

Greg Cohen  
POB 630158  
Lanai City, Hawaii 96763  
[gcacme@wave.hicv.net](mailto:gcacme@wave.hicv.net)

10,000 words

Published Belletrist Review - Vol 6, #4 - Plainville, CT - Vol 11, #2 - March 1993  
© 1993

## Hector

I grew up in a neighborhood as white as Wonder Bread. The only Latino I'd ever known was Anthony Lucero, one of the grill cooks at my father's restaurant. Wiry and ageless, Anthony always identified himself as Mexican with pride in his voice. The scent of Old Spice in his lively wake, his perfectly-manicured hands fussily adjusting the cuffs on his silk sports shirt – and how fast those hands had moved one day, when a set of brass knuckles inched out of his jacket pocket – these were all hints and portents of other worlds.

He'd been raised in the North side of Denver hard by the other delineated neighborhoods of Denver's Irish, Italian and Jewish communities. It took little effort to catch him paused indulgently in front of most any reflective surface, combing his pitch-dark hair just right, whistling "Mack The Knife" in unison with the lady killer he admired in the glass. Standing in my sweat-soaked paper hat and dirty apron bussing tables, watching Anthony breeze out after his shift never failed to energize and intrigue me. Precisely but effortlessly careful of his crisp chinos and gleaming black snake-skin shoes, he'd slip into the front seat of his low-slung chariot like a hand into a glove and rumble away into the mysterious night.

My second year of high school, my mother was in and out of the hospital with a mastectomy and resulting complications, so I was sent across town to live with my Grandmother. It's clear now how poor a frame of reference Anthony Lucero was for me, heading into my first fish out of water year in the same school where he came of age. Hair oil, leather jackets and switchblade knives were the uniform of his day, a time where a medieval or samurai code of street honor prevailed. I realized quickly how far removed that was from the charged multitude of bell-bottomed, long-haired, swarthy youths and deep-eyed Madonnas who stared at me the day I first set foot on their turf.

I passed those edgy, testing weeks self-conscious in the crowded, laughing halls amidst a sea-full of white gardenias and exotic manta rays. The pungent scents of patchouli and fragrant lilac coalesced with the tang of hair oil, buoyed through the rooms and halls by smooth, liquid slang. Marijuana and mescaline were common cafeteria words, thick with low-voiced implications of desire and disaster. Deftly applied makeup fused with the fan dance of fashion to add years to the peacock girls. They unabashedly preened before the hungry, challenging eyes of the males in a slinking dance that awed, muted and mercilessly exposed the sheltered, suburban white boy in me. The innocence of Anthony's generation and a dated term like "lady killer" were openly mocked by simple, everyday life at North High.

So when I sensed an unexpected smile, warm as dawn, it was in the same manner you respond to suddenly switched-on illumination, abruptly finding your feet planted more firmly underneath you. A stocky tank of a boy with an open, unguarded face stood before me. His raspy voice softened as he bridged the unmet and unmeasured distance between us easily.

"Saw you in Missus Carrol's Art class. My name's Hector. Hector Aragon. You wield a mean brush. Don't you just love Picasso?"

I looked at his outstretched palm, at the eyes shining with the unquenchable jolliness of a fat boy preparing to move through life a fat man. My own pale hand locked with his thick, ruddy fingers and was almost lost in their reassuring grip. I was befriended and pitifully grateful for it. My voice revealed more pleasure at being spoken to than I meant to.

"David Jaffe. Thanks, thanks. Good to meet you. Listen...maybe you can answer a question for me..." He laughed then, a wide, deep happy sound.

"Huh...A white guy from the east side...I've got answers for questions you don't even know you want to ask yet."

I was taken aback not only because a Mexican would speak to me easily and with friendliness, but also that my discomfort was so apparent even perfect strangers could read it as if I were a walking billboard of self doubt. Discussing Pablo Picasso as we stepped out into the crisp sunshine of a Colorado fall morning, Hector Aragon nudged me into a walk that would last decades. Our common bonds were art in general and music in particular. Hector was a natural a talent. I was proud I taught myself to play the harmonica and the flute. He was unconsciously modest about teaching himself to not only play the guitar and piano, but to read music. Hector was blessed with perfect pitch, effortless stage presence and an encyclopedic memory. The process of music forges strong ties, yet even from the first, when our skills and talents were rough and unrefined, we simply clicked, whether we were up on stage in some coffee house or just experimenting with chords or changes in his basement.

He came back to my room one afternoon to share a new record album by a Texas blues guitarist whose wild, fluid style was enhanced by the fact that he was an albino. I crouched by the record player, watching Hector's face as the notes sang out around us, seeing his mind work, his fingers twitching slightly in ghost maneuvers over an invisible fretboard. I'd been skipping from favorite to favorite, lifting the needle, saying "Wait...you won't believe the solo on this one."

We got to talking about the music over one tune and the next song in sequence played, a slow acoustic blues. I automatically reached down and grabbed the needle to move it to my next favorite when Hector blurted, "Hey! What are you doing?" I shrugged it off casually saying, "I just like the ones with electric guitar...listen to this."

But I didn't get to set the needle down with that satisfying pop on the smoothly rotating disc of elegant black vinyl. I was frozen by the look Hector aimed at me. Disbelief, surprise and the worst of all, disappointment all filled his eyes. He smiled almost condescendingly and took the needle, gently lowering it to the song I'd skipped over. The acoustic music drifted into them room. Hector's voice was soft, but did not lack emphasis or passion.

"Just listen to this, man...you know what that is?...source material. All the amplified stuff you like comes from *this*." He reached over and pulled his guitar from the case, looked around the room and grabbed a small glass jar and began to play, blanketing the strings with the bottle, sliding it in fluid soaring movements up and down the fretboard, playing along with the record, note for note. Scales fell from my eyes and I realized all that I'd been missing. Hector could be counted on to always offer a fresh slant. I remember that first morning, complaining that Picasso had used his talent as an excuse to treat the

people in his life, especially the women, like dirt. Hector brushed my objection aside with a wave of his brown hand. "People make allowances for genius, don't you know?"

