

Mill Rats

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BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

Marina flips open a Styrofoam box and holds it up. Inside are three pieces of California Roll and a red slab of tuna. She curls her mouth into a slack smile.

"Sushi's good when you're high."

Free sushi, even. Half an hour ago, Marina says, some lady came out of Sushi on Mill and kicked down her leftovers. Now Marina, her boyfriend Pat and their friend Nick are sitting on the brick edge of a sidewalk planter across from Uno's Pizza on Mill Avenue, begging for change and macking sushi.

It's Saturday night, downtown Tempe. A couple days ago, Marina, Pat and Nick jumped off a freight train three blocks away. Last month they were in San Francisco. The month before that, Seattle.

Marina is 26 and looks younger, with sunken yet beautiful, dark eyes. Pat's 22 and looks older, gaunt-faced, with crazy brown hair and a scraggly beard. He's wearing a threadbare Sea Monkeys tee shirt and scrap-quilt leather pants sewed together with dental floss that match Marina's. Nick's tall, 25, and looks like a badass. The black hood of his sweat shirt covers most of his face.

Nick doesn't say much, just that he recently hit the road, and doesn't like hard drugs. Marina and Pat do. They spent the first half of today begging change until they had enough—\$30—to buy a piece of Mexican black tar heroin, most of which they quickly cooked up behind Jack in the Box.

This lanky, dark-haired cat named Zach, who's been around Tempe for weeks, saw them getting ready to fix and walked over. "Got a point?" he asked. "You wouldn't believe what I just had to hit myself with, yo."

Zach opened a fist to reveal a broken syringe with a jagged tip. "I missed bad," Zach says, and pulls up his right sleeve to display a wicked red blotch, just above the crook of his elbow. After Pat shot up, Marina squirted a syringe full of liquefied heroin up her nose. It's called waterlining. Then she passed the needle to Zach. "Thanks, yo," he said, tying off with his belt.

"You guys just get to Mill?"

Marina nodded.

Zach positioned the needle over his arm. "It's pretty cool here."



Crusties. Squatters. Gutter punks. Street kids. Travelers. The young and transient in America go by and get called many names, and pass through many places. There are dozens, or, in the case of cities like New York, Los Angeles and Seattle, hundreds of them in every major U.S. urban center.

College towns, too. Crusties love college towns. Boulder, Colorado, is one of their favorites. So's Eugene, Oregon. And, as of late, Tempe, Arizona. Street kids are mobile, feverish networkers, and the word is out that Tempe, and more specifically Mill Avenue, is a choice spot to spend the winter.

"It's the bomb," says Spam, 18, who spent six weeks on Mill Avenue last January/February and came back for seconds this year. "It's warm, it's safe—there's no sickos out cruising for runaways to rape and kill, like there are in L.A. and San Fran. There's a lot of restaurants, so you can get leftovers, and it's a party town, so there's lots of girlies, and whiskey is cheap."

Furthermore, Mill Avenue is known as one of the best streets in the country, if not the best, to spange—a slang combination of "spare" and "change."

"Spare some change today, ma'am?" "How about you, sir, can you spare a little change?"

That's spanging, and Mill Avenue is a gold mine. All those shoppers and bar hoppers with fresh change in their pockets. Street kids can easily beg nine or 10 dollars an hour on a Saturday night, then go order a fast-food feast from a kid across the counter who makes half that.

Some of them also sell drugs, or connect customers—"custies"—with dope for a finder's fee. As a result, Mill Avenue is now a street where it's safe and easy to score anything you want, especially heroin, if you know the right crusty to make eye contact with.

Local officials, residents and business owners first noticed a spike in Tempe's seasonal transient population during the winter of 1995-96. This season, Mill rats started arriving in force in November. Last year, they remained a presence through March.

Street kids move around so much, it's hard to say how many are in Tempe at any one time. Between 50 and 100 is most people's guess, including the kids themselves. More than 60 were interviewed for this article in a 10-day period. Some have since left, some left and came back, some are still around.

They spend most of their days on Mill Avenue, or making bus trips to Phoenix to grab a shower and some free clothes and lunch at a downtown drop-in center for homeless youth. At night, they roam.

There is no homeless shelter in Tempe. During the past two winters, most kids slept in Tempe Beach Park at the far north end of Mill Avenue. But last August, the Tempe City Council passed an urban-camping ordinance, so now they sleep anywhere they can—caves and *Road Warrior*-esque camps on the edge of Papago Park, inside the old Hayden Flour Mill, on the roofs of private homes in the neighborhoods near Mill, under bridges, in abandoned buildings called squats. Some crusties catch naps in the park during the day, then wander the streets at night. Street kids in Tempe are almost all white, aged 14 to 26. A few grew up in the Valley, the rest are from points across America. Most drink and smoke pot, and roughly half are junkies who picked up the needle once they were on the streets, not before. They call modern society "Babylon."

A lot of them carry knives or bludgeons, and a few are dangerously violent. The more innocuous majority are merely walking image problems for downtown Tempe.

Some are runaways. Some were disowned by their parents, some were abused, some were abandoned. For the most part, they did not have happy childhoods. But now they live on the streets by choice, not necessity, and defend their existence as the harbinger of a great darkness approaching.

This is the story of one week in their world.

Saturday

Zach says one of the keys to surviving on the streets is always to return favors, so after he picks up a 12-pack at the Mobil station, he tracks down Pat, Marina and Nick to offer them a Heineken. "I know a cool place," he says. Five minutes away, Zach's cool place is a muddy field across from Tops Liquors, on the northwest corner of Farmer and University.

Most of the lot is exposed, but a semicircle of ground near the back is shielded from view on three sides by a small grove of trees, and the fourth by a stone wall that separates the field from the neighborhood of apartments and small houses behind it.

Zach yanks a piece of cardboard from a pile of rubbish and cops a squat. Nick and Marina do the same on a soiled blanket. Pat sits on a cracked, porcelain toilet. If he wonders what the hell it's doing there, he doesn't say.

Everyone cracks a beer. Marina gets out a small, decorative tin box and a marijuana pipe. Pat starts answering a question.

Why did he come to Tempe? "Honestly? I came here for the high-intensity methamphetamine abuse, to meet some new friends, to have a good place to spare change, and to shoot heroin in the sunshine in the middle of January."

Seconds later, a bald, burly guy with a goatee suddenly vaults over the stone fence 50 feet away. He's got a black Maglite in one hand and a silver, .50 caliber Desert Eagle hand cannon in the other. He looks pissed, and comes at the group with a purpose in his stride, snapping twigs underfoot.

"Hey, dude," Zach calls out hopefully. "Want a beer?" In response, the guy loudly racks the slide on his gun, levels it, and starts to yell. "If you punks don't get the fuck out of here, now, I'm gonna bust a cap in your ass!"

After the requisite scattering in all directions, the members of the group reconvene on the sidewalk. They seem relatively unfazed by their eviction at gunpoint from a trashy piece of mud. Desert Eagles, urban-camping ordinances. Feeling unwelcome is a constant for them, and only a matter of degree.

"Well, I guess my cool place bombed," Zach says. "Anyone else know a cool place?"

"Oh, shit," Pat hisses. "I left my pack back there." The bald guy's flashlight is still bobbing behind the trees. Zach walks half the distance and shouts a plea. "Hey, man. . . . Hey, man—my friend left his backpack. Can he come get it?"

A few seconds go by before the guy's voice comes back.

"Well, I'll fuckin' shoot you if I see you here again!"

Pat's confused. "Does he mean he'll shoot me if I go back there right now, or he'll shoot me if I go back there another time from right now?"

"I think he means you can get your stuff, but next time he'll shoot you," Zach says.

"I think you're right." Pat cautiously approaches the trees. "I hope you're right," he says over his shoulder.

A minute later, Pat emerges from the trees with his pack on and trots back.

Meanwhile, Marina is frantically patting her pockets and softly whining in distress.

"Pat," she says when he returns, "Pat, I dropped the dope."

"What?"

"I dropped the dope when we ran away! I'm sorry."

Pat blows her off.

"It was just some pot. Don't worry about it."

"No, I had a piece in there, too."

Now she has Pat's full attention.

"You had more heroin?"

"Yeah, I broke some off earlier. I was saving it for us."

"Like a surprise?" Pat reaches out and strokes her hair. "Oh, baby, that's so sweet." They both look back toward the trees, considering. The flashlight is gone. Cars rush past on University.

Nick breaks his silence.

"I wouldn't."

Marina looks at him, then at Pat. "You can do it," Pat says. "Just be ninja, and keep a PMA [Positive Mental Attitude]."

"You guys," Zach implores. "Don't. It's too sketchy. Go back tomorrow."

