



The Hook

by Steve Duffy

Among the many excellent and divine gifts of Athens to the lives of men, nothing is better than those Mysteries by which we are drawn from savagery to civilisation. They are rightly called intuition, because we have thus learned the first principles of life...

- Marcus Tullius Cicero

So tell us about it...

Well, this happened right in the next county, okay? Right over in Frazer County there. There's this guy, he's dating this girl, and one evening they decide to go park way out in the fields, you know, listen to the radio, neck some, make out a little; get the picture? Okay: so they're in the car and everything, and she's like, mmh-hmh... and he's like, this is it, this is it - 'cause it looks like she's gonna come across at last, right? - and the sun's going down, and it's coming real dark, and this is, like, miles away from anywhere, remember...

So there you go - only just when they're getting down to it like for real, zap, there's this news flash comes over the radio, and the voice says, Attention, attention, the public are warned to be on their guard, there is an escaped lunatic at large - 'cause this is from the asylum, right, over at Pottersville? - and it's this homicidal maniac with a hook instead of a right hand, and he's slashed up all the warders and gotten loose, and he's headed for town, so they're warning all the people to stay indoors, not to leave their houses whatever they do. 'Cause he's out there, somewhere. Hook Man. Fella with the hook.

Now the girl gets scared, 'cause it's really lonely out there and everything, and there's this psycho hook dude on the loose, and she says to the guy, hey, look, I'm not in the mood any more, okay? Stop that. I just wanna go home now: keep your hands to yourself, take me home. And like that. Now he gets kind of pissed off, 'cause, you know, he was just like so certain, right? - but she's scared, and she's crying, and she's just, take me home, I wanna go home, and yadda yadda yadda, take me home, and in the end he's like, forget it, and brrrooom, he stomps on the gas and he's outta there, like really mad at her.

So, anyway, they drive back to her folks' place, only when he pulls up out in front there're all these people outside and police and everything - 'cause they've called the cops they're so worried about her, you know? - and they're all pointing at the side of the car and yelling and shouting and freaking out and like this, so he gets out the car to see what's wrong, and he goes round the passenger side, and there, hanging off of the door handle her side, is this bloody... torn-off... hook.

And that's what can happen when you park out on a date. 'Cause that's a true story.

Once near Eleusis, in the flat lands north of Athens, Persephone, only daughter of Demeter, was picking flowers in the meadows when Pluto, lord of the underworld, crept up on her and abducted her; carried her off to Hades in his golden chariot. Distraught, Demeter went to the well in widow's black and laid a blight upon the corn; she would hold back all her fertility from the land, she vowed, till Persephone was returned. So the harvest withered and died in the fields, and the poor famished mortals had no choice but to petition Olympus for relief. Zeus, king of the gods, sighed, tucked in his robes and came down from the mountain-top to talk some sense into stubborn Demeter. He tried his very best, but it fell on deaf ears; all the reason in the world had no effect on her. Since the whole arbitration thing was going nowhere, Zeus was left with little option but to play it Big Boss style, and summon Persephone from the underworld. Smirking, Pluto fetched her up, only to reveal that during her stay in Hades she had eaten some seeds - some pomegranate seeds - thus, apparently, binding herself irrevocably to Pluto henceforth. How's that again? Don't ask.

Zeus, caught in the crossfire between Pluto and Demeter, harassed by the *feed-me, feed-me* of the starveling mortals, did the simplest thing he could think of: he cut a deal. He decreed that Persephone should spend half of each year, the summer months, with her mother, and the other half, the winter, with Pluto in the underworld. It seems to have been a compromise accepted by all parties - even, so they'd have us assume, by Persephone.

Now the Eleusinians worshipped Demeter, goddess of fertility, and enacted the story of her daughter's adventures in the underworld each year at harvest-time. The exact details of these rites are still unknown; they say that the kidnapping and restitution of Persephone was presented in the form of a linked series of tableaux, the Mysteries, replacing earlier, darker fertility rituals involving sacrifice and the shedding of blood, the symbol - it's there in the textbooks - supplanting the actuality, all part of the inexorable advance of Civilisation, capital-C. That's Progress, cats and kitties; do I hear three cheers?