If I'd known then what I know now, I might have turned away, but even after today's phone call, twenty years later, I doubt that I would have, as crazy as that sounds.

After graduation, Hector and I took the requisite road trip together, constructing grandiose plans for the future on the shifting sands of the open road. We weren't back home but a few days when my mother succumbed to the ever-recurring cancer and I just had to get away. Two years flew by before I found myself back in my old stomping grounds. I'd heard that Hector was just wasting away in the bars, but he embodied so much of my past that I had to find out for myself. His mother Rosa answered and I was surprised for a moment that she didn't sound older. I must have thought I did. A note of amused sufferance colored her voice.

"He moved out a few months ago, hon. Rented an apartment with a darling girl. Just graduated from high school, but she's a sweetheart and just what he needed. Her name's Karen." Rosa laughed saying, "She's as slim and pale as Hector's big and dark...talk about opposites attracting!"

When I dialed the phone number, a woman answered in a dull voice which brightened when I introduced myself.

"Hector's out right now, he'll die when he hears he missed your call. I don't know when he'll be back, but how about joining us for dinner tomorrow?"

I paused, thinking how long it had been since we'd seen each other.

"Please, it's no trouble." Her voice took on an earnest note. "He talks about you so

often. I know he really misses you. It would cheer him up. Please come."

I recognized the address as one of the tougher parts of the old neighborhood in the same instant I wondered why Hector needed cheering up. I was still thinking about it walking the creaking stairway to their apartment. The front door shamefully wore odd-cut plywood patches nailed over spots that had been sledge-hammered more than once. When Hector opened it, his face was cheerful and he extended a hand, pulled me close as we shook, and embraced me. I felt a surge of the old feelings, criticized myself for judging him based on gossip. Yet there was a thin tension to his motions and when Karen came in, bearing her pregnant belly before her with the purposefulness of a divining rod, I knew the depth of the waters we were sailing.

After introductions, they went out to the kitchen. Hector strolled back, two dewy, green glass bottles clinking cheerily in his hand.

"Well buddy, as you can see, there's been a lot going on here. I've missed you so many times."

"Yeah, me too. I bet you've got a raft of new songs."

"I haven't touched the guitar much lately. Otherwise, it's been up and down, mostly up now..." He gestured towards the kitchen and then his face was serious again. "Sorry about your mom. You beat feet out of here so fast after that I never got to tell you that."

"I'm sorry, Hector. There was nothing anybody, even you, could have done for me. I just had to get away for awhile. Let's not talk about that, though. It's great to see you. So fill me in...where'd you two meet? You must be excited about being a dad...C'mon, I want to know everything."

"Well...there's even more news." He stood up and paced over to the window, standing

with his back to me, making his announcement in an odd monotone to the street outside the dusty glass.

"I got a job today."

"Hey, that's great! What are you going to be doing?"

"Marching." It took a moment for the import of that single word to strike me like the hurricanes we used to compare his personality to.

"You're joking..." I said. "You in the Army?..."

He turned around and there was no joke in his dark eyes, desperation, frustration and real panic etched on his face. Frustration tightened his shoulders. I tried to take some of the sting out of my remarks.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean you were joking...but...isn't the military kind of extreme? I mean...how hard can it be to find a normal job?" His voice trembled with embarrassment and anger.

"You don't know...I never suspected. There's so much we need now. Insurance, steady money, a better place to live and besides...where am I gonna get a job that pays more than minimum wage?"

I looked past him to where his guitar case rested on the floor, fogged by a light film of dust. Karen announced dinner then and we didn't speak of music the rest of the evening. She was painfully shy, but her eyes lit up when she talked about how good it was to be away from her family, especially her father. After the meal, I tried to get him to bring out his guitar, but he begged off so desperately that I didn't press it. We chatted uneasily and when the conversation exhausted, I made my excuses. Hector walked me out to my car.

"She's a sweetie, huh? There's a chance we'll be stationed in Tacoma after I finish basic

training. Wouldn't that be great? Now that you're in Seattle, we'd almost be neighbors."

I smiled weakly back, said to stay in touch and wished him good luck, trying to make it sound like I didn't think he'd need it as much as I felt he would. I drove away, leaving him standing in the dimly-lit street with one hand in his pocket, the other slowly waving after me. I was staying crosstown, but found myself heading up into the foothills, glad for the dark night's cocoon, the car's interior close with melancholy. I parked, as glad for the sudden silence as I had been for the steady throb of the motor and hiss of the tires on the highway escaping Hector's. I stared at the expanse of city lights, trying to believe their seemingly random patterns held some clue about why people change. Yet all they did was flicker as if they weren't really there and it seemed the same thing was happening to my old friends.

A year later the phone in my Seattle apartment rang and I recognized a good mood in the raspy voice on the other end more quickly than I remembered my somberness after our last meeting.

"Hector! Where are you?"

"Where else, man? I'm wearing green army fatigues and standing in a phone booth at Fort Lewis."

"So you guessed right, then! That's great! You're about forty minutes away. Do you get a leave...can we get together?"

"I live off-base, so most any evening, but a Saturday night would be best if we want to stay up late. I'm off-duty Sundays."

"Well, of course we want to stay up late! We've got a lot of catching up to do. How's

Karen? How's being a proud daddy been?"

His reply was more the pregnant moment's silence than the few veiled words he finally got out.

"Well, Karen's ok, I'm a dad twice over now, but..."

I tried to make it easy for him then, wishing I didn't have to. "Well, you can tell me all about that when I come down. How's this Saturday?"

