

THE YEAR OF THE MAD JAG

“I’ll Sleep by the Creek”

A Novel

Cold Mountain Poems, #12

In my first thirty years of life I roamed hundreds and thousands of miles.
Walked by rivers through deep green grass
Entered cities of boiling red dust.
Tried drugs, but couldn’t make Immortal;
Read books and wrote poems on history.
Today I’m back at Cold Mountain:
I’ll sleep by the creek and purify my ears.

Gary Snyder’s translation from the Cold Mountain poem of the 8th Century
Chinese recluse, Han-shan.

THE YEAR OF THE MAD JAG

Mad adj.**1:** disordered in mind **2 a:** completely unrestrained by reason and judgment **b:** incapable of being explained or accounted for **3:** carried away by intense anger **4:** carried away by enthusiasm or desire **5:** marked by wild gaiety and merriment **6:** intensely excited **7:** marked by intense and often chaotic activity. Merriam Webster Dictionary.

Jag n, (informal) **1.** Period of intoxication by drugs or alcohol. **2.** the state of being intoxicated by drugs or alcohol **3.** A binge, a prolonged period of intoxication. (Late 16th Century, origin unknown) Encarta World English Dictionary.

Mad Jag, 1. Strain of sinsemilla (seedless cannabis) cultivated in the Mazatzal Wilderness of Central Arizona. Awarded best Domestic Sinsemilla by High Times Magazine. December 1980. **2.** Rogue jaguar inhabiting Mazatzal

Wilderness Area, Arizona. First sighting of largest American cat North of Mexican border since 19th Century.

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-one years after we went on that jag I checked in on Geoff at the Q E hospital in Birmingham as he lay dying. The emphysema had savaged him such that the hefty fourteen stone of his rugby days was now a withered nine, the once broad face now a Dachau mask.

“Eh-up Stylor, you old sod.” His words rattled from froth-corrupted lungs.

“Eh-up Geoffrey. How you feeling? You look like dog shite.”

“Count on you to gild the lily.”

“Actually it’s “paint the lily”.

“You always were a pedantic twat.” He strained to raise himself. I lifted him by the armpits, flinching at the soggy flaps of skin under the pecs. “Come back from New Mexico to get a grip of my wife again?” He gasped.

“If she’s still willing, sure. How’s she look these days?”

“Bollocks.” He groped for his fags on the nightstand, knocking them to the floor.

I picked up the pack, shook one loose, lit it, handed it to him.

“So you chanced flying even though those darlings just knocked down the moneylenders’ temples in New York?”

“They’ve got enough infidels to kill in Afghanistan just now.”

“Pity you didn’t book a seat on September 11th.” He locked me with a glare and took a long drag; his chest heaved feebly as a bout of coughing wracked him.

“Puffing yourself into an early grave?”

“Doctor says they would have made no difference. The emphysema is caused by an enzyme imbalance. Basically I’m fucked. Pretty soon you’ll have Emma all to yourself. Haven’t the strength to get between you two now.” The listless eyes searched out mine. “Ever get the cactus out of your arse?”

The memory of the last night I'd seen him, twenty-one years ago, mid-winter of eighty, eighty-one, was still vivid. I had just made the long drive to Arizona from Oaxaca, where, in the company of Geoff's wife Emma, I had delivered fifteen thousand cannabis indica seeds to a cabal of Mexican marijuana growers and where I'd just got out of a rat's arse of a Mexican gaol and where his wife had left me after a lust-lined odyssey through some of the loveliest coastline on earth. The first thing I did, of course, on arriving back in northern Arizona, was track down Emma. I found her at Michelle's little adobe house in the arroyo outside Jerome.

"*Jean, Jean, tu es trop tard. Geoff est tous juste d'arrive d'Oregon.*" Michelle had leapt up and down in her excitement. Only the French could take such delight in a *scandale*. How this darling spirit could, twelve years later, drive out to a spit of land above the Verde River, stick a hose in the exhaust and choke off her life always amazed me – but that's another story. That night she beamed with life. Dashing back and forth between Emma and I, urging us, in scrambled *franglais*, to flee to Old Mexico, New Mexico, Tahiti ("Oh those *plages noires*, so wonderful for the making love.") and glancing up the gulch for headlights.

