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The Reminding

Book Three: Julian

by Matthew Temple

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The apartment is amazing. It has white walls; high, vaulted ceilings with skylights. Two floors, an upstairs and a downstairs. Upstairs is the master bedroom and a secondary bedroom, which they are using for Acacia. Downstairs is the kitchen, living room, full dining room, and an office that Julian and Courtney are using to do HTML/CSS design work.

The apartment starts on the second floor of a building in downtown Santa Fe, New Mexico. First month's rent is free, and this is the first month. The HTML work is going to pay for the second month and months after that. Move-in specials like this are common in the American southwest. Julian and Courtney are both working on the redesign of a local website, santafedelivery.com, a service for delivery of all things, from food to lumber to housewares to plants. They found the job in a local paper: HTML/CSS GURUs WANTED. It's an open-ended job for a man named Mr. Kremer. They do the work at their apartment, upload the files to his web server, and submit their bill at the hourly rate Mr. Kremer specified. It should easily pay for the rent on their apartment as well as living expenses and all the special expenses associated with taking care of a baby.

They buy a computer on credit as soon as they move in. It's a tight financial arrangement but it should work. Both Courtney and Julian have previous web design experience. They work in shifts: whoever's not working takes care of Acacia. They both change diapers, they both entertain the little one while the other one works. About the only thing they don't both do is feed the baby, since she's breastfed. They figure if they can do enough hours on SFD (santafedelivery.com) by about the twentieth of the month, they will have enough time to get paid before they have to pay rent, and everything will be cool. From then on out it will just be a matter of keeping SFD and finding new projects. They will use their design experience to make a site advertising their design services. The rest will be history. They will get to live in this beautiful city, enjoy the shops and the scene, and take occasional trips outside the city with their own little desert flower.

And if anything goes wrong, Julian knows that Courtney has that secret debit card she pulls out in only the direst circumstances, that on their travels she uses to get them out of serious jams, and quickly puts away, closing down any conversation that Julian tries to make about it.

Julian gets away from the house at night. He goes to Evengelos, leaving early enough to get a burrito across the street first. Evengelos is a bar with live music Thursday through Saturday. When Julian goes he takes his guitar with him.

He sits at the bar sipping a PBR and makes friends with the bartender. Since he has no contact lenses it's about the only person he can see, unless someone sits down next to him. When someone does, Julian isn't sure whether it's a man or a woman until the person speaks. He goes out for regular smoke breaks, since that's where you really meet people. When he goes outside to smoke, he takes his guitar with him, in case anyone wants to hear him play. If no one is around, he takes his guitar out of the case and plays on the street, hoping to attract attention.

When he goes, he pays with the little cash he and Courtney have left over from their adventures. It's necessary for him to go out; he will die without the human contact. And he wants to take advantage of his and Courtney's open relationship. They are polyamorous, though only Julian has proven this out. He is on the prowl for women, women with spirit and spunk and soul. They can take him to their place for bedroom games, if it so works out. Courtney isn't expecting him until dawn, when he gets a few hours sleep and starts working on SFD again. There are some women around that make Julian stop. These desert types, grown up out here, wrapped in deep red robes or otherwise pure white, skin looks like it's just been gently baked by the desert sun, something spiritual about them, a solitude, like they grew up out of town and only come here occasionally. He's attracted to it, and when he sees it he wants to touch it, to hold it, and to be inside it.

But most nights it's just a burrito, then a few beers and a lot a lot of smoking. No desert women, just some Native playing Bejeweled on the casino machine. A white couple, mid-fifties, playing like they're still young, doing shots, her hand on his leg, both ugly, probably married. On Friday and Saturday a place like Evengelos fills up. The rest of the time, it's a couple of losers and him, and he's left making conversation with people he would normally not talk to. Not that he's not friendly. He is. It's just you have to be careful who you get involved with.

Mr. Kremer calls them after they send the first bill. He wants to meet. They meet at Sushi Land on San Francisco Street.

“Hi Mr. Kremer,” Courtney says.

“How’s Acacia doing?”

“She’s fine. She’s always hungry.”

“Hi Mr. Kremer,” Julian says.

“Hello Julian. How does it feel to be a new father?”

“Uh, it feels great, thank you. How are you?”

“Fine, Julian, fine. Now, what would everyone like to eat?”

“Well, we’re not used to going out for sushi.”

“Never been to Sushi Land?”

“This is our first time.”

“Well let’s get a couple of combination plates, and a couple of bento boxes, ok, that way we can try a little bit of everything.”

Mr. Kremer orders for everyone and they’re halfway through eating when he gets serious. He lets them talk about Santa Fe, about their previous journeys, about Acacia and her health, about everything under the sun. Then he puts his chopsticks down.

“I looked over the files you uploaded.”

“Yeah, did you get the latest edits to your header?”

“I got those.”

“What did you think?” asks Courtney brightly.

“Well, frankly, I thought the changes were a little amateurish. You’ve got a style I think you’re going for. But I didn’t think the page held together..as a whole. It needs to have an overall design concept. That’s what I was hoping whoever I hired would bring to this job.”

“Mr. Kremer—”

“Let me finish. I think you’re very talented, Courtney. Both of you. But I think you have the HTML/CSS knowledge without the graphic design side. The person I need, needs to have both. The whole package. This is a site that is growing in users. In a year we expect to have 20,000 registered users.”

“That’s a lot of traffic,” Courtney says.

“It’s a lot of traffic, it’s a lot of responsibility,” Mr. Kremer says. “I need to know that the designer on this site can keep up.”

“Mr. Kremer, can I say something?” Julian asks.

“Go ahead.”

“What you’re seeing there isn’t all we can do. It was rushed to get it to you by a certain timeline. This was intended as a first release only. We have design ideas that aren’t represented in what we sent you.”

“Those are our initial ideas,” Courtney says. “Not intended to be a final view into what we can give you.”

“I appreciate that, Courtney, Julian, I do. But when I say the work you gave me is amateurish, here’s what I mean.”

Mr. Kremer fiddles in his bag to pull out a slick black book which he places on the table.

Julian and Courtney look at each other.

Mr. Kremer rotates the book so it’s right side up to them. The title is *The Web Designer’s Idea Book*.

“Take a look.”

Courtney peels open the cover and flips through the first few pages, both she and Julian looking at the layouts.

Mr. Kremer looks at them expectantly. “Here’s one of my favorites,” he says. He picks up the book and flips through it, finding a certain layout. Then he turns it back around and places it before them.

Courtney is nodding. “We could easily adjust what we gave you to look more like this, if that’s what you want.”

“Should be no problem,” Julian says. He smiles, and lifts his head to Mr. Kremer.

“The problem is, this is what I expected from you on the first try.”

“It’s normal to have design discussions throughout the length of the project,” Courtney says. “If you let us borrow this book, we can get you something looking like this in..what do you think, Julian?”

“About a week.”

“A week? How does that sound, Mr. Kremer?”

“Courtney, I really feel for you. Especially with your baby. I know you two needed this job. But I need someone who can get me, quickly, what I need on the first try. That’s just not what’s happened here.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Mr. Kremer, but without a design discussion like what we just had, how were we to know what you wanted?”

“I need a designer who just knows.”

Courtney looks at Julian.

Julian says, “What you’re asking for is impossible.”

“Well that’s just the thing. I need possibility people, not people who tell me that something is impossible.” Mr. Kremer smiles at Julian. He takes his book and puts it back in his bag. He stands up. “Enjoy the rest of your lunch. It’s on me.”

“What about our bill?”

“I can’t in good conscience pay you for what you sent me.”

“We had a deal.”

“Have a good afternoon.” Mr. Kremer goes to the hostess station.

Courtney stands up, holding *Acacia*. She speaks loud enough so the whole restaurant can hear. “We had a deal, Mr. Kremer.”

But he ignores them. He pays the check and walks out.

Courtney rocks *Acacia*. She looks at Julian.

Julian shakes his head.

“Did you change Acacia?”

“What? No.”

“I told you to change her, Julian.”

“Can you change her? I’m looking for something.” Julian is hunched over the computer.

“What are you looking for?”

“Nothing.”

“Will you change Acacia?”

“In a minute, I’m looking for..”

“She doesn’t need to be changed in a minute. She needs to be changed now.”

Julian turns around. “Can you change her? I’m looking for something.”

“What are you looking for, J.? Are you looking for more jobs, another city, our next Mr. Kremer?”

“I was just looking for..”

“What? What were you looking for?”

“There have to be more jobs—”

“It’s too late for that! Our plan involved getting paid by Mr. Kremer so that we could make rent on this place and our plan is finished! There’s no time, don’t you see? You get another job today it’s not going to get done in time for us to pay rent. Now I need you to change Acacia because I need a few minutes to myself. Can you help me out J.?”

“What are you going to be doing?”

“I need to take a minute to myself. I’ve had it with Acacia. I need a few minutes so I can continue being a good mommy, after those minutes are done.”

Julian stands. He takes the baby from Courtney. “I’ll change her.”

“Please. Thank you. I’ll be upstairs. I brought you the stuff. Here.” She hands Julian a diaper and a carton of wipes.

“Ok but after this I need to spend some time looking.”

“Just give me five minutes. Then you can do whatever you want.”

Courtney is gone for fifteen minutes. During which time, Julian changes Acacia and lies on the floor with her and plays. He puts his finger out so she can see it. She grabs on. He gets very close to her so he can see her in focus, rolling on the new carpet of their apartment. He thinks Courtney is wrong. Another quick web job could have them paying their rent by the 15th or so, really not all that late, and understandable given the circumstances. He just needs a few minutes to search the various job

sites for contract jobs. They don't need to be in Santa Fe. They just need to be paying jobs, for someone honest, who will actually pay them for services rendered. He knows what Courtney is going to say..he has seen it in her eyes, earlier today. He's just waiting for her to say it. She's going to want to go back home, so they can better take care of Acacia. To go back home to Texas, where her parents are. But Julian doesn't want to go to Texas, especially Austin, where things went so bad for him. He can't go back there.

Courtney comes downstairs while Julian is lying on his back holding Acacia up in the air. "Did you two have fun?"

"We—"

"It looks like you're having fun! Here. Give her to me. Do your searches. But you know how I feel about this."

"I just didn't want..I didn't want to have to leave another town," Julian says. "I like it here."

"I like it here too. It doesn't matter. If we can't pay rent we can't pay rent. What if we call Mr. Kremer and see if he'll pay us half."

"I don't think he's going to—"

"You haven't even called him, Julian!"

"He didn't seem like he was going to—"

"But you haven't even called. You don't know."

"Do you want me to call him?"

"Yes! What did I say?"

"Just don't say what I think you're going to say."

"What is that?"

"That we need to go back to Austin."

"That's not what I was going to say."

"No?"

"No. What I was going to say was..let's go back to Tucson. Tuesday has that house. I'm sure she wouldn't mind putting us up for a while."

"Oh. I thought you were thinking about Austin."

"I don't want to go back to Austin! And have my parents breathing down my neck about Acacia, about how we should treat her? No. I'm saying what about Tucson? We can do web work from the house, have a place to stay that doesn't require us to bust our ass to pay rent because it's so much. With any extra we could help out Tuesday with her rent. And then we can find our own place. Did you like Tucson?"

"I like it better than Austin."

"No one's asking you to move to Austin!"

"I didn't really get to know Tucson."

"Neither did I. Let's do that. We can be there in one day. Put everything in the car. Let this place slide off. It's nice, Julian, but it's too

expensive. We were never gonna be able to pay for this.”

“We could have.”

“No, Julian. What Mr. Kremer said is right. We’re not design gurus. Just ‘cause you know HTML doesn’t mean you can lay out a website.”

“I disagree.”

“I respect that, Julian. I do. We can disagree on that one. But we have to do something. What do you say Tucson is it?”

Julian shakes his head. “I just don’t want it to be like..”

“Like we failed in New Mexico and had to come running back?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, people need help sometimes. We need help right now.

Julian. Are you listening?”

“What? Yes. I’m listening. I agree that Tucson is a good plan. I just don’t know if it’s the best plan.”

“We don’t have time to find the best plan.”

“Well it’s not like we’re getting kicked out today!”

“But we are getting kicked out eventually. Unless you and I get restaurant jobs like..tomorrow..and Acacia starts magically taking care of herself. Then we could pay rent on this place.”

“I really like this place, though.”

“I really like it too, J. I saw this as our home.”

“It doesn’t feel right, just giving up your home.”

“But we can’t pay for it.”

“I know. I know. There’s got to be some other way out of this. That’s why I was searching.”

“Julian. Stop searching. Start packing the car.”

—————

They drive through part of one day and part of one night. New Mexico and Arizona are big states. Julian drives, even though he can hardly see, and Courtney holds Acacia.

“Julian, you’re in the wrong lane.”

He swerves back into the right-hand lane.

“Do you want me to drive?”

“No, I think it’s better like this. You’re better with Acacia.”

“You’re fine with Acacia, you just have to give yourself a chance.”

“How am I now?”

“You’re in the lane.”

“Do you think we should have called Tuesday?”

“I would, but my cell phone’s dead. I’ll have to charge it when we get to the house. She won’t mind,” Courtney says.

“No, she won’t mind. But it depends on how late we get in tonight.”

“We can sleep in the car.”

“We could sleep in the car, but I’d rather not if we don’t have to.”

“Julian, of course I don’t want to sleep in the car if we don’t have to. Especially with Acacia. But I’m just saying if it’s three in the morning when we get there, we can sleep in the car.”

“We don’t have to sleep in the car. She won’t mind. She’ll probably still be up. We can at least take the floor in the front room.”

“To the right a little. You’re veering.”

“It’s hard to tell without any other cars around.”

“We’re lucky there aren’t many cars around.”

“Yes, but I’m saying, it’s hard to tell where the other lane is when there aren’t oncoming lights.”

“Do you want me to drive, Julian? You’re worrying me.”

“Am I not driving properly? Have we got into an accident?”

“No, of course not. You’re driving fine, considering.”

“Considering?”

“Considering you don’t have any glasses! Didn’t you say your mom had some old ones she could send you?”

“I wear contacts now.”

“Next time we have some extra money we should get you some.”

“Next time we have extra money,” he says.

“Tucson will be good for us, Jules. You’ll see. I have a very good feeling about this.”

Julian thinks, as the sky goes dark over the edge of New Mexico, about whether he has a good feeling about it, too. He likes driving; he likes going places. Tucson isn’t exactly a new place, but it’s got a similar southwestern draw to Santa Fe’s. Guys wearing cowboy boots. The desert being so close outside of town, and even growing into the towns, desert just waiting to eat all this city up. Sort of a feeling of being outside regular American civilization, being more with nature. Outlaw towns, places people ran to to avoid the law.

And in the windshield, he sees his mom, preparing steaks that she bought with food stamps, cutting them up with a sharp knife. She’s there, in her work clothes, with an apron on top, holding that straight knife, chopping away the fat. He looks into the glass, and he sees his whole dining room, kitchen. There’s Andre, sitting on the couch playing Dreamcast. And Adrian’s beside Mom, taking away the fat pieces and putting them in the trash. Aisha is standing on the dashboard like a heads-up display, describing the whole scene to him. She uses sign language, even though Aisha doesn’t know sign language, in Julian’s fantasy she does. And Julian feels comforted knowing that Aisha is there,

even though he can't tell what she's signing.

"Julian!"

"What?"

"You're swerving."

"Am I better now?"

"You're better. You know, Julian, I think Tucson is going to be a great place for us to find jobs. Everything is walkable. Fourth Avenue has tons of jobs. We could even work at the Teahouse, with Tuesday."

But Julian tunes her out. That's not the kind of job he wants.

When they pull up in front of Tuesday's house, Tuesday's light is on. It's two-thirty in the morning, and they can hear the sounds of the balalaika coming from her room.

Julian gets out of the station wagon. Courtney has Acacia on her shoulder, and she follows Julian up to the door. He knocks. The balalaika music keeps playing. He knocks again. It stops. They hear footsteps coming to the door, and can see the peephole blocked out for a second, then the door opens.

"Well hello, travelers!"

"Hey Tuesday."

"What are you all doing here?"

"We need a place to stay."

"To..stay stay?"

"Just for a little while, Tuesday, things didn't work out in Santa Fe."

"Well, come on in, we can talk for a little while. I'm about to go to sleep—"

"We'll be quiet, we promise. Can we just stay on the floor in here?"

"Or in the spare bedroom," Julian says.

"Yes, there's no one in there, you're welcome to stay in that bedroom for as long as you need. What happened in Santa Fe?"

"We fucked up a job for a website we were designing," Courtney says.

"We didn't fuck it up."

"Well, we didn't get paid and we needed to get paid to pay rent. You're sure you don't mind if we stay with you for a while?"

"Well, I have to talk to Rishi, that's technically her bedroom, but she's not using it, so I don't see why it would be a problem."

"Thank you, Tuesday."

"Yes, thank you."

"I'm sorry we didn't call, but my phone was dead and I can't find

the charger. It's somewhere in the back of the station wagon. Do you think our stuff's going to be safe out there for tonight?"

Tuesday goes to the door. She sees the full station wagon. "I think it'll be fine, but if you have a computer in there, I would move it tomorrow."

"Julian, you hear that?"

"Yes. I'll move it tomorrow."

"We just need to sleep now. I'm glad you were up. We didn't want to wake you."

"Yes, I find on these cool nights that the instinct to play music takes over. But Julian, no guitar after about three a.m. It bugs Rishi. We have quiet time from three to eight."

"Did you hear her, Julian?"

"Yes. I heard."

"You know," Tuesday says, "you and Matt both have the same habit of never saying 'yeah.' You both say 'yes.'"

"I learned that from Matt, actually. A diabolical technique. Is Matt here?"

"No. He was here but he got his own place."

"I see you have his paintings."

"He was nice enough to hang those while he was still here."

"Is Clover..?"

"She's sleeping. She's used to my balalaika. It doesn't bother her."

"We can set ourselves up, Tuesday. Julian, will you get some blankets out of the car?"

"Well, it's good to see you three! I hope you make yourselves comfortable, and we can talk to Rishi in the morning."

"Julian usually sleeps through the morning."

"You wanted blankets?"

"Yeah."

Julian goes for the door. Tuesday has left it open, so he leaves it open when he goes out. He opens the back hatch of the station wagon. He can hear Tuesday and Courtney talking quietly inside the house.

He doesn't want to be here, back with Tuesday, their tail between their legs. They could have made it in Santa Fe, but Courtney didn't have the foresight. He especially doesn't want to talk to Matt about it, and he knows, from Tuesday's emails, that Matt is right there in that backyard, sleeping in his own tent.

Julian grabs several blankets, closes the hatch, and looks up at the sky.

There is that: the beautiful Tucson sky. They could see the stars in New Mexico but Tucson has the most beautiful night sky he's seen anywhere.

He goes in with the blankets, walks right through where the girls are talking, into the empty bedroom. He lays out a simple pallet of cloth on the wood floor.

Julian wakes to the sound of Tuesday and Rishi talking outside. He can hear their words.

“It’s not about the bedroom.”

“Well what is it about?”

“It’s about not showing up at three in the morning with all your stuff on your back. Did they even call you?”

“Rishi, I don’t remember if they called or not. They gave me and Matt a place to stay in Austin, and I want to give them a place to stay here. It’s not permanent.”

“If Julian’s involved, you can bet it’ll be permanent. They’re your friends. I don’t care about the bedroom. I just don’t want our house to become completely chaotic. We put time into cleansing the spirit room—are they going to respect the spirit room? Even with Matt here, it’s too much. What is up with your friends just showing up on our doorstep?”

“Matt emailed me. We were emailing for weeks.”

“Well he didn’t email me! He shows up here, just expecting that because he and I fucked while he was on vacation here that he can just move into our house, into our yard, and that I’m going to still have sex with him?”

“You did, didn’t you?”

“That’s not the point! The point is he assumed I would. Like I’m some kind of house whore, your friend that he can have sex with anytime he wants.”

“Rishi, I don’t want to get involved with you and Matt.”

“Well keep your friends out of my tent! Matt just showed up in the middle of the night. I find him in my bed! I’m supposed to fuck him just because he sneaks into my tent!?”

“Didn’t you want to?”

“You don’t just show up in people’s tents!”

“That’s in the past. What I’m talking about is Julian and Courtney staying here for a while.”

“Do whatever you want with them! I don’t care. Just see if you can get Julian on a regular sleep schedule so he’s not up wanting to talk to me at four a.m. I’m not babysitting your friends.”

Julian hears footsteps coming up the back steps, into the kitchen, a single person, probably Tuesday. He hears the click of the stove control

and a teapot being filled with water. Then the sound of the teapot being placed on an electric burner. He looks at Courtney and Acacia: both asleep. He looks at his watch: eight-forty nine. Way too early to get up but he'll talk with Tuesday for a while. He gets up. He's wearing just his undies. He goes out of the bedroom and into the living room and through the spirit room, into the kitchen.

Tuesday is in fact there, wearing red and orange robes and sitting by the stove. Julian blinks in the bright light coming through the back door. He sits on the floor across from Tuesday.

"Good morning," she says.

"Hello." Julian picks the sleep out of his eyes. "You wouldn't happen to be making coffee, would you?"

"That I am. Would you like some?"

"Um, yes, please."

"How did you sleep?"

"I'm a little short on sleep still. Where's Clover?"

"She's in my room. Still sleeping last time I checked. Did you hear me and Rishi talking just now? Is that what woke you up?"

Julian smiles. He shades his eyes with a hand and nods.

"Don't listen to her, she's just surprised that you all are here."

"I guess you're surprised as well."

"I am, but..Rishi doesn't deal well with this kind of surprise."

"Was it rough for her when Matt showed up?"

"I don't want to talk about her and Matt."

"Sorry for asking."

"That's ok. But. I'm trying to be really clear about that sort of thing right now. Not talking with people about other people. You and I, any particular you and I, should have enough to talk about, about ourselves."

"So what shall we talk about?"

"Let's talk about coffee. Do you want cream?"

"Yes, please. Tons of it."

"Ok, I'm making it in the French press. Do you mind?"

"I adore the French press."

"Are you still tired?"

"Yes, I'll probably go to sleep after this."

"You wake up and have a cup of coffee?..then you go back to sleep?"

"I usually go to bed around six or seven in the morning, then don't wake up till four. Do you think I could plug the computer in in the living room?"

"Sure, use the living room however you like. That's public space. The spirit room needs to be kept the spirit room. You can meditate in

there if you like, but be respectful and save time in there for Rishi if she wants it.”

“I will. Be respectful.”

“Ok, good. I want her to feel comfortable here, too. This is her house, even though she lives in the yard.”

“Should I stay away from her tent?”

“That area, back there..that corner is hers. Let’s let that be her area. A Rishi-only area. For now.”

“Are you and Rishi getting along well as housemates? Yardmates?”

“Again, that’s between me and Rishi. There’s no use in you and I discussing it.”

“So I probably shouldn’t ask you about Matt.”

“You and him can talk when he wakes up. I don’t know what the story is between you two and I don’t want to know. I hope for the sake of the friendship that you guys clear out any bad air there is between you, because you had something special in high school. This house has been peaceful and it needs to stay peaceful. I’m surprised he’s not up by now, actually, but I hope that when you talk, you two can come to some kind of agreement. And be nice to him, Julian, you hurt him very deeply in Austin.”

“I..hurt him?”

“And..that’s about as far as I want to go along that path.”

Julian clears his throat. “I respect that.”

“Thank you,” Tuesday says.

And the kettle starts to whistle.

Julian goes to sleep after his one cup of coffee and doesn’t wake up again until four. Courtney is gone; so is the stroller, and Acacia. Julian takes a shit and goes outside.

Two tents: one tent, two tents. He guesses that Matt’s is the one with the electrical cord running into it.

“Matt. Matt. You in there. He thinks about snooping but decides not to. Someone might be watching. “Matt! You in there?”

To Julian’s surprise, Matt answers. “Yes? Hello?”

“It’s Julian.”

Matt unzips his tent. He has earphones around his neck. “Hi Julian.” He says it like no bad blood ever passed between them.

“Hi.”

Matt just waits for Julian to continue.

“I was wondering if you were busy, maybe we could go to the

Teahouse or something.”

“Ok, but not the Casbah. I want to go somewhere different.”

“There’s a Starbucks up the street.”

“Ok, sounds good.” That is what Matt always says: “Sounds good.”

“There’s only one thing,” Julian says. “Can you buy? Courtney has my cash.”

“Sure, no problem,” Matt says. Matt likes to have the upper hand, so of course that’s no problem for him. Matt comes out of the tent and zips it closed.

Julian chuckles. “Running an electrical cord to a tent. Not many people would have thought of that.”

“Well, given that it rains so infrequently here, it made sense. I was worried at the beginning that a puddle might form and it could electrocute me, but then I was like: where is this puddle going to come from?”

“Just watch out during monsoon.”

“Right, I’ve heard. Torrential rains.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Julian says. “You want to walk?”

“Yeah, let’s walk.”

So they head east on Speedway, up to where the Starbucks is. On the way, they talk a little, neither of them mentioning what happened in Austin. Matt asks Julian about Santa Fe, since he’s never been there, and Julian gives him the details. Julian even tells Matt about the apartment, this perfect apartment, that they had to give up because Courtney didn’t have enough vision to see them complete their first web design project. Matt asks about the software they were using to do the project; as a programmer, he’s interested in the tools. Julian tells him, afraid that Matt will make fun of the simple programs they were using to develop, but Matt just listens.

“Cool,” he says, even though Julian doubts that any of those tools were cool to Matt. Matt is being annoyingly polite.

Julian is on guard for criticism, some attack coming out of left field, but he doesn’t get any. Are they going to discuss what happened in Austin? Julian doesn’t really want to. It’s clear what happened. Matt went crazy and he left. He’s prone to do those sorts of things. Ever since high school, he’s been one to surprise you with unexpected moves. Julian is just as glad that Matt did leave, because it meant that he got to be in charge with Courtney and Tuesday as they traveled on from Llano and Austin. He got to decide what van they bought (with Courtney’s money). He got to look at the map and decide what route to take west. He said when and where. Pretty much, the girls went along. If Matt had been there, that’s not how it would have gone at all.

“So I’ve got this business idea,” Julian says, once they’re at Starbucks and sitting outside with their coffee/juice.

“Hit me,” Matt says.

“You take a penny,” Julian says, then stops. He laughs. “Do you have a penny?”

“No, I paid with my debit card.”

“We’re going to have to find a penny to start with. I think that’s best, if we find the penny, on the ground, someone’s tossed-off penny, and we make a series of gambits.”

“I think I see where you’re going with this. Keep going.”

“The first gambit turns one penny into two..”

“Yes!”

“The second turns two pennies into four.”

“And so on until we’re rich. A doubling business, right?”

“Right.”

“I like that. That’s a great idea, Julian. Now where are we going to find this initial penny?”

“So you want to do it?”

“Why not? Let’s!”

“It came to me as we were driving, last night. I kept seeing visions on the dashboard. And I do mean visions. And then my sister Aisha kind of gave me the idea in signs.”

“Imagine the story we can tell once we’re rich!”

“We started a business from a penny! This penny!” Julian reaches down and brings up a penny.

“How did you see that?”

“It was calling to me.”

“I mean, without your contacts, how did you even see that?”

Julian laughs, a high-pitched shriek. “I don’t know!”

“It was meant to be.”

“It was meant to be, my friend.”

“I agree.”

“With me?”

“Of course!”

“Indeed! Glad you’re back, my friend.”

“Glad I am, too, Jules.”

Julian laughs. He throws his head back, braids catching the sun. “And to think, at one time I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again.”

“I wasn’t sure, either. I wasn’t sure I wanted to,” Matt says.

“Tucson is a magnet,” Julian says. “We were meant to come back together here.”

“You may be right.”

“I am right. See those mountains? I’m convinced they have a gravitational pull..sideways..over the entire city.”

“That would make sense. All mass has gravity.”

“Exactly! So it’s not just down they push you, it’s to the side.”

“And why does that mean we were supposed to get back together in Tucson?”

“I have no idea!” Julian laughs.

Matt takes a sip of his orange juice. He sets his glass on the table.

“Have you been playing music?”

“Well, I have..and I haven’t. I haven’t been playing out, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“That’s what I’m asking.”

“No, then.”

“Why not?”

“I’m in kind of a hermituous mode lately I..haven’t had any suitable places to play, really. I mean in Santa Fe—”

“There have to be places to play music in Santa Fe.”

“Well there are and there aren’t. Santa Fe’s not a big music town.”

“Oh?”

“Not reeeeeeally. It’s nothing like Austin—”

“But Austin was too much of a music town, I seem to remember you saying. No one was paying attention because there was music everywhere.”

“That’s true. Tucson is really a much better..a much better middle of the road city when it comes to music.”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

“So when are you going to play out?”

“I just got here yesterday. Last night, actually. I haven’t had time to reach out to any..I..”

“I just want to see you playing out. I know that was good for you in Dayton. You worried me when you weren’t playing out in Austin. I mean..music is your thing, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I just know it gives you energy when people respond to your music. So I want to see you playing out. That’s what I would like anyway.”

“No..you’re right..you’re right. I just get into a kind of mode where I stop playing out..then I think I’m rusty..then I definitely don’t play out.”

“Do you play for Courtney?”

“Not reeeeeeally. It got kinda old kinda fast, me playing songs for her. I mean at first I would play a song and we would make love, like, right after. Now it’s more like..I can’t listen because I’m holding the baby, etc.” Julian makes the jack-off motion with his hand. “Everything changes when you have a baby,” Julian says. “Be careful you don’t do it too soon.”

“I am very careful about that. I don’t want babies. Do you think you did it too soon?”

“On the whole? No, I don’t think so.”

“Do you still love Courtney?”

“Love? Love, yes. But it’s different.”

“It’s none of my business, I just thought I’d ask.”

“What about you and Rishi?”

“Things are going well right now, but give it a day or two.”

