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The Fantastic Life of Rock Stars
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The Fantastic Life of Rock Stars

Chapter 1

Dust particles glow as they dance in the light above my head; I can imagine myself at the Beacon, haloed by the stage lights, in front of 3,000 packed seats that fan out from the stage. Heads crane from the balcony, knees twitch, a chain of excited coughs. I pull a string into tune. The crowd waits, would wait for hours, just to listen. We are about to begin an event, a shared experience of collective spirituality tapped through primal desire for music. I am the crier, they the devotees, ready to sing along to my naked intimacy, to the feelings and melodies that make them think of me as an intimate.

Adjust myself on the stool, take a deep breath. Tap my foot in rhythm: 1 and 2 and—

A glass breaks behind the bar and a drunken giggle follows from someone near the far wall. I hold my eyes shut, trying to keep the illusion.

“Is he gonna fuckin’ play something already?”

It’s gone. Broken up and spinning in the dust.

It goes as well as it can, really. A forty-five minute set, by myself in the back corner of Crosstown Bar on 8th and Avenue B. There are maybe fifteen people here. Ms Reilly manages to rouse most of them to clap when they see me packing up. It’s been worse. Crosstown fills one long narrow room, kept dark and smelling of late-night bodies and stale beer. Three tables are clustered in the back by the stage; Ms Reilly sits at one of them. Most of the crowd is huddled around the taps, not willing to let the alcohol too far from sight. A high shelf circling the room is lined with dusty liquor bottles, lined up like participation trophies, and a muted TV in one corner shows a ball game. The bar itself is nicked and scarred with drunken slurs and vulgarities, inebriated witticisms carved into the wood. I make eye contact with Ronda, the bartender. She has thick arms, sleeved in tattoos from her shoulders to her wrists. Sometimes I fantasize about her pummeling me out back with those meaty limbs. She hands me my payment, a domestic pitcher and a glass. I take it over to sit at Ms Reilly’s table.

“Well done,” she says. “Well done. That was great. It must be hard to win this type of crowd over, but I think you really had them by the end.” I wonder if she believes it. “I really like that last one.” She begins humming the song I closed with, breaking into snatches of lyric when she can remember them. She’s seen me play it many times.

The light domestic is tasteless but goes down quickly. Ms Reilly has a glass of something pinkish, which Ronda must have despised making.

“Your fingering sounded good.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I can hear you downstairs practicing. I can tell your fingering is improving.” She sips from the glass of pink.

“Thanks.” I scan the bar hoping to catch someone looking at me, someone wanting to talk to the singer, maybe another musician to talk shop. But everybody seems too involved in their own worlds to pick up on the opportunity they’re missing.

Ms Reilly puts down her drink. “Where’s Alex tonight?”

“Out with some friends.”

“That’s nice.” She looks around at the bar too. Ms Reilly is probably fifteen years older than anyone else in the room, a little larger than most. Her stretch jeans and sweatshirt too comfortable for this dank crowd. “So, do you have any other plans for the evening?”

“Just you, Ms Reilly.”

“Oh ho, how sweet,” she chuckles. “But I should head back. Going to do some work in the morning, and this is late for me.” She pushes away from the table. “Are you staying out?”

“For a little, yeah.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow then. Well done tonight. You get better every time I hear you.” She pinches my shoulder. “Goodnight Robbie.”

“Night.” I watch her leave. I sip on my beer. I stare at the bar. Will someone come by and have a drink with the moody artist sitting by himself, brooding over a half empty pitcher?

I go over the set. One progression tripped me up during “Letters from Home.” It’s a difficult few chord changes but I like that it’s hard to play. Keeps me focused,

compliments my abilities as a songwriter, composer of chords and melodies. My voice dipped flat a couple times throughout, but never so bad that anyone at Crosstown Fucking Bar would notice. But who am I? From deep inside a life created out of struggle the tormented sounds of emotional discharge erupt. Such ideas cannot be spoken but must be sung at rock tempos, throbbing 4/4 time. Passions that must be played with a heavy backbeat.

The songs are not the problem. Then what is?

Eventually the pitcher sits empty in front of me. Alcohol and idyllic musical fantasies numb the doubts. The depressing atmosphere of Crosstown, and all the bars like it, are a hazing into the rock and roll cabal. You're looking at the future of popular music, peons! For now I play to deaf ears, proving to the gods that I am worthy of my gifts. John Lennon looks down at me with a smart-assed grin. But my toils make me thirsty, so I cry to Ronda, emboldened by the brew. "Ronda," a name for the titans, "another one."

"Manager said only one this time. You have to pay now."

"Fuck that," I say and lean into her. "I won't tell if you slip me a pint."

"No."

"Fine then. You know, if you're not nicer to me, darling, I won't ever come back."

"There are five more of you that we rotate in once a week, and a thousand other dicks with their guitars waiting in line. You see the crowd you bring in?" She gestures to the besotted few. "Go ahead and walk."

I lick my chops. "Enough with the foreplay. You and me, outside. Let's go a few rounds, bare-knuckle brawl. I'll spot you the first hit."

"You're dreaming."

"I won't lie, I'm not even going to fight back. How's that? You can just shove me around a little." I wink at her and somewhere in there she has to love the attention. All women do.

She gives me the finger and takes someone else's drink order. A good time to get my gear and exit

"Nice set, mate," a guy at the end of the bar in a British accent.

“Thanks.”

“Cheers.” He turns back to his drink.

Smiling now, I make my way out into the city. My crowd has gone international.

Chapter 2

I want to know everything about you. What's Jersey City like? There's a cosmopolitan ambiguity to living along the north Jersey coast. A sense of there but not there. Freneticism leaking into the water from New York. Winds that gather out in the Hudson River, like excited children who can't move in straight lines, colliding at intersections in eager, howling dogpiles. Upturned umbrellas abandoned in gutters, women holding down their skirts, flags saluting outside of office buildings. The din of traffic and construction, caked grime, the homeless man sleeping outside the 24-hour deli. All of this beating against the front rows, looking on to the acrobatics and pandemonium of the great show caterwauling across the river, the City, whose steel monoliths tent-pole the sky for the rest of the earth to wonder and gaze upon.

It's almost too grand, that Gotham City, that Metropolis. People grow loyal to their neighborhoods in order to form a communal identity: the Village, Astoria, Chelsea, Bushwick, Woodside, Harlem, Williamsburg, NoHo, SoHo, Park Slope, Flushing and on, ad infinitum. I watch from the crowd thrown up along the Jersey coast, the adopted children of the Kings and Queens, we will forever and always live in the shadow of the golden child Manhattan, that busy little island. Envious, and reliant on the wealth that pours out from it, Jersey City—my home—is one moment filled with self-proclaimed proud New Yorkers and the next with Jersey boys and girls, glad that the Hudson offers a geographical dividing line. We're a moody bunch, a byproduct of urban sprawl, working within a fortress of prosperity. But at the day's end, after toiling in the employ of Manhattan, we must come home and sleep in a zip code that begins with a 0 instead of a 1, with all the feelings of inferiority that that entails.

I rent a basement studio apartment in a townhouse in JC (the place to be) from Ms Reilly, who lives and works on the floors above as a professional poker player. She used to make the weekend commute down to Atlantic City and sucker-play highball businessmen with an angry-housewife-with-her-bastard-husband's-bank-card routine,

which she perfected through personal experience. But with the boom of online poker she's been able to survive off of her PC. Technology has been good to gamblers. "I bullied a mechanic in Belgium out of 300 euros during lunch today, with a low pair. I was eating a tuna fish sandwich." She preys on cocky newcomers and scares them with aggressive betting. She says online gambling is a huge market of idiots who think they're going to make a killing because they get drunk and play poker once a month with their idiot friends. She is only too willing to take their idiot money. She also gets monthly alimony from her ex-husband, the big fat idiot, who she left a long time ago.

Ms Reilly doesn't get out much since she works at home. She's gotten heavier and less concerned with her appearance over the years so I like to encourage her to come see me play. The activity is good, so is the excuse to get into the city, and at the very least she must not mind my music, because she's seen me more times than anyone.

I live alone in the studio below. The place doesn't fit more than a bed, table, and some chairs, but I have my own front entrance. There's a little kitchen in one corner and a bathroom in another. In a third are my guitars, mic, amplifier and computer. In the back hallway is a shared washer and dryer, a nice perk, and there's a small backyard that Ms Reilly's grey mutt Wilson uses as a toilet. There are some plastic chairs out there, blackened by the city air, and I wonder what our lungs must look like. My apartment is musty and cramped but it calms me to be out of the ado of Manhattan, and Ms Reilly keeps the rent cheap because we get along and I don't have much money. For six years it's been home, the first that is just mine, so it's more than adequate. I'm happy here. Yes, I'll say happy.

What else? I have a girlfriend, Alexandra Michelle Carson. Alexandra is a pretty name but it takes up a lot of space in the mouth, so she goes by Alex. We've been together just over a year now. It's my longest relationship, hers too at this point, but I don't want too much info on exes. We talk about the future sometimes. It means that I'm getting older. The great thing about her is that she came up to me after a set at a bar in Hoboken, where she lives. Either Altar or The Getaway, I forget which. She's the best looking girl to ever approach me after a show; the groupie thing has yet to fully explode for me. Still, she's very pretty. Physical attraction is the most important thing. Personality has to come second, it's just the way it is. I can forgive a difference of

opinion, or a lack of one, but not saggy tits and chubby thighs. Don't write me off if that's obnoxious; appreciate the honesty.

Alex has nice thighs and perky breasts. Her mother's Albanian and Alex has the slight olive tones and dark hair of the Mediterranean. She's not tall and her nose turns up slightly at the tip, which might be my favorite part of her. A nose, right? When she first came up to me she was very flirtatious. She was better dressed than most girls I knew, and kept on about how much she loved my music. We slept together that night. I admit it's a turn-on when my music gets me laid. The next morning I gave her my number, so it wasn't my decision whether or not to call her. At first I gave her up for a one-nighter, my eighth (we all count), but she called me four days later and was just too good not to answer. We went out on a proper date that weekend. This time when I woke up she was cooking breakfast and that sealed it. Women like romance and guys like pretty girls who cook. She's devoted and genuinely likes every song I write, which is how most people would be if they'd just shut up and listen. *Do you love her?* I think I do, ninety percent sure, in as much as I understand the feeling, but who can say with certainty. It simplifies everything, so yes, I can say I love her and not feel dishonest, and you might understand my thoughts for her somewhat, but you would miss the complexities and history that continually reshape our affair. She likes my music, that's what really matters.

The next morning, walking down 53rd on my way to work when my name is shouted from behind me. A fan, maybe. There's a pen in my shoulder bag if they want an autograph.

A man pushes past two older women, walking too slowly for him. "Fucking hilarious. I knew it was you." The women sneer at me since his back is to them.

"Jimmy?" It's been almost fifteen years, but I'm too surprised to pretend not to recognize him. Jimmy Trivoli, who I knew growing up and haven't seen since a high school graduation party, is laughing and hugging me as rush hour foot traffic shuffles around us. He's dressed like me, in the button up and khakis of corporate monotony. I nod and point up to my building as he says something about the size of the planet. It turns out he's working in the same building and he insists we get lunch together as the elevator opens onto his floor. "We are going to catch up, man. I feel like I'm fucking

tripping.” It’s the only option in a situation like this, have lunch, catch up. From this remove I don’t really care what he’s done with his life. Nothing against Jimmy, we were friends once, but unless he’s working for a record company, we’ve both moved on.

New York is filled with people living in the city before they’re too old to withstand the pace of life here. The city offers you everything, but also offers it to everyone else, so we come and suckle her music and art, her culture and late nights. Growing up so close to New York it’s impossible not to be turned on by all the lights, not to come to her when you’re old enough to look for the real world. Often I imagine seeing someone from my past making their way toward me down the sidewalk, but Jimmy is the first to become an actual encounter. We used to play Nintendo together in 6th grade.

Right now I work at an investment firm pulling files, entering numbers into spreadsheets, and bleeding from my eye sockets just to help the time pass. It’s a temporary job, and I’m a temporary employee, but even that is too much commitment so I’m just a temp. It is brain aching, tedious, soporific monotony, but if you consider a full-time office job with benefits selling out to the Man, and you can live cheaply in a Jersey woman’s basement, then it allows a comfortable level of freedom to, say, pursue a career in music. And because I had the foresight to go through the Excel tutorial, I am considered proficient in the program and make a couple extra bucks an hour. Investment firms, like this one, get audited every year and bring me in to pull their records and enter the info into easy to follow charts and tables so auditors can see that everything is above board. Special skills; you could say I excel at it, har har.

This job isn’t nearly as bad as some. I have my own cubicle and all the files are close by, so in the mornings I can head straight into my pen. I don’t have to wear a tie. There is a girl who supposedly supervises me but she looks like a kid and doesn’t seem interested in anything. She absently signs my timesheet on Fridays, but other than that we don’t interact much. There’s little to stop me from just showing up Friday afternoon to have my timesheet signed, get paid for a week of staying at home, but deep down I am governed by a Judeo-Christian morality, pinching my ear to tell me how good people behave (though it is okay to take long lunches and add on an hour here and there, because it’s hard to be a saint in the city).

So I sit at my desk and turn on the computer. I slide my headphones on and begin plugging in numbers for eight hours, with a couple coffee breaks and subsequent bathroom trips thrown in just to move. The main reason, psychologically, I can withstand temping is because no one denies how awful it is. The people I come to work for don't expect my gratitude for the experience; they are relieved to have someone else doing their shit work. A sucker, yes, but a sucker for the freedom it allows. I get to work, slip on headphones and listen to music, studying for my true profession. It's like study hall, learning the structure of hit records, what makes a killer hook, and how different sounds blend when layered together. And when I have a demo that I've recorded through my laptop, I can let the hours flow away arranging and analyzing my new song, crafting it into a masterpiece, all while inputting the Average Marketing Expenditure for the third quarter into the NTG Database grid.

But shortly after 12:30 today, I meet Jimmy in the lobby and we head down the block to a sandwich shop. We eat and begin most of our sentences with "Remember the time . . ." You can forget how much of your childhood you shared with someone until you have this moment fourteen years later. And it's not that bad, really. Jimmy seems so genuinely excited to rehash that it's infectious.

"Remember Sarah Marsden?"

"Goddamn, remember the time KJ followed her home for three weeks?"

"Remember the time Johnny Ears got pissed at him and peed in his shoes in Will Holtens' basement? His shoes were squishing the next morning."

"We tried to convince him it was because the basement was damp." I laugh while I say it. It feels good.

"You know KJ married Debbie Sarcossi and moved down to the shore?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, years ago. Went out for the wedding." He reaches over into my bag of chips. "Wow, Robbie Holmes. You look the same, a little rounder but we all are. I can't believe you've been here in New York this whole time."

"Yeah, well . . ." There are implications there that leave us silent for a moment. We bite into our sandwiches to fill the lull. "You know what's funny?" I ask. "I hooked up with Debbie in KJ's parents' bedroom."

“No shit.”

“At one of his parties. We were dry humping on their bed when someone walked in—Tom Terricho walked in on us. She was so embarrassed, she ran out of the room and that was the end of our affair.” The part of the memory that’s most clear is how excited this premature encounter had me. When you’re sixteen, and this stuff is still new, the arousal is agonizingly intense. The memory alone is enough and I subtly adjust myself under the table.

“If I’d have known that I could have brought it up at the wedding. Where’s Tom Terricho when you need him?”

“Don’t know,” I say. “I haven’t kept up with anyone.”

“I know, man. You’re a mystery. What have you been up to?” This question is tough. It’s not that I’m embarrassed to be a musician, don’t think such things; the problem is that I hate the reactions given when I present myself as an artist. “And that pays the bills?” is a big one. Why does income have to be the primary determinant of a successful career? Financial stability is of course desirable, but an artist finds personal and professional happiness in creative freedom, not in salary. Besides, one day I will blow-up and swim in wads of thousand dollar bills, living in a rock star palace. Do I become a musician only then? Now the condescending replies: I hate feeling like I have to explain that this is not some silly ambition. When someone says, “Good for you,” it always comes off snarky, the most degrading thing you can say to me. I am not some wayward dreamer. I’m a fucking awesome musician. I am song. The good lord, brothers and sisters, put me on this earth to spread beauty through sound waves. Listen, children, as they seep through to your brain and finger your soul To patronize my higher calling is to blaspheme against the universal tongue, you tone deaf bastards, you mongrel hicks! Watch as I lay rock vengeance upon thee!

So I say, “I’m an analyst for Bull, Strathairn, and Tubbs, on the 14th floor.” Sometimes too, it’s just fun to lie.

“Really?”

“Yeah, but it’s pretty awful. It’s hard looking at other people’s money all day, you know. I’m getting ready to pack it in and head out somewhere, start my own

portfolio, become a private investor and live off of the residuals,” and now when I leave, he’s off on the wrong trail and I’m still a man of mystery.

“Investments, really? Sounds great, man. Good for you.”

I sigh and stare at the last few bites of my sandwich. “What do you do?”

“Oh, I work IT for Goodman’s. It’s a lot of system maintenance. They’re too cheap to update what they have and their network is outdated. The server just can’t handle the traffic they’ve got in there and the thing is crashing once a week. I’ve been talking to the higher-ups, trying to convince them it’s in their best interest to update everything. They need a complete overhaul. I mean, they’re running WorkShift 2.0 to manage their inventory, and what is that, like 3 versions back. Besides the new Stock Pro has a much friendlier interface.” He says it all as if I should follow what he’s saying, or else he’s hoping to explain it to me, either way I mumble, “Mmm-hmm,” with my mouth full of the last bit of turkey club.

“You know, it is what it is, right? I gotta be heading back, something’s probably crashed by now. This was great though. Give me your number, maybe we can talk investments sometime.” I hesitate for a moment; I don’t want to lose more lunches to this. Zoning out during the lunch hour is the only way to rejoice myself for the next four. The ‘me time’ keeps me going. But of course we exchange numbers; he’s an old friend and I won’t be working here for long, and this city is so big that it’s easy to feel lost. It’s good to have friendly numbers in your phone in case of emergency.

We walk back to our building together. When he gets off on his floor he says, “I’ll call ya sometime,” and I give him the ol’ finger gun and mouth click as the elevator closes and carries me to my cubicle, computer, and ennui. What excuse should I use if he calls for lunch tomorrow? Lunch meeting? Conference call on investor relations in Asia? Am I a bad guy or self-absorbed? Am I a bad guy because I’m self-absorbed? Is it wrong to prefer my own company to others’?

When I get home, Ms Reilly is working in the 6’ by 4’ garden that each row house has as a front yard.

“How was your day?” I ask.

“Slow. No action on-line, so I decided to clean up out here and put in some new flowers.”

“What did you get?”

“Some yellow ones. And these should be purple if they ever bloom.”

“A little color will be nice.”

“Yes, but I just can’t seem to keep anything living out here. Good thing I didn’t get the job at the Botanical Gardens.” She giggles at what must be a joke.

Wilson is lying in the shade of Ms Reilly’s car, chewing a raggedy tennis ball. He wags his tail and rolls onto his belly when I bend down to pet him. “You know, they have books that tell you what’s good to plant in specific areas, how much water and sun, things like that.”

“Oh yeah, but I’d rather try to get the ones that I like to work. It’s such a tiny space out here, it’s nice to experiment with pretty things a bit.”

“Fair enough.” I head to my door.

“Alexandra’s in there. She came by a little while ago.”

I gave Alex a key to my place a couple of months back because that’s what you do when you reach a certain point in a relationship. That’s what Alex explained to me when she insisted she get the spare key. “We’ve reached a point . . . I deserve it . . . it just makes sense.” As she went on, I weighed the commitment a key implied against the fact that it did make sense and that I didn’t want to deal with telling her no. We do spend most of our time together here; after work she comes and makes dinner and sleeps over every few days and that’s nice. There’s little I have to be embarrassed of tucked away in here that she doesn’t already know about, and it bought me reserves of her favor. Giving her a key to my apartment was the next step, so I agreed and that’s the stage we’re occupying. I didn’t even ask for a key to her place. Alex lives with a roommate, Kaylin, and it’s not fair to make her put up with me when Alex isn’t around. Her place isn’t far, but I’ve only been up in their apartment a handful of times. It’s a two-bedroom not far from the train in Hoboken, and Kaylin’s cute, but there are no guitars there, so what would I do?

Four steps lead down to my apartment door, tucked under Ms Reilly’s front steps. Two small windows, with black wrought iron bars, run along the front wall and look out

at ground level onto the pavement of the drive. They are the only windows in the apartment. Alex has on the small lamp over the stove; it gives the feeling of a torch at the far end of a cave. The radio is tuned to a pop music station, where the DJs are all Mad Dogs and yucksters. It plays music Alex listens to only when I'm not around. I turn it off. Alex is standing over the stove stirring a pot boiling on one of the burners. I grab her from behind, my arms around her waist, and kiss her neck. Her hair smells of fruit essences, with the bitterness of a laboratory origin.

"I'm making spaghetti," she says, leaning her cheek against mine.

"Great, I'm starving." I drop into a chair and grab my acoustic out of its case on the floor. My fingers begin playing notes, sliding and hammering up and down the frets. Then chords and progressions, feeling my way, limbering up before a run.

"Play me something," Alex says without turning around. It's what I was waiting to hear. This is how I pay for the meals she cooks, with rhythm and melody. Tonight, I will begin with an original piece, written in the fall, when plants begin to wither and the air chills. This one goes out to the ladies who need a body to keep them warm tonight. Ba-dum-ba-da ba-dum-ba-da ba-dummmmm.

There's only time for a couple songs before the food is ready, whole wheat pasta with cooked vegetables in tomato sauce. It's never just spaghetti with Alex. She's too concerned with diet and health. We never go out for burgers but that's probably for the best. She sets the plates on the table and we sit and have an adult dinner, discussing our days. I tell her about Jimmy, how strange it was to run into someone after fifteen years. She takes it as neat.

"What did you guys talk about?"

I shrug and spin noodles around my fork. I still haven't processed what this renewed link will do for me. "We lived a few blocks from each other all through grade school. It brought up a lot of the stupid things you do as a kid. People I haven't thought about in years. Drinking and girls."

"Where there a lot of girls, stud?"

"At that point?" Broccoli and mushrooms are speared into the ball of noodles, more than would fit in my mouth. "I lost touch with everyone. After I sold the house."

“Then it’s great that you guys reconnected. So at work today . . .” she starts on her own tangent. It’s good though. Better to get lost in Alex’s melodrama than dwell on the past.

What does she do? Alex works the floor of a designer fashion boutique on 5th Avenue, where dresses cost thousands of dollars, more money than I’ve spent on all the clothes I’ve ever owned. I’ve never been into the store, the thought of so much expensive fabric and women spewing out cash for fashion equally intimidates and repulses me. They offer you a glass of champagne just to try on a dress. For the most part, the girls who work there are vacant Barbies spouting trends and style watches; what celebrity wore the silver-sequined backless gown with the quarter train and the ruby and sapphire broach, on the red carpet with her open-toed 3-inch stilettos and the antique necklace, the designer clutch, the double sided tape and the platinum, gold, and diamonds and the weave and the bronzer and collagen or botox. It angers me that they’re all so gorgeous. Empty and stunning, selling clothes to women who only wear the best because their husbands sleep around. There’s a part of Alex that fits in there, but another that sees how silly it is. She won’t be one of them forever. She’s better than that. God, make her better.

The bearable part of her job is that she works on commission and can bring home serious money. Also, sex appeal is a work requirement. She eats healthy and has to wear makeup. She irons her hair unnaturally straight. She looks good. Always. And a man likes to be seen with a beautiful woman, to put his arm around her in a crowded bar and stick his tongue in her ear (you see the shallow forces at work in me). So let her toil in the vacuum of high-end retail for now. I can take it. Let her friends judge the dirty rocker boyfriend. I’m a foreign world to them, spitting sex and rock. It’s shame in their arousal that turns up their noses, when what we all want is to strip naked and engage in deviant sexual acts. Leggy blondes and waifish brunettes, ironed hair and press-on nails, fake curves, or no curves. One by one I’ll mount the failed modeling careers and shove the fashion out of daddy’s little princesses in our storewide orgy, spewing cum stains that add thousands of dollars to the price of a dress.

“Did she really say that?” I toss out because she’s waiting for some response.

“Word for word. She was so rude and because she’s a VIP customer I had to apologize for . . .”

There’s a piece of food, a broccoli floret, stuck amongst the top row of her teeth. As Alex punishes it with consonants and vowels, the little green bud waves in her mouth like the flag of a defenseless island nation, her words artillery shells bombarding the stalwart defenses. The floret, in its small claim of real estate, its one chance for a future, holds on, covered in her saliva, gnashed against her teeth and strafed by her tongue. Maybe, it thinks, if I survive all this, there is no one in the neighboring lot, maybe I can expand my holdings, plan an addition onto the incisor. Maybe I can build something that I’m proud of, something flashy that others will look at and envy. I can bloom and take charge of my destiny. It thinks this as the blows rain down, a prayer of hope even with the odds overwhelmingly opposed.

Alex pauses to take another bite. “What a bitch, right?”

In response I reach across the table and swab her tooth, removing the broccoli, ending its hopes of a peaceful accord, of the future it had dreamt itself into.

“You had some food.”

Melodrama is created because our lives are routine. We get up and go to work, stare at a computer screen all day, or sell over-priced garments so trendy they can’t be worn by the autumn. We can spend the evening crying or pretend that what we did was important enough to get up and do again tomorrow. Alex watches TV after her own stories are told. I play guitar quietly to myself (some might falsely label this fantasy as well) but slowly get pulled into her police procedural. “Wait, what did the detective say? Was the wife in on it?”

Eventually all the deceit wears us out and we get into bed. The evening has been couple-like and boring. The nothingness of it makes me depressed. With horror I can imagine a failed existence pockmarked by nights of small talk and bad television with Alex. The thought of marriage makes me shiver; fodder for predictability. Our situation as we stand now: she comes and goes when we require the company—more than that, but not every night. We don’t have to go out with each other’s friends, or throw dinner parties and serve wine I can’t afford, and we don’t have to go on dates, impress ourselves, or only wear clean clothes when we’re together. That’s comforting. A

relaxed, comfortable relationship. Snug. Secure as two thirty-somethings lying in a full sized bed in Jersey City, New Jersey should be. Just lying.

How long have you felt this way about your relationship? Probably since she got the key to this place. *Because she pushed for it?* Well, it's inevitable, isn't it, sexless nights? When we were first together it was all the time, passionate and raunchy, because it's not love then, it's sex, pure physical fucking desire. *You're bored with the routine?* No, the sex is good. It's comfortable sex, but that's meant in a good way. We know how to work each other. She does a thing with her hips that does it for me. I know how many kinky moves I can get away with and not come off as a pervert. We have joyous, sweaty, comfortable sex—when we have it. First times are always great, like seeing the Beatles at Shea, but they happen only once. Then there's experience. The experience of new discoveries and reinvention, not stagnant or staid but with increased euphoria from knowing that your pleasure is shared, and then the light breath of her sleep in your ear. *Do you talk about your desires?* Well, not explicitly. Do I have to? She knows the clichés and bad jokes? The female's libido wanes while the male waxes his member alone. The urges of men are strong and constant, but then I cannot speak of men, I can speak of mine, but mine are the desires and hunger of man. Tonight as I lie here, pretending to read, hiding my frustration, we play a scene that we have played before. We get ready for bed, I get excited. She brushes her teeth, I get excited. She takes off her clothes and I pulse, almost giddy. Then she puts on her comfy pajamas and turns out the light. It's degrading to masturbate with your girlfriend in the next room. And it's more often now, because the sex has slowed and she has my key so she's over more, taunting, next to me in my own bed. *In your space.* The maddening part is that she's happy that we've reached this point. She finds comfort in us not doing it all the time, instead just being close. She has proof there are other reasons I keep her around. *It sounds like you have pernicious phallicosis.* There is a piece of my soul—and here again I pick up the mantel and speak for all men, because we are a brotherhood of cock-wielding maniacs—a part of my ego which is only content in the moments after climax, following the release and before the build-up can commence again. In those fleeting moments I connect to the sacred trinity of man, who, through millennia of societal evolution, have been forced to toil in undertakings outside of his triumvirate of

consuming desires: eat, drink, and fuck. We are saturated and well nourished, there is one portal left to us to enter the consecrated fields of spiritual unity. One sweaty, panting, moist, gyrating ladder for us to press against and mount our way to the heavens.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” I say. I need to degrade myself.

Chapter 3

My mother left six months after she had me. It was always said that she wasn’t emotionally ready to have a child. Sounds to me like postpartum depression, though she wasn’t around long enough to diagnose it. My parents were young, both seniors in high school, when, to their dismay, I was accidentally conceived following a night of youthful discovery. Maybe it was after the prom. I ruined both of their plans to go to college, experiment with drugs and come to a greater understanding of sexuality before beginning to think about a family, and by that point they would have long been out of each others’ lives. Everything they had was put on hold for me. With the help of their parents they moved into a small row house not far from the school they had just graduated from and my father found a job as a teller at a local bank. The added expenses and lack of sleep and personal time must have only darkened the haunted look of their futures when I showed up, purple and bawling in the nurse’s arms. She misspoke when she handed me over to my mother. The nurse thought the muscles in her face had moved her lips to exclaim that the miracle she cradled was an end product to be apotheosized, but my mother, lying there exhausted and drugged, heard a portentous omen decrying the end to all she had loved about her youth and looked forward to in the many years she had left to live. “You have a new baby boy. Here is your son,” became “You have few choices left. You must run.” So she did. Packed a few necessities and vanished. What still awes me is that Dad didn’t leave too. Faced with the wailing, leaky incubus in front of him, he decided to plug it with a bottle, change its diapers, and let me stick around.

It must have hurt Dad to find himself a single parent, but he never spoke ill of my mother in front of me. He never justified her going but was open about explaining why she left, how young they were and how scared and unprepared she had been to start a family. They were young, experiencing sex not love, not fishing for soul mates, and a separation would have been unsurprising had she stayed. Overall maybe it worked out

for the best. She was gone so early that I don't know life with her. I never missed my mother as much as I missed the idea of one and even that didn't come up much. Dad's parents, my Gram and Poppy, were around for a while to spoil me as much as possible with their modest resources. My mother's parents, shamed by their daughter's unwanted pregnancy and subsequent disappearance, proving that fight or flight is a genetic response, deserted not long after her.

Generally I considered myself pretty special for not having a mom. No one else in school was lacking one growing up. Kids' parents got divorced, but the parent who left never went too far, and it was always the dad. Not me though. My dad was young and fun. He would pitch when the neighborhood kids wanted to play baseball at the park. He would stay up late with me to watch movies. He strove to be the cool dad and to keep me from grieving from our abandonment because he grew increasingly comfortable with where life had dropped him. He was a young, single father, as much of a magnet to women as a rock star. Many nights after I was put to bed I would sneak down to lie by the turn in the stairs to watch Dad as he charmed and pet one of his "new friends," before hurrying back under the covers as they came tiptoeing up to his bedroom. Viewing these late night trysts was better than any health class filmstrip. It's how I first saw breasts, how I learned the importance of making a woman laugh, and inventive places to put a tongue.

When Mr. Jacobs from down the block moved out to spend more time with his girlfriend, my father took it upon himself to make sure that Mrs. Jacobs didn't feel alone at night. Though I wasn't aware of these nuances at the time, Mrs. Jacobs was a few years older than Dad and probably comforted to know she wasn't the only Jacobs capable of attracting younger tail. For the next few months, on the odd night, we would have a group sleepover at one of our houses, Dad and I, Mrs. Jacobs and her daughter, Andrea. She was in my second grade class and we were still young enough at that age to be shut off into the same room at night so as not to disturb the adults. I showed her what I'd learned, alone in her room one evening, while he was in bed with the elder Jacobs lady across the hall. During the day at school, Andrea and I would ignore each other, as young lovers do, but at night the two of us would practice the art of osculation until we got sleepy. At the time the appeal wasn't clear. Her mouth was wet and her tongue

slimy. She would bite down, as if curious about the density of my lips. It was far from an act of seduction, rather a fantasy of being adult, like playing dress up. Neither of us understood the excitement so eventually we gave up pretending our love was mature and instead enjoyed the instinctual heterosexual lust for proximity to the opposite sex. We would watch cartoons while sitting thigh to thigh on the sofa, hold hands when we walked together, and lie in bed at night, forehead on forehead gossiping about the other kids at school or reading picture books taken out from the library. Perhaps this is my romanticized imagination at work on our affair, but I can recall staying up all night, cradling her in my arms and discussing the intricacies of the universe, the fine delicacies of human emotion, and the mysterious powers of fate that had brought us together like this, after we had finished a MadLibs.

At any rate, our liaison was short lived. The Holmes men did their job nursing the Jacobs women through the difficult early stages of separation but eventually it grew time for us to move on. When the overnights ended so too did Andrea's and my relationship. We continued to ignore each other at school and never again had the time alone that we had grown so fond of. The passion built between us evaporated into the New Jersey sky. Already at that age I had come to understand the disposability of a woman's love.

Chapter 4

Standing in front of the reception desk in the lobby of my current office building, having skipped the morning rush because no one will notice me sneaking in late, signing the guest check-in list because, as a temp, I don't have a security pass, when the hulk of a doorman sticks a massive finger into my shoulder. "Hey man, get over here." I have an instant of panic, wondering if I've done something wrong, the panic of someone who is often guilty. The doorman is tall and thick, a mix of muscle and heft, and speaks with a thick Caribbean accent, so his statement hits me as, "Ay mon, get ova eya," but I come off as racist when I try to sound like that.

He's half a foot taller than me, might outweigh me by a hundred pounds, 6' 6" and pushing 300lbs, standing behind his desk, looming over it really. He waves me around to his side. "Hurry it up," he says because I'm drawing this walk out to plan a defense.

“Look at this,” as he points down to his desk. Two small television monitors are tucked under the shelf on his desk with the sign in sheet. They play feeds from security cameras in the elevators. On the right hand screen two men are wrapped in each other’s arms, kissing feverishly.

“They’re holding CPR demonstrations in there today,” he says, smiling. “Look at them go.” They kiss with the desires of new love; passion like that doesn’t last for long.

When the elevator reaches the lobby and the doors open, the men step out talking about business matters, pretending work is what they have on their minds. The doorman hurries over to hold the front door open for them.

“Gentlemen going out for breakfast, then? You enjoy yourselves.”

Through the glass door he watches the two men walk away, his body eclipsing the door from my view. His work uniform is a dark navy suit and his red tie looks waterproof. A corporate bouncer.

“Love in the elevator,” he says.

“Yeah. Thanks for showing me that.” I wait a few seconds, staring at the patterns in his close shaved hair, waiting for him to say something before making my way over to hit the “UP” button.

“I’ve caught them a couple times now. They don’t know the cameras are there,” he says as the elevator doors open.

“I didn’t know there were any either. It’s a little off-putting.”

“How else am I supposed to know who’s coming?” He turns and stares down on me. “Where’re you working?”

“On the 8th floor.”

“You a temp?”

“Yes.” If I lied to this one he might crush me.

“Cause you sure don’t look like no banker.”

“Ok,” is all I can think to say. He starts moving toward me, like a bear approaching a fish out of water.

“What do you really do?” he asks.

“Data entry.”

“You an actor?”

“No. Too much of a stereotype. I’m a musician.”

“Is it that much better?”

“Of a stereotype? Yes.”

“What kind of musician?”

“Singer. I play guitar and write songs.”

“Sing me something then.”

“Right here?” My foot is propping the elevator door open. So close to escape. “I don’t perform for free.”

He leans down so that we are eye-to-eye. His breath is warm and citrusy. Is he going to kiss me? “Then you can’t be that good if you’re working here.” He erupts into volcanic laughter at this barb. Confidence is not his shortcoming. I back into the elevator and push the button marked “8”.

“It’s B-Benny and the Temps,” he sings as the doors slide closed in front of me. Riding up, I see the glint from the tiny camera lens tucked into the ceiling.

Inevitably, the longer my work assignment runs the less productive my output becomes. Until I can gauge the level of observation over me during the day I am a model freelance employee, punctual and efficient. But when their confidence is won by a basic level of functionality, my plans for mental escape are sprung and my proficiency topples like good intentions. We can rationalize that it is to be expected at such a low level of employment, expected from anyone in my position if they’re to maintain sanity. I am provided with ample time to perform the menial tasks assigned to me, in order to keep the peace between the proletariat and the full-time bourgeoisie employee elite.

Within my little cubicle, my computer is angled rakishly toward one of the walls and I sit facing the screen slightly askew to block my monitor from anyone checking in behind me. A spreadsheet is kept open and available for quick access in case an emergency cover-up becomes necessary. These are basic tricks of the slacker trade, and can help decrease productivity by 60% on a slow day. (Another good one: sneak a magazine or newspaper into the bathroom with you and shit and read that thing cover to cover. Educate yourself and crap on company time. It is rewarding to say you were paid \$15 to take a dump.) They are put to use this morning while I spend my time shopping

on-line at discount musical instrument suppliers. I've had dreams of owning a Marshall 1959HW and 1960AHW half-stack. The 1959HW Handwired Plexi Amp Head is a reissue of Marshall's 1967 handwired tube amp Superlead head, the pioneer of the tight crunch sound during those pinnacle years of rock music. The 1960AHW angled cabinet boasts 120 watts of body whipping sound production, and the Basket Weave fret cloth front looks vintage cool. Then to take full advantage of the cabinet I want the '59 Les Paul Standard with the BurstBucker Pro Pickups with Alnico V magnets and the Honey Burst finish, like the one Jimmy Page plays in the live Zeppelin DVD. Or something a little less predictable, like the PRS Swamp Ash Special with hum-canceling Narrowfield pickups and five-way blade switch—in the scarlet smokeburst, a powerful color. Polish the guitar and scuff the casings of the Marshall to give it a worn look, fuck around with Dave Navarro at the PRS factory, and then travel back to open for Hendrix at the Fillmore East in 1970. Make a jump and play with The Pixies during their Peel Sessions in the late 80s.

Right now I sling a Standard Telecaster, because I was born in Jersey and you never stop subconsciously wanting to be the Boss. I'm not looking for a trade in on Bessie; many future classics have been milked from her body, songs that will one day inspire the world to shake, but my abilities are growing and an arsenal has become crucial to help me conquer popular music. Time for heavy hitters. An American Deluxe Strat, and a Gibson SG because I like the horns. I should also develop a customized design for my signature series, maybe put a wide mahogany neck with jumbo frets (because of my fat fingers) on a Jazzmaster body with the BurstBucker pickups. The Holmes line, RH-07 by Fender. Sign an endorsement deal and never pay for an instrument again. Have a new guitar ready for each song I play in concert, the roadies and guitar techs running instruments to me after each song, because the sustain on this one is just a hair better and the crowd wants to hear every ring of the divine notes bent out of my solo. Mixed together in me are all the aspects of the great modern musician: the god given knowledge of rhythm and pitch, and the gift of music and melody, but now there's the technological breadth in which to filter through new spectrums of sound. Everything has become acceptable, so what does it take to make a sound unique? Something you can't sign your name to, only broadcast out for ears to receive and brains to decipher and glands to

secrete and women to scream and men to throw their fists into the air, Give Us More! I'm beginning to engage more with the electrical side of music, but the encumbering factor is the cost of equipment. Technology works in favor of the poor though, and more is available on a laptop now than was available at all twenty years ago. And the ears that matter, the ones with hands and contracts attached and money to make you great, listen for potential. Potential is what I have seeping out from me like Sinatra had sex appeal.

With talent like this do I sit back and wait to be discovered? Do I throw myself to the winds and let them carry my music for passerby to hear? No, that's not what you do when you take yourself seriously. Here, the 101 for aspiring musicians hoping for gigs and glory:

— Set up a webpage through MySpace or another of the free internet resources available for bands to exploit. Use it to advertise upcoming shows and give the fans a place to go to listen to your songs and fawn over pictures of the band. Also, collect email addresses wherever you can and send fans updates with any news about the band. Tell them where you'll be performing next week and how your birthday celebration went. Personalize yourself to your audience. Give them an emotional enticement to tempt them to the shows.

— Send emails to managers, producers, indie labels, and music blogs with a link to your website. Ninety-nine people will never respond. One guy will click on it, listen to a couple songs and keep an eye out for the next time he sees you're playing a show.

— Hang out at bars that showcase young bands; not bar band lifers, but bands searching for that forward trajectory, while they're still at the level where they get a drink at the bar after their show. Talk to the musicians, sound techs and bar guys who book the talent. Relationships with people in the business keep you connected to what others are selling and puts your name out there for whenever there's a search for a band to fill in last minute, or a band to share the bill, or a guy to stand in on guitar for one show, or form a side project. Whatever it is, you want people to remember your name.

— Always carry some business cards with your website on there—Oh, hold on I might have an extra one . . . yeah here it is—and don't be shy about handing them out to other musicians, sound techs, bartenders with the key to the jukebox, candidates for possible obsessive fan, anyone remotely interested. Get people familiar with your sound.

— Have some good cover songs in your repertoire. People like to sing along, and until your hit is on the radio most people won't be able to. Let the crowd sing along to one or two and they'll listen to the rest.

— Have a CD of at least three songs that you have good studio quality recordings of. An audience is going to automatically take you more seriously if you can sell them something. Let's them think you've reached a level worthy of their attention. You won't come close to covering your expenses, but every sale will feel good and boost the band's confidence.

— Keep writing and recording demos. They don't need to be great quality, just the basic structure so that someone with an ear can hear it and say, Hey I want to hear what they can do with this in a studio, here's some money, go record. Most computers now come with a basic audio recording application. Become familiar with it and spend the money on a decent mic, cables and adapters to plug you in. Plus, it's helpful to hear yourself, to really know what it is you've created.

Follow these steps and you will establish a base from which to fight your war for a career in music. From here you will need the natural talent, beneficial timing, and luck necessary to spring into superstardom. It doesn't hurt to prepare for this eventuality.

I come out of my musical reverie to find it's three days later, or maybe a week, and I'm still at my desk with my emergency cover-up spreadsheet opened in front of me. How long have I been sitting here? How many times has the burly doorman chafed me during my comings and goings from the building? Days are immaterial at this point in my life. They fill the break until the next show. Daydreams of what my life will become if only . . . they keep my mind away from thinking too much about work, because there is little thought needed to temp at Bull, Strathairn. My life in this office building functions on automatic, which is depressing for anyone with half a mind, and sometimes I have nightmares of coming to at this desk to find that I'm 45 with a mortgage and a family I never see, saving for the kids' college tuition and getting drunk alone in my basement every weekend with my guitar tucked in a closet. When I do, it helps to remember that rock and rollers don't deserve such fears, and so I sing an upbeat song in my head.

