

*Hart Schulz*

## **Taking Pictures**

The jeep hurdles train tracks and jolts us. It's dawn, and coastal fog is a smoke in the orange trees. Something has turned over a truck full of them—now, of course, it's quite empty. But a few stubbornly have found nooks in the rusted concave of the truckbed. They are inside half-a-tunnel. Others spew their seeds to a road. We'll find some later, seeds, wedged into the tread like limp nails, at the South Lake Tahoe motel. They will have held on for four hundred miles of gravel and dirt and pavement. This may be a new way for orange groves to propagate. They'll have to drop out somewhere. My sister once sprouted a lemon seed in a paper towel stuffed into a waterglass on a windowsill. When water hits them, they're like popcorn in hot oil. Alongside the road people are hurrying for free oranges even before the sun. It is like a battlefield. One man has the face of a raisin. He has worked the longest and hardest and probably will get the most oranges. The jeep keeps rolling as if it knows. We have a long way to go, little rest ahead of us, and no time at all for oranges. For a moment we are tempted—oranges would be perfect when the desert pounds into the convertible around noon—but we go on. Later we will wish we had taken a picture of the bright oranges in the grey air on the almost

black road with its fluorescent, bloody spine. Two years hence, I will pride myself that the smell of orange blossom is a reminder!

My best friend Trig has climbed up on the white monument to pose for a photo. This place is a graveyard, and the photo is unfortunate because shadows have hidden his face. Just the same, I use the jeep as a tri-pod and it crosses my mind that the heat of the engine, of the sun on the metal, may harm film. A lizard has found the shade of a wheelwell. There is no expression on Trig's face because it's blank with the darkness. Behind him two things loom—jet-black Japanese letters that climb up the chalky needle, and the grey angles of the Sierra. Neither of them are in the shade, but Trig is. Manzanar is the graveyard for interned Japanese-Americans. There's real cause for concern about barbed-wire, rusted and hidden just below the desert dust. Neither of us would want to change a tire! We're looking for the lake. Even though it's over one hundred shining degrees, the water is cold. They used it to drink. When you jump in, you worry about your head. It's possible to have a stroke! And there's broken glass on the bottom too. Kids from Bishop, kids who don't know about bad luck, come here to get drunk. Looking through the camera, you can follow a trail of junipers and sagebrush, green and purple, that creeps like a line of hair to a navel, to the shallow, blue reservoir. It makes a nice picture. But you have to watch out for rattlers—they're everywhere. And a man with a camera is easy prey.

It's a good place to sleep, and juniper fires burn long and hard. Mountains become the black froth of land or a headstone for the flat, historic desert. Trig has seen a ghost in the underbrush. But it turns out to be a quick, slanted field mouse. There may not even be underbrush. This is a desert, a place of empty cans and skeletons. The sand is an old mountain that died. All this is too much so we are in the 31 Flavors in Bishop. They really only have 27, and 3 to

5 are specialty ice creams. Tonight High Sierra Caramel, Root Beer Nut, and Bar-B-Que Chicken. A small blond catches Trig's eye. She is another angel in the crowd. The girls at work wear chocolate dresses with strawberry and vanilla bibs. They are required to wear hats too. And scooping ice cream is serious business. At 10pm, one of them will polish and scrub on her knees in the empty store as we watch from the jeep outside. There are three people now lapping ice cream, and I'm worried about my seatcovers. They are new and cost \$50 each. The lighted storefront is a nighttime desert jewel, and the people inside are like animals captured in a funny kind of picture zoo. The blond is saying, whispering, that she likes ghosts and can't believe Bar-B-Que either. She calls 31 Flavors "B and R's" because she's from Backeast.

Our friend Royce has a picture above his television. It is his brown-faced father in a sunny kimono and holding a samurai sword. There are other men, and maybe they were drinking when the photo was taken. To a little kid, the photo doesn't make sense. Behind them are the Sierras in the winter. There is thin snow on cardboard boxes. These are their buildings. There is a tiny woman with a broom too. I am only fifteen and when I go to his house to play guitar I feel uneasy. I can't help it, and nobody talks about it. Royce teaches me everything he knows about the guitar. He plays and shyly sings "Sweet Baby James". It is the sound of an angel. James Taylor's eyes are like cameras. Everything in the black and white photo is black or white. "The Birkshires seemed dreamlike on account of the frosting—With ten miles behind me and ten thousand more to go."

