

## **Martyn the Dope Pyg**

**by H. W. Moss**

Martyn was a dope pig. He didn't start out that way, it just kind of happened. You might say he evolved into a dope pig.

Unlike Darwin, however, who stretched change over millennia, it happened to Martyn rather sudden like. He was a British tourist one day, an American dope pig the next. The way it occurred was he flew from Heathrow to LAX in the summer of 1968 with a pack on his back and a bedroll, his passport and several hundred American dollars, the minimum required at the time. He had absolutely no idea that the following day he would be in Long Beach where he earned his label and where he stayed long after his holiday travel time limit expired.

Martyn never got to Mexico, he never got to New York, he never even got back to Los Angeles where there are some pretty good museums, yet it was probably the most exciting five months of Martyn's young life. The good news is he survived the experience. The bad news: thirty-eight years later he needed a new liver because the old one, the one he took with him to LAX and then to Long Beach, the same one he continued to use for, literally, the rest of his adult life, was damaged during that interlude, a brief aberration in what turned out to be an otherwise mundane if spotless life, by Hepatitis C, a curse upon his generation, but one which was unknown and unnamed in '68 when Martyn was free, white and 21.

Back then it was sex without condoms, there were no incurable blood borne diseases, carpal tunnel didn't even exist and the ozone layer had just begun to leak only nobody knew it. A nostalgic period, wouldn't you agree? Them days is gone.

Fredrick was a college student at the time. He came by Tony's to pick up a half brick from KC who was Mark's cousin. Martyn had moved into the rear shed by then and was sharing his cot with Nancy, a former nun.

Let's run through that again.

Fredrick was an undergrad in literature at the nearby state college. Several of those who lived in the house on Ximeno went to school there including Nancy. Those in school survived on student loans except Fredrick who worked at the school cafeteria, in factories over the summers, and never borrowed money. As a result, he had frequent cash shortfalls and supplemented his income by selling baggies of smoking dope.

There was some question Fredrick would ever actually graduate. He was an indifferent student who would probably have gone straight into the workforce if there wasn't a war on. As long as he carried a full semester's schedule, his draft board gave him a student deferment which allowed him and his girlfriend to smoke dope and have sex without condoms. Fredrick enjoyed both these activities a great deal, preferably performing them in close succession to one another, in propinquity as he was fond of saying. Remember, even though college was a draft dodge, Fredrick was majoring in literature and had to know words like that.

Fredrick and Cathy smoked dope because they were A. too young to legally purchase alcohol although that would soon change and B. they abjured alcohol as only young people who smoked dope could in those days. Their scorn equated alcohol consumption (with the exception of very cheap red wine purchased in gallon containers with screw on caps) with something their parents did: sit around in bars or consume great quantities of gin and vodka at cocktail parties.

Anyway, Fredrick went over to the house on Ximeno to score. He usually found Tony ironing in the living room, as he did this day.

You already met Martyn. Now there's a piece of work.

In the bed with Martyn was Nancy, who really was a former nun. She dropped out of the sisterhood and left the cloister although she remained a devout, if lapsed, Catholic. She realized late, about age 21, that her true calling was equally divine, but of a completely different sort than that of the church. She was a gifted mathematician and wanted to reach a higher level of understanding than the Mother Superior felt Nancy should aspire to achieve. So she quit the nunnery.

Nancy met Tony and Sweet William in an art class she took as an elective. She soon had a room of her own in the big old house on Ximeno.

KC (No one knew if his real name was Casey, as in "Trouble ahead, trouble behind / And you know that notion just crossed my mind," or if it was spelled with two letters, a Kay and a Cee, and if that turned out to be the case, what the letters stood for, such as, maybe his name was Kenneth middle name Colchester. KC's cousin, Mark, never told anyone whether or not KC was KC's actual name. Someone would ask, what's your cousin's name? Trying to sneak up on the question, like. KC, he'd reply. But what's his real name, the name his mother gave him at the hospital when he was born? He wasn't born in a hospital. Where was he born? On the living room floor. So what's his real name? KC.) was dealing bricks that year. He wanted to make a lot of money fast. Since he no longer went to the office, he let his hair and beard grow long. This was in the days before Rastafarianism hit the mainland so no one yet knew what dreadlocks were. KC had dreads. He had dread beard, he had dread head.

Fredrick came by the house to pick up half a kilo, 1.1 pounds of aromatic Michoacan sensomilla which he ordered from KC the week prior. When he placed the order, KC was annoyed Fredrick only wanted half a brick. “Why don’t you buy the whole thing? I mean, it’s only 90 dollars. A whole kilo. Ninety bucks. Then I don’t have to cut it up and weigh it out and you can’t bitch I shorted you.”

Rent, gas, breakfast and smoking dope were all cheap in those days. But everything is relative.

“Cuz I don’t have that kind of money. I’m a stoont, remember? Rent’s due and I have to come up with enough bread to cover that plus I gotta buy a Victorian poetry book. I gotta buy it new. I thought I could find it used.”

Yes, a kilo only cost \$90 in 1968. But you think \$90 a brick is cheap, look at what rents were. A two bedroom unit near downtown Long Beach where Fredrick and Cathy lived went for \$60 a month. Of course, the building was old, there was no central heating, just a free standing gas heater in one room, and no air conditioning during the long hot summer months. If you wanted newer construction with more amenities, you could pay twice as much in the resort area of Belmont Shore, twenty blocks south of downtown. So sixty a month was typical. Tony paid \$85 a month for the whole five bedroom house on Ximeno.