“Let’s go to the Casbah.”

“No, let’s talk about your show and how we’re going to promote it.”

“I really want to see Courtney. I need to check on her in case she needs help with Acacia.”

“Ok, but on the way let’s talk about your show.”

“And who is this ‘we’ that’s going to promote it?”

“I’m going to promote it.”

“You would?”

“I am going to. I’ll do flyers in every shop downtown, get people to make announcements at their shows, all that. You get the music together, I’ll handle the promotion.”

“You’re going to do that?”

“Yes!”

“You’re going to pay for the flyers?”

“How much will it cost? A few hundred copies?”

“You would do that?”

“Yes, Julian! Why not? I want to see you play.”

“Well what’s the venue?”

“The Casbah. In the back. You’ll get the dinner audience and we can have someone out front getting people to come back to see your show.”

“Who’s going to stand out front? You’re thinking Tuesday?”

“I will. Inbetween sets I’ll go out front and rope people in. How soon do you think we can have this going?”

“Well, in terms of the music, I could be ready..in..a month?”

“That quickly? Cool. I’ll start designing a flyer today. Let’s get on this, get you back playing out. Take over Tucson.”

“Would the girls be willing to do some dancing, you think?”

“Which girls? Tuesday and..Courtney?”

“Do you think Tuesday would do a belly dance?”

“With Courtney? Sure. I mean let’s ask them.”

“Let’s ask them now. As in: let’s go to the Casbah!”

“Ok. I’m taking this to go. Let’s go to the Casbah.”

“You know what we should do?” Julian says, almost skipping as he walks.

“What?” Matt says.

“We should take a trip. Like our trip to Pennsylvania.”

“Our mountain trip?”

“Yes.”

“But we almost died. And don’t you still have feeling loss in one of your feet from that?”

“Yeah. The right one.”

Matt looks at Julian.

Julian is nodding. “Yes,” he says. “A trip like that.”

“You’re insane,” Matt says. “But there are plenty of places to camp around here. You can walk straight up that mountain. I did it when I was here on vacation.”

“How far up did you go?”

“You see that ridge, right there, where it goes back and there’s kind of a flat rock face? That’s where I went. Just took a sleeping bag and a Subway sub. Avoided the snakes and everything.”

“How long were you up there?”

“A day. I ran out of water and it was hot by ten a.m. I was seriously dehydrated by the time I got down from there.”

“Let’s go for two days.”

“I don’t think we could carry enough water.”

“How much did you need?”

“I took four canteens and I used every drop in less than twenty-four hours. Look at you, you’re giddy.”

Julian stops skipping. “I can’t help it if I’m glad to see my friend again. So what if we each carry eight canteens.”

“Eight? It’s too much to carry. It would be too heavy. Maybe we could get some of those camel packs but I don’t know how much they are.”

“What about that mountain?”

“Too far to walk to.”

“You do have a truck, do you not?”

“Yes, but I like the idea of walking the whole way.”

“What about that mountain?”

“The U of A mountain? It’s too small. It’s just a hill. Can you see?”

“It looks the same as all the rest to me, my friend.”

“What would it take for you to get contacts?”

“For me and Courtney to decide to spend the money to do it.”

“It would be best if you could see, if we do a trip like this. Not just for your enjoyment, but to look out for snakes. They blend in as it is.”

“I’ll talk to Courtney.”

“Please do. Do you mind if I serve as tour guide and I pick the mountain?”

“Not at all.”

“Well I’m going to pick the same one I went up, because I know it now. I don’t want to have any repeats of our Pennsylvania trip.”

“Very unlikely I’ll get frostbite here.”

“But reasonably likely that we’ll see snakes. If one of us gets bit, up there, that could be it.”

“They’re not deadly, are they?”

“Yes they are deadly. Unless you get to a hospital quickly. And us getting to a hospital quickly is unlikely if we’re up there.”

“Is there cell phone service?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t try my phone when I was up there before. Probably.”

“So we could call the hospital and they could send a helicopter.”

“Yes but I want to avoid that if at all possible.”

“Of course.”

“Julian.”

“Yes?”

“Are you sure you want to do this? I mean we don’t have the best track record when it comes to wilderness hikes.”

“What better way to get better than by practice?”

Matt doesn’t answer. The boys are almost at the Casbah.

“Matt?”

“What?”

“Do you..look down on Courtney and me for showing up like this, with all our stuff in the station wagon, out of the blue?”

“I don’t look down on you. You needed a place to go, you knew Tuesday’s would be safe, you came here. That’s all I see it as. I mean look at me: I’m living in a tent in her back yard! Stuff wasn’t working out well for me in a different way, so I came here. I had work, that wasn’t the problem. But I had work that didn’t suit me, that wasn’t right for my spirit, my soul. I came here just the same as you did.”

“Thanks for saying that. I’m just not sure that..Rishi is going to see it in the same way.”

“Who cares about Rishi!?”

“Aren’t you two..going out?”

“Yes but that doesn’t mean I think you should listen to her opinion on every little thing!”

They’re in front of the Casbah.

“Do you think Rishi is here now?”

“Probably.”

“Cause I’d like to avoid any..confrontations..you know?”

“I can’t help you there. Rishi is her own person. But I doubt she’s going to confront you. Mostly she likes to do her work and stay away from people. Let’s go in.”

Julian shrugs, and takes the lead as they go around the side of the Casbah. Courtney is there, with Acacia, the two of them the only people in the back dining area. Julian and Matt sit down. Courtney hands Acacia to Julian.

“My back is killing me.”

“From her?”

“From holding her, yeah. Hi Matt.”

“Hey Courtney.”

“What have you two been up to?”

“We had Starbucks.”

“We thought of this business idea that we’re going to do.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. Well, it was Julian’s idea. The penny-doubling business.”

“The penny-doubling business, eh? And this is going to make us all rich?”

“In short time, yes, it should,” Julian says.

“Well I’m looking forward to hearing about this. One second, I’m going to get some more tea. Anything for either of you?”

“No, we’re good—do you?”

“No.”

Courtney goes. Rishi appears at the back door of the Casbah’s building. Courtney and Rishi talk for a moment, then Courtney comes back. Julian hands Acacia back to Courtney and gets up.

“That was quick.”

“Will you excuse me? I’ll be right back.” And Julian goes to the Casbah building, through the tent area, and calls for Rishi.

She comes out. “What.”

“I just wanted to thank you for allowing us into your home,” Julian says.

“I didn’t allow you. You showed up.”

“I’m very sorry about that. We mean you no trouble.”

“Can I get you something, Julian?”

“Like what?”

“Like tea. It’s a teahouse.”

“No thank you.”

“Alright then. Enjoy your lounging around in the back of our establishment without buying anything.”

“You want me to buy something?”

“That would be recommended.”

“What’s good?”

“Do you like chai?”

“Sure.”

Rishi just looks at him.

“We’ll have a pot of chai.”

“What’s Matt getting?”

“Can’t we share?”

“One pot of chai, two cups. Are we done?”

“I mainly wanted to talk to you about staying at the house and see if it was ok with you—”

“You want to see if it’s ok with me? It’s too late for that, you’re already here. You and your friends think you can just show up at somebody’s house, to live, without even asking. And I mean Matt, too. He did the same thing as you. The exact same thing. I’ll bring your chai out in a minute.”

“Rishi?”

“What?”

“So is everything..cool?”

“No it’s not! It’s not cool, Julian. Not cool. Do you understand the words ‘not cool?’”

“Well..what..could we do to make it cool?”

“Nothing! Don’t you understand? If you want to make it cool, then get the fuck out of my house! Take Matt with you! Go back to Santa Fe! You can’t just show up at my house without asking, bringing your baby, and it just suddenly becomes cool! I’m busy now, Julian, I’ll bring you your chai but I don’t have time to stand around talking with you. I’m at work! I’m on the clock!”

“Ok, ok. Thank you..for the chai.”

Rishi goes back inside the Casbah.

Julian goes back to their table.

“I see you had a little run-in with Rishi,” Courtney says.

“Yeah.”

“Is she ok?”

“No, not ok. She wants us to go back to Santa Fe.”

“Let me talk to her later. Some things are better handled among us girls.”

“Be careful.”

“Be careful of what?”

“She seems rather angry. Maybe you could talk to her, too, Matt?”

“I don’t know what good you think that’s going to do.”

“I thought you two were going out?”

“We are, but she’s her own person, I don’t control how she feels about things. You know? You have to take it up with her. Give it time. She doesn’t like to talk while she’s working.”

“I gathered.”

“Seriously, wait till she gets off and try to have the same conversation. It’ll go a whole lot smoother.”

“Ok.”

“So other than this penny-doubling business, what have you two been talking about?”

“Oh,” Julian says. He brightens. “Me and Matt..are going to do a wilderness trip, just like our Pennsylvania wilderness trip, only in the desert.”

“What was your Pennsylvania wilderness trip?”

Matt answers. “It was this two-day trip up into the mountains of western Pennsylvania, where Julian got permanent frostbite on his right foot and we almost died.”

“Is that why you can’t feel on that foot?”

Julian nods.

“And you’re going to repeat this?”

Both Julian and Matt smile.

“Where are you going to do this?”

The boys both point to the mountain.

Courtney shakes her head. “We need to be looking for jobs, Julian.”

“I will. Right after we get back. This is kind of a welcome-to-Tucson thing. Matt is going to be the guide. He’s done it before.”

“You went camping up there before?”

“Yes.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes.”

“That’s crazy. You should never go camping alone.”

“I didn’t have anyone who wanted to go with me.”

“Still.”

“We’ll take a snakebite kit,” Julian says.

“I’m not as worried about the snakes as I am about us getting jobs!”

“This’ll just be two days.”

“When are you leaving?”

Julian and Matt look at each other. “Tomorrow?”

“Ok, but after that I need your help with Acacia. And charge your cell phones before you go up there. I want you to call me once a night to make sure you’re ok.”

Julian gets a rise in his stomach when she says that. Because he knows that he and Matt are going on a journey. This is the way it used to be, between them. Julian wishes it would always be this way.

Matt wants to start walking from Tuesday's house, but Julian insists Matt drive them close to the base of the mountain. They find a cul-de-sac with a break in the fence, and start up there.

They're both wearing long pants, Julian black jeans, and Matt a pair of desert camo cargo pants. They both have short-sleeved shirts and each carries a backpack. They have settled on four canteens each, two per day, so when they start out walking their packs are heavy. Each one has a sleeping bag. Julian's is not the camping style, so he has extra weight he's carrying, and his sleeping bag is attached to the top of his backpack. Both wear sneakers.

When they start up the slope, they're both going slow, looking for snakes.

"I don't think we have to do this the whole way up there," Julian says.

"No, you're right. Let's talk, though, so we're making noise."

"Alright, what do you want to talk about?"

"I have no idea. I just want to give the snakes a chance to hear us and go away."

"Did you see any snakes on your trip up here earlier?"

"I saw a baby one."

"A baby one what?"

"I don't know, I think he's just called a Mojave desert rattlesnake. It's got kind of a banded pattern, and they blend in like a motherfucker."

Julian laughs. "Thanks for that."

"Well, they do."

"Leave it to you and I to go for a wilderness experience in a snake-infested desert, while one of us can't see. I guess with a rattlesnake you'd hear it first."

"Maybe. The one I saw wasn't rattling."

"You reeeally know how to build a guy's confidence, don't you?"

"What?"

"Maybe let's talk about something other than snakes. Like how much sugar you like on your Wheaties."

"I don't eat Wheaties. But thanks for asking."

Julian is already sweating, and they're just a tiny fraction of the way up this mountain. "How long did it take you to get up here? Before."

"Well we're going up at a different place. But from the base to where I camped? Not long. About three hours."

"And where did you see your snake?"

"I thought we weren't talking about snakes! I saw mine after I was

off the mountain, on the walk into town.”

“You didn’t see a snake the entire time you were up here?”

“Nope. I saw a bunny.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, a little white bunny. I guess that’s what the snakes eat, larger ones. It was hopping around on the rocks.”

“I didn’t know they had rabbits in the desert.”

“Me either, till I saw that one.”

“How big was the snake you saw?”

“About this big.”

“That small? That is a baby.”

“Yeah.”

“Although,” Julian says, “I hear the baby ones are the most deadly, because they don’t know how to control their venom.”

“I’ve heard that too.”

“So how are you and Rishi?”

“What?”

“I said how are you and Rishi?”

“We’re fine. Well. Parts of us are fine and parts of us are not fine. Like when it comes to sex, we’re fine.”

“I bet Rishi is excellent in bed, my friend.”

“Well, she’s crazy, so of course she is.”

“You’re crazy, too. You two are perfect for each other.”

“Julian, you just might be right. But we still fight. Things about me annoy her.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m too technological for her. The fact that I have computers in my tent is a turn off.”

“Really?”

“Yes. She’s very anti-technology. At least she says she is. I don’t know, man, how are you and Courtney?”

“Well. When you’ve been with someone as long as Courtney and I have been together, things start to get stale.”

“How long have you been together? A year?”

“Not even.”

“Cause I know you used to love having sex with her.”

“Yep.”

“Well what happened?”

“Time.”

“So do you like..just not enjoy having sex with her at all now?”

“Well. Ever since the baby..”

“Oh, the baby.”

“Yes.”

“The baby..”

“Yes. It’s like, it’s just not there anymore. For her either.”

“That sucks. Do you still do it?”

“Not much. And when we do, it’s like she’s fumbling with this and I’m fumbling with that and we’re never just..together.”

“Oh man.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you gonna stay together?”

“We have to. Because..Acacia, you know?”

“You don’t have to.”

“That’s true. We can do whatever the fuck we want. Courtney is scared of splitting because she thinks we need two incomes to take care of the baby.”

“Well even if you split, you could still take care of some of the expenses.”

“True.”

“Would you rather split?”

“That, my friend, is a good question. I don’t know. I really don’t know. How far do you think we’ve come?”

“As a percentage? I don’t know. We have a long way to go.”

“Are you sweating?”

“Some, yeah.”

“Cause I am sweating like a motherfucker.”

“Take your pack off. Put it on your front. Let your back breathe.”

“Then I won’t be able to see, because of the sleeping bag.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Julian; it’s a desert.”

“Smartass.”

“Thank you very much.” Matt turns around while he’s walking and smiles back at Julian.

Julian keeps his pack on his back. He’s just going to have to sweat. He takes it one step at a time, looking ahead for cacti and snakes. They walk among the tall saguaro cacti which are protected by law. They grow at something like an inch a year. Julian can see their flowers, though they are a blur. To his sight they don’t even have spines. When he gets close to one, he can see. And there are holes everywhere, in the ground, which can only be snake holes. They cover the ground, and every time Julian steps near one he is afraid a snake will come out of it and bite him. They’re too numerous to avoid, and with dread, he finds his steps coming closer and closer to them. Why they thought this would be fun he has no idea.

“Can we stop?”

Matt turns around. “Yeah. You ok?”

“Need some water.”

“Good idea.”

Both boys take out a canteen and drink from it. They sip at first, trying to retain their supplies, but sipping turns into gulping, which is quickly arrested.

“Two per day, right?”

“Two per day. Drink some more. We’ve got plenty of water.”

“Ahh. Famous last words.”

“It’ll last. We won’t drink much at night. We’ve just got to make it through two days.”

Julian hates saying this but he says, “Can we sit down?”

“Are you tired?”

“My legs hurt. My shins. From climbing.”

“If you need to.”

Julian sits down. He takes out a pack of American Spirits.

Matt comes closer, but stays standing. He stands so that his shadow covers Julian.

Julian takes out a smoke, lights it, and gives it its first puff. Then he says, “So what’s it like fucking Rishi?”

“Why, do you want to fuck her?”

Julian does want to fuck her; has since he met her. But he doesn’t want to make Matt feel uncomfortable. “I’m only asking..if you want to tell.”

Matt puts his hands behind his head. “Well. It’s animalistic. She’s very much in the present moment when fucking.”

“Do you like her pussy?”

The two of them make eye contact.

“Yeah. It’s tight, you know; she’s small. It’s unshaved.”

“I figured—’cause her pits.”

“Right. Totally unshaved. Is Courtney’s shaved?”

“No. From time to time.”

“You don’t mind me asking about Courtney’s pussy?”

“Why, do you want to fuck her?”

“I did, back when we were in Llano.”

“She likes you,” Julian says. “She does. Like that. You should have a go at her.”

“That would be too..complicated..for me. But thanks for the invitation to fuck your..whatever she is to you.”

Julian shrugs. “Whatever she is.”

“Maybe you me and Courtney and Rishi should all hook it up.”

Julian brightens.

But Matt says, “I’m kidding! I’m sorry for joking about that Julian. I don’t actually want to do that. I’m perfectly happy being just friends with you and Courtney, and keeping Rishi to myself. But you would like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I won’t say I wouldn’t.”

The two boys are smiling at each other.

“Catch me on a day when Rishi and I are broken up, you might find a different answer.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So what do you want to do, Julian? Sit here? Head back? Go further up this mountain?”

Julian holds out his hand.

Matt helps him up.

“Let’s go.”

“You ready?”

“Yep.”

They start walking. It’s getting to be the middle of the day, and the sun is rising higher and higher in the sky. They’re both sweating. Matt chooses their path up the mountain, and he makes it not too steep, meandering around the longish way rather than going straight up.

Julian wipes his face with his shirt. There’s so much sweat he can’t get it all. He looks back down at where they came from and he sees the blur of a city and the mountains on the other side. He looks forward and half expects there to be a cactus in front of him. He’s as worried about getting stuck with cactus spines as he is getting bitten by a snake.

“Say Matt.”

“What?”

“Tell me more about Rishi’s pussy.”

“No, pervert. You really want to fuck her, don’t you.”

“Out of a certain type of curiosity, yes.”

“What do you want me to do, tell you a bedtime story about her pussy?”

“Something like that.”

“If I do you have to promise not to tell her that I told you.”

“I swear.”

“I said you have to promise.”

“I promise.”

“Ok, well,” Matt begins. And he proceeds to tell Julian about Rishi’s pussy, in every detail, as the two of them walk up the mountain.

—————

It’s dusk before the boys arrive at the desired spot on the mountain.

They’ve each used two canteens. Julian stares out over the valley.

“Courtney and Rishi are down there, in that.”

“Yeah, and Tuesday and Acacia and all our people.”

“Is that..a fighter jet?”

“Yeah. Isn’t it wild being above where planes fly?”

“Yeah. I’m glad we came up here. Even though I can hardly walk.”

“Your shins?”

“And other parts of me. My toes don’t feel so good either.”

“Rest will help.”

“I hope. I hope it’s not like when you wake up and yesterday’s pain is ten times worse.”

“Hopefully not.”

“Do we sleep right here?”

“When we’re ready to sleep. You wanna eat?”

“Yes!”

They sit on rocks, their shoes in the sand, and each one of them takes out a Subway sandwich that Matt purchased for them earlier today. Julian takes a huge bite of his.

“Mmm. We should have stopped earlier.”

“To eat? Probably. I don’t think there are any snakes up here.”

“What about mountain lions.”

“Yeah, I think they have those. And elk.”

“Hope we don’t get trampled.”

“Yeah, we probably should have brought a gun.”

“Do mountain lions attack you?”

“I think so, yes.”

Julian smiles around a full bite of food. “Lovely,” he says.

“You’re gonna die sometime,” Matt says. “It might as well be from a snake bite on a mountain.”

“Or a cougar.”

“Yes, a cougar could attack you in your sleep tonight and that would be the way you go.”

“Can you stop trying to cheer me up?”

“We’re not gonna see a cougar, Julian. They wouldn’t let us see them. They’re very solitary.”

“But very territorial, I hear.”

“Yes, I’ve read the same. How’s your sandwich?”

“Great. How’s yours?”

“Great.”

They each eat half of their footlong sub and save the rest for tomorrow. Each has some water after dinner. They sit looking at the city until the sky is almost dark. Then they take out their sleeping bags and find an appropriate place on the flat rock heading down the other side of the mountain. They sleep next to each other, and each of them pulls the mouth of the sleeping bag tight around their head so that no snakes get in.

The stars and moon are bright, so bright that they can easily see each other’s faces when they turn to look. Even without contacts, Julian

can see the many stars in the sky. It gets cold, and Julian wonders why they are sleeping on rock instead of sand. Maybe this way they're less likely to end up in a cactus.

Julian's thoughts wander, from Rishi and her magical pussy to Courtney and her tired, post-childbirth one. He thinks about Tucson, and hopes beyond hope that this can be a place where he can play his music. It seems to him that Santa Fe would have been better—just by feel—but maybe Tucson will be ok. To have set a date for his first show with the Casbah ownership and to have Matt working on the flyer means that the show is really happening, that he'll have to make playlists and even practice. It's good, though; he needs to play out. This is just going to make him do it sooner than he would have otherwise.

"Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"Where did you go when you left us? When you left me, in Austin."

Matt sighs. "I rode the Greyhound. I rode back and forth between Houston and Galveston about six times. Then I went to Athens, Ohio and got a room in a house. I stayed with these two football players, Keiland and T. And I worked at Taco Bell."

"How was that?"

"It sucked."

"I can only imagine."

"Yeah, Taco Bell was pretty terrible. Then I moved back home with my mom for a while. Then I went to Philadelphia and found that options-trading job."

"That's the stock market, right?"

"Right. Stocks and options. Then I came here."

"What are you programming right now?"

"Some AI stuff."

"But more specifically."

"A program that rewrites itself."

They are quiet for a moment.

"Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't even feel like.. I kinda feel like I'm not allowed to say this to you, but.. You really screwed us over by leaving. Me in Austin. The girls in Llano."

"Why do you feel like you're not allowed to say that?"

"Because.. I don't know why, actually."

"Well, I'm glad you said it, since that's how you feel."

"And?"

"And what?"

“I was kind of hoping for an apology.”

“I don’t think you’re going to get one, Julian, seeing as how I think you have things to apologize to me for, that you haven’t.”

“Like what?”

“Like saying I was an obstacle to you leaving Austin. That was bullshit, man. From a friend. That was not what I expect to hear from a friend. Are you going to apologize for that?”

“Let me think..”

“No, Julian, don’t think. If you have to think about it then you’re not sorry. Fuck you for that. Really. We’re supposed to be friends, we’re supposed to be on the same level, and you treat me like that?”

“Treat you like what?”

“Like I’m an obstacle! Like the more important thing is to get the hell out of Austin as quickly as possible, and not take into account the feelings of your friend.”

“By that time I had been through an ordeal in Austin. You wouldn’t believe the things I went through. I had to leave there or die, understand?”

“I understand. I understand. I just don’t like being treated the way you treated me.”

“And I don’t like being left in hotel rooms.”

“Well you left me no choice. I could not continue with you in any kind of way, after the shit you said to me.”

“You just walked away.”

“Damn right.”

“Wow.”

“What do you want? I left you money. You made it across the desert. Did Courtney pay for the van?”

“What?”

“I said: did Courtney pay for the van?”

“What difference does it make?”

“None. I’m just wondering.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“So she paid for the van.”

Julian is silent. He doesn’t like being bullied.

“You know, you write her off like she’s no good to you anymore but that girl has saved your ass a couple of times, as far as I can tell.”

“It goes both ways.”

“Does it?”

“You’re questioning my relationship with Courtney now?”

“You’ve admitted it’s weak!”

“I should have never discussed her with you.”

“No, you should have. Because that’s what guys do.”

“I agree?”

“With me?”

“Of course.”

“Indeed.”

Both boys are exasperated after their mantra.

Julian finally speaks. “Anyway I no longer feel I can trust you, after what you pulled in Austin.”

“Julian, you’re an idiot. If you don’t trust me, then what are doing at the top of a mountain with me? I think you do trust me. Perhaps you don’t want to, but you do. I’ll tell you the truth: I don’t feel stellar about leaving you in Austin, but it was the only thing I could do, given how you were acting! I’m not about to apologize to you, though, given how shitty you’ve treated me, so if you’re looking for an apology, you’re going to be waiting a long time. Unless your behavior changes.”

“And what needs to change about my behavior?”

“Start acting like a friend! Don’t put people down by acting like we’re just bridges for you to cross over to get to where you want to go! I don’t know what happened in your growing up to make you like this but you come across as a real uncaring asshole.”

“I’m an asshole.”

“What the fuck did I just fucking say?”

“You said that I’m the asshole, that I’m the uncaring one.”

“Whatever, we’re both assholes. I’m not trying to say that you’re the only one.”

“But you maintain that I’m an asshole.”

“Yes, I maintain that you’re an asshole.”

“Because of how I treated you in Austin? Because of one little thing I said?”

“It just takes one little thing.”

“I like how you’re the one who gets to decide who is an asshole and who isn’t.”

“Everyone decides for themselves. Obviously. What is your point?”

“My point..is that you’re a little crazier than you think.”

“Oh, Julian, you think you’re the first person to call me crazy?”

That’s your attack? What is your objective in this conversation? To prove that I’m crazy? This is not what friends do to each other. We’ve never been friends. We’re just using each other for our various purposes.”

Julian lets out a big sigh. He pulls the sleeping bag tight around his head, so there’s just a little hole he can look out, look up, to see the sky. This was a royal mistake to come to Tucson. Matt doesn’t even like him. Never has. Neither does Tuesday, she’s just putting up with him because they knew each other since the second grade. Courtney doesn’t like him, she’s just afraid to leave because she thinks she can’t make it on

her own. Or she's not ready to give up on the relationship. And this idiotic idea to come up the mountain! To be stuck here with this just-for-fun stubborn asshole. To get reamed out by the person who should be doing the apologizing. It's unbelievable, the way Matt turns things around. He is smart, yes, but that's what he uses his smarts for? What a waste of a brain! And what will tomorrow be, a whole day up here, arguing about the same old shit with his supposed friend? No thank you.

Julian has trouble sleeping on the mountain, and he wakes up many times. Once, when he wakes toward dawn, he considers leaving Matt behind, just like Matt left him in that hotel room in Austin. But he really doesn't want to go down the mountain alone, not being able to see.

Matt wakes up. "Hey."

"Hey. So are we about done with this?"

"About done with what?"

"With this trip. I don't see us staying up here another day."

"You don't?"

"And arguing the whole time? No."

"Well let's stop arguing and enjoy being out here."

"Do you really think that's possible?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Plus I'd rather get down from here before it gets to be noon again.

Wearing black jeans wasn't the best idea. I'm still damp from yesterday's sweat."

"Are you wearing underwear?"

"Am I wearing underwear?"

"Yeah, can you just take your jeans off and walk without them?

It's not like there's anybody up here."

"Except some man with a telescope waaay down there is going to be like: there's a man hiking in his underwear. YouTube!"

"How much water do you have left?"

"That's the other thing."

"What?"

"I drank some water during the night."

"How much?"

"Don't get mad but like..almost a whole canteen. I was thirsty."

"Well then we have to go home."

"Are you ok with that?"

"I wanted to stay out for two days like we said but if you're down to one canteen we have to go home. You'll need that for the walk down the mountain."

“But if we have three altogether..”

“No way. We never really brought enough water for two days anyway. I’m not about to get stuck up here with no water.”

“Can’t we..cut into cactuses?”

“I tried that before. It’s really hard to get all the spines off so you can chew on the moist part. It’s not like you find a pool of water in there. It’s a last resort.”

“Are you mad?”

“No, I’m not mad. I just want us to be safe. I’m sorry we were arguing. I didn’t want it to be like that when we came up here, but, I guess.. Let’s go down today, let’s be smart.”

“I agree.”

“With me?”

“Of course.”

“Indeed.”

Julian smiles, but it’s a weak one. They eat their breakfast, they roll up their sleeping bags, they start down the mountain. It’s two o’clock before they get to the base; it takes them longer to get down than it did to go up, because they go down the way Matt went down before, and they’re crawling down a rock incline, checking for snakes in hard-to-see crevices below.

When they get to Matt’s truck, it reminds Julian of when they went up the mountain in Pennsylvania. That time, when they got back to the car, there were two oranges that they had forgotten to pack, and the taste of those oranges, after having no water on the way down that snowy mountain..that taste was the most wonderful thing in the world. This time, in Tucson, there was no beautiful surprise waiting for them at the truck. No oranges, no extra water, no beautiful girl leaning against the side of the truck. They put their packs in the back and get into the passenger compartment. They don’t say anything on the drive home. Julian stares out his window and Matt drives. Julian thinks about asking if they can stop for lunch at a restaurant but he doesn’t want to contend with Matt’s reasoning around why they should or should not go. And anyway, Julian wants a shower.

Courtney is full of questions when she sees him. Why are you back a day early? Did everything go ok? Did you see any snakes? Julian answers her questions as best he can, leaving out that he and Matt had had a colossal argument while they were up there. He really doesn’t want to talk about it.

Julian’s show comes quickly. He hardly has time to put together a set list

before the date arrives. Next thing he knows, he's setting up mics in the back of the Casbah.

"Do you think anyone's going to show up for this?"

Matt is standing at the entrance to the back part of the Casbah. "I think so. I guess we'll see."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Be sure you enunciate," Tuesday says. She's taking an order to a customer.

"I will en-un-ciate," Julian says. "Thank you. Thank you for your par-ti-ci-pation."

"You'll be fine. I'm gonna go find more people," Matt says, and he leaves, stack of flyers in hand.

Julian sits down in the stool he has found to perform in. He picks up his guitar. He strums once. Then he adjusts the microphone positions to be right at his mouth, and right in front of the sound hole. He strums again. Then he proceeds to tune his guitar.

He's going to start with Inside the Girl, then switch to Underground, then go with the Fifth Street Coffee Song. After that it doesn't matter, he's going to play a good bit of old Dayton stuff, for Tuesday and Matthew, and then end up with some of his most recent songs, which nobody but Courtney has heard.

Julian looks to the back of the Casbah. He can't exactly see, but it looks like there are four or maybe five tables filled. That will be good, but we really need to get some more people in the standing-room area.

