

~ Barstools ~

The bar was packed with cheap froth and old faces. It was late- but this was a late crowd, and I was late too, as usual. Somewhere in the roaring assembly, I heard a full chorus holler my name as I elbowed through with my guitar. It was stupid to think I would slip by unnoticed anymore. It made me wince. Whistles and cheers. F sharp and cymbals. Familiarity and contempt.

I almost left. It was a mistake to have come here. Everything was worse in a 'family' bar. I pressed my thickening tongue against my teeth and squinted at the vacant air in front of me. I was too ready to fight everyone in the room. I tried to swallow my temper, and almost puked right there. It tasted like sand and metal tarnish and raw fish. I waited until it sank down into a bland rage in my wrists, no more than a perfunctory punch behind a bored inclination. Maybe there was a flash of genuine promise amidst my quelling- if only I could season this feeling into a salty rage or a peppery burn. If only I could scrounge up any striking flavour- but I lost it almost instantly.

I was too annoyed, sluggish, indifferent.

I pushed past the walls of warm bodies and human perfume trying to lose the sound of familial laughter. Without meaning to, I found the eyes of a slender waitress across the room. I took note of her small frame, her thin waist, and the way her bare arms showed every muscle as she lifted a tray full of empty plates. When she caught me staring, she flushed under the bar lamps. I kept walking and did not flinch at the clatter of something breaking in the background. Whatever it was, it wasn't enough. I needed time to sort things out, but all I had was five minutes backstage. I found the small bathroom crammed against a brick wall, and splashed cold water on my face. Cornered and weary, I pushed my eyes back into their sockets. I pressed both wrists into my pulsing temples. Then, I tried to wipe off my face, as if somehow I could just start fresh. I tried to think. I tried to single out my thoughts and link them back to any part of my brain. I had days in my eyes, months in my stomach, years in my hands- and all I really wanted to do was go out there and start throwing things.

The weight of my spirit had sunk to new depths. How deep? Dregs at the base of a wineglass. Sludge at the bottom of a river. Erebus, below the earth. It felt too deep to trudge it up on demand. Or maybe I just wanted to bear my anger and pain in private for once. Well. No need to get carried away- I never wanted that. It just felt like the worst kind of menial labour, churning a performance to the surface, a strain on every muscle to pull up all this passion and revolt. What a battle. What a bedlam. What a business. Of course, this was my business. And I knew the moment you lost all your angry tantrums and manic rebellion to some restorative peace-giving whisper... well, then all of a sudden you were singing folk music or something, and it wasn't rock and roll anymore.

But did it even fucking matter at this point? I was always just so hellbent on romanticizing the whole damn thing. Honestly, tonight wasn't about me, or my pain, or my voice, or my show- and I was beginning to doubt it was even about rock and roll either. We were past that point now. Thanks to goddamn Mackenzie. We were all going to be just that. Past the fucking point.

I felt the walls closing in on me- the sturdy, unshakable walls of thousand american bars full of the straightforward, hard-working, level-headed people who knew how to build them. This was just another day. This was just everyday living. Just looking at it made me hysterical. Why did I have something against them? What did I have against them? Here were people who had maybe one or two nights a week to enjoy the small comfort of real friends and a few drinks. Tonight, they had the brief promise of a good night and the chance it might sustain them to keep going for a bit longer. And that's what I had against them. The brief promise of one good moment on some random night? God, I promised myself I would behave.

I owed them so much more than that. Once more, they had been kind enough to invite me to drink at their tables and be part of their family- and I needed family right now. That is why I'd worn this threadbare gray shirt and gray cotton pants tonight, wasn't it? I wanted to look like them. I wanted to make myself believe I could live their lives. I'd brushed the hair out of my eyes. I'd tucked

the leather cords around my neck into my shirt. I'd kept my boots on- but not to make a statement. I just didn't own any other comfortable shoes. Framed in the mirror with cheap plastic fixtures and bad lighting, I scowled at myself. I looked like an idiot, and I dared myself to go onstage in this get up.

Soon enough, I wandered onstage- stepping over cables, tuning my guitar, surveying the crowd. I let Charlie intonate and cough into the microphones. I let him handle the volume. I knew instinctively that I was too loud for this place. I could read the neon writing on the wall. I saw all my ends in brawls, foolish outbursts of temper, something lost in violence. That had been good for so many nights, when I had tried to raise a fuss. No, that would imply there was ever an effort on my part- I never had to lift a finger, did I? The fuss just came naturally, didn't it? But those nights were like the waitress's broken dishes, destroyed without any real meaning- broken promises that my fights ever did some good, intentions on the floor, needing to be swept away.

