

Webs

The edges of the sandwich are getting hard, not really hard, but like processed spongy coral. It's one of those pre-packaged sandwiches where the bread is extra white, extra soft, like biting into a cloud, a cloud with a little bit of scrunched up ham stuffed inside and cheddar. The Japanese make these pre-packaged sandwiches with the same Butterkrust style bread, but they cut the crusts off. I got to try one in this Asian strip center in Northeast Houston at a Japanese bakery, it was anticlimactic, but they did have the crusts removed, way too much bread though, I got three pieces in this one small sandwich. They say the yellow from the cheddar is annatto, naturally occurring, I don't believe anything in nature is that color yellow. This sandwich could have been packaged yesterday or three years ago and it still would taste the same.

Where do you want me to start?

Why don't we start at the beginning.

The beginning. The beginning? Where's J?

He's next door.

What did he say?

He just told us what happened.

From the beginning?

From the beginning.

J

Can I have one of those? A crushed pack of Pall Malls sits on a small steel table bolted to the floor along with a cold cup of coffee, a stubby pencil and a blank legal pad. I quit smoking, but you never quit smoking.

Ok. So where do I start?

Why don't you start at the beginning?

The beginning? Like the whole day?

Sure, the whole day.

Am I under arrest? Is E under arrest?

No, but with that marker and those labels along with that ratty crack pipe I believe we can remedy that.

“Crack pipe? I don't smoke crack.”

I don't remember where we woke up or at least where E said he stayed, he probably crashed at the 8th street house or maybe L's mom's house. I stayed at my parent's house by the park. I think E was trying to hook up with this checker that worked at the Kash-n-Karry, but that would have left us out in Cuernavaca. No buses go out there and we wanted to skate. See, E had a tip about this empty pool way up north off Parmer. For the most part I think we're indifferent to seriously go after the many aspects of what might be considered a normal life. You know marriage, career paths, stable housing, but we approach the discovery of a new spot with the zeal

of an Eagle Scout tying knots through a cherry stem with his tongue while hanging from a cliff building a fire.

E

I stayed at D's house last night and got out of there way before he woke up. Dude always sleeps way too late for me. I met up with J at the park. I should have went out to Oak Hill with this girl, but I wanted to skate and taking a bus from Oak Hill takes like half-a-day. Am I under arrest, is J under arrest?

No.

No? I think we're finished here then.

Yes, the detective answers, rifling through some papers, but you have this little matter of a failure to appear on a class B misdemeanor for, yes, possession of marijuana.

My lawyer was supposed to show for that because they were just going to reset the date. Or maybe I was supposed to show, I think? What's the point of getting a court date when you have to go to court three times to get it reset to eventually go to court?

I don't know, I'm just going by what I have here. Let's have a chat. Otherwise, I have no choice but to book you on the warrant.

I bet J is smoking.

Oak Hill is way out there, way way out there. But not so far that I couldn't make the trek back. See, these Austin kids are funny, I grew up in Houston, where you have to have a car

unless you live in the loop. I lived on the edge of the city off of 290, went to elementary school at 43rd and Lamonte at the northwest edge inside the loop and I went to middle school at Westheimer and Woodhead in the Montrose. I would spend four hours in some type of automobile some days, brutal. But in Austin these kids don't want to go past 183 or south of Ben White. It's the comfortable apathy of small town life that Austin has left behind and is ingrained in its children. Kids are spoiled here, not all with money, but with art and liberal ideals. All of these kids grew up thinking that producing art and having a good time is of paramount importance which kind of makes it rough when you have to work some uncreative job to pay the bills. I love it here, but there are a lot of spoiled hippy children running around. What happens to these kids? They turn into hippy gangsters, making ends meet the way their parents probably did, or still do, or their uncles, and that could be a dangerous endeavor for an already endangered species, if you don't allow them their creativity as a means for survival they will definitely become extinct. Maybe the festivals and all the money those bring will save them, but eventually it will just be a muddy Disneyland, a pop-up Pan run pho-oasis with expensive street food and overpriced beer. Austin's going to be very different in about a decade, you got live music becoming a nuisance downtown and people moving here because it's the *Live Music Capital of the World*? I don't know if that's going to jibe with all these Tesla driving fucks and their ideal bourgeois jungle gym, but maybe that's what they want, a simulacrum of Austin that closes early.

