



AN ONLINE LITERARY JOURNAL

Edited by Francesca Lia Block and Linda Davis

Fiction, Non-Fiction, Poetry

LIT ANGELS #7: HIGH NOTES

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Diamond in the Rough



By Jessamyn Violet

Jayne Payne sneered and kissed their middle fingers at the crowd, then drew a heart in the air with them. It was their way to say *fuck you, love you* to fans. They'd just rubbed us raw with their sandpaper soul while singing for the last two hours. Their fingers moved over their shaved head as they looked out at us with simmering glee, like they knew a secret that could potentially destroy us all.

Jayne Payne could fill stadiums with that look. Still, they'd only play pop-up shows in small clubs around New York, sometimes announcing them a few hours beforehand to keep the crowds down. We all had our own theories of how Jayne did their infamous stunt onstage, how they managed to levitate off the ground with those giant black feathered wings that pop up out of nowhere. The stunt seemed impossible to pull off at tiny venues. We'd stare for the strings. But Jayne was too slippery for webs. They didn't tell anyone their secrets. They'd rarely tell anyone anything that could be taken seriously at all.

In accordance with that, Jayne Payne was a notoriously hard shell to crack in an interview. I'd always wanted to land the task. In a world overrun with artifice, AI and algorithms, Jayne seemed like the last real rockstar on the planet. No makeup, no outfits, no social media, no puppy-dog-filters on their face. No fucks given. My editors at *Glitterati USA* had secured an interview against all odds and decided to send me on the assignment. They were dangling a big promotion in front of me.

Alternately, if I didn't get the real scoop, I'd likely be fired. A lot was riding on the night, including my career and my midtown studio apartment. As I got into the awaiting town car that purred out exhaust in the alley behind the venue, I vowed to get the truth about Jayne Payne that night no matter the cost. The real stuff always had a higher price tag, so I hiked up my skirt a little more.

“Ok, time to get down to my level.”

Jayne swung themselves into the vehicle like a rancher getting on a horse. Their hands, rough and calloused, draped over the backseat. They looked at me like I had

no idea what I was in for. I didn't. Their black coveralls were broken-in, and I envied their casual confidence. I'd worn what painfully uncomfortable clothes my editors had suggested. Jayne was supposed to have a weakness for fashion-forward femmes. It all felt a bit *Goldilocks and the Wolf*, if Goldilocks had been more of a calculating sell-out.

"C'mon, Donny, put on some shit and drive," Jayne said, smacking the side of the car like it was a thoroughbred. The driver switched on hardcore rap and we pulled down the alley as The Cave grew smaller in the rearview mirror.

"Where are we headed?" I said, attempting a casual tone. Jayne shot me a look that said *please, bitch*. They pulled out a bottle and uncorked it, offering me first sip.

I smelled something somewhat new and stared at the pretty foreign label.

"Japanese... whiskey?"

"You're quick, you know that?" They retracted the bottle as soon as I reached for it. "Or nope, too slow."

"Where are we going?"

"We don't ask. We just go."

As expected, everything about Jayne Payne threw me off. There was no edit button with them. They seemed uncannily self-aware, self-confident, and secure. They treated the car like it was an animal they had control over. Though they weren't driving, I sort of felt like they were. I sensed what they were capable of convincing me to do and that really shook me, how far from myself I would go to please a stranger. How far from finding myself I still was. I'd never experienced their brand of

acute magnetism before. They oozed mystery and personality, but whenever it seemed like they flashed you a gleam of truth, it would turn out to be just another face of the infinity-sided die that was Jayne Payne. And you just had to keep on rolling.

“We’re going to *Danger*,” they finally said, probably sensing my discomfort.

“That’s where the story begins.”

“Danger?” I echoed lamely, then smiled. “Alright.”

The only article of makeup Jayne Payne wore was lip balm. The brand they used made their lips like mirrors. “*Lips too slick to make you sick*” they sang in their song “Barbie Daggers.” Trails of street lights reflected in their smile as we slowed to a stop. I looked out the window at the miles of abandoned factory warehouses stretched around us. It took a moment to form a guess: Deep, deep Bushwick, maybe even past the line.

Jayne swung open the car door. “Welcome to *Danger*.”

Outside was anyone’s nightmare: Tattered remains of factories, fragments of fallen empires. The type of place where hooded figures hid in shadowy crevices, ready to step out and grab your throat. Seas of pulverized plaster clumped around splintered doorways. Dark windows simpered with broken glass teeth. Sloppy graffiti outlined negative space with crude symbols. Syringes and crushed cans littered the ground. It was all perfect “ruin porn” for any photographer, but we weren’t there to take pictures.

I stared out at the terrorscape, waiting for them to laugh and say they were kidding. The driver got out and lit a cigarette. I asked him for one. My blood boiled—raging fear and uncertainty and no nicotine to squelch it.

“I have some,” Jayne said. “C’mon.”

They took off using a small flashlight they’d apparently been carrying on their person. I hurried to keep up, aware that I was getting a slice of some story that hadn’t been told yet, too hungry for it to hesitate. We dodged caved-in ceilings and exposed rusty piping as I lamented my outfit again. My legs were exposed, and I was wearing heels. Not just any heels, but iconic custom ones my editors had an entire fashion shoot scheduled around the next day. We crossed through a huge room littered with toxic cotton-candy insulation. My heels clacked over the carved-up flooring, catching pink fluff that I kicked off with frustration. Jayne looked back at me. I flipped my scowl to a sunny smile.