It wasn't good for them. I had to face that. I wasn't good for them like this- and at some point, I had started to want to be. Or maybe I just wanted to be good for something.

And that is why I would try to sing, when I could have just started screaming and breaking things. I would not let the panic get the better of me, incessantly doubting my control, wondering how much longer I could last. I didn't have to last forever. No, in fact, I didn't even have to last the week. Tonight was about eating my vegetables. Escape was on the menu- and I would behave until I could sink my teeth into dessert.

Really, I loved nothing more than the prospect of flying into a new place for the first time- and at the end of the week, we were all heading to a town called Basse-Terre, somewhere in the Caribbean. It couldn't come fast enough. I had held onto it for weeks now, like a life raft, or like a flask of water in the desert. I couldn't wait to be pulled ashore.

Basse-terre. I liked the sound of it. I liked the way it rolled off my tongue. It had none of the harsh consonants of Jacksonville- not that I minded Jacksonville- I just hated the way I'd begin to see my future trickle and wind its way out of sight along the St. Johns River- knowing it could eventually lead to something bigger, knowing it could inch its way along a commercialized route behind everyone else. It was knowledge so perfectly distasteful that I felt stuck here, out of principle. No, I hadn't meant to stay in Jacksonville so long. It was a year of my life that I wanted back- but seeing as I could not have it back, I supposed it was finally time to move on. I didn't know much about the island of Guadeloupe- but I could taste the promise of it anyway. I would savor this old family bar tonight- because very soon, I would be far away feasting on the fresh spice of a throbbing wild Tiki bar with hand-wrapped leather rattan stools, each one carrying a traveler like myself- each one an unknown blood-relative of freedom and adventure.

A swell of presupposing applause dragged me back to the present company. My eyes flew open to the diffused view from the stage. I could feel the spotlights dimming in their sockets. I could feel the bar stools inching closer to each other. Of course, something about the impersonal backless black vinyl barstools irked me. They twisted round in a row to peer in anticipation of a satisfactory spectacle. I thought about how preposterous one of Belgian designer Henry Van De Velde's tabouret stools would look at the end of the bar. I felt that preposterous as well.

It's not that I belonged at the turn of the century. I was a modern man- but the cheap unoriginal fixtures mirrored everything I hated about my functional modern life. How had things come to this? Where was my Van De Velde to argue with his modern day Hermann Muthesius? These men were unsung heroes to me. Oh, just to hear them argue about artistic individuality against the standardization in the industry and debate the future of modern architecture! The problem was that there simply wasn't any debate anymore- or if there was, I wasn't a part of it. It felt like everything had been decided long ago by people I would never know. They had fought in a battle that was over now. They had fought for architecture and art and design, and for taking the beauty in a common stool, and making it art- and what had come of it? I looked at the world of manufactured budget barstools I was

left with- and I wondered if fighting for anything ever did any good. Is this what all my fighting would come to?

I wanted to concentrate, to follow my thoughts to some logical conclusion, but I was distracted by the instrument in my hands. I was overcome by the sweet aroma of young lovers melting into each other, like homemade butter. It was such a wholesome fragrance. I couldn't keep holding things against them. It wasn't even them. It was just this peddling town, this point on a map, this place. I tapped my thumb to my chest in consecutive affirmations. Tonight. Vegetables. Behave.

Russell screeched a familiar note behind me, and Lance kicked the last of my distraction away with a few commanding thuds in succession. Charles and I found the opening strings, and everything I had been chasing flooded mercifully into my fingertips. I pitched myself to right words and relief descended into my lungs. I wondered briefly why it had ever seemed out of reach.

Time rose and fell with my lead. The key changes waited patiently, faithfully, while I kept singing and drinking. Nothing was out of my grasp, or held at a terrible distance. Everything was in good measure. I was actually surprised when Charles announced, "Last one," in his crisp British accent. I knew I'd lost a few more hours to the same old songs.

During the bridge of the last song, it happened again. I was overcome by an alarming sense of *déjà vu*. Already seen this. Of course, I was being an idiot. Of course, I had already seen all this before. I saw it again and again, and yet I scanned the crowd, looking over and over for something that was not there. I felt my throat closing as if there were some danger, and I was genuinely relieved to let my instrument take over for the moment.