My hunch that his marriage had gone the way of anything that offered solidity in his life was confirmed when I pulled up to the address he'd given me. Two t-shirted guys in camouflage shorts with Marlboro packs rolled up in their right sleeves were working on the engine of a Camaro up on blocks in the driveway, another group clustered on the front porch where the dull silver gleam of a beer keg bulked through the railing. I approached tentatively, looking for Hector's familiar, burly shape that I didn't think even the army could have done much to reduce. Just as one of the guys on the porch asked who I was looking for, I heard the opening guitar chords of "Hot Rod Lincoln" from inside and indicated that I'd found my party.

Hector was his old ebullient, fun-loving self. His divorce had been finalized two days before and his discharge was due inside of a month. He laughed and joked easily though wouldn't talk about Karen. When I asked him about his kids he scowled, mumbled something drunkenly and got up and went out to the beer tap with his empty cup. After that, I didn't press him. We played music off and on that night but it was rough, choppy and disjointed. He'd change suddenly into a key he knew I didn't have a harmonica for or would stop in the middle of a song to throw down a shooter of whiskey, guzzle from his beer and then begin again, sometimes in the wrong place. I soon discovered that when we

weren't playing there wasn't a lot to talk about, except old times, which in that cracker box room furnished with wooden cable spools, empty beer kegs and a rattletrap Salvation Army couch, didn't seem as bright and snappy as they used to, either. I excused myself a little after midnight when a car-load of soldiers showed up with a baggie full of crystal white Methedrine.

Back then, home was a rustic little cabin east of Seattle in a pristine stretch of land known as Maple Valley. My nearest neighbor was a couple hundred yards away and the secluded house sat up a steep gravel driveway, backed off from the highway. I had few expenses and worked from home freelancing graphic work and layouts for ad agencies in town. While Hector had always been destined to be a musician, the passion I escaped high school with was painting. My freelance situation afforded me plenty of time to pursue that work. It was a grand, carefree, productive time and Hector's return, however clouded, still seemed a good sign.

About a month after our slanted Tacoma reunion, I secured my first showing in a major gallery in downtown Seattle. The Godfather Of Soul blasted brashly in celebration through the house as I joyfully prepared the canvases for transport when the music was punctuated by a distant shave-and-a-haircut at the backdoor. There stood Hector in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt with his guitar, sleeping bag and a bulking, olive duffel bag. Despite the uncertain nature of our last two meetings, I welcomed him with open arms.

He'd brought a six-pack with him and didn't bother to suppress his pleasure when I passed. It took dinner, four of his beers and a shared joint before he finally spoke freely.

"The army was just like my life, but intensified, man. Everybody telling you you're never gonna amount to shit. Except these people got paid for it! Did I tell you about

almost dying of double pneumonia? I had to stand out in a thunderstorm from midnight until sunup saluting a goddamn tree, all because this son-of-a-bitch captain walked by my post maybe thirty feet away and I didn't salute him."

By the last beer, he'd grown alternately virulent, sad and angry.

"I wasn't in love with Karen, Dave...we met at a party and she was so sweet I asked her out right away. We dated two or three times before I knew how young she was, but it didn't seem to matter, she was so smart. Not pushy like older broads – until she told me she was pregnant. Even then she wasn't bitchy, just stood up for herself. We were both scared of having it, but I didn't have the money for a trip to California and was determined to marry her rather than have her go to somebody illegal in Colorado. I just didn't understand how much I'd have to change, being married, let alone a father, too.

"Then there's the night I *wished* I was dead, when Karen walked in on me and...no, I don't wanna talk about that..." I waited with held breath and he went on, thickly unaware.

"We're all worthless, Dave! I see you sitting there looking at me all high and mighty. I just need to make a clean start. That's all this kid needs..." and he faded off, still sitting upright on the couch. I brought out a thick foam pad I used for yoga exercises and spread his sleeping bag on that and got him down on the floor. He was out like a light but I paced the darkened house, padding around the confines as a tiger in the zoo, wakeful, watching the ghosts of other, wilder worlds, haunted by insomnia and the images of a time that was less demanding and more forgiving.

The next day Hector woke me early, full of energy and I growled at him, rolling back over to sleep for awhile. When I rose around noon, the house was empty and I thought he'd left until I saw his duffel bag. I went out onto the porch and he was leaning up against

a tree, softly picking notes on his guitar. He was singing an old Lowell George song, "Missing You", one of the first tunes we'd learned together. Sober, unselfconscious and touched by the balmy late morning in the valley, he played sensitively and well. The music was amplified, not in volume but texture, by virtue of the open air and pleasant warmth. Standing there, fresh cup of coffee in hand, breathing in the world, the song so much more than just a song, really our years in high school spinning out around us, and I was glad he was there and forgave him his faults.

We went into town that night and sat in on jam sessions, roaming from club to club. I never knew if it came from the hours we'd played together when we were both learning our instruments or the long miles we'd passed playing song after song on that road trip after our senior year, Hector slouched in the back seat, guitar comfortably across his waist, his big, booted feet stretched out on the back of the folded-down passenger seat, me steering with one hand and gripping the harmonica with the other. When words would fail us in the friendship, we had always spoken fluidly in the language of music and where we'd failed so miserably in Tacoma, we succeeded that long, ambling night in Seattle.

At our last stop, he ran into some friends and decided to stay in the city. They all tried to persuade me too, but I wanted my own bed and rolled into Maple Valley a couple of hours after the bars closed, weary but satisfied. I put his duffel bag by the front door in case he needed something and could get it the next day without waking me. Walking into the darkened bedroom, I was momentarily startled by a vaguely human shape in the corner, but as my eyes adjusted, it resolved into the rolled-up yoga pad jammed between the pressures of the bedside and the wall. I undressed quickly and tumbled into bed, glad that I could sleep in.

I woke suddenly, conscious of a hand on my shoulder, a voice in my ear so clearly that I was unnerved that I was alone in the room. I was snagged then, by the brilliant scent of a pungent burning, physically feeling my eyes widen at the glowing vision of tiny, dancing licks of flame crawling steadily across the shag carpeting as if I was nothing but a dispassionate observer in some high-flying jet safely observing them consuming a real forest. I sat up in bed, rubbed my eyes to rid myself of the last vivid vestiges of this nightmare. But I wasn't that lucky, or hung over. The flames were just beginning to lick their way up the bottoms of the curtains, all along the edge of the bedcover and the curtained door of my closet. I looked down to see the yoga pad lying in a wide, loose roll wedged between the bed and the baseboard heater.