Marina's panicked. "It might not be there tomorrow!"

Nick breaks in again. "I really don't think it's a good idea, Marina."

Pat makes the call. "Okay, here's what we'll do. We'll go find a place to kill these beers and sleep, then we'll get up at first light and have a nice shot of dope waiting for us in the morning, okay?"

Nick nods. He and Zach set a brisk pace south, walking the railroad tracks. Marina and Pat hold a hushed discussion, then follow shortly, Marina casting a final mournful look over her shoulder to where the last of their heroin may or may not be waiting to take her home in the morning.

"What the hell do you think that guy's problem was?" Nick asks.

Zach says maybe the guy just lives back there and is tired of homeless kids hanging around, or maybe he works at the crack house just over the wall, and chased them off to keep cops from coming around.

"Is that the first time you've had a gun pointed at you?"

"Pretty much," Nick says.

"Not me, man," Pat says from behind. "I've had a gun pointed at me twice before. One time I was working in some speed house in Berkeley, and this guy lost his head. The other time, the first time, was my dad. He pointed a gun at me, then he gave it to me and told me to shoot him, to prove I was a man. That was always a big thing with him. 'Be a man,' he'd say. 'Be a man.' "So I pulled the trigger, but it was empty. I left home after that."

A train comes. It's a monster freight from Mexico that roars and clatters by for a full six minutes. Nick, Zach and Pat back off the tracks, but Marina stands close, basking in the noise and power.

"I love trains," she says after the last car fades to black. "The first time I hopped a train was like the first time I did heroin. I was hooked."

She rejoins the rest, who've found a flat, grassy place near the tracks to chill out, swill beer and tell stories.

Zach says he's originally from Minneapolis, and left home seven years ago, when he was 16. "I more or less got booted out," he says. "My dad was an alcoholic, and he was always calling me 'Hell Spawn' and shit, so I didn't mind leaving."

Zach says he gets around mainly by hopping freight trains and hitchhiking—Vegas, Wyoming, New Orleans, Georgia, West Virginia. "I squatted in L.A. right after the quakes in early '94. It was paradise. There were empty buildings and tons of hard drugs everywhere for about a month, until the U.S. marshals started to crack down."

While Zach's talking, Marina and Pat decide to go back for the heroin. Nick goes with them. Fifteen minutes later, he comes back. "Mission failed," he says. "It was too dark." His two friends are close behind. While they were gone, Zach flew off on a tangent about how it's possible to time-travel if you inject enough crystal meth, and how he knows because he used to have a sugar daddy in San Francisco who kicked him down a gram of speed a day. "All I had to do was let him suck me off."

Nick asks Zach if he knows anyone who wants to buy a Sony Playstation, two controllers and a few games, all still in the packing, for \$200. Zach says sorry, no, rolls a Bugler cigarette, and picks up his story again.

"I was back in Minneapolis a couple months ago. I left my girlfriend there. She's a tweaker, and I split after we went on a 30-day speed run. I came out here to do heroin and mellow out and be warm for a while. Before I got here, I was in Pueblo, Colorado. It was cold, so I hitched a ride to Vegas, and a guy picked me up in Vegas and took me to his house in Mesa. I was sitting there in his living room, and he disappeared for a minute and came back with a stack of gay porno mags. I pulled my knife and got out of there, then walked to Mill, and here I am."

"Yeah," says Pat. "There's a lot of big, bad wolves on the road. Living like this, you know, it's not all fun, like, 'Hey, let's travel around America, get high, meet people and live free.' It's like that at first, but then people start to die along the way, or go crazy, or get pregnant, or go to jail. I lost too many friends last year. My one friend, Tim, he was 19, and his girlfriend Cunt OD'd in a squat in Sparks and died, and now he's doing time for manslaughter."

Pat takes a pull on his beer, then wipes his mouth.

"I don't know how long I can last on the streets. I guess my philosophy is, spend the first half of my life getting high, then run to the woods and do the best I can out there." Marina stops scraping the resin from her pipe. "Pat, I think I'm ready to do other things. I want to have a kid. You said we would."

"I'm not ready," Pat says.

"Well, I think I am. I'm older."

"Exactly," says Pat. "I've got some more living to do. Besides, I can't even get a fuckin' heroin chunk off the ground—how can I have a kid right now?"

Marina looks down and starts scraping again. "I didn't say right now. Just sometime."

"Yeah," Pat says. "Maybe sometime."

Sunday

It's high noon, and Zach just got up, but he can already tell today's going to suck. For one thing, he's dope sick. Hasn't had a shot of heroin in almost 24 hours. For another, Sundays are the worst for spanging. But his bones are aching, so spange he must. Zach shrugs off his pack and plops down on a bench facing the outdoor seating at Crocodile Cafe. "I like to watch the yuppies eat while I spange," he says. "It makes them nervous."

Zach hits up everyone who walks past:
"Spare any change today, folks?"
"Spare change for a crack addict?"
"Spare change for a lost soul this morning?"
"Spare change for drugs and pornos?"

The first six people or pairs of people Zach spanges ignore him. "Thanks anyway," he calls after them.

Better to be polite than busted.

Along with the urban-camping ordinance, the Tempe City Council last August passed an aggressive panhandling ordinance to give cops a whip to crack on surly spangers.

"Whereas, the increase in aggressive solicitations threatens the community life and economic vitality of residents and businesses throughout the city, and contributes to an enhanced sense of fear," the ordinance begins, then proceeds to outlaw aggressive panhandling, defined as "intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly" making physical contact with the spangee, or blocking their way, or asking them for money after they've already said no, or using "obscene, abusive, or threatening language or gestures."

The ordinance also makes all panhandling illegal within 15 feet of a bank, ATM or bus stop. Zach follows the rules, and hooks a live one with his seventh cast.

"Spare any part of a hundred dollars?"

The young, Middle Eastern man smiles, stops, sets his cup of soda on a trash can, and hands Zach a dollar bill.

"Thanks, dude," Zach says, then walks to a nearby pizza parlor, blows the dollar on a Coke, and resumes his post.

Across the street, Marina's not faring much better, but, unlike Zach, she's feeling no pain. She and Pat got up early from their camp by the tracks, and found the heroin. "Someone had smashed that toilet and kicked everything around, but it was pretty much right where I thought it was."

Unlike Zach, Marina spanges with the same line, over and over. "Can you help out with some change today?"

People mostly pretend she doesn't exist. Marina doesn't seem to mind. Her eyelids are half-masted, and every few minutes, she gives her ribs or shoulders a lazy scratch.

"I was a good student in high school," she says. "Honor classes, summer-school college classes, everything. Then I went to Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and it seemed like you had to take all these boring prerequisites before you could get into anything interesting.

"My first year of college, I dropped a lot of classes, and my parents got angry. They wanted me to stay on the traditional track. Then I told them I liked girls, and they flipped the fuck out over that. Then a friend of mine's mom found a letter from me in her room where I talked about how I'd started smoking pot, and they flipped the fuck out over that. Then they basically disowned me."

Marina gets up and walks half a block up Mill to Juice Works, a smoothie shop. She waits outside the door, watches until a customer exits with a freshly made smoothie, then goes inside and asks the girl behind the counter if she can have the few ounces of fresh fruit, juice and spirulina left in the blender. The girl behind the counter says no. Marina asks if she can have a glass of water. The girl behind the counter gives her a Dixie cup. Marina says thanks, leaves, and sits back down on the sidewalk.

Marina says she came with Pat to Tempe because one day a few months ago she got on the Internet at a public library in Seattle and read about the book arts program at Arizona State University. "I want to try and audit some classes this semester, you know, just sit in and learn, because I want to make books, really artful books, you know?" Marina draws the shape of a book in the air with her hands.

"I want to make the paper myself, and work with other people and their art. Also, I want to have a baby, and learn more about plants and salves and natural healing, but I can't really do any of that when I'm traveling. I don't want to be some 35-year-old woman pushing a shopping cart, you know?"

Zach crosses the street. He says he spanged for 45 minutes, made five bucks, and called it a day. He complains about a tear in his pants, and Marina gives him a needle and dental floss to sew it up. Marina asks Zach where he's going to sleep tonight, and Zach says he has no idea, maybe the caves near Papago Park. Marina says she and Pat may catch a bus into Phoenix. Today they heard about an abandoned Carnation milk factory on Central a bunch of kids are squatting. They also heard the Renaissance Festival is hiring extras. Word has it the gig pays \$100 a weekend, plus free camping.

Pat appears and tells Marina to get her stuff together and come drink beer with some dude who just came in from Austin. She does. Zach saunters across Sixth Street to the Centerpoint plaza outside Coffee Plantation, where he says hey to a kid named Taco, who's 18 and recently spent 70 hours in the Madison Street Jail "horseshoe" holding pen.

