

Elegy for the Wood



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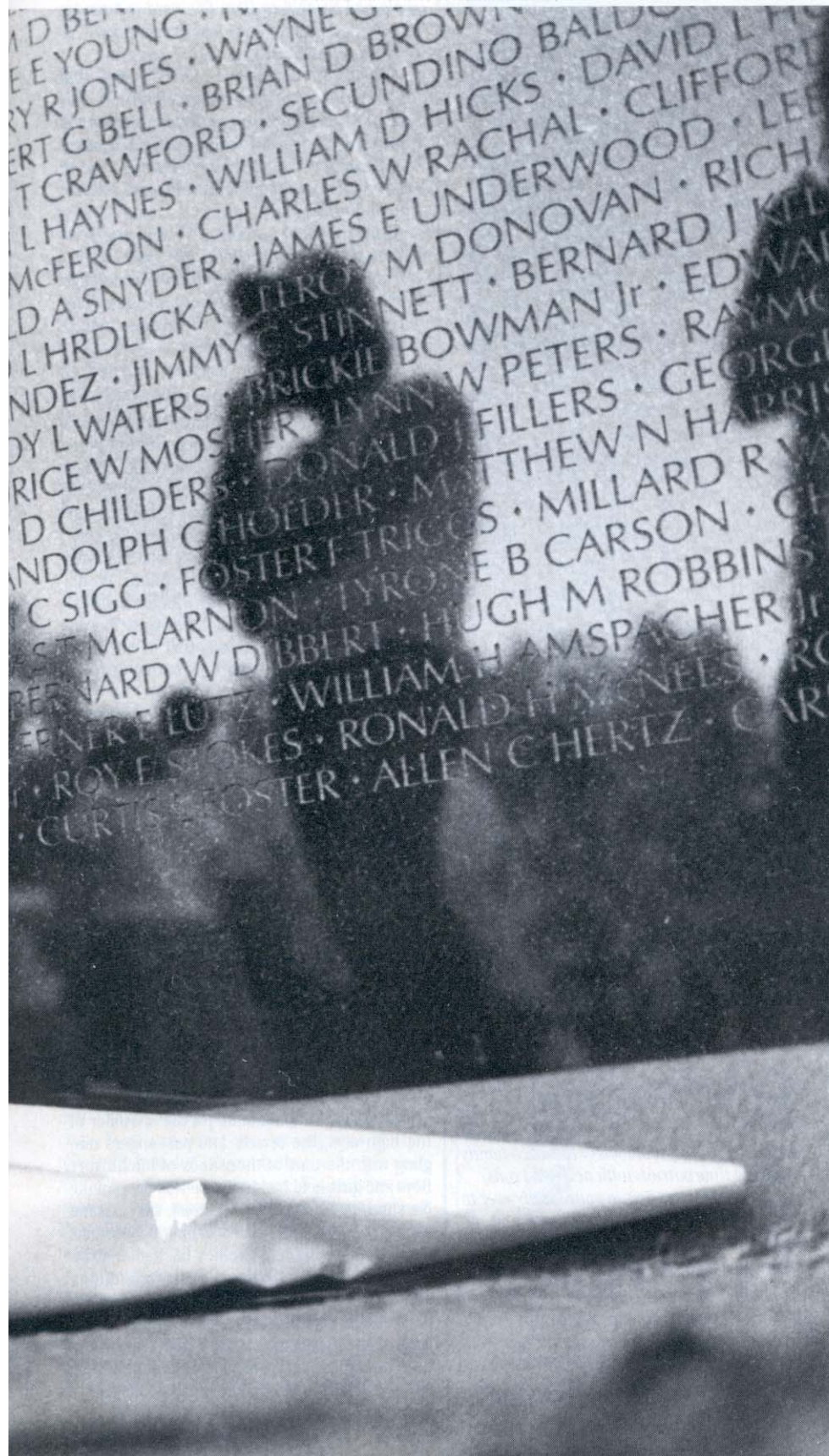
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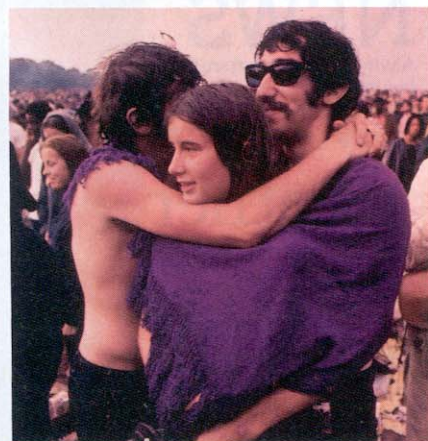
1975

