

WRITER ON THE STORM

by

Thomas L. Conn

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Lauren Bauer Advisor
12.8.11 Date Approved

Paul G. Von Member
12/8/11 Date Approved
Bon Putz Member
12/8/11 Date Approved

PROVOST
AND VICE CHANCELLOR

Luc R. Ann
12/12/2011
Date Approved

FORMAT APPROVAL

Wanda Haddock
11/21/11
Date Approved

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INTRODUCTION: *WRITER ON THE STORM*

When I set out to write *Writer on the Storm*, I stumbled on Plato's concept of artistic imitation, which he outlines in *Republic*. He states, "And so if the tragic poet is an imitator, he too is thrice removed from the king and from the truth; and so are all other imitators" (31). I experimented with many different styles and voices, and I originally was fascinated with Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and transgressive fiction; however, I quickly learned that I did not possess the desire needed to write the violent, sexual, and nihilistic content required of a transgressive fiction piece. Therefore, I sought something else, and that is when I came upon dirty realism. I wanted *Writer on the Storm* to depict real struggles in our real world, and I found the styles of Charles Bukowski, Hunter S. Thompson, and Ernest Hemingway inspiring. However, I tried to mold my protagonist, Jake Fish, into Bukowski's Henry Chinaski or Thompson's Raoul Duke from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Finally, I returned to Francine Prose's guidance which states:

In the ongoing process of becoming a writer, I read and reread the authors I most loved. I read for pleasure, first, but also more analytically, conscious of style, of diction, of how sentences were formed and information was being conveyed, how the writer was structuring plot, creating characters, employing detail and dialogue. And as I wrote, I discovered that writing, like reading, was done one word at a time, one punctuation mark at a time. It required what a friend calls "putting every word on trial for its line": changing an adjective,

cutting a phrase, removing a comma, and putting the comma back in. (3)

Prose's advice instructs writers to read other works and to understand the structures that other authors use; however, by focusing too much on structure and style, I began imitating without end to ensure *Writer on the Storm* was a dirty realist story and thus I realized that I imitated their style as well as their themes. I had not even found my own story yet, but the texts already confined me.

The pitfalls of imitation were not my only obstacle when starting to write; I grappled with my transgressive fiction and dirty realism for a long time—I have worked on and evolved the character of Jake Fish for two and a half years—before deciding what *Writer on the Storm* was to be. The fiction I read for entertainment often times does not coincide with the academic definition of *literary*. John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, explains that “it is common to find teachers indifferent to the kinds of poetry and fiction that go most directly for those values we associate with simple entertainment...the cause is the sensitive reader's too frequent experience with disappointment” (40). I found myself indeed disappointed because I wanted my story to resonate with others, to linger with readers and teach them of our society without shocking or disgusting them. A few of my earlier stories from creative writing courses had done this because I have always enjoyed controversial material that rejects the status-quo on all levels. Therefore, I chose to write *Writer on the Storm* within dirty realism because it maintains the edge I have wanted while also tempering itself, which allows other readers to bond with it.

By finding my reasoning for writing and becoming aware of my imitation, I

was able to settle on a topic I have researched extensively: Marxist attitudes within society. I did not immediately go to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *The Communist Manifesto* or Marx's *Capital* for inspiration. Instead, I searched through many books on writing craft to somehow enhance my topic into a creative entity instead of the metaphysical, ideological views I hold. Finally, I came across a page from Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, which states:

Now I would like to explore a different dichotomy – between art and money... This is where the writer finds herself squeezed between the rock of artistry and the hard place of having to pay rent. Should a writer write for money? And if not for money, then for what? What intentions are valid, what motivations pass muster? Where to draw the line between artistic integrity and net worth? To what, or to whom, should the writer's efforts be dedicated? (62-63)

Because of Atwood, I questioned the motivations of writers in relation to money and chose that relationship as *Writer on the Storm*'s main theme. The notion that Atwood has to mention money in a book on writing craft disturbed me. From that thought, I knew I wanted to explore and satirize the American Dream. Money is humanity's essence and the definition of the American Dream, and that dream has consequently changed the definition of subsistence living. Instead of surviving through one's labor, the American Dream has cornered us and created material being dependent upon money to live lives that capitalism glamorizes, or as Marx explains:

We have seen the development of the capitalist mode of production and of the

productive power of labor—at once the cause and effect of accumulation—enables the capitalist, with the same outlay for variable capital, to set in action more labour by greater exploitation (extensive or intensive) of each individual labour power. We have further seen that the capitalist buys with the same capital a greater mass of labour power, as he progressively replaces skilled labourers by less skilled, mature labour power by immature, male by female, that of adults by that of young persons or children. (*Capital* 314-15).

Aside from the outdated rhetoric at the end of this passage, Marx explains the emotions I saw when reading the Atwood passage. Writing transitioned from the artistic realm to a financial institution. Capitalism thus began inserting ideas into writer's minds, and those authors became commodities. This is what I hoped to depict with *Writer on the Storm*. Atwood reflects my sentiment, stating:

Already you may be thinking it's perhaps a little vulgar of me to have brought this up—this money business. I'm thinking it myself, since, for my generation—penny-pinchers though we were—talking about money was right down there with talking about your dirty laundry. But times have changed, and dirty laundry is now a salable commodity or else an installation in a cutting-edge gallery, so although you may be thinking this is vulgar, you may also be thinking it's direct and honest—indeed, almost respectable—for isn't money now the measure of all things? (63)

Therefore, I wrote a novella depicting this “dirty laundry” concept because it captures the metaphysical properties of capitalist-style subsistence, and it shows how

destructive money and labor can be on a writer as Jake Fish struggles with whether he is an individual or a commodity.

Moreover, I decided my novella would revolve around the American Dream because I, like many others, strive to become wealthy enough to live happily; therefore, the underlying themes of *Writer on the Storm* reflect the writer's struggle with surviving as a person and a creator. Economics controls life; I felt it was pertinent to set my story in Los Angeles because it symbolizes the American Dream for many people. Above all the ontological themes, *Writer on the Storm* has love, loss, depression, and a plethora of emotions and feelings I have pulled from reality. Bukowski was happiest drinking boilemakers and observing the world around him while Henry Miller loved to lie around ranting and contemplating the state of the world. They had much to say and I felt I could add to the discourse.

Once I chose to satirize the American Dream, I needed to find the connection between the American Dream and dirty realism. I examined various dirty realist texts for patterns of satirical style to augment my attempt at satire but eschewing imitation. I gravitated toward Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, Hemingway's *Torrents of Spring*, Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and Bukowski's *Factotum* and his short stories. I needed to primarily find the metaphysical properties of the less wealthy or the Marxist proletariat; therefore, I consulted Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious* to understand textual individualism. Jameson asserts:

[B]y definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived then necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the

voice of the hegemonic class, they cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the winds, or reappropriated in their turn by the turn by the hegemonic culture. (85)

Jameson's explanation emphasizes the need for an individual text, which causes a "polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes" (85). This applies to dirty realism because the characters are from the oppressed class and they search for their dialogical position. The use of satire is the proletarian voice builds a textual individualism because it deconstructs the oppressive hegemonic text to show the real world instead of the idealized version. Jameson concludes, "[O]nly an ultimate rewriting of these utterances [nonhegemonic cultural voices] in terms of their essentially polemic and subversive strategies restores them to their proper place in the dialogical system of social class" (86). Therefore, Jake Fish is not a revolutionary leader, but his oppression forms powerful motivation for his individual desire to control his writing as well as its distribution.

Dirty realism illustrates the silenced voice of the oppressed, and Palahniuk's *Fight Club* brings that voice to the surface. Literary consciousness allows readers to hear the other voice. It is, as Roland Barthes states, "the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure" (qtd. in Dobozy 43); however, Bill Buford transfers the inception process upon the text's author. Buford's dirty realism alters Barthes's literary consciousness, and it distorts authorial intention as a self-conscious,

hypocritical force wherein the author becomes someone “who abolishes within himself the barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old spectre: logical contradiction” (qtd. in Dobozy). Dirty realist authors, as Tama Dobozy argues, are conscious of the hypocrisy and inconsistencies they create and use them as a “subversive practice” to contend with hegemony (44). This subversion thus explains the nihilist attitudes portrayed in *Fight Club*. In the novel, the narrator feels trapped inside a commercialist lifestyle and his only means of subversion are by attending self-help groups—he does not share the afflictions from which the other group member suffer—to feel some semblance of human emotion; however, we are left unconvinced when he explains his apartment’s furnishings:

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. (Palahniuk 44)

The narrator exhibits Dobozy’s hypocrisy because he desires human connection but also wishes to maintain his materialistic lifestyle. In a way, Jake Fish also represents these qualities because he wants to write and be successful, but he cannot write and have quality human contact; therefore, he feels diminished as a human because hegemony forces him to decide between the two instead of allowing him access to both.

Fight Club became a source of inspiration but not imitation as I continued working out my story because I found the relationship of the narrator and Tyler

Durden, his alter ego, a fascinating look at surface details versus subtextual themes. Durden forces the narrator to abandon his materialist ways and together they form a sadomasochistic, underground fight club. Palahniuk uses the counter-culture's popular stance of capitalist-oppression through the narrator and Durden as reflection of self-destruction. Jesse Kavadlo suggests that "Palahniuk's narrators rebel against what the books position as the emasculating conformity of contemporary America (IKEA takes a bigger beating than fight club's members), but really what the narrator has been fighting, literally and figuratively, is himself" (5). *Writer on the Storm* builds from these qualities; however, I did not want Jake's self-depredation to be as literal as *Fight Club's*. To remain cognizant of the hypocrisy needed to capture the common emotions of rebellion and dissatisfaction, I analyzed Palahniuk's uses of dirty realist traits apart from his transgressive ones. Palahniuk uses counter-cultural emotions to depict the futility of living with dissatisfaction and angst. As Jeffery A. Sartain explains, when the narrator and Tyler Durden, two ideologically polarized characters, combat each other, no one wins "the epistemological tug of war; indeed, it is the war of beliefs between the two characters that is the foundation for all the tension in the novel...Tyler's rhetoric and ideology almost completely subvert Joe's [the narrator's] dominant narrative voice" (27). This suggests that Tyler's subversion hinders the counter-culture's argument against the hegemonic culture because when the counter-culture's voice becomes overpowering, they become the oppressors in a society devoid of anything constructive.

Even with Jake Fish's embodiment of *Fight Club's* use of hypocrisy, I did not

want Jake to become the clear ideological symbol that the narrator or Durden are; therefore, Jake had to remain complex and human. Jake could not fall into the proletarian structure because it would strip him of his individuality, which is important to remaining humanly realistic. Furthermore, I decided that Jake needed to function within hypocrisy, otherwise he would be one of two binaries. He would be either a capitalist commodity or a Marxian revolutionary; however, neither binary fit my goal for humanism.

Moreover, *Fight Club*'s narrator and Tyler Durden's conflicting ideologies make a broader statement about society. Because society has become a melting pot of ideologies under capitalism's shroud, there is a disruption of the discourse between the hegemonic class and the oppressed; however, when the oppressed voice becomes too loud and its argument becomes more oppressing and unproductive, we see a shift in power. This dichotomy between Tyler Durden and the narrator represents the breakage and disruption in discourse. The narrator states, "My wish right now is for me to die. I am nothing in the world compared to Tyler" (Palahniuk 146). He is unaware of his split personality and the ideological battle occurring in his mind. The narrator's original acceptance of Tyler shows his unhappiness with material capitalism and the American Dream. His jealousy and defeated disposition exemplify his struggle to comprehend Tyler's views even though they are subconsciously his. Therefore, at the end of the novel when the narrator finally kills Tyler, both sets of personalities remain in one body, which forms the narrator as a character "containing the full potential and knowledge of two mutually exclusive, competing identities and

ideologies” (Sartain 28). Palahniuk uses dirty realist techniques to create the depraved situations in *Fight Club*, but the highly ideological, binary, and violent conclusion represent the transgressive parts; however, he successfully creates a dialogic understanding between ideological classes, which allows the two ideologies to discuss and compromise before they destroy everything through oppression and opposition. Palahniuk is one example of the dirty realist method of hypocrisy, but he uses it not within the genre, instead using it as a catalyst for a larger, pedantic message against violence and revolution.

To achieve Jake’s humanism and retain my voice, I needed more stylistic examples than *Fight Club* to create a dirty realist text about the American Dream. I found that hypocrisy also functions in dirty realism as satire. Satire is powerfully manipulative albeit truthful. In the case of *Fight Club*, the narrator’s desire to destroy capitalism leaves him beaten and results in his death. We can see this as satire, but it is not the satire for which I searched or was it the ironic, sarcastic tone of my creative voice. I instead looked to Bukowski and Miller, whose works deal more with character ineptitude and whose metaphysical level falls beneath the text’s surface. Russell Harrison explains how Bukowski and Miller share similar styles, which include their misogynistic tones and apathy toward labor (153). Harrison states, “Perhaps their primary area of congruence, however, is that of work or more correctly, refusal of work” (153). This suggests that Bukowski and Miller’s labor apathy is the more efficient connector between writer and reader. They are distinctly different writers, and readers should not assume each dirty realist author writes with the same

style or about the same content. This is an assumption I had to overcome. Norman Mailer explains Miller's narcissism by stating, "It is too simple to think of the narcissist as someone in love with himself. One can detest oneself intimately and still be a narcissist. What characterizes narcissism is the fundamental relation. It is with oneself" (qtd. in Harrison 154). Harrison, by examining Mailer's criticism, explains that Miller's use of metaphor represents the connection between self and society (154). If we look at *Tropic of Cancer*, we see that Mailer's argument has validity, but I argue that the fictional Henry Miller's narcissism is a satirical and hypocritical representation of dirty realism instead of Mailer's claim. In the novel, Miller lives in Paris as a writer who does not write—he drinks, fornicates, and muses. To show that Mailer's argument holds truth, Miller says:

Everything that belongs to the past seems to have fallen into the sea; I have memories, but the images have lost their vividness, they seem dead and desultory, like time-bitten mummies stuck in a quagmire. If I try to recall my life in New York I get a few splintered fragments, nightmarish and covered with verdigris. It seems as if my own proper existence had come to an end somewhere, just where exactly I can't make out. I'm not American any more, nor a New Yorker, and even less a European, or a Parisian. I haven't any allegiance, any responsibilities, any hatreds, any worries, any prejudices, any passion. I'm neither for nor against. I'm neutral. (152-53)

The passage appears self-indulgent and perhaps existential; however, Miller buries the satire of an apathetic writer with no responsibilities in the subtext. He shows that if a

person disavows allegiance to society or tries to fight the labor force, he or she will figuratively cease to exist. The individual becomes a hallow apparition of his or her former self instead of forming a dialogue with the hegemonic culture. Miller's satire depicts the self-destruction caused by a person's abandonment of his or her labor. Therefore, Miller's character became one significant part of Jake Fish's character. Jake had to abandon his labor to satirize counter-cultural beliefs. For Jake, I wanted him to delineate the American Dream in a similar way to Miller by showing the polarization between commodities and individuals as well as show how laborers cannot function without their labor. Jake cannot be a writer unless he writes, but his initial rationale is that he has money and thus does not need to labor. He realizes, however, that without writing, his life has no meaning.

Even though the satirical nature of labor apathy forms a large portion of Jake's character, I still did not feel Jake was as rounded and complex as I wanted; therefore, I turned to Bukowski and discovered his use of observational satire which shows the effects of capitalism and oppression on society. Bukowski takes a different approach by showing a character that simply lives within the system. His stories function around the idea that capitalism has appropriated everything with a counter-cultural label; therefore, Bukowski does not trust any sort of economic rebellion and thus, like Miller, he remains apathetic. Dobozy states, however, that even though Marxism is the counter-culture's new mode of rebellion and "Marx has become a god...Bukowski's [works are] unquestionably the avoidance of servitude to any god" (46). As a result, we can view Bukowski as a member of the nonhegemonic class for which Jameson

argues we need because Bukowski refuses to trade one hegemonic class for another. It would create the same oppressive structures, the same hegemony, experienced within the latter. Bukowski's satire is not against Marxism as much as it is against the blind Marxist ideology that acts as a rationale for the counter-culture's struggle against capitalism. If I was to model a part of Jake after Bukowski's satirical methods, then I could not allow Jake to blindly follow an ideology. Appropriately then, I made Jake like Bukowski's Henry Chinaski, a character who would rather take a drink than become actively involved in a problem. However, I wanted Jake to again be complex instead of an imitation of Chinaski, so instead of using Bukowski's minimalist style to portray his apathy and satire, I chose to have Jake muse, like Miller, about the metaphysical and ontological concepts of life and society as they pertain to him. Jake does follow Bukowski's model of being at odds with the economic structure and not fighting against it. Harrison states, "With partial exception of *Women* [and *Hollywood*] very little of Bukowski's fiction concerns itself with writing. Even in *Women* [, *Hollywood*, and his short stories] the writing most often manifests itself through poetry readings, i.e., as work, that is as a relation to the world and indeed as conflict" (155). Henry Chinaski is in conflict with his economic status and thus any sort of labor seems futile; however, Jake's conflict is with his personal life, of which writing is more a part. Bukowski shows the dirt and grit of Chinaski's surroundings as a product of capitalism and, therefore, Chinaski's apathy is too a product because if he is a writer, then writing should be his means of production instead of his wage-labor to survive. I chose, however, to have writing be more important for Jake's character, as a

part of his humanity instead of simply a means of production. I wanted the writing to be its own character.

Finally, in regards to *Writer on the Storm* as a dirty realist story and Jake as a dirty realist, oppressed character, I wanted to incorporate dirty realist irony and satire of other works deemed acceptable in the literary community. As Robert Olen Butler states, “[A] literary desire is on the order of: I yearn for self, I yearn for an identity, I yearn for a place in the universe, I yearn to connect to the other” (41-42), which all pertain to the struggles a dirty realist character must endure to live in society. He must yearn for a better life than what the hegemonic culture has granted him. Therefore, I knew Jake needed to subvert everything accepted and established in his society. Like Bukowski, Jake observes every area and that included the literary community as well.

Hemingway humors this concept in his novella, *Torrents of Spring*. A man, Scripps O’Neil, emotionally abandons his wife for a server at a restaurant because she stimulates his lust for literature. The waitress, Mandy, mentions Henry James in casual conversation which tempts O’Neil to think, as the narrator says, “Scripps O’Neil was thinking about Mandy, the waitress. What a background she must have, that girl! What a fund of anecdotes! A chap could go far with a woman like that to help him” (Hemingway 39). O’Neil, with his wife sitting adjacent, preforms emotional adultery because of the stimulating effect literature and Mandy’s love of literature has on him. Hemingway mocks the elitism of the literary community to subtly draw the reader to “engage mortality not only as a thematic issue [within the novella], scanning like gleaners in the wake of what other books miss, but also as an artistic principle”

(Saltzman 432).

These gleaners that Saltzman discusses are human emotions which the literary community has tossed away as lesser forms of humanity, or, as I argue, it is more simply established as reality (dirty realism) versus literary perception (literary elitism). O'Neil's wife, Diana, struggles to reestablish the loving connection she first shared with O'Neil because of his desire to become more well-read; however, she understands her effort's futility, as the narrator states:

She had a man now. A man of her own. For her own. Could she keep him? Could she hold him for her own? She wondered...Diana learned editorials by John Farrar by heart. Schipps brightened. A little of the old light shining in Schipp's eyes now. Then it died. Some little mistake in the wording, some slip in her understanding of a phrase, some divergence in her attitude, made it all ring false. (Hemingway 42-43)

Diana's nervous disposition reflects her desire to keep O'Neil; however, her failure to keep his attention symbolizes how literary elitists pass off true human emotions for books, linguistics, and philosophies because the elitists cannot coexist with unaccepted forms of humanity, or, as the novella suggests, cannot accept new literature that diverges from the accepted forms of craft and content. This creates the metafictional satire that Hemingway includes in his novella. I knew I could not imitate Hemingway's use of satire for Jake because Jake's Bukowski-like disposition does not lend itself to Hemingway's satire. Bukowski prefers apathy to literary substance, and Jake reflects this apathy, which is not inherent in Hemingway's novella.

Another example that Hemingway uses is openly mocking the literary community, and I employ this satirical method to Jake because Bukowski also uses this method. His narrator steps away from the story and directly addresses the reader, saying:

It was at this point in the story, reader, that Mr. F. Scott Fitzgerald came to our home one afternoon, and after remaining for quite a while suddenly sat down in the fireplace and would not (or was it could not, reader?) get up and let the fire burn something else so as to keep the room warm. (Hemingway 76)

He calls upon the reader's intertextual knowledge of Fitzgerald's literary status to overtly mimic and satirize the literary community's pretentiousness by using a realistic event as a metaphor, which suggests that literary elitism smothers the fire of new styles of artistic expression of young and new writers. Hemingway depicts his style, described as "simple objects and events, enclosed in simple prose, offer abiding consolation" (Saltzman 432), as unaccepted. But for my voice to exist within dirty realism, I had to find recurring examples, and Bukowski ironically employs this same mimicking technique with Hemingway in his short story "Would You Suggest Writing as a Career." Harrison explains Harold Bloom's ideas of a poet's influence on his or her successors to suggest that Bukowski uses "a specific text of an earlier writer" but modifies "its thrust ('swerve') as well as the idea that both earlier and later writers can share an impulse, as stance towards society ('diamon')" because they "are useful for framing [his] relation to predecessors" (217). This is an extremely important concept in Jake's life because Jake's critics do not let his fiction stand. According to them, his

fiction does not have literary merit unless it relates to other similar, established authors. Bukowski deals with the same metafictional satire I have discussed with Hemingway. For Henry Chinaski, Hemingway is now part of the community; therefore, when a professor invites him to a party, Chinaski humorously describes him, just like Hemingway, as being “rather dead too. He kept talking about literature and writing – of all the fucking subjects” (“Would You Suggest” 36). Chinaski’s apathy explicates the satire I wanted. Bukowski captures the ideas and themes about the literary community within one name and a few thoughts. Moreover, the application of a literary or artistic name also shows the intertextuality of literature because the name carries literary qualities while it is devoid of human qualities. For Chinaski, Bukowski shows him as a guy that would rather stay at the airport bar instead of flying to Seattle for a few poetry readings. The readings represent the literary establishment, much like the agents, the publisher, and the other author in *Writer on the Storm*.

By using Bukowski’s sarcastic style against the capitalist elements of the writing profession, I discovered a unique way to avoid imitating Hemingway, but it also allowed me to reference Chinaski’s views of the literary community. I needed to capture a community that Chinaski calls “[j]ust a bunch of bullshit” (“Would You Suggest” 35), so the minimalist language left me with a variety of directions to pursue. I needed, however, to remember Harrison’s words which say that Bukowski “depicted alienated labor and sketched a mode of working-class resistance in ways having much in common with contemporaneous New Left analyses” (124). The devotion to his satire without taking a firm, counter-cultural stance connects Bukowski to

Hemingway, Palahniuk, and Miller because not one of them yields to hegemony. They form new utterances for a dialogical system without prescribing to hegemony. I had to remember, therefore, that satire does not search for solutions; it creates observations and depictions of life as mockery.

I understood that if *Writer on the Storm* was to take its place among other dirty realist literature, I needed a single story example that encapsulated the satirical views of capitalism and the American Dream. I realized that I could not ignore my passion for Marxism. Dirty realism partly functions as a Marxist genre; therefore, I felt it was important for Marxism to be an undercurrent for my satire without applying Marxist metaphysics. Furthermore, I could not allow my story to abandon my passions and my voice. That voice includes Marxist undertones. To abandon those undertones would be the “inclination to disown one’s wishes and to give in to the omnipresence of Universal Banal” (Baxter 161). *Writer on the Storm* needed to remain personal and I could not submit those Marxist issues for more personal ones. I wanted my experiences as a proponent of Marxism to resonate with readers and give them hope so they do not succumb to the expected fate of those without money. My novella does not subscribe to revolutionary ideals. Any subversion on the part of Jake is because of his yearning; therefore, I chose to write about a writer trying to write without losing his individualism and humanity in the process. I chose Bukowski’s *Hollywood* as my example of a dirty realist text involving Marxist themes.

Hollywood is Bukowski’s most blatant depiction of Marxist themes because it focuses on alienated labor and capitalism’s overreaching hand, which closes society’s

mouth. Pamela Cytrynbaum describes the novel's inception, saying, "When Charles Bukowski gets angry, he writes books—and *Hollywood*, he says, is a novel of outrage" (246). I also have had similar feelings toward capitalism and society, and I wanted apply them to my novella. It is why I place my story in L.A., just as *Hollywood* takes place in L.A. I agree with the novel's depiction of the city as a place that falsely advertises the American Dream as a conceivable and tangible thing, and as Andrew J. Madigan states, "L.A. is the place where, in the realm of fiction, people migrate in pursuit of dreams. One category of migrant dream-seeker is the writer" (447). I agree with Bukowski when he says, "I guess I never believed Hollywood—I heard it's a horrible place—but when I went there, I found out how really horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible it was, black and cutthroat" (qtd. in Cytrynbaum 246) because my time in L.A. and Hollywood reflected these same emotions. Therefore, for *Writer on the Storm*, I chose L.A. because it set me up for a story about the American Dream. Bukowski has dealt with proletarian working conditions in earlier novels; however, *Hollywood* makes use of society's fascination with Los Angeles and Hollywood as a city of immense fame and wealth. Bukowski perverts society's perception of Hollywood; therefore, I felt *Hollywood* was the most logical and practical inspirational model for *Writer on the Storm*.