It's sunset out in the corn fields. The stars are coming out, and there's the wispy plaiting contrail of a lone B-52 up there on the high frontier, taking up the torch in the long twilight struggle President Kennedy's so often preached about. Back in town, in the upstairs room where the Justified Disciples of the Western Lands meet, Reverend Kammhuber's holding forth to a handful of eager believers:

"And on that day when the Son of Man returns, it shall be like unto the lightning, that springeth up in the East, and a-crosseth over to the West! That's what it says, brothers, sisters: right here in blessed Scripture! And what else does that book have to say to us - that *good* book, that *sacred* book, that *booka truth revealed to mankind*? I'll tell you what it says. It says, one man shall be taken, and one man shall be saved, as they labour together in the fields; and it says one woman shall be taken, and one woman shall be saved, as they grind together at the millstone - and it says, so shall you be on your guard at all times, because the day and the hour

of His coming, they are *unknown* to you! That's right! That's right! Go on and look in your Bible! Read where it says thou *fool*, this very night thy *soul* shall be required of thee! Yes! This very night, the Lord might come a-lookin' for your soul! Are you ready? I say, are, you, *ready?*"

Steady, Reverend; meanwhile, life goes on below. Cuba and Khrushchev and the hammer and the sickle notwithstanding, life is good in Frazer County this fall; a fine harvest, a bumper yield, all safely gathered in. October now, and the plains are stripped back to stubble, bare fields littered with the wilting trash of stalks and husks. As the dark comes on, Skip Middleton's yellow Chevy stands out like a chromium-plated beacon; just as well there's no-one round to see it, because tonight, as they say in high-school circles, is the night for young Skip and his best girl, Ginny Elsasser. Split off from the usual crew over at the drive-in (tonight's double-header, *Blood Feast* and *Strike Me Deadly*), they're out beyond the town statutes and zoning laws, pulled off the road away past Parkers Ponds, and now, with the waning moon above faint as a run-down dashboard light... well, now it's the oldest story in the book. There are hands, and there are places for hands. There is resistance, and there is submission. Give and take, dare and double-dare; and somewhere in the background, if anybody's listening, there's the weird-beard DJ on the late-night radio show...

Consider the Mysteries, what little we know of them. The story of how the corn grows, how love comes shackled to loss and shame and power-play, how little girls lose out for the sake of what's best for the grown-ups. Real tear-jerker, if you give it the right spin: genuine hundred-per-cent Hollywood.

There's Persephone: Persephone the patsy, skipping through the fields, tra la, all sugar and spice and pigtails and gingham... well, slice it how you like, Persephone's down to play the victim here. The bimbo, the screamer; Fay Wray, wriggling in the monkey's paw. All the way down the line, she'll be merchandise, the currency of gods - all those old immortals hunkered round the table looking for a piece of her, and all she'll ever get to do is pick flowers and swoon for fear of Pluto. Now Pluto -

Ladies and gentlemen, the villain of the piece: Pluto, the scoundrel, the man you love to hate. Such a twinkle in his eye, such a devil... He stalks his defenceless prey through the meadows, carries her off to Hades and has his wicked way with her; and yet he's the guy seems to come out smelling of roses, once the dust has settled. Helpless Persephone, grim Demeter, gruff patriarchal Zeus; then there's Pluto, Mister Superfly, the one we understand maybe best of all - us guys, at any rate. He's bold, he's bad-ass, he the Mack Daddy; he makes his move... and, y'know, he ends up getting what he wants. Maybe that's why we find ourselves rooting for him, rather than for (say) Persephone. Very unfair, but how could it be otherwise? We're dealing with one of the defining myths, the very foundations of Western culture, and it seems like things have always been set up that way, that's all. Olympus to Peyton Place, it's the same old soap opera. Boy meets girl; sparks fly; who do you think's gonna burn? We may voice our token protests as we shuffle into line, we may not feel that good about ourselves, but we recognise the pull of it only too well. Fellers, we just can't help ourselves. Despite everything, despite the better angels of our nature, it's as if we feel at home here: here, in the quiet farmlands round Eleusis.

So tell us again...

