are using their hands to form intricate shapes and it takes me a moment to realize they’re making sign language. Suddenly, a strident, articulate tenor saxophone bursts out of the speaker at a too fast clip. Coltrane? Maybe?

As we skirt by Mike, Brad, and Jeff to the wheelchair ramp Mike says, “I loved those piano pieces Morgan had on the program.”

Jeff says, “I wonder what kind of scale he tuned to.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s random.”

“It had to be planned,” Brad says.

Jeff shakes his head. “I’m still amazed at those tape and percussion pieces we rehearsed. I haven’t played them for three days and they’re still stuck in my head.”

Brad says, “Wait until tonight.”

I talk into Bob’s ear. “Who is Brad Wheeler, anyway?”

“I’ve never known,” he replies. “Just keep out of his way.”

Bob takes a step up the ramp and a guy three people over takes a concurrent step. The people in between move with the flow, some unconsciously. It seems like every other person in the place is talking. Lori comes out with four to go bags and people split off the wall toward the door. A lot of feet shuffle and I follow Bob who follows Lori into the kitchen.

Stepping down into the fluorescent light I say, “Terry.”

He gives me an ear.

“What do you say we start selling suntan lotion? ‘Tis the season.”

“Sure,” he says. “And we can put a tanning booth on the roof.”

Mike Kocour orders a ham and swiss on white from me. He says to Jeff and Brad, “Dig this Trane.”

I am right! It is John Coltrane playing on the stereo. I wonder who put it on.

Jeff moves closer to the speaker next to the drinks board.

Ordering a gondolette from Terry, Brad turns to Mike. “Man, that shit we played the other night . . . Man, it goes right up to Trane and lies right past it.”

Mike smiles mildly. “Maybe. But this stuff is sweet.”

Jeff says, “I just dig it all, man,” and orders a bowl of curried rice from Bob.

Ed Peterson is coming to town tonight o play here through the weekend. Mike and Jeff and Dan Anderson, who plays bass, will be the rhythm section. Ed and Brad are the soloists.

Brad means it when he says, “It’ll be great.”

These guys respect Terry. All of the jazz community does. As a venue its an ideal spot for young players to perform. They have their freedom here. Terry places no designs on the music, except that it should end by one a. m. And established bands like Sorgum or Condition Blue make it fly.

Jenny and Debbie come in the back talking with Amy. Hellos get passed all around. Surveying the overwhelmed kitchen, Jenny says, “Working hard, I see.”

Amy goes into the office. Without further ado Debbie and Jenny meld into the work flow. Amy comes out of the office pulling a strand of hair from her mouth. Full of energy, her manner is unpredictable, her movements quick and angular.

“Don’t we get paychecks today?”

On my way to the cooler for more apple cider I inform her, “No. That’s next week.”

“Oh.” She’s crestfallen. “Oh.” But her moods are also mercurial. A mischievous grin spreads across her face and she pokes Bob in the ribs just as he cuts a sandwich in half.

“Hey!”

She laughs happily. Amy will always be part the merry child. But Bob turns the table son her by asking if she would slice tomatoes.

“We’re out.”

“Let me get something to eat first,” she says, “and I’ll come in early.”

Bob says, “Jim’s working this afternoon.”

“He is?” Amy’s surprised. “I thought I was.”

“Well, you can check the schedule if you like.”

“No. I believe you.” She laughs. “I’m getting everything mixed up today. I tried to call my mom earlier and got my ex-boyfriend.”

She goes to the back prep table and starts in on the tomatoes. She once told me that she had read all the works of Sylvia Plath. Amy’s done some writing, mostly poetry. She’s been a great friend to the Bob and Jeff show. We’d read some of her stuff and it’s good and after months of genuine concern she actually got on stage.

As it worked out Bob and I simply introduced her, got her a table, a chair, and an ashtray, and walked into the crowd.

Frightened to the core she held her ground and gave a beautiful reading. Her sense of humor, cynicism, and the ability to be in the moment pulled her through. As she withdrew from the stage, shaken and drained, she said to us, “Thank you. But don’t ever ask me to do that again.”

We never did.

Except for Terry, who is in his early thirties, all of us workers are in our twenties. We share other characteristics besides youth. For instance we have all been, or are now, involved in study at the university.

Debbie Noble is a dancer. Among other projects she works with a modern dance troupe called One Plus One. Gaining recognition they have been touring more and more. As she glides out of the kitchen, pen and paper in hand to take orders from people in line, she reminds me of Lana Turner, the actress. She has a charming smile, one that would ‘launch a thousand ships.’ Or shipwrecks. Dancers are in great shape.

While doing dishes Jenny chatters away with the customers. Alert, she picks up on people before others do. She uses this gift to engage the people around her, and with her quick wit helps to keep their spirits up.

Jenny and Debbie go a ways back with Shelley and Terry. My guess is Shelley, being a dancer, knew Debbie and one thing led to another and they all ended up working here.

What with Mark clearing tables, Amy chopping vegetables, Debbie taking orders out in line, and Jenny on the dishes there are nine of us working. There's hope yet.

Terry puts an order down for Lori and she loads him up with food baskets. As he goes out Miriam steps up to wait on a man with thick glasses, the kind that could come from the bottom of a pop bottle. The lenses are so thick that they focus light in the extreme, obscuring features around his eyes. The frames are black plastic. He orders a pitcher of beer.

Miriam grabs a pitcher off the draining board and sets it before the man with the dim eyes. "Do you need glasses?"

She grits her teeth. Then tries to smile. But it's getting ugly. Bob steps in front of her. Taking the pen from her hand he turns to the man.

"How many glasses do you need?"

"Four, please." He doesn't seem to have noticed a problem. Or maybe he's just being polite and pretending not to. Miriam giggles quietly by the coffee maker, fiddling with an empty tea pot and an idea.

Jenny takes her by the arm. Leading her away, she says to Bob, "I left my straightjacket in the back room."

"Thanks, Jenny," Bob says. Then to the man. "That'll be two-seventy-five."

He pulls up a zippered pouch. Holding the leather up to his nose he tilts his head and peers inside, his fingers working through the paper money.

Leaving the sandwiches I screen for Jenny on my way to the sinks. This is the only time I've ever seen Miriam lose it.

“Honey,” Jenny pats her, “when we get home I’ll fix you a nice bowl of chicken noodle soup. It’ll make it all better.”

Miriam thinks this is funny, too. “But I’m a vegetarian.”

“It’s mock chicken.”

Finishing up with the man with the thick glasses Bob comes over to the sinks. He picks up the empty tea pot that Miriam left on the draining board.

“Do you need glasses?”

“I know, Bob. That stuff belongs on stage.”

He laughs. I drop a bowl into the middle sink and ask, “How do we put it on stage?”

“Ask Miriam.” Bob turns on a water tap and puts the pot under it. “Maybe we could do a sketch with different kinds of customers.”

“Oh! Wait! It could start with the ever popular question ‘May I help you?’”

“Okay,” Bob says. “We could use the usual questions. ‘Wheat or white?’”

“‘Lettuce, tomato, onion, sprouts, mustard and mayonnaise?’”

“‘For here or to go?’”

“‘What would you like to drink?’”

Bob asks, “Is that phrased right?”

He pours the now full tea pot into the coffee maker and sets it on the burner. I pull baskets from the second sink into the third.

“We could ask the questions in tandem.” I stand up straight and stretch. “How about this? We each get a customer at the same time . . .”

“We’d need to improvise a counter.”

“... say two people walk up and they’re both people we’ve never seen before. It would make us act and react in a certain way.”

Bob says, “The next pair could be regulars.”

“People we know and enjoy.”

“Right. Then two that are hard to wait on.”

“That need prompting.”

I propose another. “Maybe two beautiful women.”

“That don’t know each other.”

“It can work. There’d be interplay. Besides I might get a date.”

Bob laughs. “Okay.”

We drag dishes in and out of water.

Bob says, “We could face the audience as if they were the actual customer.”

“While holding an imaginary pen and paper.”

Bob attempts a closing.

“We could put the ticket on the sandwich counter and turn back to each new customer at the same time.”

“All of our actions could be simultaneous.”

“Simultaneous is good.”

“It might depend on who the next customers were.”

“That makes sense.”

“It does?”

He looks at me as if I ought to know better. “As much as anything else does.”

I laugh. Then, thinking about the all sorts involved with this new skit, I ask, because my memory is not as good as Bob's, "Can you remember this conversation?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"I'll meet you after lunch."

"Terry," she says, "I've got to get to class."

He takes a handful of orders from her. "Thanks for helping out."

"You're welcome." She gets Jenny and they head out the back.

"Bye, Terry."

"Bye. Thanks."

Amy puts a container of sliced lettuce on the sandwich table. "I'd better go, too."

"Okay," Bob says. "Thanks. We'll see you later."

She calls out goodbyes. "Maybe I'll come by for the music tonight."

I think she likes Brad. Working my way to the counter with a bowl of chili, I say, "See you, Amy." She goes out the back. As I place the bowl on Terry's tray. Mark steps up beside him.

"Terry," he says, "I'll have to go soon."

"That's cool. Grab a sandwich before you go."

"Thanks," Mark laughs. "I will."

The phone rings at the same time Terry asks his customer, "Would you like anything to drink?"

My customer wants a raspberry soda. So I go over to the reach-in cooler and on purpose hip Lori aside. The phone rings. I pull up my pop and a tin of chopped onions. Back at the counter I make change and, as nobody's been able to get to the phone after six or seven rings, I do.

"Nature's Table. What can I do for you this fine day?"

It would be good if this happened fast – the line still goes almost to the door – but the caller appears to be a first timer. And he's supplying a party lunch, so we go through the menu. Several sandwiches, chili, pop, and loaves of bread later I emerge from the office and put the order next to Lori's stack of fifteen or twenty.

"Another big order," I say.

"Okay." She looks it over. "When does it need to be ready?"

"They said they'd be by as soon as they could. Fifteen minutes to a half hour, I'd guess."

"Okay." She puts the order on top of the sprouts. "It shouldn't be a problem."

You can count on her. I look through the service window at the clock on the wall. One – forty – two. This can't last much longer.

In back by the slicer on a cutting board in front of the chili pot Terry hacks a head of lettuce in half.

The whacking sound of the knife on the cutting board makes my head yank up.

"Chop Chop," he says.

"Huh?" I was just on my way to the cooler.

“Chop Chop. I Chinee Wu’s Deli. I chop. Chop Chop.”

“Anything you say, chief.”

Terry becomes a warrior, chopping lettuce at a super human rate, the greenish pieces flying all around the chef’s knife, all around him. The man has an amazing amount of energy and as he looks at me I have to wonder how much of this scene is a pretending.

“I choppee.”

His knife goes through another head.

“Chop Chop.”

“Yes, sir.”

I step lightly into the cooler.

“I want something different.”

“Well,” I ask her, “what have you had before?”

She gives me a big smile. “I love your sandwiches. Your bread when it’s just come out of the oven is heavenly.”

“Well,” I pretend bashful modesty, “it’s not exactly my bread.”

She laughs at my foolishness.

“Think of it as everyone’s French bread.”

“Okay. You know, everything I’ve had here has been good.”

“Thank you. Have you tried the veggie chili yet?”

“No . . .”

“How does a salad sound?”

“Um . . .”

“Let’s approach it this way,” I say. “How hungry are you?”

“Really hungry.” She laughs again. “That’s why I can’t decide what to eat.”

This woman may have some gray hairs but she came to play. Anyway, my take on “really hungry” would be to eat anything and everything in sight.

“Have you tried the curried rice?”

“No,” she says, interested. “Is it good?”

“And good for you.” I reach for a bowl.

“I don’t know. Now I’m leaning toward the chili.”

“I could fix you a bowl that’s half curried rice and half chili.”

“Could you?”

“Actually,” I say. “I have that a lot.”

“Rice and beans,” she muses. “A balanced meal.”

“How about a small salad with that?”

“You know,” she says, reaching into her pocket, “I would like that. Do you have Italian dressing?”

“Homemade.”

“Okay, then. I’m sold. It’s lunch.”

I laugh. “It certainly is.”

As a dishwasher Terry is unsurpassed. He is superb. Not a wasted motion. He explained it to me once. “A pot only needs so much scrubbing.”

The main is self-possessed. What little I know about him I’ve gained by watching him. Like Mark and Jenny he’s good with people. He has a three-hundred and sixty degree awareness. You can’t sneak up on him. Which makes for a good captain of a restaurant.

I step over to help and he feeds me dishes into the rinse sink. I run them through the bleach sink to the draining board. It’s the Illinois Department of Health Code: wash, rinse, sanitize, and air dry.

Miriam comes over and looks through the things on the draining board with no success. “I need a big serving spoon, please.”

Bob comes over, a little winded. “We need glasses and spoons.” He puts his hands into the bleach sink.

A voice comes through the service window, low and gruff.

“Gimme two coffees, black.”

Miriam helps him. Bob moves dishes to the draining board. I move dishes to the third sink. Lori comes over. She reaches for a basket at the same time Terry rinses bowls, runs them through the sanitize sink and sets them on the draining board. This shoves me into Bob, who pins Lori’s arm against Miriam’s side as she pours coffee.

The moment becomes suspended. We’re stuck together. Lori sings, “Co-ag-u-lation,” in five bell tones.

She pulls her hand out and laughs as we try to untangle ourselves.

Lori and I make sandwiches. Or more accurately, she and I are working on six sandwiches together. It's exhilarating to stand next to her. Possessing a sweet disposition she enjoys herself. She's always happy. That and a peaches and cream complexion would make nearly any woman attractive. I would not want my emotion to spill over and spoil the fun.

She brings a welcome force to the world.

Bob comes over and bends down to open the left side door to the reach-in. Lori steps back trying to keep mayonnaise out of his hair. Terry comes over and reaches to open the right side door and I step back with sprouts in one hand and the squeeze bottle of mustard in the other.

"Coagulation," sings Lori, holding the mayonnaise spatula up by her shoulder.

"Lori?" I ask. "Doesn't anything bother you?"

Her big, cheeky grin gets shy now. "I don't know." She looks at me. "Isn't that the way you're supposed to be?"

A woman can stun a man with her rightness. Upheaval happens inside of me and I blurt out, "Okay. I give up. Will you marry me?"

I surprise myself. Even as I said it I knew I meant it. Must have been growing.

Her beautiful face is aimed at the floor. The crew grows silent and I pit the possibility of joy . . .

My limbs are hotter, rubbery. Only a small part of me is now aware of what I've done. Do other beings ask such things of one another?

Still staring at the floor Lori says, slowly, thoughtfully, “I don’t think I’m ready yet.”

Then she looks straight at me. And what passes between us – FOR ONE SMALL MOMENT – is the honest possibility of our being together.

But it is not enough to make it happen. It’s a sad and beautiful world. Things stopped there for a second.

“Just thought I’d ask.”

Her eyes are wonderful. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

Lifting himself out of a crouch Terry goes to the counter with the butter. Bob, friend that he is, takes a moment to pass by my stirred up personality.

“At least she thought about it.”

“Yes,” I agree. “There is that.”

“Bob,” I say. “Look.”

He pulls his head out of the sinks. “Wow! There’s only five people in line.”

“Yes. I thought you’d like that.”

With a heavy sigh he drops a soup bowl back into the rinse sink. “I was beginning to think it was never going to happen.”

We wait on the last of the customers. The time comes when there is no one in line. Nobody at the counter. As we gather behind it Lori makes an observation.

“It looks like we had a food fight.”

Bob laughs. “I hadn’t really noticed. The place is a mess.”

Everything is everywhere. Except on the shelves. Bob makes more coffee then readies tea water. Terry and I put away the gallons of apple cider, milk, and ice tea, and the partial six packs of pop. Putting the lids back on the egg salad and the tuna salad Lori slides them onto a shelf in the reach-in. Then, taking a bleach towel and rinsing it in the hand sink, she pulls it lengthwise and lays it down against the food rubble on the sandwich board. Putting her forearm behind it – Terry brings over the big, green garbage can and flattens it to the side of the sandwich table – she squeegees as much as she can into the garbage.

Closing the lid on the depleted sandwich ingredients Terry says, “I think we better make sure the beer lines are clear.”

He opens the reach-in cooler and pulls out the red and white wine. He pours two Old Styles, one Augsburger light, one dark, then four glasses of wine. None of the glasses are full. We grab our favorites and lift our respects to each other.

Terry says, “Toast.” And we drink. Then he presents a toast. “May the bird of happiness fly up your shorts.”

Everybody drinks but Bob, who says, “Terry?”

Terry makes a convoluted set of gestures meaning I—don’t—know—I—just—said—it.

Closing the screen door behind him Arthur weaves his way through the bustling restaurant. Stepping up to the counter, he says, “Such a beautiful day. Ah, I see you’ve been busy.”

“Yes,” Terry says. “It’s been quite a day.”

Arthur asks, “How are the kids?”

A science teacher at the university, Arthur stops in nearly every working day for coffee. Like the two middle aged lady friends that will visit us for lunch every so often he carries with him something of the old school of conduct. First and foremost Arthur is a gentleman.

“They’re doing well,” says Terry. “Growing by the minute.”

“Isn’t that always the way,” replies Arthur. “And before you know it they’ve flown far from the nest.”

It has so eventuated that we the crew have formed a semicircle from the reach-in cooler to the coffee pot. Miriam bends and pulls out the gallon of two percent milk. She hands it to Bob who hands it to me. I hand it to Lori who puts it on the counter in front of Arthur. And taking a cup from the draining board Terry lifts the freshly brewed coffee off the burner and pours.

Not one of us has taken a full step. We have expended the absolute minimum amount of energy required to fill Arthur’s cup – and he didn’t have to ask for it. Pouring a lot of milk he adds a spoonful of sugar and stirs.

“Thank you.”

Terry sends the milk back along the route from whence it came and Miriam deposits it back inside the reach-in.

Before he goes, Arthur says, as he sets his spoon on a napkin by the cookie tray, “The first glorious spring day always seems eternal.”

Being customerless we work toward preparedness. Dishes are the top priority. Miriam's got the back of the kitchen cleaned up and she's ready to go home. Waiting on Monday's soup to reheat – the vegetable soup is all but gone – she hops up and sits by the chili pot.

Bob is cleaning the slicer.

She says, "I can't believe we only sold two pieces of pizza."

"I know." Bob turns on the slicer. Bunching up a bleach rag, he says, "Some days they're all gone by noon."

"I know."

Placing the bunched up towel against the whirling blade Bob watches intently as the meat and cheese grime lifts off and into the cloth.

There are only five loaves of bread left: three white, two wheat. We bag the days bread at the end of the night. It's come in handy the next day. We've pulled out the best loaves and put them back on the rack. Miriam offered to make more but Terry declined.

Jim Joyce comes in to the front door.

We're out of napkins. Walking towards the bread rack with my thoughts on the backroom and where the napkins are I am suddenly inspired. Darting forward my hands go out and I hold Miriam's soft cheeks between my palms. Kissing her on the very tip of her nose I say, "Miriam, you are the best."

Wriggling free, she says, "What are you doing?"

I'm sure I don't know. Bob gives me a look that spells go away in big letters. I had better go back to the counter.

Leaning against the wood paneling between the restroom doors, looking like he just woke up, Jim stares across at the menu blackboards.

Lori is doing dishes. I go over to help. And as I do it strikes me that we will never be as we were to each other. We wash dishes together, not saying a word, the coordination easy.

Ahe looks up. “Jim. What are you doing?”

“Sometimes,” he says, “it’s just easier to look at the board.”

“But, surely,” I say, “you know what we have here.”

Without a flicker of emotion he says, “Don’t call me Shirley.”

Peeling himself off the wall with an intake of breath he steps down into the kitchen. It’s two-twenty-three. He was supposed to be here at two o’clock. Grabbing a yesterday’s loaf of white bread he starts to make a sandwich.

“Looks like it’s been busy.” Jim is an old pro. The work to be done here he finds undaunting.

“Shirley,” Lori says, “that’s an understatement.”

Jim laughs. “Okay.” He pulls sprouts, cucumber slices, and bits of onion onto his tofu sandwich and squirts it with mustard. “I won’t be long.”

It’s over. The rush anyway. As the strains of Tom Waits’ “Swordfish Trombones” filter throughout the restaurant Bob and I sit by the halfwall near the speaker drinking Old Style. There’s the sandwich table to restock, and egg salad to be made, and dishes to be done. Jim should be okay until happy hour.

Terry stops by our table on his way to do errands.

“All set to close tonight.”

Bob and I have the closing shift.

Bob says, “Looking forward to it.”

“Should be a good night. Thanks.”

“Thanks, Terry,” I say.

As he pushes open the screen door, Bob says, “You know, it always amazes me that he’ll trust us.”

“He gives us a key and everything.”

“Yeah. Right. Exactly.”

“He has to trust somebody,” I say. “It might as well be us.”

“I suppose.”

“Yes. Well, now, Bob. Considering the new skit . . .”

“The one where several people come up to the counter?”

“May I help you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember the details we talked about by the sinks?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

I pull pen and paper out of my backpack.

“Okay,” I say. “It was ‘May I help you?’”

“‘Whole wheat or white?’”

“‘Lettuce, tomato, onions, sprouts, mustard and mayonnaise?’”

“Anything to drink?”

“That’s better phrasing.” I write this down. “What if they don’t want to eat a sandwich?”

Bob laughs. “I guess we’ll have to feed them something else.”

Chicken Fried Steak

The front door opens. A small man pokes his weathered head past the screen door. He steps quietly in, checking things out. Pocketing his hands he does a nonchalant about face and pulls up short, reeling in front of the art work on the wall. Customers look up. Racing around the kitchen - post lunch rush - I'm trying to create order. We need tuna and egg salad. We need cookies, the sandwich table is low, and beer and soda need to be stocked. Later there'll be a wine delivery. With an eye on the new fellow I wipe down the counter. Both the back room and the cooler need help.

So do I.

He steps up to me and it looks like there's half of a small egg attached to the end of his chin. Probably fifty to fifty-five years of age, he's dressed in an old wash-worn button-down short-sleeved work shirt only partly tucked into faded khaki pants. His boots are so worn they're almost talking.

Only the Midwest could create a man like this. He appears to be unaware of his hands as they draw up over his face. His hair is permanently ruffled. He's missing teeth. He has an active worried mouth and in general wears the expression of someone who mistrusts his surroundings. A farm boy grown? Standing sideways he looks me over with small brown eyes sunk deep in head. "Hi," I say. "What can I do for you today?"

He is at once timid and arrogant. "Wha'd'ya got?"

I nod to the menu boards on the wall. "That's what we have to offer. Mostly sandwiches and salads. Our soup today is lentil."

He eyes me cautiously. "What's that?"

I answer amiably. "It's a bean based soup with vegetables and spices." "Oh no, no."
His hands go to his face. "No, no."

I step sideways behind the counter. He has a voice like a little kid who talks to himself, language all chopped, an accent all his own. And a little too loud.

"Let me give you a few minutes to look over the menu. Feel free to mix and match."

He squints his eyes at the blackboard, scratches his head, and pushes his lower lip out over the upper one. Goofy man. But, hey - I'm pretty weird myself; look where I'm working.

As Terry says, any port in a storm. I go into the cooler shaking my head. The lunch rush has wrecked this place. No time. I grab carrots and celery for the salads. On the way out, I look over at our new friend. His face is about ten inches from the board, shoulders rolled forward, hands in his pockets and his nose pointed at the ceiling. Setting the vegetables by the chili pot I go into the back room for a can of tuna. I'm amazed at the amount of food we go through. Something that takes only three hours to consume here would turn blue in my refrigerator. Two and a half weeks later I would throw it out, vaguely disappointed.

The back room is a mess. There's no floor. Pinto beans seem to be everywhere. I did that earlier. No time. I climb over ten fifty pound bags of flour - wheat and white - to extract the tuna. Not to waste motion - efficiency always - I grab a plastic container of mayonnaise. Slithering off the sacks of flour, I kick over a bucket of lentils. The lid was not sealed. It'll have to wait.

Some days are better off spent in bed.

Terry will call soon for errands. I set the mayo and tuna on the sandwich table and become a pleasant restaurant server.

"Have you decided yet?"

He shakes his head, scratches his belly, and shifts his weight to the other foot. "Okay," I say. "I'll be back in a moment."

Out in the seating area I stack trays then baskets, bowls, and silverware onto a table, wiping down others as I go. Someone left behind an umbrella. That's funny: it's a warm, sunny day. On the way to the lost and found box in the office I pass a new face as he places his tray on the counter. We thank each other.

Our man appears to be missing. I hear the toilet flush. A second later the phone rings.

"Good afternoon, Nature's Table." "Hey, there."

It's Terry.

"Hey. Somebody will be at the counter soon. Can you bring down some milk? Hot sauce is almost out. We'll need eggs for tomorrow and I got a call from Jim Joyce saying he'll be late for dinner."

"Jeez, guy, anything else?"

"We've got an order for five thousand egg salads at four thirty. Want to help?" He laughs. "I'll be down soon."

"Thanks, Terry."

I hang up the phone.

"Got chicken fried steak?"

"No. I'm afraid we don't have the set-up for that."

He looks at the board and points. "What's this towboolee??"

"It's a middle-eastern dish. A grain salad made with bulgar wheat, olive oil, vegetables, and spices." I add, hopefully, "It's one of my favorites."

His lips pull back over his gums. "You got eggs?"

"We've got an egg salad sandwich on your choice of homemade wheat or white bread."

"Oh, no. No, no." He studies the board.

This is not an easy man to please. He must be hungry. He looks hungry. Why else would he be here?

He asks, "What's this pasto?"

For some reason people put wine corks in the till. I finger them now. "It's a rotini pasta salad with spinach, crushed garlic, pine nuts, salt, and shredded Romano cheese tossed with olive oil."

He looks blankly at me. Then turns back to the board. What's this gandolettee?"
Our pride and joy. The gondolette. This should get him.

"It's a ham, salami, and muenster cheese sandwich made with your choice of mayonnaise and mustard, lettuce, tomato, onion, and sprouts."

"That come with French fries?"

He stands sidelong to me, his head tilted away, his somewhat berserk eyes sighting me along his left collar bone. With his weight on his back foot and his arms tightly folded across his chest it becomes clear that he is trying to find out exactly where the food is.

"No, sorry - No room for a fryer." I pick up a cork. It's a little misshapen, having spent some time in a bottle neck, and dyed purple.

"What's this karbanzo?"

"That's chick peas blended into a spread with a curried peanut sauce and served on a sandwich."

We both know a door has closed on an idea. Drawing his hands from forehead to whiskered chin he sticks out his lower lip and almost kisses his nose.

"Wha'd'ya got to drink?"

"Well, there's the drinks board. Beer and wine. Apple juice, natural sodas. Mineral water. Coffee or tea. Milk."

He spots the tea boxes bunched up by the coffee maker. Sorting through them he pulls out a Lipton tea bag, holding it up to the light by its string.

I watch it twirl. "Gimme this."

I put a cup under it. He drops it in. I pour hot water. He raises the cup to his lips. He sips. I watch as he literally shudders from head to foot. So foul. So foul.

I want to dive under the counter to regroup. But magic forces me to the sinks. Washing dishes can be therapeutic. I look over my shoulder at the can of tuna. I've got to get ready for dinner.

"Can I have s'more water?"

I pour. He trembles. We share an afternoon. Upon finishing his cup, without a word, he drops money on the counter and starts for the door. Stopping in front of the art work, considering the red splashes, the twisted metal and torn cloth, he rubs the back of

his neck thereby generating a spin around that propels him out the door. I know we'll never see him again.

You win some. You lose some.

The afternoon has slowed. Serve a coffee. Sell a cookie. Make the student dancers from Krannert mustard sandwiches. I'm working on tuna and egg salad when Terry comes in the back door with two gallons of milk in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other.

"Hey, there," he says, cheerfully.

Chopping onions, I keep a close eye on the progress of the knife. "Hello."

He sets the bag on the floor and goes into the cooler. On the way out he tosses a few walnut pieces into his mouth. "Remember," he chews, "don't ever eat in a kitchen."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Groaning, he walks out to the seating area and stalks flies. Catching them mid air - something I can never do - he throws them outside.

The phone rings. I confirm that, yes, Sorgum will be playing Saturday night. I'm scooping chopped onions into containers for the tuna and egg salad when Terry comes in the back door with flowers from Ginza. He lays them on the counter. "Have Jim put these out."

My eyes are dripping. "Okay." Grabbing a paper towel I scurry past the counter and blow my nose.

Terry asks, "Everything compos mentis?"

"As far as I know." I sniff. "Some guy tried to order chicken fried steak earlier."

"Well," he deadpans, "I hope you sold it to him." Terry. There are times ...

We go back into the kitchen. I ask, "How do you make chicken fried steak, anyway?"

"Take a good grade of ground chuck and use a mix you'd make for fried chicken."

"Oh." I wash my hands.

He counts out the till. "So what's your fowl? Excuse me. Flow. What's your flow?"

I laugh. "Get these salads finished." I pick up the knife. "We're pretty well stocked."

"Can you wait for Jim?"

"No problem. Miriam will be in at five-thirty."

"Thank Miriam." He goes into the cooler and comes out again. "I'm going to pick up the kids and get dinner."

"We have a full band tonight?"

"Lawrence, Dan Anderson, and Jeff Stitely. Should be a good night." He raises his brow and I can see the hope of the small business owner through his glasses.

We walk around the bread rack. On his way outside Terry goes down on one knee in front of the dough mixer and prays, "One more day, friend." While there's humor he's also dead serious.

Pushing out the free standing screen door he sets it against the outside wall. "See ya, chief."

Terry picks up three pop cans and tosses them into the recycle bin. "Thanks, Jeff."
"Thanks, Terry."

We jockey the screen back into place, then I go back into the kitchen and look to the counter.

Mick Woolf

We met at the Fiesta Care in 1998.

J.M.: You also worked at Nature's Table for a short time.

M.W.: I did. Actually it was for not very long. It wasn't very long, when I think about it. It was only for a few months. (Laughs.) I'll have to think of which relationship I was having a difficult time with then. Went cross-country ... to get away. Hitched to D. C.. Terry consoled me. He said, "How old are you?" I said, "Like twenty." He goes, "Well, when you're thirty I'll worry about you then, if you're going through this still." Well, you should be worrying, Terry - anyway -'cuz now I'm almost forty. All right. Let's see. It was 1982.

I remember there was a place called Act IV. It was something and then it was called Act IV. I guess they must have taken the name from being right across from Krannert. Three acts in one play, you come and drink afterwards at Act IV. Same building as Nature's Table. It was just a place you could drink and eat and Terry picked it up.

I remember just kind of hanging outside one day with somebody and Terry came out and just offered us some beer- standing out there on the sidewalk, saying hello, or whatever. It was really nice. That was the first time I met him. And I thought he was very cordial, trying to get business, opening up. And I don't remember when it became Nature's Table.

J.M.: Fall of '79. What did you think of Nature's Table?

M.W.: Right. What I think of it like with the impact, the community, who were the people that worked there, or what they were trying to do themselves ... Obviously that

home for jazz idea, the alternative school for jazz - that they were willing to even commit to that and that developed through the years. I think Terry had an amazing aptitude for working with the musicians, dealing with a lot of the idiosyncrasies. (Laughs.) He was a very giving person. He had some stressful moments in there. . . which we all were aware of.

It was a night and day endeavor for him, he and Shelley both. But mostly we knew Terry back then. Shelley was around somewhat. Terry was there most of the time.

The main thing about Terry was he just extended himself to everybody. He truly ... wanted to help everybody out. Or at least give everybody an opportunity, whether it was an opportunity to play musically or the artist to hang their art, or even just people like us to work there. He was very trusting. I don't think he was naive, but I think he chose to be trusting; even if it went against his grain or better judgment and he had to draw lines later on some things, I think he remained really open. He affected a lot of people in town. Serving as a community resource. Well, I think that same kind of generosity that was reflected in his manner came through the organization. It's kind of like that top down thing. You got a shitty person at the top, that can often be felt that way throughout. If you have a good person at the top, hopefully it also translates. Sometimes it can translate into a decent thing even though people up at the top weren't so hot. He wasn't constantly riding you. He'd work with you. Even if he got tense in moments, you usually knew it was going to pass. It wasn't personal. I think people knew that with him. Yeah. So his generosity and I think just extending to ... opening it up. And I'm sure a lot of that, too, was Shelley's influence,

especially with the White Street Arts Center as well. She worked hard to bring people in. But ... I really think Terry was the one with the persona.

M.W.: Nobody was doing what he was doing. He was offering, you know, some vegetarian type things, or just some alternative to what was available out there. Whole food. Whole wheat bread. Making their own ... very self-sufficient.

M.W.: It was malleable. Guido sticks out. George (Boyle) playing there. The Mighty Hounds of Joy. He always found his way home. Isn't that amazing. He had a color TV. (George is blind.) Did you know that? Did I tell you this?

We lived on Main and Weber. Jerry Danziger and, uh, Mark Deffenbough - who messed up his hand - and Rich Brown, the Go player. And so George had his TV there - he was storing some stuff. It ends up in the living room and we didn't like it. Except Rich wanted to watch it. So we kept taking it downstairs. And every few days it would reappear and Rich would be watching it. When he wasn't watching it we'd put it back down. We just didn't want it to be a TV house. Gradually of course we all get sucked in. First we were giving George shit. "Would you get your TV out of here?" Pretty soon, George would come over. We said, "Shut up, man. We're trying to watch TV". So I remember the final episode of MASH. I was on campus. I ran all the way home. He took the TV.

M.W.: It's like mercury. You get close to it and you lose it. . . with the essence. It's like going down that checklist of all the components. It seemed to just jell. It was a sad day when it closed. There's still a legacy in town with it.

J.M.: Do you think it's turned into a myth at all?

M.W.: I don't know about a myth. There's a legacy though. Well, okay, here's another effect: the jazz program that we do on WILL (public radio) Saturday nights. So I do a three hour show where I program the music. But for one hour before, for most of the months out of the year - maybe a good eight months out of the year - we have recorded music from the gigs in town, of local players. And it came out of those closing celebration tapes that weekend at Nature's Table. Paul Wienke recorded that and eventually it turned into a series. Now year after year after year we've been just recording stuff ... it's all contemporary now. But that sparked it off. So you're asking about the impact now of something that isn't even around anymore ...

I'll tell you something else that grew out of that was the Jazz and Blues Association. CUJBA. (Champaign-Urbana Jazz and Blues Association). To try and get the club owners to offer this at their venues. To try to organize musicians. Which never happened. Still. Unfortunately. And, there's a lot of things in omission there that we've never done. But consistently there's been a newsletter - though it's in a real sparse form right now. But after many years. There's a hotline, a weekly hotline listing on WEFT (the community radio station of which Micky is the manager) which all the airshiffters read. And there's a phone line to call up if you want to know what's going on in town. So, I mean, this really grew out of it. Unfortunately for Terry this stuff wasn't there to support him while he was here. So. Yeah. A lot came from that. That we organized. So, the radio, the jazz and blues hot line, the newsletter, the jazz and blues blowouts and festivals. Trying to work, coordinate in the clubs. There was a real effort that was taking the legacy and the impetus and the cue from Nature's Table and you're right ... trying to fill the void.

M.W.: You can name different cultures in different clubs and restaurants and some of them are going to be a lot more mixed and open than others, and some just have that established crowd. Townie bar. Biker bar. Student bar. The Table may have had its basis, but its basis was very varied and interconnected, or interwoven. A lot of lines of connection. A lot of cross-section of different communities that would come in.

M.W.: Oh when Raphael (Garrett) died in his (Guido's) car. He was driving around with him.

J.M.: He died in his car?

M.W.: I think so. Guido was driving around with him for a while. What happened: They were together. I don't know if Raphael had a heart attack. They had that weird rivalry, contemporaries that they were. Guido was very upset. He was, "Like, man, you don't understand. You don't understand." He was telling me what it was like, basically. He lost a contemporary was the way he saw it. There was nobody he could relate to like he could with Raphael in the scene in town.

M.W.: Beer selection was pretty good at Nature's Table... It's not something you saw every day at that time in this town.

J.M.: How was Nature's Table different in 1982 than it was in 1990?

M.W.: Well, I'll tell you what. Before I answer that let me re-cap just components. The food that they presented is one element in a whole myriad of ways that we talked about. The whole foods. The different sandwiches, even to the beer. All the different crowds that were there, from politicals to the artists, the musicians, the characters, the university

people, workers, professors, students, grad people: The incubation period that went on into the artistry. A place for people to go.

The climate of the country, just changed, too. This was going on, you know - the end of Carter and through the Reagan years and Bush. Bush was still president by the time this place closed. Carter was president when it opened. Now there's . . . There's a helluva place.

M.W.: What did it do for me? First of all Terry gave me a job. I needed one. I think he was really a good boss - which showed me that people could be. Very rare. It was a place where I think things flowed well... You didn't hate going into work. Very rare.

Maybe I'd describe it as a way station.

Bored

"What do you want to do?"

My friend Scott curves against the wall and lights a Camel cigarette.

"Oh, I don't know."

Tuesday lunch, this early autumn day was slow, excruciatingly so, and the few customers who felt the need for our form of nourishment have long since left us. Perhaps it's the weather; being perfectly suited to humanity's needs, the great outdoors beckons us to that which finds a person able to believe in immortality. Jeff Machota and Bob Weckback join us, Jeff sitting down with a can of Old Style beer. Except for Lisa, who is behind the counter, and us, the place is empty. I've got one leg up on a table by the front windows, the other over a chair, my arms draped across two more chairs, and my spine sagging into another. Bob says, "Looks like you've made it all the way to sprawled."

Naomi comes in the door and I say, "Thanks, Bob. Tell us about your shirt." Scott snickers, exhaling smoke. Checkered, purple in foundation, Bob's shirt is too loud. "I don't know," he says. "It's a shirt."

"And a fine one," Naomi says. Here to work the afternoon shift, she gives us her sparkling smile hello before walking towards the kitchen.

Scott and I sip from our Old Styles. Jeff, leaning back against his chair, doesn't seem able to lift his.

Nothing is happening. No excitement., Everything is thick and dull and so are we. Scott, here via Charleston, Illinois, and a gig with Stumpwhoopt - an oddly charming band able to cull music from all that is country, and bring it into the latter half of the

eighties with a noble flourish - was dropped on my doorstep yesterday afternoon. Bob is going to a meeting of the insurgent in our community. Jeff is supposed to be there, but he looks too numb to move.

There's something about gathering the necessary energy to handle the lunch rush. Sometimes when there's no rush the energy backfires and has nowhere to go. Which results in a draining sluggishness.

"Ready?" Bob asks Machota. "Let's go."

He remains wilted in his chair. "It's all bullshit anyway."

"Why, Jeff," I marvel. "I've never seen you so despondently agreeable. This revelation just come over you? This bullshit?"

He shrugs.

Bob smiles and laughs. "Well, have fun." He and his purple shirt go out the door. Terry walks in with a large bunch of flowers in a white paper cone. He views the human wreckage with a "Nice afternoon." Touching the flowers to his forehead, like tipping a hat, he goes toward the kitchen.

I sag. Scott smokes. Jeff sips. We look out the windows.

A guy parks a sporty new four-door across the street in front of the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. The car is crystalline 1987, gleaming, streamlined, boring - like every other car on the road. He gets out with a white terry cloth towel and starts to wipe down all the glass and chrome. "Ah," Scott says. "The pride of ownership." Apparently obsessed, the man rubs headlamps, mirrors and tail lights, all the while admiring the vehicle with far too much attention and affection for what is, in essence,

merely a conveyance. Scott says, 'We should put butter under his door handles.' Jeff and I laugh.

The man opens his trunk, puts the terry cloth towel inside, and pulls out a briefcase. Closing the trunk he steps over the curb and puts money in the meter. Then, crossing a strip of grass to the sidewalk that runs the length of Krannert, he casts a long parting look before walking purposefully away. To where? The man does have focus, and where he would go would surely be a fascination.

Somehow we are unable to follow.

The sunshine reflects off Krannert's front doors - glass affairs - into our place, splashing onto tables and spilling onto the floor. Time was there were only three two foot by four foot windows in the front wall. But Terry procured a glass door, handle, hinges, and all, and we - Stan, Terry, and I - knocked out the wall to create more light. With Stan's skill we managed to save the three small windows for future use. Ripping out the wood was fun. Starting bright and early it came out fast. Reframing took the rest of the day. We were just able to nail up plywood and stuff holes against passage of our furry little friends by dusk.

I was convinced we should make an open air cafe - maybe even have a roll down bamboo screen - but the idea didn't float, though I did have Terry going for a moment. Stan, the consummate builder, was locked into the project as described from the outset, constantly weighing procedure, and had no time for my nonsense. Do, however, keep in mind his alter ego as an eight millimeter black and white film maker, his body of work containing, in part, such titles as "Beyond Soup," "The Afternoon Brunch of the Almost

Dead," and the fantasy extravaganza "Oil Wars." There's probably a connection from builder to film maker.

Terry's glass door was mounted horizontally and the three smaller windows were arranged around it. The difference in natural light was remarkable. The sun reflects into our makeshift living room. Considering the clear, blue skies - there's a delightful breeze playing with the screen door - perhaps we ought to be frolicking upon the green, through glen and glade, breathing healthful air and digging fingers in soft earth so as to cavort with passing worms.

Scott says, 'We really should put butter under his door handles.' Lisa, sitting with us now, sipping an Old Style, says, "What?"

Though it takes precious energy I fill her in. Naomi goes about the task of gathering dried out flowers in their La Croix mineral water bottles on a tray. She listens to the retelling, a wide smile slowly moving across her face, as if she were a mischievous mom allowing her children a harmless misdemeanor. (Actually, she once told me she wouldn't mind having a few "little nippers" underfoot.)

Lisa stands. "I'll get the butter."

A big, beautiful African-American woman, Lisa is capable of sparking event. And it's a good thing, too, or nothing and its inertia may well have buried us.

Naomi gets wide-eyed.

"You aren't really going to do it, are you?"

Suddenly convinced it's necessary to our well-being, I spring into action. "Let's go, Scott."

"Nope." He leans against the wall and lights a cigarette, happy enough to simply supply the concept.

I turn. "Jeff?"

Wrenching himself out of his chair, he says, "It beats whatever it was I was doing."

Lisa returns with a pound of butter. She plucks open the wrapper for Jeff and I. We gouge out lumps and ball it like snowballs.

"Okay, Jeff," I say. "We need a plan."

"What plan?," he replies. "We go across the street and stick butter under his door handles."

"Right," I say. "Good plan."

Outside on the sidewalk we look up and down the street for the owner of the car, or any other signs of determent. Seeing none, I say: "Run!"

We bolt across the street - butter in hand. Dodging cars I make directly for the driver's side, leaving my back exposed to traffic. Jeff runs around the hood to the passenger side. We gum door handles, front and back, the kind that lift up. It's over quick. I strip the extra yellow goop off my fingers, flipping it onto the street. Veering around the front of the car Jeff smears the head lamps. Guerrilla action accomplished he joins me street side and looking both ways we dart across - dodging cars - into the restaurant and to gleeful safety.

There's a small flurry of applause.

I hold up my hands. "I gotta wash this stuff off."

