

THE KILLING GROUND

It is late. All the little snakes are asleep. The world is black outside the car windows, just the dusty clay road in the headlights. Far from the city, past the last crossroads (where they used to bury suicides in England, with wooden stakes driven through their hearts), we are looking for a strange California hillside where we may see him, may even dance with him in his torn, bloody skins, come and play.

A train overpass opens in the sky before us; as we come out of it there is an unmarked fork in the road. The Crystals are singing

*See the way he walks down the street
Watch the way he shuffles his feet
Oh, how he holds his head up high
When he goes walkin' by
He's my guy
When he holds my hand I'm so proud
'Cause he's not just one of the crowd
My baby's always the one
To try the things they've never done
And just because of that they say
He's a rebel
And he'll never ever be
Any good
He's a rebel
'Cause he never ever does
What he should*

'He's a Rebel.' The driver looks left, right, left again. 'He don't know where he's going,' Keith says. 'Do you – are you sure this is the way?' Mick asks. Turning left, the driver does not answer. The radio is quite loud. 'Maybe he didn't hear you.'

Mick closes his eyes. Certain we are lost, but so tired, with no sleep for the past forty hours, less able each moment to

protest, to change direction, we proceed in a black Cadillac limousine into the vastness of space.

'Something up ahead here,' the driver says. Parked by the road is a Volkswagen van, a German police dog tied by a rope to the back door handle. The dog barks as we pass. Farther on there are more cars and vans, some with people in them, but most of the people are in the road, walking in small groups, carrying sleeping bags, canvas knapsacks, babies, leading more big ugly dogs. 'Let's get out,' Keith says. 'Don't lose us,' Mick tells the driver, who says, 'Where are you going?' but we are already gone, the five of us, Ron the Bag Man, Tony the Spade Heavy, the Okefenokee Kid, and of course Mick and Keith, Rolling Stones. The other members of the band are asleep back in San Francisco at the Huntington Hotel, except Brian, who is dead and, some say, never sleeps.

The road descends between rolling dry-grass shoulders, the kind of bare landscape where in 1950s science fiction movies the teenager and his busty girlfriend, parked in his hot rod, receive unearthly visitors, but it is crowded now with young people, most with long hair, dressed in heavy clothes, blue jeans, army fatigue jackets, against the December night air that revives us as we walk. Mick is wearing a long burgundy overcoat, and Keith has on a Nazi leather greatcoat, green with mold, that he will leave behind tomorrow or more accurately today, about sixteen hours from now, in the mad blind panic to get away from the place we are lightly swaggering toward. Mick and Keith are smiling, it is their little joke, to have the power to create this gathering by simply wishing for it aloud and the freedom to walk like anybody else along the busy barren path. There are laughter and low talking within groups, but little cross-conversation, though it seems none of us is a stranger; each wears the signs, the insignia, of the campaigns that have brought us, long before most of us have reached the age of thirty, to this desolate spot on the western slope of the New World.

'Tony, score us a joint,' Keith says, and before we have been another twenty steps giant black Tony has dropped back and fallen into stride with a boy who's smoking and hands Tony the joint, saying 'Keep it.' So we smoke and follow the trail down to a basin where the shoulders stretch into low hills already covered with thousands of people around campfires, some sleeping, some playing guitars, some passing smokes and great red jugs of wine. For a moment it stops us; it has the dream-like quality of one's deepest wishes, to have all the good people, all one's family, all the lovers, together in some private country of night. It is as familiar as our earliest dreams and yet so grand and final, campfires flickering like distant stars as far as our eyes can see, that it is awesome, and as we start up the hillside to our left, walking on sleeping bags and blankets, trying not to step on anyone's head, Keith is saying it's like Morocco, outside the gates of Marrakech, hear the pipes . . .

The people are camped right up to a cyclone fence topped with barbed wire, and we are trying to find the gate, while from behind us the Maysles film brothers approach across sleeping bodies with blinding blue-white quartz lamps. Mick yells to turn off the lights, but they pretend to be deaf and keep coming. The kids who have been looking up as we pass, saying Hi, Mick, now begin to join us; there is a caravan of young girls and boys strung out in the spotlights when we reach the gate which is, naturally, locked. Inside we can see the Altamont Speedway clubhouse and some people we know standing outside it. Mick calls, 'Could we get in, please?' and one of them comes over, sees who we are, and sets out to find someone who can open the gate. It takes a while, and the boys and girls all want autographs and to go inside with us. Mick tells them we can't get in ourselves yet, and no one has a pen except me, and I have learned not to let go of mine because they get the signatures and go spinning away in a frenzy of bliss and exhilaration, taking my trade with them. So we stand on one

foot and then the other, swearing in the cold, and no one comes to let us in, and the gate, which is leaning, rattles when I shake it, and I say we could push it down pretty easy, and Keith says, 'The first act of violence.'



J.P. Alley: *Hambone's Meditations*

ONE

Something about the curious wanderings of these griots through the yellow desert northward into the Maghreb country, often a solitary wandering; their performances at Arab camps on the long journey, when the black slaves came out to listen and weep; then the hazardous voyage into Constantinople, where they play old Congo airs for the great black population of Stamboul, whom no laws or force can keep within doors when the sound of griot music is heard in the street. Then I would speak of how the blacks carry their music with them to Persia and even to mysterious Hadramaut, where their voices are held in high esteem by Arab masters. Then I would touch upon the transplantation of Negro melody to the Antilles and the two Americas, where its strangest black flowers are gathered by the alchemists of musical science and the perfume thereof extracted by magicians . . . (How is that for a beginning?)