I try to remain objective in *Writer on the Storm*, but I am aware that readers may make certain ideological conclusions about me. Therefore, I turn to Bukowski's response to William Packard, who asked Bukowski if he restricted himself to what he will and will not write. Bukowski says:

I photograph and record what I see and what happens to me...I am not a man who looks for solutions in God or politics. If somebody else wants to do the dirty work and create a better world for us and he *can* do it, I will accept it. In Europe where my work is having much luck, various groups have put a claim on me, revolutionaries, anarchists, so forth, because I have written of the common man of the street, but in interviews over there I have had to disclaim a conscious working relationship with them because there isn't any. (qtd. in Harrison 159)

Harrison says world affairs have always been important to Bukowski, but I disagree (159). This interview takes place before *Hollywood*, but Bukowski's style and voice do not change. Chinaski is Bukowski's alter-ego, and he comments on society with a labor-intensive voice, but Chinaski never advocates for Marxism. For my story, I wanted Jake to function in the same manner as Chinaski by not standing on a Marxist soapbox and explaining every thematic element.

Therefore, I decided that *Writer on the Storm* would follow a similar formula to that of *Hollywood* and I will give an analysis of the novel to demonstrate how it pertains to Marxism, capitalism, the American Dream, and dirty realism. When the film industry commissions Chinaski to write a screenplay—something he finds irritating, saying, “Look at what it did to F. Scott Fitzgerald” (*Hollywood* 14)—Chinaski commits to the screenplay because he does not think it will be much work for him. At that moment Chinaski becomes a wage laborer instead of an artist. “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe,” Marx and Engels write. “It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the

man of science, into its paid wage labourers” (82). To avoid the bourgeois oppression, Chinaski decides to write the screenplay; however, when confronted by the only financier for the movie, Harold Pheasant, they have a heated exchange. Harold begins by saying:

“Yes, I want to finance your screenplay. I’ve read your work. You’ve got a marvelous sense of dialogue. I’ve read your work: *very* filmatic.”

“Sure you won’t have a drink?”

“No, I have to get back to my table.”

“Yeah. What ya been doing lately, Pheasant?”

“Just finished producing a film about the life of Mack Derouac.”

“Yeah? What’s it called?”

“*The Heart’s Song*.”

I took a drink.

“Hey, wait a minute! You’re *joking*! You’re not going to call it *The Heart’s Song*?”

“Oh yes, that’s what it’s going to be called.”

He was smiling.

“You can’t fool me, Pheasant. You’re a real joker! *The Heart’s Song*! Jesus Christ!”

“No,” he said, “I’m serious.”

He suddenly turned and walked off. (*Hollywood* 25)

The exchange is Chinaski’s first experience with how Hollywood’s structure works.

Pheasant’s reaction to Chinaski suggests his bourgeois status because he is paying

Chinaski to write the screenplay, which he has yet to start. By insulting the bourgeois, Chinaski has assuredly lost the film's financial support. Sarah, Chinaski's wife, responds as the voice of reason who has accepted the capitalist system, saying, "You ought to go over there and apologize... You just wanted his movie to be about *you*" instead of Mack Derouac, but Chinaski takes the proletarian revolutionary route, saying, "*That's it!* I'll write the screenplay about myself!" (*Hollywood* 27). The scene uses satirical methods to show capitalism's stupidity because Pheasants' original title is *The Heart's Song*, a cliché, Hollywood title, and Chinaski tells Sarah the title is *The Furry Flotsam Flies* to further enhance the satire. However, Chinaski decides to reappropriate his art by making it about himself and tentatively titling it *Flies in the Furry Flotsam* to suggest that his title is just as ridiculous as his previous mockery, but at least it is his title and his art.

I wanted to capture the same sort of tension in my novella that Bukowski has between Chinaski and Pheasant. I chose to use Jake and his agent, Toby, as a similar example of Hollywood and L.A.'s control of artists. However, unlike the exchange in *Hollywood*, Jake and Toby have multiple meetings because Jake knows he cannot survive without Toby's help. Jake submits to capitalism instead of wanting to escape. Each example, however, shows an alienation from one's labor.

To establish the complexity of the alienation of labor, I had to remain aware of what capitalism would mean to Jake as he tried to write. Jake's literature has always dealt with the counter-culture and the issues of subsistence living; however, Jake's works have not changed or even had an impact on society outside of a select group of devout followers. Jake mirrors Chinaski's confusion about his own writing. Chinaski reflects on

what his art has become. When the director, Jon Pinchot, and other film industry figures court Chinaski, they constantly remind him how much they adore his work; however, Chinaski notices the falsities, stating, “I scaled in at 228, most of it fat instead of muscle. My fighting days were over. To think I had once weighed 144 pounds on a 6-foot frame: the grand old starving days when I was writing the good stuff” (*Hollywood* 51). As Chinaski puts on pounds, he symbolizes the stagnancy of capitalist subsistence. It is what Stan Theis describes as “becoming that other kind of writer/artist, the one with a desk, agent, assignment, front money” (90). I used the symbolism of excess weight to depict Jake’s stagnancy as well; however, instead of having weight gained by capitalist writing, I chose to have Jake gain weight because of a lack of writing. This makes Jake conscious of what it means to be a writer in a capitalist society instead of a confused artist like Chinaski. Jake understands that “[c]apitalism attaches itself to, rather than openly opposes, the other” (Dobozsy 45). He, along with the publisher and agents, initially knows that Jake’s dirty realist fiction will make money regardless of its subversive content. Thus, Jake feels alienated from his work because it cannot escape hegemony. He becomes what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels explain as “laborers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market” (87). Therefore, like Chinaski, Jake finds himself under capitalist influence, but the difference lies within positionality which explains Chinaski’s confusion versus Jake’s assimilation.

We must, however, remain aware of the problems of applying Marxist metaphysics to Jake and Chinaski. As Jameson explains:

What this impossibility of immanence (Chinaski's confusion and realization) means in practice is that the dialectical reversal must always involve a painful "decentering" of the consciousness of the individual subject, whom it confronts with a determination...that must necessarily be felt as extrinsic or external to conscious experience. (283-84)

This suffering is essential for dirty realist characters in a Marxist-influenced story. Chinaski must suffer before his consciousness can change, and Jake has to suffer to discover his passion for writing. Jake and Chinaski believe money outweighs their writing and if they have money, they do not need their art to be representative of themselves. Therefore, both characters search for extracurricular activities to keep their statuses. Chinaski finds love in alcoholism and horse racing while Jake expresses himself through alcoholism and music. They are egotistical about their respective passions, as Chinaski explains about horse racing:

As for horses, I became a real student of the game. I had about two dozen systems. They all worked only you couldn't apply them all at one time because they were based on varying factors. My systems had only one common factor: that the Public must always lose. You had to determine what the Public play was and then try to do the opposite. (*Hollywood* 177)

We see a disturbingly capitalistic tone to Chinaski's words, an elitism that he rejects when the film industry tries to influence his screenplay. This disposition revolves around

control. Chinaski has found something of which he is in complete control; therefore, Bukowski creates an ironic personality trait for Chinaski which makes him complex and human. I chose to use music to create a similar effect with Jake because it references another artistic medium, but it also gives some form of control and elitism to an otherwise dejected human being. Both Chinaski and Jake adapt to the evolving nature of their personal passions, adapting their interests to maintain superiority over others. In essence, they create a personal hegemony to give them comfort in the overall hegemonic culture. Jake and Chinaski “cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society” (Marx and Engels 83). Without these flaws, Chinaski and Jake would function only as archetypes or Marxist templates instead of humans with individual goals and dreams. Without these passions, Chinaski and Jake would come to the “realization of labor [manifesting] itself so much as loss of reality, [they become] unreal to the point [they starve] to death” (Marx, “Alienation of Labor” 401). If having elitism in one minuscule hobby brings Jake and Chinaski solace, then that is a way of satirizing both capitalist oppression and the counter-culture’s hypocrisy for subversion.

Labor is the driving function behind the plots of *Hollywood* and *Writer on the Storm* because it demonstrates the futility of using one’s labor as a subverting apparatus against capitalism. Jake and Chinaski feel weighed down by their inability to write. I took the vivid exchange between Sarah and Chinaski as inspiration for how Jake relates to writing. Chinaski states, “‘Look,’ I said to Sarah, ‘we have just landed upon the outpost of death. My soul is puking’” (*Hollywood* 9). Andrew J. Madigan explains,

“The opening pages of *Hollywood* reverberate with both acquiescence and disdain for [Chinaski’s] fate” (452), and I knew I had to capture that specific feeling to drive my story in similar directions as Bukowski’s story. Therefore, I had to find within *Hollywood* examples of capitalism’s perversion of actual labor to bring about the submission and disdain that creates the opening atmosphere of my novella. Edward Andrew explains Marx’s views of this, stating, “The means of production are...the condition for the expression of human personality...To possess the means of production is to be able to express one’s nature in production; to be separated from the means of production is to be forced to alienate one’s personality in labor” (244). Jake associates his labor with his relationship with his ex-girlfriend, Jules. Without her, he has lost his personality for writing; therefore, he submits to capitalist oppression at the beginning, but this sets up the opportunity for Jake to change and solve the mystery of the American Dream, which is not the conventional, hegemonic definition.

Furthermore, I chose alcoholism to reflect Jake’s submission and to satirize Bukowski’s use of liquor. Alcoholism is personal for me because of personal experiences with the damaging effects of alcoholism personified in my mother; therefore, I did not want Jake’s drinking to reflect the free-spirited, joyous drinking in *Hollywood*. I felt that alcohol consumption should reflect reality as dirty realism hopes to achieve; consequently, I chose to show that alcoholism hinders the writing process just as capitalism because alcohol is a luxury that I attribute to capitalist greed. Jake, because of his alcoholism, lacks “class consciousness, the proletariat’s comprehension of their life situation and their acceptance of the interests and enemies which accrue to it” (Ollman

579). Atwood states, “The writer communicates with the page. The reader communicates with the page. The writer and the reader communicate through the page. This is one of the syllogisms of writing as such” (125); therefore, I felt a responsibility to treat alcoholism as the life-damaging activity that it is. Bukowski’s style satirizes society’s perception of alcoholism, the hegemonic view that the lower-class simply drink in excess; however, I wanted to create a story that satirizes Bukowski’s satire, this perception of accepted and expected alcoholism. Therefore, I made the conscious choice to give Jake hope of escaping his addiction. I found a strange connection between alcohol and writing, more specifically the connection between authors and drinking. For Bukowski, he became a part of that alcoholic culture, which Ron Blunden explains:

Bukowski might be a loser because the idea is dawning on him that no matter how oblivious you are to feedback, there is no denying the simple, scary fact that success is like having your soul up for auction. You simply don’t belong to yourself anymore – other people, the critics, the editors, the readers, have, in every sense, an interest in you. (161)

I did not want Jake to become another part of the alcoholic community of writers to which Bukowski submits Chinaski in *Hollywood*. Jake wants to subsist and be happy while writing, but writing has lost all its creativity. Alcohol becomes a hindrance to Jake’s writing and a stigma of the literary community instead of a mode of inspiration.

Moreover, alcoholism only enhances apathy in Jake and Chinaski, whose inability to create true, individualistic art grows from a lack of understanding the culture around them. Chinaski does not recognize the wages of others as similar to his because the

individual wage-systems are different; however, wage-systems are concurrent under capitalist ideology. Marx states:

A direct consequence of estrangement of the humans from the product of their labor, from their life-activity, from their species-being, is the *estrangement of humans* from *humans*. When a human confronts himself as a stranger, so he confronts another human as a stranger. The relationship of humans to their labor, to the product of their labor, and to themselves, is also the relationship of humans to each other, and to the labor of others and to the object of others. (Marx, “Alienation of Labor” 404)

Chinaski cannot relate himself to the other labors that surround him. The actor, Jack, has a clause in his contract that stipulates that he will be paid whether he works or not, and Chinaski, in a very telling phrase, asks, “What’s that?” (*Hollywood* 105). I used this same confusion for Jake when he calls his publisher and agent “suits.” Capitalism has alienated Jake from his labor and the broader metaphysical properties of labor. He does not realize that others must subsist within their systems as Jake must subsist in his. He feels what Chinaski feels with the film industry and that is intrusion. Madigan explains that Chinaski “resented the collaborative nature of film and its propensity to intrude into the often obsessively personal creative life of the writer” (452), and I used this concept to show how personal writing can be. Jake has not written anything since Jules left him; however, the symbols of capitalism, the agent and publisher, work to get Jake to write something collaborative, or to suit their means and not Jake’s. Therefore, I felt the relationship with Jules added an interesting dichotomy to the concepts of personal labor.

For *Writer on the Storm*, I needed Jake to reappropriate his labor to make it personal again. Marx and Engels suggest that the “proletarian cannot become masters of their productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation” (92). I knew I needed a story that referenced proletarian struggles through various epochs. Therefore, I related Chinaski’s struggle against the film industry and their attempts to appropriate his work as their own, to Jake’s struggles to write a personal story without outside influence. I wanted Jake to go through a personal, conscious journey to discover what story he could write. Jake had to realize that he had “nothing of [his] own to secure and to fortify; [his] mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property” (Marx and Engels 92). I found the ending of *Hollywood* effectively represents this concept. Chinaski has to destroy the movie based off his screenplay, but not in the literal sense. Chinaski has to express his personality in a form of labor that reappropriates the screenplay as his. He reveals his solution to Sarah:

“What are you going to do now?” Sarah asked.

“About what?”

“I mean, the movie is really over.”

“Oh, yes.”

“What will you do?”

“There are the horses.”

“Besides the horses.”

“Oh, hell, I’ll write a novel about writing the screenplay and making the movie.”

“Sure, I guess you can do that.”

“I can, I think.”

“What are you going to call it?”

“*Hollywood.*”

“*Hollywood?*”

“Yes...”

And this is it. (*Hollywood* 239)

Chinaski chooses to write the story about writing the screenplay, which makes the entire experience of his alienation a reappropriation of self that he can sell and make money.

Chinaski still lives within the epoch of the American Dream, but he decides to take those Marxist steps to destroy the movie’s story by turning it into a story of capitalist corruption and the vicious cycle through which one must survive.

If my story were to function under the same formula as *Hollywood*, Jake had to discover a personal form of reappropriation of his art. Because Jules represents Jake’s artistic drive, I had to have the two reconnect and reconcile; however, I knew that Jules could not be the only catalyst. Therefore, I chose to have Jake focus on his love for music to create a story that did not represent anything he had previously written, which makes the claim that Jake’s previous works are not representative of Jake’s personal creativity. Therefore, it was pertinent that I find the perfect voice and tone for the story. I needed to use Jake’s flaws to progress the story without becoming too didactic. I could

not use long asides to make sure the reader knew the story had Marxist undertones; however, I wanted a voice that would bring out the satirical, humorous tone that I always have in my writing. I first sought to emulate Raoul Duke from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* because he had the quirky tone for which I searched, but as I began writing, the voice sounded forced and it came off as a stunt instead of Jake's true personality. The first paragraph of Thompson's work exemplifies this, saying:

We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive..." And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?" (1).

The format was what I wanted; however, Jake is never under the influence of hallucinogens. I knew he should not speak like Duke. Prose says, "The hurdle disguises itself as the question of voice and of who is telling the story (should the narrator be first or third person, close or omniscient?) when in fact the truly problematic question is: Who is listening? On what occasion is the story being told, and why?" (85). I could not relate Jake to Duke's idiosyncratic tone and Thompson's outrageous prose. I decided that if the tone confused me, it would also confuse readers.

My next step was to find a tone that would capture the flawed, disdained disposition of Jake so readers could better relate to him. I turned to Nick Hornby's *High*

Fidelity and its protagonist, Rob, for that tone. I gravitated to the first-person point-of-view and the conversational tone along with Rob's dry humor and pathetic disposition. The passage that demonstrates this point comes toward the beginning of the novel where Rob muses over his break-up with his ex-girlfriend, Laura, after a conversation with her followed by more musing about the universal notion of break-ups. He says:

And that's the last time we will ever speak, probably. "No problem": the last words I ever say to somebody I have been reasonably close to before our lives take different directions. Weird, eh? You spend Christmas at somebody's house, you worry about their operations, you give them hugs and kisses and flowers, you see them in their dressing gown...and then, bang, that's it. Gone forever. And sooner or later there will be another mum, another Christmas, more varicose veins. They're all the same. Only the addresses, and the colors of the dressing gown, change. (Hornby 51)

To find my voice, however, that did not simply imitate the authors I have referenced, I chose to use Rob's voice, a non-minimalist voice that converses and has a discourse with the reader without wandering into Miller's narcissistic tone. I rejected the voice of a philosopher or critic because, like Bukowski, Jake "is, after all, a novelist and not a social theorist" (Harrison 182). *High Fidelity*'s musical motif also was a large inspiration. I molded my idea and my list of music, as Nick Hornby does with his novel, but the music, in some respects, has its own story with changes. Therefore, to return to my opening concerns, *High Fidelity* allowed me to avoid imitation by using a tone that matched my sarcastic voice and had no relations with dirty realism.

With all of the dirty realist and Marxist concepts I have highlighted in relation to *Writer on the Storm*, I also believe it is important to discuss those who may read my novella. Throughout my academic career, I have always written works that tackled topics of personal importance to me and challenged controversial and highly ideological subjects. Like Bukowski, I had many critics in classes; however, I maintained my resolve to find my voice. With *Writer on the Storm*, I feel I have achieved that balance between realistic and ideological for which I have striven; however, I am aware that others may not see or agree with the concepts I present. A reader who is highly religious or a proponent of capitalism may reject my novella outright, but someone who comes to it with an open, literary mind will find my observations of the world told through Jake Fish. He is a character with portions of my personality in him, but he is also a character who exists as his own person. I would have to say that the ideal readers for *Writer on the Storm* would be people who enjoy dirty realist literature as well as transgressive fiction and, to some extent, minimalist fiction. The novella references authors and traits of these distinct genres; therefore, it should draw in these readers. There are issues that arise with my decision to write within dirty realism. The language is crude and simplistic which may offend some people, but it is tame compared to the other authors who inspired me. Also, if readers are not familiar with a large variety of music, they may become lost with the affluent and diverse musical references, but I feel that without the music, the novella and Jake would cease to be unique. Therefore, I invite everyone to read my work, but I am aware that not everyone will enjoy or understand it.

I will finish with what makes true fiction great. Gardner explains, “Great

fiction can make us laugh or cry, in much the way that life can, and it gives us at least the powerful illusion that when we do so we're doing pretty much the same things we do when we laugh at Uncle Herman's jokes, or cry at funerals" (38). Therefore, I have written a novella that reaches anyone who reads it on some level because I feel that it is the most realistic piece I have written. Uncle Herman may tell terrible jokes, but one can gain life experiences from those interactions. Writing is not about imitation as it is about the writer finding creativity through individualism and recording his or her reactions to the world. For *Writer on the Storm*, I originally wanted a work that sought to humanize the depraved sectors of America; however, with my Marxist studies, doing so would be appropriating someone's experience for thematic purposes and degrading them to banality. I found Jake more relatable because, like Bukowski, I know that capitalism will eventually come into play when I begin looking for a career. I am aware of questions that will arise: How much of the story is personal experience? How much did I make up? Does he intend for me to read this as a Marxist manifesto? The answer to these questions is to not fall into the Intentional Fallacy. For my story, "There is only one road to L.A. – US Interstate 15, a straight run with no backroads or alternate routes, just a flat-out high-speed burn through Baker and Barstow and Berdoo and then on the Hollywood Freeway straight into frantic oblivion: safety, obscurity, just another freak in the Freak Kingdom" (Thompson 83). Everyone becomes that freak when he or she reads *Writer on the Storm* because I, for the last few couple of years, have been that freak who molded Jake from a crass, one-dimensional, counter-cultural drone into the complex, emotional, and individualistic person he now is. We

must remember that Jake, even with his issues with Los Angeles and Hollywood, is not the same kind of freak.

WRITER ON THE STORM

CHAPTER 1

I cross the Colorado border right before dusk. I've spent the entire day driving through Iowa and Nebraska at a steady 75 MPH on Interstate 80. My Mini Cooper needs gas, but I'll test it. I feel tired and the gas-station cappuccino—Irish Crème, I think—has gone cold. As I left Wisconsin this morning, I felt both liberation and excitement because I haven't seen the Rockies since leaving L.A. ten years ago (let me just say, John Denver is *not* full of shit). And that's where I'm going. Back to where it started, more or less.

Ollie phoned me a week ago with a writing opportunity, and since they were still counting hanging-chads when I released my last book, *The Bastard in 33 A.D.*, he said it's time for another Jake Fish novel. He'd represented me—my first agent and best friend—when publishers tried cutting corners. He got deals done with, what I called, British precision. I hired him for his accent and stayed for his company. I was young and naïve, trying to publish my first book, *Sgt. Pepper's a Dirty Old Man*. He was just off the plane—an agent with no clients. We were both desperate. I needed an agent. He needed a client. Jackpot. He introduced me to good Scotch (nothing smoother than Macallan, he'd say, but I still stick to my Kilbeggan Irish Whiskey). He's all business and puts his clients first. At least he always put me first. So how do I repay him? With nervous excuses and a lack of confidence. In my defense, the last decade has seen a few short stories, a novella, an anecdote, and a couple dirty limericks, but I filed them all away in a folder labeled: *Not for Sale*.

Did Ollie care, though? In a word, no. He, as he does, sees opportunities in the market for me. He e-mailed me a list of ideas after our conversation:

1. A drunken writer searching for success in the bowels of L.A., and he finds love in all the wrong places (how original).
2. A drunken writer trying to kick his heroin addiction through sexual therapy (What?).
3. A drunken writer with a quick wit stuck in a lengthy divorce process, so he takes a road trip to find himself (too Hollywood).
4. A drunken writer...
5. A drunken writer...

Before loading the Cooper and going to bed, I read and reread the list and thought, Christ, Ollie needs me out there, otherwise he's creatively useless. But he's never had an eye for good literature. I emerged right after the release of *Fight Club* in theaters and as Chuck Palahniuk gained his cult following. Ollie wanted to emulate that, but I said I wasn't that depressed and I couldn't hate the world that much, so he caved. A little, at least. And I became a poor man's Bukowski. A critic's words, not mine. And Ollie wants to go back to the well. Apparently now the drunken ne'er-do-well attempting to write coherent sentences passes as good fiction. Couldn't this have happened when I wrote *Sgt. Pepper's a Dirty Old Man*? No wonder I drink.

I can't drive anymore. My eyes sting and I can't see through the bug splatters on the windshield. Wiper fluid just smears their guts. Ollie's phoning again, but I toss my buzzing phone into the glove compartment. I take a pull of my cappuccino and turn up the stereo with hopes of reaching the next exit. Unfortunately, I'm playing Bob Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay" and burning across the rumble strips on the highway's shoulder.

I don't know where I'm going, so I take a left exiting the interstate. I barely catch the town's name: Sterling. There's a Super 8 sign, and I feel joy albeit brief. It's part of a hotel commune. The Comfort Inn looks too pricy and the Travel Lodge, well, should offer penicillin shots and prayers with their complimentary breakfast, Wi-Fi, and HBO. Like a bastardized Goldilocks (without the gold curls or feminine sensibilities), I found the Super 8 to be just right. I find a good spot in front, but I feel I should return Ollie's call.

"How's the driving, mate?" he asks after salutations.

"How do you think?" I ask.

"That bad?"

"Yeah."

"Have you had a chance to consider my ideas?"

"Of course I considered them."

"And?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. Not doing them."

“Why not?”

I hadn’t noticed before, but Ollie squeaks when someone rejects him. He’s never taken rejection well. How many of us do? He also reverts to the thick cockney he spoke in London’s East End before moving to the States. There’s no time for this Rubik’s cube. I need to calm him down.

“My previous books dealt with those transgressions, but can’t I offer something else?”

“Bollocks, mate,” he says. “You don’t know how to bloody write anything else.”

“I really, really need to, though. You don’t understand, I can’t write that shit anymore.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. How about we discuss things further when you get here, eh? Get you some sun and a drink. We always did our best thinking while pissed on Singapore Slings while listening to some Zeppelin.”

I’m reminded of “Good Time, Bad Times” and I almost feel the frost gathering on the side window.

“Sounds good, buddy,” I say, “but I need to get some sleep. I’m driving through the Rockies and Utah tomorrow, so unless you want to scrape my fat ass out of a canyon, you better let me go.”

“Fine. Just give me a call when you hit Barstow.”

I hang up and stare into the night. I feel uneasy about this. In the past, I would’ve followed Ollie’s lead without question (maybe even to a fault), but now, I don’t know, I feel as if Ollie’s using me. He pushes harder when there are extra benefits for him, like

when he started dating his wife. She refused to sleep with him, so instead of pursuing the sex, he educated her about the different flavors of scotch (she preferred Johnny Blue).

