may 2, 1977 7:45 AM

The job was taking too long. He had been at it for close to two hours. He should have been finished by now. He was supposed to be. He had been told to get the house on the ground and get out before any protesters could arrive. Yet here he still was, and there the house still was.

Again and again, like a giant, one-pawed mechanical bear clawing at the flanks of a cornered deer, his bulldozer had lunged, growling, at the boarded-up two-storey house in the Beltline district on the fringe of downtown. With each advance, the wide cutting edge of its heavy blade smashed through fading green clapboards and splintered studs and beams. The narrow house had creaked and groaned and let out gasps of dust. But it would not fall.

The structure was only the husk of a house now, stripped clean of anything of value. Gone, the leaded-glass panels on either side of the front door and the arched blue, green, and gold stained-glass window above the upstairs landing; gone, everything inside, from the hammered-tin ceiling to the polished spruce floors—all pried loose, pulled up, and carted away. But if this was a skeleton, the bones were sturdy. The house was not so old, built at the end of the last century to last until the end of this, and the skill and strong timber of its construction were stubbornly resisting, as if the house itself were protesting its demolition.

But Clarence "Chip" Holloway was not given to such figurative thinking.

"Goddamn you!" he cursed from the plexiglass-enclosed cab as he yanked the machine back for still another assault. "Damn you to hell anyway!"

He had two other buildings—an abandoned service station a couple of blocks east and another derelict house in Eau Claire—to knock down before knocking off. And all he was thinking was that he was in for another long, dry day to go with the month of long, dry days that had just passed.

He backed the bulldozer nearly to the front edge of the property, where a gate to the front walk dangled from one hinge off of what remained of a once-painted-white picket fence. He raised the blade. Taking aim at what had been the far corner of the front porch, he gunned the engine and jammed the gears forward. The machine lurched ahead, a spume of white exploding from its exhaust pipe, its wide track chewing up the once-tidy, tiny front lawn. The cutting edge drove deep into the corner of the house.

It was a killing blow.

Holloway ground the bulldozer into reverse and, with some difficulty, backed away, withdrawing the blade, taking the guts of the house with it. The machine paused, still growling. For a few moments, the house remained standing. Then it groaned again, a deeper, more visceral sound, a death rattle. And, like a dying animal going slowly to its knees, it sagged to its side, almost, but not quite, collapsing.

"Got you now, you son of a bitch," Holloway whispered to himself, gloating, sensing that one more strategic push would bring the structure down and get him back on schedule. "Got you now."

He climbed down from the cab, took off his gloves and pulled a cigarette from the chest pocket of his red and black plaid shirt-jacket. He struck a match on the floor of the cab, cupped it in his palms at the end of his cigarette, tossed the match away, drew deeply,

held the smoke in his lungs for a long moment, then exhaled audibly. He stretched, leaned against the track, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes. His arms and shoulders ached, as if he had brought the house down with his bare hands. He was sweating, even though the early spring air still had a late-winter bite.

He missed spring, real spring, Ontario spring—true thaw by March, greening by April, lilacs in May, promise of summer. He hated this yellow, cold season, and this year so dry.

It hardly rained in April. The radio this morning said towns around the city—Olds and others—were already running out of water and holding crisis meetings. Down south there had been early dirt storms. It seemed nothing would ever green. The buds on the trees remained closed. The brown grass of his own lawn, new last summer, crunched underfoot. If the rains did not come soon the grass would die, and he would have to re-sod; and if the rains still did not come, the new sods would die too, because the reservoir would be too low by summer to allow for the watering of lawns. Funny, for him to think about lawns, to worry about watering, about chickweed and crabgrass and fairy rings. He had always hated yardwork, and got out of it any way and as often as he could, usually dumping the job on his mother. Now—

A single drop of rain hit him in the middle of the forehead. He opened his eyes. He looked around. Another few pitiful drops fell, exploding in the dust like miniature bombs. Then nothing. He looked up, into the grey but brightening sky. He cursed again, quietly.

"You stingy old mother.… That the best you can do?"

Holloway shrugged, flicked his cigarette butt into the mangled yard, and climbed back into the cab. He put on his gloves, revved the engine again, and prepared to finish the job.