The image of a decisive series of steps in my mind quelled the rising panic in my heart. I whipped off the pillowcase and fashioned a mask in the way outlaws used to wear bandannas. Then I stood on the bed, reached out and pulled the burning closet curtains down, throwing them in front of the window, yanking the window curtains next and so hard that the rod came with them. I carefully draped the fiery edges of the quilt on top of that, throwing the rest of it over the pile to smother it. I slid the window open and in an adrenalin-boosted gesture scooped up the whole mess in one try, lifting to pitch it all out the window. I heard someone screaming then, looked around the room and only realized it was me when I saw the stream of melted liquid foam dripping out of the center of the roll, cascading down across my kneecap and shin.

Much later, I remembered how the room spun about me, how I dropped heavily to the floor and the unreal quality of the light dancing off the walls, roaring in a voice that was amplified, now that it fed on the rush of oxygen pouring in through the open window.

Later too, they would tell me that while I stood there in a clumsy effort to extinguish the surface flames, an electrical fire blazed inside the walls and over my head. The next thing I knew, I was out in the hallway, collapsed again, lying with my head on the floor staring at the brilliantine conflagration of my bedroom. I could see the line where two walls met but their surfaces moved and leapt in sheets of flame. This strange, soft geometry absorbed me. Then I was musingly entertained and amused by the line of flame marching like little soldiers in quickstep across the rug towards me. It was at that moment I felt the touch of Death and it wasn't cold at all. Rather a warm, comforting blanket swaddling me. I was reassured by the heat waves, could feel the searing light penetrating my mind and my bones, and I liked it. A vast certainty flooded me that nothing would be easier than to just lie there until the happy, dancing, mesmerizing flames enveloped me. I was loftily above all fear of their heat or their grasp.

Then something clicked, like a switch had been flicked or a handle released and fear rushed through me, a cold wind in that fiery house. I was up and running, stumbling to the back door, my breath in ragged, wild pants. I saw myself in the hall mirror for a split second and was frightened by the wild-eyed man without eyebrows who looked out at me. It seemed that he was waving me to go on, get out, get out. I heard plaintive voices from the fire then, felt the hair on my neck stand up.

When I was a boy we used to throw snowballs at passing motorists until one frigid night the moving target turned out to be a car-full of college students who slammed on the brakes and chased us down on the slick, bluish, snow-packed streets. Pounding away, puffing compact, distinct clouds of breath with my lungs afire and my legs growing leaden, I knew I couldn't go another foot when fingertips grazed the back of my coat with

a brushing sound that was so distinct I could visualize the extended, grasping hand down to the fingernails themselves while heavy breathing and concentrating footfalls overcame the smaller sound of my own. From out of some deep well, I put on a magical burst of speed and made good my escape. Those voices from the fire touched me like those threatening fingertips had years before and I hit the back door so hard my hand passed through the glass. In that instant I watched my arm as if it was a separate animal, bleeding, jerking in the clean air just on the other side of the door and I threw my body after it like I'd once seen a fireman do to break a person away from an electrical shock. The door came off the hinges and I rode it down to the ground, distantly amazed at my own strength. Glass shattered all around me. I extricated my arm, pulled myself up onto all fours and slowly crawled from the burning structure. The farther away I got, the more the sirens of death seemed only the screaming whistles of dying beams in the house. Clean air poured through my lungs and stroked my brow. The grip of death lingered in phantom pressures around my ribs, at my temples, in the centers of my eyes. I was awash with choking dry heaves. I wore a pair of BVD's, a silver bracelet with coral I'd bargained long and hard for in New Mexico, and the gold chain my grandmother left me when she died.

The silence of the outdoors penetrated me, punctuated by the occasional crash of glass or shriek of wood and metal inside. I heard the wind high in the trees and was conscious of the small clink of the two medals on my chain. I smiled then, filled with the knowledge that I had beaten Death. Just as I lowered myself to kiss the ground, my lips to the lovely, magically pungent, gritty earth, I heard the growl of an engine, looked up and was blinded by a pair of headlights whipping past inches from my head. The driver slammed on his brakes, enveloping me in a cloud of dust. I looked up, square into the window of

the driver's door, like looking at a TV screen filled with the contorted face of a bald man whose eyebrows were bushy as any owl's. He leaned out and shouted as if I were deaf, "Anybody else still in there?"

I shook my head no and before I could say anything, he yelled, with a buried note of relief, "I'll turn in the alarm!" and backed away. He roared down the steep driveway and his taillights winked at me through the trees. I was alone again. I wondered if it had even happened. Still on all fours, I heard footsteps pounding up the drive and a pair of weathered, beaten boots with the glint of a steel toe peeking through one of them stopped in front of me. I raised my head slowly. Clean, well-worn blue jeans towered up from the boots. A curious, concerned face with dark eyes and a mustache, framed by long hair, looked down with compassion. For a minute, I thought he was Jesus Christ. He gently lifted me up with the bulging muscles of a man who works with the earth or builds things upon it. He turned me around to face him and slapped me across the face twice. This wasn't Christ. I felt my eyes unglaze, distantly sensed pain in my leg, in my hand, all over my body.

"Is anyone else in there?" He asked intently. I shook my head no again and noticed the sky and trees for the first time. The tall pines nearest the house trembled and blurred in the rising heat waves. The flames scaled the peaked roof steadily, not only convinced of their victory over this small Everest, but beginning to threaten the garage a few feet away. Dawn was breaking in the east. A flock of birds burst from the nearby forest with shrieks of alarm. My benefactor brought me out of the reverie.

"Is your car unlocked? We should roll it out of the garage."