Then there was the average price of a gallon of gasoline which was 23 cents, unless there was a gas war in which case the price often dropped to 19 cents a gallon. Them days, too, is gone.

Mark and KC were first cousins, but they were also best friends since junior high and now that they found themselves old enough to move out of the homes they grew up

in, they shared the place on Ximeno with Tony, Sweet William and Nancy. The house was big and in addition to five bedrooms, it had a dining room and a living room where many couch surfers landed, at least temporarily, as had Martyn. Unfortunately, the house had but one bathroom.

There was a succession of unnamed visitors who were thought to be someone else's friend who stopped at the house for a while. The Rug Man had no other name and stayed at least a week on the front sofa. He had thick hair on his chest -- black, shiny, curly fibers the consistency of pubic hair grew in great profusion and covered his arms, his shoulders from neck to navel, down the wide front of his chest, down below the navel beyond a point at which no one wanted to investigate. And he shed his hair everywhere. It was all over the bathroom, on the kitchen floor, in plates and bowls to such a degree that every utensil had to be washed before it could be used.

The Rug Man shed so much that one day Tony got tired of cleaning up after him. He picked up all The Rug Man's clothes, his bedroll and anything he could identify as The Rug Man's possessions and put them out on the sidewalk. Then Tony locked the front and back doors for the first time ever, far as anyone could remember.

The Rug Man took the hint.

Martyn was different; he had been invited in by Tony and Sweet William. Martyn had been hitchhiking through Long Beach from LA toward San Diego when he was picked up by Sweet William and Tony. They were on the way south to their meth connection, a dealer named Charlie Natsaka, near Huntington Beach. They had just gotten out of the art class they would both soon drop and in which they met Nancy, when they spotted Martyn down the road from the 49er Tavern.

Martyn was at the freeway onramp just past the intersection where Seventh Street, Pacific Coast Highway and Bellflower Boulevard all cross, right near the college. His thumb was toward San Diego or further into Mexico depending on his mood, when Sweet William pulled up at the entrance of the 605. Tony was rolling joints from a baggie in his lap. He licked the glue edge of the paper, swirled it closed and held it in the air on display like a white straw protruding from his finger tips.

Tony cranked his window down, showed Martyn the doobie and said: “Wanna get high?”

Martyn, who had not had a whiff of pot in three weeks, said, “Wha’ uh silly question. ’Course I do.” Back home he was considered something of a lightweight, preferring to get high on pints and survive on pub grub. But he was in America now, where caution was being thrown to the wind on a regular, an hourly even, basis.

This explains how Martyn ended up on the living room couch in the house Tony rented on Ximeno next door to Darlene whose mother recently divorced Hoyt Axton, Darlene’s step father. It wasn’t long before Martyn spent every penny he brought with him on dope of one kind or another and was relegated not to the couch, but to the shed out back. That is, if he didn’t feel a pressing need to return to England, he could stay out there. He set up a cot, threw his bedroll down and made it his home. At that point he seems to have lost any hint of travel plans and did nothing but lie around the house on the couch most afternoons and well into the night getting high on other people’s stash which is how he got the nickname “Dope Pig.”

As for KC and Mark, both were regular visitors to Tony’s place on Ximeno until they, too, moved in. The house was the haunt of lots of state and city college students

who showed up to smoke pot, shoot meth and take acid, not necessarily all at the same time although Ron, for one, had done just that. He later said it was disconcerting to be on an acid trip behind speed: The mellow in conflict with the aggressive.

There was a lot more going on at Tony's, but that covers most of the big items.

Tony himself was into pharmaceutical quality methamphetamine hydrochloride, which he drilled into his forearm at least six times a day. When he finally crashed, it was usually after being awake for five days straight. He was 22 and could handle this while going to school in the art department. The meth actually worked to his advantage. Most of Tony's projects were created in the wee hours of the morning and sustained attention to detail proved to be beneficial to his art.

Tony rarely hallucinated when he took a hit, but he felt an increased empathy toward everyone, including Martyn whom he tormented mercilessly. Tony understood more and communicated better whenever he shot up. But that's what speed does: it creates a false sense of self.

One day Fredrick came by and the front door was open. He could see through the screen door that Martyn lay on the couch in the front room. Fredrick knocked and rang the doorbell and shouted through the screen which finally woke Martyn who shouted back, "Come in." Martyn sat up on the couch in his bedroll and rubbed his eyes. It was an hour past noon and Fredrick was on his way home from class.

"Look wha' they done to me, Fredri', look wha' they done to me." Martyn sometimes had a whiny tone of voice. Tony frequently mimicked it to make fun of the Brit.

Martyn hiked up his tee shirt to reveal his belly. It seems in the early morning hours while Martyn slept, Tony and several others entered the living room quietly and surrounded him. They snapped on the light and while two turned him over on his back and held him down, someone else held his feet. Then Tony set to work. He painted a face, that of a pig, on Martyn's stomach using black magic marker which he filled in with some indelible color.

