

ROBERT REED

WILL BE

What lies ahead for Robert Reed? The following story should discourage anyone from making such predictions, but we'll wager that Mr. Reed's next book will be a collection of short stories entitled *The Dragons of Springplace*. Perhaps it will even be published this April or May. But who can really say for sure?

WE WENT TO SCHOOL together. Kindergarten right up through high school. But Marv and me were never what you'd call good buddies. In grade school and junior high, I bet we didn't say ten words to each other. In high school, Marv was in one of my gym classes, and because of our last names -- Donner and Dubrook -- we were stuck in the same homeroom. And yeah, sure, our senior year we shared a locker. And that's it. That's all. Even considering how things are going now, that's all there is to tell. To me, Marvin Donner was this scruffy little blond twit who always had to wear his hair longer than anyone else and who said, "Cool," and "Neat," while grinning way too much. The twit loved to smoke that ditch weed. From junior high on, he was our official class doper. The best thing I remember about him is that when we were locker mates, he kept telling me, "Don't look behind my books, Steve. Okay? And if you've got to look, don't take any more than you really need."

"Okay, Marv," I would tell him.

"Cool. Neat. Thanks."

Despite what you hear, a lot of us kids managed to stay sober and clear-headed in the '70s. The occasional beer was it for me. I was this upstanding boy trying to hang out with the college-prep crowd. While Marv Donner was stuck in some blue-collar, pot-haze track. Shop classes and bonehead English, I'm guessing.

He was already playing the guitar. But back then, every guy tried playing it. We thought gifts liked a man good with his fingers. Marv used to sit outside at lunch, strumming hard and singing little songs that he must have written himself. Must have, because I didn't recognize any of them. And because they weren't very good. I can sort of remember their cheery noise and his scratchy little-kid voice and how he would strum and pick until something sounded absolutely awful. Then he would stop the show and twist the knobs, telling stupid jokes while trying to fix what could be fixed.

Singing and pot. Marv's life in the shell of a nut.

During my last semester, I had an early geometry class. One morning, about a week before graduation, I got to school late. One of the counselors was waiting at my locker. Ms. Vitovsky was this chunky little woman who took everything seriously. She said, "Steve," with a voice that made me hold my breath. She said, "I have awful news." Then she gathered herself before telling me, "Marvin

Donner was in a car wreck."

Marvin? It took me a few seconds to put Marv and Marvin together.

I blinked and straight away, I asked, "Is he dead?"

Miss Vitovsky gave me a brave little smile, then said, "No. But he's badly hurt." Because she thought I needed it, she put a hand on my shoulder. Then she told me, "His car hit a light pole. He's in intensive care. At General, if you want to visit him."

What I was thinking about was that I was late for class. I shook my head and admitted, "You know, I barely know the guy."

"Really? I thought you were good friends."

I wrestled open my locker. Marv's books were on the top shelf, their plasticized covers looking new. That's how much he needed books. On the spur of the moment, I reached up and peeked behind them.

Nothing there.

"I've seen you talking with him," the counselor was saying. Explaining why she had mistaken us for friends.

I grabbed my books, slammed the locker, then told her, "Sorry."

"By any chance then...do you know who his friends are....?"

Again, "Sorry."

"Well," she had to tell me, "Marvin is going to pull through." She touched me on the elbow. I can remember the squeeze of her fingers and her eyes looking damp, and I remember her voice breaking as she said, "If anyone asks, tell them. Tell them that he should make a full recovery. Would you do that, please.?"

Our fallen comrade didn't make it to graduation, naturally.

But Marv got himself mentioned. Our principal publicly wished him well. Which caused our valedictorian to do the same in her long, boring speech. Using their best Cheech and Chong voices, my classmates repeated a string of bad pothead jokes. And I made some little comment about driving into a light pole and becoming famous. "If that's all it takes," I asked, "why don't we all do it?"

Summer was busy, and boring. I spent it stocking and clerking at my father's little grocery store, saving up my money and having zero time for socializing.

I went to City College in the fall and found myself in a new circle of friends.

Around Christmas, I bumped into one of my old circle. Both of us were out

shopping. We spent most of our breath promising that we'd get together soon. Lying, in other words. Then the guy told me, in passing, "I hear Marv got out of the hospital. Finally. He's living at home again."

I hadn't thought about my lockermate for months, nearly.

But I said, "Yeah, that's great to hear." As if I already knew it. As if I'd spent my nights worrying.

Four more years slipped past without Marvin Donner.

I met this beautiful girl named Patty, and we dated. And screwed. And while that was happening, I started screwing her best friend, Molly. Which wasn't the smartest trick. Then after both girls dumped me, I met Cathy, who was pretty enough, and fun enough, and we were married just before our senior year.

I graduated from City College with a degree in business.

My father hired me. Bribed me. Whichever.

