

Off the Map

by Steve Young

It's difficult to remember, much less write down, the hard times you thought were unforgettable when you have a full stomach. It's hard to remember that dirty little room you rented in that house, from a Bosnian landlord, on 27th avenue and Missouri. The dirty little room that cost you seventy dollars a week. Five dollars more than the other rooms because it had it's own outside door. The door that had four locks, the door that strange, dirty people were constantly knocking on under false pretenses. Probably just bored, almost always high, just wanting to see the skinny white boy swilling Old English in the middle of the ghetto. To see what he looked like, to put a face with the loud guitar and even louder singing of strange middle of the night songs.

It's impossible to make tangible that feeling when you spent the whole week broke--no food, thirsty beyond words for a drink, alone and horny trying to read War and Peace. Nothing but torn purple sheets and those strange people knocking on the door. But on Friday, you collected your pay and bought two forties of O.E. while walking home. You remembered to pay the next weeks rent but forgot to eat. You just sat on the torn purple sheets and drank.

The "tick tick" of fingernails on your door roused you out of a drunken stupor, and with much hesitation you opened the door, just a crack, and there stood a drop dead gorgeous black girl. You waited for the hitch but she just smiled and said "Hi!" You smiled back and said "Hi." You were going to be a writer, you figured you had to taste life--all of it--and fucking a hooker was part of it. Right? And what a hooker!

"So, you're Steve, huh?" she said, and put out her hand.

You shook her hand and looked at it. It was beaten up and ugly. It was cold and clammy. And how did she know your name?

"I'm Carmen" she said. You stood there, holding that beautiful hookers ugly hand, blinking at the red and white neon of the Circle-K.

Your Bosnian landlord stepped from around the corner and yelled "NO, that is the wrong Steve!" and she was gone. You closed the door and locked all the locks and weren't thirsty for beer anymore, but still horny.

It's hard to remember that black mutt of a dog following you, the big pink tongue swinging in sync with her long pink titties, ribs and bones poking out through her matted fur. Walking back to that room with a carne asada burrito, a rolled cigarette and seventy two cents in your pocket. Just wanting to dig the Arizona sunset but having to keep turning to look at "this damn starved dog" following you. When you got close to your room you turned and said "GRRRR" at the dog and even you were surprised by how vicious it sounded, and the dog trotted away. You felt sad and hollow when you thought "I will wash this burrito down with flat, warm malt liquor from yesterday." It felt bad, because you were so starved and snarling you had scared a dog. You thought maybe you were losing your Buddhism.

It's difficult to recall that stormy Wednesday night when you walked through the house to the kitchen, hoping no one had stolen your last tall can of O.E. You were tired of warm beer so you took the risk of putting it in the refrigerator. You were thinking, "If somebody stole my beer I'll just switch to red wine or Jim Beam and never have to worry about it being cold." You never even thought of just not drinking.

When you got to the kitchen your Bosnian landlord was drinking E&J brandy out of a little tea cup with his pinky extended. He was playing poker at a dirty fold-out table with another tenant named Roger. Roger had a huge belly and a full red beard and thin red hair. He had wild red eyebrows that framed enormous, round, blue eyes.

He had once told you over beer and cigarettes, "People think I'm crazy. They think I'm an animal-I can tell by looking at them." You noticed that he never blinked, and decided that was what made him look so crazy. But you didn't say anything because you thought he was crazy too.

Your beer was still there and they invited you to sit down and play. Texas hold'em with a dollar limit. You had some change you had stolen out of the cash register at work. You sat down and won right off the bat, then lost a lot and finished your beer. You asked your landlord for some brandy and he poured it in a teacup, all the while babbling about never losing with his deuces. You hit a lucky streak, or they got too drunk, but either way you walked away with seven dollars in coins, and felt secure about tobacco and beer for tomorrow. But Roger followed you to your room saying he wanted to check out your guitar, because he played some. He held the guitar and started talking and wouldn't leave. He kept scratching scratching scratching under his belly until you finally asked if there was something wrong with him.

"Yeah" he replied, "I got this yeast infection underneath my gut."

He started talking about baseball and pussy and "niggers" and all the other things we are all supposed to have in common. You realized he couldn't play guitar at all and started to get paranoid about him maybe being a thief or a perve. You finally told him to leave so you could pass out, and he did, a little sad faced. When the next morning came you walked to the bathroom to splash away the brandy with cold water on your face and realized you had probably won Roger's food money at poker, and he was just hanging around hoping you would get something to eat and invite him.

It's hard to remember that you had somehow found out that your old friend Chad was in jail and had gone nuts and now had to take all kinds of meds for anxiety and schizophrenia. You called the D.O.C. to get his numbers and sent him a letter. He wrote back saying that he was getting out soon and that he wanted to meet for

beers. You wrote back saying o.k., and when he got out you were there to meet him at the bus stop on 27th avenue.

He was wearing a huge yellow jacket and he was almost fat. Your brother used to call him matchstick because he said Chad was so thin you could pick him up and strike him against a wall. But now he had an extra chin and a big pot belly. You saw his eyes and they took a long time to register you, you thought about A Clockwork Orange because you had just read that book. He said "Bro, I'll be getting some money soon but I'm broke. Can you afford a couple beers?" You said you could and started toward the bar. He took a long plastic container out of his pocket with seven compartments labeled for the days of the week. "What the hell is all that?" you asked.

"Lithium, Praxil, Zoloft, blah blah blah" God knows what. And he was slow, real slow. They had him doped up good.

You went to a bar called Big Richards Eatin' and Drinkin' Place. The whole front was lined with Harley's. You had never been there because it was cheaper to drink alone at home. When you walked in the joint was crowded with big beards and black leather jackets, everybody just stared, including the bartender. There was no room at the bar so you got a little table in the back corner. A very skinny waitress with false teeth came over to take your order. You ordered a large pitcher of Michelob and Chad was lighting a USA Gold cigarette. The back of the waitress's shirt said "I Work at Big Dicks."

Everyone kept staring to the point you weren't sure if you were in a biker bar or a gay bar, but it didn't matter, so after only two pitchers you said "Let's bail" and walked back to your room.

You watched Chad's face light up like magic as you loaded the remains of a baggy into your little blue one-hitter and took a nice drag. You held it in for a long time, so when you finally exhaled out of the crack in the window almost no smoke came out.

“See,” you told Chad, “I can't get busted smoking here or I'm out, and I have no place to go. Hit it just like I did.”

But Chad was so excited to get high he kept lighting the pipe and taking long drags and going “ER-ER-FFSSSHHHH” exhaling big blue plumes of smoke all over the room.

But you were working on another forty, and smoking too, and pretty soon you didn't care and the noise stopped. You were staring at the ceiling, high, thinking, Where's Chad? You finally got up and he wasn't in the room, so you opened the door but the street was dark. You could just barely make out Chad's yellow jacket in the dirt next to the driveway. You went over to pick it up and he was still in it. You helped him to his feet and he laughed and said “I am so fucked up dude!” He sounded just like a little kid. You walked him inside and let him have the bed. He turned into a ball of yellow on the torn purple sheets. You curled up on the floor wondering if it was a good idea to have been sharing your food with the mice the last couple of weeks.

