

Tributaries

The five of us were heading down the coast of California in a Ford Econoline. The exterior had been coated with black primer, which was a bargaining chip we'd used to our advantage in Daly City. Some old street-side crooner had sold it to us for fifteen-hundred dollars, said he had a soft spot for young musicians. At first, I thought that we'd swindled the guy, that he was a sentimental fool; his disarming smile came to mind many times afterward, in quick comet trails of memory, devoid of sleight or trickery. We had even taken the six-seater out for a test drive across Serramonte on the 280, talking with the guy about his grandchildren. He had nine of them scattered haphazard across the United States, each of them having attained various levels of success — a gamut that ran from Juris Doctors to federal convicts. We should have seen something in that. Someone with sufficient genetic material or inconsistent-enough parenting skills to raise children of such variance must have had, at least, a little immorality in him, even if it were disguised by a verisimilar charisma. By the time we had reached Palo Alto, the damn thing was shutting down at random intervals in the middle of traffic, only starting again after two or three turns of the key. Garrett, our drummer, called the crooner a few times — on the third call, he answered. Said he had to plane to catch to Acapulco, but that he'd be back in a few weeks. What a crock of shit. We ended up pushing the van to nearest auto shop on El Camino Real that had decent online reviews.

“It looks like your alternator's going out,” the mechanic told us.

“Sounds like something important,” I said.

“You bet your ass it is. But they're easy to swap out.”

“What are we paying you for then?” Lou spoke up, sharp and acerbic. I had always envied his quick wittedness. I stared at the mechanic, thinking of something clever to add. His face was bronze, his hair saturated in gel.

“You’re giving us money to work smart, not hard.” A pause followed.

“Fair enough,” Lou said. “How much?”

“Three hundred.”

“Fuck, really?” He sauntered over to me, and put on a faux-pout. “What do you think, Crash?”

“Let’s get it over with.”

Garrett put the amount on a personal credit card we used communally, and we went on our merry way. Palo Alto was strange, foreboding. We were pariahs, the only ones without an expensive sedan or an oversized SUV. Garrett used an old cassette linked to an auxiliary cable to play music off of his phone, since there wasn’t a CD deck in the dashboard. He had been on a Minutemen kick, and decided to continue his *Double Nickels on the Dime* listening spree. Their frenetic torrents of sound did little to ease my anxieties about the area. Everything felt antithetical to our own life-worn principles: uninhibited recalcitrance, hedonism, self-obsession maybe. But our morals were nebulous anyway — more the result of an instinctive beckoning than adherence to hard-fast stricture.

He passed me a pack of Pall Malls, preserving its annular trajectory around the van’s cabin. Garrett had this ability to anticipate wants and desires, as if he were a clairvoyant, wise beyond his years. Of course, that “wisdom” would turn into bad advice after the consumption of a few alcoholic beverages — a nightly outcome as of late. I had never seen someone that articulate and controlled become so extroverted and self-destructive over the course of a few hours. A few weeks ago, he had suffered a minor freak out on the porch of Lou’s house after

polishing off a bottle of Reyka alone. All had seemed well at first: his textbook stoicism had given away to a jovial felicity and wittiness, his criticisms of the new album from The Pop Group were sharp (“Too stubborn, trying too hard to be like themselves. Michael Gira on acid and Ritalin basically”), and he even started discussing his past experiences before moving near San Francisco — memories which he had remained tight-lipped about since meeting us. His outpouring of reminiscence had gotten us all talking about our own jungle-gym tribulations — particularly ones that had spurred our current, shared vocation.

We were talking about our first dates (mine was with Stacy in the seventh grade) when Garrett stood up from his lawn chair in silence. His face contorted, as if in agony. He sprinted up a hill behind Lou’s house without warning. This wasn’t a place you’d lay a picnic blanket over: deposits of soil could crumble beneath your feet like ferrous, oxidized powder; clusters of sage brush and dry weeds abounded in wild dispersal, as if thrown onto the hillside from a considerable distance; and beyond that, the pathways upward weren’t illuminated. Manuel, our bassist, journeyed upward to grab him, and I soon followed.

He was an easy find. A light swooped back and forth from his chest pocket like a beacon of surrender against the sky. Somehow, the flash on his phone’s camera had been flipped on. He was rolling around in the weeds, long stems enveloping his sides like the tentacles of some wired, magnetic tape nightmare.