Born Marvin Lester Ragovoy in Abbeville, Louisiana, Loopy Marvin could nine times out of ten rely on being misunderstood, not least by his own self. Archetypal mixed-up kid, it seemed: smart enough for something, if only he could figure out what, precisely. Not smart enough to stay clear of Korea - though thankfully he pulled a desk job in Seoul, and got back home with nothing more debilitating than a bad case of the cut-loose blues. He ran with the Beats for a while, tear-assing round the country on Benzedrine highs and a hard bop soundtrack, looking for something he didn't know what, something to make a difference. That Grail stayed slick and elusive, teasingly out of reach, up until the time - one night in early August, a roadhouse out near Alameda - he heard Jackie Brenston slamming "Rocket 88" on the jukebox and found his head wrenched round forever, ringing from the impact of the monster infant, rock'n'roll. So massive, so simple; so wonderful and dumb. My God, my God. Had it been there all the time, and he'd never even realised? Though he couldn't have known it back when, it was what he'd dreamed of when he'd dreamed of America, out there in the bonecutter chill of Korean winter, under stars colder and more remote than those of his own nativity, impeccable, indifferent. It was the bustle of streets on a Saturday night, human and inclusive, the warm bumping swell of folks out on a roll; it was the bargirl's benediction, *howdy feller, what'll it be*, that blesses lonely strangers in strange towns. It was a high-kicking strut down the main strip of Flyville, and all the cats would dig it. It was girls at the carnival with swinging hips and lipcushion kisses. It was all he'd ever wanted, it blew him away; it was all that held him to the world, some nights.

Unquestionably, he needed I-N, in. Caught up in last-chance panic, frantic for a way back past the double doors marked Young and Good-Looking, he called himself a DJ, and to his surprise it stuck. He'd always been able to talk, would talk for hours at a time on the road, behind the wheel, in the midnight space between towns when the other guys were asleep, or else lost in the road's own cryptic incidents: now, he just had to fit it in between two minute fifty-nine chunks of music. Easy. Started out in Berkeley, fooled round San Berdoo, hit Houston, Atlanta, Cincinnati... talked baloney half across the country while the hits just kept on comin', and the good times they did a-roll. Nothing ever lasts forever, though, and in the hire 'em, fire 'em payola craziness that soon enough kicked in, he made some choices that were not necessarily the best. John Law took an interest, some folks wound up playing the Jailhouse Rock for real, and all in all he figured he couldn't complain at his eventual billet: locked away in a broom-closet studio in downtown Topeka, spinning pop platters for the co-eds to make out to.

Okay, when you came to analyse it KZAZ was strictly hick-on-a-stick, like real crackersville, but Loopy gave it his best shot nonetheless. No matter what the gig (*The KZAZ Hepcat Hour*, *The Prairie Soda Soda-Pop Show*, *Uncle Loopy's Hootenanny*, read 'em and weep, pop pickers), he'd spout up a storm of weirdnizz. Rapping like a crazyman between discs in all those sad-ass teenage danceparty slots; passing the word along to anyone who might, just might understand, authentic trash beatitude that occasionally led to some contentiousness with the station bosses, prosperous farm machinery types who frankly suspected the worst of their semi-housetrained deejay. Kind of ridiculous, and yet kind of magnificent, both at once. It was good, everyone said so; only then, all stealthy-like and unexpected, it started not to happen any more...

Nothing drastic, nothing you could point a finger at, nothing except he'd lost the spark, the thing that made the difference; and he knew it. He listened, listened hard, not wanting to believe the enchantment could be over, but he just didn't hear anything out there

anymore, and could find nothing to put in its place, whatever it was. At the end of the day, you either felt it or you didn't. All that holds you is the magic, and who knows where the magic goes, once it's gone? Lost your kicks? Hit the bricks.

Maybe Marvin should've up-n-went, should've had the guts to finish it before it got messy; but he stayed on, whether from some sort of misplaced loyalty or just that old drag-you-back inertia, and the job became just that - a job. Gradually he tailed off from the heights of his bop evangelising, preached less and less revolution and played more and more candyfloss every night that passed, and nowadays he's content just to sit tight and play it their way, stick to the script and boost the sponsor regular, because really, he tells himself, really, who out there gives a damn? Slipping back fast now, burnt out and weary, just turned thirty and seen it coming and going: a Wizard of Oz who SNAFUed the balloon and had to stay back in that Emerald City, growing bitter and cynical and more like the Wicked Witch of the West with each evening's broadcast. Pay No Attention To The Man Behind The Curtain, kids... go suck a soddy-pop while he leans down on the faders, yawns a hole in the hanging Chesterfield smoke, and murmurs into the microphone as the music dies away.

