

Petty peddlers.

Inspired in part by Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven."

ON A BLUSTERY day Codell once again went to JP's. He walked to the covered stairway that had been added to convert the two story house into a two-unit. The lower door of the covered stairway was closed but unlocked. He opened it and peeped up the steep steps. The stairway had settled so much that you could see through the cracks between the stairway and the house. The wind blew like a whisper through the gaps.

A single light bulb illuminated a second door at the top. Codell climbed the crooked stairs. At the top, he raised his hand to knock, saw that it was slightly ajar, and instead knocked on the door frame. "JP? You here?"

"Codell?" JP's voice was high pitched. "Jista minute. I'm on the can."

Codell shifted from foot to foot. He studied the textures and curls of the door's peeling paint. A toilet flushed and a minute went by. He knocked again. "JP?"

The door sprang open. Codell lurched back, grabbing the rail to catch himself.

JP towered over Codell and laughed. "Don't be alarmed now! Let me guess what you want."

"I need some weed, JP. I gotta make some money."

"Do you?" squeaked JP. "Why don't you broadcast it to the world?"

"Alright, c'mon in," he squeaked again. "Close the door behind you."

Clothes and fast food trash littered JP's living room. The aroma of marijuana permeated everything. JP pushed aside a cluttered coffee table and plopped on a worn

couch. Codell cleared an area in front of a clothes dresser and sat on the floor, back against the dresser, facing JP.

“Hey, that’s my dresser.” Codell scooted forward and sat upright.

JP turned on a small television set. A black and white picture wavered. He turned up the volume. “Presented by Blue Liquid Wisk!”

“How much weed?” JP asked.

“What?” asked Codell.

JP scrounged on the coffee table and came up with a potato chip bag. From it he pulled a quart size plastic bag of dry, yellow-green marijuana.

“How much?” repeated JP, indicating the marijuana.

“Johnny, tell us about our first item up for bid,” said the TV.

“Ten joints,” Codell answered. “And two nickel bags.”

“Bill, it’s living room furniture.”

“What?” squawked JP.

“Twenty magnificent pieces and they’re all yours if THE PRICE IS RIGHT!”

“Ten joints and a dime bag,” said Codell, scootching closer to the coffee table.

Leaning against the couch was a cafeteria tray, which JP set on the coffee table. He put the bag of pot on the tray and frowned. He removed the seat cushions from the couch and dug with his fingers in the cracks of the couch.

“Higher! Higher! Bid higher!” The voices in the audience blared and overlapped.

"Twenty-four hundred, Bill."

"I'm going to freeze," said the TV.

"Damn," muttered JP. He started taking everything off the coffee table, one thing at a time.

"The actual retail price is: one thousand - six hundred - AND ONE DOLLARS!"

"What are you looking for?" Codell asked.

"AND a dashing red velvet ascot," said the TV.

JP went to the dresser and redistributed what was on top of it. He ransacked the drawers, removed the couch cushions again, replaced the cushions again, got down on all fours, and reached under the couch. After several handfuls of waste and one shirt, he pulled out a packet of rolling papers. He plunked the papers on the cafeteria tray and plunked himself back on the couch.

"Oh! Oh! I've always wanted to go to Rome! Oh, oh! Oh, Bill!"

"You were looking for papers?" Codell pointed at the window sill. "There's some Zig Zags right there."

"What? I know that. I wanted these ones."

"It has two full baths and three bedrooms," announced the TV.

"I can't hear you," said Codell.

"Elegantly carpeted."

JP began rolling skinny joints. The TV picture flickered; the show contestants and audience shouted. Codell's head was humming. He watched JP roll the joints

quickly, adroitly. JP came up with a box of plastic sandwich bags. He snapped a bag open, put ten freshly rolled joints into it, and dropped the bag on the cafeteria tray.

“Next in the home sweepstakes - ”

“Ten joints,” JP squeaked. “How many bags? How much?”

Codell looked at JP quizzically, cocking his head to hear.

“Yes, it’s a player piano!”

“I can’t pay right now,” Codell said.

JP lifted the cafeteria tray and his voice. “How much do you want?”

“Oh! A dime. Dime bag.”

JP snapped open a second sandwich bag and dumped some pot in it. He shook the bag, rolled it up, and licked the inside top. Pressing the inside top against the outside of the bag to seal it, he tossed it to Codell.

“Mr. Lowell, it is yours, congratulations!”

Codell bobbed the bag in the palm of his hand and scrutinized it. “Not a dime bag.”

“Final item, final item, comin’ up - an INBOARD BOAT!”

“WHAT did you say?!” shouted JP. He turned the TV down. “It’s a dime bag. That’s good shit. Lots of flowers. Heavenly.”

“Heavenly,” concurred the TV in an odd coincidence.

“Okay, it’s a dime bag.” Codell stuffed it in his shirt. “Can you give me my joints?”

“Five thousand five hundred.”

“ ‘My’ joints?” said JP. “Where’s my money?”

“Elizabeth?”

“I told you I couldn’t pay right now, JP.” Codell fidgeted.

“Five thousand six hundred.”

JP held up his hand and rubbed his thumb against his middle finger. “Money first, dope second.”

“All of you overbid, so we’re going to give you one more chance.”

“I don’t have it right now, JP. I got to sell it to pay for it. I’ll pay you after.” He looked imploringly at JP.

“Do I look like a bank? Pretend there’s a sign on the wall: no credit, no loans.”

JP crossed his arms and Puckered. [sic] “There are two paths you can go by. One, pay now. Or two, pay now. You can’t change the road you’re on.”

“JP, you did it before with me. You know I’m good for it.”

“You can be sure all that glitters IS gold on this lamé suit with matching boots!”

Codell grabbed the bag of joints off the cafeteria tray. “You can trust me, JP!” He turned for the door.

“Give us the big winner there, Bill.”

JP grabbed Codell’s wrist and twisted him around. Codell winced. “I take pity on you, kid. Ten bucks by next Friday.”

Codell pulled free and bolted out the door and down the steps, the wind whistling through the seams of the stairway, his feet following the cry of his spirit.

“You come back and see us again, Elizabeth.”

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At home, Codell closed his bedroom door, reached beneath his bed, and retrieved a checkerboard game in its box. He inverted the box cover and dumped in the contents of the dime bag. From a pocket he procured the Zig Zags from JP’s window sill. He rolled several thin joints from the dime bag and divided the rest of the bag into two new “nickel” bags. Next, he broke open the ten joints that JP rolled and rerolled them into twelve thinner joints. He would have no shortage of buyers. He’d pay JP for the joints and double his money on the bags. It was too easy. It made him wonder. It really made him wonder.

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Long after, JP turned off the TV. A couple of flies buzzed around, and from the kitchen came the hum of the refrigerator. He looked around the room. “Where’s that dime bag?”

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