Jeff and I make use of the bathrooms. Soap is unable to completely remove the last coating of butter. Jeff and I emerge just as Naomi brings out a tray of fresh flowers from the kitchen.

"You guys," she shakes her head, but her eyes still hold their sparkle. We follow her into the front room. Raising his beer can, Scott salutes us. "Job well done."

Lisa looks out the window and all our eyes go there.

"What do you think he'll do," she asks, "when he comes back?"

Scott says, "He probably has a hose, a water reservoir, and a generator in his trunk."

"I wonder."

One hour and two customers later and we're torpid to the hairline. The only thing that has happened is that the reflected sun shines deeper into the restaurant, creating streaks through tobacco smoke and dust. I wonder how it is that my friends - healthy, usually active people - could remain this inert, in wait on such a prank.

Lisa and Jeff do political work and both are involved with music. Jeff has one of those rare blues, jazz, funk, and rhythm and blues collections. Scott and I have played in bands, together and separately. There's always something to do, see, or promote. And yet here we sit waiting on some guy to come back to his car.

It has been said that crisis - a death in the family, a fire, the loss of a favorite pair of shoes - can bring out the best in people. It takes strong character to deal with great tragedy. But what of the other extreme: obliteration by tedium!

I sag.

Scott smokes.

Lisa reads the paper.

Naomi wipes down tables and chairs.

In an effort to break the monotony I ask a question I've always wanted to know the answer to. "So Lisa . . . "

She folds down the newspaper to look at me, exasperation blending with gladness for the interruption.

" . . . what do you believe in?"

Taken aback by my choice in non-sequiturs, she says, slowly, "I believe in something. I just don't know what it is yet."

"I believe everything," Scott says.

"I'm in love," I say. "I just haven't met her yet."

Jeff's eyes go out the window. Scott's eyes follow. Then mine and Lisa's. "Here he comes," Jeff says.

Our sorry personalities perk up. Lisa asks, "That's him?"

I say, "Yep."

"He looks like the guy that would drive that car."

Striding up Krannert's wide walkway, briefcase in hand and sporting a brand new haircut, our man checks traffic before stepping into it. He only has eyes for his car. With his devotion rekindled upon spotting it - it's almost as if he expected it not to be there - we are witness to ardent reunion.

He pulls keys from his right front pocket.

The observation of a fellow human is a vital and useful concern. Voyeurism it may be, but in this case it is also a study of a quirk we all seem to possess to some degree.

"Look at him." "There he goes." The man reaches out. "He's going to grab it."

Will he be a man - hazardous butter awaits his grasp - and simply open the door? He inserts the key. There is a measure of composure at stake here. He grabs the door handle - it's flat, a lever you pull up - and jerks away. Dangling his right hand into traffic his body corkscrews into the cocked shape of a discus thrower.

Delight pursues us. We whoop and holler.

He puts his briefcase down on the pavement. Traffic passes. He opens the door. Tossing the briefcase into the back seat he lays across the front seats, extending to open the glove compartment. Pulling out a box of tissue paper he backs up out of the car. He cleans his hand, then wipes the driver's door handle, then investigates the door behind. With a curious lack of emotional distress he works his way around back to open the trunk. His eyes don't leave the car for an instant. He passes around to the passenger side without complication, as if buttered car door handles were a regular occurrence. Like checking the oil level.

I ask, 'What are we seeing?'

Naomi says, "I need a movie camera." Scott asks, 'What's his point?'

Lisa suggests, "A prerequisite enema?" Scott says, "We're giving him one."

"Yeah," Jeff laughs. "But it isn't doing any good."

The guy reaches into the car for his briefcase. He takes it to the trunk then pulls out the terry cloth towel. Performing a full tour of inspection - with special attention

given to the head lamps - he wipes and dabs all the way around to the back of the car. Closing the trunk he gets inside the car. The engine starts up. He rolls down the window and straps on the seatbelt. Checking traffic, using mirrors, he backs, then noses out into the roadway. Never once has he looked across the street to where we, at Nature's Table, a restaurant, must surely be a source for grease. Lisa's mouth hangs open. 'Who... what was ... who was that?'

Scott replies, "A man in love with his car."

Lisa and Jeff have gone to catch the tail end of the meeting Bob went to.

Waitressing to pass her work time Naomi has brought us two more cans of beer. Scott lounges in his seat against the wall. My feet are crossed, perched atop a table.

"Well, Scott," I say, "What do you want to do?"

"Oh, I don't know," he says. "What do you want to do?"

Russell Cheatham

We met at Oh Two Main, a new club in downtown Champaign, in 2003. Russell, an organ player, is about sixty years old. He looks younger. Sorgum, a group he played in with drummer Jelly Hines and guitarist Chuck Tripp and a little later Scott Frillman on saxophone, was wonderful. There are few if any satisfactory words available to define or describe their music.

Though often asked, Russell hasn't been out to play much in recent years. He suffered a heart attack. Full with the joy of life, he's looking to form a new group.

R.C.: Believe it or not I can't give the years we started out. . . We started out as a trio with Lamont Parsons, and Danny Simms was the drummer. Lamont was the guitar player. We used to play across the street here at . . . We called it Ralph's. I can't tell you what the name of the club was. Ralph Calardi was the owner. We played there off and on for about a year. That developed into a different group. Danny left town. Lamont was doing some other things.

Chuck Tripp was my room mate for a while.

J.M.: Did you all grow up here?

R.C.: No. Chuck's from Bloomington (Illinois). Jelly's from here. And Scott Frillman is from here. He went to high school here. He went to college here. So it developed from a trio to a quartet, with Scott, Jelly and Chuck. We played together for twelve years. Played a lot of clubs around the area. Well, in Champaign we did, of course, Nature's Table. One of our mainstays there. We did the Blind Pig. We did Zorba's. Candy's, that was a small club in town. And a bunch of organizations, fraternal organizations. We did a lot of

weddings, a lot of house parties. A lot of park gigs. We worked . . . I would say ninety-five per cent of the time we were busy. And not only weekend gigs. We gigged in the middle of the week.

We did . . . Most people called it a jazz quartet. We did a lot of pop tunes. We covered some Stevie Wonder things, Marvin Gaye things.

J.M.: You would get up to the microphone and sing a little bit.

R.C.: I would sing off key. (Laughs.) We covered the pop scene and we tried to do one or two, three or four pop tunes every gig. The fact that we didn't have a singer in the group - and some of the gigs required us to do some pop things . . . We were decent enough with a horn player and a guitar player to cover pop melodies and stuff like that.

J.M.: Booker T and the M. G.'s.

R.C.: Some Al Green. Those are hip kind of things. And people who would not normally come out to hear jazz came to hear us 'cuz the word got around that we played some of everything. I believe that as an entertainer you have to play some of everything. When you walk into a club you have to be able to please the crowd. And if you can please the crowd with some jazz that's cool. Sometimes you have to play something else. Sometimes you have to play blues.

Nature's Table was sort of our proving ground.

J.M.: Did you play when it was first opening, too?

R.C.: When it was really small. Just the one side. Yeah. I think Donny Heitler was one of the first people to do the jazz thing there. Guido wasn't around yet. I remember seeing Donny with the organ. He's a great player, phenomenal player. And it doesn't matter what you play. You just call the tune and it takes him about thirty seconds and he's ready to go.

I'm not that accomplished of a musician. You can . . . I understand the process of what he's gone through to get to where he is today. Tunes go in certain progressions, certain. Tunes always go that way. You can have ten tunes with the same progression. And it doesn't matter what the key is if you've done your homework. Donny has done that.

We, with the quartet, we did a lot of private sets - like house parties. Just from . . . being . . . happy, I guess. Like Bobby McFerrin. "Don't Worry. Be Happy." We played together. We were friends. We went out and ate together. It was really tight. Everyone on the bandstand was happy. Everybody contributed something. You always interact. When you have that kind of camaraderie with the people, you interact with the audience even. They can feel that. "These guys are happy, so let's get involved."

I remember playing at Nature's Table and this town being a town that's nine to one. We would play 'til two o'clock and there's still people hanging out. I can also remember in the summertime where people were sitting out on the sidewalk. The place held what? There were a hundred people outside just hanging out. Guys would come in and get beers and go outside. Great place.

There was a bunch of original tunes that we did. Everybody plays all the jazz standards. We did a lot cover tunes from Jack McDuff, Larry Young, Jimmy Smith - very well known superstars in organ trio or quartet form, just to name a few of those people. And they all had very fine drummers, guitar players, or sax players. So it just fit the group that we were playing in. As a matter of fact, I have to say about the group, there was no leader, per se. We were all leaders. I was the organ player; but Scott Frillman was the sax player. I can't play sax. He can't play organ. So, we came together with some ideas.

Terry was in the food business when I met him. And I went over, we had a short conversation. I got a gig there, and we became friends. And we're still friends today. He's in the food business again. Terry was a fine businessman. During those years he booked a lot of people, lots of campus kids played at Nature's Table. They all learned their craft at Nature's Table. It was open seven nights a week. And they played some blues, they played bluegrass; some of everything has been tried at Nature's Table. And I'd have to say those musicians were here and they were involved with Nature's Table. They will tell you the same I will tell you. Terry's a good guy. Just like to hang out there. If you weren't playing you just went there to hang out. Eat spaghetti. (Laughs.)

J.M.: Terry placed no limits on what you played.

R.C.: You're the musician: you take care of that. It was just a great atmosphere to play in. Because people like closeness. And it was a really small place and you came to hear good music and your emotions bounced off each other. It was a little dingy. No stage lights. Not even a stage.

J.M.: You used to take out that four by eight sheet of plywood wall just to get your organ in.

R.C.: They had that big upright piano there. It was really crazy. Everybody who came there - even the guys, the musicians from out of town - loved to play there. Anybody who played there always wanted to come back. It was just a great place.

J.M.: What did you grown up on? What was the stuff you loved to hear? What was the stuff that made you want to play? What was the musical climate like in the sixties and seventies?

R.C.: In my young days as a pre-teenager I used to lay in the bed late at night and listen to this station that came from Nashville. It was called Randy's Record Party. They came on at about nine o'clock and they stayed on till five o'clock in the morning. WLAC. And they played blues, rhythm and blues, and the pop stuff. There was no rock and roll. I didn't know anything about rock and roll. We're talking Ruth Brown. Singing groups. That's too far back. My brain. There's a piano player. This guy's named . . . Red Prysock. Had a fat sound. He's Arthur Prysock's brother. Just a really fat sound. And I wanted to be a sax player. There was a piano in the house. And I used to fool around with the piano. So mom says . . . piano. So I never got to the saxophone playing. I used to listen to . . . Back in those days Red Prysock was a pop artist. The rhythm and blues artists of the time. Avery Parish wrote this tune called "After Hours" which was one of my favorite organ player's tunes. I really liked that tune. I started listening to all those rhythm and blues things and I just got more involved in the piano playing. I was in high school. I did a lot of singing. Lot of, like, group singing. That evolved into playing piano and singing. You know, I did some recitals and stuff like that.

Out of high school, there was a group that lived -- a family that lived a block away from me. And when I'd come home in the evening they were always practicing in the basement. I stopped by. Used to sit on their steps and listen to them play. Never thought about even joining a band or thought in terms of that kind of situation. And the piano player got sick or something and they asked me if I wanted to play. I said sure. So I

started playing with them. And the band was called . . . The Gaypoppers. I was still in high school.

The mother was the manager of the band. The husband was the sax player. Had three sons: a bass player, guitar player, and a drummer. And they had this guy named Johnny Blue Sanders. He could sing blues all night and never sing the same verse twice.

During those years we played in town - in the sixties - there were gigs everywhere. There was country and western gigs everywhere. There was rhythm and blues gigs everywhere. You could play on the bass. You could play Danville, Bloomington, Springfield, Decatur.

The black clubs - the black scene - was the Amvets, the Elks, and other kinds of private parties. The whole scene was campus oriented in Champaign. If you were a band there was no reason why you didn't have a frat gig or a sorority gig, because that was the scene. But in town, there were probably five or six places to play jazz. Places like Club Forty-five played jazz. Red Lion. Ruby Gulch. Chances R. Second Chance was on campus. When Mabel's first opened up it was a jazz club. They had those slippers. It was cool.

J.M.: When did you make the switch from piano to organ?

R.C.: When I was playing with the Gaypoppers I brought a . . . All the clubs - all over the country - the worst pianos in the world. Because everybody plays on 'em, everybody bangs on 'em. The club owners would never tune these things up. There was beer spilled in them. All kinds of liquor spilled in them. So I bought myself a Farfisa. The worst organ in the world. The worst organ in the world. Then I started listening to some other kind of cats. "What kind of organ is that?" And I noticed they all sounded alike. Later on

I saw Donny Heitler playing. But there was a guy over in Danville called the High Priest who played organ, a great organ player. They had a trio. He's still around. Doesn't play much anymore. And then I got hip to McDuff and Jimmy Smith and people like Don Patterson, Larry Young, at Nature's Table. That was enough. McDuff, by the way, is from Champaign. He's a native of Champaign. We became friends. Very close friends. Some of his relatives live right across the street from me. He was gone when I knew who he was. He was a bass player. And he was another one of those guys who was good enough to understand "If I have this organ I can be my own man. I can form my own group." So I went and got this organ. He's one of the better left-handed players, as far as the organ players go in the country. He died up there. (Minneapolis.)

J.M.: Who were some of your favorite players down there?

R.C.: Ah, geez. There's too many to mention. And I'll probably leave out a bunch of names. We were the only organ group in the area. And I suppose that's why we got so many gigs, because it was sort of a novelty. Most people had never seen this huge four hundred pound organ being put in the club and taken out of the club. People like Jeff Helgesen, who was a great trumpet player. Too many sax players to mention. Kevin Engel, he played baritone and tenor. (Tim) McNamara, tenor. Mitch Paliga played alto, soprano a lot. He (Ron Dewar) was around when I was around, but they played what the jazz cats would call straight ahead jazz, versus organ player jazz, which was oriented around a funk kind of feel. Some cats would call it acid jazz.

After playing with the Gaypoppers, I went on the road for a bunch of years with a group called The Wonders, rhythm and blues group, with a Hammond B-3 (organ) and Nathaniel Banks who was a trumpet player. He's a very fine jazz trumpet player. Two

trumpets in that band. Guy by the name of Tyler. Sax player, Charles Overton. This guy was hot player. He would lose five or six pounds a night. It came out of his shirt. Crazy. Came out of his shirt, playing. We went all over the country playing rhythm and blues, in those days - the sixties, seventies.

J.M.: Did they call it the Chitlin Circuit?

R.C.: Yeah. Everywhere. Everywhere. Playing in all the dives. Best places in the world to play. There to dance. I've played in places where they had chicken wire over the bandstand.

Great towns.

I got off the 'road and I came back here. I played with an organ quartet - another local really, really hip musician, a tenor player by the name of Tony Zamora. We used to play at Treno's on campus, which was, back then, called Prens. We used to play every Saturday afternoon. Same building. And I think if you go in there now . . . that big stone that's in the back room. You walk in . . . big stone there, sitting right in the middle of the floor. We played there every Saturday. We had a two hour gig. We must have played there for three or four years. And, the place, again, jam packed. Full of students. It was Tony Zamora's group. He was the head of the cultural center, the Afro-American Cultural Center. He played with the likes of Maurice McKinley, Cecil Bridgewater, Ron Bridgewater, Ron Dewar, Don Smith, an excellent piano player and singer.

Nature's Table wasn't around yet. It used to be a donut shop. Spudnuts.

J.M.: What was your favorite sandwich?

R.C.: ... I used to go there on Sundays and eat all the spaghetti you could eat. Spaghetti and bread. Real Italian spaghetti. I was like health food spaghetti. It was just really good.

It was basically a health food place. You'd drink a lot of beer. Lots of beer. Any kind of domestic beer you wanted. Just a fun place to be. Like I say, if you weren't playing there you could just go there and hang out and have fun. And everybody who walked through the building was like your brother or your sister or your best friends. It was cool.

J.M.: What are your musical plans?

R.C.: I'm in the process of putting three or four musicians together. At this point it's just a practice band. I like to develop something first before I come out and play. I don't know how long that's gonna take. Everybody's been after me to come out and do this thing of being the only organ player in town, so I'm working on it at this point. I would like it to be an organ quartet. I love that horn playing. It is just smooth. That puts the icing on the cake. When you have that rhythm section. That's it.

The Day I Discover We Have Everything

Mario can't mop the floor.

"I don't feel it."

I tread lightly.

"The floor is dirty."

"I know." He smiles graciously. "But it's not in the karma."

Here to work the five to nine shift I eye stacks of dishes on the freezer, on the floor, and try for a fitting zen koan. It's no use; the man has done his time. Nonetheless I attempt to touch a sense of responsibility.

"It needs to be done."

"So do many things."

Can't argue with that.

Making my way to the back room, and the mop, I check the chili and soup pots. They're low. I stuff the mop into the bucket and wheel it splayfooted, steering behind Mario as he makes himself a sandwich. Reaching the sinks I turn on a faucet to let the water get hot, then pour pink viscous liquid into the bucket. Mario spreads mayonnaise onto bread with a small metal spatula as I fit the four wheels of the bucket into the middle sink.

He asks, "How was your afternoon?"

"I sat on the quad and soaked up the sunshine."

"That sounds salubrious."

"I liked it."

Mario is the philosopher, a good-hearted young man with deep brown eyes and the small wisp of a beard. His work ethic might be heard to follow, still, though, it's hard not to like him. I turn off the water and pull the bucket, with suds, to the floor.

"Was it busy this afternoon?"

He confers with the ceiling. "No. It was tranquil."

Something in his manner suggest that there's more on his mind than lettuce for his sandwich.

I ask, "Did Terry call yet?"

He squirts mustard. "He came by earlier."

"Any reports?"

"No."

He brings his food to the other side of the counter. Settling on a wire backed stool he takes a big bite. Chewing thoughtfully through the mouthful, he says, "Do you ever think about history?"

I smile. In light of this question anguish over a dirty floor is nothing short of pointless.

"Only when I have to."

He muses. "I don't think history exists."

"No?" I run the mop in front of the ovens. "Where would it be?" I arrange another question for him. "Do you mean this building wasn't here before now?" I look at him.

"Or are you making all this up?"

"Yes!" he says emphatically, and points his sandwich at me. "That's exactly what I mean. Nothing is here unless I perceive it."

"Nothing?" I push the mop and twist the idea. "What about what you feel?"

The sandwich stops mid air. He fits words together carefully. "I can only feel things now."

Twisting again, I say, "Then how come I remember being on the quad?"

"Because that's here, too."

"I see." There's a lot to assemble and assimilate here.

The front door opens and into the empty restaurant steps a lone woman. I park the mop behind the bread rack and go to the hand sink.

As she strolls up to the counter I watch Mario decide in favor of interaction.

He asks her, "Have you ever been here before?"

She is spirited.

"Where?"

In all seriousness, Mario replies, "Here."

She laughs, undaunted. "I'm here now." She checks herself, patting her stomach and legs. "Or do you refer to reincarnation?"

They match eyes. A curiosity ensues. She, riding enthusiasm, and he, taken aback as much by the blithe response as the femininity exuded, share a gaze, large and tangible. Oblivious to outside circumstances they search inside one another. There's a moment where it looks like they're going to melt together. It stalls and Mario looks lost. She smiles at the impasse of the mind: their split second union.

With clean hands I step up to the counter and ask how I can help her. It takes effort, but she draws her eyes to mine and asks about today's soup.

"It's a tomato, basil, green pepper, and rice affair. Would you like to try some?"

"Yes, please."

I ladle a sample into a bowl. Mario peruses a book entitled 'Zen and Miracles.' I hand the woman a spoon.

"Thanks."

She tastes the soup and says, "Mmm," pointing her spoon. "That's one of my favorite books."

Mario looks up at her with a shy smile. "Me too."

She turns back to me. "May I have a bowl of soup and wheat bread and a glass of water?"

"Sure." I reach for a tray.

Mario says, "So you've read this."

"Yes. I love that book."

Pouring soup, I ask, "Can one love a book?"

She laughs and Mario asks, "Why not? You can love a thing."

"But the words were printed before you could read them."

Wryly, he says, "How do you know?"

"Wait a second." The woman hands me a five dollar bill. "What have I walked into here?"

I hand her her change. "A discussion of time and history."

Mario puts big, brown eyes on her. "It's all now."

She leans towards him. "You mean there's no history?" Her hands spread out from her body. "Only now."

He nods. "History, like everything, is now."

She goes on, looking at the floor. "But what does that do to time?"

I hand her a water glass. "He purports everything, including all time, is happening now."

A touch bewildered, she replies, "So I'm born and I love and I'll die all at the same time."

Mario bites his sandwich and asks, "Do you believe in time?"

"Do you?"

A bit of lettuce drifts down Mario's chin. He slurps it up.

"History," he gulps, "and time presented in history, are only constructs, and as be, can only be used as a tool."

I hand the woman a piece of bread. She takes it, and half speaking to herself, says, "Food as a tool." Looking at the bread she makes a decision. "I need to eat this piece of history and get to class on time."

I ask, 'What do you study?'

"Physics."

"Heads up, Mario."

"Metaphysics has met time," he says, happily, "and all parallel universes eventually coincide, and therefore co-exist."

She laughs. "Everything and everyone does at some point."

I wonder if that would make a good pick up line.

She picks up her tray, and thanking us, takes her leave.

"So, Mario", I say, when she has moved safely away, "How does this theory of yours deal with the future?"

He does not hesitate. "Like everything else, the future is now." The statement seems to please him. It neatly wraps it all up.

I can't resist.

"If everything is now," I say, "and so am I, does that mean I should know everything?"

"You do." He is sure.

"Then how come I feel dumb?"

It's been dead all evening. Few customers. Dishes washed and the kitchen in order, I've pulled everything off the floor of the walk-in cooler to give it a good cleaning. Buckets, boxes, and cases of beer and pop line the area in back between the prep tables and with room to operate now I'm ready to sweep and mop.

The phone rings.

"Good evening, Nature's Table."

"Hey, there."

"Hi, Terry."

"How was dinner?"

"It was pretty slow."

"How did Mario do this afternoon?"

"Well," I say. "He was here when I came in at five."

"That's something, anyway." He moves onward. "Do we need anything?"

"It doesn't look like it. I've got the kitchen clean and the reach-in stocked and I'll set up for the music soon. Other than that I'm working on the walk-in. And it looks like I'll get to the back room."

He says, thanks, then asks, "Did you turn on the outside light?"

"Yep."

"Okay. I'll be down soon."

I go back to the cooler.

Bending low in order to sweep underneath the shelving I pull estranged lettuce and other questionable objects across the sticky floor and out into the kitchen. Shifting kegs over the metal - it's mottled, pale after years of service - I run the mop through several times, then head for the back room.

Steve Griggs, who will be performing later, stands at the counter watching me. I'm mystified.

"How did you get there?"

He looks around himself then gives up his soft smile in a wide grin. "I walked through the door."

"You sure?"

"No," he considers, "but I would like a cup of coffee."

I set the pot on the counter for his inspection. "This stuff is pretty burnt." He sniffs.

"Let me make you another pot."

I pour water into the coffee maker. "You're welcome to the dregs if you like."

He says thanks and I pour black death into a cup. He pulls it to him. "Cream?"

"Yes, please."

Steve is one of the quiet people. He plays a thoughtful form of jazz. While I like boisterous and bluesy saxophone, he uses the horn to probe the depths, bringing to the listener something beautiful, though perhaps a bit strange. A sweet, persistent music to walk home with.

He asks, "Do you mind if I warm up?"

"Not at all. Help yourself when the coffee's through coming down the pipes."

"Thanks, man."

"You want the tape off?"

"That's all right."

Steve takes his coffee and saxophone to the stage. I turn the tape down. Hank Williams, senior, softens his touch. I walk to the stage. Steve sets his saxophone case on the piano bench and takes a sip of coffee.

A grimace unique to mankind attacks his face. "This is terrible."

His tongue licks around his mouth as he squeezes his throat back, swallowing. I grin.

"Yeah, well, you did ask for it."

Doing what he can to regain a life worth living he puts pained eyes on me. "You got a point."

I laugh and ask, "Is Doc Scott coming down tonight?"

"I don't think so." With respectful disgust he puts the cup on top of the piano.

"He's got patients early in the morning."

Doc Scott plays a serious trumpet when not practicing the art of dentistry. "Dan Anderson and Jeff Stitely are playing tonight, aren't they?"

He has the saxophone case open. Removing a goose-neck piece from a felt pocket he fixes it into the body of the horn.

"Yeah. We're going to do some new charts. Some originals." Holding the horn he shakes his head. "These guys will try anything."

"You always sound great to me."

His smile widens. "Thanks, man."

Even though I've set up for music a hundred times it remains a curious endeavor to get things plotted just right. Shoving tables off the stage I stand on chairs to set lights so Steve can get started. He runs scales, adjusting the mouthpiece, getting his sound. On top of Hank Williams - discordant jazz over old time country-it helps peculiarly.

I jockey tables around. With a handful of small lamps making shadow through the cross-hatch of rafters I focus light off tables edges to the floor. People need to be able to see where they're going. An empty club in the hour before the audience arrives is a place of anticipation. And the light shining from the stage is an invitation.

"Steve, what's that head?"

He pulls the horn from his mouth and says, "A Night in Tunisia." I nod, wondering after its familiarity.

There's some time before Jim Joyce comes in to close. So I go back to the walk-in cooler. I restock kegs to the left of the door. Reaching above my head to the top shelf at the right wall I pull down two crumpled brown paper bags. Parmesan and Romano cheese. I go to the back room for plastic half-gallon containers. We don't need the bags to burst.

I wonder about Mario's all-time-is-now theory. If the paper bags of grated cheese were to burst and I left the ensuing mess lay where it might, would it eventually clean itself up? In accordance with this theory there would be a time where there was no spill. I could just wait.

On a prep table I transfer the cheese, label and date the containers with masking tape and magic marker, grab a tray, and go back into the cooler. The cheese goes back on the top shelf. Yanking turkey breasts from a cardboard box I lump them awkwardly on the tray and set them next to the cheese. Turning to the other shelf I try to pull a box of raisins out from under plastic bags of fresh spinach. Some bags fall as the topmost turkey breast begins to move. It topples. Quick to plant my feet I block the shrink-wrapped turkey with the raisin box; jamming it into six-packs of beer and natural sodas on the shelf below.

Pop hits the floor. A can explodes and I jump, holding the raisin box. But there's nowhere to go. The cooler's too small. The turkey is safe anyhow.

I step out of the cooler, fizzing can in hand, an arm under the raisins, and drop the can into the hand sink.

Steve pours himself a new cup of coffee. "What are you doing in there?," he asks.

"I'm not entirely sure."

Setting the raisin box on the sandwich table I head to the back room for the mop. But the front door opens. It's Jeff Stitely leading his bass drum in with his stomach.

"Hey, man," Steve calls. "How are you?"

Jeff puts the big bass drum down with a huffing sound. "Great." He stands all the way up. "How are you?"

It's a pleasure to marvel at these kindred spirits - but I'm employed. I ask as deferentially as possible -- I'm not a part of their reunion -- "Can I bring something in?" Jeff turns to me with a big smile. "That would be great. Everything's out front." Outside the air works inside me. The sun is almost down. I stroll along the sidewalk wondering who will show for the music tonight. On the Thursday before the long Labor Day weekend it's hard to say.

I heave a green duffel bag inside.

"Jeff," I say, "What have you got in here, cement?" He hustles toward me.

"Let me get that."

"Sure."

As I lay the cloth bag on the floor I realize it holds all his loose drum gear, the pieces that hold the drum set together. He hefts the duffel bag to the stage. I go back outside. They meet me at the door and I bring in Jeff's rug. We bring in the rest of Jeff's gear and he begins the process of building his drum set. "I listened to those Coltrane sides," he says.

Steve clips his horn to his neck strap then leans an elbow on the piano. "Mike Kocour got those to me."

Bending from the waist, his Alexander training showing, Jeff unrolls his rug. He opens his bass drum case, then pulls the rug a few inches across the scarred linoleum.

"Jeff," I say. "would you like a cup of coffee?"

He bobs up.

"It's fresh," I say.

I'd love one."

“Want cream?”

He slips a rod into the bass drum and mounts a tom-tom. "No, black, thanks."

Well-schooled as a percussionist Jeff has made an effort to listen and play. I once asked him if he could make seven beats fit evenly over a five beat measure. He went to the wall with his sticks. It took some doing but Brubeck met Stravinsky.

Using the bulk of his body to guide the big stand-up bass through the doorway, Dan Anderson comes in hugging its long neck.

There are warm greetings.

Dan is a wonder, a very nice guy. I don't know where or how or what he studied but his music seems effortless, fluent. To walk a bass requires strenuous physical exertion. To do so without sweating borders on the impossible.

Feeling like an intrusion, I ask, "Can I get you anything?"

Dan's manner is open. "Can I have a plain mineral water, please?" "You bet."

I go to the kitchen and reach in to the reach-in cooler for Dan's water. On an impulse I open the top to the sandwich table. All stocked up. There's lettuce, tomatoes, onions, sprouts, and cucumbers, mayonnaise, meat, and cheese in tins. In the left-hand compartment are the lettuce salad, dressings, butter and lemon slices in a bowl, Tabasco and Durkee hot sauce, mustard. I close the metal lid and go to the stage. The place looks good.

Dan unzips the canvass bass case, saying "I like the new charts." Jeff taps a finger on a cymbal. "What do you want them to do?" Turning to his music stand Steve flips through several pieces of paper. "We'll find out soon enough."

Wading through the spilled pop cans in the process of restocking the cooler I replace the fallen turkey breast up top more carefully this time. My hands pushing air above my head, I wait. It stays put. So I pick up sodas - loose ones, ones in six-pack rings with a few missing - and put them back on the shelves.

Discarding plastic and cardboard packing, I stock shelves with beer. The cooling unit protrudes from the ceiling, blocking shelf space. I slide containers of garbanzo beans, chili, split pea and mushroom barley soup over to it, plus a bag of garlic. Miriam may not have to make a soup tomorrow: We'll be closed for the weekend. History is now. Grabbing the raisin box off the sandwich table, I push it in between a box of walnuts and a box of chocolate chips. All time is now. I slip bags of spinach in on top of the walnuts. There's back up tuna and egg salads on the chocolate chips. I wonder if Mario would see the need for back up tuna and egg salads.

I pull in buckets of salads and cookie dough. All history is now. Jesus Christ, Napoleon, mastodons, Einstein, and the Who are all here now. Be here now.

I am.

I give the cooler a last mop. Surgery, Zeus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martians, memory and thought, sunshine on babbling brooks - all here now.

A clean, well-stocked cooler is something to behold. Good sight lines bring easy pickings. Always a plus in a restaurant. For the nonce it gleams. Who knows what it'll look like in twenty-four hours.

Every person I've ever known was bound to act under the powers that be. Be that as it may a person applies a method to his living, a philosophy, a recognized truth. Some fight through life. Others live in darkness. While still others just drift through it.

But nobody I've ever met was as sure as Mario. "Everything happens now, but only if I perceive it." Would Mario derive any satisfaction from completed work? The cooler looks good. It feels good. And in the morning Miriam can use it.

Work, after all, exists.

The band rehearses to the tables and chairs. I take the cardboard and plastic and heave it out the back door. There are three metal shelves in the back room. The one at the back wall is obscured by ten or twelve fifty pound bags of flour. There are hidden treasures back there. Old crock pots, disused hotel pans, parts and tools. I wonder if the bicycle wheel still rusts there.

In front of another rack bags of grains and beans lay across buckets of grains and beans. I refill them. Underneath the draining board are recyclables. The kitchen garbage cans need to be emptied. I dispose of glass, metal, and cardboard into the fifty-five gallon drums and take the garbage to the dumpster. Around back of the building I find a bottle in a crumpled bag laying on a copy of the News Gazette Want Ads. I recycle the glass.

Back in the kitchen I stir a little water into the chili, and look up at the spice rack. I could refill spices. While pawing through the fragrant though ill-marked bags a man in a beautiful suit approaches the counter, his head turned toward the band. I go forward to greet him.

Wearing a flowing salt and pepper coat with gray trousers he stops and turns to watch the band for a moment, his back to me. I rub little circles into the Formica with a bar towel. When he turns again he makes a show of spotting me.

Slick and confident, with a wide smile, and sporting a little gray around the ears, he says, "Good evening."

"Good evening," I smile. "What can we do for you?"

"This the band tonight?" He floats a hand stageward, nodding his perfectly haired head in time to the music.

They do have a groove. "Yes, sir."

I place the bar towel aside in a lump and spread my hands at arm's length along the countertop. Taking a moment to appreciate the music, he reaches an engraved cigarette box from an inside pocket. I beat him to the lighted match, sliding a black ashtray across the Formica his direction.

He leans an elbow on the bar, pulling the tailored jacket with a hand to hip pocket. He has a slim waist and a sparkling white silk shirt. Perhaps fifty years of well-used time speak here.

He puffs smoke. "I like." The band rehearses.

"Stick around," I encourage. "Anything can happen." I add, "And usually does." He rubs the bridge of his nose. There's a large diamond pinky ring. He peers at the glow end of his cigarette. Drawing a thumb across his cheek cagily, he leans a little toward me.

I lean a little toward him.

"I've got some friends," he says. "We're looking for a place." He sands upright tucking in his already tucked in shirt. "Thought we'd check you out."

I nod a worldly nod. "It is what you see," I say. "That's right."

Confidences now shared I think about going out to the movies. I can't imagine what he wants. A hot date? A ham and cheese sandwich?

He leans on the counter again. "Here's what it is." In earnest now, he says, "My people want to surprise a friend of ours. It's her birthday and we want a party for her." "Okay."

"I've got a cake," he says. "Do you think you could keep it in your refrigerator for me?"

Aha! Now I get it. Why was this so hard for him? I become gracious and charming.

"Absolutely," I say. "What's the birthday girl's name?"

"Elsie." His burden begins to lift. He speaks more openly. "She's my sister's best friend. They've known each other since they were little. They work together." And here I thought he was going to sell me part of Florida.

"Bring it on in."

Why not? Nature's Table is always willing to help a guy with a birthday cake. He hurries out, thanking me, and is back before my wits can gather. One arm under a white box, he approaches the counter holding up a paper bag. "I've got candles."

He puts them down on the counter.

"We've been trying to find a place for Elsie's party all day," he says, grinning. "We were going to have it at my sister's, but the toilet backed up."

I laugh. "Good grief."

"Then the kitchen sink flooded the floor." Momentum drives his hands up to his ears. "They got a plumber down, but he couldn't figure it out. So he turned off the pipes. Then the electricity."

"No kidding?"

"He was worried." The man lifts his eyebrows at the stymie. "I've been dealing with this cake all day." The earlier shtick has vanished. He sighs and drops his hands to his thighs. He points.

"The chocolate's starting to sag."

We look over the cake. All things considered it's faired rather well. Just a little droopy around the edges.

I inform him that I won't be here later, Jim will, and I'll let him in on the surprise. He asks if Jim could light the candles and bring the cake out to Elsie.

Thinking Jim will get a kick out of this, I say, "I don't see why not."

He opens the bag and shows me four candles shaped like horses, chess pieces with wicks sticking out of their foreheads.

"She's turning forty today."

"Really. That should be celebrated."

He nods in agreement, looking at the cake. "I've got just the place for it," I say.

"That's wonderful. Thanks so much."

I take the cake into the cooler and set it on a case of mineral water. Up at the counter the sharp dressed man fidgets with a question. "So everything's all right?"

A little something of what he must have been like as a kid shines through. "It's fine," I assure him.

He turns renewed interest to the band. "They sound really good," he says. "I'll bet Elsie will like it here."

"We hope so."

He looks at me, perhaps for the first time, and realizes I wasn't kidding him. In gratitude he's awkward.

"Just talk with Jim when you come back."

I smile. "I'll explain about the candles."

"That's really good of you."

His honesty catches me off guard. I reach for the bar towel. "Our pleasure."

Straightening his tie, he says, "Well, I gotta pick up my sister."

I wish him all the best, and on the way out the door he flips his forefinger off his nose at me. Two guys in grand cahoots.

I pour ashes into the garbage, followed by old coffee grounds. I fill a new filter with fresh grounds and after readying a pot of cold tap water take the bar towel over the counter, under the cookie try, a napkin dispenser, tea boxes, and over the coffee maker.

I stir the tomato-rice soup, then lift the tureen to check the water level in the crock pot. There's enough. I replace the soup, clean up the crock pot and the service cart it sits on then the cart next to it with the cash drawer.

Pulling the plugs in the sinks, I walk out of the kitchen. Signs and posters are taped and tacked and stapled to the wall between the bathrooms. A bazaar at the meeting house for the Quakers. A lost dog notice with a drawing. The dog answers to the name of Spot. The Farmer's Market. A lecture by Noam Chomsky. A big, full color poster advertising a Beverly Blossom dance concert at Krannert Center. The last time I saw la grand dame she created movement in two hundred neckties.

This month, as the yellow Natures Table poster with black lettering states, we'll be hearing often from Mike Kocour, Dan Anderson, Brad Wheeler, Lawrence Hobgood, and Jeff Stitely. Very willing to play, you could almost say Jeff is our resident drummer. He'll be playing more than half the dates this September. The rest of the guys will be here nearly as often in various configurations and with other musicians. Nature's Table, for many of the young players, is a musical proving ground, a place to get your ya-yas out, a

place to practice and perform and prepare for the move to Chicago or New York - or other parts of the world. Mike, Brad, Dan, Lawrence, and Jeff have made music their life.

Also this month Bruce Brooks and the Wonders. Rocking blues with a Chicago influence. Bruce has played on Maxwell Street and New Orleans during his travels. When he's in town he likes to stop in for a bowl of tabouli. Kristen Lems will draw the folkies out with her guitar, as does the Peppermill String Band. Union Station, with Alison Krauss' pure voice. She won the Illinois State fiddle championship at the age of twelve. John Pennell, on bass, brings his songs to this lovely bluegrass band. Peter 'Madcat' Ruth from Ann Arbor, Michigan: Hendrix meets blues harmonica. What this guy can do with a few special effects, his voice, and guitar, well . . . I guess you'll have to come by and see for yourself.

Next weekend, coming down from Chicago, we'll host a performance by Joel Spenser, Ed Peterson, and Eric Schnieder. All seasoned jazz musicians. They've spent time in Champaign, Urbana and I wouldn't be surprised if some of the local musicians sit in. I wonder if Kelly Sill will be down, too. Or maybe Dan will be on bass. Still more jazz: Ryan Schultz with his valve trombone. Kevin Kizer's heartfelt tenor saxophone. Condition Blue, with Ray Sazaki and Morgan Powell. These guys are it. Music professors at the university, and performers, they are veterans of the musical world, only coming out to play when the time is right. Their material approaches mastery. Dan will probably be playing bass. Or maybe Marlene Rosenberg. She amazes me. She's not very big and the stand-up bass is; it doesn't stop her. Listening to her you feel a quiet triumph.

Barney Kessel, internationally renowned jazz guitarist, will be stopping here later this month. One of the greats, going back many years, he once, of all things, recorded with Dean Martin (Dream with Dean: The Intimate Dean Martin, Reprise Records), Ken Lane, Red Mitchell, and Irv Cottler. A sparse, sweet record.

And then there's Sorgum. Musical monsters, they are so a part of the community it's like they've always been here. Everybody loves them. Music is necessary to most people's lives, and individually Russel Cheatham, Chuck Tripp, and Jelly Hines, Hammond organ, guitar, and drum set, respectively, are soul lifting. Together in a band they are a source of musical miracles.

Be-bop, Dixie, modern jazz. Experiments. Folk. Blues. It's a wonder all this can happen downstate in and amongst the endless flatlands, the corn and soybean fields. They say Illinois soil is some of the most fertile.

I check both bathrooms, run the toilet brush around the bowls, rinse the sinks, and empty the garbage pails into the kitchen can. I scrub the sinks. Plugging the third one I run a cold tap and pour in a capful of Bo-beep bleach. Counting out the till, I leave starting money. Rolling the bills I stuff them into a styrofoam to-go cup and head for the cooler. Other cups from lunch and the afternoon nestle inside the lettuce box. I toss in the evening's take. Twenty-seven dollars. Maybe pay the light bill.

Tired, the day's weariness suddenly overtakes me. I find myself staring out into deep space, unable to take mental stock of the work left to do. I stare some more. Then decision comes and I grab a beer from the reach-in cooler.

Soups, salads, sandwiches and all the fixings are available. The reach-in and the walk-in are stocked. We have all the beer, wine, pop and mineral water. Also ice tea and coffee and apple juice and milk. The kitchen is clean and orderly.

The word everything pops into my head.

Everything?

Could we have everything? Do restaurants ever have everything? I am renewed with energy. Gleefully I pull open the freezer door. Yep. Vriner's excellent ice cream. The family owned restaurant across town serves a fine breakfast, but their claim to fame is in their homemade deserts and candies.

As far as I can remember we've always needed something. Everywhere I go, roaming about the place, I find what I'm looking for. Light bulbs, aprons, ball-point pens. I go into the cooler. It's hard to look for something that's not there. But as I run down the list in my head - I've worked here long enough that it's ingrained - I can't find anything that's missing. Same with the back room, although I could check for the bicycle wheel. But do we need it?

Finishing up the spice project. . . again, we have them all. This is getting weird. As I go through all the cook's stuff I hear Steve stop abruptly. Jeff and Dan break a second later. I raise my head to look through the window connecting the kitchen to the main room. It's glassless, square, wooden, and about a foot deep. Perplexed, Steve asks if they could run the last section again.

"I can't find something," he says.

Dan hangs an arm over the body of the bass. Jeff plays sticks in the air. They let Steve look over the sheet music in silence.

He lifts his head and asks, "Can you hear what's wrong?" Question goes around the group.

Watching from the privacy of the kitchen I recognize that there's a lot of space in a trio. No piano. No guitar. No chord instrument. It creates a lot of freedom, but it makes everybody work harder.

Jeff suggests, "Let's take it from after the head."

From apparent nowhere he and Steve count out the time together. The groove never fully disintegrated.

I wonder what they were looking for. Or at. It sounded good to me. . Everything? Oh, the fanciful mind. I wander around with a bleach rag, cleaning things, and looking into corners. After a while the music stops and I go back to the counter. The guys in the band are laughing as they approach me.

"It was weird," Dan says. "Oscar was blowing hard behind Lawrence when Doc Scott stepped in and started working with Guido."

Steve turns to me. "You know Larry Beers?"

"Certainly."

Larry is the drummer exuberant. At seventeen or eighteen he is confident, fun, brash, and loud. Above all he can be loud.

Steve goes on, "And Glen Dewey?"

Glen is a self-propelled bass player, spirited, gifted, and given to strong opinions. I'm wondering what it is I've missed. Oscar is a crazy West African hand drummer. Lawrence is a great piano player. He once said to me that all music was jazz. Doc Scott is a trumpet player who is bound to push music to its limits. And Guido is locked into bop.

I'm all ears.

"Well," Steve smiles widely. "I'm not sure what they were playing, but . . . "

"It was a fast shuffle," Jeff helps. "And Guido wasn't drunk yet."

