

J'ai Deux Amours

She was tending a campstove on the narrow counter, a spatula in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other and singing along to music she mostly didn't know. She hadn't heard me come in. I stood watching her, holding the groceries. A creamcolored sweater that showed her polished shoulders and how they tapered to her scented nape. Dark hair thickly up-pinned and from soft lobes those pendulous earrings flickering deliciously in the melodious lamplight. She looked back when I turned the music down, her green eyes shining.

"Honey," I said. "I'm home."

We made love. Standing up at first. Then careening over toward the bed. We tried, briefly, to go slow. Afterward we lay breathless and damp, wearing nothing but our socks.

"I needed that," she said into my chest. "Six weeks, I mean, I *really* needed that."

"What do I smell?"

"The stove!" she said, bolting upright. "Shit!"

She turned off the burner and kept going toward the toilet at the back of the Airstream, separated from the kitchen by nothing but a half-wall partition, no door or curtain. From the bed I could see her bare knees.

"Will you open a window?" she said, tearing a square of toilet paper. "It's smoky."

She crossed the narrow floor, collecting our strewn clothing as she came, and joined me where I stood at the open window watching the snow.

“You look even better than I remember.”

“And you look skinny,” she said. “Let me feed you.”

We got dressed. I flipped the record and set the needle and joined her in the little kitchen.

“Did you bring the groceries?”

“And a little something,” I said, reaching down to pull the bottle from the brown paper bag.

“Whiskey!” she said. “High roller.”

“First time I’ve ever come off the road with a little money in my pocket,” I said.

She cracked the seal and pulled the cork. “You’re gonna be famous!”

“It’s only a matter of time.”

“Don’t get famous,” she said. “I mean, yes, definitely get famous. But don’t get *famous*.”

“Do we have any ice?”

“No,” she said. “But it’s snowing.”

I went out in my unlaced boots and filled two coffee mugs with snow and came back. She poured the whiskey and we touched mugs and drank.

“I’m so glad you’re home. When do you leave again?”

I hesitated.

“I don’t want to know,” she said, waving her hand to stop my response. “Not tonight. I take it back.” She took me by the shirt and kissed me. Then she handed me a knife and a cutting board. “You do the bread,” she said. “I’ll put the water on.”

I sliced a loaf of sourdough and put it in a skillet with some of the grease leftover from the bacon she'd burned. When it was hot I cut thick slices from a block of cheddar and laid them on the bread. We had one tomato and half an onion.

"Mustard?"

"No," I said. "It was Dijon or decent whiskey."

"You like your onion raw or grilled?"

When the water boiled I cracked two eggs and dropped them in the pot.

"Eggs?" she said. "In Ramen?"

"Watch and learn."

"You've been on the road too long."

"Just mind the skillet, woman. This is going to be the best meal you've had since lunch."

When she turned the toaster oven on to keep the first sandwich warm the Airstream went dark.

"Damnit," she said. "I forgot to turn the heater off first."

I went out and crossed the dark yard, my boots squeaking in the fresh snow. I entered the basement of Ryan's rented house and opened the circuit box and flipped the switch. Upstairs I could hear through the muffled music the sounds of Ryan and Abbygail making love.

We sat at opposite ends of my desk, a candle and the bottle of whiskey between us.

"How's school?"

"Three more months," she said.

She was studying to become a Nurse.

“You’re gonna be rich,” I said.

“It’s only a matter of time.”

“Don’t get rich,” I said. “I mean, definitely get rich, but don’t get *rich*.”

She smiled. “Tell me about the tour.”

“We missed two shows in Michigan because of a blizzard. On the way to Chicago we watched a semi slide off the highway and break open like a piñata against a tree. This is the second year in a row we’ve toured north in the winter. You think we’d learn.”

“If you’re gonna be dumb,” she said. “You better be tough.”

After dinner I put on an old Josephine Baker record and we danced a little. I could feel in my sockfeet the cold coming up through the floor. Then we pulled the heater close to the bed and made love again, slowly this time.

“Do you work tomorrow night?” I said afterward.

“No, sir.” Her cheek lay against my chest.

“Horse Feathers is playing at the Grey Eagle. Our manager is in contact with their agent and I’m working on getting some tickets if you’re interested.”

“Yes,” she said. “I love their new record.”

“You’re not sleepy,” I said. “Your body is humming.”

“Sex that good gives me energy.”

“Will you read to me?” I said. “I’ve missed that as much as anything.”

“Only if you promise not to fall asleep.”

“I will make no such promise.”

“Poetry or prose?”

“Dealers choice.”

I turned the light on so we could read. But she looked good in the light and we didn't read.

We all went to Double Crown after the show. Horse Feathers was a five-piece, three guys and two girls. The men were the rhythm section. Mark on drums, Brad on bass, and Justin on rhythm guitar and lead vocals. The girls were the string section: Genevieve on violin and Esme on cello. They were both beautiful in very individualized ways and to watch them perform was to fall in and out of love a couple dozen times. Christina agreed.