J

I used a transfer to get up there. Our transfers look like they're from a different millennium, the bus driver has to tear the time off on the little transfer stand, super fucking analog. The heat wasn't suffocating today, we're still at that point between spring and summer where a-steady-high-nineties is welcomed with tentative relief, but imports swear we're already in the dead of summer. Not quite, slowly but slowly. It was hazy, a type of haze that left a humid film on everything as we bombed through the neighborhood. The city runs north to south, but it still was going to take an hour to get up there, the bus system is atrocious, all these progressives and their greenspeak can't give us a halfway decent public transportation system. It goes to show who still runs the capital. The thinkers, intellectuals, university crowd and environmentalists don't have the pull, you know the lobby, the money, like the back slapping bourbon on two ice cubes before noon sitting in a pair of boots that costs more than my sister's car crowd. Anyway, we were looking for a large abandoned house off of North Lamar, just north of Parmer, past 183.

E

The bus? Yeah, Capital Metro, not my favorite thing, but it's kind of meditative. The bus is strange, because you have to build your route everyday. It more than likely is the same route, but you have to plan for it and pack it up and then take it with you along with all of your stuff that you need for the day because there's no going home if you forget something. You see people like us on the bus with maybe a backpack at most and we have it easy, but you see some people with all their stuff on a wheely cart, a backpack, a side bag, a tote bag. They are building webs everyday like spiders collapsing it all as they go home and prepare to build it again. That's a lot

of work, but I guess that's how it is when you're grown. My dad told me about these spiders when I was younger, the writing spider, that he used to watch when he was a kid. It's really just a garden spider, you know like the one in *Charlotte's Web*. I'm pretty sure I was in that play in elementary school but I can't remember which character I played. They weave these xs in their webs and they build them every day, it could take hours, and then they eat them at the end of the night and then do it all over again. The webs are ethereal works of art, home and tool, they spend so much time on them because they have to be structurally sound to hold the prey, which could be thousands of times the webs' weight. So I guess these things are like masons in a way. The spider's silk is the strongest fiber in the world, stronger than steel. The xs on their webs reflect light and the rest of the web doesn't and the xs attract insects because of the light, like moths to a flame. They're ancient, much older than the dinosaurs and they have survived this long, how? The male spontaneously dies during sex and like most spiders the female eats the male after sex, it doesn't seem like a formula for survival. After the male dies the female carefully wraps him in a sack to eat later.

J

We finally get there and wade through the remnants of a long and overgrown horseshoe driveway. The house is large, large in a way where you can't see how far it goes back and one end is shrouded in overgrowth making it difficult to get a handle on its true size. I wouldn't say ominous like the houses in *Psycho* or *Amityville* but sad, sad in a way I can't truly describe, I guess ineffable, I have one of those tear off calendars that gives me new words everyday. You

can tell it was never an attractive house even when it was new. It had fading brown paint set back in more than a couple of acres of weeds, scraggly white oaks and pecan trees. It could have been a ranch house when it was built, but from years of neglect, from the sprawl of the city and the punishment of time it had sagged into a spooky and hollow almost-mansion forgotten by the country and too country to be accepted by the city. As the season remained unresolved so was the house's sense of place. Central Texas really only has two seasons, fall and summer with brief transitions called spring and winter, the former probably being the staying point as the Bavarians and Bohemians arrived on the banks of the mighty Colorado from their long walk from the coast. We walked around the side to a large iron gate secured with a heavy chain and lock. We threw our boards and then our bodies over. Backyard pools are pretty fucking intimidating and they all have multiple stories. By the time you get there it's at least on its third life. In most cases they are located at abandoned places and amongst all the solitude, neglect, foreclosure, debt, death and divorce is a wonderfully constructed hole in the ground with infinite possibilities. That group of stoned bored surfers fucking off at just the right economic collapse, just after Tricky Dick shit the bed and Ford had to lay in it followed by the reign of that poor bastard Jimmy Carter who during his time in office it seemed all the hellfire of America's shitshow was on stage simultaneously in waders doing high kicks slinging feces on the tops of the heads of everyone but the fat cats up in the balconies, started something other-worldly, a virgin artform full of passion, twisted bodies, athleticism and style.

E

I just got in the zone, you know skating, trying to use it up, figure it out, get some lines dialed. Pools are no joke and require more than just physical effort, it definitely is a mental battle of how far you can push yourself. Then the roadie for Def Leppard shows up with his mute girlfriend. I don't know where this guy came from and I really didn't care. J may have been a little more concerned. He wasn't waving a gun and he wasn't the cops so he had to be on our side. This guy was a piece of work. Hellvis I think he called himself. Hellvis? He expected us to be there, it was strange, but when you're at sketchy places like an abandoned house with an empty swimming pool kind of in the cut you have to expect some weirdness. You know that stupid slogan "Keep Austin Weird", yeah, well it was definitely weird by this point. And Round Rock has "Just North of Weird" and I think Georgetown has one like "Keep Georgetown Normal". This guy was a character, metal all the way. Y'all want to hear about Hellvis, right?

