

Standing amidst the early June, mid-afternoon weekend chaos of the Venice Beach boardwalk, with the sun cooking the back of his neck, watching a tall, shaggy-haired, rail-thin man with pasty white skin purchase a hot dog, Bill Smede felt a rare pang of fondness and love (momentarily interrupting the default irritation and anxiety). The customer was Matt Spratt, Bill's closest friend for over 25 years, and the snack he'd just obtained was officially considered a sausage by the discerning folks producing them at Joni Macaroni the Sausage Queen.

Chewing delightedly, Matt made his way out of the throng of people clustered around the vendors' little shack-bungalows and rejoined Bill in the throng of people swarming every which way on the massive concrete footpath that ran alongside the vendors.

Matt swallowed, grinned widely and said, "You should get one of these, too."

"Can't," Bill replied. "You used the last of my cash."

"Oh. Well, you can share mine," Matt offered, extending his arm so that his newly-acquired prize nearly touched Bill's nose. "Go on, have a bite, dude. It's awesome!"

"Uh, no thanks," said Bill, waving it away with his hand. "I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself," said Matt, bringing the hot dog back over next to his own face. "But it's not really about hunger." He took another bite, then added, through closed lips, "Mmm."

The two men began walking south along the footpath, continuing a circuit they'd started from Matt's home two hours ago which had included lunch at The Sidewalk Cafe, a Venice Beach institution (where, as usual, Bill had happily offered to pay and Matt had happily accepted).

To their left was a seemingly never-ending row of ramshackle eateries and souvenir shops, punctuated by the occasional palm tree, cross-street, or small, decrepit apartment building (typically occupied by around five dozen people, all between the ages of 21 and 24).

To their right sat the mobile vendors, operating from tents, blankets and chairs they set up and took down each day, hawking their primarily artsy and homemade wares such as jewelry, paintings, knittings and bongos. Behind these lay a vast stretch of sand with a paved bicycle path winding through it. Beyond that, the waves of the Pacific crashed rhythmically against the shore. This place could be really beautiful, thought Bill, surveying his surroundings. If it weren't for all the people.

"So what do they call that one?" he asked, gesturing at the rapidly

disappearing treat clutched in Matt's hand.

"This one is known as Joni's Spicy Special Curving Pork Cutlass," Matt replied with a grin. "It's my favorite."

"Aha," said Bill. "So I guess all the names begin with 'Joni's'? But wouldn't that go without saying?"

Matt made a "Mmph" sound as he chewed another chunk of cutlass, then swallowed and said, "No, actually some of them are other people's. Like they've got this long, thin one called Marco's Italian Hot Beef Needle." They both laughed.

Matt continued, "And some other ones, too. I guess these are folks who helped out Joni with her recipes." He paused. "Or naming them, at least."

"If Joni's even a real person," added Bill.

"Hah! Right," said Matt.

As the two friends made their way slowly down the crowded boardwalk, anybody watching (which nobody was) would've been struck by the contrast between them. The six-inch height difference. Matt's utterly carefree stride versus Bill's tense, rigid movements. Matt clad in just baggy tank top, baggy shorts and flip-flops, versus the comparatively decked-out Bill with his running shoes (so his feet wouldn't hurt), jeans (to prevent his legs from getting burned), polo shirt (because every shirt he owned was a polo), sunglasses, hat, and PaceTek Nano which he compulsively glanced at seven times per minute.

And indeed, Matt and Bill were very different people, or at least had been when they'd first met, as freshmen at UCLA, where Matt had arrived on a surfing scholarship and Bill had begun with an undeclared major because he hadn't made up his mind yet between math and computer science.

Since that time, they'd become considerably more alike, having shared so many experiences and influenced each other's personalities. Bill had learned from Matt how to lighten up and relax a bit (a fact some people who'd met Bill later on found hard to believe), and to better appreciate playfulness and whimsy. In turn, Bill had sharpened up Matt's sense of humor and generally broadened Matt's awareness of the world and its ideas.

But fundamentally, they were still an innocent, happy wanderer and a fretful, sensitive philosopher—which, oddly enough, was part of why they enjoyed spending time together.

Glancing at a collection of pottery laid out on a carpet as they passed it, Matt commented, "You know, I've been thinking I might try my hand at selling my clay pots here."

“Your clay pots?” Bill asked, puzzled.

“Yeah, seems like it wouldn’t be too bad, sitting out here, you know, of an afternoon. . . chilling out, watching all the people go by. Maybe make a couple bucks.”

“Maybe,” said Bill, thinking he’d be hard-pressed to come up with a more miserable activity that didn’t involve weapons or surgical tools. “But, I didn’t know you were a potter.”

“Oh, well I’m not, yet. But seems like it’d be fun. It’s not that hard, actually. I saw a thing on YouTube. They teach you how to do it in like five minutes. Painting designs on them and everything.”

Bill looked at him.

“What?” said Matt with a little laugh. “I might do it. Seriously.”

After another half mile on the boardwalk, during which Matt obtained the phone number of a young woman after she accidentally stepped on his foot, they turned left onto 25th Avenue and headed toward the small network of canals, inspired by the older Venice, that had been a neighborhood trademark for well over a century.

It was quite a beautiful scene—largely inaccessible to automobiles, lined with flowering plants and a mix of quaint houses and quirky ones. Still, both Bill and Matt suspected that the look and feel of this place differed vastly from that of its Italian namesake. They crossed over a footbridge on their way into the canals area, then another one on their way out, and, after several more minutes and a few more twists and turns, arrived at the house on Clark Avenue where Matt lived.

The somewhat ugly, single-story house, surrounded by overgrown shrubs, clad in aluminum siding on all four sides and painted a dull, faded bluish-gray (except for a few random spots that were a dull, faded yellow), had been built in the 1940s and, since then, had received the bare minimum amount of renovation and maintenance to remain habitable under L.A. County codes. One exception: in the 1970s it had been split into a duplex, with a new entrance added to one half and a new kitchen and shower to the other.

Matt’s uncle, who owned the property, allowed Matt to occupy the left side essentially rent-free. The right side housed real (albeit usually terrible) tenants, who rotated through at an average rate of twice per year.

Bill and Matt crossed the weed-riddled front yard, climbed the two steps onto the porch, and entered the house. Like Juice, Matt never locked his door. But unlike her, if a visitor knocked, he would happily come open it for them.

Matt went through to the kitchen as Bill took a seat on one of the battered, stained old couches (first moving some magazines, a floppy elastic band intended for arm exercises, a dinner plate, and a small teddy bear, to make space for his butt), across from the always-on television which was currently showing an episode of “The Simpsons” from 1997. The dirty, cluttered, totally disorganized state of Matt’s living room never surprised Bill, though it did occasionally surprise Matt himself.

It resembled the stereotypical college kid’s dwelling. Every square inch of flat surface that didn’t contain an object was covered in a thick layer of dust, but this didn’t add up to very many square inches because every surface was also littered with coffee cups, soda cans, beer bottles, papers, coins, kitchenware, miscellaneous boardwalk-style trinkets, playing cards, makeshift ashtrays and proper ashtrays. None of the furniture matched, most of it was older than Bill’s son Patrick, and some of it sat in seemingly arbitrary locations, at seemingly arbitrary angles. The two-decades-old carpet, which at the time of its installation had been the cheapest Matt’s uncle could find, had been vacuumed exactly five times, most recently three years ago, by Bill.