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Empire of Dirt

Tawni Auxier
University of New Orleans

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Empire of Dirt

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts

Creative Writing
by

Tawni Auxier,

B.A. University of New Mexico, 2003

December, 2009

DEDICATION

This book is a love child. It is dedicated to all of its fathers, but most of all, to my father, the late, great Timothy John Hackett, who will always be beloved of Tawni. Fly in peace, Daddy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mentors, Amanda and Joseph Boyden, whose patience, generosity, and skill taught me more about writing than I ever knew there was to learn, and without whom, this book would suck. Gale Walden, who supported this vision from day one and patiently and carefully read and critiqued revision after revision. Grim Jim Grimsley, who kept telling me I was going to sell books and taught us all how to use a microphone. The great loves of my life, Desi and Timmy, who inspire me daily and put up with me while I chase my dreams (and a few rock bands). Daddy, whose love sustains me still. (No matter what “they” said about me, I could never quite stop hearing you tell me I was a princess.) Momma who was always there, from the terrible twos to the terrible thirty-twos, and loves me no matter what. Bryan, my first and oldest friend, who built tree forts with me, forgave me for trying to kill him with a frying pan, and shows me every day what it means to live a love-filled life (and also showed me the video that inspired the title of this book). Jules, who has been, since the day I met her, my Fairlight. Leah, who chased me around in diapers, has continued to love, challenge, and surprise me for a lifetime, and always, always makes me laugh. Roger Clyne who creates (and is) the art that is my soul’s sustenance. Jessica (Pink Princess) who made me believe in myself and keeps running down the dream with me. Jimbo, who believes in me and gives me socks and fights off bad guys and makes sure I don’t sleep in my car. Michael Papirtis, who first told me this book changed his life and who kept his promise to be there. Tonya, one of my best friends forever, starting that day in Sunday school when we were four. Martine (my very own Mina Loy), who regales me with fine wine and Greek mythology and lives like a rock star with me. Jes, who helped me set out on this journey, wore evening gowns

to CD launch parties with me, climbed trees in groupie boots with me, and danced, danced, danced. Kris, who made the road a place of laughter and love and made a crack about hemp underwear that started my synapses jumping. Drea, whose beautiful smile will always live in my heart. Merridith, Jeni, Max, and Eva, for the crazy-beautiful times in San Miguel and beyond. And, most of all, my hero, my friend, my confidant, God (aka The Big Cheese), whose love gave me the courage to live.

A NOTE ABOUT THE LYRICS

All of the lyrics used at the beginnings of the chapters are attributed, within the chapter, to the vocalist who performed them and made them famous. That person's birth name, as opposed to his or her stage name, is used. If the songs were written with, or by, other artists, that information is noted with a "*" and detailed in the Appendix at the end of the book. Within the appendix, the songs are listed in the order in which they appear in the manuscript.

EPIGRAPH

I wear this crown of thorns upon my liar's chair

Full of broken thoughts I cannot repair.

Beneath the stains of time, the feelings disappear.

You are someone else. I am still right here.

What have I become, my sweetest friend?

Everyone I know goes away in the end.

And you could have it all, my empire of dirt.

I will let you down. I will make you hurt.

If I could start again, a million miles away.

I would keep myself. I would find a way.

--From "Hurt," by Trent Reznor, covered by Johnny Cash (February 26, 1932-- September 12, 2003) months before his death. The Grammy Award winning video is widely considered his epitaph.

MEMORIA

Come as you are, as you were, as I want you to be.

As a friend, as a friend, as an old Memoria.

*--Kurt Donald Cobain (February 20, 1967-April 5, 1994)**

My story begins before my death, in the time when I still had flesh. Hands and feet and eyes. Then, I had lips with which to lie, and I did sometimes. Now, I never do. Mine is a love story, but it's no romance. Neither is it a shortcut to Zen, a manual to make life make sense. My story only makes the kind of sense drive-by shootings make.

My story begins in the year of the house with no electricity, the night Maggie panted on our tattered couch, her belly heaving with each contraction, her sweat glistening in the clutching candlelight, strands of red hair matted around her gaunt face. From his perch in the corner, our hawk, Huitzilopochtli watched with golden eyes, rustling his mud-red wings each time Maggie moaned.

"It hurts," Maggie whimpered. I stared. Maybe it was the peyote, but damn if that tear on her cheek didn't gleam. Maggie covered her face with both hands. "I don't want that hawk watching me, Paul. The baby's coming."

"She's not coming," I said. "It's not time." I took a sliver of ice from the Styrofoam cup on the battered coffee table and swept it across Maggie's forehead. She screamed then, and said through clenched teeth, "She's coming."

"No." I placed a hand on her belly. "Not yet, Maggie. Not yet."

As I watched my wife's knuckles clench and unclench, knowing that if our baby came now, she would come to us dead and blue, I cried. Hot, unmanly tears. I couldn't stop the sobs from coming though, not when I could imagine my daughter waving goodbye to me through the golden wall of her amniotic sac. We had named her. Aspen. I had whispered that name again and again into the mound of Maggie's belly, pretending that protruding naval was some biologically engineered microphone. Every time Aspen heard me, she moved.

"She's got some right hook," I would say proudly, rubbing my stubbled chin. Aspen knew me already. Loved me already. And that night, while my wife lay panting, love was thick in the room, as thick as the softly glowing fluid in which Aspen was floating.

Maggie and I were hippies then, way back when, before we found Jesus, with feathers and flowers dangling from our dreadlocked hair. Our eyes shined as they gazed out at the earth around us, a new frontier, glittering with miracles. Monkeys fluent in sign language. Boys in bubbles. Rallies for peace. The planet was alive. Yellow. Gold. Orange. On fire with the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.

In this sunrise climate, Aspen was conceived, a burst of light erupting in her mother's womb, created in a fit of love that was made more intense with the aid of LSD. When our lovemaking was finished, we lay wrapped in the sheets, wet and panting, like fish in a net.

"Feel it, Paul." Maggie grasped my thick fingers and pressed them against her belly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Her," she whispered. "Our baby. Do you feel her?"

I gasped. "Yes." I closed my eyes. "A flash of light. A sparkler."

Six months after Aspen's conception, we thought we were doing her a favor by giving her that peyote. "Open her mind before her brain gets all muddled with toxic rational thinking,"

I told Maggie, pressing the peyote onto her slick tongue. And maybe we were doing Aspen a favor. Our daughter always saw colors more brightly than the other children.

“Do you think it will hurt the baby?” Maggie asked, still holding the peyote in her mouth.

“No, love. It will set her free.”

Back then, the only people who talked about the dangers of drugs were people we hated. Preachers. Presidents. Press hounds. Sure, films about *Reefer Madness* were shown in classrooms, but who really believed that smoking a joint was going to transform a mild mannered housewife into a machete-wielding psychopath? But the thing we did not know was that peyote was an abortive.

So six months pregnant, and my wife was in labor, and even with all the miracles, no one knew how to keep three month premature babies alive. So the glow of death swirled around unborn Aspen, weaving itself through the waves of her amniotic sac, and so she saw a tunnel. She kicked her popsicle stick legs, swimming toward it. Her heartbeat slowed. Outside her bubble, her mother screamed and Huitzilopochtli flapped.

So it happened that I fell on my knees in front of Maggie’s heaving belly and spoke my daughter’s name. “Stay with me, Aspen, stay.” Huitzilopochtli flew to the windowsill. As his yellow eyes burned starry holes in the night, I sang to my baby. *“I’m gonna love you ‘til the heavens stop the rain. I’m gonna love you ‘til the stars fall from the sky for you and I.”*

I didn’t know it, but I did, that Aspen heard me through the layers and layers of gold that swaddled her. I didn’t know it, but I did, that she was on her way out of this world, swimming toward that tunnel, when she heard my voice, flowing to her like a river from another universe. She rode that river back to life and grew in her mother’s womb for three more months, so that

when she was finally born, pink and squalling, she already loved me before my big, cracked hands ever held her once.

“Congratulations,” said the midwife, draping Aspen’s tiny body across Maggie’s belly, which was now a checkerboard of purple stretch marks. “It’s a healthy baby girl.”

From his place on the headboard of our bed, Huitzilopochtli screamed.

“Hello, Sparkler,” I said, crying again. This time, for joy. This time, unashamed. At the sound of my voice, Aspen’s wailing stopped. Her bewildered eyes, the color of the sky just after a storm, darted around the room. I stepped forward and touched her cheek, tentatively, feeling as if I might break her. Her skin was warm, pale, white, like her mother’s. Not a drop of my Mexican blood seemed to have made its way into her tiny body.

As a dead man, I have replayed those scenes again and again. First, I have peeked back through time into my daughter’s amniotic sac, watching her decide to live. And then, I have fastforwarded three months, to look once more into Maggie’s astonished eyes as she stared at the wonderful creature that had just escaped from her womb.

That is what death is. Death is remembering.

I remember this too. The day I left my body behind. It was summer, sixteen years after Aspen’s birth, long after I found Jesus in the back of that police car and gave up my wild ways. Long after I found Huitzilopochtli dead on the kitchen floor, a mass of cold flesh and feathers. Long after Aspen’s baby teeth had grown in and fallen out and been replaced by adult teeth, I died. I remember floating above our living room, looking at my lifeless body. The heart attack that evicted me from my fleshy home had been sudden. I felt almost nothing. A squeezing in my chest. A heady rush of adrenaline. A swirling of stars before my eyes. Still, I knew what it meant. You know death when you meet it.

A moment of blackness, and then I slid from my body the way a woman slips free from a dress. I was strangely unafraid as I floated up and up, watching the doctors perform their life saving rituals, watching Maggie kneeling beside me, begging me not to go. I tried to reach for Maggie and realized I had no hands. My only concern was for her and Aspen. The brick heavy load of worry that comes with life on earth was suddenly and deliciously gone, replaced by a sensation of perfect wholeness. I felt so alive. Electric.

“I’m not dead,” I wanted to tell Maggie. “I can fly!” But I couldn’t speak. No mouth.

“Clear!” Though the paramedics applied their paddles again and again, there was no saving me. “I’m sorry,” said a paramedic, and Maggie’s scream echoed like a thousand clanging bells.

The body that had been mine was already mottled with purple when Aspen wandered in, crying. I noticed her eyes, still the color of the sky just after a storm, looking as bewildered as they had on the day of her birth. She knelt beside me and buried her face in my chest. I could see the tangled mass of her cinnamon curls, the buttons of her knuckles as she pounded her fist against the floor. She was weeping, kissing those stiffening hands that hours before had been mine.

“Daddy, don’t leave me,” Aspen begged, pressing her face against what had once been my shoulder. The falcon tattooed on that chest, which once had been broad and strong, was still and cold. It offered no comfort. That stony flesh stretched out on the floor had nothing to do with me. Try as I might, I could not move it. Aspen was so small. I remember wanting to run to her, realizing again I no longer had a body. No feet.

Then, I remember the light. Death is like a mushroom cloud of golden light swallowing you whole. Death is not grounding. It is flight. If you fly high enough, you see the currents of

life, spread out below you like rivers on a map, the course of one life bubbling and intersecting with another. You can follow the flow of a life, tracing it backward and forward in time. You can watch it emerge from the clouds, a droplet of water. It falls on a glacier, trickling, picking up speed, until it becomes a pounding current, decimating sediment and stone. At last, it finds itself in the desert, becomes a trickle once more, evaporates, reunites with the sky. When you are dead, you can join forces with a life course, thrilling with its ecstasies, drooping with its defeats.

Death is not sleeping. It is being awake. You hear things. You smell things. You see the colors. Somewhere in Japan, children dance. Their teeth look like tiny pearls. And in France, silent bats sleep in a petroglyphed cave's mouth. They hang from the weeping ceiling like dirty laundry, dreaming of bugs. When you are dead, you hear all the dreams of all the creatures in all the world, swirling about you, a great whirlwind of sound and pigment. You can pick and choose from the pile if you want, taste one dream, then another.

I taste Aspen's dreams tonight. She lies crumpled in a motel bed, and I wish I had my big, cracked hands again, to tuck her in one last time. Four earth years have passed since that day my heart exploded, and still, every night, I watch her sleep, wishing for one more goodnight. I cannot leave her. Not yet.

She is dreaming of him, of the man that came and stole her colors. I could do nothing because I had no hands. Now, she is crying in her sleep again, and I cannot touch her.

When you are dead, you can ask for things sometimes. Like Aladdin and his genie lamp, only you do not ask for the things you might have asked for once. Fame. Money. Sex. Those things don't matter. What you ask for is love. It is the only thing that matters when you are dead. It is the only thing that ever mattered.

I ask to stay here, in this dank, dark motel room, thick with smoky dreams. I ask for hands, but I am given wings. I ask for a voice, but I am given wind, and the wind whispers, "I'm here, baby. Daddy's here. Sleep, Sparkler. Sleep."

*

Look closely. You will see me. A scar, a swath of blood, smeared upon the smooth face of the seeping violet sky. Look closer. Squint. Zoom in, pretending you have a camera in your head. See me now? Not blood. If you are prone to talking to yourself, you will mutter, "Ah-ha! It's only a bird. A mud-red bird." And indeed, I am.

I circle a white convertible that glides along below me, a milky bead of water trickling down the blue-black pipe of Highway 101. Some might call me a red-tailed hawk, though if you believe in ghosts, you may come to think, as the car's occupants have, that I am, in fact, a ghost of the friendliest variety. A shape shifter. An angel. Call me what you will. If you believe in such things, if you carry rabbit's feet and say Hail Mary's and haunt graveyards for signs of life after death, you will imagine that I am here to protect Aspen and Shae. They need protection, these crazy little groupies packaged in their metallic white box like so much pink candy. God, do they ever. My shrill scream is drowned out by their stereo's incessant, irreverent thumping, but still, Aspen hears it in her heart.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Each morning I get up, I die a little.

Can barely stand on my feet.

Take a look in the mirror and cry!

Can anybody find me somebody to love?

--Farrokh Bulsara (September 5th 1946--November 24th, 1991)

“Hello there, Daddy,” Aspen yells, throwing her head back to see me, thrusting her hands up, trying to touch the clouds. Trying to touch me. Cool air rushes over her palms and between her manicured fingers.

“Hi Daddy,” Shae echoes, and honks. She has adopted me for her own. Fatherless as they are, it comforts them to be parented by me, a dream. Shae has been to my grave in that barren desert cemetery, helped Aspen pull clumps of yellowed grass from the parched soil and fight cactus away from the headstone. She has seen the hawk carved on the red marble marker. “Beloved of Maggie and Aspen” it says there above the outspread wings.

Shae is drunk. It is 6 a.m. The salty breeze is caressing their flushed faces as they let the 101 guide them from Los Angeles to San Diego. Outside, the ocean slides by in a desperate, rippling expanse of vivid turquoise. It kisses the sky.

They are half naked, breasts bursting over the tops of leather bustiers like curious monkey heads. They have kicked off their knee-high boots. Their toes are painted taffy colors and are wriggling free, beautiful to look at. They wear lollipop-looking sunglasses too big for

their faces. Their hair is wild, sweaty, bed-headed, though they have not been to bed. They have been dancing all night. Dancing at the feet of their god. Their god's name is Darren Silverado. He is their Jesus in Blue Jeans.

Shae is eating cashews. This is what Aspen and Shae eat when they drive from city to city, following their god. Cashews, beef jerky, and diet soda, the breakfast of modern day disciples. Loaves and fishes are passé. You cannot subsist on most road trip food and stay thin, but these three items don't pack on the pounds. Shae's long, velvety leg snakes down toward the gas pedal. Her other is propped on the dashboard. Her facial piercings glint in the morning light.

It is probably not advisable, this driving drunk with one foot on the dashboard, but much of what Shae does is not advisable. Aspen loves Shae. For her crew cut, cotton- candy-blue hair and piccolo laugh, yes, but most of all, she loves her for the inadvisability of her behavior. When there was a traffic jam in Chicago, Shae tried to drive on the sidewalk. When they were wandering the streets of New York at midnight, Shae dragged Aspen into an alley to fawn over a forlorn pigeon with a broken wing. The pigeon died the next day in a shoebox in the backseat of their car, cushioned in tissues and bra pads.

Shae has not yet learned that there are people out there who will put you in a cage for driving down a sidewalk or slit your belly open like a pig's for wandering down a dark alley. Aspen has learned, but she doesn't care. When the worst has already happened to you, you have nothing left to lose. Still, Aspen keeps Shae from driving on sidewalks when she can.

"Watch out!" Aspen yells, and Shae swerves to miss a mangy dog just in time.

"Holy shit!" Shae says. "Is he okay?"

Aspen looks over her shoulder. "He's okay."

“Fuckin’-A.” Shae honks the horn belatedly. “Attention, Shae is at the wheel! If you wanna stay alive, get out of my fuckin’ way!”

Aspen laughs. “You’re the only person I know who is crazier than me.” She takes Shae’s cool hand. “If you were a boy, I’d marry you.”

“You always fucking say that.” Smiling, Shae kisses Aspen’s knuckles.

“Not always.”

“Yes, always. Is there something you need to tell me, girl? You’ve been in love with me since that day at the church. Haven’t you? Haven’t you?” She pokes Aspen’s arm playfully.

Aspen laughs. “Stop! Yes, I’m in love with you.” She leans over and plants a wet kiss on Shae’s cheek. “Madly. Wildly. Ever since that day.” Leaning back on the head rest, Aspen closes her glittered eyelids, remembering.

It was the summer of Shae and Aspen’s sixth year on earth when they met in the belly of a sagging church. That ambitious place of worship was already secretly aspiring to become the condemned pile of kindling that it is now, but then, its return to the dust had been slowed by a fiery young reverend who spent his Saturdays pounding nails and repairing pipes. In that summer, the church was something to look at, with its newly whitewashed walls and needle-esque steeple poking the eyes of the cloudless desert sky. It had two rooms: a foyer which housed a dusty plastic geranium, a bulletin board, and a family of rats; and a sanctuary which housed a pine pulpit, thirty torn pews, and a bruised organ. The untuned organ was mercifully silent on the day in question, as Mrs. Carmichael, the church organist of 52 years, lay in a coffin just in front of her beloved instrument. Her oddly orange face wore a thin-lipped grin that in no way resembled any expression she had ever produced in life. A yellow broach at her throat held in place a silk scarf, which in turn held closed, or at least disguised, the gaping hole left in her

neck by her tracheotomy. Her puckered hands were folded serenely over her sunken chest, like cloth napkins, and her gray hair was big and coifed, not hanging limp as it had those mornings she perched at the organ, hammering out “Amazing Grace” with a stern expression etched into her sharp features.

When the adults had wandered to the foyer to console one another, Shae had slipped to front of the church to peer into the casket. Intrigued by the thirteen rainbow colored barrettes dangling from this small stranger’s ratty hair, Aspen had followed. Now, they stood on either side of the coffin, facing one another, staring down at the dead organist’s pickled face.

“She doesn’t look right,” Shae said.

Aspen nodded gravely. “Looks more like wax than anything.”

Shae extended a dirty index finger and poked Mrs. Carmichael’s rouged cheek. “She feels like wax too,” she reported matter of factly. “My momma says we gotta watch out now.”

Aspen’s eyes went wide. “Why?”

“Death comes in threes. That’s what my momma says.”

Aspen scrunched up her face, confused. “What?”

“One person dies. Two more die too. That’s what momma says.” She shrugged. “Death comes in threes.” She poked Mrs. Carmichael again. “Shit on a stick. She really does feel just like wax. Look, my fingers don’t even make a dent.”

“You shouldn’t say ‘shit on a stick,’” Aspen said, brushing a stray curl away from her eyes.

“Why not?”

“It’s a swear. You shouldn’t say swears. Only sinners say swears.”

“My momma says ‘shit on a stick’.”

“Your momma must be a sinner then.”

“Take that back,” Shae ordered with an emphatic fury that sent dewdrops of spit flying. She reached out to grab a handful of Aspen’s red curls, but Mrs. Carmichael’s final resting place was too wide.

“You’re spitting on Mrs. Carmichael.” Aspen thought she might cry.

Shae’s ferocious fingers became suddenly docile. “Wow. Look. It just sits there. Doesn’t soak in or anything. I swear, she’s made of wax.” She dabbed at one of the spit droplets. “You gotta touch her.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Just no.”

“You scared?”

“A little.”

Shae’s expression softened. “No reason to be scared. Miss Carmichael was real nice. She used to bring my momma things to eat, sometimes, when we needed food real bad. Here.” She stretched a chubby arm over the coffin and stuck out her pinky. “We’ll touch her together. Pinky swear.”

Unsure, Aspen put out her hand. Shae linked pinkies with Aspen. “On the count of three, we’ll touch her. One. Two. Three.” On three, the girls unlinked pinkies and touched Ms. Carmichael. When her fingers met the waxy coolness of embalmed flesh, Aspen jumped a little, then giggled.

“Funny, huh?” Shae giggled too, moving her hand to caress Mrs. Carmichael’s mouth. “Feels like worms on a sidewalk.”

Aspen gave the purple lips a poke. “Nah. Worms aren’t so hard as that.”

“They can be, if you keep them in the freezer for a day or two.”

“You did that?”

“Once or twice.”

“I put a snowman in the freezer at the end of last winter. It’s still there.”

“Could I come over and see it?”

“I gotta ask my mom and dad first.”

They sauntered off together, the corpse inspection long forgotten. Later that day, they viewed the snowman, which stood a foot tall and took up an entire freezer shelf, with the same drop-jawed awe they had lavished upon the late Mrs. Carmichael.

“A snowman in summer?” Shae grabbed Aspen’s hand and squeezed. “Shit on a stick, it’s a miracle.”

Aspen grinned and said nothing. They left the snowman on the lawn to confuse passing boys, but no boys passed, and while the girls were inside dying their lips purple with popsicles, the snowman met his untimely demise at the mercy of a thirsty golden retriever.

“I’m thirsty,” Shae says, pulling the car into a rest stop, which is mostly deserted, except for two big-rigs that have not begun their workday. Proud palm trees line the stormy horizon, making the skyline look like some bizarre collection of monstrous piña coladas. Even from the car, they can smell the roadside bathrooms, so they pee in the gravel, laughing. They have developed a deep and well-founded distrust for public restrooms. You never know what will crawl up from a porta-potty. You just never know.

Shae swears like a man when she gets urine on her perfectly pedicured toes. “Fuck me.” Just like that. She stands and wipes her foot in the grass. “Wanna get a room in San Diego?”

“Nah. We’ll have to check out in five hours anyway. It won’t be worth it,” Aspen says, yanking her skirt down.

Even cheap hotels with pentagrams carved into the walls add up over time. And Aspen’s inheritance will not last forever if they’re not careful. They cannot imagine that a day will come when they will want normal jobs. Receptionist. Legal assistant. These are foreign words to them. Frightening words. They do not understand them anymore than they understand “Viking” or “gladiator.” They have a vague idea of what the costumes for the roles would look like, how they might accessorize a pair of khaki slacks and an earth-toned blazer, but they have no concept of how they would go about the day-to-day behaviors that go with the costumes. They discuss this now, this terror of dayjobs in nervous, hushed tones that are barely audible over the roars of passing semis.

“Could you see me taking a memo for some fat asshole?” Shae asks, picking a dandelion from the grass and staring at it.

“You’d be taking more than his memo,” Aspen says.

“Yeah, I’d have to if I wanted to keep my job. I can’t even fucking type.” Shae blows on the dandelion, and swaths of its white hair swirl into the crisp morning air.

“What did you wish?” Aspen asks.

“I wished I’d bothered to learn to type.”

Aspen smiles. “We pretty much suck at everything, huh?”

“Pretty much.”

They are not quite right. They may suck at typing, but they are topnotch groupies. They understand this universe of lights and guitar chords and endless horizons. Lightning flashes just beyond the porta potties.

“That was close,” Aspen says.

“Shit,” Shae says. “It sure as fuck was.”

They wander back toward the car.

“Hey,” Shae says. “You wanna drive a little? I’m beat.”

“Yeah, but I think I’d better sleep some first.” Smoothing their skirts, Shae and Aspen climb into the car. Aspen presses a button, and the car top groans into place. “You wanna just crash here for while?”

“Yeah,” Shae says. “Whatever.” She pulls down the visor and checks herself in the mirror, fingering the dark circles under her eyes.

“You want a jacket?” Aspen asks.

“Sure,” Shae says.

Aspen grabs a faux fur trimmed coat from the backseat and hands it to Shae. “Night Shae.” She squeezes Shae’s hand and leans her seat back, using a wadded up T-shirt for a pillow.

They lock the doors and cover up with their coats so that they will not attract the attention of passing rapists. Lightning is zinging across the smoke cloudy horizon, waking up the day, and they fall asleep to the soothing sounds of thunder.

Aspen wakes up to the window rattling. A tall, brick wall of a man with a handlebar mustache is trying to open her door. His snake green eyes sparkle with bad intentions. He is not going to ask her for a quarter.

“Shae,” Aspen says and shakes her. Shae is more than asleep. Shae is passed out. The tequila has finally taken its toll. Aspen is good in sticky situations though. She does not freeze like she did that first time.

She turns the keys in the ignition, throws the car into reverse, and hits the gas pedal. Hard. They lurch backward. Maybe they run over the rapist's toes, crush them like cockroaches. Aspen doesn't know. She is looking in the rearview mirror, and when she looks up, the rapist is gone. Broken toes or no, he has fled. She throws the car into park, just short of a hefty scrub oak. Maybe she scratches up the bumper a bit. She doesn't know. She doesn't care. She reaches into the glove compartment and pulls out a can of mace. As she peels out of the parking lot, she rolls down the window and holds the mace out the window. "I've got mace!" she yells, just in case the rapist thinks she is prepared to defend herself with hairspray. "Motherfucker," she adds, because Shae has advised her it's always good to use the f-word when you're trying to sound tough. She pulls onto the highway.

Now that the danger has passed, she has time to be scared. "Shit, shit, shit," she says to the rearview mirror. "You almost fucking died." The girl looking back does not seem surprised.

She drives fifty miles before she stops again. Palm trees whip past. Her heart bangs against her ribcage like a trapped bird. Her hands sweat. Shae doesn't wake up. She will not even know that they almost died when she comes to tomorrow, probably throwing up on her shoes.

Aspen makes deals with God. Not Darren Silverado, but God. The one her Daddy worshipped. She swears off drinking for good. She swears off sleeping in the car. She swears off speed, which is easy, because she has never taken speed. That is Shae's thing. Aspen's luscious curves and slopes bespeak a body never tainted by the emaciating effects of amphetamines. Still, the more things you swear off in these fits of repentance, the better, don't you think? But she doesn't swear off her Jesus in Blue Jeans. You can follow the white dot of

their car now, as it slithers along the slick, licorice whip highway, faster than an electric current, engine roaring scared.

*

In Times Square, an image of Aspen and Shae's Jesus in Blue Jeans stands, frozen in time, 20 feet tall, his rock-n-roll sneer leering at the antlike humans scurrying below him.

A homeless high school dropout who calls himself Heaven trudges along the greasy sidewalk, high on coke, jiggling the coins in his pocket to the rhythm of his footsteps and the musical growling of his belly. This is all the money I have in the world, he thinks. Heaven is unaware of the real currency he carries. His real currency is his face, his smooth, cocoa brown skin. The sharp, straight jut of his nose, the alluring pout of his lips, the wondering expanse of his seaweed green eyes. His flirtation with cocaine has left him gaunt, but gaunt is in just now. Heroin chic, they call it, even when heroin is not the culprit.

Six months ago, Heaven was not so gaunt. He was a high school sophomore, not a high school drop-out, and he had a home equipped with his own perfectly good double bed, give or take a few springs. On the night that changed everything, he spent most of the day lolling on that bed with Brandon, smoking pot and watching old movies.

"I wish I lived in that fuckin' screen," Heaven said, mindlessly fondling Brandon's recently shorn head, watching James Dean's Rebel play daddy for desperate, ill-fated Plato.

Brandon mimicked Plato. "Do you think the end of the world will come at night time?" He gazed at Heaven with beseeching eyes.

"Uh-uh," Heaven answered, donning a James Dean sneer. "At dawn."

"Fuck! You look exactly like James Dean!" Laughing, Brandon jumped up on the mattress, yanked Heaven's slipper from his foot, and held it to his mouth like a microphone.

“Heaven sits back, collects his thoughts for a moment, scratches his head, does his best James Dean. Take it Heaven!”

Heaven leapt to his feet, ripped off his other slipper, and sang. *“Life goes on long after the thrill of living is gone.”* They performed as much of the song as they could remember, gyrating and sneering until they forgot the lyrics, at which point, their concert disintegrated into a bed jumping marathon. Finally, they collapsed, exhausted. Grinning and wheezing, Heaven rested his head on Brandon’s chest.

Brandon squeezed his hand. “Let’s get some sleep, bro,” Brandon said.

They climbed into the closet, like always, except this time, they forgot to lock the door.

Two hours later, in came Heaven’s father, loosening his tie, calling for Heaven in that cinderblock voice that said he was in the mood to hit something. Heaven still wonders how he didn’t hear him until it was too late. He could have buried Brandon under dirty T-shirts if only he had heard. But he didn’t. There was just thudding pain in his skull and his eyes opening to see his father’s white fist bearing down again.

“Faggot,” his father yelled. “You little nigger, faggot. Get the fuck out of my house.”

Heaven cried, partly because the hitting hurt, but also because he was not a fag. He only liked the smell of Brandon, like the grass from the lawns Brandon mowed to earn extra cash, like the pot he bought with that cash, like the sweet sweat of a child. Feeling as if he were riding a sinister tilt-a-whirl, Heaven stumbled to his feet, only to be struck down again.

“I’m sorry, Dad.” He thought of *Rebel Without A Cause*, relishing even in this dark moment his sudden kinship with James Dean. He started to wail, the way Jim does when Plato dies. The world was starting to smell funny, that dizzy smell he got when he was twelve and he

looked down from the Empire State building. Then, he heard Brandon scream, and the world went dark.

He woke up in an alley that smelled like rotting meat. “Brandon?” He could see his breath hanging in the winter air. He glanced around, took in the dumpster, the bags of garbage, the graffitied wall of his apartment building. *God is dead*, someone had written. In the bruise-purple twilight, he recognized the lumpy form beside him as the duffel bag his mother bought him for his thirteenth birthday, right before she skipped town, ran off to Jamaica with that reggae guy. She said she was returning to her roots, even though she was born in Detroit.

“Mom,” he whimpered. His left eye was swollen shut, crusted over with blood. He was hungry, but he didn’t know where to get food, and anyway, he needed to see Brandon more than he needed to eat. As he dragged himself to his feet, his muscles screamed in protest. “Coming, bro,” he mumbled, lugging his bag to his shoulder.

When he reached Brandon’s street, he memorized each crack in the sidewalk, thinking this might be the last time he saw this place. Would Brandon hate him? Was he even alive? What had his dad done? Heaven smoothed back his dark curls and rang the doorbell, running his tongue over his teeth. He should have brushed them. Brandon liked clean teeth.

Brandon’s mother answered the door, wearing a tank top and her embroidered hippie jeans. “Brandon’s gone,” she said. Her words were a barbed wire fence. No trespassing.

“Where?” Heaven asked, his voice breaking with a ping, like a guitar string.

She wouldn’t tell him where. “Somebody busted his nose,” she said, choking up. By the way she looked at Heaven, with razor sharp eyes that wanted to cut, he could tell she thought he was that somebody. “Leave now or I’ll call the police, Bay,” she said, which was Heaven’s real name. Heaven was a nickname given to him by Brandon, because that’s the way Brandon said

he felt lying there in that closet. Like he'd died and gone to heaven. She slammed the door, leaving Heaven huddling in the icy winter air.

It's summer now, and surrounded by street smells, Heaven stumbles along, his eyes red and wet, the way they always get when he remembers Brandon. From a corner, a paunchy man calls to him, whistles at him like he is a pretty girl or a dog. When the man waves green paper with faces on it, the growl in Heaven's belly roars a reply. His hands tremble in his pockets. His fingernails clink against the coins, and he wants, more than anything, to fly away. To fly away from the emptiness of his belly and the smells of urine and rotting fruit and stale smoke. He will need money to fly, of course. More money than a few jingling coins. He knows this, and besides, he will hardly feel what comes next, high as he is from the coke. So he follows the man into an alley.

When he comes back, the green paper tucked snugly into his pocket, he falls to his knees and throws up in the gutter, quietly, so as not to disturb passersby with his retching. Still, the sour smell of his vomit permeates the air. He is embarrassed, of course, but what can he do? He looks up. Isn't that what the hymns encourage men to do when the chips are down? And what does he see but Darren Silverado, floating above the vomit and the green paper and the street smells. Safe in his billboard paradise, Darren Silverado stands untouched by humanity's filth.

With fogged eyes, Heaven gazes up at Darren Silverado. He wants bread. He wants love. He wants shoes with no holes. He wants fame, which is all of these things rolled into one. He has been swallowed by Darren Silverado on a billboard, the American dream, which has nothing to do with the pursuit of happiness these days. The modern American dream is built on the pursuit of immortality.

Heaven decides to take up the guitar, and when he rises, his footsteps mark the sidewalk with the rhythm of his fantasy. Inside the walls of Heaven's mind, stage lights glare. Guitars blare. Fans fall at his feet. He is a fleshless, boneless dream, made up of guitar cords and celluloid. He has no blood to spill. He will be like James Dean, spread out beautiful forever in black and white. Decay cannot touch him. This is the dream seed Darren Silverado has planted in Heaven's brain, and so it goes. The quest for immortality has become his reason to live. Forget Now. What is a Now worth if it doesn't go on forever?

As Heaven disappears into the subway, he glances up again and sees Darren Silverado watching, untouched.

*

Propped in a lemon-smelling motel bed, eating pizza that tastes like pepperoni and cardboard, Aspen and Shae rehash their brush with death.

"He almost fucking killed you," Shae says wonderingly. "God, those eyes. Those fucking eyes. Like a wild animal. A panther, man. Fuck." She lights a cigarette and takes a slow drag.

"You didn't see his eyes," Aspen reminds her. "You were passed out, remember?" Aspen is tinkering with a packet of dental floss, getting a long rope ready.

"How would I know he had eyes like a fucking panther if I didn't see him? I woke up when you started screaming."

"I told you he had eyes like a panther. Five seconds ago. Less."

"You said a snake. You specifically said he had eyes like a snake." Shae rustles around on the pillow, and dust flies. "*I* thought his eyes were panther-like. Cause I fucking saw them."

“And I didn’t scream until he was gone anyway,” Aspen says, winding the floss around her fingers. “It was eerie. Like one of those nature shows. I wasn’t even really scared until the danger had passed. Fight or flight. I fought. Then I flew.”

“I was scared shitless,” Shae says. “My whole fucking mouth tasted like acid. Still tastes like that.” She blows out smoke, tries to make to make an “o.” It doesn’t work. It never does. “Wouldn’t it rock if I could spell out words with my smoke?”

“Your mouth tastes like acid because you just threw up.”

“No way. It’s the fear. A fucking chemistry experiment on my tongue.”

Aspen opens her mouth, then decides to let Shae have her piece of the memory. There is no arguing with Shae anyway, not when she gets like this. “I wonder what Darren’s doing now,” she says.

“Fucking his *wife*,” Shae suggests helpfully and tries for another smoke ring. “That one looked like a tiger. Didn’t that one look like Tony the Tiger?”

Aspen begins to floss. Forcefully. “I know he’s married. I’m just saying he’s beautiful. I’m not saying I’d do him. It’s not like I’m a whore.”

“You kind of are.”

“Whatever.”

“You’re a whore with superb dental hygiene, if it’s any consolation.”

“God, that first fucking show in Colorado,” Aspen says, only she is still flossing, so it sounds more like, “Go, that fist shucking o in Co o ado.”

Shae understands though. They have sung this song enough times for her to know the lyrics by heart. “That show was pretty fucking amazing,” she says. “Fucking blew my mind.” She settles back on the pillow. “Maybe I could draw cartoons with smoke. I bet I could make

some money if I could pull that off. Mickey Fucking Mouse drawn in smoke. Wrap your head around that one.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’m not a fan of smoking.” Aspen tosses the floss on the floor.

“Gross,” Shae says. “You should pick that up.” Aspen doesn’t. Shae takes another drag. “What I want to know is how a girl like you gets through life without smoking anyway? I mean, you fucking do shrooms and acid every time you can get your hands on them, but you’ve never tried pot? Or even a cigarette?”

“So?”

“I’m just saying, most people try pot first. The gateway drug, you know?”

“Smoke grosses me out. When I was a kid, I’d cry every time my mom lit a cigarette. It was traumatic. I’ve told you that a million times.”

“You’re a fucking piece of work.” Shae blows another smoke ring. “I think that one was more like Fat Albert.”

“Fat Albert?”

“Yeah.” Shae pushes out her belly and does her best Fat Albert impression. “Hey, hey, hey.”

Aspen shakes her head.

“No? You should watch it sometime. Good show.” Shae looks at the ceiling. “Man, that first fucking show in Colorado was a good show. Remember that yellow shirt he was wearing?”

Aspen nods. “And he was singing with his blood, you know? Not his breath. His blood.”

Shae smiles. “I remember. I thought I could die happy ‘cause I was close to him.”

“I felt like I was standing on the sun. Melting.” Aspen closes her eyes and sighs.

“You’d be incinerated if you stood on the sun. Obliterated.” Shae blows another puff of smoke. “Incinerated. Obliterated. Do you know what that was? That was fucking off-rhyme.” She stares at the smoke. “Did that one look like Wile E. Coyote?”

“What a way to die,” Aspen says. “Melting into Darren forever. God, he was beautiful. Like a pillar of salt.”

“Salt?”

“Lot’s wife got turned into a pillar of salt as a punishment for looking back as Sodom and Gomorrah were burning.”

“Gomorr what?”

“Gommorrah. It was a place in the Bible. An evil place, so God destroyed it with fire and brimstone.”

“What the fuck is brimstone?”

“Lava. And Lot’s wife looked back to see it, the city melting down, you know? I would too. People she loved, screaming, dying. She had to look.”

“So God turned her to salt? That’s harsh.” Shae works at making one more “o” and then puts out her cigarette.

“I think, though, she must have been beautiful, dying like that. A sculpture glowing in the flicker of her loved ones’ embers. Alabaster on fire.”

“I think you’re the fucking poet. Not me.” Shae grabs the paper and pen on the nightstand and starts to scribble. “You mind if I use that?”

“Go for it.” Aspen shrugs. “Darren was like that, the first time I saw him. Hated by God. Lost. I thought, that is the most broken, beautiful man I have ever seen.”

“That’s what I thought,” Shae says, still scribbling. “Broken and beautiful. I mean, he was gorgeous, but he was so drunk, he couldn’t stand.”

“When is he not drunk?” Aspen asks, smiling wistfully.

“You act like his penchant for inebriation is a mark in his favor,” Shae says, looking up. “I mean, I’d do him. But he’s an alcoholic and a classic narcissist. Classic. I wouldn’t let him touch me if I were you.”

“You’d let him do you, but he can’t touch me?”

“You know what I meant.”

Aspen shakes her head. “Not really.” Absentmindedly, Aspen runs a finger along the groove in her throat. “Maybe I’d make an exception to my married clause in his case.”

“Your married clause?”

“Yeah. Married men. I won’t sleep with them.”

Shae grins impishly. “I thought you’d sleep with anyone.”

Laughing, Aspen throws a pillow at Shae. “I only sleep with men that love me!”

“And that’s pretty much every man that ever saw you.”

Aspen shrugs, smiling. “I guess so.” Shae is more or less right. Men do love Aspen on sight. She collects hearts like a careless child collects seashells, tossing them in her pocket and forgetting about them until they rattle out in the laundry and make dents in the dryer.

“On a good night, it doesn’t make me want to kill you,” Shae says, lobbing the pillow back at Aspen.

Aspen tosses it back halfheartedly. “Whatever. You’d never kill me.”

“In your sleep,” Shae says. “Like a man eating zombie.” She puts her arms in front of her stiffly and moans, “Brains.”

“You’d eat my brains?”

“Sure. A little lemon. A little butter. Maybe some paprika. Fry those fuckers up.”

Aspen laughs. “You’re disgusting.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Shae grabs the pillow Aspen threw. “Anyway, we can dream all we want, but we’ll never get him. We’re mere mortals.” Sighing, she places the pillow behind her head and settles back.

“You never know. Fate could intervene,” Aspen says.

Even though Shae rolls her eyes, she does not seem surprised by this romantic declaration. Aspen has always been a true believer, in God, in love, in destiny. She abandoned the traditions of her religion, the pot lucks and prayer meetings, but she never abandoned her faith.

“What kind of underwear do you think he wears?” Aspen asks.

“I don’t know. He goes commando.” Shae swallows a gulp of soda. Then in a flash of inspiration, she adds, “He wears hemp underwear, woven by indigenous peoples.”

Aspen sprays soda over the already stained pillowcases, and they laugh until their ribs almost break. Just when their laughter has quieted again to a painless giggle, one of them repeats, “Hemp underwear woven by indigenous peoples,” and the riot starts again, because it is so dead on.

Darren Silverado fancies himself an Indian, though his actual Indian content is unimpressive. He is 1/32 Navajo. Still, his 1/32 Navajo is more romantic than his 31/32 Presbyterian, and his between song sermons often reference sweatshops, cactus conservation, Mother Earth. The bumper sticker on his guitar case reads “Think globally, act locally.” And he puts his money where his mouth is. He recycles beer cans.

Aspen switches off the lamp. She curls up under the covers. “What shall we be tonight? Mongooses?”

“I don’t know. You pick. It’s your thing.” Shae crawls into the other bed. “I still don’t get why you have to pretend you’re an animal when you go to sleep.”

“I told you,” Aspen says sleepily. “Animals never worry. Just sleep cozy in their little nests.”

“Mongooses don’t have nests.”

“How do you know? Are you some kind of mongoose expert?”

“I just know. They sleep in trees.”

“Whatever,” Aspen says. “The point is that they sleep without worrying.” Her eyelids flutter closed.

That night, she dreams Darren as a ball of fire. He falls into her mouth and sets her insides ablaze.

*

Darren Silverado’s hotel room is not just a room. It is bigger than some people’s houses. The walls are hung with fine art originals. The sheets are made of Egyptian cotton. The chandeliers are made of crystal. The air is made of music and laughter, and should the mortals downstairs complain about the noise, they won’t get far. Darren has paid more for one night in this penthouse than the other guests would pay for a month in their rooms. The mortals are sleeping now, if they can, but sleep is the one luxury Darren cannot afford. No way could he sleep through this. No way.

“I’ll be right back,” Darren says to the pretty girl who is dangling from his arm. Pressing his lips against her delicate ear, he yells to be heard over the boom of the speakers. “I need a smoke.”

“What?” the girl screams back, giggling.

He points at the deck and shakes her off.

“Dumb as a brain-damaged slug,” he mutters as he walks away. He tried to talk to her about Ginsberg, and she’d never even heard of him. Taking a joint from his shirt pocket, Darren pushes through the crowd, smiling as they call his name. Smiling, but pointedly ignoring them. “Excuse me,” he says to the cluster of people standing in front of the glass doors. Obediently, they step aside, and he opens the door. A wall of cold air hits him, but undaunted, he strides outside, to the edge of the deck. It’s quieter out here. He can hear himself think, at least. He lights up and inhales deeply. Looking down, he can see the whole wide world, twinkling like Christmas. The smoke burns his lungs deliciously. He blows it out, and for a moment, it hangs in a cloud over the city. Oddly enough, he thinks of Nero setting Rome on fire. The pot mixes with the alcohol already in his system, and the colors get brighter. More crisp. “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness.” He recites “Howl” slowly, tasting the words. “Starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix. Angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night.” His voice in his ears is beautiful.

Behind him, he hears Jackson, his manager, say, “He’s busy right now. He needs a little time.” Darren smiles. Of course Jackson followed him out. He digs Jackson. Really digs the dude. Jackson always has his back. He has been with him since the beginning, and he is like a

father to Darren. More like a father than Darren's real father. Turning to flash Jackson a smile, Darren raises two fingers in a peace sign.

"Peace, bro," Jackson says back. He stands in front of the glass doors, his wiry arms crossed. In the porch light, his bald head gleams. He is short, 5'6", maybe, but somehow, he manages to take better care of Darren than all of his beefy security guards put together.

"How's it going?" Darren calls.

"Not bad," says Jackson. "Hoping I can get some action tonight." He looks inside. Darren follows his gaze, and through the glass doors, he sees a girl standing on the leather couch, taking off her checkered top. Slowly, one button at a time. People circle her, screaming, urging her on with catcalls and whistles. She is lovely, all black curls and long legs. Darren stares, narrowing his eyes, feeling sorry for her, almost. He wonders if he should go to her and say something. Say, "Honey, you don't have to do this." He could brush the hair out of her eyes, take her by the hand, lead her to the bedroom.

"She's pretty," he says to Jackson.

"Hot as hell." Jackson laughs.

Darren flicks the joint butt over the railing and walks to the door. Jackson opens it. As he steps inside, Darren calls over his shoulder, "Use my red guitar if you want."

Jackson's eyes go wide. "You sure, man?"

Darren shrugs. "Girls dig musicians."

The door closes behind him, and noise swallows Darren whole. He stares through the crowd, focuses on the stripping girl. Somebody shouts, "Show us your tits!" Even over the music, he can hear the screams. The girl whips off her shirt and sends it flying across the room. It lands on a mahogany end-table.

If he took her to the bedroom, they could lie together on the bed. Just lie there. He could re-button her top, hold her, ask her questions. He could say things like, “What’s your best memory from kindergarten?” And there, with the heat of her head heavy on his chest, she might tell him.

“Darren!” The slug-dumb girl is back, grabbing at his arm.

“Hey.” Darren raises a hand in nonchalant greeting and steps away. Striding toward the stripping girl, he watches her as she reaches behind her back and unsnaps her bra. It hangs loosely from her shoulders. Her breasts are smaller and droopier than they looked in the push-up bra. When she dances, her tiny pink nipples show. All in all, they are not the most spectacular breasts he has ever seen. But then again, he has seen some really spectacular breasts.

He could take her to the room and pet her head gently as she told him about her favorite kindergarten memory. Maybe it would be about a teacher. A stray kitten. A book. Maybe it would be funny. Maybe it would make him laugh, feel safe, open up. Then he could tell her his favorite memory. He could tell her about that one time when his parents were home for Christmas, and he saw his face reflected in the orb of a red Christmas ornament. He could tell her how the lights from the tree were twinkling back at him, along with his reflection, and he smiled. “My teeth were huge,” he could tell her, laughing. “I looked like a clown.” He could tell her how his parents laughed when he showed them his reflection, and his mother gave him hot cocoa, with those little hard marshmallows that crunch when you eat them. He could tell her that.

The girl lets the bra fall away, shoots it across the room like a slingshot. She dances there topless on the couch. Her small boobs bounce, and the crowd goes wild. Someone pushes a

dollar bill into the waistband of her cut-off shorts. When she sees Darren looking, she grins and dances harder. He turns away.

In the corner, some guys he doesn't know but must have invited here are snorting his coke with hundred dollar bills. They laugh. He wants to laugh too. At them. Hundred dollar bills are pocket change.

Outside, Jackson is sitting down, settling the red guitar into place on his lap. A cluster of groupies surrounds him. Darren smiles. "Way to go, bro," he mutters.

Here, music is currency. And here, Darren is music. So everybody loves him. He walks to the kitchen, hoping it will be quieter there. It is, a little at least. The table is laden with all sorts of delicacies. Some of them he knows the names for. Chicken cordon bleu, for instance, he knows. He knows filet mignon. He knows tiramisu. He does not know what that black stuff is, though. Nor does he want to. He picks up a cracker and digs around in the black stuff, watching it clot and ooze.

"Darren!" He turns, and a group of girls stands in front of him, smiling.

"We loved your last album," one says. Shyly. She's young. Fourteen? Fifteen? How did she even get in here?

He smiles. "Thank you." He says this humbly, like he means it. And he does. The pot and the alcohol are making a mess of his mind, a beautiful mess, and everything seems pretty.

"Will you sign my CD?" the girl asks. She reaches into her purse and pulls out his latest CD, *Rising and Falling*. On the front is a picture of him falling through deep space, screaming. Screaming beautifully, though. The photographer made sure he looked lovely even when plunging toward the jagged rocks looming at the bottom of the CD.

“Sure,” Darren says. He reaches into his pocket for the Sharpie he always carries. “I’d be honored. What’s your name?”

“Tabatha.” Her voice is so quiet, he has to read her lips.

As he writes, *To Tabatha—peace, love, and rock and roll*, the girls push closer. Their warm bodies press against him. “Darren, Darren,” they shriek.

Laughing, he drops the CD into Tabatha’s hands. “I love you guys!” he exclaims, taking as many of them as he can into his arms, kissing the tops of their heads. But when Tabatha runs her hand over his belly, he lurches backward. “No, Tabatha,” he says. “You’re pretty, honey, but no. No way.”

He spins away, back to the living room. His legs wobble. The topless girl is still dancing. He stumbles toward her, falls face first into the couch cushions. The mob shrieks. Someone pushes the girl on top of him. He rolls over clumsily, looks up into her face. Her eyes are glowing purple. He weaves his thick fingers into her slick hair. “Well, hello there,” he says. When he kisses her, her lips taste like wine. “Wanna get out of here?” he asks. She laughs. He stands, takes her hand, pulls her to her feet. They stumble to the bedroom and tumble side by side onto the giant bed. The thick comforter is soft against his skin. Her skin against his is hot.

“What is your best memory from kindergarten?” he asks her, staring at the mirrored ceiling. His face, looking down at him, seems far away. He runs his fingers through his rumpled blond hair, squints, waves his fingers in the air. The man overhead waves back.

Instead of answering, the girl climbs on top of him, conquering him like he is Everest. Her sharp knee digs into his ribs. “Darren Silverado,” she says, looking down at him, obviously awestruck. Her eyes are still glowing purple.

“That was some pot,” he manages to say before she kisses him hard.

He pulls away. “What is your favorite kindergarten memory?” he asks again. She answers with a tongue-slick kiss. Defeated, he kisses her back.

“Take me,” the girl slurs.

They roll together on the bed, and he wonders why it is that he feels this way so often lately, like he is the one being taken instead of the one doing the taking.

*

Darren wakes up at a quarter ‘til noon. The room is still mostly dark, but the alarm clock by the bed announces the time in red.

“Holy fuck,” he mutters. He glances around, sees bodies draped over couches and chairs and tables. And his bed. That girl is still in his bed. Did he fuck her? He can’t remember. He rustles around in the sheets, realizes he is naked. Then he did fuck her. Shit. He hopes she was on birth control.

“Jackson,” he calls. No answer. He claps. “Jackson!” Louder this time. “Jackson, party’s over!”

Curled on the couch, a pretty head resting on each of his arms, Jackson wakes up. He extricates himself from the sleeping girls and stumbles to his feet. “You heard the man,” he shouts. “Party’s over.” He walks around the room, shaking and kicking people. “Up and at ‘em.” He goes into the living room and does the same thing.

One by one, grumbling, they go. Last of all, the topless girl stumbles to her feet. She is still wearing her shorts. Darren sighs. He didn’t fuck her then. He is glad. At the door, Jackson hands her her top.

“Darren Silverado,” she says as she is leaving. Looking over her shoulder, she smiles at him, and she is gone.

Darren falls back on his pillow. His head is pounding. “You too, bro,” Darren says to Jackson.

“You got it,” Jackson says.

The door slams, and Darren is alone.

Slumped in that wrinkled bed, he stares up at the mirrored ceiling. The man staring back looks nothing like the flawless man that glared out from the cover of June’s *Rolling Stone*. In that photo, Darren was shirtless and wild-eyed, with his arms spread wide, mirroring Jim Morrison’s famous pose. Now, spider web wrinkles surround his ocean eyes. Beneath the smudge of a five-o’clock shadow, his perfect chin boasts a lone pimple. The smooth, brown skin of his cheeks is mottled by a faint remnant of acne scarring, which photographers always airbrush away.

“Where the fuck am I?” Darren reaches for a warm beer on the nightstand and takes a gulp, but his mouth still tastes like shit. He sniffs his armpits. They smell. He wishes, for a moment, that Ronnie was here. He misses her, oddly enough. “You haven’t seen the fucking woman in months,” he mutters. “Just ‘cause you fucking married her doesn’t mean she’s still your wife.” He has started doing this lately, talking to himself when no one is around. Mostly, it is to remind himself that he is real. He picks up the phone and presses zero. “Can I get some breakfast up here?” he says when someone answers.

“Certainly, Mr. Silverado. The blueberry waffles again?”

Darren takes another swig of his beer.

“Mr. Silverado?”

“Oh, I don’t fucking know. Bring me one of everything.”

For a moment, the line is silent.

Darren drinks again. “You there?”

“Yes, Mr. Silverado. Breakfast everything or everything everything?”

“What?” Darren drinks until the can is empty.

“One of everything on the entire menu, or one of everything on the breakfast menu, Mr. Silverado?”

Darren slams the beer on the nightstand decisively. “Everything everything.” He hangs up.

Lately, he has been hungry all the time. Only when he is singing can he escape the gnawing in his gut. Because of this, he is eating more often. He kicks off the covers, revealing the supple body of a naked god. Mostly. He is a little paunchy around the middle. That, and his half-erect penis is on the small side.

He wanders to the bathroom. When his fumbling hand finally finds the light switch, his eyes burn. “Fuck,” he says, flipping it back off. He gropes his way toward the toilet, feeling a mounting anticipation that is about more than his bladder. For him, pissing has become the ultimate luxury. There are very few things he can do without an entourage anymore, but pissing is one of them. Because of this, he insists on being alone when he uses the bathroom. Even before concerts, he will not allow his security guards to escort him there. “This is my time. Back the fuck off,” he tells them. The ones that have been with him for more than a few days know better than to try to follow him.

Now, in the dark, he listens to the music of his urine hitting the water. He sings along. *“People are strange when you’re a stranger. Faces look ugly when you’re alone.”* Thrilling at the sweltering sound of his own voice, he remembers what matters, what always mattered. Music. When he is done pissing, he turns on the shower and steps in. The shower, too, has a

music of its own. As the warm water shatters his skin, he remembers that guitar. That guitar *was* music, man. It was.

He had his face pressed up against the glass of the thrift store window in Bozeman, Montana the first time he saw it. It was nothing, really, that six-string, the color of an aging golden retriever, its lopsided body scarred with dents and scratches. There were other guitars, better guitars, in that store, but that guitar was like the runt puppy you just want for no reason. It called to twelve-year-old Darren, begging him to buy it. “I like that one,” he said to his best friend Sonny, who was standing beside him. Sonny, too, had his pudgy face pressed against the window. The glass fogged with their collective breath.

Sonny nodded vigorously. “It’s totally tubular.” Sonny had a tendency to agree enthusiastically with anything Darren said, in the hippest terms he could muster. “Kinda like Hendrix’s.”

In truth, the only quality the instrument in question shared with any of Hendrix’s guitars was that it had a hole in the middle, but Darren silently decided to agree with Sonny’s proclamation. “Let’s go,” Darren said, striding into the store. He heard Sonny’s footsteps follow him through the jingling doorway. “How much for the guitar?”

The cashier didn’t look up from the latest issue of *Babes on Bikes* open on the counter. Darren glanced at Sonny. Sure enough, he gaped at the busty, bikini-clad blond staring out from the magazine. “Focus, Sonny,” Darren whispered. Sonny kept staring. Disgusted, Darren looked away from his hypnotized friend. “How much for the guitar?” Darren said again.

“Which one?” Still, the man didn’t look up.

“That one.” Darren pointed.

The man glanced at the guitar. “Ten bucks.” He looked back down at the magazine.

Darren ran his hands through his shoulder length hair. The tips of his fingers came back greasy. "I'll give you five."

"What do you think this is, kid? An Arabian bazaar?" The cashier closed the magazine. "We don't haggle here. Ten bucks."

Sonny looked disappointed, his gaze lingering in the place the bikini-clad blond had been.

"Look, mister." Darren turned out his jean pockets and laid \$6 and some change on the counter. "This is all I got. But I gotta get me a guitar. I feel the spirit."

"The spirit?"

"Like William Blake. Like Ginsberg."

"What?"

In his red hi-tops, Darren's feet tapped with excitement. "They were poets. They felt the spirit. I feel the spirit."

"Settle down, kid. You gotta pee or something?"

Darren stopped dancing. "Sorry."

The man stroked his mustache, studying Darren. Even then, some people told Darren there was something about him, if you looked close enough. Not that most people did. "Your poets, did they play the guitar?"

Darren ran his fingers through his greasy hair again. "No, but nobody reads poems anymore. We listen to 'em."

Shifting in his shoes, Sonny blushed. "Sorry," he muttered to the cashier.

The cashier grinned. "I wish I knew what the hell you were talking about, kid. But I don't."

Darren felt that fire burning in his belly. “The first poets were bards.” Darren’s voice rose, making him sound like a televangelist, even to himself. “They sang their poems. I was born to sing. I was born to play that thing. That’s all I know.”

The man shrugged. “It’s a piece of shit, anyway. It’s not gonna get you far.”

Darren spread his arms wide, as if trying to embrace the whole wide world. “It’ll get me where I’m going.”

Laughing, the cashier said, “Alrighty, kid. Tell you what, you boys scrub that bathroom over there, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Thank you, sir.” Rolling up his flannel sleeves, Darren turned toward the bathroom. “You won’t regret this.”

Smiling, the man shook his head at Sonny. “He always like this?”

A grin lit up Sonny’s chubby face, showing the gaps between his picket-fence teeth. “Pretty much. I’m just glad he’s making you listen to him this time instead of me.”

Darren punched Sonny in the arm. “Ow,” Sonny whined, rubbing his arm vigorously. “Why’d you do that?”

“You should have more respect for poetry.”

Darren had preached poetry to a lackluster Sonny just the night before, as he often did. They huddled in their tree house, perusing Kerouac and Ginsberg by flashlight. Darren could tell Sonny didn’t like the poems, exactly. Still, Darren was the only kid in school who would speak to Sonny, so he pretty much played along with all of Darren’s games. Now, the boys walked into the urine-scented cubicle at the back of the store. Poised over the toilet, Darren used a dilapidated toilet brush to attack brown stains that seemed to be composed of granite. “Give me that Ajax.”

Sonny grabbed the Ajax from a sagging shelf. "It stinks in here," he said, pinching his nose with fat fingers.

"It's a bathroom. What do you expect?"

For the next three hours, Darren scrubbed while Sonny watched.

"I'm hungry," Sonny complained. He made faces in the mirror, screwing up his cheeks until his freckles converged to become one giant blotch.

"We'll eat when we're done here."

In the end, Darren walked away with the guitar and a slightly used copy of *The Complete Songs of Mary Chapin Carpenter*. Carrying their treasures, they wandered from town. Darren and Sonny sang together as they tripped over a pock marked trail. "*Imagine all the people living life in peace.*" Sonny's squeaked on the high notes, but high or low, Darren was always dead on. At last, they came to their secret place, a hidden crag crawling with trees and moss and lichen. Behind a stand of pines lay the stone skeleton of an old building, which Darren swore was once a church. There, inside crumbling walls dappled by the lacy shade of a weeping willow, they shared the bologna sandwiches Darren's mother had packed.

"Those were good," Sonny said while chewing his last bite. "Do you have more?"

"Nope. Sorry." Darren dusted the crumbs from his hands and pulled a knife out of his pocket.

"What you gonna do with that?"

"Make sure everyone knows this thing is a piece of my heart," Darren said. Sonny rolled his eyes, and Darren punched him. Then, he thrust his hand into the guitar's open mouth and carved. Water whispered. Wolves howled. The sun fell low, dripping boiling blood over the horizon's bumpy backbone.

“I’m gonna call him Dog,” Darren said. The dying daylight set his acne ablaze.

“Who?” Sonny asked.

“The guitar. Doesn’t he look like an old, crippled dog?”

“I guess he does.” Sonny layed a warm hand on Darren’s shoulder. “You found a pet after all.” He smiled. Darren’s parents wouldn’t allow animals in the house. Pets would shit and shed on the Persian rugs.

“I guess I did,” Darren said, putting down the knife and dusting off his hands. Sonny peered into the guitar and looked at Darren’s initials. DW.

“Cool, man,” Sonny said. “Can I try to play it sometime?”

Darren shrugged. “Sure.”

*

The rest, as they say, is history. Literally. Twenty years later, the thrift-store-six-string sold at auction as “a piece of rock-n-roll history.”

Sitting in a bar in Huntsville Alabama, balding Sonny laughs when he thinks of the obscene price some sucker paid for that Cracker Jack guitar.

He can still hear the auctioneer’s warble. “Darren Silverado’s first guitar. He carved his initials right inside. This is the very guitar he played in his first band, Icarus in Asbestos, ladies and gentlemen. Who will start the bidding?”

Sonny still smiles when he remembers Icarus in Asbestos. For nine months, he was a genuine rock star, a lead guitarist for an up and coming band with a top ten hit. Those were the salad days, though unless mushrooms counted as salad, salad was the last thing he ever ate. He and Darren toured the country, passing out in the back of a plush bus in Boston, waking up in

New York, still high. “Hello, New York! Please welcome Icarus in Asbestos!” It was a dream come true. Until the heroine.

Sonny’s arm starts to itch, and he remembers the cash Dog brought at the auction. *Wish I had that cash. I could buy a house. A car, at least*, Sonny thinks. Sonny has cars on the brain, as his Volvo has breathed its last battered breath and dumped the contents of its oil pan on the pavement outside the hot dive bar in which he is smoking and drinking and dating despair. “Darren, you fucker,” he mutters to his Pabst Blue Ribbon. “You always were the lucky one.” He lets his mind wander into philosophical territory, as he has nothing better to do at the moment. He ponders the twists and turns of life, the cruel arrows of fate, wonders how two kids can start a band together and one can end up a god, the other a gutter rat. He wonders, more to the point, why in the fuck he had to be the kid who ended up the gutter rat.

Mopping sweat from his brow, which is wrinkled more profusely than the brow of a 32-year-old man should be, he thinks of L.A., where there is a gutter with his name on it. Literally. The day Darren fired him, a sobbing Sonny wrote his name in that gutter with a black magic marker. Until that point, he had used the marker to decorate album covers with his John Hancock. His autograph is worthless now, but still, you can find his name, if you look for it, just down the street from the Viper Room, behind a porn shop. “Sonny Fucking Rickman, Has-Been Extraordinaire, was here,” was what Sonny wrote, precisely, in that gutter.

For a man of his standing, a street bum, to use the word *extraordinaire*, was not uncommon. There were Ph.D.’s wandering those streets, pediatricians drinking rainwater from discarded Styrofoam cups, rocket scientists begging failing high school students for burritos.

Now, Sonny tells this to anyone who will listen, the story of his fall from heaven, of the brilliant, tragic lost souls that peopled the streets of hell. Looking for an audience, Sonny stalks

the dive bars of America, an ex-almost-rock-god with a hard luck tale and a bad smile. He hadn't made it quite far enough into paradise to afford gleaming white caps when he was summarily expelled, and now, his picket fence teeth are rotted from the drugs, brown, like a cartoon villain's, no matter how much he brushes them. His arms are scarred, profusely and predictably, in the crease between forearm and upper arm, purple testaments to the depravity of his soul. His eyes are lined too, and the place around his lips, from frowning and smoking, respectively. If Darren Silverado is Jesus in Blue Jeans, Sonny Rickman is Judas in a corduroy beret, which he wears at all times to disguise his receding hairline.

He didn't start out that way though. Before Sonny was a man with a lust for heroin, before Sonny was an adolescent with a penchant for ham sandwiches, Sonny was a boy who harbored an unnatural affection for snails. He called them son, the way his father called him son. That is, very likely, why the other children hated him. That, and he smelled faintly of apple pie and urine. The apple pie because his father was a baker, and they lived in a room over his shop. The urine because Sonny had a bladder problem, as he tried to explain a thousand times. No one listened, of course. Children are not likely to feel pity for other children that smell faintly of urine, whatever the reason may be. In addition to the odor that wafted around him, Sonny had more freckles than he had regular skin. And had wiry hair the color of dried- out orange peels. As if all that weren't enough, he wore clothes from the fifties, starched collars and pleated trousers straight off *Leave it to Beaver*, because his mother was dead and his father had as much fashion sense as Eleanor Roosevelt. The only memory he had of his mother was of her lying prone and purple in a hospital bed, throwing the "Get Well" card he'd just made her. "I'm not going to get well, you little shit," she'd said. "I'm fucking dying." So Sonny was a motherless, smelly redhead. So many sins for one so small.

