

## Songwriter

On Monday morning Moses got up early and buttered his toast, then remembered he'd like to take a shower, but thought better of it, so he ate his toast and washed it down with pineapple juice. He heard a tune in his head and a few words were rising to the page. He had a rhyme in mind. He strummed a few chords. Then he finished his pineapple juice, farted loudly, and asked himself what he'd like to do today. Let's see, was all he could come up with.

The song was about a pretty girl, the daughter of communists, and somebody he'd been drunk with once. But the lyrics were wandering all around in his head, so Moses decided to smoke a cigarette and see if he could find some inspiration there. He exhaled and watched the smoke curl in the air, catching the light streaming in through the kitchen window. Time was the problem, he told himself. Time changes everything and isn't subject to change. Time is constant in its unrelenting progression of tick tick tick.

*If time will tell,*

*Who tells time?*

Moses liked this idea. It might be a song, it might be a bridge to another verse. Maybe he could work it into the chorus. Maybe he should just file it away and have some more pineapple juice. He liked that idea too.

Moses played guitar and piano and was pretty good on the drums when he had to be. He could really wail on guitar, his fingers moving like hummingbirds picking the strings, and he had been a first-call sideman for some famous bands in the 70s. But most people—if they remembered him at all—remembered his songs, hits he'd written on smoke breaks and passed on to the rock stars who called him for gigs. With a few still in rotation on classic rock, he made a modest income from his publishing rights. Rumor had it that Dylan had recorded a Moses song once, but Dylan scoffed at the notion and Moses never appeared in any of his liner notes. To hear Moses tell it, "Yeah, I met him once. It was in a bathroom backstage. We were both shaking our peckers off and zipping up."

The piano was where he did most of his writing these days. He was 55 now, and his eyes were icy blue and his hair was sandy, streaked with silver strands, and though it's true that his hair might have been thinning, no one knew for sure because no one ever saw Moses without his trademark cap. That cap was instrumental in his success at writing songs. It was a leather newsboy cap with a flat top folding over onto the brim that provided a crease where Moses could stick his cigarette and leave his hands free whenever a tune popped into his head and he wanted to play. Because Moses was a chain smoker he almost always had a smoke going, and because he always lit up just before he played, his friends said his cap smoked more cigarettes than he did. Ashes dropped in his lap and spent butts poked out of the front of his cap, but Moses never noticed

or seemed to care because these were the kinds of sacrifices he made for his art.

\*\*\*

Moses settled onto the piano bench in Ray and Sabrina's house, his fingers were particularly active. And then he started to play. It came from nowhere, but the melody got him going and when he hit the last note he could feel a woody coming on. He'd been thinking about Sabrina.

*She's the girl next door*

*But she's miles away*

Yeah, that's it. Moses loved the way Sabrina looked at him when he played his songs for her. He pictured her almond-shaped eyes, suede-colored skin and thick, wavy brown hair. He could still see her thin body in a thong bikini diving from the edge of the pool that morning and disappearing into the sun-splashed water. Maybe, he thought to himself, when she returns this afternoon I'll have a new song for her. Or, maybe I'll just sing her old favorites that she wants to hear again and again. Either way would be fine. And then he decided to take that shower after all.

Meanwhile, Sabrina left her Pilates class in Santa Monica and headed back up Pacific Coast Highway toward Malibu, the top down on her Carrera, the

ocean air a refreshing kiss on her cheek. As she turned off the highway, winding her way up the canyon, she remembered Moses watching her that morning, just sitting there at the kitchen window, checking her out as she swam her laps. She thought of his lovely long fingers and the way the vessels stood out on his lean, tautly muscled arms, pulsing with vitality. She wondered what it would be like to sleep with Moses, but knew that this was dangerous territory. He was older and fragile in a way that both excited her and made her want to weep. Yet with Moses living alone in the bungalow behind their house and never going anywhere, it wasn't hard to think about taking some pleasure there.