She said, “I haven't felt that lusty over a woman since the first time I saw Halli perform.”

We were all sitting at a big wrap-around booth in the corner.

“Oh,” said Halli. “Gosh.”

“Don't be coy,” said Christina. “You know how sexy you are. I'm talking to all you women.”

“I've already claimed Abbygail,” said Esme. “She's mine.”

“That's okay with me,” said Christina. “I'm not partial.”

“There are six incredibly handsome men sitting here,” said Ryan. “Look at us! We're bearded and mysterious, but the women are flirting with each other.”

“Good,” said Abbygail. “On behalf of girlfriends everywhere I thank you women for being so irresistible.”

Justin shook his head. “There’s enough drama in this band without any outside influence.”

“I sensed that,” said Halli. “Watching your set I thought of Fleetwood Mac. Three men and two women. Genevieve even looks a little like Stevie Nicks.”

“Genny and I were dating until Mark joined the band,” said Brad. “Now Mark and Genny are engaged.”

“And I thought Alex and Halli had it bad,” said Dan. “Am I to assume that Justin and Esme?”

“Esme’s gay,” said Justin.

“I want Abbygail,” she said. She leaned across the table and kissed her on the lips.

“Weed,” said Mark. “I hear Asheville has good weed.”

“Talk to the bartender,” said Dan. “Russ is his name. He’s in a band called Chronic Condition.”

Brad said, “We got stopped in Tennessee two nights ago and Mark ate all the weed.”

“How much did you have?”

“A little over half an ounce if I had to guess. It was shitty Mexican schwag I bought in Texas, but nonetheless.”

“He couldn’t open his goddamn eyes.”

“Was this before or after the show?”

“Before,” said Justin, shaking his head.

Mark grinned. "The backbeat lagged a little that night."

Christina and I slid out of the booth so Mark could talk to the bartender.

"We were at festival once," said Justin. "I think it was in Montana, and we get there and the promoter tells us he's sorry but we've been double booked. Naturally, we were pissed. But he paid us anyway and said we were welcome to hang backstage as long as we wanted. There were several kegs, so of course we all got drunk. That is, everybody but me. It was my birthday the night before and I was horribly hung over. The drinking began around two in the afternoon. At seven that night I get a call from the promoter. He says he just had a band drop out, their van broke down, and do we want to play in their place? I look around me. Mark is puking in the portajohn and Brad is passed out and the girls are out hula-hooping with the hippies. But the promoter says he'll pay us again for the slot if we fill it. So of course I say okay."

"How'd it go?"

"About as well as it you'd expect. Brad tripped over his own guitar cord and fell headlong into Mark's drum kit. Genevieve spilled a beer on Esme's keyboard and Esme started crying. I was so embarrassed I just stopped singing and turned my back to the crowd. And you know what Brad says to me the next morning? He says, 'Man, it's too bad we didn't get to play yesterday, there were a lot of people at that festival.' He didn't remember any of it."

Mark came back from the bar with a round of tequila shots.

"There's more at the bar," he said. "I couldn't carry all of them."

Justin said, "I was just telling the Montana story."

"When you got drunk and went home with that ugly cowgirl?"

“That was Wyoming,” said Justin. “Montana was the day after. The festival.”

“Ah, yes,” said Mark, grinning again. “The backbeat lagged a little that night too.”

Mark returned to the bar to retrieve the rest of the tequila.

“These drinks better not appear on my tab,” said Justin when he came back. “No offense everybody, it’s just that Mark is always finding an excuse to celebrate. We had a two-hundred-dollar bar tab after our show in New York last week. When I asked Mark about it he just shrugged. ‘It’s New York,’ he said, as if that explained everything.”

Mark was the youngest member of the band by about six years. He was also the newest member and his excitement was palpable. Touring for Mark was still an adventure, a party, an *experience*. I remembered what that felt like, that untouchable sense of promise and the bravado it brought with it, the way I carried my youth around like a backstage pass. That glint of superiority we all used to feel when we thought of ourselves as musicians on tour, ego-pleased and exceptional, almost blessed. I still got excited, but it wasn’t pure anymore. It came now like a dirty drug to offset the sadness of time and to justify the choices you make in light of the knowledge that everything has its consequences. That’s what happens to experience after it passes. It becomes a different kind of bravado. Not false but much humbler. I still felt blessed, but not necessarily special.

“These shots are on me,” Mark said. “Let’s have a toast.”

“To what?” said Justin. “What are we celebrating now, Mark?”

He looked as if the answer was obvious. “Dank-ass Appalachian Mountain marijuana.”

We all touched glasses and drank.

“How long have you all been on tour?” said Christina.

“Since August,” said Genevieve.

“Non-stop?” said Abby.

“We came home for Christmas.”

“But it’s paying off,” said Ryan. “Or it seems to be.”

Their show that night had sold out at 600 tickets.

“Touring is our bread and butter nowadays,” said Justin.