The other children beat him, of course, as children are wont to do. Only adults see innocence when they look at the cherubic faces of children. Children know better. Especially children like Sonny. He heard the words, “Momma’s boy, Momma’s boy,” over and over again, which perplexed Sonny since he had no Momma. Still they called him that, and worse. Children are not averse to cursing.

The ones who knew the bad words used them to tell Sonny what to do with his snails, vile things they had read in their fathers’ pornographic magazines, dirty things that should never be done to snails. The ones who did not know the bad words pushed Sonny down and yanked the snails from his pockets. Carefully, they placed the snails in front of Sonny’s face, which was being ground into the mud by a size-six boot. They lined them up, his snails, his sons, and Sonny, from his less than ideal vantage point, saw cherubic hands and a row of perfectly swirled shells, and then he saw another boot come down. Stomp. He heard his sons screaming, even from his imperfect vantage point, and all that was left of his snails was goo on the sidewalk. And he cried until his freckled cheeks turned the color of a sunburn. And he screamed like an animal, first like an animal that was dying, but then, like an animal that was angry. His scream became a warning.

The children started to get nervous, the ones who said the bad words and the ones who stomped the sons. Only the boy on the periphery, with spider web blond hair and girlish blue eyes lined with thick lashes, composing within the confines of his skull an ode to the memory of the snails, did not recognize the warning in the scream. He did not know that Sonny felt something little boys that love snails rarely feel. He felt the fire of rage.

And that fire burned through Sonny’s belly, out into his arms and legs, and with a surge of hot power, he lurched to his feet, ready to throttle any cherubic face in throttling distance.

Most of the children scattered like frightened sparrows, but one, who was slow and too far on the periphery of the action to understand quite what was happening when Sonny found his rage, got walloped good, even though he had nothing to do with the slaughtering of the sons. That quiet poet boy got throttled, and his nose spurted blood, and his ocean eyes wrinkled, and he cried and fell to his knees and begged, because he had never been hit before--his parents didn't even believe in spanking--and this violence thing was all new and strange. He did not like the metallic taste of his own blood.

And Sonny the snail lover saw the blood and looked at his freckled knuckles in awe and remembered to be gentle. He picked his victim up from the mud and wiped his face on the corner of his shirt and called him son, just like he did the snails.

He said, "I'm sorry, son. What is your name?"

And the bruised poet answered, "Darren, my name is Darren." Darren said his name like a poem.

Everything was a poem to Darren then, Sonny thinks. He stares at the initials carved into the bar, then glances at the tiny stage in the corner. A battered electric guitar leans against the wall.

"You want another one?" the bartender asks.

"Sure, brother." Sonny grins. "You ever heard of Icarus in Asbestos?"

The bartender doesn't look up from drawing Sonny's beer. "Wasn't that Darren Silverado's band, before he went solo?"

"Yep." When the bartender doesn't reply, Sonny adds, "I ask because I was the lead guitarist."

The bartender's eyes go squinty. "No way."

“Yep.” Sonny points at the guitar. “Mind if I play a few tunes?”

“I’m not sure what Manny would think,” the bartender says. He doesn’t believe Sonny, it is clear, but it is equally clear that he wants to. It has been a dull day.

“Manny owns the guitar?” Sonny asks. The bartender nods. “He won’t mind then. He’ll know who I am.” Sonny strides over to the guitar and picks it up. “Papers called me Jimmy Fucking Hendrix reincarnated.” Before the bartender can protest, he starts to play the riff from “Cherry Lip Gloss Massacre,” the song that made Icarus in Asbestos famous. It is a bold conglomeration of electronic squeals and squawks, and Sonny’s fingers do not move over the frets, they dance. He has something, it is clear, something that cannot be taught.

“Holy shit,” the bartender says, spilling Sonny’s beer on the bar. “Holy fucking shit.”

The only other bar patron, a chubby girl with too close eyes and a wide nose, swivels on her barstool to watch.

“Hello, honey,” Sonny says, and then he closes his eyes, drifts away into another time, another place. The bar becomes an arena, the homely girl a gaggle of gorgeous groupies. He plays the entire song, after which he launches into an ear numbing rendition of “Stairway to Heaven.”

When he is done, the bartender claps and hoots. The girl gives him a standing ovation. “Beer’s on the house,” the bartender says. “What did you say your name was?”

“Sonny. Sonny Fucking Rickman.” Sonny strides over to the girl. She is wearing a fuzzy pink sweater, and the bartender might think Sonny is honing in on her because of that sweater, because of the pseudo-innocent sexuality it implies, but that’s not it. The innocence is not pseudo, and as far as Sonny is concerned, there is no sexuality to speak of, as there are no breasts to speak of. None. Paunchy Sonny has bigger breasts than she does, and a good deal less

innocence. What he is after has nothing to do with sex. He is after redemption, though he is not averse to taking sex on the side. Is it fate that a rerun of *Family Tree* happens to be playing on the T.V. above the bar? Is it fate that he can walk up to the breastless girl in the fuzzy pink sweater and say, nonchalantly, “You like *Family Tree*?”

“Yeah, I do,” she says. “A lot. A whole lot.” By the way her voice quivers when she speaks, it is easy to tell she is lying. But what is she going to do? Tell him she hates evening television in general and sit-coms especially, possibly putting an end to the first real conversation she has had in months?

“I wrote the theme song, actually,” he says, and takes the stool beside her.

“I thought Darren Silverado wrote it,” she says. “Before he got famous.”

“Well, we wrote it together. I was the lead guitarist in his first band.”

Her eyes light up. It is not every day that she meets a rock star.

And then, he tells her the whole story of his fall from grace. About Darren Silverado and the snails. About Darren Silverado and Dog. About how it turned out he himself could play the guitar way better than Darren, but it didn’t matter much, ’cause Darren was prettier. About Darren Silverado and their garage band, Icarus in Asbestos, who turned out to be just the right kind of edgy for that talent scout from Virgin Records. About MTV and the monkey used for filming their fourth video, how the monkey just loved him, rode around on his shoulder day and night, crazy animal.

“Monkeys sense good in humans even when other people can’t see it,” the girl says. “I read it somewhere, in a Jane Goodall article or something.” She scoots her stool closer to his so she can hear.

“You sure know a lot about monkeys,” Sonny says. He says this as if there is a deeper meaning somewhere behind the words, and the girl seems to catch this nuance, though neither of them really knows exactly what the deeper meaning is. Still, it means something.

“I know a lot about a lot of things.” She smiles like a kid receiving a ribbon at a spelling bee.

If all of this seems choreographed, it’s because it is. Sonny is a master choreographer of human behavior, particularly humans of the golly-gee-whiz variety. People are pretty much standard units. Twist them with guilt, tweak them with desire, they’ll play right into your dance. He tells her how orange Conan O’Brian’s freckles look close up, tells her what it feels like to hold a Grammy in your hand. Then, he tells her about the drugs. He is careful, tentative, as he tells this part, as if he has never spoken of this to another soul. “I don’t know what the fuck drove me to stick a needle in my fucking veins,” he says, shaking his head viciously. “It was my fucking fault, man. And I ruined everything. My life. My love. Darren was the love of my fucking life. Not that way. Don’t raise your eyebrows like that. He was my brother, you know. My brother. Darren Silverado. I fucking miss him.” She puts her clammy hand on his arm. Bolstered by her compassion, he presses on. “I gotta tell you something,” he says. Tears pool in his eyes. “I gotta get this off my chest man. I know I just met you. But there’s something about you. I feel like I can talk to you. Alright?”

“Alright,” she says, and squeezes his arm a bit.

“Remember that guitar I told you about? Dog? Well, it was Darren’s fucking prize possession. He carried it everywhere. It was a piece of his heart.” He punches himself in the chest for emphasis. “I stole it, man. I stole it for a fix. I’m a fucking piece of shit.” And the

tears drop, making plop-plop noises in his beer. Sometimes, when it suits him, even Judas can be genuinely sorry.

“That day was the day Darren ejected me, tossed me out of heaven, man. I was homeless after that. But I fucking deserved it. Deserved everything I got. I’m a fucking piece of shit.”

He doesn’t lie, exactly, but he leaves certain pieces out of his story. Still, she may discover them soon enough, or at least, for his purposes, soon enough. For her purposes, it may be too late.

So, Judas has woven his tale, and the girl, whose name has turned out to be Macy, like the store without an S, is clearly enchanted, as non-pseudo innocent girls in pink sweaters are apt to be when approached by charming, well-worn Judases. She works at Subway.

“I am a sandwich artist,” she says with pride. “Being a sandwich artist is tough work. Not all employees are given the title right off.”

“Art is everywhere, man.” Sonny nods appreciatively. “That must be why I feel so close to you. You’re an artist too.”

She goes on to talk about precise ratios of pickles to olives, about bread and clear plastic gloves and, when people ask for it, guacamole, which is 25 cents extra. You may be beginning to sense that there are reasons, aside from her too close eyes and too wide nose and breastlessness, that this girl is alone in a bar on Saturday night. Sonny, however, does not seem to sense it. He, like Macy, is enchanted, so enchanted that eventually he tries to pick up the tab, though the bartender waves away the money. “Say hi to Darren for me,” he says, winking and sloshing a bleach-scented rag over the bar.

“Sure thing.” Sonny winks back. On the way to his hotel room, Sonny and Macy grab a case of beer from a convenience store.

“Oh, fuck. I lost my credit card,” he says when they reach the counter, slapping his pocket like he has just discovered it is full of fire ants.

“Holy crow. I hope you find it. Don’t worry. I can pay,” Macy says, and she does.

In the hotel, which smells faintly of cigarettes and mildew, he plays songs for her on a battered guitar.

“Why didn’t you play this guitar at the bar?” she asks.

“This one’s special,” he replies. “I only play it for special friends.”

She blushes and giggles. “Oh.”

He sings, “*And I swear that I don’t have a gun.*”

His teeth seem brighter. The lines around his lips, less pronounced. By the way her eyes drink him in, by the tone in her voice when she croons, “You sound just like Elvis,” he knows he could have her. But he doesn’t take her. He is, after all, looking for redemption. And for that, he needs her for more than just one night.

HOUND DOGS

You ain't nothing but a hound dog, cryin' all the time.

You ain't never caught a rabbit, and you ain't no friend of mine.

When they said you was high classed, that was just a lie.

*--Elvis Aaron Presley (January 8, 1935-August 16, 1977)**

The King is frozen mid-hip-thrust, his benevolent brown eyes oozing come-ons. Macy stares, mouth agape. Behind her, Sonny peeks over her shoulder, equally enchanted. The other flea market bargain hunters bustling by are, however, clearly unmoved by Elvis's allure. Macy sighs. "Elvis never looks more Elvis than when he's on velvet."

Sonny ponders this bit of wisdom, purses his lips, nods, reaches out with reverent fingers to stroke the velvet Elvis that has arrested Macy's attention. Elvis's oil paint sneer is wrong, he notices, but he doesn't say so.

Macy glares at a hunched over old man that breezes past, not bothering to cast a glance in Elvis's direction. "These folks wouldn't ignore The King like that if he was here," Macy snorts, and Sonny agrees that no, they most certainly would not.

The flea market smells like dirty laundry, with an undertone of rancid grease. Overhead, an orange juice colored sun beats down, boiling Sonny in his long sleeves and jeans. It is really almost more than his hungover digestive system can take, but he manages to keep the bile down. Someone is going at his head with a jackhammer. His shoulder is sore in the place where Macy fell asleep on it. Sonny could tell she fancied herself safe by the measured music of her breath. He listened all night.

What kind of man takes a girl back to his hotel room, serenades her, and then falls asleep holding her, asking first for nothing more than a chaste kiss, no tongue, she must have been thinking. What kind of man does that, and he almost feels sorry for her. Almost. He probably would if she weren't so fucking annoying.

"Well, a, blessa my soul, what's a wrong with me?" Macy belts out, suddenly, shockingly, making Sonny jump and let out a little unmanly scream. She writhes her hips, doing her best Elvis impression, which is surprisingly good.

"Whoa. Whoa." Sonny recovers his composure, glances around frantically, peeks under a junk-laden table or two. "Elvis, what the hell did you do with Macy?"

"Sonny!" She makes a sound not unlike a truck backfiring, a laugh. "I'm good, huh? I would be a professional Elvis impersonator if it wasn't for these." She grabs her non-existent breasts, and Sonny's eyes dart away appropriately.

"I'm sorry." Her voice goes from bubbly to stagnant in a second flat. "Did I embarrass you?"

"No, no," Sonny stammers. "It's just, I'm not used to women who are so—outspoken."

"I'm sorry," she says again. She jiggles her leg, worried. "I can be too much sometimes. I know that."

"I could get used to it." Sonny winks.

Now, Macy blushes, inappropriately, a blush that is rotting cherry dark and bespeaks, in plain English, a girl who is falling in love. This detail is not lost on Sonny. While Macy's blush is still overheating her chubby cheeks, a man saunters up to the velvet Elvis and does the unthinkable. He laughs. Macy gasps audibly.

Sonny springs into action. “Who the hell do you think you are, buddy?” His tone is almost demure, and his hands are shoved deep in his pockets. He doesn’t really want to fight, he hopes Macy can tell, but the affront is just too much to let pass. Something has to be said, so he says it. “That’s The King you’re laughing at.”

This guy, the laughter, is short, with arms and legs like soda straws, but he has tattoos on his left and right earlobes that say, respectively, “FUCK” and “OFF,” a clear indicator he will not let Sonny’s respectful but pointed reprimand go. Does Sonny know this? Of course, and from the time he spent in prison, he also knows that short guys with tattoos and Napoleon complexes are easy to take down with a solid punch to the jaw, so he waits. Heated words are exchanged. Metaphors, comparing the combatants to various sections of the human anatomy, are ballied about, as are questions referencing parentage and so on. From the sidelines, Macy jostles her legs, clearly itching to get in on the action. “You are not a nice person. Very unlikable!” she screams finally.

Sonny looks at her. *You gotta be kidding me*, he thinks.

She beams at him. “My momma told me to be more assertive,” she calls. “And I am.”

The laughter shoves Sonny. “Motherfucking, cock-sucking, dick-licking lowlife.” Sonny is not as subtle as Macy, but he tries to make his insults musical, if nothing else. Finally, enraged by a particularly colorful description of his mother’s love life, the laughter takes a swing at Sonny, not knowing how quick an ex-con-has-been-gutter-rat really can be. Sonny ducks and jabs, and before Macy can finish saying, “Go Sonny,” a table full of used CD’s has been upended, and the laughter is lying in the dust with a mouthful of blood and teeth. Or a tooth. Maybe just one. Anyway, the laughter is down for the count, and Macy has found her hero.

She has also found her 17th velvet Elvis, Our Elvis of Sweet Sweet Victory, she calls him, and she takes him to her trailer and hangs him on her living room wall, next to Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison, the king of her velvet pantheon.

“Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison is crying for all the sadness in the world with that one tear glistening on his smooth, brown cheek,” she tells Sonny, reverently touching the oil paint tear. She has rehearsed this speech, he can tell. Maybe whispered it to herself on wicked, windy nights.

“He’s something,” Sonny offers, whistling long and low.

“Holy crow. What you did back there was sure brave.” Shyly, Macy presses her fingertips against Sonny’s arm. “Can I get you a cold bag of peas to take down the swelling?”

“There is no swelling,” Sonny gloats, plopping himself on a dingy, butterscotch colored couch. “The guy never touched me.”

“I gotta do something.” Macy goes to the fridge and pulls out a package. “I can’t just let a hero go without proper medical care.” As she crosses back to him, her belly and thighs jiggle. “Here,” she says, pushing the peas into his palm.

Sonny slumps below the Elvises, pressing a bag of freezing-ass peas to a perfectly good eye, doing his best to look two parts the hero, one part the martyr.

“Thanks,” he says. “You’re a real Mother Teresa, you know that, Macy Blue?”

“My name ain’t Macy Blue.”

“It is now.” Sonny grins. “I always give my girlfriends nicknames.”

Macy squirms with pleasure. “I’ll just call you Son-dried Tomato then.”

“I bet not all the Subway employees know what a sundried tomato is.” Sonny winks.

“Only the sandwich artists.” Blushing, Macy giggles.

That night, Sonny sleeps installed on the butterscotch couch, which stinks of cat piss and bacon grease, but is warm enough, and surprisingly comfy, better than the backseat of a broken down car. Right under the watchful, sad eyes of Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison, Sonny lies in wait, listening with one ear for the safe, shallow music of Macy's breathing from the bedroom.

*

Shae's breathing keeps time with the rolling waves. On a tawny beach littered with cigarette butts, she sleeps in Aspen's lap. The girls are naked, but it doesn't matter. No one is looking at anyone thinking about what she can get. Aspen is coming down now, and the night is fading, bleeding from kaleidoscope to bluish dawn. Beneath her legs, the smooth sand is cool. The green sea slaps closer to her toes. She stares out at the ocean, thinking of Darren, of the way he took her hand last night, sang that song right to her. *"She's a burning bush, an angel on fire, a boiling concoction of faith and desire."* He sang those words about her.

She smiles and brushes a stray curl away from her eyes. "Wake up, sleepyhead," she whispers to Shae. Shae doesn't move. The next concert is in a town six hours away, five if they drive like madwomen. Which they will. Still, they should get going soon. Shae will want to smoke before she does anything else. Wake and bake, she calls it. That will take a bit. Always does. Aspen really should shake her into action. But she doesn't. Not just yet.

This second, this space between night and day, is magic, a sliver of quiet in a world steeped in honks and screams and boomboxes. Right now, Aspen can think, just be, without wondering who is watching. Even Shae is not watching. She is far away, in a dreamland free from wolverines, vampires, and vermin. Wishing Shae could stay there forever, in that safe sleeping place, Aspen studies her friend.

Shae's nipples are dark purple, dappled in shadows. Her mouth is O-shaped and sweet, like a baby's, and Aspen can erase the years and find the child hidden beneath her sweaty skin. She can almost see rainbow-colored, plastic barrettes dangling from Shae's hair. With fingers which show their veins through thin, pale skin, she strokes Shae's velvet cheek. Gently, she lifts Shae's arm and kisses her wrist, which is marked with the scabby prints of her pain. Shae has been cutting again.

Aspen thinks about that, about taking a knife and slicing into her skin, pressing the sinister edge of a razor blade against her leg or arm or face in a subway bathroom, just to test out the pressure. She imagines her delicate thighs tattered by the scabby remains of the razor's bite. It makes her belly lurch. She cannot comprehend why Shae does this thing. Aspen digs her toes into the sand. Finally, Shae's eyelids flutter like moth wings. "Rise and shine, morning glory," Aspen says, the way her momma used to say it to her.

As the sun explodes into daylight, they pick up their clothes, strewn over the rocks. Neither of them remembers how the clothes ended up coming off, and their amnesia is funny to them. In the wet sand, there are footprints—big ones, size thirteen, give or take—so they know someone was with them last night. They cannot remember who. But there are no bruises, no blood. Nothing has gone awry. They laugh as they dress.

When they are good and wrinkled but at least not naked, Shae sits on the rocks and digs in her purse for her pipe--a delicate, bird shaped trinket of Mexican origin. "Wanna give it a try?" she asks, even though she should know Aspen will say no, because she always does.

"No, thanks," Aspen says, sitting next to her.

"You should try it." Shae takes out a baggie. "It's not as gross as you think."

Aspen studies the pipe. The bird, with its yellow wings and wise licorice seed eyes, beckons.

“I bet Darren smokes,” Shae adds with a grin.

Aspen thinks about Darren, about the way it probably is with him. He probably really does smoke pot. If they ever got the chance to hang out with him, he probably would want to smoke. And if she tries without ever having practiced, she will gag and cough all over him. But if she says no, he might think she is a prude. Or a nark.

“I guess I will if you teach me,” Aspen finally whispers.

“Really?”

Aspen shrugs. “Sure.”

“Alright.” Suddenly, Shae is all business. This is a solemn responsibility. Aspen has entrusted her with her lungs, and clearly, she does not take it lightly. Carefully, Shae puts the pipe in Aspen’s mouth. “Now I’m going to fire it up, and you’re going to breathe really deep.”

Aspen nods. Her eyes are scared, but she’s going through with this. She knows Shae won’t laugh if she coughs.

“Like a helium balloon.” Shae must be able to tell Aspen needs more instruction. “You ever inhale the air from a helium balloon?”

Aspen nods again.

“Well, it’s kind of like that.” Shae flicks the lighter, and Aspen inhales.

It tastes worse than it smells, and it burns her throat. She does not, however, cough, which makes her buzz with pride.

“Now, hold it,” Shae says. “Hold your breath as long as you can.”

Aspen does, and her head begins to float. “I feel like that balloon you were talking about.” Her words escape in a puff of smoke.

“You’re such a dork.” Laughing, Shae smokes too. She sets the pipe on the rock and drapes an arm over Aspen’s shoulder. “Well, you done good, kid. What do you think?”

Aspen smiles. “I like it. It’s better than booze. Like dreaming. It tastes yucky though. Bleh.” She sticks out her tongue and swipes at it with the palm of her hand. Shae fishes in her purse for a water bottle and offers it to Aspen. As Aspen drinks deeply, they stare out at the sea, watching the crashing waves and the crying gulls and the dark, shapeless shadows passing just below the surface.

“What you reading?” Shae finally asks. She points to a book that is falling out of Aspen’s purse.

“I’m reading about the Aztecs.”

“Were they the ones that had wigwams?”

“Um, no. They had pyramids.”

Shae nods. “Oh, I know who you’re talking about. King Tut and all that.”

“That was the Egyptians. I’m talking about the Aztecs.”

“Whatever.” Shae picks up a shard of seashell and turns it over in her fingers.

“Shit. Those people were crazy,” Aspen says.

“All people are fucking crazy.”

“No, these guys were really crazy. They believed the world would end if they didn’t feed the sun with blood, so they built these giant pyramids where they sacrificed people.” Aspen looks at Shae earnestly, needing her to understand.

Shae doesn’t. “Like in Egypt?”

Aspen groans. “The Egyptians didn’t sacrifice people.”

“What about mummies?”

Aspen laughs. “Mummies weren’t sacrifices. They were kings.”

“Well, excuse me if I don’t spend half my life with my fucking nose stuck in a book.”

Shae throws the shell shard into the ocean. It lands with a plop and disappears.

“I don’t spend half my life with my nose in a book.”

“Yeah, you do.”

Aspen rolls her eyes. “Anyway, these freaky Aztec priests who never bathed would drag people to the top of these pyramids and cut their hearts out.”

“While they were alive?”

“Oh, yeah. They offered the hearts to the sun while they were still beating.”

Shae lifts her arm and stares at the cut places. “That’s fucked up,” she says, but she seems intrigued. She thoughtfully picks at the line of a fresh, cranberry-colored scab.

“No doubt. There was this one Aztec god, Tezcatlipoca.” Aspen likes to show off sometimes. She can’t help it. She is unsure how to pronounce the god’s name, but Shae will never know the difference. That is the best thing about collecting extraneous knowledge instead of common knowledge. No one can call you on your bullshit.

Shae sneers. “Sounds like a fucking venereal disease. Bad news, ma. I got Tezcatlipoca.”

Aspen laughs. “Tezcatlipoca was one of their greatest gods. He was supposed to be gorgeous and benevolent and shit. Every year, the people would choose a boy to act him out.”

“A little kid?”

“No, a teenager. A pretty boy, you know. The prettiest one they could find. So for a year, this kid was worshipped, dressed in the finest clothes, fed the best foods, all that. Lived in the palace.”

“Sounds like winning the fucking lottery.”

“Well, yeah, except that at the end of the year, they took him to the top of one of their pyramids and cut his heart out and ate him. His head ended up on the skull rack in their plaza for everyone to look at.”

“Gross. They ate him?” Shae ponders this bit of sadism. “I could never eat a person, man. Never, I mean even if I was with the Donner party, I would just eat bark and twigs and shit.” She turns her attention back to the cuts on her arm. “They really fucking ate the poor kid?”

“They ate him.” Aspen looks off toward the horizon, where only a thin line of mist separates the earth from the sky.

“Assholes. Fucking assholes who eat kids.” Shae’s voice is suddenly tinged with outrage. “Why didn’t the kid run away? If it were me, I’d run away the day before they killed me. Live like a king for a year, let the fuckers worship me.” She dons a dignified countenance and curves her fist around an imaginary scepter. “Kiss my feet, kid-eating assholes. Then poof. Right before they were gonna eat me, I’d take all my gold and vanish. Sianara mother fuckers!”

Aspen shrugs. “It was an honor to become a sacrifice. Plus, if he became a sacrifice, he got to be immortal.”

“Fuck immortality. I’d rather not get eaten.” Shae picks up the book and leafs through it, stopping on a photo of a crumbling pyramid. She studies it. “Why do you read this shit? It rots your brain.”

“Most people think TV rots your brain. Not books. Books make you smarter.”

“The kind of books you read rot your brain. Fuckin’ kid eaters.” Shae tosses the book on the rock.

“Not all books are about kid eaters.”

“The ones you read are. Fucking psycho. You are a fucking psycho, Aspen. You know that?”

“I am not a fucking psycho.” Aspen watches a seagull dive.

“You truly are.”

“I just like books.” The seagull flaps away with a starfish in its craw.

“I know,” Shae says. “Little Miss Look-at-my-Perfect-Report-Card-and-my-Perfect-Parents-and-my-Perfect-Shoes-and-my-Perfect-Boobs. I fucking know.”

There is a fine line between funny and mean, and Shae doesn’t know where it is. Anyone but Aspen might get pissed off, but Aspen is not a mad kind of person. All those “turn the other cheek” lessons she learned in Sunday school sank in good and deep.

Shae shakes her head. “I mean, I fucking hated you on report card day. You know that? Your daddy would give you a wad of dollars for those little perfect A’s lined up in a perfect row, and I would sit there thinking, If I had that, I could buy milk. You know I really thought that? Ten years old, I was thinking about buying fucking milk. And all you could think about was saving up for a new bike or some shit, which you wouldn’t really have to save up for anyway, ‘cause you would get one for your fucking birthday. Rich bitch.”

Aspen smacks at a mosquito. “We weren’t rich.”

“You were fucking rich. Your daddy made a shitload of cash selling those fancy houses. You know he did.”

“Whatever.”

“Then I would go home to my fucking drunk mom with my fucking barely passing grades, and maybe get the shit beat out of me for it, depending on whether or not she’d passed out.”

“I’m sorry.” Aspen doesn’t know what else to say.

“No biggie.” Shae peels the blue polish off her thumb, studying the shimmering flakes of paint. “I did get all A’s and B’s one time. My mom told me she would buy me a Baby Alive if I made the honor roll. So I did it.”

Aspen grins. “Oh, yeah. I remember Baby Alive! She came with those little fucking packets of food, and you’d feed them to her with the little pink spoon, right?”

“Yeah! And she’d eat it! She’d really fucking eat!” Shae’s mouth makes a mechanical chewing motion.

“Then, five minutes later, she’d poop it out, and you could change her diaper!”

“Right, only the food looked exactly the same way coming out as it did going in.”

“Yeah, I had one of those.” Aspen lies back on the rock and watches the waves. “I fucking loved that doll. I wonder if my mom still has it.”

“That’s why I wanted one. You had one, so I wanted one.” Shae takes out a cigarette and taps it against a rock. “So, I worked my ass off the entire year for my Baby Alive, right? And the day after my mom bought it for me, this kid dumped mud all over it.”

Aspen sits up. “What a dick! Who was it?”

“Joe Ross.”

“That little fucker. I hated that kid. Always picking his nose and wiping his boogers on people.”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t so bad. He gave me a Valentine card once. Anyway, the Baby Alive thing was an accident. We were playing outside, making mud pies.”

“I think I remember that. You cried all day, right?”

“All day? I cried all fucking month. Fuck, I still cry about it sometimes.” Shae lights the cigarette and takes a drag. “It wouldn’t work anymore after that. Wouldn’t eat or poop or anything. Just sat there staring.” She shrugs and stares out at the crashing waves, looking sadder than Aspen has ever seen her look.

“I’m sorry,” Aspen says again.

Shae will have none of Aspen’s pity. “You know what I wish we had?”

“What?”

“Crayons!” Shae grabs Aspen’s arm.

“Crayons?”

“Crayons. I fucking love to color when I’m stoned. You can taste the colors.”

“No way.”

“Taste the colors, man. Taste the Rainbow.”

“Like Skittles?”

“Like fucking Skittles.” Shae yawns, stretching her arms overhead. “Man, smell that fucking sea air. Breathe it in, baby.”

*

In the bus station, Heaven’s breathing is tattered, rattling around in his chest like loose stones as he shoves a wad of bills through a slot.

“Thank you,” the woman on the other side of the window says mechanically. Snapping her gum, she pushes his ticket out to him.

The bus depot is peopled with bums who favor its tolerably safe benches for a good night's rest. One of them is snoring, sputtering like a car with a bad engine. Heaven laughs, in spite of his nerves, which are electrified. "Wonder what that urban outdoorsman is dreaming about." Heaven juts a thumb in the homeless man's direction.

"Thank you," the woman says again, more tersely this time, jerking her head to the left.

"Urban outdoorsman? Get it?" Heaven smiles his toothiest smile. Girls have always been suckers for his smile.

"I said, *thank you*." The woman is not amused.

Heaven's smile dies, and glaring, he wanders away. The bitch is not really thankful, he can tell. No one in New York is. But where he is going? Oh, they will be thankful there. He is off to the land of sun and smiles and guitars. Heaven is still young enough to believe in movies and music. He is young enough to believe in myths of all kinds. His months on the street have left him jaded, but not hopelessly so. His new venture has given him more than enough reason to hope again.

Over his shoulder hangs his duffel bag, bulging with all of his worldly possessions, which are not worth listing in full, but include a pack of Wrigley's Spearmint Gum, a losing lottery ticket, and a *Bob Marley's Greatest Hits* CD. Also, an almost new leather jacket his father bought him for Christmas three years ago. The jacket is cool, but still, with or without the jacket, if all of your worldly possessions fit into a duffel bag, you are nothing. Heaven knows this. Heaven, a nothing on his way to becoming something. The boy from nowhere on his way to somewhere. Somewhere, in this case, just happens to be Hollywood. That is where nothings on their way to being somethings end up, shining shoes and waiting tables and starring in pornos until their big breaks come.

With one of the dollars left over from his bus fare, he purchases a bag of tortilla chips and a soda from a vending machine. He can get away with this. Heaven's middle school girlfriend hated him for his ability to consume copious quantities of junk food without putting on a pound. He doesn't break out either. His skin remains smooth and brown. As he is shoving the chips into his mouth, three at a time, chewing with his mouth open, a woman passes, a girl really, with a swollen belly and a telltale glow. "You're beautiful," he blurts, spewing bits of chip over the speckled linoleum. When he is like this, when he is hopeful, he blurts out whatever he thinks. When he is sad, he can barely find the energy to breathe, but that is another story. The girl tosses her mud-colored hair, but she does not smile, does not look back to thank him for his compliment, does not seem even mildly overjoyed by the miracle growing in her belly.

"Fuck you then," Heaven mutters as he watches the girl disappear into the bathroom.

When the loudspeaker finally announces the arrival of Heaven's bus, his hope has deflated to almost nothing. He considers staying in New York, but really, there is no point. What would he stay for? Draping the duffel bag over his shoulder, he climbs aboard, letting his eyes flicker across the stained seats, which glisten with grime in the florescent glow of the overhead lighting. He thinks of taking a seat at the back, away from other passengers, but something in him, the part of him that still believes, chooses an aisle seat near the middle of the bus, so he can be in the thick of the action. After all, he reminds himself, this is a new adventure. Anything can happen. Feeling less despondent, he watches the other passengers board, waiting to see who will sit next to him. It could be anyone, he thinks. Could be a supermodel. A sultan. His soul mate.

It is, it turns out, the pregnant girl from the bus depot who sinks next to him and smiles apologetically, cocking her head to one side. "Sorry I didn't say hi back there. I was a little

taken aback. I mean, it was nice and all, you saying I was beautiful like that. It's just, a girl doesn't hear that every day."

Heaven thinks about blowing her off, as payback for her prior rudeness. But then he thinks better of it. "A girl like you?" he asks. "I'd think you'd hear it every day." It is not a line. This is part of Heaven's charm, his ability to spout his lines like he means them. He does mean them. He is not old enough to know a cliché when he meets one.

She smiles again, wider, showing her crooked teeth. "Well, at least not from strangers."

Heaven notices the girl looks a little like Brandon when he squints his eyes just right. His belly flip-flops. "Your baby's daddy, though. He tells you you're beautiful, right?"

"Oh, him? He's long gone."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm glad. We're better off without him." She pats her belly and winks, as if the baby can see her through layers of skin and muscle and uterus. Maybe he can, this baby. Maybe he is Superman-in-Utero, with fledgling x-ray vision and sprouting slick-black hair. Whatever the case, he kicks hard, as if answering his mother.

"Ha! You feel that? Feel!" she squeals. This is the only part of pregnancy she cares for, this creature kicking and squirming inside her, like that monster from *Alien*, but with fewer teeth. The morning sickness she could do without.

Heaven's hand slides onto her belly, hoping that through the faded fabric of her T-shirt, which reads, *One tequila, two tequila, three tequila, floor*, she can feel the heat of his fingers, way hotter than she expected. He looks deep into her eyes, past the irises and nerves and brain cells, into her soul, which is buried somewhere behind the hypothalamus, rosy and glowing. He sees the real her, and what do you know, she is good incarnate. She is an angel.

Heaven thinks this about everyone, every girl who lets him look deep into her eyes. He thinks, maybe you will save me, angel. And maybe she will save him. And maybe she is an angel. Maybe all people are all angels, shit-stained and broken as they are. Maybe Heaven has the gift of seeing the truth when everyone else sees shit.

Maybe. The girl falls asleep, predictably, with her head resting safely on Heaven's shoulder, and even though Heaven steals a wad of dollar bills from her purse, if this were a different kind of story, you could imagine they were bouncing off to happily ever after, two lost souls that have found home at last. What they are really bouncing toward is a very nasty fight at the bus depot in Ohio.

At the time of the fateful bus depot altercation, Heaven has followed the girl around for three hours, give or take, wearing a desperate hound dog look. Twice, his toes have yanked off the backs of her shoes. She is irritated. Wrinkles form on her forehead. Her eyes flash. "I gotta pee," she snaps as they pass a restroom sign.

Heaven waits outside, listening for the tinkle of her urine in the toilet, thinking the sound is like rain on a roof, mysterious and soothing. Across the hall, he sees a bubble gum machine. He wanders over, his hand thrust into his pocket. The machine is gumball free, offering instead various trinkets. Rubber spiders. Ruby-colored balls. Rhinestone rings. As Heaven studies the treasures housed in their orb of glass, he sees more than a cache of worthless plastic. He sees destiny. "If it's meant to be, I'll get a ring," he says. He yanks a quarter from his pocket, shoves it into the slot, and turns the handle. Cha-ching. Out comes a green foam centipede. "Shit." He cannot let go now though. He says it again. "If it's meant to be, I'll get a ring." This time, the machine yields a temporary tattoo in the shape of a skull. "Fuckin-A." He closes his eyes and wishes one last time. "If it's meant to be, I'll get a ring." This time, he gets a ring. A tinfoil,

rhinestone-studded hunk of destiny. As the girl strides out of the restroom, he gathers his courage.

“You coming or what?” she asks.

He walks over and drops to one knee by the snack dispenser. Soft drink logos flash in his eyes as he says, “Marry me,” offering her the plastic ring.

Her mouth opens and closes like a carp’s.

“I already love the baby,” he adds.

What did he expect her to do? Fall into his arms? Fall in love? This is not a romance, after all.

“I just met you, freak. What the hell are you, a creepy stalker or some shit like that?”

The girl tosses her hair. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

She leaves Heaven crying on a bench, longing for the safe, measured sound of her breathing as she sleeps on his shoulder.

*

Aspen sits in the barber chair next to Shae’s, trying not to breathe too much. The chemically smell of hair dye engulfs the tiny salon like invisible fog. Shae is going orange.

“I’m gonna look like a fucking firecracker!” she says, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Little scarlet rivers escape from beneath her towel turban and run down her face.

“You’re gonna look like a siren.” When Aspen pumps the bar by her feet, her chair cranks up. “It’s like a ride at the state fair,” she says, laughing. She pumps the bar again, and the chair goes down.

“A siren? Like a police car?” Shae looks confused.

“No, a siren, like Homer.”

“Homer Simpson?”

“No, Homer. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*?”

“Oh.” Shae laughs. “I’m a fucking idiot.”

“No, you’re not.” Aspen pushes against the floor with her feet, making the chair spin. She gets that crazy dizzy feeling. “You’re a siren. You make sailors dash their ships against the rocks, just with the sound of your voice.” The chair slows and stops. When Shae starts to sing, Aspen watches her enviously.

“*Summer time an’ the livin’s easy,*” Shae warbles.

Aspen thinks Shae really could be a siren. She would probably dash a ship against the rocks just to hear Shae’s flawless voice. “I wish I could sing,” Aspen says wistfully.

“I think you have a pretty voice.” Shae wipes a crimson trickle from her forehead and stares at the smear on her fingertip. “Sirens didn’t have orange hair.”

Aspen shrugs. “How do you know? They might.”

“I guess. Do you think I’ll look good orange?”

“I think you’ll be a bombshell.” Aspen digs in her purse. “I love it when you change your hair. It’s like a holiday.” She pulls out a lipstick and applies a coat of glossy pink.

Shae laughs. “I don’t think you’ve ever missed a dye-ing.”

Aspen squints, thinking. “I missed your yellow.” She snaps the cap back on the lipstick and returns it to her purse.

“Did you?” Shae bites her lip. “No, you were there. Remember, you hugged me, and I got that yellow dye on your white shirt?”

“Oh, yeah,” Aspen says wistfully. “I loved that shirt.”

“It was pretty cool, even with the dye.”

“It looked kinda sunny, didn’t it? I don’t remember what happened to it.”

“You left it in some motel.”

“You know what that shirt reminded me of?” Aspen stares off into nothing.

“Darren.”

“Uh-huh.” Aspen spins the chair again.

“You told me. He makes you feel like you’re flying into the sun.” Shae lifts a corner of the towel and checks her hair. “He makes me feel like that too.”

When the chair stops spinning, Aspen looks at Shae hopefully. “Did you see the way he looked at me last night?”

“Nope.” When Shae shakes her head, a few drops of dye fly and land like blood on the mirror. “Didn’t notice.” Her voice is sharp.

“Oh.” Aspen slumps forward and props her elbows on the counter. “I thought he was looking at me.”

Shae dabs at the dye drops. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be a bitch. I just never saw him look at you.”

“You’re not a bitch.” Aspen stares at her reflection in the mirror. For a second, she sees echoes of her daddy’s face in her own. The slope of her nose. The arch of her eyebrows. It makes her proud. “You know what my dad used to say?”

“What?”

“That art was God talking to us. Sometimes I feel like that when Darren sings. Like God is talking to me.”

“You’re a freak.” Shae takes a dye drop on the tip of her finger and rubs her fingertips together, staring at the red streak left behind. “You know what they do with people who think God is talking to them, right?”

“No.”

“They put them in the loony bin.”

Aspen thinks about pointing out that Shae is the only one in the room who has ever ended up in the loony bin, but it seems mean, so she doesn’t. She keeps studying her reflection. “Do you think I look like my dad?”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“My mom used to say that I looked like him.”

“You kinda act like him sometimes too.”

“Really?” Aspen says.

“Yeah, like when you laugh, you sound like him. And you’re nice to everybody, the way he was.”

Aspen forces a laugh, watching herself to see if she looks like her daddy when she does. Her eyes crinkle like his did, and her teeth flash white. “I guess I am like him a little.”

“Told you,” Shae says.

Aspen thinks Shae is probably just trying to make up for being rude about Darren, but she wants to believe what Shae is saying. In so many ways, she has moved far away from her daddy’s world and the life he had planned for her. Still, deep down, the thing she wants to be more than anything is her father’s daughter. “I never thought I looked like him,” she says. “I mean, I’m white as an egg, and he was Mexican.”

“It’s not your skin. You got that from your mom,” Shae says. “It’s your features that look like your dad. And how nice you are to people.” She looks at her reflection and glares.

“Not me, man. I’m a bitch.”

“I told you, you’re not a bitch.”

“Yes, I am. Just never to you.”

Aspen sweeps a strand of hair away from her eyes and stares at her reflection. “I wish I was strong like him.”

Just then, the stylist walks up to Shae and pulls the towel back. “I think you’re cooked,” she says, smiling. “Ding, ding.” Humming to herself, she guides Shae to the sink. As the stylist rinses Shae, Aspen watches. The dye running down the drain looks like blood.

When they leave the salon, Shae’s hair is a fireball.

“You look so fucking hot,” Aspen says.

“Thanks.” Shae grabs Aspen’s hand. “What say we get ourselves some dreamcicles, to celebrate?”

“I love dreamcicles!” Aspen says.

“Do you like the orange part or the creamy part better?”

Aspen screws up her face, thinking. “I gotta go with the creamy part.”

“I like the orange.”

They stroll like that, hand in hand, the sun burning their scalps, past a little sidewalk café. A guy by the door is strumming a guitar. His eyes are red, his face wrinkled like a lemon peel. Gray tangles hang from his head like dead foliage. He is singing Darren’s latest hit, “We are the Dream Weavers” in a voice that is old and cracked.

“Hey, that’s Darren’s song!” Aspen says.

“It’s a fuckin’ sign!” Shae says. “Fuck dreamcicles.”

Chattering excitedly, they stride to a table and seat themselves.

“What you gonna have?” Shae asks, flipping open a menu.

“I don’t know. I haven’t even looked at the menu yet.” Aspen reaches for a menu, her hand sticking momentarily to the plastic tablecloth. “You always do that.”

Shae looks up. “What?”

“Ask me what I’m having before I even look at the menu.”

Shae smiles, light glinting off all of her piercings, her fireball hair burning. Some people say Shae isn’t pretty, but Aspen disagrees. She thinks Shae is breathtaking.

“You’re cute,” Aspen says.

Shae grins. “You’re not so bad yourself, kiddo.”

Sighing happily, Aspen peruses the menu, calculating carbs and calories. She considers a Greek salad, but really, the enchiladas look better. She feels Shae watching her as she weighs the pros and cons of lettuce versus cheese. “What?” she says, looking up.

Shae’s face is pinched, unhappy. And something else. Aspen doesn’t like it when Shae looks at her like this. Shae’s eyes dart down to her menu. “Nothing.”

“No, not nothing.”

Shae glances up. “It’s just that you’re so pretty.”

Aspen touches Shae’s hand. “So are you, Shae.”

A tight ponytailed waiter saunters up. “What’ll it be girls?” he says. Aspen glances down at the menu again. “Ask her first. I’m not quite ready.”

Shae orders a salad.

When Aspen looks at the waiter, she notices he is staring at her boobs. She is irritated, but she smiles anyway. “I’ll have the enchiladas.”

“Didn’t you say you were trying to lose weight?” Shae asks offhandedly when the waiter walks away.

“Not today, I guess.” Aspen tries not to bristle at Shae’s remark. She has noticed that other women do this sometimes, point out her imperfections. As if she doesn’t already feel fat enough. Marilyn Monroe curves are not the thing to have in an age when Kate Moss stares out from magazine covers, luxuriating in emaciated glory. Aspen has tried to lose weight a million times, but it never works. For one, she orders enchiladas instead of salad. For two, she won’t touch speed or cocaine or anything else that might mess with her heart, not since her daddy died.

Shae plays with a fork. “Hey, bet you a hundred dollars I can hang this fork from my nose.”

Letting the weight comment go, Aspen laughs. “No way. Last time I fell for that, I had to give you a hundred bucks.” Shae is a professional-caliber dangler of silverware. She can hang anything from her nose.

“I bet I can do it.”

“I bet you can.”

Even though Shae doesn’t have to prove her point, she does. After dropping the fork several times, she triumphs, and the fork dangles from her nose like a Christmas ornament. “Ta-da!” she says, trying not to move her mouth too much.

Aspen claps. “Bravo!”

Finally, their food comes. The enchiladas smell delicious, and the cheese on top of them is burned just the right kind of brown.

“I love Mexican food,” Aspen says as the waiter sets the steaming plate in front of her.

“But it’s so fattening.” Shae spears a spinach leaf.

Trying to ignore Shae’s jab, Aspen focuses on the spicy enchiladas. They are good—spicy—but she can almost taste the calories. Chewing methodically, she takes in the street around her. A guy in a tie marches past, yammering angrily on his cell phone. “I’m glad we don’t have cell phones,” Aspen says.

Shae swallows. “Me too. Fuck that, man. Who needs the stress?” She takes a swig of her water.

Both of their mothers begged them to get cell phones to keep in touch, but they refused, agreeing instead to check in from a payphone at least once a month. Still, Aspen feels bad when she thinks about her momma sitting back in New Mexico worrying about her, wanting her home. But she can’t go back. She can’t. Shoving another forkful of enchiladas into her mouth, she studies a used book shop, wondering if they have anything good. She reads articles sometimes about people finding first editions in hole-in-the-wall book stores just like that one. She is about to ask Shae if she wants to check it out when the guy who was singing wanders over.

“Hey, man,” he says, his guitar case bumping against the sidewalk.

“Hey.” Aspen smiles.

Shae kicks her under the table, saying nothing.

The man wipes his forehead with the back of one greasy hand. “I’m sorry to bug you, but I’m pretty hungry. Do you think you could help me out?”

“Sorry, we don’t have any money.” Shae scrapes her plate with her fork.

Aspen looks away and notices a pigeon pecking its way along the sidewalk, its feathers shining iridescently in the afternoon light. She thinks about her daddy, about the way he saw a

miracle in every little thing. She looks back at the man, the deep wrinkles around his eyes, the sagging slopes of his shoulders. “Here,” she says, cutting off a hunk of her enchilada. She holds it up on the end of her fork. Hesitantly, the man bends forward. She sees his pink tongue as he takes a bite. “Have the rest,” she says, and she holds up her plate, along with the fork.

The man smiles. “Thank you, miss,” he says.

“Wanna sit with us?” Aspen asks.

Shae kicks her again.

The man glances at Shae, whose eyes are as fiery as her hair. “No, thanks, miss,” he says. And he wanders off across the bar with Aspen’s food.

Shae snorts. “Why the fuck did you do that? He’s just some crack-head.”

Aspen watches the man sit alone at a table, his hand shaking as he cuts into the enchilada with the fork. “That’s what my dad would have done.”

ENTERTAIN US

Load up on guns. Bring your friends.

It's fun to lose and to pretend.

With the lights out, it's less dangerous.

Here we are now. Entertain us.

*--Kurt Donald Cobain (February 20, 1967-April 5, 1994)**

Man's oldest temple is not a cathedral or a pyramid or a mosque. It is a cave. In France, its yawning mouth breathes must and dust and petroglyphs onto swaying grasses. There, eons ago, a man wearing the skin of a slain animal drew on stone walls with blood, chanting prayers, channeling visions, touching God. In a blur of makeshift paintbrushes, art and religion were born, twins expelled simultaneously from the same rocky womb. Is it any wonder, then, that modern day gods are also walking works of art, that they are poets and bards and actors? Man is driven to worship. And in the absence of a genuine god, man will make a god of another man. Ask Homer. Ask Shakespeare. Ask Elvis. But once you turn a man into a god, he can never be a man again. He becomes something else entirely. He becomes a dream.

In an open air-arena built into a grassy hillside, tranced worshippers stomp, waiting for their god to emerge from his heaven. "Darren! Darren!" they chant.

"I'm getting a beer. You want one?" Shae screams over the throbbing crowd.

Aspen nods, staring at the stage, which aches for the fall of Darren's feet. The girls are front-row-center again. They pay for this spot months in advance, wait in line for hours,

sometimes days, if there is open seating. “Make it a Long Island,” Aspen calls to Shae’s retreating form. If Shae hears her, she doesn’t let on. Aspen looks up, stares at a handful of stars peeking out from behind the purple veil of twilight.

Around her, the other disciples of this god ebb and flow. Their faces are familiar to her. They are not all like Aspen and Shae, these groupies who have given up everything to follow their god. They are not all beautiful, or young, or female. Over in that cowboy hat stands Brent, smoking a joint, long blond hair flowing. He too stares up at the stars, probably composing a poem. Aspen likes him. Sometimes, when she has nothing better to do before a show, she listens while he reads his writings to her. Next to him stands a woman who calls herself the The Queen. She is ugly, old, wizened, though she tries to keep her age at bay by dying her hair a scary purplish-red and wearing clothes that leave little of her hunched-over body to the imagination. Although she almost never speaks to Aspen and Shae, it is clear that she hates them. Aspen and Shae surmise that she has something terrible in her past, something that makes her run, but they have given up on empathizing with her. They call her The Bitch. As if she hears Aspen thinking about her, The Bitch turns. She glares at Aspen then leans over to the woman next to her and whispers. The woman glances at Aspen and laughs, not kindly. The Bitch glares again. Aspen looks away. She sees Mike and Misty, a married couple who couldn’t hang with civilized life. Now, together, they travel in a van, selling pot brownies to support their music habit. The familiar faces go and on and on, and maybe Aspen should talk to them, but she doesn’t. She and Shae keep to themselves mostly, to keep the magic of their adventure intact. These other groupies will sleep forty to a hotel room to save cash, but not Aspen and Shae. Their journey is their own, and they like it that way.

From behind, a man's body bumps up against Aspen. The heat of his sweaty torso melts into her spine. When she steps forward, she bangs her knees against the stage. "Sorry," she says, glancing over her shoulder. She doesn't know him, but she smiles a little anyway, to show him she didn't mean to hurt his feelings.

"No problem." He steps forward too. His breath is hot on her neck. She can smell it. Rum and cigarettes. "You seen Darren Silverado before?" The way he says those words, they sound like foreplay. Looking back again, she takes in his angled frat boy face, his thick football player neck.

"A few times." She looks away.

He presses his hand into the curve of her waist. "How many times is a few times?"

"I don't know." She squirms away from him.

"Take a guess." He pulls her back.

"Two hundred maybe?" The words come out too quiet.

"You're a fuckin' groupie?" He laughs and moves his hand higher.

"It's not like that," she says. Her mouth is dry.

"Which one do you fuck?"

"I don't." Heart pounding, she stares straight ahead.

He laughs. "You hanging with the band after the show?"

"No."

"Liar." When his fingers cup her breast, she stops breathing. "Where's the party?"

Aspen's breath returns, coming now in short gasps. Her mouth tastes sour. When she speaks, her voice squeaks, the way it does in nightmares sometimes. "Please, stop. . ."

"Get your fucking hands off her, you no-neck piece of shit."

Aspen turns. Shae is planted behind them, five-feet-two-inches of steel, beers held high over her orange, bristle-brush head.

“What the hell do you care?” Pointedly, the man rests his other hand on Aspen’s ass.

Shae’s eyes flash. “Look, fuckhead. If you make me drop my beer to rip your dick off, I’m gonna be pissed.”

“Fuck you, bitch.”

“No, fuck you.” Shae dumps both beers over his head.

Shaking like a wet dog, the man swipes at his eyes. “Fucking bitch!”

“That’s what they call me,” Shae says, thrusting her chest toward him, itching for a fight. “What do they call you? Limp dick?”

He raises his fist.

Shae raises a bottle. She will use it if she has to. Aspen knows this. She would put her money on Shae in any fight. “Bring it!”

The man’s fist hangs in the air.

“You want a piece of me?” Shae throws out her arms. Each hand holds one beer. Aspen imagines her bringing them together on the sides of the man’s head, an odd pair of potentially lethal cymbals. “You think you can take on this little girl, big man?” He looks into Shae’s flashing eyes. “Well?”

He lowers his fist, and after a final moment of pathetic posturing, retreats into the crowd, swearing and sputtering. “Fuck you,” he calls over his shoulder, but it is clear that his heart is not in it.

“You owe me a couple of drinks, jackass.” Shae drops the bottles, flips him the bird, and turns to Aspen. “You okay?”

Blinking, Aspen leans her head against Shae's chest. "Yeah."

"Fucking frat boys." Shae wraps her arms around Aspen. "Trained apes are smarter."

"And better looking." Trying to match her breathing to Shae's heartbeat, Aspen listens to the crowd. "Thank you, Shae."

Shae kisses her cheek. "No problemo, kiddo."

Aspen's throat tightens. "I thought. . ."

"I know what you thought, and it's never gonna happen again. I'm not gonna let it happen again." Aspen presses her face into Shae's neck, inhaling the honey sweet smell of her. "Come on. Don't let the fucker get you down. This is our happy place. Darren's gonna be here soon."

Aspen tries to laugh. "I know. I'm sorry."

"No reason to be sorry. But hey, I know how to cheer you up." Shae reaches into her pocket and pulls out a baggie full of dried florescent blue fungus. "Some guys just sold me some shrooms." Squealing, Aspen reaches for the baggie, but Shae yanks it away. "Take a few minutes to calm down. You don't want to go on a bad trip. Remember last time? Evil Kermit and the wicked W's?"

"It wasn't wicked W's. It was wicked words starting with W." Aspen shivers. "Kermit was doing the voiceover, screaming them at me. Wizened. Winter."

Shae rolls her eyes. "Sounds horrifying."

"No less horrifying than the time you thought that chihuahua was trying to eat you."

"Hey, that was fucking scary. Anyway, I'd rather not give Evil Kermit an encore performance, if it's all the same to you. Spending all night talking you down isn't my idea of fun."

Aspen lunges for the baggie again. “I won’t have a bad trip. Darren’s here.”

Shae shrugs. “Fine, but you go on a bad trip, you owe me breakfast.”

“Grand Slam all the way.”

“Grand Slam, extra bacon.”

“Alright.”

“Alright. I’m holding you to that.” Shae opens the baggie. “Two for me, and two for you.” Shae doles the shrooms out, and, grimacing, they chew the woody stems and caps. “I wish we had those beers to wash them down,” Shae complains.

“Fuckin’ frat boy.” Aspen smiles and waits. Twenty minutes later, the world leaps into Technicolor.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Darren Silverado.”

Aspen’s breathing stops. Her heart is too big for her body. She might explode. Red lights. Roaring voices. The whole world is on fire. In a blaze of electric guitars, of throbbing drums, in a surge of love and adrenaline, he comes.

He is long and brown. His eyes run deep into rivers of ancient times, into wells too dark for remembering, into songs, woven from notes long forgotten. He moves like water flowing over stones, with the power of a thousand oceans behind him. He glides over grass and sand and everything he touches grows, drinking life from his hands. The stars reflect in his face.

As silk slips from his lips, Aspen stands transfixed, not by his words but by the strength of his bones. She is a pebble tossed into the river of him, polished by his song. She wishes she could build a ladder to his face, crawl into that space, and sleep there, curled up in the slick cocoon of his mouth.

As god smiles down at her, flashing teeth so white they light up the night, she thinks that no mortal man will ever be good enough for her again. She closes her eyes to shut out the sight of him, so beautiful a fuse in her brain will blow if she looks much longer.

Through the smoke, the hand of god is reaching down. She reaches up, takes it in her own. It is the best sex she has ever had, the touch of this hand. Her god is drowning her with those ocean eyes.

*

Darren Silverado moves his fingers over the frets with an effortlessness brought about not so much because of his skill, but because the chord progressions are simple, written for a man with a voice like cool milk and a face like a god, a man whose fingers are beautiful and thick, but slow, if not clumsy. His brain and body are buzzing from the five shots of tequila he has downed. He is vibrating with the sound of his songs.

“Jim Morrison reincarnated,” a reviewer once called him. And he appreciated the compliment, but he didn’t like being compared to someone so dark. He believes in love. He believes in peace. He does not want to kill his father. And that part about what Jim wanted to do to his mother? Disgusting. Not only that, but Jim is dead, and he is alive. He is alive, and it is hard not to believe that he was destined for this greatness, born with incomparable beauty and a talent for stringing words and notes together like silken threads.

Between songs, he shares the sacrament of intoxication with his worshippers. “Can I get a shot up here?” he calls, and hundreds of glasses dart into the air, held by hands begging god to accept their offerings. He takes one, thanks the chosen fan, and holding the shot in the air, proclaims, “Drink it in. Life. Beautiful, fucking life. Blink, and it’s over. Every second is a gift. To life.”

He salutes the roaring crowd, drinks half a shot of tequila, and gives the remaining half to a fan, this time to the cinnamon-haired girl who stands up front every night. She becomes the music when he plays. Her peaks and valleys vibrate to the smooth ripples of his voice. He has watched her many times, but this tequila sharing is the closest they have ever come to a kiss.

“Thank you,” she says, taking the tequila and tossing it back. He cannot hear her, but he can read her lips. When he smiles at her too long, her eyes flicker away. Running her fingers through her hair, she glances back and grins. She is nervous, and her timidity touches him. The shy child hiding behind this groupie’s eyes does not match the brazen cut of her clothing. For a moment, he thinks of Anise, a girl he kissed behind the slide in second grade.

Before he leaves the stage, he brings her knuckles to his lips. “You’re beautiful,” he says.

“What?” she yells, laughing.

“You’re beautiful,” he says again, screaming this time.

Her eyes glow, and then she looks at the ground.

*

Sonny’s balding head glows blue in the light of the television. Blood drips from his nicked knuckles onto the pile of plaster on the floor.

“It’s just a TV show, Sonny.” Wrapped in her flowered, fuzzy bathrobe, Macy hunches in the corner. “Why can’t you see it ain’t real?”

“It is real!” Sonny screams. He punches the wall for the third time. “You think Darren didn’t sit in that studio, talking to David Letterman? God, sometimes you’re so fucking ignorant.”

Darren stares intently at the camera, right out through the TV and into Sonny Fucking Rickman's eyes. "After I got my first Grammy, my life got a little crazy," he says. "I just didn't know what to do with the fame, you know?"

David Letterman makes a crack which suggests various possibilities of what Darren might do with the fame in question. Places Darren might stick fame and so on. The studio audience roars.

Darren laughs. "I concur. Stick fame where the sun don't shine. It's overrated anyway. I hate thinking about the way I acted back then. All I can say is, thank God for my wife. She saved me." He looks into the camera and smiles a boyish smile. "I've been clean and sober for two years. Thank you, Ronnie."

"Thank you, Ronnie!" Dave grins his gap-toothed grin and waves at the camera. "Ronnie is expecting, right?" Dave says.

"Yeah!" Darren pumps his fist in the air. "I'm gonna be a daddy, man. Wow."

Dave holds up a CD. "And your new album was released last week." The audience applauds.

Grinning, Darren nods. "Yeah, I'm really proud of this one. I think it's pretty good."

"Pretty good?" Dave flaps open a *Rolling Stone* and reads. "Darren Silverado has redefined rock-n-roll for a new generation."

Darren bows his head humbly. "Wow," he says, shaking his head. "Wow. I'm honored." He breaks into a toothy smile. "I thank God every day. And America." He looks into the camera. "I wouldn't be where I am today without all the music fans out there. This CD is for the people that got me where I am."

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Sonny bellows.

“Sonny, no.” Macy covers her ears with her hands. Her grandfather was given to hours of solitary drinking when the situation demanded it, not to these sorts of noisy, destructive outbursts. Her grandfather is the only man she has ever known close up, but she has seen this kind of thing on After School Specials. What if Sonny turns his fists next on her? And even if he doesn’t, how will she pay to fix the hole in the wall? “Sonny, stop. Please.”

A commercial for toothpaste comes on, and just like that, Sonny is done. He presses both hands against the wall and stands there, gasping for air. When he turns to look at Macy, his eyes are wounded, and she is in love, you know, and here is a secret. When a girl, especially a girl without very many options, sees the man she loves bleeding, she cannot help melting on the inside.

She goes to him and wraps her arms around him. “What is it?” she asks. “Why’d you get so mad?”

“Nothing, man. Nothing.” He kisses her on the forehead. “Shit. You’re trembling like a scared rabbit.” Brushing the sweaty strands of fine hair back from her face, he whispers that he is sorry.

“Let’s go visit him, Sonny,” Macy whispers. “You heard what he said. He feels real bad about the way he acted after he got famous. I bet he misses you too.” She is the kind of girl who will do anything to make the man she loves happy. Plus, she wouldn’t mind meeting a rock god close up. It’s the nearest she’ll ever get to meeting Elvis, now that The King is dead. “Darren’s starting a new tour in the Western states. That’s what Dave said.” Macy is on a first name basis with all of the late night T.V. personalities.

“I don’t have the money, Macy. I’m broke. Do you know how much a trip across the country would cost? Hotel rooms? Eating out? Gas?” Macy shakes her head. “Macy Blue, it would cost hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars.”

Macy looks at his moist eyes then glances down at his freckled fingers, which are clenching and unclenching nervously. “I’m not broke,” she finally says. This is true. Over three years, she has saved up almost a thousand dollars.

“What are you getting at?” Sonny asks.

“I’m getting at how much I care about you, Son-dried Tomato. And when you care about someone, you help out if you can. You wanna go to California? Let’s go to California.”

Sonny wraps Macy in a hug tighter than a hangman’s noose. “God. How did I get so lucky?” He kisses Macy on the forehead and then works his way down. Her nose. Both cheeks. Her lips.

That night, Sonny sleeps in Macy’s bed, not on the couch, and he kisses her twice, French style. She finds the warm sweetness of his tongue disconcerting, but she doesn’t tell him so. In fact, the second time, she pushes her tongue right back into his mouth, and their tongues engage in a little wet wrestling match.

The next morning, they wake to the alarm Macy set. After eating a few slabs of fried Spam, they get dressed and drive downtown. There, while Sonny waits in the truck, Macy Blue marches right into Subway. Minutes later, she waltzes out, beaming. Poking her head through Sonny’s rolled down window, she gloats. “I told them to take this job and shove it.”

“Good girl.” Sonny laughs as Macy climbs into the passenger seat.

While Sonny backs out, Macy stares silently out the window. She thinks about the way her boss’s eyes went wide when she told him she was leaving.

“Take care, now,” he said, like he meant it. He really did want her to take care. Her tummy hurts.

“You cool?” Sonny asks.

“Yeah,” Macy says, not looking away from the window. But after a few seconds, she adds, “No, Son-dried Tomato, I ain’t cool. I’ve got a confession.”

Sonny peeks at her out of the corners of his eyes. He plants his hand on her knee. His fingers are hot. “A confession, Macy Blue?”

“Yeah, I lied to you. And to my boss.” Her lips tremble. “I didn’t tell him to take this job and shove it. I told him my momma was dying of cancer. Which she did. But that was three years ago, only no one at work knows it, ‘cause no one there talks to me much. And I used my own momma’s death to tell a big fat lie, and I bet I’ll burn in hell now. I bet I will.”

Sonny takes her hand in his. For a minute, the only sound is the hot air whooshing in through the open windows. Finally, Sonny speaks. “Macy Blue, I’ve seen a thing or two in my day, and there are a whole lot worse people in this world than you. If there’s a heaven, you’re going there for sure.”

Macy wipes her eyes. “You think?”

“I know.” Sonny squeezes her hand.

Macy smiles. “Okay, then.” She sniffs and switches on the radio.

“Okay, then.” Sonny does a drum solo on the steering wheel.

Listening to the oldies station full blast, Sonny and Macy drive to the dive bar where they met. Sonny’s car is still parked outside.

“I can’t believe they didn’t tow it,” Macy says.

Lucky me.” Sonny sneers. He tosses the contents of his car into the back of her rusty blue Ford, whistling all the while. “Truth be told, it’s good to say goodbye to the hunk of junk.” He slams the door, and off they go.

