

them, wandering around like zombies in these so-called areas of free expression.”

“I was in the New York Zone the other day on an eight-hour tourist pass,” said Wordman. “It was sickening.”

“Didn’t care for the stench, eh?”

“Actually, it was the noise that got me. All that banging around on drums and guitars.”

“I know, the last gasp of the commie-hippie-flower child movement. How did it feel, by the way, checking your cell phone at the door?”

“Like I was naked, on a raft in the middle of a putrid sea...”

“Nice image, Wordman—very evocative. Remember, people, no recording or picture-taking or broadcasting is allowed in the Zone. We don’t want any of that filth seeping out and polluting us ordinary folk.”

“What happens in the Zone stays in the Zone. Isn’t that right, Brash?”

“That’s right—and I’m sure you prefer it that way, Wordman. Anyway, I bring all of this up because it was announced this very morning that Maxwell Fish—do you remember him?”

“You’re referring to Benedict Arnold Fish?”

“One and the same. According to the Associated Press, Mr. Maxwell ‘I-am-Not-a-Foreign-Agent’ Fish is going to have his house arrest status lifted for two hours, and two hours only to—get this—deliver a speech!”

“Hasn’t he done enough talking? I thought that’s what got him into trouble in the first place.”

“Apparently not. According to the AP, the government is letting him give this address in order to establish legally that they are not infringing on his right to free speech, as a presidential candidate. He’s going to give it on September eleventh, no less. But here’s the good part: Guess where he’s delivering his remarks?”

“Umm...surprise me.”

“In the New York Urban Zone, that’s where! So at least we’ll be spared the spectacle of watching Fish run his mouth off on television.”

“What happens in the Zone stays in the Zone.”

“I think you just said that, Wordman. Is there an echo in here?”

Anyway, I've got another news flash for you—and this one I know you're going to like. It was leaked directly from Republican campaign headquarters. Rumor has it that President Acton—

“You mean presidential candidate, Brash. He hasn't actually been elected yet, has he?”

“Not yet, Wordman, not yet—but he will be, don't worry your pretty head about that. Anyway, word on the street is that *Vice* President Acton, in preparation for the day when he assumes the top office, is drawing up plans to get rid of the UZ once and for all. He's gonna shut down the Zones—gonna empty 'em out at the point of a gun, if need be. Then he's gonna bring a suit to the Supreme Court to force state-wide re-votes that will allow California and the others to reabsorb our ten extra city-states, so-called, and restore our flag to the fifty stars and thirteen stripes that God intended for it to have!”

“Wow—I can't wait!”

“Neither can I, Wordman. At this particular moment, however, I'm afraid that our voyage to return America to its proper glory must take a short detour to the land of our sponsors, who have some important information of their own to share with all you loyal listeners out there.”

“The Stars and Stripes, and our sponsors, forever!”

“Well said, Wordman, well said....”



As the Kidz' limousine drove off, Blake heard a raucous banging sound approaching from the opposite direction. Looking east on Sunset, he saw a pickup truck moving slowly down the boulevard. A group of middle-aged men and women in bright tie-died T-shirts were sitting in the back, singing some indecipherable song about universal oneness as they pounded on tambourines, triangles, bongos and assorted other percussion instruments.

The truck halted directly in front of the hotel, and one of the people in the back stood and faced the crowded sidewalk. “Music festival at the Cheatau, seven o'clock!” he announced. “Everybody's welcome—punk rockers included!”

At this, his companions on the truck bed roared with laughter. He

sat down again, and a woman and man stood up with acoustic guitars around their necks. Nodding at each other, they strummed a few brisk bars and began singing in two-part harmony.

*Ain't it great to be in the UZ—nowhere to go, no one to see,
I'm heading down the road to UZFest, won't you come with me?*

Their companions shouted approval, and there was a smattering of applause and cheers from the crowd on the sidewalk. Acknowledging the response with a smile, the duo launched into the next verse:

*L.A.'s got a real cool sound, yeah, Frisco has the wind so free,
But soon I will be traveling East—that New York beat is calling me!*

Another cheer went up, as the man raised his fist in the air with his forefinger and pinkie extended. “Eight more bars,” he shouted. “Sing with us!”

*Tall and grey the wall surrounds us; where it ends, we cannot say.
But still the music's all around, so lift your voice and sing today!*

With a lurch the truck started rolling again, almost knocking the singers off their feet. As Blake watched it go, two burly men in mirrored sunglasses and black turtlenecks appeared on either side of him.

“Welcome, Mr. Kliff,” one of them said, taking hold of his arm. “Hotel security. Come with us, please.” His colleague gripped Blake’s other arm, and together they propelled him across the crowded sidewalk into the hotel lobby.

Inside, the air was thick with cigarette and marijuana smoke. The place had clearly seen better days: The carpeting was frayed and discolored, the wallpaper torn and marred with graffiti. Outlandishly dressed men and women were everywhere, perched on stools and draped over tattered chairs and sofas. Five wizened men with mod British haircuts glared from a cluster of love seats near the entrance where they sat with four willowy females squeezed between them. Just beyond them, several other women sat with their heads together, laughing over some