

*Harlan Yarbrough*  
**Different**

**N**ot the only one in the valley who didn't smoke dope, Ross was one of only four under the age of seventy who didn't—and two of the others were hard-core alcoholics. Ross didn't drink, either, when he first came to the valley, but fifteen years later he would occasionally drink a beer or a glass of someone's homemade wine. Ross didn't care for the loud electric music most of the denizens of this usually quiet and peaceful valley seemed to favor, although he was too polite to say so in ordinary circumstances.

Because Ross didn't smoke dope, many of his neighbors thought of him as "straight"—a word that has taken on an entirely different meaning in the ensuing years. Although straight in the modern sense, he was far from straight in the way his neighbors used the term—he distrusted and subverted the establishment as much as any of them and more than most. So, was Ross a hippie, like his neighbors? He was—and still is, bless his heart—a radical. If being a hippie means smoking dope, then Ross wasn't one then and isn't one now. If being a hippie means living an alternative lifestyle, then Ross emphatically was one and continues to be one. Does it matter? Probably not. He is who he is. He didn't fit comfortably into mainstream society, but he didn't fit comfortably into the counter-culture of the Valley he had adopted as his home either.

Most of Ross's former neighbors respect him, if they think of him at all, but remember him as "that straight guy" who played music and built the house on that land by the corner of Squire Creek Road. Few stay in touch with him, but all are glad to enjoy his music when he visits the valley every five or six years.

In the early '70s, surviving his late teens, Ross began to feel something was terribly wrong with his native land. Racism, sexism, plutocracy—these were all part of whatever afflicted the country, but there was more. Desperation, financial and otherwise, seemed to be driving people to superstition, religious and otherwise. Voters elected politicians opposed to those very voters' interests. The country seemed to be losing touch with reality, sinking into a kind of collective insanity. The problems, and Ross's uneasiness, grew as the late '70s decayed into the '80s.

By the middle of the new decade, Ross hardly toured in the United States, booking almost all his gigs overseas. From when he began touring overseas a dozen years earlier, Ross found Europe too crowded and polluted. He continued his lucrative tours there, because he needed the money, but began booking tours in Japan (even more crowded!), Australasia, and even a few in Latin America. Ross's months in Australia in two successive years convinced him he could enjoy living there. The election of Ronald Reagan made that seem a good idea. Even so, he felt uncomfortable about moving away from his many friends in North America—and recoiled at the thought of more than doubling the travel time to his European tours.

Ross never liked travelling, much preferred to stay home, but accepted travel as the price of making a good living doing what he enjoyed. Even

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so, he looked for ways to get out of the music industry. In one attempt, he ran the local library for as long as he could stand the internal politics of the county-wide library system. In another, he taught mathematics at the local community college, until he got sick of never knowing whether he had a job until after each term had already started.

Another attempt led Ross to work with a forestry workers' cooperative some of his neighbors had established. His knowledge of the local flora enabled him to work on a team doing "stand exams" on contract for the U. S. Forest Service. He worked with neighbors, who were also friends, for six weeks, and made as much as he would have made doing three concerts—but he enjoyed the work and liked never having to be more than forty miles from home.

A problem arose when Ross received his paycheck from the co-op and found the amount short by ten per cent. When he inquired about the discrepancy, other members told him the co-op put ten per cent of everyone's pay into a community fund. Ross liked the idea of putting funds into the community but thought they should have mentioned the deduction in advance. Still, he felt quite content to accept the situation—until he found out what the co-op intended to do with the money.

Ross knew the community held a huge party near the end of every summer, with a loud rock band and plentiful drugs. He had no interest in the drugs, of course, and didn't like the way the electric instruments assaulted his ears. Ross attended the annual party, briefly, once, in his second year in the valley and never bothered to go again. When he learned that the deduction from his pay funded the party, he felt ripped-off. When he told other co-op members about his objections, his erstwhile colleagues became defensive. When he mentioned to some of his neighbours his feeling of being ripped-off, the neighbors dismissed his concerns. The issue drove a wedge between Ross and some of his friends and diminished his feeling of connection with the community where he lived.

