

Part 1

*Everybody's going out and having fun
I'm just a fool for staying home and having none
I can't get over how she set set me free
Oh lonesome me
A bad mistake I'm making by just hanging round
I know that I should have some fun and paint the town
A lovesick fool is blind and just can't see
Oh lonesome me
Hank Williams "Oh Lonesome Me"*

The Chicken of The Sea

Henry Griffin never intended to live the life of a starving artist. Or a starving musician. Or a starving writer, dancer, actor, golfer, mechanic, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief.

“And if anybody ever tries to lay any of that *romantic* bullshit on you – you know, *art is suffering* and all that crap, you should smack them upside the head with a baseball bat,” Griffin would say. “Believe me, the food-stamp existence will gnaw on your innards - day in, day out, like an insatiable, carnivorous worm - and eventually you’ll feel like you have a bright, red ‘L’ tattooed to your forehead.”

Even the real losers, like the guy that sat on the park bench by the Corte Madera Creek every day reciting the dates and places of Grateful Dead concerts from 1966 through 2002 - recognized that Griffin’s “starving artist” act had reached a point where something had to give.

Griffin awoke that bright new millennium summer morning tense and irritable as usual: stomach growling, head throbbing, the familiar urge to dive headlong through the window rattling through his subconscious. Then he remembered – that evening, for the first time since his last art show many moons ago, he would eat relatively nutritious food:

a fine selection of chips, dip, cheese whiz, brownies, and copious quantities of cheap Chardonnay, along with his nightly pint of tequila. Scarcely a hardy repast; but, his hopes fading for a successful artistic career, or for a career of *any* sort, even infrequent sustenance seemed at least marginally preferable to the ultimate alternative. So, there was something to look forward to, at least. Throw in a frisky hooker and it might turn out to be a true red-letter day.

When he remembered the show, he swung his long, spindly legs off the futon and reached for the cordless telephone on the "night stand" (a cardboard box covered by a rectangle of plywood and the Sunday funnies,) but the cradle was empty. Then he noticed the smell - like several pounds of three-day old road kill stewing in a vat of fresh barf.

He surveyed the scene, trying to recollect events from the previous evening. There was only one empty scotch bottle, a half-dozen beer cans, a plateful of cigarette butts, a worn Fender Stratocaster propped up in the corner, and a fully clothed man curled up in the doorway with a newspaper over his face.

Griffin moaned. Mr. San Anselmo, the local street-walking Vietnam casualty, had snuck in the apartment after the artist passed out – usually around eleven every night. And, as always, Mr. San Anselmo smelled like he had been swimming in raw sewage.

Griffin walked over to the man and gave him a shove on the rump with his foot. “Mr. S. A., wake up. Get up and get the hell out of here. You smell like shit.”

The man wasn't moving.

“Jesus.” He reached over the sleeping man and opened the door, then walked across the apartment and slid open the double hung window. He leaned out, took a deep

gulp of summer morning air, and made a mental note to start remembering to lock the door.

The somewhat expected presence of Mr. S.A. indicated that perhaps there had been other nefarious activities the previous evening, but, as was the case with the last several months of blackout drinking, anything that happened after 8PM was buried deep into the darkest reaches of his aching brain.

On such occasions, which were growing increasingly frequent, Griffin found that he could retrace his steps by checking the CD player. When he saw *Bitches Brew* in the tray, he paused and ran his long fingers through his thinning brown hair. He remembered stalking around his apartment with a flat bristle brush full of hansa yellow light in one hand, a pint of Jose Cuervo in the other, bobbing to the thrumming melody of “Spanish Key”, while alternately dabbing at the autumn foliage of a serene pastoral landscape that was slowly turning into a psychedelic mess.

Encouraging though it was, this revelation did not lead directly to the location of the phone. Nor did it reveal how Mr. San Anselmo had ended up sleeping in his apartment, though at least the cool, fresh breeze from the outside had made his sleeping presence relatively tolerable.

“Mr. San Anselmo isn’t nearly as scary as he looks, once you get to know him,” Griffin was fond of saying, though he could see why some folks called him Bigfoot. The only discernible human skin on his face was his cracked, soiled cheeks. Everything else was covered by thick, matted hair and several layers of clothing, which was excellent for sleeping in the bushes, as Mr. San Anselmo did most nights, but completely impractical for crashing at a friend’s apartment.

Griffin watched his P.T.S.S. victim carefully for several moments to make sure he was breathing, then turned his attention to finding the telephone.

