

Chapter 3

Chapter 3, The GIRL was heart-wrenchingly, impossibly beautiful. Desire weakened his stomach. A waterfall of blond hair splashed on her bare shoulders. He studied the photograph surreptitiously and then closed the magazine and put it back where it belonged, on the top shelf. He glanced around to see if he'd been observed. The store owner positively prohibited the reading of magazines and a sign said NO BUY NO READ . But the owner was busy at the far end of the place.

Why did he always feel so guilty whenever he looked at *Playboy* and the other magazines? A lot of guys bought them, passed them around at school, hid them in the covers of notebooks, even resold them. He sometimes saw copies scattered casually on coffee tables in the homes of his friends. He had once bought a girlie magazine, paying for it with trembling fingers—a dollar and a quarter, his finances shot down in flames until his next allowance. And he didn't know what to do with the damn thing once it was in his possession. Sneaking it home on the bus, hiding it in the bottom drawer of his room, he was terrified of discovery. Finally, tired of smuggling it into the bathroom for swift perusals, and weary of his deceit, and haunted by the fear that his mother would find the magazine, Jerry had sneaked it out of the house and dropped it into a catchbasin. He listened to it splash dismally below, bidding a wistful farewell to the squandered buck and a quarter. A longing filled him. Would a girl ever love him? The one devastating sorrow he carried within him was the fear that he would die before holding a girl's breast in his hand.

Out at the bus stop, Jerry leaned against a telephone pole, body weary, echoing the assault of the football practices. For three days his body had absorbed punishment. But he was still on the roster, luckily. Idly, he watched the people on the Common across the street. He saw them every day. They were now part of the scenery like the Civil War Cannon and the World War Monuments, the flagpole. Hippies. Flower

Children. Street People. Drifters. Drop-Outs. Everybody had a different name for them. They came out in the spring and stayed until October, hanging around, calling taunts to passersby occasionally but most of the time quiet, languid and peaceful. He was fascinated by them and sometimes envied their old clothes, their sloppiness, the way they didn't seem to give a damn about anything. Trinity was one of the last schools to retain a dress code—shirt and tie. He watched a cloud of smoke swirl around a girl in a floppy hat. Grass? He didn't know. A lot of things he didn't know.

Absorbed in his thoughts, he didn't notice that one of the street people had detached himself from the others and was crossing the street, dodging cars deftly.

"Hey, man."

Startled, Jerry realized the guy was addressing him. "Me?"

The fellow stood in the street, on the other side of a green Volkswagen, his chest resting on the car's roof. "Yes, you." He was about nineteen, long black hair brushing his shoulders, a curling mustache, like a limp black snake draped on his upper lip, the ends dangling near his chin. "You been staring at us, man, like every day. Standing here and staring."

They really say *man*, Jerry thought. He didn't think anybody said *man* any more except as a joke. But this guy wasn't joking.

"Hey, man, you think we're in a zoo? That why you stare?"

"No. Look, I don't stare." But he did stare, every day.

"Yes, you do, man. You stand here and look at us. With your homework books and your nice shirt and your blue-and-white tie."

Jerry looked around uneasily. He confronted only strangers, nobody from school.

"We're not sub-humans, man."

"I didn't say you were."

“But you look it.”

“Look,” Jerry said, “I’ve got to get my bus.” Which was ridiculous, of course, because the bus wasn’t in sight.

“You know who’s sub-human, man? You. You are. Going to school every day. And back home on the bus. And do your homework.” The guy’s voice was contemptuous.

“Square boy. Middle-aged at fourteen, fifteen. Already caught in a routine. Wow.”

A hiss and the stench of exhaust announced the arrival of the bus. Jerry swung away from the guy.

“Go get your bus, square boy,” he called. “Don’t miss the bus, boy. You’re missing a lot of things in the world, better not miss that bus.”

Jerry walked to the bus like a sleepwalker. He hated confrontations. His heart hammered. He climbed aboard, dropped his token in the coin box and lurched to his seat as the bus moved away from the curb.

He sat down, breathed deeply, closed his eyes.

Go get your bus, square boy.

He opened his eyes and slitted them against the invasion of the sun through the window.

You’re missing a lot of things in the world, better not miss that bus.

A big put-on, of course. That was their specialty, people like that. Putting people on. Nothing else to do with their lives, piddling away their lives.

And yet ...

Yet, what?

He didn’t know. He thought of his life—going to school and coming home. Even though his tie was loose, dangling on his shirt, he yanked it off. He looked up at the

advertising placards above the windows, wanting to turn his thoughts away from the confrontation.

Why? someone had scrawled in a blank space no advertiser had rented.

Why not? someone else had slashed in answer.

Jerry closed his eyes, exhausted suddenly, and it seemed like too much of an effort even to think.

