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SECONDHAND BLUES

by

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A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri –
St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with an emphasis in Fiction

July 2013

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Abstract

“Secondhand Blues” is the first part of a novel-in-progress of the same title. It is a work of realist fiction that tells the story of an aspiring rock & roll artist, exploring the nature of ambition and how it affects (and is affected by) personal relationships. It also seeks to depict the world as it exists on the fringes of fame and success through the eyes of several different characters whose talents and ambitions have led them to take up residence there.

“Stealing Home” is a coming-of-age story that explores the sometimes elusive concepts of home and family through the eyes of its thirteen-year-old narrator. It was selected as the winner of the 2013 Margery McKinney Short Fiction Award.

Secondhand Blues

One early February afternoon, otherwise unremarkable in the annals of rock & roll history, four mop-headed musicians filed off an airplane and past the young flight attendant—the first with a nod; the next, a wink; the third, a pat on the skirt; and the last, an apologetic grin. She returned a suspicious smirk. Had she been a waitress in a basement nightclub or the stage manager of a low-rent theatre, she might have sussed that these were not four distinct exchanges but one, that the order in which she'd encountered each of the band members had little bearing on the sequence of interactions. From the outside, it often seemed as though they'd shed their individual personas for a collective one. They'd been together since their school days, years before becoming a fixture of the live circuit. They were even local legends by some standards (their own, perhaps), but here they were a relatively unknown quantity. Which was precisely why they'd come—to stake their claim. They'd played hundreds of gigs, but none that promised as much as this one. This was the big time—this was *international*.

There were no throngs of screaming, teenaged girls eagerly awaiting their arrival, though a few middle-aged heads would turn in false recognition as they emerged onto the concourse at Reno-Tahoe International. No ears would perk at their thick Liverpool scouse as they proclaimed in quick succession the need to *hit the pisser* or *grab a bite* or *find our shit first*, but a well-traveled commuter might shift his attention from the latest Grisham potboiler long enough to place the mild Memphis drawl. Only one could pull off a convincing mockney accent, and that was reserved for the stage. They weren't *fab* or even four, really, but five—or would be soon provided the 3:15 from O'Hare was on schedule.

No, they weren't *those* four musicians.

They weren't even the Rolling Stones—not really. But on a good night, they came pretty damn close. Close enough, perhaps, to rekindle the brief nostalgia of watching Ed Sullivan on the Magnavox, of listening to the copy of *December's Children* or *Aftermath* an older brother left when he

enrolled in college or enlisted in the army. And if you were old enough to have actually seen the Stones live in concert through the haze of the late 60s—a whiskey flask, a tab of acid, a joint passed three ways—well, Mother’s Little Helper probably sounded as good as you *thought* the Stones had back then. There were certainly other versions of the original—Sticky Fingers, Hot Rocks, Jack Flash, Their Satanic Majesties, The Strolling Roans, even an all-chick band called Some Girls—but none of them were among the 128 tribute acts that were converging on the Biggest Little City in the World that week. For the next ten days Reno, Nevada, would host a veritable *who’s that?* of rock & roll facsimiles, all vying for a \$50,000 cash prize, a two-week gig in Las Vegas, and the prestigious title of “International Rock Tribute Champion, 2005.”

#

If Mitch had any doubt they’d reached their destination, it would have been quickly dispelled as the band descended the escalator into the main terminal, which was populated not by luggage carousels or ticket counters or newsstands but by some two hundred blinking and clinking slot machines. Mother’s Little Helper had not been in Reno fifteen minutes and opportunity was already calling their name.

“Hey, Mitch,” said Tommy. “Gimme a dollar.”

Mitch shook his head.

“Dibbs, lemme borrow a dollar.”

“C’mon,” said Kevin. “Let’s get to baggage claim first.”

Tommy held his hand out to Dibbs. “C’mon, just one spin.”

“Why don’t you use your own money?” said Mitch.

“Cause I don’t have anything smaller than a twenty.” Tommy never had anything smaller than twenties and had a special knack for preserving them. He always insisted on giving cashiers exact change, too, though rarely his own. He’d once scoured Dibbs’s van for three pennies to avoid breaking a quarter at a 7-Eleven.

Dibbs pulled a crumpled single out of his back pocket and handed it to Tommy, who crossed

to the first machine and tried to coax it into the slot.

“That was my emergency stripper dollar,” Dibbs sighed.

Kevin checked the time again. “Hurry up—before someone walks off with our stuff.”

Tommy let out a hoot, and the machine dropped a hail of coins into the tray.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Mitch said as Tommy palmed the last of the quarters into his cargo pockets. “How much is there?”

“I dunno,” said Tommy. “About forty bucks. Hey, maybe it’s a sign or something. Maybe the gods of fortune are watching over us.”

Mitch nodded. “Are those the same gods that let you put your shirt on backward this morning?”

“What—the hell?” Tommy flipped out the collar of his t-shirt to reveal the size and washing directions. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“I just did.”

“Let’s go,” said Kevin. Two of his vintage guitars were about to enter public domain.

Tommy zipped up his jacket and turned back to Dibbs. “Why didn’t *you* tell me?”

“Because it was funny.”

Tommy huffed, grabbed his carry-on and turned away. Dibbs caught his shoulder, extended an empty palm, which Tommy stared into until he wiggled his fingers.

“Oh, yeah.” Tommy fished out four quarters and dropped them in Dibbs’s hand, then hitched up his pants and jingled after Kevin.

Dibbs considered the coins.

“Don’t worry,” said Mitch, patting him on the back. “Maybe they’ll have coin-op strippers.”

Baggage claim consisted of not a single carousel, but fifty winding yards of interconnected conveyor belts strewn with the gear of at least a half dozen other bands. It was unlikely another musician would swipe an instrument, but Kevin would be relieved to have his guitars securely in hand. Most of the guys on the tribute circuit were pretty straight shooters, but there were a few

you couldn't trust to hold a side door while you snuck a smoke or took a leak in the parking lot.

"I'm gonna go take a leak," said Tommy. "Grab my stuff."

"Grab your own stuff," said Mitch.

Tommy put a hand on his crotch and gave a tug. Mitch flipped him a finger.

They'd brought the bare minimum with them—Kevin's Fender and Gibson, Brandon's Vox Teardrop and sitar, Dibbs's Framus Star, Tommy's drum kit, two garment bags full of costumes and a duffel a piece. Brandon had shipped everything else to the hotel earlier in the week. In fact, Brandon had made all of the travel and lodging arrangements two months earlier—all the others had to do was not miss their plane. He'd have flown out with them, but since all routes from Memphis to Reno included a stopover at either Dallas-Fort Worth or O'Hare, anyway, he'd decided to kill an extra bird by leaving a couple days early and visiting his parents in Chicago.

Mitch always felt a twinge of guilt when Brandon flew back home every few months; he lived ten miles from his own parents, but had seen them maybe twice in the past year—when his older brother Davey brought the family up for Thanksgiving and two weeks later, when the old man had his stroke. It was Brandon who had broken the news to Mitch, in the middle of a three-show weekend—Dayton, Terre Haute, Bowling Green.

"Is he dead?" It wasn't the first time Mitch had asked the question.

"No."

"Do any of the others know?"

Brandon shook his head. "Do you want me to tell them?"

"No. I will," said Mitch. "On the way home tomorrow night."

"Alright," said Brandon. "But at least call home."

Mitch's first thought had been to call his girlfriend, Lainee, but he realized he didn't have her number anymore because she had moved—and because she hadn't been his girlfriend for almost three years. He spent that night with a dark-haired grad student he'd spotted from the stage and met later at an after-party hosted by the local classic rock station that sponsored the show. Mitch

called his mother from the girl's apartment the next morning after she left him in the kitchen with her roommate and disappeared into the shower.

He still spoke with his mother infrequently—had told her just a few days ago that he was leaving for Reno—but he hadn't been back to the house since his father returned from the hospital.

Within a few minutes, Kevin and Dibbs had assembled a makeshift pyre of duffel bags and guitars. Mitch, with his lone bag slung over his shoulder, watched the other two pull the last of Tommy's drums off the belt.

"Is that all you got?" asked Kevin.

Mitch reached into his shirt pocket and drew out a silver Hohner harmonica. Kevin gave him a stone faced stare. Mitch blew a single note. Kevin threw a duffel at him.

Tommy returned sipping a fresh bottle of Mountain Dew and surveyed the pile of gear.

"Hey—where's my snare?"

Mitch pocketed the harmonica and shouldered Kevin's bag. "Chill out." He pointed to the smallest of three drum cases. "It's right here."

"That's not the snare, that's the rack tom." Tommy's annoyance was shifting into panic. He'd once forgotten to put his cymbals in the van for a gig in Fort Smith and had to sneak some out of a high school band room. Another time, he played a whole set with a pair of wooden spoons.

"I told you we should have sent your kit ahead with the rest of our stuff," said Kevin. "You'll just have to use the stage kit, I guess."

Tommy looked at him as if he'd just suggested using someone else's toothbrush.

"Is that it?" said Dibbs, pointing.

"Where?"

"On the cart that fat dude just rolled outside."

"What?!" Tommy handed the soda to Dibbs and took off down the terminal, jingling like a janitor.

“You really think that guy swiped his drum?” asked Mitch.

“Nah.” Dibbs took a swig of Tommy’s soda, lifted a garment bag from the pile. “It’s right here.”

#

They had a little over an hour to burn before Brandon’s flight was scheduled to arrive. They might have gone ahead and taken the shuttle to the hotel, but by the time they got there someone would have to come right back, anyway, so they camped out in a waiting area near the slots into which Tommy quickly disappeared. The airport was rife with tribute acts—there had been at least two others on their flight alone—and Mitch, Kevin and Dibbs played at “bandspotting” for a while. Two would make guesses and the third would have to approach the person(s) in question for confirmation. Mitch successfully picked out Black Sabbath, the Police, Quiet Riot, and R.E.M. Kevin found Rush, the Cure, and Bon Jovi. Dibbs spotted Blondie and the Ramones. Among their most notable misses were a Jimi Hendrix/Sly Stone who turned out to be Lenny Kravitz, the Sweet/Slade who turned out to be Foghat, and a Billy Idol/Bryan Adams who turned out to be actor Anthony Michael Hall from *The Breakfast Club*. The game broke up after a woman who was most certainly neither Mama Cass nor Meatloaf threatened to call security on Dibbs.

Within a half hour, Tommy had gambled away all of his winnings and was eighty dollars in the hole. He slumped into the chair next to Dibbs who had been playing Tetris on a beat-up Gameboy. Dibbs passed the game to Tommy and pulled out a paperback. Kevin tuned one of his guitars while Mitch wrote in a small spiral notebook with the stub of a No. 2 pencil. He made brief notes with pensive interludes, as though he were writing a poem or solving a crossword.

“Sing me something,” said Kevin.

“Nah,” said Mitch. “Not now.”

Kevin plucked a lone arpeggio. “C’mon.”

Mitch closed his notebook, thought a moment. *She can kill with a smile, she can wound with her eyes...*

“No,” said Kevin. “One of yours.”

She can ruin your faith with her casual lies...

“C’mon, Mitch.”

He closed his eyes, shook his head. *She only reveals what she wants you to see. She hides like a child, but she’s always a woman to me...*

Kevin sighed and picked up the acoustic riff, softly on his unplugged Gibson.

Mitch sang the next verse. This was another of their games—his and Kevin’s—a sort of creative sparring, a sharpening of swords. *Chorus*. Mitch would offer a line, or Kevin a riff. But the point of this challenge wasn’t to stump or one-up the other. It wasn’t really about competition at all, but concurrence. *Third verse*. Occasionally, Mitch would throw out an original lyric, Kevin a few bars of something he’d been tinkering with. *Mhmm bridge*. It wasn’t really songwriting, but it was something. *Second chorus*. They’d never played anything of their own for an audience, never recorded a note, never even written a whole song. *Last verse*. They were better at this, at other men’s music. You knew when you’d gotten it right—you had a point of reference.

A small crowd had gathered and offered polite applause before dissipating. A lone, insincere clap lingered as four men formed an affected tableau. They were fronted by the lone clapper—a dark-eyed glower, a square chin, a thick wavy mane. It was Leo the Lion.

“Well, look here boys,” he said. “I’ll be damned if it ain’t the Mothers.”

“And I’ll be damned if it ain’t the Reacharounds,” said Kevin.

“It’s the Back Door Men!” said the short one, breaking pose to jab a finger. Leo threw up a hand to silence him.

“Oh,” said Kevin. “What did I say?”

Leo ignored him, pointed his square chin at Mitch, who was still seated next to Kevin. “Hello, Mitchell.”

“Hello, Leopold.”

Leo the Lion let this glib familiarity slide, too. “So, what are you ladies doing so far out of Kansas?”

“Memphis,” corrected Tommy.

“That’s an *illusion*,” said Leo. “Maybe you should read a book once in a while like your pal Dibble here.”

Dibbs did not bother to look up from his paperback.

“I hear the dictionary’s a good one,” said Mitch.

No skin off the Lion’s nose.

“Maybe they came to watch some real bands,” said the short one.

“We got an invite out of Des Moines,” Tommy said. “Same as you.”

“Well, it’s not quite the same, is it?” said Leo. “Considering we won at Des Moines and you finished—what was it?”

“Fourth,” said the short one.

“Fourth,” repeated Leo. “Really scraping the barrel this year, aren’t they?”

The Back Door Men had actually finished second overall at the Des Moines semifinals, but had qualified for Reno by winning Best Classic Rock Act by one point over Mother’s Little Helper. Mother’s Little Helper’s fourth place finish in a tight field *wasn’t* enough to advance, but the tourney judges awarded Mitch the Best Front Man trophy over Leo, preferring his more subtle Jagger interpretation to Leo’s overly preening Morrison.

“You know what I liked best about Jim Morrison,” Mitch said, not to Leo but Kevin. “He knew when to quit.”

“You’re an asshole, Morrow.”

The bad blood ran deeper than Des Moines, though. All the way, perhaps, to St. Charles, Missouri, where the two bands co-headlined a show at the Family Arena in December of ’99 that started with a coin toss to determine who would play first and devolved into what fans still referred to as Little Altamont.

“That he is,” said Brandon stepping around the wall of Back Door Men. “But he’s *our* asshole.”

The wall broke and Leo the Lion deflated, just a bit. Five-to-four—the odds had shifted.

“C’mon, boys,” he said. “Let’s leave the Mothers to their knitting. We’ll see them next weekend—if they make it that far.”

Tommy bristled as he threw out the old schoolyard vow. “We’ll be there.”

The Back Door Men left in file, the last trailing a single raised finger.

Kevin checked his watch. “You’re early.”

“I switched flights and took the redeye this morning,” said Brandon. “I’ve already checked us in at the hotel.” He handed each of them a plastic keycard. “We’ve got two rooms between us and twenty dollars a day in lounge or buffet credit.” He looked Tommy in the eye. “Stay out of the minibar.”

“Twenty bucks total?” asked Tommy.

“Each,” said Brandon. “But that still won’t go far here, so use it wisely.”

Kevin put his guitar back in its case. “Why’d you switch flights? Thought you were visiting your folks.”

“Yeah, well, forty-eight hours is about all I can take of them in one stretch,” said Brandon. “Besides, I wanted to make sure UPS got the rest of our stuff here, look up the local music shops if they hadn’t.”

Brandon Sharp had always been ahead of the game, had been since Mitch had first met him and Kevin at Memphis State. He’d stepped so readily into the de facto role of band manager (or fallen into it by default) that it was sometimes easy to forget what a talented musician he actually was. With post-grad degrees in both performance and music business—ground his father had already tilled, first as a session musician in the late 60s and 70s and later as the owner of a string of blues bars from Chicago to New Orleans—he was the only one of them with any sort of pedigree, and Mitch often wondered why Brandon had stuck around beyond those first few years.

“I checked out a couple of the stages, too,” said Brandon. “All pretty much the same—four house guitar amps, four stand mics and a couple wireless, drum kit and amp, Hammond keyboard. It’s all plug-and-play, so we should have no problem switching over to our own stuff, but there’s

only twenty minutes between shows so, Tommy, you'll have to be quick with your kit. Our warm-up gig is tomorrow night, not at our hotel but the other, so we need to make sure to give ourselves plenty of time. Even you, Mitch."

Mitch offered a two-finger salute. It really wasn't that the others were too loosely strung to do what needed to be done offstage, but that Brandon had always done it first. Perhaps it was a Chicago thing; Brandon was just a bit more tightly wound.

"You getting all this, Dibbs?"

Dibbs nodded without looking up.

"What the hell are you reading, anyway?"

Mitch extended a long leg and lifted the edge of the book with his shoe—Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.

"Are you kidding me?"

"I contain multitudes," said Dibbs, turning the page.

#

Mitch sat alone at a dimly-lit high top, his harmonica glinting like a switchblade in his hand as he watched the man on stage gesture menacingly, his eyes wild beneath a thick tangle of black hair. His arms were well-muscled and tattooed from shoulder to wrist, the mic cord wound around each fist like a garrote. *If you want blood, you've got it!* Mitch had picked a table halfway between the overamped speakers and the din of slot machines that poured into the lounge each time the door opened, one that was relatively clear of the thick cloud of smoke lingering in the center of the room. His notebook lay open, the pencil stuck into the spiral. He'd written nothing but noted everything: the cuffed bell-bottomed jeans, the red-and-black striped tee, the white denim vest (double breasted), the devilish grin—especially the grin.

For a tribute singer, voice was only part of the illusion—you either had the chops or you didn't. Those that didn't could often get by with a good band and great hair. A natural resemblance helped, too (Mitch was the only Jagger on the circuit who could pass for the 1966 model), but could be cheated quite a bit with makeup and wigs. Most acts wore authentic

costumes as well, custom-tailored or cobbled from vintage clothing shop racks. Then there were the physical mannerisms, the crudest of which simply required old concert footage or music videos and a few hours of mirror time. But facial expressions were much more difficult, often overlooked or poorly aped (how many Elvis impersonators wore Sid Vicious sneers?) Yet when mastered, this was the subtle sort of detail that sold the illusion to the front of the house and, more important, the judges.

Some two dozen fans had pressed to the open area in front of the stage and another thirty or forty were seated at tables or standing around the bar in the back—a decent crowd for six o’clock on a Sunday night especially for a warm-up show. Mother’s Little Helper had barely pulled that many at eight o’clock the night before. Shouts of recognition broke from the house three or four chords into each song, skillfully strummed by a man about Mitch’s age dressed in a schoolboy’s uniform complete with tie and knee breaches. *Livin’ easy, lovin’ free, season ticket on a one-way ride!* His head thrashed so violently that he’d shaken off his black cap before the first chorus, spilling out a mass of curly dishwater blond locks. The crowd egged him on with chants of *Angus, Angus, Angus*.

Mitch had never seen High Voltage before, but they were confirming everything he had heard, that Andy Blount played cleaner in concert than the real Angus and that Ben Casey’s ability to channel Bon Scott was downright spooky. They were one of the few acts that had attained legitimate superstar status on the circuit, sweeping all four categories—Best Front Man, Best Guitarist, Best Hard Rock Act, Best of Tourney—at the Regional Semifinal in Pensacola and were among the favorites to win one or more “Tribbies” there in Reno.

The crowd let out the loudest cheer of the show as the band went into “It’s a Long Way to the Top (If You Want to Rock ’n Roll)” —not when they picked out the opening riff, but when the singer slung a set of bagpipes over his shoulder.

You’ve got to be kidding me, thought Mitch. *Can he really play those?*

The door opened just as a jackpot of what must have been fifty dollars’ worth of nickels dropped into a steel tray. Everyone within earshot looked back for a moment, annoyed, then

turned back toward the stage to find that, yes, he really *could* play the bagpipes.

Everyone but Mitch.

A small timid-looking blonde stood just inside the door, somewhat embarrassed by the unexpected attention, perhaps because she looked just a bit too young to be in a bar in the first place, and a casino bar at that. No one but Mitch seemed to notice anything but the brief distraction, though. The bouncer resumed leafing through a copy of *Auto Trader*; the bartender, filling an overhead rack with clean snifters. She surveyed the room as if searching for a familiar face or maybe just an open table. Mitch was still watching her so intently that it took a moment before he realized she was looking back. Caught, he shifted his gaze to a clock on the wall with as much nonchalance as he could muster then turned to his notebook and pulled out the pencil. By the time he dared to look back over his shoulder, she was gone.

“Looking for someone?”

Mitch started; the blonde was at the other side of his table.

“No. I was just—” He gestured toward the bar. “No, not really.”

She pulled out a stool. “Do you mind, then?”

“No,” said Mitch. “I mean, yes. I mean, sure—no problem.”

“Well, I like a man who can make up his mind.”

He’d had it all wrong; she was neither timid nor easily embarrassed. She wasn’t even blonde, not really, but brunette with highlights—honey or caramel or some other edible color.

“I’m just teasing,” she said. “You were the only one who didn’t look at me like I’d crashed a funeral when I came in. Besides, I think everyone else here is like in their thirties or forties, at least.”

Mitch had been in his thirties for exactly one month, but suddenly felt much older. “So,” he asked. “What are you drinking?”

“Me? Oh no, it’s your table. I’ve got it.”

“I’ve already got a tab,” he said, though he’d been nursing the same drink since he got there.

“They’ll just charge it to my room. Besides, you can’t possibly be old enough to buy alcohol.”

Did that come across as playful or creepy? He’d settle for lame.

“Please,” she said. “I’ve been 21 since I was 17.”

Lame it is.

She waved at the waitress.

“What can I get you, sweetheart?”

The girl lifted Mitch’s glass to her nose. “Another Jack and Coke for—” She waited a beat for him to pick up the cue.

“Mitch.”

“Another Jack and Coke for Mitch and a Bacardi and Coke for Paula.” She cocked her head toward him. “That’s me.”

Oi! Oi! Oi! The crowd was chanting again, between the singer’s lines.

“I love this one!” Paula said. “These guys are pretty good. I hope they do ‘Shook Me All Night Long’—or did I already miss it?”

“This is a Bon Scott era tribute,” said Mitch. “They won’t play anything but the older stuff.”

“I thought that *was* older stuff,” she said, wrinkling her brow. “So they don’t play like half their songs?”

“Nope,” said Mitch. “Now, Thunderstruck will play the whole AC/DC catalog, but they’re nowhere near as good as these guys—they’re more like a...a cover band.”

“I gotcha,” she said. “I came up to see Fair Warning, and they don’t do any Van Hagar stuff.”

“I don’t think they’re in the lineup tonight.”

“I know that,” she said. “I meant this week. They play tomorrow night at the Golden Spike.”

“Is that where you’re staying?” *Smooth, Mitch. Real smooth.*

“Ha! No,” she said. “I’m three blocks over at the El Camino with four poker machines and no pool.”

High Voltage closed out their 40-minute set with a blistering rendition of “Rocker,” then broke

down their personal equipment to clear the stage for the next band. Each show started right on the hour.

“Up from where?” asked Mitch.

“Hmmm?”

“Up from where? You said you came *up* to Reno.”

“Oh. From L.A.,” said Paula. “Well, Pasadena, actually.”

“So, what do you do in Pasadena? I mean beside listen to Van Halen and pass fake IDs?”

“Well,” she said. “I’m a dancer—sort of.”

Mitch caught himself peeking at a lean leg extending from her denim miniskirt. She was kind of short and her toe just brushed the bottom rung of the stool. “Really,” he said. “Table or pole?”

“That’s rude.”

It was—just a bit.

“If you *must* know,” she said, “I’m an NBA dancer. Well, was.”

“You mean like a Laker Girl or something?”

“Clippers.”

He stifled a snicker; she feigned a scowl.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know they were still in the NBA.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, I guess, because I didn’t make the squad this season.”

Mitch changed the subject in hopes of regaining his footing. “So you really came all the way to Reno to see a Van Halen tribute band? Aren’t there like a dozen in L.A.?”

“Not like Fair Warning,” said Paula. “My mom said they reminded her of the real thing. And she would know—she saw Van Halen at the Whisky back in ’77, before they even cut their first record. I’ve never seen them myself, of course—they broke up like the year I was born. But my mom had all the albums, you know, and I’ve seen all the videos on VH1.”

Van Halen had split in 1985; Mitch was already in fourth grade.

“I’ll bet I’ve been to every Fair Warning show in California since I was like 16,” said Paula.

“They’re pretty awesome. It almost makes you feel like you were there too, you know, back then.”

She hesitated. “You must think I’m a real kook, following a band five hundred miles into the desert like some kind of groupie.”

That was the very word that came to Mitch’s mind.

“I mean, they’re not even a real band, right? They’re just sort of reliving someone else’s glory days—kinda sad, I guess, if you really think about it.” She paused again, as if she was sitting at a mental intersection waiting for the light to turn. “So what about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you,” she said. “What are you doing in Reno?”

“I’m in a tribute band.”

“Oh my God,” she laughed. “I am so sorry.”