Slowly, almost stealthily, he maneuvred the bulldozer to the other, still-standing side of the house, stalking it. He raised the blade again, as high as it would reach, about forty-five degrees, the hydraulic cylinder straightening like a knee unbending. His gloved hand eased the gear forward. The machine moved forward, slowly. Then, when the machine was about ten yards from the house, he jammed the gear down hard and the bulldozer made one final lunge, the extended blade smashing into the building just below the window to what had been an upstairs bedroom, half-pushing, half-kicking the house to the ground.

As the house collapsed, the sheet of plywood covering the arched window where the stained glass had been popped out like an eye from its socket. Through the cloud of dust and debris, Holloway thought he saw something tumble out of the uncovered window: shimmer of bright green, sheen of pale bluish-white, glint of gold, ugly gleam of reddish-black.

"What the f—?"

Holloway jumped down from the cab, leaving the low-growling engine still idling. He went round the back of the machine and moved toward the splintered window, tip-toeing over broken boards, loose shingles, and bricks from the tumbled-down chimney. He knelt down.

There was something hanging over the window ledge, something green, blue-white, gold, and reddish-black, something, not stained glass the salvagers had missed, something cold and stiff and staring, something … dead.

Holloway cringed, shivered reflexively, jerked upright, and turned to run, gagging. He tripped over the fallen boards, smashing his knee on a piece of shattered brick, driving a rusty square-headed nail through his thick leather glove into the palm of his right hand as he reached out to break his fall. He screamed, scrambling, half-stumbling out of the ruins. He reached the bulldozer, collapsing hard on his extended arms against the side of the rumbling machine, knocking the yellow hard hat from his head, driving the nail all the way through his hand. He screamed again, and threw up violently on the wide, dusty track.

8:50 AM

Fry's first apartment after he and Carol separated was a hastily renovated one-bedroom basement suite in a recently fire-damaged forties stucco bungalow here in the Beltline, in a seedy going-to-the-developers neighbourhood. He had rented it from McKnight, a patrol sergeant in the morality squad and part-time real estate speculator who had picked up the property cheap, fixed it up on the cheap, and offered the basement to Fry for a "cheap" three hundred dollars a month.

"Rent controls? Why, whatever do you mean, rent controls?" McKnight had asked him with mock innocence, winking. "Look it, I could get three-fifty for the place easy, maybe four, maybe more. But I don't want to hold you up. I just need a body in the basement to help me carry the place until I can flip it. I, ah, heard you were looking. You interested or what?"

Fry was tempted to say "what." In fact, he was not interested—not in the apartment, at the time not in anything. But he moved in anyway, without even inspecting the premises, which turned out to be dark, damp, with

low ceilings and loud upstairs neighbours. Not that it mattered. He was almost never there. Mostly he worked. And when he was not working, he walked.

Not that Calgary was a good walking city.

The downtown was a forest of wind-tunnelling, sun-blocking towers, a jungle of construction, with cranes perched high overhead and heavy equipment running in packs on the ground. It was a kind of factory, spewing out the paper that fuelled the business engines that drove the city: oil and finance, development, government. The high-rises were like the smokestacks of white-collar industry. The suburbs were a lesser Los Angeles to downtown's mini-Manhattan, sprawling as tangled and dense as buffalo grass for miles north and south.

Traffic was the worst in the country. One car for every two people. Roads (too clogged now to be called streets) were too narrow, torn up, barricaded, one-lane, one-way or otherwise, and often, impassable. Built to accommodate traffic in a city of one hundred thousand, they simply could not handle the four hundred thousand of the city's now half-million population who lived in the suburbs. And when the commuters from the A streets in Acadia and the B streets in Bowness and the C streets in Canyon Meadows and all the other winding, generic streets in all the other winding, generic developments in the mad planners' alphabet did manage to make their way near the city centre, they had to squeeze under the railroads, which sliced the city in half and cut access into its centre to a trickle.

It was like threading a needle with a rope.

The planners' solution was roads, more roads, wider roads, "trails" named for Indians and old Mounties, trails having nothing more in common with their

namesakes than the names. And they planned a new railroad, a “light” railroad running north-south to coax, they hoped, motorists out of their cars and help ease the congestion.

Walkers did not figure into the planners’ calculations, any more than did the old, once-stable communities that happened to be in the way of their solutions. They became, in planning parlance, “transitional” neighbourhoods—neighbourhoods, that is, in the process of ceasing to be neighbourhoods.

