

Crashes

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“You see some things out there, you wouldn’t believe,” Roger said to the pretty younger woman he knew as Jill sitting three stools down the bar. “But the thing is you can’t do anything about any of it. We can’t stop any of it.”

Luckily, this Days Inn had a bar. Every one the company set him up in was modeled essentially the same to provide a sense of familiarity.

Jill had just finished her shift. Her obligation to be nice to him has dissipated and now her tone changed, her speech clipped. Her pump dangled off her big toe. She sipped a Hendricks gimlet and slipped a camo sweatshirt over her work-mandated cream blouse. She plucked olives from a tumbler. She quit smoking in the past year or so. Roger had too. They found common ground on this. He had been drinking too much so he does mostly did in his room now. If the railroad springs a test, he could piss dirty. Beer, he’d stick to beer tonight.

“You ever feel like getting fired could be the best thing that could happen to you?” She said for anyone to hear.

“I’ve got no place else to go. They nix me, I’m dust in the wind.”

“A hundred hotels in town. Or any other. And I’m here. I tell myself I’m here to feed the cats. You believe that? I’m here to feed the damn cats? I’ve taken in three already. One uses a fern to piss on, another uses the bathtub. Not very grateful animals.”

Stray cats stalked the parking lots like bulls in a switchyard. Management encouraged it and left ceramic bowls around the hedges. They warded off possums and rats. The front desk left out large jars of Friskies for children to fill the bowls. Jill would draw maps to where they were on the property. In the absence of children, Jill fed the cats.

“How do you choose which ones you take home?”

Jill rolled an olive between her fingers. A robin was tattooed in the webbing of her hand. “The most lost looking ones. Racoons and possums will tear them to shreds.” She straightened her pile of receipts and checked her calculator again. “You on the six o’clock?”

“Sure am.” It was a little over ten hours away. Plenty of time for something but, most likely, watching the news and drinking a six pack of Ranier. He would open the windows the three inches the hotel allowed to smell the muddy oil-on-asphalt steaming off the freeways not three hundred yards away and the freight lines that traced it. Beyond that, the fields were dotted with tents like gumdrops stamped into the earth.

“I’ve never been on a train,” Jill said. “You get free train tickets?”

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“Psch” Roger made a noise he already regretted, some sort of snort-sneeze that caught in his throat. “Whole different view up front than as a passenger.”

“I used to think something like that would be romantic.” She popped an olive in her mouth and held it in her cheek. “Now I just think it sounds long and uncomfortable.”

“You see things you wouldn’t see otherwise.” Roger wanted to order another beer. Any kind, even that Piny Northwest mud-piss he avoided on principle. He drank light. He liked indistinction. That’s part of the reason he liked hotel bars. A certain distance was expected in hotels. At least in the public areas. He never had a problem in any hotel bar. On occasion, in places he knew less than this, he might even make up a name. But here, on the Columbia River, he was Roger the same that Jill was Jill. The checks both knew their names before they signed. “Some people retire to ride trains. They do the Agatha Christie thing, the Transiberian thing. They go to Machu Picchu, Bangkok, places I’ve never even thought about.”

“Why don’t you go? Money or will?” Her drink being empty, Jill seemed to be paused between one place and another.

“Both. Or maybe I don’t want to. I went to Galveston once. Read a book about the flood that happened there. Said it was the deadliest natural disaster to ever hit the country.”

“Great selling point for a vacation.” She twirled a toothpick, cracked it in half and placed it onto a small pile she’d gathered on the bar.

“I went there because it’s on the water. My wife and I went there on a second honeymoon. The marriage was in such a state I found a sort of peace with the place’s history.”

“Martyr for misery. Do you write much poetry?” She raised her hands. “Please dont fucking tell me if you do.”

“Nah, too much vagueness. I like things that I know work.”

“A man of science.” She seemed restless.

“Engineering. Things are put together certain ways for certain reasons.”

“And I didn’t think it’d ever be relevant about two trains leaving New York and Chicago at different times.” She organized her pile of toothpicks like she was building a fire.

“What’re they carrying?”

“Why does it matter?”

He raised his hand to settle the tab. “Because, if it’s people, they yield right of way to freight.”

Jill crushed the pile of toothpicks with her hand. “Guy, can I get another?”