“Because of what you just said?” asked Mitch. “Or because you’re laughing about it now?”

“Both?”

He looked away, feigned disinterest. He finished the last half of his drink in one draught.

“No, really,” said Paula. “That was rude of me.”

He smiled from behind his glass, just a little. “So we’re even?”

“Fair enough,” she said. “So who are you with? No wait—let me guess. Turtleneck, swept bangs, pouty lips—is it an emo band?”

“You know, I don’t have to sit here and take this,” he said. “There are a lot of other women in this room.”

“Not with all of their teeth.” She flashed a big toothpaste-commercial grin. “Let’s see—it’s definitely not a hair metal band. Ummm...I dunno. I give up. Who are you?”

“Mother’s Little Helper.”

Not a clue.

“It’s a Stones tribute band,” he said.

“The Rolling Stones? Aren’t they like seventy years old?”

“They weren’t always.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “You’re Mick Jagger! I mean, when he was like young and hot.”

“Well,” said Mitch. “I try.”

She pointed to the harmonica he turned on the table. “You play that?”

He nodded.

“You any good?”

Mitch shrugged. “We’re here.”

#

She looked good, she looked hotter than hell! Love Gun emerged from a cloud of vanilla-scented fog to a collective cheer and scattered cat calls, decked out in authentic sequined jumpsuits, platform boots and full makeup. Paula convinced Mitch to join the growing crowd around the stage. It didn’t take long to see they were better showmen than musicians, but he knew that was probably true of the original, too. Paula, however, was completely absorbed and Mitch soon found himself more taken by her enthusiasm than the show itself. She knew every song by heart, pounded out drumbeats with her fists, ground out guitar riffs with her hips. He’d seen that kind of enthusiasm for real bands, but rarely for a tribute act. He wondered if at any moment she might not pull off her tight black tee and twirl it over her head or slip out of her panties and slingshot them onto the stage. He wondered how many other guys in the audience were wondering the same thing. He pressed a little closer to her.

When the band downshifted into “Hard Luck Woman,” the crowd broke a little at the edges. Paula poked Mitch in the chest. “C’mon—you can buy me that drink now.”

She switched to straight rum; him, to straight Coke.

“I didn’t know you were so into KISS,” he said. “I thought you said you were a Van Halen girl?”

“I’m into a lot of things,” she said.

Mitch hoped he might be one of them before the night was done.

“KISS was my mom’s favorite,” Paula said. “She was like their biggest fan ever. I always wanted to see them just like she had, with the makeup and everything. I guess this is the next best thing.” She stopped as though she were suddenly bored by the sound of her own voice, but by the time Mitch caught the cue, she started up again. “You know that song ‘Christine Sixteen?’”

“Yeah.”

“That was her.”

“Your mom?”

She nodded.

“*Your* mom was ‘Christine Sixteen?’”

“Yup,” said Paula. “That’s how I got my name.”

“Gene Simmons wrote that song.”

“Yeah,” she said. “But he wrote it about my mom and Paul.”

“Your mother named you after Paul Stanley?”

Paula poured half of his soda into the rest of her drink. “Yup.”

Whether it was true or not, Mitch thought that might just be one of the coolest things he had ever heard.

“So what’s in the little black notebook?” she asked.

“Notes.”

She stared at him half amused, half irritated. He picked up his glass and sipped at the bare ice cubes.

“You’re a real hardass,” she said.

It was the furthest thing from the truth, really—but he was quite pleased to have pulled it off.

“It’s mostly songs and stuff,” he relented.

“Like Stones lyrics?”

“Yeah,” said Mitch. “Some of ’em are.”

Your life is trite and jaded, boring and confiscated—if that's your best, your best won't dooooo! Mitch and Paula sang along as Stay Hungry churned out their showstopper in a classic display of pure guitar wankorama. Mitch was in the middle of a blistering air solo when a tall, slender man with a red mullet approached their table.

“Figures I’d find you at a fuckin’ Twisted Sister show.”

“Hey, Ziggy,” said Mitch. “Paula, this is Ziggy.”

“Hello, Ziggy.”

“Ello, love.”

Paula snickered; everything had been funny for the past half hour. “Are you in Mitch’s band?”

“Am *I* in Mitch’s band?” Ziggy looked at Mitch who shrugged. “No, love, I do my own thing.”

“Ooh, let me guess,” said Paula.

Another look from Ziggy.

Mitch nodded. “No, really. She’s good.”

“Let me see.” Paula sized Ziggy up. “British accent, high cheekbones, edgy attitude—are you Billy Idol?”

“That’s it, love,” said Ziggy. “You nailed it.”

She let out a little squeal.

“Where’d you find her, then?” he asked Mitch. His feathers were ruffled (Ziggy *hated* Billy Idol), and Mitch found himself more amused for his part in this than usual—and impressed with Paula for hers.

“She found me.”

“Right,” said Ziggy. “Well, while you’ve been sitting here tripping on Teen Spirit and Aquanet, some of us have been working.”

As strange as the words seemed coming from those wide, thin lips, Mitch knew that they were as true as the mild cockney accent that tinged them. There was no denying that Ziggy Stardust *was* the hardest working man on the tribute circuit. Here was a singer who had actually opened for

himself as Robert Palmer (and a damned good one) for six months following Palmer's untimely death. But that wasn't the half of it. Other acts put in their hour or two on stage two or three times a week then headed back to their Best Westerns and Howard Johnsons and Super 8s to nurse vocal cords or bandage blisters, to spray Lysol into costumes or rub Noxema into eyeliner. They watched UFC championships or Discovery Channel specials, played Madden '04 or Magic the Gathering. They ordered buy-one-get-one pizzas or went out for all-night truck stop waffles. They called pregnant wives or ailing mothers or credit card companies. But Ziggy never clocked out; he was a bona fide rockstar twenty-four/seven. Ziggy Stardust was always *on*.

"You don't play again till Wednesday," said Mitch. "Same as us."

"You do realize how many booking agents are here this week?" asked Ziggy.

"I let Brandon and Kevin worry about all that."

"Who are Brandon and Kevin?" Paula asked.

"They're the help, love," said Ziggy. "The ones who keeps Mitch's schedule full of rib festivals and high school proms."

"We've never played a—" Mitch wanted to say *high school*, but honestly couldn't. "Prom."

"Yeah? Well, I guess you can wait for fuckin' Brandon or Kevin to tell you who else is here."

Mitch shrugged again, not because he didn't care but because Ziggy would tell him anyway.

"Alright, I'll tell you." Ziggy's tone dropped as though the excitement were Mitch's and the indifference his own. "IN...X...S."

"You mean Devil Inside?" said Mitch. "Yeah, I saw them at—"

"No, not Devil Inside! Why the hell would I be pissin' myself over that sorry lot of wankers?"

"I thought they were all right."

"It's not fuckin' Devil Inside!" said Ziggy. "I'm talking about the *real* INXS—here, in Reno."

"So what?" said Mitch. "They're not even a band anymore, are they? I mean, Hutchence has been dead for, what, eight years."

"That's what I'm on about!" said Ziggy. "The Farris boys are looking for a new front man.

They're going to have a competition this summer—and the whole thing's going to be on national television.”

“Like American Idol?” said Paula.

“No, not like American fuckin’ Idol.”

“Alright—so, how do you get in?” asked Mitch. “Golden ticket in a chocolate bar?”

“Yes, Mitch, in a fuckin’ chocolate bar. There’s a vendor selling them on the street outside an auditorium in L.A. where, coincidentally, they happen to be holding open auditions in a few weeks.”

A reality show where the winner stepped into a ready-made gig with a legitimate rock band? Mitch had certainly dreamt of being in a *real* band—one that wrote *real* songs and performed at *real* concerts and was signed to a *real* record label. They all did, even Ziggy. Especially Ziggy. But that was like saying every sandlot hooligan dreamt of being a big league ballplayer. Sure, a few tribute circuit legends had made the jump—Ripper Owen had performed briefly and even recorded with Judas Priest; Tommy Thayer was promoted from Cold Gin to KISS proper after Ace Frehley’s left (again)—but these were incredibly rare exceptions. Or were they really that exceptional? Owen had co-written exactly *one* song during his stint with Priest; Thayer had really been an understudy who simply donned Frehley’s makeup and assumed his Spaceman persona. Mitch himself had been a student of Mick Jagger for years, and certainly, with a bit of Jim Morrison layered in—real Morrison, not that shtick Leo the Lion peddled—he might pull off a passable Michael Hutchence. But was that really what they were looking for? Was it really what Mitch was looking for?

Then there was Kevin and the guys. They weren’t just band mates but friends—almost family, really. Even Brandon. And they were doing all right, weren’t they? They weren’t exactly raking it in, but Brandon and Kevin kept them busy enough that Mitch hadn’t really needed to look for other work in years, not since he answered a modeling cattle call and ended up in his underwear on page 63 of the Sears catalog—next to a slightly pigeon-chested (and then blond) Ziggy Stardust. Anyway, L.A. was a world away from Memphis—it might as well be Africa. He’d burn

through what little savings he had just getting there, never mind food or a bed. Anyway, Mother's Little Helper was already booked for most of the spring; how many shows would they have to cancel or rescheduled? It was a gamble Mitch could not see himself taking, not even in Reno.

"So are you gonna do it?" Mitch asked.

"One of us should," said Ziggy. "Or else they're gonna end up hiring some fuckin' Elvis impersonator."

"Seems like an awful long shot," said Mitch. "I mean, pulling up everything for a chance at a chance."

"They didn't come all the way to Reno for nothing," said Ziggy. "I expect they're here to extend a few personal invites." He brushed a fleck of lint from his shoulder. "Would improve the odds quite a bit, don't you think?"

"Maybe," said Mitch.

A spikey haired poseur screeched through the next act's opener claiming to be both an antichrist and an anarchist, as if neither was sufficiently intimidating on its own merit.

"Well," said Ziggy. "I s'pose I'll leave you two alone to enjoy a shitty tribute to a shitty band."

"Awww," Paula sighed in mock protest. "But you just got here."

"Sorry, love," said Ziggy. "But I've got a date with Joan Jett and Cherie Curie." He gave Mitch a disappointed glance. "I'd ask Mitch to tag along, but I see he's already got himself a runaway."

#

The Pissed Sexdolls show was exactly what Ziggy had predicted. After a couple more drinks and the exchange of travel anecdotes—including a complete play-by-play of Paula's fifteen-hour bus ride—Mitch realized that the evening was waning, that possibility was giving way to expectation. In thirty years, he'd had perhaps a dozen encounters with women that could be measured in anything more than hours, four that had outlasted a stick of deodorant (Lainee had been the last). By now, after six hours of casual conversation framed by underpaid rockers and overpriced liquor, most would have moved into the third act—climax, dénouement. (Sex, waffles.)

That's certainly what he'd have expected of a night out with Ziggy Stardust, of the women that gravitated toward Ziggy. Mitch began to wonder if Paula might be one of those girls, one that would sleep with him after a few hours of karaoke and fruity cocktails, after the music and smoke and alcohol had blurred him into someone he resembled and her into someone he wanted to be with. And then, he began to worry that she was.

It wasn't a question of whether he wanted to sleep with her or not, it was that what he wanted more was to see her again, and he wasn't sure if the two would work in that order, or if trying it the other way around would blow his chance at either. He had to do something soon, though; it was already 12:30—time for the night to break one way or the other. Another half hour and he'd be *that* guy, the one who hangs on too long waiting for her to make the move. When Ziggy was around, he kept Mitch from being *that* guy by being the *other* guy—the one who shows up late and cuts out early and doesn't care if you come too but knows you will because what else are you going to do, sit around and wait for something better to happen? Sometimes Mitch was the *other* guy when he was out with Kevin or Tommy and Dibbs. But none of them were here tonight. Not even Ziggy, not anymore. Mitch didn't need him around to fuck it up, anyway. He could do that himself. 12:35. Damnit.

The next-to-last band of the night closed their set with an extra crunchy version of “Bang A Gong (Get It On)” after which Mitch began to excuse himself under the pretense of lingering jet lag and a nonexistent practice session the next morning.

“I think my body's still two hours ahead,” he lied. “And I promised Kevin I'd be up early to work on ‘Angie.’” They didn't even play that one, ever. Or get up early. Oh, well. Her move.

Paula raised an eyebrow as she finished her drink.

“Oh, *no*,” he said. “I mean the *song*. It's a song, not a—”

She gave a silent, two-beat laugh, the kind that registers only as a brief tremor along the curved ridge of a clavicle—the quiet amusement of a girl who has just begun to realize the disconcerting effect her slightest glance or gesture might have on a man. Once she fully understood this, she

would be devastating.

“No, I gotcha,” she said. “It *is* pretty late. And I’ve got a promise to keep in the morning, too.”

Now Mitch’s brow interjected.

“My aunt,” she said. “She lives here, in town.”

She hadn’t mentioned that all night, had she?

“My dad thinks I’m staying with her, so I sort of have to spend at least one day with her, you know?”

Mitch walked her out to the Silver Streak’s front lobby. Was it too late to offer to walk her to her hotel, or would that smack of desperation? He began to fear he’d misplayed it all.

“So,” said Paula.

Not the *so*. The only thing worse than the *so* was its pathetic echo, the last gasp of *that* guy. He wasn’t going out like that.

“I’ll be at the Fair Warning show tomorrow night,” she continued. “Maybe I’ll see you there?”

Bam.

“Sure,” said Mitch. “It’s a date.”

You did not just say that.

“We’ll see,” said Paula. She cocked her head, took two steps backward before turning on her heels and slipping into the revolving door. She reappeared outside the glass façade, through the neon filter of the Reno strip. She stopped and stared for a moment in each direction as though either were a possibility. Then she raised a knee, adjusted her sock and exited the frame, stage left.

#

Kevin sat in a corner booth working a plateful of strawberries and melon chunks into a neat pattern with his fork. It was his third identical plate of fruit from the Silver Streak’s brunch spread in as many mornings. Tomorrow, he would have another, unless Mitch suggested IHOP or Brandon suggested Panera or the hotel ran out of honeydew. That Kevin favored routine did not mean he was averse to change, however, any more than his preference for symmetry meant he

couldn't handle a little disparity.

"Where is he?" Brandon checked his cell phone; he was the only band member who carried one. He'd taken only a single bagel from the buffet but was already on his second cigarette and third cup of coffee.

Brandon had always had a streak of irritability that ran just below the surface, one he generally kept in check with a careful balance of caffeine, nicotine and antacids. But after the stunt Tommy and Dibbs had pulled that morning, Kevin knew his bile was already up, and Mitch's absence wasn't helping matters.

"He'll be here."

"It's a quarter to noon," said Brandon. "He's probably still in bed."

It was a possibility. Kevin had lived with Mitch since college—save the year Mitch had shackled up with that hippie art student—and knew he was generally dead to the world before eleven o'clock. This was why Kevin didn't start knocking until 11:05 and didn't stop till Mitch pressed his squinting baby face into the crack of the still-chained door.

"He's coming," assured Kevin. "I woke him up myself."

"I swear that guy wouldn't make it a week without this band," said Brandon. "I don't think he's worked a day job in his whole life."

Kevin figured this was probably true as well, the second part anyway, though it seemed somewhat hypocritical coming from Brandon, a thirty-one year old man who had spent the last ten years in the very same band and whose father was worth more than the rest of their families combined. Granted, Brandon had left Chicago for Memphis State in an attempt to distance himself from his father's name and influence, but Sammy Sharp responded by buying his only son a duplex near the university—and opening a fourth B-Sharp Blues Bar in downtown Memphis. Brandon countered his father's generosity by gaining a full scholarship and moving into the dormitory. He rented one half of the duplex to Kevin (and later Mitch) on the cheap and the other to a tenure-track English professor.

And even Brandon would have to admit that Mitch more than pulled his weight on stage, if not in life. But who did, really? At twenty-seven, Tommy still mowed lawns six months of the year; at thirty-five, Dibbs still delivered pizza. Kevin himself only worked part-time at a local guitar shop and gave the occasional lesson to ADHD teens whose rock influences ran the unimpressive gamut of Smashing Pumpkins to White Stripes. In some ways, Kevin admired Mitch's ability to live the unadulterated life of a musician—or as much of it as he could manage at three to five grand a show, split five ways (less expenses). Mitch never had that moment of hesitation when an old high school teacher or distant relative asked him what he was doing these days, never wondered if he should mention stocking shelves at Home Depot or waiting tables at Cracker Barrel to pad his résumé. As the Moody Blues would say, he was just a singer in a rock & roll band.

"Isn't that the point," said Kevin. "That we'll all be able to quit our day jobs? Maybe Mitch is just ahead of the curve."

Brandon stubbed his cigarette out in the center of a bagel half and pulled another. "Mitch *is* the curve."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know," said Brandon.

"Mitch is the reason we're here." Kevin might have added *in Reno*, but he wasn't sure the statement had such a narrow application.

Brandon knew this as well as anyone but clarified the semantics. "Mitch is *how* we got here, not *why* we're here."

Fair enough, thought Kevin. They each had an equal stake in winning the tournament—or at least making a good showing, given the number of booking agents and entertainment directors for whom the annual event served as a de facto trade convention (they'd only played a single warm-up show and had already collected a half-dozen business cards). But to be fairer, Mitch had never suggested otherwise, not even in jest. He'd always been reserved about his own talent and rarely assumed a lead role offstage. Perhaps it wasn't so much that Mitch knew how important he was to

the band's success, but that Brandon did.

Kevin, however, wasn't nearly as concerned with the importance of each part to the whole as the importance of the whole to himself. For him, Mother's Little Helper wasn't just a passion or a profession, but a family—one that understood the difference between a guitar *fag* and a guitar *aficionado*. The truth was Kevin had been building this band since he was fourteen years old. Well, maybe not *this* band, but *a* band, and although this one had not cut a blues album with B.B. King or appeared on a *Rolling Stone* 100 Greatest list, he wouldn't have given it up for a shot at either, not now. He got paid to play guitar almost every weekend for hundreds, sometimes thousands of rock & roll fans that knew and loved every song. If that weren't enough (and he was pretty sure it was), he got to do it with his best friends, even if they didn't always see eye to eye.

Brandon checked his phone again. "You know he's not gonna go for this, anyway."

"Just let me do the talking," said Kevin.

"Go for what?" said Mitch sliding into the booth next to Kevin, a heaping plate in each hand.

"About time," said Brandon. "You got enough food there?"

"Dunno," said Mitch. "I guess I can always go back for more."

Brandon pointed his unlit cigarette and started to say something, but stopped just short. His expression, however, spoke plainly enough: *you're a pain in the ass, Mitch Morrow*.

Mitch pointed back with a sausage link. "Those things are gonna kill you."

Brandon lit up and took a long, deliberate drag. Mitch stuck the sausage link in his mouth like a cigar and dug into his pancakes.

Kevin pinched a slice of bacon. "Awful chipper for a Monday morning, aren't we?"

"I had a good night," said Mitch.

Brandon broke his brief silence. "What was her name?"

"Why do you assume he meant a girl?" said Kevin. (It was Mitch; of course he meant a girl.)

"Fine—what was *his* or her name?"

Mitch chased a mouthful of food with a swig of milk. "Paula."

“Sounds like a transvestite name,” said Brandon.

“I don’t think you’ve had one of those, have you?”

“What?” said Mitch. “A transvestite?”

“No,” Kevin said. “A Paula.”

Mitch swiped a biscuit through a rivulet of butter. “Haven’t even had this one.”

“Looks like the Rooster’s game is slipping,” said Brandon.

Mitch hated the nickname, which played on his stage presence (and in reverse on his sleeping habits), but today it didn’t seem to faze him.

“Gonna see her again tonight.”

Despite Mitch’s reputation, Kevin knew he never really pursued women as much as waited for them to take an interest in him. A second *date* (as opposed to an *encore*) certainly suggested Mitch was giving chase.

“So who is she?” asked Kevin. “Not another artist or poet?”

“She’s a dancer, I guess.”

Kevin and Brandon exchanged grins.

“No,” said Mitch. “Like a cheerleader.”

Laughter.

“What is she, fifteen?”

“She’s on an NBA dance squad—you know, like the Laker Girls,” said Mitch. “But she is pretty young.”

“How young?” said Brandon warily. “Last thing I need this week is to have to bail one of you guys out of jail.”

“I dunno,” said Mitch. “Twenty.” He stuck the rest of the biscuit in his mouth. “Maybe nineteen.”

C’mon, Mitch,” said Kevin. “Even Tommy doesn’t date teenagers anymore.”

“Where is Tommy, anyway?” asked Mitch. “And Dibbs? I thought this was supposed to be a

band meeting or something?”

“Tommy and Dibbs are gone,” said Kevin. “Went to Vegas.”

“What? When?”

“This morning,” said Brandon. “Sometime before I got up. They left a note ’cause they knew I’d kick their asses. Drove down with Jimi Hendrix, said they’d be back sometime tomorrow.”

“Jimi Hendrix?”

“That’s what the note said.”

“We don’t play again till Wednesday, so it’s not really a big deal,” said Kevin, although Brandon was probably right to be pissed. It *was* a punk move, even for Tommy and especially for Dibbs. At least it hadn’t been Mitch. When Tommy and Dibbs got back, they’d take their ass-chewing and that would be it.

“Maybe not,” said Brandon. “We don’t need them for this, anyway.”

“So what is *this*?” asked Mitch.

Brandon looked to Kevin and took a sip of coffee.

“We’ve been kicking around some ideas,” Kevin started, “for, um, broadening our appeal.”

“Our marketability,” said Brandon.

“We ran into a couple guys from Legend Entertainment last night,” Kevin continued. “They put together those week-long rock & roll cruises in the Caribbean.”

“That would be cool,” said Mitch.

“Yeah, it would,” said Kevin. “And it turns out they caught our warm-up on Saturday and were pretty impressed.”

“So they want to book us for a cruise?”

“Maybe,” said Kevin. “It’s still early in the week, and they’re going to check out everybody else before they make any offers, but they want about a dozen acts for this summer’s lineup.”

“How much?”

“Depends,” said Kevin. “Anywhere from ten to twenty grand for four or five shows—plus

accommodations, of course. Some acts do two or three cruises a season.”

“*But—*”

“But, what?” said Kevin.

“This is where the *but* comes,” Mitch looked directly at Brandon. “Right? The part I’m not gonna go for.”

“They wanted to know how much other Stones material we covered,” said Kevin. “Besides the early stuff.”

In the very beginning, they’d been a straight up cover band—Animals, Grand Funk, James Gang, Steppenwolf, Yardbirds, you name it, even some of Mitch’s Neil Diamond crap. That was before Kevin and Brandon had seen “1964: The Tribute” wow five thousand sweating Rib America Festival attendees and thought, *we could do that*. Well, they couldn’t be the Beatles—there were five of them and Mitch didn’t play anything (not even the harmonica at the time)—but they *could* be the Rolling Stones, who everyone in the band but Mitch agreed were a lot cooler, anyway. They already had half a dozen Stones tunes in the repertoire, and Mitch bore a striking similarity to a young Mick Jagger. He finally agreed, provided they stuck to Brian Jones-era stuff—the Stones in their prime—and that he and Kevin continued to write original songs on the side.

“I thought we agreed not to do any of that hip-jutting, finger-wagging crap?” said Mitch. “That’s what Sticky Fingers and every other Stones tribute does.”

“Do you know how much Sticky Fingers gets a show?” said Brandon. “Almost twice what we do. You know why? Because people would rather hear ‘Start Me Up’ or ‘Miss You’ than ‘The Under Assistant West Coast Promotion Man.’”

“Look, we’re not talking about turning over the whole setlist,” said Kevin. “Just expanding it a bit. The Stones have been at it over forty years and we cover, what, six of them? You’ve got to be getting tired of singing the same stuff over and over again.”

“Maybe,” said Mitch. “We could put ‘Brown Sugar’ back in, I guess.”

“Alright.” Kevin had already talked him into that one years ago, but it was a start. “We’ll need

more than that, though.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Mitch. “But I’m still not wearing any damn scarves. Or dressing like a gay quarterback.”

“We’re not asking you to,” said Brandon. “But we wouldn’t think any less of you if you did.”

#

Mitch found the Golden Spike’s lounge early and claimed a decent table well before Toys in the Attic kicked off the evening’s lineup. It was the first night of the tournament that mattered (the weekend’s warm-ups were unscored) and the crowd was already twice what it had been the night before. He flipped his harmonica, rhythmically tapping it on the open notebook at each half turn as though it were a miniature piston or flywheel. He’d been staring at the same two lines for hours—the hook of a chorus, jotted about a third of the way down the page where he expected it would fall. The three or four couplets penciled above had all been scratched out, mostly tainted by silly Aerosmithian rhymes that had nothing to do with the lines he’d written—*limbo/akimbo*, *watermelon/felon*, *placebo/gazebo*. After a while he gave up on the lyrics and tried to work out a guitar riff in his head, which was equally futile. Trying to write a song during a concert was like trying to paint in the rain.

