as we used to sing

by sam deleo

chapter 1

He's a man well acquainted with rivers. So, as he wakes up slumped against a cement wall near the waterline, Emilio Chaccone is not unconcerned about the glut of alcohol mounting a surge back up his esophagus, or the fact that he has found himself sleeping outdoors. But he wants to listen to the river first, to let it carry off the other sounds that have collected around him during the night, that are gathering around him now. He still remembers how to do this.

Light rain sieves the blue husk of a pre-dawn sky and beads on the rails of the steel bridge above him. The droplets rupture as quickly as they form, warmth lingering in the metal surfaces from an extended heat wave. As smoothly as it descends the rain streams across the seared ground toward the banks of the river. Veils of steam lift from the patchwork of asphalt and earth and rise past the melting pearls of the streetlamps.

Occasional showers in the evenings are all that have snuffed the spark needed for a sizable fire, especially in the hills outside the city. The ground always dries by morning. Few people ever notice a rain has fallen. Today will be the same.

It was still too early for commuters, and, with the curfew imposed at the war's onset many years ago, much too late for pedestrians. A rusty blotch perforated the tin sky in the east, just enough to have roused Chaccone, then the second man sleeping at the base of the bridge connecting the neighborhood to the central downtown district.

A group of wealthy families in the mid-19th Century gave birth to the neighborhood by building their homes on the other side of the river, apart from the industrial squalor choking the city at the time. Three triangular blocks facing each other like wedges of a broken circle at the foot of the bridge marked the namesake and entry to the district, "Tri-Corner." The name traced back to more than a few stories about its origins, but the most plausible version had its original name of Tri-Borough changing to Tri-Corner to better reflect the streets and architecture that later developed around the intersection. A zealous city council representative of the district during the 1950s insisted the name was linked to the hats of the American Revolution, but was later identified as an investor in a company that tried marketing replicas of the hats to neighborhood retailers and school districts, with little success.

Perhaps it was a harbinger of the area's decline. In the early 1960s, business closings and waves of urban flight signaled the end of Tri-Corner's growth.

In pursuit of his friend, Chaccone had run down the four-lane avenue perpendicular to the bridge. It had been barren like all the other streets, sounding their footsteps back to them like stones skipping across water. In decades past, First Avenue greeted visitors with family-owned shops and delis, a sycamore- and oak-lined thoroughfare with regular train service at all hours of the day. Now, in the moonless night, a cracked barber pole near the intersection by the bridge resembled a relic from a forgotten carnival. Sheets of plywood covered the window space of what was a women's shoe store. A bit further from the bridge a crumbled storefront left a hollow gap in the block like a missing tooth, with piles of bricks and debris pushed against the back wall as if from mortar shellings. The yellow neon glow at the end of the block came from the barred windows and signage of one of the few operating businesses, a gas mart that, in addition to fuel, sold convenience items, temporary credit approvals from a drive-through bank window, wireless phone services, and fast food counters offering burgers, fried chicken and tacos. Mosquitoes spiraled lazily in the grainy light, reaching the end of their options, the whole corner fluorescently blinking as if filtered through the prism of a sticky insect strip.

Breathing at various capacities inside the signature intersection's two- to five-story brick buildings were airport workers and delivery drivers, out-of-work carpenters, line cooks, drug dealers, addicts, members of housekeeping staffs, as well as a scattering of those who burrowed into the abandoned garage or shop front until they were holed out by police or security details.

"Hey. You alive?" said Chaccone as an orange shaft of light inched down a bridge support. This was the first night he had spent outside since he was a youth. His back was too stiff for him to stand up at the moment and rouse his friend Browne. He rested on his knees and touched a welt on his forehead like a boxer trying to buy as much time as possible before getting counted out. He wore blue jeans and a white V-neck tee shirt under an unzipped black nylon jacket. The straight lines of his thin, lanky frame were broken only by the beginnings of a beer belly, protruding more than usual by his stretching backward on his knees, and a thick tangle of black and white hair reaching almost to his shoulders. He wore plastic black-framed glasses.

"Who's there!?"

"Me. Emo." Chaccone tried straightening his spine and groaned. "You didn't want to sleep on my couch last night. I didn't want to leave you alone here."

"Where?"

"Here, Delaney Street Bridge. I came to see you play last night at the hotel. Remember?" He stretched again, this time with less pain. "It's me, damn it. Emo!"

"I'm Johnny Browne."

"I know!"

"How you know?"

Browne quickly turned his head and cupped his ears to listen. Like interferenced chatter from an old transistor radio, voices echoed faintly from the city side of the bridge.

"Grunts," he whispered, suddenly much more coherent. "Shut up and stay down."

The noise quickly outpaced the light gathering on the walls, but didn't separate or become any more distinct as it neared. Wild "whoo-hooooooos!" mixed with groans, guttural syllables and punctuations of more screaming. Chaccone's muscles tensed again; sure, he'd heard of Grunts, but he'd never *heard* them. A dozen or so youths — the two males in front actually looked to be well into their 20s or even early 30s, the two breeder girls in back slightly younger — ambled toward the bridge through the stripes of night shadow and faint sunlight, the withering gold glow of the downtown skyline their backdrop. Their clothes nodded to the latest fashions but were dirty and torn from repeated wear and living outdoors. The males all wore heavy construction shoes or military-issue, calf-high boots. Their hair had rigidly formed into unwashed clumps.

Browne and Chaccone followed the voices above them with their eyes, listening for any detour of boots coming down the side walkways leading under the bridge. They had all halted in the middle of the bridge, as if sensing the blood heat from the two bodies beneath the asphalt.

"Gaaaoow! Harrrrgh!" one of them moaned, "Booaahh!" another, and soon all of them were screaming and jumping up and down and stomping. "Gawaaoow!" one side seemed to be yelling, and "Aieeeeyaa!" screamed the other, as if in answer.

"Across the bridge," Browne thought hard, "across the bridge, get across the bridge." There was no place to run without being spotted and he knew they attacked first and *didn't* ask questions later.

A furious din uncoiled as they finally ran downhill from the viaduct and made their way into the neighborhood, smashing car windows, toppling trashcans, looting the rare storefront for food or clothing, screaming until blood spots likely leeched the tissue in the backs of their throats. A few lights turned on in the apartment buildings above and quickly turned back off, the mistakes of rookies or, more likely, immigrants. With flickerings of nostalgia, some may have mistaken a few of the sounds for farm animals being slaughtered, but this was a long ways from the green. All the same, one look was all it ever took to convince them of the sagacity of non-intervention, one glimpse to imprint the image in memory for future recognition. Everyone else in the neighborhood knew who it was in the same way one instantly recognizes the siren of an emergency vehicle.

Gangs were not rampant, but along with the risks of muggings, they prevented most people from any notions of challenging curfew. Safe travel at night was by car, not on foot. The rare police or private security presence in Tri-Corner was almost always to enforce evictions. Grunts and their competitors, Toughs, could be distinguished from each other by region and race nationally, though the police who had arrested or made contact with them had no clue as to their specific turfs or territories, had no real theories of how they organized. Far from portents of some grand and dramatic terminus, most people could not remember exactly when Grunts and Toughs were born in the now decades-old economic slide. Most people had given up hope for grand and dramatic ends long ago.

As suddenly as they had descended the bridge, they were gone, moving deeper into the quadrant.

"I got to get on up outta' here," said Browne. "If I was you, I wouldn't go that way." He pointed in the direction of the Grunts and, then, as if discovering the scrapes on his palms and the clothes he was wearing for the first time, rubbed dirt from

his hands with saliva and brushed off his sports jacket and oversized pants, took off his pork pie hat and beat the dust from it.

"Hold on, man," Chaccone protested.

"I told you, I don't need you to help, just listen. And you have." Chaccone walked toward him as he got up to leave.

"Stay back, Emo. I'm Jimmy John Browne."

The sounds of the Grunts screaming, shattering glass and upending objects in their path had finally faded, but when the silence resettled the air still felt loaded with their charge. Shards of rust spread across the cloud cover without anchor.

chapter 2

Browne had been flighty at practice earlier in the afternoon, trying out different time signatures and veering from song to song without signaling Cummings and Harris, the bassist and drummer he had played with on and off for years.

"Let's stick together a minute, man," said Harris, trying to lift Browne's attention from the piano. "Quit actin' crazy, you ain't crazy. Here, here we go now, J.J."

"I'm not there, either, Joe," said Cummings after a few measures. Browne went by Joe, as well as the nickname J.J., because he liked the way they sounded. He wasn't answering either of them. He wasn't thinking of anything, just feeling his fingers play. Then he was skirting through a tangled melody with his eyes closed, past amorphous images parading through his mind — black fields shadowed by peaks and valleys like notes on sheet music, rays of moonlight on the horizon, and, in brief glimpses when his eyes almost opened, the blue sheen of rivers at night.

They practiced in a red-brick cottage house Cummings had converted into a studio in the aluminum-clad residential section of Tri-Corner far from the river. Lining both sides of the alley, an eight-foot-high patchwork of wood fencing had been constructed by residents to shroud their homes from view. The band entered and exited the house from the backyard, the wood fence walling off access from the alley. Contractors provided trash pick-up once a month, about the only time alleyways were passable by car. Cummings had soundproofed the cottage house to guard against intrusion from those who might inform on their playing in hopes of a reward, as well as the dumpster divers who sifted through the alleys and the two families who had constructed shanties in the small turnabout spaces at either end of the block. Steel bars over an alley window protected the instruments from theft.

Sometimes Browne practiced late and spent the night on the single bed that lined the alley-side wall. Cummings' wife begrudgingly agreed to this arrangement, declaring it would end the first time she looked out a window to find the "vagrant" peeing in her backyard. Browne preferred his own space, anyway. If a rental space or hotel provided access to a piano, that was enough, the rooms could be snake holes.

His address for the last few years had been The Hotel Standard in Tri-Corner, which harbored an old Steinway in the entrance to the bar from the lobby. The air inside the hotel had the stale yet papery fresh scent of a library. Grime smudges and flaking white paint blemished the fine rounded plaster of archways and entrances. A multi-colored floral carpet lined the lobby. Usually staring off into unknown distances, two or three lonely tenants always seemed to be sitting in the lobby's faux-wicker chairs placed around a few coffee tables. An old hardwood floor with narrow slats in the bar creaked under the weight of steps. Daylight from the lobby shrank inside the bar as if one were entering a tunnel.

Browne had convinced the owner that the place needed the ambience live music could provide on Friday and Saturday evenings to draw people into the bar and keep them there, and more importantly, that the money this could bring in outweighed the risk of getting caught in violation of the performance statutes. For Saturdays, he had even convinced him to pay for the added ambience of drums and bass to accompany the piano for a short while. This was all the owner said he could possibly afford. He had no idea Browne also was playing the piano for tips during the week, usually in the late afternoons and early evenings when he returned from his job in the city and his mind could find rest on the length of the keyboard. This was foolish, given the chances of either the owner finding out or word spreading to the wrong ears, but Browne didn't care. It was the only place beside the carriage house where he could play.

Most musicians did not fare any better than Browne. Harris and Cummings, never completely at ease with playing the Saturday gig, eventually gave in to their wives' concerns about taking underground jobs like the one at The Standard. Browne carried on solo to keep the show alive. The three of them continued their rehearsals on Saturday afternoons simply for the opportunity to play and keep their chops up for that rare, profitable and safe opportunity, though they knew those chances had all but disappeared now.

The piano was Browne's true home, if the hotel surrounding it often played a rude host. Especially mid-ballad during a set, Browne could hear the steps on the bar floor's high-pitched, out-of-tune "strings" transformed into the slower brush work of shoe heels burying themselves in the blades of the carpet, one after the other on the path to the hallway restrooms, repeating a circle of steps in odd rhythms that colored the songs beyond his control, tied his playing to a plodding nausea, a waltzing schizophrenia, always something a bit more than song themselves. The chatter of voices and feet also meant no one was paying much attention to his playing.

Even before the first cigarette was lit, a haze circulated through the bar and rendered some corners murkier than others, the pools of dull shine on the dark cherry wood bar breaking through every few feet and the rest of it vanishing into obsidian. By the time Browne started at 9 p.m. there were three people present, not counting Elise, the bartender/waitress/manager/bouncer with whom Browne shared a long and guarded past checkered by more than just the white and black of their skin. Closest to Browne was an older man at the end of the bar who occasionally encouraged himself aloud as he worked on his drink. Near the waitress station, a man and a woman sat close together on stools and talked lowly, often shaking their heads in disagreement. After a few bars Browne didn't notice any of it.

He closed his eyes when he played and often lost track of time. His set lengths were so wildly inconsistent that Elise

sometimes reminded him to take breaks by flinging bottle caps at his head from behind the bar. With the piano stationed near the lobby, it was easy for the three customers to continue their conversations at the bar without Browne interrupting them, even during the flurries when he mashed the keys with his fists. Only Elise watched and listened. Ten minutes in, Chaccone arrived and took a barstool. Now the audience was four. It wasn't going to be a big night for tip jars, either Browne's or Elise's.

A banana moon sliced above The Standard's roofline through a cloudless navy blue sky. Though the horizons were still clear, Browne's left elbow was starting to ache as it often did when rainstorms gathered and the barometer sank. His was the kind of old scar born from an act of idiocy whose origins not even he could pinpoint any longer. But consequently, he did not enjoy rain.

He played far past the discomfort, until he felt himself entering a new landscape: a stuttering, shy sensuality, then playfulness, maybe a frolic on the wet grasses of North Carolina where he grew up, the smell of night air, some greasy strokes of blues, red beans and rice, the lightness of fugues, darkness and death, stars piercing black velvet, slowly light again, morning, the sea, a generous and violent sea under him, carrying him out, carrying him in; and, for Chaccone, after settling in his chair: sadness, brightness, reds and blues, disagreement and resolution, sunlight in orange groves, freedom… He reached into the pocket of his sport coat and grabbed his phone to film Browne. He had never attempted this before at one of Browne's shows, but maybe it could help somehow, he thought. He fumbled and dropped the phone, picked it up and set it to record again. It started and quickly stopped. Browne's left hand built a blur of fingers. He cleared the phone and pressed it to record again, but it seemed jammed somehow, as if stuck back in an analog quagmire. Browne's raised his right hand and pounded the keys repeatedly. Annoyed but engrossed in his distraction, Chaccone slumped on his barstool and was examining the phone when he was blinded and nearly knocked over by a blow to his forehead, tears flooding his eyes, and suddenly a cold sensation in his crotch, as if his urine hadn't had a chance to warm before its unexpected release. From 20 feet away, Browne had slipped his right hand under his bench while keeping rhythm with his left and underhanded Chaccone a can of beer. Elise usually only allowed Browne to drink from his smuggled cache, but, as it was Chaccone, she brought over a cold towel for his head and a glass for the PBR in his lap.

Toward the end of Browne's last set the couple on the stools began yelling at each other, one of them taking their outside leg to the floor to offer resistance whenever the other got pushy, until the momentum swung again to the other side, and then back and forth and back and forth again, like a seesaw. Browne played louder, rising to the mood. Elise informed them she was cutting them off. The man immediately made a grab for the one- or two-dollar tip he'd placed on the bar at the start of the night, a con man's front for other soldiers who never arrived, but Elise slammed one of their beer mugs down where his hand had been and swept the money away. Challenged, the man rose unsteadily to his feet, but the woman must have seen the conviction in Elise's eyes and convinced him to leave with her. Almost instinctively, Browne had reached full gallop at this instant, stopped, then plinked the keys in uneven intervals to fade his set to a close as the couple skulked out. He got up and moved to a barstool.

"You trying to fucking kill me!?" Chaccone said.

"You looked like you needed a drink. And then you drank it. I'm a scientist!"

"Not so loud, Johnny, I'm trying to close. Don't start attracting your fans now," Elise said, nodding toward the two hotel residents in the lobby passed out in the wicker chairs. Browne was guzzling a beer and did not register her remark.

"Can we go to your place, Els', finish some beer? Just for a minute," said Browne.

"I want to talk to you about music," said Chaccone.

"We are talking about music," said Browne.

Elise cleared the register and made a deposit in the safe while Browne gathered what was left of his case of beer and the three of them headed up the hotel's creaky staircase. Chaccone had known Elise almost as long as he'd known Browne. But, perhaps because they were separated for long stretches by his working abroad, he always acted as if their meetings were re-introductory. In the beginning years this grated on Elise, but over time she grew used to it and played along. He didn't know whether it was her presence that caused him to act so irrationally or something in himself, or both.

The structure of Elise's face had maintained its classic, high-cheek-boned, V-shaped form, even if skin had now begun to bunch around her eyes and brow. She wore her graying blond hair on top of her head usually, was a bit heavy, though not enough to disguise the steep curves sloping her tall frame, and possessed ice blue eyes. For Chaccone, full of the beer Browne had been feeding him, her figure quickly transformed into its younger visage. The mounds of thighs and ass pulsing through her slacks no longer looked like middle-aged haunches to him.

Poor circulation in the hotel made it stifling in the summers and at the top of the stairs Elise stopped to take a breath and wipe her brow, lifting her blouse front to her forehead and revealing her bare torso and white bra strap. Standing directly behind her, Chaccone followed the valley between her shoulder blades, two smooth brown moles on either side staring back at him like pupils, crease down past her ribcage and spill out like a small river delta on top of her full hips and ass toward the border of her white lace bikini panties. To his surprise, the skin was more golden-hued than the porcelain white of her face. It twitched gently as the soft muscle tissue responded to the movement of her arms. The heat and inertia of the canvas released for him. As if in both inhalation and exhalation, the top of her waist lifted as the bottom half tapered downward. The stretch could have been felt beneath the touch of a palm before it even reached her skin. In his own torso now he seemed to feel some hidden motion, something unspoken that tracked from her pores to her form. It stopped him, the same way Browne's solo had stopped him earlier, minus the beer can.

In the breadth of the gesture she had used her palms and shirt tail instead of the back of her hands to wipe her brow, then flicked the sweat away from her fingers. Sweat? She was glistening for him now, not sweating. He had to collect himself and come back. Would he mistake attraction for epiphany, he wondered, as he refocused his gaze on her ass just as she turned around and looked at him.

"See something you like?" asked Elise.

Browne made a snickering sound but was determined to hold in his laughter long enough for the ensuing silence to realize

its full potential for embarrassing Chaccone, so that Chaccone might initially be confused, might momentarily think Browne was amused about some other distraction than his getting caught gawking at Elise's ass. Once the moment had set, had concretized, Browne let loose a barrage of belly laughs.

"You wouldn't, haha, you wouldn't know what to do with all of that," he said, "what you gonna do with all of that?"

He laughed so hard that he had to sit on the steps and grab a spindle in the railing with one hand.

"What you gonna do, Emo, with all-" he could not get the words through the laughter.

Elise and Chaccone both waited. She smiled with him at first, then grew impatient and began to kick Browne in his thigh to get him to stop. This made him laugh harder.

"Let's go," she said. "You'll get complaints again." More laughter.

Chaccone averted glancing up at Elise while this was happening and instead looked down the stairs, considering an exit — there would be other times, less awkward times. No, he thought finally, stay — if he was here for the music, then personal humiliation could only be part of the backstage anarchies to be suffered. Browne rolled up to his feet finally, a few snickering laughs still working their way out of him, and they all continued up to the third floor.

Residing in the same building, Browne and Elise lived as two people whose bonds had endured too long for either to escape the other. Their primary connection now was music — Elise having been a singer in her youth when she first moved to the States — followed secondly by drinking. They played vinyl albums first, then CDs, followed by their mp3 players when the nights got too sloppy to maneuver a turntable stylus or jewel box. They were all that was left for each other. All their friends had given up music and moved on when it became too risky. Elise brought out another round of beers and Chaccone forced down one more after a short protest.

"What you turning into, Emo, one of those groupies?" Browne said.

"I like the way you play alright, but not enough to sleep with you. And, I don't know why I tell you any more because you can't fucking remember, but I live here now, six blocks north."

"Figures. I get me a big ostrich-looking groupie."

"Only until I find someone else who plays like you."

"You won't. I'm Joe Browne!"

"He's played better," Elise said.

"What do you know about playin'?" Browne yelled.

"Enough, you don't need to scream," said Elise.

"Don't listen to her," said Browne to Chaccone.

"Let him make up his own mind."

Browne leaned toward Elise, the alcohol causing him to almost lose his balance: "And you think I don't know? You lounge singers should shut up when-"

"You don't tell me to shut up in my own home! I'll kick you in ze ass out uf here, mister, no help from ze accountant!" Her German accent sometimes re-emerged in her speech when she grew highly agitated.

"Accountant?" asked Chaccone.

"You don't know piano is all I'm saying," retreated Browne, realizing he'd gone too far.

"You should wish it was all you said!" she shot back.

"I need to get going," said Chaccone, smelling the smoke of a bigger fire burning between them and not wanting Elise to associate him in her memory with the quarrel.

"Why do I let you come here and act like this when you've got your own goddamn room?" Elise asked, not really interested in Browne's answer. "I'm tired, I've been waiting for your *audience* to show up all night. Go, both of you. Now!"

There were still three beers in the refrigerator but Browne didn't press things. These alcohol-fueled moments might resemble a spinning carousel of images and sounds if reflected on in the days ahead, a jumble of snorts and shouts, a light shrinking toward the middle of a room like the close of an old animated film segment. Most of it would slip away for good. But Chaccone would link back to Elise's curved and tapered waist as his first point of focus in the blur of images.

"Let's go," said Browne lowly, "she got a rag on."

Elise flung a crushed can at Browne and hit him in the back of the neck as he reached the door. This caused him to laugh again though the edge of the can had creased a small cut on his neck. Chaccone pushed him out the door and into the hall.

"Good to see you again," he said to her from the doorway, immediately regretting it. "I mean, it's been a while, I'll see you later." "Damn it," he thought upon closing the door, but couldn't think of anything else to say that warranted reopening it. The door locks clicked forcefully and loudly into place.

"Come on," said Browne.

"Let's save it for another night. It's late."

Browne was having none of it. He vaulted down the hall toward the stairwell, overshot the railing and tried to right his mistake by spinning around. Instead of redirecting himself toward the stairwell, though, he continued spinning around in circles like a record needle skipping on the same scratch over and over until Chaccone clutched him by the shoulders, grabbed his arm and led him safely down the stairs. The night had the makings of a curfew breaker already, thought Chaccone. And though Tri-Corner was not a top priority for the police wagons on curfew duty, Chaccone knew that the visibility factor, and therefore, the risk factor, increased dramatically for drunks like Browne zig-zag-wandering their way across neighborhood streets. Three curfew breaks — three felony offenses of any kind, for that matter —got you life as a habitual offender.

Chaccone followed Browne toward the handful of dive bars and speakeasies in the bowels of Tri-Corner that had managed to stay in business despite the curfew and escalating municipal taxes. A woman with a bruised left cheekbone approached and asked for a cigarette. Would they like her to smoke anything else of theirs, she asked. Chaccone gave her two cigarettes. She shuffled away hiking up her rayon stretch pants with both hands and exposing the holes in the backs of the knees. Light from a streetlamp sputtered above of her on the corner.

About the only new life visiting Tri-Corner consisted of those who had begun to venture across the bridge in search of an alternative to the private clubs, guests-only hotel bars and high-priced martini lounges downtown. Leisure came at a premium that bought one separation from the crowds. As for the crowd frequenting Tri-Corner, there was a limit to the poll shows, gamer nights and virtual kicks that could contain restless youth. They came for the cheap drinks. The grit, down-and-out characters, the layers of grime rounded the nights with a thrill.

Most were too young to have experienced the link between the shake in one's ribcage and the amps of a rock band on stage, or the feel of getting lost in the crush of bodies moving to the mix from a DJ booth, or laughing till one's eyes welled with tears from a comedian's bit in a club. Those kinds of nights had passed, save for the few like Chaccone, Browne and Elise who kept trying to relive them.

Parking was plentiful on the narrow and relatively car-less streets, so no one had to walk for long stretches. The neighborhood had gained a reputation as the accepted arena for being seen "drunk," whether one was actually drinking much or not. The presence of these new customers gave action to empty, somber rooms, as well as conversations new to these parts.

"Woooo-hooo!" a young woman exclaimed from a table behind where Chaccone and Browne sat at the bar. She stretched her arms above her until her black silk tube-top slid up high enough to expose the soft white skin beneath her breasts. The man accompanying her wore an untucked buttoned down shirt and shiny jeans with suede black cowboy boots. Browne and Chaccone waited in vain for the girl's top to come off, then turned back to the bar.

"Where should we go next?" the woman said to the man.

"We just ordered."

"Whatever," she said, then got up and circled the table as if experimenting with different vantages before sitting back down in her chair. "Wonder what's going on in downtown," she said half to herself, pulling lint from of her black slacks.

"We can go back later. Unless you want to go back now?" he said. "No. No, let's stay here for a while."

"They got it bad, these folks," said Browne. "Move down some."

"Hey there," the woman said, "how are you two darlins doing tonight?"

"Baby, leave them alone," the date said, uncomfortably glancing toward her targets at the bar. "Sorry, I mean, unless you guys want to talk to her, then cool, I don't give a damn… Did you guys want to talk to her?"

"Come on," she enthused, "let's party!" She raised her glass high and emptied it in two large swallows.

The date got up and tried to nudge her back toward their table, "She gets excited."

"So we heard," said Chaccone.

"You guys live around here?" the date asked.

"Pretty close."

"Nice. Anything happening here on Fridays?"

"Don't think Fridays has a lot to do with it," Browne said. If there weren't legal risks to informing strangers, as well as Elise

to answer to, Browne might have extended an invitation for the couple to come back to The Standard next weekend. Though crowds were hardly yet an issue for Elise to deal with, she still made sure to check the ID of the rare new face at the bar before ever allowing Browne to play, just to be safe. To Chaccone and Brown, these new faces made the neighborhood more interesting, especially the women. For business owners, the visitors brought in money and gave motion to blocks traversed more and more by straggles of vagrants picking through alleys, dealing drugs and looking for any way to avoid living exposed on the streets, where one was always vulnerable to the vacancies of detention centers and penitentiaries. At least there was a stream of people running though the neighborhood now that did not peddle deeply in its desperation. And for a few hours, the streets sounded with voices, car doors slamming, footfalls and laughter. Then it was empty again.

The familiarity of living in Tri-Corner for several years made it harder for Chaccone and Browne to relate to its newfound outsider appeal, its new "cool." They had had their own scenes in their youth, music scenes, political movements, artistic trends. But they never believed it was possible to disappear inside of one, as if the self could be contained by group membership — at least not during that brief interim between entering the world's stage at birth and exiting it stage left at death. As Chaccone responded to a woman who once asked how he could feel at home while living abroad for long stretches of time: "We're born in disguise." To create another scene, even one in lowly Tri-Corner, was not only superfluous but dangerous if one began to believe this created scene was somehow real, if the second disguise gradually made it impossible to recognize oneself.

The flip side of this, however, was that what one held valuable and true was also ephemeral, as Chaccone, Browne and Elise had discovered. And, rather than rid themselves of the illusions that multiplied like ghosts around them over the last decades, they had allowed themselves to wrongly assume what all lovers wrongly assume in blindness— that the world loves what they love. They had deeper problems to contend with now than membership or exclusion to trends.

The drinks began catching up to them. They slid off their seats and stumbled over to the open stools at the far end of the bar after escaping another round of shots the woman was loudly urging until something distracted her.

"You remember the band that was playing on the east side at Hallsey's all the time? What happened to them?" said Chaccone.

"They stopped."

"Company men?"

"Some. Dunno' about the rest."

"The band and the owner were friends, as I remember. They didn't want him to risk losing the bar. This was a couple years ago. But damn, they could make anyone get up and move."

"Even you?"

"I dance OK when I want to."

"Right."

The woman began to swivel and spin across the floor to songs in her head that more and more in the bar also seemed to hear now, while her date tried interjecting himself into the dance with stabbing hip thrusts. She danced before tables of other

visitors who welcomed the show with minor variations of the de rigueur "woo-hoo" on the scale of emphasis.

"She don't need a card, huh?" Browne griped, watching the girl move across the floor. "But I do?"

Like every other licensed performer, dancers needed New Work Cards. Browne had a New Work Card years ago before losing it, though he never actually found an opportunity to use it. Cards meant you could perform legally, not that you would get a chance to do so. You also needed access to those few who could still legally hire you to perform. Like a driver's license at the DMV, the registrations of New Work Card owners were filed in both federal and state databases, so there were no dead zones one might travel to in hopes of finding work without one. People used to sell their cards in the beginning; now it would be a struggle to find a buyer for one. Live performance, carried on underground by a few like Browne and Elise in the hidden corners of cities, was all but a dead form.

On the TV above the shelves of liquor, a rock band played inaudibly during an episode of the wildly popular phenomena known as the "poll shows." As cigarette smoke wound through the pink light of the neon tubes framing the bar's large mirror, a few neighborhood regulars tugged at their drinks quietly and watched the band gesticulate wildly. At the corner table near the entrance, four college-aged kids engaged in drinking games with quarters and playing cards.

The woman gyrated to the mirror, occasionally brushing her date away when he stepped in front of her, but gracefully and without malice, as if she had learned not to translate his efforts personally. She danced over to the drinking games table and began flashing her top up. "Yeaaaahhhh!" "Woo-hoo!" "Here we go now!" "Woo-hoo!" "Oh yeahhh!" "Go baby!" The four college kids slid their chairs in a circle for her and pulled out some dollar bills for tips. They glided their hands along the outline of her body without making contact while her date danced in the middle of the floor, apparently to the same song she danced to, and tried not to stare at what was going on. She pulsed her abdomen, donked her ass up and down rapidly, grinded her crotch as near as possible to each of their faces, then made return passes so they could stuff bills inside her beltline. After they ran out of bills she smiled and wave-winked goodbye. As if an imaginary curtain had been pulled, the students reassembled their drinking game without glancing toward her again as she walked away switching her hips side to side. She high-fived her date and they laughed uproariously on the way back to their table.

"What about Cummings and Harris?" said Chaccone.

"They been talking about trying to get contracted," said Browne, "signing up with a commercial division or studio. They got kids. Probably do the same if I was them."

"I have a few ideas for you and Elise. Instead of walking all the way back to the Standard, you can stay at my place tonight, it's closer. We can talk in the morning."

Browne suddenly threw some crumpled bills on the barhead and weaved his way out the door with Chaccone following behind him.

"Hold up!" he said, grabbing for the inside of Browne's elbow. Browne yanked his arm and spun away.

"-the fuck off," and then, unable to stop his momentum, he fell on the sidewalk. Chaccone tried to help him up, but was

pushed away. Browne squatted upright and lunged forward into the street. The sound of tires squealing and the acrid smell of rubber continued for seconds after Chaccone had caught Browne's collar and pulled him backward onto the pavement.

"Sunovabitch," Browne slurred, thrashing around and throwing roundhouses. Chaccone crab-crawled out from under the barrage of swings in fire-drill style without being glanced.

"You assholes wanna get killed!?" came from the jackknifed car door up the street. An arm made more visible in the night by a gauze wrap around the elbow extended from the open driver-side door and fired a bullet from a small-caliber pistol just above them and into the alleyway. After the single shot, the silence grew deafening with anticipation. Chaccone lay motionless on his stomach, listening, and also regretting that the man had been so quick to answer his own question for them. He lifted his head and saw Browne sitting on the sidewalk wearing the expression of a daydreamer.

"Get the fuck down!" he whisper-yelled. He heard the engine rev loudly and the sound of the tires squealing moving away from them.