The angel in the crowd has pulled her sleeping bag down below bare breasts and sat up. Her hair looks like the jeep in the wind. The sand behind her is blond too in the morning and the little lake is thrilling! All this makes a good photograph. Her breasts are

small and point outward, away from a flat, hard place. She was sexually abused by her father. Two days later Trig will mention her perfume on his sleeping roll, and we'll destroy the photo because she's only seventeen when she said eighteen. Trig stretches his arms out at the sky and suggests we all take a picture at the monument. The auto-mechanism trips the camera off the tri-pod and scratches the jeep on its way down the desert. The girl has climbed to the top of the needle wastefully. It is the work of a Japanese prisoner.

My body is a corkscrew and I'm driving a golfball into thin desert. We don't know how they got enough water here to keep it green. I've taken off my shorts and Trig is taking a dramatic picture of me with Mt. Whitney in the backdrop and this golf course with tiny white flowers in the rough. We are playing golf naked. A car rolls by and honks. Cottonwood blossoms drift about like butterflies. It's hard to tell the cottonwood blossoms from the ball as it hovers high above an artificial oasis. Someone has planted alfalfa and it's growing like mad! We have hit two balls into the thick, green swamp. Our ankles are muddy but the smell is cut hay. At the 15th we are completely nude but for bulky, black cameras dangling from our necks. 31 Flavors has sponsored one of the benches, but its shining, tin banner is too hot to lean against. At the 18th I lead by one stroke and am just off the green. Trig is 250 yards from the hole. We are poor boys playing a rich man's game. His driver glints in the sun. He has hit a billowing ball. It flies beyond the reach of fragrance and into an invisible jet-stream. It is so high I have time to aim my camera, to put on a sun-filter. Trig's ball is waiting to fall onto the green! The feeling is eerie. It feels like there's war and there's been a stop in the action. It has travelled 250 yards in the desert. If I look away the ball will fall and roll into the hole and I will lose. So I stare down the golf ball and become its captive.

I take a hit on 18. To my right the guy with the cigarette draws a 4. The woman to his left is wearing a Hawaiian print MuMu. She's had three twenty-ones in a row, and this is her third mai-tai in 25 minutes. The room is a cloud of sparkling, silver smoke. To my left a suited man is waiting for me and counting cards. His long, black lips move automatically and silently. He looks at me like a bad memory, the look of scorn. But I draw a deuce and I have beaten the dealer's 19. Trig is playing slot machines with a cowboy he met. The cowboy's truck has a bumper sticker that says "Shit Happens." Trig wins a great deal of money in a short time, so we leave. "I may be ugly, but I'm not stupid," the cowboy says. He's not a real cowboy, but he wears a tall hat and calls his pick-up Bessie. At three in the morning I awake to hear him puking in the bathroom. Nevertheless, the three of us are smart gamblers. And the big lake beyond the shining casinos, with the moon in its heart, seems to be waiting.

This is Northern California and the deer have come down to our camp. We are laughing at the starry sky. Would it be funnier to get up and piss on the other's sleeping forehead with or without his permission? It's clear it would be funnier with his permission. The darkness is a hole we've climbed into willfully. We are walking, feeling the dome of the road with our feet, hidden from the moon by the canyon. Neither of us can sleep so we're off to find my swimming hole. I'm leaping off a cliff into warm, black air, then into the lock of cold water. My forearm scrapes the gravel at the bottom. I have never felt so free, this being like a trout inside the stream. If I could take a picture it would be a deep, black swirl. Trig loves the pool too and we are overcome with euphoria. At the bottom of the pool, I dream of someone I once knew. Each night my mind fills with pictures of her dying of cancer. First it is a walnut at the base of her back; then, she falls onto a hard kitchen floor in slow motion and loses her eyes.