Fredrick studied the image under the tee shirt with an appreciation for the rendering. It was quite a good likeness of a cartoon pig, he thought. It utilized Martyn's outy navel as the nose, the eyes were big and bright looking and there was a smile on the pig's face that was quite charming, rather amusing to behold. Circling the head were the words "Dope Pig -- Greedy Gets None."

Martyn spent his last dollar and began hitting people up for cigarette money. A pack cost a quarter in those days; someone gave him a dollar. While at the corner store picking up his smokes, he decided he ought to write home and bought a postcard.

"Having wonderful time in Califorcochon," Martyn wrote on the back of the postcard. The front was black, entirely black, and on the backside where you usually find the description of the front side, it read, "Long Beach at Night." Martyn thought this was hilarious. He was quite pleased there was no place for a return address and he did not volunteer one. He signed it, addressed it, stamped and posted it.

As for the salutation: Where Martyn came from school children had to learn a second language, unlike in America where it was assumed you would not. He could choose from the Romance languages, French, Italian or Spanish, or he could learn German. There were students of Russian, who were considered optimists, and Chinese,

thought to be pessimists. Remember, this was near the apogee of the Cold War. Martyn was neither optimist nor pessimist. He studied French because everyone else in his school hated the Froggies, as they were known, and he figured no one else would be in the class. He would be the only one graded and a curve would not count. He was always at the bottom in a curve. As it turned out, the class was rather full, the proximity to the continent being one big reason English school kids chose that tongue. Despite everything, Martyn did learn some grammar as well as the word for pig: *cochon*.

He thought it hilarious when he referred to the West Coast as “Califorcochon.”

Martyn did not want to return home. He lay in his cot and sang a little ditty he composed about his family:

Simple John did what women said.

Simple John married and got into bed.

The first born son was the smartest one,

But the kids grew up and they all moved out,

Because Simple John was a simpleton.

Martyn thought his father was retarded. He did not want to go back to living with his parents, especially in the same house with his father.

Tony loved to shoot up and iron clothing. He spent hours in the living room standing behind an ironing board wearing khaki shorts and tee shirt, a pair of *horaches* on his feet. He assiduously and seriously and carefully ironed towels, handkerchiefs and most especially white sheets, saying nothing, never looking up, totally engrossed in ironing sheets until it was time to take another hit.

Tony was what you called a geezer. He liked to stuff his veins with a dose that put his teeth on edge. Meth does that to you. When you over-amped you gnashed your teeth, ground them without being aware of it. When foam gathered in the corners of Tony's mouth it was a dead giveaway he was strung out.

Fredrick showed up for his half brick just as Sweet William delivered a new basket of recently washed and dried clothing for Tony to iron. With five roommates, there was always plenty of clothing coming out of the dryer.

"Hiya, William. Hi Tone. KC around?"

Tony did not look up from his task as he said, "Out back with Dope Pig."

Sweet William pointed out how wired his friend was. "You're clicking again."

"Am not."

"Are too. You sound like a South African tribesman, like you're talking !Xhosa."

Sweet William had studied philology and learned of the click language spoken by some tribesmen.

By "clicking" Sweet William was making a not so subtle reference to meth mouth, the lack of saliva users endure without a second thought. Dry mouth, more properly xerostomia, makes the tongue slap against the roof of the mouth and turns consonants, particularly alveolar stops, into cricket sounds. However, later in life -- if they lived that long -- if Hep C didn't destroy their livers first -- if cardiac problems didn't stop their hearts -- later in life when they needed a mouthful of transplants or dental replacements, i. e. a complete set of false teeth, former users harked back to this period of their lives when it was so easy to score good quality speed at extremely reasonable prices and wondered if it had all been worth it.

“I’m not clicking. You’re clicking,” Tony said defensively as he swept the iron over a puffy, wrinkled sheet and turned it into a flat, glistening, steaming egg shell cloth panel.

There is a difference between a geezer and a needle freak. Ron, who did not live in the house but was a perpetual guest and the guy who shot speed and took acid at the same time, was a needle freak. Ron enjoyed sticking a needle into himself, not just the sensation of getting high, and pretty much every part of his body was a potential target. He wondered what it would be like to stick a needle into his navel, so he did. Then he took his pants off and stuck the needle into his groin. The next needle stick was in his prick which no longer got hard. Ron did not equate his sexual dysfunction to his penchant for syringe sticks as he held the head of his penis in one hand, pierced the skin of its shaft with the needle and plunged 25 cc’s of tap water under the skin.

During all these experiments, Ron did not fill the syringe with anything stronger than tap water. He really did not want his dick to fall off and he really was a needle freak and, as such, not much of a drug freak.

His friends often invited Fredrick to participate in geezing, but he always refused. It wasn’t his style. Besides, he had homework to do, an essay to write. Then one day he realized all his friends had turned into meth or needle freaks. This took a toll on him. He became depressed. He recognized the symptoms and made an appointment with the school psychologist. One thing the state college system offered its students in those days, but no longer, was a free health clinic which included psychological counseling on a rudimentary level. However, at that time it was not particularly fashionable to say you were seeing a shrink.

After six weeks of continually asking for an appointment, Fredrick was finally granted one. He was assigned to see Dr. Calidron.

“What seems to be the problem?” the doctor asked as he removed a pair of thick horn rimmed glasses from his face and started sucking on one of the ear flanges.

Fredrick knew the real reason was that all his friends had become speed freaks. But how do you tell this to a professional associated with the campus and not put yourself under the microscope? So he answered: “Smog. I see smog taking over and choking the world to death.”