*Déjà vu*. It was happening more and more, and it was getting worse. It felt like an unanswered phone that kept ringing, like a crawling itch down your back, like a neighbor's porch light left on night and day. Last week, I had become obsessed. I had tried to research possible theories on it. I was sure I would find mystical propositions and philosophical conjecture to help explain the occurrence. What a laughably naive expectation on my part. Afterwards, I had felt like a child, a fool, a Neanderthal. What kind of evolved man still wanted vague improvable hypothesis in place of cold, hard medical facts? It was just that when it was happening, it had felt kind of mystical, like I had a hold of something transcendent, exclusive, transporting.

In fact, it was exactly like sex- when I found myself asking a slew of antiquated questions in a modern world. I hunted for passion itself- I tried to investigate passion itself- and why did I need to do this? We were in modern world full of chemicals and remedies. I didn't need to examine or chase passion. That is what Viagra was for. What had I expected? *Déjà vu*, *Jamais Vu*, *Presque Vu*. These were all psychological or neurological anomalies with textbook definitions. Some kind of French anomaly was short-circuiting my brain. *Déjà Vu*? *Sacrebleu!* I continued to be tortured by the French.

Of course, I only had myself to blame. If anything, I had been fostering my own mystical tendencies lately. No, I never liked to do myself too many favors. I was sure I now had a dangerous fixation with the Greek gods. Something had crossed a line. Yes, I had already studied the Abrahamic religions of sacrifice and redemption, Buddhism concerned with freedom and enlightenment, Hinduism that honored cycles, traditions, scripture, and Taoism which chose to revere spontaneity and immortality above all else. I had studied religion, but I had started dreaming of the gods. What place did the Greek Gods have in the world now? Were they waking me or was I waking them? They were just supposed to be a phase in college. Had I been alive with Keats or Shelley, I might not have seemed such a lunatic- or at least I might have died in the company of friends. In this century, most were satisfied with a rented copy of *Oh, Brother Where Art Thou*. I needed to face that was about as close to Homer as I was going to get.

And I had never finished college.

And I could not translate Latin.

And I was a rock musician. Really, these things should not concern me.

What, in the end, did concern me? Passion- Inspiration-Transformation? Love songs. Why then, I could join Chaucer and Shakespeare and Dante in all their wooing and praise for the Muses. Were the Muses not the patron goddesses of the Arts? A separate muse for epic poetry, for lyric poetry, for erotic poetry. A muse for epic song and sacred song. A muse for history and astronomy. Yes! Muses for the past and for the stars!

So, I was filling my mind with these things. I was a post-modern paradox. I was my own punchline. I just needed to not take it all so seriously.

But then, what about the dreams? That was a serious and sweaty business. Every night I found myself face to face with gods- the Greek Ones! Such convincing, vivid dreams with real faces and real words and real plot. They were more real each night. Real enough to distract me from reality- which was undoubtedly really, really great. How could it not be? Ha. I mean, I was just not as out-of-touch as I could be.

But maybe that joke wasn't funny anymore.

I felt alone- and it was more than the fact that I was the only one howling my lungs out on some small stage in the middle of the night. I had waited for this moment. I had waited to draw close to them. Or maybe I waited to draw them close to me. I saw their bodies rocking to the melody, as I was rocking, and I wanted that to be enough. After all, our bodies were rocking in the same rhythm. How much closer could you get? I wanted to soak up all their smells, every face, every wave. Oh, I knew how to handle myself in an ocean. I knew how to drown in every detail. I knew how to breathe in everything that made up the sea.

I came back to the notes, one on top of another, rushing like river rapids in my blood, the arcs of melody filling up every cavity of thought. I let my guitar sing the last lines. Swimming, I let my head fall back and my eyes fly open as they had again and again- on open skies, on bedroom ceilings, on blinding lights. The beat, the same beat, my friend, the beat- how it pounded in my chest. I kept the beat- and it kept me. I knew looking into the key spotlight was like staring into the sun- but I could not find the sense to close my eyes. I didn't care if I ever saw anything else again, knowing I had music to fill me with the most beautiful visions I would ever see.

When the set ended, I heard a confident voice, the creole edge more thickly pronounced, "Thank You. We are The Boulevard Boys. You have all been lovely," I sounded drunk and pretentious. Really, I had not meant to drink so much.

It was a decent set, though, wasn't it? Yes, it was all a fine set-up. A set up for something to happen. Though, things rarely did.

Mackenzie crept up behind me, and found a firm grip my shoulder.

"Don't disappear. There's someone here you have to meet," he murmured in a lazy, commanding manner.

I shrugged out of his grip.