Suddenly it's another day, and then it's tomorrow. A weekend emerges to offer nights of drinking and days in my apartment playing guitar. I try to organize a band rehearsal, because playing can snap everything into focus, but the drummer doesn't feel up to the haul in from Long Island. Frank, the faithful bassist, comes to my basement and we jam for hours, as our long affair has often played out, rocking at half volume so Ms Reilly will continue to allow it. He hunches over his instrument to watch his fingers, and I sing, tra-la, with a longing to do this for a more public affection. We sonically burst through a catalog spanning years of this scene, originals and covers, new and old. Rocking and Rolling (Rollocking, maybe), playing until my voice gets sore from so much use and we descend back to earth. Without the music we realize again that we are two men alone in a badly lit room and it's off to the bar to wait for the week to cycle through again.

This is how a good chunk of my days are spent. There might be gigs a few times a month, usually with the band but sometimes just me. Sometimes there's nothing, and it might be weeks between shows. When it gets quiet I spend time searching for places to play, dropping off CDs at clubs, and talking shop with other musicians, see if they've heard of a new place that's booking. I head into the innards of Jersey now and then too. New Brunswick has a nice little scene with a handful of bars willing to slip you a couple bucks and beer if you can bring in more than the regular crowd. If we get lucky, a Rutgers student might hear us and put us on his campus radio show. College kids love to "discover" new music. And sometimes, when it gets slow for too long, and like a drug addict I need a fix no matter how dangerous or denigrating, I have been known to check out open mic nights as well. At a certain point it becomes critical to remove yourself from these amateur hours if you want to be taken seriously and it's only when desperate for an audience that I'll sign on for one. When I do show up amongst the abecedarian poets and ex-boyfriends singing songs of the dumped, I do it not as Robbie Holmes, but under an array of stage names: Steve Rogers, Max Rebo, Lex Steele. The audience is there to watch their friends perform or to see people embarrass themselves on stage and so I sing largely unnoticed.

Of course, the major obstacle for the career musician: people are wary of paying for music. They are a finicky collective and new music can frighten them if they haven't

been told already what is worth listening too. It's hard to blame them, because there's so much to filter through. The artist has to believe that talent and persistence will be enough to get you heard eventually. That one day, with the open mic nights behind you, the years of playing bars and small clubs will have built you an audience, bought you a reputation, and you can finally relax knowing that people will come to you and your music, ending days spent at a computer in a cubicle.

My cell phone rings at work. It's dangerous to pick up the cell as a temp, officially not permitted by my agency, but it all depends on where I'm working. Some employers don't want the temp chatting on the clock. Others will let it slide if it's not too often. The number flashes on my phone. A guy I know, Ahmed; not someone who normally calls me, and I want to answer if for no other reason than it will kill a few minutes. I scope the area to make sure no one is watching and open my phone. Ahmed's in a band called 8 Armed Octopus with three other guys, based out of Brooklyn. I've seen them a couple times and talked to him one night after a show. He's seen us play three or four times. They're a little younger than us but have a good raw sound with a danceable rhythm. He asks me what I'm doing on Saturday. Not this one but the next one, the nineteenth. He says that 8 Armed Octopus has arranged a showcase for themselves at a nice place in Chelsea and are looking for an opening band, are we interested? Yeah, sure, I say. He can offer us 25% of the door after expenses. Cool, I say. He gives me the address of the place and the time to show up. He says, "There will be some industry people, so bring a crowd. We want a good energy in there." I tell him I can't really talk because I'm at work but will call later. Just like that these things happen.

Right off the bat you're thinking this is great news. What an opportunity, right. Some people from the record industry might be there? But it isn't that simple. First, how does Octopus, who probably doesn't have a member old enough to buy alcohol, have the contacts to get record people to a show? Who do they know that has convinced talent scouts to come see them? Scouts don't just go out to every gig they're invited to. Are you kidding? They don't take your call unless you have a connection. You have to know someone with the industry's ear. And Ahmed said "industry people." That's more than a person. They have a connection who can bring them multiple sets of attentive ears. Did they get an agent? Dammit. And why does Ahmed think they're so much better than us?

It seems all nice that he called me up to play with them, but if they've set up this showcase for talent scouts, and invited us to perform too, that means they don't consider us a threat to outplay them at the show. Pearl Jam wouldn't have called up Nirvana to open for them when trying to get signed; they'd have asked Live or Seven Mary Three. Dammit. Why does he think we're bad enough to open for them? Their drummer sucks. Ahmed plays bass because he can't play anything else. The singer is all over the place. Some of their covers are okay but their original songs blow. They're an Interpol knock-off, overdramatic indie bullshit. And don't get me started on the stupid name. "Hey, there are four of us, which means we have eight arms total." "Like an octopus?" "Yeah, we're like a musical octopus." Well fuck me, you're a clever bunch of spineless fucking cephalopods.

What are you really angry about? After a few minutes, I can allow that much of my ranting might be based in jealousy at what appears to be some success on the part of the young Octopi. Still, these kids are in no way better than us, so there remains the mystery of how they orchestrated this showcase and how to turn all of it to my benefit. There is a small window in which to be heard seriously as a musician. It recedes with time.

I start by calling a secret meeting of the band at the mysterious Stark manor. Avengers assemble! The band is Frank, Randy and me. We are In Search of the Deathstar; it's different, contains a pop culture reference, which has worked before, and is an acknowledgment to the geek chic culture that is trendy now and a fertile birthing ground of critics and the tech savvy computer nerds that can propel a new band to stardom through a strong internet fan base. Frank and I have been together a long time. Randy answered a flyer we posted six months ago. We lost our last drummer in an altercation after a gig. He was a bit of a wild man, as many great drummers have been, and I thought his personality would be an advantage in getting us to stand out. When a band is working the bar and small club circuit, the only thing the bookers are looking at is how many people you bring in. Our previous drummer, let's call him Moony, was antic prone. He had a tireless energy while playing, screaming long, drawn out obscenities while pounding on his kit, trying to shred his drumheads and the eardrums of everyone else. The excitement of music and an audience often got the best him and we would end

a song at twice the speed we began it. It all made Moony a memorable stage presence, maybe even one worth coming to see again, but caustic to play with. The altercation occurred when Moony decided the bartender at the club was giving him attitude and began to climb over the bar shouting, "I'll settle your tab!" like action film dialogue. While up on the bar, grasping for the recoiling bartender, Moony kicked a girl in the teeth, knocking out two of them. This involved her boyfriend, who left the poor girl bloodied on the floor to pummel and pour drinks on Moony, still reaching for the evasive bartender who was now running back and forth behind the bar, screaming. It was quite beautifully comic, looking back on it now, but we have yet to be invited back. Anyhow, it was excuse enough to kick Moony out of the band and start the search for a new drummer. Drummers are harder to come by; they don't flower on shrubs as guitar players do. We held auditions for a month before we saw Randy. He is stoic, a nice contrast for Frank and me, and his steadiness translates into an unfaltering sense of rhythm. He teaches eighth grade chemistry in Long Island so he's reliable and doesn't ever ask to borrow money. He has the Periodic Table of Elements memorized. I think, because he spent the last few years focused on teaching youths, Randy was looking for an escape from his adult routine. We're all still young men and a looming future stasis is enough to drive anyone back to the life of an outlaw. He found us, and now Randy has another chance at playing for crowds, and not to say that teaching eighth grade chemistry isn't a noble profession, but there is a larger, more attentive audience to be gained through our medium, and if your goal in life is to educate then there might be no nobler field to pursue.

Frank and I met in college. Legally he's Franklin Pierce O'Malley, supposedly related to the president. On stage he goes by Pierce because it's not so blunt. In school, I would play most Wednesday nights on the plywood stage at the back of the campus café with a gaggle of co-eds smitten with the sensitive singer/songwriter, sipping their cappuccinos in front of me. Frank liked the music and was looking for a way to meet girls so he bought a bass. We would "jam" (smoke pot) and began playing at parties, often with whatever random percussionist we could find. For a while we played with a conga player, but it made our sound too affected. There's one recording of us with the conga dude, a tape from a frat party. You can hear the first few songs we did, but the last

ten minutes we are drowned out by a drunk girl canting, “mi-cro-phone” into the recorder. It’s the best part of the tape.

Frank has remained a loyal friend and band member, letting me mold him into the player that I need. This line-up works. Frank and Randy get along and construct a blanket of rhythm on which I lay melody. Neither of them has shown any interest in songwriting, allowing me uncontested control over the band’s musical direction. It’s what I need. My faith lies in my own ability to produce hit songs, not in the group’s collected ability to be artists. We might as well be Robbie Holmes and the Randy Franks, but having the leader’s name out in front of the band feels dated at this point. It’s easier to sell the band; the audience becomes less critical if there’s no obvious chief orchestrator to be conscientious of. It also masks my pretentiousness, which can be off-putting, but is necessary to artistic success.

So, at our secret meeting of the Avengers, as Captain America, I open the discussion on how best to retaliate for the juvenile affront to our image.

“They’re asking us to open for them,” I begin.

“Okay, cool.”

“Yeah. When?”

The deeper implications of the Octopus’s invitation don’t seem to have taken root within my aggregate congregation.

“We’ll be the opening act. Since when do they get to ask us to open for them?”

“We opened for The Tomatoes a month ago. And we’ve opened for other bands before.”

“We shared a bill with The Tomatoes and agreed to go on first because Randy had to teach in the morning,” I explain. “And we have no problem opening for bands that are bigger than us, but 8 Armed Octopus was playing birthday parties a week ago.”

“I think it’s nice of them to ask us to play,” Randy says.

“Don’t worry so much about it,” Frank says. “It’s a nice chance to get on stage. And what does our audience care if we’re the opening act?”

“Are you kidding? People pick up on these little details and it skews their judgment of the band. Maybe we should back out.”

“Stop it,” Frank says. “We’re not backing out of the show. God, you’re being sensitive.”

“But we’ll never grow our credibility opening up for these kids. They’re barely out of high school.”

“Age ain’t nothing but a number,” Frank sings.

“Randy, would you open for one of your students’ bands?”

“Whatever. It’s a show.”

This is not working. They lack the ability to see the long-term effects. It’s why I am the leader and why they play rhythm.

“You said there’s gonna be industry people there,” Frank says. “This could be a big deal.”

“They won’t be there to see us, though. What do they care about the opening band?”

“Then we’ll have to be really good to get their attention, won’t we?”

Believe it or not, in my outrage it hadn’t occurred to me that we could just fucking outplay them. The thought must have always been there, because we are the tighter band. Still, we go back and forth for a few more minutes, because they don’t get to make these decisions. *Your ego has been threatened. You want to reassert yourself.* Well it hurts that the Octopus kids have found this opportunity for themselves. It sounds more promising than any gig I’ve yet roped for us. So then we just have to outplay them.

Alright, I slow my protests and eventually give in to the will of the majority, letting them have this win. If they never got their way, well, I hold too much power for it to become outright rebellion, but they might get sulky.

Powering down the cloaking shield protecting Stark manor, revealing our rehearsal studio in Brooklyn, a converted warehouse where we pay hourly for the use of a sound-proofed room, sandwiched by lesser bands emitting low drones of deep bass notes leaking through the foam. We start with “Now Baby, the Sun’s Down,” an older song of mine, to warm us up. The chords come without thought from my fingers. Next we move into “The Red Scare” and then “Triggers.” We work our way through 15 songs in the next two hours, sometimes repeating ones that need tightening, and once adding a bass trill to a bridge. “Phosphorescent,” a new song I introduced last time sounds better than

hoped. We play it three times and our confidence can be heard growing through each. It has the strong possibility of becoming a staple of our set.

The small, cluttered room with the padded walls absorbing our sounds numbs each song and would never give a first time listener the fair opportunity to experience *In Search of the Deathstar*. And I would not want to begin your introduction that way, or by describing to you our music. Words will never do justice to a song, just ask any music critic, all failed musicians themselves. Trying to explain our sound to someone who has never heard us would be like composing the history of music to a deaf man. Every song that has ever been played is distilled and composted into each song that I write. The drama of a Romantic opus and the naked Folk dirge have been considered. As have the yodel of a Country ballad and anger of a Hip-Hop throw down. Everything. Classic Rock, Blues, Alternative, R&B, Baroque, Jazz, everything. Because the cause and effect of the gift of music is that the next song layers on top of the previous one and influences all that comes after. Once someone has listened to a melody it enters the collective unconscious of humanity and becomes part of the whole. What you hear out of me is my interpretation of the catalog. I have picked and chosen from what has come before and created a song that is the pinnacle of human musical achievement. And then, when I have finished that song, I lay it on the pile and stir again and create new heights with the next song I create. *Confidence?* Something like that.

When the time expires, we pack our gear and pass by the next group as they start to load into the rehearsal room. One of their guitar players stops me.

“Hey, you’re *Escape the Deathstar*, right?” he asks.

“*In Search of . . .* yeah,” I say.

“I caught your set at the Wharf a few weeks back. Dig your sound.” A fan. We talk for a minute about our bands and the shared experience of musicians before he has to start his own rehearsal.

As I’m heading out I tell him of the upcoming show (since we’re doing it I might as well sell it), “If you’re interested, we’re playing in Chelsea next Saturday. You should come by.” He nods and waves.

“Yeah,” Randy says from behind me, his gig bag over his shoulder, “we’re opening up for *8 Armed Octopus*.”

Subject: Big Show in Chelsea!

Hello from In Search of the Deathstar:

I wanted to let all the Jedi know that we will be playing a show this Saturday at the Omni Lounge in Chelsea (info below). We need a good audience to impress some talent scouts who will be in the crowd, so come and cheer loud.

And remember to check out our MySpace page for updates on the band.

See you at the show!

Omni Lounge

93 10th Ave and 16th St

Chelsea, NY

Doors open at 7:30PM

****8:00 – 8:40: In Search of the Deathstar****

9:00 – 10:00: Eight-Armed Octopus

\$10 Cover

P.S. – keep Searching . . .

Since I agreed to go on with the show and since we have decided to outplay the Octopi, I send an email to the 53 addresses we have collected over the years from fans, and update our website with info on the show. Sending out an email is good for 10 to 15 extra people in the door. Maybe a few more since I marked this one as an important show. We have a core fan base that comes to most of our shows. I would like to say that they are all music elitists whose discerning tastes have led them to the steps of genuine artistry, but, honestly, only some are. Some like to pretend they are friends with the band

because I'll talk to them after a show. A few are nutbars and social rejects. One or two carry a Mark David Chapman vibe. But as long as they're paying at the door I'm not turning anyone away yet.

After the email, I scroll through my cell phone contact list looking for bodies I can plant in the audience. Guaranteed fans who will scream for us no matter how we sound. Friends, who will raise the crowd in our favor. Wringers who will have trouble saying no to my Jedi mind tricks.

Frank was right about the possibilities. We are a better band than Octopus, so why the fuck shouldn't we go out there and show it. Rookie mistake, asking us to open for them. The scouts won't bother to hear a note of their set. And the crowd will be a mecca of In Search of faithfals. Cheer for us my lovelies.

And when a doorway presents itself it is impossible not to think about how good things could be. *Success*. Maybe we'll sign a fat record contract. Or maybe we'll be such a hit that the Omni Lounge will keep bringing us back. It would be nice to have a home, a place with a built in audience where my energy and the crowd's merge into greatness every night. My own Stone Pony or CBGB. People will say, "Nothing like seeing him at the Omni." Could this be a place where after stardom I can show up unannounced and play a set to bug eyed, screaming fans who will tell the story to everyone they know for the rest of their lives. "No, I had no idea he was gonna show up. What a night. He took requests." And soon whenever I'm in town rumors will sprout about whether or not I'll stop by. The Omni will stay busy for years with people hoping I'll sneak onstage one night and regale them with song. "I heard from the bar back that he's coming tonight." "You always say that." "No, but for real tonight." "You always say that." Maybe the Omni will be where I take my first steps towards the millions (people, not money, though they come hand in hand).

"This is great. There's going to be scouts there?"

"Maybe. Technically the other band is organizing it, so who knows who will show up."

"This could be so big, baby. If you got signed and became a huge rock star you would be so sexy."

“Only then?” Success turns Alex on. More than the music does, maybe, but, secretly, it turns me on a bit too.

She kisses me in response. We’re lying in my bed, suggestively draped in each other. I had held off a few days on telling Alex because she has a tendency to get overly excited about one new show and then become overly consoling if it doesn’t play out well. It can be like realizing a situation is terrible only after everyone tells you they’re sorry for your bad luck. I want her excitement to feed off of mine, to let my success do what it will to her. I waited until she was in bed with me to tell her.

“I’ll bring Kaylin and some of the girls from work,” she says. “We can all get up on stage and take our tops off for you. That would get you some attention.”

“Well we want the focus to be on the band.”

“So who’s going to be there? Like, the president of Epic Records, or what?”

“I don’t know. Really it’s whoever the other guys have lined up. The thing is, is that they’re just kids. When we get up there and do our set, whoever they brought will forget about 8 Armed Octopus. We’ll just rock harder.” The show will be a battle between us and the Octopus; a competition for recognition. If success is to be found it comes at the destruction of the other. Only one will leave with a contract.

“You’re my rock hard baby,” she says. I pull her into me and we kiss, my lips driven like an eighteen-wheeler. This is passion. Five seconds. Ten seconds. I work my mouth to her neck, slobbering over it. This move drives her wild.

“Ooo, I love you,” she moans.

“I love you.”

She pushes my shoulders down onto the bed. We stare into each other’s eyes. My body shudders with desire.

“I’m going to get a glass of water. You want anything?” she asks and is on her feet like a cat.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m sorry, baby. I told Kaylin we’d do dinner. I have to head home,” she says, turning on the faucet.

“What? I thought you could stay here tonight.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” She leans against my kitchen counter and drinks. Seductive and cool. I roll over and work my way to standing with the grace of a five-legged turtle and move towards her. She smacks her lips. Neither of us has changed from work. I look like a phony in a collared shirt and khakis, but I push through it and press my body into hers, lifting her skirt with one hand and running the other up the back of her designer t-shirt.

“Just stay for a little while, ok?” I start slobbering on her neck again.

“Baby, no. I’m sorry but I’m already late for Kaylin. If you weren’t so cute I wouldn’t have even come over.” She pushes me away. “I am really proud of you though,” she says as she smooths down her skirt. “You’re going to be great on Saturday and then you’ll be a famous rock star. My rock star.” She kisses me one more time but there’s no emotion in it. “I’ll bring a lot of sexy girls out to cheer for you.” She’s gone.

Of course. Run away from me. I’m no good for you. Don’t look back. Try never to think of me again.

Now I’m alone, and horny. A self-acknowledged sexual madman. With needs too much for one woman to fill. *One woman, or this woman?* It can’t be Alex’s fault that I’ve constant desires which must be attended to. Nobody’s fault but mine that I’ve been left a lone gunman. There is an obvious choice as to what to do with myself right now, but instead I’ll use this energy and point it toward the positive. I pull my six-shooter out of its case; a Breedlove Focus that I picked up fourteen years ago when I came into some money. The Telecaster is my workhorse, up onstage with the band, rock steady. I bought the Tele a year or so after I started playing, an ambitious young gun. But the Breedlove is my baby. Guitar players have special relationships with each instrument they own, but feelings run deep between a player and his acoustic darling. Personally, there are a thousand electric guitars that I want, each of which has distinct sounds that I could pull from them, run through pedals, amps and mixers and tailor to each song that I write. Electrics are tools in your arsenal. Acoustics are different. They are a guitar stripped to its basic forms, wood and metal creating vibrations and sound. Out of the earth and into your arms, an acoustic is an extension of the music inside of you. You must find the one. Because a good acoustic gets better with age. The sound waves bouncing around inside the body impact the wood. Slight loosening of the joints

and subtle breakdown of the cellular structure create more surface space for sound waves to rocket off of. This matures the tone coming from the instrument, opening bass notes and creating an overall more complex timbre. The more you play it, the better the sound, that's the long and short. Look at Willie Nelson's Trigger and tell me that thing hasn't been played hallow.

The Breedlove's name is Anya, after a little Russian girl in my 6th grade class. I lusted after her the way only a prepubescent can. She was all things perfect to me, and when she moved away I was heartbroken (until hormones kicked in and real lust began to rule me). It felt only fitting to name the guitar in tribute of that innocent desire.

These are the best times for me to write. I have the ability to channel emotion into creativity. Ideas flow out of me as I release the pent up tension. They spread like pathogens in a petri dish. I got a case of the rockin' pneumonia.

I would like to clarify, that my songs are never as dirty as my mind. Obscenity is a crutch in art and the strong don't need that fall back. My inner perversions remain my own and my song lyrics flourish in situations of creative fancy more appropriate to a general audience.

What goes through your mind as you write? Everyone's process is different, yes, yes. As for mine, I begin with the guitar, Anya now, cradled in my preponderant arm, while the fingers of my subaltern hand take shape on the neck, sliding and hammering out sounds into notes and chords. Strumming and plucking in different times and rhythms. Patterns emerge. Series evolve and repeat. A verse is born from an opening riff, grown, then doubled and those sets are laid out in triplicate. And then out of my mouth comes song. Meaningless syllables at first, used to create the basic structure of a melody over the first six chords. That's syncopated and repeated. A mood is set. The chorus' hook is pulled from out of my ear as if it had always been there. A sentence is constructed from the syllables, "I could sell you anything, even my exhausted mind," drawing out "anything" so that the last syllable becomes three more. That becomes the anchor of the story and lyrics are slowly worked forward to the end of the song and then back around to ensure logic. Melody is altered to avoid iteration. Progressions are cleaned. Tempo adjusted and then, for the first time, sung through from start to coda as a unified whole.

From out my being and into the world I present a new work of art. The expanse of human creativity has broadened.

I stand and throw out my arms to stretch reality back into me. The world stops while I write, expectantly listening for my new contribution to take shape before their ears. Stretching is their cue to resume living.

It's late, but Ms Reilly is pacing upstairs in her living room, the heavy footsteps coming through the ceiling of my apartment. Might as well catch her and tell her about the show on Saturday then. She'll appreciate the invite.

At the top of the back stairs she throws the door open into her kitchen and hurries back to the living room saying, "Come here, Robbie. You've gotta see this guy." I follow. She's watching a poker game on TV. "He's about to bluff his way into \$75,000 with ducks in the hole. He's got them all believing he has the straight draw, and that one even has a third seven. The other one's just an idiot whose luck is running out. Can you believe these chumps?" We watch the hand with Ms Reilly on the balls of her feet and muttering under her breath. She almost topples over when the last idiot folds and Ducky takes the pot. "Wow," she says, "\$75,000 just like that. Bang, bang. Draw partner." I picture Ms Reilly in western wear. "You could pull down in one of the bigger tourneys more than I'll make all year. Even that idiot in third place will walk away with fifteen grand in consolation money."

"Is that Atlantic City?" I ask, pointing at the TV.

"Vegas, but A.C. has some big ones too. Now that they televise the high stakes tourneys, you can find one every month."

"You ever go down for one?"

"Oh god, it must be three or four years since I've been there. It's just so much easier to go on-line now." She sits on her coffee table, which groans. "But I miss the people sometimes. It's a different game when you're sitting across the table from someone, making him sweat, with ten thousand dollars in chips stacked in front of you."

"Ten thousand?"

"Well, I've never bought into anything as big as what these guys are playing for. Just can't afford to lose that much. And besides it's easier to bully amateurs out of a few

hundred dollars here and there than win a pot worth a hundred grand. Maybe when you're big enough, dear, you can sponsor me in one of the tourneys."

Segue!

"Speaking of which," I break in, "we have a show Saturday night at this place called Omni. I wanted to let you know."

"The Omni. Doesn't ring a bell."

"It's a new spot. Checked it out. They have a nice space and we'll get a percentage of the door."

"Very nice."

"So, I just wanted to let you know. No pressure, but, you know, of course you're invited."

"I think I can make it. There's another tourney I was going to watch that night, but I can record it."

"You sure? It should be a good show. Actually, there might even be some guys from a record label there."

"Oh?"

"I mean who knows what'll happen, but if they like what they hear. Some of these guys like to see a band a couple times before they do anything, you know, so at the very least they'll know us next time."

"Good for you, Robbie. Will you sing my favorite song?" She starts humming a few notes of what sounds like Singin' in the Rain, but I know what she means.

"For you? Sure."

"Well then I have to come. I need you to become a star and then sponsor me in a high stakes tourney. I'll be there cheering until you can afford to pay me back."

"Deal." Poker humor.

Chapter 5

Thursday night we have our final rehearsal before the show. The set list is finalized and we run straight through all eight songs with minimal flubs. Quick and efficient, professional. Rock and roll. Randy heads home afterwards to grade molecule tests and Frank and I go to a bar close by where we have nicknamed the cute Southern

accented bartender Georgia (on my mind). The two most important criteria in selecting where to drink? Do they have decent beer, and is there a pretty girl serving it to me. Most places have both. The New York bar industry knows the secret to repeat clientele. One night drinking at a place uptown I followed this gorgeous bartender outside to bum a cigarette, willing to take up smoking to talk to her. She was wearing hot pants and a sports bra, and it was 40° outside. I thought I was being gallant offering her my jacket, but she said no thanks. “My rent is due. I’m only out here to bring in a few more customers.”

At Georgia’s, Frank and I sidle up to the bar and give our orders to the belle herself.

“I’d do her,” Frank says.

“I know you would, buddy.”

The place is indistinguishable from most New York pubs, dark and dirty. It’s almost empty but two cute girls are at a corner booth. Frank keeps turning to stare.

“How’s work going?” I ask.

“Ehhh . . . you know.” Actually, I don’t but we’ll let it go. *What does Frank do?* He’s something like a clerk in a law library or a sales rep. He doesn’t like his job, whatever it is, and I don’t need to know much else. Not worth the space in my head, since it’s only paying his bills until the bigger doors open.

“Don’t look at them now,” Frank says, “but those women in the corner are smoking. Maybe we can bring some drinks over. You can talk all about Alex, so then they’ll both be into me and I can pick one. Or both, maybe. God, that would be great.” His desperation is charming. Frank plays the bass so he’s burdened with that stigma. Bass players are notoriously the least glamorous rung in the rock star ladder. There’s a joke in musician circles, something like, why do basses have only four strings? Because bassists can’t get past the G-string. It’s supposed to be malignant, not funny. It is his personality however that has doomed Frank to be a bass player in life. In social scenes he fills out the rhythm of the background, rarely making a mark as the center of attention. Tall, awkward, a little slovenly but steady, he has many attributes which make me love him. When a woman thinks of him though, it’s usually as a non-threatening friend. Someone they could trust with secrets. Someone who would make sure they got home

safe after a night of binge drinking, who wouldn't take advantage of them, though in his soul he wants nothing more than the invitation. It's the worst position to be in as a horny guy. Every girl has been with an asshole, hell I've been him more than a few times, but no one makes that bad decision with the sad guy you wouldn't remember even after he spilled his drink on you. That kind of continued social ostracization takes its toll on a horny guy.

"The one with the darker hair has great tits. Don't look. I should buy them a round. There's no one else here. Let's just go over and start talking to them."

I sip on my beer and let him formulate a plan. I can't blame him. My instincts are the same. The same oo-oo-pretty-girls-giddiness hits me and floods my imagination with dirty possibilities. We are all one, men and Frank and me, but the successful fellas have found the way to channel those instincts into suave nonchalance when shown high cheekbones and pouty lips. Women like the cool guy, as I steal a glance at Georgia behind the bar, and Frank looks to me as the grand vizier of cool. Collected, with a hot girlfriend, smooth. He needs the role model, to show him that success is possible, guiding him to a lady, a habitual sexual partner, as a cure to these social outbreaks, so that he may live a bearable life. If he only knew that there is no death to that thrusting desire, his head might explode, prematurely, the sorry bastard.

"I'm gonna order them a round," he says. "I'll go over and invite them to the show. That's perfect."

"Go for it, man."

"You're gonna come over with me? Talk me up a little."

"You go. I don't want to mess with your game," I say.

"Come on."

"Trust me. It'll look cooler if you just walk up and tell them about the show. Give them the drinks and be cool about it. If you need help, call me over." The truth is, I have a thing for pretty bartenders and wouldn't want to hurt Georgia's feelings by giving attention to some hussies in the back.

"Fine," he concedes, "I'll go by myself." Frank waves Georgia over. "Excuse me, can I get a round for the ladies over there." He blushes as he says it.

“Those two?” Georgia purrs in a swampy drawl. “Don’t waste your time. The two guys they usually come in with left just before you showed up. Save your money, sugar.”

“There you go,” I say.

“Yeah, I should have . . . yeah.” Poor guy. He won’t even look up from his drink when he says, “Just another round for us then.”

“Aww, cheer up,” Georgia says, and pouts her lips. “You’re gonna make me sad. Let’s make this one on the house.”

A free beer is enough to distract him from his slump, so we spend the rest of the evening talking about the band and the show, the direction of the music and desires to be famous. Our discussion flows smoothly, as if we’ve had this talk before, over many years. Music and beer and staring at women. The joy of playing with Frank is that, besides being my best friend, he’s my biggest fan, and we can repeat this conversation whenever there’s nothing else to say. The thing is it’s impossible not to sound pompous when talking about your music. You’re selling yourself: what is an objective opinion, my taste in music, is more refined than yours and you should follow it as truth. It’s the same for all artists. By being a band mate/fan, Frank is the first of my apostles. He will be instrumental in building my church while I am writing the hymns that will be my glory. One reason why I love him.

When the beer and talk have made us slip into giddiness, we drop money on the bar and collect ourselves to leave.

“This’ll be fun on Saturday,” he says as we step outside.

Yes, it will be. We will feed off of it, a beautiful, wonderful drug, and milk our high until the next show. And each time we ask for bigger doses to get us back to euphoria. The confidence built from talking about myself all night, imagining a world that I can manipulate like a song. It’s too much to just walk away without one last strut through the roost.

“Wait here,” I tell Frank and head back in, to Georgia filling a martini shaker behind the bar. “Hey,” I get her attention. She finishes and floats over towards me. “I just wanted to apologize if my friend made you uncomfortable earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she says.

“I just couldn’t leave thinking that he might have upset you. You know, he gets down sometimes, but I’m actually a very nice guy.”

“Y’all look it.”

“Why thank you. You look nice too.” She smiles, playing along. “Well, as long as we didn’t spoil your night. Can’t have you angry, maybe slipping something into my drink the next time.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not that kind of girl.”

“Just in case, I’ll keep my eye on you. I’ve learned never to trust a woman with an accent that pretty.”

“Shucks, this ol’ thang. Ain’t you sweet to notice.”

“Well, I’m a musician, you know. I have an ear for these things. You’re what keeps me coming back.”

“Until the next time then.”

“Darlin’, I won’t keep you waiting long.” Back into the chill evening, my buzz now strong enough to last the train ride home.

“What was that about?” Frank asks.

“I invited the bartender to the show. Let’s get going. I have to work tomorrow.”

Friday, work inches by even slower than it should. Usually the full-time employees, the lifers, avoid temps like the tourists we are, but today, perhaps because of my barely concealed excitement, I attract a patronizing friendliness out of them. “How’s it hanging, buddy? Did ya see the game last night? Wow. How ‘bout that?” Nod, smile and avoid prolonged eye contact. Whether I respond “Yeah, that was a great game. I too was impressed with Gonzalez’s double play in the sixth?” or “Really I disagree with the idea of professional sports. Unwarranted loyalty to profit driven corporations. Idolizing over-paid, drug abusing barbarians. Stadiums like poxes on cityscapes, blinding you with advertisements for crappy beer and long distance providers, congesting weekend traffic. Collegiate academics playing second string to what has become a limited minor league run for players who weren’t drafted out of high school. No, I didn’t see the game last night,” they would laugh and say, “Yeah, how about that,” and continue on to their desk,

unwilling to mix up the routine. So instead I smile and nod, and say, “Sorry, I missed it. Must have been taking a piss.”

I am brought in to do the office work that everyone else pretends to be too busy to do, am presumed “slow” for my willingness to do said work. As a temp I have spent days filing paperwork and making photocopies, skating by in feigned ignorance. I’ve answered the phone for people too important to answer it themselves. I’ve sat at a desk for eight hours with nothing to do because no one in the office could remember why they had brought me in. I’ve had supervisors who watched me all day to make sure I earned my hourly rate and supervisors who made me run personal errands for them when they ran out of work for me to do. I have an eclectic list of boring ways to spend daylight hours. Usually, in my business attire, I can fade away into the filing cabinets and avoid excessive contact. Maybe they assume my English is weak, or they assign me a basic level of cognizance so beyond sub-par that I couldn’t follow any conversation they’d offer. Maybe they can smell the spite on my breath. Maybe they think I’m not listening when they talk with co-workers about family matters, drug problems, infidelities, fertility cycles, and bowel movements. Why would you let a stranger hear these things? I once witnessed a man literally bend over backwards when his boss told him he had to be more flexible with customers. Who are the bozos that run corporate America?

“Hey there. Tony, right?”

An important looking person (ILP) is standing behind me. I jump, not having heard him sneaking up, and quickly open a spreadsheet over the band’s webpage, which I had been updating.

“No.”

“Oh. Well give this to Tony, will you.” He drops a stack of folders on my desk and walks away, not needing an answer and leaving me with no hint at who Tony is other than it’s not me (and probably not him).

The Adventures of the Temp!!!

Exciting episodes of a part time worker.

The temp’s confident steps echo down the tiled hall. Heads rise out of cubicles to gaze upon this giant of the office space. In his tight pants, the bulge of his tempsticles

eclipsing the office from the fluorescent glow above, male employees cower under desks, females swoon at his approach, succumbing to the temptation of this master of staffed out labor.

Marching marvelously through the office, the temp finds the dastardly ILP guffawing at one of his own anecdotes in a pool of brown-nosed underlings at the water cooler. With a gaggle of gay, giggling, girlies in pursuit, our hero nears that oily old ILP and dryly asks, “Tony, right?”

“No Tony,” snarls the ILP. “Who be you?”

“I am the Temp!” proclaims our hero to the cheers of under-privileged employees everywhere. Then this defender of the hourly wage takes his file folders and smacks the ILP upside the head before taking his girly gaggle out to lunch at Rocco’s, the official pizza of freelancers.

(Or I asked around until I found an Antoinette who hates to be called Toni and had given the files to the ILP earlier.)

Are you nervous about tonight? Perhaps. Not stage fright, though. Adrenal excitement mixed with the leftover pessimism of being asked to be the opening act for a band of kids. It’s a punishing combination, enough to fuel an artist to the emotional extremes necessary for greatness. Common knowledge says that to be a great contributor to international arts, letters, and song one must be somewhat fucked in the head. Cézanne, Van Gogh . . . raving loonies. *War and Peace* . . . only a cuckoo could write something so long. And musicians? Don’t make me get into the list of ones who’ve destroyed themselves because the music never stopped playing in their heads. That’s true brilliance. It’s why I thank God for surviving twenty-seven. And I realize that I’m not there yet, but you can’t lose it completely until there’s an audience. If a tree falls in the woods, you know? If a genius falls without ever playing in front of hordes of screaming fans, was he ever truly genius? That’s why I have reined in my creative insanity to a more presentable eccentricity, as a marketing ploy, until my name sells out stadiums. If you go too far too soon you can scare off the straight edged business persons who market the machine. Besides, the surreality of stardom is what’s supposed to push the rocker over the edge. I am totally ready to lose it at that moment.

Ranting takes me close to noon and a lunch break. When my cell phone rings I almost don't answer, not eager for another catch-up lunch with Jimmy (and I brought a peanut butter and jelly today), but then I realize, aha, another potential body in the crowd.

"Have you had lunch yet?" he asks.

Maybe he's still in touch with people we grew up with. Did ya hear? Robbie's in a band. Oh, we have to go. I always had a secret crush on him.

At lunch, Jimmy's in a sour mood and down on his job. "It's just so fucking tedious," he says, "sitting at a computer all day." He rubs his eyes. "It's messing with my vision."

"Aren't you a computer programmer?" I ask

"What?"

"Sounds like you chose the wrong field."

"Yeah, right. Hey, thanks for meeting me. I was going to lose it if I didn't get out of that office."

The lunch shop is crowded with people. A low hum of office gossip surrounds us. We sit quietly for a few minutes, protected by their noise. Jimmy plays with his pizza slices, eating slowly. I have a salad because it's getting harder not to put on weight. From the floating voices I pick out a few lines about the cute guy in the mailroom. From another table some foul words regarding public transportation. Nonsense, but it becomes a shield for us against corporate depression, a glimmer of humanity, even if it is insipid. I look back at Jimmy and offer a sympathetic smile. I know what it's like to be filled with sadness from 9 to 5.

"I'm sorry to make you come out, and then be as interesting as a turd," he says attempting to return my smile. "How's work?"

Damn, what did I tell him I did last time? This is the problem with lying about temping. "Oh, you know. Work."

"Yeah. You want a slice of pizza? I can't finish this."

It isn't fun to see someone like this. I'd feel bad, except my struggles have to be worse. Let him have another minute to mope before trying to change the mood. Maybe try a couple bites of his pizza

“Oh hey, are you doing anything Saturday night?” I ask.

He looks up from the crust left on his plate. “I don’t know.”

“This might seem random, but I’m in a band and we have a show this Saturday in Chelsea. If you’re free you should stop by. Give you something to think about other than work.”

He’s quiet for a few seconds, like he’s running through excuses in his head.

“You’re in a band?” he finally asks.

“Yeah. We’re called In Search of the Deathstar.”

“What do you play?”

“Guitar and vocals.”

“You write your own music?” he asks.

“Yeah. We do a couple covers but I write most of our stuff.”

“What are you, like a rock band?”

“More or less.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, so if you’re free Saturday—”

“Tell me where, man. I’m there. Hell yeah. Robbie, this is great. I didn’t know you were in a band,” he says, shaking off the blues. “We run into each other after all these years and now you’re a musician? It’s like fate brought us back together, man. Life is funny like that. You just gotta roll with it.” The mystifying talk about fate aside, his eagerness is appealing. He’ll be great in the crowd. I tell him when and where, and is he bouncing in his chair?

“I’ve got a good feeling about you guys. You’re good aren’t you? I know it. We grew up together, man. You guys are just what I’m looking for.” I wish everyone were this easy to convince. We are damn good. Jimmy can tell and he’s never even heard us. Maybe that doesn’t make him the most reliable witness, but he has the right attitude. In some ways, it’s how I expect anyone to respond to my pursuit: You’re a musician? How noble of you to write the songs that make the whole world sing. It’s heroic to be a musician and a songwriter. Everyone loves music. People constantly need new songs to expand their soundscape, but unless you’re Paul McCartney or fucking U2 they don’t want to hear what you offer. You’re a joke. It’s why I hold off on telling people right

away. It's a sick tendency of the world to demand something and then deride those eager to bring it. What a shame, yet here I am bringing it anyway, because their scorn is born of jealousy and I won't let that callous me. (That's going in a song.)

The warm feeling from lunch with Jimmy carries the rest of the workday by at a better than normal pace. The emotions you can inspire in people are yet another reason to be a musician. The ones that say they write songs for themselves, that they don't care what anyone else thinks, big fat liars. Self-absorbed, fat liars. If you do it for yourself, then don't share with anyone, don't expose yourself to the harsh criticism of a cynical public. If it's personal, then close your door.

By 5 o'clock I am already down in the lobby, headed toward the door. I have my headphones on and won't make eye contact with the man standing by the front desk, but he won't take the hint.

"Hold up there, Jim Morrison," the doorman says. The other workers coming off of the elevator with me keep walking out to freedom, leaving me to battle alone. "Now Jim," he says grabbing my shoulder, "when's the new album coming out?"

"Hmm?" I mumble, pulling off my headphones and trying to look disinterested.

"Sore subject then, is it? It'll be out when it'll be out. I get it. But for real, how's the music business?"

"Great, thanks," and keep inching toward the door. This has become our ritual, in and out of the building. I started bringing my lunch to avoid him those two extra times. For some reason he has decided that my struggles as an artist are a sitcom and he wants to be the loud, obnoxious neighbor.

"You know, I used to play guitar." He mimes his fingers on the strings. "Back home for the girls. A long time ago."

"Oh, ok."

"What can I do about it?"

"Sorry?"

"How do I get back in the biz?"

"Do whatever you want."

"I don't have to make a record or play nowhere?"

“You can play just for yourself if that’s what you want.”

“Is that what you do? Sit at home and play with yourself all day?” He spits up in guffaws.

“Yes, that’s great. I’ll go home and play with myself now.” I try to make my break.

“Well hold up, Jim Morrison. When do I get to hear the new single? What radio station should I tune in too?”

“Uhh, not yet. But we have a show tomorrow, so I gotta get going.”

“You actually playing somewhere? In this city?”

“Yeah, a big show at the Omni Lounge on 16th. Stop by. It’ll rock. Gotta run.”

“Oh, can I be one of your groupies, Jim? Will you light my fire?” His cheeks jiggle when he laughs, and then I escape out into the streets.

Chapter 6

What made you first pick up a guitar? I wasn’t writing anything seriously until college, but Dad bought me a cheap Yamaha, that I traded in for the Breedlove, when I was fourteen or fifteen. “Learn to play and sing and girls will think you’re real deep. Soulful. They eat that up.” He had a beat up Gibson acoustic that he’d bought as a teenager, when he wanted to join Led Zeppelin. He kept it leaning against the wall in the living room, across from the front door, so that it was the first thing a date saw coming in the house. Without fail they would ask him to play something. If I was still awake he’d make me sing harmony on “Wish You Were Here,” or take lead on “Rocky Raccoon.”

Music’s always been linked with sex for me. Shortly after he got me the Yamaha Dad gave me my first pack of rubbers. “Not that they’re a license to screw around, but it’s better to be prepared.” He knew the potential consequences of an unchecked teenage mind and wanted me set up with the chance to make my own decisions as I got older. Most of that first pack were used up modeling them naked in front of the bathroom mirror. One I saved for my seventeenth birthday when Megan Marie Matarazzo gave me exactly what I had asked for. I still think of her fondly. Mmm.

“Sex is not love. Remember that. They’re both fun, but one’s a lot less work. You’ll know soon after meeting a girl whether or not you’ll ever love her.” He never

kept a woman around long enough for them to get ideas. A line up of blushing faces in rumbled, musky clothes joined us for breakfast throughout my childhood. One, who might have been named Tina, would sing while he played guitar in the living room. When I asked Dad if he was going to marry her he sat me down, explained that my mother had left a profound impact on his faith in marriage, and that it would take many, many women for him to change his opinion. He also added that no one could change his opinion of me, which was a sweet father-son moment for us—though I never saw Tina again.

Sex was an open topic of discussion from an early age. “Make sure she comes.” A young man and an adolescent, there’s really no way it couldn’t have been. Dad must have seen himself as a seasoned veteran offering clues to help shape my life, paths that avoided his mistakes. I certainly saw him as such when I was younger. His wisdom, “Have lube ready. She can get nervous and dry out easily and then it’s like masturbating with sandpaper. You’re not trying to build up calluses down there,” could have filled a guidebook for teenage Casanovas. My guitar was another bestowing of this knowledge.

