

By Winnie Neiwin

Under fixations

Ben is a user. It started last summer when a friend turned him on to "Mary Jane"; now he is mainlining hashish at the rate of four grams an hour. Ben is just one member of a subculture that exists just below the slick veneer of our fair city - a culture that, after months of preparation, I was finally ready to infiltrate. Today Ben was taking me to the source.

We followed an intricate maze of back alleys and side streets, and finally we came to the house. Out front, two street-wise hookers, cleverly disguised as ten-year-old girls, were skipping rope. Ben knocked, and the door was opened by a haggard old woman, ravaged by years of drug dependence. Ben delivered the ingeniously simple code:

"Hi, Mrs. Erchuck - is Scott home?"

headquarters: satanic rock music was blaring from the open front door, and two of the toughest looking bouncers that I've ever seen were pretending to play football in the front yard. After another intricate exchange of codes - gibberish like "go out and cut right - I'll nail you on the sideline" - we learned that Scott and Billy were in "the den."

It was a perfect set-up: with textbooks piled high on the desk, ragged-edged notebooks spilling onto the floor, any casual observer would have sworn that it was just a typical student's workplace, not a "den", as the two goons out front had so aptly put it.

Scott was in the last stages of dependence: spaghetti-like arms hung listlessly at his sides; his jaundiced eyes were clouded over;

peace sign, and said things like "gimme five, Clive," and "Where's it at, cat?"

Billy went to the kitchen and returned moments later with the stuff. Since marijuana looks and smells exactly like the common herb, heavy users always hide their supply in spice jars marked "oregano". Billy unscrewed the cap and poured the "hemp" out onto the table. I immediately produced my "works" - a kit containing rolling machine, strawberry-flavoured papers, tweezers and matches.

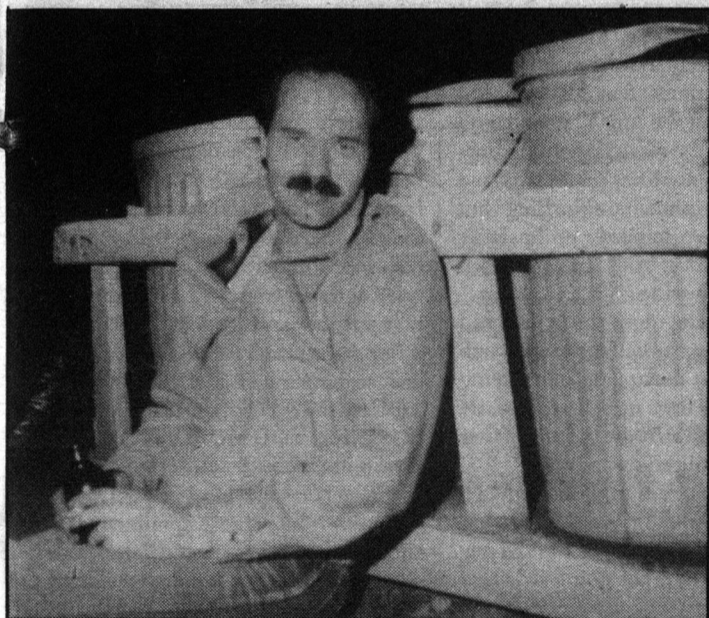
By now I was really caught up in the excitement - so much so that I even convinced myself that my duty as a hard-hitting news-hound would only be half fulfilled until I went all the way. My new-found friends introduced me to the most thrilling - and often fatal - method: the "ear-suck". I held the reefer against one ear while Ben put a funnel against my other ear and sucked through the narrow end.

Within seconds I was hallucinating. My high was infectious - before they even "toked up", the other three were rolling on the floor, gripped by convulsions of hysterical laughter. A "contact high" can be even more intoxicating than the actual chemical reaction to the drug, but it is always short-lived. Within minutes the others came down, and their stories began to unfold.

Billy told me of a user he knew who had experienced a "flashback" while talking to his high-school guidance counsellor - he was sent away to a nuthouse for life. Scott had done two years hard time - driven wild by the "munchies", he had held a seven-eleven clerk at gunpoint while he cleared an entire shelf of Dad's cookies.

The phone rang, and suddenly I realized that the first stage of dependence had overtaken me - paranoia. I was absolutely positive that it was my mother calling to check up on me. I was lucky - it was just a wrong number, but already, the second stage was creeping up on me. I had a nearly-irresistible urge to find out what heroin was like.

The others began to talk about "cramming" and "psych tests" - and I was sorely tempted to stay. *Someone*, however, had to get out alive and tell the story.



Fuzzy and fading: Ben the user after "earsucking"

She raised a knowing eyebrow, nodded down the street. No, he was at "Billy's". Our trek through the concrete jungle continued.

Now I was really beginning to sweat. Sure, I had the outfit - paisely shirt, bell-bottoms, peace medallion - and I had the lingo down pat, but there was still one big question mark. What if it came down to the ultimate test? What would I do if someone actually handed me a reefer? At this point, I really didn't know what I'd do.

But this was no time for doubts. I was already in over my head. The ramshackle three-story house before us was obviously the

his jaw hung slack; he hadn't shaved in hours. He explained that the bags under his eyes were the result of "cramming" all night. I shuddered at this reference to the addict's last resort - the only means of ingestion left once all the veins have collapsed.

Scott's gaze lingered for an eternity; I thought I was done for. At last Ben broke the silence and introduced me as his friend, the "narc" (street slang for narcotics addict). At once, all three - Scott, Billy, and Ben - exchanged knowing glances, and the ice was broken - I was in. They slapped me on the back - I flashed the

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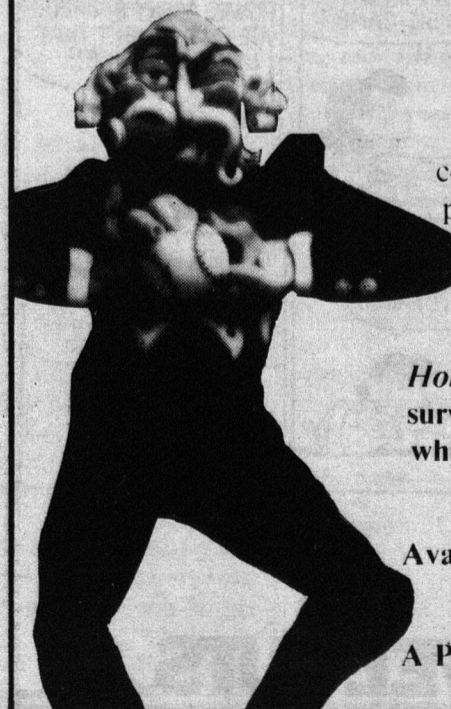
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