The bartender, who’s nametag, a brass rectangle like a shrunken version of an office placard, read Guy, came to her and gave her a look. “Only two, you know that.”

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“Really? Who’s going to say? So, I’ve got to go somewhere else? Why?”

“I don’t make the rules.” A corner of his starched shirt had come untucked and he had a divet scraped from his neck from shaving. “Jilly,” he said.

“Jilly? For fuck’s sake, Guy.” She turned to Rgoer. “I don’t go by Jilly if you’re wondering. I don’t think anyone does actually. Will you be here for a minute?”

Roger shrugged. “Got nowhere to be I can think of.”

“Could you watch my stuff?” She glared at Guy who raised his hands.

“Do what you need,” Guy said.

“Glad I have your permission to use the restroom.” She left her stool askew when she walked away.

“Do you want any food?” Guy asked Roger.

Roger wasn’t eating. He had eaten here several times but the only cook who could cook an egg wasn’t here tonight.

A moment later, Jill returned. As she slid her jacket off the stool, she said. “You like it here? The food sucks and Guy can’t make a martini to save his skin. Most of the other railroad guys hit the Hooters up on the Island or get pizza delivered. Honestly, you’re the only one whose name I know.”

“I spend more time on the road than home. It might sound pathetic but this is my living room as much as anywhere.”

“That does sound pathetic. But I’ve heard worse.”

Roger might have wanted to tell her that he might be older but, from what he understood about himself, he had maintained alright. He had his pride.

“I’ve offended you.” She patted his shoulder. “Not what I meant to do.”

“I’m not easily offended,” he said this with confidence and self-loathing.

“Are you offended by bad margaritas? I know you’re from the Southwest so I’m not sure if that’s sacrosanct.” Her syllables stretched further in some places than others not in the way one might stress or emphasize but in a gummy West Coast way that he remembered from eighties movies set around the beaches of Southern California. He liked the way it had an enthusiastic resignation.

“A margarita has never done a thing to me because I’ve never done a thing to it.”

“Beer man, huh? Might as well have rolled in like a tumbleweed from Kansas.” This could have ended abruptly but the mere fact that she had given him more thought than he had to himself in more time than he would like to admit, gave him an unhealthy surge of confidence.

“They got drafts wherever you’re going to?”

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“I’m guessing they do but I go for the guacamole. They might make it from scratch.”

“How far away is it?”

“Couple miles up the road, right by the first house I lived in on my own .It’s called El Mocajete. Been there before?”

He shook his head.

“You need to put those cab vouchers they give you to better use there, Roger.”

He never used the vouchers but knew some of the other guys did. Jill wasn’t wrong. Some of them even expensed ten miles rides downtown to the better strip clubs and bars.

Roger tipped the drivers in cash which they seemed to appreciate. He made small talk. He tried to avoid the weather. “She said this place has good guacamole?” He said.

The driver was young, ear-bud plugged into his ear, hair cropped neatly over his collar. “She’d know better than me.”

Roger appreciated the response. Sometimes the drivers ignored him completely. Jill tapped her legs to a beat that murmured through woofers in the trunk.

Jill noticed him tip which made him second guess the gesture. “No one else tips the cab drivers. They just tell them to idle for a few minutes and let the meter run. You should see some of the totals they come up with”

A red carpet rolled out the door like a tongue beaded with cigarette burns. Beyond a heavy wooden door, the grease-trap smell of heavy salt and canola oil gave way to plug-in potpourri and wet-dog mildew. Mariachi played but Roger couldn’t find a band, only fist-sized speakers stashed behind paper tulip bundles like discarded prom corsages. “Familiar enough for you?” Jill led him through the place partitioned with plaster-slathered adobe-esque drywall that somehow inspired a feeling of intimacy.

As they took seats at the bar, Roger sensed old cigarette smoke and reflexively smelled his collar. He had quit himself and used to smell himself before returning home to his wife after sneaking a couple at happy hour.

She ordered a Cadillac margarita. He ordered Pacifico and they shared chips and salsa until it was crumbs and pink water. “What about the guacamole?” The bottom of the bowls stared back bloodshot. He couldn’t see himself but felt he could see her seeing him which was worse. He looked too formal in a blue polo and loafers. Why would he have thought to wear anything else? He should have gone upstairs and changed. Should he order food or, maybe tequila? Liquor was too forward, too emblematic of youth and therefore carelessness. He did, however order another beer and ask if she needed a refill as well.