stock Nation

BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTO BY MARTIN BENJAMIN; COLOR PHOTOS BY DAN MCCOY BLACKSTAR



*Memories from
that most
American summer.*



Left: The Vietnam Memorial (Washington, D.C.)

Inset, left: Joni Mitchell onstage at the Woodstock Festival

Above: At the festival, citizens of the Woodstock Nation

By Peter Golden

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair, an Aquarian Exposition, was supposed to happen in Wallkill. Woodstock, famous because Dylan hung out there, had been too small to fit the projected audience of 100,000. But Wallkill was perfect. Dozens of workers, hippies having a ball, were already building the stage and concession booths. Then the town board had a meeting. A farmer yelled out: "The first hippie that sets foot on my land I'm gonna shoot to kill." It was a popular sentiment. The board voted and the festival was run out of town.

Bummer.

Sound freaky? Not for 1969. Oh, wasn't that a time? Paranoia time. A pair of Kennedys and a King already gunned down. Find an inner city and I'll find you a fire. College curriculums include demonstrations—violent or nonviolent, depending on your major. Hard-hats and peace freaks rumble on Wall Street. Vietnam plays on TV every night, a mini-series without end. Walter Cronkite is the host: 71 U.S. casualties, 543 Communists, and You Are There. TV screens in quaint living rooms glow with napalm. And you can rise from the couch and touch the war with your hand.

You had to a) smoke a joint, b) do a bowl of hash or c) drop a hit of acid just to keep up with things. I mean, after watching the news you had to get stoned to get normal.

Sweet legacy.

For now, though, repeat after me: "Beam me up, Scottie," and we'll return to July 3, 1969. Woodstock was scheduled for August 15, 16 and 17, except now it was all dressed up with no place to go. The promoters frantically searched for a site. In White Lake, outside the town of

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Bethel, they turned on a road—named Happy Avenue—and discovered hundreds of acres of green virgin fields, a natural amphitheater with a plateau curving around it like bleachers. Grass rippled in gentle waves, breaking on a shoreline of gentler hills, and the border of great leafy trees could serve as an acoustical backdrop so the music wouldn't fade in the wind. Route 17 was only a mile away.

Here was Nirvana.

The land belonged to 50-year-old Max Yasgur, owner of Yasgur's Dairy, where, as Max liked to say, they sold the "Cadillac of milks." Initially, when contacted by a real estate broker, Max refused; his workers were cutting hay. The next morning the broker phoned and said it was those kids who wanted it, the ones who'd been kicked out of Wallkill. That information did the trick for Yasgur, always a champion of lost causes.

Michael Lang was executive producer of the festival. His vision of Woodstock dated back to an acid trip he took in 1967. He saw a nation free from war and racism, where drugs, rock music and toys floated through the air like angels. Now, dressed in bell-bottoms and a leather vest without a shirt, his long curly hair tumbling in his eyes, he met Max and immediately figured the farmer for the sharpest of the sharp. Lang was a good judge of character. Max said he wanted to help, but didn't want to lose his hay crop. Lang offered to pay him for it and Max named his price: \$50,000. Max also wanted his land returned in mint condition and had Lang promise to deposit an additional \$75,000 in an escrow account in case of damages. They shook hands and Max walked off. Smiling. Lang stared at his palm, shocked. Max only had three fingers on his right hand. And Lang, a hip New York City boy with back-to-nature dreams, knew nothing about farm machinery. Still, he was excited. His Woodstock Nation would happen. Every madness would end.