The sun is fading, but the air is still warm when they set out. The clouds are rimmed with pink. They sing, damn it. They sing, because this, my friends, is the beginning of a great adventure, and now, nature is celebrating with them, exploding into a firework sunset.

Sonny shouts, “If there is such a thing as heaven, Macy Blue, I bet we’re already there.”

*

Backstage, Darren’s heaven is not as flashy as it is frontstage. Sure, there are amenities. Mounds of food. Buckets of beer. Mirrors everywhere. But there are no red lights to smooth his wrinkles. Looking less than youthful, Darren slumps on a suede couch, studying the girl across from him, watching her sensible shoes tap as she scribbles in her notepad. She is poised uncomfortably in a folding chair, her back board straight, her eyes glued to her pen. She chews a strand of mousy brown hair that has pulled free from her tight bun. This grosses him out. But he likes her glasses. Black-rimmed, thick. Her collar is high. She looks smart. She was sent by some magazine—he can’t remember which one. He laces his fingers behind his head and stares at the ceiling. “Hey, you ever read Ginsberg?”

She looks up. “I’m sorry?”

“Ginsberg. You ever read him?”

She starts writing again. “He was a Beat Poet, right?”

“Right!” Elated, Darren leans forward.

“I think I read him in college. I don’t remember. I studied journalism, mostly.”

“Oh.” He falls back again. The couch smells like cigarettes. He wouldn’t mind a cigarette right now. “You got a smoke?”

“Sorry, no. I don’t smoke.” She adjusts her glasses. “Are you a poetry aficionado?”

Darren sits up again. “Yeah, man. Poetry was my first love. Music is poetry, you know. Poems were always meant to be sung. In the Middle Ages, traveling minstrels sang their poems. People say poetry is dead, but it’s alive and well. Rock-n-roll is the poetry of our generation.”

Scribbling, the girl smiles. “You’re smarter than you look.”

Darren grins. “Should I take that as a compliment?”

“Yes. So, Darren, tell me about your process. How do you write your songs—er, poems?”

“They just come to me, the way they came to Blake.”

“Blake?”

“William Blake. *Songs of Innocence and Experience?*”

The girl shakes her head. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Well, Blake wrote these incredible poems back in the eighteen hundreds. He claimed he was visited by angels when he wrote them.”

The girl raises her eyebrows. “Tell me more.”

Suddenly, he feels like he did when he and Ronnie went to see that marriage counselor. Probed. He isn’t sure he wants to tell her more. How can he tell this girl about what happens to him when he is writing, about the way he says, “If there is anyone out there who wants to talk to me, talk now.” And they do.

“That’s pretty much it. He thought he was visited by angels.”

She crosses and uncrosses her legs. They are pretty. Sleek and long. “Are you visited by angels, Darren?” She leans forward.

Darren runs his hand up and down his leg.

Her voice softens. “Just between us.” She sets the notepad aside. “This is off the record.”

He looks into her eyes, trying to discern whether or not she can be trusted. From far away, her eyes looked brown, but when he looks close, they have colors in them. Golds and greens. It is the colors that make him decide to tell her. That, and the fact that he just wants to trust someone right now. Anyone.

“I’m a conduit.” He bites his lip. Takes a breath. Pushes on. “I don’t write the songs. They write me.”

If she thinks he’s weird, she doesn’t show it. She seems interested, but not put-off. Like what he is telling her is normal. He knows it is not normal, which is why he knows he is not crazy. Crazy people think their weird shit is normal.

“Do you think I’m nuts?” he asks.

She laughs. “Quite the contrary. I think you’re the most interesting person I’ve met in quite some time.” Darren smiles shyly. “And I meet a lot of interesting people.” She crosses and uncrosses her legs again. “I mean, our society’s obsession with science gets a little old, right? We just need to stop being so damn pretentious, acting like we’ve got it all figured out. Science can’t explain everything. And between you and me, I think we could use a little more poetry in our lives. A few more angels, a few less physicists.”

Darren laughs. “Amen to that, sister.”

Eagerly, she leans forward. “So, how does it work? How do the songs write you?”

He looks deep into those colored eyes, takes a deep breath, exhales it as a confession. “I talk to angels in my sleep.”

*

“I can’t believe I just slept with Darren Silverado,” the girl says. Her head rests on Darren’s chest. The effects of the Ecstasy they took hours ago are fading, but still, everything is perfectly beautiful. Darren moves his legs, and the silk sheets rustle against his skin, achingly soft. Smiling, Darren pets the girl’s rumpled hair. It feels like velvet. He never wants to stop touching her.

“I can’t believe I just slept with a reporter,” he says. “My manager will be pissed.”

“No worries.” She strokes the fine hair on his chest. “You can trust me.”

“Your hair is so soft,” Darren says.

“Yours too.”

Smiling, Darren looks around the room. Pulsing candlelight. Plush carpets. Purple orchids. Half empty champagne bottles litter the coffee table. Darren raises his hand in the air and stares. His fingers are strong. When he clenches and unclenches his fist, his tendons pulse like spider legs. Tiny hairs sprout just below his knuckles. He turns his hand over, studies the palm. A crimson stain grows at the center.

“I think I’m Jesus,” he mumbles.

The girl’s pretty face laughs. The world blazes red, then fades to black.

A siren blares. Darren shudders awake. He gasps, sits up. The smell of scented candles hangs in the air. Lavender. But the darkness seems thick enough to smother him. A hot knot of panic grows in his belly.

“Where the hell am I?” He slaps at the bed, the headboard, the wall, looking for a light switch. He can’t find one. He tries to remember what city he is in. Cincinnati? St. Paul? New York? Something warm beside him stirs. “Rufus?” he says, and then remembers that the dog is long dead. “Ronnie?” The warm thing moves again, and a hot hand rubs his leg.

“Darren,” a woman’s voice whispers.

Not Ronnie. He can smell the woman now, a strange, tart odor, not like Ronnie, who smells slightly sweet even when she has gone for days without showering. “Who the hell are you?” Darren says, running his fingers along his scalp. This has been happening more and more often, this waking up not knowing where he is. Some nights, he doesn’t even know who he is. The feel of his own flesh against his hands is foreign to him.

“I’m Marion,” the voice says, scared. “Marion Winters? I interviewed you today.”

“Marion?” Darren tries the name on his tongue, which is coated with thick, bitter sludge. The name is unfamiliar. Rage rises in his belly. “Get the fuck out of my room.”

The woman yanks her hand away, and he hears her stumble to her feet and rustle around in the dark. “I—I can’t find my clothes,” she stutters.

“Oh, come on. Just wrap up in this and get out.” Darren pulls the sheet away from his body and thrusts it into the darkness.

She takes it and stands there, breathing. “Darren?” she says again. She is crying. He can hear her sniffing.

“What? You want money? Sell the damn sheet. It’s worth more than your car. Now. Get. The. Fuck. Out.”

“You aren’t Jesus!” she screams. He hears footsteps, and the door slams.

Stunned, he stares into the darkness. His hands fumble in the air around him until they hit something hard. Glass shatters. He flops back against the mattress, defeated. His breathing is so loud it drowns out cars, boomboxes, sirens. “Where the fuck am I?” he whispers again.

Heaven’s amenities, the crystal chandeliers and forever stretches of gleaming marble, are invisible in the dark. Heaven is only Heaven if you can see it. When it is dark, even god can get lonely sometimes. When god is staring hard and seeing nothing, no color, no light, he can ball up beneath his feather comforter and remember that once, he had a name that meant something. “God, where the fuck am I?” Darren screams into his mattress. “God, where the fuck are you?”

Darren does not really, when he is alone with himself, believe he is God. But still, people need something to worship, and for reasons having much to do with human nature and a little to do with the American dream, he has bowed into the roll. To become god, he left a man behind, an unremarkable man.

Darren Wilkensen had an outbreak of acne when he was 12, a brush with death related to a near miss lawnmower accident when he was 14. When he was 16, he went on his first date with a plump, dishwater haired girl. (He still remembers her name. Karen. It was Karen.) When he tried to kiss her, she laughed, inexplicably, and called him a fag. Darren Wilkensen graduated 143 in a class of 312. He was dangerously, ridiculously underweight. His school therapist called him “socially inept” in her report, the report she wrote when his father left town with a busty blonde named Shelia. Yes, Shelia. How cliché. The ordinary stories are cliché because they are common, unremarkable, laughable in their inability to rise above the status quo.

And then came his garage band, Icarus in Asbestos. He met Jackson and traded Wilkensen for Silverado. A god of flesh was born. When a god takes over a man, the man slowly dies, until all that is left is a god shell with nothing inside but an atrophying, rotting

memory. The tortured boy becomes a human sacrifice like the Aztec Tezcatlipoca. He dies alone, but forever, the god shell lives on, radiant, on coffee mugs and T-shirts, beaming in unauthorized biographies. This is Darren Silverado. A god shell. Wrapped in his luxury sheet, a death shroud reeking of sex, he is slowly breathing away the dusty remains of Darren Wilkensen to make room for Jesus in Blue Jeans.

The thing that hurts, that makes him ball up in the dark and cry, is this. With all the love that is hurled at his feet night after night after night, none of it ever penetrates his shell, because no one loved Darren Wilkensen like this, and that acne scarred boy still rustles around from time to time, rotting and weeping inside.

BLUE DAYS, BLACK NIGHTS

*I didn't realize I would miss you the way I do,
And now, somehow, I know I will pay for the times I made you blue.
Blue days, black nights.*

*--Charles Hardin Holley (September 7, 1936—February 3, 1959)**

Sometimes, you don't know why things happen the way they do. For instance, why is a barber in LA selling shards of Aztec pottery to his customers? Why are the pottery pieces nestled in a basket next to the hair gel and the sculpting creams? You just don't know. But whatever the reason, the shards are there, and Heaven notices them as he is paying for his haircut, after stepping off the bus in the Promised Land. New beginnings mean new haircuts. It is that simple. He probably shouldn't have cut his hair. His face is a little too narrow without the curls. But there you have it. He has cut it. Billows of black hair mar the checkerboard floor.

Heaven points to the pottery. "What are those?" he asks the barber.

"Genuine Aztec pottery," says the barber. "Five bucks each."

"What's Aztec?"

"They were people. Indians."

"They lived in teepees?"

"Nope. They built cities. Fancy ones. They lived in Mexico until the Conquistadors wiped them out."

Heaven wants to ask what a conquista—whatever—is, but he feels silly. So he says, instead, “The corridors killed them?”

The barber smiles. “Conquistadors. And yeah, they did.”

“Why?”

“Well, mostly because they wanted the Aztec’s shit. But also because they were a little freaked out by the Aztec religion. They thought it was barbaric. This coming from the people who brought us the Spanish Inquisition.” He laughs.

Heaven laughs too, even though he has no idea what the barber is talking about. He wants to hear more about the Aztecs, but he is the kind of guy who knows you should never pester a man holding a straight razor. He is also the kind of guy who pockets shiny things, stones and beetles and coins, so when the man turns his back, he steals the Aztec pottery, smiling like a billboard. He rushes from the store.

“Don’t you want your change?” the barber calls.

“Keep it,” Heaven calls. When he is far enough away from the store, he holds his Aztec bit up to the sun, imagining he can see through the pottery, back to the powerful brown hands that molded it hundreds of years ago, before conquista—whatevers, before skyscrapers and telephones, before any of this.

A sun-browed man crosses his path. Heaven catches sight of him in his peripheral vision, just to the left of the pottery. The man is strong and sharp, and the leather smell of him sets Heaven’s pulse to jumping, whether he likes it or not. He traces him with his eyes, until the man disappears around the corner. And then, because he is, for the most part, a creature of impulse, Heaven’s feet take over.

Breathing in a stuttered, short way, he follows the man around the corner, searching for the back of his head, and yes, there it is, entering Ray's Pets. All of a sudden, Heaven is on the market for a lizard. He has always kept some kind of pet, after all. A bug. A toad. Once, a dog. Keeping something alive near him makes him feel safe, even when he isn't. Those times he had to sleep on the roof of that building, the toad in his pocket kept him from feeling utterly alone. Now, dropping the pottery in his pocket, Heaven steps through the jingling doorway.

"Hello," says the chubby girl behind the counter.

Heaven waves and walks to the reptile section. He sets his duffel bag and guitar down, and squatting in front of an aquarium, searches lizards' eyes for a soul with which he feels a connection, intermittently and clandestinely studying the man's straight nose and thick forearms, wishing he could touch the tanned skin, hating himself for wanting this, but wanting it anyway, and experiencing some very acute indigestion. He has an ulcer, he's quite sure, from the fallout of the inner conflict. The smell of animal shit hanging in the air doesn't help.

The man is looking for a mouse, which scares Heaven, because this means he very likely has a snake, and people who keep snakes are usually crazy in the head. He has known three of them. Still, he cannot look away. The man is watching the mice intently, and it is hard to tell which one he has his eye on, but Heaven guesses it is the white one. The white one stands out because the rest are gray.

"Can I get some help over here?" the man calls, glancing around, and that is when he sees Heaven watching him. Embarrassed, Heaven looks away, but that doesn't stop the man from smiling and saying hello.

Shyly, Heaven smiles back. "Got a snake?" he asks.

The man looks puzzled. "No, why?"

“You’re buying mice.”

When the man laughs, Heaven notices how perfect his teeth are. “Oh, no,” the man says. “I’m in the market for a pet. No violence for me, thank you very much. I once saw a python at a zoo eat a mouse. Nightmares for days.” He puts his hands in the air and backs away from the cage. “What can I say? I’m a wuss.”

Heaven’s face flushes. “I like animals too,” he ventures, hoping the man will not be the kind who mocks these sorts of confessions.

“I can see that.” The man wanders over to stand behind Heaven. Heaven stares at the lizards. He can feel the man watching him. “That the one you want?” the man asks, pointing at a small, green thing with bulging yellow eyes.

“Yep,” Heaven says even though he has not made up his mind. He glances over his shoulder and smiles at the man. Up close, the man looks older. He has little webs of wrinkles around his eyes, and his skin is leathery, like maybe he has spent too much time tanning. His black hair is gray at the temples. But his chin is dented like Superman’s, and if Heaven doesn’t look too hard, the man is as handsome as Heaven first thought he was in the street. Also, he looks rich.

“Miss,” the man calls, and a girl bustles over. “Pack this lizard up for this young man. Put it on my tab.” Nodding, the girl goes into the room behind the cages. The man looks at Heaven again and smiles. Heaven’s heart leaps up into his throat. He smooths back his freshly mown hair and takes a deep breath. “So you new to L.A.?” the man asks.

“I—how did you know?” Heaven asks.

“I can see it in your eyes. This city hasn’t gotten its claws into you yet. You still have a soul.” The man winks. “Besides, you’re carrying a duffel bag.”

“Oh, shit.” Heaven laughs. “I forgot.”

The man’s eyes are shiny and cool, like icebergs made of cocoa. “I’m Brick Harton.” He thrusts out his hand.

“Brick?” Heaven tries to stop the chuckle before it escapes his lips, but he can’t. “Your name is Brick?” By the time he thinks about shaking Brick’s hand, Brick has dropped it.

But Brick laughs too. “Yep, Brick. I know. My parents were utterly insane. Whack jobs.” He draws loops near his ear with his index finger. “And what’s your name?”

“Oh.” Awkwardly, Heaven puts out his hand. “My name is Heaven.”

Smiling, Brick takes Heaven’s hand in both of his own. “Heaven? A guy named Heaven laughs at a man named Brick?” His palms are hot and damp.

Heaven feels his face flush. “I guess it’s pretty fuckin’ dumb, huh?” He tries to pull his hand back, but Brick holds on.

Brick’s forehead wrinkles with concern. “What’s dumb? Your name?” Heaven nods. “Oh, no. God, no. It’s beautiful.” Brick squeezes Heaven’s fingers. “Breathtakingly beautiful, son.”

Again, Heaven lights up sunburn red. He can feel it. Only this time, the heat is not just in his face. It’s all over him. “Thank you,” he mutters, looking at his feet. Brick holds Heaven’s hand a second longer, then drops it.

The counter girl returns from the back room. “Here you are, sir,” she says, approaching and putting a small box in Heaven’s hand.

“Oh,” he says. “Thanks.”

Nodding, the girl returns to her place behind the counter.

“Open it up,” Brick says, draping an arm over Heaven’s shoulder. “Let’s see your new friend.”

Heaven obeys. Carefully, he lifts the lizard that stares up from the bottom of the box, yellow eyes bulging. The heat from the man’s arm is burning through the leather of Heaven’s jacket.

“Well, look at you.” Brick pets the lizard’s head with one finger. “Aren’t you a beauty?” Then he looks at Heaven. “What are you going to name him?” His hand slides away from Heaven’s shoulder, and Heaven’s skin feels suddenly colder.

Heaven studies at the lizard. *What’s your name*, he thinks, though he is too embarrassed to say it aloud. Inside his head, he hears the lizard whisper, “Plato.”

“Plato,” Heaven declares.

“Um, it’s actually a female lizard,” the girl calls.

“Oh,” Heaven says. “I guess Plato’s a fuckin’ stupid name for a female, huh?”

Brick laughs. “I think Plato is a spectacular name for anyone.” He eyes Heaven knowingly. “So, do I have a philosopher on my hands?”

“A what?”

“A philosopher.”

Confused, Heaven smiles.

“Plato was a Greek philosopher of some note,” Brick says.

“Oh.” Heaven blushes again. “I read about him in school, but I was talking about the guy in *Rebel Without a Cause*.”

Brick laughs and slaps his leg, as if this is great joke. “Of course!” His eyes go wide, and he looks at Heaven beseechingly. “Do you think the end the world will come at night time?”

For a moment, Heaven stares in stunned silence. Butterflies grow in his belly and flurry there. Finally, he whispers the familiar lines from the movie. “Uh-uh. At dawn.”

Brick shakes his head wonderingly, as if overwhelmed by Heaven’s cleverness. “You are the first boy I ever knew that could quote that film,” he says. “You are quite astounding, Heaven. Quite. Here’s a bit of trivia for you. Did you know that that *Rebel Without a Cause* was originally intended to be a vehicle for Marlon Brando?”

Heaven shakes his head. “No way.”

“Yes way. James Dean was the second choice for the role.”

Heaven is on a roll with his movie quotes, so he yells, “Stella!”

Brick laughs. Then he yells, “Plato!” mimicking Heaven’s Brando impression. Heaven laughs.

“Imagine,” Bricks says, “how different *Rebel* would be had Brando played the role of Jim. Hell, we probably wouldn’t even know who James Dean is.”

“That would be fuckin’ crazy,” Heaven says.

“Or what about this? Can you imagine if that movie was made today?” Brick wears the elated expression of a man recently struck with inspiration. “Jim would be a rebel *with* a cause. He would be a member of Greenpeace.”

Heaven takes up the joke. “Yeah, he’d want to save the whales and shit!”

Brick slaps Heaven’s back. “He’d be a vegan.” He does his best James Dean impression. “Dad, stand up for the whales!” They share a good laugh, and then Brick reaches into his jeans pocket. “Look,” he says, pulling out a wallet. “I have a meeting to get to, but I would really, really love to get to know you better.”

When he opens the wallet, Heaven can't help but notice that it is stuffed with more money than he has seen since he had that cashier job at the convenience store. If he didn't like Brick so much, he'd think about following him down the street and pickpocketing him. But he does like Brick.

Brick slides out a business card and presses it into Heaven's hand. "Will you call me?"

Heaven nods.

"Do you have somewhere to stay, Heaven?" Brick lowers his voice. "Because if you don't, I can probably help you out." Heaven shakes his head. "No, you don't need help, or no you don't have a place to stay?"

"No, I don't have a place to stay."

Brick eyes him critically. "How old are you?" he finally asks.

"Um, twenty-one," Heaven says.

Brick smiles kindly. "No, you're not."

"Yeah, I am."

"No, you're not."

Heaven looks at the floor. "Sixteen," he whispers.

Brick's eyes are sad. "I thought as much. And a sixteen-year-old boy should not be wandering the streets of Los Angeles." Brick touches Heaven on the shoulder. "You are staying with me until you find a place." He taps on the card twice. "Call me, Heaven."

Heaven watches Brick's broad shoulders disappear through the doorway. Then he looks down at the card. On it is printed Brick's name and a couple of phone numbers. Nothing else. Heaven runs to the door. "Wait!" he calls to Brick's retreating form.

Brick turns around, smiling. "What's up, dude?"

“When?” Heaven calls.

“When what?”

“When should I call you?”

“Anytime, Heaven. Anytime, day or night.” Brick holds two fingers in the air, a peace sign. And he disappears into the crowd.

Heaven wanders back into the store. The girl has her back turned, stocking shelves. He lifts a candy bar from a display and darts back out. As he walks along, he drops Plato in his pocket. Her tiny feet rustle around, tickling him. Shoving the candy into his mouth, he keeps his eyes peeled, searching for Brick’s face.

*

As Aspen maneuvers her convertible through a crowded intersection, she talks to the car.

“Watch out for pedestrians, Sybil.”

Sybil has recently grown a soul. Her locks open and close without provocation, and her turn signals switch on unbeckoned. It has never occurred to Aspen that the car may have a wiring problem. Well, it occurred to her once, but she didn’t say it aloud. It’s more fun to have talking transportation.

Astonished by their car’s sudden interest in interacting with them, Aspen and Shae have developed an elaborate system for communicating with their automobile. They pass their hours on the road chatting it up with Sybil, trying to discern her favorite color, her favorite song, her preferred brand of gasoline. “You doing alright there, girl?” Aspen asks. In answer to Aspen’s question, Sybil’s right turn signal pulses. “The right arrow is flashing!” Aspen announces. “I think it means her day’s going good.” She stares at the signal in wonder, forgetting, for a moment, to steer. The car veers.

“Awesome, but watch the road.” Shae laughs.

Aspen straightens the wheel. “Sorry.”

“Do you think she’s hungry?”

“I don’t know. Do you need some gas, Sybil?” Aspen asks. Sybil does nothing. “I think she’s okay.”

Shae smiles. “Alright.”

Still, Aspen watches for a sign that Sybil is hungry after all. Just as a Ford pick-up with dents in the doors passes them, Sybil goes nuts. Right and left turn arrows flash. The doors lock, unlock, and lock again. “She is hungry!” Aspen says.

“No!” Shae laughs. “She’s got the hots for that Ford!” She pats Sybil’s dashboard. “I totally get it, Sybil. I like rugged men myself.” She looks at Aspen and winks.

Aspen laughs. After a moment, her eyes glint with sudden inspiration. “Do you think she can tell the future?”

Shae gasps. “I don’t know,” she says, clearly intrigued. “Ask her something.”

Aspen buries her fingers in her curls, thinking. “I got one. Is my dad watching me, Sybil?”

Shae grabs Aspen’s hand. “You already know the answer to that one.”

Aspen watches the locks. “Does he, Sybil? One click for no, two for yes.” The locks click twice. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!”

Shae gasps. “That’s fucking amazing.”

Four hours later, the girls’ interest in conversing with Sybil has waned. They pull into the parking lot of an internet café. As they put up Sybil’s top, the sun falls low.

Inside the cafe, Shae saunters toward the counter. “I’m buying.”

Aspen has broken a heel, but the sign on the café door insisted she wear shoes, so she hobbles along behind Shae. “Thanks.” She smiles a tired smile.

Shae reads the chalkboard on the counter where today’s specials have been rendered in powdery color. “Wanna try a pumpkin pie latte?”

Aspen shrugs. “Sure.”

As Shae orders their lattes, Aspen glances around the shop, bored. It is a Mom-n-Pop kind of place. Mismatched, cozy furniture. Lopsided, badly framed posters of long gone rock stars. Morrison. Joplin. Marley.

“I’m gonna go sit,” Aspen says.

“K.” Shae pays the barista and waits for change.

As Aspen limps toward a couch in the corner, she notices Darren staring out from the cover of *Entertainers Magazine*, which has been tossed on a nearby coffee table. The sight of his picture sets her heart pounding. Those eyes. She remembers the way it felt when he grabbed her hand. She snatches the magazine up and falls back into a plush chair, reading the words splashed below his impossibly handsome face: *Darren Silverado, Rock God or Whack Job?: “I talk to angels in my sleep.”*

“Fuckers.” She spits the word out like bad meat.

A middle-aged woman with Joan Rivers hair looks up from her computer screen, glaring.

Shae looks over her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“These fuckers are calling Darren a whack job!” Aspen snaps the magazine open and searches for the article. “Listen to this: ‘God complex anyone? Darren Silverado joins the ranks of the cracked-out rock stars that have gone before him. His delusions of grandeur rival those of Jim Morrison, who is rumored to have believed he was the reincarnation of Dionysus.’”

“Fuckers!” Shae says. Joan Rivers glares at them again. Shae takes her change and the lattes. “Did he actually say that? He talks to angels?” She walks to Aspen.

Aspen scans the article. “I guess so. Who cares though? Maybe he does.”

“Could be, I guess.”

Aspen flips the magazine closed and shows Shae the cover.

Shae sighs. “He’s fucking beautiful.”

“He grabbed my hand, Shae.” Aspen closes her eyes. “He touched me.”

“I think you may have imagined that, kiddo,” Shae says. “You were tripping, remember?” She pushes a latte into Aspen’s hand. “You still wanna check your email?”

“I guess so.” Aspen stands and follows Shae toward a bank of computers, balancing her latte carefully, trying not to spill. She does. “Oh, fuck,” she says, and since they watched a show on Rorschach Therapy at the motel the night before, she points at the brown puddle on the pale pink tile and adds, in her best Sigmund Freud voice, “Tell me what you see, Shae.”

Shae laughs. “That fat guy that was hitting on you last night.”

“Ew!” Aspen says, laughing. “What a freak! He stood there just staring at me saying, ‘You’re beautiful,’ over and over. I was like, look, mother fucker, I’m here to watch Darren, not you.”

“I didn’t hear you say that,” Shae says.

“Well, I didn’t say it. But I thought it.”

Shae takes a sip of her drink. “Holy shit. That’s hot.”

Joan Rivers clicks her tongue. “Language, girls.”

Aspen and Shae look at one another and burst into laughter.

“Language, girls,” Shae mocks.

They seat themselves in front of computers and log into their email accounts, which they have only recently acquired, mostly in an effort to stave off their mothers' constant nagging for contact. Shae takes a gulp of her latte. "Fuck. That is *fucking* hot." In the quiet café, her voice is sonic boom loud. The woman shakes her head. Aspen blushes. Without commenting on Shae's vocal rebellion, she opens the first of ten letters in her email box. All of them are from her mother, of course. The email is short.

Beautiful Aspen,

Please write to let me know you are safe. I know I drive you crazy, but two months is too long for a mom to go without hearing from her kid. Someday, when you are a parent, you will understand. I pray for you always. I miss you more than you know. I thought about you a lot yesterday. Hope you were okay. Dad's death day is always hard. Five years. Can you believe it? I still haven't gotten used to not having him around. Or you. I want my little girl home.

Love you. Love you. Love you.

Mom

Aspen's belly tightens. Her eyes burn. She didn't remember. She didn't even fucking remember the anniversary of her daddy's death. "Sorry, Daddy," she whispers. And she is sorry. And she isn't. Truth be told, she would rather not remember that day.

“Did you say something?” Shae takes a gulp of her latte.

Aspen shakes her head. “Nothing, just thinking out loud.” She stares at the screen, trying to decide whether or not to open the other emails. She decides no. Instead, she types a reply to her mother’s letter, slowly, hunting and pecking each letter with her pointer fingers.

MOM (The caps lock is on, and she doesn’t know how to turn it off.)

SHAE AND ME ARE GOOD. WE ARE IN OREGON RIGHT NOW. WE SAW THE OCEAN IN WASHINGTON. WE WENT TO THAT ONE BEACH WHERE WE SWAM WHEN I WAS A KID. IT WAS STILL THE SAME. REMEMBER HOW WE FINALLY TALKED DAD INTO WEARING SWIM TRUNKS IN PUBLIC, THEN HIS SHORTS TORE RIGHT UP THE BACK? I LAUGHED WHEN I THOUGHT OF IT. IT MADE ME MISS HIM. I MISS YOU TOO. SORRY I HAVEN’T WRITTEN MORE. IT’S HARD TO FIND A COMPUTER. I LOVE YOU TOO.

XXXOOOOOOOXXXXOOO,

ASPEN

When she is done typing, her eyes are wet. She remembers her daddy laughing, bobbing in the waves that day. And then, because she can’t help it, she remembers him dead on the floor. His swollen tongue was sticking out a little. There were cuts on his fingers that would never heal. Those are the two things she remembers most.

“I’m feeling kinda sick.” She sends the email and shuts off the computer. “I’m gonna go

sit on the lawn.”

“OK.” Shae doesn’t look away from her computer.

Aspen shoves the copy of *Entertainers* into her purse, to add to her collection of Darren paraphernalia she keeps in a box in the trunk. In it, she has every ticket to every show she has been to, in addition to any set-lists she has managed to acquire. Also, there are clippings of Darren from magazines and newspapers. And best of all, a tissue paper flower he once handed her from the stage.

She hobbles outside. Staring at the clouds, she kicks off her shoes and sits cross-legged in the grass. *What do you see, Aspen*, she thinks. *I see a kitten*, she answers herself. *A semi-truck. A mushroom. A dead hand.* And then she stops, because this game is only making her feel worse. She diverts her attention by searching for four leaf clovers among the slender grass blades and fuzzy dandelion heads.

Finally, Shae comes. “You ready?” she asks. Her voice is gruff, and she is wearing her sunglasses.

“Uh-oh. Another bad letter from your mom?”

Shae shrugs. “Doesn’t matter.” Offering her hand to Aspen, she says, “Let’s get outta here.”

“Yeah.” Aspen grabs Shae’s hand, and Shae pulls her up. “She’s a bitch anyway,” Aspen says, kissing Shae’s cheek.

Shae manages a tight little smile. “Fuck, yeah. What do I need her for when I got you?” She looks at Aspen’s dirty bare feet. “You gonna get your shoes?”

“Nope. What would I need with a broken shoe?” Aspen takes Shae’s hand, and they cross the parking lot.

“This pavement is still *fucking* hot,” Aspen says, prancing.

“Language, girls,” says Shae. They smile.

When they come to the car, Aspen asks, “You driving or me?”

“Me.” Shae opens the driver’s side door. They climb in, and Shae turns the key in the ignition. Sybil locks and unlocks the doors. “Hi Sybil,” Shae says, patting the dashboard. She looks at Aspen. “Question,” she says.

“For me or Sybil?” Aspen asks.

“For you. Where the hell are we going?”

Aspen shrugs. “I guess we could keep driving.”

Shae groans.

“If you’re not too tired,” Aspen adds.

Shae rests her head on the steering wheel. “Nah, I’m not tired. Just. Oh, I don’t know what the fuck I am.”

Aspen touches Shae’s hair. “You’re brokenhearted.”

“Yeah, that.” Shae backs the car out and pulls onto the highway. The street lights whiz by like comets. “Do you ever think about death?” Shae asks.

The question takes Aspen off guard, despite Shae’s casual tone. She shrugs.

“Sometimes. Who doesn’t?”

“What do you think happens when we die?”

Aspen shrugs again, rolls down her window. “Heaven, I guess. Streets of gold and all that. That’s what my dad said.”

“What about hell?” Shae asks.

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as hell.”

Shae nods. “Fuck. If there’s a hell, we’re already in it.”

Aspen picks a piece of lint off her shirt. “Did you know the Aztecs didn’t believe in hell? They thought everyone went to Heaven. Just different kinds of Heaven.”

“Like layers of Heaven?” Shae asks. “Mormons believe in that.”

“I always forget you used to be Mormon,” Aspen says. “No, not layers of Heaven. Not better or worse Heavens. Just different Heavens.”

“Depending on how good you were?”

“No, depending on how you died. Like drowned people went to drowning heaven. And, of course, sacrifices got to be gods.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Shae is silent for a moment. Sybil switches on her right turn signal. Shae smiles. “I think Sybil agrees with you. We all go to Heaven.”

“Do we all go to heaven when we die, Sybil?” Aspen asks. Nothing happens. “Do we?” Nothing again. “You try,” she says to Shae.

“Do we all go to heaven?” Shae asks. Sybil locks and unlocks the doors. As the girls squeal, the neon sign of a liquor store captures Shae’s attention. “I need a fucking drink,” she says.

“Language, girls,” Aspen says, clicking her tongue.

Shae cracks up as she pulls into the parking lot. After making sure Sybil doesn’t need anything (she doesn’t), they go inside and fill a basket with soda and mini-bottles of liquor.

“Holy shit,” Shae whispers in Aspen’s ear when she sees the cashier. He is the kind of man you might see staring out from a cologne ad. His face is sharp in all the right places. His five o’clock shadow looks painted on, perfect. His shoulders are broad, and Aspen can imagine the way it might feel to cry on them. It might feel safe.

“Holy shit is right,” Aspen says. “That there is one beautiful boy.”

“Dibs,” Shae says.

Aspen thinks about arguing and then remembers Shae’s mom. She wonders what she said this time. The sober letters are fine. It’s the drunk ones that break Shae in half. “He’s all yours, lovely one,” she whispers in Shae’s ear as they saunter toward the register.

“Hello ladies,” says the beautiful boy as they place their bottles on the counter. He says “ladies,” but he only looks at Aspen.

“Hello back,” says Aspen. Her voice is cool, and she takes a step away.

“Hello.” Shae steps in front of Aspen and puts out her hand. “I’m Shae.”

As he shakes Shae’s hand, he looks past her, at Aspen. “So will this be all for you girls?”

“I’d say it’s more than enough.” Shae laughs. “In fact, we’re having a little roach-motel-room party later, if you wanna come over and take some of it off our hands.”

“You serious?” he asks Aspen.

Aspen shrugs. “She is. I won’t be there. I’m going to see my fiancé.”

As he rings up the bottles, he glances at Aspen again and again. “What’s your name?” he asks finally.

“Aspen,” she says. And then, “Hey, Shae, I’m gonna go to the car. I don’t wanna run around here barefoot. This floor is a mess.”

“Why aren’t you wearing shoes?” he calls as she walks toward the door.

“They broke.” She doesn’t look back. The bell above the door jingles her goodbye.

She waits in the car this time. It is too dark for clover hunting, and anyway, she just wants to rest. She puts her seat back and closes her eyes. The sound of the door handle makes her open them again. “You asleep?” Shae asks, setting a bag of bottles in the back seat. She

climbs in.

Aspen sits up. “Nah, just resting. How’d it go with supermodel boy? We staying in town after all?”

Shae shrugs. “He bored me quickly. Pretty, but not much else. Kinda dumb.”

Aspen reaches for the bag of bottles. “Too bad,” she says. “He sure seemed to like you.” She knows this isn’t true, but she has learned to throw Shae a bone every once in a while.

Shae grins. “He did, didn’t he?”

“Yep,” says Aspen. “Fucking smitten.” She digs in the bag. “What do you want? Vodka or rum?”

“Rum.” Shae checks herself in the rearview mirror. “Why didn’t you tell me I had lipstick on my teeth?”

“I didn’t notice. Sorry.” Aspen pulls out a bottle of diet soda and three mini bottles of rum. “Anyway, your pretty boy didn’t seem to mind much.”

“You think I should go back and talk to him again?” Shae asks as Aspen dumps half the soda in the parking lot and pours the minis into the soda bottle.

Aspen shrugs. “If you want. I wouldn’t waste my time if I were you though. You’re too smart for him.”

“Sybil, should I go back?” says Shae, switching on the ignition. Sybil says nothing. “I guess that’s a no.” Shae drives away.

Aspen peeks over at Shae. Shae’s eyes flit from the road to the starry sky and back again. “You know what we are?” Shae asks.

“What are we?” Aspen puts her chair back and closes her eyes.

“We are angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night.”

Aspen doesn't open her eyes. “That's pretty. Did you write it?”

Shae groans. “No, dummy. It's Ginsberg. ‘Howl?’ Pretty much the most famous poem ever written.”

“Oh,” Aspen says. Ginsberg. “Howl.” She files it away under extraneous knowledge, something she might use at a party to impress someone. Aspen falls asleep to the sound of Shae's soft voice reciting the entire poem, verbatim. She doesn't understand the poem, exactly, but she likes the way it sounds, like a song.

*

“Wake up, pretty girl,” Shae says.

Aspen opens her eyes. The car clock flashes 12:19. Another musty motel, and they stumble inside. The bed is hard, but Aspen barely notices before she sleeps again. Her dreams tonight are soft and sweet, the colors of cotton candy. She is irritated when a clanging noise makes them evaporate. Coiling her body like a snake, she tries to sink back into the dreams. But the clanging comes again. She opens her eyes. The noise is coming from the bathroom. Dirty light leaks out from underneath the door.

“Shae?” she calls. No answer. She sits up. “Shae?” again, louder this time. An answer comes in the form of maniacal laughter. Shae's laughter. Aspen runs to the bathroom door, knocks. Shae doesn't open it. Aspen tries the handle. It is locked. “Shae, what are you doing in there?”

“I'm taking down the fucking mirror so I don't have to look at me.” Shae laughs again. “God, you should see all this blood.”

“What blood?” Aspen pounds on the door with both hands, her voice rising. “Open this door, Shae, or I’m fucking breaking it down!”

“You know what I look like? I look like a Victoria’s Secret ad that collided with a Sylvia Plath poem. That’s good, huh? I should write it down.”

“You should write it down, Shae. You should. Open the door and I’ll hand you a pen.”

“I’ll write it with the razor blade.”

“Fuck, Shae!” Aspen yells.

She kicks the door, but it doesn’t budge. The clanging comes again. She flips on the light. Desperately, she scans the room, searching for. . .for what? She doesn’t know. And then, she does. A hairpin. She runs to her purse and digs around until she finds one. As Aspen shoves the pin into the doorknob, Shae is still laughing. Finally, the lock clicks. She turns the knob and swings the door open.

Shae is standing in front of the mirror, which is torn halfway off the wall, dangling from sinewy ropes of peeled plaster and paint. Dressed in black panties and a lace bra, she is clutching a razor blade. Her face is swollen and snotty. Her wrists are crying blood. Scarlet drops punctuate the tan, chipped tile by her feet.

“The beast is getting hungrier,” Shae says, turning to look at Aspen with wide, vacant eyes. Her voice is a growl.

“Fuck, Shae. Fuck.” Aspen runs to her and draws her into her arms.

Smiling vacantly, Shae pulls away, her eyes wide and glistening. Drooling a little, she whispers, “Fear is the self you thought you left behind sneaking up on you.”

“Shae, what the fuck? What the fuck?” Aspen sweeps her hand across Shae’s forehead. “We gotta get you to the hospital.”

“No!” Shae yells. “I’m not going to the hospital.” She starts to cry and crouches on the floor. “Not like last time.”

Aspen remembers the stories Shae told her about the last time she was in a mental hospital, the way she was trapped in hell with the crackheads and homicidal maniacs and alien abductees. Shae wraps her arms around herself and starts to rock. Low and long, she wails, rocking, rocking.

“Shae.” Aspen goes to her and sits behind her. “Why the fuck do you do this shit?” Gently, she pulls her into her lap. She doesn’t want to do this. She wants to go back to her cotton candy dreams. But she does do it. She does it because that is what love does. Makes you do the beautiful things you don’t want to do. Cradling Shae’s head, she sings, *“I’m gonna love you, ‘til the heavens stop the rain.”*

Shae slumps back. “Don’t ever leave me,” she mutters.

“I won’t. I’ll never leave you, Shae. We are Siamese twins. Attached at the heart. Remember you used to say that?” Shae closes her eyes. For a second, Aspen wonders if Shae is dead. But Shae starts to snore, and Aspen decides no. Snoring means breathing. “Fuck you, Shae,” Aspen whispers. “Fuck you for pulling this shit.”

Aspen surveys the bathroom, the checkerboard of bloody tile. She lifts Shae’s wrist and wipes the blood away with her shirt. The cuts are jagged but shallow. Horizontal instead of vertical, which means Shae didn’t really want to die. Isn’t that what she read somewhere? If someone wants to die, they cut straight along the vein? She kisses the wound, comes away with blood on her lips.

She thinks again about taking Shae to the hospital, but then, she thinks about what they did that last time. They locked her up like an animal is what they did. Some crackhead tried to

rape her in there.

Aspen extricates herself from Shae and props her on her side against the wall, just in case she throws up. Tenderly, she lifts Shae's head and shoves a wadded-up towel under it. Then, she goes to her suitcase, where she digs until she finds Bactine and Band-Aids. Wondering what it is like to die, she cleans the wounds. Her whole life feels suddenly empty, like the inside of a helium balloon. Nothing makes sense, and she hates this, these fucking motel rooms, these rest stops along the path of her flight. She wants to run and never stop running. Bad things only happen when you stop.

"Daddy," she whispers. "Help me. God, wherever you are, fucking help me. Your little girl is dying." And even though she is not the one who is dying, Shae is the one who is dying, it feels true, all the same. She is dying.

She remembers when she was alive. She remembers sitting on her daddy's lap while he told her stories from the Bible.

"And David shot the rock," he said, miming shooting a stone from a sling shot, "and it whizzed through the air and hit Goliath straight in the head. And he was gone. Just gone."

*

Darren lies on a rumpled hotel bed, staring at the ceiling, holding the phone away from his ear. It doesn't help. He can still hear Jackson yelling. "Let me get this straight. You told Marion Winters, the Marion Winters, you talk to angels in your sleep?"

Darren strangles the receiver with both hands, shakes it, finally brings it reluctantly to his face. "Look, I didn't know she was a big deal. Anyway, she said it was off the record." He is trying to be patient. Jackson gets like this sometimes. Darren wouldn't take it from anyone else, but he trusts Jackson. Still, his guts start to boil as he waits for Jackson to answer him. What is

taking him so long? He's probably trying to compose himself. He can't afford to piss off Darren Silverado, and he knows it. *Yeah, fucker*, Darren thinks. *Pull it together. Who is paying whose rent here?*

When Jackson speaks again, his voice is calmer, but his breathing is still labored. "Oh, for fuck's sake, Darren. You believed her? How long have we been doing this?"

Darren holds back the "Fuck you," that wants to escape his lips. Instead, he says, "I thought she was different." He doesn't like how pitiful his voice sounds. He sounds like he is begging. It pisses him right off. As if he isn't pissed already.

"Darren." Jackson sounds now like he is talking to small child. *Condescending prick.*

"What, man? We had a connection." Darren notices a dog shape in the plastered ceiling. He imagines it is Rufus, his dog from all those years ago.

"Meaning what? You fucked her?"

Darren takes a deep breath. "Yeah, I slept with her. So?"

Jackson's laugh sounds like sandpaper. "Of course you did. Is that when you told her you thought you were Jesus?"

When Darren squints his eyes, the dog on the ceiling looks like it is barking. "Well, actually, yeah, it was."

"Oh, for fuck's sake Darren!"

"Look, in my defense, I was high."

"So, you only think you're Jesus when you're high? Well, I'll just issue a statement saying that then. That should clear the air. Come on, Darren, you're the poster child for sobriety. It hasn't even been a year since *Rolling Stone* ran that story. We're lucky she didn't write about the drugs."

“Probably because she fucking did them with me.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely wonderful.”

Darren can almost see the disappointment in Jackson’s eyes. Sometimes, he reminds Darren of his father. Darren bolts upright and punches the mattress, sending a cloud of dust shimmering into the sunlit air. “Fuck you, Jackson!” Jackson’s stunned silence makes Darren feel guilty, which makes him madder. “Who the fuck do you think you are? Do you know who you are talking to?” Jackson says nothing. Darren takes another breath. “Do you, dude?” Still nothing. He punches the mattress again. “You are talking to Darren Silverado.”

Darren can hear Jackson breathing. “My mistake,” Jackson finally says. “I thought I was talking to my friend. The guy I found singing in that shit bar in Montana all those years ago. The guy I named Silverado. The guy I think of as my own son.”

Darren tears up at the word “son.” He kneads his temple with his fingertips. “Look, Jackson. I’m sorry. Okay? I thought I could trust her.” Jackson sounds like he is crying. Is he crying? Or laughing? Hyperventilating? “Jackson?”

“Look, Darren. Just never trust a reporter. Never. Fucking bitch.”

“Fucking bitch is right. I threw her out, if its any consolation.”

“Fuck me!” Jackson’s voice is angry again. “So if ever she wasn’t going to print what you said, she certainly was going to after you threw her out of your fucking bed! Listen, Darren, I will do damage control here, but do this for me. From now on, you trust no one. Trust is a luxury you can’t afford. Ever again. Got it?” Darren stares at the dog on the ceiling. “Darren, do you hear me?”

“Yeah, Jackson. Trust no one. Got it.” As Darren slams the receiver down, his eyes burn. “Fucking prick!” he says.

He flops back again and stares at the ceiling. The dog there says nothing, but his mouth stays open, emitting an endless stream of silence.

WORLDS COLLIDE

*I told you that we could fly,
'Cause we all have wings, but some of us don't know why.
I was standing, and you were there.
Two worlds collided. And they could never tear us apart.*

*--Michael Kelland John Hutchence (January 22, 1960—November 22, 1997)**

For the third time in as many days, Heaven dials the number printed on Brick's card. The payphone smells like cigarettes, but at least it works. The last one stole his quarter. As the phone rings, a sea-scented breeze tousles Heaven's hair. "Come on. Answer." Heaven's heart pounds. Another ring. "Fucking answer, Brick." Heaven is tired of sleeping on park benches, but more than that, he can't stop thinking about Brick. He wants to see him again.

"This is Brick Harton." Brick's voice is louder than Heaven remembered. His belly lurches, and he almost hangs up. Almost. "Hello?" Brick sounds annoyed.

"Um, yeah." Heaven clears his throat. "This is Heaven."

"Heaven?" For a moment, the only sound is the static on the line. "Oh, Heaven! Great to hear your voice. I thought you weren't going to call. How's Plato?"

"Good," Heaven says. A car whizzes by, honking. "Sorry I didn't call sooner. I tried a couple of times, but you didn't answer."

"I'm sorry, dude. Work has been crazy. You should have left a message."

"I don't really have a phone, so it didn't seem like there was much of a point. You

wouldn't be able to call me back anyway."

The static makes Brick's laughter sounds crackly. "Well, then, we'd better figure out where to meet so we don't lose track of one another again."

"Sounds good." Heaven feels suddenly dizzy. He thinks about the way old dudes ask each other to hang out in movies and tries to imitate what he has seen. "You wanna, um, have a drink or something?"

"Well, we could do that," Brick says. "Or you could just come to my pad. Didn't you say you needed a place to stay for a few days anyway?"

"Uh, yeah, I did." Heaven's heart pounds. This isn't the first time a stranger has offered to let him crash at his house, but it is the first time a physically perfect stranger like Brick has. "Are you sure it's cool?"

"Of course. I have more than enough space." Brick gives Heaven an address. "Take a cab," he tells him.

"I don't have any money," Heaven says, trying to sound properly embarrassed, but really, he is pretty sure he knows what Brick will say. He knows a cash cow when he meets one.

"No worries, dude." That spine tingling, gravelly laugh. "I do."

As Heaven rides to Brick's house, he can't figure out why his guts twist themselves into a knotted rope. Sure, he's nervous. After all, Brick is sexy as hell. And rich. But he feels more than nervous. He feels afraid. The sour taste is in his mouth, the one that used to come when his dad was about to hit him.

He doesn't want to think about it. Instead, he watches L.A. slide by outside the taxi window. Broken-down stores give way to manicured lawns, and soon, the taxi winds its way up into lush, flower strewn hills. The houses that glide past are bigger than supermarkets. Iron

gates, crawling with ivy, stand guard in front of them. Heaven can't see much past the high fences, but he bets there are swimming pools too. He wonders if Brick has a pool. He remembers the way he and Brandon used to have back flipping contests off the diving board at the apartment pool. Once, Heaven dove too close and hit his back on the edge of the board. Brandon gently rubbed the scrape on Heaven's back and promised not to tell anyone about how hard he cried. Heaven remembers Brandon looking at him that day, worried, and then, in his imagination, Brandon turns into Brick. Heaven thinks about Brick rubbing his back.

As the taxi screeches to a stop, the cab driver whistles. "Wow, kid. You live here?"

Heaven stares at the black iron gate. *Harton* is spelled out in twisted metal letters on the top. "No. Well, yeah." He smooths his hair as best as he can, feeling suddenly grungy.

"Yeah. Now, I do." The driver looks confused. "My dad just asked me to come live with him." Heaven slings his duffle bag over his shoulder. "I lived with my mom in New York before this."

"Well, kid, looks like you just died and went to heaven." The driver presses the intercom button on the box by the gate. "I got a kid here who says he's your son," he calls out. Too loud. Heaven blushes. *Don't say that*, he wants to scream, but the lie is already in the air. He can't take it back. He wonders if Brick will start yelling the way his dad would when he caught him lying.

Brick's laughter echoes through the speaker. "He's my kid, all right. Send him in."

And the gates to heaven swing open.

*

Shae is all the colors of a full gumball machine, singing along with the car radio at the top of her lungs. "*Hate, baby, hate, when there's nothing left for you. You're only human, what can you do, it will soon be over.*" Shae's voice is as tough as she is, raspy and intoxicating.

Aspen is driving fast, 100 miles an hour, maybe faster, fast enough that bugs that happen in through the open top pelt them like hailstones. Not seeming to notice, Shae hammers out the beat with her palms on the dashboard. “Michael Hutchence, man. He’s the shit!” she yells over the roar of the wind when the song is over. “We oughta go catch him in concert sometime. Take a little time off from Darren. Try something different.”

Aspen doesn’t answer.

“Sybil, should we go see Hutchence?” Sybil doesn’t answer either. Undaunted, Shae presses on. “Hutchence is fucking hot as hell. I mean, not *Darren* hot, but still, hot.” She punctuates her statement by lifting her T-shirt for a passing semi driver. He swerves and nearly careens off the road. “Shit on a stick! Did you see that?” Shae laughs so hard, tears roll.

Aspen joins her. “I guess you’re feeling better,” Aspen says when the laughter finally dies.

“Sure as shit, I am,” Shae says, thrusting her hand out the top. Some of her Band-Aids come loose and wave in the breeze. “That wind, man. Feel that wind.” She closes her eyes. Aspen takes a sidelong peek at her friend, trying not to worry. Trying to leave last night where it belongs. In the past.

When they woke up, they did what they do best. They ran. Left the blood and the mangled mirror for someone else to clean up. Or at least they thought they did. Aspen carries it with her today though. She can’t stop seeing the blood. She can’t stop hearing that awful clanging. She tries to tell herself it was a one time deal. A momentary lapse of reason. Shae is granite, after all. Nothing can break her. Maybe she cuts herself sometimes, but not usually the way she did last night. And the time she ended up in the hospital before was a fluke. She accidentally overdosed was all. That’s what she told Aspen anyway. That’s what Aspen told

herself. But there is no way to argue last night was an accident. Sybil locks the doors. “Look!” Shae is pointing.

Grateful for the distraction from her dark thoughts, Aspen looks in the indicated direction but sees nothing out of the ordinary. Just a dented, yellow truck. “What?”

“Sybil likes that truck. And there’s a guitar in the back. Maybe she wants us to get him to play for us!”

Aspen squints, trying to see if the driver is a guy or a girl. “How? We’re on the freeway.”

“Catch up to him.”

Aspen does. As they pull alongside the truck, Shae lifts her shirt and smiles. The driver, who turns out to be a guy, glances over, does a double take, and swerves.

The girls roar. “It’s like clockwork!” Aspen yells.

Shae waves at the man and screams, “Pull over!”

Laughing, he rolls down his window. Without the glare of the glass, Aspen can see him better. He isn’t bad looking. Blond. Brown-skinned. A little on the scrawny side, but a guitar covers a multitude of sins.

“What?” he yells.

“Pull over,” Shae yells again.

He doesn’t ask why. The old truck screeches to a halt on the shoulder, and Aspen pulls up behind him. Laughing, he hops out of the cab. He is tall. His clothes are rumpled, but fairly new. “What the hell is wrong with you girls?” he asks as he strides over, grinning.

Shae laughs. “I could tell you, but it would take all day.”

“We saw your guitar in the bed of your truck,” Aspen says.

“Well, Sybil did,” Shae corrects.

“Are you Sybil?” The guy looks at Aspen.

“Oh, no. I’m Aspen. The car is Sybil.” The guy looks confused, but Aspen doesn’t feel like explaining the sudden emergence of Sybil’s soul. She cuts to the chase. “We thought maybe you’d play us a song.” She smiles a smile she knows is pretty enough to melt icebergs.

Shaking his head, the man runs a hand through his hair. “You gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“Nope.” Shae thrusts out her hand. “I’m Shae, by the way. This hot little filly beside me is Aspen.”

“I’m a horse now? And anyway, I already told him my name.” Aspen smiles at the man. “So what do you say? Will you play us a song?”

He shrugs, as if this isn’t the best offer he has gotten in a blue moon. “I got things to do.”

“Please?” Shae winks. “We’d make it worth your while.”

He grins. “You’re serious, aren’t you?” The girls nod vigorously. The man looks around. “Here?”

“No, by the arena.”

Aspen smiles again. “Darren Silverado is playing there tonight. You can pre-party with us.”

“Why the hell not?” the guy says, throwing his hands in the air.

*

Heaven drops his guitar on a hardwood deck and stands, weak-kneed, in front of the tallest door he has ever seen. Furrowing his forehead, he shifts his duffel bag from one shoulder to the other. As he prepares to knock, he notices a door-knocker in the shape of a lion head, just like in the movies. As far as he can tell, it’s made of solid gold. He wonders how long Brick will let him

stay, thinking if it is only a few days, he will find a way to snag the knocker when he goes. What would he need to take it off? A screwdriver? He leans closer to the knocker, trying to discern how it is attached to the door. It's hard to tell. Finally, he lifts the knocker and lets it drop. Despite the tentativeness of his movements, the knock is loud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Like his heart.

He glances around the yard, looking for a way out, just in case. Not that he wants to leave now, but he likes to know he can escape if he needs to. He understands how quickly good things can go bad. The huge yard is surrounded by tall, flowering hedges and high stone walls. He is trapped. He has that sinking feeling, the one he used to have when his dad drove down a high hill too fast. Fighting back panic, he knocks again. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Waiting, he wonders what will happen next. Will a maid with a frilly apron come? Or a butler with a British accent? Will he say, "Would you like tea and crumpets, sir?" Heaven wonders what a crumpet is. He knows what tea is. He's not a fan. His stomach burbles. Glancing around the porch, he wonders if Brick would notice if he upchucked in one of the giant potted trees.

The door swings open. The man standing in the doorway is no butler. "Heaven!" Brick throws open his arms, which are clearly muscled, even under his long sleeves. "My long awaited guest."

"Uh, hi." Taking a deep breath, Heaven shuffles forward and gives Brick an awkward hug. "Thanks for letting me come over." Brick smells good, like fancy cologne or some shit like that. His hair, when it brushes Heaven's face, is stiff.

“Of course, dude,” says Brick. Why does Brick keep calling him “dude?” Is he trying to sound young? Cause it’s not working. “Come on in.” Brick lifts Heaven’s guitar from the porch and holds open the door.

As Heaven steps inside, he feels like the wind gets knocked out of him. The place is that great. All gold and marble and fancy rugs. Paintings are everywhere—lumpy, real paintings that look nothing like the smooth poster-prints Heaven’s dad hung on the apartment walls. Right in the middle of everything, a spiral staircase winds its way into infinity. Just like in the movies. Heaven thinks that maybe the cab driver was right. Either he is in heaven or he is in a movie. Same difference, really. “Holy fuck,” he says. He reaches out to touch a vase that is painted with pictures of dancing men with goat’s legs. Then he thinks better of it and pulls back.

Brick laughs. “Go ahead. Touch it.” He takes Heaven’s hand and runs his fingers gently over the bumpy surface. “You’re touching the past, Heaven. Plato might have touched the same thing you are touching now. Imagine that.”

“Well, shit,” Heaven says.

When he pulls his hand away from the vase, Brick holds on for an extra second before letting go. “Speaking of Plato, where is the little guy?”

“You mean girl?” Heaven reaches into his pocket. “Here.” He pulls out the lizard and sets her gently in the palm of his other hand. Plato scuttles forward, and her tiny claws scratch Heaven’s skin.

Smiling, Brick shakes his head. “You are too much. You keep that lizard in your pocket?”

Heaven shrugs, suddenly embarrassed. “Where the fuck else would I keep her?” he says, dropping Plato back in.

“Seems as good a place as any to me,” Brick says quickly.

“Well, it’s not like I could carry an aquarium around on my back.” Suddenly angry, Heaven looks at his shoes, noticing the way his toes are almost breaking through the fabric. He will have to hit the old fucker up for some new ones.

“Of course not. I didn’t mean to imply there was anything wrong with you keeping him, er, her, in your pocket, Heaven.”

When Heaven looks up, Brick stares at him in a burning, secret way that says he is interested in something close to Heaven’s pocket, but not a lizard. Heaven glances at the staircase, hoping Brick doesn’t want the same thing that man in the alley wanted right away. His throat tightens at the thought. He decides if Brick tries anything, he will kick him in the balls, snag the fucking goat vase, and run. “So,” he says, trying to sound casual, “what’s upstairs?”

“Well, your room, for one.” Brick’s gleaming smile sets Heaven at ease again. “I took the liberty of having Julia ready a room for you.” Brick spins toward the staircase and starts to walk, swinging Heaven’s guitar. “You are staying, right?”

“Um, sure,” Heaven says. Hesitantly, Heaven follows Brick up the stairs. He feels so out of place in this house, like a rat dropped into paradise. As they climb, Heaven has to remind himself that this is real. His anger at Brick evaporates as quickly as it came. He cannot believe his luck. He wishes he could show Brandon this place. It is more like a museum than a house. He remembers in sixth grade when his teacher took him to the art museum and those paintings made him feel all tingly. Weak too. Being so close to so much art made his legs feel like rubber. He remembers how he wanted to kneel in front of the paintings. He remembers the way the other kids laughed at him when he cried at how pretty one painting was—that one of the blond

boy with an arrow through his heart. Brick's paintings are like that. They make Heaven want to cry. They are cracked and old, like something out of a history book. Most of the people in them are naked and beautiful in an old-fashioned sort of way. The girls are kinda fat and soft with big eyes. The boys have curly hair and sharp noses. Everyone looks like they are about to cry.

Upstairs, Brick's house is the same as the downstairs, art everywhere. Everything looks expensive. "So, what do you think?" Brick asks.

"Holy fuck," Heaven says. And then, he wants to slap himself. How many times can a guy say "holy fuck" before he starts sounding like an asshole? Feeling small, he shuffles along the hallway behind Brick. The rug under his feet is thick and soft. He can tell this even through the soles of his hi-tops. When he gets to his room, he says it again. "Holy fuck." Brick laughs and leans Heaven's guitar in a corner. "Sorry," Heaven says. He looks around, wishing he could show Brandon the bed. It has curtains and everything. Mountains of pillows. "You're fucking kidding me," he says. "I can stay here?"

Brick winks. "You bet. It's all yours. And I'm right down the hall if you need anything." Brick walks to Heaven, lifts the duffel bag from his shoulder, and drops it on the bed. He points to the open door of a closet that seems to go on and on forever. "You can put your stuff in there."

"Thanks," Heaven says. Standing here in the fanciest room he has ever seen, Heaven feels grubby. "Do you think I could, uh, use your shower?" he asks, looking down at the rug, which is woven with all kinds of pictures. He bets Brick didn't buy it from a catalog. He bets it was made by hand. He tries to figure out if he could roll it up and get it out a window himself, or if he would need someone else to help lift it. It looks heavy. "I feel kinda dirty."

He isn't sure, but he thinks Brick's eyes flash. "Of course," he says. "It's just down the hall." He leads the way.

The bathroom is bigger than the living room in Heaven's old apartment, and it is equipped with an intricately tiled tub the size of a small pool. "Holy fuck," Heaven says.

Grinning, Brick claps him on the back. "You seem to be saying that a lot."

Heaven blushes. "It's just, well, I've never been anywhere this nice before."

"Most people haven't. You'll get used to it. I promise." Brick winks. "Take a bath if you want. Soak for a while." Brick smiles a sly smile, like he thinks he is playing a joke on Heaven. Then, he closes the door.

Heaven goes to the sink and shuts the drain. As he pulls Plato from his pocket and releases her in the sink, he whispers, "Can you believe this fucking place?" Plato scuttles along the sides of the slippery sink, trying to escape. She doesn't get very far before she slides back down toward the drain.

Slowly, Heaven undresses, peeling back his smelly T-shirt and grimy jeans. He glances over his shoulder before he takes off his underwear. He feels, well, naked. Not quite alone. Finally, he yanks off his reeking socks, sprints to the tub, and climbs in. He turns the gold faucet handle, and warm water comes swooshing out. He isn't sure if it is possible, but the water feels smoother than regular water somehow. On a shelf next to the tub, he sees a carton of bubble bath. It's been years since he took a bubble bath. Since before his mom left. He thinks of her for a second, remembering her wide smile and soft, black skin. She was so pretty. The color of the sky at night. He misses her. A lump of sadness forms in his throat, but he swallows it. "Fuck that," he whispers, dumping some bubble bath in. A cloud grows under the pounding stream of water. Suddenly, the air smells like vanilla. A surge of joy comes over him, and he

laughs out loud. How did his world go from alley to mansion in a week? Feeling like a kid again, he scoops up a handful of bubbles and makes himself a Santa Clause beard, the way he used to when he was little. There's a knock at the door. Thud. Thud. Thud. Quickly, Heaven wipes away the beard. "Heaven?" From the other side of the door, Brick's voice sounds muted and garbled, like the parents on Charlie Brown.

"Uh, yeah?" Heaven tries to remember if he locked the door.

"I just wanted to let you know I ordered an aquarium for Plato. Until it comes in, you can keep him in the big bowl I put on your bed. I put some grass in there for him."

"Thanks," Heaven says.

"Also, I put some fresh clothes on your bed. I'm not sure we're the same size, but I thought you might need something to wear."

Heaven is embarrassed. Brick noticed how old his clothes were. "Thanks," he mutters again.

"I'll have Julia wash up your clothes so you can wear them tomorrow," Brick adds. "I'm sure you'd rather sport your own groovy duds than my old man threads."

Brick really is trying to sound young. It makes Heaven laugh a little. He doesn't feel so shitty now. "Thanks!" He manages to say it without sounding like he is laughing.

"Sure. Hey, I'm going out tonight. Do you want me to drop you anywhere, or would you rather hang out here?"

Heaven can't figure out why, but he is suddenly creeped-out by the idea of being in this big house all alone. Those painted people might be freakier at night. "Maybe I could go see Darren Silverado?" he ventures. "He's supposed to be in town."

“You got it. I’ll drop you there and give you some cash to take a cab after. Just call if you’re not coming home. I’ll worry.”

Heaven pulls the arm on an imaginary slot machine. “Cha-ching!” he whispers. “Uh, I don’t really have any money for a ticket though,” he calls, trying to sound as pathetic as humanly possible. “Do you think I could, well, borrow a little?”

The silence lasts so long, Heaven wonders if Brick has walked away. Finally, Brick laughs again. “Of course, Heaven. I’ll buy you a ticket as well. I’m sure we can think of some way for you to earn your keep while you get back on your feet.” Brick’s footsteps echo in the hallway outside the door, then disappear. Thud. Thud. Thud. Liking the pounding of Heaven’s heart.

*

In an abandoned parking lot, Aspen and Shae’s feet pound. Laughing, they dance to the frenzied music of the man’s guitar. The man (Aspen and Shae still don’t know his name) is propped in a beach chair, strumming hard, his eyes squeezed shut. As the girls whip and whirl, a breeze flirts with the hems of their yellow skirts, while overhead, the Van Gogh stars dance. In the distance, the lights of the arena where Darren will play flicker along with the stars. The show starts soon, and in a few minutes, the girls will leave, but for now, they are lost in the guitar and the stars and the throbbing of their hearts.