The headlights came. I walked out to meet them. Geoff slewed the pick-up to a halt and picked his way fast through the steep cactus-strewn yard.

"Don't think you're fucking off with my missus, Stylor." He barked. "You've done your dash with her."

And he came on hard, swinging wildly, backing me against the porch rail. I ducked under a haymaker and scampered towards the open. But the ex-open side flanker bore down on me and I was crushed into the hard desert dirt by a kidney-bruising tackle. Gasping with pain I twisted to fend off the fists.

"Don't do this, Geoff, please." Emma ran from the house. Geoff, fist held high turned to his wife. Seeing him distracted I lunged up, caught him a glancing blow and shoved him away. We staggered to our feet, chests heaving, Emma between us. "It's no good Geoff. I've decided." Emma says. "I'm going with Jem."

His head sank, hands drooping at his hips, spent with the effort of the brawl and the realization of the outcome of the affair. When Emma turned towards the house his gaze followed her for a second before he came at me again. My first side step left him sprawling. The second he didn't buy and I went down under a hail of fists and took the barbed limbs of a cholla cactus in my back and arse. Screaming then with my own rage and pain, the chunks of cactus swinging from my back, I hurled myself at him and forced him down before Emma and Michelle ran back.

"It took a while to get all the spines out, yeah. " I conceded, settling into the bedside chair. "But I had some willing help."

"You don't have to remind me, you wally. The missus had a soft spot for you. Even before you slipped her a length." Geoff glanced over my shoulder. A doctor approached. The grimness of this dullard's expression was not lost on Geoff.

"Morning doctor. Looks like you've come to tell me I'll soon be pushing up daisies." Geoff said.

The doctor looked at me. "Good Afternoon. Jonathan Parkin. Pulmonary specialist for the QE." He didn't offer his hand.

“This is Jeremy Staylor, Dr Parkin. General ne’er do well and back-door man.” Geoff said. “You can speak freely in front of him.”

“I’d rather do this in private, Geoffrey.” The doctor pleaded.

“I’ll wait outside.” I offered.

“No Style. I’d sooner have you here.” Geoff caught my eye. “Better you than no one.” He reached for my hand; his was cold, skeletal.

“Dr Parkin,” Geoff continued, “Staylor and I are old friends. We’ve known one another for thirty years. Went to film school together. Please just get on with it.”

“Very well. I have to tell you that the infection is too far advanced for us to treat it further with any hope of success. The anti-biotic is not proving effective. That’s often the case with transplanted organs. The body’s immune system cannot protect them as well as our own. We have advanced the dosage as far as we dare. If we increase it any further....well, in your weakened state

“How long do I have?” Geoff’s hand, squeezing mine, had the strength and urgency of a frightened child’s.

“Not long I’m afraid. Days. A week at best.” The doctor, in his mid-forties, younger than both of us, was clearly not inured to this side of his duty. He shuffled edgily. “We’re all extremely sorry. We’ve done all we can and you’ve been a model patient; an absolute brick. A shining example to everyone here who...”

“Yeah, yeah.” Said Geoff. I felt his hand clenching. I knew that the flannel from the doc would piss him off at the best of times. “Thanks, Dr Parkin for all you’ve done.” The doctor, eager to take his cue, fled.

“Where’s Ems.” I said. “Should I get her?”

“She’s at Pete Carter’s. She’s been here for days. She went to have a bath. Give her a bell, would you mate? And send the kids in.” He had sunk into the pillows and seemed scrawnier yet.

I hurried out of the ward, glancing at other patients, who slept or read or stared bleakly into space. It was a relief to reach the corridor where Geoff’s kids occupied themselves next to the nurse’s station.

Tessa, sixteen and surly, and who would suffer most from her father’s death, threw me a withering glance before turning back to her books. Matthew, a stout twenty, who had his mother’s resilience, looked up at me as I approached.

“I saw the doctor go in.” He said, studying my face. “Is my dad dying?”

The intensity of his stare was unsettling. There was an accusatory edge to his look. I wondered if his mother had ever mentioned me to him.

“Your dad would like to see you both.” I avoided his eyes.

“How is he?” Matthew fixed me again.