We entered a narrow hallway. I shivered. It was getting creepier with every dusty, dark shell of a former room. Still, I held my tongue. We came to a somewhat “working” space, complete with a cleared doorway and a futon on the floor. Vines grew through the cracked warehouse windows. Assorted half-burned candles lined the windowsill. Jayne went over to an old desk in the corner, opened a drawer, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. They tossed me one after taking one for themselves, lit theirs and a candle with the same match, and passed the candle to me to light mine. Then they lit every single candle on the windowsill. As the room illuminated with flickering flames it felt like I was getting to see the most secret of all clubhouses.

“So, this is... your spot?”

“I summer here,” they said with a lightning-fast grin. “Have a seat.”

I couldn't tell if they were kidding, and I didn't know where to sit. Jayne rolled their eyes.

“I thought you'd be a little more rock 'n roll. Aren't you writing about it?”

I stayed quiet and lowered myself onto the frameless futon while trying to keep my legs closed, finally collapsing them to the side. Jayne had already hit me right in my weak spot. The truth was that I'd had plenty of rock star moments in my 20s, but somewhere down the line, I'd tamed. Five years back, you couldn't have paid me to wear the heels. Nothing would have been worth it. Just five years back I was a freelance boss, full of ideas of my singular path to greatness, living in the kitchen cupboard in my friend's Brooklyn studio. Since then, I'd become ensnared in the *Glitterati USA* steady-paycheck trap that tames dreams and spirits fast.

Something stirred from the other side of the futon as I settled into a seated position. A small striped tabby rose from the bunched-up sheet and came over to explore me with a tiny pink nose and big round eyes.

“That's Toast,” Jayne said, sitting down cross-legged on a rug in a corner that seemed like a sort of shrine. They picked up a beat-up black Martin acoustic, dropped their cigarette in a soda bottle ashtray, and started to strum. “She likes the ladies.”

Toast head-butted my arm, purring proof.

“Does Toast... go with you elsewhere in the winter?”

Jayne stopped playing and gave me a look I probably will never forget for the sheer amount of shame it raised in me. They ran their hand over their buzzed head. “Show me a cat that takes orders. Cats choose for themselves. They stay if they want to stay. They go if they want to go.”

I looked around again at the chipping walls, corners filled with cobwebs, desperate to change the subject.

“So, you live here?”

Jayne snickered. “Do you know how long I’ve been writing songs?”

I thought for a moment, then shook my head. I’d only heard unconfirmed rumors. I didn’t even know how old Jayne was. They looked like a music legend. In other words, a perpetual twenty-seven.

“You ever heard the saying, ‘What gets you there, keeps you there?’”

I hadn’t.

“Everything seems to be about beauty, right? Surface-level beauty will always have charm and power, especially over the weak. But the idea that success is determined by how beautiful we and our surroundings are... That’s losing game advice. There will always be someone or someplace more beautiful. Still, people spend so much time and money painting, injecting, and carving their bodies up like it’s the only project that matters. Moving, redecorating, tearing down, renovating spaces to live in. None of it actually matters. Not for fame, not for talent, not even for sex appeal. That scares you, I can tell because you work for a big fashion magazine that revolves around image and you clearly hide behind your hair. Those heels you’re

wearing are man-made torture devices. Can you ignore the pain long enough to have a decent thought?”

I pushed at my hair self-consciously, shifted my throbbing feet. “Not really.”

“I know. So, I obliterate all constructs. Some might call it cult-like or anarchistic, but given the state of mainstream society, I call it common fucking sense. And it keeps me writing songs that don’t suck. These days artists break young, change everything about themselves, listen to uncreative assholes, make bad decisions, and wonder where their ‘gift’ went. Well, maybe it isn’t a gift. Maybe creativity is on loan. Maybe it sticks around for the people who remain humble. I was born a penniless queer in the projects. When I sit here, I feel myself feeding off the destruction and demolition. I breathe it, I live it, and I write it. This is where I come up with nearly all my songs because creativity is earned through purity of intention and applied pressure, like the strict, specific elements needed to form diamonds.”

“I like that theory.”

“I like diamonds/ Diamonds are tough/ Yeah, you know I like/ My diamonds in the rough,” they spoke/sang, perfectly quoting their own (hit) song “Diamond in the Rough.”

It was fascinating, and as I took a moment to look around while wondering if it was true, I spotted a few stacks of books in another corner that looked like serious reading. I wanted to check out the titles but didn’t get up. “How long have you been coming here?”

“Since I was twelve,” Jayne said, their voice getting huskier. Dark eyes sparkled in the candlelight. Something shadowy passed in them.

“Really? Why?”

“Needed to get out of the house.”

I wondered if I should push, figured I had nothing to lose.

“Was it unsafe?”

“Natalie Jackson’s mother wasn’t safe,” they said, eerily switching to third person, using their birth name, and speaking in a robotic-sounding voice. “When Natalie began to go through *the changes*, Natalie’s drug addict mother peddled out ‘one-on-one’ time with her child in their bedroom for cash.”