Maybe it wasn't smart to return to the grocery. But Cathy was pregnant -- with twins, we found out -- and she had a talent for spending everything we had. That's why I took over managing the store, working some bruising hours. Early one morning, driving to work, I heard this odd song that just kept going and going. It was pretty enough, I guess. And the refrain sounded like it belonged on the radio. Light and fun, and all that. "What might be, should be, will be," it went. Then, "Will be, will be, will be "

The song never finished. The disc jockey put it to bed after five minutes or so.

"'Will Be' is the title," he announced. "By a local talent. Marvin Donner."

I could have rushed over to Musicland and bought the '45. I've met hundreds who did, or at least claim they did. But frankly I've never been much for pop music. Sometimes, I go for years without even playing any of my Beatles albums.

"Will Be" was in the Top Forty for three quick weeks, peaking at 31st before quietly drowning in the disco sea.

An old classmate came into the grocery one day. He reported that Marv still looked like the same blond-haired twit. That he was living at home with Mom. Still. And that he was making pretty good money singing at the local clubs.

I heard "Will Be" a few times, always on the radio.

Usually I was in the Chevy, which had shitty speakers. But one time I was at my folks', hearing it on their big cabinet stereo. That was the only time when I really listened to the words, and some of them stuck. "The plague will come in the blood," stuck. And, "The sandman burns the desert." Grim bullshit like that, and no wonder it didn't sell better. That's what I was thinking. Then I heard

that line about "The ragged rings of Neptune," and I was thinking, "Poor Marv.

"Saturn is the planet with rings," I was thinking.

And I shook my head, feeling awfully superior to that stupid little dooper.

Life melted past me.

I was this kid just trying to keep his family happy and afloat. And then I wasn't the kid anymore. I was living out on the edge of town, in a house with four bedrooms and as many toilets. But the twins were out of college, and the other two kids were paid for. And that's when it occurred to me that more than half my life was done, and if changes were going to be made, I needed to make them now.

It was a pretty typical divorce. Pissy and bloody, and left unfinished for too long.

In the end, Cathy got a fat slice of the grocery. But I found myself being philosophical about the loss. The grocery was my father's, not mine. And Dad was safely dead, immune to what was happening to his legacy and to me.

No, what mattered in my life was me. Finally.

I rented this Upscale one-bedroom apartment and leased the best sports utility 4X4 that I could afford. Then like millions of brave grayhairs before me, I went out patrolling for willing young women.

My third date was a single gal in her twenties.

Named Lucee. "The same as Lucy," she told me, "only different."

Maybe she wasn't as pretty as some, and I think she could have misplaced ten or twenty pounds. And early on, I learned that she had some wonky beliefs. Before we were done with dinner, I learned all about Chinese herbal treatments and how the Shriners had a role in Kennedy's assassination. But on the bright side, we ended up back at my apartment and in my bed, and at one point, while I was lying happily on my back, Lucee started humming a familiar little melody.

"What's that song?" I managed to grunt.

She said something that I couldn't quite decipher.

"The song," I moaned.

Then her mouth was empty, and she said, "Will be," as if that was enough. As if I should know instantly what she meant.

"Will be what?" I said.

"It's about the future, Steve. Don't you know the song?"

I hadn't thought about "Will Be" in years. Or Marv Donner. That's why I just lay there, sputtering, "I don't know it. Should I?"

Lucee shook her head and pulled herself up over me, sex forgotten for things more cosmic and vital. "It's all they talk about on the Internet," she informed me. "I can't believe you've never heard of it."

"Will Be"?

Again, she hummed the refrain.

"Wait," I muttered. "What might be, should be, will be...:"

She grinned and said, "You do know it!"

"Well, sure. I used to hear it on the radio. Back when you were wearing diapers, practically."

That put a light in her eyes. "Really?"

"The singer...he's a local guy..."

"He is," she agreed.

I rolled out from under her and looked at those bright eyes. Then I told her the clincher. "You know, I went to school with Marv. We were lockermates. Buddies, even."

Her eyes changed their color.

Their tone.

Then Lucee, with two Es, scooted back a bit and shook her head, pointing out, "A minute ago, you didn't know what I was talking about."

Asking me, "Just how gullible do you think I am?"

Lucee taught me the basics that night. The song was obscure for a lot of years, she admitted. But then some music buff in Albany or Indiana was playing the old '45, and he realized that certain passages made sense. The sandman who started the fire was Saddam, of course. The poison in the blood was AIDs. And Neptune really had a goofy set of rings. Which was something that I didn't know until that moment.

According to the Internet, and my date, a bunch of predictions had already come true. And others looked ready to.

And yet. I didn't hear anything more about "Will Be" for several months. Lucee

was exaggerating the song's importance, because even the wonkiest rumors on the Net creep out into the real press. Which didn't happen. And I didn't hear anything more about it from Lucee, either. She didn't return any of my calls, and after a week or two, or three, I decided she was too crazy anyway and gave up on her.