LAFCADIO HEARN: in a letter to Henry E. Krehbiel

She was sitting on a cream-colored couch, pale blond head bent over a red-jacketed book, legs crossed, one heel resting on the marble coffee table. Behind her in the picture window there was a thick green hedge and then, far away below, the City of the Angels, bone-white buildings reaching out to where, this being a fairly clear day, the Pacific Ocean could be seen, glinting in the sunlight through the poison mist that the land

and sky became at the horizon. There were other people on the matching couches of the room, the lobby of that motel-like mansion, and more coming in now, but she did not look up, not even when I said 'Excuse me' and stepped over her extended leg to sit down next to her husband, Charlie Watts, one of the Rolling Stones.

'Do you remember him, Shirley?' he asked.

A fast glance. 'No.'

'A writer. You remember.'

'I hope he's not like one who came to our house,' she said. Then she looked at me again and something happened in her green eyes. 'You're the one.' She closed the book. 'You wrote about me in the kitchen.'

'Somebody else,' I said. 'You're reading Priestley? *Prince of Pleasure*. Do you know Nancy Mitford's books?'

'You said I was *washing dishes*. I have never been so insulted.'

'But Shirley, you *were* washing dishes. What else could I say?'

'You should have made something up.'

'Where was this?' asked Bill Wyman, another Rolling Stone, sitting with his girlfriend, Astrid Lindstrom, the Swedish Ice Princess, far away from me at the end of the couch. 'Great bass sound, ennit?' A portable phonograph in a corner of the room was playing 1930s records by the Kansas City Six.

'Yeah, Walter Page, really good,' Charlie said. 'An American magazine. They had it at the office.'

'Was it about all of us? We never *saw* it,' Astrid said. Wyman kept scrapbooks.

'I shouldn't want to, if I were you,' Shirley said.

'Never get a sound like that with an electric bass,' said Wyman, a bass player whose hands were too small to play the acoustic bass.

‘The electric bass is more flexible,’ I said, trying to help divert the conversation. ‘You can do more things with it.’

‘You can’t do *that*,’ Wyman said. ‘Can you, Charlie?’

‘Never,’ Charlie said as Page’s bass and Jo Jones’ brushes blended with Freddie Green’s guitar, their rhythm steady as a healthy heartbeat.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘We’ve had you on the defensive since you got here,’ Charlie said. ‘Did you happen to bring the paper with Ralph Gleason’s column? We haven’t seen it.’

‘I read it on the way in.’

‘Was it bad?’

‘It could have been worse, but not much.’ Once I asked Charlie how he felt about the many press attacks on the Stones, and he said, ‘I never think they’re talking about me.’ And Shirley had said, ‘Charlie and Bill aren’t really Stones, are they? Mick, Keith, and Brian, they’re the big bad Rolling Stones.’

Charlie smiled, pulling down the corners of his mouth. ‘I always liked Gleason’s jazz pieces. I know him, actually. I mean I met him, the last time we played San Francisco. I’d like to ask him why he’s become so set against us.’

A man with receding black curly hair and bushy scimitar sideburns was coming into the room from the open doorway at the far end, wearing white shorts, carrying two tennis rackets and a towel. ‘Tennis, anyone?’ he asked in a voice it would hurt to shave with.

I had never seen him, but I knew his voice from suffering it on the telephone. He was Ronnie Schneider, nephew of Allen Klein, the Rolling Stones’ business manager. Almost before I knew it I was standing between him and the door. ‘Did you get my agent’s letter?’ I asked after telling him who I was.

‘Yeah, I got it,’ he said. ‘There are some things we have to change. Tell your agent to call me.’

‘He says he’s been trying to get you. There’s not much time.’

‘I *know*,’ Ronnie said, his voice a fiend’s imitation of girlish delight. He gave me a bright smile, as if I had just swallowed the hook. ‘Doesn’t anybody here want to play tennis?’

‘I’ll play,’ Wyman said.

‘Here, this one’s warped.’ Ronnie handed him a racket shaped like a shoehorn, and they went out across the patio and the juicy Saint Augustine grass to the tennis court. I watched them through the glass door as they walked; then I noticed that my hat was in my hand, and I decided to sit down and try to relax.

Serafina, the Watts’ eighteen-month-old daughter, came in with her nanny, and Shirley took her out to the kitchen for something to eat. Astrid went along, possibly to chill the orange juice. The Kansas City Six were playing ‘Pagin’ the Devil.’

‘What did Gleason say, exactly?’ Charlie asked me.

‘He said the tickets cost too much, the seating is bad, the supporting acts aren’t being paid enough, and all this proves that the Rolling Stones despise their audience. I may have left something out. Right. He also said, “They put on a good show.”’

The back door opened and in walked a gang of men. Tall and lean and long-haired, they stood for a moment in the center of the room as if posing for a faded sepia photograph of the kind that used to end up on posters nailed to trees. The Stones Gang: Wanted Dead or Alive, though only Mick Jagger, standing like a model, his knife-blade ass thrust to one side, was currently awaiting trial. Beside him was Keith Richards, who was even thinner and looked not like a model but an insane advertisement for a dangerous carefree Death – black

ragged hair, dead-green skin, a cougar tooth hanging from his right earlobe, his lips snarled back from the marijuana cigaret between his rotting fangs, his gums blue, the world's only bluegum white man, poisonous as a rattlesnake.

From his photographs I recognized Brian Jones' replacement, Mick Taylor. He was pink and blond, pretty as a Dresden doll beside Jagger and Richards, who had aged more than a year in the year since I'd seen them. One of the others, with dark hair frosted pale gold and a classic country and western outfit from Nudie the Rodeo Tailor, I remembered seeing on television and record covers – he was Gram Parsons, and he came, so I'd heard, from my hometown, Waycross, Georgia, on the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp. We had not met, but I had reviewed his band the Flying Burrito Brothers' new album, *The Gilded Palace of Sin*. I had no idea he knew the Stones. Seeing him here, finding another boy from Waycross at this altitude, I sensed a pattern, some design I couldn't make out, and I got up to speak to Gram Parsons, as if he were a prophet and I were a pilgrim seeking revelation.

