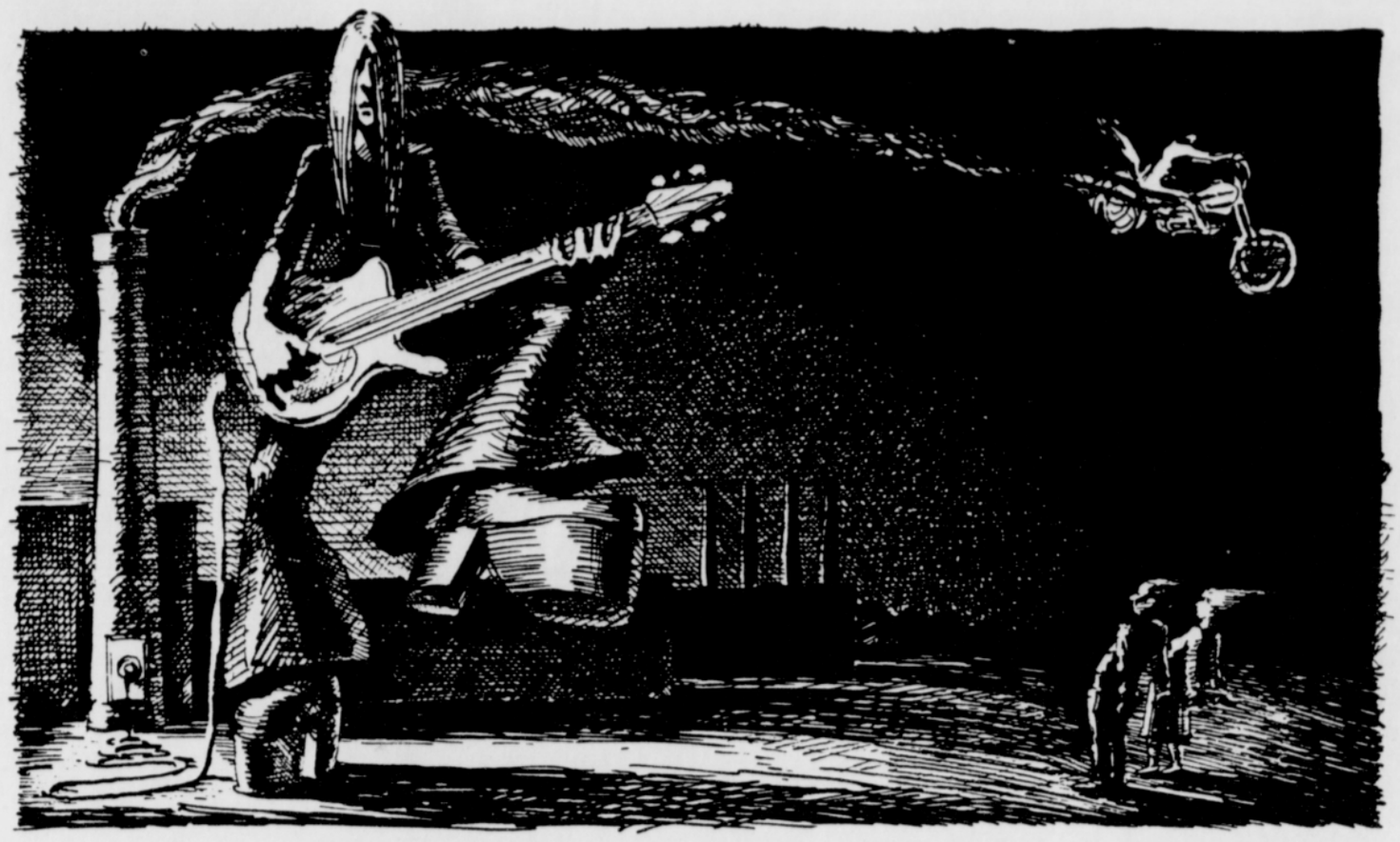

JEFF MARKOWSKY

IN THE GROOVE

BY JOE VINCENZA

She looked like something the cat dragged in. She really did. Her hair, which was usually one of her more alluring traits, had none of its characteristic qualities. It did not shine or glow. It didn't even smell good. Dirty and matted, it now hung unkempt on the ripped shoulders of her designer gown. The dirt on her face was starting to dry and crack, like a mudpack she once got at an overpriced resort.

