Life among the dope fiends in East Palo Alto

All the Wrong Moves

THERE ARE 18 ITEMS LISTED ON THE MENU AT Hank's Fast Foods. And one that isn't.

Water.

Warm—not hot—water in a clean Styrofoam cup, filled three-fourths high for the walk across the parking lot.

Ten cents a cup. For the junkies.

Who's got a dime? He won't take nine.

"Who's got a dime, man? You got a dime, Stevie? C'mon, man, wake up!"

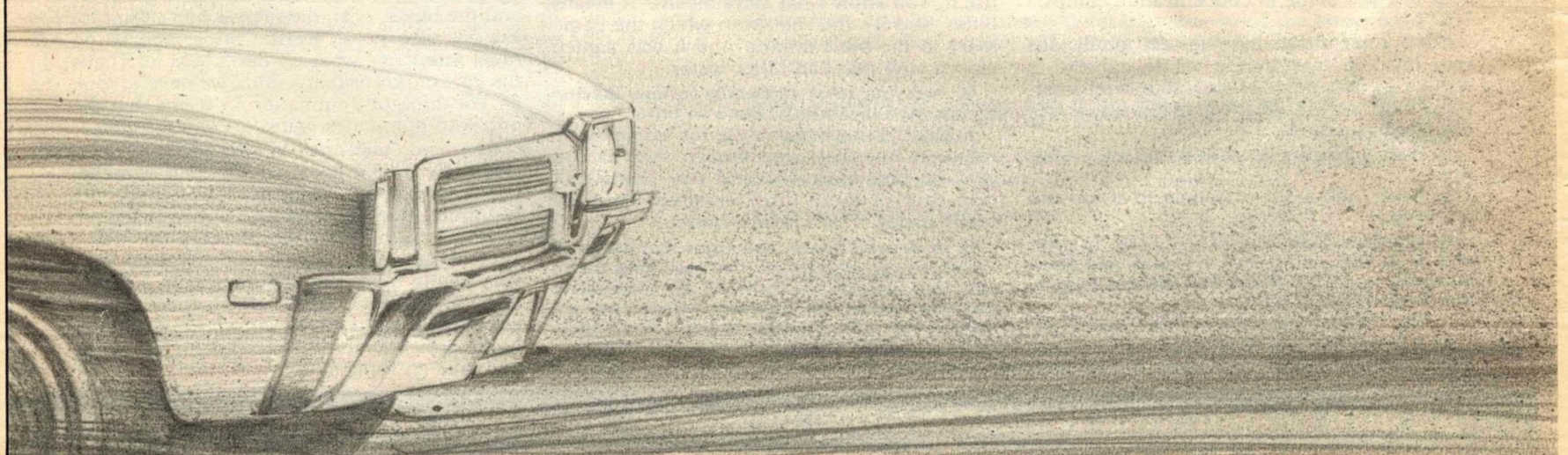
It's late afternoon outside of Hank's, across the street from the East Palo Alto City Hall, at the busiest corner of this tiny, struggling community of retirees, refugees and junkies. Commuters stream by from the Dumbarton Bridge, on their way home to the condos and cul-de-sacs of the Peninsula. The junkies are lounging around, warming themselves in the sun, haggling with street dealers, hustling for bucks to feed their arms.

Three blocks away in Palo Alto, just across the highway, the houses cost half a million dollars.

"I got a nickel, man. No, wait . . . six cent," Den says. He looks over at the next car, where three men are shooting up. "We need four more cent. I'll hit them up."

Eighteen thousand people live in East Palo Alto. Up to 500 of them are junkies, and hundreds more filter through each day to score. East Palo Alto and neighboring East Menlo Park are known as the easiest places to buy heroin in Northern California. *continued*

