

THE LLAMA

by Joe Peterson

We're sitting in Tina's living room, light streaming through the large plate glass window when she asks me how in the hell I ever ended up in Kankakee Illinois. How else would I have ended up here:

I was born here.



She passes the jay—nice home grown sticky Oregon bud that her husband Rex brought home with him on his return trip from the Gulf war. I pinch the jay from her, still shocked she'd called me, which I'd been hoping she'd do ever since she'd hinted three weeks ago at a party that not only did a small cache of the stuff still remain, but that her husband Rex would be out of town sailing on an aircraft carrier for the rest of the month.

Holding the jay as if it were a holy relic, which it practically is, I inhale delicately. The smoke is moist, pungent, and has the hallmark spicy almost minty flavor of world class pot. I exhale and as if I'd just purchased my ticket to play: get frisky with her. Truth to tell: I'd always imagined myself here, alone with her, in the privacy of her home (I'd known Tina on and off for more than four years). I may have never imagined I'd also be getting stoned with her on some of the best pot in the world, but there was always some point, when, if I ever did end up here, I knew we'd get naked. I often imagined that point. I'd imagine her lift-

ing her arms straight above her head as I lifted her dress up and over, her naked body coming suddenly into full view. I'd imagine her near perfect skin riding firmly up her legs, and then gliding like carved soap over her hip bone and muscle. I'd imagine the eye, the exposed throat, the dangling hand, the dark patch of pubic hair... Never once though, did I believe the day would come when she'd pick up the phone and as simple as it was ordinary invite me over. So this afternoon when I got the call, which in retrospect seems utterly inevitable, and right now with Tina alongside of me on her white overstuffed couch, which also seems inevitable, I begin to experience that rare mystical moment when dreams become reality. I grab her sweaty hand, then turning to watch her eyes which stare at Cookie—a llama she's leashed to a maple tree just beyond her window, kiss her exposed throat.

"Whoa there Abe." she says, pushing me back. "Going a little fast there, donchya think?"

"Uh uh." I say, hedging my bet. I move in for another kiss.

"Stop!" she says.

I ease off and try to collect myself. "Whoa, there," I say to myself, "listen to her cowboy—she's a married woman, after all." Even so, I'm hard as a rock and worried I'll go crazy unless Tina does something for me—soon. "Pace yourself." I say, trying to calm down, "Be happy." In fact I am happy; happy that Tina's by my side, or rather that I'm by hers, invited to spend the rest of the afternoon getting as high as I please while her husband Rex sails-

oblivious to what's going on here—somewhere on the other side of the planet.

