

Clifford Hickey is a folk musician looking for the big break that will save him from his back-up plan, USC law school. But when he arrives in Evergreen for a folk festival and discovers that his brother Alvaro is the prime suspect in a murder, his plans change.

- Honored as a Best Book of 2006 by January Magazine
- Set in 1971 at a northern California folk festival.
- "Kuhlken's fourth mystery to feature the endearing Hickey clan...brings the social and cultural scene of the period vividly to life." *Publisher's Weekly*, August 21, 2006
- "Colorful characters and a compelling storyline with the right amount of suspense will keep readers guessing. Recommended for all collections." *Library Journal*, August 2006
- "Readers will enjoy this tale, which captures the history and atmosphere of 1970s California as well as the complex dynamics of a fascinating family." *Booklist*, August 6, 2006
- "Kuhlken revisits the Hickey family in a tale as sensitive and heartfelt as it is action-packed.... Lying fallow hasn't hurt the Hickeys, who've only become more introspective and complex.... Crime, punishment and redemption. Kuhlken's best." *Kirkus*, August 28, 2006
- "... the first hardboiled Christian mystery." *Pages Magazine*
- "...along with the interplay between the characters, the poignant comments and the laugh-out-loud one-liners, *The Do-Re-Mi* contains more than a trace of the bitter aftertaste that the Summer of Love and the promise of the 1960s not only failed to pan out, but left America in the throes of the confusion and paranoia of the 70s." Stephen Miller In *January Magazine*

THE DO-RE-MI

1

Pop wanted me to practice law. USC admitted me to their Juris Doctorate program.

So I asked Pop, "Are lawyers crooks to begin with or does being a lawyer make them crooks?"

The sun was falling fast toward the Rubicons across Lake Tahoe from our cottage. Pop stood over the steaks he was grilling. Mama had gone inside for mosquito repellent.

For the past half hour, Pop and I had discussed the San Francisco Chronicle's latest revelations about President Nixon's Watergate blunder.

Pop used the Chronicle to fan smoke out of his face. "Nobody's anything to begin with," he said. "Lawyers can go bad, but you're not that kind of man."

Pop was usually right. That time, he was dead wrong.

Later that summer, on the last Wednesday in August, 1972, I drove north on Highway 101, into the redwoods. The two lane highway was cluttered with hippie vans, sputtering VWs, and family wagons descending upon the town of Evergreen.

Hippies claimed Evergreen was the closest place on earth to Eden. I wouldn't have disputed their claim. The air was crisp with a mild salty tang and the seductive fragrance of redwoods. Because of the mountains that horseshoed around the valley, leaving one side open to the breezes off the Pacific, twenty miles west, Evergreen was an ecosystem apart, with balmy winters and summers cooled by mists and night rains that blew away at dawn, over the Trinity Wilderness.

Most of us crowding the highway had come for Big Dan Mills' Jamboree. I believed that weekend would change my life. I only

hoped it would change for the better.

The jamboree was a folk festival. Over the past three years, it had become a major event, even while half the people who used to talk politics in coffee houses had turned to dropping LSD and spacing out on electric guitars.

My brother Alvaro had convinced Big Dan to invite me to perform. I would be on stage Sunday, just before the finale. In my daydreams, it was my chance to turn pro, to meet record producers and earn a shot at playing clubs like the Troubadour in Hollywood. At least, I might land a booking agent and give myself a solid reason to forget USC, where I was supposed to start law school in twenty days.

As I passed a sign marking twelve miles to Evergreen, I was trying to decide what to play. I wished to God I had written even two good songs. But so far, the only tunes or lyrics that came to mind when I picked up my guitar were those I had heard. Besides, I didn't feel wise enough about the world to write honest yet meaningful words. Pop said the songs would come after I had experienced more.

Most of the people whose songs I played were coming to the jamboree. Lightnin' Hopkins, my favorite living bluesman, was coming. Ramblin' Jack Elliot, who had been pals with Woody Guthrie, would be talking about Woody and playing Woody's songs. Tom Paxton was coming, and Dino Valenti. Richard Fariña was dead, but his wife Mimi was on the bill. I wouldn't risk her displeasure by doing any of Fariña's songs. Buffy St. Marie was coming, which meant I wouldn't play the Peter Le Farge numbers I knew. They were about Indians, which was her territory, not mine.

Rumors had circulated that Bob Dylan meant to show up,

forsake his rock and roll ways, turn back to standing alone with his acoustic guitar and harmonica, and rekindle the folk scene.

Maybe a Steven Foster number would work, I thought. Maybe "Beautiful Dreamer," one of Mama's favorites.

Alvaro could help me choose. I hoped to find my brother tonight. I hadn't seen him much in the past few years, since he left for Vietnam. And I was anxious to show him my new guitar, a Gibson Hummingbird, my twenty-second birthday present from Pop. I had lusted after a Hummingbird since Alvaro taught me to play.

I believed our family was blessed. Mama appeared to be healing. And as far as we knew, Alvaro had stayed out of trouble for months now.