\*\*\*

Club Rincon wasn't much more than a roadhouse out on PCH, but its roots went back to the 60s when on any given night you might hear folk music, surf guitar or righteous blues. Ray bought the club in '99 after he'd flogged his last band to death and decided that venues might be more profitable than management. By then, Club Rincon had played host to rock bands, punk, new wave, and occasional outlaw country. The place had heard it all and established itself as the go-to room for up-and-comers.

Ray called Sabrina's cell and got her just as she was passing through the gate in front of their home.

“I’m going to a club in Hollywood tonight. Checking out an act I’m thinking about for the 10 o’clock slot on Sunday night. You could swing by here and we’ll get dinner first.”

“I don’t think so, Ray,” said Sabrina as she parked the Porsche beside the faux Italian fountain in the center of the circular driveway. “I’m already home and don’t feel like driving back into town.”

“C’mon, babe, it’d be fun. It’s a chick trio. They’re kind of pop, kind of alternate rock. I hear they’re funny.”

“I thought we talked about Moses for Sunday night.”

“No, you talked about it and I said I’d think about it,” said Ray.

“You’ll call me when you’re coming home?” said Sabrina.

“I’ll call,” he said.

Moses. He didn’t need to be thinking about him, but there he was, the guy on his mind now and all the money they’d made back when Ray had represented him. This was long before Moses had tripped out and wound up medicated on a daily basis. Back then, Moses could wind himself up into a nerve-rattling high and groove with any band on stage. But Ray also remembered the downers that followed. Sabrina was right: the 10 p.m. Sunday slot was always open for off acts, and Ray could see him up there, singing in his sweet folksy voice and playing those old songs on acoustic guitar the way they were composed. Naturally the audience would totally dig it because no one had ever heard those familiar songs played that way before. Ain’t gonna happen, thought Ray.

\*\*\*

Ray and Sabrina lived in a large house that resembled a Mediterranean villa and they both encouraged Moses to drop by whenever he wanted to play the grand piano in their living room with the million-dollar view overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Ray told anyone who cared to listen that the piano had once belonged to Randy Newman, and though most people took his word for it, others remained skeptical, chalking it up to Ray's constant need to paint himself with a brighter brush.

Sabrina was napping in the sunroom when the first soft chords rippled through the air and woke her. At first she just lay there with her eyes closed, enjoying the melody's gentle massage. She pictured his long fingers finding the right key just an instant before he actually heard the note in his mind, composing right there, a tune unwinding in his head. This was something new, with a trace of melancholy, and maybe Moses would find just the right words this time for one of those ballads that shredded her heart.

Though he was tall and broad-shouldered and always wore jeans and kick-ass motorcycle boots, Sabrina never saw Moses as the rough character Ray always cautioned her about. She supposed it was the sweetness of his songs and the tenderness in his voice, but even she had to admit that she heard something primal and dangerous in the rock and roll stuff he'd written back in the day. But so what? That's what made it rock, right?

Ray saw a different Moses. He'd said, "Growing up in Honolulu, Moses was a juvie and a high school dropout. His father went MIA and his mother was an alcoholic, too boozed to know where he was half the time. He boosted cars and couldn't stay out of fights, and after he was arrested for aggravated assault his mom shipped him off to live with her brother in Burbank. First time he picked up a guitar was in California. He's not the puppy dog you think he is, babe."

"Don't stop," said Sabrina as she walked into the piano room and stood behind him. She placed one of her hands on his shoulder, letting him know that she was right there, close. "I like it."

Moses glanced back at her and didn't miss a beat, just as if he knew she would be there sooner or later, summoned from sleep by the music he played so effortlessly it was like he was humming a tune only he could hear.

"How you doing, girl," said Moses, his fingers rolling over the keys, teasing the melody from out of its hiding place, a burning cigarette wedged in the crease of his cap. Moses always called her "girl" and Sabrina liked that, thinking it appropriate because she was a good twenty years younger than both Moses and Ray. Moses had known Ray's first wife, but neither of them spoke of her anymore and Sabrina never asked why.

