

## Fiction contest

## Point Men

First of five parts

By STEVE WIESINGER

HAYDEN RYAN WAS one of those guys who become mythic even to his best friends. Tomas and I were perched on crates in the garage of the house his grandfather had just bought for him, and Tomas was buzzing about Hayden's latest exploits: Hayden's getting a job at the clubs in Tahoe, moving in with a gorgeous lady dealer, and chucking over Cal after four years of doing it the hard way, working his way through. Myself, I thought Hayden could've waited to graduate.

But these were the post-Kennedy years, early Vietnam. And in keeping with the times, Tomas had also learned that Hayden's new lady dealt more than blackjack.

A pair of years raced by, and one winter break from graduate school I was in Tahoe and decided to check out Hayden for myself. I spotted him behind a blackjack table in a frilly tuxedo — definitely not Cal '60s style. Then I recalled how Hayden was part dandy and hated having anyone look, or think, or perform better than he.

"Hey, man," I said to him in our well-rounded vernacular, "what's happening?"

"Hey," he replied with a hitch of his blond head.

"So how's the life?"

"Good." His green eyes were anything but enthusiastic. Maybe he thought I looked too Haight Ashbury in my WWII flight jacket, or that I was going to hit on him for weed.

"Listen, it's work time," I said. "I could meet you in the coffee shop after your shift is up."

"Twelve," he agreed, "midnight."

"Out of sight," I said, already moving away. I positioned myself at a crap table and, in the curious way perception works, I computed something in Hayden's expression that I had noticed back in high school: Hayden's utter confidence in his ability to read the odds. When we were teenagers, his confidence made him a formidable athlete and poker player. It also contributed to his guts. The year we graduated he had pulled me unconscious from a wrecked car. The car could've exploded on him for all he knew. So now I didn't much question his calculations about helping out his girlfriend. Besides, it was early 1966 by now, Vietnam had revved up, counter-culture values had ripped through the colleges, and we felt like we were creating a new world.

That night at the coffee shop 12 o'clock came and went. By one I was frosted. The next day I showed up at the beginning of his shift. "Hayden," I said.

He was manning the roulette wheel, too early for serious players. "What's happening?" he answered.

"I waited last night."

"Something came up." He gave his twin-dimple smile, cockiness behind it — or maybe caution.

I pulled out the dollar chips I'd bought in advance. "I hear you're doing well — from Tomas." I played red and black, a sucker's bet.

"All right," he smiles. "It goes as it goes."

Eventually, I dragged out of him that things were better than OK. And I let him know that I was working my way through an

M.A. in community planning, had a woman I'd moved in with, too. I didn't mention that I was preparing to marry the young woman since matrimony was completely unhip circa '66. I checked him out politically, and he was as radical as ever.

Finally, he warmed up sufficiently to tell me to try Keno, best odds in the house, or at least blackjack. I'd lost \$18 talking to him, a loss I could ill afford. Walking away from his table through all those ringing bells I thought, what's with him? In high school, I had consistently whipped him playing poker, and everyone in our group knew I had supplemented my part-time jobs with what I made gambling.

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Tomas still lived down the block from my parents, next door to the house where he'd grown up with his grandfather. So I'd often drop in on Tomas and his wife, Gaby, and get an earful about Hayden. Sitting on crates in his garage, where we went to get away from the noise of the kids, Tomas informed me how Hayden had taken over his lady's business. It turned out that his girlfriend had been chipping and eventually got sucked into addiction, something I knew very little about. Hayden had looked after the woman for a few months, then moved on. Since police pressure at the lake remained slight, he expanded to South Shore and became the biggest

dealer there; in the winter, skiing far into the mountains, camping overnight, and taking drops of marijuana from light planes.

Sometimes he also called Tomas to borrow one of his cars. Months later, the police would phone Tomas, saying they had found the car abandoned in an airport parking lot. Later, Hayden would explain that he ditched the car somewhere like Sacramento, had caught a connecting flight to Denver, then ended up in Phoenix, his actual destination.

Now all this blew Tomas's beanie. Even as a kid Tomas went off fast: skinny, intense, one minute you'd be playing and the next he'd be around your neck. Now with Gaby and the two kids he was antsy, ready to leave work at his grandfather's machine shop at the drop of a joint, afraid of being left out. Later I wondered if he had an odd guilty conscience, because he frequently joked that he got married so he wouldn't have to go to Vietnam, then when they changed the statutes, he had kids so he wouldn't go.