Hopefully Matt is working on that. Julian realizes he needs to find a tip jar. He puts down his guitar and goes to the kitchen, the back area where the dishwasher stands.

"Hey, Roland. Hey, man."

"What's up Julian?"

"I'm looking for a tip jar. Do you have anything back there that might serve as such?"

"Let me see, man. I just might." Roland laughs. When he comes back, he's carrying a jar decorated with colored paper.

"This is perfect. Do you think you might have a marker that I can borrow?" Julian uses the marker to write "TIPS" on a paper napkin which he tapes to the jar. The tape, he got from Rebecca, the red-headed hostess who usually stands behind the pastry cabinet. When he takes it back to her he lingers.

"Shouldn't you be standing out front, to try to get people to come in?"

"Ignacio likes when I stand back here."

"Do you think I could trouble you for an espresso?"

"No problem, Julian." She turns to the espresso machine.

Julian watches her make it, looks at her body. Her hair wisps down the back of her neck. Her b-cup breasts are still firm; he doubts she even needs a bra. She moves like a sprite, like some woodland creature that was transplanted into the steel and concrete world.

“Do I owe you anything?”

“No, it’s on the house if you’re playing.”

“What about food?”

“Only drinks.”

“I hear you have an excellent chai.”

“The best in town.” Rebecca hops a little when she says it.

It makes Julian want to rape her, not rape her, but rape her.

“Anything else?”

“Not now,” Julian says, sipping his espresso.

“I like the way you talk,” she says.

This encourages Julian. “I decided long ago not to talk like my brothers and sisters, but instead to take on a more eloquent way of speaking. I find this suits me well.”

“Well, it’s nice. You sound like a businessman.”

“I’m aiming more for the enlightened artistic type.”

Rebecca laughs. “Do you want the lights low?”

“Please.”

She turns down the lights.

“Well, I’m off to prepare,” he says. He goes to the stool and places his espresso on the edge of a speaker. When he sits, he looks over in Rebecca’s direction, but he can’t tell if she’s looking at him. She’s a red-headed blur from where he sits.

Matt comes back in the room, followed by some kids.

“What’s this?”

“I have brought you an audience!”

“Welcome,” Julian says. “There are some seats..or you can stand.”

It’s three kids, high-school aged. They sit on the floor.

“If you want drinks or food, see the lady behind the counter,”

Julian says. Then he turns to an inward world. Closes his eyes.

Remembers the faces that made his music, times he spent with friends, even Matt. Some of the lyrics he’ll sing tonight are from Matt’s poetry, and he’ll still sing them, even though he and Matt are on the fritz. He doesn’t understand their friendship. Sometimes they argue, like on the mountain, sometimes Matt is completely crazy like in Austin. And sometimes it can be ok. Matt offers to help drum up an audience for his show..how can he decline. But he can’t trust Matt, not anymore, not like he could in high school. And even in high school Matt was showing signs of cracking, like when he messed up their performance of Guys and Dolls by not singing. Just stood there, mute, on the stage, while the orchestra

played his music. Had some insane principle that made him do it. He's not one to be moved. Julian can't move him. That's why Julian calls him the just-for-fun stubborn asshole. It's like he's doing this stuff to entertain himself, with no regard to what others might feel.

Julian thinks of Dayton, and the good days, when he first started playing music, when Anna and Nik and Matt would come and watch him play. That was a good old town, but useless to him now. The town of his birth and the town his mother and brother and sisters still live in.

It's going to be tough, starting all over in Tucson, but tonight's going to be alright. He's got free espresso from Rebecca—maybe a chance with her. And these three kids, and those four tables, lwho'll listen to him. He's going to play his heart out, make it a show to remember, even if Tuesday and Matthew are the only ones who really care.

Courtney comes through the door, holding Acacia in a blanket, and she kind of bends on her knee and says, "Hi, Julian," and settles herself in the corner.

Julian taps the mic. "Hello? Hello, and welcome to Julean and the Rai. I am Julean and the Rai, and I am going to be playing some songs for you tonight. Songs from my past, songs about some of the people here. Please tip your server generously, and tip me as well..right down there." He clears his throat. "Let's begin."

Julian wakes at four-sixteen p.m. Courtney is beside him.

"There you are."

Julian clears his eyes. "Yes, hey."

"I need you to watch Acacia. I have a job interview."

"When and where is this interview?"

"At Sabine's Café Passé. She's interviewing me as a food runner, to sell food to businesses up and down Fourth Ave. So I need you to watch Acacia while I go up there."

"Uh..I was thinking of going out, actually."

"You were."

"Yes."

"Can it wait until I'm done with my interview?"

"How long is your interview going to take?"

"I don't know, J., but not long."

"It's really kind of urgent that I get out of the house."

"Why?"

"Because I've been stuck here for umpteen hours and I need to get out."

"You've been stuck here sleeping."

“Well, now I’m awake.” Julian smiles.

“So are you not gonna let me go to my interview?”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t go.”

“We need this job, Julian.”

“Can’t you see her tomorrow?”

“Are you gonna be available to watch Acacia tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“It’s not ‘of course.’ It’s whether you decide to or not. Or are you gonna have something urgent to do tomorrow? What are you going out to do, anyway?”

“I have to see some people.”

“About what?”

“Courtney, I feel like you’re interrogating me.”

“I’m just trying to figure out why I can’t go to my job interview today!”

“Is tomorrow ok?”

“I’ll call Sabine. Can you hold Acacia while I call Sabine?”

Julian takes the baby. She’s awake, alert. Julian smiles at her and lifts her to his face level. She smiles at him. He puts her down on the bed beside him.

Courtney is standing, with her phone to her ear. “Sabine? Hi, this is Courtney. Julian has a job interview today so he can’t watch Acacia. Is there any way I could meet with you tomorrow? Yeah? Ok, thanks. I appreciate it. Ok. See you then.” She tosses the phone on the foot of the bed. “Ok, Julian, you’re freed up to go see your people. What time are you going to be home?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m asking in case you wanted to have dinner together.”

“I better pass.”

“You’re going to pass. Ok. Well. I’ll see you when I see you. Have a nice day Julian.”

“Are you mad?”

“I’m not mad. It’s just..I’m stuck here taking care of her, you’re out having fun and I just miss when we could go out together. And have fun, you know? When do I get to have fun?”

“I’m working on that as we speak.”

“You’re working on it?”

“Yes. I’m putting together some fun for us to have, at the house, that we can both enjoy.”

“What kind of fun?”

“It’s a surprise, but we’ve talked about it before.”

“I don’t want to play your games, J. I don’t want to guess.”

“Then don’t guess.” Julian gets up. He pulls on his black jeans.

He leans over and gives Courtney a kiss. "I'll be back tonight. If I can bring you some fun, I will."

"Ok. Whatever that means."

Julian finds a shirt, slides it over his head. "Are you going to be ok with Acacia today?"

"I guess I'll have to be."

Julian grabs his backpack. It has his notebooks in it. He finds his wallet on the floor. He checks it. It's empty. "Can I have some cash?"

"I don't have any on me."

"Can you get some?"

"We'll have to walk to the ATM."

"Can we do that?"

"Yes, I'll get Acacia ready and we can all go together. Do you object to that?"

"No."

Courtney goes into the hall, to get the stroller.

Julian says, "Why would I object to that?"

"You just might. Who knows. I didn't know if you minded being seen in public with me."

"Courtney. You're being unreasonable."

"Well I'm sorry! It's just sometimes it seems you don't want to be around us!"

"Don't invent things, Courtney."

"I'm not sure I am inventing them."

"Of course I have no problem being seen in public with you or our daughter. Sometimes I do need alone time, and after we get the cash I am going to take some alone time, if that's ok with you."

"Of course it's ok, Julian. It's always ok."

"Ok. Then everything's ok."

"Sure."

Julian goes and stands by the back door, waiting.

"You wanna help me get her ready?"

"Oh, ok, sure."

"Thank you!"

After the cash machine, Julian and Courtney go their separate ways. Courtney and Acacia head back toward the house and Julian goes all the way down Fourth Avenue to a little coffeehouse called Home Brew.

Home Brew is different than other coffeehouses. It doesn't have a consistent or corporate decor. It hardly has a cash register. It's just a few chairs in a small room off the Ave.

The checkout girl is named Charity. She's what Julian would consider white trash. She's beautiful: long, brown hair and big boobies. She wears long dresses and today she's wearing a blue one that goes to just above her sandals. When she sees Julian she stands up from her chair behind the counter.

"What are you reading?"

"I'm reading the book that you gave me, silly."

"The one about the enneagram?"

"Yes!" Charity smiles, an inviting smile.

"Did you decide on what type you are yet?"

"I think I'm a..seven..enthusiast. Because look, the vice fits: gluttony? What do you think I am?"

"A seven."

"Wow! I got it! Do you need your book back, Julian, because I'm really enjoying reading this."

"Keep it for as long as you like."

"I'm still on the first chapter, The Nine Types."

Julian reaches across the counter and touches Charity's hands with his own. He flattens out one of her palms. He runs his index finger along one of the lines in her hand.

"Well that book gets waaay more in depth, once you continue on. You should come over sometime and talk with me and Courtney about the enneagram. She's into it too, you know."

"What are you looking at now?"

"Your heart line. See this gridding? See how it's scored along here? That means you're an artist. Or it can mean you fall in love easily." He runs his fingers gently along her hand. "You have interesting hands. I'd like to take a look at them sometime, when you're not working."

"Say Julian, what type are you, in the enneagram?"

"Eight. The challenger. So we're neighbors. Neighboring types can get along easily, as we do. Courtney is a nine, the peacemaker. I'm right in the middle of you two, which means I take some of the traits from each of you, into my self. What are you doing later tonight?"

Charity blushes. It's not just the two of them in the coffeehouse. Two other people sit in chairs, reading. "Um..I get off at eight."

"You could come over. Courtney is planning on making dinner. You could bring the book and we could do an extended reading. As I was saying, I'd like to check out your palm in more detail, and I'm sure Courtney would be interested to discuss the enneagram with you. She's very knowledgeable about the nine types, and might be able to help us figure out what your subtypes are."

"Ok, I can come over for a little while. I can't stay up too late tonight because I have to be back in here by eight a.m."

“We’ll just do a couple of readings and send you on your way.”

“Ok, Julian. Did you want some coffee?”

“Uh, yes, I’d like a red eye.”

Charity takes her hands back from Julian and uses them to make his drink. Julian stands at the counter while she makes it. He watches her move, looks at her backside. Her breasts shake a little when she removes the espresso cup from the machine. He imagines her laid back in his and Courtney’s bed, pulling up her dress..

“Here you go.”

“Why thank you.” Julian takes a sip of the drink. “You make an excellent red eye. How long have you worked here?”

“Eight months.”

“Where did you work before?”

“I was in high school.”

“I was in high school once.”

“How old are you, Julian?”

“How old do you think?”

“Cause you look like you’re of no age. Like you don’t have an age. You’re like some mythical creature from a book.”

“We’re all mythical creatures,” he says. “When I first saw you I thought of a pegasus.”

“What made you think of that?”

“Well, you’re elegant like a horse, yet you’re light, you can fly, like a horse with wings, a beautiful creature, kind, gentle. You were always kind to me from the beginning.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Some people aren’t! Don’t take your kindness for granted. It’s rare, you know, to meet someone like you, who has that form of kindness, that you would treat a total stranger with such care.”

“We all start out as strangers,” Charity says.

“True!”

“But you could never feel like a stranger to me,” she says. She puts her hands back on the counter.

Julian takes them in his. He makes a pocket of his hands for her hands to go inside. “So we’ll see you tonight, kind Charity?”

“Yeah.” She says it all breathy.

He starts to go.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how to get there!”

Julian comes back to the counter. “I’ll draw you a map.”

When he's done with Charity, Julian crosses the street. He goes into a bar called O'Malleys.

"Is Kate here?"

"Let me get her for you." The man goes into the kitchen and Julian unzips his bag. He takes out a book called *Palm Reading: A Little Guide To Life's Secrets*, and sets it on the bar.

Kate comes out.

"That's for you."

"Oh, Julian, what is this?"

"It's the palm reading book I was telling you about."

"Ok!"

"You can keep that copy."

"No."

"Sure."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Just consider my offer to come over sometime and have me read your palm. Courtney would be there, she can do enneagram types and the like."

"Oh, Julian, I can't tonight, I'm working."

"That's ok, we might be busy tonight, but sometime."

"Sure, I'll come over sometime and you can read my palm! Which one is this again, the life line?"

"No, that's your fate line. This is your life line. This is your heart line. And this, is your sun line."

"Is it wrong if I say I like it when you touch my hand?"

"No, not wrong."

"But you're married!"

"No, not married. Together, child with. But not married."

"So, it's..ok?"

"Perfectly."

"I mean it's ok with Courtney?"

"It's ok with Courtney. In fact," Julian says, cupping Kate's hand in his, "Courtney is part of the reason I want you to come over."

"I don't understand."

"Courtney gets lonely, as I do. When you've been with someone as long as she and I have, you need extra company sometimes. Courtney likes you just as much as I do."

"But I only met her once."

"Well you made an impression."

"Are you inviting me over for a sex thing?"

Julian shakes his head. "Only if you want it to be."

"You are!"

“Kate. Courtney and I like you very much. We’d be inviting you over for dinner and palm reading. Good company. But if it should happen to turn into something more, I want you to know, that Courtney and I would not be opposed to that. I hope you don’t think I’m being too forward.”

“No, Julian, not at all. I like you two. I would love to come over for..whatever.” Kate blushes.

“Good. We’ll just have to find a night when you’re off work and we’re both free, and we’ll do this.”

“I’m off Mondays and Tuesdays.”

“Ok. Now I want you to read the first few chapters of this before I see you again. It will facilitate conversation, if we’re speaking the same language. You don’t have to memorize the placement of all the lines. But know the names of all of them, and be able to locate a few of them on your hand.”

“Ok.”

“Pick a line you like most. Be able to show that one to me and tell me what yours means. You might have to skim some of the later chapters for that.”

“Ok, I will. Are you gonna tell Courtney that we talked?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell her that we talked about..?”

“About what?”

“About the three of us getting together?”

“Most likely.”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. You’re not as nice as you pretend to be, Kate.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean under that innocent exterior, you’ll be surprised what you find.”

“I’m not exactly innocent, Julian.”

“But you come across as innocent, that’s what I mean. I just mean that when the right situation arises, you’d be surprised what you end up doing.”

“Now you’re sounding naughty.”

“I am feeling naughty.”

“I think you better go, Julian.”

“Why, do you have something important you’re doing?”

“Yeah, I’m working. I’m prepping for tonight.”

“Take that book. I’ll see you soon.”

“Alright, Julian, thanks for stopping by.”

Back at the house, Julian goes into the bedroom. Acacia is sleeping. Courtney is sitting up in bed reading.

“Got some good prospects,” Julian says.

“Prospects of what?”

“Of women to come over.”

“Oh did you? Guess what Julian I got the job.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I start tomorrow. I took Acacia with me to the interview. It wasn’t even really an interview. We just talked for a few minutes, and she gave me the job.”

“That’s..excellent!”

“Yeah, now you just need to find one and we’ll be fine.”

“I’ve been looking.”

“Yeah?”

“Keeping an eye out.”

“That’s great Julian so tell me about these women.”

“Well,” Julian says, sitting on the bed, “there’s Charity, who just turned nineteen. She works at Home Brew..you know that place?”

“I’ve seen it from the outside.”

“Yeah, she’s got brown hair. You would like her. She wants you to do her enneagram.”

“That’s good. That’s a good segue into..”

“That’s what I thought, too. You can loosen her up with some talk about the nine types. I’m doing her palm.”

“That’s good, Julian. One type of touch can lead to another.”

“Exactly.”

“Who else? Who else?”

“Then there’s Kate, who you met briefly.”

“I remember.”

“Also brown hair—”

“You’re developing us a type, Julian!”

“It’s just what I’m attracted to, I can’t help it.”

“That’s good, that’s good. You should be attracted to them. Tell me about Kate.”

“Kate. I don’t know if you met her long enough to know this, but Kate is kind of ditzy. Not ditzy, but, she’s not very worldly. She thinks she is but she’s actually quite innocent.”

“How old is she?”

“She’s older than Charity. She’s..twenty-two?”

“How did you meet her anyway?”

“O’Malleys.”

“She works at O’Malleys?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because they only pick a certain type of girl to work at O’Malleys. I know that type. Ditzzy, I’m surprised she doesn’t have blond hair. Kind of that stupid college girl image.”

“Yeah, exactly. Like a Girls Gone Wild girl.”

“Exactly! She’s like a Girls Gone Wild girl?”

“Yep.”

“Do you think she’s right for us?”

“It’s just an act. Under that exterior there’s an intelligent, sincere girl who wants to have some fun with us.”

“Are you sure it’s just an act?”

“Pretty sure. Anyway that’s Kate.”

“Are you sure it’s not Katie? That sounds more Girls Gone Wild.”

“No, it’s Kate.”

“Well, maybe there is hope for her.”

Julian smiles. He knew Courtney would like these girls.

“Anyone else?”

“That’s it for now.”

“You done good, Julian. You done good. You wanna go out tonight? For dinner? I was thinking sushi.”

“Sushi? Do we have enough money for sushi?”

“My treat.”

“Oh, your treat. I see. No, actually, I told Charity that you were cooking dinner and that she could come over tonight.”

“She’s coming over tonight!?”

“Yeah, she gets off at eight.”

“Oh, so we have time.”

“Plenty of time.”

“I have to take a shower! You should shower, too, Julian, you stink.”

Julian sniffs his pit. “Ok, so we’ll both shower.”

“I don’t even know if I have enough food here to make dinner!”

“There’s plenty of food.”

“Will you help me?”

“Of course I’ll help you.”

They kiss, a quick lip smooch.

“Will you hang with Acacia while I take a shower?”

“Sure.”

“I’m so nervous!”

“Don’t be nervous!”

“I don’t believe I’ve never even met this girl and she’s coming over.”

“You’ll like her. She’s wearing a long blue dress today. She has

these firm breasts that are not little. She's smart."

"Not like Katie?"

"Not like Katie."

"Poor Katie, listen to us..we're ruining her!"

"Katie's alright, she just needs to be around people who can get her out of Girls Gone Wild mode."

"People like us?"

"Exactly. People like us."

"What should I make for dinner?"

"Something light."

"What does that mean, Julian, something light."

"I just don't want to get us all bogged down if we're going to.."

"..If we're going to have sex with her."

"Ooooooh-ooo I'm getting excited," Julian almost screams, standing and clapping his hands together.

"We've needed this," Courtney says.

"Yes we have."

"I mean any two people are bound to get tired of each other after a while."

"Yes they are."

"There's nothing wrong with a little extra-curricular activity every now and then."

"No there isn't."

"Does Charity have a last name?"

"I'm sure she does.."

Courtney laughs. She's around the corner in the bathroom. "It sure is good to hear you excited again, Julian. I've missed that about you."

"It's good to be excited."

"Well if this is all it takes, then that's easy, right? Just some extra company?"

"Just the right type of company."

"You mean the kind we can fuck."

"Exactly."

"What if she doesn't fuck us?"

"I reeally don't think that's going to happen."

"Why not? What makes you so sure?"

"I read her eyes."

"Lol Julian. You read her eyes. So you're sure she's going to sleep with us?"

"Pretty sure."

"Did you mention that possibility to her?"

"No. I mentioned it to Kate. She was all over that shit."

“So you didn’t mention it to Charity?”

“No.”

“So she doesn’t know we want to fuck her?”

“I don’t know. She might suspect. We’ll have to break it on her very gently.”

“I’m leaving that to you.”

“No you’re not! You have to help!”

“You said Kate was all over it?”

“She picked up on it right away. She wants to play.”

“You couldn’t have had her over first? Start with the easy one?”

“Ahh, little Katie, the easy one. She’s the older of the two but our Charity is the smart one. I’m telling you. You’ll like Charity. I mean even before you get her clothes off.”

“You’ve got me nervous, now, how’re we going to pop the question, just like: do you want to get freaky, little girl?”

“We’ll guide her.”

“We’ll guide her like a gentle stream.”

“Like a gentle stream of: do you wanna get fucked you little nineteen-year-old whore?”

“Nineteen, Julian: damn.”

Charity arrives precisely at eight-thirty, indicating she’s come straight from work. She’s wearing the same blue dress. She comes to the front door and knocks.

“Julian! Can you get that?”

Julian quietly goes to the door and opens it. “Welcome to our humble abode.”

“Hey Julian, I brought this.” From behind her back she takes a handful of biscotti sticks she stole from work.

“Why thank you. And come in, sweet miss.” He says this so quietly, Charity can hardly hear him.

She laughs loudly. “Did you just call me ‘sweet miss?’”

“I did,” Julian says, following her into the room.

“Are these your paintings?”

“No, they belong to Matt, who doesn’t live here anymore.”

“They’re beautiful. I especially like this one.”

“Would you like to come into the kitchen. Courtney’s there.”

“Yes, hi, I’m Courtney,” she says, coming out of the kitchen and extending her hand for Charity to shake. She has Acacia in her other arm.

Charity takes the hand like it’s a piece of tissue paper, and shakes it using two fingers. She drops it and Courtney takes it back.

“And this is Acacia!”

“Hi Acacia!” Charity bends down to say hi to the baby.

“Do you want to come in here? I made coffee.”

Charity sits on the stool in the kitchen. Courtney goes to the stove. Julian stands in the doorway, shirtless, with his arms over his head.

“So before we get started,” Charity says, “I just want to clear something up.”

“What’s that?”

“Well the word’s been going around that you two are inviting people to your house just to fuck them, and I wondered if I was part of that plan?”

“You heard what?”

“That you were inviting people over just to fuck them.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“People.”

“What people?”

“Well, Kate, from across the way. She comes in my shop to get her coffee. Did you all tell her something like that?”

“I think Kate,” Julian says, “may be a bit confused.”

“Oh really? How is she confused?”

“Well..we did talk to Kate, but it was she who introduced the idea of a threesome.”

“Cause she says it was you.”

“Kate said that?” Julian laughs. “Kate Kate Kate. She’s been very busy talking about something she doesn’t know about. Kate. I told Kate we wanted to have her over and she assumed it was for the purposes of a threesome. She’s very sexual. When she told me that I was like, ‘What? A threesome?’ and she was like, ‘Yeah, why don’t you me and Courtney have a threesome.’ So I think that is the story you heard which Kate is apparently mixing up.”

“So you didn’t invite me over for a threesome?”

“We invited you..for dinner. For enneagram and palm reading. Courtney and I have never had a threesome so I don’t think we were expecting one tonight! But you know, if..if.. Nevermind. No. Charity. Please accept my apology on Kate’s behalf if that’s what she told you. We just wanted to have you over for dinner.”

“Ha, yes, just dinner,” Courtney says, looking at Julian.

“Ok, well I’m glad we got that cleared up,” says Charity. “What’s for dinner?”

“Dinner is..squash and..well, squash cooked Irish-style and a cauliflower casserole I made yesterday. Sorry it’s not fresh, but it should be ok.”

“It smells wonderful, Courtney.”

“Thanks.” She smiles an extra special smile at Charity. “Julian, you want to play her some of your music while dinner is getting ready?”

“Oooh, please,” says Charity.

Julian sits cross-legged in the living room. He takes out his guitar. He thinks about starting with Inside the Girl, but after all this talk of threesomes he decides against it.

Charity sits on the floor in front of him. She puts her legs to the side. “Go ahead. I’m ready.”

“This is a song about some old friends from Dayton.” And he hits the initial chords, strumming like a madman. He sings for Charity, and gives it unusual effort, making sure he enunciates all the words and that the passion is there, in every stroke and pick of the guitar.

After dinner, he, Charity, and Courtney are sitting around in the living room. Acacia is sleeping. Julian pulls out a pack of American Spirits.

“Want one?”

“Oh, Julian, you know we’re not supposed to smoke in the house.”

“I wasn’t going to. Do you want one?”

Charity says, “Yes.”

“Then let’s go outside.” So Julian and Charity go out the back door while Courtney clears the dishes. Julian extends his hand with two cigarettes in it. Charity picks one. “I thought you were going to pick that one.”

Charity laughs. “What does it mean?” she says a little too emphatically.

Julian lights her cigarette and then his. “It means..that you’re not as opposed to the idea of a threesome as you indicated earlier.” Julian takes a deep drag on his cigarette. He squints. He looks at Charity.

She takes a drag off her cigarette. She squints. She exhales, looking upward, then looks back at Julian. “I never said I was opposed to it.”

“You didn’t?”

“No. You must listen more carefully, Julian. All I was trying to do was figure out the score. You have me over to your house, I’m going to try to figure out the score. You and Courtney are a little bit older than me, and you’re very sexually aggressive Julian, then when Kate comes by and tells me you’re trying to hook it up with her to have a threesome, I’m of course thinking, are they trying to hook me up for a threesome.”

“Have you ever been in a threesome before?”

“No. Have you?”

“No. Well, yes. Once when I was waaay younger, there was this

threesome-ish event, but, as I would like to see it unfold, no, I have never been in a threesome.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Charity says, and she stands with her cigarette by her face, smiling at Julian.

Julian comes across and kisses her.

She kisses back.

They tongue each other for a few seconds before Julian has the striking feeling of guilt: he’s cheating on Courtney! Then he remembers that it’s ok, this is exactly what Courtney wants. Then he realizes that he liked the guilty feeling.

They stop kissing and go back to smoking.

“Are you into girls?” Julian asks.

Charity ashes her cigarette. “I’ve kissed a girl. But I’ve never done more than that with a girl. Is Courtney into girls?”

“She’s like you. She’s kissed a girl—I think. But she hasn’t had a lot of girl-on-girl experiences if that’s what you’re asking.”

Charity laughs. “That is exactly what I’m asking! What else would I be asking, Julian?”

“Uh..I don’t know?”

“You’re silly. Can I have another cigarette?”

“Sure. But I think in a minute we should go inside.”

“I’m not ready to go inside yet. I’m worried that when we go inside Courtney’s going to like feel up my dress and the whole threesome thing will get started, and I’m not quite ready for that just yet.”

Julian lights her new cigarette.

“I need to build up my courage,” Charity says. “This isn’t what I thought I’d be doing when I woke up this morning. How long have you been planning this, Julian?”

“Since the day we met.”

“And how long ago was that?”

“About a week.”

“So I’ve know you for about a week and now I’m about to have a threesome with you. I wasn’t necessarily planning on getting fucked by you, Julian. And I still want to know about the enneagram and stuff. That wasn’t just an act on your part, was it?”

“It wasn’t an act.”

“So we can do that stuff sometime?”

“Of course! We can do that stuff when we go inside. Courtney can show you enneagram and I can read your palm. We’re not looking to just threesome-and-run, you know? I’m really your friend. Courtney is now your friend. We can do enneagram stuff just as soon as you’re ready to go inside. And it’s not like Courtney or me is just going to pounce on you. We’re very gentle. In fact if you just want to do enneagram and palm stuff

tonight, that's fine."

"Don't bullshit me, Julian. You know and I know that there's no way you're letting me get out of here tonight without a threesome."

"So a threesome it is!" Julian says gleefully. He looks up at the stars.

"Why did you come to Tucson?" Charity asks.

"The sky. The people. Me and some friends were travelling and we just stopped here."

"I've never been anywhere else. Well. My aunt's in Philadelphia so I've been there. But I've never gotten to see the country, you know? Or other countries. Have you been to other countries?"

"I'd like to," Julian says.

"This has been my whole life. Tucson High. Fourth Avenue. Do you know how boring it is to grow up here? So when you and your friends stop here because this is the place you liked, of all the places you went on your journey across the country..it's a little weird for me?" Charity smokes. "And now tonight, when Kate comes in to get her coffee, and I learn I'm going to be having a threesome with some dude and his wife—"

"Do you like me?"

"Yes, I do. You're very magnetic, Julian."

"The Earth is magnetic."

"You know what I mean. And I like your wife, too. I like Courtney. She can cook. You're lucky. Where is Acacia going to be while we..?"

"I think she's still asleep."

"Cause that would be awkward, if your baby watched."

"No worries. No worries. I think we can just leave her sleeping in the living room while we all..uh..go to the bedroom."

"I'm really going to do this." She looks Julian directly in the eye.

"Are you ready?"

Charity nods. "I'm ready to go inside now."

Inside, Courtney's waiting with her top undone. Charity steps into the kitchen and sees her like this. Then Julian's behind her, with his hands on her shoulders.

"Is this making you uncomfortable?" Courtney asks.

"No, just give me a second to..get used to it."

Courtney takes Charity's hand. "Take all the time you need." And Courtney places Charity's hand on Courtney's breast.

Julian's hands work their way down Charity's back, unzipping her blue dress, and he puts his hands inside her dress, feeling her skin. He sees she's wearing no panties, and this excites him, that all she has on is

her dress. He goes to the top of her dress and takes it off her shoulders.

Charity crosses her arm across her chest. "Can we..go to the bedroom?"

Courtney leads Charity by the hand and the three of them go in a train through the living room, where Acacia is sleeping, and into the bedroom. The light in Tuesday's room is off.

Once inside, Charity lets her dress fall, and Courtney and Julian make a Charity sandwich, Courtney on her front and Julian on her back. Julian instantly gets an erection, which he presses into Charity's backside. Charity and Courtney are kissing; Charity has her hands on Courtney's breasts.

Julian reaches around to Charity's vulva, which is shaven. He touches her lips.

She winces. "Ah!"

"What?"

"Your hands are cold."

"I have poor circulation," Julian says, and he warms his hands with his breath. Then he reaches around to her again. "Better?"

"Better." Charity undoes Courtney's belt. She helps Courtney take off her pants.

Julian is left standing there, behind Charity, not knowing what to do. Should he take his clothes off? Would Charity be good enough to help?