The man stifled a laugh. “That’s a new one. Never had anyone come in with that particular syndrome. Now, I could understand if you said, ‘All my friends have become speed freaks.’ For that we offer group therapy. But this smog thing, that’s a new one. For that we offer group therapy, too. Care to come to our group? We meet twice a week and have special get togethers on weekends.”

When he contracted crabs, Fredrick knew exactly where they came from. He asked Sweet William if the house was infested. Yes, it had been for quite some time. Well, how’d you get rid of them?

“Here’s how you kill ’em,” Sweet William said with a beatific smile. He had obviously practiced this delivery on others in the household. “Shave the left side of your pubic hair, pour lighter fluid on the right and set it on fire. When the crabs run out, you stab them with an ice pick.”

Back to KC and Mark: they were geniuses. Certified, honest to Buddha, off the charts registered members of Mensa, tested, discussed, analyzed, taken apart and put together again before they were aged six and seven respectively. Perhaps that was why

they began selling dope: because they were geniuses. After all, it's said to be an easy way to make a lot of money real fast.

They didn't always sell dope. KC, for example, was hired by an international marketing and advertising agency in New York City straight out of high school. First he did an internship during the summer, which means he worked for free. Then they hired him to create surveys for young people. The thinking at the agency went: Get a young person to write the survey for young people. It'll be more authentic that way.

KC stayed with it as long as he could. He only lasted two years. Then, just like Nancy the nun, he quit, but for totally different reasons. KC wanted to get rich fast and money motivates genius, believe me.

KC liked to tell of his experiences in the skin trade: "The guy in charge would ask, 'Does it contain baking soda?' Incredulous response: 'Of course it doesn't contain baking soda. It's a rubber glove, for god's sake.' So he would say, 'Okay, well put some baking soda in it. That way we can promote it as the only dish washing apparatus with real baking soda.' And that's one reason I got out of the business."

KC did not like brand name products, not because of quality issues, but because they were brand name products.

"Another company that hired us made band aides. They wanted to know: What is the single most important thing people want the product to do? So we interviewed a few thousand people, held focus groups where they handled the product, examined the product, talked about the product, answered questions about the product and you know what the agency found out? The one thing people wanted from a band aide was that it sticks. So six months later there's an ad on TV and it shows an egg suspended in the air

by a band aide stuck to someone's finger with the line: They stick. Which is another reason why I quit the business. That and they were paying \$20 a day when I can make \$1,000 a day dealing kilos."

KC intended to quit dealing in a year and sign up for law school. He applied while still in New York and was accepted, but he put it off to gain some real world experience. Now that he was in business for himself and had an idea of how one might run a corporation, he considered going for an MBA, emphasis in finance. With that ticket he could work anywhere. In the mean time, he dealt dope from his bedroom.

Sweet William was a couple years older than the others. He never had a girlfriend, but not because he was intellectually pure.

Tony introduced Sweet William to Nancy before she moved in. However, it was not until they met one morning in the bathroom that he actually spoke to her. She was just getting out of the shower when he stumbled in and started brushing his teeth. In the mirror he saw her discomfort as she attempted to modestly towel off and said, "Don't worry honey. I'm not interested. But if you can get it up, you can have it."

Sweet William was into music, particularly Ravi Shankar on the Oud, and Middle English Poetry. He stayed in school straight through, never missing a class. By the time he was ready to graduate, he was \$10,000 in debt to the student loan program. Think about it. With rents and gasoline and cigarettes and kilos at such low prices, ten grand was a LOT to owe.

If he graduated, Sweet William would have to pay it back. However, he could put that off if he went to graduate school. So when they offered him another ten thousand to

be paid out over two years if he simply signed up for the Master's program, it was a no brainer.

Meth played a big part in Sweet William's academic success, just as it did Tony's career in art. Sweet William enjoyed reading in bed. Throughout high school, before he was turned on to dope and was still known as Bill, Sweet William methodically fell asleep at midnight. He would close the book, look at the clock, realize it was exactly midnight, and right after turning off the light, he would promptly fall asleep. These days, he read in bed until he saw the sun rise. Then he closed the book and got out of bed. Sweet William and Tony sometimes did not sleep for weeks at a time. As a result, Sweet William got a lot of reading done.

Tony stood in khaki shorts and tee shirt behind his ironing board ironing white sheets. He made sure they were carefully folded lengthwise, then he ran a needle attached to a blue nylon thread up through the folds to create six different evenly spaced segments. Then he assiduously and seriously and carefully re-ironed all the white sheets he had just threaded. He said nothing, never looked up, was totally engrossed in ironing those sheets. There were several sets of newly ironed sheets draped over coat hangers in the nearby closet.

The drugs were fun at first, but things started creeping up on Tony. He would get out his 'fit and pop the top off a vial and insert the needle through the rubber cap and withdraw some of the contents all the while under the watchful gaze of any number of people who might be in the room at the time. They each wanted to have a taste with him. There could be six or seven on a given afternoon including Carmen and Ron and Rick and George and, of course, by this time Martyn. Tony passed the syringe around, helped

people tie off, watched as each got a register, the blood rising up from the base of the needle demonstrating it had hit a vein, all sharing the same syringe as Cream's "Disraeli Gears" played on the stereo. He got them wired while his mouth went dry and flecks of foam formed in the corners of his lips. But when he came to Martyn lying on the couch, Martyn's eyes focused on the silver metal point, waiting his turn, practically woozy with anticipation, Tony whisked the syringe away and said, "Greedy gets none."