“Best shag” of his life, as Ollie put it. Does this mean he wants to screw me? An empty bank account, maxed out credit, and overdue rent say I can’t complain. I need something, anything, and Ollie’s never disappointed, so I’ll trust him. I have to.

The Super 8’s lobby is plain. Vanilla walls. Literally. The carpeting was gray with a few coffee stains from breakfast. Some peeling wallpaper. A guy sleeping by the payphone. A middle-aged man, perhaps in his 50s by the look of him (some grey hairs on his head and in his beard along with some droopy jowls), greets me. His beard is coffee-stained and he’s got bags under his eyes. He’s been here too long.

“What can I do for you, sir?” he asks. Is that discontent I hear?

“Any rooms available?” I tell myself to remain polite. I’ve been working on it.

“Look around. See any other cars in the lot? Or people out here?”

I point to the guy by the phone.

“Him? He’s no one,” he says. “Do you want a room or not?”

“If you have one available, then yes. Of course.”

“Did you not hear me? I said we do.”

He didn’t say it, but I’m in no mood for a fight.

“I’ll take it.”

“What? So you’re too good to say *please*? Typical. You kids...” Did he just say *you kids*? “...You have no manners. No wonder this country’s in the shitter.”

“Can I *please* have a room? It’s been a long day—”

“And always in a rush. Can’t slow down and take your time. Always doing things half-assed and stepping on others.”

“I can go over to the Comfort if it’s such a hassle.”

His shiftiness makes me nervous. He keeps scratching his arms and neck. If I have to guess: a combination of too much coffee and lack of food. I should know. When I pulled all-nighters to meet deadlines, I’d suck back the finest grocery-store coffee. Pot after pot. The gurgling stomach. The trips to the toilet. Every half-freaking-hour. This guy even has my eye-tic. There’s only one solution for a coffee overdose. I pull out three cigarettes and roll them to him. He stares at them for a moment. Then stares at me. Then back to them. Like a slow bobble-head. With an occasional head tilt. Back and forth. Back and forth.

“What the fuck is this?” asks the receptionist. I’m more scared of his bristling.

“A cure for cancer...in a manner of speaking. You’ve got too much caffeine running through your veins, and you need to relax. I’m just offering—”

“Do I look like a smoker to you, *sir*?”

I want to ask what a smoker looks like.

“No, that’s not what I meant. It’s just, when I’m writing—”

“You’re a writer? Like a newspaper writer...what are they called?”

“A journalist.”

“Yeah, a journalist. You’re one of those?”

“No. I write books.”

“Ooohhh,” he says, now with a smirk. “So you don’t have a *real* job?”

And just like that I’m transported back to my twenties and I have to once again convince my mother and Eric—because my brother can’t detach himself from Mom’s hip—that writing pays the bills. Sure this guy’s a little taller than Mom is. And a lot fatter. But he speaks like her. The condescending tone. That awful grin. If there’s a devil and I meet him, he’ll have that fucking grin. I’ll never forget that conversation. Unlike then, though, Dad’s not sitting in the den listening to The Who while I plead my case.

When Mom said no to me going to college, I ran to Dad. He said he’d help. He went over to his bookshelf full of records, pulled out a stack, and dropped them into my arms. I still remember the plastic wrap and dust. Tickled my nose. I remember saying something like, “I can’t sell these.” Didn’t matter. He took them down to the record shop the next day and came back with cash. More than enough to send me to L.A. I, however, jotted down every record he sold: Dylan’s *Blood on the Tracks*, *Zeppelin I* through *IV*, *The Beatles* (also known as “The White Album”), *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, The Doors’ *L.A. Woman*, and a signed copy of the self-titled *The Doors*. And *Abbey Road*. *Abbey* fucking *Road*. All for this little shit’s writing career. From that day on, Dad would still sit in the den listening to records, but he traded his Beatles and Stones for B.B. King, Joe Turner, Sam & Dave, John Lee Hooker, and his new favorite, Taj Mahal.

I’ve almost reclaimed them. The records, I mean. Still missing the signed Doors’ album (good luck) and *Abbey Road*. I’ll die before I give up. When Dad died I made it

my only goal. So when this guy yells at me for being a writer, I think of Dad's sacrifices, but I need a room.

"Drifting off? Not even listening, eh?" the guy says.

I slid my credit card to him. He asks for my address. Why? I don't know. I read it from my I.D., but that's not even good enough. He's still bristling.

"Now what? Do you have a problem...er...scratch that. Just tell me, what's wrong with my address now?"

"Why do you have to read it? Don't know it by heart? Is it fake?"

"I've been driving all day. I'm fucking tired! Look, just give me a goddamn room so we can end this game."

"Fine."

Could the futility be over? Can I finally plop down on a bed, put on a Dylan tune, or even some Pink Floyd (nothing too loud), put on some earphones, open a fresh bottle of Kilbeggan I've packed, and drop out? He then says, "Oh, I'm sorry, *Mr. Fish*—"

"Doctor Fish to you, *sir*."

"It seems your card's been declined."

What?

"What? Try again," I say.

"I don't think it'll work."

"Try again, damnit!" Not another card.

"No."

"Yes! Please!"

“Sorry. And look at that, we don’t have any more vacancies. I’m so sorry.” That fucking grin.

I feel sick. My fist is shaking and I’m trying not to smack him. The guy who’d been by the phone is gone. It’s just the receptionist and me. No one would know. Eric’s never pushed me this far, though, so why this man? What makes him so different? So special? His lack of empathy or his disdain for my lifestyle? No. Eric’s shared all those traits. It’s something deeper. Something I feel I’ve repressed. Buried deep beneath my guts. The reason I left L.A. Rejection.

I didn’t leave L.A. because the writing stopped. No. The writing was still good, still potent. I went for a girl. And not just any girl. The one. Or so I thought. Jules moved two months before me into a small apartment down on Venice Beach. We had tried the long-distance thing first, but it didn’t work. I missed her and Mom started asking why I went through so many tissues. Masturbation is not something you discuss with your highly-religious mother. In January of that year—last time the Packers had won a Super Bowl, I think—I moved in with her and went to USC for creative writing. Jules liked the stories I’d write for her in high school, so I had her support. It was bliss. I thought so anyway.

Mom never warmed up to Jules. Jules was an Irish Protestant. We were Irish Catholics. These women were doomed to a war with 16th century roots. Someone should’ve told Jules. When I moved, Mom was heart-broken (at least that’s what Eric told me). She had a mild heart attack and spent nine days in the hospital. Dad said he’d

take care of things. Eric really hated me after that. Jules would rub my head in her lap. Her petite fingers passing through my hair and beard. She'd say, "You can't worry about it. Your Mom's strong." I wasn't sad because of Mom's sickness. No, I couldn't understand why I didn't care.

"But my brother hates me," I said one night, staring out at the Pacific on our balcony, drowning my guilt in a Budweiser. "He'll learn to love you and respect you in time," said Jules. We laughed. Ha, ha, ha. It felt good to laugh. Was it Jules, the beer, or both? Or neither? I didn't care. I wasn't scared to lose Mom. Jules said I could handle it if it happened. I believed her but didn't need it. Mom was home in a week and a half and on the phone yelling at me for not calling. What is it with moms?

With Mom okay, I buckled down on school (for Dad. He paid for it after all). When I met Ollie in graduate school, Jules immediately formed a strong dislike for him. She thought he'd screw me over. He'd come over and she'd huff and puff. I remember her passively mocking him, but Ollie couldn't see it. He thought Jules loved his accent. She'd mimic the cockney and pretend to hold a monocle while Ollie and I laughed and drank.

When he'd leave, I go back to the typer to continue revising from my editor's notes. I forgot about sex—I would even kiss her goodnight on the forehead instead of the lips—because the writing's what mattered. Then, when I came back from dropping off my thesis, the apartment was empty. She took almost everything. Somehow she managed to take a couch/love-seat set, two rocking chairs, a flat-screen T.V. and about 50 or so DVDs. She took the kitchen utensils. The Rolling Stones posters. The bed. The

desk. Even the goddamn computer. I remember asking neighbors if they'd seen anything. One guy said he saw two guys loading a truck, so naturally I assumed she had cheated on me. With two guys. And a truck.

Even though she'd taken many of the possessions (we'd split the cost), I only hated her for taking the record player. I had bins of records and nothing to play them on. I couldn't handle it. I couldn't cling to Ben Folds lyrics ("The bitch went nuts. She stabbed my basketball. And the speakers to my stereo") and emot. Years later, I cataloged my albums in my head. It's easier. No scratches or scrapes. Accessible any time of day to tell me what and how to feel, and why I should feel it this or that way.

I phoned Ollie, but he said he was busy and that I should "go find a good prostitute. She'll shag you proper. Shag the depression out of you." This was a joke. I knew this. But I found one anyway. And the police found me.

I catch myself thinking of Jules from time to time. I miss her green eyes and her smile. Perfect teeth. No whitening necessary. A few pimples to prove she's a natural. After Ollie bailed me out and I paid the state of California (prison overcrowding allowed me to only serve five days in jail), I ran home. Now I can't get her off my mind. I see her with the receptionist—who now looks more like Meat Loaf—singing, "It's all coming back to me now." I hate that song.

I realize I have two choices tonight: load up on energy drinks and more shitty coffee and drive through the night, or pretzel it up and sleep in my car. I choose to sleep. Or try to sleep at least. I open my tailgate and pull out a bottle of Kilbegggen from my suitcase.

It's packed and getting everything back to their places is tough. I try not to listen to pop music, but for this occasion, Mazzy Star's "Into Dust" plays in my head—what I refer to as my mental turntable—while I settle into the front seat for the night. Its minor tones and soft guitars remind me that life hasn't been kind. I start asking myself why I'm trying to get back to L.A., to ground zero. When I moved out there, Jules and I were cramped in our apartment (as I am now sans the shifter up my ass), and we had nothing. Like many young people moving to L.A., we packed our suitcases with love, hopes, and dreams. We thought we'd found harmony. No room for cynicism and experience in the suitcase because if we'd had that, we wouldn't have left. Don't worry. There's plenty of that packed now. Right next to my plaid shirts and dress pants, the Kilbeggan and the Johnny Black (for Ollie), and two cartons—yes, two cartons—of Camels. There's hardly room for the typer, but I made it fit. Sacrificed a few shirts and pants.

When you're young and suffer heart-break, you're still youthful enough to listen to your emotions, which say: there's more out there. Chin up. More fish, blah blah blah, sea. Do you know where that thinking gets you? Packing junk food, perhaps a case of beer (for quick stops at highway rest areas), and loading an iPod with "Behind Blue Eyes" and Floyd's *The Wall* even though you want, you crave, for Bob Marley to tell you "Don't worry about a thing, 'cause every little thing gonna be all right!" But it doesn't come. And you're stuck in a parking lot in Sterling, Colorado, a town that settlers should've named F.U.B.A.R. for better representation, and you realize that you'd never catch Bob Marley dead in this town.

I'm tempted to flee. My hands shake and jiggle the keys hanging from the ignition. A pull of whiskey doesn't help. I realize I gave my last cigarettes to the Super-8-prick, and remind myself to avoid further charity (L.A. has a large homeless problem). I feel my phone buzz. Just Ollie. I let it go to voicemail. Not in the mood for drunken ramblings. Not tonight. Perhaps he has set up a meeting. Or maybe he's lonely. It can wait until morning.

I try to close my eyes, but can't get comfortable. I get out of the car, sit on the hood with the Kilbeggen next to me, and look up at the stars. They let me know I've become small and insignificant. The last time I looked at the stars was when Dad and I sat on the roof when Mom was pissed. We listened to records (*The Dark Side of the Moon*, if memory serves me) and looked through a telescope. I asked Dad what was up there. "Whatever you believe, Jake," he said. With that, my eyes get heavy and I let *Dark Side* play, front and back, until there's nothing but crackling.

CHAPTER 2

Eric calls early. I'm just outside Vegas on Interstate 15. I weigh the pros and cons of the forthcoming conversation. Why does everyone want to talk all of the sudden? No one ever calls in Wisconsin. Except the landlord. And let's not forget the creditors. Eric and I haven't spoken much since Dad died. Ten years today. I remember freezing my nuts off at the funeral while I tried singing "Fly Me to the Moon" (his request). I give in and answer.

"About damn time you pick up your fucking phone!" I hold the phone away from my ear and think, you chose poorly, Jake.

"It rang three times," I say. "Settle down, you crazy bastard."

"Were you writing? Did I disturb the great Jake Fish from writing his next bargain-bin novel?" I put it on speaker phone and throw it on the passenger seat.

"Course not. What was I thinking? Probably just drinking again..."

The Mojave allows me to tune out. Years of arguing have conditioned me to just let him yell. He's at his happiest when berating me. I'm waiting for his usual, "If you'd spend less time thinking about yourself and more about the family, then I wouldn't be like this," Then I'll say that he should mind his business. Then we'll blah blah blah, and we'll yada yada yada before going back to not speaking. In the past, I'd end the fight with, "I'm sorry, I didn't know giant pricks could have opinions." Dad would chuckle and Mom would glare to shut him up.

I can't stomach this right now and I want to call Ollie, so I finally say, "Are we done yet because I've got, you know, things to do."

"Have you even been listening to me?" He asked.

No.

"Yes, of course," I said. "What were you saying again?"

"I knew it. You are drunk, aren't you? Told Mom this was a mistake."

"Firstly, I'm driving—"

"And when's that stopped you?"

"Just shut it and tell me about Mom."

"As if you care."

"Of course I care. Perhaps you don't remember, but she's my mother, too."

I hear "Give me the damn phone!" in the background. If I could get down on my knees, I'd be praying to God and Allah, Zeus and Odin, or maybe Thor. I'd pray to Osiris and to Yahweh. No one's ever available when you're in need. Is anyone listening? I hear Mom's voice on the other end and I want to die. Knew I should've driven off the mountains yesterday.

"Jake, are you teasing your brother again?"

"Mom, I don't have time for this. I'm kind of driving."

"You never have time for me anymore. How are things?"

"Can we do this later? I promise I'll call."

"Like you promised two months ago? I'm still waiting for that."

"Fine, I'm well. And you?"

“Been better, but thanks for asking.” She coughs into the receiver, which is pleasant, and then there’s some indistinguishable feedback. “Sorry, just wiping down the phone.” Sanitary wipes! Of course. She’s never without them.

“Your voice sounds raspy. You okay?”

“Yes and no.”

“And that means?”

“Oh you know. Old age. Closer to meeting God. You ever wonder what he’s like?”

No. I’m not doing this right now. I can’t do this. We always do this every Christmas. She traps me with religion. We fight. I leave. She cries. Eric calls. He yells. I yell. Wash, rinse, and repeat. Merry fucking Christmas, eh?

Ollie’s calling so I say, “Mom, important call on the other end. Got to go. Call you soon. Promise. Bye.”

I don’t answer Ollie’s call. I’d gone through a day of mountain-driving (accelerating and decelerating, ironic prayers for a service station, and no cell phone reception or signs of civilization). I agreed last night to call him when I reach Barstow and that’s what I’ll do, damnit. I’m exhausted, hungry, a bit guilty (I did just hang up on Mom), and slightly annoyed. Eric and Ollie trade off calling. I want peace. If only for five minutes. With that, I turn off my phone for now.

I joke to myself that maybe Mom’s on her death bed and that’s the last time we’ll speak. I don’t know why I find it funny. I tell myself it’s because I finally avoided one of her guilt trips/rants. But perhaps she’s won because, like I said, I do feel guilty. My

last words: “Call you soon. Promise. Bye.” Not my best last words (if they are the last). I would’ve accepted: “I love you,” or “Please take care of yourself.” That shows sympathy. Shows I’m still human. But that’s never been our relationship. “Call you soon. Promise. Bye.” It fits. It’s us. I don’t linger and turn up “Mama Told Me (Not To Come).” Well she hasn’t...yet.

I burn the Cooper hot through the Mojave heat, opting to forego a photo-op at *The World’s Tallest Thermometer* in Baker, and rush over the hills and reach Barstow by dinner time. I call and tell Ollie to meet me down at my old watering hole, The Jack Rabbit, around 10ish. Hopefully the years have been kind to it and Tim hasn’t sold it or gone out of business. Especially in this piss-poor economy. I’ve always viewed it as my tiny slice of Wisconsin. In between the clubs and high-end establishments in the Valley, this tiny shack, no bigger than a double-wide, sits in their shadows. I can almost see the signed Sammy Davis Jr. photo and the Three Dog Night mirror behind the bar. What really changes in a decade?

Ollie says he’ll meet me there around eleven with a few “chaps.” It means business-types. Suits. It’s okay. More time to prepare. Drink a few whiskey sours to warm me up. L.A. nights spent alone can be cold. Got to get nice and fuzzy, though. I’m expecting company.

L.A. is exactly as I left it. The highways run like seagulls to fresh meat. Every car’s white. In a town of supposed creativity, it’s lacking. I find screaming obscenities and

extending the bird-finger are tension-releasers. There's a lot of pent up aggression. For the receptionist. For Eric. Hell, even Ollie's pushing it. An SUV (also white) cuts me off. I can't make out the woman's face, but her bastard kid flips me off through the back window before going back to his DVD. I yell out my window, "Fucking cunt and runt!" If you come to L.A., prepare yourself to change into a vile, heartless, apathetic troll. And that's just the driving.

Jules once—and I made sure it was a one-time thing—ran a person into a ditch. She didn't stop. She flipped the person off. She didn't even remember it. I sent her into the tub with a book (a Margaret Atwood or Alice Sebold usually did the trick) as I did after every moment of stress. And there were many. "You're so good to me. What would I do without you?" she said one summer evening. We were trying to make love—a last ditch effort, perhaps—but she received a call from the principal of the school at which she taught. Fired. Terminated. Or as the guy put it, "We have to let you go." Should've just said, "It's not you, it's me." Make the rejection stick. Needless to say, it ruined the mood. Hey, at least she got a call, right?

I arrive in West Hollywood on time. Finding a parking spot—a free spot, I should say—still is damn near impossible. If you don't have someone who'll offer their driveway, expect a walk of a good mile. Maybe two or even three. Sometimes four if you're persistent. If five, well, it isn't *that* important. I, however, find some luck as a car leaves right across the street is a non-metered stretch of road. With a little maneuvering, my parallel-parking is successful.

The Jack Rabbit's exactly how I remember it except for the mural that'd been added to the side of the building. The door's a curtain because, come on, there aren't bugs in *paradise*. Some punk-kids, with their chains, spiked-jackets, and sweeping black hair, surround the pool table right in front. I walk right through their crowd and bump shoulders with the *big* one.

I take the stool at the end of the bar, right next to the men's room to avoid *accidents*. Tim's not here. Must have the night off. I'm looking at the whiskeys for their Irish selection. Someone's just come out of the lady's room and taken her place behind the bar. I don't like bartenders bothering me before I'm ready. I don't need their salesmanship. I know what I like. My stack of bills should let her know I'm a serious drinker and no upselling necessary. She finally comes over to take my order. I look her straight in the eyes to order a Jameson (on the rocks) and become sick. Sicker when she realizes who I am. Jules drops an empty Coors bottle on the tile and her eyes pop. She looks exactly as I remember: Deep brown hair, green eyes, pale skin (even when there's sun every day), but her teeth are a bit yellow. She doesn't say anything and passes me a Jameson sour before walking to the other end to attend to another barfly.

I can't help but stare. She still remembers my drink of choice and even knew the whiskey I'd order. She didn't even take any money. I pray for Ollie to get here to distract me from this awkwardness. However, if glares are bullets, she's sporting a 12-gauge. Like it's my fault.

To make matters worse, there's karaoke. Some guy—looked like a cockney chimney sweeper—just finished ruining “When the Music's Over” by The Doors (and I

wanted to “turn out the lights”), and two girls follow with a screeching, off-key rendition of Paul Simon’s “Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard” (love the song, but it was *our* song, by which I mean it’s the song Jules and I danced or made love to, so it has lost its beauty). Next up is a woman who first says, “You better tip Jules here, you drunk asses. You won’t find anyone who’ll take better care of you.” I don’t feel like an argument. Still recovering from the one with Mom earlier. The woman goes on to sing “House of the Rising Sun.” Not my favorite Animals song (I’d take “It’s My Life” or “Please Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood”), but it didn’t matter because she would ruin any of them. She fashioned herself a professional karaoke singer (a ridiculous concept) because she has all *her* songs picked out and never once looks at the monitor. I’m sorry, but you can dress up a dog in clothes and train it to eat at the family dinner table, it’s still a dog! She made the barflies uncomfortable by putting her arm on their shoulder and *serenading* them as they drained their beers. It doesn’t take long to figure out that Tim’s no longer here. Gone are the days of loners and professional drinkers at the Jack Rabbit. Instead of interesting characters with intriguing yet depressing stories, the place sold out to gimmicks. What would Bukowski say? “Uh huh, a huh...this is the way this bullshit works,” and go back to his boilermaker. With each passing drink, each of us, the barflies, nod to each other. One synchronized thought: We’d kill her if it were legal.

I catch Jules looking over at me. She’s flushed and runs into the restroom again. I think she caught my scowl. Same as Dad’s. Doesn’t matter how happy I am, I won’t have that big smile (a family photo hung over our old sofa and it greeted guests with two boys, one smiling and one not, a woman beaming because the entire family managed to

make it into the church's basement for the photo, and a man who, if you starred long enough, showed a frown which said, "I want to be watching football, but I love my wife more").

Jules exits the restroom and walks right up to me.

"Why are you here?"

I don't know what to say. There are so many things that come to mind. More like fragments. I've spent so much time practicing what I'd say if this moment ever happened, but I'm blanking.

"Ummm...Hi?" is what I manage to say.

"You can't be here. You shouldn't be here. I can't work with you here."

"I'd leave but I'm meeting—"

"Let me guess, Ollie?"

"Yeah. It's important."

"I'm sure it is. It always was. Just don't talk to me, okay?"

"Fine. I can manage that."

"That'll be a first."

She slides me another Jameson sour before walking away. The Animals-girl taps me on the shoulder, saying, "Are you upsetting Jules?"

"No. Now go back to butchering great music."

I know I'm *that* asshole. The one that ruins everyone else's fun, but I don't care right now. Jules berates me and this girl has the balls to assume it's my fault? I never was good with others. Good to know I've still got it.

The cockney-schmuck goes back up for another round. I groan in between sips. It's not until I hear the collaboration of John Bonham's drums, John Paul Jones' bass line, Jimmy Page's guitar riffs for "When the Levee Breaks" that I finally see red. If I blackout and pop him one, I shouldn't be held responsible, right? The bastard can't even reach Robert Plant's vocal height. As if he were a seal being clubbed. If only. I've always had a rule to which Dad, I think, would've agreed: If someone covers a song, they better make damn sure he or she can sing it as good as, if not better than, the original. One exception, however. *Fish's Law*: No one, no matter how musically talented, should *ever* sing a Zeppelin tune because *no one* can sing like Plant.

I slam my glass on the bar. Ice flies everywhere and Jameson covers the wood. I can see Jules throwing me out. Also, I'm thinking a night in jail may be worth the lesson I should teach this man. As I stand up to charge, I feel a familiar hand.

"Leaving Jakey?" I look up and see Ollie smiling at me. He's had his teeth fixed since the last time I saw him.

"What? Oh, sorry. Just a little accident."

"What are you feeding me mate over here?" Ollie says in Jules' direction and laughs. A loud, snorting laugh. She flips all of us off and proceeds cleaning my mess. Just like old times. I make out, "Fucking jackasses" from under her breath followed by, "No wonder I cheated on him." Cheated on me? Did she say *cheated on me*?

"Jake. Jake! Hello, Jake," Ollie says, snapping his fingers.

"Yeah, sorry. Just distracted."

"The hot bartender?" Look before you speak, dumbass. He must know it's Jules.

“No, it’s just, you know...” I want to say that Jules cheated on me. “...that guy, that fucking guy, over there, singing. Zeppelin.”

“Complete your bloody sentences. Stop this stuttering,” he says. “Anyway, this is a Fish’s Law thing, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I fucking knew it. But Jake, even so, it doesn’t mean you can run around out of sorts with broken glassware and violent intentions. You look like a prat, sorry to say.”

“He started it.”

“And you’re a grown bloke,” says Ollie, “so deal with it. What I can’t understand is why you dragged us down here. When you said to meet at your favorite pub, I imagined a tad more class. However, you’ve always been a bit dodgy, love.”

I notice the two suits behind Ollie. He talks unaffected, as he’s always done. Their legs are crossed and they’re hugging themselves.

“Boys, boys,” I say, “don’t worry. I don’t bite. Well, unless you touch a certain spot underneath...you know, that’s not important, what are you drinking?” Ollie gets two Coors Lights for them, but he can’t decide for himself.

“You know, Jake, no matter how many years I’ve lived here, I’m still not sold on Seppo beer. Give me a warm bitter any day.”

“Quit your bitching. These *fine* gentlemen and I haven’t been properly introduced and you’re raving about proper beer. Where are your manners? What did you tell me?