Browne got up again and began weaving side to side down the pavement, walking a little faster every step that proved to him he could somehow remain upright. Chaccone scrambled up after him, careful to make sure the car's taillights fade from red to pink in the distance as he followed.

"Hold up!"

"Stay the hell away!" Browne made the corner and now began a stuttered jog toward the cement monolith at base of the bridge about three blocks ahead. Because of First Avenue's downhill slope and Browne's level of inebriation, his jog couldn't help snowballing into a full-tilted churn of elbows and knees. It had begun to rain lightly and the dry film of dirt on the streets set up a greasy resin. But even after he fell, if Browne had not paused after getting back on his feet to raise his middle fingers to the drizzling sky and scream at the rain, there was little chance Chaccone would have heard him and spotted his smudged outline in the moonless night.

At the bridge base, Browne gasped to catch his breath, examined both sides of his skinned and bleeding hands, then, his lungs finally relaxing, almost immediately passed out slumped in a cubbyhole on the river side of the monolithic column. Chaccone followed down toward the river, hoping to find no one else under the bridge beside Browne. The gunshot had luckily not prompted any police sirens. A light hush of rain was all he could hear now. The streetlamp on the corner threw a pale blue sphere on top of the wet pavement but did not stretch far enough to illuminate the column.

Rain stippled swaths of the river tempered by the green glow of the boat lights undergirding the bridge, clearance markers for traffic. Facing into the darkness and standing where he believed he had last sighted Browne tilting skyward, Chaccone noticed a slumped silhouette at the base of the column, the flow of the water in the background serving to better frame the stillness in the foreground.

He approached cautiously until he was close enough to recognize Browne and felt under his nose for a breath. He examined his body as best he could in the darkness. He wasn't certain at first whether he had been hurt from his fall, and Browne would not wake up no matter how he jostled him. He couldn't leave him here alone. He sat down with his back against the

column and faced the river. It was almost curfew now. He rested his head against the cement, the rain ticking away around him, and before nodding off, reflected on the last few years.

They had not been fruitful. He had struggled to remain independent while more and more of his trade sources in Latin America were bought out by large companies. But more worrisome to him than this, he felt the buoyancy of his spirit challenged at every moment now. Marooned in the middle of a game he had fought to avoid playing, it was harder to locate what had given him sustenance in the past, and there was the growing fear that only he was aware of this, save for his closest contacts like Browne and Elise, as if everyone had adapted to an oxygen depletion in the air but him. He was astonished and even a bit envious at how quickly normalcy reasserted itself for people, no matter how drastically their circumstances changed. Maybe it was fear, he thought. In any case, he wasn't going to give up. But there felt like less room to breathe.

He awoke to a rust in the dawn sky, the moment before an arrival of voices that sounded spontaneously and recklessly playful at first, a rebellion against the keeping of hours and quotidian routines, if only they were not in such a strange tongue. He awoke to uncertainty as raw as the column's grain of cement against his face, to the world he constantly tried reviving with his personal hopes even though it was dead and there was nothing left to escape anymore, only the jumble of actions, the whir of motion, metal and plastic, hurtling past the eyeless windows and doors of gray buildings, past the giant torn billboards, the acres of chained lots, spaces expanded and restricted simultaneously, the faded memory that there was once a choice other than simple force and fear, now buried deep in the pits of peoples' stomachs. Every day now felt a bit farther from the day before.

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"I have pursued my self, and been pursued by it," Chaccone thought upon limping back to his apartment in the morning. Especially when he was hungover, he had a habit of tossing melodramatic philosophical daydreams around in his head as if to deodorize the vile excursions of the night before. They helped add distance and purpose to acts like getting drunk and sleeping outdoors unnecessarily.

"I have made both peace and war with my self, followed it home and also to wrong addresses, felt secure from its façade of limitations and desperately oppressed by them, used it and been used by it, felt it desert me in dangerous places, defended it and denied knowing anything about it, and finally, loved it and seen the moment when I would need to kill it."

He wasn't always sure if it made sense. But it was reverie. For him, uncertainty and identity existed symbiotically until the end. But he sensed that, in the time he had left, a farewell of sorts was still possible to all that he valued and felt had now passed away.

"What is to be done?" he thought. He held a bottle of Ibuprofen and a bottle of aspirin close to his face in the middle of his living room as if one would magnetically draw itself toward the ache inside his head. He went with the aspirin. He adjusted

the blinds on his windows from closed to one-quarter open.

"Alright, there, better," he mumbled to himself as his eyes adjusted to the light.

Keeping the volume appropriate to the level of his headache, he put on a favorite aria and immediately felt himself replenishing. It healed him almost as much as if he sat before a soprano whose eyes closed as she lifted her arms up and reached for the upper register, her ribcage gently swelling and narrowing, swelling and narrowing, the way he had seen Elise's do only hours ago.

He surveyed the small one-bedroom apartment crammed full of books and records but barely any furniture save for a metal-and-glass kitchen table set, two black lamps sitting on oak end tables to either side of a black leather recliner, and a queen mattress on the floor in the bedroom. He'd moved in long ago after defaulting on the loan for his condominium in the city but never got round to decorating. He should've known better about buying the condo, a man in the foreign import/export racket like himself where the money comes and goes according to the trade winds. He told himself that with all his Latin American contacts, he would find something that provided for his allowances. He always did.

His last gig started out well enough, selling Columbian coffee beans to a few small independent outlets in the city, no sales pressures, no huge travel demands. But he wasn't a rookie to be forgiven a false sense of security, he knew that when a price or tariff rises, clients scare off and pull back shipment orders. It was that way with almost everything: coffee, bananas, alpaca clothing, folk art, pan flutes, the bootleg recordings of American music that he peddled under the table for his own unreported pocket money. There was no predicting any of it over the long term, not even "units" of black market blues.

However uncertain his livelihood was, it had never bothered him much before because he never had anything to lose prior to the condominium. He'd amassed debts now. He knew poor. He didn't know poor and in debt.

Now in his fifties, he felt thankful he had not signed on many of the other major dotted lines. There was a marriage license in his thirties, but the signing of divorce papers shortly thereafter proved some of life's dotted lines were reversible. He'd been a man with more passions than partners, always placing his faith in the present, maybe because he was too lazy to think of anything else. "I am familiar with the unexpected," he thought, enjoying the oxymoron in his reverie and recalling the days in his youth before he knew any better, those sun-blind days when he embarked on his affairs with rivers disarmed by the utter lack of planning and overabundance of enthusiasm that would develop into personal hallmarks…

chapter 3

"No la mata," Chaccone cried to Norberto, who held the tortoise in his hands as if he was weighing whether to take his knife to it for their dinner or toss it back into the river. The eye of the turtle facing toward Chaccone rolled upward slightly and calmly blinked once, expressing the ennui of a traveler enduring a standard border search. Travelers without pre-arranged destinations are seldom in a hurry.

But how could Chaccone guess Norberto's thoughts when he could scarcely believe his actions: setting down his paddle so suddenly and snatching a tortoise from the water with his bare hands, sensing fish below the muddy crest of the river, hearing monkeys minutes before the sound of their crashing through the trees reached Chaccone. When he was moored on dry land, the man was considered a town drunk by his fellow villagers in the Amazonian island of Lagunas. He was a different being on the water, as if he had retained sensory abilities everyone else had lost in the passing of generations.

The young traveler Chaccone had been told Norberto was the man who could show him the submerged jungle, or the "semillas," as the natives referred to it. Every time he heard this word used he pressed for clarification, knowing the word "semillas" translated as "seeds." But, this is exactly what would be repeated back to him — semillas. Some even scooped up soil or shook loose tall stalks of grass to show him seeds in the palm of their hands. Finally someone pointed to the trees and explained that it was the seeds that sprouted the trees, from the trees came soil, from the soil formed lagoons, hence, semillas. Alright, he'd never thought of it that literally before, but alright. And, in another part of his mind, he sensed they were telling him something he hadn't been on the continent long enough to understand.

Chaccone saved money for over a year to buy a plane ticket to Lima and cover his expenses. Magazine articles and books he'd read in the fluorescent flickerings of his graveyard shifts as a cashier at a convenience store had fueled his curiosity about South America. He didn't know if different kinds of chaos existed, but the one he was living in felt much too predictable. It felt to him that, if lands could be compared to animals, there were still some left that had not been tamed. To delay the fears of his mother, he told her had found a job in another town. There was not time to go into detail, but he would call and explain once he was there.

The hazy clouds his plane sailed through to touch down in Lima never completely dissipated once he was on land. The city wore a coat of fuzz and always appeared just beyond focus to him, as if he lacked the prescription glasses necessary to see as the locals saw. It was also more expensive than he had imagined. He found a Spartan room at one of the several hotels named The Inca and that evening walked to a depot to purchase a bus ticket north to Chiclayo. From there he could begin the inland trek to the rivers. He didn't know this path would be littered with snapped wheel axels and walks in the dead of night waiting for the next crowded Volvo truck to test the cratered terrain, with white waterfalls pouring from the sides of the jungle basin as if frozen in the distance, the few beds every 50 or so miles reserved for prostitutes — a good week before he would set foot in a boat and then another after that to the waterways. There would be plenty of time to explore the capitol, he thought, and rest if necessary. The mighty Amazon awaited.

One afternoon in Lagunas he followed some directions given to him by the owner of the cinder-block building known as the town hotel and discovered Norberto laying drunk on the dirt floor of his mud hut, having started the small fire beside him to cook his dinner but then passing out before getting around to it. Chaccone left him sleeping there and walked back slowly toward the cement hotel building on the town's thin dirt roads to resume figuring out how he could leave the island. He'd been stranded there for eight days. His excitement over exploring a new country had hardened and crystallized into a tension that felt like a stone he carried around in his stomach. There was water, there was jungle, there was sky, but there were no doors. In one of the books he'd read, a man had gotten lost in the Amazon Basin and lived as a Mormon missionary for 20 years before finally finding the money to get back home. The empty rumors of boats arriving on their way to Iquitos, where he could catch a flight out of the jungle, sounded less plausible and more like people telling him what he wanted to hear. And these people had problems more serious than his for their conjecture. He had left behind the larger islands of Moyobambo and Yurimaguas without much delay — a good thing, since the terroristas moved in after his departures and had their fill of raping, robbing and killing. How long would it be before they reached Lagunas, the next island in their path? The small Lagunas police force had already fled three days ago in motorboats. They had taken their parrot mascot with them. It finally struck Chaccone how far away from home he was.

He spent his days scribbling in his notebook and his nights sitting with Arturo, the father of the family that owned and lived at the hotel. Since he was their first guest in several years, the family had adopted him as their own. He ate with them, used the same outdoor shower they used near a wildly tall green garden, and sat in front of the building with them to follow June bugs, satellites and stars with their flashlights each night after dinner. Arturo boasted his family was well-armed and would give any comers more than they would want to handle. Even with the uncertainties it held, the night sky always roused their sense of wonder and untethered them from whatever fears had taken hold during the day.

With so little to do, time floated like citrus scents winding through an orange grove, dreamlike and sensorial in the same breath. One morning at dawn he awoke on his cot on the dirt floor of his garage-like room to find an apparently sober Norberto peering down at him. Chaccone had learned to sleep lightly and keep at bay the advances of rats in the rafters and the blood-brown roaches on the ground with the flashlight he slept with on his chest. He never heard the man approach. He reflexively

shined the beam in Norberto's face, but he did not go away. It took him another moment to realize he was not dreaming. And yet, it was as if he had slept through not only their introductions, but also some agreement they had made about an excursion.

"Vamonos señor, necissitamos provisiones," Norberto said in an urgent tone, the knife scar on his crevassed left cheek, which he would refuse to explain, opening and closing like a tiny flower as he spoke. He stood there while Chaccone dressed, then led him outside and explained their itinerary as if they were merely reviewing a schedule that had been arranged months in advance. Chaccone bought the rice and tins of tuna Norberto ordered at the town store. They loaded them in a canoe near the water, and, as if the semillas were about to revert back to seed form any moment, left before dawn the following morning.

By the time of the turtle detainment, the recent college dropout who couldn't swim and the village guide had floated the river for three days, sleeping in the canoe and riding out incessant rains that had swelled the water level over most of the lagoon mounds where they might have camped or at least regained their land legs again momentarily. The turtle might have been a flavorful alternative to their tuna but they had nowhere to build a fire. Norberto slipped the disk-shaped patient gently back in the river just as the rain was slackening a bit and a muted glow burrowed out of a pocket in the sky.

As the yellow sun finally broke and spread, a new world came to life, parrots reflecting the wet light with azure, lime and scarlet feathers, the unleashing of a pent-up cacophony of whoops and whistles, cries and laughter from any number of other birds and creatures. Norberto suddenly pointed upriver, and, like the pulling of an aquatic rabbit out of the river's hat, a small dolphin leapt out of the water in a pre-fab, upside-down "U" arc, as if it had been spinning in oval revolutions that climbed nearer and nearer the surface of the water, timed to the moment of the sunlight's descent, yet also moving outside of time, marooned as it was from its origins in the sea.

"Escucha. Monos," Norberto said, cupping his ear to listen for monkeys. After they had rowed steadily for at least five solid minutes — though it was almost always Norberto rowing since only he had the technique and strength for it — after they had completely left the stretch of area where these supposed monkeys were and Chaccone was sure his guide was mistaken, a low wheezing started, like the wind streaming far off through the trees, then slowly built momentum into a roar spiked with high-trebled snaps and crackles, and then the whole swath of forest sounded as if it was being run through a wood chipper. The quick black arms forming blurry triangles as they swung and reached, swung and reached, a great invasion of arms and legs off the ground, black forms levitating through the treetops. Black shapes in green leaf polka dots. At the end of the tree line it stopped. They sat and watched. They looked at the water. After a rest, as if a ritual had been completed, mingling and playing broke out, some eating, and they were gone. Excitement over the charge he witnessed pulsed through Chaccone with such electricity and pace that he could not form thoughts. He felt his breath come back, finally. For the first time in his life he was part of a world beyond what his expectations could encompass.

He could hear the howler monkeys in the distance now also, with the echo of their roar always rounded by a soft "just kidding" sigh. Norberto smiled in satisfaction, but Chaccone's heart filled with light. So he'd read a few books about South America and reminisced about his childhood daydreams that dinosaurs lived in the southern continent longer than anywhere

else, so long perhaps that maybe one or two still thundered through the jungle; so he'd envisioned trains with cushioned seats and refined compartments, instead of the reality of buses and then trucks snapping their axels on mud roads and stranding passengers in the middle of nowhere; so he'd come here alone and had imagined regional boat transit service in the Amazon Basin — so he was a naïve and gullible dupe. But he wasn't crazy, after all, he thought, there were wonders.

The sun began to raise every molecule in the lagoon to its steaming point and to Chaccone it no longer felt like a river their canoe rested on but a lily pad perforated by hot murmurings, with dolphins geysering up all around the canoe and other fish surfacing to see what life was moving on top of the river as well. A small caiman found a patch of earth near the treeline and maneuvered itself in the sunlight. Birds of prey glided the rain-wiped sky. For both men setting their oars down, it seemed a good time to stop. They let the soft current rotate the boat around in lazy circles. More than generations separated Chaccone's senses from the way Norberto's could function, but it didn't matter now. They were not moving forward or backward, but almost like the jungle, Chaccone thought, floating beyond purpose. He thought of his stalled life in Buffalo for a moment and wondered why this felt different.

"Escucha. Personas," Norberto said suddenly.

"?Como?"

Norberto didn't answer, he just waited, and Chaccone had forgotten completely about it when a larger canoe appeared in the distance several minutes later. They did not signal. Couldn't they see them, Chaccone thought, were their senses duller than his? But Norberto was not concerned. When they grew closer the three men in the large canoe waved and Chaccone went back to resting his back against the interior of the canoe tip again.

The men turned out to be Norberto's cousins, out hunting in the rain, gone for who knows how many days and now making their way back to the village. Carrying a boatload of batteries and lamps, they were going to hunt and fish tonight as well, not wanting to waste a chance at the nocturnal life that would soon come on shift in stranger, stealthier forms. They spoke to Norberto lowly and sparingly, with long pauses, as if their prey might be eavesdropping. They gave him some bread that they'd miraculously managed to keep dry. Another extremely long pause and it was time to part. They waved and were off.

Norberto was unlike anyone Chaccone had met for more than just his extra-sensory instincts of the jungle. Under his snarled bush of black hair, his inset eyes expressed a growing awareness of Chaccone's world and his own separation from it, of his body struggling against the soreness of aging more and more, of his talents eventually finding their end in the foreign tour companies that would surely move to this part of the jungle one day, as Chaccone had heard they had done already along the more populated stretches of the river.

For the first time in almost four days, Chaccone and Norberto would feel land under their feet and, if lucky, start a fire to help ward off the emergent flying insects that had been absent in the rains. Thanks to a tip from the hunters they found some surfaced ground among the groves of trees that lined the banks of the channels and set up camp as night was falling. The soil was moist but dry enough 20 feet back from the water to hold a fire. Replacing the diurnal aviary chatter was a new language, as if a second work shift gave way to a third.

The darkness ripened around them with a slithering, loose-skinned presence, imbued with the slow march of those who preferred seeing to being seen. An albino armadillo tiptoed toward their camp twitching its back luminously as it stopped, turned and retreated back the way it had come. Eyes glowed in the path of their flashlights on the surface of the water from time to time. It wasn't so much that Chaccone felt outnumbered and disadvantaged, as it was that there was not the luxury to choose fascination or boredom in the same way one could while waiting in line at the grocery — and when he was actually back in line at the grocery, he wondered if he would remember this fact. When he'd finished eating and got up to rinse his bowl he was stunned to see a small albino caiman watching him from the edge of the river. Norberto had just commented on the rareness of albinos at seeing the armadillo, so their sudden appearance sent a wave of chills through Chaccone.

They had surrounded themselves with their mosquiteras early in the evening, their small fire having little effect on the insects. Chaccone began to say something when Norberto silenced him with a raised palm. What was it he was hearing this time, Chaccone thought? He followed Norberto's silent lead but the uncertain look on his copper-hued face, usually a repository of certainties about the lagoons that appeared and disappeared every six months as land and water, like two exposures of the same negative, seemed edging toward doubt in Chaccone's wearily formed opinion. Exhaustion weighed on both of them. A few moments more passed and Chaccone began to doze off every few seconds and then shake himself awake with worry he'd missed what Norberto was saying or hearing.

As little as a month ago he was working the graveyard shift at a convenience store in Buffalo, also experiencing nights full of their share of reptiles. He was a college dropout looking for a new kind of thrill, something to fracture the patterns and motions he'd learned to execute in rote like everyone else around him. He'd already developed a number of habits that usually take years to manifest themselves: washing his hands and face excessively, pulling and twisting his thick black locks repeatedly, exercising a tendency to overuse the word "effluvial" in common everyday speech. He was aware of his eccentricities just barely enough to be eccentric and not neurotic. But he hadn't been finding many kindred spirits in his "village."

As long as he they were going to be waiting for whatever Norberto heard to either appear or remain hidden, Chaccone got up to wash his hands one last time. It was when he was reaching for his bottle of camp soap that he noticed it, a speck of light far off on the river's surface seemingly moving closer to them. Norberto saw it also but sat silent and still.

"?Quiéne es?" Chaccone whispered.

"No sé," Norberto said quietly, uncertain who it could be. "No hagas ninguno ruido."

And so they waited without making a sound. The light grew closer and now it could be seen playing on the surface of the water whenever it was diverted to one side, as if probing the water. The light didn't bounce much, so the boat seemed to be moving smoothly through the water. And now the low, steady thrum of an outboard motor's trolling blade could be heard faintly. At the point where the wide channel began to bend away from their camp, the boat edged in their direction, though Norberto had doused the fire minutes ago. More than two voices echoed over the still water but Chaccone could not make out any of the Spanish words. And by now he was not going to ask Norberto, fearful of both making noise and of what his answer might be.

Neither of them moved more than it took to shallowly inhale and exhale. The boat still appeared to be traveling in their line. When it reached about 50 yards from them, an unmistakable sound was heard, the ratchet of guns cocking and empty chambers accepting bullets, followed now by the loud whine of the outboard motor as they accelerated toward the camp, the floodlight illuminating the bodies of Chaccone and Norberto pressing so flatly against the ground they looked to be trying to lift up a sleeve in the earth and crawl inside like worms. The canoe had given them away.

They were screaming before anyone climbed ashore. They pulled Chaccone and Norberto from the ground and one of them hit Norberto in the jaw with the butt of a gun, some of his blood splattering through the floodlight's beam. There were three of them, the largest was wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap and walked straight to Chaccone, pointing his pistol at a spot on Chaccone's forehead where he fancied adding a third eye:

"!Hable! !Hable!" He pulled back the trigger.

Thoughts of how to stay alive for a moment longer raced through Chaccone's head — quick-something quick or it's over. He would speak as instructed and it would be without the slightest trace of accent. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. This was it. No last-minute rescue, no third party on its way from the screen cut of a movie, no saving sniper shot, just death, and the accompanying ridiculousness of sudden unexpected death, of it being here, now, like this.

And so an odd resignation set in, a giving up, of submitting to the mercy of terrorist thugs, because Chaccone knew there were no exceptions, these people killed all foreigners, but especially Americans. He'd been reading about them in the periodicos: in the altiplano Germans pulled off of trains, tortured and shot; a Swiss woman raped and killed in Yurimaguas; American hikers shot near Cusco. Sure, different groups of them, your mountain goats or your jungle rats, but the same result. He was young, he would miss out on so much, but on that most defining aspect of life, he would learn soon.

"!Hable!" the man yelled again but with even more force.

And Chaccone had no choice. The charade would end sooner or later. They would have him as soon as he uttered his first upstate-New York-accented Spanish, so, why not:

"!Chinga tu madre!"

"!Gri-i-ngo-o-!" the man barked ferociously, firing the gun, sending the bullet just to the side of Chaccone's head, close enough for him to sense heat and motion passing his right temple as he held his eyes squeezed close, wondering if he was still alive. He felt water empty out of his bowels and then a searing bright light knifing into his head and then, nothingness.

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A diamond sun glimmered through the haze above him when he awoke, drawing out sweat beads to sting the wounds on his jaw and the side of his head. He was on his back, his hands and feet bound, and his hands and wrists ached from lying on top of them. As near as he could see craning his neck, they had spent the night at the camp, but the canoe was gone.

"?Donde esta' Norberto?" he asked the man standing and watching him from the other side of the smoldering fire pit. The man wore hiking boots, khaki fatigues and a beige unbuttoned shirt with red-and-white emblem patches on the shoulders. He pointed his AK-47 lazily at Chaccone, then glanced away.

"?Donde está mi amigo?" The man reacted with the swiftness of one swatting away a persistent mosquito.

"!Callete!" he yelled and lunged at Chaccone with the butt of his rifle. A second man wearing the same uniform approached and they spoke lowly to each other. The two men helped Chaccone to his feet and then walked him to the boat where the man with the baseball cap was sitting smoking a cigarette. Unlike the other two, he wore jeans and a Harley Davidson T-shirt.

With an outboard motor, they moved at a clip fast enough to actually make Chaccone feel a bit seasick. How quaint, he thought, to feel like vomiting also. But he was alive. That was the odd thing.

They veered off a bend in the river and took a narrow inlet that led deeper into the jungle. It wound onward into the brush for a few minutes, and then there appeared a clearing through the rim of trees. Dry land. A Quonset hut occupied most of the land strip, but a narrow dirt road coiled away from its far side. On both sides of the hut were oval holes dug in the ground. It made sense now, Chaccone thought: a coca leaf refinery, and the road likely the transport route of the cocaine byproduct.

They threw Chaccone inside the hut near a support beam while smirking men took turns approaching and inspecting him. He'd faced down death, he thought, and it turned out they actually wanted him alive. But maybe only because they mistakenly presumed he knew something he didn't, or could be of some use to them that he couldn't — in which case, they would probably torture him before killing him. Never believe things can't get worse, he thought. Then, to his surprise, one of the three men he arrived with unbound his feet and hands and calmly handcuffed his wrist to the beam. He was sitting on the floor in the middle of the almost empty Quonset hut, save for the several cots lining the walls and a table, a disoriented animal gradually realizing it was the center of attention. Sunlight flooding in from the high windows seared the room like the convection rays of an oven.

A lengthy discussion among the men began just outside the hut, with Mr. Baseball Cap's voice leading most of the meeting. What little was audible to Chaccone came too fast for his level of Spanish and in a dialect he hadn't heard before. He tried to follow but exhaustion eventually overpowered hope and he hovered in a state of semi-consciousness a few blinks above sleep.

If he made it out alive, he vowed, he'd make the most of every second afterward. No more wasting time, working at convenience stores, stealing the food when he grew bored or hungry, spending the days hanging out in his room; he'd start really living, set out for adventure somewhere and- "Wait a second," he thought, "that's what got me into this bullshit situation. No, I'll learn to value the mundane as adventuresome, like I was following an instinct, like the turtle Norberto pulled from the water, a son of the land and sea, sky and earth, and the days will go by as new and sweet as when I was a baby."

It was not so long ago, even if it felt like it was from the vantage of his present circumstances: He must have been 5 or 6,

out on the sidewalk shoveling Buffalo's heavy March snow with his small plastic shovel, not paying much attention to where or why he was shoveling the snow, when he stopped and noticed the sweat on his forehead and eyebrows below his knit cap, felt it beginning to evaporate from his skin in the still, wet March air. He looked over at the snow piled against the maroon brick side of the duplex. The contrast of colors must have fascinated him. He didn't know for how long he was staring at the snow against the brick, but he couldn't really stop staring at it, either.

At some point, the recurring dream he had been having began to invade him with a heaviness. He didn't understand this dream that always woke him abruptly in the night and which was beginning to scare him recently, but it floated into his mind without invitation. It came with the feeling of a growing weight filling his body like lead, accompanied by a dark and nebulous image of iron and flowers mixing, of the merging of plant and metal. When he was lying in his bed it made him feel so dense and heavy that he would fall through the mattress and boxboard, through the floorboards and foundation into the earth itself.

He doesn't remember toppling over into the snow, he doesn't remember anything, only waking in his mother's arms while she carried him inside the house. He would never pass out again. The dream eventually went away. But there would be other occasions hereafter when he would again feel paralyzed by such an expanded pause in his thoughts, caught still as a reptile in the sun, perched somewhere in a balance between the passing of time and its cessation.

The room seemed to be rotating on a slow camera pan and the men he glimpsed through the entrance were out of focus to him. He tried to listen in on what they were saying again but was still not picking up much. With his free hand he felt his head again to make sure it wasn't blood loss that was causing his exhaustion. No, good, it was starting to dry and build a matted base for scabbing.

He did not want to think about how he found himself in this situation anymore. If a person can be working in a convenience store in Buffalo one day, traveling the Amazon Basin the next, then almost killed, he thought, there were no natural patterns at play, only artificially constructed, pale forgeries, the kind that frame the jungle and its inhabitants as either hospitable or unwelcoming, benign or malevolent, when in actuality it was a place as far from his grasp as the moon. It had taken him coming here to understand this, to realize hazard was king here as well, that perhaps hazard and the jungle were one and the same. And so, there could be no accurate prediction of one's reactions, either, not now and not in the future. As if he were about to reluctantly bear this notion out, a chaos-fueled giddiness suddenly settled upon him.

Get past it, he told himself, pay attention, damnit. A new adrenalin helped him keep his eyes open, fueled primarily by the fear of what might happen when he closed them. They were going to kill him, he thought, they were merely debating how to torture him now:

"I'm not whipping him," he imagined one of them was saying. "I've got tendonitis with all the whipping. You whip him."

"Whipping?" another would say scornfully. "I'll cut him a thousand times like a Japanese samurai." He hoped there was not a Spanish translation for the word samurai.

"Why go to the trouble?" he thought he heard a third say. "He's not worth more than a bullet — ok, maybe two or three." General hearty laughter would ensue.

And then Chaccone felt that same sensation overtake him — laughter. Of course, he knew this was the most dangerous abreaction to his trauma, and maybe because he knew this, it now grew less easy to avoid. At first silently, deep inside his brain he laughed, laughed and felt a small release from the pressure of his consequences; then it spread to his diaphragm, silliness without reason or cause, and to his belly, and finally, against his absolute determination to stop it, out of his mouth, light snickers, then cackles, then- boom! — one of the men shot up from his chair and kicked him hard in the side. But now he couldn't stop, the restrained laughter broke loose into loud full-breathed guffaws while he was being kicked repeatedly. Mr. Baseball walked quickly over to him and cocked the gun and pointed it for the second time at Chaccone's head. But now the laughter was completely beyond his control. He lifted his hand up weakly to signal, "don't shoot." Mr. Baseball fired clean through his hand and walked away, leaving Chaccone groping his hand between his thighs to try and suppress the pain and bleeding. Now it was the men standing around him who began laughing.

After letting Chaccone bleed all over himself for a good while, one of them dressed and wrapped the wound, located in the flesh between the thumb and forefinger, with clean gauze and isopropyl alcohol. A misshapen star-like scar would eventually form on his left hand. It would be the kind of star that rooted him closely to the earth whenever he attempted to float away. But for now, at least, he had a sliver of proof he'd be given sufficient time for that to occur: Why disinfect a dead man's wound?

The men worked busily outside his post in the Quonset converting coca leaves into cocaine over the next two weeks and he was fed twice a day and allowed to use the outhouse when necessary. They also quizzed him daily — Mr. Baseball speaking very slowly and sometimes in broken English — about a nebulous mission. They revealed details about it gradually for him to commit to memory, and watched for weaknesses in his reactions. He was to be their mule to Iquitos, delivering to a larger operation. They had not told him explicitly, but he sensed they were also in some kind of trouble, some duress, which might explain why they had use for him in the first place.

In converging scenarios he put together a theory that this particular local terrorist clan had in some way or another wronged a larger group, maybe even the same group, more or less, but a more powerful branch with more money. And he was the guy who would make the delivery to right things again. Why else did the men shout to each other in panicked tones and seemingly work from morning till night if not because they had a deadline, a deadline of some consequence.

There were no more armadillos, dolphins or albino caimans to look at; outside, the hothouse workers sped blindly toward the last item of faith worth killing and dying for — the deal, the payoff. The birdcalls he could hear from his station at the beam were alarm calls. The monkeys released jittery bursts of racket, as if, he half-believed, crazed by the spell of the white powder stirred from paste in this narrow clearing. Despite the heat, he felt better stationed inside the hut. The tan semi-circled ceiling of the Quonset took the place of the burning sky outside. The pre-fab walls beaded with water only slightly slower than the opened pores on Chaccone's arms. Remnants littered the naked interior, soda bottles, crumpled paper, cigarettes and joint roaches, spills of liquid on the concrete that Chaccone would monitor in their slow evaporations. But mainly he studied the abundant empty space of his enclosure.

It required an unfocused eye that would eventually be lulled to the peripheral trappings of scale. An un-centered gaze that refused any partiality for the near or far, the wide or narrow, an occipital convergence on sunlit dust. Chaccone could rest this way without pain in his body or mind. It was a process where he started big, say a 4'x4' square of space, and gradually collapsed it, but without any real intention. Where the reduction ended he never knew, because by that time he'd completely forgotten where he started. It was a study in unlooking, and then a diminishment inside of his mind's eye. So: 4x4, 3x3, 2x2, 1x1, nothing x nothing, until the jungle was lost and then rediscovered from an interior vantage. He lost track of his breath and sometimes felt as if he'd stopped breathing altogether. There was only a swinging gate converting the air outside into breath inside, then releasing it as air again, over and over. "Chaccone," whatever that was, was excluded from the process.