"That place bites," Taco says.

According to crumpled charging papers Taco pulls from his pocket, his legal name is Robert Marion Bates. Early in the morning of January 23, Bates—Taco—was arrested for violating a park curfew. Taco says he and his friend Wayne were sleeping on "A" Mountain and got busted by two bike cops. According to the court papers, Taco spent three days and nights in Madison, then appeared before a judge and pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to time served and cut loose.

Taco says he's been on Mill four months. He says his mom abandoned him when he was 5, and he spent his childhood in foster homes and on the streets. "Mostly on the streets." He says he came to Arizona because his Uncle Glenn, who lives in Canada, told him his real mom lived in Quartzsite. He was in Seattle at the time, and hitchhiked with some friends to California, caught a freight train to Needles, then caught another to Tempe. He says the friends he came here with hitchhiked to Amsterdam last week.

They hitchhiked to Amsterdam?

Taco thinks for a minute. "Maybe they said Albuquerque."

Taco says he caught a ride to Quartzsite and tracked down his mom about six weeks ago. "She said she was sorry for leaving me," he says. "She said she had a lot of problems, and I couldn't stay with her."

So he came back to Tempe for the primo spanging. "I made 15 bucks last night in less than an hour. Saturday night on Mill means hella people, and hella money."

Taco says he smokes pot but doesn't do hard drugs, and doesn't steal unless he's really, really hungry, and then only candy bars. "For a street kid who raised himself on the streets, I'm well-behaved," he says.

Street life is good, Taco says, but he started looking for a job today. He produces a folder and takes out half-completed job applications from Cold Stone Creamery, a Mill Avenue ice cream shop, and Coffee Plantation.

The folder also contains a poem Taco wrote last night. "I write a lot," he says.

Here's the poem. It's untitled.

The darkness sweeps across the land

The war has begun

We've lived our lives quite differently

But now we are one

We've got strength, spirit, and attitude

We fight side by side and offer

*Our hand in help
So if you're down and feeling out
Give us a yell
We're always on Mill
We're the Dank Krew, man
But keep it low
The pigs are on patrol
That's this war I'm talking about
Between the squatters and the cops
And it's on.*

Who's the Dank Krew? Taco won't say, exactly. "We're just a bunch of kids who've got each other's backs," he says.

For example, Taco says, a few nights ago, this short, buff black dude people called Preacher raped a 15-year-old girl under DK's protection while three of his friends held her down. Taco says "some people" tracked down Preacher's friends, one by one, and "had a boot party on their heads." Preacher has yet to be found. "Either he'll show up or we'll find his squat," Taco says. "Then we'll kill him."

To punctuate that threat, Taco pulls a strand of hemp cord from the pocket of his denim jacket. One end is a loop. On the other is a small, sharp, double-edged knife blade, securely attached with black electrician's tape. "You swing it," Taco explains. "It's my weapon."

Taco won't say if the "DK" graffiti tags that began appearing on walls and sidewalks around Mill Avenue last month are the Krew's handiwork. He also won't say how many kids are in the Dank Krew. Asked how you join, Taco takes a slug of his latte and smiles slyly. "You just gotta be dank."

The name's a double-entendre: "Dank" is drug slang for a moist, earthy-scented strain of high-grade marijuana. It also describes the personal appearance of many street kids. Taco, however, is fairly well-scrubbed for a guy who says he slept under the Mill Avenue bridge last night. "I keep myself clean. I wash up in bathrooms, whatever. It's a self-respect thing."

The last time he ate, Taco says, was IHOP pancakes late last night.

"I don't eat much on Sundays to save room for Hot Dog Jesus," he says.

Hot Dog Jesus?

"Yeah, he's this religious guy who feeds us hot dogs on Sundays in the park. There's usually two feedings—one at 2, and one at 6."

It's a quarter past five.

One hour later, Taco rolls into Tempe Beach Park with a posse of five—Fuzzy Bear, Cisco, Spiderman, Marcia and Freedom. Three boys and two girls, all under 18. They walk through the park and up a dirt path that leads to the slanted slabs of concrete and massive pylons that hold up the Mill Avenue bridge over Rio Salado's dry bed.

A dozen other kids are already under the bridge—smoking pot or just staying out of sight and waiting for the food to arrive. The DK bunch hunkers down behind a pillar and starts roasting a bowl. Cisco keeps standing up and peering around the pylon. It's not clear whether he's checking for cops, or Hot Dog Jesus, or both.

At 6:43, two vans with "God's G.I.F.T. Ministries" decals pull into the parking lot. "Perfect timing," Taco comments. "I'm nice and stoned, and I've got the munchies." Shadowy figures—more than 40 of them—emerge from under the bridge and all corners of the park, shambling toward the vans as darkness falls. From a high vantage point, the overview is a scene from "Night of the Living Street Kids."

"Hey," Cisco says, "that's not Hot Dog Jesus."

"So what?" replies Spiderman. "They've got sandwiches."

Every kid gets a food bag, laden with some combination of the following: bologna sandwich, peanut butter and jelly sandwich, cheese sandwich, fruit cup, animal crackers, fruit drink, box of Wheaties, cupcakes, small plastic tub of microwave macaroni and cheese. A few kids ask for condoms or needles, and strike out, but socks, tampons and toothbrushes are freely disbursed. Rabid trading ensues. Socks are the most valuable item, followed by animal crackers.

Once the dust of barter settles, the pack disperses to picnic tables around the park to chow down. Sitting at one is Taco, Cisco, Spidey, Marcy and a good-looking, blond-haired guy named Lewis. Dinner conversation centers on donating plasma.

"You can only do it twice a week," says Lewis. "But the money's good. You get 15 bucks the first time, and 20 the next." Marcy asks what about body piercings. "Just be cool," Lewis advises. "Remember to say you've had them for at least a year."

Taco asks Spiderman for a lighter and waves the flame across the bottom of his mac-and-cheese container, walking a tightrope between melting the plastic and warming the coagulated orange goo inside.

A man approaches with a cluster of teenagers in tow, and introduces himself as Scott Ogles, youth pastor for the Living World Bible Church in Mesa. Scott asks if anyone wants a Bible, and Lewis says sure, he'll take one. Scott hands Lewis a massive Bible the size of a hardback college dictionary. Lewis looks slightly aghast.

"Got anything smaller?"

Scott says sorry, no.

Then he goes around the table and asks everyone his name. When he gets to Taco, he says, "Where'd you get the name 'Taco?'"

Taco shrugs. "I like tacos."

Scott asks Spiderman where he's from.

"Usually I'm from Saturn, although I hear Mars is nice this time of year."

Scott forces a weak laugh, then asks Spiderman why he has a thick metal spike stuck through the brim of his baseball hat. Well, Spiderman says, "You can either put the spike between your fingers and punch with it, or just swing the hat around and fuck somebody up."

Scott moves on. "So, has anyone ever talked to you about salvation and what it takes to get into heaven?"

"Yeah," Taco says, "quite a few times." Scott says that's good, and goes to the next table. Two girls from his youth group stay behind. One of them is actually named Charity. "Mind if we pray for you?" the other asks.

"Mind if we fornicate on this table?" Marcy fires back.

"Hey," Taco says to Marcy, "chill out and show some respect. They gave us food. They can pray if they want."

The girl begins: "Father, Lord, O God, we thank you for the opportunity to come tonight and minister to these people, and we ask that you watch over them, O Lord, and we ask that you not let people look down on them, because we're all people, and we're all made of you, Father God, so we ask that you send these people the help they need, whether it's shelter or food or jobs, we ask that you open the doors to them, Lord, and show them your love. Please send it their way. Amen."

The girls offer more sandwiches, more socks, then invite everyone to church and say goodbye. A few minutes later, the vans are gone, and the temperature is falling. Taco, Lewis and the rest gather up their garbage and throw it away. Lewis tests the heft of the Bible Scott gave him. "Man," he says. "I can't carry this around."

He goes back to the table, sets the good book down and walks away.

Monday

Two months ago, Jester's home was a tepee in the redwoods about 40 miles north of Arcata, California, where he lived with two guys who got drunk and beat him every day. Then Cherokee and Sharon came to the rescue.

"We basically said, 'You don't deserve Jester,' and kidnaped him," Sharon says. "They were too wasted to stop us."

Now Jester's lying on the sidewalk outside the Mill Avenue entrance to Coffee Plantation with a rope leash around his neck. Dogs make the stunt travel of riding trains an even dicier gambit, but lots of travelers have them anyway, for protection and loyal friendship. Plus, there's no better spange lure than dog-on-a-rope, especially one with a good, mournful look, like Jester.