"Does it have any words?"

Moses stopped playing, pulled the cigarette from his cap and took a mighty drag before stubbing it out in an ashtray from Club Rincon, of which there were many around the house because no one could smoke there anymore.

"They all have words, girl," said Moses, "we just have to discover what they are."

Then he shook another cigarette from his pack and lit it with one of the stick matches he kept in abundance in his pocket with his smokes. He notched his cigarette into his cap and started to sing...

*I never wanted to be a thief  
Till I found what I wanted to steal.  
I never planned on a life of crime,  
I didn't know you'd make me feel  
This way about you.  
Stolen kisses...*

Sabrina's breath caught in her throat as the lyrics danced into her consciousness and wove their magic around her emotions like a soft flannel scarf tied at her neck. It wasn't subtle. Sabrina just knew the song was about her and that Moses was flirting. When Moses stopped playing, she asked the obvious question: "Is there more?"

"No doubt," said Moses. And then he followed that with one of his riddles that made him seem somewhat mystical and deeper than he probably was. "But the story has yet to be written, thus the song has yet to be sung," he said, winking at Sabrina as he pulled a burned out butt from his cap and placed it in the ashtray.

Sabrina wanted to ask if the song was for her, about her, but instead asked him if he ever wanted to play in front of an audience again. "You know,

just you and your acoustic guitar, singing all those songs of yours that people remember. Maybe mix in a few new ones.”

“Solo? That’s the way we come into the world. Sure, why not?”

“Ray has an open slot this Sunday night. Pretty low key, mellow crowd. Think you could put a set together?”

“Easy,” said Moses, his right hand tapping the keyboard in weird arrhythmic progressions.

Sabrina got up from the bench, then leaned into Moses and kissed him on the cheek. “Finish the new song. I’ll talk to Ray.”

\*\*\*

Ray got home sometime after two, and because he’d had a few too many, woke up Sabrina as he clumsily climbed into bed. “Sorry, sweetheart,” said Ray, but then he realized that he was quite aroused and really wasn’t sorry at all. Sabrina mumbled something into her pillow, so Ray snuggled up behind her and began kissing her neck and licking her ear.

“Were they any good?” said Sabrina as she turned over to face him.

By now, Ray was rock hard and not really in the mood for conversation, but when he tried to kiss her she pulled away. Moonlight bathed their bed just enough so that Ray could see his beautiful wife and the question that lingered on her lips. He brought his hand up to her breasts and said, “What?”

“The chick trio. Did you like them?”

“Oh,” said Ray, losing a bit of enthusiasm and resigned to the fact that a little verbal foreplay might be necessary. “Yeah, they knocked me out.”

“So you signed ‘em for Sunday night?”

“I wish, but they’re booked solid for the next six months. They just released a new CD and my guess is they’ll be heading out on tour.”

Now Sabrina inched closer and kissed him tenderly on the mouth. “So Sunday night is still open.” It wasn’t a question.

Ray loved his wife with a passion he’d never felt for any woman before and considered himself fortunate that Sabrina had married him so late in life. Sabrina’s mother was Vietnamese and her marine father had brought her to the states after the war. In the blue light of the moon, her exotic features and lush mane of hair tempted him to lose himself in her eyes as he so often did. But he knew where this was going, so he didn’t say anything and waited.

“I told Moses you were thinking about letting him have it.”

“Oh, c’mon, Sabrina...”

“He’s excited. He’s putting a set together.”

Ray propped himself up on his elbow and said, “Look, Moses doesn’t know whether to shit or eat asparagus. Don’t do this to him. He’s bi-polar, babe. We’ve got him on life support. I know I owe him a ton—he made a lot of money for me—but that doesn’t include letting him be humiliated in front of a roomful of strangers. He’s incompetent at best. He thinks writing songs is his job, but that only works when you’re writing hits. He used to be good at that, but now he just maintains.”