"The moon stood still, cats an' kitties..." (Theatrical pause, a little sigh.) "Thuh, moooon, stood, still. On Blueberry Hill. Mr Fats Domino, some righteous rollin' anna rockin', specially for all o' you sweet thangs parkin' out in them cars there, heh-heh-heh. Ain't that somethin' now, that's really somethin': I foun' ma thrill, can you dig it? I foun' ma thrill. Dig? 'Cause you know there's some kinda thrill out there tonite, some kinda wiild an' crazy night-time prowlin', an' it's comin' down the radio straight through the back door o' your heart on KZAZ, that's KZAZ, number one station of the Sunflower State. Good rockin' comin' to ya courtesy o' Fat Al's Hamburg House, Main Street an' Gardner, downtown Independence, home of the corn chowder frank that just don't quit, an' now what say a li'l Buddy Holly here, thass Buddy Holly, awl-rat, I say, awll-raaaaat..."

I foun' ma thrill; yeah, right, tell me about it. A song that used to signify, "Blueberry Hill": used to mean a lot to him, really did, in ways he never needed to explain. Now, it's just another rinky-dink in the pile, lead-in to the station ID and sponsor slot, halfway-point in the show and then home: back to the roominghouse, back to another night of no sleep, smokes and black coffee drilling the hole where his guts used to be. He commences to cue up "True Love Ways" perfunctorily and without detectable enthusiasm, his once-beloved bomp cheapened somehow, cherry no longer, irredeemably pimped, because if it isn't love, then what else is it? He shucks off the headphones, big deal, daddy-o, tilts his chair back against the wall and stares bleakly at the ON AIR sign; and meanwhile, our boy Skip gets a hold below the belt, and Ginny she don't know yet if she will or if she won't, and the sky wrings out its last in the Technicolor west, and

not so many miles away -

No land but this land, for the killer. No skies but these. Before and after, nothing; all within this wide horizon, the absolute frontier. Always this field, this empty field; always the silence and the dusk.

Not history, the clamour after the fact, and not fate, the patient pitiless consequences. Only the smell of cooling earth, the stirrings of the wind: the path of least resistance over ruts and furrows. Ahead, the perpetual sunset, the old slaughterhouse in the west. The crimson of blood at the distant edge, the cruel curving blade of iron; these shadows, eternal, unmoving. Always and now. The indivisible freedom of the instant.

Doctors and nurses, at the Pottersville asylum:

"Oh no. Oh my God..."

"Will you get, I don't know, just get the police here... get a hold of the sheriff's office or something - and cover 'em up, for Christ's sakes. Cover that up, now."

"I mean, what, what is this place, this is supposed to be a secure facility? This is safety-glass, here? Reinforced? Triple-strength? Holy shit... I mean, look at those shutters there, just, bang, he just went through the damn things like they weren't even there - I don't know. This is something else here."

"I just - I don't - I mean, where do you begin with a thing like that? Where am I supposed to begin, here? Patch 'em up, what? Jesus. I can't even tell which piece goes with which."

"Oh, that's good. That's real cute. We gonna rehabilitate him, they said. Rehabilitate, *him*? Rehabilitate my ass. Rehabilitate him with a full pre-frontal, 's about all. He lookin' rehabilitated to you?"

"My God, my God, will you look at that. I tell you, I seen some stuff, I seen some honest-to-god action - you know, like Saipan? Iwo Jima? - well, I seen all that, but I never seen nothin' like this here in my entire whole life. You understand? Never nothin' like that. Not ever."