After London Calling burned through a dozen Clash tunes, The Zoo opened with “Bad Boys Running Wild,” kicking up the sort of nostalgic dust that settles over rare B-sides and deep album cuts. Mitch hadn’t heard the song in fifteen years but still recognized the spiraling intro. Scorpions was the last concert he’d seen with Davey, the summer he left home for Birmingham after a falling out with their father—ten years before Mitch would leave on similar terms.

Mitch knew most of the guys in The Zoo personally. They were also a Midwestern band, and a comeback story of sorts, having been forged by members of two earlier tributes—after Lovedrive’s lead guitarist lost his hand in a sheet metal accident and Blackout’s lead singer lost everything else in a head-on collision. Mitch wondered if Mother’s Little Helper would continue without him, if some freak illness took his voice or a scaffold fell and snapped him in half. Or

Kevin. No, not without Kevin. It was his band after all—his and Brandon’s. But Kevin was the glue or the hinge or some other thing that keeps stuff together. Mitch could see them going on without *him*, though—Brandon might take the lead (he’d been a singer before Mitch showed up) or maybe they’d find someone else, someone who could actually read sheet music and maybe pick up a guitar once in a while.

Mitch spotted Paula before she saw him but resisted the urge to flag her, opting rather to watch her work her way through the crowd in a tight green sweaterdress and what Mitch referred to as “go-go” boots. It was one of those outfits where the allure lay paradoxically in its modesty—long sleeves, a turtleneck and a hem that fell just six inches above the boots. What remained exposed was accentuated: a perfectly framed face, bare save the slightest trace of eyeliner; thin wrists and slender fingers, feminine yet unpainted and unadorned; and the sexiest pair of knees Mitch had even seen. A pair of schoolmarm glasses and a wool beret and she might have resembled the kind of pretentiously sophisticated girls he’d openly mocked at Memphis State but secretly wanted to be with. But there was nothing faux-frumpy about Paula. Instead, she looked like something that had stepped off a 1966 *Tiger Beat* cover.

And there, perhaps, lay her greatest appeal, at least for Mitch. She *was* young, and yet seemed like she’d been young for a very long time—or rather that she was young, but from another time. Her youthfulness was not gleaned so much from contemporary influences—Britney Spears, *Dawson’s Creek*, Abercrombie & Fitch—as borrowed from a previous generation, one Mitch could relate to more readily. His mother might have called Paula an “old soul,” but that wasn’t it at all. There was a wisdom there but not at the expense of wonder, intelligence and experience that hadn’t devolved into cynicism. She knew enough of the world to be interesting, but not so much that she was no longer interested.

“Hey,” said Paula, finally catching Mitch’s eye. “You’re here!”

He couldn’t tell whether it was excitement or surprise that caused her voice to lilt.

“So how’s ‘Angie’ coming along?” she teased as though the song were another woman.

“Seems I haven’t been giving her enough attention,” he said. “Angie” was exactly the sort of song Kevin and Brandon wanted to add to their repertoire. “I might have to take her out more often. What about you? How’d your day go?”

“*My* day?”

“Didn’t you have to take a basket of treats to your grandmother’s cottage in the woods?”

“Oh *that*.” She looked like a schoolgirl who had just been asked to give a report on a book she hadn’t read. She leaned into his ear. “Can you keep a secret?”

He nodded.

“I played hooky today.”

Mitch gave her a tsk.

“I know, I’m a bad niece,” said Paula. “It’s not that I don’t want to see her—I just don’t want to see her right now. I mean, I love my aunt, but she’s always got more advice than I have problems and more questions than I have answers for. And that’s after she gets through her opening gambit—” Paula affected her best Brooklyn-Jewish accent. “You’re too thin. How’s your father? You look just like your mother. Are you still dancing? Your mother loved to dance. Are you going to school? Why not? Are you seeing anyone? Why not? You can’t dance your whole way through life. God, you look so much like your mother.”

“So your aunt is Barbra Streisand?”

Paula laughed. “Was it that obvious?”

“Just a little bit.”

There was something there, too, that wasn’t quite as obvious. *Your mother* loved *to dance*. She’d done that the night before—*my mom* had *all the albums*; *she* was *their biggest fan*—but he hadn’t though much of it. Everybody did that, talked about their family in the past tense: *my father* was a *racecar driver*; *he* thought *rock & roll* was a *waste of effort*. But this was someone else suggesting Paula’s mother was not around anymore. And how many times had he gotten that himself—*you look so much like your brother*—not about Davey, who was alive and well, but Robby, who’d been dead

thirty years?

“You okay?” said Paula.

“Yeah, why?”

“You just looked like you were somewhere else for a second.”

“Me? No,” said Mitch. “So, are you excited about the show?”

#

Fair Warning opened with the predictable but crowd-pleasing “Eruption” and “You Really Got Me,” just as they were segued on the first album. Perhaps to appear a more mature and discerning fan, Paula resisted what Mitch knew was an urge to rush the stage as the mop-headed guitarist teased the opening licks out of a crisscrossed Frankenstrat replica. Mitch preferred to be in the middle or even back of the house, so that he could see the audience’s reactions as well as the performance itself. Fair Warning’s sound was pretty close, although the singer’s voice broke down around the falsettos, and from across the hazy room, they *looked* like Van Halen. Like Paula, he only really remembered the David Lee era from music videos. He hadn’t seen them live until their first tour with Sammy—Paula would still have been in diapers.

Well, they say it's kinda fright'nin' how this younger generation swings!

Mitch pulled at her hand. “C’mon—can’t see anything from here.”

She took his hand and then the lead, weaving through the crowd toward the stage.

The singer (Tony, as she would later refer to him) picked Paula out of the crowd with a wink almost right off. Stage banter was usually minimal on such a tight show clock, but he made a point of calling her out at the song break.

“Hey, do you all know Paula?” Tony extended a hand to pull her up onto the stage, but she turned embarrassed into Mitch. “Paula’s all the way up here from L.A., aren’t you sweetheart?”

A whoop from a sizeable portion of the crowd.

“You know,” he continued. “We’ve been doing this a long time now, but do you know what keeps us going?”

“The mortgage,” said the bassist, followed by a ripple of laughter.

“The cocaine,” shouted the drummer, followed by a roar.

“No!” Tony laughed. He pointed to Paula with a sideways finger-gun. “It’s looking out at this crowd every night, no matter where we are, and seeing pretty faces like this one.” He fired his finger at Paula. “Just what will I do with all of these *beau-ti-ful girrrls!*”

It was lame, but the corresponding guitar riff came on cue and the crowd ate it up. And so did Paula. While she was not quite as animated as she had been for Love Gun’s show, as Mitch had remembered her for hours afterward as he lay awake in the dark, she was more—something. Vibrant? Alive? Real? Perhaps that was it; he had been merely observing the night before, watching her like a film clip. But now she stood with her back pressed into him, each of his hands in hers at her hips—when had that happened?—and as she dipped and swayed, he became a conduit for her *realness*.

After the show, Tony and the guitarist came out, shook some hands, mugged for a few photos and signed a large woman’s chest, one on each side, as her bald-headed husband fumbled with his camera. The guitarist had donned a yellow zebra print jacket and patchwork jeans; Tony sported a pair of candy-striped bell bottoms and was still shirtless. The two made their way toward Paula while Mitch waited for drinks at the bar. He hurried the bartender.

“Mitch, do you know Tony and Eric?”

“Great show, guys.” Mitch handed Paula a glass and shook each hand. “Really. How long you been at it?”

“What’s this now?” Tony turned to the guitarist. “Eighteen years?”

He looked it, thought Mitch. Face to face, he figured the man was at least forty though his skin, which was two shades darker than his bleached hair, looked even older. The real David Lee Roth had to be in better shape than this guy who had been straining not only on the high notes but at the kicks and jumps, too. “Well, you still got it, man.”

“Well, thanks, Mitch,” said Tony.

“Let’s just hope the judges think so,” added the guitarist.

“Screw the judges,” said Tony.

“Mitch is in a band, too,” said Paula. “Mother’s Little Helper.”

“That’s cool,” said Tony. “What is that, like some kinda edgy modern rock thing? I can dig that. I guess that stuff’s pretty hot right now, eh, Mitch? Maybe you’ll catch a break before it goes out of style.”

“Yeah, Mitch,” Paula snickered. “Maybe you’ll open for these guys someday.”

“You never know,” said Tony. “You just never know. So hey, we were just asking Paula here if she wanted to hang out with us tonight. You’re welcome to come along too, if you want, Mitch.”

Mitch had never been so disgusted by the sound of his own name and never wanted to hear this guy say it again. “Thanks anyway, but I was hoping to catch the Who and Kinks tributes back at the Silver Streak.”

“Kinks, huh?” said Tony. “Well, that’s a bit old for my tastes, but that’s just me.”

You just played two Kinks covers, you moron.

The guitarist reddened but said nothing.

Tony turned to Paula. “So, just us then?”

“Actually,” she said. “I kinda want to see the Who myself.”

“Alright then,” said Tony. “I guess we’ll see you around.” He turned at the door and aimed his finger-gun at Paula again. “Stay gorgeous, babe.” He shifted it the right. “Take care, Mitch.”

Bang.

#

You think we look pretty good together! The Why put on a rather lackluster performance despite authentic mod outfits and a nearly note-perfect musicianship. It was perhaps that very perfection that belied a restraint that represented everything The Who *wasn’t*. Mitch was about to tell Paula he thought as much, but could see by the way she had begun to inspect his harmonica like it was a Chinese puzzle box that she had long since tired of the show herself. Was she already regretting

not taking up Fair Warning on their offer? They were, after all, the reason she was here. Had she felt obligated to stick around with him, to humor his mild obsession with the British Invasion? *C'mon, Mitch—that guy was a douchebag. Why wouldn't she rather be with you?*

Still, Kinked stood to be even blander than The Why—much less accessible, much more...English. Surely the last thing a smoking hot L.A. girl weaned on glam metal wanted to do with her evening was spend it with poor imitations of self-absorbed British musicians.

“Ello, love.”

Speak of the devil.

“Hello, Ziggy.”

“Didn't expect I'd find you here.”

“Well,” said Paula. “Mitch had heard that these guys were pretty good and—”

“Him?” Ziggy put a hand on Mitch's shoulder. “No, love, I completely expected I'd find him here. Mitch is what you'd call a bit of an Anglophile. Loves all things British. Idn't that right, Mitch?”

“There's a few I can do without.”

“Oh, now don't go getting your knickers in a twist,” said Ziggy. “I've come to do you a favor.”

“A favor?” said Mitch. Ziggy's favors usually involved two girls—and a coin flip, if he was feeling generous. “What kind of favor?”

“I've come to pull you out of here before you bore this little girl to tears.” Ziggy winked at Paula. “Come now, all work and no play.”

Mitch was about to give Ziggy a sharp pinch on the thigh beneath the table to let him know what a pain in the ass he was being, but Paula's interest was piqued.

“What'd you have in mind?” she asked.

“Well,” said Ziggy. “I've heard there's this positively dreadful karaoke bar just up the road.”

The Dew Drop Inn had the feel of a 1970s pizza parlor—wood paneling, orange shag carpet, green vinyl booths, stained glass lighting—the kind Mitch remembered quietly vanishing alongside skating rinks, drive-ins and video arcades in the mid-eighties. In one corner a Bally Flash Gordon pinball machine sat next to a vintage Wurlitzer jukebox; both had been unplugged, presumably for the karaoke crowd. *Crowd* was a generous term; the place was less than half full of what Mitch figured were mostly locals.

A heavysset lady he deduced was named Pattie (from the vinyl “PATTIEOKE” banner hanging from the deejay table) was plugging up a small monitor on a tripod and testing a mic that turned out to be hot. Most of the patrons were clustered around a half dozen binders that catalogued every song in Pattie’s extensive karaoke library from Aaliyah’s “Back and Forth” to ZZ Top’s “Sharp Dressed Man.” One woman kept confirming—in case anyone had missed it—that she would *have to do* “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” and another that Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” was *her* song.

Ziggy sat across from Mitch in a round corner booth flipping through one of the binders. He was flanked by Stevie Nicks and Christine McVie from Second Hand News (Ziggy had introduced them by their real names, but Mitch had soon forgotten which was which). Paula was tucked into the middle of the booth between Mitch and Stevie. Ziggy had hooked up with the two women just before he tracked Mitch down. When he realized he was going to be down a man—or rather up a girl—Ziggy had them all wait in the Golden Spike lobby under the pretense that his guitarist, Nick, was coming, too. After five minutes he said, “Fuck it, let’s go.”

When Ziggy turned to the “F” artists, Christine stopped him.

“Ooh, do they have ‘As Long As You Follow?’”

“What?” said Ziggy. “You can’t do a Fleetwood Mac song.”

“Why not?”

“‘Cause it’s a rule.”

“I don’t think she knows the rule,” said Mitch.

“What’s the rule?” asked Paula.

Mitch explained. “You can’t karaoke a song by the band you’re in.”

“Whose rule is that?” asked Christine.

“It’s my fuckin’ rule,” said Ziggy.

“Why?”

“Because it’s not very fair, is it?”

She didn’t follow.

“You see that girl up there?” Ziggy asked. The woman on the stage was in her mid-thirties, hair bobbed a bit too short, eyes set a bit too close. She was grinning nervously into the mic as the opening bars of “Hit Me with Your Best Shot” played. “What’s she singing?”

“Pat Benatar.”

“That’s right,” said Ziggy. “And I’ll wager she’s the best damn Pat Benatar of the night. That is, unless the *real* Pat Benatar gets up from the back of the room and shows her up. And that girl over there,” he nodded toward the loud woman from before. “She’s going to be the best Shania Twain. And that guy in the corner—well, I don’t know what he’ll do, but if he takes a go at a Bowie tune, by God, I’ll let him be the best fuckin’ David Bowie here tonight.”

And so they spent the next three hours applauding the best Patsy Cline, the best Steve Perry, the best Johnny Cash and the best Axl Rose the Dew Drop Inn had to offer. The best Pat Benatar also turned out to be the best Tina Turner and the best Stevie Nicks. Stevie herself was the best Bonnie Tyler of the night—admittedly not much of a stretch—delivering a throaty and incredibly sexy rendition of “It’s A Heartache.” Ziggy and Christine were the best Elton John and Kiki Dee, after which Ziggy became the best Robert Palmer, breaking his own rule (in spirit if not letter) with a spot-on “Simply Irresistible.” Mitch took best Neil Diamond honors with a performance of “Solitary Man” that a more discerning audience might have regarded as soulful or sobering. He settled for *that was the shit* and *God, I hope I ain’t next*.

And Paula herself, when she finally got up the nerve to take her turn, was the best Alanis Morissette. *I’m sick but I’m pretty, baby!* Ziggy’s girls had winced at each missed note—Stevie like an

anxious stage mother, Christine like a catty schoolmate—but Mitch was taken by the passion and indifference she seemed to wield at once, both hot and cold like the bittersweet glow a streetlamp casts over the papery wings of a thousand would-be lovers.

It was Mitch who finally broke up the party around two o'clock, just as Stevie and Christine had nearly convinced Paula to join them on a Wilson Phillips tune. As the crowd had thinned, the ratio of men to women had spiked—the room was teeming with *that* guys—and a few of the leaner, hungrier ones had gotten bold enough to approach their booth in hopes of picking off the spare female. But none could really tell which one that might be, so their efforts had become increasingly indiscriminate. The girls had drunk enough not to notice, Ziggy enough not to care.

On the walk back, Paula leaned heavily into Mitch—maybe for balance, maybe for warmth. She was a good head shorter than him and he was glad to be able to smell her hair rather than the alcohol on her breath that mingled with his own in the cold. They were almost at her hotel before either said a word.

“So which one would you have taken?” Paula asked.

“Hmm?”

“Which one of those girls?”

“What do you mean?” His face went hot.

“Oh, c'mon. I'm not *that* dense,” she said. “I know one of those girls was for you.”

“You heard Ziggy,” said Mitch. “He was expecting his guitarist—”

“Please,” she said. “The only thing he was expecting was you to be alone when he found you.”

She was right, of course. Ziggy's attempt to throw her off for Mitch's benefit, while noble, had been clumsy at best. He should have waited longer for Nick—ten, fifteen minutes—should have gone back in and pretended to leave a message with the front desk. There was something about this girl that had even Ziggy Stardust off his game.

“So which one would you have taken?”

“Stevie Nicks,” said Mitch.

Paula looked at him for a moment as though she were sizing him for a suit. Or maybe a straightjacket.

“Yeah,” she said. “Me, too.”

They lingered outside the El Camino for a moment, joked about the cheap southwestern motif and the broken “No Vacancy” sign—the last three letters were burned out, which Mitch suggested meant they didn’t allow cows. It was silly, but drew a giggle. The place looked a little seedy, but he didn’t want to suggest walking her up to her room or wait long enough for her to decide whether or not to ask him. What he wanted, like the night before, was to make sure he would see her again.

“Well,” he said. “If you’re going to play hooky again tomorrow, maybe we could do lunch?”

Do lunch? Was he planning a date or a merger?

“I mean, go to lunch. Or dinner, if you don’t eat lunch—”

He was going to have to gargle all night to get the foot taste out of his mouth.

“I was thinking more like breakfast,” said Paula.

Even better.

“Really?”

“Sure,” she said. “Why don’t you come pick me up about eleven.”

Oh—*just* breakfast. Yeah, that worked too.

It was only four blocks from the El Camino back to the Silver Streak, but by the time Mitch got back to his room, he’d worked out the first half of his chorus.

#

Peg’s Glorified Ham ’n’ Eggs was the first real evidence that Reno existed outside of airport terminals, casino lounges and hotel buffets—and in the daylight, no less. Mitch had only been in town four days, but stepping out of the cab in front of the restaurant had produced the same odd sensation as changing into tennis shoes after a few hours of roller skating. The cab had been somewhat of an extravagance, given the place Paula had suggested was only a half mile from the Strip, but he was pretty sure she had blushed as he opened the door for her outside her hotel, so it

was money well spent.

Inside, Peg's might have passed for any other roadside diner—teal vinyl, white china, little glass syrup pitchers—except that it was twice the size and packed at 11:20 on a Tuesday morning.

Mitch looked over the tri-fold menu until he found something he recognized as standard breakfast fare. “I think I’m going with this country fried steak and eggs.”

“You’ve come like two thousand miles into the desert for country fried steak?” said Paula. “What, they don’t have any grits?”

“I guess that’s not very *glorified*, is it?” he conceded. “How about the Mickey Mouse pancakes? See, he’s got a little whipped cream bowtie.”

She shook her head and raised her menu to hide a smile.

A slender waiter with a large Adam’s apple and a Howdy Doody haircut appeared at their booth. “Hi, I’m Derrick—I’ll be your server on this *glorious* afternoon. So are you kids ready to order, or do you need a minute?”

Kids? He couldn’t have been much older than Paula and beamed the sort of glee club enthusiasm that translated into only one viable trade—hospitality. As an occasional high school actor and short-lived theatre major, Mitch could remember at least a dozen Derricks and suddenly had the mildly sadistic urge to order Mickey Mouse pancakes from each of them.

“No, I think we’re ready,” said Mitch. “Tell me, Derrick, what’s your most *glorified* breakfast?”

Paula snickered, still behind the menu.

“Well,” said Derrick. “I would recommend the California Benedict, the Chorizo Scramble or our most popular dish, the Huevos Ranchero.”

“That sounds pretty adventurous,” said Mitch. “Huevos Ranchero it is.”

Paula nodded her approval.

“And for the little lady?”

“I think I’ll just have the country fried steak.”

“*Ex*-cellent choice,” said Derrick.

After fifteen minutes of waiting, Mitch was eyeing the bowl of shiny foil-topped jellies like it was full of tiny oysters just waiting to be slurped out of their plastic shells. He settled for a sugar and cream concoction that had started out as black coffee and which Derrick and several other overeager servers kept diluting at two-minute intervals. Paula was staring through the window at a couple seated outside under an umbrella. The woman kept tearing bits of ham from her plate and feeding them to a big black dog.

“Do you believe in fate?” she asked without looking at him.

He almost laughed but there was something deliberate in her tone, something that suggested she’d been contemplating this question for a very long time. Mitch had never been more than a ritualistic subscriber to fate or chance or luck—cross fingers, blow dice—but perhaps these were forces that existed whether you believed in them or not, forces that manifested in places like Wall Street or Hollywood or Reno. He was more certain of love—had sung about it continually and written about it intermittently—but understood it even less. Was he in love with Paula—after two nights? It was a silly notion, but the truth was Mitch didn’t really have many points of reference. He knew this much: he hadn’t fallen this hard for a girl in sixteen years, not since Jenny Coffman had haunted his high school dreams like Whitesnake videos. Not for Lainee, not even for Kat Alverson at Memphis State. He knew this too: he didn’t have four years to figure it out. Four days, maybe. Yeah, he could use a little fate right about now.

“I think so,” said Mitch. “But not in the sense that it’s a road leading to some single inevitable destination. I think it’s more like an exit on a freeway, and if you’re not paying attention, you’ll miss it.”

“How do you know if it’s your exit?”

“Maybe you don’t until you take it,” said Mitch.

For as small as she was, Paula put away steak, eggs and potatoes at a rather impressive pace. Mitch had always had a quiet admiration for women who didn’t suppress their appetites out of some sense of propriety. Lainee would have ordered something whole wheat with fruit and then

pinched half a slice of his bacon; Kat would have had a salad (do they make breakfast salads?) and then gone home to eat peanut butter out of the jar. He did his best to keep up until the Huevos Ranchero got the better of him and he called for the check.

Mitch laid thirty bucks on the table and finished off his orange juice. “So, what else is there to do in Reno on a Tuesday afternoon?”

“Um, we could get divorced,” said Paula, swiping a finger through the last of his refried beans.

“We’d have to drive to Vegas first and get married.”

She looked out the window again. The couple and the dog were gone. “C’mon,” she said. “I want to show you something.”

#

Mitch wasn’t sure where they were going and hadn’t bothered to ask, but Paula had said it wasn’t that far and wanted to walk rather than spring for another cab. She admitted after a half hour, though, that it was a bit farther than she had remembered. Mitch figured they’d gone two miles, but was in no hurry to get there, wherever there was. It was unseasonably warm for Reno, or what he assumed was unseasonably warm given the chill of the last few nights, and he was no stranger to walking—he and Kevin had shared a single Pontiac Sunfire since Mitch had split up with Lainee and moved back into the duplex.

Lainee had been a walker, too—and would drive an hour to find a new place to do it. Once she’d walked an arboretum or nature trail she was not likely to repeat it. He figured they’d walked every park in a fifty mile radius, and Lainee had sketched him at each one—leaning against trees, sitting on boulders, pissing in creeks. They were all charcoals, and Mitch was constantly wiping sooty smudges off her chin or the side of her nose or finding them on himself later. She sketched him at home, too, and on stage or in diner booths—she was sketching him when they met. She must have done a hundred in the year and a half they were together; they all made him look like James Dean.

“This is it,” said Paula. She cut across an empty parking lot backed by a hundred yards of eight-

foot pine fencing. At the far end of the complex were a big green outbuilding and a high chain-link gate.

Mitch read the sign above the gate. “Moan-a Stadium—Biggest Little Ballpark in the World.”

“Mo-ana,” she corrected.

Mitch lifted the heavy padlock then clanged it down again.

“Doesn’t look like it’s open,” he said. The paint was peeling from the building and everything he could see through the gate was edged by tall, dead weeds. “Doesn’t look like it’s been open for a while.”

Paula rattled the fence beside him. He turned to offer a sympathetic shrug, but she was gone—already halfway up the gate. She hiked one leg over the top then the other, dropped like a cat on the other side. She flashed him a mischievous look—*are you in?*—then disappeared into the ballpark. Mitch scanned the parking lot and scrambled over the fence after her.

Inside, he hopped another fence and found himself in leftfield. She was across the diamond, leaning over a low rail that separated the infield bleachers from the home dugout. When he crossed the first base line, she flipped something to him—an old grey baseball. He held it up, examined it like an ancient artifact. Half the stitching was gone and the loose panel gaped open in his palm like a jawbone.

“Alas, poor Yorick!” He couldn’t remember the rest, but it was enough to draw a smile. He climbed atop the dugout opposite Paula. “Is this why we came?” he asked. “To find a lost ball?”

“This is where my parents met,” she said.

“At this ballpark?”

“In this spot,” she said. “My mom was visiting my aunt and uncle that spring. Uncle Stan always had season tickets.”

“So your dad was a baseball guy, huh?”

“I guess you could say that,” said Paula. “He was drafted by the Dodgers in ’81. Got traded to the Reno Padres two years later.”

“Your father was a pro ballplayer? Would I have heard of him?” Mitch could name maybe a dozen baseball players. Babe Ruth. Bo Jackson. Maybe half a dozen.