I was certain I'd met everyone I ever wanted to meet again. I had shaken their hands. I had let them kiss my cheeks, whisper into my ears, and buy me drinks when I shouldn't have. I was always meeting people but never meeting anyone new. The last few months, I had kept to myself as much as possible- and this bothered people. I found that out soon enough. I was only in my early twenties- and people expected that ambitious desperation- that youthful drive to meet and to promote and to want, want, want. Well, I wanted to get away. I wanted my island. I wanted it more and more.

At the first opportunity, I wandered backstage. Without meaning to, I craned my ear to the flat, stone wall, as if I could hear something meaningful being said very far away from here. Was there any story? Was there any more to it than this? Was it just going to be song after song, night after night, on and on and on? I tried to ward off the relapse of my sickening disappointment. Only minutes ago, the room had frothed above common beer, it had been spiked with real spirit, with the porous divinity of a Pentecostal church.

What was I missing? What had I lost? Everything had been right there- in the song, in the strings, under the lights. Why could I never hold onto it?

I felt a cold gust of air from somewhere unseen brush my cheek. Instinctively, I checked to make sure Charles was still occupied before I followed it. I disappeared up a hidden staircase. I let the door creak closed slowly behind me, and in the privacy of another silent rooftop, I sank to my knees, to the ground, and to my back as if being shot down by invisible bullets. And then, I lay with my right hand over my heart, as if I might be about to pledge something important.

... and I let my heart hammer away, I let the latest air escape my lungs, I let my eyes fall open. I watched the stars inch their way across the open night sky. They were not in any hurry. I could see that.

I listened to the leaves rustling in the tree that clung to the side of the building. I told myself I could hear them fluttering down the alley behind the bar. Suddenly, I wanted to ask them what it felt like to drop to their death, to billow out, to keep traveling long after they had fallen. It was December, and they were falling despite themselves- falling for another of Florida's cold bluffs.

My mind wandered back to countless rooftops in different cities, in different countries, in different company. They had stayed with me- all the rooftops I had laid down my head to rest. I thought about all the girls I'd brought there, found there, taken there. I thought about all the men I'd argued with or drunkenly embraced. I held them in my heart, the way a young girl might hold a bouquet- the precious hand-picked joys of a moment, the flowers of the earth.

But I'd come up to the roof to be alone, hadn't I?

I wanted them out of my head. I'd come up to greet the icy ache above the stage, and maybe I'd come to find the loneliness and the darkness I had been avoiding. I shivered against the cement. I grimaced as the roughened concrete dug into my back. I was an idiot for coming up here in the middle of the night, for finding a way to ruin every ordinary night, and for not wearing a goddamn jacket. And why? I always had to find the coldest, darkest moment and call it my own. I could hear my mother's voice, 'you'll catch your death if you go out without a jacket.'

Yes. I was still trying to catch it.

Still, this chilling black rooftop would be so different in just a few hours. I saw the cement baking in fresh light, my feet firm upon the view of such great heights, drinking in the promise of a new dawn- a deep drink, a burning spirit, the intoxication of the morning. And what would it promise?

It promised every great wonder.

But I already had more than my fair share of wonders, didn't I? I had the wonders of the world. Oh, how I wondered about this place and these people. I wondered at the unsolved fate of every person, the unanswered mystery of every human being- how I wondered who they really were on their own- and who we all were together. I wondered about their true potential- the heavy-hearted working men and women of all nations, of all backgrounds, of all trades. I wondered if I could save them. I wondered if I could fail them. I wondered if my songs might ever have a real chance to effect them, strengthen them, transform them. I wondered if anything could transform me. I wondered what would be better for them- to wake up to the possibilities of better worlds, to sleep against the mire of mediocrity- or to fall like the leaves, to fall to dreaming.

I had time to wonder anything I pleased, I suppose- but I was concentrating too hard again. I could feel it on my face- I had to shake it off, stare off into the distance, perhaps realize that I was not concentrating at all. My thoughts had already strayed back onto the anxious barstools twisting back and forth at the bar, back into the inviting tenor of someone else taking the stage, another man with a microphone.

I had not paid attention to the line-up- but I had seen the snappy young men chatting back stage. Lance was the only one of us without a real chip on his shoulder, and he'd talk to you, so long as you had a thing for hitting drums. He had come back to us, and we had pretended not to care when he

told us it that it was a big deal for the other band tonight. It was going to be their first time in front of a real audience.

I thought back to the first time I had sang in front of anyone. It had been December too- but the air had been so different, warm, dense, a blanket over the crimes of a city.