“He sings to me, Ray. I know how good he is.”

“He just wants to fuck you. That’s what he does. I’ve known this guy for thirty some years, and the only time he gets laid is when he gets a girl alone and sings his songs. That’s his idea of seduction. Women eat it up and think he’s normal.”

“It’ll crush him if you say no.”

“Believe me, worse things could happen.”

Ray collapsed onto his back and stared at the ceiling, so Sabrina leaned over him, her bare nipples touching his chest. Later Ray and Sabrina made turtle love. Penetration was achieved, but lovemaking was impossible because of their shells.

\*\*\*

Moses took the news in stride, wrote up a set list, and actually rehearsed a little. And then he made an appointment for a manicure. His nails were chipped and uneven and that wouldn’t do at all, no, not at all for the virtuoso performance he planned for Sunday night. Then he replaced the strings on his old acoustic Gibson, his very first guitar, but still with him and perfect for the folksy sound he needed.

He liked that song “Stolen Kisses” and desperately wanted to finish it for an unveiling at his gig. He pictured Sabrina hearing it, her eyes misting slightly as he picked her out of the audience and sang it directly to her. Still, he didn’t

know where that song was going and seriously doubted he could finish it in time. And then he remembered Wendy, wannabe groupie, party girl, and Ray's first wife. To this day, Moses figured he'd done Ray a favor with her, but he could still see Ray's face when he found out and all the hurt and anger that resulted. Why remind Ray of something that had been forgotten so long ago? No, "Stolen Kisses" would have to wait. Besides, it was almost time for his manicure.

\*\*\*

On Sunday evening a stretch limo pulled into the driveway in front of the house. Of course the limo was Sabrina's idea, but Ray had gone along gladly, thinking what the hell, this is the way we used to do it, let's have some fun. The three of them climbed in back, Moses keeping his guitar case with him, afraid to let the chauffer stow it in the trunk as if somehow his music would disappear if he let it out of his sight. Sabrina was dressed in hippie chic with low-riding bells, a cream-colored peasant shirt under which she was braless, and a scarlet headband. Ray was dressed all in black, looking quite like the nightclub impresario he actually was. And then there was Moses. Blue jeans, black boots, and a blue cowboy shirt with snap pockets that Sabrina had borrowed from Ray's closet. Naturally, the trademark newsboy cap topped it all off, and though a pair of sweat stains had already appeared at his armpits, Moses was styling and at least he was clean.

“I’m opening with “Kimberly”, said Moses. “Kimberly” was an up-tempo smoothie with clever lyrics and lots of internal rhymes that had been a #1 hit on the charts and was still being covered by bands and solo artists. As they drove along PCH to the club, Moses became more and more animated, his hands fluttering about without the guitar that was tucked away in its case because he was so much more adept at playing music than talking about it.

He went through his entire set list with Sabrina nodding enthusiastically, while Ray’s only comment was, “You’ve only got an hour. You may have to skip a few so you can finish with ‘Exiled From L.A.’ Keep an eye on me, I’ll give you a heads up.” Of course “Exiled” was a big rocker that everyone knew, and Moses liked that idea. It could be one of those moments like that first time Clapton unplugged on “Layla”.

When they arrived at Club Rincon, Ray surveyed the parking lot and saw that it was about three quarters full, not bad for a Sunday night and probably just right for Moses. A full house might make him blink, thought Ray, but a mellow crowd with the joint half-filled should be very doable. Ray was even starting to look forward to the evening as Sabrina stepped out of the limo and Moses opened his guitar case and pulled out two packs of Marlboro reds and stuffed them into the pockets of his shirt. And that’s when Ray dropped the bomb.

“You might as well leave those in the car. You can’t smoke inside.”