“Alright, Garrett. Enough is enough. We’re taking you back,” I shouted from a distance.

“Leave me here. I don’t deserve it.” He was crying, his body doubled over, his voice a dull bark.

“Come on, Garrett. I’m not going to just leave you out here. Let’s pick ourselves up, okay?” Manuel said. He grabbed his arm, and started dragging him. It was hard not to imagine the exchange as a social discourse between teacher and student in elementary school, the only

difference being that Garrett was almost two hundred pounds and had the build of an Irish fighter — long reach, barreled torso, broad shoulders. I didn't want to be the target of one of his drunken scuffles, though I was curious as to why he had run away. His reactions were without reason, completely capricious. I felt obligated to help him.

As I approached closer, Garrett's eyes opened wide with fear. It was as if he could see right through my face. I felt like my skin was the façade of a dilapidated structure — the decay of rotting timber, the pervasive odor of must and mold, putrescent carrion, all ready to collapse together within. Had I done something wrong? If only he had known this: his fear frightened me, maybe more than it actually frightened him.

I shook this notion away. Manuel and I had to hoist his arms over our shoulders while he struggled to keep his balance. Occasionally, he'd remember his longing to be abandoned out in the wilderness again, and once this occurred to him, he would brace his feet against the dirt to halt our progress. What the hell was this about? He must have seen someone else in me, some figure from his past. But that would mean he had to be in a hallucinatory state, in the throes of a hysterical fugue.

The next morning was an adequate coda to the irresolution that permeated the night before. Garrett and I spoke in private after he awoke at noon, wan and sweating from the insulated heat of the room. He sprang out of bed without hesitation — he must've still been drunk, or in uncharacteristically good spirits. I listened to him apologize profusely about the night before. His requests to be forgiven were borderline supplications; I had to put a hand on his shoulder and tell him that no one particularly cared, that we all had had our moments, (“Remember that time Manuel had gotten so blitzed, he stole a car at his brothers' party and took it for a joy ride?” [he was a strange drunk, downright criminal in the right setting]) and that he was far from the first person in the world to have acted erratically under the influence. He

accepted this, but a slight twinge of mortification entered his eyes during the brief lulls of our conversation. He wasn't a guy who lost control often (at least, not until recently), and he wasn't willing to pick up the habit.

"If you keep drinking so heavily, I would look at this as a kind of...inevitability."

"There must've been something that set me off, something I could avoid next time."

"Look, you don't have to tell me this. I'm really curious what you thought you were running from last night. Maybe knowing that would help."

"I don't remember really."

"Not even a little bit?"

"Hey, if I think of the reason, I'll let you know. Alright? I'm not in the mood right now. This fucking headache is killing me."

"Sure," I said.

We'd left it at that.

Pacific Coast Highway meandered and staggered along buffeted precipices without warning, seemingly drunkenly, funneling us against the shoreline. We were at the mercy of our unsafe proximity to the cliffs below, our semi-functional car, and the absence of shoulder lanes or rest areas for increasingly longer stretches of road. So we proceeded slowly — maybe slower than the drivers behind us would have wanted. Jared, the other guitarist, was steering. He'd only joined the band a few months ago, and we were still in that honeymoon period in which everything he did was to garner fraternal acceptance or a sense of belonging. I'd be lying (and so would the others) if I said that I didn't take advantage of his obsequiousness. When he had offered to drive at least half of the trip before we left, I told him that if he drove the entire way, I would pay for his food. He agreed with an enthused fervor, a feigned reaction reminiscent of an

employee-employer relationship. What I didn't tell him, was that it was likely all-you-can-eat, gas station buffets from there on out.

The next few hours passed without incident, but also without excitement. During a bout of sleep, I dreamt I was in Oakland again, walking back to my apartment at night. Fire escapes loomed above, draped in silhouette, and as I ambled along the curb, these shadows flourished and multiplied. Soon their metal outlines clustered, twisting and intersecting like cobwebs under moonlight. I began to walk faster, but I could feel the darkness festering behind me, an amassing flurry of ink. Breaking into a run was now impossible; my legs had already atrophied, my muscles had fatigued, and every joint was grinding together disharmoniously. Soon, down an alleyway between two brick buildings, I saw the profile of Garrett. He was in a dress, and a noose dangled from his neck. I turned to chase after him, but little could be done with my impaired legs. He climbed on top of a dumpster, and began to knot the noose around a ladder descending from another fire escape. I opened my mouth to speak, to yell, to scream — only the stifled wheeze of an older man passed through my throat. And then, a vibration of sound resonated throughout my body. A formless groan.

