

Zen Rockstar
(Tales of Westgate #6)

by

J.D. MacLeod

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One

March 25, 1998

Not every loss is a shock. Some of them you can see coming, very clearly. Some of them you *could* see coming – if you knew where to look, or didn't fool yourself into doubting what your eyes told you.

When I was blindsided by unwelcome news on that dull spring Wednesday in March, I was – somewhat surprisingly – not all that surprised. I felt like a piece of stemware where someone performs that classic feat of legerdemain and whisks the tablecloth out from beneath me: a sudden tremor, and then, miraculously, still standing.

After I pushed my way past the creaky door into Bob's, habit made me reach for the lapel of the red plaid flannel shirt I wore in lieu of a proper jacket. But I paused before shrugging it off my shoulders, when I saw that Bob was, unexpectedly, not seated at the worn card table he used as a checkout counter. Instead, he stood, filling the back doorway that led into the kitchen. And he looked at me gravely, his mouth tight and small, lost in the bush of his huge wild dark beard. No sign of his customary toothy grin.

His gravelly voice was low and downtrodden. "Frank, I'm wondering if I should just tell you to not even take your jacket off, man."

I stopped where I was, let my hand fall, felt a flicker in my stomach. "Is something amiss?"

Even his sigh had coarse gravel in it. "The store is shut down, man. As of like a couple hours ago." He lifted a helpless hand, ran it back over his shiny pate, and let it drop; I noticed how low his shoulders hung. "We're done, just like that."

The store in question was essentially the two front rooms of Bob's third-floor apartment, filled with skewed wooden bookshelves, each of which was stuffed tight with used books that suffused the air with their unique, marvellous scent. For me, one of the most magnificent perks of working at Bob's these last few years was the chance to experience the magic of Old Book Smell on a regular basis.

I brushed my hair back off of one shoulder, fidgeted with one of my earrings. "This is, uhh, sobering news. I did realize that business has been slower for

some time now, but..." I completed my statement with a vague little wave at nothing. I knew Bob realized it as well: on more than one occasion, he complained about the competition from the "new place on York Street with the big storefront window".

He shook his head. "Naw, that ain't even it. There, uh, there was a guy from Town Hall here this morning. I guess the bylaw people got wind of me somehow."

My eyes widened. "Wow," I said. "I guess I believed that, if that hadn't happened long before now, then it never would." Bob's bookstore was not, strictly speaking, legal. His apartment was in a building on lower Hamilton Street that wasn't zoned for commercial, and Bob himself had never troubled with such niceties as permits or licences. The place had no signage, was invisible from the street, and had thrived all this time purely on the strength of word of mouth.

One could say that Westgate was a cultural mosaic, like Canada in microcosm. A town of eccentrics. A town of karaoke enthusiasts. A hippie retirement community, perhaps. Also, a town of bibliophiles. And when a fellow bibliophile offered rare and unusual tomes, catering to singular tastes, his townsfolk showed enough interest to allow him to earn a modest profit from his offerings.

For a good few years, at least.

Bob made a half-hearted shrug. "I lucked out a bit, I guess. The guy was someone I used to hang with in school. He said he was gonna tell them that the place was locked and nobody in. He's gonna come check again on Monday. If he sees no sign of a business then, he tells his people nothing's happening here. I get no fines and I stay off Town Hall's radar."

I nodded slow. "Does Trevor know?"

Bob's mouth tightened. "Naw, he's still at work." But, suddenly, some of his patented gap-toothed grin bloomed, surprising us both. "But you can bet *he's* not gonna be so broke up about this, eh?"

I half-smiled, but could still feel the sad in my brow. "I'm sure that the chance to reclaim his rec room will delight him no end."

Shuffling over to the card table, Bob picked up a small brown envelope lying

next to the cash box. “Anyway,” he sighed, “I know I always pay you on Friday, but here’s your wages up to the end of this week. Not expecting you to come in, though.”

“I’m certainly willing to, good sir. I, um, I could help you pack the books up –”

“No-no, man. Thanks, but, uhhhh..... really, I’d rather do that myself. I don’t want you to catch me bawlin’.” And he made his snort-chuckle so familiar to me after our years together. He pressed the envelope into my right palm, his hand enormous on top of mine. I felt coins moving inside, the crumpling of bills.

“Anyway, I, uh, I’m real sorry to have to hit you with this outa nowhere, Frank. It’s been such a blast having you around here – I’m gonna miss you, man. I’m really hoping this isn’t gonna muck up our friendship, ya know?”

I shifted the pay packet into my left hand and held the right out to shake. “As if anything could, stout fellow. I... I do understand, your hands are tied.” As he took my hand with his bear-threatening grip, I added, “Rest assured that I will miss this gig as well.”

His eyebrows lifted, crinkling his brow with concern. “Will you come to Blues Night sometimes?” I simply nodded, and he made a sad little smile. “I remember you used to never miss it, man. But after, ummm –”

I cut him off with a shake of my head. “Have no fear. Alternating Sunday nights, still? You haven’t changed the schedule on me?”

Another snort-chuckle. “You got it.” He clapped a heavy hand on my shoulder, gripped and shook vigorously. “Anyway, you take care til then. And don’t worry: we, we’ll figure something out, right?” His eyes hoped that he was speaking true.

I gave him one emphatic nod. “Most assuredly.” As I stuffed the envelope in the pocket of my torn-off jeans, I called out, “*À bientôt.*”

On my way back down to the street, I could feel a tightness in my throat, but not the stairs under my hiking boots, or the railing in my hand.

The barest attempt at rain was falling as I trudged up Hamilton Street toward the

Ambassador. When we were children, we described such a rain as “just spittin’” – and the sensation of being spat upon today struck me as peculiarly apropos. My room at the Ambassador was paid up to the end of the week, so I still had a few days before my need for shelter grew truly pressing. But the odds of finding a new source of income in that time appeared minuscule. From all I’d heard, jobs were even thinner on the ground now than they were a few years back, when it was my good fortune to snag the part-time position that Bob had only just created. Best to give my notice to the front desk when I got home.

The prospect of living on the street now loomed very palpable before me, and that same notion most definitely sucked. Even as recently as my high school years, I had no memory of seeing any homeless people in Westgate; my parents, and Town Hall, assured me that they did not exist. The mission building on George Street was empty every time I passed it by, and its purpose remained a mystery, one which I never bothered trying to solve. But over the last couple of years, I would now and then see someone who appeared to be in dire straits loitering downtown, and the mission more often had people going in or out, or simply sitting on the sidewalk in front of it with their backs against the brown brick wall. Perhaps it was time for me to learn what the people in that building actually did.

Nevertheless, I still hoped for a better solution to my predicament. Or tried to hope, at least.

My brooding distracted me enough that I allowed myself to look up and across the street, and see the leftmost window over the old shoe repair place. Normally I tried to avoid looking at that window. On a fragile day, back when the wound was still fresh, I’d even go out of my way and circumnavigate the block so as not to see that building.

That window belonged to the apartment I used to share with Inch, until last summer.

The day she told me that she had given notice to the landlord and was moving out... that day was a shock. We’d had four good years in that apartment, Inch and I. That was my perspective on them, anyway. But on that day, I realized that she would disagree.

In retrospect, I suppose I should have seen it coming. Over the final year, she grew impatient with my habits and quirks, which I admit are legion. Things that

used to make her laugh – god, that wicked cackle of hers – or shake her head, bemused... gradually those same things drew bitter scowls from her. At the same time, she became less willing to discuss what was bothering her. Or much of anything.

Today I noticed that the window there was new. So were all of its neighbours in the building. They sported what looked to be aluminum frames covered in white vinyl. A step upmarket from the chipped and worn wooden frames, full of drafty gaps, which Inch and I lived with. This suggested that the apartments had been renovated in such a way as to price them beyond our reach. Ergo, chances were that, even if we had stayed together, Inch and I could not afford to live there now.

As things stood today, I couldn't afford to live anywhere.

Two

March 25, 1998

As ever, the first thing I noticed when I walked into the dim front lobby of the Ambassador was the smell. Decades of cigarette smoke and stale alcohol were engraved into the air, and into every surface of the building. The longer I lived here, the quicker I was able to tune that fragrance out after it greeted me, but I never quite got used to it.

The second thing I noticed was Estelle sitting behind the front desk, looking as bored as she always did when she worked upstairs. The bar in the basement was the Ambassador's real business, and when she tended it she came to life that touch more.

Estelle looked like someone who ought to work in a tavern. Big, olive-skinned, hair in a Mohawk dyed black, and habitually clad in camo pants and a tight black tank top that showed off her brawny arms and tattoos. Merely catching sight of her was enough to make most bar patrons mind their Ps and Qs. My dealings with her made my stay in the hotel a tad more interesting. It occurred to me that I would miss her.

When she glanced over and saw me, her brow furrowed gently. She gave me a small nod of greeting.

"Estelle, I, uhh..." I could hear unsteadiness in my voice; I cleared my throat. "I need to tender my notice for the end of the week. What time is checkout on Sunday?"

Her eyebrows lifted a little. "You leaving us, Frank? What, is it something I said?"

At least one corner of my mouth couldn't help but smile at that. "Not at all. An unforeseen change in my circumstances, more like."

"Oh." For a second, I thought I saw concern in her eyes, but Estelle always prided herself on what she called "minding her own business". "Well, uhh, officially checkout is eleven a.m., but for you I ain't gonna worry about it. Whenever suits you, all right? It ain't like we have people lined up begging for a room here."

I nodded. "I've always appreciated not needing to push my way through the

throng when I've had occasion to speak to the desk."

She smiled gently. "I'll put a note in the book so that whoever's on that day doesn't hassle you. And hey, if your, uh, circumstances change again at the last minute so that you can stay, just tell us, huh? No problem."

"If that should happen, I will notify the Church that I've just performed my first miracle."

Estelle sighed. "Y'know, I'm sorry to see you go. Which I can't say all that often. You been here what, eight? Nine months? And it's probably the first time we ever had a rockstar stay with us, so, yeah."

"You are too kind," I said. "As always."

Today it took four tries to get my room key to catch in the lock. I wasn't going to miss that aspect of it.

I looked around the tiny, musty room and mentally tried to pack. Still queasy at the idea of where I could possibly be packing for. I realized I could fit all my clothes into that big canvas laundry bag in the corner. A few books, which would likely tuck into that same bag. A box for my Walkman and cassettes. And my guitar case – the only item here which could provide any context for Estelle's rockstar remark.

That was it. I lived light. In a state of non-attachment, I liked to say.

But it gave me a small start when I suddenly realized that I hadn't taken my guitar out of its case since the last time I went to Blues Night at Bob and Trevor's... and that was just after New Year's.

In any event, packing would take under an hour, and I certainly didn't need to put a dent in it now. Besides, seeing that it was Wednesday, I had a prior engagement. A dinner date.

With my father, over a plate of pasta.

I didn't ring the doorbell when I arrived at father's antique, brown-brick duplex. I didn't even knock. I just opened the front door as if I still lived there, and it was unlocked for me as if I were expected.

Ever since I finished university and moved out, nigh on five years ago, father instituted Wednesday night dinner as a way for us to maintain close contact. Since then, I could count the weeks it didn't happen on the fingers of two hands. I appreciated the sense of structure it gave to my life through its ups and downs. And spending time with my father was in no way a chore; we got on, as the saying goes. Plus, since Inch left, the Wednesday dinners he prepared for me were often the only decent meal I ate in the week.

As I turned to hang up my plaid shirt beside the door, I heard the expected heavy, whuffing breaths approaching my back. I turned to face the shaggy golden leviathan that father always assured me was in fact a retriever. I didn't even need to bend down to be able to reach behind his ear and ruffle him. But Waffles cocked his head quizzically at me when I walked on past him through the front room, without asking him who was a good boy. Even he could tell I was somewhat subdued this week.

Father's voice came through the far doorway leading to the kitchen. "Just gotta drain the rotini, man – grab your chair."

I pulled out my customary kitchen chair, the comfortable white one with a missing rung at the back, and watched father standing at the sink, steam billowing up toward his face. The marinara sauce with meatballs was already in a serving bowl on the table, releasing its own steam. Then he set a larger bowl of hot rotini in front of me, the lifter resting on it, and seated himself while I dished up my dinner.

He waited for me to finish, then worked on filling his own plate. Keeping his eyes on the sauce ladle, he said, "So: what ails you, my dude?"

I blinked, all innocence. "Ails'?"

He looked up at me. When I saw his pale, gray-blue eyes, I realized once again that I was looking at my own. Indeed, seeing his fair hair, his lean, sinewy face, was very much like looking into a mirror – albeit a clean-shaven, crew-cut mirror. "Ails," he repeated. "What ails you? It's not like I'm using a word you don't know.

Are there even any?" He allowed himself a short chuckle.

"You, uh, you have me at a loss, father."

"You're real quiet tonight, Frank. Normally by now you would've had something to say about how ravishing my cooking smells or whatnot – and you might not realize it, but I live for those moments, man. But you haven't made a sound since you got here. Something's got you distracted, at the very least."

I picked up my fork and prodded a rotino. I wasn't sure if I wanted to dump today's woes on him, but I also didn't see how I could keep something this large from him, either. After a second, I relented and regaled him with my epic tale of acute unemployment and submitting my notice at the hotel.

Father swallowed and said, "Wow, that *is* heavy. No wonder you're on another plane right now. So, you got plans? Anything lined up?"

"Nothing has come to mind as of yet. But I still have a few days." I finally made myself pick up a forkful and eat. And yes, it was delicious as ever. I managed to say, "By the way, please convey my compliments to the chef."

He gave me a crooked grin. "*That* slacker? No chance – it'll go to his head." After chewing thoughtfully and swallowing, he added, "From where I sit, Frank, the thing to do seems to be 'move in here' – at least for the time being."

I looked at my food. I didn't trust myself to look at my father, just then.

He sighed. "Look, man, I can dig it. You don't wanna impose. I know. And you see it as a step back, being a dependent little kid again. And that's a drag on top of all the other drags."

Finally I looked up at his eyes again, and found myself fighting not to smile. "By Jove, Holmes," I said.

Father let himself smile without restraint. "Hey: I know you better than most. And if I was in your shoes, I'd feel pretty much the same, dude." He put his fork down and sipped from his water glass, and I realized that I wanted to do the same, and did. Then he went on. "Be that as it may: my idea may be a bummer, but it's a practical one. It's gotta beat sleeping in alleys, right? And it's just for a while, just til you can find something better. And there's something in it for me, too. It'd

be nice to have some help looking after Waffles, nice for him to have a bit more company. I'd make you earn your keep, man." He gave me a decisive nod, and the clicking of nails approached us on the kitchen linoleum – Waffles responding to the mention of his name.

I felt torn in multiple directions. Quivering relief. A sense of retreating into childhood, just as he described. A simmer of bitterness at having no options, no agency.

There was tightness in my chest when I drew a deep breath and returned his nod. "Colour my arm twisted, father."

Three

March 29, 1998

Mother told father to tell me that Taylor would come into town from Belvedere and pick me up at one on Sunday. Therefore, I expected him around two, and he did not disappoint. I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the Ambassador's main entrance, my bag and box and case at my feet, when his red Ford pickup, so glossy I had to squint, pulled up in front of me. He left the truck idling, loud, and leaned across to open the passenger door.

Taylor scowled at my feet, then called over. "Is that all ya got, Freak?"

I shrugged, heaved the bag of clothes over and into the pickup bed, then lifted the cassette box and guitar case up and in with more finesse. I climbed into the shotgun seat, and Taylor shifted into gear and roared up the street. While I was still groping and fumbling for the sections of my seatbelt. Which I couldn't find.

He heaved the wheel into a left turn and shook his head. "God *damn*, Freak, you still live like a fuckin' student."

I shrugged again – shrugging was often necessary around Taylor. "I don't need much."

"You could never *afford* much, you mean. And the *Ambassador*? God damn, if you'd ever like get a proper job for once in your miserable life – and now you ain't even got your *shitty* job. Mom said."

"Am I right in assuming that she didn't sound surprised?" Mother would see my joblessness as a disappointment and a personal affront, one of many I had thoughtlessly inflicted on her over the years.

Taylor snickered, said "Whadda *you* think?", and took one hand from the wheel long enough to punch my shoulder. While I rubbed it, I glanced over at him focused on the road. I felt like only the pale eyes and hair connected us – Mendel would say those were inevitable, coming from two blonde blue-eyed parents. But with his big, football player build, his respectably *au courant* haircut ["like Chandler from *Friends*," he liked to brag], Taylor felt a generation removed from me. Despite the fact that the calendar reassured us he was merely two years older than I.

“Anyway,” I said, “I do appreciate you coming out all this way to help me –”

“Don’t thank me – I’m only doing this cuz mom made me. If it was up to me, I’d be home watching the game.”

My eyebrows lifted. “It’s unlike you to be whipped, Taylor.”

He glanced sidelong at me for a second. “This is for *mom*, Freak. Moms don’t whip.”

“Well, if ever there were a way for a mom to whip, ours would surely be the first to discover it.”

Taylor barked out a laugh at that, short but apparently genuine. On rare occasions, I was still able to coax one out of him, and those occasions always left me inordinately pleased.

I continued. “Not sure how I would have made my way to the homestead otherwise. A bit too much to carry across town, despite what you might think. I could’ve asked Dougie to lend me his van, perhaps?”

Taylor shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. Once mom found out you were dumped in it, she – what did she say? – she ‘wanted to offer you a show of support’.” He made a sound like “tuh”, then said, “Nope, she said *she* was gonna be the one to give you a hand with this – which means *I* was gonna be. Same diff to her.” He looked over at me and, in unison that comes with years of practice, we said, “Resistance is futile.”

And in unison we smiled.

Father must have heard Taylor’s pickup approaching the house [as I’m sure all his neighbours also must have], because he came out the front door and down the walk while we pulled up and parked. Taylor got out and shut the door behind him with a boisterous thunk while I slid out my side and reached with a stretch back into the bed, groping for my belongings.

Behind me, father called out “J.T.!” I glanced over my shoulder, saw father give Taylor his relaxed smile and clap his shoulder with unselfconscious bonhomie.

“Thanks for doing this, man, we really appreciate it. You gonna come in for a coffee or whatnot?”

“Well, I at least gotta use your little boys’ room, eh?” Father head-gestured him into the house, then strode over to me, took hold of my sack of clothes, and heaved it over one shoulder. He made it look easy, but I thought I saw a flash of a wince in the corner of his eye. I was about to ask him to take the box instead, since it weighed less, but he head-gestured me to follow him with the rest of my gear.

As I caught up beside him, he slapped his free hand on my back. “Welcome home, Frank.”

I knew I was welcome, but somehow this didn’t quite feel like home anymore. Which, it seemed to me, was as it should be, by now.

After performing his ablutions, Taylor stayed long enough to share coffee and idle chitchat with father in the front room, while I sat off to the side, almost a chaperone. Taylor seemed intent on talking about hockey, and steered the conversation back to that topic more than once. Father made game attempts to find out things like how Taylor was, and how his job was going. But neither topic seemed to interest Taylor as much as the Leafs did, and he glossed over them with bland reassurances.

Father dropped a hint or two encouraging Taylor to come out and visit more often, which brought further bland reassurances. I didn’t find them compelling, but father seemed to settle for them. And then Taylor rose and took his leave, taking the hand father offered for shaking, punching my other shoulder, and absently brushing the top of Waffles’ head. A few seconds later, the pickup thundered into life and pulled away, returning to Belvedere.

The ensuing quiet was almost unnatural.

After dinner, father and I escorted Waffles on his evening constitutional, and then I tackled the pitiably brief task of getting myself settled in. My former bedroom was converted to an office shortly after I first moved out, and father’s

desk was still piled with papers and journals. But it was pushed back into a corner to make room for the antique roll-out cot, marginally less musty than my room in the Ambassador. And my old dresser remained in the room after all this time, for lack of any other space to put it, I assumed. Several Super Friends stickers still clung to the dresser's veneer, scuffed and scratched like the rest of the unit. I had to admire their tenacity.

I left my clothes in the canvas bag for the time being, not bothering to use the dresser drawers or closet. To do so would, somehow, feel to me like I was well and truly settling in... and I was still trying to convince myself that my stay here would be a brief one. It seemed remiss of me to inconvenience my father this way, although he hastened to assure me that he usually worked in the front room anyway and rarely touched the desk. I felt uncomfortable and restless here, in ways I found difficult to pin down.

But it occurred to me, in that moment, that I had felt this way for months, and my new situation was only bringing a new facet of those feelings to light.

Four

March 30, 1998

The next morning, I was awake and up before my father left for the office, surprising us both. I wish I could attribute this to my diligence and discipline, but I give credit to the unfamiliarity and idiosyncrasies of the cot – I spent the night sleeping only in fits and starts. Yet more incentive to make my stay a brief one.

During my last few days at the Ambassador, I'd already allowed myself the luxury of wallowing in despair, anxiety, and inaction. Today it was time to grasp the proverbial horns of the proverbial bull and find work.

I borrowed father's computer and printer to type up a resumé, while Waffles took upon himself the duty of keeping my feet warm. The resumé didn't take long: part-time work at the campus library while I attended university, and before that a few high-school years of stocking shelves at the late, lamented Spadafora's grocery store, evenings and Saturdays. I couldn't very well list my *sub rosa* engagement at Bob's Battered Old Books without dumping him in unpleasantness again, so I indicated that I had occupied myself most recently as a freelance musician. To which there was some truth, if only a modicum.

Not that what went onto this page mattered so very much, in the long run. Almost anyone in town who was willing or able to hire me would already know me, and already know what they thought of me. One of the mixed blessings of small town life.

Once I had a dozen copies printed up, I slid them into a manila envelope, made a quick stop in the kitchen to ensure that Waffles had fresh water while I was out, and then walked downtown to seek out opportunities to unload a resumé upon some benevolent soul.

I don't recall seeing a single instance of the archetypal Help Wanted sign in the window of any of the businesses I passed. That would be too easy, I guess.

The first place willing to keep my resumé on file, even though they stressed that they had no openings in the foreseeable future, was Moonwalk Music. I could see them wanting to humour me and make such a kind gesture, since I was a regular customer of long standing.

As I was leaving the store, I glanced back at the cashier filing my paper under the counter, and felt a flash of memory, seeing Inch make similar movements in that exact spot. She worked cash here for a couple of years, just before she got her job on the front desk at the realtor's office, where she remained today.

I blamed that realty job for what happened between us. I tried to tell myself that such blaming was irrational, but that wasn't enough to stop me completely from doing it anyway.

The comic book shop across the street was not as willing to indulge me as the cashier at Moonwalk was; they declined the opportunity to read my concise but scintillating literary work, and turned me back out into the street without even wishing me good luck.

Several more attempts led me on a path which brought me to the library, facing The Square. I went inside, as I had regularly done several times a week for over ten years. Ms. Kowalczyk at the circulation desk nodded and smiled as I slid past her to the black naugahyde chairs in the Periodicals section. From there, I picked up a couple of newspapers and settled into a seat. Which made its customary flatulent sound – I heard a very young giggle come from somewhere off in the stacks.

My usual reason for filling a chair in the library, year in and year out, was the opportunity to read the thrice-weekly newspaper column, *It's Like This* – what I liked to describe as an “accessible science” feature, and one which resonated with me pretty much without exception. I became a fan of the column's author, Michael McPhail, almost from day one, and, since my parents didn't subscribe to the *Daily Quotidian*, I was forced to find and read that paper where I was able.

By way of the most cosmic of serendipities, Michael McPhail happened to move to Westgate from Toronto about six years ago, and I happened to meet him, and I now counted Mike among my truest friends. It occurred to me that I was doing myself no favours, avoiding him as I had been over these past months.

Today's column featured an interview with a newly arrived researcher at the local Institute for Paranormal Studies, where my father worked. During her conversation with Mike, this Professor Kim shared some intriguing ideas about her research in telekinesis, but admitted she had little to show so far in the way of concrete experimental results. Points for integrity, there. Judging by her

picture in the column, my guess was she was close to my own age. And I felt a soft stirring of envy, that she had come so far in the world so fast. I pushed that stirring down into silence.

This morning, I had a second newspaper in my lap: the *Belvedere Record*, which I usually avoided because of what I saw as its reactionary bias. But it was the closest thing to a local paper that Westgate had – “*Informing the Tri-Cities since 1888*”, its masthead proclaimed – and I wanted to avail myself of the local classifieds.

Given that these ads purported to serve the entire Tri-City area, its Help Wanted section was dismayingly meagre. And yes, the old truism held: everyone was looking for someone with experience. Had I really expected to find the perfect solution on my first day out? I liked to think I was not nearly so naive.

I left the papers on a glass table between chairs, headed out and down the library’s wide stone steps, and trundled back to father’s house for lunch, letting my manila envelope dangle from one hand. I had left the house with a dozen copies of my resumé; I was returning with nine. I had no clue whether that represented good luck or bad, for my first day of hunting.

When I got onto the front step of the house, I noticed the mailbox hanging beside the door. Unchanged from when we first moved here, except perhaps for a few more rust spots and scratches in its black paint. A metal box, missing one of the hooks underneath which were intended to hold a rolled newspaper, a flap on the top that shrieked like nails on chalkboard when you flipped it open. I decided to risk the shriek in order to check for today’s mail.

As soon as I touched the lid, I was reminded of the charming boobytrap lurking within this battered rectangle. The mailbox suddenly swivelled down, away from my fingers, dragging over the brown bricks with a grating sound til it hung at an angle. Magazines fell out of it onto the floorboards of the porch. Inside the house, I could hear Waffles’ muffled barking at the sudden commotion; once he could smell that I was the cause of it, he settled down.

All these years, father had never gotten around to fixing the loose screws on which the mailbox hung. To be fair, I never had, either. But father seemed almost to enjoy the mailbox’s quirks, in some quietly perverse fashion.

Mother once said that that mailbox was the reason she finally left. I was sure there had to be more to it than that. Reasonably sure.

I squatted to pick up the magazines. Two identical glossy copies of the alumni magazine from Belvedere University. One mailing label addressed to *Dr. Steven Wagner*, the other to *Frank Wagner*, without honorific. A wry reminder that I had never bothered to update my contact info with the alumni office. Not that I worried: from one month to the next, I rarely bothered to open the magazine. That part of my life felt very far away and irrelevant now, somehow.

Then I fiddled with the bare screw protruding from the wall and hung the mailbox on it once again. When I unlocked and opened the front door, Waffles was sitting directly in the doorway, ears and eyes alert, tongue hanging and mouth smiling, tail swinging, trying his best to give me the impression he had been rooted to that spot all morning, awaiting my return to the exclusion of all else in life. I was charmed but not convinced.

I reached down to scratch gently behind his ear. "Who's a good boy?" I said.

Lunch when I got home consisted of a peanut butter sandwich, an apple, and a cup of instant coffee. Immediately after I ate, I washed up my few dishes, and tackled the ones father and I had left from breakfast. This sort of domestic fastidiousness was most unlike me: I wondered if I was trying to make a good impression on my absent host, as if he didn't already know me well. As if I were on probation of some sort.

After the dishes were done, I went into the front room and sprawled on the sofa. Waffles took this as an invitation to curl up between me and the coffee table. I let one hand slide limply over the edge of the sofa cushion and idly pet Waffles' smooth warm head.

I felt at a loss. Father had a TV but I didn't feel like watching. He had a pleasing, untidy library but I didn't feel like reading. Absently I wondered if this was to be my life for the foreseeable future, and the prospect of that felt leaden.

Idly I glanced over at his turntable and stereo. I could rifle through his LP collection and see if there were any recent additions to it. But I noticed from the

empty album sleeve propped against the record shelves that he already had ***Tea for the Tillerman*** by Cat Stevens pulled out and readied on the turntable. Many's the time I'd heard that album, both here and at the old house, as far back as I could remember. It would serve now as well as anything. A retreat into the safety of nostalgia, perhaps.

After I got the disc playing, I returned to the sofa and stretched out again. Sometimes my mind wandered, trying to think of other potential employers in other sections of town where I might make inquiries. Other times I found myself focusing on the songs, listening to the guitar, and trying to identify chord patterns. Wondering how I could modify them to fit my own style and more limited technique. I'd played a number of acoustic covers during the final years I was performing, but never tried to do any Cat Stevens.

Maybe I thought his material was beyond my capabilities. Maybe it was because I knew Inch wasn't all that keen on him, and we always performed together.

But somehow, even though I ended up listening through the album twice, my interest in it didn't translate into enough momentum to get up, get my guitar, and try to learn any of the songs. I just lay there, quiet, until it finally occurred to me that Waffles might appreciate getting outside on a weekday afternoon for a change. A chance to earn my keep.