I let the silence hang for a minute. There was nothing to say except *I’m so sorry*, but it felt like they specifically didn’t want to hear that.

“That’s horrifying,” I finally said.

“Yeah, well, there’s only one way I can see it: All that gave birth to Jayne Payne. At least this place gives me a spot to disappear to.”

I couldn’t believe they were volunteering this much information. Unless it was all a well-orchestrated lie like their previous interviews had been. They’d been an army brat, they’d been an orphan, they’d been adopted by circus people. This felt so real, though, I didn’t want to say anything in case Jayne would say more. Would they go to the trouble to plant the cat, set the whole scene up? There was no telling, but it certainly felt authentic. They had me pegged, but I was far from feeling the same about them. I felt exposed and silly and didn’t know how to hide it. If this was the

truth about their history, it was even more miraculous they'd gotten to where they were today. But how could I know for sure?

Jayne squinted at me as if deciding something, then got up and approached me, extending their hand. After a moment I took it and shakily stood up. They were a couple of inches taller than me, even with my terrible heels. I realized I was holding my breath. They were so striking up close. I stared at their long natural lashes, fierce cheekbones, the tiny scar on their chin. They put their hands on my shoulders and ran them slowly down my arms. I swear, I felt heat everywhere, like they were lighting me on fire, and I couldn't move or hardly breathe. I didn't want them to stop. Then they turned abruptly, blowing out all the candles in one impressive, practiced move.

“Okay. Let's go to *Wild Child*.”

I stood there for a moment in the dark room. Then I followed them out.

I didn't bother asking where *Wild Child* was. I'd grasped that Jayne didn't favor foreshadow. Part of the psychological dynamic that was unfolding in this strange version of an interview was that I was powerless the entire time. Asking questions was futile. Jayne would divulge exactly what they wanted to, when and how they wanted to, and all I could do was shut up and listen. Even then, a stressful part I was also straddling was that my editors had agreed to a non-recorded interview. I was supposed to reconstruct all the details from memory. It was the only way Jayne would agree to do the piece. That meant Jayne had ultimate veto power across the board,

and everyone knew it. Payne had all the power. They not only owned it but commanded it. *Power* worked for *them*.

We hurtled through the city streets towards an unknown destination, sipping Japanese whiskey to gangsta rap. It felt like a fun abduction, almost. They stared at the outside world as if challenging reality just by existing. I sat there watching strips of streetlight pass over their face. Jayne didn't mind. They knew they were enchanting. They looked like they were a perfectly crafted cocktail of every nationality on the planet, the force of every single bloodline pumping simultaneously within them.

Jayne Payne was a gangster without a gang.

The car stopped and they immediately swung the door open to the back of another warehouse. This one wasn't abandoned, but it was dark and darker out there in the alley. I didn't bother guessing which part of the city it was as I climbed out. I'd settled into the assignment's groove and was attempting to roll with it. The warm whiskey courage helped. I stood there, calm as I could be in the broken dumpster alley as Jayne danced around in anticipation. The driver knocked on an unmarked door as he lit another cigarette.

A small window slid open. Jayne turned around and spanked their ass at it.

"I know that ass." The door opened and the man inside looked like he low-key used to be a gladiator. Bursting biceps in shirt sleeves, bulging veins in thick neck.

"Hey, Jayne-y."

Jayne gave him a peck on the cheek and swung through the heavy curtains beyond him, not bothering to introduce me or wait. I nodded uncertainly and he laughed.

“Good luck keeping up,” he said.

I hurried through the curtains and was stopped short by the sight before me. It was like a secret Wonderland. Giant flowers spit dry ice from the walls and ceilings down onto the dance floor. My eyes swung past booties swinging glowing hula hoops, people in nooks doing bumps or making out. There was a bar to one side that was a neon masterpiece. I scanned the crowd for shaved heads and while finding several, none belonged to the one – the *only* – Jayne Payne.

There was a hallway to the side of the bar marked by a lit blue arrow. I took a chance on it. The hallway was lined with fake grass and lit with little lightning-bug lights hanging from the ceiling. It was the kind of hallway you wanted to hang in for a while. Jayne was in there talking to identical twins with spiky dark hair and glittery black eyeliner. Something tugged at my gut. They saw me.

“These are the twins,” Jayne said.

The twins stared at me, and I stared back. They didn’t smile so I didn’t smile. I kind of hated them. Was I jealous? I couldn’t tell. I looked away, focusing instead on Jayne’s earlobe. They had a ripped earring hole, a little jagged tear in their earlobe. I wanted to touch it.

Jayne finally broke the silence. “Drinks.”

I followed them to the bar. Glowing planets hung above, rotating ever-so-slowly. The bartender looked like he put acid in the drinks. For some reason, I distrusted nearly everyone there. I'd been to crazy parties before, but this was on another level—a creepier one. Jayne put a hand on my arm and again tiny flames raked my nervous system.

“So, I can drink,” Jayne said.

“So can I.”

“I meant I can drink you under the table.”

“I don't want to know what's under the tables, here.”

“Well, at least try to keep up for a little.”

We grabbed cocktails that glowed highlighter yellow in the blacklight. I didn't ask what they were. Not asking questions was a hard condition to work with in an interview. They pointed to what looked like a cushion-lined spaceship in the corner. As we walked over, I felt giddy. Just as quickly, I dropped into fear. Someone called Jayne's name as we were sitting down and they left me staring woefully after them, painfully lost and trying not to suck down my drink too fast.