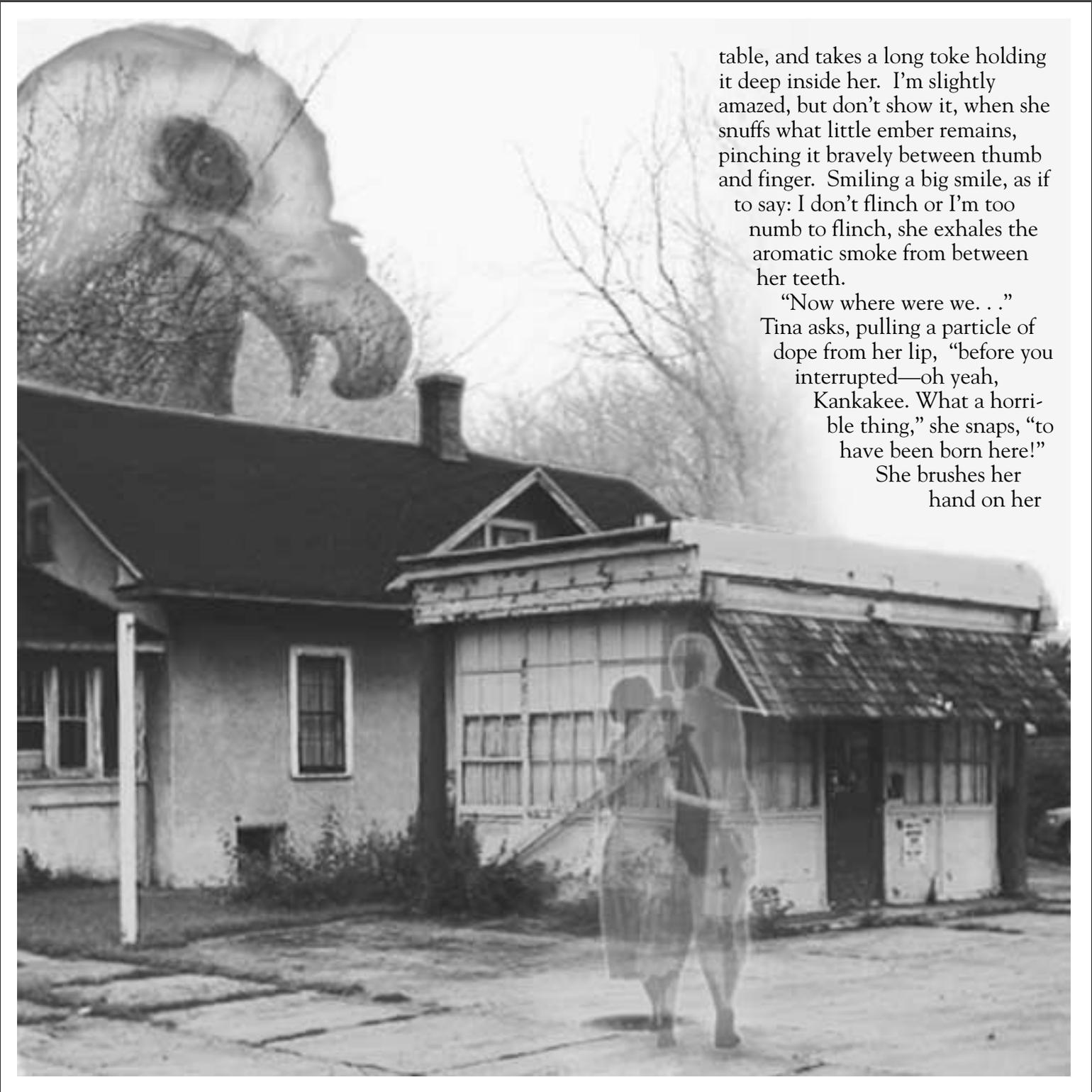
"Whoa there," she says again for good measure. "Here Abe," she says, handing me the jay. "Cool off."

I grab the jay which has been smoked to an ember and take another hit. But I burn my fingers and toss the jay aside.

"I knew you'd do that." Tina says, laughing. "Here, watch."

With two red painted fingernails more effective than any roach clip, and the practiced grace of an old pro, Tina snatches the ember from the coffee



A black and white photograph showing a woman and a child walking on a sidewalk in front of a house. The house has a large mural of an elephant's head on its roof. The woman is wearing a patterned dress and a hat, and the child is wearing a light-colored dress. The house has a chimney and a window with a white frame. The background shows bare trees and a clear sky.

table, and takes a long toke holding it deep inside her. I'm slightly amazed, but don't show it, when she snuffs what little ember remains, pinching it bravely between thumb and finger. Smiling a big smile, as if to say: I don't flinch or I'm too numb to flinch, she exhales the aromatic smoke from between her teeth.

"Now where were we. . ."

Tina asks, pulling a particle of dope from her lip, "before you interrupted—oh yeah, Kankakee. What a horrible thing," she snaps, "to have been born here!"

She brushes her hand on her

skirt, and laughs. "Oh! I'm sorry Abe," she says, placing her hand on my lap, "I didn't mean that. But it must drive you crazy--doesn't it? To watch all your friends come and go and not be able to leave, yourself?"