But as I stepped around the table Jagger turned, and for the first time since he came into the room we were facing, too close, his eyes like a deer's, large, shadowed, startled. I remembered reading on the plane out here a *Time* magazine report of a study showing that when two people look at each other, the one who looks away first is likely to dominate the situation. So I gave Mick a friendly smile, and he looked away, just like the dominant people in *Time*. I had the feeling I'd lost a game I was trying not to play, but then I was past Mick, saying to Gram, 'Good to see you.'

'Yeah,' Gram said reasonably, 'but who are you?'

I told him, and he said, 'I dug what you wrote about our band.'

'I'm from Waycross,' I said. He peered at me for a second,

then handed me the joint he'd been smoking. We walked out onto the narrow front lawn (as we went out, Keith was saying to Charlie, 'Did you see what your friend Gleason said?'), sat on the grass beside the hedge, and talked about people and places in Georgia. Gram said he had no intention of going back. I remembered my mother telling me that after Gram's mother and father had divorced, his father, a man called 'Coon Dog' Connor, had killed himself, and Gram's mother married a New Orleans man named Parsons. I wouldn't know until later, when people started writing articles and books giving Gram belated credit for creating a new form of music, that his mother, whose father had owned Cypress Gardens and most of the oranges in central Florida, had died of alcoholic malnutrition the day before Gram graduated from high school. Even the house in Waycross where Gram lived had been sold and moved off beside the main southbound highway.

From where we were sitting, high in the sky over Sunset Boulevard, it seemed that by facing the east we could see, except for the smog, all the way back to Georgia. But if the smog had gone, what could we have seen except the people who make the smog? Gram inhaled deeply on the joint, an Indian silver swastika bracelet hanging on his wrist, his eyes opaque pale green, like bird's eggs. 'Look at it, man,' he said, as if he had heard my thoughts. 'They call it America, and they call it civilization, and they call it television, and they believe in it and salute it and sing songs to it and eat and sleep and die still believing in it, and – and – I don't know,' he said, taking another drag, 'then sometimes the Mets come along and win the World Series—'

With all the revelation I could handle for the moment, I spun back through the house to the patio, where most of the people who were here already and some new ones who had arrived were breaking up a powwow, leaving Jagger talking

upward to a very tall young man with a Buffalo Bill mane and red side whiskers. ‘Now, Chip,’ Mick was saying (so I knew he was real, this man who called himself Chip Monck), ‘we can’t *do* audience-participation things. I mean, I appreciate your suggestion, and we do want to get them involved, but we can’t *play* “With a Little Help from My Friends,” and – what do they *know*? You can’t expect people to sing along on “Paint It Black.” Rock and roll has become very cool now, but the Rolling Stones are not a cool sort of thing, it’s a much more old-fashioned thing we do, it’s not as if the Rolling Stones were, y’know, five *dedicated musicians* – I mean, I’d much rather go on stage in a gold Cadillac or wearing a gold suit or summink like that—’

Suddenly but gently, calmly, Chip put his hands on Mick’s shoulders and said, in the mellow baritone that soothed the dope-freaked, mud-soaked thousands two months ago at the Woodstock Pop Festival, ‘I just want you to know how pleased I am to be working with you guys.’

Mick laughed. When Chip had touched him, Mick’s hands had come up to hold Chip at arm’s length by the collarbone. Not certain whether Mick was laughing at him, Chip also laughed. They stood, knees slightly bent, in the classic starting position of wrestlers, grinning at each other.

Inside, someone was playing the piano. I looked, saw that it was Keith, joined him on the bench and asked, ‘What about this book?’ I trusted Keith, at least to tell the truth; a bluegum man don’t have to lie.

‘What about it?’ he asked, playing no recognizable melody.

‘I need a letter.’

‘I thought Jo sent you a letter.’

‘Many letters, but not what I need. She says I need Allen Klein’s approval.’

‘You don’t need anybody’s approval. All you need is us. Jo! Hey, Jo!’

From the depths of this serpentine house Georgia Bergman emerged. She was the Stones' secretary, an Anglo-American girl in her middle twenties, with black kinky hair done in the current electric fashion, sticking out all around like a fright wig.

'What about this letter?' Keith asked. He was still playing, nothing you could recognize.

'We sent it,' Jo said, 'but it wasn't right, it didn't work, it umm—'

'I'll talk to Mick about it,' Keith said, no certain comfort to me, but I said 'Fine,' and Jo took me for a walk on the grounds of this place, rented at great expense from some of the Du Ponts. We strolled out the back, toward the far corner of the property, where there were a child's playhouse, slide, and swings. I walked with my head down, groping toward thought.

Just over a year earlier, in September 1968, thinking that with one more story I could publish a collection of pieces about music, I went to England to visit the Rolling Stones. For almost three years, since Mick, Keith, and Brian had been arrested for possession of drugs, the Stones had stayed out of sight, performing in public only once. I saw the Stones, attended Brian Jones' trial, and wrote a story, but I had only glimpsed – in Brian's eyes as he glanced up from the dock – the mystery of the Rolling Stones. In the spring, after the story was published, I asked the Stones' cooperation in writing a book about them. It was June, and I was still waiting for an answer, when Brian, who had started the band, left it because, he said, of 'musical differences' with the other Stones. Less than a month later, Jo Bergman called me in the middle of the night to say that Brian had been found dead, drowned in his swimming pool.