Warning: From this point on, the story gets fuzzy. There were cruel slices of stares. A bouncy bad-vibes guy wearing small sunglasses who wouldn't stop touching Jayne. Men, women, and twins lobbying for their attention. Talk of exes. I'm pretty sure they said their last serious partner died while running with the bulls in Spain a couple years ago. No one worth mentioning since. Stupidly, I asked about dating apps, to which they responded (somewhat iconically) “I am driven by a force much

greater than algorithms.” Damn, that was hot. Three or four more glowing cocktails, I lost count. Jayne could drink but didn’t touch drugs because they’d never heard a drug story that wasn’t the same as all the other drug stories; in other words—*cliché and sad*. They said they weren’t addicted to money either. Or women.

I didn’t believe anything they said by this point.

I felt tricked. All we’d managed to do was have a few frequently interrupted conversations while getting me in prime shape to be... well, sloshed and seduced. Except I knew instinctively that no plush orgy bed awaited us. So, what then? Why was this all happening? Jayne Payne took my hand and stroked it. I will never forget a single time they touched me. “This is what a terrarium of fame looks like. A ridiculous dimension in which everyone’s an emotionally troubled teenager. They think—”

“Stop!” I remember interrupting. “Wait! I’m not going to remember all this!”

The precipitous look they gave me seared itself deep in a place beyond the neon cocktails.

“You’ll remember.”

I felt their hand press hot and high up on my thigh, a burning punctuation to their point.

What can I say? My brain obeyed Jayne Payne without running things by me first. The city streets sang gritty romance to us as we tumbled out of the unmarked club. I remember some pushing and shoving, flirting by all other terms, in the alley. Another bouncer got pissy. Maybe we were getting too rough. Maybe he was jealous.

“I was more of a man at 15 than you’ll ever be,” Jayne sneered at him. We all knew it was true. They shoved me through the open town car door and tumbled in beside me.

“Take us to *Pain*.” That was all they had to say. The world was wobbling. I clung to an open window, ready to use it as a toilet at any given moment. Jayne rubbed my stomach through my shirt; slow, concise, circular movements that magically cured my spins. I felt taken care of and roughed up at the same time.

Never more alive, though.

We eventually pulled to a stop, and I looked up at the Brooklyn Bridge, masterfully lit against the dull gray black of a light-polluted sky. Then, the bridge started to look threatening. I showed Jayne my fear. They nodded and opened the car door.

“Follow me.”

I must have, because next thing I knew, I was climbing up onto the iron beam parallel to the walkway with Jayne as my fearless leader.

“Did you know that today is our birthday?” they said amicably.

I shook my head, keeping my eyes on them, trying not to look down. Jayne walked calmly in bare feet across a beam (*when had they taken off their shoes?*), the black water churning far below. Their feet were so sure of themselves, just like the rest of them. Me, though—I clung to the metal caging, feeling the bumpiness of the rusty old bolts beneath my high heels. *The murderous million-dollar shoes...*

“Happy birthday?” I offered weakly.

“It’s *your* birthday, too.”

“No, it’s not,” I said, though not entirely sure. The New York skyline tipped before me as cool air rushed up my mini skirt. I gripped the beam as tightly as I could without cutting through my own skin. I didn’t want to argue with them. Their edge was so sharp it was like a blade to my face all the time.

Jayne ran a hand over their head as they looked at me. “This is your return,” they said. “It’s a big one for you. You haven’t made your peace with death yet.”

My fingers were practically numb from gripping so hard, so I guess I hadn’t.

“Do we have to die to do that?”

“Each time we face death, new life begins,” they explained. “So, today is our birthday.”

I was paralyzed in their cerebral clutches. What did they want me to do? Talk them out of it? Jump with them?

“Jayne,” I pleaded weakly. “Please. Let’s just call it a night.”

They tilted their head back and laughed. “C’mon, what’s one little jump? One little leap to say *fuck you, death*. I swear, only then can you see who you really are. Some people go their whole lives without seeing that. This is my gift to you. Be open to it.”

I was frozen in fright. The city night swirled around me in a streamy, light-traily soup. I wasn’t ready to die for the truth behind Jayne Payne. Or myself, for that matter.

And yet, my brain/mouth betrayed me. “Fine.”

Jayne nodded. “On the count of three, okay?”

I closed my eyes. The rush I got just from being up on the beam already felt like a full force *fuck you* to everything. Maybe they were right. Maybe I needed to see who I really was. Maybe I'd forgotten, or maybe I'd never really known. They didn't start counting down, though, so I opened my eyes. Jayne had moved right next to me and was staring at me so intently that I startled and keeled over.

Falling—falling *really fast*, is like time travel. The seconds stretch and retract like entire years going by. The wind pushed up around me as if to try and stop the inevitable. I saw myself, a thin, erasable outline of myself, and my life, my echo-y, hall-of-mirrors life, and it was not enough. I was not enough. As I waited for the cold water to crush me with its liquid surface, the abyss called out to me like an old friend. I didn't want to answer. I didn't want to die, but at the same time, I'd never been more aware of all I'd already killed in the process of living the way I had been.