Steve shakes his head. "They were pushing it so hard. And Lawrence was laying down these bizarre substitutions and Glen was getting pissed."

Dan says, "Oscar got to chanting."

Steve says, happily, "Then Doc started playing." And they lose it to laughter. I grin along.

Steve manages to get out, "I didn't know that Guido could stretch that much." "Oh, yeah." Jeff says. "Doc was on fire and everything he did Guido matched in bop. I thought something was going to break."

Dan says, "Probably Glen."

"I've never seen Glen so mad, " Steve laughs. "And he just played better." Jeff says, "And Lawrence was madly oblivious, totally in the groove." Steve says, "Doc kept pushing Guido."

Jeff says, "Oscar was in the middle, man, chanting some African thing, drumming. And Larry was all wide-eyed, having a gas. He knocked over a crash cymbal."

"But Guido," Steve says, taking a step back from the counter and watching his hands. "He played bop beautifully, as if complete chaos were his natural state." He looks at his friends. "What is it with this guy?"

Dan shrugs, "He plays bop."

I don't guess these guys wake up in the morning eager to go back to sleep. I ask,
"Can I get you guys anything?"

As they go out the door for a little fresh air I can't help but wonder. I've got the place to myself. I suck in the silence. This place has its own personality. I. put myself in the exact middle of the building and slowly turn around, three hundred and sixty degrees. Empty. Clean. Prepared for night.

I dial the phone. Terry's answering machine picks up.

I wait. "Terry. Listen. We have everything. We're totally stocked. Come on down. There's nobody here. We have everything."

Hanging up the phone I hear the door open. Familiar footsteps approach the counter. I dart out of the office.

"Jim!"

I probably appear to be deranged. "We have everything."

He looks at me. Then around the kitchen. "Oh, come on," he laughs. "Restaurants never have everything."

"We do."

"Yeah?"

He looks me over. Jim is a little sun burned, which takes drive this late in the summer.

"What have you been doing?" I ask.

"We set a volleyball net up on the quad. Coffee filters? Plastic forks? Bleach?"

He came to play.

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

He laughs again. "Everything?"

"Apparently. From what I can tell anyway." "Wait a second." He checks the coffee.

"Fresh," I say.

"Toilet paper?" "Yepper."

"69 Eggs?" "Yes." "Butter?" "Yes." "Yeast?" "Ooh," I say. "Good guess. But yes we have it."

He lifts the lid to the sandwich fixings and closes it. "I don't believe you - yet." "Believe it," I challenge. "Find something we don't have."

"Customers." He laughs. "Below the belt, Jim."

He washes his hands. "How about mop heads?"

"New and used. You can mop the floor to your heart's content." "Later," he says, and goes into the backroom.

I take off my apron and drop it in a cardboard box by the furnace in the office. I'm sipping Old Style when Jim comes out of the cooler, tying an apron around his middle.

"It could be cleaner," he says.

"I didn't say the act was finished. Just that we have everything."

"Okay. Okay," he says. "I believe you. Why is there a cake in the cooler?" I fill him in.

"Elsie, huh." He checks the till. "How many people?"

"I'd guess something like eight."

"When will they be here?" "Soon. I'd think."

"Do you have any matches?"

I check my pocket and come up empty. The sharp dressed man must have picked them up. I realize I don't know his name. But how many guys will approach Jim tonight about a cake?

We search around the kitchen until Jim finds some in a jar Miriam keeps on her shelf.

"Okay," he says. "It's mine. Have a seat."

"I will."

I take my beer into the front room. Facing a chair towards the stage I lean my head back against the wall and murmur, "Everything. Everything. Everything."

Machota

He wears T-shirts and blue jeans. Jeff Machota is around five feet seven, built solidly, just developing a paunch. He keeps his hair in a ponytail, a bushy knot at the back of his neck. I don't remember, but he might be Polish. (He's from Cicero, Illinois).

He looks kind of Italian to me. He's probably several things.

By listening to heavy metal he graduated from an all male Catholic high school to blues then jazz. As a student at the University of Illinois he lived in Allen Hall. Dropping out two years later he worked a summer making pizza at Papa Del's: "They were morons. Chowderheads. Knuckleheads." He started at Nature's Table in 1985.

"Terry put up a help wanted sign. Theresa (Donnelly) pulled it down, called me . . . "You better come in here tomorrow."

Theresa and Jeff did political work, starting with student government, then moving against apartheid. He worked on campaigns for Harold Washington and Jesse Jackson, against the Gulf War and Chief Illini-wek – the American Indian football mascot at the U. of I.

Smiling, of strong opinion, Machota is tolerant, stubborn. He thinks quickly, wants social and political change - but certain people or ideas or kinds of music can go to hell for all he cares. He loves and hates passionately; it's refreshing to see that kind of joyful fire, that form of determination in a man. Maybe Jeff is an asshole - he can be superb at running that fine line - but he believes entirely what he believes. Peppered with expletives, his speech is fast. He likes people.

"How often was there really stuff written in the News Gazette about (Nature's Table's) weekend acts?"

Machota has something to prove. I have no idea what it is, but there is no doubt in my mind that if a bulldozer was coming straight at him - and he truly didn't want it there - he'd stand in front of it, probably laughing.

M: So, from what I know, J. D. - John Dalhsted was working at the U of I - went up to Chicago a lot to hear jazz. He was trying to be a drummer at that point. Later on he tried to be a guitar player.

So he went up there a lot. He had come into contact with Guido. And Guido, by the late seventies, was doing really - he was once featured on the front page of the Tempo section of the (Chicago) Tribune. He showed it to me once - and he was doing pretty well. But he really slipped into heroin, and, like, um, owing people money.

He owed people a lot of money. He was in trouble. People were after him. And he was strung out. So J. D. said, "Come down to Champaign - there's a place you can play. " And I'm pretty sure it was 1980. That's what I heard. So Guido came down early on, got to meet everybody.

So Guido ended up kicking heroin, but became an alcoholic. The Old Style cure. He smoked a lot-of dope. But he basically stayed down here after that. And he became the big fish in the small pond.

Until Raphael came down years later.

M.: Sorgum was one of my favorites. Actually the original Bontuku was amazing, with Kurt Morrison. The Wonders were great, with Bruce Brooks. Bruce is a crazy guy, a

really good guitar player. Guido's bands had some moments. The Happy Blues Band, for instance.

I'm trying to think. Yeah. Doc Scott's band, like the Metal on Flesh band with Ryan Shultz. Every Tuesday I worked there. Nobody was there.

And (Kevin) Kizer's band: Kizer, Raphael Garrett on bass, and Tim Mulvany. Tim is actually making it big on the scene in Chicago now. He's with some really big players. And that was some phenomenal stuff. I just remember seeing some of the best music with like twenty people in the audience. Later on (Scott) Frillman and Mitch (Paliga) all had great bands. (Jeff) Helgesen had great bands.

M.: Okay. So. Happy Hours. I worked Happy Hours. Every Friday. The red beans and rice stuff - which was great. It was hot music for a while.

J.M.: You never really liked hot music.

M.: I can appreciate it. It bores me after a while.

J. M.: Louis Armstrong doesn't tear your head off.

M.: Yeah. For awhile. (Laughs).

J.M.: What is the jazz music that makes you go?

M.: Well, it's interesting . . . that. . . how much I've grown jazz-wise since the Table. I started listening to a lot of stuff then, um . . . because I had known jazz, but then I got to hear a lot - and, see, the motherfuckers never announce the tunes.

And the year after the Table went down I got ... I decided I was gonna do something I decided years earlier: I went and took the class to become an airshifter on WEFT.

And I've been doing that for over four years, three hours a week. And now I know a lot of those tunes I heard forever. I was seeing bands ... I was seeing jazz bands like five days a week at least. Every week. And some other stuff. I worked three nights a week, so for sure I heard those nights. I usually hung out other times.. And so I learned about jazz. And now I'd say my tastes have changed. What I'm really into now would be post bop, leaning toward the post avant-garde stuff. Not just stuff that's balls to the wall blowing, but music that takes into effect the sixties happened and the seventies happened. A lot of music doesn't acknowledge that stuff. This young guy James Carter, he's like twenty-four, but he plays old tunes - but he knows stuff happened later on. He knows what happened to Coltrane. He doesn't say everything ended in '61.

(Danny Deckard, a drummer, playing down the street tonight at the Blind Pig - where Machota now works - comes into the Esquire and up to our table.)

J. M.: Right. Hand on a sec! What's your scoop Danny?

D.D.: Let me get set up. Then I'll come back over here.

J.M.: Or should I come by there maybe when Jeff and I finish up?

D.D.: Yeah. Either one or the other. And then we're gonna go to someone's house to eat.

J.M.: Okay.

D.D.: At six, I think. I'm gonna try to ...

J.M.: Relax.

D.D.: We'll work it out.

(Machota bends his mouth close to the microphone on the little tape deck.)

M.: The saga unfolds. The plans develop.

J.M.: One way or another, old buddy.

D.D.: So if not between now and then, tonight.

M.: Now or never?

J.M.: (Sings). It's now or never. . .

D.D.: Thanks. Keep me from breaking.

M.: (Laughs).

D.D.: See ya.

J.M.: Okay. So your love of jazz goes all the way into the sixties and early seventies.

M.: Yeah.

J.M.: Even Mahavishnu Orchestra?

M.: (Laughs).

(Danny reappears.)

D.D.: Something about Mary Clark (a singer from the north end) sitting in the freezer growing hair on her chest and sweating. Do you remember that?

M.: Don't remember that one Danny.

M.: So one Happy Hour. . . when they were already big, because they weren't always hot music, he booked them (Bontuku) in. Sometimes Terry's booking things were very confusing. I couldn't figure out what he was doing. Okay, with the poster thing - I mentioned earlier. I would type up the posters, the words. I would give the words to Brian (Ruth). He would cut them up, do a design.

And some of the ones he did were good. Then he got lazy and didn't do any so I had to take his old designs. He made some really cool logos when he put his mind to it. And basically he and I took the posters out and put them up. We tried to get a bigger audience - because Terry's idea of posterizing for an event was to make up twenty posters,

put ten on a table and put maybe ten outside and two someplace else. There'd be like two in each bathroom.

So we tried to expand that a little bit. So we're working Happy Hour. Bontuku did their own publicity, which was a good thing. Mordecai had it all together, stuff like that. They advertised a three hour Happy Hour and we had some big band that night. So when I came in - and I was already more or less in charge - I said, "So listen, you guys can only play two hours." And they wanted to charge three dollars. And we were only charging two dollars instead of one. And, um, it was a bad day. I'd been there all day. It got really crowded. The place was fucking packed ... and I already had this thing where they play for two hours and they had to cut it short, and they advertised three hours.

So at one point someone comes up to me and says, "There's some beer on the floor. Some guys just spilled." Remember the little ledge area, like you stood up there. Well there's some woman down below the ledge. Some guys had spilled beer on her head. Okay. So it's busy, it's crowded, it's an accident. So I'm out there mopping this up. You talk about the changing crowd. There was frat guys in there for Bontuku and stuff. We helped give the woman some towels to wipe off her head. And I'm out there mopping it up and I turn around and this frat guy took a mouthful of beer and was spitting at some other guy. I dropped the mop handle, grabbed the guy by his shirt and threw him up against the wall - picked him up and threw him against the wall. All these guys are bigger than me - I'd bounced people quite a few times from there - and I start screaming at this guy. "You don't do this in here. I don't want to see this fucking shit in here. Blah. Blah. Blah." Eric had come out - kind of in the background - and he was much bigger, bigger than my ten feet or . . .

And so then . . . One of the guys . . . There was a gang of three or four guys. Well, the talker of the bunch managed to convince me, "Oh, we're sorry, we're sorry, we're sorry. We'll stop this, we'll stop this, we'll stop this." So then I go, "Okay. Okay." Go back to the kitchen - or behind the bar. I guess it's the bar at that point, and, um ... These guys start talking shit, like making comments about long-haired hippies. So I'm just like ... I don't know. I don't need to be hearing this shit.

So I see them spitting beer again. And I go, "Eric (Rueben). Follow me."

"You guys are out of here."

And they're making a big stink. So I'm up there in their faces. So finally we got those guys out of there. It almost came to blows.

The kicker was: Chuck Segard comes up to me - it's like he's taking these guy's side because I'm hot-tempered - and is telling me, "Jeff, you can't let your ego get in the way of things." I almost wanted to go off on Chuck. I didn't say a word. Whatever. All this has happened. So I'm like ready to punch a hole in the wall. Chuck says this. So a few minutes later Mordecai comes up to me and says, "See. This is what happens." I'm like, "What?" "When you mess with Oscar ... Oscar's got this kind of power. Things happen." "What are you talking about?" Scott was convinced that these guys were irate because Bontuku had to end early because they advertised it was three hours not two hours because I had fucked with Bontuku's karma. So therefore ... I was just ... I had to drink a whole bunch of beer after that. I didn't say anything to Scott. I was like . . . I said, "It's not what it's about."

Terry was always supportive of stuff. Like he would give us bread. He would donate leftover bread. He would take it off to the Men's Shelter or the Catholic Worker's

House, someplace like that. I mean, Terry had a consciousness. I'm not saying he didn't. But I think by having so many political activists and people who were not just thinking political - which there were, lots of times - but people who were out doing a lot of organizing, I mean, campus organizing. But doing stuff. In the Gulf War- lots of people came around during the Gulf War and did a lot of stuff.

There was a core of like fifty people at that point.

J.M.: Students?

M.: No. Everything. Community. Students. We had veterans from World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, and some active duty people. We had undergrads, grads, faculty, staff. It was the most diverse group.

We had two big rallies. One after the war started - the air war - and one after the ground war. One of the cool things was that I had to ask occasionally for time off for political activities. Terry would cover for me if need be. Um. And Terry actually got involved after the first war. We had a twenty-four hour response set up. We knew it was going to happen eventually. We said, "Okay. After the war happens - after it starts - we'll call people and twenty-four hours from that we'll meet in downtown Champaign. There's a rep office. We'll set up the time. We'll call people." What we had, um, a very elaborate kind of hierarchy of order going on there. We had tactical leadership. We had a security force. People of our own, like somewhat glorified crossing guards.

J.M.: (Laughs).

M.: In some ways: Butto make sure people were crossing the street. To make sure that - we had like twelve hundred people - that they could get from one place to another. And Terry was one of these. He went to a training session. He was great. He was jumping in

there and doing stuff. And I remember that time even more people that had never been to the Table before came out because they knew that Terry was involved.

After the ground war started we actually had two marches. One from Urbana. One from Champaign. And we met up and went to Foellinger (Auditorium, on the south end of the quad) and we passed the Table - like we marched past the Table, like in the afternoon. It was cold. It was fucking winter.

And then, almost concurrent, almost before it started, in '89, Charlene Teeters came to campus and was doing Native American stuff. The Chief Illini-wek issue. She and her partner Don, a white guy.

Years later I was talking with this Afro-American woman, Amani Bizel, worked at the YMCA. We were talking, "Why doesn't anybody see this is so stupid? Why don't we ever do anything about it?" We were just waiting for someone to start it, in some ways. We had talked about this. It wasn't an active thing.

Once she started going with it then the P.R.C., the group I was involved in at that point - the Progressive Resource Action Cooperative ... so, were, um . . . We'd gotten really involved with that issue . . . because it really hit. It hit the power structure of this community, actually - the whole Chief Illini-wek thing. You see, people in this town - who never went to the U of I - they're invested in this. They think it's their culture. They love it. So we hit the News Gazette people. The people that run the News Gazette were behind the forces to keep us ... from doing this.

J.M.: There was only like fifteen of you or so.

M.: At times. There was more people. There was less people. But we had a lot of impact. Actually we had the most multi-racial coalition to that point in like decades. African-

Americans. Latinos. Asians. Whites. Indians. But Charlene ... You could not see Charlene and not be moved by her story.

To leave the audience not crying. Terry made a strong connection. Either at that point or some other point he had taken the family out to some Native American reservations. Maybe later, maybe earlier. He really connected with Charlene and they felt this was a place they could come. They actually had meetings there. They felt the Table was safe, that it was supportive.

We started selling the shirts near the end, the Native American Progress T-shirt. And a lot of people knew that. I mean, I guess I'm kind of into political stuff. Those were the two major things: the Gulf War and Chief Illini-wek stuff. The whole thing, too, with doing the art openings there - you talk about the role in the community of Nature's Table. A lot of people saw Nature's Table as a place where they could go. We even had some people like Arthur Ghent who held office hours at Nature's Table.

I will probably never meet a club owner like Terry Masar unless I own a club. (Laughs). No. That gave a shit about the music. That loved the music, loved the art, loved whatever else and wanted to do what he could - where else? I mean, he employed musicians. He had Mark Dziuba serving spaghetti and singing...

He made sure the bands got cheap beer and free food. And the reason people loved the Table - even years later when they moved up to Chicago - even if there was only twenty people in the fucking house - there was an attitude that it was a place people could come and be comfortable. It was their place.

The same thing went on -to the artists who were able to have those art openings. Come on. Those art openings. I've never seen anything like that. Terry provided wine. It

was cheap wine, sure, but apples, bread. That whole spread of artists. And the political community. It was the same thing. There was a whole area of cross section.

J.M.: So you're saying there's a real connection between the art world and the political world here.

M.: Some. There was some intersection. And the musical world. I think all three of those communities... There's four communities, I would say, that fit, that fit into the Table. The music community first - five communities. The music community, the whole food community, the artist's community, the political community, and the misfit community.

J.M.: Right. The freaks.

M.: Yeah. Cause there were people there - how many people - hated jazz, never wanted anything to do with jazz, but loved the Table and then grew to love jazz, or at least like it and appreciate it, and loved the people who played it. That was through the work Terry and Shelley had done to set the place up, as that kind of thing. You respect the artist. And I explain to people to this day, you know, Terry subsidized the music with the food business. If we didn't have the campus location and the food. . .

In the later years there were two nights where the money cranked out. Maybe three. Thursday, Friday, Saturday nights. And the rest of the nights were like, "Do we make payroll? Did we do this?" But it was great music. It couldn't happen anywhere else.

M.: We even had the folk people there you know. The folk scene. Like when you did the Bob and Jeff shows, the Jeff shows, and the John Lafond shows.

J.M.: I don't know if John was folk or not.

M.: No. No. I'm just talking about all the other things that happened there. Because as time went on it became much more - there were more things happening. We had the Last Straw (country, bluegrass, rock, pop) playing.

So the impact on the community was: after years people knew about it. There's a lore spread throughout Chicago of all the graduates, the jazz graduates at the U of I and of Nature's Table, of what, overall, Nature's Table had in their development; because you had the U of I School of Music, which had people like John Garvey, who was respected. But that stuff was somewhat ... Where it trained a lot of people ... it was still tight. It was teaching individuals how to be a member of a group, how to be an individual on the bandstand and work with other people. It was a different kind of training.

Terry knew since he opened there that he was going to be taken over at some point. He tried to buy the building repeatedly. They wouldn't let him.

The university got it. Terry tried to buy it from (the) Durso (family) over the years. So we all knew it would come eventually: that the university would tear it down. And then what happened the last few years: that middle building got so decrepit and dilapidated we started getting rats. It was just nasty. Terry didn't ... Terry had absentee landlord. All the repairs were done by him. The roof, everything else, he did. And the last couple of years, he was kind of like ... Well, he knew it was coming to the end. So at the point where we're doing up to our best the place is falling apart.

M.: I tried to get Terry involved. I decided I'm going to make something of this. And I did talk to Terry and Shelley both. I said, "Terry I'm not going to make a case for Nature's Table - to fight for Nature's Table - if you don't want this." I said, "I'm willing to throw (in) all my resources. I can't speak for the Table because you're the Table." We all are,

but it was his, you know, his thing. He was the owner. He needed to fight for it. And Terry essentially gave me the go-ahead.

So throughout this I started developing a file, all this stuff that's going on. The master plan. How they're going to build the chemical life science building into a huge sixty-five million dollar complex, right. And we're going to be the parking lot, or the butt corner or something like that. So jokes came about. It was going to be the ten story jazz institute they were building there. It would start out the hot jazz floor. You'd move up to the be-bop floor, then the hard be-bop floor ... Each floor would be a different level of jazz ... Like the Nature's Table Jazz Institute.

So we got into this group. And one of the things that we did do, that was great, was that we got a bunch of community involved about the university expansion in general. The Beckman (Institute) had gone up a few years earlier. Strawberry Fields (whole food grocery and bakery) had waged a huge campaign. And lost - spent thousands of dollars, millions. And may be why Dean is still in the hole.

And then the Beckman . . . I mean , , . there's no front doors facing University Avenue, towards where the black community is. It's the back side not the front side. Welcome. It's the back side. Facing inward. So we had to raise a lot of these things.

We had a forum at the YMCA where we invited the university people. They came. And they showed their slides. And then - there's like a hundred people showed up who were all against them. And it was great. Shelley spoke. Shelley was pretty good. Um. Some other people spoke. And it was - they sweated. The guys in front were twitching in their suits, pulling on their ties. They were feeling it. Oh, man. It was ... That

was probably the only thing they paid for that whole thing. But it was ... I wanted to turn up the heat in that room. I'd just like to make them hotter, more uncomfortable.

M.: So I put together the last Saturday night. There was a few bands. I think there was some band ... Terry's friends. And then Sorgum played. And then Sunday I put together a bunch of bands, basically from the last generation of Table people who'd left town to come back, not the guys who were making it big. The last generation. The people who had put in the last four or five years. The Tom Paynters. The Jeff Helgesens.

Terry decides he's going to make it a big party, too. So he throws a bunch of food . . . grills ... pulls the motor home up. Jim Beckman has his truck. But Paul Wienke - before I really met him - showed up. He recorded the whole last weekend. It turns out he had been trying to convince WILL to record live jazz in town. They let him record classical. He got the go ahead the last weekend at the Table. And WILL TV comes out there. We just . . . Hundreds of people were flowing out into the streets.

I've got some photos of it being torn down. They made a video. I have photos of the wrecking ball, or right after the wrecking ball hit it. Me and Terry were sitting out there. You showed up, didn't you?

So then the Table was gone. So Mick and Paul called this meeting... Like within a few weeks I was president. (Laughs). The Jazz and Blues Association formed. CUJBA.

We made an attempt to carry on the legacy of Nature's Table. That was the goal: to carry on the legacy of Nature's Table. To make sure there was a place for jazz and blues to play in town, that would support the musicians, and recognize the musicians.

'96 would be the fifth year. Our blowouts don't happen the same time every year. This is our fifth anniversary of the association, with a blowout. The Jazz and Blues

Association got all these bands. Within a year or so a bunch of places started doing jazz and blues.

What I really feel with the Jazz and Blues Association, with myself and Paul . . . there was always a core of ten people. We've really made an effort to keep the spirit of the Table alive and to try and promote the music and respect it and give our . . . and make sure we don't rip people off. That's the legacy the Table always holds. They didn't get ripped off. Like Mabel's. Which would rip people blind. Like when the Modern Humans would play there. The Big Good Thing. The door would be pulled out.

So Guido had had a couple of strokes. He was paralyzed after the first stroke. He got better. He got his feeling back. He could play again. He had another stroke. The doctor had to tell him to stop drinking and smoking. Kept on doing it ... Well, then he got put in a nursing home. They both went to see him. I didn't go see him. It was too bizarre for me. The last weekend at the Table I worked to put together a Guido tribute. He was still alive.

I asked Kevin Engel, who was playing with him - who was a good right hand man of his, as he had many over the years, who he all burned. Like Tim McNamara. Kevin said, "No. Guido just pissed me off this week. I'm not going to do a tribute to him. But I'll play some of his songs."

Some of those guys went and picked up Guido from the nursing home, brought him out there. Kevin played a couple of tunes. And Guido sitting in the corner. And he asked me for an Old Style. He couldn't drink it. He was really bad. I went and got it. Opened it up. He had it in his hand. He just wanted to hold it. And then Kevin said, "This one is for a good friend of mine, Guido Sinclair." And he called off one of Guido's tunes.

Guido has this big smile on his face. That was the closest moment I was to tears the entire weekend. Because it was like ... It was fucking great. Here he was ... this guy. It showed up ... Everything. This guy what's got nothing. The Table's provided a place. Here's people he taught playing his music for him. Though in perfect Guido style, the tune ends - Kevin's blowing his head off. Guido's like half dead over there. He gets up. After his song he was going to say thank you to Guido. Guido left. Someone took him out to get high somewhere. Guido was gone. It was like . . . what a way... Guido, you know, to fuck with you ... Guido to fuck with people.

J. D. didn't show up to the funeral. Public assistance won't cover you being buried all the way. Like only part of the way. Or whatever. It's some bullshit. But Shirley (Blankenship - Guido's wife) found out. So we had to raise money to get Guido in the fucking ground. She did one night at the White Street Arts Center, which was her night, which was horrible. Ed D'aleo (folksinger) showed up and played for like a half an hour. Of all the people who should play, why does Ed D'aleo get to play for a half an hour?

So I did a night at Zorba's, which was probably the most ... the best jam session I'd ever fucking seen. Danny and I did it.

And the next night we did it over at Candy's just north of Buddy's, which Sorgum played at, which was good, too. It's gone now. It wasn't even there for long.

But the Zorba's thing was just amazing. It was the most transcendent jam session ever. And Danny wouldn't let Popeye or Ed D'aleo play.

J.M.: I was thinking when we gutted the place.

M.: It was Monday.

J.M.: Was it really? We all actually made it back the next day? Good lord! Talk about professionals.

M.: Here's my recollection. So on Sunday we had the whole big deal. Terry had the food out there. I think Liz and Lisa and Rosie had made a bunch of stuff. Val.

J.M.: I came in at eleven and they'd done almost everything.

M.: Yeah. They'd been working on it for a while. The day before, too.

J.M.: Like chicken, hot dogs, corn ...

M.: I don't know. I probably didn't get much of it.

The night went on. The crowd dwindled. Probably about one-thirty or two o'clock we locked the door. The band was still playing. The place was still full, but there was no more out-flow. So we locked the door and just kept on going. Till when, I don't know.

Ali Hussien was around. Danny. We got up on the roof then. There was a bunch of people still around, probably twenty hard core late night Table people. And we were kicking off the facade like by Horizon Books. Then we were throwing shit into the University building next door. And then at one point we knocked off the electrical wires. (Laughs). There was a bunch of wires . . . 'Cause all of a sudden somebody said, "The cops are here." I think it was already morning. It was already light I think. So me and somebody else, maybe Bob (Weckback) went under cover. We hit the road, because I had dealt with the cops earlier. I didn't want them to know I was still here. So we boogied. We raced and hid on the quad for a while. And Ali -- I think it was Ali - and Liz (Weckback) had made this dinner- or breakfast. And the plan was Terry was going to have that auction. He was going to auction off everything that Monday morning. So . . .

we had to go pass out for a while. The auction started like at nine. I thought I'd get a little bit of sleep 'cause I wanted that Schlitz clock.

J.M.: That's right. Did you get it, by the way?

M.: No. Terry had sold it. I got there like ten minutes late.

Brian Reedy couldn't. He was too freaked out. He couldn't make most of the weekend.

J.M.: What was on Bob's shirt? It had a dollar bill and a bunch of food stains . . .

M.: Bob had made a shirt. He took a shirt, and he had gone into the kitchen and he poured tamari and everything all over the shirt, and took food - anything he found in the kitchen - and put it on there. His whole point was he was doing a countdown shirt. He was hanging it outside. And it was really foul. It attracted flies and bugs. Like he was counting down: seven ... six ... five ... four ... I think he did like a week's worth of countdown days.

J.M.: With the same damn shirt hanging outside the whole time?

M.: Well, he would take it down and put it back up, because we were all kind of giving him a hard time about it.

Several quotes:

On the day we gutted the building: "It was either channel three or one of the local stations came by. It was like four or five o'clock. They wanted me to introduce the weather."

"I got two bricks (from Nature's Table) at my house."

"I think a lot of people were smart and fucking in bed. Because we had basically done forty-eight hours of straight partying. And it was a Monday; some people had jobs. We

didn't anymore." Concerning why more people didn't show up the day after the last weekend to help gut the place.

"Terry wanted to expand."

"I remember Antonio Vanariario. 'May I have a sip of beer for a penny, please.'

Completely dead serious."

"And then there was Matt Rubenstein (a classical piano student and a Nature's Table employee) who could quote Trotsky."

"In revolutionary war times the bars were always the organizing spots." "There were two hundred drunk frat guys waving American flags."

"I think a lot of people look at it with rose colored glasses." Nature's Table after it was gone.

Concerning people who seldom or never went to Nature's Table bemoaning its loss: "Where the fuck were you?"

'We helped a large amount of high schoolers get their first drinks."

"I told you the Nature's Table shirt in Africa story. He said, 'Chuck Tripp.

Nature's Table. I know that place.' "A comment from an African in Africa in a land rover who spotted Jeff.

Concerning the myth of Nature's Table becoming a legend: "It happened in six months."

"A lot of people didn't go because it was on campus."

"Oscar was the Ghanean Guido. The reason Raphael and Guido couldn't (co) exist (was) because they were both negative matter. Come together and it blows up. Same thing with Guido and Oscar."

"In a void Oscar is Guido. Guido is the best alto player ever, because he's in Champaign, Urbana."

J.M.: You ended up being a pretty good friend with Guido, too.

M.: Well, I let him live at my house.

J.M.: A month or two, even.

M.: Fuck. It ended up being like six months.

M.: So the question would just be: Why?

M.: (Laughs).

M.: One second he'd (Guido) be telling you a great story and then he'd be fucking ripping you off in a minute if you weren't paying attention. But see, he knew he couldn't pull it over on me. If I was going to give him a buck or two he knew I knew what I was doing. He knew I was a Cicero guy.

M.: I let Guido live with me when he stopped drinking. 'Cause when he stopped drinking and was just getting high he was a different person.

He didn't drink for most of the time he stayed with me. But then he started ... I had this bottle of vodka up on the shelf. Every once in a while I'd have a screwdriver. I'd notice the bottle going up - and going down. I'd notice there'd be cheaper bottles of vodka in the garbage, on the top of the garbage. And then it started to be just water, I know it.

When he wasn't drunk,- he was just high, like he would ramble and shit. It would more have a point. It would end at some point. It wouldn't go on for seventeen hours. One night he played; he had a hundred degree fever and he played. And he was like drunk and

high. He was out of his brain. Oh my god. It was insane. The ramblings he was doing. All of his raps.

M.: For a guy who probably didn't graduate from high school, he was incredibly intelligent. The knowledge he had. The story that to me demonstrates his intelligence, but also the bizarreness of living together. . . I wake up one morning, from my room. Guido's sleeping on the couch. I had one of those like chairs that fold out into a bed. They're really floppy. So, I wake up, smell the hot sauce in the air, the Louisiana Hot Sauce, look over . . . Guido's in his underwear and his ball cap watching a history channel World War Two documentary while eating cereal with a bunch of hot sauce on it.

Concerning Guido after a stroke:

M.: He was fucking driving . . . which he couldn't really. And he was wearing a wig. He was wearing like a . . . like a . . . And Brian Ruth told me he saw him. He told me he ran into him at County Market - and Guido had a wig on. And Guido was walking around going, "Aaee ... Aeae ... bash yum a cigarette . . ." And Brian just looked at him, pointed at his wig, and starting fucking laughing, like doubled over, Brian did. And Guido, of course, started laughing, 'cuz he realized how ridiculous it was. Guido didn't lose any hair. He was just wearing a fucking wig. Like a little Afro wig.

J.M.: Remember one time he showed up in a tie-dyed . . . ?

M.: Tie-dyed polyester jump suit. Yeah. He was doing WILL, live recording, up at Gregory Hall, which I went to see . . . I don't know how you can dye polyester, but somebody did it for him. He had even a tie-dyed ball cap on. It was from head to toe.

M.: Guido was a very important part of Nature's Table. Guido was the resident . . . the real jazz guy . . . And he . . . Terry could rely on him to put something together at the last minute. Even though Guido much overplayed what he was, he was something.

And he was a big fish in a small jazz pond. That's why when Raphael came he had a hard time. When Oscar came he had a hard time. These were people he competed with in his circle of influence.

M.: A lot of these young jazz recording artists have never toured.

Danny Deckard

Danny is glad to be alive. He makes friends wherever he goes. Slim, almost skinny, his long red hair is tied back in a ponytail. The Midwestern upbringing can be heard in his expressive voice.

Starting with rock and funk and drumming his way into the farther reaches of jazz Danny has probably played in more bands than he can remember.

We met at the Fiesta Cafe - good Mexican food for Americans - late, after he had finished a gig at the Blind Pig. I'd worked interviews most of the day and was all tuckered out.

What follows happened at an easygoing pace.

D.D.: The first day after I got here and stayed at this house that they gave me the address to, that they had a room for me - Tim McNamara lived in it, Wayne Coniglio and Larry the bike man. You remember Larry the bike man. He's the man with the five thousand bicycles in his bedroom and the rest of the house and the rest of the property. Very strange older guy whose family - wife and kids - lived in Indianapolis. But he had a job with the water survey at the U of I and lived in this house with us, which was next door to what used to be the old jazz headquarters, resident hotel: ten-oh-five-and-a-half (Main Street, Urbana, IL.) I spent the night there. The next day I got up to go to the stove, get some stuff, and when I came back, sitting on my front porch, was Ryan Shultz. I knew him because that first night that I came to visit he was playing with Larry Beers (drummer). That first night I came to visit, first time I was ever in . . . now that I remember. Start talking about it, it's coming back. He was in that first band, the first

people I ever heard there (Nature's Table.) And so I recognized him - and he - I thought he was phenomenal. Ah.

J.M.: And he was.

D.D.: Larry Beers was not playing that first night. Forget everything I said. It's coming back to me now. It was Joel. Joel was playing drums.

J.M.: Joel Spenser.

D.D.: Yeah. There was a party at Larry's afterwards. That's right.

J.M.: Was Joel in town?

D.D.: He was just . . . Or what was it? No, the first night it was Larry playing drums and I came one other time. The next time I came, before I moved - I visited one other time - and Joel was playing drums and Ryan was playing and Dan Anderson was playing bass, and I'm not sure who all else, but I was amazed by, one: I'd never heard anyone play bass trumpet. Two: I never heard many people play as well as Ryan was playing - trumpet. He was phenomenal. Another one of Doc Scott's disciples, thanks to Doc, along with Kokes and Stites and Dan and Brad, and blah, blah, blah. D. A. and Brad Wheeler.

J.M.: He had an amazing sense of harmony, Brad.

D.D.: He's in Paris now. But Ryan was sitting on my front porch when I walked, come home, my first day, in town, come home from the store and there's Ryan with his trumpet. And he goes - he's sitting on my front porch. I walked up. He goes, "Hey. Are you the new drummer in town?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"You want to play duets?"

"Man, I would love to!" We commenced to play duets every day.

J.M.: (Laughs).

D.D.: For about the next two years. We'd get up. I'd go to his house. We'd listen to records, drink a pot or two of coffee, come over to ten-oh-five and play duets and then go off to do whatever we had to do.

J.M.: No bass player at that point.

D.D.: It was just he and I. Bass trumpet and drums.

J.M.: That's really hard.

D.D.: It was very hard, and it was really fun. And I had never played duets like that before. I mean, it's not uncommon. It's a great exercise and everything. It's just tremendous. His playing is so deep that he's playing so much of the tune - by himself - (laughs), that for me it was just educating. I really got to learn the tune. Of course, you've got to really know the tune to make it happen as a duet anyway 'cuz especially drums and something else. I mean, it's great exercise. And that's one of the ways I learned how to . . . And every night we'd end up at the Table.

Waiter: How ya doing? Another beer? A little more coffee?

J.M.: I'm doing fine, thanks.

D.D.: I'm doing good.

Waiter: You can order up any time.

D.D.: All right. Do we need to get out of here?

Waiter: No. No. Just doing my job.

J.M.: All right. You're not gonna hold us up. But if you need to kick us out, feel free.

Waiter: I'll bring you the check and if you want anything else let me know.

D.D.: All right.

J.M.: Danny, I thought you had gathered in another person to make it a trio.

D.D.: Well,,we did have a trio. I mean, this was just separate. We just played duets everyday. It was a great . . . It was mine. It was like going to class for me. He was a phenomenal teacher - great lab sort of thing. But we had a trio and I still can't believe I got to be a part of it. Way over my head. 'Cuz we weren't just playing standards. We were playing pretty advanced tunes - as a chordless trio.

It was Dan Anderson playing on bass, Ryan Shultz playing on bass trumpet, and myself on drums. And playing some really hard music. Playing some Woody Shaw music. Some Steve Swallow music. Dave Liebman music. Some original stuff. Eric Dolphy and Mingus and I mean it, it was just really hard to do with bass, trumpet, and drums. And it was just a wonderful experience. Dan Anderson is not necessarily one of the best bass players or one of my favorite bass players or anything. It's not really that. It's more he's one of the best musicians I've ever heard ... ever. (He's surprised.) Also just his old personality and everything. He's just a character. I mean, every important part of the local scene at the time. He'd been around for a long, long time. Um, he was actually a tuba player, which I didn't know that, but . . .

J.M.: Well, he played tuba. He was working with a variety of players. He played even with the Dixieland stuff. And, uh, about the same time we're speaking of he also auditioned in Europe to get into one of the German Symphony Orchestras.

D.D.: Right. He had been in Germany - I think actually on the road. It was some sort of a ... German orchestra. Do you have a knife?

J.M.: Not here.

D.D.: No pocket knife, or ... That's okay. Continue.

J.M.: My understanding is that Dan had a shot at an audition in Germany with a symphony orchestra and he went there - also knowing other people there that he could play jazz with and they had accepted him as a . . . as . . .

D.D.: As God.

J.M.: But the way he got turned down was that he could not operate the . . .

D. D.: A bow.

J.M.: For the bass.

D.D.: Oh, yeah. For bass. Yeah. He was a jazz bass player. He was a classical tuba player, or any kind of tuba player. .

J.M.: Now, you got to play with just about everybody.

D.D.: From the time I was here. And who was left? A lot of the other people were gone by then. Like for instance all these people. Dan was still in town. Ryan was in town. Stitley (drummer) was gone - I wouldn't have played much with him anyway. Brad Wheeler was gone. Joel was gone. Karen Korsmeyer (bass). I didn't even know her.

J.M.: The last wave we're looking at here. Of the great musicians you got to work with.

D.D.: Ryan Shultz. One of the best horn players in the country (laughs) today. Just phenomenal. He pretty much did the same thing. He didn't go to school here; he went to Nature's Table and went to Doc Scott's house. John Hurtibise turned into ... just one of my favorite bass players.

J.M.: He never stopped. That guy refused to not learn more about the bass. D.D.: Which is all a combination of two things. Number one: Nature's Table and the scene and our house . . . with the . . . which our house existed because of Nature's Table and John Garvey's philosophy in the big band of not having an amp. So we had this shitty bass -

you probably heard - and he learned how to play the bass the way those guys really played bass for that type of music.

J.M.: Did you play with Raphael (Garrett) later on?

D. D.: Not too much. I didn't play with Raphael too much. The most Raphael played with Kevin (Kizer). They really had a great relationship.

J.M.: And maybe Guido.

D.D.: Not a whole lot with Guido. I mean, he did play a lot with Guido but not a lot.

When I played with Raphael it was with Guido or I don't remember, whatever group that we got together. It was fun. I got to listen to him a lot more than I got to play with him.

J.M.: (Big yawn). Excuse me. Way over tired. Uh, other horn players you got to play with.

D.D.: Mark Stryker was playing alto and Tim McNamara. Jeff Helgesen. Mitch Paliga.

We had a great time in different bands. He was a great player. He was like a stylist, too.

He'll play whatever bag and try to play correct. Some of the other guys, like Andrew

(Andrew) and John Hurtibise would play whatever you want, but they'll play what they

want. They're going to play bop up your butt. They're going to play some shit, straight

ahead stuff. Mitch; he doesn't care. He's just gonna play. And he's gonna play the shit out

of it. And he doesn't care.

J.M.: And there was also the band called Troubled Monk.

D.D.: Troubled Monk. Ryan and Mitch and John Hurtibise and Kurt Morrison and

myself. That was us. No keyboards.

J.M.: Okay. Why could Natures Table sustain such a unique arrangement? How come? You wonder. Something so unique as Troubled Monk (Theolonious Monk tunes played as funk) could actually draw a crowd.

D.D.: Well, you know, a place that managed to make it work right off the bat is going to cultivate this scene and it doesn't have to fight. The support's already there. And that attracts more support and that attracts - which means acceptance. (He laughs.) And there's a lot of people who wouldn't normally come across this stuff, but would come into the scene like this and see how friendly and how wonderful and beautiful and lovely and just ... right. (Laughs). And it was. You know you can't really deny such a thing.

J.M.: What's your take on Terry?

D.D.: Terry is one of the special guys on the planet. (Laughs). Who knows way more than he ever suspects himself. I'm sure. Or . . . more than he wants to let on, anyway.

J.M.: He always made welcome all the musicians, right?

D.D.: Always. Of myself. Immediately. Just seemed, Oh, great! He said, "Hi." Mark or somebody introduced - or Tim. "This is Danny. He's moving in. He's a drummer." And "Hey. Welcome aboard." Immediately. Make yourself at home sort of thing.

J.M.: What was your favorite food? What was your favorite meal?

D.D.: Oh Gawd! After I ate all the pizza I could possibly hold, any combination of turkey sandwich or tofu salad sandwich. Tabouli. Pesto. Who came . . . who, who, Ju, Ju, not Julie. Who, uh - shit. Sue came up with the lasagna didn't she? Did Sue come up with the lasagna?

J.M.: I'm not sure who had the recipe.

D.D.: I forget who she got the recipe from, but, yeah, she started that shit. It was fun. Pesto and tabouli, always great. The mushroom-barley (soup), probably one of the reasons I wasn't as sick as I usually am. (Laughs). Chocolate chip cookies.

J.M.: I've been trying to learn how to ask (good) questions and I want to ask you, what was the impact that Nature's Table had on the community?

D.D.: Well, it depends on who you're asking. To me, it did all sorts of things. Again, it was - like I said - it was the headquarters for all sorts of community interests. Like people, you know, attract like people, you know, so, I mean, uh, call them what you want. I don't know. You're paraphrasing here. Again, it seemed to be a center for activism and stuff and just goodness. Now there's the other take on it. For example: the place could have been on fire and the police would have just driven by and said ... nothing. 'Well, the Table's on fire. Big deal.' So it depends on who you ask. Other people, you know, probably don't think too highly of, but, we're not interested in them. (Laughs). And thank goodness they had no effect on the Table.

J.M.: Is there a particular memory or highlight you'd like to bring a story to? D.D.: Hmmm. . Just all experiences there. (Laughs). Nights with Guido kicking your butt, playing, leaving you on the bandstand. Calling the tune off, playing the head at light tempo, light speed, and then leaving . . . the building. And then coming back twenty minutes later, and play the head out. Then tell you everything you were doing wrong.

J.M.: (Laughs).

D.D.: He was a great guy. Thank God for Guido.

J.M.: It's true, isn't it.