“Tripp Lambert? Not unless you follow the Pasadena Pumas.”

Mitch drew a blank.

“My high school,” she said. “He’s the athletic director and varsity baseball coach.”

“Never made the big leagues?”

“Nope. He quit playing a year after I was born. He always told me he’d found something he loved more than baseball, but I guess that’s just something fathers say.”

“Just the good ones,” said Mitch.

Paula climbed over the rail onto the dugout and sat on the front edge. She pushed her shoes off with her toes, let them drop onto the concrete below.

“When I was old enough to realize what he’d given up, I couldn’t help wondering if he’d been trying to pass his own ambition on to me. I mean, he had me hitting off a tee by the time I was two and snuck me onto my first team a year early. By first grade, I was playing in two different softball leagues.”

“You must have been pretty good.”

“That’s just it,” she said. “I was horrible. But he kept taking me, anyway. When I finally got hit by a line drive, I made him promise I’d never have to play again. I had to wear an eye patch for a month; that helped seal the deal.”

Mitch winced. “Damn.”

“Yeah,” said Paula. “If I’d known it was going to hurt so much, I’d have looked for an easier way out.”

“You took a softball to the face to *play* your dad? How old were you?”

“Six,” she said. “He signed me up for a cheer camp later that summer and had me in jazz and tap classes by fall—not because that’s what I wanted but because he didn’t really know what else to do with me. It grew on me, though, especially once I found out my mom had been drill team

captain in high school. That and I've always had a thing for athletes, I guess."

"And rockers?" said Mitch.

"And maybe rockers," she said after a moment's consideration. "I mean, I did follow a Van Halen tribute band from L.A. to Reno, right?"

Touché.

"You know," said Mitch. "I used to be something of an athlete myself."

"Oh, really?"

"Sure," he said. "Did some wrestling back in Memphis." He pulled his shirt up just enough to reveal a six-inch scar along his right shoulder blade. "Got this in a title match, 1985. I'd just dropkicked Hank 'The Tank' Tompkins and was going for a Superfly Splash when I fell off the fencepost—"

"Wait," Paula laughed. "You mean like in the backyard?"

"Yeah," said Mitch. "Doesn't that count?"

"Maybe," she said. "What else you got?"

"Well, I did run track in high school."

"Really? You don't seem like the track type."

"Gee, thanks."

"No, I mean, you seem like you'd have been too cool for it."

Mitch laughed. "I actually went out for track to *be* cool. There was this little doe-eyed blonde I was pretty hung up on, and I figured track was the one sport I couldn't screw up. I even lettered all three years."

"You ran three years *for a girl?*" said Paula.

"I guess so."

"Did you catch her?"

"Yeah," said Mitch. "For a little while."

He lobbed the broken ball onto the field. It hit the pitching rubber and rolled toward the plate.

“So what’d you do in track?”

“Whatever they needed me to,” said Mitch. “Morrow, we’re down a man for the 400-meter relay. Morrow, you’re throwing discus today. Morrow, you know how to triple jump? Well you’ve got twenty minutes to learn.”

“Jack-of-all-trades?”

“Master of none,” said Mitch. “Although I was pretty good at 800-meters. Coach said I didn’t have the intensity for sprints or the focus for cross-country, but just enough of each to go balls out for a half-mile.”

“So can you still do it?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Go ‘balls out’ for a half-mile.”

“I dunno,” he said. “But I’ll bet you a dollar I can beat you around the bases.”

Paula looked up at Mitch then down past her bright white socks to the dugout floor. “Okay,” she said. “But you’ll have to get my shoes.”

No sooner had he dropped into the dugout and bent to scoop up the empty pair of Keds than she leapt from the top and bolted for first base. He started after her then broke for home instead, picking up the old ball from where it had come to rest just outside the batter’s box. He stood on the plate and waggled it at her as she rounded third. She was grinning the whole way, a grin so disarming he was already on his back in the dirt before he knew what hit him, the broken ball rolling out toward the mound.

Paula sprang to her feet, brushed her hands on her hips and stepped firmly on the plate. “First rule of catching,” she said. “Never get separated from the ball.”

“I thought you quit when you were six,” said Mitch.

“I said I quit *playing*,” said Paula. “Never said I quit learning.”

The walk back to the Strip took the better part of an hour and it was nearly four o'clock when Mitch and Paula entered the Silver Streak lobby laughing and covered in dust. Mitch wondered if he might have swallowed as much as he was wearing, but it was more likely the six-mile round trip in the dry Nevada air that was driving his thirst. He motioned to one of the lounges.

"You want to get a drink?"

"Now?" said Paula turning her palms up. "I'm all dirty."

"Do you want to go up to my room?"

She shot him a crooked smirk.

"I mean to take a shower or something."

Same smirk.

"What I *mean* is you could get cleaned up while I sit in the hallway and think of stupid things to say the rest of the night."

"You think you might run out?"

"Not really," said Mitch. "But I like to be prepared."

She nodded at the elevator. "Come on," she said. "Maybe you've got a clean shirt I can steal."

Upstairs, Mitch had no sooner slipped his keycard in the door than the next one opened.

Brandon stepped out with an unlit cigarette.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said. "Sonuvabitch is right here."

"Where's he been?" said Kevin from inside the room.

"Looks like the rodeo," said Brandon. "We've been looking all over for you. Even tracked down your pal, Ziggy."

"Why would Ziggy know where I was?"

"That's what *he* said, 'What do I look like, his fuckin' mum?' Cocky bastard."

"So—what's up?" said Mitch.

Kevin stepped into the doorway, nodded at Paula. "Tommy and Dibbs aren't back yet."

"It's only four o'clock," said Mitch. "We don't play until tomorrow. It's hardly time to panic."

“Tommy’s in jail,” said Brandon.

“It might be time,” said Paula.

“Alright, hold on,” said Mitch. “As long as he didn’t kill anybody, he should be able to post bail, right?” He looked at Kevin. “Tell me he didn’t kill anybody.”

“They arrested him for solicitation,” said Kevin. “It’s a thousand dollars. We’ve got it—barely.”

“So we wire the cash and they drive back, right?”

“Jimi got arrested, too,” said Brandon. “For possession. They impounded the car.”

“So even if they post bail,” said Mitch. “They’re still stranded in Vegas.”

“Pahrump.”

“Pahrump?” said Paula. “What’s in Pahrump?”

“Chicken Ranch,” said the three men in unison.

Tommy, Dibbs and Jimi had left Vegas that morning as scheduled, but decided to swing by the landmark brothel on the way back. After being turned away by the Ranch’s exorbitant prices, they stopped at a local convenience mart before leaving town where Tommy flashed two hundred buck to a dolled-up undercover cop while Jimi blazed up in plain sight. Dibbs was carrying a half-ounce of his own, but was inside the store with an armful of Red Bull and Kit Kats when it all went down. He ditched his stash and laid low until a couple of uniforms showed up to take the other two and the car.

“We’ve been looking for a rental since we gave up on finding you,” said Kevin. “Jimi’s band said they’ll give us two hundred bucks to cover the car and gas if we bring Jimi back, too, but there’s two other conventions in town this week. No one has anything.”

“Screw Jimi,” said Brandon. “He can find his own way out of this.”

“I can get a car,” said Paula.

“For real?” said Kevin.

Paula nodded.

“Are you sure?” asked Mitch.

She nodded again. "I can borrow my Aunt Deb's."

"No, I mean are you sure you want to get mixed up in this? It's not your problem—you don't even know these guys."

"I'm not doing it for them," she said.

Mitch searched her eyes for a glint of doubt. "Alright," he said.

"Not a chance," said Brandon. "I'm not losing you, too. Me and Kevin'll go."

"Can either of you drive a stick?" asked Paula.

Kevin shook his head. Brandon took a drag on his cigarette.

"I can," said Mitch. It was one of the few things his father had bothered to teach him.

"Well, I'm going too," said Brandon.

"There won't be room," Paula said. "Not if we're bringing back three more."

"Looks like the lady's made her choice," said Kevin.

Paula told Mitch to give her an hour then meet her out front. All three men watched her until she disappeared into the elevator.

"Damnit, Mitch," said Brandon. "You better not fuck this up."

#

Maybe two dozen cars had pulled up in the fifteen minutes Mitch had been waiting in front of the Silver Streak, but each had either dropped off passengers or been handed over to a valet. It was only a quarter after five, but the sun was almost gone and the temperature had already dipped again, the day's mildness having been only a brief reprieve from the cold bite of a Reno winter. As he waited, he recapped the hours he had spent with Paula over the last three days—seventeen. The trip to Pahrump and back—seven hours each way—would nearly double that. That would surely be the most time he'd spent with a woman in the three years since Lainee, maybe more than he'd spent with his own mother. He wondered how many more hours it would take before this twinge subsided, the mild anxiety that the last time her saw her would be just that. He pulled out his notebook, jotted down a line.

As Mitch tucked the book back into his pocket, he admired a sweet mid-eighties model Camaro—white with black inserts and T-tops—which must have been waiting for a valet. After a moment, the tinted window on the passenger side dropped and the driver yelled out.

“You coming or what?”

This was definitely cooler than her “Christine Sixteen” story.

“Your aunt drives an IROC Z-28?”

“Not much,” said Paula. “It was my Uncle Stan’s—he bought it during some sort of mid-life crisis. But he died like eight years later.”

“He must have been behind schedule,” said Mitch.

For as sharp as the exterior was, Mitch was disappointed to find the radio didn’t work.

“I don’t know about the tape deck,” said Paula. “But I think there’s some old cassettes under the seat.”

Mitch pulled out a pink and teal canvas carrying case. “I don’t think this was Stan’s.” There were twenty tapes, all labeled *SuperHits of the 60s*. He opened one, scanned the liner notes. “The Animals, The Turtles, The Zombies, Gary Puckett and the Union Gap, Question Mark and the Mysterians, Gerry and the Pacemakers...”

“You made that last one up,” said Paula.

Mitch popped it into the deck, adjusted the volume and slipped into his best overnight deejay voice. “Hello class, I’m Dr. Morrow and this is Rock & Roll 101. If you’ll please open your texts to page 1964 we’ll begin with British blues.”

There is a house in New Orleans...

The tape had played out by the time they reached the Highway 95 turnoff in Fallon sixty miles outside of Reno. Mitch had sung all of Side One and most of Side Two—embarrassing Paula with “Young Girl,” himself with “Big Girls Don’t Cry”—before remembering he had to sing for real the next night. He checked the map Brandon had gotten from the front desk and insisted they take along. The 400-mile route was marked in pink highlighter with slashes every sixty miles,

which Brandon considered conservative hour markers.

“Only 760 more miles,” said Mitch, popping in the next tape. “Maybe we’ll get through all of these,” he joked. The Soul Survivors—“Expressway to Your Heart.” Maybe he could sing just one more.

“How can you possibly know all of these songs?” Paula laughed. “I mean, most of these guys must have split up or died before you were even born. How does that work?”

“You tell me.”

“I’m asking *you*,” she said. “Besides, I already told you. My mom grew up on metal—it was like all I ever remember her listening to. So, what, were your parents like hippies or something?”

Sonny and Patricia Morrow had been the furthest thing from hippies Mitch could imagine. They had been nearly forty when he was born, married years before Chuck Berry ever sang about Memphis, before Elvis Presley or Carl Perkins or Roy Orbison were signed to Sun Records, before a young gospel singer named Johnny Cash was turned away by Sam Phillips with instructions to “go home and sin, then come back with a song I can sell.” It was his brother Davey who had given Mitch his first real taste of rock & roll, all-night sessions of Deep Purple, Molly Hatchet and Blue Öyster Cult muted by the thin trailer wall. But it was Jenny Coffman who had inadvertently exposed him to its true roots, his first real love introducing him to his next.

“No,” said Mitch. “My parents mostly listened to stuff like Marty Robbins and Patsy Cline. As far as rock, I hadn’t really heard anything older than Led Zeppelin until I went out with this girl in high school.”

“Hold up,” said Paula. “Is this the same doe-eyed blonde that had you running in circles?”

“Yeah, I guess it was,” he said. “Anyway, we started dating our junior year, such as it was—school dances, PG-13 movies. Her parents kept a pretty close rein on her—”

“What was her name?”

“Jenny,” said Mitch. “Are you taking notes or something?”

“No. Go ahead.”

“So we spent a lot of time at her house watching *21 Jump Street* reruns or listening to music in her room with the door ajar. When she first invited me up, I was expecting her to have like a dozen CDs nestled between two dolphin-shaped bookends—you know, Debbie Gibson, New Kids on the Block, Whitney Houston, maybe some Roxette or C+C Music Factory. But what I found instead were 45s and LPs—hundreds of them, records Jenny’s father had collected before her parents had married and found religion in the Jesus Movement of the 1970s.”

“Why dolphins?” asked Paula.

“I don’t know—don’t all girls like dolphins?”

“No,” she said. “Some of us like ponies. So, anyway—what happened? I mean, why aren’t you in Tennessee with like a dozen doe-eyed, pouty-lipped little babies?”

“She left me,” said Mitch. “For a stringy-haired guitar fag—a damn Nirvana fanboy.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope,” he put up three fingers, a Scout’s oath. “God’s honest truth. Kurt Cobain stole my girlfriend. And then he killed hair metal.”

“Bastard.”

“Yup.” He looked out his window into the darkness. “That riff is still like a dagger.”

#

They made good time, reaching Brandon’s third sixty-mile mark by eight o’clock, and Mitch had made a point of asking Paula if she was ready to trade off at each of them. It was mostly out of courtesy since she showed no signs of tiring, seemed in fact to be enjoying the trip, but part of him was itching to be behind that wheel.

“What’s at the next marker?” she asked.

He checked the map again. “Tonopah.”

“Maybe we can switch there.”

Mitch popped in *SuperHits of the 60s, Volume 4*, but dropped the volume a bit. He took out his notebook and stared at the lone chorus he’d strung together the day before, tried to pin down a

phantom melody that had been haunting the edges of his sleep. There were no words, just a tune that Mitch, unable to read much less notate music, transcribed as a crude string of *ba-da-dot-da-dot-dum's* or *do-doot-doot-do-do-do's*—a secret code he would later replace with lyrics or translate into guitar riffs and bass lines by vocalizing them into a mini tape recorder he'd bought in junior high.

"So what is that, really?" asked Paula.

"What is what?"

"That book," she said. "Is it like a journal or something?"

"It's just music notes and stuff," said Mitch.

"That's what you said before, notes and songs."

"Yeah."

"Rolling Stones songs?"

He closed the book, put it away. "Yeah, some of them are."

"But not all of them?"

"No," said Mitch.

Her face lit up.

"Is that what you were just doing—writing a song?"

He shrugged.

"Seriously?" she said. "Can I hear it?"

"It's only four lines."

"How many songs are in there?"

"A few."

She turned off the cassette. "You've got to let me hear one."

He shook his head.

"Please," she plead. "I'll let you drive."

"Pull over."

Paula pulled onto the shoulder, but hit the power locks when Mitch reached for his door

handle. “Un-uh,” she said. “Song first.”

He sighed. “Alright—one verse, one chorus. But you have to promise not to laugh.”

Paula crossed her heart.

Mitch thought a moment, then vocalized a pop-metal guitar intro before singing the first verse:

*You know Janie wasn't easy
but she sure was worth a try;
oh she had a two-inch bra strap
and a seven-button fly.*

*I was never good with numbers
but I always knew the score;
I was winning six-to-one when
Janie's dad kicked in the door.*

Another improvised riff, followed by the chorus:

*I was caught
with my hand in the cookie jar
never really got too far
but that was alright by me.*

*I was hot
goin' crazy from the heat
but I never missed a treat
if I could get one for free.*

Paula's grin grew so wide her cheeks looked like they were about to pop off her face.

“You promised,” said Mitch.

“I'm sorry,” she snickered. “It just sounds so—”

“Nineteen eighty-nine?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it should,” said Mitch. “I wrote it when I was fourteen.”

“No way.”

“I was listening to a lot of Poison and Great White—”

“Fourteen?” said Paula. “You've got to be kidding me. That's pretty awesome.”

It was quite possibly the worst thing he'd ever written. "You were about to laugh your ass off."

"Yeah, but—you really wrote that when you were fourteen?" she said. "I mean, it sounded just like, I don't know—like something Warrant would do."

"Hey now," said Mitch. "That's my fourteen-year-old ego you're trampling on."

"So what's it called?"

"The song?" said Mitch. "Cookie Jar."

"Is there more?"

"Oh yeah," said Mitch. "There was a whole album."

"I've gotta hear it," she said.

#

By midnight, Mitch and Paula had counted out three thousand dollars at the clerk's window of the Nye County Detention Center; by 12:15, Tommy and Jimi were free men once more. Dibbs had been hanging out in the tiny lobby for nearly twelve hours with a handful of crossword books he'd picked up at the local drugstore. Tommy was wearing a T-shirt that proclaimed "I JUST GOT LAID AT THE CHICKEN RANCH."

"Tell me you did not go in front of the judge in that," said Mitch.

"What?" Tommy said. "They wanted like four hundred dollars an hour—this was only twenty bucks."

"Well, you just spent a whole day in jail for a thousand dollars," said Mitch. "I hope you got your money's worth."

Jimi pointed at Tommy and busted up.

"I don't know what you're laughing at," Mitch said. "It cost an extra thousand to bail you out."

"Man, that's just the Being Black in Nevada Tax," said Jimi.

"Well, it's a good thing there's not a Being Stupid Tax," said Mitch. "Or none of you would have gotten out of here."

Paula popped the Camaro's hatch and crammed their bags in.

“That’s a sweet ride,” Jimi told Mitch. “Nice car, too.”

“There’s only four seats,” said Tommy.

“One of you will have to take the hump,” said Paula.

“There you go,” Dibbs said to Tommy. “You got one after all.”

“No way—I’m the tallest.”

“You’re also the skinniest.”

“I ain’t sitting on no hump,” said Jimi. “Not for two grand.”

“Just figure it out,” Mitch said. “We don’t have all night.”

“Alright,” said Jimi. “Gimme a quarter—we’ll flip for it.”

“This is actually happening,” Mitch said to Paula.

Tommy got the hump, anyway. They stopped at the same minimart where Tommy and Jimi were busted to gas up and grab some snacks before heading out of town. With minimal traffic and a little luck, they might make it back to Reno by sunrise. Mitch switched out *SuperHits of the 60s, Volume 7* for *Volume 8* and checked the heat, which was already on high but blowing warm at best. Paula curled up in the passenger seat with her coat turned around backward like a blanket, while the three in the back grumbled about elbows and asses.

About forty-five miles out of Pahrump, cruising at a good clip on Highway 95, the smell of skunk seeped into the car. No, it wasn’t a skunk. There was a faint sweetness behind it, one Mitch recognized but couldn’t place. He checked the rearview mirror.

“What the hell?”

Jimi had lit a fat joint and was trying to pass it to Tommy.

“Chill out, man. It’s coming your way.”

“Are you guys completely retarded?” asked Mitch. “Where did you even get that?”

“Don’t blame me,” said Dibbs. “I just told him where I stashed it.”

“Throw it out,” said Mitch.

“There’s like an eighth in here.”

“That’s not an eighth,” said Dibbs.

“I don’t care,” said Mitch. “Toss it. All of it.”

“I ain’t throwing this shit out, man.”

“Throw it out,” said Mitch. “Or get out.”

“Just do it,” said Tommy.

“No way,” said Jimi. “There’s a pig right there.”

“Fuck.”

Mitch glanced at the speedometer. He’d just blown by a state trooper doing 88.

Tommy watched out the back windshield. “He’s not coming. Maybe he was asleep.”

“Nope,” said Dibbs. “There’s his headlights; he’s pulling out.”

“And there go the cherries,” said Tommy. “He’s got us.”

Mitch pounded the wheel with his fist. The cops would haul them all back to Pahrump.

They’d probably let Paula go but impound the car for sure and double the bails. Mother’s Little Helper would be done in Reno. Paula would be gone. Mitch hit the wheel again, glanced down—he was doing 95. He checked the mirror; he had almost a quarter mile on the trooper. For a fleeting moment, Mitch thought, *I could run*.

He turned to Paula whose eyes were as wide as poker chips, then pulled onto the shoulder and turned off the car.

By the time the cruiser pulled up behind them, all the windows were down. Jimi had pinched out the joint and tucked it into his sock. Tommy pretended to be asleep on Dibb’s shoulder.

The trooper came up on Mitch’s side and shone a flashlight through to Paula, then across the three faces in the back seat and back to Paula. He was an older man, maybe 55 or 60, with large weathered hands and a widow’s peak that showed beneath his hat. “Never liked these tinted windows,” he said.

“No, sir,” said Mitch. “That’s why I put ’em down. My daddy didn’t care much for ’em when he was on duty, either.”

“Your daddy’s an officer?”

“Yessir,” said Mitch with a slightly exaggerated drawl. “Was. Retired from Shelby County eight years ago.” He handed the trooper his driver’s license.

“Awful long way from Tennessee,” said the trooper. “You want to tell me where you’re headed in such a hurry?”

Mitch had barely had time to come up with the first lie. “Would you believe I’m a Mick Jagger impersonator and were on our way to a concert in Reno?”

The trooper studied Mitch’s face for a moment. “Wouldn’t be the strangest thing I’ve heard tonight. You got insurance and registration on this?”

Paula pulled the cards from the glovebox.

The trooper looked them over. “This your car?”

“It’s my aunt’s,” she said.

He considered this for a moment then shone the light into the backseat again. “You boys are pretty quiet back there.”

Too quiet, feared Mitch. In the rearview mirror, Tommy looked drugged—or even dead.

“Yessir,” said Dibbs. “It’s been a really long day.”

“Well, you folks just sit tight for a minute.” The trooper took the license and registration back to his car. As they waited, another lit up cruiser pulled in behind the first.

After a few minutes, the trooper returned. “Well, I’ve got good news and bad news,” he said. “The good news is I’m only writing you up at 81 which will save you some money and trouble.”

This is it, thought Mitch.

“The bad news is you’re not getting to Reno tonight,” said the trooper. “Not the way you’re going. Some yahoo turned over a tanker truck full of God-knows-what about twenty miles ahead; highway’s shut down both directions.”

“For how long?” asked Mitch.

Long as it takes,” said the trooper. “Three, four hours maybe—have to wait for a haz-mat crew

to show up.”

“There’s no other way?”

“Not unless you go all the way back past Vegas and up 93 to 375,” the trooper said. “Take you as long to do that as it would to wait here. If I was you, I’d just find a place to sleep in Pahrump and head out in the morning.” He looked into the backseat once more. “You all look like you could use the rest.”

The trooper handed Mitch his license and a ticket and returned to his car. A moment later the two cruisers left in opposite directions. Mitch rested his head on the wheel and tried to determine if the situation had gotten better or worse in the past fifteen minutes.

“What are we going to do?” asked Tommy.

“I say we do what the man said,” said Jimi, whose own show wasn’t until Thursday night. “Get some sleep and go up tomorrow.”

“That’ll cut us awful close,” said Dibbs.

“Too close,” said Mitch. Besides, Paula hadn’t signed on for this. Surely she was already regretting getting mixed up in it, maybe getting mixed up with him at all. He had to get her and the car back to Reno.

“Brandon would blow a gasket,” said Tommy.

Dibbs concurred.

“We’re finding a way back tonight,” said Mitch. “If I have to drive around the whole freakin’ state of Nevada.”

Paula perked up at this, looked over the map for a moment. “Double back,” she said. “I can get us back to Reno.”

#

They drove southwest down a desolate stretch of road for what must have been thirty miles. At first there had been a lone building or speed limit sign every few miles, but Mitch hadn’t seen so much as a utility pole in the last ten.

“Where are we?” asked Tommy.

“I’ll tell you where we at,” said Jimi. “We in Area 51. Be just my luck, too—getting snatched up in a UFO driving through the desert in the middle of the night with a carful of white people.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” Tommy said.

“You ever hear of any brothers getting abducted by aliens?”

“We’re not in Area 51,” said Mitch. “I don’t think we’re even in Nevada anymore.”

“We’re in California,” said Paula.

“There wasn’t even a sign,” said Mitch.

“This is it,” said Paula pointing to a road that cut toward the mountains. “Turn here.”

“There’s a sign,” said Tommy.

It was a large wood and stone marker that resembled both a gallows and a gravesite from the old Western films Mitch’s father used to watch. He slowed to a stop as they approached, the headlights illuminating the dark red lettering: Death Valley National Park.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said.

“We can cut through to 395 and take that all the way to Reno,” said Paula. “I drove it once with my dad. Well, the 395 part, anyway.”

“I ain’t going in there,” said Jimi.

“Can we go around?” asked Tommy.

“It’s almost two hundred miles out of the way,” said Paula. “It’ll take twice as long.”

It was almost two a.m. and they weren’t any closer to Reno than when they’d left Pahrump. Mitch looked into the mirror. “What do you think, Dibbs?”