Shae can dance. Man, can that girl dance, like a peppershaker in the hand of the number one maraca champion of the world. Aspen, on the other hand, has never been a particularly good dancer, but she is enthusiastic, and she doesn’t care what people think. Her hips move in time to the music, and her hair billows around her face like a cloud. She catches Shae by the hand and

cooperates, more or less, with Shae's twirl. "Look at you go, Shae!" she shouts. "This isn't even your kind of music."

"It's all my kind of music," Shae yells back, grinning.

They fall into one another's arms, and with her face pressed hard into Shae's shoulder blade, Aspen feels the world slow down. The stars drift now.

They are each other's true loves. Not because of sex. What with *Playboy* and *Cosmo* and airbrushed flesh being used to sell everything from hand cream to hand grenades, many have come to the erroneous conclusion that sex is all there is. There is something else, of course. There is love. And sometimes sex is about love. And sometimes love is about sex. And sometimes it isn't. Sometimes the great loves of your life are fathers or daughters or sons or lizards or snails.

This is how love is. We want to keep it in a little box, but it doesn't play that way. It explodes all over the whole world, like a bottle of purple paint dropped from a window. It splatters everywhere. It grows from your belly button like a weed, wraps tendrils around heads and sandals and beaks and wings and anthills. It is not like a daisy, he loves me, he loves me not. It is like a vine of ivy, crawling all over the house. Watch out for love. It will get you. It will eat you alive, swallow you whole, infect you like the germs in a toilet stall, if you do not push the door open using only one finger.

*

Heaven does not push the door to love open with one finger. He is, in fact, crashing into love at the edge of the parking lot, peering out from behind the fronds of a palm tree, spinning tales about destiny and angels as he watches those two beautiful sirens dance. Brick dropped him off hours ago, and as Heaven was walking to the arena, he came upon this impromptu party. Now,

he cannot tear himself away. He foundered between the two girls for a moment, wondering which one was his angel, but his heart set itself finally and firmly, like concrete, on the redhead, because the awkwardness of her dancing meant innocence. Also, while the orange haired one is hot in her own way, the other one is hot in everyone's way. She is the kind of girl that would pose as an angel in a magazine. Boys like to imagine that girls who look like angels really are angels.

Tentatively, Heaven steps from the safety of the trees into the moonlight. He sees the way the girls look at the guitar player, and he wishes he had his guitar too. He has been practicing, and he can play a lot of songs now, at least the ones that consist of only three chords. Mid-twirl, the girls see him and stop dancing.

"Shit on a stick," says the orange-haired one, too loud. "Dibs."

The redhead says nothing, but her eyes are wide, surprised.

My eyes must be swollen, Heaven thinks. *Oh, fuck. My eyes are swollen*. He has been crying a little, moved as he has been by the dancing of the girls, by the overwhelming good fortune that has fallen into his lap. By Brick. By the paintings. By everything.

The redhead smiles at him, and he thinks that he has never seen a person smile quite like that. It makes him weak, the way those paintings at the museum did. Walking, watching the redhead twirl again, he remembers the Aztec pottery and wonders if it is the thing that brought him all this good fortune. He hates to be greedy, but he needs more luck right now. He takes the pottery from his pocket, and he whispers a prayer, not to any god in particular, because he hasn't gotten that far in his query about the universe. But he at least has decided there is a god, so he prays. He thinks vaguely that maybe he is talking to the god of the Aztecs, whoever that god might be.

This pottery may or may not be magic, but it certainly has a knack for catching light, and as it glints in the starlight, the redhead stops dancing again. “Aztec pottery!” she says, running to Heaven. Like magic. Heaven watches her eyes shine as she stares at the pottery in his palm. “Do you know how old this is?” she shrieks. “Can you imagine the hands that molded it?”

How crazy, because that is just what Heaven thought of when he took it, those hands that molded this pottery, and he tells her so. He never takes his eyes from her face, and she never takes her eyes from the pottery. “Here,” he says and presses it into her palm. “Have it. I bought it for you.”

“For me,” she whispers, and maybe it is because she is drunk, but she begins to cry.

“You’ve done it now,” the orange-haired girl says. “Aspen’s a fucking history nerd. You’ll never get rid of her after this.” Heaven glances at her for the first time in a while. Her eyebrows are drawn into an angry line. Still, he smiles, hoping she is right.

At the show, it becomes abundantly clear she is wrong. With the music pulsing and the smoke billowing, Aspen seems to forget all about Heaven, who stands behind her.

“Can I get you a drink?” he screams in her ear. Up close, he can smell her hair. It smells like apples. If she hears him, she doesn’t show it. He tries again. “Your hair smells nice. What kind of shampoo do you use?” No response. Glowing faintly in the red lights, her hands thrust high, she gazes up at Darren. Defeated, Heaven looks at Darren too. It’s crazy, but it seems like Darren is watching Aspen from underneath his lowered eyelids. Of course he is. Aspen is the prettiest girl Heaven has ever seen. Why wouldn’t Darren be watching her? Suddenly and irrevocably, Heaven hates Darren. He glares. Heaven could swear Darren glares back. Quickly, Heaven looks away, focusing again on Aspen. He wants to tell her Darren is a fucking prick, but he senses this won’t go over well, so instead he says, “I think he’s singing just for you.”

Aspen turns, smiling a smile that makes him catch his breath. “What?” she shouts.

“Darren Silverado’s singing just for you.”

“You think so?” She reaches back and squeezes his hand. Her fingers are so warm.

When she lets go, he presses his hand into the curved place between her hip and rib cage. He feels himself get hard and steps away from her a little so she won’t notice.

“I’m going to get a drink,” Shae yells, leaning toward Aspen. Heaven had forgotten she was even here.

“Get me one too,” Aspen yells back.

“Get your own fucking drink,” Shae says.

As Heaven watches the orange head disappear into the crowd, he feels rage jolt through him. He doesn’t like this Shae already, the way she talks down to Aspen. “What’s up with your friend?” he yells into Aspen’s ear.

“What?”

“Why is your friend being such a bitch?”

Turning to look at him, Aspen shrugs. “She’s not a bitch. She’s just had a tough life.” But her eyes are wet.

Heaven wants to kiss her. She turns back to Darren.

*

Darren’s song is cold on his tongue. Still he performs it flawlessly, like he has a thousand times, smiling on the lines that are supposed to make him smile. It is lucky that he knows these lyrics well enough to sing them in his sleep. Between his recent bout with insomnia and the ten shots of tequila, he is sleepwalking. He has slept three hours in as many nights. His eyelids are heavy. When he closes them, his mind wanders. He wonders about Ronnie, how full and round her

belly must be now, distended with the weight of his child. *I want to go home*, he thinks, and then, he tries to remember where home is. For reasons he cannot fathom, an image of the cinnamon-haired girl flashes through his mind. His fingers miss a fret, sending a piercing high note through the speakers. Alarmed, he opens his eyes. *Keep playing*, he tells himself silently. He glances down at the girl, smiling until he catches sight of a hand on her hip, fingers burrowing into her flesh like hungry parasites. A surge of anger electrifies his belly. With a squeal of off notes, the song grinds to a halt.

“Sorry,” he says into the microphone. “Let’s try that again. One, two, one, two, three, four.” The band takes up the song. Glaring, he screams the lyrics louder than usual and kicks, karate style, in the parasite’s direction.

Heaven notices. Heaven is the kind of guy that notices these things, but he doesn’t mind. His ancient animal brain tells him that in the fight for a mate, antlers dashing against antlers, he has just won. Silly, smiling Heaven. He thinks can outwit god.

*

After it is all over, Aspen puts the passenger seat forward so Heaven can crawl in the back of her car. He hopes she will join him, but instead, when he is in, she bends over to put the seat back again. He can see straight into her shirt, and her boobs are probably the most perfect boobs he has ever seen. He tries not to stare. The car smells faintly apple-y, like her. He gets hard again.

“Do you always eat this late?” he asks, trying to distract himself, as she climbs into the front seat.

“Sometimes. If we’re hungry.” Aspen flips down the visor mirror and applies a coat of lipstick. Her lips are like something from a porn mag. Red and full. “Sometimes, we forget to eat though.” She presses her lips together and snaps the mirror shut.

“Buckle up,” Shae commands as she slides into the drivers seat. When she turns the key, the car’s right turn signal flashes.

Aspen laughs. “Sybil likes you,” she says.

“Who’s Sybil?” Heaven asks.

“The car.” Aspen turns and smiles at him. “She has a personality.”

Heaven smiles too. “That’s fucking cool.”

As Shae drives to the waffle house, lurching and swerving all the way, she glares at Heaven in the rearview mirror. Heaven’s hard-on is history. Digging his fingers into the upholstery, he fights back the urge to scream like a little girl getting her braids pulled. He watches streetlamps rush by overhead and wonders if these flashing lights will be the last thing he ever sees.

“Why didn’t you invite the guitar guy?” Shae asks.

Aspen shrugs. “I didn’t see the point. Not like we’ll ever see him again.”

Shae laughs. “I suppose he did his bit, didn’t he?”

Aspen smiles and glances at Heaven. “Yep. And anyway, I found something better.”

Heaven’s heart lurches. When he steps from the car, his breathing is still ragged. He watches Aspen’s ass as he follows the girl into the restaurant. Coffee pots gurgle, and a plump waitress leads them to a booth.

“This okay?” she asks.

“It’s great,” says Aspen.

“No,” Shae says. “Can we get a window seat?”

Nodding wearily, the waitress takes them to a table by the window. “Better?”

“Sure, but could you turn out that light? It’s blinding me,” Shae takes a seat by the

window, reaches for the lamp over the table, and fiddles with the bulb. Aspen sits next to her. With a hangdog look, Heaven seats himself across from Aspen.

“Please don’t touch that. It’s our policy to keep the lights on,” the waitress says.

Shae glares. “I don’t want to fucking be blinded while I’m eating my pancakes. Who is turning out the light gonna hurt?”

“I said, it’s our policy.” Curtly, the waitress passes out the menus and leaves.

“What a bitch,” Shae says. “She’s not getting a tip. I can tell you that much.”

“It’s fine, Shae.” Nervously, Aspen fiddles with her napkin. “Maybe she had a rough night.”

“No, it’s not fine. The customer is always right. You ever hear that?”

“Yeah,” Aspen says. Heaven reaches across the table for Aspen’s hand and clasps it as Aspen continues. “I guess the lighting isn’t exactly flattering. I’m sure I sweated all my makeup off.” She looks at Heaven apologetically.

“You look beautiful,” Heaven says.

“Wait. Ask this guy,” Shae says, pointing at a passing pimply waiter. When Aspen doesn’t respond, Shae calls, “Excuse me?” As the man turns, she flashes a toothy smile. “Would you mind turning out this light? My eyes are a little sensitive.”

The waiter smiles. “Sensitive eyes, huh?”

“I’m pretty much sensitive all over.”

The waiter blushes. “Well, sure, miss.” He beams at Shae as he unscrews the light bulb. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Just your phone number.” As the grinning waiter scribbles his number on a napkin, Shae drums out the beat to a song on the table. “Can you guess what song that is?” she asks.

“Nope. You got me.” Clearly nervous, the waiter sets the napkin on the table.

“Come On Baby Light My Fire,” Shae says.

“Oh, of course. I shoulda known that. Sorry.” He pulls a notepad from his pocket.

“Hey, I might as well get your order, since I’m already here, I mean. What else can I get you girls? And boy.”

Heaven clears his throat. “Um, I won’t be having anything.”

“Aren’t you hungry?” Aspen asks.

“Not really,” Heaven says. “I ate a big dinner.” He hasn’t eaten since he had that weird peppery sandwich on rye bread at Brick’s, but he isn’t about to tell Aspen he has just enough money for a cab ride home.

“Alright.” Aspen shrugs.

Aspen and Shae order. When the waiter leaves, Shae shoves the napkin into her purse and whispers, “Not that I’m gonna call him, but it seemed polite to ask.” Giggling, she goes back to her table drumming. As she drums, the girls rehash the show, blow by blow. “Did you see how on fire Josh was tonight?” Shae asks. “The best drummer alive.”

“That guy from Def Leopard with one arm was pretty good,” Heaven offers.

Shae snorts. “Not as good as Josh.”

“Josh has two arms,” Heaven points out.

“I loved that pirate shirt Darren was wearing,” Aspen says quickly. Heaven is glad she changed the subject. The last thing he needs is a late night “Who’s the world’s best drummer” brawl with the orange-haired bitch. “I love pirate shirts,” Aspen adds.

“I thought it was more like a hippie shirt,” Shae says. “Maybe a cowboy shirt.”

“Whatever.” Aspen’s eyes gleam. “He looked amazing.” Resolving to buy himself a

pirate-hippie-cowboy shirt the moment he gets some cash, Heaven begins to build a sculpture with the silverware. Aspen watches Heaven, narrowing her eyes. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." He balances a butter knife on top of the sculpture.

"How old are you?"

Heaven adds a salt shaker to his creation. "Twenty-one."

"Me too!" Aspen grins. "You seem younger."

Smiling, Heaven says, "So do you."

"People say that about me a lot."

Shae snickers. "Cause her parents fucking hid her from the world."

Aspen nods. "They kinda did." She watches Heaven as he adds some sugar packets to his creation. "They were great parents. Don't get me wrong."

"They were," Shae says. "Her dad was the nicest guy I ever met. But fuck. They were so overprotective. Sent her to this tiny Christian school."

"You went there too," Aspen says, carefully contributing a spoon to Heaven's sculpture.

"Yeah, but I had a life outside. You didn't."

Aspen shrugs. "True. I didn't really see much of anything until me and Shae started following Darren."

"They wouldn't even let her watch PG-13 movies," Shae adds. "She'd watch 'em at my house though."

"They wouldn't let me listen to secular music either." Aspen takes her lip gloss from her purse and applies a shiny coat.

Heaven is confused. "Secular?"

"Non-Christian." Shae rolls her eyes.

“Some Christian music wasn’t so bad,” Aspen offers, turning toward Shae. “What about Petra?”

“Oh, come on. ‘God Gave Rock-n-Roll to You’?” Shae looks disgusted, like she has just discovered that she has stepped in a pile of dog shit.

Aspen laughs and puts the lipstick away. “Yeah, that was pretty bad.” She looks at Heaven again. “I used to listen to secular radio in my bedroom with my ear pressed up against the speaker. I loved music. I couldn’t stay away.”

“I contributed to her delinquency.” Shae grins. “I gave her Bon Jovi’s *Slippery When Wet* for Christmas.”

“Remember how we used to stare for hours at that poster you had of Bon Jovi?” Aspen asks.

Shae laughs. “Oh, yeah. Man, he was hot! I loved big hair rockers!”

Aspen smiles wistfully. “He wasn’t as hot as Darren.”

“Too true,” Shae agrees.

“I love music too,” Heaven interjects, feeling left out. “I actually play the guitar.”

Aspen’s eyes light up. “You do?”

“Yep.” Heaven adds the pepper shaker to his sculpture, and the whole thing comes tumbling down. “Shit,” he says, laughing.

“Bummer.” Aspen looks at the toppled sculpture sadly.

Shae grabs a fork. “Bet I can hang this from my nose,” she says.

“Bet you can,” Aspen says.

Shae hangs the fork from her nose. “Tada!” she says.

“Yay!” Aspen says.

Heaven says nothing. Instead, he puts the salt back where it belongs, then the pepper.

“So why’d you start following Darren anyway?” he asks finally, looking at Aspen.

“I don’t know,” Aspen says. “It was kinda like destiny.”

“What do you mean?” Heaven doesn’t like the sound of this “destiny” word, as it’s applied to Aspen and Darren.

“I just never thought I’d follow a rock band. When my dad died, I had a modeling contract.”

“I’m not surprised,” Heaven says.

“Well, it was no big deal. Just a local agency in New Mexico. And they said I had to lose a bunch of weight before they sent me out on shoots anyway. I was trying, starving myself, you know? But at my dad’s funeral, I saw all the people who his life had touched. It was standing room only. It made me realize I didn’t want to just spend my whole life looking pretty. So I gave up modeling.” She pauses, looking down. “I finished high school. Took some college classes, but I didn’t really know what I wanted to study. I kinda loved everything.”

“I knew what I wanted,” Shae says. “I wanted to study writing.”

“Yeah, she did,” Aspen says. “Shae wanted to be a writer the first time she picked up a pen.”

Heaven doesn’t care what Shae wanted to be. “So how did you go from taking college classes to following Darren?”

“Oh, yeah.” Aspen smiles. “Well, I thought about getting married, and then—then some bad shit happened, and my inheritance money came in, and me and Shae hopped in the car and drove.”

Heaven wants to ask what kind of bad shit happened, but before he can, Shae pipes in.

“And then, we just happened to go to one of Darren’s shows in Colorado, and we fell in love with him.”

Heaven really doesn’t like this “in love” phrase as applied to Aspen and Darren. “Oh,” he says.

“It was really serendipitous.” Aspen glows like a spotlight. Heaven has noticed this happens every time she talks about Darren. “We were sitting at Dairy Queen in Ft. Collins, talking about how we had nothing to do that night. Right then, this guy comes up to us and asks us if we want to buy tickets to Darren Silverado’s show in Denver, which just happens to be that night.”

“A scalper,” Shae adds helpfully.

Duh, Heaven thinks.

“So, we said, ‘Why not?’ And the rest is history.” Aspen beams.

Just then, the waiter comes to the table, carrying a tray laden with food. Heaven’s belly roars its reaction to the piles of pancakes. Shae and the waiter flirt as he serves them. As soon as the waiter walks away, Shae and Aspen dig in. Heaven’s mouth waters. Aspen glances at Heaven as she pours syrup over her pancakes. “You sure you don’t want a bite?”

“Well, maybe just one,” Heaven says.

“If you want the rest, you can have it. I try not to eat much after dark. It makes me gain weight.”

“No. You eat your breakfast.”

“I really don’t want it. I never eat much at night.”

“She eats like a bird.” Shae interrupts through a mouthful of eggs. “At least at night. Trust me. You can’t tell by looking at her, but she never eats after dark.”

Heaven glares at her. "I'm not a big fan of skinny girls. I think Aspen is pretty much perfect."

Aspen smiles weakly and pushes the plate toward Heaven. "Here, go ahead. It's all yours."

"Thanks." His eyes burn, like when he looked at the paintings. "You don't know how much this means."

Aspen smiles. "You're sweet."

"You're prettier than a painting." Heaven kisses her knuckles tentatively. Then, he takes a forkful of pancakes and pushes it into his mouth. The bite is warm and wet with grease, and even though he hates breakfast foods, he will always love pancakes, because his angel shared them with him the first time they met. He can see it now, their fiftieth anniversary offering a menu featuring piles and glistening piles of pancakes.

"You're not so bad yourself," Aspen says. "Hey, we're having an after party in our room. Wanna come?"

The pancakes catch in his throat, and he coughs. "Sure. I'd love that."

Shae drives back to the hotel. As Heaven climbs out of the back seat, he wonders who will be at this party. But there is no party. No guests. No beer. No chips. Just a lonely, mildew motel room strewn with the various garments Aspen and Shae tried on before the show. Aspen falls into bed and pats the bed beside her. Heaven is supposed to curl up beside her, so he does. The warmth of her body melts through his, and he buries his nose in her fruit-scented hair, getting hard again. "Good night, beautiful," he whispers.

"Night."

*

You may think, as Heaven does, that this is special, but for Aspen, he is just another beautiful boy to curl up next to on a chilly night. Still, through the siren strewn darkness, he never reaches for her breasts, not once. This endears him to Aspen. She knows her breasts are her greatest asset, and consequently, she displays them. But she wishes that they weren't her greatest asset. Her greatest asset should be her eyes, which are blue on the surface, but if you look inside them, are flecked with bits of gold. Or her canine teeth, which stick out just slightly in the front and give her character, but not enough to notice unless you are looking hard. Or maybe her greatest asset should be her propensity for breaking into horrific tap dancing in the middle of shopping malls. Or her books. How about her history books? But breasts? Two hunks of fatty flesh? If ever she meets a boy who loves her for something other than her breasts, she will marry him instantly, or at least this is what she tells herself, but now that she has met one, she isn't ready quite to marry him, exactly.

Still, when the dawn rolls in and her breasts remain untouched, she is grateful, and she buys Heaven a breakfast burrito at a Mexican dive on the seashore, a well-intentioned gesture that goes terribly awry, because Heaven is allergic to guacamole, and his throat swells almost shut, and he says he thinks he's going to die. Heaven is allergic to everything—guacamole, shrimp, peanuts, wool, caffeine, strawberries, wheat—and he is always going to die. Unwilling to have Aspen see him looking dead and unattractive, he makes a panicked exit from her life.

"He's cute," Aspen says as she watches him ride away in the back of a cab. She flips down the mirror and checks her hair.

"I've seen better," Shae says. The tires squeal as she pulls onto the highway.

*

Sunlight glints off the *Harton* spelled out on Brick's gate.

“Right here,” Heaven says. The cabbie raises his eyebrows but doesn’t comment on the opulence of Brick’s home. Grateful for his silence, Heaven pays the driver quickly, hoping Brick will still be sleeping.

He’s not. “Well, look what the cat dragged in,” Brick says when Heaven opens the front door. Brick perches on the edge of his leather sofa, sipping his coffee and eying Heaven over the edge of the mug. His legs stick out from the bottom of his bathrobe, which is embroidered with his initials. His legs are too skinny, Heaven notices. A bad match for his torso, which resembles that of a body builder.

“Sorry,” Heaven mutters. He stands frozen in the doorway, unsure whether to enter or flee. “I woulda called, but I couldn’t find a phone.”

“Sorry?” Brick takes a gulp of his coffee. Heaven nods, noticing Brick’s anger is not like his father’s. He does not hit, or even yell. In fact, he speaks more calmly than normal, the pulsing vein in his forehead the only indication that he is not at all calm. Brick has been up all night. Heaven can tell by looking at him. Either that, or he has been smoking pot, judging from the redness of his eyes. “So, tell me how you couldn’t manage to find a phone in the greater Los Angeles metropolis?” Brick blows on his coffee.

The use of the word “metropolis” makes Heaven think of Superman. He decides Brick really does look kinda like Superman. An old one. He notices Brick’s wrinkles are deeper than he remembered. “I tried, sir.” Heaven’s father liked it when he called him ‘sir’. “I just couldn’t find one.” Heaven glances behind him, sees a fluffy cloud floating. He turns back, sees the door knocker, wonders again what tool he would need to dislodge it from the door.

Brick shakes his head, opens his mouth, and then closes it again. Heaven can hear the faint echo of someone's footsteps upstairs. The maid? Finally, Brick smiles. "Did you really just call me 'sir'?"

Tentatively, Heaven smiles back. "Uh, yeah." He shifts his weight. "Is that cool?" He glances over his shoulder again. A finch flits in a treetop. He can hear cars buzzing along far away.

Brick chuckles. Takes another sip of coffee. Chuckles again. And then he throws back his head and laughs. "Sir!" He sets his coffee on the table and stands. As he walks toward Heaven, he says, "No, it's not cool. It's terrible! It makes me feel like an old man." He throws an arm around Heaven. "Just try a little harder to call next time, dude. I told you, I worry."

Heaven feels an urge to run. But why should he run? Brick hasn't hurt him so far. And where would he go? Besides, all his shit is upstairs. He looks once more into the magnificent yard, with its high walls and impassible hedges. Then he looks at Brick. He is still laughing, but his eyes are cooler than normal. Cold.

"Yes, sir," Heaven says. "I mean, Brick."

Brick laughs, but that vein in his forehead is still pulsing. He closes the door.

*

On top of the covers and fully clothed, Sonny and Macy lie together on a motel bed. In spite of the heat, they are curled into one another like a pair of quotation marks. They have turned the air on high, but still Sonny is sweating. So is Macy. Her damp clothes are plastered into her fat rolls. Sonny looks away from her and stares at the television, which is playing old cartoons. Sonny wanted to watch *Cops*, but Macy insisted on cartoons. "You know what I could go for?" Sonny says, watching Elmer Fudd go red in the face at Bugs Bunny's antics.

“What?” says Macy. She laughs as Bugs dips into his hole, leaving Elmer Fudd to be blown away by his own rifle.

Elmer Fudd rematerializes. “Chinese food. We should have some delivered.”

Macy stares at the wall, breathing like a cyclone. Sonny wonders if she has some kind of nostril problem. Her breathing is louder than most people’s. Finally, she speaks. “Number one, I don’t like Chinese food. Number two, we should probably go easy on the spending if we wanna get to Darren.”

Sonny sits up. “I thought you said you had money?”

“I do. Some. I think I have about seven-hundred dollars left.” Macy breathes more.

“Seven hundred dollars?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Holy shit, Macy! Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I didn’t know I was supposed to.”

“Fuck, Macy.” Sonny stands and leans against the air conditioner, thinking. “That’s not going to get us far.”

“It will if we practice careful spending. That’s what momma used to tell me. Practice careful spending.” Macy guffaws at the cartoon.

Sonny runs his hand over his balding scalp. “Careful spending, my ass,” he mutters.

“What did you say?” Macy asks.

Sonny turns to face her, his hands planted on his hips. “I said, we’ll just have to get some cash.”

SMOOTH CRIMINAL

*You've been hit by,
you've been struck by,
a smooth criminal.*

--Michael Joseph Jackson (August 29, 1958—June 25, 2009)

Glowing in the florescent lights of Another Man's Treasure Thrift Shop, Macy stands under a cardboard sign that reads *YOU BREAKA, YOU BUYA*. "I got me three shirts for a dollar," she says. And she has. Or she will, as soon as she pays for her haul. The shirts in question are, respectively, a pink paisley button-up missing a button (but she can fix that), a lime green tank top boasting a coffee stain shaped like the Virgin Mary (it has already occurred to Sonny to contact the *National Enquirer* concerning the phenomenon), and a more or less white T-shirt with mallard ducks on the front. Outside, tumble weeds roll past--the primary residents of this town, it seems. Other than a few dilapidated trailers, a gas station, and a diner, the place is a ghost town. "You can't beat a thrift shop for deals," she says, carefully arranging the shirts in her handheld basket.

"Not a chance," Sonny says agreeably, perusing the toy shelf. He picks up a startlingly life-like water pistol and shoves it into the waistband of his jeans.

"You gonna buy that, stud?" Macy asks. She has been reading women's magazines, trying to gather clues on how to behave in a relationship, now that she is in one. The magazines say you should call your man things like "sexy" and "stud" to boost his self-esteem, as the

general consensus is that men have frighteningly fragile egos under all that cologne and cowboy bluster.

“Sure. Why not? It’s 50 cents.” Sonny looks into a mirror and smiles with one corner of his mouth. He studies his reflection, whistling silently. It is his habit to pucker up and puff air in and out. Macy has noticed this, and she likes it. Yesterday, she made a secret list on a napkin called, *Things I Luv About Son-Dried Toemaetoe*. “Whistling with no noise” was number one on the list.

Macy sets aside her basket, throws her arms around him, and places her version of a seductive kiss on his neck. When she pulls away, it looks like a snail has been trekking across Sonny’s skin. “I like the hat,” Macy says. “It makes you look French. Like Pepi Le Pu.”

“Pepi Le Pu?”

“The skunk from cartoons.”

“You think I look like a skunk?” Sonny places the hat vehemently back on the rack. “No thanks. It stinks in here already.”

The store does smell bad, like dust and mildew and something else Macy cannot place. Sweaty armpits, maybe? “Aw, that’s how all thrift shops smell.” Macy touches Sonny’s arm. “It ain’t so bad.”

Sonny snorts and picks up another hat, a baseball cap this time. He slides it on and pulls the brim down low. Macy liked the way he looked in the beret better. Pressing the beret back into his hand, Macy says, “Keep the yellow hat. It looks sexy on you.” Sonny takes the beret. “Can we stop here for the night?” Macy runs her fingers along his arm, the way *Cosmo* said a *Cosmo* girl should.

Sonny jerks away. “Where would we sleep?”

“I saw a motel a few miles back.”

“Nope. We gotta keep going.” He turns his back and resumes his silent whistling.

Macy tries not to get her feelings hurt. She remembers the way her momma used to call her “little miss sensitivity” every time she cried over something small, a mouse in a trap or a bird in a cat’s mouth. “What else you got there?” As she peeks into Sonny’s basket and pokes at a pile of blue polyester, she works to seem upbeat.

“That’s nothing.” Sonny smacks her hand away.

Which only encourages her. “Whatcha got? A present for me or something?” She lifts the fabric. It turns out to be a shirt. She reads the insignia sewed onto the breast pocket.

“Police? What you need a police shirt for?”

“None of your damned business. It isn’t a present for you, Macy Blue. Just back off.” Macy feels that familiar, hot wash of rejection flood her abdomen, just under her ribcage. It makes her burn all over, right up into her eyes. Blinking back tears, she pretends to study a ripped umbrella decorated with red and black dice. “You go on out to the car.” Sonny’s voice is hard, like three-day-old bread.

Now, this next part may make you think less of Macy, that she is insecure or controlling, and maybe she is, maybe we all are, when it comes right down to it. Few of us really believe that there is enough in this world to go around, that if we sit back and worry-not, Jesus style, everything will work out alright. We are no Messiahs, we. We are not particularly adept at considering the lilies of the field. We watch and we wait and we churn and we worry, especially when we have something to lose. Especially when we have found love.

So when Macy assumes that Sonny is telling her to leave so he can have a private conversation with the check-out girl, who has wide brown eyes and rather trendy stone -washed

jeans, it's hard to blame her. You might think the same thing in her position, with the hot heat of rejection still burning your belly and the man you love wandering away across the store, staring at the pretty girl, his gaze ripe with intention. If you were Macy, you might do just what she does.

Stepping outside, she looks at the truck, which is parked a good block away, and then back at the store. Instead of leaving, she opens the door again, just a crack, and stands, listening. When she hears Sonny say, "Hello, sunshine," she starts to cry. Sobbing silently, she listens to Sonny and Betty Davis Eyes giggle and flirt their way through the checkout procedure. As the girl croons, "That will be \$12.29 please," Macy peeks her head in, working up the courage to march in and confront Sonny. But he ruins all her plans by pulling out the water gun. She can't see it from the back, but she hears the girl scream, and somehow, she knows what it is. Sonny growls, long and low, "Just put all the cash in your drawer in this yellow hat, and I won't hurt you a bit."

And then, Macy's throat closes tight, and she starts to run, because she can't believe the man of her dreams has turned out to be a criminal. She runs, feet pounding pavement, tripping on cracks. She is just about to the truck when a hand closes around her upper arm, and Sonny's voice says, "Where are you running off to, Macy Blue?"

"I don't know," she screams, pulling away from him.

"There's nowhere to go." Sonny yanks open the passenger door. "Now get in the truck." He runs around to the driver's side, climbs up, and starts the engine.

Macy Blue looks back toward the store, imagining the girl, wild-eyed now, screaming into a phone. She tries to remember whether or not she spoke to the girl, wonders if the girl got a good look at her. She sure as shootin' got a good look at Sonny.

“The cops will be here soon,” Sonny yells. “You in or out?”

Macy’s belly starts to burn. She wonders if she will have an accident right in the street, the number two kind. Her face gets hot at the thought. She thinks about the cops finding her here, sobbing, with dirty undies. She glances around for someone, anyone. She sees nothing but tumbleweeds. “In,” she finally whispers. She trembles her way into the idling truck.

“Smart girl.” Sonny reaches over her and slams her door. Before she can say “Elvis, save me,” she is speeding down the dusty road with fiery-eyed Sonny at the wheel, talking like a crazy man. “Fuckin-A! You shoulda seen the look on her face!”

“I bet she was scared,” Macy whispers, and she cries harder.

When Sonny looks at Macy, his face goes soft. He grabs her chubby hand and squeezes. “I’m sorry, Macy Blue. We needed cash. No way I’m gonna let my girl starve.”

If her head was clear, she might point out that she was never in any danger of starving. She ate a triple scoop ice cream cone--strawberry, pistachio, and double fudge--not an hour ago. But her head isn’t clear, so she doesn’t say it. And Sonny touches her, see, right on the spot where her momma used to kiss her goodnight, that soft place between her eye and cheekbone. It’s such a tender gesture that her heart softens a bit. She sees the fear in his eyes, and she sobs, “I’m scared too.”

“Of course you are, baby doll.” Keeping one eye on the road, he kisses her quick. His mouth tastes sweet, like breath mints, and his tongue is warm. As he pulls away, she looks in the rearview mirror, expecting to see red and blue lights pulsing. “What are you looking for?” Sonny asks.

“Cops,” she manages.

Sonny laughs and says, “We’ll be long gone before they figure out what’s what. You think they got a police station in this tumbleweed town?” His eyes are shining. “What a fucking rush, huh?” He kisses her again, sloppy and hot. Then, he tips over the beret and dumps the cash on the seat between them. “Count it,” he says. “See what we got.”

Macy doesn’t like the way he says “we,” but she sorts through the cash with trembling fingers. “We got \$287. No change,” she whispers finally. Sonny whoops. Macy puts the piles of bills back in the hat and shoves the loot under the seat. “Why—why didn’t you warn me?” she stammers. “You never told me about this.”

Damn Sonny and his crocodile tears, the way he can make his bottom lip quiver on command. “I wanted to, okay? But I was afraid I would lose you.” When he buries his head in hands, the truck veers. Screaming, Macy grabs the wheel. When they are again in the proper lane, she puts one hand on his arm. She plants a wet kiss on his neck, feeling somehow softened by the smell of him, and she whispers, “I’m not going anywhere, Sonny Rickman.”

They don’t stop for 200 miles, except once, behind some bushes, to remove the license plate, and once more, at a junkyard, to get a new one. They stay away from highways, taking instead back roads broken by cattle guards and potholes. The world crashes by in a rush of green and blue. Macy cranes her neck, looking for the cops, but they never come, and after a while, the python of terror in her belly uncoils. Finally, she finds that she can breathe right again.

“I think we’re good now,” Sonny finally announces. “We fucking did it, Macy Blue.” He raises his hand, and she high fives it, laughing. She feels suddenly high, like she could fly. Like she already is flying. Up ahead, they see a cluster of gas stations presided over by a set of golden arches.

“McDonalds!” squeals Macy.

“I sure could use a drink,” Sonny says. “I’m fucking parched.”

“Me too,” Macy Blue says.

Sonny pulls into the drive-thru. “Hand over that cash,” he says. As Macy pulls the hat from under the seat, he adds, “Whatever you want. It’s on me this time.”

Macy grins. “A double cheeseburger and large fries and a Coke. Supersize me! Oh, and some mayo for the fries.”

Sonny gags a little, sticking out his tongue like he has just spit out something rotten.

Macy laughs. “What? It’s good,” she says. “My momma used to eat fries that way.” In her own ears, her voice sounds different. It is like someone filled her whole body up with helium. “I feel so alive, Son-dried Tomato.” She leans her head on his shoulder. “I never felt this way before in my whole life. Are we like Bonnie and Clyde now? ”

Sonny laughs and squeezes her knee. “Something like that, though I don’t know about you, but I don’t plan on killing anyone.”

“Me neither.” Macy leaves a sloppy kiss on his cactus barb chin. Sonny asks for “a shit load of ketchup” but forgets to ask for mayo, and they drive away. While Macy is wolfing down her burger, Sonny eats her fries. “Did you eat my fries again?” she asks, digging around in the bag.

“Oh, sorry.” Sonny wipes his greasy fingers on his jeans.

Macy is crestfallen. “It’s alright.” But it isn’t. She keeps digging for fries. She doesn’t find them. Instead, she comes face to face with destiny, which, in this case, comes in the form of the paper Monopoly game board attached to the side of the bag. Macy unfolds it and gasps.

“Holy crow!”

“Holy crow, what?” Sonny mutters through a mouthful of fries.

“Holy crow, we could win a million dollars. Let me see your drink.”

“Why?”

“Just let me see it.” When he hands it over, she pulls the tiny, square game piece from the cup’s waxy exterior, her hands trembling with anticipation. “Holy crow!”

“What?”

“If we get Park Place, we win a million dollars.” She holds the game piece in the air like a trophy. “We already have Boardwalk. We’re halfway there! Let me see your fries.”

“They’re gone.”

“The box I mean. Just give it here.”

He passes it, and Macy peels back the game piece. “Holy crow!”

“What now?”

“If we get B&O Railroad, we win five million dollars. That’s what.”

“Isn’t that something?”

“Gosh, yes, it’s something. Think about it. Us being millionaires, living in a mansion by the sea. Or on a lake. What would you rather?”

“What?”

“Lake or ocean?”

“Ocean, I guess.”

“Sonny Rickman, when I win my million dollars, I am going to buy you a mansion by the ocean.” She grabs his hand and pulls his knuckles to her mouth. She kisses them.

Something hot in Sonny’s eyes flares. “You fucking rock, Macy Blue,” he says. “You know that, right?”

Smiling shyly, she folds the board up, along with the game pieces, and presses them carefully into her wallet. “I’ll put it here, for safekeeping. If you get a game piece and want to check if we’ve won, feel free to get out my wallet.” She leans back against the seat and stares at the roof of the truck. “It’s so good. So good.”

“What’s so good?”

“It’s so good that they’ve finally come up with something easy to do that gives you lots of money!”

Sonny bursts out laughing and pats Macy’s dimpled knee, which is peeking out from beneath the hem of her flowered skirt. “Easy money is good, Macy Blue. I’ll give you that much.” Sonny grins. “You are one cool drink of water.” Macy blushes.

As they drive on, they play “Name That Tune.” Sonny silently whistles a song, and Macy tries to guess which song he is puffing. Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff puff puff.

“Only You?”

“No! Try again.” Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff puff puff.

“Heartbreak Hotel?”

“Macy, it’s not Elvis. Try again.” Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff puff puff.

“Um. . .I’d Like to Buy the World A Coke?”

“No! Jingle Bells! Damn, Macy. Listen.” Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff. Puff puff puff puff puff.

“Oh, I hear it now. Can I have a turn?”

“Go for it.”

Puff puff puff puff puff puff puff puff. Puff puff puff puff puff.

“You Ain’t Nothin’ But a Hound Dog.” Sonny guesses it on his first try.

By comparison, the rest of the ride is dull.

*

Dull rides. Shae and Aspen could tell you a thing or two about them. Whirring tires and a slick ribbon of freeway and everything else is sand, stretched out forever like a wrinkled, taupe turtleneck on a fat guy. There is nothing to say for rides like this except, “Are we there yet?”

And then, all of the sudden, magic appears, from out of the blue, or the brown, as the case may be. Looming on the red rock horizon are dinosaurs of the most vicious, life-sized variety, feasting on one another’s papier-mache flesh. It is like Shae and Aspen have just driven through a wormhole, slipped from the 20th century Arizona into the Jurassic era. Just in time. Aspen was about to clip her toenails, which is never fun to listen to. And also, Shae has to wonder, where will the toenails go? Probably into her drink. Whenever Aspen whips out the clippers (which is often), Shae covers the gaping mouth of her diet soda, feeling that little stab of hate people feel when a loved one does something gross. Like when a boyfriend picks his nose. That kind of hate.

But now, with papier-mache deliverance hulking into view, Aspen drops the clippers and starts to shriek. “Oh my god! He ripped him right in half!” She stares, mouth open, at a pterodactyl who is poised sinisterly over his prey, beak thrust through the flesh of a horned, paper dinosaur of uncertain genus. The pterodactyl’s ragged teeth are dripping paint blood into the boiling sand. “Holy shit!” As they pass the green, hulking thing, Aspen flips around in her chair to see it again. “Shit!”

“Dork!” Shae smiles, her hate melted into the heat waves. When Aspen shrieks and shudders some more, Shae laughs so hard she spills a dose of diet soda on her jeans. “Stop! You’ll make me pee my pants. Or wreck.”

“But they’re so scary!” Aspen yells. “Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Look at this guy.” She points at the t-rex, who is more or less menacing, with his tiny talons and his razor-ish teeth. “Imagine him chasing us. Twenty-feet tall. Jaws as big as our car. Imagine that.”

Shae does. The idea of being pursued by a papier-mache dinosaur, no matter the size, fails to elicit terror.

“I think I was eaten by a dinosaur in a past life,” Aspen announces. “That’s why I’m so scared of them. I’ve always been afraid of large reptiles.” Shae looks in the rearview and watches the dinosaurs turn into insect specks on the horizon. “Like alligators.” Aspen shivers. “Or dragons. Holy shit. Dragons. My dad loved this one Chinese restaurant when I was a kid. There was a giant dragon painted on the wall, and I swear to God, every time I ate there, I got the heebie jeebies. I couldn’t even finish my rice. So anyway, that’s why I think I served as a dino-snack at some point in my history.”

“Dinosaurs didn’t exist at the same time as people, you freak,” Shae says.

“Yes, they did. Scientists found footprints, man and dinosaur, side by side.”

“Maybe it was your footprint they found. Maybe you made it right before the dinosaur ate you.” Shae reaches out her hand like a claw and grasps the tender of flesh of Aspen’s belly.

Aspen shrieks with delight and slaps her hand. “Don’t! Don’t.”

“You’re a fucking freak.” Shae says it like it is a medical diagnosis, her voice heavy with solemn finality.

“Oh, come on. Haven’t you ever had an irrational fear?” Aspen digs in the rubbish around her feet until she finds a can of cashews, the toenail project obviously forgotten. She flips off the lid and starts to eat.

“No.”

“Yes, you have. Come on.” Aspen chews with her mouth open when she is excited. This bothers Shae. Still, Shae can’t resist the urge to reveal her darkest secrets. There is a black, masochistic beauty in exposing one’s most vulnerable self. Perhaps the beauty lies in the fact that the revelation may elicit empathy, or even love.

“Okay. Well, I’ve always been kind of freaked out by those posters in nail salon windows.”

“What?” Clearly, Aspen expected more.

“What did you want me to say? Chainsaw murderers? Ghosts?”

“I don’t know. Flesh eating viruses? Those are scary.”

“How would you know?”

“For your information, my neighbor got one once. It was disgusting.” Shae is curious, but she isn’t about to gratify Aspen by asking questions. Aspen forges on. “Really, nail salon windows?”

“Nail salon windows, you know those nail places in strip malls where they do cheap pedicures and fake nails? Those posters they have of the Asian women with six-inch claws all painted silver and shit?” Shae shudders. “Those scare me. I used to have nightmares about those women chasing me, ripping me apart with their festive claws. Yikes.”

“And you call me a freak? At least my fear is a tiny bit logical.”

“Logical? How the hell do you figure being afraid of being eaten by a fucking dinosaur is logical? Dinosaurs have been dead for millions of years.”

“My fear is based on experience, recent or not.”

“Ah, yes. Your illustrious past life dino-snack experience. Well, that’s credible.”

“Thank you, Shae. I appreciate your willingness to mock my most sacred beliefs.”

Silence. “Anyway, it’s better than being afraid of a poster. Like a poster is going to chase you.”

“I’m not afraid of the fucking posters. I’m afraid of the women on the posters. Women who, I might point out, still exist in the modern era.”

“You said you were afraid of the posters. You specifically said the posters.”

“I meant the women on the posters. Fuck, Aspen. Do you have to be so literal?”

“I’ve been accused of many things, but being literal is not one of them. Literary? Yes. Literal? No.”

They drive on in silence. Relative silence anyway, give or take the gsh gsh sound of Aspen’s chewing and her occasional off-key singing. *“I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony. A song of love that echoes on and never goes away.”*

“So,” Aspen finally says, perhaps deciding that a truce beats the hell out of boredom.

“Did I tell you Darren smiled at me last night?”

“Huh. I thought that smile was for me.”

Aspen doesn’t laugh.

*

Heaven is hitchhiking to Darren’s next show, one thumb thrust out, the other in his pocket, petting Plato’s head as he walks along. The show is not until tomorrow, but he wanted to give himself

some wiggle room, just in case he couldn't catch a ride. He told Brick he was staying with friends for a few days. "Friends?" Brick had asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Just these old friends of my parents," Heaven had lied. "They are only in town for a couple days."

Brick had agreed, reluctantly, to allow Heaven to go. He had to work anyway, he said. Heaven has noticed that Brick works a lot, at what, he'll never say, exactly. Heaven has figured out it's something less than savory. Something that makes Brick very, very rich. Drugs maybe? Heaven hasn't asked questions, though he supposes that if Brick ever were going to tell him the truth, it would be now. After last night, he is starting to feel close to Brick. Brick got home late, but Heaven was still awake, and they stayed up and watched old movies together. Now, Heaven wonders if he was wrong to be scared of Brick. Of course he has trouble trusting. Why wouldn't he? But so far, Brick has given him no reason to be afraid. Heaven feels a little bad about lying to Brick about the concert, but if he had told the truth, Brick might have asked to go with him. Brick still acts like he is younger than he really is, as if he is trying to impress Heaven. He uses words like "fat" and "rockin'" to describe good things." Only sometimes though. The rest of the time, he just talks like an old dude. Also, he asks Heaven to share his music with him. Heaven gave him some Nirvana last night, and he thought Brick was going to, well, shit a brick. "This is so radical!" he said. It made Heaven laugh. He doesn't mind having Brick around, but he would have felt weird talking to Aspen with Brick looking over his shoulder.

Now, as Heaven walks along the edge of I-25, tufts of grass tackle his feet. He trips frequently. His scalp and armpits are drenched in sweat. His duffel bag is heavy, but he doesn't care. He is lost in Aspen's memory, the way her hand brushed his belly in the night, setting his heart and genitals ablaze. She snored when she slept, quietly, and he found the wheezing sound

of her humanity endearing. When he kissed her gently on the top of her silky head, she sighed and snuggled closer into him. Remembering that, he smiles.

Maybe that is what catches the attention of the driver in a passing green van. It screeches to a halt beside Heaven, and, seeing the way the aging vehicle is battered in a decidedly sinister manner, he wonders if it is filled with mafia hit men, ready to yank him in and bust his kneecaps. But as the door squeals open, he sees it is not peopled by hit men. Or if it is, they are hit men of a different breed, not the kind you see in movies, overseeing hooch deliveries and sawing off shotguns. Six strong-ish young men sprawl in the seats, which have been more or less sewn around the edges of the van like a fringe. The smell of pot wafts out, tantalizing. For a second, Heaven wonders if he has wandered onto the set of *Scooby Doo*. The guys all look like some version of Shaggy.

“Hey, man,” Heaven says. “Thanks.” As he climbs into the van, he beams at a lanky blond wearing old jeans and a faded fraternity T-shirt, taking a drag from a soda can bong.

“Where you headed?” The guy coughs.

“Denver.”

“You’ve come to the right van. We’re going there too. Wanna hit?” the young man offers, and Heaven, never averse to taking a trip to the stratosphere, says, “Sure.” As Heaven takes the bong, the van lurches to life. Off they roll, down the highway, in their smoky tin can van.

“I’m Dan.” The man extends his hand. “So, what’s your name? Where you from?”

“Heaven and New York,” Heaven says, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

“You’re from Heaven? Hey, guys, check it out. We’ve picked ourselves up an angel.” Dan laughs good-naturedly.

Smiling, Heaven passes the bong. He has gotten used to these sorts of comments about his name. “No, I’m from New York. My name is Heaven.”

“That’s a weird name. Your parents hippies or something?”

“Either that or cult members,” one of the other guys ventures.

“Neither,” Heaven says. “My real name is Bay. Heaven is a nickname.” The smoke starts to work its magic, and the colors in the van get a teeny bit brighter. The noise of the engine grows loud. The bong makes another round. For a while, the only sounds are the van roaring and the sucking and blowing of smoke. Heaven looks out the window, watching the river of scenery flow past. Sand dunes and yuccas and red cliffs.

“Why would you use a fairy-ass nickname like Heaven?” Dan asks.

Heaven feels a stab of panic. *This is normal*, he tells himself. *It’s normal to be paranoid when you smoke*. Seemingly aware of his fear, Plato rustles in his pocket, and Heaven reaches in to pet her. Willing his suddenly pounding heart to slow down, he talks to Plato inside his head. *Don’t worry. We’re in this together*. When the bong comes around again, he shakes his head. “I’m good for now.” As the other guys laugh and chat, Heaven keeps petting Plato. His panic dissipates, giving way once more to sleepy serenity. Clearly, the guys have forgotten about his name.

Or not. The guy next to him grins. “I think I’ll call myself Flower.” He stands and pirouettes clumsily, then falls on his ass. Everyone laughs.

Heaven laughs, too. Hard. And then he thinks about the way he used to laugh like this with Brandon. He remembers Brandon, the way you remember things when you are high. Like Brandon is right there in front of him. He sees his big eyes and his jeans hugging the place between his thighs. Heaven smiles. “A friend gave my name to me.” He reaches his hand out,

like maybe, if he tries, since he can see Brandon, he can touch him too. He can't though. There is nothing there but air. "I guess I'll never see him again."

"Him?" Dan laughs. "You a fag or something?"

"No." Heaven's heart starts to race again. He can't tell if it is the pot, or if he should really be scared. Shaking, he passes the bong again without smoking. Why did he smoke the pot? *Ride it out*, he tells himself. *The panicky part is probably almost over.*

"So, this guy who gave you your nickname," Dan says. "What was his name?"

"Brandon." The name drifts into the smoky van.

"What?"

Heaven says it again. "Brandon." Man, his heart is gonna break right through his chest. Will he have a heart attack? He reminds himself that no one has ever died from smoking pot.

"Why would some guy named Brandon call another guy 'Heaven'?" Dan asks.

"He's gotta be a fag," someone says. The others mutter their assent. "Look. What's he doing with his hand in his pocket?"

"It's nothing." Heavens yanks his hand out of his pocket. His head spins, like he is on a tilt-a-whirl. *I will never fucking touch weed again*, he promises himself. He hates it when getting high goes this way, when it makes him panicky. *Breathe*, he tells himself, but it doesn't help.

"Hey, look, I think I dropped some of my shit on the road back there. Could you let me out?"

"You're a fairy, aren't you?" Dan stands.

"I said no," Heaven stands too. "Fucking let me out."

"Oh, we'll fucking let you out." Dan shoves Heaven.

Heaven sprawls on the van floor. Suddenly, he is quite sure he will die here. The other guys rise, and they surround him. For a moment, they look like sharks about to feed. Their teeth

seem sharp. Then, they morph again. Now, they all look like his father. “Faggot,” one of his fathers says.

“You probably thought you were gonna get you some, when you saw this van full of men, didn’t you, fag?” says another. His fist lands with a dull thud in the center of Heaven’s face. Hot pain shoots through Heaven’s nose, burns his eyes. He tastes blood.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” he chokes, stumbling backward.

“Faggot!”

Something hits his ear, sledgehammer hard, and everything starts to ring. The world explodes into stars. He smells a sour smell. “Stop, please,” he whimpers. Dan punches him in the stomach. He hears the “oof” sound he makes, just like people do in the movies when they get hit. Suddenly, he feels far away from himself, like he is watching this instead of living it. Like he is in the front row eating popcorn. “Pow, right in the breadbasket,” he mutters, gasping. Lucky for Heaven, he throws up then. The reeking, green contents of his guts pooling on the floor disgust his attackers. *My secret weapon is vomit!* he thinks, and inside his skull, a victorious laugh echoes. The Heaven that lives inside his mind throws back his head and goes *HA HA HA!* The van screeches to a halt, and Heaven’s fathers toss him by the freeway, like so much crumpled litter. “My duffel bag!” he shrieks as they drive away. They don’t listen.

The taste of his own blood makes Heaven throw up some more. The smell of his own bile makes him dizzy. As he screams, “Brandon,” his vomit seeps into the sand. He remembers the warm, sweaty smell of Brandon’s hair tickling his nose, and then, he remembers the glass shattering sound of his father’s rage. “Faggot!” his father screams in his memory. “Dad,” Heaven whimpers.

And then, he remembers Plato. Terrified of what he will find, he reaches into his pocket and pulls her tiny body free. He opens his hand. Miraculously, Plato is unscathed. She scuttles over his palm.

Heaven sits by the road for what seems like hours, staring at Plato's little body. The day is hot, and his head hurts so bad, he thinks it might blow up. Cars rush by, close enough that the wind from them rustles his hair, but no one stops. Until someone does.

"Heaven!" He knows that voice, his angel's voice, riding the waves of the rippling horizon.

"Aspen!"

Her white warmth moves across the asphalt and kneels in the sand beside him. "Baby, what did they do to you!" She helps him to the car, and crooning, tucks him into the back seat of the convertible, propping his head on something soft.

From her place in the driver's seat, Shae says, "Don't get blood on my coat."

Ignoring her, Aspen looks at Plato peeking out from Heaven's fist. "Do you want me to hold your lizard for a while?"

"Sure." Heaven gives Plato to Aspen. She smiles. "He's named after Plato from *Rebel Without a Cause*".

"I don't think I know that one."

"You know: 'Do you think the end of the world will come at night?'"

Aspen shrugs. "Never heard of it."

They drive.

*

Aspen runs a cool hand over Heaven's face. The motel blanket is scratchy beneath his back, and his head pounds, but having Aspen touch him like this makes up for it. Light from the streetlamps slips in through a crack in the curtains, but other than that, the room is dark. Still, he can see the outline of her, hovering above him. He can see Shae too, standing by the door, her arms crossed.

"You sure you'll be alright?" Aspen asks. As she bends to kiss his forehead, he breathes deeply, inhaling her apple green smell. He nods a nod he hopes is pathetic enough to contradict himself. No, I will not be alright, he wants to say. But he doesn't. His lips are so swollen, they hurt when he talks, and anyway, he doesn't want Aspen to think he's a wimp. Weakly, he lifts his head from the flat pillow and coughs. "Okay, then." Aspen pats his hand as she stands. "Well, if you need anything, the phone is right here." She pushes it closer to him. "Press zero for the hotel operator. Nine-one-one for an emergency." She smiles. "Of course. You know that." She kisses him on the forehead. "We'll be back pronto."

"Come on, Aspen!" Shae says from the doorway. Her voice is sharp.

"Coming," Aspen says. "Sleep tight, Heaven. Don't let the head rugs bite." Looking over her shoulder at Heaven, Aspen laughs halfheartedly and walks away. The girls take hands, and the door clicks shut.

Heaven stares at the door, not quite believing his angel left him here like this. His gut, which has been sore since the beating, hurts more now, and his head throbs as he scans the room for something to occupy him while she is gone. He should sleep, but he can't. He is lonely and afraid, and anyway, he wants to be awake when she gets back. He doesn't want to miss a minute with her.

Feebly, he sits up and drags his legs over the edge of the bed. As he stands, wearing only his boxers, the room spins, but he doesn't sit down. Instead, he goes to the corner and flips on the light switch. He sees a bottle of cheap whiskey sitting on the dresser. Elated, he stumbles over and drinks deeply from the bottle. It burns his throat, but he doesn't stop. Maybe this will make his head stop hurting. Maybe this will make his everything stop hurting. Still clutching the bottle, he trips back to the bed, finds the remote, and switches on the TV. He sets the bottle on the nightstand as he flips through the channels.

This motel is too cheap for cable, and nothing is on except for reruns of *Family Tree*. As the familiar theme song floats into the room, Heaven can't help but see Darren playing it—he ended his concert with the tune last time. A little joke, Heaven supposed. A nod to his humble beginnings. Now, remembering the way Darren glared at him, Heaven decides he needs another drink. He retrieves the bottle and flops back into the bed, sipping as he watches. It is an early episode, the one where Janie gets braces, and everyone thinks she is too young to work at a bar. As the whiskey starts to work, Heaven begins to chuckle along with the laugh track. By the time the episode ends, Heaven has finished half the bottle. Some commercials come on, and then, the *Family Tree* theme song plays again. “What is this?” Heaven mumbles. “The all *Family Tree* all the time channel?” But he doesn't change the channel.

He is halfway through the episode when he realizes he is drunk. Really drunk. Drunker than he has ever been, maybe. The room begins to turn slowly, like a merry-go-round. His belly lurches. Panicking at the thought of Aspen finding him in the bed, passed out, covered in vomit, he tries to stand, but his legs give out, and he falls back on the bed. “Aspen,” he whispers. The room goes dark.

When he wakes up, the room is still spinning. His mouth tastes like puke. Again, he imagines himself in the bed, covered in vomit. But this time, in his imagination, he is dead. His brain is hardly working properly, but he at least has the sense to know he doesn't want to die like this. And if he does die, he wants at least to be clean when Aspen finds him. He rolls out of the bed, crawls into the bathroom, flops over the edge of the tub, and turns on the water. Propping himself against the wall, he lets his head fall forward, hoping this will keep him from choking on his own vomit if he passes out again. He sees his knees, knobby and torn, jutting under the pounding streams of water. Then, the world goes black again.

When he wakes up, everything is still blurry. He makes out bits of puke trapped in the drain. *God, don't let me die here*, he thinks again. The world goes black.

For hours, Heaven passes out and wakes again, always praying desperately in the conscious moments. At last, he opens his eyes, and the world looks almost normal. It is rocking, not spinning, and he can sort of think. He is alive.

"Thank you, God," he whispers. He stands slowly, using the edges of the tub for support, and stumbles to his bed, peeling off his soaked boxers. He wants to sleep, more than anything, but he is afraid the vomiting will start again. Propping his head against the headboard, he stares at the painting across the room—a generic print of a forest, nothing like those divine paintings of Brick's. He misses Brick, suddenly. He thinks about the way Brick smiles at him and throws his arm around his shoulder. He thinks that Brick would never have left him alone tonight. As he tries to absorb the fact that Aspen did leave him, people on the television laugh. The hotel smells like vomit now, and the air conditioning has been running on high all night. It's cold. He wants to be angry, but he can't. He feels more alone than mad. Now, more than ever, he wants to see his angel. She couldn't have known how bad-off he was tonight. He remembers the way she

looked when she found him on the highway yesterday. She stared down at him, scared for him, her eyes soft, her head haloed in sunlight.

*

The arena pulses with light and breath and anticipation. Waiting in the wings, Darren watches the crowd sway and swoon to the tunes of the opening band, Sanguine Shyster. Darren nods his approval. He has handpicked the band for this honor, paving the way for god. They are just the right kind of good. Good enough to wake up the audience, but not good enough to outshine Darren.

When he grows bored of their shenanigans, he scans the molting audience (the girls are losing their clothes), craning for a glimpse of the cinnamon-haired girl. Finally, he sees her, gliding toward the place that will be in front of his feet. His heart surprises him by lurching like a car stop-starting in rush hour traffic. How long has it been since a girl made him feel this? He can't remember. Smiling wistfully, he thinks about the ice-melting way she watched him last show, the way she shyly glanced away when he caught her staring. "Look at her," he says to the guard that stands behind him, a brawny fellow with rusty eyes and a perpetual wheeze.

There are a hundred girls in the front row, and still, the guard knows who he is talking about. His eyes narrow as he appraises Aspen. "I'd fuck her," he says.

Again, Darren's heart surprises him, pounding now with rage. He takes a deep breath. "Get the fuck out of here," he mutters.

The guard stares, stunned. "What?" he finally manages.

"Get the fuck out." Darren turns to face the guard, balling his fists, ready for action.

“What did I do?” The guard looks like he is going to cry, fucking wuss. “Was it the girl?” Darren feels his heart race again. “When I said I would fuck the girl?” The guard shakes his head. “You can’t be fucking serious? You’re firing me over some slut?”

Before he can think about what he is doing, Darren punches the guard, smack in the mouth, thrilling at the gratifying sensation of knucklebone meeting flesh. A split appears in the guard’s lip, already leaking blood. “Watch your mouth, you fat motherfucker,” Darren adds, an afterthought. As he shakes his hand out, he hears footsteps pounding and turns to see Jackson running toward him, looking stunned.

“Get him out of my show!” Darren yells. Jackson’s eyes hold a question, but he doesn’t ask it. Instead, he grabs the arm of the dizzy guard-no-more and ushers him out. “Asshole,” Darren mutters, and he looks at his fist. His knuckles are already starting to swell. There is blood on them. His own or the guard’s? He can’t be certain. Muttering curses, shaking his hand again, he looks for the cinnamon-haired girl.

*

An hour later, Darren takes the stage feeling sorry for punching the guard’s face. He is planning to rehire him, maybe give him a little extra something for his trouble. Truth be told, he doesn’t like what he is becoming, and his belly twists and turns with the realization. He got into this music gig for all the right reasons. He didn’t want to be a rock star. He wanted to change the world. If Darren had to write a trailer for the story of Earth, this is how it would run:

The world is a whirling mass of faulty cosmic gray matter, melting down to an apocalyptic nervous breakdown. Hijinks ensue. Stay tuned. Nothing makes sense here. The lakes and rivers run bruise-blue with poison. The fish are dying, bubbling to the water’s surface in the last spasms of death. Hate grows in hearts like weeds, strangling them, soaking the soil in

blood. Guns blaze. Children starve. Gay boys die, beaten and tied to fences. The air here will choke you if you swallow too much. The pandas will be extinct. Baby seals are bludgeoned as a matter of course. The sun will melt us all in a few million years, give or take. It's a scientific fact. Ignore this fact. Get up, brush your teeth, put your blinders on, and do your job. What right do you have to make a noise, a scene, a splash, when you are only one of so many termites gnawing your way through the rotting wood of life?

Unless. Unless woven into this black tapestry of pain is a shimmering thread. A thread that glows until it blasts through the madness like an atomic bomb, leaving a golden mushroom cloud gleaming in the dark. Let's name it hope. Hope in the face of impossible odds. Men and women find it when they look, even in the darkest places. They find that golden thread, and they latch onto it, wrest it from the black fabric and begin to weave a new tapestry. A tapestry that glistens with all the words we write in greeting cards but almost never see in action. Love. Peace. Joy. We've seen those who do this, men and women who latch onto the hope and never let go, weave a whole new world. We know their names. Mother Teresa. Martin Luther King Jr. Why not you?

"Why not me?" Darren asked himself that day, long ago, when he bought that thrift store guitar and named it Dog. "Why not me?"

Aspen and Shae see true when they look at him. They see a man who cares. He wants more than anything to do something, anything, about this madness. Before he was a god, he was a poet, and poets notice things. They stick their heads in ovens because all the noticing gets them good and depressed. Darren wants to do good. But damn it, he is only human. But if he were a god? Think of all the good he could do.

For Aspen and Shae, he is that thread that shines in the blackness. Their reason to get up in the morning, their reason to believe. Maybe they are misguided. Maybe. Or maybe they know something others don't. Maybe he is part of their truth. Maybe, if there is a point to all of this madness, he is part of their point. Maybe they really did come down here, to this ugly-beautiful planet, to find broken-beautiful him. Whatever the case, there he is, above them, shining and singing about peace and love and all the things they so want to see but never have, not since Aspen's daddy died. He was once alive. Aspen has a hard time believing it now, but she remembers him, standing strong in a beam of sunlight, holding a shoebox. "Hello, Sparkler, I bought you something."

She thought it was sneakers, and she was ready to fake delight for him, even though the last thing her six-year-old heart wanted was a pair of shoes, unless they happened to be pink or feathered or glistening with sequins. He handed her the box, those big, cracked hands cradling cardboard, and when she opened it, out flapped a dove, white with pink toes, and there, shining in the newborn morning, that bird was the greatest miracle she had ever seen. "Thank you, Daddy!" She didn't have to fake it. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed his face. It was poky like cactus. She can still feel the rough brush of his cheek against her lips. He was there. He was real. Once upon a time, there was a safe place.

And now, it is here again, in the face of this man standing over her, straining into his song. He is the only thing that makes sense. She doesn't wait for him to reach down to her. She reaches up. Instantly, her hand is wrapped in smooth brown heat, and then, he is pressing her fingers against his chest. She can feel the leather drum pounding of his heart and the rough hair bristling through the soaked fabric of his shirt. She thinks that every time she comes, for the rest of her life, this moment will flash through her mind.

“I think I love you,” she whispers. She feels stupid as soon as she says it, even though she knows he can’t hear. How could she love him? She doesn’t even know him. He has touched her exactly twice, and for him, it is probably just part of the show. But her palm is still burning. She wipes it on her jeans, thinking she is starting to remind herself of one of those psycho-stalker people on TV. Still, no one has ever made her feel the way he does. Sometimes, Shae reads her old poems, things written in a time when it was ok to talk about love like it wasn’t a cliché. Those poems talk about “how do I love thee, let me count the ways.” They talk about melting and sweating and pounding hearts, and if those poems were a medical diagnosis, she would have every symptom. Either she is in love or having a heat stroke.