This is how I woke up — moaning in a car with three other people.

“Save the nocturnal emissions for later, man. We've still got a ways to go,” Lou said. Everyone cackled; a jocular spirit passed between the four, without the acrimony of schoolyard teasing. I felt self-conscious at first, but with a little maneuvering, I was able to steer our conversation back to our next stop. Our upcoming gig was a house party in San Luis Obispo, a town whose residents were easily sorted into a social dichotomy: feckless college students, and those who resented them. I had only traveled to “SLO” a few times before to meet up with an old girlfriend of mine working as a public defender. Over drinks, she would tell me about life out there — rough economy, but filled with the mellifluous voices of downtown carousing and New

American restaurant fare. But I'd hardly paid attention to the town each time I visited, choosing to pass my time in her apartment instead. We weren't together anymore.

This guy, Marcus from Ridgewood, Queens — he was the one who shook our hand at the front door. He talked like so many club promoters and would-be DIY entrepreneurs, filling our heads with big ideas about the future of the band, about getting into a recording studio and booking a few free hours on him. He was nice enough — unlike most venue owners and higher-ups, he wrote his own music (somewhat a conflict of interest in this industry, but there were no rules for your own shows anyway) and he even assured us that drinks would be on the literal “house” tonight — but you could tell he had been tossing back Adderall for days, and it looked as if it were the only substance holding his body together. After bringing in our gear, Lou and I smoked a cigarette outside with him. Smoke filled our little wooden alcove, tucked away from the front porch.

“When did you guys get in? Don't tell me just now,” Marcus said. He laughed under his breath and sniffled.

“Just now,” I said.

“Every time you come here, it's like your trying to avoid having a good time. You don't even know what the rest of the city looks like.”

“We'll play the gig, meet a few people. That's enough for me. Not like there's much city out there anyway.”

“You Bay Area people are spoiled. There's plenty to do, if you know the right crowd.” Marcus hit my shoulder with a mock-jab. “Any new material? I liked that last seven-inch you guys put out on Leather Stars — the one with the glitchy beats.”

“Oh, thanks. That's more of a one-off thing, something I put together in my bedroom.”

“The new direction we’re heading towards will incorporate more of a tropicália-meets-noise aesthetic,” Lou said, diverting Marcus’s attention with emboldened sarcasm. “That track is closer to a demo.” His dismissal of the song was aggravating; the hours spent recording were now stamped with a term that suggested an unfinished project — a tentative vision rather than an artistic accomplishment. I had written almost all of our material without outside help. Why did it need his input to be complete? Somewhere behind that smile was an injured ego, some insatiable gorge that longed for attention as filler.

“He’s full of shit obviously. Though that direction does sound kind of interesting...” I said.

“Well, I’m an interesting guy. Ain’t I, Marcus?” He rolled his eyes in response. Garrett came out of the burgeoning party inside with a beer in his hand, his eyes darting from side-to-side along the porch. I waved him over, and he acknowledged my presence with a slight nod before approaching, his head diverted downward.

He craned his neck behind mine, and whispered, “So, when we getting paid? I’m trying to pick up something special tonight. Met a few people.”

“I’ll ask. Don’t worry yourself with it.”

“Hey, don’t suck up to this guy too hard. I’ve seen people like him take advantage of hanger-ons. The people they know and make friends with become a steady source of crowdsourced income all their own. ‘Oh, who in Nashville tonight is willing to offer me a couch?’ ‘Who in Seattle? I need to borrow fifty bucks.’ Fucking prick.”

“Don’t worry about it, Garrett. I’ve got it under control,” I said. He finished his beer quickly and started walking away. “Hey, don’t get carried away too much tonight, alright?”

He smirked. “Speak for yourself.”

I shook my head, and turned back around. “Marcus. Our money. What’s happening with that?”

“Yeah, your cash is coming, soon enough, There’ll be at least thirty people, guarantee it. You get a percentage of the door, of course.”