If Martyn whimpered enough, Tony might relent and give him a little taste. If, instead, Martyn folded his arms across his chest and rolled over on the couch turning his back to Tony, Tony might persist in telling Martyn's backside, "Dope pig, piggy, piggy, piggy. Greedy gets none, greedy gets none."

This sing-song taunt was a carry over from Tony's last job as a dwarf at Disneyland. He played Dopey for six months and got into sing-song speech. It was a good paying gig, but Tony had to drive to Anaheim daily and he hated the commute. One day he and Tinker Bell were caught boffing in the hold of the Pirate ship in the Caribbean. They were both fired.

In addition to not being much of a mathematician, Fredrick was not much of a business man and ratios were something he rarely contemplated. All he knew was he needed to sell enough smoking dope to make the monthly nut. He could get ten dollars a lid, which is what they called an ounce in those days. He knew that half a brick was a little more than a pound, which is 16 ounces. Out of that half, he expected to sell 16 baggies and keep the rest for his own personal stash. He figured to pay KC half what a whole brick cost, which should be \$45. Thus, he ought to make a profit of \$115 and have a little left over. Even a literature student could do that much math.

“Strange Brew” blared from the living room speakers. Fredrick did not stay to listen after he got directions on where to find KC. Tony wore a funny nose and glasses, khaki shorts and tee shirt as he assiduously and seriously and carefully took the white sheets which he had ironed and strung with thread from the closet. They resembled wide Venetian blinds slumped in the middle on the coat hangers. He lay them out on the back of an overstuffed chair in the living room, said nothing, never looked up, was totally engrossed in spreading the sheets in perfect order on the overstuffed chair back.

“Knock, knock,” Fredrick said at the door of the rear shed. There was no doorbell, it really was little more than a potting shed.

“Come in,” KC said as he pulled the curtain aside. He sat on an overturned milk carton, a sturdy square metal supermarket box that once held four one-gallon containers of milk. This was one of Martyn’s few pieces of furniture.

“Hey, KC,” Fredrick said, “I came to pick up that half brick. Did it come in yet?”

KC was stoned. He had been awake for half an hour, since eleven thirty, and, boy, did he have the munchies. He was trying to convince Martyn and Nancy to get dressed and go out to breakfast with him at the pancake house down the street. Nancy lay on the other side of the cot peering over Martyn’s shoulder when Fredrick walked in. It was clear she was naked under the sheet which she kept wrapped around her shoulders.

And that’s another thing that didn’t cost an arm and a leg in those days: breakfast. A complete meal in a nice restaurant with coffee, eggs, choice of bacon or sausage, toast and hash browns typically cost less than two dollars. Often a dollar forty-nine, in honor of the local state college whose mascots were the 49’ers of the Gold Rush. This was in

the days before nationwide chains killed variety. Most restaurants were locally owned, in private hands where the pride of serving good food at reasonable prices shown through.

KC said, “Yah, I got it. It’s in my room. Sixty bucks.” He held his palm open and waited for the cash to fall into it.

“What are you talking about?” Fredrick was taken off balance. “A whole kilo is 90, so a half ought to be half that, 45.”

Martyn said nothing. He smoked a cigarette and dropped ashes on a scrap of carpet that covered the rough wood floor around the cot.

“Sixty is about right,” Nancy said putting her hand out for Martyn to pass the smoke. He had bummed it from her in the first place since he was so broke he could not afford tobacco. Oh, and in those days tobacco was good for you. She took a drag, said, “Although technically, it should be \$54 because that’s sixty percent of ninety.”

“What are you talking about?” Fredrick became defensive. He was getting beat out of his rent money. “A whole kilo costs \$90. Why are you charging so much for half?”

KC said patiently, “Because that’s how the business model works. You pay more percentagewise for a smaller amount. It’s called economies of scale. You pay more than half for a half, more than a quarter for a quarter. That’s how it works.”

“You’re joking. I never heard of that.” Fredrick gave KC a moment to respond in which KC simply stared out the window at Darlene next door who had just come out in her bathing suit to work on her tan. “You really won’t take \$45?” Fredrick said with pleading in his voice. “I planned on giving you forty-five.” KC shook his head no. “Oh, all right. But, see, the problem is I only brought \$30 with me. I planned on selling a

couple lids to cover the rest. Can you front me? I guess it's thirty bucks now I owe you instead of fifteen."

"What, do you think this is a bank?" KC became indignant. "Me pay for my own brick? So you can sell it? That doesn't make any sense."

Nancy passed the cigarette back to Martyn who tapped the ash onto the floor. "He's right, you know Fredrick," she said. "If you don't pay him the full amount, he's making you an interest free loan. You get student loans, don't you?"

"Not me," Fredrick said. "I don't like owing money."

"Well, everyone else does. I got lots of them. Anyway, they all have an interest rate component. My latest was four percent. I have to pay the loan back with interest at four percent. So you ought to be offering KC here four percent on his money is how I got it figured."