Back home, his peers in Engineering and Anthropology classes, living at home or working dead-end jobs, hanging out and getting drunk, heading to the drive-in with their dates, might be surprised to learn what had happened to him, though he rarely concerned himself with such things, having grown accustomed the four walls of his small bedroom. There were times when he exercised this privacy by pacing around his bed from corner to corner, the way someone would go for a walk.
An unnamable sense of expectancy overshadowed his solitude. He might break from a daydream to jot down ideas and plans in a notebook, or, during the many rainy days of Buffalo, stare out his window at the robins hunting worms on the soggy grass of his backyard. He could watch the clouds roll in from the lake and the rain they brought for hours at a time. But as much as he felt moored in simplicity, he was too young not to wonder if there weren't different experiences, and if they only came to life when one chased them. He hadn't yet discovered the need to be more specific than that.

He was taken up river to learn to maneuver the outboard and steer the boat, walked through the exchange point and the password he was to wait for, only proceeding if he heard it, signaling if he didn't. Failure didn't leave him any option so he wanted to focus and learn the duties quickly. They fed him better food and he was allowed greater freedom to move about, albeit under the supervision and discretion of a guard who stayed with him at all times. Though the men were suspicious of it, he was allowed to wash his hands almost as often as he wanted.

The task was to deliver a boat hull full of drugs to safe harbor in Iquitos, but the plan contained no further contingency, no mention at all of what Chaccone did after this point. Whenever he brought this up, he was told there was nothing for him to worry about as long as he succeeded. Mr. Baseball was to lag behind alone in a smaller boat, close enough to make sure the delivery was executed, far enough away to avoid attracting attention.

Chaccone wasn't sure which day or even how long after dawn it was when the two of them finally set out. But the whine of the electric outboard motor that he steered transfixed his attention for what seemed like a long time to him on the still brown water, intruding on the other jungle sounds in a way that made him feel even more foreign to the surroundings. Occasionally, he glanced at the sky to trace the sun's arc above him. They kept a rapid pace and the breeze it created provided the only relief from the heat. Once they were safely within a few hours from their destination, they stopped to camp for the night and review plans for the drop-off one last time. Thick crowns of trees in observant poses curved over the inlet where they anchored as the last violet light of the day slipped from the leaves. Chaccone felt eyes watching them in the branches but could see nothing —

maybe Norberto had rubbed off a little on him, he thought. He still had no idea what had happened to him. Mr. Baseball Cap ordered Chaccone to start a fire, then began cooking a dinner of rice and plantains.

Chaccone tried to break the uneasy silence by speaking about the myriad ways he had learned to appreciate how plantains and bananas cooked, as well as commenting on the tree masts that loomed behind them, the relative difficulty or simplicity of their mission, the various calls of certain birds and the cooking time of rice on an open flame. It only seemed to agitate his partner and make him uncomfortable. He tugged his baseball cap and said little to nothing, taking off the hat to fan the coals with it intermittently. For Chaccone, seeing the man's thinning matted black hair slightly disarmed the image that fear constructed in his mind. It made Baseball seem older and more frail, if not necessarily less dangerous. He decided not to ask any more questions for a while but could not stop stealing glances at the man.

His eyes were inset by a protruding brow that smoothed into a lighter-colored forehead where the cap usually blocked the sun. He had not been clean-shaven once over a period of weeks but also strangely never quite reached what could be considered a beard and not stubble. Perhaps the hair had simply given up. He was large in build though his shoulders hunched inward and he walked with a bit of a limp, like a dog that had been injured in fight.

Two Capuchin monkeys had quietly descended and sat at the edge of the clearing. One of them locked onto Chaccone just as he looked up from washing his hands. As their eyes met, the monkey curled its lips back and brought its upper and lower rows of teeth together repeatedly as if to indicate that, while Chaccone's actions were not yet humorous enough to warrant laughter, they did merit the trill of a silent "t." The other monkey was almost as transfixed by the fire as Baseball. Or perhaps it was the hat, which Baseball had now tossed aside to crouch under the kettle and blow harder on the coals. This monkey may have interpreted his relative nearness to the hat as Baseball's shy invitation for him to give it a whirl and try it on for style. A few quick gambles on all fours and he had seized the fashion opportunity, hat in hairy hand and Baseball springing up after him. He easily beat Baseball to the tree and scrambled up it with the hat, his partner inspired by the action and hopping through branches to join him. Baseball was screaming. He began climbing the tree from some not-very-well-thought-out strategy and the monkeys calmly walked the plank of an upper branch to the safety of another tree. Baseball reversed himself and jumped down.

The monkey inspected his find on high: It didn't appear edible — at least, it didn't have much flavor. But it was sturdy. It felt nice wiped against various parts of the body. And it even seemed to fit on his head. No, it definitely did not taste good. But yes it did fit nicely on the head again, perhaps aided by the saliva that... A gunshot shattered the rustling of the trees and the monkey with the hat was on the ground and before it could look up, Baseball macheted off a hind leg. Both animals were shrieking incessantly. Baseball struck down with the blade on the other hind leg and blood bubbled in the grass. Slapping both arms into the ground, the animal instinctively made a doomed attempt to stand up on its absent legs. The motions and shrieking subsided some now from the fallen monkey but its partner was in hysterics, making charges toward Baseball, who fired at it with each opportunity. The legless monkey was still faintly breathing but in deep shock. Its arms no longer had the strength to pull it along the ground.

Baseball stepped the toe of his boot on the monkey's head as its arms weakly waved in the motion of a dying bird's wings, and took his blade to its ears, one side at a time. When he had finished cutting, he walked in the direction of the partner, firing again to graze it and stop its frantic retreat. He fired twice before it was well out of range, echoing its last few panicked shrieks more sporadically. When he turned he made a step or two back to the fallen monkey, perhaps to finish the job, perhaps just to admire the work of his justice, then thought better of it and headed back for the camp. Speechless, Chaccone was shivering as if an Arctic mass of air had descended on their encampment. Baseball threw him an ear. It landed at Chaccone's feet.

"?Te gusta monos? Que lástima, buen provecha," he said to Chaccone, who could barely assemble an answer to the question in his mind: No, he did not like monkeys when they were like *this,* and he did not have an appetite, either. Baseball dished out the rice and bananas, but Chaccone did not touch it.

Neither spoke again for a long time. Yet there was only a momentary silence around them. As darkness filled the gaps from river to sky, the jungle chorus descended with a frenzied pitch, perhaps still registering at alert level, perhaps instinctually broadcasting their superior numbers in tones more bold than usual, or maybe simply feeling the excitement that death awakens in those familiar with killing.

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When the river became a channel and the channel became a bay and the horizon dipped beneath the curve of the earth until the bay looked like a sea, the grand Amazonian island of Iquitos finally appeared before Chaccone in the distance, almost a full month after he'd expected to see it, and under very different circumstances. For starters, he would not have been alone but in a modestly sized passenger boat, almost exactly like the one chugging ahead of him toward the harbors. Fit for about a dozen passengers, the boat swelled over the mild crests with what looked to be about 30 men, women and children squeezed and crouching tightly along its floor. The pole guide stood starboard left at the bow and wore a water-weary expression on his dark face, seemingly content to coast into harbor with the minimum effort on his part while his partner manned the outboard in back. A river snake crossed their path, a long black serpent with yellow markings, more stripes than dots from Chaccone's vantage, and suddenly, it was snake-chasing time.

The guide and motor operator in the back must have communicated, "Let's give these people a treat," telepathically, and soon they were steering a path of circles around the traveling snake. Everybody was happily cheering now — they were chasing a snake, a black and yellow snake, chasing a snake in a boat, no less — meanwhile forcing Chaccone and Baseball into a wide detour around them where they could no longer see the target area at the marina.

It was little consolation, but Chaccone couldn't help but remind himself that he might've been a passenger in that boat, which had begun its journey who knew how many tens of hours ago from who knew where, a boat that may have been simply adding one more notch to a hull marked with several reptile-chasing detours. That would have been just fine with him today.

After a few minutes everyone bored with the chase except the small children, the boat resumed its course and the guides resumed their silent weathered stares. The people and the snake were fellow competitors, Chaccone thought as he tried to regain course, and so they felt compelled to have fun at the snake's expense while he was exposed, the way an athlete might be heckled when visiting another team's home field. Baseball lagged behind but called out to Chaccone and pointed him back to his left toward what looked like houses in the distance.

The hand-off was to take place at Venecia, which, along with its neighbor Belen, was a floating village. People traveled from shack to shack via canoe. The canoe lanes from Venecia and Belen grew gradually shallower until boaters eventually ran aground on the streets of Iquitos. The shacks themselves were made of buoyant balsa wood, so if the river ever rose high enough to lift them off their stilted foundations, they functioned well as floating houseboats steered by guide poles. Villagers, especially the children, frolicked in the water like seals, sometimes diving in with their clothes on from the portals of their living rooms. The kids played water tag while the teens experimented with underwater heavy petting safe from the view of their parents. Others bathed and still others navigated all this traffic by canoe as they went about their errands.

Chaccone looked back over his shoulder at Baseball crouching to conceal himself and his weapon like a panther ready to pounce, and again tried to relocate the "mark" ahead, the receiver. He finally spotted the hand signals from a man standing in a boat anchored ahead of them at an Iquitos harbor. Again, the specter of mortality descended rapidly on Chaccone. He cut the motor almost completely and sputtered into the marina sector of Venecia. Baseball veered off to anchor at a gang-friendly house about 40 yards from the pier so he could observe the transaction from inside.

"Bienvenido pasajero," said the mustachioed man at the Iquitos marina with a tone of expectancy. He stepped out of the boat.

"Bienvenido pasajero," Chaccone replied as instructed. The man motioned with his hand and another man driving a pick-up with a covered bed backed up to the canoe. The truck had a light beacon on top of the center of the cab but Chaccone did not have time to ponder its function. The mustachioed man ordered Chaccone to begin loading his black trash bags of cargo in the truck, raising his voice, "!No! Déjale," when Chaccone attempted to unsnap the vinyl cover off of the truck bed.
As he pushed the bags under the bedcover of the truck, Chaccone could feel that something was stopping them from reaching all the way to the base of the cab. But he wasn't going to point out any space constraints until it became absolutely necessary. He finished forcing all of the bags in with just barely enough room to close the gate.

As they pushed Chaccone into the truck, squeezed between the two men in the middle of the cab, he looked back for Baseball but saw nothing, the houses with their soaked wood all a maze of dark brown run under by the tan of the river.
He saw only his empty canoe listing freely in the water with its load emptied, a boat that no longer retained an iota of his presence. It did not seem to have been abandoned by him or anyone at all that he could remember anymore. Now that his time felt near it was an object freed from those associations — it was no one's boat, could never be anyone's boat, other than perhaps the wind and water tilting it back and forth. His breath shortened and his thoughts jolted back to the road ahead when the

driver switched to second gear and the shifter hit Chaccone in the groin. Was it not dire enough to be killed during a South American drug transaction you knew nothing about, he thought, or did you also have to be emasculated by a stick shift along the way?

Here were 350,000 people on an island in the Amazon zigzagging in motocarros, sitting on corners and talking, sleeping on plaza benches, working, hustling johns, eating plantains, blissfully unaware an American was about to be sacrificed. Every one of the actions lacked a purpose from Chaccone's point of view. Maybe one of the gang would cut open a bag of the cocaine as they did in pulp B-movies, skeptical scowl planted firmly on brow and lips, lift a knife-full to his planked tongue, taste and smile ever-so slightly, extending a knife-full to Chaccone who would waste no time in snorting it like an addicted lab rat. This way his brain would already be pre-electrified for the heat of the bullet slug, there would be less thermal variance between metal and membrane. And if there were an afterlife, he thought, maybe he would have a bit more energy for the trans-mogrification, a slightly higher horsepowered engine for locating that shambalic glow.

This feeling buoyed him until they came upon a square monolith in the town's center, an iron monstrosity that towered over them with a slate gray finality. Rumored to be the dark American continent's distant cousin to the Eiffel Tower, the Iron Building, as it was called, was erected at the start of the 20th Century but bore no resemblance to the nearby government palace or its other contemporaries. It was massive unrefined block iron, smooth un-windowed iron, capped with satellite eyes and Medusan strands of antennae. Like death, it seemed solid and imbued with a density untypical of the earth, no holes for air, no variations, no avenues of return, just the oneness of an immensely heavy element. As they passed in front of the colossus, memories of his recurring iron flowers dream from childhood filling him again, the pallid wafer of the sun slipped into a pouch of sky and the clouds grayed with rain. "I never tanned evenly anyway," Chaccone thought to himself while picturing his face on the head of a corpse in some funeral parlor, knowing his fate was not sending him to such a place and unready to tackle the potential significance of his dream in the present context. He had always sensed that terror, even the terror of death, could be chased from the mind momentarily by the sudden entrance of absurdity or humor, but at this point, all he could hope for was resolution.

Rain began to smear the windshield, but either the wipers did not work or the driver did not turn them on for whatever reason, and Chaccone watched the roofs and walls of the small squat homes waver and straighten, waver and straighten, the lilacs bleed soft purple and the broad leaves of palms bend in imaginary gusts as if, when viewed through the lens of death, his waking world would dissolve.

They left the city, if it could be called a city in its slow-motion hush, left all the people sitting patiently and still in the plaza while their children trotted around benches in the soft rain, the wayward toucan couple reporting in muted echoes from a tree by the bay, the motocarros weaving a network of patterns across the island with tiny, barely audible 60 cc whines fading and approaching, fading and approaching. It seemed mathematical to him, a happy coincidence of crossing paths that likely repeated itself every single night. There were 350,000 people in this island city of the Amazon but it began to appear to Chaccone that he was not on a parallel stage with anyone here anymore, not even the two sullen men riding next to him in the

car, who in his periphery began to resemble the faces of the people he saw in passing outside, one face imprinting itself on his retina only to be lifted and replaced by another and another of the same exact features; he wanted one last steadiness amid the endless shifting, a farewell to all this verdant sensuousness he'd only fleetingly glimpsed, like some dark voluptuous woman who calls to you and then vanishes as you follow around a corner, to simply record these last impressions of the island in his mind while being swept away by this spiraling flow that was about to deposit him in who knows what abyss.

But what am I doing, he thought: I have not been Emilio Chaccone for very long and soon I will no longer be Emilio Chaccone, end of question. I should be readying myself, he thought, instead of daydreaming. He tried to regain a more detailed catalog of his situation. He could see they were leaving Iquitos proper and winding through a labyrinth of working-class neighborhoods, little brick ranches on small plots without grass, their colored interior lights synching to the approaching honeyed dusk, a stereo or TV occasionally heard, couples dancing in one or two homes; men along the dirt road fanning flames from small firepits; tired children walking home in no particular hurry, the whites of their eyes glowing from smudged faces; most residents already resigned to the shadow of the coming day, framed in doorways and asleep on sofas, swaying in back lot hammocks, only vaguely aware of time passing.

They made it to Bellavista, a muddy parking lot of a town on the island's Nanay River coastline. Almost all of the 20 or so buildings skirting the open lot were on the shoreline and several people who had set up the food stands common to these small pier towns were breaking them down for the day. A radio station in one of the small shacks blared music from tin speakers posted on wooden poles around the lot. In a booth with what first looked like a picture window until one noticed the absence of glass, two DJs stood inside announcing the time and temperature after every song, as well as the description of the music, the names of people who happened to be passing their booth, fishing conditions, the weather forecast, their opinions on national news items and the latest rumors about produce at the market in town, and any other topic that seemed to afford them hearing their own voices for a few more seconds. His fate would escape inclusion in the electronic broadcast of these thoughts, and he felt grateful for avoiding that recital.

The pick-up climbed a narrow and muddy drive that led around the side of a house set away from the parking lot and out of view from the town. Three men came out of the house to meet them, two armed with handguns tucked behind their belt buckles, the third an older white-haired man walking between them.

The mustachioed driver ordered Chaccone to unload the bed of the truck into the back of an old van. Until now, he had not uttered a single word after the initial code phrase. Unloading the bags was noticeably easier than loading them. After the first 20 or so, they were practically springing out from under the cover. As he reached under for the last of them, he jumped back with a start after feeling it move violently against his grip. The next grip was on his own shoulders, pulling him backward, the two guards moving quickly past him and dragging a man tightly bound and gagged from the bed of the truck near the cab. They let him fall out of the truck to the ground where he rolled like a lumpy loaf of bread. The driver produced a blade from his belt and roughly cut the gag, leaving the man gasping wildly for air.

The driver's black mustache spread into a smile, revealing a gold front tooth, as he looked to Chaccone and said two words: "Bienvenido pasajero." Everyone but Chaccone and the man on the ground laughed for a long time at hearing their secret password aired out publicly. The man on the ground looked about wildly, as if searching for a place to roll to and hide.

The longer this game played out, the less sense it made to Chaccone. It appeared neither the people the captive man represented nor Mr. Baseball's gang had prepared for what an interested third party might be capable of with the right information floating around Belen, Bellavista and the Iquitos harbor. The thought of this scenario raced circles inside his head and he grew nauseous. Playing a role without agency, without ever knowing what was going on, a vertigo had corralled such centripetal forces in him over the last few weeks that he finally felt his body about to implode. He did not intend to speak, the words just came out, which explained why he spoke them in English.

"I haven't done anything!"

Hearing the words resonate in the silence that followed not only provided commentary on just how little he *had* done thus far in life, but also made their ring and their source real to him — they couldn't be unspoken. They defused the tension and forced a course of action, which, be it good or bad, he began to welcome — death could no longer be worse than the waiting for it.

"?Cómo?" the driver asked, looking to his partner.

"?Quién es este?" said the older man.

"No lo sé," the driver responded to Chaccone's delight.

Could it really be they hadn't realized he was not a gang member? Even in uttering the two simple Spanish passwords it should have been apparent he was a foreigner. Perhaps the driver thought it too minor a detail to mention, the accent of a man who would be soon dead anyway. Chaccone knew he had to act quickly. He reached into his crotch — it was the only place he reasoned his most important documents would be safe — and immediately two guns were cocked at him. He froze and begged permission to pull his hand out slowly, which he did, under orders to keep his eyes shut until whatever he produced could be retrieved. As the old man reviewed his birth certificate and driver's license — Mr. Baseball had kept his passport — Chaccone chronicled his ordeal in halting Spanish, from Laguanas to Iquitos.

The man gave him back the documents and signaled toward the bound man on the ground. The driver kicked him violently in the jaw, drawing a rush of blood from his gums, then twice more to the midsection. Having only recently recovered his breath, the man on the ground was now chasing after it again in spasms. But he managed to confirm Chaccone's story insofar as he swore he'd never seen or heard of the American before in his life. The old man did not signal his guards to beat him for any more information. He had already had the man's back-ups shot execution style with silencers as they watched their shipment being rowed in on the river from the front seat of their sedan. It had been the bound man's job to simply kill the sacrificial victim who made the delivery after it had been loaded, an arrangement Baseball had surely known about. This is likely what the old man had initially planned, also, to cover the tracks of his interception of the shipment.

But the story he'd now heard from Chaccone so amused him that he began to smile broadly, his tan brow collapsing in

its folds and his chest billowing with a quiet, wheezing laughter as he eyed the American and shook his head. As his two guards put away their guns, Chaccone noticed they both had identical shoulder holsters. In fact, he only now noticed the mustachioed man was also wearing one. Did they standardize some of their look like Mr. Baseball's group, or were these standard issue items, as in government issued? Chaccone looked quickly at the man curled in the fetal position on the ground. His hands were barely visible but his feet were in plain sight to Chaccone: Handcuffs and leg bracelets. He'd only now noticed.

The old man stopped himself laughing with an intentionally deep inhale/exhale and then looked in Chaccone's eyes with a gravity that said he rarely found anything humorous for very long. For his part, Chaccone tried to soften his eyes so that tears might come to them. He thought of sad things, of losing his father, of the pain he caused his mother. He was so genuinely terrified that he began to *act* terrified — that moment of truth again, he thought. The old man finally opened his mouth to speak.

"Vete," he said.

Chaccone waited for more. But that was it, nothing more came. Just, "go." There had to be a catch, some trap waiting. He took a tentative step behind him, unwilling to show anyone his back yet. The guns remained in their shoulder holsters. Everyone's hands were at their sides, save for the old man, who stood with his arms crossed and his head nodding ever so slowly from side to side in a mix of disgust and surprise.

Chaccone bowed his head slightly while keeping his eyes on them and very slowly turned from the group of men, the house, the captive, all their bags of white powder, and began the long walk back toward slumbering Iquitos, where his salvation would likely pass as unnoticed among the dreaming as his condemnation had. A mile down the road, when it was clear no one had been sent for him from any reconsideration the old man may have had, the buzzing of the insects returned to him and he heard the sighs and greetings of birds he'd been deaf to just minutes ago.

As the fading yellow sun sank behind the black water, a silence between these calls revolved around him with a crackling charge he could hear like the pops and skips of a stylus on a record. In the dense spaces where the foliage blinded him from the water, he could sense the fullness of the trees crowd the air. He thought of Norberto's exchanges with the jungle. He wondered if his guide had made it out of his side of the ordeal alive. He felt his neck and elbows and thighs to make sure he was all in one piece and there were no festering wounds on his body, and to simply reacquaint himself with the free flow of breath and blood. He looked at the water's skin in the waning light. It remained unbroken while wide stretches of it shifted so imperceptibly he wondered if he wasn't still dizzy from all that had occurred. Yellows and blues settled on the horizons and the dark crown lifted above him. A red streak followed the sun like the blood in an egg. He traced the subtle changes in the sky from one instant to the next.

To his left he spotted weak reflections patterned in a loose circle on the ground. He walked over and found an old rusted red bicycle on its side. The final few rays of yellow light shone inside a few brown beer bottles. Someone had dug a shallow fire pit. An old rag and some paper had been singed from the fire, a few bottle caps blackened. A prism of dull blues and violets splintered from pieces of broken glass in the middle of the pit. Print had faded from the white paper of tin cans that once held

beans, perhaps, though he did not wonder about their contents or the motives of those who had left them here because nothing about what he saw seemed incongruous — not now, at least. He watched a rusty glint spread over the trash from the last of the sunset. He sat down next to the pit as if to examine treasures, every detail of his surroundings like parts of music not struck by any hammer, string, mallet or machine, but existing in a way he could not quite put into words or thoughts. Nesting birds dotted the treetops, scatterings of dark hues moving in the branches. Absent of another witness, he felt in the center of the quotidian and nocturnal shifts trading places, held by the pause between those calls fading away and those just beginning. From his spot on the ground he had a view to water on either side of the trail. The river rinsed on the shallow banks and turned the mud the same shade of anthracite as the water.

How long he sat there he didn't know — his senses couldn't register it, did not provide enough separation from his surroundings in order to do so, and, as if trapped, he tasted his own absence this time without any gun pointed to his head, without a gauntlet of pain or the compression of his will by others, but only the trees and the treasured trash strewn around him in the circle and the river's hush to confirm this comfortable and fleeting paralysis, this experiment that had given new evidence he was indeed alive. By the time this notion had formed his mind, the light had drained from the sky and been replaced by ink. By the time he continued walking toward the island city, he had already decided he would dedicate himself to discovering other opportunities to be the subject of such experiments.

June bugs came out ahead of him on his path and lighted on the sky's black curtains, and, through his eyes, mingled with the harbor lights of the city and even the stars on the horizon. He had no flashlight to navigate the sky like he and his friends did in Lagunas, letting the hours settle around them during all those nights spent in reverential whispers with Arturo's family. With a wavering sense of depth his focus reached its limit on the horizon and all the sky's reflections moved together like vertebrae in an endlessly curving spine, and he wondered if, like the speed of light, death meant a propulsion beyond both the near and far.

He might have never felt like moving from his spot on the ground if the tension he had been holding in his stomach not finally uncurled. His belly convulsed and rumbled in protest of his having eaten no more than a few handfuls of rice over the last several days and nothing at all today. He was at least 20 pounds below his average weight. He would be able to eat now because he had not been eaten. The thought of fried plantains, boiled fish, even rice, made his mouth salivate wildly. Remembering the tang of fresh ceviche pushed him almost beyond himself. After eating such a meal, he would wash his mouth and hands lengthily, luxuriously.

He recalled the howler monkeys' repeated hollow strikes against coconuts in the semillas, sometimes accompanying their cracking of the shells with thunderous celebratory roars; or how the pelicans loaded their gullets with fish and insects and sat apart in carnivorous meditations; the slow grinding of a tapir's jaws as it chewed grass, an upper lip occasionally quivering in anticipation of the next bunch; the last involuntary muscle spasms of the mouse entering the hinged portal of the snake.

Eating was a natural state of being, he thought, and one only caught glimpses between bites. Each one consumed another and was eventually consumed through bonds as hidden as those of the tide and the moon; every day was on loan, putrefaction

being the principal balance, and somehow he, Chaccone, 19 years old and never been laid, had waded through a peristalsis of shit and fire, saw the cape drawn away to reveal death's white horns and managed to laugh while it charged, and, almost by accident, before it was too late, resuscitated his youth to taste the flavor quickly fading from the contemporary palate — that of the moment.

chapter 4

The stocky official at the U.S. consulate in Iquitos offered no response to the story the skinny, unwashed figure before him presented. Chaccone waited in vain for a reply while watching the perspiring man, greased black hair parted to one side and a stomach fairly bursting through his buttoned-down shirt, pushed a chair on wheels with his stubby legs back and forth between two desks: The consulate desk was stacked with pamphlets about the embassy in Lima that the man perfunctorily handed out to visitors before they could spill a full sentence from their mouths, while back at the Western Union desk he read the teletype communications that arrived, checked the status of electronic transfers and processed the rare money wire for incoming Peruanos who congregated in the small waiting area with concerned looks on their faces.

The chair was his shuttle. Abandoning it to traverse these two galaxies did not seem in the realm of possibility to him. The rolling of the wheels hissed like a sliding glass door opening and closing. After almost an hour and a bit more pleading from Chaccone, the man phoned the embassy in Lima. If there was one overriding message he relayed to Chaccone from the embassy, it was: We are located in Lima, you are located in Iquitos. It was an easy but undeniable statement. The trip between the two cities by land was challenging enough even if one had the money for it. Chaccone was broke.

He knew the police would care even less about his dilemma than the overheated consulate clerk. He wandered the plaza at the center of town in a daze, and the more he failed to think of options for himself, the faster his focus to do so evaporated into the still afternoon air. Now the laughing children running circles around the wrought iron benches in the sun were laughing at *him*, the adults who appeared so somnambulant when he rode past them with an imaginary noose hanging over his head, eyed him with gazes exposing his nightmare, the mundanely tragic tale of another American tourist who had lost his ways and means in a foreign country. It was a bright sun-splashed afternoon, not too hot or cool, perfectly suited, in fact, for a tourist trip to the nature preserve on the edge of town, or even an innocent little river voyage in a canoe, he thought with bitter humor.

After making a few sweeps of the plaza, he spotted some English words on a sign down one of the side streets that knifed from a corner of the square. It read “Peace Corps.” He didn’t recall coming across any Peace Corps office in his readings about Iquitos, so maybe the sign was a mistake that referred to a different kind of Peace Corps than the one he knew, one that

delivered assistance take-out style instead of in the field. There was nothing to lose.

A freckled woman sitting at a desk in the back of the room looked up from a book as he entered. The second desk nearer the entrance was unoccupied. She regarded him at first with the expression of one whose daydream had been sidetracked for a fraction of a second by a harmless insect flying into her line of vision, and then, as more words tumbled out of his mouth, her gaze settled heavily on him. He spoke slowly until he was fairly certain he was being listened to, then rapidly and animatedly as he gained the confidence to shift to the long version of his tale of woe.

Whether she believed him or not, she closed her book and asked him to have a seat. She had been there five years, she said, and had never heard a story quite like his, but he wasn't the first to solicit this kind of help from her and his circumstances didn't alter the fact that she had little assistance at her means. There was one option available. She handed him a clipboard with an application and a series of waiver forms. He bent the pages between his thumb and forefinger and let them riffle like playing cards back down to the clipboard. If he was willing to work a mission as a volunteer, she explained, he could gain transportation back home when a leg of the project was completed.

"All the projects we have in Peru are at least eight months out to term completion," she said.

He had already guessed there was little Peace Corps presence in Iquitos, but he didn't think it would be necessary to leave the country. A seat would be reserved for him on the next flight of volunteers returning to the U.S. that was scheduled to depart in a little more than two-and-a-half months from Rio de Janeiro, a mere 2,400 miles away. He would have to report to Rio and work there as a volunteer until it departed. He was lucky, she assured him. Many people in his circumstances found flight delays up to a year, it was simply a matter of timing. There was a supply truck arriving the following night from Colombia that her colleagues would accompany to its final stop in Rio de Janeiro. He could travel with them.

"I've never done this," she told him, "so be smart about it. I'll backdate your term to give you the minimum term of three months of work. If anyone asks, you were mis-assigned and spent a couple of weeks working here until transportation arrived."

"I hope to pay you back for this."

"If what you told me is true, I wouldn't expect to see you here ever again."

"I wouldn't have either a day or two ago. I want to go home. But then I think I'll start saving to come back again."

She gave him an advance of $25. Any sum more than that had to go through the regional accounting office in Lima.

"If I had anything to spare myself..."

"No, it's fine."

As he filled out the last of the forms, he had the feeling he should be reading them more carefully than he was, but then, as far as he knew, there was no boot camp in the Peace Corps. What could they do, he thought, ask him to plant 20 more rice seeds than everyone else, force him read to an extra chapter to the village kids? He had met friends and was having a grand time, he would tell his mother, and yes, he'd lost everything and would need to work a couple of extra months, but these new friends would take care of him. She had a right to know that much, to have her worries answered. It would be the first and last time

Chaccone would ask his mother for money. She could afford to wire another $25, maybe even $50. But the fare back to the U.S. would equal months of her salary, and besides, he was the one who had gotten himself into this mess, even if he still wasn't clear exactly how. She had always been willing to protect him further than her means allowed, and knowing this made him cringe digit by digit as he dialed her number from the toll free line at the Peace Corps office.

"I want you to come home now, Emilio," she pleaded.

"Neither of us have the money for that, ma. But if I get to Rio, I'll be able to come home soon."

"How did you lose your plane ticket and all your money?"

"I told you, I lost it on the river."

"How?"

"I don't know. It's a big, messy countryside."

"Are you on drugs down there?"

"No ma."

"Sweet Jesus, you're on the dope!"

"Ma, I'm not on any dope. It's just big country down here, it's easy to lose track of things."

"Thank God your father didn't hear this, he'd lose his damn mind. Kids here, they protest the war, they use drugs, they don't work. But at least they do it in their own country. You have to go to South America to do it. Here's not good enough for you!"

"I'm not doing drugs or protesting any war. And I'll be with friends, working. It's just extending the vacation a little, ma."

"There probably isn't even running water down in this Rio! How you gonna' wash your hands?"

"Don't worry, ma, everything will be fine."

"You've got me worried even more now you say everything will be fine."

"Ma, I'll be back soon, just not as soon as I expected, alright? Take a big, deep breath in and let it out now. It will calm you down."

"Oh my God, you sound like you're on the dope right now."