Out of curiosity, I looked for my old lockermate in the phone book.

No Marvin Donners, or Marvs. But it had been a lot of years, and even potheads move away. And besides, your modem prophets usually have a 900 stuck in front of their phone numbers.

Those next months were pretty lousy. When I was married, the world seemed filled with young willing women. But after Lucee I plunged into a stale stretch where I wasn't meeting anyone, young or otherwise. And where every other part of my life was full of problems, too.

The store roof began springing leaks, and my freezers were coming to the end of their natural lives. My assistant manager left me for one of the big chains. And all the while, my ex was riding me for not keeping up with the monthly extortion payments.

In the middle of everything, I spotted an article in our local paper. Reprinted straight from The New York Times, it talked about an obscure song and all the ludicrous predictions that had come true. Plus those still waiting for the chance.

Read his lyrics in the proper way, wrote the reporter, and the songwriter had successfully predicted every President starting with Reagan.

"The chimp's sidekick," Marv called him.

Bush was, "Texas Yale."

Then there was, "The little rock has busy rocks."

Plus our current Top Dog: "The hero from the flatlands!"

And there were other predictions that became history. "The eye-told-us what to do!" was the Iranian hostage mess. Three Mile Island was "The Amish meltdown." The collapse of the Soviet Union had its own full verse, complete with the birthmark and the wall tumbling down and tanks shooting at their White House.

Plus there were the wonky science predictions that seemed to pan out. "Jove's pimply child," was a moon of Jupiter. Apparently. "A man from New York is born twice," was the billionaire's clone baby, announced just weeks ago. And "The sun lives inside a bottle of light." Which wasn't a dooper's mutterings. But instead, I learned from the article, was a pretty fair description of the newest fusion reactors.

Yet what really impressed me, and sold it for most of the world, was what hadn't quite come true. Yet.

"After the third day of the third month of the century's third year," Marv once sang, "the bear kills a third of everything."

The reporter made the easy guess about the bear's identity. What's more, that predicted date arrived a week later, and exactly on cue, our stock market took a wild tumble, hundreds of billions of dollars evaporating in a single horrible day.

Economic nightmares have warnings. But usually not in a bad pop song.

Over those next days and weeks, what started as crazy electrons on the Internet turned into the only story on the news. Even the stock market took second billing. "Will Be" was the subject of every editorial and a hundred special in-depth reports. The Flatland Hero mentioned the song at his press conference, joking that Mr. Donner was the newest member of his cabinet. And overnight, our little city filled up with cameras and reporters vying for a word with or even a glimpse of our most famous citizen.

Oh, yeah. Marv still lived nearby. With Mom, as it turned out. And Mom happened to like a certain fat old reporter who worked at one of the local stations. That's why he beat out a brigade of Pulitzer winners to get the interview of the century. Of the millennium. Whatever.

Expecting history, I watched that show.

My first impression was that Marv hadn't aged at all. My one-time locker buddy was sitting in the tiny living room of his mother's tiny house, looking as boyish and simple as ever. His hair was thinning but blond still, and it was still just as long, tied in a ponytail. But on second glance, I noticed that his face had that sickly wrinkled look that you find in kids who die of old age at fourteen. Normally I would have thought Marv looked silly. Old hippies always do. But knowing what kinds of gifts he had at his beck and call had me thinking, "On him, it looks right. Just like a prophet should be...!"

The lucky reporter was flustered enough to tremble, and his voice cracked and broke and sometimes stopped altogether.

"Where did you...did you...think up this wonderful song...?"

Marv gave him a dooper's vague stare, then with a smoke-roughened voice said, "On my back. When I was in the hospital. There wasn't anything to do but look far ahead."

The reporter gulped and said, "Yes...I see..."

He hadn't done his homework, obviously.

"Why were you there...in the hospital...?"

"I wasn't feeling good." Then Marv broke into an odd little laugh, something in the eyes either very wise or very empty. "But I got better. I got well."

"Well...that's good to hear." Another gulp, then, "Can you tell me? How did you look into the future?"

A giggle. Then Marv leaned forward and told him, "Carefully. I did it carefully."

The interview lurched along like that. Stupid questions followed with words that might mean everything or nothing. Depending on how you heard them.

Finally the reporter mustered up his courage, asking, "But what about the future? Is there anything that isn't in your song--?"

"Stop!" a woman barked. Then a white-haired old gal- his mother, I guessed -- came running into the picture, hands raised, screaming, "We warned you! We are not, not, not discussing that!"

She looked like her son. Except she was clear-eyed and tough as gravel.

With a strength that took everyone by surprise, she shoved the camera out of Marv's face, telling the world, "It's over. We're done! Leave us alone!"

I'D NEVER FOUND TIME or the excuse to make it to any high school reunion.