Fry walked in these neighbourhoods, in the shadow of the cranes, in the bulldozers’ path—in the Beltline and Eau Claire, the Hillhurst, Sunnyside, Victoria, Sunalta, and the Mission—where once-formidable nineteen-twenties three-storey walkups sat dwarfed and threatened by eight, ten, twelve storeys of concrete and reflecting glass newly moved in next door; where renovated late-teens townhomes sat at one end of an inner-city block, and boarded-up stucco bungalows sat at the other.

In the beginning he did not think about the neighbourhoods as he walked through them. He hardly saw them. He tried not to think at all. It was better not to think. It was better to be numb.

Fry had looked for numbness in the twenty-five-ounce bottle he refilled at first once a week, then twice, then three times. And he found it. But on the week he came to the fourth refill, he stopped, finding in the empty bottle a deeper emptiness, an ending he was not ready to accept. He kept the empty bottle. He still had it.

He started walking instead. He numbed himself on the street, walking, hour after hour, the sound of his scuffed, old pointy-toed boots on the sidewalk the only sound he allowed himself to hear, a kind of

metronome marking time, step after step after step. He did not see. He did not think. He walked. Hands stuffed in the pockets of his well-worn sheepskin coat, the collar turned up, his head bent down, he walked, and walked, and walked.

He had walked past the old woman every day for a month before he saw her, and then only by chance, when he happened to raise his eyes as he passed her while she worked around her fading-green house with the striking blue, green, and gold stained-glass window upstairs. And he truly paid attention to her only later, in hindsight. For the next five months he made a point of seeing her almost every day, a little bird of a woman with snow-white hair under a bright floral-patterned scarf and thick half-glasses slipping to the end of her nose, a heavy black-cloth jacket over a filmy faded print dress, old-fashioned dark stockings, and worn blue sneakers.

She lived on a street that looked like a set of bad teeth. High-rises—drab grey snags of concrete, already rust-stained—rose the width of a football field on either side of her street, about fifty yards apart. On both sides of one of them were black asphalt gaps where the bulldozers had razed houses to make way for parking lots. On one side of the other stood a decaying three-storey stucco walk-up; on the other a tiny, discoloured bungalow with paint chipping from its clapboards in layers of tan, green, and white.

The old woman had lived in one of those terminal "transitional" neighbourhoods. But she had not appeared to be resigned. She coaxed green out of the grudging spring, raking and weeding, watering and feeding, reverently tending her lawn and her flowers. She made summer seem possible. She reminded Fry of

the sheer, stubborn persistence of life. And she helped him to see again.

She had become a kind of constant to him, a constant in a city constantly changing, being changed. He liked to think of her emerging purposefully from her house, scarf on her head, rake in her hands, refusing to see the obvious, refusing to bow to the inevitable. Sometimes he even fantasized about taking over for her when she was gone, buying the house, taking up her rake, her battle. He knew it was a fantasy, even as it occurred to him. He knew the house would not long survive the old woman. The house could not afford the land on which it sat. In the planners' minds, and probably on their maps, it was already gone. The old woman would be the last person to live in it.

Now Fry lived in a little house he rented in Eau Claire, just south of the Bow River. He still walked, though he had found better places to do it. Sometimes he retreated to the old, serene, virtually untouched neighbourhoods near the water, the lush quiet and the Victorian gingerbread and fine wide porches speaking of a Calgary of another time. Usually he walked along the meandering river pathways, where, among the stately cottonwoods and fragile wildflowers and under the impossibly big, impossibly blue vault of sky, he could almost forget the steel, concrete, and glass that were literally just around the corner.

The eastern papers said that the best view of Calgary was from the air at night, coming upon it suddenly out of the black, a filigree of light at the end of the prairie. They were wrong. Fry preferred the city on the ground, at the centre, where the rivers curled together, defying the neatly gridded street plans of the last century's planners, creating natural curves and slopes and open

spaces that this century's planners had not yet managed to destroy.

Sometimes he still walked through the Beltline neighbourhood that they *were* managing to destroy, to see the old woman defiantly at work on the tiny lawn outside the doomed narrow house. But not lately. In fact, he had not been by since the fall.

It was not the weather. The winter had not been too cold. There had been hardly any snow.

He had simply been busy.

The twenty-five hundred people a month the boom brought into the city brought with them whatever problems they had had wherever they came from; and their coming created problems for both them and the city that neither had ever dreamed of—Fry's kinds of problems.

He wished he had not been so busy. He knew now that the old woman had not made it through the mild, dry winter, and he could see that her house had not survived the even drier spring. As he stooped under the yellow and black police cordon where the white picket fence had been, Fry—John Jacob "Jake" Fry—a detective in the homicide unit of the Calgary Police Service, had a dull aching feeling that summer would never come.