“You’d better ask him yourself.” I tried to sound conciliatory but realized immediately that I had failed. I’d always been hopeless when called upon for sympathy and compassion. It seemed to elicit the antithesis: callousness, indifference.

They gathered their things together and slunk away to the ward. I moved to the pay phone and fumbled the unfamiliar coins into the slot.

While I waited for Carter to find Emma it dawned on me with horror that I was about to speak, for the first time in over two decades, to the woman who had cracked my heart; who had caused me the keenest pleasure, the greatest longing, and the longest agony; and against whom the conversation, the touch of the lips, both upper and nether;

the laugh and cry of every woman with whom I had had an affair since and any with whom I would; all would be compared, judged, stood against this woman and the profound bliss and deep misery I had experienced through, and after, my affair with her.

“Jem?” Her soft Yorkshire vowels stabbed across the years. “What on earth are you doing there?”

“I came over for a film festival. In Kendal.” I felt my voice waver. “I thought I’d check on Geoff.”

“That’s nice of you.” She said and I searched for but found no trace of sarcasm. “And how does he seem to you?”

“Not so good, Emma. In fact the doctor came while I was there.” I heard the snatch of breath. “I think you’d better come.”

“I’ll get my clothes on and I’ll be there.” She said and the pause that followed was rich. “Don’t leave. I’d love to see you. It’s been a while.”

“Yes Emma. Twenty one years.”

“My god. That long?” She said, but I knew she knew.

I prowled the hall while I waited, tempted to flee, unsure where to meet her: just the two of us, here in the corridor, with the nurse glancing at us from her reports, or at the bedside amidst the family tableau, a family I’d almost fucked up before it had started, and with my old mate ready to croak. Why in Christ’s name had I come?

If I stayed here in the corridor could I trust myself not to collapse, a gibbering wreck at her feet, or worse to fling myself on her, gasping, ripping her clothes aside as I had in the past, a violation she had not merely condoned but abetted, many times, during our affair, her own urgency palpable as she had unbuttoned my fly. My heart began to fibrillate, as it was wont in times of stress since the bundle branch block had occurred. How the fuck were you supposed to reacquaint yourself with the lust of your life? I’d thought about this moment for over twenty years and now instead of being in control of it, it bore down on me like the avalanche I’d once dodged in the *grande couloir* of the *Argentiere*.

I opted for the bedside and skulked there like a spare prick at a wedding as Tessa wept and clung to her dad and Matthew sat in the bedside chair and rocked, back and forth, from his waist. I prayed that she had aged appallingly and now was as ugly as a box of frogs, dark bags hanging under her eye-sockets like a terrier’s testicles; that she’d gained two stone and that once firm, sculptured arse was now a slack cellulite sack.

But no such luck. The double doors swung wide and, despite myself, my head whipped round like a hawk’s. Damn you I heard myself muttering damn you, damn you, to hell. In over twenty years she hadn’t even had the decency to gain more than a couple of pounds. That gorgeous ballerina’s five foot five, eight stone plus, striding towards me was identical to the one that had lain naked before me on many Mexican beaches and Arizona creek sides in the warm winter of nineteen eighty. The platinum blonde pageboy was cut the same. Not till she approached the bed did I notice some extra lines on her face and an added puffiness to her neck and cheeks. She hugged me quickly and turned away. Tessa, she, and Geoff were immediately entwined, wracked with sobs.

I crossed the ward to a chair at an empty bed where I tried, god knows I tried, but failed to force a recollection from my mind. I shall fester in hell for it but all I could think of as I stared across that hospital ward at the death bed of one of my life’s best friends, as his family wept in misery for the conclusion of a hideous five year

disease, all I could think of was this: that the last time I had seen the woman, the wife, the mother, she had led me from the Spirit Room in Jerome, Arizona to her marital bed. It was early spring nineteen eighty one and the husband Geoff, who now lay dying twenty feet away, was then in the bottom of a jagged canyon, seventy miles due east of Jerome, tilling an infamous garden for the planting of a famous strain of weed, the incomparable, the mystical, the High Times award winning, the Newsweek featured Mad Jag sinsemilla of Mad Jag Canon, grown and marketed the previous year by yours truly and the brilliant, crazed Wizard of the Mogollon Rim.