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Jill shrugged. She was cracking toothpicks again and setting them in piles. "It's too much salt." She dabbed the edge of a cloth napkin into water and touched it to her wrist. "Salsa's hard as hell to get out of linen. Fuck." she cursed a sort of world-weary, expectant curse. "These goddamn shirts we have to wear. Got to keep them white, got to keep them clean. They don't supply the shirts either and I've only got two."

"Bleach." Roger tugged at his collar.

"I did that once. Went into the janitor's closet trying to bleach out coffee from one of these. Wound up burning myself." Waving a hand for the server, she seemed to stop herself. It was demanding, high-maintenance. "I try to wait for things that never come. Does that ever end?"

"In my vast experience?" Roger shook his head, clearly distracted by the intimation about age. "I wait and wait and for nothing really. The world goes by and I watch it."

"Quite the profession to be doing that. I bet you see a lot out there." She flicked away the piles of toothpicks as the bartender approached, squeezed out a smile and asked if they needed more chips and salsa or...guacamole. "Chips and salsa refill would be great. And a couple Cazadores with limes," Jill said.

"What's the most beautiful thing you've seen?." Jill leaned into the bar and seemed to search him as if more might hinge upon this simple question that he might imagine.

Roger almost took a chip but set it down on a cocktail napkin. "Family of elk," Roger said. "Three of them set up against the fog just outside Yosemite. We were on hold for so long the noise didn't scare them away. "The world got so quiet, it was like everyone forgot to breathe. The clouds just seemed to melt all around us..." He hoped this was a good answer. She seemed satisfied anyway.

"Sounds pretty great."

"Most of it isn't." He dipped a chip into the bowl, and went for another.

"Want to know the most beautiful thing I've seen at work?" She reached into her bag and pulled out a rawhide wallet. She flipped it open. There was a picture laminated of a moustachioed man holding a rifle. She smiled and displayed it like a trophy.

"If that's somethig beautiful, you really need to get out more."

She might have laughed but the tequila came. "I do the training wheels." She put salt in the webbing of her fingers and held a lime in her left hand. "To Henry Willard!"

After they drank the shots, Roger took the wallet off the bar and opened it. "Is this Henry?"

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“Sure is. Henry loved his guns. I mean, who keeps a picture of himself in his wallet, much less with a gun?”

There might have been many Roger knew. People never surprised him.

“You probably guessed Henry was a prick and you’d win a prize if you did. Nothing but bullshit the whole time he was a guest. He’d smoke right outside the door just so we’d have to tell him to move. And it was seventy and sunny at the time. Always complainin’, being crude as fuck. He even came in drunk one night and put a hand on me.” She patted Roger’s chest. “He just did a move like that while I was changing out the cucumber water.”

“And you couldn’t tell him to leave for that?”

“I couldn’t ask him for a bucket of water if I was on fire, according to corporate. I mean, I could but I might get fired and it’s just not worth it.”

“So did he forget his wallet?”

“Thing is, old Henry was meeting up with some buddies up in Washington somewhere and they are some of those suspicious types who only deal with cash. He came back stumble-drunk like a fruit-fly swimming in cider. He then offered me money to go upstairs with him. He set the wallet down and forgot about it. “Five hundred bucks. He didn’t even ask about it the next day. Not to me at least,” She took a sip of her drink. “Don’t think I’m a bad person though. If he wan’t an asshole, I would’ve given it straight back.”

“And that’s beautiful to you?”

“Got my electric and water paid off. So...yeah.”

Roger couldn’t tell the story to be self-effacing or irreverent. Either way, he found it tragic in a way that he may not have years ago. “You’ve got to keep the water boiling.”

Jill took another chip and eyed it with suspicion. “You’ve told me the best.” She gathered herself and straightened her posture as if her drink had thrown her off balance. “Now, you’ve got to tell me the worst. Because I know the worst is always much more of a trip than the best.”