But Charity turns to him next. She takes off Julian's shirt. She pinches his nipple, and the two of them unbutton and unzip his jeans together. She feels his dick through his underwear, then she pushes those down. And Charity is kneeling, licking Julian's dick, and Julian is in heaven. Charity, his perfect little post-high school girl he recruited, is playing exactly into his and Courtney's plan. Soon he'll be fucking Charity, and he'll get to see the sweet look on her face when she comes.

Charity takes her mouth off Julian's dick and sort of crawls into the bed. Julian is looking at her ass. Julian and Courtney look at each other, and they can each tell the other is satisfied. This is all they need: just a little variation in the bedroom! They are holding hands as they each kneel onto the bed, one on each side of Charity. Then everyone shuffles off their clothes completely.

They do all the things you would expect. Oral-oral Charity-Courtney. Oral Charity-Julian. Oral Julian-Charity. Then Julian ventures to fuck Charity, and she lets him, Courtney lies beside them watching their faces. Julian even fucks Courtney. Courtney puts her fingers inside Charity, and then inside Charity's ass. Courtney and Charity scissor, and Julian gets his hand involved in it somehow. For a while Charity and Courtney just kiss, then Julian gets behind Charity and

fucks her doggy style while the girls are still kissing. Julian is careful not to come. He wants the action to keep happening. But it is too much when Charity is on bottom and he is fucking her and she squeezes her eyes together and something about the look on her face makes him come, right there, inside of her.

Julian falls over on his side.

“Did you come..did you come inside of me!?”

Julian nods, breathless.

Charity stands. “I don’t believe you! What did I tell you? Don’t come inside of me.”

“I never heard you say that.”

“Julian, she said it less than a minute ago.”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t hear anyone say anything!”

“You were too wrapped up in the moment.”

“Use your common sense, Julian. Why would you come in a girl who you don’t know if she’s on birth control or not?”

“We should have used a condom.”

“I know, I know, I almost insisted on that a minute ago but I didn’t want to ruin the vibe.”

“Julian, bad form,” Courtney says, and all of the sudden he’s the bad guy. Simply came in a girl—the natural thing to do—and now everybody’s mad.

“Do you have a lemon?” Charity asks.

“I’ll get you one,” Courtney says.

And they’re off on some girl-code mission, to get a lemon and stick it up Charity’s puss. Totally ruining the vibe. When they should all be lying there enjoying the glow, the two of them are in the kitchen and Julian is in here letting the last of his cum drain out onto the sheets.

“Are you two coming back in here?”

“In a minute!”

“Cause, in a minute, I can go again,” Julian says to himself. “If you’re ready.”

“Right this way.” Julian opens the front door. “Is anybody home?” No answer. “Come on in.” He motions to Ember.

She goes inside the house. “So Courtney’s not here?”

“I guess not.”

“I thought you said—. Julian, what is this?”

“This is my house.”

“But what is this? You said it was going to be you Courtney and me.”

“I forgot. Courtney must still be at work. But..what time is it?”

“Four forty-three.”

“She’ll be home soon. I promise. We’ll wait for Courtney. Do you want to hear some of my music?”

“I guess, Julian, but this isn’t what I expected.”

“Life is rarely what we expect.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do, but I would think you would have the foresight to enjoy a moment as presented to you, even if it’s not what you expect.”

“I don’t think foresight is the word you wanted there.”

“This is a song called Inside the Girl.”

“What? Inside the Girl? What are you trying to serenade me here?”

“I’m simply trying to play you some music. Sit down.”

Ember sits, the bells on her dress ringing as she does. She shakes her wrist, and about twenty bangles settle into a new position. Her tongue is pierced, and Julian wants to see what that feels like on his dick.

He settles into place, strumming hand poised above the strings, and he says, “Inside the Girl.”

“Julian, let me stop you. Now, maybe you invited me over here to have a threesome with you and Courtney, like you said. Or maybe you just want to fuck me, without Courtney present, which is why you have brought me here while Courtney is clearly not here. All I’m saying is I don’t want to get Courtney mad at me. If I run into her on the street, or if she comes by the shop, and this is after you and I have fucked..and Courtney is mad..I’m gonna be real pissed at you.”

“Indeed.”

“Now, your business with Courtney is your business. But what I’m saying is her being ok with a threesome is way different than her being ok with you and me fucking while she isn’t here. And I want you to be clear in your mind about which of those things we’re doing, because even if I was willing to have a threesome with my husband and one other girl, that wouldn’t make it automatically like I was ok with my husband just..fucking..that one other girl. So don’t have me take my dress off and be fucking you when Courtney gets home and she’s surprised to see it. I like you, Julian, but you’ve about got me on my last nerve when it comes to this shit. I don’t like fucking to be a problem in my life. So if it’s gonna be a problem, I can walk home right now.”

Julian sets down the guitar.

“It’s like this. Courtney and I have lost interest in each other, sexually. So we’re opening ourselves up to other partners. Courtney and I are not married, by the way. So, yes, we have been having threesomes to spice things up. And yes, we are ok with seeing other partners, just one on

one. Perhaps I wasn't clear about what the situation with today is. Today, I invited you to my house, because I want to have sex with you. Courtney doesn't get off work for a few hours and I thought it would be nice for us to have this time together. If you're interested in having a threesome with me and Courtney, I'm sure that can be arranged, either later tonight or some other day. This is no big deal. Courtney's not going to be mad."

"She's ok with you and I sleeping together in you and her's bed, with her not present?"

"Yes."

"Did you ask her specifically about me?"

"No, but—"

"Have you done this before, sleep with just you and another woman in you and your wife's bed?"

"We're not married."

"Whatever."

"No, I haven't. This would be the first time. But I promise you this is all cleared and checked with Courtney, in general."

"Cleared and checked huh?"

"It's totally cleared and totally checked."

"What time is she getting home, for real?"

"A little after seven."

"See, this is not good. I feel like I'm sneaking around behind somebody's back. I don't know, Julian, I think I might have to go."

"Don't go! Just sit here and let me play you this song."

"I'll listen to your song but I don't know about the sex thing."

"Forget about the sex thing. We're just playing music."

"Yeah right. Julian, I think you better go ahead and fuck me so I can get out of here before Courtney gets home."

"You would do that?"

"Yeah, Julian, I want to, I just don't want it to be like you're cheating on your girlfriend with me. You guys have a baby together."

"It won't be like that. I promise."

Julian and Matt are at The Grill, eating breakfast. It's about four in the afternoon. They sit in a booth.

"Whatcha havin'?"

"I'm having..two eggs over easy and tater tots. What about you?"

"I'm getting a steak. If you don't mind."

"No, get whatever you want."

"I made some notes about The CeleProph that I'd like to go over with you later." (That's The Celestine Prophecy: The CeleProph.)

“Ok, well I’m meeting Rishi later, so maybe another day.”

“You two are back together?”

“For the moment.”

“These notes won’t take long. You want to go over them now?”

“Actually, I’d really just like to eat my lunch and deal with matters of spirituality later.”

“You mean breakfast.”

“For me it is lunch. Or almost dinner.”

“Lunch and dinner are spiritual.”

“No doubt, Julian. I’m not trying to say that they’re not.”

“You should really read this book. I’ll loan you my copy.”

“I’m thinking about other things right now, Julian, I can’t take on another book.”

“It’s a quick read.”

“My head is full of ideas, you hear what I’m saying? I’ll read it later.”

“I just really want to be able to talk with you about this book.”

“I know. I want that too. But I can’t right now, ok?”

“I think you’re making this into a bigger deal than it is.”

“O-k.”

“You could read this in one night if you set aside the time.”

“I’m thinking about computer stuff, about cellular automata, I’m pursuing those thoughts at the moment. Give me your copy of the book. I will read it eventually.”

Julian unzips his bag.

The server arrives. He’s a black kid, nappy head. Julian sees that his shoes are torn and the kid has duct taped them back together. “What can I get you all?”

They tell him their order. The server goes.

Matt says, “The service here is kind of slow today, don’t you think?”

Julian says, “Not everybody exists to serve us, ok?”

“Are you upset with me?”

“I just advise you to recognize that everyone’s first priority in life isn’t to serve you.”

“I know that! I’m just saying we sat here a while before our server came around. I’m not insulting him! I’m just noticing the facts of our sitting here. Usually someone comes around and asks for a drink order right away. That’s always happened since I’ve been here. Today, that didn’t happen. I’m just noticing.”

“Well keep in mind your noticing affects other people.”

“Do you think he heard me say it?”

“You talk louder than you think sometimes, Matthew.”

“Ok, so I’ll leave an extra-big tip. It’s no big deal, Julian, I’m just observing the details of what is happening here.”

“As long as that’s all you’re doing.”

“What else would I be doing?”

“I just hope I don’t know,” Julian says. “I just hope I don’t know.”

“Are you going to give me the book?”

“Are you going to read it?”

“Eventually, yes. I said I would.”

“I’m going to keep it, then. When you’re ready to actually read it, come see me.”

“Jesus, Julian. I thought we could have a nice lunch. Do we have to argue about the The Celestine Prophecy for god’s sake? Doesn’t that go against the point of the book, I’m guessing?”

“Actually, The CeleProph might have some interesting things to say about this interaction.”

“Like what.”

“You’d have to read the book.”

“I will read it, Julian. Can you respect the fact that I’m working on some other things now?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. I just can’t switch my brain off and on about various things. I’m a slow mover. It’s like turning around a large ship once it’s moving.”

“I think you’ll find that’s a self-imposed limitation.”

“You’re the expert on everything, aren’t you Julian.”

“Only on things I want to be,” he whispers.

“Can we leave aside The CeleProph and enjoy a meal together?”

“Fine,” Julian says. “What do you want to talk about?”

After breakfast, the two boys walk together up Fourth Avenue, toward the Casbah.

A homeless man approaches. The man, who is black, addresses Matthew. “Can you spare anything, man, a penny even.”

“I don’t have anything to spare.”

“Come on, man, I know you got something.”

“I don’t. All I have in my pocket is my chapstick.”

“Come on, now. I don’t need that.”

“I wish I could help you.”

“Man, fuck you,” the guy says, and he goes past them.

“Have a nice day,” Julian says.

The homeless man doesn’t say anything to that.

Julian and Matt take a few steps before Julian says, “Why didn’t you give him anything?”

“Huh?”

“I said, why didn’t you give him anything?”

“I don’t have anything.”

They take a few more steps.

“Come on, you know you have something.”

“I don’t, Julian, I used all my money.”

“Matt, you paid for The Grill in cash.”

“No I didn’t. I paid with a card.”

“Well you left the tip in cash.”

“I left a tip on my card and I used the rest of my cash to leave him an extra tip on the table. That was the last of my cash. I gave him everything I had in my wallet.”

“Are you trying to tell me that if I checked your pockets—”

“You’re not gonna check my pockets!”

“But if I did, you’re telling me that you have absolutely no cash on you?”

“That’s right.”

“Why didn’t you at least give him a quarter?”

“Why didn’t you give him a quarter? Why is he asking me for money and not you? Let’s ask that question.”

“I think I know why you didn’t give him anything.”

“Why is that.”

“Because he’s black.”

“What?!”

Julian looks at Matt, satisfied.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No.”

“Are you calling me a racist?”

“I’m just saying let’s get to the real reason why you didn’t give him anything. You could have taken him down the street and bought him something.”

“Yes, I could have, but you and I are walking down the street having a conversation and I don’t want to interrupt that. If I have money to give and I feel like giving, I give. If not, I don’t. That’s not a crime.”

“It is if the only reason you’re withholding money is because he’s black.”

“I don’t have any money on me!”

“It’s not just this instance, Matt. I’ve seen you do it before. You treat people differently because they’re black.”

“I do not Julian!”

“Yes you do.”

“Fine, say what you want. I’m done with this conversation. Do you think I treat you differently because you’re black?”

“In short: yes.”

“How?”

“You discount my opinion, you speak to me differently than you speak to Courtney or Tuesday—”

“If I’m discounting your opinion it’s because I think you’re fucking crazy, not because you’re black.”

Julian stares at Matt.

“Like right now. What you’re saying is crazy. You can have the opinion that I’m racist all you want but that doesn’t make it true. It’s not true. It’s just what’s built up inside your imagination because you’re paranoid that people aren’t treating you well, when in actuality, all your friends are treating you the best way they know how. Do you think Courtney is racist?”

“A little.”

“She had your baby!”

“She’s still racist.”

“Do you think Tuesday is racist?”

“Again, a little. I’m not saying you’re driving around with a Confederate flag in the back of your truck. I’m just saying you’re a little racist and I notice it sometimes.”

“You know what, Julian, fuck you. Maybe I am a teeny amount racist just like everybody is, but I’m not a significant enough amount of racist to even discuss. The reason I didn’t give that guy money has nothing to do with him being black. When he approached us I didn’t say, ‘Oh, great, here comes a black guy.’ I just thought, ‘Here’s a guy asking for money and I don’t have any. Oh well. He’ll have to get money from somebody else!’ I don’t think of you as my black friend. I think of you as my friend. Sometimes I think of you as my slightly-paranoid friend, but not my slightly-paranoid black friend! You can believe whatever you want but I am not racist. And fuck you for calling me a racist. I’ve never treated you differently because you’re black, not even in my mind. Fuck you, Julian. You go get a quarter and give it to that guy. It’s not all my responsibility to take care of. Go ask Courtney for a quarter, and run and give it to that guy, with my apologies. Go ahead.”

“Are you done?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not saying you’re ‘lynch a nigger’ racist. I’m just saying that in small ways, it comes out.”

“No it doesn’t and fuck you.”

“Fuck me because I’m black?”

“Fuck you because you’re crazy.”

“Are you sure this isn’t the pot calling the kettle black?”

“Pun intended?”

“No, actually.”

“Well fuck your pun anyway. And fuck you. Did I mention that? God damn, you’re crazy. You think the people right around you are hating on you racially when they’re actually just trying to love you. Courtney isn’t racist, Julian. She loves you, and she loves your biracial baby. Nothing about that girl is racist.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve talked to her, I’ve seen her interact with you. There’s nothing about her that’s holding back because you’re black. She loves you, Julian, and even though you drive me fucking insane, so do I. I love you as my friend. I don’t give a shit that you’re black. Just: get over that, ok?”

“It’s hard. It’s hard when all your life you’ve been treated differently by white teachers, even by black teachers, by white girls who didn’t want to go out with you because you were black—”

“Do you think that’s why Tuesday never went out with you?”

“Who knows.”

“But you think that.”

“Yes, sometimes I do.”

“Tuesday isn’t racist.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s just not like that. She loves all people.”

“Then how come all the guys she’s gone out with are white?”

“Because that’s what she grew up with. That’s who’s in her neighborhood.”

“That, my friend, is racist.”

When Julian meets Jade he is standing at the counter at Sabine’s Café Passé. He is talking with Sabine about the puzzle of the week when Jade comes up beside him.

“Jade, you want some coffee?”

“If I’m not interrupting anything.”

Julian looks over at Jade and is instantly hooked. Short, white, blond girl with an amazing face. Little breasts—normal for her size. And just the most intent look about her. Completely alert, as few people are. Julian knows right away she’s a spark.

“No, Jade, you’re not interrupting. Julian and I were just talking about the puzzle of the week.”

“What’s the puzzle of the week?”

“You haven’t seen my puzzle of the week? It’s right over here. It’s a logic puzzle that if you solve it you get a free drink.”

“Where did the old one go?”

“Someone solved it.”

“Who?”

“Someone named Matt.”

Julian shakes his head. “If it’s the Matt I’m thinking of, he doesn’t even drink coffee.”

“This might be the same Matt, then. He got orange juice for his drink.”

“That’s definitely the Matt I’m thinking of.” Julian shakes his head again. “Motherfucker.”

“Jade, you want more of the same?”

“You know it.”

“Can I see your hand?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to read it,” Julian says.

Jade slowly extends her palm.

“Uh-hnnn,” Julian says.

“What? Am I gonna die soon?”

“No. Why? Do you want to?”

“Kind of.”

“But I do see something here in your fate line. How old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

“Something’s about to happen to you. Something you’ll remember your entire life.”

“I suppose that’s meeting you.” Jade is smirking.

“What do you do?”

“Environmental activism.”

“Is there some problem going on at your work?”

“There’s a problem going on at the house, which is all people I work with. So I guess: yes.”

“You need to steer clear of this problem.”

“No kidding.”

“Can you tell me more about the nature of this problem?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Jade,” Sabine says, “here’s your coffee.”

Jade takes the steaming cup from Sabine.

“Where are you sitting?” Julian asks.

“There.”

“Come sit with me.”

“Ok.”

Julian takes her to the front alcove, where he and Courtney have their stuff spread out. Courtney is off on a food run for Sabine. She has Acacia with her.

“Now, why can’t you tell me about this problem at the house?”

“Because it’s personal.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I just met you!”

“But in the time you’ve known me, have I done anything that would lead you not to trust me?”

“Except for being really forward, I guess not.”

“The reason I’m being forward is I was struck with a feeling that you and I are supposed to know each other. I’m not sure for what reason. But the minute I saw you I knew we were supposed to meet. Are you a writer?”

“Yes, I write articles for our newsletter. Writer and editor.”

“And this is about environmental stuff?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm. I’m going to have to introduce you to Courtney, when she gets back. Maybe it was her you were supposed to meet. Can you stick around?”

“How long?”

“Twenty minutes, just until Courtney gets back.”

“I can stay till then.”

“Let me see your palm again.”

Jade puts her coffee down and gives Julian her hand.

Julian wraps his arms around her arm, putting one of them far up near her elbow, keeping one close around her wrist.

Jade can feel the heat of his body.

“See I know you are a spark, because of the length and unbrokenness of this line right here. It shows that you will be mentally and spiritually active your whole physical life. Most people, this line only goes to about here..sometime in their mid twenties. But you go all the way up here.” He traces the line with his finger. Then he brushes his thumb all the way up her arm.

“Are you sure this is all about my fate line, Julian?”

That night, as expected, Julian and Courtney have Jade over for dinner. Jade arrives on her bicycle, and Julian thinks of her sweaty panties after the ride over to their house. They might be creased between her pussy lips. He wants to take them off her.

“Jade, you want a cigarette?”

“I have some.”

“Let’s smoke.”

Jade and Julian go outside, leaving Courtney and Acacia to continue making dinner.

“I like you, Jade.”

“I like you too.”

“Would you like to have sex with me and Courtney?”

Jade coughs. “I thought you just said ‘have sex with me and Courtney.’”

“I did.”

“Julian, no, I’m not going to have sex with you and Courtney. Did you read my mind or something? Do you know about my problems at the house?”

“No.”

“I had sex with somebody I shouldn’t have. Now it’s a big deal. I might get fired from my job over it. Then I’d have to go back to Portland. And I don’t want to go back to Portland. I want to stay right here.”

“So what does that have to do with having sex with Courtney and me?”

“I have sex with the wrong people. I have sex at the wrong times. It’s becoming a pattern with me so I don’t exactly want to repeat the situation with you and Courtney, though I’m sure having sex with you would be nice.”

“Maybe what you consider a problem really isn’t a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe you should have had sex with that guy you work with. Maybe it’s ok and people are just giving you a hard time about it.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t strike me as someone who has a congenital problem with sex, Jade.”

“What’s ‘congenital?’”

“I just think you should maybe consider a second opinion before labeling yourself as someone who has a sex problem. I mean you’re nineteen—how bad of a problem could you have?”

“I mess up everything with sex.”

“Maybe you need to have a good experience, to show you that that isn’t the case. I think Courtney and I can be a safe place to explore some of what you’ve been missing—”

“Forget it, Julian. Stop trying to sell me. I feel like..I feel like you’re trying to use a Jedi mind trick on me and it’s not working.”

“Is the problem that Courtney would be involved? You don’t want to have sex with a woman?”

“No! That’s not the problem! Have you been listening to me? I mess things up with sex. I’m enjoying getting to know you and I’m playing my cards different this time. I don’t want to mess that up by you me and Courtney getting buck wild.”

“That’s what I’m saying. What if it wasn’t you me and Courtney. What if it was just you and me?”

“What? No! Julian, you and I are not having sex.”

“What if you pretend this little mishap at your house never happened?”

“Julian, I think we should go back inside and help your wife with dinner.”

“She’s not my wife.”

“Well your girlfriend, your slave, whatever she is to you.”

“I’ll meet you in there. I’m going to finish smoking.”

“Bye.”

“Are you leaving?”

“I don’t know. I’m just going inside.”

“I’ll see you in a moment.”

“See ya.”

Jade goes inside.

Julian watches through the back windows as Jade takes Acacia from Courtney and rocks her against her shoulder. The two girls talk. Julian wonders what about. Is Jade giving him up to ‘his wife’ that he wanted to have sex with her? Won’t she be surprised, to find that Courtney wants the same thing. Julian smokes with confidence, knowing that Jade will stay. Courtney will comfort her, convince her that staying is the best idea, and they will have their threesome, just like they always do. He will taste Jade’s sweaty panties and get his dick inside her, hold her down and fuck her till he comes. Jade will be just another girl in an endless series of girls that he and Courtney are powerful enough to convince to take their clothes off. “Come have dinner with us,” says the spider to the fly. And the fly comes inside, and they kill her. They have her exactly as they want her. It’s a matter of who contains the most power. Julian—especially with Courtney—could convince anyone to sleep with him. Anyone. Jade is a special trophy because of her age, and because of her beauty. That they can convince this one is a special accomplishment. Julian puts out his cigarette and goes inside the house.

“I’m just saying, if this isn’t the first time you two have done this, maybe it’s time to look at yourselves and ask why are we doing this?”

“We know why we’re doing it.”

“Why is that?”

“To have fun.”

“But don’t you already have enough fun when it’s just the two of

you? Or has that become a problem?"

"No, that hasn't become a problem."

"I'm not trying to offend you. I'm asking this as someone who has a sex problem. I think all three of us need to be asking why we are compulsively fucking! I'm like you in this way. I told Julian how it's become a problem at my house, and at my job. Then I meet you two, and it seems like you have exactly the same problem! I hate to be the stranger who points this out."

Julian puts his hand on Jade's shoulder. "Jade."

Jade steps away from Julian. "Julian. Courtney. Goodnight."
And Jade goes out through the front door and gets on her bike.

"Jade, wait."

But she doesn't. She puts her feet on the pedals and rides off down Euclid Avenue.

The next day, Julian and Courtney see Jade again. They're at Sabine's café, sitting in the front window area when Jade comes in. She either doesn't see them or she ignores them, but either way, Jade goes straight for the counter.

"Your usual, Jade?"

"Yes. How's the puzzle of the day? Has anyone solved it?"

"Yes. Matt came in and solved this one, too."

Julian stands and goes over to Jade. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Julian."

"When you get your coffee, would you like to come and sit with us?"

"Sure, I'll be right over."

Julian sits back down. He can't take his eyes off Jade. Her eagerness, her openness, her attentiveness. Except not to him and Courtney or their offer.

"I think we might have gotten started on the wrong foot," Julian says when Jade sits down.

"Hi Acacia! How are you this morning?" Jade says.

"She's fine," Courtney says. "She's about ready to take her morning nap."

"How was you all's dinner last night?"

"It was fine. Wish you could have stayed."

"Me too. Just wasn't feeling it, you know?"

Then Julian says, "Courtney, can I see you outside?"

"Sure. Jade. Will you hold her?"

"Sure."

Courtney gives the baby to Jade. Jade bounces her a couple of times, then sets her in her lap.

“We’ll be right back,” Courtney says.

Julian goes out of the coffeehouse first and lets Courtney follow. He walks down the block until they’re in front of a book store. Courtney is beside him.

“I want to get Jade back over to the house.”

“So do I.”

“So how do we do that?”

“Well, we invite her, promising that it’s just for dinner and company, and hope she shows up.”

“I was thinking..what if we invite someone else along with her, so she doesn’t get suspicious? Or what if we do something with her in public to gain her trust, and then invite her over to the house.”

“You really want to get her into the sack, don’t you?”

“Don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. She’s the finest girl you’ve approached.”

“I agree.”

“Well just don’t do anything obvious that’s going to tip her off.”

“Maybe we can get her to drink wine at the house. It might loosen her up a bit.”

“Maybe we can slip something in her wine.”

“Are you serious?”

“I don’t know, Julian, we’re just talking.”

“Maybe we find someone she likes, and invite her over too.”

“What if it’s a boy?”

“We invite him over.”

“You would do that, with a boy, have a foursome, with a boy?”

“If Jade was involved, yes.”

“I agree. It would be worth it with Jade.”

“Courtney.”

“Yeah?”

“I really want to fuck that girl.”

“I want to, too. We will. We just have to play it cool. Make friends with her first. Let’s go back in there and just talk with her, don’t mention coming over, don’t mention the threesome, just show her we’re good people she can trust to hang out with.”

“Ok. Courtney. Do you really think this is possible?”

“Getting with Jade? Hell yeah. It’s just going to take a little more work than Charity or Kate. Anyone can be gotten.”

“Ok. Anyone can be gotten, right?”

“Right. Julian.”

“Yeah?”

“Just don’t be forward with her. I mean don’t touch her hands or anything.”

“I won’t touch her hands.”

“You do, sometimes, that’s a thing you do. Just keep your hands to yourself.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t. Keeping my hands to myself.”

“I’m serious. Don’t flirt with her.”

“Would I flirt with her? I’m not going to flirt with her.”

“Ok, because you have a tendency to do that.”

“No way. I won’t flirt.”

“Just make normal conversation. Act like we’re normal people.”

“Normal people. No problem. I’m a normal person.”

So they walk back to Sabine’s and what do they see when they get there? Not Jade sitting alone with Acacia in the front window, but Jade and Matt sitting with Acacia in the front window. Matt is across from Jade. Jade holds Acacia. And the two adults are chatting away, obviously into each other.

“Hello Jade, thanks for watching Acacia.”

“Have you all met?” Jade asks. “This is my new friend Matt.”

“Oh yeah, we know each other,” Julian says.

“Great, then why don’t you sit down.”

“Oh, no, Matt was just leaving, weren’t you Matt?”

“No, I was just staying, talking with Jade.”

“Didn’t you have to be downtown to..that thing with your art show..”

“No, I don’t have anywhere to be. Jade was just telling me about her magazine. Did you all know that Jade is the editor of an environmental action magazine?”

Courtney takes Acacia. “No, we didn’t.”

Julian asks, “Does anyone want a refill on their coffee? Jade?”

“No thanks, I’m fine. Where did you two go, anyway?”

“We just had some things to discuss,” Courtney says.

Matt slides around and sits next to Jade. “Feel free to sit down. There’s plenty of room here.”

“So I heard you solved the new problem of the week,” Jade says.

“Um, yes, that’s right,” Matt says. “Julian, are you going to stand there or are you going to sit down like a sensible person?”

Julian slowly steps over Acacia’s baby bag and sits across from Matt. Courtney sits down next to him, across from Jade.

“Well isn’t this nice,” Matt says. “I was just walking down the street and I look in these windows and I was like, ‘I know that baby!’ But I didn’t know the person holding her. So Jade and I introduced ourselves and we’ve been having the nicest conversation. Seriously, Jade, you’re

quite the conversationalist. But you two must already know that, since you're friends with her."

"Actually, they've been interested in me for other reasons," Jade says.

"Oh, really? What are those?"

"Julian? You want to tell him? Why you two are interested in me?"

Julian sits awkwardly, looking at the floor.

"Why were they interested in you? Some kind of experiment?" Matt says.

"No, actually—"

"It doesn't matter," Courtney says. "Jade, we're interested in you for all kinds of reasons, not just one."

"That's right," says Julian. "So tell us about this magazine."

"What magazine."

"The one you work for."

"Oh, it's nothing. I was just telling Matt."

"She was just telling me all about the ins and outs of publishing a magazine, something I know nothing about, and she was telling me something of the culture of the people who produce this particular magazine, how they work, where they stay, etc. You said you all live together in the same house, right Jade?"

"Yes, in this case we do, though that's not common for magazines. But we're on a very tight budget, so."

"Jade," Courtney says, "how did you get training to become the editor of a magazine?"

"Mostly just from magazines I produced growing up. Like I made a school newspaper for my high school when I went there. We didn't have one before. And I just put it together with my computer and a few friends. So really it was just editing small stuff like that that got me into it. I'm gonna go refill my coffee, I'll be right back." Jade stands. She goes over to the counter.

Matt sips his OJ. "So what were you two interested in her for?"

"Matt, just don't worry about it," Courtney says.

"Do you want me to guess?"

"Don't be an asshole."

"You think the world is just yours to do whatever you want to with it? That people don't have value for their own sake? You think you can just take a nineteen year old and seduce her and that's necessarily ok?"

"What are you doing sitting here with her if not flirting?"

"I am flirting. That's because I'm being flirted with. And how much do you want to bet that she wasn't flirting with you two?"

"You weren't there, you don't know anything about what she did."

“Oh, yeah? She flirted with you, Julian? I’m feeling so many sparks between you now that you’re here. Read her body language, bro, she’s not into you. Why don’t you guys go find a twenty-six year old to drag back to your cave and fuck? This girl is hardly a woman yet.”

“Again, then why are you flirting with her?”

“I can safely flirt with someone without getting involved. I’m having an innocent conversation with a girl in a coffeehouse.”

“Oh, yeah,” Courtney says, “it’s all innocent.”

“It is.”

“Are you telling me you wouldn’t fuck that girl?”

“If she wanted to, you’re goddamn right I would, but that’s a little different than trying to coerce her into having a threesome when she’s obviously not into your guys.”

“Who said anything about a threesome?”

“Tuesday, if you must know.”

“What did Tuesday say?”

“Not much. But she didn’t have to say much. I can read the situation as soon as I walk into it. The way you guys are protectively moving around her, as though she’s your property. It’s obvious the minute I see it. But yeah, Tuesday told me you guys are hooking it up with random women, bringing them back to the house. I’m just saying this is a really nice girl. Jade—and I’ve only known her for five minutes—but Jade is a special person. She’s a spark. Which is I’m sure part of why you’re attracted to her. But she’s not someone to just be used. She has that light that made us all friends in high school, Julian. She’s your equal, not some animal to be trapped.”