Because Moses hadn’t been in a nightclub—or almost anywhere—for close to a dozen years, he hadn’t once thought that he wouldn’t be able to sit up there on the stage, light up and notch his cigarette into his cap to the amusement

of the entire audience, and then start to play. His face was ashen and the circles beneath his arms became noticeably larger.

\*\*\*\*\*

The spotlight tracked Moses out onto the stage. He sat down on the stiff cane chair they'd provided. He was sure he looked rather folksy, quite at home up there with his guitar, but his brain was on fire. His eyes settled on an obese man wearing a shirt with pink flamingos. Suddenly it occurred to Moses that maybe he should say something by way of introduction, so he leaned into the microphone and said, "Hi, I'm Moses...", but stopped abruptly, startled at the sound of his own voice. The obvious next move was to start to play, so Moses strummed the intro to "Kimberly" and was mildly surprised when a number of people in the audience applauded, having recognized the distinctive opening chords. That felt kind of good, so he extended the opening with an elaborate guitar riff, then realized that he'd created an awkward moment as the audience patiently waited for him to begin singing. He started in on the first verse and could hear that his voice was wavering, so much so that he found himself listening to the sound of his voice and having difficulty remembering the lyrics. Desperately he searched the faces in the crowd for Ray and Sabrina, but no matter how hard he tried not to let it happen, his eyes always locked in on the obese man wearing the shirt with the pink flamingos.

Finally he brought “Kimberly” to a merciful end. What to do now? He immediately launched into his second song. His guitar playing was excellent, certainly up to his highest standards, but his voice was weak and fluttering and sounded alien over the house speakers. The song was called “I Remember” and somehow he made it through the first two lines:

*I remember waking up in hotel rooms.*

*I remember singing songs out of tune.*

Unfortunately, the next lines were vague recollections at best, so he faked them with some humming and skipped ahead in his mind in an effort to remember the start of the second verse, which suddenly popped into his head:

*Cigarette butts, smoking up the afternoon.*

*Gin and tonics, I've got to stop drinking soon.*

The moment he remembered those first two words his right hand stopped playing and instinctively reached for the cigarette in his cap that wasn't there. So much for “I Remember”, he thought.

Moses sensed that the crowd was becoming uneasy and decided that an early exit might be just what the doctor ordered. But not before he gave them a proper sendoff. That's when Moses stood up, kicked over the cane chair and loudly strummed the chords that kicked off “Exiled From L.A.” This would be the

all-instrumental version, and just to add a little showmanship, he strutted back and forth on the stage while he played, even though that meant he kept going off-mic, making the whole thing sound pretty weird. By now his eyes had adjusted to the darkness and he finally spotted Ray and Sabrina seated in a booth at the back. Moses wondered what they were thinking, but it didn't really matter because he was getting off on his energy now and the sound of his guitar. He wrapped it up with a big, improvised finish, then bowed into the microphone and said, "Thank you, goodnight." He walked off the stage to the sound of some light clapping coming from a booth in the back of the room.

\*\*\*

The ride home wasn't quite the celebration Ray had been planning. He'd found Moses standing by the limo out in the parking lot. He was smoking a cigarette and another one was half-smoked and stuck in his cap. Jesus, thought Ray, they're both smoking.

But Ray was inclined to get out of there with as little collateral damage as possible, so he told him, "Hey Buddy, that was different. Maybe some first-night jitters, but you really rocked 'em on that last one."

"You think?" was all Moses had said.

Ray took that in, then said, "C'mon, Moses, just write some new songs. You're writing all the time, but you never get past the first verse. Finish one and I

could probably find someone to record it. You wouldn't have to sing it for anyone and your royalties could go up."

Now, safely tucked away in the car and buzzing down the highway, Ray popped the cork on the first of the two bottles of Taittinger he'd put on ice. Moses, who rarely drank alcohol, downed his glass and asked for another. At first he was quiet, lost in his thoughts, his face shut down like a church after midnight. Then the champagne started having its desired effect, and Moses smiled when Sabrina said, "I liked the way they applauded when they recognized 'Kimberly'. They knew it was your song."