We had found another street corner in the persevering district of New Orleans called the French Quarter. I was standing with three parts of a brass band behind me and my mother with her small red accordion. The decision was not premeditated and I had no idea that I would sing that night- to a variety of chattering tourists, distracted commuters, a crowd of wide-eyed street kids, Rastafarian vagrants, and a kaleidoscope of peddlers- but I sang a lot growing up.

My mother sang into a microphone that hooked up to a single box speaker. There was a real young man with a real large hat who walked back and forth to collect money for us- the homeless and the hungry and the unsaved. The only point where anything seemed to stop was when my mother hit the high notes in a solo. That was when you felt like things mattered- your life, the open road, the people you hadn't met yet, the people you wanted to meet. That's right. You still wanted to meet them when she hit a high A note. If cupid's arrow had some audible quintessence- it was that note through human lungs. It pierced something in you.

My mother had friends visiting from South Carolina that month- a saxophone player, and two trumpet players. I remember they had rubbed dirt on their skin to blend in more. It was the tall woman with the sax who dragged me out next to her during a song. She thrust the microphone into my hands and commanded "hold onto this..." She knelt down and held her hands over mine and leaned into the mic and began to sing 'Away in a Manger' in the British tune and nodded that I should sing it with her. We sang it together one time around, until the instruments caught on behind us- and then she let go of my hand, and that was when I first began to sing by myself.

And what had happened between that night and twenty minutes ago was something I was still trying to figure out. After that Christmas, I had remained a street singer with my mom for the next few years. I am perfectly serious when I say that I must have raised hundred upon hundreds of dollars, probably climbing into the thousands- all crumpled bills tossed in men's hats, wooden bowls, plastic boxes, guitar cases, etc. Enough for me to be able to look back and think 'Ah, where did the money go!'- but then, perhaps it all went to the same place it always goes- safely into the hands of countless strangers who can straighten it out and carry it in a breast pocket near their heart and call it their own. And even when my parents died, when I'd felt like an orphan, when I couldn't find friends, when I'd nearly died from pneumonia, or food poisoning, or men with knives, or some drug slipped into my drink- I kept singing.

The great singers sang through it all. Didn't they? They sang through the riots, and the wars, and the governments. They sang into the collapse of great nations, the uprising of youth, even if it threatened to tear everything they were standing on top of into shreds. They didn't mind if it all burned up or fell down. They never planned to have anything more than the song they were halfway through singing.

And I had songs- a solid handful to call my own. Words and notes I'd strung together over the last year. Was I already tired of singing them?

No. It had just been a long year. We were less than a week away from the New Year now. I told myself this year it couldn't be about what I had- because I didn't have much of anything real left. It had to be about what I might be able to create from this point onward. I was hoping I could create something better than my recent existence. I was hoping I could organize my words and get a real album together. Yes. I was hoping that. I was hoping that with all my heart. And there you had it. Words and hope- like twopence in my pocket- as I ventured into the world to find or make my fortune. January was out there like every restless audience I had kept waiting.

For so many years now, I had believed I was as good as the North star. I was constant- untouchable- a fixed point despite the turning of the earth. I had a rather staunch conviction that I, if

anything, could be depended on to stay the same. But that was just like me, forgetting my humanity like a jacket to keep me warm. Nothing had happened this year- just absolutely nothing- and it had maybe changed me more than the rest. It was hard to accept. Time could change me. It had changed me. The words I once had in me- words I thought would always be there- well, some of them were already gone. In life-changing minutes and heart-breaking days and roadside gas stations and other people's childhood bedrooms- gone! I had never earned a home in the constellations. My words lived in a me- a human vessel- the most unreliable mobile home in the universe. How could I expect that nothing would be lost in the transport?

Any words of mine were to be spoken in the briefest of turns, really. I had to learn how to let them out when they so passionately rose up in my throat. I kept trying to save them, like stamps in a book for letters that never got sent. I kept stifling them down into silence for a more eloquent future. Why? The future would bring its own words.

The present demanded my attention- but something in me was scared. Scared of the futility. Scared of my failure, or of something failing me. Why do this?

It had been some time in the early nineteen hundreds, when my Van de Velde had built his best theatre for the Cologne Exhibition in Germany. What a time to give the world your best work! It had stood for a year before being destroyed as a result of World War I. Why do this? Why build a theater when there was war and rumors of war? When I began to feel like everything was futile, I would think of him. And it didn't really matter if I was a rock musician, or a writer, or a furniture designer. I was trying to create something better to stand in the world, wasn't I? It didn't matter if it lasted. It just mattered that I made it beautiful. It mattered in the moment. And moments still mattered- at least to me.