If it was my car keys that were lost, I probably would look in the refrigerator, Griffin thought, such being his deteriorating mental condition. Not once did he leave his car keys in the refrigerator.

“Maybe I’m spending a little too much time hanging out with Mr. S.A.,” he wondered aloud.

As he put *Bitches Brew* back in its case, it occurred to him that perhaps, if the phone were his car keys, it would be very unlikely for them to be in the refrigerator. Just then, as if the phone were looking for Griffin he heard a muffled ring. He stopped, listened. It sounded like someone was strangling a turkey. *In the refrigerator*. No... it was coming from the *freezer!* He opened the freezer door and there it was, frosty, next to the buffalo wings from several years back.

He reached in and tried to grab it while stabbing at the icy “talk” button. It immediately slipped out of his hands onto the linoleum floor, where he promptly kicked it under the fridge. He could now hear the faint voice of the caller from deep in the under-refrigerator mire; it was the owner of the California Heritage Art Gallery - the only gallery that showed Griffin’s paintings - his loyal rep, Archibald Wilcox.

“Hello? Hack? Are you there? Henry? Henry!” The artist fell to his hands and knees and poked his hand under the refrigerator, only to knock the phone farther into the assorted clumps of thick, oozing under-fridge grime. “Hack!” yelled Wilcox. “I know you’re there! What the hell are you doing!? Say something for God’s sake!”

“Coming!” he yelled as he lay down and stretched his arm full length, coaxing the phone through the muck. As soon as he got a grip on it, he yanked it from its stinky hiding place.

“Shit! Goddamnit! Oh, you son of a bitch!” Griffin howled. He had ripped off a healthy hunk of flesh from the back of his hand on some protruding piece of refrigerator metal.

Then he heard a battle cry from the doorway “Ayyyy yaayyy!” Mr. San Anselmo barked as he sprung from his supine curled-up position into battle stance, his bloodshot eyes darting around the apartment.

“Wilcox! Jesus, Wilcox!” Griffin hysterically shouted back into the frozen phone. “Mr. San Anselmo! Look! I’m bleeding!” He pushed his torn hand toward Mr. San Anselmo, thinking the shell-shocked vet might spring into action and fetch a bandage. “Aaaaaaagh!” Mr. San Anselmo stood transfixed by the blood. Griffin froze. Oh Jesus, now I’ve done it, he thought. Mr. S. A. is going to have an Agent Orange flashback, break my neck, and carve my heart out with a butter knife.

Instead, the homeless man turned on his blown out heel and bounded down the steps of the apartment three at a time, then took off down the sidewalk in a lopsided gallop as if he had seen his *own* heart being cut out by some mud-faced Vietcong in the screaming jungle.

“Shit,” Griffin mumbled. “I scared the poor bastard half to death,” half thinking, *that’s what you get when you crash at your friend’s apartment uninvited.*

He stumbled over to the sink, switching the phone to his good hand, watching curiously as the blood slid into the white porcelain sink.

“Hack, what the hell was all that yelling about?”

“Shit, Wilcox, forget that shit! I’m seriously bleeding here! I’ve got a major cut here, Wilcox. I may never be able to paint again!”

“Well, put a band aid on it, you helpless wretch!”

“Band aid?” Griffin whimpered. “I don’t have any band aids. Shit, Jesus. Hold on a second, Wilcox, I gotta *do* something here.”

He paused in his panic to imagine Wilcox, sitting in his silk kimono and slippers, sipping a latte and fondling his balls in the morning sun on his deck in Mill Valley. He thought he even heard him take a noisy slurp of steamed milk.

Griffin put the phone down and looked frantically around the kitchenette for something that would stem the bleeding. All the rags were covered with dried oil paint and evaporated turpentine – not the kind of thing even an armchair suicidalist like Griffin would want to apply to an open wound.

“Okay, Henry,” said Wilcox impatiently. “So you’ve got a little cut. I really don’t have all day to play Florence Nightengale... you know, I have to get the gallery ready for an opening tonight.”

“An opening?” Griffin asked, searching his bathroom cabinets for something that might substitute for a Band-Aid. “Tonight?” he asked again, spying a box of Lightdays Panty Liners in the back of the cabinet under the bathroom sink – remnants of his former marriage.

“I found some panty liners. I think we’re okay. Now tell me about this opening you’re having, Archie.”