Of course, it didn't work out that way. What dream ever makes it through the night? Other people were busy living other lives halfway around the world, on the flip side of Woodstock, in the jungle home of the tiger and the cobra: Vietnam.

You thought you were slick, all right. Dropped out of that redneck college in Florida and came back to Jersey. Your old man didn't think it was so cool. "You wanna hang around Newark the resta your life? Work construction like me till you piss blood?"

Mom cooked. And cried. And wouldn't let the old man watch the news in the kitchen. Boys dying on the tube blew her mind. Freaked you out too. You'd known them at Vailsburg High: Jimmy Covello, Frankie Smith—they'd hang out in Auto Shop—and walking through the neighborhood you noticed how their folks had pasted gold stars in the sooty windows of their two-family houses. Old-time patriots with new dead sons.

Sure, you were the first in your family ever to go to college. But you were a fullback and the coach switched you to tackle. You quit. Screw the scholarship. That fat redneck didn't know squat.

"Vietnam's the prime-time show America's not ready for," Deborah had said. She'd been the one decent thing about college. A Jewish girl from Queens. Studying oceanography. Smart. Pretty. With auburn hair spilling down like a silken cape

and blue-green eyes and you hated thinking about her now because it felt so lonely.

Driving to the Keys in her MG you swapped childhoods, laughed and baked in the sun. Deborah laughed again at the motel since you, big football jock, froze when the clerk asked if you wanted a single or double and Deborah had to answer. Then you lost your wallet and muttered, "Saint Anthony, Saint Anthony, please come around," and found it in the car and explained Saint A to Deb. She used it later, on the Coppertone, but no dice, you thought, because she was Jewish.

At night, you considered yourself such a stud, but Deborah taught you a thing or two, mostly that love was no joke, and afterwards when the world rested and sighed, you said something about checking out Vietnam, and, figuring you were kidding, she replied, "It's too dangerous. Better wait for the movie."

Now, stretched on your bed, wearing your Vailsburg letter jacket, Mom calls you to dinner. The old man's taken his portable on the porch to watch the news. You stare at the ceiling, the image of Deborah chasing a Frisbee on the beach blinking behind your eyes like tears.

REALITY IS INFAMOUS FOR INTRUDING ON dreams. Max Yasgur was so upset with the construction on his land, the damage to the grass and trees, he was compelled to empty the \$75,000 escrow account. Next, just a couple of days before the festival began, the chief concessionaire, Jeff Joerger, in charge of the operation Food for Love, informed the promoters he was bummed about his deal. He didn't want to split his profits with them. Lang argued, but Joerger held the aces. No 100 percent, no food, and therefore no festival. Joerger won, proving that of the many practices that survived the '60s, strong-arm capitalism was one.

Now, everything was set. Sanitation facilities, water supply, motel rooms for the performers, the wide wooden stage, sound systems, doctors, nurses and aid stations, even security drawn from off-duty NYPD cops. (The cops had been interviewed at a City College assembly hall. They were hired depending on their responses to such questions as "What would you do if a hippie called you 'Pig'?" If the applicant replied, "Kill the bastard!" he was rejected. If he said, "Shake his hand," or "Give her a kiss," he got the gig. Although Commissioner Howard Leary had forbidden his cops to work the festival, many defied his edict. What a trip! Pigs for Peace.)

By Thursday, August 14, the roads leading to Bethel were jammed, traffic stretching for 11 miles, four cars deep. Vans blaring Jefferson Airplane, ancient hearses painted with lush swirls of Day-Glo paint abandoned on the shoulder of the highways, the drivers and passengers mingling with the tens of thousands of hitchhikers. Boys and girls held hands. There was no honking. No shouting. No shoving. Instead, they passed wineskins, and joints rolled in pink peppermint paper. As evening fell, fireflies flashed and the march continued. Hippies, their belongings strapped on their backs, or even balanced on their heads, paraded through the tumbling twilight, slogging past the stalled traffic, resembling the Vietnamese refugees who abandoned their villages, relocating to another part of the war.

It was time for Woodstock. Don't trust anyone over 30. Grab an oh-zee of grass and your guitar, don't forget your mantra. Welcome to our Nation. It's a drag some of you must miss the show.