“It’s your call.”

Mitch dropped the Camaro into gear, pulled back onto the road.

“Sonuvabitch,” muttered Jimi.

Paula held up *SuperHits of the 60s, Volume 9* and Mitch nodded his approval. They descended into the valley as The Bobby Fuller Four lamented their own less successful run in with the law.

#

When Kenny Rogers and the First Edition dropped in to see what condition their condition was in, they were about halfway through the valley. Tommy and Jimi were asleep, the one drooling on the other's shoulder. Dibbs was still awake, but had been watching the horizon without a word for nearly an hour. Mitch fished for half a Slim Jim that had fallen between the seats.

"I have to pee," said Paula.

"Okay," said Mitch. He slowed a bit, but didn't stop.

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. A tree or something?"

"I think I saw one back in Pahrump," said Dibbs.

"Just pull over," said Paula.

"Hold up," said Mitch. "There's something up there."

It was a tiny general store with two gas pumps. Mitch checked the Camaro's gauge. Half.

"Empty or full?" said Dibbs.

Mitch had planned to stop in Tonopah on the way back. He hadn't accounted for the lengthy detour, hadn't even thought about fuel until the needle dipped sharply about a half hour ago.

"Full," he said as he watched Paula peer into the darkened storefront. "Just under half full."

Paula went around behind the building. Mitch got out and checked the pumps. All locked up. Dibbs got out to stretch his legs despite the bitter cold.

"Witch's tit," said Dibbs.

"What?"

"My grandpa used to say 'it's colder than a witch's tit.'"

"I think I saw that on the map," said Mitch. "Between Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells."

Paula came back to the car. "Sign in the window says next gas is thirty miles ahead in Panamint Springs. Says it's open 24 hours."

Back on the road, Dibbs resumed his vigil and Paula curled up under her coat again. She

slumped against her door, asked Mitch if he was alright. “Perfect,” he said. She gave him a grin and closed her eyes.

About halfway to Panamint Springs, Jimi woke up and gave Tommy a jab with his elbow.

“Get off me, man. That’s nasty.”

Tommy smacked his lips, all of his saliva having drained onto Jimi’s silk shirt, and slurped at the bottom of a two-hour old fountain soda he found in the floorboard.

“Is there anything to drink? I’m like dying of thirst here.”

Mitch shook the empty minimart bag at him.

“Well, you sure picked the right place for it,” said Jimi.

“Take you three days to die of thirst,” said Mitch. “Just pray we don’t run out of gas and freeze to death first.”

Dibbs stared at the dark ridge of mountains on the horizon. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—”

I take a look at my life and realize there’s nothing’ left, Tommy blustered.

Jimi followed his cue: *’Cause I’ve been blastin’ and laughin’ so long that—*

After a beat Paula, her eyes still shut, blurted, *Even my mama thinks that my mind is gone.*

Thirty seconds later, they were all chanting the chorus: *Keep spending most our lives, living in the gangsta’s paradise.* Sixty seconds later, there was a bang in the rear of the car.

“I think someone just popped a cap in our ass,” said Dibbs.

They all got out and surveyed the damage. The tire was shredded.

“Tell me there’s a spare,” said Mitch.

“Here’s one,” said Tommy, rooting in the hatch.

“Thank God.”

“But it’s flat.”

Mitch pressed his palms into his eyes, ran his hands over his head.

“I think there’s an air thingie under the seat,” said Paula.

Mitch kissed her hard on the forehead. “Dibbs, get the ‘air thingie’ and see if that tire’s any good. Tommy, Jimi see if you can find a place for the jack while I loosen the lugs. Maybe we can get this done before we freeze our balls off.”

“Don’t be shoutin’ orders at me,” grumbled Jimi. “Ain’t my fault we out here in this shit.”

It wasn’t his fault—not entirely—but he certainly wasn’t making things any easier, either. “I swear to God,” said Mitch. “I will beat you to death with this tire iron and bury you in this desert.”

Jimi turned away with nervous laugh. “Is this guy serious?”

“No,” said Dibbs. “We don’t have time to bury you.”

It turned out the spare was good, and despite the tiny jack that had about as much torque as a can opener, they were back in the car huddled over the heat vents within twenty minutes.

“You okay?” Paula asked Mitch again. “You look a little tired. I can drive if you want.”

“I’m fine,” said Mitch. He ejected the cassette from the deck. Paula handed him the next, held onto it playfully for a moment when he tried to take it. As disastrous as the trip had been, she still showed no sign of discontent, and as much as he regretted putting her in the situation, he was glad she was there.

They reached Panamint Springs with a quarter tank, give or take. As promised by the sign at the last station, the little store was open—but there was no gas.

“Won’t be any till tomorrow afternoon,” said the clerk, a robust and genial man with white hair. The patch on his shirt read “Gus.” Mitch would have guessed the man was the owner had he not been working the graveyard shift. “Did you try Furnace Creek?”

“No,” said Mitch. “We stopped at Witch’s Tit instead.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing,” said Mitch. “How far is the next gas?”

“Depends. Where you headed?”

“Reno.”

“Oh, I’d say about fifty miles,” said Gus. “Out in Lone Pine. Olancha’s only forty-five miles, but it’s out of your way. Not even sure that station’s open this time of night. Yessir, I’d say Lone Pine’s your best bet.”

“There’s nothing closer?”

“Well, you’ll drive past Keeler on the way, but there’s nothing there,” said Gus. “And I mean nothing. Place has been a ghost town since they diverted the river to Los Angeles and dried up the lake.”

They restocked their provisions—juice, soda, pretzels, candy bars, beef jerky. It was all exorbitantly priced, but they were glad to have it. Tommy bought a long-sleeved t-shirt that said I SURVIVED DEATH VALLEY. Mitch grabbed an empty gas can and two pairs of brown jersey gloves.

“Now, remember,” said Gus. “You want to take 136 to 395, don’t stay on 190.” He looked out the window at the Camaro. “And you kids be careful up in them mountains.”

They piled back into the car and Paula asked Mitch again if he wanted her to drive. He looked at the gauge. If it was accurate, they had three or four gallons left. Sixty, eighty miles maybe. It would be enough. Except they were carrying five people—into the mountains. But then they would come down out of the mountains, too. If he nursed it, Mitch thought, they would be fine.

“You get some rest,” he said. “I’ll get us to Lone Pine.”

The tank ran empty on 136 just past Keeler. Mitch coasted onto the shoulder. Everyone else was asleep, including Paula and Dibbs, who had been awake at least as long as Mitch had, maybe longer. He sat for a minute or two. It was after four o’clock Wednesday morning. If the old man was right, they were at least thirteen miles out of Lone Pine and still nearly three hundred out of Reno. It was maybe twenty-five degrees outside and wouldn’t be much warmer in the car—not for very long. He woke Tommy and Jimi quietly, motioned for them to follow him out of the car.

“We’re out of gas,” he told them. “Someone’s going to have to go back and see if there’s anything in that town.”

“What town?”

“Keeler,” said Mitch. “We passed it about two miles back.”

“The old man said there’s nothing there,” said Tommy.

“Well we can’t just sit here. Who knows when the next car will come by, and it’s going to get cold fast.”

“It’s already cold,” said Jimi.

“It’s going to get worse the longer we wait.”

“How far’s the next town?”

“Too far,” said Mitch. “Now the sign back there said there were fifty people in Keeler—”

“That sign could be fifty years old.”

“Maybe,” said Mitch. “But we’re going—two of us, anyway.”

“Who?” said Jimi.

Mitch looked at each of them, then back to the car. “You and me.”

“Aw, come on, man,” said Jimi. “Let’s at least flip for it or something.”

Mitch shot him a middle finger. “There you go—you’re coming with me. Tommy, stay here, stay warm, stay awake. If someone comes, flag them down. Try not to wake up Paula or Dibbs unless you have to; one of them will probably have to drive pretty soon.”

“I wish you’d brought Brandon’s cell phone,” said Tommy.

“Who would we call?”

“I dunno,” said Tommy. “Brandon?”

“Brandon’s the last person I need to hear from right now.” Mitch handed Jimi a pair of gloves and grabbed the gas can.

“Gee, thanks,” said Jimi.

“I bought them for *her*,” said Mitch. “We can leave them if you don’t want them.”

Jimi pulled on the gloves.

“Come on,” said Mitch. “And keep up.”

They covered the two miles back to Keeler in twenty minutes or so, mostly at a light jog, though Mitch had to keep waiting for Jimi to catch up. “I’m too old for this shit,” he said. Mitch was fairly winded himself, but tried as best he could not to talk or breathe through his mouth in order to keep the cold air out of his lungs, and more important, his throat. With any luck, he still had to sing tonight.

There was an old two-pump station in town, but the pumps were at least fifty years old and the building was boarded like almost everything else on the main road. Almost all of the houses were dilapidated, too, and they couldn’t find a single light among them, but eventually they came across a couple driveways with late model cars—or at least ones produced since the Reagan administration.

“So what’s your plan?” said Jimi. “Go up and knock on the door? I don’t know about you, but these look like the kind of people that have big dogs and bigger shotguns.”

He had a point. Mitch had thought they might find a stray gas can or two for lawn mowers or something, but there weren’t any lawns either.

“Over there,” said Mitch, pointing to a detached garage with a bare light bulb burning over it.

They crept in by the unlocked side door. Jimi flicked his Zippo and they searched for—what? There were all kinds of tools ranging from old rusty farm implements to dusty power saws. In the middle of the garage was a dismantled engine block on the ground next to an all but gutted ’57 Chevy. Mitch scanned the pegboard walls, spotted a yellowed coil of clear plastic tubing. He lifted it off its hook, poked his finger in one end.

“Let’s go,” said Mitch. “We can probably get a couple gallons of gas out of that pickup next door.” He held the tubing out to Jimi.

“What you want me to do with that?”

“Syphon the gas out of the tank.”

“What makes you think I know how to steal gas?”

“Do you know how to do it or not?” Mitch knew the basic principle, but had never done it

himself. He also knew whoever did it would end up with a mouthful of gasoline. “Look, you get it out and I’ll carry it back.” He held up the empty can. “That’s almost twenty pounds of gas, and you barely made it here empty-handed.”

“Gimme the damn hose.”

When they were back within sight of the car, Mitch ran ahead with the gas, leaving Jimi to cover the last few hundred yards at his own pace. The others were all up and waiting. He handed the can off to Dibbs. Paula was in the backseat with Tommy’s Death Valley shirt pulled over her own. Mitch gave her his gloves, climbed into the seat next to her. He was too exhausted to realize how cold he was.

By the time Jimi got there, huffing like the Little Engine That Could, Dibbs had the car running and the heat blowing. Mitch stayed in back with Paula and Tommy while Jimi rode shotgun. Dibbs drove them into Lone Pine, by which time Tommy and Paula was asleep again, Paula under her coat in Mitch’s lap. Mitch let her sleep through a stop in Bishop too, relished her warmth against him, but nudged her awake when they passed through the eastern edge of Yosemite, just as the sun was rising over Mono Lake.

When they finally pulled up in front of the Silver Streak, it was ten o’clock—nearly seventeen hours after Mitch and Paula had left. Dibbs had called ahead from Lone Pine, let Brandon and Kevin know they were four hours behind schedule while leaving out the details—or at least the most incriminating ones. Tommy and Dibbs each grabbed their bags out of the hatch and shuffled like bleary-eyed zombies into the lobby. Jimi gave Mitch a parting fist bump, shorthand for *thanks, man—sorry I was such a pain in the ass*.

“Are you going to be alright?” Mitch asked Paula. “Do you want me to drive you to your aunt’s?” He realized he’d been with her 23 ½ consecutive hours and part of him wanted to make it an even day. “We could take a cab back.”

“I think I’m just going to head back to my hotel,” she said. “I’ll take the car back later.”

“Well, I could drive you over and walk back?”

“You’ve already walked, what, ten miles today and driven—well, a lot,” she said. “I think we both know what you really want.”

“Waffles?”

“Sleep,” Paula laughed. “And lots of it—you’re delirious.”

“So, no waffles?”

“Tomorrow, Mitch.” She patted his cheek. “We’ll have waffles tomorrow.”

“Promise?”

She crossed her heart. “I’ll see you tonight.”

By the time Mitch got up to his room, Tommy was already snoring like a piece of heavy machinery. Three minutes after his face hit his pillow, Mitch was out too, dreaming of cement mixers and police chases and California sunrises.

#

I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me? She was late, which Mitch usually would not have dwelt on except that it kept him from thinking of the other possibility—that she was not coming. It was just a little past seven and Mother’s Little Helper would not take the stage until nine, but Paula had promised to meet him before Revolver’s Beatles tribute, which was only fair he had teased her on the drive to Pahrump since he had sat through her cheesy Van Halen show. Had he called it *cheesy*? He had meant to say *shitty*. He probably shouldn’t have said either.

Mitch pulled out his harmonica, began to turn it in his hand. She had probably just overslept; he might have himself had Brandon not roused him and Tommy at five o’clock—and without any mention of the night before. “We’re on in four hours,” he said. “If you’re gonna eat, you should probably do it now. I don’t want anyone blowing prime rib and shrimp all over the stage.”

Revolver would have been the headliner had such a distinction been made for each night’s eight-act lineup—the lounge was already near capacity by 6:30, before Blynd Tyger had sleazed through the final chorus of “Pour Some Sugar on Me.” Whatever remained of this crowd would surely reflect well on the acts that followed, but who wanted to follow the band favored to win

not only their heat but the whole tournament? Mitch hadn't thought much about the competition all week, but now, up against the top Beatles act in the country and slotted between equally intimidating Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd tributes—*who the hell scheduled this thing?*—he began to believe that Brandon might have been right when he suggested that they'd find better odds at the roulette tables.

"This place is packed," said Paula without apology as she sidled into the seat next to him, one he'd hooked his leg through after several people had tried to steal it away. "You must be nervous."

He hadn't been, really, not until then. He'd played much bigger venues than this, but never with so much at stake—or in front of someone had he hoped so desperately to impress. Sure, she'd heard him goofing off in the car or singing at karaoke, but that was different. That was him and Ziggy preening, trying on new suits. Tonight, she would see the real Mitch. After all, *this* was who he really was—wasn't it? Still, her presence was a relief that somehow countered this anxiety, a peculiar tonic for its own affliction.

"No," said Mitch. "Not anymore."

Revolver was the real deal, or as close as anyone had come in forty years. The bassist even played a right-handed Hofner turned upside-down, just as Paul McCartney had in the early years, though Mitch suspected he'd had it restrung. Almost-Paul pitched his latest manuscript to a paperback publisher as not-quite-John and damn-near-George harmonized. *Frère—re Jac—ques*. How do you top the goddamn Beatles? They even made novel writing sound hip.

Mitch had always preferred them himself, even to the Stones. Sure, the Stones were more bluesy, more ballsy, but the Beatles had two legitimate front men, two self-contained *songwriters*—and another waiting in their shadow. Jagger and Richards were collaborators at best; neither would have been able to get it done alone.

"So why aren't you in a Beatles tribute band?" asked Paula.

"Because this," Mitch raised his harmonica, "is all I can play."

"I'll bet you could."

“Could what?”

“Play guitar,” she said. “Or drums, or piano—or whatever. I mean, if you really wanted to.”

“Maybe,” said Mitch. “I guess that’s the hard part.”

“What is?”

“Figuring out what you really want.”

“Not really,” she said.

“You already know what you want?”

“No,” said Paula. “I know what you want.”

“And what do I want?” asked Mitch.

“More.”

“That’s it?” he said. “More?”

Paula nodded.

“Everybody wants *more*.”

“Yeah,” she said. “But you could have it.”

Well ahead of the allotted time, Revolver left the stage still playing the outro of “Hello Goodbye.” The crowd seemed not to have noticed the set had been cut short and gave a full 90-second ovation—after which the band reemerged in full Sgt. Pepper regalia and finished the show by compressing the entire album into an eleven-minute medley. Ten minutes after the final chord of “A Day in the Life” and another sustained ovation, a voice came over the house system. *The judges’ marks are in—final score for Revolver, forty-eight.* Another collective cheer.

“Forty-eight?” said Paula. “Percent? That doesn’t sound very good, does it?”

Mitch pressed his palms into his eyeballs. “Out of fifty.”

#

Hey, hey, mama, said the way you move, gon’ make you sweat, gon’ make you groove! Ziggy showed up halfway through Dazed & Confused’s set, fawning over a young black woman who was nearly as tall as he was. She wore a short black halter dress that must have been strategically taped and had

legs all the way up to her perfect teeth.

“So what’s the mark?” asked Ziggy.

“Forty-eight,” said Mitch.

“Sonuvabitch!”

Paula introduced herself to Ziggy’s date; her name was Taffy. Paula and Mitch shared a suppressed giggle over the rims of their glasses.

“I thought you had your own show tonight,” Paula said to Ziggy.

“Not till eleven, love. You comin’ out with Mitch, then?”

“Sure, if you promise to do ‘Cradle of Love.’” Paula flashed a mischievous grin. “That’s my favorite Billy Idol song.”

“This one’s a riot, ain’t she?” Ziggy said to Taffy. “Well, it’s certainly a fitting number, but not exactly in my repertoire. But don’t worry,” he told Paula. “If you get too bored, perhaps we could find you some crayolas and a nice colouring book.”

Mitch excused himself at the opening licks of “Stairway to Heaven,” leaving Paula to hold her own against Ziggy, and vice versa. There was still a half hour until show time, but he needed a few minutes to himself, to shake what nervousness he could into a urinal and stare the rest into submission over a running sink.

The guys were all waiting backstage when he got there. Tommy was pacing back and forth, a stick in each fist, stopping to pound out a silent polyrhythm before each turn. Dibbs sat on an overturned milk crate dangling a cigarette over one knee. Kevin was tuning one of his many guitars, always tuning his guitars.

“Where the hell have you been?” asked Brandon.

“Out front,” said Mitch. “With Paula. What’s the problem?”

“Oh, it’s nothing—just that we’re on in twenty and still have to set up all our shit,” said Brandon. “You could have at least let us know you were here.”

“Chill out,” said Kevin. “He’s here. He’s always here.”

“Yeah,” said Brandon. “Till the time he’s not.” He dropped his own cigarette on the tile floor, crushed it with his foot. “C’mon,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

#

Moments after the lights dimmed, Tommy counted them in with a cowbell groove that was met with a generous round of applause. They had resisted the temptation to go right for the throat by leading with “Satisfaction” and it had paid off. *I met a gin-soaked, barroom queen in Memphis.* The band was good—solid if unexceptional. Kevin was as carefully accurate a guitarist as there was in the circuit, not flashy but able to produce just the right sound out of anything he picked up. Brandon was a respectable rhythm guitarist and valuable utility man; over the years, he had taught himself piano, saxophone—even the sitar and violin—in order to expand their repertoire. Tommy and Dibbs were as steady a rhythm section as any. But Mitch *was* exceptional. They knew it when they asked him to join the band, knew it as they flew out to Reno with an invitation that might well have read “Mitch and guests,” knew it now as he shrugged on a swagger like a jacket that fit only two people in the whole world.

They resisted, too, the temptation to close with “Satisfaction,” then gave the crowd “19th Nervous Breakdown” before Mitch brought his strut full swing on Willie Dixon’s “Little Red Rooster.” *I am the little red rooster, too lazy to crow for day.* Kevin got the chance to show off his slide guitar, but the others hated the song, a straight forward blues number that Brandon referred to as “Mitch’s monologue.” “It’s not even a Stones tune,” Dibbs had protested. They had even taken to calling him “the Rooster,” long after Kevin put the debate to rest and the song became a setlist staple. Mitch had always despised the nickname, but he owned it tonight as he channeled one man’s blues through another man’s voice. He pulled his harmonica from his shirt pocket—a blues harp, he’d heard someone call it once—and brought the song home.

What a drag it is getting old! “That’s a stupid name,” Kevin had said. “It sounds like a Frank Zappa album.” It was one of the few things Mitch and Brandon ever agreed on, though, and they couldn’t show up for their first gig without a name. No one ever came up with anything better.

Kevin had to admit, at least, that it was a good song—*She goes running for the shelter of a mother's little helper!*—and represented the sort of eclecticism diehard fans (and judges) liked to see sprinkled among the bigger hits. Mitch looked out at Paula and wondered if she'd ever even heard it.

“Paint It Black,” “Ruby Tuesday,” “Jumpin’ Jack Flash”—another string of fan favorites. Mitch’s onstage confidence and energy were infectious, not just among the crowd but among his bandmates. When Mitch was on his game—really *on* it—the others actually played better, not because they were afraid of being upstaged but because they had been. When the attention was on Mitch, the others seemed less inhibited, less cautious—more like a real rock & roll band. He was the lightning *and* the rod. Kevin knew it and, deep down, Mitch did too.

Paula had worked her way to the front of the crowd and it took all Mitch had not to notice, not to sing to her. *Take me to the station and put me on a train; I've got no expectations to pass through here again.* Mitch had done a lot of shows over the years, more than he cared to admit—shows and years. He’d played—instrument or not, he was *playing*—hundreds of towns before this one; he’d probably play hundreds more. He’d played taverns and theaters, block parties and state fairs. He’d played weddings and theme parks, airfields and riverboats. And, yes, he’d played high schools and rib festivals. He’d played for thousands of people. He’d played for himself. He’d played for money. He’d played for Kevin and the guys. He’d played for women. But he’d never played for—well, whatever it was he was playing for tonight.

They closed out their set with “Brown Sugar,” “Gimme Shelter” and “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” (which also happened to be Mitch’s sardonic reply to the occasional heckler who would clamor for “Start Me Up” or some other late-era Stones tune). By the time the crowd broke for the bar after a final ovation, Mitch looked like he’d just finished a triathlon and was lining up for another. He was used to ninety minute sets, two hours when they could get them. Forty minutes? A tease, he thought. He was only at half a tank, maybe more. He wanted to run. He wanted to fight someone. He wanted to break something.

#

Paula watched as Mitch hopped off the front of the stage and into a lingering throng fans and wellwishers. She'd been navigating these barroom crowds with him all week, but as he made his way toward her now, there was something different about him. She wasn't quite sure what it was exactly—if his shoulders were a bit higher, his features a bit sharper—but tonight he wasn't so much *part* of the crowd as *apart* from it. There was everyone else, and then there was Mitch.

"That was—amazing," she told him. It was exactly the sort of thing her junior high friends might have said after a Backstreet Boys concert or a midnight screening of *Titanic*. Paula wondered if she had ever told Tony the same thing after a Fair Warning show; she was embarrassed that she probably had.

"Fuckin' brilliant is what it was," said Ziggy.

An attractive older woman interrupted, asked if she could get a picture with Mitch. Her friend snapped a photo with her cell phone, then the woman turned and planted a big kiss on Mitch's sweaty jaw. Her friend snapped another. "I want that in black and white," said the first woman as they giggled toward the bar.

Paula ran her hand down the side of Mitch's face, wiping away the sweat and the kiss. "You're burning up," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Like doing another show."

"Well," said Ziggy. "You might have just earned yourself one."

Mitch posed for another quick photo with a couple of guys in goatees and ponytails that Paula figured for NorCal hippies. As she handed back their camera, one of them got a good look at Ziggy.

"Hey—you're David Bowie, aren't you?"

Ziggy gestured demurely; he wasn't even in costume. "Not really, but I'll do in a pinch."

They handed the camera back to her. "Could you get one more of us? With Mick *and* Bowie?"

She snapped another shot, after which Ziggy and Taffy congratulated Mitch once again before

slipping out to grab a bite before Ziggy's own midnight show at the Golden Spike.

Another man extended a large hand to Mitch. "Helluva show," he said. He was bit shorter than Mitch but wider, fiftyish with a receding hairline and a suit that seemed just a bit dated. "What's the name?"

"Thanks," said Mitch. "It's Mother's Little Helper."

"I think he means *your* name," Paula whispered.

"Oh—Mitch," he said. "Mitch Morrow."

"Mal Reubens," said the man. He handed Mitch a business card. "You've probably heard this a hundred times, but I think I might have an opportunity for you—"

Mitch turned the card in his fingers, held it back out. "That's great," he said. "But you probably want to talk to Kevin or Brandon. I mean, they're the ones who take care of all this stuff."

The man turned to the stage where Kevin and Brandon were packing away the last of their gear, even as the next band was bringing out their own. "Your pals up there?"

"Yeah," said Mitch. "That's them. They're the brains of this outfit." He grinned at Paula. "I'm just a hired gun."

"You guys been at this a while, then, have you?"

"Almost ten years," said Mitch.

"I see," said the man with mild disappointment. "Well, good luck this week."

"They're almost done," said Mitch. "If you've got a minute."

"Tell you what, Mitch," said the man, glancing down at the card in Mitch's fingers. "I'll just let you hang on to that. Give me a ring when you get a chance."