But instead of freezing water I was caught by strong arms. We hovered over the surface, Jayne's oil-black feathered wings in full bloom. I had never seen anyone or anything so spectacular in all my life. My heels were even still intact, dangling from my feet on bare legs that were slung over the supernatural rock star.

“Well? Who are you?” Jayne demanded.

“I'm not enough of who I want to be,” I said after a moment. “I have left the things that matter to me behind in order to advance in a way that I don't actually agree with.”

Jayne started ascending back up to the bridge.

“See? You're reborn, now. Knew you were worth catching.”

Had there been others? Others who hadn't been caught?

My heart was flitting against my ribcage as I sucked in a breath and dared to ask the question absolutely everyone wanted to know: "Who are *you*?"

They looked at me and I saw flickering deep within their eyes.

"I thought I just showed you. I'm the dark angel of rock n' roll."

And just like that, the truth of Jayne Payne was no longer a question to me.

They were a miracle of mad truths. They were a screaming storm of the clearest rain.

They made me want their kind of ultimate freedom more than I wanted anything.

They made me want to return to my teenage dreams of being a writer of the kind of stuff you had to really fight to get paid for.

I knew something else: I wasn't going to get there at the *Glitterati USA* office.

The next day, I told my editors that Jayne had told me nothing fit to print.

There was no way I was giving them the story. It would be the equivalent of selling both of our souls, and I couldn't let them do that to us.

"What about the heels?" one of the editors asked.

I pulled them out of my backpack and put them on the desk. He picked up one and examined it, revealing a tiny scuff on the bottom. He frowned at me.

"Yeah, you're fired," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and went home to start my life over again.

Jessamyn Violet is a writer and musician living in Venice Beach, CA. Originally from Massachusetts, she graduated with a BFA in Writing, Literature and Publishing from Emerson College. She went on to earn an MFA in Creative Writing from California College of the Arts. She's published a book of poetry called *Organ Thieves* (Gauss PDF, 2017) as well as short stories in *Ploughshares*, *Adelaide*, *3 Elements*, and more. Her debut novel is *Secret Rules to Being a Rockstar* (Three Rooms Press, April 2023). She is also the drummer for the band Movie Club. For more info, you can visit www.jessamynviolet.com

A CONCEPT ALBUM ABOUT



By Elizabeth Barker

Sometimes when Gabe disappeared for too long I'd open my phone and start texting him elaborate love letters about what he'd left behind, but I never actually sent them. Part of the problem was I couldn't properly illustrate everything I had to tell him. I needed an emoji of a sea anemone and an artichoke flower and one of those poppies that look just like fried eggs, plus a guava pastelito and a mangonada with a fat tamarind straw. A witch on a broomstick (me) and a wild pony with a

tattoo of a rose (him). I wanted a new version of the wine emoji, where you could press and hold and select a glass of white or pink or the Blue Hawaiian flavor of Boone's Farm. And then a new version of the manicure emoji where you could choose different colors of nail polish, ideally infinite colors, all the way up to iridescent teal and zebra print and neon yellow and gray.

Or jungle-green, which was Gabe's ex-girlfriend's nail color, which I knew before I even met him. Her name was Valerie and she'd been famous for a year or two: she made a record and put it out herself and the songs got around—all the way from Los Angeles to the city I grew up in, a perfect diagonal across the whole country. A record label re-released the album and I bought it on a drizzly afternoon in January, on a break from the store where I worked selling \$100 candles in nonexistent scents like "cashmere." The album cover was a photo of a girl lying on her back on an unmade twin bed in the middle of a vacant lot, her head hanging over the bedside and her long black hair tangled up in the weeds and wildflowers growing up from the ground. She had on a seafoam-green nightgown with the sleeves torn off and big black boots with the laces untied, and wore mood rings on three of her fingers. When you opened the gatefold, it revealed that the lot sat beside the onramp to a freeway jammed with cars; the sky overhead was a scuzzy pink and smudged with clouds. I'd never been to Los Angeles, but I knew that picture held some truth about L.A. that no other picture or movie or magazine photo had ever captured before.

That night I listened to Valerie's record three times in a row, on the floor by the space heater in my bedroom. Her voice was sleepy and silvery, and she sang about flowers that could bite, flowers with eyes, flowers who'd evolved to invent their own language and mythology and dance crazes. Sometimes there were no drums, sometimes the drums hit like a house falling from the sky and slamming straight into the ground. Her guitar was skulky like a spider creeping across a windowpane, or bright like lightning lighting up a haunted attic; it was car crashes and cat scratches. My favorite song had a bassline like a snake and guitar like buzzing bees, and the lyrics were about bees too: a story of bees gaining supernatural powers so that the flowers bloomed everywhere and overtook her entire city. It put pictures in my head, like hot-pink roses swallowing buildings whole, or daisies sprouting up from the floor in the grocery-store cereal aisle. I had an old drawing pad from school somewhere in my closet and thought about digging it out, but instead I just kept lying there and letting the songs make movies in my brain.

By the time I finally moved to Los Angeles, two and a half years later, Valerie had vanished from the world—she canceled a big tour after three shows and broke up with her label and shelved her second record. She deleted herself from the internet but there were still little pieces of treasure to find, like an interview where she talked about her favorite places in Los Angeles. The first day I got there I went to the park she'd mentioned and took at least a hundred pictures of flowers whose names I didn't know, feeling like I'd landed on an imaginary planet.