But it seemed important that summer. The economy was still buckling beneath us, and just like the song predicted -- "Siberia goes bye-bye" -- a civil war was brewing in Russia. With all of these important things happening, the reunion became a kind of duty. A way of elbow-scraping with history. Even when it was announced that your most famous alum wouldn't attend, I did. All of us did. How else could you come to terms with what was happening?

I ended up in the corner of a packed ballroom, shooting the shit with most of my old circle. The men were fat or balding, or both. The women looked as if menopause was riding them hard. But the talkers still liked to talk. And the ones who always knew the gossip at school were the ones pretending to know it all now.

"The car crash is what did it," one fellow assured us. "Marv got a pretty good head injury. Obviously the damage did something to his wiring."

We nodded. Obviously, absolutely.

Then another in-the-know said, "He still doesn't function too well. I saw him when he was still performing. Remember the Cottonwood House? His mom had to practically lead him up on stage and back off again." Then with a wicked little wink, the guy added, "He wears a diaper, too. The way I hear it."

Again, we did our nods.

Then I said, "She's quite a gal, his mom is."

"The way I hear it," said a woman, "it's Mom who stole back the rights to his song. Six or seven years ago, when it was worth nothing."

We all had a good chuckle about that.

"Plus," said one baldie, "she's responsible for that deal with their new label. The Donners, I hear, get fifty percent of every sale."

Someone else said, "It's two hundred million sold now. Worldwide."

A third said, "It's half a billion, if you count the pirates."

I just nodded and listened, and nodded some more.

Then a younger woman -- a blonde with fat glasses who had married into the circle -- asked, "But what does the rest of the song mean.?"

She was looking at me, I realized.

"What's 'Will Be' still got to tell us?"

I didn't have any special clue. But she seemed to expect something out of me, which is why I said, "Westfall's our next President."

I'd read it somewhere, and I wasn't the only one.

"A gray-beard leads us into battle," quoted one of the know-everythings. "That's got to be the Senator. It's got to be!"

Then someone else said, "It's with China, the war is."

As if there wasn't any doubt.

"The crowded man reaches for his island," the quoter continued. Then he paused, waiting for everyone's eyes to settle on him. And that's when he informed us, "The Mainland is going to invade Taiwan."

We couldn't stop agreeing with him.

Then his loyal wife added, "And we'll win that war, too."

"Blood on the water, blood on the land," he sang. Worse than Marv, even. "And when blood is in the sky, the fight is won."

"Blood in the sky?" I asked.

"Space warfare," he replied. In an instant. As if he'd written the line himself.

It went on that way for most of the evening. Even when it was boring --when we were repeating the same verses for the fiftieth time -- we couldn't seem to drop the subject. I didn't hear a whisper about anyone's kids or spouses or jobs, and nobody heard anything about my adventures, either.

I did try to bail out. Once. I was up at the bar, shelling out too much for my second beer, and a tall woman appeared next to me, saying, "Steve? Steve Dubrook?"

I looked at the name tag, then the face. Two or three tucks had left her skin stretched over old cheekbones. A tight little mouth smiled, and that's 'when I remembered Jean. Our class president and valedictorian. She went off to the Ivy League, I remembered, and came out a tough, successful lawyer.

I sputtered something like, "Hello. How's stuff, Jean?"

"We were just talking," she confessed, gesturing at the best-dressed group in the place. "'Who knows him best?' we asked ourselves. At this event, I mean. And I think it's you, Steve Dubrook."

"No," I said. Pointblank.

But she didn't believe me. "You two used to hang out together --"

"We shared a locker," I began.

"And," she added, "you listened while he abused that poor guitar. Remember those lunchtime concerts --?"

"I sat there once or twice. I guess."

She laughed. As if I was an idiot, she shook her head and said, "Judging by those lukewarm responses, I'm guessing that you don't see Marvin anymore. Is that a correct assessment, Steve?"

Jean was a stuck-up bitch in high school, and life just seemed to have honed those talents.

"That's too bad," she told me. Then laughing again, she added, "What you should do, you know, is send a gift to your old buddy. With a note. A nice gift and a pleasant note telling him how happy you are for his well-deserved success."

Then she said, "I've already sent my gift."

I had to ask, "Why bother?"

She found my stupidity to be fun. "Because," she told me, giggling like a school

girl. "Because that little shitfaced drug-addict is the most important and powerful man in our world today."

The economy kept up its robust collapse.

By New Year's, my store was suffering. My families were going to the cut-rate supermarkets, and my loyal customers -- the ones who started with my father and stayed with me through lean times -- were getting to that age where they were eating little, or being shipped off to nursing homes, or they were dead.

I wasn't bankrupt. Things weren't that bad, yet. But even after cutting back on payroll and working seventy hour weeks, I could see a bankruptcy in my personal future.

Meanwhile, Marv was prospering.

He and Mom bought the old Redhall mansion, then sank a quick million into its restoration. They moved in Christmas morning, and immediately the VIPs started falling over themselves, eager for an audience with our resident Visionary.