A brief interlude with Dallas Police Sergeant Rector McCollum

Well, we apprehended one Robert Louis Rodgers of Austin, 40 years old, in a sting operation where he tried to sell the stolen motorcycle jacket to some undercover officers working with a confidential informant. I don't know all the details of how he got the jacket, but apparently Rodgers had a way with locks or at least locks that wasn't much good for lockin'. He was visiting the Elvis Auto Museum across from Graceland and went ahead and got into the case with the King's size 44 Harley Davidson jacket in it and took it. I can't figure how anyone would have missed that, a man lifting a jacket from a glass case and then walking out with it? Ain't it a wonder we don't have more of Rodgers's likes trying to pawn off Mr. Presley's artifacts in our

great state. Well, he had the jacket and our dedicated team of undercover agents arranged a buy for \$100,000. Shit, \$100,000! I don't care if that jacket was dipped in gold and came with guaranteed pussy every time you put it on, ain't no jacket worth that much money. I seen the tape, he just walks to the buy with it draped over his arm, nonchalant, not a care in the world, bout to sell the King's jacket and make off with a cool 100 grand. This Rodgers had a rap sheet, mainly for breaking into soda machines and snack machines, a fuckin' quarter hustler. Guess he got in over his head with this one, that's a hell of a jump to go from knockin' over the Coke machine to sellin' six figured jackets. These fuckin' people. Nope, I never heard of no Hellvis or nothin' like that. But yes, he did jump bail and is currently wanted by the Dallas Police Department . Maybe we should just look for the trail of quarters, fuckin' coin cowboy.

J

“Ugh, it's just us right now,” I say, confused, but relieved that he wasn't waving a gun at us or yelling.

Hellvis was scuzzy, embattled, like he had been in the metal militia and fought every disco demon as his pale peninsula of a potbelly jutted from the black leather. He might as well have stepped out of the bathroom of the Backroom at a Dangerous Toys concert circa 94'. He had on these short gray gym shorts, the kind you were issued in school or not the kind we were issued in school, but the kind Fred Savage wore in *The Wonder Years*, you know like t-shirt material. He was rocking some seriously beat up white New Balances untied with no socks and his ankles were paler than he was and the reason I know all of this is because we were like eye

level with this guys fucking feet for at least 10 minutes. He spoke with a weird drawl, definitely not from around here, but probably Texan, something like, “We’ll fuck man I got beer, some spray cans and a bag of joints! Ain’t y’all ready to shoot? I got my setup and I’m ready to rock man.” E and I are looking at each other like what the fuck is going on, is this for real, where’s the dopey white guy in a baggy suit with his video crew waiting to surprise us, are we about to get murdered?

“Are yer other buddies coming, cause this is all the beer and shit, we’ll just see how much smoke is left cause I’m bout to fire one up and once I get started I don’t stop to the last roach,” he says and sets the 12 pack of Icehouse down.

Hellvis waddles back towards the Jeep itching his ass. He orders us to come and take a tour of the house and grab the beer. We climb out of the shallow end cautiously and I pick up the beer and we follow him. He pulls another heavy chain with an old rusted lock on it through the two handles of the French doors. The girl is out of the car, I was casing her, looking all mousy and shit. She was an older teenager or in her early twenties. He swings the doors open and gives an uncomfortable pronouncement with his hand to indicate, ‘here it is’ or ‘look what I have.’ But he didn’t seem too sure of what he had. And then he tells us straight faced as a man wearing a leather jacket with no shirt on drinking a less than cold Icehouse stubby and basically walking around in glorified boxer shorts without a dick flap could.

“I’m watching it for the owners. I ain’t got all the keys yet, but I’m just tryin’ to keep the place from falling apart and fuckin’ kids from trashin’ it.”

E

Yeah, Hellvis, unreal. You couldn't make this guy up. The scuzzy denim jacket, his brown scraggly oily hair, his dirty white t-shirt and ratty flip flops. He was a special case to say the least. You know you see people sometimes and you're like, no, this guy can't be what my eyes are processing, but at the same time there's this genuineness to them. This guy had that in a real shady way. We're drinking like Red Dog with this guy or Old Milwaukee and he's just carrying on like it's all normal. He had a girl with him too, she didn't say much, but she did introduce herself with a mousy wave and then kind of hung back. This guy had to be squatting there, I don't know who he was trying to fool. He takes us inside all formal like with airs of white trash royalty. You could tell some strange stuff had gone on there or maybe not so strange for a place like that, a place that would attract such characters as ourselves and Hellvis. Dude was strange, but not any stranger than you or I, if you get what I mean.