Touching an incredibly sore spot, I feel my heart leap. Sure it drives me crazy. But I hold my ground. After all, I didn't come here this afternoon to discuss my failings.

"Oh," I say, "who gives a fuck!"

"Yeah Abe," Tina says, slurring her words a bit, "but you don't wanna get locked up here forever, do ya?"

"Listen Tina," I say, "you're here, what's your excuse?"

"Alright, alright," she says, trying to calm me down, "don't be crabby you'll ruin my buzz. Here have a Dorito or something." She hands me the bowl of Dorito's and we start munching.

"Anyways," says Tina licking her fingers after crunching on a chip. "I can't leave. At least not for a while, I have Cookie to care for. She's precious to me. She's like my child. And we have this nice ranch house with a big back yard that's just perfect for her."

"Well," I say, "I can't leave either. I have a crippled mother."



“Oh,” Tina says. “That’s terrible.”

“No it’s not.” I say, “It’s just the way it is.”

“My you’re awful bitter, but if it’s any consolation Abe, my parents are both dead.”

“Better dead, than cripple,” I say. “Shit.”

“Well,” Tina says after a moment, “Better high, than not.” She lays her head on my shoulder and starts drifting off. I put my hand on her exposed thigh and start stroking it up and down with my fingers.

“Listen,” I say, “how ‘bout Rex, when’s he get back?”

“Rex,” Tina says, “he’s gone for another week or so. I got a call from him this morning. It’s the funniest thing. He called to see if I wanted anything from Java. He’s in Java—can you believe that—where on earth is Java I ask him. Java, he says, why it’s on the other side of the planet honey. Oh, I say, then why don’t you bring us home some coffee beans. I love fresh coffee. But you know Rex—he’ll probably bring something home I least expect. Like a diamond, or opium, or something to get fucked up on.”

“Well,” I say after a moment pulling a pearl-handled pot pipe from my front pocket. “How ‘bout smoking some more weed Tina? You wanna do that?”

“Right now?” she asks lifting her head off my shoulder. “But aren’t you high already, Abe?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m high sure, but really high...”

“Oh, alright then. We can do some more, if that’s what you want. Sure.” Tina gets up and reaches for the baggy of dope on the coffee table. “But,” she says, laughing very suddenly, “I can’t believe you’re not high yet. I mean this stuff really kills me. I was just thinking for instance, what it would be like being Cookie roped to that tree. I mean I’m crazy high.” Tina’s body suddenly rolls close to mine, and her eyes as bloodshot as a road map, turn to look at me. I go to kiss her but she turns away from me all flushed.

“Um,” she says, resting her head back on my shoulder. “Before Rex left, I told him, I said: keep this shit away from me Rex, I don’t want any of it, it makes me go crazy, it makes me feel paranoid and lonely smoking it. I don’t want any





of it. Well, he says, tossing a three-ounce bag on my lap, this ain't gonna hurt you. Now look at me Abe, I'm all mixed up."

All of a sudden, and quite unexpectedly, Tina starts crying. It's a light and fractured cry like troubled sleep, and it stops as soon as it starts: her body shaking, then quiet. I put my arm around her, but she brushes me off and wipes a tear.

"I'll be OK, Abe. Thanks. Just let's sit here for a moment like this, alright?"

"Alright," I say stroking her soft thigh with my fingers.

"No, I'm serious, Abe," she says, "just let's sit and chill out a little alright!"

"OK," I say, pulling my hand away.

We sit for a long time on her white overstuffed couch not touching each other. Tina's not exactly crying, but she's not exactly happy either. I start wondering about her husband Rex, always traveling around the world, constantly on the go, leaving Tina here, in this small

desolate beat-up town, thinking maybe it's safer that way. I imagine him coming home on leave after one journey or another, bearing exotic gifts—one of which obviously was this llama that stares back at us from the other side of the plate-glass window, the other of course, the dope we're smoking, and maybe yet a third—the hand carved coo-coo clock that hangs from the living room wall and ticks the seconds of our afternoon one by one irrevocably away.