Billionaires paid for the privilege. I heard.

While politicians and the Hollywood-types gave what they could. I'm assuming.

Every night, the news gave an update on Marvin Donner's social calendar. In February, it was the President himself. The old war hero dropped into town in Air Force One, just for the honor of standing on that wide old porch, shaking hands with a fellow who the Secret Service, on any normal day, would have watched extra close.

Asked what he and the old hippie had discussed, the President said, "Issues. Trends. The promise of the future."

In other words, "No comment."

Next week, Senator Westfall announced his candidacy from the same porch. Marv stood next to him, staring off into nothingness. The Senator stroked his gray beard for the cameras, then told the nation his intentions: His only goal was to protect and preserve everything that Americans deserved and rightly expected. Who could argue with that'. And then he mentioned the Chinese without mentioning them. "Who else has a mandate to lead in times of strife and struggle?" he asked us. "Who else is there but me?"

About that time, I got up the nerve to do what lean recommended.

The way I figured it, it wouldn't hurt. And maybe, just maybe, Marv would throw some business my way.

Since I didn't know his eating habits, I decided on fruit. I put together a dozen big baskets of everything. The best and the exotic. Then after a good deal

of hard thinking and doubts, I settled on a simple note written with my best pen.

"Missed you at graduation," I wrote.

"All the best.

"Steve Dubrook."

The baskets and my note were sent, and nothing happened.

Which was a surprise, somehow. Like when you have a lottery ticket that turns worthless. That kind of surprise.

Then it was weeks later, in the spring, and I got back to the apartment late one night, turning on the TV, the news telling me that Vladivostok had thrown off Moscow's shackles and Westfall was leading in every poll and some astronomers in Chile had followed a suggestion in the "Will Be" lyrics. "The great comet comes from under our feet." Sure enough, a giant lump of ice was falling toward the sun, its orbit ready to swing it within a couple million miles of the great Marvin Donner.

And that's when the phone rang.

I figured trouble at work. One of the old freezers passed on, probably. I picked up, starting with a crisp, "What is it?"

The voice at the other end introduced herself as Miss So-and-so, and I was cordially invited to share dinner with Mr. Donner. "Would tomorrow night be convenient?" I heard. "Perhaps at seven o'clock?"

I knew it was a joke. It had to be.

But his social secretary didn't give me time to make an ass of myself. "A car will pick you up, if you wish," she told me. "At home or at work."

"Home," I blurted.

"That would be best, sir."

"This is...this is for dinner...?"

"Yes, sir," she told me. Smooth as can be. Then she added, "And we ask that you come alone, Mr. Dubrook. And please, let's keep this meeting strictly confidential."

For every reason, I was excited.

Nervous.

Nearly sick to my stomach, frankly.

The car arrived at a quarter till. It was an ordinary sedan driven by some ex-Marine-type who greeted me by name, then said exactly three more words to me.

"Buckle up, sir."

We arrived at the Redhall at exactly seven. A big iron gate swung open for us, and the driver let me off at the front door. Alone, I climbed the marble stairs and walked across the enormous porch, thinking of all those important people who had come here, and because of it, practically doubling over from my bellyache.

Just like the gate, the front door swung open for me. But instead of the butler that I expected, I found a young woman. Early twenties at the most. Tall and blonde, wearing tight slacks and a tighter shirt, and if anything, thinner than she was beautiful.

She said, "Hello," with a soft, familiar voice.

Then she said her name just as I remembered her. "Whitney Larson." A songwriter and singer whose last album must have done dynamite business. Considering that even I knew who she was.

Whitney called me, "Mr. Dubrook."

I mumbled something about liking her songs.

"Oh, god," she said. As if surprised. "Really? Thank you so, so much!"

I just about panicked. What if she asked me questions about her music? But she thankfully dropped the subject, waving me toward a set of French doors, telling me, "They're waiting in here, Mr. Dubrook."

Here was some sort of parlor done up like a room in a museum. The tall chairs and big rug belonged to the late 1800s. Even the air tasted stuffy and old, I was thinking. As if I'd just stepped back in time.

They were Marv and his mother.

I knew Marv's face better than my own. That's what television does for a person. He was sitting in the tallest chair, and I looked at him and tried to smile, and he stared through me for what felt like a year, big pale eyes brightening up with what looked to me, of all things, like tears.

I tried to say, "Good to see you, Marv."

I don't know if I got the words out.

Then his mother was standing next to me. Maybe seventy years old, but vigorous as an old Chevy. At first, I thought she was smiling at me. Then, I wasn't too

sure. But she told me, "It's good to meet you. It's always a pleasure to know my son's friends."

"And...it's good meeting you..." I managed.

Then I started to say, "Ma'am."

Marv cut me off. He shouted, "Is it?" The eyes fought to focus on me. His body fought gravity and a pair of clumsy legs, trying to climb out of that antique chair while he sputtered, "Is it? Is it?"