A warm gust blew across the roof, probably from the kitchen. When the warm air hit my skin, I had the sudden feeling that there was someone standing close to me. I was startled by the immediate closeness. All of the hairs stood up on the back of my neck, and I closed my eyes instinctively- like men in the bible who knew no man was meant to look full in the face of god. I wondered briefly if it was Apollo. Slumming it on the rooftops of Jacksonville with a twenty-four year old singer who had been ready to quit half an hour ago? Alright. Probably wasn't Apollo himself. Maybe it was his sister Artemis- there for everything I was hunting. I bristled in the night, unable to name or know who or what presence might be with me. I felt suddenly small. What if a god really was standing with me? What if he were real, and everything or more than I could imagine? Apollo, a god of song. I wanted so badly to be his friend. But how do you spend time with the gods? What do gods and humans do together on a Saturday night? Just hang out and wait for morning.

The thought struck me that maybe it wasn't a god at all- but all the muses he had sent to me instead- standing over me- deciding once and for all that I truly was of no more use to them. All of a sudden, I felt panicked they would leave. My stomach churned and I felt every fiber in my being holler out silently into the night.

Wait! I sat up, and dusted off my clothes as best I could.

Wait. Oh, wait! I know. I know! I've been wasting my time here. I will stop. There's a story to be had. There's action, adventure, magic, the most real magic- and sound and music and love and everything worth believing in- and I'm sorry, so sorry! I have been finding all the wrong things. I have been looking in all the wrong places. I know it's time. Time for everything I have kept waiting, left waiting.

I flew to my feet, and back through the door I had come through. I eased down the stairs, still kicking around my thoughts. I let my eyes fall over the same faces again, this time seeing each one, seeing each man on his own journey. Each man with his own gods. And I was pathetically glad mine hadn't abandoned me yet.

Unconsciously, without fully recognizing her, I locked eyes with a slender blonde at the bar. I relaxed at the very sight of her, some stalling engine in my veins finally slipping into stable gear. Her luminous face was a beacon, a sure sign that I was heading back in the right direction.

She had worn the red dress- with the large ruffle around the collar. Oh yes. I closed my eyes and saw the red dress as it had hung alone in the closet earlier. I let my mind flood with the color. 'How red?' the muses asked.

Well- as red as a red velvet wedding cake- as red as an Emperor Francis cherry- as red as a forlorn Little Riding Hood- as red as a rose by any other name that would smell as sweet!- as red as the smudges on Dracula's serviette- as red as a Red Snake Roulette Bet- as red as 80's lipstick on a mirror- why yes, as red as the Affiche Rouge...!

True, I can't immediately tell if she is glad that I am finally there, or not. I wait until she nods her head gently at the guy in front of her, and I understand the night, the man, the signal- because we've played this scene together a hundred times before.

I watch the man motion for a drink, as I approach. I am close enough to hear him ask, "So, have you lived here all your life?" He asks this rather impatiently. It is clear that he's asked a lot of girls before her, as his eyes dart around the room, waiting for her answer, any answer, so he can doll out the appropriate response. I imagine if she says yes, he will inch closer and say 'so, what's good here' and if she says no, he will lean in and ask with concern 'so, where'd you start out?' That is his routine. He is like a man punching a time card. All he can hear is the noise. All he can do is hope it is the right time.

As I step closer now, I see the large black pools of her eyes. She stares knowingly at me. We both know what will happen now. For a moment, it is our secret, and it feels good to share the same future.

She reaches into her purse and puts a ten dollar bill on the table. "Yeah, I come here all the time. I have to." She pauses, "For my boyfriend-" and she stands up to greet me. "Ben!" she says confidently, slipping into my arms, and kissing my cheek.

The man turns to look at me in drunken disbelief. She cannot be serious. He looks furious, incredulous, mad that he has been cheated at his own game.

"Benjamin," I reach out to shake his hand gruffly, wondering why it feels good, why it is tasty to savor the defeated look on his face.

"Let's go-" I say, pulling her out of his claws. I feel like an ever-gallant hero, rescuing a princess from a common monster.

We leave him there, without hesitation, and are on our way. We giggle together, and are so happy that we get away. I'm glad to be together. I am full of anticipation. Where will we go? Out for a walk? Home to our apartment? But before I can ask, she stops me- halfway to the exit.