Jade sits down.

Matt leans back in his seat.

Jade says, “So, what did I miss?”

Julian says, “Uh, we were all just hoping that you could tell us more about your magazine.”

Jade wants to go downtown. Courtney has to work, so she stays with Acacia and Julian and Matt agree to walk with Jade. Julian can’t stop thinking about Jade’s panties.

“Tucson’s gone from..don’t you think Tucson used to be more of an outlaw state?” Julian asks.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Matt says.

And Jade laughs.

“Have you seen the guys walking about with their six-shooters?” Julian asks Jade.

“No.”

“You haven’t seen that? They walk into the grocery store with ‘em. They’ll be sitting in restaurants with ‘em. But I think from the time when Courtney and I were here before..to now..it’s become less outlaw.”

“It hasn’t become less outlaw,” Matt says. “You just got used to it.”

“So what do you do, Matt?”

“I’m working on a theory..that has to do with computation. I’m thinking about computation and cellular automata.”

“What’s ‘cellular automata?’”

“I’ll show you sometime. It’s easier with a picture.”

“But it’s math, right?”

“Basically. What are you doing downtown?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t..I shouldn’t even go. I’m looking at this dress I saw the other day, that I might get. I really can’t afford it, but hey, who needs to eat, right?”

“Do you want company while you look at it?”

“No, you two should really do your thing. I don’t want to get between you.”

“You’re not getting in between anything,” Julian says. “We were just walking you.”

“No thanks, guys. I prefer to shop by myself.”

“As you wish,” Julian says.

“You know what Tucson makes me think of?” Matt says.

“What?”

“Fight Club. Where they’re building an army. The way there’s so many group houses around here, it’s like people here are building armies.”

“I haven’t seen Fight Club in forever,” Jade says.

“We should watch it sometime. When the big TV comes.”

“What’s the ‘big TV?’”

“Matt ordered this ginormous TV that we’re going to use to play video games on.”

“And watch movies. We should have a movie night. We’ll start with Fight Club.”

“Ok, who’s invited?”

“Everyone. Julian, Courtney, Acacia, Tuesday, Rishi, me. You. Anyone you want to bring, Jade.”

“No, I don’t want to bring anyone. Everyone I know is from my house.”

“Well what about Thursday?”

Jade stops walking. She faces Matt. “You’re some sort of magic worker, aren’t you? You create, I can see that. And this math thing you’re doing, it’s something special, isn’t it? You talk about it like it’s nothing but I can tell it’s something special.”

“And you,” Matt says, “are a seer. I would love to read your magazine. I bet it’s spectacular. You will have to tell me more about Earth First, as well. You sound like you’re really putting your life on the line where it matters. I admire that.”

“Ah-hem,” Julian says. “Hello in there? Magic circle of Jade and Matthew. We were walking?”

“Just a minute,” Jade says, and she holds a finger up to Julian. Jade takes Matt’s hands and puts them on her chest, above her boobs. “Can you feel that?”

“I feel a lightness, Jade, that’s all I feel.”

“That’s all I wanted you to feel.”

“Yes, you do have a lightness, I can see that. You are unencumbered.”

“Well, I am encumbered by one thing, this house mess that I’m involved with. A conflict between me and the house.”

“But I feel even that will be lifted soon,” Matt says.

Julian thinks it’s a bunch of bullshit.

“Hello? Jade, Matthew, the sun is hot, let’s continue.”

“A minute,” Jade says. “Where did you come from?”

“Dayton.”

“But before that.”

“Dallas, originally.”

“I feel you’re from none of those places. You have me in your heart already, don’t you? I could see you doing it.” Jade hugs Matt. “I’m so glad I met you. You have made my week and it’s only Tuesday. We will do our movie night. And much more, you and I, I think. What do you think of that?”

“I think you’re right. I can feel it too, Jade, there is a connection between us. It was right that we met this morning. You’re a beautiful soul, I can tell that already. Good to meet you!”

“Good to meet you!”

They’re like beaming into each other, it’s ridiculous.

“Ok, now, Julian, if we must go.”

“I just don’t want us standing in this sun too long.”

“Don’t interrupt matters of the spirit,” Jade says.

And Julian can’t disagree. He just disagrees that what was just happening was a matter of the spirit. “That looked much more like a matter of the flesh to me.”

“Julian, don’t be crude. That’s why you’re so bad at getting women into your lair. Try going at it with a little more finesse.”

“Who says we’re bad at it?”

“Oh, gross. Just what I don’t want to think about. How many young girls you and Courtney have fucked. Gross, Julian.”

“It’s not gross at all.”

“It is. Because I could tell from talking to Courtney that it’s just because you two have problems in your marriage. I hate to be the nineteen year old who points this out. And I thought I was the one with sex problems!”

“Courtney and I do not have sex problems.”

“Oh please. That girl hasn’t been banged for months. You need to bite the bullet and fuck your wife, Julian. Is she so disgusting to you?”

“Jade, I do fuck my wife.”

“Not that I can see. You can tell by the look on her face she isn’t getting fucked. You should let me come over and I’ll do it with a strap on.”

“Are you serious?”

“Oh, no, I shouldn’t say that. See, that’s the kind of statement that gets me in trouble. Forget I said anything. I gotta go, guys, thanks for walking me and you—” she rushes up to Matt, gets right in front of him “—you and I have things to talk about. I can tell. And movie night!”

“Yeah, movie night. Fight Club. As soon as the big TV gets here.”

“When is it being delivered?”

“I don’t know, but as soon as it’s here, we’ll do it. Should we trade numbers?”

“Yes but not now. I’m always at Sabine’s.”

“Ok, I’ll see you there.”

Jade reaches up and kisses Matt on the lips. Her hands are on his chest.

“See you Jade.”

Jade smiles. She gets on her bike and crosses the street, leaving Matt and Julian in front of the Chicago Store.

They both watch her as she goes, until she’s out of sight.

“What was that?” Julian asks.

“What was what?”

“You and Jade!”

“Nothing. We obviously connect, and we were just talking.”

“You weren’t just talking!”

“Hey, she kissed me. There’s nothing I can do about that.”

“You could have stopped her!”

“I’m not gonna stop a girl who’s kissing me.”

“You know, Matt, there’s a certain code. Between brothers. You don’t kiss—or hit on—a girl that your brother’s interested in?”

“Even if the girl doesn’t like your brother?”

“That has nothing to do with it?”

“So I’m supposed to ignore a girl’s advances just because you like her, even though she doesn’t like you back?”

“Yes. Absolutely. And what about you and Rishi?”

“We’re broken up.”

“For how long?”

“A few days. Why?”

“You don’t break the code.”

“I’m not sure the code makes any sense! Jade is obviously into me, she’s obviously not into you, so what sense is there in me turning her away when she makes advances? Anyway mostly I was just being friendly to her.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Go ahead.”

“When Courtney and I are obviously trying to hook up with Jade, it doesn’t help when you’re extra friendly with her.”

“You want me to not be friendly to a complete stranger when I meet her, just because you and Courtney want to have sex with her?”

“That’s the code. You don’t have to be rude to her, but it’s not appropriate if you’re friendly with her.”

“If I’m friendly with her!?”

“You were being warm and open with her. It’s inviting.”

“I was just being friendly with her. You expect me to be cold toward Jade?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“There’s a reason the code is in place. It’s to prevent arguments between brothers. Arguments like this.”

“The only reason this is an argument is because you’re being unreasonable.”

“Are you calling the code unreasonable?”

“As it’s been stated to me, yes. Face it, Julian, Jade doesn’t like you. If she did, she’d be sleeping with you. She doesn’t, so she’s not. She happens to like me, and you have a problem with it. Get over it, Julian! Find someone else to seduce! It’s not my fault that Jade doesn’t like you, and I’m not about to be rude to her just to satisfy ‘the code!’”

“Have it your way.”

Matt exhales.

“The thing about the code,” Julian says, “is it was designed to create peace among brothers, among friends. I’m simply asking you to follow a code that I think will help there to be peace between us. It might sound unreasonable to you now, but this code has been around for thousands of years, even going back to the Bible, and it has prevented wars, my friend. Wars. Now you and I have had some tension, and I think this could help alleviate it.”

“Does this mean you’re not going to flirt with Rishi?”

“If you don’t want me to, I won’t.”

“You don’t even like Rishi.”

“Rishi has been so rude to me that she’s hard to like.”

“Yeah, well welcome to Rishi.”

Julian laughs.

“Your code is stupid. If Jade liked you it would be different. But to ask me to withhold pleasure from myself just because you’re jealous is a ridiculous kind of code. I like Jade. If I get the chance to fuck her I’m going to. You can like that or you can hate it but that’s just the way it is.”

Julian wakes. He walks around the house and sees that he’s the only one home. He goes to the computer in the living room and searches for porn. He’s on a fruit and vegetable kick, so he finds some video of a woman masturbating with a cucumber. He thinks about looking for horse porn but decides not to. Instead he finds some white girl porn with someone who looks roughly like Jade—well, not really like Jade at all. But in his mind he’s masturbating to Jade. He comes.

The HTML books are beside the computer and Julian picks up the main one. He could study HTML, learn new tags that would help him be a better designer. He could design the website for his and Courtney’s design company. Maybe get some jobs in Tucson. So he opens the book, and goes toward the end. No. What he really wants to do is experiment with the IFRAME tag. He had seen it before, in Santa Fe, and wanted to play with it. Now he has the chance. No rent to worry about, no timeframe on how long they can stay in Tuesday’s house.

He thinks about Matt’s programming, his artificial intelligence work. A program that can reprogram itself. It is genius, no matter how simplistic the implementation. That was what needed to be done: make a program like that. And Julian thought he could improve the code, if only he knew how to write in C. Maybe he could learn. Find some web tutorials or something. So he does that: he googles C tutorials and finds one called Learn C in 30 Days. Perfect. If he just follows the instructions he’ll learn C in 30 days. He goes to the first lesson. It’s on variables. What is a variable? How do you set a variable? What kinds of variables are there?

He reads through it and he’s ok for a while but then he starts thinking about Jade, and how that motherfucker is probably fucking her right now, in his apartment with the big TV. She was all over him on the first meeting! The gall of Matt to go after her when he knows he and Courtney are into her. They had invested time in Jade, worked her, gotten her to come to the house. With just a little more convincing, they could

have Jade. And then Matt comes along.

Julian thinks: if I can learn C in 30 days I can make a self-rewriting program that's better than Matt's. For all Matt's smarts, Matt isn't as smart as Julian, he isn't as expansive. Matt has kind of a little world he lives in, one of prejudices and assumptions and limitations. It has frustrated Julian since high school. If only Matt was an aquarius (like Julian) instead of a capricorn. Matt has aquarius as his rising sign, but it's not enough. To be a true visionary you have to be an aquarius. And Julian has only met a few of those.

He reads more about variables and gets bored. Thirty days of this. It's nothing like HTML, which doesn't even have variables. There's too much ground to cover to learn C; he's not going to be able to overtake Matt. Matt has been programming since he was in the second grade, or something. If only Julian's mom had had a computer around, Julian could have done that too.

In the past, he's come to points like this. He sets aside music for a while, and does graphic design or tries to learn programming. And for a while he feels like he's learning it but then something happens like Mr. Kremer, and it questions whether he can build a website at all. Or he talks with Matt about programming, and he sees how far he would have to go to get to where Matt is with that. And in the end, he puts all that down and picks up the guitar—the only thing he has any chance at being good at.

Julian puts down the books and goes to the Casbah. Tuesday is working. He gets her to give him a free tea and he sits in the back, with his guitar, messing around with a new song.

"Tell me something, Tuesday."

"What is that."

"You and Matt are close, right?"

"We have been for a while."

"How come you and I never got that close?"

"You're asking me?"

"I'm asking you."

"How should I know? It's just the way things are. Matt and I, I think, relate on a spiritual level. That's why we've been such good friends this whole time. You and I just don't have those types of conversations."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not spiritual in the same way he is?"

This frustrates Julian, who thinks he's just as "spiritual" as Matt. "What does he have spiritually that I don't?"

"I can't put my finger on it," Tuesday says.

“You really think Matt is more spiritual than me? I smoke American Spirits, what’s more spiritual than that?”

Tuesday looks at him.

“I’m kidding! I’m joking! Jeees. Rough crowd at the Casbah tonight!” he says in announcer voice.

“Are you feeling down, Julian?”

“Not down, exactly.”

“Have you seen Courtney today?”

“No. Why?”

“Because I don’t know if he grounds you spiritually, but I know when I have a partner they do..they can have that effect. I was just wondering if spending some time with Courtney would help.”

“Courtney and I aren’t exactly seeing eye to eye. So..”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. It’s not a problem. Want to hear part of my new song? It’s not finished.”

“No, I really have to work now, but you’re welcome to stay here and practice, if you like. I’ll bring you more tea when you run out.”

“Actually, could I have some chai?”

“You want chai?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Julian, I’ll bring you chai this time but you really ought to pay for your drinks.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome Julian.”

—————

In a couple hours, the Casbah is filling up, people are arriving to eat dinner, and Matt shows up. He sits down at the table where Julian is and takes out his laptop.

“Do you want to hear my new song?”

“Not really. I want to work on some stuff now.”

“It won’t take five minutes.”

“No thanks, Julian, I’m not in the mood.”

“Can you not sit here then?”

“What is this your own private table?”

“I was practicing.”

“Keep practicing.”

“It will distract me if you’re here.”

“What the fuck do I care, Julian, I’m not going to take up another whole table by sitting over there, when I can sit at this table that we’re already using. I don’t think Tuesday wants us taking up all her tables with

people who aren't paying for their drinks."

"You don't pay for your drinks?"

"Well, I do, but I know you don't. The point is I want Tuesday to be able to fill as many tables as possible with real customers." More insane logic from the Matt man.

"Well, just keep it down, will you?"

"Yeah, I will. You're the one with the fucking guitar."

"Can you please not say 'fuck?'"

"What, am I offending you?"

"It's just too harsh."

"Fuck you, Julian, you're getting crazier than ever these days."

"I was sitting here long before you got here. I've been here all afternoon. If you don't mind, I'd like you to sit at another table."

"I'm not moving, Julian. Just deal with it."

Tuesday comes up. "Can I get you anything?"

"Yeah," Matt says, "can I have the seitan cheesesteak and a pot of chai?"

"Anything for you?"

"Can you please make him leave, he's distracting me from my practicing."

Tuesday laughs. "I think I'll leave that between you two. So, a seitan cheesesteak and a pot of chai..and you, do you want anything?"

"Can I drink some of your chai?" Julian asks.

"Sure," Matt says.

"Alright, I'll be right up with that." Tuesday leaves.

Matt has his head in his laptop. It's getting dark and the blue light shines on his face. He's typing away, quietly, at amazing speed.

"I'd like to clear up anything that's happening between us so we can interact like normal fucking people," Julian says.

Matt closes his laptop. "I'd like that too." He shakes his head.

"But?"

"But..you're acting crazy lately, and I can't get along with that Julian."

"How am I acting crazy?"

"You're talking about concentration camps, all this paranoia about the government, black helicopters..you sound like Rishi."

"I think it's better to be informed than not."

"But concentration camps? You really think the government is building concentration camps for its citizens? Anyway that's not even the main thing."

"What is the main thing? Is it Jade?"

"It is Jade. Your logic on the bro code makes no sense."

"It's not exactly the 'bro code.'"

“Whatever.”
“Did you sleep with Jade?”
“She came over.”
“Did you sleep with her?”
“None of your business. I invited you. The Fight Club movie night, remember? Where were you? I know you weren’t working.”
“I was sleeping.”
“Well if you had come over maybe you’d know what happened.”
“Did you and Jade fuck?”
“I thought we weren’t allowed to say fuck.”
“Did you?”
“Like I said, what I did with Jade is between me and Jade. I’m not going to report back to you on the details. It’s disrespectful to Jade.”
“So you did.”
“I didn’t say that.”
“You’re not denying it.”
“All I’m saying is why the fuck do you want to know?”
“You knew that Courtney and I were working her.”
“Julian, this is the other thing. You’re working every girl in town. Every coffee shop hostess. Every bartender. Every hot activist girl who walks the streets of Tucson is supposedly in your pocket. You make it impossible to talk to anyone without somehow offending you and Courtney. You don’t own all the pussy in this town.”
“Well, my friend, I’m not leaving this table.”
“I never asked you to.”
“If you don’t want to hear me playing..you can move.” And Julian straps on his guitar and starts playing, and singing, as loudly as possible, his new song.

Courtney wakes Julian the next morning.

“What?”
“I need to talk to you, Julian.”
Julian grunts.
“Julian wake up for five minutes.”
“What is it?”
“I need to talk to you.”
“Go ahead. I’m listening.” He opens one eye.
Courtney’s there holding Acacia. “Roland quit.”
“Who the fuck is Roland?”
“You know him. The dishwasher..at the Casbah? Tuesday told me about it just now. They’re looking for a new dishwasher. You could work

there!”

“Who’s Roland again?”

“The dishwasher at the Casbah Tea House. He quit. You can have his job, Julian. They’re looking for people right now.”

“Work as a dishwasher at the Casbah Tea House?”

“Wake up, I’m trying to talk to you!”

“I heard you!”

“Ok, good. What do you think?”

“I thought we were going to do internet marketing.”

“This is real, Julian. This is right now. They need someone to start today.”

“That’s not exactly what I was planning on doing.”

“What were you planning on doing?”

“Internet marketing!”

“For who? There’s no jobs, I’ve looked!”

“You looked?”

“Yes!”

“I thought I was looking.”

“I was looking too. Julian, tell me one thing that’s wrong with working as a dishwasher at the Casbah.”

“It’s working as a dishwasher, for one.”

“I knew you were going to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Resist.”

“I’m resisting being a trained monkey at the Casbah!”

“Tuesday works there, is she a trained monkey?”

“She’s not their dishwasher.”

“It’s a job, Julian.”

“I know.”

“It’s a job and it’s available right now.”

“I know.”

“I’m already working. My deliveries for Sabine don’t make us that much money. We need a second job.”

“I wasn’t quite ready to start.”

“Be flexible, Julian.”

“Maybe I can find something else.”

“Ok, like what?”

“I don’t know, like I was thinking I could be the bouncer at a bar.”

“You know who they hire as bouncers? Big fat dudes.”

“Or I could play out more and make tips.”

“Tips? Do you know what you made at your last show?”

“Yeah, I know, I know. The promotion was off.”

“The promotion wasn’t off. You just don’t make that good of tips

when you play.”

“Do you think it’s a reflection on the music?”

“What?”

“Do you think..? Nevermind.”

“I want you to go to the Casbah and talk to them.”

“Ok.”

“What?”

“I will.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

“Oh thank you Julian.” She kisses his forehead. “Thank you.”

“There’s just one thing.”

“What.”

“I’m not washing Matt’s dishes. In fact I’m not working there if he keeps hanging out there. I’m not going to slave over that motherfucker’s dishes. So you find some way to get him to stop hanging out there.”

“You want me to get Matt to stop hanging out at the Casbah.”

“That’s right.”

“What’s your problem with Matt all of a sudden?”

“All of a sudden? It’s not all of a sudden. This has been going on for years.”

“And you’ve been hanging out for years. Why is it suddenly a problem now?”

“Do you know what that motherfucker did?”

“What?”

“He made moves on Jade when you weren’t looking.”

“He made moves on Jade.”

“Yeah.”

“Well Jade was a wash anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jade?”

“Yes, Jade.”

“Jade was a wash.”

“She wasn’t a wash.”

“The Jade? Julian, don’t kid yourself.”

“Jade was not a wash.”

“Julian. Please. That’s what you’re mad at him about? Forget it. Jade wasn’t interested. We gave it our best try.”

“We could have had her.”

“Oh, Julian. No we couldn’t have. Will you go to the Casbah, please?”

The best part of working at the Casbah is getting yelled at by Jesse. Jesse is the kitchen manager. She's short, she's a punk, and she likes to yell.

"Julian! Julian!!"

Julian comes around from the dishwashing station, into the kitchen. "What?"

"This grater doesn't go here! Don't just put things away. Ask where they go!"

"Where does this go?"

"Don't ask me! I'm busy! Ask Michael."

Michael turns around. He's standing at the grill. "That goes right up there. See?"

Julian takes note of Michael's facial tattoos. Mike seems like a guy who would fuck you up in a fight.

"Julian!"

"What?"

"Get back to the dish station. Things are piling up!"

This is how it is on Friday nights. There's never an end to the dishes. They always finish way after close, at one or two in the morning. Julian wishes Rishi was kitchen manager. The entire Casbah is filled with Rishi's handwriting. She has labeled every jar, every shelf, every piece of machinery. If Rishi was kitchen manager, Julian wouldn't get yelled at..he doesn't think. But she's not; Jesse is.

"Julian!"

"What??"

"You need a safety meeting."

"I'm fine."

"Julian. Out back in five. Meet me by the walk in."

"What did I do?"

"Just meet me there."

Julian picks up a large pot. He takes the shower head and rinses it out. He tries to get every surface of the dish, like Jesse showed him. Clean the inside of the dish. Clean the outside of the dish.

Pretty soon Jesse is behind him. "Julian. Safety meeting."

He puts down the pot and follows Jesse to the walk in.

Jesse opens the door.

Julian goes inside.

Jesse takes out a glass pipe and a plastic bag. She fills the pipe with pot. She hands it to Julian.

Julian looks at it.

"You need a lighter?"

"Yeah."

Jesse digs in her back pocket. She hands Julian a lighter.

Julian sparks the pipe and inhales deeply. He hands it to Jesse.

“Sometimes you just need a good ole safety meeting.” She smokes and hands the pipe back to Julian. “Where did you grow up?”

“Not around here.”

“I grew up on the south side. Motherfuckers’ll kick your ass down there. Was picking up my kid from school, motherfuckers had a chain out. They were about to beat him up, too, but I brought out this crowbar I like to keep in my car. Showed those kids who to mess with. See this scar? I got that from that chain. But I left them with something worse.”

“Does your son know how to fight?”

“No, and I don’t want him to know. They’re just little kids, they shouldn’t be fighting. They should be in school. You carry a weapon?”

“No.”

“I always carry this.” Jesse takes out a huge David Bowie knife. She hands it to Julian.

He doesn’t know what to do with it. He’s never even owned a knife. He hands it back.

“I’ll cut a motherfucker up with that shit.”

Julian is wondering why she has it at work but he decides not to ask.

“Are you..married, Julian?”

“No.”

“But I saw you have a kid.”

“Are you married?”

“Eight years,” Jesse says.

“How many kids you got?”

“I have three.”

Julian wouldn’t have imagined Jesse married. He bets her husband is a punk, too.

“What’s your baby’s name?”

“Acacia.”

“That’s pretty, Julian. You should bring her in the restaurant sometime, I’d like to meet her.”

“Ok.”

“I might yell at you in there but it’s just how I am when I’m working. Don’t let it bother you.”

“I’m not used to being yelled at.”

“You’re not, huh? You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t want to get used to it.”

“Don’t be a pussy, Julian. You never worked in a kitchen before?”

“I have.”

“Oh. Where?”

“I washed dishes at Denny’s in Austin.”

“Is that where you’re from, Austin?”

“No, actually, I’m from Dayton, Ohio.”

“You travelled a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Well, like I said, you’ll get used to it. You just gotta keep up. Don’t let the dishes stack up. We’re only on lunch. The dishes really shouldn’t stack up on lunch. We have so few tables, Julian. You should be able to keep up with it. You will, I know. Here, you want another hit?”

Julian decides he better have as many hits as possible, to make it through the day. He doesn’t usually smoke pot, but..

“There’s something else I don’t allow. That’s hitting on people you work with. You know I’m married, so that shouldn’t be a problem. Ignacio and Rebecca..that’s a whole different story, there. Ignacio’s in with Mary—you know Mary, the owner? I don’t know what his arrangement is, but I’m hands off with those two. I know Rebecca’s cute, but don’t hit on her.”

“Why do you think I would hit on her?”

“Because I know how guys are, Julian. And I don’t need goddamn love triangles going on in the kitchen. Leave those little servers alone.”

“Tuesday is my friend from way back.”

“Yeah, she mentioned it. I guess whatever you do with her is your own business. But leave the other servers alone!”

“I wasn’t..going to do anything with them.”

“See that you don’t. It’s bad enough with Rebecca and Ignacio. I’m trying to run a kitchen here, not a dating service! Keep your cock in your pants, Julian, and we shouldn’t have any problems. And I ain’t in no open marriage so stay the fuck away from me in that regard. I ain’t looking for no affair, that’s not why I have you out here. You’re out here..because..everyone needs a safety meeting once in a while. I can see it in your eyes, you’re about to walk out on me. You want to quit, don’t you? Well don’t quit, ‘cause it was hard enough finding you and you’re not that great of a dishwasher. You’ll do fine, just check with Michael if you need anything. I’ll be keeping an eye out for you.”

Saturday night. Julian is working the Casbah. Jesse has gone home and the only manager there is Ignacio. They’re playing Manu Chao and Julian can’t stand the bouncy nature of it. He feels like he’s in a costume circus of some kind. There are speakers right above the dishwashing station. And, if that wasn’t enough, it’s a packed night at the Casbah and dishes are piling up..

“Ignacio, don’t we have something a little more soothing? This is

giving me a headache.”

“Manu Chao is soothing.”

“No he’s not.”

“What’s wrong with you, you don’t like Manu Chao? Half the world likes Manu Chao.”

“Just asking.”

“The dishes..they pile up Julian. You want me to come help you?”

“No, I’ve got it.”

“We’re running out of forks. You need to do a load of silverware.”

“I’m gonna do a load of silverware after I do these big pots.”

“We don’t need big pots. We need forks.”

“I’m on it.”

“Are you? I’m not sure if this job fits you Julian. You move too slow.”

Julian wants to tell Ignacio off but he doesn’t want to upset Courtney by getting fired. He almost does it anyway. “Don’t you think it’s time for a safety meeting?”

“I don’t do safety meetings. You gotta talk to Jesse for that. You want me to call her? Tell her you need a safety meeting? Hold on, I will call her.”

“Ignacio!”

“What?”

“Don’t call her.”

“Just get us the forks.” And Ignacio’s gone.

Right then Matt shows up. He comes from the back dining area. “Hey, Julian!” He’s carrying a video camera. It’s pointed at Julian.

“What is that for?”

“Just recording.”

“If you don’t mind, not while I’m working.”

“So, Julian, how’re the dishes tonight. Looks like they’re stacking up!” Matt roves the camera around the dishwashing station, then locks it back on Julian’s face.

Julian tries to be pleasant. “You’re in an excited mood.”

Matt is looking at him through his camera. “Well, Julian, I just said, what the fuck is this video camera doing sitting in my closet? It should be out in the world, recording things. I got this great shot of the prayer flags in the alley. How long have you had this job?”

“A couple of weeks.”

“Do you like it?”

“Do I like it? You want to know if I like washing dishes at the Casbah Teahouse in Tucson, Arizona. What do you think?”

“Sounds like there’s room for improvement.”

Julian turns away from the dish station. He’s wet, he’s wearing

yellow gloves, his hair is in his face. “There is,” he says. “There is room for improvement. Are you going to stand there pointing that thing—”

“So when do you get off?”

“When all the dishes are done?”

“When do you think that might be? I was thinking about going over to The Grill. They have live music there tonight, as I’m sure you know, and I’d like to go.”

“With me?”

“Why not, Julian, what else are you doing?”

“Well I won’t be done here until about one in the morning.”

“That’s ok. This music doesn’t start until about twelve. So, you’re good to go?”

“Are you still recording?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you recording? I’m a mess, I’m working, this isn’t exactly the time to be making a documentary film—”

“It’s not a documentary. It’s just shots for my website.”

“Don’t put this on your website.”

“Don’t worry, Julian, you look fine.”

“Uh huh. I do. I look fine? Go record Tuesday or somebody.”

“I already did. Can I get a close up of that water. It looks great in that light. Look at how that clamp light is shining on the water. It’s amazing!”

“It does look good, now that you mention it.”

Matt goes in close for the shot.

Julian stands back from the dish station, happy for the break.

“So, I’ll come find you at one o’clock or so.”

“How ‘bout I just meet you at The Grill.”

“Even better. I’ll be at the bar.”

“Ok.”

“See you, Julian.”

“Bye.”

Matt, still recording, goes into the back dining room.

Julian loses track of him.

Tuesday brings a bus tray full of more plates and teapots and sets it beside the stand where you’re supposed to put bus trays. The stand is full. Setting it beside is the only thing Tuesday can do.

Julian looks at the dishes. He rinses the big pot he was working on earlier and puts it away, overhead. Then he gets set up to do a load of silverware.

Ignacio comes by. He puts his hand on Julian’s shoulders. “Ahh, you’re doing the forks. Yes.” He claps his hands together, then drapes his arm all the way around Julian.

“Ignacio.”

“Yes?”

“I can’t move.”

“Oh, sorry! We should touch each other more often, don’t you think?”

“You mean just me and you?”

“No, everyone,” Ignacio says.

Julian looks at his eyeballs. They’re dilated. He and Rebecca are doing ecstasy again. “Rebecca!”

Rebecca, in the pastry area, comes right over.

Julian checks her eyes. Pupils big as dimes. “Rebecca, would you make me a cappuccino?”

“Of course, love.” She dances back to where the Grindmaster is.

Ignacio follows her. He stands behind her and fluffs her hair, running his fingers through it, laying it down on the top of her dress.

If they would bring some for everyone, then this might be fun. But having your manager trashed out on X and to be sober beside them, gets old real quick.

Julian looks back at the Grindmaster. Ignacio is gone. It’s just Rebecca making his coffee. Julian takes off his gloves and sets them on the side of the sink. He goes over to the Grindmaster and stands right behind Rebecca. “Rebecca?”