It struck Roger how no one had asked the question before. Most people thought the job was mechanical. He was part of the engine room, part of the machinery. But there was always someone awake and watching. He could have told her about being stranded a day in the snow or taking out that sixty-seven Cobra that got caught on the tracks outside Sacramaneto. He could have told her about seeing tornados dancing across the plain or seeing men roasting stray dogs on spits. Instead, he told her the truth. “I killed a man,” he said as plainly as he was able. He examined her in his periphery for reaction but couldn’t detect much of one. She just seemed to study him. “It’s not that it was intentional, obviously. But, it happened. Every

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conductor does at some point. It was years before it happened to me. When it did, I could see him, coming. He was closing in on me, locking eyes with me.”

She picked at crumbs from the wax-lined bowl. “He was on the tracks?”

“He was standing there. But now, when I think on it, I’m not sure he wanted to be. I think he could have been walking and just did that to stare at his mortality, so to speak.”

“You couldn’t stop?”

“We were going forty, maybe fifty. There’s no physical way all that steel could stop even if another train crossed paths. We can lessen impact but that’s it. I swear he could see me. There’s no way that he could. You can’t see anything too clearly going that fast in that moment. But I thought I could see his face, his eyes. It was like they were waiting for me.” He let this hang, probably for far too long.

“Well, fuck,” Jill said. “And I would’ve countered with someone writing their name in shit on the bathroom mirror. That’s really heavy.”

“Didn’t mean it to be. I really didn’t.” He truly regretted it but she had asked.

“Don’t be. That’s a hell of a fucking thing.”

“It’s part of the job. A lot of steel and space separating the two of us, though.”

Jill sucked her drink from the hollows of ice cubes in her glass. “I was in an accident. My friend, my high school friend, we were driving in the tunnel underneath Washington Park. Coming back from *Zoo Lights* if you can believe that shit. Fucking wholesome *Zoo Lights*. Either we merged careless or we hit black ice but we did a three-sixty right there in the tunnel. Got T-boned by an F-150. The car hit her side, not mine so I came out okay. I mean, I had a limp, cracked rib and contused lung but it could’ve been worse.”

“Were you driving?” He said this before he could think, before something could grab him by the sleeve and tell him it might be inappropriate or worse.

“No one has ever asked me that before.” She raised her eyebrows, gave off some kind of smile and reached into her purse.

“Let me pay.” She dropped two twenties on the bar and led the way toward the door before he could argue. “I want to show you the house I used to live in. It’s right down the street.”

A gauze of mist hovered over the road, sidewalk and world that seemed wholly slathered in oil-grease making it drugged, muted. It was Monday and traffic had ended. The dulled lights of a shuttered cafe and an Arco station gave off a jaundiced glow.

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It was late for Roger and not even for a work-night. At most, he'd be half-submerged in a British procedural, down to his final beer. But tonight, he was in a neighborhood just north of downtown, following a woman more than a decade his junior wherever she was leading him.

The house where she had lived was just down this street past Greeley. They had a pool table in a garage held together with concert flyers and vent tape. "All my friends from those days have families now. They're all grown up. Either that or they're dead I guess." She stopped as if considering going back to her old house. "I miss living there. I really do. We used to go and hang out by the railroad tracks. Over there." She pointed to where the street ended. "It goes back to the hotel. It's a quicker way." She didn't wait for a response, even if Roger could come up with one.

He followed her until the sidewalk ended and stopped at a steep slope beyond the guardrail. Ahead, cargo ships nested in webs of steel cranes. Further, the city and bridges were one glazed smear of light in the fog. "I used to watch the trains from down there." Jill craned herself over the thicketed lip of the embankment. "I always wanted to hop on one. It seems like such freedom."

"We should probably go back now." For Roger, the need to be what he was supposed to be, outweighed what he might have wanted to be.. "I could use another voucher."

"We're going down there," Jill said. "It's still early." She didn't sound drunk but that didn't mean anything. Before Roger could object Jill began to step sideways down the steep hill.

"You're blouse," He called out.

"The salsa already ruined it. Ten bucks online. I'll get another if I have to." She made a sort of surfing motion with her arms for balance.

Roger followed. "This isn't a good idea," he called out, maybe to himself rather than Jill who was already ten paces ahead, a long sliver of light slicing in her path.

"I used to do this all the time. For a long time I walked everywhere until I got run over."