Justin was the songwriter and bandleader. He was the oldest of us all, which I didn’t know for a fact but knew nevertheless. He sat among his bandmates with a kind detached paternal amusement, proud and happy but also subdued by the weight of responsibility. It was like seeing Ryan five years from now, the way he seemed to bear the burden of the band’s fate whether we expected him to or not, the pressure of our collective emotional investment, the way he sensed every tension as if it were a critique of his leadership.

They were talking now about publicity.

“We hired a publicist for the release of our EP,” said Ryan.

“Did it help?”

“First time we’ve ever come home with a little money in our pockets.”

They compared rates, they talked about radio verse print publicity.

“Who’s your booking agent?”

“We don’t have one.”

“You’d be making double with a good agent.”

“So I’m told.”

“Who’s booking your shows?”

“Our manager.”

“Who’s your manager?”

“She’s new to the business. But she’s tough and we trust her.”

“What are you paying her?”

“Same as us. We split it fives ways.”

“That’s good. There were times my manager was making more than me. We toured in Europe a few years ago and came back in the red and I had to pay my manager out of my own pocket.”

“Europe,” said Ryan, nodding. “I’d take a loss for Europe.”

“I have a couple contacts,” said Justin. “If you’re interested.”

“Yes.”

“When’s your next tour?”

“We leave in a week.”

“For how long?”

“About a month.”

Justin nodded. “What are you doing in June?”

“Nothing,” said Ryan.

“Interested in touring out west?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll talk to our agent,” said Justin. “He’s booking a tour now and we’re looking for support. Agent wants a west coast band, naturally. But I’m not thrilled with any of the offers. Do you guys have a following out west?”

“We’ve been out there a few times.”

“I’ll talk to my agent.”

Christina looked at me and I knew what she was thinking.

“I’m ready for some whiskey,” I said, touching her knee under the table. “Let’s go pick out some whiskey.”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s.”

At the bar she stood looking at me while I looked at the bottles of bourbon.

“My sister is getting married in June,” she said. “You know this.”

“Nothing is set in stone.”

“The wedding,” she said. “The wedding is.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Okay,” she said. “Good thinking. It’s best just to keep everything at arm’s length, isn’t it?”

“Pick your whiskey,” I said.

I could feel her looking at me.

She said, “What happened between you and Halli?”

I looked over at her slowly. “What?”

“What happened between you and Halli?”

“Two house bourbons,” I said to the bartender.

“At first I was intimidated,” she said. “At first I tried to hate her. But she’s impossible to hate. The more I get to know you both the more I feel her pain. Why is that?”

The DJ started playing loud rockabilly remixes and we had to shout.

“It won’t always be like this,” I said. “Someday hopefully we’ll be more established. We’ll make money and set our own schedule. But right now it’s very unpredictable.”

“It’s not about the money,” she said. “Or even the schedule. It’s something else. Some inner distance.”

“It won’t always be like this.”

“That’s why Halli left you,” said Christina. “She left you, didn’t she? Not because she wanted to, because she had to. You wouldn’t let her in. And if Halli can’t get in, who can? I thought maybe I was an exception, but I’m not.”

“It won’t always be like this.”

She looked at me for a long time, shaking her head. “Okay,” she said finally. Her eyes got glassy and she looked away. I held her by the nape of her neck and told her I loved her. She sighed and wiped her eyes. “I think we have different definitions.”

Abbygail appeared. She glanced at me and then took Christina’s arm. “Let’s dance.”

They went and joined the other three girls on the dance floor. I drank the whiskey and ordered another and took it with me to the booth. Ryan and Justin were there alone. Dan, Brad, and Mark had gone out for some latenight food.

Ryan said, "I just wonder sometimes if you can love two things at once. I know you can, that's not what I mean. I'm saying there's only so much love to give and sometimes it all goes to one place and sometimes it gets spread."

"You think it's the money," said Justin. "You tell yourself, Once we start making money."

"I'm not saying I don't love Abby. But do I love her like she loves me?"

"It's nice to make money. You've got to make money. But it has a way of exposing all the unpleasant problems you liked to blame on superficial shit. Success makes things easier, but also harder."

"Okay," said Ryan. "I know I don't. And so does she. But she doesn't know what to do about it, other than to keep hoping I will change."

"Success," said Justin. "Doesn't change much."

I finished my drink and went out to the dance floor. We were the only ones out there, Christina and I and Halli and Abby and Genevieve and Esme. They were beautiful and I loved them all.

"I didn't know you could dance," Christina said in my ear.

"We danced last night."

"I mean really dance. I want to learn to swing dance."

"I can swing dance."

"I didn't know. Will you teach me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Now."

We were both a little drunk and it wasn't the prettiest dance lesson. Our feet got tangled up and we'd careen into the other women. She liked it when I spun her, but it made her dizzy.

"Hold on," she said, leaning against me and resting her forehead on my shoulder. "I feel a little sick."

I held her close and we danced slowly.

"Some other time," I said. "We'll go dancing for real."

"I would love that," she said. "I didn't know you danced."

"We'll go."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Will you spin me?" she said. "Just one more time? I want to be spun one last time."