Chaccone reminded himself that he was her only child and all that she had now. She became pregnant with him late in life. At 36, it was an unexpected turn for her and more uncommon among women her age at that time. She and her husband had been warring with each other steadily and the night of his conception was the first time they'd had sex in over two years. The pregnancy was so surprising that Chaccone's Guatemalan-born father, nearly 10 years his wife's senior, suffered a heart attack upon hearing the news, choking on the pot roast that he'd understandably lost focus on chewing while at the dinner table — hence the first public mention of Chaccone's entry into the world was accompanied by gagging, vomiting and cardiac arrest.

In some ways for Chaccone, travel had become an experiment in reshaping this arrival, of reinterpreting the home he could not undo.

• • •

At some point along the crowd's momentum-gathering zigzag through the neighborhoods, the contagious passion broke the restraints corralling it. As if a massive rainbow had condensed and deluged the shanties below it, multi-hued clusters of people now emptied from their homes out onto the streets. Their bronzed bare backs and legs raised the blue and yellow paints on their skin in high contrast. Both men and women preened with plumes of oranges and whites and reds like birds of paradise in mating season. The drumbeats vibrated with urgency absent in the weeks before, until the sensation tickled the skin of one's back like switching fronds of palm trees.

Even in the many days before this crescendo, Chaccone had barely recognized the people he had come to know since he arrived. They'd shifted from the level of their cultural and religious dedication to the music into a state of being directly acted upon by it. The drumming classes — the "batucadas" — and all the singing and dancing practices now were emerging from routines into forms where raw responses could flourish.

Chaccone fell in at the back of the coalescing crowd with the musicians, barely able to hear himself think above the rhythms, which weren't intended for thinking anyway. Most people moved with their own found syncopation to the music, but the dancers up front were made of one body, twirling like wheels within a larger circle in wide, white baiana skirts lined with hundreds of orange and blue carnations below the waist and at the base of the white headwear. Their eyes flashed rhythmically, even their fingers seemed to form the same "letters" as they spun round — Chaccone knew immediately he would follow them now anywhere.

Two or three cars approaching on the street we're quickly swallowed in the "banda" of dancers, drummers, musicians and thousands of others in the neighborhood who simply were there to march along. He had fled Buffalo to discover what was wild about the southern continent, not to find himself in even more vast, congested and polluted urban swaths. But, at least for now, there was something different occurring here that had nothing to do with city or countryside, that made both feel to him more indistinguishable, inseparable. He was learning a different way of experiencing them. Far from concerned, the drivers and passengers emerged from their vehicles and danced with the crowd until the procession moved past them. This was not even the "parade," Chaccone would learn, these people were merely heading toward a designated cross-section of streets to focus on their drinking and partying skills, and yet, amid all the crowding women in glittering rhinestone bikinis, amid the bubbling cacophony, he felt his whole body stroked by the electric friction of it all.

Steady lines of bottles from a house bar on the corner passed through outstretched arms like the web of a spider and drums galloped through the trochaic beats of a samba. Chaccone began to dance, first in imitation of others' movements, then simply as the rhythm instructed. His frazzled black hair and lanky gyrating frame were instantly conspicuous to both the few

who knew him and those who didn't, and the bottles soon circled back around through raised hands and filtered their way toward him. The alcohol took its toll on him, one bottle always followed by another a minute or two later, and his dancing became more legs versus hips than the shy toe-tappings he'd begun earlier. The people in the crowds had been through this before, but what was informing Chaccone, how was it the faces of the others so exactly reflected what he felt inside? Perhaps this kind of happening overpowered everyone that came too close to its magnetic pull in the same way.

A young woman grabbed his waist and pulled it to hers. They cavorted through some steps together in the narrow space the crowd allotted them. Like taut-skinned young fruits, her breasts grew lighter hued near the unripened bottoms that showed outside the triangular patches of her rhinestone bikini top. The other time in his life Chaccone had been so close to a girl this voluptuous occurred when he slow-danced with a cousin at a funeral wake and felt it necessary to walk back to his seat slightly doubled over in order to conceal an unwelcomed excitement from his watching relatives. And unlike that moment, people cheered him now. But truth be told, they cheered for everything, and everything inspired their cheers.

As they ran far to find a clear spot in the crowd, the girl raised her arm in the direction of the band and fluttered it up and down in what might have passed for a train conductor's motion if it weren't performed so liltingly. A few extra drumbeats cannoned out like rimshots to inside jokes. They hugged closely to the brick wall of the bar on the corner and made it around back by the kitchen dumpsters.

She kissed him for what seemed to him a long enough time to constitute a cue, if not an invitation, or, at the very least something rare enough to his experience that he could not let it pass. He unfastened the button on his pants as secretly as possible, pulled her close and placed his spindly fingers on her bikini patch, drawing it up and down slowly until he could feel the warmth against his hand becoming moist. Her breath quickened and she yelped something in Portuguese that he could not decipher from the Spanish glossaries in his head. "What next?" he thought. She led him to the wall, put his hands on her hips, pointed to the sky, then jumped up and wrapped her legs around him so that he had no choice but to hold her up. With one hand around his neck, she struggled to guide him inside her until he finally got the message and went with it. He leaned her against the wall to support his thrusts and, for the first time all day, looked skyward: white clouds seemed to pulse against the blue in half time to their skin on skin rhythm, and the whole dome rotated as if in time with the rainbow-colored umbrellas twirling lazily among the marching orchestra.

As he grew dizzy from staring into a wide stretch of blue sky, he wondered if everything happening here, all that had happened to him in his travels, was imaginary or just immensely tangible. He felt a river of warm light rush between the crown of his head and the sun, every second reeling it further into his body and letting it back out. It had made his knees buckle. The music echoed around them and with his eyes closed he saw the flowered baianas spinning, yellows from sunrays filtering through his eyelids and the pink tones of flesh commingling.

He had never felt the canals of his senses this flooded, this sated, and, without fully realizing it, he smiled broadly.
His partner looked up in amusement at the black stubbled underside of his pointed chin and began to giggle softly.

This release brought them even closer together than the sex, breaking the silence just after they reached their peaks and began the slow, easy crawl downhill.

She took his hand and pulled him from his sudden fatigue. "Vem," she said, and suddenly they were ambling inside the building's back door, past the kitchen foyer and line cooks laughing at them, up a flight of stairs and through an old bolted wooden door onto the roof of the café. The girl let out a gasp and stopped abruptly at the top of the stairs as if frightened by something, then gathered herself and led Chaccone to an edge of the roof where they looked down not only on their banda, but on other large groups teeming all over this side of the city. Colors and sounds bled together – yellows, blue and oranges, drums and horns. The music of their parade drowned out that of the others' in the distance and the motions of those bandas blocks away synched up in odd times to the songs, sometimes just preceding the beat, sometimes lagging one step behind.

The comfort of their silence, of not being able to communicate, was now beginning to fade for Chaccone, and almost reflexively he asked in Spanish what her name was, not expecting an answer.

"Oshun," she said, and pointed her finger at the crowds. Simultaneously, she tapped Chaccone's opposite shoulder with her other hand and when he fell for the trick he was startled to find an old coal-black woman sitting in a rocking chair at the end of the roofline to their left. She looked at him and smiled, and said in broken English, "Have a nice day. No?"

As opposed to a few seconds ago, now it was his mind that couldn't function while his tongue was fluent. The woman waved them over. Chaccone looked back at the girl. She shrugged her shoulders and motioned Chaccone to accept the invitation.

The old woman wore a white headdress and was draped in a triangular-shaped black robe with gold embroidery. Her half-lidded eyes expressed fatigue and contentment, as if wavering in new combinations of a perennial delight over the festivities below her. Chaccone wondered how she made it up the stairs in the long black gown and if the rooftop chair was reserved for her. Might the girl have known the old woman was up here, he wondered. It was almost as if she kept him on the other side of the roof until she was sure presenting him was acceptable.

The woman's hands appeared remarkably smooth and her shining black pupils crowded out the white irises until they were mere slivers flashing here or there when she turned, giving her somewhat of a mad expression. He approached with trust in the girl who had so recently granted him a sexual identity, as if sex could grant one a temporary exemption from madness and danger.

"You like mushic?" the old woman asked looking down at the crowds.

"I love it."

"You loves my granddaughter?"

"What?" Chaccone looked over at the girl who seemed to be staring in disbelief, a mix of amusement and awe in her wide eyes. She showed no signs of understanding what was being said but watched them intently.

"Yes, 'dish my granddaughter." the old woman said.

"She's very nice, but I just met her." He paused. "I like her very much."

"OK. I tinks she like you too," she said, looking back at him with a knowing wink, as if not only his recent sexual encounter, but all of his secrets, even those he himself was not yet fully aware of, had been aired over all the tin pairs of loudspeakers mounted on the tops of the cars circling the city during Carnaval week. It was more than surprise. He felt a sense of hidden forces rapidly closing in on him and pushing him across his border of defense. Just what was he prepared to defend, anyway? It was too much at once. He backed away from the old woman like a man concealing his intention to run until the last possible moment.

"I- It was very nice, it was an honor to meet you," he mumbled finally.

"You please to have her back by di first light," the old woman said through a smile, two front teeth missing in it but a soft and spooky laugh echoing through the gap. Chaccone ran. Across the roof, through the heavy wood door, down the steps, wrong way through the kitchen — even more laughter here from the staff — back again right way through the kitchen and out the back door into the rollicking crowd again. And when he looked back finally, there was the girl, laughing, clapping, hugging him tight until he had nowhere to move. She bowed her head to him as if he had been granted some rite of passage. She pointed to her ears and then his ears, as if telling him to listen, then held a finger to her lips: "Shhhh," she mimed amid the great noise. He nodded but was still unsure of what had happened on the roof. The crowd gave him no time to ponder it, pushing against him as a circle was forming around some dancers.

Arms see-sawed and legs intertwined as various couples moved in and out of the circle, whistles and applause serving as the judges' panel. The girl was dancing again, Chaccone noticed, and soon, despite his confusion, he could not help swaying along to the beat her body kept. He tried to avoid looking at her for long stretches, but she was smiling at him again, the moist whites of her eyes gleaming at him. A dancing couple was chosen to lead the parade, the man wearing all white —Panama hat, short-sleeve shirt and cotton pants — and the woman throwing a white shawl over her gold bikini top and skirt. As they snaked their way to the front, their white clothing flashed through the crowd in the dusk light, occasionally disappearing under the crowd's many pats on the backs and congratulatory hugs.

The banda rose and inched forward like a mammoth millipede. It headed in the general direction of the Sambadrome several miles away, a route filled more with gesture than intention of getting there. Faint color puffs of fireworks from over-anxious neighbors could be made out briefly now against the darkening beige-orange horizon. Their charges announce the larger sounds and visions to come, more pieces of the night winding away from fixed points.

As people along its path join the banda and it becomes more crowded, Chaccone and the girl detour again and this time he's convinced she has no idea where she's going. They stop at each corner to gauge which turn to make, the streets fused with peripheral light as dusk has fallen, arms and legs with neon blue and gold paint to this side, a gaggle of kids with sparklers to another, white uniforms of men to that side and reflections from orange and yellow costumes mingling in the shadows.
As the streets darken and the sound of drums get a bit more distant, Chaccone suggests with a kiss on the back of her neck and a pointed finger to his lips that there are better things to do than going back to the banda parade from which they came.

They can see the hill districts again ahead of them as the tenements and shanties crowd the streets tightly. The pinks and greens and blues of the buildings darken, also, the red tiles on the roofs merging into each other. She kisses him deeply again and he can think about nothing but finding another secluded area behind a building.

Ahead of them, or perhaps behind them, a flute is being played, just loud enough to rise above the parade's soft rumble. They both hear it and look around for its source, but most of the shanties and floors of apartments are vacant, all the action back toward the city center where everyone is marching. They walk further through the narrow streets that begin their climb up the hills to the favelas in another few blocks and all is silent except for the song they are following.

The sound is both subtle and full as it reframes the commotions of the day, and yet it's plaintive also. And now it's clear as they turn another corner that it's a voice, not a flute, a woman's voice singing alone in an empty neighborhood.

"O que ela…" Chaccone tries to ask about what the woman is singing. The girl points to her mouth and ear and shakes her head to indicate she does not understand the dialect.

It is soft and nearly soprano in range, but full-throated and warm, sung in a folkloric style. They hear the resonance of the singer's pauses between verses invite the still of the neighborhood into the song, just long enough for them to take notice and return to her voice with new ears. They stop walking completely and listen, still uncertain where exactly it originates. As a faint breeze falls, the voice sounds very close to where they are standing. There is no baby being hushed to sleep, no partner stirring to the sounds. One moment it rises in torment. Another verse descends in calm tones. Another turn careens toward a question. Through a simple glance at the expressions on each other's faces, Chaccone and the girl realize they are both at the same time wondering about the source of this voice, this woman, and why she is singing, what inspires her, and lastly, what does her singing mean beyond the words of the song?

The song revisits the color and sound of their day from a new space. The more they listen, the more the heart of the voice blooms into the streets. It echoes in solitude off the pavement and the concrete of the tenements on top of a lyrical path with no destination other than the path inside the song. Chaccone and the girl have given up trying to locate it, they stand holding hands with heads bowed listening, the sounds tracing not merely where they've been and where they are going, but what the song makes them now, whatever its meaning, of the song as it reveals them, and then of their place in the silences. They have both closed their eyes, perhaps in hopes of hearing it more clearly. They feel the day's parade, the outbursts in the night and everything about them compress into the plane of the sounds they hear. Through the still of these deserted streets the voice comes to them like a rumor, as if carrying secrets about those who live in these empty homes, and through this expression, invites the two of them to recognize their own desires, as well. Invisible as an eye of a storm, it has no source or name.
All of their fears, everything that waits to cave in on them at any moment, the melody has stilled.

It does not last long. There is a matter, no surprise — a man talking loudly and a woman who answers as if she is defending herself. Chaccone and the girl open their eyes and see two navy blue shapes laboring against the dusk background at the end of the street. There is a noise that sounds like a slap as the figures enter a plaster house — or perhaps it is just the door being

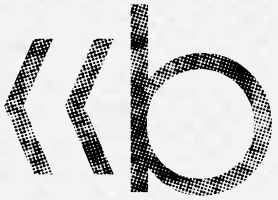
slammed behind them — but the woman is crying and yelling through tears. The man is yelling back, angrier. The song continues to fade in the background while Chaccone and the girl wait for its force to resume, but it only slips away, then is drowned by the screams of the couples' argument and trails off completely, but precisely when, Chaccone and the girl, by their stunned expressions, seem less certain. And difficult as it would be for them to communicate, neither wants to risk asking the other whether they really heard what they thought they heard or not. It feels beyond their powers to describe.

They walk back until their legs begin to ache. In need of some sanctuary, they move to revisit the night from their perch back on the rooftop. It is another half-hour walking, but, with a destination, they gain a bit of energy. When they arrive, the old woman is gone and so is her high-backed chair.

Lights of the city are blinking like snapshot flashes from hill to hill, surging down avenues as diamonds scattered through the amorphous multi-hued crowds. Their banda has joined the body of a larger snake a few quadrants off and will soon peel away and make its return. Some of the people have already come back to wait on the corner below the young couple, drinking and dancing. A mix of adrenalin and alcohol lifts the emotions of the group in pulses. One night will conjoin another as necessary, endurance the only measure of days passing.

Chaccone wonders if the girl might have been serving as his chaperone, performing a bacchanalian duty now exhausted. When he turns to give his thanks for the joy she has shown him, she is already gone. Strangely, he's not a bit surprised.

chapter 5



e right back, goin' down to the school," the boy mumbled as he shot out the side door with his baseball glove like a line drive past the woman reeling after him from an imaginary mound.

"Get back here, Johnny!" She lunged after him a last time in hopes of snagging the tail of his t-shirt. She'd seen the same from her own son on the poorer side of town but this one was smaller and faster. "Your father will hear about it from me if you miss another lesson!"

He wasn't going to let that happen, he thought, as he ran toward the schoolyard, but he wasn't sure which part of her threat he'd try to prevent, his father hearing about it or him missing his lesson. As it was a hot, lazy Saturday afternoon in the South, his father, as well as his father's father and an aunt, were taking siestas under ceiling fans in upstairs bedrooms.

"Only got five innings in me," he said taking a spot in the school's vast asphalt outfield, "gotta go out with my family for dinner." He still wasn't comfortable talking about his piano lessons with his friends.

"Hell with that," the pitcher said as he wound up and let the white rubber baseball fly toward the strike zone spray-painted on the brick side of the school. The batter swung and missed an undeveloped curve that barely broke two inches, but two inches at just the right time.

In Battlesboro, in the south of North Carolina, there wasn't much else of interest to sixth-graders besides speedball at the schoolyard, petty theft and the sneaking of cigarettes, which probably wasn't as frowned upon as it was in other states. Schools regularly organized field trips to tour tobacco companies so students could get a good look at the magic behind the making of the cigarette.

The young Browne took his cuts and managed two home runs, three doubles and two singles before making three outs. The ball meeting the old chipped wooden bat — there was no Willie Mays-style stickball this far south of New York — felt better than any of those delicate keystrokes at the ends of his fingertips. He took his turn to pitch.

They lived in east Battlesboro in a nice part of town, his dad a doctor assuming his first residency, his mom constantly

drifting between part-time secretarial/admin jobs, swim classes and gossip lunches at households of various levels of notoriety in the neighborhood. The fact he was an only child aided Browne in limiting his attachments to the world, a project he'd already begun but one soon to be accelerated. By the sixth grade he was already wondering why more people didn't see things the way he did, and since they didn't, thought it best to keep to himself, finding comfort with a few close friends instead of trying to accumulate lots of them like the more popular kids in class.

A few blocks from his school was a theater that screened older movies at reduced ticket prices. His classes, to Browne's rationalizations, weren't so serious they couldn't be occasionally sacrificed for an old Western matinee or vintage silent comedy. To think otherwise, as most adults did, was plain stupid, he thought. The same went for teachers who couldn't understand a joke, whether it was a few harmless exploding caps thrown at the blackboard, a jar of lab mosquitoes let loose in their desk drawer, or a bookmark conveniently moved to an earlier lesson in accommodation of skipped classes.

Family for Browne was nice in small doses but confining to one's interests. Girls, he was finding out, could sometimes make you feel funny for some reason, but it was not a bad feeling. Music could make you feel the same way when people weren't always trying to tell you how to play it.

But lately, he carried with him a penetrating and sometimes scary feeling. It had invaded him after a recent visit by his aunt and uncle when they and his parents were once again discussing his future education as if he were not even present. He was getting bored pretty fast so he asked his mother if he could go to a neighbor's home, and halfway there decided a little fresh air with the slingshot might be a better option. A few clanging stop signs later, the low gray clouds peeled toward the horizon and a sweltering sun began heating his belly to a curdle, the last traces of lunch having moved south hours ago. Another fried baloney sandwich would hit it about right, he thought.

He also thought past the absent fried baloney toward another vacancy that would need to be filled, eventually, which was what they were all so busy talking about back at the house: What would he become? And "what" wasn't the word that gave him pause. "How" was a different story.

Maybe hunger makes you think messed up things, he thought, but he didn't see the sense of it all. Because he already knew some of the possibilities from his daydreams: musician, doctor, dentist, policeman, poet; a member of the Milwaukee Braves or a City League baseball hack; a local hero or an area criminal. None of them seemed more than a silly part in a game that adults played. But "how" did you become someone? Was he the only one who thought that was impossible?

"Quit your stallin' and just throw it over the plate, gawdamnit," the batter yelled.

Browne dug the tips of his fingernails into the ball and reared back, extending his fingers wide as he released the ball from his nails so that there was barely any rotation on its path to the batter. The ball floated for several feet on a normal course until the friction of the air grew resistant against its lack of spin. Then, just as it approached the batter, it fluttered downward in a motion as wavering and unexpected as a butterfly heading for a dandelion it had spotted below. The batter couldn't hold back his swing and missed badly.

"Damn you again, just throw it right."

"I'm throwin' right, you just ain't swingin' right."

"Gawdamn you, you know what I mean."

It was the start of the fifth inning already and Browne was well out ahead. But this was just getting fun. The piano instructor would hang out at his house for a while waiting for him and that meant his lesson would be shorter. Besides, his record was 13 wins and 6 losses. If he left now, it wouldn't be a complete game.

"One more of those and I'm gonna' rush the mound."

"What?"

"That's what the batter does when the pitcher messes with him, like makes fun of him."

"How do you know?"

"I seen it."

"OK, you better stop looking so funny then." Browne gripped the ball in his glove by his fingernails and prepared for another knuckleball. A headwind was building in front of him and he waited till it peaked to release the ball. Ten feet out of his hand and the ball was aping a drunken fly this time, sputtering toward the batter's chin until he bailed from his batting stance — then ducking down and away, landing just inside a corner of the paint on the brick wall.

"Strike three!" the outfielder yelled and began running in for his turn to bat.

"Damn you — you, you asshead," screamed the batter. He dropped the bat down on the black asphalt and it began clunking hollowly in a rapid pattern. Fearing the bat would break, Browne raised on his toes and took a half breath in, exhaling as the bat came to rest with one final clunk and a few rolls, signaling that it had somehow escaped un-cracked. They only had one bat; if it cracked, the game was over. With no catcher to protect his back as he walked to the outfield, Browne suddenly found himself in a headlock, the batter trying to fit in close-range, limp jabs inside the round of his arm. Browne flung his arm on the back of the batter and managed to put him in a headlock also, and the two of them circled like partners chasing the tail of a two-piece horse costume.

"That's what pitchers get who don't take hitters seriously," the batter said from the ground after being thrown down by Browne and the outfielder.

"You better not have broke that bat. I got to hit next," said the outfielder.

Browne had a slightly bloody nose, not a problem in itself, but there were now scarlet droplets on the tan polo shirt his mother had given him recently for his 12th birthday.

"Time out, time out!" Browne yelled upon noticing, "I gotta get this blood out. Shit!"

"Hey, my mom can take that right out, right on out," said the outfielder. "Come on, we can get some freeze-pops, too," He looked at the batter getting up from the ground. "And no more fighting, idiot, don't you know a knuckleball?"

"Knuckleball fuckleball!"

At Tommy the outfielder's house, Browne made sure his nose was good and packed by Tommy's mom, packed with so

much gauze that it hung out a quarter-inch below the nostril, proclaiming to everyone who could see the scarlet center that blood had flowed here, and flowed here recently. A good story, he was going to need a damn good story for the confrontation with his father, and the blood couldn't hurt his chances. But now the freeze-pops could be licked, now the popcorn could get popping. Browne won the coin toss to decide which of the three channels to watch on the tiny screen framed in the center of a massive console in the parlour — and he chose a "Movies We Remember" classic: "Modern Times," one of the only films by Chaplin that Browne had yet to see. He loved comedians, especially silent lonely ones. Once the procession of images began moving across the screen, he forgot all about the lesson back home.

Assembly line conveyor belts inspired by the film kept revolving through Browne's head on his way back home. He walked eastward through the late afternoon light, intermittently glimpsing a strange round glow of an early sunset shrouded by clouds on the horizon. The assembly lines kept moving, but without the necessary clown to break up the repetition. They were segments of a single body. Was this also one of the "whats" that people chose to become, workers in a factory?

He could never make out any of their faces, though he tried hard to see them throughout his walk. The clouds dissolved into a gray vapor surrounding a smudge on the horizon. It was only when the movie faded from his mind that he saw the backs of heads and hunched shoulders, parts seemingly moving from hand to hand, faces maybe blank, maybe blackened. Their motions all matched and they seemed to sniff each other's ears as they swayed side to side while they worked, like mice lined up in a column, occasionally coughing from their own stench. What were they making? The line formed at a waterspout and the motion spread out in waves, water moving off the ground and from one person to the next. A familiar smell grew stronger. And Browne punctured his own daydreaming with a cough. The stench was thick in the air. And hot.

"Johnny, Johnny!" his nanny appeared from nowhere and grabbed him, sobbing wildly, clutching him over and over. "Where were you, where were you! I started dinner, I went to look for you, only for a minute, only a minute! … oh my God!"

He ran toward the house and she grabbed him across the chest and held him in place. He tried to slouch his way through her smothering grip, finally gave up and looked around for his family. His mother must have not returned home yet, he thought at not seeing her. He was about to ask the nanny about everyone else when the flames licked out from the inside of the house and begin to cradle the exterior, even more orange against the slate grey sky than he believed orange could be. The front door that he had run back and forth through so frequently had already blackened like a piece of toast. He felt the air all around him suctioned toward this event metabolizing his home, bristling the stub of hair on his arms and pressing heat down against the skin, drawing tears from his eyes even though he did not believe he was crying.

Its light and power were to his youthful mind more terrible, and therefore more deserving of wonder, than what any man seemed capable of producing. The wall to the right of the front door fell away and the speed at which the X-ray frames of the sofa, coffee table and easy chair in the sitting room vaporized made him think there was an invisible force besides the fire driving the destruction. Flames bled through every window one by one, every crack in the house unknown to him till now, even up from the drain vents on the front stairs, until the blue haze on the wrap-around plantation porch was a halo of smoke and a hazy melt of plastic chairs and floorboards. Piece by piece the blaze tilted this loose corona as if gravity had left the premises.

Only God or the devil, he thought, could make things twist in such unnatural motions.

The flames turned more white than orange as they brought chunks of the home to the ground in crashes preceded by groans and squeaks. To his transfixed stare, every thing the fire disappeared it replaced with new shades and shapes.
A chameleon-like column of smoke, flame and swirling ash rose three stories until the chimney lurched left once and caved in a slow motion descent that coaxed the rest of the roof to follow. He did not know if this collapse had taken several minutes or an hour. It had moved with the pause and jump of a snake, opposite the predictability of the water bucket assembly line that stopped its link of arms almost as soon as he arrived, the men and women watching the filmic progression now from the same distance where he stood watching, all held dumbstruck by the fury. And though he wished this line of men and woman could somehow dissemble the force in front of him, ground the drama and reverse its direction until the blaze recoiled into earlier smokeless frames, there was no end in sight to it.

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This street, 125th St. Harlem, seemed to him a song written by a hundred composers — truck drivers on deliveries, percussions of perforated mufflers, barking street preachers, emergency sirens, beauticians talking loud on their breaks, all members of the unwritten, uncharted congregation that gathered and was also corralled, emigrated and exiled, that snatched independence while it was still being denied them. The constant rush of cars and trucks, the people walking quickly, the roar of everything happening at once made it harder for him to think about his loss than if he had stayed in Battlesboro where memories would have filled each minute clicking by. He may have gone back to his piano lessons in North Carolina. Here, they were necessary to relieve the pressure of the new experiences that piled up within him every day. And slowly, untraceable to either month, day or song, the piano transformed from instrument to weapon. When it became his voice years later, the sound, if not the words, still rang with fierce and elemental tones, as if they only found human expression in the moments that settled afterward.

On the sidewalk in front of him was a large coffee-complected woman wrapped in a thick dark brown cotton skirt, topped with a white blouse and white bandana, slowly picking up the dried leaves draped from the side of her stand and rolling cigars. All the traffic and exhaust at her back did not appear to concern her. The soul food joints sent waves of sweet grease odors onto the sidewalks from the street-level and second-floor storefronts, and sometimes even from third stories if a fire had forced them to make the climb upward — all irrelevant in her case, since she didn't share many of their customers. She rolled and the islanders came. On either side of her, a cage of doves. The foreign scents caused Browne to eye them with suspicion. He'd never seen birds in a tobacco factory, this wasn't like anything in Battlesboro.

He had not spoken much to anyone since the fire, but his curiosity got the better of him: "Whatta' those doves for?"

A very long pause as she continued her rolling and proceeded to take a long draw from the lit cigar in her ashtray. Then a piercing glance into his wide-open eyes: "Do I know you — sonny?"

He had nothing to say in response. He immediately wished he'd never asked. She was a strange woman — not strange like his mother had become now, but strange and big like the city, shadowing a past not easily connected to the jumbled present. No, she didn't know him and he didn't know her, big deal, and he didn't give a damn what the doves were for, anyway, he thought.

"Forget you," he said and walked further west, life along the avenues finding all manner of expression: on one corner the microphoned Islamic preachings from a white-shirted cleric and his brothers, the gospel voices of a group of women on another (with vinyl pressings for sale in blue plastic crates), the bright red, green and orange robes and headwear of African dancers, the sax player and his open case full of change, salesmen calling out passersby, snake charmers, performers of routines from forgotten worlds, other worlds remembered in new ways and recreated on the spot in front of you. And he was only up to Lennox Avenue.

He turned north and weaved further west to the brownstone where he was living with his mother's parents. His mother was not ready for him yet. She was not ready for anything yet. When she was, everyone assumed she would be released from the hospital and take her son back to North Carolina. But the whole family was still in shock from the loss of Browne's father, grandfather and aunt in the fire. No one had the energy to envision how things might resolve, if they ever could.

His grandparents were quiet, unlike his mother, and in the large ground-level apartment they had owned for decades they kept a baby grand in a back room where he had insisted on sleeping instead of in the bedroom they'd prepared for him. Returning home from summer school classes at his grandparents' parish, he tried to play what he'd seen during his day. If he awoke during the night, he would practice playing a song as lightly as possible to avoid waking his grandparents.

Separated from his schoolyard pals now, he has fewer distractions from playing and begins to slowly find a method of expression. His sense of humor closes inward and grows darker. He stops on his walks home sometimes to hang out at Riverside Park, slogging along the outside perimeter and making up stories about the new characters he encounters on a daily basis, while the people inside smoke their herb under trees or sip bottles on benches. The stories are a way of acclimating for him, of taking some control over surroundings outside the tiny circle of the piano bench.

He is fascinated, for instance, by the man who hurriedly leaves the building where he works every day on his lunch hour, ascending up into the park and usually finding his favorite tree vacant. Browne notices how casually the man saunters back to work after a rejuvenating smoke session, whistling as he goes some days, stopping to shout or wave at people he recognizes on his way.

It is such a glowing white that Browne imagines the white-shirted cleric meticulously ironing his shirt every morning, inspecting it for any blemishes and then emerging from his entryway and striding a few paces before noticing a wrinkle or stain, returning home to repeat his shirt maintenance routine, emerging again and making it a little farther before another imperfection is noticed —this process of discovery repeating in various scenarios, coffee shops, street corners, anywhere sufficient light

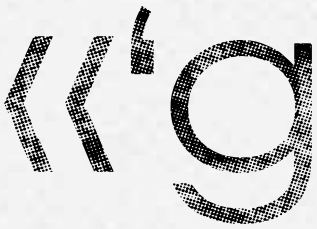
provided a more piercing perspective for an inspection. When he needs a stronger image, Browne imagines a pigeon shitting a runny black and gray stain on the man's back. As for the cigar woman, he envisions all the white doves escaping whatever fate awaits them, each one of them clipping a Cuban in their claws for good measure, and all of them shitting on her at once. These peripatetic daydreams shape a rhythmic context for the daily hustle of Harlem. They become what he hears.

His instructor listens to his playing without declaring it right or wrong, and, unlike his old piano teacher in North Carolina, doesn't demand he play anything the same way twice. He has the capability but not the discipline to do things the same way twice now, and he doesn't care to try. But he plays.

During a lesson he might be rollicking and crisp, but alone later at night the notes come out jangled and more remotely connected, emerging from the same line in different times and places. He understands the music of others but doesn't quite comprehend the content of his own, it snakes from his fingers without direction or intention as if from a unknown maestro whose music had been partially robbed by a head injury or inexplicable disease, so that someone else, transformed, now plays without complete command of the skills available to him, feeling his way through by a strangely familiar sense of touch, but blind and deaf to the process of notes begetting tones and the melodies born from this order.