D.D.: But playing with the Helgesen Quintet with Scott (Frillman), Hurtibise, and Andrew. Playing with- I guess it wasn't actually Sorgum unless I was sitting in with Sorgum. Pretty much the rule we had was if Russell and Jelly were playing it was Sorgum and if I was playing with Russell it was the Russell Cheatham Quintet or whatever. And so anytime I was playing with Russell with Kurt or Scott, it was – or Brian Wilke - very exciting. Just all the relationships. I'm not the only one, but it was a lot like - the north half (of Nature's Table) was almost like my living room.

Waiter: Coffee? Anything?

D.D.: Thanks. Just there all the time. Not in the way. Tried not to be. It was just the place to be, if you weren't busy doing something else. Guido singing 'The Days of Wine and Roses.' Incredibly entertaining.

It was undoubtedly one of the most important parts of my life. (Laughs). For what that's worth. To me it's worth everything. And it's responsible for . . . gosh . . . for almost half my life at this point, it seems like, not quite. But . . . (Laughs.)

Good Morning, Nature's Table

Once I had a great love. We lived in beauty and harmony. She dropped in from above - Great love. The Universe ever expanding, We Became huge. So big the World - We broke apart. Now, that which is me I hold fast lest it burst.

Six o'clock, ante meridian.

Outside is a wonderland of ice and snow. Icicles hang from trees and branches droop to the sidewalk while boughs made too heavy by freezing rain have broken away to block the road. Utility lines are topped by ice, and beneath evergreen bushes sag like solid little men. In the early morning, snow falls effortlessly on a silent gray-white world.

I stomp my feet and try to fit the key in the front door lock.

Inside, sustained by the steady glow of the street-lamp through the windows, I stumble past shadow and the smell of stale cigarette smoke to the kitchen light switch. Setting the thermostat at fifty-nine degrees I go to the back of the kitchen and turn on the ovens. Stuffed into the opening at the bottom of the door to the backroom is an apron. I kick it aside, slide back the bolt, step in and pull the light cord. Two aprons are frozen solid to the bottom of the backdoor in a miniature snow drift.

It was fifty degrees and sunny yesterday.

The heater kicks on followed by a little blast from the ovens. I take off my mittens and pull up the big chili pot.

It's Tuesday. We need two batches of white bread and two of wheat. Up front on the counter there are eight cookies in the tray. I'll need to bake off two trays of chocolate chip and one each of oatmeal-raisin and peanut butter-raisin. We'll need tabouli and pesto. Today's soup is split pea.

Pulling a chefs knife from the utensil bucket on the lower shelf of the cook's prep table I walk around the bread rack and set it on the composition cutting board on the sandwich-making table. Still viciously tired I go into the small office and stare dumbly at the furnace. I shake my head. Jeff, you can't live on two hours of sleep and twelve hours of alcohol a day. I look at the red phone mounted on the wall by the door. I've got to get an order ready for Terry.

Fishing tapes out of my army jacket I put Patsy Cline in the cassette deck. Maybe she can help.

At the three-basin sink I turn on the two faucets - one hot for the first sink, one cold for the third. I pull the bleach bucket up into the middle sink and an empty half-gallon mayonnaise container from the shelf above. Holding it, watching for the water to get hot, I notice the empty draining board. The floor is clean, the place in good order. Mr. Jeff Machota closed last night. He'll be in around nine-thirty to prep.

I put the mayonnaise container under the flow of hot water and go into the walk--in cooler to make the initial check on our supplies. God I'm tired. How can a body need to eat, shit, and sleep all at the same time? Tabouli is low. We're out of spinach pesto. The curried rice will make it through lunch. Reaching down the three remaining mayo containers of chili, I step out of the cooler and set them by the crock pot on the back prep table.

At the sinks I shift a spigot on its swivel from the third sink to the bleach bucket and pull out the mayo container from under the hot water. I plug that sink, set the container of water on the sandwich table, then bend down beneath the customer counter to the soap and bleach.

The small of my back protests.

A heavy truck crunches by, rattling the building. I pour bleach into the bleach bucket and cold sink and pink soap crystals into the hot one. Still in my hat and coat I go into the cooler and sift through boxes of vegetables. I come out with celery, carrots, and a cake of yeast. At the sandwich table I cut an eighth from the cake onto wax paper. I walk it to the dough bowl and drop it in. On the lower shelf of the cook's prep table are several buckets. Scooping out a cup of pure cane sugar from one of them, I pour it into the dough bowl. The hot water in the mayo container goes in next. Turning the mixer on to three and slowly raising the bowl with a lever I watch as the dough hook spins splashing into the mixture.

Stopping the taps, I pull the bleach bucket to the floor. We're rolling.

While white dough rises on top of the hot oven and a wheat batch grows in the dough bowl, I sort through a big pile of red kidney and pinto beans - twenty-eight cups worth - for stones. With my hands cupped I draw the beans across the prep table and into the chili pot on the floor.

From another bucket I pour sixteen cups of green split peas into boiling water, add bay leaves, and cover. Down to a flannel shirt over a sweatshirt I heft the split pea bucket into the still entirely too cold backroom and sit on it, elbows on knees, nabbing my hands into my head. Okay, Jeff, you've done this before, you can do it again. Be thankful you have something to do, a job. A reason, be it fabricated, is reason still.

I ask out loud to nobody in particular, "How?"

"Quit talking to yourself."

"How?"

I can't help but wonder after me. Could anyone actually be this lonely and remain standing?

The phone rings. I walk to it.

"Good morning, Nature's Table."

A musical voice replies, "Eulalie's Burp Market."

It's her. Once again I am stunned by the sweetest sound I know. "Hi. How are you?"

Exactly how am I supposed to answer that question? Somehow, finding reserves of energy I never knew I had, I rise to the occasion.

"Have you been outside yet?" I ask.

"Yes." She's thrilled. "I want to go for a walk. It's so beautiful." So are you.

"I've never seen anything like it," I say. "Are any trees down there?" "Yeah," she laughs. "And everything is covered in ice. It glows." Her happiness does too, over the phone.

"There's three foot icicles. I hope my camera doesn't freeze." She laughs again.

"I'm going to walk to school and take pictures. It'll make a great series."

I'm puzzled. "You're going to work?"

"If we're open. I'm going to show them plaster casting."

She teaches art to high school students in Mattoon, Illinois. A small Midwestern town.

"Are you going to do masks?"

"Maybe. I'd like to. But I don't know yet if the school will let me smear their faces."

I know better. She can do anything she wants to. The force of her heartstoppingly attractive nature - a walking magnificence - inevitably makes everyone around her quite agreeable.

"Anyhow," she says, "I just wanted to call and let you know I'm coming up to town for the weekend. There's a party and I thought you might like to come."

I'm doing splintered dances. We used to live together.

It's such exquisite agony to be in her presence anymore. In the same room. It's not overly easy on the phone either. "Yeah. Drop by when you get in."

"Okay."

There's an honest pause and I'm hung between tattered joy and ancient despair. She comes back over the wire with a touch of compassion that rivets me. For a moment I wish I didn't know her so well.

"What are you making today?"

I tell her all about the food that's cooking, and what else I'm going to do. I ask her, "Have you found an easy way to peel garlic yet?"

"I like to roll it between the palms of my hands. It loosens the skin up."

Long and tapered, her olive-skinned hands are strong and supple, elegant in their ability to perform intricate and delicate work. She is well-suited in her career as a teaching artist, however, being concentrated brilliance, I'm sure whatever work she chose she would do it well.

"I'll bet you do," I say.

It gets a laugh - and there is a lot of pleasure in giving someone you love joy and laughter. In this case it hurts strangely. My body fires adrenaline all directions. My insides revolt. When we were in love together the pit of my stomach almost never hurt.

Must be the weather. I am an empty vessel and I am not powerful enough to remain empty. I take a deep breath while holding the mouthpiece of the phone away from my mouth.

"So," I clown, "what you're saying is that I should massage my garlic first."

"Oh, yes." She laughs and I can see her face, like that of a happy child at play.

Her eyes . . .

Her eyes. I think it was because I could feel her soul. Her being marvels. To look into her eyes is to see her whole, for she holds nothing back. She is entirely engaged in living. At every shaping moment.

"Oh, yes," she goes on. "You have to caress food when you make it. You have to love it or it won't taste good and last long and feel good inside you."

"Yes. I know. Thank you."

She makes a noise that sounds like "Oop" over the phone. "I've got to go to work now."

"Have fun," I encourage, "taking pictures," then in afterthought "and smearing kid's faces."

"I will." And it's time to go. "I will. Bye, love."

"Bye, love."

We hang up the phone. "And thank you."

The words sound eerie in the empty restaurant. They mean so many things when I say them that I wind up not knowing what they mean at all. I stand in the little furnace room holding the phone on its plastic cradle, in the aftermath, unable to move.

The moan starts low inside me. My head. My face. Moan becomes growl. Fever takes hold, building, feeding itself, rising in pitch until groan becomes horrible singing, shouting. It screams higher. The sound takes me out prowling into the restaurant cursing, defying, waging war on self and all. My curses call down the gods.

. "You tell me - and you tell me now - why and what for, or I'm going to break this restaurant. Then I'm coming after you." Molecules rage far past body limit and full unto speech.

"You don't lie to people." I turn round padding feet, stalking, increasingly alert. "It's wrong." I let go the whole lot of it. "Who the fuck you think you are? You make us fall in love - the greatest of world possibility - and you crush us! God damn you." My heart. To die. My eyes. "I hate you."

I'm shaken, trembling as I revolve in a slow circle, looking only at what I can see. The counter. The bathroom doors. The window view out to falling snow. The piano. The menu board. The counter.

"I see it. Because I was everything. Became it. I was you." My fists beat the air.

"Monster!"

I hit myself over the heart. "Do your worst."

The split peas boil over, spilling green foam onto the electric burner. A burnt smell. I am the cook. Know me.

The phone rings.

"Good morning, Nature's Table." A goofy voice speaks at me.

"Yes. I'd like to order twenty-seven and a half gondolettes with no havarti, extra mayo on half, four on wheat bread, twelve on white. One with both. No onions on the wheat. Extra tomato on the white. Make me one half wheat and half white and on one white cut out the middle of the bread."

"Let me get a pen."

"Give me the full boat, run it through the garden, for six on rye. No sprouts. Hold the mayo. Give me a side of mustard. Also pepperoncinis. Do you have horse radish? This is to go, and do you have pickles?"

"Yes," I say politely. "Well actually we don't have a rye bread. Though we do bake a fine wheat loaf."

The voice relaxes. "Hi, Jeff."

"Hi, Terry."

"How do we stand?" "I've often wondered." However eloquent he might be, Terry is still only partially awake.

"Yes. True. Faith and Begorrah," he says. "Though I don't know what that means."

"It's early," I say. "You don't have to. What's that sound?"

"I'm squeezing orange juice."

"Hang on a second," I say. "I have to turn bread."

My things are on the worn red bench beneath the stereo. I lay the phone on my jacket and walk through the kitchen to the ovens. Its doors pull down ninety degrees, when laid on their hinges. I pull out a tray of white bread, turn it around on the door, then

slide it back into the heat. I check the chili beans and split pea soup, the boiling eggs - Jeff will need to get egg salad made - thinking I better get garbanzo beans on. Picking up the phone I ask, "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Okay." I take the phone out to the sandwich table and pick up the knife. Squeezing the phone into my left ear with my shoulder I chop onions. "We need a box of mushrooms for tomorrows soup." "Mushroom barley." "A bag of onions." "Fifty pounds." "Garlic. Also green onions and green peppers. Eggplants, I think, and you better get broccoli."

"Tomatoes?" "Um, yepper." "Lettuce?"

"I don't think so. Let me check."

Hanging the phone cord over the office door's door knob, letting the phone dangle, I go back into the cooler. We need lettuce. I make a quick check for the less immediate necessities.

On my way to the phone my eyes sweep the kitchen over for anything else we might need.

"Terry" ?

"Last I looked."

"Look too hard," I say, "and it will curl your toes. Yeah, we'll need lettuce."

"Okay."

"Okay; the only big problem is I need butter to make cookie dough."

"I'll make a trip to County Market. Can you get any out?"

"There's enough for the chip and for oatmeal or peanut butter, but I'll need to make more to get us through lunch." I open the reach-in cooler doors. "Looks like we'll need milk and half and half. Hot sauce, too."

"Okay. What else?"

"I'm not sure. Eggs are getting down. We'll need more for tomorrow or the next day."

"I ordered them," Terry says. "How about tomato sauce and paste?" "Hang on."

I drop the phone into a vegetable box on the floor underneath the hand sink. It pulls the cord, but stays in the box. In the backroom I look over shelves and labels on cans. On the way back to the phone I yawn uncontrollably.

"Well, it looks like we'll need crushed tomatoes for vegetable soup on Friday, and you better get napkins and coffee filters."

"The guy from Sysco is coming in this morning."

"Anybody else?" I think about the roads. They're probably blocked all over the city.

"You might get a call for a coffee order," Terry says.

"How much should I get?"

"Get two pounds of Colombian drip and one pound of decaf."

"The whole bean?"

"Yes."

"Okay, chief. I can't think of anything else. Where do we get walnut pieces from?"

"Dohme." Dohme Produce, a Champaign-Urbana wholesaler.

“We're going to need some fairly soon. When do you go to Chicago again? We're starting to get low on Romano and parmesan and it wouldn't hurt to get more basil and oregano.”

Terry's found an Italian market up there. "I hope I can go Monday. Now," he says. "About those gondolettes. Let me have three with no meat or cheese . . . "

"The vegan gondolette."

"Yes. And a chocolate chip cookie in each bag."

"Better order bags."

"We'll bring our own."

"Please do. We here at Nature's Table encourage bag bringing."

Terry laughs. "It's a good thing nobody hears these early conversations."

“Why?”

"They'd probably give us a free trip to Mercy Five."

"You think so?"

"Or maybe an award. Like an Elmer."

"Is that a fool's Oscar?"

"Exactly."

"That'd be cool."

"So," Terry says, his voice getting goofy again, "What you're saying is you seek fame."

"No," I say. "Glory." Or at least the chance to cook dinner for someone besides my ego."

"Freud?"

"No. Massachusetts."

I ask, "Have you looked out the window yet?"

"They're all frosted."

"Drive carefully, if at all."

"Gravity," Terry affirms. "I rely on gravity."

Holding the first full smile of the day, I shake my head, though obviously Terry can't see it. "Now don't forget the hot sauce."

"Naturally."

"Thanks, Terry."

"Thanks, Jeff."

"We'll see you when you get here." I hang up the phone and go back to chopping vegetables. Thanks, Terry.

My conscience says: Okay, Jeff. You've got a logical mind. What is it to be lonely? Use your resources.

I answer, "How?"

Conscience says: No talking now. Keep your voice to yourself and go to work. I answer: Okay.

Conscience says: Are you lonely? I answer: Yes.

Conscience says: Why?

I answer: Because I exist.

Conscience says: Too vague. Go to work. Why are you lonely?

I answer: Because I live in an incomprehensible world and in this world a way out of loneliness is to be in love.

Conscience says: What do you love? I answer: I used to love everything.

Conscience says: Careful. Used to? I answer: That's true. Was true. Conscience

says: Yes, I know. What's true now? I answer: Only me.

Conscience says: Are you sure?

I answer: Of course not. Are you?

Conscience says: You don't need to ask me that question. I answer: Yes I do or I wouldn't ask it.

Conscience says: Very good. First lesson learned. I answer: Thank you.

Conscience says: You used to love everything. Why not now? I answer: Because I can't.

Conscience says: Why not?

I answer: Don't push me. There's only so much of me to offer. Conscience says:

Very good.

I answer: Fuck you.

Conscience says: Yes, you did, didn't you.

I answer: I'm talking to myself, talking to myself. Why am I talking to myself?

Conscience says: Who else can you talk to?

I answer: Good point.

Conscience says: Second lesson learned. I answer: Tell me more, oh voice.

Conscience says: Now don't disrespect yourself. I answer: Who better to disrespect?

Conscience says: You're learning. Humor is a weapon.

I answer: Humor is a weapon. Okay. What am I fighting? Conscience says: Fear.

I answer: Scary.

Conscience says: What does clarity bring? I answer: A good look at reality dispels fear.

Conscience says: Go further. How?

I answer: Because clarity brings power. Conscience says: And power?

I answer: It holds knowledge.

Conscience says: There are things, physical and otherwise, that you cannot know.

What is it you fear?

I answer: That I'm not good enough to be in love. Of falling short of my potential.

Conscience says: Be aware that what you see can be made into pattern. I answer:

With humor?

Conscience says: Humor is a weapon. You cannot laugh without knowledge.

Sometimes to understand is to laugh at yourself.

I answer: At you. Conscience says: At you. I answer: To laugh. Conscience says:

Everything is laughable. I answer: So am I.

Conscience says: You're learning.

I answer: But everything I know has been destroyed. I lived my love wrong. I feel like I'm dying.

Conscience says: You're alive.

I answer: But everything is broken, changed, ruined, not what it used to be.

Conscience says: It never is. How do you see the world?

I answer: Empty piled on empty and no end to it.

Conscience says: It's not only about you. It's about the world, too. I answer: It's empty. I'm empty.

Conscience says: And therefore available.

I answer: Entirely.

Conscience says: Third lesson recognized. I answer: My ears are ringing.

Conscience says: It's the world. Listen.

The phone rings. There's a knife in my hand - and a lot of chopped vegetables on the cutting boards. I lay the knife down, carefully, wondering

...

Two batches of bread rise gracefully and obscenely out of hotel pans on top of the ovens. The phone rings. There's bread and cookies baking.

"Good morning, Nature's Table."

It's a woman's voice and it's puzzled. "Hello?" she says a little tentatively.

The years behind the counter hold me in good stead. "What can we do for you?"

She's reluctant. "Well, I think I have the wrong number."

"I know the feeling."

She laughs a bit uncertainly, but asks, "What number is this?"

"Three-four-four-four-nine-hundred."

"Oh." She sounds disheartened. "Really?"

"Who is it you're trying to reach?"

"My friend Jackie."

I step out of the office to the sandwich table. What's cooking smells undamaged, though the rising dough beckons.

"He's not here."

She laughs through the concern in her voice. "I'm sorry." I assure her it's okay.

She remains puzzled. "But this is the number she gave me." I like her. "Maybe you could try information."

"Maybe," she considers. "I think I'd better." There's a pause. In it low buzzing noises come over the wire. "I hope she's all right. She told me to call her this morning."

"And you found us."

How curious.

"Nature's Table," she queries. "That's the jazz place, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's right."

"I've never been there. People tell me it's a good place."

"Well," I say modestly. "We hope so."

She enjoys her laugh this time. "I should come by sometime. You have food, too, don't you?"

"Yes. Most of it's homemade."

"That's nice," she says. "Do you serve lunch?"

"Everyday but Sunday." I put the professional note into my voice. "Then we have a spaghetti dinner special."

"Maybe I should try that."

"Sure," I encourage. "We welcome all eaters." She gives me the laugh I look for in everybody. "Good luck finding Jackie."

"Yes," she says. "Thank you!" "Goodbye," I say.

"Goodbye."

These phone conversations. As I lift the lid to the garbanzo beans and watch the beige foam recede down the side of the pot I can't help but feel it's an odd world.

I need to make a pizza. Did I order green peppers?

Heaving down an overflowing white batch from the top of the ovens, punching it down, watching it deflate, I take stock of things. We've got bread, soup and chili, and some cookies. If I can get water on the boil for pesto noodles, and for bulgar for tabouli, we'll have all the salads before lunch.

I pick and pull and yank out the white sponge from the silver hotel pan then throw it over my arms back into it. Scraping bits of dough off the hairs on my forearms, oiling my hands, I smooth out the dough and heft it back on top of the ovens.

Jeff will make the coffee. If Terry can get his van through fallen branches I'll have butter enough for cookies - the last batch of wheat bread may have to wait. I take the eggs off the burner and put them temporarily by the slicer.

There's curried garbanzo spread and probably salad dressings to make. I pull up another pot and head for the sinks. We need pinto beans for dinner burritos, and salsas and rice - also baba ghanouj and hummus. Maybe Terry should get chopped garlic instead of whole bulbs. It would save time in the morning.

Work dispels loneliness but does not dismiss it. A woman.

What I really want to know is when do I get my soul back. If this all weren't so hilarious . . .

key grates into the lock on the front door. Mr. Machota arriving in from amazing icicle land.

The lunch rush will bring awed customers with their own stories about the weather.

I need to be alone.

Food Fight

It's after ten o'clock in a mid-March morning and we're open for business. The long winter months are behind us now and everyone is itchy, yearning for the advent of Spring. Visions of brighter colors seed the mind, giving rise to thoughts of lazy sunsets with a good meal under the belt and friends to pass the evening. Spring, the season of new growth - now like an almost forgotten promise - is evident in dripping eaves and the ability to throw a tightly packed snowball.

Bob Weckback comes in from the backroom with a can of tuna, and says, "You can still see your breath back there."

I give Jeff Machota several loaves of bread. "How many sandwiches, Jeff?"
"Thirty, Jeff."

I may have to make another batch of bread. "At least they're all the same. Half gondolettes with everything to go."

"Yeah."

We slice open the long loaves. Tantalizing aroma rises to our faces. "Fifteen white? Fifteen wheat?"

"Yeah."

In the spirit of cooperation we help make each other's sandwiches; it's more efficient and time is money. First the mayonnaise goes down, then ham, salami, and muenster cheese. I spread out sprouts and drop on lettuce while Jeff lays down tomato slices. Sprinkling chopped onions, he squirts yellow mustard on my hand.

"Hey!"

Laughing, Machota gives me a towel.

"Sorry."

I turn to the hand sink. 'Who's this for again?' Jeff rolls sandwiches in wax paper. "The Panpipe Society." "I didn't think there were thirty panpipes in this city."

Jeff took the order shortly before we opened this morning, and Bob, happening to come in early, and being a helpful sort, poured a cup of coffee and started in on the tuna, tofu, and egg salads. Music made by the Mitch Paliga Quartet - recorded here last night by Jeff- skitters and runs and grooves again through the empty restaurant. Though the building remains chilly in it's extremities, Winter is showing signs of breaking in the people.

Jeff and I have a natural competition. Occasionally for fun we do sandwich races. Until he came along I could beat everybody - even Terry sometimes. But Machota, though not an athlete in the usual sense of the word, has quick hands aligned with the ability to concentrate. And he usually beats me. It's become a source for congenial rancor.

"Jeff," I say. "How about we time one?"

Grinning through his curly black beard, he agrees. "Okay." I ask Bob, "You want to watch the clock?"

"Sure," he says. Anything new to Bob he wants to do, even if he's done it before. He goes over to the coffee maker and looks through the service window at the Schlitz clock on the wall in the main room.

Armed with serrated knives, bread laid out before us, Jeff and I are ready. Bob counts, "Four ... Three ... Two . . . "

The phone rings and he answers it. I'm going to beat Jeff this time. I go around back, stir soup, and look him over for weak spots.

Bob comes out of the office.

"Terry wants somebody to shovel the walk out front."

Jeff and I converge upon the sandwich table. Bob goes to the clock. "Get ready."

We pick up our knives. I bounce on the balls of my feet. "Go," Bob says. "No wait!"

Blades touch bread. We look at him.

"The second hand went past the twelve," he explains. "Let's start at fifteen after."

It feels like steam is coming out of my ears. I was ready that time.

"Three ... Two ... One!"

We slice the loaves open and place the tops on their backs. Jeff grabs the mayonnaise spatula. I grab ham with one hand and salami with the other. He grabs lettuce with one hand and sprouts with the other. I spread mayo on my top half. Jeff lays down slices of ham and salami. Bob reports. "Ten seconds."

One of the rules is that the sandwiches can't be made too sloppily. Jeff stretches a web of alfalfa sprouts. I place tomato slices. We bump each other grabbing for the muenster cheese. Sliced yesterday, the gluey stuff comes out in clumps, the slices pulling apart too slowly.

"Eighteen seconds." We're running even.

Jeff places tomatoes. I drop on lettuce. He sprinkles onions. Digging my fingers into the tin of onions with one hand, I read for the mustard with the other. Jeff gets to the yellow squeeze bottle first. I smooth out the vegetables on the top half of my sandwich then squirt on mustard.

Jeff rolls the top of his sandwich onto the bottom. So do I. We both grab for the top piece of wax paper from the shelf behind us. Several sheets flutter towards the floor. Snatching one from mid-air, I turn and lay my sandwich on it. Jeff cuts his sandwich in two. I cut mine. He folds and rolls. I fold and roll.

He presents the finished sandwich to Bob, who says, "Twenty-eight," as I present mine. "Twenty-nine."

Machota laughs as he pulls the garbage can from under the counter to the sandwich table. He asks, "How long till the soup is ready?"

"Anytime," I reply, evenly. To lose is to become more philosophical. "All I have to do is add the miso." But nobody likes being beaten. Is this true?

Bob and I pack sandwiches into paper bags on the customer counter. I ask, "How many more, Jeff?"

"Nine."

I head for the oven and pull out a tray of white bread and replace it with a tray of wheat. Joining Jeff at work on the remainder of the sandwiches we weave a nice intercoordination; I help make his and he helps make mine.

He squirts mustard on the back of my hand.

"Hey."

He laughs.

As an indomitable spirit Jeff can be overly forceful; and if there's any fight in a person that person may find himself at loggerheads with an indomitable spirit.

"Aim, Jeff. Aim." I reach for the bar towel. "It was an accident."

"So is this."

I slap his forearm with an extra-gooey mayonnaise spatula. "It was an accident."

He laughs and turns to the hand sink.

The last few sandwiches get finished without incident; but I still go back to the cook station a little agitated. Bob goes behind me into the back room as I stare into half-finished buckets of tabouli, pesto, and curried rice. I've built a small hill of vegetables on my prep table. I go into the back room for more curry powder.

Bob fishes through produce boxes. Jeff comes in. I stretch above Bob to a paper bag on a top shelf. Jeff reaches over Bob in an attempt to get napkins. He misses. A foot slips and he falls onto Bob. Bob rams me. My arms fling up and I knock into fifteen empty half-gallon plastic containers. They rain down on our heads. Struggling, we swat at them. They fly around. Bob lunges for the kitchen wall and Jeff beans him with one of the hollow containers. It makes a ponk sound. Bob grabs one out of the air and throws it at Jeff as he runs into the kitchen.

"You coward," Bob yells. "Come back here."

Jeff hurries into the cooler. The door closes behind him with a thud-click as Bob bounces another container off it. Plastic containers eddy around the back room. Bob picks one up and shows it to me.

"What are we doing?" "You're asking me?"

I take it and flip it over my shoulder. It springs, jumping off the mop bucket. Breathing misty breaths, rubbing my palms together, I say, "Jeff's in the cooler." Bob meets my eyes thoughtfully. "No escape."

"Like putty in our hands." "Like putty."

Sneaking by the bread rack, Bob whispers, "What do you have in mind?" "Bird seed. I'm sure." I grab a loaf of wheat bread. "Trust me."

"Huh?"

I hand the bread to him - Machota could appear at any moment - and get a loaf for myself, holding it like a ball bat.

Arthur, our only customer so far, a teacher, steps up for a coffee refill. Temporarily, we abandon our fantasy of beating sense into Jeff's head with bread long enough to get Arthur his coffee and two-percent. He fixes it with sugar, leaving the spoon on a napkin on the counter.

We go back to the walk-in cooler. Tittering, Bob stands behind where the cooler door will open. I stand in front of the door willing the inevitable confrontation. Machota can't stay in there forever. He'll get cold.

I wag the bread bat off my shoulder. The cooler door opens abruptly, and Jeff springs forth spraying a can of soda. It's a natural root beer, I notice, before ducking away. He shook it up. Must have been listening through the door. Smart. Angling around he sprays Bob with a natural cherry pop. I bat him over the head. The loaf breaks and what isn't left in my hand bounces erratically away. He turns, regarding me introspectively, and Bob crowns him.

Machota tickles me, laughing the laugh triumphant, and darts past. Grabbing red and yellow sandwich baskets he flings them at us. The stack fans out in the air. I throw bread through it. Bob throws handfuls of lettuce and sliced tomatoes, but Machota escapes to safety beyond the customer counter.

Watching this spree, Arthur sips his coffee. He's been a favorite patron for as long as I can remember. Spruce in a gray suit, white dress shirt, and red tie, he says, "Don't hurt yourselves," and takes his cup of coffee back to work by the front windows.

Jeff laughs. The scuffle over, he steps back down into the kitchen. Bob squirts his face with mustard. I stick a mayoed spatula down the back of his pants.

Hands to his face - yellow beard - Jeff's good nature prevails.

"You realize this means war."

"Oh, yeah?" I scoff.

Bob says, "Sez who?"

Machota just goes to the hand sink to rinse out his beard. Our kitchen is hardly big enough to swing a cat in. It's unimaginable that a poorly constructed crew could work it. Jeff goes to the dish sinks. Retaliation comes in the form of water. Cupping his hands, Jeff throws away the rules, and with them, lots of sudsy water. He comes after us with a sauce pan. Swiftly, gleefully, we go around the bread rack - Bob to his unfinished salads, me to my prep table. Bob dips his hand into the ground white pepper jar. As Jeff bears down on him, Bob opens his hand and blows.

Jeff douses him.

A splash and a sneeze and the front door opens. Jeff sneezes six more times in a row. Bundled up, a small woman enters. She takes off her shawl and shakes out the snow. She wears dark colors, cotton and wool. Bob pulls the skirt of his apron over his head. He ducks and rubs. Approaching the ah point in ah-choo, Machota pushes a knuckle up under his nose. Even in this uncompromising position he seems to be enjoying himself.

Snow drifts down lazily outside the front windows. We were too busy to notice. What steps up to the counter is an innocent, a frail, ethereal woman in need of protection from more than just the elements.

Surreptitiously kicking fight debris under the counter, Bob walks forward to greet her, successfully becoming the polite restaurant worker.

Sweet and quiet, in a high voice, she asks, "Do you have hot tea?"

I take in her every gesture. Bob, who has a girlfriend, is entranced. As he directs her to the tea boxes by the coffee maker I pull the spatula out of Jeff's pants. Using both of them as a screen I go to the sinks. I hand Jeff, who is still sniffing, a mug. He fills it with hot water, puts it on the counter in front of Bob, and goes back to the panpipe sandwiches.

Her eyes large and round, she says, "Chamomile, please."

Delighted to be of service, Bob gives her the tea box. She drops a packet into her steaming cup and Bob says, "it started snowing again." "Yes. It's lovely. So silent."

She unbuttons her coat. Maybe five feet tall, she probably weighs only a hundred pounds. In all her quiet alertness, her given naiveté, she could be a model for a painting.

So I ask, putting a bowl on the draining board, "Are you a student?" Her hand jerks out of her purse. She gives Bob two quarters. "No."

I startled her. As she folds in on herself, following the law of self-preservation, I feel like the proverbial bull in the china shop. She takes her tea into the main room and sits by the piano. Would that I could play something by Eric Satie . . .

Bob looks piercingly at me. We both have seen something . . . Maybe the same thing.

"Who?" he asks me, "or better yet, what was that?" "A magical person."

"On this planet," he says, "she'll be crushed."

"True," I say. "A real mystery. But right now we've got Jeff off guard." Raising my left eyebrow, I wiggle it. "Let's get him."

Bob gives me his what-do-you-have-in-mind?-I'm-not-so-sure-but-maybe-yes face.

"Let's continue with gooey," I say. "More mustard and mayonnaise."

I hand him stuff off the draining board and we walk behind Jeff as he works on the sandwich order. Bob pretends at the various salads. Back at my prep table I survey the vegetables - and decide Machota could benefit from several tomatoes smooshed into his personality. I walk over to Bob with an armload. He nods and picks up a nearly full container of mayonnaise.

Nonchalant, we amble around the bread rack. Jeff throws parts of two gondolettes at Bob. I rapid fire tomatoes. They connect. Machota actually catches one that doesn't burst. Meanwhile, with both hands overhead, Bob advances forward to pour mayonnaise on top of Jeff's head. Stepping inside, Jeff stuffs the tomato into Bob's right ear. It squashes and squirts, redly dripping onto his white t-shirt. Bob keeps on coming. Backpedaling, Jeff laughs. But he doesn't want that much mayonnaise threatening him. Fifteen inches in diameter, the mayonnaise - oil, egg, lemon juice, salt, EDTA - hangs by suction and Bob's touch, acting much like the world's largest tube of toothpaste.

Bob steps on Jeff's foot, which pitches him off balance onto his back foot. Squeezing, Bob throws both hands forward. He yanks the plastic container back. Blobby white stuff hands there a second before going through Machota's fingers and into his face.

Bob lifts up his foot and Jeff sits down on the floor looking like a mayonnaise Santa Claus. He takes off his glasses. It makes him look a little like a raccoon.

I hand Bob a tomato. "Care to finish him off?"

Bob looks at him a bit wistfully, I think, then jams it into my cheek. Tomato mixes with my beard.

"Dexterous, Bob."

I take a bunch of parsley from my back pocket and wiggle it under his nose. He dodges away. I pick a cucumber up off the sandwich board and toss it past his hip to Jeff.

Back on his feet, Jeff clubs Bob with the cucumber. "Ow!" Bob grabs his head. "That hurt."

I run around back. His grin, all but permanent now, Machota shoves Bob ahead of him, toward me. They round the bread rack and I throw Bob's half-finished tuna salad at them. Why not? The place is a mess. There's nothing to lose. I don't know who is on whose side, or if anybody is on anybody's. Jeff picks up the big mustard container. Bob comes at me with the green salad. No time to retreat and regroup. So I hold up a carrot, and say, "Carrot, anyone?" and throw vegetables as fast as I can. I won't back off. Neither will they. Salad pours over my head and for a brief moment my world is green and leafy. Somebody pulls my arm and a pungent, yellow goop surrounds my head.

Mustard.

To what do we afford purport and significance? Light in shadow? Good digestion? God's hand at rest upon the Bible? There's a tomato in my hand, so I take a bite of it and hold it out to Jeff as a sort of olive branch. He takes it and looks it over for the best place to bite and shoves it into Bob's stomach. Bob blurts. "What are we doing?"

I give him a loaf of bread. "You're asking me?" I grab one for myself.

"Redecorating, maybe?" Machota runs away.

"Yeah," Bob laughs. "Whatever. We sure made a mess of this place. For what?"

We go after him.

"You sure you want a point to this?" "No."

A five gallon soup emerges from the dish sink. With a great sweep of his arms across his body, Machota heaves the water at us. His aim is good. We get soaked. He sets the big pot on the floor, opens his smeared face, and starts laughing. Not his fast, fluttering giggle, but full blown laughter from the belly. Bob and I stand dumb. But the situation is too ridiculous and Jeff's laugh too infectious.

"Good grief," Bob says. He runs his hands over his wet head. "Look at the floor!"

I laugh. "Look at you."

Machota laughs even harder and when I ask him what he's laughing at he replies to a different question.

"Remember, Jeff. You started it." "Oh, I did, did I?"

Bob takes off his apron. We are all varieties of stain. There is water everywhere. The walls are splotched and the floor flooded, dotted with food. A slow technicolor rivulet lazily flows to a low spot before the big garbage can.

A voice speaks from the back room. "Good thing I bought new mop heads."

Terry, the owner, our employer, comes in holding up new mop heads. There's an unusual moment where we put it all together, separately and collectively. I feel a fool. We have neglected our job, wasted food. Moreover, we have deliberately disrespected the

integrity that is Nature's Table. Call it childish, or impulsive fun, or even blame it on the weather - we are in trouble.

The thick, white, rope-like strands of the pristine mop heads hand from Terry's outstretched hands.

Once, when playing in a pick up band at Mabel's, in a blue three piece suit, red, white, and blue gym shoes, and a Mr. T bandana holding a brand new mop head in place on my head, we performed "I Am The Walrus" for a full house on the last night before classes started for the fall semester. I felt ridiculous then. I do now. But on stage it was fun. Here, the foolishness is not necessarily appreciated.

Terry sloshes to the counter. With a flip of his foot, he lofts a head of iceberg lettuce at the garbage can.

"I miss all the fun."

The lettuce bounces past the counter - and the thin air we've been breathing refills with the welcome aroma of fresh bread and coffee. I wonder what Arthur and the innocent woman think of us.

"How's the sandwich order coming?"

Even Jeff, normally Mr. Confidence, is a little intimidated. "There's two sandwiches left."

Terry bends to pick up a chunk of bread. Turning it all angles of viewpoint, following with his chin, he says in a voice gone a little goofy, "Very pretty. The porousness alone makes for good art. Pleasing to the eye." His free hand follows along now. "All the little holes. That's the key to good art - to look into the spaces." He looks at

us. "And the lines. Graceful as a folk dance. And such color!" He holds it up to the kitchen's fluorescent light. "Maybe there's a market for it."

He tosses it into the garbage. Handing Jeff the mop heads, he takes off his coat. "Let's clean it up."

Jeff Helgesen

"There was a point right before I came to college where I made a decision to play every gig that came along, just to get more playing time."

He becomes a regular at Nature's Table early on. The first time he went there was with his Dad, also a trumpet player, to see " . . . Ron Dewar, or something like that. I was a junior in high school here . . ." The next time was " . . . Mark Stryker's quartet, and he played really out of tune and he was wearing a headband and I was like 'This jazz shit is really weird, man.' So I didn't go back for a while. He almost put me off it." We met at the Bread Company - which took over the back part of Treno's - in 1998. He recently participated in Trumpet Madness, a four trumpet jazz night at Zorba's, featuring Ray Sazaki, Tom Wirtel, Doc Scott, and Jeff Helgesen.

"From the very beginning I tried to play with players who were better than me to try and learn faster."

He studied with Ray Sazaki for several years and played in the big bands with John Garvey and Ray. This led to playing for three and a half years over four tours with Ray Charles.

Notable local bands: The Modern Humans, Bontuku, Sorgum, The Jeff Helgesen Quintet.

Favorite sandwich: "A cookie and a Busch beer."

"I came into school, played in the big band, then I got kicked out of school because I wasn't making my grades. I was staying up too late. Whatever. The whatever was the interesting stuff."

J.M.: It seems like when I first got here in '75 that jazz was already an institute around here.

J.H.: Yes. Well, you've got to remember that Garvey's band kind of gained some national prominence around 1967, because, number one: they were a very talented group of players and they were playing stuff nobody else was playing.

It may be that Garvey kind of built it up or maybe it may have been just chance, or people might have heard. It's hard to say. Around 1967 or 1968 he put together a state department tour to Russia, which was virtually unheard of at the time.

J.M.: Ron Dewar was in the band that went to Russia?

J.H.: He was. Howie Smith, an alto sax player who's still around - he passes through town once in a while - he wrote a bunch of arrangements for the band that were very . . . that went on to be published. He's very popular. Cecil Bridgewater was in the band. He was arranging and playing. He ended up in New York. He still comes back on holidays because he's got family here.

J.M.: Why would Garvey be so in love with dance band music, swing band music?

J.H.: Oh, well, I'm not sure. I'm sure his experience in Jan Savitt's band and his experience with ensemble music - the Walden String Quartet music - made him qualified to lead a dance band. How it ended up being a concert jazz ensemble thing . . .

I came to school in '81 and I didn't get into the band. There was a big turnover in the band the year after that. So I started in the third band.

It was co-led by Doug Tidabek and Mark Curry, who was the lead trumpet player in Garvey's band, who later got me on the Ray Charles band.

J.M.: So when did you start with Garvey?

J.H.: '82. Fall of '82. And I played with the band on and off for five or six years really, I guess. I did three years in a row, then I dropped out of school, then I came back and played in the second band for a while.

By the time I got back it was Birkner's band. Ray's band . . . It was kind of interesting. When I came to school -1980 - 1983 - there was kind of an upheaval. Ray was still leading a band and people were getting fed up with playing this weird Russian chamber music that Garvey was starting to push on people. And Ray was busy playing a more swinging repertoire . . . Thad Jones and Mel Lewis stuff that was more complicated.

J.M.: Count Basie. Ellington.

J.H.: Some of that. Mostly it was Thad and Mel stuff, which is very challenging and was kind of in vogue at the time.

J.M.: Who were some of the others? Dorsey brothers, Benny Goodman - those charts get used at all?

J.H.: No. Not so much, because that's mostly ... these are mostly dance band things. And mostly what would get played in the big bands here anymore are . . . It's not so much music for dancers as it is music for listeners. The Basie band stuff being kind of an exception, the Ellington bands being kind of an exception.

J.M.: What was Garvey's repertoire then, at the time you were in it?

J.H.: He had a pretty wide variety of stuff that had been written for the band by other people. Chuck Israels is writing a lot of stuff at the time. He was the bass player with Bill Evans, who now teaches out in Washington. He had a bunch of just old stuff. I mean, the band had been together fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years - anyway a long time. Their library's huge. There's hundreds of charts in there and Garvey had his favorites, some of

which were published, some of which were written for the band, some of which he was just buying off the shelf.

J.M.: So much of it sounded like it had come out of the old bands though. J.H.: Yeah.

There's a bunch of good old Basie charts and stuff like that.

J.M.: Glen Miller?

J.H.: Not really. Some very old stuff like Jimmy Lunceford . . .

J.M.: Fletcher Henderson band?

J.H.: Yeah. That kind of stuff, occasionally. Yeah, but it wasn't the foundation for it. It was mostly Basie style stuff.

J.M.: That would be the Garvey thing: mostly Basie style?

J.H.: Right. Not exclusively. But a lot of that.

J.H.: People just got so fed up with Garv that they decided they'd rather play in Ray's band. So the best players were actually playing in the second band. And a lot of people just kind of hop-scotched up ... There were a lot of great players in Ray's small group Condition Blue. Guys like Steve Griggs and his girlfriend at the time, Karen Korsmeyer.

J.M.: Played bass.

J.H.: She went off to study with Rufus Reed.

J.H.: When I joined the band the other players were Brenda Lacosi, Tom Flanigan's little brother . . . Kevin . . . that was Lawrence Hobgood. In the third band, in Doug Tidabek's band, where Jeff Beer (trumpet) played, for half a semester, that was Mike Kocour. The rest of the group in Garvey's band . . . Larry Beers was playing drums. Rafe Bradford was playing bass. Kevin (Kizer) was playing tenor. Scott Frillman was playing barry (baritone saxophone).

J.M.: What about Ryan Shultz? When did he show?

J.H.: Ryan never played in Garvey's band to my recollection. I don't think he ever – he was more of a small group player. Played in the second band some.

They (the big bands) were a springboard. Well, I mean, it was pretty intensive practice. Every band would rehearse Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, two one hour rehearsals and one two hour rehearsal, and if you were lucky you got sectional work, too. Plus Nature's Table which was having music just about every night. So, you know, those things fed one another a little bit. So there were a ton of people getting a lot of opportunities to play.

J.M.: What do you think of the connection between Nature's Table and the big bands?

J.H.: If there was . . . I wouldn't say there was a connection. I mean, there was a connection in that, as I said, the two were probably feeding one another. It was probably more of a system. What people were learning at Nature's Table was getting reflected in the big bands. What people were learning in the big band was probably getting reflected and improved at Nature's Table, once the players were getting better. So the players that were really good at the U of I ended up playing a lot at Nature's Table. They were in high demand.