Emma had led me through the cold starlit streets of that ramshackle mining town that had changed us all for ever, and up the stairs to her marital bed where her normally stunning figure was swollen to a quivering voluptuousness by the beginning of her pregnancy with the young man, who now, at the hospital bedside, self consciously stroked her shoulders. Oozing libido as most woman do when first pregnant, she had threatened to burst from the white lace camisole. Dragging my clothes from me she had, with those articulate lips, honed the steel of a willing erection and then swung astride to ride me confidently and urgently to her own shattering orgasm. The power of her climaxes had always intrigued me but this one was exceptional. My neck was clenched so hard in the crook of her arm (to keep me from seeing her face, as she knew I longed to during her climax) that I was forced to free myself to avoid choking. Lifting her chin from my shoulder, which she fought briefly without losing her rhythm, I watched in rapt fascination as her face contorted in a rictus of lust. Perhaps heightened by the realization that this was her last time astride me she abandoned herself to ecstasy, culminating in a keen of quietus that rang through the silent streets and out over the broad desert valley to the red rock cliffs above Sedona and beyond. I'd always loved the masculinity of her orgasms but this one dwarfed the rest. She toppled as if pole axed and lay panting beside me her body arched away leaving us only connected like farm yard dogs until finally, with a delightful vaginal fart, she disengaged.

“Jem.... JEREMY!” Emma’s voice snapped at me across the ward. “I’m taking the kids home. Geoff wants you to stay with him. Can you hang on for another hour or..?”

“Yes, sure. Of course.” I spotted the lines of strain on her brow. The mascara of one eye had run into an LA gangster’s tear, the crow’s feet fanning from her eye sockets had furrowed – but goddamn at forty-seven she was still gorgeous. Her strong mouth sought a smile but formed a pout and her turquoise pupils held my gaze again for the first time in twenty-one years. I’d always expected a tense reaction to this moment but was not prepared for the surge of disquiet and desire I felt, like the after-rush of a close call in traffic with the danger passed and the adrenalin raking your hamstrings. I watched her walk away and try as I might could not stop my stare from drifting to the former ballerina’s fabulous arse.

“You’re a twat, Style. A randy twat.” Geoff’s gravel snatched my eyeline away. He hauled himself up from the pillows. “I don’t know why we were always such mates, you and I. I know you always thought of me as a Brummy yobbo.”

“Which you were. And you had me pegged as a public school pillock.”

“Which no fookin’ doubt you were. A little alliteration and a bucket of bullshit make a public school ponce.” A ghost of a grin crossed his mouth. “We had some times though. Didn’t we just? Back in the seventies.” His eyes were glazing over. Geoff was

not lightly given to mawkish recollection but on his deathbed a man may change. "People always rave about the sixties." He said. "But you know it really kicked off here, in Brum, in England, in the seventies."

"As Lennon said: 'The sixties were just breakfast time.' Maybe in some places in the sixties it was happening, the Haight Ashbury, Greenwich Village, Warhol's Factory, The Roundhouse in Streatham but it was in the early seventies that it really went off."

"Think of the bands we saw in the Brumagham boozers before they hit it big." His chin came up and I glimpsed through the death mask the old fire. "Stevie Winwood and the Spenser Davis Group. ELO. Traffic. UB40 in the Moseley Arms."

"That was later, when I was in the states. I remember Chicken Shack in the Arch Club under the railroad track in Aston. With Stan Webb and Christine Perfect."

"I'd rather go blind, boy, than to see you walk away..." His attempt at the song trailed off.

"Don't give up your day job."

"Thanks." He suffered a smirk to cross his face. "And they went on to form Fleetwood Mac. Then there was ELO at Mothers in Erdington."

"Traffic in the Elbow Room." I remembered.

"Aaah, The Elbow Room, What a beltin' club that was. Christ, did we pull some totty out of that joint, eh mate." The jaundiced cheeks gained a hint of colour. "What about Ozzie Osborne belting it out up in some West Brom back room for a couple of bob. And you and Wally ended up living in his old flat. Aye the Midlands had the fookin' bands in those days. Now it's all Manchester or the smoke." He sighed and sank back.

"Well we had ourselves a couple of good years in Manchester, eh?"