8:55 AM

Fry walked toward the rubble that had been the old woman's home, hands in the pockets of his open black overcoat, dust quickly coating his highly polished black shoes.

His eyes studied the scene, as if trying to memorize it, to photograph and file it away. He had already made a mental sketch of the scene behind him:

Multi-coloured lights flashing in the street—yellow from the ambulance backed onto the sidewalk, red and blue from the two blue and white cruisers parked at the curb, red from the single police motorcycle at the edge of the mutilated lawn. Faces peering down from apartment balconies and around the corner of a crumbling stucco porch. Faces of children crowded around a finger-smeared window in the basement daycare centre across the street. Faces of curious passersby craning their necks for a glimpse. Faces of three women in faded jeans and expensive leather jackets huddled beyond the yellow cordon, Bristol-board protest placards held limply in their hands, the felt-penned messages upside down: Cottage yes/condos no, Save the cottage, Cottage industry kills history.

On his left as Fry approached the ruins, a paramedic was leaning over an ashen-faced man wearing a red and black plaid work shirt and sitting slumped forward on the track of a silent bulldozer, his right arm strapped to his chest, a huge white bandage wrapped around his right hand, a small circle of blood soaking through. On Fry's right, two officers in blue uniforms knelt like archeologists at a dig before what remained of a window frame, examining, but not moving and hardly touching, the debris around them. A few paces behind them, another uniform with three stripes on his jacket shoulders stood, feet spread well apart, scribbling in a small black notebook. Two other uniforms, one in high black motorcycle boots and a white helmet, stood on opposite corners of the property just beyond the cordon, keeping the rubber-necking passersby passing by.

"What've you got, Strahan?" Fry asked the uniform with the shoulder stripes and the notebook, who looked

up under the bill of his cap and said, "Oh, you're the one got the call, did you, Ghost? That's funny."

"Ghost" was Fry's nickname, from "the Grey Ghost," which came from his prematurely gun-metal-greying hair and the dark circles around his deep-set, penetrating eyes the grey-green colour of a cold mountain lake. It used to get a rise out of him. No longer. The only officers who dared use it to his face were those who had been on the force as long as he—nearly twenty years now—and most of them had stopped because he had stopped letting them know that it bothered him. Patrol Sergeant Paul Strahan, homicide, however, did not easily let things go, which frequently made him an asset as a police officer, but—Fry caught himself thinking again what he had thought more than once before—all too often an asshole as a human being.

"Yeah, I got it. Your sense of the obvious is as acute as ever. Why funny?"

"You'll see."

"Show me."

"Follow me, as Custer shouted to his troops." Strahan tried to snicker, but managed only an odd, sharp bark. "You guys all clear here?" he called to the two kneeling constables.

"Clear? How the Christ do I know?" one of the constables answered, looking back at Fry and Strahan. "Come on ahead. But be prepared. This ain't no crime scene, it's a friggin' bomb scene. Wha'say, Jake?"

"Adams—MacElroy," Fry nodded, squatting between the two uniforms.

They were matching bookends of current police-recruitment policy: tall, heavy-set, bright-eyed, with neatly trimmed moustaches on their scrubbed-looking fresh faces, slightly fleshy around their tight collars, like

ageing college football stars—which Adams actually had been, at the University of Calgary, later becoming a third-round draft choice of the Edmonton Eskimos. But he had turned down a chance at the pros to become a cop, studying what Mount Royal College liked to call "police science." MacElroy had been a military policeman stationed, among other places, in Shearwater, Cold Lake, and Cyprus. He left the forces for the force so he could stop travelling and start making babies and some money.

"Not much," Fry continued. "I like the sound of Strahan's voice so well. What about you boys? What've you got to say?"

Adams only looked at Fry and whistled noiselessly, shaking his head, something like disbelief haunting the back of his blue eyes. He gestured with his head toward MacElroy, whose right hand held the corner of the police blanket spread below the ruined window.

"Pull it," he said.

MacElroy, who had the same look in his eyes—and it was not simply disbelief, Fry could see, but something closer to horror—obeyed, slowly, almost delicately, lifting the blanket.