Maybe for him music was too strong a tool to disassociate from sex. There is no way to separate the two. But for me the guitar developed into more than a tool. My creativity eventually made imitation tiring and I began to write my own songs. They weren’t much to dance to at first, too blatantly focused on my still limited sexuality to be anything but awkward, but they were all part of the maturation of my abilities. Still, I never shied away from the attraction women have to a man with an instrument. The guitar, the same implement of creation with which I build worlds today, got me so much ass in college that they awarded me a doctorate in coitology upon graduation; that they nicknamed the morning-after pill a “Holmes drop”; that the feminist group on campus detested all men but still loved me. I was the artistic, sensitive, mysterious rake who would sing a pretty girl a sappy song, or maybe, if she was lucky, an original that shone a light on my inner depth and beauty, to convince her to show me her tits.

All this to say that without Dad, I wouldn’t be up here accepting this Grammy. This one’s for you, Pop.

Saturday afternoon: before the show. Sitting on my bed staring at the white wall across from me. A crack runs from the top left corner of the wall, snaking its way under the ceiling for a few feet before shifting south and abruptly ending at eye level. The crack helps to break up the uniformity of the cheap drywall and cheap paint. I used to hide walls behind posters and tapestries, but as I get older I feel sillier having simple distractions mask my surroundings. So here is my wall before me unadorned, naked and flawed. Emptied nail holes, scuff marks and handprints I've never tried to clean. If I soften my focus the dirt and scars on the wall will begin to make patterns. I find a man's exaggerated face with one eye pinched closed and mouth open in an excited scream. If I stretch my imagination, he flips his tongue out of the corner of his mouth several times, taunting me, and then gives a psychotic wink of understanding, there's no hope, we're all mad here. The radiator spits quietly.

My guitar is cased and lying next to my amplifier, dressed for the trip and waiting for my move. Almost time to go.

I get to the Omni early (of course I do) and have to convince a bartender that I'm with the band and not just dragging my guitar around hoping someone will ask me to play with them. The main floor of the Omni is a nice lounge/bar area with tables and cushioned chairs to sit in while drinking \$12 martinis and listening to samba music. Original pieces of art are for sale on the walls. Large silk-screened prints with decorative embroidery sewn into the canvas in a retro home ec homage. It's alright, the kind of place I might bring a girl on a date, but never come to with friends. There's a door at the back and stairs that lead down to the club area where we're playing. The basement is grungier from withstanding a much more riotous crowd. There's a raised area in back with some tables and chairs, for the VIPs who don't like to stand up at a show. There's a larger open area for an audience, and a bar to one side. The stage is raised a couple of feet off the ground, along the back wall. It's maybe twelve feet across and ten feet deep—not huge, but plenty of space for the three of us. Opposite the stage and to our left is the sound booth, a small, walled platform with a built in table for the mixer to sit on. The outer platform wall is covered in band stickers, probably of acts that have played here, or maybe it's a decorative collage that has been pasted on to add authenticity.

There's no backstage area, but a hallway to the right leads to the bathrooms and an emergency exit. The air down here is stale, bad ventilation. Hopefully there's an AC unit to turn on when the bodies start packing in. Maybe 120 people would max out the crowd. Overall, not a terrible space; a few steps up from some places I've played, but still a ways from where I want to be.

For a few minutes I'm alone down here, and so I create the entire concert in my head. We walk out on stage. In between songs I say charming things so that the crowd is not only drawn to the music but also to me. As leader of the band, I control our relationship to the audience. I have to read them to learn what will win their affection and keep them engaged in our performance. Personality is almost as important as music in creating a memorable concert experience, and with record industry people possibly sitting at the VIP tables, memorability will be crucial tonight.

In my head I see how successful we could be. I see the audience singing along to our songs and crowding the stage to be close to me. I see them bouncing to our up-tempo songs and standing enrapt when we play the ballad we've included. I see the applause and the impressed nods from the suits at the tables. The contracts and the late nights in recording studios. I see the first time we hear ourselves on the radio. The festival tours and the first time I pass someone on the street wearing our t-shirt. I see the interviews and playing on Saturday Night Live. The parties and famous people we'll befriend. I see madness and drugs and orgies and solo albums and reunion tours and celebrity girlfriends and awards and paparazzi and rehab and stadiums and money and ecstasy.

Randy shows. Reality sparkles and streaks through the febrile haze of my fantasy. I help him bring down his kit. Then Frank, vibrating at an excited frequency; I think he drinks a lot of soda before each show. The sound tech arrives while we're setting up on the stage. He runs wires and we go through a couple songs for the sound check. We finish and no one from 8 Armed Octopus has shown, so we all stand around and chat. We make nice with the sound tech, which is always good to do. I give him one of our demo CDs, and we talk about equipment and some of the acts he's worked with. He claims to have been a fill-in guitar tech for the North East leg of a Rancid tour. He tells us stories that all begin with him being "so wasted," and we chime in with polite, somewhat jealous responses of awe. When 8 Armed Octopus finally come down the

stairs, they're whispering and giggly and being escorted by the Omni's manager who was never told that all four band members are underage and legally not allowed in the basement area. The manager makes the bartender promise not to serve them alcohol and says loudly that they are to leave as soon as their set is finished. "We should play, like, twenty encores," Ahmed says, and they all giggle some more as the manager walks back up the stairs, cursing quietly in a voice we're meant to hear.

There is no backstage area, so while 8 Armed Octopus sets up on stage, Frank and Randy and I sit at a table in the back VIP section. I stare at the door although it's still early for anyone to show up. Frank is chattering, still hyped on this adrenaline/sugar rush. Randy is air-drumming through our set. I sip on a beer slowly, working toward the balance of calmed nerves while maintaining mental cohesion. Frank keeps talking and I nod to whatever he says. 8 Armed Octopus finishes their sound check and the singer goes over to the sound booth and slaps on a couple band stickers. Randy keeps drumming. What would it cost to get stickers made? They could be In Search of the Deathstar in the Star Wars font on a starry night sky background, and then each album title can be an episode number. Frank keeps talking. At some point we'll get a letter from George Lucas' lawyers but we can worry about it then. Randy keeps drumming. 8 Armed Octopus gathers at another table and Frank goes over to talk with them. They share the same nervous energy and all start giggling as one. I stare at the door, waiting for my future to take shape. Randy, unfazed by it all . . . keeps drumming. His desire to play tonight does not grow out of a desire to be a rock star, or to create music for the lasting prosperity of our culture. I have known drummers like him, and it's only drummers, who feel life percussively, through syncopated beats and bop patterns bouncing through ear drums and rib cages, so that his playing becomes the broadcast of his heart beat and his roots pulsating life through the earth, connecting his beat with the hypnotic world rhythm. I admire how he embraces that rhythm, but my interpretation of the beauty in sound is more melodic, and while we can play together to create moving song, we will never sit on the same page emotionally because of our difference.

The sound tech sits next to me with a shot of something and a beer, which he holds onto. "I hate it when kids start showing up like this." He nods toward the Octopus' table. "They don't know anything about the history."

“They haven’t put any work into it.” I want a beer and a shot too.

“Exactly.” He shoots. “Plus the manager wants us to keep an eye on them, and that’s not what this is about.” He puts a leather boot up on a chair and sips his beer.

“Makes you feel old, don’t it?”

I nod distractedly. There are voices at the top of the stairs.

“Everything changes and stays the same, right? Did you ever see Rancid back then?”

“No.” I’m watching the stairs.

“Man, shit went down would’ve killed these kids. But then it’d probably kill me now too.”

The first two audience members walk down and into the funhouse. Two fellow teachers at Randy’s middle school, a Mses Comely and Coquette. And slowly the stairs begin leaking out a crowd, friends and old schoolmates—no strangers yet—who have been solicited to come, and a few collected fans we have gathered through the years. The tech leaves to make sure everything is set. The Deathstar crowd quickly outnumbered the Octopus side, because we’re on first and their friends aren’t legal, but it feels good to trump them so early. We try to play it cool, but the energy of the mob soaks into us. Ms Reilly has come. Alex and her roommate, Kaylin, walk in and Alex plants herself on top of me, to lay claim, as she does when I’m surrounded by fans.

And now, with my public before me and Alex’s wet lips in my ear, the atmosphere is maturing and the place is ready for a show. But where are the record company suits? They have yet to show, and the members of 8 Armed Octopus are sitting separated, amongst themselves, behaving like the real stars of the evening. A wave hits. It reminds me that we’re the opening act. This isn’t really our show. Panic clumps in my lungs. I can feel it when I take a deep breath. It chokes my voice. My voice is my instrument and this cannot be happening now if we are performing for our fame. Where are they? The smiling faces around me turn mocking and then sinister and cruel. Alex’s tongue becomes a serpent’s, burrowing through my head until I can’t take it anymore. I haven’t had enough to drink to calm myself, but as I heave Alex aside to get another beer, the tech walks up, says the crowd looks good and are we ready to start? But we can’t start yet. The suits aren’t here. So I drive past them all, past the bar, and close myself

into the bathroom. It's a tight space, and it smells the same color as the stains under the urinal. The stall door hangs battered on one hinge. I look at my reflection in the speckled mirror and take deep, slow breaths down my throat, hoping I can calm my nerves and release the knot in my chest. My stomach is tense too. Breaths come in, fill my lungs and then push down to my diaphragm. I need to breathe to sing, and sing to succeed. This tension was unavoidable, whether it was brought on by seeing record scouts or by not seeing them. It set in after the phone call with Ahmed and is now sprouting its way up into my throat. I'm angry at myself too, for just thinking it would go away on its own. Angry for not preparing myself for panic. Angry that there's no one out there to see how great I could be. Someone will have to come get me out of the bathroom. I can hold court with the stink, ease my panicked reflection, and buy more time for the suits to arrive.

The water out of the faucet is near freezing. I splash it on my face in an attempt to bring focus to this moment. I run my wet hands through my hair and fuss with each strand, trying to achieve a look that's cool. Why did I wear this outfit? These clothes don't fit right. I've put on weight and now this shirt is too tight. My legs are too long, my gut too loose. Where's the muscle definition? This is not the look of a rock star. I'm nothing but a shoddy fool, now with damp hair. Where's my image? You need an image to sell a sound.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, letting the air out slowly. My shoulders drop. I'm not here. I'm not . . . I'm backstage at Madison Square Garden. The arena is filled to capacity, and the crowd (with Springsteen-like devotion) has come to have a moment of their lives enshrined in their consciousness. To be able to say, I saw Robbie Holmes at the Garden. I'm backstage and their excitement bleeds through the whole building. The beer vendors have turned to stare at the stage as well. No one wants to miss the moment when I come out, and the whole building can let go, submit to hysterics, scream and applaud. It's the comfort of sharing this moment with 20,000 fans, where madness is the way to fit in. I saw Holmes at the Garden once, fucking unbelievable, changed my life. They love my music and they love me. Twenty thousand voices screaming, "Robbie!" And a climactic moan, "Hoooooollmmmess!"

“Robbie. You okay?” Frank’s head asks, poking out from the other side of the door.

“Yeah.”

“It’s time for us to go on.”

“I know.” Relax. “Anyone else out there?”

“A couple more kids showed up. They’re still letting people in.”

I grab a towel and dry my hands and face. I look at Frank. This is the time for us to share some truth about who we are and what we do, where our lives are progressing and how we connect to each other and the music.

“It really stinks in here,” he observes.

“Yes, it does.”

“Hi everybody. Thanks for coming out tonight. We’re happy to be here, because you all look very nice.” (Aren’t I charming?) “We ready? One-two-three-four.”

— Musical Interlude —

I made, in my first few days at college, the conscious decision to create a new image for myself. A lot of kids use this change in scenery and the new social circle as a chance to redefine their character, to walk out as a jock or a siren or whatever else they couldn’t pull off in front of kids who had known them since they were babes. I decided to become the guy who plays guitar. Now, not everyone is SRV, but 9½ people out of 10 can play something on the instrument, like a three chord song picked up to impress friends, so to be known as “the guitar guy” I had to act fast. One Friday night, before social cliques had time to set in amongst the freshman crowd, when students would hang around the common areas waiting for the sounds of alcohol to herd them toward the bacchanal, I set myself up in a circle of chairs, and claimed Emperor of the world of intellectual musical poets and their admirers. I soon had a collective of citizens, women mostly, but a few dudes who were digging my sound, righteous. Some talked intimately amongst themselves, and used me as pleasant background music. Some stared intensely

at me, instantly in love. An imitator even arose on the other side of the room, but he proved no match for my repertoire, and ended his set by gazing lustfully at my clan.

Tremendous success. Compliments from pretty girls. Invitations to jam with other musicians. But the deeper understanding that grew out of my project that night came from a small group of guys who had set up close by, purposefully within earshot, and began complaining about the noise. They didn't like the songs I was playing. Said I was just showing off and fishing for friends. Both true. But the evening was too much of a success for their insults to sting. What I realized was just how much all guys want to be the guitar guy, the musician, the Rock Star. Why those 9½ people pick up a guitar at some point to see what their ability and patience can offer. I realized that I was far from alone in this game and if I was going to remain Emperor I would have to put in more effort than it took to be just the guitar guy.

That's how long our set lasts. Just long enough to get caught in a reverie. Thank you and goodnight.

Chapter 8

And? How did it go? There is a nice applause as we gather our equipment and clear the stage. Alex is the first one up to me. Arms around my neck she tells me how good we were, how she danced to every song. Praise is automatic out of her at this point but I'd throw a tantrum without it. The audience has filled in nicely—maybe forty or fifty people here in chatting clusters along the walls, in skinny jeans and knit caps despite the heat. I strain to see who is sitting at the tables in the back but can't tell through the crowd. There's Ahmed talking to a middle-aged guy I don't recognize. What's my best move at this point? Should I grab a table at the back and wait for someone to come to me, or seek out any industry people and ask for feedback?

It might look desperate walking around searching for them, so I head to the table where Alex is keeping her things to plan my next attack. Randy goes upstairs with his teacher friends, and Frank has cornered Alex's roommate, so it's up to me to sell this act and it should be before the Octopus start playing. My pre-show nerves have reshuffled into an adrenaline wave from the good set. The table area is almost filled, but it's not

clear who will offer me a contract. It's mostly small groups of friends back here, a couple people I've seen at our shows before, but no obvious talent scouts. Alex is clinging to me like a leech, but in a good way; the music turns her on, and it's James Bond to have the best looking girl in the club hanging off you. There is one empty table, where 8 Armed Octopus had been sitting during our set, and the middle-aged suit that Ahmed had been talking to walks back and sits down there. He catches me spying him, so I smile and nod like we're old friends. This dude is out of place here, too nicely dressed and a bit too old to be at a club like this. This could be the guy. He smiles back and then, oh my god, gets up and walks over to our table. I shove Alex off and stand up to shake his hand.

"How's it going?"

"Good, thanks. I just wanted to say how much I liked your songs. You guys were great."

"Oh, thank you. Thanks so much," I say and offer him a seat.

"Uh, sure." We sit. Now that we're close, there's something familiar in his face. "I came to see the Octopus play, but I have to admit you guys are much more my style. Just don't tell Ahmed." He smiles.

"Don't worry about that."

"I knew a couple of those covers you played. I try to get Ahmed to listen to the older stuff but what can you do."

"Oh?"

"He's my boy." And there's the resemblance. He's Ahmed in thirty years.

"Do you work in music?" I ask.

"No, I'm an accountant." Sigh. "I'm a little out of place here, but it's a big night for Ahmed so I couldn't miss it. And what a nice surprise to hear some rock and roll. I don't even know what you call what he plays." His proud dad act is bumming me out. He has as many years on me as I have on Ahmed. There's no generation we share and I'm not here to guide the old guy through the world of contemporary music. As he talks I keep looking for the real suits, but no one is promising. My heart sinks and the wave of post-set excitement breaks. It shoots out of me and lodges itself in a younger man, probably standing by the stage with a girl he'll take home tonight and then never talk to

again. And here I am at the old folks table talking to an accountant. I knew from the beginning that this show was a bad idea, but everyone else got so excited and I let it get me worked up. And now, fuck, I let myself get so invested just to get shot down. Where are Randy and Frank through this? They say go for it, let's play the show, but then it's up to me to put in the work. And they're off with girls and I'm talking to a dad, having my heart crushed, having my soul flayed. There's a radio station where the signal is weak and all you can pick up is static.

Through my doom Jimmy's hands pop up in the air, waving me over to talk to him, and I'm glad for the excuse to get away from the adult table. I had missed him in the audience. We head upstairs where it's less crowded and a little quieter. Randy has a table with his teachers. Ms Coquette is using her pout to convince him to take her home tonight. I get caught watching their flirtations and come to in the middle of what had been a one-sided conversation with Jimmy.

"I said, did you write all those songs yourself?" he asks.

"Yeah. All me."

"And where do you get your ideas from?"

"Depends. They mostly deal with personal stuff I'm going through."

"See, I totally got that. You know, we haven't seen each other in all these years, and then out of nowhere I bump into you and it's so cool to see how quickly we reconnect. There's a shared history between us, growing up in the same place. Am I crazy? Do you feel it?"

"Yeah, sure." Hey, there's Ms Reilly talking to someone at the bar.

"I knew it, man. There was a reason we ran into each other again. Ok, don't freak out on me or anything, but I'm making a movie."

"Really?" Did she bring someone with her?

"Oh yeah. It's going to be great. It'll be the story of our generation. You know, there's this struggle that we go through, fighting off the adult world. It's put off for so long nowadays. I'm older than my parents were when they had us, but I'm not ready to think about kids or getting married. It's like how people live so much longer today than fifty years ago even. Lives are being stretched and youth is stretched out more and more

too. Thirty years old is still a kid, mid thirties. But then when do you flip that switch on and join the real world? It's like that. When is that moment?"

"Wait, you're making a movie?"

"It's gonna be awesome. Really artsy, I might throw in some weird time sequencing stuff, and we're gonna shoot kind of guerilla style, on location but without permits or anything because we want everything to be natural. And we've only got a few weeks 'cause this buddy of mine is borrowing the equipment from his work and can't get caught with it. We'll have this great message about young people and how the lives of youth have evolved. Like a rallying cry for our generation and a window for older people into our world."

"Sounds cool," I offer, supportively.

"It's called *Discontent and the Excess Flash*. 'The Stunt Generation,' that's the tagline. Or maybe 'Generation Stunt.' Like it's all an unfulfilling, flashy show, but also stunt like stunted development, because we're not growing up, you know? I knew it was fate when we ran into each other at that office building. You are going to add a whole other level to this."

"I will?"

"I'm going to use your music in the film. It's perfect. We grow up together, lose touch, but reconnect years later just before I start shooting. I'm a filmmaker and you're a songwriter. Look at us, with these noble, ambitious careers. I will capture the visual images of our generation, and you will make the sounds. I can see life pushing us back together, fate asking us to speak for a global displaced youth culture. That could go in the press release. I heard it in your music tonight, the same anxieties that I want to capture on film. We have to work together."

"I can't believe you're making a movie."

"We will make a film. I'll write, star, direct, and produce and you'll be the soundtrack. I can't pay you, of course, but I know a place where we can record some tracks. We'll use some of what you played tonight, but you should write more, write some songs specifically for the film . . . Oh my God."

"What?"

“Have you ever acted before?”

“No—”

“Doesn’t matter, you’re going to play yourself. I’ll add a scene where I take Raven to a Robbie Holmes concert. We’ll get shots of you and the band on stage. Maybe I’ve taken Ray out to the show. Maybe we have a fight or some guy is hitting on her, there’ll be some tension or . . . no, I got it. Fuck, instead of at the club, I’ll meet her at your show. The music becomes tied into our whole relationship and when a song plays it brings the audience back to that moment, and it’s like ‘remember where we were and now look at us.’ Fuck, that’s perfect.”

I am numbed by all this information, unable, as of yet, to form an opinion on this idea. I ask him, “When did you become a filmmaker?”

“Well, you know, always, but I’ve taken some classes and everything. Believe me, I know what I’m doing. The script is almost done, most of the scenes are mapped out, we’re in the process of casting right now. This is serious. Feature length. Going to festivals, man. I’m going to capture a real moment here, and it will define our generation. Fate brought us back together.” He grabs my shoulder, pulls us close over the table. “The two of us were meant for bigger things, man, to share our gifts, and we’re gonna help each other towards that end. This is a big moment in our lives. Do you see it?”

“Sure,” I guess.

“Fuck yeah. Give me a few days to finish casting and work out your scenes. Then I’ll send you the script and we can work out the details. We’ll have some songs, a cameo from the artist, and the soundtrack to a motion picture. I like this. You like this because I really like this.”

It all feels bizarre, the speed at which Jimmy throws the info at me is a little dizzying, but . . . what’s the downside, really? Sounds like a nice project. In fact, there’s the potential to be great. A focus and intense motivational drive to get some songwriting done. This could be the start. Soundtrack to a movie. That I’m going to star in. As myself. Simon and Garfunkel had Mrs. Robinson and I have Jimmy Trivoli, whose enthusiasm has, yes, completely seduced me.

Without embarrassing ourselves we do a celebratory dance for the joy of artistic collaboration and have a drink to toast the work ahead. It's not the kind of contract I was expecting, but what it is is the possible beginning to everything I've wanted and more. Opportunities arise for those who put in the effort, those with the talent and connections. Jimmy leaves because the ideas are coming too quickly now not to get them all down on paper. I need to talk to the band, let them know about the new songs to come, the extra rehearsals, recording, and appearing in a movie. I get to tell them we will be filming a real fucking movie.

Randy's still ensconced in pretty teachers, at his table. Let's take this chance to be the best wingman he's ever had. "Hey ladies, sorry to interrupt. Randy, just got through talking with this film director who wants to use us as the soundtrack to his next movie. Oh yeah, and he wants us to play ourselves in the movie. We'll talk about it later. You guys have a good night." I wonder if cute teachers are as dirty as I've dreamt they are.

I should go down and find Frank, but Ms Reilly is still at the bar with the stranger, and I want to make sure she's alright. The stranger is obscured, leaning in and talking intimately with Ms Reilly. She giggles as I get close, her hands holding onto the bar. It's the first time I've heard such a noise come out of her. You could almost call it cutesy, which is not an adjective usually given to Ms Reilly.

"Ay now, Jim Morrisaaan." The mountain shifts out of the shadows and becomes the doorman from my office building. He looks silly in a purple silk shirt, but maybe that's because I've only ever seen him in his uniform.

"It's you," is all I muster.

"I thought you did ok. Not my kind of music, per se. Too moody. But at least now I know you're not sitting alone and playing with yourself all the time. I was getting worried," the big man says and nudges Ms Reilly like this is an old joke between them.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"You invited me to your show, so I came to see my friend the rock star."

"Desmond says you work together," Ms Reilly smiles.

We're in the same building. I'm only temping to pay the bills, but he's just a doorman. And he's obnoxious.

“Jim’s temping upstairs in my building,” he says. “He works with the brains. I’m the muscle downstairs.”

“Oh, you keep them all safe up there, don’t you?” Ms Reilly says and rubs his arm. She’s flirting, and I . . . I just . . .

“You know I do. Safe all the day. But at night I let my wild side out to play.” And, no joke, he growls at her.

“Maybe I could take a walk on the wild side, then.” I’ve lived with her for a few years and never seen anything like this.

“Uh-oh, Jim. Ya hear that? This girl’s playing with fire. I might have to take her outside before the whole place goes up.”

Flip the switch, the projector whirs to life, the spot light on the screen, countdown, 3, 2, blip:

The lion. King of this concrete safari. His mane shaggy and hip. See the hairs on his body stand in excitement as the prey enters his sight. She bucks and dances just out of his grasp, tantalizing in her movements. He nips playfully at her, enjoying the thrill of the chase. The prey flips her hair and winks over her shoulder as he closes in pursuit. They circle each other in the narrow space, leaping and feinting, flirting and suggestive. Watch now as he rears back and dives, claws out, coming down on her from above, forcing his weight onto hers, sinking his teeth into her neck. With his claws he tears away her fur until she is only naked sinew. He tosses her carcass into his nest, mounting her and feasting in heaping mouthfuls. Her body jerks and twists in deathly convulsions that could almost be confused with ecstasy. Now he buries his face into the mess and feeds. The taste of her on his tongue, he pulls harder at her flesh. Growling, he swallows her down, relishing her taste down his throat. The thrill explodes inside of him, he loses control and enters an instinctual frenzy, plunging his entire body into hers, panting, working faster and harder in devouring bites, spittle and juices leaping into the air. His sleek, lean body tense with pleasure and wet from exertion. He cannot stop gorging upon her meat. Bite and chew and toss her about. Look at him swelling up, but one more mouthful, force it deep, gnawing on her fleshy bits until, here it comes . . . he belches, loud and long, echoing throughout his kingdom, releasing the built up gases at work on

his insides, shaking her body underneath him, and then, finally sated, he rolls over and falls asleep.

Ms Reilly didn't come home last night. I don't know how that makes me feel.

Chapter 9

I wait outside my office building on Monday morning until a few guys in sharp suits and pastel ties, braying loudly, brokers probably, walk in the front door. I use them as a screen to get into the elevators out of sight of the doorman whose frame skulks by the monitors at his desk. I don't want to hear about where Ms Reilly was all weekend. It's too early to need that.

Sitting at my desk avoiding using too much energy, t-y-p-i-n-g n-u-m-b-e-r-s s-l-o-w-l-y-2-3 into the computer and watching the clock stumble toward lunch. Jimmy calls at noon. I've put a lot of thought into his movie idea, and researched critically acclaimed soundtrack albums heavy on one band or artist: *The Graduate*, *Superfly*, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, *Purple Rain*, *Magnolia*. This could be a great thing.

"Wanna go to lunch?" I answer the phone.

"Sorry man, I'm just getting up. I'm not there anyways. Quit that job. Had to finish up some stuff for the film, you know. We're going to start production soon. You excited?"

"So you're not working here anymore?"

"No way. It was only a temp thing, so no big deal. Got to focus my time on getting this project together. Final touches here and there, the little details. Are you wondering about your scene? I've put something together, a framework really, with you playing and us at the show. It's very free form right now. I think we'll get the shots of you doing your thing on stage and then me and Jen can spout some dialogue so we have options for us in the crowd. It'll be organic."

While he continues on, I can see an ILP in a suit over my cubicle wall turn a corner and head toward my desk. I begin pounding blindly at the keyboard to look busy.

"Look I gotta go," I say. "Can't really talk at work."

“Right, right. Know that drill. Listen, I’ll stop by when you’re getting off and give you a copy of the script. You can look at it and start thinking about some songs that you want to come up with. I’ve put some notations in where they should go, but, you know, if something really hits you just let me know, because you should feel good about contributing. That’s kinda the—”

“Gotta go.” I hang up and try to look engrossed in the computer screen and stack of papers in front of me. Someone in IT probably ratted me out for my internet use. That’s got to be it. Or else they noticed I’ve been coming in late.

“Robert, do you have a minute?” the suit, the floor supervisor, asks.

I try to look as if I hadn’t seen him coming.

“We have an opening in our marketing department that we have been trying to fill for a while without any luck. Technically it’s an assistant position but there would be a ton of hands on work with the team, learning the business side, not just making calls. Clarissa said you might be interested in applying?”

“Who?”

“Clarissa in human resources.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Well send her your resume. She’ll set everything up. We’re a family here and like to promote from within. As long as you’re not a Mets fan. Just kidding. You see that game last night?”

After work I pick up the script from Jimmy, and he explains every scene to me, every marking he has made for music, and the greater good that will flow out of this film. When he bounds off to meet his “props guy,” I cross the Hudson and lie in bed reading the script in my apartment. I don’t do well with scripts and plays and that sort. The heavy dialogue slows me down. I get confused by the various characters, the different voices, lose the arc of the story through so many speeches. Plus the dialogue sounds bad. No one talks like they do in scripts, but on screen Jimmy’s won’t be as forced as it sounds in my head. The acting is more important than the individual lines anyway and I’m not an actor so it sounds like shit out of me.

My eyes carry on unpiloted as I daydream of music and concerts and becoming adored. *Set the scene*. I want to do a music video, something that will go viral, introduce us to a huge audience. It would have to be clever, maybe a parody. Those are popular. Jimmy could direct and help come up with some idea. We could get some model trying to break into acting to play my love interest. Maybe a sci-fi theme where I rescue her from aliens, Frank and Randy in bad makeup. Cheesy special effects, laser blasters, and explosions. We get away in my ship. They follow us through asteroid fields, camera shaking. I'm singing the whole time. We escape with my warp drive into another galaxy. That's just off the top of my head. It could be anything. We just need to ride the momentum of the movie. Make music videos, book talk shows and concerts. I know it isn't the same cultural icon that it once was but I want to be in *Rolling Stone*. My story, how Jimmy and I reconnected, made the film, the hit album. Not necessarily on the cover, but, yeah, the cover of *Rolling Stone*. What important creative personality of the past 40 years hasn't been on the cover. Annie Leibovitz can take the photo. Not a standard me on a white background boring shot, something inspired that will be included in her next gallery exhibit. Me hanging in a museum.

The feeling of Jimmy's script is revealed (with help from his barrage of explanations before he handed it over), and it does resonate as something I have felt. Fitting my songs in will work. He was right, there is a similar tone in what we are separately making with our art. Maybe it's the sound of our neighborhood growing up, or being the same age and living where we do. Maybe we are more likeminded than I would have admitted. *What's your plan?* A few songs have been placed in my head already, and ideas for new ones are coming. Having a structure like this to work in will speed up the writing process for me. I know what the outcome needs to be instead of fumbling blindly until there's an exit. I will write songs of ambiguous longing, filled with poetry of despair, and wandering, and lust. They will be vague references to the script so as not to sound too produced yet still maintaining a distinct connection to the story. The cries for attention from a generation lost in its youth.

The world moves faster now, gaining pace, and the first few steps into it as a matriculated contributor to society can be muddy. It's easy to be swept along the wrong current and end up miles off course spinning in eddies when you had always hoped to

Phish. The future is wide open, unending space to tumble through, never reaching the bottom just sinking lower and lower, falling into oblivion and lonely death. There are real life options, but the exciting ones have lines out the door. The well-paying ones too. Safe ones will help you wallow in monotonous drudgery for drawn out years, and anything personally rewarding will not be financially so. Of the rest, the majority of them will turn out to be a dead end bringing you back to start all over again, except now you're a little older and slower and don't have as much fight left because taking life may cause drowsiness. *Bitter?* No, but frustrated with the uncooperative nature of time, with constant financial struggles, living in a basement studio while temping to pay the bills, my eyesight being eaten away by the radiation off of a computer screen, stuck in a cubicle, my eggs in one basket. I'm scared that while not doing what I want to do my anger will turn music into something I hate and then I won't have anything.

Now I can pick up a sheet of paper and write down ideas or hold onto the guitar and find the sound I'm looking for. The critical moment for me in this piece is the concert scene. That will be when the audience is strapped in and forced to listen to my plea from this film. I have to create the right song for that scene. One from the back catalog will not hold up. This one has to be the song of the film. The one nominated for an Oscar. The song that captures an era and catapults its singer, if not to legendary status than at least to cult icon. I could survive with a small but very loyal following. Critically acclaimed if not always commercially successful. Tom Waits if not Springsteen.

Sitting on the edge of my bed with Anya in my lap. The music is where to start. Bad lyrics can hurt a great sound, but bad music and no one will ever hear your words. A rhythm is just beginning to emerge, chords are following each other and I play as if my fingers are exploring every logical harmonious progression, tossing aside what doesn't work, what falls flat on the ears. I will strum here and then a little faster, emphasize the bass notes, an E, A, B minor, and F# minor in an arpeggio, da-damp da-da-da damp. Maybe a key change into the bridge, slower, discorded. My head is buckled over the guitar; my cheek is almost resting on the curve of her body as if the closer I get my ear to the sounds the higher my soul will be lifted to envelope the world in the self pity of a sarcastic age. The unrest of my thoughts and wants. The dissonance of a generation lacking an enemy to dissent against.

And then my front door opens. I jump, a little, thrown out of an indulgent stupor. Alex and her key walk into the apartment. She dumps her purse into the corner by the door and drops next to me on the bed.

“I had a really stressful day at work. Can we just have sex?” she asks and takes off her shoes.

Remember that I love sex. I love sex with Alex. It is good, quality intercourse.

“Right now?” Tightening my grip on Anya.

“Yes, now. I had a bad day and need to relax. No love stuff, just a fuck.”

I don't say anything. There was a time when that sort of question might have been enough to finish me off. The problem now is this song. I like what is happening with it. It had begun to emerge and I was beginning to hear, somewhere in the back of my head, the outcome. The whole unit, maybe even the rhythm section, was coming into reach. There was a groove and every moment wasted I am losing it. It will never be the same song as it could be right now, and I want this song.

Alex is staring at me, waiting for an answer. “You see, I'm just in the middle of working on a song, baby, and I really need to keep on it right now. Give me half an hour and I'm all yours.”

“Half an hour.”

“Yeah. Maybe closer to an hour. I'm really in a groove and want to work through it now before it's gone.”

“Are you joking? I just came out here so we could have sex. I need a de-stress fuck, come on.”

“No, that's great, and I'm there for you in, we'll compromise and say 45 minutes, okay.”

“What?”

“Gimme a little time.”

“You want me to sit here for 45 minutes and wait for you to finish playing guitar?” Her face flushes with either embarrassment or anger.

“Actually,” stay strong for the music, “I need to be alone to finish up. You could go get something to eat and then come back here and we'll do whatever you want baby.”

I'm not really hungry so you get whatever you want." She doesn't say anything, just stares at me. "Please let me finish this song. I really want to get it down now."

The pleading is a mistake. It acknowledges her pain, giving her the opening to get aggressive.

"I cannot understand how you can be so self-centered." She snakes her hand under Anya and massages my crotch. "Like my feelings can just be ignored. When I come here after work and ask you one favor, something you should feel lucky to do for me, you can sit there and ask to play with your guitar first."

"I didn't know you were coming over. I'm in the middle of something." I try to squirm away but she shifts with me.

"So now I have to ask when I want to come over?"

"Well, no you—"

"Because you're the one that gave me a key, okay. Why don't you just take it back if you don't want me coming over."

"It's not like that. Jesus, don't make this about something it isn't."

"Then you don't care about me." Her hand presses harder and faster on my crotch as our anger escalates.

"Really? That's where you're going with this? I'm just asking for a few minutes to write this song."

"You'd rather play by yourself than do something for me. It's always the same with you."

"I'm working here, do you get that? This is when I get to write music. It doesn't work when I can't concentrate on it. I need to have time to myself, with no distractions, to work on this movie."

"And I'm a distraction to you?"

"Of course you are." A new tactic. This new atmosphere is killing the song and I need to act quickly to save it. I pull her hand off of me. "When you're here I can't focus on anything else. I can't ignore you when you're in the same room as me. You're too important." I hate myself for talking like that but a fight would be the end.

"I'm too important?" This time the question is smaller.

"Of course."

“Really?” Like a child now.

“Baby, you’re the most important person to me. You know this.” The fight is over. There’s still hope. I run my fingers along the neck of the girl in my arms.

“I love you so much, Robbie,” she says as she scoots in close to me. “You’re important to me too.” She grabs Anya away from me, as I restrain myself from lunging after it, and pulls me down so we are lying on the bed together. She puts her head on my chest. “Can you just hold me?” she asks, not waiting for an answer to pull my arms around her. I haven’t avoided anything.

We lie like this for a minute. Quietly I hum the different fragments of song that are still with me, but it’s like waking from a dream and watching the details disappear. Maybe there is still some way to get Anya back, record what I have so far, save the fragments. But then she sucks snot back into her nose and I realize she’s crying. Oh god, she’s crying. The light tears that all woman can do on command. Needy, attention grabbing tears.

“What’s the matter?” and oh how I try not to sound annoyed.

“It’s just (sniff) that I had such a stressful day today and all I needed was to see you and then you get mad at me as soon as I come in the room. That makes everything even worse.”

“I’m not mad at you,” I say. “I was just working on something.”

“But I know that your music is important to you. I love to listen to you play. You know that. But sometimes I need some time with you. I need to be important too. I love you so much and you have to love me too.”

“Of course I love you, baby.” But when the words are out there they sound far away, like lines from the movie script and I am not an actor and don’t sound convincing. Maybe it’s just my dislike of the moment. Alex doesn’t hear anything false in the line, but then she wrote it. She nests her head further into my chest. Each sniffle out of her is bringing back my anger. New subject.

“So, I was kind of offered a job today,” I say.

She sits up. “You were?”

“At the place I’m temping.”

“Doing what?”

“Something with marketing.”

“Baby. You’re going to take it?”

“Probably not. The movie’s going to take up so much time that it’s not even worth it.”

“But that’s the goal, isn’t it? To get something better than just a temp position.”

No, the goal is to be a rock star. “Yeah, but it’s not the right time. And I would hate it.”

“You really should go for this. You’re never going to love the first job you get, but you’ll make some more money and eventually something else comes along. These are the steps that you’re going to have to take. It’s part of being a big boy. And we have to start planning for our future. You can’t live in a basement forever.”

“I don’t know.”

“Robbie, really this is great news. Lets go out and celebrate. Put on a nice shirt. My treat.”

She doesn’t get it. Doesn’t see that there’s already a plan. It’s in the works. The dress code is much more casual and there are no cubicles. But I am hungry.

Was it gone? The song will not remain the same. When I finally get back to working on it later that night, the chord progressions of the guitar are still there, collected in my brain, a mixture of the sound and muscle memory as my fingers shape themselves into music on the fret board. I am able to pick up where we were interrupted before with that, but the melody has evaporated as though it were never there. I had hooks, man. But the prolonged intrusion kept me from developing those thoughts, and with no words to remember, only pretty humming and nonsense syllables, the intricate up and down of the melody has been lost.

Serious matters require undivided attention and time is made for such pleasures as these. Evenings after work there we are, a boy and his instrument. I have to focus on this now; it takes serious effort to be more than all the others. When Alex calls during the days I make excuses: going out with friends, practice with the band, won’t be home until late. They are the excuses of a man with secret affairs, and like a man in lust I sit with Anya, tickling her neck and holding her body as only experienced lovers do. I know

how to touch her to make her sing and she lies moaning as my hands run along her curves. Pluck on her strings and her whole body resonates with the vibrations of six note chords harmonizing through her mouth. Confidence in each position, but with a delicate bearing, each new movement brings memories of roads we've danced before. The sound we create we share with each other. As much the tones from her body as the chords and the words that I sing. Together we near the climax of our creation. One and two and . . . uhhOhhh. I finish the song, smack her on the ass and give her cab fair home.

On the third night of this affair everything takes shape in my head and the music and words come together. This song. The theme to the movie. It might not be my place to say for certain that this is the one. It's Jimmy's movie, so I guess all final decisions are ceded to him, but there it is. It won't change, trust me. I can be stubborn at times like this. If it's not seen right away, it will be explained that the nuanced flow of the music's rhythm will fit that of the film. The story told in my lyrics falls into the outlying reaches of the theme of his script. A harmonious union of sight and sound. Gu gu ga choo Mrs. Robinson.

After I have completed a song a wash of contentedness floods out of me. Another part of me has been opened to the greater reaches of humanity, and I guess it's one more piece of writing scratched into the wall asking the world to never forget me. Being thought of is nice. So I sit back, grinning like I've just shot a beautiful load of life-giving junk into some gorgeous woman. Such an outpouring of energy leaves you just as spent, wanting only to lie back, watch television and eat chicken. And so I do. And it is glorious.

Until I hear the door slam in Ms Reilly's apartment upstairs and the muffled voices of her and her friend the doorman. He's finally manipulated her into bringing him home. Ms Reilly has a gambler's ability to read people but she's lonely and has let her guard down with this one. She was obviously hurt by her first husband's brutality but here she's making herself vulnerable to another imposing figure. I too am slightly terrified of the size of the doorman. He has the potential to cause great physical damage and survival instincts make me wary. No one needs to be that big. I turn the television up to block their sounds.

It's late and I get into bed with the TV still going. My eyelids are getting heavy when the ungodly squeak of bedsprings pops into my head. I mute the television, hoping that I misheard, hoping for mice instead. Bedsprings they are, and with no filter of sound I can hear their moanings and mumblings of sweet nothings. Gag reflex. I bury my head under pillows and scramble for the remote control to turn the sound back on, to make the accompanying visuals go away, but then there is a crash and the bed upstairs gives way under their combined weight. A low male grunt as the doorman hits the floor, and a yelp out of Ms Reilly. Oh God, she must have been on top. She begins laughing and soon he starts in too, at a tremor inducing frequency that rains plaster down on me from the ceiling. Then he moans and their passion will not be stopped by broken furniture or prayers. I turn the television up, but don't take my head from under the pillows, and fight to fall asleep.

I have a dream that night. I am lying underneath Ms Reilly's bed as the two of them go at it above, the bedsprings screeching over me. The mattress pushes closer and closer to my face with each thrust, threatening to collapse on top of me, and leave me destroyed under them. I panic, struggle, but cannot move out from below the bed. The mattress sinks lower, just reaching the tip of my nose. When I turn my head it's pressing on my cheek and chest. My legs thrash and my arms push against it, but they keep coming down heavier and heavier upon me, suffocating me. I scream, and with one final thrust they shove me through the floor of her bedroom and I crash down into my own apartment. Then, with a continuity lapse you accept in dreams, in front of me is my dad. I look at him but he does not see me. He's sitting at my table. He holds his head in his hands and his body shakes as he sobs. This is a familiar dream. I try to get close to him, to comfort him but my legs are broken from the fall. So I am stuck, unable to move and staring at my weeping father. I look away and he's sitting on my bed, then standing in the corner. Everywhere I turn he's sad and alone, and I can do nothing for him. If only I could get to him I could do something, could save him. For a long time I'm fighting to move, to reach him, concentrating until I'm sitting up in bed, still half asleep, searching the black room for him. Now it's too dark. I've lost him again. Finally I can move but he has slipped away while I wasn't paying attention. It's heartbreaking to lose him like

that, a minute of panic and moaning before it becomes clear where I am, and the realization wakes me completely. It's too early to get out of bed, but I won't sleep again tonight, so I'm left with the memory of that dream to run along my eyelids until the sun rises.

The first person I play the song for is Alex. It's good to present something new and important like this to someone who will only give you positive reinforcement. When your work is still raw and needing approval. She likes it. She likes every song I play for her first, but offers only stock compliments and I had hoped for a recognition of something special, because this song is something more. But you take what you can get sometimes and someone had to hear it before Jimmy because things change when you play it in front of an audience, and it has to sound good to him.

When I play it for Jimmy he's sitting in one of the chairs in my place. The song has not yet left my apartment yet. He takes the lyrics and looks them over.