"Aye, we did. Pity we didn't hang on to that house we bought in Didsbury. Worth a fortune now."

"We've all got twenty-twenty hindsight when it comes to real estate. " I said and added quickly, as his face darkened. "As they say in America."

"But Didsbury was fookin' great then weren't it? Seventy five, seventy six. What was that old schoolhouse we used to go to where they spun the early reggae and ska and we were the only white cunts there and the rasta guys passed you those massive ganga spliffs and you and I and Ems and Lou and Trish would dance till we creased up and went down in fits. Oh fookin' ell Style." He gasped and tried again to drag himself up by the hanging handle. "Shite, things were great back then....Why did this have to..."

And he tailed off as he welled up and a tear started across his cheek. I reached for his shoulder and tried to clench it comfortingly but felt the spare knuckle and my hand betrayed me.

He shrugged me off and his face fell away. After a long beat he turned back. "You know I tried to forgive you Style. But I never could." He grimaced with the pain and the heft of the words. "I know Emma went willingly but at the time it was you I wanted to kill. I wanted to winkle pick your goulies into the middle of next week. I wanted to..." He began to retch and flung the bile away with the back of his hand and reached towards me, guttering.

"Jesus, Geoff. Oh Christ. NURSE" I yelled over my shoulder as Geoff grabbed my wrists, babbling like a drowning man while his eyes blazed and rolled upwards.

CHAPTER TWO

The repetitive shriek of the stall horn in a Cessna cockpit is as welcome as the wail of an alley cat snatching you from deep REM.

“What the hell does that noise mean, Wiz?” I shouted over the drone of the turbo engine.

“If it wasn’t me flying it would mean we were auguring in!” Wiz grinned as his hands flickered over the controls, tweaking the pitch of the prop, angling the flaps to slow the plane as we pitched past the canyon walls. “Get that sack out there. We’re coming in. I want to knock Stilt out of his tree.”

Squatting in the spot from which we had removed the passenger seat and taking care not to foul the dual control yoke with my back, I jammed my shoulder against the door and forced it open against the rush of warm Arizona air. The contents of the bag, food supplies for the pruning crew for the weeks of work ahead, were tightly bound in canvas and rope. Slipping two fingers through the rope I forced the package out on to the wing strut, fighting the slipstream, struggling to hang on to the bag and avoid going out the door myself.

“You set, man?” Wiz yelled.

“Set!” I shouted back and tried to reassure myself that as I was now irrevocably committed to hurtling through a beautiful canyon in the desert mountains of central Arizona to drop supplies to a remote garden now blossoming with over a thousand gorgeous, mature, female marijuana plants that there were few other pilots in the world I’d rather have at the controls. With over five thousand logged hours, and god knows how many more left unrecorded flying dubious loads across the borders and deserts and oceans of Central America and the Caribbean, my new found partner was the guy I wanted next to me.

“Hold it...hold it ...OK. GO!”

I loosed my grip and leaned out to watch the bag drop, forgetting that the door, which had been held by the breadth of the bag, was now at the mercy of the slipstream. The door slammed into my left temple and fired me across the narrow fuselage into Wiz’s elbow. My shoulder clipped the dual controls and I felt the plane lurch before I was flung back against the flapping door.

“What the fuck!” Screamed Wiz, wrestling the plane, his face creased with concentration. “You dipshit. You want us to wreck down here. In our canyon.”

“Terribly sorry.” I tried my best BBC and jammed the handle down on the door. Looking back as the plane yawed through the narrows and Wiz gunned the turbo to climb us up and out and into safer airspace I caught a glimpse of a tall figure clinging to the branches of the white pine that marked our garden. This was Stilt, Wiz’s partner from the previous season.

Wiz kept the stick pulled in and we climbed towards the canyon rim. I looked across at the charming madman who had brought this sea change to my life. Thick lips pursed into a moue of concentration as he peered through the Perspex bubble; the dark moustache and pointed goatee beard jutting forward; the keen hazel eyes betraying the compassionate nature of perhaps the softest crook to ever grace the 'profession'.

It didn't seem less than a year since we'd met in Phoenix. I'd just lobbed in from San Francisco after an eventful drive from New York. It was then a few days before Christmas nineteen seventy-nine and the only people I knew in the states were Dali and his wife Fiona.