‘You’re a grown bloke?’”

“At least your wit’s still bloody intact,” he says while sitting down. The stools may be cushionless, but after a few drinks, we don’t even notice.

Ollie does the Jake-to-Suits introductions. Mr. Fred Stevens is a publisher near Oakland looking for an author who’ll spit a new novel off the assembly line every year or two. His words are technical but translatable: selling your soul gets you a cult following and the possibly of more pay checks. Craft isn’t important. Think Chuck Palahniuk. No wonder Ollie likes these guys.

The other guy is a publicist named Mr. Toby Madison. Ollie tells me he’ll do an image overhaul. He says, “You scream *lazy, college dropout*, so that’s your current audience. Think of yourself as a working man’s Bukowski.” A bit redundant but we’ll see where this goes. “Like we discussed earlier, Bukowski lovers read your stuff. Let’s give them another drunken escapade. Now you’re looking at me as if I’m daft—”

“Me? No,” I say.

“I assure you this will work.”

“Fuck me, and Toby here can do all that?”

Mr. Fish...” Doctor. Doctor Fish. “...I can assure you—”

“Hey Ollie, check this guy out. Sounds just like you.”

“Mr. Fish.”

“Doctor, please.”

“I am so sorry. Dr. Fish. I assure you we’ll work diligently to make you the most likeable and most irresistible author in the country.”

“*Toby*. Two things. First, stop reading off your office’s template for handling clients. And second, I don’t care about image. I care about words.”

“The public loves to put a face to a name. I’ve read your stuff and out of all the top writers, you are the best.”

“You’re just like my brother. I can’t tell if it’s a natural embellishment or you’re too stupid to understand reality. You see, in the real world, this world, the author, that’s me, writes. Following so far?” He nods. He’s either annoyed (the most plausible), confused (also plausible), or scared (okay, hell, they all work). It’s hard to read stoic. “Okay, well, then the publisher, Mr. Stevens here—”

“Please, call me Fred,” Fred says.

“Right, Fred. You see, his company publishes the book. Then sells it. Then the author, me again, collects royalty checks. Now where do you fit in? I don’t need a publicist to speak for me because, and I’m fairly confident of this, I think, as a writer, I can represent myself with *words* better than you can with your business communication degree.”

“Jake, let’s be fair here. The chap’s trying to help. Remember your last interview?” asks Ollie.

“No.”

“Exactly. You’ve never had one. People don’t know you; ergo, they don’t want to talk to you. Toby will make you more than just the piss-head you are now. Movie deals and program opportunities on the telly.”

“Then what are you for?” I ask Ollie.

Crickets.

All this talking has watered down my drink. Bastards.

“Dr. Fish. Have you ever wanted to be more successful? Fred asks. “You published two novels at such a young age, but since then you’ve been absent.”

“Says you.”

“To be honest, your life makes for such great material.”

“I don’t do the non-fiction stuff.”

“No, not that. Just your experiences. Capture those in vivid detail and you’ve got a bestseller.”

“*The Times*’ list? Promise me *The Times*’ list and you’ve got a deal.”

Again, crickets.

“Look, before you moved away, you lived a rather, how do I put this—”

“Careful, *Fred*.”

“Depraved lifestyle? You’ve seen and done a lot, yes?”

“I’m not seeing the reference point here.”

“Drugs.” Guilty. “Alcohol.” Duh. “Crimes.” Come on now. Misdemeanors.

“And...prostitutes?”

“Goddamnit, Ollie. You told them?”

“You shagged a prostitute.”

“You told me to!”

“I was kidding! Besides, I’m not the one who let the Old Bill catch me with my pants down, am I right?”

“Jules left me and I needed to get laid!” Ollie raises his eyebrows. “Or an average one.” He sighs. “Fine, I just needed a hole. Happy?”

“I little bit. But I understand, mate, but L.A. and the media don’t forget bollocks like this. They’ll dig it up and label you as someone who fancies brass flutes.”

“You’re cut off. I don’t even know what that is. I’ll assume it means prostitute. Anyway, the media? L.A.? Even if, and that’s a big *if*, I cared, no one knows me. So the likelihood of people remembering that stuff is slim if not none.”

“You’d be surprised, Jake,” Fred said, “but that’s in the past and my publishing house...”

“Excuse me, *Fred*, but where did you say you worked again?”

“Tin Cup Publishing.”

“What? Like the shitty Costner flick? Never heard of it.”

“Well we’re not the most well-known...”

“Fred, I’m an unemployed writer. I’ve heard of the lesser known places. Haven’t heard of yours, though, which means no one else has either. Christ Ollie, I’m trying to resurrect my career and you bring me schmucks.

“Jake, you’ve almost been completely blacklisted, mate. You’re still semi-known to publishers. This is what you’ve got. You’re just lucky that they’re the sort with low moral fiber and blokes who love to gamble. No offense, mates.”

“None taken,” Toby and Fred say in unison.

“And if I don’t go with the suits?” I ask Ollie.

“Then you’ll be self-publishing your forthcoming novel from some dodgy website in a dodgy part of town like some ol’ dodgy lady with too much available time. Then you’ll go on these unorganized book tours across the country. You’ll read in coffee shops and Barnes & Nobles with hopes that someone will buy a copy. By then you’re broke and with your financial situation...”

“I know I’m behind a *few* bills, but we’re working on that. You and I. We don’t need them.” My stack of bills has disappeared. Have I had that much to drink? Or did Jules take it. I don’t see her. Where’d she go?

“Yes we do.”

“I’ll get by.”

“Can you afford that, though?” Ollie asks. I want to say yes. “Can you, Dr. Jacob Abraham Fish, be brilliant, and I mean bloody brilliant, enough to *be* the American Dream? On your own?”

Like a rolling stone? I wish. It’s been a dream. My American Dream.

Toby’s nursing his Coors. Sucking like it’s his mother’s tit. Fred’s on a stool tapping his foot to the Animals Girl’s version of “Landslide.” The Fleetwood Mac one not the Smashing Pumpkins. Like it matters. What have I become? The girl sings, “Well I’m afraid of changing cause I, I built my life around you.” Such true words. If Dad were here, he’d crack me over the head for feeling something during a Fleetwood Mac tune, but I never told him about my affection for Stevie Nicks. There is a lot I never said. Like I loved him or that Football Sundays with him on the couch, in our underwear,

were the greatest days of my childhood. Then there's Mom. I really should call her. She sounded...off. No messages on my phone, however. A good sign, right?

Okay, I lied a bit. There are truer words and better songs. I will take: Zeppelin's "Gallows Pole," Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'," The Doors' "The End," and, a more recent entry, Warren Zevon's "My Shit's Fucked Up." But it had to be "Landslide?" Does it even fit? Sorry Dad.

I throw back my drink. It's time to slow down. Handling the warmth and tingling feeling is one thing. Spinning walls are completely different.

"I'll tell you what, mate. I can tell you're still confused. Or maybe it's your misplaced Irish Pride. But why don't you come to a party I'm hosting at this smashing Hollywood club. You can mingle or sit in a corner and brood. Your choice. No, forget that. You don't have a say. You're coming because as a guest in my home, I have to entertain you. I will not have you sitting on your arse fiddling your willy."

"Fine, whatever," I say to Ollie. Turning to Fred and Toby, I ask, "Should I expect you two tomorrow as well?"

They tell me they're coming and Ollie buys a final round. Scotch for Ollie and me. Wine for the suits. Dive-bar chardonnay. The horror! Can't wait to spend more time with these two.

The Zeppelin guy gets up to sing "Immigrant Song." A vast improvement, Fish's Law aside, but when vomits the verses, I'm lost. I just hang my head in shame. Defeated.

CHAPTER 3

Ollie wants to get to the party early. It's for a record-release from a new band he represents. He said last night, "These blokes will impress the snot out of you." I doubt it, but I never reject opportunities to converse with musicians. So what if they're new. The Stones and The Beatles had to start somewhere, too. The market can destroy the art before the public sees it, so this party means they've already won.

"You're not wearing those trousers again? Are you, mate?" Ollie asks.

"What's wrong with my pants?"

"You wore them out last night. You smell like the three packs of fags you smoked last night."

"Okay, Mr. Hollywood. What would you suggest?"

"Shirt, tie, clean pants, and maybe some cologne. And some make-up. I can't have you looking knackered. People will think you'd rather be in bed."

"I would rather be in bed. Or, you know, writing."

"Party first. Writing later."

I drop my pants in Ollie's living room (my temporary bedroom) while he runs back upstairs to finish getting ready. I'm already annoyed and I give a stare that says so, even though he never sees it. It's that sort of look you have when you see a cassette player in a new car. What's the point? Or, in this case, what's taking him so long? Since when does he care about appearances? And did he offer me make-up?

"Done yet?" I ask as he turns on a blow dryer.

No answer.

Like Jules, he takes forever. She never knew what to wear or if her hair looked nice (the correct answer to these questions is always: “Of course, hun.”). Teaching forced her up before the sun. Or I should say forced *us* up. She’d spring from bed and stumble into the bathroom. After pissing, flushing, brushing her teeth, stomping on a scale, she’d hop in the shower. I remember because the walls separating bed and bath were like multipurpose paper. And then there was the singing. Etta James or Eagle Eye Cherry. No one’s perfect.

Ollie’s far from perfect. He’s awful. The hair dryer is loud, yes, but it’s his singing of some pop tune that gets me. I’ve never heard it, but it’s got the ooh-yeahs and I-love-you-babys.

“Every time your voice cracks, Lennon turns over in his grave,” I say to him. He appears wearing hair curlers (blue ones).

“What did you say?” he asks.

“Not important anymore. All I have is: what the hell? You’ve gone to the Dark Side.”

“Funny. This isn’t an everyday thing—”

“It never was an any-day thing.”

“Get fucked, *Doctor*. You’re still in the same bloody trousers.”

“And I’m comfortable, thank you.”

Ollie huffs back out of sight. I sit on the sofa that contorted my right shoulder last night. With all his money now, you'd think Ollie would have a spare bed. Wonder what his wife thinks.

Any time Ollie's nervous, he won't leave until he drops a deuce and takes a shot of scotch. I've got some time. I admire Ollie's home. He's found something on the Venice Canals. I'll admit I'm jealous. His flat screen takes up one wall. His liquor cabinet—made out of oak, glass, and portions of crystal—has bottles of scotch older than me. Aside from the view (a neon green, yellow, and sky blue house across the canal), this is a dream house.

“Are you ready?” Ollie runs down stairs. Where's the flush?

“No, but I'll get there.”

I look down at his hands. Yep, he gave himself a quick manicure. Goddamnit.

We take Ollie's BMW. It's fast, I'll give it that. Ollie tells the valet to be careful, and he makes sure to catch the kid's name: Francisco. The band's already here drinking. Some fruity drinks, blended, with strawberries and kiwis for garnish. They have tight pants and V-neck shirts. They've dyed their hair different colors. And do I smell...lilacs? Oh good Christ.

I waste no time finding a spot at the end of the bar. I ask the bartender for Kilbeggan (neat). “Sorry, sir, we don't have that.” Of course you don't. I settle for Bushmills. Aside from the blue and purple lights reflecting off the bar's polished marble,

it's manageable. Bathroom's adjacent. Good path to the door for smoke breaks. I sense, however, I'll be smoking a lot tonight. Call it a hunch. Hope I have enough.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me?" I look up from my whiskey and Jules is right in front of me. "Why are you here?"

"Party."

"Really? You're here for the party? Wow, you're more pathetic than I remember."

The sun's setting and the place is getting darker. I can't see what Jules looks like but I assume it's pissed-off, I-want-to-kill-you-with-this-knife, or vexation (yeah, the last one is nice). As Ollie takes the stage to welcome everyone, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I put up my finger, saying, "Excuse me." She comes back with, "Good riddance."

When I get outside, people are hovering around the entrance. No place for privacy. I notice it's Mom calling but can't find a good spot. I run around the corner. People are everywhere. Can't you people just get lost! Once I find an alley, with no barking dogs or homeless men, I answer.

"Mom? What is it?"

"You promised you'd call."

"I'm so sorry. I've been busy."

"You're always too busy. Too busy to call. Too busy to visit. You can't even write me a letter?" There is one at home. Filed away.

"I'm sorry."

“You’re always *sorry*. And where are you? Is that...music I hear?”

“There’s a club across the street.”

“Where are you?”

“Mom, listen. I was going to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“I’m in L.A. But only for two weeks.”

“L.A.!”

“I’m trying to write again.”

“Oh, Jake. I thought you gave that up.”

“Why?”

“Because you wrote two books and stopped. I figured it was a phase.”

“Mom, a writer doesn’t *publish* two books because he’s going through a *phase*.”

“Don’t talk back to me. What did I teach you? Honor your—”

“Father and mother. Yeah, yeah. That shit didn’t take, remember?”

She coughs, a hacking cough, and spits something out (probably green) before saying, “Watch...your...language.”

“Christ, Mom.”

“Don’t you dare blaspheme to me!”

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll say a few *Our Fathers* over some Bloody Marys, okay?”

“Always with the lip. Just like your father.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I'm uncomfortable. My ass is sweaty and my temples ache. And I've got the punched-in-the-gut feeling. Mom and I don't talk much. Conversations followed a format: yelling, name calling, and final condescension. And I'll take each one on the chin. Could really use an Advil. Or something stronger.

"Jake, I'm worried about you," says Mom.

"Don't be."

"The last time I saw you...when was that? Christmas? Last year?" Your birthday, four months ago, but close. "Anyway, last time you were here, you'd gained some weight." The stressed buttons on my shirt don't refute that.

"So I've gained weight. So what?" Mom always has to be the health conscious one.

"I don't give a darn about your appearance. It's your health. Your father was a beefcake—"

"Don't say beefcake."

"Sorry. He was plump, but that doesn't matter. I want you to look at your life."

"Mom, I don't have time for a philosophical debate. I've got to get back."

"Will you just listen?"

"Mom, I can't. Ollie's probably looking for me."

"Mr. Smith? That's your agent, right?"

"Yeah. He's working a book deal for me."

"Well that's...great."

"So, I need to go."

“Jake.”

“Mom, seriously! What?”

“Don’t raise your voice to me! You will listen, damnit!”

Mom’s voice cracks. Then there’s a silence. It’s long. So long that I’m able to watch a homeless man cross the street, walk right by me, piss on house, shake, zip, and walk away. I begin to worry because Mom’s never at a loss for words. She’s a crier but there’s not even a whimper.

“You there?” I ask.

Then I hear her—it’s the sound of her coughing. In fact, she’s hacking and groaning, gargling and spitting. I’m glad she put the phone down. It’s unlike Mom, however, to be like this. Always a model of physical health. Never smoked a day in her life. Has the occasional glass of red wine at dinner (although she had two at my cousin’s wedding and slept until noon the next day). Always ate her vegetables, and I can’t remember a day she wasn’t drinking cranberry juice. Real stuff she made. Not the sugary, store-bought variety. So why the coughing now?

“I can let you go if necessary,” I say.

I know she won’t let me go.

“I can’t let you go, Jake.” Can she detect my concern? How do I ask her about her health? We never talked about these things before. “Jake...”

“Yes, Mom?”

“Do me a favor.”

“What is it?”

“Quit smoking, okay?” Where’s this coming from?

“Okay? Why?”

“Just do it. Before you kill yourself.”

“So this is about my smoking? Once again you just want to tell me how to live my life?” I know that’s not it. She’s not coughing anymore except for a few wheezes, but I hear something else—soft crying.

“No, Jake. No. I’m sorry. It’s your life. Go. Live it.”

“Thank you.”

I’m tempted for a moment: to have it out with Mom. Just unload it all. The writing (or lack thereof). Running into Jules. My finances. Her nagging. Her health. A once-in-a-lifetime conversation with her. But I don’t. I can’t. Too soon. I have so many things out of sorts. Fixing the issues with Mom is down the list of priorities. And that job should be saved for a therapist.

CHAPTER 4

I was worried what the party would be like when I got back. It is, in fact, just as I'd imagined: guys with gelled hair and women in short, sequined dresses dancing like fools while sipping martinis and daiquiris. I shake my glass toward the bar and Jules gives me a disgusted smirk. Her co-worker, however, pours me another. It takes skill to achieve what I have. The girl that used to love me is now incapable of speaking. Aren't I supposed to save the speechlessness for sex? Well, that's long gone, is it? I have to entertain somehow. There's someone in my seat, but a scowl sends him away. I suppose I don't have that inviting demeanor. People (guys, gals, gays, straights, youngsters, and still-wanting-to-be-youngsters) look me over, see the beard and the frown, and they run for the dance floor. I'm not bothered, though, because I'm not here to support them. I'm supporting Ollie and his clients—okay, just Ollie. So, the I-will-cut-you look works brilliantly in keeping the air guitar players and the too-drunk-to-stand girls across the club.

There are many songs that the band on stage could play, but they chose Simon and Garfunkel's "Cecilia." An electric guitar, full-metal version that should be illegal. Even Jules covers her ears and she used to love the more alternative, grunge scene. I think now's a good time for a smoke, but as I get up to leave, Toby and Fred arrive with hands extended. They're dressed to kill in their black tuxedos with vests and bowties. I expected a few ladies on their arms seeing as it's a classy affair and L.A. loves (and needs) others to see them. Fred says he's not married and Toby got divorced 18 months

ago. We aren't similar but any common ground deserves a drink. Thanks to Ollie, I'm drinking for free tonight (I need it, too, because I've almost exhausted my cash from last night). Luckily the bartender—not Jules—allows *my* guests the same courtesy. A pinot noir for my fellow loner and vodka-lemonade for the divorcee.

“So have you come to a decision yet?” Fred asks.

“Getting right into business, Fred? Can't we enjoy ourselves?”

“I wish, but my boss wants an answer by tomorrow morning.”

“And we are a package deal,” Toby says. “Take it or leave it.”

“Usually, *Toby*, I don't let others push me around. But, I'll tell you what, since you two humored me last night in my environment and are still willing to do business with me, how can I say no?”

“Then that's a yes?” ask Fred.

“It was rhetorical, sir... Yes. That's a yes,” I say, sighing.

I've dealt with suits before. It didn't end well. Ollie had convinced Blarney Press to publish my recent novella. Contracts were signed. The writing was done. But when the story hit the editor's desk, they rejected it. We threatened to sue, but they pointed out some fine print we'd neglected to read. They said, “It's not like your other work.” When I responded with, “Then find a different story,” they did.

I can't get carried away this time, by which I mean with suits. Fred and Toby get what they came for: a handshake and a signature. They're gone as fast as they'd come. Not even a thanks-again-for-the-drink or it-was-a-pleasure-seeing-you-again. I don't

even think they talked to Ollie. Just left me with an appointment with Toby tomorrow to discuss image issues and story ideas (I'll bet he brings up *drunken writer* at least three times).

Ollie's band takes the stage. I look around for Jules, but she's probably gone. The band, however, is...well, I don't know how to describe them. Each song is different. One features a trumpet. The next features a tambourine. Definitely not ska. Now it's conga drums? New age? World? Tribal? I'm waiting for a rain stick. Why not, right? What other obscure instruments could they use? Possible choices: the triangle, a saw, a recorder you learn in grade school, and a washboard. Ollie said they were Indie. I call it lazy. They may call themselves Blueberry Muffin Afternoon, but Eclectic Misfit Toys is a better fit. I hate Ollie right now. He should know better. If music were food, I indulge in fine cuisine (healthy and nutritious) whereas these bastards are fast food (mmm, trans-fats).

I'm washing my hands of this, and although I've been back for mere minutes it seems, it's time for a cigarette. Perhaps Mom's tried calling again (no luck). It would've given me a proper excuse for an exit. The air's a little cool for Hollywood—60 degrees—but it still beats the single digits in Wisconsin. A few other people have the same idea but remain distant. Eyes on the stomachs. Non-smoking hands tucked in pockets or armpits. One guy even has a stocking hat. He's probably never seen legitimate snow.

Ollie finds me and he's not alone. The band needed a smoke break, and Ollie wanted to introduce us.

“Dr. Jake Fish,” I say, shaking their hands. The rattle off a few names that I’ll forget (I think one’s named Gunderson). They don’t pop out like Dylan or Jagger or Morrison or Hendrix (for diversity’s sake).

“Ollie tells us you’re a writer?” asks the lead singer.

“Trying to be.”

“That’s cool.” His friends aren’t interested. They spot a girl hosed in glitter and drift away.

“And you, of course, sing. Who were your influences?” It’s the generic question posed to artists, but it shows intrigue.

“Oh, you know, all kinds. There’s so many to name. Can you roll yours off the cuff?”

I want to say: of course. Thompson, Ford, Sebold (thanks Jules), Bukowski, and that’s just the first four that come to mind. Maybe Burgess or Burroughs.

“I understand completely,” I say, “but tell me, if a guy wanted a copy of *Abbey Road*, where should he look in L.A.?”

“Why not download it or pick up the C.D.?”

“I think what Dr. Fish means to ask is...” says Ollie, “...where can he find a decent vinyl selection?”

I’ll tell him later that I know what he’s doing—can’t let the washed-up client educate and humiliate the new one.

“Check thrift stores? I don’t know,” the singer says. “Our vinyl, though, will be available at our concerts or off our website.”

He slides me a business card. Very Rock & Roll. I've got *Abbey Road* on the brain and want to be listening to "Something." Jules and I would sing it in the car on our way to Griffith Park or Beverly Hills. I want to go back to when she was here regardless of if she'd have me. Anything's better than this. I'd keep to my end of the bar and we'd share moments of disgust for the music. And I'd drown it out with "Something." I just want her here. To relieve me of this nightmare. Tonight Jules could come up to me, punch me in the face, spit in my hair, and I would thank her for the attention.

"Sorry, buddy," I say, "but I'm only looking for *Abbey Road*—"

"What street? I can look it up on the GPS on my phone."

"No, man. The album? By the Beatles?"

"Ohhh...riiigghhtt." He doesn't get it. And why should he? "Well, keep our record in mind. They make great gifts. Christmas is coming up. Give it to your mom."

If he knew my mom, he'd have held that in.

"Thanks," I say.

The band heads back inside. I tell Ollie that I should go. I lie and say my phone's back at his place and I'm expecting a call. He says he has the spare key taped to the roof of the lion's mouth on his patio. He gives me cash for a cab and says "cheers" before disappearing back into the club.

CHAPTER 5

The next morning my buzzing phone startles me while I eat corn flakes. It's probably Mom. Maybe Eric if my suspicions of Mom's health hold any weight. I'm running so late for my meeting with Toby that I don't have time for a conversation. Maybe this is me using my meeting as an alibi to tell Mom later, or maybe I don't want to keep one foot back in Wisconsin, but I find myself missing it at the moment. Crisp long grass recently covered with snow. Christmas lights on houses and pine trees. I'm even yearning for Mom's insults. Or Eric's insults. At least I know what's behind them, but here, in Hollywood, they look at you funny or they ignore you. You don't register. Is it anxiety over this meeting? Or do I really miss my family? Right now I'd take mockery and derision from Eric because that's home. This, this is unknown.

I toss a notebook into my shoulder bag as a cab honks outside. It takes a little bit to get there due to road construction and what not (another plus for Wisconsin. No year-round road construction). The cabbie drops me off, and I check my phone before going in. Eric has indeed called. I'm already late. What's a few more minutes? I phone Eric and he answers.

"Hi, Eric. You rang?"

"You're in L.A.? Couldn't have told me?"

"Didn't think I had to."

"This is just like you. Mom gets sick and you bolt to L.A."

"Mom's sick?"

“Of course. Has been for a while.”

“What’s awhile?”

“Two, maybe three months. Don’t worry, though. *I’ve* been driving her back and forth from the hospital.”

“The hospital?”

“Yeah. The doctor says she has ‘bronchioloalveolar carcinoma.’”

“Lung cancer?” It makes sense. The coughing and spitting, the wheezing and the scratchy voice.

“Yes. Lung cancer. Maybe you’ll come home for this one. When will you put family over yourself?” And here’s the lecture. “If it’s not this, it’s me bailing you out of jail.”

“It’s been five years. Drop it. Mom’s sick yet you can’t stop, can you? Look, let me save you the trouble: I’m worthless, I’m selfish, and I’m a fuck-up. Can’t you wait till Christmas for this?”

“Mom might not make it until Christmas.” Has it spread this quickly? “Maybe if Dad hadn’t smoked all those years, she’d be—”

“He’s been dead ten years! Don’t you dare blame this on him! Don’t you dare!”

“Just the truth.”

“Look, you half-witted bastard,” I say, channeling my inner-Bukowski, “if you ever, *ever*, talk ill of Dad again, I’ll rip your goddamn lungs out! Got it, *little* brother?”

I hang up before he can respond. Yep, just like home.

My meeting with Toby is worse and more unproductive. I can't stop thinking about Mom. I've already lost Dad. Can I handle losing her, too?

"Let's play off your drinking," says Toby. I want to suggest: How about my anger? Same damn tune. Same broken record. "Are you with me, Jake?"

"Dr. Fish."

