

MARK IWINS

A Sid Vicious Story

By Lester Bangs

Before last Thursday, what I always thought of whenever anyone mentioned Sid Vicious's name was what a photographer friend who'd been on the Pistols' American tour said when I asked him what Sid was like. "A dying child," he answered, rather nonchalantly I thought. "Just like a giraffe that holds open its mouth and you throw the pills up."

Thursday, of course, I got a little more to consider. Sid and his girlfriend Nancy Spungen had been seen stumbling into the elevator on the way to Room 100 in the Chelsea Hotel between 4 and 6 a.m. According to hotel manager Stanley Bard, they were "loners" who slept most of the day, and were out most nights till about this time: "I (Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page one) didn't know anything; wasn't he supposed to be a rock star or something? He was off his rocker: a nice, quiet, pleasant person, but he and his girlfriend were always bruised, and they were both always inebriated or high. I had told them I was gonna throw them out, because they had been knocking at other people's doors when they came home at night and couldn't find their own apartment."

On the whole, it had not been a good week for 21-year-old Sid and 20-year-old Nancy, who were registered as Mr. and Mrs. John Ritchie (Sid's real name). The preceding Sunday, their room on the second floor had gone up in flames when Sid fell asleep with a cigarette in his hand; that was when the management moved them down to 100. On Tuesday, according to one tenant, "Sid and Nancy went down to pay the rent—I was in the lobby at the time—and Sid was sayin' 'I couldn't hit it, man,' right in front of him. Nancy fell down on the sidewalk 'cause they were on Quaaludes and chipped her tooth and cut herself that day. Later she called me up and asked could I find her anything—I'd hit Sid up once. He couldn't find a vein, so I hit him through his scar tissue. That afternoon before that morning was when we saw them most—they were all over the hotel looking for Dilaudid. That's when I realized the incredible tolerance they had for junk."

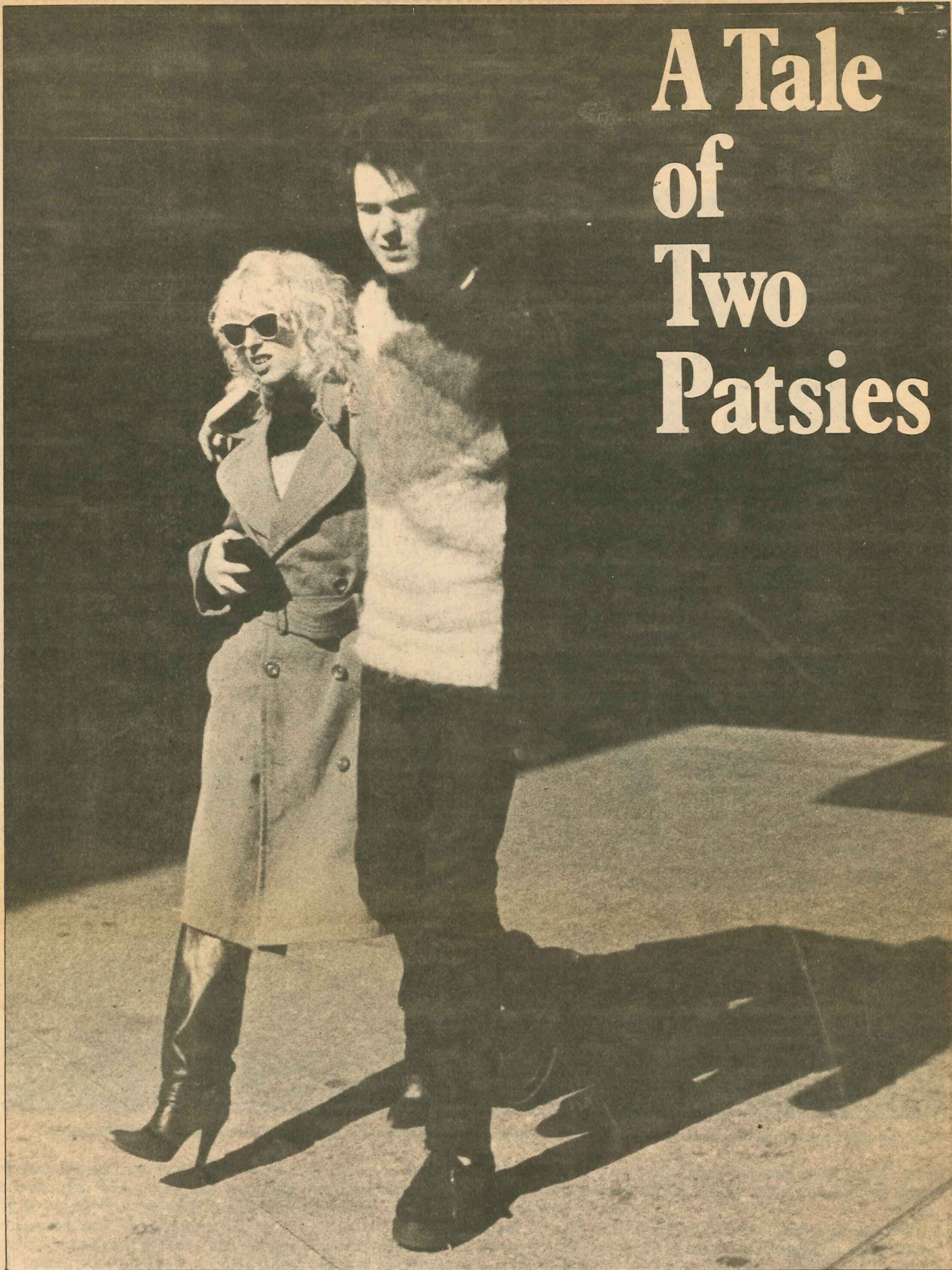
Apparently they didn't find any—there is a lot of junk around those parts, but according to another tenant the couple were so desperate, and their tolerance so high, that they had no regular dealer; everybody agrees that he was on Tuinals, which are known to make you mean, the night that it happened.