"Yes, and there's a spare key on the firewall." I heard myself say. He pulled me gently

back from the house.

"Can you stand here for a minute?" I nodded assent and he ran to the garage, disappearing through the wide opening. Timeless moments later I heard the familiar growl of the engine firing over and then he pulled up behind me, the car idling roughly. The door opened and thumped closed, his footsteps approached, but I couldn't take my eyes off the flaming structure. His voice was soothing, patient and calm.

"C'mon man. The heater'll be cranking in a minute. You're going to freeze to death out here."

After narrowly escaping a fiery death and warmed by the heat from the blaze even twenty feet away, I laughed at the thought of freezing to death. He looked at me strangely, then took off his flannel shirt and draped it over my shoulders but it just fell off. He retrieved it and put each of my arms through it like you would dress a child or a bed-ridden person. I let him. I could barely see my fingertips and the shirt tail hung down below my knees. I still have that shirt. He put his hands on my shoulders and made me look him in the eye.

"Listen, I know you're in shock but you've got to think! Are you sure there's no one else in there?"

I spoke my first clear-thinking word since waking up, wondering how he'd known where to find the car key. "Yes."

"And you're okay? I mean, you'll be alright until the firemen get here?"

"Yes. Thank you. Yes." His eyes were full of pity and frustration.

"Listen, then. I got to get to work, man. You'll be alright. Here. Get in the car now, you can still watch it from inside."

I let him slide me into the driver's seat and leaned on the console as the door was closed firmly. He waved once, gave me a thumbs up and jogged down the driveway.

The whole world rushed in on me then. I looked down at my body and saw it shivering. I looked up at the strangely changing shape of the house afire, sharps corners blurred by swooping jets of black smoke, sparring jets of flame so many shades of red and orange you could watch them change forever. I laughed then, when I realized I was doing just what he'd said; sitting and watching my life go up in smoke like you would plop down with popcorn to watch a movie on TV.

Then I remembered my paintings. Three bundles, over twenty canvases, all ready for shipment to the show. I jerked the car door handle so hard it snapped off in my hand but the door opened and I didn't notice that I still carried the handle as I ran around to the other side of the house where we found it gleaming in the green grass the next day. There was so much I didn't notice; the power of energy that burned through me when moments before I'd been near passing out, my scorched, scalded knee, the bleeding, torn skin embedded with pebbles and dirt from my crawling, or even the growing heat as I moved up to the two picture windows that flanked my easel and work table.

Moving blindly, I made fists of my hands, bashing them solidly into the nearest picture window pane, unaffected by the hissing sound my skin made on contact with the white-hot sheets, frustrated by the way the safety glass of the windows only starred and buckled. At the same instant, it bulged outwards, as if the house had taken a deep breath and then brittle cracks like lightning bolts zig-zagged down from the top of the window frame. I lost my balance then, falling to one side just as the glass literally exploded outward. The shower of countless gleaming shards looked like bright orange stars as they

refracted the increased tint of the flames. I crawled back up to the now-open window, unconscious of anything but my hope that the bundles of canvases were intact and close enough to reach. The loose strands of a bowknot that held the nearest batch together were just starting to glow bright orange as I reached inward. A blast of heat stunned me and I hesitated but then reached farther, consciously unconscious of the way the hair on my arms scorched off, the intense pain and acrid smell that came from my beard. Sensations that transcended hot or cold, pain or pleasure washed through me. I was bent halfway into the window and looked down to see the edges of the flannel shirt on fire. I made one last lunge and when my fingers were millimeters away from the paintings, the edges of all three bundles spontaneously combusted before my eyes. I fell backwards with a howling cry of pain that had nothing to do with my body.

The next thing I remembered was a row of faces, the shouts of men, the grind of heavy gears and spit of the tires under a fire pumper struggling vainly to make it up the steep dirt driveway. I was wearing a fireman's yellow coat with the name "Chester" on the front. My legs and arms were dangling and I realized I was in the arms of a big man, being carried like a rag doll away from the house, down the driveway incline, out along the road lit by the flash of emergency lights and the long row of cars at the beginning of their morning commute, slowed and gawking at this tragedy. Just before he placed me in the front seat of a car, a fine rain started. It was cleansing and pure on my face and I was transfigured, felt as if I were glowing with an aura everyone could see.

As the fire chief's car pulled away and the siren started its mournful cry that I'd never heard from inside before, I watched the house out the back window, still burning, but with the dark shapes of men standing at angles on the roof, forcing the flames into submission

with axes and portable canisters that gleamed in the morning light. The sun was cresting low mountains and I could see the whole valley, for four or five miles, laying peaceful and pristine beneath a lazily moving dark mist that was my life and loves and all the work I'd done in over ten years.

Yet where I was defeated beneath the blaze, now I felt so alive. I was floating. There was no pain and a sweet comfort swaddled me. From out of nowhere I remembered a story I'd heard about Ernest Hemingway losing everything he'd ever written when he was about my age and all I could think about as the doctor and nurses worried over me at the hospital was that I could never recreate those paintings.

The fire examiner came in to ask me questions about how it started, involuntarily frowning when I told him about the foam pad falling over to block the heater. When the Red Cross lady put a phone in front of me and said, "Call whoever you need to....take as long as you want, honey." I became all business. I called my father first, feeling in command but breaking down into shattered, gulping tears as soon as I put the event into simple words: "My house burned down around me this morning."

The call to my mother was smoother and then I thought of Hector, what he might think if he showed up at the house without being told, but I didn't have his friend's number anymore. I'd lost it in the fire, the first of countless times I would say that to myself for years afterwards. I called a lot of people, but was never able to locate Hector. Word came over a week later that my worst fears had been realized. He'd gone to the smoldering shell of the house unawares, then raced to my biggest client's offices where they sat him down and filled him in. They said Hector seemed as shaken by the news that I was okay as he had been by the visual knowledge that I wasn't.