"Hey," Tomas told me, "the cat is so sharp he's never even been tailed, he wears disguises, man, disguises." Only one thing bugged Tomas: Hayden's political rap, which Tomas swore came from the brainwashing at Berkeley — put LSD in the coffee machine at the Pentagon, Hayden said, tune in, turn on, la di da,

## Steve Wiesinger

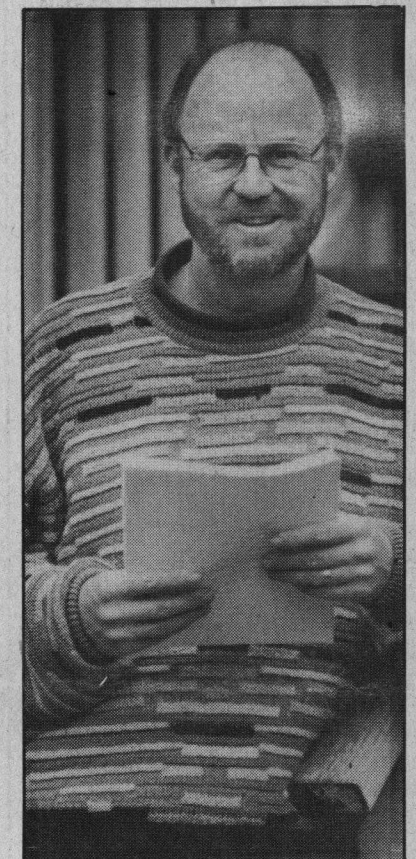
Steve Wiesinger taught for five years in Soledad, San Quentin and Vacaville state prisons. "Point Men" is from a collection of prison stories that attempts to unravel the causes of violence in our society.

Wiesinger has taught at Soquel High School for many years, but is taking a leave this spring to write. He served as co-chairman for Local 7 of the National Writer's Union, and co-edited the first Santa Cruz County anthology, Lighthouse Point.

He is now writing a psychological crime novel and has just published a grammar book for people who hate grammar with Educational Design Inc. in New York. Random House just sent him contracts for two children's books.

Wiesinger has two sons and is "blissfully, roller-coasterly married to poet Gael Roziere."

With the publication of Wiesinger's "Point Men," all eight of the winning stories in the Register-Pajaronian's fiction contest will have been published.



whip the system however you could.

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For two years I was out of the

country — teaching English in Merida, Venezuela, a honeymoon adventure with my wife, though

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# POINT

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we of course didn't use the straight term honeymoon. Next installment I got from Tomas on Hayden, he turned out to be going through some changes. By then I'd expected to hear that he'd retired to Hawaii, or at least Las Vegas.

"So," I stated, "a woman."

"He hasn't gone with anyone for a couple of years," Tomas answered. We were sitting on some old deck chairs in his garage among the cars and tools. Noise came from upstairs, along with the creaking of floorboards. Tomas's grandfather, who bought this place to keep Tomas close, was always dropping by doing repairs or drinking coffee, so I told Tomas to cool it when he offered me a joint. He lit up anyway, and took on a peculiar look as he toked, his skinny face and long nose drooping like a sad dog's.

"Hayden's been doing some skag," Tomas indicated his vein.

"You're kidding? Hayden?" By now dope had exploded way beyond the colleges, young people all over the country gulped down smoke like demented firemen. As for me, I had sworn off even marijuana; I had experienced some ugly trouble south of the border that turned me off permanently.

"Why the hell is he doing that?" I said.

It boggled me, this change in Hayden from the person I'd witnessed handling his life at 15. His mother had moved east then, and Hayden started working and paying rent and bills and supporting a car — all while pulling top grades, the same later at Cal. My parents never liked him because he made up his own rules, but to me he was a man while we were still boys.

"He just chippies a couple times a week," Tomas said.

"Great."

Now, regretfully, I also understood Tomas's hangdog expres-

sion: He had kept Hayden company.

"What the hell reason does Hayden have for that?" I asked. "No women problems, no money problems. He's never been unhappy, even when his mother left."

"It's just around." Tomas picked his nails, which were lined with black grease. Tomas's parents had died in a weird hotel fire when he was seven, but he rarely mentioned it, said he didn't even remember them. Now he gazed toward his '51 Chevy pickup, done for drag racing. "It's no big thing."

"He doesn't have kids." I laid the allusion on Tomas none too subtly. "Or a wife who depends on him."

"Hell, man." Tomas pushed away from me. "Hayden can handle it."

I was sick of this drug stuff, sick of Nixon's interminable jungle killings, sick of the lies on the 6 o'clock news. Sick even of my oldest friends. With my wife, we did our obligatory visits, then escaped the states again, working salmon boats and restaurants and schools in Alaska.