Her satiny green dress was tight fitting and low-cut, with a ruffled hem just above the knees and three-quarter-length ruffled sleeves. A wide silver belt was cinched tight at her waist. The top of her left nipple had popped out of the dress. On her right breast just inside the line of the garment, at the end of a fine silver chain, lay a jade-coloured stone carved in the shape of a cat. On her right wrist was a silver bracelet, on her left a silver watch, five minutes fast. She wore silver and jade-coloured rings on three fingers of her right hand and on the index and pinky fingers of her left. The third finger

of her left hand looked as if it might have once worn a ring, but there was no ring now. Her legs were splayed, her arms stretched over her head. The right leg of her patterned panty hose was torn at the calf. She had no shoes. Her skin was the blue-white colour of snow in the moonlight, heavily rouge-darkened at her cheeks. Her long, fake nails were painted nearly the same poppy-red as her mouth. Her lips were slightly parted, her hazel eyes wide open, one long, false lash askew. Her ash-blonde hair reached from just below her shoulders almost to the top of her head, where it stopped abruptly in a crude circle of blood, blackening, shiny and hard.

She had been scalped.

Fry choked down the bile rising in his throat and tightened his stomach. He glanced at Adams, then at MacElroy with, despite his effort at self-control, he was sure, the same disbelieving horror that was in their eyes. He looked up at Strahan, who was standing over his shoulder, his glasses hiding his eyes.

"Ought'a see the look on your face, Ghost," Strahan said, in a half-hearted attempt at a joke. "You're livin' up to your nickname."

Fry stiffened but let the remark pass.

"MacElroy," he snapped, "cover her up. And I still don't see what's so funny, Strahan."

"Funny?"

"Yeah. Remember, you thought it was a real hoot that I got the call."

"Well, you saw her—how she was done."

"Yeah, I did. So?"

"Ah, your new job and all, the Indian liaison committee, you know...."

"Oh, I see. You've already got a theory about this, do you?"

“Could be, say, a hooker who wouldn’t put out for a—”

“Wow! You not only know what happened but why,” Fry broke in. “In that case, why don’t you just give me the perp’s name and I’ll run along and pick him up? No point in wasting any more time here.” Strahan ground his back teeth, flexing the muscles in his jaw, but did not open his mouth. “You giving up police work for shamanism or something?” Fry continued. “Sure sounds like a Ghost Dance to me.”

“I’d think that’d be more up your alley, wouldn’t you, Ghost?”

“Oh, give it a fucking rest, Paul, will you for Chris’ sake,” Fry said coldly, annoyance at the old nickname welling up, spilling over, along with anger at some of the new nicknames—Chief Fry and Grey Howl and Buck—he had been hearing in the halls. “We can play our little games of Bleeding Hearts and Name That Bigot another time.”

Strahan looked away, sniffed, and cleared his throat. He said nothing. Fry sighed, silently cursing himself for insulting the sergeant, who was as sensitive about himself as he was insensitive toward others. Fry knew it. He should have known better. He put his hands on his knees and pushed himself to his feet. He took a deep breath and blew it out audibly. He stepped back a few paces from the ruined window, nearly tripping on a fallen brick. He regained his balance, took a look at the debris, and suddenly laughed out loud.

“What’s funny now?” Strahan asked defensively.

“Me.”

“You?”

“Yeah. Me.”

“How?”

"I almost asked if there were any signs of forced entry."

Strahan smiled in spite of himself. The tension eased. Clumsiness does have its virtues, Fry thought.

"Let's catch us a bad guy, Strahan," he said. "And whoever did this is a *bad* guy."

The sergeant gestured with his head toward the man in the plaid shirt sitting on the track of the bulldozer.

"Fella there found her. Thought he was just knockin' down an old house. Got himself a surprise."

"He notice anything else?" Fry asked, studying the man from the distance.

"Don't think. He's pretty shaken. Put a nail through his hand runnin' to get away from her."

"He all right?"

"Yeah, I think. Lost his breakfast, but not much blood. Paramedic gave him something for pain. Can't take the nail out here, though. He's got a damned board nailed right to his hand. Almost fainted twice."

"No point in talking to him here, I don't imagine. Tell the medic to get him to emergency. I don't want the bugger to die of shock—in case he did see anything useful. Send Fellows there with them," Fry said, nodding toward the motorcycle uniform directing pedestrian traffic beyond cordon. "He can get a statement, for what it's likely to be worth. And what's with the demonstrators there? Thought the sixties were history. They witnesses?"

"Only to the one thing they didn't want to see."

"Which was?"

"Oh, not what happened to her. To the house. Don't you read the newspapers, Ghost?"