She turns around.

Julian has an arm on either side of her, closing her in. “How are you feeling tonight?”

“I’m feeling great!”

“I can imagine. How long have you and Ignacio been going out?”

“Oh, we’re not going out,” she says. She’s just saying that because Jesse has a policy of not dating your co workers.

“You two seem pretty friendly for people who aren’t going out.”

“I’m friendly with everyone, Julian.”

“Would you be friendly with me?”

“Always, always. Of course I would.”

“How friendly would you be?”

Rebecca laughs. “Pretty friendly,” she says.

“Since you and Ignacio aren’t going out, would you give me a tiny kiss?”

“Where?” she asks.

Julian points to his cheek.

Rebecca leans forward and kisses him on the cheek.

Julian grabs her hands and pulls her away from the Grindmaster. “Dance with me,” he says. He pulls her into kind of a circular dance.

Tuesday comes out of the kitchen. “There you are. We’re out of

ramekins. I can't pour salsa."

"Use those little bowls," Julian says.

"We need ramekins! Stop dancing and get back to work!"

"Ignacio said I could dance."

"Really."

"He told me to dance with Rebecca."

Rebecca says, "He did!?" and she holds Julian tight.

Tuesday leaves, back into the dining room.

Rebecca whispers in Julian's ear. "I like Ignacio very much. But don't tell Jesse."

"I think Jesse already knows," he whispers into her ear.

Rebecca pulls back and looks at him. They are holding hands.

"Does she?"

Julian nods, then pulls Rebecca close again. "Did you and Ignacio do a little ecstasy tonight?"

"What? No.." (Pshff.)

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Because when I look at your pupils..they're very large and very black. And when I hold your hand..I can feel your heart beating, and it's beating very fast. You can tell me. I won't tell anyone."

"It doesn't matter if you do," she says. "Ignacio's manager."

"So you did do some ecstasy tonight?"

Rebecca pulls back again and looks Julian in the eyes. She nods, seriously, then she smiles.

"Do you have any extra?"

"Ignacio only brought two."

"Next time..bring extra. You've got to keep your dishwasher happy."

"Oh, I forgot, I was making you a coffee."

Overhead, the music changes. Instead of Manu Chao, Dave Matthews.

Julian wants to feel Rebecca up. He wants to reach between her legs and touch her. He wants to make love to her in the employee bathroom while she's on ecstasy, have that red hair pressed against the tile.

She turns around and picks up his cappuccino cup. She's gotten as far as putting the grinds into the machine.

Julian takes a risk. He puts his arms around her waist.

When he does, Rebecca lays her head back on his shoulder. "That feels nice, Julian."

"Only because you're on ecstasy."

"No, it does anyway. It's nice to have someone to stand with."

“You want to take a walk with me?”

“Right now? I think you’re supposed to be washing dishes.”

“I’ll get to that. Do you think we can take a walk, right now?”

“Maybe,” she says. “You would want to walk with me?”

“Of course. I want to hold your hand some more.”

She’s rolling her head around on his chest.

He squeezes her tighter. “Why don’t you put my hands where you want them to be.”

She turns around with his cappuccino. “Here you are.”

“Forget about that for a minute. Put it down. Good. Now put my hands on you where you want them to be.”

“What?” She shakes her head.

“Take my hands. Just take my hands. Good. Now put them where you want them to be.”

She thinks a second, then turns them around and puts them on Julian’s chest. She laughs, and spins on one foot.

Ignacio comes into the pastry area. He goes straight to Rebecca and the two of them engage in a sloppy kiss.

Julian is standing right there so he gets to see it in all its detail.

They’re making out like they’re the only ones in the room.

“Well, I guess I’ll..get back to those forks.”

“Huh?”

“I got your forks, Ignacio!”

“Oh, I changed the music for you. Julian, is this better?”

Julian turns to face the dishwashing station. “Much. Much better.”

Julian is walking. It’s dark. It’s his day off. He’s wondering where he’s going. Well, he knows where he’s going, but he’s wondering why.

“Sittin’ on a train station, waitin’ for the dawn,” he sings.

He’s going to Matt’s apartment. There were promises of drinks and a “party,” though Julian doesn’t know what that means anymore. To be honest, the only reason he’s going is to talk with Matt’s sister, who he’s been insanely attracted to since high school. How is that, the sister of your best friend is always the most attractive?

Julian goes through the gate, walks around the pool. There’s noise coming from apartment #1, way in the back. Julian can’t see who all is there, but some people are convened outside Matt’s door, which is open.

“Julian!” he hears Matt shout.

“Hey buddy!” It’s Josh, who also works at the Casbah.

“Where’s Courtney?”

“I’m inside, Julian!”

“Pardon me, I’m gonna say hi to Courtney.”

Julian ducks into the apartment. Courtney’s there. Acacia is next to her, sleeping on a pile of blankets. They kiss.

“Julian, you won’t believe it. Acacia took her first steps. Matt got it on video so you can see.”

“Matt got it on video?”

“Yeah, Julian. Our baby took her first steps!”

“Thats..wonderful.” All Julian can think is how Matt got to see his baby’s first steps before he did. That Courtney is here hanging out with Matt, instead of hanging out with him. Julian goes outside.

“What exactly is the big idea?”

“What?”

“You saw my baby’s first steps before me! You videotaped it?”

“Julian, I can’t help when your baby takes her first steps. But yeah, it’s on video. Have Courtney play it for you.”

Julian looks threateningly at Matt. He can’t see Matt’s facial expression, so he doesn’t know if he’s angry, laughing, scared. “I told you to stay away from my wife.” Everything gets silent. Julian taps Matt on the shoulder. “I’m kidding, I’m joking.”

“Ok Julian,” Courtney says from inside.

Matt and Josh laugh.

“Do you want a drink?”

“Sure! What do you have?”

“I have rum.”

“Do you have something to mix it with?”

“Yeah, I have pineapple juice and Coke. Tell me what you want, I’ll make it.”

“You will?”

“Yeah Julian. What do you want?”

“Coke.”

“Strong or weak?”

“Strong.”

“Ok, I’ll be right back.”

“So, Julian, I heard some of your show the other day. You sounded good.”

“I did? I thought I sounded like shit.”

“No, no, not at all. The guitar sounded good. I couldn’t hear all of your words, from the kitchen, but you sounded good, man.”

“Do you play?”

“An instrument? No. I’m a filmmaker. I’ve been wanting to put together this documentary..or no..a short film based on the camaraderie you develop in a kitchen. You know that dance you do where everyone

works together and you're like extensively choreographing shit and before you know it it's like..this..dance you do, with everyone you work with, servers, cooks, dishwasher."

"Do you think we have that kind of dance at the Casbah?"

"I think..there's room for improvement at the Casbah."

"Well I know for myself, I can't see, so it's kind of hard to be at the height of choreography."

"Julian, I'm not picking on you specifically. I know you can't see. I'm just saying at the Casbah we all don't quite have it down to the level of art, yet. But we'll get there."

"You think so?" Julian asks. What he's really thinking is he doesn't give a shit if they ever get it down to the level of art at the Casbah. He's not in it for the long haul. In fact this city is starting to bore him. Josh is talking but Julian isn't listening. He's taking out his cigarettes. It's a new pack. He's packing them down. Opening the plastic, tossing it over the railing toward the pool. Taking one out, lighting it.

Matt comes back with Julian's drink. He asks if he can bum a cigarette.

Julian gives him one. Then they're all smoking and drinking and Julian is looking at the pool, of the reflection of lights on its surface. The white lights from in front of the doors of upstairs apartments shines in a twisted pattern, and Julian stares at it. He thinks of his mom, putting away groceries. And she saves a special sack for herself, that will go in her bedroom. Aisha is there, sitting on the floor with her knees pulled up against her chest, watching as their mom takes that last sack of groceries into her bedroom. And then Aisha and Julian meet eyes, and they know it will be a fight for the food that is in the cabinets, once it gets down low enough. And Julian knows that Aisha sneaks into Mom's room too, because he's seen the trash after she does it: the macaroni and cheese box, with the cheese packet, opened. He will need to tell her to throw her trash away outside the house, to complete her training as a food stealer.

"Julian. Julian? Julian!"

"What?"

"When is your next show going to be?"

"I don't know..if I'm having a next show."

"Bullshit," Josh says. "When's it going to be?"

"You're having a next show, Julian," Courtney says from inside the apartment.

Julian doesn't answer. He turns back to the pool and stares at the lights.

In a minute Matt is next to him. "You doing ok?"

"Doing fine."

"How's your drink?"

“The drink is strong my friend.”

“Good. I’ll get you your next one when you’re ready.”

“I think it will be a while before I take my next one, with the way this is made.” Julian thinks before he asks his next question, but he goes ahead and asks it anyway. “Is your sister here?”

“Yeah, she’s back in the back room. She’s not in the mood for a party.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“You can try.”

Julian sets his drink down by the pool railing and goes inside. He walks past Courtney and Acacia, past the kitchen, and down the hallway. He knocks on the door.

No one answers.

He knocks again.

“Matthew?”

“No, it’s Julian.”

“Oh, hi Julian.”

“Why don’t you come out and join the party?”

“I don’t feel like a party tonight.”

“It would be so nice to have you.”

“Thank you Julian, but I don’t think so.”

“Please. Just for five minutes.”

Silence.

“Is that the sound of you thinking about my offer?”

“No, that’s the sound of me being very tired and needing some sleep.”

“Well after your nap if you feel like coming out, please do.”

“Ok. Goodnight Julian.”

“Goodnight.”

Julian goes back up to the front.

“Well?”

He picks up his drink. “She won’t come out.”

“She needs some time alone, I think. Can I have another cigarette?”

“Sure.”

“You guys, I can smell the smoke in here,” Courtney says.

Julian goes to the door and closes it. It’s just him, Matt, and Josh by the pool.

“Do you know any of your neighbors?” Josh asks.

“I know there’s some hot girls that come out and use the pool,” Matt says.

“So is this true, you have video of Acacia’s first steps?”

“Yeah, you wanna see it?”

“Not now.”

“Guys, take a picture.” Josh has his phone out, and he’s aiming it at Julian and Matt.

Instinctively, they huddle together, their faces close, and they both smile. It turns out to be a great picture, even though spirits aren’t exactly running high between the two of them.

The night goes on, and on, with more drinks and cigarettes and random conversation, going inside, going outside, finally watching the footage of Acacia’s first steps on Matt’s giant TV, her lunging toward the camera when she finally fell.

And Julian feeling no shame at trying to get Suzanne to come out of her room when Courtney is sitting right there in the living room, and Suzanne isn’t someone Julian and Courtney have talked about sleeping with together—this is just someone Julian likes. But she remains in her room and eventually Matt encourages Julian to leave her alone, let her come out when she wants to, but she never comes out, not that night. And Julian remembers back to the last time he saw her with Matt, because that’s the last time he’s going to see her..ever.

It’s four a.m. and instead of walking Courtney home he makes sure she gets safely out of Matt’s house and on her way with the baby, and then he walks the other direction.

Toward downtown, he walks, managing his directions by street signs that he walks right up to. He makes it a few blocks east of Fourth Avenue, to Kate’s house. You remember—the bartender at O’Malley’s. He knocks on the door. There is no answer for a long time. He knocks again.

Kate comes to the door. “Julian! What are you doing here?”

“I need a place to sleep.”

“Come in. Is everything ok? You can sleep with me but I have someone over. It’ll be a little crowded. Or you can sleep on the couch.”

“With you.”

“Ok, come with me.” She leads him to the bedroom, where someone is definitely sleeping.

Julian can’t tell if it’s a man or a woman, but he takes off his shoes and sits on the edge of the bed.

Kate gets in bed and holds the covers open for Julian.

He lies back.

Kate covers him.

Julian lies there stiffly.

Kate leans into him and kisses his ear. “I’ll make you breakfast in the morning.”

And Julian tries to sleep. Kate won’t respond to any of his advances and he ends up lying there thinking about how he’s got to, got to, got to get out of this town.

When Julian wakes, he's the only person in the bed. He sits up. Sounds of voices from the other room. Kate and another girl. He gets up, and goes into the bathroom. He uses wet toilet paper to wipe his ass and his armpits. Runs a finger along his teeth, gargles with water. Then he goes out to the kitchen.

"Hi Julian. Did you sleep well?"

"Who is this?"

"This is Key."

Key waves. Both girls are wearing their underwear and t-shirts.

Key leans against the counter.

"You hungry Julian?"

"Uh. Not really."

"So why'd you come over here so late last night anyway?"

Julian clears his throat. "Can I smoke in here?"

"You can smoke outside. What's up with you, man?"

"Courtney."

"Oh. Problems with the old lady. Have a smoke, Julian, we'll be here."

Julian goes outside. It's cool in the mornings. He is barefoot. He sits on the porch step and lights a cigarette. The problem is Courtney is running his life. Making him get this dishwasher job, while she hardly works—delivering food to shops on Fourth Ave? She gets yo push a stroller around the avenue, he's stuck in a back room getting videoed by Matt while Matt spends his saved-from-his-last-job money. Julian's getting yelled at by Jesse and forced into safety meetings just so the two of them can bond. He never wanted to come to Tucson.

"So what's the doin' to ya, Julian?"

"Oh, nothing, just running my life."

"That's not good."

"And now, she's not cool with having other girls in the bedroom.

When the fuck did that change?"

"What? That was like y'all's thing."

"But it's not our thing anymore. It's my thing, and Courtney wants no part of it. Jade convinced her that we have problems in our relationship."

"Who's Jade?"

"This girl."

"Never heard of her."

"She's from Portland. She convinced Courtney that the only reason we're having threesomes is because there's a problem with our

marriage. Now Courtney wants to fix it. I say there was never any problem to begin with.”

“Except she’s running your life.”

“That’s been recent. She’s always concerned about money when the thing is..her family has money. She never has to worry. She’s got this secret credit card that she keeps for emergency situations. We’re not really in trouble, but she acts like we’re in trouble, like it’s necessary for me to wash dishes at the Casbah just to make ends meet. She knows she can use the card anytime!”

“That’s kinda twisted.”

“Tell me about it. And sex between us has become like we’re old folks. She lies there. I do my thing. She hardly responds. Where is the passion?”

Key looks at Kate and Kate looks at Julian. Kate says, “You were very passionate when we made love.”

“That’s what I’m talking about! I don’t want to be living little people’s lives. I’m trying to come clean of all this shit from past lives. In a past life I was a street sweeper. Now I’m a dishwasher?? Courtney has no idea what that does to me.”

“You’re a musician, Julian.”

“I know!”

“So play music.”

“I do!”

“I mean play out more. I can get you a show at O’Malleys.”

“You can?”

“Sure.”

“Well, that’s good. But. I’m not sure how much longer I’m going to be in Tucson.”

“Why?”

“Because I might be moving.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know yet. Probably..”

“It’s ok if you don’t want to talk about it. I know how plans are at the beginning.”

“Yeah. Thank you, Kate. Thanks for understanding.”

“So you want breakfast?”

“Actually, I was thinking you, me, and..was it Key?..could go back to the bedroom..”

An awkward silence.

“Key and I are..kinda seeing each other now.”

“Well congratulations. I should go.”

“You can stay for breakfast.”

“No, thank you. I need to talk to Courtney.” And Julian goes back

to the bedroom to find his shoes.

“Julian, where have you been?”

“I had to see a friend.”

“What does that mean, you ‘had to see a friend?’ Does that mean you slept with somebody?”

“I didn’t sleep with anyone, if you must know.”

“Then where were you?”

“I went over to Kate’s.”

“You went over to Kate’s.”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t sleep with her.”

“No.”

“I think that’s worse, Julian. I’m on the sidewalk with Acacia last night and you just walk the other direction? I thought we were going home. What’s so bad about this place you can’t sleep here?”

“I needed not to get yelled at.”

“That’s not fair, Julian, that’s not fair. Don’t put this back on me.”

“Courtney, I don’t want to have a fight right now.”

“This isn’t a fight. This is a simple question: why do you feel more comfortable sleeping with Kate than with me? Is it because she doesn’t know you as well?”

“It’s because over there I can get some quiet.”

“That really hurts me, Julian, you should know that.”

“I’m sorry it hurts you, I don’t mean to hurt you Courtney.”

“You won’t even sleep in the same bed with me?”

“Come on, don’t cry.”

Courtney picks up Acacia and puts her over her shoulder. She bounces up and down and Acacia makes some noises. “Is it because we have the baby?”

“No, I just..need a break sometimes.”

“Well did you get your break? Are you ready to deal with reality now? ‘Cause I need you back here with me, in reality. Julian did you hear me?”

“I hear you, I just don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ugh. Do you really expect me to believe you didn’t sleep with Kate?”

“I didn’t! I slept next to her in her bed..with her girlfriend. They didn’t want anything to do with me!”

“Did you try to have sex with her?”

“What difference does it make?”

“Just tell me.”

“Yes, I did, if you must know. I tried and failed. I laid there with my eyes open half the night, thinking about more ways to fuck Kate but none of them worked out! The next morning I learn that Kate is going out with Key.”

“Who’s Key?”

“The other girl. They’re seeing each other; Kate wants nothing to do with me.”

“That had to hurt.”

“It did, Courtney, but not as much as when you tell me to get back to reality. I’m in reality. I’m standing here with you. Do you want more help taking care of Acacia, is that it?”

“No, I’ve got Acacia just fine. What I want you to do is focus on your job.”

“What is there to focus on? I wash dishes!”

“That’s exactly what I thought. Do you know what Rishi said?”

“What did Rishi say?”

“She said they’re thinking about firing you. Because you’re not paying attention to your job.”

“Rishi said that?”

Courtney nods.

Julian heads for the back door. “I’m gonna talk with Rishi—”

“No you’re not! Don’t you walk out on me while we’re talking!”

“Courtney, I can’t take it when you yell at me. Look..you’re upsetting Acacia.”

“Acacia’s just fine!”

“Please don’t yell. I’ve got something I want to talk to you about.”

“I can’t wait for this.”

“Well—”

“I think I know what it is, Julian. Just go ahead.”

“I’m trying, if you’ll let me talk.”

Courtney sits silently. Acacia cries.

Julian wants to wait until Acacia stops crying but it sounds like that could be a while. He starts, “Courtney, things have not been going so well between us—”

“Oh great.”

“So I think it would be a good idea if we took some time apart.”

“Julian..don’t do this to me.”

“So I’d like to take the car and go to Fort Collins..for a while.

Maybe for a year. Maybe six months. I just need to get out of Tucson. This place is killing me. That job..is killing me. I can’t pay attention to it..there’s nothing substantive to pay attention to. I get yelled at by Jesse, then I get yelled at by you when I come home. Some people can live like

that; I can't."

Courtney's eyes have been welling up this whole time. To Julian's surprise, when she speaks she speaks quietly. "Take the car. That's fine. I get around here walking anyway. But don't expect me to wait for you, while you're in Fort Collins."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means if I need help raising this baby, and I can find it, I'm going to take it. I'm not waiting around for you to make up your mind to be a father. I don't think you ever wanted to be a father in the first place."

Julian says nothing.

"Go. Go to Fort Collins. I wish you well. I would say come back here if it doesn't work out but you're not coming back, are you?"

"Just," Julian says, "don't..hook up with Matt."

Courtney laughs. "That's what you think? Matt's less suited to be a father than you are. You think I've been trying to get with Matt this whole time? You really are crazy, Julian, if you think that."

"Don't tell me you don't like him."

"I like him plenty well. Fuck you, Julian. He's too obsessed with Rishi to notice I'm in any kind of trouble. Are you taking Kate with you?"

"No."

"Did you ask her?"

"No. I haven't asked anyone."

"I'm surprised by that. I really am surprised. So do you have everything you need?"

Julian looks at her. She knows what he needs, but she's going to make him ask. After all the humiliation she's put him through, about the job, about fucking other women, and she's going to make him ask. "You know what I need."

"What? What do you need? Can I give you anything else, as you leave me? You have the car. What else could you need? Oh..that. You mean you can't even leave me on your own? You have to use me on your way out the door?"

"All I need is a few hundred."

"No it's not! A few hundred will barely get you to Colorado. What are you going to do once you get there? You'll need more than a few hundred, Julian."

"Well I didn't want to ask you for too much."

"How much is too much? Just ask for what you need. I'm not going to figure this out for you."

"How 'bout..a thousand?"

"Is that what you want? A thousand?"

Julian looks away. "Sure."

"Don't ask me twice, now."

He looks back at her. "I'm done asking."
"Come on, Julian. Let's go to the ATM. Let's get your money now."
Julian just looks at her and shakes his head.
But she's standing, rocking Acacia, insisting that they go.

Denny's. Fort Collins, Colorado. Julian sleeps on a bench just inside the restaurant. When he wakes up it's still dark. There's a girl standing over him.

"What's your name?"
"Claire. What's yours?"
"Julian." He stands up, brushes himself off, makes eye contact with Claire. "And how are you tonight, Claire?"
"You mean morning," she says. She points at the clock.
Julian looks at it but it's just a blur.
"Are you new to Fort Collins?"
"As of a few hours ago, yes."
"Well you should get you some breakfast. Julian? You want a table? Usually we don't let people sleep here but you looked so peaceful."
"It was better than sleeping in my car, so thank you."
"You're welcome. You wanna sit now?"
Julian goes to the newsstand, grabs the local arts paper and an apartment guide. "Yes, would love to. Uh," he says on their walk to the table, "will you serve me?"
"I'm supposed to just be the hostess but if you want, I will. Do you know what you want?"
"Coffee, and..coffee."
"That's it for now?"
"Yes, thank you," he says, quietly. And Julian begins flipping through the arts paper. You can usually get a good idea of the scene in a town by looking at their arts paper. Good way to meet people. Or find places to meet them.
Claire brings him his coffee.
"Can I have some creamer?"
"More creamer?"
"Yes, please."
"Hold on a minute." She comes back. "Is that enough?"
"For now."
"You really like your creamer."
"Yes, I do. Do you have a boyfriend?"
"Do I have a boyfriend?"

“That’s right.”

“Yes, I do, and he’s gonna be picking me up in a couple hours, so watch yourself.”

“Oh, I need to watch myself now?”

“Are you feeling threatened?”

“Not really. Can you sit for a while?”

“I guess so.” She sits on the edge of the seat, with her knees sticking out into the aisle.

“You’re very cute, Claire.”

“Don’t get flirty, or I’m gonna have to go back up to the hostess stand.”

“Not flirting, not flirting, just stating a fact. Your boyfriend is very lucky.”

“Do you think it’s luck?”

“I think luck has a hand in everything,” he says, sitting back in his chair. Julian opens cream after cream and pours them into his coffee.

“You really like your cream.”

“I like you, Claire.”

“Stop it, Julian. I told you. I have a boyfriend.”

“What’s his name?”

“Chris.”

“Why do you love him?”

“Who ever said I love him? I just said he was my boyfriend.”

“Do you love him?”

“No.”

“Then it’s ok for you to talk to me. You’re not in love. That totally makes it ok.”

“Does it?”

“Yes, totally.”

“Totally, huh?”

“Yes. So what do you do, Claire. Other than work here?”

“Oh..nothing.”

“Come on. You must be into something.”

“Well. I write reviews of comic books. On my blog. I like comic books.”

“What’s your blog? Write it down for me, I’ll check it out.”

“Do you have a computer?”

“In my car.” Julian gestures out the window.

“Where did you come from, Julian?”

“Places.”

“Oh, no! Now you have to tell me! Where did you come from?”

“Originally I’m from Dayton, Ohio.”

“Ohio. That sounds boring.”

“Well, it is.”

“Haha Julian. You’re funny. Have you decided what you want to eat yet?”

“I’m not hungry yet.”

“Did you drive all night to get here?”

“All night and part of a day. I’m not sure what day it is now, actually.”

“Tuesday.”

“And..how long did I sleep?”

“You were there when I came on shift! Normally we kick people out who sleep but second shift said to leave you, said you’d ordered food already and just needed a little nap.”

“They said I’d ordered food?”

“Yeah.”

Julian doesn’t remember that. He must have been very tired from the drive. “I’m going out for a cigarette, Claire, would you like to come?”

“Sure.”

The two of them leave Julian’s table and go outside. It’s cold. Their breaths show in the air. Julian offers Claire a cigarette but she has her own.

“So how long till your boyfriend gets here?”

“A couple of hours.”

“I’m safe talking to you then, for a couple of hours.”

“He’s not a fighter or anything, I just better not be sitting at your table with you when he gets here.”

“Jealous guy?”

“Is he? I don’t know.”

Julian looks Claire over. He tries to imagine what kind of clothes she wears when not working at Denny’s. The back of her head is shaved, kind of a punk-style haircut. “Who do you live with?”

“Why, you wanna move in?” Claire laughs. “I live with my mother, so it wouldn’t work out.”

“Who says? Maybe your mother and I would hit it off.”

“Ewww. That’s gross Julian. Do you really think you’d like my mother?”

“Why not? I like you?”

“You never quit, do you, Julian? What do you think, you and me are gonna hook up tonight?”

“Why not? We’re two human beings, tiny balls of flesh in an infinite multiverse of possibility. We can hook up, or not hook up, or do whatever we want.”

“Is that your car there?” She points to the station wagon.

Julian nods. “You’re very perceptive. But you would have to be to

write reviews of comic books.”

“Are you really going to check out my website?”

“Ideally, you’ll show it to me.”

“But if I don’t, are you gonna check it out anyway?”

“Of course. I’m legitimately interested in what you do.”

“I gotta get back inside. If you decide you want any food, come and find me.”

Julian stands there. There’s the possibility of moving in with Claire, there’s definitely that. But better to widen his search net first, meet some more people. He must have slept through most of the day after getting here. He remembers sleeping in the car now, then coming into Denny’s because it had gotten too cold and he didn’t want to waste gas by running the car for heat.

A guy about Julian’s age drives up, parks in one of the close spots, and gets out of his car.

“Say,” Julian says.

The guy looks at him, then looks away.

“I was wondering if you could tell me where the hot spots around here are.”

The guy comes toward the Denny’s door, where Julian is smoking.

“Could you tell me where people play live music around here?”

The guy pauses at the door. “Live music?”

“Yeah.”

“Well nowhere around here. You’d have to go to Old Town. Some places around there. I don’t really know.”

“Are you a musician,” Julian asks.

“A musician? What do I look like?”

“Just asking.”

“I ain’t no musician.”

“Well, what do you do?”

“I go to college, bro! CSU! What do you think?”

“Well, just looking at you, I had no idea.”

“Don’t worry about what I do,” the guy says, and goes inside the Denny’s.

Bad omens, Julian thinks. First girl he meets has a boyfriend. First guy he talks to is a douchebag. Very iffy. He smokes the rest of his cigarette, then lights another one. This is it. He’s shivering in Fort Collins, Colorado, with just him and the station wagon. He’s once again traveling on his own, without Courtney. This is how it was after he and Amy broke up, and it was just him on the road. The smell of a new town. The excitement of starting over. All the new places to explore. He is going to do just fine without Courtney and Acacia. Just fine. And he doesn’t have to be around Matt and Tuesday and Rishi and that whole

crew. Constant drama. A bunch of reminders of his past. This is the right spot for him to be in. He never felt it for Arizona. But Colorado, is right for him.

He goes back inside, and his guess is correct. The douchebag he met at the door is Claire's boyfriend. He's drunk. He's hanging all over her at the hostess station.

"Julian, are you ready to order?" she manages to ask.

"I'll just drink coffee for now."

"How did you know his name," the boyfriend asks, as Julian walks away.

"Because he's a customer."

"You know your customer's names?"

Julian looks back at them. The boyfriend stops talking. Julian sits down at his table and takes out his notebook. He starts to write. To write about Claire and her boyfriend and how Colorado is giving him mixed signals.

Claire comes over. "Sorry about that."

"Not a problem."

"So really, do you want something to eat? It's on me."

"Why is it on you?"

"Because I feel bad. He's just drunk."

"Maybe you should be the one to drive home," Julian says.

"I will, I will. You want some eggs?"

"What I want, is your number."

"Dammit Julian." But she takes his notebook, turns it around, and in the margin writes her number. Then she looks closer at the paper.

"Are you writing about me?"

Julian turns the book around. "I always make notes of my surroundings."

Claire smiles flirtatiously. "Is that what I am now, one of your surroundings?"

Julian shrugs.

"I'll get you some eggs. You're not a vegan are you?"

"No."

"Good. 'Cause you look like the kind of crazy motherfucker who might be a vegan."

Days pass. Julian hangs out at the Denny's but Claire doesn't come back and she doesn't answer her phone. Julian tries her number a million times.

He goes into Old Town and tries the bars there. He thought it

would be a good place to find musical connections but it's just a bunch of white-baseball-cap-wearing college students. He almost gets in a fight with one, over a girl that Julian was just talking to. He wonders if it's because he's black. He wonders if that's the problem with Claire, too—that he's black.

He talks with a couple of shop owners about playing music there, but they give him the runaround. He's got to call this other guy, who organizes the music. When Julian tries calling that guy, the guy doesn't answer. There's no quick way to get a show off the ground. These people are looking at music as if it's some casual thing; Julian's looking at it like it's life and death. He has a certain amount of money remaining. When that runs out, he's fucked. He could always call Courtney and ask her to Western Union some more, but that would be too embarrassing. On about the third day he starts questioning his decision to come here.

He can't go back with Courtney, that's for sure. If 'Collins isn't going to support him, who will? And then the thought, the terrible thought, comes into his brain. It's the last thing he wants to think. He almost screams aloud when it first comes, he's so opposed to it. But then it circles back around, and plants its seed in his mind, and he starts to think of it as inevitable.

Dayton. Go back to Dayton. Save to travel more. Upgrade the station wagon to a nicer car. Something more him. Stay with Mom—stay with Mom for a little while? He tries to talk himself out of it, reminding himself how grim Dayton has been to him, the pathetic coffeehouses and small-minded people, racist white people and racist black people. No way he's meeting a girlfriend there. He's worn out the population of available white girls—they're all wary of him now.