A woman in a business suit hands Cherokee an Uno's pizza box. "I want you to share this with the dog, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," Cherokee says. He met Sharon last summer, when both were following Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart's Furthur Festival around the country. Cherokee is 25, and grew up in Seneca Falls, New York. He started traveling when he was 15. "I just got bored and started hitchhiking." Sharon is 18, and started living on the streets after she flunked out of Finger Lakes Community College. The two arrived in Tempe in mid-January.

"I didn't think we'd be here this long, but right now I think it's too good to leave," Sharon says. "The spanging is great here. People are sweethearts. They keep us fed, they keep our tobacco supply going. It's nice."

Sharon's only major complaint is that Tempe doesn't have a needle exchange. "They don't even give out bleach kits here. In San Francisco, people walk up and down Haight Street giving out kits to clean your point."

Cherokee and Sharon share a needle with each other, and no one else. He began using heroin when he was 20. She started eight months ago. Today, they're both feeling the early symptoms of withdrawal.

"Dope sick is like this," Sharon says. "Your bones ache, your muscles hurt, you're draggy, and your nose drips. It's not, like, horrible or anything, but it's bad enough to make you want more heroin."

This kid named Briggs comes up and bums two pennies from Cherokee, then walks into Coffee Plantation.

It's a popular trick, Cherokee says: Coffee refills are self-serve, and cost 50 cents on the honor system, so you fill your cup and drop two pennies in the box like they're quarters.

Briggs comes out with his coffee a minute later and tells Cherokee and Sharon he got a job at the Renaissance Festival as a litter bearer.

Coming into spange range is a man with dark hair in his late 20s wearing new jeans and a Guess shirt. Cherokee's about to hit him up when the guy stops, stuffs his hands in his pockets and says, "You seen Pat today?" Cherokee says no, he hasn't. The guy leaves, searching both sides of the street with his eyes. Cherokee says he doesn't know the dude.

"Probably some custy looking to score."

Freedom, who was in the park last night, runs up and throws her arms around Sharon. "We're leaving, we're leaving, we're leaving," she yells. "I'm finally going to California." Cherokee also hugs her goodbye.

"Where you headed?" he asks.

"I don't care. Santa Monica, I think."

Freedom pats Jester on the head—"Bye, Jester"—then piles into a beat-to-shit IROC with Texas plates and five other passengers. She leans her head out the window. "See you on down the road!"

"Every day a few leave," says Cherokee, "every day a few arrive."

Take Brooke, 18. She just got to Mill a few hours ago. Hitched a ride from Albuquerque to Phoenix last Saturday, then spent a couple days wandering around South Mountain Park. "It was beautiful and everything, but it got cold at night," she says.

She came out of the park this morning, and a vato in South Phoenix told her she should find Mill Avenue. "He said that's where all the street punks hang out."

Brooke says she's 16, but looks about 12. Maybe it's the braces. Maybe it's her size—five feet, 85 pounds. Her head's shaved. "I used to have multicolored dreds, and when I got tired of them, it all had to go." Brooke says she ran away from home in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, last March. "My mom's a county commissioner and a big-shot lawyer and all that bullshit, and I used to fight with my parents a lot, and she made me go to a Catholic middle school. I just couldn't handle it anymore. I haven't talked to them since I left, but I've sent them a couple postcards. I don't want them to think I'm dead or anything."

Brooke's sharing a black metal table in Centerpoint plaza with Taco, Cisco and Bell, a 15-year-old DK member who also has a shaved head—except for a shock of black hair in the front—and looks about 12 years old. Bell pulls out a bag of Vitamin C candies she got from the Salvation Army and passes them out. Taco tells Brooke if she needs anything or anyone hassles her, to find him or Cisco or anyone else in the Dank Krew. Brooke gives him a thumbs up. "I'm gonna go walk around. Figure this street out," she says, and leaves.

The other three just keep chilling on the terrace. The nucleus of Mill Avenue crusty culture is the open-air Centerpoint plaza on the southwest corner of Sixth Street and Mill. It's centrally located, there's room to hacky-sack, a couple dozen tables with chairs, and a constant cross-flow of people to watch. The plaza is their favorite place to exchange information, set up drug deals, and kick it when there's nothing else to do, which is often.

It's also private property. "The whole Centerpoint area is what's known as a super block," says Rod Keeling, executive director of Downtown Tempe Community, Inc. "It's a public space, but it's not public property. It was turned over to the developer by the city."

Which means Centerpoint can make and enforce a different set of rules. No panhandling, for one, which most of the kids respect, and no hanging around unless you buy something, which most of the kids don't. Instead, they play cat and mouse with DTC, Inc.'s white-jacketed TEAM security guards, quietly taking over tables and seeing how long they can hold them before getting 86ed, only to come back a few hours later for another go.

Keeling says DTC has asked Mill Avenue restaurants not to give homeless kids throwaway food, and lobbied for the aggressive panhandling ordinance. Also, Keeling says, the management firm's four downtown ambassadors, who wear aqua sports shirts and ride bikes, have a directive to hand out cards to transients, titled "We'll give you a hand, Not a handout." The card reads: The Downtown Community Council has zero tolerance for those who practice illegal behavior—including panhandling [which is a bit misleading; panhandling isn't illegal in Tempe, only rude panhandling].

The organizations on the back of this card can help you with food, clothes, shelter, counseling and work. This is our helping hand. Reach out and take it.

"We understand that most of these kids come from difficult circumstances," Keeling says. "We understand that. But if we're going to have successful civic places, and not just shopping malls, we have to deal with the issue of disorder in public space."

Not that Mill is a place of great disorder, Keeling points out. DTC hired an ASU marketing class to conduct a survey last year where 350 weekend-night customers were interviewed, and 89 percent viewed downtown Tempe as safe.

But they'd never met the Dank Krew.

Violence is a near constant subtext among the street kids on Mill. They're constantly slap-fighting and throwing things at one another and making threats, often involving homosexual rape. One favorite is "I'll open your ass up so wide it'll be like throwing hot dogs down a hallway." But few are as frightening as some of the kids in the Dank Krew, who describe beating strangers with a cold enthusiasm that recalls the droogs in *A Clockwork Orange*.

"It was about 8:30 last night, and we were hanging out here after we came up from the park, and started hanging around here," says Cisco, sitting outside CP. "James walks up to some older dude sitting here with his wife and asks the guy for a smoke. His wife gives him a smoke, but the guy tells James, 'Get a job.' James told Smokey what the guy said, and Smokey started giving the guy shit. He kept calling him a faggot, over and over, for like 30 minutes, until the guy finally got up and rushed Smokey. Then we all kicked the shit out of him. It was me, James, Taco, Bell, Dwayne, Landon and Smokey."

"It was like pigeons on popcorn," Bell says, giggling. "The guy's wife started kicking James in the butt to save her husband, and Marcia grabbed her like, 'I don't think so, bitch.'"

ASU undergrad Julie Silverman, 21, was outside Coffee Plantation with her roommate that night. "All of a sudden, this little rumble broke out and knocked into our table," she says. "It was basically seven or eight kids kicking this guy in a plaid shirt."

A Tempe police report says the guy in plaid was Jack Penrod, and he was there with Sheila Penrod. Neither could be reached for comment, but the Penrods told police they were sitting at a table in the Centerpoint breezeway next to a table of kids who started making comments about homosexuals. Jack Penrod told police he stood up and asked Smokey, whose real name is Eric Cossner, "Are you talking about me?" Cossner answered, "Only if all faggots wear blue, orange and green shirts." Then, Penrod said, one of the kids shoved him from behind, and he was attacked.

Cossner told police Penrod attacked first, not him, and the kids who jumped in were trying to break up the fight. Penrod was cited for disorderly conduct and released; Cossner was also charged but, since he had no local ID, spent the night in jail.

Smokey got out this morning; he appears and sits down. He says he's 13, but looks a couple years older. He looks like a model in a Calvin Klein ad set in a gas station. Smokey's the kid in overalls with grease on his chest. "Y'all talking about me?" he asks.

"Yeah, we were talking about that guy you fucked up," Cisco says.

"Which one?" says Smokey.

He takes a spoonful of Bell's cup of soup, then slicks back his hair with two swipes of a plastic comb.

"Smokey's already been in two other fights since he got out," Taco explains. "One down by Juice Works where he made some dude's eye bleed, and another at Salvation Army. Kicked both their asses good."

"What happened at Salvation Army?" Cisco asks.

"Some tweaker asshole," Smokey says. "He came up on Marcia right after she took her pants down to pee, and he wouldn't go away, so I was like, 'Whap, whap, whap.'" Smokey punches air: right jab, left jab, right cross. "The guy's sunglasses were all broken and sticking in his face. It was funny."