"Not if I don't have to."

"Well, this here building, excuse me, what used to be this building here is, was, a real cause celebrity."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Real heritage stuff. Built before the turn of the century. Only one of its kind left downtown, or was. Heritage groups, historical society had a big fight with city hall and the developer."

"And we know who won."

"Yep."

"And you know what we're going to have to do with these sticks of heritage," he said.

"Yep," Strahan said, resignedly. "Try to put them back together, and see how the lady got inside."

"You got it, Strahan. And you, MacElroy, you got enough pictures?"

"Yeah, Jake, enough—too many."

"Yeah. Don't let it get to you. I know, easy to say. Keep her wrapped up. I don't want anyone to see her. No-body. Call in another ambulance. Get it backed up close to the, ah, house as you can. Get her out of here. And keep the press the hell away, whatever you do. I know I didn't need to say it, but I did anyway. And something else I don't need to say but will: nobody makes a statement unless his name is Fry. Are we clear?"

Half an hour later, Fry stuffed his notebook into his inside jacket pocket. The man in plaid had been taken to the hospital, the woman in green to the morgue. Three additional uniforms had been summoned to help comb through the wreckage of the house. So far, they had found a fake silver-fox fur jacket with its lining soaked in blood and one high-heeled silver shoe. They were still looking when Fry turned to leave.

On his way across the torn-up front yard, he stepped over a sign knocked down and tracked over by the

bulldozer, a City of Calgary Notice to the effect that an outfit called Cottage Industries had made application to the city to build a twelve-storey, one-hundred-twenty-unit condominium tower on the site, and anyone who wished to comment on the application was advised to apply in writing to the city clerk's office.

"Too late now," Fry mumbled to himself. "Too bloody late now."

The media were waiting for him on the other side of the cordon, a tangle of cameras and microphones thrust at him, a babble of questions shouted at him. Before he went over to officially say nothing to them, he stopped at the front walk, leaned down and righted the gate against its post, then carefully swung it closed behind him.

10:00 AM

"Jesusfuckingchrist … Whaddayawha'time…? Whatthe fuckwhy…? Comeon … Cutitoutcutitthefuckout…! Comeon…!"

Lesley Connor stammered half out of sleep, his eyes fluttering open painfully to the bright light shining through the uncurtained French doors to the dormer porch outside the second-floor bedroom of the rambling condemned mansion at the foot of Mount Royal. He closed his eyes, cursing again. Lying nude on his stomach on a soiled mattress in the middle of the uncarpeted and otherwise unfurnished room, he groped blindly for the old steel alarm clock on the floor beside the bed. On the third swipe, he found it, knocking it over just as it began to clang. He grabbed for it, missed, grabbed again, clutched it, yanked it into the bed and tried to turn it off with both hands, but failed. Finally he smothered it under his single pillow

until the ringing slowed, then stopped. He peeked under the pillow and groaned.

"Tenfuckingo'clock! Whothechristsetitfortenfuckingo'clockinthemorning? It'sthefuckingmiddleofthe night!"

He slid the clock across the floor on its face, pulled a rumpled sheet over his body, except for his feet, and collapsed onto the mattress.

"I fucking set it, Lee Boy," said the girl kneeling on the floor beside the mattress, poking him again with her right hand, then, when he did not respond, with her right fist. "Come on! You gotta get up! They'll be here any minute. Come on. Come on!"

"Behere? Who'llbehere? Whaddaya…?"

The sleep-befuddled youth—twenty years old, maybe—raised his upper body from the mattress on his two wiry arms, shaking his head, his long, luxuriously black hair cascading over his shoulders and down into his eyes.

"You know. The reporter from the *Bulletin*. And the photographer. Remember? They're coming to do a story on us, on what we do, in the house, you know, how we live."

"If I don't get some zees I won't live and neither," he swung the pillow weakly at her, and missed, "will you. Come on, just fuck off. I'm not gettin' up."

"Lee Boy—"

"No, godfuckingdammit, no. Ah ... just give 'em one of my T-shirts and my glossy, my pretty picture. You talk to 'em, you and Benny and Gina and John. You don't need me—unless they got a music deal for me—ha, ha …"

He pulled the pillow tight over his head with his two hands and held on, refusing to budge, refusing to react even when she tried tickling the bottoms of his feet.

“Oh, Lee Boy, you ... you prick,” she said, getting up from her knees, seeing the clock, grabbing it and throwing it at him, hitting him in the back.