But he's running out of money. Sleeping in the car is getting old. What choice does he have? Over a period of days, he goes from having the slightest consideration of going back to Dayton..to feeling that it is the only way he can survive. His mind is playing tricks on him, he knows that. He's got to get the spark back, kick this pessimism. 'Collins is as good a place as any, he can survive here. But that's not how it's going.

He tries calling Claire again. He could use a little company. But she doesn't answer, and she doesn't have voicemail set up. The phone just rings and rings and rings.

Just a little bit of company. He'd even take Matt's company, if that shows you how in need of it he is.

Julian is rearranging his stuff in the back of the station wagon, on kind of an alley. He's in Old Town, as far as he can tell, though he can't read the

street signs. He has the computer out on the sidewalk, and he's re-packing his clothes in milk crates, folding each item carefully.

"You can't park here." Some man, on the sidewalk, coming toward him.

"Why not?" Julian says.

"Because you're not a customer. This is reserved for customers."

"But it's ten o'clock."

"So?"

"So when does your bar open?"

"That doesn't matter. We need these spaces open for customers."

"So you say you need these spaces open for customers?"

"Yeah."

"Well you don't have any customers, so you can't mind if I park here for a second."

"This is customers only."

"How do you know I'm not a customer. Maybe I'm just waiting for your pub to open."

"I need you to move your car."

"Yes, you've made that very clear. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to finish folding my clothes and then I'll move."

The man comes toward him.

"Is that meant to be a threat?"

"Wha'd you say?"

"Are you trying to threaten me by your proximity?"

"No threat. Just asking you to leave."

"And I'm telling you, I'll leave in a minute."

"Son, you got a real problem forming here."

"Only if you make it one."

"What?"

"I said, 'Only if you make it one!' Let me ask you this. Do you have live music in your establishment?"

"Live music? We got a jukebox."

"Well I'm a musician, and if you'd allow me to play for you, I think you'll see that having some live music in a pub is a definite advantage."

"It's a what?"

"A definite advantage." Julian goes for his guitar case.

"I don't wanna hear no music. I want you to move your damn car!"

Julian takes out his guitar.

"Do you hear what I'm sayin' to you, son?"

Julian looks at the man, at his face. "Now this is a little song I call Inside the Girl." And he gets right into it, strumming his heart out, playing his best for this ignorant man.

The man stands there for a minute, then makes a dismissive motion with his hand, then goes back inside his bar.

Julian thinks about stopping, but he hates to stop in the middle of a song, so he keeps playing, right through to the end. He gets a couple of stares from people walking by on the cross street, but no one stops to listen. He finishes up with a flourish, one foot on the sidewalk, one foot on the street. Then he puts his guitar away and goes back to folding clothes.

The man comes out again, this time with someone else, his bartender maybe.

“I asked you to leave.”

“And I’m leaving. Just as soon as I finish this.”

“You’re leaving now.”

“Thanks grandpa.”

“What the fuck did you call me? You can call me daddy, if you want to call me something.”

“Yeah right. The chances of that are about as small as the chances of—”

“The chances that I’m gonna put your head through a window, son, are increasing.”

“Is that a threat? ‘Cause I can call the police and have you escorted off the premises, if you threaten me again.” Julian has his phone out. He waggles it in his hand to show them.

“Now you listen here, I want you to get in that car and get the fuck off my property.”

“I’m not on your property, sir. I’m parked in the street, legally, in front of your pub—”

“And why do you keep calling it a pub? It’s a bar, son, a bar!”

“I’m parked, legally, in front of your bar, not doing anyone any harm. So unless you want the police involved I suggest you leave me alone.”

The whole time the bartender says nothing. He just stands there backing the other guy up.

“Listen, son: if you don’t get the fuck out of here I’m gonna call the police.”

“Please do. I would welcome some reason in this conversation.”

The man shakes his finger at Julian. “You’re gonna regret this, son!”

Julian gives them both the finger.

They go back inside.

Julian debates whether he should stick around for the cops to arrive. Should he call them himself? Probably not. He’s not sure if the station wagon still has its insurance up to date. And when the owner of

the car comes up as Courtney Lang, and he's driving the car, what suspicions might that lead to?

He quits folding clothes and throws the last bunch into a milk crate. He gets in the car and drives. He had been considering getting a sandwich at that man's bar, before he met the man. People are silly. When they could be friends..they oppose each other instead. Matt would understand. That is something Matt is good for, understanding. Now he's getting sappy about Matt! Julian makes a left turn, and he gets honked at. Not sure what he did wrong exactly, maybe the other direction had the go?

He thinks about driving back to Tucson, seriously considers it, and then he's battling with which one more injures his pride: going back to Courtney or going back to Mom. What is the root of his problem? Money. He needs to fix the money side of things, then everything else will work. So what does that mean? Go back to Dayton, hole up in his room doing internet marketing, get some web site jobs, start a design company, and finally get the money flowing. Then he can travel anywhere he likes, be it Fort Collins or Japan. He's leaning toward that. His mom probably won't yell at him for coming home. Courtney probably would. He doesn't need to have Matt looking over his shoulder, videotaping him while he's working at the Casbah. What an asshole. And Tuesday, just acting neutral toward him, as she always does. He's a non-factor. She's always just waited him out. Waited for him to realize she isn't interested. She never just came out and said it. It's a certain type of cruelty, a certain type of cruelty, to do that.

At a stoplight, Julian checks his cash. He's rapidly hemorrhaging. He needs to get to a destination, fast, and stop the losses. Fuck Fort Collins. Maybe it was meant to be in another time, when he has more resources. Maybe he'll live here when he's old.

Someone's honking. Check the rear-view mirror. It's just a blur. The person honks again. And it's right then..that honk puts him over the edge. He's not going to stay here. He's going back to Dayton.

A few days later he's there. Dayton, Ohio. City of his youth. Decrepit trash hole of a city, but home nonetheless. Aisha's home when he gets there.

"Julian!" she squeals. And that's the warmest welcome he's going to get.

"Where's Mom?"

"Work."

"At Colonel White?"

“No. New work. She works at the art store on Salem Avenue.”

“Art store? Whatcha been up to?”

“Oh, Julian, ain’t nothing changed.”

“You sound very worldly.”

“How long are you staying?”

“As little as possible.”

“You say that like you hate us.”

“I could never hate you, Aisha. Where’s Andre and Adrian?”

“Adrian’s with a friend. Andre’s..away. You know he joined the Army?”

“Oh right. Right. Wow. That’s intense.”

“You can stay in your old bedroom. We haven’t used it for anything.”

“Thank you, little one. So how’re you holding up, with no big brothers and just you girls here?”

“No big brothers is nice. I can play PlayStation whenever I want.”

“No doubt. Did you miss me?”

“Not really.”

“Give me a kiss.”

She does, right on his cheek, and Julian is satisfied.

“Help me bring in a few things in?”

Aisha gets up off the couch, leaving the TV on. She goes outside in bare feet and stands by Julian as he unlocks the back of the station wagon.

“Julian! I hear you’re home.”

Julian looks toward the door. It opens. His mom comes in.

“Julian! Look at you! World traveler. Where have you been?”

“Most recently..Fort Collins, Colorado.”

“But you’re back now, huh?”

“For the moment.”

“I’m gonna cook you a special dinner tonight. I know you like ribs.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Come here, give me a hug. I missed you, Julian. Sort of got used to having you around here. Your bedroom alright? Aisha didn’t steal any of your stuff, did she?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.”

“Sometimes I come in here and catch her lying on your bed. I think she missed you. So what’s your plans? You gonna stay with us for a while?”

“That I don’t know. I thought I’d get the computer set up, do some

jobs—design jobs—and make some money.”

“You always were good with the computer. I’m so proud of you, baby. You have time to eat dinner with us tonight?”

“Of course. I’d love to. Thank you for the invitation.”

“What?”

“Thank you for the invitation.”

“You gotta get your words unstuck, J. You mumble sometimes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, anyway. I’ll have dinner ready soon. You hungry?”

“Ravenous.”

“Ok, let me leave you alone. I’ll be out here if you need anything.

Great to see you, Julian.”

Julian thinks briefly about all the times his mother has yelled at him. Now everything’s hunky dory? It’s like she doesn’t remember all the bad stuff that passed between them.

Julian closes his door and goes back on the internet. He’s looking for anything he can find: HTML, simple JavaScripting, Flash design jobs. He has accounts on the major contract sites, he’s used those in the past to get jobs. His ratings aren’t that good, but..you have to start somewhere, right?

He works until dinner, getting back online, making lists of jobs to bid on, putting out some preliminary questions to some of the jobs. Dinner is nice, it’s his mom and Adrian and Aisha and him. They all ask questions about Julian’s travels, and Julian asks questions about Andre. Julian tells them all that he’s a father, and Vivica is surprised.

“So where is she?”

“In Tucson, with her mother.”

“And who is her mother?”

“Miss Courtney Lang.”

“Why aren’t you there with them?”

“We went our separate ways.” Julian almost whispers it.

“Oooh. You are your father. You are your father all over again. What is it with you young people? You think you can be having babies all over the place, not paying them no mind. Oooh, Julian, something about that just doesn’t sit right with me.”

“She’s very well taken care of. Courtney’s family has money.”

“But don’t you think that baby wants to see its father?”

“She got to see me.”

“Are you going back?”

“Not right away.”

“Oooh. Julian. Wow. How does it feel to be a dad?”

“Not much different, actually.”

“You are your father through and through.”

They talk some more. Julian feels he's put on the spot, and he wonders why he came back here. But he knows: make money so he can travel more. He made a commitment when he was nineteen, to spend all of his twenties on the road, and his twenties aren't over, so. He sits with his mother and sisters, and looks at how much older they both are, and wonders what Aisha will be like as an adult. He decides right then that he's going out tonight. No way he can hang around here tonight. He'll go downtown, see if he can nose out a show, some live music, something.

"May I be excused now?"

"Julian, what? You're acting like you're a little child at my table again. You can be excused any time you want, and you don't need to ask about it, either. How'd you like those ribs?"

Julian nods. He's still chewing one.

"May I be excused?" Aisha asks.

"No! You may sit here until your sister's finished. We're gonna have dinner like a civilized family."

"But Julian—"

"Julian is a grown man. With a baby. He can do whatever he wants."

He takes the station wagon downtown. He doesn't even know what's open anymore. He goes up Fifth Street. There's the Oregon Emporium, but never any live music there. He hears music coming out of the Trolley Stop. He slows down and rolls down the window. He doesn't really feel like drinking but it'll have to do. He parks and walks back to the bar.

"Oh, I don't even need to ask for this motherfucker's ID," the bouncer says.

"You don't?"

"No! Julian you don't recognize me? It's Brent!" Brent hugs Julian, hard, slapping his back. "It's Brent Praeder!"

"Brent! How have you been?"

"Great! I heard you were on the road."

"Just making a pit stop."

"Good, good. Well I'll talk to you later. You here for the show?"

"I don't know who's playing, but.."

"It's my friend Joel's band. They're kind of experimental. You know they play with Speak & Spell's and shit like that. You remember Joel, right? Or was he a year before you graduated?"

"I remember Joel."

"Anyway get your ass in there, Julian. I gotta check these people out."

Julian goes inside. The place is full. Tables full. Bar full. Oh wait, there's a table over on the side, with one chair.

Julian sits at the pathetic table. He wishes he hadn't brought his bag with him. Someone's on stage, kicking a Speak & Spell. He guesses that's Joel, but can't really see. Julian takes out a notebook. He writes down his thoughts from the day, from his last little bit of driving, to seeing Aisha, to seeing his mom. He writes about Courtney and Acacia, and he thinks of calling Courtney. It would be a nice thing to do. He starts to get mad that no one's come over to serve him but then he remembers that these tables are serve yourself.

Then a miracle happens. A girl pulls over a chair. She has long blond hair and a baseball cap on backwards.

She looks directly at him and says, "What are you writing?"

Julian doesn't miss a beat. "I'm writing about synchronicity, that strange unnatural force which caused you to push your chair over here and ask, 'What are you writing?' That same force that brings countries together on a good day, and tears the world apart. It's the reason I know exactly what you are going to say next without ever having met you. Synchronicity. That's what I'm writing about."

"And what am I going to ask you next?"

"If I'll have a drink with you."

She nods. "That is very close to what I was going to ask you, yes, yes indeed."

"And you say that word, I know you are a true spark."

"What word?"

"Indeed."

"Indeed? Indeed I said indeed. And you think this makes me a..spark?"

"A true spark, I can tell it right away in your case."

"So with others it takes longer?"

"Sometimes, yes. But usually you know right away when you meet a spark."

"And what is..a spark? This is what you use to start fires, yes?"

"A spark..is..someone who has that something..a special something..inside them. It's someone who never let their light be taken away."

"And you think..I am this?"

"Indeed."

"Indeed," she says, and smiles.

"So may I join you for a drink?" Julian asks.

"Yes, you may join me. I will have.." She trails off, and in that moment, the miracle is interrupted. Another girl, about this one's same age, comes over.

“We have to go.”

“What? Now? I was just getting to know my friend..”

“Julian.”

“Kasia.” She takes his hand. “We have to go?”

Her friend nods.

“Ok. I’ll be there in..just a minute.”

The friend leaves.

Kasia runs her finger along Julian’s palm. Your love line says..”

“What does it say to you?”

“That we were supposed to meet,” Kasia says, loudly, over the noise. “Give me your number.” She holds out her arm for Julian to write on.

He writes down his number, and just as fast as Kasia came, she leaves. Julian, on the high of meeting her, writes late into the night, drinks little, and feels satisfied with the day as he drives home to his mother’s house.

When he gets home he masturbates to Kasia’s image, imagines fucking her, hopes to hell she calls.

It’s around three a.m. that he decides to check email once more. He kneels in front of the computer. There’s an email from Courtney, a long one. He doesn’t have to get through the first few lines before he reads that Courtney is pregnant with their second baby.

Kasia never calls. Julian waits three days and then gives up on her. Just another girl who is attracted to him in the moment and then loses interest, maybe when her boyfriend is around or maybe when she really thinks about the fact that he’s black.

Julian wastes no time setting up his next solo show, this time at the Ghostlight on Wayne Avenue. The manager seems a bit racist, but Julian goes ahead with it. It’s a good location and it’s about the biggest place he thinks he can book at this point in his career. None of these people know about his first two albums, self-produced gems of the indie world. The Muse Tree was his first, Disconnect his second. But someone like Joe Kettering who owns the Ghostlight doesn’t care about indie albums. He just wants someone to play music while people get their coffee, as an add on to the coffeehouse, much like people pick out paintings to go with their couch. They don’t really care about the art, they just want it to match their furniture. Joe Kettering can basically suck Julian’s dick, but it’s a place for a live show.

Julian goes through old songs. Being back in Dayton reminds him of Tuesday and Matthew, and the times they had. It reminds him of even

earlier times, when Jenny was still in town, and the theatre crew was intact. So he pulls out lyrics he hardly remembers, songs from high school, from before the albums. He doesn't think about the Ghostlight patrons. He closes his eyes and sings, he sings for people who aren't in the room and may never be again. He sings because he can sing, plays because he can play. Joe Kettering can be as white as he wants, can serve coffee to the most racist people in Dayton; Julian's going to play anyway. He's not even playing for them. He's just playing, and playing for the tips. And then he opens his eyes, and who is in the front row but Kasia?

She's not with a boyfriend. She seems to have come there alone. Julian smiles, and keeps singing. Now he has someone to play for, someone worthy of listening to his music. He'll take a break soon, and talk to her, assuming no boyfriend comes along. He can work her, wear her down into fucking him. She didn't seem that innocent, she'll probably be up to it. Hopefully she has a place, because taking her back to his mom's place is not an option. With Aisha right around the corner? His mom showing up all the time? Forget it.

He looks again at Kasia. She's cupping her coffee in both hands, looking right up at him. He smiles at her. She smiles back. Definitely fuckable. He'll have his dick inside her before the day is out. Rip those white girl panties off. Maybe she'll even go for the ass, or let him go for it. He's smiling at her, so sweetly, while thinking of his dick entering her, her gasping, maybe wincing a little 'cause it's so big. Yeah, hopefully she has a mattress somewhere around here. Keep playing. Stay with it. Impress her with the song. That's the best thing about being a musician. Women love men who are expressive. Musicians always get laid.

After his set, he sits down beside her.

"You know I forgot to tell you, last time we met, that Julian is a Polish name."

"Are you Polish?"

"That is where I am from, yes. Kasia is short for Katarzyna.

Would you like me to write it down?"

Julian gets out one of his notebooks. He lets her write her name.

"How long have you been in..America?"

"Eleven weeks. I am going home in one more."

"No, you're going home? Why?"

"Because I do not wish to stay here forever."

"Are you enjoying the show?"

"Your show? Yes I am enjoying it. You have excellent diction. I can understand the words as you sing. You should come hang out with me after the show."

"I was just going to ask you if you wanted to."

"What? Hang out? Yes, I think it would be a good idea."

“So you read palms?”

“Why yes, I do. I have read palms since I was a little girl. My father taught me how.”

“I could do a palm reading for you, if you like.”

“You read palms? What a coincidence.”

“There’s no such thing.”

“What?”

“There’s no such thing as coincidence. It’s synchronicity, that you’re here today.”

“This is the universe telling us something?”

“Exactly. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No. You are quick to ask the question. Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Like I said, we will hang out. No guarantees. But I think I like this one, Julian.”

“And I, you.”

“Just don’t play it too fast.”

“Of course. Who do you live with?”

“My uncle. He lives in America now.”

“Is he home?”

“Is he at home? Why you want to know this?”

Julian smiles. “So do you know many Julians?”

“When I was little. There was a boy named Julian. And also we have a moviestar, Julian Sobczak. Have you heard of him?”

“No.”

“Well we do not have movies like you have movies here. But to us, he is big star.”

“I’m going to play my next set now. Will you stay?”

“Of course.”

“Indeed.” So Julian goes back onto the platform and straps the guitar over his shoulder. He plays with vigour, keeping his eyes closed most of the time but looking at Kasia sometimes. He likes the way she talks in English. The simplicity and straightforwardness of her sentences, it’s like the language is forcing her to be honest. She is definitely a spark; Matthew and Tuesday would like this one. Julian takes a couple songs off the end of his playlist and finishes early. He skips talking with Joe Kettering and just takes his tips and goes out the back entrance with Kasia.

It’s a bright, warm day.

“So where do you want to go?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Can we go to your place?”

“To my house?”

“Yes. Your house. Unless your uncle is going to be there?”

“He might be there but we can still go.”

“Did you drive?”

“No I walked.”

“Let me drive us there,” Julian offers, and he takes her to the station wagon.

“This is your car?”

“Yes.”

“Not exactly..how you say: babe mobile?”

“It’s not exactly a babe mobile. Well I didn’t buy it.”

“Who bought it? Your ex girlfriend buy it!”

“We bought it together.”

“And you got the car?”

“She got a lot of stuff.”

“What did you give her?”

“A baby.”

“Oh! That is hilarious, Julian.”

He’s not sure if she understands he isn’t joking, but he doesn’t explain. “Where is your house?”

“It’s on this street. Just drive that way for about six blocks.”

Julian turns onto Wayne Avenue. “You might want to put on your seatbelt,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t see.”

She makes no motion to put on her seatbelt. “Julian, if you can’t see, how is it you have license to drive car?”

“I had contacts then.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Kasia, is your uncle going to be home?”

“Why are you so concerned about my uncle?”

“Well, does he..like black people?”

“We do not have this level of racism against black people as you have here. My uncle will not hate you because you are black.”

“It’s not racist in Poland?”

“Oh yes, it is racist in Poland. Just not against blacks.”

“How did you..like the show?”

“Oh you were wonderful, Julian. You play very well. And your music, it is very..spiritual. You made me cry.”

“I did? During which song?”

“I do not know which song it was, but it was in your second set.”

“Kiss the Girl? The Day of the Daffodils?”

Kasia laughs. “What is this ‘day of the daffodils?’”

“It was this day..that me and my friends had. It’s a day that will

last forever.”

“You name your days?”

“The special ones.”

“I bet you have had many special days.”

“This is a special day.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m here with you.”

To his surprise, Kasia takes Julian’s hand and rubs it against her face.

“Oh, sweet Julian, you are already dear to me.”

She gives his hand back so he can drive, but he puts it on her leg instead.

He looks over at her.

She is blushing.

Yes, Matthew would definitely like this one. Would probably get off on her being Polish, too. The two of them, Matthew and Julian..so similar, it’s no surprise that their taste in women is identical. But this time there is no Matt around to fuck things up with his ever-so-innocent-seeming flirtation, his stealing someone right from under Julian’s breath. It would be just Kasia and him, hopefully without her uncle. And when Julian came in her sweet Polish pussy it would be so right, the perfect score, he will have made it there first. Will he be the first black guy she is with? Even if she’s only fucking him because he’s black, for the experience, that’s ok. And with her going back to Poland in a week he doesn’t have to worry about commitment, catching feelings. He can even get her pregnant, and he doesn’t have to be around for the decision of what to do with it. They’re not going to make him pay child support from Poland, right?

“So, where is it?”

“This is it, slow down.”

“This?”

“Yes. What’s the matter, you don’t like my house?”

“Your house is fine, no, I like the wood. Should I park—?”

“Park in the driveway. My uncle isn’t home. Park right there.”

And Julian backs up, stopping traffic, so that he can fit into the driveway. When he pulls into the driveway, he thinks of his dick sliding into Kasia’s pussy, and he hopes that will happen soon.

—————

Upstairs, Kasia takes Julian into her bedroom. She opens up her laptop.

“I will show you my short film from college. I studied film production. You will like this film. It has lots of sex.”

They sit on Kasia's bed and she shows him the film. It does, indeed, have lots of sex, fast-motion sequences of people fucking in a warehouse.

"Where did you shoot this?"

"In my cousin's factory. He manufactures carpet. This is a side room in his factory. We were allowed to shoot there on one condition: no sex. My uncle read my script and he wasn't happy with all the fucking. But it's my movie, it's my film, you know? I wanted to do this, so I did it."

"Did you show it at your school?"

"My teacher saw it, but I wasn't allowed to exhibition with the other students. They said it was pornography. But I didn't care. I made my movie."

"That's nice lighting there."

"Thank you, Julian, do you know anything about film production?"

"I took a video class in high school."

"So you know about C-stands and gobo arms."

"Absolutely."

"What is a gobo arm?"

Julian sits silent.

"You don't know what a gobo arm is?"

"They must not have covered that."

"What kind of video class did you go to? Did they have lighting as part of your course?"

"Lighting?"

Kasia laughs. "I'm serious. What kind of course did you go to that didn't have lighting as part of the curriculum?"

"We learned lighting, we just didn't learn gobo arms."

"The gobo arm is what you use to do lighting, scrims and bounce cards. Did you use bounce and fill?"

"Maybe our course was a little light on lighting?"

"I don't believe they didn't teach you lighting. That's half of making the film!"

"Can we fuck now?"

"Oh, Julian, you are so naughty. You know I brought you up to my bedroom to fuck. That is why we are here. And yet you ask me straight out, do you want to fuck? You are a naughty boy."

Julian rubs Kasia's leg. "How much more of your movie is left to go?"

"About an hour."

"Did you make a feature?"

"A feature? What is this?"

"A feature-length film."

"It is one hour and twenty minutes. That's all I can tell you. I

don't know what is 'feature.'"

"I made a film. It's called Buuuppy And Other Acid Flashbacks."

"What is 'buuuppy?' I know what is acid flashbacks."

"It's like a burp. It's like a cross between 'bro' and 'burp.'"

"What does this mean? Your film is about a burp?"

"You'd have to see it."

"Do you have a copy?"

"At my house."

"You have a house?"

"I'm living with my mother, currently."

"Julian, if you want to have sex with me, then have sex with me."

"Well I want you to be involved in the process."

"I will be involved."

Julian leans in to kiss Kasia. They kiss, and Julian is kneeling over her, rubbing between her legs, trying to get the button on her jeans open. Kasia helps him: she unbuttons the jeans and shuffles them off. She is wearing pretty panties, with a tiny pink bow in the front. Julian pulls them off her. He takes off his own jeans. He's not wearing underwear. Kasia comes forward and puts Julian's cock in her mouth. He is already hard. He pushes her down on the bed, climbs on top of her, and spreads her legs with his. Then he reaches down and guides his dick into her. It's a tight fit at first, with Kasia moaning and a frown on her face. But then they get it in, and Kasia is doing another kind of moaning. Julian fucks her, and he comes in her, with his hands on her shoulders, pressing her into the bed.

"Oh, Julian, you made me come."

"I did?"

"Yes, several times. It has been a long time since a boy could make me come just by fucking me. You have done this."

Julian presses into her one more time.

Kasia runs her hands through Julian's hair, feeling individual braids.

"Do you think it was different..because I'm black?"

"No. What does that have to do with anything?"

"I just wondered. Since you said no boy had made you come just by fucking you. And I did. Is it because I'm black?"

"Julian, don't talk silly talk. It is not because you are black. It is because I like you, I genuine like you. We are able to talk. You know about film. I will read your palm now." She takes his hand and looks at it. She traces the lines with her fingers.

Julian enjoys the last moments of being inside her; he's getting soft now.

"Oh," Kasia says.

“What?”

“Oh wow. You might not like to hear this.”

“What?”

“Your fate line. Look how it is. And my fate line. Look how it is. This means. You are coming to Poland with me. I would not joke about this, and I don’t know what your feelings are, but see this break?”

“Yeah.”

“We each have a break in the same place.”

“Yeah.”

“I think you need to come to Poland with me, Julian.”

“Ok.” Julian smiles.

“You can say ok, just like that?”

“Indeed.”

“Don’t you need to check with your mom?”

“I travel freely.”

“Do you have a passport?”

“Yes.”

“Has it expired?”

“No.”

“You would come to Poland with me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Kasia, take me to Poland with you.”

Kasia hugs Julian tight. “You will be my lover and you will make me come by fucking me. We will have a beautiful life. I will show you a new place in the world. You will like it, I guarantee. Do you really want to come?”

“Yes, Kasia.”

“Yes, Julian, I think you will be glad you said yes. I like you, Julian. Do you like me in return?”

“Of course I like you. I’ve liked you since the moment I met you.”

“Are you mad that I did not call?”

“I’m not mad. I wanted you to call.”

“Well I will give you my number now. You can call me anytime you want. We leave for Poland in a week. I will help you pack. Do you have a warm jacket?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Good. You will need that. Julian, do you think you will get tired of me?”

“Tired of you!”

“Yes, do you think you will want other girls?”

Julian thinks of how sweet Kasia’s pussy is.

“Because I cannot bear it if you are with another girl. Especially if

we are fucking, you have to be with just me.”

“I will, baby, I will.”

“Ok, good. I thank you.” She gives Julian a little pat on the back. “I will work on my next film and you can play your music. I think you will find many places to play when we get to Poland. And my brother is a musician. You can play together, if you want.”

“You’re working on a next film?”

“Yes, this one is about fucking as well. You see, I was raped by my uncle when I was younger, so I always think about fucking. I am fixated on fucking. For this next film I will have funding so there will be more fucking than last time. It is good, yes, to make movies about fucking? Can you think of something you would rather watch at the cinema?”

“Not really. Can I help with your film. If you need a cinematographer, I can do that.”

“You are trained as a cinematographer?”

“Well, self-trained.”

“That is excellent, Julian. You will be my cinematographer. The production office for the film is in my bedroom, so we meet there. That will be convenient for you, since you will be living there. Oh, Julian, to bring you back to my country, is amazing, yes? Do you still want to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, my little peach, we meet each other, this is a miracle. You’re just like me except you are a man. You write in notebooks, you are quiet but you perform. Your music fills me with joy. I could listen to you sing forever. Will you sing to me in our bedroom?”

Julian laughs.

“Will you?”

“Sure.”

“You are such an artist! And you know film, too! And you fuck me..oooh boy you fuck me like I have never been fucked. You make me come. Do you think you could fuck again?”

“Right now?”

“Can you fuck right now?”

“In a minute.”

“In one minute? Ok..” Kasia smiles.

“Are you..sure you want to take me?”

“Take you with me to Poland?”

“Why not? We have to find out how long your travel visa can last, or maybe you can get a student visa, if you go to school there. But yes, my Julian, I want you there with me.”

“Ok, then I’ll go.”

Kasia claps.

“You can call me Jules if you want.”

“Jules?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, Jules. I will call you Jules.”

They both laugh. And for a moment they hold each other, looking each other in the eyes. Julian can see her from this close, can see her bright eyes and her fresh face, her girl’s smile, and that little dimpled chin.

He wants to go to Poland and never come back. He wants to go there, become a citizen there, travel Europe, become famous in Europe. Maybe he has to make it there first, then America will accept him. Lots of artists did better in Europe. Maybe he would be one of them.

The thought of leaving Dayton makes him hard again. He reaches between Kasia’s legs and maneuvers his dick so that it’s just barely pressing into her.

He looks at her, as in a question.

She answers without speaking. She nods.

And Julian pushes it in.

That day Julian packs. He gets everything into one large duffel bag, knowing he can buy more clothes when he gets there. Unfortunately there’s no room to take his computer, so he leaves it behind with a stack of stuff in his bedroom. And of course he takes his guitar.

He and Kasia see each other every day that week, usually at her place, one time at his. She wanted to meet his mother.

“Julian, you’re going to Poland now?”

“Yep.”

“Kasia, you take good care of him, he’s my oldest. Oh, Julian, come here, give me a hug.”

His mother’s affection seems false to him, it seems put on. When did she go from food-hoarding, screaming mom to all-hugs, all-smiles mom? Maybe since they’ve all grown up a bit. Julian shakes his head.

“Are you ok, baby?”

“Yes, just thinking,” he tells Kasia. “Can we go now?”