Oh, and this was an era when mortgages cost a mere six percent even if none of those who lived in the house on Ximeno would acquire a home loan for a number of years. You earned three percent on your savings at a building and loan, which is what savings banks were called in those days, and you paid six percent to borrow. Them days, too, is long gone.

This kind of talk was way over Fredrick's head. All he knew about the lending industry was confined to his passbook account which earned three percent annually. He had maybe \$230 in the bank, the sum total of his life's savings. "Sixty dollars for half a kilo is way more than I expected to pay, KC. That's highway robbery. I mean, what did you pay for it, hunh? I bet you didn't pay anywhere near that."

“If he’s a good businessman, he paid half what he charges you,” Nancy volunteered. “It’s a mark up called keystoneing. Retail seller buys wholesale, doubles the price to his customers.”

Martyn looked askance over his shoulder at her. “What are you? Sittin’ on the Woolsack?” This was far too obscure a comment for American ears and everyone looked at him uncomprehending.

Finally, Fredrick said, “C’mon KC, front me thirty.”

KC did not like the way the conversation had drifted into revealing his business practices. “Okay, if you quitcherbitchen I’ll front you thirty. I hope you brought that much with you.” KC rose, indicated Fredrick should follow him back to the house. They entered through the rear door, a screened in porch that led to the kitchen. Fredrick followed, held the door as it closed so it would not slam. Crossing out of the kitchen, he heard voices from the front room. It sounded like Tony was in an argument, which ran completely against his nature, even when he was wired like an electric train.

KC led the way through the dining room toward the hall off which his bedroom lay. As they cut across, they neared the adjoining living room. The voices became louder, more insistent. KC and Fredrick detoured to see what the commotion might be.

A full figured Asian man with a thin moustache was backing his way out, making toward the front door as two white guys, one with a gun drawn, pressed their way toward him. The Asian faced KC and Fredrick who stopped in their tracks and stared. Tony was on the couch, his feet off the floor, knees bent below his chin in a scrunched up position, his butt on the round overstuffed arm rest and his back against the wall. He was cringing in fear, another response heightened by meth.

“Take it easy, now,” the Asian man said soothingly, his face a study in controlled emotion. If he saw KC and Fredrick he gave no indication, but he must have seen them since he was looking directly at them. “This doesn’t have to escalate. You can end it now. Okay?”

The men threatening the Asian were in profile to KC and Fredrick, as if they had risen from the two folding chairs opposite the couch. They were older, perhaps in their early 40’s and dressed in casual middle American attire, slacks and short sleeve shirts. They were not yet aware of being watched by KC and Fredrick. KC had no intention of letting them know he was there and turned to Fredrick with a finger to his lips. He began slinking in giant deliberate strides toward the hallway and his room. He waved Fredrick to follow.

They neared the hall, heard the kitchen door slam followed by two voices. The men in the living room turned toward the sounds as Nancy and Martyn strolled toward them. Martyn had pulled on a pair of pants but no shirt and Nancy was wearing jeans and a big tee shirt that hung on her slender shoulders like a cloth bag. They were both barefoot. In his hands Martyn held a bath towel and his dop kit.

They froze in their tracks when they saw the man with the gun.

The Asian man said, “Put the weapon down. Let’s just talk and leave these people alone. I can take care of everything. All you have to do is negotiate, not argue.”

Apparently his words had some effect because the pistol was lowered. That’s when the other man pointed at Martyn’s belly and said, “What the fuck kind of disease you got?” His question was directed at the pig caricature which had become an ill defined image as it melted with Martyn’s sweat. He had been unable to wash the offensive

drawing completely off with soap and water. However, after several days the salts in his skin spread the dark marker in a wide area like an ancient, blurred tattoo on a long retired sailor's forearm.

Martyn waltzed over to the pistol and stuck his face down to the man's waist level and looked straight up the barrel seemingly without being aware there was a finger on the trigger.

"Is that real?" he asked with child like innocence.

The man with the weapon said, "What the fuck are you doing?" He looked around the room at Tony and Sweet William who had backed into a corner near the window. He turned to Sweet William and asked, "He fucking crazy or what?"

Sweet William said, "No. He's British," as if that explained everything.

The second man asked, "What's that got to do with him being crazy or not?"

Tony volunteered, "He's never seen a gun before. They don't have them in England."

The second man said, "So how do they shoot people over there?"

The man with the gun said, "The police have guns in England, don't they?"

"Bobbies." Sweet William replied. Then when the two men looked quizzically in his direction, he added, "They're not called police in England. They're called Bobbies. And, no, they don't carry guns."

Martyn was insensitive to the conversation. He said, "So it's true. Americans really are mental for guns."

"Now what's he talking about?"

Tony ventured to translate. "He says we're all crazy."

“Yah, ’at’s right. You’re mental. You’re all mental,” Martyn said as he stood up and looked around the room at everyone, one at a time.

“You,” the man with the gun said to Martyn. “Get over there and sit on that couch. You, too, girlie.”

The other man said to Sweet William, “Okay, now where’s the money?”

Sweet William fumbled a roll of cash from his pocket and extended it. The gunman indicated his friend should take it, which he did. The money was Sweet William’s first payout on his new loan, a little over \$400.

After counting it, the man said, “Is that all? This is supposed to be a big buy, not a little deal. What gives?”

The Asian man was as close as he could be to the front door without actually going out. His hands were up, palms open and in plain sight. “You got it all wrong, pal. We just arranged to deal a couple ounces of speed, nothing more. I thought you were here to sample the product.”

