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I've always
thought a poet
should think
big, not small.

A mass audience
is created of an
incredibly exquisite
network of many
little communities.

I write for the little
community where
I start, and I have

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Cherry

NORRIS CHURCH MAILER

Easy Rider was incredible. Brother Wilkins was right, in a way, to be scared of it. The heroes were long-haired dope-smoking hippies on a motorcycle road trip across America, and the villains were ignorant rednecks, just like all the ones who drank coffee at the Town Café right here on Main Street.

One of the hippie characters, whose name was George, was played by a really adorable guy named Jack Nicholson, and in the scene when they were sitting around the campfire and he got stoned on grass and started talking about UFOs, it was just the best. I think every kid who saw that wanted to be on the road and free like that. Then later, when they stopped at that little café—which, I kid you not, was a dead ringer for the Town—and all the stupid old hicks were making nasty cracks about their long hair and all, I couldn't hardly stand it. I had seen it too many times in real life. Even G. Dub, who had lived in this town his whole life, got a lot of grief when he started to grow his hair long.

It was a big relief, in the movie, when they left the café—after realizing that they weren't going to get served—without a fight. I thought, They are smart to get out of there. They're going to be all right. Ha. In the very next scene, they were ambushed by those same rednecks from the café, and George was killed.

I just couldn't stand it. I started to cry. It was so real. I could see Tripp lying there, his head bashed in by a baseball bat, just like George.

"Don't cry, Cherry. It's just a movie." He put his arm around me.

"No it's not. It's not a movie. It's real life."

He squeezed me close to him. I slunk down in the seat, making myself as small as possible, and snuzzled my shoulder into his armpit. I should have shut my eyes, too, because in the next scene, carried away by their grief, Billy and Wyatt went off to a cathouse in New Orleans, picked up two hookers, and got zonked out on acid in a graveyard right in the middle of the daytime. The camera did all kinds of weird things—zooming in and out, getting fuzzy, distorting the picture—trying to make it look like a real acid trip, I guess, and the girls took off all their clothes and danced naked in the graveyard. You could even see their black pubic hair. That was enough, right there, to send Brother Wilkins into orbit.

"Is that what trips are really like, Tripp?" I whispered.

"Kind of. As close as you can get it on film. Not bad. Whoever made this movie knew his stuff."

By the time we got out of the theater, I was wrung-out. I couldn't believe that awful redneck with the disgusting wen on his neck just blew Dennis Hopper away like that for no good reason. I hoped the wen was cancer and his jaw would have to be amputated like poor old man Winston Coffey, who got cancer from dipping snuff and went through the last ten years of his life with no jaw, holding a handkerchief in front of his face to catch the spit and I eating baby food that his daughter poured down his throat with a funnel. I know that it's a sin to wish bad things on people, and I know, of course, it was just an actor in the movie, not a real man. I mean, obviously, I didn't wish the actor to get cancer and lose his jaw, and maybe it was a fake wen anyhow, but ... oh, I don't know what I wished. It was just all so real. Maybe I was still upset from my conversation with Mama, and the funeral and all.

We headed out to the lake after the movie. I was really glad that Mama hadn't gone with us. I don't think she's ready for something like that. Better to start her out on more Elvis movies, or Doris Day and Rock Hudson.

"Penny?" Tripp asked as we drove down the road that ran by Baby's house. Our windows were rolled down and the radio was playing "Let the Sunshine

In." I loved that song and turned it up really loud, since we weren't near any railroad tracks.

"What do you mean?"

"A penny for your thoughts. You seem to be rolling some wheels in there."

"Sorry. I guess the movie got to me. It's just ... I think that the world is full of an awful lot of hate-filled people. I mean, who were those guys hurting? Why should anybody care how long they wore their hair? It's not fair."

"Nobody ever said it had to be fair."

We had pulled up to the edge of the water, about a mile past Baby's house. It was, in fact, probably right about where they had found Carlene. Tripp killed the motor and flipped off the lights. It was real quiet. You could hear the frogs croaking and the crickets chirping.

"Why did you come out here, Tripp? It's creepy. I think it's where they found Carlene."

"Is it? Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"Do you want to leave?"

What was wrong with me tonight? He was going to think I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown or something. "I don't know."

He scooted the seat back and put his arm around me. I didn't feel any easier.

"I'll tell you a story to get your mind off of the movie. Did you ever hear about the trapper and the hook?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"It's a true story. Once upon a time in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, there was a trapper who got his hand bitten clean off at the wrist by a wolf that was caught in one of his traps. He shot the wolf but was so weak from loss of blood that he couldn't get home, and he lay there in a fever, beside the body of the wolf, hallucinating for two days before they came looking and found him. He was in the hospital out of his head for months, but he lived, and they made him a hook to replace the hand he had lost.

"But the experience unhinged him, and he got crazier and crazier. He took to roaming the hills at night, and if he saw a car parked in the woods, he thought it was poachers after his traps and he would sneak up on the parkers and kill the boy and rape the girl.

"One night, a couple went parking up there, and the girl had the jitters. She just felt like something wasn't right. The guy didn't want to leave, but the feeling she had kept getting stronger and stronger, until finally, practically in a panic, she made him gun the car and take off. When they got back to her house, he got out to open the door for her, and there, hanging on the car door handle was ... a hook!"

He grabbed me at that moment and I screamed.