The 1988 election convinced Ross he did not belong in the United States. That 48,886,097 adult Americans voted for a former CIA operative and Director confirmed that the land of Ross's birth was no longer the country he had known, no longer his home. He therefore told his agent to book an extended tour of Australia as soon as possible, which, because of prior commitments, meant twenty months later.

Most of Ross's neighbours had no idea that his background included a degree from the nation's (and the world's) top science university. He didn't brag about his accomplishments and hadn't made much use of the degree he'd spent five years earning. In the course of his Australian tour, however, Ross found that Australian states' education officials became quite excited about his degree coupled with his interest in teaching in their schools. The education authorities grew even more excited, when they learned Ross was willing—even eager—to teach in a remote rural community. Before he performed his last show, in Cairns, all three of the country's eastern states had offered him teaching jobs with his choice of location.

All three wanted him immediately but expressed willingness to take him on at the beginning of the new year. Because of contractual obli-

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gations in the U.S., Ross knew he could not move to Australia before January. He spent two full months deliberating: he liked the climate in Queensland but had more friends in Victoria—New South Wales held no appeal for him. In the end, financial considerations (being closer to the larger entertainment market of Melbourne), led Ross to accept a position teaching physics and mathematics at Bacchus Marsh High School in Victoria.

Ross liked Bacchus Marsh, about half the size of Grants Pass, the nearest city to his home in Oregon, although at first he lamented not knowing any musicians in the immediate area. His musical contacts in Melbourne made up for that. Ross could get to Melbourne in under an hour and to Melbourne's airport at Tullamarine in forty-five minutes. After school on a Friday afternoon, he could check in at the airport before five o'clock and be in any of the Australian state capitals except Perth in time to perform a concert that same evening. One weekend, late in his first year as an Australian resident, he even managed to do a concert in Brisbane on a Friday night and one in Cairns on the Saturday night and still front up for class Monday morning. Often, Ross earned more on his weekends than he did in the course of his week in school.

None of Ross's students and no one else in Bacchus Marsh knew anything about his weekend gigs until the latter part of that first year. Late in the last class of a Monday morning, one of his students asked, "What did you do on the weekend, sir?"

Aware the class would not accomplish much more in that period, Ross replied, "I flew to Perth after school Friday and played a concert Saturday night."

Several of the boys laughed, and one said, "Bullshit!"

"Keep that language outside this classroom, thank you, Neville," Ross said with a schoolmaster's stern demeanor.

Other boys and some of the girls called out to their teacher, saying such things as, "But you didn't really do that, did you, sir?"

Before Ross could answer their questions, the bell rang for lunch, and the class streamed out. Word spread over lunchtime, and the students in Ross's afternoon classes peppered him with questions. He responded by telling them, "I'm not answering any of those questions until you get your work done, so get to it."

Partly because of Ross's "cool" American accent and partly because they recognized he genuinely respected them and liked almost all of them, most of Ross's students liked him in return and behaved well for him. That week proved more of a trial than most, until he said at last to each of his classes, "OK, if you have all your work done before the last week of the school year, I'll bring in some of my instruments and play them for you."

That promise seemed to satisfy Ross's students, and they worked at least as well as they had before they learned of his other occupation. By the last week of the school year, all but one or two students in each class had covered all the assigned material—and in two classes all had. As promised, he brought four instruments to school on the last full day and played a few tunes for each of his classes. Carefully supervising, he even

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let some of the students hold the instruments and play—or attempt to play—a little themselves. Some seemed disappointed Mr. Jacks didn't play the popular tunes of the day, a few seemed impressed, but all seemed pleased not to have to do the usual schoolwork. The year ended on a positive note.

Over the next two days, Ross flew to Amsterdam and did a concert there before spending four days with a friend in Delft. Ross had wanted a more intimate relationship with Jeske ever since he'd met her. She seemed to want that, too, but she had a "sort of" commitment to a "sort of" boyfriend that left her uncomfortable about sharing an intimate physical relationship with anyone else. Jeske and Ross felt great fondness for each other, though, and they enjoyed an affectionate friendship.