Later, when Darren is tuning his guitar between songs, she looks away long enough to see a pale man standing nearby, watching her with ice-blue eyes. She smiles at him, but he does not smile back. He doesn’t look away either. She does, reaching again for Darren. He touches her again.

After the show, she and Shae walk back to their car, drunk and laughing. The click-clack of their high heels keeps time with their hearts in the darkness. By their feet, something stirs. A cockroach? A rat? Aspen shrieks, clutching at Shae.

“That’s so fucking gross,” Shae squeals.

Just then, they notice a black Mustang slinking out of the shadows in the distance, no headlights. A dark centipede slithering down the street. It moves toward them, and soon, they can make out the outline of the man in the driver’s seat. His features grow more distinct, until at last, Aspen sees, shining in the glow of a street lamp, a pair of ice-blue eyes.

“I saw that guy at the show,” Aspen whispers. “He was watching me.” She grabs Shae’s hand. “It’s dark, Shae.”

The man stops, rolls down his window, and pokes his head out. “Hello,” he calls. They walk faster. He backs up, keeping pace beside them. Their high heels patter against the sidewalk like rat feet. Pat. Pat. Pat. “I said hello.” The man’s voice is friendly, but something sinister lurks under his words. Still, even though she is scared, Aspen has the urge to say hello back, to be nice. But she takes strength from Shae, who is marching along beside her, fierce and rigid in the dark.

“Let’s go back to the concert, Shae,” Aspen whispers.

“The concert is over.” Shae walks faster.

“There will be people there. The show just ended.”

Shae keeps walking, brick wall strong. “I’m not running from this fucking freak. I won’t give him the satisfaction.” And to the freak: “Fuck off!”

He doesn’t fuck off. Instead, he whips his car into the alley in front of them and jumps out of the car.

“I’m running,” Aspen screams. She turns and runs.

“Fuck you, you freak!” Shae shouts, but she runs too. Behind them, boots pound the pavement. The girls run fast, or maybe he runs slow. Maybe he is biding his time, making sure they don’t have somewhere to run.

They do. They run through the doors of the concert hall, into the warm brightness, and who is standing there but Darren Silverado himself, surrounded by a mob of worshippers. When he sees Aspen crying, he turns away from them, muttering apologies and promises. He strides right over to her. She can smell him, sweat and tequila. He takes her hand, and she wonders if he will feel her pulse pounding. His fingers are hot. “Why are you crying?” His voice is soft and strong all at once. She didn’t know she was crying until now.

“A man chased me,” she says, and the drummer hears her and runs off into the dark to find the man and bash his brains in with a drumstick. These men are heroes.

Darren Silverado looks straight into Aspen’s eyes and whispers, “You’re safe now.”

For the first time since the day she saw her daddy’s body cold and purple on a gurney, she believes she is.

*

“I can’t believe Darren Silverado asked me my name!” Rehashing her encounter with god, Aspen props her bare feet on the dashboard. Her brush with danger is long-forgotten.

“He asked mine, too,” Shae points out. In the early morning glow, Shae’s hair seems blood-red instead of orange.

“Did you see the way he looked at me?” Aspen throws her head back and closes her eyes, remembering the way Darren’s eyes flashed when he glanced over his shoulder at her as he walked away. They spoke for only a minute, but still, it was the most beautiful minute of her life. He said that he had seen her in the front row all those times. He asked her where she was from. “I think he might like me! Do you think so?” Aspen flips down the mirror to see what Darren saw when he looked at her. Her hair is rumpled, her makeup all but gone. Still, she is glowing.

Shae shrugs. “I don’t know him, Aspen. How the fuck do I know what he thinks?” She pulls into the motel parking lot and turns off the car.

“That’s true,” Aspen says, trying to sound like she isn’t going crazy. “We don’t really know him.” But holy fuck, the way those ocean eyes looked at her.

When they open the door to their room, Aspen is surprised for a second to see Heaven slumped in the bed. She had almost forgotten he was there. “Heaven!” She goes to him and touches his face. “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

He smiles weakly. "I wanted to wait up for you."

"Are you alright?" Aspen cups his chin and lifts his face. "You look awful."

"No." His lips tremble. "I thought I was going to die tonight."

On the other side of the room, taking off her shirt, Shae answers him. "I thought you were gonna die too, kiddo."

Heaven tries to sit up, but it hurts. He flops back down. "Then why the hell did you leave me?"

Shae tosses her shirt in the corner and kicks off her shoes. Standing in her lime green bra, she shrugs. "The show must go on."

Heaven stares, trying not to cry. "Aspen," he whispers.

"Yeah?"

"Can you take me home tomorrow? My dad kinda misses me."

"Of course." When Aspen kisses his forehead, her lips are cool.

SEDATED

Twenty-twenty-twenty four hours to go. I wanna be sedated.

Nothin' to do and no where to go. I wanna be sedated.

Just put me in a wheelchair get me to the show.

Hurry, hurry, hurry, before I go loco.

*--Jeffry Ross Hyman (May 19, 1951--April 15, 2001)**

The purple curtains of Heaven's bed flutter in a breeze that blows in through the double doors. Rushing over his broken face, the cool evening air is soothing. Outside, crickets chirp. Their high pitched monotony is somehow more noticeable to Heaven than the other more aggressive noises of L.A. He closes his eyes. The mound of down pillows under his head is exquisitely soft. "I thought I might die," he whispers.

Poised on the edge of the bed, Brick presses an icepack to Heaven's eye. "Fucking animals!" His voice is choked and thick, like he is crying. Heaven opens the eye that is not covered by the ice pack. Holy crap. Brick *is* crying. His eyes are swollen and wet. His forehead is wrinkled. A little dew drop of snot escapes one nostril. Heaven cannot remember the last time someone cried for him. Wait. Yes, he can. His mother cried for him when he fell off his bike and had to get three stitches. He remembers that. She said, "Oh, my baby," while the doctors held him down and poked him with needles. Just thinking about it makes him cry too. "Don't cry, Heaven," Brick says, setting the ice pack on the nightstand. "You're safe now. I've got you." His strong hand strokes Heaven's hair. His skin smells spicy, like that expensive

cologne he wears, and suddenly, the cologne smells like home to Heaven. “Please, never hitchhike again. From now on, if you need anything, just let me know. A ride. Anything. You can trust me, son.”

Son. Brick called him son. Heaven remembers the way Brick laughed when the cabbie called Heaven his son, good naturedly, like Heaven really *was* his son. Heaven reaches up and grabs Brick’s strong hand. “I was so fucking scared.”

Brick’s lips, as they press against his forehead, are hot. “I know,” he whispers. “I know you’re scared, Heaven. It’s a big, scary, fucked-up world we live in.”

“Plato was in my pocket.” Heaven snorts and swipes at his nose. “I can’t stand to think about what could’ve happened. I mean, what the fuck was I thinking, carrying a fucking lizard in my pocket?”

“Heaven’s, she’s safe.” Brick glances at Plato’s aquarium, where the lizard clings to a plastic leaf. “Snug as a bug in a rug,” he says, lying down next to Heaven. Wrapping his arms around Heaven’s waist, he whispers, “You’re both safe now.”

Heaven thinks back to New York--that man in the alley. But the man in the alley never acted the way Brick is acting now. The man in the alley never even saw Heaven, really, much less crying for him. Feeling suddenly tired, Heaven buries his face in the muscled warmth of Brick’s shoulder.

*

Evening descends, a bruise on the face of the brown, baked horizon. As Aspen pulls into a deserted New Mexico gas station, she fiddles with the radio, looking for something upbeat. Her belly is empty and cold. She has been driving all day, and her eyes are rimmed with red. Her hand trembles as she reaches out to shake Shae awake. “Hey, sleepyhead,” she says.

Groaning, Shae stirs. “What?”

“We’re here. In Estancia.” Aspen is irritated that they have to be here at all, right after she met Darren for real, but Shae’s momma wrote, asking for a visit, threatening to die, the way she does now and again. “She’s not really fucking going to die,” Aspen had said to Shae, but Shae didn’t believe her. Shae never believes her.

Shae starts up and looks around. “At Momma’s?”

“No. The gas station. You asked me to wake you so you could change, remember?” Aspen tries to keep her annoyance from showing.

Shae nods. “Yeah, yeah.” She pulls down the visor and stares into the mirror. “I look like shit.” Swearing, she licks the tips of her fingers and wipes away the smudges of mascara under her eyes.

“You look fine.”

“Who fucking cares? She’ll probably be too drunk to remember my name, much less notice what I look like,” Shae says. Still, as Aspen pumps gas, Shae rifles through the trunk and goes into the bathroom, carrying a hodgepodge of wrinkled clothing.

When the gas pump clicks off, Aspen replaces it and sinks back into the driver’s seat. “What the hell are you doing, Shae? It’s fucking cold.” She turns the car on and leans toward the heater vent, looking around at the miles and miles of cloudless sky, which is a faded blue color, like a pair of jeans washed one too many times. Underneath the sky lies a whole lot of nothing. Dilapidated bars and pawn shops. An overpriced grocery store. A post office. Her stomach churns. Finally, Shae emerges from the gas station wearing a loose turquoise T-shirt, jeans with no holes, sensible shoes.

“Well, if it isn’t June Cleaver,” Aspen says as Shae climbs into the car.

“Shut up.” Looking in the mirror, Shae runs her hands over her fuzzy, orange head. “Do you have a hat?”

“No.”

Shae slumps back. “I hate this place.”

“Me too.”

“Fucking Estancia.” Shae slaps the visor into place. “I’d rather die than live here.”

“I don’t blame you. Where to?”

“Take a right,” Shae instructs, guiding Aspen onto the paved road that runs through the middle of town. “Do I look okay?”

“I already told you, you look great. Very *Leave it to Beaver*. All you need is an apron.”

“Do you think I should put on a scarf to cover my hair?”

“I don’t know. Does your mom still freak out about stuff?”

“She freaked out when she found out I’d pierced my ears.”

“You did that when you were thirteen.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t notice until last year.”

“I still don’t get it,” Aspen says. “What’s wrong with pierced ears?”

“It’s a Mormon thing.”

“But you’re not Mormon anymore.”

“I already told you this. I told you like a million fucking times.”

“Oh, yeah. You’re mom got kicked out of church for leaving your dad, right?”

“Yep. Ex-co-mun-i-cat-ed.” Shae enunciates each syllable of the word. “She’d still be Mormon if she could, but they won’t let her. So we went Baptist. All the guilt, none of the holy underwear.”

Aspen laughs. “Thank God, or I never would have met you.”

Shae smiles.

“I still don’t fucking get that shit about excommunicating her. Your dad beat the shit out of her.”

“Yeah, well, when did religion ever make sense?” Shae juts her chin in the direction of a faded sign marking the entrance to a trailer park. “There it is. Desert Rose Community.”

“Why did she sell the house in Albuquerque?” Aspen asks.

Shae shrugs. “I never asked.”

As they drive along the winding dirt road that slithers through the trailer park, Shae applies a thin sheen of clear lip gloss and a coat of mascara.

“You look great, Shae,” Aspen says again.

Shae smiles nervously. “Thanks.”

They pull up in front of a faded brown singlewide. It sags, as if someone put all the furniture in the front room. The porch droops in the middle, and the stairs are missing boards. Yellow in places, the lawn is spotted with plastic fairy sculptures. Once brightly colored, they are now almost white. A vacant flowerbed runs in front like a scar. Aspen bites her lip. What the fuck is she doing in this hellhole when she could be with Darren?

“Here she comes.” Shae groans. As Shae’s dumpy momma emerges, Shae checks the mirror one last time. Aspen studies Shae’s momma, trying to ascertain whether or not she is drunk. She decides yes. Her eyes are red. Smiling, she wobbles toward them in her floppy, flowered house dress.

“That’s a good sign.” Shae opens her car door. “She’s actually wearing clothes.” When she is *really* drunk, Shae’s Momma wanders around in a tattered gray bra and thong underwear

that may have been suited to her younger self, but certainly do her matronly body, which appears to be decades older than its actual 42 years, no favors.

“Shae, honey.” Shae’s Momma totters to the center of the porch and throws her arms open wide.

“Will that porch hold her?” Aspen whispers.

“It’s stronger than it looks,” Shae hisses back and then jumps out and runs to her mother. “Momma.” Throwing her arms around her momma, Shae rests her face on her stooped shoulder. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, Shaelynn. This place ain’t nothin’ without your smile.”

“Are you alright, Momma? Are you sick?”

“Sick?” Shae’s momma seems to have already forgotten her hysterical letter. Aspen rolls her eyes. She fucking knew it.

“Your letter said you might be dying, Momma.” Shae seems unperturbed by the fact that her mother has summoned them 600 miles for an imaginary, unnamed disease.

Shae’s momma clutches her belly. “Oh, yeah. Well, my ovaries have been hurting something awful. I think it’s cancer.”

“Did you see a doctor?”

“A doctor? I’m not giving my money to them crooks.” Finally, Shae’s momma sees Aspen. “Aspen!” Shae’s Momma waves. “Little Aspen. Pretty as ever.”

“Hi, Rhonda!” Plastering on a smile, Aspen gets out of the car. Even from far away, she can smell the odor of rum and cigarettes that hangs around Shae’s momma like a cloud. Her throat tightens. Tentatively, she walks toward Rhonda. Last time she came here, almost three

years ago, Rhonda called Aspen a whore. From the way she is grinning, Aspen guesses she doesn't remember. "Good to see you!" Aspen calls.

When she puts out a hand, Rhonda grabs it and uses it like a fishing line, pulling Aspen to her and holding her head against her flabby chest. "Darling Aspen. Such a pretty girl. You look just like your momma when she was your age." She pulls back and pats Aspen's cheek. "You girls want a drink?"

"No, thanks, Momma." Shae smiles. "We don't drink." She glances over her shoulder and winks at Aspen.

They step into the trailer. The windows are curtained with faded brown sheets. Paper dishes, coated with various mold cultures, decorate the stained coffee table and counter. "Excuse the mess," Rhonda says. "Ben's a pig." Ben is Rhonda's newest boyfriend.

Aspen is glad she said his name. She wouldn't have remembered otherwise. "How is Ben?" she asks.

"Oh, the same old fucking thing. Sponging off me, like always. Won't get a fucking job."

Shae goes to the kitchen and begins to stack plates. "Do you have a job now?"

"Nope. Can't work. It's my disease. I'm dying, Shae." She lights the corner of a napkin with a stove burner and uses it to light a cigarette. "Sit down, why don't you?" Tossing the burning napkin into the sink, she gestures toward a tattered green couch that rests in the corner, poised in front of a small black and white television set. On the screen, soap opera actors huddle around a hospital bed and hope someone will live. Shae and Aspen wander obediently to the couch and sink down.

“Maybe if you moved back to Albuquerque,” Shae suggests, watching out of the corner of her eye as her Momma pours rum into a plastic cup. “Maybe you’d feel better if you weren’t out here in the middle of nowhere. It’s gotta be depressing.”

“I ain’t depressed. I’m sick.” Rhonda’s voice takes on a sharp edge. Leaning against the counter, she puffs on her cigarette, drinks, and appraises her daughter. “What’d you do to your hair?” she finally asks. “You look like a fucking popsicle.” She laughs so hard at her joke, she starts to wheeze.

Shae laughs nervously. “A popsicle?”

“Skinny on the bottom. Orange on the top. A fucking orange popsicle. And it’s so short. You ain’t gone lesbian, have you?” Rhonda puts out her cigarette in the sink.

“Momma.”

Rhonda walks to the living room. “Don’t ‘Momma’ me. Have you?”

“No. I haven’t gone lesbian.”

“You better not. It’s a fucking abomination. No daughter of mine is gonna be a fucking abomination.” She sighs and sinks onto the couch next to Shae, patting her knee. “How’s school? You still making straight A’s?”

“Yeah, Momma. I’m making straight A’s.”

Aspen squints at Shae. Shae shrugs. “I graduate next semester. I’d graduate now, but I have to do my internship.”

“It’ll be nice when you finish. About time someone in this family made some money.”

“I probably won’t make much money right away, Momma.”

“More than I make.” Rhonda downs the rest of her rum and heads for the kitchen to refill. “I saw your daddy yesterday, Aspen.”

Aspen crosses and uncrosses her legs. "I'm sorry?"

"Your daddy. He came to see me yesterday." She pours a generous shot into her cup.

"Um, I'm sorry, but my daddy's dead."

"I know that. He comes to see me sometimes though, when I'm sad. He's a good man, your daddy. He understands me. Doesn't judge." Rhonda wanders back and sits on the couch again, sipping the rum this time.

"Oh."

"That's how I knew you girls were coming here. He told me. I woulda fixed up the place, but I'm so tired these days."

Shae runs a hand over her head. "I called to tell you we were coming, Momma. Yesterday. I called and told you I had a week off school. Remember?"

"You never called. You never do. Aspen's daddy drops by sometimes though. Said to tell you he loves you, honey. Called you his Sparkler."

Aspen jumps. "He said what?"

"He said to tell his Sparkler he loves her. That was it. That, and some stuff about how this shit is killing me." She raises her glass and cackles. "Dead ain't so bad, Paul. I don't mind dying."

"Is. . . is he here now?" Aspen clutches the edge of the couch cushion, her eyes burning.

"What? Of course he ain't here. He only comes when I cry."

"Oh." Aspen wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Crazy kid. Thinks her dead daddy is here with us." Rhonda cackles again. "Your Daddy, he was some kind of man, I tell you what. He used to go around looking for people to help. One time, he brought me groceries. I ever tell you that, Aspen?"

“You did, but I don’t mind hearing it again.”

“Me and Shae didn’t have two pennies to rub together, and so I say, ‘God, send a miracle,’ and here comes your daddy, walking up the sidewalk with an armload of groceries. Weren’t just macaroni and cheese either. There was steaks in that bag. He smiled like he meant it too.”

“He did stuff like that a lot,” Aspen says.

“I guess he did. Your Momma was real lucky. How’s your momma anyway? She holding up without him?”

“She’s good. Strong as ever.”

“Always was. In high school, we all thought she’d be the first girl president someday. She married your daddy instead. Not a bad trade if you ask me. Good man, your daddy.

Shae stands. “I’m gonna do some of those dishes, Momma.” She walks briskly to the kitchen. “Where’s your trash can?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Do you have a trash bag?”

“There’s some grocery bags under that sink there.”

Shae shuffles around in the cupboard until she finds a bag and begins shoving paper dishes into it. Aspen watches, wishing Shae would come back.

“You want a drink?” Rhonda asks, wiping a moisture mustache away with the back of her hand.

“No thanks,” Aspen says. She traces the faded flower pattern on the couch with her fingertip.

Rhonda wanders to the kitchen, staggering a bit now. She retrieves a cup from the cabinet and fills it. “Here, honey,” she says, thrusting it at Shae. “You look like you could use a drink.”

“I told you, Momma, we don’t drink.” Shae lifts a slimy sponge from the sink and rinses it under a stream of steaming water from the faucet.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Live a little. You see me once in blue moon. You can’t even celebrate with your own Momma?”

Shae shuts off the faucet then reaches for the drink. “Fine.”

Rhonda laughs. “That’s my girl. Here’s to us, baby girl.”

“Here’s to us, Momma.” Shae smiles uneasily and sips while her momma guzzles.

“That hits the spot. A refill?”

“My cup’s still full.”

“Well, then one for pretty little Aspen.” Rhonda fills another cup and wanders back to the living room. “Here you go, pretty thing.”

“Thanks, Rhonda.” Aspen takes the cup and sips politely. The rum burns her throat. She wishes she could guzzle it, but instead she takes another sip.

“I bet the boys go nuts for you.” Rhonda runs her clumsy fingers through Aspen’s hair. “All that fucking hair. Like fire. Piles and piles of fire.” Her fingers get stuck in a tangle, and she yanks until her hand pulls free. Aspen winces. “Shae used to have pretty hair too. Didn’t you, Shae?” Shae, on her hands and knees scrubbing the linoleum, doesn’t answer. “She did. She had the prettiest hair. Thin though, like spider webs. Not thick like yours. We can’t all be beauties, though, can we, Shae? Can’t all be fucking beauty queens like Aspen.” She plops on the couch and rests her elbows on her knees.

Aspen sets her drink on the table and glances at Shae. Shae stares at the floor, absorbed in her cleaning. Aspen mumbles, “You should see the way the boys go nuts for Shae. She beats them off with a stick.”

Rhonda guffaws. “More like the girls go nuts for her. I was pretty when I was her age. Don’t know what the hell happened with her. She looks like her father is what.”

Shae stands suddenly, wiping her hands on her jeans. “Well, Momma, we should be going.”

“So soon? Can’t even have one drink?”

“We had a drink, Momma.”

Rhonda groans and stands. “How about a soda pop? You girls want a soda pop?”

“No thanks.”

“Have a soda pop. Take one for the road.” Rhonda heads to the fridge and pulls out two generic sodas. “Ice cold too. It’s a hot one out there. It’ll be real nice to have an ice cold soda on the road.”

“Thank you,” Aspen says quietly, taking the can Rhonda is shoving in her direction.

“Yeah, Momma, thanks,” Shae says, taking a soda as well. When Aspen turns to walk out the door, Shae presses a \$20 bill into Rhonda’s palm. “Here, Momma. It isn’t much. When I finish school, I’ll help out more.” Rhonda’s face softens. For a second, Aspen knows, Shae sees beneath Rhonda’s slack skin the Momma that used to be, the Momma that smiled and sang show tunes and read stories about cats in hats. “I love you, Momma. Don’t ever forget that, K?”

“I won’t, Shaelynn.” Rhonda starts to cry. “How could I forget a thing like that?”

As they back out of the driveway, Shae stares at her momma, who slouches on the sagging porch, her head bowed. Aspen glances at Shae. Her wet cheeks shine in the streetlights. “You’re the prettiest girl I ever saw, Shae,” Aspen whispers. “If you were a boy, I’d marry you.”

*

On a tour bus bound for Santa Barbara, Darren Silverado and Darren Wilkensen wrestle. They are both trapped inside his long, lean body, fighting it out as he sprawls in his bunk, staring at the ceiling, his head propped on his interlaced fingers. The smell of pot hangs in the air, and he can hear his bandmates in the other room, laughing. He doesn’t want to laugh right now though. The fight inside him hurts.

Every time he gets high, he feels this, these memories creeping through his body, ripping him apart. He remembers touching a fuzzy caterpillar on a branch at the park when he was three. He remembers the terror he felt the first time he walked through the lunch line on his first day of kindergarten, smelling banana pudding, watching the big kids taking their trays, worried that he wouldn’t know what to do when his turn came. He remembers breaking his ankle in a biking accident when he was eleven.

Then, he remembers shaking hands with Jackson for the first time. He remembers the terror he felt the first time he played at a major music festival, waiting in the wings watching the band that went before him, worried that he wouldn’t know what to do when his turn came. He remembers the way the fabric on David Letterman’s couch felt the first time it flirted with the skin on the backs of his arms.

“Whose baby will this be?” he asks himself. “Darren Wilkensen’s or Darren Silverado’s?”

Right now, Ronnie is in labor. She called three hours ago. “It’s time,” she said. Darren almost said, “Time for what?” Thank God, he remembered and stopped himself. Instead he said, “Just breathe, honey, breathe,” as if he, instead of Ronnie’s mother, were going to be her labor coach. He has never been to a Lamaze class, but he has seen live births on television. “I love you, honey,” he said before he hung up, and though he doesn’t know if he meant it, he is glad he said it all the same.

Ronnie, a lanky chemistry major with a broad nose and a killer smile, married Darren Wilkensen when he was nineteen. They were the kind of in love that only people stupid enough to marry young can be. They imagined their life together as a series of *Lifetime Specials*, each one more heartwarming than the last. The wedding. The honeymoon. The house. The babies. At worst, their marriage would be punctuated with small spats, which would end, inevitably, with passionate lovemaking by a smoldering fireplace.

The wedding, paid for by Darren’s parents, was as perfect as they had imagined, despite the fact that one of the groomsmen passed out and hit his head on a pew. The honeymoon consisted of an overnight stay at the local Hilton, with champagne and heart shaped chocolates on the pillows. The house was a studio apartment. The babies refused to come. The spats did come, but usually ended with hurled cutlery and expletives, not lovemaking. After three miscarriages, they visited a doctor who told them grimly that Ronnie was unlikely to be able to carry a child full-term without expensive fertility treatments. They lived on Ramen noodles and Kool-Aid. How could they afford test tube babies?

When they were both sophomores in college, Icarus in Asbestos was discovered, though Darren was fond of saying that they didn’t need to be discovered, as they were never lost. Ronnie rode along on the bus during his first tour. After that, they bought a house, a real house.

She wanted to come on tour again, but he made excuses. Tours came and went. She bought a dog. Gave her friends expensive gifts. Hosted parties. Got a nose job. Eventually, she forgot to miss Darren, so much so that when he came home, she resented his intrusion on her territory. They never fought anymore when he visited, just silently avoided one another when possible, making love feverishly two or three times during Darren's stay to confirm their married status.

She can't be happy, Darren knows. But she has never even threatened to leave, in spite of the tattered state of their marriage, because he is Darren Silverado now. Without him, she is just another college dropout. Sure, he'd have to pay alimony, but never again would she walk down the red carpet on his arm.

For his part, he has stayed with her because she is the only thing in his life that never changes. Beautiful bimbos come and go, but Ronnie stays, solid and unmoving, ruling serenely over his house, glancing every now and again at the pictures of his boyhood that stand on the mantle over the fireplace. She is the tie that binds Darren Wilkensen and Darren Silverado together, keeps him from breaking in half for good.

"It's Darren Silverado's baby," he concludes. The baby was, after all, bought with Darren Silverado's money. The baby will never know Darren Wilkensen. To Darren's offspring, that acne-scarred boy will be nothing but a fading photograph.

Jackson opens the door and steps into the long, narrow room that houses all their bunks. "What's up?" he asks, pushing his hands into his pockets.

"Not much. Just waiting."

"She hasn't had it yet?"

"It's only been three hours. She could be in labor for hours. Days, even."

"Shit. Why don't you come party with us? You can't just lay here brooding."

Darren starts to say no then thinks better of it. “Yeah, dude. Yeah. Christ. I’ll go crazy lying here like this.” He gets up and shakes his head, trying to chase away the memories that race in his mind. “Do we have any banana pudding?”

“I don’t fucking know. What do I look like? Your wife?”

Darren laughs. “Not in this light, though with the lights off. . .” He reaches out and rubs Jackson’s shoulders.

Laughing, Jackson shakes him off. “Don’t worry, Darren. We’ve got some substitute wives for you in here. You won’t even have to turn out the lights.”

They step into a smoke clouded room, lined on both sides with long couches. The band is there. A set of blond twins sits on Josh’s lap. One of them toys with his slick, brown hair. On the other couch, three women loll, all young, all beautiful, all wide-eyed at the sight of Darren up close. “Hello, girls,” he says, smiling. He strolls to their couch and asks, “Mind if I join you?”

Two of them giggle and sit up. One of them, a brunette, stretches out further and says, “Only if you know the password.”

Darren’s smile grows. “The password?”

“Yeah, the password.” She kicks at him playfully.

“What do I get if I give you the password?”

“You get to sit down.”

“But it’s my couch.”

“Not right now, it isn’t.”

Darren laughs. “I give up. The password. You’re beautiful? How’s that?”

She smiles and makes a buzzer noise. “Wrong answer. Try again. I’ll give you a hint. It’s a living thing.”

“A living thing? I don’t know. Whale?”

“No, but good guess.”

“Harpoon.”

“Nope. Harpoons aren’t alive.”

“I think I’m done with this game.” Laughing, Darren bends and picks the girl up. She squeals and tries to hold on to the cushion, but it is no use. Darren has a good fifty pounds on her. He plops on the couch, still holding her, and presses his face close to hers. He can smell the wine on her lips.

“So, what was the password?” he asks.

“Algae,” she says, giggling.

“Oh.” Darren sweeps her hair away from her face and studies her green eyes and cupid’s bow mouth, curved into a sly smile. “Is that the password I need to kiss you?”

She answers by placing a hungry kiss on his lips. “You don’t need a password for that,” she says when she is done.

He closes his eyes and tries to imagine that she is Ronnie, but the thought of his wife, propped in a hospital bed somewhere, grunting, is no aphrodisiac. He thinks instead of Aspen, the way she looked at him when he told her she was safe. She looked at him like she saw him. The image sets his belly on fire.

He takes the girl there on the couch, oblivious to the other bodies that fill the room, losing himself in her warm wetness, forgetting to remember who he is, who he was. They move in time with the bus as it bumps and sways along the freeway. He groans the word “Aspen,” as he comes. The girl says nothing. He falls asleep on top of her. When Josh shakes him awake, dawn trickles in through the window shade. The girl sleeps with her head on his arm.

“Darren, the phone. It’s your wife.”

Shaking free of the girl, Darren sits up. “One second,” he whispers, shoving his legs into his boxers.

“What?” the girl says, stretching and rubbing her eyes.

“Not now,” Darren hisses, taking the phone. “Hello, honey. . . Oh, my god. No fucking way. No fucking way! A boy? A boy? Holy shit. A boy! Guys, I’m a daddy. I have a son!”

*

Heaven is releasing Plato in a park. He has to. What can a guy do with a lizard in his pocket? He can’t dance. He can’t run. He can’t sleep. Not with that lizard in there, threatening to die. That close call with the dudes in the van scared the shit out of Heaven. He’s lucky they didn’t punch his pocket. If they had, Plato would be a mound of mush. Being with Heaven could have been the death of Plato. And a life of captivity in an aquarium is no life at all. So he is letting her go.

“Goodbye, beautiful,” he says, and kisses her on top of her scaly head, memorizing the look of her, the way her skin shimmers in the sun, the way her green eyes bulge out at him, begging him to keep her. Her toes spread into four exquisite little webs, crowned with perfect, pointed claws. Her knee joints are breathtaking, barely larger than pinheads. “I can’t keep you, Plato,” he whispers. “I just can’t.” He sets her in a clump of grass and kicks at her with the tip of his tennis shoe, just enough to jar her into movement. “Go now,” he encourages.

Plato scrambles off under a pine, and Heaven turns away, misty-eyed but elated. His love is strong, but it does not carry over into real life for long. Heaven is glad to be free of Plato, truth be told. He does not want to catch anymore crickets. He does not want to remember to change out the water in her aquarium. He comforts himself by imagining the life she will live

now, the Don Juan lizard that will come along and sweep her off her feet, make her pregnant with a hundred tiny lizard babies, or eggs, as case may be. Anyway, Plato and her boyfriend will have a perfect little love nest, made from string and toilet paper, and Plato will sleep on a bed made of flower petals, safe in the scaly arms of her lover.

This is not, of course, the way it really happens. Ten minutes after Heaven walks away, Plato is spotted by a playful poodle named Riki Tiki Tavi, who really wants nothing more than friendship but has a deadly way of going about getting it, particularly when animals one percent of his size are concerned. He barks joyfully at Plato, waves his cotton ball tail twice, and leaps into action. With two snaps of his jaws, Plato is ripped in half. Her blood stains the bark beneath the tree. The poodle forgets about friendship and settles for a snack.

FIRE

*The time to hesitate is through,
No time to wallow in the mire.
Try now. We can only lose.
And our love become a funeral pyre.
Come on, baby. Light my fire.*

*--James Douglas Morrison (December 8, 1943-July 3, 1971)**

Sonny and Macy wait at the drive through window, which is lit up from the inside, exhaling tantalizing French fry grease into the night.

“What do you call a flying turtle?” Macy asks.

“I don’t know.” Sonny’s skin glows yellow in the neon radiance of the golden arches.

“A shellicopter.”

Smiling, Sonny groans. “Where the hell do you come up with these crappy jokes?”

“I read it on a popsicle stick. Wanna hear another one?”

“No.”

“Knock-knock.”

“I said no.”

“Panther.”

Sonny sighs. “Panther who?”

“Panther no panths, I’m going thwiminng!” Macy laughs until she can hardly breathe.
“Get it?”

Sonny rolls his eyes. “Yeth, I get it. Thath why I’m not laughing.”

The window opens. “Here’s your order,” the girl says.

“Don’t forget to ask for extra salt on the fries,” Macy whispers to Sonny. “And mayo.”
She hands Sonny a \$20 bill before he has the chance to ask, because she doesn’t want to impose. She is not good at receiving, but when it comes to giving until it hurts, she’s a pro. “Go ahead and pay for yours too with that,” she says. Sonny doesn’t say thank you. They drive away before they realize one order of fries is missing. “Take mine,” Macy says, and Sonny does.

Peeling the Monopoly game piece from the side of her soda, Macy announces, “I got Indiana Avenue!” Sonny gives her a quick congratulatory kiss. He never offers her any fries, but she doesn’t mind. He forgot to ask for mayo, and fries are no good without it. Besides, she can’t really eat much, not with the way he is looking at her hungrily over the edge of his drinking cup, like she is Priscilla Presley herself. Nervously, Macy switches on the radio and adjusts it to the oldies station. Like magic, Elvis’s thrilling vibrato slides out through the speakers. “Holy crow! It’s my lucky day! ‘Are you Lonesome Tonight.’ I adore this song.”

Sonny rolls his eyes. “Holy crow. Holy crow. Don’t you know any other swear words?”

“Dagnabbit?” she offers tentatively. He laughs scornfully. She shrugs. “I don’t like swearing. My momma said my tongue would rot off in my head if I used swears. Real ones, I mean. Dagnabbit is fine.”

“But wouldn’t it be exhilarating to say, ‘Fuckin’ A, I adore this fucking song’?”

For some reason, Sonny suddenly reminds Macy of a vacuum cleaner salesman. She looks away. “It would just make me feel dirty. I’d probably wash my own mouth out with soap,

since Momma's not here to do the job." Macy's knee starts jiggling, the way it does when she's nervous. She changes the subject. "This song is the one Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison is singing." She chimes in, using, of course, her best Elvis voice: *"Is your heart filled with pain? Shall I come back again? Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?"*

"Who did you say is singing this?" Sonny asks.

Stony silence envelops the cab of the truck. Finally, Macy speaks. *"Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison? With the one glistening tear, expressing all the sadness in the whole world? You never listen."*

"I do. I remember now. Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison. The painting over your couch. How do you know this is what he's singing?"

"I just know." Macy is put out, and there is no way she is spilling one more secret tonight, so Sonny Rickman can just drive on listening to the sounds of "Are You Lonesome Tonight" fading away into silence, or worse yet, the sound of tires on asphalt, rmm, rmm, rmm. Sonny can just listen to the ugly noise of no more Elvis, for all she cares, and that is that.

Later, at the motel, she is silent. She drops her suitcase on the double bed closest to the bathroom, because stupid Sonny should have to walk a bit if he has to pee. Sonny doesn't protest even though she always lets him have the best bed. Maybe he has that instinctive sense of self-preservation most men have, that sense that tells them to shut the hell up when a woman is good and pissed at them. Macy changes in the bathroom noisily, banging chipped porcelain and stained linoleum.

"It sounds like a construction zone in there," Sonny calls.

Macy can hear him smiling, but she doesn't smile back. She emerges wearing a flannel nightgown boasting a teddy bear that sits neatly in the place her breasts would be if she had them.

"How do you make a strawberry shake?" asks Sonny.

"Take it to a scary movie. I told you that one." Macy does not laugh.

"Night, Macy Blue," Sonny says when he switches off the light. She says nothing. He falls into his bed, which is chillier than any gutter he ever slept in.

Macy can't sleep. She knows if she does, her chance to punish Sonny will have come and gone. A good night's rest has a tendency to erase anger, and she just isn't ready for that. Instead, she counts sheep. Loudly.

"ONE. TWO. TWO-AND-A-HALF."

Sonny buries his head beneath his pillow.

"FIVE. FIVE-AND-THREE-QUARTERS."

He shoves his fingers in his ears.

"TWELVE. THIRTEEN. FOURTEEN. FOURTEEN-AND-NINE-EIGHTHS."

"What are you doing, Macy Blue!"

"I happen to be counting sheep."

"Why are you using fractions then? Sheep don't come in parts. Unless your sheep counting fantasies are more violent than I would have suspected." He laughs too loudly. She doesn't.

"Some of them are part hid behind the fence, Sonny Rickman."

"Well, could you count quieter?"

"No, I cannot. FIFTEEN. SIXTEEN. SIXTEEN-AND-ONE-SEVENTH."

She is at two-hundred-twenty-six-and-four-fifths when he finally starts snoring. She doesn't see any point in counting after that. Exhausted, she closes her eyes.

Before she knows it, waves are breaking a thousand miles below her, and she is clinging to a slick cliff face, climbing up, up, and up, heart banging, head dizzy. She will fall if she looks down. She doesn't look, but still, her foot slips. Flailing, she falls a thousand miles and shatters on jagged rocks. Her blood dyes the water wispy red.

"Macy, Macy, what is it?" Sonny shakes her awake. She screams until she realizes her body is intact. Her screams become sobs. "What is it, Macy Blue?" He is standing over her, glowing faintly in the moonlight, wearing a pair of tattered smiley-face-bedecked boxers which reveal, quite indelicately, a tuft of wiry orange pubes. Even in the midst of her terror, she is embarrassed.

"I had a dream," she says, looking away. "I fell." He smooths the hair back from her forehead. "I'm afraid of heights. When I was three or something, I climbed our bookshelf and pulled the whole dang thing over on myself. I broke both arms and cried under that shelf for a good half hour before my momma found me. But you know, falling, watching the tile zoom toward my face, that was the scariest part."

Sonny doesn't know what to say, so he does what he does best. He starts to sing. He wishes he knew a lullaby, but he never really had a momma, so he settles for the only remotely lullaby-like song he can come up with at the moment. "*Hush now baby, baby, don't you cry. Momma's gonna make all of your nightmares come true. Momma's gonna put all of her fears into you.*" Despite the macabre nature of his lullaby, by the time he finishes, Macy's sobs have become quiet gasps. He launches into another song, one he knows she will love. "*Goin' to a party in the county jail. Prison band was there and they began to wail.*" He slows down the

tempo so it sounds more like blues than rock-n-roll. When he is done, her eyes are closed, and her belly is rising rhythmically, in- out, in-out. The wrinkles in her brow have been ironed away. He starts to tiptoe back to his own bed, but her moist hand grabs his wrist.

“Don’t go,” she says.

Why does he listen? Well, partly, it is because that little boy who loved snails still lives inside of Sonny somewhere, and he has a soft spot for delicate things. And partly, it is because he hasn’t been laid in a good six months. He crawls into bed with her, and she scooches closer, pressing her hefty bottom against his belly and crotch.

You gotta give it to Sonny. He is gentle. He kisses the back of her neck first, and then, when she turns toward him, he kisses her eyelids and her cheeks and her chin and her throat before he ever gets anywhere near her tiny breasts. When finally, he pulls back the loose neck of her nightshirt and lets his lips brush against her earthworm pink nipples, she gasps.

“Is it okay?” he asks, the way a real gentleman would.

“Yeah.” But she sounds like she might cry.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

He is. There in the dark, with the moonlight erasing his wrinkles, wiping away the years, he becomes the Sonny Rickman that might have been had Icarus in Asbestos never formed. He wraps his arms around Macy and pulls her to him, kissing her forehead again and again. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“It’s just that—nobody has ever touched me there,” she whispers.

He freezes. He can’t help it. A twenty-two year old virgin? He didn’t know such creatures even existed. “I’m sorry,” he says again, and he drops her, bam, against the bed, which is the harshest action he has taken tonight, but probably the kindest too.

Still, Macy Blue is in love, you know, she has been saving her gift for this, for the magic moment when The One comes and discovers the deepest, unexplored caverns of her. She gathers her courage, grabs his fingers, and places them gently on her breast, shuddering at the warm weight of his hand. Remember that Sonny Rickman that might have been? Well, he evaporates, and the Sonny Rickman that is takes over, the bastard.

Before the night is done, the motel sheets are stained with Macy's virgin blood. Sonny is tangled up in her body in the gray morning light, and when she whimpers in her sleep like a puppy, he whispers, "What the hell have I done?" The morning answers with quiet.

*

The guitars have gone quiet, and Darren has left the stage. He touched Aspen five times tonight. She counted. He never touched anyone else. She watched. And she is almost a-hundred-percent sure he turned and smiled at her as he was leaving. She stares at the place he stood, then glances over her shoulder. Shae is walking toward an exit, kicking broken bottles and crushed plastic cups with her high heels. Reluctantly, Aspen turns to follow.

"Excuse me," a deep voice calls from the stage. Aspen spins toward the sound, thinking, impossibly, that it might be Darren. It is not, of course. Instead, a bald, wiry man stands at the edge of the stage, smiling. "You're Aspen, right?" Confused, she nods. "Could you come here, please?" Aspen looks at Shae, who has stopped too. Shae shrugs. Aspen steps forward, and the man leans down. "I'm Jackson Labeaux, Darren's manager. This may seem a little odd to you, but he asked me to invite you backstage."

Aspen's knees almost buckle. "What?"

Jackson laughs. "Darren asked me to invite you backstage. To talk." Aspen stares. "Shall I tell him you declined?" Still, she stands paralyzed.

“She’ll go,” Shae calls from behind Aspen. She walks forward and puts her hand on Aspen’s arm. “Right, Aspen? You’ll go.” Aspen nods again. She is shaking. “Pull it together, kiddo,” Shae whispers in her ear. “This is a dream come true. I’ll be at that 24-hour-diner down the street.”

“Come on,” Jackson says, and he puts out his hand. Slowly, as if in a dream, Aspen reaches out and grabs it. He helps her up onto the stage, and in spite of the fact that her bones have turned to water, she follows him. Halfway across the stage, she stops and looks back at Shae. Shae is standing in the clutter, looking small and alone. Aspen feels a twinge of guilt for leaving her, but she extinguishes it quickly. Shae would do the same thing if Darren had asked her backstage. She would. And anyway, Shae *told her* to go. Aspen thinks, momentarily, of asking this Jackson if Shae can come too, but she isn’t sure of the protocol for this sort of thing. Smiling weakly, Aspen waves at Shae, and then, she follows Jackson into the wings.

Backstage, guards part in the face of the emissary of the king, and she passes like a ghost through white halls. Finally, they come to a door. At its center, a paper sign hangs. *Darren Silverado* is written on it in black magic marker. Aspen has the urge to steal the sign to add to her Darren paraphernalia collection, but thankfully, she remembers her manners before she does. Jackson opens the door. “Ladies first,” he says, stepping aside. Hesitantly, she steps into the glaringly lit room. There is a bucket of beer. And there is smoke. Pot smoke. She is glad that she has practiced smoking, relieved that her interview with her god will not go awry because her lungs are fresh and pink like baby pig skin.

Then she sees him. He is sprawled there on an overstuffed couch. His hair is damp, falling around the strong lines of his jaw, and tiny wrinkles radiate from the corners of his eyes like beams from the sun. Her god is revealed to her in all of his glory, and sweat drips from the

straight tip of his nose. She can smell him, and it melts her, this proof that he is still a man. He looks smaller, somehow. Almost fragile. Bolting upright, he smiles shyly and says, “Hello Aspen.” It is like the ocean breaking in her ears, the sound of him saying her name. “I hope you don’t think it’s weird I asked you to come back here.”

She does think it’s weird, weird in the same way it would be if Ed McMahon showed up on her doorstep with a check for a million dollars. She shakes her head. “Uh, no.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m a perv or anything.” He laughs nervously. “I just liked talking to you the other night and thought it might be fun to, you know, talk more.”

She wants to say something, but all her words have dried up. She manages a squeaky, “K.” God, she is a fucking idiot.

“Have a seat.” He pats the cushion next to him, and she obeys. He says this. He says, “I see you out there dancing every night. You’re beautiful. You’re light. You’re walking light.” His eyes burn like supernovas when he says it. She thinks of that comic book the boys in school used to read, the one about the superhero that burst into flame sometimes. The Human Torch, was it? She believes, if he put his mind to it, Darren could self-combust. “You remind me of this girl I knew once,” he adds.

“Really? Who?” she manages. Something in her belly flutters like leaves in a gust of wind. She tries to remember all the lessons she has learned about boys, about the games they play, the things they say to get a girl into bed. Those lessons don’t matter much now. Darren is smiling at her.

“Anise. I kissed her behind the slide when I was a kid.” He chuckles. “My first kiss. Want a beer?”

“Sure,” Aspen says.

He hands one to her, and she drinks greedily. “So, tell me about you,” he says.

She swallows and rests the bottle in her lap, feeling like she is taking a pop-quiz. On astrophysics. She doesn’t know one goddamn answer. “Uh, there isn’t much to tell.” Her head is spinning. It can’t be the beer. Not yet. It’s that this whole thing feels like a dream. But it’s real. She can smell Darren.

“Well, how about this,” he says. “How about you tell me your best memory from kindergarten.”

Aspen’s throat tightens. Stage fright. When she speaks, her voice comes out too quiet. “Well, once, my daddy bought me a dove, only he hid it in a shoebox, so I wouldn’t know what it was. I thought it was shoes. But when I opened the box, the dove flew out.” She stops, looking at Darren to see if she is boring him. His eyes are still burning, as if she is saying the most interesting thing he has ever heard. “My dad liked birds.”

“Sounds like you have a pretty cool dad.”

“I did.” She drinks again. “He’s dead now.”

“I’m sorry.” Darren touches her hand, and she shivers. When he pulls it back, an awkward silence ensues. She doesn’t know what to say. Through the wall, she hears girls giggling. She wonders if this happens a lot, if the band brings girls backstage every night. Her throat tightens. She is such an idiot, thinking she is special. She stares at her beer bottle. “So what’s your dad like?” she finally manages.

“My dad? Well, you know that guy, Hitler?”

Aspen nods.

“That’s pretty much my dad.”

Aspen laughs, and then stops abruptly, not sure if Darren meant to be funny. Silence again. More giggling girls. She should probably be giggling too, not just sitting her staring at her beer. If she doesn't say something, he will get up and walk away. But she can't think of anything to say.

"So your dove, what'd you name it?" he asks.

"Jehosophat."

Darren grins. "Jehosophat?"

Aspen feels herself blush. "Yeah, he's a king from the Bible. My parents were pretty into the Bible." God, she must sound like some kind of religious fanatic. Which maybe she is, underneath it all. She tries to hide it, but secretly, she still prays all the time, still believes all the stuff her daddy said. She doesn't want to talk about it. "What about you? What was your best memory from first grade?"

Darren smiles. "Well, my folks used to travel a lot, but this one Christmas, they stayed home. I remember everything about that Christmas. The way the tree smelled. Those gingerbread cookies me and mom made together. I don't know why I remember this, but I remember seeing my face reflected in a red Christmas ornament. My face was all crazy, you know? My nose was like this." He makes a fist and puts it in front of his face. "Huge." He laughs. "I had big teeth, like a fucking piranha or something." Aspen laughs too, stopping herself from telling him that piranhas have relatively small teeth. Now walruses? They have big teeth. "Not much of a memory, huh?" Darren asks.

"It's a great memory," Aspen says. "Sometimes, it's the little things that matter most." Darren flashes a smile that seems scared. She makes him nervous too. Aspen can hardly believe this. Her god is human. It feels like it felt when she was a kid and she found out her teachers

had houses, that they didn't just live at the school all the time. "Do you remember what kind of presents you got?"

"Oh shit, do I ever." Laughing, Darren falls back and runs his hands through his hair. "I got a copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*."

Aspen smiles. "When you were in kindergarten?"

"Oh, yeah." Darren stares at the ceiling. "And you can bet my dad made sure I could read that book by the end of the year. In fact, I read the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* for my kindergarten graduation." He extends his hand in the air and looks up at an invisible Juliet. "But soft, what light from yonder window breaks." Then, dropping his hand, he looks at Aspen. No. He doesn't look at her. He burns at her. "It is the east and Juliet is the sun."

Looking into those boiling ocean eyes, Aspen is so overcome with wanting, she thinks she might throw up. She crosses and uncrosses her legs, toying with a loose thread on her jeans. "You must have been smart."

Darren shrugs. "I guess. Not that I got good grades or anything. I kinda hated school."

"Well, you must have liked it a little, kissing all the girls on the playground."

Smiling, Darren breathes deeply and drinks again. "Not all the girls," he says finally. "One girl. The rest of the girls hated me. I was skinny, and I got beat up a lot. Anise only liked me because I wrote her poems. Bad poems, I'll grant you. One was called, 'My Bozeman Girl.'" He recites. "She gives me her Bozeman laugh, I laugh, makes me smile when I wanna hurl. Must be obvious to you why I love her, my Bozeman girl."

Aspen laughs. "Smile when I wanna hurl?"

Darren nods. "Yeah. I know what you're thinking. Fodder for a Pulitzer, right?"

"Of course."

“Anyway, I never kissed anyone again until I was 15. This girl named Karen. And I don’t even know if she counts. She called me a fag when I was done.” He looks down. Aspen could swear he is blushing.

“What a bitch!” she says. And she means it. She would drop-kick this Karen if she could. Darren suddenly looks even smaller. Childlike. He glances up at Aspen. Smiling softly, she points at a scar on his forehead, a scar she has never seen under the forgiving stage lights but shows up now in the fluorescent glare. “Is that what this is from?” she asks gently. “The kids beating you up?”

“No.” He laughs. “I fell off my bike.”

“Oh.”

“This, though.” Tentatively, he lifts his shirt an inch, revealing a pale memory of a cut along his belly. “This was from those kids. I was running a race one day at Play Day. You know Play Day?”

“No.” Aspen shakes her head.

“Play Day was this thing we did at our school. We’d all run races, you know? Fifty-yard dashes. Hundred-yard dashes. Get ribbons and shit if we won. I always sucked, but you had to run or you flunked P.E., right? So I was running the hundred yard dash, and I don’t know what happened, but for some reason, I was winning. For the first time in my fucking life, I was winning. I could feel the wind on my face, and I could hear my mom and dad in stands, cheering. ‘Go Darren! Run, son, run!’

“The finishing line is a rope on the ground, and I’m coming up on it, my head thrown back, you know, and just as I cross it, some kids lift it, and I trip. Fall flat on my fucking face. Cut my stomach open on some rocks on the ground.”

“That’s awful.” Picturing Darren as a little boy with a gash on his belly, Aspen lifts her hand to touch the scar and then stops herself. “Did you at least get a ribbon?”

“No. Yeah. I guess so. I don’t really remember. It didn’t matter after that.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

He smiles and shakes his head. “No biggie.” He holds up his hand, tanned and calloused, with deep ridges worn into the tips of the fingers. “If you wanna see scars, you should see what the guitar strings have done to my hands.” Laughing nervously, he takes her hand and runs her fingertips over the dents in his.

Aspen’s nerves buzz like naked electric wires. Darren the man evaporates, and Darren the god takes his place. Her god is touching her, and it is like all the near death experiences say. White-hot light. Smoke, maybe clouds. She has never been a cool girl, a girl who knows just the right thing to do, so instead of doing what she should do, she does what she wants to. Which, in this case, just happens to be the right thing. She lifts the fingers and gently kisses them. Her soft mouth slides over his calloused skin.

“And my lips,” he says. His voice comes to her from far away, from some place outside these fingers. “Look how raw my lips are from singing.”

Instinctively, her fingers move to those lips, which are indeed raw. More than anything, she wants to kiss them too. But he pulls her fingers away and takes her hand. “You bite your nails?” he asks, touching her jagged thumbnail.

She can’t breathe. “Sometimes, when I’m nervous,” she manages.

“What else?”

“What do you mean?”

“What else should I know about you?” he asks.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you.”

Aspen wiggles in her seat. Now that he is holding her hand, she tries to think of something clever to say, but she can't. She says this instead: “Look, you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, so if I make an ass of myself, that's why.”

Darren laughs. “Are you always this honest?”

“Mostly.”

“Well, don't worry. I'm just a regular guy.”

“Well, you're the most beautiful regular guy I've ever seen. So it's hard to talk.”

Darren leans closer, his eyes suddenly pleading. “Please tell me about you. I'm sick of thinking about me.”

Aspen takes a drink of her beer and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. “Um, well, I'm from New Mexico. I travel with my friend, Shae.”

“I've seen her. She has orange hair.”

“That's the one. She's been my best friend since we were tiny. She's more like a sister than a friend.”

“You're lucky to have someone like that.”

“I know.”

“Do you guys still live in New Mexico?”

“No. Well, officially, yes. I mean, that's where I get my mail. But no. I haven't been home in months.”

“Where do you live now?”

“Hotel rooms.” Aspen laughs.

Darren smiles. "Me too."

She tells him then about her childhood in New Mexico, where the cactus, with its wild explosions of purple flowers and its dagger sharp spines became a symbol of life, of how much it could make you smile and cry all at once. "I didn't know it would hurt this bad," she says after three, maybe four, beers have made mush of her impulse control.

Darren touches her face. And then, he stands. "Well, Aspen, I'd better get some sleep. Big show tomorrow."

Confused, she stands too.

"We'll do this again," he says, giving her an awkward hug. "Jackson will help you find your way out."

He starts to walk away, then stops. "Hey, you ever hear of Ginsberg?" he calls over his shoulder.

Ginsberg? Where has she heard that name? Oh! She remembers now! "Of course." Aspen smiles. "He only wrote 'Howl,' the greatest poem ever written."

The elated look on Darren's face tells her she has gotten the right answer. *Thank you, Shae*, she thinks.

"Come see me again, Aspen?" he says.

She smiles. "I will."

"Promise?"

"Pinky swear." She holds up her pinky.

He walks back and links his pinky with hers. "I'm gonna hold you to this."

"Of course," she says. "Pinky swears can't be broken. It's like making a promise to the mafia."

Darren laughs. “I can bust your kneecaps if you don’t follow through?”

“Something like that.”

“K, then.” Darren kisses her cheek, and smiling, walks away. The place where his lips touched her skin burns.

*

Slumped on Brick’s leather sofa, Heaven and Brick watch *Rebel Without a Cause*. Both of them hold full, long-stemmed wine glasses. Brick clasps his stem gracefully, using only the tips of his fingers. Heaven strangles his. On the intricately carved table in front of them, there are four bottles—three empty and one half-full. The wine is expensive, Brick told Heaven. He went on and on about it, sniffing it and talking about bouquets and hints of raspberry. To Heaven, it tastes the same as any other wine. The good part is, it has gotten Heaven drunk. Right now, the movie is at the scene where the cops shoot Plato. Heaven hates this part. No matter how many times he watches it, he always gets a little nauseous, hoping against hope that Plato will get through it alive.

“Oh, fuck.” Brick gasps when the shots are fired.

Heaven tries not to cry.

As James Dean weeps, Brick touches Heaven’s hand. “It’s okay, dude,” he whispers. Heaven leans his head on Brick’s shoulder. Brick wraps his steely arm around Heaven. “It’s okay.”

Heaven’s eyes are so blurry, he can barely see as James Dean’s father promises to be there for him. But he can hear. “Look, Jim. You can depend on me. Trust me. Whatever comes, we’ll fix it together. I swear it. Now Jim, stand up. I’ll stand up with you. I’ll try to be as strong as you want me to be.” Brick’s strong arm tightens around Heaven. The credits roll.

“Wow, that was some film,” Brick says, petting Heaven’s hair. “I always forget how good it is.”

Heaven answers Brick with a sniffle. He hopes, momentarily, that he will not get snot on Brick’s brown silk shirt.

“You identify with Jim, don’t you?” Brick whispers. Heaven nods. “Because his father is such a prick?” Heaven nods again. Brick takes a deep breath. “Heaven, I don’t know what the story is with you and your dad.” With his head pressed close to Brick’s chest, Heaven hears Brick’s voice weird. It is echo-y and too loud. “I don’t need to know, unless you want to tell me.” Brick waits.

Heaven doesn’t say anything. What can he say? Yeah, Brick, my dad was a fucking prick. He beat the shit out of me. And then I was homeless, and I gave some guy a blow job for the bus fare here. This is information he’d rather keep to himself.

Brick pats Heaven’s shoulder. “No worries, dude,” he says. “You don’t have to tell me. Brick’s smell is strong--sweat and that spicy cologne. “Just know this. I am here for you. I will always be here for you.” He pulls away from Heaven. Lifting Heaven’s face gently with his fingertips, he looks into Heaven’s eyes. “Heaven, I *will* be as strong as you need me to be.” He kisses Heaven then, hard. “I love you, Heaven.” His mouth tastes like wine, and his chin scratches Heaven’s face. With his heart pounding, Heaven kisses him back.

Later, when they are in Brick’s bed, Heaven still can’t stop feeling like crying, even though the movie ended an hour ago. While Brick fumbles on top of him, kissing him so forcefully it hurts, Heaven tries to make his mind go somewhere else. *Think about the beach*, he tells himself, but he can’t. He can only think about Brick, the way he smells now, salty, and the way he grunts too much, like a pig. Plus, he is so heavy, Heaven thinks his spine might snap.

Heaven doesn't fucking like it. He doesn't like any of it. Even with the silk sheets, Brick's bed is harder than his own. Plus, when Brick stands to take off his clothes, first his silk shirt, then his jeans, then his boxers, he leaves his paisley patterned socks on. He looks ridiculous, standing there naked except for his socks. He stares at Heaven, and his eyes are hungry, the way a dog looks right before it gets into the trash. Brick's legs are too skinny. He is so hairy, Heaven wonders if he is part gorilla. Suddenly, he wants Brandon, who was lean and wiry all over.

"I won't hurt you, Heaven." Brick promises. "I could never, ever hurt you." But he does.

Heaven wakes up in the morning with Brick's leg on top of him. For such a skinny leg, it's heavy, just like Brick's name. It's damned near impossible to get out from under it, but finally, Heaven does. As he stumbles to the bathroom, his belly is on fire. And when he wipes, there is blood on the toilet paper.

"Brick!" he says. "Brick, I'm fucking bleeding!"

From the next room, Brick keeps snoring.

SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS

And so this is Christmas

For weak and for strong

For rich and the poor ones

The road is so long

*--John Winston Lennon (October 9, 1940-December 8, 1980)**

Shae laughs that tinkling bell laugh. “‘Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the hotel, not a creature was stirring, not even a roach shell.” Sitting Indian-style on a motel bed, she clutches a bottle of red wine, screwtop. The pea green, scratchy comforter is rumpled beneath her. Aspen sits on the other bed, drinking white zinfandel, also screwtop. They are wearing reindeer-horn headbands that flash, red-green, red-green, celebrating Christmas, which is eleven minutes, fourteen seconds away. And counting. The muscles around their mouths are working to form smiles, smiles that mean happy, because they are happy, truly happy, in this moment, this one pretty fraction of their lives that will someday be stacked up with other fractions to add up to forever. But they are sad, too. They miss people. No happiness, however far reaching, is ever perfectly set in concrete. It is always marred with some hand or footprint that mucks up the smooth, shining finish. Always.

Aspen can tell without asking that Shae misses her momma, who is probably passed out somewhere over her own bottle, counting sheep or aliens or passing semis. But Aspen knows

Shae remembers her before the bottles, when she used to smile and tap dance and sing show tunes.

And who does Aspen miss? Well, of course she misses her daddy. Her daddy is the landfill hole in her heart that will never be filled no matter how much trash she dumps in. And her momma. She misses her momma. So she picks up the hotel phone and dials. “Um, I’d like to make a collect call.”

“What’s your name?” The operator’s voice is tinny.

“Aspen.”

The phone rings, and then Aspen hears her Momma’s voice. “Hello.” Just the sound of it makes her want to cry.

“I have a collect call from Aspen.”

“I’ll accept the charges! Aspen, baby, is that you?”

“Ok. Go ahead,” the operator says.

Aspen almost hangs up, but it’s too late now. “Yeah, Momma, it’s me. Merry Christmas.”

“Aspen? Oh, baby! It’s so good to hear your voice! Where are you?”

“Denver, Momma. I’m in Denver. It’s a white Christmas here.”

“I filled your stocking, in case you decided to come home.” Silence. “I miss you, Aspen.”

“I miss you too, Momma.”

“Are you living in Denver now?”

“No. We’re just here for a few days. I’m still traveling with Shae. We’re seeing the country. You should see the Garden of the Gods. It’s so pretty, it’ll make you cry.”

“Why don’t you two girls come home for the New Year?”

“We can’t. We don’t have the money.”

“I’ll pay for it. I’ll buy you plane tickets.”

“Momma, it’s not a good time.”

“Why? It’s because of that boy, isn’t it?”

“I have to go. I love you.”

“Aspen, he’s gone.”

Aspen waits, breathing hard. “He’s in jail?” she finally whispers.

“No, baby. He skipped town.”

A sound crackles over the line, something like an eggshell cracking.

“I love you, Momma. Bye.”

The phone cradling the receiver makes Aspen think of mangers, blessed babes being rocked in cartons of scratchy hay. Aspen’s eyes start to burn again, but before she can get too morose, Shae conjures another rhyme. “Twas the night before Christmas, and all over the bed, were splotches of spilled wine, both white zin and red.”

“You’re good.” Aspen wipes her noses with the back of her hand and takes another swig of wine.

Shae beams. “I will be a poet someday. You watch. A poet of epic proportions. Ezra Pound. Sylvia Plath. Shae Young.” She wobbles to her feet on the bed and clutches her bottle to her chest, as if it is an award. “Thank you so much for this Pulitzer. I’d like to thank the Academy, my mom, my best friend in the whole wide world, Aspen.” She takes a little bow, which sends her reindeer headband sailing to the floor.

As she jumps down to retrieve it, Aspen laughs. “There isn’t an Academy for Pulitzer Prizes. That’s the Oscars.”

“Whatever. I’ll win. And I’ll make writers fashionable again. I can fucking see it now, me on the front of *Vogue* wearing a very expensive sweater. Cashmere or some shit like that.” She assumes what she must consider to be a sultry yet intellectual pose. “I’ll be holding my book and a bottle of fine wine, Vintage, 1742.”

“I believe you.” Aspen peels back the label from her bottle.

“Speaking of poetry,” Shae says, “I bought you something.”

“Really?” Aspen’s gloom dissipates. “What?”

Shae thrusts a lumpy package wrapped in concert posters at her. “Open it and find out.”

Carefully, Aspen opens the package, loathe to tear Darren Silverado’s face, which stares soulfully out from the posters. She will add these to her collection. When she is done unwrapping, a book called *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* rests in her hand. She stares at it. “Cool.” She doesn’t know what else to say.

“I thought you might like that, since you’re so into your books. It’s Mina Loy.”

“I never heard of her,” Aspen says. It sounds rude, so she adds, “I mean, I bet she was cool. Right?”

Shae nods enthusiastically. “Oh, yeah. She was this mind blowing woman. She was drop-dead fucking gorgeous. Look at her picture.” Shae jabs a finger in the direction of the book’s cover, which features Mina, forever beautiful in black and white, wearing fishing-lure-like earrings when that sort of thing just wasn’t done.

“She *is* really pretty,” Aspen says.

“Not only that,” says Shae. “She was brilliant. But she ended up with fucking losers. Always. Fucking losers. We’ve got that in common, me and Mina.”

“You’ll meet the right one someday,” Aspen encourages.

Shae grunts. “Whatever. She did meet the love of her life, but he disappeared at sea. She went all over the world looking for him.”

“I’d look all over for Darren if he was lost at sea.”

“How’s Darren gonna get lost at sea?” Shae’s voice is suddenly harsh.

“He could go on a cruise or something.”

“Darren’s not gonna get lost at sea. If anything, he’ll die in a plane crash. That’s the way rock stars die. Maybe a drug overdose. But he’s not gonna drown.”

Aspen winces.

Shae doesn’t notice. Instead, she rushes on excitedly, grabbing the book from Aspen’s hand and ruffling through its pages. “I swear, this book can tell the future. One day, I asked Mina if I should go out with this Australian insole salesman, and when I opened the book, I saw this phrase that said, ‘Antipodean lightning.’ When I looked it up, you’ll never guess what ‘antipodean’ meant.”

“What?” Aspen leans forward, intrigued, as always, by new ways to converse with God.