All I had to do was amble over to the coathooks by the front door and pick up his leash. The jingle of the clip on the end was enough to send Waffles dashing back through the kitchen, where his nails on the floor made the sound of an old-time stenography pool. Then he came cantering back over to me with his stick gripped firm in his mouth. For Waffles, leaving the house without his stick was like a human leaving without their keys.

We walked over toward the small park a couple of blocks down the street; I was up for playing fetch with him for a while, since the day was sufficiently pleasant. I was also curious to find out if there were any other unemployed folk at the park, choosing to occupy their afternoon in the same way I was.

Five

April 2, 1998

The next couple of days passed in very much the same mould as that first one, excepting the fact that I seemed to have already passed a threshold of diminishing returns: every day, fewer of my resumé's found a new home outside of my envelope. I'd leave the house after breakfast, walk to a part of town with a promising number of businesses, make inquiries in establishments that didn't seem like an impossible fit, go to the library to scour the want ads, find nothing, and return home footsore and less than optimistic. Check for mail, usually need to fiddle with the loose screw and set the mailbox level again, have lunch, wash up, rest my feet a while and listen to father's old records, and take Waffles out for an extra run. It didn't take long for me to notice that my life was beginning to resemble a hamster wheel.

On this particular day, I decided to hike down to the small branch campus of Belvedere U., where I took the classes to earn my degree, and see about the possibility of working in the campus library again. Conchata, the chief librarian, made a convincing show of being delighted to see me again, and insisted on spending a while simply catching up. But she offered no hope *vis-à-vis* hiring me. Library policy reserved part-time jobs for current students, and I supposed I could see the sense in that. And full-time positions – when they were open, which at the moment they weren't – went to people with diplomas or degrees in library science, not philosophy majors. Again, sensible albeit unhelpful.

My path from campus to the public library downtown took me past Westgate's venerable family restaurant The Wien, my favourite eatery in a town that offered stiff competition in that regard. I used to frequent it quite regularly, especially during those years when Inch and I would eat there together. The staff there were almost family, and I regretted that my finances of late had obliged me to give The Wien a miss more often than not.

I glanced in the window as I walked past, but saw only my own reflection, dark and blurred. I could only assume that the regular early-lunch crowd would by now be gathering in there. But, after I had gone past a few more steps, I heard a door burst open behind me, with a thump and rattle. And a voice called my name.

A voice I recognized at once. A voice with which I was intimately familiar.

I put a small, relaxed smile on my face and turned to face the voice. “Hail and well met, Mitch,” I said, not yet moving closer.

Mitch Sano beckoned me toward him, energetically, impatiently, as if I were being stubborn. I relented, trundled back to The Wien’s door, and offered Mitch the hearty handshake he would expect. “Geez, Frank, where ya been? *How* ya been? Hey, c’mon, me and Dougie are just getting started on lunch – c’mon in!”

He looked a little different today, his coarse black mop of hair now trimmed up off his shoulders, but his brown eyes still blazed with the energy that made him one of the most powerful guitarists I ever knew. And he still favoured black rock-band T-shirts with white sleeves. I blinked, shook my head vaguely, mumbling, “I, umm...”

“C’mon, man! Just have a coffee with us – I’ll buy.” And with a start in my chest, I realized that he knew. He knew and understood, and it made less of a difference to him than it did to me.

At that, I smiled a bit bigger, made an expansive gesture toward the doorway, and said, “As you wish, *confrère*. And a plethora of thanks.”

When Mitch led me to the back corner booth, I heard Dougie calling out to me. “Vogner!” A small twitch of the lips in his poker face was what passed for a smile – you had to know what to look for, with Dougie.

I didn’t often hear anyone call me “Vogner”. Dougie was one of only two folks who did. The second one being Inch. I know it might sound as if everything reminded me of Inch, but the reminders came particularly thick and fast with these two rascals.

For the past four years, Mitch and Dougie had been, respectively, the lead guitarist-slash-vocalist and drummer of Ikiru, a modestly successful post-grunge band and Westgate’s best-known musical entity. Which I will grant is not saying much. But for several years before that, they formed half of the grunge band Vog – along with Inch, and myself. And, despite their years of greater success on their own, a part of me still thought of these guys, warmly, as My Band.

I offered Dougie a firm hand while I slid onto the bench, and he took it with his

challenging grip. I noticed his shortened sandy hair, similar to Mitch, nodded toward it, and said, "Ikiru is adopting a new image, Dougie?"

His massive shoulders shrugged. "Just taking life as it comes, eh?"

I nodded. "Always wise, good sir. Dwell in the zen of the now."

A warm touch fell on my shoulder and became a comforting rub. I turned and looked up to see Effie, one of The Wien's wait staff, flashing me her lovely spontaneous smile. "Heya, Frank! Good to see you! How you been?"

I swallowed and smiled back. "Capital."

Effie nodded, but didn't push with further questions about my protracted absences – she said she didn't like to pry. "Can I get you a coffee to start?"

"Just a coffee," I said, "start and finish, please."

Mitch spoke up. "And that's on our bill, okay, Eff?"

Effie gave Mitch a gentle elbow nudge and another bright smile. "You're the boss."

After she left, Dougie's voice rumbled. "I keep telling you, Mitch, she likes you. You should go for it."

Mitch blushed. "Shut up, ya lump."

My erstwhile bandmates dug into their lunches and started up conversation that to me sounded as comfortable as if we were still meeting up several times every week. I asked about Ikiru's triumphs and travails; they asked if I was writing any new songs, or giving any further consideration to the idea of returning to the stage. I felt conspicuous answering no to both.

After Effie set my coffee before me, Dougie poked his fork at what remained of his shepherd's pie, then said to his plate, "Um, I saw Inch a few days ago." Without raising his head, he glanced up and over to me.

I started to say, "I trust she's keeping well", but was interrupted by Mitch turning and punching Dougie's shoulder. "Dammit, Dougie," he growled through gritted

teeth, trying not to be overheard by neighbouring tables. “Why the fuck you wanna go bringing *that* up?”

I had my coffee partway to my lips but set it back down. “Mitch, it’s not a problem.”

But he was still intent upon excoriating Dougie. “Why you even wanna *talk* to that bitch?”

Dougie frowned. “Hey, me and Inch made a great team.” He then suddenly blushed and looked toward me again. “Like rhythm section, I mean.”

I raised a hand, almost in benediction. “Understood, dude. And eminently true.”

Mitch was now muttering almost more to his food than to us. “She’s just lucky I wasn’t there, is all I can say. I woulda torn a strip offa her, I’m tellin’ ya.”

I leaned into the table, closer to him. “Now, now. You and she were friends and bandmates for years. All of us were. No reason for that to change. I never wanted anything that happened with me to come between you two.”

He looked me in the eye, his own eyes hot and bright. “No one fucks over my friends, man. Especially not you. I dunno that I can ever forgive her.” I was taken aback by what I saw as pain in his tight face, and realized that I was not the only one who had some difficulty in processing last year’s events.

I gave my head a gentle shake. “There’s nothing to forgive. She... she just followed her heart, is all. How many times have you heard me advise someone to do exactly that? Certainly no cause for finger-pointing. It’s yet another lesson in acceptance, is all.”

Dougie shook his head slowly. Mitch’s mouth fell gently open, and then he said, “You and your damn Zen! How can you be so, so *chill* about something like this?”

I shrugged. “Peace. It’s what I do.” But there was a subtle tightness in my throat, that gave the words a rough edge.

Mitch gave me a crooked smile. “Incredible,” he said.

Six

April 7, 1998

The novelty of the job hunt wore off faster than I expected, and I soon found myself bogged down in fruitless inertia. By the time the weekend arrived, I was no longer pavement-pounding to track down the elusive employment in its native habitat. I still went to the library every day to check the want ads, and they still offered nothing, but the rest of the time I appeared to be lounging around the house, listening to records.

What I told myself I was doing was regrouping, strategizing, determining which other faces of the socioeconomic cliff I had not yet attempted to scale. The difference between that and lounging was a subtle one, and elusive to the untrained eye.

By Tuesday, I had thought of at least one possibility that might justify a long walk, and I brought a resumé downtown to The Wien. I had zero experience waiting tables, but on the off chance that they were willing to train, I felt I had nothing to lose. My coffee with Mitch and Dougie last week reminded me how much I enjoyed the ambience there, and liked the people. The hypothetical chance to work alongside them seemed to me worth looking into.

Brisk air followed me in through The Wien's front door: winter was reluctant to loosen its grip on Westgate just yet, and I could feel the pink that the mid-morning air had awakened in my face. As I intended, the restaurant was not particularly busy at this time of day – a better opportunity to speak with Gus or Anna about working for them.

I glanced around for some sign of either of them, but the first person I recognized was Mike McPhail, sitting in the same rear booth where I hung with the Ikiru lads last time I was here. He was intently scrawling on a yellow note pad with a ballpoint pen, a cup of black coffee waiting near the pad, and I told myself that he was hard at work and it would be best that I not disturb him.

But just as I began to move myself toward the lunch counter over at the side, Mike happened to pause his pen, glance up, notice me, and his head lifted higher with a start. "Heya, Frank!", he called out. I could see a smile starting to grow on his face, and he watched me with an expectant expression which, I realized, was the assumption that I would come over and regale him with badinage for a while. As I had been doing for years.

By the time I reached his table, his hand was already extended, awaiting mine. I took it and attempted to shake with the enthusiasm Mike deserved. He continued looking up at me a few seconds more, his expectant look now tinged with curiosity. Then he released my hand and gestured toward the other corner of the booth bench. “Well, sit!”, he said. While I slid into place at the table, he went on: “Since when does Frank Wagner wait for an invitation before pulling up a seat?”

I shook my head and smiled sheepishly. “My apologies, good sir – out of practice and off my game.”

Mike cocked his head. “True – you’ve been conspicuous by your absence a lot lately, and don’t think we haven’t noticed.” He gave me a subtle little salute with his coffee mug. “Not to worry, though. You good?”

I shrugged. “Not bad enough to warrant the word ‘bad’. Preoccupied, though – varieties of game have been afoot.”

Mike gave me a slow nod, and began to open his mouth in a way that suggested further questions. He wasn’t usually one to be fobbed off with such a nebulous reply. But he was intercepted by the arrival of The Wien’s head waitress, Zoe, bearing another coffee which she set next to Mike’s, before squeezing herself in beside him on the bench.

She looked over at me with a bright, dimpled smile of a warmth and candour that she alone could summon. “Hi, Frank, great to see you!” She adjusted the banana clip in her thick black hair before reaching for her coffee. “Don’t mind me barging in – I’m just taking my break with Mr. Author here today.” Mike snorted gently and rolled his eyes, and she nudged his shoulder with hers.

I watched the easy rapport between them with, I admit, something of a twinge. Mike and Zoe had become An Item very shortly after Inch and I did – within a year, she left her apartment and moved into McPhail Manor down the street from here – and here they were now, still together and still thriving. And somehow this left me with the feeling that I had taken a wrong turn somewhere, without even realizing I had turned at all.

“One could scarcely call this ‘barging’, Zoe. In fact, your arrival is somewhat fortuitous for me.” She regarded me with raised eyebrows. “I was wondering if

you could provide me with insider information re the possibilities of obtaining work here.”

Zoe blinked. “You?” I simply nodded. “Are you looking for a second job?”

I cleared my throat. “An only, actually.” At that, both of them wrinkled their brows and said a sympathetic “ohh”, as if they practised for an Olympic synchronized event. I’d give them a nine point four. “A very recent turn of events,” I added. “More of a downturn, really.”

“Ow, geez, sorry, bud,” Zoe said. “Um, do you have any experience waiting tables?”

I fidgeted with my goatee. “I’m trying to think of a way of saying ‘nil’ that also somehow sounds promising.”

Her mouth twitched, just a touch. “Well, Anna really prefers hiring people with experience. And nowadays it’s not that hard to find experienced wait-people looking for work, so there’s that.” She pursed her lips. “Do you have a resumé?”

I handed her my manila envelope.

“I’ll give this to Anna, anyway. Who knows, she might make an exception, knowing it’s you.” A feeble flicker of a smile. “But we just hired a part-timer for evenings a couple weeks ago, so we don’t have any openings for the next who knows how long. I don’t wanna make promises, okay?”

I looked in her eyes, and in those luminous depths I caught a glimpse of what Mike saw in her. “I appreciate you doing what you can. Thank you.”

Mike touched the tip of his tongue to his lip. “Hey, Frank, you wanna come over for dinner? Been a while since you dropped in, y’know?” He turned to face Zoe, his eyebrows raised, seeking consultation.

She gave him a small nod. “Tomorrow. I’ll be putting that giant crock pot on.” She turned to me. “Can you make it tomorrow night, Frank? Do you want to?”

I felt a flush, warm, unfamiliar. “I can think of nothing that would delight me more.” Then I slid off the bench and to my feet. “And that’s as good a cue as any for me to trundle, and allow you to savour your break in peace.”

There was a spark of amusement in Zoe's eyes. "Is seven good for you?"

"Ah yes, knowing what time to arrive is certainly a valuable datum, thank you." I gave them a small, loose salute. "*À bientôt* til seven tomorrow, fair denizens." As I turned and headed for the door, I could hear Zoe gently giggle behind me.

While father and I ate dinner that evening, I mentioned to him that I would be dining elsewhere on the morrow. He gave me a slow nod of approval. "That's a slick turnaround, dude. Wednesday was always your night to hang with your old man – this week, it can be your night to get away from him. Rock on." He speared a forkful of green beans and snickered. "I'll make a point of cooking something you hate. Dunno what yet, but I'll figure it out."

"Most considerate of you, sir."

"Don't speak too soon, man – I'm gonna make sure there's plenty of leftovers for Thursday."

Seven

April 8, 1998

Despite the heavy rains of Wednesday evening, with only brief breaks for torrential downpours, I still managed to reach the imposing front door of the magnificent brownstone McPhail abode within a few minutes of my ETA. One hand gripped a plastic bag, now streaming and dripping like the rest of me, containing a couple of cello-wrapped pairs of chocolate crullers. A gift for my hosts, thanks to a convenience store en route and some remaining funds from my final pay packet. My other hand formed a fist which hammered on the door with a serene violence.

The door opened quietly to reveal Mike's warm half-smile. He backed into the foyer and beckoned. "Heya, Frank, hurry and get in here, geez." Over his shoulder I could see Zoe a few steps farther back. She peered past him at me, waved, and then turned and went upstairs.

I slid inside and Mike hurriedly pushed the heavy door shut against the elements. We paused long enough to shake hands before I then shook water off the bag, handed it to him, and then shook water off myself. He peered within the bag while I slipped my soggy runners off and nudged them onto the mat by the door.

Mike made a soft nod of approval. "Very urbane, Frank, thank you." He turned to face me, his smile a bit wider. "Now you're making me feel under-dressed – this isn't a formal do, y'know." He called back over his shoulder. "Frank brought dessert, Zo."

Zoe's voice came from the top of the stairs as her feet reappeared, descending. "My hero." When the rest of her came into view, she was holding a blanket-sized pink towel, which she brought over and handed to me. "Thank you, bud. Hey, how about you go up and change? There's a robe in the bathroom. Then give me those things and I can bung 'em in the dryer for you while we eat."

I nodded my thanks, then flopped the towel over my hair. "You take hostessing to the Nth level and beyond." Then I trundled to the stairs, my socks leaving wet footprints that neither of them remarked upon. Just as neither of them had a word to say about my lack of an umbrella for my long walk to their home. Mike and I had been friends for over six years, Zoe and I considerably longer. They knew that I didn't believe in those contraptions.

There is a sweet peace in being accepted.

Over plates of rich and savoury beef stew, we caught up, in précis, about the past few months: Mike and his latest literary projects, Zoe's anecdotes about her co-workers and hobbies, my sudden reversal at Bob's and new living arrangements. Then Mike swallowed and said, "Bunny was asking about you the other day – she says hi."

Bonnie was Mike's daughter, who came in from Toronto once a month to visit him for the weekend. I happened to meet her briefly on a few of those occasions over the years, and watched her grow – in time lapse – into a teenager whose alertness and intellect mirrored her father. Suddenly it occurred to me that, by the time Mike was my age, he was married (possibly even divorced by then), a father, and established in a career in journalism. I felt a flash of being left behind, and tried to let that pass. "I trust she's well," I said.

"Oh yeah, she's doing great. More to the point, she was asking if you've been playing anywhere or writing any new tunes. She's become something of a fan."

I blinked. "Unexpected."

"Yeah, I, ah, made her copies of some those Vog soundboard tapes. After her and her friends burned out on Boyz II Men and started getting into rock. She says that Vog, and I quote, 'kicks Nirvana's butt.'" When he said that, Zoe giggled.

Again I blinked, and briefly blushed. "Debatable, but flattering nonetheless. I'm afraid you'll have to tell her that production remains on hiatus."

Mike sighed. "Gotcha. So anyway, she's really getting into stuff like yours, wants to learn how to play guitar now. She's got a birthday coming up, so me and Barb are gonna get her one, I think. You got any recommendations?"

I bit my lip and felt a smile. "Tell her not to be seduced by the siren call of big names and price tags. A humble punk-rock generic will do splendidly, as long as it feels comfortable to hold and play. She should trust the wisdom of her hands."

Mike nodded. "Okay! 'Avoid big price tags' – I like the sound of that! Thanks!" And he chuckled.

After a silent moment of chewing, Zoe tentatively spoke. "So are you seeing anyone?" Mike turned to look at her, his eyebrows drawn closer together.

There was a sudden weight in my stomach, unrelated to the food. For a second, I simply sat and felt it. "I see the two of you. And myself if I look down."

She rolled her eyes and tried not to smile. "Frank."

Mike looked at me. "It-it's okay, Frank, you don't hafta –"

I raised a few fingers. "No no, fear not. We're all friends here." Fixing Zoe's gaze with mine, I took a breath and said, "So far, no one has caught my eye. Or, I have caught no one's. Best two out of three falls wins."

"That's a shame," she said. "But I don't mind admitting that I sorta had hopes for you two. You always looked to me like you had a real future."

I saw that my main course was finished, without my being aware, and I nudged my plate barely away from me. "I wonder now how often I ever thought of that. In retrospect, I feel as if I took us as we came, a day at a time. Living and being in the moment."

Mike spoke up. "Were you guys on the same page about that? She was maybe looking for a future and you weren't?"

I shook my head and fidgeted with my bathrobe's lapel. "I really don't think that was it." But I also wondered if I was mistaken there. "I mean, I didn't *not* want one. It... it wasn't something we discussed so much."

Zoe said, "Being on the same page is so important. Communicating. I remember a time when Mike and I were, uhh... well, I had moments where I was wondering if this whole thing was a mistake."

Mike raised his eyebrows and looked toward her. "Ah, The Rough Patch?"

This caused my own brows to raise in turn. "Oh?" In the years he and Zoe had been together, they always appeared to me as the very picture of domestic bliss.

In the past year or so, I sometimes envied their ability to keep things intact and on an even keel.

Zoe blushed. “What else? Is it okay if I tell him?” Mike nodded and she continued. “Um, a few months after I moved in here, Mike started hinting that I should quit my job. The hinting got pretty hard after a while, and finally it turned into flat-out arguing.”

“No throwing dishes, though,” Mike added. “Too cliché.”

“Anyway,” she said, “he was saying that, now that I didn’t have rent to pay on my apartment, we could get by fine on what he’s making from his writing. But what I was hearing was something like the old fifties husband, Fred Flintstone malarkey about how ‘no woman of mine is gonna work’. Like he resented me having any kind of life away from him. I felt smothered and patronized.”

“But see,” Mike said, “from where I sat, Zoe was punishing herself, on her feet all day, doing something that was taking her away from, from doing something fulfilling. Like how I felt about my job at the paper: it was taking me away from my writing. Stuff like *that* is what I resent. And as soon as I was lucky enough to get out, I got. So I wanted that for her, too.”

I nodded and simply said, “I see.”

Zoe said, “But before he actually explained all that, he was just telling me I was being ‘silly’, or ‘contrary’, like it was all self-evident. And the thing he didn’t get was that I *like* my job. I find *it* fulfilling. I love the people I work with, and I love meeting all the different people that come in. Mike’s too much of an introvert for that to even occur to him.” She gave a soft laugh, and even Mike chuckled. “I would really miss The Wien if I had to give it up. And true, we don’t need the money, but it’s nice to have some extra. We can travel and stuff, not worry so much about things. And I like feeling like I contribute.”

I tapped a fingernail on the edge of my plate. “So, clearly, you were able to resolve this impasse of yours.”

Zoe nodded. “Yes, once we realized how serious this was getting, and that we needed to sit down and really talk, really hash things out. Talk about *why*. *Why* did he think I was being silly, *why* did I think he was being domineering. We got onto the same page. And finally realized that each of us was honestly trying to

do what we thought was best for both of us.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, “and one of the most important things, maybe this is something you wanna hear, Frank: there were no bad guys in this. Everyone’s heart was in the right place. But there were still misunderstandings, and, and clashes. You can both mean well, and you can both do the right things, and sometimes things still don’t work out anyway. And it isn’t anyone’s fault. Y’know?”

I could feel a wan little smile on my face, which hopefully told them I had listened and was trying to digest. “Rain falls on the just and on the unjust.”

Mike’s mouth made an amused twist. “Well, it sure fell on *you* tonight!”

And I thought, but didn’t say, *not just tonight*.

When I returned home and patted Waffles at the front door, I caught the unmistakable scent of cabbage filling the house. Not a favourite of mine – I appreciated father awaiting my absence before deciding to cook that. As I expected, he occupied the sofa in the front room for his traditional after-dinner sprawl. But, not as I expected, he had neither the TV nor stereo on. From this angle, I couldn’t see it, but I could plainly hear his guitar. Something I hadn’t heard for several years, at least.

I toed off my shoes and walked in til I could face him and watch him play. Cradled in his lap was a Martin twelve-string, a beautiful beast, all golden veneer and nacreous inlays, with a full, singing tone. Father liked to, as he put it, “hack around on the guitar now and then, just for kicks”, but never pursued it seriously. I liked to think that he approved of my attempts to make something more out of my own playing.

I nodded when I recognized the song. “*Out in the Country*.”

He nodded back to acknowledge. “Three Dog Night.” I grew up with him playing that number around the house, and I found a soft comfort in its familiarity. He looked down at his fingers. “I still dig this chord, man – sounds so fancy but so simple to actually do.”

“I remember you teaching me that chord. And how wizardly I felt, the first time I got it down clean.”

Father stopped playing. “So how are Mike and, uhh, Zoe?”

“Thriving in peace.” I glanced into the kitchen. “I, uh, I’m perfectly willing to clean up those dishes for you. Work off some of my calories.”

He grinned. “Far out, man, thanks. Knock yourself out.”

As I shuffled toward the kitchen, I said, “Honesty compels me to inform you that this is actually an excuse to give you a wide berth. Now that I realize you’re stuffed with cabbage.”

After a brief burst of laughter, Father said, “Excellent deduction, my son. I think I’ll advise you to eat a fair pile of the leftovers tomorrow, like, in self-defense.”

Eight

April 16, 1998

Over the next week, my life gradually settled into what was beginning to feel like routine. Or, perhaps, more like the proverbial tunnel, but one without a light at the end. I went to the library, I re-positioned the loose mailbox on its loose screws, I cleaned the kitchen, I hung out with Waffles, I walked the streets. From time to time I'd pass a friend or acquaintance and greet them with a casual salute. The enforced hiatus of Good Friday, when everything was closed, passed without incident. Some days I got wet, but I noticed that warmer and brighter days were, more and more, putting in an appearance.

There was one day when I wandered through the maze of the industrial park near the north end, attempting to leave my resumé in factories. None of them had positions vacant. One or two were willing to keep my paper on file. But, more often, the person working the front office would give me a quick visual once-over and wrinkle their nose as if they caught wind of an unpleasant smell. [I was always freshly showered so I knew it couldn't be me.] And they'd tell me that they weren't accepting resumé's.

And finally there was another day, a cooler day, when I considered checking the pretentious but friendly coffee shop Third Eye Caffeine, a few doors down the street from our old apartment. We used to visit it on rare occasions when we wanted to go out for coffee and The Wien was closed. The baristas always appeared to enjoy their work. Not that I had any experience, and not that I was so committed to the idea of working in the food service industry, but it was a possibility.

I was still a few steps from the café when its front door opened, and my world went into trite slow motion, and the breath in my lungs turned to lead.

Inch came out, holding a paper cup.

The sight of her bright blue eyes and clear baby face made me blink for a second or two. As expected, her white-blonde hair was in a neat pageboy: when she started working at the realtor's, she gave up her short punky spikes and grew them out into something respectable. She was wearing a gray wool coat, down to her calves, and sharp black boots. The ensemble looked new, and carried a whiff of a higher budget than we had known in our years together.

This was not the first time I'd seen Inch since we went our separate ways – hard not to cross paths more than once in a town this small. Some of those times, she didn't see me, and I, unsure of what to say or do, simply let her pass. Other times, our eyes would meet across a distance, and she'd keep moving and nod at me, looking wary, perhaps mouthing a silent, uncomfortable “hi”.

Today she didn't notice me, but turned her face away to look behind her. I was just about to keep walking toward her when I saw Nicole Kane come out and join Inch, standing very close. At the sight of Nicole, I suddenly found myself stepping back behind a nearby phone booth, leaving just one eye clear to watch them.

I'd never met Nicole, and didn't feel ready to meet her now, but I recognized her at once. In Westgate terms, she was almost famous. Her face appeared in display ads on the sides of buses, on downtown benches, in bus stop shelters – if Westgate permitted billboards, she'd be on those. Thick, neat, glossy, chocolate brown hair hanging to her shoulders, flawless features, a serene smile which told the world that she sat in the driver's seat of life. And, always, the logo of Westgate Realty in the bottom right corner. In the top left, small print saying, “Home? Office?” And, in larger print, her ubiquitous tagline: “Nikki Kane has what you need.”

To her clientele, to the town at large, to Inch, she was Nikki. But not to me. I couldn't bring myself to refer to her with a diminutive that way: it implied a camaraderie which I absolutely did not feel.

This was the first time I had ever seen Nicole in the flesh, and it was a surprising revelation for me. All this time, I had assumed that the picture in her ad was the end result of a P.R. team working until there was nothing left but airbrush. But, here and now, I could see that she honestly did radiate that supermodel beauty, that strength of will. She wore that same driver's-seat smile. She also carried a paper cup, and wore a beige trenchcoat, open, beneath which I could make out a dark gray pantsuit and boots very much like Inch's. Nicole's heels were low, but she still towered over Inch. As did most people. And I got a sudden impression that Inch was moulding herself, as if Nicole were a visual benchmark to be achieved.

They stood a moment talking, too quietly for me to make out, heads almost touching. Nicole briefly laughed, throaty. At one point Inch gestured across the street, and Nicole gently shook her head. Then she reached an arm around

Inch's shoulders and squeezed her closer. An affectionate move, but also somehow possessive, jealous. She guided Inch toward a black Lexus parked in front of the café, opened the passenger door, and ushered Inch inside. Nicole got in the driver's side and, within a few seconds, the car pulled out and purred its way up the street, passing me by like a phantom.

It wasn't til the car was gone that I noticed how my heart was racing.

I didn't go in to Third Eye to ask about a job. I didn't even go to the library. I turned and walked home, without noticing or remembering anything I saw along the way. I even stopped feeling the gentle coolness of the air – I was aware of nothing. At least until the floor of the front porch creaked underfoot.

With one fingertip I lifted the lid of the mailbox to look inside, and it made its usual rusty scrape. But then the mailbox fell off the wall completely and clattered onto the porch, a metallic bang that echoed in the stillness of the neighbourhood. Even the birds held their breath.

For a few seconds I glared at it, as if I could ignite it with my eyes. I was barely aware that my breath was huffing through my teeth. Then I lunged down, snatched the mailbox up in one hand, and savagely bounced it off the porch floor again. A much louder bang, a fresh gouge in the floorboards.

I picked it up again and hurled it at the wall. A clang, piercing. A corner of the lid bent. I kept picking the mailbox up and throwing it as hard as I could, at the floor, at the wall. I didn't count how many times. And somewhere in there, I started giving voice to something. Not profanities, not words of any kind – more like the shrieks of a furiously psychotic chimpanzee.

I bellowed, and screamed, and threw and threw the stupid, stupid mailbox. Once I bounced it off the front door, and dimly noticed that one of the tiny windowpanes cracked with a dull *tink*, instead of shattering with the satisfying cinematic crash one might expect. My throat burned. Finally, with a short hoarse yell, I heaved the box at the front lawn, where it made one final clank and the lid popped completely off before it all lay still in the grass. I backed against the front door, slid down it til I was huddled and sitting on my haunches. I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, and I sobbed, and wailed, sending more echoes down the street, my chest and shoulders heaving.