Can't they respect me? Everyone wants the silly drunk caught with a hooker. Sure, L.A. is known for off-the-cuff-antics and bat-shit-crazy-scenarios, but I didn't do it because I could. That wasn't me. Christ, what would Mom think? Toby reassures me, however, that everyone loves a good redemption story. I quip, "That's why Hollywood uses it for five flicks a year?"

I tune Toby out and look over headshots of clients hanging on the wall. Don't recognize a soul. What can he really do for me? Do I become another nameless face or "another brick in the wall"? I'll give Toby credit, though. He looks powerful in his black suit, white shirt, and black tie combo. Guessing Italian, but I'm horrible with fashion. The Blues Brothers did it better. And Dad would agree. He once said, "Give a suited man a desk, he'll talk down to you, but give him a microphone, and he'll change lives." Maybe that's my problem. I don't own a suit.

"Now, Jake, I've been in contact with a few liquor companies."

"Really? For what?"

"Well, how do you feel about vodka?"

"Hate it. Why?"

"Clyde's Brothers Spirits wants you to promote their vodka."

“Do they make whiskey?”

“No.”

“Then no.”

“And if I’d said yes?”

“Still no.”

“Why?”

“Did you not catch the part about me hating vodka?”

“You’re a writer. You drink. Why not drink for free? Besides, what would Hemingway have been if he hadn’t drank, hmm?”

“First, he never drank while writing. Two, maybe he wouldn’t have shot himself. That’s only, you know, speculation, though.”

Toby’s shifting butt cheeks. He’s asking himself how a writer knows so much about another writer.

“Okay, what about Bukowski,” asks Toby. “He drank and wrote about drinking, no?”

“Do I look like Bukowski?” I kind of do today. Didn’t have time for a brush or an undershirt.

“Sure.”

“Have you ever read Bukowski? Or did you simply brush up on the Cliff Notes? He was a womanizer. An Alcoholic. Apathetic. You see, *Toby*—”

“Mr. Madison.”

“I’m no Bukowski, *Toby*. I don’t womanize. What’s with you all pushing Bukowski on me? Just tells me you all read my dissertation. I don’t worship the prick.”

“He’s the perfect example of an alcoholic writer.”

“He didn’t make shit from his image, though. It’s fucktards like you that profited!”

“That’s why you should go with Clyde’s—”

“I’m not drinking their shitty vodka!”

My outburst gets Toby out of his seat. I’m fist-pumping inside. Can’t tell if he’s going to strike me or not. I decide to test it by lighting up a cigarette, breathing deep, and exhaling toward his face. He coughs and takes puffs from an inhaler.

“This is good. Tobacco usage. Get money by smoking specific cigarette brands.”

Jesus Christ, he doesn’t have an off switch. Why isn’t Ollie handling this stuff? Isn’t this why I pay him? Then it hits me. The clues have been right in front of me. Ollie did push me off onto Toby and Fred. He hasn’t been around much. I want to still believe in him, but my doubts make me look at Toby’s nameplate on his desk:

Mr. Toby Madison
Agent and Publicist

Ollie had me sign with a new agent? First I find out Jules cheated on me, then that Mom’s got cancer, and now this? The sheisty bastard dropped me. I hear “Sounds of Silence” and wonder what happened. My best friend. It was a mistake coming here, but I can’t give up. I’ve lost everything else. I won’t lose him.

I put my cigarette out on Toby's desk. A moment like this requires something better than "Sounds of Silence." Something with anger. My mind settles on AC/DCs "Shoot to Thrill." Music has always helped with emotions. Dad taught me that. But anger's still tricky. I'm sure there are better songs than an AC/DC tune, but that's what I'm going with. This will go one of three ways:

Ollie: Why are you upset? Didn't you see this coming?

Me: No, how could I? You know life's shit on me. You too? I hate you!

Ollie: Why are you upset? Didn't you see this coming?

Me: Right. My best friend and agent drops me. How could I have not seen it?

It's so simple.

Ollie: Why are you upset? Didn't you see this coming?

Me: Fuck off.

Maybe I'm wrong.

Of course I'm wrong. Life's not that simple. Conversations are complex. Friends are like any other relationship. There's good times and there's bad times (now the song makes sense!). I was his best man. He was my closest friend. We shared each other's special events. Birthdays, book release parties, new client signings. Everything. What went wrong? I don't have answers, but I'll get them. One way or another. May

not be the answers I want. Or the ones I expect. But I'll get them. One thing's for sure:
rejection fucking sucks.

CHAPTER 6

“What do you mean he dropped you?”

I’m immediately regretting calling Mom. At least I’ve shifted her disdain to Ollie. It’s okay if I’m sullen because of her, but if someone else messes around, the gloves come off.

“He passed me off. Sold me at a discounted price.”

“It’s okay, hun. Let it out.”

I can say many things about Mom but uncaring (mostly) isn’t one of them. She was always there to clean knee-scrapes or take me in for stitches (bike accident). But can she fix me now?

“I’m figuring things out. No need to worry yourself.”

“Nonsense.”

“Mom, you have bigger issues, yes?”

“What...what do you mean?”

“Eric told me.”

“Told you what?”

“You know.”

“Just say it.”

“You have lung cancer. Why haven’t you said anything?”

“We never talk and I didn’t want that to be the subject. Besides, you’re sorting your life out. God’s handling mine.”

“Don’t you mean the doctor’s handling it?”

“He’s done all he can.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m dying Jake. You probably picked up on that.” I didn’t. “Always were quick, weren’t you? Foolish, yes, but quick.” I’ll take it. It’s backwards, but at least it’s a compliment.

For a moment I’m relieved. Harsh, I know, but it’s the first absolute, definitive answer I’ve had all week. There’s nothing I can do. No use driving home. Sitting bedside would be futile. Don’t know if I like “foolish,” though.

“Do you need me to come home? I can have the car loaded and be there in a day and half.”

“It’s fine, Jake,” she says. “Eric’s here. He’s taking good care of me. Did you know he fixed the T.V. in the room? When did he learn to fix things?” Dad tried teaching him to hammer a nail. I had never seen so many bruised fingers.

“All right, but if you need anything, please call.”

“I’d say don’t worry, but you’ve always been good at that.” She got one last zinger in. Fate’s given me a retry at least. If this is the last time I talk to her, have to make it count.

“Take care of yourself, and if I don’t hear from you again, give Jesus hell for me, will you?”

“I love you too, Jake.”

I'll take this as a victory. I've properly said goodbye to Mom in case it's the last, and I have Mom's words as ammo in case Eric wants to berate me again. So what's the significance of having the ammo? There's nothing significant about it; there's no tactical advantage, but in war you relish in opportunities and good intel.

Ollie's not home when I arrive. The lights are off and the curtains drawn. It's quiet and I hear only gentle splashing from the canals. It's not like Ollie to be out on a weekday afternoon. He's a work-from-home kind of guy. Never liked desks or nameplates or framed pictures. Not like my *new* agent. I used to envy him. Some days—when magazines kept rejecting story after story—I wished I was Ollie. He'd be out meeting people, taking phone calls, going out for drinks, or kicking back with a scotch in one hand and a T.V. remote in the other. Without pants, of course. He'd invite me over to watch football—ours not theirs—and say, “You Yanks can't settle for gentlemanly sports. You warped a ball, put armor on, and have a punch-up.” Then he'd slap my chest. Real gentlemanly. I told him, “Brits, you just don't understand.” But he learned quickly. A few short months later we traded boxers for box seats, taco dip for, well, I don't really know what it was. Shrimp dip, maybe? He gained a few pounds (he used to be a twig with boney arms and chicken legs), but then—in L.A. fashion—liposuction took care of his problems. I kept, however, growing.

No use in dwelling on good times. I take off my pants and throw them on the couch. There's a baseball game on T.V.—It's not the Angels, but it'll do. I'm soon bored, however. There's hundreds and hundreds of channels but nothing worth watching.

I almost stop on a documentary about the earth, but what's the point? In the circle of life, we all die. Everything dies one day. Let's hear Elton John sing about that, eh?

I don't hear Ollie come in.

"Wake up, tosser," Ollie says.

"I'm up, I'm up."

"How was your meeting?" asks Ollie.

"Fine."

"You didn't insult him, did you?"

"It's fine. Busy man, that Toby. Who knew a publicist has so many duties? And his tenacity. Chills. He also had some *great* ideas."

"You insulted him. Bollocks. This is your only shot, Jakey."

"Sure, sure. Hey, can I ask you something, though?"

"Of course, mate."

"*Mate*. That's funny. If we're such good *mates*, why not tell me you were shafting me?" He starts making a pot of coffee. "We had an agreement!"

"You're surprised? Look, you're a good chap, always have been, but when you got nicked with your trousers down, I bailed you out. How did you repay me?"

I put my pants back on.

"You ran home to your mum. I had to fend for myself. You buggered off when we had a good thing going. You know I could've fixed it."

He's right. He could have. The misdemeanors. The assault and battery when I punched Hal Melbourne, a rival author (he's the Stones to my Beatles, only because he's edgier).

Let's not forget the other battery charge (I was on a first name basis with the LAPD) when I punched—seeing a pattern?—a director, whose name I can't legally say, for adapting one of my favorites, Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream*. He even put the Yuppie from *American Psycho* (film's better than the book) as the lead. He had it coming. And I handsomely paid him. I'm sure he's forgotten that.

Ollie pours himself coffee. That's okay, I didn't want any anyway.

"This is about us," I say, heart panging. Ollie glowers.

"Jake, do you know how I afforded this house? How I got out of that dreadful flat?"

"Your wife's a designer?"

"No." (There's hesitation, but, in fact, Ollie's lies so well that hesitation doesn't have context, I suppose.)

"Then enlighten me."

"I signed other clients. Better clients, *mate*."

"Like who?"

There are: some reality show stars, Blueberry Muffin Afternoon, Franky McDonald (some kid who won a singing competition), and Jared Leto (of course he signed the Yuppie). Not that impressive, but Ollie says, "They're smart business

decisions. They've made me enough quid to never work again." I almost feel happiness for his success. Almost. Did I hold him back? Weigh him down?

But that's not it. I know I'm more talented than these schmucks. I know I've got something left in me. And he doesn't see it. And I realize he's a terrible friend. I'm just another dollar sign. He wasn't always terrible. Something changed him. He lives in his gated mansion, with his lion statue and expensive scotch. I don't need him, and I do.

"Jake, mate, why do you have to be such an arse about this?"

"I don't know. I guess I never thought you'd trade in your Sex Pistols for tacky crap, your Chucks for loafers, which look terrible, by the way. Most of all, I didn't think you'd lose your fight-the-man attitude."

"We all have to grow up. I can't relate to 'God Save the Queen' with the same ironic fervor anymore. I lost my best mate—"

"My father died!"

"And I would've come with you! Been there to buy you a pint and let you unload."

Silence.

"We ~~were~~ friends," he says. "Aye, we were, but you left and I had to find my own way." Ollie finishes his coffee and heads upstairs, saying, "Excuse me, though, I have a meeting."

Hal Melbourne walks through the door and I almost lose it. He's still got the stupid mustache that Dads wore in the 90s. I notice a folder and two bottles of booze in his arms. If I'm seeing those right: there's a bottle of Clyde's Brothers vodka and some

Macallan (though not the expensive kind). Still better than the Johnny Black I brought. I would've afforded it had I not bought so many bottles of Kilbeggen. But, you know, the doctor comes first, right? Yeah, the doctor has always come first. In everything.

Seeing Melbourne wrenches my guts. He wanders upstairs without a word. No use in staying here. I creep outside with the Johnny Black. I want to get blitzed and listen to Springsteen's "Born to Run." Maybe I'll sing once I'm three sheets to the wind. I could land in a hospital. And Eric would rush to care for me. Or chastise me. I don't know what I want. I do know, in fact, that my drinking will be barbaric.

I want to talk to Mom. Yes, I need my mommy. I could die of alcohol poisoning. She should know before I go. I dial the number. It rings and rings and rings. No answer. She always answers, though. I try the house phone. Nothing. Finally, I phone Eric. Straight to voicemail. As I stand on one of the Venice Canal's white bridges, I keep trying. Still getting the voicemail. Call again. Voicemail. Again. Voicemail. Rinse. Repeat. Rinse again to be sure. It's gotten dark. I take a seat on the bridge. I'm still calling. Still no answer.

CHAPTER 7

I go down to Venice Beach. I want to see the old apartment. The concrete sidewalk is showing more wear than I remember, and the people have changed. Tourists still have fanny packs and *Welcome-to-California* T-shirts. And sure, the vendors are here peddling hemp jewelry, paintings, and other *art*. The promenade, though, is more commercialized (fashion clothing stores, cheap sunglasses, a sports bar, and a Botox outlet).

The beach isn't much better. I step over a homeless guy sleeping in the sand. He has the right idea. The sand would've been better than that bridge in the canals last night. I always loved the feeling of sand between my toes. After kicking off my shoes and feeling the grains, I'm reminded of walking along the beach with...

"Jake?"

"Jules? I was just thinking about you."

"Great. I'm so glad. Why is it that you come back here and I can't go anywhere without you hovering around?"

"Umm...I don't know? Fate...I guess?"

"Don't be an asshole."

I don't think I'm being one. She's wearing a white bikini with a black bottom cover-up. Her sunglasses give her bug-eyes, and her shoulders are already sunburnt.

"Do you need me to put lotion on you?"

"What did I just say?"

“No, no. Nothing like that. It’s just, well, look at your shoulders. You’re burning.”

“Oh, sorry. I thought you were, you know, making a move.”

“Aren’t we past all that?” I ask.

“I guess. So why L.A.? Why now? And look at you.”

What about me? Do I have something in my teeth? Is my hair out of place?

Acceptable responses, but I choose to be more juvenile.

“Well...look at...you.”

“Don’t do this, please. I’m being cordial. I know I haven’t been the last few days, but I’m trying now.”

“Fine. Well, I’m here on business.”

“That’s why you drank alone the last two nights?” Good point.

“Kind of. Ollie *was* helping me get the writing career going again.”

“Was?”

“He dropped me for another agent.”

“I knew he was a scumbag. What did I always tell you?”

“That ‘he’s a slimy, sleazy scumbag?’” I ask, going back to the words she first used when meeting Ollie.

Jules and I walk along the along the beach. It feels nice. Safe. Familiar. Her left arm dangles by her side. I want to grab her hand. Hold it. But that’s long gone. Kids around us and I wonder what our kids would’ve looked like (our green eyes, olive skin, and terrible slouching issues). She wanted to name our boy Jacob (not Jake) after her

father. I joked about naming him Ringo. She didn't find it funny. It was okay, though. I would've let her name them. She liked that sort of stuff. I named enough people in my stories. It's her turn, I would tell myself.

"So, how is the writing?" she asks.

"Currently on hiatus."

"That bad, huh?"

"I don't know if I have anything more to say." In fact, I *do* I have plenty to say. I *don't* know if anyone cares to hear it.

"Shouldn't be too hard."

"You'd think."

"Just write what you know."

"Did that. Now all I know is heart-break, loneliness, and depression."

"Oprah will love that."

"I don't give a damn what Oprah thinks!" Why am I mad? "This is your fault." I want to go back to the yearning and the hand holding and the kids.

"My fault?" asks Jules.

"Do you need a replay of what happened? How you left?"

"No. I was there. I know what happened—"

"No you don't! Do you know how many nights I tried falling asleep to 'Behind Blue Eyes?' You almost ruined The Who for me!"

"Every night?"

"Close. I changed it up with 'Love Hurts' or 'Here I Go Again on my Own.'"

“But you despise 80s ballads.”

“I despised you more. I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep.”

Where did this come from? I want to run. Springsteen said I was born for it.

This was a mistake. I can’t be nice to her. Can’t have an adult conversation. No, I want to put gum in her hair and snap her bra strap. Maybe pull down her pants while everyone laughs.

“This was a mistake.” She turns to walk away.

“Jules, wait,” I say, reaching out to grab her arm but don’t, “don’t go. I’m sorry. I’m just feeling a little...alone.” I let out a sigh. “Can I show you something?”

“I really shouldn’t. It looks like it’s going to storm.”

“But Albert Hammond says, ‘It never rains in southern California.’”

“Didn’t they warn you? ‘It pours, man it pours.’

“Touché.”

“And you know how L.A. drivers are in the rain.”

“Disgraceful? Is that how you put it?”

“Close enough.”

“No, I’m serious. Please, just humor me.”

I want to prove that I’m not such an asshole. I have 35 years against me, but I’ll try. We walk from the beach to Speedway—one of the shadiest alleys/streets I’ve ever seen. We stop at the corner of 18th and Speedway to look at the Jim Morrison mural. Some guy painted it on Morrison’s old apartment building. The sheer height is intimidating. Now *that’s* art.

“Why are we here?” Jules asks. “We’ve seen it before.”

“I know, but did you actually *experience* it? We took a lot for granted back then.”

“Wasn’t the building gray? Or a powder blue?”

“I think, but doesn’t the royal blue bring out his boyish physique and the tight leather pants?”

“I like the native-looking belt.” Figures Jules would notice the one accessory. I guess it’s better than commenting on him being shirtless. Makes this easier.

“And that microphone. Do you have chills?”

“No, but I see what you’re getting at.”

“Dad didn’t believe this was here.”

“Really? Didn’t you tell him?”

“Yeah, but he couldn’t believe that someone had enough spare time, and paint,” I say, pointing at the mural, “to do *that*.”

“Then why didn’t you fly him out here to see it?”

“What, and leave you alone with Mom? No thank you. I would’ve wanted to come home with the apartment in one piece.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Can you do me a favor? Can you take a picture of it?”

“A little touristy for you, isn’t it?”

Jules pulls a camera from her beach bag. I knew she’d have one. Always did. She snaps a few to be safe and shows me them. Two are blurry but one is perfect. Figure

I can tape a photo on Dad's grave. Not just for him, though. For everyone walking by. They'll stare and say, "Hey, that guy was one cool son-of-a-bitch." Damn right he was.

When we'd talk about Morrison, Dad would say, "Like so many artists, he got into too much shit. Died before his time. What a waste." I remember asking him if he was referring to me. He never admitted it (Mom wouldn't let him live it down), but he was a worrier. When I once got sick—I think it was the flu—he didn't leave my bedside except to get me medicine or juice or run down to the corner comic shop for that month's Batman.

When he died, I emoted on paper. I sat at my desk and wrote about how L.A. had changed me. Not just Jules or the prostitute. How artists—musicians and writers alike—had to be substance-abuse cases. Had to fly off the handle. Get completely twisted. Crazy sells in L.A. It's their biggest commodity. Unfortunately, people live so fast that they burn out. They either overdose (Morrison) or blow out their brains (take your pick). Even though Hemingway didn't drink while writing, his *persona* drank mojitos while at the typer. Talk about pressure. I needed Dad to tell me it was all right. That I'd get back on my feet. That I'd write and sell another lousy book. He loved *Sgt. Pepper's a Dirty Old Man* (I had it buried with him. His choice. Our secret. Everyone else thought it was a Bible. Close enough. If there's a hell, I'll be there. Right next to Dad). But Dad wasn't there, and this is how I ended up putting things in perspective: Hemingway shot himself, Dr. Thompson shot himself, and Virginia Woolf drowned herself. I wondered if I needed to die for others to appreciate me. (Also: why do so many writers have guns?)

All I had left was Eric harping, “If you want to succeed, you’ve got to put in the hard work. No handouts.” It’s off his greatest hits album. Cataloged A for Asshole among my other albums. I could only take so much his stuff that night, so I switched to *Blonde on Blonde* and drank a half of Kilbeggan before passing out.

“The old apartment’s looking better,” I say.

We’re taking the museum tour of our lives. We’ve reached the Where-the-Magic-Happened wing on Brooks Avenue. A band down on the beach plays “Let the Good Times Roll.” Something Louis Jordan could be proud of. I know I liked it. And Jules was tapping her feet. A beach cop rides by on a horse. He smiles and waves. Jules waves back. I nod. Cops still make me nervous.

The current tenants love flowers. They’re all over our old balcony. Jules says, “See, I told you lilies would’ve been perfect in the right left corner.” No, they wouldn’t have, I want to say. That’s where my desk and typer were. Facing the ocean. There are more than just lilies, though. They have: roses, carnations, tulips, daffodils, and some blue ones hidden in the back. And then there’s plants. And more plants. It was too much. Jules beams, though.

“What’s behind the philodendrons?”

It’s a mural of some kind, and it’s new. The paint’s still bright, still reflecting sunlight. I make out a computer and the word *fuck* printed in bold letters on the screen. There’s a hairy chest poking out of a plaid shirt. A bottle of Jameson next to the guy with a glass of it (on the rocks) in his hand.

“That looks familiar,” I say.

“It does? I can’t see his face.”

“Take the computer out of it. Just focus on the guy.”

“Holy shit, that’s your book-jacket photo.”

Whoever painted this, he/she knew me. Maybe even respected me. I see it capturing writer’s block (which I have), or it’s capturing his/her disdain for technology (also guilty). In fact, I’ll take a typer over a computer any day. I don’t know about anyone else, but my typer’s never crashed and lost all my information. Never had a virus uploaded. Never distracted me from my work. No saving. No editing. That’s done later. By hand. With a pen. Write till it’s done. Then write it all again.

“Do you think they got my good side?”

“What good side?”

“You know, the right side of my face where my beard isn’t patchy.”

“Ha, sure. It’s hard to tell, though.”

I don’t know why a part of me hates the mural. It’s as if I’m dead. Is it wrong to not want an artist to immortalize you? It’s not like I’m Morrison. I haven’t changed lives (that I know of). The kids walking by don’t even recognize me—as a counter-point, I doubt they recognize that “Boogie Chillen” is in the air or even know who John Lee Hooker is. They pass us while holding each other’s hand. And now I’m more uncomfortable.

Then the brooding stops. Yes, I’m incompetent. Ask anyone who knows me, but it’s a blessing. I can’t control anything. No one can. Chaos theory in action. I cheer up.

Cheer right up. If I'm dead, there are no expectations. I can reinvent myself. I'm reminded of Dylan's words: a man is a success if he gets up in the morning and gets to bed at night, and in between he does what he wants to do. I find the quote comforting. It's the reason I had it engraved on the right side of the typer.

Jules still admires the mural. She's smiling. As if she's smiling at me. The day's better than most we've shared. And I don't want it to end. To have the awkward goodbye (we'll hug and our butts will stick out; I'll go to kiss her cheek but hit her ear).

She turns to me. "Is that 'Idiot Wind'?" she asks. I don't hear it at first. She walks toward the promenade and I shuffle close behind. She's right. It is "Idiot Wind." And he's good, too. Really good. Enviously good. He wears a leather vest and a cowboy hat. Has a smoker's voice—what great musician doesn't?—that adds character.

That's where the fascination ends, however. The guy's a little naïve. He doesn't suspect anyone knows the song. He finishes and people clap and they toss him their dollar bills. He says, "Thanks folks. That is a song *I* wrote called, 'Someone's Got It in for Me.'" I've been listening to *Blood on the Tracks* since I was 10. "Idiot Wind" is one of my favorites. And Jules liked it, too (although she prefers "You are a Big Girl Now"). We can't let this stand.

"Hey prick!" Jules says. "Over here!"

He looks at us.

"Yeah, you." I chime in. "Do you get royalties every time Dylan sings *your* song?"

“Excuse me?” he asks. “Who do you two think you are?” His face turns a nice shade of pink.

“Just two people who know that album by heart. Change the title all you want. Still the same lyrics.”

His eyes get shifty and he’s looking for an out. He wipes his brow. People are putting bills back in their wallets and purses.

“I wrote that! I swear to god!”

“Sure. Keep lying to yourself. Hack,” says Jules.

He slams the guitar case shut and runs. The crowd, those who hadn’t already taken back their money, chases after him. You can’t mess with people’s money. That’s what Dad said when I tried running a lemonade stand, but that’s another story.

After the crowd disperses and the man only has an empty case, I walk up and say, “Don’t fuck with someone’s art. It’s timeless. People don’t forget the songs that have changed them.”

He screams and stands up. He takes a swing. His hand flies by my left eye. There’s black hairs and a mole on his middle-finger’s first knuckle. Momentum carries him past me and over a woman’s table. Hemp necklaces scatter. His guitar case sails and lands next to a homeless man’s head. The table snaps in half. The woman screams and punches his back. Wood splinters surround him as he lies there. Just defeated. I almost empathize with him. I’ve know what’s it like. Rock bottom. I’m still working at it. But I have hope. And sometimes hope’s all you need.

Jules grabs my arm and we run. She's being so nice to me. I've almost forgotten about the cheating. I'll bring it up later. She's lighter on her feet. Should start eating better. And perhaps give up smoking as Mom suggested. I don't know why I'm thinking about this. My chest pains could have something to do with it.

When we get to Jules' car (down Brooks, through two alleys and a Subway parking lot, across Venice Blvd., over a homeless woman, and onto Abbot Kinney Blvd.) we stop to catch our breath. Jules jokes, "You look terrible, but I didn't think you were *that* out of shape." I give her a *ha* and sit down on the curb.

"Think we lost him?" I ask.

"He wasn't going anywhere." She rummages in her bag. "Jake, I know we haven't been on the best of terms..." Understatement of the year. "...but I had fun today. Really." She's telling the truth. Her nostrils flare when she's truthful. And she's dead serious.