Frames of his own silent film accompany him while he plays, flickering disjointedly, from nostalgia to rage, from awe-inducing terror to adolescent playfulness, and since he plays by instinct at these moments he is always surprised by the sounds that comes from the actor, the stranger on the piano bench, how in its wilderness the sound shatters his expectations and gives him the raw materials needed for such moments without pattern, every note, every moment standing on its own.
And so it goes night after night. Until the stranger inside finally grows, if not familiar, more fleeting.

chapter 6



ood' can mean many different things," Chaccone thought as he lay in bed while Elise showered. "What did she mean, 'good?' Good enough? Good as in absent of evil? Good & Plenty?"

He rolled from the bed, put on his boxers and walked over to Elise's front door and the "thin" mirror that hung from it, tall, narrow and kind in the shape of its opinion. He tried out a few angles. None of them worked. The profile disappointed him the most — a large, long-beaked, flightless bird he saw looking sideways at him, an emu, to avoid the ostrich comparison Browne had made, maybe a hint of the dodo, with salt and pepper feathers on top and a sagging midsection.

At least he wasn't fat, he told himself. He could still walk mile after mile. Unemployment was shaving away his paunch, but on the downside, returning gangliness everywhere else. Give and take, he figured. And how many people his age had hands as spotless as his, nothing even under the nails. Nails like porcelain, in fact. And weren't emus a delicacy in some places?

"Don't bother, it's all a lie," Elise said returning from the bathroom.

"What's the distortion percentage?"

"Not enough."

"Kind of the opposite of the old funhouse mirrors."

"What?"

"Funhou- never mind, they probably didn't have those where you grew up," he said. "What did you mean when you said 'good?'"

"Nothing. It was good."

"You can be honest with me."

"I am being honest. Stop worrying."

"I'm not worried, just curious."

"I don't know, you know when music is good, right?"

"There's music that makes me feel something and there's music that doesn't."

"Ok then."

He immediately flashed to Browne, not just because of the current awkward circumstances, but because Browne's hazardous approach had made him feel more than any musician before. Had he heard Browne in his youth, he often wondered, would he have bothered going to South America, immersed himself in the club life? Or would he have become a musician and had his whole life turn out differently — and then be stuck in the same predicament as Browne was, a player with no place to play? People like he and Elise made choices that brought them here, he told himself, Browne included. It was why they were together, all of them, because there was no place else.

"So, 'good' as in I moved you?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Oh fucking forget it."

"Fucking forget it is right. This is new to me, too, you know."

"What?

"Having someone stay the night. I don't do this."

"You mean since Browne?"

"I mean since anyone and no one."

"Alright, I'm not trying to pry. I'm asking for a chance. The past is over. You wouldn't have given Browne's music a chance if you didn't believe that, am I right? And look how he's playing again. There's a possibility. That's all I'm asking."

"Amazing," she said, as if speaking to herself. "It's as if you're both so paranoid you're not able to recognize real threats anymore."

Chaccone walked away slowly, his mouth open to speak, then turned back in her direction as he fumbled open a can of beer, sipping slowly, finally looking away from her, still unable to process her last comment. His gaze found the mirror again accidentally and he grimaced.

"If there are threats we're not paranoid."

"That's not what I said."

"If Browne plays the same place all the time, word spreads and the wrong people find out sooner or later. That is a threat you seem to ignore."

"I was talking about your lack of connection to reality," she said tiredly, cinching her robe a bit tighter, crawling back in bed on her side and pulling the covers to her cheek.

"Let me get this straight," said Chaccone, who, as opposed to Elise, grew more enthused by the musical direction the conversation had taken, "you think we're crazy because we struggle to find places for Browne to play, and crazy for thinking there are dangers in doing so?"

"Yes," came muffled from beneath the covers, "because you don't see the connection any longer between the two, supply and demand. Because you think everyone thinks like you."

"How can I know what people think?"

"I said you think you know. You assume people don't come to hear Browne because he doesn't have a license and a promoter, he's underground, not because they don't care to hear him."

He was poised to utter something he believed would both crumple her logic and at the same time unite all three individuals. It would be one part motivational two parts inspirational, elucidating to Elise, through a number of first-hand, eye-witness experiences, that the sad state of the world didn't excuse them their roles as keepers of a worthy flame, that everyone should at least be given the choice to listen or not listen to a person like Browne play, that the world grew more interesting when people gathered around someone like him trying to create music: Maybe people would be drawn in by it; Or it would disgust them, turn them off completely; But they would be confronted by it.

He was prepared to propose Browne play a request or two from Robert — the gullible and elderly owner of The Standard, who Elise tried to look out for and manipulate at the same time, could be mollified into waiting longer for the shows to bring in people. This might involve him begging, most likely bribing Browne. He would remind her of the long personal histories the three of them shared together, stretching all the way back to the halcyon days of Elise's nightclub, The Double E. He would try to lighten things up with a self-deprecating comment, maybe how he didn't have many more cans-of-Pabst-to-the-forehead left in him and needed a partner to look out for him once in a while now. After his optimistic fervor had warmed her, he planned to finish things up by crawling back in bed with her. He knew she would fight him on almost every point but he was just going to have to be persistent.

"Go and leave me sleep," Elise said curtly.

He looked at the whites of his bare feet and shook his head. He gulped the rest of the beer.

He thought back on Browne's gigs years ago at her old club. At the end of it all, there was the long trial during which she lost ownership of the club, where they saw each other every day. They hadn't hung out regularly since until she and Browne moved into The Standard. Browne had never opened up in any depth about her to him, or about anything, for that matter, in all the years they'd known each other. Now, he had woken up in her in bed.

Back when she still regularly came out to see Browne play, he remembered, she might appear wearing anachronistic beatnik era clothing, hip pastiche gear of modern youth culture or the uniforms of the growing subsistence-level factotum class. She might even dress as a man or in some other weird one-time-only getup that helped her avoid a fixed expression of herself. She always arrived alone and departed alone, usually toward the end of the last set. And while she liked to drink, she never indulged with strangers. She would have made a good spook for intelligence agencies, he thought.

Circumstances had obviously changed since then, but to Chaccone, they had changed more in the last several years than in the four-plus decades of his life before. He knew he couldn't prove to Elise how this transformation had occurred so rapidly. But he wanted badly to believe she felt as he did. Life's music echoed everywhere, he reflected, on phones, over car stereos,

through myriad radio signals and computers, vibrations of music, the rhythms of speech, sounds and noises, all melding into one constant brain-roiling rattle, which, like everything else, people absorbed in new ways. But it was all deflective background effect to him — not just the music — all of it. What was in the foreground you never saw or heard. Like a dead language, it was ubiquitous and ghostly in its absence. And after a while, you no longer noticed it missing.

After this night, he began hanging out at the bar in The Standard regularly. The drinking wore on his stomach but he didn't mind if it meant getting to see Elise. He knew that she didn't believe he was all-the-way crazy, and that's all the hope he needed at this point in his life.

Given that he'd never been a big drinker, Chaccone's presence at the bar felt odd to Browne, who would return home from his job to find his friend, the out-of-work, import-export man, trading stories over rounds of ales. Chaccone would immediately begin badgering him with enthusiastic chatter about finding gigs, so Browne thought himself the main reason for the visits — in the beginning.

i
the game

chapter 7

"Nutty bastards," the man mumbled, looking down on the ballroom filled with partiers from a railing on the second floor and nipping at a whiskey sour.

"It's always the same, every year," she said. "But they love it more each time."

"Because that's the thrill of it. Do the same thing over and over and make all that money, as long as everybody else believes you're selling something new. To the latest and greatest, right?" He raised his glass but she didn't join the toast.

"You don't give enough credit where it's due."

"I didn't say that."

Below, throngs of people representing government bureaus, search engine behemoths and their content divisions, media conglomerates and their music branches, and elected officials were shouting loud encouragements and dancing as an accordionist in lederhosen led a band through a polka number on the main stage by charging around with his arms pumping and head twisting in exaggerated motions each time his part came up. He had no microphone or amplification of any kind, so it was clear the music booming throughout the hall was not coming from him or his so-called band. That everyone knew this, and that The Environmental Music Association's International Musicians Convention was the one of the few places where this was not supposed to happen, or at least did not *need* to happen, didn't seem to matter to anybody. As the woman commented, it only seemed to make the guests enjoy it even more. For the body politic that forged the performance statutes, faking live performances at an event where they were perfectly legal was the ultimate insider's joke. This year's theme emblazoned convention hall banners, coffee mugs and t-shirts all over the downtown district: "Songs Will Keep Us Together."

This was not to say that all of the bands on the bill for the weekend were synching up to recordings — an Irish a cappela

group actually velvet-throated a version of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" earlier in the day on an auxiliary stage, and a Balinese gamelan orchestra had whipped up a bellstorm of a racket shortly after them — it was just that the ones that did ape their songs always elicited the loudest applause and guffaws, the broadest grins, the drunkest hoots from the conventioneers.

What this cabal held prima facie, what many others had gradually accepted through their lead, was as basic to them as a Sunday school lesson: All peoples loved music, all peoples would always value music. But live musical performance, well intentioned as it might be, created a social volatility that led straight down that well-traveled road of events getting out of control when they occur in the wrong contexts. There were the student riots fueled by music in the decades past, and, before that, the rural music traditions that contributed to farmer and race rebellions, the miner strike songs traded by the backwoods music circuit in the Appalachian mountains, and, most recent of all, an age where there were almost more people playing music than listening to it. That kind of situation would have been simply too explosive if it had been left unchecked.

Several years ago, the "Wages War" rally provided the opportunity to check it. A massive concert at a public protest in Chicago against economic austerity measures, the event left 8 dead by nightfall from battles with police trying to disperse the crowd. The city of Chicago issued a curfew ordinance the next day before all the debris could even be cleared from the host parks along Michigan Ave. As the 6 p.m. curfew fell, the L trains stopped moving, traffic lights stayed red. Police and security forces set about corralling all of the trespassers into custody. As Cook County filled up, they transported the detained to other counties, all at great cost to the city. But the second day, the streets were empty, the city hushed. Plastic cups and paper sacks from the rally blew north on Michigan where it veers close to the water and made the leap from land, buffeting out into the lake like seagulls bobbing on waves. Only those in the panoptical perches of upper suites and penthouses across the street could witness them floating away. The occasional bursts of wind were the lone commuters on the streets.

Retail stores, coffee houses, restaurants, bars, music venues and movie houses lost tens of thousands of dollars this first week, but only one of these businesses relied on live performance. This week of imposed curfews proved to be the model for the national curfew, set at midnight, a time when many businesses were already closed, anyway. The moment felt ripe to the media lobby for a push on legislative action regulating live performance. That fall they had persuaded the city and state district attorney offices to collaborate on Illinois v. Wages War, 501(c)(3). The case made it to the U.S. Circuit Court for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago the next year, and then the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled the decision against Wages War to be federally binding and, thereby, rendered general assemblies, musicians, live performance artists, live music venues, performing arts centers, coffee houses, even panhandling banjo players, all restricted by licensing laws.

Once the government codified the licensing laws, live performances, music and other forms of cultural expression were legal in specific social contexts, largely free state- or faith-based events, where they could be appreciated not by a few, as one Supreme Court Justice wrote in a brief citing "non-discrimination," but by all in the community. The argument allowed audience access if not creative access. It made music social, if not personal. And, many argued, wasn't this how music was originally intended to be enjoyed when one imagined those first bones thumping against a tautly drawn animal skin — without all those nasty instincts attached, of course.

That this social truism of human nature now resulted in live musical performances being generated by the same relatively small group of people, and that these same people earned billions of dollars from its production, was merely a function of what everyone implicitly agreed upon, the logic followed, what market demand proved they wanted — and it was the protection and fulfillment of this public's demand that was paramount.

Performance licensing may have affected other industries less drastically, but by no means was music the only cultural form of expression that underwent new regulations. Theaters, for instance, now applied for state proprietor licenses that allowed them to stage stringently defined "text-based" productions. The texts themselves were not regulated, but there had to be a text, and theaters submitted those texts to the state licensing bureaus each year as a matter of record. Improvisational material and even interpretations of texts required that a theater apply separately for each performance at the federal level through the National Adornment of the Arts (NAA).

Stand-up comedy clubs closed and comedians fought each other for the relatively few writing and acting jobs available in film and television. A sanctuary for poets and public speaking events, the coffeehouse performance scene also disappeared, since only published, copyrighted material could be read there. You could write all the poetry you wanted, but speaking it publicly required licensing, and all licenses granted for written works always deferred to their need to be first registered in the Library of Congress. Even turntablists and DJs who manipulated sounds live needed licenses to scratch and spin without fear of penalty. Sentences handed for convicted first offenders ranged from 30 to 90 days, though any time spent in either the state or federal penal system was too long.

Several years ago, Browne was nabbed in a raid of club where he was playing, the agents standing up like audience members to applaud and then pulling out their weapons and federal IDs to march he and the owner off in handcuffs. The owner hired a lawyer and commuted his 60-day sentence in a county jail to six months of probation. The musicians themselves faced heavier felonies. It was Browne's second offense. He got 16 months in a maximum-security penitentiary up state and nearly didn't make it.

Most prison cells now were doubled up, housing a minimum of four inmates. The length of sentence determined — at least initially, as physical confrontations had a way of rearranging protocol — which prisoner received either a bunk or a floor mat. Near the end of his sentence, Browne moved off the floor, where roaches and a plague of mice made sleeping more than a few moments at a time impossible. One day, a new cellmate tried to stage a takeover of his bunk. The ensuing fight left sent both men to the hospital ward, Browne with a concussion and a broken kneecap that still ached him when he sat down to play. No matter your sentence, once you were inside now, it was left to chance whether you would survive long enough to come back out.

Most of the revelers gathered at the convention did not know about this dark world suffered by those who challenged the laws that guarded all they owned. But they shared no clawing need to make themselves aware of these burdens. If the music, news and culture they brought to people didn't have value, they wouldn't be wealthy, they wouldn't get to play as hard as they did at these conventions, the thinking went. Their spots would be filled by others.

Elise, as owner of The Double E, faced her own violations, even though she might have been able to escape them with the defense she procured with a large chunk of her fortune if not for the shadows of her past life, in the form of Reed, also stacking against her. The defeat — or rather how easily the case was defeated — was the first signpost to the three friends that they were out of their depth, that they had not fully realized the scope of the changes that had taken place around them.

Throughout the annual three-day event, over 70 bands would perform representing the U.S. and over 40 other countries. A few had actually even traveled from those countries on U.S. government dime, but that was not as encouraged as it had been in the old days of the EMA before budget cuts curtailed many of the old functions of the federal government. The bands were still paid well in comparison to what they might earn at other licensed gigs. But the event now functioned primarily as a party for the industry and secondarily as the government-sponsored celebration of music and culture it had begun as.

Work got done here also, in between the pat-on-the-back, loosened-tie drinking bouts and the typical guilt-ridden conventioneer trysts: if not deals, then the beginnings of deals; if not strategies for technological innovations in the way entertainment was packaged, accessed and consumed, then the seeds of those strategies.

Tall, athletic and now with gray streaks in his brown hair, Jack Bonds had always attended these events as an occupational obligation, but they didn't thrill him or his partner, Sharon Jones. Both of them had joined the Environmental Music Association in hopes of it serving as a resumé-builder for positions at higher-profile government agencies. Bonds dreamed of a job in intelligence and the younger Jones hoped to move into civic policy — the Department of Education or state-level politics. So far, neither had achieved anything that would gain the attention necessary for these kinds of promotions. And neither was ready yet to make researching and busting up the rare wedding, bar-mitzvah or family reunion that featured unlicensed live music, in hopes of happening upon a famous headline-grabbing victim, part of their daily routine.

One gained a promotion the same way the metrics of business models were monetized — by creating a viral buzz, by drawing attention to your employer, gaining topic trend amid the endless chatter that occupied the days of most people who could still afford to maintain their muiltimedia connections. Government agencies tried to attract advertisers now, since many competed with private sector businesses that provided similar services. The Pentagon employed marketing campaigns to persuade recruits to choose the armed services over private militia companies. As if an earlier, more innocent time had returned from a communal sense that no longer existed, Fraternal Orders of Police staged ice cream socials to encourage residents to sign up to receive their email campaigns. Both police and security companies staged social media contests that rewarded citizens for criminal information, but the backlog they created in the criminal justice system eventually put an end to them.

"What's the matter, this too boring for you street cops?" joked Barry Simalcummer, upstairs to smoke in the cigar bar and enjoy the panorama.

"No sir, we were just mentioning how people seem to be enjoying themselves a bit more with each convention," said Jones.

"Yeah, the atmosphere, the level of, the music keeps getting, uh…" offered Bonds.

"Oh these things are always great, always well organized. But not good enough to forgo a quality cigar," said Simalcummer. "How's work treating you these days?"

"Pretty quiet on our side, sir. Can't speak for the Anti-Piracy Division," said Bonds, "but we're working more on the prevention side than with actual cases lately — research, investigation, venue inspections, school curriculum validations, that kinda' stuff."

"Well, valuable work all the same, if not as thrilling as it could be," said the lobbyist. "Ever think about going industry?"

Bonds and Jones looked at each other with stifled surprise. This was not an invitation to give things a whirl at some fledgling start-up company. Simalcummer was a major player for Media Entity Assets, the lobby group and some said managing ownership for the three giant media conglomerates. He was known by everyone on both the government and private sides of the industry.

"Sir?" said Bonds.

"You just told me casework is dropping. So, if the kicks aren't there for you anymore, why grind away in an agency job, why not make some money?"

"We're just fancy cops in suits following codes, we don't know music."

"Probably more than you need to know, believe me. You have experience on the streets, you've worked with the school systems, you could be perfect for Research and Recruitment. Studios are always looking for help on the recording side."

"You mean finding substitutes?" said Jones.

"Sometimes. But mostly contractors. Studio workers, engineers, songwriters, musicians."

"You mean in-house?" said Bonds.

"It's a complete process with many moving parts. They look to see if people are a good fit. They're not going to discriminate. So if you like working with people…"

"I'm not sure people like working with me," said Bonds.

"…and you bring in good people, it gets to be easy. Take the poll channels, for example. No one knows all the work that goes into them. It's a massive endeavor, you've got people from the music staff to the search divisions to the political lobbies and on and on. But everyone watches them, on the pads, their TVs, their computers, their phones — in storefront windows — it doesn't matter. They're the democratic process in action. They give people a hand in choosing what gets played and what doesn't, who succeeds and who doesn't. We just determine what they want, then we give it to them. Supply and demand."

"But if most of it's, what he said," said Jones, pointing to Bonds, "in-house. Then what's the point?"

"Wow, maybe you *have* been on the street too long. Anyway, we'll talk about it later, I've gotta get back to my wife before her mind starts wandering. Come downstairs and drink up, there's one of those tap-dancing Spanish flamingo acts about to come on that's a real hoot."

Neither of them could be bothered to correct his malapropism. As was the case whenever they saw him, they were transfixed by Simalcummer's walk as he moved away from them back toward the staircase. It was a walk that announced him from

great distances, a combination of both tiptoeing and charging, a bounce that always appeared about to break into a run. The premium Italian suits he wore, far from cloaking this perambulatory style, violently clashed with it and drew even more attention to it — a warm-up tracksuit would've been a more natural fit.

Despite his rise to the top tier of the industry, Simalcummer was still not yet 30 years old. He had a round baby face, the red blush only now beginning to fade from his cheeks, small shiny black eyes, effeminately thin eyebrows and soft lashes, with bushy black hair. He was a whiz kid who understood the detours of the digital age before they became its highways. He'd yet to figure out how to convert these instincts into an ascendant position, not necessarily one with more money or perks, just more leverage to issue decisions instead of merely helping to shape them. But he was climbing quickly.

"Maybe he's right," Jones mused, "maybe it's time we started thinking about the future."

"That's what it's about," sighed Bonds. "No one would blame you for trying."

"What about you?"

"I just try to get through the day."

Jones was used to terse dramatics from her partner. But what if *she* could learn the game, even if it meant starting from the ground up in order to learn it? She would be wealthier than she would ever be in her current career path, all in about the same amount of time it would take for her just to earn a more or less horizontal department switch.

"Why was he talking to us about all that poll show stuff?" she said.

"I don't know, to show off maybe? Let's get another drink."

"Or to warn us we're being phased out. He would know."

Jones walked slowly behind Bonds as if still in thought and then caught up to him in time to buy their round of drinks at the giant circular downstairs bar. Confetti began raining down from the ceiling and the hoots, now connecting end to beginning, formed one long caterwaul. Bonds and Jones turned around with their drinks to a whirl of bodies and red and yellow Spanish flags on the expansive stage, which was raised about five feet from the ballroom floor.

The talent organizers for the event had obviously found some fresh-from-the-border Mexicans who, convinced of the opportunity of a lifetime, were confusedly trying to strum their guitars and tap their shoes on stage to the Moorish-influenced flamenco progression from the south of Spain that was booming over the speakers. The men wore huge red felt sombreros and red mariachi suits with white and green trim. The women, who attempted the majority of the dance steps, knew enough to lift their layered white dresses up and away from their shoe heels. Those aware of the cultural conflation were laughing their asses off. Everyone else thought it was magic.

With the guitarists desperately strumming and the male singers giving up their attempts to mime this strange Oriental warbling and now singing what they knew, a Mariachi-flavored flamenco begins to emerge from the stage that might actually be intriguing if it could be isolated from the other thunderous racket. Simmalcummer and his wife are in the middle of one of many circles forming out on the floor, dancing back to back, partly because she is too drunk to maneuver her own weight

alone. Seconds after the flamenco recording stops the band halts what appears to be a song about a divorcee from Chihuahua.

Major Bonner, a decorated war hero recruited to the private sector by M.E.A. as much for his public persona as his years in intelligence and multiple Pentagon and government contacts, swings a towel he brought down from one of the hall's suites, lets out a long "Yeeeeeeehaw!", and the rest of his table follows suit as if on cue, producing towels from under their seats and jumping to their feet. Bonner runs to the floor amid cheers and bounds up on the stage with the spryness of a 30-year-old man in the frame of a vault-chested career soldier pushing 60. "Give these wetbacks a hand, goddamnit!" And turning to the band, "Helluva job, amigos! Helluva job!' And when he actually starts a staccato stomp of a flamenco dance at stage's edge, the music resumes and those in the nearest tables fling their napkins at him, causing everyone else to ball up napkins and throw them on stage, followed by towels from Bonner's table, two of which drape one of the guitars, so that a Mariachi-suited guitarist in sombrero now appears to be rocking a blanketed baby to sleep before he dips down low to let them slide off the instrument. The cut of Bonner's steps recalls a relative of Irish step dancing summoned into a crash of heels extinguishing a fire.

Simmalcummer sits his wife down with another drink, jumps on stage with the major and begins a kind of alternate-footed hopping, which for him merely looks like he's walking in place. Many others join the action and a chop-stepping conga line begins to follow around the band members, who glance regularly at the human cordon circling their stage space with poorly disguised worry. The flamenco song in the speakers picks up speed and intensity. From a viewpoint on the floor, you can now see the stage rumbling from all the feet beating on it.

At the head of the line Major Bonner stops suddenly, yells "Up!" and points his thumbs toward the ceiling. Despite the minions of drinks they've waylaid, these are not rookie conventioneers unaccustomed to protocol. As Bonner handily scoops up the smallest of the guitarists near him, two men quickly assist him and three more lifting another still-strumming guitarist (never stop working or it could mean no pay, or worse!) above their heads, while the mob of conga-clickers have seized the rest of the band and done the same, resulting in the whole ensemble still desperately struggling to perform their parts from a bouncy 6 1/2 feet off the ground. Sombreros fall and roll off the stage from the crowd surfing, buttons separate from Charro jackets and the whole room has broken into an urgent chant of "Ole! Ole!"

Obeying their instincts for law and order, Jones and Bonds move closer to the stage to catch any errant bodies. Jones ducks as a tambourine sails over her head. Bonds picks a bra off the floor and, not knowing what to do with it, hands it over to Jones. A Chihuahua, perhaps the bands' dog, is running loose in circles and nipping at revelers' ankles, which actually elicits more accurate flamenco steps from them. As the song winds to a close, Bonner is leading a cheer of "hip-hip-hooray!" to accompany a toss-and-catch of the bandleader that he has begun with six or seven other men. The panicked musician rotates defensively in the air to cradle his guitar in front of him in preparation for his landing, but in the thick of the crowd catching him, one of Bonner's hands accidentally grabs the fret-neck of the guitar and is cut by a string. "Goddamn g-e-e-e-e-e-t-a-a-r!" he yells. The crowd on the floor, thinking an encore is being rallied, yells back "G-e-e-e-e-e-t-a-a-r! G-e-e-e-e-e-t-a-a-r!", and augments their standing ovation by throwing flowers from the table centerpieces at the stage. Applying pressure on his hand to stop the bleeding and making sure his uniform isn't blemished by any of the "loser lotion," as he and his buddies called it back

when he was a fresh-faced grunt in Da Nang, Bonner leaps from the stage without seeing Bonds and Jones, almost flooring them both.

"Holy hell! That was about as boneheaded as it gets, awful sorry, you two, you alright!?"

"You didn't do any damage, sir," Jones offers, since she appears to be his main concern and focus. In her 20s, she has large doe eyes and a coffee complexion, and her body cuts a figure both lithe and curvy at the same time.

"You sure, honey? Well, whatever I done, I aim to repair it. You two follow me while I get a wrap on this little scrape 'a mine. I'm gonna' fix you up with the finest pour of tequila the both of you have ever had. Fall in!" He begins a determined march, stops suddenly and looks back at the stunned Bonds and Jones. "Well come on! Time's a wasting!"

Major Lafayette "Fat" Bonner was always the first to go out and the last to come in, whether it was a jungle mission or a night on the town. And though he knew the days of glory were behind him now, that was no reason to stop having fun — or making money. He was also fully prepared for the challenge of discovering who would get the last laugh: the Army, his new employers or himself.

Uncertain of just what depth and range of influence Bonner still possessed within the Pentagon, and thereby the government, the execs at M.E.A. always erred on the side of caution with him, which is exactly the way he wanted it. When M.E.A. shopped their war hero around to glad-hand their advertising clients, they made sure he was always seated in luxury's lap. For the convention, they had customized his suite to his most specific requests, which included knocking out a wall to connect two suites on the penthouse level into one super suite —Bonner made sure the balconies connected, as well. There was also a 24-hour staffer in the concierge on duty specifically to answer his requests.

As they entered the suite, the two girls in the middle of the space playing naked ping-pong, and not very well, stopped what they were doing to execute a mock salute. "It's just not funny anymore, girls, I'm telling you, tain't working for me," said Bonner, and the girls winkingly smiled at each other.

He seated Bonds and Jones on a massive gray leather sectional and headed to the bathroom to get a wrap for his hand, but not before pouring his guests two margaritas from the pitcher in the double-door refrigerator. "These'll hold ya', but don't let your tongues hang on to that sugar too long. I got business for them." And then, looking at a girl bending over to pick up a ping-pong ball and back at his guests again with new concern, he said, "And I meant tequila business, not funny business. You two just relax, about everything."

"You guys are welcome to play winner if you want," one of the girls said.

"Or we could play doubles," said the other.

"Thanks," said Bonds, trying to look them in the eyes and quickly giving up, averting his gaze to far to the side.

"We're not staying long, but thanks, you two look like you're having fun," Jones answered.

"Not really," said the first girl, who then whispered, "but he doesn't want us leaving."

"Leaving?" said Jones.

"Got that sucker strapped up good and tight now," said Bonner, returning from the bathroom.

"How long have you been here?" Bonds asked him.

"Coupla' weeks."

"For a weekend convention?"

"I like to get a head start on everyone else. Get to know the locals — these industry types are all boring for the most part, anyway."

"I don't know, they look like they're doing alright for themselves down there."

"All show, the partying. Not really their comfort zone. But I could tell you two are in possession of a couple of cosmopolitan minds right off."

"You don't even know us."

"'Simmer' says you're thinking about crossing over."

"What?!" said Jones. "We just-"

"Oh calm down, honey, I'm not telling you what to do. There's a lot of bull in both professions. I figure, why not get paid for your time? I had a lot of friends in all sorts of places, and I've had enough of just about everything — but, not everything pays equal."

"That's the criteria," said Bonds.

"Hell, I'd prefer to be in the action somewhere right now leading some brave young kids. That's the place I was meant for, not this goddamn universe of usury. Body just gave out on me, knees and back couldn't take the strain. If I was in theater now I'd hold everyone back. Ah well, as wars go, these are lousy ones nowadays, anyhow."

"And so you joined the M.E.A.?" asked Jones.

"Girls," Bonner announced from a bullhorn he had picked up from a desk, "C-O-C-K-T-A-I-L P-A-R-T-Y!" The girls set their paddles on the table and jiggled to the master bedroom of the other suite. Bonner took a seat and watched them go, as if in thought. That side of the mega-suite gleamed with hip red and white upholstered love seats and chairs, a horseshoe-shaped navy blue leather bar dotted with white stars, and walls adorned with posters of the hottest M.E.A.-contracted celebrities. Between the bar and two love seats at right angles to each other there was room for a Murphy bed to be extended from the wall. A large screen TV/theater center wrapped the wall in front of the furniture.

The décor was much tamer, almost business-like, on the other side of the ping-pong table where they sat on the drab gray sectional. The front of the room was anchored by a long mahogany desk, which held a computer tower, printer and battery-powered bullhorn, and faced the patio's windowed sliding doors. To the side, there was also an erasable marker board on a tripod with a calendar grid drawn on it.

"You think I don't know it's a joke?" he answered to Jones' question. "That it's a bunch of selfish kids playing with their toys? Of course. There's no decency. Goddamn, I would have loved to have some of these assholes I meet with daily now back in a platoon, even on a base camp. I'd would've broken 'em down, until they were so broken the little cowards would have never

had the balls to do half the things they've done in their business dealings. I'm not even a big fan of music and it still turns my stomach. Luckily, I get to stay away from most of that in my job. I'm 'PR,' as they say."

The girls emerged from the far bedroom in shimmering floor-length black silk dresses, sleeveless and V-cut in front and back, their blonde and brunette hair spread across each rounded, toned and tan shoulder as they strode slowly forward.

"And how are our guests doing?" asked the blonde. "Need a freshener on those margs or perhaps a trayful of guacamole and chips? We've got some ripened avocados in the fridge, just delicious, and it's no trouble at all." Jones and Bonds shook their heads no, speechless from the clothed, yet somehow bolder presence of the girls.

"I've got friends in the agency — Anti-Piracy, so you probably don't know them," said the brunette. "But I've got a lot of respect for what you two do."

"Were you two just playing ping pong in the nude?" asked Bonds.

"Of course, do these dresses make us that different to you?"

"No, but- I didn't mean to- you talk differently now."

"We work for the M.E.A., so it follows we work for Major Bonner," said the brunette. "This is our job."

"We do enjoy ourselves, strange as that sounds nowadays," said Bonner.

"People think you're crazy now if you chew gum different than everyone else," Bonds said.

"Oh sure. And besides 'crazy,' you can add ex-hero, mascot and glad-hander if you like — I don't even make the deals, just prep 'em. But I have my fun," he said and extended his meaty arms to each side as cue for the girls to nestle under them on the sofa. "The suits downstairs let themselves go one or two nights a year. Then it's chasing dollars again, day in day out. I enjoy myself every day, and then just make sure they cut me in on what they earn from all their chasing and worrying."

"Seems too good to be true, what's the catch?"

"I don't know too much, or too little. Just enough," he winked.

"We should get back," said Jones, looking nervously at her watch.