J.M.: Garvey would have a lot of guest artists. Even Ron Dewar played with him five and ten years later.

J.H.: Yeah: Absolutely. And Birkner's band . . . I mean, Garvey band backed up Joe Williams and Clark Terry a few times here on campus. Birkner's band backed up Clark Terry. We backed up Bill Watrus. He's a trombone player - kind of a high note trombone player. Pete Christlieb - who was the tenor player on the Tonight show band - we backed

him up. We did a tour down in Memphis area, down south. Backed up a bunch of players.

Yeah, you got all sorts of interesting opportunities to back people up.

J.M.: And of course you guys would play at Krannert once in a while, didn't you?

J.H.: Yeah. Once or twice a semester.

J.M.: Did you find you'd play any different there, just because the sound was so different?

J.H.: Yeah. It was terrible. I hate playing there to this day.

Krannert was designed . . . Krannert was built in 1969 and it was designed to be state of the art. And I think, by design, rooms like the Great Hall were kind of set up so that you could set one person in the center of the stage and you could sit as a listener anywhere in the empty hall and no matter what they played, no matter how soft or loud they played it, you could hear it anywhere. And it really does that pretty well.

The problem, though is . . . if you want to make a big difference - like in a big band between playing really soft and really loud - what you end up with is kind of dead level, right in the middle. And what you'd find would be bands would go in there, like Woody Herman band or Duke Ellington or whomever - and they still do this to this day - and bring in a bunch of amplifiers and the soundmen and turn on all the amps and it would just sound like noise and just mush. And bands still do that. You'd think Krannert would say, "Think about it."

J.M.: But you guys would go in just acoustically, no microphones.

J.H.: Pretty much. It was still bad. The sound would still be mushy, yeah. J.M.: Would it reach halfway back?

J.H.: Oh, you'd hear it all. It would bounce all back. But the problem was you never knew how loud you were playing, because the bounce - back you would get . . . You'd get the soft stuff bouncing back and you'd get the loud stuff coming back, and the only way you can tell in a big band - or a small group, for that matter - about how loud you're playing is how does the room talk back to you. Do you hear some reverb? Does it feel loud to you? And in there nothing feels soft. It feels like you're playing into a pillow all the time. So the band would play a set and they'd just be tired out, busting their gut trying to play loud - and you could hear it.

I remember there was one time. There was one concert we did in there. Garvey did this. He brought -this was like in '85, '84 -'85 -he brought in an alumni band. This was with Mark Kirk (saxophone). I don't know if you remember Mark.

Each band did a set in the Great Hall. We set up two big bands, one of each side of the stage. And then it's the last number. Actually . . . a little background. We decided we were going to do this famous tune that was by the Basie and by the Ellington bands. They did an album 'Battle Royale' and it had these tunes where both bands were playing. And the opening tune - which was kind of a battle of the bands - was called 'Battle Royal'. So somebody had the bright idea to do the tune. So we organized this concert.

J.M.: This was in the Great Hall.

J.H.: Yeah. This was in the Great Hall. So Mark is feverishly working for a week or two trying to get all this stuff worked out. We get there on the day of the concert. We've got a rehearsal at two o'clock. Nobody's seen the parts yet. We've got a table downstairs at Krannert laid out twenty feet long with ten people writing out parts to this thing from pieces of the score. You know, you get done with a piece of the score, you'd hand it down

to somebody else; they'd write more. So by three o'clock everybody gets all this music. We've set all this stuff up in the orchestral rehearsal room at Krannert and we play it down. Of course there were a lot of mistakes. But it was just amazing. And this is the night of the concert. (He's still astonished).

J.M.: (Laughs).

J.H.: We got out there and we played and it went really well. I don't know if there's a recording of it anywhere, but that was uh, the craziest experience I ever had.

J.M.: So playing in the room at Nature's Table, what did that offer you besides just simple intimacy?

J.H.: There's a lot to be said for that. For one thing you get to play whatever you want to. And play for a big or a small crowd. Unless it was really packed, or really empty, you never knew how big a crowd you were really playing for. It might be ten people. It might be fifty people. You could never tell. It depended on how well organized the band was.

J.H.: Andrew (Andrew) and I started a two trumpet group. We played for a while and then he gave up the trumpet for the piano. Then we took the chords from that book and put Scott (Frillman) on that book. And that was really the first playing I did with Scott.

And it was that group that eventually evolved into my quintet, which was Gary on piano, Danny on drums, Pennell on bass.

J.M.: John Hurtibise.

J.H.: No. John Pennell. This is later. After a while those guys left. Just kind of fell by the wayside. So I reconstructed that with Pennell on bass and Gary on piano. And this is before I knew Gary played drums, which he now plays exclusively.

J.M.: Gary Payton.

J.H.: Gary Payton, yeah. And, uh, you know, actually now I think about it, it didn't start with John. It started with Glen Shutz (bass), who was still in town.

J.M.: Who was just a fabulous player.

J.H.: Yeah. Absolutely ... It was great. It was a blast.

J.M.: Did you play much with Brian Wilke (guitarist who played in Trumpet Madness) then?

J.H.: No. Brian and I went to high school together, oddly. Brian was a senior when I was a freshman. And we played in the same jazz band for a year. I'm sure, till many years later, he didn't remember me very well. He was playing with Dewar.

J.M.: He was already great?

J.H.: Yeah. He was - undisputed - the best player in the band. So, no, we didn't play a lot together until . . . Well, he left town for a while. He went down south, Nashville.

J.M.: So when does Ryan Shultz show up?

J.H.: He just popped up out of nowhere. Ryan was playing . . . with John Scott's band.

J.M.: . . . John Scott. He used to play all the time on Tuesday nights, I don't know for how long. Years. He played with Mike Kocour and wasn't it usually Dan Anderson and Jeff Stitely?

J.H.: Yeah. Or Karen Korsmeyer. It would generally be him as soloist with piano, bass, and drums. Exactly. Sometimes he'd bring down a tenor player like Ed Peterson. I didn't know John really until about three or four years ago actually. I loved his playing. I think I was running in circles John didn't much care for. Because it was Tuesday nights he was always fighting the big bands down at Treno's forever. (It) wasn't always Garvey's band;

but some big band was always there and it was always packed. And what I hear of the Table . . .

J.M.: There would be five people. Sometimes there was nobody there but the band and the workers. Honest to God.

J.H.: Oh, I believe it. I've played for crowds like that. Some of those nights were great, actually. But for John's band . . . What he would do . . . John would get a couple of drinks in him and he'd come down and start yelling at the band over here (Treno's).

J.M.: He'd get funky at Nature's Table, too. Nonetheless, no matter what you hear, the guy could play.

J.H.: Oh, yeah. He is a great player.

J.M.: He went through . . . some strange . . . was it tendonitis?

J.H.: Yeah. He had to switch hands. And he still plays left-handed.

J.M.: So there was some sloppiness going on, but it wasn't horrible sloppiness. Right?

J.H.: Right.

J.M.: But the thing about John that always confused me was he would get so mad at himself.

J.H.: Yeah. He was frustrated because he felt he could be so much better of a player if he was playing right-handed, or wasn't having trouble with his chops, or whatever.

He lived in Detroit. Went to Berklee (School of Music, in Boston). He was a contemporary of Herbie Hancock and they wrote some tunes together. Mid-60's, probably. Early '60's, actually. Because this would have been before Herbie went on the road with Miles, which would have been '63 or '64. Yeah, John knew a lot of people.

He gave up the horn for three or four years . . . He gave it up because he got tired of playing with bad rhythm sections. And so he basically said, I'm not going to waste my time with this. And then three or four years later he started back up, because I think he figured out if he didn't start playing again . . . It wasn't like bass players were going to come flock to him to get him to play again.

J.M.: Did Doc write his own tunes?

J.H.: Yeah. Almost exclusively. He plays standards, but he's got a whole book of his own music. It's all great.

J.M.: Do people know who this guy is?

J.H.: John never made a name for himself.

J.M.: By choice or by happenstance?

J.H.: No, he . . . No, he really wanted . . . He felt like if the tendonitis didn't hit him - and he'll tell you about this . . . He was a contemporary of Freddie Hubbard's and Lee Morgan's; and he felt he was really playing stuff that they weren't playing and stuff that was as inventive as what they were doing. He was right on their tails.

J.M.: Would you agree?

J.H.: Well it's hard for me to say. As inventive? Absolutely? His writing is great. His execution? It's really hard to tell; his chops and his hands give him so much trouble, you know, it's hard to tell exactly where he would have gone. The tendonitis he got from practicing himself into the ground. And again, he'll be the first to tell you. But, um, yeah, Doc ended up being . . . He was a tragic story of somebody who knew exactly what he wanted to be and circumstances beat him into the ground for it.

J.M.: What kind of impact did Nature's Table have on the community?

J.H.: Well, its short term impact was pretty serious, judging by the response that came out of its closing. Also, it was exclusively - almost exclusively - playing for cover kind of operation. It had its lunch and dinner crowd. It had its devoted crowd that would just walk in for the music. Very seldom paid more than two bucks for cover.

Those are the reasons it could survive, I think. People were willing to play for nothing . . . There were times when I played five nights a week. Small group jazz. Bontuku. Whatever. That doesn't happen.

J.M.: For a while you and Danny . . .

J.H.: Oh yeah! We were playing there all the time.

J.M.: Who were the bass players that were there so much?

J.H.: Well, Hurtibise was in high demand.

J.M.: Then there was the other Raphael (Garrett).

J.H.: Yeah. We played together some. I called him for a couple of my gigs. That was pretty weird.

J.M.: Give me some of your favorite players who played at Nature's Table.

J.H.: I really loved Ray Sazaki's band Condition Blue a lot. Sorgum was very good. I always liked playing with Bontuku.

Has anybody told you the story about the night Guido pulled a knife on Oscar? That was an interesting experience. I don't remember the exact circumstances, but I remember Guido being there. We got done playing the gig, and we were filling the place pretty consistently. Anyway, it got to the end of some gig, and Oscar and Guido went into the back to talk about something. Apparently Guido wanted to talk with Oscar about something.

J.M.: Was Oscar on something? He was so crazy.

J.H.: No. He's still crazy.

I don't know who I saw first. I was doing something like tearing down and then I remember seeing Oscar leave, or Guido comes out looking for Oscar and Scott Mordecai, who was his left, his right hand . . . and went down to them. They were at a pay phone and they were calling the cops. And I said, "Why are you calling the cops?" He says, "Guido pulled a knife on me."

He took a knife from the kitchen and went out looking for Oscar. Well, apparently, what had happened . . . Oscar and his wife years ago . . . were staying with Guido and somehow his ukulele had gotten broken and no money had changed hands to get the repair work done. So apparently Guido corners Oscar in the back little store room and demands some money for this thing. And they got into a little shoving match and Oscar kicks him up against the wall and storms out. So we basically told Oscar he better just leave. Get out of Dodge. Eventually they just dropped the charges.

J.H.: I remember sitting in with Groove Holmes (jazz organ master) once. He played there a number of times. This was shortly before he died. He was really big. I guess he was always really big. Guido just kind of pulled me up there. He said, "Here, c'mon up and play." I said, "Oh, okay."

And then one night I was playing and (Jack) McDuff showed up. He just kind of walked in. He was out in the audience and he sat in on a tune on piano, ya know. He's just playing on piano, and . . . it was . . . like . . . Damn!

J.M.: (Laughs). Could he get around a piano as well as he could an organ?

J.H.: I have no idea. I don't remember. It didn't matter. There was just a glow about the night. It was like, "Yeah. I played with you. Yeah, you played piano." But, yeah, those are the up sides. But sometimes you can get some real . . . I'm sure I was one of them, you know, guys asking to sit in.

J.H.: I didn't come away with as much of a respect for Guido's playing as a lot of people did around town. That wasn't an educated opinion.

There were so many things that bugged me about Guido that I'm sure I let it taint my ability to listen to him as a musician. Clearly a lot of people thought he could . . . you know, the line is: when you caught him when he was really on . . .

J.M.: Did he have the technique?

J.H.: Yeah. It seemed that way. You know, I don't know. It's really . . . Well, just the way he ran the band: it was so disorganized. Everything was a jam session. And that was okay up to a point. It gives you all this freedom - but I was trying to learn how to play.

I remember one gig when I played there and the place was pretty crowded and it was a bad night. It was one of those nights with Guido where I wasn't having any fun. And he was calling stupid tunes. So we get done with the tune - and there's about fifty or sixty people in the place. It was a pretty good crowd. And he starts turning pages in this cheap nasty old fake book. And I'm going, Oh, God, what's he going to call now. And he calls up this tune called, 'The Wiffenpoof Song.' Now, 'The Wiffenpoof Song'; you'll know, is the old theme from 'Bye Bye Birdy' . . . uh, 'Bye Bye Blacksheep.' (Sings) "We are poor little lambs who've lost our way. Bah, bah, bah." So I'm . . . Guido's like, "You got the head." "I don't want to play the head." "No. You got it." So we play . . . start playing the tune and I'm thinking, God I hope nobody's talking about this tomorrow. So I

play the thing and I play a solo, and I look up, and who's walked in in the middle of the tune but Ray Sazaki, Brad Wheeler, and somebody else heavy in my mind - Joel (Spenser) or somebody like that. And they're just back there laughing. That was one of the things that put Guido away.

J.M.: What did you make of Brad Wheeler's playing?

J.H.: I didn't understand Brad's playing. I still don't understand Brad's playing, actually. He was working so hard to make his solos really complicated. That may not have been his goal, but he was trying to do so much. Sometimes he - didn't really touch . . . me. I was looking for people to play a lick once in a while, ground things a little bit.

J.M.: Understood. Would you say he got too intellectual about it?

J.H.: For my taste. But, I mean, I liked his playing a lot. He was an individual. He had a voice on the horn, you know, and all that stuff, but . . . He played really long solos. I don't know. It was just at that period of time it was hard for me to figure out exactly what he was doing, so I didn't listen to him very hard.

J.M.: Did you ever get to hear his compositions, the academic . . . whatever . . . stuff?

J.H.: Nope. Never did.

J.M.: I got to hear a few . . .

J.H.: He was a strange egg.

J.M.: I think he had a lot of music in him, but, he could sure piss people off.

J.H.: Oh, yeah. He was very ... They used to call his attitude Brad Vibes.

Concerning Zorba's and Trumpet Madness

J.H.: All four of us are different players. I think Ray clearly has the upper hand in any kind of one of those contests, because he's mastered the horn. He's not playing anything adventurous like John Scott is.

J.M.: But he can play everything in his head.

J.H.: Oh. Exactly. And do it better than any of us can play what's in our heads respectively.

J.H.: I don't know that Ray wrote a lot of music, to be honest with you.

J.M.: Was he basically a teacher? What was his position at the University?

J. H.: It was and still is . . . I think he's a tenured professor here, now. He's playing wind ensembles . . . Playing responsibilities. But most of his time is spent teaching.

J.M.: He reaches way back.

J.H.: Yeah. He doesn't play the horn really loud.

J.H.: More than anything else Ray has a style. I would find that I would go into his office for a lesson and I'd be stressed out about playing. And we'd get into playing. And we'd get into talking. And by the time I came out - going in I wouldn't feel like I wanted to play. Okay. I think I'm ready to go - and I'd come out really wanting to go into a practice room and go play for another hour and a half. Because I felt so good about playing. How he got that I don't know - but he had a way of making students feel at ease. All his students really loved the way he taught. He could teach by example.

J.M.: Could he play all the classical material, too?

J.H.: Oh. Absolutely. As well or better than the jazz stuff. He's just a phenomenal classical player. Astounding.

J.M.: How does a person get that . . .

J.H.: You got to North Texas State and spend eight hours a day in a practice room.

J.H.: The Modern Humans played there a few times. The Big Good Thing played there once.

J.M.: I ran across that poster.

J.H.: I've got pictures.

[A ten piece band, The Big Good Thing had five of the best young horn players in town. Short-lived one summer, we tried a lot of lovely funk tunes. Once, most of us appeared in diapers. Bruce Bethel did a lot to put this band together.]

J.M.: Cut it out.

J.H.: Mabel's.

J.M.: Oh, God.

J.H.: So what's your question?

J.M.: I thought you had a playing relationship with Ryan Shultz that went on for years.

J.H.: On and off. It was usually just to get close to him because he had a different concept about playing the trumpet. At the time he was playing the valve trombone, and later he switched to bass trumpet. I have a couple recordings of those, too. Larry Beers . . .

J.M.: Where did Larry end up? New York City?

J.H.: No. I think he's up in Chicago. He blew through town a week or so ago. J.M.: Let's go back to the Humans. They were around for a while.

J.H.: Yeah . . . It was about a year before I left to go on tour and I came back and it was for another year. It was two and a half years, probably. And it was a direct out growth of Bontuku. When Bontuku folded . . . Bontuku was Kurt Morrison and Tom Sullivan and me and Mitch Paliga and Mark Bruner (Mouse). Those guys were all a part of Bontuku. And when Oscar decided he'd had enough of Bontuku - which didn't last very long - he said, "I'm through with this" and about two days later we had Former Modern Humans. And then about a week later Oscar was kind of hurt, by all that. Who knows why.

J.M.: What can you say about Scott Frillman?

J.H.: Oh. Jeez. Scott was a contemporary of mine. Because he went to school at Centennial when I was going to school at Central. So we knew about each other. We never really played much together until the university scene. And I'd go out and see him and sit in with Sorgum sometimes. Until he got into Andrew's (Agnew) group we didn't play much together.

J.M.: You ended up pretty good friends.

J.H.: Oh, absolutely. We still keep in touch. And he was on the road with me (with Ray Charles).

J.M.: What propelled you to do that? Why choose that?

J.H.: Well, it was an opportunity - to travel. You can't really pass that up. I mean it was an opportunity to make a bunch of money and play with a big name. It's the kind of thing I've been able to . . . If you look at what I've done over the past ten years, seven years worth of it is probably handing my hat on playing with Ray Charles - plus you become a better player.

J.M.: We're talking one-nighters?

J.H.: Sometimes two in a night.

J.M.: Six nights a week?

J.H.: Yeah. Sometimes it was two times a week, sometimes it was fifteen times.

J.M.: Were the bands solid?

J.H.: Oh, the band was okay. It was better than anything I've played with here, but it wasn't top notch.

J.M.: Let me ask you a couple of dumb interview questions. What was your favorite thing about Nature's Table?

J.H.: Cookies and beer.

J.M.: And, uh, how did you feel when the Table closed?

J.H.: Really tired. It was like three a. m. and I was ready to go home. And I couldn't figure out where all my gigs went.

Bill and Fred

It has been raining for two days. Thunder and lightning have struck too close to be merely exciting. Birds are gone. The gutters are running. This morning the dawn sky transformed from terrible black to a dull ominous gray, at one point taking on a violet-green and sickly cast. It got very still. Twenty minutes later sunrays burst through performing half rainbows. Then the skies closed and the heavens fell.

Rain upon relentless rain.

Under an oversized umbrella two middle-aged men stroll vigorously to the front door. The casually dressed shorter one opens it.

“Before me, Fred,” he says.

Fred says, politely, “No, Bill. No. After you.”

“Oh, by all means. You go first.”

In all earnestness, Fred says, “Couldn’t possibly. You simply must be the first to enter.”

“Well,” Bill says, in the slightly mocking voice that only an old friend would use. “If I simply must.”

They go in.

“Very quaint,” says Fred.

“Yeah,” Bill says, taking in the paintings on the walls. “It looks like they threw colored mud at the canvas.”

“But, Bill,” Fred corrects, “modern art requires modern means.”

“Cavemen threw mud, Fred.”

“True. But modern man gave it color.”

Wiping down the counter Jeff Machota recognizes the pair as the newcomers they are. He says to Naomi, “Check out these two.”

Looking up from slicing tomatoes, she and Jeff watch as Bill and Fred roam the empty restaurant. Jeff just unlocked the front door.

Open for business.

“Curious,” Naomi says.

As they approach the counter Jeff says, “What can we do for you?”

“Young man,” Fred says. “Over the years I have developed a strong allegiance to a tea known as Darjeeling. Does your fine establishment carry that brand?”

Machota, born in Cicero, Illinois – the town that Al Capone ruled so well – is unflappable. He points to the boxes of tea by the coffee maker. “Check there.”

Fred does. Pulling a bag out by its string he holds it up. “It’s a pity,” he says “that such a splendid and beneficial tradition has been reduced to this.” The bag twirls. “Tea on a string.”

“Sign of the times, Fred.”

“So it is. And one must grow with them. Just a moment, young man.”

Jeff was about to pour hot water into a mug.

“Please. Allow me to put the bag in first. Thank you.”

Bill gets coffee. Letting it sit on the counter he lights a cigarette. Jeff puts an ashtray at his elbow. Bill says, “I don’t know how you can drink that stuff.”

“I’m British,” Fred explains. “And it’s tea.”

Dropping his dead match into the ashtray, Bill says, “Oh,” and puts a dollar next to it.

Machota asks, “Do you want any half and half or lemon?”

Fred says, “No thank you young man. You have been most helpful. That is all for the nonce. Perhaps we shall partake of your abundant luncheon after a bit.” Then to Bill. “Shall we park ourselves by the windows?”

Bill lowers his head and points with his coffee cup. “After you.”

As they walk away Naomi steps up beside Jeff. “Curiouser and curiouser.”

Jeff says, skeptically, “That’s one way to put it.”

Bill and Fred sit at the corner table by the windows in the front room looking out.

“I love the rain,” says Fred.

“That’s because you’re British.”

“More than that, watch how it runs down the glass, the detours it makes. Glass is not flat.”

“I know.”

The door opens and a swaggering youth enters. He has long, silky, blond hair that falls halfway down his back and a beard that is bushy and much darker in color. Bill and Fred wave and say hello, but he ignores them.

Up at the counter he orders a tofu and Swiss cheese sandwich on wheat.

Jeff Machota asks, “Mustard or mayo?”

“Mustard.”

“Lettuce, tomato, sprouts, and onions?”

“Lettuce, onion, and cucumber.”

Jeff writes.

“Name?”

“Don.”

“Something to drink?”

“Water.”

Jeff gets him a glass. He takes it to a table by the piano. Naomi brings him his sandwich. People come in the door. Bill and Fred greet them. The lunch rush develops. They greet everyone. Becoming hungry themselves they get in line. Eyeing a poster pinned to the wall for the Kevin Kizer Trio, Fred asks a young woman next to him, “Are you familiar with this man’s music?”

“Actually, I am.” She’s outgoing, happy to be of help. “I’ve seen him several times. Mostly up here.”

“Really.”

“Yes. He sounds great. Knows the music. Do you like jazz?”

“Yes, madam. As a matter of fact I played baritone saxophone as a young man. Would you recommend the performance this evening?”

“I would,” she smiles. “Kevin is a fine player.”

Bill asks, “What are you going to eat?”

“A turkey sandwich.”

“Yeah? How’s this gondolette?”

“It’s good.” She turns away and talks to her friend.

“Fred,” Bill says quietly, “how come you can talk to women but I can’t”

“Consider, Bill,” Fred says, instructing, “that it is because I am neither forward nor crass. If I may suggest, old friend, you might wish to soften your touch.”

“Soften my touch.”

They order a whole gondolette on white with everything including pepperoncinis, and split it while sitting in the front windows looking out on the rain.

Evening and it’s raining. Bill and Fred return with dates. Working the dinner shift Naomi comes out to greet them.

She sings cheerfully, “What can we do for you this evening?”

Naomi is a very nice person. Quick and through and attentive. Nature’s Table doesn’t usually provide table service. But business is slow and Naomi enjoys her ability to add a personal touch. She makes people feel capable.

Fred asks, “Is there a wine you can recommend?”

“Yes. The Fetzer’s.”

“Dear woman,” he says. “Do you serve a Chablis?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Please, then.” Fred is magnanimous. “Bring it on.”

Smiling a wide, eye-twinkling smile, Naomi says, “I’ll be right back.”

Marie, a brunette – Bill’s date – says, “This is nice.” She takes off her turquoise jacket to reveal a white satin blouse. The neckline is low. “I’ve never been here before.”

Ann, Marie’s accomplice, a redhead in a green dress, says, “Neither have I. I love it.”

“That’s because it’s lovable,” Bill says.

Marie pats his cheek. He smiles at her. “Kindness will get you everywhere.”

Naomi arrives bearing a tray with four glasses, a corkscrew, and their bottle of wine. Fred does the honors. Handing around glasses he is about to make a toast when he realizes Naomi is still there. He offers the toast to her.

“To good company.”

The others raise their glasses. “To good company.”

“Young lady,” Fred says, “would you like to join us?”

“I better not.” Naomi holds her pen and pad. “Are you ready to order?”

Under Fred’s direction they get hummus, baba ghanouj, tabouli, and a chefs salad with cucumber dressing for the ladies. Bill and Fred get a whole gondolette on white with everything including pepperoncinis. A slim, brown man of latin descent comes in the door wearing a big smile. Bill glances over at Fred. The brown man walks around the place once, gets a Pepsi from Naomi, and goes to the bathroom. He comes out smiling, the rain still dripping from his leather hat as he goes to the door.

Fred raises his glass to the ladies.

“To long life and friendly surroundings.”

Back for the music, without dates, Bill and Fred stand the band to drinks. Kevin Kizer will have an apple juice; John Pennell would like a plain mineral water, and Steve Adleman, on drums, a cup of coffee.

As the band sets up people come by to say hello. Introductions go around and by the time the band is ready to start Bill and Fred know everybody in the place and have bought most of them drinks.

Kevin starts the night with John Coltrane's 'Giant Steps.' Bill and Fred settle into their corner by the window. The rain doesn't stop the flow of people from coming to hear the music. It may be encouraging it. Rain has become so regular, so consistent, that it's almost like a familiar pain. Without it where would we be?

Don comes in the door.

Bill asks Fred, "Digging the music?"

"As you say, I do 'dig it.'" Fred taps his knees out of time with the music. "It awakens all manner of feeling."

The latin man comes in the door. Smiling his way to the counter he does a low five with Don. Don takes his glass of beer into the main room and looks for a seat. The latin man takes his bottle of Guinness and sits in the front room. Captivated by the music he soon seems to merge with it, as if he were the only person in the room.

"What I like," Bill says, "is the way Kevin throws himself into the music. I know John . . ."

"The bass player."

" . . . is working . . ."

"Hard." Fred says. "And Mr. Addleman . . ."

" . . . is steady. But Kevin is so fluid, so natural that he's a constant surprise."

"Delightful!"

"Yes."

The band plays with gusto throughout the night. Bill and Fred enjoy it so much they promise to come back tomorrow.

Friday, ten-oh-two in the morning. There's a fine drizzle coming down. Under skies the color of slate Bill and Fred once again find themselves at the front door.

Fred says, "After you."

Bill balks. "I went first last time, remember? This morning, at the E-lite Diner."

"Yes, Bill. Please, you must forgive me. That scene had temporarily slipped through the loose tendrils of my slipshod and bumblingly inefficient memory."

"What?"

"Treat it as an elliptical phrase meaning: let us enter and find refreshment in the form of hot tea and coffee."

Leaving his oversized umbrella open inside the door Fred, a big man with a graying beard, approaches the counter with a raised hand. "Halloa." Pulling monopoly money out of his suit coat pocket, he says, "If you'd be so kind, coffee for my friend and tea for myself, please and thank you."

Pointing out what must be obvious, Machota says, "That's monopoly money."

Naomi chops an onion.

"Yes it is."

Elaborating, Jeff says, "It's not real."

"I agree," Fred says, throwing down the paper bills. "Yes, but – how do you Americans phrase it – it's still good."

"Not in here."

"Especially in here." Fred goes on to explain. Bill lets him, unable to find a reason not to. An experienced restaurant worker, Jeff grabs a towel and goes about

wiping down various objects below the counter. He is familiar with strange people talking at him from the other side of it.

“Especially in here. In this magical place of music the cigarettes are counterfeit, the libations merely borrowed, the music ethereal.” Drawing upon deep inner conviction Fred sighs. “Young man. Surely you must realize there are few establishments pursuing music as this one does. In here – in these friendly confines – light and sound are transformed. People are warmed. Life is given more oomph.” He picks up a dollar of the monopoly money and flourishes it. “Music prevails. Certainly this money is good.”

“Not in here.”

“Tell me,” Fred inquires, “have you ever eaten mock duck?”

Jeff says, “Quack,” and puts an ashtray on the counter.

Bill puts a real dollar beside it.

“Kevin sounded great last night,” he says.

“Yeah.” Jeff puts the dollar in the till and grabs two mugs. “He’s a great player.”

Fred, like the rain, continues. “The fellow is gifted. Tell me,” he says, lowering his voice and becoming confidential, “What makes this place tick?”

Jeff laughs as the front door opens. In walks a slim man with dark hair combed straight back over his head. He walks to the counter with the air of one who has been here before and invested his time well. Bruce Brooks.

Jeff greets him affably. “Hey, Bruce. Chris called this morning looking for you.”

Chris Quirk, a painter and a musician is scheduled to play bass tonight with the Wonders, a blues and rock band that Bruce fronts.

Fred introduces himself. "I saw your advertisement." He points to a poster on the wall between the bathrooms. Bruce looks t here, then at Fred again, and then at Jeff with an amused smile.

Putting out a hand, Fred says, "Bill and I hope to attend your performance of blues music this evening."

They shake on it.

A man of few words Bruce continues to smile. A talkative person in Bruce's presence might find the conversation a little one-sided. The more you say the more Bruce doesn't. He watches you and unless you are thick-skinned like Fred you start to feel a fool.

Jeff asks him, "What can I get you?"

"A glass of water, a bowl of tabouli, and wheat bread. And a cup of coffee."

Naomi goes into the cooler with a bowl as Jeff reaches for a glass.

"Such splendid efficiency the staff here employs." Fred beams at Bruce. "Don't you think? Eh, what?"

Bruce says, "Yeah."

"So you're just getting off the road," Bill says. "Where have you been traveling?"

He takes a moment to answer. "Mostly south."

Stepping out of the cooler Naomi walks to the counter and puts the tabouli on a tray Jeff has set up with bread and water.

"How's the bus coming along?" Jeff asks.

"It's getting there."

"Are you going to install plumbing?"

Bruce laughs. “Yeah.” He and his dad are outfitting a bus for the road.

“I took it down to New Orleans.”

Jeff asks, “How’d it run?”

“Good.”

Instead of working the clubs Bruce has been playing more and more on the streets. Maxwell Street in Chicago is an old haunt. He goes to San Francisco.

Fred asks, “Do you know any songs by Theodore Bikel?”

Bill grabs Fred by the arm and pulls. “Catch you later.” Dragging Fred away he says to him, “Let’s go sit by the window.”

Jeff pours Bruce’s coffee. “Get a hold of Chris when you get a chance.”

“All right.”

Afternoon, and Bill and Fred hold vigil over the remarkable rain. This kind of drenching happens in the Midwest, often in the spring, though summer thunderstorms do go great gangbusters. However, this late fall day it is gray with the promise of winter.

A guy sits in the main room slurping soup and reading a paper back. Two women in their middle fifties chatter their way into the restaurant. Wet and happy they’re wondering what to do with their umbrellas.

Naomi comes out from behind the counter to help.

“Why don’t you leave them open,” she says, pleasantly. “Just lay them on the floor. They’ll dry.”

“Oh, good. Thank you.” They do, then both of them take off their glasses.

From the corner by windows, Fred says, “Nice weather for ducks.”

One of the women laughs as she pulls off her coat. Rewrapping her shawl around her shoulders, she says. “That’s so funny. Mother used to say that.”

Fred rises. Graciously, he says, “We have something in common then. Let me introduce my friend.”

Awkwardly, Bill rises, clasping his hands in front of him. Fred says, with no little fanfare, “Please meet William Jennings Fergeson.”

They exchange how-do-you-do’s and so-nice-to-meet-you’s.

Bill smiles. “Call me Bill. Please meet Frederic Fulsome Phippes – Winsleigh.”

Fred says, “Call me Fred.”

At this point in the introductions the door opens. An elderly couple in woolen coats make their way inside out of the rain. At the sight of Bill and Fred they become frightened, startled.

Attempting to assuage their feelings, Fred says, “The weather is so difficult. Won’t you come in and have something warming to drink?”

The ladies go to help them with their things.

Bill offers, “They have tea and coffee and hot apple cider with cinnamon.”

“Oh!” Brightening, the elderly woman sits. She sighs. “Hot apple cider sounds just right.”

Shrugging off his coat the old man says, “I could do with a cup of coffee. No cream or sugar.”

Naomi, who has been standing respectfully off to the side, says, “Let me get those drinks for you.”

Fred says, “Thank you, young woman.”

Thrust together by the elements the group settles in at several tables by the windows. Fred suggests a game of gin rummy. The elderly couple decline, but the two lady friends are all for it.

Hot drinks get served.

Bill pulls out a desk of cards from an inside coat pocket. As he shuffles the old man places an envelope on his knee, under the table, out of sight.

A little before five o'clock Jeff Machota comes in the back door.

Naomi says, "There's something I wanted to ask you." She looks out to the front room. "I don't know about those two."

"Bill and Fred."

"Yes. Suddenly they're hanging out here all the time, buying people drinks . . . Apparently they were here all day yesterday."

"I asked Terry," Jeff says. "He knows them."

The afternoon is slow and rainy, dreamy, like something out of a picture book portraying a rainforest: the steady downfall on leafy vegetation, the way time begins to fold in on itself as it retreats to the primordial; except that out the window the rhythmic splatter is on cement illuminated by the early glow of the street lights. Even the relative lushness of Krannert, across the street, remains in shades of gray.

Bill and Fred pass the afternoon playing gin rummy with the two lady friends before their husbands pick them up for dinner and a play.

Bruce Brooks is taking his first solo of the night. Mark Defenbough, a guitar player in his own right, once said, “I don’t know how he can play so tight.” Bruce’s left hand looks like he’s squeezing a ball. Hard. Too hard to make the fluid sound he makes. He plays an old beat up Telecaster and it surprises when such heartfelt music comes through clenched fists.

“Stormy Monday” is their first selection. Every few minutes people come through the door. The lights are low. The open beam ceiling in the main room is getting a little smoky. All smiles, the latin man comes in. He works his way through until he’s only a few feet from the band. After a moment’s inspection he goes to the bar grinning happily, talking away with the bartenders and the customers.

Three college students come in to take out sandwiches. A musician or two. But, sadly, no eligible women in Bill and Fred’s age group. That’s okay. Bill and Fred haven’t seen much of each other lately. What with work, and the distractions life offers, there hasn’t been time. So as the Wonders launch into ‘Sweet Home Chicago’ they clap and hoot and whistle and generally enjoy themselves, much to the delight of the people around them.

Bruce plays at a healthy volume.

Terry and Shelley come in the back. They must have found a babysitter. Jeff nods to them as he bends to pull out a six-pack of Old Style from the reach-in cooler. Terry nods back. He looks over his wife’s shoulder through the square glassless window above the cook’s station to the stage.

Don comes in. There’s no one at the cover bucket. He drops money in. Slipping his hands into the pockets of his baggy pants he lopes up to the counter. Jeff gets him a

beer. As Bruce starts up a Hendrix – style version of Bob Dylan’s ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ Don goes into the bigger bathroom. A moment later he exits.

Fred says to Bill, “His backpack is flatter.”

“Huh?” Caught off guard, Bill looks up. He had been thinking that you never get entirely over the death of your parents, and you never lose your taste for women.

Taking out his wallet Fred drops a twenty on the table. “Excuse me.” He hoists himself up by first pushing on his knees Bill pulls a twenty out of his pocket. Taking Fred’s he tucks both bills underneath the ashtray.

“Fifteen minutes.”

Fred says, ‘Five’, with conviction.

He goes into the big bathroom and locks the door. Everything is in place. Pulling off the swing-top lid to the garbage can he lifts out a crumpled brown paper bag. It’s heavy, a solid object inside. Plucking open the twisted neck of the bag he pulls out a gun. A revolver. He checks it. It’s empty, cleaned, smelling faintly of oil. He puts it back in the bag, the bag back into the wastebasket, then jockeys the lid back on. He urinates and washes his hands.

Back at the table he tells Bill, “We’re both wrong.” He sits. “One minute.”

The ever-smiling latin man goes to the restroom. Bill and Fred wait. Out he comes swinging the paper bag like there’s a sandwich in it at his thigh. He walks toward the door.

They rise, Bill grabbing the twenties.

“Here,” he says.

Fred waves them away. “Buy me something sometime.”

As the latin man approaches the cover bucket they pounce. Machota comes flying out of the kitchen. Bill grabs the latin man from behind in a bear hug, pinning his arms to his sides. Pulling handcuffs from the back of his belt Fred snaps them on the brown man's wrists. Too surprised, overcome, he doesn't struggle. On the run Jeff arrives in time to have Fred push his sergeant's badge into his face.

"What are you doing?" Jeff asks, heatedly. "What has he done?"

Yanking the bag from the captured man's hands, Fred opens it, showing the gun. Even Jeff is taken aback.

Terry appears at his side.

"Let it go," he says, quietly.

Jeff Machota watches as Bill and Fred take their prisoner to the door.

A voice from the crowd, a male voice, shouts, "Hey, what's Spenser's first name?"

Fred calls roughly over his shoulder, answering the unseen voice without a trace of his British accent, "Edmund."

Over against the wall by the piano Bruce plays the melody to 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.' The Wonders never missed a beat.

It turns out Don's a junkie. Pietro, the latin man, did not withhold information. In search of drugs Don burglarized a house. He thought it was his dealer's. It was the next-door neighbors.

An elderly couple lived there. The one that had been startled by Bill and Fred at Nature's Table. Mr. Miller, the elderly man, had passed an envelope in secrecy under the

table to Bill. It held a key. And this is what got the ball rolling. It was his house that had been broken into. As the police searched through it he had absent-mindedly picked up a post office box key off the desk and put it in his pocket. The next day he found his own in the top desk drawer. Natural curiosity held him in its sway. He was on his way to the post office with his wife when she felt a complaint, a slight dizziness. So they stopped at Nature's Table to fend off the cold weather with a warm drink. They were startled by the presence of Bill and Fred, two of the many policemen they had to talk to about the robbery. Mr. Miller gave up the idea of finding out what was in the mystery post office box. He gave the key to Bill. Bill got Don's mail.

Bill and Fred had had an eye on drug trafficking in Champaign-Urbana in general. And in Don in particular. Don thought he could use the jewels, perhaps to sell back to their owners.

Bill and Fred did, too.

But Don wanted to get rid of the gun before dealing with the jewels. One doesn't just throw a gun in the garbage. Or bury it. Or hide it in a tree. It gets found. So Pietro was contacted. He didn't want Don to know where he lived. Don had been living on people's couches and off their kindnesses or their foolishness. So after checking out Nature's Table it was decided to make the drop there. It was relatively safe. And maybe just a little daring. Like the movies.

But Bill and Fred had been following their movements.

Arrests were made. Names were named. Mr. And Mrs. Harvey Miller got their jewels back. Bill was promoted. A fire, started in the basement of a house near Second and White streets, brought the fire department. They found a young man dead, shot by a

bullet from the gun Don had tried to make disappear. He was lying next to an apparatus designed to manufacture LSD.

A trial was held. Don and many others were implicated. Once out on bail Pietro skipped town.

Forty Thousand Loaves of Bread

Ten o'clock in the morning. Jeff Machota unlocks the front door. On the way back to the kitchen he laughs.

"How many loaves of bread do you think you've made?" I laugh. The mind does funny things when at work.

"I don't know, Jeff."

Wiping down the slicer, Jeff says, "I'll need to boil eggs soon."

Chili beans, rice, garbanzo beans, and split pea soup have all the burners in use. Poking up the rice lid with a big spoon, I ask, "How soon?"

"Soon as possible."

"Better check and see if you have enough eggs." "Okay."

I dump a white dough sponge out of a hotel pan onto an oiled sheet pan and cut the big, amorphous lump into three roughly equal sections. Jeff comes out of the cooler holding a cardboard platter with seven eggs.

"Is Terry bringing in more?" "He said he would."

Jeff goes back into the cooler and comes out with a box of tomatoes. "So how many loaves of bread have you made?"

I open the oven. "That depends. Monday and Tuesdays I do only two batches of each." The wheat bread is browning nicely. I tap a loaf, then close the oven door.

"Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday I do three wheat and two white."

Bob Weckback comes in the front door. He steps into the kitchen and Machota asks him, "How many loaves of bread do you think Jeff has made?"

Bob smiles and takes off his glasses. They've fogged up. "Now there's a stumper." He deposits his army jacket in the office. Rolling up his sleeves, he asks, "How long have you been the cook?"

"Must be more than two years now."

He pours a cup of coffee. "Okay. How many do you make a day?"

"We were just trying to figure that out."

Jeff puts a dozen tomatoes in the hand sink and turns on the cold tap. "How many loaves per batch?"

"That depends on a lot of things," I say. "The weather, for instance. Heat. Humidity. Maybe twelve to twenty, five or six on a tray."

Jeff says, "Let's call it fifteen."

Bob steps behind him to the bread rack. Pulling out a couple of trays, testing, he asks, "Any bread coming out soon?"

I reply, "There'll be some wheat bread in three or four minutes."

The front door opens and the pleasant lady steps in. She's always so nice. Between forty and fifty years of age, dressed with care, she is quietly beautiful, confident and competent. Arriving at the counter with a briefcase and a smile, she says, "Hello. May I -have a cup-of coffee-please?"

"Certainly," says Bob. "Just a second."

She comes in several days a week between ten and eleven for coffee and to do a bit of work. Here is the sum total of what we know about her. We don't know her name, because she's never ordered anything else except the occasional sweet. She's not a

teacher; but we know she works for the university from casual remarks and from the papers she works on over coffee. Above all she is pleasant.

Bob reaches down a coffee mug. "How are you today?"

She presents two quarters elegantly. "Well, thank you." Lightly etched into her face are age lines that have only enhanced her beauty. "And how are you?"

"Dandy. We're trying to figure out how many loaves of bread the cook has made."

"There's a thought."

About her Bob told me that every once in a while you meet someone you'd like to be; if only for a day.

Jeff says, "That's sixty loaves a day on Monday and Tuesday."

"Yep," I say. "And seventy-five Wednesday through Friday."

Getting pen and paper from next to the cash drawer Bob leans his elbows on the counter and starts to figure. A curly headed young man bursts through the door . . .

The pleasant lady smiles. "Best of luck."

"Thanks." Bob watches as the new-comer approaches. "May I help you?" "Smells good in here. You make your own bread. Cool."

"There'll be some wheat bread coming out of the oven any minute."

The young man's eyes brighten. "Cool." Happily, he takes in his surroundings. "A friend of mine told me I should come here for lunch."

Bob likes people. "Try the sandwiches. They're great."

"Yeah?" Bubbling with energy, having an adventure, the young man says, "Give me a turkey and Swiss on that hot wheat bread." "Everything on that?" "Yeah." He checks the board. "No. No sprouts."

While writing, Bob says, "A turkey and Swiss on wheat with no sprouts." He looks up. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. I'm hungry. I didn't get to eat any breakfast." He turns to the menu board. "Is the chili ready yet?"