"Thanks. I enjoyed it, too."

"I got you something?" She did? When? Where was I? I've had my eyes on her all day.

"You do?"

She pulls out an album from her bag and hands it to me. I recognize Morrison right away. His head's transparent and overshadows his band mates. It's their self-titled. But there's more to the cover. The signatures. All of them: Jim Morrison, Ray Manzarek, John Densmore, and Robby Krieger. Ray's is a little smudged.

"Where did you find this?"

“I ripped it off that guy. While he rushed at you, I snatched it.”

I want to make love to her. Right here. In the road. I grab her and hug her. I kiss her cheek (not the ear). I thank her more times than I should. I forget the cheating. It’s in the past. I’m a new man, although I’m still in a rut. But I’ll fix that. Because of her, *Abbey Road*’s the only one left. That’s as easy as an Internet search. This is great.

“I’ve got to get going,” says Jules.

“No, stay awhile. We can go for a drink. Remember that place—”

“Jake, no. This was a one-time thing. I can’t see you anymore. It’s not good for me.”

I’m embarrassed and speechless. What do you say to that?

“I have to pick my son up from school before going to work. Take care, Jake.”

And like that, she’s gone. The jealousy and angst return. What once was joy has turned to mere contentment. And I’m back to my twenties wondering about her. She’s got a kid? What’s his name? How old? Is she married? I’m worked up. So worked up, in fact, that I march straight back to Ollie’s to settle things.

CHAPTER 8

Ollie's having a few scotches with Melbourne. Like we used to. I burst through the patio door but trip over a rug. This could've gone better, in an ideal world, and they laugh; I feel as if this won't go as planned. I stand up and brush myself off. They tip their glasses. I want to be back with Jules. There was tension, but it was mutual tension. And we had fun with it. This, this is something no man should have to do. Have a heart-to-heart with his former best friend. Men discussing their feelings never ends well. Either there's crying (something no man looks good doing) or punches are thrown (considering my Irish temper and Ollie's brashness, it's possible). I want to go home and not do this. *Home* home, that is. With Dad grilling on the deck and Mom mashing potatoes. Eric would be peeling carrots. I would toss a football to myself while singing "Luck be a Lady."

The joke's on me: Ollie's ready to go.

"Jake, come. Join us."

Not with him here, Ollie.

"Sure, why not?" I say.

"Hal and I were discussing our new venture. Now you'll probably think we're daft, but listen to this." I've never seen him so excited. "It's a book, okay bound with a generic cover like an ocean view or a jungle. You know, something vague to inspire people."

"To do what exactly?"

“To write. Everyone has fantasies about becoming a published author.”

“No self-respecting writer calls him- or herself a *published author*.”

“Exactly,” Ollie says.

I try to piece things together. What does he mean by *exactly*?

“What exactly?”

“These people aren’t writers. Think about the millions who dream of it, though.

The chap sitting at his desk while the clock barely moves. The housewife with too many bloody children, whose life is bollocks and she wants to feel important.”

“So you’re offering people, with no experience or creative education, a chance at publication? Isn’t that the same as self-publishing? The shit you said was pointless?”

“But you *can* write. These sods can’t, and if we can capitalize on this self-publishing craze, maybe we can make a few quid out of it.”

Ollie offers me a scotch but I decline. Not thirsty.

“You’re right,” I say. “You *are* daft. There’s no sense to this. How would you make more money than the self-publishing websites?”

“Aesthetics, mate. People visualize a book bound and complete. It makes the writing easier. They can touch it. Smell it. It’s tangible.”

“And who have you coerced into doing this?”

“Fred, of course. No use being mates with a publisher if you can’t use each other.”

I realize I no longer recognize Ollie, recognize my best friend. He may have been reckless with his life but never with his friendships. And where’s his wife in all this?

“Does your wife approve?”

“My what?”

“Your wife? You know, your wife who stood next to you when you couldn’t sign any other client but me.”

“Are you being cheeky with me?”

“Not at all.”

“The twat packed up and left two years ago! But of course you wouldn’t know that.”

He didn’t call to tell me. I would’ve supported him. When his first American girlfriend left him, I was the one holding him. We listened to Smiths records and got sick on Rocky Road. That was then, though.

Things settle down after that. Melbourne sits in a recliner. He hasn’t said a word to me and it’s making me nervous. Ollie continues with his phantom book idea. I still don’t understand. Apparently, the book is the *author’s* vessel. Ollie says that they’ll pay each writer a reasonable sum (anyone trained to detect sarcasm knows that Ollie’s ideas of a *reasonable sum* will differ from the writer’s). It’s a flat rate for art. As if everyone’s the same. Ollie says, “Self-published writers need to sell their work. We take care of that step. They feel at ease.” *Ease?*

I have to admit, Ollie’s tenacious. It’s a quality I liked...when he was *my* agent. Ollie wants my approval. He still craves it. He still offers me scotch, but I keep refusing. More vehemently each time.

“So what do you think, Jake?” Ollie asks again. “You may think the idea’s dodgy or that it’s diddling people, but it’s a smart business model. Writing is going in different directions, and we need to adapt. A person can’t write on a typewriter and drink whiskey.”

“You’ve done your homework. I’ll give you that,” I say. “The idea, however, is shit. So, what, you’re going to pay them their monies and keep the royalties? You make money from the purchase, minus printing cost and the writer’s wage, and from subsequent purchases of that writer’s work?”

“You pretty much have it.”

I give him a thumbs-up and a half-smile.

“Why are you looking at me as if I’m mental?” he asks.

“Ollie, just leave the poor sap alone. He’s analog. We’re digital. The future’s leaving him behind.”

“Haven’t said anything to me in the last couple of days, and *that’s* what you come up with? How do sell more books than me?” Hal retreats behind Ollie. Probably remembering my right hook about now. “Ollie, I’m sorry I’m not up-to-date with the new ways to scam people. But, you see, when you say there’ll be an ocean or trees on the cover, do you know what I’m inspired to say? It’s the death of literature.”

“But just think, Jake. Isn’t this your Yankee Dream? To write and make money without the hassle of true publishing? Just create and sell. No more editors. No more hoops to jump through. Write what you want.”

Sounds good for a moment. If you think about it, it's every writer's dream. But ultimately it's still assembly-line, manufactured crap. It's not art.

"Sure, that sounds great and all," I say, "except you still take double the profits. So, you're really the one's owning everything."

"It's a *free market*," Hal says over Ollie's shoulder.

"Yeah, well, I grew up believing in a *free country*. You know, *Ollie*, if I could, I'd fire your ass."

"Well, mate, it's a good thing I sacked you first. If you can't support me, like I supported you for years, then you can leave. You're nothing but a sorry wanker now anyway." I can't tell if his tears are from sadness or the scotch. He wipes his face, continuing, "I helped you from the time you hired me until the time you buggered off. Take your shit and your non-existent talent and get fucked!" Hal laughs, in my thinking anyway, inappropriately.

They say things flash before you when you die. The same goes for friendships. I'm thinking: I found him when he was nothing (he ate Chinese take-out every night and hung outside of clubs trying to pick up drunk women), and I can't remember why I cared. I'm thinking: would my second book have sold better if he hadn't influenced it (he thought of the title, *The Bastard in 33 A.D.*, because he wanted to "stick it to *those* people," those people being religious folks). Finally, I'm thinking: what's the goddamn point?

I've got nowhere to go except home. Back to a dirty apartment. Back to the cold and the snow. Ollie's thrown me out. I haven't even been here for the full two weeks (so

much more to do). Jules has said her peace and that book is closed. What do I have left?

A long car ride back through the Mojave, Vegas, Utah, the Rockies, and corn fields.

With icy roads and spinning tires. In short, I'm back to where I started, back to rock bottom—or with Mom's health, below the rocks—as I was a decade ago.

I load the car with the last of the suitcases. I act like I don't care, but Ollie *was* like a brother. More than Eric has ever been. Right now, I'll accept a call from Eric. Or a message. Text or voice. Anything, really. I think about running down to Venice Blvd. and jumping in front of a car. I think about fighting Ollie. A true fight. One with closed fists, black eyes, and loose teeth. One that reminded you there's more than anger. Anger's only the catalyst for pain. And I want pain. When I turn around, Jules is standing next to her white SUV.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I don't know. It feels like guilt. Let's go with that.”

“Well, you're in time to see me off then. Back to Wisconsin.”

“Why? Because of me?”

“Don't flatter yourself. Things just didn't work out with Ollie.”

“See, I told you he was an asshole.”

“Don't start. I just want to go *home*. There's nothing here. You people with your fake city, fake tits, fake, well, everything. Everything's slimy and nothing feels right. Spending money on expensive scotch and high-end club cover charges. For what? To feel important? To get noticed. Living the *dream*. Becoming a star?”

“Do these,” she says, cupping her breasts, “look fake to you?”

“Well...no...but...I was generalizing, I know, but—”

“But nothing. You’re just as judgmental as everyone else, and when things don’t go your way, you either run or you get your ass kicked. You don’t adapt.”

“Funny. That’s exactly what Ollie wanted me to do. *Adapt*.”

“Jake, people are shit wherever you go. Even in Wisconsin.”

“At least there’s some semblance of civility there.”

Jules leans on the Cooper and puts her arm around me. It feels nice. Feels familiar. This is how *home* should feel.

“Jake, I’ll tell you what. And don’t make me regret this. Why don’t you stay with me for a while?”

“What about your kid? Your husband. I won’t want to impose.”

“You’ve imposed your whole life, but it’s a part, surprisingly, of your very rough charm. Plus, I didn’t say anything about a husband.”

“Boyfriend, then?”

“Nope.”

How’s staying with her going to help? What am I going to do? Make a move? Rekindle our old flame? Babysit the kid? None of those sound promising. Wouldn’t it be great, though? If she realized, after a few days, that she made the biggest mistake she could’ve made by cheating on me, and we get back together, as if nothing ever happened. But what about the kid? Haven’t thought that far.

There's only one song for a moment such as this. Pearl Jam's "Black." It's not usually on the mental queue—Pearl Jam is Jules' favorite band—but I feel it's applicable. I hear Eddie Vedder growl, "I know someday you'll have a beautiful life, I know you'll be a sun in somebody else's sky, but why, why, why can't it be, can't it be mine." If only life was as simple as songs. Play it and things happen accordingly.

Mom will be pissed if she finds out. I feel guilty for not checking up. But I decide to try optimism. I'll have a place to sleep. I still have my typer and, to a lesser extent, my health. That's enough for now. In the morning I'll cook breakfast. Show a little gratitude for once. I recall she used to love eggs.

CHAPTER 9

Jules doesn't look pretty in the morning. What woman does? They'll tie their hair up, but after eight or so hours of rolling around, it becomes a bird's nest. Jules' son sits at the end of the kitchen island eating Cheerios but never takes his eyes off me. He's probably confused, wondering, "Who is this man and what did Mom do last night." He can't be more than 12. I don't pry, though. Don't want to scare the boy.

"Who are you?" he finally asks. "Mom, who is this?"

"This is Mom's friend, Dr. Fish, hun," she says.

"What is he doing here?"

"He, um, needed a place to stay, so he slept...downstairs."

His brown-eyes squint. I swear he's looking into my soul because he says, "You didn't touch anything, did you? I know where everything is."

"I'm sure he didn't touch any of your dolls, dear."

"Mom, they're action figures," he says through his teeth.

"Don't worry, I didn't touch your Darth Vader," I say, hoping to put an end to it.

"You better not have. If he or any of my figures are missing, I'll hunt you down."

"Jacob David Connolly! Apologize!" Jules sounds strangely like Mom, but I'm not going to tell her.

"But Mom, I don't know who he is. How do I know he didn't take anything? I don't trust him. He smells like cigarettes."

I back away and let them have at it. No use getting involved. He's not buying my explanation anyway. I can't blame him. I've got *that* look. The one parents warn their kids about. I have to give Jacob props, though. He's an organizational machine. One look at the basement and you'd never know a child plays down there. He's successfully accounted for everything down to the last detail. Proper business strategy. He has the makings of a fine businessman, but like so many others similar to him, he's got only one route: fall in love, move in with the girl, become a writer, and get crushed.

Jules struggles with him. He's very animated (I've never seen arms say so much). In mid-arm-flail, he bounces his cereal spoon off the table onto the lino below. I can't let this continue. Not in good conscious. A boy and his mother shouldn't be at each other's throats. It's not healthy. Before you know it, the boy will rebel against everything for which she stands. Then write about it. And laugh. And she'll cry.

I say, "Jacob, I assure you I didn't and never will touch your possessions. I'm a doctor for Christ's sakes. If you can't trust a doctor—"

"Mom! He swore with Jesus' name!" Really? I shrug.

"My mistake," I say.

"Jake...er...I mean, Dr. Fish, we don't use that kind of language in this house," says Jules.

I try whispering, "Then don't let him read my books."

"Don't worry, no one else reads them either." Well played. I'll give her that one.

"Hey, no secrets!" Jacob says.

“Sorry, hun. Dr. Fish was apologizing for cursing. Why don’t you run upstairs and get ready for church.” It’s Sunday. When did I lose track of time?

“Sure thing, Mom. Is Dr. Fish coming, too?”

“I don’t think so. He has a lot of work to do.”

“He should go. It’d be fun. He needs to ask God for forgiveness anyway. And aren’t we supposed to rest on Sunday?”

“That’s enough, Jacob. Dr. Fish can pray on his own, right?” I cough. “Now run along.”

“I guess, but what about the offering?”

“He told me to put some in for him.”

“Oh. Okay.” He rushes up the stairs.

Jules can only shake her head. Arms folded. Tapping her right foot. The left foot’s for catchy songs. The right, well, that’s for disgust. I pour some coffee for us. She blows on it and takes a sip. And another. Steam runs up her nose.

“You know, you’re a real jerk, right?” she says. “You can’t talk that way around kids. And before you say it, yes, I admit that church has screwed him up a bit.”

“A bit?”

“Yeah, *a bit*. But I can’t stay mad at you because you still, after all these years, make one damn good cup of coffee.”

“Still the best. Eat your heart out, you overpriced coffee shops,” I say.

“Jake, can you please, though, temper your act and your shenanigans while you’re here?”

“What shenanigans?”

“The wittiness. The apathy.

“The Second Amendment says I can have those.”

“And no music references—”

“No, you can’t kill the music. Besides, a little culture never hurt anyone.”

“I know. Believe me, I’m the first to agree with you, but he’s not socially ready.”

“I’ll start with something light, like Cat Stevens. Or Yusaf Islam. Is that the name?”

“No Cat Stevens.”

“Fine, but if you let him focus all his energy on that Bible stuff, you’ll be the proud mother of another Eric Fish.”

“Married. I’m assuming kids.”

“Two kids.”

“A steady, well-paying job. What mother wouldn’t want that for her son?”

“You forgot anal retentiveness and being a general, all-around bore.”

“Is he happy?”

“Hell if I know. We don’t really speak.”

“Well, perhaps you should talk,” says Jules, sipping her coffee and hugging her mug. “He may seem like a chore to you, but he’s taught you things.”

“Yeah, sure, like not to be him.” I won’t tell her I’ve been missing him. That’ll ruin my argument.

“Did you not, if I recall, shave his cat one night, after a night of drinking, and glue the hair to Eric’s face while he slept?”

“Jeez, Jules. Come on.”

“Did you?”

“Yes! I did it! Happy?”

She sits on a chair and crosses her leg.

“Yes,” she says, taking a drink. She’s right, as usual. I did do it. Was it horrible? Yes. Did I apologize? No. But try living with a person who constantly shadows you. Reporting every transgression to Mom—and Dad laughs because he’s proud. I can’t defend myself, but it created a vivid scene for *Sgt. Pepper’s a Dirty Old Man*. “Such depraved behavior expertly captured,” praised one critic. “Jake Fish makes use of purple prose to depict the most haunting image of feline mutilation,” said another. You’d think with reviews that positive, I would’ve made Oprah’s list by now. Guess my prose is too purple. Either that, or her staff read the letter Ollie sent, which said Oprah should read the book—in her defense, the letter was informal and perhaps a little insulting—and she, with profound sense of confusion, asked, “Who is Jake Fish?”

“Why send him to church?” I ask Jules. “Just curious.”

“Try raising a boy on your own. It’s tough. I needed additional support. Something to teach him proper morals.”

“How about sending him outside? He’s looking quite pale. I learned so much from falling out of trees and breaking limbs, or falling off bicycles and scraping my knees.” Wow, I fell a lot, didn’t I?

“He burns too easy.”

“Did you try a daycare when he was younger?”

“An L.A. daycare? You’re kidding, right? Parents overwork the daycares. No one cares about their kids, so they dump them off. And the kids are terrible. The other day I was down in Glendale, at the Galleria, and a woman’s child ran around knocking over trash cans.”

“Let me guess. She had headphones on.”

“Yes. God, it’s so frustrating.”

“I remember.”

“And when the little shit ran into me, did she apologize? No. She just said, ‘Let’s go get some ice cream.’”

“Okay, daycare isn’t an option. What about school?”

“Schools aren’t any better. Kids are brats and teachers are glorified babysitters.”

Jacob appears at the top of the stairs. He’s wearing a suit. Black. A white shirt and a black tie. Now *that’s* a Blues Brother. Hair properly combed and a pair of shined, black wingtips.

“Whoa, buddy, what are you all dressed up for?” I ask.

“Church, Dr. Fish. This is how you’re supposed to dress for God.” Jules and I look at each other. We shrug. With her eyes, she says, “Got to admit, he could be worse.” Point taken.

It’s Jules’ turn to shower and get dressed, which leaves Jacob and me plenty of time to become further acquainted.

“So...you like *Star Wars*, eh?” I ask. Solid icebreaker.

“Who doesn’t?”

“True. Do you like music?”

“I love all kinds of music. Not the stuff on the radio, though. Mom listens to boring stuff. I like rock and roll.” Since when does Jules listen to boring stuff?

“Really? Rock ‘n’ roll?”

“Oh yeah. A kid at school...you can’t tell this to Mom.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Pinky swear?”

“Pinky swear.”

And we pinky swear.

“A kid at school gave me a Pearl Jam C.D. I can’t understand what the guy’s saying, but I like the guitars and drums.”

“Don’t worry. I sometimes can’t understand him either. His name’s Eddie Vedder. You’ll understand, though, when you’re older.”

Jules doesn’t need to worry about music with him. He’s got it under control. Can’t wait to see her face when she finds out he’s listening to Pearl Jam. Her first love. She lost her virginity while Vedder performed The Who’s “Baba O’Riley” live for the first time. The floor of Seattle’s Moore Theater gave Jules’ ass a nasty burn, too.

“I’m old enough. I’m almost eleven.”

“That is old,” I say.

The math doesn’t add up for me. Jacob’s almost 11-years-old and Jules left ten years ago. She was pregnant when she left? There are only three possible options: Immaculate Conception (which if true means I’ve been wrong about *everything*), I’m his father, or Jacob’s the product of her infidelity.

What should I think here? I’ve never been good at math, sure, but I’m not an idiot. I should’ve expected this, though. I knew she cheated and I never asked. I’ve been too busy soaking this all up that I’ve gotten lazy. Comfortable, even. While Jules is upstairs, Jacob and I have been bonding. Real bonding, too. Bonding over important things: *Star Wars* and music. Do you know where bonding gets you? Talking to the bastard child whose father banged your girlfriend while you were wherever. That’s not fair

I don’t want to throw a tantrum. The boy doesn’t deserve it. I look around for booze but the place seems dry. At this point, I’ll settle for schnapps. I ask Jacob where Jules keeps the alcohol—any almost-11-year-old knows where to find good whiskey, right?—and he says, “Mom keeps the adult drinks downstairs in the locked cabinet.” Of course he doesn’t know where the key is. It’s not his fault—although kids should know these things. I excuse myself and go outside for a cigarette.

The storm, by which I mean the suspected rain, never came. I’ve smoked four or five cigarettes with The Who on the brain. “Won’t Get Fooled Again” just seems to fit. Before I know it, I’m on Ocean Park Blvd., which is ten blocks away. The street is busy,

as usual, and I can only make out the outlines of the cars that zip by. Bicyclists glower because I don't get out of their way. One girl yells, "Watch where you're fucking going, asshole!" There was something hauntingly Brooklyn about her. God forbid you mess with someone's *L.A. Zen*.

I would've happily jumped in front of a car last night, but I have no use for it now. Vehicular manslaughter is not, in fact, my preferred way to die. I'll accept: natural causes, a painless illness, a sudden heart attack, or in a shoot-out (I've wanted it since the first time Dad showed me *Scarface*). Jules and Jacob are leaving when I return. I wave at them. They're running late. A simple thumbs-up from me suffices. Jules burns down the road and she reminds me how insane she is on the road. Even in L.A., if you can believe it, she stands out. Once she turns on Ocean Park and is out of view, I wait for the forthcoming horns. Like a full orchestra warming up, there are squealing tires (strings) and horns in unison (horns, naturally) aside from one straggler. Normally I'll say a good band is only as good as its percussion section, but in this case (which would include bent steel and deployed air bags), I'll make an exception.

As I come up to the front door (a few potted plants, a welcome-home mate, and midnight blue latticework offsetting the white siding), I remember I didn't cook them breakfast. One thing this trip has proven is that I am, in fact, an awful house-guest. Who cares right now about identifying Jacob's father? I should be happy that I have a place to stay. But I'm not happy—I admit being around Jules is more gratifying than it was with Ollie. At least she's up front and honest, for the most part.

Cooking is a good way to relieve stress and quiet the mind. You're thinking too much about not burning yourself to care about writing, agents, and ex-girlfriends with bastard children. Breakfast is easier, too. It's cracking a few eggs and watching them sizzle alongside your aggression. Same with bacon. Or sausage. I'm using bacon because, well, bacon makes everything better. After a little black pepper (freshly ground), a little garlic salt (for taste and because Jules loves garlic), breakfast is done. I put everything in bowls so they can dig in once they return. Jules won't admit she's grateful for it. She hates—always has hated—that I'm a better cook.

This father business has me thinking of sex. A search behind the record stacks into bins of hazy and drunken memories yields nothing. When's the last time Jules and I had sex? I recall reaching the complacent stage of our relationship—when finances and bad T.V. trumped swanky and dirty lingerie. Don't get me wrong, financial stability is important for any relationship to thrive, but a surprise shower together or even cuddling at night would've been nice. It's not too much to ask, is it? In her defense, though, I *had* recently finished a short book tour for *Bastard of 33 A.D.*, and touching up my dissertation. Our small apartment got smaller because I had books and articles everywhere (tables, chairs, the bed, the desk, and a book even in the utensil drawer). We also gained some weight. Or I did. I didn't feel sexy, sexy enough for her anyway. I'd look at my naked body—with fat pockets by the hips and a sagging ass—and felt sick.

I didn't want to be *that* guy. There are two types of guys: those who don't care that they're fat and those that have an inner-teenage girl complete with irrational

insecurities. I hated that I was the latter, and I never told Jules. Probably should have. Might have saved our relationship. Or postponed the inevitable. What guy would admit that, though?

I know she's had sex, but with who? I may never know. And maybe I shouldn't know. What am I doing here? What do I hope to achieve? I don't have those answers. And seemingly for the best. I pull out the typer and feed paper through it. I want to write something meaningful. I don't know why, but I want it to show Jules, in some manner, that I've grown. I want it to sound like a sad Ben Fold's song ("In time I will fade away. In time I won't hear what you say. In time, but time takes time you know"), but also not, for the first time, reference any music. My words. My feelings. So I write:

Jules,

I've left. Shocking, I know. I just can't do this. It's not your fault. I appreciate the kindness you've shown me, though. More than you may know. Where am I going? Haven't a clue. You will probably take this as vengeance on my part for what you did, but it's not. It wouldn't be gentlemanly of me to think so.

I cooked breakfast for you two. Hope you like it. I didn't take any, but don't worry, I'll grab a muffin or something on the way. I just, you know, need time to think. Jacob said he was almost 11. Getting big. Honestly, don't worry so much. You're doing fine. A great mom. But who's his dad? Is he named after him? Or named after the person you wished was his dad? All these questions point to one thing: I can't stay.

I don't want to leave and that's frightening. I still love you. Always have. We were drinking coffee and being all domesticated, it brought back wonderful and painful memories. But this was better. No books or annoying agents. And one of us still looks 20—my metabolism went on vacation, I think. But I feel toxic and I'm bitter. You don't need that baggage. I'm sorry about the prostitute. Ollie's idea. No, that's not true. I was stupid and desperate. You know me. Never could take care of myself.

By the time you read this, I'll be near Barstow, I hope. Who knows, really? Jacob's a good boy. If he's mine, I'm proud.

Affectionately yours, always,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Jake Fish". The signature is stylized with a large, loopy "J" and "F".

Dr. Jake Fish

P.S. Jacob's sneaking Pearl Jam records. Thought you should know.