"I'm sayin' for the last time, here: to hell with the guards, forget about 'em, just get through to the sheriff's office right now. You seen what he did to those orderlies - now are you about to stand there aholdin' your yank while he up and pulls that kind of shit on John Q. Taxpayin' Citizen? Because I ain't, even if you are. Now you get on to Vernon at the sheriff's office, you tell him we got an emergency class one situation here, state troopers, tracker dogs and sharpshooters, swear in all the deputies he can lay his hands on - and you tell him, do it right away now. Now, before it's too late."

Other countries, other customs. There's a passage in the *Golden Bough* about the Pawnee who used to live round these parts: according to Frazer (or Frazer's sources, those sunk-eyed sober frontiersmen who learned something wholly basic and fundamental about the new world, and perhaps about themselves, out there on the plains, in the ultimate dynamics of travel in a straight line; who learned these things and came out the other side purged and branded by the knowledge, given over to solitude and silence and the pursuit of receding horizons) - according to the authorities, anyhow, the Pawnee made sacrifice to the gods for their corn. Blood had to be spilt on these fields, or else the land would stay barren.

They'd take a captive from the Cheyenne or the Iowa, tie her to a stake (the stories are of squaws, mostly) and stoke up the fire at her feet while they made a dance for the ancestors. The medicine men would pick the bravest of the braves, fit his bow with the sacred arrow, and guide the shot home with their chants and adjurations; afterwards, once the arrow had struck and the flames had licked out into cinders, they'd cut her up and dab her blood on every edged tool in every tepee, and the crows would pick the fields

for what remained, carrying the spoor of blood into the sky for a message to the ancestor spirits, away beyond the evening star.

Frazer's plainsmen looked dourly on these rituals, citing them as proof of the intransigence of the red man, final and incontrovertible evidence that here was where God was not, seeing in them both the essence of the problem - the savage's ability to be as bloodily literal as his gods - and its solution: to accept it all, to enter into the spirit of the blank and feral interior. To give the wilderness its head; to let each atrocity sanction its response in kind, in the ultimately incorruptible name of the Republic. Such men, firm and resolute, the chosen tools of manifest destiny; the cleansing vanguard of westward progress, necessary agents for the coming generations. Thankless, unacknowledged tasks accomplished; the plains secured, so decent Christian people could settle and raise families, build churches and court-houses and whole towns like our own Eleusis here in Kansas. Eleusis, named from respect for the classical inheritance, the unbroken thread of Western culture stretching all the way back to another cornfield on another plain, the back end of another summer, another little girl stuck up by love...

What is there that endures, but the hook? Eyes blur with sweat, muscles cramp and stiffen; there is infirmity in the ebbing blood. Stumbling and falling in the dark, the volumes of the body become hazy and attenuated, come adrift in the vast indifference of the night, the lost American night.

And now, out at the faltering limits of vision, a spark, a distant point of light. As if all nature could be recreated, focussed to an atom, a singularity; as if no stars shone but this star, the lodestar of the fields. Close in on this scintilla, draw closer to the glowing centre. Sudden locus of all things; light, and blood, and iron. Umbilicus of the new world. The stink of killing on the wind.

Deep in country blackness, the killer's pale eyes shine. *Chevy*, he whispers, first word in sixteen years, soft and low as the passing of souls.

The radio announcement has finished, and they've dropped back in on the last few bars of "True Love Ways": too late, because everything's come unstuck here in the yellow Chevrolet. Snuffling Ginny's gone into a huddle, all cut up about something, tugging at the muss of her clothes, and Skip's got a bottom lip to sit on, the perfect schoolboy sulking fit familiar to women since whenever: "Hey. C'mon. What'd I do? Huh? Ginny? I said, what'd I do wrong, huh? What's the matter?" Nothing to say to that. Whiny, sore-assed: "Ginny...?"