“I don’t do that shit,” the gunman said derisively. “Makes you crazy.”

“Mental,” Martyn volunteered. “Makes you mental.”

By now KC and Fredrick had tip-toed down the hall and were well out of sight in the back. KC opened his bedroom window and climbed out. He landed on a rose bush that had not been trimmed in years. Somehow, he managed to keep from crying out and, gingerly, he picked himself up, ran across the long driveway that led to the back yard, crossed over to Darlene’s mother’s property and practically ran over Darlene whom he had quite forgotten was sunbathing in a lawn recliner.

She looked up from the teen magazine she was reading and peeled her sunglasses down enough to peer over them. “Why hello, there.”

KC heard Fredrick’s old motor scooter engine start up. It was a ’59 Vespa with a two stroke engine and maybe 90 cc’s worth of power. Fredrick was making his getaway, slow as that might be. KC did not want to stop either, but he had second thoughts: Darlene might be of assistance.

“Can I use your phone?” he asked. She had dragged a standard issue white telephone with a dial pad and a 25 foot cord out onto the patio table. She nodded to indicate where it was located and said, “Be my guest. Local call, right?”

This was at a time when there was no free long distance phone calling, ever.

Inside the house, the phone on the end table next to Tony rang. He did not touch it. It rang again and the gunman shook his head indicating Tony should not reach for it. “Don’t pick that up,” the gunman said.

The phone rang a third time.

“Don’t pick that up.”

On the fourth ring Tony picked up the receiver. “Hello. Yah. . . . Well, do you think? Yes, that would be a good idea. Ok. Bye.”

“Don’t do that again,” the man with the pistol said insistently. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Johnny means business,” the gunman’s partner said.

Angrily, the man with the pistol turned to his accomplice. “I told you not to call me by my name.”

“We didn’t hear a thing,” Sweet William said immediately. “He sort of mumbled it. I think he said Gary. He called you Gary, right guys?”

Nancy and Tony said, “Yes,” in unison. Martyn added, “Johnny. He called you, Johnny.”

The one named Johnny began waving the pistol back and forth, side to side from one hostage to another, not settling on anyone in particular. Then he centered the gun on Martyn and said, “Where’s your stash?”

“Believe me, you’re asking the wrong person,” Sweet William volunteered.

The gun swung in his direction. “Okay, smart guy. You tell me where the stash is.”

The Asian said, “I still have it. We didn’t get that far before you came in. He was going to give me the money, I was going to give him this.” With two fingers, carefully so he made no fast movement and his actions were seen as non-aggressive, the dealer removed a plastic bag from his shirt pocket. He dangled this in the air and it was plain to see it contained a white powder.

“Two ounces, high quality crank.”

Tony looked at the meth and said indignantly “That’s not pharm chem quality. What were you going to do, sell us some Hell’s Angels kitchen crap?”

The dealer appeared sheepish. “Well, sometimes the pharmacy connection doesn’t come through. I thought I’d give you a good price on this shit.”

The bag was snatched out of the air by the gunman’s accomplice who held it up to the light in order to examine it more fully.

Nancy said, “You can’t do that, that’s theft and greed and all the other things the Bible says you have to cleanse yourself of if you want to enter heaven.”

“Heaven can wait. I want my money now,” the gunman said.

At that moment, the hot iron on the board behind them began to burn through the sheets on which it rested.

“What’s that smell?” the gunman asked as he backed away from the couch and bumped into the ironing board. The elbow of his gun hand made contact with the iron which was lying face down. Reacting to the hot metal on raw elbow skin, his fingers squeezed reflexively and the gun went off. The Asian said, “Oooffff,” and began to hiss like an air balloon being slowly emptied of its contents. Everyone turned in his direction. He stood there with a surprised expression on his face. His knees buckled and he began to slump toward the floor.

The accomplice said, “Why’d you do that for? You were only supposed to scare ’em, not shoot ’em.”

“Man, hey, I’m sorry, man,” the shooter said bending over his victim. “I didn’t mean it. The fucking thing just went off. And I burned my elbow, damn.”

Martyn said from the couch, “‘Ee’s fakin’ it, idn’t ’ee?”

Through the open door the sound of police sirens could be heard some blocks away. The two thugs looked at each other, made a tacit agreement between themselves, leaped over the supine body of the Asian and pushed the screen door away hard enough to rip the mesh from its frame. Tony had cautioned everyone not to push on the screen, to use the door handle when entering or exiting the house in order to preserve the insect barrier. He saw the screen tear and said, “Dammit!”

As soon as the two were gone, Nancy leapt off the couch and was holding the dealer's head in her lap in seconds flat. His breathing was labored and then bubbles of bloody spit began exploding all over her tee shirt.

His voice gurgled as he said, "I'm dead. They'll never get an ambulance here in time. I must ask you a favor, while I'm still conscious. I'm a devout Christian and I want you to give me the Viaticum."

Nancy was dumbfounded by the man's request. The Last Rites were performed by a priest who administered the sacrament of the Eucharist, or a lay person who has been granted the position of Eucharist Minister. As a former nun, Nancy had been so designated.

"How could you possibly know . . ." she began to ask, but he cut her off.