About the time *New Zoo Revue* gives way to Bugs Bunny, a friend of Sid and Nancy named Neon Leon, who lives on the same floor and has recently made himself scarce, reportedly heard someone knocking on his door. It was Sid and Nancy, bearing their most prized possessions: Sid's leather jacket, his two gold records, all kinds of Sex Pistols memorabilia and letters from Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren. They asked him to hold the stuff for them and went back to their room. A bit later Leon heard someone pounding desperately at his door, but didn't answer—he told a neighbor that at that point he was frightened. "Of what?" wondered the neighbor.

No one is too clear about what happened then or for the next couple of hours, but at around 9:45 Sid, who later told lawyers that he couldn't remember anything, dialed 911 and, according to the hotel desk, said, "Someone is hurt." When the ambulance attendants arrived they found Nancy's body, nude except for a black bra, under the sink in the bathroom. She had been stabbed in the stomach, and had hemorrhaged. They called the police, who showed up and promptly arrested Sid for what turned out to be a charge of second-degree murder. "We think it was just an argument that started and went too far, like most homicides," Detective Gerald Thomas told me that afternoon as his associates booked Sid, whose pupils looked like they were made of wax, in the next room. "I would hold him responsible for her demise, but I couldn't say whether it was accidental or not."

Then the press moved in.

Sid Vicious was christened John Simon Ritchie on October 5, 1957. He comes from a broken home. He got beat up regularly by gangs in the neighborhood, and didn't get along so well with certain visitors to the household. He quit school at 15, claiming later it bored him. While there he had become friends with one John Lydon, later renamed Rotten, and it was John who tagged him "Sid Vicious," saying in a later interview that he did it as a joke because Sid was so much the other way, and bristled at the name Sid because he thought it sissified. ("So now I'm stuck with it," laughed Sid at the time.) When a rift developed early in 1977 between Rotten and Glen Matlock, original bassist for the Pistols, Sid was the obvious replacement:



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he'd only been playing bass, in emulation of his idol Dee Dee Ramone, for about six months, but Sid had so much charisma that he soon almost eclipsed Rotten. At times the latter seemed perhaps a little too cerebral, even paranoid, whereas Sid was hewn of more gutbucket rock-hero stuff. No one knew what he bragged most about—all the girls he'd fucked, all the junk he'd shot, all the money he'd borrowed, or how he'd kicked shit out of rock writer Nick Kent, who later wrote an admiring profile of Sid in *New Musical Express*.