\*

Ten miles south of Evergreen, I slowed to observe three kids who could pass for cupids. They and a man stood with bowed heads around a simple cross of redwood branches in a ditch beside the highway. Grieving for a Mexican friend, I thought. Along the roads of Mexico, people marked the site of each fatal crash with a cross or shrine.

The man slouched beside the cross. He had strawberry blond hair, long, wavy and braided. The kids' white ringlets hung to their shoulders. They all were tan, and shirtless though the sun had disappeared behind the redwood forest a half hour ago.

I raced through an S curve and into a cacophony of sputters and rumbles. I stood on the brakes when a platoon of outlaw bikers fishtailed onto the highway from the dirt parking lot of a tavern called the Crossroads.

In the dusk, I couldn't read their colors. Cossacks, I thought. Alvaro had confessed to brawling in an Evergreen saloon. He had argued about the Vietnam issue with a biker. The

biker ran with a gang called Cossacks.

Highball Trail began just south of the Crossroads and went east along the bank of Whiskey River. In a letter, Alvaro had mentioned the river's name, and added, "Tell Mama it's only water."

I drove into the forest while dusk turned to dark so fast the road seemed to dip and carry me underground. Along the trail, second growth redwoods made way for ancient trees as wide as logging trucks and tall as Jack's beanstalk. Their fragrance was like a potion. It left me giddy and able to imagine the world had become a safe and wondrous place, where evil could no longer reside.

Since I had failed to replace a burnt out dashboard light, I bounded over ruts and fallen branches trying to sense the passing miles. The road narrowed into a trail more suitable for horses than cars. I stopped, crawled into the back and found my flashlight in the crate of camping gear. According to the odometer and Alvaro's directions, the Mexican flag would greet me 1.3 miles ahead.

Night had come. Only drips of moon or starlight leaked through the trees. As I drove on, redwood branches scratched like fingernails along both sides of my wagon. I swerved and dodged, but ruts grabbed the wheels and yanked them sideways. The muffler scraped granite and showered the forest with sparks. I imagined a forest fire beginning here and consuming the face of the earth. Then I wondered why dread had possessed me.

Two miles ahead, I found a clearing and parked. I shut down the motor, sat still and listened for a human sound. I heard the river whoosh over rocks, and what sounded like a pair of baritone cuckoos. Jays squawked ornery lullabies. I shouted for

Alvaro. The birds flew off.

Whiskey River and its flood plain allowed enough break from the redwoods to let starlight fall on the water, which frothed along the banks and churned in mid-stream. Fallen limbs and gnarly stumps flashed past. Across the river was a grove of trees like aspens except flowers grew from their branches. The flowers a shaft of moonlight exposed were red, yellow, and blue, like a vision of heaven that came to me when I got beamed by a wild pitcher's fastball. Even through the redwood fragrance, in the upriver breeze, I caught whiffs of jasmine and of somebody's marijuana garden. Not Alvaro's, I hoped.

Most of the ground between the trail and the bank was too soft to walk without sinking to my knees, but it made a good bed. I threw down a tarp and sleeping bag upon which I lay and dispelled dread with happy thoughts. I imagined myself on a stage packed with my favorite performers. I scrunched up against Mimi Fariña while I watched the booking agent who had just signed me up wave a high sign. And I wondered how disappointed Pop would be when I told him I was going on the coffee house circuit instead of to USC.

I didn't hate the idea of practicing law. But it was Pop's dream for me, not my own. Pop had left USC during the 1920s when his sister came down with rheumatic fever. To pay the bills, he worked days as a bank guard. Nights he played his clarinet in a dance band, which folded when the Great Depression struck. Then Pop joined the L.A.P.D.

Life had taught him to admire good lawyers. And he said I had the right stuff, courage and a passion for justice. But I had no passion for a life of courts and criminals. I wanted to sing, play guitar, and someday write songs that would encourage

people to act more loving, kind and faithful. Like Mama, I was a dreamer. Not a fighter like Pop or Alvaro.

When I had told Pop about the jamboree, he gazed at me over his pipe and pondered. "You're a little rough," he said, "but that's your charm. The gravelly voice and your size gives you authority. People listen to you." I swelled with pride to think that Pop, who was no flatterer, thought of me that way. Then he added, "But the music business will break your heart."

\*

The first gunshot woke me. The next report could've been a thunderclap. The last four sounded like maracas. For minutes I sat and listened, but the forest had gone mute.

I worried about Alvaro. In our family, if the phone rang at 3:00 a.m, we feared for Alvaro. If a police car drove up the street, we wondered what he had done. Alvaro was wild. Besides, amongst the tools he had brought on what he called Operation Clean was a rifle. He told us he meant to feed himself with the rifle and his fishing gear.

I worried myself to sleep. In the morning, I stumbled to the river and splashed my face with crystalline water.

I was tossing my gear in the Chevy when I peered down the road and spotted my brothers' marker. The Mexican flag waved from a branch that overhung the road, twenty feet up. Last night, I hadn't looked that high, though I should have remembered Alvaro's monkey-like skill at climbing trees.