By Bernard Bauer



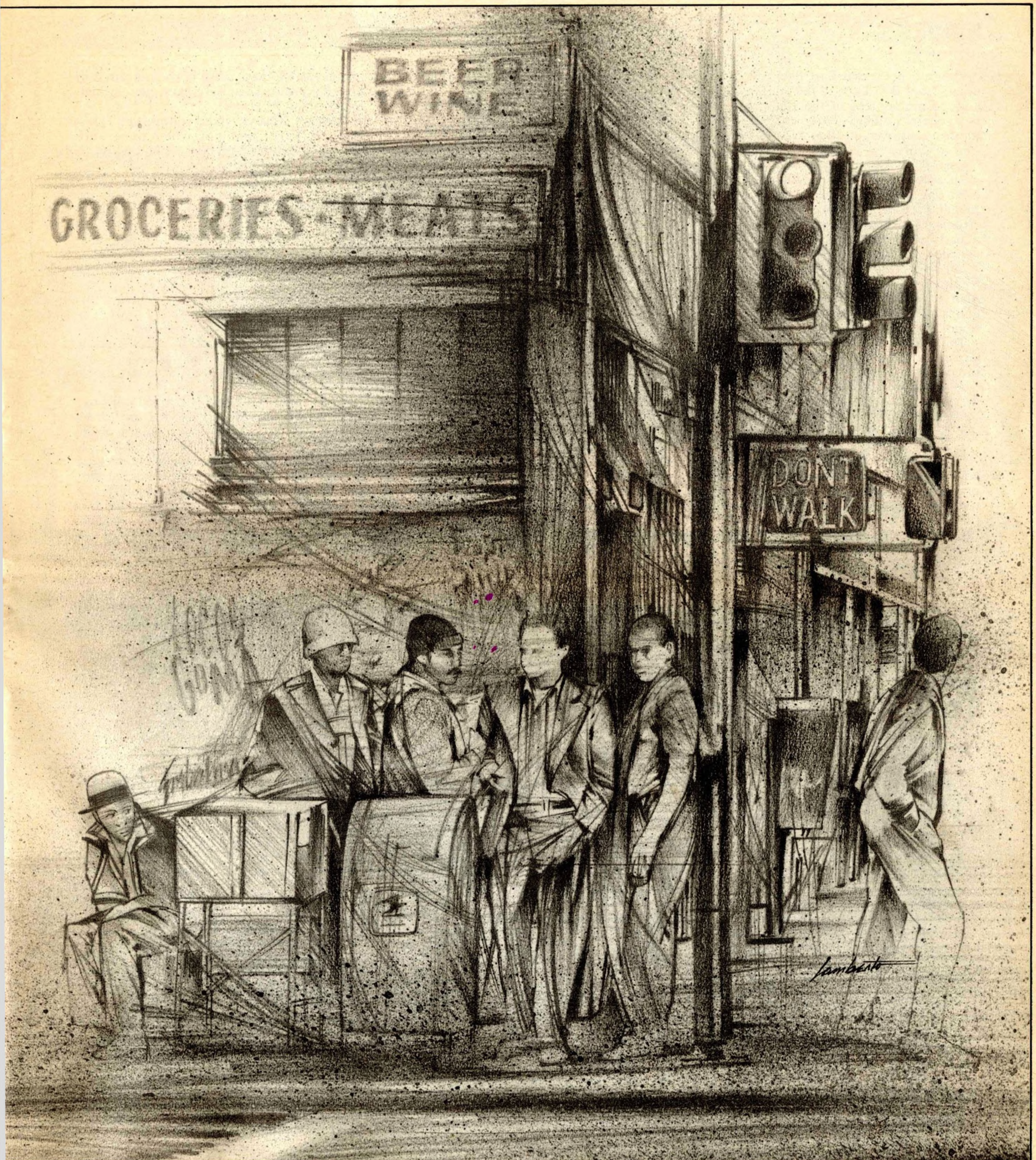


ILLUSTRATION BY LAMBERTO ALVAREZ

"It's no secret that East Palo Alto is wide open," says Bob Luca of the Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement of the California attorney general's office. "We've got people coming from all over the Bay Area to East Palo Alto to score."

East Palo Alto's first police department went into business on July 1, but without even one detective working drugs full time, it will have a hard time cleaning up the streets. The San Mateo County sheriff's department, which has worked the area for decades, has barely made a dent.

"At the present time, we're being overwhelmed by the volume of drugs," says Lt. Alan Johnson, who heads the county's narcotics task force. "We don't know which way to go."