"I'm an undercover cop. We've been watching this house for months. I've read the file on each of you, you in particular. You're the only one who can do this; I need your help now."

Nancy realized he was probably correct in his assessment of his condition, although she wanted to believe he would live. She looked up to see Sweet William and Tony arguing over what had just happened.

"And then the goddamn phone rings and you have to pick it up. I thought he was going to shoot us all for sure when you finally hung up. Who was on the other end anyway?" William demanded.

Tony said, "KC. He asked if he should call the police. I told him it would be a good idea. He hung up."

The sirens grew louder, were almost at the house. Nancy looked at Martyn who was just sitting on the couch casual like.

“Go into the kitchen, Martyn, and bring me a piece of bread.”

“Hunh? Yer ’ungry at a time like this?”

“It’s not for me,” Nancy explained. “It’s for him. It’ll have to serve as a Eucharist.”

When Martyn did not move fast enough for her, Nancy said, “Now! Hurry!”

He returned with a loaf of wheat bread from which she tore a piece. She held this in the air, signed the corners of the cross, lowered it to the dying man’s lips and began reciting the liturgy she had learned years ago.

Tony and Sweet William heard the mumbled Latin phrases and stopped arguing. Tony seemed to suddenly realize there was an injured man in the room. He hunted for and found the phone book in the end table and began frantically running his thumb down the list of emergency numbers in the front. This was way before 911 was in place.

Sweet William, on the other hand, picked up the telephone receiver and dialed O. An operator must have answered because he said, “We need an ambulance,” and gave the address on Ximeno.

Two policemen, for there were no women in uniform in those times, arrived on the front porch with drawn guns.

“We have a report of a home invasion. Anyone hurt? Where’s the robber? Uh, oh.” That is when they saw Charlie Natsaka with his head lying in Nancy’s blood covered lap. She looked up with an expression of utter loss: Natsaka had just stopped breathing.

Two hours of questioning elapsed before the police were satisfied it was a low level drug deal gone bad. The body was removed and, remarkably, no one was arrested. On the

one hand, the police would have required a search warrant to investigate the rest of the house where they would undoubtedly have turned up KC's bricks. On the other, none of those they frisked were holding, so there was no reason to arrest anyone. Most of the people involved could prove they lived there and, although not above suspicion, with the perpetrators long gone and the one person who might have explained what type of drug was involved dead, they promised to return with a warrant and left. They took Martyn with them.

Martyn was handcuffed and brought before a judge. His visa was expired, his money spent, he had lost about 40 pounds and did not look like the photo on his passport. He had no one to call who might go his bail, certainly not Tony or anyone in the house. Nancy had no money and they were not particularly close even if they did fuck once in a while.

Martyn had known the time would eventually arrive when he had to depart for England; he simply did not know exactly when that would be nor under what circumstances. He had imagined such a circumstance and was sanguine about his prospects. Fredrick once asked, "How you going to get home?"

"Well, if I 'ave to, which I don't think I 'ave to do, I c'n always ketch a ride to Veracruz, along the Gulf of Mexico. They let you cross the border into Mexico on a Bri'ish passport no questions ast and from there I ketch a boat to England. Work my passage home."

However, when he was picked up after the shooting, the British consulate did the right thing. It was, after all, a socialized country over there even then. They made sure his hair was cut, his face shaved and he had a full belly, then they bought him a plane ticket

home. He was escorted directly to the Long Beach airport, flown to New York, taken into protective custody so he would not wander off before his transatlantic flight, and transferred to a BOAC plane bound for London.

On the way over, Martyn had time to compose another poem:

### **Jake Is Dead**

Yonkle the Weasel died in the great quake  
which you each read of in your Eastern papers.

Too bad, each of you sighed, that L. A. had been swallowed  
and Jake died. But you could be happy for an end to Western pressure,  
the new blueness of the Sky.

The fact that Jake was dead was reported by himself  
as he called Long Distance on the phone to report the recent catastrophe  
and to donate his most recent acquisition, a large bottle of A-200 Pyrinat Liquid \*  
to this infested, festering mound of humanity and your beloved worn out country.  
Thank you, Jake, may you ever wear and never fall into ill repair  
because you've not your bottle with you.

\* Go to your nearest corner drug store and ask for a bottle of this green liquid. Note: It cures a common ailment.

“Clean cup, clean cup,” Sweet William came around the couch with a vacuum wand.

Although broad daylight outside, another hot, dry summer Long Beach day, the living room was dark and cool. This was because Tony had several layers of ironed and threaded white sheets hanging over the windows as curtains. Five people lay around unmoving on couches, one more on the floor. Tony was in the corner ironing more

sheets. Casually, as if lighting a cigarette, he stopped what he was doing, picked up a hypodermic needle, examined it, shrugged, made a fist, tapped the crook of his elbow, inserted the needle and got a register. Then he shoved the plunger home. When the syringe was empty, he unclenched his fist and stood back waiting for the drug to hit. It was almost instantaneous.

Tony in khaki shorts and tee shirt went back to his ironing board and assiduously and seriously and carefully ironed and stretched more white sheets onto curtain rods which he hung along with the others above the living room windows. He said nothing, never looked away from his work, was totally engrossed in hanging those sheets.

A voice from the center of the room asked, “Hey, Tony, you got any of that speed left?”

Tony just shook his head no and continued ironing.

# # #

(July 12, 2006)