It would’ve been shit turnout for an actual venue; for a house show (especially one booked a week beforehand), you couldn’t ask for more — at least, without also asking for attention from the local police department.

By the time we were supposed to play, I was drunk — not uncomfortably so, but pushing my ideal threshold. What might’ve been a temperate climate before became sweltering after the first song of our set list. I had always tried to avoid eye contact between any single person in the crowd below; their faces and bodies would congeal into an indecipherable swarm of bodies, and the resulting visceral effect was something close to being inundated by a human deluge, or stumbling upon a room-sized Hieronymus Bosch painting. Our instruments were so loud in comparison to the house’s cheap PA system that I could only hear the faint suggestion of a voice resonating from my chest. Manuel had this habit of turning his back to the audience and locking eyes with Garrett as they grooved together, which was endearing to watch from my end, but also ruined our stage presence. I motioned to him with the neck of my guitar, swinging it toward the front of the “stage” (a carpeted living room space) after I caught his attention. He narrowed his eyes, and the motion failed to register as any sort of understandable communication. He tried to synchronize with my movements instead. This pissed me off, maybe irrationally so. I shoved my guitar against the tube amp, and ended the song with feedback and cacophonous distortion while the everyone else played on. The crowd cheered louder than usual.

Afterwards, we decided to meet up at Kilarney's, an Irish pub within walking distance of the house. One of the locals had recommended the place, but when we arrived, we were less than thrilled with the referral. The crowd felt like a facsimile of the house party we were trying to escape from, with a few more bikers and feminists thrown into the mix. Garrett ordered everyone well-liquor, and we watched a few people play beer pong under a canvas tent. The din of laughter and bloviation seemed to gyrate and toss around us; my initial instinct was to retreat in the midst of such noise. But after we'd had a few more drinks, I eased into letting go. I found myself shooting the shit with the bartender — a woman named Beverly who claimed to own a cactus farm further in the valley. Turns out that the weather in San Luis Obispo was somewhat volatile to the crop during the winter up until mid-spring, but she had found a position against a mountain that shielded them from erratic weather patterns. She cosseted them until they could survive no longer, and when the influx of nopales to the region's various farmers' markets dried up, she went back to bartending.

Garrett slapped my right shoulder, and sat down on the cheap barstool next to me. He was visibly drunk, and began to talk about how the set went — too much rhythmic variation, not enough crescendo at the end, et cetera, et cetera, whatever.

“She's cute right?” he asked. He motioned toward Beverly. I ogled for a few discreet seconds. A wispy-locked brunette, thin but not overly so, tits large but not overly so, with a toothy grin and ambiguous ancestry — she was, admittedly, my type.

“So are a lot of women. She's interesting.”

“I've known her for a long time actually. Since childhood.”

“No shit?” The personal connections to this city felt almost alveolar — as if they had trickled down from San Francisco Bay and pooled into the numerous capillaries of neighborhood

streets. Maybe if you stuck around too long, you'd risk getting caught in the current. You might even end up staying rather than circulating back north.

"Yup. Good ol' Bev. To be honest, I kind of had a thing for her. For a real long time."

"What are you getting at?" He turned his head toward the bar for an interminable length of time, avoiding my gaze. "You don't want me to fuck her?"

"Man, don't even say it like that." He spilt his drink on his chin, and continued, "Fuck is too harsh a word."

"Right. So don't make love to her?" I laughed.

His face went stolid and flush, like something had sobered him.

"I'm serious though. It's fucked up that you're even entertaining the idea."

"I didn't know who she was. Hell, if you're so focused on her, why don't you talk to her?" I said. His behavior was now strange, aloof, controlled. Why the hang-up on this chick? After all, was often promiscuous, sometimes unfairly stringing along women. Garrett had never wanted to acknowledge his own vulnerabilities, let alone share them with others. But here he was: laying his stake on someone he had never been with. He walked away without a response, and I waved down Beverly again.

"Hell, cactus farming is more interesting than what I do. My friend over there likes you."

"That's not news to me."

"How can you tell? He's not exactly the forward type." She didn't answer, but instead acknowledged my question with a nod while pouring me another drink — some means of placation, no doubt.

"Let's talk about something else."

"Okay. You like living here?" I said.

"I don't really think about it that way."

“Why not?”

