

Cherish

I was sitting on a bench in the Kansas City bus station, my hands trembling, numbness crawling up my stomach, thinking *oh my God, what have I gone and done?* For a moment, I just stared at the second hand on the cracked wall clock, breathing in what passed for air, waiting for the drumbeat in my head to shut down. My cracked lips tasted salty, and I had the weirdest feeling that my eyes were hanging out on stalks. The bench had this purple stain on it, which could have been jam – but no, it was probably blood – and I scooted over to the other end, wondering if I were going to catch tuberculosis. Flashing red and green lights up on a board dazzled me, and static from a speaker grated on my eardrums, and diesel fumes were making me queasy. A mouse darted by, and I felt its dirty grayness. It was like this dark cloud was passing overhead and everything was losing its color, plunging me into twilight, and I was tumbling off a cliff, blowing away like dust; but then I took deep breaths, counting forward to ten and then backward, and gradually control seeped back into my blood vessels.

Yes, it was true that the overnight ride had been hard, the bus bouncing and bumping, cigarette smoke drifting out of the bathroom, and for most of the ride I'd sat slumped over with my arms around the sides of my head, trying not to throw up, wishing I'd remembered to get some Dramamine from Alfred's Drug Store before I'd left. A little after midnight, in the seats right across from mine, this blonde-headed girl and a guy

with a bandanna who looked like a rock star decided to have a make-out party, and she was moaning and making this weird giggle and climbing all over him and his hands were going everywhere they shouldn't have. I didn't want to watch, but I kept glancing over, getting this awful feeling inside, I don't know, maybe because I felt jealous or left out or something. Then, after everything had calmed down and they'd finally gone to sleep, I stupidly looked out the window into the swirling darkness and thought I saw a finger beckoning to me.

But now the demons of darkness had fled, and they couldn't touch me, and I was beyond their reach, at least for a while. I wasn't exactly safe yet, but I'd swam too far out into the ocean to try making it back anyway, so I just needed to stay cool and accept the hand I'd been dealt. For the thousandth time, I checked my pockets to make sure I'd brought enough money, but how could I know under the circumstances? At least I had my bar of soap and toothpaste and bottle of shampoo and a couple of changes of clothes packed away inside my suitcase, but I was a little worried that the handle would rot off. Everything looked hazy and unreal, and the walls and ceilings had this rainbow aura, and the tiles on the floor seemed like they were floating around like lily pads. This freaky feeling started bubbling up in my stomach like it had on the bus, and I started thinking that maybe I hadn't really burned all my bridges, and, for a second, I just wanted to break and run and get back to where I'd come from.

But then somebody turned on the radio, and it was playing my secret song, "Baby, I Love You," and this was a really good omen, making me feel sort of like when I was eating a banana split, and when I closed my eyes I could see my dream girl floating in some violet place, smiling, blowing me a kiss. When I opened my eyes, I noticed a

page of newspaper flapped around near my feet, its headline reading **White House Operatives Arrested Inside Watergate Complex**, and I thought about Richard Nixon with that weird grin on his face, and that made me remember the Vietnam War and how I could still get drafted.

After a while, I got up and went across the street to a coffee shop for a doughnut and a Coca-Cola. This old lady with a deck of Tarot cards said that she'd read my fortune for a dollar, and, even though that was a lot of money, I had to know. When she told me that I would find true love with a stranger in a foreign land, a rainbow appeared and I tingled all over, because maybe, for once, the evil spirits that shadowed me had been left behind in Mississippi. After I dragged myself back to the bus station and slumped down on a bench again, I noticed how strangely light it was inside.

At home, back in Hope, Mississippi, it was always dark, even at high noon. In the morning before school, there would often be a bloody fistfight in the sand behind the gymnasium. In the afternoon, protesters, both black and white, marched across the street from the high school, chanting and waving signs, and inbred folks whispered about the KKK and lynching some of those outside agitators. In the evening, clouds of mosquitoes drifted overhead, and every single one of them wanted to suck your blood, and, as the sun went down, trucks spraying DDT rolled up block after block. Every night at the High Hat, rednecks would throw hoodlums out windows, and hoodlums would toss rednecks back in through the door, and glass would shatter, and somebody would get stabbed, and policemen would break up groups of three in the parking lot, saying, "No congregating, by order of law." Then the sun would come up, and everything would start all over again.

My parents had placed me under house arrest, and, at S.D. Lee High School, I was public enemy number one, and a couple of coaches were getting their exercise using a two-foot long paddle, wrapped in tape and drilled with holes, to give me three licks for such offenses as talking in the study hall or using a curse word in front of such a fine lady as my biology teacher, Mrs. Billy Jordan. I wasn't allowed to get a driver's license, and so I couldn't get in on whatever the boys and the girls did down at the reservoir or in the shadowy lot behind Blueberry Park; but it didn't matter, because all I had to do was close my eyes, and I could make anything real. When sometimes, after dark, I was able to sneak down the fire escape and make it four blocks to the YMCA, I'd get slapped around on the basketball court by Mike Holmes and Gary Champion and sometimes even Jimbo Smith.