"I want to go home. Just take me home, now. No -" slapping out viciously at his hand - "don't you ever touch me again. Not ever, you hear? Just take, me, home. Now. Right this minute. If you don't take me home right this minute -"

"All right," his voice cracking an octave, suddenly wanting out, anywhere, just out, "well all right then, you wanna go home, then all right;" and he guns up the engine full of spite, rocking her back into her seat as he torques off in a screech of spinning rubber, back to the highway, back to Eleusis -

- and meanwhile, who woulda thunk it? Come alive, twice the size, back on the hotline to the heart of nowhere, here's Loopy Marvin burning down the airwaves, 'cause he foun' his thrill - and not on no Blueberry Hill, neither. Knocking coffin-nails in the lid of his gainful employment at KZAZ, dropping one last kiss-off on the youth of Middlamerica in that old black-crow gabble of his, here come the big-daddy, manic, crazed and stateless. Because the newsflash came through, and it sang to him, the newsflash - lit up with the imagery, a poetry like rock'n'roll, like the dark side of the mojo, the mad shine in the eyes of Jerry Lee, the original Killer; a poetry that shines now through the radio in the swamp-dog voodoo croaking of your good-time evening deejay -

"Can ya hear me, sweet things? Ah said, can you *hear* me? You know you better listen up good now, baby, ain't no time lef' for playin' games an' foolin' roun', 'cause doncha know the boogeyman's out tonight? Mister The Original Boogeyman his self, got him a big ol' butcher hook for a hand, done sliced him up a dozen men awready, ah say, don'cha *know* it? Can'tcha *feel* it? Huh?"

"Ohhhh yeah... he's out there, awright. Hook man. Out there in the dark, you know he's movin' up slooow an' stealthy on the edge of town - he's a-comin', he's a-comin', someplace where the streetlight it don't *shine* so bright, dig? Comin' down yo' alley, sneakin' roun' yo' backyard, here he comes a-crawlin' right up to yo' house, an' Lord-have-mercy, he see *ever*' li'l thang you do, you best believe it. Hear me?"

"So y'all better be good tonight, y'hear, better stay at home, turn off the light, lock all the doors, lock the shutters up tight - re-e-e-al tight now! - I say you better hang on in there, baby, else he gon' come callin' on you... an' then *hoo!* look-out, that's all she wrote. Gooood-night. Aw-re-vwaaah. 'Cause he's big, an' he's mean, an' he's jus' a hunnerd miles o' bad road; he's the shadow in the rearview, he's some place you don't never wanna be, he's the *wrong, fork*, offa the *innerstate* - dig? He's the las' chapter, he's the incomin', he's the ver' las' thang you see before the *lights go out* -"

Sounds of a struggle, in the deejay booth; then a dry metallic click, followed by unthinkable stillness, dead air. What were we to think? Left alone in the night that way... A long, long wait, all of us with our own thoughts, our own fears; and then the pop and hiss of wax under needle, before Mantovani and his ever-lovin' Strings slip into "Someone To Watch Over Me", and a measure of control is regained in radioland.

From Testimony of John Red Horse, sound archives of the University of Northern Colorado:

Some of the other tribes, they used to say the Pawnee were crazy men, on account of how we didn't fight the white men same as they did. Some Pawnee even rode with the white soldiers; hunted down Cheyenne, Arapaho, took plenty of scalps. You can see them in the museum at Severance now. Those other tribes said the white man turned the Pawnee's heads, sold them whisky with some kind of bad medicine in it...

Strychnine? Some of the agencies used to put strychnine in the whisky they sold to the Indians...

It made them crazy, that's all. They'd jump into the fire, roll around in it like a buffalo at the wallow. I seen two men half kill each other over a bottle of that whisky, lots of times. It was a very bad thing; a wicked thing. I say that's why the Pawnee ended up here, on the reservation: it was the Great Spirit punished us for breaking the hoop of the nations, going against the old ways. That's what I think. I don't know if that's true.

Do any of the men still follow the old traditions, carry out the old rituals, any more?

None of the men care about the old ways any more. They get liquor from the store, sit around on the sidewalk and drink all day if

they got the money. Once every so often, one of them gets crazy like a mad dog, steals a gun or something, tries to get off the Indian lands and go shoot at the white folks, but they always catch him first, shoot him down dead. That's the way it is - just like with mad dogs, shoot him dead. There are no great warriors any more. Some of the men, they dress up like clowns, dance the old dances for the people who come in automobiles, tie some squaw to a post and dance round her... but that's just foolishness. I don't know.

My grandfather, he told me the story about when he was a young brave, how he'd been the one to shoot the stone arrowhead, kill the squaw for the next year's harvest. Said she was a Cheyenne woman. But I never saw anything like that. Everything changes; all of those things are gone now. That's not the white man's way. I don't know who was right and who was wrong. I know who won and who lost. That's all I know.