Reaching the bottom, damp with soot and mood, Roger tried to stay where the ground was lighter, so as it was drier. Even if they wanted to crawl out of here they couldn't. To their left was a busy road that led out to the shipyards on the island. To their right, an embankment too steep to climb. The only way out was forward. "You got run over?" He might have wanted to touch her shoulder. He might have wanted to later and the next year and maybe three or four after that. But, he wouldn't..

"You got in a car wreck and then run over too."

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“Nothing like a train.” She stopped and knelt down close to the tracks. “There isn’t any next days after that.” She craned her neck and light sliced across her face. “Can you still see the man that died?”

It had taken time, but he had begun to forget. “I see him but it’s not him. It’s just a person-shape out there. I don’t see anything about him.”

But he did. He saw him in different ways on different nights. He had written the beginnings of six different stories and, in each, the man was different. He was married single, vagrant, employed, lazy and tenacious. He was anything the moment saw fit and there were too many moments to count.

“I hardly remember anything about either of the people who hit me. One was a younger guy. Other was a mom, a hairdresser who’d just moved here from somewhere in Kansas.”

“Do you need to know more about them than that?”

“They didn’t get charged or anything. Insurance took care of what it could. I used to be a gymnast in school if you can believe that. The first took away the will to pursue it any further, the second took away the ability to. Big difference between not wanting to and not being able to.”

“Sometimes that’s the same thing.” Roger kicked an empty Schlitz half-rack away.. The path aside from the track narrowed. Roger warned Jill not to walk on the tracks. He’d nearly twisted too many ankles to count.

Struggling for words, he wanted to come up with something less ordinary than he feared he was. He often had difficulty seeing it beyond routine and ritual. She rolled up her sleeve and brought his fingers to her skin where small, silver ribbons perforated the surface. She could feel the glass inside of her, she told him. And she often flinched at sudden light and sound.

“That’s a lot to go through for anyone.” He let his fingers remain on her arm. Most people couldn’t handle all of that.”

“How do people handle anything.” She pulled her arm away like she forgot it belonged to her and studied it herself. “Therapy didn’t do anything. Drinking is temporary and, without good company gets fucking boring and embarrassing.”

They continued walking. A plastic bag matted around Roger’s loafer that was already smeared with mud and grease.. He kicked at it and then leaned over to peel it away.

Ahead, a banging noise like iron work. Jill turned to Roger who lagged, possibly willing the moment to drag itself out. He could hear voices too, in jagged turns. And, as the tracks bent, tiny bundles of flames appeared, as if someone had plugged burrows with kindling and lit them.

“Hey,” Roger called out. “We might wanna turn back. Get a cab.”

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“We’re in it now.” Jill might have had a moment of clarity or deference but she turned and tilted her head. “It’s just kids,” she said. “Kids being kids.”

“Or worse. There are worse things out here.”

“Evil things?” She laughed at the absurdity of this. The ground thumped with each cymballic thud. “Evil is a lazy way to describe anything.”

There might not have been evil but there was ill intent. And Roger had seen plenty of it. But, he was sure that Jill had seen it too.

Ahead, in the middle of the track something blocked the track, possibly bovine. A carcass, or tent, it was difficult to tell. Jill had slowed her pace, bold as she was, so they walked abreast, keeping a slight distance. There were several voices, heavy breathing, scattered sentences that weren’t questions or answers but clustered words that dissolved just as quickly as they had formed. The metal thuds got louder. Roger tried to steer them out of the narrow shelf of streetlight from up the gulch but there wasn’t any way to get by unseen. The path was far too narrow and the fires cast enough light, albeit waist-high and there were too many people to go unnoticed.

Jill turned and made an expression like she was tired of the whole situation. That this place, right now was as much hers as anyone else’s. He saw her eyes blink quickly and her muscles untighten. She walked into the expanse of light.

As Roger approached he could see the structure was webbed, like it was built of timber, or...rebar. Off, toward the gulch, there was a pile of rusted railroad spikes stacked like bone. Bent-back people grabbed them on both ends. They struggled to carry them to the track where two others helped them heave it onto the pile.

One of them, a woman, wore a Superman tank-top and hair that reminded Roger of a Davy Crockett hat. She pointed them to the others. There were five but, combined, would have been the weight of one very large man. Along the pile of steel bars were jugs of water, a handle of Potters whiskey, three packs heaped with bedrolls and tents and another plastic canister of what might have been gasoline.