That felt like it went on far longer than it likely did in actuality.

When I finally quieted down to sniffing, my breath trembling, my face hot, I could hear the muffled scratches of Waffles pawing at the inside of the door.

There wasn't even any mail.

Nine

April 16, 1998

Finally I stood and opened the door. Waffles nuzzled and snuffled at me, reassuring himself that I was in one piece. I rested an unsteady hand on his warm head. When I asked him who was a good boy, my voice emerged in only a rough whisper. Then I wandered into the front room and slowly sank onto the sofa. Waffles popped up onto it beside me and rested his chin in my lap.

For a while I simply sat there, my ears ringing from the quiet, dazed and vaguely afraid. Some of that fear arose from the slowly dawning awareness that I had created the sort of disturbance which might have neighbours calling the police. I wondered what I could possibly say to them if they did show up. Some of the fear was more nebulous and nameless, coming from the incomprehensible nature of what I would always think of as The Mailbox Incident.

Eventually I wiggled a leg under Waffles' chin to shift him, stood up, and got myself a glass of water in the kitchen. While I drank, I thought. Then I splashed my face with cold water, dried it, pulled open the junk drawer, and searched through the jumble. This kitchen drawer was where father kept what few tools he possessed, and I managed to locate a screwdriver and pliers, as well as a small, half-empty box of wooden toothpicks.

I set all of these on the kitchen table, then went out to the front yard to retrieve the pieces of mailbox. I felt excruciatingly conspicuous doing so, as if every house in the neighbourhood had pairs of eyes watching me from its front window. I set the pieces on the table and, wrestling with the pliers, finagled the lid's back corners into position in their crude swivels so that the lid was attached and functional again. A while longer to try and coerce the bent front corner more or less where it was before, as best I could.

Out on the front porch, I removed the loose screws from the wall, wedged toothpicks into their holes, as many as would fit, then drove the screws back in, where the fresh wood made them grip snug and solid. I hung the mailbox on them again, noticed a subtle new dent in its front face. Then I took hold of the box and wiggled it. It stood steadfast. I tapped it, pushed down on it, nudged it sideways. It barely shifted. I tested the lid. It shrieked louder now, but it worked, and the whole doohickey seemed content to stay put.

The entire operation took fifteen minutes. Without the pliers repair work which I

myself had made necessary, it would have been five.

Time for Phase Two.

It took some searching to locate a broom and dustpan – in the back mudroom, as it turned out. I swept carefully around the front door, both inside and out. The cracked glass looked to me like it hadn't lost any splinters, but I was unwilling to take that risk. The most difficult aspect of that job was keeping Waffles' muzzle out of my way while I swept – the broom head fascinated him. Mistaken for a small dog, perhaps.

Another trip to the junk drawer for an old pair of scissors and a measuring tape. I wanted a roll of masking tape, but could only find duct tape. That would suffice.

I measured the cracked window, returned to the kitchen, pulled a cereal box out of the recycling bin and cut a piece of it to size. Back to the front door to tape the cardboard into place over the breach. An unattractive repair, but the best I knew how to do, and it would keep the worst of the elements out.

Working with my hands made me feel rather more settled, and centred. Finally I felt like eating something. Today's something ended up being another PB sandwich. While I made my way slowly through it, I was thinking that, even if the police never came to the door, father would undeniably come home from work at some point. And I wondered what I could possibly say to *him*.

Waffles jumped off the sofa and bounded to the door when he heard father coming up the front walk. I remained semi-reclined, and craned my neck to look back at the entrance. When the door opened and father stepped in, he was gazing upon my cereal box handiwork, unperturbed. He then absently reached down to pet Waffles, looked at me with a thoughtful expression, and said, "So, did the front door explode?"

"You noticed."

"I did. Sherlock Holmes got nuthin on *me*, man." He came around to the sofa, stood, and looked down at me with patient expectancy. For a few seconds, that's all there was.

Drawing a deep breath, I sat more upright and related The Mailbox Incident to him as best I could recall. Throughout my tale, I could feel warmth in my face. I apologized most particularly for the window, the part I was unable to put right. I offered no explanation for my behaviour – not even to point out that I didn't have one.

When I was done, father let his eyes close for a second. When he opened them, he looked unruffled, as if he had heard nothing out of the ordinary from me. After a breath, he said, almost to himself, "Far out." Then he straightened, turned, and headed toward the kitchen with his slow saunter. Speaking louder, calling back to me, he said, "I'm hearing the call of pizza, man. What say you?"

"As you wish."

I heard the phone being picked up, then the sound of dialing. No need to ask where to order the pizza: he knew the number for Vito's by heart. As did I.

The pizza box sat on the kitchen table between us, mostly closed. We worked partway through our first slices without needless verbiage, and I felt the deep, primal comfort that comes only from Vito's three-meat special. Then father paused before his next bite: the time had come for talk.

"So. My man. I'm guessing that this job hunt gig is stressing you out, am I right?"

I swallowed. "That, umm... that would be difficult to deny. Not to mention pointless."

He nodded, finally allowed himself another bite. Then he watched my eyes, lifted a placating hand toward me, and said, "Now hear me out, dude. I'm saying this not as your dad, but as a friend – can you dig?" Curious, I nodded, and he continued. "Sometimes... sometimes when you're saddled with something really heavy, it can help you out a lot to have someone who's got your back, to talk it out with, like. I mean, you know you can tell me anything, just like always. But, but sometimes it's easier and better to take it to someone more, like, objective? With more experience?"

My eyes almost opened wide. "Uhh... you want me to see a therapist?" The idea felt even more ludicrous after I said it out loud.

Father winced. “No, man, not – what do I mean here... I’m not saying *I want* you to. I’m putting it out there for you to think about if *you* want to.”

I put my pizza down and looked at it. “I... it’s not something I ever considered. I mean, the budgetary aspects alone render the whole enterprise moot – especially now.”

“On me. A gift. If you want.”

I gave father a mild frown. “I couldn’t. There is no way I –”

“Frank.” When he interrupted me by simply calling my name, I knew he was serious, and I came to a sudden stop and listened more closely. He sighed, his gaze grave upon me. “The way I see it, you and J.T. never really cost me a dime. I mean, with Star waiting til you were both eighteen and done high school before she, like, split to go do her own thing. I never had to pay child support, right? Even your university got covered by her tuition waivers. So you kinda owe me a chance to do something for you. And the person I have in mind really doesn’t cost so much.”

“Someone in mind?”

He popped the last of his pizza slice into his mouth and spoke around it. “Remember Dr. Bloomfield?”

I blinked.

“My supervisor back when I was in grad school. I’ve talked about him.”

I didn’t remember, but nodded.

“Yeah, so, there was this chick T.A.-ing for him the same time I was. But different courses. Named Vera. I didn’t really know her then but knew *of* her, y’know? Anyway, when I went to his funeral, this is back when you’d be in grade nine I guess, I run into this Vera again. Turns out she got married to him!” Father paused for a soft chuckle and a gentle shake of his head. “So we talked a bit, and I find out she got working in counselling here in town, after she got her Masters. Well, a few years later I remembered her, when the divorce came down and I started feeling like I could do with someone to unload on. And she helped

me a lot, she's really good. Not super academic, but, uhh, sharp."

I picked up my pizza again and gnawed a piece off. "I see." After I chewed and swallowed, I said, "So she's not a psychiatrist."

"Nothing so heavy. Officially it's just 'counsellor'. But she still knows what she's doing." Father stood up and went to the counter to put the kettle on for coffee. "But man, with what you told me today, I gotta think that something big is going down with you. And you know I wanna help you with it if I can, but I dunno if I can, right? I, I just don't want you to ignore it. But I can't make you go. You're a grown man – up to you to decide."

A voice inside me said, *A grown man would pay his own way*. And, with a curious little startle, I realized that the voice was not my own.

I looked at the kettle, listening to its soft rustles and clunks as it warmed up. Still watching it, I said, "I'll sleep on it."

And I did. But not soundly. And not purely on account of the cot.

I almost didn't leave the house the next day. I wasn't abandoning my job hunt – I simply needed a break. People take breaks all the time. Perfectly reasonable.

I took Waffles out a couple of times. I made several attempts to read but couldn't muster the focus. As it turned out, I spent the majority of my time that day simply ruminating. More than once, I nodded off while doing it. Napping during the day was most unlike me, and yet there it was.

When father came home from work and asked me how my quest for gainful employ progressed, I shrugged. "It continues apace, with nothing to show for it." This got a nod from him and was enough to close the subject for the evening. The distractions of leftover pizza and a Jays game were sufficient to take his scrutiny off of me. Normally I'd enjoy watching with him, but, again, couldn't muster the focus. I think the Jays won.

After a quiet weekend, where father noticed my reticence but was prudent

enough not to draw attention to it, I made another push on Monday morning to resume this new existence of mine. I realized I had yet to investigate the possibility of a position at Calder's Grocery Mart, and walked there on a fact-finding mission.

Or almost walked there.

As I passed the storefronts of the modest strip mall, where Calder's awaited at the far end, I saw a woman emerge from the hair salon a couple of doors ahead. A short woman with a blonde pageboy.

And, at once, I found myself unable to take another step. And my chest constricted til I felt actual pain. My thoughts were a jumble close to genuine panic; I was barely able to focus enough to ask myself if I should seek medical attention.

The blonde woman turned to face me. She walked closer.

And I could see that it wasn't Inch. And she walked past me, taking no notice of me whatsoever.

I forced myself closer to the brick wall of a laundromat, leaned on it, and tried to breathe normally. I knew what my body needed to do, but I couldn't make it listen.

A matronly woman came walking past in the opposite direction. She spared me a brief glare of disapproval. Mistaking me for a drug addict? Understandable, perhaps.

I couldn't make myself continue on to the grocery store. Everything in me said it wanted to go home. A cynical part of me said that what I was returning to wasn't truly home but I'd have to make do. I leaned and breathed a while longer, til I felt more steady, and then turned back to the house.

I deliberately avoided touching the mailbox before I went in the door. Even though I knew it was repaired.

When father came in after work, and petted Waffles, he looked at me, seated on the sofa, twisted round to face him. His eyes widened a little, in concern. Possibly I appeared more stricken than I realized.

I said, "So how do I get in contact with this Vera?"

Ten

April 27, 1998

The following Monday, at ten a.m., I gave a good solid pounding to the front door of a townhouse, in a string of identical units, newly built in the south end. An unfamiliar neighbourhood, one I rarely had any cause to frequent. But this was where Vera lived, and it seemed she chose to work out of her home. I appreciated the informality of this arrangement; I had doubts about my ability to converse comfortably in the clinical atmosphere of some faceless office.

After a few seconds, the door clicked open softly, and a voice in the dim hall behind it said, "Frank? Come in." The door silently opened wider, and I slipped inside, alert and curious. Out of habit I offered my hand. Vera paused only a split-second, then accepted it in a firm, warm grip.

As we shook, we spent a few blinks taking each other in. She looked up at me: she was barely taller than Inch. Large eyes, that appeared hazel in this light, behind black-rimmed glasses. Eyes which gave her the look of a predatory bird suddenly granted superhuman intelligence. A thick nose and wide facial bones added to the impression of eagle strength in her face. But most striking of all was her hair: a wide, wild profusion of brown and gold corkscrew curls, a huge tangly mass that seemed to constitute half of what she was.

She let go my hand, and I saw she held a clipboard in her other. An over-large, cable-knit gray sweater, big enough to serve as a dress, big enough for her to get lost in. Below that, dark slacks with huge, loose legs. And bare feet.

Then her small mouth smiled, gentle and honest. "So," she said, "you're Steve's son. I can see it. How *is* Steve? We didn't have much time to talk when he called to set this up." Her voice was nasal but not abrasive; it made her feel informal, warm, approachable. I wondered if it was a tone she had cultivated deliberately.

"He maintains an even keel. From what I can surmise, his biggest problem these days is having me underfoot."

Her smile grew, and I saw teeth. "My office is upstairs – c'mon." She waited for me to toe my runners off onto a woven straw mat, and then I followed her. The carpeting on her stairs was new, like the house, and thick, so that it silenced our feet completely.

We came to a small landing with several closed doors, and she opened the one at the farthest end, then gestured me in. “The recliner is for you, if that’s okay?”

“The floor would be okay,” I said, and surveyed the room as I went in. Vera squeezed past me to sit on a fat loveseat facing the recliner she mentioned. Between the seats was a small glass table with a box of tissues and a bottle of water. On the off-white walls, I saw a diploma from Belvedere University, another from a small college in Toronto, framed watercolours of flowers. A dark wooden bookshelf stood in one corner, packed tightly but neatly. A magnolia in early bloom grew just outside the window. The overall effect was one of being studiously not clinical.

The recliner was black faux-leather, and, as I sat, I braced myself for the flatulent sounds of the library, but there was only a soft squeak. I left the chair-back upright. Vera sat cross-legged in the loveseat, her legs disappearing under the vast hem of her sweater-dress, only one set of toes peeking out. She seemed utterly relaxed, and that helped me.

She leaned across to hand the clipboard to me, along with a fine black marker. “Just a quick little form for you, before we get started, please.” It was mostly standard I.D. and contact info formalities, and I made quick work of it. When I handed it back, Vera removed the form from the clipboard, and I saw a lined pad beneath. She studied the form, jotted notes on the pad, tucked the form under, then looked at me, bright and interested.

In the better light, I could see soft laugh lines in her face. I wondered what she saw in mine, or to what extent she could read me without my speaking. I wasn’t sure whose place it was to begin, and the silence felt long.

Her head tilted a little. “First time?”

I nodded, rather too vigorously. “Yes.”

“Well, don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.” And she burst into a wide, easy grin. Her teeth were distinctly uneven but somehow charming. She wore them with such complete confidence, such un-self-consciousness, that they somehow gave me a glimpse into the fundamental serenity of her. “So,” she said, “I saw that, where the form asks, ‘*What brings you here?*’, you wrote ‘*my father’s advice*’. Do you not want to be here?”

My mouth fell open, just a tad. “I... I didn’t really know what to write.”

Vera looked at me seriously, and waited.

Finally I said, “In actuality, I was embarrassed to write it.”

“Okay.” And something clicked for me when she said that, the way she said that. Matter-of-factly. Like she understood, and accepted, and didn’t judge, and wouldn’t push. It felt somehow freeing. And I considered the possibility that she knew it would.

“And it would take a much larger form.”

Her quirky smile returned, and she adjusted her glasses down her nose, very slightly. “You have about an hour of airtime. You can fill the whole thing with your explanation, if you want.”

After a couple of deep breaths, I related to her The Mailbox Incident, feeling less flushed and less awkward the longer I went on. She scrawled frequent notes as my story progressed. When I finished, I rested back in the chair and watched her face. I felt a gentle tremor in my chest, from reliving the experience.

Her eyes flicked to her watch, then returned to mine. “That took far less than an hour – well done.” More jotting. “So, essentially, you came here because you lost your temper?”

“In a nutshell.”

She tapped the marker cap on her notepad. “I’m going to put it out there that most people wouldn’t think that was something that called for counselling.”

“I’m... it’s what I bring to the table, nonetheless.”

Her fingertips toyed with a stray curl of her hair. “You were just about to say, *‘I’m not most people’*.”

“Uh...”

“But you stopped yourself. Why?”

I blinked and thought for long seconds. “It... it felt needlessly self-aggrandizing.”

There was a glint in her eye – yes, hazel in this light as well. “I’m gonna share a professional secret with you, Frank; you might appreciate this. I dunno how many people I have worked with over the years. Dozens, maybe hundreds.” Her smile got wider. “And in all that time, and all those clients, *none* of them were ‘most people’. Whether they realized it or not. Not *one* of them.” She gave me a small nod. “So if you wanna say you’re not most people, you go right ahead.”

“If the time comes again.”

“So clarify for me. This to-do with the, ah, mailbox. I take it this sort of reaction from you is not your usual?”

“Not since I was maybe *two*. No, this was egregiously disproportionate.”

“I see.” She did a long jot.

“Especially over something this trivial. One of my rules for living is, ‘When something doesn’t work, you repair it, replace it, or manage without.’ No other options – certainly nothing to be gained by going nuclear about it.”

Vera nodded. “You could make a case for that, sure.”

“I even said it to Inch on more than one occasion, when something in our apartment broke down. She didn’t always want to hear it – she was more inclined to see the *merits* of going nuclear.”

“I’m sorry, ‘Inch’ is?”

“Ah. My, uh, my ex.”

Quick jotting. “And her name is *Inch*? Nickname?”

I reached, then looked to her eyes for approval before taking the water bottle on the table. After cracking it open and swallowing, I said, “Surname. She vehemently prefers not to use her given name.”

“And that is?” I thought I saw her suppressing a smile.

Without meaning to, I glanced to the side just for a second, as if Inch were seated over there and overhearing me. Then I confessed: “Jocelyn – but she *hates* it.”

Vera’s eyebrows raised. “Well, I guess she’s allowed to? So I should refer to her as ‘Inch’?”

I nodded. “It would make things feel far less surreal.”

“How long were you with her?”

“I’ve known her in at least some capacity for over ten years, but we cohabited for four of those.”

“And when did she become ex?”

“Last year. July.”

Jotting. “So, not really all that long ago. And something anyone would call a serious relationship. Okay.” A quick pursing of her lips. “What do you wanna tell me about Inch?”

Eleven

April 27, 1998

As it turned out, I wanted to tell Vera everything.

I went back to when I first noticed this tiny girl in the school hallways in grade ten. The thing about her that first caught my eye was her black jacket, festooned with dozens of band buttons and badges – because some of those bands were obscure, and many of them were favourites of mine. It was quite some time later that I began to notice the rest of her usual look: bedraggled cheap sneakers, skinny jeans with holes. Excessive eyeliner that made her blue eyes big and brilliant. Hair chopped viciously short, in wild spikes, hair so white-blonde that I was sure it was bleached. Very much a by-the-book, punk-rock image... but one with few representatives at Westgate C.V.I. in those days. She stood out.

Months went by when I would see her in the distance, or pass by her at her locker. She became part of the background of my scholastic life. And then came a semester in grade eleven, when we ended up in the same French class, and I learned her name, and heard her unexpectedly childlike Betty Boop voice, and had more opportunities to see her in action. Action that frequently resulted in her being sent to the vice-principal's office. She was capable and did her work, she wasn't needlessly disruptive for the sake of a laugh, but she had zero tolerance for what she called bullshit and, seemingly, zero capacity to keep her volume down when she felt the need to speak truth to power. I gradually came to envy her strength and her fire.

A day came when my tardiness directed me to an empty desk immediately beside this small, abrasive punkess, and she asked me if she could please borrow a pen. To be more precise, what she actually said was, "Hey, Shaggy, gimme a pen, asshole." But she also said thanks when I handed it to her. A couple of minutes later, my curiosity got me to ask her about one of her buttons, which bore a name I didn't recognize. This was how I learned that I ought to be listening to Age of Chance, before Mlle. Charbonneau told us to *taisez-vous*.

I never asked Inch to return the pen.

After that, more occasions arose that led us to speak, often about music, or class work, but sometimes wandering farther afield. At times we even had brief exchanges in the halls or the cafeteria. I learned in no uncertain terms that she was to be addressed as "Inch". We were teenagers, and bonded as much over

our hates [Madonna, Whitesnake, evening TV soaps] as our loves [Hüsker Dü, The Replacements, sitting on the bank of the West River and watching the water flow over the dam]. At some point I realized that I never saw dark roots in her hair. But we didn't eat together, or meet outside of school. Inch was more "someone I knew to talk to". At least at that point.

As I spoke, and Vera took notes, she ended up hearing about my music as well as about Inch, because both stories intertwined. All through high school I was learning and practising guitar, and making rudimentary stabs at assembling crude songs. But it was in grade thirteen, late 1989, that the raw, powerful sounds coming out of Seattle excited and inspired me to get serious about forming a proper band.

To begin, I recruited Mitch, who I already knew was a committed and accomplished guitarist, and who quickly shared my enthusiasm for this new musical direction. We worked as a duo for months, learning covers, and arranging guitar parts for my compositions. We found rehearsal space in a loft downtown, and then put out feelers that we were seeking a rhythm section, with only a couple of unsatisfactory nibbles in return.

Our first stroke of luck came in the summer, when Dougie Kowalczyk introduced himself – a fellow alumnus whom neither Mitch nor I had ever really gotten to know over the previous five years – and impressed us mightily with his drumming skills in audition. An immediate shoo-in.

Once word got around that we had obtained our drummer, local bassists seemed to express more interest in vying for that position in our combo. We auditioned a couple of them: by no means dazzling, but we'd have to take what we could get, eventually.

And then, to our mutual surprise, Inch showed up, carrying a bass. She had never seen fit to mention that she played. To be fair, I had never seen fit to ask. She played with us without obvious displays of frilly virtuosity, but she was steady and solid, with great momentum and a rich, surprising melodic imagination. By the second song, I could see the excitement in Dougie's face telling me that this was the one he wanted to play with. Even then, I could feel the importance of good chemistry in a rhythm section.

Inch was in. The band was complete. We got down to serious work. She and Dougie wanted to name the band Vogner, after her nickname for me, and we

settled on Vog. We built up our repertoire and tightened our teamwork, preparing to show the public something truly good.

And this was when Inch and I started spending substantially more time together, rehearsing with the others, then hanging out with them between rehearsals, then hanging out without them. We slowly became fast friends, Inch and I.

But it was another couple of years that went by before I was able to admit to her that I had fallen for her hard, and couldn't see myself living without her. It took about that long for me to even admit it to myself. It was with the most profound delight that I learned the feelings were mutual, and within a year we were pooling our resources and sharing a humble apartment.

The blame for Vog's demise can be left entirely at my feet. The band had no fame or fortune to speak of, but we thoroughly enjoyed playing for a small yet ardent following. However, the loss of Kurt Cobain in April 1994 didn't merely take the wind out of my sails – it was more like the wind tore my sails completely away. Kurt was my inspiration above all others, and to carry on blissfully oblivious to his absence did not sit well with me, somehow. Mitch and Dougie were still committed to rocking hard, and they were not wrong, but I seemed to lose all stomach for it. They went onward, with my blessing, regrouping as Ikiru, and I watched their successes with unalloyed contentment.

Inch, though, had no interest in performing without me. I didn't press her to justify this decision, because I identified with it too strongly myself. Any musical future I could envision included her, no question.

But that musical future took something of a left turn when I sold my guitar and amp to a starry-eyed teenager. On numerous occasions he had snuck into the King Eddie [underage] to watch Vog perform, and he made it clear that owning my guitar would somehow give him primo bragging rights amongst his peers.

I took the money to the pawn shop on George Street, to replace my electric instrument with an acoustic one, which would better suit my sombre, introspective frame of mind. And it was there I happened upon Bob Farrell, a burly, garrulous customer who knew the proverbial thing or two about acoustic guitars, and wanted to be sure that I knew he knew. He gave me useful advice for choosing a suitable and comfortable beast within my budget, and I was glad

that the cosmos had unexpectedly caused our paths to cross. It was only later that I learned Bob was the proprietor of a clandestine and marvellously funky used-book store, and that he would play a much larger role in my life.

It was at this point that Vera, with regrets, informed me that we had reached the end of our allotted time. [And a bit beyond – she said she “didn’t like to be rigid about these things”.] “Well, Frank,” she said, “thank you for being so... forthcoming – it’s already been a pleasure to work with you. And let me reassure you that you are not ‘most people’.” She grinned, and I replied with a feebler smile. “How do you feel?”

I thought for a second. “Unsettled,” I said. “Like ground that’s been freshly dug up.”

She nodded. “Preparing your garden. So: can I invite you back in two weeks?”

“I look forward to it.” And I was mildly surprised by how much that was true.

Twelve

May 1, 1998

The week passed with little to show for itself and little to recommend it. I walked to the library every other day to read Mike's column, one of the only features of what now seemed like my past life which continued to hold my interest. Sometimes I also perused the want ads while I was there, but not consistently. I had given up on pounding the pavement, at least for the moment.

By Friday, I just wanted to escape to a place that wouldn't remind me of my current predicaments and shortcomings. After breakfast, I prepared Waffles' water and other amenities, as I did every morning to ensure he could manage comfortably flying solo while I was out. But when I left the house that day, I walked west, away from my usual hunting grounds.

When talking with Vera, I mentioned in passing my affinity for the West River dam. In the ensuing days, I kept reminding myself how long it had been since I spent any time there. So this morning I was chilling at West River Park – with any luck, I would find some surcease from the monkey chatter of my thoughts.

The day was solidly overcast and brisk; I wore my heaviest flannel shirt which warded off the worst of the chill. The cold spring was delaying the budding of the trees; I noticed when I reached the park that branches looked sparse, the leaves barely begun to push out. But pushing nonetheless, undaunted. A lesson in there, I was sure.

The park was mostly deserted during school and work hours on a weekday. The wooden bench near the dam was empty, and I let out my breath while I sat. The bench was perched on a small rise to give one a clear view of the greenish water sliding over the top of the short concrete barrier, smooth and infinite. The sound it made was a soft, hypnotically endless sigh, ideal for zoning out and losing the flow of time.

Just what I needed today.

A pair of Canada geese drifted on the river just below the foot of the dam, their wakes quickly smoothed away by the current. In the distant trees across the river, I was just able to hear a few louder birds. I glanced down the slope of the park and saw a couple of young mothers with preschooler children expending their energies on the swings and slide. But any sound they made didn't carry

this far, over the backdrop of the dam; for me, they were pantomime performances of family life.

I turned back to watch the geese, who ignored me, and sit with my thoughts. Those were not so much a hamster wheel as a fly stuck in a kitchen: buzzing from one area to another, randomly, recklessly fast, never staying put for long, but eventually returning to the same places over and over.

If the grass were dried out, I might have heard the rustle of approaching footsteps, even over the drone of the river. But the ground cover was now lush and supple and silent, so I was startled when a voice behind me said, "Oh hey."

Inch. My heart lurched. I turned with far more speed and agitation than I wished.

At first I only blinked, and took her in, and it took me a few seconds to realize I was holding my breath. I tried to remind myself of how I felt when I was talking with Vera about Inch: remembering that she was not just a breakup, a painful event – she was a person, one I cared about. That made it easier to face her, the realization that I could again relate to her as that person. On some level, if I chose. Already I was deriving some benefit from counselling.

Her hair was wind-ruffled, but still fairly neat and soft. Her makeup much subtler than our early years together. White blouse, navy blazer, soft gray slacks, a small purse over one shoulder. I remembered when she didn't even *own* a purse. Mother would say she now looked presentable. Father would call her strait-laced. Me, I found this look mature... and arm's length. I wondered how many of her school friends passed her by on the streets now without recognizing her.

Finally I managed to speak. "I... I can... go, if-if you want."

Her forehead tightened. "No-no, geez. Um... okay if I sit?"

I blinked harder. "As you wish." She stepped around and sat at the other end of the bench, and I noticed that I slid back, a bit farther away. I caught a hint of her cologne, the same scent she started wearing shortly after she got this job.

Inch looked over at the geese for a few seconds, then turned back to me. "You don't need to avoid me, Frank. Didn't I say I wanted us to still be friends?"

I was reminded that the first sign of trouble to finally sink in was when she gradually stopped calling me “Vogner” and started calling me “Frank”. Eventually I learned that Nicole told her my nickname was immature. “You said you hoped we could be.”

“Yeah, well....” She looked down, at my hands, then at her own.

“You, uhh, you look good,” I finally said. “Are you good?”

“Oh yeah. Yeah sure.” She looked back up to my eyes. “*You* don’t look so hot. You okay?”

I bowed my head. “Why thank you.”

She half-smiled without meaning to. “No-no, I mean... I’m sure you look great to most people. Ones who don’t know what to look for.”

I paused to breathe. “You aren’t at work today?”

She shrugged. “Took the morning off for a doctor’s appointment.”

“Oh. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, just prescription refills. Normal okay stuff.” She rubbed her forehead. “I guess I booked a little longer than I really needed.... Don’t *you* have work today?”

“I no longer have work *any* day.”

Inch gaped. “*No! Bob fired you?!*”

I shook my head. “Town Hall finally curtailed his lawlessness. Or bylawlessness, if you will.”

“Really? Aww, that sucks. I loved Bob’s.” In earlier days she did, but she gradually stopped showing up there once she got settled into Westgate Realty. That job bore much responsibility for much of the change in Inch over the past year-and-some. For example, the utter lack of “fuck”s which used to pepper her conversations. The old Inch would have unleashed several, upon hearing this news. But she needed to “watch her mouth” at the reception desk, and that

watching became habit without her even realizing.

“I agree, it’s a lamentable turn of events. But also a powerful reminder of the... impermanence of all things.”