What else do you want me to say for this machine? I'm tired now. Let me go back home.

By definition, the Mysteries are hidden to us; all except the last. Paradoxically, the last, and, you'd expect, the most secret of the revelations is the one on which all the authorities agree, the one you'll read about in every travel guide and coffee-table picture book. Where's the mystery in that, you might well ask? Well, perhaps it's meant for the sting in the tail, the final twist of the knife: that even after we discover the denouement, even then, the heart of the matter, the meat of it, might still somehow escape us. As if Joe Friday and his facts, ma'am, may not, in the end, be the only thing that matters, be all that is important. Just what do we know, when we know that the ultimate Mystery takes the form of an ear of corn, reaped in silence? That it's universal, perhaps; that it's the common fate, and there's no getting away from it... maybe that's all the message there is. Maybe there's only destruction, and creation, and maybe none of it makes any sense.

So is knowing that enough? Or must we hear the story from the beginning, one more time?

She never lived it down, the shame of that homecoming. The sirens and the torches and her parents' ashen faces, the sheriff carrying her out of the car and into the house, the shocking bloody proof there for everyone to see... and then, when she missed her next period, boy the shit *really* kicked in. Weeks of wrangling back-and-forth between Elsassers and Middletons; the purgatory trip into Kansas City, Skip sitting next to her on the backseat like some apparition, her parents up in front looking straight ahead at the swimming windshield as the storm-clouds emptied over the plains; the wretched stumbling pantomime in the tacky Chapel of Love; and after all of that, the miscarriage in the spring, life wrenching loose, clenching, tearing, voiding, so that nothing had any point any more, or any value. Only mornings of dusty indoors light and silence, trips out to the Thrifty Mart and back; cigarettes and coffee in the afternoons, *Time* limp and leafed-through on her lap, sick headaches in a darkened room. A wife among other, plainer wives out in the tract-home sprawl, with their dull-company husbands and their sullen screaming children, forever picking up the tabs on wild nights over and done with, the stuff now of locker-room brags and tall tales, memories and resentments.

Come the summer, and to no-one's real surprise, Ginny was back living with her mother and father (*no place like home, Auntie Em*, which you surely must remember...), Skip having lit out west in the Chevy by more or less mutual consent. He made the coast, and got by well enough, working gypsy for a landscape gardener's in San Clemente, living out of a trailer, hooking up with the longhairs and the peaceniks - even, after a while, dealing the occasional lid of home-grown to nervous surfers and college kids, anyone who couldn't tell a bunch of bitty seeds and stems from grade-A Hawaiian celebrity weed, as advertised.

Seemingly without meaning to, the way most things happened to most of the folks you knew, he wound up in Long Beach, on the street end of a distribution chain run by the altogether heavier elements of the Love Generation, riding a tenuous fluke of acid-head grace all the way to the limit, that place we don't know where it's at till we've crossed it and gone beyond; at which juncture the government caught up with him, late in the spring of '68. He picked up his draft papers from the mailbox in the first bright-knife shudders of a total nightmare trip off some highly counterfeit Owsley: he crawled back upstairs, made it back inside the apartment somehow, and somewhere in there, without knowing much of what he was doing, he got the hedging shears from out his work-bag, stuck the first two joints of his trigger finger in between the blades, and leaned down hard on the long wooden handles. After a while, someone came by the house to score a cap or two, found him passed out in a pool of blood in the hallway, stayed long enough to call an ambulance before splitting. Unfortunately, the cut was rough and botched, and the shears had been dirty, and he wound up losing the entire hand.

What, the killer? You know they never caught him; he's still on the loose. He's still out there. Out in the fields, where the sorghum and the grama grass rustle on the bluestem prairie plains, and you think it's just the wind. The scream of birds flying south; ripples on the surface of the still black water. A silhouette on the horizon, some cold October evening when the air is laced with winter's first foreshadowing. The past, the future, run together at the edge. A memory that claims you; an inheritance, a destiny.

One knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld. Our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld - a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. All day long, suspecting nothing, we pass them by, but no sooner has sleep come than we are groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors.

- Walter Benjamin