J

Then he comes out with "I'm Hellvis! What do I call y'all?" Now names are names, I generally don't put too much stock in them because they either came from the Bible or a relative and then from the Bible, but Hellvis? How the fuck is that anyway to introduce yourself with a bunch of pentagrams looming above and one at your feet, I don't know, but it made me uncomfortable, not in a scary I'm going to get sacrificed way, but I felt sorry for the guy.

What? His name, I guess. You thought I already knew it? I guess.

E is just taking it all in and I didn't know if I should laugh or run, I probably should have done both. He wheels around to face us, whipping his hair looking like a post-apocalyptic metal promoter about to cut the lawn. The girl oozes in behind us and takes a seat against the wall on an overturned milk crate. He didn't introduce her and if we hadn't seen her with our own eyes she might as well have not been there.

He tells us, "Yep, I seen yer buddies here a few days ago and we made plans to shoot. I figured they sent you in their place, cause shit, they was supposed to be here a while ago."

We're following him around on the grand tour, through the extra-large kitchen, he shows us the defaced, decrepit molded sheetrock, stained and ripped up carpet in the dining room and general neglect of a long forgotten home as if all the while it had been his home and he just fell behind on repairs, or he was on an extended vacation. We follow him up a carpeted winding staircase with a balcony that overlooks the large room we first entered. I could see the large pentagram clearly now spray painted on the floor in the room below. The girl looked up at us sheepishly as her knees knocked together and she chewed her fingernails. He starts fucking with one of the doors that's closed, obviously it's locked and he's gotta know this..

"I don't have the keys to a couple of these upstairs rooms yet and I don't want to mess up the doors trying to get in," he tells us.

We sip our not quite cold beers slowly, at least I do, I think E was probably working on his second but that shit made me want to throw up, it takes me a while to get acclimated to piss beer close to piss temp. All of a sudden the tour ends and Hellvis jets downstairs and then disappears into a room he didn't show us earlier. He scampers out of the room with a plastic grocery sack moving possessed. He lays the sack down by the girl's feet very cautiously and

ducks back into the room then emerges pushing a gray metal TV-stand with a TV and VCR mounted on it, he wheels it into the room with the pentagram on the floor clutching an extension cord. The set-up was one me and E, and maybe the girl, would have watched movies in grade school on, or sex-education tapes in middle school. It even had the safety yellow comic strip of a tipping TV if you didn't wheel it right on it.

“Want to see my video,” he asks.

Possibly it was the weed from earlier or the beer, more than likely the combination of the two but none of this was alarming, strange, but not threatening in any way. I think E probably felt the same, we were there for the journey and while we had arrived at our destination we definitely had yet to *arrive* at our destination. So, he runs the extension cord back into the room he wheeled the cart out of and comes back with an ill formed pinner dangling from his lips. He lights it, presses play and then whips his scraggly mane to one side. He inhales deeply and the smell of burning seed and rough dirt weed wafts our way as he motions the joint in E's direction, sputtering and coughing. Hellvis was on the screen in front of us in the same dark glasses framed in a crooked medium shot playing a black guitar and banging his head wearing the same leather jacket. There was no audio, but you could faintly hear the metallic ticking of a pick against strings as Hellvis on screen mumbled words as he mumbled along as he watched himself, but the mumblings didn't seem to match-up. I became pretty good at reading lips in high school as I would put one earphone in the ear that couldn't be seen while I feigned listening, but I was listening, or rather reading and pretending to be listening.

E

I'm skeptical of taking anything from people, much less drugs and especially weed that is pre-rolled. I've had some bad experiences with that back in highschool. You've seen the after-school special of the latch-key-kid that comes home and then smokes laced grass with his tough neighbor and then jumps out of his parents' second story window thinking he can fly? I've been that kid, except I didn't jump out of any windows, I just froze in the backyard at this party, glued to a lawn chair. I finally made my way inside and sat on the couch and forced this girl I knew to watch me to make sure I didn't burn the house down. I remember this guy N sitting there, real thuggish kid, but we got along ok and he's just like, "you're on that dip, that water right," and I'm silently freaking out. I ended up in the bathroom for the rest of the party for like three hours until I finally came out after most of the people left. That was like a long anxiety attack on fry. I quit smoking weed after that for like a year or so. Hellvis is smoking what smelled like burning squirrel. I wasn't too hip on taking it from him. I think I hit it a few times, but he's sucking that pinner down and then he would light another. He had a whole bag of them. And the movie, Hellvis' rock video. Not much rocking without sound, but he was getting into it trying to mimic the mumbling he was doing in his video. This guy had the whole set-up. TV, VCR, some crazy stand I only thought existed at schools or deferred adjudication classes. It was complete mayhem, but in a quiet way.