“Australian! I took that as a yes! On Mina’s advice, I spent one of the best nights of my life with Digby Renolds. Wow!” Shae throws herself back on the bed and kicks her feet, reveling in retrospective ecstasy.

Grinning, Aspen opens the book. A silver hawk pendant on a chain falls in her lap.

“Oh.” Shae is suddenly serious. “That’s part of the present too. I thought you’d like it, what with your dad--” She stops.

“I love it.” Aspen smiles. “Thank you, Shae.” As Shae comes over and clasps the chain around her neck, Aspen starts to cry.

“Hey, no crying on Christmas.” Shae kisses Aspen’s cheek and wipes her face with a manicured fingertip. “Now, where’s my present? What? You think I didn’t see you sneaking around the mall the other day, looking over your shoulder every two seconds like the KGB was stalking you?”

Laughing a little, Aspen wipes her eyes and reaches for her purse. “I did do that, but I couldn’t find what I wanted to get you at the mall. I had to go to a special store.” She reaches under the bed and pulls out a brown paper bag. “With special bags, obviously.” Aspen thrusts the bag into Shae’s hands. “Sorry I didn’t get the chance to wrap it.” Tapping her fingers against the bedside table, Aspen waits. She is nervous. Gift-giving is difficult for her. She cannot stand the thought that the beneficiary of her kindness might not like the gift. She would just as soon not be present while Shae opens the bag, so that way, if Shae doesn’t like it, she can have a minute or two to collect herself, and when the time comes, fake happiness, saving them both embarrassment.

“Here goes,” Shae says, reaching into the bag with her eyes closed. “Holy shit,” she says when she pulls the gift out and opens her eyes. “Oh, holy shit. Holy shit. Baby Alive! You got me Baby Alive!”

“That freaking doll is hard to find,” Aspen laughs. “I searched all over kingdom come.” She is relieved that Shae is genuinely happy. Aspen is adept at reading people. She knows that there is always that flicker of honest emotion before the lie comes out of the mouth. Shae is not lying.

“Holy shit.” Shae throws her arms around Aspen’s neck and squeezes until it hurts. “I love you, girl. You are the great love of my life, you know that?”

“You’re mine,” Aspen says. “Well, you and Darren. Shae, you should have seen the way he looked at me.” She thinks about Darren, sees that scar on his stomach. “And he’s so, I don’t know, normal. He’s just really, really nice.”

“I know. You told me.”

“You know who he reminds me of?”

Shae pulls her arms away and makes a show out of reading the back of Baby Alive’s box.

Aspen presses on, needing Shae to understand. “My dad. Something about him. Maybe how strong he is. How kind he is. I mean, I thought he was hot before, but it’s different now. More than that.”

Shae shoves the box in Aspen’s face. “Look. She poops. She poops, Aspen! She poops fucking florescent colors!”

“Merry Christmas, Shae,” Aspen says, sensing that this is not the time or place to speak of Darren again, sensing that maybe there will never be a time or place to speak of Darren. Maybe he will have to be her secret, the treasure she carries with her in her belly to her grave. This saddens her further, this sense of secrecy. Secrets are always sad. People want to shout the truth from the rooftops. But they can’t. Not usually. And that is agony. It is like being the only person in the whole world who has ever tasted chocolate.

“Merry Christmas, Aspen.” Shae thrusts her bottle forward to toast. “Hey, you wanna hear a poem I wrote?”

“That would be great.” Aspen smiles, trying to forget about Darren for now. “I love your writing.”

Shae reaches into her pocket and pulls out a clump of wadded up napkins. “It’s a pretty dark poem. I was in a shitty mood.” She smooths her shirt and clears her throat. “I call this ‘Road Trip.’ It’s about you a little, but not really. Anyway, I hope you like it.” She clears her throat again.

“White line eels slither past, writhing in sea of boiling black.

Crows mourn, and with them, I cry, though my eyes are dry as raisins.

Mustn’t wash away the face I keep stored in a rhinestone lipstick case

boasting a heart of plastic diamonds and a tiny splintered mirror

that reminds me what you see when you see me. A starlet. Scarlett Ohara

with no accent and a tendency to scatological humor. My screams slip out

as laughs that crack this thin veneer of sanity, and, yes, I think I’m going

crazy, and, no, I don’t think you’ll help me so I don’t ask.

Purple desperation pulses through the snakes of my fingers

strangling the steering wheel, which could hardly breathe before I

found it, leather bound tight around it, like my skin around me.

But you don’t see it. You’re blind. Or at least you don’t mind

the me’s that are crucified on the telephone poles we pass

dripping motor oil instead of blood into Kentucky bluegrass.

What was I looking for, you want to know, and if I told you

you'd snicker, so I go into a rant on the evils of Nietzsche

though I only remember he said, "God is dead," and the context is lost to me,
but bullshitting is my specialty, and you call me brilliant, and I take a drag,
and we talk about abortion and bombings and gulags and Tampax
and Anthrax. (You liked big haired rock bands. I only liked their hair.)

And you sleep. And I say, I was looking for love, how cliché,
in stranger's eyes, in roadside signs, in feathery contrails, in every bed
of rusty nails I made for myself, I was looking for love in all the wrong places
because there are no right places. We drive past your daddy's grave, and his

gray ghost beckons to me. 'Did you bring wildflowers today, a dandelion crown?' But I
pass, petal to the metal, I won't slow down 'til I run out
of gas. Love isn't lurking under those rocks. Nothing is left of him
except maybe those stretched out socks you buried him in, and I'm

looking for love, but I know it's not there.

It's not anywhere. So I keep driving
and crows keep crying
while you snore."

Aspen's eyes are wide and wet. "That's good," is all she can say, because she doesn't want to squelch Shae's dreams, but god, how could she write those things? "Which parts were about me?" she whispers.

Just in time, the phone rings. "It's Darren!" Aspen trips across the room and falls flat in a pile of unwashed laundry. "Oh my god, oh my god, it's Darren." The poem is instantly forgotten. She stumbles to her feet and stares at the ringing phone.

"Why the fuck would it be Darren?"

"I told him we were staying here."

"You talked to him again?"

"Well, no, but I told one of the roadies to tell him. You know, just in case he was staying in town for Christmas."

The phone stops ringing. "Shit!" Aspen says. "Shit, shit, shit!"

Shae doesn't seem to care. "He's not in town for Christmas, Aspen. He's with his fucking wife. And his new baby. And besides, I doubt the roadie even told him. Which roadie did you tell?"

Aspen's stares at the silent phone.

"Aspen, which roadie did you tell?"

"That one with glasses." Aspen doesn't bother to disguise the irritation in her voice.

"The greasy ponytail guy?"

"Yeah."

"He's always stoned. He definitely didn't tell him."

The phone starts ringing again, and Aspen shrieks and fluffs her hair.

Shae rolls her eyes. "Stop primping. He can't see you through the fucking phone."

“What should I do?”

Shae shrugs. “Answer it.”

“Okay. Okay.” Aspen fidgets with her hair one more time. “Hello.” Her voice changes. Even in her own ears, it sounds fake as a Christmas tree made of tinsel. “Oh. I’ll check.” Her voice is flat now. She puts her hand over the receiver. “Did you order a pizza?”

Shae shrugs. “Nah, but we’ll take it. What kind is it?”

“What kind is it?” Aspen asks. She looks at Shae. “Deluxe,” she whispers. Shae nods. Aspen goes back to the phone. “Yes, we did order a pizza, as a matter of fact. . . .Alright, we’ll be here . . .Thanks.” She hangs up. Deflated, she slumps on the bed. “I thought it was Darren.”

Shae watches Aspen for a minute, and her face softens. “Oh, fuckin-a,” she mutters, standing. She moves to Aspen and sits beside her. “No worries, kiddo. You’ll get your shot at him.”

Aspen looks at her. “You really think so?”

“I fucking know so.” Shae pats Aspen’s knee. “You can have any man you want. Even Darren Fucking Silverado.”

Aspen stares at the wall, her eyes glossy. “Maybe you’re right, that thing you always say about me being a mortal and him being a god. I mean, you are right. I’m acting like an idiot.”

“I’m not right. I’m just being a bitch when I say that.”

“You’re not a bitch.”

“Oh, yeah I am.” Shae smiles. “Hey, I know what we should do.”

“What?”

Shae grabs the Mina Loy book. “Let’s ask Mina.”

Aspen’s mood plumps up. “How do we do it?”

“We just ask.” Shae shrugs. “Like this: Mina, does Darren love Aspen? And then, we open the book.” Shae does. Then, she closes it again. “Wait. You should ask, since you’re the one who needs to know.”

Tentatively, Aspen takes the book. She squeezes her eyes shut and slowly opens the book. She looks down. “Decorously garbed, he’s lovin’ up the pavement.” She reads carefully. “Interminable paramour of horizontal stature.” She glances up, confused. “I don’t get it.”

Shae beams. “You don’t fucking get it? ‘Interminable paramour?’ ‘Interminable’ is everlasting. ‘Paramour’ is lover. You were right, Aspen! Darren is your everlasting lover!”

Squealing, Aspen falls back on the bed. “Oh, my god, Shae. You try!”

“K!” Shae takes the book and closes her eyes. “Mina, what’s next year gonna bring me?” She opens it. “‘The spirit is impaled on the phallus,’” she reads. She wrinkles her forehead. “What’s that even mean?”

“It means you’re gonna get laid!” Aspen laughs. She kisses Shae’s cheek. “Love is in the air!”

Shae grins. “Fuck, yeah!” She puts her hand up, and Aspen high fives it. Then, Shae picks up a bottle. “Here’s to love!” She drinks deeply.

“To love!” Aspen echoes.

*

So let’s think about love. Macy and Sonny sure are. Well, at least half of them are. Sonny is actually thinking about sex, but since he doesn’t know the difference between sex and love, we’ll let him off the hook and say he is thinking about love, too. They are sleeping by the road tonight, in a tent Sonny managed to shop lift from a drugstore. This tent is the shit. It sleeps two, with little or no leakage, and in the morning, it folds up into a bag roughly the size of a

toaster. If you think about how hard it would be to shoplift a tent the size of toaster, you may develop a new respect for Sonny and his skills. Together in their toaster tent, they lie on their backs, staring up through the blackness. “Merry Christmas, Macy Blue,” Sonny says, planting a kiss on Macy’s cheek.

Macy smiles into the darkness. “Merry Christmas, Son-dried Tomato.”

Sonny sings “We Wish You A Merry Christmas” in his best Elvis voice, and Macy claps at the end. When she finishes, the crickets take up her cheering.

“I love crickets,” Sonny says. “Remember that book from when you were a kid? *A Cricket in Times Square*?”

“No,” Macy says.

“It was my favorite,” he says. “What was yours?”

“I don’t know. I never read much. I liked cartoons though. ‘My Little Pony’ was a good one. And ‘Smurfs.’ They were pretty funny. I wanted to be the girl Smurf.”

“Smurfette?”

“Yeah, that was her name. I wanted to be her. She was so pretty, with a flower in her hair and all that.”

“No wonder I call you Macy *Blue*. You’re a Smurf at heart.”

“Maybe my heart is blue. Maybe it has flowers in its hair. Maybe inside, I’m as pretty as Smurfette.”

“Come on, now. I think you’re way prettier than a blue midget.”

“Aw, thanks, Sonny.” Macy stares hard into the canvass of blackness. Outside, the crickets chirp on, reep, reep, reep, and cars whoosh by, composing an endless airy anthem to the relentless business of life. “Sonny?”

“Yeah, Macy Blue?” Sonny runs his palm along the curve of her hip.

“How do you feel about me?” Macy’s voice trembles in the dark.

“I don’t know.” He pulls her close. She notices he smells clean, like hotel soap and deodorant. Macy buries her face in his fuzzy chest, her heart racing. “I dig you,” Sonny finally declares.

A dark stone of disappointment rises in Macy’s throat, until she thinks back to third grade, to synonyms, which she thought were called cinnamons (Language class always made her hungry), how sometimes two words mean exactly the same thing. “Love” and “dig.” It’s pretty much an even trade off. She sighs and snuggles closer.

“Wanna do it?” Sonny asks. He’s a hopeless romantic, our Sonny.

“Not tonight.” Macy is still sore from last time. As far as she can tell, doing it is overrated. She will have to do it two more times, she has calculated, since she wants two kids, a boy named Beck and a girl named Becky, but other than that, she is not really interested in doing it, as Sonny so seductively phrases it.

Sonny thrashes about, tossing an arm over his eyes to shut out the nonexistent light.

“Macy Blue?”

“Yeah, Son-dried Tomato?”

“Would you get my guitar from the trunk?”

Macy groans. “Sonny. I’m in my PJ’s, and I don’t know where my shoes are.”

“Please?” He runs his lips along the soft skin behind her ear, just the way she likes it.

It tickles, and she giggles. Still, she is not quite convinced. “Why don’t you get it?”

”Because I’m settled in.” Sonny kisses her ear again, then whispers, “I’ll play ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ for you.”

“Will you sing like Elvis, with that warble in your voice?”

“Sure.”

“Fine.” She is not happy about it, but she goes to get the guitar. When she returns, toting a can of chips in addition to the guitar, Sonny is propped against some pillows holding a flashlight under his chin, looming large and shadowy in the eerie glow. Macy screams. “Sonny Rickman, you put that flashlight away! You scared the beejezus out of me.”

Laughing uproariously, Sonny slaps his knee. “Oh, god, you shoulda seen your face.”

“Very funny, Sonny Rickman,” Macy snorts. But she smiles to let him know maybe she does think he is funny, just a little bit. “Now put that flashlight away before you give me a heart attack. Weak hearts run in my family. My Great Uncle Slap Jack died when his heart gave out. He was just sitting on the toilet, and his heart blew up. He died right there.”

“Slap Jack? You had an uncle named after a pancake?”

“I don’t know what he was named after. That’s just what we called him.”

“Did you have aunts named Biscuits and Gravy?”

Macy screws up her face, thinking. “No, but I had a cousin named Wheezer.”

“That’s not a breakfast food.”

“And a dog named Wile E. Coyote.”

“That’s not a breakfast food either.”

“Well, I didn’t have any cats named Sausage Link or nothin’. Sorry to disappoint you.”

“You don’t disappoint me, Macy Blue.” Cricket-spattered silence fills the tent until Sonny stands and slaps Macy’s backside. “I gotta show you something. Give me that guitar.” She does. Sonny kneels and shines the flashlight inside of it. “See that?” His voice is tinged with awe, as if he is giving her a very first look at the Hope Diamond.

Macy keels beside him, peering inside. “I don’t see nothin’.”

“You don’t see those initials carved in there?” He moves the light.

“Oh, yeah. I see them. What’s that they say? D? W? Whose D.W.?”

“Guess.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anyone named D.W. Well, David Warrensby, this kid who sat behind me in Spanish class in ninth grade. We said it Daw-veed, so we sounded Mexican, when we were in class. My Spanish name was Mardi Gras. We got to pick our own.”

“Macy, it doesn’t stand for David Warrensneiken, or whatever the hell his name was. It stands for Darren Silverado.”

For a minute, Macy is quiet. Finally, she says, “Sonny, I ain’t no spelling bee champ, but wouldn’t those initials be D.S., not D.W.?”

“His name used to be Wilkensen. What the hell? You thought some kid was really born with the name Silverado? Use your brain for once.”

“Oh.” If Sonny wasn’t so busy staring at the initials, he might notice the mist settling over the penny-colored part of Macy’s eyes. But he doesn’t notice. She is glad he doesn’t. “Why’s Darren’s initials in your guitar?” she says, trying to sound cheerful.

“I’m gonna tell you something, Macy. Something I couldn’t tell you right up front because I wasn’t sure that I could trust you. Remember how I told you they sold Darren’s first thrift store guitar at auction?”

“Yeah. The guitar you bought with him?”

“This is that guitar, baby doll. Macy Blue, meet Dog.”

“Oh my gosh!” She falls on her knees and pushes her hand into the guitar, feeling the peaks and valleys of the carved initials rubbing against her fingertips.

“Dog is worth more money than most people make in a year, Macy Blue. I sold everything I had to get him.” Sonny rubs the cracking wood with affection. “My R.V. My royalty rights to *Rippin’ it at Ripleys*. Everything.”

“Holy crow, Sonny? Why?”

Sonny is quiet. He stares into the black hole at the guitar’s center, remembering the way Darren’s hand shook when he carved the initials into the wood. “You ever go to church?” he asks finally.

“Sure. We went every Sunday when Momma was here.”

“You remember how they sing about washing away sins and being whole again and all that? Well, I want that, Macy Blue. The day my whole world fell apart was the day I stole this guitar from Darren. Dog meant everything to him. It was like his heart, like the piece of him that was true and good and real, even in the middle of all that crazy fame. And I stole it for a fix. I betrayed my brother for a high. Do you know what that feels like, to be that big of a piece of shit? So I figured, maybe if I bought Dog back for him, sold everything to do the right thing, my world would fall together again.”

Macy Blue cradles Sonny’s balding head against her floor-flat chest.

*

Brick walks closely behind Heaven, his cool hands pressed over Heaven’s eyes.

“Are we there yet?” Heaven smiles. He can see light between Brick’s fingers, but nothing else. Still, he is familiar enough with Brick’s house to know where he is. They are headed for the garage. Heaven has been there a few times in the middle of the night, to scope out possible moneymakers. Brick has a butt load of tools, and his car is probably worth a hundred-thousand bucks. Heaven thinks, from time to time, about filling the car up with tools and

running, but he doesn't. Why would he run when he has everything he ever needed right here? Sex with Brick isn't as bad as it was the first time, and even if it was, it's a small price to pay for a home. Heaven is learning to make his head go somewhere else when Brick touches him. He runs off into the movies, seeing Marlon Brando and James Dean and Marilyn Monroe act out America's fantasies.

Brick laughs. "Keep walking." Heaven trips on the edge of a rug. "Careful, now," Brick says playfully. "We don't need any Christmas excursions to the ER." Finally, Heaven hears Brick open a door. Cool air rushes over his skin. "Alright," says Brick. "You can look now." He removes his hands.

They are, as Heaven guessed, standing in the doorway to the garage. What he did not guess was what he would see in the garage. His belly flip-flops. "No way, Brick!" Heaven gasps, staring at the red motorcycle in front of him. A matching red helmet hangs from the handlebars, and a giant red bow is tied on the seat. "No fucking way!" He runs to the bike, stroking its slick, shiny paint. "Holy shit! You got this for me?"

Brick laughs. "Merry Christmas, Heaven!"

"Oh, fuck!" Heaven is yelling now. "I can't believe it!" He does a little dance. "No one ever got me anything this awesome, Brick. Ever." Impulsively, he runs to Brick and throws his arms around his neck. "Thank you."

Brick wraps his arms around Heaven's waist and squeezes. "You're welcome."

"Can I take it for a spin?" Heaven beams.

Laughing, Brick releases him. "In a minute, dude. Let's go have some turkey first. Maria has the table ready."

Heaven grins. “Awesome!” He doesn’t want to wait to ride the motorcycle, but the dinner part is exciting, too. The whole house smells delicious, like roasting meat. “We never had turkey for Christmas, even before mom left,” he says as he follows Brick to the kitchen. He feels like laughing right out loud. This is the best Christmas ever. As they pass the tree, which is almost as tall as a telephone pole, Heaven grabs a candy cane from a branch.

“Never?” Brick says, looking over his shoulder. His eyes look sorry.

Heaven shrugs, tearing opening the candy cane. “No.”

“What did you have?”

Thinking, Heaven sucks on the candy. “Well,” he finally says, “once my mom bought one of those rotisserie chickens. That’s as close as we ever came to a turkey.”

Brick’s smile is sad as they step into the kitchen. “Well, I think you will find Maria’s Christmas turkey to be in a category all its own.”

Heaven gasps. No matter how many times he eats with Brick, he just can’t get over how fancy everything looks. And today, things are grander than ever. The whole table is done up with garlands and poinsettias. Gold candles are everywhere. The plates are surrounded with more forks and spoons and knives than could ever be necessary. The turkey is as big as a beach ball, even though Heaven and Brick are the only people eating it. Last night, Brick had a big party with all his Hollywood friends, but today is just for him and Heaven, he says. Which makes Heaven happy. Heaven hates Brick’s friends. They are all too pretty—the fake kind of pretty. Not one of the bimbos that has walked through Brick’s door has had a real pair of tits. And the men? A bunch of faggots is what they are. When they come over, Heaven leaves, which seems to be fine with Brick.

Now, though, it is just them. There are rolls and stuffing and salad and mashed potatoes and some jiggly stuff that looks like cranberry sauce, except it's not shaped like a can. As always, presiding over the dinner is a giant painting of a naked man on the chaise lounge. "Holy fuck!!" Heaven says.

Laughing, Brick pulls out Heaven's chair for him. "Holy fuck indeed." When Heaven is seated, Brick places Heaven's napkin, which is green with gold stitching, in his laps for him and adjusts it. Then Brick seats himself across from Heaven and places his own napkin in his lap. Lifting his glass, he says, "To our very first Christmas together."

Smiling, Heaven raises his glass and drinks. The wine is bitter, but he is getting used to the taste. "Good wine," he says, knowing this will please Brick.

"Ah, yes," says Brick. He swishes the wine in his glass, sniffs it, and then takes a sip. "A little fruity, yes?" Heaven nods, hoping he looks like he understands what the hell Brick is talking about. Brick smiles. "So Heaven likes fruity wines. I will make a note of it."

Grinning, Heaven takes a bite of turkey. He closes his eyes. "Mmmm," he moans. Brick was right. Maria's turkey is the best thing he has ever tasted.

Brick grins. "I'm glad you like it." He takes a bite and chews thoughtfully, staring into the flame of one of the candles.

"Brick," Heaven says.

Brick keeps watching the flame. "Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

Heaven takes a deep breath. "I've just been wondering, how did you get so rich?"

Brick laughs. “This is one of the things I love about you, Heaven. You never mince words.” He takes a gulp of wine and then looks at Heaven intently, like what he is about to say is very important. “There are no secrets between us. You know that.” Heaven nods, waiting. Brick takes another drink. Finally, he says, “Well, Heaven, I am in the film industry.”

Heaven’s heartbeat speeds up. “You make movies?”

“Yes, Heaven. I make movies.”

“Like *Rebel Without a Cause* and shit?”

“Well, something like that. Art films.”

Heaven glances at the painting hanging over the table. The piercing eyes of the naked man stare soulfully back at him. “Like that?” he asks.

Brick looks at the painting, smiling. “Exactly like that.”

Studying the painting, Heaven takes a bite of mashed potatoes. They are buttery and rich--nothing like those instant mashed potatoes his mom used to make. He opens his mouth to speak, then remembers that Brick doesn’t like him to speak with his mouth full. He swallows. “Brick?” he says.

“Yes, Heaven?”

“Do you think--well, do you think I could make it in the movies? I mean, do you think I could become an actor?”

Brick sets his glass on the table, looking surprised. He dabs at his mouth with the corner of his napkin. “I thought you wanted to be a musician. You’re always practicing with that guitar. Which, for the record, makes me very proud.”

“Well, I do want to be a musician. But I want to be an actor, too. I’ve loved movies ever since—well, ever since forever.”

Brick studies Heaven. “Heaven,” he says finally. “I think I could help you with both of these aspirations.” Heaven’s eyes widen. “I know people in both businesses, actually. If you keep working, I might be able to help you make a demo CD. I could pass it on to some friends, you know. With connections.” Gripping the stem of his wine glass, Heaven’s hand starts to shake. Brick clears his throat and continues. “And the movies. Well, I direct my own films. I could cast you in one myself.”

Heaven gasps, imagining his face on the big screen. His pulse pounds. “You know what you should do,” he says excitedly, forgetting, this time, to swallow his food before he speaks. “You should do a remake of *Rebel Without a Cause*.” Bits of mashed potato flurry from his mouth like melting snowflakes.

Brick smiles indulgently. “And you would play Jim?”

Embarrassed suddenly, Heaven nods. “I mean, if you think I could pull it off.”

“Of course I do, Heaven.” Brick reaches across the table and grabs Heaven’s hand. “I believe in you. I knew you were something special the moment I saw you. And think about it. A black Jim. That would be quite a statement. You are infinitely clever, Heaven.”

Heaven feels himself blushing. He wasn’t trying to make a statement. He just wanted to be in a movie. “Thanks,” he mutters, staring at his plate.

“Now, Heaven,” Brick continues, squeezing Heaven’s hand warmly. “You should know, however, that I make *art* films.” He looks at the painting meaningfully.

“Uh-huh,” Heaven says, not quite sure what Brick is getting at.

“Which means that, on occasion--” Brick spears a bit of turkey and chews it carefully. He washes it down with a swallow of wine. “—nudity is involved.”

Heaven blushes again. He looks at the painting, feeling stupid for not knowing what Brick meant. “Well, that’s what art means, right?”

Brick nods. “Yes, Heaven. That is often what art means.” He smiles in a way that seems a little sneaky.

“Well,” Heaven says. “I don’t mind being naked, if it’s for art.”

PIECES

*Each time I tell myself I can't stand the pain,
But when you hold me in your arms, I sing it once again.
Take it, take another little piece of my heart now, baby.
You know you've got it if it makes you feel good.*

*--Janis Lyn Joplin (January 19, 1943-October 4, 1970)**

A misty rain settles softly over Aspen and Shae. They stand outside Darren's bus, damp and shivering, staring at the painted eagle soaring on the side, wings spread wide. The eagle feels like a sign to Aspen, looking so much like a hawk if she squints her eyes right. She thinks it means her daddy has brought her to this place, to this man. And maybe he has, her daddy. Whatever the case, she hasn't been able to think about anything else since the night she talked to him. At every show, he looks at her with those burning eyes. But he hasn't asked her backstage again. So she has decided to go to him. It was Shae's idea. Shae said, "If you love him so goddamn much, stop acting like a fucking schoolgirl and do something about it." So here they are.

The show ended hours ago, but fans mobbed the bus, begging Darren and his band-mates for autographs. Aspen and Shae waited on the sidelines, whispering, watching until the last of Darren's worshippers wandered away. Now, Aspen studies the eagle, which glows dully in the light of the parking lot lamps. She tries to suck courage from its glinting, gold eyes. *You can do this*, she tells herself. She has never done anything like this before, ever. Usually, the boys

chase her. Silently, she thanks God for the rain. Rain is good for her. Her skin gets softer when it rains. Her curls plump up. And now, more than ever, she needs to be gorgeous.

“Well, fuck,” Shae says, kicking the gravel with her glittered toes. “Are you gonna do it or not?”

“I don’t know.” Aspen bites her lip. “I don’t think I can.” She wishes she had smoked some pot before she came here. Then, she wouldn’t be so afraid.

“Oh, shit on a stick.” Shae rolls her eyes. “Of course you can.”

Aspen stares at the blacked-out bus windows. He is right there, just behind that glass. “What if he doesn’t want to see me?”

“Look, he fucking wants to see you, ok?” Shae’s voice is diamond hard. “He made you promise to come see him again. He made you *pinky swear*.” Aspen’s eyes burn, and she blinks. Shae pushes. “Well, didn’t he?” Aspen nods. Glancing at Aspen, Shae groans. “Oh, fuck, Aspen.” Her face softens, and she pokes at the edges of Aspen’s mouth. “Come on. Smile. You’re prettiest when you smile.” Aspen shakes her head. Reaching up to brush a stray curl away from Aspen’s face, Shae laughs softly. “Yes, you are. And you know it. He’s a man, kiddo. All men love you. It’s just the way it is.”

Aspen doesn’t smile. “I wish.”

“Listen, I’m only going to say this once.” Shae looks at the ground. “You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen. I mean, you’re a fucking goddess. Do you know how it feels to be a regular woman standing next to you? It feels like shit. Everywhere you go, men fall over themselves trying to get your attention.” Aspen doesn’t know what to say. Shae touches Aspen’s face. “Anyway, I’ve seen the way Darren looks at you. He wants you.” Aspen grabs Shae’s hand, and Shae squeezes her fingers. “You told me after he talked to you, you felt like

maybe you came to this planet to find him. Fine, then. I believe you. Go get what you came for.”

Aspen looks at the eagle again. *Daddy, make me brave*, she thinks. She is almost sure that Darren will let her in. Almost. Outside the bus doors, Jackson stands, glaring at nothing, his arms crossed. She wonders if he will remember her. She holds out her hand to Shae. “Give me your flask,” she says.

Shae digs in her purse. “You don’t wanna be too drunk.”

“Just give me the damn flask.”

Shae presses it into her palm. Aspen drinks greedily and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. As she reapplies her lipstick, the whiskey burns her throat and belly. “Wish me luck.” Setting her jaw, she gives Shae the flask and starts to walk. When she stops and looks back, Shae is wearing that broken look that comes right before she cries. But she smiles instead. “Go on, chicken shit,” she encourages. There is a goodbye in her eyes.

Hesitantly, Aspen turns away. *Go on, chicken shit!* she thinks. As she approaches Jackson, she thinks about that Bible story her daddy used to read her, the one about Queen Esther, how she entered King Xerxes’s royal court without an invitation, knowing full well that if he decided he didn’t want a visit from her, he would kill her. She understands just how Queen Esther felt. Doing her best to disguise her terror, she juts out her chest and sways her hips. “Hey there, Jackson!” Her voice comes out quieter than she intended. Still, he grins. When she reaches him, she touches his arm. “Remember me?”

Jackson laughs. “Of course I remember you. I’m guessing you’re something not too many men forget.”

“Thanks.” Aspen laughs awkwardly, feeling herself blush.

He glances at the temporary tattoos she has applied to her chest, a flurry of rainbow colored butterflies. “Those real?”

She laughs. “No, they’re fake. Shae and I were just playing around.” Actually, she figured it couldn’t hurt to emphasize her breasts tonight. Her boobs have always opened doors for her, and tonight, she needs one particular door to open. She presses on. “Look, I don’t know if this is alright. . .” Suddenly terrified, she glances behind her. Shae is gone. She turns back. Her stomach has twisted itself into a hard knot. Jackson waits, his eyes open wide, expectant. “Um.” Aspen hopes she won’t puke. “Do you think I could go say hi to Darren?”

Smiling, Jackson winks. “I don’t think that would be a problem. Let me make sure.” As he pushes the bus door open and disappears inside, Aspen’s heart pounds. What if Darren says no? What if he tells her to go the fuck away? She thinks about fleeing. But she doesn’t. She waits. The rain is heavier now, and she hopes her mascara doesn’t run. It’s waterproof, but you never know. Jackson comes back. Stepping aside, he says, “Go on in.” He holds out one hand and bows, as if he is a butler granting her entrance to a king’s palace. And maybe he is.

“Thanks,” Aspen says. She trips forward, feeling suddenly as if she is in a dream. Just like that night backstage. The steps are steep and slick. Her wet shoe slips, and she almost falls. She catches herself on the railing. Looking back at Jackson, she mutters, “Sorry.” As she stumbles up the next two steps, she inwardly chastises herself for apologizing. *Idiot*, she thinks. *Like he gives a shit if you tripped.* And then she steps into the bus. It looks like a fancy version of the R.V. her daddy rented for a vacation when she was little. Plush, bench-like couches run along both sides of the narrow room. A giant TV mounted in the corner is playing a documentary, something about Bob Marley. And there on the couch is Darren, holding an acoustic guitar, smiling. The sight of him makes Aspen gasp.

“Aspen.” He makes her name sound like a poem.

“Darren.” She makes his name sound like a mistake. She wipes the rain drops from her face. “Uh, hi. Sorry. I’m a mess.” She dabs at her eyes, hoping her makeup is intact. “It’s raining,” she adds. *Like he doesn’t know that, dumb ass*, she thinks.

Darren smiles. “I noticed.”

“So, is this okay?” She shuffles her feet in the thick carpet. “Me coming here, I mean?”

He laughs. “Of course it is. I’d be pissed if you *didn’t* come.” He pats the couch. “I mean you did pinky swear, after all. I wouldn’t want to have to bust your kneecaps.”

Laughing nervously, she walks forward. She is still thinking of Queen Esther, of the way King Xerxes held out the royal scepter when he saw her, offering to grant any wish she might make. Aspen can only think of one thing to wish for, and it’s sitting right in front of her. She tries to think of something to say. Something clever. “Um, hi,” she says again. *Aspen*, she thinks. *You are a drooling fool*. She always knows what to do with men, but this one renders her borderline mute. Apparently, he renders her lame as well. She trips and plunges onto the couch beside him.

“Well, hello.” He laughs, and Aspen wishes she were invisible. But when his laughter softens into a smile, it’s different than the one he uses on stage. Less sure. Almost nervous. The same smile he used backstage. “Just working on some songs.”

“Oh.” She pushes her damp hair from her eyes, and when she puts her hand back down, it brushes the rough fabric of his jeans. He is so close. She reminds herself to breathe. “I hope I’m not in the way or anything.”

“No fucking way.” That awkward smile again, and he bounces his leg. “You’re a muse,” he says. “I’ll write better with you here.”

“Thanks.” Feeling herself blush, she looks down at her hands, which are twisting and untwisting in her lap.

“Wanna hear what I’ve got so far?” The question is tentative. He looks at the guitar, not at her. “I mean, I’ll play it for you, if you want.”

Is it the booze making Aspen’s head so swimmy? She leans back, feels the soft fabric of the couch brush against her skin. “Um, yeah. Sure.”

Darren smiles again, this time that smile he uses on stage. So wide, it lights up the room. “It’s kinda rough around the edges. I just wrote it today.” He strums once. The sound of the chord vibrating makes her belly tingle. “Don’t be too hard on me.” And he starts to sing. He sings things that make her feel hot all over. Not because of the words. She is too dizzy to hear the words. It is the sound of his voice, raspy and jagged, that makes her feel like she is flying. She stares at him, trying to keep her face neutral, trying not to let him know that she is so ecstatic, she might just explode all over his bus. She thinks she is probably doing an abysmal job of being neutral. Her face is on fire, the way it used to feel when she would lay for hours in the ruthless New Mexico sun, before she figured out she would never tan, only burn. She touches her cheek. *This is the best moment of my whole life*, she thinks. She tries to memorize everything about him, the way his throat moves when he sings, the way the scar on his forehead gets redder, the way his thick fingers brush the guitar strings. She cannot help but imagine those thick fingers inside her. She feels herself get hot between her legs, and she looks away. She closes her eyes, but his voice keeps going, becomes a physical presence, whispers along her skin. He stops singing, and she opens her eyes. “So, what did you think?” He smiles.

She tries to find words. “I thought,” she whispers finally, “that if god was a sound, it would be that.”

His eyes go wide. “Really?” She nods. “Thank you.” He looks down. “I don’t know if anyone has ever given me a better compliment.” When he looks up, his eyes burn at her.

She wants to look away, but she can’t. She should say something, but what would she say? Something cheesy, like those romance novels she used to read, when she was a good Christian girl trying to learn all about sex without actually doing it. She might say, “Take me know, you rogue,” and bare her heaving bosoms, and how stupid would that be, so she just sits there, staring.

“Hey.” Darren finally breaks the spell. “You want a beer?” And he sounds like he is asking her something else. Something more secret.

“Yes.” She runs her hands over her thighs. “Yes, I want a beer.”

Smiling, he sets the guitar aside and stands. As he strides to a fridge in the corner, she watches his shoulders, the way the muscles in them move almost imperceptibly. She imagines burying her face in those shoulders. He pulls the fridge open, and she pictures his wiry arms around her, the way it would feel to have Darren Silverado hold her tight. She has the sensation, for a split second, that it would feel like coming home. He turns to face her, a beer in each hand. He is wearing the nervous smile again. “Mexican beer good?” He uses the bottle opener fastened to the wall to pop the top off of each of them. “I’m a sucker for Mexican beer.”

“It’s fine,” Aspen says, wondering if he can look at her face and see the things she is thinking. She wonders if he knows she is trying to picture what it would be like to kiss the dent in his throat. “I’m actually part Mexican.”

“No way,” he says. “Really?”

“My dad was Mexican. My mom was Irish.”

“You’d never know by looking at you,” he says.

“Yeah, well, the Irish won.”

He laughs. “So, do you like to sing?” Darren sits down and puts a beer in her hand. The heat from his skin melts through her again.

“Thanks.” Aspen takes a drink. “And yeah, I do. Like to sing, I mean.”

“Good.” Darren picks up the guitar. He strums it, and she knows before he opens his mouth what the song is. She claps her hands. “I love this song!”

He laughs. “*I hear that train a comin,*” he sings.

“*It’s rollin’ round the bend,*” she sings along. Her voice is a little off-key, but suddenly, she doesn’t care. Her whole body is buzzing. She has never been so happy. She keeps singing, and she feels her voice melt into his.

When the song is over, he asks her if she has any requests. She feels like she used to feel in Sunday school when the teacher would let them pick their favorite songs. However, “Jesus Loves Me” seems inappropriate, so she says, “Joker” instead.

“You got it!” He starts to play. She doesn’t know all the words to the verses, but when he gets to the chorus, she sings too. “*I’m a picker. I’m a grinner. I’m a lover. I’m a sinner.*”

For hours, he plays, and she sings along. Every half hour, he gets up to get them both another beer. Soon, she is so drunk, she can’t think anymore. She can only do. He is playing something soft and sweet when she looks at his leg, bouncing in time to the music in his faded jeans, and she wants more than anything to put her head on his knee. So she does. She lies on the couch and rests her head on his leg, feeling his kneecap jutting into her skull. It hurts a little, but she doesn’t move. He is so close. So human. She inhales. He smells musty and sweet, like an animal, so good, she wants to swallow him whole, sins and all.

If he is surprised at her sudden display of intimacy, he doesn't show it. He keeps playing, singing in that gravelly voice, though he stops bouncing his leg. She stares up at him, hardly believing this is real. Darren Silverado is playing just for her. She recognizes the look in his eyes. Not desire. This is more than that. A jolt of something hot runs from her belly, through her whole body, like an electric current. Darren is looking at her the way her daddy used to look at her when he was tucking her in to bed. The way King Xerxes must have looked at the exquisite Queen Esther. He is looking at her like she is treasure. It is suddenly scary, the perfection of the moment. It is scary because she cannot bear the thought that it will end. When the song is over, he touches her arm. "Hey, you," he says, looking down at her, smiling. His teeth are so white.

"Hey, you," she whispers back.

He is the most magnificent thing she has ever seen. He is the Grand Canyon and the Pacific Ocean and the Taj Mahal all rolled into one. He is her faith. He is her blasphemy. She thinks about how people think love is blind. But now, she sees everything. The tiny scar on his chin. The downy hairs on his cheek. The spiderweb wrinkles around his eyes. When he licks his lips, she realizes she has to touch his face. So she does. He has not shaved today, and his five o'clock shadow is sharp. His eyes are vulnerable, scared almost. Still, he lets her touch him, saying nothing. She runs her hand up his chin, to his cheekbone. Gently, she runs her finger along the hollow under his eye. She strokes his eyebrow. His hair.

The bus door opens. Aspen looks up just as Jackson steps inside. "Dude," he says. "I've been on the phone all night. . ." Jackson stops. His eyes flash as he takes in the scene. "Oh, sorry. I didn't know you were busy."

“No worries, man.” Darren strokes Aspen’s arm. “Wanna tell me about it in the morning?”

Aspen sits up. Her bladder is achingly full. How did she not notice until now? “It’s fine. You can talk. I have to go to the bathroom anyway. Can I?”

“Oh, sure.” Darren sets the guitar down and leads her to a door at the back of the room. He opens it, and she steps into the next room. It too is narrow. Bunks line the walls, like summer camp. This is where he sleeps. It smells like a locker room. She smiles. Darren points at a door to the right and says, “It’s there.”

“Thanks,” she says. She steps into the bathroom and closes the door behind her. The bathroom is a tiny cubicle, so small she can hardly move. When she looks into the mirror, her hair is rumpled and her makeup smudged. She wishes she had her purse, but she left it on the couch. She runs her fingers through her hair. “This is not a dream,” she whispers to herself. “You are on Darren Silverado’s bus.” Reeling, maybe from the unreality of the moment, maybe from the beer, maybe from both, she lifts her skirt and sits on the toilet. While she is peeing, she thinks about the scar on his belly. She wants to kiss it. She stands and pulls up her panties.

As she opens the door and steps into the bedroom, she hears snoring, but with the door closed, it is so dark she can see almost nothing. She does not even notice him until his lips press against hers. For a second, she wonders if it is really him, and then she recognizes that musty smell. It is. She kisses him back, hard. Wrapping his arms around her, he starts to walk backward, leading her through the aisle that runs between the bunks. She trips on somebody’s shoe, but he keeps kissing her, and they keep stumbling. Toward what? She wonders if he is taking her to his bunk. Someone moans in his sleep, reminding her they are not alone. She wishes it didn’t have to be this way. Still, his mouth tastes like beer, and his breathing is ragged,

and she wants him so bad, she is on fire. Suddenly, she doesn't give a shit if god wants to take her on his bunk in a room full of sleeping men. Who is she to say no?

But he doesn't. There is another door at the back of the room, and he opens it, pulling her through. She stops kissing him and looks around. It is a storage room of some kind. Fluorescent lights burn her eyes. It looks as if the contents of the bedroom have overflowed into this room. Clothes are strewn everywhere. Books. Papers. And there--those are the boots Darren wore in Colorado. Aspen laughs. "I think you guys need a maid."

"Sorry." Darren smiles, and he kisses her again. "It's the only place we can be alone."

*

Naked in fluorescent light, Aspen and Darren kneel, facing one another. Maybe it is the booze. Maybe it is the blinding overhead lighting. But whatever the cause, he is shining. The halo of light that hovers around him swallows her. When he slides inside her, she gasps, and the heat of him floods her whole body. It is like nothing she has ever known, this sex. He kisses her throat, and she remembers all the things she learned in church, about the two becoming one flesh. It feels like that. It feels like his heart pounding against her chest is her own.

*

Later, when it is all done, he holds her hand, tracing the veins on her wrist with his fingertip. He tells her things. Silly things. He tells her about a tricycle he rode when he was three. It had silver tassels on the handlebars.

*

"Aspen." Her name, in his mouth now, is jagged. He rests his head between her breasts. Her belly is on fire.

*

He tells her about the first time he tasted licorice. He doesn't know why he remembers it, but he does. He was five. The licorice made his mouth black.

*

When he comes, his gasp sounds like a child crying. She cradles his head until his breathing slows. Burying her fingers in his sweaty hair, she feels that same thing she felt the first time she saw him. She wants to lick his broken places whole. It scares her, the power of this thing she feels. She wonders, suddenly, if she will ever see him again.

"So what now?" she whispers. She runs her fingers along the arc of his spine, memorizing it, just in case she never touches him again.

He says nothing.

*

He tells her about the way his father punished him with silence. Once, he says, his father went without speaking to him for three weeks. He says he wishes his father would have hit him.

*

She can't take nothing for an answer. He is still inside her. She never wants him to leave. She thinks when he does, she will always, always feel empty, as if part of her was amputated. She buries her face in his hair, smelling salt.

*

He tells her about those mornings he found his mother crying, crumpled in the shower. He tells her how his mother had eyes like icebergs. Empty and vast.

*

“I should have asked this sooner,” he whispers. His breath on her earlobe sends shivers over her skin. She waits, thinking he will say something important now, something that will stop her terrified heart from racing. “Are you on birth control?”

Her belly lurches. This is the kind of thing a man says when you will never see him again. She nods, trying not to cry. She is mostly on birth control, though she is not particularly good at remembering to take her pills. She kisses the top of his head, thinking about all the things she has learned about men. She is a man-expert. She knows the rules. One of the biggest rules is: Never, ever act desperate. Don’t act desperate, she tells herself.

*

He tells her about the time he licked the slide in the winter, and his tongue got stuck. He tells her how Anise poured water from her thermos over his tongue. And then, when his tongue pulled free, she kissed him.

*

Aspen acts desperate anyway. “Will I ever see you again?” she whispers. She feels her fingers clutch at his back and wills them to stop.

*

He tells her about those kids who tied him to the swing set with his own belt during recess. They pulled the leather strip through his front belt loops and fastened it around a pole. They tied his hands too, using a frayed jump rope, laughing while he cried. When the bell rang, they scattered like crows. He yanked himself free, terrified of the trouble he might get in if he didn’t return from recess. He tells her about the torn belt loops. He tells her about the pink bracelets of shredded skin left on his wrists by the rope.

He looks up. His skin is damp. His hair is tangled. His ocean eyes are wide, child-like. “You don’t understand,” he whispers. “I haven’t felt this way since—fuck, since Anise, behind the slide.”

Her heart races faster. “Me too,” she finally manages.

*

He tells her about his first date, about Karen, that girl from chemistry with the green eyes and bad skin. He tells her about how much it scared him to ask her on that date. Just as he leaned across the table to kiss Karen, her friends walked into the restaurant. When she called him a fag, he almost cried. But he didn’t. He says that he never has felt quite as alone as he did, sitting at that table, staring at the stained tablecloth, after Karen was gone.

*

Exhausted, they crumple together on a bed made from dirty laundry. As Darren sleeps, curled like a child, Aspen runs her fingers over the buttons of his spine, still not believing he is real. She reaches around him and touches the scar on his belly. “I’m sorry they hurt you,” she whispers. He whimpers in his sleep.

*

As Heaven and Brick step from the dark auditorium into the bright sunlight, Heaven winces. He almost forgot it was not night. They stroll to Brick’s Mustang, Brick’s hand resting on the small of Heaven’s back. The suit Heaven borrowed from Brick is too big, and he feels stupid wearing it. But Brick insisted. A guy about Heaven’s age passes, and Heaven can’t help but notice how strong his shoulders look under his shirt. When Heaven turns his head to watch the shoulders, his starched collar scratches his neck.

“So, what did you think of the concert?” Brick asks.

Quickly, Heaven looks away from the shoulders. “The concert?”

“The symphony we just heard?”

“Oh, the *concert*. Sorry. I always think of rock shows when I hear that word.”

Brick laughs.

“It was cool.”

“That’s all?” Brick asks. “Just cool?”

Heaven swallows. “It was fucking cool,” he says. He glances behind him, but the shoulders are gone.

Brick laughs again. “What did you think of the horn section? I thought they were on fire.”

“I thought they fuckin’ rocked.”

“They did rock, didn’t they?” Brick smiles indulgently.

Heaven hates it when Brick smiles like that. It always makes him feel like he’s said something idiotic. “I like trumpets,” Heaven adds.

“I concur.” Brick nods. “It’s always been one of my favorite musical instruments.”

Heaven nods. “Me too.” He stares at his feet scuttling over the asphalt.

“I just thought that seeing a live symphony might help you out with your music, if you want to make a career of it. Which I think you can, easily, with your talent. Speaking of talent—” Brick glances at Heaven then looks away. His hand on Heaven’s back tenses. “I think I’ve found a role for you.”

Heaven’s heart jumps. “In *Rebel Without a Cause*?”

Brick laughs. “Well, not that, just yet. You should probably get your feet wet before you try on a role of such epic proportions.”

Heaven blushes. “Yeah, sure.” In his pockets, his fists clench and unclench. He cannot believe this is really happening. He’s going to be in a movie! *Play it cool, Heaven*, he tells himself. “So, um, what is it? The role you have for me?”

“Well, in this particular film, you’ll be playing a smaller role.”

“That’s understandable,” says Heaven. “I mean, I need to get my feet wet and everything.”

Brick nods. “Right. You’ll be playing a pizza delivery boy in the film.” He looks at Heaven like he wants to make sure he hasn’t upset him.

Heaven smiles brightly to let Brick know he’s fine. “Sounds like a blast.”

They have reached the car. After opening Heaven’s door for him, Brick slides into the driver’s seat and starts the engine. Heaven closes his eyes and inhales the leathery smell of the car, trying to digest the fact that he is going to be a real actor.

As Brick is backing out, his head turned so that Heaven cannot see his face, Brick says, “You’ll have a couple of lines, but most of your role will be silent. Is that cool?”

Heaven nods, thrilled at the thought of having lines. “Yeah, Brick. It’s more than cool! It’s fucking awesome.”

Brick laughs. He is done backing out, but he keeps his head turned away a little. “Actually, I was hoping you could do a screen test for me tonight, at the studio.”

Fear washes over Heaven, the way it used to when a teacher would announce a pop quiz. “Tonight?” Heaven fiddles with his fingers. “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Brick turns on the radio. Classical music fills the car. “This alright?” he asks. Heaven nods. Brick smiles. “No worries, dude. It’s just a screen test. Between you and me.”

Heaven isn’t convinced. “Just you and me. No one else?”

Brick pats Heaven on the shoulder. “Just us.” He winks. “Give you a chance to show me what you’re made of.”

Heaven bites off a jagged thumbnail. The screechy violins in Brick’s music stab his eardrums like ice picks. He wishes he had the guts to turn it off. “Alright.”

They are on the freeway now, and the world rushes by. Lampposts. Billboards. Palm trees. The smell of hot dogs wafts from a diner. Heaven’s stomach growls. He likes Brick’s gourmet food okay, but he wishes he could eat regular food sometimes too. He is trying to decide whether or not to ask Brick if he can have a hot dog when Brick says, “We’ll have a few glasses of wine at home, to celebrate your debut.”

“Awesome,” Heaven says, forcing a smile. He’d rather have a beer, but oh well.

“I find that a glass of wine before shooting often helps my actors loosen up.” Brick’s voice sounds easy, too easy, like he is trying too hard to sound casual. Heaven’s stomach tightens. It is never a good sign when someone tries to act casual. It means they aren’t. “Also, Heaven, I have another question for you.”

Those violins are really going to town. Heaven wants to cover his ears. “Um, alright.”

“Now, no judgment here, alright? This is just between us.” Brick reaches over the console and grabs Heaven’s hand. “Heaven, have you ever tried ecstasy?”

Heaven swallows, not sure what to say. Is Brick talking about drugs? Because if he is, this is a shocker. The hardest drug Heaven has ever seen Brick use is bourbon. “You mean like being really happy or what?” Heaven shifts in his seat.

Brick chuckles. “No, like ecstasy. I believe you kids call it ‘E’.”

Heaven looks away quickly. Is this some kind of trap? Is Brick gonna kick him out of the house if he finds out he’s done drugs?

“What, you thought I was too old to know what ‘E’ was? Come on, dude. I’m hip.”

Brick switches off the classical music and plays with the knob until he finds something modern.

Kurt Cobain’s voice is raspy. “*Married! Buried!*” Kurt screams.

Heaven laughs nervously. Should he tell Brick the truth? His father would fucking kill him if he said yes. But Brick is not like his father. He glances at Brick, who is watching him, waiting. His eyes aren’t scary. If anything, they are amused. Still, Heaven isn’t willing to risk it. “Nope. Never tried it.”

Brick laughs. “Liar.”

Heaven looks at him, trying to tell which direction this conversation is going. “I’m not lying.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Fine.” Heaven opens and closes the glove box. “I tried it once. At a party.” It’s not quite the truth, but it’s not a lie either. Of course he has tried ecstasy, but more than once. Way more.

“Did you like it?” Brick squeezes Heaven’s hand. “Remember, no judgment.”

“Yeah,” Heaven finally mutters. “I liked it.”

“I ask because some of my actors use ecstasy—sorry, ‘E,’--before a shoot.” Brick’s voice is too easy again. “Would that be something you think might benefit you? I mean, obviously, it’s not a requirement. I just thought it might help you loosen up.”

Heaven grins. Is this what Brick was nervous about? Offering him drugs? Did he think Heaven was some sort of prude or something? If only he knew. “Yeah, I think it would help a lot.”

“Great,” Brick says. He lifts Heaven’s hand and kisses it. “Great. You’re gonna be stellar, Heaven. I know it.” He goes on and on then, about Heaven and superstars and Oscars. Heaven stares out the window. He is excited, but his stomach hurts again. He wonders if he is getting an ulcer.

*

The highway goes on and on, a black ribbon imbedded in sand and saguaros. Beside Sonny, Macy’s sweaty body writhes in the throes of another Elvis impression. Her knees knock against the gear shift. “*Love me tender, love me true, never let me go.*” Sonny clenches the steering wheel until his fingers turn white. This is getting old. Really old.

“What did you think of that one? Good, huh?” Macy barks.

“Yep.”

“Was my lip right?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic.”

Macy grabs the rearview mirror and turns it toward her face.

“I was using that.” Sonny pushes her hand away. “Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m driving.” Scowling, he readjusts the mirror.

“I have something in my teeth.” Macy turns it back.

“I’m driving.” Sonny readjusts.

“Fine. I’ll just sit here with a hunk of hamburger in my teeth. It’s not like it’s uncomfortable or anything.”

“You do that.”

Macy turns on the radio and fiddles with it. “Dagnabbit.” She switches it off.

“What now?”

“It’s just, have you noticed they don’t play much Elvis around here? It’s like they forgot all about The King. All they play is that rap. ‘I like big butts’ and stuff.”

“Rap is actually pretty complex,” Sonny says.

Macy snorts. “Complex? You want complex, try listening to ‘Jailhouse Rock’ backward.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Listen to ‘Jailhouse Rock’ backward sometime. That’s what I’m talking about. There are secret messages in there.”

“Secret messages?”

“Yeah, like once, it saved my life.”

“Oh, right. How?”

“I was listening to it, and I heard Elvis say, clear as a bell, ‘Look up high,’ so I did, and there was a spider up on the rafter. I think it was poison too. It had a red butt.”

“Whatever.”

Macy crosses her arms. “Sometimes I get sick of you unbelievers.” She turns the mirror back and picks at her teeth with her fingernail. “So what do you want to do tonight?”

“Dunno.”

“We could go ice skating. Yeah, Sonny! Let’s go skating. I bet we could ask them to play Elvis songs while we skate. Think of that. Elvis on ice.” She wrenches the mirror in Sonny’s direction. He has an impeccable view of his knees. Swearing, he readjusts the mirror.

“What do you think of that? Elvis on ice?”

“I think an eternity spent screaming for mercy in the fires of hell would be more scintillating.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s supposed to mean I’m not enthusiastic about the Elvis on ice experience.”

“You’re a sadsack, you know that?”

“Oh, fuck. Don’t you dare.”

“Don’t dare what?” Macy grabs the mirror and starts to sing, watching herself.

“Sadsack sittin’ on a block of stone, over in the corner weeping all alone. Said hey mister, don’t you be no square.” She starts to poke Sonny in the ribs. *“If you can’t find a partner use a wooden chair. Let’s rock! Everybody let’s ROCK!”*

“Macy, don’t take this the wrong way, but if you sing another note, I’m going to chop your body into manageable pieces and bury them under a cactus.”

Macy scoots away from Sonny and stares out the window. He glances over. Her eyes are wet.

“Oh, come on, Macy, I was kidding. I’m not really going to chop you up.”

“Why wouldn’t you? You’re already a desperate criminal. You rob thrift shops at gunpoint. Why wouldn’t you chop me to pieces and bury me under a cactus?”

Sonny reaches out and puts his hand on her chubby knee. “Come on, babydoll. You know I’d never hurt my Macy Blue.”

“Sometimes I think I should just take my truck and head home before you get me in big trouble.” Macy rolls down her window and takes a deep breath of the cool desert air that rushes in. “It’s not like you’re any fun these days anyways.”

“Sure I am, Macy Blue. Listen, you’re right. Elvis on ice sounds like fun. Let’s do it.”

Macy looks at him. “You mean it?”

“Of course I mean it. Would I lie to you? Let’s go ice skating.”

“Really, Son-dried tomato?”

“Really, Macy Blue.”

Macy scooches close to him. “They said this would happen in *Cosmo*. They said just when your man gets on your last nerve, he’ll do something special and redeem himself.”

Sonny taps his fingers against the steering wheel. “There’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?”

“We don’t have enough money to go out, do we?”

“I guess not if we wanna keep eating.” Macy slumps. “So this means we can’t go do Elvis on ice then?”

“No, Macy Blue. This means your man’s gonna have to get some spending money, that’s all. I’ll get some cash tonight. We’ll skate tomorrow.”

“You’re not gonna knock over a bank, are you?”

“That was a one time deal, Macy Blue. I told you I’d never stolen before. I’ll never steal again.”

“How are you gonna get money then?”

“Trust me, babydoll.”

*

Heaven sprawls on a stained couch, waiting for Brick to adjust the camera. He feels fucking amazing, like he could fly if he wanted to. The months of saying no to drugs have paid off. (Not that he really said no. It’s just that no one asked.) It’s been years since any drug has made him feel this good. The glaring lights of Brick’s studio glint off the white tile, and loud music blares in the background, INXS. *So slide over here, and give me a moment. Your moves are so raw. I’ve got to let you know. I’ve got to let you know, you’re one of my kind.*

“You’re one of my kind, Brick!” Heaven yells.

Brick peeks around the camera, laughing. “You’re one of my kind too, Heaven. Now, just say something for me.”

Heaven’s mind races. “What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. Something from *Rebel Without a Cause*.”

Thinking, Heaven drums his fingers against his leg. He can feel the gentle pulsing of his fingertips through the fabric of his jeans. It feels awesome. He dons his best James Dean sneer. ““They think I can make friends if we move. Just move, and everything will be roses and sunshine.”” He thinks about the familiar lines, and realizes, with a gasp, that Jim’s parents in the movie were right! Moving *was* the answer. He moved from New York to L.A., and now, everything really is fucking roses and sunshine!

“Good, but let’s get a little more feeling in it,” says Brick.

“More feeling?” Heaven’s heart races. He can do this. He can do anything.

“Yeah.”

“Ok.” Sitting up, Heaven recites the line again, trying to feel more than he did last time.

“Better,” Brick says. “Now, give it to me one more time. *Really* feel it.”

Heaven closes his eyes. He can hear his blood bounding through his veins. He really can. “I’m feeling it, Brick. I feel more than I’ve ever felt.”

Brick laughs. “Well, then, let’s try this. An acting exercise. Now, one of the key ingredients to good acting is to be naked in front of your audience. Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

Heaven nods, not understanding a word of Brick's speech. "What did you just say?" he asks after a few seconds then collapses into laughter. Brick laughs too. "Stop using such big words," Heaven finally manages.

"Well, what I am trying to say--" Brick smiles. "--is that it might help if you feel more emotionally vulnerable—sorry, big words—more *real* if you remove an item or two of clothing."

Heaven thinks this is a great idea. Everything is a great idea. The whole wide world is great. He takes off his shirt and tosses it in a corner. The air on his skin is cold. Goose bumps prickle on his arms.

"Great." Brick peeks out from behind the camera again, smiling. "Try the line now." His eyes look hungry.

"You look like that *Silence of the Lambs* dude right before he eats someone!" Heaven calls.

Brick smiles. "Thank you, I guess."

Heaven laughs.

"You gonna say that line again?" Brick fiddles with the lens.

Heaven says the line again. He does feel it more!

"Awesome!" Brick calls. "This exercise is really working for you. Now, why don't you try taking off your pants?"

"Alright," Heaven says. And he does.

*

Shae strangles the steering wheel in lieu of strangling Aspen, who is talking with her mouth full again.

“So, Josh comes backstage, and he sees me sitting there on Darren’s lap, right, and he says, ‘So, are you and Darren a thing now?’ And before I can say anything, Darren says, ‘We’re more than that,’ and he kisses me. Right in front of Josh. And Jackson. He hasn’t said it, but I think he loves me, Shae.”

Shae stares at the skyline. A storm is kicking up. “Should I put the top up?” she says. “It looks like it might rain.”

Aspen shrugs. “I guess.” She shoves another handful of cashews into her mouth. “So I might be wrong, but I think he might say it tonight.”

“Do you think you could not do that?” Shae says.

“Do what?”

“That.” Shae grabs a T-shirt from the backseat and wipes the dashboard angrily. “Talk with your mouth full. You’re getting spit on the dashboard. It’s fucking gross.”

“Sorry,” Aspen says. She puts the top on the cashews. “So do you think he might say he loves me tonight?”

“How the fuck should I know? I never go back there with you. I don’t know Darren Silverado from Adam.”

“His name is actually Darren Wilkensen.”

Shae snorts. “Wilkensen?” She says it like it is the name of an STD.

“Yeah. He said Jackson changed his name to Silverado when he signed him.”

“I always knew he was a fucking fraud.”

Aspen glares. “What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.” Aspen flips open the cashews and noisily eats.

“Anyway, his old guitar player, Sonny Rickman, came up with the name. I guess they were watching some old Western, and Sonny thought it would be a great name. Darren ran it by Jackson, and he loved it. So he renamed him.” Shae turns on the radio. A few minutes later, Aspen switches it off. “So what do you think I should wear tonight?” She eats another handful of cashews.

“I don’t know.” Shae turns the radio back on.

Yelling to be heard over the pounding bass, Aspen says, “Sybil, should I wear my green dress or my yellow to the show tonight? One click for yellow, two for green.” She waits. A minute later, the locks click twice. “Green it is.”

Shae sighs. She feels far away from Aspen, and she doesn’t like it. “You’d better check it out with Mina.” Shae pulls the now dog-eared copy of *Lost Lunar Baedeker* from the dashboard and tosses it in Aspen’s lap.

Smiling, Aspen picks it up. “Should I wear my green dress, Mina?” After she opens the book, she wrinkles her brow, looking puzzled. “From the green incline of vengeance the Vesuvian vine drips lucently.”

Shae gasps. “She said ‘green.’ That’s fucking amazing. Totally wear the green dress!” Spurred on by Aspen’s success, she says, “Am I going to be a famous poet, Sybil? Right turn signal for yes. Left for no.” Nothing happens.

“Oh, well,” Aspen says. “She probably didn’t hear you.” Just then the left turn signal comes on unbidden.

“Stupid bitch,” Shae mutters.

“Shh,” Aspen warns. “You don’t want to hurt Sybil’s feelings, Shae. Our lives are in her hands. The last thing we need is for her to go schitzo and ram us into a retaining wall.”

“That would be suicide for her.”

“Yeah, well. Suicide is not unheard of in the automobile world. And Sybil doesn’t exactly strike me as particularly *stable*.” Aspen whispers the last word, patting Sybil’s dashboard the way she might pat the head of a disgruntled toddler.

“Like you would know anything about *stable*,” Shae mutters, glaring at the white lines slithering along under the car like so many eels.

“What?”

“Nothing.” They drive on in silence until Shae asks, “So how is your darling *Darren*?” This is a rhetorical question, and a conspicuously venomous one at that. Shae does not want an answer. She knows perfectly well how Darren is, since he is the only thing Aspen ever talks about. Well, maybe she does want an answer, but she wants it to be something like, “I’m sorry for leaving you alone after the show six times in a row.” Aspen doesn’t seem to sense this.

“Oh, God, Shae,” she says, “I have never been so in love. Never. I know it seems stupid, like I’m just a dumb groupie or something. But when I’m lying beside him, I think, I could die now.”

Shae rolls her eyes. “You sound like a fucking romance novel. And not a good one.”

Aspen glares. “I’m sorry I sound like a fucking romance novel,” she says. “I happen to be involved in a romance.”

Shae snorts. “Is that what we’re calling your little fuck-fest? A romance?”

Aspen balls her fingers into fists. “I am so sick of you,” she finally whispers.

“What did you say?” Shae asks.

Aspen speaks louder, enunciating every word. “I said: I’m. Fucking. Sick. Of. You.”

“Yeah, well, I’m fucking sick of you too.” Shae glances at Aspen, who stares out the window. She has seen Aspen angry before, but never this angry. She is shaking.

When Aspen turns to face Shae, her face is red with rage. “You’ve been such a bitch lately.”

Shae lurches a bit, as if she has been slapped. Never in all the years she has known Aspen has Aspen ever called her a bitch. She grips the steering wheel so tightly, her knuckles go white. “Same to you, but more of it,” she finally says. She really does. Immediately, she blushes at the inadequacy of her retort.

Aspen laughs coldly. “What is this, kindergarten?” she asks.

“Can’t be,” Shae bristles, glancing at Aspen’s nipples, which are thrusting out unencumbered from beneath her flimsy pink T-shirt. “Last I checked, there were no whores in kindergarten.”

Aspen was not made for this sort of sparring. She can throw a verbal punch or two when she is good and pissed, but her anger is usually short-lived. Shae knows this. Like clockwork, Aspen’s rage evaporates, and biting her lip, she stares forlornly out the window.