Again, my friend, you were too slick for words. Pulled number 5 in the draft lottery. But before the Army could make a man out of you, you enlisted in the Air Force. Became an APe (Air Police) and got assigned to McGuire right in Jersey, only an hour or so from Atlantic City and Asbury Park, a couple of hours from home, and a sweet 10,000 miles from Vietnam. Slick; you were made in the shade.

Then one night some drunk was driving a jeep along the barracks streets and smacked into a stop sign. The jeep stalled and you double-timed it over from the duty shack. The driver was a sergeant, some old burnt-out lifer, mean and skinny as a snake.

"Little trouble?" you asked, smiling, friendly.

"Get f---ed," he said, trying to turn over the engine.

"Be cool," you said, gently taking his hand from the ignition.

He swung at you, missed, and toppled from the jeep. He struggled up and said drunkenly, "APes worse'n f---in' cops." He asked your name, you told him. He staggered off. Singing. You didn't know the song.

In January, you got called to Personnel. There he was, the sergeant, Sgt. Riker. He was a pal now, thanked you for saving his butt. Then he laid the good news on you. He had a Temporary Duty (TDY) assignment at Hickam Field in Hawaii. With a permanent reassign 90 days later. He knew you were good. Didja want it?

Damn straight. Cold, gray New Jersey was kicking your ass. You hadn't written Deb in months. And you'd always dug From Here to Eternity. You'd be Burt Lancaster on the moonlit beach with any chick you wanted.

In Honolulu, hula girls draped leis around your neck. You guarded hangars, watched coconuts grow in the palms. You swam, even surfed, at Waikiki, worked on your tan. Then your orders came. Signed by Riker and a captain you never met. Your permanent reassignment: Da Nang, the Republic of Vietnam.

Riker got you, man. By the shortest of hairs.

AT 7 A.M. ON FRIDAY, AUGUST 15, WITH FOG rolling across the festival, Governor Nelson Rockefeller declared White Lake to be in a state of emergency. The 200,000 concertgoers were sleeping everywhere: in the woods, on the highways on top of cars or under buses. The great wooden stage was a tiny island in the human sea. Couples skinny-dipped in streams, made love in the field, smoked half of Mexico's leading cash crop. Food and water was already scarce, the toilets too crowded to even bother waiting in line. And it was now a free concert. There were not enough ticket-takers and the kids kept coming. The promoters would lose well over a million bucks.

Things were not quite as far out as planned. None of the performers wanted to open the show. The size of the crowd freaked them out. Some hadn't been able to navigate through the traffic and had to be flown in by helicopter. Richie Havens finally volunteered to open, and at 5:07 p.m.,

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only a little over an hour late, John Morris, the emcee, stepped onto the stage and said, "Let's welcome Mr. Richie Havens," and a nation was born.

So we were in the field, a quarter of a million of us, cheering, twirling tie-dyed T-shirts like flags of honor and singing—heads, hips, hair, arms, legs, breasts moving to music. Bonfires were built and the Stars and Stripes were tossed in, along with photographs of President Richard Nixon and Vice-President Spiro Agnew.

"Give that fire something to burn about," we laughed, and oh, how it burned.

"Gimme an F!" Country Joe shouted, and 250,000 voices gave it to him. "Gimme a U! Gimme a C! Gimme a K! What's that spell?"

We all knew and repeated it thrice. When Country Joe sang the chorus the crowd rejoiced:

"And it's one, two, three, what are we fightin' for?"

"Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,

"Next stop is Vietnam . . ."

Sing and entice, the Angel of Peace to earth. Unfortunately, for some, the war went on. If only they could've been among our number.

You're in triple-canopy jungle, guarding runways in the boonies so the Caribous can land and resupply the grunt companies. Not a bad gig, you figure. Until the dinks start with their mortars. A faraway, airy, coughing sound. Lightning flashes followed by explosions and you trying to crawl into the earth with your a-hole puckered and illumine flares turning night into noon and beaucoup incoming pounding the mud and you

vomiting your C-rat of franks and beans and too scared to flinch, so your face stays in the vomit. Later, the lieutenant says to you, "There it is, Breeze. Ya got your cherry busted."