"This is really good," he says. "Really good. It's perfect for the film. You're going to play it in the club scene, right?" I nod. "Great. This couldn't have worked out any better."

That is the feedback I had hoped for. Despite my early antisocial anxiety we seem to have really connected with this idea, boarded the same wavelength. The age and environment you grow up in. "I love how you tied the lyrics into the film's message. Oh man, I'm so glad you get it like that. Yes!" He stands and paces the small floor space. "Now this is what will be going through my head while we're filming. What else you got?"

I play some of the other songs I've chosen for his film. Most of them are older, but there are two more I wrote in my week of seclusion. All told ten songs are set out to be included in the film. We talk again about placement, sketching rough ideas of what goes where, but final decisions will come later of course. Jimmy promises to let me have input in everything musical as things take shape. Our little project, he calls it. His intoxication is catching.

"So we're going to start filming on Monday."

"Really."

“Yeah, so what I need from you now is to go into the studio and record these songs. I’ve got a guy who’s helping me out with the sound editing. He’s got a little sound studio in the basement of his house. You get out there on Monday and start laying tracks down, alright?”

“Sure, but yeah, it’s only that’s kinda soon,” I sputter. “I haven’t even played some of these for Frank and Randy. We’ll have to rehearse before we record. There’s no rhythm section to the new songs.”

“That’s what the weekend is for. We’re on a tight schedule with equipment rental and everything so we need to get these songs finished. Three weeks to shoot, and then a little more time to edit it all together. It’ll be a bit guerilla, but that’s how the great ones are done. You’ll put the songs together, and then a few days in the studio to record. We need to hear that song while we’re filming your scene so we can sync you guys up, and maybe you want to come by before that even, to get a feel for the process, you know. It’s going to be great, don’t worry.” Words like that are supposed to make you nervous, but what can you do except call Frank and Randy, tell them the story and convince them to clear their weekend. Randy’s a little gruff about the last-minuteness of it all, but I explain that, as an excuse for breaking a date, going into the studio to record is like slipping her a roofie. He agrees to everything in the end, like it’s a big sacrifice what I’m asking. Frank, as always, is thrilled to have something to do. He’ll find a way to get the time off work. Going to record some songs, awesome. Be in a movie, sweet. He doesn’t have the commitments to break for this.

So I head out on the A train into Brooklyn, into a rundown and dirty neighborhood. Walking from the subway the languages on store signs change every few blocks from Spanish to Arabic to Chinese depending on the local ethnic majority. Bodegas, dollar stores, cheap Chinese and pizza restaurants, dive bars. We’re in a tiny white room on the first floor of our rehearsal space that just fits the three of us and our gear. We wear earplugs in order to stand that close to the drum kit. On weekends each room here is full, 90% men, who don’t have health insurance because they spend their extra money on this place and new strings. If there was another option, a better, affordable place to play in the city I would take it and not look back at these blind to reality losers, pathetic, failed rockers all.

Frank and Randy sit and listen to the new songs, nodding their heads in rhythm. It's a process we go through often, and they know the fragility of the creative mind and are encouraging in their assessment. I come to Frank with most of the bass lines already envisioned, and he dutifully stays within the boundaries given to fill out his role. It's more frustrating with Randy. In my head the drums are there, but words do not express beats well, and I cannot create those sounds on a drum set faithfully, so I have less control over the percussion. The lack of total creative control here is difficult to accept, but Randy is good and quick to put together something I like. I make him work at it though, until it's perfect, so that he never gets sloppy with his dedication.

The other songs they both know well. Just the three new ones need the work but we've been playing together long enough to be quick picking up new material. By Sunday night confidence is high for our start the next day and we drink to celebrate. The three of us sit around a sticky table in Georgia's empty bar. She looks tired. We're probably keeping her from closing.

"Aint' she a peach," I say.

"Is that a joke?" Randy asks.

"The accent kills me."

Frank says, "It's all for the customer. Ambiance."

"Yeah, it's a put on."

"You're a teacher. Everyone's suspect."

"It is weird to think that one of my students could grow up to look like that."

"Pervert."

"A little bit of the dirty South right here in our city."

"She's going to hear you."

"No one's innocent working in a place like this."

"How dare you insult a lady," Frank says in a mocking drawl.

"I've seen the devil go down in Georgia."

"You attack her honor, sir."

"The devil has more fun."

"It gets so hot in the South that people are bound to get a little kinky."

"And people trust you with their kids."

“You Yankees have no class.”

“But we have experience.”

“I’m a gentleman.”

“Protecting the innocence of fair Georgia.”

“As one should.”

“In order to spoil her yourself.”

“I would never.”

“Really?”

“No, sir. I’m a taken man.”

We’ve been set up. A ruse to bring us winding round to this. Not to come right out and say it, but to give it the appearance of a natural flow to the conversation.

“Who?” I ask.

“Kaylin,” he says.

“Who’s that?”

“Alex’s roommate?”

“Yes she is.”

“You are not.”

“Well, yeah, kind of. We made out after the show.”

“Oh god.”

“And I’m going to see her next week.”

“Cool,” Randy says.

I saw them talking that night but figured she was being polite. She’s too good looking for him. If it doesn’t work then he’ll be miserable and want to talk about it a lot. He’s never had luck with women. This better not effect the band.

Randy continues, “I’ve been seeing that woman that came to the show.”

“The teacher? Which one?”

“Meryl. The dark haired one. Ms Sinisi.”

“Oh, that’s hot. That’s like every kids fantasy, dating the teacher.”

“Yeah it is.”

Listen to the them, on about relationships and new girls. *You’re not happy for them?* I mean, all the best, but it’s hard enough to get us together as it is. Women lead to

trouble in bands, just look at my crazy girlfriend, and this could end up as unneeded stress for me. But they're happy, so good. As long as they keep their priorities. We've been together a long time and this has never been a problem. Suddenly here we are, making a movie, and women start appearing out of no where. I'd like to believe it's coincidence but I'm cynical. Alex has been around long enough that I can trust her. But now here's her roommate. That's just what I need. Fuck, wait a second.

"Did you see Kaylin during the week at all?" I ask.

"Just on the phone."

Alright.

"She asked how band practice was going. Apparently that's where Alex thought you were all week."

"For a few days, not all week."

"What does that mean?"

"I told Alex a few days. What did you say?"

"Depends. Do you have another band?"

"No. Come on."

"Then I covered. What were you up to?"

"I was working on the new material."

"Which of us are you lying to?"

"It's not that bad," I say. "I just needed time alone to work on the songs and she doesn't get that. Alex shows up and you know how small my apartment is. If she's there I can't get anything done."

"Lying ends up looking worse than it is," Randy says.

"Just tell her you need to be alone."

"She doesn't understand it like that. She thinks I'm asking for time away from her."

"Are you?"

It's a more reflective conversation than I want to be part of. I sigh and run my fingers around the water stains on the table, regretting where this has led us. Not right now, in this dark place with Georgia staring off behind the bar. Not with these guys who

are starting new romances and infatuated with love and women and the innocence of it all. Not in Brooklyn and maybe not even with myself.

“No. I just needed time to finish up the songs. This is important for our future.”

“Sure it is.” Randy smirks.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt her feelings but I couldn’t handle the distraction.”

“Lies hurt the relationship.”

“Who are you?”

Randy laughs at himself. “Let’s finish up and leave this shit hole.” Being serious will start to make anyone uncomfortable.

On the way out Frank pulls me aside to ask if things really are okay.

“They’re fine.”

“You can tell me, you know. I won’t say anything to Kaylin.”

“I know. Don’t worry.”

“I just think it’ll be cool for us to date roommates. We can stay over at their place and have breakfast together in the mornings.”

Remember the fun of getting to know someone new, before the big arguments come? Before the nagging pinch in the back of your neck laying out what you’ve done wrong? Alex is a better manipulator than me, better at getting what she wants, but hell if I’ll be wrapped around anyone’s finger. Lying to her is unnecessary, self-destructive, childish retaliation. But I’m not out of my mind to want some personal time to work. Everyone has passions, she can’t negate mine, and a man has to follow what drives him or he will succumb to madness. Fuck her if she doesn’t understand that.

A personal confession (since I am nothing but honest), I haven’t spent much time inside of a recording studio. It seems absurd (it must) that someone with the gift of music so embedded within the fabric of his structure does not live in the studio. It boils down to this, renting a good recording space is expensive, it’s money I don’t have and would rather put toward my own equipment. With advances in the technology, I’ve been able to record extensively onto my laptop. Not the same quality as Abbey Roads, yes, but good enough to souse my immediate desires. Guitars, bass, and rudimentary percussives at my disposal, used creatively, can create a more than passable demo. You see, I have years of

experience recording, but little time spent in a proper studio, which doesn't matter because it's all about the song writing anyway.

The little time I've spent inside of a professional studio was used to record six tracks, to make the two separate three-song CDs we sell at shows. It's great, necessary to have them, but at this point I'm tired of those songs and wish we had some more. A few months after we'd wrapped in the studio I had six new songs to record. And then six more. The thing is, I write faster than my bank account inflates. So instead of continually heading back to the studio I invest in my own recording equipment and now have recordings of every song I've written in the past few years. Sometimes, when I feel it's going to be special, I even plug into the mixer and tape our concerts—official bootlegs to put up on the website. The quality isn't what it could be in a studio, but it's a better way to spend my money and it gives me the freedom to play with and build the songs over time. And, you know, there has always been that secret desire to break as a solo artist. Not a narcissistic drive of evil abandonment toward Frank and Randy, but one of personal creative freedom, one for unadulterated artistic control. Reaching heights of one-named-legend status. Holmes. Sherlock? No, Robert.

My point is that for all my experience as a future musical icon, I am a little nervous as Frank and I travel toward the address we've been given by Jimmy. "He'll be expecting you."

We've entered the depths of suburban New Jersey for this, zipping along highways in the Band Travel Wagon, my old Toyota van, weighted down with guitars and electronics. Farther in, past the cluttered towns and into more open, hilly sprawl where a family can have a substantial front yard. It costs money to buffer yourself from your neighbors around here. Maybe we're dealing with someone who really knows his shit. How does Jimmy know this guy?

The house we pull up to is of modest size compared to some of the surrounding homes, but still my apartment probably fits inside the master bath. It sits atop a sloping drive and is painted the same off-white as every house on the block, most likely a regulation of the neighborhood board.

It's always a little nerve racking knocking at a stranger's front door, welcoming the unknown. It doesn't become less so by the man who answers.

“Who’re you?” asks a grizzled, hairy man wearing nothing but briefs, standing in the doorway in front of us. I’m left speechless but Frank says, “We’re the band.”

“Oh yeah,” he says, then yells “Car! Your friends’re here!”

Footsteps peddle down a staircase his naked torso blocks from view, and then a younger voice emerges behind him. “Jesus Dad, put some clothes on when you open the door.” Hands shove the father away to reveal a young smiling face standing behind. “Don’t mind him. Come on in.”

The two of them make room to let us into an open, well-lit foyer that has been decorated by a lonely suburban mom with a high spending limit.

“Hey, I’m Carson. Dad, we’re going downstairs. Don’t bother us.”

“I’ll see what I can manage.”

“And keep it down up here.”

“When’re the beer and girlies showing up?”

Carson leads Frank and me through the kitchen, downstairs into the studio in the basement. It’s a large space, a converted rec room, probably sound-proofed with old action figures and soccer cleats. The front area holds the recording tools. A computer console and monitor sit on a table surrounded by other machines, which must bend and tweak the music. A family of speakers makes a semi-circle on a shelf built into back of the table. In the back left there is an 88-key synthesizer and a second computer. With the big desk chair in the middle of the room the set-up looks like the deck of the Enterprise, and it stares out onto a plate glass window, through which is the recording room. Microphone stands reach up like metallic reeds in a swamp boogie.

“So here’s the space. You guys’ll put your stuff in the next room. What kind of setup are we looking at?”

“Uh, it’s just the two of us for now,” I say wandering through the electronics.

“Our drummer can’t make it until later on.”

“Guitar and bass,” Frank offers.

“Usually better to start with the percussion, but Jimmy says we’re in a crunch.”

Carson stares at the two of us. “What I’m thinking is this, you use any shit on the bass? Effects or anything?”

“Not really,” Frank says.

“Alright, well I can plug you right into the computer really. That’ll give us a clean tone that we can digitally manipulate if you want. It’s a little neater this way if that’s alright with you.”

“Sure,” Frank says.

“Cool. Guitars?”

I’m a bit overwhelmed by the setup and nervous that my inexperience in a recording studio will show and be ridiculed by this kid. He’s turned his parent’s basement into a studio? How old is this guy?

“How do you know Jimmy?” I ask.

“We took a summer class together in the city.”

“You still in school?”

“No, I graduated in the spring.”

“From where?”

“Fayetsville.”

“Where’s that?”

“Right down the road.”

“High school?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh God,” I say.

“Did you like school?” Frank asks.

“I’ve got to call Jimmy,” I tell them and walk over to a corner as they continue to talk.

“Yeah, man. How’s it going?” he answers.

“Jimmy, who did you send us to here?”

“Carson? He’s a good kid.”

“How old is he? What’s going on?”

“Don’t worry. He knows what he’s doing. A real smart one. Graduated a year early.”

“Graduated early?” What am I doing? “Hey Carson, how old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Jimmy, you sent us to a seventeen-year-old’s parent’s house to record.”

“Don’t worry, I said. He’s got a nice little set up down there. His stuff sounds good. And he’s helping me out with this, alright, so be nice to the kid. I’m working on a budget remember.”

“Jimmy—”

“Sorry buddy, I gotta go. We start filming soon. Make me good music, ok,” and he hangs up. I turn around to face the others who are discussing homecoming dances and phys ed class.

“Jimmy say anything?” Carson asks.

“No.”

“Ok. Guitars?”

“Yeah.”

The recent high school graduate takes us into the next room, the sound-proofed recording space, and tells us how to set up our gear. The room is small and scattered with mic and music stands, stools, cables along the floor, headphones, and in the corner behind an office cubicle partition, a drum kit.

Carson plugs Frank’s bass in and sets a microphone in front of my amplifier. His suggestion is that we record the guitar and bass simultaneously, with a click track coming through the headphones to keep us steady. The tighter we are the easier it will be to incorporate the drums in later. He doesn’t give away his age when he works, but it’s hard to ignore the scrubbed face that cranes over the desk to look back at us through the plate glass or the innocence in his voice coming over the head phones.

By the time school lets out and Randy calls to say he’s on his way, we have three tracks done with bass and guitar. How we do it is Frank and I record our parts together and then I go back and double over my guitar track. Guitars can get lost in the mix, so the kid says, and since they are the instrument driving the music it’s good to bump them up a bit. Fine by me. I also throw in a couple over-dubbed riffs and solos here and there. Not too much because there is only one of me to play these things live, and I’m not inviting another guitar player on stage to take focus from me. That leaves out drums and vocals but already it’s exciting to hear what we have. The quality improvement over my meager little system is instantly recognizable from the playback.

Randy arrives at the train station. I pick him up and bring him back to the studio. He makes quick work of the percussion, the rhythms emerging complete from out of his arms. Hardly a second take is needed. It's impressive to watch him go at it. He's through the three that have strings and two more in less time than it took Frank and me. We pat him on the back and head out of there so Carson can make a late dinner with his parents. We all drive back to Jersey City, laughing, high from our endeavors and harboring increased desires to make our fortunes doing this.

When I get home, Alex is there with dinner made and this time the domesticity of it makes me smile. She wants to hear the details, the songs we played, the process of recording. She likes being a satellite to the music scene and tells me ideas she's had for the album's cover design.

Later in bed together I wrap my arms around her, pulling her back into my chest, holding on to the experience of the day. The warmth we create makes the bed a comfortable place and my sleep is deep and uninterrupted through the night. I don't remember my dreams, which means they were ambiguous and pleasant like daytime television. When I hit the lighter morning patterns, where you go pleasantly back and forth between consciousness and sleep, and you dream of lying in bed, a knocking at the door throws off that peace. In the dark I stumble and put on a pair of pants that was lying on the floor, making my unsteady way to the door.

The frame of the doorman blocks all but slivers of the early morning light struggling past him. "You can't go to work looking like that. I'm sure they make you put on some more clothes."

"What are you doing?"

"I missed you avoiding me at work yesterday. Thought I'd drop down and make sure you weren't locked in or nothing."

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Well then get dressed. You coming to work?"

"It's too early for this," I whine.

"Nonsense. We can ride in together."

"I don't work there anymore," I tell him. "I got something else going on."

"Oh, so it is. Just a temp. No more deskwork for you then?"

“Not right now. Working on something else.”

“Becoming a rock star I suppose.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“The great Jim Morrison being reborn before my eyes. You’re going to save all of music with that band of yours?”

“Rock and roll.”

“Hey, you know Wendy and I started our own band. Seems we have a similar taste in music. Comes with a heavy rhythm.”

Is he being clever?

“We busted her bed the way we were rocking the other night.”

“Please don’t remind me.”

“Ya heard that? What’s the big rock star doing home on a Friday night. That doesn’t seem fair.”

“It wasn’t.”

“So you caught our show. Tell me Jim, your professional opinion, you think we got an act people want to see?” and he bursts into loud waves of belly-roll laughter.

“Quiet. You’ll wake up Alex.”

“Who’s that?”

“My girlfriend.”

“She’s got a boy’s name.”

“Alexandra.”

“That sounds like a girl. Alright then. I’ll head off alone to my boring ol’ non-rock star job. But listen Jim, thank you for inviting me to that show the other week. I am very glad to’ve met Wendy.”

“I didn’t really invite you, just told you about it.”

“She’s a fine woman. And you know it was something special that brought me out that night. I don’t know what, ‘cause I’ve grown past going to dinky concerts like that. But some voice inside me told me to go. Must be fate, right?”

“Alright. Please leave now.”

“Ms Wendy Reilly,” he says, his eyes misting. “Yes ma’am, a fine woman.”

“I’m going back to bed.”

“Ok, ok, Jim. Don’t mean to keep you from your beauty rest. Go back to your rock star life if you want. Just don’t forget about us little people.”

“There’s nothing little about you.”

“She’s been talking about me, hasn’t she.” He laughs again as he turns away from my door.

Alex is buried under sheets and pillows and pretending to be asleep if she isn’t. The sight of a sleeping woman, one who you fuck around with and love, if that state exists, that sight should bring comfort, a resigned content maybe to the man in her life. Looking down on Alex she’s a mess. Wisps of hair floating off of her head, her face smashed into a pillow. Where is the warmth I took from her last night? Has it been slept off? I brush back her hair, lean in to kiss her cheek and am smacked by her breath. Isn’t love supposed to erase the bed head and morning breath? Is it this fickle? As Alex lies unador(n)ed in my bed, sleeping in because it’s her day off, can I bring the feelings of last night back? How can I fall asleep holding someone, embracing our mutual acceptance, thrilled by unfolding career success, and wake the next morning so ambivalent? Sometimes I wake up cranky and this could be part of it. Or that stupid doorman banging on my door. Did he think I wanted to tag along with him on his way to work? Is he going to be staying over here all the time now? How many more early morning visits and late night acrobatics before I snap like a bed frame strained under middle-aged over-exuberance?

Before I can drown myself in every stank bit of early morning sludge I gather around me, the beautiful thoughts of going back to the recording studio and plugging myself into the electronics, capturing the music of a generation, buoy me out of my melodramatic funk. And they continue to be the thing that excites me for the rest of the week as I make the trek into the Jersey highlands for the chance to hear for myself, separate from the process, the sounds that originated in my head.

It is a fairly quick process. By the end of the week we have finished all recording: drums, bass, rhythm and lead guitar, the occasional tinkle on keyboard (those were mostly spontaneous bursts of filler suggested by the kid), and vocals.

The effort as a whole is not very exciting. It’s repetitive and frustrating playing songs over and again, hard to recreate the passion of a cheering audience. The secret to it

all though is, dear god, I love it. Record the guitar and the bass. Listen to that. Add the drums. Listen to that. Layer on three seconds of guitar to flush out an empty bit. Listen to the song again to get the new three seconds in perspective of the whole. When the song is complete, listen to the track through once for the guitar, again for the bass, again for the drums, and again for the vocals. Again and again, I didn't want to stop.

The middle of the day on Friday, Frank and I are sitting in the booth with the kid Carson, having finished the last of the vocal tracks. Post-coital exhaustion hangs in the room, but given the chance I'd attack her again.

"Now what?" Frank asks.

"Well it's going to be a couple weeks until I'm done mastering everything," Carson says.

"A couple weeks?"

"Yeah, to make it sound real good."

"We don't get anything until then?" I ask.

"Well sure, I'll make you a CD of what we have now. It's not perfect yet but I can mix the levels quickly and you can take home a couple CDs to hold you over."

Alright. For a second I was scared I'd have to leave with nothing.

"It's going to take a few minutes to get everything ready," Carson says. "Would you guys mind doing me a solid until then?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Would you mind picking me up a case of beer? It'll give me something to do for the weekend, you know?"

I laugh at him. "You want us to buy you beer?"

"Just a case of something cheap. Oh, and a bottle of Boone's for my girlfriend."

"We're not going to—" I start before Frank cuts me off.

"Of course, dude. Is there like a place we can pick some up?" And then we are driving to the local booze mart.

"Why did you say that?" I ask Frank.

"What do you mean?"

"Now we've gotta supply alcohol to a minor. Who are we?"

"Relax, it's not a big deal."

“It is.”

“When did you become so old?”

“It’s not that we’re too old but, yeah, first we have to record with a fucking teenager, and now we’re buying him alcohol. Let’s not be that guy.”

“Who?”

“The skeezy older dude that brings the beer to high school parties.”

“You’re thinking way too much about this. I thought you liked Carson.”

“So what, we recorded with him. We’re not becoming his friends. I won’t come over on the weekends, drink beer and jam with this kid.”

“God, how cool are we that this kid was hanging out with us? He just did us a nice favor. He’s recording us, we’re not paying for anything, and we sound great. Least we can do is buy him some beer. You never drank as a teenager?”

“Shut up,” I say forfeiting my point. We’ll buy the kid a drink. Best to stay on his good side while he’s still working on our tapes, but I tell Frank that we cannot drink with Carson at all. I have to draw the line there. He laughs at how serious I’m taking it. The difference between us is that he’s clowning around while relying on me to bust my ass to get us heard.

In the liquor store Frank is still smirking. I go straight to the refrigerator in the back and grab a twelve-pack of some cheap, light, shitty water-beer, the tasteless variety that appeals to seventeen-year-olds. Frank is in one of the aisles, standing in front of forty varieties of alcohol, reading labels and mouthing prices.

“Let’s go,” I say.

“Look at this. It’s fifteen bucks cheaper for a liter. You forget how expensive New York is.”

“I don’t. Come on.”

“Kaylin drinks tequila.”

“Mm hmm.”

“I should pick her up a gift.”

“You bring a girl a handle of tequila?”

“Something kind of nice. I think she’ll like it.”

“You know her better than I do.”

The cashier at the front scans the twelve-pack and the Boone's Farm, and I can see how he looks down at me. You're buying this for a minor, aren't you? For shame, his eyes scold me. Guiltily I pay and grab the case off the counter. "Don't forget your wine," the clerk says dryly.

"You sell it," I mutter. Frank is standing behind me with two bottles of tequila in his hands.

"I'm going to get Carson one," he tells me as the cashier puts them in bags. "He's got to learn to like the hard stuff sometime." I hold my tongue until we are out of the store and back in the Wagon before I tell him what I think about buying liquor for the kid, but he only laughs at my morality. *Is it really morals that restrains you?*

We get back to Carson's place and sneak around to the back basement door so his father won't see us supplying his son with alcohol. His eyes light up like Cinco de Mayo when he sees the tequila, so lets do something special mastering those songs, kid.

Chapter 10

Alex is sitting on the left side of my bed and I stalk the small bit of floor space to the right. I can't stop making excuses one moment, remember it's not mastered yet, that part will get fixed digitally. Next I'm pointing out signs of brilliance for her to listen for. It's the second time I've made her sit through the songs, all ten in a row, because it takes a couple listenings to seriously wrap your mind around a piece of music. I have heard the songs through too many times already but a few more won't kill anyone. Frank and I played it the whole car ride home and that night I sat and listened to it again (and again) and in the morning I turned the stereo on and played it again. When I heard Ms Reilly moving around upstairs I brought it up for her to listen to. We sat in her living room and she tapped her feet and bobbed her head to each song, and when one of the new ones came on she said, "Ooo, I haven't heard this before." She sat patiently through the whole thing, telling me what she liked and humming along to guitar parts she recognized. At the end of the disc she told me she liked it very much and would send it out as gifts to her family as soon as it was released into stores. We're not there yet but I promised to bring her a copy when the mastered disc was finished. "Will you come up this evening so Desmond can listen to it?" I stood confused until she said, "You know. My friend who

works in your building.” Having a name doesn’t mean I’ll start liking him hanging around here, but everyone will have to hear the album eventually.

“Oh, you’re not working there anymore, are you? I should have thought of that since you’ve been off recording this lovely album,” she continued. “He told me about coming down the other morning to ask you to take the train in with him. He’s very sweet like that, isn’t he? Of course he felt bad about waking you up.”

Ms Reilly left for a moment, lost in thoughts of Desmond. As she returned, slowly, she asked, “You like him, don’t you?”

Though I wanted to tell her the truth, that he seems brutish, instead I hesitated, considering her feelings and said honestly that I didn’t know him that well.

“He says that the two of you are friendly at work.”

“I guess so. We didn’t really work together though. We’d see each other in the lobby.” Does what passes between the doorman and me constitute friendly banter? I had seen it more bordering on harassment.

“He likes you quite a lot.”

That seems unlikely. He enjoys using me as a verbal assault target. Or bullying me with blimpish physicality.

“Actually,” I told her, “it’s hard for me to feel a connection to anyone that I work with. In any office I’m just a temporary fixture. Most people I’ll never see again, so it’s easier not to make connections.”

“That must make it hard to enjoy what you do.”

“The point is it’s not what I do. It’s how I make some extra cash.”

“Well anyway, I just think Desmond would like to hear your songs. We met at your show so it’s like you’re the soundtrack to our relationship.” No I’m not. “You can bring the disc up later and play it for us. He’s coming over tonight so I can cook him dinner and we can play cards. Desmond thinks of himself as a poker player.”

“Gonna take him for a ride?”

“Maybe. You want to play too?”

“We’ll see. I’m supposed to have dinner with Alex tonight.”

“Bring her up too. It’ll be like a double date.”

That was enough for me. Down I traveled, back to my basement apartment and here I am playing these songs through again for Alex.

Alex, I can see, has begun to space. Her ears aren't hearing the music, her focus has gone elsewhere. "Listen to the bass line right here," I say.

"I hear it. It's good. I told you baby, this is amazing."

"It came out pretty well, right?"

"I love it," she says.

"And it still has to be mastered, but. . ." It doesn't have to be said. We are in agreement. It's awesome. I'm awesome for writing these songs. The band is awesome for recording them.

"Have you played it for Ms Reilly yet?" Alex asks.

"Yeah. This morning. She invited us up for poker tonight."

"Sure. Why not?"

"No, you misunderstand," I say. "I meant that in an 'isn't she amusing, we would never go play poker with her and Desmond' kind of way. You missed the inflection."

"Who's Desmond?"

"The doorman."

"Who?"

"Her new friend. They have loud sex upstairs."

"Really? We should totally go up then. I want to see this guy." It isn't a discussion. I lose again. My point is left decaying in the still basement air. And what was my point exactly? Do I need to explain it if it's left unheard? I have a point. One of sound mind and logic. It's not that I don't like the doorman. I don't like the doorman. It's not that he's taking advantage of Ms Reilly's loneliness, which is most likely true too. Here it is, Alex and I are young and in love (love exists in this argument) and require more to quench our wanderlust than a night at home playing games with the middle-aged humpers upstairs. *Why does she want to go up?* Some part of Alex thinks that this is what couples do. An attempt at suburban nesting rituals, like women gossiping by the fence. Bullshit to that. This is no suburbia. We're a young couple meant to be frolicking in the throws of the greatest city the world has ever known. The long arms of New York reach out to us across the Hudson and offer dank cellar bars,

overpriced alcohol, loud music, pretty women and lunatic men basking in the glow of fluorescent neon and sneering with hipster cool. I sneer good, too.

“Do you want to listen to that song again?”

“Hey, whatever happened at work? Did you get that job?” she asks.

I restart the track we had been listening to. “No. That fell through.”

“What happened? Did you give them your resume?”

I only want to hear the music. The snare drum is too poppy. That will have to be turned down in the mixing.

“Robbie?”

My guitar is running through a Boss Power Stack pedal. That’s where that crunch is coming from.

“Robbie?” She gets up and turns off the stereo.

“Don’t do that.”

“What happened at work?”

“I didn’t want the job.”

“Why not?”

“We had to record the album. The movie’s on a tight schedule and I couldn’t do both. So I quit.” She won’t move away from the stereo. “If things start happening with this then I won’t need the money anyway. And I can always get another temp job until then.”

“You can’t keep working temp jobs forever, Robbie.”

“Of course I won’t.” Why would she worry about that? “I’m taking care of everything.” I hug her, pulling her away from the stereo. Sometimes it feels like she’s afraid there’s no plan.

Alex leaves, says she has to run errands. Time apart so we don’t get sick of each other. She’s coming back later so we can go upstairs to age uncomfortably. I lean back in a chair, balanced on two legs, resting my feet on the bed. The songs continue to run through me, though I’m finally giving my ears a respite. Breaking down each section of instrumentation to hum to myself or drum on the air. I remember a song that I wrote in college that would have been perfect for this project. The rushed aspect of it all might grow apparent more and more as we look back on our success, but this is not the time for

regrets. The songs have been recorded. A soundtrack to an independent film. A golden ticket to the big show.

The phone rings and Jimmy is talking before I have finished hello.

“I hear it’s really good. Carson says you guys wrapped everything up.”

“Yeah. He’s mastering the tracks now,” I say.

“Excellent. You liking everything?”

I do. I really do. “Yeah. Sounds good. I was just listening to it earlier. Still can hear it in my head.”

“Great.” He sniffs like he has a cold. “We’ve got to bring you guys in to film your scene now.”

“Uh huh.”

“Ok. Tomorrow morning at 10 AM. You remember where my parents live in Havex, right?”

“Kind of, but the tracks aren’t—”

“Bring what you have down with you. Plus your gear. We’ll have you guys mouth along and dub the finished tapes in later. I’m going to try recording you guys live, but I don’t know about the acoustics. We’ll have to see how it sounds down there.”

“This is short notice.”

“I told you, we’re under the gun to get this wrapped soon. So 10 o’clock, remember. And if you want, bring some people with you. We need to fill out the crowd scene. The more bodies the better.”

“Alright Jimmy, but I’ve got make sure the other guys can—”

“Great. See you tomorrow.” Click. He gets his way, I’ll give him that much.

Jimmy grew up two blocks down and one block over from the house on Milligan Ave. Occasionally I would walk over there when we were in school for video games or underage drinking when his parents were out of town. I can see the route mapped in my head. I could describe for you each intersection of the whole lower middle class suburban neighborhood. Small houses stacked next to each other in military rows, separated by cement driveways and sometimes chain-linked fences when you can’t trust anyone. Backyards too small to play catch in. No trees big enough to climb. A lot of kids with pent up energy and not enough space to let it out in. Adolescent rage bouncing

off the blacktop surfaces, growing bigger and wilder with every leap. Too many people and not enough space. Accidents happen in that clutter.

“Have you ever played before?” Alex asks as we walk up the stairs to Ms Reilly’s level.

“Well sure. I mean kind of. Not really for money like this.”

“You’ve never gotten together with the guys and played?”

“No. We get together and drink usually.”

“I thought all men played cards.”

“The real ones, yes.”

“Jesus.”

“I played a couple times when I was a kid. I have a basic idea of how it works.”

“You’re going to suck aren’t you?”

“Why do you assume that? I could be great at this.”

“Don’t try to impress me or anything. And don’t do anything dumb. And try not to lose right away.” Why do birds . . .

Ms Reilly takes her cards seriously. She has a green felt card tabletop set over her dining table which has been dragged into the living room. There’s a metallic briefcase filled with chips and three decks of cards on the felt top. These accessories must rarely get the excuse to come out. The rest of the furniture in the room has been pushed to the sides to give us an open playing arena. Wilson, her mutt, is already under the table waiting as a footrest. The walls of the living room, and most of her home, are washed in light, muted grays, and salmon colored carpeting and furniture throws add texture to the surroundings. The walls and book shelves are decorated in photographs of extended family, presumably to make up for her own lack of a nuclear one, but there is a charcoal sketch of Wilson above her sofa on the far wall, the only piece of art (liberal definition) noticeable.

The doorman is already seated at the card table counting out chips when we walk in. “Jim Morrison and his lovely entourage have arrived,” he calls out. Ms Reilly is dumping potato chips into a plastic bowl.

“There’s beer and soda in the refrigerator. Help yourselves,” she says.

The four of us sit around the table awkwardly for a moment, unsure of what formalities the evening requires.

“Everybody knows the game?”

“The one they’re always playing on TV?”

“I thought it would be the best bet with our different experience levels,” Ms Reilly explains. “Ten dollar buy-in. Keep it simple. It’ll be a friendly game.”

“Robbie might need us to walk him through a game.”

“No. I get it. Let’s just play.”

“Uh-oh. Jim Morrison’s a rookie.”

“He’s never played before.”

“Yes I have. They play it on TV. I know what I’m doing.”

“It’s alright Jim. We’ll take it easy on ya.”

“Ok,” Ms Reilly says, “let’s see how we do.” She shuffles out the cards.

“Remember, it’s just a friendly game. I remind myself too. I tend to get competitive.”

The game begins, and it doesn’t take long to realize I don’t know what’s going on. The basic rules are simple enough, but the strategy passes me by, watching the other players, guessing what they hold, and any tricks to betting. Mostly I give up because my cards never seem to add up to much.

“You can’t fold every time, Robbie.”

“Strike when you’ve a good hand, dear.”

“Watch out when he plays one though. The boy’s not a bluffer.”

“No, he’s a terrible liar, aren’t you Robbie? That’s why he’s not even trying.”

“He’s holding back now, but he’ll get a hand soon and then he’s off.”

“I’ll try to ready myself for him.”

“I’m going to raise.”

“She’s feisty. I like this girl, Jim.”

“One of us has to make a showing.”

“No, dear, you already put your money in. Don’t fold yet.”

“God, Robbie.”

“Well don’t try to bluff me now, Jim. I know you don’t have anything.”

“Are you sure you want to put that much in, because . . . you know what, I’ll just fold. Look, you won a hand.”

“Don’t pity him.”

“Oh, look at that lovely red queen.”

“Don’t try to scare me off. You’ve only got the low pair. I’ll reraise.”

“How do you know that, Ms professional? Fine, I fold.”

“I think you like it when I’m aggressive.”

“That’s right woman.”

“Robbie you’re the big blind.”

“No dear, your money’s already in. Just check.”

“I’ll take his money, if the boy wants to give it up.”

“He’s back to folding every hand.”

“You have to go with the cards you’re dealt.”

“A little fight is good though. Use that rock star charm to shake some money from us.”

“You stayed in with that. I told you you can’t lie.”

“You’re getting the idea though. But you shouldn’t call with nothing.”

“Alright, Jim. It’s time for us to stand up to these women.”

“So I make you nervous, big man?”

“Oh no. You are right where I want you.”

“I’ll raise you.”

“She’s bluffing. If you got anything in there call her.”

“Ha, I knew you were going to suck.”

“I said if you had anything, Jim. You’re getting low now. Gonna have to pull something out soon.”

“That’s good. Be aggressive with those last few chips.”

“He’s got nothing. I can tell. I call.”

“It’s just a friendly game, dear.”

“Look, he’s not even trying anymore.”

After I go out I sit there defeated. Ms Reilly’s manipulative skill becomes obvious now that she’s stopped playing nice with me. She bullies the others, scaring

them and then backing off, saying it's just a friendly game. She and Desmond flirt unashamedly, making me wince at their barely concealed entendres. I cough like a sensor every time something really awful is about to be said. Alex doesn't seem to notice. She is focused, trying to read the hands of the other two, determined to stay in the game.

"Robbie, why don't you get your CD for us to listen to," Ms Reilly says after coughing fit to quiet them.

"Will it distract from the game?"

"Oh, go get it. I want Desmond to hear."

I return with the disc and put it on while the others are absorbed in a hand. No one says anything at first; we just listen while they play. I notice that the doorman's leg is bouncing in time under the table.

With the start of the second song I say, "This is one of the new ones I wrote specifically for the film."

"Isn't it good?" Ms Reilly asks.

"Alright, Jim Morrison."

"There will be this scene in the movie where the band is playing this song at a concert. I was reading through the script, feeling this emotional pull from it, and this music matches that feeling. I even took a few lines from the movie and inserted them into the lyrics." Ms Reilly wins a hand and Alex deals the next. "Right here . . . 'We've got to run to keep up or else we'll all fall behind.' That's from the script. More or less. I changed it a little to fit the rhythm. Here's the chorus . . . I like that part when I go into falsetto. 'Everywhere we go we are.' This is going to be like the theme song—"

"Shut up, Robbie!" Alex snaps. "We're trying to play the game."

The others don't look up from their cards. Ms Reilly folds and Alex wins the pot. The doorman shuffles the deck slowly as the song ends.

"You know Jim, that last one's pretty good."

"Oh I know this one." Ms Reilly hums along as the next song begins.

The rest of the game goes by quickly and hushed. Alex only lasts a few more hands before Ms Reilly takes the rest of her chips. I grab the disc say goodbye and we

trudge down the stairs to my place silently, waiting for the door to close before the argument begins. This is what it sounds like:

I YELL AT YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Is this serious? She's not apologizing for her outburst. She embarrassed both of us down there. No one knew how to react. And what the hell, like she wasn't begging me to play it for her earlier. It was a stupid game and I'm the one who's right to be angry. She's the one who's immature and not taking this seriously. Because she's been rude to me all night and I'm sick of it. I don't care about the fucking game, of course I care more about listening to my music. Because that's what's important to me. Well then maybe she's too serious about the whole thing and we should just relax away from each other for a while.

I've said it before when really angry but she sees most of what I say as empty threats and laughs at me, to my face laughs and says that she can't deal with this shit tonight, screw this. Gathers her stuff and leaves. *Do you mean it?* Right now, at least. How can we be right for each other if we're going to fight like this, when she can lose her mind like I don't even know her. I can't tell what my subconscious motives are but I'm glad she left. I really hate her after nights like this but we've made up before. *Will you talk about it?* With her? The choking anger is part of any relationship. But so is a certain emotional security. Is this what it's always going to be like, no matter who the other person is? *There is no perfect woman out there that you just haven't found yet. But that doesn't mean—* Then what's the point of ending this one and starting over. If left completely alone, without the packaged good and bad distractions of having someone else around, I'm afraid that this uncertainty would become consuming. These would be the only conversations I ever had.

Early the next morning everyone gathers at my basement apartment, tired and cranky. Kaylin has come to be in the crowd. She announces that Alex decided to stay home. "She was really tired." But they all know that there must have been a fight because only spite would make someone miss out on being in a movie. Alex enjoys to torment by forcing our secrets into the open.

It doesn't matter though. This day will bring enough drama that she will soon be forgotten.

I haven't been back to Havex since shortly after Dad's funeral. You could say that I've avoided it, but this is the first excuse there's been to go back. Everyone is talkative as we head out in the Travel Wagon, excited by our work today. I am too, and am focused on that emotion rather than my anxiety at passing so close by old memories I've ignored for a long time—though this would be a good excuse to make Alex feel guilty about not coming today.

I find Jimmy's old house without a problem, taking a route that avoided my own. His parents' basement is a cold utility space, not a comfy recreation room. The floor and walls are cement. A washer and dryer are in one corner, around which storage boxes have been stacked which must usually clutter and spread across the entire floor. In another corner there's a newly constructed, hazardous looking platform made of plywood and cinder blocks, our stage. The basement is dark, has no windows. Water stains, low along the walls, means it probably floods every spring.

Down here with us Jimmy has assembled a cameraman, a sound guy holding a microphone on a pole, five neighborhood teenagers, and a very pretty young woman in a lot of makeup who must be the actress. Frank has brought Kaylin and Randy brought Ms Sinisi, but all told it will be a pathetic crowd scene. We've played for worse.

Jimmy is everywhere, constant motion, loading equipment onto the stage, taking it all down again to get video of us loading, dragging the camera guy around to get different angles. When the band is in place and equipped he circles, brings me down to the front of the stage, moves Frank to my right, lowers cymbals to see Randy better, moves Frank to my left. "Ok, now you guys run through the new song. The sound will suck but lets try it live."

With the sound bouncing off the cement walls our song becomes a pastiche of borrowed notes, few of them resembling anything I wrote. More like a bunch of kids with their first instruments, and the teenagers in the room look just as eager as they should to hear the noise. That take is scrapped. Jimmy pulls out an old boombox and plays our CD through that and we lip-synch. Four times through the song with Jimmy bouncing around with his cameraman in tow. Close-up on me, and then Frank and Randy

playing. Then he steps back and takes us all in, gets the rest of them to stand in front of the stage, cheering on to the record as we move our mouths and arms along, strumming on unplugged guitars and mouthing lyrics. Jimmy perches the camera right behind Kaylin's shoulder. "We can't shoot too wide or it'll look like an empty basement. Get the girls in the shot. A club's only good if it's got girls." All this time my eyes keep landing on the actress standing alone in the back, looking bored through all her makeup. Looking bored, but looking at me sometimes too.

"Ok, that's enough. Let's do the scene now. You guys keep going like you're playing still, we'll catch you in the background. Everyone else, Greg is going to give a signal and that means the song is done and everybody start cheering. Claps and whistles, but nothing too crazy or the sound will pop." Jimmy places his extras around himself and the actress, and we go again banging fruitlessly on our instruments.

"How was that Greg?"

"It looks a little empty honestly."

"That's what I thought. Alright guys, we've got to rearrange this a bit. Robbie, will you guys put down your stuff and come here for a moment." We step off the stage and Jimmy hands us three t-shirts that were sitting on top of a box. "I need you guys to help fill out the crowd scene now. Put on the shirts and stand around like you're watching yourselves play. Not like you're watching yourself, but like you're an audience member. Like you're someone else watching who you really are up there, right. Just get them from the backs. We can't see their faces. Tight shots of Jen and me." The crowd gathers around, facing the stage, surrounding the camera guy who is orbiting Jimmy and Jen, the very pretty actress (what's she hiding under all that makeup?). Dangling above us all is the microphone on the pole, which picks up their dialogue:

Jimmy: Hey.

Jen: Hey.

Jimmy: You like these guys?

Jen: Yeah, they're pretty good.