I call out, "Yes," and take a tray of hot wheat bread to the rack. "Can I get all this to go?"

"Sure." Bob reaches high above the counter to a shelf made of narrow wooden slats for a styrofoam cup. "I'll get the chili." He goes behind Jeff - who is slicing the wheat bread - to the crock pot by the slicer. Giving the chili a good stir, he thinks out loud in my general direction. "That's one hundred and twenty and two hundred and twenty-five."

"Right," I say. "Three hundred and forty-five loaves a week."

Jeff throws open a paper bag, puts the turkey and Swiss inside, and sets it on the counter. Bob puts in the chili and a piece of bread. He puts in napkins and a plastic spoon.

"Anything to drink?"

"How about one of your natural root beers. That sounds good." "You bet."

Jeff hands the pop to Bob. The curly haired customer says, "Do you really make three hundred and forty-five loaves of bread every week?"

"Yeah." Bob laughs. "You've got good ears. More actually. We break . . . um . . . bake bread on Saturdays, too."

"You know, I'd like to buy a loaf of white. . . "

"French. One dollar."

" . . . bread. Make garlic bread later." He smiles all the way up from his shoe laces. "Cheap at twice the price."

Jeff wraps it in wax paper, puts it in a bag, and brings it to the counter. "That'll be a total of six dollars and twenty-five cents." Taking a ten, he makes change. "Thanks." "Thanks." A hand comes up in a loose kind of salute. "I'll be back."

"Come by anytime," Bob says. As the young man picks up his food, Bob adds, "We have music at night."

"Really."

"Yeah. Jazz mostly."

"That's excellent. My friend mentioned music. But he didn't say it was jazz. Cool."

"There are schedules by the door. Go ahead and grab one."

"I will. Well, gotta go." Clutching the bags of food to his body, he fairly bounds out the door, grabbing a flyer on the way. Two or three music schedules float to the floor in his wake.

"All right." Bob rubs his palms together. "Breakfast."

Plucking very hot bread off an equally hot tray, he drops it on the sandwich table before the heat can get too far into his fingers.

Jeff says, "Let's call it three hundred and fifty loaves a week."

Bob pulls up the tofu salad. "That makes fourteen hundred loaves of bread." He shakes his head in disbelief. "Fourteen hundred loaves of bread."

The back door opens and Brian Reedy comes in, closing the door behind him. Entering the kitchen cheerfully, he says, "Hi, everybody."

Squeegeeing with the elbow and cloth the leftover stuff off the cutting board into the garbage, Jeff asks, "How did it go last night?"

Brian is a long, tall drink of water. He must have very hot blood. Wearing a thin, plaid, zip-up windbreaker probably manufactured in 1961 - while the rest of us require down jackets, wool hats, and gloves - he gets by warmly with just a t-shirt, the windbreaker, and some kind of orange felt duck hunters hat. He's thrown his coat off his shoulders - but having been stopped by Jeff's question, his elbows are pinned to his sides, allowing freedom of movement to only his hands and forearms.

"The dancers weren't dancing to us."

His forearms rotate like they're part of a low tech robot in a grade B sci-fi movie. He's astonished. "I couldn't figure out who they were dancing to." Lonely Traylor, the band Brian drums for, played Mabel's last night.

"It was weird."

Laughing, Jeff asks him, "How many loaves of bread do you think Jeff has made?"

"Wow." Brian was probably born wide eyed. "That could be a lot of bread." Having gotten out of his coat and thrown it into the office he sticks his hands into the dish water and turns his head to look at me.

"Hi, Jeff."

His friendliness is so thoroughly honest I couldn't hold back a smile even if I had to. "So things went all right."

He pulls a big pot out of the sink. "Yeah. But the dancers . . ." He pours pink granulated soap into the sink and flips his hands back and forth as fast as he can - like a fish making suds. "They were running. Like it was wind sprints at basketball practice."

Bob takes his breakfast sandwich to the other side of the counter and sits on the wire-backed stool. "That's great."

"It was weird."

Terry comes in the back door and sets a produce box on several bags of beans. He steps into the kitchen and Jeff asks him, "How many loaves of bread do you think Jeff has made?"

"Is this a trick question?"

The front door opens and the mailman comes in. He drops off a rubber band bound bundle at the counter without a word. He never gets anything. He never says anything. And you're lucky if you can even catch his eye.

Terry goes to the counter and rolls back the rubber band. He looks at the front page of the Daily Illini.

Jeff asks him, "Did you get eggs?"

"They're in the van."

Looking at the newspaper, Bob says, "We figure Jeff makes fourteen hundred loaves of bread a month." He takes a bite of his sandwich.

"Gee." Terry turns a page of the newspaper. "That's worthy of the bronze oven mitt award."

Squeezing yellow mustard out of a plastic bottle into the split pea soup, I say, "Thanks, Terry."

Machota asks Terry, "What's the news from the university?"

He takes in a breath. "I met some of their people this morning and it looks like they want to take this place in May. They may stretch it, but we're supposed to be ready to move by then."

Brian Reedy simply says, "Gosh."

Rumors have been in the making now for a while. But this is the first time the university has put its big foot down. It's called Eminent Domain. A law. They are bigger than we are. Dale and Terry have businesses at either end of this building. In between, long in disuse, stands a space owned by the university. Jeff and I went in there once - vandals, it seemed had pulled down the boards nailed over the door- and it was decayed, rusted, and it smelled bad. For as long as I have worked here, and probably long before, the space has remained unoccupied. In the works at the university is a multi-million dollar project involving a coordinate science building slated for this sight. Jeff has been preparing to fight.

"What do you want to do about it?"

"I don't know yet," Terry says. He walks out of the kitchen to the tables and chairs.

It's a shock. In the aftermath we go about our work. Nobody talks. Terry comes in the back door with flowers.

"Have Brian Ruth put these out when he comes in."

Machota says okay, and we go outside to unload the van. I ask him, "What can we do?" He has political experience. I do not. But this is too close to home.

"We can get out petitions."

My insides are a little scrambled. "You mean get the community response?"

"Yeah."

Jeff moves in worlds I can never hope to know. He has a wide network. I try to make soup taste good. I hand him a waxed box of produce: green peppers, parsley, green onions, cucumbers, broccoli, and garlic. I throw a bag of onions over my shoulder and we make our way over the rickety back step and cracked cement floor of the back room into the kitchen.

Bob ties on an apron. "Look at the bright side," he says. "We won't have to work here anymore."

"Good point," I say. "Bob."

The three of us bring in the rest of the load from the van. I have a bad moment while stirring the soup when I wonder what I'm going to do if this place has to close. Where will we work? There's not that many places in town that will accept the likes of us. Where will the jazz musicians play? What will this do to the community? People love this place.

Jeff steps out of the cooler with a full tray of eggs. "So, Jeff, you make fourteen hundred loaves in a month. How many do you make in a year?"

Bob asks, "How many weeks are we closed a year?"

We follow the college school year and usually close when the students are away.

"Well," I say, "Christmas break is usually two or three weeks."

"We get a week off at spring break and four days over Thanksgiving," Jeff says.

Stepping into the kitchen, Bob says, "Also about a week after spring semester and a week or two before fall semester starts."

"I make less bread during the summer, too. Usually only two batches of each every day."

Brian Ruth comes in the back door. He throws his coat angrily, I think - I can never quite tell - over the stack of flour bags. Strapping on an old apron he walks into the kitchen. Jeff asks him how many loaves of bread I've made.

Bruised, with scabs, Brian says, "How would I know?"

"What happened to you?" I ask.

"I fell a lot on the ramp."

In the backyard of a house at the corner of Birch and California, he and some friends have built a wooden U-shaped skateboard ramp. They've been practicing. Machota directs him. "You can put out the flowers."

"Okay." Pulling a towel out of the bleach bucket, Brian twists out the excess water and snaps it at Brian Reedy's elbow, missing by an inch.

"Hey, Brian."

Brian Reedy pulls his head out of the dishes. "Hello." There's that glad-to-see-you smile again.

I get down the hot plate and move the rice to it. "Jeff, you've got a burner free."

"Thanks."

Putting on the oven mitts, I bump the top oven up to four hundred degrees, then pull out the hot wheat bread. Walking it to the bread rack, I yell, "Hot wheat bread," and bring back a raw white bread tray. Jeff sets a pot of water on the burner then puts eggs into it with a slotted spoon. The pleasant lady drops her coffee cup off at the counter. Terry, who had been arranging tables with Brian Ruth, walks behind her into the kitchen.

She says to him, "I couldn't help overhearing that the university is planning to take your business. That's such a shame."

Terry thanks her.

"Will you move to another spot?"

"It's something we'll have to look into."

"It's wonderful to be able to come here." She gives him a smile, or more accurately, a radiance. He thanks her again, and as she goes he sorts through the mail.

"Jeff," he says. "Can you make sandwiches for the kids?"

Jeff asks, "Do they still like mayonnaise?"

"Let's try two turkeys, one on wheat, one on white, with lettuce and mayonnaise, and two cheese sandwiches, same way. Is the soup ready?"

Breaking through the surface skin of the split pea soup with a ladle I stir its steamy aroma into my face.

"Yes."

"Okay," Terry says. "Give me three soups." He turns a page of the newspaper. "Is Emil coming in for lunch?"

Jeff says, "He'll be in at eleven-thirty."

Bob puts a pen behind his ear, and says, "So that means in September, October, November, December, January, February, March, April and May we make roughly fourteen hundred loaves of bread."

"Round down for December, January, and April."

"Okay." Bob uses his pen. He laughs. "That's like twelve thousand six hundred loaves of bread."

Jeff asks, "How many do you make in the summer?"

I do a rough estimate in my head. "Maybe three thousand."

"So," Bob says, "over fifteen thousand a year. Terry. . . Give Jeff a raise." He folds down the newspaper. "I'd love to."

Emil comes in the front door, following Brian Ruth into the kitchen. He waits as Brian dumps a lot of sad looking flowers into the garbage. Emil and I have become fast friends. We met while putting up a show at the Armory Free Theater, a student production of a Bertholt Brecht - Kurt Wiell musical. He set the lights. Doggedly, as if working were one of the worst things in the wide world, Brian goes back out to the tables.

Dropping onion skins into the garbage, Jeff asks Emil, "How many loaves of bread do you think Jeff has made?"

"I don't know. I just walked in." He's dish dog for the next few hours.

Bob asks me again how long I've been the cook at the same time Jeff asks Terry if there will be any more deliveries.

"Maybe two and a half years. I can't quite remember."

"There should be wine coming in this afternoon."

Jeff puts Terry's sandwiches into paper bags. "What if the guy from Sysco calls?"

"Tell him I'll call him."

"Okay." Bob puts his pen down. "That makes thirty-one thousand two hundred loaves of bread in two years."

"Plus," I add, "about eight thousand for the half year."

"That means -" Bob's loving this "-you've made thirty-nine thousand two hundred loaves of bread. That's wild."

Drying his hands on his apron, Brian Reedy says, "That's incredible." Jeff laughs.

"Let's call it forty thousand."

Terry carries his family's lunch around back to my table and I hand him his soups. He says, "I'll see about those bronze oven mitts."

I walk him out the back door. "See ya, chief."

"Give me a call if you need anything. Thanks."

"Thanks. Have a good lunch."

Locking the door behind him, I go back into the kitchen. Things are slowing down. We're almost ready for the rush so I ask Bob if he'll help me de-stem some spinach.

"Sure." He walks over to me. "So how does it feel to have made forty thousand loaves of bread?"

I tear open a plastic bag of fresh spinach. "Pretty good. It's incomprehensible, um . . . still sinking in."

His hands reaching to the drop ceiling, Brian Reedy stretches out his back. Emil now officially becomes the dishwasher. Jeff asks Brian if he will chop vegetables for egg salad. Yawning, licking his lips, he says, "Love to."

Walking forward with a tureen of hot soup, I call out, "Hot soup! Hot soup!"

Emil beats me to the crock pot up front with a glass of water. He pours it into the crock pot and I put the soup inside. I turn up the thermostat and he plugs the crock pot in. He grins at me.

"I washee dish."

I point to the oven. "I bread."

"And there you have it."

"Yes." As I walk behind Jeff to the back of the kitchen, I think, if we close - and that seems eminent - how many loaves of bread will I have made? Another voice in my head answers, You can put it on your resume.

Five people come in the door. Jeff checks the coffee. Brian Ruth comes back into the kitchen. Four more people walk in. Bob tears old music schedules into squares to use for orders. He hands Brian Ruth a pen and says over his shoulder, "Here we go again, boys."

After Hours

It's Friday night and Bob Marion is back in town. We're closing up Nature's Table. It's something we used to do with remarkable frequency. Since nobody could, I volunteered to work tonight. And as it's been quite a while since I've done this, Bob - who is visiting from Seattle - figured he would help out.

There was a time when we had closing down to a thought. Not a wasted motion. Now, however, our timing remains rusty. With the front door locked and the kitchen set to rights we go to work on the seating area.

"This," Bob says, "is familiar."

I sweep. Bob follows with the mop. The Rolling Stones provide us with a 'Beggar's Banquet.' Brushing the night's debris into the dustpan, I walk it toward the kitchen garbage can. Bob rolls the mop bucket over the molding at the foot of the wheelchair ramp. It jerks back and forth as he tops the incline. Soapsuds and water slosh over the sides.

"Got to mop there anyway."

Bob sings a slow blues. "You got to mop for me baby."

I answer, "Mop. Mop." Like a horn section would.

The floor in the main room is drying in patches, like waves receding down a sandy beach in stop time. Lumped against the back door steps are two garbage bags. I open the back door. Cool, wet, fresh air bursts in like it might snow. I heave the plastic bags into the dumpster.

Bob and I have always found little tasks to be fascinating. To move a chair an inch is to change the world, maybe the universe, which may go some distance to explain why we wrote songs about shoes, food, and animals.

Tonight, Danny, Helgesen, Scott Frillman, and John Pennell played. There was no piano player, though Ryan Shultz and Kevin Kizer brought down their horns. When Bob and John Pennell visit they turn almost immediately into a couple of country boys.

"Buy you a beer Bob?"

"Beer-Bob. Don't mind if I do."

Bob emptied the mop bucket down the toilet. I steer the bucket through the fire door, lock it, lock the back door and go into the kitchen. As I bend down to the reach-in cooler the tape player clicks off.

I hear music.

Holding three cans of Old Style in their six-pack ring, I walk out front. Bob plunks a few notes on the piano. I set the beer on the green tile topped table with blond wood edges - Bob knows the old brown veneer topped tables - and we go into session.

"I was going to change the tape but I heard jazz coming out of the walls above the sinks."

"What?"

I look at him. "Honest?"

He believes me. "You know how there's silence in between - when you take off a tape and put on another. There's a silence there?"

"Where there's no music playing."

I point my finger at him. "Bingo."

Bob laughs a little. "But . . . "

"I heard music coming softly out of the wall. Jazz. Be-bop."

He looks at me.

"I'm not kidding."

"Guido. Was it Guido?"

"I don't know if it was Guido or not, but it was definitely something Nature's Table does a lot of. It never used to come out of the wall though, Bob."

"Wow. Really." He laughs curiously. "Amazing. Not surprising, I suppose. The walls certainly heard a lot of it."

"This place can be weird at night, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, yeah. I don't know if I told you about this. I was mopping one night. . . "

"Alone?"

He sips his beer then goes on. "I was kind of holding the mop behind me – the mop head was trailing behind me - and I was coming, I think, coming around the front of the counter, then as you turn . . ."

"Do you mean by the bread rack?"

"Wait. . Yeah, right, it was by the bread rack. Thanks. Something grabbed the mop head."

"How were you holding it?"

"The mop head was trailing behind me."

"It was on the floor?"

"I'm not so sure . . . now."

"Or did you have the mop head . . . in front of you?"

"Yeah." His memory comes in full. "That's right. You're right. The mop head was in front of me."

"So the handle . . . "

"Something tugging it." He has a thought. "Maybe it was whatever was playing jazz in the wall just now."

"Let me put on another tape."

"Sure."

As I walk toward the counter light from the kitchen catches something on its surface strangely. A glare from a water spot. I wipe it dry with the sleeve of my flannel shirt, then search through my backpack. Pulling out the Stones, I put in a mix tape, then turn up the volume.

Bob says, as I approach the table, "It was funny. . . "

"How can you be sure?"

He makes incredulous little noises in his throat. "How can I be sure?" He gives me a how-can-you-ask-me-that look.

"Okay. I'll ask a different question."

"How can I be sure I have two feet? They're there every morning." "Are you sure?"

"No."

We laugh.

"But, " I ask, "you didn't bump it against the wall or something?"

"Oh, no, no. There was nothing. No rational explanation. Who knows?"

"What do you attribute it to, do you think?"

“We both spent enough time in here alone . . . “ The last thought dangles on the end of a thin thread of reality. "Late at night there's all kinds . . . "

"Spirits."

“Whatever ... roaming around here. I remember one night I was getting ready to leave and I got this amazing sense that these chairs were full of people. I remember it was the one time I got really scared.”

"I mean, normally when spirits grab your mop head," he laughs, "you just sort of go, “Okay, we're just playing here.”

"Right. Right!"

"Yeah. 'We can play.' But that night . . . these chairs weren't empty." This retelling brings us gales of laughter.

"Okay," Bob says. "You got a table with four sides and you put four chairs around each side." He pauses. "It seems completely arbitrary. It felt like all the chairs - because none of them were lined up perfectly, ninety degrees and all that – every chair was a little bit off. Some were a little further away from the table than others."

“So therefore a little more human, if you will."

"Yeah. And I suddenly felt there were eighty people here and they were all staring at me. 'Look folks. I'd love to stay, but, uh . . . you know where the beer is and there's some ham in the fridge, some bread, some garbanzo spread, so just help yourselves. Put a few dollars in the till and I'll tell Terry about it in the morning."

"That's the other thing."

“What?” Bob asks.

"Terry's got to know about it."

"I know. He is the proprietor. It's his place, you know, but in such a way that's so far beyond the notion of property. He's got the name on paper . . . but it's obviously so much deeper than that with him. What's this we're listening to?"

"A bunch of different stuff. This is Joni Mitchell."

"Oh. She sounds good."

"Her blue period."

"Yeah. She sounds fairly blue here." He waves his fingertips up all around his head. "It's just something that I sense. Maybe she's not blue at all." He yawns. "Want another beer?"

"You going?"

"Sure."

He goes with half his checkered flannel shirt hanging out of his pants. I take a long look around the place. Whatever spirits brought here tonight are friendly ones. "On his way back, Bob says," Is this Ray Charles?"

"Actually," I say, "It's Madonna."

"Ah. Well. Ray Charles. Madonna. They're closely linked."

"The more you talk about it the less sense it makes."

"Might as well listen to it," I say. "Be better off."

"Well, that's true. You keep talking about any dumb thing you find a hundred reasons why."

"Becomes superfluous. What did you say? Super. . .

"Superfluous persiflage."

"Superfluous persiflage."

"Well, exactly," Bob says. "Talk about anything long enough and, uh, it makes sense."

"Or translates into jello."

"Or," he laughs. "It makes sense. Either way it's fine, you know. I don't know why people pick the dumbest things to talk about."

"Like us."

"But why not?"

"But why not," I say. "Yeah. If you look into an ash tray long enough it might actually turn into something interesting. Something bigger than an ash tray, for instance."

Louis Prima sings, 'Angelina.'

"I know someone," I say, "who purported that theory: If you look at something long enough it turns into the whole universe."

"I always thought - and I'm sure I'm not the first - but the thing that's so great about watching infants is that they do that. You hand them anything and for ten seconds . . ."

"It's their world."

"It's like this beer can." Bob holds up his Old Style and I look for the frog on the label. "It's everything in the universe for ten seconds or what." He laughs. "and the thing is: they get bored with that." He drinks and throws his beer can over his shoulder.

"And the next thing comes into view."

"Yeah." He laughs. "Right. It's like what happens with everybody. You get bored eventually with the universe and finally throw it all down and look for something else. But with kids it happens three times a minute. Which is why they're so happy, I guess."

"Or unhappy."

"Well, yeah. Because in the meantime they're getting fed and watered and they're past shitting their diapers." He laughs. "Pretty good."

"I always figured one of my favorite ages to be would be four."

"Four."

"And here's why."

Bob sips absentmindedly.

"Here's why."

"Okay."

"Because at the age of four you've got control of your arms and legs." "Pretty much so."

"And you can talk more or less. More or less you understand things that are going on around you."

"Right."

"You can make your own fun happen. You can go to the toilet, and succeed, for the most part, but you don't have to go to school."

"Ah. I see."

"And - unless you have pushy parents - you have few if any jobs or chores, yet. You don't have to take out the garbage."

"I see. I got'cha. It's that last moment."

"Age four brings grave responsibilities."

"You're becoming powerful. But you're still helpless."

"Right."

"That's kind of cool," Bob says.

"And your parents will let you get away with murder. The hitting, the kicking and screaming. You can literally knock over grandma's five million dollar vase."

"Yeah."

"And it can just barely be explained to a four year old."

"You might get in trouble for a day or so. They might not like you for a day or so. In the end it's no big deal."

After a final check on the state of the kitchen Bob hands me a beer and we go into the main room and sit down at the table next to the table we were just sitting at.

"Perspective," Bob says.

"There's a song title."

"How about 'December in Seattle.'" He searches his pockets, pulling out lighters. "How did I end up with these?"

"Another fine song title."

He improvises a crooner-like voice. "Will I see you in December in Seattle?"

I sing, "I saw the moon over Krannert."

"Don't tempt me."

"Actually, when I was up there that one December. . . "

"Seattle?"

"Seattle. It seemed like it rained every single day."

"It does that. Yeah." Bob says, "It did that to me one November."

"Actually," I say, "I remember. You called me. You said, 'Jeff, it's been raining for twenty-eight days.'"

"I meant it." He laughs. "After all you gotta go out. I figure your normal human state is to be dry."

"Did you ever check inside there?" I point at his stomach.

"Well. Yeah. Right."

"You know those bodily fluids."

"Considering we are largely water."

"Actually we're largely space."

Bob breathes out smoke. "I've heard that." He laughs. "That's a great way of looking at it."

"It's because electrons are largely empty space."

"Right. Atoms."

"Very good, Bob. Excuse me. I was amiss."

"If we're all just ... each atom has ... the one thing atoms have more than anything is empty space."

"And people wonder why they get confused."

"So largely we're kind of like big cheesecloths."

"What?"

Bob laughs. "Well, we've got all these holes in us."

My voice rises and falls in a long, drawn out Oh.

"We're more like a sail," Bob says. "Most of it goes through us."

In the cooler, grabbing a six pack off the shelves, I realize how glad I am that I don't have to work tomorrow. I switch the tape to Loretta Lynn.

At the table, I say, handing Bob a beer, "Loretta seems pretty cool, doesn't she?"

"Loretta seems very cool."

"Don't come home a'drinking . . . ' "

" . . . with lovin' on your mind."

"There's a little nugget of wisdom."

"That's something the women on this planet definitely understand." "The reverse,"

I say, "is fairly true, too."

"Well, yeah." He laughs at something I can't quite identify. "I was thinking about the stuff that happens late at night in this restaurant."

"This place definitely has a different atmosphere in the middle of the night."

"Oh, yeah. The thing I was thinking about was when you come in in the morning to open, nine, nine-thirty, and the cook's been here since six or seven ... so all the energy's been focused on the kitchen, because Chris Ahern or Robbin or somebody has been running around and got all this stuff going on. But when you sit in the back of the main room . . . "

"Before we open."

"Especially before we open: it's very peaceful."

"Beats coffee at Denny's."

"Right. You sit and have a cup of coffee and there was this amazing stillness at that time of day because all the energy was focused on the kitchen, was focused on opening."

"Yep."

"And so all the energy in the place goes into the kitchen and there's this beautiful emptiness going on in the rest of the place to help that."

"Right."

"You have sunlight when you get the cooking going."

"It's not that it's spooky," I say. "It's that there's so much there in the middle of the night."

"Well, yeah. So much in the building."

"Truly inexplicable."

"Well, yeah. So much that happens here is like being in your friend's basement."

"Oh?"

"When you're hanging out in high school, in the midst of all this normalcy and boringness, there's this basement place you can go to and listen to Black Sabbath."

"And live it up a little."

Bob says, "Turn on the black light, the rest of the world doesn't even know."

"Doesn't even get in."

"When you leave at night, when you're finished closing, cleaning up, you finally lock the door. . ."

"And the place welcomes you go goodbye."

"Right," Bob says.

"Come back again soon."

"Yeah," he says. "I just try to do some. . ."

"Gesture of thank you."

"Yeah. A little 'Thank you walls and tables and everybody. Thanks for another great day.'"

"Did you realize this place was an IGA at one point?"

"I didn't know that."

"Later it was a pizza place."

"I remember that," says Bob. "When I first got into town wasn't it a donut shop?"

"We should ask Terry."

"What I'm wondering is that all the energy contributes to what it is now."

"Yeah . . . "

"So it must have been a pretty cool IGA." Bob laughs, hard. "Damn fine IGA."

"Who knows what happened on this land before then."

Bob grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. His dad grew up in Mount Olive, Illinois. Smalltown, USA.

"It only takes me four times to figure something out," he says.

"But hey when I get it."

"After I've done it six times, man, look out like howdy."

We laugh.

Bob says, "Of course there's no way to answer that question. You can say that about any place. You got to figure the history of a piece of land has some effect on what happens now on it."

"Don't you feel this land, Champaign, the state of Illinois, pulling you? You're in Seattle. Doesn't this land pull you home?"

"Oh, yeah."

"The land itself."

"Absolutely."

"Not only is your family here - or most of it - but there's something to be said for being made of clay."

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

"That's why I like beer."

"You like beer?"

"Beer. Clay. They're about the same."

Bob laughs. "I'll have to work on that, but I think you're probably right."

"Well," Bob says. "Yeah. Sure. That kind of Buddhist flap about total dedication and concentration. According to what the Buddhist and Zen folks talk about you can climb the highest peak or make a cup of tea. It's the same thing as long as you can have that absolute dedication to detail, to take every move very genuinely."

"And, of course, over-seriousness will demolish the thing, too."

"Well, yeah. It's not that things are important."

"What is important?"

"Anything you do is no more important than anything else you do. The importance comes from . . . "

" . . . where you focus your attention."

He studies on it. "I guess so."

"So just keep in mind wherever you're focusing your attention that's the important item at the time. But do you also purport that we shouldn't forget everything else is out there?"

Bob breathes in and out. "I'm not sure."

"Wha'd'ya got?"

"I don't know." He laughs, considering. "Okay. All right; so take something simple like making a cup of coffee and reading the paper - something I do every morning

- and like everything, I can do that thoughtlessly, just out of habit, and not even be aware that I'm drinking the coffee."

"Ah. Awareness. The awareness consideration."

"Yes. And I've certainly done that some mornings." He waves a hand around his head. "I can sit there and read the whole paper- and then if anybody asked me about what I've read, I'd say . . . "

"Wasn't it Neil Sedaka that sang, 'Waking up is heard to do?'"

"Maybe not paying attention in the morning is a good thing to do sometimes."

"It's necessary anyway."

Going into the office, searching through the jumble of tapes on top of and next to the cassette player, I find a Tom Petty Greatest Hits record. The first chords of 'American Girl' clang forth. What Nature's Table can absorb.

Bob says, "That drummer keeps it rooted."

"Raised on promises."

Bob laughs. The second verse begins and I call out. "Whoa!"

"What?"

"My moustache got caught in the beer can." Carefully pinching hairs under my nose, between thumb and forefinger, I pull loose from the metal pop top.

He laughs.

"It's painful; it makes you need to sneeze."

"Sounds like no fun at all."

"None. It's horrible. Don't grow a moustache, Bob."

"Okay."

"That's the lesson here."

"All right. I never figured why they switched from pull tops."

"What was wrong with using a can opener?"

Mr. Petty takes the tune to a softer, instrumental break. Bob says, "Very nice little section here."

"Out of nowhere, too."

"But perfectly chosen."

"Yes."

Back at the top of the song, riveted by the guitars, Bob says, "Here we go," and a moment later, "Great band."

"They're an actual band. They're not just some bunch of guys."

He swivels in his chair. "I think it looks all right."

"They can open tomorrow."

"Yeah. The kitchen's in good shape. The cook will be happy with where we're at."

"Okay. I think we need just one more song and we can get out of here."

"If I were the cook," Bob burps, "I could walk into here."

"A little Chet Atkins then?"

We're on our feet now, headed for the kitchen. I hope everything is findable tomorrow morning. When I walk into work Monday morning after two days off it's sometimes hard to locate all the necessary ingredients.

"Let's hope it's all in order."

Bob says, "I'm sure whoever the cook is, they have that drama every morning."

It's late. I let my thoughts drift, remembering Bob being in some of Stan's movies. Stan liked the grainy black and white super eight film and he liked to work with some of the scarier modern day images. I recall Bob talking in an outdoor phone booth.

"You've 'starred' in a couple of Stan's movies."

"Yeah. I've been in a couple of Stan's movies. I seem to recall being . . . in a grave yard."

He laughs a little.

"Well, you know - Stan's one of those guys who ask you to do something and you just say, 'Okay. When do you want me there?'"

"He's also in the running for the shyest guy."

Bob laughs.

"Yeah. I know. He's great." "What do you make of Chet?"

"It's sweet, so sweet."

"And he's playing so many parts."

I whisper, "It's just so good." A marvel.

"Chester," Bob says affectionately countrified.

"You figure he's a Chester?"

"Everybody's a Chester."

A new song starts. "Wow," Bob says.

Caught by a particularly juicy guitar chord, he says, 'Wow!' again. "It's about time we go. I need to be heading out."

Chet strums yet another exotic chord on his guitar and Bob laughs. "He doesn't even need the other players."

I get up and check all the equipment in the kitchen. The back door is locked. Grabbing two old aprons I spread them out along the bottom of the back door against the cold, then turn down the heat and turn off the lights.

Bob and I pull chairs off the tables in the front room and I ask, "Why did you come back in February?"

"Why didn't I come back over Christmas or in the summer?"

"Yeah."

"It's in between."

"It's in between."

"It's in between."

"It's in between."

"Yeah," Bob says. "It's not one thing or another, like everything." "Okay," I say.

"Let me do an idiot check."

I make a final tour of the place. My job. The hatches are battened down. Lights off. I go to the front; Bob unlocks the door and we step outside into a light snow shower.

Relocking the door, pocketing the key, I turn up the collar of my coat. The outside sign is off. We walk down the block.

Bob says, "The snow sure is beautiful."

One Busy Day

I'm exhausted.

I step past the counter and out of the kitchen – with a tofu salad sandwich that was a mistake left over from the lunch rush, and bump into somebody in line.

“Hi, Jeff.”

I'm too hungry.

Pulling more than my eyes away from the food I look up and into a smiling face.

“Oh. Hi, Larry.”

“How's it going?”

Standing dumb, I can't laugh. He couldn't possibly know that today the lunch rush was merciless – and its still going on.

“Oh. Can't complain.”

Were my words delivered automatically? I can't tell, because I'm too tired.

“Aren't you playing here soon?”

“Actually,” he says, “yeah!” and takes off his backpack. Larry plays bass in a rock band. I can't remember the name – I've only seen them five times. He could be twenty-five or thirty-nine; either way he wouldn't mind. His music might be described as an agglomeration of most of the styles of the last fifty years.

“The Shakes,” I blurt out, remembering.

Unzipping his pack he pulls out posters. “Looks like you've had busy lunch.”

“That's an understatement.”

“Many things are,” he says pleasantly. Larry's dark hair falls past his shoulders except where it's been cut away to expose his right ear.

Taking the posters, I say, “I’ll put a few up and leave the rest by the door.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

I make a decision. “I’m a ruin, Larry. I need to sit down and eat this sandwich and remember who I am.”

“Sure,” he says. “We’ll talk with you later.”

Glad for Larry’s understanding of human nature, I head for an unoccupied table by the piano. Plopping into a chair I breathe. A man in his middle twenties nods at me over his soup and newspaper. I breathe some more. Sitting up straight I set the posters on a chair then arrange what’s left of somebody’s lunch on a couple trays. Settling into some quiet time I pull John Steinbeck’s “Cannery Row” from my back pocket.

A book and a sandwich might be as close as you can get to privacy in public. Mustard and onions and sprouts and tofu salad on white bread. I take a bite and read the first paragraph four times without comprehension. Something about sardines and saints.

Putting in eight hours without a break will do things to you.

Another bite and I survey the room, chewing thoroughly. Once in the front room two ladies in their late fifties or early sixties sit chatting over sandwiches. They have been coming here for years. Old friends, they are very at ease, creating a little world of their own.

Two tables by the back wall have been pushed together by several boisterous students – both male and female – all trying to impress each other’s hormones over pitchers of beer and chips and salsa.

I bite and chew and Sheila O’ Halloran, an employee, comes in. She steps up to the counter as Bob Weckback steps out of the kitchen. With love-light in their eyes she

hands him a book. I've always had a mild crush on Sheila, but I guess she never noticed. Good for Bob.

Squeezing between them and the wall Jeff Machota comes out, a towel tucked under the string of his apron. As he approaches my table he casts an eye on the group in back. They are very energetic at their game of quarters. I'm not sure of the rules, but apparently it involves bouncing the coin off the table into a beer glass and drinking.

Jeff is made of strong stuff. He grew up in Cicero, Illinois – the town Al Capone all but made his own. Personally I've always thought he'd make a great mayor, say along the lines of Chicago's Mayor Daley. Nobody but my old buddy Bob Marion could ever see my point of view on Mr. Machota. On the other hand Jeff always thought Terry looked like Jack Nicholson. I never saw the resemblance. Whatever. However, if Nature's Table were ever to be made into a movie – and stranger things have happened – Dustin Hoffman could play a great Jeff Machota.

He asks me, grabbing the trays off my table, "Have you seen them before, Jeff?"

"No. They're news to me."

The young man glances up from his soup and newspaper as Jeff goes back to the kitchen.

He clears his throat. "What's that you're eating?"

Mid-bite, I put up a finger. I'm not sure just yet if I'm ready for conversation with a stranger.

"Well," I swallow. "It's a tofu salad sandwich."

His manner is open, kindly. "Looks good."

"It is."

I'm about to look down and get back to my book. When his clear, blue eyes say, I won't take a piece of you.

"What's it made of?" he asks.

"It's like tuna or egg salad," I say, swallowing again. "You know. Carrots, celery, onions, mustard." I look to the sandwich for recall. "Parsley, mayonnaise, tamari, white pepper. I think that's all."

"I think I'll try it sometime."

"You're new around here, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I transferred from Arizona this semester."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm a T.A. in chemistry."

A teacher's assistant.

He shrugs. "Pays the bills."

I say, "Know the feeling." I wonder what he really does. He's in good shape. Eyes are bright." So what do you do when you're not filling test tubes?"

"Grade papers." He laughs.

I may have a live one here.

"I don't know," he says. "I've been wandering around trying to get to know the town."

"It can be a little slow around here. But there's a lot of good points. Krannert, for instance." I point across the street.

He asks, "Have you been to the Blind Pig?"

"Many times."

The Blind Pig recently opened in downtown Champaign. They've been having some music and already people are wondering if the jazz musicians will go there when we close.

"I saw a band there. A big guy was singing and playing harp and hand percussion."

"Ah. That sounds like Griz." Maybe this guy is a music person. "Was there a curly headed blind guy playing drums?"

"Yeah. And he had a nice voice, too."

"That would be George." George Boyle – the stories I could tell. Wonderful fellow. We would pass the time on the porch of Translucent House – we lived there though at different times – partying and talking about It. Young men in search of reasons why. He's blind and he used to go jogging. George is not shy." He did a tour with Little Walter, a blues guy. He's studying to be a lawyer.

"Is that right? How about you? Do you play?"

"I can get around the guitar some."

"Yeah?" He sticks his pinky in his ear. "I've been playing saxophone again."

"Tenor?"

"Yeah." He shifts in his seat. "I saw a band here last night."

"That would be Danny, Scott and Jeff."

"I guess." His finger comes out of his ear.

I ask, "Did Russell bring down his Hammond B-3?"

The Hammond organ is an almighty instrument in musical hands. Russell Cheatham plays in Sorgum.

“Big, black guy?” He studies his pinky.

“Yes,” I say.

“You bet he did.” His head rolls around his neck as he searches for words.

“Good grief. So much rhythm in that guy.”

“Yes, there is. And I ask you, what does it take to get that solid?”

“I wouldn’t know.” He thinks about it. “What can you say?”

“Yes?”

He laughs. “That’s about it, isn’t it?”

“It,” I say, speculatively.

Feigning world weariness, he says, “The ineluctable! The implacable!” His hands rise above his head imploringly. “The irrefutable It!”

“Ineffable, isn’t it?” I grin at that. “Very literary, aren’t we?”

He’s irreproachable. “Only when reading.” Back on the subject of last night’s music, he says, “That tenor player is nuts.”

“Scott Frillman?”

“Scott, yeah.”

“If Scott’s nuts it’s the right kind of nuts.” I laugh. I like this new fellow and I want to marry one of those lovely older ladies. My tiredness is beginning to abate. Most of my sandwich is eaten and my beer is gone.

He waves a hand around the room. “So what’s the story of this place?”

I stretch my arms as far over my head as possible. Due to the late hour I’m going to have to miss yoga class. “What do you want to know?”

“I’ve been here only a couple of times. The music’s great, but, like, man, what’s the scene?”

Oh . . . A jazz man. I scratch my beard. “Well, a lot of the players are students.” I laugh. “They keep moving to Chicago.”

“I’ve heard the music school is great here.”

“It is,” I say. “And mostly we have jazz. Actually, toward the beginning it was nearly all jazz.”

“Really. When did this place open?”

“Fall of ’79.”

“When did you start?”

“Winter of ’81.”

“Really.”

“Yeah,” I say. “A lot of great players have come through. Some big names, too. People like Barney Kessel and Herb Ellis. Groove Holmes. Rob Libeman. Once on a three day weekend the Rufus Reed Quartet stopped here between New York and parts west. Another time Billy Taylor was playing at Krannert . . .”

“Billy Taylor! They have jazz at Krannert?! Cool.”

I nod agreement. “. . . and he brought his trio over after the show.”

His eyes are all over me now.

“Lawrence Hobgood – get this: this guy passed out of all the ear training classes. Didn’t have to take them. Excuse me. He was a student here.”

“Yeah?”

“Anyway, his band gave up their instruments, gladly. I was washing dishes and Terry had to come in and shush me. I didn’t know. He said, and I quote, ‘They want to hear every note.’ The crowd was spellbound. I’ve never seen it so quiet in here.” I’m beside myself. “The musicianship was impeccable. There’s been a lot of talented people here over the years, but I don’t think very many could top Billy.”

All smiles, now, he says, “Sweet.”

“Everybody went home happy that night.”

“I’ll bet. I didn’t know they have jazz at Krannert.”

“Yep,” I say. “They have everything over there. Theatre. Dance. Opera. Even electronic music.”

“I’ve done some of that.”

“Really.” I’m delighted. “Do you know of Pierre Henry or Edgar Verese?”

“Sure.”

Now it’s his turn to be delighted.

“Once,” he says, “I recorded saxophone sounds on twelve cassettes. Then, in performance, I set up a half circle of cassette desks on chairs, turned them on one by one, and improvised over the top.”

“Jazz?”

“No. More new music really. Just sounds.”

New music maintains that all sounds found on the planet are viable musically.

“This is interesting. What else do you play?”

“When I was at Berkley we played just about everything.”

“Boston?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I studied saxophone for orchestra.”

“Is that right. I didn’t know there was much saxophone for orchestra.”

“There’s some. A lot of it is transcription of other instruments, but there’s new music, too.” He gives me a big grin. “It’s what I’m into most right now.”

“How do you feel about Bobby Keyes?”

“Who’s that, man?”

“Tenor player. He’s played a lot with the Rolling Stones.”

“Oh.” Jazz heads don’t always go for rock and roll. He takes a moment to regroup. “I don’t know, man. I haven’t heard enough to speak about it intelligently.”

“Well said. How about Johnny Hodges?”

“My man. Fabuloso. Extrodinaire.”

Mr. Hodges played with Duke Ellington for years. He sends me through the roof..

“You’ve got to hear Kevin Kizer then,” I say.

“Does he play here?”

“Yes, he does. There are times when Kevin seems to do the impossible. Terrific tenor. He can grapple with a horn; he can get all that foo-foo, breathy stuff – blues in the jazz – ton of rhythm. He loves Mr. Hodges, too.”

“I’ll keep an ear out. Man, I love the Ellington bands. All the inside chords, the leading tones.”

“I have a hard time hearing that. I just can’t sort out the chord clusters.” And I wish I could do it NOW. Yesterday, if at all possible. “Need better ears.”

“Well, you just have to work through the changes, run scales, find substitutions.”

I laugh. “That’s just it. Sevenths and ninths have me fascinated. Things like diminished or augmented triads float right over my head.”

“It’s different, you know, when your instrument only produces one note at a time. You treat the music differently out of necessity.”

“Right. The guitar is a percussion instrument, really.”

“Exactly. So the sax moves naturally through chords where the guitar strums them.”

“Do you play any other instruments?”

“Some other reeds. A little piano. But I like the tenor best.”

I say, “I’ve got an alto sax, but I can hardly get out the Fred MacMurray ‘My Three Sons’ theme song.”

He laughs fully and easily at my ineptitude and the ice is broken.

“I should introduce you around,” I say. “Musicians sit in here all the time.”

He gets a little shy. “When I talked with Danny last night he told me to bring down my horn.”

“Sounds like Danny.”

Danny Deckard has been a boon to Nature’s Table and quite possibly to nearly everyone he’s ever met. He’s never happier than to be behind a drumset. I’d have to ask him, but I think he played here one stretch nine nights in a row – with different bands. He reminds me of another drummer from times gone by, Jeff Stitely, because they both put in more hours than most of the regular employees.

I realize I don’t know this new guy’s name. I’ll have to find a way to introduce myself.

“Yeah,” I say. “Danny’s great.”

He looks around the room. The young people in the back are still playing quarters and spilling drinks. A busy restaurant makes a multitude of sound. All due to the human. There are heaters and coolers and generators and water and electricity and customers and the room reflects it. My old friend Bruce enters into the din carrying his saxophone in a rectangular case. Ignoring the last vestige of a hippie at one table and trying not to stare at a very beautiful woman at another, he searches the faces around him until he finds mine. Way back when Bruce used to work here –but he never made a tofu salad sandwich. There was some principle at work. And business was slower. That he got away with it says something about respect. Terry is an unusual restaurant owner. Anyway, Bruce, in the afternoons when it was really slow, would pull a chair into the kitchen and sit and read. It’s a step down into the kitchen and so the counter is relatively high. His figure sitting in a chair reading Schopenhauer . . . I don’t know . . .

Bruce might have been born into another universe. He wasn’t.

Ambling over, he says, “Hey.”

“What’s up?” He might enjoy this guy from Arizona. “Pull a seat.”

“No. Thanks. I’m going out to the quad.” He shifts the bulky case to his other hand. “Want to get your guitar?”