Shows in Stockholm, Oslo, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Zurich, and Milan consumed the next three weeks, and, after two more days with Jeske, Ross flew back to Victoria in mid-January. Two days getting settled back into life in Bacchus Marsh yielded to three days of music with friends in Melbourne—no gigs, but many hours of jamming for fun. Although Ross usually played Swing or Western Swing, one of the Melbourne sessions—which ended up lasting eight hours and then resumed the next day—involved traditional Irish music, which Ross could play, some, and also enjoyed.

In the course of the Irish session(s), Ross learned five new tunes and became re-acquainted with eight others he had sort-of learned in other sessions. He also became re-acquainted with Marie Murray, a teacher from Castlemaine who played the flute and made traditional Irish dancing look sexy, whom he had met at a festival the previous year. Two years older than Ross but looking ten years younger, Marie appealed to Ross on many levels. The attraction was mutual, and she invited him to visit her in Castlemaine at his earliest opportunity. He spent most of the next week there with her and, in their brief times out of bed, learned three new Irish tunes from her.

Their enjoyment of their carnal and musical time together led them to repeat their tryst as often as their schedules allowed. In practical terms, that meant they spent two or three weekends a month together. Marie travelled to Ross's gigs with him or rendezvoused with him, when traveling together proved impractical, as often as she could. Excepting report-writing weeks and weeks with out-of-state gigs, Marie drove to Bacchus Marsh or Ross slipped away to Castlemaine almost every weekend.

With only a few exceptions, their relationship seemed free of obstacles and impedimenta. Marie shared Ross's lack of patience with religious beliefs, shared his progressive political outlook on social issues, shared his revulsion toward tobacco smoke. She didn't understand and felt uncomfortable with his vegetarianism but shared his aversion to the drug culture. Marie did not share Ross's progressive political outlook on economic issues. Ross accepted her omnivorous diet but felt bad that she disliked his vegetarian one. He also felt bad that she seemed unable to understand or accept his progressive economics.

Marie shared Ross's rejection of mainstream commercial music. She did not share his broader rejection of mainstream culture. She liked his

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articulate conversation; she disliked his enthusiasm for physics and mathematics. She felt attracted to his showman's charisma, but—despite his faithfulness and devotion—she resented that other women felt attracted to him, too. Not recognizing the innocence of both parties, Marie felt threatened by Ross's friendship with her teenage daughter.

"You can only have one girlfriend," Marie shouted. "If Evelyn's your girlfriend, then I'm not."

"But Evelyn isn't my girlfriend. You are. She's the same age as some of my students, f'r crissake! She's your daughter and my frie—"

"You dedicated a song to her, when you did that concert in Bendigo."

"And I dedicated two to you. For that matter, I dedicated one to Danny Spooner—do you think he's my boyfriend?"

Sometimes, Ross succeeded in mollifying Marie. Other times, he ended up driving back to Bacchus Marsh or she to Castlemaine. The repeated blowups and Marie's ongoing criticism of what she called his "insistence on being so bloody different" wore Ross down, left him feeling stressed even on the rare days when school did not. Having spent eighteen months in Bacchus Marsh without meeting any like-minded friends didn't help.

In October of Ross's second year at Bacchus Marsh High School, after a particularly vitriolic tirade from Marie, he gave the principal two months notice and contacted the Queensland education authorities about a job on the Atherton Tablelands. That weekend, he drove to Castlemaine and told Marie he couldn't endure the pain and stress of her attacks. She apologized and they enjoyed twenty-four blissful hours. When he told her he had resigned, she blew up all over again and sent him packing.

Evelyn wept, when she learned Ross intended to leave the state. She rang twice to beg him to stay and four more times to beg him to take her with him. Although sorely tempted, Ross declined and left Victoria and Bacchus Marsh as he had arrived, alone.