"Hey," I say handing her the pipe, "cheer up, honey. Let's load this baby up and start smoking."

"Wow." Tina says, taking hold of the pipe. "This is a really nice pipe Abe. I mean it's beautiful."

"You like it?" I say. "It's my lucky pipe."

"Lucky?" she asks stroking the handle and examining the brass bowl.

"Yeah, lucky."

"Well how 'bout that, Abe! My llama's lucky too."

"So's my pipe." I say.

"Believe it, Abe!" she says, "Things can really be lucky."

"Yes." I say reaching with my hand for her thigh.

She opens the baggie, and with those red painted fingernails fishes for a pinch of the pungent dope.

"It's such a pretty pipe. I can't wait to try it."

She packs the bowl and hands it to me. "You wanna go first, Abe?"

"Uh uh," I say, "you go."

"Me first!" she says. She lights up, takes a long meditative hit, then hands me the superheated bowl. "Careful, Abe, it's hot."

I take a toke then hand the pipe back to her.

"You see, Abe, all I wanna do right now is have

kids. I wanna have four or five of them. I want them to fill the house and make noise. Knock things over when I'm not looking. I want them to come to me with their cuts and bruises. But how can I expect to have kids, when Rex is always away."

"Hey." I say, touching her cheek with my hand. "Don't worry. It'll be OK."

"Do you think it'll be OK Abe?"

"Yeah," I say, "everything'll be OK."

"On top of it all, Abe, when Rex does come home after one of his long trips he doesn't even wanna screw. Can you figure that one out? He's either too tired, or too worn out, or he's just not interested. Is that normal?"

"No," I say.

She brings the pearl-handled pipe to her lips and takes another hit. "I don't know any more, I don't know. Here," she says, "have another."

I take a long toke, then set the pipe down.

"Of course, Abe," she says, "It wasn't always like that."

"Never is," I say.

"Shit, we never used to get high, or drunk, or be away from each other for long periods of

time. All we used to do was have sex. Sex, sex, sex. That was our drug. But things change, I guess. Lives change. We've changed, Abe, Rex and I have. Now I feel like an old siren, stuck in this town waiting for him to come home. Look at Cookie, Abe, isn't she a wonderful creature?"

I run my hand up Tina's thigh, slip it underneath her skirt and feel her legs part ever so slightly. Cookie is chewing at the grass as if it's involved in some kind of mission.

"I used to think that it was me, or that I'd be the





one who'd grow tired of having sex. But Jesus, Abe, it was him. It was Rex. I only grew to like it more. I still do, too. I like having it with him."

"Well," I point out, "I was married once, too. It can be like that."

"But does it ever reverse itself, Abe, and get better?"

"No," I say, "at least it didn't for me and my wife."

Tina grabs the bowl and takes another toke. "Here," she says, handing it to me. "May as well get blown away, how 'bout it, Abe?"

I grab the pipe, and like a diver plunging deep for oysters inhale deeply. I hold my breath, letting the smoke work its magic deep in the darkness of my lungs. Then I close my eyes and relax. When I open them, Tina's staring at me, her cheeks flushed.

"Well," she says, her legs still spread apart.

"Well," I say, grabbing her skirt and slowly pulling it off.

"Whatd'ya say?" she asks.

"What'd you say?" I say.

"I just hope he don't walk in right now," she says.

"Me neither." I say. And then I laugh. "Ha! Ha!"

I'm perfectly merry and happy when I catch that llama the corner of my eye. It's watching me pull the skirt off Tina. Suddenly I stop what I'm doing. I feel like I've been caught in the act. It's looking at me, grass hanging from its mouth, like Tina's mother might have looked at me, or Rex, or my mother. I watch it blink its long South American eyelashes, and stare not quite suspiciously, but curiously. Bug off, I say, bug off you old goat. But it stares until some kind of satisfactory connection is made. Then it lowers its head and using those all-too-human camel lips resumes nibbling the grass.