This earned me a pretty scowl. “Well, yeah, of course we don’t wanna forget *that*, Dalai Lama.”

I paused to blink a few times. “Learning to accept can be challenging, but in the end rewarding. It’s how I cope.”

“Yeah yeah.” She looked away, toward the trees, watching and listening. “So, what, you came out here to meditate?”

“To sit with my thoughts, yes.”

“It ain’t a mountaintop in Tibet but I guess you gotta take what you can get.” Her gaze returned to mine and softened. “But yeah, I guess you *would* have a lot on your mind now. It’s a tough time to be outa work, right?”

“Indeed.”

Inch’s eyes widened, and once again their colour and purity caught softly in my chest. “Oh hey, geez, where are you staying now?”

I cleared my throat. “My father is putting me up for the interim.”

She let out her breath. “Thank god for Steve. He’s a good guy – you’re lucky to have a dad like him. I mean, I wish.” She watched the river and blinked quickly. “It’s a tough time to be on the *street*, *too*, so, yeah.”

I nodded. “So, what brought *you* out here today?”

“Hey, you ain’t the *only* one who can sit with their thoughts out here. I knew this trick before I ever met you, remember.”

“And what weighs on you now?”

“Never mind! Just... stuff. I got stuff. We can’t all sail through life like you.”

“I’d hardly call this past month or so ‘sailing’ – more like baling out my boat.”

Her mouth twisted gently and she nodded. “Fair enough.” Then she suddenly stood and brushed off her slacks. “Well, I’m gonna leave you to it and head back – probably gonna need to eat soon, anyway. So, you take care... and I hope you find something soon.”

I murmured a quiet, “And you.”

Her lips tightened as she looked into my eyes, deep and direct. “And hey: if you run into me again, say hi. I mean, we’re not strangers. Don’t... like, don’t be afraid of me.”

Still quiet, I said, “I’m... I’m not.” But by the time I got words out, she was already turned away and out of earshot, down the slope of the park.

I wasn’t afraid of Inch, my tension and elevated heart rate notwithstanding. “Afraid” wasn’t the word. But what was?

Thirteen

May 10, 1998

The GO bus running from Westgate out to Belvedere spends about twenty minutes travelling past farms and rolling fields, with a few patches of woodland scattered between. I spent the twenty minutes gazing out the window, watching the vista stream past me, noticing the variety of greens and how the warm afternoon sun made them vibrant. Spring had a firm foothold at last.

My Walkman provided a private soundtrack to the lulling view. I'd started with *Nevermind*, but quickly found that today was one of those days where the songs were weighed down with my pangs of loss. I swapped the tape out for the extra one in my shirt pocket: a mixtape from Bob, of old acoustic blues songs. Heavy on Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, someone Bob enjoyed performing – on Blues Night, Trevor played creditable harmonica to flesh out Bob on guitar.

This reminded me that several Blues Nights had already passed since I last saw Bob, and I still had yet to make an appearance. I chided myself, but not so severely as to make a promise that I would attend the next one.

In my other shirt pocket was my copy of ***Start Where You Are*** by Pema Chödrön. A birthday present from Inch two years ago, always worth a re-read. I brought it in case I felt like reading on the bus.

I didn't feel like it.

Resting in my lap was a modest bunch of assorted flowers, in an equally modest wrap of white paper. I'd prefer to rest them on the seat beside me, which would keep them out of accidental harm's way, but that seat was occupied, just like every other one on the bus. Mother's Day was a busy travel day here. So I attempted to be careful where I rested my hands, and listened to the blues, and watched the landscape flow like a river. Flow like time.

Before I left the house for the bus terminal, father had pressed a pair of twenties into my hand, intended to cover the cost of my fare and a bouquet. He stressed that my current situation was not going to deprive mother of my presence on Her Special Day. I couldn't help wondering if my presence this year was going to be less special than usual.

Taylor's truck awaited me, parked on the street in front of the Belvedere terminal. I climbed up, rested the flowers on the seat between us, and out of habit reached for a seatbelt while he pulled away from the curb.

He was wearing a pinstriped buttoned-down shirt and dark slacks today, which gave him a touch more polish than his usual sweatshirt and jeans. Taylor liked to "wear something good" when he was meeting mother for a special occasion. He grimaced gently when he glanced over at me and saw that I had not followed suit. But he said nothing about it: after this many years, there was nothing new to be said. Watching the traffic, he gave his head a small shake. "At least you remembered to get her *something*. Where the hell did you get *those*, Freak?"

"Have I ever *not* remembered? And these come courtesy of a surly woman who set up a card table and canopy on the street, just outside the bus station parking lot."

Taylor burst out with a short laugh. "Ya know, that was gonna be my guess? God, you're pathetic. Well, it's about as good as you ever manage, ain't it."

I looked toward him with a small frown. "If I bought them before today, they wouldn't survive long enough for her to see them. And on the actual day, how many options still remain?"

He sighed. "Okay, yeah, I guess."

I relaxed a little. "By the way, I truly do appreciate you doing this for me when I come in to visit."

Taylor made a loud exhale. "Well, if I didn't, then I'd be sitting there at mom's waiting for you to grab a bus or a taxi – or, knowing you, you'd fuckin' *walk* all the way across fuckin' *town*, and mom would never let me hear the end of it. So no thank you, Freak, I don't need that."

I felt a smile in one corner of my mouth. "At Christmas, you simply said, 'You're welcome'."

"Yeah, well, that was Christmas – the lift from the station was part of your present."

“Duly noted, sir.” That earned me a punch in the shoulder.

When I followed Taylor inside the front door and we slipped our shoes off, I saw mother perched in her favourite corner of her favourite sofa, reading a fat hardcover bound in dark sober cloth. She looked up when she heard us come in, and she favoured me with her small Mona Lisa smile, subdued but not cold.

“Frankie,” she said. She rested the book on the sofa and stood, then walked to me unhurried. Today she wore her pale hair piled high on her head. Understated white blouse, small fine necklace, dark modest skirt. Her slender tastefulness reminded me of a model gesturing toward a showroom in a better-living magazine: quite in keeping with the tone of her home.

She stepped close and gave me one of her signature embraces: taking hold of my shoulders and lifting her face to press her cheek to mine, poking me with her pointed glasses. Allowing me to catch a hint of the perfume which I called *Eau de Special Occasion*. And, as always, she pulled me close against her for exactly two seconds: long enough and forceful enough to be intentional, not long enough to slip its leash. “So glad you came,” she said.

“Wouldn’t miss it, of course.” I handed her my humble bouquet. “Happy Mother’s Day.”

Mother took the bundle from me and fluttered her lashes at it. “How darling. Thank you, dear, I’m just going to go put these in water. Tay, will you come help me carry the trays, please? Just take your seat, Frankie, won’t be a second.” Taylor followed her into the kitchen without a word.

I sat in the overstuffed armchair that matched her overstuffed sofa, so that I would be at her elbow when she returned. I heard short rattles and thumps coming from the kitchen, the faucet running, words I couldn’t make out. I looked around the spotless gloss of the room. Against the opposite wall, facing the sofa, stood the tall, dark, glassed-in china cabinet. A small shelf jutted out from it about halfway down, and on that shelf towered a pink-and-white vase erupting with two feet of floral excess: gladioli, delphiniums, hydrangeas. Beside the flowers stood a greeting card the size of a magazine, embossed and gilt-edged. From here I could just make out the heading: *To a Wonderful Mother*. Below that was what appeared to be a poem, in tinier print.

I felt no urge to get up, walk over, and read it.

Mother returned to the front room, carrying a silver tray of baked goods. "I'm going to leave your flowers on the kitchen table," she said, "so I can look at them over my morning coffee." Taylor emerged behind her with the coffeepot in one hand, in the other another tray with demitasses, a cream pitcher and sugar bowl.

She set her tray on the glass table before the sofa. Speaking to it, she said, "As you can see, I got something of a baking urge today, so I conjured up some banana bread." She glanced over her glasses, up at me, and added, "I had a feeling you wouldn't object."

I smiled. "That scent did strike me as familiar, not to mention compelling." Mother had always enjoyed baking; for her, it served almost as her Zen meditation. Plus, she acquitted herself admirably with the results.

She moved around to her seat to allow Taylor access to rest his tray beside hers. "And Tay was sweet enough to bring some cannoli – he knows my weaknesses." Taylor sat at the other end of mother's sofa; then, we all leaned in to serve ourselves. I took my coffee black, and made a point of sampling the banana bread first.

While mother took a tentative sip at her cup, I said, "So. Mother. *Wie gehts?* What have the fates been dealing you since Christmas?"

A short exhale through her narrow nose. "Well, since you ask: a younger fellow in the department was just made Associate Dean, out from under me. Yet again. So I suspect fate dealt me that card from the bottom of the deck. On the other hand, I've had a new paper accepted for the next *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, and I'm making decent progress writing my next textbook. Overall, life has been uneven, but skewing toward what some would call 'okay'."

I nodded and said, "Brava." Beyond mother, Taylor shook his head with a look of subtle disgust.

"But *you*, Frankie," mother said. "You certainly have more than your share of challenges these days, Steve tells me. I'm sorry about your job."

Taylor spoke up, "It was only a matter of time, mom."

“Hush, dear,” she said, glancing to the side, not quite at him. Watching me again, she added, “It’s such a shame. I really had hopes, when you stopped seeing that street urchin, that things were finally looking up for you. That you’d have a chance to sort your life out.”

Where to begin. I blinked a few times before saying, “Mother, I’ve seen pictures of you in your hippie days. You passed for a creditable street urchin yourself, back then.”

Mother gave me a scowl. A mild one – everything about mother was mild. “I was a child, Frank. The hippies were children, all of them. Especially the ones that adopted the uniform, with the long hair and beards and outlandish outfits. All caught up in some massive, giddy lark. It was fun at the time, but... I realized I needed to grow up once I became a mother. That was one of the things that attracted me to your father. He had the courage to reject the peer pressure and look mature.” She shook her head. “But inside, he was just as much a child as any of them.”

“A child you chose to marry, though.”

Mother looked away, toward the gladioli. “I was very much in love with your father, at the time. It was all about peace and love in those days. More importantly, I wanted Tay to have a full, solid family. And *you*, when you happened along. I still think that was the right choice then.” She looked back at me, her face now softened. “Whatever Steve’s shortcomings, you boys could have had far worse for a father. There’s never been any question how much he loves the two of you. How much we both do.”

Taylor leaned in and kissed her cheek. I was preparing to do the same, because it would then look churlish *not* to. But before I could move, mother spoke again: “But I can’t help wondering where he’s left his head, sometimes. Has he said nothing to you about this?” And she gestured toward me, up and down, indicating and indicting my entire being.

I brushed my hair back off of one shoulder. “About what, exactly?”

“Have you been traipsing around town this whole time, trying to find a job, still looking like *this*?”

I swallowed. “That’s a rhetorical question, clearly.”

“Oh, clearly.” She shook her head, short, sharp. “Frankie, people are looking to hire someone mature and responsible – that’s not what you’re showing them.”

I shifted forward in my seat. “I’m showing them myself. Everyone there knows me.”

She fixed me with a firm gaze, and the exasperation on her face was, of course, mild. “There are hundreds, if not thousands, of people in Westgate who do *not* know you – you aren’t Elvis.”

I couldn’t resist. “Who?”

And mother burst out laughing. Something I couldn’t recall her doing in years.

Fourteen

May 11, 1998

The next morning, I had another ten o'clock appointment with Vera. The weather had grown warmer still, and today she answered the door forgoing the voluminous sweater. Along with wide-leg pants similar to last time, she wore a tank top, with broad pink and purple stripes, revealing how round and soft she was, quite unlike Inch. She led me upstairs almost eagerly, and I got a feeling for how much she loved her work.

She curled up her legs under her clipboard, held her marker at the ready, and let out a happy sigh. "So. Shall we continue with your history with Inch? Or has something else come up that you'd rather talk about today?"

I debated telling her about my Mother's Day visit, but realized that my relationship with mother consisted largely of scars – whereas my issues with employment, and Inch, and The Mailbox Incident, were still fairly raw. So I resumed where I left off.

Which led me to relate the story of the acoustic duo The Doughty Swains, who first performed late in the fall of 1994. Inch and I played a Cobain tribute, along with some originals old and new. We played less frequently than Vog had, and to even smaller audiences, but a few people seemed to find our music acceptable, and we were following our hearts. The Swains played sporadically for a couple of years.

Then came the day that Inch prepared for her interview for the reception position at Westgate Realty. Her excitement had her babbling – a job that paid so much more than she was earning at the music store, and one where experience was preferred but not required. She scrubbed her face and hair, replacing the proto-goth makeup for something subtler, and exchanging spiking gel for finger-fluffing and a hair dryer. It was with some consternation that I realized I had never seen her look anything like this before. The transformation was, in hindsight, unsettling.

She borrowed an earth-toned pantsuit from her mother to complete the self she wanted to present to the interviewers, and I urged her to break the proverbial leg as she set off downstairs to the street. Two hours later, the door clattered as she

burst in and leapt upon me, arms around my neck, squealing in incoherent joy. A new world beckoned her.

Slowly, so slowly at first that I didn't notice it happening, Inch began to drop hints about moving "somewhere better" now that more money was coming in. When we finally sat down to discuss it, I let it be known that I was quite comfortable and content where we were, and would prefer to save up our new surplus for something fulfilling, such as travelling the world. Which I had never been in a position to do, but to do so now, in her company, struck me as a thrilling proposition.

Our failure to see eye to eye in this matter gradually bled into other corners of our life. She complained more often about the shortcomings of our apartment, and of my efforts to clean and maintain it. She bemoaned the fact that we were "still living like students". She said I had yet to "grow up", and began to despair of me, that I might never do so. She gave band rehearsals a miss to "go out with the girls from work". Not that I had any grounds to object – we weren't joined at the hip, and I wanted her to have and enjoy her independence – but when the music suffered for it, that gave me pause. I spent more of those evenings out having a beer with Mitch and Dougie, or occasionally Mike and Zoe.

And, over the course of months – and not limited to our moments of friction – I started to hear more and more about what "Nikki said". Nicole seemed to have opinions on many aspects of our life, from what we did with our money, to the part of town in which we lived, to our music and pastimes, to my own behaviour and appearance. Never having seen me did not preclude her from making judgments on how I looked, apparently. I couldn't be sure if Inch was seeking out Nicole's advice, or if Nicole simply offered her advice indiscriminately, like a lawn sprinkler whose spray could not be avoided. But it did seem to me that they spoke together frequently, and that their conversations fuelled Inch's discontent.

The Doughty Swains went dormant for several months.

And then, at the end of June, Inch came home, looking muted and grim, and informed me that she had given the landlord two month's notice. (The rental agreement was in her name from day one, since she held a job of longer standing and higher pay than mine.) July's rent was already paid, and our deposit would cover August. She was moving to a better apartment. Of her own. On her own. She was "sick of being a kid" and "refused to feel guilty for wanting more out of life". She was no longer happy in our domestic arrangement. She

“still loved” me but that “wasn’t enough”, and she hoped that “somehow someday we can figure out how to still be friends”.

I was struck numb. And dumb. Words did not fail me often, but at that moment they did. I simply acquiesced in silence.

Two days later a black Lexus arrived to pick her up, where she waited out on the sidewalk with her belongings. A brunette woman appeared to be helping her load her things into the hatchback, but I was too high up to make out her face. They struggled with loading Inch’s bass and amp, which necessitated bungee cords.

Inch didn’t look back, or up at our window.

Over the next couple of weeks, I heard via mutual friends that Inch was in fact being put up in Nicole’s condo, while she saved up money for first and last month’s rent on her own place, plus associated expenses. But I never heard any further update to indicate that she had now acquired her place, or where it might be.

After that, I was forced to vacate the apartment before September, unable to afford it on my wages alone, and with my name absent from any of the landlord’s paperwork. What I *could* afford was one of the smallest rooms in the Ambassador, not far up the street. Or, rather, I was able to afford that through the fall and winter.

Vera continued writing for a few seconds only. Frowning gently, she tapped her marker on her pad a few times, then looked over the top of her glasses at me. “So, Inch chose to just up and leave? No sitting down to try and work things out first?”

“Perhaps I didn’t explain well,” I said. “I suppose one could consider her months of vocal dissatisfaction to be attempts to parley and reach an understanding.”

“Soooo, you had opportunities to work things out beforehand but it just never happened?”

“As you say.”

“And you couldn’t get her to change her mind? Ask her to try talking things out again?”

“I... I asked her if she was sure that this was what she wanted.”

“I assume that she was sure.”

“Yes. So then I let her go. Which implies I had some other option.”

Vera began jotting again. “You did want her to stay?”

“Of course.”

“But you didn’t ask her to?”

My chest tightened, and I sighed in an attempt to loosen it. “I... if someone is going to be with me, then I want them to want to be there. I don’t want someone there because I begged them, or coerced them with guilt, or manipulated. If they don’t truly want to be there, then they shouldn’t be.” I fidgeted with an earring. “I respect her happiness and her autonomy, then, now, and always.”

She wrote faster for a few more seconds. To her notepad, she said, “That’s... that’s very level of you.” When her pen stopped, she looked up at me again, and watched my eyes for the space of a few silent breaths. “Okay. I’m gonna come at this from another direction for a second – just trying to get a handle on where you are with everything. And I mean *everything*. So, I can’t help noticing how big a part of your story your music is. It keeps coming up along with everything else in your life. Maybe you don’t realize, but, Frank... the light I see in your eyes when you talk about music, it’s kinda breathtaking. That’s when you seem even more alive. Would you say that music is your calling?”

I toyed with my beard. “Well, I have referred to it as my passion... at least to my confidantes.”

“Are you still playing? Singing?”

I shook my head.

“Not necessarily in public, I mean, even just in your room, just for yourself.”

“Not really since Inch left.”

Vera jotted. “Why do you think that is?”

“I... I’ve had no inspiration. I haven’t been moved to.”

“So, would you say that you haven’t been playing because you’ve been feeling down?”

“That sounds like a fair summation.”

She scrawled a few more notes. “Well, I would like to put it to you that, at least to some extent, you’ve been feeling down because you haven’t been playing.” She watched my eyes, looking for some reaction, some understanding. “I get the sense that your music is how you nurture your spirit. I want to encourage you not to neglect that. Your spirit needs nourishment, to help you meet the challenges and struggles you’re experiencing now. Please try and get back to it, if you can. See if it doesn’t make things a little easier.”

I nodded, more to acknowledge than to agree.

“Let’s call it your homework – but you’re not being graded on it.” She grinned.

I nodded again. “Please let me know if it will be on the final.”

Vera cocked her head. “Another thing that’s been on my mind for a while: Frank, surely you must be aware of the fact that, uh... the way you express yourself in general is fairly unusual. I mean, your command of the language is pretty obvious, to me. I gotta tell you, reading over your notes is a lot of fun.” And she softly giggled. “Is, is this something you’ve always done?”

I nodded. “It earned me the censure of more schoolmates than I care to recall.”

“So why do it?”

“I... it’s just my way. I come by it honestly: I grew up with well-educated parents who love the language. I suppose I picked that up through osmosis.”

She glanced down at her notepad. “I remember that you have a brother, is that

right?”

“Yes. Taylor, slightly older.”

“Does he speak the same way?”

I briefly licked my lips. “No.”

“Then there has to be more to it than osmosis. Do you... have you ever considered the possibility that your words might be a shield? Not saying you use them as one deliberately, but you might benefit from them that way anyhow.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “A shield how, exactly?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a way of not letting people see too deeply into you. Your tone gives you this sort of Mister Spock vibe, and everyone sees this cool rockstar guru guy floating through their lives. That’s one way of making people and life easier to deal with.”

“Are... are you saying I’ve erected a facade?”

Vera’s eyes widened and fluttered. “No! Ohhhh, no. A facade is fake, by its very nature. And one thing I’ve already learned about you, one of the most marvellous things about you, is that you very genuinely *are* everything you appear to be... and you always do you, as natural as breathing. The image you present isn’t at all dishonest. But it’s very carefully curated. Which might not always be best for you, even though I’m sure it feels like it is.”

I nodded and tried to digest.

“And your shield can provide a barrier for you as much as for everyone else. Words are a great way of putting some distance between you and your feelings. Enough distance and you don’t even have to know those feelings are there.”

“I suspect that you’re going somewhere with this.”

“I am. I’ve given a lot of thought to your violent reaction to the mailbox, which is what brought you here in the first place. I’d like to get back to it for a moment.”

There was a quick flutter in my stomach. “Very well.”

“The way I remember, you gave me a full account of what happened, blow by blow, gory details, everything. Hiding nothing. But you described it so detached, it was a bit like listening to you read an autopsy. And you also seemed detached from what it meant at the time, like it was all a complete mystery to you.”

I nodded vigorously. “Just so, and it remains one even now.”

“Okay, then I have a bit of a challenge for you. We’re going to dig into that event a little more. So, it’s pretty clear what you were feeling when that happened. Anger, or more like rage. A touch of fear. And a *lot* of pain.” She stopped there, and just looked at me, her eyes suffused with such soft warmth that I found it difficult to return her gaze. “But what I’d like now is for you to tell me what you were *thinking* then. If you can remember. *And!*” She paused for effect, lifting a forefinger. “You have to describe it to me in words of one syllable. Or less.” She let her hand rest in her lap and then she patiently watched me.

I felt my eyes widen as I thought back to that afternoon. I had avoided recalling it as much as I was able. Reliving it now was distressing for me. It seemed that she realized this. Expected it, even. Yet she was asking me to do this for her, regardless. And somehow I found myself willing.

“I...” Words were reluctant to come. “When the box fell, I...” My voice cracked. And suddenly I didn’t need to make an effort to limit myself to little words; I found that they were all I had. I looked at my hands. “I just wanted it to *work*. I just wanted things to work. I just wanted things to stay where they belong. Why...” I tipped my face up to look Vera in the eye. “*Why* was that so, so fucking much to ask?”

We watched each other, and in a few seconds I noticed that the image of her was wavy and smeared. She bent forward, reached for the tissue box on the table, and handed it to me. And only then did I realize that my eyes were streaming.

I pulled a tissue out and released the rest of my tears, for as long as was required. Crying, not screams, but strange soft moans, and my chest and shoulders shuddered. Not seeing Vera, I was still aware of her waiting for me; I could feel her calmness in the room, enveloping me. Somewhere in my pyrotechnics, a dim inner voice told me, *She’s used to this, she knows how to handle it. I’m safe here.*

I went through another tissue, finally settled down, blew my nose, and discarded the tissues in a small wastebasket beside my recliner. Then Vera finally spoke. “Well, that’s pretty normal, really. To want things to work.”

“But, see, there’s a powerful lesson in play here,” I said, unsteadily. “I wanted things to work’. ‘*Wanted*’. The Second Noble Truth: *The cause of suffering is desire*. I desired, I suffered. It’s almost textbook.”

She nodded, suppressing a small smile, as if she was holding back a delicious secret. “So you remember your Four Noble Truths. Then of course you remember the *First* Noble Truth: *Suffering is inevitable*. But you see, what this tells me, then, is that *desire* is inevitable, no?” I felt my mouth fall open slightly. “It’s human to want things, Frank. And yes, sometimes wanting gets us hurt. And hurting is human, too. But it’s still okay to be human anyway. And –” A quick glance at her watch. “– I’m afraid we’re going to have to leave it on that note for today. Give you some time to chew it over.”

Fifteen

May 17, 1998

I chewed over, all through the long walk home, ignoring my stomach's complaints that lunch was late today. Over the last few years, I had accumulated a wealth of experience in ignoring those complaints.

Before I unlocked the front door, I checked the mailbox, savouring the grinding squeak of the lid. All secure. There was only the one envelope, addressed to father, of course. From Vera. Briefly I wondered if it was an invoice for my sessions, and again I tensed against pangs of guilt. Nothing to be gained by indulging those, I told myself.

My cereal-box window repair was still in place on the door, and I commended myself for the durability of my work. Perhaps I should be making job inquiries in the areas of home repair and general contracting. I also found myself wondering just how many weeks the window had been resting there in a state of make-do. Time was becoming, not just fleeting, but a fog. My current lifestyle left me adrift, detached from the clockwork momentum of the world around me.

I made myself a sandwich, gave Waffles a treat, then took lunch into the front room and listened to one of father's Neil Young albums while I ate. My eyes wandered to a corner near the milk crates full of LPs, and perhaps it was this morning's discussion with Vera that made me more consciously aware that I was seeing father's twelve-string, its case lying on the floor, lid open. I realized that father had left it lying in that spot, rather than putting it away, ever since that night I found him playing it, over a month ago. I had gotten so used to seeing it over there that I stopped actually noticing. But now I was in the moment with it.

All the way through my sandwich, I kept letting my eyes flick back to the guitar. And I kept letting my thoughts wander from the stereo.

When I finished eating, I stood up – which put Waffles on high alert – walked over to the corner, picked up the guitar, took it back to the sofa. For a while I just held it, and looked at it, and I could feel my breathing and my heart.

Out of long-ingrained habit, I played an open E major, listened to it ring, then an open A. The sound was lambent. But it needed a little fine tuning, which I took care of with pinging harmonics and turning keys and patience, and I felt myself settling inside, like putting on my most comfortable shoes.

The record finished playing and I let it be. I ran through the intro to “Long Cool Woman”, gratified that I still remembered how. Then I started picking out other old classic riffs as they came to mind. The guitar played beautifully, but I couldn’t help noticing that father kept the action on his strings a little softer than I preferred, and this neck didn’t fit my hand as perfectly as my own cheaper six-string. But this twelve-string sound was bliss, and I hadn’t yet had my fill of it.

I was ragged, and muffed plenty of notes, and stumbled over holes in my memory, but I could feel things coming back to me. Soon my fingertips felt tender – after so long without practice, their calluses were almost completely evaporated – and I took frequent breaks to rest and rub them. I played pieces of old blues songs Bob taught me, ran through a few of my own compositions... and a part of me wondered if father leaving his guitar lying around was more than just his usual propensity for untidiness. Perhaps he intended it as a nudge from the cosmos. Perhaps I would ask him.

And then I felt the familiar poke of a canine snout against my shin. I looked down to see Waffles displaying his stick in his teeth for me, his bushy tail wagging with determination. I looked over at the clock and saw that the guitar had occupied me for just over an hour. And in that time, my troubles and ruminations had fallen silent. I felt lighter: not just less weighed down, but more illumined. Not vastly so, but I was prepared to begin this journey with a single step.

I reached down to scratch behind Waffles’ ear. “A sterling suggestion, stout fellow. My fingers could do with a break. Let’s trundle.”

During the remainder of the week, I regained some of my impetus and walked resumés down to the south end once or twice, investigating possibilities I had seen on my way to or from sessions. However, those investigations were fruitless. Every establishment told me that they had no openings and did not keep resumés on file. And when I came in to inquire, the employees invariably looked at me as if I were dragging in a sack full of roadkill behind me. It seemed the south end was not my milieu.

But every day, whether I embarked on the hunt or no, I made time to resume my guitar practice. And I did it properly, by taking out my own guitar, my humble but

lovable beast, and sitting on the cot. I had no wish to berate myself for being so unconscionably remiss as to neglect this instrument for so long. But, to my quiet pleasure, I found that I was unable to browbeat myself while I was playing: I was once again firmly ensconced in the moment.

Waffles spent the time sprawled at my feet on the floor. He knew better than to try resting on the cot – not that it was forbidden, just that it was less comfortable. He gave me no indication whether he took any enjoyment in my rusty playing; no doubt the simple act of having company was enough for him.

By the weekend, I noticed that my calluses were already starting to rebuild, my playing regained some fluency, and my memories of songs sharpened. I felt as if my spirit had opened a window and let in fresh air.

Which went a long way toward explaining why I told father on Sunday that I would be taking my guitar over to Bob's that evening for Blues Night. Once I reminded him what that was, he told me to "rock on".

My nervousness about knocking on Bob's door was ludicrous, and I knew this full well. Hadn't I simply walked through this door for work, several times a week, for years? This place and these people were as familiar to me as my own home and family. Yet I couldn't shake this sensation of feeling uninvited, unsure of my welcome.

The door creaked and cracked open, and I saw one of Bob's eyes making a puzzled scowl. But the eyebrow quickly lifted, Bob let out a boisterous cry of "Hey-hey!", and he yanked the door open wide.

"We're The Monkees," I replied, but he muffled me with a one-armed bearhug and pulled me into his front room.

"Ya made it!" The delight in Bob's voice was palpable. "Hey, Trev, look!"