I’m still just coming out of the tired fog. I only live three blocks away, and he is energized . . . “How long will you be there?”

“Probably all afternoon.”

Dressed in a t-shirt and blue jeans cut-offs, Bruce is as tan as the street people are this spring. To a lot of people Bruce is a regular guy. He works hard at his job. He goes

to the gym. But what they might not know is that he is an adventurer. For instance, he once led a train of eight of us on an underground journey through the university's steam tunnels. We wandered around down there for almost three hours – there was an unlocked steam gate across from the Armory.

Bruce fights boredom.

“Okay,” I say. “Half hour forty-five minutes.”

He's moving again. “See you there.”

I ask the new fellow, “You want to sit over here?”

He picks up his backpack. “Who was that?”

“Hard to say.” Bruce is more of an experience than a topic for conversation. “He reads a lot.”

He drops his pack by a chair at my table. “Am I supposed to bus my table?”

“No. We do that.”

“Oh, that's right.” He pulls out the chair. “So what do you do here?”

“Actually,” I say, “I made your soup.”

“You're the cook?”

“I am.” I bow in my seat. “At your service.”

Settling into his chair, he says, “Pretty good stuff, your vegetable soup.”

I'm only learning to receive a compliment. “Robbin, a cook before me, did a lot to make this recipe work.”

“It does.”

“Thanks. Try the curried rice or the veggie chili sometime.”

“Pretty good?”

“Well,” I point a thumb at myself. “I make it.”

“So it must be good. Tell me,” he laughs, “Who runs this place?”

I just heard Terry in the kitchen.

“Whoever he is he must be quite a guy to put a jazz club in the middle of all these corn fields.”

“Not to mention the soybeans.”

“Are those the shorter green ones?”

“Yes,” I laugh, “They are,” and point my head toward the kitchen.

Terry comes out with a light bulb in his hand. He walks toward us. Stepping up into a chair he reaches into the rafters. Unscrewing a burned out bulb, he says, “Here,” and drops it to me. Shaking the new one up by his ear, he says, “The beer order came.”

“The pop, too. Did you get the stuff for the art opening?”

Screwing in the light bulb he tucks loose brown electrical cord under a clamp light. Stepping down he dusts the shoe mark off the green padded chair. After graciously bussing two tables, he stops by ours.

I put the spent light bulb into a red basket on his tray. “You had a few phone calls. Sysco wants an order for Monday. Jeff has messages. Any other deliveries?”

“Shouldn’t be.”

He needs to move.

“We’ll need milk tomorrow. And barley and rice early next week. Um . . . pinto and red beans by Thursday.”

“Okay. Anything else? How was lunch?”

“It was busy, but we’ll be fine.”

“I’ve got errands. I’ll pick up the kids and we’ll be by for Happy Hour.”

“Bontuku ready to play tonight?”

“Better ask them.”

Terry carries with him a kind of stern absurdity, a strong back in the face of chaos. Imagine trying to raise four kids and run a restaurant. When there’s time enough there’s laughter behind his eyes, though some of the laugh lines on his face have turned to worry.

“They’ll be here though.”

He laughs shortly. “That’s the rumor. Thanks, Jeff.”

“Thanks, Terry.”

Nature’s Table is finally making enough money that Terry doesn’t have to live night and day anymore. He’s always had good cooks, and since the advent of Machota he can now pay better attention to other things. His kids, for instance.

Having kept his respectful distance the new fellow comes back to life.

“So,” he says. “That’s the owner.”

I nod. “Somehow he makes this place work. I’ve been here nine ten years now and still don’t know how he does it.”

“He’d be resourceful.”

I think, you don’t know the half of it, but say, “Very.”

Bob Weckback steps out of the kitchen with a glass of red wine and a sandwich. Recently he and I went twice to see ‘Henry and June’, a movie based loosely on Henry Miller and his loves. It was deemed of great necessity that we bring a bottle of wine and two glasses into the theater.

“Here’s a good guy.”

“Can I join you?” To me. “Looks like we’ll have to miss yoga.”

My companion gets up. “My name’s Mark.”

We introduce ourselves.

I say, “Mark’s just moved here from Arizona.”

Bob sips his wine. “Do you play?”

“I play tenor.”

They sit. Bob takes a big bite of sandwich. A piece of cucumber falls back into the basket. Pushing his black rimmed glasses up his nose with the sandwich hand, he sits bolt upright in his chair and lifts his glass. “You should bring down your horn.”

Giving me a sidelong glance, Mark says, “That’s what I keep hearing.”

Bob’s a kind of herald. “I’d love to hear you play.” A kind of musical ambassador. “Who do you listen to?”

“Coltrane, Monk, Mingus. I like a lot of stuff. Have you ever heard Sun Ra?”

Bob nods, chewing, so I say, “We saw him and his Arkestra last year at the Auditorium.”

“The building at the end of the quad. Right?”

“Right.”

“You’re kidding,” Mark says. “I thought he didn’t tour anymore.”

“They had to wheel him out to the piano,” Bob says. His face is a splendid image of remembrance. “We took up four rows in the balcony.”

I help Mark out. “There was a rather large contingent that went from Nature’s Table.”

Bob laughs. "That night." He looks at me. "Do you remember when they were leaving the stage?" I shake my head. "Michael Holloway was yelling, 'Take me. Take me with you.'" He turns to Mark. "Sun Ra actually believes he came from Saturn."

"So I heard." Mark leans back in his chair. He crosses his legs. "You know, I think I'm going to like it around here."

Bob says, "It's a great town for music."

"Do you play?"

There's just a hint of reluctance in Bob's response. "No." He tastes his wine. "So what do you think of Champaign-Urbana?"

"You know, I've never seen winter turn all the way to spring before. It's quite a process."

I say, "So are you ready for a long, hot, summer?"

He looks at me like I'm an alien. "It's hot in Arizona, too, you know."

"Dry heat," I parry. "It gets humid around here."

"We'll see."

"Come down tonight," Bob says, "and check out Bontuku."

"What do they play?"

"Traditional west African music. Oscar Sulley." Bob says, "is a master drummer from Ghana. Bontuku is a high-life band. African rhythms. He and Scott Mordecai start the night just playing hand drums."

"Then the rest of the band works it's way into it," I add.

Bob says, "There's horns."

"Cool."

Jeff Machota walks purposefully down the wheelchair ramp to our table.

“Jeff,” he asks, “Is there any more soup?”

“There should be,” I say, getting up. “There should be labels.”

“There are. But I can’t read them.”

“Excuse me,” I say to Mark. Then to Jeff, “Let’s go see.”

Threading our way through customers, past Brian Ruth and Brian Reedy, we go into the cooler. Jeff’s stocking design has put nearly everything to the touch. Anymore, only about one and a half people can fit in here, and as Jeff closes the door, cramming us in, his foot gets stuck between two kegs. Balance is rickety as I pass half gallon containers of soup to him. Twisting, he pushes the big knob on the door and we ungracefully tumble out.

I set two containers of soup on the sandwich board at Brian Ruth’s elbow.

“Hey,” he says with some heat. “I’m working here.”

With his long arms he picks up the soups and puts them on the floor. Standing up he grabs a towel. Snapping it he bends down to clean the toe of one of my new Pro-Keds.

“You do that,” he says, “and they’ll stay looking sharp.”

“Thanks.”

Jeff laughs – we take the soups around back.

“Jeff?” I ask. “Do you think the customers ever really notice what does on in the kitchen?”

“I think they come here to eat and party.”

“Do you think they care if pots and stuff get put on the floor?”

“This is a restaurant, Jeff.”

“It’s true.”

“I think some of them do. But they don’t have to eat here.”

“No, they don’t”

Jeff, and others at Nature’s Table, are heavily into politics. Nature’s Table supports many causes. Marches have started from here. And ended here. An ongoing concern has been the trouble in South Africa. What’s called Apartheid. Divest Now, a coalition against apartheid, once set up shop on the quad.

Perhaps their effort could be summed up in these lyrics:

Shanty town –

O shanty town.

I spent a night with them, largely to see what it was to sleep in a tent on the quad. There were other tents and makeshift shelters. It must have been quite a sight for university officials. I met a sweetheart of a woman there. And like most of my encounters with women it didn’t go the way I hoped it would. Perhaps that is the fate of love of politics.

“Jeff,” I say. “What do you think would happen if nobody voted?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

One of the labels puts a container of vegetable soup at a week old. Maybe I’ll take some home.

“But, Jeff,” I say. “What if nobody did?”

He pulls a big stirring spoon and turns on the electric burner. Brian Reedy comes through on his way to the backroom.

“What if everybody – and I mean everybody – ignored politicians?”

“Wow,” says Brian.

I say, “If everybody ignored them politics would die.”

Jeff turns to face me. “Should it?”

“May I have a cup of coffee?”

That would be the voice of Jeff Helgesen.

“But, Jeff,” I say, “didn’t you once say – remember when we buttered those car door handles?”

“Yeah?”

“You said it was all bullshit; politics was.”

“I still never said that. It’s a pigment of your imagination.”

“No, Jeff,” I say. “You said it. Granted you were bored and exhausted – we all were – but you did say it was all bullshit. Remember?”

“No.”

“Such is memory. Anyway, I maintain you did. But just for a minute imagine what would happen if there were no politicians?”

He laughs and goes to help out at the counter.

Jeff Helgesen plays the trumpet. Enough said. He stirs his coffee as Machota asks, “Are you playing tonight?”

“After last night,” Helgeson says, “do I have a choice?”

Danny comes in the front door, his curly red hair wet, trailing down his back. He steps up to the counter with a fine, “How ya doin’?”

Danny and Jeff live together in an apartment over on Stoughton. My guess is that they were listening to music until all hours after the gig last night, again. I've seen this happen before: a group of musicians get together and eat, sleep, and drink the music. There's a jazz house on MainStreet that Kevin Kizer and Tim McNarmara and a train of others lived and learned at.

What they would produce.

I turn down the soup and go forward. As Jeff gets a cup of coffee for Danny, I speak softly to the back of his head.

"Soup's on three."

Stepping up to Jeff Helgesen, I say, "I'm sitting down with a guy who plays tenor. He just moved here from Arizona. Want to meet him?"

He looks into his untasted cup of coffee. "Give me a minute."

"Take as many as you like."

He blows across the surface of his coffee. "Very kind of you."

I grab a beer and go back to the table. Bob loves to meet new people. For him, and apparently also Mark, jazz provides an endless source for conversation.

Mark asks him, "Have you heard Sam Rivers?"

"I love him."

Mark asks me if I like Charlie Christian, an early, renowned guitar player. The problem is I'm stuck on rock and roll. "I haven't heard that much. I also need to find out more about Django Reinhardt."

Bob gets up smiling and takes his empty glass into the kitchen.

“You know,” Mark says, looking around, “it’s very relaxing in here. Like somebody’s living room.”

“Come often,” I say. “And stay late.”

He leans back in his chair. “Okay. I will.”

Returning, with his glass refilled, Bob sits down and picks up his sandwich. Sitting up straight, he says, “This place is a blast.”

Danny Deckard comes over, then Jeff Helgesen, with their coffees. Setting down his cup, Danny massages my shoulders.

I let out a physical, “Oh.”

He recognizes Mark from the night before and smiles, “How ya doin’?”

Danny’s delight in remeeting him nearly disarms Mark. They shake hands. Machota comes over and sets his stuff on the table next to us. Pulling out his new purchases – a stack of vinyl – he hands Danny a Sunny Stit record.

“Man,” Danny says, dancing his slim frame from one leg to the other. “He’s so cool.” Danny’s from Indiana.

Looking over to the counter I realize that for the first time in too long there is no one in line. It’s a relief and I’m not even working.

Bob asks, “How many decades are we going to have to put up with the Grateful Dead?” He laughs.

“Where did that come from?” I ask.

“Saint James Infirmary.” He points up.

It’s on the stereo now. Provided by Louis Armstrong.

“I heard the Dead play it once.” Bob smirks and shrugs. “And you know how the brain works.”

I say, “I do?”

“Well,” Bob says. “Let’s just say one thing led to another.”

Danny is the only musician I admire who likes the Dead. And if he likes them there must be something to it. I hope.

“Come on now,” he says.

“But you’re a Deadhead,” I say “And I’m a Rock head, so there can’t be . . . There isn’t . . . I’m . . .” making a fool of myself. They smile and laugh at me: I am good-naturedly teased – as Mark looks on.

Machota hands Danny two more record albums. Donald Byrd and Coleman Hawkins.

“Jazz heads,” I call to them, thereby taking my revenge. They all laugh again, but with me, too, this time.

“Bob,” Machota says “Can I go over something with you?”

“Sure.”

Bob gets up and goes over to the other table. Standing, he and Machota review notes concerning the official football mascot Chief Illini-wek.

Mark, Danny, and Helgesen embark upon a conversation concerning various sidemen in Miles Davis groups.

My chair is in between the two tables.

Chief Illini-wek is really a college student dressed in Indian clothing. Dancing around the field he helps to create enthusiasm for the team. This has been viewed as

offensive and disrespectful. Also as misrepresentative of Indian culture. (Who was it that named the Indian American? Who was it that named him an Indian?) Others see it as a long since tried and true tradition to be remembered and revered.

There will be differing views on any one topic. Gradually, however, the community is losing favor with the Chief, finding it demeaning to Indian life, a spectacle without faith.

Mary comes in the door. She doesn't see me at first. I watch her progress as she steps up to the counter. I'm just under six feet tall. Mary is maybe three inches shorter than I and in naturally good shape, though as far as I know she takes no exercise beyond walking around the campus. She has blond hair that falls past her shoulders, fair skin, and there are a few freckles. She's attractive. But there's something else about her – she has called herself an air head – a shy kindness with a naivete that's as old as the hills. I watch her eyes as they move over the menu board. They shift and when she sees me smiling at her her face lights up.

I met Mary last semester when she transferred from Massachusetts. She didn't know a soul and I had recently taken a bad jolt to the heart in a broken love affair. It came to pass, while hanging around the counter late one afternoon, that she strolled up to order a turkey sandwich and we fell into conversation.

I sat with her over her dinner.

Right from the start we enjoyed each other's company. She has a boyfriend back east – they meet in Ohio when they can – and I'm still a little too clobbered to be sure I'm ready to get involved with a woman again anyway.

So it works out: we keep company and it keeps our spirits up.

She walks down the wheelchair ramp.

“Hey, Mary.”

“Hey, Jeff.”

“How ya doin’?” Danny says. He slides an empty chair my direction.

Resting her strong hands on my shoulders, she says, “I think I need a transplant.”

“How so?” asks Danny.

Mary leans up against the back of my chair. “My friend Celeste is having a bad time of it.”

I crane my neck around. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know for sure.” There’s frustration in her worried face.

“I got a letter from her today. I’m a thousand miles away. It might as well be a million.”

She rubs my neck and shoulders. I let my chin drop to my chest. From my perspective – post lunch rush – this is turning into a banner day for massage.

Mark has a question about Paul Chambers. I take the opportunity to confer with Mary. “Bruce came by and asked me if I wanted to go out to the quad and play music. Want to go?”

The light changes in her bright, blue eyes as she balances her schedule. Mary is an industrious student, after a fashion, and to be drawn away from her work is an achievement on her part, an honor bestowed upon me.

She smiles. “Sure. I could us a walk.”

I stand up. It gets Mark’s attention.

“Hey, man,” he says. “Good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I say. In parting, I add, “You might want to check out the music at Happy Hour. It’s Dixieland.”

“Yeah?”

“And there’s an art opening right after.”

Danny says, “Mark Dzuiba is playing with Lawrence Hobgood.”

“Dzuiba’s back?” I’m happily surprised.

“In living color.”

He’s been in New York City for some time now and by all reports doing well. His partner Debra Noble – a dancer who worked here early on – and he, went and bit the Big Apple.

Danny says, “He got in last night. They’re going to play duets.”

“And Bontuku tonight,” Mark says. “Busy place.”

Goodbyes get passed around. Mary and I jabber our way to the door as she slips her arm through mine.

The new art on the walls is big and abstract. Maybe a little too big. The acrylic colors are bold, mostly primary, on very white canvass. The shapes are blunt and blocky, with streaks and splats. All big. The biggest one hangs on the longest wall in the main room. It must be ten feet wide and five feet tall, consisting of one great, long, black swoosh with tiny yellow, red, and blue dots.

At first glance it looks like a twelve foot human must have passed a paint brush the size of a snows shovel across the canvass. Moving left to right, it's a simple statement that draws the eye to the stage.

The Dixieland band is hot, restless, playing to a listening audience. In your imagination, close your eyes, and hear the years peel away and with them the influence of rap, rock, modern jazz and the big bands. What do you hear?

I clear a table beneath a painting that must have been performed by someone with a squirt gun. Did they have squirt guns during the roaring twenties? Trickle and drips, color collisions – all fine – but it makes for a curious juxtaposition against live music from the past.

I take several empty bottles and glasses into the kitchen.

“You’re still here?”

Jeff Machota, in apron, is pouring a pitcher of Augsburger Dark. He laughs. “It just kept being busy.” Going past me he sets the beer on the counter next to Brian Reedy and turns to face me. “Can you make both salsas?”

“We’re out? I just made them this morning.”

“We’re out now.”

Rosie comes sailing around the bread rack with a bowl of red beans and rice. “Hi, Jeff.”

“Hey, Rosie.”

She smiles at me. “Welcome to the craziness.” She steers past to the counter. “Feel free to put on an apron.”

“I just might have to.”

“We’re almost out of soup,” Jeff says. “Could you see what we have left?”

“There’s no more vegetable.”

“Anything. I’m trying to get the sandwich board stocked.”

I go into the cooler; Jeff’s stocking design is deteriorating under the strain of business. No salsa. There’s two containers of mushroom barley soup leftover from Wednesday. I grab them and some jalapenos. Closing the door on the cold, I go past the bread rack. Brian Reedy follows me to the cook’s table where he lays down a bit of ripped paper by a leg of the electric burner. The writing on it is miniscule.

“What’s this?”

“An order for two bowls of red beans and rice,” he says, helpfully, hopefully.

“Would you get them please?”

“Sure,” I squint. “What are the names?” His writing is clear, almost script. “I can’t see it.”

“Joan and John Jones.”

“Really?” I tilt my head from side to side, trying to see it. I don’t. “I’ll get them.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

“You’re welcome.”

The beans are getting very thick, so I add a little water then fill the two bowls. Brian comes around to get them. I check the chili – it’s low, caking up the sides of the tureen in the crockpot. I lift the tureen. There’s plenty of water below. I go back into the cooler for more chili. Flipping open the handle on the way out, it bangs Jeff’s elbow.

He yelps, rubbing in the pain.

On my prep table I find an empty plastic salad container with a can of tuna in it and a can opener on the can.

“Is this a hint?”

Mary walks in the back door.

“Hi, Jeffie.”

“You know, Mary, as much as I hate working I really enjoy making the tabouli and the curried rice and the soups; but what I like to make the most – even though hot bread makes me swoon – is the red beans and rice.”

“Really, Jeffie? You hate working?”

Mary is twenty. I just turned thirty-four. She drove her Kay car a thousand miles to a place where she knew not a soul to finish a college degree – and met me.

Dashiell Hammet wrote a novel called ‘The Thin Man.’ Nick, forty-one – an ex-sleuth – wanted a vacation and Nora, twenty-six – his wife – loved adventure. So it was off to New York City for the Christmas holidays. A murder occurred. One thing led to another and they were drawn into the mystery.

But maybe that wasn’t the important feature. Maybe the mystery was Nora and Nick’s remarkable rapport. Fond of each other, they actually got along. There were little arguments, of course, and they teased each other a lot. But they were equals – a match for each other.

Somehow Nick and Nora’s age difference brings me encouragement.

Dixieland bands thrill me. Even as a kid the joyful rhythms and singing gave me a jolt. I watch through the kitchen window as the trombone slides a long howl out it's bell; as the trumpet improvises on the melody – occasionally reinventing it – the clarinet flies over, through, and around it.

I once took a class about twentieth century music with Laurence Gashee, the clarinet player. It was a good learning experience. Close to sixty years old then, he was shy, given a quick smile. The nineteen year old in him would occasionally slip out and it would make me wonder how he could withstand lecturing to the fifteen of us.

It must have been the music.

We started with Debussy, Satie, and Richard Strauss. The latter was the grandson of Johann Strauss, the waltz king, and his music – witness 'Electra' – is shocking, foreshadowing much of what was to come; for instance Arnold Schonberg and Igor Stravinsky. Mr. Gashee's class looked at the advent of the phonograph. Of radio. At the roaring twenties, neo-classicism, the effect of world war on music. We reviewed modern methods: musique concrete, electronic music, and computer driven music. Miles Davis. But what tickled me most was his lecture on Frank Zappa. Here's this wonderful yet shy, white-haired guy trying to impart on us his enthusiasm for 'Lumpy Gravy' and 'Help I'm A Rock.'

A friend of mine played a pick up game of football with Tom Birkner, the trumpet player. He said Tom would make a natural coach. His version of 'Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home' is something to look forward to; his voice is so strong he doesn't need a microphone.

Morgan Powell, playing the trombone, is a professor of music at the university. A composer, he once took two pianos and retuned them to what our ears would find dissonant beyond repair: shivering near harmonies. Two gongs next to each other, once struck, will shimmer slowly together, merge together – which is not unlike the two pianos.

“Who’s the banjo player?” Mary asks. “He’s great.”

“That’s Mike Miller.”

“Is he reincarnated?”

“Yes. Absolutely. Indeed.” Who is this woman? “Are you?”

With his bushy mustache, Mike Miller even looks the part, a solid player. Scott Mordecai is on drums. Parts of his set date back to when the music originated. Later on he’ll play hand drums in Bontuku.

Mary takes the can opener from me. While she cranks open the can of tuna I go into the back room for two number ten cans of crushed tomatoes.

“Would you open these, too?”

“You bet, Jeffie.”

Rolling my eyes, I set to chopping vegetables. “When you get a chance would you please get down the parsley and black pepper?”

“Sure, Jeffie.”

“Jeffie?”

“I was trying it out. I like it.”

“Jeffie,” I consider. “You know, I never really had a nickname.”

“Oh,” Mary says, “that’s bad,” extending the ‘a’ in bad. She shakes her head. “Everybody should have a nickname.” I can see the little girl in her working on the matter.

“Eric Fields used to call me that sometimes. Jefe, too. But they never stuck.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she promises, while opening a can of tomatoes. Making food is not one of Mary’s major interests. Actually, eating doesn’t seem to be either. We’ve spent so much time together that I gave her my house key. Living in the dormitories can bring on all kinds of misery. In return she gave me a key to her kay car. But I can’t remember her so much as making a grilled cheese at my place.

“Would you pour one can of tomatoes into each of these two bowls?”

“Sure, Jeffie.”

Brian Reedy pulls up a half gallon container of mustard from the reach-in and puts a funnel into a yellow squeeze bottle.

“Leave that out,” I call. “Please.”

“Okay.” He picks up the mustard and pours. It globs into the funnel.

Jeff yells back, “How long on the tuna salad?”

I yell forward, “Four minutes.” Then in a lower voice, “Will you get me some celery and carrots from the walk-in?”

“Sure.” She leaves off the “Jeffie”, but I can tell she still thinks it’s funny.

Without the use of measuring cup I pour mustard and mayonnaise on the tuna, adding spices by pouring them into my hand first. Over the years I’ve learned a few techniques for chopping vegetables. Mary watches. There are any number of ways to not show off.

Breaking up the chunks of tuna, I mix it all together. I label and date it and take it to the sandwich board. Brian Reedy slides his half-finished gondolette over so I can fill the tuna salad sandwich order. I set it at Jeff's elbow in a red basket and go back to the salsas.

Machota yells, "Two red beans and rice, white bread."

I yell forward, "After these only two bowls left."

'Alexander's Ragtime Band' rolls to a halt and Jeff yells, "Okay," into the relative silence. The audience bursts into applause. I stir the chili and soup then concentrate on the salsa.

The band strikes up 'Sweet Georgia Brown.'

"Will you get me some green peppers?"

"Only if I get to try some."

"Green peppers."

"No, Jeffie. Salsa."

"I don't see why not."

Salsa: tomatoes, garlic, onion, jalapenos and green bell peppers, cayenne, cumin, red wine vinegar, and salt. The hot kind gets more cayenne and jalapenos. I grab a new bag of corn chips from the back room and rip it open under Mary's nose. We sniff luxuriously. I get a bowl, a basket, and a sheet of wax paper and bring it to the counter.

Jeff says, "Could you bring it to the big guy in the orange shirt? By the windows. Wait!" He jumps to the reach-in. Handing me a Pepsi, he says, "Big guy."

"Orange shirt. Big guy. Okay . . . I've got him."

The place is standing room only, something that's been happening a lot lately. Shelley and Terry are by the door with their kids. Seredy, a smart and lively blond-headed nine year old, is hanging with her dad. Shelley juggles the young twins, and Tyson, age seven, talks with Michael Holloway, who holds court on the ice cream chair outside the front door. I hand the big guy with orange shirt his chips and salsa and we thank each other.

For the purposes of big science, the university is going to take Nature's Table. We keep a petition on the counter. There have been a surprising number of signatures. We need more, of course. Word of mouth has been a great source. There have been newspaper articles and editorials, and people on the radio. I'll bet there's been some kind of T.V. coverage, but I haven't owned a T.V. since 1978.

There isn't any one person who is responsible. So its hard to know exactly who or what to fight. Should Machota barge into the university president's office and punch him on the nose? Should I sing to the treasurer 'The Ballad of Nature's Table'?

I pour the chili into its crockpot then bring forward the mushroom barley, calling, "Hot Soup! Hot Soup!"

Rosie has the crockpot back on and I slip the tureen inside.

"Thanks, Jeff," she says.

"No. Thank you."

Rosie laughs her great laugh. "You're welcome. Now go away." Across the counter, her customer laughs. He's a big guy with lots of hair. Rosie is smaller, maybe five foot three or four, and as it's a step down to the kitchen the big, hairy guy towers over her.

“Would you get me a Bud with that sandwich? A Budweiser. No glass.”

“Sure. I’ll get that for you right now.”

One of Terry’s policies is: get the customer their drink and ask them to sit down; we can bring the food out to them. Rosie is a great worker and because she’s at ease with herself the customers have fun with her.

Reaching over the prep table, I put my knife in the clutter on top of the freezer. I load up my cutting board – Mary helps – with all the dishes and take them to the sinks. I dump the lot of it into the suds then grab the knife to wash it first.

Doing several loads of dishes, I manage to clear the floor and most of the freezer top. I take the ladles and big spoons and my knife around back to the utensil bucket.

Wiping down my work space, I say, “Mary.”

Slowly, she turns, pulling herself away from the window. “These guys can really play,” she says.

I smile. Wonderful woman. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“Okay, Jeffie.”

“That again.” I pick up the tomato cans. “Say, have you ever seen the movie ‘Casablanca’?”

“No.”

“You’re kidding. That’s really hard to do. How about the movie ‘Harvey’?”

“No. I don’t think so. Are they good?”

“Are they good?”

I pick up the tuna can and we go out the door.

She had to make a phone call, so I'm back at Nature's Table. Lawrence and Pzuiba create a musical atmosphere that is much different than at Happy Hour. The Dixieland crowd was drinking and dancing. Now, the people might have to talk to each other, about art, or wine, or meaning.

Terry comes in the back door laughing with a man I've never seen before.

"This is Raymond Foss. He put together the art work."

I introduce myself. "Are all these paintings yours?"

"No, no," he laughs loudly. "No." Terry moves on. "No. I have too many friends who bitch about their art not being shown. I got tired of hearing it so I called Terry and said I'd put up a show."

"I thought this stuff was all one artist."

"No. Three painters who have a studio together. They work with acrylics mostly. Use brushes, spray guns, sponges. Whatever's around."

"Push the paint around with their hands."

"Exactly. But they needed a kick in the butt. So I gave it to them."

Shorter than Mary, this guy has blue earrings and black hair like I've never seen before, the proud owner of a ton of energy.

"Do you paint yourself?"

"Only shit." He laughs. "you didn't think I was going to fall for that old straight line. Of course I don't paint myself. I gave it up years ago."

With a great big smile he falls in behind Terry, going past the counter six seconds later he's shaking somebody's hand. Mister Foss is in his natural environment: People. Mary comes in the back door the same time Machota rounds the bread rack.

"You haven't been here all day, have you?"

Jeff laughs. "Yeah. This is one of the busiest days we've ever had." He goes into the back room.

Looking at me, Mary asks him, "What do you mean?"

He says, foraging amongst the shelves, "It's been a nearly constant run of people for like eight hours."

"Do we need anything?" I ask.

He grabs two packages of napkins and wax paper. "Mostly they're eating the art show food."

There's a spread; of brie cheese and grapes and bread.

"And Bontuku tonight," sighs Jeff. Even he looks a little weary.

"It's ironic," Mary says, "that Nature's Table is doing so well after all these years of trying and how the university is going to tear it down. It's almost like they waited for it to flourish to kill it."

"We're not dead yet." Machota starts for the counter.

Word of mouth has been one of our major resources. If enough people talk about us something will happen. Most of the people who go out for music, food, and drink

seem to know about our imminent demise. Hope against hope. WEFT, the community radio station, talks about us. New customers appear.

Terry and Shelley – and others – have talked to university officials. There seems to be some give and take: a final date has not been issued.

The hammer will likely drop next spring.

Everybody has their day. Universities are here today and gone tomorrow. Is music forever?

“How’s Paul?”

Mary’s question makes me giggle. Paul is not a person. Paul is a band. Terri Taber, who works here lunches, suggested the name. It was during the noon rush – where weird conversations happen anyway – that I called out, “Does anybody have a good name for a band?”

Terri did not hesitate.

“Call it Paul,” she said.

I brought it to the rest of the boys in the band: Mark Revenaugh, Rick Schattnick, and Emil Boulos. After considerable consideration it was agreed upon. The hottest new vocal group – indeed the only new vocal group in town – was dubbed Paul.

Mary slips the back door screen into the back door frame. She waits, holding up her hands to see if it will fall back out. It doesn’t. There’s a rip in a corner. As it’s free

standing, and not hinged and bolted down, it falls sometimes. There's a formula for making it stay in place that changes every couple of days. Shadows are getting longer. As we thread our way between the recycle bins and the parking meters. Mary has a question.

"I heard Guido had a stroke."

"Yes. He did."

Mary's quiet a moment.

"He seems to embody that whole smoky jazz image."

"Film noir?"

"Now don't make fun."

Smiling back at her, I say, "Wouldn't dream of it."

She's a little super-charged. "He's lived the life of a jazz musician."

"He is a jazz musician."

"I don't doubt it." She's quiet again. "Do you think he was born at the wrong time?"

"Like this age isn't able to support Be-bop?"

"Something like that."

"Hard to say."

Scott Mordecai drives up for the third time today. Once to drop off something for Terry and once again for the Dixieland, and now to set up for Bontuku.

Terry meets him at his car. They pull drums out of the back seat, setting them on the sidewalk, then go around to the trunk.

"I talked with Celeste."

“Yeah?”

“I think she’s okay.”

“Good.”

I can feel her yearning for her people back east. She’s had a whole life before I even met her.

“You want anything? I’m going to get a beer.”

“No,” Mary says. “Thank you.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you out in front.”

Overweight and happily disheveled Michael Holloway steps down into the kitchen. Among other occupations Michael is a poet. Wearing overalls, he goes to the walk-in cooler and tapes up a newspaper cartoon next to the door. It depicts, in the first panel, a guy going serenely to sleep, every hair in place. There’s a full moon outside his window. The sun is beaming in the second panel, but he’s bleary, his hair in severe disarray, exhausted after a good night’s rest. Michael looks at me and laughs. The deed done, he grabs a beer from the reach-in and steps out of the kitchen.

Terry steps out of the cooler with a six pack of Dos Equis. He looks over the cartoon and laughs. Smiling at me, he says, “Got to go with the flow.”

I raise my Old Style to him. “Go with the flow.”

Mary sits over by the Horizon Bookstore. I go there. She doesn't know I approach and I get the chance to look at her as just Mary – not Mary and me. Her instead of we. I dated a woman who once made this thought provoking statement: It is not just who you are; it's also who you are when you're with somebody else.

Mary surfaces from her thoughts as I sit down next to her.

“So, Jeff.”

“So, what.”

“So, over the years how has this place changed?”

“Well, first there was nothing and darkness. Then there was light, then water, then land, and later creatures form from the primordial goo. Humans appear . . .”

“No. How has this place changed?”

“Oh. You mean Nature's Table.”

“Yes, silly.”

“I get it now. Well,” I say. “Time, you know.”

“Time. Tell me more.”

“How am I supposed to?”

“That's right. How? Come on, Jeffie.”

Searching for a place to start, I offer, “It's busier.”

“How is it busier?”

“One thing is the patronage of the college students.”

“Patronage?”

“Now don't make fun.”

Mary's having fun. “Please. Go on.”

“I guess more people, over time, knew about us. The more well-dressed crowd started to come by. The fraternities and the sororities. The yuppies.”

“It must have made a difference.”

“It brought us more business. In a way it was good when the mainstream found out about us. Though before the times were . . . uh . . . more intimate or something.”

“Getting wistful?”

“Great word wistful. You say it twenty times in a row and it becomes verbal mush. No, not really. But it was a different time.”

“How was that?”

“Well, less people, for instance. And the crowd seemed more interested in the music. Now sometimes it seems like a party where nobody is listening.”

“Like at Bontuku.”

“Exactly. I think at some level everybody’s feeling it, what Oscar can do, but sometimes those nights turn into a fraternity kegger.”

“But it must have opened up things to them that they’d never experienced before.”

“It did.”

“And,” Mary says. “That’s good.”

I smile at her. She’s said, That’s good, with the finality of an aspiring eight year old philosopher. No more question about it. Danny’s new blue pickup truck waits in traffic to turn into the parking lot. It’s almost dark out now.

“Yeah,” I say. “Maybe they recognized a different sense of possibilities, something not so normal.”

“So,” Mary asks, “What’s normal?”

I reply, “When you request and are given sixty-five million dollars to build a chemical life sciences building and in the process snuff out an erudite bookstore and a well-loved jazz club you take the money and build. That’s normal.”

“If you’re a university.”

“And have a Central Master Plan.”

A van pulls up and double parks. Oscar Sulley and John Hurtibise get out, John hauling his bass amp, Oscar carrying the bass guitar. They go inside. A moment later and Danny follows them. There’s an ebb and flow as the art crowd departs and the Bontuku crowd arrives.

“I’m going for another beer. You want anything?”

“I think I’d like to try a Tucher.”

“You’re kidding,” I say.

Mary’s not much of a drinker and Tucher comes in an oversized bottle.

Furthermore it’s a weirdly fizzy wheat beer.

“Want a glass and a slice of lemon?”

“Absolutely.”

“Mary,” I say with awe, “If I had a hat I’d doff it to you.”

“Me, too.”

“I’ll be back.”

Matt Rubenstein and Peggy walk up to Mary as I pass through the door.

It's chaos inside. All the lights are on. Everything is everywhere. Val and Shelley try to clear the art opening food as Jeff and Terry move tables into place for tonight's show. The musicians chatter and try to avoid each other – therefore getting in each other's way – while they get set up on the small stage. The place needs a good sweep. One of my favorite things about Nature's Table is that the people contribute; customers lend their help in nearly every aspect of our existence. I've seen Danny clean a room just because he wanted to.

As Terry says, "Thith I Thay To Thee: To Thine Own Thelf Be Thure."

I never really knew what he was talking about either.

Val kind of reminds me of a young female version of Terry. Industrious and capable she has a work ethic that states business before pleasure, and like Terry there's a lot of business to take care of.

Val raises Terry's spirits.

Sue and Liz and Val and Rosie and others make desserts and lasagnas and keep the dinner hour flowing with burritos and middle eastern plates. The place has grown well past the point where one cook can bear the workload.

Ali Hussein goes into the small office and comes out with a broom. He'd like a job. Nobody will hire him because of his last name and we don't have a job to give him. He makes out as best he can. Flipping on the P. A. Terry begins the tricky process of placing microphones. Dzuiba picks up his little amp and guitar and sidles past twelve U of I music stands to the front door. Reaching over the keyboard with the front piece to the piano Lawrence settles the wood into place. He checks that it's solid, latches it, then

pushes in the bench. Picking up his leather satchel he goes up the wheelchair ramp to the counter. Hurtibise follows him.

Brian Ruth and Sharon have their hands full behind the counter.

“John,” I say, “what can I get you?”

“Hey, Jeff. Thanks. How about a lemon mineral water?”

Lawrence sets his empty lemon mineral water bottle on the counter and turns to John. “Hey, man. How are you?”

“Good, man. Good to see you. What have you been doing?”

“I’ve been up in Chicago.”

Sharon says, “You sounded great.”

“Thank you. I heard the university is about ready to take this place. I’ll be sorry to see it go.”

“Yes,” Sharon says. “We’ll all miss this place.”

The one chance I had to play music with John was at a rehearsal for a band Matt Rubenstein wanted to start called Funk Face. The story goes that Matt had picked up on some of the new rhythms in Washington D. C. and the Funk had won him over. Matt is a talented classical pianist. He also had a cheesy electronic keyboard. Invited to the rehearsal were Danny, Bruce, Helgesen, Mitch Paliga, and Scott Frillman. Matt had made some loose charts. Mostly it was jamming. John and I had fun changing keys on Matt when he least expected it. Later, because he had enjoyed himself so much, Matt asked me, “Is that all there is to it?”

“What do you mean?”

“That changing keys like that.”

“Yes and no. It can be a trick in the wrong hands.”

Mike Cerri, a trumpet player, and I went to a performance of Matt’s. It was held in the Great Hall at Krannert. There was a full orchestra. Mike and I fell asleep in the fifth row. He and I and several friends had wine and dined at the Greek place on Fourth and Green beforehand. Matt came away from the concert dismayed, but happily so. He had made so many mistakes, he’d said, that he was forced to improvise. He just laughed it off.

Lawrence spots the petition on top of the jewelry case. He reads it and signs it. The purple shaded jewelry case takes up far too much counter space. I think Guido has something to do with its presence. Jewelry makers from around town present their wares here.

I give John his water then go back for Mary’s Tucher. Getting my bluejeans jacket from the office, and putting it on, I grab a beer glass from the draining board and slip it into the left-side inside pocket of my coat.

“Planning a theft or a picnic?” Sharon asks.

“Neither.” I pull up a Tucher.

Sharon mouths an Oh as I get out an Old Style.

“Who are you drinking with?”

“Mary.”

“Oh.” The lines around her eyes crinkle as she smiles. “Mary’s nice.”

I slice a lemon and put a quarter of it into the glass in my jacket pocket.

“Yes,” I say. “She is.”

After pouring from the big, brown bottle Mary squeezes the lemon on top of her Tucher. She drinks, pauses, then makes a surprised face. “This is good.”

“I can’t deal with all the fizziness. Where’s Matt and Peggy?”

“I like it.” Mary has taken a lot of the fun of being a kid into adulthood. “They went inside. So,” she says, “How has the music changed over the years?”

“It has.”

“How?”

“Are we back to that?”

“Yes.” She’s insistent. “How is the music different?”

“Well. There’s more of it.”

Mary listens well. “Go on.” She puts people at ease. “In the beginning,” I say, “there wasn’t any music. And this is probably important. It came along slowly. The Jack Webb Band was one of the first. The Memphis Nighthawks. Ron Dewar was a great sax favorite around here then, played in the band. He’s in Chicago. I heard him later on. There was also a performance group Terry liked called Maestro Subgum and the Whole. Maestro would show up onstage wearing only a top hat . . . um . . . strategically placed.”

Mary laughs.

“I never saw them, but people told me about them. They did skits and take-offs on the affairs of the day.”

“Like the Bob and Jeff show?”

“I don’t think so. My guess is that they had a mission in mind.”

“Political satire?”

“I’m not sure, but I think that’s fair to say.” I ramble on. “When I first started working here Terry had a tough time pulling bands in every night. TBA was one of our regular bands. To Be Announced. Now we have to turn bands away.”

“That’s a luxury.”

“Yes it is.”

“That would make a great song title.”

“The Beatles . . .”

“Yes, I know,” Mary smirks. “You played it six times in a row yesterday.”

I almost blush. “Yes, I suppose I did.”

“Go on.”

“Okay. In the beginning there wasn’t a lot of music. What there was was almost entirely jazz.”

“Yeah?”

“Guys like Mike Kocour and Jeff Stitely.”

“What about them?”

“Are you just trying to get me to talk?”

“No. Yes. I’m interested.”

“You’re interesting.”

She waves a hand at me. “Aw, go on.”

“Thanks, I will. Mike and Jeff – also known as Stites – used to play here more hours than a lot of the employees worked. There were others like that in shorter stretches. And there’s the great connection to the music school. I don’t know. I guess

the outlet was needed. Terry's the kind of guy who had to work for himself. So he started this coffee house restaurant thing and the musicians came to him.

"Is it coincidence?"

"I wonder sometimes. It's uncanny. Dumb luck maybe. Terry never had a business before as far as I know. He drove a truck at one point." I cough. "A beer run, I think. Did you know he was on the University of Illinois football team?"

"Seriously. No kidding?"

"He was their punter. And he was voted most valuable player two years in a row."

"Really."

"Yep. But think. What does that say about the football team?"

"They had to punt a lot?"

"Bingo. I may make a football fan of you yet."

"Who's Mark Dzuiba?"

"Just a guy."

"No. Come on."

"That's right," I say. "You wouldn't have gotten the chance to get to know him."

"No."

"Well, he's a funny guy. Curly hair. Laughs a lot. Very quick., You know how you think I'm a good guitar player?"

"Yes."

“Well, in my eyes, he really is a good guitar player. Great, probably. Got all the fingers you could ever need. All the technique. He took the time to work through the chord changes and scales. He plays wide open, without any hinderance. Fabulous stuff.”

“You like this guy, huh?”

I look at Mary. Her eyes are bright with teasing. She’s caught me off guard and she knows it – one of the many things I like about her. I say, “If Mark has any areas of guitar he needs to look at it would be rock and roll and blues. Keith Richards is something he probably won’t ever be totally moved by. Muddy Waters. Just like Wes Montgomery will never take me all the way. Mark does jazz, though I’m sure he’s competent in all styles of music. He played a lot with Sorgum when Chuck Tripp moved to Chicago.”

“I never saw Chuck Tripp play.”

“Well, as Dzuiba would say, he’s a guitar god.”

Mary asks, “Who is Lawrence Hobgood?”

“He and Dzuiba – that’s pronounced Jooba – I think he might be from upper eastern European heritage. Anyhow, you know how I agonize over trying to find chord changes when I’m listening to music.”

“Yes. It’s fascinating.”

“Lawrence passed out of all three ear training classes. Somebody told me he actually scored a hundred percent on the course tests, which means he can hear the music sufficiently enough to reproduce it. And he has the hands. At Treno’s I saw him once play piano to a silent film. No score. He just watched the screen.”