“Ouchfff,” he said with his face in the mattress. He did not move.

“You’re such a shit, Lee Boy, just a shit, a shit, shit, shit!” she yelled at him as she slammed the door so hard it sprung back open.

The girl—actually a woman in her late twenties, with lines of laughter and sun already around her heavily shadowed blue eyes—skipped quickly down the winding stairs to the ground floor, her large braless breasts and long, straight ponytail bouncing with every step. As she descended, she passed stair walls decorated with felt-markered mountains with happy faces, obscene graffiti, and holes the size of a fist. The wall on the ground-floor landing featured a black silhouette of a fleeing cartoon figure. Her full figure jiggled to a stop in front of it.

A scrawny, scruffily bearded man in his mid to late twenties in frequently patched faded jeans and a clumsily hand-lettered “Calgary Stoopede” T-shirt lay on the tattered sofa in the parlour directly across from the landing, absentmindedly picking at the strings of the guitar in his lap, his bare, dirty feet dangling over the back of the sofa.

She said to him, pouting: “Lee Boy won’t play.”

“Told ya so.”

“Told ya so,” she mocked him, making a face and sticking out her tongue.

“Now, now, don’t be bitchy. He didn’t get in ’til after three, as usual. And you know he wouldn’t recognize a morning if it reached out and hit him.”

“Yeah, right, Benny. You tell him that when he

finally does wake up and gets all pissed off because he missed out on the publicity and he'll reach out and hit you."

"Oh, I'll survive. And so will you. And maybe even Lee Boy."

"Where's John and Gina?" she asked.

"Where do you think?"

"Oh, Christ. Like a couple of rabbits."

The scrawny young man wiggled his nose at her.

"Fuck you," she snapped.

"Now you've got the idea."

She was just cocking her tongue for a reply when the doorbell chimed, a deep, rich, melodious sound that now seemed out of place here, a strange, ghostly echo of another, better time.

"Oh, shit! They're here!" the young woman said, raising her arms in exasperation and stomping her feet on the landing. "Get the door, will you, Benny. I'll go upstairs and try to unscrew those two."

"Good luck, little mother."

"Oh, don't you take anything seriously?"

"Sure I do," he said, picking one string of the guitar, "pluckin'... and fuckin'."

She looked at him, at first sarcastically, then almost wistfully, with a momentary twinge of regret, then turned and bounced back up the stairs, shouting.

"John! Gina! Come on you guys! It's Cinderella's sistyugler. The balling's over."

10:15 AM

The second chiming of the bell was still echoing when Benny reached the heavy oak door with the intricately patterned leaded-glass window. He turned the solid-brass knob and pulled.

“Say, man,” he said to the tall, gangly, boyish-looking man with Clark Kent glasses, dishevelled dark-brown hair, and drooping moustache who was standing on the wide veranda. Then, noticing the big, moon-faced man behind the camera at the foot of the veranda steps, he corrected himself. “Mans.”

“Grant Melton,” said Clark Kent, extending a right hand with a misshapen thumb and only three fingers. “The *Bulletin*. We arranged to do a story on you folks, sort of the other side of the boom.”

“Right,” Benny said, accepting the reporter’s hand comfortably, without a flinch, or a look. “The *flip* side of the boom. Come on under, er, in, that is.”

“Well ...” The reporter’s face indicated that he was not sure how to reply, but it quickly regained its confident mask, and he his cocksure composure. “Come on, Donnie, let’s go,” Melton yelled back at the photographer, who snapped another shot of the front of the house, lowered the camera from his face, clicked the high heels of his shiny, pointy-toed new boots, saluted with his left hand, and clambered up the steps, camera bag flapping at his side. His new denim jeans, rolled up once at the bottom, rustled stiffly and the fringe of his new leather jacket fluttered as he ran.

“This is Donnie Miloche—” Melton began to introduce him.

“G. Donald,” the photographer interrupted him, grabbing Benny’s hand, shaking it hard. “G. Donald Miloche—and you are?”

“Benny—Benny Sunshines.”

“Benny Sunshines?” Melton asked, reaching for the notebook in the inside pocket of his grey tweed sports coat.

“Yeah, Sunshines,” Benny said. “Well, Chambers,

Benny Chambers, Benjamin Charles Chambers on my birth certificate. But everybody calls me Benny Sunshines. It's the group I'm in, you know, The Sunshines. Last names don't mean much to us. First names and group names are what we usually go by. Good enough. Better, really, for sayin' who we are. Come in and meet the rest of the Sunshines family."