Smokey's dressed in jeans and several layers of tee shirts. The top one is black and says "SMOKEY" across the front in large white letters. The "Y" is spattered with dried blood.

"That's what happens when you fuck with Dank Krew," he says. "I get your blood on my shirt."

A beige van cruises past, driving south on Mill. "Food van," Cisco says.

Every Monday night, the van trolls Mill like an ice cream truck, pulling off to a side street or parking lot every few minutes to dispense goodies. It's part of a street outreach program run by Tumbleweed, a Phoenix-based shelter for homeless youth. Cisco, Smokey and company follow it to a parking lot next to Jack in the Box.

A pair of Tumbleweed employees open the back doors and hand out blankets, socks, condoms, food and hygiene bags—small cloth sacks with a toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, soap, deodorant and a comb inside.

Tumbleweed program manager Gail Loose says a group of ladies in Sun City buy the hygiene products and sew the bags themselves. Besides the outreach program, Tumbleweed also runs two shelters with a total of 27 beds, and a drop-in center. "There's a nap room there, and a clothing bank, and showers," Loose says. "We serve two meals a day, and do some group counseling, and a doctor comes in once a month."

The first time a kid calls Tumbleweed's drop-in center, a van will come pick him or her up, and give them bus tokens so they can come back for free. The center's address is 420 East Roosevelt, which amuses the kids on Mill to no end—there are supposedly 420 psychoactive compounds in marijuana. "Pulling a 420" means puffing a joint, and it's a stoner ritual to get hella baked every April 20.

Tumbleweed's outreach program and drop-in center are funded by a federal Housing and Urban Development grant. Services are available to anyone under 22. There's only one other shelter for homeless youths in the Valley—Home Base, which shares office space with Tumbleweed, and runs a 25-bed shelter for kids 18 and under.

Since last May, Loose says, Tumbleweed and Home Base have collectively served 628 homeless kids, and got 55 of them off the streets—24 returned home, the rest got a place of their own. Tumbleweed employs two full-time case managers to help kids who want to set goals, write away for their birth certificate to get ID, and find a job. Sometimes it takes a few weeks, but they can stay in the shelter in the meantime.

In other words, if any of the kids on Mill wish to change their lives, the support system to help them do it is firmly in place.

But, Loose admits, most of them don't want to change.

"Most of these kids are just passing through, and they just use us for the services, and we know that," she says. "But it's better than them being dirty and sick."

Loose describes the Tumbleweed staff as "a bunch of bleeding hearts."

"We see the conditions they're living in, and we want to give them everything we can, but we've found they just turn around and sell half of whatever we give them, so now our philosophy is to give them just enough to get through a couple days, so they'll have to come back to us, because the more times we get to interact with them before they leave town, the better chance we have of getting them to work with us.

"It's hard, because they all hate authority, and when we try to introduce them to the programs at Tumbleweed, there are rules and structure and curfews and authority figures—all the things they've grown accustomed to not dealing with."

Loose says almost all of the kids who use Tumbleweed and Home Base hang out on Mill Avenue, and agrees their numbers are increasing. "Traveling's the vogue thing to do right now." The Tumbleweed van pulls out of Jack in the Box to make another lap around Mill. Down the street a block, Cherokee and Sharon are still spanging. They stop when a Native American man who tells them he's a shaman gives them 13 dollars. Now they have enough to buy heroin. But instead of scoring, they walk up and down both sides of Mill, gathering every kid who's on the streets, then taking the whole raggedy band back to Jack in the Box for French fries.

"When a shaman gives you money," Cherokee says, "you should do the right thing with it."

Tuesday

The jagged-edged, hand-scribbled cardboard on the floor of Greg's kitchen warns, "If you don't pay rent, don't ask for food."

Greg and two other guys pay rent here—a railroad-car-size house three blocks west of Mill, on the sketchy side of University. If Greg were a punk rocker, crusties would call him a "house punk," which makes him cool if he lets street kids party and crash at his place, and a little bitch if he doesn't.

Greg's cool.

But he isn't punk rock. At least, he doesn't look it. Greg looks, for lack of a better word, normal: big guy, mid-20s, short hair, mustache. Jeans and a sweat shirt. Bouncer for an East Valley nightclub. Moved here from Detroit. Soft-spoken. Total misanthrope.

"I hate people," Greg says. "And that's deviant. I dress this way because I don't want to make deviancy an obvious statement. All I want to do is work, get old and die." Greg says he likes travelers because they're not fake. Most nights, he opens the door to his home and lets them party there. Usually, a few crash on the carpet inside. Periodically, Greg will get pissed and shut down the scene for a few days or a couple weeks, depending on how pissed.

Tonight, though, it's on. The Dank Krew is in the house—Smokey, Wayne and Bell. And seven other kids, including Zach, Lewis and Spam, who's guzzling from a "space bag"—the silver pouch from inside a carton of box wine.

In a tribute to Radio Rahem, Spam has "LOVE" tattooed across his right knuckles, and "HATE" across his left. "I was going to get 'BEER SLUT,' but then I didn't."

Spam's 18. He grew up in Charlestown, a tough Irish 'hood outside Boston. He says his dad was a Vietnam vet who used to beat the shit out of him and his mother and washed down a handful of Trazidone with Jim Beam most evenings. Spam remembers hiding under a plastic table in the kitchen when he was 5, while his father shouted orders to take cover and return fire. "Sometimes he drank himself back to Vietnam."

Spam's favorite city is New Orleans, but he favors Tempe as well. He was here last year this time, back when kids could sleep in the park. "Man, every day, you'd have 30 people in a circle, smoking joint after joint. Sometimes I never moved from one spot against a tree for a whole day. I'd just keep passing out; and every time I'd wake up, somebody was sticking a bottle in my face. It was that good.

"This year, I'm a little disappointed."

That's the idea, says Tempe mayor Neil Giuliano. "Tempe may be known as a fun-filled, hospitable environment for travelers, or slackers, or whatever they call themselves," he says. "But that can change."

The urban-camping and aggressive-panhandling ordinances were only a first step, says the mayor. "We're going to pass whatever laws we need to pass to make sure we have the tools we need to manage the homeless population." However, Giuliano says he has no idea what those laws might be yet, but one thing's for sure—he does not support the idea of a homeless shelter in Tempe.

"We got attacked last year for not having a shelter, and it's like, 'Well, yeah, we can open a three-car-garage-type shelter somewhere near downtown,' but why should we? We don't have any other services for these kids nearby, and we're not going to just warehouse people."

Giuliano was on the founding board of directors for Home Base, and says he's spent several nights doing outreach. "I've put on the yellow shirt and baseball hat, and started at the bridge and worked my way down. Of course, these kids have no idea who I am. So, yes, I've talked to many of them.

"I feel badly for the real runaways—those kids who've come from abused homes, for whom the streets are a better option. But I don't feel badly at all for the pack kids, the ones that hang out in clusters around Coffee Plantation and Urban Outfitters, who have chosen to live this way and

chosen to elicit fear from citizens, and I will be very aggressive in making Tempe a less friendly place for them."

Which is a flat-Earth policy, really. It may work for Tempe, but does little for society as a whole. This winter, some of the roughest kids on Mill came here from San Francisco, where they were pushed out by new mayor Willie Brown's aggressive anti-homeless policies, which include sweeping Golden Gate Park every night with helicopters and ground patrol. If Tempe runs the travelers out of town, they're not just going to fall off the end of the Earth.

"That's true," says Giuliano. "And I feel the existence of these kids is a very sad, dangerous commentary on the state of society, and the reality is if these kids stay on the streets, eventually they're going to be forced into a society where 'the system' is going to have to deal with them legally, and that's too bad, but for most of them, it's their choice. Ultimately, it's their choice."

Tonight it's Spam, Smokey, Lewis and the gang's choice to get schilly in a back room at Greg's house. In three hours, nine of them go through a four-liter space bag of rose wine and two 30-packs of Milwaukee's Best. Spam brought the space bag, and the kids pitched in change to buy the beer, which Greg traveled all the way to Mesa to purchase from an Albertsons, where it's on special for 10 bucks a 30-pack.

Greg moves the party to his front yard, gets a barrel fire going, and plugs in a portable radio. The only rock station he can get is playing Foreigner's "Double Vision."

I wanna stick around 'til I can't see straight.

Spam says he doesn't shoot heroin. "I only puff kind bud and get schilly, but I get schilly every day." Spam's protective of the space bag. When someone holds it for too long, he scolds them. "Schwill and pass, pussy ass!" Late in the evening, it takes Spam several repetitions of this mantra before he gets Zach's attention.

"Yo," Zach replies, "have you ever read 1984?"