"Oh come on now," said Bonner, "I ain't talking war crimes here, just business. And it's nothing you two haven't seen yourselves. It's just that I own a personal history laden with more valuable connections than you youngsters — which I god-damn well earned, mind you!"

"Yes sir, I know," said Jones.

"We really should be going, Major," said Bonds, still stealing glimpses of the girls in their dresses and unsure of why he was following Jones' lead except that he felt a vague sense of his partner's discomfort.

And yet, why should he pass up this golden opportunity to talk to someone who could pluck him out of his rut? Was it time he got on the inside and made some coin, too? And just what would he buy with it all, he wondered, his mind wandering toward the envelope of a dream that would elude him once again unless he could think of something to fill it… anything! Screw it, he thought to himself, let's get out of here and go have a beer. He began to stand up.

"Now Christ almighty, I nearly knocked the both of you to the floor, I'm not going to have you leave affronted by me again!" howled Bonner, and Bonds swiftly re-sat himself. "I'm just telling you two it's a closed system now, it begins and ends in one house, OK? They don't need anybody else."

"Trends still come and go," said Jones meekly, afraid of riling the major any more than he was riled.

"Come here," he said, getting up and walking to the other side of the suite to examine the framed music posters on the wall. "Take a look at Fist McCall, here. Moved over a million units this year. The cowboy hat, the beard, the aviator shades, the red-and-white striped shirt with blue jeans he's wearing for this photo session, those are all authentic Fist McCall. Am I right?"

They both nodded.

"Now, step over here and look at Flossy, self-proclaimed king of the computer-automated gay dance industry — and by the way, he oughta' know he's the king, or queen, if you like, because he created it some years ago right here in this very suite — nice fellow, too, just a little too gay for me, not that I have anything against that, I mean, poke around where you like, just don't poke me, right?! Look, he's like a ghost with the white robe, bald head and pale make-up. But put a beard on him in your imagination a minute. Put those bomber shades over his eyes. You see the face bones, the lips?"

"Fist McCall?" said Jones.

"You got it, darling."

"What? I have a friend who adores Fist."

"Why are you telling us this?" said Bonds.

"Oh lots of people know, and they eat it up, just love it, mostly the memorabilia and collector fans, but some of the poll show and music buyer types, too. But darlin', I'll leave it up to you whether you want to unclench your friend's 'Fist' for her," laughed Bonner. "Yeah, they're pretty good at creating a sensation, always a new demand… I don't think any of 'em would last 60 seconds on a battlefield, though. I'd take you two any day over these suits."

"I don't think we'd win any medals in either theater," said Bonds.

"W-which isn't saying we would never consider trying industry side sometime, at least speaking for me, sir," Jones said quickly.

"Honestly, I just don't keep up enough with any of it," said Bonds.

"Nobody *can* keep up, that's the whole point, soldier. Even old Fist, a lot sooner than he probably likes, will be put out to pasture back in a corner of marketing or finance or some other God-forsaken limb of the beast that he came from. If there's one thing M.E.A.'s good at, it's keeping things moving — chop-chop."

"That's what our side needs, sir, more turnover," said Jones.

"Just call me 'Fat,' sweetheart, for Lafayette, or L.B. if you like that better." Bonner took a card from his wallet and gave it to Jones. "I can't promise anything great to start out, but it's an option, if you want to think of it like that. Now drink up, I ain't finished with you two yet."

"We're technically still on call, there's a youth center we need to-" said Bonds.

"On call my ass. We got a square dance to go to! Girls, clean-up detail."

"I guess we have a little time," Jones said to Bonner, holding the card she had in her hand so delicately it looked as if she were afraid to smudge it with her fingerprints.

The girls pulled their dresses over their heads on their way to the bedroom and quickly re-appeared in housekeeping smocks as Bonner was forcing a departing shot of his favorite premium tequila on his guests. Wiping down the kitchen and gathering glasses in silence, the girls acted toward Jones and Bonds with the courtesy of hired housekeepers. "Excuse me, mam," the brunette mumbled quietly while picking up a napkin that had fallen next to Jones' feet.

"What about the girls, do they get to come along?" asked Bonds as they drank up and headed for the door.

"Not what I pay 'em to do. This is business," said Bonner. "Besides, would you want to share two lookers like that with anyone else?"

Back downstairs, stage lights had come up to signal a merciful intermission of festivities. Conventioneers schmoozed at each other's tables but most of the moguls and upper echelon execs took the opportunity to leave. They had carried the torch and lit the fountain but weren't much interested in watching the games for too long. If this ever was their scene — and for most, it wasn't — they'd outgrown it by now; the convention needed them more than they needed it. And also, there were more than a couple of them who were simply afraid of Bonner, whose wrecking ball orbit swung just beyond the range of their power. The rest of the world feared The Pentagon and its contractor limbs, they were no different.

"Look at these saps," Bonner said, "you'd think it's a wake in here whenever there's a little break in the program. Follow me, compañeros." At the circular bar, he ordered more tequilas against the protest of the agents.

"Where'd your friends go?" asked Bonds.

"Now goddamnit, I knew I'd forget to bring more towels down here." Staff sometimes announced drink specials or summoned the occasional missing conventioneer to a meeting spot from the bar's P.A. system. Bonner grabbed its wall-mounted speaker piece: "Folks, we've got a minor request for you all. If you have any extra room towels, any extra room towels whatsoever, that you're not using as diapers or bra stuffers or what you will, could you please bring 'em over to the circular bar pronto. Thank you. As you were."

More than a few guests halted mid-sentence to display an effort, either looking under their seats, in their purses or veering their heads toward the floor spaces between the tables, before resuming with each other. Nothing monumental was required to derail the drunken conversations in progress, so it was no surprise the crowd re-focused itself into an eruption of applause when Fist McCall appeared on stage.

Confetti and red, white and blue streamers rained on the stage, and the speakers blared his latest top ten hit, "I Might Just Need to Knock You (on Your Ass)," while he took a victory lap and waved to everyone, pointing out familiar faces, blowing kisses. His appearance was a clash of Country star and working man chic: a diamond-banded 10-gallon hat and sleeveless

flannel shirt exposing his lithe, tanned and oiled biceps, as if he'd been lifting weights until just seconds ago to get what little muscle mass he had fully pumped; tight dungarees with four-inch cuffs rolled up, anchored by a gleaming burnished gold belt buckle; and, though they looked a bit out of place with the pants style, pointed-toe rattlesnake skin cowboy boots. Smiles and laughter spread through the crowd but the standing ovation abided.

"Are we having some f-u-u-u-u-u-n?" McCall boomed.

Conventioneers raised their hands, stomped their feet, made toasts, waved napkins and a few even miraculously produced some towels to Bonner's pleasure. He enjoyed swinging them around wildly and using them to toss people in the air, but he also thought towels were practical to have at the ready, since any party worth attending was always a messy affair. He'd saved many dresses with a towel and some soda water.

"Now just think what you'd have missed if you'd have checked out early," Bonner said to Jones and Bonds above the din.

McCall grabbed his guitar and pulled up a stool to the edge of the stage. Men stepped aside to let all the women crowd up front and form a shrieking semi-circular ring of upturned adoring heads. McCall slowly lifted the brim of his hat, which had been tucked on top of his eyebrows, to reveal a perfectly pompadoured head of black hair. More screams from the women conventioneers. "Yeah, take it off, baby!" one laughed. He fought mightily to find the right key and then began strumming and slowly singing:

Don't be cruel/
To a heart that's true/
Don't be cruel/
To a heart that's true…

The crowd cheered louder than it had all night, even at the height of its earlier piñata-bursting exuberance. One moment Bonner seemed to be enjoying himself and the next — it was as if he felt things needed to go farther, to be *pushed* farther. He sat next to Jones laughing and shaking his head as the song neared its end, McCall standing with his back to the stage switching his hips side to side. Bonner signaled a victory sign to the bartender for two more tequilas and then covered ground with such stealth and swiftness that he seemed to be transported on stage. McCall turned to face the cheers, one hand raising the neck of his guitar and the other extending a "number one" forefinger above his head, his eyes shifting right and widening with that look of horror common in the instant before one is hit by falling objects or collides with another vehicle – wide-eyed confirmation immediately followed by flinching, squinted-eye denial. Bonner threw his arms closely around the exposed rib cage before McCall could lower his elbows, and quickly began applying a bear hug so tight that singer's body went rag-doll limp as if in self-defense, instinctively playing dead, as it was lifted in the air to the wild cheers. Upon realizing the air that left him had not been duly replaced, McCall frantically revived himself and tried to squirm free. "Fist! Fist! Fist!" Bonner had whipped the crowd into cheering, and McCall's struggling oiled arms only seemed to be conducting the refrain with a palsied brand of

energy. “F-I-S-T- Fist!” went the new cheer.

Bonner felt McCall’s body wilting again and mercifully put him down on his feet while waving up to the stage some of the same men he’d corralled for the Mariachi toss. They climbed up and laid McCall across their arms horizontally while he gasped and clutched his rib cage. At every “Hip-hip-hooray!” they tossed the singer into the air and caught him.

“Hey, he ok?” someone yelled to Bonner down by McCall’s ankles.

“Sure he is!” Bonner yelled back from shoulder-catching position. “He knows the rules.”

Backstage, McCall was absorbed by his handlers as a battered fighter returning to his corner is absorbed, while the crowd outside finally gave up the Bonner-led cheers of “Encore!” and went back to their tables.

“Ain’t that Fist something?” Bonner asked his two guests, returning to the bar’s circle and victory-signaling two more tequilas for them. “I hope I made it a little easier for him to go back to corporate.”

“Why doesn’t he take his money and retire?” said Bonds.

“Retire? Ha- ho! If that were the case, you might see me up there with a geetar, not him. But I already get to live like a star now. He only gets a few years of it, if that. Then back to the corporate rat race.”

“Why be famous if you can’t claim it?”

“He certainly can claim it, son. Who’s on the poll shows more? Who else in the last five years has played a presidential inauguration, entertained diplomats and foreign heads of states across Europe and the Middle East, sold-out the Southern Baptist Revival circuit four years running, did 11 USO tours and headlined all the major state fairs? Now, can he claim the road leading to or away from all of that? No, no one wants to buy a stock holding that they can’t trade, no real value in that. When the mold’s set for his replacement and the timing is right — he’s got no choice in the matter. He knows the routine, son, it’s what I call a celebrity rental.”

“Well sir,” sighed Bonds, losing a grip on his patience for the night. “I don’t think I really need to know any more about Fist or Flossy or any of these other clowns and their one-word clown names. We should be getting back, Jones.”

“Fine, stay on the sidelines, soldier, there’s plenty who do have a ‘need to know,’ as you say.”

Bonds suddenly realized he’d insulted the major, who was imparting this knowledge with the intention of helping him not impressing him. He quickly apologized, thanked Bonner and shook his hand, as did Jones, who flashed Bonds a scathing look. This served to more than double his shame. How had he become so blind? If he wanted to stay at a job that offered little in the way of a future, with illicit live performances the rare, almost freak occurrence now, then so be it. But he wasn’t going to ruin an opportunity for her, he thought. He could never live with himself if he hurt her like that.

Bonner responded with a forceful pat on Bonds’ back and a firm, enduring hug for Jones. As they parted from him, neither Jones nor Bonds wished it was the last time they’d see him, as much as a tornado his presence was.

“And at least get off the street, you two, that ball game’s over,” yelled Bonner as they walked off. Jones waited to make sure Bonds was continuing on ahead, then quickly turned and waved to Bonner. He sent back a gentle salute with a wink.

A bass beat now began to rumble and bump lowly. It increased in volume until everyone in the room took notice and raised their voices to compensate for it. Reaching its peak, it shook the walls, commanding everyone's uncompromised attention. As the volume softened, notes from a piccolo, violin, tambourine and what sounded like a zither were thrown in, and more than a few conventioneers turned about in confusion, looking for a signal, a towel from Bonner, anything.

From each side of the stage two teenaged boys emerged in togas, sandals and garlands, and tried executing an inchoately choreographed hopping and skipping dance step. Two more of them carried flutes they pretended to play and two carried wineskins they pretended to drink from occasionally. They struggled to meet at the center of the stage at the same time, turn back around and repeat the same steps over again.

At the back of the stage red velvet curtains parted to reveal a neon pink-glowing, 20-foot-high triangular DJ booth being wheeled out by two stage hands, and instantly the music switched to the familiar "Frog Stare," M.E.A.'s current dance club hit, a confection of beeps and boops tensioned by frequent machine gun drum beats. That it was an electronically produced track made it a perfect candidate for live accents, some loops, patches, even a slightly new mix; but, none of the controls in the DJ booth were connected to an output. In fact, they were not even real, just plastic demo buttons and knobs for effect.

While studio remixing was encouraged as a way to increase sales for a song, the M.E.A. was aware of the ease with which this could be accomplished live, which is why licensed deejaying now meant playing songs in the orderly fashion you might have heard coming from a jukebox 50 years ago. Bonds and Jones still ran into the rare rave-style party outside the city limits, but it was the Anti-Piracy Division that enforced matching copyright to original song versions and fining those who deviated from that use online.

Dance club music was big business because it was as close as one could get to a legal live performance experience. Owned by repeat investors more or less, give or take a few, the clubs staged listening nights every week except for the last weekend of the month, when huge crowds turned out for dance marathons that stretched from noon to curfew in some cities. The security costs were high, but, at $30 a head, one could earn quite a profit from the throngs of youths who showed up to dance with one another — not for the music, which they already knew by heart, but from that unpredictable experience of dancing with someone, someone you might never even see again. It was the sock hop lined with rings of security. It was the only event that rivaled the poll shows in mass appeal. In many ways, it was the poll shows acted out and lived by those who would never get to appear on one. One heard the same basic song rotations from Seattle to St. Pete, but "Dance Night" was a cultural ritual.

Out on the ballroom dance floor now, everyone, the middle management drones, the younger eager-to-please set, the old suits with trophy girls, the exec-level hags with trophy boys, began to boogie as best they knew how. And why not? They were the authors, they were the composers, they were even the musicians, and they threw a great party.

Atop the pyramidal DJ booth a shiny dome framed in gold wraparound shades crowned the summit after a long climb up the back stairs to the top. The crowd stopped mid-step and began to hiss like snakes — "F-l-o-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-y, F-l-o-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-y" — aping the entertainer's famous pronunciation. Each boy on stage took a knee before the pyramid, one hand on his heart

and the other extended toward the top of the pyramid. The bald dome centered atop the pyramid as the steps gave way to a tiny platform with a microphone stand. Flossy lifted his arms under his sequined pink dress out to just about waist level, enough to match the lines of the triangle, his head shining on top like a star on a Christmas tree. The crowd cheered wildly.

As the drumbeats carried the song to its first crescendo, Flossy swiftly raised his arms straight overhead, the dress obscuring his face in a veil of hot pink. Almost immediately his figure slouched, breaking the symmetry, and his right hand grabbed his lower ribs in pain where the bear hug moments ago had particularly pinched. His battle scar, Bonner thought.
Just as quickly the arms raised again, the recovery gallantly maintained.

At the bar, Bonner downed another tequila. "The things I've learned to swallow," he said aloud to himself.

• • •

Bonds and Jones finished their beat and wrapped up another uneventful week. He logged in on his laptop while she drove their black government-issued sedan in search of an all-night diner to work on their schedule for the following week, a routine they dutifully performed every Friday — this Friday later than usual because of the start of the M.E.A. convention — but one which seemed less and less necessary over the last few years because of their dwindling caseload.

For Bonds, landing a job with the federal government wasn't the most obvious choice for a boy growing up in a working class neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The government recruiter from the E.M.A. who visited his college in upstate New York wore a silk three-piece suit and wowed Bonds by dropping names and spinning stories about detective work. He looked only a few years removed from college himself, and he told Bonds that if money was his prime motivation, law school was certainly the way to go after graduation; but, you could still make a decent and perhaps more exciting living enforcing the law for the government in the public sphere instead of defending it in a courtroom. The basic requirements were: Graduate near the top of your criminal justice class, where Bonds was firmly rooted, and enroll in a 6-month training program. It wasn't salaried training, but recruits received boarding and a stipend. He couldn't guarantee Bonds a position after that, but he assured him there should be no problem for a student of his caliber:

"It's six months versus three years of law school," he said, "both great careers."

Bonds' reward upon completing his training after graduation was serving two years as a gopher and desk dunce for the agents above him. When he finally made it out into the field, he found his work less than thrilling — busting club owners who ran clandestine open stage jam sessions and comedy nights, closing down raves in the hinterlands that featured DJs without permits, and hauling off slam poets from coffeehouse basements. These were the exciting jobs. After two years of slaving he was a federal cop all of the sudden, and, as a consolation for the increasingly declining caseload, at least that sounded more important than working as a city cop.

He had been on the other side of the law during his few brushes with trouble as a kid, and, likely no different than most people entering the field, he aimed to make the law respectable. But just like any municipal cop, it didn't take him long to realize that without any connections, he wasn't going to be moving up the ranks too quickly.

He married a woman he met during a raid of a Romanian wedding reception in his fifth year on the job. She said she noticed he seemed to be the only officer uncomfortable with the arrest of a 70-year-old accordionist uncle of the bride and his guitar-strumming son, and she thought she detected kindness behind this unease.

While they were together, he grew to love her more than he thought he was capable of loving anyone. He hoped a family would fill the void left by his vanishing dream of the big law firm partnership. There was never a chance for it to happen. His wife was diagnosed with breast cancer in their second year of marriage and died a year-and-a-half later.

Now a widower in his 40s with few friends and fewer networking contacts in his field, he often told his partner, "Don't let me hold you back, Jonesy, I had my day," even if he had no clues as to where or when that day occurred. But he didn't feel regret. He hadn't given up hope in crossing over to that big opening in another government branch — say an intel job that offered some interesting international travel. But, he knew he was collecting pension all the same.

"Not much going on next week, big surprise," Bonds said. "Wait, what is this? A new posting just surfaced here about some 'Fashionista' gathering tonight. Location is 25 miles north/northwest; abandoned airplane hanger facility on 3,000 acres — that's a big area, there must be old runways, too."

"What's a Fashionista?" said Jones.

"Let's see, 'Event: masquerade ball/fashion show' — I don't know, oh here: 'Fashionista is a group of fashion designers who also host parties,' it's the name of their website."

The posting wasn't exactly accurate about the directions. They spent the first few miles outdistancing the hum and glow of city development until dark fields stretched before them for miles, eventually giving way to rolling hills and clusters of spruces and elms as the road climbed in elevation. The spate of fires had not reached this part of the countryside. According to their GPS reading, the pavement came to an end five miles further than their job file indicated, and a gravel road led another 500 meters to a large circular parking lot full of cars and buses. Jones drove straight past the lot and parked on the grass next to a runway. A wide field of crabgrass field led to the hangar.

In the moonlight, the building looked tan with a few rust streaks. A line of partygoers three or four bodies thick stretched at least a hundred yards from a side door in the structure. A huddle of police conferred among themselves near the entrance, many of them looking confused.

"Great, do we ever get to handle anything on our own anymore," said Bonds at seeing them.

He and Jones greeted the police with their E.M.A. identifications exposed and asked about the party.

"Oh, we thought you were the D.E.A.," one of them said.

"Sorry to disappoint."

"No, it was just… We're not sure what to make of this. There doesn't seem to be anything here for any of us. See for yourself."

The music got louder and tinnier sounding as Bonds and Jones approached the door and went inside. Stepping into the black, Bonds was blinded by one of the laser strobes careening about from the ceiling. Their eyes adjusted and they could see the lasers were not the only illumination. Spotlights moved up and down a modeling catwalk that was at least 100 feet long and 10 feet wide. It was fringed in footlights and its white glass floor was under-lit as well, so the girl just emerging from the black velvet curtains backstage seemed to be walking on a luminescent tongue of milk.

She had boyishly short hair and wore oversized mirror sunglasses; a ring around her neck that multiple strips of olive drab fabric hung from, swooshing seductively over her small bouncing breasts but never separating long enough for the nipples to be exposed; skin-tight hot pink shorts that exposed the bottom third of her ass; and, calf-high army combat boots. She was working all of it with exaggeration, swinging from side to side, bouncing as she walked. She made her turn with a swish and applause rained down. Nearing the backstage she paused, and, instead of exiting, made a U-turn and headed back down the catwalk. She swung from side to side again, bouncing as she walked. She made her turn. Again the applause. And this time when she neared the backstage area a young man in sunglasses poked his head out of the curtains and waved her to come off. She blithely waved him off, but he gestured more intently for her to exit and she reluctantly obliged.

The man then came out jerkily gyrating all four limbs to the loud beats. He hit the floor, bounced up, did a split, ran to the end of the runway and pirouetted his turn. The applause resounded even louder now. He was wearing knickers. Gold chains bounced on a tight wifebeater t-shirt. A newsboy hat was pulled low to his wraparound sunglasses. His wristbands were striped red, white and blue.

A figure in a black robe and hood appeared next at the back of the runway, moving a huge platform-soled black boot one tentative step forward and stopping, as if wondering what to do next. Removed the hood, a pasty-faced girl wearing black eyeliner and lipstick was revealed, the tip and tail of an arrow piercing her mouth and sticking out of either cheek, accentuating her gaunt sunken-faced look. Her hands, as geisha white as her face, were tipped with black nails. Pulling her hood back up, she lurched forward in the large boots, head slightly bowed, shoulders hunched, and, reaching the end of the runway, made a wide turn and headed back without pausing. The applause rained down again.

While the runway was the only illuminated feature, strobe lights crisscrossed in front of it just enough for Jones and Bonds to make out a man sitting at a control board where the models made their turn. He had a chart in front of him and seemed to be monitoring the rotation of songs, as well as adjusting a knob whenever the applause sounded. Bonds fixed himself upon the man's station and, as the strobes passed, tried to make out the rest of the space. Nothing.

"Hey," he yelled above the music, "I'm not seeing- I'm not… There's no one in here."

"Let's go back out a minute, I can't hear or see anything," screeched Jones.

Back outside they tried getting information from a few people waiting in line.

"DJ?!" said a man wearing a feathered white fedora and pinstriped black zoot suit. "Hey, this dude wants to know if there's a DJ tonight."

A few people next to him in line began laughing.

"Screw the DJs, man," said the pig-tailed schoolgirl next to him, jumping with her arms extended to the sky and kicking her white knee-high-stockinged legs up behind her, the tiny plaid skirt fluttering up above her white cloth underwear. "It ain't about DJs no more. It's about us!"

"You looking for the cops?" said a woman dressed in a dark blue police outfit with thigh-high tight shorts, boots and a white motorcycle helmet. "Well, check me out!"

Bonds and Jones walked back to the group of police now near the end of the line.

"So whatttya' think?" said the one they met with earlier.

"What is this?" Jones asked him.

"Beats me. We were told to expect alcohol and illegal drugs. No one's snuck so much as a can of beer into this place while we've been here."

Jones looked back to the crowd, wondering if she was seeing correctly. The three people they'd just seen on stage were back at the end of the line, apparently waiting their turn again.

"What the fuck is this?" said Bonds. Recorded music blared from inside, but no one was manipulating the songs in any way that could be construed as a violation, and, as far as the performance codes went, there was nothing in them that prevented people from dressing up in costumes for each other's amusement as far as Bonds and Jones knew. Even general assembly prohibitions did not stretch this far away from population centers.

"Why are you guys asking us, shouldn't we be asking you that,' said an older cop.

"Did I just hear people over there, too?" said Jones pointing to the woods on the other side of the hangar.

"Yeah, maybe the show's going for more of the natural setting," said the cop.

"I don't think that's part of the show over there," she said.

"Who knows. Riot Control was called out here about a year ago. They shot a few Grunts who used to roam around this area. You two have a good night," said the cop, turning to join the rest of his group that had headed back to the parking lot.

"Wait, shouldn't you go check it out?"

"Be my guest," said the cop, eyeing the line of trees on the far side of the hangar one last time.

Jones looked over her shoulder on the way back to the lot. Foliage rankled at the edge of the field. The last sustained breeze broke across the summer night before a calm from the farther reaches arrived with sounds of crickets and the unfinished shapes of dew.

"What do you think?" she asked Bonds.

"Nothing's happening here. Let's go."

Inside, the zoot suit was high-stepping and spinning to breakneck salsa samples, twirling his chained keys and spinning

around the big turn for some well-deserved applause. It was impossible to *see* much of anything, but the sonic boom of the door on the hangar's opposite side coming off its hinges and slamming to the concrete commanded attention all the same.
By the time zoot looked around, the intruders had climbed up the runway and tackled the programmer as he tried to escape. Zoot flew out the back of the stage, jumped the flight of stairs, hugged the walls lowly till he reached the door where he had entered, and bolted out screaming, "Run! Run! Some shit goin' down… R-u-u-u-u-n!" The first few in line didn't need to be told, they could see for themselves by peeking in the front door left ajar. Once they started sprinting in fear, the panic spread and everybody began dashing for the cars.

Howls and caterwauls pierce the tune still blaring the frenetic 2-1-2 salsa beat inside, the programmer lying on his back, mouth agape in horror, his torso flipping like a largemouth bass out of water while hands rip his clothes from his body.

A man in dusty rags and matted hair tries the programmer's polo shirt on, claps his hands above his head and screams to the ceiling in approval. A woman wearing a giant green trash bag with arm and neck holes cut out of it, torn jeans and sneakers without laces, smiles and yelps a seal-like approval, "Arrr! Arrrp! Aaaaaarrrp!" While others are distracted with whatever they were able to grab or tear from the programmer, a young girl covered in a canvas-like pancho whose feet are bare and scarred, the dust and dirt like an aura around her shining in the bright light streaming along the runway, lunges in and sinks her teeth into the programmer's calf, perhaps upset at arriving on the scene too late for spoils. His scream rises above even the marauder's decibel level. It is hard to tell how much flesh has been taken from the leg because the blood immediately fills the wound and spills out. As if jolted by an electrical current, the programmer somersaults and is on his feet running to the back of the stage, his attackers pursuing. By sticking close to the walls and out of the light he makes his way out the door. At this point in the awe-inducing and condensed present of his experience, he likely doesn't care that his all-out sprint to the lot attracts the attention of a few Grunts outside scavenging items left behind by those in line. It's his best chance to just try and outpace them. Most of the cars have trampled over brush to shortcut the exit but a driver in a van spots him and flings open the passenger door. It's the zoot suiter.

"Close it and lock it! LOCK that fucker!"

A group of Grunts immediately pry at the door handles, both the passenger and sliding doors, and their force rocks the van side to side on it chassis. They scramble up toward the roof but the Zoot accelerates with all the gas pedal and engine can take, the wheels spinning, then catching and throwing the Grunts to the ground.

"Holy fuck!" he says looking in the rear view mirror. "H-o-l-y fuck! You're bleeding, fuck, you're bleeding.
You gonna' be ok?!"

The programmer/sound guy says nothing. He doesn't look like he has even heard the question asked of him.
He is slumped in the seat and shaking. In fact, the echoes ricocheting through his head are beyond words.

chapter 8

Before he finally opened his eyes — and the pain in his head advised against it — he knew he was lying on something that was not a bed. It was hard like steel. Or wood. No, he thought, it's not a coffin, at least he didn't think it was. He also realized he had an almost full erection, also encouraging news, if for no other reason than it meant he hadn't pissed himself. Yet.

But sooner or later the unknown has to be confronted. He closed his eyes even more tightly at first, hoping it would give him bounce-back momentum against the glue that had been manufactured in his eye sockets during the night — first there was blurriness, light slipping through the cracks of the eyelids, which still stuck together in the corners. Browne finally reached up with the thumbs and forefingers of both hands and unstuck them the rest of the way.

"Good morning, my brother. Thought you were dead," said a wooly man with a white afro and beard who was standing over him. "Been watching you. You don't seem to breathe much."

Browne's gaze followed the stained cement floor underneath him to the cement benches and the cement walls painted dark green, and then to the barred front wall.

"How long I been in?"

"Last night. They let everybody else go, but you just stayed there — out."

"What about you?"

"Me? I like it here. If it weren't for the lack of booze, I wish they'd never kick me out. But then, that's what gets you here in the first place," said the man, who began laughing loudly at himself.

From Browne's vantage on the floor, this laughter transfigured the man's face into an inhuman shape, reptilian creases and a wiggling pod of fuzz lining the small moist center of the mouth. Heat and nausea tumbled in Browne's torso and exited his skin as cold sweat. Nothing, no surviving images, surfaced from the void of the night.

"Well ain't you gonna', you know, attend to your musical affairs, find out about your gig?"

"What gig?" A panic-driven image of The Standard's piano being wheeled away on a movers' dolly flashed before him.

"Maybe you were just telling stories like everyone else."

A guard, hearing the talk, ambled over to the cell, keys jingling, looking at a log sheet, "James Jackson Johnson Browne?"

Browne got up slowly and then explosively raised his hand all the way over his head with the bravado of a fourth grader.

"You're free to go now. Or you can stay till midnight. Up to you."

"I'm sure you two will get one hell of a party goin' tonight, but I got business."

Browne waited patiently for his personal items at the prisoner release desk, dusting dirt from his sport coat and noticing a bloodstain on one of his pant legs. He was finally issued a large manila envelope that contained his wallet, holding a total of $16, a folded sheet of paper with musical notations on it, three sticks of Juicy Fruit gum, a pocket knife, a compact magnifying glass and a matchbook with yesterday's date written on the cover, followed by a hyphen and the words, "8 p.m. Corner Pocket."

Outside, in the soft heat of 11 a.m., a vision of The Corner Pocket's façade came to Browne, its signage with white neon letters and accompanying neon eight ball above a thick black door with bronze press-button doorknob. This immediately triggered a montage of unwelcome images revolving about a center that emerged more clearly into focus: "8 p.m. Corner Pocket" was a gig. If it ended with him in a cell, it probably wasn't a good gig. Positive memories often floated through Browne's mind accompanied by a melody, but these were a silent movie:

1. It's night and Browne is getting up from the sidewalk grabbing his knee and flexing it back and forth, then suddenly charging from a crouch position like a defensive lineman at a black door that he never reaches, met in front of it and thrown back to the ground by two men, one larger than the other but both big and both dressed in faux-silk white windbreakers with eight balls embroidered on the left chest area. 2. It is late afternoon possibly, Browne is sitting at a piano in the corner of the bar inspecting it, trying to play a few lines, but it is badly out of tune, keys are cracked, it has not been played in years. 3. It is night and Browne is getting up from the sidewalk and charging from a crouch position like a lineman at a black door, which he never reaches. 4. From the corner of his eye, he sees a doorman in a windbreaker glance at him at the piano and go up the back stair and come back down accompanied by a man with a scruffy salt and pepper beard. 5. The man with the beard is hunching up his shoulders with his hands outstretched, occasionally cupping them together, as if holding water, and pointing them at the piano, at Browne and at the door. 6. It is night and Browne is getting up from the sidewalk and charging from a crouch position like a lineman at a black door, which he never reaches.

Couldn't have sailed that battered ship, anyway, he tells himself on a park bench near Tri-Corner, where his small room awaits him at The Standard; no reason to go home right away — no gig, no money waiting. He needs the birds in the park more at this point in the afternoon, and, adapting to his presence below them, they are now calling each other again from the maple trees around him. He hears the chickadees, black-capped and fat, laying down the bass line, "eeech, eeech, eeech," low and guttural. Song sparrows trumpet over it, "twee, twee — tri-li-li — twee, twee." Occasionally, a robin flutters the upper register of the score in his mind. The sun hits Browne full in the back and bakes some of the sting from his bones. He has warmth and song and feels free for the moment.