Whitney said, "No, love."

"No -- ?"

"Dinner. He's here for dinner." The girl seemed like a pro. She grabbed the seer by his shoulders, then steered him toward me. "Darling," she purred, "Mr. Dubrook is a big fan of mine."

The pale eyes found me. His raspy voice said, "Are you? A fan?"

Jesus, I thought.

I said, "It's good to see you. How are you, Marv?"

The question was too much. Again, the eyes lost contact. The boyish face suddenly filled with little wrinkles, and he looked old. More frail than his mother, easily. But he managed to tell me, "Not real bad. You know?"

I nodded. As if I understood.

Then his mother placed herself between us, saying, "This is such fun. Let's continue this in the dining room. Shall we?"

WITHOUT QUESTION, it was some dinner.

Their dining room was enormous and fancy and very modern -- as modern as the parlor seemed old -- and we sat at one end of a glass table meant for forty, four fancy place settings waiting for us. Marv got the end position and an extra soft chair. His mother sat on his right, Whitney on his left, and when I hovered for a second, the girl patted the chair next to her, saying, "It's for you, Mr. Dubrook."

I settled.

Someone said, "Steve."

Marv's voice was different now. Clearer, louder. I looked up and saw him staring at me, his face excited now. Then he took in a big breath and halfway flinched, pulling his head between his shoulders, and old Mom just patted him on the back,

telling him, "No." Calmly and matter-of-factly, she said, "This is dinner. Just dinner." Then she told him the date.

Whitney leaned close to me, and as if we were in study hall, she whispered, "It's a matter of time. Marvin is uprooted in time."

All I could do was nod and say, "Huh."

"Uprooted," she repeated, as if it was the official medical term. "One of our recent visitors was a Nobel winner," she continued. "A physicist. Or a mathematician. Either way, he explained that somehow Marvin's brain works backward. Sometimes the electrons travel in reverse inside him, and all of a sudden, the future turns into his past. Which is why he remembers things that haven't happened. And why he can seem, now and again, a little bit confused."

Again, I said, "Huh."

She looked at Mom. "Is that the way Dr. Roonie explained it?"

The old gal shook her head. "Not really. No." But instead of setting us straight, she wadded up a napkin and dabbed the spit off of her son's mouth and chin.

The kitchen door opened. I found myself glad for the interruption.

But instead of a fancy meal brought on silver trays, I saw another ex-Marine type carrying a pair of huge white sacks from McDonald's.

Mom tore both sacks open, then handed out the treasures.

"Mr. Dubrook. A Big Mac, or a fish sandwich?"

"A Big Mac. Please."

"Shake or pop?"

"A shake...I guess..."

"We have both," she promised.

I was nervous and a little confused. "Okay," I said. "Both."

Which made her grimace. But she pushed two cups toward me, then made a third cup with one hand, holding it to her mouth until the ex-Marine understood, his solid legs carrying him out of the room in a dead sprint, then back again, a cold can of pop in hand.

The rest of the meal was only a little more soothing.

Whitney kept trying to explain Marv's state-of-mind. Or lack of it. And I tried

to understand what she was telling me. Dinner for her was a diet Coke and a fish sandwich, minus the fish. When she wasn't picking at her own food, she helped Mom deal with Marv. Two Big Macs were sawed into bite-sized pieces, and the women used their fingers, giving the poor guy advice about when to chew and when it was time to swallow.

I tried not to stare.

I tried to join in the conversation and give reasonable answers to the occasional question thrown my way. Once or twice, Whitney asked about my life. Then Mom would steer us back to her son. How did I think the media treated him? Fairly, or not? I said, "Pretty well, I think," and I sensed from her face that it wasn't the best possible answer. But before I could make another stab at it, she shook her head, telling me:

"You know, you're the only one who's gotten to visit us. Among his childhood friends, I mean."

I guess I felt honored. That's what I told her, at least.

She wiped her son's mouth. Not gently, but hard, like someone who couldn't remember when she wasn't wiping that mouth.

Then Marv blurted out, "I asked." He swallowed and said, "For you to come here."

I looked at him. "Thanks."

"Old...friend..." the poor guy croaked.

"Yes, dear. Steve is a friend." Mom wiped again, even harder this time.

I put down what was left of my sandwich.

Marv reached for me. Despite eating burgers and probably getting zero exercise, he still managed to be awfully thin. The hand was bones and pink fingernails and those pads of callus that guitar players get.

On the spur of the moment, I asked, "Do you still play much, Marv?"

"Want to hear...?" he asked. A devilish grin filled his face. Then to his mother and his apparent girlfriend, he said, "Alone. In my room."

Neither woman spoke, nor moved.

Just like that, Marv was in charge. By himself, he tried to rise to his feet. Midway up, he paused and took a deep breath. Then I joined him, putting a hand under a skinny arm, feeling like a giant when I eased him into the standing position. Both women watched me, and I couldn't read either of their faces. Then Marv pulled himself out of my hands, and he kissed both women on their mouths, telling them in a quiet, practiced way, "I love you."