Adam comes over and stands on the sidewalk, a fish out of water. Once, he dressed up as Groucho Marx and sang the song ‘Samovar the Lawyer’ during a John Lafond Christmas Extravaganza, tails and all. Eric Fields, another guy I know who plays guitar and writes songs, and others, had gently ? coerced John to emcee some shows. So my dear old sweetheart Julie – and John – wanted me to vote in the year’s presidential election. I hadn’t given it much thought. John cut me a deal: if I voted he’d do the show. I drew in a breath, gritted my teeth, and stepped into the voting booth. It was terrifying. Too much responsibility. I hadn’t voted in twelve years. Julie and John were done in less than five minutes. It took me twenty-five. (I voted mostly for women.) It was all I could do to not let my soul get punctured. I hated it and came out of the booth shaken. The two of them never quite got what my problem was. After a while I gave up trying to explain it to them, and later to nearly everyone else.

A truly unique and funny guy, John turned out to be a natural onstage. He can speak a few phrases in several languages. For instance, he knows how to say I love a rubber chicken in Russian and I have a fur sink in French.

Peggy comes out the front door. Adam and Peggy McNamara – no relation to Tim McNamara, the saxophone player – and Matt, work here, or have worked here. She’s wearing make-up, red lipstick, something you don’t see a lot of on Nature’s Table employees. It’s Friday night and I suspect romance is afoot. Peggy sits down next to Mary and hugs her knees.

“I love spring.”

“I know,” Mary says. “It’s so comforting.”

Peggy looks across the street and into the night. She says, “Everything gets so colorful.” Three people dressed in black come out followed by Matt with a salad and a sandwich. The people in black are not in a hurry. Matt splits off towards us and sits down.

“You know, no matter how much I eat, I’m always starving two and a half hours later.”

Matt is slim, a little taller than Mary, and as Robbin, one of our ex-cooks says, has a sweet disposition. He tells good bad jokes. Shoving a remarkable amount of salad into his mouth, he says, “Dijoo fee zoze vwipzees?” He laughs and a piece of lettuce falls into his lap.

I say, “Once again?”

He chews and swallows. “Did you see those gypsies?” Laughing, he swallows again. “Toward the end of the rush.”

“There were three of them,” Adam says. “They were odd.”

“Yeah,” Matt says. “One of them looked like Johnny Carson.”

I laugh. “Sorry I missed this.”

“One of the others looked like Neil Young,” Adam says.

Mary asks, “What was the third face like?”

“Like it was hewn out of rock,” Matt says. “The only thing that moved in it were the eyes, and the end of his nose when he chewed.”

“Imagine,” says Peggy. “Gypsies in Illinois.”

“As much gypsy,” Adam says, “as you can get at the end of the century. They didn’t talk to each other.”

Peggy gets up. "Matt, can I get you anything?"

He shakes his head. His mouth is full.

Adam says, "I'll go in with you."

When they've gone I ask Mary, "How's that Tucher treating you?"

"Fine. Just fine, thanks."

"Too fizzy. The stuff's too fizzy."

"That's just what you think."

Matt appears to be entirely absorbed with his food. "Run with that thought," I say.

"Yours is only one perspective."

"So be it."

"But, Jeffie, doesn't one have to live in the whole world?"

I must have said something like this before. "All at once? I have trouble living in Champaign-Urbana."

Matt spits and laughs. Kurt Morrison makes his way around front with his guitar amp. Matt points his fork.

"Wasn't he in the Modern Humans?"

"You know," I say. "I think so, but have you ever seen him do his Know Your Zeppelin bit?"

There's an outburst of hand drums and Oscar chants too loudly into a shrieking microphone.

I ask Mary, "Do you want to go sit on top of Krannert and watch Nature's Table?"

Matt says, “Don’t let me keep you. I can eat solo just as with company.”

Mary pours the rest of her beer into her glass then gets up and puts the bottle on the brick window ledge. It leans out a little.

“Legs go.”

When we get back the African Highlife is in full swing. In his wisdom Peter Townsend might have called Oscar a head case, though surely he must have thought himself to be one, too. Oscar is a master drummer from Ghana. When he plays, rhythm and sound flow from his hands like the rest of us breathe. Scott Mordecai, something of a brilliant head case himself, comes away from these nights with nothing but admiration for Oscar’s music.

We go in the back door. Mary adjusts the screen.

There are some charts – if Helgesen puts his hand to them you can be sure they are easily readable – but a lot of this music flies by the seat of its pants.

“I love Danny,” Mary says, looking through the kitchen window.

For a skinny-bone, red-haired white guy Danny sure is funky. As a teenager he used to go home after school, put on the headphones, and drum along with Parliament Funkadelic. There doesn’t seem to be a musical style he is unable to grasp.

My friend Scott, drummer in Stumpwhoopt, likened the drummer’s job to this: the bass player plays the bass, the guitarist the guitar, the horns play together and the drummer plays the band. Danny can do this, though, rightfully, Oscar will always lead this band.

Rosie pulls a sixpack of diet Pepsi up from the reach-in. I once saw her riding her bike on Illinois Street out by Cottage Grove. She didn't see me. I was walking through Victory Park. To my eyes, as she rode by so tall in her seat, she looked positively serene and strong.

I speak directly into Mary's ear. "I always wanted to get to know Rosie better."

Mary says into my ear, "She's great."

It isn't due to a closed nature: Rosie is inexplicably happy, often bubbling with cheerfulness. She walks over, but it's so loud in here we have to concentrate.

Rosie eyes sparkle. "They sound great."

"Yes," Mary shouts, turning toward her. "I love it."

We watch through the kitchen window. Jeff Machota comes over and he's not wearing an apron. Rosie puts his shoulder as I talk into his ear.

"I thought you worked Friday nights." I aim my ear at him.

"What?"

I raise my voice another notch – the music has taken on yet more intensity, and with it volume. "I thought you worked Friday nights?"

"I do, but Terry's here and Brian and Ali said he'd help so I get a break."

"Let me buy you a beer."

"Old Style. No, wait, let me remember my dream last night."

Rosie yells, "How is Guido anyway?"

Jeff is able to penetrate the ways of Guido better than most. "He's okay. But I don't think we'll see him for a while."

Sharon's come over to listen. "You live hard, you die hard."

“That was Shakespeare, wasn’t it?” I yell at Jeff. “Let me get you that beer.”

“No, wait. I don’t want to forget this dream. It was even weirder than most.” He laughs. “It was multi-layered, kind of like things were happening on top of each other, overlapping. All these things kept happening, but they didn’t always make sense. They were in the wrong order or something.”

Sharon shouts, “Go on.”

“They kept coming – these like toothbrushes. For a while they were marching. That was weird. Then they turned into giraffes.”

I yell, “Why?”

“I don’t know.” He laughs as the memories keep coming. “The giraffes started playing football. I don’t know why. Because they had to, I guess.”

“Cool,” I say. “I’ve been having expanding Nature’s Table dreams, again.”

Rosie yells, “Oh, no.”

“The building keeps expanding and I’m the only one who’s working. I keep finding more rooms, more people, more sandwiches to make, more dishes . . .”

Sharon yells, “What happens to the toothbrushes?”

Machota shifts his weight to his other foot. “See, that was the funny thing. After that some of the giraffes turned into giant Popsicles. The giraffes couldn’t eat them they were so big.”

“What happened to the giraffes?”

“They turned from Popsicles into a string quartet that juggled. Then I woke up.”

I yell, “And came to work.”

“And came to work.”

“Let me get you that beer.”

I pop the top, hand it to him, and he takes a long, healthy pull, lets out a sigh, and wipes his face on his forearm.

“Long Day.”

Mary yells, “Do you think this is the busiest day that Nature’s Table ever had?”

“Yes, maybe.” Machota takes another sip. “It wasn’t the busiest lunch though.”

Oscar’s hand shoots into the air. It vibrates. He throws it down. The band stops and he says some mostly unintelligible stuff too fast into the microphone.

Jeff asks us in a conversational tone, now that the decibels have dropped considerably, “Guess who’s the next guest artist for Ed D’aleo’s folk night?”

Sunday, folk night, in a jazz club, necessarily produces some interesting results. There’s a clash of interests.

Ed D’aleo, a fairly serious guy, speaks in a deep, round voice while singing in a high fluttery one. I always wanted him to sing baritone, maybe even bass.

Rosie says, not yelling, “I couldn’t imagine.”

Simply put, Machota says, “Ed D’aleo.”

Sharon says, “He’s never done that before, has he?”

“No,” Machota laughs, “He hasn’t.”

“I like him,” Mary says. “He’s doing what he loves.”

Pop music is emerging from Africa, spreading throughout the world on compact disc. In part inspired by traditional rhythms, it doesn’t rely on complex harmony built on

intricate chord structures. Mark Deffenbaugh once observed, “African musicians like instruments that buzz.” I liked that thought. They must build a lot of their instruments by hand.

Oscar starts the band off by singing to the bass and drums, then to the horns, what he wants to hear. He goes around to everybody in the band, then straddles a conga drum.

And it surprises me unto my very bone marrow that frat boys love it. Mary is going on about the Platters.

“The singing group, the Platters,” Rosie asks.

“Tell me,” I say.

The Platters were a vocal group that did rhythm and blues and doo-wop in the late fifties and early sixties. ‘The Great Pretender’ and ‘Smoke Gets In Your Eyes’ were big hits for them.

“They needed directions,” Mary says, “to get to Eastern Illinois University. It was funny because my mom works as a teacher there – and you know how good I am with directions. This time I actually knew where to tell them to go.”

“Nice,” I say.

Charleston, where Eastern Illinois is, is less than an hour south off interstate fifty-seven.

“They were lost.”

Hands up I love the music from the fifties and sixties. Maybe it has something to do with there being less recording equipment available. Rhythm and blues like Ray Charles and the Coasters, the country music of Hank Williams. Johnny Cash. Carl Perkins. Be-bop and modern jazz – Charlie Parker, Sun Ra, Roland Kirk, Coltrane . . .

World War Two had it's effect. I'd have to research it, but it seems every generation going back several generations had a war to fight, a rallying ground. During the sixties, when the only war we were having was a holding action staged halfway across the world, the current generation, confused and agitated by whatever a holding action was supposed to be, found themselves at odds with their own people. They fought their own government. There was a surplus of energy and a strange foreign menace. Monk, Miles, Mingus – can a musical line be drawn from jazz to Hendrix. Dylan. The Rolling Stones. The angry and naïve heavy metal by Black Sabbath. It was powerful times that made a civil dent in society, furthering cultural understanding, creating yet more problems. The great and directionless energy that was the sixties – the broken hearts that could not focus, that could not rearrange the powers that be – may have sputtered out. But some of the music produced approaches the timelessness of the ages.

And Mary has a Platters story to tell, so I pump her for information.

“What did they do? What did they say? Why were they here? How did they look?”

Jeff mocks me. “Did they eat any egg salad sandwiches? Any tabouli? Any pesto? Coffee?”

Mary laughs. “No. They had a gig to get to.”

“A brush with fame.” I turn to Jeff, “Did you ever hear about Bruce meeting Wendy O. Williams?”

“She wanted eggs.” He laughs. “Yeah. He told me that one.” Plasmatics. She appears sometimes wearing only shaving cream. They've been known to blow up T. V.s onstage. I heard they once took a chain saw to a Cadillac. The afternoon after her

Mabel's gig she came into Nature's Table wanting eggs. Bruce responded with, "Raw or cooked?" She and her body guard walked out without another word. Bruce probably went back to his reading.

"For some reason," Mary says, "they stopped her for directions."

"I love that about Nature's Table," Sharon says. "How things just happen here. Why not Oklahoma City and it's B. B. King?"

I always liked Sharon. So much common sense. She asks, "Were they the original Platters?"

"All I know is they said they were the Pretenders."

Everybody looks at Mary. Nobody says anything.

She looks back, puzzled. "What?"

Rosie yells over the music, "The Pretenders?"

"Did I say that?"

"Yes."

"Oh, sorry. I meant the Platters."

In an effort to get all that I can from her story, I ask, "Did you like them?"

"Yes. They were smoking and friendly. They had a limo."

The image of a limousine parked in front of this beat up building is thoroughly pleasing.

"Black?" Sharon asks.

"Black."

Rosie laughs. "Gotta love it."

"Actually," Mary says. "You do. And they made it to their gig."

Machota asks, “Did your mom go see them?”

“I called her and she said she saw in the paper that they had played.”

“So that’s great.” I congratulate her. “You met the Platters and gave good directions.”

“That’s right.”

“Do I detect a hint of sarcasm?”

“Detect what you like, Jeffie.”

It’s getting late. We watch the music. Presently Rosie asks, Machota, “What’s up with Mitch Paliga? He hasn’t been around for a while.” A saxophone player, Mitch has the respect of the musical community, especially the horn players. Quiet and friendly, what’s within him doesn’t necessarily surface in conversation. What lies beneath is delivered in his playing. A great soloist, with confidence and humility, I get the impression that if Mitch was your friend you really had a friend. He reminds me of Steve Griggs, a sax player from some years ago who was also talented and soft spoken.

Machota says, “He’s been in Chicago a lot.”

“It’s like a slow parade,” Rosie says. Jeff laughs and Mary asks, “What do you mean?”

“The musicians,” Rosie says. “They play here for a while then move to Chicago.” She laughs. “Musicians seem to adopt this place, nurture it, then move north.”

Mary observes, “It’s like that sometimes.”

Jeff Machota has his apron back on. The place is still packed tight. People are partying, dancing. Oscar – the band – is happy. Mary and I step out of the relative safety of the kitchen – at least you can breathe in there – onto the chaos on the platform before the counter. Three heads move three different directions and I spot Adam leaning on the railing watching the band. I tap Mary’s forearm with the back of my wrist.

“Let’s go visit.”

She sees where I’m looking and puts her head close to mine. “I see what you mean. Lonely.”

I put my mouth to her ear. “Womanless.”

Inching and nudging, trying not to step on peoples feet, dodging elbows, smiling, we work our way through the mass of people.

Adam holds a Tucher to the rail. I yell, “How can you drink that stuff?”

He yells, “I like it.”

“So do I,” Mary yells.

The band sounds great. Mordecai is entirely focused. Oscar’s hands are a blur. The lively horns, the fabulous, relentless rhythm. A strong hand drops on my shoulder. I turn and it’s Terry. “You left these on the stereo.” He gives me my glasses. I don’t wear them much so they tend to get left behind.

In earnest, Mary asks Terry, “Where will all these people go?”

Caught off guard, Terry says, “Not here,” while adjusting the bill of his Brooklyn Dodgers cap. “Let’s not count our chickens before they’re eggs.”

Adam yells, “What chickens?”

“Never mind,” Terry yells. The song ends and he salutes us. “Bon voyage.”

Adam says, “You and Bugs Bunny.”

“Thank you very much,” Terry says exactly not like Elvis. He goes back to the kitchen much faster than we got out of it.

Mary says, “Let’s go outside.”

Adam says, “No thank you,” and Mary and I work through the crowd.

Fresh air.

The cool air dances over our skin. Even in the middle of spring the band can heat up the place. We sit a moment on the stoop.

Mary asks, “What’s going to happen to this place?”

Nobody needs to tell her. She looks across at Krannert.

“Too bad there aren’t those connections.”

“I don’t know. Do you think the music would have survived intact with all that money behind it?”

“Ask Danny. You told me yourself about all the wonderful shows you saw there. You were even in some.”

“Some.”

Mary grabs my hand.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

Given life, what brings us joy? What restores us when our resources are low?

For one it might be studying. For another it's talking. For others it's numbers.
What is it that makes a person feel connected and alive? Some people cut diamonds.
Others don't eat breakfast.

Man has change, needs change, maybe is change.

Your best friend may be on his or her back in the hospital. There are books and
science and art and law and people who can pick up a rock and tell you what it's made of.

It is said that the best of times equal the worst of times. Sometimes we feel a
balance. Humans wield their faith and their facts, their wisdom, love, and sorrow.

Earth, water, air, fire?

But what of joy?

Tom Paynter

We met at Zorba's in 1998. He was working on a paper about Eric Dolphy for his Ph. D. in music composition. He'd already finished the required piece of music – scored for woodwinds, percussion, and electric piano. At the time he was a student at the University of Chicago.

“At Berklee (School of Music) I learned a lot of stuff from books and just practiced a lot, and was pretty much of a loner.”

He lived in Champaign-Urbana from 1987-1993 and played with “just about everyone who played there.” He also worked at the experimental recording studios at the U. of I. Under the supervision of Scott Wyatt.

Bontuku was a major musical force. He had a trio with Elliot Torrez and Kent Johnson, Bands called Or . . . and Nebula. He's fascinated by sound, from what you find in the symphony orchestra to what you hear in the parking lot. His main instrument is the piano.

Tom took the time to listen to and learn about the players at Nature's Table who came before him. In 1990 he went to Russia with an alumni big band headed up by John Garvey. I got the feeling music is what draws him out from himself.

“I don't know. It's . . . when I came to town, it almost seemed like the score had already begun to wane, in a little bit, a little bit. Now there was still the jazz house over on Main Street.”

J.M.: Who were the people you played with most at Nature's Table?

T.P.: Probably people like Kevin Engel (saxophone), Justin Kramer (drums), Doug Spaniel, bass player. Well, Jeff (Helgesen), of course. Played with his band sometimes back then. It's hard to recall because it seemed like everyone was playing one everyone else's gig anyway.

T.P.: I like being able to go back and forth. I like being able to play a tune that's in a tonality and play pretty harmonies and nice licks over it and all that, but I also like stretching out and trying to find new stuff. But, of course, in a live venue you can't antagonize your audience the whole time.

Even though these are little door gigs I'm probably going more for the art than the entertainment. I mean, hopefully what I do is entertaining, but . . .

T. P.: And I think the good thing is they had music every night of the week, so it was continuous. There was a certain continuum to doing a gig. Also the same people seemed to come back a lot and there was a sense of community.

J. M.: Did you find you would play differently depending on who was in the audience, or how full the place was?

T.P.: Definitely. Specific example: I can remember one night when just about the only person in there was Michael Holloway, and I know what he likes.

J.M.: (Laughs).

T.P.: So that changes. I don't think you should . . . How can you not be affected by the people in the room, that are six feet away from you, or whatever. So I definitely would try and play to the crowd.

J.M.: What would you play for Michael?

T.P.: Oh, stuff that was more quirky and bent up, more like a Thelonius Monk sort of thing, but even more perverted, maybe.

T.P.: One of my memorable gigs, when I was a sophomore at the U of I, was going to hear Brad (Wheeler), Art Davis, Mike Friedman, and Ed Harrison was the bass player. Anyway, it was a free band and I distinctly remember for some reason – maybe ‘cause of the humidity or just the way Art was blowing – there was actual steam coming out of the horn. I could see steam coming out. And I thought, man, this is the . . . This is where I want to be.

J. M.: What role did Nature’s table play with the university music students?

T.P.: I think it gave them a whole different sort of applied education – sort of learn by doing. And Guido, you know, he wasn’t a perfect guy – he had his faults – but he taught all of us a lot.

He wanted to teach us all, and whether or not that meant humiliating you on a gig, or whether it meant just telling you a suggestion on what to do, how to count something, or how to feel a phrase . . . All these little things.

J.M.: Could Guido play piano at all?

T.P.: Yeah. He could. He could chord out tunes. He could go through the changes. Because he wrote a lot of tunes, too. And that probably got me writing tunes, too.

T.P.: Some of the jazz players we met in Russia were ferocious. They had flawless technique and obviously spent a lot of time assimilating the music from recordings . . . That was really inspiring: to hear someone over there who could smoke your ass. And here you are coming, representing jazz from America, and they're burning your ass.

T.P.: In the Garv band you chance the instrumentation to make it sound better. And the shout chorus – all the horn players went out in the crowd. They had this riff going and they just walked around and played the piccolo obbligato from John Phillip Sousa's 'Stars and Stripes Forever' over it. It was in the same key. It was nuts.

T.P.: The Russia trip. I don't know what I'd like to say about the Russia trip other than the last concert we gave before we left was not too good. It was at Krannert. And then we gave a performance when we got back and that was at the Foellinger Auditorium on the quad. And I remember everyone dug it. The place was crowded. And it was like welcome home. And it was a great gig.

I think he (Garvey) wasn't afraid to experiment or exaggerate something to the point where it was more extreme than most people would ever consider doing. Let's not forget John Garvey would have the oboe-ist stand up in a Hayden Symphony if it had a solo. It was not only his arranging. Everything was choreographed. It's like, we played a tune of mine called 'Lava Man' and there was a section with two trumpets playing what sounded like, to John, mariachi music. It had nothing to do with mariachi music, really. But suddenly the trumpet players had sombreros on.

He liked to have an ensemble play so the listener could never have any question as to where the focus was.

J.M.: Didn't he also travel to . . . Java?

T.P.: Bali. Right.

J.M.: Balinese Gamelan music.

T.P.: In fact, a whole group of U of I faculty went – I believe in the early seventies.

Dorothy Martarano and a whole bunch went over.

J.M.: And he brought back some instruments.

T.P.: And wood carvings and lots of stuff.

T.P.: The piano at Nature's Table was classic. And I loved having it at Sweet Betsy's.

It's what we say in the trade, "A good jazz piano." Mason and Hamline.

But that piano had a certain lightness of touch and it had a very bright tone, which makes it good for jazz. That's why I say it's a good piano. It has a rather thin sound, so it almost made you voice the chords differently.

It always had a strange intonation because of people banging on it all the time, you know, and it may be missing a string, and you may find a note on it that sounds like a honky tonk. You know, it's really ringing, Riiiiii. So, sometimes I try and incorporate it into a solo – because it would be like an event.

"But it's only gonna work tonight, Tom."

T.P.: I do recall taking home loaves and loaves of Table bread at the end of the night.

And another thing I probably had there was the pizza which and broccoli and lots of stuff

on it. But I remember when you played a gig at Nature's Table you came back and your clothes would smell like two things: second hand cigarette smoke and garlic.

T.P.: I remember one time in particular where we were playing 'Blue Gardenia' and I didn't know the tune. And he (Guido) didn't have a proper chart on it. He just had a sheet that said Blue Gardenia with a few chords on it and there was no tempo or anything and I'd never heard the tune. And he expected me to comp under him soloing when I hadn't even heard the tune. And he just stopped. And this was not "We're rehearsing." This is "There's people out there." He said, "Get off that bench," and sat down and did a block chord harmonization of 'Blue Gardenia' very slowly. And he said, "Watch what I do," you know, and I learned something from that. But I still don't know how to play 'Blue Gardenia.'

On Bontuku:

T.P.: Oscar would start it off with more of the traditional thing, with he and Scott Mordecai, then bring up the group with shakers and bells, just playing a sort of twelve-eight pattern, bell pattern. But we didn't get . . . really all too much into the nuances of traditional music. We just played the one dance-in tune and that was it. People would pick up percussion during the set of someone was blowing to light the fire underneath them.

T.P.: He's (Oscar) actually from the Ivory Coast. And Bontuku supposedly is the city or area he came from, but I don't think that can be verified. But he did spend time in

Ghana and he was also a musician on some touring ship. And that's, I think, where he learned how to write western (music) notation. A cruise ship.

T. P.: The African drumming. Not much I can tell you about that. I never learned any of the dances. I only know when (Midawo) Gideon (Fdi Alorwoyie) played a cue on the drum the dancers would respond with another episode of what they were going to do.

Tom Torrino had an Andean . . .

J.M.: The Squeezetones.

T.P.: He had an Andean pan pipe group. We played Peruvian pan pipes and also some Bolivian tunes on pan pipes. And we also played another end-blown notched flute called a tana. Anyway, so I was doing that Indian group off and on, oh, probably three years. I also played in the Gamelan Indonesian Orchestra for probably only a semester.

J.M.: Who headed that one up?

T.P.: Well, Charles Capwell was the prof. And we had a visiting artist from Indonesia that was teaching us. But I was only in that for a semester. I've also played in the Russian Folk Orchestra with Garvey. So I did some gigs. The mainstay of it is balalaikas and dohmras of varying sizes, but they also had a few wind parts occasionally.

J.M.: It wouldn't be traditional flute, would it?

T.P.: It would be. It'd just be arranged out. But it would be some Russian tune.

J.M.: Why was Garvey so interested in Russian music?

T.P.: I don't know. I think originally he found a lover in Russia and fell in love with the country.

T.P.: Playing in Bontuku got me playing out in public a lot more and probably did loads for my self-esteem even though we weren't getting paid. Just having the opportunity to play. Bontuku gigs, you know, the crowd was always way into it. And it was sort of a party crowd. I don't know. It was just fun. It was probably the first time I had fun playing in a band for an extended period of time in public, probably one of the first bands that felt good to play in.

J.M.: How was Oscar as a band leader?

T.P.: He was okay. I mean, he was pretty generous with solo space for me. The worst thing about Oscar . . . and it wasn't entirely his fault, but just the whole financial thing of that band led to its demise. And was probably responsible for its high rate of turnover of members. Remember Bontuku changed . . .

J.M.: Every single night.

T.P.: Yeah. I remember when I was in the band we didn't have a steady drummer for more than two gigs.

J.M.: You had a couple of keyboards, didn't you? You had one that was mostly plug in stuff.

T.P.: Right.

J.M.: And you had one that was just farfisa nonsense, or wasn't it?

T.P.: Yeah. It was a Yamaha Elect-tone. The only thing your couldn't elect is a harmonic other than an octave. Mo it's a rather bland sounding box. So I used to hook it up to pedals.

J.M.: Tell me.

T.P.: Well, pedals were great at the Table. . . I mean everyone loved pedals. In fact here's a pedal story. Ryan Shultz, he used to have a band 'Troubled Monk', only played Monk tunes, but they played them far out, pretty far. And Ryan would bring a microphone and a pedal called a mutron. It was a combination octaver and ring modulator. It sounded nasty. He would terrorize Shelley Masar by turning on the mutron when she would take cover. She'd be sitting by the door taking cover and he'd put this thing on and it would sound like an elephant under water.

J.M.: Where's Ryan?

T.P.: He's in Chicago now.

J.M.: Playing?

T.P.: Playing. He's one of two bass trumpet players in Chicago.

J.M.: Tim McNamara's in Chicago. Mitch Paliga's in Chicago. Who else is in Chicago?

T.P.: Kevin Kizer. If you want to go way back, Ron Dewar, all those guys. The people I already mentioned, like Kelly Sill and Art Davis.

J.M.: Did Kelly live down here?

T.P.: Yeah. He did. He was a philosophy major here.

J.M.: And did Joel Spenser live down here?

T.P.: Yeah. They all were before my time.

J.M.: John Campbell?

T.P.: Yeah. They all played at the Table.

J.M.: They were all probably at the U of I.

T.P.: Except John Campbell went to ISU. But he did play in town. In fact John Campbell just came back to Chicago from New York.

J.M.: Oh yeah?

T.P.: He was the accompanist for Mel Torme.

J.M.: Which isn't a bad job.

T.P.: That's a good gig.

T.P.: Remember Peter Rumboldt?

J.M.: Certainly. Yeah. Australian weirdo.

T.P.: He's up in Chicago. He's playing mostly dance classes.

J.M.: Is he pursuing the Dixieland, the hot music he loved so much?

T.P.: He had hard times and he was unemployed for a while. And now he's on dialysis. He's had some hard blows. He had a tumor in his ear removed and so, but Peter was a guy I hung out with at the Table, who I met with at the Table and we talked a lot of piano. Our styles were a lot different – but I think that's what I wanted to learn about. Some of that old stuff that he already had under his fingers. Teddy Wilson and Art Tatum. He couldn't play like Art Tatum, but he knew some Tatum licks. And he could play stride and that fascinated me, because anybody that could keep that up and just . . . and the leaping of the left hand. I can't even find the notes when I do that.

On Terry:

T.P.: And I think he was rather generous with giving people gigs and providing that forum for them to express and learn how to play. He doesn't need to do that. He doesn't need to do White Street. He doesn't make money on a lot of these things, right. So I thought Terry was a pretty good guy. I don't know him that closely, but from dealing with him, he seems pretty cool.

I think Terry is what . . . I think what this community needs is more Terrys.

T.P.: I want to just be able to continue doing my own music in whatever format and it doesn't really need to reach tons of people. But I will say that I've got a CD recorded. We did it over at Pogo (Records. Champaign). And I'm going to mix it down this summer.

I'm always in episodes. What do I want to do now? I want to mix down that C.D. I don't have a big overall plan to be a messenger of avant-garde. It's like what happens happens. I just want to live. I just want to live and be able to keep doing what I'm doing.

The Final Party

“Okay. Lift.”

We jockey the counter around until it pulls loose from its supports then lifts free, then we lay it against the wall underneath where the menu boards used to hang. I stop through where the counter used to be – half expecting it to break my entrance.

“Okay.” Terry says. “Let’s trough it.”

Before we started today, Terry pulled out the last keg of beer from the walk-in cooler. (It’s permanently off now.) He went back in and got one of the bus tubs that’s served as a catch-all under the cooler shelves. Using a screwdriver on the mouth of the key (the taps have gone back to the beer distributor) he poured from the keg into the gray bus tubs set up on one of the two chairs left. Anything like cups or glasses are long gone. Dodging grim lettuce leaves, walnuts, raisins, and loose sprigs of parsley, we drink by holding the tub up to our lips. We’re toughing it. That’s okay. Terry took out the pieces of cardboard.

“No nutrition there,” he had said.

Eminent domain.

Yesterday . . . The last weekend Nature’s Table let it out. An awful lot of people created a beautiful chaos. There was live music for three days. Today, Monday, the next day, we are here to “save the good wood.” Terry held the auction earlier this morning. Passersby stop in to pay their respects.

We are tearing the place apart. The coolers, the sinks, the ovens, the mixer – the good wood – will be saved. One goal of many today is to leave nothing behind that is useful. Fuck the university. The ingrates. Apparently they don’t want music and good

food to be too close to them. Bob Weckback pedaled down on his bike from Timpone's Pizza. He works there now. Wearing a white button down dress shirt and black pants, he says, "All we need is a one hundred and twenty-two year old woman who has a talk show on T. V. Can you imagine anyone disagreeing with a one hundred and twenty-two year old talk show host?"

"It'd be great, Bob," I say. "But I don't know anyone one hundred and twenty-two years old, or anyone who does – or any reason why a one hundred and twenty-two year old woman would want to host a talk show, or have us on it."

"So she could help us find a new place to put Nature's Table."

"You're a day late and a dollar short, I think, Bob." With the weekend still coursing through my veins, I turn to Machota. "So, you were standing on the roof of your car, right?"

"I was," he laughs. "The police wanted everybody out of the street and I said I'd get them out."

Brian Ruth says, "They got off the street okay. But they were back off the sidewalk ten minutes later."

"But," Machota points out, "by then there were no cops."

The artwork is gone. As well as the tables and chairs. Jeff Cross and his truck have been invaluable. He has warehouse space. The last time we were over there Terry needed to move a long refrigerated glass case in order to store some of his stuff. When nobody responded to his call to work he put his back against the wall and his feet up on

the display case and pushed. Bob Weckback and I went wide-eyed at each other: the thing was too heavy for one person to move.

Jeff Cross is a high-powered smiling guy and like the great entrepreneurs he's always got an iron in the fire. When Terry bought La Bamba for lunch (burritos as big as your head) Mr. Cross ate his in about six bites. I think he and Terry were the original owners. There might have been another partner. Anyway, my understanding is that they never quite agreed on what sort of establishment to open. There was talk about a hamburger stand, an excellent choice given the location. Eventually, perhaps due to his budding interest in food, Terry bought Jeff Cross out. (I didn't know this, but, apparently, when Nature's Table first opened they aspired to espresso coffee, a wider variety of breads, and homemade roast beef sandwiches.)

The piano went to the White Streets Arts Center. Machota was sitting on one of the toilets, holding on to the piano "about thirty feet off the ground" in the flatbed of Jeff Cross' truck. Musicians will play at the arts center this summer. But in a dance space with little food and no beer and wine . . . To say the least, the feeling will be different.

Terry wanted to keep the leftover staples. So we put them in his garage. The stuff in Terry's garage . . . I can only imagine what Shelley must think. There's no room for a car and it's a two car garage. There is a canoe in the rafters and something that looks like a deflated dinghy which might be a kid's swimming pool. Life wants and needs have conspired to make Terry's garage a necessarily inspired headquarters. Pathways throughout do exist. But only Terry is able to plumb their depths. We made

room at the front for the ten gallon buckets of beans and grains. The garage door barely closed down on them. The irony here is that if Terry had more space and time he might actually get everything done for everybody, including himself.

The last weekend at Nature's Table – May 10th, 11th, and 12th, 1991 – will always and forever remain indescribable. Paul Wienke, from WILL, the public television and radio station, got it on video. But it won't be able to portray . . .

People arrived in droves. It made me wonder harder about what this place would have created and accomplished for the community had it been given longer tenure.

The door was open.

For the better part of three days the place was packed. People traveled in from out of state. Loss showed in sad eyes and fond greetings.

Seredy, Terry and Shelley's oldest, wanted to go up on the roof with me. Other people were up there, too. She must be ten or eleven by now. Interlocking our hands to each other's wrists, I yanked her off some kind of utility box and we wandered happily over the several layers of roofing paper Terry had laid against the elements, in between alien-looking objects that stick up out of roofs, until we looked down upon her dad standing next to his R. V. barbequing chicken and tofu dogs. He gazed up at us with infinite concern as we peered over the edge of the building.

We waved back.

We're trouging it when Rachel Lee strolls in the front door with a friend and an electric saw. She's a singer.

"Hey. I want some too."

Delicately, Terry hands her the gray bus tub. She takes a big, sloppy pull, sets it down on the chair, wipes her face on her forearm and points. “I want your bathroom wall.”

Laughing the biggest laugh of the day, Terry throws open his arm in welcome. “By all means. Saw away. What are bathrooms for?”

I’ve been receiving memory after memory until they’re all but piled up on themselves. Somebody pounds out a beam in the ceiling of the main room as Rachel Lee’s saw rips through wood in the small bathroom . . .

Yoga class with Lois at the White Street Arts Center. She studied in India. She did this thing with Terry’s legs. She had him stand up as straight and tall as he could, then told him to stretch his hands to the floor without bending his knees. He could do it easily enough, though he couldn’t put his palms comfortably on the wood. Lois went behind him. She sat on the floor and wrapped a belt around the muscles above his knees, then pulled back once.

“Pull up on your knees.”

At the same moment Lois pulled back hard holding the belt steady. It stretched Terry’s hamstrings, though his hands didn’t quite reach the floor as they had before. She pulled hard enough to make his face hurt – and he thanked her. Yoga meets football at Lois’ gym.

A delightful, beautiful, and tall Japanese woman named Miki Makahara used to work here. Tim McNamara, who plays saxophone, was especially sweet on her. I remember once hurrying in out of the rain. The place was empty. Miki was looking out

on the downpour as she leaned on the counter. As I walked toward the kitchen I watched her. Rain seemed to bring to Miki a yearning sadness. She barely noticed me. It was as if she felt the great beauty of the world. After all she was human. But more than that it was as if she could feel the world's potential. Miki and I are friends. I learned a little something about love and kindness in that moment.

And a little about Tim McNamara.

Brian Reedy would take a leftover end of a loaf of French bread and make a face – a breadman. He'd use the big end of a carrot for eyes, a tomato slice for lips, and alfalfa sprouts for hair, kind of like Mr. Potato Head. He stood it up on the counter to greet the customer. The Blackstone Hotel. Being at the Jazz Showcase in the Nature's Table: Scott Frillman, Tim McNamara, Mitch Paliga, and Kevin Kizer and witnessing the saxophone greats Johnny Griffin and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis. The Blackstone held beautiful elegance. The audience was reverent and vocal. In Chicago, the Blackstone Hotel was one of the places where it happened. Organizing a Nature's Table softball game for fun and exercise. Singing "My Buddy," a barbershop number Ira Feldman had picked out for a show I was doing. He was working part time at the Horizon Bookstore – two doors away – and he had a key. One Sunday evening he brought Toby Twinning, a composer, Mike Cerri, a trumpet player, and me over to rehearse. It's barbershop; you don't need instruments. Since I was the least accomplished singer they gave me the melody. We worked it out. I flubbed my line onstage and Ira immediately covered for me – the first chorus was sung in lochs. As we turned the corner to the second verse I found both the melody and the lyrics and we were fine. Ira congratulated me on staying focused. That felt great coming from the guy who taught me ear training in college.

There was a science teacher named Rod. He had a Scottish accent. Somewhere in his late forties or early fifties, sometimes, just after we'd opened up, he would stop in and very politely ask for a glass of red wine in a coffee cup. We knew he was a good guy. A drink in the morning was how he got things done.

One night he was sitting with me and Bob Marion. Rob Libeman, a national act, was blowing onstage and we were enjoying a drink and conversation at a table in the front room. Rod may have been a little loud – he rarely came out at night – but so was the music. Libeman took the reed out of his mouth and told Rod to shut up. When he didn't, Mr. Libeman snapped, "Shut up, motherfucker."

Bristling with injured dignity, Rod was aghast and astonished. "I've never been called that before."

Never again will there be hot bread coming out of the oven. No cheese will ever melt on it if it did. Von Freeman. Rufus Reed. Billy Taylor. Marvin Sparks. John Pennell once took me to a baseball game in Ohio. He'd begun to sell his songs and he felt like I had contributed enough on one tune to repay me. John and Alison Krause were founding members of the bluegrass band Union Station. They played many times at Nature's Table. John's string bass needed work so we took it to the Bass Shop in Cincinnati. The baseball game was a blast, too.

Suzy. Soosie. Souxie – she spelled her name differently depending on the occasion – was a weekend cook when Julie Stenzil was head cook. Anyway, Suzi made

laminated signs for curried rice and tabouli. In one Guido was depicted resting against a palm tree in the desert happily spooning food from a bowl. A camel stood nearby.

Guido showed up yesterday – after several strokes – and set up shop by the front windows with the newspaper. People brought him Old Styles he could no longer drink. He could hardly speak. He was gracious, laughing. A beaten man, he portrayed himself as triumphant. Who knows. Maybe he was.

The sawing stops . . . Rachel Lee steps out of the bathroom. With a big grin she holds up a two and one half foot by five foot chunk of graffiti filled wall.

Jeff Machota laughs. “Where are you going to put it?”

Pulling the board to one side of her body she peers around it to look at the front. “Oh, I have just the spot.”

Work is being done on every molecule of the building. The rafters are on the floor. Walls become skeletons. The air conditioner in the window behind where the piano used to be will not push in or pull out of the wall. The music overhead stops so I go into the office to change the tape. Aretha Franklin comes out, John Coltrane goes in and Danny Deckard shouts, “Yes!” from somewhere in or around the building. Turning, I see sheets of paper behind the water heater. I reach out my foot to toe them close enough to pick them up. It’s three of the classic Catfish and Carter posters, Xeroxed to death. Catfish has a Stratocaster and a moustache, Carter a Hammond organ – but for the life of me the drummer’s name won’t come to mind. This rhythm and blues trio packed the house with their own brand of soul and rock and roll.

They won't anymore.

On my way to the bus tub I hear Jeff Machota say, "I'm pretty sure Kevin Kizer played the last note."

"I never thought of that," says Bob Weckback. "The last note played at Nature's Table."

"Hey, Jeff," I say. "I don't know why I remember this now, but you know Jenny Kogan?"

"Yeah. I never worked with her, but she used to come in a lot sometimes."

"Do you remember the advertising slogan she made up for some imaginary print shop?"

"No."

Terry says, "Someday my prints will come."

Apparently the music went on last night until three-thirty in the morning. Good. The party went on until after dawn. Mary and I left around two-thirty. She needed a place to stay so she could be here for the last weekend. She had to leave bright and early this morning. So now I've got this place to gut and a three story house to help scrape and paint over on Hill Street for the summer and then I'm off to Seattle to see what Bob Marion, Beth Amsbary, and Mark Fullerton are doing.

I can't help wonder about Nature's Table. It really happened. Did I pay good attention?

Working is a strange job. I yank another sheet of wood paneling off the wall with an iron crowbar and let it fall to the floor with a bang. I wrote a punk song called “Work” that I want to record someday. It has one word and one chord: Work and E. The band bashes home the E chord. Guitars feedback and everybody screams “Work! Work! Work!” Like a train, the thing speeds up slowly until the tempo is too fast to handle, then the song falls apart into the Big Rock Ending.

Work is strange. The people you meet. Day in and day out, I’ve worked with some of these people for years. I may never see them again. You may choose your friends, but you can work with people who are your strangers for years. Lo and behold, time turns them into something much more than mere acquaintance. Customers, too.

Work.

Terry holds up an electric screwdriver.

“Step into my office.”

We step up into the walk-in cooler. It’s empty. Not really a cooler anymore, merely metal walls, floor and ceiling. It even smells different. Coolers vibrate a kind of permanence. I clap my hands once. With less objects there’s more reverberation. As we take it apart I am put in mind how four by eight sheets of wood make up a room.

Machota comes by to lean on the doorframe. “It’s bigger and smaller at the same time.”

I say to Terry, “When I first used to eat here I figured the cooler went back ten or fifteen feet.” I put a handful of screws into the front pocket of my blue jeans cut-offs. “It seems impossible that we were ever able to keep everything in here.”

Terry drops a handful of screws on a pile he's started on the beat up flooring. "We did, though." He kisses the screwdriver. "God bless the power of the screw." He gives a short laugh.

With all the screws are pulled out, Machota and I balance the roof with our hands and the tops of our heads. Terry guides it to the floor in the kitchen.

Does Val know how amazing she is? And I keep having his image of Rosie sitting crosslegged on a rock by the Pacific Ocean and watching the sunset roll upon the water.

The harmonica player, Madcat Ruth – who sometimes made his harps sound like Hendrix – from Ann Arbor. The dreadlock reggae guy Tony Brown. Little Pat Rush and his blues band from Chicago. The tremendous flow of ideas from Chuck Tripp's guitar. Donny Heitler. Mike Kocour tuning the piano before a show. Sitting across the street on Krannert, watching Nature's Table. Terry finally deciding it was good to sell Guinness Stout.

Being onstage with musicians far better than me.

One spring break Terry, Stan, and I tore out the kitchen floor. Breaking away several layers of battered tile and water-damaged wood, we dug down far enough to stand on exposed dirt. When I stood up straight my nose reached two inches above the counter.

I asked, "May I help you?"

There was no one there, of course. My tomfoolery went unheeded as Stan and Terry persevered in breaking out and clearing away splintered wood and tile.

The south wall – the art wall – in the front room is currently painted white. There are spray paints and visitors have been encouraged to develop their technique. . . Graffiti includes roundly cursing the university as well as themes of peace, love, and jazz.

Brian Ruth is working with black paint, designing something that is almost letters and words in a language public to the youngest generations.

Stepping over two-by-fours that have been gathered into piles, I say, “So, Brian, why do people install metal into their faces? I mean the other day I saw a beautiful woman with eyebrow earrings and nose and lip studs, with a purple, blue, and maroon lightning bolt tattooed across her face from her right ear to her left shoulder. What’s up with that?”

Brian shakes the can of spray paint up by his right ear, then points it at the wall. “Don’t think too much about it.” Black paint sprays out of the can at the wall. “It’s just self expression.”

A human being will work hard to make a business run. He’ll work until he drops. What grows from that? This question and more and sometimes all you can do is save the good wood.