After some weeks Jo sent me a letter for the Stones, offering their cooperation subject to agreements between the Stones, the publishers, and me, but you can't do good work that way. You have to write the best you can and share control

of nothing, neither the manuscript nor the money. Any other arrangement produces not writing but publicity. Finally Jo turned the book matter over to Ronnie Schneider for Allen Klein, widely considered the most powerful agent in show business. In self-defense, I hired an agent, Klein's literary equivalent. He sent Schneider a letter to sign for the Stones. But Keith said I didn't need Klein. Then why did Jo tell Klein, or his nephew Schneider, about my book?

Jo sat in a swing and swung slowly back and forth. It was, as I would learn, typical of the Stones' manner of doing business that I didn't know exactly what Jo did for them, and neither did she, and neither did they. She had consulted an astrologer in London who had told her that I would write this book, but that it would cost me everything except my life. She did not know the details – that while writing it I would be assaulted by Confederate soldiers and Hell's Angels, would go to jail, be run over by a lumber truck on the Memphis-Arkansas bridge, fall off a Georgia waterfall and break my back, have epileptic seizures while withdrawing from drugs – but if she had known, she would not have told me. She didn't tell me about the astrologer until much later, when there was no way to turn back. Now, eager, I climbed a swing chain with my hands – climbed it easily, for months I'd done nothing but write Basic English letters to the Stones and lift weights. As I reached the top and started down, my scarf fluttered up, my left hand clutched it around the chain, the silk was like oil, and I crashed to the ground, searing my hand, mangling the little finger, shocking it blue-white, with great crimson drops welling up where the flesh was torn away from the nail, dropping in the dust. 'I thought you'd do that,' Jo said, and I thought, Where am I, what is happening to me? I was in California, being punished for wearing a scarf.

I walked away from the playground with a kind of psychic

limp. Al Steckler, a promotion man from the Klein office in New York, was arriving at the back gate, carrying an attaché case. We'd met in London. I told him hello and went inside to sit on the couch and suck my little finger. The next thing I knew, Jagger was sitting beside me, asking, 'What about this book?'

'What about it?' I looked around the room. Steckler and a few other people were there, Jo sitting on the floor with a Polaroid camera, taking a picture of Mick and me.

'Those books are never any good,' Mick said.

'That's true,' I said, assuming that he meant books like *My Story* by Zsa Zsa Gabor, as told to Gerold Frank. 'But I'm not going to write one of those books.'

'What would your book be about?'

'About?'

'You know, what would be in it?'

'What will be in your next song?'

'A girl in a barroom, man, I don't know. It's much easier to write a song than a book.'

'I am hip,' I said. 'I am fucking cognizant, Bucky.' He laughed so pleasantly that I said, 'Well, maybe I can give you some idea.' I gazed into the gloom, frowning, and Mick said, 'You don't have to tell me now, you can give it some thought if you like—'

'Naw, if I think about it too long I'll get bored.'

Mick laughed again. The others were quiet, watching us. Jo was waiting for the photograph to develop.

'Maybe I can make a comparison,' I said, and I told Mick that I had written a story about a blues singer who had swept the streets in Memphis for more than forty years, but he's more than just a street sweeper, because he's never stopped playing, if you see what I mean. I didn't look at Mick to find out whether he saw. You write, I told him, about things that move your heart, and in the story about the old blues singer I wrote

about where he lives and the songs he sings and just lists of the things he swept up in the streets, and I can't explain to him, Furry Lewis, what it is about him that moves my heart, and I can't tell you what I would write about the Rolling Stones, and so, well, I guess I can't answer your question. No, he said, you answered it, and for the first time since I thought, long months ago, of writing this book, I felt almost good about it. That should have warned me.

Jo showed us the photograph. It was too dark, Mick and I were dark isolate heads, like Mount Rushmore as a ruin. Steckler opened his case to submit for Mick's approval the cover for the Stones' concert program, featuring a girl wearing an Empire hairdo, a cloudy cape blown back to reveal her zaftig figure, and a surprised expression. Mick approved. Keith and Gram came in from the tennis court (none of the Stones could play tennis, and they lost balls, can after can of balls, day after day; you'd come up Doheny toward this place, on Oriole Drive, and tennis balls would pass you, headed toward Sunset) and sat down at the piano. Mick sang along with them. The afternoon lengthened. It was one of those Scott Fitzgerald Sunday afternoons in Hollywood that go on and on.

Just a kid actin' smart
I went and broke my darlin's heart
I guess I was too young to know

The force of romantic poetry, its details cribbed by Coleridge and Wordsworth from the writings of William Bartram on the country and the legends around the Okefenokee Swamp, had landed Mick and Keith (whose dog Okefenokee I would later meet), the two English rhythm & blues boys, at the piano with a Georgia country cracker singing Hank Williams songs. Mick didn't look sure he liked it.

Steckler was saying to the telephone, 'A week from now is no good. We must have extra lines in by tomorrow . . . Would it help if I called the governor? . . . I'm quite serious, dear.'

I'll never see that gal of mine
Lord, I'm in Georgia doin' time
I heard that long, lonesome whistle blow

Just off the living room in the office (I told you this place was like a motel), yet another promo man, David Sandison from England, was pounding out a press release that, as I read it over his shoulder, said nothing about Brian Jones, only noted that this tour 'marks the American debut with the Stones of Mick Taylor.' It condemned, without naming him, Ralph Gleason's attack on the Stones, assuring the press that 'everyone will get to see and hear the group to best advantage.' The release also said the tour 'will take in 13 cities' and then listed fourteen cities where the Stones would play. I was glad to see that I was not the only one who didn't quite know what was going on.