The junkies rub the cops' faces in it. "I'll shoot up right on the street, man," Den brags. "Watch this."

As usual, he has spent every penny he has on dope, forgetting to set aside a dime for water. But he manages to bum four cents, and he gets a cup from Hank's.

Leaning against a parked car, he fills his syringe with water and shoots it into the two bags of heroin and the bag of cocaine. With practiced precision, he mixes the solutions together into "speedballs," a combination of the floating, ecstatic high of smack and the razor-sharp edge of coke. Then he slams the whole thing into his arm.

The traffic flattens out into a soft hum as the dope hits his heart seconds later.

"Hmmm . . . That's what I call 'English,' " says Den, tasting his high with connoisseur-like concentration. His eyes roll back and his voice slows to a 16-rpm drawl. "Yeah, English," he says. "Good shot, old man."

EAST PALO ALTO IS A PARIAH AMONG ITS well-to-do, white neighbors. Its homicide rate is 12 times that of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties', and six times the statewide rate.

Assault, robbery and theft are also epidemic here. "Every night I take all my equipment out of my school—typewriters, machines, everything," says City Councilwoman Gertrude Wilkes, who owns a private school. "If I don't, it won't be there in the morning."

The heroin trade is at the root of the endless crime wave. "The problem is the stuff that spins off," Police Chief Danny Nelson says. "You see people getting pumped full of holes here all the time."

The voraciousness of the junkies keeps many retirees hostage in their own homes. And police say that thefts in nearby communities —especially Stanford University and Menlo Park—are fueled by the habits of the users.

"Look at all the Mercedeses in East Palo Alto," says Lt. Johnson, a 15-year veteran of the city's drug wars. "Those aren't shoe salesmen—they're dope dealers."

Dealers operate openly not only because the police are outnumbered but also because they know the penalties for their crime are a joke.

"We arrest very, very few users," says Johnson, who complains that the courts undercut his work. "And the typical sales conviction gets from 20 to 90 days in the county jail."

As the main force in the relationship, Den scores the dope, mixes it, even shoots it into Stevie's hand. ('Stevie no good with the spike,' he says. 'He's too greedy.') He uses that role to rip off his friend, often mixing speedballs for himself but plain smack for Stevie.

Major cases against dealers get nowhere. The prosecution of alleged drug overlord Carson Cohee, for example, dragged through the state courts for so long that police say he was selling hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of dope out of his East Bayshore smoke shop while out of jail on bail. In frustration, law enforcement officials turned the case over to the federal government in August.

Money to fight the drug traffic has dried up since East Palo Alto's rookie police force went into operation last summer. When the community paid the San Mateo County sheriff's department for police services, there were two full-time detectives working the area. Now, there are none.

"The East Palo Alto police department is inexperienced, and the criminals are taking full advantage of it," says Wilkes, whose son died of a heroin overdose in 1982. "They're having a field day. They are in charge, and the quicker we face it, the better off we are going to be."

Nelson, however, says he's confident about beating back the junkies and points to a recent increase in the number of drug-related arrests. But, as he acknowledges, it remains to be seen whether convictions will follow.

Johnson wishes him luck. "We moved the dealers from place to place," he says. "We bounced them half a dozen times. It doesn't seem to be changing the problem."

JUNKIES IN THE STREET DON'T LOOK LIKE junkies in the movies. They aren't skinny and run-down, and they don't wear rags and sleep in alleys.

Den, for example, is broad and muscular from pumping iron in jail; he takes vitamin C and watches his diet. Stevie, slender and tall, is built like a long-distance runner; he's partial to velour sweat suits.

The typical East Palo Alto junkie lives with his mother or his girlfriend. He's in his 20s, has been kicked out of school, has never held down a job and has no marketable skills.

Stevie and Den, who agreed to be interviewed on the condition that their real names not be used, were born and raised in East Palo Alto. They have been getting high together for 13 years.

They've always liked combinations—Boone's Farm and pot when they were young; Robitussin and beer when they were strung out for cash.

In 1967, Den shot "crank"—methamphetamine—for the first time. "That's when the crank was good," he says. "None of this bathtub shit.