He sees the namesake Tri-Corner streets in the distance, three giant pie wedges of buildings facing each other, entry to the maze of his last several years, axis to the twists of his struggles, and yet he is glad to see it. The sun's rays coax a ruddiness from the wall of the brick building nearest him, as if each brick were undulating vertebrae in a mortar-fused spine. It is the oldest of the intersection's buildings and tympanums above the top tier of windows carry on the three-sided theme, framing small stone gargoyles in their boundaries. Figures pass in front of the windows occasionally. Framed in red brick, one man in a white v-neck t-shirt sticks his head out the window, his hands splayed to each side on the windowsill, and breathes deeply — yes, good, isn't it, thinks Browne: Nothing much happening and at the same time many events in progress, and through it all, never forget to breathe it in, even the urine-scented floors of drunk tanks when one loses both a gig and one's sanity for a night.

A shadow portions the building diagonally and he watches a man hug a woman in a window along this dividing line. He turns away to give them their peace. Rounded bleach-white clouds gain separation from the rooftop and float off to the horizon, replaced by more groupings from the east. Like the clouds passing over him, he feels orbited by worlds moving too swiftly for him catch, events cycling through an ether consumed by throngs of people whom oxygen fails to animate any longer. Browne feels this implicitly, as if he's an anachronistic species of lungfish yet to climb out of the. Yet he has never felt himself lacking, just as from this park bench in the still haze of a Saturday afternoon he hears nothing lacking in the top and bottom of a melody carried by the tiniest of creatures without the least trace of effort, measuring the rush of larger bodies in motion.

Maybe music is in the end effortless as well, he thinks — an effortlessness preceded by a long tension-building duration of efforts — then a release, so that laziness could only describe the way some on the outside looking in interpreted his life. Either his whole life had been spent living a reality only he had access to, and so, an illusion, or, he had become the maestro he always thought he was.

Clouds stack up on the horizon as if reaching a wall. He feels the sun's heat on his back drop a level, then linger lightly, having already chased most of the aches incurred last night. In the thin shade he watches the grass — "the Lord's handkerchief," one of his favorite Whitman expressions — revert to its duller, early morning hue of forest green. The neon lime of the maple leaves also loses its intensity and psoriatic tan blotches on the trunks fill with shade. He loses track of just how long he has been here but senses a change of shifts, a lull, the birds sounding farther off now, smaller, the melody fainter, as he closes his eyes, further and further back in his mind…

"Drunk again?!"

"Uh?" he mouthed from a near sleep.

Browne opened his eyes to discover Chaccone standing over him, crooning his neck forward like a dog straining against his leash.

"Ahhh!"

"It's me."

"I know."

"Want one?" Chaccone offered a can of beer from a paper sack. Browne stared at it for a moment as if looking at an unrecognizable object, then took it and cracked it open.

"So, how did it go?"

"They weren't ready. Wasn't my fault."

"Not exactly what I heard."

"Told 'em to fix it and tune it and they said they would. But they didn't."

"So are you alright? They told me they had to call the police."

"So it was *them*!"

"You're surprised?"

Chaccone related a story new to Browne, namely that he left the club and came back drunk, or a lot drunker, got on the roof somehow, maybe from the dumpsters in back, no one knew, threatened to tear the place apart piecemeal and began yelling insults about the club from the its very rooftop.

"You're lucky you got off with just public intox."

"And the moral of the story is, 'Take care of your damn piano.'"

"Oh I'm sure it didn't hurt them at all that the piano looked out of use when the cops showed up. But forget about that. There's barely a club owner still hiring, you can't act like this with one that is."

"No one told the cops about the gig?"

"That gets them busted, too, why would they do that? When I told you I'd be willing to manage these jobs, this is what I was talking about. Elise thinks it's a good idea, too."

"You don't know what she thinks. And you don't know about music gigging."

"I could've found out about the piano in advance, maybe got it tuned or rescheduled the gig, anything a little different than you getting up on their roof seems like an improvement."

"Managing a piano player ain't no job for a man."

"You're not having much luck doing it yourself."

"Maybe I should try gettin' on with one of the churches. I could play organ if I had to, I've done it before. I could still play my gigs when they come up."

"I don't think so. All that's over once you're registered. All of the sudden, you *exist*, you're a musician, and your musician's income is filed per performance by whatever church you're at. Are you ready to file taxes on that? 'Cause they'll be able to trace it when you're registered."

"Maybe the price you pay to gain an audience."

"And do you think you'd get to play your music at a church?"

"I'd solo."

"You can't 'solo' at church."

"Done it before. They're gonna' find out I'm playing now sooner or later, anyway."

"Not if we stay careful. I've got some strategies." Chaccone, who had been pacing back and forth in front of the bench where Browne was seated, now took a knee like a coach about to lecture a player.

"You'd get busted, too, you know, just for booking the gigs," Browne said. "And it ain't a night in county."

"I'm aware of that."

"You willin' to give up a half a year, a year, who knows how long, I got friends I still ain't seen from years ago."

"I know how to be discreet. I learned the hard way in South America."

"It's different here."

"Ok," said Chaccone, standing up again. "You're right. I should think about getting back in touch with my trade connects, head back down south."

"Damn," Browne whispered, a little taken aback, "that didn't take much."

"Oh, so you need me to stay now? Make up your mind, because I'm getting spooked hanging around in the company of people who break the law."

"Alright shut up, you know what I meant. Music is serious business."

Chaccone paused to reflect on Browne's comment about music, highest on their roster of sacred cows that also included painting, poetry, nature, death, enlightenment, all the big transcendents. Neither of them possessed the fastidiousness common to members of secret societies. They had no uniforms or club handshakes. And yet they both felt themselves the self-appointed keepers of an old order in a new world. What exactly this order was to them remained obscure, since neither of them ever actually agreed with the other about it. But they shared a vague impression that it was as central to them as their own dreams.

For her part, Elise sympathized with them. It was Browne and Chaccone's notion that others should also feel as they did which she tried to disabuse them of, without much success. Most of the time she didn't have the energy to match their stubbornness, since dissuading others of their mission requires its own sense of mission.

"I hear you," said Chaccone. "I'm already a part of it."

Browne didn't answer.

"And, don't forget about recording, either, I'll find us a spot, put up some soundproofing, it's cheap," Chaccone said, his motor beginning to rev again. "I mean, you're still in your prime for the most part. Good for us, but there's no telling how long that'll last."

"What?"

"Whaddya' mean 'what?' We're not getting younger. Your back could go, your hands could go. Both of us might go anytime."

"Then you can go first."

"I'm going to get a car as soon as I save up some money. We need to be able to see the clear spaces again, 'the magnificent honesty of space,' right?"

"I have the trees. I was sitting here all day with them until I was interrupted."

"Fine, but why not horizons, too, wind in the fields, sunlight on the lakes, unbounded blue in the sky. It can recalibrate the time we used to have —to hell with curfews!"

"I remember that van you had once. Pretty good night's rest, too."

"Sure, I'll get another van! Or at least something like it fit for sleeping. But we're talking about now, and right now you gotta' be more careful, more careful than you were last night." Perhaps it was the mention of the van, but as he was talking, Chaccone felt he had repeated these same words to Browne years ago, that, in fact, they were replaying the whole of a conversation. Far from deflating him, this stamina they had filled him with a sense of pride. And still, one could not help wondering, from time to time, where all the years had gone.

"And as I was sayin'," Browne said to bring Chaccone back from his pause, "maybe other people should be more careful, too."

"They're just trying to make a little money. They don't have as much to lose as you do."

"Nobody's gonna' take what I got," Browne said, pointing a thumb to his chest.

"You still need to play."

"There's still some places."

"You hearing anything I'm saying?"

But Browne was already humming a melody to himself, as he often did when he grew tired of talking to someone, occasionally punching it up with drum or horn solos he'd think up when he was extremely tired of talking to someone, as he was doing now, the whole experience of his missed opportunity last night and the ensuing incarceration too annoying to revisit this soon. Chaccone was bringing him down.

Browne dropped out of conversations at random moments. It worked to his advantage at times, though it was difficult to determine if and when it stemmed from a motivation or from the utter lack of one, when he was in control and when he was simply gone, checked out.

There was more to it than this, more than questions about attention spans or social graces. Though Browne loved movies, was an avid reader and devoured all kinds of music, he guarded his experiences at an elemental level. Whether he was studying an etude or regarding an elm, there could be no trusting any source other than himself, not because those sources were illegitimate, but because they could not make him feel as immediately. It was this simplicity of thought that made his music almost incidental to his life, and as such, had gradually dissolved the distance between the two.

Browne's insularism, intentional or not, played a prominent role in his checkered job history. His job in the music library at M.E.A. subsidiary Mamen Electric was not his first at the media conglomerate. He began in customer service, a member of a

large pool of unskilled employees who received the lowest pay, the fewest benefits and the worst shifts.

As the sole call bank for the company before the work was moved overseas, Browne's area handled everything from customer complaints to purchases to tech service calls. At first, the behavior occurred only during the department's peak-stress moments, but then it also began happening when Browne came into contact with his managers: the humming would start, his eyes closed as if he were enjoying a peaceful nap, and then he would begin turning around in circles, somehow staying on his feet through what likely were formidable surges of vertigo that gathered steam within him. They thought he was crazy. Much milder behavior had resulted in direct termination of employment for many of his colleagues, and the high unemployment levels everywhere made it practical, even profitable, to fire employees for all sorts of reasons. But perhaps because management feared he was handicapped, maybe because they were simply curious, Browne received a job review.

During his brief moments of clarity at the review, he managed to convince the three company representatives determining his fate that he suffered from episodes of attention deficit disorder triggered by feelings of claustrophobia, the kind of claustrophobia inherent in phone banks of employees sitting shoulder to shoulder trying to talk over each other into their headsets. Further, that the only relief from these episodes that had ever been discovered, after doctors had run through the standard 16 or 18 prescription medications recommended for his prognosis, he told them, reciting a list of pharmaceuticals he had researched and committed to memory, turned out to be the simple, calming influence of music. Since he was small enough to fit in a shoe box, Browne told his employer, he had always been able to work very efficiently when around music. He even recounted how his doctors had thought of him as somewhat of a savant. "Sounds crazy," Browne told the befuddled review panel, "but I can prove it right now."

The psychologists assigned to Browne as part of his probation had proffered many explanations and prescriptions for his occasionally mad behavior, but attention deficit was not among them. And this was not the evidence he was headed toward anyway.

The supervisor, department manager and human resources rep reviewing Browne grew curious. Since they had not even heard of a "music library" in the basement of the complex's west wing, they could never have guessed Browne knew a musician who used to work there, the same musician who tipped Browne about the job in the first place. Nor could they have known about the habits of the employee currently working there. And if Browne turned out to be delusional as well as having A.D.D., they figured, it would render a decision to release an unemployable man much less burdensome. Even a judge beyond the influence of a powerful corporation like Mamen could not recommend employment over treatment in such a case.

They unwittingly followed Browne past the beige cubicle dividers in Marketing, around an IT wing, across the acres of desks in Sales, past Research, down an elevator to Lobby Level, across two food courts, and, following some restrooms, down an exit stairwell that should've led to first-level parking. But it didn't. They stepped out one by one into a long and narrow hallway with white linoleum flooring and weak fluorescent lighting. At one end of the corridor was simply a wall, at the other end a door with one word on it, "LIBRARY," printed in generic white block letters. They stood in the tight hallway, no one sure who should be the one to try the door, and Browne began turning around in circles again.

All three managers grabbed at his shoulders to stop him and gently pushed him toward the door. There was no keyhole in the doorknob, let alone a scanner for ID cards, as was the case with many of the company's departments.

The door pulled open easily and they were immediately assailed by a noodling guitar solo playing at a high volume, as well as a pungent cloud of smoke, neither of which anyone had sensed only inches away on the other side of the door. The dreary linoleum and fluorescent lighting continued with them into the room, and long alphabetically ordered rows of vinyl albums, old reel to reel canisters and CDs stretched ahead of them for yards and yards. The walls and ceiling were covered with antiquated soundproofing panels. It looked as if the whole area had been part of the old building, before the renovation and addition of the complex decades ago that would eventually annex its current three-block radius. There was no access from the parking area to this part through the building. And the company's massive digital conversion of all its copyrighted material created such a vast archive that employees rarely had need of a musical "hard copy" in the form of a vinyl record or CD from archival years. If they did, few would know this was the place to find one.

In front of the rows of music and off to the right side of the room stood a tall counter, a pair of sandaled toes sticking up from one end of it and the bespectacled top of a very hairy head, whose eyes were closed, peaking above the surface of the other end. The four of them approached the counter. Several strings of smoke rose from an ashtray full of roaches that had been partially ignited by the burning joint resting next to them. The face of the director from human resources reddened. He took off his horn-rimmed glasses, wiped his eyes and attempted to run his fingers through the few strands of light brown hair left on his head. He knew this kind of thing was his territory, that he had to do something — they were waiting for him to do something — but he had no readymade, handbook-certified explanation to assist him. He decided he would take the ashtray, and as he reached for it a hand shot up from behind the counter and immediately clamped down on his arm. There was a brief moment of recognition in the bearded face of the man behind the counter that perhaps the suit who just woke him up was from management, and this made his eyes shrink further behind his forest of hair. But then his eyes squinted with new resolve, his gaze beamed through the glasses of the human resources rep and his grip grew firmer, because regardless of what was going to happen to him, he seemed to be saying to himself, these bogarts were not going to confiscate the last of his weekly stash!

The director let go of the ashtray and extricated his arm from the grip. "Let's go," he said.

"Wait, my demonstration!" cried Browne.

"We'll take your word for it."

And in a way, they did. Once it was established that the position actually did exist and the library was not just some secret illegal crash pad, they immediately fired the long-haired clerk. Browne made it through a 90-day probationary period while human resources sent a report to management regarding whether the job should be phased out. That report was likely never completed or lost, leaving Browne with one of the cushiest caretaker jobs imaginable, even if it only paid the same salary he was making in customer service — as if he'd planned it that way all along.

Getting up from the park bench and stretching his wiry frame, Chaccone was ready to walk home with the rest of his

six-pack. He knew how long to wait before it was hopeless with Browne. Sometimes you weren't going to get him to speak. But Browne stopped humming and tilted his head skyward. He looked over at Chaccone, nodded and said, "Least we still got the Standard." Their eyes met for a moment before Browne craned his neck back and faced the sun again, resuming his melody. But Chaccone clearly heard it —Browne had said "we" to him for the first time.

• • •

Browne could smell pianos from behind walls, or maybe "feel" them was a more accurate description — the tautness and inertia of the strings, the latent pull of the ivory keys, the echo and dust in the wooden cavity of the box. But the schoolhouse was also an obvious target, not too unlike the one he attended briefly for a time back in North Carolina, which now seemed long ago to him.

It was one of many abandoned schools in Tri-Corner that had closed over the last few years after running out of funding. The newer schools that closed were never much to begin with, skeleton shells with desks, chalkboards and limited texts and materials. This schoolhouse was one of the relics, built in the first half of the 20th century in a sector of the neighborhood steadily gobbled by commercial growth over the century's second half. In its beginning, Polish and Italian kids made up the majority of the student body, then the children of working class blacks and Irish evened out the population, and then the bottom dropped out on all of the numbers in the new millennium, regardless of race. But it had a science lab, something students at the newer public schools had never heard of, it a had a creaking wood floor gymnasium, even glass back boards on the basketball hoops, and most importantly for Browne, it had a music room.

The only risk lied in making sure it wasn't a crash pad for wanderers, or especially, Grunts. Families of migrant workers might occupy a building like this for a short while, but they worked and lived in the warehouse district of the city. Once Browne determined it was safe, it was only a matter of borrowing some bolt cutters and bribing a piano tuner he knew with some cheap brandy.

On their way to the schoolhouse Chaccone insisted they stop off at his place and he left Browne waiting below on the sidewalk. He came back to the street carrying some saddlebags and slung one over the back of Browne.

"What the hell you doin'?! Browne yelled, violently pushing-shaking the bags off of him to the ground.

"For our journey, Sancho. There's some scores in there."

"What the-" Browne stared down at the bags on the ground again for a good while to determine if Chaccone had just done what he thought he'd done, "what the hell you throwing saddle bags at me for?"

Chaccone smiled but didn't reply. Browne slowly picked up the weather-beaten leather bags while still fixing his glare on Chaccone and pulled out several sheets of paper from the pouch pockets. They were song scores from Tin Pan Alley musicals of

the wartime ‘40s, including some from two blackface revival films. Browne looked at Chaccone squintedly, as if he were afraid for him.

“You’re the one’s crazy,” Browne mumbled and began to walk off, though not before throwing a saddlebag over his shoulder.

“You can keep your own music in them, too,” Chaccone yelled after him.

Browne walked on ahead. A block from the schoolhouse he broke the silence.

“Split up,” he whispered, not looking back at Chaccone.

“What do you mean?”

“Split up.” He pursed his lips and looked away like a ventriloquist does as he spoke. “We need to split up so nobody sees us going in together.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask questions, goddamnit. I’m the one found the damn schoolhouse.”

Thinking Browne must know something he didn’t, Chaccone stood perfectly still on the street corner and looked straight ahead of him, which actually served to attract the attention of every passing car or pedestrian in the same way a drug dealer or asylum escapee would. Finally he couldn’t stand it any longer and followed around the corner where Browne had disappeared.

The bricks of the building at the end of the block stood out first, almost black with narrow outlines of red, as if charred by a massive fire. A black tile roof added to the foreboding presence, brightened only by flakes of white paint still clinging to the window trim. A house with much more recent brickwork butted up against the schoolhouse building on one side in the adjacent lot, and on the other side a desolate schoolyard stretched to the corner, framed by the peaks and valleys of a beaten chain-link fence.

Chaccone guessed Browne had gained entry from the back of the lot, out of view from the street and the house next door. He climbed over a broken part of the fence and walked up some steps to a back door, which was locked. On the ground level he tried another locked door and almost tripped over the metal guard of a wide window well. He looked down and saw a gaping hole, not just a broken window, but the absence of a window, an opening fairly concealed but wide enough for Browne to fit though it. Chaccone climbed down, backed his legs into the opening, hung by his hands and let go.

“Why didn’t you wait?” he yelled at Browne after limping upstairs to the auditorium. “I almost broke my fucking ankle jumping in here.”

“That first step ain’t easy.”

“Wow,” he said at noticing the baby grand, “look at the shape it’s in. Why didn’t you tell me about this place earlier?!”

“Shhhhh. That’s why, for that very reason there.”

“Alright, alright,” said Chaccone in a lower conversational volume. “You have my word — I tell no one. Not even Elise.”

Browne stopped in his tracks toward the stage. “Now why in the hell would you be the one to tell Elise and not me?”

"I-I dunno. I just meant I wouldn't tell anyone."

Browne shook his head and looked up as if trying to remember something or resolve a problem in his head. He didn't speak.

"It's a temporary kinda thing to begin with," he muttered finally.

"How long?"

Browne said nothing because to him the question seemed outlandish, since to answer required knowledge of both when the lot would be purchased and when it would be cleared. Instead he threw his right foot onto the ledge of the three-foot stage, his white sock beaming in the musty early evening light between his dark pantleg and shoe, pushed himself up, rolled over on his back, got up and sat at the old Steinway.

Red velvet curtains with bald brown patches lined the back of the stage, which was quite wide, a "music room" only the secondary function of the auditorium. A lectern with microphone anchored the end of the stage opposite the piano, while rusty score holders were bunched in a corner backstage behind where Browne was warming up, shaking his hands and pulling finger joints. Chaccone sat down in the first of maybe 25 or 30 rows of seats, many of them only backs and arms without any cushion pads.

The small afternoon light limping in from the high and narrow windows above turned gray. Like a waiter setting a banquet table or a priest preparing some occult ritual, Browne lit several candles he found in a supply closet and evenly placed them around the semi-circular stage, saving three for the top of the piano case. Then he sat down and played. And he didn't stop for a long time.

Many things happened during the next several hours:

• Saturday night fell like a cool, soothing balm for the prickly heat of day. The sparrows and chickadees of Browne's Corner Park split the scene or nested in the trees, but in either case, the production at neighborhood's edge slowed to an occasional chirp… chirp. Flickering bursts of metallic blue and white illumined the windows of the near building as residents who couldn't afford to chase after their gratifications on the town watched them dance across their screens. In other parts of the city, those few with more disposable income approached the speed of the cathode ray in their pursuits, from car or rail to bar or club, theater to restaurant, to car, rail, bar, club, club, party and back again to zero point.

• Over at The Standard Hotel, Elise closed the empty bar early with Robert's blessing but begrudgingly pulled him aside and repeated the idea of hiring Browne for more nights a week instead of just one or two, knowing well that Browne would not think to petition for it and probably not thank her for doing so on his behalf, either. Robert had told Browne earlier in the week that he wanted him to skip this Saturday, making the missed gig at The Corner Pocket even more upsetting to Browne.

"I've helped him enough already," said Robert. "He's the only one who gets his rent pro-rated by the week, everyone else has to cough up a month's worth at a time to get the resident rate."

Then Robert removed the glasses from his mostly bald head, except for the ring of gray that started on the sides and struggled to meet in the back, and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Elise knew him well enough to guess he'd

now raise his voice to a more plaintive, less embattled tone, at least momentarily. He'd also briefly open his watery eyes as if he was pleading innocence to a cop at the scene of a fender bender, until they steadily receded back into their shells like snails, leaving only the black tips of his antennae-like pupils to handle the whole of the light spectrum.

"I like the guy, ok? He's missing some marbles, but I like him. I don't even know why I like him, to tell ya' the truth. But the bar's barely making it, I don't have it to spare."

"Well, Mr. Robert," she chided, addressing him as she always did when she wanted to reintroduce some European formality and, in this case, hopefully some authority, as well: "*This* is what you have." She unfolded her arm and let it slowly sweep from the darkened bar to the tables stacked with upturned chairs, and then all the way to the dimly lit piano in the hall. She paused for impact, ready to walk off after the last syllable. "You better do *something*."

• In anxious times one expects anxiety to ride the crest of popular social afflictions. For those out on a Saturday night, the unspoken concern was to make it home safely. But there were other worries besides safety that have also been the focus of men and women since they rummaged around in caves. You could list a chunk of this lengthy index beginning with the only one letter if you liked, say "S": Sanity, Self, Sex, Success, etc. The difference was that people believed whatever troubles these topics might represent could be remedied for a price now — and that was the rub, the font of renewable, replenishing anxiety. Even if you couldn't afford most of them, the myriad of "solutions" had grown so vast, the cures and assortment of drugs too numerous, it was difficult to choose among them without feeling anxious.

People talked in cafés, in offices, in bedrooms, but they were often too anxious to digest much of what was said. They pondered things on buses, in their homes, on the street, but usually not for very long before another thought crowded in and pushed the old one out, and then another did the same thing to this thought, and then another and another, until anxiety became both the fuel and end product of these thoughts. Everyone kept moving, twitching, leaping, hopscotching forward, going somewhere, anywhere.

And all of this anxiety charges the city at night with a restlessness, a motion that turns, squirms and twists, a competitive energy generated without any of the competitors able to identify the source and write down the rules of the game in ink. Instead, it occurs more or less within the framework of a learned regimen of habits.

Moving against the current of this regimen, back at the schoolhouse Browne and Chaccone are diving into the white river, the flowing moment of music, not ready yet to resurface. When compared to the musical sources available to the general population, the schoolhouse is located a mile under the crust of the earth, or in the middle of a sea, marooned. And the music sounds born from a wilderness. Browne's hands grab, pound and attack the length of the keyboard, sometimes balling into fists when his fingers fail him, squeezing out cascades of tightly bundled tones. Chaccone presses his fingers against his throbbing temples, barraged by the dissonance, then gradually finds a way in, begins to almost anticipate the sounds somehow. He is still jarred by Browne's wild playing, but there is something else; what was a sort of madness emerges into loose patterns, a slithering free from the chaos. And after purging himself, Browne glides into a lilting melody. Until the tension builds again.

Chaccone tries to follow it all, feel everything.

"Bravo, masterpiece strokes!" he yells at the tail of the melody's second turn, as Browne breaks to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"I don't do masterpieces."

This stops Chaccone, who is still trying to process what he has heard over the last few hours. "No, no, look what you just accomplished. Who else could've done that?"

"That?" Browne says, glancing at the keyboard. "That was mostly mistakes."

chapter 9

The music coming from the apartment could faintly be heard in the hallway, a scratchy Telefunken record spinning songs from the 1930s, plaintive, monaural cries in Berlinesque accents. Jones stood and listened to it, staring at the heat-puckered gray paint flakes where the walls met the ceiling and getting a chill from the tiny echoes of the dead world sounding from the apartment. What little she knew of this world came from her mother, one of its few preservers, who was sitting only a few feet away behind the door.

Her mother asked that she not visit her here — not that they shouldn't see each other — just that it not be here. But Jones was in the downtown area for a dinner with a few industry contacts, and she was early, she told herself less than convincingly. The other reason for the visit, which Jones rationalized to be an incidental motivation rather than a primary one: She might be able to pry information about her mother's network of musicians that could help boost her and Bonds' sagging caseload. And maybe deeper in her mind — to say "heart" would be introducing an area that Jones hadn't had much experience exploring yet —was the motivation of an estranged daughter to better grasp why the fear that haunted her as a child revisited her even now, to discover through her mother the answers hidden in the past. These were vulnerabilities Jones had not been able to fully declare to herself, let alone her mother.

The meanings of random German words in the songs came back to her for the first time in years as she stood at the white door debating when to knock. The heat in the hallway filled with the odor of bacon grease from the floor below. She could still turn back, maybe this was only another vanished trail, like the trails she and Bonds chased all over the city.

She had grown up a fatherless mulatto girl with a white mother, a set of circumstances challenging enough without one's peers repeatedly calling attention to it. She got it double barrel from both whites and blacks, "oreo," "half breed," "zebrahead."

As the years passed, she grew embittered over her mother's lack of cooperation in contacting her father. Elise offered her daughter the familiar refrains every time, that it was long ago, that she was unmarried and not going steady with anyone at the time, and that she was sorry. From Elise's point of view, this was preferable to telling your daughter that her father did not want

her to be born. As a remedy for what she felt was her mother's intransigence, Ela Edelweiss became Sharon Jones on the day she graduated from college, choosing a name she would no longer have to explain to others.

She had secretly planned the name change for a few years in advance, waiting first until she was no longer a minor and in need for her mother to submit a petition for her to legitimate the change, and then until she made herself more financially independent by securing a scholarship to graduate school. Legally changing her name was her reward to herself, a way of beginning fresh. But for her mother, who had prized her daughter's differences, not the least of which was her name, it was a false beginning, a sordid gesture, and finally, a betrayal. This was six years ago. They still saw each other occasionally now, but it had widened the rift between them.

Jones looked down at the stains on what was probably a moderately expensive bluish gray Berber rug 30 years ago, now faded to gray, and then at the creaky dark wood banister she had just ascended, striped with light from the windows at the top of the landing. She should go back down those stairs, she thought, spare herself this potential embarrassment, as well as the critique that will eventually engulf her once she is behind the door. She remembered the long drive she and Bonds made to the outskirts of the city the other night, blindly hiking across fields, searching for clues in the dark of an empty airplane hangar, and the deadbeat group of cops, all for nothing. She knocked.

"I told you not to visit here," came from the other side of the peephole. Then the door slowly opened and pulled the chain taut. They looked at each other's eyes through the crack for a long time. The ensuing silence melted some of the tension between them. A stranger would still not mistake them for the mother-and-daughter pair they were: the daughter with caramel-colored skin, frizzy shoulder-length dark brown hair and a slender build; the mother fair-complected, big boned, blue-eyed. It had been months since they'd seen each other.

"Things have happened. I needed to talk to someone." The sound of "needed" thawed the grip on the door and Jones heard the chain unfasten.

"Hello momma."

"Are you OK?"

"Yes," mouthed Jones weakly. They hugged each other loosely and quickly, the formal hug they had become accustomed to over the last several years. Elise then clutched her daughter by the shoulders and pushed her away for a rapid inspection.

"Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Most nights."

"What's happened?"

"Well… Edward hit me."

"Hit you?! Who's Edward?"

"The man I've been seeing for the last year. I know, I never mentioned him to you."

"Why am I not surprised," said Elise, scanning her daughter's face and almond eyes, unaware she was looking for an absent bruise caused by an invented man. Stunning as her figure and flashing smile were, Jones had been on barely a handful of

dates in the last year. The two women sat down at opposite ends of the sofa, using the distance to measure their words.

"You look fine."

"I-I wasn't really hurt. It was more the idea of it."

"Yes, it is a shock, isn't it. Did you call the police?"

"No. Word would have spread to my department, eventually, and it wouldn't make me look very good." She paused. "I trusted him."

"I'm sorry." Elise looked away. She should have more than that to say, she thought, more than "sorry." What would she have said when they were closer? "You're young. You will have," she offered, "you have lots opportunities still ahead of you."

"But how will I know who to trust?"

"There aren't any guarantees. You have to trust yourself."

"What does that mean?"

"You're the only one who knows what it means."

She refused to return Elise's gaze. Talk like this from her mother always angered Jones — so equivocal, she thought, always inscrutable, never practical. Adding to her unease, deception did not come easy to Jones, she had to steel herself for it:

"You weren't alone like me at this age. You had friends when you were young," she said, looking back at her mother.

"I didn't have a professional career like you. There is plenty of time for friends when you're a singer."

"Do you still keep in touch with them, your musician friends?"

"Some of them."

"What happened to them?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I dunno, because I think I made a mistake in not keeping up with the people I knew from a few years back, especially college friends, and maybe there is a way to stay in touch with some of them, like you have with your old friends."

"Some of the old gang still live in the Warehouse District, but I don't go visiting. It's more dangerous there than here. I hear from them once in a great while, that's all. Two of them who used to work at the club died. A lot of time has passed since those days. There were no licenses then, musicians could play anywhere without worry of-" she stopped, she did not want to derail her daughter's visit with an old argument between them again. "It was a different time then, and in some ways, the same as now. But you didn't come to listen to me go on about that."

"No," Jones said. "I just realized I had no one to tell."

In truth, all of this tired Jones. The fact that, in her work, she and her mother happened to oppose each other was unfortunate but simply how events worked out. No one was responsible, not even her mother, it was just the way the world was, and people needed no more to justify their role in that world than the roles themselves. To think otherwise was to be a dreamer, to believe in philosophy, which, in the world of today, was an outdated endeavor. If the live performance of music once possessed

an innate value beyond what the market determined, as her mother had argued with her so many times that they no longer spoke of it, then how could such value just up and disappear?

Elise walked to her small kitchen and returned with some wine, while Jones took in the sprawl of books and records, the empty beer cans on the coffee table, the white button-down man's shirt draped over the arm of an old black leather recliner, the- a man's shirt? Who owned the shirt, she wondered. She had to find out before she left.

Elise poured herself some wine but did not offer any to her daughter. "I don't say this because I don't like the work you do," she began, taking back her corner on the sofa, "but your job is not worth all the time you give to it. You have to get out and meet people."

"I'm starting to. I'm having dinner with some associates not far from here later tonight."

"Here?"

"It's getting to be a popular place now. At least to visit."

"Where?"

"Here, Tri-Corner."

"Ha," Elise forced a laugh, "there's nothing happening here, it's a dead zone. I suppose what you do on your free time is up to you, but I've told you not to frequent this side of town on my account, especially this dump of a place."