In an alcove of the office there were a bar and a refrigerator. 'Want a beer?' Sandison asked, fetching one for himself.

'No, thanks,' I said. The office was not bad as offices go, with bookshelves around the walls and a large desk cluttered with papers.

'At first they were going to play three days each in three cities,' Sandison said, opening the green Heineken bottle and filling a glass. 'Then there were seven cities.' He took a long drink and I saw, there on the desk, partly covered by other papers, the letter I'd heard about but not seen, from my agent to 'Mr Ronny Schneider.'

'Now there are – how many? Fifteen?' Sandison asked.

'Dear Mr Schneider,' I read. 'This letter will confirm . . .

your willingness and that of the Stones to cooperate . . . we will seek and obtain the approval of the Stones . . . through your office before entering . . . agreement with publishing house . . . Rolling Stones will share in the proceeds . . .

‘Or is it thirteen?’ Sandison asked.

‘. . . we further agree that the final text will be cleared with the Stones and their management . . .’

‘Doesn’t matter, it’ll probably change again tomorrow,’ Sandison said, coming back from the bar as I slipped the letter into my shirt.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised at anything,’ I said, going out into the hall, where I came face to face with Schneider.

‘I’ve been looking for you,’ he said. ‘We need to talk about our deal. First of all, I think the boys should get half.’

‘Talk to my agent,’ I said, planning to tell my agent not to talk to him. ‘I don’t know nothing about that stuff.’

Earlier this afternoon I had driven out of Memphis, Tennessee, where I lived, along the wide, tree-lined streets, oaks arching over the road out of town, the old town center within the Parkways, on the way to the airport. Farther out along the road there was a wide strip of land that had been, ten years ago when I first came to Memphis, a row of three or four farms, with a mule in the field, an unpainted cabin or one wrapped with imitation redbrick tarpaper, an old Ford disintegrating in the front yard, an old black man in overalls sitting on the front porch smoking a pipe, all of it laced over with poverty and honeysuckle, all of it now gone; as I passed there was only a flat expanse of mud, little puddles standing in it, a television picture tube sunk like a fossil in the timeless ooze. I had to pass the mud-colored office building where Christopher, who if she wants can be one person after another, who – allow me to show you this blue-eyed watercolor unicorn – was teaching our cat

Hodge the alphabet, had for the last four years taken reservations for Omega Airlines. She had a sweet disposition, and her manners were just as nice. 'Rats and mice,' she would say when she wanted to curse. But the work at Omega was hard on her, and so on us. For the last three years, since Christopher and I had entered what passed for married life, I had taken flights at family rates to research the stories I wrote so slowly that no one could imagine how desperate I was for the money.

Later twenty of us, the Stones and company, lazed around a sunken, white-clothed table at the Yamato-E, a Japanese restaurant in the Century Plaza Hotel, waiting for dinner. It took a long time, and someone – Phil Kaufman – passed around a handful of joints. Kaufman, from Los Angeles, a dwarfy German type with a yellow mustache, hung out with Gram and had been hired to help take care of the Stones while they were in town. He had done time on a dope charge at Terminal Island Correctional Institute, San Pedro, California, with someone named Charlie Manson. The rest of us had not heard of Manson yet, although we soon would, but it would be several years – four – before Kaufman made the news by stealing Gram's dead body from a baggage ramp at the L.A. airport and burning it in the Mojave Desert. (The subject of funeral arrangements had come up during a conversation between Gram and Phil some months before the night – in September 1973 – when Gram overdosed on morphine and alcohol.) As I started to light one of the joints, I noticed that the others were putting theirs away. Chip Monck, who had been flying around for the last few days, checking light and sound conditions at the concert locations, and who was now sitting across the table from me asleep, his head lolling to one side, woke up, saw me holding a joint and a burning match, said that there would be no dope on this tour, and if you got arrested

with any, you'd be on your own. Then he fell asleep again. I thought he sounded silly, but I put the joint in my pocket.

As Keith was coming back from the toilet, a man and woman passed behind him, and the woman, seeing his ragged black mane, said in a loud drunken voice, 'You'd be cute if you put a rinse on your hair.'

Keith turned, smiling, showing his fangs. 'You'd be cute,' he said, 'if you put a rinse on your cunt.'

Some of the group, led by Jo Bergman, were singing 'Happy Birthday.' Ronnie Schneider was twenty-six today. I was twenty-seven. I did not sing. Neither did the Stones.

After dinner we went in a fleet of Cadillacs to the Ash Grove, a small club where the old blues singer Big Boy Crudup was sharing the bill with the young blues singer Taj Mahal. The place was too crowded to see if you were sitting, so some of us were standing in the aisle when a tall redheaded cowboy kid with freckles came up and told us he was Taj's road manager, and he was happy the Stones were in L.A. because he remembered how good the Stones were to them when they were in London. We got grass, coke, Scotch, wine, anything you want backstage.

We were in the aisle again, Crudup was singing 'That's All Right, Mama,' with Taj's band, two black men, two white men, and one Indian playing together, and I was feeling each vibration of the music with every spidery tracing of my nervous system when the road manager said to me, 'You know, it's hard, workin' for niggers.'

I didn't know what to say to that. He nodded at the rest of the band: 'And that bass player and guitar player and drummer may look like, uh, Caucasians, but in they hearts they niggers.'

I didn't know what to say to that either. Then he completed the thought: 'But you know, you can have more fun with niggers than anybody else in the world.'