I moved to L.A. in the middle of the summer, two weeks after my 24th birthday. In September I went to a party with three of my roommates and wore a T-shirt I'd made with the name of one of Valerie's songs, spelled out in snakes and bees and petals and fruit. I was drinking a beer under a massive cloud of jasmine in somebody's backyard when a very tall boy with wild green eyes came up to me and stopped and pointed like he was challenging me to a dance-off or a duel. "Where'd you get that shirt?" he asked. His own T-shirt was black with "L.A." in royal purple, but the "A" was the anarchy sign. I told him I'd silk-screened it and he nodded and smiled, showing off a chipped front tooth. "I like it," he said. "I like the bees. That song's my favorite."

The boy sat down beside me and told me his name was Gabe and he'd known Valerie forever. "We grew up together, kind of," he said. She'd been best friends with his older cousin Nina who always got stuck babysitting him; he'd first met her when he was ten and Valerie was thirteen. They all grew up in the Valley, in a faraway place called Reseda.

"What was she like when she was thirteen?" I asked. The whole thing seemed impossible, but he had a mood ring on his right ring finger and a tattoo of a pink rose on his wrist.

"The same way she always was—a big genius, super-spacey. Obsessed with David Bowie and that movie *Xanadu*. She always had her hair in her eyes, it drove my mom crazy," he said, and tugged at his own hair. It was the same crow-feathery color

and texture as Valerie's, but Gabe's fell just below his chin and the ends were jagged like someone had hacked it with a jackknife.

I asked where she was now and he twitched his shoulders and looked away, looked up at the sky like he was consulting the moon. "Beats me," he said. "I haven't seen her in forever. At least a year or something. Not since she left for that tour." He pointed at my empty bottle and asked if I wanted another, then jumped up and grabbed us two cans of Tecate from the ice-filled kiddie pool at the edge of the yard. As he walked back to me, I noticed everybody watched him like he was famous too.

Gabe sat back down and we drank our beers and I told him how I'd listened to Valerie's album every morning on the bus to my dumb candle job, willing myself to move to Los Angeles.

"And it worked!" he said, and high-fived me. "You like it here?"

"I do. I like it so much."

"Why? I mean, what do you like about it?"

"I like how there's all these giant flower blobs everywhere," I said. It was the first thing that came into my head, and I didn't feel the need to say anything smarter. "Like this one," I told him, pointing to the jasmine above us. "They're like these crazy sculptures, or monsters from outer space. But, like, benevolent monsters. Monsters that're great big sweetie pies."

"Yeah, man," he said. "I like that too. That's a relief—if you were all, 'I mostly just moved here 'cause I've got this idea for a screenplay,' I don't think we could be friends."

“Are we friends?” I asked.

“Yeah, obviously,” he said, rolling his eyes. “We love all the same weird shit.”

A pack of girls appeared and one pulled on Gabe’s sleeve, telling him it was time to go. He told them he’d catch up and turned to me and handed me his phone. “Do the thing,” he said, and I added myself to his contacts with a hibiscus beside my name. When I woke up the next morning I saw that he’d texted me at 4:30 a.m., a photo of a bus-sized bougainvillea puff shot in garish flash. “Pretty good blob,” he’d typed. I responded with three beating hearts and saved the photo on my phone, in a new album I named “flowers from outer space.”

The first time we hung out Gabe skateboarded over to my apartment from the place he was crashing a few streets over. It was a Saturday afternoon and we walked down to the park and drank the bottle of bad champagne I’d stuffed in my bag and shared a big plastic cup of mango and watermelon and pineapple soaked in chili-lime salt. Gabe told me stories about Valerie, who he always called Val, like how when he was younger she’d played him music like Siouxsie and the Banshees and *Hejira* and the Shangri-Las and shown him *Suspiria* and *Valley Girl* and *Faerie Tale Theatre*. Sometimes when his cousin Nina was babysitting, she and Valerie would take him out driving way past his bedtime. They’d drive from his apartment to Malibu Canyon and listen to their dark dreamy music and smoke cigarettes and talk about things he assumed all teenage girls talked about all the time: shapeshifting, astral projection,

the magical properties of calendula and juniper. One night when he was 16 and his mom wasn't home she showed up at his apartment and asked to use the bathtub, then spent the whole night recording on a four-track with the green guitar she'd bought at a yard sale when she was twelve. She came over and did the same thing again three nights in a row, and a few weeks later gave him a tape with all the songs she's made, including one with his name in the first verse.

"We had this thing for a while," he told me when the sky started turning that scuzzy pink.

"What kind of thing?"

"Like a *thing*, you know. A love thing or whatever."

"An affair?"

"Eww, what? No. We just fooled around a while, a few months maybe. I guess I was her boyfriend for like five seconds. It was right around when everything started to blow up. I think it made her feel normal to hang around me—she really hated all that shit. Like, the magazines and having to explain her songs to people."

"Is that why she quit everything?" I was still stuck on their love thing, jealous of them both but also sad that it hadn't worked out.

"I guess. She never talked to me about it. She canceled that tour and came home and took off again and didn't tell any of us where she was going. She always said she wanted to live in Angeles Forest and hang out with mountain lions. Maybe that's where she is."