She limped. Not because she was hurt, but because she had sometime earlier in the evening lost one of the heels from her shoes, also designer, designed to match the dress. Which as luck would have it, now did. They both were useless.

"The mirror," she thought. "Do I dare look in the mirror?" This was a difficult one. The mirror, you see, was used to this kind of thing. It had seen her straggle in at all times of the day and night, looking far worse than she did this night. The mirror had seen it all, and it never approved. Never.

She gathered her courage, which by now matched her dress and shoes. She entered the bathroom. "Lights off at first, I think," she said, so quietly that the mirror took no notice of her. "What happened?" kept running through her mind. She could see the question, like it was typed out on a screen — WHAT HAPPENED?

Lights on. The mirror awoke with a start. It did not like what it saw. She looked into the mirror. The mirror looked into her. For a moment they both winced. *What happened...*

Her eyes, pale blue, bloodshot, were thrilled to have the smeared mascara removed from their general area of her face, which after minutes of washing and drying, was beginning to look like her again. The mirror could now cope with what it saw.

This was supposed to be a fun night. Big party, new clothes, famous people. She knew her date was a bit of a strange guy. She had said to the mirror before she went out that night, when she looked like the perfectly styled and shaped woman, how it didn't matter who she went there with, as long as she got to go. She would dump Steve once the party really got going. "Just drift off into the crowd," she told the mirror, which offered no opinion on the plan. Sure, he was a handsome enough man. And as this was the release party for the new album which *he* engineered, he was sure to know all the musicians and singers. All the stars she wanted to meet, the reason she wanted to go. "This one is going straight to the top," is what he had told her. She believed him. She believed everything he had ever told her. He was, she thought, just one of those people who you can trust in life. "Yeah, trust," she said aloud. Trust tore her dress, trashed her night and almost ended her life. 10:08 p.m. the price of trust took a drastic turn upward.

For the first hour, everything was fine. She had some really good champagne and managed to meet the lead guitarist and heart-throb of the group. All the while the new recording, some kind of pop/rock thing, was being played at a staggering volume, causing everyone to shout to be heard by the person standing directly next to them. She told him how much she liked the songs, even though she really didn't. "It's crap," he shouted at her, "all of it a bunch of mindless crap!" He then went on to tell her a story, of which she could only half hear, and less than half cared about. The gist, she decided, was that he found the music to be boring and without social value. He hoped to make enough from the album to take his share of the profits and go to Africa or someplace to make a record with the natives.

Having had her fill of human interaction, she went back to her date. He seemed different. "Is he smashed already?" she thought. No, not that at all. He was as clear-eyed as ever. His face, however, showed none of the openness which she had come to expect. Knowing right away she would be sorry if she asked, she sat beside him, and eventually said the three words he had longed to hear: "Is something wrong?"

"Something," he murmured quietly several times over, "something, something, something..." "Really," she said, "What *is* wrong?" He said nothing. For what seemed like a long time, he just sat. The music continued to play. It was, she decided after a time, quite mindless. Still, for reasons she couldn't clearly understand, she found herself more and more drawn to it. Feet were tapping, as polished lips sang along with the childlike chorus.

"You like this music, don't you?" he said finally. She did not answer at first. She did not hear. Grabbing her snapping fingers he wrestled her to attention, repeating the question. "Yes, I guess I do," she said. "Why?" he asked. She sat silent, the music stopped. A lot of guys in designer suits were now in the room. She guessed that they were the owners or something. She decided that this might bore up the party, and that now might be a good time to leave, at least for awhile. But someone else had decided for her.