Jimmy: I saw them at the Pickford a few weeks ago. There were more people there.

Jen: Whatever.

Jimmy: They're from around here.

Jen: I know. I went to school with the singer.

Jimmy: Cool. Look, I'm not going to bullshit you. I think you're, alright. I've seen you around before, but I'm tired of just looking. I want to know you. We should go for a drink sometime.

Jen: Maybe . . . My name's Raven.

Jimmy: I know. I'm Sundance.

Jen: I know you are.

The words start to lose meaning we go through so many takes. They come off a little pretentious but that's a character thing. Or it will be fixed up on film. Editing and whatnot. I say this, like I know. Remember that the music will be playing under it.

When everyone has agreed that all angles have been shot, that there is enough raw footage to assemble something cohesive, the disassembly begins. "We've got to put everything back where it was. I promised my mom," Jimmy says and the strike begins. My stuff is quick to pack and while closing the latches on my guitar case, Jen comes up behind me.

"I really like the song," she says.

"Thanks. You were really good."

"Well, I don't believe that, but thanks. My name's Jen by the way."

"I know you are," I say. She laughs, a confident sound, calling people to ask her what's funny. "Robbie."

"Nice to finally meet you. Jimmy's really excited about the music. Told me the whole story of running into you."

"Yeah, he thinks it's gotta be fate. Hopefully everything works out."

"It's such a process though. We're going back into the city now. Filming is exhausting."

"Have you done a lot of movies?"

"Oh sure. Tons."

"Yeah?"

"Not really. I do theater mostly. It's hard to get into film."

“That’s what I hear.”

“This is pretty low budget but Jimmy’s driven so it should all come together.”

“Sure, it’s gonna be great.”

“You never know these things will end up. I shouldn’t say. I’m sometimes surprised by what people think.”

“That’s a vote of confidence.”

“I said I liked the music.” She laughs again, sure of it.

Jimmy walks over to us after putting down a box labeled “wedding china.”

“Went well, right? It’ll be a nice little scene. Establishes our relationship, introduces the artist behind the music. Good work. You want to ride with me and we can talk about what’s next?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jen says. “It was nice finally meeting you. Robbie.” She winks her left eye at me, a wink that matches the audacity of her laugh, and takes the stairs up out of the basement.

“Nice, huh?” Jimmy asks, watching her leave. “I wouldn’t have cast her on looks alone, but in this business . . .”

“Sure.”

“We’ve been seeing each other.” He rubs his nose. “Casually for now because I don’t want to deal with the awkwardness of directing a girlfriend, who would be playing my girlfriend too, which gets cerebral, man. It’ll get more serious after we wrap, I think. Hard to be certain I’m not just transferring the feelings of our characters. We’ll see. Makes for good chemistry on film though.” I just look at him. My stomach tightens and I force the smallest hint of a smile.

Driving the Travel Wagon, cramped with people and musical instruments, bodies and necks, drum after drum after drum. The first girl I really kissed lived on this road. I used to ride my bike to see her. Up that street are my elementary school and the park where we played baseball on the tennis courts. My high school is down a few more blocks. Trawling slowly along streets, gathering memories that had been left behind. Circling the nucleus of my youth. Weakly pushing myself away. There’s the home of an old babysitter. Getting closer still and still pretending to avoid it. Mentally preparing for

what will only disappoint. Waiting at the stop sign guarding the block then quickly down the street, eyes on the road, past my old house and to the next stop sign. The giggling, flirtatious voices crowded in the van with me don't notice how tense I've become, so I circle around the block again. At the fourth right I remember to breathe and finally drive slowly enough so that I can see the house. It looks different of course. Houses adapt to fit the people living inside of them. The small, grassy front lawn of a bachelor and his son is now flowering. There's a different color to it, but I can't figure out what has been painted. It looks warmer now. That's what I gather as we pass, and no one else in the van notices that they've been down this road before.

Ms Reilly is in her little front yard when I return, a trowel in one hand and a pile of pulled weeds beside her. A small stool keeps her end a few inches off the ground. She's wearing a wide rimmed straw hat to keep away the sun. Something about it feels like the 1950s. Her back is stained with sweat from the effort of pulling the weeds. I stand watching her for a moment before she stops and finally looks up. I can't see her eyes through the shadow of her hat. Perspiration drips from her chin.

"How's the movie going?" she asks. I shrug and lean forward onto my guitar case. Wilson lies close by, gnawing on a rawhide bone, uninterested in anything else. He makes little grunting noises as he chews. Traffic sounds are woven into the atmosphere. Child screams come from around the block.

"Where's . . ." I stop myself from calling him the doorman. It feels like he's always somewhere close.

"I don't know. At home. He was a little upset he lost so quickly last night. Did you have fun?"

"It's not really my game."

"At least you can admit it. Some people waste a lot of money pretending it is."

More children's voices come down the street. Cries that signal warmer weather and longer days.

"Alex gets very aggressive, doesn't she? She'll never be very good if she doesn't learn some patience."

"Well . . ."

“Well I’m not going to say anything.” She pulls a weed out by its stem and then digs out the roots left behind. “I don’t think Desmond had much fun either. He doesn’t like to lose.”

“You’ve scared everyone off.”

“Does it bother you that he’s over so often?” she asks. I pause to think about it. It’s a new direction to our conversation.

“I know that he’s been spending a lot of time over here. Does it bother you?”

“It’s not my place to say,” I reply.

“No, but I’m curious. He likes you.”

“Doesn’t show it well.”

“He ribs you because he knows you can take it. Does it bother you?”

“No, it’s fine. It’s your house. Have him over all the time.”

“I see.”

“No, not like that. I don’t mind if he’s over. Of course not.” A woman pushes an empty stroller on the sidewalk, past the house. A little boy in green overalls runs ahead of her, stops, waiting for her to catch up, then runs off again. Wilson stands watching as they pass, but returns to his bone when they’re gone.

“Is he moving in?”

“Oh god, it’s only been a few weeks. No. But I do like him.” She pictures him, standing over us, laughing, probably.

“Good for you.”

“It’s just that at my age these things tend to move a little faster. Why spend so much time courting if you know you like each other?”

“You want to get married again?”

“I don’t know if that’s necessary. Marriage isn’t all that hot in my experience. But we’ll see. Nothing’s happening tomorrow anyway except you’ll probably see him over here. His place is a dump.” Wilson looks up from his bone and wags his tail. “You know, I’d always wanted to be with a black man,” she continues. “Because of the stories.” She clucks quietly and drops her trowel into the dirt wiping the mud from her gardening gloves. “He smells good too. Different than any other man I’ve been with. Maybe it’s because he likes such spicy food.” She takes off her gloves, dropping them

onto the cement. “Smell is important, Robbie. Make sure you end up with a woman who smells nice. And not her perfume either. Catch her in the morning, before she’s showered. Then you’ll know if she’s a good one.”

Black dicks and smells haunt me now. And Wilson gnawing on a rawhide. I listen for the sounds of the kids playing around the corner, to bring my thoughts back to innocence, but they’ve gone quiet.

“What does Alex smell like?” Ms Reilly asks. I shrug. She wears expensive perfume that she gets from work, a model employee. “Hm. Well that’s enough for today.” Ms Reilly stands and stretches her hands into the air. “Come on, Wilson. Lets go for a walk.”

“You stink,” Alex says later as she lets herself into my place with her key. I’m lying in bed, cradling my guitar, trying to look ever so . . . unconcerned. Like I’ve forgotten we were even arguing. What was that? Who are you again?

“Hmm?” I query.

“Oh, you’re very nonchalant lying there. You’re so cool, but you were supposed to call earlier and convince me to come this morning.”

“Your message was that you were tired.”

“Yes, but you were supposed to convince me to come anyways. I would have come with a little prodding.”

“I had no idea.”

“Well Kaylin told me how boring it was so I’m not upset anymore,” she says. “Besides, it was nice to have the apartment to myself for a while.” She drops onto the end of the bed. “I forgive you also.”

“I don’t need forgiveness.”

“For everything yesterday.”

“Don’t try to—”

“It doesn’t matter, it’s been done. I was angry at first and acted mean but now I’ve gotten over it. Ms Reilly’s really good at poker by the way.”

“Maybe I’m not over it.”

“You’ve got to let things go. I’m done talking about it.” We sit for a moment looking past each other before she says, “Are you hungry? I’m going to make something.” She hops up and walks to the corner that is my kitchen.

This is her apology. Alex turns soft and feminine. She likes to fill my plate with food and when I go back for seconds. She wants us to be close, physically when not intimately, absorbing each other’s presence. Each intake of breath. She wants to talk about our days. Every scene is further input into our hidden selves, deepening the waters of our relationship. She isn’t always dainty. She’ll break wind and giggle, or piss with the door open to continue a conversation. These are moments to breed comfort. She likes being a woman who has a man. She might even like me separate from that. Who I am is less important than where I am. She has deep, rooted ideas of how our relationship should revolve. Each step is coordinated and problems come when there’s resistance to her plan. Her life is a train that only runs when it’s following the tracks that have been laid before it. Derailments and suspensions are not efficient. They ruin schedules and slow the process down with the biggest fear being having to start it all over again. Her train runs one direction, accepting small stops at stations of import like living together and marriage, children and careers. As long as they follow the schedule.

Alex is a young and fabulous city girl, well dressed and trendy. She gets eyed walking down the street. She is too pretty and puts too much effort into looking nice to be eating next to me, but then, I play guitar. I’m untamed, scruffy, a free spirit in need of a good woman to settle me. That’s my appeal if not what I’m looking for. That’s why I attract a woman like Alex, why she bullies me to follow her schedule.

And now: salad and potatoes, foods that Alex must have purchased. My teeth grinding them into ugly masses of lumpy nutrients that are swallowed begrudgingly but hungrily. I’d never eat this well if it weren’t for her.

“And I have to open tomorrow because Carrie promised to take one of my shifts if I would take this one but then she keeps saying that she’s busy every time I ask her to cover one of mine. Its getting to the point where I might bring it up to with Michelle, but then Carrie’ll bitch if the schedule is changed,” she blathers on and on, filling the silence that I refuse to disturb.

I can hear the chewing in my ears. The food and the saliva. My fork scrapes against the plate. Are these pine nuts? When did she get pine nuts?

“Geena’s going to be out all next week because her sister’s getting married, I’m so jealous. Don’t you like weddings?”

I should start eating better or else just get fatter if something happens with Alex. And lift weights before the movie comes out.

“Remember Tina and David’s wedding? Didn’t she look beautiful?”

Are those free-weights still tucked under the bed? I wish it wasn’t so expensive to get a gym membership. That’s what I should really do. Get in shape before the movie comes out.

“Everyone’s picking up one of her shifts. Maybe we should go on a trip. Somewhere warm where we could sit out on a beach all day. We’ve never been on a vacation together.”

If there’s a premiere party I could get something cool to wear. This could be a chance to update my look. Should I get a stylist? Alex will tell me what looks good.

“Are you listening? You’re being very quiet.”

“I’m eating.”

“So am I. Whatever. I’m going to have to open twice next week, and you know I hate that. People don’t buy designer clothes at 9am. We’ll have to go to bed early so I can get up.”

The sex is quick, expected as part of getting past the fight, romantic, not dirty. She’s too secure in our relationship to put in much effort. We lie side by side afterward, not touching. Alex is asleep quickly, snoring lightly, and I wait a few minutes to make sure she is soundly out. I watch her lying next to me, on her stomach, her head turned towards me, her face smushed into the pillow. I lean over to study her. She looks like a child with the blanket pulled up to her chin. Slowly, I lift the sheet and fold down the corner, exposing her naked back. I bring my nose down between her shoulder blades, hover above her skin close enough to see her little translucent hairs, and smell. A deep inhalation. Sensory receptors shoot to my brain: her flowery perfume, still fragrant at the end of the day. Sniff again, still perfume. I move over her body. Under her arms, her antiperspirant. By her neck the perfume again. Her face smells like the scented

cleansing wipes she uses. Her breath like mint toothpaste. Her hair has the sweet, robust, artificial odor of coconut shampoo. Nothing real. Pull the sheet back further and I get the rotten medley of coitus, the only natural scent on her. Everything else comes from a laboratory.

My head falls back to rest on pillows. Ms Reilly's recent tenure of solitude would seem to disqualify her as an expert on the neurological connections between the olfactory sense and human attachment. It could be some new age crap she heard. But if this really were some secret truth, what does it mean if I can't smell her? Nothing is inherently off. And I like her perfume. We have similar tastes.

Could she be hiding something underneath all these scents? Brimstone? Maybe Alex is aware of this smell/love connection, and all these layers are for me, to hide the evil stank of pretty girl, so I won't question her motives and will let her keep the spare key.

What does it matter anyway? The sights and the sounds, of course, mean more. A soft touch. A little bit of taste.

I can see Ms Reilly lying in her bed with the Doorman running his nose over her crevices and folds of skin. I shiver. Alex turns her head away and moans. I turn out the light.

Staring into the night, the emptiness of dark, my senses leave me. I'm all alone, suspended in a field of the obscure. Who knows what the future holds.

Last night I dreamt I was home again. You always call it home. Dad was there. We were in my old bedroom, the way it looked when I was twelve. Posters of bands and athletes covered the walls, comic books on the shelves, and probably a dirty magazine between the mattresses. Dad was telling me about a new car that he'd bought. A nice one. He used to talk a lot about cars.

"Don't be afraid to drive fast," he said. "That's all there is. Feel the world whipping past you."

"Ok, Dad."

"It's red. A red convertible. You know what that means?"

"Yes."

“Women love expensive cars, Robbie. Do you know what that means?”

I shake my head.

“I have a new friend, Robbie, and I want you to meet her.”

“Ok.”

The actress walked into the room. She was wearing a long, backless red dress. Her face was covered in the same caking of makeup from before.

“Hello Robert,” she cooed.

“Robbie, this is your mother. Do you know how to make love?”

“No,” I lied. I do know how. Why couldn’t I tell him that?

Jen climbed onto the bed, on all fours, and Dad moved in behind her. They began to writhe, on top of my sheets like that, in the swirling, ghostly colors of dreams. Their bodies pressed tightly together to become one and then wrenched apart as if searching for air. Jen screamed in pleasure, loud bursts of joy.

“You see how it’s done, Robbie? Do you see?”

“Yes, Dad.”

He thrust her into another gear and they accelerated into a frenzy. Faster.

“Do you see me Robbie?” Jen turned, her face still and clear amidst the action of their bodies.

“Yes.” I stood right next to them. Looked down at them on the bed. I stared into her face, through all the makeup, farther and farther into her. I could almost see who she was underneath. Just a little deeper.

“You can see how I do it, can’t you?” When I looked up it was Jimmy on top of her now. “This is how I’ll do it.”

“Get off of her!” I screamed. I grabbed at him and continued yelling, cursing him. He was hurting her. I threw him off the bed and he ran out, escaped through a maze of shadow outside the door. I never left the room, but watched him go with the all-seeing eye of the creator.

“Robbie, you saved me.” I finally turned back and it was my mother’s face, the one in the picture I have, before she left, a teenager, smiling and innocent. I held you, pulled you into me with arms passionate and desperate. Scared that if I let go you’d leave again. I became the one being cradled. “Here I am, Robbie.” A dream I’ve had before,

common in children who have suffered abandonment. “You’ve saved me, Robbie, and I’ll never leave you. You saved me.” Being held by the absent parent. “I love you, Robbie.” Reassurances that you were loved. “Your mother’s right here.” Craving that lost attention.

It went on from there, we might have gone shopping for clothes, but the rest is not important now.

Do you have this kind of dream a lot? Yes, but forget the obvious mother issues that will plague me for the rest of my life. Driving past yesterday was the first time I had seen my old house in years. That was my bedroom from the time I was little until I went to college. It was Dad’s room when he was a boy too. It looked the way it did when I was twelve or thirteen. Adolescent. Though the room didn’t change much through the years, the posters on the wall changed to illustrate my evolving personality. When I was younger it was athletes, the Jets, Mets and Nets (I liked that they rhymed), because little boys have to like sports. As I aged my fantasies of standing at the center of sold out stadiums began featuring me on lead vocals and guitar. Eric Clapton and the Violent Femmes. Jimi Hendrix kneeling before his flaming guitar. The men on my walls had gone from having defined musculature and divine athleticism to being thin and reedy, scraggy and unkempt, hawking a raw, sexual energy. Though in my memory it was a sudden transition to music, a whitewashing over my juvenile self, it must have been a slower process, where these two selves coexisted. This dream seems to have caught me in this in-between, as if two images of the room had been juxtaposed over each other. The innocence against the fear of understanding. Then there’s Dad. I’ve heard that some people panic when they can’t visualize the face of the one they’ve lost, but that’s never been my problem. What’s hard are the times I forget that it’s a dream. No, waking up, that’s the hard part. Dad often shows up in dreams; it might only be in reference or as an unseen character in the narrative, but it’s always nice to remember him and good that he still comes to me. This time we talked about cars. We did that when he was alive. It was attached to his need for women and the things that attract them. He was forced into boring, practical, Japanese autos because of me. Before I came and made extravagance impossible, his child had been a red, 1965 Chevrolet Corvair Corsa. I’ve never developed his love of cars. Their function is utility; my van is necessary to carry my

equipment to shows, but I listened to him talk about his Corvair convertible. His son and his car. Son. Car. Corvair. The backless red dress.

There are two confessions in this elucidation. One should be obvious. The other is that I have experienced the framework of this dream before, though it hasn't been for years. "Robbie, this is how you fuck a woman." My dad dated. Looking back it feels like an endless parade of women, and there were probably more who didn't make it into our house, but with the number coming through he couldn't have been too picky. It was an odd transition as I aged and grew more aware of what was happening behind his closed door, what he was doing with them and why he needed so many. Sometimes I spied on them from the landing, sometimes she was gone before I woke, and sometimes we would have a nice family dinner that my dad would cook and the three of us would sit around the table and discuss the day. What a family were we then: a son, his father, and the understudy mother. Did he use me in his act of the sensitive single dad on those nights? These women brought to witness the love that kept this poor man and his poor son together through all that had befallen them. Come hungry for dinner and a show, ladies. Stick around for the late performance. You won't be disappointed.

It was these days, with Daddy's new Mommy at the table, when the light dawned on their hijinks, when curiosity and inexperience throbbed at the spectacle of a pretty woman's face, that my nights involved his imagined instruction. "Take her like this." My dad was open about his love of women and more women and little was not discussed between us but anything remains in the abstract until it is experienced. I had the principles, could pass a written test, but did not yet know the intricacies of being left alone with them. And the unknown is a little scary. "Kiss her right there." Asleep at night, in the alternate landscapes of dreams, taking attentive notes so as not to miss some minute detail that could possibly multiply the pleasure given and received. He was a reassuring presence. "Turn her hips like this." They weren't quite erotic, watching my dad like that, more like the instructional videos watched in health classes, only more engrossing due to the interactive possibilities. One night, perhaps a weekend morning when I could sleep in and follow through with the story, my father turned to me and said, "Now you do it." I climbed on top of the woman lying on the bed. I don't remember her face, probably whoever had been at dinner with us that night, asking polite questions

about my day, classes at school, movies and video games. And now she was placed under me, lying limp because I wasn't ready to imagine what the woman should do. Maybe she moaned my name. My nocturnal pleasure rose. And there was my dad watching, judging me. "Touch her, Robbie. Go slow until you're ready." O, the anxiety. The pressure to perform, to impress him. I wanted to do exactly what he said. And the dream and my inexperience made anything possible. "Lift her above the bed. Float with her in the air." Music played. The woman, grateful to be a part of our father and son moment, cheered me on toward climax, "You do it so well." The passion swelled with triumphal music, horns blaring and bows sliding faster across strings. "That's my boy." Muscles tensed and a final splash of cymbals.

I awoke alone and messy that morning, that's why I can remember this one. It was quick and intense, embarrassing but still exciting because it was new and a part of growing older. "You're becoming a man." I am a man now. I struggle sometimes but . . .

My second, more obvious confession: I want Jen.

Chapter 11

Since I'm working on a movie, my ambitions have grown. I'm at the Meadowlands now, make them cross the river to see me, the capacity crowd, chanting my name, holding up lighters, wearing t-shirts showing my face smirking back at me. Eighty thousand people who own every album, have the posters on their walls, who read books and write blogs about me. I am the soundtrack to their lives. They dance to me. They screw to me. They love me, want me, need me. I can see them all. Hear their desire as they wail my name, crying themselves hoarse but too caught in the moment to notice. They're there, waiting for me.

Just another moment. Let me keep it one more moment.

When I finish my set at Crosstown Bar there's a smattering of drunken applause from the regular crowd. I pack up my gear and toss it by a table, then head to the bar for my reward. No one looks at me as I wait for Ronda, in tattooed glory, to finish another order and make her way to me. At some point this will get silly. I'll be too big for these

dives that can't get people in the door no matter what they're selling. Lennon would starve in here. They need to enjoy me while they can, because I am on the fast train now. Soak it in people. I am not made for caverns like this.

Ronda finishes and sighs before she comes up to me. "The usual?"

"You know my usual?" I ask. "That's a sign of affection." She begins to fill a pitcher. "At some point we'll have to stop these games, you know. I won't be in dumps like this forever. Now is your time to hop on the train of Robbie Holmes as an early devotee. I'm going places, over the hills and far away. You can be my bodyguard."

"What do you really think you're accomplishing here? You think pissing people off is the way to get someone to give a shit?"

"Maybe. My ways are mysterious. But I think you like the attention."

"Knock it off or I'll toss you out of here."

"Ah, if that's what it took for you to shove me around."

There's a hint of a smile, I swear, that she swallows before it can erupt across her face. "Drink your pitcher and get out," she says and turns to her next order.

I drink alone at my table, too proud to mingle at the bar. I must look intimidating, sitting by myself. I know artists have reputations that can make us look erratic and difficult to the common man. The emotional burden of the creative mind. There is no need to fear us though. It takes only a little study to learn how best to sate our egos and then the artist can be anyone's friend. Come sit at my feet and learn from me. Buy me a drink and I will unveil the secrets of the artistic soul. Trust in me, for the benefit of all. I am fun to have at parties.

There are no takers, and no one from my coterie has made the trek—there are only so many times I can drag them into a cesspit like this. Sometimes as a musician you have to make journeys on your own, into inhospitable territory. Like training in the Danger Room. This is one of those nights, which I accept because I've written the soundtrack to a movie, and what the fuck have these losers done? If they're in here, nothing. They've never written the soundtrack to a fucking movie, that's right. Not too much longer now for me. But these *misérables*, they'll be drinking here every night until their bodies grow too sad and quit on them. This is the pinnacle of their lives, but I've got a galaxy of happy days ahead of me. Joy convinces me to feel sorry for them all.

The Beatles in Hamburg. The echo hits me from the bottom of my glass.

“Ronda!” I hold up the empty pitcher from my seat.

“You’re done. Get lost.”

I grab my gear and head past Ronda, toward the exit. “The door will be unlocked, dear. Remember, it’s your turn to wear the harness.”

There’s a man cradling a hand-rolled cigarette outside in the mist. With a familiar accented voice he nods his head and says, “Liked your set, mate.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Not much of a crowd in there.”

“Naw, nothing to send home about. I know what it’s like to play for a lot like them. Not the most fun you’ll have.”

“You a musician?” I ask.

“Somewhat. You write your own stuff?”

“Mostly. I usually play with a couple other guys.”

“I see.” He takes a slow drag from his cigarette.

“You?”

Through exhaled smoke, “Not much anymore. Used to sit up like you with my guitar for crowds worse than this, but couldn’t stand it anymore. I like writing songs more than performing them.”

“Holland, Dozier, Holland.”

“Something like that.” He takes a final puff before tossing the butt into the street. “I’ll have to record them all one day before I die. Anyways, cheers.” He goes back into the bar and I make my way home through the mist.

Chapter 12

Monday has come and left me with time to think too much about things, like women and impending stardom. I haven’t heard from my temp agency since bailing on the job at the Bull. They get huffy when you quit a job and won’t offer another until you’ve repented, but the real reason anyone temps is so they don’t have to commit themselves full time to corporate bureaucracy (the man). I need to be able to drop everything if a chance to go out on tour comes up. Once I quit a job for a gig in Richmond. Seven-hour drive for an hour set at a bar that had just reopened after clearing

out their rat infestation. They were trying to lure back customers with live music. I was not enough of a draw.

My days are free until the temp agency calls, but there's a good chance a record company will wave a fat signing bonus under my nose before that. I try to be productive, spending hours with Anya, but my mind is elsewhere, too excited about the future to write. So I lie in bed, guitar next to me like spent love waiting to be held again, and think about the movie, watching myself on the big screen. The concert scene is where the action takes off, the start of their relationship, implanting my music on the subconscious of the audience as the impetus to life and love. They'll want me to provide the same for them. Clamoring for more, a sequel, maybe more like a companion piece, it could be the story of the band, our lives leading up to that concert, somewhat fictionalized, but true emotions. Why don't musicians make movies anymore like The Beatles did? This could start some big revival movement, a magical mystery tour of band films.

After two days and wells of good ideas I call Jimmy, tell him I'm interested in watching them film another scene, artist connecting to artist, a student of the creative process. He tells me what and where they'll be tomorrow. I pick the last one that Jen is filming, since it would be good to hear more from her on our project. *An innocent exchange of ideas?* "Yeah, stop by. More eyes and ears. You can tell me what you think about the scene musically. There should be a song swelling at the end of it. Plus we're done filming on Friday 'cause my cameraman has a paying gig, so you're getting toward your last chance if you want to watch." He says where in the city they'll be, Brooklyn, near Williamsburg. I say I'll be there.

Discussions with Jimmy about future projects can be tabeled for now, to let him focus on what's at hand. What I can worry about in the meantime are the possibilities of Jen. Find out what exists between her and Jimmy. Curiosity, fueled by the tingling, bitter sensations that have been more frequent whenever Alex is around. Jen seems . . . hot. That's enough for me right now.

It's embarrassing how many shirts I try on, but eventually I'm out the door a day later heading into the city to meet up with the crew. Just a perfect day in the city. Warm before it's gotten sweltering, the sky is mostly clear but there are enormous, cottony white clouds slowly migrating overhead. Clouds that angels live on in Sunday school

pictures. It seems as if no one works on days like this there are so many people lining the streets, crowding into parks, happy to be a part of the life of the great city. People smile in weather this inviting and cheer me on in my endeavor. Whatever happens it's good to have a reason to leave my apartment and get caught up in the beauty and sunshine of people and tall buildings. The adventure is the thing.

The L train brings me into Brooklyn. I walk out of the earth and take in the borough. It really doesn't feel so different from Jersey City, mirrored on the opposite side of Manhattan. Where Manhattan is tall and lean and flashy, Brooklyn is stylishly unkempt and has more room to spread itself out. There are secrets in the outer boroughs; they're more personal, and have more space to keep things hidden. When I find Jimmy and his posse they are standing in front of a small grocery/deli with a short green awning. The sound guy and cameraman are back, talking to Jimmy. Jen is leaning against the window of the deli, looking bored and still wearing too much makeup. No matter. There's also a new guy standing slightly apart from the rest, holding a digital camcorder.

"Robbie," Jimmy says when I wander up to the group, "good to see you. How're you doing? Alright man, give me a second here to get set up." He huddles again with his crew. I make eye contact with Jen. We smile at each other like two cool people should but I keep away for now. Build the suspense. That's drama. I turn back and the camcorder guy is filming me. I give him a look and he turns his camera back on Jimmy.

"Ok, let's do this. Places everyone," Jimmy finally says and the group shuffles into their spots. "Move up a little Greg. There. Wide shot first. To the right an inch Jen. Perfect. Are you filming all this?" The camcorder guy nods. "Awesome. Everybody ready. Let's be quick now. Scene 24 take 1. Action."

There is a noticeable energy shift as they begin. A hum like flipping the switch on a tube amp. The focus is drawn into the scene. A small crowd has gathered across the street to watch.

Jen: Sundance. What's going on?

Jimmy: I have to talk to you.

Jen: Why did you call—

Jimmy: Raven, I know that you said you don't believe in the machinations of society's ideal that we find our storybook romance, that there is a one and only for every one. I know you don't believe in love and I'm not exactly sure what I believe. But I know that I think about you all the time. If I'm painting or out drinking with friends, you're always there, like I can't focus on anything else, and I figured the only thing to do was tell you about it. I think I love you, though I'm not even sure what that means.

Jen: You're right. Sundance, I don't believe in what is defined as love. Human beings are instinctual and it's silly to think there's only one other person in all the spectacle of all this world that can truly make me happy.

Jimmy: I know but I had to—

Jen: (putting her finger to his lips) What I believe is that you have to follow your desires. And what I desire is you. Only you. Forever. If some people call it love, that's their right. But I desire you.

Jimmy: Baby, I desire you too.

And then they kiss in the middle of a tangible field of passion. Jimmy looks like he is ready to start taking clothes off right there. My cheeks are flushed. Someone from the crowd across the street hollers, "Hit that shit." There's laughter and my face grows hotter but still their lips fight to swallow the other's. The camcorder guy is taking in the entire production getting the kiss, the camera and sound guys, the crowd watching, and me sweating all on video. It just goes on, agonizingly, and I made myself come here. What was I thinking? It has gone beyond acting. Jimmy is not this good. No one could be. Why aren't they stopping? And just as the length of their lip smacking slugfest begins to edge into ridiculousness there is a tinkling of bells as a big man in an apron steps out of the deli. "I told you to stop taking pictures in front of my store. Get out of here before I call police." For a moment everyone is frozen, confused by the interruption. The crew is focused on Jimmy who has removed his lips from Jen's though they still embrace. He turns to the camcorder guy, "You filming?" The camcorder nods. "Everybody ready?" he asks and then screams "Cops!" The whole group, camera and sound, Jimmy and Jen, take off running down the street with the camcorder guy following them, still shooting. I stand, dumbfounded, watching them recede up the sidewalk. I turn back to the shop

owner and we share a puzzled moment as spectators to an oddity. Then with nothing else to do, I take off running after them.

After a few blocks I come upon the group ducked around the corner of a building, breathing heavily. The sound guy has dropped his microphone and is heaving into a trashcan, the camcorder focused on him.

“That was great,” Jimmy pants. “You got us all running? Great. Good job everyone. You ok Soup?” The sound guy waves, his head hidden in the bin. “Catch your breath and I’ll go scout a new location.” Jimmy walks off, talking to the camcorder, which follows him.

Jen checks herself in a compact mirror, touching up her powder. The camera guy peeks his head into the trashcan to see what Soup has deposited in there and Soup wipes his mouth with his sleeve.

“What was that?” I ask, since no one offers an explanation.

“We were pretending to run from the cops for the DVD extras,” Jen says, closing the compact and putting it back into her pocket. “Since there’s no budget for this we don’t have a permit to shoot in the city, technically we’re not allowed to be filming, so Jimmy wants to play up the guerilla aspect of it by getting shots of us running from the cops for a ‘making of’ documentary.”

“You guys have been chased by the cops?”

“No, but we’ve pretended to run from them a few times. I don’t really think the police would chase us. We’re much too small. It’s all part of this epic idea of his. He thinks he’s making Citizen Kane, you know.”

I shrug, unsure if she thinks that’s a good thing. Jimmy has the quirks of a creative mind.

Eventually Jimmy calls for us to follow him down the blocks until we come to a storefront similar to the one we have run from. The process of filming begins again and soon Jimmy and Jen are back, “I desire you,” in the throws of passion. Arms entangled, mouths locked. And locked. They finish filming the scene and Jimmy says, “Now focus close on me,” and they do it over. Again they kiss, and here I’m standing watching them now for a third time. When they finish, the camera focuses close on Jen. “Robbie, some song should kick in here. Something triumphal.” And the kiss resumes. Then twice

more, and I'm wondering if I could just leave. No one's going to turn away from their spectacle to notice me.

Did I really think that Jen would have answers? A crush was all it was, fueled by anger at Alex's behavior. She hasn't been excited enough by the movie, and wow, I can hear the saliva swimming back and forth through their mouths. What really needs to be addressed is Alex. With everything falling into place with the band, maybe it's time to put all my energy there and take a step back from her. Regain my freedom, enjoy the benefits of my success. They're still kissing? Alex has been there for me though. She's been loyal and deserves some recognition for that. Supported the band. *What will you do?* I don't know. What do you think?

"That was good," Jimmy says. "Let's go once more, see if we get something new out of it."

"Haven't we done this enough?" Jen asks, her eyes defiant. It's a question that dares him to say no, one of conviction and annoyance. The tenderness is gone. She doesn't want to kiss him again! She's an actress. None of it was real! God, I want her even more now.

"Yeah, that's enough. We've got to make up some time. Jen you're done for the day. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know when I'll need you." Jimmy gives her a long hug. "You did really great today."

I, of course, decline the offer to continue along with the group. One scene is enough, thanks. We wave them off and then Jen and I are standing on the street corner alone in the expanse of Brooklyn. The stream of so many lives, eyes forward, racing through traffic patterns makes us feel small there, and looking for closeness. Strength in numbers.

"Well," she says.

"Exactly." We sound like the dialogue in the film.

"We sound like the film," she says. "Where are you headed?"

"Not sure. I'm done for the day."

"Yeah? I haven't eaten anything all day. Want to tag along and get some food?"

There are moments where you can see the consequences of your actions rippling through

your life, closing and opening doors. Going out to eat instead of finishing the leftovers at home.

Or is it fair to put that much pressure on food? Everyone has to eat out sometimes, doesn't mean you shut down your kitchen.

“What did you have in mind?”

She tells me about herself and her family, and from her mouth everything sounds interesting.

“I grew up in Maryland. Have you ever seen the Chesapeake? It's so beautiful, but who wants to live in Baltimore or D.C. There's nothing to do. I had to move away from there.”

“My sister Lisa is still at home and Sam goes to UMBC. I don't see them much now, but we're all close.”

“I studied theatre in school, and then it's like, what else can you do. So, here I am, being swallowed up by New York, trying to fit the stereotype. I even wait tables when work is slow.”

We are the only two diners in a small Japanese restaurant downtown where you pick up your order from the counter. A place she picked out, a little out of our way but the extra effort means she's enjoying the company. We sit on plastic chairs at a plastic tabletop. We use chopsticks. Our discussion is lively, with chuckles and flirtatious touches on the arm, with no emptiness, continuous discourse. We ask questions of one another, tell light anecdotes and smile. I tell her I'm an only child and she asks if that's made me egomaniacal. I say you can't pinpoint one reason. That's the kind of talk it is. It's a lot of fun and Jen is sharp and sarcastic, funny and pretty, a young woman struggling to be an actress, living in NYC, one of thousands doing exactly the same, but with that something extra. She's sitting across the table from me.

When we finish eating we remain seated at our table, too involved in each other to leave, another great sign. Subtly I maneuver the conversation to more illuminating topics.

“It's fascinating watching the process. I didn't know anything about shooting a movie before all this.”

“So far you’ve watched yourself onstage, pretended to run from the cops, and then watched us make out for an hour. That was the insight you were hoping for, right?”

“Well, I got to see the benefits of starring in your own movie.”

She smiles. “It’s a lot of hard work.”

“You two looked like you were enjoying yourselves.”

“That? That was acting. Believe me, it’s work.” She’s stopped smiling and looks irritated. The front window is littered with pasted flyers announcing apartments for rent and guitar lessons. The fading afternoon light filters through and explodes against her back. There it is again, the strength she maintains.

“It’s just that I heard you and Jimmy were spending time together outside of filming.”

“No,” she says bluntly. “Who said that?”

“It’s not important.”

“Fucking Jimmy. I knew he was up to something.”

“Don’t blame the guy for having a crush.”

“He keeps taking me out to dinner.”

“Thus the confusion.”

“You try to build a connection with the guy you’re pretending to fall in love with, it makes it more believable for the film. It’s work and a free meal.”

“Don’t be mad at him. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

She stares at me. Her eyes are slippery. I can’t quite hold onto them. “What are you doing here then?” she asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe I’m not so great at reading people’s motives. Did Jimmy ask you to talk to me?”

I have to laugh. “No,” I tell her, “I just enjoy eating tuna rolls with a pretty girl and you’re the only one in here. I can go if you’re done with me.”

She scowls at me before giving in to my charm. “Alright, you can stay, because you called me pretty, which is bold and means I’ll have to keep an eye on you.” She looks down at the empty sushi trays on the table in between us. “Lets get out of here. They only like you to loiter for so long. Maybe . . . oh God, do I still have all this make-

up on?” She picks up her bag and starts rummaging through. “I totally forgot. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t notice how ridiculous I look?”

“No, I wasn’t sure you did.”

She slaps my arm, smiling. “I’ve got my eye on you,” she says and then takes her bag with her into the restroom. I’m on fire now. Running cool and smooth, turning tricks. I throw away our trash and try to catch my reflection in an unmarked corner of the window. This is fun, relaxed, all the excitement of a first date without the pressure of being on one, because we are just two people having a flirtatious afternoon, an early dinner, which is a casual meal.

The pursuit, it energizes my whole frame, washes me in adrenaline, collects in my fingertips and I run it through my hair. I feel like a reformed junkie who has found the queen of the damned again after so much time clean and helpless. She is welcoming me into her swimming embrace.

I gaze out at the window again, this time past my reflection and into the animated view of the city outside. The sight offered is a fragment of the monstrous growth that reaches in all directions, up higher than buildings can rise and beneath even the most subterranean train tunnels. The pulsing cement of life, the cancerous filth that threatens to drown us all, the city’s inhabitants one fluid mass, generating the power to carry on creation. But it’s too easy to lose the common language that opens this union to more than just an abstract spirituality. Finding a friend, discovering the common soul that brings us all into the metropolis is necessary to carry on here. We need each other, you see. I want to explain it to the Japanese guys behind the counter.

She comes out from the back finally. Her face is raw from having been scrubbed clean of the makeup. “I hate having all that on,” she says. “Usually I remember to take it off right away, but you must have distracted me. People probably thought you were eating with a hooker. Who brings a hooker out for sushi?” Without the mask of cake on there is a patchwork of light freckles falling from the bridge of her nose and evaporating on her cheeks. A few even swim on her ears. Overall it gives her a rougher texture, a slight air of tomboyishness. The harder edge in her personality is now a physical trait as

well. She's adorable but not vulnerable. She should never wear that much make-up again.

"I was afraid you were hiding something underneath all of that."

"It's for the film," she says. "Otherwise I'd get washed out. My face would become a ball of light floating through the movie. There'd be no emotion."

What a lovely simplicity she offers to life. She's confident without being conceited, which must help when you doggedly audition for professional approval. She carries herself well.

We begin the walk across town. Jen needs to catch the E train into Queens to meet up with friends, and I make my excuses to walk her there. No one's in a hurry, so we stroll and continue telling stories about ourselves, suggesting the interesting, witty people we really are. She tells me about bad plays she's been in and embarrassing moments she's had on stage, like when a set piece fell down on stage that an actor was quick-changing behind. I tell her about gigs I've played with no one in the crowd to hear me, and about stealing sips of vodka from Jimmy's parents' liquor cabinet as a teenager. I avoid talking about my family; it's too heavy to get into this soon. Emotional baggage comes later.

When we hit Broadway she makes us detour up to Madison Square Park. She says she likes to stop by the dog enclosure whenever close by, so we stand outside the wrought iron fence watching the dogs inside tumble over one another in their attempts to nose each others' backsides. The smell of piss stagnates around us.

"I love dogs," Jen says, smiling at the bunch.

"You better if you're going to put up with this stench," I say and kick the gravel underneath our feet.

"Look at that one with the tennis ball. Look how happy he is just to chew on a ball. Don't make that gross."

"Ok."

"It's all about simple pleasures. They're so in tune with their own joy. We had Lucy when I was growing up, a brown mutt. She looked kind of like that one over there. Same color but longer fur. She had the best life—a family that loved and fed her, a yard

to play in. That's all she needed. What a great dog." She sighs and watches the one that looks like her Lucy. "Well, take what you will from that about me. How about you?"

"Dogs? They're fine. I didn't have one growing up so I missed that whole childhood connection, but they're alright."

"That's vague. Now I don't know what to think. Are you playing it cool?"

"No," I say. "Can't I be somewhat indifferent to dogs?"

"You can, but it's boring. People are much more interesting when they take a stand one way or the other. But if that's all you have to offer . . ." We stare out at the animals. Benches line the far side of the enclosure and a small dog runs along the seats, barking at the bigger dogs as they romp. An owner tosses a tennis ball for a pack to chase and scramble after. What is most interesting to me is the playfulness of their actions, an honest enjoyment of their surroundings and open friendliness to anyone else willing to have fun. These are not games of emotion here. They're like children at a playground. If I tried hard enough their barks might turn into the shouts of kids at play and then I might be able to see them as more than just animals, and maybe I'd feel more than indifference. But I don't try.

We stare at the happy celebration jubilee that is dogs at play (probably all strangers to one another). I ask, "Did I just ruin this by not showing more interest? Did you figure out what a schlub I am?"

"I'm not picking up schlub. Are you a schlub?"

"Just a little. Normal amount."

"I can't fault you for being the normal amount of anything, though you do risk coming across as middle of the road. A normal schlub, indifferent to dogs. You've got to be careful of becoming a bore."

"Boring's not good? I was going for straight laced and uninspiring."

"No, boring's bad."

"Oh, well then next time I'll wear a funny hat. That's good, right?"

"It's a start."

She finally gives up on the dogs, but not on me, and I walk her to her subway stop. For a few minutes we keep talking as we stand on the street corner, neither of us really wanting the moment to end, but soon we hit a natural conclusion, where to keep the

discussion going would be forcing it and we're just too cool for that. Goodbye, she says. So long, I say.

She starts down the stairs. "Can I call you sometime?" I ask before she reaches the bottom. How did you ask a girl out before there were phones?

She turns to look up at me, shading the sun from her eyes. "You can, but only if you come to the wrap party on Saturday."

"What's that?"

"Filming has wrapped so we get drunk together. It's this Saturday at some bar downtown. Get the info from Jimmy and if you show up I'll give you my number there. I have to make you work for it." Then she turns and disappears into the earth, waving over her shoulder, off to catch a train.

The sun is sinking behind the buildings but the sky is still lit and hazy, the best you can hope for on a New York evening. The weather is nice and I have too much excited energy to go sit in my apartment. I decide to a walk, let my happiness infect others in the city.

