

A small circle of friends

In college, the bonds of friendship form without fanfare. They strengthen invisibly. And when they break, it's amazing how little has changed.

I met them in a coroding apartment on 11th Avenue, a few blocks from campus. It was Thanksgiving and Gerald Ford was still president — 1975, if you can't remember that far back. The menu was self-basting Butterball turkey, macrobiotic salad and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

without malice
harry esteve

Gathered around the table was a small circle of friends, eating, chatting, seeing if they had enough gas money between them for a trip to Bend during the long weekend. They didn't, but who cared?

I was in a state of semi-euphoria. For the past three months I had been living alone in a tiny studio above what used to be the Tandy Leather Company on West Seventh. Barely 18 years-old, a newcomer to Eugene, I had taken to talking to my bicycle rather than endure silence evening after evening, night after night. Now here I was having Thanksgiving dinner, talking to people. Nirvana.

Ben stood out that night — both literally, because he seemed nearly twice my height, and otherwise, because of his general goofiness. He had spent a year in Vietnam, part of the time wandering through the jungle, carrying a gun and trying to stay alive, the rest of the time, sitting in an office, printing an underground anti-war newspaper, earning an early discharge and an FBI file.

And the others around the table. Paul, the cynical New Yorker, prematurely balding, nearing his political science degree which he knew would become worthless the moment he shed his graduation robe. All he wanted to do was take pictures with his 35 mm Nikon.

Dave, tall, handsome, mustached, and Marxist. He was the only one with a girlfriend, so he kept his distance. He was also a veteran of the Vietnam war, but he never said much about it.

Peter, who was in school, but had no idea why and eventually left because he couldn't pay tuition. I recall a particular evening when he and I wandered around downtown Eugene somewhat aimlessly, primarily to talk. Neither of us had any money. He stopped at a pool hall on the west side of the downtown mall. "Watch this," he said.

I followed him into the smoky bar and watched, wide-eyed and underage, as he calmly hustled three games of eight ball and won three dollars. "Dinner," he said as we left. We bought a loaf of bread and

sandwich makings at the Safeway on West Seventh.

It was getting late. He told me he'd show me where the whores hung out as we walked to his house. I said I didn't believe there were any in Eugene. "Just watch," he said again.

As we passed by an office building on Oak Street, a woman stepped out of a doorway and asked us if we had any plans for the night. Peter said no. She said she could help us out if we'd like. Peter said no thanks, and we kept walking. "See?" he said.

The apartment on 11th became the central hangout. Most days, by five o'clock we'd all wind up there, killing time. Classes filled the days, and gave us something to talk about. Homework was reserved for long Sunday afternoons and late Sunday nights.

I began to know Ben better. He told me only a little about his Vietnam days, but he admitted that they had changed him permanently, and he would always find it hard to join society's mainstream. It wasn't a choice, he said, but a result.

He worked hard at keeping his drinking under control. He tried to keep his mind on his classes, but they made less and less sense to him. He could probably graduate, he said, but he still had to take a health class to fulfill the University's requirement. That's when he told me he was 30 years old and had been in college on and off since he was 18.

Spring came and the group grew restless. Paul couldn't take it. He took off suddenly one night for Winnemucca, Nevada to gamble. He won. He returned a week later with the trunk of his old Mustang packed with cases of Coors beer. He shared his wealth unselfishly.

But with the warmer weather, the bond began to deteriorate. Peter dropped out of school and hitchhiked to New England. Dave moved in with his girlfriend and spent his time with her. Paul walled himself off, trying desperately to pass enough courses for his political science degree.

The school year ended. Paul packed his Mustang with camera gear and headed for New York City. I said goodbye to Dave and Ben and left Eugene as well. The bond broke as easily as it had formed.

Last week, in a fit of nostalgia, I called Ben. He was still in Eugene, still attending classes at the University. He filled me in.

Dave had shrugged off Marxism for Capitalism, owns a Porsche and sells stocks and bonds in Eugene. Paul couldn't make it in New York City, breezed through town three years ago, and left, still wanting to take pictures. Peter had stayed on the East Coast.

And Ben? He was considering switching his major to either educational psychology or statistical analysis.

"I'm trying to be respectable," he confided, "but I'm having a hard time." This year marked his 16th in college.

"One of these days I'll take health," he said.

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Uncanny drums

Last week Jesse Colin Young sold out at the Hult Center. The box office, however, had hundreds of unsold tickets after the show. To be more specific, Young sold out musicians everywhere by utilizing a computerized drummer instead of the real thing. Not unlike the rhythm accompaniment one uses when banging away on grandma's Wurliitzer organ, Young's "drummer"

sounded canned, shallow, and tinny. Worst of all, it insulted a good portion of the audience, prompting many listeners to gather their belongings and bolt for the exits.

Between tunes, Young introduced the latest member of his band, calling it "beautiful" and "creative." Yet Young's machines succeeded at reducing his spontaneity and the size of his audience. At the time, I wondered who was playing guitar — Young

or his computer.

Ironically, Young, who not so long ago was a struggling and frequently unemployed Greenwich Village folk guitarist, prefers to employ a computer rather than invoking the creative assistance of a fellow musician and artist.

In short, the computer should relieve us from mundane tasks such as University registration; may it never replace the artist.

*Will Connery
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