J

Hellvis was struggling with a can of red Walmart paint in the deep end. He carefully drew a skull, he tried to draw it menacing, because I guess skulls are always supposed to be menacing right, but it ends up looking uncomfortable more than menacing. Like it might have shit on itself.

“Take the sides. Draw whatcha-unc-to, just don’t mess with my logo, it needs to be good for the shoot,” he tells us while he’s hanging upside down.

A joint is bouncing up and down in his mouth. The fumes mingled with the weed, intoxicating. I drifted off standing in the deep end for a minute as E was making quick work of one side. We painted, skated, drank and smoked joint after horrible joint and at some point I just couldn’t move anymore with all that pumping and I was getting fatigued from the beer and weed so I went inside to finish off our provisions, to maybe breathe some life back into my lungs and get my head right, that shitty weed was fucking me up. The girl was still sitting there letting one of those pinner joints smoke away between her fingers watching what I can only assume was the same tape. I take a seat and begin to do my thing, pack my *crack pipe*, as you eloquently put it. I pass it to her, Hellvis is still banging his head and strumming away up there on the TV and then she speaks. She tells me that she met him answering an ad for a “metal chick singer” from the Back Page of *The Chronicle*. She confirmed the obvious that they had been squatting there, but he was shooting a “video” and this was the location, so it was just cheaper to stay here instead of going back and forth from a motel room every day. He didn’t want to have to lug all that equipment around. I didn’t see any equipment yet except this old TV/VCR stand. At some point the screen went black and she continued to watch and we continued to talk, inconsequential shit that revealed nothing and then the screen held her as she was laying down legs facing the camera spread eagle masturbating. I tried not to look surprised, but how do you not look surprised? I

expected her to get up and turn it off, but she just let it play and lazily hit my pipe as she had already laid what was left of the roach on the ground. I don't know, what the fuck do you do in a situation like that?

E

I bet he told you about the girl right? J can't leave nothing out. I wouldn't have told y'all, but what does it matter anyways right. So yeah, we finish painting and J is back in the house and I'm just buzzing from the fumes and everything. What? Yeah, and the marijuana and the beer, but mainly the fumes at this point so I'm just letting the wind hit me, right, and I think Hellvis had waddled over to the Jeep. I'm caught in one of those moments between, where you are not really where you are, but at the same time you're there. And it starts to get slightly chilly with the wind and all so I decide to take a few more runs before we completely lose the sun. Hellvis finally lugs out this dinosaur camcorder and films me a little bit and J comes back out and he gets some shots of both of us. He's wanting us to just carve over his logo, frontside and backside, I never really hit the coping frontside but I definitely did some little backside chink chinks, you know.

J

I mean the last we saw him? We had our second wind as it was cooling down and we wanted to get our skating in so we were just taking runs as the sky bled a crazy orangish red, it was immaculate, and we just were in the pool and we heard a pop, pop, pop!

E said, “that wasn’t no fucking backfire,” and it sounded really close.

I don’t know, it could have been a backfire? I used to live in this kind of seedy area just north of 183 and Lamar, kind of close to the access road and cars would backfire all the time and you swore it was something else sometimes just because of your surroundings, so maybe it was something like that. We ducked down for a minute and decided to peek over the edge. We couldn’t see anyone anywhere so we made a run for it, hopped the fence we came in over and jetted to the fucking closest convenience store to get some water and snacks and shit and then we met you guys in the parking lot and here we are not under arrest. What else do you want?

E

You remember those spiders I was talking about? They literally leave nothing behind, but their sacks of eggs, they are too small and fragile to leave fossils and she dies with the first frost, her web will just blow away in the cold wind. I like to think that they die collapsing their web, on their way home. Yeah, well, spring comes right and they emerge from the sacks or cocoons or whatever their mothers left them unattended in all those months, little spiders. But they emerge fully functional arachnids with all the knowledge, skill and prowess of their mothers and their mothers before them, who knows maybe more, an accumulation of history stored in themselves ready to go to work, their Sisyphean task of building their webs and capturing their prey, collapsing their web then rebuilding their webs and capturing their prey. We’ve only been here what, 60,000 years and we’re still struggling to get the basics down in some ways, having a home, gathering food, well at least distributing the food, and making sure our children survive,

but they got it down, had it down for millions of years. And then they begin to build their webs again, again and again.