"I used to geeze up in the morning, and, mmm, I be *tweaking*. Wired fo' sound! Five dollars, too. Three people could take off on a $5 paper. I used to drop a lot of acid, too. Every day—either acid or mescaline, really good cocaine or weed."

Around 1970, Stevie and Den started playing with heroin, backing into the scene at first by snorting it. Today, Stevie shoots $60 a day. Den's habit is at $90 a day, down from $200 during his dealing days.

Den, whose left hand is scarred with two deep slash marks, slips back and forth from ghetto slang to articulate, mainstream English. He has been convicted of several felonies, and he is ruthless in his hunger for dope. Stevie is a petty thief and burglar who has served close to nine years in jail.

As the main force in the relationship, Den scores the dope, mixes it, even shoots it into Stevie's hand. ("Stevie no good with the spike," Den says. "He's too greedy.") But he also uses that role to rip off his friend, often mixing speedballs for himself but just plain smack for Stevie.

"What can I say, man?" Den asks with a shrug. "I am a dope fiend. And that is what you call a typical dope-fiend move."

A limousine with blacked-out windows slides by, moving fast. Den spits onto the sidewalk.

"I went to school with influential white peoples—DAs', businessmen's kids. All these was rich cats," he says. "They were using drugs. They were shooting dope way before I started."

Back then, heroin was not only plentiful but cheap. A junkie could fix twice for $10. It was just too easy.

"We'd go to parties. The cocaine dealer —he has four, five chicks hanging on his arm," Stevie recalls. "The heroin dealer has four, five chicks hanging on his arm. Then he's got a Cadillac parked outside, a Rolls or what have you.

"At that particular time, at that age, we didn't perceive them as being negative role models. We perceived them as being successful, easy-living, cool, black people. You dig? That's what we saw. That's what we were subjected to. . . . We're not thinking that this is illegal. That's secondary. We're not thinking that this is something that the rest of society is down on. We're seeing what we see, and what we see looks good.

"And before we can get to the point where they are, which is, you know, having fancy cars, fancy chicks, and all the attention and things like that, and the business end of it, and making the money—we're hooked, like mad dogs."

continued

BLACKS AND MEXICAN-AMERICANS HAVE split the dope trade in East Palo Alto. Blacks control the sale of synthetic heroin, also known as "China white," while the Mexicans, working from strictly segregated apartment buildings, import and distribute *goma* (Spanish for gum), a tarry variety of heroin.

A stable of runners sells the synthetic smack on the street, and their wages are paid in dope. Undercover agents from the sheriff's department concentrate their efforts on these dealers.

As for the Mexican heroin, the police don't even try. According to Johnson, the flow of *goma* into San Mateo County is impossible to stop, because it's brought in by "mules," illegal aliens who cross the border every day with drugs. Police believe the dope is refined in labs in the village of Aguililla, about 900 miles south of El Paso in the state of Michoacan, and transported each day across the border.

"It's like grains of sand," Johnson says. "It just amazes us, the people that we arrest, the numbers and the types. Most of the Mexicans are first-generation immigrants with no criminal record here or there. They don't use the stuff. Most of them have jobs. You arrest them, and they're nice people.

"Normally, they don't speak English. They have no history here. You ask them their name and they all say 'Jose Gonzalez.' They're all named Jose. We arrest them, they make bail and they split.

"They see this as a means of upward mobility in the United States," Johnson says. "Ethnic ascension."

"STEVIE, MAN, GO GET SOME RIPPLE, man," Den says. "My sweet tooth acting up. Here's 18 cent."

The English is wearing off, and they are restless. Stevie strolls toward a mom-and-pop store to panhandle for the Ripple. Den feels like window shopping, so he heads over to 1760 Bay St., an all-Mexican apartment building that functions as a heroin supermarket.

Three kids are fighting over a BB gun in front of the two-story tan building, located half a block from City Hall. In the fading light, Den walks down the long driveway, past a cluster of carports where grease-covered, muscled men are arm-deep into their Chevys. Droplights suspended from the open hoods cast jack-o'-lantern shadows on their faces.