"I need to settle down..." He'd breathed out. "I mean, thank god! You don't know...to think he actually walked out of there alive, I was sure he was dead. I gotta get some air, thanks for the number."

He stumbled out of the office and my life that afternoon. I heard he'd returned to Denver a few days after that with only the clothes on his back, a shaving kit and his guitar.

As my burns healed and I limped along the slow road to recovery, again, the news of Hector was all bad; he was drinking too much, his paychecks had been garnished for back child support and he seemed content to just hang out in his parent's basement, in the part of town where he'd grown up as if nothing had happened to him, as if there had never been a wife or the army or two precious daughters. The miles and time did their steady work then until he'd fallen from my mind except when I would hear live music or play it myself and in those moments, his absence continued to lessen me and my life.

Over the next few years, I was back there several times but coincidences and indecisive times for me kept us apart. To see him would bring up that fiery dawn again and there was a part of me that wasn't ready, didn't know if it would ever be. I was hurting but then, so was Hector. Word came that he'd been diagnosed with diabetes, but refused to quit drinking, that Karen had taken him to court for child support, that he never even made the effort to see his kids. I knew that last one meant he was wallowing in shame so great that he didn't want them to see him so lost. I just couldn't bring myself to hold out the helping hand again and each visit passed without my once dialing his number, conscious of how strange that seemed.

But then I had less time for music; there was easy, fun money in commercial illustration now that people knew my work. Best of all, my paintings began to sell. The

critics said the work held a "mysterious, burning" quality which always made me laugh. I was coming into my own. So of course, that was when I experienced the bittersweet way life rewards us, only to alter the prize so it's nothing like you hoped or expected. Sometimes, it even completely takes everything back, as it took my father.

Yet another flight home, relieved only that it wasn't threaded thick with worry and dread, but morose and hollow as only the final trip back can be. That first night, I went from the airport straight to friends on the north side because I couldn't bear the family right away. Ten minutes later, Hector walked in the door, guitar case in hand. Time stopped in a thin corridor between us. I was conscious of his weight but it was no greater than I had visualized fifteen years before in a high school hallway. While he was stockier than ever, the worry lines I'd seen in his face before and after the army were gone. His breath smelled of beer and his greetings were awkwardly warm, but when he saw the pain of loss in my eyes, his smile lost its uncertainty and a steeliness broke through his drunkenness. Without another word, he took out the guitar, looked over and said, "Well? You ready?"

I had so much emotion to release and music was the tap, the power of my loss and his ancient understanding of it bridged all that lay between us. Everyone who does something from sheer enjoyment knows those moments when you transcend yourself; the pool player running the table twice on some famous, feverish night, the paperboy who nails every porch without a single miss, the musician reaching unreachable notes, experiencing a broadening of the vocabulary in the very playing. It was this and more for us that night. Hector looked like hell but played like an angel and he brought out the best in me. Unmarred by mere words, our conversation ran for over an hour before we came to a halt

and immediately hugged.

We were back. The old songs sounded better than ever as we displayed new sounds and techniques to each other in the familiar settings. I was dismayed to see the bad condition his old guitar was in by now. We'd always called it "Jukebox in a Case" for Hector's encyclopedic song knowledge. I was amazed and impressed, not only with the new material he'd learned but the way he managed it as the guitar's slightly bowed neck and worn tuning knobs constantly slipped the strings out of pitch. We'd look at each other and in his glance was the unspoken feeling that all he'd needed was someone to trust him for him a little while, even if it was only the trust that's needed for playing in unison. It was an electrical night, of the kind that come rarely and seemed deigned by the hand of god or fate, when you can feel life energy flaming in everyone and everything, when all is in order in the world, a moment that will be the bright core of memory. The next morning I buried my father.

Within two weeks, my mother, sister and I were the beneficiaries of a large sum of money split three ways and still respectable. I committed to help Mother buy some property, get her moved in and help invest the balance of her monies. I had another thing I wanted to do there and picked Hector up after he got off work one day, casually telling him I had to stop at Bobby's Music to get a new harmonica. Once we were inside I turned to him with a grin I'd been dutifully hiding since I picked him up.

"Well...here it is, pal of mine. I don't need harmonicas. What we're really here for is to pick you out a new guitar...on me." I opened my wallet to reveal a sheaf of crisp hundred dollar bills. His eyes went wider than I had ever seen them and then they filled with tears, as did mine. He spoke roughly.

"No. I can't take it. You don't have to do this...you've got better things to spend your money on..." I put a hand on his shoulder lightly.

"First off, I know you don't believe that. I sure don't. And listen. I've got money I never expected to have...not this soon. Besides, my dad would have been the first to tell you to look at it this way; if we spend every nickel of this, it's less than two percent of what he left me." I looked my old friend squarely in the eye.

"Let me do this, please? The old man would have wanted it. You can't argue with me there. He always liked you."

He smiled then and began to slowly browse the wall of guitars with reverence in his eyes and step. Occasionally he'd reach up like an amazed child and just stroke the polished wood of one or another. There are few things in my life that have given me as much pleasure as that bright afternoon in the music store, the room and street outside radiant with sunny promise. Hector tried two or three instruments, but they were hundred dollar guitars and I could hear it before I looked at the price tags. I walked over and my eye was caught by a handsome guitar with the word "Martin" in flowing script. It's sleek, rose-colored body seemed a living thing, the ivory pick guard and deep black nutty wood in the neck beckoning the eye. When the salesman put it in my hands I felt a charge, like when you walk across a rug and static electricity zaps you. I turned towards Hector, light on my feet.

"Here man, try this one." He strummed a chord, then another, then a furious run of lead notes. The salesman nodded, impressed.

"This is it." I said. Hector looked up at me, shaking his head and holding the price tag for me to see - \$550. I looked at the salesman. "Well we brought cash, but weren't ready to

pay quite that much..."

Hector took my cue and played a lovely run of Spanish guitar notes that turned into the opening of "Dixie Chicken".