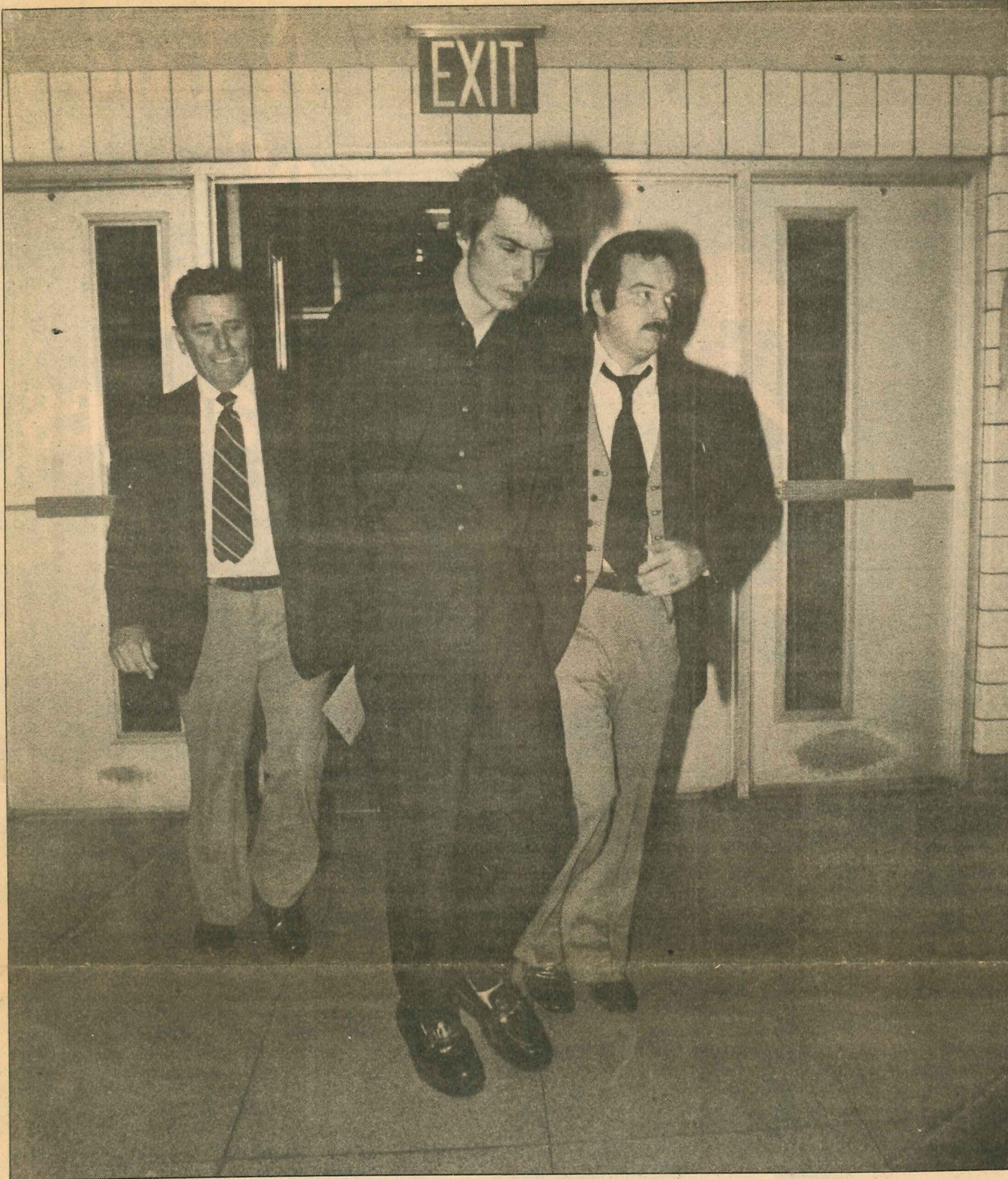
But a lot of people think that in reality he's plenty more Sid than vicious. "Sid had barely even smoked grass before the Pistols' first gig at the 100 Club [March 30, 1976]," says one New Wave artist, and his friend Stiv Bators of the Dead Boys, calling him "generally a very sweet guy," said that although he'd heard Sid had quite a reputation as a street fighter back in London, he'd never seen him make a violent move, in fact had witnessed Sid backing down from fights. "It's his reputation," explains Sex Pistols guitarist Steve Jones. "He's got this thing about his image that he like tries to impress on people. There were two couples down souf in this caf, and

this one guy says, 'You think you're really tough, don't you, well how about this?' And takes a cigarette and puts it out on his hand. So Sid says, 'How about this?' and takes his knife, slashes open his wrist, pours the blood on his cereal, and eats it. That was just the way 'e was. 'E just did it to prove 'e was tough. He'd rather have a scar on 'is face and not have anybody laugh at 'im for the other thing."