On the walk back to my apartment I told Gabe how one night my last summer at home, I'd driven around my city late at night, listening to Valerie's record and saying goodbye to everything. It had been a Sunday night and the streets were empty. In the middle of downtown I saw a coyote run through the crosswalk. "I never even knew there were coyotes where I'm from," I said. "She must have summoned him or something."

"Bananas," said Gabe.

"Yeah, it really was."

"No, I mean—there's some bananas," he said, pointing toward a palm tree outside the liquor store, a fat bunch of green fruit hanging from one of its branches. "Or maybe they're plantains, I can't ever tell."

"That's so cool," I said. "I walk past here all the time and I never even noticed that."

"Pay more attention, dude!" he said and sighed, shaking his head like I was his lazy student. "Don't be one of those people who's got no idea what's happening right in front of them. Bananas will save your soul."

After that day we were together all the time. Gabe would come over and we'd walk down to the hamburger stand near my apartment and eat egg sandwiches with big icy Cokes, or take the bus downtown and walk along the part of the L.A. River they'd used for Thunder Road in *Grease*, or I'd drive us out to the sea caves at El Matador or to the Santa Monica Pier to play skee-ball. We ate shrimp and rice out of

coconuts stuck with cocktail umbrellas, hot cherry pies from the McDonald's on the PCH in Malibu, pineapple empanadas from the bakery on my block, a banana split sundae from the diner where Valerie had worked as a waitress. We never had much money and Gabe didn't believe in faking like we did. Everything we did was free or very cheap, and we took pride in not participating in the dominant economy of our neighborhood (highbrow coffee, luxury juices, eighteen-dollar glasses of wine that barely got you buzzed).

One hot Saturday night in October Gabe took me to the still-vacant lot where they'd shot the cover for Valerie's record. I made him wait while I took a thousand pictures of the wildflowers, shot in forced perspective to make them look as big as buildings. Before I'd moved to L.A. I'd never really cared about flowers, but now they hypnotized me. I'd get caught up in their crazy opulence and speak whatever floated into my head, like how *dappled* was such a cute adjective for the way the sunlight hit the petals in hazy little patches. "I can't believe *dappled* is a word," I told him as we left the lot and walked back home. He repeated it in a whisper and made his face serious, like it was an important observation. I liked that he didn't poke fun or ask me a rude and boring question like, "Are you stoned or something?" I hated it when people confused being fascinated with being stoned. Like it was impossible to be enchanted by the world on its own. "I like how you never mistake my fascination for stonedness," I told Gabe then, and he shrugged like it was nothing.

For a while there was kissing but then the kissing stopped. Right around when I got used to him being in my bed all the time, Gabe showed up at my door one

morning and sat me down on the front steps, exhaled very grandly and said, “I’m not really good at all that boyfriend-y stuff. Sorry—I probably should’ve told you that like three months ago.” I held it against him for a while, punished him by pretending I’d lost interest in doing things like buying churros from the churro cart and then walking around our neighborhood for hours without really going anywhere. But not too long afterward I fell for someone else, and when that crashed and burned Gabe became something different to me, someone safer and sweeter: my egg-sandwich buddy, skee-ball rival, my brother, or angel or whatever he was meant to be all along. I never knew how to explain us to my friends and I never really tried. I wanted us to make no sense, like a flower so ornate it was totally over the top. Like one of those passionfruit flowers that grew in the hedges outside my apartment building, with the frazzled tendrils and bright purple petals and the klutzy little stamens sticking out from the center, as if the flower got bonked on the head and went *boi--oi-oi-oing!* I wanted us to be like that.

But sometimes Gabe disappeared, and I was back to being exasperated. I’d go weeks without hearing from him, my texts answered only with a single playing-card heart emoji. Then he’d reappear and say things like, “Oh—I was hanging out with some people at this party downtown and we decided to drive out to the desert at like five in the morning ‘cause someone knew someone who’s got a yurt in Joshua Tree, and then I ended up staying ten days or something. It was cool. I saw a rattlesnake and a road runner. I brought you back some dates.” The first three or four times he went away I faked like it didn’t bother me, but I made myself tell the truth after he

came back from a week in Big Sur, where he'd gone camping with some girls he'd met at his old job bar backing at a flashy restaurant downtown.

"It freaks me out when you go away and I don't know where you are," I told him. He'd shown up that afternoon at my job, another store that sold expensive candles but also empowerment-feminism-themed tarot decks and fragrance mists formulated to attract abundance and harness the energy of the moon. He'd brought me a jade stone he'd found on the beach, craggy and heavy and shiny as an emerald.

"I was hanging out with the gray whales," he said, and nudged the stone closer to me across the counter. "They said to say hey."

"I'm serious. It's shitty not to say goodbye."

"Okay, I know, I'm sorry. I promise I'll always say goodbye."

How about you just never go away again at all? is what I wanted to ask, but I knew it wasn't fair. You couldn't hold people back from leaving if they wanted to be somewhere else. I knew that from leaving home. You had to let them go wherever they felt called, and hope that it ended up being good for their heart and for your heart too.