In nineteen seventy-three I'd flogged seats in a van from England to Greece and the beautiful Fiona with the hideous brummy accent and Geoff, her main squeeze and my main mate, had grabbed the last couple of spots. The van, a V4 Ford Transit, which must rank as one of the most worthless motors known to man, had broken down three times before we even got out of England. It took ten days to reach Athens by which time the paying passengers, all nine of 'em, were ready to crush my knackers in a vice, Fiona and Geoff had split up for good and Geoff had left the party late one night in Klagenfurt, pissed as a fart, needless to say, on the neighborhood postman's bike. The night drive from Zagreb to Belgrade was made in the days when it was a two-lane highway and must rank as one of the world's most dangerous but that's another story. On the volcanic island of Santorini Fiona had met Dali and a couple of years later they got hitched up in Arizona at a fine, hippy wedding on the Mogollon Rim.

Dali had an adobe house in the older part of Phoenix with a studio at the back. Had he realised when I pitched up that winter morning that his house was about to become the major hangout for a stream of over-educated transatlantic yobbos and tarts and their dramas and intercouplings and traumas over the next few years he would probably have slammed the door in my grinning boat race. But in keeping with the generosity of his countrymen he threw wide the portal and I moved into the studio.

The city of Phoenix was then in the process of establishing itself as the hideously polluted, over-populated, water-thieving cauldron of seething humanity that ranks it today as one of man's finest follies. However basking through that warm winter in Dali's yard, bare foot and chested, plunging occasionally into the cold pool, I had some sense of why the Hohokam Indians had flourished there when the Gila and the Salt rivers still ran through the valley and before the patina of concrete and asphalt had had the effect of keeping nighttime summer temperatures over three figures.

Dali's paintings, which adorned the walls of the house and studio, were an exuberant concoction of Rousseau, Courbet, Kandinsky, and Hieronymus Bosch elaborated by the influence of early Disney cartoons, heavy metal mags and tempered with the occasionally sobering touch of Thomas Hart Benton or John James Audubon. Dragons menaced maidens, orange tressed youths flung Frisbees above skyscrapers, flocks of grackles browsed urban marshes. The style of his painting and the extravagance of his moustache, which might well have had its extremities waxed and up-curved, gave him his moniker.

"This one seems atypical of your style." I suggested one day as we whiled away the hours in the studio. "Is it unfinished?"

“No.” He said grinning at the painting of a rampant jaguar, jaws flared, fangs bared, massive front paws held menacingly. “That’s a graphic job I did for the Wizards of the Rim.”

“Wizards of what?”

“Wizards of the Rim. The Mogollon Rim. The Rift valley of Central Arizona. It’s for their label.”

“Why are they called Wizards?”

“They’ve built a scene around their adventures in the canyons of the Rim, the growing trip, the Carlos Castenada gig.”

“The growing trip?” I asked disingenuously.

“I’m sworn to a code of silence here.” He daubed paint lavishly on to a new canvas. “But what the fuck. You’re becoming part of the gang.”

“I am?”

“After a fashion.” He scabbled in an untidy desk drawer. “I’ve got a label somewhere. Here.”

The bumper sticker with a removable back had the jaguar leaping from the left corner. Dominating the right side were the words: Mad Jag. In smaller lettering in the lower right it read: Wizards of the Rim, Mad Jag Canon, Arizona.

“Rather vague.” I said “So what’s their business?”

Dali drew a deep breath. “They grow sinsemilla.”

“What the hell’s that?”

“Seedless grass. The labels go with each bag. And the Mad Jag is the tits, man, primo.”

“Let’s puff some.”

“I’m fresh out.” His marriage to a Birmingham bird had given him some English colloquialisms. “That shit doesn’t last long round here. Word gets out and every head case in the neighborhood is coming by for a toke or to buy a lid.” He worked away at his painting. “Tomorrow though the Wizards’ll be in town. We’ll be awash in bud. And you’ll be picking your brains off the roof top.”

Next morning a couple of characters strolled into the back yard and my life took the path less traveled by.

COPYRIGHT
© June 2008
Jonathan Slator
228 Morada Lane

Taos NM 87571