The man gave Paula a warm smile—one that seemed to belie a certain sadness or maybe just tiredness, the sort of smile fathers sometimes give teenaged daughters—and then slipped back into the crowd. Two women, much younger than the first pair, filled the void. Mitch posed for yet another camera, a long arm wrapped around each slender waist. Paula thought of Ziggy and Taffy, of Christine and Stevie at karaoke, of the sort of girl Mitch would be with if she weren't there. But

she was there, and as the two young women gave way to a middle-age couple patiently waiting their turn, Mitch's eye did not follow them for a moment but turned to find her instead.

The wait for the scores felt longer than the show itself. Mitch seemed unconcerned, although there was still a strong undercurrent of nervousness, some unspent energy working its way through his system. He started to fidget with his harmonica again as they waited for the waitress to bring their drinks. Paula thought it was a cute tell, like the way Lance Bartell used to bounce his knee under his desk during biology quizzes. Adrenaline, that was it—or at least that's what it felt like to her. Could you get a contact high from adrenaline? Whatever it was, it had caught hold of her when Mitch took the stage and hadn't let up since.

There was a brief hush when the PA finally crackled. *Final score for Mother's Little Helper—forty-six.* There was perhaps some consolation in the scattered groans and complaints of the remaining crowd, but none that seemed to matter much to Mitch, not then.

"Well, that's that," he said, polishing off the first of what Paula suspected might be many Jack and Cokes.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "That show was unreal. You—you were really something else."

"Maybe that's what we need," said Mitch. "Something else."

"Hey," she said. "Remember when I told you my mom saw Van Halen at the Whiskey in '77?"

"Yeah."

"This is the one I'll tell my kid about someday."

"The time you saw a Rolling Stones knock-off band in Reno?"

"No," she said. "The time I met Mitch Morrow."

He grabbed a cocktail napkin and pulled the pencil from his little black notebook. He jotted something down, turned it over and slipped it under her fingertips.

"There you go," he said. "Something for show and tell."

She flipped it over: *Hey Paula—All my love, Mitch Morrow.*

They sat through the Pink Floyd tribute that followed Mother's Little Helper. The aptly named

Comfortably Numb was a bit too melancholic for Paula, but Mitch seemed to relish the mood.

Ghost in the Machine followed and promised an equally dismal set—*There's a little black spot on the sun today*—and Paula had nearly resigned to spend the evening brooding with Mitch when he remembered Ziggy's show.

"Are you sure you're up for it?" she asked. "You look pretty tired."

"No, I'm good," he said. "Besides, I told him I'd be there."

"Okay," she said. "But can we swing by my hotel first. I want to grab a sweater and change these shoes. I'll be quick, I promise."

#

There was light, apprehensive rap at the door, then another—a bit louder, more assertive. The sun had parted the curtains and cut a bright swath across the sheets. Mitch waited for the shrill *Housekeeping!* but it didn't come. Another knock. Paula crossed in front of the bed wearing only an old Guns 'N' Roses T-shirt that hung to about mid-thigh and pulled a pair of white cotton panties from a drawer.

"I got it," she said.

Mitch looked at the clock. 12:34. *Make a wish*, he thought. He couldn't think of one.

She came back with a sheepish grin. "It's for you."

Mitch wrestled his jeans out of the tangle of blankets on the floor. Paula drew the curtains back then tossed him a pink men's Polo shirt from a suitcase. He pulled it on and went to the door.

"Well, good morning, Sunshine. Nice shirt."

Mitch leaned out the doorway, looked down the hall. "How did you find me here?"

"You're not exactly fuckin' Carmen Sandiego," said Ziggy. "I just asked the clerk where Mick Jagger was shagging the little blonde tart."

"What? No, I mean—never mind. What are you *doing* here?"

"That's a fine how-d'ya-do after standing me up last night," said Ziggy. "I'd never do that to a mate."

“Yes you would.”

“Alright, maybe,” said Ziggy. “But I’d feel real bad about it afterwards—and I’d make it up to him by promising not to miss him in the semifinals.”

“You won?”

“Course I fuckin’ won. Don’t act so surprised.”

“No, I’m sorry,” said Mitch. “That’s great—no, I’ll be there. I swear. It’s just—we’re out.”

“Out? What’d you score?”

“Forty-six, but Revolver beat us.”

“Forty-six? You’re not out, you twit.”

Mitch was puzzled.

“Twenty-four acts advance to the semifinals,” said Ziggy.

“Yeah,” said Mitch. “The winner from each stage on the first four nights.”

“There’s only four stages,” said Ziggy. “That’s only sixteen. Then they’ll take eight from the top of what’s left.” He rapped Mitch on the head with his knuckles. “And here I thought you was the smart one.”

Mitch hadn’t even spoken with the rest of the band since the show. He wondered if they knew they still had a shot. Of course they would. It was him who had been preoccupied, had forgotten why they were here in the first place. “So that’s why you came all the way out here? To tell me we we’re still in?”

“No, I came to tell you *I* was in,” said Ziggy. “And to quit being a fuckin’ twit.” He held up a small white card. “And to show you this.”

“What’s that?”

Ziggy flicked it to reveal a bold red imprint—*INXS*.

“It’s a golden ticket.”

Twenty-one, red.

Mitch placed another stack of chips on the table. He was on a pretty good run since the night before and figured it was as good a time as any to try his hand at a few other games of chance.

“It’s been red three times in a row,” said Paula.

“Yup.”

“You keep betting black,” she said.

“Black is cool.”

“Looks like red is the new black.”

“There are trend followers,” said Mitch, “and there are trendsetters.”

“You’re setting a trend by betting black?”

“No,” said Mitch. “Look, I double my bet each time. Eventually it has to come back to black; when it does, I win everything back plus my original wager.” He held up two chips. “See, luck is like a butterfly. If you chase it, you’ll never catch it. But—” He balanced the chips in a V on his knuckles. “If you’re patient, it might just come to you.”

“Luck is like a butterfly?” said Paula. “Did you just make that up?”

“Yeah,” said Mitch. “What do you think?”

Thirty, red.

She plucked the chips off his fist. “I think the trend followers just took your money.”

Mitch counted out another stack of chips and placed it in the small black diamond once again.

“So what are the green zeroes for?” asked Paula.

“That’s where the house gains the advantage,” he says. “A single number pays 35-to-1, but there are thirty-eight slots on the wheel.”

“Can you play them?”

“Yeah.”

Paula put a chip on each green square. Mitch recounted his bet.

“How much is there?”

“Eighty dollars.”

“So if you win, you’re up like, what, five bucks?”

“Yup.”

“And if you lose?”

The croupier let the ball fly.

“Then we’ll trade these last four chips for a bucket of nickels and a couple drinks,” said Mitch.

Paula reached under his arm and slid the stack of chips into the center of the table.

No more bets.

“What are you doing?”

“Chasing a butterfly.”

A moment later the ball came to rest.

Seventeen, black. Big winner.

The croupier swept the table except for Mitch’s bet then proceeded to count out an obscene amount of chips.

“Let it ride,” said Paula.

What?

“That’s \$2800, sweetheart,” said the croupier. “The table limit is two hundred.”

“She’s kidding,” said Mitch. “We’re cashing out.”

Paula turned to a slack-jawed woman with too many rings. “I always wanted to say that.”

They burned a hundred dollars’ worth of quarters in the slots then took to sampling casino games they’d only seen in James Bond movies. They were hopeless at pai gow and sic bo but had nearly mastered the intricacies of craps before spending the rest of the afternoon at an off-track betting lounge cheering on horses with names like Ants in the Pants and Johnny Hates Jazz and Gravity’s Rainbow. Before long they were making up their own.

“How about Amanda Reckonwith?”

“That’s pretty good,” said Mitch. “Let me see...” He looked over his program. “How about

Mother's Little Helper?"

"Hmmm, I dunno," said Paula. "What are the odds?"

"Looks like a longshot," he said. "24-to-1."

"How much we got left?"

He flipped through the bills. "Twenty-two hundred."

"Bet it all," she said.

#

They had lunch at an overpriced sushi bar with a live kabuki show and played a round of glow-in-the-dark miniature golf before finding their way back to Mitch's hotel late in the afternoon. The band had only been comped two rooms between the five of them, which was all they usually booked when they paid their own way. Mitch and Tommy always took one room, because Mitch was the only one who could sleep through their drummer's incessant snoring. The other three would take the second room with Kevin more often than not in a sleeping bag on the floor—not because he preferred it but because the small sacrifice kept the others from grumbling. On the flight in, they had joked about getting a third room while they were in Reno and drawing straws for it each night.

"No way," said Brandon. "I'm not paying for Mitch to bang groupies with David Bowie."

"And I'm not paying for Tommy to jerk off to scrambled porn," said Mitch.

"I'll just wait till you're asleep."

"I'd appreciate it."

Mitch knocked at the door before letting himself in with the keycard. The room was empty, the beds already made. Out of some primal male instinct, he flipped on the television. *I walk a lonely road, the only one that I have ever known*. He didn't know which was more surprising: that Billie Joe Armstrong had reinvented himself as the de facto poet laureate of tweenaged eyeliner androgyny or that MTV was actually playing a music video in the middle of the afternoon.

"Is this yours?" asked Paula pointing to a drawer, rooting through it before he answered. She

laid a striped jersey sweater and a fresh pair of jeans across one corner of the bed. Mitch couldn't remember the last time a woman had set out clothes for him, a gesture he found both submissive and assertive at once.

Paula stepped between the beds and picked up a can of Axe body spray from the nightstand.

"That's not mine," he said defensively. They always ribbed Tommy over the stuff, called it WD40 because you spray it on "tools."

She sniffed at the can. "I like it."

Mitch rounded the corner of the bed, stepped just behind her. The can clinked on the nightstand. She turned into him unexpectedly.

"I—"

He caught her hip with one hand and her chin with the other, stole the next syllable from her mouth. Her hand pressed his shoulder, withdrew for a moment, two, before settling on his chest, her fingertips curling into his collarbone. His slid beneath her sweater, pressed into the warm small of her back. She gave like a bowstring—a delicate balance between consent and control. He traced her taut spine, struck a chord that buckled her knees. With a deft finger snap, he loosed the narrow bra strap as they fell onto the bed, just before his hand was pinned beneath her. He ran his free hand across the thin flesh of her ribs, found the warm curve of her breast. He drew up his thigh to part hers, pressed it into her. She coiled around him, constricting with each breath he took. Her heart pounded into his temple. *I could do this forever*, he thought.

"Not cool, dude. That's my bed."

"Hello, Tommy," said Paula from beneath Mitch.

For a second, Mitch's impulse had been to snatch up their loose clothing—but they hadn't shed a stitch. Paula shrugged back into her bra, excused herself to the bathroom with a demure grin.

"*Not cool?*" said Mitch.

"What?" said Tommy. "Hey, how was I supposed to know? You could've pulled the latch, you know, put out a sign." He picked up a little plastic doorknob placard from the table and shook it

at Mitch. “See? *No molestar.*”

Mitch knew the protocol.

“It’s not like I was expecting you, anyway,” said Tommy. “You’ve barely been around all week. And then blowing us off like that after the show last night? Not cool, either.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Mitch admitted.

“The guys are pretty pissed. Brandon, even Dibbs.”

“Kevin?”

“Kevin’s never pissed,” said Tommy. “Well, he never shows it. But, yeah, everyone’s pretty upset you’re not taking this more seriously. I mean, we’ve still got a shot at the next round.”

“We’ve got a shot at the whole thing,” said Mitch.

“I don’t know,” said Tommy. “Maybe. Anyway, Kevin’s called a band meeting after the last scores come in tonight, whether we get bumped out or not. Brandon says 2-to-1 you won’t show.”

“Take his money,” Mitch said. “I’ll be here.”

Tommy considered the opportunity. “Alright.” He looked to the bathroom door. “I was gonna get a shower, but I guess I’ll come back later. What do you need, like six minutes?”

“Get out.”

“Fine—just stay off my bed.” Tommy stopped in the doorway. “Oh, and one more thing—”

“What?” said Mitch.

“You look like a douche in that shirt,” said Tommy then ducked behind the door just as the aerosol can clanked against it.

#

Paula it turned out had been much more amused than embarrassed that afternoon, but Mitch apologized profusely, anyway, and promised to make it up to her that night. An act called Diver Down had come out of Buffalo with three awards in tow including one for their front man Danny LaBonte. They were billed as “The Best Van Halen Show East of Pasadena”—not *tribute* but *show*, as though they deferred only to the original. Mitch had never seen them in person, but figured

they stood to be the best Van Halen in Reno, anyway. At least he hoped as much. He was ashamed to admit it, even to himself, but he hoped they might steal a bit of Fair Warning's thunder, knock that Tony guy down a rung or two on Paula's ladder of esteem.

I heard the news, baby, all about your disease! The rest of the crowd was no doubt split between those who hoped to catch some nostalgic glint of greatness and those who hoped to see another act knocked out of the running with a sub-forty score. It was the last night of first round performances and the place was packed with rival bands that were still vying for wildcard slots or had already made it to the semifinals and were merely scouting the competition. Many were still in full costume having played earlier in the evening, but others were simply trying to draw the attention of talent agents or hoping for a final hookup. Mitch had already spotted an Alice Cooper, a Peter Criss, two Freddy Mercurys, a Run-DMC and a skinny-tied group that was either the Cars or the Knack.

"There's Billy Idol," said Paula.

Mitch turned to look, expecting she was poking fun at Ziggy again. "That *is* Billy Idol."

"I know."

"No, I mean that's *actually* Billy Idol," said Mitch. Billy was trading handshakes with a cluster of New York Dolls. "And there's—"

Mitch's expression fell as Paula's brightened.

"Tony!" She waved and then blushed, perhaps over her own enthusiasm.

"Hey, Paula!" Tony and his guitarist were in full Van Halen garb even though they hadn't played in two nights.

Is he even more tan? Mitch wondered. He remembered the time he and Ziggy had gone to a costume party as Hall and Oates. Mitch had worn an enormous caterpillar of a mustache. Seeing Tony now reminded him just how ridiculous he looked that night. Mitch laughed out loud.

"What's up, Mike?"

"It's Mitch," Paula corrected.

“Right,” said Tony. “Mitch. So, Mitch—these guys any good?”

You’ve got to ro-ob-oll with the punches to get to what’s real! They were—damn good. The band—well, the band was serviceable, but Danny LaBonte was something else entirely. Other tribute singers played to Diamond Dave’s own parody of himself—much as other Jagers assumed the caricature rather than the character—but there was something much more primal, much less polished about this guy’s performance. He had a six-foot split jump and five-octave chops, hit every whistle, every growl, everything in between. He was Roth before the booze and the babes, before the rock & roll train wreck.

“He’s a kid,” said Tony. “Of course, he can throw those kicks now. But where’s he gonna be in ten, fifteen years?”

Not here, thought Mitch.

Diver Down closed their set with a one-two knockout: “Everybody Wants Some!” and “Panama.” *Don’t you know she’s coming home with me? You’ll lose her in the turn!* They were clearly the best band so far that night and the crowd (though half of it reluctantly) agreed.

The room thinned just a bit as some migrated to the bar and others left for one of the few remaining shows on the other three stages. Paula went for drinks; Mitch whispered the room number into her ear so she could put them on his tab, kissed her for good measure. He watched as her figure was swallowed by the crowd. He turned to find Tony watching as well.

“Well, Mitch—what do you think?”

“About what?”

“This show,” said Tony. “Think they’ll crack forty points? I wasn’t all that impressed myself.”

Tony’s guitarist was conspicuously silent.

“Probably forty-five,” said Mitch. “Or better.”

“That’ll bump us off the board,” said the guitarist, referring to the list of eight wildcard leaders on a giant dry erase board that was updated each hour. Mother’s Little Helper was still at the top with 46; Fair Warning had slipped to the bottom with 40.

“Fuck it,” said Tony “We’ll be back next year.” He looked back toward the bar. “So, Mitch, you gonna keep that pretty little lady all to yourself this week?”

“I guess that’s up to the pretty little lady.”

“I guess it is,” said Tony.

Forty-four. Mitch had honestly expected a higher score, but wasn’t complaining—not because Diver Down had knocked out Fair Warning but because his own band was another hour closer to the semifinals. He’d actually begun to feel a bit guilty for the pleasure he’d taken in Fair Warning’s demise.

“I’m sorry your band got knocked out,” he said to Paula during the break. “I guess you were hoping to see them do a couple more shows, considering you came all the way up here.”

“It’s not *my* band,” she laughed. “But I do hope to see a couple more shows. Either way, it’s definitely been worth the trip.”

By midnight, Mother’s Little Helper *was* guaranteed at least one more performance. With only eight bands left to play—and one of those disqualified under the Wilcox Rule (so named for a tribute circuit drummer who’d played briefly with both Rainbow and Blue Öyster Cult)—they remained atop the wildcard standings, their first round score second only to Revolver’s overall.

#

After the semifinal lineups were announced, Mitch walked Paula back to the El Camino. “It’s just a few blocks,” she’d insisted but he already felt lousy about cutting the night short for another band meeting, even if this one was legitimate. She’d promised her aunt she’d spend the next afternoon with her, plans Paula admitted she’d probably have blown off again if it hadn’t been for borrowing the car.

“No,” said Mitch. “I wouldn’t ask you to—that really saved our asses. Besides, I’ll see you tomorrow night at Ziggy’s show, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s a date.”

The door was open and the guys were already going at it by the time he got there. Hotel doors

were always open—it was a rock & roll thing, or maybe just a college dorm thing. Mitch couldn't recall where the one had ended and the other began. He could hear them from the hallway.

"I told you, he's out chasing tail with that Ziggy faggot."

"If he's a faggot why would he be chasing tail?"

"Shut up. You know what I mean—and you owe me twenty bucks."

"He'll be here. We've got plenty of other stuff to go over."

"Face it, he's just not a team player."

"No 'I' in team."

"I swear I'm gonna punch you, Tommy."

Mitch rapped at the doorframe, walked into the room.

Tommy turned and planted a fist in Brandon's shoulder blade then leapt over one of the double beds in retreat. "Looks like *you* owe *me* twenty bucks."

"I thought the odds were 2-to-1," said Mitch.

Mitch couldn't really fault Brandon—he was right after all. Sure, Mitch pulled his weight on stage, but that was only fraction of the whole. He was a good performer—maybe a great performer—but he was a lousy band mate. He did what came easily for him, left the rest for the others to deal with. If this were a *real* job, he'd have been fired long ago. It wasn't that he didn't care for the others—they'd been his friends, his brothers almost, for ten years. It wasn't that he never had any ambition, either, just that he seemed to have lost it somewhere between \$200 and \$2000 a gig.

"We've been discussing some changes," said Kevin.

"What kind of changes?" asked Mitch.

"For Saturday night," said Kevin. "We had a solid show yesterday, but—"

"A kickass show," said Tommy.

"But we may get some of the same judges Saturday, maybe some of the same crowd."

"We need something new," said Dibbs.

We don't need to turn over the whole setlist," said Kevin. "Just mix it up a bit."

"Yeah, of course," said Mitch. "Don't want to give them the same twelve songs every time—I mean, we're not Loverboy. Let's see—we haven't used 'Cloud' yet. We can bump 'Breakdown' for that and we could drop 'Jack Flash' for 'Sympathy.'"

"He still ain't getting it," said Brandon.

"Getting what?"

"We were hoping to work in a couple of later songs," said Kevin.

"We were thinking maybe 'Tumbling Dice,'" Dibbs said. "You know, since it's Reno."

"We talked about this," said Kevin.

"Yeah, but I thought you meant eventually," said Mitch. "You want to make a change like that mid-tournament?"

"I told you," said Brandon. "This is a waste of time."

Seventeen, black, thought Mitch. *Big winner.*

"No," he said. "You guys are right; it's time to try something else."

"Are you serious?" said Brandon.

"Yeah," said Mitch. "I mean, 'Tumbling Dice'—that's actually pretty clever. Like 'Viva Las Vegas' but subtler. And it's a great song."

"You've never done that one live," said Kevin.

"If you can play it," said Mitch. "I can sing it."

"We'll have to cut something," said Brandon. "To make room."

Mitch thought for a moment. "We'll cut 'Rooster.'"

"We're not cutting 'Rooster,'" said Kevin.

"No it's cool. I'm getting tired of it, anyway."

"You sure?"

Mitch nodded.

"Alright then."

“Maybe we could flip at one more,” said Dibbs.

“Can I pick it?” asked Mitch.

“You’ve got to sing it,” said Kevin.

“Wild Horses,” said Mitch. “Instead of ‘No Expectations.’”

The others nodded their approval.

“Have to knock the dust off that one,” said Brandon. “It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, well,” said Mitch. “It’s a special occasion.”

#

Mitch showed up for Ziggy’s show alone and reeking of Tommy’s body spray. He was an hour early, but paid only passing interest to the two women onstage. *Winter nights we sang in tune, played inside the months of moon.* He jotted sporadically but deliberately into his notebook, his pencil reduced to a knife-sharpened nub. The eraser was long gone and he had taken to scratching his missteps, though less often.

“Bet My Heart in Reno on a Game of 21,” read Ziggy over Mitch’s shoulder. “What’s this?”

Mitch flipped the book shut. “Nothing.”

“Nothing my ass,” said Ziggy. “That’s a fuckin’ song, idn’t it?”

“It’s just some notes.”

A knowing grin crept across Ziggy’s face. “You’re writing a song for that little blonde.”

Mitch felt for his harmonica—he must have left it up in the room.

“Where is she, anyway?” asked Ziggy. “Or have you got the night off?”

“She had plans with her aunt.”

“Well that’s a bit of luck then, ’cause yours truly has a pair of go-go’s lined up for the evening.”

“You found a pair of go-go dancers?”

“Not go-go dancers, you twit. *Go-Go’s*.” He riffed a couple bars of “We Got the Beat.”

“No,” said Mitch. “Which ones?”

“I dunno,” said Ziggy. “The redheaded sexpot and the one that looks like a pixie.”

“No,” Mitch said again. “I’m with Paula.”

Ziggy gave him a funny look, as if one of those words were off.

“She’s coming,” said Mitch. “Tonight.”

“Well then, I guess it’s Nick again,” said Ziggy. “We’ll see. Might not even need him tonight.”

So where were the spiders? Three songs into the show, Mitch spotted Ziggy’s Go-Go’s a few tables away and even then only by chance as the crowds were even bigger going into the weekend semifinals. The redhead *was* a sexpot, though Mitch suspected he might have opted for the pixie had it been a week earlier. What was it about Ziggy that drew these women?

Certainly it was not the flame-croched leotard that stretched from one arm to the opposite leg, the other limbs pale and naked. Ziggy had at least a dozen costumes, each more outrageous than the last. He had mastered the quick change and even in a forty minute set would make as many as three. *Making love with his ego, Ziggy sucked up into his mi-i-ind.* Mitch had seen Ziggy’s stage show many times over the years yet was still impressed anew with each performance, dating back to those early years in Memphis when they were each building reputations in the Midwest. Even the most established acts on the tribute circuit hoped at best to replicate a sound, approximate an appearance. They aspired not for greatness but to sell the *illusion* of greatness. Ziggy Stardust was a different breed altogether. He *was* the illusion; he sold only himself. There was something that seemed not studied—and Mitch was as studious as any—but organic in Ziggy’s performances, something inextricable from the man himself.

And I...I will be king! Mitch had not considered it until that moment. If he was going to win the tournament, he would have to beat Ziggy. Could he beat Ziggy? He had sized up the strongest competition—High Voltage, Revolver, Diver Down—but none of these had cast any real doubt, not since he had staked his interest in Paula on winning it all. He didn’t want to think about it. Not until he had to, not until it came to that. He opened his notebook, reworked a line, strummed an imaginary guitar in his head.

How do you think I'm going to get along without you, when you're gone? It was 10:22. A Night at the Opera was halfway through their Queen set; Ziggy's show had ended almost two hours ago. Mitch had gone from anxious to impatient to irritated in that span and was working up to upset when he jumped to worried. Where was she? As much as he hated them, he wished he had a cell phone. It didn't matter; Paula didn't have one either. He wasn't sure that he would have called her anyway, not yet. He wasn't her father. He wasn't her—well, he wasn't sure what he was other than pissed. Maybe she went to the wrong place? There *were* four different stages. No, they were only using two stages for the semifinals—one at each hotel. Still, she should have turned up by now.

By 10:45 Mitch's desperation had finally thwarted his attempts to not appear desperate. He walked over to the Golden Spike. *In a town without a name in a heavy downpour, thought he passed his own shadow by the backstage door.* The room was packed, but he pressed through the crowd for two or three songs. He thought he caught a glimpse of her hair then a note of her laugh, which he trailed out of the lounge and into the casino until it dissipated in a rain of coins, a siren's wail.

She wasn't in her room either—or was not answering his increasingly assertive knocks, his calls from the lobby phone. Had he a number for her aunt he might have called it, though it was nearly one a.m. Didn't she live in town? *Barbara? Deborah? That's it, Deborah. Aunt Deb.* He needed to find a phone directory. Then what? He didn't even know her last name.