Shae is not above empathy, most days, at least not for the people she loves. But as it turns out, she does not love Aspen. Not right now. If she did, she might reach out and take Aspen’s hand, say she’s sorry. Express her feelings. Take responsibility for her part in the misunderstanding, the way her school counselor used to say she should. If she did this, she knows Aspen would be sorry too. So sorry. Buy Shae a new pair of thigh-high boots, a dozen daisies, and two bottles of tequila sorry. But Shae doesn’t do it. Instead, she says, “Sybil, is Aspen a whore? Two clicks for yes. One click for no.”

Sybil clicks twice. The wind rushes in through holes in Sybil's floorboards.

*

After Macy and Sonny check into a particularly seedy motel (there are dead roaches in the bathtub, and the bathroom window is stuck open permanently), Sonny says, "I'm going out." He stands by the door holding a paper sack.

"What's that?" Macy sits on the bed flipping through television channels.

"It's a present for my grandma. I have to mail it tonight, or it won't get there in time for her birthday." He dons a worried look that he hopes will conjure for Macy images of a frail, gray-haired shut-in, rocking her lonely self to sleep, waiting anxiously for her grandson's birthday gift, which will give meaning to the few years--heck, months--she has left.

"The post office is closed. Besides, you told me your grandma was dead."

"It's for my grandmother on my father's side," he says. "I told you about my maternal grandmother."

"Oh." Sonny is pretty sure that Macy doesn't know what maternal grandmother means, and he uses the window of her confusion as an escape hatch. Before she can press the point about the post office, he slams the door and steps into the star-speckled night.

In the truck, Sonny opens the bag and pulls out his California State Trooper uniform. It is slightly wrinkled, but that won't be noticeable in the dark. He isn't in California, but hopefully, the insignia won't be noticeable in the dark either. He pulls off his shirt and pants. Shivering, he yanks the uniform on as quickly as possible. He presses a toy badge onto his chest. As he is pulling out of the parking lot, he checks himself in the mirror. He is passably handsome as a cop, bald spot or no. Too bad he doesn't have a police hat.

He drives for half an hour, scanning the horizon, studying each pedestrian that passes. At last, down by the 7-11, he sees two girls, fifteen, sixteen years old, wearing short skirts and stiletto heels. They are huddled behind the dumpster, passing a bottle wrapped in a paper bag.

“Bingo,” he says, and checks himself in the mirror one more time before he parks the truck across the street. As he steps out, he puts his hand on his hip, in the spot a gun would be if he had one. He approaches the girls with that menacing, clipped stride he has seen enacted by officers of the law. “How’s it going, ladies,” he calls in a voice that is half good-cop, half bad-cop. The girls clearly don’t know which way it will go with this one. Their terror shows in their wide eyes and gaping, glossed lips. The air smells like rotting garbage and rum.

“Fine,” one girl says. Her voice is tinged with brassy sass, and she stands and thrusts a hip out rebelliously, probably to let Sonny know he doesn’t scare her. But he can tell he does. She hides the bottle behind her back.

“What’s that you got there, sweetheart?” Sonny’s smile is tight-lipped. He does not want them to see his teeth.

“Nothing.”

“That’s a whole lot of nothing.” Sonny pulls her hand from behind her back, gently, but authoritatively.

She holds on for a second then lets go. As her grip relaxes, her face crumples. “Oh, my god. Oh, my god. Please don’t put us in jail, sir. I’m just holding that for my brother. He’s 23.”

“Your brother, huh? Could I speak to him?” Sonny glances around the parking lot.

“He’s not here now, but he’ll be back soon. Please don’t put us in jail. Oh, god. My mom will kill me. She thinks I’m at a sleepover.”

“Look,” Sonny says, brushing her bangs away from her big eyes. “You seem like a nice girl to me. Still, I can’t let you get off Scott free. You need to know this kind of behavior is completely unacceptable. This stuff can kill you.” He opens the bottle of raspberry rum and sniffs it. “It’s either a fine or jail, ladies. I’m sorry. I can’t let this one pass.”

“How much is the fine?” the other girl asks. This one is chubby. But she has nice shoes. Designer shoes. Sonny estimates their worth at \$100. Maybe \$150.

“The traditional fine for this sort of thing is \$500. Each.”

The sassy girl starts to cry.

“That’s what it will be if I take you down to the station and settle this up there. Of course, they might just book you if I take you in. It’s hard to tell. The city is cracking down on this sort of thing.”

Now the other girl is crying.

“Oh, shit.” Running his hand over his scalp, he taps his boot. “Look, I don’t want to see you girls cry.”

They look hopeful. Miss Sassy thrusts out her ample breasts and sighs heavily.

“You watch a lot of Marilyn Monroe films, honey?” Sonny asks. The girl, who might be pretty if she had her teeth fixed, looks confused. He thinks about telling her who Marilyn Monroe is, then thinks better of it. “Listen, girls. Here’s what I’m going to do for you. Why don’t we settle this up here?”

“What do you mean?” the chubby one whispers.

“What I am trying to say is that if you pay your fine here, I won’t take you in. No one’s gonna bust you. You pay up, I let you go.”

“You want us to bribe you?” Miss Sassy gasps.

“I wouldn’t call it a bribe, exactly. More of a discount.”

“How much?” the chubby girl says. She is already rifling through her wallet.

“Five hundred dollars,” Sonny says. “For both of you. Miss Sassy rolls her eyes. “Or I can just take you in and charge you \$500 each. You decide.”

When all is said and done, Sonny leaves the parking lot with \$167.34, a bottle of raspberry rum, a pair of designer shoes, and the Miss Sassy’s phone number. He will not be able to call her before he leaves town, not with Macy hanging around like a vulture on road kill, but the crumpled edge of the paper rubbing against his fingertip blows his ego up like a hot air balloon. “You still got a lot of piss and vinegar left in you yet, big fella,” he says to the rearview mirror, and winks. “Not bad for a night’s work.”

*

After a particularly amazing show, Aspen and Darren are curled up together on a couch backstage. They face one another, talking poetry. Well, Darren is talking. Aspen is listening, though she is having a hard time focusing. She is insatiably hungry. The kind of hungry that only comes with smoking pot. She can’t stop thinking about cheese.

“You know what sounds good?” she asks Darren. She touches the swirl of his ear, deciding it is the most perfect thing she has ever seen. “Your ear is pretty.”

“Thanks.” Darren touches her ear. “So is yours. What sounds good?”

“Cheese.”

“Cheese?”

“Yeah.”

“That does sound good.”

She studies his ear some more. In the next room, Jackson’s voice booms.

Darren presses his lips against her forehead. “You know what the problem with getting cheese is?”

“What?”

“We have to fucking move to get it.”

Aspen thinks about this. She tries to move her legs. They’re heavy. “That is a problem,” she concedes.

Darren starts talking about poetry again. She still wants cheese. “Darren?”

“Yeah?”

“I still want cheese.”

Darren furrows his brow, thinking. “We could slip out the back. I saw a grocery store down the block on the way in.”

“Won’t someone see you? The paparazzi or something?”

Darren groans. “I guess you’re right.”

Aspen looks at his ear. “How are we gonna get cheese then?”

Darren thinks for a second, then says, “We could hold up a cheese bank.” He laughs, thinking he’s funny.

He is funny. Aspen laughs too, until it hurts. Finally, the hilarity subsides. She looks at Darren again. His hair is messy, his jawbone dark with a few days worth of stubble. Suddenly, he seems frayed and fuzzy. “You look like Chewbacca.”

He narrows his eyes. “Chewbacca?”

“Yeah, the wookie from *Star Wars*.”

“You think I look like a wookie?” He seems confused.

“Yes. I’m not just flattering you. You really do look like Chewbacca.”

Darren starts to laugh again. “Well, thank God your not just flattering me. It would break my heart if I didn’t *really* look like Chewbacca.” He sits up and tickles her belly.

Squealing, she slaps his hands. It tickles so much, it hurts.

“Stop!” she shrieks. “I hate being tickled.” He doesn’t stop. She arches and kicks against him, until finally, she lurches toward his neck, ready to bite. Just in time, she realizes that sinking her teeth into his jugular might not be a good idea.

“Stop! I almost killed you,” she screams, still laughing.

He freezes. “What?”

“I almost bit right into your fucking jugular.”

Laughing, he covers his neck with his hands. “What are you, a vampire?”

“I told you, I hate being tickled!”

“Jesus, I guess so. Can you imagine trying to explain that one to the cops. ‘I’m sorry officer. He was tickling me. I had to bite out his jugular.’”

Aspen’s shirt has ridden up around her midsection, and she puts one finger in her belly button. Its bumps and swirls feel funny, high as she is. “Think that would count as self-defense?”

“Probably not.”

“Holy shit.” Sighing, Aspen sits up and strokes his jugular apologetically. “I almost killed Darren Silverado.”

“Don’t call me Darren Silverado. I hate that name.” Darren takes Aspen’s face between his hands. He has that look in his eyes again, the one that makes her feel like treasure. “You’re probably the only woman who has ever told me I looked like a ewok.” He smiles.

“A wookiee,” Aspen corrects. He still looks like one. Chewbacca is looking at her like she’s treasure. From here on out, she will have a soft spot for Chewbacca.

“What?”

“A wookiee. Chewbacca is a wookiee.”

Darren laughs. “Forgive me. You’re probably the only woman who has ever told me I looked like a *wookiee*. You’re also probably the only woman who has ever made me want to take her right after she tried to rip out my jugular.”

“Then you’re not scared? I really did almost kill you.”

Darren looks down at the bulge in his pants. “Apparently not. The only way I’ll be scared is if you don’t spend the night with me.”

Aspen laughs.

“What?” Darren asks, letting go of her face.

“That was just kinda a cheesy thing to say.” She grabs his hand. “Sweet, but cheesy.”

Gently, Darren pulls down Aspen’s shirt. “Speaking of cheese, I bet we could get room service to bring us some at my hotel. We could get a whole cheese tray. An array of cheeses.”

“You want me to come to your hotel?” Aspen is stunned.

“Yes.” Smiling, Darren puts an arm on each side of Aspen. He leans in until she is lying on the couch again. Gently, he kisses her.

When he pulls away, Aspen is flustered. “Well, I’m supposed to go to this hair appointment with Shae in the morning,” she says, brushing the hair out of her eyes. “It’s a big deal. She’s going purple.” She looks up at him. He still looks like a wookiee. A soft, cuddly wookiee.

“No problem. I’ll have you back to your hotel by ten.”

“Her appointment is at nine.”

“Fine. Eight-thirty.”

Aspen kisses him again. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Darren Silverado.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“What should I call you then?”

Darren kisses her forehead. “Wilkensen. Call me Darren Wilkensen.”

*

Darren and Aspen lie in his hotel bed, twisted together. Their sweaty skin glistens in the candlelight. When he kisses the top of her head, she smiles. “Aspen?” he whispers.

“What?”

He twines his fingers through her hair. “Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe.” She lifts his hand and studies the swirls on his knuckles, the dents in his fingertips. “I guess I just think we are little specks on a little speck in a universe that goes on forever. I don’t think we have what it takes to figure it all out.”

“Yeah.” Darren runs his finger along the shell pink circle of her nipple. “I guess so. But hey, if we do come back, I’m gonna find you. Next life, I’m finding you first, before I find anyone else.”

Aspen doesn’t know what to say, so she presses her lips against his palm. Finally, she whispers, “If you can’t find me, I’ll come for you.”

Darren touches her face. “I wish I found you first this life, before I found someone else.”

“Me too.” She breathes deeply. The air smells like cinnamon. It must be the candle.

He rolls onto his back. “I can’t leave her. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

“What?”

“My wife. I love her, Aspen. I can’t leave her.”

Aspen stares at the ceiling, feeling like she has been flying in a wind machine, and someone just turned the wind off. “I didn’t ask you to.”

“Cool,” he says. “Cool.”

Aspen stares at the candle on the bedside table, wondering why he is talking about this. To Aspen, Darren’s wife is irrelevant, a phantom that exists in the world outside the one in which she lives. Aspen watches shadows dance on the wall, thinking about just how much she *doesn’t* want to talk about his wife. She is pissed at him for forcing her to. Sitting up, she snaps, “I’d better go. Shae is going purple tomorrow.”

Darren sits up too. “How are you going to get home?”

“I’ll take a cab.”

“At least let me walk you down.”

Aspen shrugs. “Whatever.”

As she stands, Darren wraps his arms around her waist. “Wait,” he says.

She glances over her shoulder. Those eyes. She sinks back down. “What?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you Aspen. It’s just that— “ He stops.

“It’s just that what?”

“I have to tell you something.”

Her belly cramps. Is she scared, or is she getting her period? She is supposed to start sometime soon. She glances down at her thighs to make sure they are blood free. They are.

“K.”

“You know how that guy had to fill in for Josh tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Josh has meningitis.”

“I’m sorry,” Aspen says, and she is, but she isn’t sure what this has to do with her.

“Well, we’re rescheduling the tour. It’s just going to be me, solo. Jackson thought it would be cool if I played some of the places I played in L.A. before I got big. So that’s what we’re doing.”

“That’s awesome!” Aspen says. Her cramps dissipate. “You mean, you’ll be playing dive bars and stuff?”

He nods. “Yep.”

“Wow, that will be amazing.”

“Well, there’s more,” Darren says. “Aspen, my wife is coming out to meet me on the tour.”

Aspen tenses. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry, Aspen. She’s the mother of my child, you know.”

Aspen stands. “I know.”

Darren grabs her hand. “Listen, Aspen, I have to ask you something.”

“Alright.” Aspen scans the floor, looking for her jeans in the semi-darkness.

“Baby, I hate to ask you this, but can you, well, can you pretend you don’t know me when she’s around?”

Aspen freezes. “What?”

“She’s known me since—well, forever. She would know I love you if she looks at me. She would see it in my eyes.” Aspen’s anger evaporates. He said it. He said I love you. She sinks back onto the bed and looks at him. “I’m so sorry,” he says.

She touches the sharp jut of his chin. “Fine, Darren,” she whispers finally. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.” Gently, he pulls her face to his and kisses her.

*

Miles away, Shae stares into the darkness. Every time she moves, the crumbs left over from her dinner of crackers scratch her back. The sound of the freeway keeps her awake for hours as she listens for Aspen’s key in the door. It never comes. Finally, she falls asleep on a wet pillow.

She wakes up to the screeching of the alarm clock. Before she looks at Aspen’s bed, she knows it’s empty. The room feels hollow. She opens her eyes and stares at the unrumpled comforter. Her eyes hurt. Her head pounds.

“Fuck you, Aspen,” she mutters. She is going purple today. Alone.

RUN

Of all possible worlds, we only got one.

We gotta to ride on it, whatever we've done.

We'll never get far from what we leave behind.

Baby, we can run, run, run, but we can't hide.

*--Jerome John Garcia (August 1, 1942--August 9, 1995)**

The convertible top is down, and Shae and Aspen fly into the dark, whizzing through flurries of snow that remind them of deep space. Tiny flakes speckle the windshield and disappear like dying stars. In the distance, the moon hangs, haloed in silver. The radio plays something by Darren, something wild and free and dangerous, a tiger constructed of baritone and bass, stalking the speakers, eating listeners alive. *"We are the dream weave-eeeerrrrrrss,"* he scream-sings.

"I love him," Aspen shrieks, throwing her hands in the air. As Aspen closes her eyes and belts the words to the song, Shae reaches up through the snowy darkness and clasps Aspen's fingers, and together, they fly like that, the wind kissing their snow freckled faces and damp hair. Aspen cannot tell Shae is crying.

Miles away, in a house the size of a shopping mall, Darren is playing a private party, smelling of good scotch, surrounded by spit-shined movie stars, singing the very same song that Aspen is singing, at exactly the same time. If you put their faces side by side, their lips would form the words together. Looking down, you notice things like this, things people would never notice in the middle of things. You notice how people touch without even knowing it.

And over there is Heaven, wrapped in scarlet sheets, naked and hard and pumping away into something fleshy and beautiful. Two aesthetically pleasing people locked in slick, hot, pseudo-love. But look closer, and you will see that Heaven's eyes are empty. A dark thing at the center of him has cracked open. Invisible poison is seeping into his invisible innards, the feeling parts behind the physical parts, the soul matter under the gray matter, the thing we never see. The hot eyes of the cameras burn him.

These broken moments are hard to stare at for long, so look away, into Macy Blue's eyes, Macy who is stretched out cold and alone on a motel bed, staring at the gray, rain-stained ceiling, waiting for Sonny to come home. He disappeared two days ago. He has been doing this more and more often, disappearing for days at a time, and then reappearing just when she is about to give up hope. Now, she wonders where she will go if he doesn't come back. She thinks about her lonely trailer with its pantheon of Elvises. She imagines Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison, knowing his one glistening tear is for her. She whispers, "I want my mommy." Macy thinks maybe Sonny is robbing another thrift store.

She is wrong. He is stretched on a mattress too, in a vacant, stinking house laced with shattered clutter and shit. A needle is still buried in his arm, though he does not feel it. Like Aspen and Shae, he is flying through deep space, lost in a world of wind and whispers and white.

RED

It makes no sense at all, I saw red. I saw red. I saw red.

One more secret lover that I shot dead.

Every day I wake up, just a little bit more,

feelin' like a dog in the yard because it's just how we are.

*--Bradley James Nowell (February 22, 1968—May 25, 1996)**

Looking down on Macy's sleeping form, Sonny holds a bottle of raspberry rum and a pair of red stilettos. "New shoes for you, Macy Blue," he says, relishing the musical sound of his words. The morning sun falls over Macy's face, and he can see the tiny, pale hairs that sprout on her cheeks. He has never seen them before. "Babydoll, I got you some shoes." Macy snores. Hoping against hope for an early morning screw, he shakes her. "Wake up, Macy."

Muttering, Macy opens her eyes. "Where have you been?" she whispers.

"I told you. I went to get us some spending money."

She sits up. "Did you rob another thrift store?"

"No, I most certainly did not. But I did get you these."

When she sees the stilettos, she rubs her eyes. "How am I going to stand up in those?"

“I was hoping you’d wear them lying down.” Sonny sets the shoes on the table and runs his fingers through her tangled, fine hair.

“Ow.” Macy rubs her scalp. “You can climb into the other bed if you want, but I’m going back to sleep pronto, and I sure ain’t wearing those shoes. Not after you disappeared on me again.” She flops down and rolls away.

Sonny sits on the edge of the bed. “I’m sorry, Macy Blue. I wanted to take you ice skating. Remember, Elvis on ice? I had to get some cash.”

“Yeah, so, how did you get it?”

“I did a few chores at a church.”

“A church?”

“Yeah, I just knocked on the door and asked the pastor if he had any chores that needed doing. He said he did. Gave me ten dollars an hour.”

Macy rolls toward him. “Well, that was nice of him,” she says. Her voice is still hesitant.

Sonny nods. “He was nice. He let me sleep there. On a couch.”

“Why didn’t you come back here to sleep?”

“I’m sorry, babydoll. I didn’t finish working until after midnight. I was bushed.”

Macy scrunches up her face, thinking. Finally, she says, “Those shoes look way too little for me. I’m a size ten. I have uncommonly large feet. That’s what my Momma told me.”

“I like your feet.” Sonny grins.

“Momma said I was like a puppy. She said I’d grow into them. But I didn’t.”

“Well, they are nice feet.” Sonny rests his hand on her waist. “Have a drink with me?” he coaxes.

“Oh, Son-dried Tomato.”

“Oh, Son-dried Tomato what? Drink with me.”

“It’s too early to drink.”

Ignoring her protests, Sonny fetches the hotel glasses from the dresser and dons one of the paper covers like a hat. “Drink with me, and I’ll sing for you, me lady.” He tips the paper cap.

Groaning, Macy sits up. Sonny pours raspberry rum into the glasses. Macy points at the disheveled newspaper sitting on top of the T.V. “Oh, there was an article about Darren in there,” she says. “You might wanna read it. His drummer got mini-gitis or something.”

“Meningitis?”

“Whatever. Anyways, Darren had to cancel his regular tour, so he’s doing this last minute solo tour, to remind people about the old days. He’s just playing little bars and stuff. A tour of all his old ‘hang outs’.” She marks the phrase “hang outs” with index finger quotations marks. “The tickets are a million bucks or something though. Even more than they were before.”

Sonny spills a spot of rum on his shoes. “No shit?” He trips to the TV and picks up the paper. “Damn it, Macy. Did you have to mangle it like this? Which section was it in?”

“I dunno. The entertainment section, I think. It’s got a picture of some actor on the front, from some dumb TV show.”

Sonny finds the entertainment section and scowls. “That would be Richard Blake, from *Family Tree*.”

“Oh, sorry,” Macy says. “He looks so old now. I didn’t recognize him.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Sonny snorts. “You are impervious to any and all cultural developments, living, as you do, in your ivory tower of Elvis impersonation and sandwich artistry.”

Macy stares at him. “Why do you always have to be so mean?” she asks, taking a swig of the rum.

“Why do you always have to be so oblivious?” Sonny asks absently. He is folding the paper into quarters, reading as he goes. “Grammy winner Darren Silverado will launch his Yesteryear Tour on Mardi Gras at L.A.’s infamous Viper Room.” He smiles, scanning the list of cities on the tour. “Holy shit, Macy. Do you know what this means?”

Macy shakes her head. “That Darren is going to have a good tan?”

Sonny smacks his forehead in frustration. “It means that easy access to Darren is a given. Do you know how little these clubs are?”

“But the tickets are too much, Sonny. The cheapest ones are like \$300.”

“So what? Even if we can’t get to him there, there are only going to be one or two fancy hotels in most of these towns. We just hang out in the lobby until he comes down, and viola, my redemption is complete.”

“Oh,” Macy says, “I was gonna say that’s what it means.”

“What it means is that the universe is conspiring with me.” Sonny tosses the newspaper on the floor and runs to her. When he kisses her, she kisses him back, and later on, when he shoves her feet into the stilettos, she wears them lying down, just like he asked, even though she complains that they hurt her bunions considerably.

“California, here we come,” he whispers into her hair before they sleep.

Sonny wakes to the sound of Macy grunting from the floor. The afternoon sun is blinding. “What are you doing?” he moans.

“My sit-ups,” Macy gasps. “I want my bod to be beach ready.” A magazine is opened next to her, and the florid, taffy pink words, “Make Your Bod Beach Ready,” loom at the top of the page.

“Holy shit. Can’t you get your bod beach ready at a decent hour?” Sonny yanks a pillow over his head.

“No can do,” Macy says. “At a decent hour, we will be in the truck, and I don’t think you want me trying to do sit ups on your lap while you drive.”

“I suppose not,” Sonny says. His words are muffled.

“A rhino’s snot?” Macy says.

Sonny yanks the pillow away. “I suppose not!” he snaps, and heads off to the shower, cursing the sun’s knife-like rays as they slide through the window and stab his eyes.

*

Aspen and Shae perch in Sybil’s lap, wearing matching crowns and layers and layers of bright Mardi Gras beads. “Mardi Gras!” Aspen squeals, clutching the steering wheel gleefully. She looks to Shae, who is staring out the window, for a response.

Shae scowls. “We’re not even in fucking New Orleans. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Aspen says. “People who don’t live in New Orleans celebrate Mardi Gras too, you know. Besides, Darren wanted the first show of his Yesteryear Tour to be special.”

The sidewalks are crowded with revelers, even though it isn’t dark yet, and Aspen is forced to drive slowly. The buildings and billboards limp by. Up ahead, Aspen sees Darren on

a billboard singing soulfully, sporting an acoustic guitar, his eyes closed. “Yesteryear” is printed in loopy letters at the top. Aspen squeals again.

Shae covers her ears. “Fuck! Could you stop screeching? I’m getting a migraine.”

“Sorry,” Aspen says, still looking at the sign. “He’s just so fucking perfect. He looks like a fucking god. Like--what was that one god? The god of fire?”

“Thor?” Shae spits the word out, bored.

“No, Thor was the god of thunder. Darren would be the god of fire if he was a god. Can you believe that man has been inside me?”

“Most men have,” Shae mutters.

For a moment, Aspen’s belly boils, but she pushes the rage away. She won’t let Shae ruin Mardi Gras. She fucking won’t. “I have a feeling about this tour.” Aspen presses on. “It’s going to be awesome. I just know it.”

“I doubt it.”

“What’s with you, grump-a-lupagus?” Aspen lifts one hand from the steering wheel and reaches across the gearshift to pinch Shae’s knee, which is conspicuously knobby, a sharp protrusion under the shiny black of her fake leather pants.

“I just know things,” Shae says, shrugging. “I feel something dark coming.”

“No way. This is going to be the best time of our life.” Aspen honks at a gaggle of drunk transvestites to punctuate her statement.

“Yours maybe.” Shae stares out the window.

“Ours.” Aspen grips the steering wheel tighter. She does not like the way Shae has been talking. They have always been an “us.” Now, Shae talks as if they are separate. They patched

up their little spat in the car, but still, Shae is distant. “Remember? We’re Siamese twins? Joined at the heart?”

Shae smiles with her mouth, but her eyes are dull. “You always were a sap,” she says. “I’ll miss you.”

“You act like you’re going somewhere.”

Shae writes something with her fingertip on the slick surface of her pants. “I’m already gone,” she whispers finally.

“What? Where?”

“The fucking moon. I don’t know. I’m just gone.” She looks at Aspen, and her eyes are as forever and formless as the photos showing the moon’s cratered surface.

“You’re here, with me,” Aspen says, fighting back a little wave of panic that starts as a slicing pain just under her heart. “We’re in for the best night of our whole lives. You watch.”

“You’ll probably just go home with Darren again.”

“Probably not,” Aspen says. “His wife is on tour with him.”

Shae sits up straight. “What?”

“His wife. I don’t think it’s a big deal though. He loves me, not her.”

“How do you know that?” Shae says. Her voice is worried.

“He said it. I told you.”

“Did he say he doesn’t love his wife?”

“No, he loves her too. I mean, she’s the mother of his child.” Shae stares at Aspen. “What? He loves me more.”

“How do you fucking know?”

“I just know.”

They arrive at the Viper Room and bypass the line, which stretches around the block. A bouncer the size of a Brahma bull steps between them and the door. “Can I help you ladies?”

Aspen smiles and flashes her driver’s license. “We’re on the guest list. Aspen Stone, plus one.”

The bouncer checks the list. “Go ahead,” he says, and they sashay through the door and head straight for the small stage, front-row-center. Only a few revelers have made it through the door ahead of them, but they have snagged tables. Aspen and Shae have no interest in tables.

Silently, they stand by the stage, staring at the red velvet curtain. Aspen can hardly believe her luck, that she will be standing this close to Darren, in such a small room. If she wants to, she can reach right out and touch him. The thought of her fingers brushing over his skin makes her belly flip-flop. Their intimacy has driven her to want him more, not less. She fingers her sequined tube top, her heart pounding at the thought that he will be here soon. Less than an hour now.

“I’m gonna get a drink,” Shae says.

Aspen watches her slouch to the bar, not seeming to notice the hungry eyes of a handsome boy she passes. At the bar, she keeps her hands pressed firmly to her sides, like she is holding herself in. For a moment, Aspen imagines herself and Shae as Siamese twins in the throes of being cut in two. She doesn’t want to admit it, but the first slice has already been made. The invisible scalpel has begun its invisible work. It is only a matter of time before they fall away from one another, separate. Her eyes burn at the thought.

A flood of people rushes into the room, interrupting Aspen’s dark musing. The front doors must have opened. She studies them as they enter, watching for people she knows. When The Bitch’s scary purple head bounces into the bar, Aspen wishes there were other people

around her so she could hide. But before Aspen can turn away, The Bitch sees Aspen and grins, showing yellow teeth. Her smile is sinister as she sashays over. The Bitch never talks to Aspen and Shae. Never. Aspen's throat tightens. She wonders what The Bitch will say. "Aspen." She says Aspen's name as if they have been friends for years. Then, she throws her arms around Aspen and squeezes.

"Um, hi." Aspen hugs her back awkwardly, thinking that The Bitch must have bathed in her sickly sweet perfume. Stepping back, The Bitch starts to chatter, something inane about a young man she is ostensibly sleeping with, a story Aspen doesn't believe for a second, because who would sleep with this wrinkled old prune? Thankfully, Shae comes back from the bar.

"Hey," she says, her eyebrows raised into a question. "What's up?" The Bitch emits a raspy sound she must hope is a girlish giggle.

"The Bi—The Queen--has been regaling me with her tales of daring do," Aspen says. Her voice is sweet, but she shoots Shae a sarcastic glance. "Apparently, she's sleeping with some young hunk."

Shae snorts and eyes The Bitch critically. "In your dreams, lady," she finally says. The Queen storms away. "What the fuck did she want?" Shae asks.

"I think she's trying to get close to me. People must be hearing about me and Darren," Aspen whispers, her voice tinged with pride.

She is going to say more, something about Darren, but a familiar voice she can't quite place interrupts. "Hi, Aspen." When she turns, Heaven stands behind her, smiling shyly, his hands thrust into his pockets. He looks different. Cleaner on the outside. A fancy haircut and expensive clothes. But his eyes are darker, like someone snuffed the glow inside them.

“Heaven!” Hugging him close, Aspen asks, “How have you been since New Mexico? I was so worried about you.” His hair smells good, like fancy mint shampoo.

“I’ve been great.” Heaven smiles. “Brick—I mean, my dad—is helping me get some film work. And he’s helping me put together a demo CD. He’s going to pass it along to some friends.”

“Wow! That’s great, Heaven!” Aspen says. “I can’t wait to hear it! Hey, you wanna stand by us during the show?”

“Sure.” As Heaven rambles on about his music, Aspen’s mind wanders. She thinks about the river that crashes from Darren’s mouth into her ears, drowning her head in heaven. She thinks about the way he smiles when they are alone, like a child. She thinks about how she finally knows what love means. Concert goers crowd into the bar, shoving and chattering. Still, Heaven goes on, about the way his new guitar teacher said he had natural talent, about how his voice coach compared him to Jon Bon Jovi. He tells her about how Brick helped him put together auditions for a band. Now, he has a drummer and a bassist and a lead guitarist, and they practice every day, sometimes all day. He tells her that the first song he ever wrote was about angels, and he was thinking of her when he wrote it. He is about to sing it when the curtains part.

Jackson lopes onto the stage, wearing a silly silver hat. For Aspen, Heaven evaporates. Darren will be here soon, so close she can touch him. Still, invisible Heaven keeps whispering in her ear, buzzing like a gnat. She wants to swat him. “Happy Mardi Gras!” Jackson shouts, and applause erupts. “What an honor, seeing Darren play in such an intimate setting, huh?” The crowd shrieks its assent. He rambles on for another minute, citing Darren’s humble beginnings, and finally, he says it: “Ladies and gentleman, please welcome Darren Silverado!” As the

audience thunders, Aspen holds her breath. Seconds later, Darren explodes onto the stage, beaming, screaming, strumming his guitar. In a surge of love and adrenaline, he comes.

Aspen waits for those ocean eyes to look at her. They don't. She watches the hand of god, hoping it will reach down. Not this time. Like Shae, god keeps his hands to himself tonight. His indifference leaves a wound. It hurts physically, so much so that Aspen wants to run and crumble in a bathroom stall, weep into a wad of toilet paper. Instead, she waits. *Look at me*, she thinks, practicing her telepathy. Still, he pretends she is not there. She is invisible. "Darren Wilkensen, look at me!" she wants to scream. But she can't. The song is too loud. The smoke is too thick. He is too far away.

And, then, she sees her, whirling in the wings, dancing like a child. His wife. Aspen recognizes her from the magazine pictures. As stunned as she might be had Godzilla shown up in the wings, Aspen watches the graceful body twirl. Suddenly, she knows, and wishes she had never known, why Darren loves this woman, despite her too close eyes, despite her hips still thick from baby weight, despite her largish teeth. This woman dances like a child, and so, Darren loves her.

When the show ends, Darren turns to the woman he loves, smiling his secret smile, and asks her to join him on the stage. She comes to him, taking his outstretched hand in hers, and there, before all of California, Darren Silverado kisses his wife. Aspen tastes that tequila-tainted kiss. Blinking back tears, she turns to smile at Heaven. Heaven smiles back, vulnerable, lost, but looking, if she squints her eyes, a little like Darren. She kisses him hard. His kiss tastes like tequila too, and despite pain pooling in her chest, she is not alone.

*

Dawn turns sea fog into silver soup. Slouched on the beach, Aspen is unenchanted. It is the sort of morning during which ghosts rise from the mists and dreams drown in the incoming tide. Heaven sits beside her, wiggling his bare toes in the cool sand, watching the white-haired waves roll, talking, talking, talking.

“Brick said it was the best song he’d ever heard. And it’s my first song ever.”

Aspen smiles. “Cool.” Her stomach is a fraying rope, wrenched into a permanent knot, and her eyes are trying to cry. As Heaven blathers on, she studies him out of the corner of her eye, noting similarities to Darren. They both are tall. They both have the same strong jaw, speckled with five o’clock shadow. But Heaven’s eyes are swollen with desperation, while Darren’s gaze radiates confidence. Heaven is not Darren, and try as she might, she cannot muster one bit of love for him. Even if Heaven will be the next Darren Silverado, which he says he will. *“If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with,”* she sings under her breath, warbling a little on the high notes.

Sometimes, you should listen to the songs people sing. Sometimes, they are telling you something. If Heaven was paying attention, he might get nervous, and with good reason. You have to be careful of people who embrace the philosophy about which Aspen sings. You can never be quite sure if you are the one they love, or the one they are with. Heaven sure as hell can’t tell the difference. “Can I kiss you?” he asks.

Aspen’s insides turn to ice. Still, she says, “Sure,” and he does. There is something about kissing the one you’re with when the one you do love is kissing someone else. Those kinds of kisses taste cold and sharp, like desperation.

When Heaven pulls away, he looks into Aspen’s eyes. “Let’s go somewhere,” he says.

She can tell that he wants her the way a mosquito might want her. He wants to suck her blood. She doesn't care. There, with the ocean breathing, and the sand caked like stucco on her eggshell skin, Aspen sees a cave, a dark, whispering mouth, calling to her from its secret place in the sea cliff's face. "Let's go up there," she says.

Heaven grins. "I'm game," he says. He helps her stand, and they pick their way over the sand, leaving footprint trails behind them.

They scale the cliffs in bare feet to reach the cave, and Heaven's vacuum hand catches a belt loop on her jeans when she slips. As the cave swallows them, its breath is cold, and its throat is littered with ashes and broken beer bottles and cigarette butts, but Heaven blankets them with his tan sweater, making the cave theirs. Still, Aspen is shivering. Heaven lifts his shirt and lets her crawl inside. Both of their heads fit through the neck hole. The empty sleeves flop behind Heaven's shoulders as he holds Aspen. And their hearts are pressed together inside that shirt. It is then that Aspen kisses Heaven again, hungrily, with tiny specks of gold morning catching in her hair. Heaven thinks it is about him. He does. He doesn't understand that inside her mind, she is kissing Darren.

"I wrote this song the night I asked my beautiful bride to marry me," Darren said when he returned for an encore, and Aspen almost threw up, because he had sung the words of that song looking at her so many times. "*She's a burning bush, an angel on fire, a boiling concoction of faith and desire.*"

"This is your song," Heaven whispered into Aspen's ear. "I think about you when I hear it." Aspen clutched at his hand.

That was the best moment of Heaven's life to date. It's funny, how, if asked, the two of them would tell two different stories about the same night, and they would be telling the truth. Heaven would say, "All my dreams came true." And Aspen would say, "It was a nightmare."

After the show, Aspen couldn't imagine going back to sleep in a cold motel room, or worse yet, the back seat of a car, listening to Shae snore, so instead, she invited Heaven for a walk on the beach.

So now, here they are, lodged in a cave's infected throat, rolling on bottles and cigarette butts, and now, Heaven is moving over Aspen, his wiry body tensed with love and longing. Aspen hopes that when he is done, he will fall on her and smother her. Outside the cave, waves crash, drowning small things—bugs, bar napkins, beads.

*

Darren is drowning in his wife's perfume. Why is it that rich women always smell like shit? He hates that thick, throat-clogging tartness. Turning away from Ronnie's scratchy head, which rests on his shoulder, he thinks of the way Aspen smells, subtle and sweet, like an apple blossom. His belly clutches as he remembers how Aspen looked at him when he left the stage. The heat behind her eyes had gone cold.

"Shall we order room service?" Ronnie asks. They are sitting on the floor, leaning against the bed of his hotel room, and a chick flick is playing on the big screen. As some lady wails over her dying friend, Darren rolls his eyes and looks away. He has never been one for all of that melodrama over cancers and breasts and fried tomatoes. Shadows from the television dance over Ronnie's tanned skin like roaches.

"I'm not hungry, but you can if you want," he says. "How is Evan?"

“Good. He’s good.” She smiles, showing deep wrinkles around her eyes, which are too close together. They always have been, but now, their closeness offends him. Before today, he found it kind of cute. “I show him your picture every night at bedtime.”

“Cool. Glad he’s good.” Darren wants more information than this, but he isn’t sure what questions to ask. Have Evan’s teeth come in? Is he crawling? Does he laugh? He isn’t sure when these milestones should occur and isn’t particularly keen to reveal his ignorance. “I miss him,” he says. He covers his face with his hand and watches the way the light falls through the spaces between his fingers. He does miss his son, as much as a man can miss someone he has met three times. His love for his son is more cerebral than visceral. It tortures him, sometimes, this lack of feeling for his own flesh and blood. He has gone for days without thinking of Evan, ever. Still, he bought his bandmates Cuban cigars to celebrate his son’s birth. That has to count for something.

He removes his hand and studies his wife’s body, which is long and mostly tight. Even through the fabric of her jeans, he can see the muscles in her thighs. She always had great legs. And a great ass. It is a little bigger than it used to be now though. He tries to be tolerant of this imperfection. If she is fat, it is from carrying his son. He reaches out and grabs her breast, nonchalantly, the way he might impulsively reach for a nearby cigarette lighter or Rubix cube. Something to play with. It isn’t a particularly earnest action. It lacks motivation.

His wife turns to him and smiles. “I miss you,” she says, showing her big teeth. She places a cool hand on his cheek and kisses him, and when her tongue flicks against his, he thinks, suddenly and irrevocably, of a serpent. For the rest of the day, he sees her that way, a long, slimy-tongued serpent, and he can’t make love to her because of this. It feels like bestiality. She cries when he tells her this, after he has downed a six pack.

Thick sobs choke her throat, but she doesn't leave. She doesn't even say anything, just lays there crying, burying her face in the hotel comforter. He wants to smack her. "I'm sorry," he says, and heads for the shower. He peels off his clothes, steps in, and stands with his hands pressed against the intricate tile work, wishing the pounding water would drown him.

*

Heaven is drowning at the center of a great ocean with no shore. The roaring waves go on forever. Ink-black water swallows him whole. Thrashing to the surface, he gasps for air.

He jolts awake. The dream dissipates, but still, the waves crash. It's cold. Sunlight burns through his closed eyelids. Rocks dig into his shoulder blades. Where is he? He opens his eyes and sees a jagged stone ceiling. The cave. Now he remembers.

"Aspen?" he asks, looking to the place beside him. It's empty. "Aspen?" He stumbles to his feet. Running his fingers through his hair, he scans the cave. Aside from the shadows dappling the walls, it is vacant. Maybe she went for a walk. Quickly, he pulls on his clothes, exits the cave, and climbs down the rock wall. His feet fumble, skidding and kicking loose pebbles to the beach below. He sees the form of a woman walking along the shoreline.

"Aspen?" he calls.

Aspen doesn't answer. He jumps from the rock wall into the sand, remembering the way Aspen slept in the cave, rolled up in an exquisite little ball, snoring softly. He cannot believe that she is his. He thinks about the way his mom used to sing, *"Well, it's nice to be alive when a dream comes true, maybe you should stick around, it could happen to you."*

"You were right, Mom," he whispers. Aspen turns and walks away from him, wading ankle-deep in the water. He follows. "But you were wrong, Dad," he mutters.

He imagines returning to New York for Christmas with Aspen in tow. “Dad, this is my beautiful wife, Aspen,” he would say. His father would cough. That’s what he always did when he didn’t know what to say. At night, his father would lie awake, listening jealously as the springs on Heaven’s childhood bed creaked and groaned. His father would probably make an effort to impress to Aspen, making her breakfast and offering her little trinkets, bracelets and such. Of course, Aspen would never notice him. What would she want with Heaven’s balding, paunchy father?

And his mother? What would she say if she met Aspen? Heaven supposes he will never know. His mother is somewhere in Jamaica with that reggae musician she ran off with. She left Heaven two hundred dollars and a note scrawled on a McDonalds napkin, which he kept in the bottom of his shoe until he met Brick. Now, it stays under his mattress.

Dear Heaven,

By the time you get this, I will be gone. Please don’t view this as abandonment. View it as an expression of my trust in you. You are strong, ready for anything the world throws at you. I know this. I know I am at last free to pursue my path, unencumbered by the responsibility of raising a child. For you are no longer a child. You are a man. Do well, be brave, and know I will always love you.

A million kisses,

Mom

The note was considerably kinder than anything his father ever said. “You’ll never amount to anything,” his father screamed. But L.A. thinks differently. L.A. thinks he is “a thrilling new voice wrapped in the bod of Adonis.” That’s what the reviewer from *The L.A. Times* said after his first gig a few days ago. Heaven loves singing, feeling the thick notes sliding up his throat and over his tongue. He feels like himself when he is up there on that stage. He forgets to be afraid.

He has almost caught up to Aspen. He can see the sun glinting off her red hair. “Aspen, wait up!” he calls. She turns.

“Excuse me?” she says.

“Oh,” Heaven says, stopping short. “Sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

Shrugging, the woman who is not Aspen turns and wanders off alone down the beach, walking the water’s edge like a tight wire.

*

Just now, the woman who is Aspen is sitting on a motel bed dialing the phone, still wearing Heaven’s shirt from last night. The words *Protect Your Nuts* are printed in brown across her breasts. Mascara is smeared to her cheekbones, and her skin is blotchy.

“Hey, Darren, it’s Aspen.”

She speaks into the receiver, trying to sound perky. Visualization helps, so she imagines her words being tiny little pink balloons, floating happily up to the motel ceiling. “I just wanted to say hi since I didn’t get the chance to say it last night. Give me a call if you feel like it.”

“Why do you keep calling him?” Shae is brushing her teeth for once in her life, and so, she is, for all intents and purposes, foaming at the mouth.

“I only left one message,” Aspen says, staring at the phone, willing it to ring.

“You called sixteen times. I counted. He hears it ringing whether you leave a message or not.”

Aspen shakes the phone a bit. “I can’t believe he’s not calling me back.”

Shae shrugs. “He’s probably fucking his wife.”

A little hornet’s nest of rage has been building steadily in Aspen’s belly for weeks now, and it breaks wide open. All of the hornet sting her insides at once. “Fuck you, Shae,” she whispers.

Shae stops brushing. “Fuck you, Aspen!” She launches her toothbrush at Aspen, and it strikes her right breast, leaving a trail of foam on Heaven’s shirt before it plops to the floor. “I try to save you from making a whore of yourself for that narcissistic freak, and this is the thanks I get? Everyone is laughing at you, laughing at Darren Silverado’s little slut, and you’re too fucking self-absorbed to notice.”

Aspen puts the phone down and turns slowly. “Get out.”

“What?” Shae says.

“I said, get out, bitch.”

“I’m a bitch? I’m a bitch?” Shae grabs wadded up clothes from corners and shoves them into her suitcase as she speaks. “You leave me alone night after night to go fuck your stupid band boy, and I’m a bitch? I put up with your shit, your preening and prancing and showdogging, and I’m a bitch? Do you know what it’s like to be me, standing next to you? Do you know what it feels like to be fucking invisible? But I put up with your shit, because I loved you Aspen. I fucking loved you.”

She slams the suitcase.

Aspen shakes as Shae's purple head and slight shoulders disappear through the doorway.

"I loved you too," she yells.

But Shae is gone.

COLD HEARTED MAN

*Like a snake, he had no friends. He didn't need no one.
Hurt his pride deep inside. He was another mother's son
Reputation, broken glass. Everybody prayed
for their lives on the street where they happened to meet.*

*--Ronald Belford Scott (July 9, 1946-February 19, 1980)**

A man on his way to redemption should sing. And Sonny is on his way to redemption. Polished and restrung, Dog is sitting in the back of the truck, safe in its velvet-lined case. Sonny has spoken to some groupies who know that Darren Silverado is staying at the Hyatt Regency, the only high end hotel in town. They didn't know the room number, but no matter. Darren will have to come out of his room sometime. Sonny will wait in the lobby, hand the guitar to Darren, and voila, Darren will understand, finally, that this whole thing has been a big misunderstanding. Maybe he will shake Sonny's hand. Sonny can see it now. Darren's hand, the hand that has clasped four Grammys, wrapping around his fingers, gripping them like he means it. "Let bygones be bygones, man," Darren will say. Darren would say that. Sonny hardly dares to hope it, but he hopes anyway, that maybe Darren will be ready and willing to take up where they left off. Maybe he will invite Sonny to tour with him, and what is left of his life will mean something.

"Jimmy Fucking Hendrix Reincarnated," he says to Macy.

“What?” she asks absently, staring in the rearview mirror, absorbed in applying a sheen of green eye shadow to her lids. She looks like a fucking clown.

“Jimmy Fucking Hendrix. That’s what the newspaper called me the first time Icarus in Asbestos played.”

“That’s pretty neat,” she says.

She just doesn’t get it. Jimmy Fucking Hendrix Reincarnated is on his way to redemption, about to fulfill his destiny. It will make some cover story for *Rolling Stone*. But still, Sonny doesn’t sing. Instead, he falls silent, trembling. Macy mashes up against him, clammy and sweaty. Smelling like cheap makeup, she jostles her legs, clearly nervous as well. “Holy crow! I’m gonna meet Darren Silverado in the flesh,” she said this morning when she woke up. Sonny watched her put on her best dress, the one with the sunflowers, along with the red stilettos and a thick coat of Daring Cherry lip gloss. She bit her nails off as evenly as possible.

Now, they pick up some fries and shakes to calm their nerves. “I got Indiana Avenue from my cup!” Macy announces. “What’d you get?”

“What the fuck, Macy.” Sonny snorts. He is not in the mood for this. “Who gives a shit about your stupid little game?” Holding the bag, Sonny stuffs his mouth with fries.

From the corner of her eye, Macy watches him. “Can I have some?” she says finally.

“What?” Sonny asks absently.

“Fries. Can I have some fries?”

“Oh, yeah.” Sonny hands her a couple and goes on eating.

“I wish I could slap you,” she whispers.

“What?” he asks, not sure he heard her right.

“Nothing.”

He turns on the radio. Kurt Cobain is singing.

“Turn that off,” she says. “It sets my teeth on edge.” When Sonny doesn’t listen, she turns it off herself.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” Sonny asks, but he doesn’t turn it back on. He is too lost in his memories, his fantasies, his possibilities, to pay Macy any mind. Palm trees rush past, and buildings dressed up in white stucco and brick-colored tile loom in the windshield and then evaporate in the rearview mirror. The air smells like salt, and Sonny rolls down the window to take a big gulp.

“Roll that up,” Macy says. “You’ll mess up my hair.”

Sonny snorts. “Like it was attractive to begin with.”

So, Sonny and Macy the clown arrive at the Hyatt Regency, and for all of their prior preening, Sonny feels woefully out of place with the expensive suits and the designer smells. Still, they plant themselves firmly on a high-backed couch that looks like it was stolen from an Al Capone movie, and they wait. It is somewhere between midmorning and lunchtime, so Sonny figures Darren will just be waking up. He remembers the late night parties that came part and parcel with fame--the groupies and the bottles and the mirrored, powdery highs. God, how he remembers. Soon, Darren will roll out of bed and order room service. Or not. Maybe he will come out for breakfast. He will come out, catch sight of Sonny on the couch, and do a double take. “Sonny, is that you?” he will ask, and Sonny will laugh and say, “Yeah, man, it’s me, I brought you something.” He will open the case, and Darren will remember that day in the thrift store, and that other day, the fateful day he expelled his best friend, his right hand man from heaven, in that fucking rage he has cursed and cursed again so many times. He might get misty

at the sight of the guitar. He used to cry sometimes. Sonny remembers that. He would not be surprised if Darren cried. “Where is he?” Macy asks.

“It’s been ten fucking minutes, Macy.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah, ten minutes. We could be here all day. Settle in.” She leans back and does her best impression of settling in, but she is unsuccessful for the most part. Her face is all scrunched up like a wad of toilet paper. Her knees are jostling again, up-down, up-down. Just the motion is making Sonny nervous. “Would you fucking quit that?”

“What?”

“That leg jostling thing. Why can’t you fucking act human for five seconds?”

And she starts to cry. Right there in the middle of the Hyatt Regency lobby with the Liz Claiborne suits looking on, she starts to wiggle and weep. This is too much for Sonny. He will not let her do this, not today. He will not let her ruin his redemption. “Get out,” he says under his breath. She looks at him, and her eyes are wide and smeared with green paint. “You heard me, get out.”

Something breaks inside her eyes. He sees it. It seems like all of the pissed-offedness she has stored up for twenty-two years comes flooding up her into her face, and finally, exits her mouth. “Stick it up your fat rear end, Sonny Rickman,” she screams.

And out she goes.

*

In comes Aspen, through a bar door. The Screamin’ Demon is the name stenciled on the menus. By the PacMan machine, she reaches out a hand to steady herself, wondering at the way the

colors streak and dance around her. Her feet find the floor to be wobbly at best, and her head, her lovely head, is spinning.

The bar is stuffed with misshapen Picasso-ish faces, their misplaced eyes stuck smack dab in the middle of putty foreheads and cheeks and chins. The deformed faces all say, “Hello, Aspen,” like she is a movie star. One man wants her picture. She poses with him, remembering to don a cover girl smile. She can smile like nobody’s business, even when her guts are breaking open and spilling bile all over. Smile, smile, flash, and when she starts to fall, the man steadies her and kisses her straight on the lips. And she shouldn’t care. Every day, this man, that man, kisses her, gropes her, licks her cheek like she is some sort of human lollipop set out on the plaza for general consumption. Her boundaries are as thick as the membrane around the yolk of an egg. But tonight—maybe it is the drugs, or the brand of tequila—she cares. All of the sudden, she cares. “Did I say you could kiss me?” she asks, and reels away.

Those deformed faces are all watching. Hello, Aspen. Hello, Aspen. All of them, watching the queen, waiting for the king to emerge from his Paradise, Darren, her Darren, who is just now fondling his wife’s meager breasts. That Darren.

Aspen’s brain is on cruise control, and it cruises right down memory lane, to the scriptures of her youth. Inexplicably, she laughs and says, “Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she.” And the deformed faces laugh too, showing big, yellow teeth like she has just told a joke about a one-legged man in a bar. Which makes her think of bars.

She tumbles to the bar and orders a Long Island. More bang for your buck, Shae always says. And where is Shae? Maybe she is in Boise or Japan or Constantinople. Maybe she is on the moon. Who knows?

There is no such thing as drowning your sorrows. They stay inside your belly, little fuckers, swimming around in the alcohol. If you fill your belly with enough vodka or bourbon or gin, they might just ride the tide into your face and slip out through your eyes. Aspen's sorrows do just that, and Aspen, beautiful, fucked-up Aspen, is dripping mascara on the bar, thinking of Darren's strong, cool hands wandering over his wife's imperfect form. His wife probably has warts. She does. And cellulite. As if that weren't enough, her teeth are too big.

Speaking of teeth, some men are like sharks, rows and rows of razor teeth, hungry for blood. That man who kissed Aspen, he is like that. He is the kind of man who will only take no for an answer if people are watching. Men like him are everywhere, and they prey on the Aspens of the world, candy-colored, fucked-up girls with perfect breasts who are dripping mascara on the bar. Men like him smell blood, and it makes them want to feed.

This guy--he doesn't even have a name, he doesn't even deserve a name--struts over to Aspen and puts his hand on her thigh. She can hardly feel his hot hand through the thick waves of her stupor, but finally, she notices that he is talking to her with his big, yellow teeth. His breath smells like rotting meat. And when she focuses on it, that heat on her leg, which at first feels two thousand miles away, turns out to be his fingers. They feel like a family of spiders rustling along her skin. Cringing, she runs a search in her brain files for the word that means no. Oh, wait. No. No means no. "No," she says.

We have already discussed this particular shark's reaction to no, so when he does a quick scan of the bar patrons, and no one seems to be watching, he decides to pointedly ignore Aspen's

rebuttal. He shoves his hand straight up her skirt until she can feel the tips of his fingers through the silk of her panties. The world is spinning, colors are streaking, and a man who does not take no for an answer has his hand on her panties. Again.

Drugs do something to you. They take you out of time. When you are on drugs, you can visit any time in your whole life like it is happening now. Sometimes, you hop in the time machine because you want to, and sometimes it abducts you, whether you want to go for a ride or not. Aspen takes a time machine to three years ago, and she is on a couch, fumbling with a Jesus freak she thought she might marry, right up until he shoved his hands up her skirt and didn't stop, even when she said no. At first she thought he didn't hear her, because he loved her, this man, so she said it louder. "No!" Panic rippled around the edges of that no like heat waves. She looked up into his eyes. They were empty. Black. Wormholes into another world. He didn't see her. She bucked against his impossible weight and thought, with the stunned clarity of the recently damned, *Hell is made of bricks*. The last no was a scream, a sob. "Daddy!"

She went limp and left her little body, floated above it like a balloon while the Jesus freak ripped off her panties and shoved himself inside her. Something small and secret inside her shattered. He was sharp. Her guts tore. Little coiled organs uncoiled and slithered around her belly, settling in all the wrong places. The discarded panties had yellow dots on them. They stared up at her like tiny eyes. She laughed. She remembers that. Maybe not aloud, but at least quietly, she laughed at the tiny, yellow eyes. They smelled like popcorn. Or maybe the couch did. The Jesus freak grunted like a rooting piglet at the state fair, and she heard him from her place above him. Barely. She heard something else too. Someone was crying. A girl child.

It took a minute from beginning to end. Maybe less. A minute, give or take, during which she was a thing instead of a she. That was the worst part. The thingness he made her feel,

the way she tore right up the middle and felt her self leak out through the rip. She was like a split seam on a pair of jeans. Unsewn.

When he was done, he yanked up his jeans and told her she was Jezebel. She drifted like a feather, down, down, down, settled into her mottled, unsewn body. Lying on the couch, bleeding a little, sticky in the place between her legs, she begged. She remembers that, begging. “Look at me,” she said, her voice breaking and shattering in shards over the room, like glass. As if he could give back what he had stolen. “Look at me.” He stared straight ahead, buttoned his fly, walked out.

And so Jezebel ran. Ran until she found a man, a Jesus-looking man with ocean eyes who sang songs about love and peace, and she ran, and she ran, and she ran. And she never said no again. Because if you never say no, no one can ever not listen. If you never say no, you are in charge.

But now, she is saying it again, and this shark is not listening, and this time, she thinks, she will run before he is inside her, and with every bit of strength left in her body, she stands and pushes his hand and she runs. She runs. She runs. Through the bar, out the door, over the sidewalk, across the street with its jagged yellow lines, its streaking, blurry cars. A squeal of tires, and something huge and metal strikes her hard, like a Goliath sledgehammer.

And she is gone. Just gone.

*

She's gone, Darren thinks. His hand on his wife's breast is limp and cool. The stretch marks crisscrossing the sagging sack were put there by his son, and yet, he does not know this woman, not really. The mother of his child is sitting here naked, and all he can see is Aspen. Ronnie has

forgiven him for the way he behaved. She is gentle and magnanimous. And all he can think of is Aspen. “She’s gone,” he whispers.

“What?” his wife says. He stands, runs his hands through his hair, yanks on his pants and says, “Look, I’m sorry.” He kisses her cheek, which is covered in tiny hairs, like centipede legs. “I’m going now.”

He follows the maze of hallways that crisscross the hotel and makes his way to the lobby. Immediately, a hundred voices swell. “Darren Silverado. Oh my god, Darren.” They are like hungry wolves these fans, and he cannot imagine signing another autograph just now. His signature is worth \$1,000. They said so in *Rolling Stone*. In school, not one person asked him to sign a yearbook. Not one, and now this?

Purposefully, he shoves on, until one of them grabs his arm. He turns to look, and who is standing there shaking but Sonny Fucking Rickman, older now, fatter, but the same rat face and squinty eyes, with one hand outstretched and a guitar hanging from the other, and man, Darren just doesn’t need this shit right now, and he says it, “Sonny, I don’t need your shit right now. I don’t want to shake your hand.” He shrugs Sonny off, hoping he will evaporate like mist, but instead, Sonny grabs his arm again and smiles, showing his rotting teeth. Darren can smell his breath. It smells like shit.

“Wait, brother.” Sonny puts a hand on his arm. “Just let me show you.” He sets his guitar case on the floor and kneels in front of it.

What the fuck is he doing? Asshole. Darren starts to walk away, but Sonny grabs his leg.

“Wait, Darren!” he says. “Let me show you!” He fumbles with the latches on the guitar case and starts to open it.

Darren raises his foot, fighting the urge to kick Sonny in the face. Instead, he brings his boot down hard on the guitar case, slamming it shut. "I don't want to see your fucking piece of shit guitar," he says.

As he storms away, he looks back and sees Sonny, still on his knees, staring at the guitar case. His eyes look the way Darren's mother's eyes used to look. Like icebergs. Empty and vast. Darren almost feels sorry for him. Almost. He stops, seeing for a second, that boy that stood with him in the thrift shop window. But quickly, that boy evaporates, leaving a junkie in his place. "Sonny Fucking Rickman," Darren mutters.

And he is gone. Just gone.

CASTLES MADE OF SAND

*He cries oh, girl you must be mad,
What happened to the sweet love you and me had?
Against the door he leans and starts a scene,
And his tears fall and burn the garden green
And so castles made of sand fall into the sea eventually.*

--James Marshall Hendrix (November 27, 1942-September 18, 1970)

Macy Blue has a special place in her heart for “Blue Suede Shoes,” ever since Sonny gave her the nickname. She can’t help but think The King’s reference to her name, written years before she was even born, means something, that it is the tie that binds her and Elvis together, linking them through space and time. Now, lying in the motel bed, she listens to “Blue Suede Shoes” over and over, straining to hear exactly what Elvis is trying to say. Smelly smokes wafts in through the vents, and the scratchy fabric of the bedspread rips her sanity to shreds. Eventually, she sings along good and loud, until her vocal chords threaten to snap, with her name inserted in the place where “blue suede shoes” should be.

*“Well, you can knock me down, step in my face,
Slander my name all over the place.
Do anything that you want to do, but uh-uh,
Honey, lay off of my Blue. Don’t you step on my Macy Blue.*

You can do anything, but lay off of my Macy Blue.”

At last, it hits her like a semi truck. Elvis wrote this song in expectation of this moment, the moment she, his Macy Blue, would be stepped on and slandered by that pig of a man, Sonny Rickman. It was a warning. Sonny had better watch out. Elvis is good and ticked. She wonders if Elvis will attack, make Sonny die of a coronary on that couch in the lobby. It could happen. She wouldn't be surprised.

The thought of Sonny twitching his way to his death in a smelly old lobby gives her some comfort. Quiet at last, she realizes all the singing and screaming has left her good and hungry. What she could really use is a peanut butter and banana sandwich. But she doesn't have the energy to get one, and even if she did, she needs to conserve the money she has left. She closes her eyes and begins to drift off, dreaming of that sandwich. She can smell the salt sweetness of the peanut butter, the rich tartness of the almost ripe banana slices.

That is, of course, when Sonny Rickman barges through the door, waking her right up from her most beautiful dreams, as usual. So it turns out he has not died of a heart attack after all, which chaps her hide. But now, she notices he looks like he has been crying. His eyes are swollen. The sweaty remnants of his meager hair are plastered to his head, and he smells like whisky. Whisky and smoke. Dog is still in his hand.

“Didn't you find Darren?” she asks.

He answers with a little muffled sob that forces a shot of snot from his right nostril.

“Son-dried Tomato, you okay?” she asks in spite of herself, her voice softening up like meat under a tenderizer.

And oh my god, he is not okay, because he falls to his knees and starts to pound the

mattress with his fist.

“Sonny?” she whispers, forgetting that she hates him. “Sonny?” She crawls across the mattress and buries her fingers in the tufts of hair above his ears. “What is it, Son-dried Tomato?” She kisses his bald spot.

“Darren Fucking Silverado. That’s what it is,” he yells, his voice cracking.

She is afraid the people in the next room will call the cops. “Shh,” she says, partly to comfort him, partly in hopes of shutting him up.

“I’d like to punch him right in the middle of his fat fucking face,” he screams.

“He’s not really fat.”

Probably not the right thing to say.

“No. Thanks for fucking pointing that out.” Sonny’s words are sharp and cold, made of stainless steel. He jabs her in the chest again and again. “He is not fat! Or bald! Or broke! Or dying!”

“What?”

“I said he’s not fat, as you so helpfully noted. Or bald. Or dying of fucking AIDS.” He punctuates the declaration by yanking up his sleeve and shoving the jagged purple pattern of track marks in her face.

“You’re not dying,” she says, smiling a little crooked smile. Her face has gone pale. “You’re not dying.”

He laughs, a sound something between a barking dog and a walrus with indigestion. “Not fucking dying? What the fuck do you know, living in your little tin can in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere? What the fuck do you know about life, Macy Blue?”

“I know that you don’t have AIDS. I know because you slept with me, that’s how I

know. I know because you wouldn't do that to me." She wraps her arms around his neck and pulls his face to her flat chest.

He jerks away. "How the fuck do you know what I would do?"

She looks into his eyes, the copper colored eyes that have looked down on her while he moved inside her. And all of the sudden, she knows. She knows. "If you're dying, I'm dying," she whispers. She understands that much from watching after school specials. And it is more than she can take. "Oh, holy cr—holy shit." Her eyes roll around, looking for something to focus on, something that will bring her back to reality, snap her out of this terrible dream. "It's a dream. I was just dreaming of peanut butter and banana sandwiches. And now I'm dreaming this. That's all. I'll wake up soon." But she doesn't wake up. Sonny Rickman is still kneeling in front of her, slobbering and sobbing. She stares at him until, suddenly, she starts to laugh, a rusty truck backfiring over and over and over.

Something in her voice brings Sonny out of his stupor. "Oh, fuck, Macy. Oh, fuck. I just needed a ride. A ride from there to here, to give Darren the guitar. Oh, fuck. What have I fucking done?"

"You've killed me. That's what." Macy Blue balls up her pudgy fingers. Something strong inside her, a magnet or gravitational core, yanks her arm back. Then, the magnet lets go, and her fist flies forward. Macy Blue's fist strikes like a sledgehammer, and beads of blood spatter from Sonny Fucking Rickman's shattered nose all over the motel comforter.

*

Huddled beneath a too-sweet smelling lilac bush, Darren takes a swig from a half-empty bottle. His hands are shaking. Rotting purple flowers litter the ground, and bits of trash are pushed up against the fence behind him. It smells bad, but at least he can think. Paparazzi. Producers.

Groupies. Why can't they all leave him the hell alone, just for one night? He isn't even safe in his own hotel room. Ronnie is still there, he's sure, whimpering and wishing for explanations. And he has nothing to give her. Nothing. Of course, with his luck, he is no safer here than anywhere else. With his luck, he will wind up on the cover of *Entertainers Magazine*, drunk and drooling underneath a bush. He can see the Headline now. *Has Darren Silverado Gone the Way of Sonny Rickman?*

"Indeed, I have." He yanks the label from the bottle bit by bit. "Here's to you, Sonny, my brother."

Sonny Fucking Rickman. He never saw that coming, but all the same, wham, there he was, a blast from the past, rewind to fifth grade. The second Sonny's stooped shoulders passed out the hotel doorway, Darren Wilkensen reared his acne-scarred head.