“It’s easy to get discouraged,” she said, her voice impassive. She looked under the counter, and pulled out a shot glass from underneath that was pre-filled with a tawny substance. I saw her creep back into the kitchen area, where, presumably, she knocked back the drink. I primed another question for her return.

“Where are you from originally?”

“How do you know I’m from anywhere but here?”

“No one seems to be from this place.”

“Orange County.”

“I kind of fucking hate it there.”

“Me too, that’s why I don’t complain about living here.”

“Not to knock your feelings...this town may not be as little artificial as the OC, but everyone seems to hate how domineering the college culture is. It’s teeming with hipsters, afflicted with the I-listen-to-Mumford-and-Sons-and-dress-like-a-fashionista-lumberjack types, rather than the Neutral-Milk-Hotel-adulating, Pitchfork-reading dilettantes.”

“Are there any good forms of hipster? Derogatory connotation is kind of part-and-parcel with the term. I like Neutral Milk Hotel though — what I’ve heard from them.”

“Cool. I’ve been listening to their first album all week.”

“You know, I grew up near Avery Island, in Lafayette.”

“I thought you were from Orange County.”

“I am, but as a kid, I lived in Louisiana. Polar opposite.”

“I’d imagine.”

We talked for nearly an hour, a dopamine rush overpowering us, and all was quick-cut, breakneck — like we were ascending to some celestial villa, building a ladder there off of each

other's words. Her eyes were wide enough to fall into, and I almost felt like I did, for a moment. And then I thought of how I looked — likely mimetic, wide-eyed as well. I started to get that really stupid feeling — like I cared about her, even though I hardly knew her. The topics of our discussion were flourishing so quickly that it was difficult to imagine their eventual destination. Talking was easy, every movement had a purpose, things had meaning again. As the crowd began to diminish, I noticed my other bandmates playing beer pong, and Garrett talking to a woman wearing Doc Martens and sporting a short-banged haircut. It made me feel better to see him with someone else. Maybe he didn't care that much.

She invited all of us to her place after her shift was over, and told me that a few others would be joining us. We requested an Uber driver and waited outside as the late-night valley winds began to increase in velocity. When we got back to her place, I was surprised to see Marcus again. Apparently, he had been staying there with another woman named Jessy, a waitress who volunteered at the nearby veterinary hospital on weekends. I couldn't tell whether they were an actual couple or not; reason would suggest that repeated siestas in the same bed qualified as serious relationship material. But the two rarely touched each other, and when they did, every gesture felt like another proclamation of a conspicuously platonic companionship — an intentional display by Jessy, to signal her inward revulsion at the mere suggestion of being with Marcus. These social boundaries, or rather, the imperceptibility of them, were beginning to exhaust me. It seemed that everyone around me had invisible ties to each other; my own intentions were see-through, in a different sense of the word. Less than an hour had elapsed before we were passing around four bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon between the seven of us.

I was tangled up in a conversation about one of Marcus's guitars in the living room when I realized that Garrett and Beverly were missing. I told him I was going to get another drink, and looked for them in the kitchen to no avail. Through the window adjacent to the refrigerator, I

could see a plume of smoke billowing across the sky, leaving a gossamer of gray in its wake. The two of them must have decided to smoke a cigarette downstairs. I traversed outside, where I overheard them below.

At first, I tried not to pry. But, out of an inevitable curiosity, I began picking up bits and pieces of their conversation from the foyer on the second floor, hidden from sight. All of this strange behavior Garrett had shown in the weeks before was nagging me. I felt rejected from some idyllic congregation, in which each of my friends had ritualized their surreptitious meetings behind my back. Was Garret's past with Beverly somehow related to his minor freakout? We had only finalized tour dates two months ago, a date that coincided with the outward signs of his erratic behavior.

I rid myself of this notion; it was uncharacteristic of his usual demeanor. Still, Beverly's susurrations carried over the staircase, as if she were delivering an aside in stage-volume whispers, staccatoing every consonant and enunciating every word — all with the supposed intention of remaining quiet. But I could tell that she wanted someone to overhear, to eavesdrop.

“We've talked about this enough. I don't want to see you hurt, but you're putting me between a rock and a hard...whatever.”

“So, you're with him and that's it?”