The Cooper's ready to go. There's enough gas to get me out of California and through Vegas. It's all becoming routine. This packing and loading up of my life, that is. Before leaving I place Darth Vader on the note. I know I said I wouldn't touch it, but who hasn't lied to a kid? The letter's rubbish, but who has the words for love? Marvin Gaye or, help us, Barry Manilow? You can't capture love. In fact, the only sufficient examples are break-up songs, but they, as with everything else, describe the lack thereof.

I pull out and get on Ocean. I don't know where I'm going. As I turn onto Pacific Ave., I realize that nothing's familiar anymore. What happened to the hope and reinventing myself? Nice thoughts to entertain, I guess. At the very least, I wrote something. If anything, it's a start.

My phone vibrates. I think it's Jules, but I didn't leave her my number. It's Eric. I hold my breath and feel awful for not checking up. Sometimes I am, as Jules says, an asshole.

I answered.

"Now's not a good time, Eric. What do you want?"

"Mom's dead."

CHAPTER 10

Fact: nine in ten people with lung cancer die. That's 90%. Lung cancer is a very efficient, A-minus student. So why do I care so much? There wasn't anything I could do besides get her drinks or the Sunday comics (she loved reading her "Garfield"). Mom, however, shouldn't have died. I never pegged her for a quitter, but when Eric said she refused treatment, that's exactly what came to mind.

I arrive at Griffith Park around noon. I choose it because of its away-from-everything feeling and because cell phones are useless. If I can deal with the no-smoking, things should be okay. If someone wants me, they can make the climb up to the observatory. But who would come? A washed-up writer's mom dies—who gives a shit? All that stuff about art and artists was optimistic bullshit. Why couldn't she last two weeks? If Mom's up there, I hope she's not watching—she'd better be asking Jesus, "What the hell, man?" That's what I'd ask him.

I should know better, as I quickly discover (maybe if I would think straight), that parents don't appreciate you yelling *fuck* around their children. One woman gasps. Another gives me the stink-eye. Or maybe it's just lazy. I don't know. This one woman in particular, though, walks up and gives me an excuse-me-sir tap on the shoulder (her husband's too busy yakking on the phone about *figures* to do her dirty work). It's a collage—her face—of Botox cheeks, collagen-injected lips, and frowning, penciled-on eyebrows. Her hair netting is showing under her wig.

“I don’t appreciate that kind of language around my daughter. This is a family place,” she says.

“Would you like an apology? Or a cookie? You look as if you could use one, a cookie that is.”

She’s third-world skinny. Just another drone in paradise. Who pays first-world-money for a third-world-figure? Her daughter even looks malnourished. Her ribs poke through her sundress, but thankfully her make-up covers up the flaws.

“You’re a real asshole, you know that?”

“That’s what women tell me.” Only one woman but the most important one.

“But before you continue, let me point out that *I’m* not the one whose daughter looks like an assembly-line China-doll.”

“Well...” She gasps. “...I’ve never. Harold, are you going to let him speak to me like this?” she asks her husband. “Harold!”

He puts up a finger. I’m guessing he does it a lot. As she presses further, he walks away, swatting toward her as if she’s a buzzing fly. She huffs and grabs her daughter’s hand before storming off. The girl smiles and waves at me, saying, “Bye, bye!” Poor kid.

The sun even sets early for L.A. winters. Sunny L.A., ha! I can barely make out the first letters of the Hollywood sign. Spotlights shine up from the Kodak Theater down below. Though far away, I can tell it’s a movie premiere. Hearing Mom’s voice (“Those Godless beasts!”) usually is eerie, but there’s something cathartic about it all. I even agree with her, if you can imagine. To her, Hollywood is doomed. “Another Sodom and

Gomorrah,” She’d say. If there’s a god, though, he doesn’t give two shits about Hollywood because the Scientology building at the center of Hollywood Blvd. is more than enough for a few fireballs.

Ollie’s probably down there. Would he care that Mom died? Probably not. Unless, that is, there was a story he can extort. And he’s one of the friends Mom *did* like.

I find a bench to sit on. Families roam between the observatory and the railings overlooking the hiking trails weaved throughout the valley. I see the kids—full of joy—skipping and chasing each other around the James Dean memorial. The parents’ faces covered with adoration. I can’t remember Mom having that. I’m trying to picture her face, but everything’s a blur. I still can recall Dad’s straight, gray hair, brown lips, and pale skin while in the casket, yet Mom escapes me. I was her oldest but the black sheep. *God’s* unwanted child. But I miss her. And I miss Eric. And Dad. And, of course, Jules. I feel helpless and I want to be held and have someone tell me it’s okay, everything’s okay. A mother consoles her daughter across from me—the child tripped over an untied shoelace. Mom would say, “That’s why you always tie your shoes.” What about a hug? Still waiting for one.

I never think about death, and my only experience was Dad. I imagine Jules dying in hopes of feeling something proper. I can’t lighten the mood with music because the inner-phonographic is stuck. The records don’t play and the needle, I think, is broken. I sorted out five albums for Dad to handle the grief, but they aren’t, for some reason, working. I want The Stones’ *Let it Bleed* because of “You Can’t Always Get

What You Want.” The song’s hopeful, just the thing for this funk. It assures me that everything’s fine if you just try. I could keep on keeping on. The other albums, in order, include: The Sex Pistols’ *Never Mind the Bollocks* (for my desire to break stuff and let loose), Pearl Jam’s self-titled (for “Come Back”), *Grace* by Jeff Buckley (saddest album I own, especially because we lost him before his time), and finally *The Beatles* (because it has “Ob-La-De, Ob-La-Da.” Life does go on, la la la and all that).

The stars come out and I think about Jules. I’ve exhausted my guilt for Mom and beat myself up enough. I want something semi-enjoyable (don’t make it up to Griffith Park that much, you know). I haven’t looked at them since my roof visits with Dad—it just hasn’t been the same. Jules tried getting me outside by nagging. (“You’ve been typing all day. Can’t we go outside for some air? The sky is beautiful.”) She’d go on and on about expansive galaxies but still the center of each other’s lives, blah blah blah. She’d try different tactics—some Alanis Morissette or Sinatra’s “Come Fly with Me.”—and I’d grunt. “Why go outside when we can listen to Frank in here?” I’d ask.

What’s wrong with a guy finding music enjoyable but not the stars? There’s no law. Anytime I put headphones on and tune in, I shudder. It doesn’t matter if it’s Sinatra or Bowie or Zeppelin, I melt. I grew out of the stars—maybe it was simply a with-Dad thing—but the music remains. Dad and I, every Sunday, would mix Bloody Marys while listening to “Sympathy for the Devil,” his counter-point to Mom and Eric going off to church. This was during my punk phase, which Dad disliked but accepted. The Ramones or The Clash, Pixies, Sex Pistols, and anything else I could find. I had it all:

green mohawk, metal studs on a black leather jacket, patches on my jeans, army boots, a piercing in my ear, and a wallet-chain.

I tried writing a punk story before Dad died. And before Jules left. Sort of a Sid and Nancy tale—Jules and I fought a lot around this time—about forbidden love. Drugs. Sex. Uninhibited, raw passion. With guitars, drums, bass, and a cello player for variety. I wrote a few pages and mailed them to Dad, and he wrote back a week later—Dad’s penmanship was horrendous, and he hated stamp, and didn’t like licking envelopes, and never knew what to write about—saying he liked it. But the characters were, as only he could say, “kind of pussies.” He wanted true musicians who cared about craft and not mine who cared about the sex and drugs. For a story about music, there wasn’t much rock ‘n’ roll.

There was one element that Dad made sure to highlight, though. My story meant something. It’s wasn’t dogmatic like the others. People did stuff. Maybe they were lazy, but they still had dreams. Hopes for families and kids. They wanted to be happy but didn’t know how to be. I’ll never know, though, because everything crashed two weeks later.

As people walk to their cars, they give me peculiar looks. It isn’t frowning-disgust or squinting-confusion but more of a wide-eyed, oh-my-god-he-wants-money look. Sad failures look the same, I guess. Truth is: they’re on every corner with cardboard signs asking for spare change or outside a Seven Eleven hoping someone drops their doughnut. And I fit right in. I can’t be mad at the kids poking me or the teenager kicking my shin to

impress his girlfriend. If it makes them happy, I salute them. It's easier to cope, though, because I know where I stand. The worst, I think, is over. Mom can't die again and I've closed the chapter on Jules. Maybe I can live down on Venice Beach as my fellow *failures* do.

It feels good to be up here with the crowd thinning, but *The Doors* and my typer are in my backseat unattended (shameful, I know). As I walk down, I'm reminded of my poor health. The road winds around a large cliff and cars honk because I'm in *their* way.

When I reach the car, I see a familiar white SUV parked behind me. I dive forward, without thinking, and smack into my bumper. I'll hide here forever before I let Jules know where I am. The gravel hurts my stomach and my left foot smacks a pipe. I've scraped my hands and knees. I think there's a hole in my good pants, too. Remember rock bottom? This is lower, much lower, but I know that things can only improve from here. They have to. If not, then I'm worse off than Venice Beach's homeless people are. They at least have sand. I will remember this and file it away: *Rock Bottom and Tomfoolery.*

"You know I can see you, right?"

"I can't hear you."

"Jake, get up. You're making an ass out of yourself."

I slowly poke my head out.

"How'd you find me?" I ask.

"Please. I'm not an idiot. You came up her every time we fought or you had a bad day. And especially when you missed your dad."

“I did come here a lot, eh?”

I try to be nonchalant. And quirky. As if I’ve lived here among the trees and insanity has taken me.

“Why did you leave?”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t be cute. Tell me.”

“Didn’t you get my letter? Do you know how many minutes I spent writing that?” It took closer to an hour, but I don’t want to appear desperate, which I am.

“Yeah, I read it. It was...sweet.”

Sweet? She said sweet? Praise Aphrodite and Dionysus and the rest that loved to love! This is great! It’s not an ironic “sweet,” but a genuine, butterflies, eyes batting, “sweet.”

“And you’re absolutely pathetic,” says Jules, winking.

“Hey...”

“Sorry, but you are. You tell me you love me but you ‘can’t stay.’ What the hell is that?”

“Well, keep going. There’s more to it than that.”

“I know I didn’t tell you about Jacob. What gave it away besides the age? Was it the eyes? He had to get his Dad’s eyes,” she says, biting her cuticles. “I guess I haven’t told you a lot of things.”

“Well, let’s see then, we have the what, the who, and roughly the when. Stop me if I’m going too fast.”

“Go on.”

“I guess we need the where, why, and how.”

She lights up a cigarette—I’m not going to lie, it’s arousing—and exhales toward me. The flickering street light above adds to the mysteriousness.

“Do you really need the how? You’ve known about the *how* since you were 15-years-old. And you definitely don’t want the *how* for Jacob’s birth.”

This I do not. They don’t tell us men about birthing specifics: there’s poop and blood and other fluids involved in child birth. It explains why I’ve always been a little shit.

“Then give me the other details.”

“First, we need a little pick-me-up.” She pulls out a flask of Kilbeggan, saying, “Cheers,” before taking a pull. She passes it off to me.

“Cheers.”

“Well,” she says, wiping her mouth, “it happened outside San Francisco. You were finishing your dissertation and I took a trip to visit Steph. Do you remember?” I don’t. “Anyway, we’re at a bar, too drunk to stand, and before I knew it, we were back at her place with two guys.”

There’s not enough whiskey in the world to drown this moment.

“I get the picture,” I say.

“In a blunt, degrading, but all-around justified sort-of-way, I had sex. I cheated. No protection. And in three minutes, we were done. I got up, wiped myself off, and left. Bing, bang, boom.”

“I’m in hell right now.”

“I know. So, I didn’t come home. I hire a moving company to pick up my stuff—”

“You mean *my* record player.”

“I bought it.”

“Bullshit!”

“Okay, okay. Fine. It was *yours*.”

“Anyway, after the guy’s moved your stuff—which was quite the surprise—what happened next?”

“I stayed in San Fran. with Steph until I heard about your *breakdown*...”

“You mean the hooker, right?”

“Yeah. It was on the news. I felt vindicated for a moment. And then, nine months later, after moving into my current place, Jacob was born.”

“So why come forward now?”

“Guilt, I guess. A lack of honesty, maybe. I don’t really know. Plus, you’ve had a rough time out here, and I didn’t make it easier right away.”

“Yeah, but that’s been me from the beginning. You know I’m a train wreck.”

“But I shouldn’t have piled it on.”

“Just troubled waters. So what about the why?”

I can guess what it is. I’ve thought about it every day and night. I take a drink to hide my crooked smile.

“Our relationship stalled. We cared more about reality T.V...” You did, but who wants to split hairs? “...instead of, you know, getting married and starting our family.”

“I was finishing my degree. My final degree. I’d been in school for almost a decade. Can you imagine raising a kid during that? I know I was making money from my writing, but come on. It would’ve been suicide.”

“I guess I got sick of waiting. I wanted more.”

“It shouldn’t matter, right, if two people *love* each other, they’ll make it work.”

“Well, maybe, you know—”

“I don’t know!”

“Stop yelling, Jake. I just think I...stopped loving you.”

Ouch. That one hurts. What a bitch...no, I don’t mean it.

“This is where you say you always will love me, just not in that way?”

“Jake, stop.”

“No, I want to hear it.”

“I’m serious. Just stop.”

“I’m not stepping in bullshit. You can’t love a person one minute and then stop loving them.”

“Ugh! Okay! Here’s the truth: You published *Sgt. Pepper* and became a giant dick. Ollie was always around and when you weren’t writing or reading, you were drinking and acting like an imbecile with him.”

Guilty.

“So this is my fault?”

“No! Not at all.”

“Let me guess, it’s not me, it’s you?”

“It’s complicated.”

“That was my next guess.”

Neither of us has a good point. It’s all circular, coming back to one thing: we sucked. It’s stupid to think we can fix years of problems sharing a whiskey and a few smokes. What’s more depressing is how much we both hoped our points would matter, and how much I want to be with her even after all that. I can hear Johnny Cash (Mom’s favorite) singing, “What have I become, my sweetest friend. Everyone I know goes away in the end,” and I think it’s all true, but is it because I make it so? Aren’t I supposed to ditch dead weight and move forward? Forget things I can’t control?

We hug as Jules says, “You need to take care of yourself. First and foremost.” We both get into our cars and I decide I’ll leave first, leaving her in the rearview mirror. A symbolic gesture that’ll feel nice, somewhat.

It’s too late for us, I understand that now. I can’t stop things from ending. But when Men complain about their wives or girlfriends nagging—during Football Sunday—because they haven’t taken out the trash or mow the lawn, they don’t realize that at she’s still there. Still loving their ass. I imagine Jules giving up after cheating, saying, “What’s done is done” while throwing her arms up. She probably used more colorful metaphors. I have that effect on people.

I’m about forty yards ahead of her when I see her vehicle rocking. Shadows surround her car. I debate leaving her and it all behind. She left me with my problems,

so why shouldn't I leave her to her own? She's always handled herself. Why not now? I know, though, that I'll feel regret—my desire (not my ability) to please her has always outweighed everything else. It is, in fact, time I *do* something. I can't keep running. I turn around and the tires burn. I pull up with my high-beams on and yell, "Get the fuck away from her!" Men, or beasts I should say, swarm her and pound at her windows. Her windshield is already busted in.

"Give us your shit!" one of them says. He wears a torn trench coat but no shirt. His pants couldn't be dirtier. They're grimy and brown, and I don't even want to know what the green stain is. He runs toward my car and kicks in the front bumper.

"You want money? I don't have much cash," I say, as if they care about the amount. Fear grips me, shooting up my spine. I slowly step out with my hands raised. He's got a gun—a magnum—pointed directly at my head.

"Give me all of it, the cash and the car. Now!" Jules is crying and yelling and holding the windshield up with her feet. I'm piss-yourself scared, but I'm her only hope.

"Take it. It's yours. Just let her be."

"No, see, I said *all* of it. She'll be a good fuck later. All tied up and what not."

I toss my keys to him and raise my hands above my head.

"Take the car. Please, just go. She's not worth it."

As soon as he looks back at her, I rush him and wrestle the gun from his hands. His smell is almost indescribable (there's definitely some garlic and feces in there, but there's something else, too. Cabbage, maybe?). The gun falls to the ground and I dive on it. Before I can stand up to take back my stuff, they're all in the Cooper and peeling

out. *This* is my lowest point. I think about shooting out the tires, but I've got terrible aim (hunting was the one thing Dad and I never did. After coming close to shooting his foot, he said, "You're done"). Before disappearing into the night, I see things thrown out of the side windows.

On the ground is my Doors album (with signatures), one of my suitcases, and my typer. Thank Odin. Good thing I'm not worth much. The record, though, would've gotten them more than the car. Probably.

"There goes my ride and only way home," I say. My phone's in the glove box, too. Can't call Eric. I kneel on the blacktop and realize I'm stuck in L.A. Jules gets out and sits next to me and holds me. She smells like apples and cinnamon. *Home* should smell like this. As *home* should smell. But it's not home because behind that apple pie I smell, is the faint remains of the Cooper's burnt tires. I hold the record tight and am grateful for the ability to do so. There's nothing more eye-opening, more humbling, than having a gun—no, a cannon—shoved in your face to make you contemplate your life. In a morbid sense, it's like being reborn. Shit and all. I let Jules hold me longer. We'll have the conversation concerning our future later, but we're just happy to be alive. Here's my promise: from now on, anything I do, I'll do because I'm happy and I'm alive. I know I'll have to do something about the writing—give up or write something—but I can't think anymore tonight. Too much death today. Maybe tomorrow, though.

CHAPTER 11

We arrive at Jules' place, which is dark and quiet. We stumble around—too drunk to think—looking for light switches. I find the blender. It roars, only for a second, before Jules rips the plug out. “Don't touch that. It was a gift,” she says. Our feet hit the lino like H-bombs, and Jules trips. She gasps at first and then cries and then laughs. I get a picture of what she was like while pregnant.

“Will you quiet down? You'll wake up Jacob,” I say.

“Oh, no, we're fine. He's at a sleepover.”

My heart pangs: she looks beautiful while giggling on the floor. Her hair falls in front of her face, hiding one eye. Tiny crows-feet make her look elegant and sophisticated. I've got to be straight, here, because I want to make sure these are legitimate feelings and not whiskey-emotions. Jules goes downstairs to fix us drinks. I suggest coffee, but she's not having it. I admit, though, I've missed our drunken stupidity. Some of our best (and most passionate) nights started like this. It was like a first date all over again. After surviving a hold up (an obscure excitement, something to remember), we've moved to safe libations, which I haven't had since...college? I can laugh here. I can cry. I can sing (can doesn't mean I do). It almost feels...right.

Jules reappears with drinks in tall glasses.

“What's this?” I ask, tasting some pineapple.

“My secret recipe. Created it at work.”

“The club?”

“Yeah.”

“That night was horrible. Lucky for you that you left early.”

“Are you kidding? They had me running around in back fishing out bottles of vodka.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, those jackasses trashed the place. I didn’t get home until five the next morning.”

Jules sits down and sprawls out on her sofa. I sink into a leather recliner next to her bay window. She spills onto her carpet, but she won’t find it until morning. But who cares? We laugh and bullshit, not caring about anything else but ourselves. And it feels good. For a while, we are young again.

I want to make Jules a mixtape. A collaboration of every song that reminds me of her. Both the good and the bad. You can’t have re-first date without a mixtape. Not a C.D. but a tape. You mix it up—a lot like a cocktail—and stick it in a play-card box and pass it along. I can’t think of enough proper songs, though. Right now, I have: “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye, “Landed” by Ben Folds, “Sunny Day in Hell” by Argyle Johansen (my morning theme song), and The Clash’s “Should I Stay or Should I Go.” It’s a start, but these things take time and careful planning. A person can’t throw a bunch of his or her favorites onto a tape and say, “Here, these remind me of you.” Like writing, the tape is a narrative. Jules’ tape will start out strong (“Let’s Get It On,” it always gets me), and move to the dark times, by which I mean the period when she was worse than Satan and

Hitler. Then it will hit the climax—don't know if we're there yet—and then resolve itself. All in 12 to 14 songs, or chapters. Make them count.

“You never told me, how's your family?”

I've forgotten that I haven't told her.

“Um...well...Mom died yesterday morning. That's why I went to the park. I wasn't thinking straight and my death-records were out of sorts. I wanted different ones than I used for Dad, but those were the only ones that came to mind.”

“Jake, I'm sooo sorry. And I hit you with news on Jacob and cheating while you crumble inside.”

“I was lost. I wanted to feel something and nothing. I don't handle death well. Not in my programming. But in a way, your honesty helped. It gave me focus. Think about happiness and serenity. Then the swine made off with my car.”

Jules makes us some coffee as our drinks get low and the fuzziness wears off. She has me move to talking about Mom. I explain how I miss her and wish I was a better son.

“I'm sure she loved you without condition.”

“Jules, you don't have to be nice. She hated you. And I mean that in every literal sense. She would've car bombed you if given the chance.”

“Oh, wow. Really?”

“That woman was IRA for life. And you thought she was such a sweetheart.”

“God. And why are we being so nice then?”

“Because she handled the worst son ever like a professional. She was driven by love...mostly.”

“That’s so sweet, Jake. When’s the last time you spoke this way?” asks Jules.

“Oh, you know, here and there. Usually I keep those things inside.”

“Don’t. It suits you.” Jules puts down her coffee and grabs my hand. “Come with me.”

She leads me upstairs to her bedroom. This isn’t like Jules. She was always more conservative—aside from the cheating—when it came to sex. I assume that that’s what is happening. She’s looking to become a Barry White song, and like when we were younger, we’re surrounded by Pearl Jam and Nirvana posters. My heart sinks and I’m confused. Where’s this going? What will come of this?

She unbuttons my shirt. I try to stop her, but she says, “Shhh, just relax.” I can’t focus and the alcohol is affecting things. If Jacob were home, this wouldn’t be happening. But why am I even thinking about him? Now? Right this second? I’m going to have sex for the first time in years, with the only girl I have ever and will ever love, and I’m thinking about a kid? I’m not sure how I feel about this.

“You’ve been through so much, and I can’t tell you what is going to happen, but right now, I just want you to lie here and enjoy yourself,” she says. Easy enough.

She moves to my pants and before I know it, they’re on the floor. She climbs on top of me and kisses me and smiles. Now *this* is what home should feel like. I hesitate to join in, but it becomes more difficult as she removes each layer of clothing (tank-top, pants, bra, panties, and then, because everyone forgets, socks). I finally let go and return

her kiss. It's not humanity's greatest or most sensual kiss, but my hormones didn't give a damn. Then time slows, and I feel every hair that dangles in my face and I hear every whistle of her nostrils—maybe she has a cold. Will I get sick?—and her tiny chin hairs tickle my lips.

“Jules, I don't want—”

“No more talking.”

Before I can say another word, she kisses me again. After a second, longer and more passionate kiss, I say, “Fuck it,” and flip her over. I kiss her neck—her kryptonite—and she trembles. I know I should've thought about protection, but you don't think of these things when you're with *her*. I was a teenage boy again. If Mom's up there—or anywhere, really—I hope she looks away. She doesn't need to see this. She's got more important things to do now. But as for me? Greatest. Night. Ever.

CHAPTER 12

It takes me a month, but I finish Jules' mixtape. A little late and it's not my best work. I changed songs around, omitted songs that should, in fact, be there (I had the Gin Blossoms' "Allison Road," but thought it was too depressing), and put songs in that shouldn't be there (Tom Waits' "Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis"? What was I thinking? I'm better than that). Thankfully, Jules has a decent stereo system and a halfway acceptable record collection, or I could've never finished. It was harder than is used to be: in my 20s, I would've had the tape done in a seven hours.

I've spent a lot of time messing around and days off spent walking the neighborhood and the beach—which, by the way, grows old quickly. I'd take too many smoke breaks. Watch too much T.V. But, for the first time in years, besides Jules' letter, I have finished something. It may not be what I want, but there's always room for more tapes.

The writing? Well, that's a different story. The mixtape kept me occupied...mostly. I don't even know where I've stashed the typer. After trying to write once—once, as in, I exhausted the paper supply and went out for a beer—I put the typer away and focused on the tape. How do they do it? Musicians, I mean. How do they keep it up? Is it wrong to envy Bob Dylan for writing close to 800 songs? That may not be accurate, but it's close. He's out writing and performing—going on a half century now—and I can't decide between a Stones or Beatles song, much less tell a worth-while

story. I use the tape as a scapegoat to hide my writer's block. I don't want Jules to know I haven't written a useful word.

She's already annoyed with me. I've been that roommate everyone dreads: leaving the refrigerator empty (aside from a non-fat yogurt) and clogging the toilet (I warned her about the burritos). I lie—more like fib—about writing, though. I say I have outlines and ideas. She says, “Yeah, heard that before.” She's on to me. (“So how's the writing coming. Still *outlining*?”) I'm drinking more than before. I'm finishing a bottle—it doesn't matter of what—every two days. I'll sit on the couch with my notebook and pen, but I don't write anything. Jacob will bring his Darth Vader by me, saying, “Maybe this'll help.” A child's simplicity is, for a moment, inspiring. I yearn for it. And dread it.

The robbery did something to me. Didn't I promise to make myself happy? I must've spent it all on the sex with Jules. Now I have to find something else to make me happy. Good luck.