All this must have impressed Nancy Spungen. From a well-heeled suburban Philadelphia family, she came to New York in 1975, gravitated to the people hanging around the Heartbreakers, supposedly started doing junk. When the Heartbreakers moved to London, she went with them—"to be a rock star's girlfriend," says one friend. She ended up with Sid. By most accounts, not only were they terrible for each other, but the relationship was epically destructive. Not many people on the punk scene have anything good to say about Nancy Spungen. "Sid said to me on the American tour that Nancy was the only woman he ever loved," says Blondie publicist Roberta Bayley. "He was very poetic about it. I guess she was perfect for him—they could beat each other up

every night and nobody'd mind. They had real fights. Sid really liked to get hit, getting the shit beat out of him. But it wasn't like real s&m—more kiddie stuff." "He was a real masochist and she was real dominant," says *Punk* magazine's Elin Wilder, while Malcolm McLaren, gearing up to claim a suicide, avers, "She was a known masochist. Many times she committed various masochistic acts to attract his attention when it seemed he was going over her. She would make herself ill, cut her wrists."

Things had been deteriorating for the two since the Pistols broke up last spring, and by the time they arrived in New York on August 23, they were nearing bottom. She was managing him now, and there were some who said that Sid didn't even want to play his awful gig at Max's last month, that she made him. Meanwhile, he was getting beaten up regularly on his way to the methadone clinic, which everybody said was why he bought the knife that supposedly killed her. Stiv Bators was with him the day he bought the knife. "The last thing I remember him tellin' me, two days before it happened, he said he'd been fucked with so much he wasn't afraid of getting beat up anymore. Then we took a cab



Malcolm McLaren should have Sid out on \$50,000 bail by now. A new record, supposedly to pay his legal fees, is in the works.

up to Times Square and the two of them bought identical knives, 007 blades, at Playland."

"Everyone hated her," said a friend who'd known them in England and lived at the Chelsea. "They didn't go out much; too sick all the time. When Sid played Max's he was so sick from methadone he couldn't even talk. I think the chances he didn't do it are very high. They played with knives all the time, just stabbing each other lightly. She could have fallen on the knife. I think he cared about her more than he cared about himself. Nancy said in England that Sid would be sick himself before he'd let her be sick. Sexually they had a really normal, good relationship. That was the strong point—the rest of it was just games. They got so wound up in the punk image, so conscious of who they were because the media kept pushing them. Of course they loved it. When I saw them in England, they looked good. When I saw them at the Chelsea, it looked like she'd been run over by a truck, both of them were covered with bruises and sores, and Sid couldn't even talk enough to say hello."

She appears to have been simultaneously his lifeline and, according to most accounts, his ruler. One Chelsea tenant described being introduced to him by Bators: "I held out my hand and she shook it, shielding Sid." One Max's habitue described an incident during his gig there: "A girl stopped to talk to Sid in the hallway. He talked to her till Nancy came by and screamed, 'FUCK OFF!' He snapped, slugged the other girl, smashed her head against the wall, almost cracked it open."

A neighbor describes them a couple of hours before Nancy died: "I was afraid to get in the elevator with them—I saw them at 4 a.m. before it happened—not because of violence but because I was afraid they'd vomit or fall down on me. He didn't even look like he could lift a knife."

Almost everyone who knew them on the punk scene feels that it was probably either an accident or suicide, but some of the Chelsea Hotel's other residents are inclined to look to the environment itself. "I'm scared to death," said one woman. "People come into my room when I'm sleeping at night. We've heard them. They take your stuff when you're not around; when they hear we're here, they slam the door and run. Plus they don't have anyone who asks what you want at the desk—anyone can walk in here and do anything. The police should close this place down, or at least investigate it and the manager a little more thoroughly. The maids are freaking out constantly—they're always finding things like manure and blood in the rooms. You can come in here at 4 a.m. and nobody asks you where you're going. This is dangerous. If somebody wanted to get in this room they could, because the door frame is loose, and so is the window shutter."

"Who knows if Sid Vicious killed that girl? Everybody knows they had a lot of money. You could see big wads of it in her open purse while she wandered around on the nod. They always paid their rent in cash, and they were always dropping it in the lobby—even my eight-year-old daughter referred to him as 'the man that's always got a lot of money in

his hand.' My friend was coming up here that night and saw them—said they were all lovey-dovey. That girl was killed on the first floor—how come nobody heard her screaming? We don't think Sid Vicious did it either, and if he didn't, we wanna know because that killer might still be running around."