Chapter 13

After my night with Megan Marie Matarazzo, all those years ago, a desire to strut arose within me; nothing makes a boy more instantaneously feel like a man than losing his virginity. There was no physical change I could detect, nothing obvious in the bathroom mirror that shouted my conquest. But this was news that must be shared. I didn't shower, savored the smell of latex and loin sweat, put on torn jeans and a flannel shirt, clothes that rock stars wore, and walked around town hoping to run into friends, see if they'd heard anything, if a glowing Megan had already been around to inform. I wanted bird plumage to shake in front of people as they passed, tail feathers to dance with. I wanted a flag to wave or a horn to coax resonate bass notes from. My shoulders swayed in exaggerated rhythm with each step and thud of my heavy Doc Martins on the sidewalks. I nodded to strangers as if we were conspirators about to blow the dam and flood everything. But no one in that Sunday crowd was able to put the pieces together. They carried on solemnly, mechanically ignorant of my joy, my success, maturation, and

my desire to share every detail of it. Faced with their failure I left, went home, unwilling to give up my strut.

Dad was smoking a cigarette in the kitchen. “Did you enjoy your birthday?” he asked. I brought him his Gibson and we sang Springsteen songs. His voice had become rougher over the years, a smoker’s limited vocal range. We scratched through “Atlantic City” and “Brilliant Disguise.” We got to “Growin’ Up” and I smiled, knowing it would come up eventually, thinking it a poetic segue. When the song ended I got two beers out of the refrigerator and put them on the table.

“What are you up to?” he asked.

I had planned to come right out and say it, brag for him, make him proud. But I got nervous, thought that it might not sound as mature as it needed to. Maybe the moment should be more serious.

“Was Mom your first?”

He was taken aback by the question and looked at me, calculating my motive.

“What have you heard?”

“Nothing. It might be helpful to know though.”

He shrugged. “Then yes.”

“I thought so, anyway.”

“Was the only one for a while. Shit-filled diapers and not sleeping tends to kill your desire.” He took out and lit another cigarette. He smoked more as I got older. Where the parents of friends were always trying to quit or had stopped long ago, Dad embraced it as an act of personal rebellion and eternal youth. He had always smoked and as I got closer to the age of moving out he looked toward the oncoming solitary life that he had never had by intensifying the habit. I’d be off to college next year and he would still be a young man. “You were a little cock blocker.”

“Sorry about that.”

He smiled and strummed the guitar, repeating G and E minor chords.

“What was she like?”

“You know everything by now, don’t you?”

“Not really.”

He kept going back and forth on those two chords, brightness and melancholy, brightness and melancholy.

“Is there someone in your class you like?”

“Yeah.”

“A girl.”

“Ok.”

“You like her, she’s nice, cute, you make her laugh?”

“Yeah.”

“But would you trust her, if it was something really important? Do you really know her?”

I squeezed the bottle cap into my palm, lifted it off and traced the impression left with my finger. I thought I knew Megan, knew her well enough to want to be with her, sleep with her again.

“It’s odd for me to think about her now. She’s still a teenager in there. She was your age. I look at you and I just don’t know.” He took one last drag then stubbed out his cigarette. “And here I thought we were just singing a few songs. What made you think of your mother?”

“It’s not her,” I said. “Just talking.”

“Ah. Well you’re smarter and better looking than me, so I probably can’t tell you anything new, but there’s a lot of fun to be had in this world if you’re smart about it. Lots of places to go and women to meet. So don’t feel tied down. Enjoy yourself.”

“I am.”

“Now will you play a couple more songs or have you finished with me?”

He leaned over and clinked the necks of our beer bottles. It was the first time he let me drink with him. The acquired taste for beer wasn’t there yet, but I enjoyed myself. We were just two guys hanging out. I picked up my guitar and we started playing “The River” but he stopped after the second verse.

“You’re using those rubbers, right?”

It is a long week leading up to the party. The temp agency sends a few day jobs my way, working reception a couple days, creating Power Point presentations another, filler work, just to make some cash. I also do a serviceable job of avoiding Alex. Mostly I say we're busy working on the film, mixing songs with Jimmy. The possibility of Jen has stolen my focus, and it would be too much to swallow that in front of Alex. Maybe hints from this avoidance will begin to leak into her brain and she'll grow tired of my childishness and if we do split up it will be on mutual terms.

Thursday night Ms Reilly knocks on the downstairs door. She stands in the doorway, sheepishly at first. "I have a favor to ask," she says. "You can say no if you want, I don't want to put you out." She's going away for a week and would really, really appreciate it if I'd to watch Wilson while she's gone. "I'll be back next Sunday. He just needs to be fed and taken for a walk twice a day. I'll knock off half your rent for the month." It's too good a deal to reject and I would have done it for her anyway.

"Phew, thank you." She relaxes. "I didn't know what to do if you said no."

"Where are you going?"

"The Triton Group Poker Tournament in Atlantic City. Twenty-five thousand dollar cash prize to the winner. I haven't done a big tourney in a while and it's our first trip together on top of that. I'm excited." Just like that she's going away. To Atlantic City. With him.

"You and . . ."

"Desmond's going to be my cheerleader. Oh, don't tell him I called him that." Her throaty laugh is oddly similar to his.

"Was this his idea?"

"You know it's been too long since I went down. There's always an excuse to be made. Desmond's never been though so he got excited about the idea."

I bet he did. "Your first trip together is big, isn't it?"

"It is what it is," she says. "He's the one who found the tourney. He's covering part of my entry fee, said he's putting his money on me." She blushes and sucks in her cheeks.

There's some angle here. Maybe he's got plans of running off with her money if she wins. He could force her to give it to him. I won't be there if she needs me. "Just be careful, ok."

"Don't you worry about that. Come up and I'll show you where his leash is."

It's good for Ms Reilly to go off and play in her tournament. She deserves to get out of the house and have fun. But if he's there, if she's gambling, bringing money with her, we don't know what he might do. "It's AC," I warn. Don't trust anyone down there." She smiles, but doesn't catch my meaning.

But having Ms Reilly out of the house this week will be good. Between Jen and Alex this could pan out to be a complicated few days. If I'm lucky.

The party comes, finally, on a drizzly Saturday night. Don't misunderstand, it's not an unwelcome rain. There is no foreboding intention behind it. It's a light rain that presses you to quicken your pace to duck into dank bars and consume, consume and be merry in the dark warmth.

I show up late, hoping to create dramatic suspense for this actress. The bar is crowded, mostly with hip kids who have nothing to do with the film. This isn't a party so much as the bar chosen for our crowd to gather at, and we make up a rather small bundle of the patronage. Jimmy is in one grouping, talking to a couple of guys who turn out to be some of the other actors in the film. I say hello and end up branching into a conversation with the sound guy, Soup (like Campbell's, he says). We talk about the music and sound in the movie, him from a technical standpoint, me from the creative side. He asks about the recording sessions and I give him as much info as I can on the equipment, what microphones and amps, the machines the kid used to capture our sound. Soup seems familiar with everything I mention, or else he's bragging about what he does know, and offers suggestions for mic and speaker upgrades. It's a conversation that would be interesting any other time, but there's too much else on my mind at present to talk shop. Jen's dark hair is black in the low light, in waves that kiss at her shoulders, only a few feet from me as she talks to three girls who must be the other actresses. She has her back to us and I can't be sure if she's seen me yet, no matter how many glances I throw at her. The situation now is how to get the two of us alone to talk. I can't just set

myself in on her circle, got to be cooler than that. But I also can't let her see me waiting around for her to finish with them, can't convey desperation. When I get this excited about a girl it can, for a passing moment, regress me emotionally back to a teenager who has just become aroused by these desires and is uncertain how to act on them. It feels like we have three cliques dominating our corner of the bar, the popular actress-girls are over there, the popular actor-boys are there, and that leaves me in, what, the AV club gang talking about microphones, microphones!, when there are women in the world to be wooed.

Soup is still going on about sound equipment and I haven't paid attention to know where it has taken him, so I excuse myself to get another drink and plan my next move. A mob is fighting for the bartender's attention and all I can do is wait to squeeze in for my turn. How do I pull Jen away to flirt with? What do I get to drink? While lost in thought an elbow digs into my ribs. I turn, ready with an angry glare and there she is, smiling because she's gotten to me first, and it's so perfect it should be a scene in a movie, as we're celebrating having filmed a movie. It all wraps so nicely up within itself it's almost too much to take.

"Hey there," Jen says. Bodies press us closely together in the crowd for the bar.

"I was going to say hi but didn't want to interrupt."

"And you were having sound conversations with Soup?"

"He knows his stuff."

"It's what he does."

She looks amazing. Whatever pretty girls wear to look sexy and cool out at the bar, that's her. Her look transcends changing styles. She's wearing whatever I can imagine her wearing. She fits any fantasy.

I buy us drinks and we spend the rest of the night as one unit. People come and go from us but we always fall back into each other when we're alone. The talk is always seamless and fluid because we're still learning about each other and have our full range of life stories to choose from. She tells one and it reminds me of one of mine which reminds her of another. Told close because it's loud in here. A few large glasses of beer fall into my mouth and she sips on small, squat glasses of whiskey and ice, a grandfatherly drink she is proud of liking and flaunts. Jimmy passes us every time he

goes to the bathroom but acts as if he doesn't see. At one point he approaches, coming back to the bar, rubbing his nose, flushed with drink and the heat from the crowd. He's buzzing and won't make eye contact with Jen. He asks where the rest of the band is and I realize that I never mentioned this revelry to them. In my head I was Jen's special invite and didn't consider telling Frank or Randy, though they would have just gotten in the way, so please excuse them and their busy, busy lives. I get nervous and expect Jimmy to mention Alex, to hint toward my faithlessness, but then has he even heard of her? Instead he pulls me aside so Jen can't hear and points out a girl, another actress in the film, that seems to be more enamored with his role as writer, director, producer, and star. Do you think she's pretty, he asks, because I think she's pretty. I wanna drink something off her tits. Of course she's pretty, I assuage his doubts. Alcohol and dim lights make everyone pretty, that's why we gather in places like this to drink, I think but do not say. That seems to be all the encouragement he needs. When he falls, the true fighter is quick to rise and begin anew. Jimmy says nothing about Alex, nothing about why I am in a corner spending time with Jen, but pats me on the back and follows his new prey into the crowd at the bar.

"Did you have to tell him off?" I ask Jen when we're alone again.

"I made it clear that nothing would happen between us." I smile at the thought of it and she catches me. "I told him I was too talented to sleep with him." She laughs as she says it and almost spills her whisky.

"Fascinating. What about me?" Coyly winking with my words.

"Chicks love musicians. We'll see how much I drink."

A glow emanates from our corner that little by little swallows everyone in the bar, kissing them with the excitement generated from passion and flirtation until each one, on their own, pauses at some point to appreciate the freedom with which they are able to live their lives. An urge is developed, simultaneously amongst the patrons, to embrace those around them. The bartender purposefully forgets to charge a man for his drink, and that man, grateful for his fortune, buys a round for a woman he's been afraid to talk to. Toasts are made, glasses clink, lovers embrace forgetting the strangers around them. Old friends and flames will be drunk dialed tonight, memories rehashed and connections

reestablished, because what is important in life is the people you can connect with and hold onto.

The noise in the bar grows as people are less able to hold on to the joy that has sprouted from their core and so let it escape through their throats. Jen and I are still together, still talking and drinking. Drinking and staring into each other souls, past the pretensions of hipster attitude, man, and we genuinely connect with one another, not like when people say, oh, we have a connection, but like when you finally meet someone who appreciates the complexities of your life and can follow the treads you've worn into the earth.

Our treads have filled with overflow from the bar, become a pool that we have waded into—oh my god, I know—and without broadcasting it, but not hiding either, we submerge ourselves and swim out into the night arm in arm, more to keep our heads above water than anything else. The lights of the city reflect in our pool and project dizzying swirls of life off the surfaces toward 6th Avenue. The city doesn't sleep, it revels with us in our celebration. Couples swim past, smiling, knowing we are headed toward the same haven. Noisy carousers sail down the streets or bob outside of bars smoking cigarettes, gauging wind speed and water temperature. Jen has never ridden a PATH train, and this is a night to gorge on intrigue, so we turn down blocks until our pool cascades underground, down into warm stagnant air and a subter-hic-ranean homesick station. What had been the last drops of our night swim clinging to my skin become droplets of sweat pulled down my back. We sit shoulder to shoulder, on the filth blackened floor, leaning against the filth blackened wall. We talk in voices too loud, uncaring of the people around us, or unaware of the space we consume. They forgive us because of our inebriation and joy. We are young, in heat, and envied.

Time has reached a spotty hour. The long wait for the late-night train vanishes and suddenly we're standing close on a half-full train car, our mouths pushed together. Her spit on my lips. Someone is staring at us. Then we are walking toward my apartment, I am pulling on her arm, can't get home fast enough. If we slow down I'll remember Alex. No rest, time moves forward, tempo, like music, avant-garde rhythms woven through electromagnetic amplifiers, the speakers hidden in the trees or in the walls or implanted into everyone's ears so that we can all live in synch. Footsteps in cadence

and our melodies harmonize until the song carries loud and passionate music into the apartment, so loud we'll wake them upstairs. I can't remember to keep quiet. We've embraced and fallen to the bed, conjoining until it's not clear whose end is whose. Noises and body parts are given to the communal being. Come along for the ride. Is someone scratching above us? Everything's fuzzy. There's no fear of consequence. All is love. Taste her whiskey. Taste the salt from our swim and the heat and swallow it all down, believe this is ecstasy. The world leans absurdly off in one direction and I tighten my grip on her so that we won't fall into the abyss. I will protect her and she will protect me from the velocity of the earth, which is greater the farther out you go. The gravity of the sun is slingshotting us across the solar system. Time is moving so quickly that it'll soon lose all meaning and only the blurred space around us will exist and even that will become natural and fade from consciousness. When one of us moans the sound carries us into the sky, through cloud levels and upwards as waves into the ionosphere. We oscillate at sacred rhythms known at the creation of the universe and are broadcast to the world as proof of hope and love and happiness toward mankind. People everywhere smile.

We come back down exhausted, and sleep.

Pain wakes me with a slow understanding that something is trapped inside my head, chipping away at my skull, clawing its way out. I roll over to see if Alex can help, but it's not Alex lying next to me. Who is this? The thing in my head barks a longing, hungry yelp. Wake up, it says, feed me. With each agonizing pulse of blood through my body the beast comes closer to bursting out from my forehead. Scratch, pound, bark. The stranger shifts in my bed and moans. I sit up and the movement produces a fresh wave of pain and nausea but also brings focus. This dizzying mass of confusion separates and forms individual parts. The scratching is at the back door. My brain is still throbbing but I forgot to feed Wilson last night so I groggily get out of bed and put on last night's clothes. Not-Alex rolls over and becomes Jen; everything's clear now. I'd smile if there wasn't so much hurt.

"Is that a dog?" she asks.

"Wilson. I have to feed him."

“I love dogs,” she says and closes her eyes again.

Wilson is right behind the door as I open it. “Sorry, guy.” He pushes past me up the stairs to his place. I give him an extra half scoop of kibble as an apology and sit at the kitchen table rubbing my temples while he devours.

“You’re looking a bit rough,” Jen says when she walks into the room. She pulls a chair out next to me. Wilson is quick finishing his food then sits in front of her, instinctively knowing that she is the better one to play to.

“This is Wilson, is it? Are you a good boy?” she coos while scratching his head. The old mutt and is glad to accept the attention. “I thought you didn’t care much for dogs. Was he just playing it cool, Wilson? Was he?” Maybe dogs only respond to questions.

“He belongs to my landlady. I’m watching him for the week while she’s at a poker tournament.”

“That’s impressive. Did she win you in a poker game? Huh?” Wilson wags his tail in response. “And you don’t feel anything for this sweet boy?” she asks me.

“Wilson’s alright. I’m looking after him for the week. That should earn me something.”

“I don’t know. Wilson, is he good to you? Is he?” She continues scratching his head until he flops onto his back and then she rubs his belly. The sun is just rising over the skyline outside the back windows of the kitchen. The day is warm. The floor tiles are cool on our bare feet. Everything is quiet save for the contented grunts and snorts coming out of the dog. My head throbs but the rest of the world is so peaceful that it’s worth it. There’s a glimpse here of the attainable joys of the American dream: to have land and a home and family. These are the things that people sacrifice for, trade in freedom and move away from the city.

“Are you hungry?” I ask. “There’s a diner we could walk to.”

“No thanks. I’ve got to get back. And not like as an excuse, but I have an audition later I have to prepare for. I had fun though.”

“Good. Me too.” We sit and have a moment of shared relief that we both came off well. All our effort and good behavior was appreciated. “Give me a second and we’ll walk you to the train.”

It's lovely outside. More than that, it's happy. Sometimes the world can reflect my mood, a gift I have. Sunday morning, and it's early enough that most people are still sleeping off their Saturday night. Our walk to the station is leisurely. Wilson sniffs as much as he can and goes to the bathroom on the sidewalk, and even picking up his shit with a plastic bag cannot ruin this stroll through the streets of Jersey City, which is the nucleus at the center of the world.

When we reach the PATH station I'm not sad that she's going, because I know that this is where this scene ends and that more are coming. Leave while we're still high off of each other's scents.

"Let me give you my number," I offer, but I don't have a pen.

"Here." She hands me a postcard with her name and a va-va-voom picture of her on it. "My number's on the back. It's like an actor business card. Don't think I'm weird for carrying around my headshot." She kisses my cheek and walks down into the belly of the earth to catch a train. She doesn't look back; it's dramatic and very effective.

So what about Alex? Here's the thing about last night, I was pretty hammered and, honestly, can't really remember sleeping with Jen. I know we had sex, but it's like knowing I had a birthday party when I turned five, there are few details in there. I woke up hungover but happy that Jen was lying next to me, so we must have enjoyed ourselves; well, she obviously did. We were hammered, so do I get a pass? Have strayed but can still quietly return? Everyone makes mistakes after too much to drink, and I have no details to hide. I am no villain. The decision is still there for me to make.

The next week is long. There's been no time to book shows since all this movie ado began, and there's no temp work to be had. Most of the days are spent playing Anya, but my mind is too distracted to write. I tool around on the strings, doing fingering exercises, soloing, and searching for a new song to cover at shows. The emptiness of my little apartment gets to me sometimes so I entice Wilson to stay down in my place with little bone shaped cookies. When my hands need a break I read, watch TV, and spend a lot of time thinking about Jen. Even if that night with her is a blur, she still haunts me more than any guilt.

Alex stays over Wednesday night. The pressure of emotional uncertainties has strained our relationship for the past couple weeks, but she comes over happy, trying to plow through any tension that remains. She kisses me and says, “I feel like we haven’t seen each other in forever.” Then she kisses me again, an invitation to undress and touch her. In a moment we are tearing at each other, aroused by the immediate elevation into passion. The sheets on the bed haven’t been changed from the weekend, and we make love rolling in the sweat of the other woman. I keep quiet to avoid saying her name. Instead I suck on Alex’s body, her neck and shoulders, running down to her chest. I moan and match my pleasure with hers, and when I burst, it’s into possibilities of uncomplicated infidelities. Lying in bed afterwards, with Alex softly running her nails along my torso, she says that she loves me. But what does it mean? Seriously this time, what do I do with these words? They’re supposed to carry weight, but they sit above us, light and airy, and Alex and I watch them hang there, unaware of what the next step will be. With nowhere to settle, her words grow nervous and begin circling the bed, maybe they can touch down over here, or over here. Finding no room, they are ready to give up and dissipate into empty space when Alex tries again. “I said, ‘I love you.’” There they are again perched over us, waiting, expectant. “Love you too,” I say, and when she sighs and brings her head to my naked chest I begin to understand. It’s call and response, see. The motto of the staid. Words cried, stating your presence, here in a bed, in a city, out of the billions, I’m asking you to be my partner because otherwise we’d be lonely. All it is a fight against loneliness. A selfish need for company, because if we’re bored we might as well be it together. Love is not a thing. Lust and desire are things. Need is a thing. Love is a nothing—an instinctual fear of being alone. We compromise heart-rending amounts of soul to abate the fear. And here I’m in my own home, bullied into panicking too because it is tiring being alone. But it’s my choice to make. To live on the other side of the river. Being told when to love does not satiate the fear. It brings on waves of new panic because my love collaboration doesn’t calm me. *So what are you looking for?*

I pull myself from under her and we both turn onto our sides, back to back, spent and trusting that the other is too tired to go anywhere tonight as well.

“Hello.”

“Robbie? Hi it’s Wendy. How’s everything going?”

“Ms Reilly. Everything’s fine. How’s AC?”

“We’re having so much fun. We’ve spent the morning in the casino and now Desmond is taking a nap. I think I’ve worn him out.”

“I’m not sleeping, I’m resting,” he says muffled in the background.

“Of course, sweetie.”

“Tell Jim Morrison to rock and roll.”

“Desmond says hello.”

“I heard.”

“Has Wilson been good?” she asks.

We are sitting on the floor together in her living room because there’s more light through the windows and she has a bigger TV. “He’s been great,” I say looking at him and scratching his head, which rests in my lap. His ears perked when he heard his name through the phone.

“He hasn’t been any trouble?”

“None at all.”

“Oh good. Then I have a bigger favor to ask. How would you feel watching him for another week?”

“What’s going on? Is everything OK?”

“We’re fine, but you remember that tourney I entered?”

“Yeah.”

“I won it,” she says.

“Oh my god, you did?”

“Yes. Hooray me. But next week there’s a bigger one, and since I won the last one, the casino has invited me to play.”

“You won the poker tournament? All that money?”

“It was a bit, yes. But this one’s a much bigger pot.”

“How much?”

“I’m nervous to say. Half-a-mil.”

I’m stunned. “You could win five hundred thousand dollars?”

“I could, but this will be much more difficult. Money brings out the best players. I haven’t played with big guns for a while so it would mean a lot to get in there.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Yes, I think it will be. But you’d have to watch Wilson for another week.” His ears perk up again.

“Of course. This is huge. Don’t worry about us. Wilson’s my buddy.” His tail thumps on the floor like he’s following our conversation.

“Oh, you’re a dear. Thanks so much, Robbie. And this will cover your rent for the month, so don’t worry about that.”

“Take your time then.”

“In that case, no, just kidding. Well you have the number at the hotel if you need to call for anything. And tell Wilson I miss him.”

“Will do. Good luck next week.”

We hang up and then it’s just Wilson and me again. He rolls his eyes up to me from my lap. “Just us for another week. You don’t mind do you?” His tail thumps the floor again. “She’s off with the doorman. He’s a lot bigger than us, isn’t he? You and me will have to keep an eye on him. Make sure he’s not after those winnings.” He sighs through his nose and closes his eyes. “Yeah, it does sound like they’re having fun.” I scratch his head and sigh myself, because I don’t have a job and am sitting on the floor, watching television in my landlady’s house. “Thanks for keeping me company, Wilson.”

Chapter 15

Because it has been a while with no steady work, I take the first long-term job the temp agency offers, which leads me, Monday morning, to a skyscraper owned by a large publishing conglomerate in the heart of Times Square. Walking down Broadway toward 42nd Street around 9AM is like trying to fight your way through the other maggots to get to the rotting flesh below you, except that the carcass is neon and sponsored by Coca-Cola. The sidewalks are heavy with people too busy to be anything but self-aware and cars attack each intersection ready to race off if only the asshole in front of them would get out of the way. There are also the tourists who just have to get a picture of that

billboard advertisement, and just how many stories is that building? No foolin'? They swarm to this area, because it's all so bright and loud, and because there is money here, enough for a magazine publisher to build a skyscraper to house its many periodicals, and for one such periodical, a monthly gourmet cooking magazine, to employ a temp to wash dishes in their test kitchen.

Because it's New York, and because this is the age that we live in, it takes about an hour to go through building security, prove my low threat level, and get clearance to come in five days a week, all before I've even seen where it is I'll be working. The whole process seems designed to take up time more than prove my worthiness and since I'm paid by the hour that's fine by me.

When I'm finally shown into the test kitchen it's after ten. The receptionist points to a young woman reading a magazine, sitting on a table along the wall in an alcove off to the side, and leaves without introducing us. Ahead of me is a large room with eight kitchen nooks, two rows of four, which look like they were plucked from a home design catalog. Each has stainless steel appliances, high cabinets and granite counters. Each is bigger than my kitchen, which does not imply much, bigger than most metropolitan apartments' kitchens. Each nook has an arsenal of utensils bunched on the counters and each sink is empty, with a sponge and bottle of dish soap nearby. A battalion of kitchens ready for inspection, Captain.

The woman sitting on the table is watching me over the edge of her magazine. "The new guy, eh?" she asks, her face half hidden. She could be about my age, maybe a few years younger, and has wild curly hair loosely tied back. "How long are you here for?"

"Open ended for now."

"Yeah, so you'll be around. Good. I don't want to waste my time if you're only in for the day. What do you do then?"

"I think I'm supposed to be washing dishes."

"God, yes. But what do you do for real? Are you a dishwasher?"

"I'm a musician."

"A creative type, hmm?" She closes the magazine with authority. Her face is even younger than I guessed, with an aquiline nose and weak chin. Her lips are painted

an ironic bright red. “I’m a performance artist. I’ve also done some acting and mime work but really I like to create my own material.” She pops off the table and shakes my hand with confidence. She has on an apron over a t-shirt and jeans. I’m over-dressed in my standard temp attire. “Waz yer name, kiddo?” She affects some kind of character.

“Robbie. You?”

“Tiara.”

Pause. “Like the headgear?”

“Like the crown, yes.”

“Were your parents hippies or something?”

“That’s rude.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“I shall forgive you this one. If you really want to know and aren’t just being malicious, I am descended from Serbian nobility. My parents never wanted me to forget our royal history.”

“Really?”

“What kind of music do you play, Robert?” she asks, but before I can say rock and roll, or comment on her attitude, the chefs enter and the workday begins. Here’s how it breaks down: The chefs make food, everyone tries it (even lowly dishwashers) and comments, the head chef separates what is right for the magazine, Tiara and I wash the dirty dishes, and we start all over again. At 4PM the cooks leave and Tiara and I clean up. There are even some leftover plums I’m allowed to bring home. The day was more than a tolerable way to a paycheck. It was a delight. Tiara is a nutter but tomorrow she’s going to show me some of her performance pieces, so at least she’s entertaining. It might become tedious at some point, but for now I’ve never had a better time doing a job that garners no respect. It was laid back, requiring an enjoyably low level of thought with enough movement and interaction to stave off the boredom. The freneticism of a restaurant is absent, which leaves these test kitchens genial. Here are the songs that play through my head throughout the day: “Rocks Off,” “Are You Experienced,” “A-Punk,” “Phosphorescent,” “Swordfishtrombone,” “Coffee & TV,” “In Between Days,” “Candy’s Room,” and “Now Baby, the Sun’s Down.” I began writing a song as well, using the food as inspiration and creating rhythms with the pans and scrub brush.

You took the Cacciatore out
And placed it on the bottom shelf
Grilled Shrimp Satay, Split Pea Puree
Dark Chocolate Tart all by myself
Quiche Lorraine, mama
Quiche Lorraine

It's just an exercise, relax. Much better on the soul than sitting in a cubicle. More than that, it's a light on a world of possible temp jobs that toss out the cubicle entirely. It refreshes my view of the nine-to-five, but no one else is as impressed. Alex first laughs when I tell her about washing dishes, but when she realizes it's not a joke she tries to hide her shame, but not too hard, so I imply it's just for a few days. When I mention the job at band rehearsal later, Frank laughs and throws his water bottle at me, and after dinner at a burger place Randy tells me to throw his trash away for him. At least from the guys it's in fun. Out of Alex is honest disgust, which steels my resolve to enjoy this job. And while I can understand the trepidation at telling people her boyfriend is a dishwasher, we haven't fully emerged from our rough patch, and excuses to bother her are welcomed.

Highlights from my first week as a dishwasher: the spinach soufflé, the breaded goat cheese and shaved pork salad, and Tiara's Peggy-Anne, teen beauty queen. Almost as much fun as tasting gourmet food all day is Tiara's line of characters from her performance art pieces that she lets emerge while working. She adopts new personalities throughout the day, washing dishes in one kitchen as a chatty hairdresser and in another as a Blacksploitation film heroine. The chefs treat her as the company pet and I think it's great to witness someone's creative process at work. Peggy-Anne is a commentary on ideals of beauty and the effects of forcing young girls into sexualized pony shows; I like the funny voice she uses. Choka Brotha, her Blacksploitation character, not only tackles race issues but also deals with how the powerful feminine ideal has been MANipulated into a male fantasy; she makes some interesting points, but could be taken as a bit racist out of context. There are others (I don't know if the hairdresser is a comment on

anything) that make for a workplace teeming with ridiculous characters without the clutter of human bodies. She has qualities that remind me of Jen at times, not physically, she's too out there to be sexually appealing, but they do share a few personality traits, quirks that I attribute to being an actor or performer. There are stereotypes that go with being a musician, and ones that go with being an actor, aspects of character needed to do what we do. They share some of those, though Tiara is far more extreme across the board. With both there is the sense that even when being themselves they are presenting a character and there is part of the story hidden from you. With Jen it adds an enticing hint of mystery. Tiara appears to be holding the crazy off. Both will look intensely at you during a conversation. Jen has deep, provocative eyes, and her lips curl into a smirk when we talk, like she already knows what I'm going to say. And at the bar that night she would turn and press her cheek to mine when telling me secrets about the film or just asking if I wanted another drink. Tiara, again, just looks crazy, but watching from a comfortable distance she comes off as a one-woman freak show, perfect for speeding along the day. It's like being paid to go to dinner and a show, and it's enough to keep me coming back no matter what anyone else says.

The phone rings. Come in to Hoboken, she says. Let's go out to dinner, my treat, she says. Alex is trying to be sweet, but I don't want to see her. She'll get mad if my job comes up. I'll get mad if she avoids it. Things have been off between us since the card game and I've fought the desire to let it go because I'm sensitive and she was mean. Now we bounce between pleasantries and bitterness. That sounds fantastic, I say because I don't want to give her any ammunition. She chooses a bar and grill place, for me. She doesn't like greasy food, but I love beer and a burger. Another nice gesture. She's vicious.

She's sitting at a table with a soda water when I arrive. "Hi, baby," she lights up. "Thanks for coming. We don't usually hang out around here. I thought it would be nice."

I nod and order a beer. There are TVs everywhere showing various sporting events, a couple baseball games, a poker match. The wall décor is all faux antiques, stuff like old sleds, tennis rackets, and street signs. Kitschy. The whole place feels phony,

like it belongs at a shopping mall. It's a sham, which makes it a perfect atmosphere for our relationship right now. Maybe I'll order a fucking Bloomin' Onion.

"How was your day?"

"Fine," I say.

"Did you have a job?"

She's baiting me. "Yeah. I'm really enjoying the kitchen. Tasty food. People are nice. All I have to do is wash some dishes. It's great. How was your day?" Swat it away.

"Oh, you're still washing dishes? Uh . . . my day was great, actually. First, I had a really big sale to these, like, middle-aged twin sisters. One of them must have just gotten divorced 'cause she bought all these low-cut tops and sexy dresses. Like, a whole new wardrobe, really. And then the sister got herself a few things. Oh, and then I totally talked the first one into buying this cute leather jacket that's really expensive. She was buying so much stuff, and then I bet Charlene that I could get her to buy the jacket too. And she did." She holds up her glass. "Cheers." We clink to her success, or to my failures.

The waiter comes and Alex orders a salad. I order a greaseburger with bacon and french fries, a bowl of fat soup, and lard nuggets to compensate for her salad. And another beer.

"But that wasn't even the best part," she says when the waiter's gone. "I've got good news." Her eyes are bugging, but I keep focus on the televisions behind her.

"Robbie, look at me. I said I have good news."

"Mmm."

"I got a promotion. I'm the new knitwear buyer for the store. I'm going to start working in the corporate office."

"You're what?"

"I'm going to be a buyer. I'll get to go to fashion expos and study trends and stuff like that. And things that I pick out will be sold in the store."

"What the hell's knitwear?"

"Like sweaters and things that are knitted. It could be tops, shawls, stuff like that. Isn't that great?"

“When did you apply for this?”

“Like a month ago almost. I didn’t think I’d get it, but the office called today. I start next week, and it’s more money, nine-to-five, no more trading shifts. And, you know, now I’m working up the ladder.”

“What ladder?”

“Well I want to be in-charge of a buying department one day, for like an Anthropologie type place, somewhere hip. You know that.”

She’s never said those words to me before, never mentioned buying clothes for a living. What a stupid dream to have. Just marry well then. “So you’re going to buy sweaters. That’s great, I guess.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s the first I’m hearing of it, that’s all.”

“You know this is what I want to do and the last time I applied for a promotion you made fun of me, so I wasn’t going to bring it up unless I got it.”

Now I look at her. “That’s a lie. I think it’s great. You should totally buy sweaters. People need to look good when it’s cold and if it pays better than what else could you want.” I finish my beer.

“So,” she says when the silence bursts, “tell me more about your temp job.” I’m pretending to watch one of the baseball games. She knows I don’t follow sports.

“Hmm?” A full-blown argument is looming, the tension ignored over the last few weeks. She wants me to snap first, so I’m to blame. And a serious talk about our feelings and our future will have to follow, and then a schmaltzy, lovey make-up session. It will be unbearable.

“I said, tell me more about your job.”

“Yeah? It’s a lot of fun. There’s this crazy girl there that keeps it interesting. She’s an actress and does all these different characters while we’re working. These accents and says funny things. Totally crazy, in a likable way.”

“So what exactly do you do all day? You just wash dishes?”

Don’t defend it. “Mostly.”

We’re quiet again. I start watching a poker game on a small TV in the corner. It’s bizarre that they televise card games now. I think about Ms Reilly and her

tournament, off with the doorman. Can you get too old to stop your life to run off like that? Alex and I have never gone away, we wouldn't want to. We'd get sick of each other without the breaks. I envy their adventure of new romance. It can be so pleasant before these moments scab over. I stare through the poker game, through the TV, and search for the reason I'm so angry right now. What was it that set us off? Why aren't we over it?

"Are you even going to look at me? I would like to celebrate." I do look at her. I see the year we've spent together along a timeline running between us. At her it starts with immediate passion. The first night, when she approached me, and then still thinking about her a few days later, I had to call. There was so much heat that we never took the time to know each other. Sexual intensity carried us, but now, inevitably that's slowed and it's a loose framework revealed to be keeping us up.

"You're so distant. You know, I'm tired of dealing with you when you act like this."

I only barely hear her, still walking the timeline of our life. They are like stepping stones in a creek, but the jump becomes farther apart between every rock. Brief moments of passion with little substance to support them. She introduced me to her parents once, when they were in the city visiting. We spent a day at the Shore. I gave her a key to my apartment because she told me to.

"I wanted to go out and celebrate. I thought it would be nice for us to spend some time together. But you just sit there like an idiot, not saying anything."

Is that what we have to show for a year together? Don't we need more to be a success?

"You're a jerk."

And now the timeline stops at me and I am calm. There are too many holes in there for my anger to keep. It has fallen through the emptiness and washed over her, leaving me to look honestly at the situation between us. Why are we doing this to ourselves?

The waiter returns to the table with our food. Alex is so huffy that she starts bitching to him about something. I turn back to the poker game on the television in the corner. Someone is holding a pair of eights. The camera cuts to a wider shot and the two

players sit glaring at each other. A man and a woman, their eyes arguing, trying to read the other, gauge the next move. And in their eyes I see our tension, ugly, bitter and manipulative, broadcast on two different pairs of eyes. It's the same, isn't it? We're no different, Alex and I, playing each other, back and forth, no faith, no trust, keeping our cards close.

When the camera closes in on the woman I'm so wrapped in my own storyline that it takes a few seconds to become clear, and it's a dizzying, absurd coincidence, there's just no way, but yes, it's Ms Reilly sitting at the card table with a hefty stack of chips in front of her. That's her tournament on TV. There's A month ago she was alone playing games online, and now she's on TV, playing for all that money, and she has a pair of eights. And it was that new relationship high that moved her out of the living room and down to televised poker tournaments in Atlantic City. That's what put her on TV, and left me watching.

"Ms Reilly is on TV," I say.

"What?"

"She's on TV. Over there in that game."

Alex looks but turns right back. "I don't care. I can't deal with that right now."

"But she's on TV."

"You have a weird infatuation with your landlady. I put up with too much from you already. With your moodiness and laziness, and you can never be grateful. You've become too much to handle."

"I have?"

"Yes, Robbie. You have no motivation, and it drives me crazy."

Wait, this is unexpected. Stay focused. "What are you talking about?"

"You're a bum. I was hoping you'd end up liking one of your stupid temp jobs and get a real job from it, but then you just threw that away."

"I'm not going to work in an office for the rest of my life."

"So, what, you'll wash dishes instead?" It's the way she says, "wash dishes," that—

"I'm a musician. Why isn't that good enough? Because you don't think I'm good enough."

“It’s not even about being good. It’s become your excuse. ‘I’m a musician,’ so you can’t get a real job? And are going to be a pathetic crank until you become a big star? You’re an adult, Robbie. Time to motivate yourself to be one.”

And here’s the fight, but this is not the level of attack I had prepared for. And in a restaurant. People close by are starting to look at us. And there’s Ms Reilly on the TV. It’s unsettling and surreal. I struggle to an avenue of retaliation.

“I’m going to be in a fucking movie in a few weeks. You have no idea what I’m working on.”

“You don’t honestly believe that anyone will see your pathetic little movie.”

“Of course they will.”

“Robbie.”

“What about you? You’re going to buy sweaters? What’s that?”

“It’s called a career, idiot. I am working toward the career I want and it’s because you’re too busy with your own failure to notice anything but yourself that you say stupid things like that.”

“Fuck you, I’m a failure.”

“You are, and you’re too childish to realize it.”

No motivation!?! Jesus Christ, she can be nasty. “You don’t even know how much work I put into being a musician. How many hours I practice and songs I write, and the shitty clubs I play. How many places I turn up hoping it’s the right place this time. Stupid things like that show how ignorant you are. I’m more driven than anyone you’ve ever met.”

The “ignorant” bit hurt her, and I knew it would. This has degraded quickly.

“Well then you’re wasting your life on a hopeless pursuit. You’re an awful musician, and you’ll never make anything of it, and one day you’re going to wake up an old man still pretending he’s twenty-five, and you’ll be the only one who doesn’t realize how pathetic you are.”

A breath to keep myself from going too far off the edge. Put down the fork instinctively grabbed as a weapon. *Relax. Think about this.* My eyes shift because I don’t want to look at her anymore. There’s Ms Reilly, still playing cards, happy, away from here. *Breathe again. Bring back that lost calm. Look at the two of you. What*

happens next? I finally understand what this evening has been. I even give myself another moment to make sure this is right, but there's no doubt. Maybe it's the first certainty we've come to in this relationship. "We need to break up."

"Excuse me?"

It won't be as eloquent as it ought to be. There's a poetic ending in my head if there was more time, but the action is what's important now. "We need to break up. I'm sorry, but it's over."

And what does Alex say? She responds with empty, angry words that she'll be embarrassed to have said one day. And my time is not hers to waste anymore. I stand up, calmly push my chair in and leave, with her screaming, knocking over glasses, my food uneaten, and everyone staring at the scene we've created. I go, without looking back, because this is the end between us, and because I didn't bring enough money to pay for the bill and we shouldn't drag this out any longer than we must.

The air outside the restaurant helps to ease me from the dream-like atmosphere of the last few minutes. Have to keep moving though to avoid Alex if she tries to continue the fight out here. I take a side street and make a roundabout way back to the train station, through the nooks of trendy, downtown Hoboken. Twenty-five years ago, when I was young, Hoboken held as much appeal as Newark has now. Dirty, dangerous, minority filled. But then some white guy must have realized how close it was to Manhattan and luxury condos began popping up, and faux-dive bars replaced the genuine and here we are now. Money began pouring in, investors waiting to be annexed as the sixth borough. Hoboken became nice. Nice shops and restaurants, especially close to the water. There are a couple clubs to play live. They're nice. Nice. Boring. There are too many people here with enough money to keep the real fun out. The same thing is happening to Jersey City. It's a slower process for whatever reason and the blend gives it a much broader appeal. There are places to take a date for a meal, and then there's the Indian pizza place and the two dollar fried chicken take out. There are a few boutique clothing stores, and the mall in Newport would be the pits, except they have a movie theater. And then there's the hipster record shop and the quiet bar where the old guy will buy a round if the house is small enough. There are even a couple places to get up on stage, but you're not going to get a big crowd in JC. That's part of the charm.

And? Yes, I'm avoiding the subject of what might seem to have been a rash decision. It was obviously coming—we were building toward the moment of dissolution, and I haven't hidden my dissatisfaction and waning interest in her. But you think it was too quickly done, that after a year together Alex deserved more explanation, a grand adieu? *It wasn't my decision to make.* Well, it will come; she won't let that be the end. But for now it's what we both need, the quick cut and run, so she understands that it's over and this isn't a grab for attention. Do I look harsh and uncaring now? Have I become unsympathetic? *Of course not.* Maybe it's a selfish move to be so blunt, but this is clearly for the benefit of all parties. Alex has to go, to make room for more interesting characters. Ones that will continue to add to the emotional spectrum of our story, that will give us adventure. Ms Reilly's done it right, took a chance and ended up on TV. That's what I need. This is freedom. Lets go to Atlantic City.

Chapter 16

How did you find out? Freshman year at a big, state school is lunacy and a bit terrifying. You become an alcoholic. I had drunk before, but those were stolen sips or binging on whatever small amount was consecrated at a party. You take what you get, and you don't really like it. It served the purpose of intoxication, but ughhh. High school taste buds aren't acclimatized to the pungency. But in college there are twenty-one-year-olds who'll buy you anything, and you realize there is so much variety, and, oh my, different flavors of beer, and ways to mix drinks so that you don't taste the alcohol. During the weeks, homework and empty pockets keep the peace as best they can. Maybe a joint slips in before reading a chapter on Latin American political history, or a late night showing of a horror movie. But weekends are gleefully idiotic bacchanalia. Innocent college girls willing to try anything. Naïve boys lacking the imagination and experience to take full advantage. It is blissful freedom to celebrate no more curfews or chores. No calling to check in and say when you'll be home. No watchful parental eyes to regulate or tell you to put that down. It's excess, a boon to the maturation of a student body, more so than any class. Learning comes after the party, in the world of adults and bills and real life drama. We need the party. We need the fun.

One Sunday morning in the second half of my freshman year, I woke with a monstrous headache. It tasted like my teeth were rusting away. A trashcan next to my bed had purple chunks of vomit swimming around the bottom of it. What had I been drinking? I found a bottle of water and drank. My roommate, a nice guy named Teddy who I never saw again after that day, was still asleep in his bed across the room, so I lay back, massaged my throbbing head, and tried to recall what had gone on the night before. There was a frat party—I never pledged, but kept friends in a few as connections to goings on. There was a girl that had led me to another party and then off somewhere else after that, a marathon night of celebrations, sampling from kegs and tubs of mixed punch. I had just gotten a flask and was trying to impress people by pulling it out. A toast to inebriation, a few too many, and then the veil drops and there's a distinct end to my memories. I couldn't even say how I ended up in my own bed, but credited my survival instinct.