Then he sagged up against me, and to nobody in particular, he said, "It's all right. It's fine."

HIS BEDROOM must have been the library once. It was on the ground floor, and it was huge, the tall walls covered with fancy, mostly empty bookshelves. Marv had me close the door. I felt like a high schooler spending time in a buddy's house. I kept my voice down. I asked him, "Where do you want to go?" and he had me ease him down on the edge of his enormous bed. Then I took the trouble of picking up a fancy-looking guitar, all bright and clean with a red-and-black checkered sling to ride the shoulder. Turning toward him, I asked, "Is this okay -- ?"

Marv was leaning forward, showing me the top of his head.

Intentionally, I mean. Ghostly fingers pulled apart the long hair, and where it was thinnest, I could see the vicious scars caused by his car crash.

"I have headaches," he said. "Always."

I said, "I'm sorry."

"Maybe that's why..." he began. Then he hesitated, giving me a long, sad look before he told me, "Out of kindness, maybe. Because of my pain?"

I didn't have a clue what he was telling me.

All I could think of saying was, "Maybe."

The guitar sat on the bed next to Marv. Forgotten.

Up on the wall, between a window and the closed door, was a long whiteboard. Like something you'd see in school. The date was written on it in big black numbers.

"Are you all right, Marv? Do you need anything?"

He said, "No." Then, "Yes."

I started to ask him, "What do you need -- ?"

But he interrupted me. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it. To graduation, I mean."

"You had better things to do," I told him.

He snorted, then laughed. Which made him wince in pain, and he doubled over and coughed a few times. Weakly.

From the other side of the door, his mother called out, "Are you all right, Marvin?"

"No," he replied. Then he was laughing again, his face twisted from the pleasure or the pain. I couldn't tell which.

Only one set of shelves had books. It looked like an old woman's library. Reader's Digest condensations, plus a few hundred romance paperbacks. I stared at the books because I didn't want to look at him anymore. Then I heard Marv telling me, "Yeah, it's there," as if I knew what he was talking about.

"Right where you expect it," he told me.

I looked at him. Not a clue in my head, I asked, "What are you talking about?"

He just smiled, looking just like that goofy little twit that I'd barely known all those years ago. Quietly, in a near-whisper, he said, "It's on the top shelf. Behind the books."

"Are you still smoking ditch weed?" I asked.

He winked at me. And chuckled.

I told him, "I hope you know, I never looked in your hiding place."

No response.

"Except," I added, "when they told me you were hurt. I was afraid they'd search our locker, and I'd get blamed for your shit."

"Look," he urged me now. "I want you to."

I reached high, expecting a plastic sack full of drugs. But instead of that, I found an old spiral notebook, the paper gone yellow and brittle. I opened it and flipped through the tired pages. It took a few moments before I finally realized what I was seeing. Words, written fast and sloppy. But I could decipher enough words to realize, "This is your song. Isn't it?"

"My song," he chimed.

Then again, he told me, "Look."

I thought I was. But then something obvious hit me, and I understood what he wanted. Trembling, I flipped to the last page, and I read it. After so many months of hearing Will Be on every radio, I knew instantly that this verse had never been sung in public.

I said, "Shit."

"You found it," he whispered. Then with a louder voice, he added, "This isn't the time. It's too early."

I read the verse three or four times.

Always, my eyes stuck on the name Steve Dubrook.

Then I couldn't read it anymore, and not knowing what to do, I put the notebook back in its hiding place, and I started for the bedroom door. I don't remember being angry, or scared, I just wanted very much to be somewhere else in the world.

"Come see me again," Marv told me.

That's when I turned and told him, "You know, I wasn't your friend. Trust me on that. We shared a locker, that's all. I barely knew you...you little shit..."

Marv smiled anyway, and he lay back on his bed, telling me, or maybe telling himself, "Some days, I want to die so much..."

I practically ran for the front door.

His mother was sitting in the parlor, waiting for me. Her face was a mixture of anger and something else. Indifference. Acceptance. Whatever. She was bolt upright in one of the old chairs, her hands knotted up in her lap and her eyes cutting through me until I had to tell her, "I won't do it. It's bullshit, and I won't."

She pulled her eyes shut, then said, "But you don't have any choice. Do you?"

I turned and walked outside, crossing that giant porch. Whitney was waiting. She came at me and smiled in the oddest way. And as I was trying to slip around her, she planted a little wet kiss on my lips.

"What's that for?" I sputtered.

She just smiled in a bleak, forgiving way.

Again, I said, "What?"

"I'm an excellent judge of people," the girl purred. "And I think you're really a fine person, Mr. Dubrook. When it's time and you do it, you'll be acting out of kindness. Just like Marv wants -- "

"Fuck Marv!" I screamed.