He sat in the cold on a bench outside the El Camino, partly to clear his head and partly because he still hoped she might step out of a cab, apologize for standing him up. *I'm so sorry, she would say. My aunt got food poisoning from some bad curry; we've been in the ER all night. You must be freezing. Come on in, I'll make it up to you.*

And then, he was afraid she *would* come and catch him there brooding in his insecurity like a pimply-faced teenager. *You've lost your cool, Mitch.* He felt foolish. Hadn't she been with him all week? She'd slipped out of sight for a moment and he'd given chase. *Play your own game,* he thought. *Double up—she'll be back around.*

He got back to his own hotel around two. The guys were all in one room, door ajar. *I see my*

Mary Ann walkin' away. Tommy and Dibbs were standing in front of the television clacking away at plastic Guitar Hero controllers. Kevin sat behind them strumming “Smells Like Teen Spirit” on one of his own guitars.

“Knock it off,” said Tommy. “You’re screwing us up.”

“What? It’s the same song.”

“It is not,” said Dibbs.

“They’ve got the same chord progression.” Kevin began alternating the two riffs.

“So do like a hundred other songs.”

Kevin switched to Blue Öyster Cult’s “Godzilla.”

“Cut it out!”

Brandon was at the desk playing something that resembled solitaire. “Where you been?” he asked without looking up.

“Out.” Mitch studied the game but couldn’t figure out the object.

“Yeah?” said Brandon. “Well you smell like a tool.”

“Thanks for noticing,” said Mitch. “Anyone come looking for me?”

“No. You expecting someone?”

“*Damn it, Kevin!* I’m about to go Pete Townsend on you with this controller!”

“I don’t know,” said Mitch.

He went to his own room and tried to sleep, tried to put the night behind him but found himself plagued with a tinnitus that alternated between slot machines and that damn Nirvana riff. Something on the other side of the wall kept banging against it. It wasn’t the rhythmic knocking of sex, it was the heavy, sporadic thump of horseplay. He lay in the dark staring up into a pillow, breathing his own hot breath over and over for what seemed hours. Eventually the horseplay stopped and was replaced by a growing number of voices in the hall. 3:12. The bars were closed.

Mitch stepped into the hall, blinked sight back into his eyes. Brandon was standing there, too, in the next doorway smoking a cigarette.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Guys asleep?”

“No, they’re still playing that damn game.”

“Can I get one of those?”

Brandon shook a cigarette out of the pack. “Though you quit?”

“This one doesn’t count.”

The door across from Brandon’s opened and the sound of a party spilled out over strains of Ted Nugent. *Stakes are high and so am I, it’s in the air toni-i-ight!* A blond in spandex pants backed out of the room with an ice bucket. He started in the opposite direction then turned around.

It was Tony.

“Hey, Mick!”

“Where is she?”

“Where is who?”

“Paula.”

Tony laughed. *I see you there with your Cheshire grin, I got my eyes on you.* The guitarist stuck his head into the hall. He had a necktie around his head like a Japanese businessman.

“Who’s out there?”

“It’s Mick,” said Tony. “He’s misplaced his girlfriend.”

It is difficult to say which happened first—that Brandon managed to mutter *oh, shit* or that Mitch landed a haymaker square into Tony’s big orange California nose. The chronology of what followed is approximate at best: The headbanded guitarist let out a war cry and karate chopped Mitch in the face. Brandon punched the guitarist in the kidney. Both rooms emptied. Fair Warning gang tackled Mitch. Axl Rose came running with a camcorder. Brandon and Kevin wailed on Fair Warning mercilessly. Tommy went medieval, wielding his plastic guitar like a battle-axe. Someone lit a strand of firecrackers. Dibbs lit a cigarette. Mitch pulled out two handfuls of Tony’s chest

hair. The guitarist bit Kevin on the leg. Tommy caught Axl on the backswing. Someone else picked up the camcorder. Guns 'N' Roses gang tackled Tommy. Tony crawled out from under the pile and took off down the hall. Someone lobbed an unopened beer can that hit Tony in the back of the head. Dibbs stubbed out his cigarette, pick up Tommy's guitar and went to work on Guns 'N' Roses. The elevator chimed and a cop stepped out followed by a soldier. Then a construction worker. Then a cowboy. And an Indian chief. And a leatherclad biker in assless chaps.

The aftermath: by the time hotel security arrived, the hallway was clear save the firecracker debris, a dark moist circle and a pile of hair. The guitarist broke his hand on Mitch's cheekbone; Tony's nose never set properly. A video titled "Rolling Stones Kicking the Crap out of Van Halen" surfaced on a new file-sharing website called YouTube.

The soldier applied a cold compress to Mitch's face. "What was that all about?"

"A girl, I think," said Brandon.

"Must've been some girl," said the Indian.

"Hold up," said Tommy. "How did you guys get into the tournament?"

"What tournament?" asked the biker.

#

"Mitch."

"Hmph."

"Mitch!"

Mitch rolled toward the clock. 12:36. The sunlight was brutal. He hadn't had a single drink the night before, but this was perhaps the worst hangover of his life.

"Get up, Mitch," said Tommy. "Someone's here for you."

Mitch thought he should get dressed, but he was still wearing what he had on the day before.

"Hey," said Paula.

Mitch had never been so relieved to see anyone in his whole life. He smiled, but the pain in his face twisted half of it into an involuntary grimace.

“What happened?”

“It’s a rock & roll thing,” he said. “Does it look as bad as it feels?”

She placed her hand on his face, so gently that he could feel the warmth but not the pressure.

“I don’t know,” she said. “How does it feel?”

“Like pudding.”

She stroked his cheek lightly, but it was enough to make him wince.

“Oh, Mitch—I’m sorry.”

“For that? It’s nothing.”

“No,” she said. “I’m sorry about last night. I just—I wanted—I just came to tell you that. And to say goodbye.”

The other half of his smile fell. He didn’t say anything. She started filling the void with things he didn’t want to hear.

“I’m leaving,” she said. “Today—in an hour actually. For Boston. Well, for Denver first—”

“What?”

“I got a job,” she said.

“Last night?”

“As a road manager,” she said. “Can you believe that?”

Believe it? He could barely process it. “For who?”

“Diver Down,” she said. “You remember? How good they were—are. Way better than Fair Warning, anyway.”

He’d punched out the wrong sleazy bastard.

“Except they didn’t quite make it last night,” she said. “They got eliminated. But semifinals, that’s pretty good, right—for as young as they are?”

Why does she keep talking?

Because you’re not saying anything, stupid.

“I mean, they didn’t really have a chance this year, anyway. Not with you still in it.”

I don't have anything to say.

Ask her to stay.

"You're not even going to see my—our show tonight?"

"We have to leave today to make Denver by Monday," she said.

Ask her to stay.

"But I wanted to come and wish you luck." She laughed the laugh he thought he'd heard the night before. "Not that you believe in that, right? Or need it. You're going to be great," she said.

"I know it."

Tell her to stay.

She leaned in toward his swollen cheek, then pulled back and kissed the other one. He winced again, anyway.

"Goodbye, Mitch. And thanks for everything. This has been like one of the best weeks of my life." She turned and walked out the door.

Stay. Wait.

"Wait—" He hurried into the hall after her. "Paula?"

She turned. "Yes?"

Her face was bright. She wore a short black peacoat. Her boots were crossed at the ankles, her gloved fingers interlaced.

She's a kid, Mitch.

He reached for her hands, folded a wad of bills into them.

"Here," he said. "It's your half of our winnings. It's a long way to Boston." He pulled her into him, pressed his face into her hair until the dull ache grew to a hot sting. "Take care, Paula."

She pulled away, wiped his tear off her own face. "I've got to go."

He stood there barefoot in the hallway until the elevator chimed, watched it open and swallow her up. With another chime she was gone. A moment later, the adjacent elevator opened and spat out a middle aged woman that reeked of lilac, a grotesque magician's trick.

#

Ziggy Stardust jiggled the button impatiently as he stood at the elevator in the Silver Streak lobby. In the last twelve hours, he'd been upstaged by a half-rate Freddy Mercury, lost his lead guitarist to a Mott the Hoople tribute and struck out with not one but two different Go-Go's. And now the fuckin' lift was having a go at him. Just as he was ready to give up, it dinged behind him. He threw his arms up.

"Unbelievable."

He turned back as the doors parted and young girl rushed out into him. He caught her as she fell. She looked up at him and started.

"Ziggy?"

"Ello, love."

It was Mitch's little blonde. She was a mess.

"What's all this, then?" said Ziggy. "You all right?"

Paula wiped her eyes with her gloves, said she was fine.

"Where you off to in such a hurry?" He still had hold of her arm. "Has Mitch gone and done something stupid?"

"No, it's just—I've got a ride to catch."

She tried to turn away, but he wouldn't let go until she looked him in the eye. When she finally did, he saw it—she was running. He didn't know to where or from what, but he recognized the desperation. He turned her loose.

"Does Mitch know you're leaving?"

"I just told him."

"Fuck." Ziggy knew this girl would be trouble when he first met her. He'd come to vent his own frustration, not to play goddamn wet-nurse. "You couldn't wait one more night?"

She shook her head, stifled a sob. Ziggy let out a long breath.

"Will you do something for me," she said. "For Mitch?"

"I think you might have already done enough." He wasn't in the habit of making promises to women he had no intention of sleeping with, especially ones that were in the midst of breaking his best friend's heart. Yes, even Ziggy Stardust understood heartbreak.

"*Please*," she said. "I need to know you'll do this."

"Alright," he said. "What is it?"

"Don't let him go back to Memphis."

"And how do you propose I stop him going home?"

"Take him to L.A.," said Paula. "Take him anywhere—just don't let him keep doing *this*."

"And exactly what's wrong with *this*?" He'd been doing *this* himself as long as Mitch had, maybe longer.

"He's going to be something special," said Paula.

"That's where you're wrong, love," said Ziggy. "He's already something special."

"Make *him* see that," she said.

She reached out, gave Ziggy's hands a squeeze and walked away.

"Hey," he called out after her. "Why not you?"

"He doesn't need me," said Paula. "He's got too much holding him back already."

A bellman parked a large baggage cart in the middle of the lobby, knelt to tie a shoe. When he stood and rolled it away she was gone. Ziggy turned, blew out another long breath and pressed the elevator button again.

#

Ziggy found the door ajar and Mitch sitting on the edge of his bed in nothing but a pair of jeans, watching the blank television. His face looked like it had been used as a doorstop.

"What happened to you?"

"I had a long night."

"Yeah," said Ziggy. "I hear that's been going around. You still got all your teeth?"

Mitch ran his finger carefully under each cheek. He nodded.

“Well then, it’s nothing a little makeup won’t hide,” said Ziggy, checking his own visage in the mirror over the desk. “Get dressed. There’s one of them posh coffee spots up the street.”

“I don’t feel like going anywhere,” said Mitch. He was about two sighs short of a full sulk. “Besides, I don’t even like coffee.”

“Well, it’s not always about you, now is it?”

“Paula left,” said Mitch.

“Girls do that,” said Ziggy.

Mitch didn’t say anything, just stared at his own toes. This was going to be a bit tougher than Ziggy thought.

“Look, Mitch.” He pulled out the desk chair, straddled it backwards. “You had a good run, right? Spent some time, shared some laughs, even got a little piece or two—but it’s not like you were in love with her or anything.”

Mitch shrugged.

“Tell me you’re not in love with her.”

“I don’t know.”

“For chrissake, Mitch, it’s been a week, not even.”

Ziggy didn’t know what to else to say or why it even had to be him who said it, except that’s what Mitch would do if it were the other way ’round, except it wouldn’t be the other way ’round because he wouldn’t have let himself get hung up on a damn girl like this in the first place. He hadn’t let a woman get close enough to hurt him since he was thirteen—when he’d left his own mother strung out on a sofa six months after coming to live with her in America.

“She left me for David Lee Roth.”

“And she’ll leave him for someone else,” said Ziggy. “Everyone leaves, Mitch—or gets left. If it hadn’t been her, it’ve been you. When you were done here, you’d have flown back to Memphis and she’d have been the one sulking in a hotel room.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Mitch. “I mean, unless we win.”

Ziggy gave him a slap on the shoulder as he dismounted the chair. “That’s what we’re here for, idn’t it?”

Mitch nodded.

Ziggy stepped into the bathroom, began to piss with the door wide open. “When you go on tonight?”

“We’re up third—after the Back Door Men and Revolver.”

“Leo the Lion made it this far? I guess they let in all the poofs.”

“I didn’t even ask,” said Mitch. “Did you win last night?”

“Not quite.” Ziggy turned on the sink in the vanity outside the bathroom. “Fuckin’ Queen beat me by one point.”

“So you’re still in.”

“For the moment,” said Ziggy. Nick had promised to stay with him till summer if they won the fifty grand and the gig in Vegas, but they’d have to get to the final first. There were only six slots, and A Night at the Opera and High Voltage had already secured two of them. Mitch could still get in if he won his heat, but if either runner-up topped Ziggy’s score tonight, it was over. He’d have to go home and find another guitarist or...well, he hadn’t really gotten that far yet. He checked his face again in the vanity mirror.

Mitch came up behind him, looked over his shoulder. The figure they cut together reminded Ziggy of one of those album covers from the 80s, Wham! or Tears for Fears or—

“You remember that Halloween we went as Hall and Oates?”

Mitch nodded.

“You and that fuckin’ mustache.”

Mitch smiled into the mirror.

“C’mon,” said Ziggy. “I’ll buy you a scone.”

“Alright,” said Mitch. He retrieved a harmonica and a little black notebook from the nightstand then followed Ziggy out the door. “What’s a scone?”

#

The time to hesitate is through, no time to wallow in the mire. Saturday's shows were the last before the Sunday final, and anyone who still had a stake in the tournament had gathered in one of the Silver Streak's two main lounges, six acts taking each stage for what was likely to be their Reno swan song, though as Mitch sat at the bar with Ziggy, he figured there were just as many peacocks present. Or lions, as the case may be, with Leo and his Back Door Men leading off the night's lineup. To advance, Mother's Little Helper needed to win their heat—a tall order considering they were following Revolver again—or finish a strong second for one of the wildcard slots currently held by Dazed & Confused and Ziggy himself, which meant posting an even higher score than they had Wednesday night.

Mitch tried his best not to think about Paula, to concentrate on the task at hand, but like anything he might attempt to put out of mind, she turned up everywhere—in a flash of teeth, a splash of hair, the crash of a jackpot. She was in the music itself. *Don't you love her as she's walking out the door.* It was neither coincidence nor conspiracy; rock & roll had always been the language of euphoria and heartbreak alike. She was in the half-finished song tucked away in his back pocket.

"I don't fuckin' believe it," said Ziggy.

"What?"

"Over there."

Mitch followed Ziggy's finger to a table just off stage right. There were three middle-aged men in dark jackets. Two wore dark glasses as well. "Who is it?"

"It's fuckin' INXS."

Mitch looked again. "Are you sure?"

Ziggy reached into his pocket, flicked out the little white card.

"Who do you think they're here for?"

"I dunno," said Ziggy. "Could be they're checking out everybody."

"Looks like they're checking out Leo," said Mitch.

Mr. Mojo rising...fuck me, baby. Sure enough, moments after the Back Door Men had closed out their set with an ill-conceived “L.A. Woman/The End” medley, Leo was in front of the stage trading handshakes with the Farriss brothers. They handed him a little white card of his own.

Ziggy ripped his in half, tossed it on the bar.

“What’d you do that for?”

“If that’s what they’re fuckin’ looking for,” said Ziggy. “I don’t want any part of it.” He finished his drink in one draught, clink the glass on the bar. “I’m going to step out for a bit.”

“Are you coming back?” asked Mitch. It came out far needier than he’d intended, but the truth was he really needed something to help keep his mind off Paula and it was still too early to get drunk.

“Have you played yet?” asked Ziggy.

“No.”

“Then I’m fuckin’ coming back.”

The Back Door Men set the mark with what Mitch considered to be a very generous score of 45 out of 50. It wouldn’t be enough to beat Revolver—who had just taken the stage to an ovation few acts got at the end of their set—and it wasn’t enough for a wildcard slot. Leo could be pretty thick, but he had to have realized that himself. Mitch wondered if the little white card Leo had tucked in his own pocket was any concession. *I think I’m gonna be sad, I think it’s today.* Alright, maybe it was a conspiracy. Mitch glanced once more at the Farriss brothers, who’d been joined by a fourth man, before finishing his own seltzer and giving his seat up to a portly man with a bad comb-over.

#

Backstage, Mitch found Brandon alone with all of their equipment, perched on a gutted speaker box. He had a shiner that showed even through his makeup. It might have been the first time Mitch had seen him without a cigarette all week.

“You’re early,” said Brandon. “What’s the occasion?”

“Just thought I’d let you know I was here,” said Mitch. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Kevin and Dibbs went to check the scores on the other stage.”

“Tommy?”

“Upstairs,” said Brandon. “Taking a dump.”

“I didn’t need to know that.”

“Shouldn’t have asked.”

“You’re not smoking,” said Mitch.

“I quit.”

“Really?”

“No,” said Brandon. “I ran out.”

Mitch pulled a crumpled pack out of his pocket, handed it to Brandon. “I had a relapse this afternoon.”

Brandon shook one out, handed back the pack.

“Keep ’em,” said Mitch. “I’m quitting again.”

Brandon lit up, took a deep drag. “How’s your dad doing?”

All Mitch really knew was that he was still alive. “Good,” he said. “I mean, as good as he can be.” Sonny Morrow had already survived a heart attack by fifty-five and colon cancer ten years later. If God wanted the old man dead, he was going to have to try a lot harder than a stroke.

“How ’bout yours?” asked Mitch. “What’s he up to this month?”

“Offered me a job.”

This wasn’t news; Brandon’s father offered him a job every time he flew back to Chicago. In fact, nothing seemed to elude Sammy Sharp more than why his son refused to take an interest in the chain of B-Sharp Blues Bars that were his namesake.

“When’s he going to realize you’re more interested in music than business?” said Mitch.

“He has,” Brandon said. “That’s why he’s offered all of us a job.”

This *was* news.

“He wants me to manage the bar in St. Louis and to make us the house band. Four nights a week—and we’d tour Chicago, Memphis and New Orleans regularly. Other cities, too, once he franchises.”

“Sounds pretty decent,” said Mitch.

“Well, there’s more,” said Brandon. “We’d have to drop the Stones act, go back to a broader rhythm & blues catalog. We’d have to change the name, too; he wants to “rebrand” us as the B-Sharp Blues Band, or something like that. And we’d have to relocate to St. Louis, of course.”

“So we wouldn’t be a tribute band, anymore,” said Mitch. “But we’d still be a cover band?”

“Like when we started,” said Brandon. “But for a whole lot more.”

“How much?”

“Salary for me, a thousand a week for everyone else. More as the franchise grows.”

“Does Kevin know all this?”

Brandon shook his head. “I wasn’t going to tell anyone till we saw how things shook out here, but seeing as this is probably our last night in Reno, I might as well tell someone.”

“Why me?”

“Cause I figure you’re probably the least like likely to go for it,” said Brandon. “Besides me.”

“So you don’t want to do it?”

“I don’t know, Mitch,” said Brandon. He stubbed out his cigarette and pulled another. “Do you?”

Mitch stepped over to the black curtain, peeked out across the stage through a narrow slit in the fabric. *Here I stand head in hand, turn my face to the wall.* He scanned the crowd for Ziggy, half hoping to find Paula instead. He didn’t see either. The guys from INXS were gone too, their table now occupied by A Flock of Seagulls.

Stealing Home

When Carla left she took everything she'd brought with her except for me. That was about the whole place, seeing as how when we first moved in with Daryl, he didn't have nothing but a Coleman camp stove and a beat-up couch that smelled like weed and cat piss—which was odd because Daryl didn't smoke. Or have a cat. Anyways, Carla had us throw it in the dumpster before filling the trailer with what she could from the house after Mama Rose died. The bank had give us sixty days, but it wasn't till the sheriff give us seven more that Carla took Daryl up on his offer.

It was at Mama Rose's funeral that I'd first met Daryl. He couldn't have been much older than Carla, but he was kind of scraggly and thin while she was still as pretty as the high school photo on Mama Rose's mantle. He had a ballcap tucked in the back of his jeans and kept smoothing his hair with his hand, but it wasn't doing no good. He hugged Carla tight again before he left, then patted me on the shoulder like he knew exactly how I felt, even though I wasn't quite sure myself.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"A friend," said Carla.

"Of Mama?"

"No, of mine."

She waited as though she expected me to ask something else, but she never give me no grief about who I hung out with, so I just nodded, watched the church ladies gather up all the plants and flowers from around the picture of Mama Rose that Carla had picked out of an old family album.

"Tommy," she said. "You know I'm your real mama, don't you?"

Mama Rose was sixty-three and didn't have no business having a thirteen year old boy, but Carla was only twenty-eight and didn't neither.

"Yeah," I said. "That's what I figured."

It was the last week of school, and I'd missed the bus again. We didn't have no phone and Carla would've told me to walk it anyways. It was three miles back to the trailer park, which I didn't mind except it was already so God-awful hot out. I messed around on the way, trying to catch minnows in a styrofoam cup under the bridge at Wood Creek, so it was well after five o'clock by the time I got home. I could see the truck in the driveway from the end of the street and was working up the nerve to chew Carla out for not coming to look for me. When I opened the door, Daryl was sitting on the floor in the front room with three sweating beers and three empty cans. There was a pack of pork steaks and a bottle of Maul's sitting in a puddle on the counter next to where the fridge had been.

"She's gone, ain't she?"

"Bout the size of it."

I walked to the back of the trailer. My mattress and bedding was still there, my clothes and a few little things that didn't amount to much anyways—some toys I'd outgrown but didn't want to leave behind at the old house, a ZZ Top poster with the red coupe, my Daisy air rifle. I lifted the corner of the mattress. My *Playboy* magazine was gone—the one with Suzanne Somers from *Three's Company* on the front. Mama Rose hadn't found it in three years; didn't take Carla three months. The other bedroom was empty except for Daryl's own clothes.

"Where'd she go?" I asked.

"Beats me."

Daryl had been gone all day, a roofing job over in Pikeville. I wondered how she got the place cleared out so fast without the truck.

"What do we do now?"

"Well," said Daryl. He looked me for a long moment, like the answer might be written on my forehead. "I guess we'd better grill up them steaks before it gets dark."

#

The first thing I stole that summer was a box fan out of a window in a double-wide three circles over. I'd been out collecting cans because the air conditioner was broke and it was hotter in the trailer than it was outside. There wasn't anything to do there, anyways, except stare at where the TV used to be. The fan was sitting in the back bedroom window, still running, but I could hear people in the front room yelling at a baseball game. *There he goes...get him, GET HIM! Argh! Stupid catcher—did you see that? Didn't even throw!* I found a stick about as tall as the fan was to prop the window and stood on a cinder block to reach in and whip the cord from the outlet.

I told Daryl I'd found it on the curb and wasn't even sure if it worked and then acted all surprised when it did. He said people put out perfectly good stuff all the time, said most people got so much stuff they wouldn't even miss half of it.

"You haven't seen no couches, have you?" he asked. He'd been sleeping on the floor since Carla left. "Sometimes people put out big stuff like that when they get new ones—chairs and coffee tables, too. Once I found a treadmill over in Pineridge Estates with a cardboard sign on it that said 'TAKE ME'."

"Did you?"

"What the hell am I gonna do with a treadmill?"

I said I'd keep an eye out for any couches or other stuff we could use, and I did, too. I found a mini-fridge in an open garage on Culp Lane and a 13-inch black-and-white TV in an unlocked camper on Schultz. I took a whole box of dishes from a yard sale table that'd been covered with a tarp overnight and a couple towels off the maid's cart at the Apple-Valley Motel. I lifted two fishing poles and a tackle box from a truck bed outside the New Moon Tavern. I give 'em to Daryl on Father's Day (according to the pinup calendar I'd swiped from McCauley's service station). I didn't say that's what they was for, but he eyeballed me kind of funny till I said I didn't know when his birthday was and maybe we could catch something down at Wood Creek big enough to eat besides peanut butter 'n jelly or mac 'n cheese or beans 'n franks.

"Ain't you tired of things with 'n in the middle of 'em?" I asked.

“You mean like pissin’ ’n moanin’?”

“No, I mean like green eggs ’n ham...”

Daryl laughed. “When’d you learn to read?”

“When you learned to wipe your own ass.”

“Your mama kiss you with that mouth?”

He didn’t mean nothing by it, but it still stung a little. I didn’t want to let on, though. “Why not,” I said. “She kiss you, she’ll kiss anything.”

“Too-shay,” said Daryl. “Well, what about Mac-Donalds? Burgers ’n fries? You got a problem with those?”