Resting didn't ease the eruption in my head, so gingerly I rose. Hopefully Teddy had aspirin. I made my way over to his dresser but my balance left me while stepping over a pile of clothes, and I fell into my desk, knocking a textbook onto the floor. A new wave of pain shot through me. "Sorry," I said. "Need some aspirin." Teddy rolled over in bed and sat up quickly, rubbing his eyes.

"Are you ok?" he asked. "I feel a little sick," I mumbled. "What are you going to do?" "I'm gonna go back to sleep." "Are you going home today?" "No, why?" "Because of your dad?"

In the emptiness of the night before, a blanket of sorrow reappeared. "What happened to my dad?" It was a child's quivering voice, when I wasn't supposed to be one anymore.

Teddy was nervous. "The call you got last night. You don't remember?" He didn't want to say it. He'd dealt with me last night and here I was going to make him do it again, because I was a drunk. That's what college kids are though, it wasn't my fault.

He went through it for me. The call came from the hospital around 3AM. They broke the news, but must have guessed I was soused. There was a number to call for the rest of the details. It came back in brief hazy moments as Teddy said what he had gotten out of me last night. As he spoke my mind wandered, revolted maybe, against having to

process so much sadness at once. I'd have to drop the rest of the semester, and wondered if this was excuse enough for the school to let me pass my classes. Everyone would know something bad had happened and I'd become the miserable guy that people avoided at parties. And where would I live next year? Who wants to live with the newly orphaned? And, god, how would I pay for school? Teddy kept talking, but my mind peddled off in different directions. I was terrified. I began to think of my Gram and Poppy Holmes, who had died in a car accident when I was eight. The impact of their death hadn't hit me when it happened. I was still too young to know death then, or maybe too many people had already left at that point to register grief. They gave us everything in their will. We moved into their house because it was only a few miles from ours and in a nicer neighborhood. It was the house Dad had grown up in. They had never changed his room when he moved out. It was where I slept whenever they watched me for a night, when Dad wanted time alone with some date. I moved in with all his old stuff, aware that these were the toys he had played with when he was little like me. They were special because they had been his. The adventure of moving overcame the tragedy. But he was so sad. I would catch Dad crying at night in his new bedroom, his parents' old room, and climb into bed with him and cry too. What hurt was seeing him in such pain. I couldn't miss them the way he did, but I mimicked his pain because that's how we learn to show emotion, and what brought him back from the bleak was knowing he had to be strong for me. Now I had no one to give me comfort and no one to be strong for. Dad was the last. He was the entirety of my family and being sober the impact was immediate. I cried for a long time in our dorm room, unable to hide my fear. Teddy tried to be a comfort, but eventually left me alone, which is what I needed. I cried for Dad, and because I never honestly had for my grandparents. I cried for my mother's cowardice, and because there would never be a brother or sister. I cried for every bad thing that had ever happened, every loss I was left with. When the important ones were done I cried for the trivial things, like being terrible at little league and bad haircuts. I cried until every last tear was out of me, a lifetime's supply into my bed sheets. I flushed them out because I was alone now, and it meant life was only going to be difficult from then on out, and tears did nothing for you. Better to be done with them. It's not fair to

take away every safety net from a kid like that, but there I was, swaddled in my wet sheets, heartbroken and angry and alone. What a vicious shit life can be.

Chapter 17

Didn't make it to Atlantic City. Pulled off when I reached the exit for Havex. Didn't realize until the van was already moving toward the right lane, old habit, having done it so often all those years ago. I sat, through the night, parked across the street from the old house and thought about Dad. At some point I fell asleep and woke sore and needing to pee. If having to go wasn't becoming urgent I would have made an excuse not to do it. Too easy to back out, continue to leave it alone.

The superficial differences noticed from across the street fade away or become insignificant standing at the door. The door is the same. I want to pull the key out of my pocket and let myself in. I ring the bell, not knowing what to expect. It's still early to be a stranger at the door. A man younger than me answers, wearing a bathrobe. A woman pokes her head around from behind him in the living room.

"Sorry to bother you and about the hour. I'm not selling anything. I used to live here and am in town for the morning and was hoping to just have a quick look around. Reminisce, whatnot. Uhh, look back on childhood, those kinds of things. I don't want to get in your way. I know it's early. Sorry about that."

The man looks back at the woman but is smiling when he turns around. "Sure, come in. We were just having coffee."

"That'd be great. Mind if I use the bathroom?"

The furniture in the living room is all different, where everything is placed. A big wrap-around sofa and a nice TV mounted to the wall instead of the built-in cabinet set that hid our Nintendo and VHS cassettes. The color on the walls is wrong too and they have framed posters hung where we had left the family pictures that Gram put up. The way you move through the room is off too. Where I had been able to see my old house standing close outside, it's unrecognizable in here.

They take me to Dad's bedroom, where they sleep now. This is where it had happened. Where the EMTs picked him up and put him in the ambulance. Because of that it feels more like the old place than other rooms, but is still something new. I stand

at the doorway unwilling to step inside. The closet has been expanded into the room; the bed is against the opposite wall and the nightstands on either side match. So do the lamps. The presence of a woman living here. Nothing specific. Maybe how put together it feels.

My old room, Dad's older room, has become an office of sorts with a desk and computer, a bookshelf and love seat, new carpeting. On the walls are neither musicians nor athletes. There's a framed Picasso print and a black and white photo of a couple kissing under the Eiffel Tower. All elements of a little boy's room have been erased, no nicks and bumps and greasy handprints. I am gone. My Dad is gone. We left no mark behind. Except that there's a guitar on a stand in the corner.

"Do you play?" I ask. It's a basic Yamaha, cheap like my first guitar.

"Not as much as I used to," the man says. "Everyone plays a little, don't they?"

My room doesn't exist in here anymore. I wish there was something secret, a hidden panel or a floorboard to remove and I could poke around and there would be a stack of dirty magazines one of us had hidden and left behind. But those were never a part of it. They wouldn't be mine if I found them here.

"This was my room. My bed was over there."

"Yeah? Just the extra room now," the man says. "The futon pulls out, of course, if we have guests. Or if I get in trouble." He winks at the woman.

"It's really nice. A lot nicer than it was."

"Just different, I'm sure," he says. "Houses tend to grow up too."

I sit on the futon, against the wall where my bed was and close my eyes, try to see everything as it was. How it had looked when we first moved in, decorated as it was when Dad slept here, when he moved out just before I was born. Then how I had changed it. What had been mine, the toys and books, the posters and music? What had I brought that was any different?

The man coughs and then whispers something to the woman. "I've got to get ready for work," he finally says aloud. "It was nice meeting you. Take your time." He turns to the woman. "You ok showing him the rest?" The woman smiles and rests against the desk as the man leaves. I realize just how kind they are for indulging me like this.

“When did you move in?” I ask.

“We bought it, what, four years ago. From a couple, but I forget their name. They started having kids and needed more room.”

“You don’t have kids?”

“No.” She looks down into the coffee mug she’s cupping in her hands. “Just a dog sniffing around the back yard.”

“Are you married?”

“Just before we bought the house. We met in college.”

“And you’re both from around here?”

“Not originally. We went to school in New Brunswick, got jobs after we graduated and haven’t been far since.”

“Is it nice? Sorry. I mean marriage, the house, the neighborhood.”

“It’s what you hope for.” She hides in her coffee mug again. Just for a second. “When did you sell?”

“Fifteen years ago. It was my grandparents’ before that.”

“Must be special for you then.” This time I force the smile. “Can I ask what you’re looking for?”

At first I’m afraid she’s angry, but her head is leaning toward her shoulder, curious. She’s still in her pajamas, sweat shorts and a cotton shirt, but she isn’t self-conscious. “I’m not sure. Something to remind me of what it used to be like.” She nods. “I wanted to get away for a while, and thought that this might bring something back that had been forgotten.”

“What?”

“Nothing particular,” I say. “Just hoped there would be something.”

“My parents moved when my little sister left for school. I was already away in college but I remember being so angry at them. It was a betrayal. They were abandoning my childhood. It feels silly now, but I yelled at them when they told me. And I called the new place ‘their house’ instead of ‘home.’ To hurt my mother.”

“It can’t be the same, can it?”

“I still don’t want to think of other people living there. How everything would be different. I couldn’t go in that house again. Wouldn’t want to be in your shoes here.”

My mug is empty but I keep putting it to my mouth like there's something left, delaying the end. I need to go back and feed Wilson. Going to be late for work. Why did I come here?

"What kind of dog do you have?"

"Chocolate lab," she says.

"I like dogs. Can I see it?"

She leads me to the back door, as if I didn't know the way. Outside the dog is lying in the shade of a tree overhanging from a neighbor's yard. The woman opens the door and the dog rises, sniffs my hand and looks at the woman expectantly.

"Don't go too far out there," she says. "We haven't cleaned up after Gracie in a while."

Unlike the landscaping in the front yard the back is just grass, left to give the dog freedom to play. The wood shed that my grandfather built has been replaced with a plastic one, but other than that it's the same empty lawn. In the back right corner there's a slight depression and then the ground rises at a small angle until it reaches the fence. When I was ten I started digging in that spot. An imagined urgency told me it was an important job but I can't remember now what the reason was. Off and on for two or three weeks I went out there with a shovel. Sometimes neighborhood kids would come by with trowels and spades, maybe Jimmy was there at some point. Dad would help remove the big rocks. He made up stories of the earth burping up rocks when it rained too much, and how we might find the secret tunnel that Poppy had built into New York for business trips. At some point I got tired and gave up digging and the hole slowly filled in again over the years.

"That's my fault," I say, pointing to the depression. "I used to play back there.

"Gracie likes to lie out there when the sun is right." The dog wags her tail.

I thank her for letting me look around and get back in the van. I never asked for her name. Now I wish I had. On the highway headed back to Jersey City I pull out my phone and scroll through the contacts, find the number and hit send:

"Hi, Jen? It's Robbie."

"Who—oh, Robbie. Sorry. Hi."

"How's it going?"

“Good, thanks. What’s going on?”

“Uh, you know. Do you feel like getting a drink tonight?”

“Really?”

“I mean, what’ve you been up to, how’re things? We should catch up.”

“It’s been a little while. I didn’t think you were going to call.”

“Yeah? Sorry. I’ve been busy—not an excuse, but I really have. Had a couple shows and then I couldn’t find your number for a while. It’s been hectic.”

“No sweat.”

“I’m not trying to play it cool. It’s not like that.”

“I said, don’t worry about it. It wasn’t a critique, just I didn’t expect you’d call. Why don’t you come by my place after work and we’ll go somewhere around here.”

“Oh yeah? Perfect.”

Chapter 18

Given a made up excuse the test kitchen staff are reassuringly unconcerned with my lateness. Tiara on the other hand wants details on the extent of the mess made by the dog. “He had emptied the garbage and there was chicken tikka masala spread into the living room.” First she questioned me as a TV news reporter. “He must’ve eaten something rotten because there was sick everywhere.” That evolved into the cross examination of a prosecutor. “It was soupy with what looked like wadded up balls of tinfoil.” Then the attention of an over-concerned friend. “I’ll be alright. I just hope the poor boy hasn’t given up on Indian food entirely.” The improvisation was fun, stopped expectations for tonight from dragging out the day. A game between two creative minds, the appeal of acting was clear. Though it lacks the critical import of music it is a way for those without the technical skills of a musician, for example, to exercise the imagination. And Tiara seemed encouraged by my ability to keep up.

To Jen’s uptown, 72nd and Lex, an area and a building much too nice for a young struggling actress. She must be subletting from a friend, or dogsitting, or have eight roommates. She answers the door with her hair tied back, in sweats and a camisole—comfortable (but sexy) clothes. Nothing to wear out for a drink.

“Sorry,” she says. “You wanted to go out, but I’ve got to go over lines for this show opening in a couple weeks.”

“Oh. That’s alright. We’ll do it another night.”

“Well I was going to say, I’ll open a bottle of wine here if you run lines with me.”

Thus commenced our second night together. Another appeal to acting might be that the emotional pandering speeds along the seduction process. Lines were not read for long. The wine was put aside quickly and this time when I woke there was no fog clouding the previous evening’s actions. Jen was still asleep, so I lay there awhile, remembering how wonderful these early moments are with someone new. A new girl is always seen through Vaseline lenses, whitewashed, flawless. Eventually it breaks down and shadows become apparent, tarnishing her glow and devaluing her celebrity. But it’s nice when she’s perfect. I had forgotten how perfect a new woman can seem. Especially Jen. She’s beautiful and smart and, you know, so far perfect. She must smell like something amazing. Just lean in, breathe into her neck, catch a hint of soft musk and flowers from her hair. Something earthy with a hint of Graham crackers maybe. I inhale again, deeply, letting a benign, dopey grin spread across my face, soaking in how good it feels after what could have been a miserable lifetime with someone else. The beautiful scents of a beautiful woman. Suddenly Jen jolts up, cracking her temple into my nose. Twinkling lights.

“Owww. Wha’ the fug.”

“Fuck. Are you alright?” she asks, rubbing her head.

“You hea-budded me.”

“You startled me. Were you smelling my hair?”

“No.”

“Do I stink or something?”

“Fug tha hurd.”

“I’ll brush my teeth.”

“You broug my nose.”

“Let me see.” She grabs my hands away from my face. “You’re not even bleeding.”

“Your head’s a wrecking ball.”

She laughs. “Baby.”

“You surprised me. I wasn’t expecting to get clocked.” I tenderly test out my nostrils to make sure they still work.

“Maybe watch where you stick that thing next time, Cyrano. Why are you up so early?”

“I have to go to work.”

“Oh, the great musician and his day job.”

“Keeps me humble.”

She kisses me on the cheek. “I’m sorry I head-butted you. But lets quit smelling me while I sleep. It’s a little creepy.”

She walks me out and we pick up coffee on our way. The conversation comes much easier than the last morning after we had, any awkwardness smothered by flirtatious banter. There is a lovely relaxed quality to Jen, an ease she has with her place in the world that I want to embrace, let it bleed into me. For all of Alex’s confidence she lacks this self-security. Hers is a fight for position. It’s worn me out. Jen’s the antidote, the reminder why we chase women in the first place, to feel better about ourselves.

During the lunch break at work, where Tiara and I eat the butternut squash pasta with fried sage leaves that has just been photographed for the magazine, Jimmy calls. I have tried him a few times since the wrap party but never got him on the phone. He must be busy editing, that’s what I hope his excuse is and not that he’s angry Jen left with me that night. Sex and good food and now news of our coming success. Good day, sunshine.

“Jimbo!”

“Robbie?”

“Sorry. What’s up?”

“Oh, hi. Listen, there’s an issue with the music.”

What? Please, no. “Is there something you don’t like?”

“It’s not that. Carson needs you back in the studio to rerecord some of the guitar dubs.”

He sounds tired, beat up. “Ok. Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, yeah. No worries. Technical glitch. Easier if you come rerecord instead of him trying to recreate things digitally. Something like that. Just give him a call. Try to see him next weekend. He’ll tell you what he needs.”

“No problem. How’s the editing going?”

“Great, man. Really coming along now. Slow but moving.”

“You know, I had an idea about using the concert scene as a music video for the song. I can post it on our website. More advertising.”

“Sounds great.”

“Can you send me the scene?”

“Uh, yeah. I’ll work on it and send it to you when we’re finished.”

“When can I see it?”

He’s slow to answer. Has the call been dropped? “Not yet. Soon. We’ll have a big premier screening when we’re ready. Invite everyone. There’ll be distributors, names, and we’ll talk about what the future holds for our project. It’s exciting.” He signs off because he’s “tired. Didn’t get much sleep.” Keeping busy.

I don’t know the process of editing a movie, but it sounds like it’s weighing on him. A creative perfectionist, I can relate. Like this, back to the studio. These things come up when you’re a musician. But it could be fun. No worries, good vibrations.

Turning back to my lunch, Tiara is staring at me, purposefully bugging out her eyes as wide as possible. “What was that?” she asks.

“Nothing. Just this thing.”

She chews a piece of squash, the edge of it hanging from her mouth like a little yellow tongue.

“I was asked to write the soundtrack to this film and now they need me back in the studio to record some overdubs. It’s great.”

“What is? The movie or the music?”

“Ah, both. I’ll have to cancel my plans and go back in over the weekend.” The words are a song, rolling out of my mouth. They need me back in the studio, loops through my ears, a playground taunt.

“Sounds good,” she says and finally closes her eyes.

“You know how it is. The director happened to be at one of my shows. He liked us, asked me to write all the music for this film project he was starting. A ‘voice of a generation’ piece. Something like that. You know how it is.”

“Sure, sure,” is all she’ll say. Jealousy breeds inside of her. The bitterness of watching another artist succeed. It kills her. Our food is good, but I can’t stop my mouth to chew.

“We used a few pieces I already had, you know, since they spoke to the audience the film’s going for. But I wrote five or six new songs as well. Specifically for the film. Went into the studio a few weeks ago. Now I need to go back and record some more overdubs. Not a problem. Nice big place out in Jersey.”

“Yeah.”

She doesn’t understand the triumph of creative success. She’s just a kid with silly dreams that she’ll do a one-woman show some day with all her characters. I might be laying it on too thick for her to grasp.

“There will be a premiere at some point, when the piece is edited. I’ll let you know. You’ll probably like it, you’re an actor, right?”

She shoves more pasta in her before speaking again. “Hey, did I ever tell you that I’m friends with a scout for a big record label?” she asks. Out of nowhere.

“You are?” I try to sound nonchalant, but it’s like telling a junkie your cousin runs a meth lab.

“He was my brother’s roommate in college. Now he works for, I forget, one of the big guys.

“That’s probably a fun job.”

“I should have said something before. I mean I haven’t heard your music yet, but if you’re as good as you say you are . . .”

“Hey, I didn’t know you wanted to hear it. You want to hear us? We’re both artists. Hold on.” I open my wallet, always prepared, and pull out two business cards with our website on there. “Go there. You can listen to the new songs we recorded and some older stuff. And if you want, give one to your friend, too.”

“Sure. I’ll pass it on.”

“I could grab you a couple passes to the movie premier too. Bring your friend along.”

Butterflies and rainbows. Happy songs. Sometimes things hit, boom boom boom, so fast you have to wait until it’s all over to be grateful. Alex done, quick and easy. Jen, bless her, will make this new period a sunny place. Jimmy says the movie’s going well. Going back to the studio, making it a good thing. And crazy Tiara knows a record man. There’s even enough butternut squash pasta for me to have seconds. Days like this don’t come at you often. I know that, so I eat slowly.

Ms Reilly is back when I get home from work a couple days later.

“I can’t believe it,” I say. “I saw you on TV. You’re big time now.”

“You saw it? I didn’t call because I didn’t know when it would be on. Did I look ok?”

“You looked great. I was in a restaurant so I didn’t get to see too much. Did you win?”

“Hardly,” she sighs. “One of the big stakes guys won. I got excited playing with all that money and they pounced on me. I came in fourth.”

“Out of all those people? That’s great. And you were on TV.”

“Yeah. I did make a little money, too.” She smirks. “Desmond must have been bored watching me play all that time. Not that he complained.”

“Well, good for you.”

“How was Wilson?” He’s sitting next to her, not ready to let her out of his sight so soon after getting her back.

“Great. Well behaved. Sometimes he’d stay downstairs with me when he was lonely.” I scratch his head. Wilson reads this as an invitation and stands and presents me his butt to scratch. His eyes go back and forth from Ms Reilly to me as I oblige. He has no poker face to hide his joy.

“How was your week? You look well.”

“It’s been a good few days,” I say honestly. “I’ve had fun with Wilson.”

“Looks like he had fun with you too,” she says.

“You know, if you ever need me to, I can take him out for a walk every once and a while.”

“That’s sweet. He’s been flirting with you long enough. About time you noticed.” When I stop scratching him, Wilson backs into Ms Reilly, but she ignores him. “That reminds me. I got you a shirt.” From a bag on the floor she pulls out an oversized blue t-shirt that reads ‘Atlantic City Strip Poker Champion’ on the back. “Desmond picked it out for you.”

“Sure did.”

“I don’t know. He thought it was funny. He’s gone into work to see what the damage is after taking so much time off. He had to make up a family emergency. That’s why it’s nice to be self-employed.”

“It’s good to have you back Ms Reilly.”

“Thank you, Robbie. It’s good to be home.”

I stay with Jen the next night, rolling in sheets awash in sexual harmony. We spill through backdrops of green fluorescent intangibles and wake into a world of hominine comprehension. I am filled by the poetic philosopher of romance. Bird songs punctuate my understanding. Emotions that would repulse me coming out of anyone else boil over inside of me, do their worst to make me grin wide and stupid.

We lie in bed afterward. My fingers pluck at her naked body. She talks about the play she’s rehearsing, struggling to become the role—she hasn’t spoken to Jimmy since they finished filming and is already fully transferred into this new project. It’s hard, she says, dedicating so much time and energy and not getting paid. You can feel a bit like the butt of a joke. She says it’s her choice to make, but still it’s hard.

Over her chest I can see out the bedroom door, down the hall into the living room. There’s a kitchen off of that, each room separate, with its own walls. Not like my studio’s communal spacing. “How do you afford this place?”

“My parents help. Mom and Dad support what I’m doing.”

“That has to be nice.”

“Yours don’t?”

I tell her the brief version, Dad dead, Mom gone, a few details. This is much earlier than I usually offer up my tragedies but there seems no reason to hold back with her.

“That’s awful.”

“It was so long ago now, I don’t think of it.” *That’s a lie!*

She pulls the sheet up to her shoulders, covering herself. “I don’t know what I would do if I lost my parents.”

“Life would go on. It’s hard but you don’t stop being yourself.” Her eyes are on the ceiling, watching some imagined fear play out. “I didn’t mean to bring you down, just don’t want to keep anything from you.”

She turns on her side and switches off the lamp. In the darkness the space of her apartment is ever expanding, into the recesses of shadows. The ceiling is multilayered atmospheres. The hallway out the door leads to well-furnished infinity, skyrise absolution.

There is a melody that I hum going home in the morning. It echoes through my sinuses, drowning out the cars and trains, the screaming from the city. It’s familiar; at first it seems to be something heard before, but no, that’s not it. What I am hearing is a soundtrack to emotion. My soul has opened to know happiness, a strange and noble pursuit, and it sings with life. I am alive in the present, listening as I broadcast song. It’s an experience separate from a conscious process of creation. This song has always been inside of me but only now has now found the needs to flower. It is the vibrations from my soul striking joy, my body the amplifier to give it voice.

When I get home, Anya plays the chords without hesitation, with no reworking, no stumbling to find the progression. I sing. The words evolve in the split second before they leave my mouth, without thought. I am unconscious now, experiencing something spiritual. Channeling gods of music and life.

I hit the playback on the recorder in front of me and hear it as if for the first time. It is like rediscovering your favorite food as a child. This song is special. All my music is crafted and reworked until it meets demanding standards, but there are moments when you just know that you have heard something special. This song.

Now, love songs are tricky. There are so many of them, how do you make it fresh? The Beatles ruined it for the rest of us. Made everything after them sound conventional. But a new sound has just poured forth from me. The song is called “Corvus.” It’s Latin for “Raven” (I looked it up), Jen’s character in the movie. It is dedicated to my new muse.

I bring Anya to the studio with me, along with the Telecaster. I need to record this new song. It has to have a place in the film. Just me on acoustic guitar. Stripped. Raw and emotional.

“No problem. I owe you the extra time anyway,” Carson says.

“Sure. What?”

“Yeah, sorry about losing those tracks. They just vanished. I was blitzed that night.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a lot of experience with hard alcohol, and it came on stronger than I expected. I was mixing the tracks, then all the sudden it’s morning and the guitars are gone.”

“You were mixing my songs drunk?”

“It’s your fault, really. I passed out on the floor.”

“My fault?”

“I’m seventeen and you gave me a handle of tequila. What were you thinking?”

The anger passes quickly. It all serves a purpose. This is how I came to record the song. Embrace the legend. “You gotta learn sometime.”

We do the guitar tracks first. Just some overdubs. Nothing big; part of the subtlety of the mix and the layering you can utilize in a studio. I want to get them out of the way to focus on “Corvus.”

Carson pulls up the first track on his computer. The program he uses is a souped-up version of what’s on my laptop. “Same basic programming,” he says. “It has some more sound options and can record to a higher bit rate. Money buys quality.” That’s exactly it. What I’ve been doing in my basement apartment for years is what he has set

up here now, except he has soundproofing, better mics, speakers, a faster hard drive, and the space to fit it all. Money gives you that. That's where I lose out.

I follow along as he selects the now blank track that held the second guitar. He goes through and explains what most likely happened—he saved a ghost track over my recording, a mid-range riff during the chorus. I even show him a shortcut to highlight the individual track and open it into a new window.

“Impressive,” he says. “Most musicians your age don't keep up with the tech.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You know, not like you're old, old, but musicians tend to get stuck in their ways.”

“Fuck you, first. Second, this is an evolving industry. New technologies changing the landscape. Fewer albums selling. Big companies losing money. If you want to survive you have to keep on top of this shit. Adapt or die out.”

“That's what I say. Glad we're on the same page, old man”

The overdubs roll quick. Three songs. Takes me an hour on the Tele. Professional pace. Then, with the recording equipment still up, I pull out Anya for the new song.

“What's this one called?” the kid asks.

“Corvus.”

“Corvus? Whatever. Count it off when you're ready.”

One-two-three-four . . . the music comes out of me like finding water in the desert. The open emotional happiness of sharing yourself with a beautiful person—the joy of life's pursuit. Musically it isn't complicated, because the feelings are basic, primal, and shouldn't be colored by excess. I nail it the first time through (we record it a second time to make sure, but it isn't necessary and will be left out of the legend). On the first take for the vocals I get so caught in the moment that my voice cracks on a high note toward the end, but I pull myself together and go again. I've been playing this song nonstop since yesterday and that feeling of newness rains over the recording coating it in the thrill of discovery. Finding new romance. Writing a classic song. Watching the future of your life take shape out of years of haze.

“Corvus, you said?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool. It’s different from the others. In a good way. Come in here and listen to it.”

Carson plays it back, balancing the levels as we go through, adding a subtle reverb to make the guitar sound bigger. It’s perfect. Exactly the way I heard it in my head. Three minutes and twenty-two seconds. A hit single recorded in under an hour. The high of birthing something so beautiful, knowing the import it will be afforded when released on the world. I want to dance, to carry Anya through the streets and lead a parade of revelers singing along in my wake. Cry out my song for love, children.

But I am too cool to reveal these emotions to a teenager. He says, it’s good. I say, I know. And we continue mixing the rest of the tracks.

Carson has a good ear. I hear it as he plays back what he’s already mixed. The levels are set. He adds the new guitar tracks and I follow the minutiae of his process, sometimes capturing individual notes and sliding down the faders so they don’t pop. Methodically we go through each song. He makes me rerecord three notes where I went flat on the vocals. He cuts tenths of a second off a bass track where Frank was slow. Polishing each song to give it the sound of money. Think of it as a super model putting on concealer to hide the faint bags under her eyes, making her that much more unattainable. And I help out too. These songs are my limbs so I can tell him when the snare needs to come down a hair, and when to punch the guitar. Carson adds his own suggestions too, tricks of the studio that add to the effect, like doubling Frank’s harmonies to make his voice stronger in a chorus. We work as a collaborative team, two sets of ears, in stereo, alchemists churning out gold. The kid knows what he’s doing.

Hours later, when we finish with the last song he turns to me and smiles. This is his project too, and his joy derives from the gloss on the finished product. “That’s it then,” he says. “We have a soundtrack.”

“Well,” is all I can manage. It feels good.

“I’ll burn you a few copies for the band, and send one to Jimmy tomorrow. You tell him about the new song?”

“Not yet. I know where it should go. I’ll talk to him.”

“He’ll like it. It’s the right vibe he’s going for.” Carson pops blank CDs into his multi-disc burner. “Hey listen, you’re deep in the New York scene, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. I’m deep, man.

“I’m thinking of moving shop up there soon. My dad wants his basement back, and I’m a bit far out here to get the New York crowd. Jersey suburbs aren’t offering me enough reason to stay.”

“It’s a different world.”

“Yeah. Dad’s gonna help with some startup capital but I don’t really know the scene there yet. It’s all about who you know.”

“Exactly. The city’s a big place.”

“You know the equipment and have the ear.”

“I’ve been at this for a while.”

“You ever thought of working in a studio?”

I know what he’s getting at, and underneath it all he’s still a kid, nervous about stepping out alone. I sympathize with him. “Listen, if you’re going to set up in the city I’ll be able to send work your way. I know the people, bands, all the clubs. People know me.”

He’s encouraged. Says he’s been working on a business plan, hoping to find a partner so he can still have time to enjoy the city, but that he’s serious about it.

“You’re a smart guy. I believe you. Talk to me when it’s really happening.”

Everybody thinks they can write the next pop song. It’s too easy to sound great in the shower. People pay for the chance. Working in a studio might even be better than test kitchen dishwashing, the dreams of hopeful musicians passing through would make better stories than Tiara. Of course, it will never come to that. With this film and album I’ll be too busy for anything else, and by then I’ll be the greatest advertising this kid could hope for. He won’t need a partner to welcome him to the city and I would rather be on stage.

I drive back listening to the sounds of *In Search of the Deathstar*. Do you create? Do you know the feeling? Experiencing something that does not exist until you make it so. And then to be presented with that creation, through stereo speakers while driving

seventy-five down the highway. Creative thought has spurred every great moment of civilization. It is the boon and burden of the human mind. Some people, most it seems, fear the depths of inward thought that breed creativity. They spurn reflection, are happier having others present ideas to them. Philosophers, inventors, politicians, great thinkers all need a creative mind to thrust them above the ordinary. It is noble to use it to effect social change, but true creative artisans play in the form for the sake of creation itself. And at the pinnacle of artistic pursuit: the musician. Pleasing sounds strung together and layered in a mathematical formula, an abstract notion for most people. The ability to subtly manipulate the emotions of an audience through chord progressions. Language in poetry, ideas in conversation, infecting the listener because they are sung. Religions, nations, relationships use music as identifying markers, promoters of spirituality and union. God created man in his own image, and the creative pursuit of man is the ultimate form of worship toward a higher power. God bless us all, and God bless rock and roll.

I park the van on the street and carry in Anya and the Tele. The deadbolt is unlocked when I put the key into the door, which is strange. I never forget to lock up. I push open the door and what is . . . The mess is the first thing. Drawers have been removed from the dresser and overturned on the floor. Clothes are scattered around the room, on the bed, the floor, and the table. I've been robbed. My TV's still there. Where's my laptop? A clank in the kitchen brings my eyes up. Alex is sitting on the counter, tossing forks at my refrigerator.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I scream.

"I wanted to pick up some stuff I left over here." Clank.

"You trashed my place?"

"Yeah." Clank.

My utensils are all over the kitchen tiles. She's torn open a bag of cereal and dumped it on the floor too. And a splatter of orange juice runs down one wall, at the foot of which is the empty carton. I don't know what to do. She was gone and things had felt so good. This woman brings destruction with her. The end of days.

I stand there, dumb. In response she throws another fork.

"Stop throwing my shit. What are you, a child?"

“Why should you be the only one who gets to act childish? I wasted a year babying you, you musical hack. It’s my turn to throw a tantrum.” She throws a spoon at me.

“Alex, cut it out. I need you to leave now.”

“Oh, well if that’s what you need. Let’s make sure to do whatever the brat needs.”

“Look, if you want to talk about this, fine. We’ll talk about it. But you have to calm down.”

She hops off the counter and smiles. There’s a fleeting hope that maybe this is all her idea of a joke. “I’m always the calm one. The only one with any sense of reality. Putting up with your pathetic music career. ‘Listen to this song I wrote. Do you think I’m a good guitar player? Will you come listen to me play at some shit hole bar?’”

“You’re upset and saying stupid things. Really, you should go, let me clean up the mess you made, and we’ll talk about this later.”

“You want to run away?” she asks in a voice used to speak to a child. “Take off and leave me with the bill again?” This time she throws a butter knife, hitting Anya’s case next to me.

“You crazy bitch, are you mad because I left you at the restaurant?”

“God, you’re a fucking moron. You think it’s that simple?” She lifts a small glossy postcard off the counter, studies it. “Who’s Jennifer Courant?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Some part of your pathetic fantasy where you pretend to be a rock star so you can cheat on me?” She slams Jen’s headshot into the orange juice stain on the wall, where it sticks, her phone number looking back at us.

“We’re not together anymore, Alex, so it doesn’t matter what I do.”

She storms up to me, her cheeks turning redder as she gets closer, building for her final assault. “For a year I held your hand while all you worried about was music. Put off everything for it. Now I’m a year older and you’re still a loser. You can’t sing, you can’t write a decent song, and ten years from now you will still be living in this basement, playing open mic nights, and believing that your big break is just about to come. And at that point you’ll be too old to ever change. You’re a fucking hack, a poser

who's becoming a fat, old joke. You'll never make it as a musician, you'll never be a rock—”

Anger takes over. I don't know what happens until afterward. I strike her, hitting the hollow of her cheek, her mouth hanging open in mid-abuse. It sounds more powerful than it was. The thud bouncing off her cheek. And underneath the smack there is a hollow pop echoing in the cavern of her mouth, like when kids slap their lips to make a drum. We are both stunned at first. I've never been violent like that before.

“I didn't mean to . . . Sorry. Don't know what to say,” I mumble. She won't look me in the face. My mind runs through her possible reactions. “Alex—”

She moves faster than my mind can process the attack. She's close, and when she kicks, whether it's on purpose or not, it is the sharp edge of her shin bone that connects to my balls. Ungodly pain. Lungs empty. On the floor and fetal, retching, trying to breathe. Dizzying swirls of light reflect off my tears.

“You motherfucker.” She spits on me. I cough and writhe, knocking over the Tele's case, pressing my forehead into the hard, black plastic. Curses, white noise. There's nothing but the pounding between my legs. Get to my knees, moan into the carpet, slowly lift my head, focus.

The snapping of latches behind me. “You're a loser Robbie. You deserve all you get.”

There's a crash, the smack of strings out of tune, and then I blackout.

Chapter 19

Only 37. It was a heart attack. Died in the ambulance before they reached the hospital. That's only five years older than me.

There had been a woman with him. He had never mentioned her to me. She was just the next in his line. They had been at some level of arousal and he was slow to admit something was wrong or to guess how serious it was. Maybe he was taking it like a man.

He didn't give anyone a last message for me. No final words of love or advice.

I had to ride the train home by myself. Into New York to transfer back into Jersey. I had to tell his friends and his job. Cancel his credit cards, talk to his bank.

I had to arrange the funeral. The woman who had been with him was married and the wake was crowded with neighbors who otherwise wouldn't have cared, attracted to the gossip. Boredom made them dress up and hover close by, speak in low tones, look sad, hope I would break down so they could tell friends they were right there when I lost it, the poor child, because they did not have this melodrama in their own lives and they were jealous, would have wished someone close to them dead for the chance of this attention. I wanted to get out, lock myself in a small room where there were no hands to shake, no condolences. But what would they have said about him if I wasn't there? Was there space for a genuine sadness? Would they have felt vindicated that his behavior caught up with him in the end?

There were women at the wake, the ones who had come before his death. They cried for lost love, or cursed him under their breaths, emotional because we rarely get to exercise it so openly. Faces from throughout my childhood. Women I'd known for a few weeks and then never seen again. Until now. He brought us together. The revolving door of surrogates who had occupied the role of feminine maturity in my life, not the teenager dressed for the prom in the one picture I had. She was the one missing from the scene. And I waited, secretly, not even admitting to myself what I was doing, waited to see her come through the door and take over now that Dad had left, forgiven in this moment because I was afraid to be alone. She had heard it all, was back, sorry for her mistakes, willing to work for forgiveness for a lifetime spent in hiding. But she never came and when she didn't I knew for certain that any road to her was barred, no future redemption would come. We would never find each other.

The other one missing was the woman who had been with him. I didn't know her but thought someone in the crowd would come forward. From one of the gossiping bundles came that she was in the hospital. That her husband had a temper and wasn't happy when he heard the story. I had to find her, needed the words from her mouth about what happened, how he felt and what he said. Had he asked for me? When everyone had finally left I went searching. It was late when I found her. Because of the attack, the nurse was reluctant to let me into the woman's room, but when I explained she said, "She mentioned you might stop by."

I stood in the doorway. There was only one bed, by the window. She was thinner then.

“Ms Reilly?”

She turned and opened her eyes. Her right cheek was swollen and blue and her right wrist and forearm were on top of the sheet in a cast. She was on painkillers but after a moment her mouth twitched.

“You can call me Wendy.” She waved me toward a chair with her good hand then pushed the button to raise herself in the hospital bed.

“Robbie? How are you?”

I didn’t want her sympathy, not here. There had already been too much of that.

“I’m sorry I missed the funeral. They won’t let me out yet.”

Sitting next to her I almost felt guilty, like it was my fault she was in here. Depression is infectious in a hospital, and I had brought it in with me. What if she couldn’t offer me anything else on him? She was waiting for me to say something but there was nowhere to start.

“Funerals are just awful, aren’t they?” She turned away so I couldn’t see her bruises. “When it’s someone really close and all you want is to be alone. My mom died a few years ago and her funeral was the hardest part. These cousins that I never see showed up and were bawling like it was their mother up there. We never saw them. Didn’t send Christmas cards. But here they were going to pretend like this was harder for them. She was mine, and it was supposed to be my time to grieve for her. Instead I spent the day trying not to smack them.”

“You should have.”

“Violence doesn’t solve much.” She shifted in the bed. “It was quick. He felt tightness in his chest but he was being very brave about it. Then he collapsed before the ambulance got there. He didn’t feel anything after that.”

“Did he say anything? For me?”

“It was too quick. He didn’t think he needed to.”

That was the real end. When there would be nothing else coming from him.

“He talked about you though. Showed me pictures. Said he was jealous of the time you were having at school. He also said you two liked to play guitar. And apparently you have a great rock and roll voice.”

I was empty and for the first time since coming home I gave up trying to cope with it. She leaned down toward me, it must have been hard for her, brought my head into her shoulder and stroked my hair as I cried. It was the kind of touch that a father doesn't give. Her body was warm. She'd been in bed for a couple days at that point but the smell was so human that in the moment I nested in it.

When I was done she handed me a tissue and sat back in bed. “What do I do know?” I asked.

“If I were you . . . I'd want to get away from here. Barcelona is a great place to get lost in.”

“We never made it much farther than the Shore. Dad thought there was enough to see in Jersey.”

“Really? You know, I honestly didn't know him very well. Would you tell me about him?”

I need to believe that Dad didn't know she was married. She had taken her ring off and was out for a good time away from a violent, unhappy home. Dad provided her with comfort and possibilities. It was a question I never asked Ms Reilly, was she wearing her wedding ring. I was too afraid of the answer. That there might have been other affairs, families broken up, other women put in a hospital like she was. He was not that man. Through his faults he held on to a morality that showed respect for people and for traditions and perseverance. My life was proof that Dad was a good man.

He left me everything in his will—of course he did, there was no one else—and all there was was the house. But that ended up being a lot. His parents had paid off the mortgage before they died, so I became the third generation of Holmes to own the two-story New Jersey home. I couldn't keep it though. That house was a curse upon our family. It brought heartbreak and premature death upon our clan. So I sold it. And found myself with more money than an 18-year-old knew what to do with. I traveled.

To London where I got shit-faced. To Amsterdam where I ate mushrooms and told my sad story to strangers who would listen. I bought a rail pass and lived on trains with an ounce of marijuana smuggled on board and sat numb as the world passed by. Germany, Austria, Italy. Slowly along the French Riviera. I wandered Barcelona and sent a postcard to Ms Reilly. Western Europe, but all I saw were bars and alleys, drugs and cheap prostitutes. Excess through a teenage mind, my friends for three months while I was broken. When the rail pass expired I dropped everything and got on a plane home.

This isn't a story about mourning. The strongest impression my father made was the necessity of perseverance, and I would not dishonor him by falling to my own excess. I came back home, with no home to return to, thought of my options, decided I was not ready to be an adult, and went back to school. To a new school, so I wouldn't have to face anyone who knew me before; I gave myself the luxury of never speaking of the past. The rest of the money paid my tuition. A fairly responsible use of the inheritance over all—not that my degree has done me much good.

Ms Reilly escaped into Jersey City and grew more comfortable being alone. She would check in, invite me to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with her, was the only person to come see me graduate. Six years ago when her last tenant moved out she offered me the basement apartment and it's where I've been ever since. We were both comfortable ignoring the past.

I did allow myself one further bout of excessive spending. The only thing of Dad's I kept was the Gibson. But it is not a musician's instrument. It's a hobby and sentimental and has been put away. Anya was my investment in solitary life. If you are a musician then you know the value of a truly great instrument. Buy them young, splurge, pay 4 or 5 months rent, become family. Over time the sound waves bouncing around in the body create an increasingly perfect space to mature in, opening the wood on a cellular level to expand resonance through the chamber. Anya has a depth and timbre that I had never heard from my hands. When I first played her the notes sang out over an infinite time. They carried on forever forward and backward through my life. The vibrations swam through her body into mine and were broadcast out from the crown of my head. I had to have her; it was appropriate. Dad would have approved.

Chapter 20

Cccrrrrrrxxxxxxxchhhhheeeeeeeetetetete goes my brain. In the black expanse of the universe are distant twinkling light specks. I've tumbled . . . from a stage and am now trapped under the feet of the audience. My left temple throbbing. People buzzing concern through the blinking stars but I don't understand. Can't think through the fuzz. Can't move. The lights dance to the feedback as a brighter, uglier light grows in the distance. As it reaches them it absorbs the dancing specks one at a time. I open my mouth to shout a warning, keep it away from swallowing me, but my mouth is scratchy with cotton. I open my eyes fully and spit the carpet from my mouth. My head and crotch rebel when I try to sit up, pulling me in opposing directions. Instead I roll on to my back and stare at the ceiling, the expanse of white plaster. Emptiness. Maybe a concussion. The uncertainty slowly dematerializes—this is my ceiling, my rug. Alex . . . I unbuckle my belt and open my jeans so nothing is touching my swollen groin. My head . . . I drop my eyes to the left, unwilling to try that side of my head against the floor. A fissure splits the rosewood body. I reach out and pull her toward me. The neck drags after, splintered, held only by the strings. I vomit on the carpet and then cry as I did fourteen years ago.

I haven't left my apartment for a week. Have barely left my bed. Two migraines have been fucking in my skull since that night, a competition in tantric endurance. I don't turn on the lights. Move as little as possible. Mostly I lie in bed and weep uncontrollably. Sometimes I watch TV.

I called out sick to work. Told them I was on bed rest under doctor's orders. Then I turned off my cell. Don't want to hear from anyone; afraid a familiar voice could start me bawling again.