“It's less, 'I'm with him,' and more, 'I'm not with you.' Make sense?” she replied. They moved further upward, and leaned against a wall. The pair were in plain sight now. And more than ever, I felt like an undiscovered voyeur, estranged from the events taking place below, on the fringes of another uncharted past relationship.

“He's self-centered. I can't believe you even talk to him,” said Garrett. The remark stung, reminding me of a few moments of callousness toward him. While I hadn't always been outgoing

or selfless during our time together, Garrett had possessed his own fair share of anti-social tendencies. But more importantly, what right did he have, honestly, to claim a woman as his own without her consent, or anyone else's? Still, my feelings could've been subconscious justification for my own flirtatious behavior — a way to slip into the guise of heroism. This...this was not what I wanted either.

“Sometimes I still think about you. My feelings haven't dissipated. Doesn't that mean something?” he continued. She recoiled from his newfound close proximity — his face was inches away from hers — but the wall prevented her from stepping backwards. Then came those words, the big reveal: “I love you.” That perfidious expression —perverse in one context, beautiful in another — had always been at the mercy of its expresser. His “I love you” took on an air of desperation and loneliness. Garrett rested his hand on the wall above her head, and she looked at him nonplussed, but concerned. Things were getting ugly: he was noticeably inebriated and increasingly domineering, but we still had a tour to carry out, a car to drive down the highway, and friendship to maintain, even if it hadn't been much of one for the past few months. I promised myself that if things took a turn toward the physical, I would step in. But in all honesty, I had no foresight into how I would actually accomplish such a task; I was never an effective mediator of conflict, and had been in my fair share of friend-instigated brawls. They had always found me somehow, despite my best efforts to mitigate them.

Oddly enough, it wasn't Beverly who ended up getting hurt. She pushed him back, and Garrett tripped and fell onto the pavement. He didn't get back up, but instead lingered there, wrestling with his hands. A small yelp echoed against the sharp, stucco corners of the foyer; it was a starting pistol, a Grand Marshal's waving green flag. Instinct pulled me into motion and down the stairs.

Garrett's left hand was trembling. He had plunged the end of his cigarette into the skin between his thumb and forefinger. A dime-sized wound now sat atop of it, appearing suppurated despite its freshness. I grabbed the cigarette out of his hand, crushed it, grabbed him by the arms and pulled him up.

"What the fuck is going on here?" I said.

"Nothing. This...this was stupid." He gripped his hand.

"You're right." I turned to Beverly as I continued to hold him. She was frightened of both of us now.

"I'm sorry about this. He gets this way when he's had too much to drink. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah. I can't feel a thing." I let him go, but stayed vigilant.

"Hey, it's fine. It's not the first time," she told me. We locked eyes, and that fuzzy feeling hit me again. I tried to suppress it, but the emotion came rising out through my chest cavity, like a chaotic pendulum of low frequency, pulsing through the walls of its enclosure. Garrett stopped thrashing about.

"We'll talk about it. After I take care of this guy."

I lead Garrett up the stairs and resolved to put him to sleep in guest room after bandaging his hand. Up until tonight, the room had been Marcus's, but he had no qualms with sleeping on the foldout mattress that slid out of the living room couch. After setting him down on the bed, I picked up his hoodie and splayed it out on the bedside. Badges and emblems representing various bands and collectives made it look like a quilted patchwork. The corner of a Ziploc bag extended out of the left center pocket, milky and translucent. I pulled it out of the pocket and was greeted with a granular mass of white powder. Garrett had told me he "scored" earlier tonight, and this must've been what he was talking about. But his self-loathing behavior didn't exactly match the

expected profile of someone who had done a few lines — you'd expect muted anxiety to turn into beguiling virility, self-hatred to transmute into self-love, and self-mutilation to siphon off into outward violence. Garrett must have gotten so sloshed that he had forgotten he was “holding” in the first place. I picked up the bag and looked at it. If I were to lay a few lines out for myself on the bathroom counter, he would hardly notice. It wasn't the first time I'd snorted cocaine, but I was maybe seven years younger; the older I had gotten, the more pernicious and long-lasting the residual effects of drug use had been — insatiable hunger, sleep deprivation, even a day-long malaise of depression and fatigue. Still, I had nowhere to be but the inside of a car tomorrow, and the alcohol had me all tied up in the present, with little forethought to consequences.