Grant Melton followed Benny inside, with Donnie "G. Donald" Miloche close behind him. The journalists had scarcely taken two steps into the wide, oak-wainscotted entryway when they stopped, or were stopped by, the smell of human excrement.

"Holy shit!" Miloche exclaimed without thinking. Then, embarrassed, he added, "Sorry, but I mean …"

"Holy shit's what you mean," Benny said. "At least shit. Shit's what it is. How holy it is I can't say. But it is shit. Sewer pipes are busted all to hell in the basement. When you live with it you forget about it—ten minutes inside and you won't notice anymore."

"Whoa!" Miloche said, waving his right hand in front of his nose. "Why don't you complain to the landlord?"

"Whoa! yourself," Benny said. "You think the landlord doesn't know? How do you think folks like us get to live in a Taj Mahal like this? If the place wasn't condemned we sure as hell wouldn't be here, and if there wasn't shit floating in the basement it probably wouldn't be condemned. So in a way we owe the shit a debt of gratitude."

"What, you get it rent-free, just to keep an eye on the premises?" Melton asked.

"No."

"No? What's it cost you?"

"Three-fifty a month."

The reporter rolled his eyes but said nothing, merely jotted in his notebook. The big photographer Miloche had continued down the hall, admiring the wood floors and panelling and the delicate cut-glass chandelier.

"They condemned this place?" he asked, to no one in particular, incredulous.

"Yeah, it's a bitch, isn't it," Benny said. "Guess the land's worth more without it. We'll just crash here until ..." The rumbling on the steps behind him stopped him in mid-sentence. "And here they are, well, all but one, the Sunshines family. This here is Bonnie Irwin," introducing the big-figured mother figure, who was wearing a blue sweatshirt over black tights. "And these sleepy sheepish-looking people behind her are John Mackenzie and Gina Stoltz." The two looked at the journalists, at each other, and then giggled like children. "Our missing fifth mouseketeer is Lesley Connor.... He hates 'Lesley,' thinks it's sissified. Lee Boy. But then, he's from Texas," as if that were explanation enough. With a feigned stiff British accent, Benny then said: "Shall we all adjourn to the breakfast room?"

The breakfast room was actually a house-wide, glassed-in sunroom filled with new healthy plants and well-worn, once-white-painted wicker furniture that looked to be original to the house. Melton sank into the soft cushions of a deep, wide-armed wicker club chair. He crossed his long legs and rested his notebook on the arm of the chair. Miloche prowled the room unobtrusively yet intently, with a kind of stealth, punctuating the reporter's open-ended questions with the pointed click of his shutter.

For the next three-quarters of an hour, Benny and Bonnie, John and Gina—the Sunshines—filled Melton's notebook with impressions of the underside of the

boom, of what it was like to be the frail vanguard of alternative music in a city where the only musical alternatives for most were top-forty, soft country, or some no-edges, middle-of-the-road version of both:

Gigs in wino bars where business was so bad the owners were glad to have a band, any band, even *their* band playing anything, even *their* thing. Running a gauntlet of rednecks from some mop closet-cum-dressing room to a postage stamp of a stage. Sharing the spotlight with local drunks so drunk they would climb up and shove pencils up their noses or straightened clothes hangers down their throats, and usually get hoots of encouragement and louder applause. Knifings in the johns. The night John's nose was broken and the Sunshines' van's windows smashed by a gang with baseball caps and tire irons. One-night stands in rooms rented under false pretenses (the only way they *could* rent them), where fan damage to the hall usually took most of the haul from the performance. "Posers—" rich kids from the suburbs who dressed the part and came to the clubs for a weekend evening on the wild side. Kraft dinners and Ramen noodles at five boxes for a buck, salad from a Safeway dumpster. Clothes from Sally Ann, customized at home with scissors, thread, and magic markers. Drugs? Sure, Lee Boy … never mind that, scratch that … but nothing heavy, just hash, a little mushroom, beanies and black beauties—the trucker's wake-up call.

"Wait a minute, you guys! Wait!" Bonnie Irwin called from the hallway as the two journalists were leaving. "Lee Boy, Lesley, he wanted you to have a T-shirt and his glossy."

"His glossy?" Melton asked.

"Yeah," she said, handing the reporter a photo with creases and turned-down corners and two Calgary