Julian practically lives in Kasia’s room for the week. He meets Kasia’s uncle, the one who raped her when she was little? He seems like a gentle guy. Still, Julian wants to kill him, for doing that to her. He doesn’t deserve to live.

Kasia manages to get Julian a ticket on the same plane from Dayton to New York, and from New York to Warsaw-Chopin, but from Warsaw-Chopin to Łódź they have different flights. Kasia puts it on her credit card.

On the first two flights they are able to sit next to each other. They snuggle. As they leave New York, Julian makes a promise to himself that he won't return to the States for at least one year. He'll see as much of Europe as possible. Europe to him is a magical place, an older place. America is just a teenager. Europe is at least middle-aged. And he loves the accents. Something about Kasia's reminds him of slightly-retarded special education kids from high school, and he loves that about it. Something slow, premeditated, about her English. He leans up against Kasia and she puts her head on his shoulder. Julian puts his hand on her leg. He would like to join the mile-high club but isn't sure how realistic it is.

On the flight their first movie is Erin Brockovich. Julian likes Julia Roberts but the in-flight headphones suck and he can barely hear it with the volume turned all the way up. Kasia goes to sleep almost instantly on their international flight, so Julian is left with a lot of time to think. He takes out his notebook and writes a list of goals for the year:

In Poland:

1. Establish a presence for Julean and the Rai
2. F. A. L. T. W.
3. Make \$\$ — Internet Mktg. / Web Design
residual income?
4. Learn Java
5. Help Kasia with her film (cinematographer)

There are other scribbled notes at the bottom, but those are the main points.

Julean and the Rai is his band. The "and the Rai" part is supposed to be the other members of the band, which as of now are nonexistent. But he would find them, he would find the Rai, in Poland.

F. A. L. T. W. stands for "Fuck At Least Twelve Women" and is written in abbreviated form in case Kasia or someone else stumbles across his journal. Twelve seems like a good number because there are twelve months in a year. He doesn't want to fuck more than that—he's not looking to become a gigolo. He just wants to meet women at a decent rate.

In item #3 he underlined "residual income?" because, although he wants to develop forms of residual income, he doesn't know how to do that using his internet skills. How do you create residual income through internet marketing and web design? He doesn't know, but there must be a way.

He wants to learn Java, a programming language, because it would make him more viable as an internet guru. He knows Java is the language

to learn because Matt told him. Julian has a Java book (Learn Java in 21 Days) in his duffel bag. He just needs to set aside the time to study it.

And last, he wants to help Kasia with her film. He was the cinematographer of numerous short films in high school, so he knows he can be the cinematographer on this. Different cameras, a more complex lighting setup..but basically the same thing. He's going to make her film look great.

He makes other lists, notes, writes down possible lyrics to a new song about meeting Kasia in Dayton, about how different she is compared to everyone else in that town. And then Julian, too, falls asleep, and doesn't wake up until it's nighttime and they're somewhere over the Atlantic.

As soon as they deplane in Warsaw-Chopin, Julian can feel the difference. People look at him differently. He's still exotic, 'cause he's black, but the look these white people are giving him is different than the looks he gets from white people in Dayton. People move out of his way when he walks, instead of ignoring him and blocking his way. When he smiles at women, they smile back. With Kasia on his arm, he smiles at a girl in a red dress and a black hat, and she smiles back so warmly Julian is sure he could get her to fuck him.

Kasia waits with Julian until his flight leaves. His is leaving four hours before hers, so he'll arrive in Łódź and have time to kill before Kasia arrives. Julian is glad about this; he wants to explore the Łódź airport with no one with him, maybe meet some people. It seems right that he should arrive in Łódź alone.

They kiss before Julian boards. Then Julian is on his own, walking down the entry ramp toward the airplane.

In Łódź, Julian realizes all he has is American money, and he can't find a money changer. Should have done that in Warsaw. So he tries to buy a coffee with dollars but they won't let him. This is going to be a longer four hours than he expected.

So he settles down in one of the terminals, stretching his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles, and he starts sketching people he sees. He only gets glimpses, everyone is blurry, but he pretends he is an artist and has traveled here to do a show. Mostly he sketches women, and he looks at them as though he has full right to do so, as if the necessity of sketching them makes it ok to stare. A little girl catches him,

and she comes over and looks at the notebook. She points to the sketch that Julian is making of her.

“You’re very smart,” he says.

She looks surprised, and then her mother calls her back, and the little girl goes.

By the time Kasia arrives, Julian has explored every inch of the Łódź airport, made ten pages worth of sketches in an otherwise sketch-free notebook, and is dying for a cup of coffee.

“Julian!” Kasia says, when she de-planes.

“Hey baby.”

“Oooh, I like it when you call me baby.”

“I’m reeally thirsty for some coffee.”

“Let’s get some. Julian, did you behave yourself in the airport?”

He isn’t sure if she’s kidding. “Uh..yeah?”

“Well at least you didn’t run off with any of these beautiful Polish women.”

“Can you help me change my money for Polish money?”

“Zloty. Our money is called zloty. We will go by a bank. I still have some U.S. dollars as well. Are you starting to doubt your decision to come here?”

“No, no. So far it’s great.”

“But you’ve only seen the airport! Come with me. We will get our bags and take a cab. I will ask him to go by downtown so you can see some of our historic buildings.”

“I saw train maps. Can we take the train?”

“Not to my house. Well, you can..but..it is better we take a cab, since we have our bags. Come this way. The baggage area is over here.”

They get their bags and Julian’s guitar, and they load into a taxi, a tiny yellow-and-black one, and they have to set the guitar in the front seat so that everything fits.

Kasia speaks to the driver in Polish. “I just asked him to take us to my film school. You are surprised, I bet, that we have film school in Poland.”

When they get there, Julian can see some buildings through a white fence, lots of trees, and that’s about it.

“I’ll take you with me sometime so you can see inside.” Kasia grabs Julian’s hand and squeezes.

Julian's feeling almost like he's married, and he doesn't like the claustrophobic nature of it. He frees his hand from Kasia's and cracks his knuckles.

"Do you want to go home now?"

"Yes." Julian stares out the window the whole way there. Everything he sees is brand new. Every car, every street, every billboard, is something he's never seen before. He should have done this sooner. He looks at Kasia. She is looking out her window, too. She seems content. She doesn't seem like that high maintenance a person.

When they get to Kasia's home Julian sees how simple it is, and how small. She is one apartment in a row of apartments. Her place has three stories, but they are the tiniest little areas. Spaces carved out in the corners of the rooms: a bean bag and a reading lamp. Her tiny kitchen table, just big enough for two. The cab driver helps bring in their bags, then it's just the two of them, standing in Kasia's apartment, in Poland. Julian grabs Kasia, and pulls her close. Kasia unbuttons the button on her jeans, then unzips, then wriggles them down. Julian pushes her down on the loveseat.

Kasia waits till Julian has his dick inside her. Then she says, "Now you're home."

The next morning, Kasia shows Julian the tram that runs close to her house. They ride together into downtown Łódź, where Kasia takes him to the DaimlerChrysler bank to change their American dollars. She withdraws money from her account to give to Julian—walking around money, she calls it. Then she leaves him to go by her film school.

"You will be able to find your way back ok?"

"Yes."

"You will be ok with the money I gave you?"

"Yes."

"You love me?"

"Yes. Come here Kasia." He takes her and kisses her, on the sidewalk in front of the DaimlerChrysler. "Now get going."

"I'll see you at home."

"See you," he says, and he turns away from her, holding his guitar in one hand, his other hand in his pocket where the money is. He's wearing a hat, even though it's a warm, sunny day. He goes around the block, finding an open courtyard where many people are walking and some sitting, eating their lunches.

He opens his guitar case and takes out his guitar. He sets the guitar case in front of him, open, and throws some zloty in to make it look

like he's already gotten tips. Then he starts to play.

He plays through the first few songs on The Muse Tree, and almost immediately a small crowd gathers. A woman dressed in jeans and a sleeveless shirt comes up and tips him. Julian can't see exactly how much she's given him, and the Polish money leaves him at a loss for relative values, so even if he could see, he wouldn't know how much money it is. But she tips him. She tips him and she returns to her standing place, and listens. Business people pass without stopping. A family comes up, and the dad gives money to his son to put into the guitar case. It is the single best response he's gotten out of every show he's ever done, every time he's ever busked.

He plays with passion, bolstered by every tip, every person who stands there watching. He rips into the guitar, strumming the hell out of it. He's afraid he'll break a string. But here come more people, and more tips. He starts telling himself he's found a home, where people are generous and interested and where no one seems to care that he's black. In the U.S., people aren't giving their children money to put in his guitar case, they're ushering their children along, away from the strange musician, the suspect black man who's probably homeless, playing for his drug money. He gets none of that here, and it almost makes him cry. People are listening to him. He plays almost until it's dark, his fingers cramping, before he decides to close up shop.

He manages to find the stop for the homeward-bound tram. Once aboard, he sits in the very back, window seat, and stares out at the scenery on the other side of the plastic. A feeling rises in his stomach, this pure excitement. He will fuck Kasia tonight. At least once. And tomorrow he'll be on the lookout for the first of the twelve women he will fuck in the next twelve months.

He gets off the tram and doesn't recognize where he is. He walks one way for about ten minutes, and doesn't see Kasia's street. He goes back to the tram stop and walks the other way, and he finally comes to it, the little side street that leads to Beli Bartoka, which is where they live.

He has similar problems finding the exact apartment number. He remembers what the staircase looks like but finds himself in the completely wrong building. When he knocks on the door he thinks is Kasia's, it's a father holding his child, and Julian says, "I'm sorry," and the man just nods and closes the door. He tries another staircase and is afraid to knock on the door, but it opens automatically and there is Kasia.

"Hello!"

"How did you know that I was here?"

"I heard you on the stairs. You were singing."

"I was?"

Kasia nods.

“I played outside today. I got tips.”

“You did?”

Julian looks at her and smiles.

“Don’t you love it here in Poland,” she says, putting her arms around Julian’s neck. She kisses his cheek. “Make love to me.”

“I was planning to.”

“Well let your plan become a reality,” she says.

“First help me count this money.” He opens his guitar case and takes out the guitar.

“You made all this?”

“How much is it?”

Kasia moves the money, bill by bill, into a new pile. “This is almost fifty bucks!” She smiles.

“Not bad!” Julian says. “Not bad! You know, I could feel the energy of the crowd today. I had like twenty people watching at one point! I don’t know if any of them could understand what I was saying, but I could feel that they felt the music.”

“Most people here speak English,” Kasia says. “Are you going to play again?”

“Hell yeah I am!” Julian thinks about giving Kasia back some of the money she gave him, since he made such good tips. But he thinks better of it: he’ll keep both sets of money just in case. You never know when you might need some extra cash.

“Julian. Julian.”

“Yeah.”

“Where were you? I think you went on a little trip right now. I was asking you if you want squash for dinner. Does that sound good?”

Julian isn’t sure he even knows what squash is, but it is certainly a vegetable. “I’d rather have meat.”

“Ok, you want meat. We can go out for dinner tonight. I don’t have—wait, I might..” She gets up and goes to her freezer. “Yes! I will make you kaszanka. Perfect for a meat lover.”

“What is kaszanka? Am I saying it right?”

“Yes, you are saying it right, and what it is is..blood sausage. You have had it before?”

“Oh, yes, that sounds wonderful Kasia.”

“Do you like sauerkraut?”

“Love it.”

“Great! I will make you traditional Polish meal. Come keep me company. Or you can play me music. I’ll even give you tip!” Kasia works at preparing the meal.

Julian stands behind her at the stove and feels her up. He runs his hands over her clothed body, kissing her neck and unbuttoning the button

on her jeans.

“Stop it, Julian.”

Julian unzips her jeans and pushes them down a little.

“I am trying to cook here?”

Julian puts his hand inside the crotch of her jeans.

Kasia turns around. She has a knife in her hand. “Am I going to have to cut you with my knife?”

Julian turns her around so she’s facing the stove again.

“So I cook, you pleasure me, is that it?”

Julian puts his hand inside her panties.

She leans back against him, still with the knife in her hand. She lets him play with her, put his fingers inside her. She makes an “mmm” sound. “You know, Julian, it would probably make sense for you to go to a Polish class. They have classes for foreigners. That’s what you are now, a foreigner.”

“And yet I felt more at home here than I have in a lifetime of living in the States.”

“I’m glad you had a good day. Would you be interested in a Polish class? It would help you mix in better, and I think it’s required if you want to move your citizenship here. Have you thought about whether you want to stay?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

“It is too soon to ask you this. But you only have ninety days before you need a work visa to stay. I don’t know all the rules. But you can ask.”

“I’ll look into it.”

“Oh, Julian, I hope you can stay. You would improve my life. But I understand, this place is new to you—”

“I want to stay.”

“Then you should learn Polish. I will help you find a class.”

Julian zips Kasia’s jeans and buttons their button.

“Are you done with me?”

“For now.” And Julian goes into the living room and plays his guitar, waiting for Kasia to finish making dinner. He plays her the beginning of the set he played on the street today. He feels expansive, he feels amazing. That he could come halfway across the world, that he could learn the language of this place and eventually be so far away from America that America would be irrelevant to him. That is possible. That degree of distancing himself from America is possible. He feels an awakening, like a new part of him is just being born. And Kasia is part of it. She is special. She loves him properly, is here to help him. It is right that she is making dinner, that she is serving him. He is a king. He was born that way and he has been brought up that way, even though few

around him knew this. He is King Arthur, and Matt is Sir Lancelot, and there have been so, so many Guineveres. He plays his music, and plays it loud, hoping the neighbors will hear. This is his time, his place, and he's taking full advantage of it. Stretching out his cock to stick inside of Kasia, to reach the full depth of her, owning her body with his. He wishes this could last forever, that this would always be the way it is, a woman to sleep with, a hot meal, and the satisfaction of doing his art and being appreciated for it.

"Julian?"

"What?"

"Dinner is ready."

He keeps playing.

"Julian!"

"What?"

"Dinner."

"Let me finish this song." Julian opens his eyes. He sees Kasia set out two candles and put them on the table.

She lights them with a cigarette lighter. Then she leans back against the kitchen counter and reaches in her pocket for cigarettes. She lights one and it is the smell of Kasia smoking that makes Julian put down the guitar and venture into the kitchen.

Polish class turns out to be a pain in the ass. He has to ride two trams to the outskirts of the city, even though Kasia has a car. She has a car but she doesn't use it. Only on special occasions.

His class has about fifteen students. The teacher is this exceedingly short woman named Lidia Gorski. She writes her name on the whiteboard the first day of class. She speaks entirely in Polish, no English at all. She has pictures, on her laptop, of objects, and she speaks the name which is written in Polish below the object. The whole class is projected on the front board. Julian is reduced to reading aloud, with the whole class, these Polish nouns that Lidia is pronouncing. The whole school aspect of it is demeaning. He stops pronouncing the words, opens his notebooks, and writes. It's times like these he feels very alone in Poland, when he's stuck here without Kasia, doing this menial task of learning nouns. He wants to be fluent in Polish, but isn't there a better way? He'll have to search on the internet for a program that lets you learn Polish—maybe they can get the Berlitz package for Polish.

His teacher is saying "dom" and pointing to the picture of the house. Oh, like "domicile," Julian thinks. He says the word in his mind. Then she has a picture of a hat, and she's saying, "kapelusz." Julian

listens to the voices pronouncing the words, in the dark room. Most people are just dully repeating what the teacher says. One guy, an Australian, is making fun of the teacher with his pronunciation. At least he's not just going along with the program. Julian hears a girl to his right, pronouncing the Polish with an English accent. He looks over at her. She is wearing these funky overalls that look like pajamas, with a cap that looks like it's out of Alice in Wonderland, floppy felt. And she's wearing Chuck Taylors, one red and one blue. He watches her lips as she pronounces "ręka," and he misses the picture on the screen. Then the girl with the floppy hat looks at him, and he looks away.

After class he makes a point to find her.

"Find me interesting, did ya?"

"I'm Julian."

"I'm Penny. Well, is ya going to stand there staring at me or is we going to take a walk?"

"A walk? Sure, let's walk."

They're outside and they both light cigarettes.

"Can I have one of those?"

Julian offers her the pack.

"Where'd you get 'em?"

"Ohio. America."

"Yeah I know where Ohio is, yeah? I've never been there."

"No reason to go."

"Is that where you're from?"

"Born and raised. But I've travelled."

"Oh yeah, where to?"

"Different places in my country. Texas, Arizona, Colorado. You're from England?"

"How'd you guess?"

"What brought you here?"

"My fucking boyfriend. He was Polish. I get here and the fuck, he breaks up with me. Do you believe that?"

"So why are you still taking the class?"

"You mean why am I still here?"

Julian nods.

"I'm here because I bloody like Poland, that's why. I still live with him. We just don't fuck anymore. And he wants me out, too, you can tell. So he can get on with some little twats he finds out here. Checking out the talent, you know. You got a girlfriend, Julian?"

"Me..no." Saying this reminds him that Kasia is supposed to pick him up tonight, from class, to go out to dinner. He takes a long drag on his cigarette, then says, "We've got to go back."

"Why?"

“Because I just remembered my sister was going to be picking me up but I’d rather stay out with you, if that’s alright.”

“You mean you want to hang out with me?”

“If that’s alright.”

“Well, fine, but I don’t know where we’re bloody going to go. We can’t go to my place. Can we go to your place, go hang out with your sister?”

“No, she’s doing school work, she needs her time to herself.”

“I suppose we could go to a coffeehouse. What you think?”

“Brilliant.”

“Brilliant!? Now you’re talking like me!”

“Here’s my sister, I’ll be right back. Wait for me here.”

So Penny sits on the steps in front of the building where Polish class is, and Julian goes out to meet Kasia, who is waiting in her car.

“Ready?”

“Actually..”

“What, Julian?”

“I think I’m going to go around and explore, I need to find coffeehouses I can play at.”

“You want to explore? Right now?”

“Yes.”

“I thought we were going to dinner.”

“I know but I really have to get on this, before I’m here too long. I need to play out more, to make more money.”

“Why you need money? I have enough for the both of us.”

“I don’t like being dependent on someone else. I need to be able to make my own money.”

“I respect that, Julian. I understand. But why tonight? Coffeehouses will be closing in a few hours anyway.”

“I got inspired. Tonight. In class. I’m going to just look around for a few hours, then I’ll come home.”

“You want me to come with you? You want me to drive?”

“No, I don’t want to interrupt your evening.”

“My evening..was supposed to be going out with you.”

“Can we go out later?”

“The restaurant closes at ten. Come have dinner with me? I have special things I want to tell you.”

“Kasia, I can’t tonight.”

“You’re really not coming, are you? I can’t convince you?”

Julian stands upright and lights a cigarette. He can’t see Kasia’s face anymore.

Her hand reaches out of the car and grabs his belt buckle. “When will you have dinner with me?”

“Any night but tonight.”

“Ok, go. Go. I will see you at home at what time?”

“Soon.”

“Soon could mean tomorrow morning. Are you coming home tonight?”

“Probably,” he says quietly.

“Ok. I let you go. Be careful. Bye.”

“Bye.”

And Kasia drives away.

Julian goes back to Penny, on the steps.

“That’s not your sister.”

“Yes it is.”

“Are you adopted?”

“No, she is.”

“You think I’m thick? That’s your girlfriend! You send her home and you want to shag me?”

“We’re having problems.”

“Right you are!”

“She and I are broken up. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m worryin’, I am. What you want with me?”

“I just want to hang out.”

“Well hang out is all it’s going to be.”

“That’s fine. Let’s go, let’s find a place to sit inside we can get a cup of coffee.”

So Penny and Julian walk to the tram station, to head closer in to the city.

“What you do, Julian?”

“I’m a musician.”

“Like how?”

“I play the guitar. I’m in a band called Julean and the Rai, and we’re just getting together to do our third studio album. Do you play music?”

“I wish I could. No, I don’t do anything like that.”

“What do you do?”

“I can juggle. Nah, I do magic, like.”

“A female magician.”

“A female magician, that’s right.”

“Can you make Miss Gorski disappear?”

“Can I make Miss Gorski disappear? I can make your todger disappear.”

“What’s a todger?”

“What you think?”

Julian laughs.

“You’re a very bad boy, Julian, I can tell. You dump your girlfriend for the evening to go out with me. You have any other girlfriends besides me and her?”

“Not in this country.”

“Not in this country! The boy’s insane.”

“Do you find me attractive?”

“Quite. Do you find me?”

“Indeed.”

“Indeed? Is that what you say?”

“Indeed.”

“Indeed. Well. I guess you better give me your number.”

Julian takes out his phone.

“Did your girlfriend buy you that?”

“Yes,” Julian nods. “Did your boyfriend buy you that?”

“As a matter of fact, he did. Ok, let’s have it.”

Julian tells Penny his number.

“I’ll call you so you have mine.”

By this time they’re at the tram station. Penny leans up against a sign detailing the tram’s route. Julian thinks she looks beautiful. And he’s never met a female magician.

“Do a trick.”

“You want to see some magic?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, come here.”

He takes a step closer to her and she slings her arm around him and kisses him.

“Wasn’t that magical?”

“Indeed.”

“Indeed. You like saying that word? And don’t say ‘indeed.’”

Julian laughs.

They ride the tram together to downtown Łódź.

Then Penny says she better go her way for the night. “I’ll see you in Miss Gorski’s.”

“Don’t you want to hang out some more?”

“Not tonight, Julian. I’m tired. Say hi to your girl for me.” And Penny’s gone, off around the block to get her tram.

Julian goes home.

When he gets there Kasia is sitting on the loveseat, not doing anything, her back straight, her hands folded in her lap. “I did not expect you this early.”

“I wanted to come home and see you.”

“And see me you do. Have a seat.”

Julian sits next to her.

“I want to talk about something.”

“Ok.”

“How was your class tonight?”

“It was fine.”

“Did you learn any new words?”

“I learned ‘tramwaj.’”

“That is an easy one. Do you like your teacher?”

“There’s nothing much to like about her.”

“I am pregnant, Julian. I thought you should know. My period did not come this month. Today I bought a pregnancy test. I am positive.” She pauses for a long time. “What do you think of this?”

“I’m happy.”

“You want to have baby with me?”

“Of course.”

“Are you sure? Because it is not too late.”

“I think you should do whatever you want with it.”

“That is not what I wanted you to say. You either want to have the baby or you don’t. I want to know what you think.”

“I think..we would make a beautiful baby, Kasia.”

“I think so too, Julian. Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Ok.” Kasia exhales. “Now who was that girl you were walking with tonight? Is she a friend of yours from class?”

Months pass. Polish class gets harder. Instead of viewing slides, they carry on real, but simple, conversations. They say things like “Gdzie jest łazienka?” and “Poproszę zupe.” Penny and Julian fuck, and he likes when she talks while they’re doing it. It’s crazy, all the sneaking around, but to Julian definitely worth it.

One day, when Kasia is picking Julian up for class, Penny comes up to the car. She knocks on Kasia’s window. Kasia rolls it down.

Penny hands her a letter, in a sealed envelope. “Open it when ya get home.”

Julian tries to catch Penny but she’s gone.

“What do you think this is?” asks Kasia.

And Julian only wishes he knew. The whole ride home he’s nervous. He racks his mind for what Penny could want to say, and the worst thing he can come up with is that Penny has come clean about her and Julian’s fucking, and felt it necessary to report this to Kasia. This is Penny’s fucked-up way of breaking up with him. This is going to make Polish class very awkward.

When they get home, Kasia places the letter on the kitchen counter. She corners Julian on the couch. "What is in the letter?" she asks.

"I don't know," Julian finally says.

"I would rather hear it from you than read it from her."

Julian squirms. He doesn't know what to say.

"Do you have a thing for her?"

"For that girl? No, Kasia, never."

"Are you going to pretend you don't know her name?"

"I know her name. It's Penny Corbett. We got to know each other in Polish class."

"How well did you get to know her?"

"I feel like I'm being interrogated."

"I don't want to interrogate you, Julian. I just want to know what's in that letter."

"You and me both."

They sit in silence for a moment.

"Ok," Kasia says, and she gets up. She goes to the letter, picks it up, and brings it to her desk. She opens the lap drawer and puts the letter in.

"So that's it?" Julian says.

"I don't need to read it if there's nothing in it."

"Aren't you curious?"

"No. Are you?"

Julian doesn't know how to play this game. "Let's burn it," he says.

"You want to burn it?"

"Yes. That Penny girl is a little crazy. Whatever it is, we don't need to read it."

"You would rather we burn the letter."

"Yes." Julian keeps his face pointed at Kasia, with an even expression. This should get her to go along with him.

"Well let's burn it then." Kasia takes out her cigarette lighter. She holds it under the letter. She looks at Julian. "But what if it contains an invitation to a dinner party? What if Penny Corbett is writing to invite us over to her house?"

"Do you want me to read it to you?" Julian says.

"I'm starting to think I do want to read this." Kasia puts away the cigarette lighter. She waves the envelope around.

"Just read it," Julian says. "I'm tired of this."

"You want me to read it?"

"Go ahead," he says.

"Are you keeping secrets from me with this girl?"

“Just read the letter.”

“You won’t answer me. I think that says something. You refuse to answer me about whether you are keeping secrets with this girl.”

“I have no idea what’s in that letter. Just open it. Penny’s crazy, it probably says all kinds of crazy stuff.”

“How convenient, that Penny is crazy.”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“Well you’re acting guilty, Julian, you are!”

“I’m not guilty of anything. Open the letter.”

So Kasia does. She rips off one side of the envelope and removes the letter from inside. She’s standing in front of Julian while she reads it. When she’s done, she sets the piece of paper down on the coffee table.

Julian looks in Kasia’s eyes, but she doesn’t let on what she’s thinking. He leans forward and picks up the letter.

Dear Kasia,

I’m sorry to be writing you this letter at all.

Julian intrigues me and [scratched out]. We have become close. I want to bring him back home with me to England. I’m not sure if you’ll understand how much I like your boy. But, the fact is I’m pregnant (Julian does not know this so please keep this letter twixt us girls). And I think it’s wrong for a child not to have his Daddy present. I want this to be civil between you and me. Please know I’m doing the best thing I know how by telling you.

Penny

Julian places the letter back on top of its envelope. He looks Kasia directly in the eye and doesn’t falter.

“So she’s crazy, huh?”

“Totally mad.”

“Julian, don’t play games with me. Where and when did you find the time to make love to this girl? Where did you do it? At her place?”

Julian just looks at Kasia.

“At my place? Julian, tell me you did not make love to this girl in my apartment..in our apartment! Tell me you did not make love to this girl in our bed!”

“We used the couch,” Julian says.

“Oh! You are crazy, you are the crazy one for bringing her back to our place. You did this when I was at school?”

“Some afternoons when I knew you were going to be out.”

“Julian. You did not know she was pregnant with your baby?”

“She’s obsessed with me. She’s probably making that part up.”

“Did you not have safe sex with her? Oh, Julian, how could you do this to us? When I am pregnant with your baby, now she is pregnant with your baby..”

“Like I said, I really doubt that she’s pregnant.”

“But you do not deny you fucked her?”

Julian just looks at Kasia. He says nothing.

“And now you are silent. You are silent! You cannot tell me that yes you did this thing? You are killing me with this. Killing me!”

“Kasia. Come sit down.”

“Sit down with you on the couch where YOU FUCKED HER!? I cannot. I cannot sit with you there. Do I even believe you that you did not use our bed? You have lied to me about her, why wouldn’t you lie to me about this? Did you fuck her in our bed, Julian?”

“What does it matter?”

“So you did! You did fuck her in our bed. I told you in America, this is one thing I cannot stand, is if you cheat on me. That you had to be with just one girl. You said you were able to do that. You were not! I want to kick you out but where will you go? Maybe back to America.”

“I’m not going back to America.”

“Well you cannot stay here.”

“I thought I might go to England.”

“To be with her.”

“I’m not with Penny, I’m telling you. She’s crazy.”

“Oh yeah, she is crazy. She is the one getting two women pregnant. You have nothing to do with this.”

“I wouldn’t be going to England to be with her.”

“This is supposed to make me feel better? You would be going to England to what? Fall in love with some other girl? A new girl? How many new girls do you need?”

“I’ll leave tomorrow.”

“With what? How will you get to England?”

“By train.”

“You have no money, just your tips. Do you have enough for a train ticket?”

“Yes.”

“I am lucky Penny wrote this letter. Now I may still have time to get rid of this child.”

“Don’t do that.”

“You have no say in it!” Kasia screams. She sits on the floor and cries. “Now I may have time to get rid of it. With you, I would have had

this child. Without you, like Penny says, the baby has no father. You think I would have this baby by myself?"

"You could."

"No I could not. Are you made up, then? You're going to England?"

"Yes."

"I will give you money."

"You don't have to do that—"

"I will give you money! You need more than a train ticket, you need to have a place to stay once you get there, if you are not lying to me and will not be staying with Miss Penny Corbett."

"I'm not staying with her."

"Good! I am not trying to give her money. This money is for you, Julian, to get set up. I hope you will play your music there and I hope you will write me when I write you. This was not meant to be, you and me. Can you stop loving Penny and stay with me and we can have a baby together?"

He says nothing.

"I did not think so." Kasia snuffles. "I thought highly of you, Julian. For a while I thought you loved me. But you need new women. That is your curse. I think you should go tonight." Kasia goes to her desk again, finds her checkbook. She writes a check and gives it to Julian.

He looks at the amount. He had no idea Kasia had so much saved. It's enough for him to live on for half a year.

"You will have to cash it here, before you go. Put your money in a bank, Julian. I would welcome you to stay until morning but I cannot stand that you are here."

So Julian packs his duffel bag. He doesn't make eye contact with Kasia as he's moving about the apartment, gathering his things. He takes the duffel bag and his guitar, one in each hand, and Kasia is facing the other way when he walks out the door.