My father, who was always sweating and scratching and never made eye contact, said I was irresponsible; and my brother, even though he'd already finished up his freshman year in college, still didn't mind telling on me for disturbing him while he was watching Walter Cronkite on the CBS Evening News; and sometimes, if I didn't sneak real quick past the kitchen counter, my mother, usually in hair rollers and always in bifocals, would toss down the New York Times and try slapping me in the head. Then there was that thing my mother had done to me while my little sister Cindy watched, which I could never tell anyone about, not now, not ever, and when it was over, my father had shuffled in wearing his dirty undershirt and red boxer shorts, and had said, "Did you leave any marks? Did you leave any marks?"

All of a sudden, I noticed this lost-looking girl, about my age, sitting right across from me on the bench, and it was too unbelievable, because she looked just like the

dream girl I always carried around in my head. Had she been there a second ago? She seemed hungry and tired, and she was waiting for somebody to save her, and she seemed both hopeful and frightened, just like me. She had on this hippie outfit: a blue bandanna wrapped around her silky brown hair, glass beads, a purse with a peace sign, a loose lavender top, and a thin flowery skirt. She had her knees up, her sandaled feet on her suitcase in front of her, her cherry-colored toenails glistening. Her eyelids drooped lower and lower, opened for a second, and then shut, and her breathing grew soft and light.

I observed the old ladies with their trembling fingers, the man mopping the floor, and all the sad and lonely people, but my eyes kept wandering back to the girl. I glanced around, at the filthy windows, the cigarette machine, and at a guy in a muscle shirt drinking a 7-Up, and then at lady with long fingernails and weird earrings, but this magnet kept drawing me back. I checked to make sure she was still asleep, took another sidelong peek, gazed around again, stretched, yawned, and then my eyes returned, this time focusing in a little more. I looked away, then back, and away, and back again. Her eyelids seemed to flicker, and I glanced away real fast. Then back again, and my cheeks got hot and I looked away, determined to keep my attention on the floor where it belonged.

All of a sudden, her eyes fluttered open, and they were blue like mine, and she regarded me, her moist lips parted, almost smiling, and her face flushed, and, for a moment, something passed between us. Then I got up quick, mortified, terrified, and almost ran to a bench on the other side of the room. I started thinking that maybe, just for once in my life, miracles were really possible, and this was in fact the girl the old

woman with the Tarot cards had been talking about, and she was destined to be the one. I'd live my life out with her and always be faithful and true, and we'd have a Border Collie and three grandchildren and live in a house with white columns and old-fashioned rocking chairs on the porch, and it could be just like that song *Cherish* by The Association, if only I could just get up the nerve and go back over there and make contact. Three times I tried to get my feet, my heart beating wildly, but then, body filled with lead, I sank back down.

After a while, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her get up and go out to meet her bus, and tears came into my eyes and my lips started shaking, because I'd lost the chance of my life, and when would come another; but, after a few minutes, I calmed down a little, reassuring myself that everything was still all right, better than that, because she too was traveling to her own special place, and one day in some other bus station we would meet again.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how impossibly well everything was going. I mean, my hair was already getting long and it would only take a couple of days to grow a beard, so I'd fit right into Height-Ashbury, where everybody went barefoot, and bra-less girls would take you by the hand, because it was the age of Aquarius, and maybe I could live on a commune and get healthy eating natural foods and be a potter or something; and even though I wouldn't be going to college, at least I'd never get drafted, and maybe, if worst came to worst, I could get in with those Hari Krishnas I'd seen chanting on the street corner and shave my head and find eternal peace.

After about an hour, my bus bound for San Francisco showed up in the terminal. When I glanced back at the ticket counter, my heart started beating wildly again, and I turned around and took a few steps. Because what I was doing was really crazy and irreversible, and it still wasn't too late to turn back, because I still had money to buy a return ticket and I'd only been gone for a day or so. Maybe I'd blown the whole situation up in my head, like I always did – I mean I'd had some good times and I was the class clown and there was this one teacher who really liked me – and it wasn't like my parents had stopped feeding me or set my bed on fire. Of course there would be hell to pay, and I'd get a beating and be permanently grounded, and, for the rest of senior year, I'd never get to go on my first date or even kiss a girl; but maybe, after a couple of months, if I didn't do anything else wrong, they might let me get back into the high school band and I could go on out of town band trips. The next year, if I were really lucky, I could sneak into Mississippi State, and, if I got my grades up, one day I might even become a doctor or major in animal science or work in a loan office or something.

But then I thought about those civil rights workers who'd gotten murdered in Mississippi; and Bob Dylan singing "Blowin' in the Wind"; and coming back from Vietnam in a body bag; and how the head cheerleader Lisa Harrison wouldn't even give me the time of day; and that my only friend, Danny Atkins, whom I'd smoked marijuana with once behind the tennis court in Blueberry Park, had told me how I definitely needed to get the hell out of Dodge; and that time Billy Harper had beaten my face in behind the YMCA; and what my mother had done; and something else I couldn't even put my finger on; and, feeling so terrified that I thought my trembling hands were going to shake

themselves loose, trying to keep my mind focused only on the image of the lovely girl I'd just seen, I grabbed hold of my rotting suitcase and dragged myself on board.

The End