"No, let's stay. Let's dance," she nods towards the crowd. "I know," She waves her hand dismissively. "You hate dancing to this music-" she snips. "But I wore this dress," she states threateningly enough.

I don't argue. No, you do not argue with her. You do not argue with a dress like that. I am not really listening to the music. I can't dance when I really listen. She knows me so well. I let my chin rest on the top of her head. I let my feet melt, sway, step.

I think about how different everything is when you have a girl waiting for you at the end of the show. No, there had not been enough girls- especially according to Charles. People were constantly after him asking if I was a queer, and it wasn't just because of the earrings and the eyeliner or my inability to talk about sport games.

I told him to just say yes.

It felt true. I didn't want a sweet, kind girl to keep at home. I didn't want trouble either. I wanted something I couldn't describe yet. Besides, I knew the way I became enamored with people



wasn't normal. I had to be careful. I was too apt to want gods. In some ways, I was as queer as they came.

I stared down at her, and she was lovely. She quieted the noisiness in me. She softened my heart. She put me completely at ease. I was so glad she had come tonight after all. I was glad she had worn the red dress. I began to ask her something- but she pressed her index fingers to my lips, shaking her head in objection.

"Don't ask me the same old questions, Ben." She looked so exasperated that it startled me. "Not tonight, alright?"

"Maybe I keep thinking you'll answer them differently," I say playfully, but I can hear the defensive catch in my voice. I had only wanted to talk- but it was like she knew that part of me was still waiting to get into an argument, when I hadn't known it myself.

She gave me an understanding smile. "Besides, no one can ever answer your questions right."

"No. Not yet," I say, pulling her closer and almost kissing the top of her head. We sway from foot to foot, and I let my weight rest comfortably against her. As I hold her close, I think about the fact that I'm holding onto the whole mystery of another person. The mystery of a woman.

Maybe the story was right here. Maybe I wanted the story to start right here.

Yes. That was true. I was impatient- eager to smear the first gobs of paint across a pale canvas before the colors had been properly formed or mixed. I was hungry for it- like cinnamon and cayenne, a promise on the roof of your mouth before you bit down into the hearty crumble of some sweet preparation.

I wanted that first tangy revitalization of inception, the immaculate birth a great story. The kind of story that would pass one day into legend, something worthy of being told again. I wanted that immortality. I was looking for it everywhere- but maybe being a singer had nothing to do with living forever.

Could my story be in a mere dance- and with a girl like this? Our dance of human aspiration. Maybe it was our love, and our kindness to each other that would save the world. Maybe our children would lead the future. I felt all the real promises of love, not too far out of reach. Well, no more than the night stars- always there for an unspoken wish, or a burning promise, or a distant dream when you needed it most.

Oh hell. I was glad she hadn't let me speak. I was sweeping myself off my own feet again. Yes, I was sounding too romantic again- but so we sound- those of us who fall in love before breakfast and have an appetite for such things.

My mind snagged on it, though. I had a flooding urge to commit to this life in my arms. I could be that musician with this faithful girl on my arm. She was stunningly perfect- and she had waited for me- smelling like apples and beer. Her beauty suited me, I thought, knowing it sounded conceited. But it did. She did. Something about her hair, cut in layers, like my own. I needed a blonde to balance out my black mop. And her eyes were wide like mine- with tints of green and gold.

I had to bite my tongue, more questions gnawing their way into my thoughts. What is our life going to be like? Will you hop on a plane with me tonight? Will you be terribly vex with me if I kiss you now? Are you my Yoko? Are you my Courtney? Are you my Priscilla?

I was drifting, my mind relaxing into the possibility of our future, eyes half-open and half-closed, when suddenly I saw Charles striding towards us, and I felt a firm hand clutch my upper arm. There was something about the way Charles held my eyes while straightening his shirt collar as Mackenzie snapped me back to reality. That striped shirt. That was a businessman's shirt, wasn't it? That was a goddamn shirt for Mackenzie's man.

My long déjà vu ended.

Oh, damn them all, and their bloody endless marketing, and their incessant foolhardy dreams, and every last consensus of ambition that ended in dollar signs. They were going to make me shake his hand. What was his name again? The Man who sold the world.

"I wouldn't cut in," Charles said to her without addressing me at all, "but the band needs him to wrap up some business." He nodded to Mackenzie, and then threw me at him like I was the last amp to be loaded in the van. "Take him."

Mackenzie spoke firmly into my ear while very calmly navigating us to the bar. His low gravelly voice crushed by cigarettes made my stomach flip in repulsion. "Look man, this is what you are paying me for. A record label. This is it. I'm telling you. This is our man." I felt just like a president being briefed about the guy who was going to take over his country.