The dealers stand in loose clusters off to the side, arguing over prices and waving bags of heroin. They look up sharply and stop talking as Den walks toward them.

Den is high and showing off. "I can walk there in total darkness and no one will mess with me," he says under his breath. "Watch this shit."

He calls out a phony bid to the group. "Eleven dollars. I got $11. C'mon, man, I come here all the time."

"*Que?*"

" 'Leven dollars, man," he says. "C'mon, man. I come here all the time."

The dealers look at each other. After a burst of machine-gun Spanish, they come back with their price—$75, firm, for a quarter gram.

"They be selling rocks," Den mumbles. "No loose shit tonight."

Then out loud: "OK, *amigo*. We'll think about it."

But he doesn't leave. Instead, he plunges deeper into Mexican turf, behind the carports to a torn-up shack the junkies use as a shooting gallery.

The floor is covered with matches, bottle caps and empty glassine bags. Stevie drops to his knees and gropes through the bags, hoping to find some dope leftovers. Nothing.

"Damn!" He is getting irritable. The high is almost gone. He strides back down the driveway to get his share of the Ripple.

But for once, Stevie has turned the game around. All that is left of the Ripple is backwash.

"That was 18 cent of my money in there, you ----er!" Den yells. "You burned my ass!"

Victorious for once, Stevie sweeps his gaze

Den plunges deeper into Mexican turf, behind the carports to a torn-up shack. The floor is covered with matches, bottle caps and empty glassine bags. Den drops to his knees and gropes through the bags, hoping to find some dope leftovers. Nothing. 'Damn!'

past his buddy and out onto the street. "What can I say, baby?" he mumbles. "Dope-fiend move."

LATER IN THE DAY, DEN RELAXES WITH A joint at his sister's house. "Basically, the cops here don't give a f--- about people selling dope," he says. "They've got a situation where they can telescope you from the so-called city building; they could spot everyone making transactions; they can come down, and they could bust them all—if they wanted to.

"But I know that a cop ain't gonna want to mess with me if he knows I just bought a $15 bag of dope to go and use for myself. If they happen to know that there's 20 drug users in a shooting gallery, yeah, they might go in there and bust you, but that's a lot of paperwork for them. They know the DA is going to tell each and every one of them, 'Hey, you guys were using dope. We caught you with a bag of dope and an outfit.'

"And you say, 'Well, no, you didn't. I wanna talk to a lawyer.' OK. Rather than go through all the b.s., the DA is gonna make you a deal. You get summary probation and time served."

The cops' failure to touch the dope trade angers long-time residents and fuels cynicism among the junkies.

"They make enough busts to make their jobs secure," Stevie says. "And they all want to be in on the big bust."

There is also a persistent rumor, stoked by some of the city's politicians, that the foes of East Palo Alto want the city to devour itself, so that it can be rebuilt as an expensive marina community.

But behind the speculation, accusation and conspiracy theories remains the undeniable fact that East Palo Alto is a heroin candy store. And if you're a junkie, the temptation is overwhelming.

"There was a time when I wanted to do it," Stevie says, rummaging through his pockets for some change and coming up empty. "Every day, every night, I wanted to do it. It was cool. It was what was happening. I was making money off of it.

"Now I'm doing it, and I don't want to do it. But I'm doing it because it's a security blanket. I'm doing it because I'm bored. I'm doing it because I don't have anything else going for me. I'm doing it because right now I'm afraid that if I don't, I might get violently ill in the middle of the night.

"Heroin is a weak man's drug, whether he be poor, middle class, rich, white, black, Mexican or whatever. Every time I stick that needle in my arm, I feel the pain of the fact that I'm weak. I'm submitting."

The conversation trails off. Den's sister is in the kitchen, cooking dinner and humming along with gospel music on the radio. He makes sure her back is turned, then slides open the top drawer of her dinette. He pulls a $20 bill out of an envelope.

Stevie looks over and shakes his head.

"C'mon, blood," Den says in a whisper, smiling his huge, dangerous smile. "Half for you. It's just another dope-fie—"

But Stevie cuts him off with a look of half-hearted disgust. "Don't say it, man. Just don't say it." W

BERNARD BAUER is a Mercury News *staff writer.*