“Panty liners?” cried Wilcox, shocked

“Well, I’m bleeding, so...at least they aren’t used!” Griffin knew this thought would stop Wilcox in his tracks. After a long pause, he started in again. “Okay, what about this opening? Are you phasing me out now, or what?” asked Griffin, who, in all the excitement, had completely forgotten that it was *his* opening that Wilcox was referring to.

Wilcox wasn’t surprised. First, Griffin had been producing paintings so slowly that it had been almost six months before he had enough new work to warrant another show. And, since Wilcox was the only gallery owner in town who would include new paintings by unknown artists alongside well-known California “masters,” particularly if they captured at least some of the spirit of the turn-of-the-century California impressionist movement, the artist had little outlet for his work. Besides hanging his art at the local bakery for free donuts, coffee, and surreptitious glances at the high school muffins, the shows were few and far between.

“Well, Hack, I don’t think you’re going to want to miss this one. I have *personal* confirmation from Richard Morgan’s secretary that Mr. Morgan himself plans to be there.”

“Razor Rick Morgan, the multimedia impresario?” Griffin asked, popping off his futon as if somebody had just shoved a 40-volt cattle-prod up his ass, all thoughts of his mangled hand temporarily shoved aside.

“That’s the one.” Wilcox said, drolly. “Looking for some California landscapes to put in that fancy new compound he built in those cow pastures up north.” Why was Wilcox so calm? He usually pissed himself when given the opportunity to rub elbows with the likes of Rick Morgan.

“California landscapes? Shit, Wilcox, did you tell him about *me*?” Griffin squealed, thinking that perhaps his big break was just around the corner.

“Well, this particular show features a very comely young painter, just out of the Oakland school. Quite talented, not unlike Charlton Fortune, in my personal estimation. Knowing you, Henry, you would thoroughly enjoy meeting her! Maybe take her out for a night on the town.” The artist could hear Wilcox chuckling to himself as he slurped off the last of his latte, no doubt purchased at the Depot in downtown Mill Valley that morning.

“I don’t date artists! You know that!” Griffin shouted. It was one of his few rules. What would an artist see in another artist? Sloth, irresponsibility, complete self-absorption, sophomoric humor, puerile interests, probable alcoholism and/or drug abuse, and possibly suicidal ideation. No, only the most naïve, blockheaded no-talent would tolerate the “artistic nature” of a painter, and only for a very limited period of time. Besides, he couldn’t even take himself out for a night on the town, much less some comely young E. Charlton Fortune wannabe.

“Oh, sorry, Hack, there’s a call coming in on the other line. Call me back though, will you please? I don’t think I can make it through the day without knowing exactly how you became so mortally injured. Bye now!”

Griffin put the phone down, ironically relieved, because at that moment he really had more pressing issues: an urgent need to pee, a need to close the door and the window because the apartment was now thoroughly aired-out and it was chilly in his boxers, and a need to eat. He hadn’t a bite of anything since a paltry bagel and cream cheese brunch the

day before. Drain the bladder, warm the place up, have a bite - then, he could stop and think. Something about Wilcox's opening sounded fishy.

Relieved, the artist focused on finding sustenance. The choices were depressing: a few sorry dill pickles floating at the bottom of the jar, a drawer full of mustard, ketchup, sugar and nondairy creamer packets, a couple of beers, and a lone can of tuna.

He considered walking down to the bakery, where several of his paintings were crookedly displayed on faded, yellowing walls, and begging, yet again, for a donut and a cup of coffee. But he was down there the day before, and he was beginning to feel that he was wearing out his welcome. And he suspected the little high school love-nuggets behind the counter were starting to catch on to his voyeuristic agenda. *Best to give their little sticky buns a rest*, he thought.

It was at the very moment that he cracked into the can of tuna with his Swiss army knife and got a full whiff of the 'chicken of the sea,' feeling slightly nauseated by the similarity in odor to Mr. San Anselmo, he remembered it was his own goddamn opening! And Rick Morgan was coming to see his paintings – not the paintings of some Cal Arts coed. *Damn that skunk, Wilcox!* Just because he supplied the artist with all the tools of the trade and kept them refreshed on a regular basis – no small investment, to be sure – that didn't mean he could go around yanking his chain! Or maybe it did, but at the moment Griffin was angry enough to dip his agent's head in a vat of turpentine.

Unfortunately the artist's righteous indignation did not keep his spirits up for long, and, card-carrying self-defeatist that he was, he never suspected for a moment that Morgan would actually buy one of his paintings. Griffin was good. He knew it. But, as he had learned at a very tender age, he was never quite good enough.