I was able to peer over the fuzzy edge of Bob's forearm and see Trevor emerge from the kitchen. As was so often the case, he was clad in a sleeveless white undershirt that clung to his willowy torso, and he completed his ensemble with a beer bottle near his lips. He lowered the bottle to favour me with his wide, tight grin. "Frankie!" He almost made a song of my name. "Well, it's about fuckin'

time! How ya been?"

My voice was smeared by the crook of Bob's elbow. "Some might say I am 'hanging in'."

Bob released me and shoved me into the front room. "We didn't think anyone was gonna show this week, man, all outa town for the long weekend and all. This is great! Grab a seat, I'll go getcha a cold one."

I stood in the middle of the room, still holding my guitar case, and attempted to get my bearings. This was once nothing but crowded bookshelves. Now there were sofas and armchairs, all deeply worn, none matching. An oval rug under an old, unvarnished wooden chest serving as a coffee table. A battered shelving unit for Bob's stereo which used to reside in the kitchen, as well as a tiny, tired TV set. But I noticed that I could still detect the lingering scent of old books. "It looks very different from when I was last here," I finally said.

"Yes, thank god," said Trevor, giving me a little spank as he passed me with his beer and dropped into a corner of the sofa closest to the wooden chest. His bare feet promptly lifted and rested their heels on the makeshift table. "We actually have room to stretch out and breathe now. This is fuckin' heaven." And he made an expansive gesture around the room.

Bob came back in with two open beers in one hand, his experienced-looking guitar in the other. He offered a bottle to me, and I eased it from his fingers with a nod of thanks. While I rested my guitar beside an armchair and seated myself, I said to Trevor, "I had a hunch that you wouldn't be overly forlorn about the books taking their leave."

"What tipped you off, cutie? My years of bitching about 'em?" And he burst into his patented sharp laugh, which got a grin out of Bob while he sat at the other end of the sofa. Trevor then gestured like a game show staffer displaying a prize. "Oh, and allow me to draw your attention to?"

I saw that he was indicating what used to be an open doorway, leading into a smaller room that Bob called "the Rare Volume Collection". Now, that entry was filled with an old, dark brown wooden door, matching the antique moulding in the room. "We've moved our bedroom into there. Oh my god, now I actually have enough room to get out without climbing over Boo-Boo. I mean, I *am* sorry about your job and all, Frankie, but there are some real silver linings here."

Bob glanced sidelong at Trevor and suppressed a smirk. “Yeah, the old bedroom in back is now Trev’s home office.”

Trevor reached over and swatted Bob’s biceps. “I always wanted one! So, so you can just eat me!”

Bob winked and muttered, “Later. We got company now.”

I gave my head a little shake, bent down, opened my guitar case, and coaxed out a couple of packages of gently compressed chocolate crullers. “A gift, good sirs,” I said, then underhand-lobbed one of the packets across the room. “I was remiss not to bring them sooner.”

Bob cried, “Hey yeah!”, as he reached up and caught the donuts. Then both of them said, “Frank Specials!”

Over the rattle of tearing cellophane, I said, “So what happened to the books?”

Bob handed a cruller to Trevor, then bit into the other without restraint. “Oh, I still got ‘em all – duh. There’s a little storeroom downstairs that we finagled from the landlord.”

Trevor spoke up. “By which he means / sweet-talked and kissed ass. All in the name of saving Boo-Boo’s musty tomes.”

“And you might not believe this, Frank, but.” Bob paused just long enough to swallow. “Remember the guy from the town who shut me down?”

“I suspect I will never forget,” I said around my donut.

“Well, when he came back, and saw that everything was all above board and end of story, he tells me that I should try renting a table at the farmers’ market and sell ‘em there. I dunno why that never once occurred to me, but there ya go. So, a while back, there was an opening and I got it, and now Battered Old Books lives again! But only on Saturday mornings.”

“Bravo,” I said. I knew better than to ask if he needed to hire staff for this new incarnation of his business. “I trust that will go well for you.”

Bob nodded. “A lot more visibility there, for one thing. There have already been some mornings where I made almost as much as I did in a full week working outa here. So yeah, I got a good feeling about this.” He reached for his beer, took a swallow, then stared at the label. “And since that is only the one morning on weekends, I also figured that maybe I can look for a regular nine-to-five on top o’ that, bring a bit more in.” He looked up at me. “You found anything yet?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“Aw, man, I am so sorry. That is really rough. Ya know I still feel –”

I held a hand up to stop him. “No need. That’s old ground. We’re good.”

Bob sighed. “Yeah, I got no leads so far, either. It’s... I dunno.” He held the bottle against his forehead and let his eyes close.

I looked at him, then, almost as if seeing him anew. It was commonly understood that middle-aged men faced more difficulties finding employment than twenty-somethings. Compound that with Bob’s hair, ringing his shiny pate and falling past his shoulders, his beard covering his chest, his galaxy of earrings... and I wondered if he too was ever mistaken for a roadkill deliveryman when he made his approach to a prospective employer.

Trevor shifted along the couch toward Bob, slid an arm around Bob’s neck and a hand down his chest. “I told you not to worry, Boo-Boo. You know we’ve always squeaked by on what I make – we’re not gonna end up on the street. And you know I think it’s great, you wanting to bring in some extra so we can breathe a bit. If you can, that’s wonderful. Nothing wrong with wanting a bit more for us. It’s all good, okay?” Trevor looked across at me and stage-whispered, “He worries too much.”

I nodded. “As I recall, yes. And I’ve always admired how supportive you are of him. Even with the bookstore – and yet I know you were never particularly fond of that endeavour, all those years.”

“Oh, you’re so suave, Frankie! Just say it bugged the shit outa me, okay?” Another laugh. “But *you* know. Sometimes you... sometimes something doesn’t really matter to you, but you *make* it matter to you anyway cuz it matters to *them*. Maybe to some people, it looks like you’re stuck having to put up with bullshit. But really, I think that’s part of making a relationship work.” He gave

Bob's neck a gentle hug. "And yeah, even though I like to bitch, I do try to be supportive."

His eyes still shut, Bob let out a short chuckle. "Not supportive enough to come help me at the farmers' market."

"Well, maybe I *would* if it didn't mean getting up at the crack of hell, after a fabulous Friday night. I mean, some of us need our beauty sleep." Trevor flashed his thin grin again. "And, for some of us, beauty sleep is just wasted effort."

Bob suddenly turned, and the two of them were wrestling on the sofa like siblings. I reached for my beer. I had come here to play music, and I reminded myself that that would happen, in its own time. On occasion, with these two, patience was required.

Sixteen

May 19, 1998

After Victoria Day, my life returned to its unpromising New Normal. The following morning, I made my way to the library to read Mike's latest opus and satisfy myself that the want ads only bore offerings for people with an MBA and five years' experience. After that, I decided to head westward to The Wien. I had some funds remaining from my last allowance, and it was now close enough to lunchtime that I might consider a grilled cheese to go with my coffee. Eating out was such a rarity for me, these days – I wondered if Vera might consider it “nurturing my spirit” to allow it now.

But, at the intersection, I had a near-collision with a southbound pedestrian: Inch. We both made little startled sounds of “oh”, followed by “oh hey”.

She adjusted her purse strap and looked up at me, her expression cautious. “So, uhhh, what's up?”

I shrugged and brushed my hair back. “Just out for my morning trundle.”

“Okay. I, um, I was just gonna grab some lunch.” A few blinks of her large eyes, a gentle bite of her lower lip – and suddenly I couldn't help thinking of the taste of it. “Hey. You wanna come with me? I'll buy.” I could feel her pushing the boundaries of her comfort zone, attempting to Be Big About This.

That attempt pushed me outside my zone as well, but I felt somehow obliged to meet her halfway. “As it happens, I was just about to hit The Wien for some lunch. So, thank you and *allons-y*.”

“Nuhh, no.” She head-gestured south. “Let's, let's do Third Eye.” She began crossing the street, and I felt as if she would pull my sleeve – if she dared touch me.

“Even though The Wien is better and cheaper?”

“I got my reasons. C'mon.”

As we passed the doorway to our old apartment building, we both pointedly ignored it. There was no door there, no old memories, no sir. “Care to expound on said reasons?”

Inch sighed. "You and me go into The Wien together, everyone sees... I don't want gossip."

"You never used to be overly concerned what other people thought or said."

"Well okay, maybe not gossip, but *you* know. We're at a table together, and if Effie or god help us Peter comes over, they'd be all, 'ooooo, so you guys made up?' I don't need that."

Picturing them made me smile. "At least Zoe would be more discreet, but no doubt she would make eyebrows at us."

Inch snickered. "Yeah, she thinks she's so cool."

"Actually, Zoe is quite cool, in her own fashion."

"Maybe. Anyway, I don't wanna hafta put up with any of that. It'd make me feel all... clunky."

"When you put it that way, I confess that I would feel clunky as well. So this course of action is probably for the best."

"Well duh." Her pretty grin broke out but she quickly pushed it back into hiding. "I mean, this is us just trying to be friends. That's all."

I pulled open the glass door of Third Eye and, out of habit, held it for her. "That's all," I said.

"Grab us a table and I'll go order. Whatcha want?" Inch reached into her purse, searching.

"A grilled cheese, or something of that genus. Uh, please." She nodded and got into line. She didn't ask how I took my coffee. And, as I found a table in the farthest corner, for just a moment the whole situation felt like two or three years ago, comfortable and familiar, easy and sweet. But, overall, the recollection still held more pain than pleasure for me.

Inch found the table and set down a tray with my sandwich, our coffees, and what appeared to be a chicken salad. An unusually sober and responsible choice, at least for her, as I remembered her. But it felt prudent not to remark on it. I simply thanked her, waited for her to sit, and picked up my sandwich.

After eating a bite, she said, “How’s the job hunt going?”

“As barren as last time we spoke.”

“Ah. Sorry.” She looked down at her salad, speared some with her fork. “Ya know....” Her mouth worked silently a moment. “You....” Then she lifted her eyes back to mine, and hers were wary. “You might wanna think about, like, a, uhh... a makeover of some kind.”

I looked at her, my feelings suddenly such a tangle that no single one of them was able to push to the surface.

Inch gave me a soft scowl. “C’mon, don’t act like you don’t know what I mean. You remember what I had to do to get this job? It’s not like I woke up one day and went, ‘oh my god I can’t wait to look like my mom’. But those guys would never let me in the door looking like I used to. I wanted it and I did what I had to in order to get it. It worked.”

“And you’re happy with it? No regrets?”

“You mean ‘do I ever wish I was back at Moonwalk?’ Nope, not once. It’s a decent job with decent money. What’s to regret about that?”

I gave my head a little shake. “I dunno.... I can’t help feeling that it’s playing pretend.”

“More like playing the game, maybe. But it’s a game that’s part of being an adult. Maybe you need to do something that works, and not worry so much about your samurai code of honour or whatever. Like Nikki says, ‘You’ll never win if you don’t play’.”

My jaw felt tight. “Ah, so she’s still saying things.” I sipped at my coffee, but it needed a little push to swallow it.

For a moment, Inch just blinked at me, still scowling. Then she said to her plate,

“Anyway, think about what I said, okay? I’m just trying to help.”

A twinge of bitterness made me prod. “On reflection, I’m rather surprised that you aren’t having lunch with her.”

Her fork stabbed at a piece of chicken. “Can we not talk about her?” She pushed the forkful into her mouth, then, without raising her head, her eyes looked up at me. “I didn’t mean to bring her up. Just... habit.”

I nodded slowly. “I’m perfectly willing to not talk about her.”

We ate in silence, and I could see tension in her mouth, her face, that others might not have seen. She kept looking from her food, to me, and back, and I saw that, despite the light blouse and soft hair, this was very much the Inch I knew. This was Inch struggling inwardly, either not knowing what to say, or not knowing if it was wise to speak. And the best thing for her, at such times, was to avoid pressuring and give her space.

Not abruptly, but without warning, she set her fork down on her plate, loud, and pushed her chair back. “I don’t think I can finish this – you can if you want.” She stood and gathered her purse strap from the back of her chair. “I gotta get back. Hey, uh, thank you for coming. For giving me a chance.” The struggle in her face was still going on.

I nodded, knowing that she was seeking the space she needed. “Of course. Thank you for lunch.”

“Anyway, I, I hope things work out for you soon.” As she turned and walked to the door, I watched. And noticed that her tan slacks, although loose-legged, fit snug in the hips. And made me aware of her body. In that moment, I was sure that she would remain a part of me for the rest of my life. But I was not sure if that was cause for gratitude or regret.

I stayed long enough to finish my sandwich, but felt it would be uncouth to touch Inch’s plate. When I emerged onto the street, I looked across it to Moonwalk Music and spotted a familiar face just coming out: Mari Takamura, a talented local pop singer and a friend since back in my Vog days. I paused for a deep breath, rolled my shoulders and set them back, then strode slow and serene

between the cars til I was behind her. I greeted her with a call of “hail and well met”.

Still facing away from me, she said, “That can only be Frank.” Then she turned and gifted me with her smile, undeniably dazzling as always. “How goes?”

“I am being here now.” She giggled softly, and I went on. “You aren’t at work today?”

She gave an easy shrug. “I wangled a little extra time off. The long weekend kinda jumbled my schedule a bit.”

“I see. Speaking of which, uhhh... you still work at Calder’s, correct?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do, do you know if they’re accepting resumé’s?”

Mari’s eyes widened and blinked. “Oh! Are you looking?”

“I must confess that I am.”

“Um, yeah. I mean, there’s nothing open now, but they always keep resumé’s on file anyway. I think there might’ve been an opening in the warehouse a few weeks ago? But that got filled before they could even advertise it. But yeah, go for it. When you get there, ask for Doris and give it to her. It’ll help if she can put a face to the name, y’know?”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Much obliged.” I berated myself for not following up on that lead again after I was scared off on my first attempt.

“Oh, and, umm... can I give you an insider tip?”

“Always.”

“You might wanna, I dunno... slick yourself up a bit first? I mean, if there *is* an opening, Fred is gonna be hiring, and he’s gonna ask Doris ‘what did you think of this guy’ and all that. Plus he’ll wanna meet you himself. And, let’s be honest, Fred and Doris are both really nice, but they’re kinda old and not exactly cool, right? And Fred can afford to be choosy. Just so you know.”

I nodded. "Thank you for that. I appreciate it."

Mari started to turn away. "Hey sorry, I gotta run, I'm supposed to be meeting Gwynnie. Good luck, okay?"

Another nod of thanks as I watched her power-walk up the street. But I stood in thought a moment longer. To be presented with the same message twice within an hour.... I couldn't shake the feeling that said message was being delivered by the cosmos itself.

Seventeen

May 20, 1998

Over dinner that evening, I broached the subject with my father, wielding my customary aplomb: "Father, allow me to begin by confessing my extreme discomfort, so that we can take that as read and carry on."

He put down his fork and raised quizzical brows toward me.

I breathed deep. "May I please borrow twenty dollars?" I felt a blush, and inwardly winced.

"No problem, man. What's shakin'? Are you hitting the coffee and donuts extra hard this week?"

"I, uh, need it for a haircut."

He blinked. "Rather sudden, but far out."

"At least I think I do. I find myself deeply conflicted about the whole endeavour."

"Uh, you figure this will help you find work? Is that it?"

"The idea has been presented to me more than once, of late."

"It could work. Probably worth a shot, dude."

I fidgeted with my coffee mug.

"So let me guess," father went on. "The conflicted comes from you feeling like, if the world was sufficiently groovy, it would dig you no matter how you looked."

"Not the word I would've chosen, but you have the gist."

He sighed. "Okay, hear me out, man. The way I see it is, there are people who feel like the way they look is, like, an expression of who they are. It reveals their truth to the world. Some of them get very hung up on it, and it can get seriously heavy. And there are others who just know who they are, and know that how they look has nothing to do with it."

“I gather you count yourself in the second camp.”

Father grinned. “You’re quick today. Like, back in the hippie sixties, I still looked just like this.” He gestured toward his pre-Beatles teen-idol hair. “Lotta guys then wrote me off cuz they were into the whole Deadhead look and figured I was as square as their folks. But I just looked and dressed the way I was comfortable with, y’know? But when it came to things that counted, matters of the heart, and society, and spirit, I was as hip as any of ’em.”

“And so you remain.” I saluted him with my mug.

“So that was the thing.” He sipped at his coffee. “Plus I could smoke any of ’em under the table.” At that, he chuckled.

I held a palm toward him. “I don’t need to know if you still can.” When I gave it some thought, I knew there was some truth in what he said. When I perused magazines in the music store over the last couple of years, I saw that members of Pearl Jam were now wearing their hair emphatically short. As was Chris Cornell of Soundgarden. A drastic change of appearance from their heroic, early-nineties heyday, but clearly they all remained mighty mountains of coolness. They knew who they were.

“So have no fear,” father said. “You could *shave* your head and you’d still be the second-coolest dude in town. *You are Frank Wagner, man.*”

I found myself smiling. “Need I ask?”

He just raised an eyebrow and drank his coffee.

Kitty-corner from the park where Waffles liked to play stick was a tiny plaza, too short to qualify as a strip mall. Besides the obligatory convenience store, one of the remaining three storefronts was a hair salon. Perhaps the term “salon” lends it an overabundance of cachet: it provided simple haircuts, bargain prices, and a place for newly trained stylists to gain some experience, no appointment needed. They offered nothing fancy, and, the next morning, I entered the establishment for the first time, in search of nothing fancy.

The salon was cramped, but bright and clean. Top 40 radio played over a P.A.

Black-and-white posters of young men and women, modelling various hairstyles, adorned the small portions of wall that weren't mirrored. And a professionally convivial, bespectacled redhead, who looked to be fresh out of high school, escorted me at once to a swivelling chair – business was not booming at this time of day.

She draped a black sheet over me, velcroed it around my neck, turned the chair to face me toward the mirror wall, and addressed my reflection. “All right, what are we doing today?”

“Cut – severe. Similar to what Stone Gossard has nowadays.”

“Who?”

“Sorry. Uhhh... something conservative but not military. Back and sides short but not transparent, the top long enough to have a little life in it. Oh, and something that doesn't require any after-care at home: knowing me, that will never happen.”

She lifted a lock of my hair with her fingertips, assessing its length and weight. “So we're talking a major change here, then. You really wanna lose it all?”

I gave one nod. “Its time has come.”

“Ohhhh-kay.” She lifted a fat photo album from a glass table, flipped through it, and showed me a picture of a neatly shorn blond man. “Something like this?”

“Near enough. This says: ‘No one will ever ask to speak to my manager, because obviously I am the manager.’ That's what I need.”

“Can do.” She clapped the book shut and returned it to the table. “And what are we doing with the beard? Anything?”

A sudden mental picture of Chris Cornell's chin. “Very short, like the back and sides. But don't remove it – otherwise no one will be able to tell my father and me apart.”

“Eww, you don't want that, yeah. So, you're going for like a soul patch sorta.” One of her eyes winced. “Well, some guys can pull that look off, I guess. Are you auditioning for a boy band?”

“Only as a last resort.”

“Then here goes.” And her hands and scissors began to work, and I felt the surprising relaxation that comes when someone touches your hair and head. I let my eyes close, reluctant to actually witness the transformation as it occurred. At times she hummed along to the radio; it sounded like she was unaware of doing so. Weight gradually fell away from my head and neck. The process felt unexpectedly meditative.

I found myself remembering very occasional visits to a barber shop when I was a preschooler. I didn't recall the barber's name, but could still picture his white hair and white apron, his thick forearms covered with freckles, his hands blunt and ruddy and rough. But his scissors almost made music while he worked, cutting with incongruous delicacy and finesse. And I remembered that, despite being the elder, Taylor had a harder time holding still for the process than I did – confounding the expectations of everyone but myself. I wondered if I would ever remember where that barber shop was, or learn if that barber still worked, or even still lived.

I returned to the present when I felt my stylist working at my chin, playing her own song with her tools. A new tune as she applied an electric trimmer to me once again. Still I kept my eyes closed and relaxed, willing myself to be surprised. Telling myself that, no matter how bad it was, it would grow back.

Her implements grew silent and I felt the chair turn. “What's the verdict?”

I opened my eyes, faced directly toward the mirror again. The stylist stood behind me, holding a large hand mirror behind my head. My first split-second response was a flash of strangeness – my resemblance to my father was almost disturbing. Then I looked closer at her handiwork. The sides were smooth and even, not too thin, and I found myself reaching up to run my fingers over. The top had some lift, a gentle defiance, and some soft waves that I wasn't expecting. I tried to reassure myself that I had done the right thing.

“This is exactly what I had in mind,” I said. “Thank you; I applaud your skills.”

Her voice said, “Oh! Well, thank *you!*” Her face said, *You're kinda weird – I hope you don't come back.* But she appeared more kindly disposed toward me when I tipped her all of the change from my twenty.

I noticed the difference more distinctly when I stepped outside and began walking home. The lessened weight, the breeze on my ears and neck. Not needing to brush blown hair out of my eyes. After a moment, I realized I felt freer. I felt renewed. These sensations were unforeseen, and I choose to take them as auguring well for my future.

When father came home from work and first saw me, his eyes widened for a second. Then he gave me a thumb up and said, "Very smooth, dude. 'Tis the dawning of a new day."

I rubbed the back of my neck, which felt bare and alien. "Still getting acclimated to it, I must admit."

"No, *here's* what you must admit: you *really* did it cuz, after spending all this time with me, you finally realized that you wanted to be as cool as your old man."

I raised both hands in surrender. "*Mea culpa*, sir. The truth will out." Which got him to laugh.

Eighteen

May 21, 1998

I woke the next morning feeling shifted into gear. After breakfast, I printed a few more copies of my resumé, then went into my room to deliberately choose an outfit.

At the back of my closet was a garment bag containing a dark gray, pinstriped suit. My *only* suit: a gift from my mother, along with a tie, a white shirt, and black shoes, to wear to my university graduation ceremony. At the time, I felt it a pointless expenditure, since I would be completely covered in a black robe. But she felt this was her way of making a contribution. Plus, all the other graduands would be dressed nicely under their robes; therefore, I would make a proper showing, for her sake. Resistance was futile.

I had not worn it since.

Wearing the full jacket and tie today struck me as overkill; I settled for the suit pants [noting with some satisfaction that they still fit], the Good Shoes, and the Good Shirt. But I rolled the shirt cuffs up a tad, with the intention of appearing casual as opposed to incomplete.

During the walk downtown, I kept noticing how different I felt. My pace was a bit more brisk. No more head-tossing my hair out of my face, which had become such a constant in my life that I stopped noticing it years ago. Sometimes I reached up to twirl my hair around my fingers – another subconscious tic – and I found nothing. The air flowed past my head and neck in new ways, unfamiliar but not unpleasant. It took some time for me to admit to myself that these changes felt liberating.

Numerous times, friends and acquaintances passed me by without recognizing me. Some halted, performed an admirable double-take, and stopped me to discuss my new appearance for a few seconds. Some of those praised it; none mocked it – but a few did ask me who died.

I even received a second look from Ms. Kowalczyk when I passed her on my way to Periodicals and picked up the morning newspapers. And it was here that I had a sense of the cosmos acknowledging my efforts by meeting me partway: in the want ads, I saw that a local bank sought to hire a teller. All they asked was a high school diploma and an aptitude for math. Experience preferred but not

essential. And this bank was only a block away, on the other side of The Square across from the library.

I picked up my resumé envelope and speed-walked across The Square, into the bank, and directly to the service desk. When I asked the receptionist about applying for the teller position, she looked both mildly surprised and mildly pleased.

“Do you have your resumé with you?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

But when I opened the envelope to remove a copy, she suddenly stood, almost fluttering, and said, “Actually, can you wait here just for a second, please?” Then she half-hurried past the tellers into the rear of the bank. In less than a minute, she reappeared at her station, leaned toward me confidentially, and said, “Is there any chance you’re available to speak with Mr. Weston right *now*? He has a few moments free.”

I felt my jaw relax but tried not to gape. Could it be this easy? “Absolutely.”

“Come this way, then, please.” I followed her to the back and she indicated the open door of a tiny office with a glass front wall. As I slipped inside, she pulled the door shut.

Mr. Weston stood and leaned across his desk, extending his hand. “Thanks for coming to us, Mr.?”

I made a point of giving his hand an extra-firm shake. He was big, with an ex-football-player look to him. Dark blue suit, red tie. And iron-gray hair in a style disturbingly similar to my own. “Wagner. Frank Wagner.”

“Have a seat, Mr. Wagner.” He eased back into his chair and extended an expectant hand to me. With some rattling, I removed a copy of my resumé and handed it to him. His eyes flicked over it quickly. Then he frowned. “You’re not a business major?”

“No, sir?”

“Ah. Well.” And then he handed the paper back to me. “Then, ah, I’m sorry for

any misunderstanding, and for taking up your time.”

“I, I don’t understand. The ad said nothing about ‘business major’ – it said high school, and I have that.”

“Well, you, you also have university. You’re overqualified, really.”

My jaw tightened. “I can still do this job.”

“Sorry, you’re not what we’re looking for.”

“Then why did you ask to see me?”

For a few seconds we played staring contest. Then Mr. Weston blinked and looked aside. “We, uhh... we have a junior manager position coming up soon. Haven’t even posted it yet.”

“I still don’t follow.”

“Well... normally when a man comes here looking for a position, it’s for something managerial or executive. And usually they have the qualifications for that. So I was hoping. But we’d never consider putting a man on the front counter. It’s policy.”

“Which your ad doesn’t mention.”

He scowled, then gestured toward the door. “Please, Mr. Wagner. And good luck to you.”

I stood and brushed off my pants. “Um, thank you for your time and insights.” Then I quietly found my way out of the building. Now that I was making a more concerted effort to play the game, I was learning some more of the rules. But I didn’t enjoy playing it. I wondered if anyone did.

I took pains to breathe more deeply and slowly as I turned the corner and made my way to The Wien. Doubtless, some quiet time over caffeine would be beneficial. But when I neared the door, I saw Mitch ahead of me, just opening it to go in. He looked at me, then turned back toward the door with no reaction.

I called out, “Mitch!”, and could hear a faint echo even over the traffic.

He froze with a start, turned toward me again, and his eyes got round. He trotted over to me, said “Holy fuck!”, and then laughed. “When did *this* happen?”

“Only yesterday, *confrère*.”

His eyes took me in at full length. “Wow, rockin’ the Cornell look, eh? Very slick – you’re the man! Hey, I was just gonna grab lunch – c’mon.”

Our traditional back corner booth was empty, and I followed Mitch to it, drawing the attention and calls of most of the regulars at their tables. When Effie spotted me, she brought business to a standstill to gather every staff member around me, where I endured their amazement and approval and well-wishing. I wondered if there might be any money in setting up a travelling sideshow, with my hair as the featured attraction.

While we waited for Mitch’s meatloaf sandwich and my coffee, he leaned in and said, “Okay, so am I right that the job hunt is what got you so duded up?”

“Just so.”

He gave a small grimace of sympathy. “How’s that going?”

“Looking up lately, as it happens, just a touch. I had a quasi-interview just this morning.”

“‘Quasi’? Does that mean it didn’t go so good?”

“A most cogent analysis, good sir.”

Mitch shook his head. “Sorry, man, this is still sucking. Gotta tell ya, I am so thankful I don’t need to worry about that shit. Although I dunno if I’d ever let on to Mama-san about it – I don’t want her giving me attitude.”

“You have many blessings to count, Mitch.” Mitch was still working at his parents’ convenience store, longer hours now that he was finished school. And he still lived in the upper apartment with his folks.

“Oh yeah, I know. But there are still down sides – like, Nat and me always have to go to her place. Can’t ever bring her to mine, right?”

I leaned aside to allow Effie to set our meal before us. She insisted that my coffee was on her today, and I made a polite little fuss before I acquiesced. Then I returned my attention to Mitch and said, “Nat’?”

“Oh! Natalie’s my new, I guess she’s my girlfriend. Met her at the Fist Buddies gig last month. Fuck, man, she is so hot! Wait til you see her – amazing!”

Part of me was thinking, *so you don’t actually know her*. But the part that spoke said, “Kudos and well wishes. Another blessing to count. And yes, I can see the inherent difficulties in entertaining her in your current circumstances.”

Mitch shrugged and picked up his fork. “Well, so far she’s okay with how things are, so we’ll see.”

I knew better than to suggest Mitch move out to a place of his own. We’d had this discussion years ago. His present abode was comfortable and convenient enough, for the most part. And his funds were better diverted to more important matters, such as guitars, and their accessories, and studio time for recording demos. He was “investing in his career”. The convenience store job was only a way to pay the bills; rock was his destiny.

Yet he stood poised to inherit Sano’s Variety when his parents retired, which was perhaps just over the horizon. And, on the one hand, I hoped he would take the reins rather than sell the business – because the child in me found the thought of “no Sano’s” to be an unwelcome one. But, on the other, even if a life in retail was not his career, it might well be his future. A future he never chose, but seemed prepared to quietly accept. His security was handed to him years ago, and I wondered if he had sufficient appreciation for it.

