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## Getting an Education

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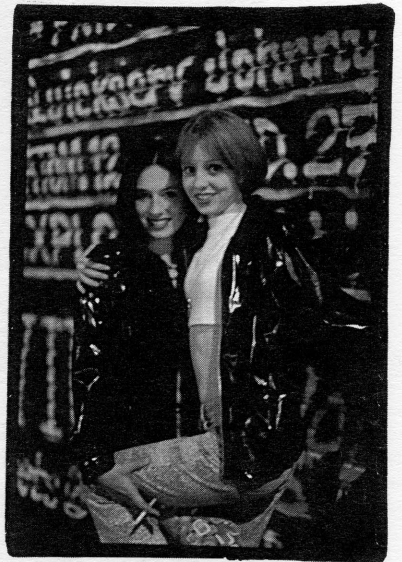
# Getting An Education

"Getting an education," Mr. Smythe, Newton College philosophy instructor once said, "is what you're here for." Together you pushed your cafeteria trays forward and surveyed lunch, steaming from the recesses of a platinum, gleaming swamp. Someone bumped along behind you, while Mr. Smythe, just ahead, loitered over the brussel sprouts and yams, and that's how you stalled out before the special-of-the-week, swimming in a laddle of grayish goo, sea of spittal served up by an officious cafeteria lady yelling, "Next!!"

"It's really not about credits, or diplomas, or pleasing your mother or father," Mr. Smythe continued, "although all of that is fine and good, perhaps necessary, too... but it really is about you."

"...it really is about you."

After two semesters with him, you had a shared history of sorts, and you trusted him. You'd found comfort in his perky little bow tie, the part neatly carved down the center of his cerebellum, his measured and punctuated way of speaking. He had become, in all of his odd mannerisms, perfect for you. You'll



always remember that first class you'd taken from him, how he'd convinced you that he could argue that a chair leg really was a ham sandwich and that God was a frog.

"...not all  
learning comes  
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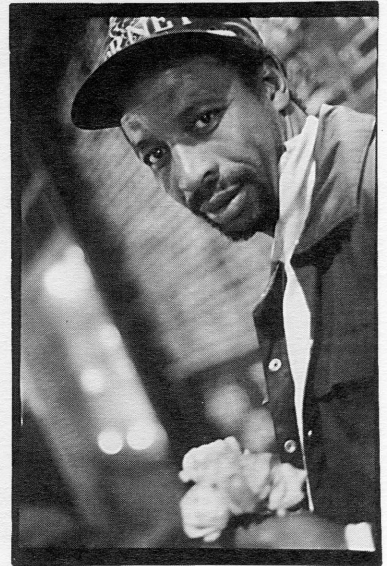
"It's summer," Mr. Smythe said, helping himself to the macaroni and cheese. "Get a job, travel a little; not all learning comes in a catalog with three credit hours attached." He was smiling at you, with his two larger-than-life God's eyes swimming

beneath his bifocals. You'd been only twelve hours shy of graduating, might have done it over the summer. But no...thanks to him you devoted your summer to working as a med tech dissecting lab rats, until Ann Putnam, an old high school friend, called from California and invited you out. You were only too happy to escape the smells of formaldehyde, the feel of plastic gloves, the images of rat feces.

Ann took you on a grand tour - Disneyland in Anaheim, Johnny Carson in Burbank, a quick whirl past the stars' homes in Hollywood, down into the arroyo of Pasadena's Rose Bowl, all topped off with a cruise up Highway One. Ann had put the Miata into cruise control, uncorked a bottle of Merlot, offered you some string cheese and crusty bread. She'd plugged in her daddy's Steve Winwood tape, then pressed the button, and the sunroof opened with a purr. The warm sunshine had poured in and you giggled all the way up the highway. Mostly you saw the ocean. The endless unfurling of the rolling blue fabric, fringed in white, lacy spray. It was almost as if someone was snapping the fabric just for you. It was so opulent, so rich, mile after mile of the blue, never ending, liquid promise. But then the highway took a detour, and you lost your blue view. The

Miata sped through farmland, and you cut through lettuce fields dotted with the bodies of jeaned workers with red bandanas tied about their heads. The workers were doubled down, as if that was their permanent shape. You couldn't tell who was male, female, old, or young. At this distance, they all looked the same, still silhouettes, bowed shapes, bent among a sea of deep green furrow.

It's a party,  
right there in  
your brain...



Later, you'd stopped at a one-pump gasoline station and an old man came hobbling out from the garage. He put fuel in the car, washed your windows. He checked the oil and tires, too. His movements were slow and budgeted, as if each act would cost. Ann hurriedly thanked him with a curt, dismissing nod and hightailed it for the highway. You looked in the rear view mirror and just glimpsed him there, disappearing into the swirl of your dust, like a phantom your imagination had created and then, in its omniscience, erased. After that, it had been a horrible day. You and Ann argued continuously, about nothing. And you decided you really didn't like her very much. She put you on the 737 for Dallas, and you haven't spoken since.

At the end of August, Bio-tech cut you a check for \$1,000, wished you well, and sent you packing with a fat brown rat you'd grown rather fond of. You're happy to be back at Newton; you like learning...that feeling of an itching brain, the two sides conflicted, night after night after some scintillating lecture, your empathetic heart siding with both sides, your mother's voice championing one or the other view, your father's voice, firmly but steadily endorsing yours, your libido

Will you ever  
not remember...

tossing in a log or two on whatever fire is burning out of control, your child's voice wanting to make peace on all sides and not caring, particularly, about the argument, just so that all get out unscathed. It's a party, right there in your brain, a chorus of voices singing and shouting and celebrating... right there in your head, a class meeting at four a.m. in the morning, in your bedroom, on the waterbed, bouncing up and down and punching it out for the podium, and this is about as good as it gets. Will you ever forget these words, these themes, these figures of Marx, and Jesus, and Darwin? Will you ever forget Ann and the fields of lettuce and the feeling of their backbreaking labor stretching your spine? Will you ever forget the lifting of those old eyes upon your young face, his figure repeatedly disappearing in your dust, a refrain which you hadn't understood until now...? Will you ever forget? Will you ever not remember, what it is to get an education...?