"If you got cash, I could let it go for...Four and a quarter! How's that?...Anybody'll tell you that's a hell of a deal, but it's worth it to me to see that she gets a good owner. You boys picked out the best guitar in the store. I'm going to miss this one."

Hector flashed me a smile that could have handily replaced the summer sun outside and looked back down at the wondrous thing he held in his hands. I said, "Go ahead, keep playing. It sounds good." and went over to pay, humming along as I went. As we walked out, Hector said, "How did you know this was the one I wanted from the first?"

"I didn't. It was just the one I wanted from the first."

"Well, that salesguy wasn't kidding about it being his favorite. It was the only one that was already in tune."

We laughed as we headed for the car, charged from the purchase and the fact that there had been magic in it. That night we made the rounds of every bar and small club in the old neighborhood, Hector showing off his new beauty like a proud father and there was a new tenor and urgency in our sound that had never been there before.

I'd originally planned to head for New York, to try and sell my paintings, maybe acquire an agent. But Denver was experiencing what they call a buyer's market in real estate, and I began to speculate, buying beat-up houses, doing a quick renovation and if I couldn't sell them right away, there was no trouble renting them. Dollar signs loomed in front of me and like the worst of gamblers making too-frequent pilgrimages to Vegas, I got in deeper and deeper. I was painting less and less. I was still getting long-range

advertising projects from Seattle clients, but spent my other days working property deals, learning carpentry, electrical or plumbing the hard way and passed my nights playing music with Hector. We were rehearsing in earnest now, had put together six twenty-song sets and were working all the open mikes and jam nights, planning to work as a duo without ever really saying it out loud. We were looking for exposure, building up our courage, too. We began to secure small gigs; in coffeehouses, on restaurant patios, for small parties and weddings. Hector started writing melodies and recording them. I'd play them over and over, penning lyrics and then we'd review together. Always the comprehensive musician, he showed me tricks for volume and control even on my own small instruments plus got me started singing harmony and playing percussive devices.

I'd bought an old brownstone to restore for the family. I was converting the carriage house out back into a loft apartment and studio for myself when I was in town and then my mother would move into the big part where I was living amidst construction and renovation. Hector and I were in the music room one night after a long, difficult rehearsal where we'd learned three songs and finalized an original. He looked at me and out of the blue, said, "I know I have to get a handle on my drinking. It's got me, man. I never knew anything could be this powerful, could have this much control over you. I'm glad you decided to stick around this trip."

I stared at him, unable to mask my surprise and not trying.

"That's the first time you've ever admitted it, Hector. That's great, man, a big goddamned step. You know there's only one thing that can help you come back...and you're holding it in your hands. I'll always do what I can, but you've got to lock on to what's important."

A few days later, I got what I would always refer to as “The Call”, from a friend in New York. She'd found an agent who liked my paintings and had also lined up art directors at two agencies interested in my commercial portfolio. It looked like the move I was waiting for. I wasted no time, planned optimistically. I closed up shop in Seattle, had everything left there shipped to Denver and started selling off as many houses as I could, even if I had to break even. I hired a management company for the two or three remaining rentals. I offered Hector the use of the brownstone, really the chance to get out of his old room in his parents' basement, which he'd returned to like some homing pigeon. I figured that if he had a place of his own, there'd be less temptation to hit the bars, especially with tons of books to read, a record collection to die for, and a music room for all our equipment in the basement. In exchange, he'd pay phone, heat, cable tv, keep tabs on the ongoing remodel job, take care of the brownstone...and he'd sign up in an alcoholics' counseling program. I silently hoped the generosity of the deal would soothe the sting of my abandoning the duo for greener, solo pastures. Yet he agreed happily, and the day he took me to the airport was a fine one for both of us. I can still see the firm way we faced each other at the departure gate, surrounded by all we had been and all we hoped to be.

That feeling had been so certain, Hector had felt so positive and alive that I was doubly shocked when word began to drift back by the end of summer that he was having parties at the house, that no one was there to let in the carpenters, that when you looked inside through the front window you could see the place was a mess. All I could get was his voice on my answering machine. He finally called me and without going into explanations, apologized and said he'd slipped a little bit but that he was okay and back on the wagon, everything was caught up and he gave me status reports on the remodeling

that were what I needed to hear. I was cold and less than friendly, hoping to scare him back into reality.

"Hey. I'm serious here. I've got too much riding on this for you to drop the ball now, Hector. Do you hear what I'm telling you? Don't fuck up, man. Please." His voice was encouraged, but contrite.

"You're right. You just don't know how hard it is sometimes..."

"And I don't want to know because you'll dwell on it. Tell me about when it's good." I could hear him smile then.

"It's best when I have a great place to come home to after work. And it was nice to have people over but I know that gets me into trouble so I've cooled it."

I steered him past that one, too. "How are those two new songs coming?"

"I know you're waiting for tapes but I'm still working on them...they're not quite right yet, not quite right."

After I hung up I couldn't avoid the pervasive feeling that something more than a new song wasn't quite right. Three weeks later I got an offer on the house the same day his alcohol counselor called, reporting missed sessions, bad attitude and other painful news. My mother was settling down into a cozy house in the old neighborhood that we'd planned to turn into a rental when the brownstone was ready, but she'd been showing signs of not wanting to move again. I decided to sell the brownstone. Within a week I'd struck a deal and called Hector to give him the news. I tempered it by offering him a chunk of change for moving me out of there so he'd have some funds if he didn't want to go back to his parents' basement. I wanted to just store my things until New York resolved into something besides tryout advertising work and maintaining my confidence after my

first show that earned good reviews, but minimal sales.

I got Hector on the first try. He was disconsolate at the news, but then I told him that we had lots of options, that I'd been thinking he might want to join me in New York or if things didn't pan out in Manhattan, I'd return and we'd go on the road with the music. With that to buck him up, he promised to call his counselor immediately, organize the move and he guaranteed a truck from work and plenty of strong arms. My mother and aunt agreed to pack fragiles and supervise the housecleaning. I spoke with Hector a few nights later and he told me everything was almost packed and all was on schedule for the move that weekend.