Yes, you did. It hurt.

DAY 2, AUGUST 16, FOUND SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 400,000 and 500,000 folks sprawled across Yasgur's farm. The music resumed at noon: Santana. The Grateful Dead. Canned Heat. Sly and the Family Stone. The Who. Some of the group managers, when they heard the promoters were losing their shirts, demanded payment up front before their clients would perform. Janis Joplin had other problems. She was so intimidated by the size of the audience that she drowned her voice with whiskey, stumbled around the stage making the best of her bluesy whine. Meanwhile, hippies, stoned-stupid, wandered through the fields, selling drugs like popcorn.

"Get the best hash in America. Straight from Lebanon."

Woodstock was an herbal and pharmaceutical bazaar: We could swallow Purple Haze, the colors shooting across our eyes like the tracer rounds on Cronkite. Or inhale bitter speedy crystals until the blood pounded at our temples and we thought we could hear the whap-whap of choppers and the splash of grunts firing their 16s and hauling ass through a rice paddy. "Don't bogart that joint my friend/Pass it over to me." And if the kid doing the passing was a 20-year-old vet with century-old eyes, we were sampling a taste straight from the land of the Vietcong.

"Doin' the dew," the grunts called it, and the smoke was harsher than a dragon's breath, burned across your brain like napalm.

But then what would you expect from half a million kids who grew up on TV: All you have to do is smoke it, snort it or drop it, then kick back and watch the show inside your head. Easier than punching buttons on the next generation's cable box, better than MTV.

Yet all dreams were not pleasant on Dream Street. The bummer tents and aid stations were full. Bad trips, kids shrieking, somebody accidentally run over by a tractor while sleeping and dying before he could reach the hospital. Somebody else dying of a heroin overdose. Nightmare visions as terrifying as the real world.

You are dreaming of the Keys when the dinks hit the firebase. Small-arms fire, flares and grenades erupt in the darkness and you empty your 16 at the perimeter. Nearby, some kid from 3d Plt with a belly wound tries to shove his intestines back in, the slimy tubes snaking through his fingers and him screaming for his mother. Even after Doc zaps him with morphine he's still screaming for his mother. You want to shoot him. After the dinks split, it's quiet. The kid dies before the Medevacs come. "Don't mean nothin'," Doc says, but from that moment on, you are afraid to dream.

"GOOD MORNING," GRACIE SLICK SAID. "IT'S a new dawn."

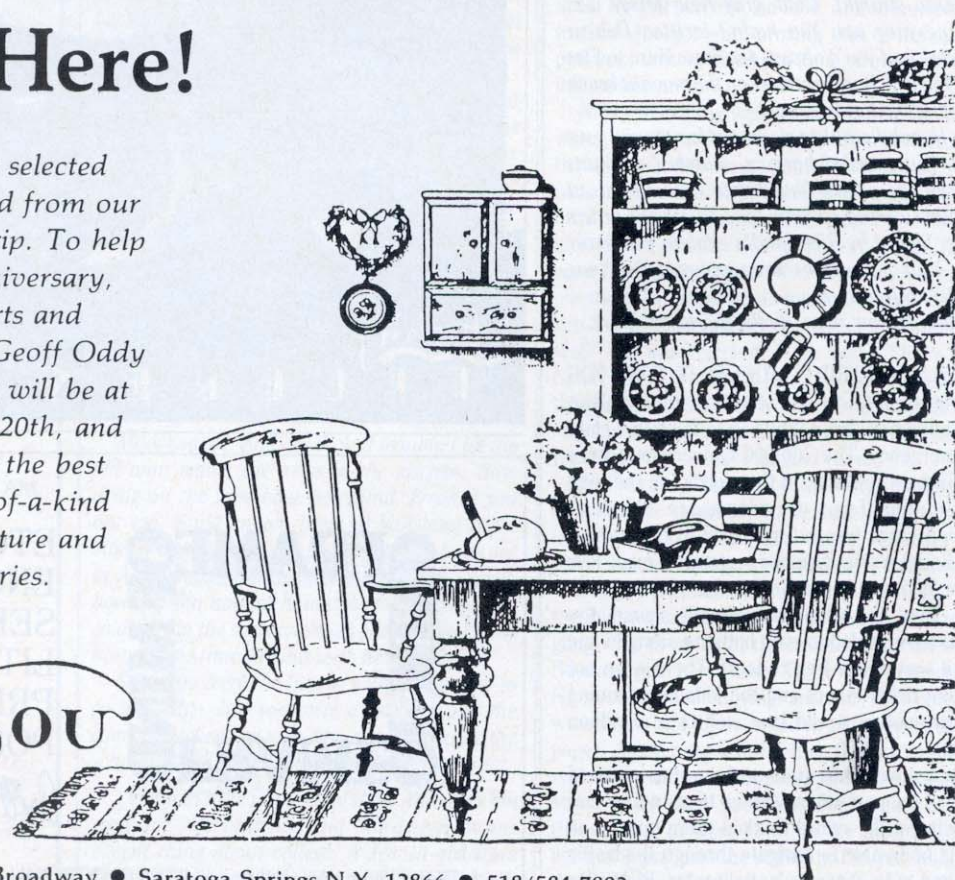
And it was. Day 3, August 17, and Jefferson Airplane roared into its act. It began to rain, hippies sliding and laughing in the mud. There was