“No kidding?” We hadn’t eaten at an actual table since Carla left. “You get paid or something? What about the lot rent? And the electricity? It’s bad enough we don’t got no air—I don’t want to lose my fan, too. Or my ice cubes.”

“Now you starting to sound like an old lady,” said Daryl. “Don’t you worry ’bout none of that—ain’t but a hundred and fifty dollars altogether. Hell, I make that in three jobs. Come on—maybe I’ll let you drive.”

“For real?”

“Ha! No. What are you, ’bout twelve?”

“I’ll be fourteen come September.”

He eyeballed me again.

“Well, maybe just a little,” he said. “On the way back.”

#

A week later, Daryl fell off a garage in Bakerton and wrecked his back. He spent most of the summer laid up on a couch we’d spotted behind the thrift shop when he could still help me lift it. What money he’d had left went to a doctor visit and a bottle of pain pills. When those ran out, he started getting a couple at a time from a leather-skinned woman next door named Cheryl in exchange for giving her rides into town. She smoked like a chimney and didn’t have no one else

around except a couple cats, though I'd swear it was never the same two. Some nights they'd sit outside in lawn chairs drinking her beers until long after the lightning bugs had quit. I could hear 'em out my window if I shut off my fan, jawing about whose breaks had been the toughest or whose daddy was the meanest. Cheryl told stories that was hard to believe but not big enough to be lies—like winning eight thousand dollars in the lottery or smoking weed in Willie Nelson's tour bus. Daryl mostly talked about nasty jobs he'd worked and no-count bosses that never paid him right, about his wrecked back and the bad knee that made him walk just a little funny.

"My daddy used to call that a *jake-leg*," Cheryl said.

"Ain't no jake-leg," said Daryl. "I busted it on a rock crossing Wood Creek when I was nine. Never healed up right. Look, here's the scar."

I kept expecting to hear him say something about me or Carla, about what a bad mother she was, what a pain it was to be stuck with a kid that ain't even yours. But he never did. Not that I ever heard, anyways.

#

I stole a Lawn-Boy from the old man who did mower and bike repair out on the highway. He always had a row of 'em for sale on the lawn, day and night. I took the cheapest one he had—the masking tape I peeled off said \$25—not because I felt bad about taking one, but because it was the farthest from the house. I really could have used a bike, too, but I'd made a sort of rule about taking more than one thing from the same place. It was a stupid rule, I guess, but it made it a little easier to believe I wasn't doing anyone no real harm.

Within a month, I was cutting twelve yards a week and two every other week (which was a pain because it was twice the grass for the same eight dollars). Once I managed to find a weed trimmer someone had left leaning against a tool shed, I got an extra two bucks a yard for a total of a hundred and thirty dollars a week—almost enough to cover the power bill and lot rent for the whole month. Our only other costs was food, gas and Daryl's medicine.

Daryl didn't eat half of what I did, but he was taking twice as many pills—more than Cheryl had to give him. If I'd known where to steal some, I would have. I went into the drugstore in town once and asked which shelf the vicodin was on, but the man said it was a prescription-only drug and asked, "Who sent you in here?" I laughed and said "Gotcha!" like it was a joke and ran out.

I wish I could say I only took things we needed, but I knew better. I started stealing things I wanted, too—a Cardinals ballcap out of a dashboard, a bow and arrow set off a back porch, a portable stereo with a Lynyrd Skynyrd tape still in the deck—and not just things I ran across, but snooping around places and coming back later. That's how I run into Miss Eva.

I figured I had maybe twelve more weeks before the grass wouldn't need any more cutting. If I could get a few more regular yards, I thought maybe I could sock enough money away to get us through the winter, which was gonna be awful lean for roofing jobs even if Daryl did get back on his feet. I'd just finished a yard on Oaklawn and found a real shaggy looking one around the corner on Midway. The houses just outside town limits wasn't nothing fancy like the ones up in Pineridge, but they wasn't all tiny or trashed, neither, like most of 'em across the creek. This one had a big cedar porch and looked pretty well kept outside the grass. I went up and knocked on the door.

"Ain't nobody home."

An old lady was standing on her own little cement porch across the street.

"What?"

"I said, ain't nobody home."

She waved me over. I raised my hand to block out the sun.

"Come here," she said. "I ain't shouting no more."

I knew the house, but didn't recognize the woman. I pointed to myself.

"Yeah, *you*," she said. "Come here."

I left my mower in the shaggy yard and crossed to the edge of hers. She waved me closer. I stopped at the bottom of her steps.

“You cutting grass?”

“That’s what the mower’s for.”

“Don’t sass me, boy. What’s your name?”

I wanted to lie, but there was something in her voice sounded like Mama Rose. My mouth spit out the truth faster than I could make up anything else.

“Tommy Jenkins.” Gah! Last name, too!

“What you charge?”

I settled down a little when I seen she just wanted to talk business, eyeballed her yard. “Ten dollars...a week.” I added that last part because old people’s the worst about wanting to pay regular.

“I’ll give you two dollars.”

“Gas’ll cost that much,” I said. It was a lie, but I wasn’t about to cut no yard for no two dollars. “I’ll do it for eight without the trimming.”

She came out to the edge of the porch. “Two dollars,” she said again.

Crazy old lady. I just wanted to get out of there, but the yard really wasn’t all that big and I already had one right around the corner and hoped to get the one across the street, too. “Six dollars without the trimming,” I said. “But that’s my final offer. And it’ll have to be every week.”

She’d made her way down the stairs to me. She was a big woman like Mama Rose, not so much fat as tall. “Two dollars *with* the trimming...” She leaned toward me and whispered. “And I won’t tell Mrs. Parker I seen you coming out her back door with a microwave oven last Friday night.”

All the blood ran to my shoes.

“And that’s *my* final offer, Tommy Jenkins.”

#

Me and Daryl put them fishing poles to good use that summer, which was about the only time he got out of the trailer except to take Cheryl somewhere or to go to the chiropractor he found over in Pinckney who only charged twenty dollars to write a prescription. We pulled a mess of smallmouth and bluegill out of Wood Creek once Daryl showed me where to look for 'em. We even caught some channel cats down by the old railroad trestle which is way better eating because they ain't got so many bones.

"How'd you know there was catfish down here?"

"Water's deeper," said Daryl. "And muddy, too. Catfish is one of the dirtiest and laziest critters there is. All that concrete slows up the current so they don't got to work so hard to stay put. They'll eat about anything, too, if they smell it. Catfish got a better nose than a dog."

"Your daddy teach you all that?"

"Ha! Only thing my daddy ever taught me was how to dodge a boot."

I tried to hook a minnow through the lips.

"I guess that's one more thing than my daddy ever taught me."

Daryl held out his hand. I give him the minnow and he threw it in the creek then handed me a piece of chicken liver. "Well," he said, flicking his line just upstream of a half-sunk tree.

"Sometimes the best thing a father can do for a boy is not be around."

"It ain't no big deal," I said, throwing my own line the other way. "Ain't like I missed out on nothing."

"Maybe he's the one missed out."

I didn't want to talk about fathers no more.

"How old are you, Daryl?"

"Old enough to remember when the train used to run that bridge." He started notching a stick with his knife. "Thirty-three," he said. "I'll be thirty-three come fall. My granddaddy first brought me down here when I was 'bout six or seven. Knew this creek better than anyone ever fished it."

"Guess ain't too much changed about it since then."

“Plenty’s changed,” said Daryl. “Water ain’t as high, nor as clean. Fish ain’t nearly as big, neither. Not as when I was a kid.” He poked the notched stick deep into the ground and picked up another. “My granddaddy used to say, no man ever steps into the same river twice—’cause it ain’t the same river, nor he the same man. Suppose that goes for creeks, too.”

He ran the second stick up and down along the notches of the first. It sounded like something I’d heard before but couldn’t put a name to—a woodpecker maybe, or a bullfrog. He kept rubbing those sticks together for a good minute or two.

“What are you doing?”

“Shhh.”

He nodded at the ground. A big fat nightcrawler was working its way out of the dirt. And then another. And another. I grabbed the butter bowl and started tossing ’em in. Daryl laid the stick down and turned over two handfuls of wet leaves. There was dozens of ’em—more than we could’ve used if we’d fished all night. But I kept tossing ’em in the bowl anyway, till I’d grabbed every last one.

#

Much as I hated cutting that yard on Midway, I was there straight up noon every Tuesday—partly because Miss Eva scared the bejesus out of me and partly because she always had bacon sandwiches and a special lemonade she made with fresh strawberries in it. She paid me each week with a crisp two-dollar bill she took out of a Bible she kept in the pantry. Every time I spent one of them bills I’d get a funny look like I was trying to pull something over. Sometimes I wondered if Miss Eva didn’t tell everyone in town *except* Mrs. Parker about that microwave.

“All done, Miss Eva,” I shouted from the back porch. I could smell the bacon through the screen door.

“Come on in.”

I took off my cap and wiped my forehead on it (I’d made the mistake of wearing it in the house first time I cut the yard). There at the kitchen table was a plate of sandwiches, a pitcher of

lemonade, the wooden-cased Bible—and another old lady.

“Tommy, have you met Mrs. Parker?”

“No, ma’am.” I rolled the cap tight in my hands.

“Dottie, this is Tommy Jenkins—that name ring a bell?”

“Jenkins,” Mrs. Parker thought aloud. “You any relation to Rosemary Jenkins?”

“Yes ma’am. She’s my mama,” I said. “I mean, my grandmama. I mean *was*—she passed last winter.”

“Well, she was a fine lady,” said Mrs. Parker. “How’d you come to know Eva here?”

“Tommy’s been cutting my yard this summer,” said Miss Eva. “He’s been making fine work of it, too—thorough, prompt and no complaints.”

“That so?” said Mrs. Parker. “How much do you charge?”

“Oh, he’s got a special rate for old ladies like you and me,” Miss Eva said. “Ain’t that right, Tommy?”

If I’d of had a zipper in the back of me, I’d of slunk right out of my skin and left it there to fend for itself—bacon sandwiches or not.

“Two dollars a week,” said Miss Eva. “And that includes the trimming.”

“Well that don’t sound like nearly enough, does it?”

“No, ma’am,” I said. I looked her in the eye, if only to avoid Miss Eva’s. “It’s plenty.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Parker. “When can you start?”

“I can do it right now, I suppose.”

“Nonsense,” said Miss Eva. “Sit down. You can do it after lunch.”

It wasn’t enough that Miss Eva had branded me with them two-dollar bills, but now I had to go up to Mrs. Parker’s door every Tuesday to collect from her as well. But I did it—clean up into October when the leaves was falling faster than the grass could grow. When I finished Miss Eva’s yard for the last time that year, she’d made a big pineapple upside-down cake and two whole trays of oatmeal raisin and chocolate chip cookies. After I’d eaten my fill, she put the rest in a paper bag

and handed me two silver dollars.

“Well, I guess you won’t need me back next week,” I said.

“No,” said Miss Eva. “I suppose you’ve cut all the grass there’s gonna be for a while.”

“I could come a couple more times and rake the leaves.”

“That won’t be necessary. I ain’t got but the two trees out front, and I kind of like when the yard gets all crunchy. But you come back around next spring,” she said. “And we’ll talk about that eight dollars.”

#

I made out pretty good that Halloween. I put together a passable Rambo costume with a pair of fatigues, a bandana and a lump of charcoal to rough myself up. I probably didn’t need much help, though. I didn’t take but maybe a bath a week and my last haircut was the one Carla give me. I took my bow and arrows and a pillowcase and hit as many houses as I could in two nights, made sure to cover Pineridge Estates because they give out full-size Hershey bars and Hostess cakes and one old man even give every kid a dollar bill. It was cold, especially with no shirt on, but it was worth it.

A couple days later I got up early and took my air rifle up to Paradise Lake. I woke Daryl up and asked did he want to go with me, said maybe we could take the poles, too, or the bow. He just grumbled about how it was too early and too cold and his back hurt too much, then rolled over into the couch.

It took me all morning, but I finally shot two quail. I tied ’em together with a shoelace and slung ’em over my shoulder. Later on, I hit a rabbit pretty good, but didn’t have enough pumps in the gun to kill it. He stumbled around a bit, but got up and lit out before I could get off another shot. When I got back home that afternoon, Daryl and Cheryl was sitting on the couch and already had six or eight cans of Busch scattered on the table. My pillowcase full of candy was sitting there too. They was laughing their heads off about something and the whole trailer stank of Cheryl’s cigarettes.

“You eating all my candy?”

“Naw,” said Daryl. “Just some of the chocolate.”

Cheryl let out a cackle that sounded like it was half laugh, half cough. Like it was leftover from whatever had been so funny before I came in. She stubbed out her cigarette on an empty can and leaned over the table for another. Her blouse sagged and I could see her naked alligator skin clean down to her belly.

“Ain’t you supposed to be in school?” she asked. She looked at Daryl. “Ain’t he supposed to be in school?”

I stood there with the rifle and the dead quails. “Somebody got to work around here,” I said. I tossed the birds onto the table. “There’s only two—I didn’t know we was having company.”

“Aw, come on now, honey,” said Cheryl. “I’ll buy you some more chocolate.”

“With what?” I said. “Pills?”

“What’s the matter with you, Tommy?” asked Daryl. “That ain’t no way to behave.”

“Since when you in the business of caring how I behave?”

“Come on, Tommy. I ain’t your daddy.”

“No you ain’t.”

“But I ain’t the one left you behind, neither.”

I dropped the gun on the floor but felt like I needed to have hold of something, so I grabbed the pillowcase off the table and took off out the door. I could hear Daryl outside yelling my name behind me, saying he didn’t mean nothing by it, but I didn’t turn around, not till I got to the creek.

I sat under the bridge and ate candy till I was sick of it and started throwing Tootsie Rolls and candy corn into the current. I unwrapped all the little peppermints and butterscotches and tried to skip ’em like stones. It was only about two or three o’clock best I could figure, and I was starting to wish I’d grabbed something besides that pillowcase. My rifle maybe, or my bow. Or the rake. I thought about going back for it, but there was only a few hours of daylight left and I was already halfway to town.

I skirted a few yards till I found what I was looking for—a wide metal fan rake. I headed to Pineridge Estates where folks cared more about what their yards looked like and I could maybe get ten dollars for a big one.

#

I never cut no yards in Pineridge—they was too particular to hire a creek kid with a third-hand mower that quit every ten minutes—but I figured a rake was a rake. There wasn't no fences in Pineridge, just the edge of the woods in the back and a post or bush marking the property line on either side. There wasn't no clotheslines neither, or cars in the front yard or dogs on chains in the back. At school there was two kind of kids, those who hated kids from Pineridge and—well, everyone hated kids from Pineridge. But there was those who wanted to *be* kids from Pineridge and those that knew they never could.

When I got there it seemed no one in the neighborhood was home from work yet, or if they was, they was already out raking their own yards. I had two ladies tell me to come around after their husbands got home and another ask me to come back in a week or two when most of the leaves had fallen. I finally caught a man in the driveway of a big house with a “For Sale” sign in the front. He said he didn't live there, but he was selling it and it wouldn't hurt to have the leaves raked. He said he'd give me five dollars but that I had to rake 'em all the way back to the woods behind the guest house, not towards the street.

“What's the guest house?”

“It's the little house behind the pool,” he said, showing me around the side.

“That's like two yards,” I said. “And twice as much work to drag everything around back.”

He give me ten dollars and said he needed it all done that night because he was showing the house the next day. Then he left and never bothered to come back to see if I'd done it.

It took me at least two hours—the sun was gone—but I got it finished the way he wanted. Nobody lived there, I guess, but you'd have never known it. There was still water in the pool and a gas grill on the patio and all kinds of furniture and stuff in the house, even plants on the tables and

pictures on the walls—and that’s just what I could see downstairs. The guest house in the back looked like a tiny version of the main one, but it was probably bigger than some I’d mowed that summer. I couldn’t imagine who would live in a house so big and still need a spare one in the backyard. The smaller house even had a little kitchen with its own fridge and stove and what I guessed was a dishwasher. There was curtains and mirrors and little pillows on the couch and chairs. It reminded me of a dollhouse but for regular-sized people, like maybe kids would use it for a club or something. I wondered if Carla was living in a little house like that.

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It was well past dark when I got home even though it wasn’t more than eight o’clock. The truck was still there but I couldn’t tell if it had moved, if Daryl had come to look for me or not. I hoped he had, hoped he was worried about not finding me and was waiting inside for me to come back. The kitchen light was on, but he wasn’t there. Instead, there was a note scribbled on the back of an envelope on the counter that said, FOOD IN MICROWAVE – WATCHING RED DAWN NEXT DOOR – COME ON OVER. I popped open the microwave and found what looked like a tiny chicken on a plateful of rice. I looked out the window to Cheryl’s trailer. It was dark except for a pale flicker in the front room. I shut the microwave, flipped off the light and went to bed. I turned on my box fan, crawled under the covers and waited for the droning blades to cut down the day like an overgrown yard.

It was still dark when I woke up—and cold. Daryl was asleep on the couch, still in his jeans and shoes and snoring like a cement truck. I stepped barefoot out the door, sat on the frosted steps for a few minutes watching the breath puff from my nostrils like a cartoon bull. There was no moon. There had been just a sliver a night or two before, but now it was gone completely. I went back inside and slipped on my shoes and jacket. I lifted the truck keys off the hook.

I cut the headlights and parked alongside the woods that ran behind Pineridge Estates. I grabbed a flashlight and a pair of brown jersey gloves from under the seat and a tire iron out of the bed. It wasn’t but fifty or sixty yards up the hill to the guest house. I was about to pry open the

door facing the woods, but decided to try a window first. I peeled the rubber strip from around the edge of the screen and tried the pane. It gave a little, then all the way. They'd just left the window unlatched like—well, like a lot of people in our neighborhood probably did. I climbed in, locked the window behind me and opened the back door. Then I went around the side again and pressed the rubber back into the screen, good as new.

I took everything. The 19-inch color TV, the VCR and a cabinet full of tapes, the turntable stereo and speakers and a whole crate of albums. I took the space heater out of the closet and the air conditioner out of the window, the comforter off the bed and the mirror off the wall. I took the toaster, the can opener, the waffle iron, the crockpot, the silverware and the spice rack. I took the vacuum cleaner, the hair dryer, the bathroom scale and the toilet plunger. The telephone we couldn't use and the microwave we didn't need. I took the little pillows off the couch and chairs. I must have gone down the hill through the trees and back twenty times, each quicker than the last. By the end, I was running with the same laundry basket, filling it with whatever loose stuff would fit—lamps, alarm clocks, toilet paper, dishtowels—and dumping it into the cab of the truck. I could feel sweat pouring down my ribs and knees under my clothes even as my frozen breath trailed behind me. Was this how Carla had done it? Had it been this easy?

I went back up one more time. I started to drag the mattress out of the bedroom, but it was too much for me by myself. I thought about prying the dishwasher from under the counter, but it would have taken too long and was probably heavy as the mattress—wasn't room for it in the truck, anyways. Why didn't she just go ahead and take everything? Had she run out of space first—or time? I thought about smashing something with the crowbar, but didn't see anything left worth breaking. I stepped out the front door and walked over to the edge of the pool, looked across to the main house. I stood there a good long while as the cold crept back into my body, until I could feel it trying to get into my bones. I unzipped my pants and pissed into the black water, then turned back to the guest house. I lifted the WELCOME mat from the doorstep, tucked it under my arm and slipped back into the woods.

When I got back to the trailer park, I cut the headlights again, popped the truck into neutral and coasted into the driveway. In the dashboard, a creepy plastic cat with shifty eyes and a clock in its belly said it was four-thirty—I'd come and gone in little more time than it took to cut a ten-dollar yard. There was a little tin shed beside the trailer that was empty except for my mower and trimmer and I piled everything in there but the comforter. Daryl was still out cold on the couch; I pulled off his shoes, put the comforter over him and went back to bed.

#

When I woke up the day was half gone. I felt like I'd slept clean through winter and was hungry enough to eat just about anything. The smell of something frying drifted all the way back to my room. When I come down the hallway, Daryl was working a skillet on the cook stove.

"You making breakfast?"

"Breakfast? It's two in the afternoon," said Daryl. "I done been to Pinckney and back already."

"More pills, I suppose."

"Yeah, well, maybe you *suppose* too much." He flipped one grilled cheese sandwich, and then another. "I went to see about a job."

"You got a job?"

"Settle down, woman. I said I went to *see* about a job," said Daryl. "Turns out they opening one of them instant oil change places out there."

"You think they gonna hire you?"

"Don't know—but Cheryl says she knows a guy might be able to get me on at the packing plant, too."

"Daryl," I said. "I done something stupid."

"Wouldn't be the first," he said. "Nor the last."

He smiled at me like he was expecting to get one back.

"What, you talking about that comforter? You snuck it out a machine at the laundromat, didn't you?"

“No—”

“Well, then you pulled it off a clothesline somewhere,” he said. “I know you didn’t just ‘find’ it laying around. I know you didn’t ‘find’ a lot of these things.” He tapped the microwave with the spatula. “But I never said nothing to you about it. I didn’t, but I should of.”

“Daryl—”

“Look, you ain’t got to say nothing.” He set each sandwich on a plate, handed one to me. “Just promise me you ain’t gonna do it no more.”

There was four quick, angry raps at the door. I’d heard that knock before.

“Who the hell is that?” Daryl peeled back the curtain over the sink. His shoulders dropped.

“Oh boy, Tommy,” he said. “What you done now?”

I went to the other window. A deputy was standing in the yard with a shotgun and another was looking through the shed. Daryl opened the door to a third that was older than the other two.

“You Daryl Greene?”

“Yessir.”

“That your truck?”

“Yessir.”

“This your trailer, too?”

Daryl nodded.

“I think you gonna have to come with us, son.”

“Can I get my shoes?”

The older man nodded, followed Daryl into the front room. He took a good hard look at me in the corner. “This your boy?”

“No sir,” said Daryl. “That’s just the neighbor’s kid. Go on, Tommy—” He give me a harder stare than the deputy had. “You better get on next door to your mama now.”

#

Daryl plead guilty to the whole thing and got six months in jail and three years of probation. It would have been a lot worse, but didn't nobody live in the house and I hadn't actually broke into it far as they could tell. They didn't take nothing else from the trailer but Mrs. Parker's microwave and she didn't end up pressing no charges. Maybe no one did miss the stuff I stole. But I took it all back, anyways—well, most of it. I left twenty-five dollars in the mailbox for the mower I took from the old man on the highway. I left twenty-five dollars for the trimmer too because I'd need it come spring and for the mini-fridge and TV because I was too scared I'd get caught taking 'em back where I got 'em. It probably wasn't enough, but it was something.

I got on alright by myself for a while. I had about six hundred dollars saved up from mowing and made a little more raking leaves and shoveling snow. I kept the heat down and the bill paid. I dropped off the lot rent at the office every month. I thought about going back to school, at least for the two free meals a day, but I was afraid what they'd do if they found out I didn't have no grownup around. Cheryl said I could come over if I ever needed anything and I did a few times, mostly for the company, but a little bit of that woman went a long way. She was the only one knew I was living there on my own—which is why I got a little jumpy when there was another knock at the door a week or so after Christmas.

I'd taken to sleeping on the couch after Daryl left and sleeping later into the morning, too (the more I slept, the less I ate). At first, I thought it was just the screen door come unlatched. But then it come again, soft, like they wanted something but didn't want to trouble nobody for it. There wasn't no car and I couldn't see no one out the window. Another knock. They wasn't leaving.

“Who's there?”

“Daryl?”

“He ain't here right now.”

“Tommy? Is that you, Tommy?”

I cracked the door. It was Carla. Or used to be. She was rail thin and had her hair cut off short. Her eyes was dim and sunken. She was standing in the snow in sneakers with no socks and a t-shirt with no jacket. I let her in out the cold but didn't say nothing. I'd thought of all kind of things to say while she was gone, but didn't none of 'em fit right then. I sat on the couch. She stood just inside the door like she might cut out again any minute. She didn't say nothing, either, not for a long while. Then she asked where Daryl was.

"He's in jail," I said. "But it wasn't his fault. It was mine."

"How long?" she asked. "You been here by yourself?"

"I don't see why that concerns you all the sudden."

"Tommy, I'm your—" She couldn't stand to say it any more than I could stand to hear it.

"Tommy, I'm sorry. I been in a real bad place for a while."

"A while? You been gone six months," I said. "What kind of place you think I been in?"

"I'm here now, Tommy."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't need you no more."

"No," she said. "Maybe not. But maybe I need you."

I didn't know how long it would take to forgive Carla for leaving, but I knew I had to do it, had to know that much forgiveness was possible. I didn't know if she would ever learn to be a good mama, either, or if that was even what I needed her to be. I didn't know what would happen when Daryl got out, didn't know if him and Carla would stay together or where I'd go if they didn't. What I did know was that I wanted to go back to school, wanted to be fourteen, wanted to not know so much for just a little bit longer.