Moses laughed. "Girl, it was my song once, but these days I just rent it out." Though Ray and Sabrina had no idea what was so funny, Moses laughed even harder, and when he sipped his champagne he laughed again so hard that some of it fizzed out of his nose like snot from Old Faithful. Now *that* was funny and got both Ray and Sabrina laughing too. Moses suggested they open the second bottle.

\*\*\*

On Monday morning Moses got up late feeling dull and hung over. His failure had been nothing less than colossal, right up there on stage for everyone to see, but something important had been said last night if only Moses could remember what it was. This was exciting. The trauma of yesterday was over, and for some reason this new day held an unseen promise.

Suddenly he had an urge to play the piano. Knowing that Ray and Sabrina would be gone already, Moses entered the back door and went to the piano room, assuming he'd have the house all to himself. Instead, he came face to face with two people he'd never seen before. A skinny man with dirty hair and red blotches on his face was standing by the dining room table. Behind him was a woman who had probably been pretty once, but now looked desperate and sleep-deprived. Even for Moses, their body odor was palpable. On the enormous lacquered table Moses surveyed an odd assortment of items: watches, jewelry, passports, a laptop computer, and one of Ray's Armani suits.

"Where's Ray and Sabrina," asked Moses.

The guy hesitated a moment, then said, "They'll be right back. But we'll be going now. We can't wait for them any longer."

Of course, Moses instantly recognized a couple of meth heads on the prowl when he saw them. "You don't look like any friends of Ray and Sabrina."

The couple had started to move away, and the moment might have passed, but the guy couldn't let it go so he turned and said, "What's that supposed to mean? I find your tone insulting."

Now the woman chimed in: "Dale has been offended, sir. You've no cause to be rude."

The idea that this guy's dignity had been stepped upon made Moses laugh. Then he imagined this stupid tweaker in Ray's Armani suit, thinking he looked pretty sharp, and that made him laugh even more. The guy stepped up to

Moses and said, “Your friends won’t be pleased when we tell them how you treated us.”

And that’s when Moses remembered what he used to do back in Honolulu when street punks and addicts got up in his face. He threw his right elbow out with such a force that he split the bridge of the guy’s nose and he crumpled to the hardwood floor. Then Moses kicked him once in the ribs for good measure, knocking the wind out of a guy who wouldn’t be getting up anyway.

The woman screamed, “Dale, Dale…” and threw her body on top of him, shielding him from any more blows.

Moses picked her up and sat her down in one of the chairs and softened his voice: “Little darling, I’m not going to hurt you. Just stay put and I’ll be right back.”

Then Moses left the room and went to the kitchen where he knew Ray kept a roll of duct tape in a catch-all drawer. When he returned, the woman hadn’t moved and stared at Moses with the frightened eyes of a cornered animal. Moses picked the guy up and placed him in a chair next to her, then ripped off long strips of duct tape and bound his arms and legs. Then he secured the woman in the same way, and because she didn’t resist, he patted her softly on the head when he was finished.

By now, the adrenaline release was tapering off and Moses had a moment of clarity. And that’s when he remembered what Ray had said the night before about finishing a new song and finding someone to record it. Moses went

straight to the piano. He glanced over his shoulder at his hostages, but they seemed unimportant now, resembling little more than furniture.

So Moses started to play. He attacked the keys, laying down a powerful bass line with a catchy hook. He played it over and over again until he got it just right, and then he sang the first two lines that magically popped into his head and strayed from there to his lips:

*I can see the criminal, lurking within your eyes.*

*You can be so cynical, Ooo you're such a bad guy.*

It was kind of jazzy, syncopated, something new for him, and maybe a little dark. Yes, he thought, this is something I can work with, so he played the opening over and over again. He couldn't wait for Sabrina to get home.