"Tripp Barlow, I'm going to kill you!" He was laughing and dodging my fists, and then he opened the door trying to get away, and we fell out onto the ground. By then, I was laughing too.

"You really are a nut. And of course I've heard that old story before—or a version of it. My great-grandma heard that story."

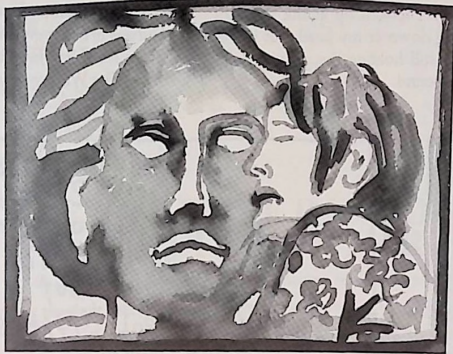
"Then why did you scream?"

"Because I felt like it. Now, get me up off of this wet ground."

He pulled me up and the two of us leaned against the hood of the car, looking up at the sky and out over the dark lake.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and flicked his Zippo. The smoke smelled sweet and a little like alfalfa, but different. He wouldn't ... surely it wasn't ... but it couldn't be anything else.

"Would you like to try a toke?" He held out the joint toward me. It was thin, and the tip glowed red in the dark. I began to tremble, but I tried not to let him see. I put my hands between my knees and pressed them together.



"Is that marijuana?"

"That's exactly what it is. Grass. Weed. Pot. Cannabis. A natural plant made by God. A gift from God to human beings. It's as natural as tobacco—grown right in the same ground. And it's probably a lot better for you."

He took another drag, inhaled it, and held it in his lungs for a long moment before he blew it out in a stream. Now I couldn't hide it. I was shaking visibly. My hands were cold. I looked out at the dark shadows on the lake. It had to be right out there where they found Carlene. I was getting a little sick to my stomach. The smell from the smoke seemed to be making me light-headed. Anyway, something was.

"Don't be scared. You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. I just want you to feel as good as I do right now. I promise, it is not like drugs. It's just a little wild weed. Straight from the earth."

I put my icy hands into my armpits to try and warm them up. This was crazy. I couldn't believe I was out here in the presence of an actual marijuana joint. I should run as fast as I could to Baby's house. I'd be safe there. But part of me didn't want to—the same part that hated the rednecks and loved the hippies in *Easy Rider*.

"I don't know how to smoke. I never tried it."

"Let me show you." He took a deep drag on the joint, then put his hand behind my head and pulled me into his arms. He leaned in to kiss me, and as my lips touched his, he breathed smoke into my mouth. I held my breath, then pulled away. Some of the smoke got into my mouth. I exhaled as hard as I could, so it wouldn't get in my lungs. He seemed not to notice that I hadn't actually inhaled any smoke.

"See, it's not so bad, is it?" He held out the joint toward me. "Here. You try it. You just put it between your lips and suck in. Breathe it all the way down into your lungs and then hold it for as long as you can."

There was a funny taste in my mouth. I looked up at the sky, half expecting to see a bolt of lightning coming down at my head, but it was clear. The stars hadn't moved. Tripp was still holding the glowing joint out to me. Oh well. In for a penny, in for a pound.

I took the joint from him with trembling fingers and put it to my lips. I sucked the hot smoke into my lungs. For about a second. Then my body rebelled and I started to cough. Deep, racking coughs. I couldn't catch my breath. Tripp tried to pat me on the back, but he was making it worse.

"No, get away from me!" I choked out the words and pushed him away. Leaning against the car bumper, I slowly got my wind back. I breathed several clear drafts of air, and then the strangest thing started to happen. My heart began to pound. I could feel the very blood pump through all its chambers into the veins and arteries, racing to the ends of my body, arms and legs, rounding the corners of my fingers and toes and climbing again to my heart. My whole body was beating like a giant heart. The air was so clear, the stars so bright. My heart beat faster and faster. It was going to run right out of my body. I must be dying.

"Tripp! Take me to the hospital! I think I'm having a heart attack!"

He started to laugh. He threw back his head and laughed and laughed.

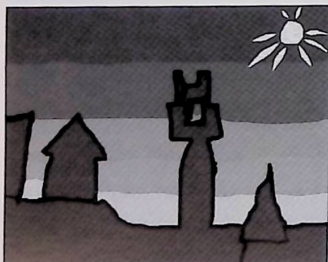
"No, baby, you aren't having a heart attack."

"I'm not dying?"

"You're getting high. Like nobody I ever saw before." He put his arms around me and held me tight. He must have felt my heart pounding, because he started to rub my back in slow, firm circles. Nothing had ever felt as good as that back rub did. After a minute, I started to calm down. I did trust him. He wouldn't let anything bad happen to me.

Something new was starting. I was relaxing, my heart returning to normal. I was so relaxed that I felt dreamy. It seemed like I could float. My arms floated up and went around Tripp's neck. We kissed. A slow, warm, friendly kiss that tasted like burnt fields and moonlight.

Norris Church Mailer was raised in Arkansas and now lives on Cape Cod with her husband of twenty-five years, Norman Mailer. She's the mother of two sons and the stepmother of five daughters and two sons. "Cherry," is excerpted from her first book, *The Windchill Summer* (Random House, 2000).



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"i can't believe it's the
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we'd all be zinging around
in our little jetson saucers
by now... but i do see the future at
that cool little store called MAP..
those morphic shaped JOHNATHAN
ADLER vases... ViSiOnaite +
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