"Dude, I think you've asked me that every day since I met you. Now give me that fucking space bag." Spam takes a hardy schwill, then sniffs an armpit and says he needs a shower, bad. "It's not the funk," he says. "I don't mind the way I smell. It's that my arms are black." Spam pulls one sleeve of his hoodie up to reveal a forearm caked with dirt. "Man, I hate it when I get this dirty. I'm gonna have to soap that shit up three times to get it off."

Wind swirls through the yard, showering Bell, Lewis and Spam with sparks. They cover up and wait for it to pass. "Storm's coming," Glenn says.

Smokey grants a brief interview. He says he came here from Las Vegas. He says he makes money in drinking contests, and sometimes "jacks motherfuckers for their money." Smokey says a week before his 9th birthday, his mother shot him in the stomach over drugs. He had hers, and wouldn't give them up. Smokey says hell, no, he won't show his scar. He says it helps in life to be good-looking, and he wants to start a riot. "The Dank Krew will own Mill Avenue." End of interview.

Of everyone at the party, including Greg, blond-haired Lewis has lived in Tempe the longest. "I'm 22, I've been traveling since I was a kid, and I came here four years ago from Bend, Oregon." Like Taco, Lewis came to Arizona to find his real mom. Also like Taco, he didn't stay with her long once she was found.

"I'm homeless, but I stay everywhere," Lewis says. "I have lots of friends. I work day labor when I feel like it, I score pot for people who pay me, and I hang out on Mill every day." Lewis says he used to smoke and sell crack, and did heroin about 20 times, but now he's clean, except for beer and pot.

"I've seen a lot of kids come through Tempe in the last three years, and it seems like most of them have just given up on life," Lewis says. "That's why heroin is so popular. It lasts a long time, and it makes you real content, no matter what you're doing—sleeping under a bridge, asking people for money, whatever. I'm not like that. I know I'm only on the streets as long as I want to be on the streets. I'm trying to establish a relationship with God in my own way, and I want to figure out what I want to do in life, go to school, and do it. I just need some incentive, like the right girlfriend. For now, I'm still out here, meeting new people all the time." He gestures around the fire. "Half these people, I don't know their names.

"People look at these kids every day on Mill, and they think of a stereotype—dirty junkies. And it's pretty darn accurate. Some of the kids here this winter, they'll steal from people they know, people they don't know. They just don't give a fuck."

Ominous clouds in the night sky tear open, and a hard rain starts to fall. Spam scrambles inside with the rest, whooping. "I'm one of the lucky ones tonight!"

Wednesday

Today is specials day at McDonald's—49-cent cheeseburgers and 70-cent six-piece Chicken McNuggets.

"Stoked," says Chris.

Chris isn't like most of the kids on Mill. He's homeless, and bangs dope, but he's also from the Valley. "My dad's a lawyer. I grew up in obscene wealth, went out to dinner every night, graduated from Shadow Mountain High," Chris says.

Now he's a street junkie, and likes it that way.

"I could be in college right now if I wanted. But I've played that game, and I realized that this Babylonian, societal paradigm of a sorry excuse for what we call civilization is a bunch of bullshit." Chris spreads his arms and circles them in the air. "These are the last days of Rome, man. The fiddle player's warming up, you know what I'm saying? And when all this shit comes crashing down, it's the street kids who will build a new world. We're the cockroaches."

Chris, 20, says he left home about a year ago. "I just appreciate life a lot more out here. Normal people take too many things for granted, like showers. When you haven't had a shower in three weeks, you appreciate it. And sitting outside watching people all day is a hell of a lot more interesting than sitting inside watching TV."

He says the number of kids on Mill doing heroin this winter has probably tripled. Last summer, Chris had a \$60-per-day habit. Now he's down to \$30. "Spanging 30 bucks is no problem when you have a pet monkey to feed."

The monkey's fun to play with, Chris says, but the damn thing shrieks when it's hungry. Just now, he can hear it start to jabber, and goes off to sponge outside Hooters.

This afternoon's skies are foreboding another storm, courtesy of El Nino. The crusties on Mill today look more bedraggled than usual after last night's storm. Taco's lugging a garbage bag filled with his sopping bedroll and clothes. He says the camp where he stayed last night is under three inches of water. "My folder got soaked, and the job applications fell apart," he says. "I'm bumming."

Zach and Spam share a coffee in Centerpoint plaza and talk about what to do tonight, and where to sleep. Greg's house is out of the question, Spam says. Greg's pissed. Someone stole all the sodas out of his fridge last night. Zach suggests they get a bottle of whiskey and break into the old Hayden Flour Mill.

"I'll go with that," Spam says. "But let's invite the leprechaun."

Enter Phinius, who indeed is impish and predominantly green—green hair, green and blue plaid cap, Army green surplus pants, jacket, pack and sleeping bag.

Phinius, 25, has a ring through his septum and several tattoos via a homemade gun. "It was a needle mounted on a Walkman motor," he says. "It hurt like hell." One of his tats is the letter "N" with two

arrows inside a circle—the international squatters symbol, which means "Squat or Rot." Phinius says he's 25, originally hails from Denver, and started traveling six years ago to get away from a felony warrant. "I sold bunk acid to an undercover."

Last year, Phinius squatted a building in San Francisco with a squadron of Irish punks for a few months, and got their accent down pat. Phinius says you can make 40 bucks a night spanging with an Irish accent. He also runs scams. One recent Friday night, Spam cleared 30 dollars in one hour with this one:

"Excuse me, sir/miss. Would you care to bet me a dollar that I can tell you exactly where you got your shoes, and exactly how much they cost?" To anyone who agrees and shakes on the bet, Phinius says, "You've got your shoes on your feet, and it just cost you a dollar to hear it."

Phinius was standing outside Coffee Plantation last night when the storm hit, but got lucky. Some guy in a suit saw this girl from Hollywood named Danielle huddled inside an empty New Times box and gave her \$40 for a hotel room. Danielle gathered up Phinius and six other kids and they all went to Motel 6. "We just smoked Buddha and played spades all night."

Phinius, Spam and Zach pool their day's spanging proceeds to buy an 18-pack of beer and a fifth of Jim Beam (Spam's fiercely loyal to his father's brand). They kill the beer—six each—in about 45 minutes behind a Laundromat on Ash, then make their way back to Mill and start walking toward the flour mill's towering, white grain silos.

The group crosses Mill and scrambles up a muddy hill to get behind the Hayden Flour Mill, where there is a small, rectangular hole in the concrete, a few inches off the ground. Probably a window at one time. Somebody's already done the dirty work—a metal security gate that once guarded the opening is pried back, allowing just enough room to pull a minor act of contortion and drop several feet through darkness into a pile of old wheat.

The depths of the flour mill are dark and creepy. The echo of wheat scuffing and cracking underfoot resonates inside the concrete, underground chambers like the soundtrack to *Friday the 13th*. Thick cobwebs hang from a network of dusty pipes and conveyor belts. On the upside, it's got walls, a roof, and it's underground, so the air's warm, if dusty.

Spam leads Zach and Phinius over a conveyor belt and through a series of doorways to another circular storage cell, diagonally opposite the one they entered. Piles of grain line the walls. A lamppost outside yields barely enough light through a tiny window to see. Every few minutes, a jet on approach to Sky Harbor Airport roars overhead, low enough that its landing lights strafe the room with a green, pulsing strobe.

"I used to hang out in New Orleans with this bunch of kids called the Drunk Belligerent Crew," Spam says, holding the bottle. "We drank Jim Beam, and we had a couple of drinking rules, which we're going to abide by tonight. The first is, we pass the bottle in a circle, and it never touches the ground. If you set the bottle down, you get skipped next turn. The second is, always dedicate a new bottle."

Spam twists the top off the fifth. "I dedicate this bottle to the Drunk Belligerent Crew." Spam takes a long pull and passes the bottle to Zach, who does the same and hands it to Phinius.

"Hey!" Phinius holds up the bottle. "I dedicate this bottle to Marcel Marceau. That is my friend who died of an overdose on cocaine and methamphetamine earlier this year in Denver, Colorado. He was one of the best friends I ever had, and he died on May 18, 1997. I drink to Marcel Marceau. He was my brother, and I hope that someday his spirit will make it as far as Arizona."

Phinius tips the bottle to Spam. "To Marcel Marceau."

"To Marcel Marceau," Spam says, seriously.

Phinius tips the bottle to Zach. "To Marcel Marceau."

"Man," Zach says, "I wouldn't sell my soul to anyone."

Phinius explodes. "Say it, goddamnit!"

"Okay, okay. To Marcel Marceau."

Phinius nods, satisfied. "Well, all right." He glugs whiskey for a three count, then passes the Beam back to Spam.

Ten minutes later, the bottle is two-thirds empty, and everyone's flat-out blasted.