I slipped onto the barstool next to the man in the suit. Maybe he had a story, and maybe there was a scar on his chin that made him different from other men I'd met in other suits. Maybe his hair was darker, his eyes rounder, but my mind found no redemption for him in these details.

There were appropriate handshakes, with the lock of firm handcuffs, and then with very little fanfare, he began to say words I had heard several times before.

"It's official. I'm going to meet you boys next month in New York," he paused emphatically. "You need a real record."

I smiled politely. I needed a lot of real things.

As he continued, I looked down, as if I was listening very intently to everything he had to say. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Charles dancing happily with my girl. Her mouth was moving very quickly, as if she was telling him a story she hadn't been able to tell me. She laughed at one point, and I wondered if it was at my expense. I watched as Charles held her delicate shoulders and pulled her close. I tried to read his lips. I could only make out 'glad you came' or 'that's the same!' or 'what's your name?'

Briefly, she looked confused, and then laughed as the music ended, and they fell apart. "I'm there for other business anyway, and I thought I'd sit in on your session. I genuinely dig your sound."

I came back to the conversation I was supposed to be having, trying to surmise the genuineness of his sentiments.

"Thank you," I said- as it was the only thing I could think of that would not start an argument.

"We'll talk more in New York," he said hopefully. He made me curious. I wanted to ask him what he did in an office in New York, why he wanted to back a record, if he'd ever actually played a guitar, and what he thought we had in common. I looked into his eyes and saw the future. He was going to take me to bars in New York- with brushed steel bar stools that swiveled to reveal well-turned out faces.

"Of course," I say watching the girl walk off through the doors, without a backwards glance, wondering when I would see her again. I was somewhat hurt that she did not wait a few minutes longer for me.

I smiled then, and said to him as if confiding something, "I can't wait."

The others crowded around us all at once- elated, disbelieving, festive. I knew the night was beginning now instead of ending- and we were all about to do some serious drinking. They were all so sure this was finally going to be IT. And I thought back on how many times before I'd believed it was going to be IT. How it never had been IT. How one day it really would be IT. And hypothetically, how it could be today. Today could be IT..

A young man's voice drifted through to the bar, and I turned around, eager to find the owner. I stared at the boy on the cramped stage, amused at how he was belting out his tune too close to the microphone. He had changed the beat of the night- and he hadn't asked permission first. It was set to end obscurely, quietly and without a bang- but he'd said no, no listen to me, no not yet. Off he went, pumping, tapping his foot in time, beating it into the floorboard. His head was almost like a knife chopping on a cutting board.

Looking out, he cannot help but notice myself and my company clinking glasses with the man in suit. His eyes glaze over them easily, until they settle on me. I hold his gaze. I see things there. He wants IT too, want to make IT, to make IT happen. One day, he wants to be sitting on my barstool. I don't look away. I want him to know that I am happy to share this moment with him. That I see him as the only one in the room who is my equal. We are not men or gods- just lead singers. I recall Mackenzie's words from hours ago. There's someone here you have to meet. Well, maybe there was, after all.

"C'mon," I hear Lance bellow cheerfully from the middle of our company. "Let's get out of this dive! Let's go celebrate!"

"Let's celebrate here," I say lowly, and nod to the boys onstage. "Watch the kids." They exchange concerned looks, but the looks are erudite, compact, passing. They are not too concerned. They are already ordering another round. I decide to motion for another myself. I will need it, while I think about what exactly I am going to say to the boy onstage, after he has finished, when I introduce myself.

"Charles," I catch him as he walks by, before he leaves me to drink at the bar alone. "Did you catch her name?"

"The blonde?" he asks offhandedly as if I could be talking about someone else. "It was Chelsea."

I stare at the vacant spot where we had found shelter and support in each other's arms. That had been twenty minutes ago. Ben and Chelsea. Chelsea and Ben. Ben and his Band and Chelsea in the red dress.

"Probably wouldn't have worked out anyway, mate," he volunteered, noticing that my thoughts were still on the girl.

"I suppose you're right," I say, trying to feel better about the whole thing.

"Plus," he paused almost compassionately "she seemed to think your name was Benjamin," he offered, as if it were the first of many problems to come.

"True," I reflected soberly to myself. "And we don't even know anyone named Benjamin..." I trailed off, knowing that maybe that was the point. I was always dancing with someone else's story, with common names, and people I did not really know.