Anya lies next to me in bed, broken into pieces, a shattered neck and spine, unfixable, irreplaceable. I run my fingers along her fret board. Tickle her pegs. Cradle her body in my arms as I used to. A lover without his partner. A son without a father. A child encapsuled in an adult's body, sick and lonely, without an idea of how to fix the broken mess that surrounds me.

Poor, poor pitiful you. You, tone deaf and callous, might scold me because you misunderstand this heartbreak. She was not a mere inanimate object, replaceable. She was an extension of my own musicality. A friend to harmonize with. My co-writer. Forget even that I no longer have the money to replace her. This was a despicable act. The worst attack Alex could have pursued. And the cruel joke of it all is that she doesn't even know it. She couldn't understand the hurt she gave. All she intended was to lash out with her own anger, but the idiot has murdered a family member.

The days have run one into the next, with little distinction between day and night. I sleep for a few hours, then wake for a few hours, cycling through time in what I now plan on being an eternal penance. But for what? How have I sinned? A lifetime of loss besets me, the star of a rock opera, Technicolor Superstar, an unwitting man, beset by the wrath of God, abandoned by his family, undergoing Christ-like brutalities for the good of what? What have I left to prove? Why am I forsaken?

Enduring this pain will numb me to all other feelings. I'm drying into a husk of unaccompanied melody. Broken notes flecked and decaying. Betrayal sets in in that all I want is to be held by my mother. It's a disturbing desire that reminds me of being very young, craving something I've never experienced, not because it is foreign, but because we all are born with a shadow memory of the womb, that warmth ingrained in our subconscious as ideal safety. As an infant I cried out for the unknown, instinctually bleating for a mother's arms, never having felt the embrace. How could I exclude my father in that way? Later, as a child, I consciously cried for Dad instead—he was the one I really needed. That effort is gone now. "Mother," I sob into Anya's neck. "Oh Mom. Mom." *My sweet boy.* It's a cry to a ghost. "Don't leave me." This time she is the one I want. Dad is gone. Anya is broken. Somewhere out there is my mom, filled with regret, searching but unable to find me. Maybe she will hear me now, back through time and space, and I can change her mind. She's standing at the door, seeing the decision before her and the outcome of her actions. If I cry loud enough, that instinct will kick in, she will remember the safety of the womb, what a mother represents to her child, she will feel the link, her child's need, it will overcome her and she will turn back before the moment of abandon, turn from the heartache she feels, free herself from regret, and find herself again with her family in her arms. All of us together. A chance to do it again.

I cry and wait. But again she doesn't come.

There's a banging on the door leading to Ms Reilly's upstairs. Banging that gets more persistent when I ignore it. The pounding syncs with the throb in my temples, refusing to go unanswered, so I stumble out of bed and peer through a sliver of open door.

"What you doing in there? Why you take so long to answer the door?" the baritone in the unlit stairwell asks.

"Leave me alone."

"You weren't touching your instrument, were you?"

"What?"

"Get dressed. Wendy made dinner. Come eat with us."

"I'm not hungry." I try to close the door, but he has a shoulder up against it.

"Come on, Jim. We haven't seen you all week. We were getting a little worried." He pushes into the room, sending me stumbling back. "Jesus, it stinks in here. What's that mess on the floor?"

"Nothing. Get out of here."

"Aww, did you break your guitar?" he asks and walks toward the bed.

"Did I break it? Would I do that?" I can hear the hysterics in my voice. They weren't supposed to be there.

"Wow, that's really broke. How'd you manage that?" The doorman picks up the shattered body.

"Don't touch her," I say. Moving toward him my feet get caught in a pile of clothes and I stumble into his massive shoulder. My face bounces off and I land on the floor.

"Whoa there, Jim. Careful now. You feeling alright?" A paw big enough to flatten me grabs my arm and stands me up.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"To see if you're hungry."

"What's your game?"

"Huh?"

"Your game. What are you doing to Ms Reilly?"

“There’s no game, Jim. We’re having dinner.”

“Why are you always here?” I ask.

“Because my place isn’t as nice and I go where the lady tells me. You should understand that.”

“Stop coming down here and bugging me. You think you’re rubbing it in my face?”

“I’m being friendly, Jim. If I’m going to be over here a lot, it would be nice to get along. Though you make it difficult sometimes.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“That’s too bad.” He looks down at the bed. “What happened to your guitar?”

I won’t answer him.

He points to the hole in back of her body. “It looks like you lost the fight.”

“Leave me alone.”

“You know you smell like my asshole.”

“Just get out of here! Leave us alone!” I scream. Melancholy and anger seething in me all week becomes vicious aggression. I spring at him, the immovable object, bounce off his shoulder again, landing on my ass.

“Take a shower,” he says, stepping over me toward the door. “Open a window. If you’re hungry, we’ll save some food upstairs.”

“I’ll kill you. If you do anything to hurt her I’ll kill you.”

“Ha. Jim Morrison, you crack me up.”

You can use this. Find yourself again with the music. It’s shit, all of it. It’s not poetry, they’re lyrics without song. But they sound contrived, out of someone else’s mouth, or recycled emotional pandering. I’m convinced it is impossible to be original with pain anymore. And pain’s all that comes out now, because that’s all there is, and it will kill me creatively, and then that’s the end of everything else. That’s the reason I take a shower on Monday. The sick of the past week seems to root itself further into my skin rather than rinse away, and I sit in the bottom of the tub after the water’s turned cold questioning this drastic shift to my life. Fuck it all. Mostly I worry about lasting affects on my songwriting—both technically and emotionally without Anya. Is creativity

something that can vanish like this? Tell me, it's going to all be ok? *Shhh. There, there. It will come.* I convince myself that going to work is a necessary experiment, physically separate myself from the wreckage. I turn my phone on for the first time in a week. There's a couple messages from Frank. Only one from Jen, asking to do something last weekend. And then one from Jimmy. "Carson played me the new song. It's great. Perfect for the sex scene. I'm going to use it there and move 'Phosphorescent' to the end. Hope that's cool. Good work. Call me later." Visual stimuli: Jen's flawless tits projected on a giant screen. Sexual objectification as art. That's a turn on. Ten foot tits on the screen . . . rock and roll . . . and then there's Jimmy's mouth all over her, and the smirk on his face as we watch it together. His emasculating eyes peering around crow's feet, searching for a reaction in my face. Fuck it all. The next time with Jen, I won't be able to help it, I'm going to have to ask her about the scene. How many takes did he get at her? It's the kind of thing that . . . I don't know.

She only called once all week? Right? She wasn't worried that I had vanished? She's an actress, where's the unnecessary, overdramatic panic? Even if it's just for show, it still means something. It's another thing, I won't be able to help it, it's going to come out the next time we're together. *She's not good enough for you.* But she is. We'll talk and she'll know how to make me better.

At work, the test kitchen feels cavernous and empty after a week confined to my basement. Everyone is friendly, asking if I'm feeling better. Tiara is over-inquisitive, needling for answers to what I had, what it felt like, what doctor I visited. She wants to improv again but I don't have the energy. Or maybe it's the nature of a temp to be mistrusting.

The clatter of pots and pans echoes out of the sink and the skin peels back around my fingernails throbbing with the sting of dish soap. Dried caked on remains. I try to push an upbeat playlist through my head, force the cobwebbed negativity out of there, but everything seems to transition into Dylan singing, "You're gonna make me wonder what I'm doin'." Tiara is an Egyptian sheik named Ramses, describing a love for European cars and American sitcoms. We sample a truffle risotto. I let my thoughts go, hoping the absurdity of my work environment brings back the normalcy which hangs misty just beyond my reach. When I get off work I'll call Jen.

“Listen, my friend,” Tiara says in accent. “Listen. My friend the record producer, you would still like to see him at your big premier movie film?”

“Sure.”

“He would very much like to make an appearance.”

“I can, whatever, that’s fine.”

We have leftover bowtie pasta in vodka sauce and rosemary potato wedges for our break, but it’s no comfort.

“Last time I talk of my friend you seem so, I don’t know, cocksure. Now you are falling. My friend, you are not happy?”

I drop my head back against the wall, right onto the guitar-shaped knot, and yelp, more from the reminder than from the lingering pain.

“Are you ok?” Tiara asks this.

“It’s just . . .” I’m not ready yet. Nothing is like it was or was supposed to be.

I cut off the thought and instead sing a song in my head. Tiara, for the first time, is quiet. She slowly finishes the potato wedges.

“I enjoy the process of creation, don’t you?” she finally says.

For the first time there doesn’t seem to be a character looking back at me. Maybe this is really her. Or maybe it’s just a role she’s become very good at. Something appealing is in there though, an invitation to share in her take on the world, to build it with her.

“You know,” she says, “I don’t have to do the producer bit.”

“I thought he was a scout.”

“I’m still trying to work it out. He’s got to be pushy. Who’s more pushy? ‘I’ll make you a star.’”

“Sounds like a manager.”

“Alright, he’ll be a manager. Tony Piccolo.”

“I would have liked to meet him.”

Everyone is lying. Jen doesn’t pick up until the third time I try her. She sounds harried; there are voices in the background.

“Sorry I didn’t call back sooner.”

“Ok.”

“Something happened and . . . I’ve been busy with working on things.” I chicken out of telling her. It’s me. I don’t want to relive it yet.

“Yeah. Robbie, I’m really busy. Can I call you back later?”

“It’s just that—” But what? I don’t want her to get off the phone.

“What?” she asks.

“I haven’t been feeling well, and, I don’t know. How’ve you been?”

“I’m fine. Busy. Wondering where you’ve been.”

“I’ve been sick, I guess. Can I see you tonight?”

“Not tonight. I’ll be here late. Maybe—” In the background I hear a man call her name.

“Who’s that?”

“The stage manager. What do you need?”

“Nothing, I just want to see you. Let me come to your place tonight.”

“Really, I can’t. It’s not a good time. I’ll call you later.”

“Tell me about the sex scene in the movie?”

“Jesus. I’m hanging up.”

“What the fuck? I need you, alright. Just . . . when do you get off?”

“Bye Robbie.”

She doesn’t call back. Her phone goes straight to voicemail when I try later from my bed, she remains lying next to me. I don’t know what to do with her. I can’t keep seeing her like this. It’s shattering. But do I leave her to rot? She deserves some ritual, and it will take time to decide what that is, and until then she will torture me lying there. *Sacrificed to rock and roll.*

Another day passes and I don’t hear from Jen. And another. Now she’s disappeared. I’ve stopped leaving her messages, and now hang-up when she doesn’t answer. I need something, am turning to her for it and she isn’t there. I need to be held, or get laid. I don’t want to talk to Frank about it. I want . . . Ms Reilly to get rid of Desmond. At least there’s work to get me out of the apartment. Tiara is a flippant distraction, but holding myself together for those hours out of the house makes the ache of being home more masochistically desirable.

And another day. Now it's the weekend and if I remain alone all day this cycle will be that much harder to break. Jen's still not answering. I finally try Frank but he doesn't answer. Randy's busy. Jimmy is M.I.A. Ms Reilly is out. I go out to a bar alone one night, get drunk quickly because everyone's watching, pitying me. I spend the next day going through hipster record shops, hoping to find the perfect album to express my emotions, but nothing is deep enough and I end up back at the bar in the evening. The next. My isolation feels limitless. It gets colder. I give up looking for a way out.

After work and I'm already in bed when the phone rings on Sunday. I almost well up. An unlisted number. It could be anyone.

"Hello."

"Yes, I'm calling for Robbie."

"You got him."

"Oh, yes? This is Ismail Rashid. I spoke with you at a concert a few months ago. I'm Ahmed's dad."

The old guy who wasn't an agent. Did I make a friend? "Yeah, I remember."

"Really? Great. How are you?"

"Getting better, Ish. It's a slow process, though."

"Oh?"

"That's ok. What's going on?"

"Yes, I was calling to ask if I could hire your band for my company's anniversary party, actually."

A corporate gig? The least rock and roll thing you could do. You'll regress playing for those paycheck whores, the same ones who make your temp jobs so miserable. One of them takes a photo and years later a blog article circulates about your embarrassing past playing company parties. Rumors will start that you did weddings, and that's when your credibility gives way. This is a step away from greatness. But he's my friend and he's reaching out to me.

And then he says, "We can offer you \$2500," and holy shit I need \$2500. I think, I no longer own an acoustic guitar. I think, \$2500 would buy me a nice guitar. And right here my principles crumble and give in to my need for wealth and company. The cloudburst doesn't last all day. Redemption. I will not run from it.

“You’d have to play mostly covers. Upbeat stuff that people could dance to.”

Yes, we will play songs people can dance to.

“And, can I ask, could you play ‘Summer of 69’? I love that song.”

Bryan Adams? We will play Bryan Adams. When can I get my money?

Not your finest moment. I’ve had worse in the past few weeks. And I deserve it. I deserve a new guitar. And an audience, no matter how depraved, will hasten my healing process. It’s easy to convince the others. Randy says yes right away, and Frank calls back when I mention we get paid. They don’t have a moral hesitancy, and knowing they’ll make \$200 each is the cherry on top. I feel generous offering them anything really. The new guitar is a band expense, and this leaves me with less than what Anya cost many years ago, but maybe I can find a deal on something used. I’m good to my friends.

We spend three hours practicing the upbeat covers that we’re going to play. That’s all it takes us to get them down, and for a while, during ‘69,’ I am completely lost in the music. The past climbs off my shoulders and just listens to us play. I laugh when my voice cracks going high on “you told me you would wait forever,” and it feels like a brand new experience, where people always bob their heads and sing along. When it’s over I retreat back from the release, not ready to let go of the past few weeks, but it’s nice to believe that redemption is waiting for me.

Later, at the bar with Frank, it’s one more spin of our familiar scene, dim lights, lo-fi music, beer, and pretty bartenders. It’s been too long since we were here, and I can feel the bar conspiring to find out where I’ve been. The whispers from tables, the sad look from Georgia as she pours our drinks. Frank is already caught up.

“Alex told Kaylin everything.”

“What did she say?”

“That you hit her so she broke your guitar and left you.”

“That’s not what happened,” I say. I give him my side, the break in, the destruction, the cutlery attack.

“Cutlery?”

“Forks and knives and shit.” I tell him that I was the victim in this. That she didn’t just break Anya, she kicked me in the nuts and then smashed my head in with her. That she went postal on account of me dumping her, not the other way around.

“So you didn’t hit her?”

“She gave me a concussion. I don’t know what else happened.”

“Wow,” he says. “That’s at least more interesting than her version. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine now, except I need a new guitar. Thanks for the concern.”

“I tried calling at first but the story kept getting worse.”

“Sure.”

“And, you know Kaylin took her side, and I don’t want to mess that up.”

So he’s chosen sides. This betrayal will be the seed of what eventually destroys our friendship. Will come up again when looking for good men I can trust. But we can mask it in drink for now, for the sake of the band.

Also pretty Southern Georgia is here, the bar tender and Jen still hasn’t called me back. I need attention but there is enough of a crowd that she can offer little chitchat as she pours drinks. I try to make eye contact, but she turns to work the far side of the bar. The silence has lengthened between Frank and me, and that never looks good. I ask, “So things are going well with her?”

“What?”

“You like Kaylin?”

“Yeah. I do. It’s still early, you know, but she’s really cool.”

“Yeah? How?”

“She’s just a good person.”

“What does she do?”

He explains. Something with office work for a web designer. I’m still trying to catch Georgia. She’s at the taps, slowly pouring a stout for an older guy to my right. When he pays I wave her over. Her ponytail dances left and right from behind her head as she walks, and she has these small, short hairs at the top of her hairline that fall down and give her tiny bangs. Beads of sweat are breaking out under them across her forehead and down her chest, exposed in a low-cut top. Her cheeks are rosy from running around

and her perfume mixes with a more natural smell. The sexuality of her appearance. It feels like years that I've been longing for a woman, and I realize I haven't masturbated since before the attack. There's a lot built up in me.

I say quietly to Frank, "Do a shot with me."

"Oh, no," he says. "I gotta work in the morning."

And then Georgia is in front of us, leaning on the bar. "What can I get you boys?"

Smile in response to her drawl. "Well, we were going to do a couple whiskey shots if you'd do one with us."

"Uh-oh. Sounds like y'all are looking for trouble."

"Isn't everybody?"

"Well then. Three shots it is." She drops three glasses on the bar.

"Uh, make it two actually." Frank sounds like he's never been a part of a successful conversation with a bartender. Like now that he has a girlfriend he wants to forget the years I helped him along in these cajoleries. "I'm going over to my girlfriend's later."

"How responsible," Georgia says. "You're few and far between."

"I've gotten too old to function well after the shots begin," he says.

Georgia passes me my glass. "To the lucky lady then." She shoots.

"Functioning has never been my problem." I need to counter the damage Frank is inflicting.

"That's fourteen dollars."

We're losing her. Put the money on the table. "Hey, what time do you get off tonight?" I do my best to sound like Johnny Cash.

"Oh, I work late."

"Don't be afraid. We would have fun together."

"Flattered, but it's real busy right now."

She's playing hard to get. Asking me to pursue. I lean into the bar, reach over to grab her hand. "Look, you play it cool back there, but we're having fun. Let me take you out tonight."

“Hun, I work for tips.” As she says it the beautiful Southern accent disappears. Her look dares me to call her on it.

“Don’t mind him.” Frank is the one to break the standoff. “He’s getting over a concussion. He’s usually very charming.”

“You should get that looked at, darlin’.” The accent and smile are back. She winks at Frank and then turns away to serve others.

“Did you hear that?” I ask.

“Yeah, you were striking out.”

“She isn’t even—”

“Just give it up.”

It’s all breaking down. Everything is fake. The entire city. Where is reality and truth? Who isn’t playing a game?

Chapter 21

Now no one’s knocked upon my door. Only one set of footsteps is moving around upstairs, so I decide to risk it and hope that the doorman won’t be over this evening. Ms Reilly answers her door wearing an apron and brings me inside so she can keep stirring a pot on the stove. *What can she offer you?*

“Desmond’s coming by soon. He has me eating better than I used to.”

I sit at the table and scratch Wilson’s ears. There’s a brown tennis ball in his mouth. He doesn’t want to play with it, just to show me he has it.

“Sodas are in the fridge if you’d like one.” On the counter are peppers and onions, chopped. She splashes oil into a pan and adds the veggies. In another pot she sets rice to boil. We are quiet while she watches over the three burners, stirring, tasting, seasoning. She has me taste a green mash from the first pot and since I’m not having any more I say it’s good. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other but I’m at a loss as to where to begin. Wilson grunts and leans his head into my fingers as we wait for a conversation to develop.

She begins humming as she works. It takes me a minute to realize it’s “Phosphorescent.” I begin singing when she gets to the chorus and she joins with a pretty harmony. I never realized she had such a nice voice.

“Desmond told me about your guitar,” she says when we reach the end. “Is everything alright?”

“Alex and I broke up.”

“Are you ok with that?”

“She took it a lot worse than I did.”

“Well good. To be honest I didn’t like the way she treated you. Pushy, isn’t she. Of course, I’ll take it back if you start seeing her again.”

“No worries there.” Wilson turns his head and I grab the wet tennis ball out of his mouth, hold it just out of reach over his head. He stares at it and whines, stretching his neck. “I know I’m not always the easiest person to get along with either.” He jumps up onto my lap and licks my face until I drop the ball.

“Oh, to be sure. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be with someone who makes you happy. Even you deserve that.” She sings through her harmony on “Phosphorescent” again.

“What are you going to do about the guitar?”

“Have to get a new one. It’ll hurt,” I say. Wilson is back at my feet with the tennis ball.

“Well, I know they can be expensive. If you need it I can help out a bit. I’ve still got some winnings from AC. Or we can defer your rent for a month or two if that will help.” The onions and peppers are sizzling on the stove.

“I’d never ask you to do that.”

“I know you wouldn’t, and that’s why I offered.”

“Thank you. There might be a way for me to take care of it myself, but thank you.”

“The option’s on the table. We all need help sometimes. And an artist shouldn’t be without their instrument. I’m lucky all I need is a deck of cards.”

I grab at the tennis ball again but this time Wilson holds on to it in his mouth. He throws his weight back and his nails slip on the tile as he tries to wrench the ball from me. He growls playfully. When I let go he stumbles back but returns to put the ball and his mouth back in my hand. This is what I have been looking for. These past lost weeks I was drawing out my martyrdom but there was no audience for it, no suffering save for

mine. Time wasted when that's the commodity we all guard with our lives. I spend too much time trying to ignore the things I don't know.

"Did Dad know you were married?" So much for the rules. Time eventually overlooks these restraints.

She turns from the stove. There is a color to her that hasn't been there in the past. I don't know if it's Desmond or if it's from my question.

"That's a strange thing to ask."

"I've been thinking about him lately."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"And what will this do?"

"It's the one thing I don't know."

"You don't believe that, do you?"

"What else is there?"

"Most of it. It's mostly unknowns. Mostly myth we create. Knowing won't change that. We're all too complicated to really be understood."

"But I'm sick of the unknown. You can manage things when you understand them."

"Sometimes it only makes things worse when they're out of your control." She clicks off the burners and places lids on the pots and pan. "Is that why you don't like Desmond?"

"I never said—"

"I know."

I release the tennis ball again but Wilson brings it back to my hand. He doesn't want the game to stop. "Well . . ." It's just . . . what do I say about him? "I don't know. He's a doorman."

She leans on the counter. "And what are we?"

I don't know. "What if he's just after your money?"

"What money?"

"The winnings from your trip."

“That’s ridiculous. He’s the one that convinced me to go. And he would never. What else?”

“Not really sure.”

“Because he’s black?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Then what?”

I want to be able to convince her of something. “He’s kind of a bully.”

She smiles. “No he isn’t. He’s a bit loud. And a giant certainly, but he’s sweet, and genuinely trying to be your friend. I don’t keep sending him down to your place.”

“I know.” I toss the tennis ball into the living room and Wilson trots after it, tail wagging.

“Is this a longer conversation?”

“No, just . . . he’s alright to you?”

“Yes. I don’t worry about anything with him.”

“Well then.” Wilson is gnawing on the ball in the living room. “As long as I know that you’re ok.”

She takes off her apron, bunches it on the countertop, and shuffles toward me. Sitting in a chair at her kitchen table, my head is level with her chest when she pulls me in. She rests it there, wrapped in meaty arms, strokes my hair and says, “You’re a sweet boy, Robbie.” For a moment I almost cry, I want to, but there are no more tears in me.

The front door opens and Desmond stalks in. Wilson is up and weaving through his legs, the ball still in his mouth. “I could smell it out from the street. Hey, it’s Jim . . . should I come back?”

“No,” Ms Reilly says. She leans my head back to look at me. “We’re good for now.” She lets go of me and kisses Desmond.

“Are we almost ready to eat?” He smacks her backside as she turns to the stove.

“Just about.”

He pulls a chair out next to me and sits at the table. Wilson offers the ball to him now, resting his head in his lap. “How’s it been, Jim?”

To let go and return to the basement now would be a risk of backsliding that I don’t want to take, not yet. If this is just faith in a myth it is still better than the

alternative. And it isn't ruined by the intrusion. Change can be incorporated and certainty maintained, a measure of resilience. Isolation is not always helpful. Faith sometimes is.

“Would it be alright if I stayed for dinner?”

Ms Reilly turns but before she can speak Desmond says, “Of course, it's alright. Wendy always makes plenty.” He leans over toward me, scratching Wilson's back. “You can have most of mine,” he whispers. “I love this woman, but she is not a cook.”

Three days later we've loaded up the Wagon and are headed to our sellout performance. *A corporate whore. Traitor!* The remaining fear clinging to my psyche of an uncreative sickness multiplying inside of me will be sloughed off tonight. Performing will help, money will, and the corporate pandering doesn't matter. A stage is a stage is a stage. A paycheck by any other name will still buy a new Anya, as if nothing ever happened, and we're back on track to making music. It's a good time. I want to hear about Randy's teaching life, students, chemical compounds, and teacher girlfriends. The elements of his life outside of the band that used to seem like distractions. I can forgive them now, embrace his deviating interests as part of what makes us work. Franks is in the back, quiet after his betrayal the other night, but perhaps forgiveness is still an option. Life can return. The air blown through the window from 6th Avenue can renew our dedication to each other. *They know you're up to something.*

The party's in the ballroom of a hotel downtown. Ish meets us in the lobby and brings us around to the stage to set up. He's wearing a tux, which makes me a bit self-conscious of the carefully placed holes in my shirt. “That's alright,” he says. “I have to dress up.” We plug everything in and wait in a corner for the show to begin. My typical pre-show nerves, a spirit in the night, don't show up here. There's no fear. All it took were some bad decisions to sell my artistry, but \$2500 can buy it back. Ish stops to see if we need anything and I ask about Ahmed.

“He's great. They're all in Los Angeles.”

“Vacation?”

“No, a producer has brought them out there to record their album. They met after that concert you played together.”

They're . . . *'We can just fucking outplay them.'* That's never going to happen to us, is it? *Not here, it won't.* There's a reason why it turned out this way. And why there's still no fear. *You have to really want it.* What do I want?

I visit the open bar and hors d'oeuvre plates. Sing cover songs in my head. Laugh with the band. And then Ish calls us up to the stage and the music unfolds through the multiverses.

"Good evening employees of Metempsy and Kosis, LLC. Let's say we put those calculators away and have ourselves a good time."

They love us. *Their opinions don't matter.* Women in pantsuits sing along to the covers. Guys loosen their ties and shake awkwardly on the floor, beer bottles sloshing as they hoot. They cheer, they move, they adore us on our stage. They are, unapologetically, the best crowd I've ever had. Even through the few original songs we sneak in, the corporateers stay on their feet. And it becomes clear to me the beauty of the wedding band, a live jukebox, perched before a joyous crowd who, without cynicism, without pretension, just wants to be entertained. *Don't do it. They'll drown you.* I see how easy and dangerous this life could be. Professional facilitator of fun.

"Thanks. You guys are great. Here's to fifty more years of interests and deductions."

Guys bring us drinks as we pack up our equipment, and tell us about how they used to play guitar. The young, low-level women flirt and tell us where the after-party's going to be. Suddenly I'm not underdressed. Sweat-stained undershirts are revealed as buttons come undone in a parade around me of awkward high-fives and compliments about our level of rock. And up comes Ish, still swaying to the music. He slurs, "You guys were great. I'm going to tell everyone about you," and hands me an envelope full of cash, winking. "So you don't have to declare the income." I pocket it quickly, unwilling to share just yet, needing it close to me, to garnish my certainty that this is why you do it, to be the coolest guy in the room, the gravitational center of the evening's galaxy. It's here that it swallows me completely. *Take it back.* I feel like a god, adored, like I've always played right here, in this moment. *You're a fool to think there's happiness in this life.* And this size, the level of right now, could be perfect. Why push so hard to expand it into flamboyant excess? Why can't I take it easy, settle for being a surrogate, idol for

hire, fill-in rock star, available for parties and worship when the real things burn too hot to grab at their robes. Record songs in the studio I run with Carson, structure my world in music, reshape and evolve, finding levels outside of crowds. There is a point when it all becomes meaningless, but right here, with bottles of beer and people who want to be seen by my eyes, with guitars and toys and stability and no more worry, this will never grow old.

My little boy, you'll lose me again if you give up here. There's always the chance that it could become real. Haven't you learned from me? Don't run away.

I want to celebrate my discovery, but not like this. There's a shallowness even in getting carried off by this new certainty. What will save it is having someone who knows the secret. I had that, briefly, with Alex, but she never understood there were layers to the myth. Jen sees more. She will know the intricacies and the light; she's an artist. She's the one missing from all this. So when the party starts to break up, when the others have loaded the Wagon and people start heading out to bars in the night, I walk away, get a paper bag beer at a bodega, and catch a train uptown. I sing to myself, unconcerned with the sideways stares of the other late travelers, happy that there seems to be a direction to my life that only now is clear was lacking. It spurs my creativity and melodies float over the rhythm of the wheels clacking against the tracks as we hurtle through the underground, leaving behind the people above distracted by all the glitter. I am graced with the clarity to see beyond the distractions, to know what is important and what is artifice. Here it comes together, each small crowd and bad note coloring this transcendence, each broken body and missing parent. The cosmic forces governing the world at once recognize my presence amongst so many and finally open up to me. Jen can see all of this as I do.

We haven't spoken in weeks and it's late when I ring her buzzer but why hold off happiness and faith. A few minutes of pushing the button before she answers and the tinny voice through the little speaker doesn't sound happy, but she lets me in. After my weeks of cloistered penitence I fall into her sofa, embracing her essence, still nursing my paper bag drink.

"Some things have become clear to me." I feel spiritual and want her to recognize the importance of what I'm saying.

“Is this going to be an argument? I’m too tired for that.”

“No, why would . . . you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been busy. The play is up.”

It doesn’t matter, whether or not it’s an excuse. What’s important now is everything in front of us, the clarity. “I realized something tonight.” I wait for her response.

“Yes?”

“No, I realized something, everything, who I am.” Again I wait for it to dawn upon her. It’s like a physical presence in front of me, so much so that she must see it too.

“What does that mean?” she asks.

“I’m a musician. Everything I’ve done has led me to this point and here I am, a musician. Not a rock star, but I don’t care. That’s not important anymore.”

“That’s good.”

“It wasn’t easy to say.” The paper bag is empty and standing is harder than I thought it would be. In her kitchen I look for another beer but there aren’t any in her refrigerator.

“Robbie, I have to get up early tomorrow,” she calls out, hidden by the walls dividing the rooms. I want walls and separate rooms. Her to say, ‘I’m in the kitchen,’ when I come home. I could live here.

“You should celebrate with me.”

“Celebrate what?”

She hasn’t caught on like she should have. There’s an opened bottle of wine in a cabinet, glasses too. This will help her understand. “I want a more normal life. I can do that.”

“Ok.”

“You’re a part of that too.” Again I wait for her to see it all clearly. She’s sitting in a chair, in a red bathrobe, folding the chord that ties around her waist into accordion squares. She looks so plain there, not badly, not boring, real, no makeup. She’s like me, that’s why she’ll agree this is a good idea.

“I think it would be best if you went home and we talked about this another time.”

“No. This is important.”

“Sure, but I don’t think—”

“I’m not explaining it properly.” She takes one of the glasses and I sit back on the couch, drinking from the bottle. “I know what I want. We’re both artists, you understand that about me. And that’s not something you can just give up. But I figured out what I can do now.” I forgot about the other glass in my hand. Maybe I’ll pour just a small glass. “I’m willing to settle now. Isn’t that what you wanted?” She’s looking at me from her chair across the room. She doesn’t comprehend. She’s not even trying.

“I never asked you to do that.”

“You expected things from me. We need to be together.”

“What does that mean?”

“That, uh . . . what . . . we should be together. More.”

She’s quiet again. Contemplating all I’ve laid out here. This is a moment of action, a headliner. Big things happening. When she gets up her hands are at the knot on her robe as she walks toward me. She understands everything, like I get it. I’m a little drunk and that might make the bedroom celebration less memorable than hoped but—

“Robbie, I’m going to bed. And I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”

“. . . Why?”

She moves past me. “Because I’m twenty-three and not thinking at all about settling. You seem to be in a totally different place right now. You’re not a bad guy, but you have to go now.” She opens her front door.

“But we’re both artists.”

“Goodbye, Robbie.”

“Wait, you’re only twenty-three?”

Outside the buildings threaten to collapse around me leaving me caged in their rubble, guilty of bringing the whole city crumbling down. I’m at a loss for how to escape until the envelope of cash in my pocket clears its throat.

Chapter 22

I want to wake up and find it’s all waiting for me, the gold records, the sold out tour, the fans that love me. My rewards after so many years. The truth is it takes hard work to be a star, more than anyone would like you to know, more than is sexy. It takes

luck and sometimes talent can't overcome that. And if you do elbow your way into even a little celebrity the fight continues. Longevity is an immediate concern. You must evolve quickly and constantly, enough to impress critics while staying loyal to your base. Be aware of what's younger and shinier and drawing more attention, staying one step ahead of what everyone else is listening to. Keep everyone guessing as to what you'll come up with next. Extol the purity of your artistic motives while shaking everyone's hand. Put out an album of blues or folk songs, maybe world music, that purists will discuss but no one will buy. Pay for it by licensing your hits to sell sneakers and cola. Sing a duet with the newest pop star. Deny time, pretend you deserve it. Binge drink, experiment with drugs as doorways to creativity and as palaces of numb escape. Clean up, regress, show weakness and regret. Become eccentric because it's expected. Eat strange animals, destroy hotel rooms, spend ridiculous amounts of money on frivolous things. Sleep with women, give them locks of your hair, use them as muses, and let them define their self-worth from your attention. Let men worship you as roadies, guitar techs, and web hosts, as fans, as a market. Watch people dance to your songs, imagine couples screwing to them. Manipulate moods, change opinions. Become a personality, one that people ask big questions of, that people listen to and sing along to. Realize that the rock star, for the three and a half minutes he is on stage singing his song, is the center of the world. Is God. Can never be alone.

Chapter 23

I dreamt that I was alone on stage. At Crosstown, but not Crosstown, a more open, unknown space, the stage lights so bright they mask everything beyond the edge. Anya's with me and we're playing a song I've never heard before. I can't see the audience in front of me, but I know he's there, singing along in his raspy smoker's voice. The crowd has come just for this, become a unit of common thought, emotionally charged by the music. They are eyes and ears, organs in torsos, arms wrapped around each other. They are piss and blood and snot, the dirty things that make us run, semen and sweat. They are anger, desire, fear, and hope. All the good things and the bad that mix to breathe life into us. And together they made a solid body of love without a voice to speak for them. "I am your voice," I sing, and they sing back from the darkness, "You

are our voice. We are one.” We make the song up as we go along; they know it and cry because I fill what’s missing in them, making us all complete. I hold the last note and they scream and stomp their feet for more. I face the light with faith that he is out there, proud, asking me to be his voice.

When I woke the song was still ringing in my head. I grabbed the Telecaster and worked out the chords and melody. The chorus goes, “I am your voice, singing out. You are my heart and my song.” It’s not the greatest thing I’ve written, and it’s not the worst, but maybe more than any other it most typifies who I am as a musician.

One hundred thirteen dollars was left in my pocket at the end of that night, the rest spent in a wave of excess that I cannot regret. Money buys fans in clubs; drugs and breasts pressed into my face, limousines through nocturnal Manhattan. It buys respect and envy. With money I created the story of my success, arcing through one night where I could be exactly who I’ve always wanted. And all of it, the highs and the nausea, everything is rock and roll.

How do you ever know that you’ve tapped into your full potential? How do I know that I wouldn’t be the world’s best car salesman if I tried? Or rodeo clown? How does clarity of desire play into it? What percentage is hard work? Who tells me when my turn is over? Speak to me. Will my songs make people dance and weep and will they be played years after we’re all dead? Do I need doubt? Where have you gone? Who do I talk to?

“Can I get my cut from the show. I want to take Kaylin some place nice,” Frank said when I answered the phone.

You can’t. It’s gone. But it was an investment. It is paying off my doubt and saving us all from obscurity. There are sacrifices we must make. Anya is still broken beside me in bed. And last night . . . things have been rough lately, but last night I was a rock star. I’m sorry it took \$2500, but it was necessary to keep me from disappearing.

“First you lied about how much it was and then you spent it all anyway?”

I didn’t lie. I really tried to convince him of that. It was always the band’s money. My cut was going directly toward a new guitar. His anger reminded me of what I am still missing.

“God, Robbie. I wish I could be more surprised than this.”

It's all part of what we do. Why we work shit jobs and are miserable most of the time. Because we're important, we're selling out thoughts and ideas, and unless we believe it no one will. No one will think about us, and wonder who we are, why we thought as we did. They need to love us or we fade away. Forever, Frank. We can make something that outlasts us.

"That's not me, Robbie. There are more important things to think about."

But there's always the chance that it could become real.

"Do you know anything about me?"

Yes. You're the rhythm.

"That's not what defines me. I'm not miserable or lost. The band is nothing more than a good time. But you're too caught up in a delusion to see anything other than an audience. I can't keep encouraging it. I don't want to be in your band anymore, Robbie."

That was a while ago. I never bothered calling Randy. Frank must have told him and that was it.

Time for change. Change can inspire. We'll find new musicians. We'll rebuild the sound. Create a new name. We could be In Search of Something New. But the band lives on. Because we are the band.

We've been thinking about this, it's always lied in the back of our head. Never stop looking for ways to improve. Take some time to think about it, never be rash, come back harder, better, stronger.

You've been so quiet since that night. I need someone else to help me. Jimmy's disappeared. Find him. Whatever happened to that film? That was our ticket.

"Hey, Robbie. How's it going? Been a while."

"Jimmy, you're a hard man to track down."

"You're wondering about the film, right? It's on hold for a bit. There was an issue with financing and it's stuck in editing for now. Had to move on. Got a job as a PA on this indie thing, but the director knows fuck all. If they let me take over I could make something out of it."

"So is our film going to get done?"

"Money, man. I've got expenses. Unless you want to help us out we're tied."

“I don’t have any money.”

“How about I sell you the concert scene as a music video. You want to let people hear your music.”

“But I really don’t have anything.”

“Well that’s where we are then. It’s a tough business, you know.”

“Alright, but what else is going on? You want to hang out?”

“Yeah, man, let’s party. One of the guys on set will get us some blow if you can front me the money.”

“I don’t—”

“That’s right. Ok, I’ll talk to him. Give me a call sometime and we’ll hang out.”

And that’s . . . is there no one else? That’s the extent of my social life? Where is everyone I used to know? Someone has to speak to me. All the phone numbers I have, emails from fans, names of people I haven’t spoken to in ages, people I don’t really like. I call Tim Spool who I haven’t spoken to in months, who I stopped calling because he would never come out to a show. I call him seeking forgiveness.

“Robbie?”

“Tim, man. How’s it going?”

“Wow. Uh, good.”

“Yeah? I just wanted to see what you’re up to.”

“Making dinner, actually.”

“Anything good?”

“Not really. Fish sticks.”

“Fish sticks? Oh man, I haven’t had those in years.”

“Yeah, they’re disgusting but the kids can’t get enough.”

He’s got kids. Did I know that? Is he married? Or is he the one who got divorced? “What’re their names again?”

“Pat’s four and Conner’s two.”

“Wow, Pat’s four? I can’t believe . . . Pat’s that old.” I can’t use a pronoun with that. Am I supposed to know about his kids?

“Yup. He was born right after the firm transferred me out here.”

Where is “here?” Where are four years? How did life move that fast?

“So what’s going on with you, Robbie? You have kids?”

Me? “Me? Ah, no. Still at the music thing.”

“Oh. Are you teaching?”

“No. Playing shows.”

“That’s right, you and Frank were a band.”

“Yeah, we’re a band.”

“Good for you.”

I hate that. Why did he say that? “What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Just good for you still playing in the band.”

He’s laughing at me now, I can tell. He never got the music, wasn’t creative. No, good for you, you fish stick-smelling prick. Fuck your kids, Tim. “Actually we just recorded an album. It’s coming out soon.”

“Really?”

“Oh, and I wrote the soundtrack to a major motion picture, story of a generation saga. Epic. Simon and Garfunkel and *The Graduate*.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Yeah, it’s brilliant. There will be a big premier soon. Support the whole show. The director’s some film genius, next-big-thing type. Visionary, I’ve read.”

“That’s really great, Robbie. Sounds like fun.”

“It is great. And I fucked the lead actress too. Gorgeous younger girl, and talented. A real fucking star.”

“Oh. That’s uh” There’s murmuring on his side of the line. “Listen, Robbie, I got to help the kids eat. But it was good catching up. I’ll call you some time.” And he hangs up.

The little shit. That’s why I stopped calling him. My phone is filled with assholes who I never talk to anymore, who would say stupid things like “good for you,” if I talked to them now. I delete Tim’s number. Then more numbers. If I can’t remember the last time we spoke, they’re no longer there. It’s grown into years, not months of separation and if I can’t stop time from running off without me then I can erase the people who remind me that the world is unforgiving of my needs. Jimmy and Jen and

Randy and . . . I could still hold on to Frank. Hope that there's a way back, one chance to start over.

And where have you been? Are you still out there? Where are you for all this? The one who always runs away, who was never really there. You've abandoned me again. Every time I need you. Just say something, let me know you're still there.

I find Alex's number in my cleansing and the hurt seethes up again. I delete it but that's not enough with her. Her stank still wafts through this cellar. There is still a pile of her things on the table; she left in a hurry after the attack, afraid she might have killed me. I pick up camisoles from the pile, a blouse, and tear them into rags. A pair of sweatshorts she wore as pajamas into pieces. I pull apart the links of a necklace and shatter glass beads. But it's not enough. Her toothbrush is in the bathroom. I shove it down into my pants and then out onto the heap. There are photos in an album. I pull them out and tear them into strips, separating her shoulder from her neck, her ear from her face, removing one breast and then the other from her torso, pulling her legs apart. I create a broken pile of her remains, but still I can smell her in the room. I don't know what else to do. But then I see her, still on the bed, still broken, and I realize that it's the rotting carcass that I smell. I need to get rid of her now; this is part of the cleansing, this is her ritual goodbye. I pick Anya up off the bed and begin stuffing the broken pile of Alex into her, in through the hole in her back that's the shape of my head. I force everything in, until it is spilling out, and then I take her out into the backyard, onto the cement patio. For the first time I notice how cold it is. The city is in the sky, looking down on me, lights reflected off low hanging clouds, muddy swarms of energy that wait for my sacrifice. I lay Anya on the cement and get a bottle of lighter fluid, cover her body and pour it down into the sound hole. Then I pray. Dear God, let this take away the pain. Let this be what I need. Music is my life, God, please don't forget me. I strike a single match. She catches right away, the fire dancing along her body and down her neck. I kneel in front of her and will the flames to rise higher, leaping out as the women burn inside. This sacrifice I offer for love and forgiveness, for music. Wilson barks at the door, sensing the tumult but afraid to come out. His sharp yelps cry out over my rhythmic chants and join this song. Take away my pain . . . music and life . . . don't forget about me. There is power in this moment. It should be feared and respected.

After an hour there are only embers and the charred outline of the body. In the back of my closet, in a case that hasn't been opened in years, is Dad's old Gibson, cheaply made of composite wood. The strings are out of tune. It sounds flat after the resonance of the Breedlove, letting out grunts that quickly die away without the space to move through. I sit on the bed and twist the keys into tune, comparing the notes, the subtle modulations, my ear resting near the sound hole. The body is cold from sitting alone for so long, closeted, ignored. We start slowly, letting it remember its role, remember music. My fingers on the fret board, plastic pick, beat of a wrist, notes into chords in progression and rhythm into song with words in poetry and melody telling a story for everyone and no one, for the composer, the singer, the band, the audience, for him, for her, for me.

By myself, on the bed, I sit and play Springsteen songs until the morning.