Zach tells a story about how it was his friends who busted sellout punk singer Jello Biafra's legs a few years ago. "Oh yeah?" shouts Phinius, "well, I busted Jello in the face at a Lung Butter show in Berkeley in 1991. Death to Jello Biafra!"

"Dude," Spam says. "You wanna get a little louder? I think there's some people in Phoenix that didn't hear you."

"I don't need to be quiet," Phinius says, "because you know why? We're ninja. All of us, we're ninja. We're ninja, goddamnit!"

Zach's turn. "Dude, shut up, please, because if we get arrested, yo, I'll have to work for the government. I've already been approached to work for the government three times."

"That's the big '90s easy," says Phinius. "The government wants all us kids to work for them."

"And you know why?" Zach asks. "Because we've got skills, dude. Mad skills."

Phinius nods. "We are who we are."

"For real, dude," Zach says. "We're the heroes of the next 10 generations, dude, because everything's crumbling."

Phinius thrusts both arms in the air. "Listen to me! Listen to me! I don't wanna hear anything else right now but this!"

He pauses for effect, then lowers his voice to an intense whisper. "We are the forerunners of a frontier yet unseen. That is us. That is our people. That is our tribe. We are the forerunners of a frontier yet unseen. We live and travel in a world of truth, and that is so rare in these times, and . . ."

Phinius belches. He does not look well.

"Here you go." Phinius passes the bottle to Spam, puts his head between his knees, and quietly vomits bourbon on his boots. Zach and Spam ignore him. Zach picks up a handful of wheat and lets it run through his fingers. "Think how fucked the world would be without wheat," he says. "This is money. No, this is shit. The Earth shits and lets us eat."

Spam starts playing harmonica, softly. He still has the bottle in his lap. "Schwill and pass, pussy ass," Zach says, sitting cross-legged, wheat trickling from both hands. Spam doesn't hear him. Zach howls, "Schwill and pass, fuck-o!" and flings wheat around the room.

Spam stops playing. "Oh, shut up. Like you need any more. Look at you. You're sitting there playing with bird seed." Zach gets to his feet and wanders off into the mill, banging into pipes and muttering to himself in the dark.

For several minutes, Phinius alternately leans against and slides down a wall, struggling to free his bedroll from the frame of his pack. Finally he succeeds, unfurls his sleeping bag right through the sour puddle of bile and bourbon he threw up earlier, then worms his way inside, and sacks out.

Spam tells a joke. "What did the farmer say when he lost his tractor?"

What?

"Where's my tractor?"

Zach returns, covered in dust and wheat, dumps his sleeping bag in the middle of the room and crashes out.

Spam starts telling his life story. Youngest of four brothers. Alcoholic, abusive Vietnam vet father. Mom left dad when Spam was 9 and moved to a shit town in New Hampshire called Claremont. First arrested in fifth grade for kicking his principal in the shins. Arrested again for punching junior high school principal by accident during a fight. Started smoking pot and pulling burglaries when he was 12. Busted during a break-in during the summer between seventh and eighth grades and sentenced to several months at a juvenile facility in Grove City, Pennsylvania. Ran away several times, got caught several times. Started reading books.

"The first book I ever read was when I was 13. It was called *They Cage the Animals at Night*. It's about this kid who gets thrown from orphanage to orphanage, and he winds up in this one orphanage where you get teddy bears, but when you go to sleep at night, they take the bear away from you. That's just where it gets the title from. It goes a lot deeper than that. I started crying, and one of the kids in my cottage said, 'Oh, I got stuck with a sissy,' but I didn't care, man. That book is badass."

Spam plans to title his first book *Green Fuzzy Slippers*. Why? "Because I ran away from that place so many times I couldn't wear my own shoes, even in the middle of winter. Only these green, fuzzy slippers."

Drunk or not, Phinius and Zach do not sleep peacefully. Both twitch and jerk in their sleeping bags, and occasionally groan like they're in pain. Spam, who clearly can hold his liquor, says he got enough high school credits while he was in the boys' facility to be a junior when he came out, at age 15. But he dropped acid his first day in public high school and dropped out a few months later. He fell in love with a preppie girl whose friends hated him, and she eventually broke his heart. He ran pot from Jersey to New Hampshire for a while with one of his brothers, and started breaking into cars.

"One road trip to New Orleans changed my life," he says. "I quit doing crimes and just stayed on the road."

Spam stops talking because Phinius is making a commotion. He thrashes out of his sleeping bag, gets to his knees, unzips and—captured in the flashing green light of a landing plane—begins to piss on his sleeping bag and backpack, tracing lazy figure eights with his torso as he struggles to stay upright.

"Phinius!" Spam yells. "Phinius! You're pissing all over your own stuff!"

Phinius looks over. "Wharrgh?" he says.

"You're pissing on your stuff, man!"

"Hey!" Phinius shouts, then faces forward and keeps the hose running. Ten seconds. Fifteen.

"That's all beer," Spam comments.

Finally, Phinius is done. He flops forward, draws his legs under him, extends them into the soaked sleeping bag, and snuggles in.

"Phinius!" Spam yells. "You're sleeping in your own piss."

Phinius responds with a wordless, guttural bellow.

Spam shrugs.

"All right, then. Sleep tight."

Thursday

One of Zach's favorite custies came to Mill Avenue today, looking for heroin. Zach overcharged the guy \$25 for a half-gram, then called a dealer from a pay phone in the parking lot of a gas station on Mill and University. Meanwhile, the custie—a middle-aged guy sporting a paunch and a perm—bought a cup of coffee and read a Stephen King book at a table outside Coffee Plantation.

Sometimes, Zach says, the dealer says to meet a guy in a car near the intersection of 13th and Mill. Sometimes a vato shows up on foot. Sometimes it's a kid on a bike.

Today it's the kid on a bike.

The tar comes in a wax-paper bindle cocooned in saran wrap the shape of a large vitamin pill. "In case you have to swallow it," Zach says. He unwraps the package, breaks off a third for himself, rewraps the heroin, and walks back to the plaza to make the delivery. Then he shoots up half the heroin, and a few hours later, shoots up the rest. Now Zach looks ready to watch cartoons for the next eight hours.

He starts mumbling about getting kicked awake by the cops this morning in the mill, and Spam lays out the scenario:

"It was really early, but I thought I heard somebody come into the room and leave, like a janitor or maintenance man or somebody. So I tried to wake up Zach and Phinius, but there was no way, so I went back to sleep. Next thing I know, the cops are kicking us, telling us to get up."

Spam says the cops ran the names they gave them for warrants, then issued a trespass warning and let them go.

"They had a hell of a time with Phinius. He was still wasted, and he smelled like piss."

Word of Zach, Phinius and Spam getting busted spreads fast via Mill Avenue's jungle telegraph. Now, the flour mill is a "hot squat," and the kids will steer clear for a while. Smokey's day is ruined. One of his favorite things to do in the world is get inside that mill, climb a ladder to the roof of the grain silo and puff dank bud next to the giant cross up there. The other day, he and Wayne and Bell were up there for hours, he says, and the view was fantastic. He and Wayne lifted some heavy, tear-shaped metal pulleys from the mill on the way out, which they now carry, tied to lengths of rope.

"They're called Smileys," Smokey says. "Because all you do after you get hit in the head with one is drool and smile."

Smokey and Wayne lay waste to a tree outside Sweet Daddy's arcade with their Smileys. Each blow puts a deep dent in the trunk that bleeds white sap. Smokey likes the effect. He and Wayne decide to round up Cisco and a couple other DK bros and go see a man about a mugging.

Spam shakes his head when they leave. "I don't trust those kids. They're talking about going out jacking people again. I don't trust anyone who talks about peace, love, down with Babylon and let's go jack some motherfucker."

Nick's back on Mill today. He says he and Marina and Pat have been in Phoenix, and crashed at the empty Carnation factory last night. He doesn't recommend the accommodations. "I woke up in the middle of the night and my throat was all swollen, and people told me I was lying next to a room full of asbestos." Nick is still trying to sell the Playstation, but he's knocked the price down to \$100, without the games, which he pawned yesterday.

Everyone hovers around Centerpoint plaza for an hour or so, waiting complacently for something to happen. Zach goes to find a place to nod out. Someone says fuck it, let's go drink at the caves. Zach, Cherokee, Sharon, Nick and Phinius get a space bag and some beer, and make the 45-minute trek to a chunk of desert on the edge of Papago Park, within eyesight of the 202 freeway. "This is it," says Phinius.

The caves are at the base of two red-rock formations; nearby are several groves of trees with fire circles in their middle.

Phinius says he heard about the caves a couple days after he came to town. "Only travelers know about this place," he says. "The cops don't come out this far."