Then it occurred to me that this was uncharacteristic of me, to think so much on the future. Normally I was devoted to being here now. And when Inch got her new job, she began to think more of the future. And I never really joined in with her. That may have been part of the problem. But perhaps I was learning better, and changing for the better.

I toasted Mitch with my coffee. “Hoping all goes well.”

Nineteen

May 25, 1998

The remainder of that week followed my modified New Normal. Father insisted on lending me some of his clothes so that I wouldn't appear in the identical outfit every day on my job hunt... and now I not only felt like I was playing pretend: I was playing dress-up. It rankled, but I endured.

My more traditional presentation earned me a less chilly response in the businesses I called upon, and I managed to leave more resumés on file. I took one to Calder's Grocery Mart and left it with Doris, who was just as Mari described: amiable and pleasant, but not remotely avant garde. There was even an ad for a file clerk position in Town Hall, where they had me fill in an application. It was, if nothing else, a time of increased potential.

And, every day, I spent more time in my room with my guitar. I practised the fingerpicking Bob had taught me. I mentally resurrected my old Doughty Swains setlists and brushed up on all those songs, but I couldn't help filling in the bass lines in my head. Sometimes I sat in the front room, listening to father's albums, repeating certain songs in my quest to get them down. My playing and voice were never polished, even in my prime, but I could hear them losing some rust. My calluses slowly rebuilt. I was rediscovering the comfort and peace in my music.

When Monday came, and Vera opened her door for her first look at Shorn Frank, she gaped, then smiled open-mouthed. "Wow!" she finally said. "Come, come in." While I slid my shoes off, she shook her head and said, "I hope you aren't sick of hearing how much you look like Steve."

I gave her a small, cordial smile. "I can roll with it."

First thing she wanted to hear when she curled up on her loveseat was what prompted my new coiffure. While I explained, and related the concomitant differences I now noticed in my life, she jotted down a few notes. Then she stopped and looked at the page for a few seconds. When she raised her eyes to me again, she said, "What would you say if I were to suggest that this new change is an attempt to win Inch back?"

I sat with that for a moment. "I... can understand why someone might interpret it that way, but I'm not aware of that actually being a factor."

“Aha. Even though she was the one who suggested you do something like this?”

“She was one of several. And I eventually felt that she – that they might have a point. Worth pursuing.”

She nodded, and reached up absently to toy with her hair; without thinking, I mirrored her, and my fingers fondled air. “There’s something else about Inch I’ve been wondering for a while now.” She paused, and I thought I saw something in her expression like caution. “How do you feel about Inch leaving you for a woman?”

My brow tightened. “I never said that’s what she did. *She* never said that’s what she did.”

“But you suspected. I mean, she’s still living with Nicole, as far as you know. Haven’t you wondered?”

I sat quiet for what felt like an inordinately long time. “Um... the way she spoke about Nicole, so often, and so... glowingly... I admit, there were times I wondered if Inch was feeling things. I suppose I dismissed them?”

“Inch is bisexual?”

“Yes, I was aware of that back in high school. So, what you’re suggesting is not impossible.”

“Do you find that, I dunno... threatening, maybe?”

I shook my head. “No. Honestly, no. But I still find it deeply mystifying.”

“How so?”

“She... she and Nicole had been acquainted a couple of months at best. How could you run off to be with someone you don’t even know?”

“Maybe Inch fell in love. Maybe she simply found Nicole extremely attractive. Compelling, overwhelming, maybe. I mean, I’ve seen Nicole’s signs around town – she’s a very beautiful woman. Unless that’s all just special effects.”

“I’ve seen her in person, and that is indeed how she appears.”

“Wow, okay. I know she’s not your favourite person, but don’t you at least agree she’s gorgeous?”

I shrugged. “Not for me to say.”

Vera gently bit the cap of her pen. “Please explain.”

“I... I learned very early on that I’m attracted to a person once I know them – well. A pretty face is not enough to get my attention.”

“I notice you said ‘person’ there, and not ‘woman’. Are *you* bisexual, Frank?”

“I’ve had no indication of such, so far.”

She smiled. “Sounds like you’re not ruling it out, though.”

I shrugged again. “I continue to discover myself.”

“Commendable.” Another quick jot. “So you never went through the ravages of puberty? Never put up pictures of bikini babes in your locker?”

I reached for the water bottle on the table. “Very well, I will grant that I had a year or two, early on. When my hormonal casserole was fresh out of the oven, as it were. Back then, a girl’s appearance, or even availability, was enough to fire my interest. But it seems to me that my desire then was fuelled by curiosity as much as anything else. Eventually, I’m not sure what changed, but the... spiritual component of those relations overshadowed all the others. And thus my friends’ lockers displayed pages from the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, and mine had photos of Pixies and Fugazi from rock magazines.”

She nodded, and it was with some pleasure that I noticed she didn’t seem to need me to explain those names. Mentally I awarded her two Cool Points. “So, the odd man out, once again. But content with it, seems to me.” She paused in thought for a second, then: “Did you ever feel... I dunno, more evolved than your horny friends back then?”

I opened my mouth to deny this, then stopped. I was here for help, which I wouldn’t get if I were dishonest with Vera or tried to erect a facade. Finally I said,

“There were probably moments when I did.”

She nodded. “I’d like to encourage you to look at that differently. I mean, I gotta tell you, Frank, those swimsuit fans... that is perfectly normal behaviour. And it doesn’t necessarily make them, uhh, morally suspect – they can still be great guys. It’s okay for people to like what they like, and want what they want. And it’s okay for *you* to.” She tapped her notepad with a fingernail. “So does this mean you never fell in love at first sight? You don’t believe in it?”

“I believe it happens for some people... but I don’t believe *in* being in love, *per se*.”

Her eyes widened and she started scrawling quickly. “Wow okay, *this* I gotta hear more about. Why not?”

“Well... I believe in *loving* people. In caring for them. But being *in* love is that... that romantic insanity which makes one person believe another is somehow magically flawless and superhuman. And that this is somehow more important than everything else in their lives. Enough cause to send their life off the rails. It can happen in a few days, or a few minutes, over someone you don’t even know. It happens for no reason and ends for no reason. People are sure, beyond any doubt, that this person is ‘*The One*’, and then a few months later they find they were utterly mistaken. And not long after that, someone else comes along and they are just as absolutely sure that *this* is ‘*The One*’. When something is that fleeting, and it’s so easy to be mistaken about it, how can we give it any credence? How can we grant it any kind of weight? I, I believe that people experience it, but it’s not important. It’s meaningless.”

Vera wrote for long seconds. To her page, she said, “I need to, uh, rebut you, at least in part.” Her pen stopped and she looked at me. “The first time I saw Hal, when I was T.A.-ing for him, I just turned to jelly, right on the spot.” A short giggle; she blushed, and her eyes brightened. “And yes, within a few days, I was in love with him. I didn’t know then that I was gonna marry him, but I knew he was incredible. And I was still in love with him after I learned that he wasn’t ‘flawless and superhuman’. Man, those long afternoons grading papers with him, when I found out how short-tempered and contrary he could be. Of course, I never told him how I felt til after I graduated and stopped working for him. But he was smart enough that I bet he knew.

“Frank, what I felt was something not as shallow or flighty as what you described

there. But yes, I absolutely was in love with Hal, til the day he died. And it was my... my great good fortune that he felt the same about me.”

The light in her blinking eyes was riveting. “It sounds as if you were indeed fortunate, yes.”

“Listen: I will grant you that, yes, sometimes we can do some very foolish things in the name of love. And it isn’t always a worthwhile substitute for thinking things through. But! What I think you’re missing is that, crazy as it might be, it’s real. And powerful. People really feel it. And they need to. And not try to dismiss it.” She watched me for a second. “You don’t deny that you love Inch, do you?”

I took a drink from my water bottle. “No. I don’t deny it.”

“And didn’t you ever tell her that you loved her? That you needed her?”

“I *don’t* need her. I don’t need *anyone*.”

There was soft pain in her face. “Oh, Frank.”

“Look: I don’t have her, and yet here I am. Clearly, I don’t need her.”

Vera’s shoulders fell. “Oh my god, that is the most brutal definition of ‘need’ I ever heard! Maslow would hate you!” She giggled, and even I half-smiled. “God, by that line of thinking, then yes, people don’t need anyone, okay. But! You can just as well say that people don’t need to be happy, then, either. Mm?” And she cocked her head – a little aggressively, I thought.

“I... I’d need to sit with that one.”

“Whenever you like. But, as you know, people *want* to be happy anyway. And that’s okay. I’m gonna keep coming back to that. Whether you *need* Inch or not, it’s okay for you to *want* Inch. And it’s okay for you to want to be happy. Sometimes I wonder if you’re afraid to want anything. And I’ll let you sit with *that* til next time.”

Twenty

May 26, 1998

That night, I dreamed a different sort of dream.

Almost invariably, my dreams are a limited experience. I see everything, but I hear only muffled voices, much like the earliest sound films. And nothing else. While I am dreaming, I don't notice these omissions, but, when I wake, in retrospect, I recognize that there were no ambient sounds, no smells, no tactile sensations.

Why this dream was different, I don't know, but it offered a full sensory environment. I was lying on a beach, and I could feel the firmness of sand beneath a blanket, under my back. I heard gulls and the surging of waves, smelled salt air, felt the heat of the sun on my skin. But, in the dream, I was focused completely on other sensations, the most dreamlike of all.

Vera was naked, straddled on top of me, riding me. Sunlight caught the gold in her thick curls, and cast their shadows curving down her breasts. She gazed down on me with glittering eyes. She gaped, smiled, gaped again as she rocked on me and I rocked under her. She panted, whispered how good it was. But soon the sound of her voice, and of the surf, was drowned out by the building rush of my own blood.

I watched beauty spots on her chest and shoulders as she swayed, ran my hands over skin that felt warm and soft but smooth as glass. I felt myself move inside her, relentless and urgent. She bent forward, her pale flesh pressed on me, and her lips found mine. She smelled of tenderness and gentle heat; she tasted like my true home. Blood moving in me built to a low, pulsing roar.

Then she straightened upright, ground herself down, cried out, and I was unleashed.

When I awoke the next morning, not only did I need to shower even more insistently than usual, but I also needed clean sheets.

Father noticed me carrying my white bundle of bedding through the kitchen and out to the washing machine. He moved his mouthful of toast over to one side

and said, “Didn’t you just do your sheets like two days ago?”

He was absolutely correct, so I shook my head. “No no, it was longer than that. These are really due, if not overdue.”

He shrugged and resumed eating.

The rest of that day, throughout all my activities, my thoughts were repeatedly redirected back to remembering that dream. The last time I had a dream of that sort – the type that requires custodial maintenance afterward – was a good decade ago. What suddenly brought that back?

And why Vera? I had spent a grand total of three hours with her to date. She was, at best, maybe two steps removed from an utter stranger passing by on the street. The idea of any sort of attraction to her was ludicrous. I decided my best course of action was to put it out of my mind and go on.

But my mind decided otherwise.

No matter how I tried to occupy myself and tend to the day, I kept replaying the dream in my head, remembering its pleasures. Thoughts of Vera were insistent, and exciting. So exciting that I eventually found myself compelled to release the physical pressures in me – which was something else I’d had no need to do in over a decade. I no longer recognized myself.

Days followed, where I continued to job-hunt, continued to play music... but, interwoven in all that, I continued to fantasize about Vera. What if, at our next session, she shifted to one side of the loveseat and beckoned me to join her? What if she opened one of the *other* doors of her upstairs landing, and urged me inside? What if she showed up at the house some afternoon while father was at work, slipped inside, and locked the door? I found that my urges were demanding satisfaction several times a day. It was as if my early teen years had hunted me down and reclaimed me. There was a new energy informing everything else I did, and a sense of rediscovering a part of my self that was lost.

I was looking at Vera, and thinking of her, in a way I hadn’t done with any woman in years – a way completely separated from any sort of deep

relationship. Despite the undeniable physical rush of it, this new fixation disturbed me. So sudden, and inexplicable. I felt a loss of control; while I didn't quite fear for my sanity, I wondered about it.

Mulling it over in the ensuing days, I decided that this was one thing I couldn't discuss with Vera. I worried that she would find my thoughts even more unsettling than I did. For all I knew, this might even be grounds for terminating our professional relationship. I felt I had already gained substantial benefit just from the few sessions we had done to date; I was very reluctant to lose the opportunity she represented.

Conversely, I also wondered if she would somehow be able to read this in me anyway, if I might give myself away with subconscious cues that she was trained to pick up. But I decided that was out of my control, and there was nothing to be gained worrying on that score. That was simply a risk I was obliged to take.

And our next meeting was nearly two weeks away. Perhaps this carnal frenzy, whatever it was, might burn itself out by then. A "wait and see" approach seemed my best course of action for the time being.

I also wondered: was this how my "horny friends" lived their lives?

Twenty-One

June 1, 1998

The following Monday, I encountered a powerful diversion.

That afternoon, I was sitting in the front room, my guitar in my lap, the inevitable Waffles on my feet. My attention shifted from listening to *Harvest* on the stereo, to working on some rudimentary slide guitar licks, to remembering the glow of Vera's skin. I heard the front door open when father came in from work, but his customary greeting didn't follow. There was only silence, until I heard a soft rattle behind me and felt him lay a sheet of paper on top of my head.

I stopped playing, took hold of the paper, and turned to face him. He stood watching me, his eyebrows raised. "Potential good news, dude." He gestured toward the page I held.

Then I saw that it was a job application form for the Institute of Paranormal Studies. In my chest I felt a starburst of hope. "Expound, please," I said.

Father rested his hip on the back of the sofa. "This morning, Wayne from Facilities buzzes me, asking if I can put up a posting on the jobs page of our website. I have to explain to him yet again that the only page on our website so far is the one that says 'Under Construction', so his posting is gonna be restricted to more archaic channels. But we get gabbing and I find out that Facilities is opening up a new position in their front office: Dispatch Assistant. Sounds like something you're qualified for. If you're into it, man." And he handed me another sheet of paper – a printout of the job posting.

I scanned the page nervously, not quite daring to trust this stroke of luck. Straightforward office work. They requested good organizational and communication skills, and preferred some experience working on a computer, which I gained in several of my electives in school. After a six-month probation came union membership and benefits. And the salary was higher than I, or most of my friends, had ever seen.

"Normally, they would give union members first crack at it," father said. "But this is an entry-level position – it'd be a step down for any of the technicians over there. So it's fair and square up for grabs."

I looked up at him cautiously. "Are you planning on pulling some strings or

twisting some arms on my behalf? I'm aware that you're one of the highest-up of the Institute's muckamucks." Somehow the idea of nepotism didn't sit well with me, regardless of how handsomely I might benefit from it.

Father shook his head. "Separate department, dude – I have no say in it. I don't see or know most of the guys in Facilities, other than their IT folks like Wayne. The dispatcher doing the hiring, I think his name is Jerry, but that's about all I can tell you. So no, I won't be throwing my weight around for you – you gotta land this fish on your own."

As I went in search of a pen, I recalled that I had never gone fishing. I hoped that wouldn't prove detrimental here.

The application and interview process on Thursday for the dispatch position was almost uneventful. I dressed in full metal suit and tie to meet with Mr. Gruenwald-Call-Me-Jerry, a bluff, ruddy, middle-aged fellow in plaid shirt and khakis. He glanced at my papers and we chatted briefly about what the job would entail.

At one point he said, "Isn't there somebody named Wagner working over in Admin?" I acknowledged that that was my father, upon which he shrugged and muttered something about "not the only one here with a kid applying for this", so it didn't appear to be an issue. We concluded with a handshake and his assertion that he would "be in touch".

The "in touch" occurred the following afternoon, and the floor nearly fell out of my stomach when Jerry informed me that I started Monday if I was still interested. I lost no time in confirming that I was. I was vaguely aware that the Institute saw itself as an auxiliary branch of academia; therefore, possibly my university experience gave me a slight edge over other applicants, making me "a better fit".

That evening, while we ate congratulatory pizza, father was exuberant in describing the advantages he could offer me, such as transportation to and from work, and the continued availability of his wardrobe until I could save up for my own. I expressed my intention to begin repaying him for my sessions with Vera, but he insisted that those were and would remain his gift. I also suggested that I would now be able to return to my room at the Ambassador, or possibly a larger

and less decrepit one. But he urged me to remain here a while longer, until I had accumulated enough capital to put down a deposit on a proper apartment.

“You’re worth making yourself comfortable, man. And besides, I’m kinda digging having you for a roomie again, so I’m in no rush to shoo you out. It hasn’t been that bad, crashing with the old man, has it?”

Honesty compelled me to concede that it could indeed be worse.

Father was also good enough to remind me that I had an appointment with Vera booked for Monday, and I would need to call her to reschedule. I was aware of a subtle jump in my pulse, at the mere mention of her name. As well as a quiet unease, when I considered how much longer I might be obliged to wait before I was able to see her again.

On Monday morning, I shone, at least outwardly – inwardly I felt something much akin to stage fright, which brought back memories of my earliest gigs with the band. On the drive up to the Institute, father clapped a hand on my shoulder and gave it a reassuring shake. More than once he reminded me to breathe, and insisted that I was undoubtedly going to rock.

That first day consisted entirely of training. Jerry showed me around the office, acquainted me with the computer and pager systems, introduced me to maintenance technicians as they came and went. I trusted that their names would stick with me in time. I shadowed him as he fielded calls for repairs and requests for equipment, contacted technicians and directed them where needed.

“See, this is what the job boils down to, basically, Frank,” he said during a lull. “Someone needs something fixed, they call here, we page the technicians to find out who’s free, they buzz us back to confirm, and buzz us again when it’s done. We leave it to them to figure out priorities – like triage, I guess. That’s what they’re trained to do. Sometimes they’ll come in to get stuff out of the supply closet” – he indicated a gray door in the corner – “but a lot of the equipment is in the storage sheds out back, so they won’t bother you. And you just record everything in the book here, and when things are quiet you transfer them into the spreadsheet there.”

I nodded. “It does seem simple enough.”

“Yup. But you saw how busy the phones can get sometimes – that’s why we could use someone else here to help answer. Plus it gives me more time to catch up on paperwork in the back office. Feel free to bring a crossword or sumthin, though. It can get pretty dead other times.”

“Noted.”

“Oh. Sometimes some staff member will come in here asking for supplies from the closet so they can take care of something themselves. That’s just a flat no, always. Only the technicians are allowed to fix anything around here; they’re trained for it. Union rules. Be polite about it, but if they give you a hard time, take their name and I’ll go round and kick their ass. No reason for anyone to give you any grief. And I don’t want them thinking they can pull a fast one on the new guy. Just take the call, send the crew, record it, that’s all folks. Got it?”

“It is completely got.”

Suddenly two phone lines rang at once. Jerry nodded toward the newly installed second phone at the other end of the counter. “You wanna try picking up line two? Just write everything down. I’m right here. Go for it.” And he gave me a crooked grin.

I took a quick, deep breath, and jumped.

Of course father wanted to hear all about my first day during the drive home. Echoes of my first day of university, and high school, and grade school. It was almost odd, how little the questions changed from one occasion to the next.

“Everything went swimmingly. I expect to get the gist of this gig with little difficulty. Once or twice this afternoon, when Jerry was working in back, someone came in and appeared bewildered, like, ‘Hey, you aren’t Jerry?’ That was what passed for amusement today.”

“Yeah, man, I know, you ain’t doing this gig for kicks – it’s for bucks.”

“Fair enough. And Jerry indicated that, after my probation, he intends to train me in the intricacies of ordering supplies. So I suppose we can consider that to be

room for advancement.”

“One day at a time, dude. Be here now.”

“Roger wilco.” I watched the traffic, other drivers behind other wheels focused on returning home after their long days. And I had trouble deciding if I still felt like I was playing pretend, or just experiencing a new and unfamiliar facet of myself.

And I wondered when I would next see Inch. I wanted her to know what I had done, what I had achieved.

Twenty-Two

June 21, 1998

A couple of weeks passed while I found my feet at the office. Gradually I gained fluency with the communications equipment, with the standard abbreviations employed in log entries, with the names of technicians and other staff. Jerry began staying in the back room more often, and for longer periods, and was delighted at this chance to catch up on his backlog of paperwork. I spent my downtime browsing the binders of building maps, learning where offices and labs were located, getting a feel for how the Institute was physically laid out. I still had many questions, and asked for help, and made mistakes, but I was developing a grasp of the job, slowly but not so slowly that Jerry was displeased. There were times, now and then on some days, when I stopped feeling like an imposter.

Without meaning to, I also spent some of my downtime thinking about Vera. Imagining that she showed up unannounced and came to my counter, subtly breathless and smelling subtly pleasing, her bare arms inviting caresses. Dreaming that she asked me for a tour of the supply closet, or if I had a key to Jerry's back office while he was away for lunch. Despite the fact that I responded to the pleasures of these fancies, they felt foreign to who I knew myself to be, so alien that they carried a hint of fear. These thoughts came to me unbidden, like an obsession.

And I wondered if this was how Inch reacted to Nicole... if she found herself blindsided, unexpectedly compelled, helpless. Maybe these fantasies of mine provided me with a fresh insight into Inch's behaviour and choices. Maybe I might need to risk discussing them with Vera after all.

But my opportunity to do so was still a fair ways off. When I phoned Vera to reschedule my morning session which conflicted with my first day at work, she sounded genuinely pleased to hear my reasons for doing so, and happy for me. But this put me in the position of needing to rebook a timeslot outside of normal office hours, and those were understandably in very high demand. My next appointment was, out of necessity, pushed an additional three weeks into the future.

Which gave me numerous opportunities to confront my new reality: that I was suddenly smitten with her, or more like consumed by her. I managed to focus sufficiently so as not to allow erotic daydreams to adversely affect my

performance in the office. But, on my own time and in my own place, I found myself indulging those daydreams, repeatedly.

The time came for another Sunday Blues Night at Bob's, and this time I felt led to indulge. The evening was almost balmy as I trundled downtown with my guitar case, the sun low but still warm: no need for a second shirt, not with the solstice upon us at last. As I climbed the stairs to the apartment, I could hear two voices and two guitars, as well as Trevor's blues-harp. Certainly not unprecedented for other aficionados to join the festivities here: I wondered which one I might be meeting this time.

Bob's share of the music stopped as he came to answer the door. He greeted me with the requisite wide eyes and exclamations, since this was his first sight of me since my tonsorial transformation. He ushered me inside, and Trevor stopped playing to gape and tease me.

Occupying my preferred chair was someone new, who stopped playing and regarded me with curiosity. Even though he was seated, I could tell that he was extremely tall, wiry and grizzled and weathered, smelling of smoke, and wearing a deeply aged black leather jacket even in the warmth of Bob's apartment.

Bob introduced me to Karl, and I strode over to offer him my hand. While Karl returned my shake with a firm, rough grip, Bob said, "Karl's an old school buddy passing through town this weekend. He came in to play The Loft last night."

I nodded and said, "I trust that went well."

Karl shrugged. "It's The Loft. It's a bit of fun." His voice scraped, suggesting years of hard living. An archetypal blues voice: no wonder he'd enjoy joining Bob and Trevor this evening.

Bob had slipped away into the kitchen and re-emerged with a Molson Canadian for me. "Here, man, we're already warmed up so you better catch up, eh? And, speaking of The Loft, I was talking with Junior the other day."

"Oh, *Vito* Junior?"

Trevor jumped in. "No, Junior Mints – of *course* Vito Junior. You know he's

basically taken over the restaurant from his pops now, right?”

“I remember Vito’s been bruing about the idea of retiring for quite some time now.”

“Well,” Bob continued, “he pretty much has, by now. But he’s still running The Loft upstairs cuz that’s his baby, eh? Anyway, Junior knows that I know you, and he was saying that Vito was asking about you.”

“He was?” Bob nodded while I took a swig of my beer. I looked at the bottle and spoke to it. “I confess, I haven’t darkened the door of Vito’s in a good many moons.”

Trevor called out, “Well, maybe you should go darken, then, Mr. Buzzcut. Now c’mon, get tuned up and let’s party.” And he punctuated with a short wailing phrase on his harmonica.

I left Bob’s that night a shade early, with the intention of finding Vito. Darkness had fallen by then, the streetlights making a soft buzz overhead, but Vito’s would still be open – late-night pizza orders comprised a sizable portion of their business. And it was only a matter of turning a few corners and walking up a few blocks to get from Bob’s to there.

Vito’s had a new front door, glass with an electric buzzer, in place of the splitting wood and tarnished bell I remembered from days of yore. The warm, spice-filled air immediately made me hungry. Junior sat behind the counter, smoking and reading the paper. Lean, sallow, dressed in black – some things never changed. Behind him, in the kitchen, I saw an unfamiliar youngster tossing pizza dough.

Junior turned and looked toward me, his face neutral for a few seconds. Then he blinked and leaned forward. “Frankie?”

I gave a gentle smile and nod. “Junior. Hail and well met.”

“Hey, lookin’ sharp, buddy. How you doin’? Been a while.”

“Too long a while, and my apologies. And I have no complaints.”

“Oh hey, papa wants to see you.” Junior turned and opened a door in the back corner. “Hey papa! Get out here!” He turned back to me. “So hey, can I get you sumpin?”

“I did just stop by to say hello, but now I have to order a slice, please?”

His smile was easy, with a hint of relief. “Three meat?”

“You haven’t lost your edge, sir.” I gave him a loose salute with a few fingers.

He laughed, walked along the counter, and picked up a cutter, as the back door opened and Vito came out. Again, a brief bewildered look, then one of recognition and a creased smile. Vito shuffled out from the counter with his hands partly raised toward me. I offered him my hand and he took it in both of his.

“Frank, you look different,” he said. “It’s good to see you.”

“Thank you, Vito. You’re keeping well?”

“Good enough, hah. Trying to take it easy these days.” Vito was a little stooped, his hair whiter and thinner, his grip a bit tremulous, but his brown eyes remained as bright and vital as an owl’s. “Listen, I was hoping you’d come by.” He turned back to face Junior. “Hey, thanks for calling me out, Joon.”

“Yo, papa.”

Vito looked up at me again and finally released my hand. “He’s a good boy, he remembers things.”

“What can I do for you, Vito?”

“A while back I got thinking, it’s like a year, more than a year, since I saw you upstairs. I miss you. When you coming back, hah?”

“Oh, um.... my, uh, my band broke up.”

“Well, can you make a new one? Or just come yourself, maybe? I get lots of solo guys up at The Loft, that’s not a problem. But I miss hearing you, Frank.”

My mouth moved empty for a second. “That’s, that’s very flattering, thank you.”

“I always liked you special, y’know? You... you remind me of Tony Bennett.”

I almost laughed. “That’s a comparison I never thought I’d hear.”

“Naa, I mean, you don’t sound like him. And god knows you don’t *look* like him. But, but you both love what you do. And that makes you a cool cat.”

“Well, I’ve always wanted to be one of those, Vito, so thank you again.”

“Please come back sometime soon, hah? Try.” The corners of his eyes filled with lines as he grinned. “You don’t want me to play the Old Card and tell you about ‘who knows how much longer I got to hear you again’, do ya?”

“Oh, no – heaven protect me from your Old Card.”

Vito patted my shoulder with surprising vigour. “Attaboy. You let me know when I can book you. And I’m gonna let you go now, and get back to my shows. You take care, Frank.”

“You, too.” I watched him trudge back to the door.

Junior said, “I gotcha slice here whenever you’re ready, Frankie. One fifty.”

I walked over and reached in my pocket. “New prices? Glad I came prepared with some extra funds.” But I was conscious of the relief I felt, to actually have actual money of my own with me.

He shrugged. “Times change, buddy.”

Twenty-Three

June 23, 1998

There was no sign of anything out of the ordinary or untoward on Tuesday morning. I felt I was asking fewer questions of Jerry, and I got nods from him as I fielded calls to his satisfaction. One was from a researcher kept waiting by the technicians longer than they expected; I expressed professional regret and assured them their problem would be serviced in turn. I juggled multiple incoming responses from the pagers without dropping any. I was managing as well as could be expected after so little experience.

Then, when Jerry was out for lunch and I minded the store, a more agitated call came in.

“Hi, I’m calling from The Green Lab – I have no light here.”

“Pardon me?”

“The overhead light, the ceiling light – the second bulb just burned out. There’s no windows here, all I got is this little desk lamp.”

I grabbed a notepad and started writing. “Sorry, where did you say you are?”

The woman on the phone over-enunciated. “The. Green. Lab.”

“Very well, I’ll notify the technicians immediately.”