TWO

Music's music. Talkin' 'bout puttin' on a show in New York, I'm gone be like the monkey, I ain't gwine. There's so much shootin' and killin' and goin' on now. These places, all the folks be all crowded, you don't know what's gone happen. Ain't I'm right? You can't tell how these guys is, fella. Pshaw, man, they's snipers everywhere. I don't mean hidin'. I can recall three or four fellas was killed dead for playin' music. Me and you partners – I got you wid me – we playin' – you see what I'm talkin' 'bout. Well, we *over* dem. I ain't gone call 'em, dey dead now. Poisoned one and kilt the other. They done it 'cause he could play better than they could. I'm tellin' you what I know, now. I wouldn't kill nobody 'cause he could beat me doin' anything. That's right. Ain't I'm right? Anybody gone kill me, 'cause you and me can do a little better than they can. They callin' on us all the time. Ain't callin' on them. Me and you goin', say we goin', let's go. We play over there, jump up an' mess you up. Mess you up, boy. Another thing, you be around these places, don't do much drinkin'. Drop a spool on you. Don't drink much whiskey. Keep on playin'. They drop a button on you, boy, 'fore you can be sure. They got a gang, now. You try it. Mess you up, boy. Buck Hobbs – some friends I ain't gone call they names – he could play, they couldn't play like him. The same song I play 'bout Frankie and Albert, all them old songs, 'John Henry,' he could play. Others couldn't beat him. One hit him 'cross the head one night

with a guitar, 'cause they couldn't beat him. It didn't make him no difference. He just rock right on. Got down and stopped playin', he got hold of a drink, he was dead. Buck Hobbs. They kilt him. I think about all that. I don't want to leave here. House full. Fightin'. Over in our home where I was born, up in Pleasant Hill, that's where they done it. Just near Pleasant Hill. In the grove.

MISSISSIPPI JOE CALLICOTT

The 11:45 a.m. train from Paddington Station (£3 2s 5d return and Who is the third that walks beside you?) rolled west from the drab blocks of flats at the outskirts of London to the May-green fields around Reading and Didcot, with trees, hedges, pink pigs, black and white cattle, tractors, thatch-roofed barns and houses under heavy white clouds.

I sat facing forward, trying to read the biography of Hemingway that William Burroughs recommended during one of our talks about Brian Jones, earlier in the spring, when my life, as Brian's had, was beginning to come apart. I was reading to find out how Hemingway kept going after he lost Hadley. For the first time in almost ten years – it was 1970 – I was a single man; that is to say, alone.

Past Kemble, after the Swindon change, there were hills, horses on hillside fields in the sun. To the left of the track the land dropped away, green treetops down in the valley reminded me of the foothills of middle Georgia. Outside Stroud, as we were crossing a stream moving quickly through young willows, I saw ducks rising together and schoolchildren on a narrow dirt path leading under a small brick bridge, one boy waving a Union Jack at the train. Two seats ahead of me, a woman was telling her little boy and girl to stop singing 'Yellow Submarine.'

After Gloucester, where the land is flat again, the train heads north to come to Cheltenham. The official guidebook still called it Cheltenham Spa, though the ‘healing medicinal waters’ that attracted ‘the elite of many generations’ went bad some years ago. Exactly how many years ago the guidebook didn’t say. It didn’t matter. I didn’t come here to take a bath.

Taxis were parked outside the redbrick train station, but because I always do things the hard way, I let them leave with other passengers and started walking, with a black nylon flight bag – too small to hold clothes, a tape recorder, and the book about Hemingway – slung on a strap from my shoulder, the book like a circuit rider’s Bible in my hand. There are back streets in Cheltenham that look like back streets in Queens, New York, or Birmingham, Alabama, Depression-era apartment buildings and houses with lawns where no grass grows. The book and the bag were both getting heavy by the time I reached the center of town. Cheltenham was built mostly during the Regency, and the stately columns of the Municipal Center regard, across the broad Promenade and its tree-darkened sidewalks, the Imperial Gardens, bright with red, mauve, and yellow tulips planted in neat curves and rectangles, sparrows dancing about, pigeons whirling and coursing overhead.

I walked on to a side street, found a phone kiosk, and from its picture in the yellow pages chose the Majestic Hotel on Park Place. It looked like the hotel where W. C. Fields would stay when he was in town. It was also between where I was and Hatherley Road, where Brian Jones grew up.

I had walked far enough to welcome, if I had any sense, a ride in a taxi, but I was not ready for that. I wanted to walk past the fine shops of the Promenade and the neat houses under the manicured trees. Cheltenham was designed to be a nice place, and it is a nice place, up to the point where they decide you are not so nice. Some of Cheltenham’s nicest people

had not spoken to Brian Jones' mother and father in years, while others stopped speaking to them only when Brian was buried in consecrated ground, his final outrage. You can listen close and hear the clippers clipping the hedges of Cheltenham.

The Majestic Hotel loomed like a faded ghost among apartment buildings going to seed. The desk clerk was in a little glass case like a ticket booth. The bartender leaned on his elbows in the empty cocktail bar, wrinkling the sleeves of his starched white jacket. The elevator smelled as if it had been closed since the 1920s. Slowly it took me to the third floor, to my single with a sink. The room was loaded, as are all single hotel rooms, with intimations of loneliness and death, of killing the night in loneliness. I lay down on the salmon-colored bedspread.

My feet rested for a few minutes, but my mind didn't. No book is any help against loneliness, and no drug can touch it. After she left him, Brian must have kept on thinking about Anita Pallenberg as, alone, I kept on thinking. Anita thought that Marlon, the son she had with Keith last year after Brian died, would be Brian reborn. He wasn't, but she did not stop thinking about Brian. 'I'll see him again. We promised to meet again. It was life or death,' Anita said. 'One of us had to go.' A tough decision. I swung my tired feet off the bed. Thinking was getting me nowhere.