"Tonight was different, I told you I had no one to talk to about this. Why do you have to try to make it about the neighborhood again?"

"Why? Maybe because my apartment is not so nice and I don't get many chances to go elsewhere, someplace nice where we could meet. And because I see the neighborhood more than you and know it can be dangerous here."

"I'm armed, you know, we carry guns. Why do you keep living here then?"

"I'll be moving soon."

"You said that years ago."

"Well maybe I'm finally- it doesn't matter. The point is, we can get together elsewhere — when you have the time for me."

"I'm here now, but apparently it makes you uncomfortable."

"No. It's OK now, now is fine, please," though she could not chase away the dread of Browne knocking on her door at any moment. She hoped her last rebuke of him had not worn off.

"At least you seem to be having better luck than I am with men," Jones said nodding toward the chair.

"Oh, the shirt," Elise said and immediately grabbed it and threw it violently in a closet. "Yes. Well yes, actually, I have just met someone. He is a nice… he is a good… we get along OK."

"What's his name?"

"Oh, you don't know him."

"Still, what's his-"

"Emilio."

"A foreigner. I should have guessed."

"No, he's an American, a mutt, more or less… He's kind of an awkward, stunted, laughable ma-" Elise struggled between her own emotions and those she wanted to reveal to her daughter. "I'm kidding, he's nice, actually."

"How did you meet?"

"A mutual friend. And we ourselves are just friends, it is not anything serious."

"Of course."

"'Of course?'"

"Of course it's nothing serious," Jones said pointedly.

Elise squeezed her wineglass until it seemed ready to crack in her hand, and could not believe she had been careless enough to leave the shirt out in the open. "You said you needed to talk to someone about *your* love life, not mine."

"I'm a result of your relationships. I have a right to talk about them, too."

"And I have a right not to talk about them."

"Strange how your right to privacy has always cancelled out my right to know about myself."

Elise's anger suddenly was defused. Jones remained the only person able to douse Elise's temper, albeit not for unconditional lengths of time, because she alone revealed the one failure her mother's ego could not disassemble and move beyond.

"I've never denied my mistakes. But I tried to help you every way I knew how. The past and the present can't be placed all in a nice little package and given a new name — so that, if you don't like one, you change the other to make them fit together better."

"Don't think I'm ungrateful. I just have my own life now."

Elise could not rise far enough above the pain this caused her to utter a response, because she knew from the casual tone in which Jones spoke it that it was not measured or self-conscious, nor ill-intentioned, but a simple statement of fact.

"I should be going to meet my friends."

There was another uneasy pause.

"I hope you have a good time."

"It's odd to bring up now, but I think one of my colleagues likes me, although he's quite a bit older than me. I'm not sure what I'll do about it yet."

She waited for her mother to fill in with her usual array of advice, convictions and protocols. But nothing happened. And it was suddenly exasperating for Jones, more exasperating than her mother's endless opinions about her. Because now Jones wasn't lying, the man she spoke of did exist — in fact, he was drinking in a bar only about a mile away.

"How do you know," asked Jones, breaking her mother's silence, "if the feelings you have for someone are real, if they'll last?"

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At the convention center downtown, Jack Bonds sips a tequila alone at the empty circular bar. After pacing back and forth in his apartment to stave off the persistent and encroaching nausea of loneliness, he's rented a room for the night in hopes of catching the tail end of the Major Bonner party tour, though he has no idea what he would do if he did. It doesn't matter all that much one way or the other, he thinks, good to get out for a change. There are notions a man his age needs to give up on and put away, particularly in regard to romance, and this might help him do just that. It's been so long since he's been out, however, he doesn't know where to go.

The bartender uses a shot measure when she pours his drinks, which happens only in the interval when she has finished one conversation on her cell phone and has yet to begun another. She is either happily unaware or acutely mindful that Bonds is her only customer. Her blond hair is as thick as straw in its utter healthiness. Her breasts somehow point skyward.

"What time do you close?" he asks.

"Depends on how many customers we have, they're trying to cut costs."

After a befuddled clockwise scan of the barstools at the circle, Bonds does not see any "customers." Still, he is determined he'll not be rushed to finish his meager jigger of cactus juice. He asks for a slice of lime just as she has punched the last digit to make another call, inviting an unplanned-for dilemma of choice. She glances at him and then quickly back to her phone, as if she's set in motion an inevitable event of physics so momentous it leads in both past and future paths directly to the singularity of the Big Bang.

"Um," she pauses as someone obviously waits on the other end of the call. She glances at the bowl of whole limes next to the sink, then back again toward the phone. "Uh sorry wrong number," and disconnects quickly.

"Nice to have a lot of friends."

"Yeah. Both the ones you know and the ones you haven't even met. Right?"

"Oh," Bonds nods his head. He does not want to ask, does not want to begin. Instead, he ponders the possibility that this is a set-up, this bartender job a front for the woman at a crucial hub for international dialogue, the city's convention center. She's another intel who's become a good actress, a "dizzy bartender" this time, he thinks. Nothing is what it seems, anyway, so who's to say? Perhaps things are, in reality, exactly their opposites now.

He can see her walk to her car after her shift wearing an expression of fatigue and annoyance over the bartender job she's been given as a cover. He sees her filing her dailies at her apartment on her laptop, smoking a chain of British cigarettes and putting them out in the coffee cup from this morning, one of many cups and plates strewn about the rooms. Denied the option of hiring a cleaning service for security reasons, she has avoided more and more housekeeping duties by the day. Out on her balcony with a brandy she sees the lights glimmer downtown, the moon coasting behind veils, and wonders how many more days she can endure. She could be on a tropical beach, in the hills of some faraway country, on the streets of an exotic capital.

In those places, at least it would be easier to be alone. Instead, she's tending bar at a convention center. She'll spend tonight with her background profiles. It feels like such a long time since she's been with anyone. Her breasts rise nearly to her chin as she inhales deeply and slowly exhales. She pushes her fingers through her blond mane, lets her hand fall down and smooth her inner thigh. Her legs are firm, not a centimeter of sagging skin on her body, but the motion still tickles the softer veneer wrapping the sides of her quadriceps. For a moment, she's drawn to the image of the man sitting alone at the bar earlier. He seemed interesting and kind, if a little old…

No, Bonds thinks, snap out of it, man. The Zeitgeist demands bludgeoning force. Power does not waste time with sex anymore, even at the intel level, because sex is bloodless and requires subtlety, and those who waste time on subtlety are vanquished. She could not move in the circles of world governments and allow one's feelings to be so reckless with regard to a stranger sitting at a bar, so spontaneous and-

"But at least he wasn't fat," he imagines her thinking about him, " he had a sturdy athletic build, actually. Maybe he'll be back tomorrow, and if so…"

"Excuse me — sir? I'm going to give last call now," she says as if the subject had never been mentioned between them.

"Uh, it's only 9 o'clock." Bonds does not want to go back to his room yet and suffer through insomnia or the television. He panics for an angle, anything to change her mind.

"They want us to close if there's less than three people at the bar after 9 p.m., sorry."

"If you can decide to close, you can decide to stay open, too, right?"

"I don't understand." Bonds pulls out the business card he was given at the convention and hands it to her.

"Wow, Major Bonner. But I've seen Major Bonner on TV before and you don't look anything like him."

"That's who I work for."

"You're work for the M.E.A.?! I've D-R-E-A-M-E-D of being on a poll show."

"I'm just in the legal department. But if you keep this bar open for me and all my thirsty friends," he says, gesturing to the empty barstools, "you've got yourself an audition. Now please be clear, no guarantees, no contract, just an audition."

"Really!? An audition for a poll show?"

"Yep."

She screeches the requisite "woooo-hoooo!" and reaches for her phone.

"No-no," said Bonds, waving his index finger, "not a word to anyone or the deal's off. I could get in trouble from, uh," he searched for the cliche, "making deals under the table like this."

When he heard himself speak this aloud, he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Was it really this easy? He felt so out of touch. He hadn't actually seen a poll show in ages. He was a functional illiterate of the entertainment industry and yet his job was to help regulate it.

But he knew enough to know poll shows were not just shows anymore, their phenomenon had mushroomed into an

apparatus of the most influential individuals in the country — senators, movie stars, governors, music icons, legislators, sports heroes. And if the shows had grown so influential to their audiences, they also deftly measured public opinion for those seeking to exert this influence.

So much money flowed into and out of the poll show productions in so many different guises that they had even been known to occasionally influence stock market levels on releases of their polling results and audience sales numbers. The demographics and profile information about a poll show audience member were of ultimate value to advertising departments because they could provide real time decision-making results. And though a political candidate could find sponsors from other industries, exposure through the M.E.A.'s many-tentacled reach was necessary to win.

Whether the shows' surveys of public opinion were ever honestly disclosed was an altogether different story. Bonds knew that even Bonner's connections did not reach all the way up the poll show ladder to its lofty perches. The shows had grown into political machines operated by those with the kind of power and connections best preserved through discretion and prudence, not celebrity, Oz-like executives who sat on many boardrooms but otherwise remained in the shadows beyond public circumspection.

"This is unbelievable. I used to sing in the school choir."

"Good. Then you can get back in singing shape. And you already look great."

"Thanks, I've done some modeling, just for local businesses here, you know, a few car dealerships. But it's so tough to break through even after you get a little experience. People kill for a chance like this."

"A chance is correct, that's all it is. Don't expect anything more."

"You have no idea how long I've waited for something like this. Thank you so much!"

He did his best to fight off her requests for particular details. The sustained level of her enthusiasm caught him by surprise. He wasn't quite prepared for this much of it, and he began to feel a little nauseous fielding question after question. He asked for some seltzer water and bitters and tried to change the subject. After all, this was supposed to be about *him,* too.

"I wanted so bad to work the M.E.A. convention that was just here, but all the special events like that go to the people who've been here longer. They get all the big-tip jobs."

"I only made a brief appearance myself because of previous commitments. I wouldn't worry, it didn't seem like you missed that much."

"That's not what I heard. So tell me more about what you do at the M.E.A. And your tequila is on the house, by the way."

"I don't want to disappoint you with the boring- is that a customer?" The busboy approaching in the brown vest-and-pants uniform could not be mistaken for a customer, but the diversion bought him some breathing room.

"I have to say, when you walked in, I never figured you for an e-worker."

"E-worker?"

"Oh come on, cut the modesty…" She sucked her teeth chidingly. "You work in the entertainment industry! There's e-workers and those of us who want to be e-workers."

"Well, if you want to put it like that…"

Like what? Why didn't he know? He was a social anachronism. In college and well afterwards he loved going to concerts and films and parties, felt a connection to a cultural scene. Now, he felt no connection to anything, couldn't identify a "scene" of any kind and had trouble understanding where his preferences for the simplest items came from — a box of cereal, a painting, pairs of socks, underwear. It's all about "The Game," he thought, he never knew what else to call it. And he had dropped out of the competition, withdrew from the source of motivations, the bundling of every trickling stream and rushing river that emptied into that murky ocean of the power-plus-influence now called "culture." There was a hell of a Game going on — an epic gamble expanding imperviously in the face of the wars, natural disasters, droughts and famines spreading wildly about it — and everyone Bonds knew seemed to be playing but him. And he yet had worked to help all of it happen, in a way, miniscule foot soldier for the giant cultural signifiers, the behemoth media groups who had deciphered methods to smother voices other than their own, then pushed those measures into laws controlling the channels of access. *He* was also to blame for not knowing why he chose the socks and movies he did.

Maybe it wasn't too late for him, he thought, but how was he to find alternate options in this cultural competition when one's job essentially was directed at eliminating them both? He'd arrived at the sinking realization that everyone — from he and Jones all the way up to those like Bonner and Simmulcummer — had simply done their jobs too well for him to ever be surprised by anthing again. And though money always bought access, this kind of predictability did not seem right to him, even if so far he was unable to work out exactly why.

At night, dreams littered his consciousness and took root. He slept as often as he could because it stimulated him slightly more than being awake, and because if he was awake he had to observe The Game, since there seemed no place real or imagined where it was not in progress or in view. In his corner of the universe at the E.M.A., the private side and public side played each other for the highest stakes, though he could testify from personal experience that the differences between the two had vanished. But no matter, that only meant there were more reciprocal back scratches, ass kisses and blow jobs to go around. And the more the merrier, The Game loved it like a boundless single-celled organism registering repeated orgasms of mitosis. Sometimes he wished he had the time to compile a record of all he had seen happen detail by lurid detail. Would anyone even bother to suppress it now, or would it simply be a source of humor, maybe even worked into a poll show theme, while he searched the streets for a new job? What if people had found it easier to live without surprises?

That he hadn't landed the dream career did not prevent his job from appearing in his dreams. Though most of the time, his sleeping life rivaled his waking life in its images of tedium: The adolescent Bonds trying on different pairs of shorts in a J.C. Penny's for his mother and Aunt Geraldine's approval; the odor of dog shit wafting through the wall of sleep as he picked up turds with plastic bags in preparation to mow the backyard lawn at his boyhood home back in Pittsburgh; a scantily clad Jones seeking condolences in his arms and his chivalrous responses, and he always sitting her down, throwing a blanket over her on the sofa, talking things out over a cup of Joe — except on those few occasions when the details grew murky and he would wake

up in a sweat. But these somnambulant scenes didn't inspire the same regret as handcuffing an aging drag queen, or busting up the entertainment at the weddings of immigrants, or sitting on the dais for yet another honorary dinner for another M.E.A. executive. If only sleep could arrive without dreams as its passengers, he often thought.

Most people would think he'd done well for himself at the M.E.A., he often reasoned, coming from the working-class poor, the first family member to go to college, the first one to take vacations, travel, to buy cars brand new. If they cut his pay, would he feel better about what he was doing with his life all these years? Conversely, if he somehow fell in to a *lot* more money, he could use it to vanish. Not a trace. As if he'd never been here. Fine by him.

"Can I buy you another drink, Mr.- I don't even know your name."

"Oh sorry, Jack. Or J.B." He didn't even know why he said "J.B.," he'd never been called that. He thought it might catch on when he first started with the agency, a tongue-in-cheek preface for his goal of landing an intel job that would gain him a sort of personal trademark. But he would forget to tell people to use it, that he preferred to go by "J.B." instead of Jack.
He ordered another tequila.

"I'm 25. Do you mind my asking your age?" He thought about lying. In addition to being in good physical condition, he still had distinguished features and only a sprinkling of gray in his brown hair.

"Old."

"Late thirties, forties?"

"Sure."

"Tell me about the poll shows, have you met any of the people?"

"Some. But like I said, that's not my job, I'm in legal."

An hour later they were in his room and Bonds wasn't quite sure how it happened. Or, more accurately, he was aware that he'd invited her to have a drink in his room and that she'd accepted with the vague stipulation that she needed to meet her boyfriend somewhere later, but he felt there was someone other than himself uttering the worn out lines about "getting to know each other better" and how "we might have more in common than we realize." No matter how badly he wanted her, he wasn't used to approaching women like this. He was never really in command of the "active pursuit" mode. When he dated, which was rare, it was almost always the result of introductions along the path of his routines at the dry cleaners, the grocery, church when he could force himself there, an infrequent social gathering where he might meet the friend of a friend, etc.
He was treading new ground, but he didn't care because none of it felt real.

"The poll shows are a little different," he improvised, "but I've seen all kinds of entertainers, and you seem to have that kind of personality."

"I've tried to be an outgoing person. My mother encourages it."

"Your mother encourages it?"

"Well, you have to do everything you can to get by, including staying positive. Yeah, she taught me that."

"And your father?"

"He's pretty much a drunk now. Ever since he lost his job. That's why it's so ironic I'm a bartender. "

"Sorry."

"It's fine, he loves me and all, he's just not outgoing like me," she said, slipping out of her shoes and walking barefoot to look out the glass doors of the balcony at the city. Her feet were a deeper shade of gold than her hair and were tipped with neon pink toenails. She had taken her shoes off because she said she never wore them at home, only while she worked. "It doesn't matter that things used to be better for my family. We can't worry about that now."

"I don't think much about my past either"

"That's why this audition is so important. I've always known being in the e-business was its own reward. But now…"

"Look," he wanted to end it all now and tell her the truth. Maybe after they'd hashed it all out he'd still manage to merit a sympathy fuck for being honest in the end with her. But he couldn't sound the words out. When she turned from the window she appeared more bronzed and radiant than before. She walked slowly toward him with her head slightly bowed, as if she were aiming to lay her brow on his chest. Directly in front of him she lifted up in one swift motion and kissed him on the lips.

He kept his tongue in his mouth as long as he could, which was about three seconds. His hands smoothed up and down the curves from her hips to her shoulders, as if he were unhusking her. She lifted her top off. He undid her bra, cupped her breasts and pushed her back on the bed. He could not drink enough of her in, and though she seemed cold at first, she was beginning to respond to the caresses of his tongue and fingers.

He had not felt this excited by a woman in years. A door had opened, and passing through it allowed him to express himself in heretofore-undiscovered ways. He drew from measured brushstrokes to wild releases of color and motion, mixed iambs and trochees across peaks and valleys, shaped her flesh with hot blood for mortar, moved with comedian's lightness yet weighted their heat against flight with the gravitas of a tragedian. And there was plenty of solid, good clean fucking, too. He rode her, she rode him, they rode off together and came back again.

When it was over, he lay on the bed and let the rays of what he felt must be glory, if it exists, wash over him from head to foot. She nudged her body against his playfully, though he was too preoccupied with the sensations still radiating in him to turn to her. J.B. was a gamer, he thought, and Jack Bonds had underestimated the value of playing. Contrary to his repeated estimations these last few years, maybe there was hope for him, maybe it had only been from his skewed perspective that he seemed to be drowning. He felt lighter, more buoyant.

She had her things together and was standing at the foot of the bed.

"Wha- I didn't hear you come out of the bathroom."

"I don't believe in lying unless it's necessary," she said, speaking rapidly. "I'm not going to see my boyfriend because I don't have one. I'm going to my other superstar job, nightshift at the convenience store near where we live. Also, your watch and the $140 I took from your wallet will be refunded in full when you call me about my audition — I'm not stealing, I just need to make sure you keep your promise."

"Wait a minute," said Bonds, lifting his head and left shoulder from the bed with visible effort and glancing around for his pants.

"My number's where your cash was. OK, talk to you soon, I hope. Bye." She was out the door and down the hall.

He put his pants on and hurried to the elevator, where the light indicator near the ceiling was just illuminating "L" for lobby. He padded barefoot back to his room with his head slightly bowed in thought. The glorious tingling sensation coursing through his whole body a moment ago now existed only in his genitals, a last phantom trace of pleasure. He moved with purpose around the room as if he were on a search for something to do. But there was nothing to be done, no sense getting dressed or gathering his things since it was still evening. Finally, settling back on the bed, he pressed the power button on the TV remote.

"…so here he is," the poll show host with chiseled looks and perfectly parted hair announces, "and now, let's get r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-eady to vote!"

The simple set consists of a polished marble floor and seemingly depthless white backdrop, as most of the visual fireworks that appear on viewer's screens are virtual, not live on set. A man wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a bow tie, white shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots walks on stage to canned applause. He reaches a lone chair, turns it around backwards and sits down on it, hands folded and elbows resting on the chair back as the camera begins pulling him in slowly for a close-up. Bonds cannot place where he has seen the man before as he listens to him begin speaking in a soft Texas drawl.

"I was gonna' tell ya'll a story tonight, and then I changed my mind. I decided I'd sing a song from the new album instead. And then when I got up this morning, I thought, 'Maybe it's time to take a little break from the showbiz game for a minute and just come out and tell my friends how I feel tonight?' And so that's what I'm gonna do. No bull, just the straight poop, as they say." The canned applause bubbled with a few chortles of laughter.

Bonds immediately noticed the more obvious changes made to the shows since he'd last viewed one. While a toll-free, 11-digit number and web address had always been present at the bottom of the screen for people to cast their vote by phone or computer, the rest of the image area was usually devoted to the host and entertainers. Now, the screen was constantly shifting into half- and quarter-split image boxes. In a clockwise path — or was it counter clockwise, sometimes their speed was deceiving —the boxes rotated around the man in the chair, filled with both connected and seemingly random content. Bonds could not discern whether it was distracting or hypnotizing, hot or cold, opening him up or pulling him in, and he could not shake the feeling that it only replicated what had just happened to him with the girl.

While Fist McCall spoke, for instance —and the close-up of his face confirmed for Bonds that it was indeed Fist— one of his hit videos broke out in a square content box just above his head in the upper right corner of the image area. In the upper left corner, footage of him working out on the Hunkmaster Flex home exercise gym also occasionally appeared. But then, cuts to clips of imploding buildings, footage of war victory marches, of couples kissing, of babies playing with their parents would flash on and off for varied stretches of time, from fractions of a second to minutes at a time. The audio feed remained the same but the video engineers were having a free-for-all in the programming room. Once, there was even a quick cut to a clip of Flossy

flailing away on the Hunkmaster Flex standing leg curl like some Rockette reject. It was as if all this had just become too easy, as if the producers now were simply painting canvasses and filling soundscapes with a stable of inside jokes that taunted both the celebrity and his or her audience.

They had also learned that an uninterrupted message is as doomed as a long-winded high school lecture. Much better to introduce the message or advertisement first and massage it back into the audience's mind after several interruptions, more of a reinforcement than an overload strategy. You could never assume just how long viewers actually paid attention, so why waste effort with the prolonged message of an infomercial?

"You don't need me to tell you that times are tough," McCall continued. "We send soldiers off who fight for our way of life every day, and some of them don't come back. They make — you guessed it — the ultimate sacrifice. But you sacrifice, too, trying to make ends meet and saving up as much as you can, doin' your part to make the country great. You work hard. And you play hard. And you need to be in the best shape you can be in to keep up. That's why I'm asking you to consider the Hunkmaster Flex Home Gym when you vote in a few minutes."

The images of Inuits carving up the meat of a whale suddenly appeared on Bonds' screen and then vanished. Fist's mug was brought in for another close-up, with the footage of him getting after it on the Hunkmaster in a box just above his left ear. "The Hunkmaster is small enough to fit in any basement, even a spare room, and yet it offers all the benefits of a health club gym — without the expensive monthly fee. If you're busy like I am, you don't always have time in your schedule to get to a gym. Hunkmaster Flex brings the gym to you, so you can exercise as much as you want, whenever you want to."

Hunkmaster's features and benefits dazzled Fist to such a degree that he felt it his duty to let the viewers at home know them as images of an eagle dive bombing a river for a fish played above his left shoulder and the chair back was plastered with footage of a tanned Brazilian model in a thong bikini. The Hunkmaster was made of graphite and titanium, a material that was actually stronger than steel, was lightweight, and easy to assemble and disassemble, he said. It worked every major muscle group, even facial muscles, for a toned, younger looking appearance. It was a time-saver, it was used by this celebrity, it was used by that celebrity, so on and so on…

After he finished, the host broke back in to restate poll show procedures and repeat the call numbers again. The Hunkmaster was the last of three products in the "At Home" division.

"As you know, a vote counts as one point, a purchase as 100 points, and the winning product garners another 1,000 points for its company," he said. "Those points all go toward nominating the company's candidate for this fall's primaries. You can vote for your favorite product, you can vote for your favorite candidate — that's up to you. Just *be sure to vote*, right? Here's a quick word from Choice Corporation candidate, Pat Ball."

A pre-recorded segment showed a man in a track suit who looked to be in his late 50s performing bicep curls on a Hunkmaster.

" Hi, I'm Pat Ball, V.P. of Finance at Choice Corporation and that company's proud candidate for this year's approaching

presidential primary. I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania…" The mention of his hometown snapped Bonds from his sullen torpor.

"…And it was there that I learned the lessons that have stayed with me all my life, lessons about perseverance and hard work and living with a can-do attitude. Cancer took my mother from my father and I when I was 8-years-old. As you can imagine, we were both devastated. But my father was not a quitter, and he taught me to never give up, that if you want something bad enough, you find a way to get it. This is the kind of attitude we need leading our country. You've just seen how our Hunkmaster Flex can get you in shape. Our country needs to get in shape, too. There is too much inefficiency in the system while everyone else struggles just to get by. I know how to trim that fat and make us all healthy again, a healthy country again. Vote for me and let's get this country back on the road toward health and prosperity."

"Thank you Pat," said Fist, back live again. "I gotta' get me a track suit like that, he is one sharp dude. And you might be thinking a guy as rich and famous as Pat Ball works out in his own private multi-million dollar gym or at some gated country club. But no, that was his actual Hunkmaster machine that you just saw. And while you'd do well by this great country of ours with a vote for Pat, I think you should consider doing your body a favor, too, by purchasing this great home gym. I haven't always been in the kind of shape I am today. But once I started working out on the Hunkmaster, I can tell you the ladies started to take a little more notice."

An image box over Fist's right ear revealed a muscled Flossy in a tight pink unitard back at the leg machine performing kicks and curls even more flamboyantly than before. McCall looked away from the direction of the cue cards in front of him and must have spotted a monitor that revealed the video clip of Flossy.

"Shortly after-" he said and froze mid-sentence. His mouth hung open but no words came out. Flossy kept the leg kicks going through the silence.

Scarcely able to believe what he was watching from his bed, Bonds began howling with laughter at the inside joke, imagining that off camera the programmers were laughing right along with him at their attempt to make Fist squirm.
A rumor that Fist and Flossy were one and the same person was one thing, broadcasting it in front of millions was another.

"Excuse me." Fist had forced a cough to get his bearings. Then the box vanished just as quickly as it appeared, leaving only a streak of pink on the viewers' retinas.

"But, ahem," Fist soldiered on in a shaken tone, "shortly after I began working out on the Hunkmaster, I signed my very first record contract down in Texas."

Bonds laughed harder, rolling on his side until his belly began to ache, until his laughing muscles hurt from their lack of training for this kind of anaerobic laughter — just the kind of training that a Hunkmaster Flex could exact, incidentally — and his groping hands finally reached the remote and turned the television off before he could watch Fist McCall pounding his heels into the marble floor as he walked off the set at his segment's end, before he could learn that Choice Corp. had racked up an impressive 487,000 points to win the night's "At Home" runoff, and well before the show's "New Talent" programming, which Bonds had so conveniently used for his own "purposes" earlier in the evening.

"$140 and my watch," Bonds reminded himself. But it wasn't the money or the watch that made him finally stop laughing, as much as the possibility that, besides the poll show programmers, no one else got the joke.

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Jones and Browne approached the front door of The Standard from opposite sides. With one in tears and the other sulking, they nearly brushed shoulders in the foyer without noticing each other. They were moving through opposite ends of the Elise spectrum, one exiting the prism and the other entering it, neither completely whole without the third-party separations and refractions she exacted. Through hard times and good times, the bohemian experiences and the windfall business transactions, hundreds had peopled Elise's days without stopping longer than to take what they thought they needed. And she was more than happy to let them go. The few who connected did not separate from her easily, even if only because, after closer inspection, the nature of this connection became a chameleon-like source of puzzlement for them.

"You fucking Chaccone?" Browne was never one for subtlety.

"Ha! And what if I am?" she shot back scornfully.

Had it crossed her mind, she could have been more forthcoming and told him she had no plans to see Chaccone "romantically" again since their one-night stand, that he'd stopped by the bar yesterday full of excitement over finding a job with a big company doing trade with Peru and that he would be flying there in a few days. But it didn't cross her mind. Browne's rages and jealousies had to be confronted, she had to continually redraw the borders separating them now from their past together. Jones' visit made her more defensive than usual with him, more protective of the truth that only she knew about all of them.

Perhaps clinging to an unspoken hope, Browne interpreted her answer as a "no," or, at the least, a "not yet." That was enough for him right now. In no small part, he was a great pianist because, in his mind, no one had yet been able to deny his being so. It was the same principle with Elise for him, since they spent more time together than with anyone else in their lives. In his mind, she had never actually told him explicitly that he was not the man closest to her in her life, and until she did, no matter how many years had passed, he was her man.

Browne sat on the floor, back against the wall, knees up, elbows on knees, hands clutching the brim of his hat, which covered his eyes. She walked to the kitchen and finished washing what was left of the dishes in her sink. She bagged her trash and put it by the front door. She straightened up her loose records and CDs, but did not put anything on to play. There was a time long ago when she was more faithful to Browne than anyone else in her life.

"Nothing is owed anyone," she said finally.

"You two been spending a lot of time together— none of my business, sure — but if he starts meaning more to you than I do, I want to know. And I want to know damn quick."

"Why?"

"You owe me it. No matter what you say."

"Did you not just hear me?"

She studied a coffee cup next to the sink and was reminded of a time when her temper might have caused her to throw it at him, before she had decided their emotions had killed off their reason and they could not — should not — be together.

"Both of you suffer from delusions," she said.

"Who doesn't?"

"Me. I remind you never to expect fairness, never to expect anything in return for anything."

"I'm not asking any favors, just to be straight with me."

It went back and forth like this as night gave way to early morning without the music or drinks that were brightening other rooms in the building as they usually did Elise's, and the streets below emptied of thrillseekers from across the bridge, and the bellies of a few clouds bloated with moisture that evaporated before forming into droplets. Browne finally left unsatisfied at not finding the words he wanted, and uncertain now about much more than his finding venues for the performances that were sprouting up inside him again. Elise and Chaccone had been spending alone time together, that much was certain, even if it meant nothing, as she tried to make it seem.

He stopped first at his room down the hall to gather supplies, then knocked on the door of a neighbor, a drunk who was almost always up late. He offered the man five dollars and they walked to his window where Browne unfurled a bedsheet, ball ping hammer and pack of 1" nails on the floor. He wrote his message in thick magic marker on the sheet. He tacked a corner of the sheet into the outside ledge of the windowsill. Back at his own window Browne caught the other end of the sheet with the hammer tied at its end, which the man had successfully swung to him after a few woozy attempts. The makeshift banner unfolded, large enough to be seen by those entering the building in the morning. It read:

CHACCONE

IS A FINK

Browne secluded himself in his apartment for several days, listening to old records or gazing down at the street to take in the various reactions to his handiwork. Just before leaving for his new job — which involved re-establishing old trade contacts in Peru, this time backed by the biggest distributor in America — Chaccone visited Browne to say goodbye and talk to him about Elise. The large banner that he spotted a full block away and a locked apartment door convinced him his friend had gone through a recent reassessment of their relationship.

Chaccone tried throwing stones at the banner to unseat its corners from the sidewalk, he tried warm words of encouragement to melt the lock on Browne's door, speaking of years fighting the good fight for musical freedom toe to toe, shoulder to shoulder together, all met by silence. But for Browne, perhaps musical freedoms and personal freedoms were not interchangeable, or else were too closely connected. Chaccone could have no more believed Browne was a ghost than to have ever guessed this about his friend.

Chaccone pledged from the other side of the door that he would abide by whatever decision Elise and Browne made, but that he'd done nothing wrong and felt certain that at least she agreed with him on that point. He said he was going away for a while — not only from the door but the country, too — that his heart was paining him, that he hadn't meant to injure anyone, and that he would visit again when he returned.

A few changes were in order, Browne thought after Chaccone had left. And this was a good start. Sometimes you needed to stake your claims in life, because others were going to do the same with or without you. He hoped he still had claims to stake, he hoped that everything wasn't fading from him the way it faded from fools, without their ever noticing. Sure, the banner stunt was "melodramatic," as he imagined Elise would describe it. At least, that's how she usually described things like this that he'd done in the past. But for the first time since he'd met her, he wasn't sure any longer.

To read the rest of “As We Used to Sing,”
send a request to sdeleo@samdeleo.com
and you will be emailed a pdf.