“No-no, you don’t get it. The other bulb burned out weeks ago and I already called I dunno how many times – you guys keep blowing me off. We’ve been working in flickery half-light all this time. I have a research subject who came in from out of town to work with me, and I’m supposed to be doing a session with him at two. I can’t work in the dark!”

“I’ll, I’ll have a technician there A.S.A.P.”

“You better or the Director is gonna hear about it.” She hung up sharply.

I sent a page out to all the technicians with the details. Within seconds, the replies began coming in: busy. Busy. On lunch. Busy.

No one was available and willing to attend to the task. I understood that a burned-out bulb was routinely considered lowest priority, which explained why the other bulb had lain neglected as long as it did. I considered paging Jerry, but suspected he would tell me to let the technicians do their job and trust their expertise. The situation did not sit well with me.

After a moment, I pulled out the building binders and browsed the indexes. I found The Green Lab's location on the first floor of the Research Building, and consulted the specs for the room. The ceiling light was standard four-foot fluorescents. We had those bulbs in the supply closet here. And I had changed those before, when I worked in the campus library.

I located two new bulbs in long boxes, gathered them up along with a stepladder, and took them out of the office. I taped up a hand-scrawled sign on the door: *Back at 2 – apologies*. Then I trundled, as quickly as I could while burdened this awkwardly, across the compound to Research and knocked on The Green Lab's door.

The woman who opened the door wore a white lab coat, glasses, and a severe expression. "Well, thank god – how long is this gonna take?"

"But a few minutes, I can assure you. I would, however, ask your assistance in holding this door open so that some light comes in from the hall?"

The researcher folded her arms and used her entire body as a doorstop while I set up the stepladder beneath the light fixture, in the dimness. I struggled with the cover, blinked and spat when dust and grit shook off and down into my face. The job was fussy and tedious as I removed a bulb, climbed down to lower it gently onto the floor, climbed back up and down to repeat, climbed up to wrestle a new bulb into its slots, back down and up again to repeat.

But the room was brilliantly lit when I finally reached the floor, slid the expired bulbs into the empty cartons, folded the ladder, and left as clumsily laden down as I had arrived. At least the researcher thanked me, although it sounded grudging.

When I returned to the office, my sign was missing and the door was open. Jerry stood behind the counter, and gaped when he saw me in the doorway. "What

happened?”, he said. I thought I saw distress in his face, as if I were bringing in a dead body instead of a stepladder.

I explained, in brief, the urgency of the situation and the lack of alternatives.

Jerry let out a sharp sigh. “I... oh, god.” He squeezed his eyes shut, pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed. “Just, just put that stuff down.”

I returned the ladder to its closet. “Where do dead bulbs go?”

“Never mind, just put ‘em down.”

I leaned the bulb cartons against the wall near the doorframe, then turned, watched Jerry, and felt unease crawling into my stomach.

He lowered his hand and stared hard at me from across the room. “The *technicians* do that stuff, Frank. I told you that on day one. I don’t think I could’ve made that any clearer.”

“But they were all busy. I said –”

“It doesn’t matter. That’s *their* worry, not yours. Union rules, I said, remember?” Jerry rubbed the back of his neck, and his forehead crinkled. “Frank, I hate to do this, I really do, but I gotta let you go.”

The room suddenly grew cold. I couldn’t move.

“Look, if word of this ever got out... if management ever found out that this happened, and we didn’t do anything about it... they’d be all, ‘Oh! Well, if *you* don’t care if untrained, non-union people do this job, then neither do *we!* So we’ll bring some in! Gee, I wonder what *other* parts of the Collective Agreement you don’t care about?’ You see? Something like this can, can seriously undermine us at the bargaining table. It puts things at risk that we all fought hard for. We can’t just let it go.”

I stood quiet. This felt nightmarish.

“I’m really sorry, Frank. I know this doesn’t feel fair, and it sucks, I’m sorry. But I’ve got everyone else to think of.” He ran a hand back over his hair. “I... I’m gonna need your office key back.”

I shook my head, staring at my feet, and said “right” so quietly that I almost couldn’t hear it.

“Okay, then, uhh... just, uh, get your things, then.”

All I had was a book, kept in a drawer under the phone, to read during down time. The drawer sounded unnaturally loud as I opened it.

I put my key on the counter, then managed to look up at Jerry before I turned to leave. He was biting his lower lip, and his eyes were bright. “I’m sorry,” he said again, “and, and good luck to you, eh?”

Very quietly I said “thanks” and walked out, feeling as ethereal as I did when I left Bob’s Battered Old Books, months ago. I certainly hadn’t wanted to come full circle this way, and yet I was here now.

Before I left the Institute, I detoured across to the Admin Building to stop at my father’s office. Once I entered the lobby, I found that if I simply walked with purpose, as if I belonged and knew where I was going, then the receptionist paid me the scantest heed. Father’s door was open; I tapped on it as I peeked my head in.

He looked up abruptly, curiously. “Hey, man! What’s happening?”

“I, uhhh....” My voice sounded faint and faraway, even to me, as if I were talking in my sleep. “They’re sending me home. Just letting you know not to wait for me after.”

“What, are you sick? You don’t look so hot, dude.”

“No, I....”

“Do you want a lift home?”

“No no, you have work to do. I, I could do with a walk, actually. I’ll just go.”

“Okay.” He watched me dubiously. “We’ll talk later?”

I nodded. "We'll talk later." Then I slipped away.

When father got home later, we talked. I told him everything as thoroughly as I could recall.

"Ow, man," he said when my tale was complete. "Talk about your rock and hard place. I mean, it's not like I don't see their point, but this is a major drag."

Half-heartedly, I sipped at a coffee. "I must agree." After we looked around the kitchen, then back at each other, I said, "I'm also waiting for you to point out that I'm the one at fault, for going rogue."

Father shook his head. "No, man, no. You were serving the greater good, and it's on them for not recognizing that. Like, why not find some other way to censure you, that takes that into account? Dude, this is draconian."

I didn't have the energy to raise even a half-smile. "It's some small comfort to hear I'm not alone in feeling that way about it."

He shrugged. "At the same time: not my department, not my call. And even if I felt like bending Inez's ear about it, I'm pretty sure she'd say the same. Just gonna have to live to fight another day."

"Back into the breach," I said. "At least my job search routine hasn't had time to cool down, let alone grow rusty. I can get back on the horse tomorrow."

Father slurped at his mug, then said, "Y'know, man, I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to take a day to just, maybe, bind your wounds, gird your loins. And let yourself feel the sting – that part's important, too."

I nodded and sipped.

"Oh, and don't forget, dude: in times like these, your guitar is your best friend."

"I hear," I said. "And I don't intend to let myself lose sight of that again."

Twenty-Four

June 25, 1998

On Thursday evening, I took pains to appreciate the beauty of the early summer weather while I walked the long walk across town to Vera's house for a 7 p.m. appointment. After this, I'd no longer need to occupy one of these hotly-contested Working Man's Timeslots.

When she opened her door, there was a soft thump in my chest, like something pushing from within to escape. This was my first time seeing her since she suddenly, forcefully occupied the forefront of my thoughts. Was her smile of greeting larger than before? Brighter, more eager? Did her breath just catch now, at first sight of me? Or was that only what I wished? She wore a flowing, mint-green sundress, and I caught myself looking for hints of her body's curves inside it. I felt that my memories and fantasies of her paled before the power of her actuality here and now. I struggled to keep my face and greeting pleasantly non-committal. But my gaze was riveted to her hips when I followed her upstairs to her office.

Her curls caught gold from the low sunlight as she tucked her legs up inside the sundress and parked the clipboard in her lap. Then she began our session with a cheery, "So how's the new job going?"

I cleared my throat. "It has gone. Away."

She gently gaped, and her forehead tightened, as if this news actually mattered to her. "Oh, no, you're kidding." She suddenly took quick notes. "So I guess we'll be talking about this, right?" And I realized that I was, in a way, lucky to have the opportunity to discuss it with her as promptly as this.

I related the incident to her in full, as I had to my father, and she wrote frequently and interjected with a few questions. When I was done, she looked at her notes, tapped them with her marker, and breathed. And I found fascination in watching her breathe. I noticed the beauty marks on her shoulders and upper arms, and suddenly realized that they appeared in my dream just as they did here. I had been watching and remembering the minutiae of her appearance all along, without conscious awareness.

"I can only imagine what a disappointment this must be for you, after all your time and effort trying. And are you angry about this, Frank?"

I took hold of my knees, left bare by my torn-off denim shorts, and suddenly I was very aware of my own skin. “I can understand the position Jerry was put in. He did what he needed to do.”

Vera tried not to smile. “That doesn’t answer my question. I know that / would be, in your position. I’d see this as a classic example of ‘no good deed goes unpunished’, and this would go beyond frustrated for me – I’d be furious. So are you angry?”

I huffed out a breath, without meaning to. “All right. Yes.”

Her shoulders relaxed, and I found that mine did as well. “There we go. We need to get you in touch with this. Tell me more about it.”

“Yes, I’m angry. I’m bitter. I’m hurt. I did the right thing – not according to their rules, but in the larger scheme of things. I worked for the cause of good and it wasn’t acknowledged. No, not that I did it to *be* acknowledged, but I didn’t do it to be punished for it, either. It’s, it’s unfair. But I need to remind myself that life is unfair.”

“*Do* you, though?”

This brought me up short, so that I paused, and watched her face, and waited for her to go on.

“Do you need to remind yourself, when you already know? Is reminding yourself what you’re really doing? Or are you trying to get yourself back in line?”

“I, I don’t follow.”

“Isn’t what you’re doing more like:” – and here she wagged a forefinger at me – “‘Oh, no, Frank, the world isn’t fair, and everything is impermanent. You have to accept it – quietly. You can’t go around being hurt or angry about it, not even for a minute. And you can’t go around wanting differently than what you’ve got. That wouldn’t be enlightened. We can’t have you going around not being enlightened, Frank.’ Does any of that sound like something you recognize, maybe?”

“I....” And words failed me yet again.

Vera wriggled back into her seat. “I want to tell you a story. Years ago, there was this friend of Hal’s, a wonderful guy named Simon. Travel photographer, he came through these parts once in a while. And, as it happens, a very serious student of Buddhism – I think you’d appreciate that. A beautifully laid-back man, it was relaxing just to be around him. He even told me that he’d love to join a monastery, except he hated how he looked in orange.” She giggled, and she was lovely. “Anyway, this one time, Simon was giving Hal and me a lift home from the airport, which was great – Hal loved to save a buck, right? So there we are, leaving Pearson, and you know how hellacious the traffic is out that way. Hal and I are in the back seat, and Simon’s up front, and oh my god. He spends the whole time yelling at the other drivers, leaning on the horn, dropping F-bombs left and right, I thought he was gonna rip the steering wheel out, just this relentless storm of rage and profanity until we finally got off the 401.

“When I finally caught my breath, I lean forward and say, ‘Simon, this is a side of you I never saw before!’ And he calls back to me and says, ‘There are no Buddhists behind the wheel!’”

She stopped to smile in reverie, and I found myself joining her. “I never forgot that. Obviously. But it gave me a lot to think about, and eventually I found that I wanted to take it a step further: ‘There are no Buddhists.’ There are only human beings, trying to follow the teachings of Buddha. Trying, and sometimes failing.”

Finally, I said, “I see.”

“I do want you to see. I know I’ve said this before, but we’re all human. You just as much as any of us. And imperfection, and frailty, and failure, is a big part of that. Even when we know better, we blow it. We try and we fail. Bad things happen that we didn’t deserve to happen. We want things, and so we risk the pain of losing them, or never getting them. We feel anger and pain as well as joy. We feel love, even when we can’t get that love back in return. Only sometimes, if we’re very lucky, we *do* get it. And so each of us is a mess in our own way, and it’s okay that we are. It doesn’t make us less worthy. Even though we’re not perfect, no matter how bad we blow it, we’re still worthy of love, from ourselves more than anyone. And the most loving thing we can do is nurture ourselves, and not give up on ourselves. So that we keep on trying, no matter how it turns out in the end.”

I sat silent for a good minute. A rarity for me, when not alone.

“I’ve given you a lot to think about, I know.” There was an amused gleam in her eye, and for a second I wondered if, somewhere in this session, I had inadvertently given her a clue to my inappropriate thoughts about her. “Well, two weeks is a good amount of time to think, and then we’ll get you back here? Kind of unfortunate, that’s it’s easier to find a timeslot that works for you now. But I will wish you wonderful good luck, and hope that you have to call and reschedule this next one, okay?”

During the long walk home, through the elongated shadows cast by the sinking sun, I thought about accepting my imperfections and failures. About nurturing myself despite them. About my wants, and attempting to pursue them rather than transcend them.

And so I found my path diverted once I reached downtown, and once again entered Vito’s. Junior looked exactly as he had when last I saw him, as if he hadn’t moved in days. “Frankie! Hey, nice you didn’t leave it so long this time before you come back to say hi, right?”

“The pleasure is mine, Junior. Just stopping in quickly with a message for your father.”

“Oh, you want me to get him?”

I raised a hand. “No no, no need to disturb him. Just let him know that I’ll need two weeks to prepare a set. He can book me any night after that; I’ll make it work.”

Junior grinned. “Aaa, you are makin’ him a happy guy, I tell ya.”

“He’s doing likewise for me. Please let him know he can call me once he has a date in mind – I’m in the phone book under Wagner S.”

Twenty-Five

June 30, 1998

My life resumed earlier patterns. Most days, I at least made attempts to leave paperwork with potential employers, and even began to touch base with earlier contacts and follow up, to see if anything had changed. I checked the want ads in the library, but they were back to offering nothing of promise – their own subtle form of mockery. I tried to remind myself that I had found one job, so I could find another. It was not knowing how long it would take that wore at my spirits.

Some days, I found it more difficult to fend off the sense of discouragement and lethargy, but tried to walk to the library every day, if nothing else. I told myself that my frequent walks, including those with Waffles, were a form of self-care, even if I had nothing in hand to show for my efforts.

But every day, I practised my playing and singing, and spent time choosing material for a setlist. There was a little fear in the thought of returning to the stage, no matter how modest a stage, and especially of returning without Inch: the good luck charm of not only my musical performances, but of my life. However, I found some uplift in the realization that this was a mild fear, an energizing one, which could be channelled into excitement, and anticipation. This energy could help me try, and help me enjoy the trying.

A day came when I felt particularly wearied of the fight, and broody, and decided to walk to the river and sit with the peace. The sun made its presence felt that morning, and I was grateful for a thick but steady breeze making my sojourn that touch more comfortable – the afternoon threatened to be oppressively hot.

The music of clusters of children on summer vacation rang out from the swings and slide as I passed them. Not hurrying, I stepped carefully up the hill from the park, and their playful voices faded. When I looked ahead, I could see that my traditional bench was already occupied.

By one person. Whose white-blond hair glowed in the intense sunlight.

I approached the bench quietly and cautiously. When I drew closer, over the steady rush of the river, I could hear sniffing.

“Excuse me,” I said.

Inch made a little startle, sniffed louder. She lifted a hand quickly to her face, pulled it away, then turned to face me, blinking. “Uh, hey. Haircut.”

She never had much inclination to cry – I had seen it happen half a dozen times or less, in all the years I’d known her – and she never wanted me to know, but I still recognized her tells when I saw them. “I’m beginning to wonder,” I said, “if we need to start booking reservations for this bench. I’m sure I can put my hands on a wall calendar.”

Her smile was soft, barely there. “We can share it for now, if we have to.” She shifted toward one end and I sat on the other. For a moment we just looked at each other and listened to the river. Then she gestured toward my hair. “So you listened to me?”

“That’s not unprecedented, Inch.”

“Well, you still look really good.”

“Thank you. As do you.”

“Still looking for work?”

“Still looking.”

“Ah. That sucks.” She looked down at her hands, watched one rub the other.

“You’re off today?”

“Um, yeah, I, uhh... I booked today off to move.” Her voice cracked on the last word.

“Indeed. To where?”

“Oh, out by Mari and Gwyn’s place, sorta. Uh, got movers coming after lunch, but my stuff is all ready, and I didn’t feel like just hanging around the condo waiting for them. Too antsy. I needed to get out a while and....”

“And think?”

“Yeah. I mean, this is where we come to do that, right?”

“Most assuredly.” We looked at each other, then she turned to watch the river flow.

She sagged forward. “Oh god, Vogner, I fucked up. I fucked up so bad.”

I couldn't miss the change in her tone, and it brought back memories in torrents. “Even if we were to grant the truth of that, you will find that you are in good company. Such as, pretty much the entire species.”

She looked back over her shoulder at me, and I saw a crooked, feeble smile. “Always looking for that silver lining, Dalai Lama.”

“No, more like looking for a truth that might offer you some comfort. And perspective.”

“Yeah, well, looks the same from over here in the cheap seats. But I shoulda done this long before now.” A heavy sigh. “So many things I shoulda done different – I just didn't have sense enough to see at the time, y'know?”

“I might know – I'm not sure.” I paused, wondering if I was about to wander into dangerous territory. “You've... you've been living with Nicole this whole time? I mean, you've never said as much.”

Inch swallowed. “Yeah, I was. But I got a place on my own now. Nikki is... well, I was wrong. Took me a while to find out.”

There was pain deep in her eyes, and I wondered how long it had been there without me seeing. “Why didn't you tell me? When you left. Why didn't you tell me she was the reason?”

“I don't know, Vogner. I don't. I think I didn't even wanna admit to myself that's what I was doing. And, and I didn't think you'd understand. Besides, all the other shit I told you, that was all true, I meant it. At least at the time.”

“I... I might understand. So, try me. What happened?” I suspected that I already knew some of what she would tell me, if she chose to.

She sniffed and blinked, and searched my eyes. “Are you sure you wanna listen

to this? I mean, I know you never really liked to hear about her.”

“I’m ready.” And, strangely enough, I was.

She took a deep breath. “Well... well, Nikki was one of the people who interviewed me, maybe you remember. And, like, I noticed her right off. I mean, she looks good, but it wasn’t just that. She had this, this energy, this aggressive smart. Almost edgy, but not in a way I ever saw before. And I started focusing my answers at her, and she was encouraging back at me. And she made me want to work there way more than I did when I first went in, y’know?”

I nodded. “Like you didn’t really know what hit you?”

Her eyes widened. “Yeah! Yeah. And so I start working there, and we start talking every day. And I find out that yeah, she really is smart, but a different kind than you. Like she’s got a handle on life and everything, and has this like fire inside her – I dunno, she was just, just really exciting. And the gorgeous didn’t hurt.

“But then she finds out that I’m like a Rock Musician, and this wild punk rock chick in a former life, and I start feeling it back from her, like *she* thinks *I’m* edgy and exciting. And she wants to start hanging out at lunch, and asking me to tell her about shit I did, like she can’t get enough of me. And I, I dunno, it was kinda overwhelming. And so fuckin’ *nice*.”

I pondered how I might feel if I got any sort of encouraging feedback from Vera, at all. “I can see how that might be, yes.”

“Uh-huh. So we’re together more and talking more, and I’m hanging on her every word, and can hardly tear my eyes away from her when she’s not out with clients and all that. And I kept trying to tell myself that I wasn’t crazy about her, that I couldn’t be. But I couldn’t get myself to listen to me.

“And then, cuz I’m talking about my life, she starts hearing about you. And listen, Vogner, I gotta tell ya, I am... I’m ashamed of some of the shit I am gonna say, but here it is.

“So after a while, she starts feeding me these little ‘just my opinion’ things about how you have no drive, no ambition. About how pissed off she’d be about all the things you do or don’t do. And then she’s on about how you’re just a child, and

you're stuck always being one, and you're holding me back from something better, and I deserve something better."

I just nodded, but my stomach tightened as I was forcibly reminded of why Nicole rubbed me the wrong way.

"And after another while, I started listening. I dunno, I, I was so blown away by her, it was like everything she said was smarter and more important than what I said... more than it actually was, probably. And, well, you know what happened then. Like I said, I'm ashamed now. And I'm sorry. I know I haven't ever apologized to you yet about any of this, Vogner, but I'm doing it now. I don't expect you to forgive me – I dunno if you ever can. But I am sorrier than I have ever been about anything in my life, and I hope you can believe *that* much, at least. Please."

Very quietly, I said, "I do." I felt like my brain had much that it still needed to process. "But today you're moving out, so clearly things went south somehow."

"Well duh." And a feeble giggle burst from Inch, surprising us both. "At first, everything was this fuckin' magic kingdom, y'know? God, I remember when she was helping me load my bass into her car, she was all, 'ooo, this is so cool, you gotta play for me when we get home,' cuz I'm like her rockstar, right? And for a while it was like that.

"But then I'd wanna go catch a band at the King Eddie, but she doesn't wanna go cuz it's 'too loud and icky', so we stay home and watch fuckin' *Real World*. Yeah, she's 'too beat from working all day to go bouncing around downtown like a kid'. But if her friends wanna get together at some tacky cocktail lounge or some shit, she's all up for that and drags me along, too.

"And then she starts complaining when I practise my bass, cuz she's 'watching something' and she 'can't hear'."

I shook my head. "That doesn't sound right. You always practised at a very modest volume – I couldn't hear you in the next room unless the door was open."

"Well, you can't tell *her* that! So I start playing less and less til I fuckin' stop altogether. And then I start thinking, well, maybe I'll go out and catch some gig on my own, and that's some sort of *crime*, apparently, she's all offended and

pissed and I end up not going.

“I even missed that Fist Buddies gig in April cuz of her. I try telling her that playing and going to concerts is what I do, and I thought she liked that about me. And she says, ‘Hey, I love Canada’s Wonderland, but I don’t wanna live there.’ I mean, I was already turning into her without even thinking about it, looking like her, going to the gym with her –”

“You *hate* gyms!”

“*I know!* But I start thinkin’ that she isn’t gonna be happy until I am like one hundred percent her fuckin’ *clone*. Oh, and then all this time she’s been complaining about how much room the bass and amp are taking up in *her* closet. That we share. So finally, a while back she asks me how much I thought I could get if I sold them.”

I could feel my eyes widen. She watched them, then nodded slow and grim.

“Yeah. So I went off my fuckin’ tits about that, and she’s all, ‘Hey, I was just thinking out loud, what, I’m not allowed to think in my own home?’ and all that shit. And I finally got it. When you’re an uptight white business tycoon, the Punk Chick is kind of a thrill. For the first while, anyway. But when it came right down to it, she never really liked me – maybe she just liked my potential. And fuck that – I am no one’s fuckin’ potential.”

I nodded. “Indeed you are not. But, it must be said in her defense – and no, I can’t believe I am saying *that* – quite possibly she also found you gorgeous.”

Inch blushed. Which I had almost never seen. I made a point of filing the sight of it away in my memory.

“It might be that, when you walked into that interview, she found herself smitten out of nowhere. Suddenly, inexplicably, but undeniably.”

“I dunno. Maybe. I mean, I guess that can happen.”

“It can. Demonstrably,” I said.

Inch shrugged. “Even so, that’s a helluva way to run your life.” She looked at her watch, then stood. “Shit, I better go. I wanna have time to eat something before

the movers show up.” She looked down on me, and I saw hints in her eyes of things I used to see there. “Hey listen, Vogner: thank you. It feels so good to finally talk to someone about all this shit. It’s been a rough few months.”

“I imagine the atmosphere in your office has been tense, as well.”

“Yeah, and it’s gonna get worse. But nothing I can’t live through. Anyway, take care and thanks again. I’ll see ya.” And she trotted down the grassy slope.

I stood and called down after her. “Hey!”

She stopped and turned to face me.

“You didn’t give me your address!”

“Are you still at Steve’s?!”

“Yes!”

“I’ll call you once I get a phone put in!”

I waved her on and watched her go, feeling cleaner and lighter than I had in many months.

That night, the phone rang and father summoned me to come take the call. When I said hello, and heard the voice on the other end, my pulse rate shifted up one gear. It wasn’t Inch, but I knew it at once when it said, “Hello, Frank?”

“Hail and well met, Vito.”

“Sorry? Wuzzat?”

“I said, ‘Hey, Vito!’”

“Aaa, you gotta speak up for me, son. So listen: I got you booked for July eighteenth, awright? That’s a Saturday, Saturdays are always good. You can do it?”

That was well over the two weeks I requested. “That sounds capital, Vito.”

“What?”

“Perfect! I’ll be there!”

“Attaboy. You are gonna sell the place out, Frank, you just wait and see.”

“Oh, have you started charging admission?”

“What? Naa, but *you* know what I mean. Always the wise guy, heh. Thank you, Frank, this is gonna be great. So you have a good night, hah?”

“Thank *you*, Vito, and good night.” And, after we hung up, I noticed that my heart was still in high gear.

Twenty-Six

July 18, 1998

I made a concerted effort over the next two weeks not to let the upcoming gig at The Loft completely derail the rest of my life which needed attending to. I still read the want ads and, most days, walked the streets of various regions of town, but always without results. I still walked Waffles and played stick with him.

And I have a distinct memory of returning from the park one afternoon, and noticing the cardboard taped to the front door window. Father still had yet to perform or arrange a proper repair of the glass. And it occurred to me then that this was exactly the sort of thing that used to drive mother to distraction. No doubt Nicole would think even less of a display like this, were she ever to see it. It was food for thought.

A day came when Inch made good on her assertion, and called to give me her new address and phone number. Our conversation was fumbling, awkward, and brief, but functional. I was wise enough not to see it as an invitation to visit, or call. It was more that she thought it a good idea for me to have this information on hand, just in case. And that's the spirit in which I took it.

I had another appointment with Vera during that interim. She was excited to hear of my making an effort to return to the concert stage, however humbly. And even more excited about my managing to mend a fence or two with Inch. She felt I was making substantial progress, and encouraged me to take some pride in that. And when the session ended, she suggested booking our next one in four weeks as opposed to our customary two. "Unless you feel you need to see me sooner," she said. And, rather than look for some excuse to minimize the time before I could be with her again, I followed her lead and agreed to the date she chose. Because I knew that my reasons for wanting to see her had less to do with our counselling work.

I told myself I was being silly. I didn't castigate myself over it – but I also didn't let that silliness take the reins.

However, I did invest more time and effort than usual in practising, and choosing songs, and organizing them into a set. I was never what most people would consider an accomplished musician, but I felt that by now I was back in fighting trim, or as near to that as I had ever been. Technically, I was ready to do this.

I chose not to fear the possible dire consequences of attempting to appear on stage without Inch. Instead, I told myself that I would not allow her absence to deprive me of the gift of this show. I could almost hear Vera's voice saying that not having an income, or not having Inch, did not mean that I did not deserve to do this for myself. They did not make me unworthy. I had a hunch that she would also approve of the way that my musical focus kept my thoughts from wandering into daydreams of her, had she known about those. The fantasies were not stopped completely, but reduced appreciably. Baby steps.

Father remarked, with a wistful smile, how the near-constant sound of my singing and guitar reminded him of seven years ago, when I was working to build and launch Vog. Those were good times, he said. He never minded the noise, because "it was cool to have a Zen rockstar in the house". He took pleasure in my heightened energy level when I was in music mode now, and even found it somewhat contagious. If I could make a positive contribution to his environment, then so be it.

I was caught by surprise, the first time a friend stopped me in the street downtown to congratulate me on my upcoming Loft show, and tell me they planned to attend. When I asked how they had heard about it, they said it was "on Vito's sign". I was near enough to York Street to trundle over and see.

A folding, self-supporting sandwich board sign, with a chalkboard on either face of it, always stood on the sidewalk in front of Vito's. Its purpose was to announce performances in The Loft. Normally it was left blank unless there was a show upstairs that night. But now, unprecedented, there was an advance announcement chalked upon the lower half of the sign:

July 18
Frank

I walked around the sign to see the identical message on the other side. It was plain to see that Vito was unusually enthused about this performance, and I found that touching. It made me more determined to put my heart into the show.

Before I headed off, I noticed a homeless man sitting on the ground outside of Vito's, his back against the gray stone wall, a frayed hat resting upside down on the sidewalk beside him. I still possessed a large percentage of what I had

earned during my few weeks at the Institute: most in the bank, but some in my pocket. I found a loonie and dropped it in the hat. The man looked around, bleary but startled, as if he didn't see me and couldn't fathom what that clinking sound was or what might have caused it.

A few doors down the street sat a busker with an acoustic guitar and a hardshell guitar case beside him. I tossed a second loonie in the case and received a nod of thanks.

On the night of the eighteenth, I sat in what Vito insisted on calling "the dressing room", a cramped closet at the rear of The Loft where musical artists waited to make their entrance. It had a wooden chair, and a window, and blessing of blessings a window fan, which I sat an inch away from. The main room of The Loft was surprisingly well ventilated, with larger fans near the larger windows keeping the venue not cool, but reasonably refreshed. Back here, though, the July heat pressed in on me from every side. I sipped at the complimentary Labatt's Blue which Vito provided to musicians, and found it warming more quickly than I wished. But warm beer backstage is a fact of life in the trenches of rock, and thus I felt archetypal.