I didn't remember much of what followed. The night was a series of still-photographs you could only occupy and live in for a second. The meaningless drudgery was sifted out, only the purest joy remained. Beverly and I were talking on the dinner table for what seemed like hours, but I recall only certain details: her smile; the look on Marcus's face after she cracked a joke; the way I accidentally poured bong water into Lou's glass, thinking it was wine; how at some point, I had lectured Jessy on the importance of acting upon ambition, at whatever cost; the texture of tortoise-shell sheetrock which lined the wall to the master bedroom; the taste of spearmint chapstick and nicotine on Beverly's lips; and the soft impact we made on her bed. We fucked, I think. Flashes of sensorial information looped endlessly in my head as I fell asleep.

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In the morning, I awoke to Lou throwing sharpies at my face.

Beverly was still asleep. The blanket next to me rose and fell, her inhalations short portamentos, her exhalations long glissandos. I looked over her for a moment as I got up. Her breath smelled of cigarettes and fermenting vinegar.

“Put your fucking clothes on, man. We should’ve left an hour ago,” Lou said. He was wearing a leather jacket and a marinière.

“Shit. What time is it?” I felt gravity pulling my head to the floor, as if a helium balloon on the opposite side of the world were tethered to it. Drunkenness hadn’t left me, an outcome for which I was grateful; a graceful exit from the city, a reconvention at the van, and the delegation of financial culpability — they could all be accomplished with minimal effort and little to no nausea.

“It’s eleven. Let’s go. I’ll wait for you outside. I’ll call a ride.” He left the room.

I stood up quietly and dressed, my heart tugging at me as I remembered the night before. What had seemed easy between us was now hopelessly mired in unforeseen ties; not only would I have to avoid Garrett as I slipped out of the room, but in our van conversation, I’d have to make sure the subject of last night’s conclusion was avoided entirely. But a part of me didn’t care. Something in me no longer wanted to feel like some onlooker, some passerby.

I left a note on her dresser with my phone number, peered through the door, and saw no one. Pushing my hand into my pants pocket, I was alarmed — it was full of...something. It was as if I had stuffed my hand into a rich ore of granulated sugar. And then I remembered the cocaine. The plastic bag must have broken. There wasn’t any use in trying to pretend I hadn’t stolen the bag from Garrett. I figured I had better do my best to excavate the remainder out of my pocket and flush it. That way I could at least leave open the possibility that he had carelessly left it somewhere. I ambled over to the bathroom, and scooped what I could out of my pockets and into the toilet.

Star-crossed, stranded, disconnected. Those words, they were all that ran through my head as Jared, for maybe the twelfth time, attempted to jumpstart the Econoline. We had been

outside with the car for at least an hour. That old fucker, the crooner, must've bought himself a new van with the money we paid him, something with heated seats and air conditioning. I kicked one of its tires; Lou looked over at me, and did the same with greater aplomb. Garret sat on the curb with a paper bag between his legs, almost catatonic. Manuel and Jared were finger-dancing over their phone screens with the technological panache of Gen-Z ten-year-olds.

“What do we do? Another mechanic, Crash?” Lou asked.

“Yeah. Call a tow truck,” I said. “Let James know we might be late for that show in Santa Barbara.” He pulled out his phone and started tapping away.

I sat on the curb next to Garrett. He hadn't given any indication that he'd remembered last night. I was concerned, obviously, about his act of impulsive self-mutilation. But I was also frightened of bringing up the subject — maybe he had seen Beverly and I together in her room, having stumbled upon us on accident, his perception of the world still glassed-over and beery. Without knowing how to navigate the situation with nimbleness or delicacy, I sat silent for a few minutes.

“At least it was a good show.” The air between us lost its density, became breathable again.

“It wasn't so bad.”

“Can't believe we met Bev last night.” He acted taciturn, but looked as if he were brimming with a cauldron of words underneath.

“Yeah. How's your hand, by the way?”

“Fine.”

“Don't remember how you got it?”

“Oh, I remember, Crash. Don't think I'm stupid.” Garrett forced his hand into his pocket.

“Just trying to make sure you’re alright.”

“I don’t know what your version of ‘alright’ is. Not being an inconvenience?”

“Not sure what you’re going on about.”

“I shouldn’t have to explain.”