So maybe what I wanted before, about wanting Jules and needing to be happy...maybe I was wrong. I fell for lust again. Now, Jules comes home asking for money for bills (grocery and cable, so far). The post-sex honeymoon is over.

After coming home from work, she fixes Jacob and me dinner.

“Jake, I'm sorry, but I can't take care of *two* children.”

“I thought I was more of a *Hausfrau*.”

“Don't get cute.”

“Yeah, don't get cute...Jake,” says Jacob

Who asked you, kid?

“I’m serious. If you’re not going to write something, you need to get a job.”

“And how the...heck, am I supposed to get there?”

That was close. Jacob shifts his seat away from me.

“That’s your problem. I have to get these clothes off and shower. Please do the dishes when you’re done.”

Who’s she to lecture me? It’s her fault I’m here. If she hadn’t have come that night, I’d still have the Cooper and be on my way home. I go over to make some tea (coffee is gone, too). It takes a little bit for the water to boil. While waiting, I try to write. Jacob finishes his hot dogs and puts his plate in the sink. I write down: I...hate...writing. I rip out the page and throw it. Unfortunate aim, however, as it lands on the stove and catches fire. I grab a dish towel and swat the flame, but the kettle tips over, spilling boiling water everywhere.

“What the hell’s going on in here?” asks Jules from the top of the stairs.

“Just an accident. I’ve got things under control.”

She comes downstairs and Jacob runs into the basement.

“Jake, I’m sure it was an accident, but that’s not the point, is it?”

“It isn’t?”

“Look at you.” I’m sick of hearing that. “You’re falling apart. You’re not sleeping. You’re not eating much.” I had thrown away half of my hot dog. “You’ve lost, what, 20 pounds?” Jesus Christ, Jake—

“Mom! I heard that!” Jacob says from below.

“Not the time, Jacob Connolly!”

“You better pray later.”

“Ugh, fine!”

“Look, Jules, I’m sorry I’ve become a nuisance,” I say,” but you’ve got to understand. I don’t have any motivation. After that night, you know, the night we—”

“We don’t talk about that, remember.”

“Right, right.”

She sits down next to me.

“Jake, don’t think I’m not empathetic. I am, really, but sometimes a person has to cut ties. You did okay without me in your life. You’ll be fine this time.”

“Okay? I haven’t written since you left! Everyone keeps saying, ‘Look at you.’ What about me? Does this look fine? I’m now starting fires.”

“Why don’t you go have a cigarette and take a walk? Clear your head.”

“What? Another walk to the beach. No thank you.”

“Take the truck and go to the park.”

“It’s ruined for me.”

“Well, find something. Right now, I need you out of here.”

As I walk out the door, I can’t help but be pissed at her. Because she introduced sex into the equation, everything’s different. It may be a non sequitur, but that’s how I feel. She owes me more respect. It’s like she’s leaving me all over again, and I’m sick. I don’t deserve this. But then, what am I really doing here? What do I hope to accomplish?

. . .

I wander a few good miles up Ocean Park and search for something stimulating. The last time I was this desperate I had a hooker snorting blow off my dash. There's nothing too enticing around here, though (a coffee shop, Blockbuster, Enterprise Rent-a-Car, and a middle school). However, a bookstore catches my eye: *Writer on the Storm*. A store whose name is clearly inspired by the Doors warrants investigating.

There's not much to the outside: a few tables and chairs with wind-battered umbrellas. The windows have book suggestions from the staff. Emily apparently loves Henry Miller and Hemingway. She's chosen *Old Man and the Sea*. A fine choice, but I would've gone with *The Sun Also Rises* or *Torrents of Spring*. His short stories are also acceptable. But unlike music, I don't judge readers. If someone reads, they have my goodwill.

Now Miller is not a favorite writer of mine. Nor is he one of Jules'. We never liked his liberal use of *cunt*. While reading *Tropic of Cancer*, Jules threw it across the room, saying, "He's supposed to be a *good* author." It's a word whose user must tread lightly. It's not okay, as Miller thought, as a description of women. Not even out of anger, unless she cuts you off in traffic.

A lovely girl behind the counter welcomes me. Striking green eyes and some girth. I wouldn't ever say that to her (or any woman), though. She's healthy and knows how to eat. Maybe a kid or two although maybe she's too young. A size 8 pant, if I had to guess—worked at a Gap during my undergrad.

It has all the characteristics of a used bookstore: worn bindings and scribbled notes on pages. That vanilla smell. I wonder if any of my stuff is here. I find the F's and sure enough, they have three copies of each novel. In pristine condition. The binding cracks as I open it and flip through the pages (not even one mark). Like any used bookstore, though, they buy new books to sell at lower prices. That has to be the explanation. What really digs into me is all the Palahniuk books that look as if they'd gone to war. Someone loved them and sold them for someone else to love. I feel sick and may pass out.

I snatch a copy of *Sgt. Pepper* and *Bastard* and bring them to Emily—I've decided to call her that regardless. While she scans my purchase, I notice a book sitting on a feature table. It's Ollie's phantom novel.

"Excuse me, what are those?" I ask.

"Oh, those? Some stupid scam. They help find the 'Writer in everyone.'"

It's printed on the front.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, and my boss had to pay a ton to sell them. That's why they're full price. Do we look like a place that's well off?"

I shrug. The store does look worn—and maybe this is my preference—but I like it. Emily looks down at my books and gives a confused frown.

"Something wrong?" I ask.

"No, not really. I can't remember if we ever sold one of his books. You a fan?"

"Used to be."

“See, I never got into him. Felt like he tried too hard, you know. Wanting to emulate Bukowski or something. There’s enough Bukowski. No need for rip-offs.”

“He’s a little more philosophical, though, right?”

“You mean wordy and boring?”

I don’t like Emily much. Too smug. Too confident. There’s enough confident females in my life. No need for another.

“Maybe you just read it wrong.”

“Ha. Remember that scene in *Bastard in 33 A.D.*? When Jim rapes Mary? His most devoted friend? How is that *artistic*?” I forgot about that. For a moment I want to lay everything out: “I’m sorry, what qualifies you as a critic? Did you make thousands of dollars? Have you published anything?” However, I show restraint. To her credit, she’s publishing as much as I currently am. She may, in fact, be a better writer. I’m sure she’s better at writing women characters. Still don’t understand them.

I try going over the stories while she bags up my books. I can’t find a coherent plot line. What was my motivation for the rape? Was it a disturbed reference to “The End”? “Mother, I want to fuck you!” Morrison had said. *That’s* poetry. That’s a statement. For me, I stole that imagery by making Mary the mother figure. While Jim descends into obscurity and all his friends leave, she’s there for him. Feels like the author’s own Mommy issues.

“You know, you make a great point,” I say.

“See. And what’s with the alcohol abuse? It never works. Fish, like others, uses alcohol to make his characters chronically terrible.”

“Maybe he uses alcohol to avoid his feelings.”

“If so, that is one lonely man, but who am I to judge? He’s at least published something. Meanwhile, I’m stuck in this rattrap.”

“Yeah, but it’s a lovely store. Great character. Great name.”

“Really? I think the name’s cheesy and overrated?”

“The Doors?”

“Yeah.”

What does she really know? I mean she’s wearing a Killers T-Shirt. No, no. That’s not fair. She has valid points. I just don’t want to accept them.

Before leaving, I look at the phantom novel. It has the ocean as Ollie said it would. It has blank pages. And a \$30 price tag. Ollie has no shame. Who charges a used bookstore full price? I feel Emily’s gaze and know she’s disappointed. I put the book down and leave.

No one’s home. It’s a bit unsettling and familiar. But the furniture’s still here, so there’s that. I notice a note on my typer—Jules must’ve found it—which sits next to a fresh package of multi-colored paper. I assume it was on sale or that Jacob likes using it because I’ve never written a word on anything except white, plain, multi-purpose paper. The note reads:

Jake,

“You can’t always get what you want...but if you try sometimes,

you just might find you'll get what you need.”

Took Jacob to the beach. Be back later.

With Love,

Jules

Now that's how you write a letter. Short and inspiring. Jules always has used the Stones song as a pick-me-up. I can't bear to tell her it's my song for procrastination or pushing hardships aside. Or maybe that's what it has come to symbolize. It once was my dissertation song. But that, like so many other things, was long gone.

Jules cleaned the kitchen. I don't know why I feel guilt again. She loved cleaning our old place on Brooks (sweeping, dusting, and organizing everything). She lived for it, or that's what she told me. I sit down at the kitchen island and think about Emily. “If so, that is one lonely man,” she had said. And right she is. How pathetic is it that I'm here—in my ex's dark house—and don't know what kind of writer I am? If someone would ask me what record fit their particular mood, I could, like Dad, search my bar-like jukebox selection and press play. Or if they wanted a good book, I had that answer, too. But ask me to write and I'll come up empty.

Something comes over me—I don't want to be the brooding, mysterious artist who doesn't create art—and I pick up my notebook and a pen. I write in ten minute spurts (broke my thumb when I was six, and it's twitched ever since). There's a story in me, something that's been festering and long forgotten. I've been going at it all wrong. Instead of asking: what should I write? I ask: what do I want to *read*. It's a Sid and

Nancy tale. For Dad. The sex, the drugs, and the egos have ruined the band and the music died. They wanted to be *rockers* instead of *musicians*. Then they grew up and started families. It's for Dad, but it's also a redemption story for me. And redemption for music in general. Music needs to get back to making *Abbey Road* instead of looking like fashion-store mannequins.

As I take notes, I remember one of my graduate school professors saying, "The best stories are not merely inspired ones. They are ones over which you task and task. Draft and draft," but he didn't stop there. He continued, "But also, your story will write itself because if a story flows from you, it means you've already had that world created in which the story exists. Therefore, your story moves along as it logically should."

What else have I forgotten? I can't recall ever feeling that, my story writing itself. I skated through graduate school—who wants to fail a published author?—because I felt destined to succeed. And *Sgt. Pepper* did succeed and I found my devout followers. *Bastard*, though, tanked hard. It deserved its criticisms, too. It was lazy and misguided. The suits gave me the idea. Hence my mistrust.

I begin writing—real writing this time—and my thumb hurts, but I push through it. I dive into the colored stuff and it (surprisingly) works with the typer. I separate scenes by color: violence on red, drugs and alcohol on blue, and the music goes on green. The system is different—I used to write from Chapter One to The End—but efficient. It helps me visualize and the story pours out. As I write, I find the story getting greener and greener. I don't hear Jules and Jacob come home. Before walking upstairs, Jules makes me some coffee and kisses my head. Without realizing it, I write: I love you. It's not

planned, and it wasn't what I wanted, but it fits in the context—the lead guitarist is polishing his guitar. Why not love it?

I work through the night until the sun rises. No one speaks to me. They go about fixing their bowls of cereal (I never realized that Jules chews so loudly). I finish my thought and decide it's time to sleep. I rest my head on the table, and feel my eyes get heavy while drool makes its way to my lips.

After five days of typing, I've again run out of paper. Jules is at work and I'm not within walking distance for office supplies (unless Enterprise Rent-a-Car will part with some paper). I walk down to Writer on the Storm to see if they have any. Emily greets me with a smile and a wave. "Back for more?"

"No, no. I'm writing a novel and ran out of paper. Do you sell any or know of a place that may have some? They need to work in a typewriter."

"A typewriter? Wow, you're one of those people."

"What?"

"Trying to be cool by writing on a typewriter. You know, drinking caramel macchiatos, wearing scarves and stocking caps, while everyone watches you write your novel. Gag me. But hey, you already have the glasses."

"I've had my typewriter for almost 25 years."

"Oh, sorry. I just assumed...Great, now I feel like an ass."

"Do you know where I can find paper?"

"Not within walking distance. You could take a cab or bus."

“I wouldn’t have enough money. Do you sell notebooks?”

“No, unfortunately. But we do have video games.”

“You’re not helping.”

“I know, but it’s fun. Haven’t you ever heard of flirting?”

I haven’t noticed and it’s discouraging. There was once a time I would’ve seen her, noticed the attraction, and made her a mixtape or given her a signed copy of my novel. Not to lead to anything, but just to massage my ego. But now, I can’t even think of myself as attractive much less think anyone else would think so. But it’s what I say next that’s more surprising.

“I’m seeing someone, sorry.”

“What? Ha! It’s just innocent flirting,” she says. “My way of saying you’re one of the good ones.”

I’ll never understand women.

The phantom books are still featured. Not a one is missing. Yeah, definitely was a great idea. But I’m desperate. I take two—of course one doesn’t have enough for a single novel. Ollie, you swine.

“Please don’t judge,” I say. “it isn’t what it looks like.” I don’t know why I care about what Emily thinks.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it. That’ll be \$65.85,” she says, grinning.

“What? I thought they were \$30.”

“Taxes, duh.” California’s extra 10%. It really puts dents in the pocket book. Speaking of which, I’m short by \$40 and my cards are defunct. I, however, notice a

credit card Ollie and I opened when we first got together. Ollie couldn't be stupid enough to leave it open, could he? And not just open, but to still be using it? I don't assume anything these days. What do I have to lose, though? It'll come up declined and I'll move to another option. I think about the possible felony, but I'm out of options. I cross my fingers and hand her the card. Success!

“Well, you enjoy whatever it is you're doing, and please, stop in again,” Emily says.

We say our goodbyes and I head toward home.

The rest of the story flows freely. When I finally feel as if I have redeemed music (and myself), I end it. I number the pages—350, give or take formatting and such—and stack each page on top of each other. It doesn't have a title yet, but that'll come. I'm not worried. I've written a novel. A decade's worth of trials, errors, and shit. And, in my opinion, it's my best. And that's what matters.

I search through the phone book—haven't used one of these since getting a cell phone. How convenient—and find Toby's number (he's got the smallest ad ever). I phone him to set up a meeting—still need to jump through the hoops—for tomorrow morning. He squeals. I half-expect him to piss himself and run out to kiss his secretary. Money must be tight. Sticking it to Ollie by having him pay Writer on the Storm for my novel is an added perk. Truth is, I wouldn't have written this while still his client. I should thank him. I get Fred's number at the end of our conversation (“You lost it? Not very professional, Mr. Fish,” he says).

I call Fred immediately after getting off the phone with Toby. He says he'll have a bunch transcribed, printed, and shipped once an editor's through with my novel. I tell him that Jules edits all my work. She's already agreed—I didn't really ask her so much as beg her, and she likes that.

When I finally put the phone down, I look at the book. The colors shoved into the phantom's cover are a rainbow of organized chaos. It's beautiful. Not pretty or attractive or sexy. Beautiful. I smile at my work. Jules asks, "What's next?" All I can muster are faint, mumbled noises and one word, "Sleep."

CHAPTER 13

I'm a half hour late when I arrive at Toby's office. I missed breakfast and my stomach rumbles as I ride the elevator to the fourteenth floor. I'll hit up In & Out Burger on the way home. Jules took the day off and gave me the truck. I'm apologetic when I enter Toby's office. He doesn't say anything about my tardiness; he hugs me—a bone-cracking man-hug—with smiles and a kiss on the forehead (a little strange, I'll admit). I'm not normally a man who'll embrace such affection from another man, but today I'm making an exception. As I smell Toby's Stetson cologne, I remember the enthusiasm of a finished novel.

The novel's good. Great even. It's not a *Jake Fish* novel, but a book written by Jake Fish. There's Clash references and homages to the greats: Dylan, Zeppelin, the Stones, The Beatles, and The Who (it'll resonate, hopefully, with an older crowd, people who lived it and not simply read about it). But now I have to sell it.

Toby's wearing his power suit and wants to get down to business.

"After intimacy like that, how about a cigarette first?" I ask.

He pulls out two cigars.

"Will these suffice?"

"Can't complain," I say, lighting the Cuban.

Dad would've done the same thing and Mom would've shaken her head. Both, however, would have been proud. I'm happy. No, it needs more intensity. I'm joyous, ecstatic, and elated. I feel like listening to "Honky Tonk Women," singing along with

Mick Jagger, and letting loose. It doesn't have any relevance, but for some reason, I don't feel music needs to tell me what to feel anymore. It just makes me happy. Like the story does.

"God, I was losing hope for you," Toby says, less forceful than last time. The sigh after his statement says it all.

"Just had to find the right story. And the right medium in which to write it."

"Well...the book is great aside from the handwriting, which is awful, but we'll work with it." He picks up his phone, saying, "Melanie, can you come in here?" His secretary, whose name I finally know, comes in and he hands her my book. "Go make copies of Mr. Fish's novel." *Dr. Fish*, Toby, Doctor. "Now where were we? Ah, yes. The book. Well, I've contacted Fred and he has transcribers standing by. It'll be harder with it half-typed and half-written, but they're professionals. I, on the other hand, have started planning the marketing for your big return."

"Toby, let me stop you right there. The return isn't that big. Shit, more people have either forgotten my name or haven't a clue who I am."

"That's why we market it and shove it down society's throat."

"Who'll buy it? My *loyal* fans? They'll think I sold out."

"We'll send you on a book tour. Do some signings and T.V. interviews. We can make this work. It's such an engaging story."

"Really? What happens?"

"It's about the music."

"What about the music?"

“Making proper music.”

“And the main character.”

“There are...so many *main* characters, it’s hard to choose.”

“Right, right. My mistake.”

“Hey, it’s what we need. A story about sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. Trust me, it’ll sell. Plus, I’m seeing the next *Almost Famous* out of this. What do you think of, wait for it, Jared Leto playing the lead?”

No, no, a million times no.

“You keep saying ‘trust me’ as if it means something. This is my story. For everyone to enjoy. So no. And no. And no again, for emphasis. No movies. I don’t want Hollywood’s sleazy hands on this.”

“But if we can get the money, why not?”

“Because this isn’t theirs. Or yours. It’s mine! You’re to have Fred print a few, say 50 or so, and sell them at a place near Venice Beach called Writer on the Storm.”

He frowns.

“Do you understand, *Toby*?”

“That little discount, used books place?”

“Yes.”

“That’s financial suicide.”

“Yeah, well, get it done. It’s what I paid you guys for.”

“The contract you signed says differently.”

“Then I’ll take it elsewhere.”

“And we’ll sue.”

“And I’ll counter-sue. You don’t own me or my work. Period.”

We do the back-and-forth thing for a few more minutes before Toby agrees. I think he just wants to be done with everything. He knows he’ll take a hit on this, but he didn’t do the work, so...fuck him. I want it to fall into hands of real readers—the person who’s strapped for cash but still picks up a softcover for entertainment and enlightenment. It can’t happen with hardcovers retailed at 25 to 30 bucks. These people still have hope for happiness and I’d like to think I contribute to that instead of offend.

“If we’re selling this at that store, then can we at least talk about your follow-up or possible sequel?” asks Toby. I really wish he’d listen to himself and hear the desperation. I wonder if The Smiths (“Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want”) would have more effect on him.

“I’m finished with it all,” I say, relighting my cigar.

“So...a follow-up it is. Do you still have those ideas that Ollie shot your way almost two months ago?”

“Nope. Those ideas, no offense if you had a hand in them, were shit. I did that shit in my twenties, but now, after all this, I’m done with it.”

“Well, then, what’s *your* next idea.”

“I don’t know. Maybe teaching. Or working in a bookstore. Or writing for *Rolling Stone*.”

“Oh, I get it—”

“No, you don’t get it. I’ll become a teacher or work in a bookstore. Or, possibly, write for *Rolling Stone*. Guide others to proper books and music. Maybe teach a few to write well. I wrote this novel for my Dad. Now that it’s done, so am I.”

Toby drops his cigar onto the hardwood. His mouth hangs open. His eyes pop out so far I fear he may detach a retina.

He finally gathers himself and picks up the cigar.

“What?” he asks.

“I’ve got to move on. Writing doesn’t bring me the same joy it once did. Maybe it’s the economics. Or maybe I just don’t have interesting things to say, but I just don’t have the imagination to create the stories I feel will benefit the public at the volume you people demand, so I’m out.”

“But you’re going to teach kids to write, I assume. Or tell people what books they should read? I hope you know, you’d have to write articles if you went the *Rolling Stone* route.”

“I’ve always had a knack for telling others what to do. Of course I’d rather do that. People can make up their own goddamn minds. If people want to write, then I’ll encourage it. Then, if or when they’re good enough, then they can put up with the suits. You know, *your* kind. Plus, if I wind up writing articles, it’ll mean better hours and a life of music. Do what you love, that’s what Dad always said. And Mom, I think, agreed.”

“Who cares about what your parents said or think? This is *your* life.”

“What, I’m just a Mommy’s boy? Or a Daddy’s boy? Please. If you’re the example of someone who did things *on his own*, I think I’ll be fine.”

What Toby doesn't comprehend is that sometimes one has to flip to the life's B-Side. They may not be the *Greatest Hits*, but their importance is unquestionable. Like Pearl Jam's *Lost Dogs*, I must discover my other opportunities. And some day, when life has added a few more years onto me and new stresses have emerged, I'll come back to the *Greatest Hits*—they always have something to say when you need them.

"Well, I guess my hands are tied," Toby says, as if he's realizing there's more than the job, that life offers a lot more (like going out and finding a new wife), even though it'll take a little getting used to, if he goes that route. "Take care, Jake...um...I mean...Mr. Fish."

"Dr. Fish."

"Right, sorry. Dr. Fish."

Jules looks up as I enter. Seeing her smile—as if I was coming home from work—tingles a bit. She asks about the meeting. I give her the basics and she calls Toby a "tool." That deserves a high-five. I put my novel back on the island and we stare at it. She can tell I'm not just happy. I'm satisfied. She grabs my hand and holds it tightly. I give hers a squeeze.

"Have a title yet?" she asks. I haven't thought of one. There are so many possibilities.

"I was thinking: *Can't Buy Me Music*."

“I like it. Short and concise. Oh, and I took the liberty of setting up a reading at that bookstore you told me about. The owner seemed thrilled. I know it’s still in its handwritten-typed phase, but I think it’ll be good for you.”

“I like the idea. But on one condition. You have to be there with Jacob.”

“Jake, I don’t think it would be appropriate—”

I show up to the store early. First time I’ve been early for anything. They have my other novels displayed on their feature table. Someone has moved the phantoms to the back. I won’t gloat too much, but it’s a nice sight. And they’ve been price-dropped. Ha!

“Thanks again for doing this,” the owner, Patrick, says. Jules and Jacob leave to wander the racks.

“My pleasure. I love your store here.”

“Thanks. It’s not much, but it’s homey.”

“Definitely.”

“Oh, before I forget, Dr. Fish, this was sent for you.”

Patrick hands me a bottle of Kilbeggen. Toby must’ve sent it for my *image* (Ollie is the only one who’d tell him what I drink). I told Pat that he or one his employees could have it—I quit drinking once the writing started. Clarity is...different.

“Who’d pass on free whiskey?” Emily asks, walking up behind us. She snatches it and takes a back-row seat. Perhaps if I was still stuck in my rut as Emily is stuck in hers, I too would’ve drained that bottle. I hope she finds happiness, though.

The crowd files in and takes their seats. There's about 15 faces—ages range from those too young to remember grunge music to those old enough to have had a crushes on Sinatra or Marilyn Monroe—with their eyes on me. I pull out the first chapter and start reading. Right away I find a typo (“That’s why we read stuff aloud,” my professor said). They don’t notice, however. It feels nice to have an audience, have people genuinely caring about me. Jules has a big smile and Jacob, that boy, is wide-eyed.

When I finish, I hear whispers: “I’ve got to get that,” one says, and another says, “Wonder how it all turns out.” People come up to thank me, telling me they’ll buy copies “for my husband” or “for my father.” So I have a new audience: middle-aged men. Even Emily comes up and says, “Way to go. It’s your best work.” Coming from her, I don’t know if it’s a compliment or not at first, but a wink seals it.

Finally Jules and Jacob remain after the crowd clears. I’m sweating and breathing heavily.

“So what’d you think about that, buddy?” I ask Jacob.

“Well, in my expert opinion, I think it was awesome! I didn’t understand some parts, but you’re a good writer.”

“Don’t worry, someday your Mom will explain things. She’s a good teacher.”

“Wow, easy on the compliments,” says Jules. “It’s your day. You deserve them and many more.”

“Why don’t we get out of here and get something to eat.”

“Yes!” they both say.

I thank Pat again, and just to keep my options open, I ask if I may send my resume to him. He agrees. As we leave, Jules asks, “What was that about?” I smirk and say, “Just some B-Side stuff. Nothing to worry about.”

We all hop in the SUV and drive off. As we head toward Santa Monica Pier for some Mexican food, I hear a faint whisper from the back. Jacob is humming a song I can’t immediately place. He bobs his head from side to side and finally sings “Ob-La-De, Ob-La-Da”. Jules and I look at each other. It’s a jaw-dropped, twinkle-in-the-eye kind of moment. Whatever music he’s sneaking, it’s all right with us. I then smile for myself. A genuine—no catalyst required—full-toothed smile. I can’t wait to get home. *Home* home, I mean. I grab Jules’ hand. I think I’ll finish the mixtape, or make a new one for her. Something that represents her. And I know the opener, the attention grabber. As we all look forward, we all belt it out, “La la la la, life goes on.”

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