Roger thought about how much money he had. He then thought of heroics and how silly they might be but, this might be, the only case for the rest of his life in which he might be able to do something that anyone would consider heroic.

“We’re just walking home,” Jill said.

“What do you think we’re going to do?” The woman said. “Jesus Christ, what the fuck?” She turned to the rest of the group. She moved in wide, wind-swept motions. “She thinks we’re going to rob them or something.”

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Roger thought about offering them money. Instead he took one step, a single step forward so that he was a half step ahead of Jill.

“Is that valour?” The woman said. “Do you have a sword or something too?” Her subjects managed a laugh. One of them, equally thin but with a patchy beard said. “Do you want us to rob you or something?”

Roger didn't know how to respond.

“Yeah,” the woman said. “That would make for a better story, wouldn't it?”

“Or kill you?” The man said.

“Fuck, this guy looks like he might be carrying. Something like Charles Bronson.”

“Who?” The man said. “The silent movie guy?”

“Nah, nevermind. Didn't you watch movies growing up?” It was difficult to tell her age, possibly forty, maybe a hard twenty-five. There were letters and stitching etched into her skin as there was with him.

“We don't want to bother anyone,” Jill said. “Just passing through.”

“If we wanted to rob everyone who passed by, the cops'd be down here in a hot minute,” the woman said. “Nah, we're just passig the time. But if you wanted to make a donation....” A cup made its way from the crowd, an aluminum drinking cup dangling from a finger.

Roger could smell the oil, sweat and whiskey as sharp as anything he ever had. He pulled a ten that he had freed up in the minutes before, from his pocket and slid it into the cup. “Next round's on me,” he said.

“Are you trying to derail a train?” Jill said. Roger, as gently as he could, reached for her shoulder. He wanted to tell her that it didn't matter, not really. Almost nothing could derail a train. Certainly, not a haphazard pile of scrap metal.

“Baby, this won't derail a train,” the woman said. “We just want to make something go, boom.”

Jill passed Roger an expression that he couldn't read. It was somewhere between shock and disappointment and, in that moment, he knew his night would end sleepless, coldly thinking about this moment and what went wrong and what could have been fixed. He'd stew and sweat and shower challenging the clock, the alarm to sound off to send him away from this place and back home where he would be alone.

The sweat cooled and gelled on his back and joints. He realized at once that he should be very tired but could not think about sleep.

Jill hung back, engaged with the small group. Roger was steps away, out of earshot but something as small and simple as directions back to where they were going.

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When Jill turned back there wasn't anything he could glean from her. She might have been taking a reservation or changing the cucumber water or itemizing a bill.

As they walked away, it was like the group had never seen them. They continued their work but it sounded sloppier, the metal thuds spaced further apart

"Was I supposed to stop them?" Roger asked. There had been silence for a minute and he figured he had to say something. "Because she was right. Whatever they're doing doesn't really matter. It's blowing into a sandstorm. It doesn't matter."

Jill walked quietly ahead until Roger could see the lights from the highway and knew they were getting close to the hotel.

They veered off the tracks, through a severed chain fence and out onto the ball fields Roger could see from the window in his room. "That woman back there, I knew her." Jill walked to the center of the field. Beyond, in the outfield tents hunched to the ground and a mountain of drywall was burning beyond, next to the road. "She used to come over our house."

Roger wanted to go to her but didn't know what to say. "When I wonder what happened to people I knew back then, I think I wonder more what happened to me. So much fucking scares me that I can't see straight sometimes. Does that ever go away?"

Roger wanted to tell her that he was afraid too. That it never went away. "Did she recognize you?"

"Maybe, it's possible. Who knows. I don't care," She said.

A group of cats gathered at Jill's feet and rubbed at her ankles. She bent over and scratched at one behind its ears.

The hotel was so bright that Roger flinched. It smelled appetizing and clean. Jill disappeared down the hallway, sobered and shaken.

Roger retired to his room, showered and laid in bed. He lay waiting to hear the sound of the Two AM train, the last one before his six o'clock and for the crash of metal, from here like a sprinkle of coins onto its grill and he knew that he'd still have three hours to sleep.