“Why don’t grow up, Garrett? What the fuck has gotten into you lately?”

“So, it’s about being a grown-up, huh? Like you’re some paragon of maturity, someone who only breaks promises when it suits them.”

“No I don’t. And at least I try not to burden everyone with my insecurities.”

“Fuck you.”

“I care about Beverly.”

“You care about your ego. You wouldn’t know feelings if they bit you in the ass. You’ve never cared about anyone in your life.”

“Don’t make me laugh. You don’t know that girl any better than I do.”

“You’re disrupting our relationship.”

“What the fuck are you on about?” She was visibly annoyed when you were around.”

“Liar.”

“She doesn’t want you.”

“Whatever. You know what? I quit.” He whispered this, as if he would disturb the tranquility the area. The surrounding mountain cascades felt imposing, indifferent to our conversation beneath them. “And you know what? Looking at you is like staring into a cold mirror. You’re not any different than me.”

Lou stood between us, putting his arms out and dividing us symmetrically. “Ladies, we need to stop. The tow guy only has enough room to take four of us to the mechanic’s shop. Someone will either have to wait here or call for a separate ride.”

“I’ll wait,” I said. “Fucking hell.”

“Maybe you can stay inside for a few hours with Marcus and the lot.”

“I’m sure you’d love that,” Garrett said, all sarcasm and sneer.

Text me, Crash,” Lou said as he turned around.

“My phone’s dead,” I told him. He didn’t seem to hear.

Walking back to Beverly’s from the parking lot wouldn’t be an issue (it was a five-minute stroll at the most), but slipping unannounced into their apartment certainly would. I traipsed up the stairs to the foyer and knocked on the door. Nothing. I placed my ear against it, hoping for a faint rustle or the slightest indication of movement; the likelihood that everyone had left within an hour’s window was small. The aural restlessness of an antiquated building greeted my ear. I remembered the interior of that same facade I’d imagined during Garrett’s meltdown. After a brief interval, I tried the door. It was unlocked; the knob spiraled into a black oblivion as I twisted it open. The whole apartment was dark, but sallow light penetrated the interstices of the blinds; the individual shafts of sun had arranged themselves like prison bars over my hands and body. I called out her name, then Marcus’s, but couldn’t hear anyone. I took a seat at the dining table and figured if no one was home, that I could just as easily make myself comfortable, and explain the strange intrusion when one of them had arrived, and yet, I couldn’t bring myself to sit still in my chair; euphonious laughter was emanating close by, and I couldn’t determine its exact origin — was it coming from inside, or outside? I turned on the dining room lights, and attempted to trace the source of the laughter (it seemed more like a cackle every second), occasionally calling out Marcus’s name. The tittering grew louder as I headed down the hallway toward Beverly’s room. Maybe her headphones had prevented her from hearing my knock at the door, or, for all I knew, the room was acoustically insulated, without windows or hard corners. The possibilities evolved and copulated in my mind. I heard a second voice from the room as I

stood outside the door. Always, it felt, I was standing outside of a natural pairing, the often maligned card in an otherwise decent hand of poker. I opened the door.

“Woah, hey.” It was Beverly. She stumbled over a book on the floor, surprised at my presence. “How are you, Crash?” she said.

“Doing great, listen...” I trailed off. The outline of a silhouette moved against the wall.

“Who’s there, babe?” a man’s voice said. Then I saw a face, reflected in a mirror adjacent to the doorway, and both of our eyes locked through the reflection. Pre-facial-recognition, pre-cognition really, I thought I had glimpsed myself, or an imprecise duplicate, in the silver amalgam. He stepped in front of me, as if from an alternate reality, for which the mirror had served as a portal, and shook my hand.

“One of Garrett’s friends from out of town,” she said.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. He was smiling. “Bev’s boyfriend, Will. You know Garrett, huh? We all go way back.” A lanyard dangled from his neck with an identification keycard as its pendulum. A picture of his face, and “William Wilson” in big bold letters, remained lurid under its lamination. He wasn’t lying.

“I’m sure.” I paused, and rooted my hands into my pockets to keep them steady. “That’s all anyone does in this city. Go way back.”

He laughed. “You’re a funny guy.”

“Well, I have to get going. I lost something in this room.”

“No, you should hang around. We’re bored,” Will said. “What was it that you forgot anyway?”