Now, Darren remembers Dog, the way it felt the first time the guitar strings cut into his tender fingertips. And then, he rewinds again, to that Christmas. He was huddled under another tree in a room that smelled like pine needles and cinnamon, with his father and mother standing nearby. He remembers it because it was the only Christmas his parents were actually there. Most Christmases, they were off on some ski trip, leaving him alone with the emptiness that engulfed him like a fog when they were gone, along with his smothering aunt, who smelled like Vics Vapo Rub and talked in a nasally voice. But that Christmas, his parents were there, and the world was crisp and cold and icy blue, and his big-nosed reflection gaped at him from the curved, shiny face of a red Christmas ornament. That year, his parents gave him a *Complete Volume of the Works of Shakespeare*, wrapped up in snowman wrapping paper with a candy cane attached. He was five, so naturally, he was more interested in the candy than the book. That did not bode well for him. If he remembers correctly, and he does, his father called him a common house brat, which Darren

could only guess belonged to the same family as the common house rat. Rats were not good things. They smelled bad and ate television cords. He was like that. It made him cry to think it.

“We’re so proud of you,” his father said, though, after Darren read the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* at his kindergarten graduation.

“But soft, what light from yonder window breaks,” Darren calls through the branches, looking up at the side of the hotel, admiring the way the sunlight ricochets from its myriad windows. He wipes a speck of drool from his chin with the back of his hand. “Arise fair sun, and kill the envious moon.” Envious. That’s what his father is.

“We’re so proud of you,” his father says now, when he comes to watch Darren accept his Grammys. But when the supermodels kiss Darren on the cheek, he can see the envy squirming behind his father’s bulging eyes. “That’s my boy,” he called out once when Christy Brinkley stopped to say hello. His parents never came to his guitar recitals, but they sure are around when the cameras are flashing. His mother has used the money he passes along to buy herself a set of veneers for her teeth, at \$2,000 dollars a pop. The dentist did a bad job. Her teeth are too big for her mouth now, and they are so white, they hurt Darren’s eyes. Their whiteness is especially conspicuous when she is standing near his father, butted up against his yellow parchment skin. That doesn’t happen very often though. She still hates his father for running off with that Shelia floozy, which is what she calls his father’s new wife.

“Father, I want to kill you,” Darren drones. He takes another scalding pull from the bottle, which is filled with suspicious looking gold liquid, probably tequila, but maybe whiskey. He has peeled the label away completely, and he is drunk enough that his taste buds are shot, so it’s hard to tell. As the liquid burns its way into his belly, he realizes he really does want to kill his father. All those evenings, the way those proud, unflinching eyes stared back at him from

across the dinner table. “Father, I want to kill you.” He says it again, louder this time. It feels good to say it. The way his father, stone-faced, swallowed French onion soup without so much as a slurp or a smile. The way he never laughed at Darren’s jokes. Never once.

“Why did the snail paint an S on his car, Dad?”

“I don’t know, Darren.”

“So people would say, ‘Look at the S car go’!”

Stony silence.

The way his father hounded him, noticing his every error. The unwashed fork. The socks balled up in the corner of the bedroom. The untucked shirt tail. All were precipitators for outbreaks of silent disdain. Darren’s civilized parents didn’t believe in spanking, so they punished him with silence.

“Echo the sounds of silence,” Darren slurs loudly, which is probably why his wife finds him at last. Her tiny hands part the branches. He knows those fingers, the dainty rings, the freckles on the knuckles, before her face even peeks through the leaves.

“Hello there, dear,” he says, laughing manically.

“Darren, what the hell are you doing. The press is going to have a field day if they find you here. Is that what you want? You want your fans to see you this way? Your career will be over.” She reaches her hand toward him and crooks a finger, beckoning. “Come on, before they find you.”

“Fuck,” he mutters, and grabs her hand. “The jig is up.”

“Let’s get you to bed,” she says sternly when they reach the hotel room, having somehow managed to evade the throngs by taking the back stairs. He falls face down onto the bed and

inhales the sweet lilac scented sheets, which almost overwhelm the sour smell of his breath.

Almost.

*

When Aspen wakes up, she notices instantly that the sheets smell like bleach. Also, monitors, adorned with various lights and noisemakers, stand guard next to the bed. An IV runs into her arm, hurting her when she moves. Which must mean she is in a hospital. “Nurse,” she calls tentatively, and one comes running, just like in the movies--a massive woman with gray hair and spectacles.

“Well, hello, sunshine,” the smiling nurse says. Her gravelly voice sounds like she has been smoking since she hit puberty, maybe before that.

“Hello,” Aspen says back, and smiles too, because she is nothing if not nice. “Where am I?”

“You are in the Malibu General Hospital, honey. You were hit by a car. You have a concussion, so you’ll be staying here for a few days.” The nurse checks Aspen’s IV.

“Am—am I alright?”

“Oh, yes, honey. Nothing but a good concussion and a few bruises. Look at that one.” She points at Aspen’s arm, which is purple from elbow to wrist. “You didn’t break anything, though. We checked.” Aspen smiles feebly. “The baby is fine too, miraculously enough.”

Aspen’s stops breathing. “What?”

“The baby. It’s fine.”

“What baby?”

The nurse touches Aspen’s hand. “You’re pregnant, honey.” Aspen stares. “You didn’t know?”

Aspen shakes her head. "I'm pregnant?"

The nurse nods. "Frankly, I'm glad you didn't know. I didn't like to think you would have taken all those drugs if you did."

"I wouldn't have," Aspen whispers. Her heart races. "Um, how pregnant am I?"

"Six weeks," the nurse says.

So it is Darren's. Aspen looks out the window, watching a woman eat a sandwich and read a book. She turns back to the nurse. "Do I get a phone call?"

The nurse guffaws until her ample belly shakes. "What do you think this is? Prison? You get all the phone calls you want." She pushes the phone on the bedside table closer to Aspen. Then, she pats her on the head and turns to go. "Oh, yeah." She turns back. "Don't cross any more streets when you're high, honey."

"Okay," Aspen whispers. When the nurse leaves, Aspen starts to cry. The tears burn her cheeks. She touches her cheek in the place where it hurts most, and the sewed up ridge of a deep gash meets her fingertips. Panic congeals in her belly like bad milk. "Nurse!"

The nurse runs back into the room, orthopedic shoes pounding. "What is it, honey?"

"Am I—is my face ruined?" Her heart is pummeling her ribcage like a fist. She would rather die than this. She cannot imagine life as an ugly person. Her beauty is all she has.

The nurse laughs. "Your face is the prettiest face I've ever seen," she says. "I imagine it will be just the same when you leave here. Maybe a little scar, but nothing you won't be able to cover with a touch of makeup."

Relief floods Aspen. "Thank you. I'm sorry for bothering you," she says, and the nurse leaves again.

Aspen glances around the room, at the immaculate linoleum and the two urine-colored chairs poised in the corners, waiting for visitors. The curtains are a bluish shade of death, and the floor looks colder than the Alaskan tundra. In the next room, a woman is screaming at a nurse. “I want some fucking vicodin!”

Aspen has never been so alone. Crossing her arms over her belly, she stares at the wall and thinks about the stuff Darren said about his wife being the mother of his child. Well, now, she will be the mother of his child. Barely breathing, she dials his number and waits as it rings. She imagines him walking into her room, lighting up the dark hospital like the fourth of July. A woman’s voice answers.

“Um, is Darren there?”

“Yes, but he’s indisposed. May I ask who is calling?”

“This is Aspen.”

“What can I do for you? Aspen.” Each word is an ice dagger.

“Can you just tell him I’m in the hospital. I got hit by a car.”

“Hit by a *car*?” The woman sounds disgusted, as if getting hit by a car is a sin akin to prostitution.

“Yes.”

A pause, which is punctuated by the noises of paper shuffling in the background. “I will certainly let him know.” Click.

That click resonates with Aspen, echoing in her ears like a gun blast. It bounces around her brain like a ricocheting cannon ball as she sleeps, wakes, watches, sleeps, wakes, watches again for Darren to swagger through the door. “Has anyone called for me?” she asks the nurse every time she comes in.

“No, honey,” the nurse always says. Her compassionate tongue clucks grow ever more emphatic, eventually becoming so loud they rival the echo of the phone clicking. Finally, on day three, when Aspen is pulling on her shoes, the nurse says, “Honey, whoever he is, take my word for it. He doesn’t deserve a girl like you.”

And as Aspen climbs into a cab, she realizes the nurse was right.

“Where to?” The paunchy cab driver watches her in the rearview mirror. She can tell by the way his eyes widen that he will ask her for her phone number before the ride is over.

Aspen opens her mouth then shuts it, realizing she has no good answer to his question. “I don’t know,” she says finally. “I guess back to my car. It’s outside the Screamin’ Demon. Unless it got towed.”

“You just got out of the hospital. You don’t have nowhere else to go, somewhere safe?”

“Safe?” she whispers. Tears burn her eyes, and damn it, she almost starts to cry right there in the smoke smelling back seat of the taxi cab, with the cab driver staring like she’s a stripper on a pole. She opens the door and steps out. “Thank you. I won’t be needing a ride,” she manages to say.

“I could take you to my place,” he yells as she walks away.

Another thank you rises in her throat. She is nice. Always nice. She opens her mouth to say it, but somewhere between her throat and her lips, the phrase morphs. “Fuck you,” she calls. And she keeps walking.

Off the cab squeals. Hunching on a bench, Aspen pulls out her address book and flips through the pages, scanning the names. She keeps hearing the cab driver say “safe, safe, safe” over and over in her head, like a corny echoing voiceover from an old detective movie. And then she sees his name. *Heaven*. Aspen does not love Heaven. Sometimes, when she is drunk, she

doesn't even remember his name. But she knows he loves her. He told her so in the cave. So she goes to a pay phone on the corner and dials the number he scrawled in her book that night they first met.

"Hello," a voice says. Deep. Older. Definitely not Heaven.

Aspen fiddles with the hem of her T-shirt. "Um, do you think I could talk to Heaven?"

"May I ask who is calling?"

"Aspen."

She hears the voice call for Heaven, say her name.

"Hello?" Heaven's voice is eager. "Aspen?"

"Hello, Heaven. It's Aspen."

He laughs. "Yeah. I kinda got that."

"Sorry. I'm a little out of it."

"I've missed you so much. Where have you been?"

"It's a long story. Look, Heaven, I hate to ask this, but I got hit by a car—"

"You got hit by a car?" His voice is panicky.

"Don't worry. I'm fine. I could just—well, I need a place to crash for a while. Do you think I could stay with you?"

"Let me ask my dad." She hears voices mutter, and then Heaven comes back on the line.

"Brick says that would be fine."

When she arrives on Heaven's doorstep, he holds Aspen so close, her lungs deflate. It feels good not to breathe.

*

Sonny can't breathe. His heart pounds as he pulls the uniform over his head. Smoothing the shirt over his belly, he stares into the mirror, at the purple, bloodied bulb that was his nose. From the next room, Macy snores. He would wake her up to say goodbye, but what would be the point? She has not spoken to him since she found out the truth. Sonny walks out of the bathroom and looks at her, at the soft curve of her body as she sleeps. Her face is as smooth as a baby's. Inexplicably, he has the urge to kiss her eyelids. "I'll be back, Macy Blue," he whispers, and he opens the motel door.

FALL

I'm not tryin' to preach to no one, to no one at all.

I've seen so many of my good friends just rise to fall

'Cause they got so much money or a woman so fine.

Well, my friends have all been fools. It happens every time.

Every mother's son better hear what I say.

Every mother's son will rise and fall someday.

*--Ronald Wayne Van Zant (January 15, 1948-October 20, 1977)**

Look, if you know someone, you know him, even if you haven't seen him for years. You know his habits. If he's a heavy sleeper or a smoker or an insomniac. Or if he's, say, shy by nature and doesn't like it when people follow him to the bathroom. Darren Silverado is like that. He has never let his security guards stand outside the bathroom while he's doing his business. Something about his right to privacy. Now, taking this into account, let's just say you are Sonny Rickman and you know, really know, Darren Silverado, who has just denied you your shot at redemption. What do you do?

You show up at a concert wearing your uniform, flash your fake badge, and the doors to Darren's Backstage Paradise swing wide open. You stand outside his dressing room, and when he emerges, you follow him into the bathroom, ten steps behind, of course, with a thrift store guitar named Dog in hand. You wait, giggling a little because it turns out that Mr. Rock God

farts. And when he walks out, buttoning his custom made jeans, you slam the guitar into the middle of his fat fucking face.

After he falls onto the tile, with blood spurting from both nostrils and one eye and a hideous gash in his cheek, you leap on top of him and punch and pound until there is nothing left of that fat fucking face but pulp. Rage is coursing through you, and the air is made of adrenaline. Thick acid rises in your throat, gagging you. The whole world is painted red. Bam. Bam. Bam. That. Fat. Fucking. Face.

Darren screams, of course, at least until he loses consciousness. The guards, who were glad to have a few minutes off, are at the other end of the building, but they still hear him screaming, and they come running. The beat of their boots against the tile warns you. Bam. Bam. Bam. You snap out of your stupor, see Darren for the first time, floating in a halo of his own blood, looking just like that day in fifth grade with the snails and you whisper, “I’m sorry, son.”

And you are fucking gone.

At least this is the way Sonny imagines things will go. “*And another one bites the dust,*” Sonny screams, picturing the look Darren’s face will wear when Dog slams into it. He imitates Darren, making his eyes wide, forming his lips into a surprised “O.” He laughs, sings some more. “*You took me for everything that I had and kicked me out on my own. Are you happy, are you satisfied, how long can you stand the heat?*” As he drives, he slaps the steering wheel with his palms in time to the music. In the light of passing street lamps, his badge glints yellow.

“Concert,” a sign up ahead says, and rows of orange cones tell him where to go. He pays the parking attendant and pulls into a space. Gaggles of young, mostly naked girls loiter outside

the bar, giggling, applying lipstick, adjusting bra straps. Sonny looks them over as he walks toward the bar, envying Darren, thinking that his “brother” can take any one of these bitches home tonight. Any one. From a nearby car stereo, Darren’s voice blares. Sonny ducks behind the building.

Behind the bar, things are quieter. Sonny remembers this bar from the days before he became a rock god. He remembers the way the backstage area looks. Dingy and dark. Winding hallways. Bathrooms at the back. At the backstage door, he stops. He starts to worry, wondering if anyone will believe his getup. “You are a cop,” he tells himself. “Fake it ‘til you make it.” He pounds on the door. Nothing. Pounds again.

A moon face peeks out. “What up?”

“What up?” Sonny does his best to look affronted. “What up is I’m here to do my job. That’s what up.”

The moon face sizes him up. “You security?” he asks.

Sonny points at his badge.

The moon faced man shrugs and steps out of the way.

*

Darren is shitting, and the smell of it pleases him. He has become a connoisseur of bathroom experiences. They have become his sanctuary, his rare forays into sanity. As the years have gone by, he has become more and more particular about the reading material housed in his backstage bathrooms. Some stars insist on crust-less sandwiches or bowls of green M&M’s. All Darren asks for is a variety of educational magazines. He wants to use this rare private time to educate himself, since college passed him by. Now, grunting, he flips a page of *National Geographic*, reading with wonder about the Aztecs and their hideous rites. He quivers at the

violence portrayed in their ancient paintings. A chest carved open. Bloodied hands holding a beating heart to a boiling sun. Dismembered bodies toppling down the stairs of stone pyramids. “Fuck me,” he says. He is done shitting, but the article is interesting. He keeps reading until he finishes. Then, after setting the magazine carefully on the toilet tank, he wipes and flushes.

Some people say that our thoughts attract events to us. That if a man, for instance, is exiting a bathroom, wiping his wet hands on his jeans, thinking about human sacrifice, he is more likely to come in contact with some form of violence. This may be true. It may not be. Had Darren been reading, for instance, about the mating habits of wolverines, would Sonny Fucking Rickman have been less likely to be poised outside the bathroom door, holding Dog over his head, gripping the neck like a club? Not bloody likely that Darren’s thoughts would have made one bit of difference. He could have been thinking about fuzzy bunnies, and still, Sonny would have been standing there, red-faced, panting.

“What the fuck?” Darren says when he sees him. Stunned, he stops. He cannot believe it is happening. The thing the human brain does with violence is this. It refuses to believe. It normalizes the situation, so that Darren, looking at a clearly deranged Sonny, pauses instead of taking decisive action. He does not call for his guards. Instead, he says, “How the fuck did you get back here?” Sonny answers with a snorting little chuckle. He locks eyes with Darren, and they stand like that, as if they are in fifth grade again, engaged in a staring contest, until Sonny’s eyes flash, and before Darren has time to cover his face with his hands, Dog slams into his forehead. The pain is excruciating, and still, he cannot believe this is happening. Staggering, he covers his face with his hands, tasting bile. His hands come down bloody. Sputtering, he looks at Sonny, and sees, for a second, a glimpse of compassion in Sonny’s eyes. “Please,” he manages to mutter. Sonny’s gaze wavers. He glances at the door. He might run. His

indecision takes two seconds, maybe less, but Darren has a lot of time to think in those two seconds. Everything is slow-mo. He thinks about that first time he met Sonny, the way that freckled fist slammed into his face and busted his nose. Then, he thinks about Sonny sitting there watching him carve his initials in Dog's open mouth. He looks at Dog, who is now cracked up the middle, just in time to see the guitar's wooden face move in for the kill again.

Daren's head explodes in agony. Warm, wet blood runs over his face, as if he is in the shower. His mouth tastes like metal. Gagging, he tries to catch himself, but he sprawls backward, and even though he just finished shitting, he shits his pants again. He smells it as his head slams against the tile. He hears a cracking noise. His skull, he thinks. Or maybe his teeth. Before he loses consciousness, he wonders if they are broken. He thinks about his mother's teeth. Two thousand dollars a pop.

*

Fastforward. Sonny crouches behind a death-smelling dumpster in an alley a few miles from the bar, looking at the hot, sticky blood on his hands. After the beating, he jumped in his truck and drove here. He doesn't know why he stopped. He doesn't know why he did any of it. He tossed Dog's shattered corpse into the dumpster, but if the cops find Sonny, they will find his weapon as well, quickly enough. And they will find him. Won't they?

Half an hour ago, he saw a fleet of police cars scream by. He has been waiting since then for the cops to come cuff him, but for reasons he cannot fathom, they haven't. Maybe they think he is still in the bar. Probably. They probably shut down the bar, locked everyone inside. They are probably frisking concert goers left and right. Frisking them for what? Do they know Darren was beaten with a guitar? How could they? Darren was the only one who saw, and for all Sonny knows, Darren is dead. Maybe it was a while before anyone found him. Maybe they didn't

know he was missing until he failed to step on stage. Sonny imagines the announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Darren Silverado!” Thunderous applause. No Darren.

“Oh, fuck,” he whimpers. He remembers Darren, acne-ridden and smiling, preaching poetry, his eyes on fire. He goes back even further, sees those snails, his sons, lined up on the sidewalk. He remembers Darren’s ode. He moves forward in time, thinks of that lost shot at fame and the tracks on his arms and the prison bars and that fucking spaniel, remember that fucking spaniel who got run over by the train? Edgar Allen? He remembers him. And because that spaniel has always reminded him of Macy Blue, he starts to think of Macy, too. That girl, the best girl he has ever known, the only girl that has ever really loved him, might just die because he is such a fucking piece of shit. He is a murderer twice over.

He starts to say that, over and over in his mind. Fucking piece of shit. Fucking piece of shit. And he realizes that his death, no matter how soon it is, will not be soon enough. He decides it is time to once and for all do the world a favor and rid it of that fucking piece of shit has-been-extraordinaire, Sonny Fucking Rickman. He punches the dumpster again and again. Clang. Clang. Clang. If the cops aren’t smart enough to do their job, he will do it for them. Huffing like a steam engine, he peeks out from behind the dumpster, scanning the alley for the police that must be onto him for certain now. He listens for the pounding of boots on the pavement. None come. “Come on, fuckers!” he screams.

As he trips to Macy’s truck, his knuckles bleed, and he likes it. He deserves to bleed. When the cops finally do find him, he decides, he will threaten them and make them shoot him. Suicide by cop. He has heard of it before. But what happens next doesn’t make sense. Cops are supposed to be good at sniffing criminals out. But now, even though Sonny is right out in the open, he might as well be invisible. “Fuck you! Fuck all of you!” he screams while he is

climbing into the truck, but no one pays him any mind. Even the feral cat lolling at the edge of the lot ignores him.

He pulls out of the parking lot, his tires squealing. Buildings and signs and stoplights rush by, and it occurs to him that he can just drive the truck off of the next fucking bridge he comes to, and he plans on it. But when the next fucking bridge comes, he passes it up. The courage isn't there just yet. So he keeps driving. "Next fucking bridge," he says aloud. But he doesn't drive off that one either. He keeps driving. And driving. And driving. His knuckles drip blood on the steering wheel, and he drives for three hours straight, fills up the tank, and drives some more. It is after he fills up the gas tank that he realizes where he is going. "Can you get me a map to Mexico?" he asks the gas station attendant.

The attendant eyes Sonny's mangled hands but says nothing. "Here you go," he says, holding out a map. "That'll be three-fifty."

DEVIL INSIDE

Look at the faces. Listen to the bells.

It's hard to believe we need a place called hell.

*--Michael Kelland John Hutchence (January 22, 1960--November 22, 1997)**

Aspen and Heaven loll in the hot tub in Brick's backyard, staring up into the misty dark, trying to see the stars. "Do you believe in aliens?" Aspen asks, fluttering her fingers in the warm water.

Heaven shrugs. "Maybe. I don't know what I believe in."

"You don't believe in God?"

"Well, yeah. I believe in that."

"You know what I believe in?" Aspen says.

"What?"

"I believe in love." She says it before she thinks about it. But after she says it, she wonders. Does she still believe in love? A month ago, she did. Today, she isn't so sure. Touching her belly, she realizes that she at least still believes in her love for this baby. She already loves it fiercely, even though she has told no one of its existence. It's like all the electric love she used to feel for Darren is running through the umbilical cord to the piece of him growing inside her.

She hears footsteps crunching in the gravel and sits up, crossing her arms over her breasts. She hasn't told Heaven, but she doesn't like the way his dad looks at her. Not that she can complain. Brick has been nice. More than nice. He has told her she can stay with him as

long as she needs to. It's a tempting offer. She thought her family was rich, but apparently, they weren't. She has never seen anything like Brick's house, except maybe on television. *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* or something like that. Brick steps into the lamplight, holding a newspaper. He smiles at Aspen, and his eyes wander over her body.

"I should go in," she says to Heaven. "I'm kinda overheated."

As she starts to climb out, reaching for her towel, Brick says, "Isn't Darren Silverado that rock star you kids like?"

"Yeah," Heaven says.

"Well, look at this." Brick thrusts the paper under Heaven's nose. "Apparently, one of his ex-bandmates tried to kill him. With a guitar, if you can believe that."

Aspen's legs turn to rubber. Overhead, the faint stars shudder. Sinking onto the ground, she whispers, "Is he OK?"

Brick shrugs. "Maybe. They don't know yet. He's in critical condition."

*

Rewind. Before all the driving, on the night Sonny punched Darren's fat fucking face to pulp, Darren laid in the bathroom in a pool of his own blood for forty minutes before his guards dared disturb his privacy to check on him. The ambulances came. Sirens sang, groupies howled, and it didn't look good. You can beat someone to death. If you are good and pissed, you can kill someone with nothing but your bare hands and a guitar. And Sonny almost did. Almost, but not quite. Well, maybe he did. Darren didn't die, but when Sonny messed up his face like that, he killed Darren Silverado. Darren Wilkensen survived. Barely.

So, on the night we rewind to, what is left of Darren Wilkensen is lying alone in a bleach-scented hospital bed, and you would not recognize him if you didn't look at the name on the

chart next to his bed. The wood from the guitar shattered and slashed his face wide open. His eyes are swollen shut. His nose is broken and blue. His lips are three times their normal size, and one of them is split in half. The sheets around his feet jostle, and he lifts his head. Even this slight movement makes him cry out in pain. Volts of electric agony ride the wires of his nervous system.

“Where am I?” he calls, and the nurses come running.

“You’re in the hospital,” they tell him, and then he remembers Sonny and Dog. An invisible fist punches him in the gut.

“I can’t open my eyes,” he whimpers.

One of the nurses, who is well-meaning but lacking tact, speaks to him through the darkness. “It’s probably better that way.” And he knows that his face is gone. Just gone. He can feel it. It feels like a truck ran over his head. All of it, the concert halls and the luxury hotels and the beautiful girls, come crashing down around him, bruising him again and again like falling bricks and stones.

He sleeps. In his dreams, he sees things. He sees Sonny, shorter, pudgier, frecklier, the way he was in the days before his middle name was Fucking, stretching out his hand, calling Darren “son.” “I’m sorry, son,” he says. His face moves in slow motion, like putty.

He sees Aspen, standing in the sand on some beach, calling to him. He can see her mouth moving, but he cannot hear her words over the crashing waves. She is smiling. He wants to touch her hair, which is billowing in the breeze. In his dreams, he can still walk. In his dreams, he can almost fly, though when he rises an inch or two above the sand, invisible hands yank him back down. As he moves toward her, he sees his face reflected to him in the mirror of the ocean. He has acne again.

He sees Ronnie, perched on a velvet couch. She looks like his mother. She is bouncing a baby on her knee. He cannot make out the baby's face. The faceless baby is wailing.

He sees his father, smoking in bed, sneering. Darren walks to his father's bedside, batters his head with a microphone. "Father, I want to kill you," he says. Darren's father bleeds.

He sees Marion Winters. He never knew her much, but his dream remembers her face. "You aren't Jesus," she screams.

And he wakes up. And he's not. He's not Jesus. His eyes can open now. When they do, the sun hurts them, setting the room alight with a blur of twinkling stars that finally congeal to become a nurse. "Hey, sleepyhead. You hungry?" The nurse gently touches his shoulder. "Try to eat something." She gestures toward a tray on his bedside table. The cubes of Jell-o remind him of falling bricks.

Three days later, he tells Aspen about those falling bricks and stones, when she walks through the door and lights up his dark hospital room like a New Mexico summer. She is wearing jeans and an old purple sweater. No make up. He has never seen her like this before. She is more beautiful than he ever imagined. "It sounds like what the Philistines must have felt when Samson pulled their temple down on their heads," she says, sitting down on the bed beside him and taking his hot hand in her cool one.

He remembers the story from Sunday school, and he whispers, "Yeah, it's just like that." She lifts his hand and presses his fingers against her lips. The jagged knot that rises in his throat scares him. "How did you get in?"

"Jackson let me in. He just told me everything that happened."

Monitors beeping, comfortable shoes tap tapping on hallway tile, and then he whispers, "What did happen?"

Using one finger to brush the limp hair back from his mangled forehead, she speaks gently, as if to a child. “Someone attacked you. One of your old bandmates.”

“Sonny Fucking Rickman. I know that. What happened to me? Where did I go for all those years?”

“I don’t know, Darren.”

“I hope they never catch him,” he finally whispers.

Aspen’s eyes go wide. “Sonny Fucking Rickman?”

He nods a little.

“Why not?”

“He’s my brother.” He sees Sonny then, crying over those snails. Now, Darren cries too, for the snails, for Sonny, for everything.

Aspen sits with him for hours, until the sun falls low on the horizon, and orange light slips through the blinds, setting on the hand of her god on fire.

“Aspen?”

“Yeah?”

“Stay with me.”

“I will. I don’t have anywhere to be.”

“No. Not just now. Forever. Stay.”

Aspen’s belly drops, flip-flops around like a sunfish in a net. This is it. What she has wanted for so long, like winning the lottery or striking oil. Why is life such a masochistic tyrant, doling out exactly what you want at precisely the moment you don’t want it anymore? Because Aspen realizes, suddenly, she doesn’t.

“I can’t,” she whispers.

He squeezes her hand. “Why not?”

Staring at the wall, Aspen feels the heat of his fingers in her own. She doesn’t want to let go. But she knows she has to. If she is ever to be anything but this empty thing she has become, she has to walk away. “I just don’t like what I am right now. I wanna be something else.”

“So be something else with me.”

She almost says yes. Almost. Silently, she watches him, seeing the way he is, broken. The orange fire of the sun fades into gray twilight. Darren’s hand stops glowing, and suddenly, she knows for certain he is no god. He is mottled and blue and unbeautiful. But that’s not the thing that makes her want to leave. It’s the thing that makes her want to stay. The love she feels now for this bruised, bleeding human is so strong, it almost knocks the wind out of her. She wants to save him, this man that was never really a god. But how can she save him when she hasn’t even saved herself? He couldn’t be her god. She can’t be his. “Darren,” she whispers, tenderly touching his battered cheekbone. “Darren Wilkensen.”

He smiles and then winces. “Aspen Stone,” he says.

“You remember how I told you about my daddy, what a good man he was?”

He nods feebly.

“Something about you reminds me of him.”

“What?”

“Your strength. Your fire. Even now, as broken as you are, I see it in you. Yours is a fire that will burn on and on and on, no matter what happens.”

He chokes. She can’t tell if it’s the effect of her words, or just a normal cough. “Thank you,” he finally whispers.

“I think that’s what made me follow you. When my daddy was here, he was strong for me. And then he was gone, and no one was strong for me anymore. I saw you, how strong you were, how you took the world and melted it with that fire inside you, molded it into the thing you wanted it to be. I wanted you to be strong like that for me.”

“I *will* be strong for you.”

“Darren, I don’t want you to be strong for me. I want to be strong for myself. When I am with you, I kneel. I want to learn to stand.” He closes his eyes, protecting himself, she knows, against the thing she must say. She doesn’t want to say it. She could surrender now. She could give in and kiss him and say, “Alright, I will be your wife. I will be your wife and nothing else forever.” She thinks about that. His wife and nothing else. She doesn’t want to be nothing else. She thinks about her daddy, about how strong he was, about how he did what had to be done. She thinks she is her father’s daughter. “I love you, Darren Wilkensen. More than I ever thought I could love anything. I love you even more now that you’re all banged up and blue.”

Laughing weakly, Darren opens his eyes.

“And I know from what happened after my daddy died, the way he was still with me even when he wasn’t, that this kind of love doesn’t go anywhere. This isn’t the kind of love you choose. It’s the kind of love that chooses you. In a way, I’ll always be with you. And you with me. But right now, I have to learn to stand. All by myself.” And she stands.

“Aspen,” Darren whispers.

“Yes?”

“If you can’t stay, forgive me, at least.”

She stares at the print on the wall, a hive dangling from a flowering branch. Forgive, she thinks, and truth that feels like a song without words whispers over her. If the song had words it would say: Forgive us our debts as we forgive those who trespass against us, because you and me are one. You fall asleep fearing. Me too. You wake up hating. Me too. You run ripshod over small things in your path. Dandelions. Beetles. Wasps sucking blood from ruined stems. Me too. We are the victory and defeat of this planet. We are the no and yes. The amen and silent scream. We are the dream. You and me. We break. We bend. We die, in the end. We fear, we hate, because we are so small. Like wasps on ruined stems, we never see the waffled sole coming.

Aspen feels this truth without words, and she forgives her ex-god and his secret sins, and before she stands to leave, she kisses him right in the middle of his broken face.

Darren Wilkensen memorizes the warmth of her lips, knowing that this is the first and last time she has ever kissed him.

*

Aspen walks back to Brick's house through empty streets. In the moonlight, the fog is magical, layering the asphalt in wispy gold.

"Who will love me?" she asks herself. And then she whispers, "I will love me." As she says those words, something breaks open inside her, something white and whispering. She trembles. The air in her lungs is icy and crisp. Beneath her feet, invisible roots wind down into the core of the earth, sucking strength from its belly.

When, beaming, she flings open the door to Brick's house, he stands in the living room, his arm draped around Heaven's shoulders. Behind him, a tall man looms, with thick glasses and hair the color of tap water in a third world country. "I am Lyon Pierson from Mad Dog

Records,” the man says, striding to Aspen and thrusting his hand toward her. “We’re a small label, but I think we can sell your boy here. He’s got some voice.” Mr. Pierson’s hand in Aspen’s is cold. Like frozen fish.

She pulls away. “I’m sorry, Heaven,” she whispers, wiping her palm against the scratchy denim of her jeans. “I’m going home.”

This is the last time she sees him like this, Heaven the boy that has not yet become a god. Next year, his first CD, *Heaven Scent*, will release to ink applause, but Aspen does not see the god that he will become. She only sees him as he is now, trembling, reed-like and fragile. And she feels she should kiss him one last time. It would be appropriate. But the thrust of her heart, banging against her ribcage like a piston in an engine block, is too strong. It propels her forward, out the door, into the whispering dark.

She begins to walk.

*

Molten sunlight scorches Sonny’s skull as he heads from the hotel’s front office to the room he has been given. Overhead, palm fronds wave in a salty ocean breeze. The key in his hand jingles, providing backup vocals for the Mariachi music that drifts from the doorway of a nearby cantina. Sonny is only an hour across the border, in a tourist -infected town called Puerto Penasco, but he is over. He is safe. At the sight of the uniformed border guards, his gut wrenched into a worried knot, but the brown, machinegun-toting men waved him through without looking twice.

Now, he crosses a packed dirt yard, surrounded by a sagging fence and enlivened with bits of rotting garbage. A yellow lemon rind. A fading, red candy wrapper. A decaying, orange cat. As he pushes the plywood door to his room open, he imagines that if anyone wants to break

in and rob him, they will have little trouble. He plops down on his bed, a thin mattress supported by a cement slab. Groaning at the bed's unexpected, unforgiving hardness, he flops back. His blanket is scratchy and torn, and his pillow is as flat as a peso. The wall's chipped face is decorated with a lone painting, crooked and warped, clearly intended to cover the gaping hole that peeks out from behind it.

As he lies on his slab of a bed, that hole stares at Sonny like the eye of God. It asks him questions. It says, "How did it feel when your brother's blood splattered into your eyes? Did it burn?"

"Yes, it burned," Sonny says aloud. "I could smell it too. Salty, like the ocean."

"And when you felt his nose crumple under your knuckles, how was that?"

"It made a sound," he whispers. "Like crackers crumbling into soup."

The eye laughs at that one. "You are clever," the eye says. "Did he scream?"

"He didn't have time." Sonny stares at the sagging ceiling. "I saw the light leave his eyes."

The eye laughs again. "When he shit his pants, did you smell that too?"

"I did," Sonny whispers, and buries his head under his pillow. After a minute, he peeks out. "Is he dead?" he asks the eye, his voice quavering.

The eye doesn't answer.

"Should I die now?" he asks.

But the eye is all out of words. Sonny stares at it for hours, waiting for it to decide his fate. Its silence becomes a living thing, more potent than any of the words it spoke. It engulfs him in nothing. "This is hell," he thinks. "Hell is vast and forever nothing." Outside, the world goes on. Mongrels bark and children laugh and cars roar, but inside this dingy room, emptiness

reigns. After a while, Sonny realizes the room is hollow because he is the only thing in it. And he is nothing.

He stands and walks to the bathroom. As he stares at his reflection in the chipped mirror, he sees himself for the first time in, well, maybe ever. For years now, he has imagined himself as that man that played with the monkey in Icarus in Asbestos's first video, a little chunky, but hardy, and happy, and handsome in a mischievous sort of way. He is not that man anymore. He is ugly. His freckled scalp peeks out from underneath tufts of graying orange hair. His face is leathery and lined, punctuated at its center with the blackened blob of his broken nose. His teeth are brown. And his eyes. Dear god, his eyes. That is the place where the emptiness inside him leaks out. He stares into his eyes, sees hell in those two rusty black holes, and he knows what he has to do.

Methodically, he takes a camping knife from his pocket and, returning to the bedroom, carves through the television cord. Dragging the severed cord behind him like an umbilicus, he slumps back in the bathroom, where he loops the cord around the shower rod and yanks on it. The rod clangs to floor. Undaunted, he frees the cord and carries it back to the bedroom. Mutely, he scans the room.

At last, the eye of God deigns to talk to him again. "Look up," it says. And he does. There above is a thick beam. Sonny pulls a rickety chair from the corner and uses it to wrap the cord around the beam. Using a special knot he learned in Boy Scouts, he ties it tight. After he yanks twice, to make sure the noose is sound, he loops the cord around his neck and ties the special knot one last time. His heart hammers. His blood roars in his ears. He sees everything. The cracks in the paint. The ants marching single file toward a dried out lime wedge on the floor. The smudge on the glass of the room's only window. He looks out the window, sees the

turquoise sky and the prickly palm trees and the Kool-Aid colored buildings. He thinks that it is good that this beautiful world will go on when he is gone. It's breathtaking. Too bad he didn't notice until now. Taking a deep breath, he looks at the eye and says, "God, forgive me."

Then he kicks the chair out from under him. The cord tightens around his neck, hurting more than he ever could have imagined, and almost instantly, his lungs begin to burn, begging for air. Gasping, he struggles with the cord around his neck, but it doesn't budge. It slices into his skin, and when he flails his arms, he sees blood on his hands. The world begins to waver. Death closes in. Sonny can feel his chest collapsing. His heart is pounding harder than it ever has, but not for long.

He looks out the window once last time. The word "Angel" is scrawled on a wall across the way. Vaguely, he thinks of angels, wondering if they are real. His prayer for help is an aching feeling in his belly, not a litany of words. He has no strength left for coherent thoughts. As Sonny's struggling slows, he sees himself standing with Darren at that thrift store window, discovering Dog. Then he sees Macy Blue singing, wearing her best Elvis sneer.

He hears a crash, and the world goes black.

*

Sonny wakes up to a pounding on the door. “Señor,” a woman’s voice says. “You break the room, you pay.” Gasping, Sonny sits up and rubs the throbbing collar of shredded flesh circling his neck. He looks up at the cord hanging impotently from the overhead beam. The knot was not as special as the Boy Scouts said. Thank God for that. “Thank God,” Sonny whispers. “Thank God.” Bending his knees, he wraps his arms around them and buries his face. He smells his flesh, sweaty and hot. He is, for the first time in so many years, maybe for the first time ever, happy to be alive.

He looks ahead and sees the days he has left, and suddenly, every day seems precious. More than anything, he wants to make them count. He wants to see some pyramids. He wants to learn to swing dance. He wants to kiss Macy Blue. The image of her sweet face flashes through his mind, and he realizes that if he spends the days he has left without her, he might as well be dead. She is the only person who has ever loved him. He looks out the window again, sees the word “angel” scrawled on the wall.

“I’m going back,” he says, and he struggles to his feet.

*

Aspen’s feet crunch on the gravel path that leads to the door of her childhood home. Her curls are crammed into a bun, and the contours of her body are hidden under a graying T-shirt stenciled with the faded words, *Darren Silverado, Rising and Falling Tour*. The suitcase in her hand is heavy. In a shaky whisper, she practices her lines. “Momma, I’m home. I’m sorry I was gone so long.”

Dropping her suitcase on the porch, she stands in front of the door, drawing in the cool morning air, her heart hammering. She stares at the tiny copper knocker. A hawk. Finally, she lifts her hand and lets the knocker fall against the wood, tentatively. She waits, but no one

answers. She knocks again, louder this time. Before she has finished knocking, the door swings open, and her momma stands there in a kimono bath robe, her hair pulled up into a towel turban.

“Oh, god,” her momma says. She presses her fingers against her lips. “Aspen?”

Aspen cannot remember her lines.

Her momma throws her arms open wide, and Aspen falls inside them.

EVAPORATE

We are all water from different rivers

That's why it's so easy to meet

We are all water in this vast, vast ocean

Someday we'll evaporate together.

*--John Winston Lennon (October 9, 1940-December 8, 1980)**

In his Montana home, Darren sprawls on a velvet couch, his eyes squeezed shut. He has downed a handful of pain pills, and the coffee table beside him is littered with beer bottles. His breathing is shallow. His face has healed, but it will never be the same. His nose is crooked. His cheek is dented. Part of one eyebrow is missing. The doctors say he is out of the woods now, but nevertheless, he feels death coming for him. It stalks him in his dreams. Now, he dreams this:

On a stage, he stands, hands moving over strings, hot breath soaring into his song. Guitar chords batter the air until it bleeds red light. Below him, frenzied fans feed on noise pollution, growing stronger with each echoing infusion. Feet pound littered ground. Transfixed by his own voice, Darren drinks smoky air, exhales it again into the mass of swaying worshippers, a benediction, a gift.

Someone gives back.

A bottle spins up and over heads, an amber glass bird with tattered paper wings. It flies toward Darren, strikes him, slicing through skin and skull. Darren crumbles into the throbbing arms of the waiting stage. Blood pools in his ears, the groove between his neck and chin.

In his dreams, Darren dies surrounded by worshippers. This is not how he dies.

He is barely breathing when Ronnie finds him on the velvet couch. His skin is cool and gray. Frothy drool pools in his ears, the groove between his neck and chin. The air around him is thick and bitter—urine, sweat, shit. Ronnie staggers, steadies herself with one hand, covers her mouth with the other.

“Darren!” Her cry is muffled.

She calls 911. “My husband is dead. I think he’s dead. Darren Silverado. He’s dead.”

They come, of course, faster than they would for any man who was never a god, and they apply their magic, a mechanical magic that is limited, at best. Frenzied paramedics buzz around him like bees, lift him onto a gurney, rush him to the hospital, sirens screaming.

“We’ve got a heartbeat,” they say. They say this seven times, frantically pounding at his chest, electrocuting it with their paddles. “Come on,” they say. But he doesn’t come on. “Stay with us, man.” But he doesn’t stay. He doesn’t want to stay.

In the fluorescent light of a hospital room, a doctor stands, takes Ronnie’s hand, says, “I’m sorry.” And she staggers backward, sits on a bench, stares at the cold, white wall.

*

As Darren Wilkensen slips from his smooth brown shell, stretching toward the warm glow engulfing the world, he sees his five-year-old face reflected in the orb of a red Christmas ornament. Smiling, he sings. “But soft, what light from yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun.” As he flies away, swathed in radiant gold, he catches a glimpse of Aspen. She is lying in her childhood bed, wrapped cool in pink sheets. He feels her love for him seeping into the light around him. He knows now, what she meant when she said “love.” She meant love that winds itself around two people like a python, like a living noose, and squeezes them together

until they cannot ever be whole alone again. She would throw herself in front of a bus for him. She would lie down on a cross and die. And what she doesn't know, what she will never know, is that she already has, that a little part of the man who was never a god flies tonight because she gave a bit of herself to love him.

*

Do not think for a minute this life thing will always be kind, or even civil. Sometimes, it is downright damned treacherous. Tomorrow, it will be for Aspen. But tonight, in her corner of New Mexico, she sleeps. Tomorrow, she will read of Darren's death in a newspaper, front page. But tonight, she dreams of him. He is standing above her, sweat cascading down his face and throat and chest, dripping over her scalp, baptizing her. His eyes are on fire, sinking deep and deeper into forever. Her hand is hungry for him, for the reassuring crush of his bones against her bones. Before she can touch him, he evaporates like mist, and she stands alone in front of a dark, empty stage. The red lights are gone. Musty cold swallows her whole. Graveyard silence buries her alive. His song is dead. Broken bottles and crushed plastic cups litter the slimy ground beneath her feet. Her Jesus in Blue Jeans is gone, and this shattered heaven is all that is left of her religion. This is the ruin of her church, after the conquistadors came and made it into hell.

Aspen wakes entombed in darkness. She stands, presses her hand against her belly, which protrudes beneath her oversized T-shirt. The baby kicks. "It's alright," she whispers. But it is not alright. She knows this somehow. An ugly hand squeezes her heart, crushing it. She steadies herself against the wall, which is still spotted with the posters that marked her ascent into adulthood. Stryper, a gaggle of ostensibly Christian musicians, dressed in skin-tight

yellow and black stripes, sporting makeup and billows of hair. A poster of Marilyn Monroe. Van Gogh's *Starry Night*.

Aspen staggers to the porch and steps into the icy air, watching the Van Gogh stars dance. She leans against the railing and tries to fight this black thing, knowing instinctively that this thing is death. She thinks it is her own death. She watches a flurry of moths flit around the porch lamp. "Fuck," she whispers. "What the fuck?"

She goes to her bedroom again, rustles in a drawer until she finds the Mina Loy book. Asking for a sign, she sits on the edge of her bed and opens the book. *The spirit is impaled on the phallus*, she reads. It doesn't make any sense. "Fuck you, Mina." She throws the book in a corner and stumbles to the living room. She switches on the television. A rerun of *Family Tree* is playing, and the theme song fills the room. Aspen's eyes get hot. "Your daddy wrote that song," she tells the baby in her belly. The baby does not kick an answer. Aspen watches the rerun, then an infomercial, and finally, there on the couch, she falls asleep.

She wakes up to a phone call. "Aspen?"

"Yeah." Aspen rubs her eyes. She can hear her momma in the shower, singing "Amazing Grace." Outside the window, an iridescent hummingbird sucks at a feeder her daddy hung all those years ago.

"This is Rhonda."

Shae's mom? Why would Shae's mom be calling? "Oh, hello, Rhonda. How are you?" She has been thinking of giving Shae a call. This is good. She smooths her hair.

"Shae's dead." Just like that. Shae's dead. In the seconds of silence that follow, Aspen thinks of all sorts of things. Practical jokes and candid cameras. This is not real.

Aspen stares at a cloud of dust drifting in a swath of sunlight. “She’s not dead.” Her momma is still singing, and the sound of her voice is soothing. “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.*”

“She met this boy. He seemed real nice right up until he beat the shit out of her. I think that’s what pushed her over the edge.” Shae’s mother makes a gurgling sound. “Son of a fucking bitch.”

“She’s not dead,” Aspen says again.

“She slit her fucking wrists right there on the porch. We found her with her eyes open, staring up at nothing. Why would she do that to herself? Why?”

“She’s dead?” Aspen lets the receiver drop, presses her fists into her eye sockets. She wants to cry, but she can’t. She wants to laugh too. She doesn’t know why, but she has an irrepressible urge to laugh. Or scream. Instead, she whispers, “She was watching the Van Gogh stars dance.” And she throws the phone.

She slumps to the floor and sees it then, Shae, bleeding out, twitching, watching the stars. Shae will be an ashen flower in a vase in icy ground, and still, Aspen can see her dancing that night in California in her yellow dress, and she can see her dancing that other night, ugly beautiful courageous crying gasping peeing shitting, and then, embracing death as it crept along her flesh, rippling skin’s soft whiteness with bolts of purple gray.

Shae is dead, and there is nothing amazing about that.

REDEMPTION SONG

But my hand was made strong by the hand of the Almighty.

We forward in this generation triumphantly.

Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom?

---Robert Nesta Marley, February 6, 1945-May 11, 1981

Macy pushes a tape, labeled in black bubble letters *Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison*, into her player. Elvis's spine-tingling vibrato floods her trailer. She took a bus home after Sonny disappeared. Where else was she supposed to go? "*Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight? Are you sad that we drifted apart?*"

The phone rings. She answers.

"This is Macy," she says. Her eyes get big, and she asks, "Tomorrow?" She nods while the guy on the other end talks, and then she says, "Thanks. Bye." She hangs up the phone.

She goes to the freezer, rummages around, and pulls out a box of ice cream. She gets a bent spoon from the drawer, remembering Sonny, the freckly bald spot and the thrift store guitar and the AIDS. Slumping on the butterscotch couch, looking up at *Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison*, she digs into the ice cream. She thinks about that AIDS test she had. The doctor told her days ago, but it didn't seem real until now. Tomorrow, she goes in to discuss treatment options. She remembers the way the doctor said, "It's not a death sentence anymore. We can't cure it, but we can fight it." She doesn't believe him. "*You know someone said that the world's a stage, and each must play a part. Fate had me playing in love, you as my sweetheart.*"

AIDS. She is destined to die, and no Elvis of Heartbreak Poison, with his single glistening tear, could ever express what it feels like to know that the man you love has killed you. *“Honey, you lied when you said you loved me, but I’d rather go on hearing your lies than go on living without you. Now, the stage is bare, and I’m standing there with emptiness all around. And if you won’t come back to me, then they can bring the curtain down.”*

Bring the curtain down. Macy throws the ice cream, drops to the floor, presses her face against the musty carpet, whispers again and again, “I’m dead.” She tries to see herself blue and hard in a casket, but it just doesn’t make any sense. Her hands, her fresh, alive, hot hands folded cold and still against a breathless, caved-in belly.

“God,” she says, “if you’re there, I may be coming to see you, it looks like. But, if you’re there, I wanna know a thing or two about this life before I check out, find one good, solid reason to believe this whole wide world ain’t just one big piece of shit.”

There. She said it, just like that. Shit. Straight to God’s face. Slowly, she rises on chubby legs, which are suddenly electric, alive with the tingle of blasphemy. She looks down, and maybe it’s the way the sun is falling, slanting through the shades just so, but damn it if those legs, those ugly, fat legs she has hated for so long, are suddenly the most beautiful sight she has ever seen. She lifts her skirt and runs her fingers over her thighs. “I’m alive,” she whispers.

She walks to the bathroom mirror. “Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.” She reads aloud the tattered bumper sticker stuck to the glass. She strokes her belly, her throat, explores the delicate skin of her eyelids, the almost invisible purple veins spidering out from her nostrils. Her irises have a million colors in them, golds, greens, yellows. There are universes inside her eyeballs, and she never noticed until now. She runs her fingers down her face, over her neck, along the elegant curve of her collarbone, halfway hidden beneath the fabric

of her T-shirt. She rips the shirt away and tosses it on the linoleum. In her pink Lycra bra, she stands, noticing the points of her nipples jabbing at the fabric. She can see the outline of them. She wonders what it might have been like to press them against a baby's lips. She touches her breasts, reverently, realizing that they were always meant to be something more than a just a man's toy. She tugs at the front of her bra, gently first, then harder, until the metal snaps tinkle to the floor. The rest of the bra falls too, and now, naked from the waist up, she strokes the cool, sloping roundness of her belly. Next the skirt falls, and she is naked. Beautiful for the first time ever. She has never been more alive.

She hears the front door brushing along the carpet as it opens. When she peeks her head out, she sees the brown shape of Sonny looming in the doorway, two McDonald's bags clutched in his trembling fists. Narrowing her eyes, she steps into the living room. He doesn't say anything about her being naked, not the way he once would have. Instead, he looks at the overturned box of ice cream, a puddle of melted gunk spilling from its mouth. He says this: "I got you French fries, Macy Blue. Like you like them. Extra salt. A shitload of mayo. All you can eat."

All you can eat fries to make up for murder seems an uneven bargain at best, but she is hungry. Without saying a word, she walks to him and takes the bags from his hands. Beneath Our Elvis of Heartbreak Poison, she sits. It is probably habit that she tears the Monopoly game pieces from the boxes of fries before she eats, probably habit that she even bothers to look at them at all.

And here's the kicker. God must have been listening to one Macy Blue, when she prayed a blasphemous prayer from her place on the dusty carpet of a flea-bitten trailer just this side of Nowhere, Arkansas, because lying there in her outstretched palm is Illinois Avenue, which

combined with the Indiana and Kentucky in her wallet, is good for a grand total sum of \$5,000, taxes, titles, and licenses not included. What does she do? What can she do? Macy Blue, who has never won anything in her whole life, lets out a whoop, throws her arms around Sonny Rickman, and kisses his weathered cheek.

And I'll tell you something. Sonny Rickman, also known for our purposes as Judas Iscariot, feels his jagged breath catch in his throat. Damn it all if Sonny, our broken, bastard son Sonny, doesn't take his first baby step toward redemption.

*

Macy's fingers grip the rusty bars of the fire escape, her knuckles gleaming in the yellow glow of street lamps. She and Sonny have come here, back to this building where they first met, to say goodbye to the US of A. First goodbye, then they will run off to Mexico, if they can make it over the border without the cops nabbing Sonny. Sonny says it will be a piece of cake. Whether or not they can make it to Mexico, they certainly can't go inside the bar and dance, so they are climbing to the roof instead.

"Just a little farther," Macy yells to Sonny, who is clinging to the fire escape beneath her, puffing along, onward and upward, his face puckered and pink. Below them, cars skip and skittle along, their low beams slicing the darkness. To Sonny and Macy, the ground is miles away, but it is probably just a matter of perspective. You know how your brain plays tricks, especially when you are risking your only life.

Sonny's foot slips, and he lets out a little scream. Okay. A big one. "Ai-EEEEEE!" Just like that. "If I fall, I'm suing your ass!"

“For what? My flea bit trailer? You can have it. Besides, if you fall, you most likely won’t be in any shape to hire a lawyer, what with your brains being sprayed all over the sidewalk.”

“Thanks for that image,” Sonny grunts. “I’m feeling much more relaxed. You ever consider becoming a psychologist?”

“Ha. That takes ten years or something, just to get the degree. I have only so much time. I ain’t gonna waste it with my nose stuck in a book, thank you very much. From here on out, it’s gonna be cactus and cantinas for us, Son-dried Tomato.”

They climb on in silence until, at last, gasping, they tumble over the wall onto the hotel roof, rolling like pillbugs in the wind. “Holy shit,” Sonny says. “I thought you were afraid of heights.”

“I was.” Grinning, Macy settles on her back, pillowing her head with her interlaced fingers. The pale yellow glow of the streetlights illuminates the pink lipstick smeared on her teeth, and yet, in her grubby T-shirt and jeans, she is radiant. She glows ethereal, a rare, glorious creature of light and lipstick. She stares off through the black canvas of night, her gaze piercing atmosphere, stars, planets, seeing straight through into forever. Sonny has never known her to her look so lovely. A warm spot grows within his chest, spreading and flooding his whole body with heat, like hot cocoa spilled inside him. As he scoots over beside Macy, his sharp breath catches on his larynx.

“I--I wonder which star belongs to Elvis,” he says, and his hand gropes in the darkness until it finds her fingers. He squeezes them shyly, as if he has never touched a girl before.

Macy smiles. “Elvis ain’t riding no star.”

“No? Where is he then?”

“I don’t know. Those trees. Those ants. Your blood maybe. Maybe you drank some water that had a little dab of Elvis in it and put him in your blood.”

“How about in those velvet Elvises you have in your trailer? You think his spirit lives in them?

“Nah. Those are all me.”

“You?”

“Yeah, sure.” She looks at him and laughs, that car backfiring sound. Or maybe it isn’t that. Maybe it is a cannon blast, exploding the dark wide open like the Fourth of July. “You think Elvis, the real Elvis, had anything to do with The King? I mean, he died, peeing and crying, just like any old man. I needed some place to hide all my hopes and dreams and fears and wants, so I tucked ‘em all into The King. That’s all it was, them Elvis paintings on my wall.”

“You still believe in Elvis?”

“Nah. I believe in something bigger than that.”

For a moment, the only sounds are those that are a part of the night, the breeze and the car engines and somebody’s stereo blaring The Doors from a block or two away.

“Macy, I’m fucking dying.” Sonny’s voice breaks.

“I know, Son-dried Tomato.”

“My whole life was a fucking waste.”

“How do you figure?”

“When I was a little kid, you know what my guitar teacher said? He’d never seen anyone with so much natural talent. Ever. And the first time Icarus in Asbestos played, the newspaper called me Jimmy Hendrix reincarnated. Fucking Jimmy Hendrix.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Look.” He yanks up his sleeve, shoves his arm close to her face so she can see the scars, tiny worms slithering along the crook of his arm, faint purple in the starlight. “This is what I got to show for my life. The tracks of my life. I mean, look at Darren. I went to the fucking supermarket, and all I saw was his face, staring out at me from every magazine on the rack. They’re saying he’s just like Jim Morrison. He’s gonna live forever. But me? I’m not Jimmy Hendrix. I’m Sonny Fucking Rickman, has-been extraordinaire.”

Again, the breeze and the cars and The Doors, until finally, Macy finds words. “Maybe that was enough.”

“What?”

“Has-been. I mean, even if you’re a has-been, at least you’ve been. You were here, Sonny. You lived. As much as Jimmy Hendrix, or Darren Silverado, or Elvis, or any of them. Maybe more. You lived. Feel that wind rushing into you? That’s life. And look hard, see those stars, the way they go on and on and on and make you feel so little ‘cause you don’t know where they end? Maybe you feel little ‘cause you are. Maybe even if you were on a billboard somewhere, a mile high, the real Sonny Rickman would still be a little dot in a big ol’ universe. So you don’t matter, no matter what, even if you get on the front of a hundred magazines. And you do matter, no matter what, ‘cause here you are, with your heart pounding and the breeze on your face. You matter ‘cause you’ve been. You matter because you were here.”

Sonny feels her warm skin pressing against his, the gentle hammering of her pulse in the flesh between her thumb and index finger. The tar under his back is still hot from the day, seeping saved-up sunlight into his skin and muscles and bones. Above him, the stars wink and dance, and below, though he cannot see it, the cars are streaming and beaming along, and the

people are laughing and crying and jitterbugging, and here, right now, he is here, Sonny Fucking Rickman is here, and there is something warm in his chest, and all of the sudden, he realizes that hot cocoa wetness is love. His voice is choked and thick when he turns to her and whispers, “It’s enough, Macy Blue.”

She looks back at him, lifts her hand and strokes the smooth, warm skin of his bald spot. “It’s fucking enough,” she whispers.

*

Darren and Shae are dead. And so, two parts of Aspen are dead, and this is how it goes, this life thing. People do not die all at once, they die a little at a time until the hope in them wears out. Forget hearts and lungs. People do not die from organ failure. They die from hope failure, pure and simple. A doctor may as well have diagnosed Aspen on the day she found out her true loves were dead, said, “You are dying, Aspen, beloved of Shae and Darren. You have only so much time.”

So, here she is, sleeping now, in her childhood bedroom, clutching the mound of her belly. This sleep brings no peace. This sleep is a river of blood, and Aspen is drowning in it. Her nightmares come in stop-start fits. Knives. Nooses. Rusty nails. She wakes from one of these nightmares to see, glowing outside her window in the light of the pregnant moon, Shae’s limp body hanging. Shae’s face is turned toward her, her eyes vacant and cold. Her dead fingers are swollen like plums. Aspen tries to scream, but her throat is closed. She cannot make a sound. She stares until the hallucination becomes Darren. His eyes, too, are empty. Finally, the hallucination evaporates, becomes a hummingbird feeder hanging from a wire.

Frantically, Aspen pats the floor until she finds her jeans. Tripping into them, she remembers Shae’s words. *Death comes in threes.* “Daddy, I’m coming,” she whispers.

I hear her. I always do. If you look closely, you will see me. A scar, a swath of blood smeared upon the smooth face of the seeping violet sky. Look closer. Squint. Zoom in, pretending you have a camera in your head. See me now? Not blood. If you are prone to talking to yourself, you will mutter, “Ah-ha! It’s only a bird. A mud red bird.” And indeed, I am. I am the red tailed hawk circling the white car that glides along below me, a milky bead of water trickling down the blue-black pipe of Interstate 40. The car slithers on and on, bumping along dirt roads, crashing through sand dunes and scrub oaks and puddles, until at last, it finds its destination.

The cemetery is a carpet of brown weeds and yellow grasses, dotted with flagrant eruptions of orange and purple and crimson wildflowers. The colors dance in the warm breath of a fragrant desert breeze, a heady concoction of tawny earth, cactus fruit, and baking sunlight. Rippling heat waves break the crust of the turquoise horizon. Civilization is light years away, and so, when Aspen stumbles from the car, she is alone with the dead. She opens the rickety gate, picks her way through marble and terra cotta tombstones, pausing to pull thorns from her sandaled feet, trying to make out names through the overgrowth of spiny weeds.

Martin Reinhold, Husband, Father, Friend 1914-1962. A rusty cast-iron angel has fallen. Her face is buried in the sun-baked soil of Martin’s grave.

Elia Michael Caramel, June 9, 1959-June 10, 1959. A tiny rusted junkyard decorates the abandoned tombstone, a fleet of matchbox cars.

The residents of this cemetery have been left to their peace. Do not pity them. You do not know, cannot know, the wishes, the dreams of the dead. Perhaps their dreams are only of you. Perhaps, all of their other desires have been granted. Perhaps they wanted it this way, wanted to be left alone in a dry desert cemetery with no one but coyotes and cacti for

companions. Perhaps, after the hustle and bustle of earth life, a long, languid nap was in order. Or, perhaps they are not trapped here at all. Perhaps they are soul snakes, and their entombed bodies are the skins left behind when the beings inside have moved on. Perhaps, death is not a threat. Perhaps, it is a promise. In your world, their bodies are fading away into dust, to become part of the grasses and the cacti and the coyotes and the wildflowers. But do not pity them. Do not pity me. I am flying.

From my place above the cemetery, I spread my wings, look down, watch the beautiful baby I called Aspen when first her tiny body was placed in my cracked hands. This is the truth of the dead. We can see where you are blind. And what I see, picking her way through that lonely cemetery, is a beam of light, a shooting star. Her essence scatters over the grasses like a million sparklers on the 4th of July. Earth words do not cover it. And what I see is my daughter. Love is more durable than cockroaches in a nuclear holocaust. It is the most enduring substance in the universe. She will always be my baby.

She has found my bed now, the patch of earth where they laid my body to rest, and she is kneeling there, her faced pressed against the place on my headstone that says her name. I am, will always be, Beloved of Aspen. She is yanking the weeds away from my grave, bleeding from soft fingertips. She is calling me. Her screams break the silence of the cemetery, set the coyotes to howling. She has a knife in her hand, a glistening blade pressed against the purple line of life that branches along her arm. Not now, baby. Not now.

I ask for a wind, and it comes, shakes her from her reverie, and still, she is screaming. I melt myself into the wind, wrap around her, kiss her wrist, hold her head the way I held it when she was a baby, when she was too weak to do it herself. I hold her head, and Aspen, sweet Aspen, feels my cracked hands sliding along the skin of her face, smoothing her hair, I am in

love with this child, I am love, and she feels me and falls silent. I tell her baby I am here holding you now hold on baby hold on.

She breaks open like a mug of wine, spills all over my grave, and I drink it down, because life, beautiful life, is such a gift. You can never get enough of it. You can never get enough of it, baby. You can never get enough of the sky and the sea and the land and the hands that hold you and love you and break you. You can never get enough of it, so hold on, because even though you don't know it, you aren't ready to let go just yet. Around that corner, through new moons and waning moons, waits a child, with laughter rippling the velvet skin around her wise, gold-colored eyes. The first time you hold her, the first time the warmth of her blood seeps through her skin into yours, you will thank God you didn't let go. You will thank God, sweet baby, who is bigger and smaller and wider and longer and shorter than you can ever dream, who breathes in every human, who lives in everything.

"Where's Shae?" Aspen whispers.

Shae, beautiful, laughing Shae. She was going to write a book of poems that would make the stars dance and the planets sing, if only she'd just held on. She flies now.

"And Darren?"

He flies too, but you, you hold on until life lets go of you, not the other way around, because there is magic at work here that you, while earthbound, will never understand.

She looks up and sees me perched red on the branch of a great cedar that has lived now on this planet for two hundred years and counting. Aspen, my shooting star, my sparkler, my baby, sees me.

And she decides to live.

APPENDIX

“Come as You Are” was written by Kurt Cobain, David Grohl, and Krist Novoselic.

“Hound Dog” was written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

“Smells Like Teen Spirit” was written by Kurt Cobain, David Grohl, and Krist Novoselic.

“Blue Days, Black Nights,” was written by Ben Hall.

“Never Tear Us Apart” was written by Andrew Farriss and Michael Hutchence.

“I Wanna Be Sedated” was written by Douglas Colvin, John Cummings, and Jeffrey Hyman.

“Light My Fire” was written by Robbie Krieger, John Densmore, Ray Manzarek, and Jim Morrison.

“Happy Xmas (War is Over)” was written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

“(Take a Little) Piece of my Heart” was written by Bert Berns and Jerry Ragovoy.

“We Can Run” was written John Barlow and Brent Richard Mydland.

“Saw Red” was written by Bud Gaugh, Brad Nowell, and Eric Wilson.

“Cold Hearted Man” was written by Bon Scott, Angus Young, and Malcom Young.

“Every Mother’s Son” was written by Allen Collins and Johnny Van Zant.

“Devil Inside” was written by Andrew Farriss and Michael Hutchence.

“We’re All Water” was written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

VITA

Tawni Vee Auxier was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and received her BA from the University of New Mexico.