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hardly any drinking water and less food than Biafra. But they endured. Joe Cocker performed, got high with a little help from his friends. Max Yasgur, tears brimming in his eyes, took the stage and said, "I think you people have proven something to the world. That a half a million kids can get together and have three days of fun and music and have nothing but fun and music. And I God-bless you for it!"

Soon, Alvin Lee and Ten Years After charged up the crowd, but even hippies can get enough. Tired, muddy, hungry, thirsty, they began to split. The Band played, followed by Blood, Sweat and Tears. Johnny Winter and Sha Na Na. Finally, Jimi Hendrix, and his lunar version of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Less than 30,000 of the Woodstock Nation remained. The others trudged through the rain, searching for a way home and disappearing in the mist, the final notes echoing across the farm.

You're reading Playboy, a sniper fires and you roll in the mud, swallowing a scream. In no time, a dressing binds your waist, morphine sloshes through your veins like sunlight, and the Medevac chopper drops you at Quang Tri for surgery. That's how it is in a modern army with all the conveniences. Everyone's telling you your war is over; the million-dollar wound, my man. They fly you to Japan and finally, God bless America, to the VA in East Orange, New Jersey.

They have trouble controlling your temp. Peritonitis, a doctor says. Mom comes with her veal and peppers. The inside of your chest feels scorched and you're too tired to breathe. You'd have thought it was sleep except you saw dudes go out like that. You know you're history, see mom crying, your old man chewing a dead cigar, and through the drug-dreams, Deborah prancing across the floury sand, baby oil shimmering on her sleek brown skin, her hand stretching for the Frisbee as it sails beyond her reach, and beyond yours.

Forever.

JONI MITCHELL, ETHEREAL SONGSTRESS, looked over the human fields of Woodstock, and composed its anthem: "We are stardust/We are golden/And we've got to get ourselves/Back to the garden." The clouds must have parted then, the sun slashing across Yasgur's farm like salvation, brightening that briefest of moments when a generation swayed to its shining musical dream. It would be finished soon enough, the Nation banished to the past, impossible to resurrect, as haunting and elusive as the ghosts of Camelot.

Lucky you, slick. You're gone and forgotten. Government said you didn't die in combat and left you off the wall. Your friend, the quarterback who handed off to you in high school, who stayed in college, maybe because he was scared or because that's what his folks told him to do, or because he wanted to be a writer, went to D.C. last spring. He saw how they had, at last, added your name, but he didn't feel as if you'd come home. He faced his guilty reflection in the glimmering black wall, thought about you, how he'd put you in a book the way he'd promised. Saved your life the best he could. Then, slowly, he rested his forehead against your name and wept. □

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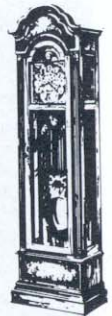
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