Cherokee and Sharon start a fire in one of the fairy rings using twigs and scraps of beer carton.

Spam warns everyone he's about to take off his shoes, and then he does. Phinius recoils from the stench. "Hey," Spam says, "sneaker rot is bad, but at least I don't have bugs." Cherokee and Phinius agree bugs are the worst. "It's getting so you have to check somebody's dreds before you give them a hug," Spam says. "Body parasites freak me out."

Marina and Pat show up, and ask if anyone has a line on clean needles. They tried to buy a 10-pack at a pharmacy today and got kicked out. Pat says he's afraid of hepatitis more than HIV, but he's never been tested for either. "I'm healthy. I've got no open wounds, no diseases. I'm not coughing. I don't smoke. I'm not worried. Besides, it seems like if I'm going to have a needle in my arm, I should at least get high."

Marina says you can get high just from the feel of the needle. Cherokee says that's right, and he knows because he gets two HIV tests a year. So far, so good.

A jet flies over. Cherokee says he wishes he had a surface-to-air missile with a giant paint ball on the tip. Spam says his dream is to get a small plane and drop red paint on the White House. Cherokee says he's pretty sure White House airspace is defended. So what, says Spam. "Like I couldn't outmaneuver them."

Spam has a poem to read. It's written on the back of a list of characters in the play *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. "The last time I was in Claremont, I got drunk and auditioned with the Off-Broadstreet players to play Ed Earl Dude," Spam says. "I got the part, too, and I would've been in the play, except I left town."

Anyway, Spam says, he wrote the poem one morning in a St. Louis Greyhound station on his way to Tempe.

*The cathedral-type ceiling stares down
at me
A wino's church at the bottom of a
bottle
I found the messiah
He intoxicates me and I vomit
the demons
Am I saved or possessed?
Whichever it is, the feeling is almost*

*like Nirvana
My ignorance leaves me in a state
of bliss
What they call a hangover is just me
recovering from the spirit entering
the night before.
But by the end of the day, I feel that
he is gone.
And so, I must let him enter
once again.*

Asked for the poem's title, Spam thinks for a second, then busts out: "I call this one 'Greyhound Station Hangover, St. Louis, Missouri.'"

Friday

It's late afternoon. Cherokee and Sharon are hanging out on a planter around the Centerpoint plaza sign with Jester, a couple of tourists from Massachusetts, and Danielle, who got the room at Motel 6 the night it rained.

Danielle is 19. She has a gorgeous angled face and a wracking cough. Danielle says she ran away from home in Michigan last year. "This one night, my dad invited my ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend to dinner, and they all sat around and talked about how I should be in a funny farm," she says. "I went upstairs and out my bedroom window."

Three weeks later, she was in Hollywood, doing drugs for the first time, and turning tricks. "I never spange," she says. "People in Hollywood used to give me shit for being a prostitute, but at least I was earning the money." Danielle says she was engaged to a member of the notorious gutter-punk gang Hollywood Dogs, but he went to jail for a long time, so she moved in with her mom in Detroit.

"I got a job at a gas station for a while, and then a Big Boy, but nothing worked out," she says. The last time she sold her body, Danielle says, was right before she left Detroit, a few days after Christmas. "It was this guy in a doughnut shop who just kept asking, so finally I did it, because he said he'd pay me 200 dollars, which is a lot, but I hated it. I just laid there and didn't move, except he kept trying to kiss me, and every time he did, I'd slap him. It was gross."

Wherever she goes, Danielle says, men buy her food, give her money for hotel rooms, and offer to take her home with them. "Guys on the streets, guys in suits, it don't matter. Men who can't get

laid are always around me," she says. "I don't like violence, but if I was bigger, I'd beat the shit out of them all. I just wish they'd shut the fuck up.

"I know I've messed my life up. I know that. But I can't get my shit together. Everybody tells me to get a grant and go to ASU, everybody tells me go to Job Corps, everybody tells me do this, do that. But I don't know what papers to ask for, and I don't know what to write on those papers if I did. It's supposed to be so easy, but it ain't."

Danielle coughs and draws her arms tight around her knees.

"I've got nothing better to do than sit and watch people all day, and I see business people, you know, and I wonder what it's like to be them. I wonder what they think about when they zone out, and what they were doing when they were 19."

A TEAM security guard comes up and tells Danielle, Cherokee and Sharon to "vacate the planter."

Sharon asks why, and Mr. TEAM says because they're not buying anything. Sharon asks the tourists from Massachusetts if they've bought anything from Coffee Plantation, and the tourists say no. Sharon asks them if they intend to buy anything from Coffee Plantation, and the tourists say not really. Sharon asks Mr. TEAM if the tourists have to leave, too. He says no. She asks why not. He says, "Because you're transients, and they're not." Sharon gets up and gives Jester a tug. "Thanks for clarifying."

The big excitement tonight is that an older tramp who stole Cisco's stuff a couple weeks ago is back in town, and Cisco is talking payback. He and Smokey hatch a plan: This 17-year-old girl from Mesa named Tuna will lure the guy into an alley with the promise of a blowjob, where Cisco and Smokey will jump him. Some kids who are hanging around the plaza follow Cisco and Smokey into the alley, some follow Tuna to watch her pick up the guy, and some say screw this drama, let's go drink beer in the pink house.

There are eight of them: Spam, Sharon, Cherokee, Lewis and his brother, a girl named Trash, a fat, quiet kid named Mike who ran away from home in Phoenix two weeks ago, and a guy named Scratch, who says he's getting married next week in Payson. The pink house is on the northwest corner of Farmer and University, close to the field where the bald guy hopped the wall with the Desert Eagle. It used to be a neighborhood Mexican restaurant called Zendejas. Now it's a squat.

The cops busted the pink house a couple weeks ago, but a few kids crashed there last night without incident, so it's off the hot-squat list. Getting in is cake. The back door is off the hinges. The walls inside are sprayed with graffiti—dozens of names, DK tags, quotes from Dante's *Inferno*, the Old Testament, James and the Giant Peach, and "Gangsta, Gangsta," a rap song by Niggaz With Attitude.

Scratch invites everyone to his wedding. He says there will be hella cheesecake to eat. Cherokee and Sharon ask if anyone else is going to the Rainbow Gathering in Ocala, Florida, next month. Spam says he might do that, or he might go to Mardi Gras, or he might go find this chick who lives in Prescott he met in Denver last year, or he might go see this chick he knows in L.A., or he might go to Tucson, or he might just stay here, or he might go check in on his mom. "I think she misses me."

Earlier this evening, Spam called home from a pay phone outside Coffee Plantation. His brother answered. "Hey," Spam said. "It's your brother."

Pause.

"What do you mean, what do I want? Get mom. There's a reporter that wants to interview her."

Spam's mother came on the line. Her name is Fran. She said her son's real name is Nick. She confirmed Spam's stories about his dad, his stories about running away from the juvenile facility, and his claim that he left home at 15. "Nick's always had what I call 'happy feet,'" she said. Fran said Claremont, New Hampshire, is a small factory town of about 30,000 people. "There's a curfew whistle you can hear everywhere. It goes off at 10 p.m. on weeknights, and midnight on weekends, and this town is so small the police actually enforce the curfew. Nick always hated it here. But he can't say I mistreated him."

He doesn't. "Well, that's good, because he had a good home here. I don't know why he lives the way he does. I think Nick has a lot of chaos inside him. I think that's why he likes New Orleans so much."

Last year, Fran said, Nick's father died, and she had to go find him in New Orleans to break the news. "I couldn't even ask for my son by name. I had to walk up and down the river banks asking if anyone had seen Spam."

It turned out Nick was in Orleans Parish Prison. "He's been in there several times," Fran said. "It's usually a relief to know he's in a jail, because at least then I know he'll get a good night's sleep and a shower and at least a couple of hot meals."

Fran said Spam calls her about once a week. "I like for him to stay in touch, because it's hard sometimes when I can't call up my son and ask how he's doing. He doesn't carry ID, and my biggest fear is that something will happen to him and they won't know who he is."

"The only time I don't like him to call is when he's been drinking. He's smart except when he drinks. That's when he gets in trouble, just like his father."

Spam's brothers don't think he will ever settle down, Fran said. She hopes he will. "I always say to him, 'You are not a street person. You don't have to be out there. You have a family that loves you and place to live, but this is the lifestyle you have chosen, and it's not something anyone else in the family can understand.' I tell him, 'It's one thing to spare change when you're 18. It's another to do it when you're 40. As you get older, people will get less sympathetic. Think about that.' But I don't think he does.

"I don't think any of those kids think about anything but now, and when now is gone, it's forgotten, and tomorrow becomes now. And that's just how they see the world."