Before she knew it, she was being led by the hand out into the alley and the cool stale air of the fall night. "What is going on?" she asked Steve. He was now looking very nervous. "The music, you liked the music," he said. "Yes," she repeated, "I like the music." Clearly and plainly, he asked her again, "Do you know why?"

"Not really, I just do."

Looking around for a private space, he led her a few yards down the alley to an alcove lined with old metal trash cans. There was almost no light, and now she could barely see the outline of his face, which was tighter than before. He paused a long time.

"Do you know what data compression is?" he said.

"No."

"Put simply," he continued, "data compression is a way of storing or transmitting vast amounts of information through electronic devices. Now," he added as he looked very carefully around, "do you know what subliminal messages are?"

"You mean like when they wrote the word 'sex' in the humps on the Camel cigarettes box?" she said.

"Look, suppose you could encode a subliminal message in the data stream of, say, the digital information on a compact disc. And suppose also that the message encoded is something like *'This is great music — I'm going to buy lots of these records.'*"

He asked her again, "Did you like the music?"

She again answered "Yes."

"Do you know *why*?"

Slowly, slowly, she began to understand.

"This record is the first in a new line of recordings designed to trick the consumer into buying," he continued. "The music doesn't mean anything. It's the encoded message."

He let her ponder this information for a moment. Then he said, "The problem is you could use this system to encode *any* message you wanted. Something harmless like "*buy this record*," or something not so harmless like...."

The shadows in the alley were moving.

"We have to get out of here and tell someone," he said. Grabbing her by the waist he shoved her down the alley and out into the street. He followed. They ran down Broadway for about three blocks. She lost the heel on one of her shoes, causing her to slip and land face first in a shallow puddle. This slowed them down a great deal. They ducked into another dark alley.

"Who are you going to tell? No one will believe this stupid story. I don't believe it myself," she said.

"If they catch us, you won't have to worry about who believes us, we won't be telling anybody anything."

A bright light blinded her just as she felt Steve's hand release hers.

"Hold it right there," demanded a voice from the other end of the light. "Is this man assaulting you miss?"

"Yes," answered Steve. "I'm having my way with her so get lost." She almost laughed out loud when she heard him say this. He turned to her and hugged her, whispering in her ear, "Look, I'm gonna let that cop take me in. They'll protect me, at least for awhile, so stop laughing and play along. And for God's sake find the FBI or something and tell them what the hell is going on here."

The voice shouted, "Let her go — Now!"

Steve twirled her free, ripping a nice gash out of her new dress in the process.

The police said that she could come down to the station to file charges if she wished. She said that she was "too shaken up by the whole thing" and would come down in the morning. They gave her a ride home. She sat in the front of the car while Steve and the other officer sat in the back. She stole a glance at him a couple of times in the rearview mirror. He looked tired, but calmer than he had looked since their evening began.

Who would she tell? Who would believe her? No one. "The FBI," she said aloud. "They're probably the ones who thought about the idea in the first place." As she stood in the shower, she took stock of her evening. She had a torn dress, broken shoes, a ride in a police car, a run through some very nice alleys and a story so far-fetched that after just a few hours she didn't even believe it herself.

The only good thing that happened was she heard some music she liked. She decided that tomorrow she would find a record store and buy a compact disc player. She did not own one, but she had been meaning to get one. She turned out the light. The mirror bid her good evening.

Joe Vincenza is the new program director of KMUN-FM, Astoria's Radio Free Columbia Pacific.

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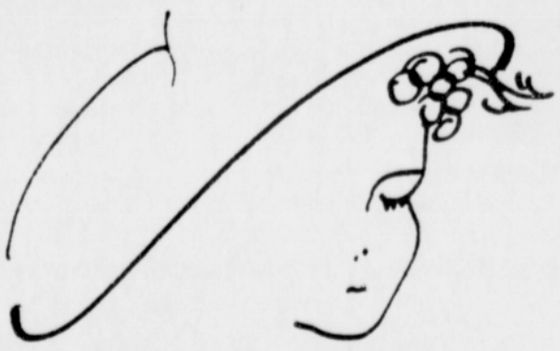
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