Another tenant says: "My first flash was somebody came to the door and she opened it. I told Stanley I didn't wanna be on the third floor or below, because that's where most of the junkies are. He said, 'What's the matter with the third floor? I have 32 foreign-language students staying down there.' I guess he figured out that the junkies can walk up and down to the first three floors and not bother the other tenants in the elevators. But I don't trust the employees either. I've seen 'em take money from people checking in at 5 a.m., and say 'You have to leave at noon,' and then just pocket the money. A girl on the — floor finally put her own lock on her door because the bellboys kept coming in and out stealing cocaine and grass, finally stealing jewelry. She said, 'That's it, a joint now and then is cool, I don't even mind the cocaine, but the jewels . . .' Don't put in the article what floor she's on. One reason I'm saying that is because of my own paranoia of the employees. I don't wanna get robbed myself."

While I was there I made one last attempt at contacting Neon Leon. I phoned his room and a male voice answered. He said that he'd given Leon my previous message, but that Leon wasn't talking to anybody. "Do you know anything?" I asked.

"Them and one other party were in the

room," he said. "I know who it was but I don't wanna say."

"Was it a dealer?"

"I'm not sayin' any more," he snapped, and hung up.

On Friday, bail was set at \$50,000, and Malcolm McLaren flew in. Sid spent the weekend detoxifying at Rikers Island, and by the time you read this McLaren should have him out. Malcolm says that a new Sid Vicious record produced by Steve Jones, supposedly to pay his legal fees, will be in the works "as soon as he's capable. I've got a film of Sid from our movie that I'm going to show to the TV people over here, and what you will see in there is a tremendously charismatic performer. I don't think any of this is as clear-cut as it's being made out to be. Is he innocent? Of course he is. Until proven guilty."

A young woman is dead. I don't care. You probably don't care. The police don't care. The papers don't care. The punks for the most part don't care.

The only people that care are (I suppose) her parents and (I'm almost certain) the boy accused of murdering her. I have no idea whether he did it or not. I do think that they both wanted to die, and now she is dead, and I don't imagine he cares much about living. Such a compliant sacrifice seems somehow unworthy of all this public attention—think of the scene in *The Chelsea Girls* where the S girl says of the bound M man, "This is no fun, he's enjoying it too much!"—until you think of Gary Gilmore and remember how banal and straightforward this bloodlust is.

The only reason anybody much is interested in this homicide in the first place is that he's famous, and is supposed to stand for something. But since almost no one really cares about whatever it is he stands for—these little nerds yelping "please kill me"—were gonna threaten this society?—we're left with celebrity: Sid Vicious isn't famous because of the Sex Pistols (the American public cared about their music, much less what their lyrics were saying?), or even because he's accused of killing somebody—Sid Vicious is famous now because he was semi-famous before.

Sid Vicious is a patsy. He should have been in the Stooges. A lot of people think he was used by the Sex Pistols organization; a lot of people think he still is being exploited. But that was nothing in comparison to what a great scapegoat he makes now. A case like this certainly does bring out the best in people.

Thursday night I went down to Max's to see if I could find anybody who'd known Sid and Nancy. That was where I met Trixie Plunger. She works in a boutique called Revenge, looks like she just slid out of a bin filled with flour and soot where she spent the last six months watching endless replays of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and told me: "I actually think it's kind of cool. I really liked her, but it's cool that him having the reputation he does he stabbed his girlfriend and she's dead."

Trixie is no more typical of the people you meet on the punk scene than Sid and Nancy were, but quotes like that certainly are helpful at moving products of various kinds. *Saturday Night Live* has already whipped up a Sid Vicious joke. "Free Sid Vicious" signs are appearing. There's a picture of him at Bleecker Bob's with "Mack the Knife" written on it. I've heard about one woman who has tapes of his sets at Max's and is looking to get them pressed.

Meanwhile, *Punk* magazine had its annual awards ceremony Friday night and a party at a new club afterwards. Everybody had a great time, and what Sid Vicious talk you did hear mostly centered around how the public reaction to what happened Thursday at the Chelsea and in the papers since was going to affect the rest of them. Tish of Manic Panic and the Sic Fucks found out when she left the bar that night. A bunch of kids from the suburbs drove up, jumped out of their car, and surrounded her and her friends. One guy made an obnoxious sexual overture and she told him to get lost, so he gave her a right to the jaw that put her in the hospital.

Punk-bashing? It beats toga parties cold.

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