At four a.m. New York time the phone rang in my friend's apartment and somehow I knew it was for me. My mother's voice came across the wire, furious and scalding, with no prelude.

"If that lazy son-of-a-bitch Hector dares show up there tomorrow without help I'll skin him alive, David! He said he'd be up and ready but we stopped by tonight on our way home from the store and the house was dark. I used my key to get in and my god! If you could see that place...no, it's better you can't. There's enough dirty dishes in the kitchen for twenty people to have been living there! Your stereo cabinet was unlocked, wide open to the world through those side windows. Nothing's packed except your record albums, a couple boxes of books and the music room is empty."

Good morning, I thought. I was calm from being more asleep than awake and spoke soothingly.

"Well, all you can do is get the kitchen squared away and then pack it up, which was going to take you all morning anyway. Maybe he got hung up getting the truck or picking

up helpers."

"Helpers!" she snorted. "With help like his, I don't know...whatever made you think he could straighten out?"

"Mother," I snapped back. "I appreciate all your help and that you were over there after midnight, but it's four a.m. here. How 'bout if you guys just start in the kitchen and call me if he's not there by ten or eleven...okay?"

She grudgingly agreed and I rolled back into bed with a loud groan of misery. I slept poorly and rose early. By the time I'd showered and eaten breakfast, the phone rang again. It was nine-thirty.

"David's moving service." I answered glibly. My mother's voice hissed back.

"Well, I'm glad you think it's funny. It's almost lunchtime here and your 'friend', and I use the term loosely, just arrived." Her voice lowered into a harsh whisper. "He's drunk, David! Looks like he's been up all night."

"Did he bring any help?"

"Oh sure, there's six or seven of them...but they're all in the same shape!"

I smiled in spite of myself at the image of Hector and seven hung-over friends facing my mother's sobering wrath.

"Well, where's the old bartender in you, mother? If you can't sober them up and get them moving, no one can. I know you've got better things to do around there, but if you give them some coffee and take them to breakfast on me, they'll work better this afternoon."

"Take them out? Are you crazy? They don't even deserve to get paid for whatever they manage to get done. No. They can work while I get breakfast going, there's eggs and

bacon and juice still here. Well, do you want to talk to him?"

"No," I answered wearily, "but put him on." I breathed deeply as I heard him take the phone. "Hector...what the hell's going on?"

"Oh man, I'm really sorry. I just wound up not coming home last night."

"Well, I hear in spite of what you told me, that hardly anything's packed." His voice was ragged and thin with a familiar litany.

"It didn't go as fast as it was that night I talked to you...and things are tough, man. Karen found out where I was working and garnished my wages for child support again and I've had to work all kinds of overtime."

"So why didn't you pick up the goddamned phone and let somebody know you were falling behind? Damn! You know how much work has to get done over there today?"

He was silent for a moment. "Well, what else can I say, David? I'm here now, and I told you I was sorry."

There was a whine in his indignant tone that simply got under my skin.

"You know that just doesn't cut it, Hector. Apologies don't make up for the trust I put in you or...say, have you been paying all the bills like you agreed?"

The silence was longer this time and I shook my head, felt my hands growing like ice.

"Whatever you owe me, you better have it in cash or a money order to my mom by the end of the week. Are you gonna live like you're still in high school forever? Grow up, Hector! How could you do this to me?" His voice came back tight and angry.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand. I just got jealous of you."

"How could you be jealous? There's goddamned little of what's mine that isn't yours." I yelled so loudly someone came and closed the door of my room.

"I gave you a great roof over your head Hector, stood by you when no one else would, even after you ran out on me after the fire..." It was spoken before I knew it.

"I knew you'd bring that up." His voice was suddenly as icy as my own. "You'll never let me forget that one, will you? Sitting in that office I knew you'd blame it all on me and that you always would. Why don't you just come back and take care of this so you'll know it's done the way you want it? I don't want to be responsible for...I don't want to take a chance on letting you down again."

I was shaken to my core. "Listen you lazy, ungrateful son of a bitch, I'm on the first plane I can find and you better be finishing the last load when I roll in or so help me, I'll kill you. Now let me talk to my mom again."

"What did you say to him?" She whispered. "He went positively gray there at the end."

"I told him I'd be there in a few hours and he'd better be there, too, and almost finished...of course, I can't make it. I've got two interviews tomorrow that it's taken me almost two months to set up. But it ought to scare him into getting everything done...so listen. Thank you a thousand times. I owe you a big one for this. Call me later and keep me posted? If it doesn't work, I'll call for another day or two and we'll get some real movers in there tomorrow or Monday."

They managed somehow despite the poor start, and Hector disappeared the day after that. I spent a week worrying myself sick about him, hearing my harsh words over and over, even after all the dust from the move had settled. Then the bills began to arrive. Ninety days worth of utility bills. Three past due cable TV invoices that showed he'd added channels the week I left. The amounts seemed to add up as fast as I wrote checks and would for some time. Almost a year later when the stereo came out of storage, both

the power amplifier and one of my custom-designed and built speakers turned out to be cooked. My anger was feverish, with no outlet but to go shopping for new components. Instead I picked up the phone and called his parents, having heard he was back in the basement. Rosa answered, this time sounding as old as I'd expected her to years before. At first her voice was sympathetic, saying I'd missed him. But then her tone shifted to mortification as she softly said, "I just want you to know how awful Hector's dad and I feel about how he mistreated your trust. You were a good friend to him, David. More than he deserved."

I only partially heard her words, my memory clouded with the image of Hector gently lecturing on the roots of blues music with the care of a scholar. I remembered our old argument about talent excusing manners or honor, and decided that even if that was true, it was only for *fulfilled* talent. Abruptly, I asked if he still had the Martin guitar. Her voice was so full of embarrassment it hurt when she replied, "I'm sorry, David. He pawned that a long time ago."