I parked just past the flag on a rocky patch between two redwoods and started along a single-file path. Walking toward the twang of guitar strings, I wondered what disturbance or nightmare had woke Alvaro before six. At home, we needed to use bribery or threats to lure him out of bed.

His camp was a quarter mile up the path. As I neared, he started playing and singing a *corrido* ballad he had made up while in Vietnam. It told of when he got wounded and missed his rotation on point and so his best *amigo* took over and died that day.

In the center of the clearing, Alvaro squatted Indio-style, finger picking the guitar he had bought in Paracho, Michoacan. He was the musical genius in our family. His right hand danced on the strings while the fingers of his left hand ran up and down the fret-board. He was perched on a redwood stump so wide an orchestra could have joined him. The clearing was bordered by ring of second growth redwood small enough to allow daylight into the camp. Mexican string bags of groceries, clothes and utensils hung like *piñatas* from the branches. Behind Alvaro stood an army surplus bivouac tent that could accommodate a dozen cots. The Browning 30.06 hung by a strap from a notch in a flagpole beside the tent's entrance.

Alvaro handled his Paracho guitar like a relic. He laid it into a hard-shell case before he sprang off the stump, his arms wide to greet me. His embrace felt as if he meant to weld me there. When he let go, he jumped back and flashed the grin that was a primary weapon in his arsenal of charms. He had used it to hustle *turistas* in Mazatlan after his widowed *borracho* papa got sentenced to eight years in a Sinaloa prison. No doubt that grin had helped him hitch rides a thousand miles north and over the mountains to Tijuana. He survived in Tijuana by stealing and hustling and on the graces of *putas* he charmed, until he made enemies of vicious older street kids and decided to jump the

border.

His charms helped him win his place in our family, and later they boosted his career as lead guitar and featured singer in a heartthrob Tijuana rock band. As the house band at the Aloha Club on Avenida Revolución, the district that drew Mexico's best rockers, he was becoming a star. Then he got nabbed at the *frontera* with fifty bottles of the methamphetamine pills we called blackbirds.

Today, though, he looked clean and sober enough. His *Indio* eyes with their long black lashes never blinked while he asked about Pop and Mama. They closed for a minute when I told him Mama was still in danger of slipping back into her catatonia.

I handed him the \$100 bill Pop had sent.

"Keep it, *hermano*," he said. "You the man just graduated college. What'd I do to deserve Pop's money?"

I pressed the bill into his T shirt pocket. "You're being good."

His eyes flicked away. He strode to the fire-pit, stirred coals, then stretched toward a woodpile beside the pit. He grabbed a long branch and snapped it over his knee, into three parts. He stacked them on the fire. "*Huevos* for breakfast. I got canned *chiles* but no *chorizo*. *Quieres cafe*?"

"In the biggest mug you've got."

I sat on the big stump between his guitar and a cassette recorder. The lid was open. The tape inside was by Phil Ochs, to whom Alvaro would introduce me in a day or two.

My brother had met Phil Ochs at a peace rally. He got introduced as a Vietnam hero turned against the war. Ochs asked him to tell his combat stories, and afterward they kept in touch. It was Ochs who got Alvaro the jamboree gig.

I considered Reverend King wiser than Chairman Mao, whom Ochs admired. I didn't like Ochs songs that praised armed revolution. But Alvaro was no pacifist. He called Ochs gutsy for

singing what he believed even though it could get him killed. And once when I criticized Ochs, Alvaro said, "Hey, you've got to like the guy who wrote 'There But For Fortune,' no?" With that, I couldn't argue.

Still I wondered about the fascination that made my brother lead off both letters he'd sent me from Evergreen with quotes from Phil Ochs songs.

The coffee pot hung from a spit above the fire. Alvaro used a hot pad. He always took care of his hands. He poured a mug full and passed it to me. "Yeah, you can tell Pop I'm being good. I did the cold turkey thing. One day I didn't get out of my sleeping bag, just hung in there all scrunched and sweating, waiting for the mole people to attack." He shot me a glance that meant, You just got all you need to know, little brother. "How long you here for?"

"Only the weekend."

"Then it's off to begin your climb to the Supreme Court, right? When do you play at the festival?"

"We. You're going to back me. Sunday at four."

Alvaro shrugged. "Pop's not coming, right?"

"He won't leave Mama yet."

"I miss her," he said. "So, soon as you get to USC, you're going to bury your nose in the books, *entiendes?*" He fixed on me a gaze that meant, "Or else."

We laughed together at the irony of the prodigal lecturing the dutiful son, and Alvaro prophesied, "With a brother like me, we better get a lawyer in the family but quick."

As his last words faded, he turned and peered at the path I had walked. For a minute or more, he stood frozen, his right hand raised as if to signal a platoon. We both heard a twig snap.

I whispered, "What--"

Alvaro sprang past me, leaped toward the tent and grabbed his

rifle.