



Robert Plant, the golden god, has hay fever.

Either sinus feels like a tea kettle erupting -- the heat and dust of the Central Valley are like flares being shot off into his nostrils.

Even with the windows in the rental car sealed, those vicious bastard particles plunge deep into his wooly head and start raping the membranes. Snot flows like magma. His eyes look like stigmata, or at least nasty open paper cuts, as he parks the Chrysler LeBaron in the parking lot of the Ceres Holiday Inn Express. He flew all night to land in San Francisco a little past day-break, then drove straight, stopping once to shove scrambled eggs around in some blank rock-tour restaurant.

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During the drive, he listened to a Calypso CD he just picked up -- old Mighty Sparrow stuff. He's careful to avoid the radio these days. In flipping through the stations, he risks a hall of mirrors effect; certain three-note snippets are enough to send his face into a scarlet burn.

Fuck the Sun, he says. Fuck the heat of the shitty, productive, agricultural Central California sun. It's so unlike the Santa Barbara, Malibu cocaine fried egg sun of his first set down in

California, so eager to please the skin with a tattoo of warmth. 1970? '71? Anyway, it was before Big Log, before Honey Drippers, before rediscovering the more elusive pleasures of tannic acid and fine bone.

His curly hair looks like spun polyester as it catches that late-morning sun. At his age, this hair looks stupid, like a hopelessly dim waitress in some wretched beach egg house in Orange County. It's now clear the dignity in old age that he had hoped for even as he mainlined Southern Comfort, post-orgy, is now permanently hamstrung by the bane of Bozo hair. Maybe he'll go crew cut like Picasso.

He lurches through the tarry parking lot, looking at the flat stinking fields, clutching an overnight bag. The AC slaps him as he steps into the stucco lobby.

At the counter: "Errr...hullo. The name is Ron Head." His assistant books him under "Ron Head". He's not fooling anyone, of course, when he pulls out the AMEX black card with his name embossed on it: R. Plant.

Using only the first initial is, of course, a lame play for anonymity. He's fucking Robert Plant, all right. He can't even wear fucking sunglasses, because it will just make him look even more like Robert Plant.

More than once, someone on the Ceres Holiday Inn Express staff has offered him weed, an offer to "party", and most embarrassingly, a halting request to go "bro out" in downtown Manteca made by a shivering teenage bellhop. (He's often wondered: what is it about Zep that attracts sallow teens with wispy man-boy moustaches? Did they not see we were fucking serious as cancer, working our fucking asses off like men? We hung out with BRITT FUCKING ECKLUND.)

The pose is of course a formality now, just a fillip to his celebrity and the general lack of celebrity in these parts. Hotels are the portals by which men and rock stars mingle, and tradition dictates that name of the Rock Star remains unspoken, even if the town population couldn't muster up a good crowd for John Philip Sousa under the band shell, much less work itself into a true locust frenzy. Anyway, the town tends toward older farmers and migrant workers. Not the Zep demographic.

The manager was expecting him, and in lieu of a penthouse, she offers up a room overlooking a tepid willow and the shaded west-facing parking lot. She also arranges for a selection of magazines chosen at random from the local 7-11 to be fanned across his bed to greet him when he arrive, AC blasting.

He enters the room, throws his bag down, and turns on the TV. He immediately gets the chills.

His daughter, Rachel, is working a half-day today, as she does every time he visits. She's a large-animal vet with a successful practice here in the Central Valley. He's proud of her, and after bloody-well paying for her stay at UC Davis, he has every right to be. Of course, raising her wasn't something he took an enormous role in, other than the steady infusion of cash and

an occasional discreet side trips on tour and incognito vacations in secluded bungalows in one of the tax-shelter republics that bead the azure waters of the world.

Rachel's mother was always friendly in person, but she always firm, even bloody minded, about his obligations.

She had been a light during a particularly dark night in Denver, the night Bonham took an axe to a local herbalist's prized signed baseball bat. Bonham's rages sometimes fucked up the band's social plans and medicinal procurements to no end. Of course, plans never fell through, they just got more expensive. Rachel's mother waited outside the bus, like they all did, but the way she spoke to him managed cut enough through the murk of violence that hung over the hotel that night that he still could remember their conversation with some clarity decades later.

A year later, a friendly personal letter, a photo, a detailed budgetary plan (focused, impressively, entirely on the comfort and future of the newly born daughter) and a shorter, less friendly missive on the letterhead of a law firm that his solicitor assured him was not to be trifled with.

His money paid for braces, horse lessons, clothes, college, and the establishment of a veterinary clinic. Now it pays for the yearly weekend in the Central Valley, to visit his secret grandkids, barbecue with the secret son in-law and go water-skiing. But, fuck, his sinuses pay for it, every bloody time.

More fiction by Greg Mills can be read at [The Bastard of Art and Commerce](#) .