I fiddled with my guitar, detuning and retuning it, just to occupy myself. I felt my shirt pocket to ensure my brass slide was still there. I tapped my feet. I was nervous, as I had been every time I ever prepared to face an audience. But years of experience made this a familiar nervous, and as always I reframed it to myself as a good nervous: it would keep me alert, and attentive, and in the moment. It meant that I still cared.

I could hear Vito's boombox playing, out in the main room. He liked to use it for intermission music before and after sets, his choices of tapes always idiosyncratic. Tonight I was tickled to hear him playing Tony Bennett.

A part of me kept thinking of how serene it would be, if this were a Doughty Swains gig, and Inch were playing with me. I believed I could do this tonight, but it would never be the same.

Every few minutes I eased the door open a crack, to peer out at the gathering audience. I was too taken aback by what I saw to fully enjoy it. The Loft had only a few tables, and a maximum capacity of about fifteen, maybe twenty if Vito

brought in a few folding chairs. But this....

Each table was provided with extra folding chairs, and each chair was occupied. In addition, the walls were lined with people sitting on the floor, many of them nursing bottles of Blue. My guess was fifty, perhaps sixty people. I was reasonably certain that a gathering of this size in this locale was a violation of bylaws. I was also reasonably certain that I wasn't going to report Vito to Town Hall.

From where I sat, I was watching the audience from behind. They were all turned to face the lone chair at the front of The Loft, where I would sit for my show. But a few people, those I knew well, I could recognize even from the rear. Mitch and Dougie at one table. A young woman with long dark hair sat with them. When she turned her head enough for me to see her magazine-pretty profile, I deduced that she most likely was Natalie. So they were still together: a good omen.

Mike and Zoe sat at another table, crowded in with Peter and Effie. Near the back, Bob and Trevor. Mari and Gwyn over there. Off to the side was my father – it seemed no one wished to sit with him, but they raided his table of its other chairs.

I didn't see Inch.

Would her presence have surprised me more than her absence? I didn't know.

The door opened wider and Vito looked in on me. Speaking low, he said, "Looks like they stopped coming. You can start any time. Break a leg, hah?" Then he gave me a wink full of lines and slipped away.

I stood up. Took a deep breath. Brushed off the seat of my shorts. Took hold of my guitar just below the headstock. Picked up the beer in my other hand. And made myself take that first step out. The boombox clicked off.

It was tradition at The Loft that no announcements were made. The artist simply emerged without fanfare, wove through the audience to the front, and began. They were free to introduce themselves if they so desired. Once people first noticed that I was in the room, sidling between them, a scattering of applause

began before I even reached my seat. Approaching the chair waiting in the brighter light felt like a weird melange of strange and familiar. I had done this a number of times before, but never alone.

And yet I wasn't alone. I was surrounded by old friends. I felt warm, and not just from the summer air.

When I sat, and looked out at the crowded room, the applause grew full, and lingered. In the back corner, Vito sat beside the beer cooler, arms folded, looking inordinately self-satisfied. I briefly licked my lip, then smiled.

"Welcome, Westgaters old and new. It's, uh, been a while. I'm thankful to be back, and thankful you're back with me." Scattered clapping. I brushed back imaginary hair off my shoulder. "For the first time ever on stage, you are witness to... the Streamlined Frank Experience." That got chuckles. "That will be the name of my next band." That got laughter. And I relaxed, and felt myself easing into place.

I moved my fingers into position on my guitar. "Every gig I've ever played, I've opened with a Kurt Cobain composition. It's always brought me luck, and ergo I see no reason to risk stopping now. This is 'All Apologies'."

Many in the audience applauded as soon as the name was announced, but the sound faded away as I began playing. This was one that Inch and I used to play, and I missed hearing her bass beside me, but soon I was lost in the song, and the moment enveloped me.

Halfway through it, I caught movement from the corner of my eye, turned slightly toward it. Inch came in the door, squeezed between tables. I stumbled over a word in the lyrics, but caught myself and settled back in, while still observing her. My father waved to her, and only then did I see that he had, in fact, held onto one of the chairs at his table, for her. She and Dougie nodded briefly as she passed his table, and her expression looked uncomfortable, conspicuous.

I kept singing and playing, and finished the song. There were cheers amid the clapping. "We now have Kurt's blessing. An evening filled with *joie de vivre* is guaranteed for us all."

I took a quick sip of my beer, and realized that I found it easier to address the audience if I pretended she wasn't there. "I've been exploring numerous

avenues since last you heard me,” I said, “and this next one is new. To me – it actually dates back to before I was born.” And I started into Brownie McGhee’s “Walk On”. Once I sang the first two words, I heard hoots of approval from Bob and Trevor’s table. I took a short instrumental break in the middle for some fingerpicking. Not as fluent as Bob, certainly nowhere near as accomplished as his friend Karl, but I played in the correct key, and kept the momentum going, and it worked. And it got applause at the end.

Up next was “a Doughty Swains original that some of you may still remember, called ‘Be Here Now’. I hope you also still remember that we performed this number long before Oasis stole that title from us. So, fie upon thee, Noel Gallagher! Fie, I say!” A quick glance at Inch before I started playing. She wasn’t laughing, as a few others were at that moment, but she had a pleased glow about her.

And it was during that song that I fell deeply into my personal groove, the altered consciousness that made performing worthwhile for me. I felt so peaceful yet so vital. This was my home. How could I have neglected this desire for so long?

Another Cobain cover, “Aneurysm”. Followed by “On a Nerve”, which got cheers of recognition from the old Vog fans in the room. It felt like a very different animal from when the full band used to bring it to life with an awesome roar, but it was one of the first of my songs I was content with back then. And I was still content with it now.

Dipping into Vog’s repertoire suddenly inspired me to go off script. The mood of this gathering was more akin to a group of friends in a large living room than a proper concert. There was a spontaneity in the air that made me feel I was rediscovering myself.

And so I called across: “Mitch!” He perked up with a quick grin. “Any chance I can twist your arm to come up here and do ‘Moga’ with me?” He burst out laughing at that, and some others in the crowd burst into applause. “Can’t do it without your voice, sir – it needs those harmonies.”

People started clapping along with a rhythmic chant of “Mitch! Mitch! Mitch!” til he finally stood, shaking his head, and slunk up to my chair while the applause swelled to full force.

I gestured toward him. “No need to introduce Mitch Sano, as surely we are all

Ikiru fans here.” The cheers grew louder still as Mitch leaned against the wall beside me.

“You’re nuts,” he said to me, still laughing.

I looked up at him from my chair. “As you well knew long before this.”

When I started playing the intro riff, fresh cheers erupted. “Moga” was always the most popular of Vog’s songs, one of our few originals to be composed by Mitch instead of myself, and also one of my personal favourites. It was a paean to the rebellious high energy of a blonde punk girl we both knew. Of course we were unrehearsed and ragged, but we had fun and so did our listeners, and the song went over well.

I chose my setlist for this evening to treat and salute the friends I hoped would attend. There was another blues for Bob, “Trouble in Mind”, played as he taught it to me from Lightnin’ Hopkins’ record. It was a chance to break out my slide for some primitive but apropos punctuations. Then The Saints’ “Messin’ with the Kid”, which got claps and a cry of “Yeah!” from Mike, who first lent me the album from which I learned it.

Next, a change of pace. I played a pretty chord sequence, very gratifying, and sang:

I left my heart, in San Francisco

which got surprised laughter from the room, and loud clapping from Vito in the back corner. But I stopped dead, and called back, “Sorry, Vito, that’s all I know!” Everyone laughed louder, and applauded, and over them Vito retorted with a jovial, “Learn the rest of it, dammit!”

I let the laughs and applause die down, and looked around the room in silence. But life roared inside me then, and I didn’t want this night to end. I would never shunt this part of me away again.

“My deepest thanks, all of you. You’ve been far kinder than I deserve.... Um, I don’t know if he wants this to be made public knowledge, and, as it happens, I don’t care, but: my father is here tonight.” I pointed at him; he grinned sheepishly, and there were scattered claps. “He always was, and remains, one of my staunchest supporters. He always encouraged me and believed in me,

and I need to thank him for that. He raised me on music, and I'm going to wrap up with a few of those songs now. Thank you, father; thank you, everyone."

Applause as I launched into Neil Young's "Are You Ready for the Country", another chance to play some punk slide guitar. "You Can Close Your Eyes" by James Taylor, which put the crowd into a thoughtful mood. And then my finale.

There was clapping, and soft cheers of recognition, as I started playing Cat Stevens' "Wild World". And without realizing it, I began playing it directly to Inch. I almost forgot anyone else was in the room. Our eyes locked, and I felt wrenched inside:

*But if you wanna leave, take good care
Hope you have a lot of nice things to wear
But then a lot of nice things turn bad out there*

Inch started to wipe her eyes, and I had to close mine in order to focus on delivering the first chorus. I chose the song simply because I liked it, and it held pleasant memories of my childhood. The aptness of its lyrics came almost as a shock to me tonight.

I finished it to prolonged cheers and applause, which I acknowledged with a simple bow. Then I stood and prepared to carry my guitar back into the dressing room. But, just as they did for Mitch, the audience started clapping, and chanting "Frank! Frank! Frank!", some even pounding their feet.

Over the din, I called back to Vito, "Am I allowed to do an encore?"

"I'll cuff ya 'cross the mouth if ya *don't!*"

Smiling and shaking my head, I returned to the performance chair and sat. The chanting stopped and the clapping rhythm turned to tumbling applause, then faded out.

"Very well, one more." I positioned my hands. "But I haven't practised this one, so, seatbelt time: a rough road lies ahead." I thought for a second, then: "This gives me a chance to show you my favourite chord." Which I played, and as I let it ring, I heard my father clap.

And I ended my set with "Out in the Country", the way father taught me from his

Three Dog Night record, but more rough-hewn. I finished to fresh applause and said, "That is truly all I've got. Time for you all to go get another brew." And my friends stood and surrounded my chair with their congratulations. It felt like a homecoming, one I had long sought without always being aware.

Twenty-Seven

July 18, 1998

Many of those present at The Loft were reluctant to leave. They stayed, and bought more beers, and conversed with me and with each other, and Tony Bennett played in the background, and it felt even more like a party in a large living room. But, gradually, people filtered away, making their goodbyes, and I felt a responsibility to wait and acknowledge each one.

At last, no one remained but me, and Inch, and Vito, who urged us on. “C’mon, kids, lemme pack up and go catch the late show.” He came closer and rested a hand on my shoulder. “Wha’d I tell ya, hah, Frank? Was that a terrific show or what? You’re a good boy, and you’re gonna come back soon, right? Good, now get outa here.”

Over the clamour of our footsteps in the stuffy, echoing stairwell, Inch said, “Can we talk?”

“As you wish,” I said, and reached above her head to hold the door open for her. “I’m in no hurry to be anywhere.”

People filed away from Vito’s in various directions, singles, couples, small groups, their voices carrying and sounding close in the thick stillness of the summer night. A few restaurants and cafés had lit windows, the patrons inside clearly visible. The older places without air conditioning let the sounds of talk and laughter and music fill the street through their open doors. “Where to?” I said.

Inch shrugged, turned north and started walking. I followed, my guitar case brushing my legs now and then. The streetlights made her hair blue-white when she walked beneath them, made the hem of her loose T-shirt cast a long shadow. Our first few steps were made in silence, and I knew her well enough to wait.

“You did great tonight, Vogner. Really great. Glad I came.”

“Me, too.”

She looked up at me. “I wasn’t sure if I should. I mean, I knew I wanted to, but I didn’t know if it would be smart. I guess I was afraid to – and that’s after me

telling *you* not to be afraid of *me*, yeah? Geez.... anyway, I even called Steve and asked him what he thought. And he said, 'If *you* come, it won't matter if anyone else does.'

"He can be quite astute. And, on occasion, quite other. As my mother would be the first to tell you."

"Anyway, I'm glad I listened to him."

"And I'm sure he was glad you called. He's told me he misses you."

Inch gave a short, gentle laugh. "Yeah, he said that to me, too. I, I didn't know what to say back, to that..." We fell silent for a while, then, and I let her lead, turning when she turned. I got the impression that we weren't aimlessly wandering.

When we passed the transition from downtown into residential streets, I said, "I don't know if you could tell, but I felt rather naked up there. Many a time I found myself thinking how much better this would sound with a bass." I glanced down at her pointedly.

She snickered. "Bullshit artist. You did great up there on your own – you rocked it all. You, you definitely didn't need me up there."

"Let's just say that's a matter for some debate." By this time, night was upon us in full, and I realized that Inch was steering us toward West River Park. The swings and slide were deserted, and the pair of lampposts near them cast only the feeblest light up the slope toward the bench. The entire area was deserted but for us, the only sounds the long rushing of the river and the hidden throngs of crickets. Out here, the stars appeared more numerous, and brighter. Across the river, near the barely visible treetops, the crescent moon hung low.

I leaned my guitar case against the back of the bench, and we sat down, a ways apart, and looked over at the moon, and listened. How often we had done this in years gone by, but closer together then. I waited for her to be ready to speak again, to tell me her reason for bringing us here. Taking quiet pleasure in her presence while I waited.

When at last she spoke, her voice cracked for a second. "So, I've had a lot of time to think, this last while. Spending more time alone."

“Do you like your new apartment?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s great. Not as new as Nikki’s place, but it’s comfy, and has enough room. And everything works, and there’s no funky Mystery Stink like some places I could mention.”

“Ah yes, the Mystery Stink. You know they’ve renovated that building now; they most likely tore out the Mystery Stink and replaced it with some new plastic smell.”

“You don’t think they woulda preserved The Stink for posterity? Like a historical landmark or some shit?” That actually got me to laugh. “Anyway, like I said, I’ve been thinking. And I know I dumped a lotta shit on you last time we were here, but... but I guess I wasn’t really finished.”

“You know that my ears are yours whenever you want them.”

Inch took a deep breath, rolled one shoulder, then looked up at me. I could barely make out her blinking, in this dim light. “Anyway, like I said, I’m sorry that I let Nikki turn me against you like she did. She was saying all this bullshit about you, and I was a fuckin’ idiot to ever pay any attention to it.”

I interjected. “I... I ought to tell you that I have been thinking about that as well, this past while. And it occurs to me that, on some level, some of what she said were things you already thought, deep down. If they were complete fabrications, they wouldn’t have resonated with you. She was picking up on problems we had, and amplifying them for you, painting them in harsher colours. But it wasn’t *completely* bullshit.”

She shook her head. “No. No, that’s not it – I never thought that way about you.”

“Perhaps you did, deep down, just a little. Perhaps you didn’t want to. You know it goes against my grain to say that Nicole was right about anything – especially about me, when she never knew me – but it’s possible that there were at least grains of truth in some of what she said.”

She sniffed, but said nothing.

“If you sit with it a while, you might see. / needed to sit with it a while.”

“But that’s still not it, Vogner, I.... She was trying so hard to make you sound like a waste. A loser. But she was trying so hard to make me into a Little Nikki, too. And like she woulda liked you better if *you* were one. And I don’t think she actually liked anything about me, the *real* me.”

She took a deep, unsteady breath. “This last while, all I can keep thinking about is how you always, *always* accepted me for exactly who I am. You always *encouraged* me to be who I am.”

“How could I ever want you to be anything but who you are?”

Inch sniffled again. “I mean, god... even when I started this job, and changed how I look, and how I, I act... it’s like you could see me wanting to be different. And you accepted who I wanted to be, along with who I am. You never complained about it, once. You never tried to talk me out of it.”

I just shrugged.

“And so now I’m like, okay, so yeah you leave your laundry laying around. And sometimes you blow off doing the dishes, and yeah that sucks. And so you don’t have a business degree like your brother. But you never tried to change me. You always took me just as I am, and you were good with that. And fuck, how much more is that worth? How could I just chuck that away? I was a fuckin’ idiot!”

Softly I said, “No no. We’re all just human.” She wiped her eye. Inside, I braced myself. “Remember on the way over here, when you said I didn’t need you?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Regardless of whether or not that’s true... I want you. Not just in my band – in my life.”

Very quietly, she said, “What?”

“I want you, Inch.”

She made a sudden soft sound, perhaps a cough, perhaps a sob. “What, *now?* *Still?* After ev-everything I did?”

“I wanted you long before the first time I ever told you. And I’ve never stopped.”

She burst into tears, then, unrestrained, loud in the night. Slumped forward and covered her face with her hands. I slid along the bench to her, wrapped my arms around her, cuddled her head to my chest, and rested my chin on her hair. Suddenly I felt as if a brilliant surgeon had just reattached a missing limb. I held her, and felt her tremble, and listened to her weep. As long as she needed.

Her voice was wet, muffled against my body. “Even though – I mean, how can you even trust me now? I, I dunno if I can ever trust me anymore.”

“Inch, I... I know your intentions are good. And I know how we can get swept away by, by life. All we can do is deal with things when they come. Things will happen, and things will change. We know that. We can expect it. But we don’t fear it: we live in the moment. When the moment changes, we change with it.”

Inch’s sobs settled. Face still against my chest, she said, “Fuckin’ Dalai Lama.”

I stroked her hair. “And yet you accept that about me. You have for years.” I kissed the top of her head – it was done before I even realized.

She pulled back a bit, wiped her eyes, looked up at me. “Yeah, I have. And I do.”

We kissed in the dim moonlight.

Our very first kiss, also on a summer night years ago, was much the same as this one. In retrospect, neither of us could say who made the first move; it was as if it happened all on its own. And it was quickly followed by more, and pulling tightly together, and hands wandering slow and far, and a sense of timelessness and space. But where that first kiss blazed with discovery, this one glowed with returning.

At last our mouths broke apart, although not far, and we breathed. Inch said, “So, so what are we doing?”

I blinked. “Aren’t we kissing?”

She pushed a thumb into my ribs. “C’mon. I mean, are we making up? Getting back together? Starting over? What?”

“Well... I said I want you in my life.”

“Me, too.”

“And so, I hope we are putting ourselves back in each other’s lives. Somehow.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve always been sure.”

This time, she definitely kissed me first. “Good. But how?” She licked her lips, then said, “Well okay, you still don’t have a place. But I do. So you could maybe.... hmm?”

I sighed. “Actually, I don’t think so.”

Her arms relaxed enough to let us sit an inch or two farther apart. “No? Too fast? You think I’m like snagging you on the rebound or some shit?”

“No, I know you better than that.”

“So, like, what?”

I rubbed between my eyebrows. “As I said, I’ve been giving this – giving *us* – some thought. More than just ‘some’. And it occurs to me that, right now, you are living on your own for the first time. It, it might be good for you to try it a while longer.”

“But –”

“And I still never have. Not counting the Ambassador – I mean a place that I bear some responsibility for. I’m wondering if we pushed too fast last time. I mean... our domestic situation was the source of most of our friction, when you think about it. It might be best for me to get some experience living on my own. Help me grow. Make me a better housemate.”

“Huh. Well, under the circumstances, that could take a while.”

“It could. But we don’t need to be sharing the same roof to be ‘together’ in that sense. For a while, at least.”

“So then what? We go back to, like, dating?”

“If you like. Just as long as I’m with you when I can be. We can work these things out as we go along. It doesn’t all need to be set in stone tonight.”

Inch pulled me a bit closer and rested her head on my shoulder. “But you’d still come over to my place sometimes, at least?”

“Of course. I’m not suggesting that I should be forbidden to even enter. And, even now, you could come over, as well. For a traditional Wednesday night dinner, perhaps. Father misses you. So does Waffles.”

“Does he?”

“Indeed. He said as much, just the other day. It sounded like ‘whuff’, but I knew what he meant.”

“Ah yeah, the Dalai Lama is fluent in dog.” I felt the tip of her nose nuzzling my neck. “And... and you’re old enough now that you should be allowed to stay overnight sometimes.”

“Ah yes. Slumber parties. Pillow fights and smores.”

“Yep, lotsa those.” A moment of quiet, where I cuddled my cheek on her hair. Simply to smell her again was a blessing. And then she snickered.

“What?”

“I was just remembering a time I snuck you into those bushes over there and sucked you off.” Then a giggle.

“Aha. I can remember more than one such time, actually.”

I felt her move her face to look up at me, and I moved to return her gaze. “I still remember how.” There was enough light for me to make out her teeth in her grin.

“I have no doubt that you do.”

She squirmed even closer against me. “Want me to prove it?”

My heart jumped, and I could feel hers against me. “That depends. Will you allow me the opportunity to prove that I, too, remember how to do some things?”

She leaned up for a quick kiss, then said, “Yeah, I will.” She stood, urged me to my feet, and pulled me toward the darkness of the brush. But not before I snatched up my guitar – I didn’t want it out of my sight, even for this.

Perhaps it’s the heat of youth that allows us to shrug off such things, but I had no memory of the bugs in those bushes being as execrable as they were that night. Not even thirty yet, but already older and wiser.

Twenty-Eight

July 31, 1998

Over the next couple of weeks, many things didn't change, but, in a sense, everything did. My job hunt continued, with dogged and nigh-infinite patience. Even without a gig in the offing, I practised my guitar regularly, giving some thought to a new setlist for my next Loft appearance. I asked my father about getting the front door window repaired, and he said, "Ohhh, yeah, yeah man, I should."

And I got together with Inch essentially every evening, and we hung, just as we did before. Things between us quickly felt so familiar, it was easy to forget that our separation ever happened. She'd treat me to coffee at The Wien, or a beer at the King Eddie. When I fluttered about mooching off of her, she waved me off, quietly but firmly. "When you get a job, then you can treat me back. Until then, however long that is, well, it is what it is, Vogner. See? I can do Dalai Lama, too!"

To which I nodded and said, "I have taught you well, grasshopper. Perhaps *too* well."

We window-shopped, wandered the streets, wandered the park. We talked and talked. Other times we walked in the most companionable silence I ever knew. To conclude the evenings, I'd walk her home. Sometimes she invited me in for coffee. But not always: she was aware of when she was tired and had work in the morning. She remembered to care for herself, and mostly without my reminding her. There was no anxiety or desperation, no urgency when we remembered that we had time. Time enough for everything.

She offered me a key to her apartment, but I declined. That was how things started last time, how we slipped into things too quickly, and I was still wary. She tried to respect my wishes, but let me know she was holding that offer open indefinitely.

On a Tuesday, I asked my father about inviting Inch for dinner the following night, and he thought that rocked. He insisted there would be rotini, to give her something familiar to help orient herself.

When Inch arrived, father made the effort to be extra-laid-back, extra-smooth, and extra-cool. He greeted her as if she were returned from vacation, absent for only the most innocuous of reasons, and with congenial tales to tell. She relaxed quickly in his presence, as almost all folks did, and they made up for lost time with impressive ease. And not once did he even hint at anything like ‘How could you break my son’s heart the way you did? How could you be such a bitch?’ – had mother been present, there would have been substantial risk of that. My father may have been something of a sloven, at least in the eyes of some, but he remained the coolest guy in town.

We were just settling at the table when the phone rang. Father stood to answer it, listened, said, “Hang on, please,” then offered the receiver to me with a shrug.

After I said hello, the voice on the other end was familiar, but I couldn’t immediately place it. “Hi, Frank? It’s Mari. Takamura?”

“Mari?” When I said that, father and Inch turned to look at me, Inch’s eyes wide. “Um, to what do I owe this honour?”

“I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time, am I?”

“N-nothing that can’t wait for a moment. What can I do for you?”

“I’m actually calling from work now. Listen: are you free to come here on Friday morning and talk to Fred?”

“Wha – yes. Yes, of course. Any time. This is about, um...?”

“A job opening, yep.” I could hear the smile in her voice. “I’ll put you down for ten, okay? Fred’ll be done his coffee by then and be in a good mood. So okay, see you at ten on Friday. And listen, Frank? Don’t worry.”

“I’ll do my best. Good night and thank you.”

We hung up, and Inch said, “So what did *she* want?”

“I...” I looked at both of them in a mild daze. “There’s a job coming open at Calder’s.”

Inch said, “Oh my god.” Father said, “Fingers crossed, dude.” Waffles made wet,

gobbling noises in his dish.

I showed up at Calder's shortly before ten on Friday, in my suit and tie. Sweating from being overdressed for the heat. Once I got inside the front door, and felt the blessing of the store's air conditioning, I paused and looked around me, trying to get my bearings. A door opened in a back corner and Mari waved at me from it, then beckoned. She wore a maroon uniform, like the ones I saw on the cashiers I walked past.

I stepped into a small office, where filing cabinets and a desk barely left room for two people to stand. Mari managed to take a step back from me, and eyed me up and down. "Wow, don't you carry yourself well? So hey, what are you doing after this?" She giggled, and flashed me one of Westgate's prettiest smiles.

"Um, that remains to be seen, but I am sure to be doing something."

She giggled again. "Just kidding. I heard. You and Inch are back, everyone says. That's good, I'm, I'm real happy for you guys."

"So, so what should I be expecting here?"

"The truth? Expect to start working here, the week after next."

I gaped. "Is this more kidding?"

"Nuh-uh. I already told Fred he should hire you. He just wants to gab a sec to make sure you aren't actually literally unbearable."

"You.... Can you do that?"

"Kinda-sorta? Well, here: I haven't seen you in a bit, so you don't know. Doris retired a little while ago and I got made Floor Manager. So when Greg handed his notice in, it was up to me to look through everyone on file, see if we had anyone good to fill the position. I picked you. And Fred trusts my judgment. He doesn't wanna waste time seeing a lot of people if he doesn't need to."

"I see." I rubbed the back of my neck. "So, this comes of having friends in high places."

“No, Frank, it’s not just cuz I know you. I mean, I know a lot of the guys we have on file there. And most of them, I wouldn’t even want in here as customers, never mind on staff. It actually helps that you’re a bit older than most of who we have on the floor now. I know you. I know you would do a good job. You have experience. And you’d be a good, steadying influence on the others – you’ve been that for *me*, more than once. I think you’d bring a, a serene vibe to the store. Like a bit of Zen, y’know?”

“Hm. I never foresaw Zen being a marketable skill.”

“Yeah, well, life is full of surprises.”

“An everlasting truth. So... would this mean you’d be my boss?”

“Ish. More like your senior. I mean, I can’t hire or fire you – that’s Fred. But I can kinda tell you what to do.”

“Well... I can assure you that I will do it.”

“And I know you will. I wouldn’t’ve put your name out there otherwise.” Mari glanced at her desk. “And now it’s gone ten.” She walked to another door at the rear of the office. “Want me to announce you to Fred?”

“If you please.”

Just before she knocked, she stage-whispered, “Breathe. Relax. You got this.”

The interview went as Mari predicted. It lasted perhaps five minutes, most of which was spent talking baseball with Fred. I wasn’t a rabid fan, but I followed it enough that I could offer informed opinions and insights, and convince him that I was Okay. He told me I started on the Monday after the long weekend. Then he briskly hustled me out – perhaps he felt another coffee coming on.

I was almost afraid to allow myself to celebrate; the sudden reversals of fortune at my last job were still rather fresh in my mind. But I had a feeling that this new environment didn’t hide as many trip wires, and I told myself to relax. Let the future bring what it would, and savour today’s success today.

The first thing I did when I returned home, besides pet Waffles and give him a snack, was phone Inch's apartment and leave a message that, in the near future, I could start buying the drinks. In the afternoon I rested, listening to albums and practising. I greeted father after work with the news, whereupon of course he immediately proclaimed pizza. And as we ate that pizza, we discussed my future.

"You're gonna need a bunch more white shirts, man," he said. "In a place like that, they want you to assume The Look, right?"

"I can manage that."

"And I know I just said this not too long ago, but: you don't wanna go rushing back to the hotel, dude. Sit here a bit longer, save up, and get yourself a nice pad."

I swallowed and nodded. "I do look forward to a proper place of my own."

"For sure, for sure. And take your time – save up *a lot*, for somewhere really good. Someplace you could bring somebody back to."

"As it happens, that does figure into my plans, at some point."

"Right on. But like I said, slow and steady. You don't wanna hurry things. I mean, remember, Waffles'll miss you when the time comes."

"Will he?"

"You know it, man."

Just then, a knock came at the front door, and Waffles trotted over to it, wagging. I walked across and opened it, and, lo and behold, there was Inch, unannounced but not unwelcome. Waffles insisted on forcing his head beneath her hand, whereupon she absently scratched and patted.

"Get your shoes, Vogner. We're going out celebrating."

"When you're with me, I'm already celebrating."

“Bullshit artist,” she said. But oh, the smile she wore while she said it.