The elevator was just as slow going down. The bartender was still leaning on the bar, not a customer in sight.

I walked back to the Imperial Gardens and sat on a green park bench to smoke some marijuana and observe the end of Wednesday afternoon. Maids were clearing the red, blue, and green tables under the orange-and-yellow-striped umbrellas that said *Tuborg*, where a few people were still eating snacks among the flowers. The inscription on the gardens' sundial read: 'I only count your sunny hours/Let others tell of storms

and showers.' Now just one boy and girl were lying on the grass, not moving, as if they intended to spend the night here.

Looking out over the tulips and trees and softly humming motors of twilight Cheltenham, I thought of Brian saying, on a visit home near the end of his life, 'If only I'd never left here.' I fieldstripped the cigaret end, tearing the short paper, rolling it into a tiny pill that would vanish, with the smoking material, into the wind. Then I crossed the Promenade, passing the third military monument I'd seen in this town. The two others were for Africa 1899–1902 and World War I. This one's plaque read, 'This memorial was originally surmounted by a gun taken at Sevastopol. During the war of 1939–1945 the gun was handed to the government to provide the metal for armaments.' Though it was smaller, Cheltenham reminded me of Macon, Georgia, where I went to high school wearing an army uniform, carrying a rifle: the last place where I felt constrained to fieldstrip cigarets, not because of smoking marijuana, but to keep the area well-policed. Both are pretty towns with many trees.

It was 6:44, and I just had time for a sandwich. Down the street was a café that looked as deserted as the bar at the Majestic, just an East Indian girl in a white uniform behind the counter. She was putting things away, getting ready to close, but she asked if I wanted to eat.

I bought a watery orange drink and a cheese sandwich, because there aren't many ways to ruin a cheese sandwich. A woman came in, took the money from the cash register, let the girl out the back door and locked it. As the girl left I realized that she had the only dark skin I had seen in this town.

Back at the hotel, I was so cool and relaxed that my tape recorder was still packed away when the desk clerk called to say that a taxi was waiting. I loaded the recorder with tape and then decided to leave it.

Before I could look over my notes the taxi pulled into the parking lane to let me out. The mustard-colored semi-detached houses with tiny squares of glass behind brick fences, perched uneasily on the rim of the middle class, looked so small and regular that I thought I must be at the wrong place. But I entered at the gate and went up to the front door, where a glowing plastic bell-ringer bore the name L. B. Jones. I rang the bell and waited, trying to smile. It was night now, and I was standing in a pool of yellow light under the porch lantern, cars racing past on the dark road, flashing in each other's headlights.

The little man who opened the door had receding grey hair and a rather broad but sharp-nosed face, red under the pale, lined skin. As I began talking, I couldn't stop thinking that he was the same size as Brian, that they must have identical skeletons. He had Brian's, or Brian had his, way of walking almost on tiptoe, holding his hands back beside his hips. He had the same short arms and small, strong hands, and though Mr Jones' eyes, behind glasses framed with gilt metal and grey plastic, did not have the quality Brian's eyes had of being lit from within, he had Brian's funny one-eyed way of looking at things. He stood before me, one foot forward, hands down by his pockets almost in fists, peering with one eye.

I said who I was, Mr Jones said he was glad to see me and led me into the living room, where I sat on a couch, my back to the front wall, and he sat in a stuffed chair printed with ugly flowers before the unlit electric fireplace. He told me that I was the fourth of my countrymen who had come to discuss writing about Brian. 'People come with letters from publishers, then they go away and one hears nothing more. I don't know what to make of it. I think they're pulling my leg,' he said, again turning one eye on me.

I started to answer him, getting as far as, 'Er, ah,' when

Brian's mother came in. I struggled to my feet and said hello. She looked gentler than Mr Jones. She called him Lewis and he called her Louie, short for Louisa. Her eyes were a normal, pretty blue. Her hair was as yellow as Brian's, a shade that appeared to age well if given the chance.

We all sat down, Mrs Jones in a chair at one end of the room, me at the other end, Mr Jones in the middle, gazing at the cold fireplace. I tried to explain what I was doing, but the room was capturing all my mind. It contained, besides us and an orange tomcat, typically turgid English furnishings, an old Heathkit record player, an older radio, a black and white television set, a flowering bonsai tree under a glass dome, an American Indian figurine given to each of the Stones in 1964 by the German teen magazine *Bravo*, and on the mantle over the fireplace, a little rubber doll with bright red trousers and a white mane of spun nylon hair, the most vulgar possible caricature of Brian, and yet it seemed a totem to him, the central object in this tiny grotesque room. The orange cat curled in Mrs Jones' lap. I asked his name, and she said 'Jinx.'

'Such a shame,' Brian's father was saying. 'Brian could have been a brilliant journalist, he could always play better chess than anyone else at school, so much talent wasted.' He put his back teeth together and grimaced as if a horrible transformation was taking place.

Mrs Jones asked, 'Did you have a good supper tonight, love?'

I thought of the supper I had tonight and other suppers missed and other things than suppers missed and some of the things not missed, all because of what I had seen in her son's eyes. 'Fine, thanks,' I said. Then I started asking questions.

Mr and Mrs Jones met in South Wales, where they were living with their parents. Mr Jones' parents were school-teachers. His father sang in opera societies and led the choir

at church. Mrs Jones' father was for over fifty years a master builder and church organist near Cardiff. Mrs Jones' mother was sickly and so didn't train for anything and was now quite well at eighty-three. Her parents were living, his were dead.

Mr Jones studied engineering at Leeds University, then married and started working for Rolls-Royce. In 1939, with the war under way, he was transferred to Cheltenham, where he and Mrs Jones had lived ever since, he working as an aeronautical engineer, she giving piano lessons.