And that was the moment, the very first one, that I actually felt that maybe I could, like the song says, "Put a bullet into the singer's face."

The rest of my story is more or less public.

For a few more months, I tried to live my own life, taking care of my business and enjoying the occasional date. There were days when I very nearly convinced myself that the last verse would remain secret. A private mistake. But there

were also days when Whitney or Mother Donner would come into my store, pretending to need groceries. In other words, they were checking up on me, and reminding me that they hadn't forgotten.

One day, I walked up to that old woman. "I won't do it," I promised. "I won't shoot him, or kick him. Or even see him again."

Which would have been welcome news, if you're a normal mom with a normal kid. But she wasn't. In her mind, I was an agent of God or the Future. Whichever. And since I needed prodding, she must have gotten Whitney to talk with Rolling Stone.

At the end of the interview, apparently by accident, the girl let it slip that there was a secret final verse. Then she told the world what was supposed to happen. And if that wasn't sick enough, she let the reporter know just enough to follow the trail back to me.

I thought I had a plan ready.

If the secret ever broke, I told myself, I was going to empty out the cash drawers and my bank accounts and borrow on my credit cards. Then I would disappear into Mexico, or out on the high seas somewhere.

The problem was that I needed time to vanish.

Which the press didn't give me.

I went to bed as one person, then woke up famous. Infamous. Whatever.

Police had to set up barricades around my store to hold back the crowds, then the car traffic got too heavy, and they shut down the street in front of us. But still thousands came through the doors in those first days, hoping to see the famous angel of death, and sometimes they would buy a pack of gum or a package of T-bones. And that's when I realized that not only was I stupid to ever think that I could actually vanish, but I was even more of an idiot to think that I'd want to.

Letterman and Leno had fun at my expense. Those old bastards told their stupid jokes, and I got angry. But it didn't do any good, so I just stopped watching them.

People I met and people who'd known me for years wanted to know how it was to be part of the most famous song of all time.

But really, isn't that what we've all been doing for the last year, anyway?

Everything's been decided for us. Everyone has agreed. In another year-plus, Westfall will be our President and we'll be fighting with China. And of course we'll win. We know that's the truth because some guy who can't even hold up half a conversation once wrote something that never actually mentioned the Chinese.

Sometimes I lie awake, and I just wonder.

Lucee's back in my life. Now that I'm famous, she comes into the store every day. Just to wink and wave and hope that I'll give her two seconds of time.

I'm the hub of history, she tells me. When I give her the chance.

In these last weeks, about a hundred different lawyers have sent me business cards. One of them wrote, "Think of me afterward. If it looks like a mercy killing, I can get you 2 to 5. Down to time served, with good behavior."

Just the other day, I was pulled over for doing fifty in a thirty-five zone. But the cop recognized me and let me off with a warning. Or two warnings, really. He said, "Mr. Dubrook," with a quiet, serious voice. He said, "The kind way, really, is to put it here." Then he touched his own temple, giving me this knowing little wink.

Honestly, a man has to just wonder.

There's a thousand ways to write, "Go to the store," and every version works well enough. So why couldn't some head-wounded druggie write a bunch of nonsense that only seems to have come true?

We've been playing this huge and dangerous and very stupid game.

Tomorrow, Senator Westfall blows back into town. He's leading in the polls by barely thirty points, and his opponent has grown his own scraggly gray beard. Which means it's time for another visit to poor Marv.

Maybe I could get onto the grounds, and with a cheap revolver, put a bullet into the mansion's fancy woodwork. Then I would sit in a prison cell for the next few years, safe and tidy, and people around the world would realize that not everything in that damned song was going to come true.

Except I don't want to sit in any prison. Ever.

And I suppose I could kill myself now. Today. That would hopefully put an end to this craziness.

But I'm not going to be that kind of hero.

Just yesterday, Lucee came into the store, and she cornered me against the greeting cards. She told me exactly how many days it was until the big day, then she asked me how it felt to be one of God's angels.

"Shit," I said.

I told her that I was just going to keep living my life. And why not? My business is booming. There's some nice ladies who find me intriguing, but they

don't bring these things up over dinner. Or in bed. Plus Letterman's people are talking about a little something next month. And of course, people like you are paying for this interview.

For me, life has never been better.

But Lucee couldn't drop it. She kept calling me God's angel and asking how it felt. And finally, I flat-out told her, "I'm not going to shoot anyone. Particularly not Marvin Donner. When the big day comes, I'm going to be somewhere else. And I'm not telling where."

"But you can't," she told me. "How can you avoid your destiny?"

"Easily," I replied.

"But if you don't do this one thing," she sputtered, in horror, "then our future...it's totally and forever changed...!"

Which made me laugh.

That's what I did.

I just held my belly and shook my head and laughed, and after a little moment, I said, "Darling." I said, "Don't you get it? That's the way it's always been."