Brian was born on the last day of February 1942. The Joneses' second child, a daughter, died at about the age of two.

'How did she die?' I asked as gently as possible.

'She died, and that's all I'll say about it,' Mr Jones said. I tried to explain again why I was asking questions, but Mr Jones had been hurt too many times by lies and by the truth in print, and he was nowhere near ready to trust a writer. He told me that their youngest child, Barbara, born in 1946, now a physical education teacher, wanted no part of anything to do with Brian, and he asked me to leave her alone. He ground his teeth again. But he couldn't stop himself from talking and bringing out family photograph albums.

One photograph showed Brian about five years old, playing with a grey tabby cat.

'One day when both Brian and the cat were very young, Brian announced that the cat's name was Rolobur,' said Mrs Jones. "That's Rolobur," he said. Don't know whether he was trying to say something else and it came out Rolobur, or what. He painted it blue once.'

'The cat?'

'With no idea to hurt it,' Mr Jones said. 'Which he didn't, he used food coloring that soon came off, and the cat lived with us for about sixteen years.'

'Brian was a strange child,' his mother said.

She started giving Brian piano lessons when he was six, and he studied it until he was fourteen. 'But he wasn't terribly interested,' she said. 'Then he started playing the clarinet.'

'Which didn't help his asthma any,' Mr Jones said. 'Brian had croup when he was four, and it left him with asthma. He had terrible asthma attacks. It was always bad when he went to the beach on holiday, and he'd been having bad attacks down at Cotchford, very bad attacks down there just before his death.'

Cotchford Farm was once the home of A. A. Milne; Pooh Bear lived in its Hefalump Wood. It seemed right that Brian should have the place, where he died so soon, less than a year after he bought it. Many things had hurt him by then, and Mr Jones could not stop going over them, trying to find where things went wrong, where to place the blame. 'I was down there with him, in a sort of junk room there at Cotchford, not long before he died. He came across a photograph of Anita and just stood for a moment looking at it. He said, "Anita," almost as if he were talking to himself, as if he'd forgotten I was there. Then he put the photograph down and we went on talking, doing what we'd been doing. The loss of Anita upset him terribly. Nothing was the same for Brian after that. Then the drug charges, all that trouble. I didn't know how to help him. We were close when he was young, but later we had . . . differences of opinion.'

So much promise . . . a choirboy . . . first-chair clarinet . . . now old friends were saying, Well, it's about time you retired, isn't it? He stared at the cold fire, clenching his teeth, then went on talking.

'Brian rejected all discipline. He was suspended from school twice. Once when he was in the sixth form he and some of the other lads used their mortarboards as boomerangs, sailing them up in the air. Brian's came apart, and he refused

to wear it. They suspended him. 'A most salutary experience' for Brian, a week's suspension, according to that twit of a headmaster. Brian spent the whole week down at the Cheltenham Lido, swimming, and came back a hero to all the other boys. I hardly knew how to deal with him. The headmaster would complain about him, and I'd become very serious and sit Brian down for a talk. 'Why is the headmaster always writing us with complaints? Why do you disobey them?' And Brian would say, 'Look, Dad, they're only teachers. They've never done anything. You want me to do the things you did, but I can't be like you. I have to live my own life.' He was terribly logical about it all. I could hardly get anywhere trying to argue with him.

'Brian simply loathed school, the exams, the discipline, all that. He made his O levels and A levels in spite of himself. At eighteen he left school. He wouldn't consider going to university. He had a dread of going to university and couldn't face years of study before he could be self-supporting. He hated the idea of being twenty-five or twenty-six before he could start earning his own living. For a while he was keen on dentistry, but after he left school, he decided to go to work in London for an ophthalmic firm. There was an ophthalmic college affiliated with the firm, and Brian studied there for a while, at the same time he was working. The firm had a branch in Newport, but Brian wanted to go to London. He wanted the London nightlife, the jazz clubs, all that. He loved jazz, Stan Kenton, that sort of thing.

'I took him to London for an interview with the ophthalmic firm. He put on quite a good show, and we left, and I said, 'Well, what train shall we take home, the five o'clock?' And he said, 'No, Dad, I want to go to some jazz clubs before we go home, would you like to come along?' I told him, 'No, no, I don't want to go.' Brian said, 'I'll come

home on a later train.' He'd been to London more often than I'd known, hitchhiking, going to these clubs. I came on home and Brian stayed in London. He came home about six A.M. He bought me a hamburger that night in London. I don't know why I should remember that. I suppose it was the first time he ever bought me a meal.

'Brian was obsessed with music. He used to play these, what are they, Modern Jazz Quartet records—'

'The reverberations used to drive me crazy,' Mrs Jones said.

'These records were playing morning, noon, and night,' Mr Jones said. 'I saw it as a positive evil in his life, undermining a quite good career. Maybe music was his eventual downfall, but at the time I saw it as an evil because he was so obsessed. Music had driven out all thoughts of a conventional career. His involvement with music and London life, the life of the nightclubs, all that, ruined his career at the ophthalmic firm and school. He threw school and his job over and came back home. He had odd jobs, played with a band, worked in a music shop in Cheltenham, selling sheet music, records. He was becoming totally absorbed in a musical atmosphere. I knew Brian had musical ability, but I was very chary that he could achieve success. To me the most important thing was his security. I was unsatisfied to see him just drifting, and I saw no security or success likely to come from jazz. But to him – a religion it was, he was a fanatic. He went back to London for good when he was about twenty.'

At about the same time, two other young men were coming to London, where they would meet Brian, and none of them would ever be the same.

'Brian's fall wasn't my fault or because of drugs,' Anita said. 'It was Mick and Keith.'