When Gabe wasn't around I went out more. I spent more time doing normal things like going to parties or bars or shows in warehouses and backyards. Sometimes it was exciting—there'd be someone good to kiss, or I'd end up in the perfect little gang of people who all had the same idea of what fun felt like, and we'd go off and do something stupid and extraordinary enough to keep me full of a giddy energy for at

least a few days. Like the night I was hanging out with the girls from the apartment next door and we ended up at the house of a boy whose dad played bass in some big-deal band from the 70s, and the boy had a heated pool with a slide and lights that changed from purple to pink to blue, and we all went swimming at three in the morning then stayed up drinking wine coolers on the chaise lounges till dawn. That night I got home sometime after eight but I was still wired and went for a walk around the neighborhood, stopped for a coffee and a coconut donut and kept walking. On one of the side streets near the donut shop there was a staircase, six flights leading up from the sidewalk to the street that ran parallel. I climbed the top and took in the chaotic swath of land that ran alongside the stairs: great big gobs of poppies and jasmine and bougainvillea, a banana tree and a lemon tree, a tree whose flowers were frilly pink trumpets, a cluster of those skinny orange flowers that just looked like Cheetos. The ground was littered with fallen palm leaves and candy wrappers and crushed cigarette packs, smashed lemons and bottle caps and bougainvillea petals. I took out my phone and started texting Gabe, who was off in the desert again with some girls who were all in a band and playing a show at the saloon in Pioneertown. I told him how I'd found a secret cave full of pink trumpets and Cheeto flowers and BANANAS, and even the trash was magnificent and the light made cool patterns on the overgrown grass. *Dappled as fuck*, I typed, wishing you could italicize words in text. I stopped and reread it all then closed my phone without sending the text. Sentences typed on phones were ugly and completely lacking in

grandeur—the font was bland and sans serif, even all my imagined emojis couldn't make it beautiful enough. I wanted to be like Valerie and invent my own planet.

One morning at the start of my third springtime in L.A., Gabe called and told me he was leaving town for a while. Some of his friends had opened a bar in a beach town in Mexico, and Gabe was going down there to crash with them and bartend. “I’m just gonna check it out for a bit,” he said. “I need a change of scene. Maybe I’ll turn into one of those guys who fishes at the beach. You know those guys?”

“I know those guys, yeah,” I said. My heart had gone heavy and I wanted to tell him not to leave again. I had a feeling he’d stay away much longer this time, but I made my voice bright and happy. “You’ll make a great fisherman. Go catch a tiger shark.”

The day before he left Gabe came over late in the afternoon to say goodbye. I’d bought a new drawing pad and started making pictures of my secret cave and thought of giving him one, but I wasn’t ready yet. My favorite brush pens were expensive and I was still missing a few colors; I needed a show-offy magenta for the bougainvillea and a soft pale green for the unripe bananas. For now I liked spending hours in my room trying to make everything as alive and strange as it felt in my head. I hadn’t drawn anything in a long time and I’d forgotten how it felt to devote yourself to something so small, how it simultaneously shut out the rest of the world out and filled you with some kind of warm electricity that made you feel connected to everything.

For Gabe's going-away present I gave him a picture I'd printed of that banana tree lit up in the liquor-store neon under a lavish full moon, plus a box of the marzipan-style peanut candies with the red rose on the package. "They probably have those candies in Mexico, but hey," I said. We were sitting on my front steps, eating tacos from the taco truck down the street.

"I got something for you too," Gabe said, then unzipped the backpack he'd brought along and pulled out a neon-yellow Walkman.

"Oh, cool," I said, taking it from him. "I think I had this same one in sixth grade."

"Open it," he said, rolling his eyes. "The important part's inside."

I pressed eject and pulled out the tape, a blank Memorex cassette decorated with stickers of shooting stars. "What is it?" I asked, although I already knew. My stomach buzzed and I could feel my whole face light up.

"It's one of those tapes Val made at my mom's house," Gabe said, reaching into his backpack again. He pulled out a Vons bag and handed that to me too. There were six more tapes inside. "I think that's all of them," he said. "The one with the cat stickers on it? That's my favorite. It's a concept album about the feral cats that lived in the alley behind her apartment. Like *Cats* meets *Hounds of Love*."

"Why are you giving all these to me?" I sorted through the tapes and saw that some had handwritten labels. One was called *Musa x Paradisiaca*, another was *Little Caesars Skater Boys*. Even her cursive was transcendent.

"Because—you need to keep them safe."

“Are these your only copies? What if I lose them?”

“You won’t. You obviously won’t.”

“Okay. Yeah, you’re right, I won’t.” I stacked the tapes in a neat pile inside the bag then set it aside. “Who else has these?”

“Hardly anyone. My cousin. A few of her other friends. Some of the songs are from when she was like 14. It’s pretty crazy. There’s some really good shit in there. It’s like buried treasure or something.”

“Why’s it all on tapes?”

“I don’t know, man,” he said, giving me one of his twitchy shrugs. “I guess she’s into ancient technologies. Who knows why she does anything?”

Gabe stayed a while and we drank some beer and lit some sparklers I’d saved from a friend’s New Year’s Eve party. When it was time to leave I kissed his cheek, and he kissed my forehead and we held onto each other for a long time. “I’m barely going anywhere. It’s just Mexico—it’s right over there,” Gabe said, and gestured across the street, in the direction of the bakery where a rooster lived in back and patrolled the sidewalk every morning.

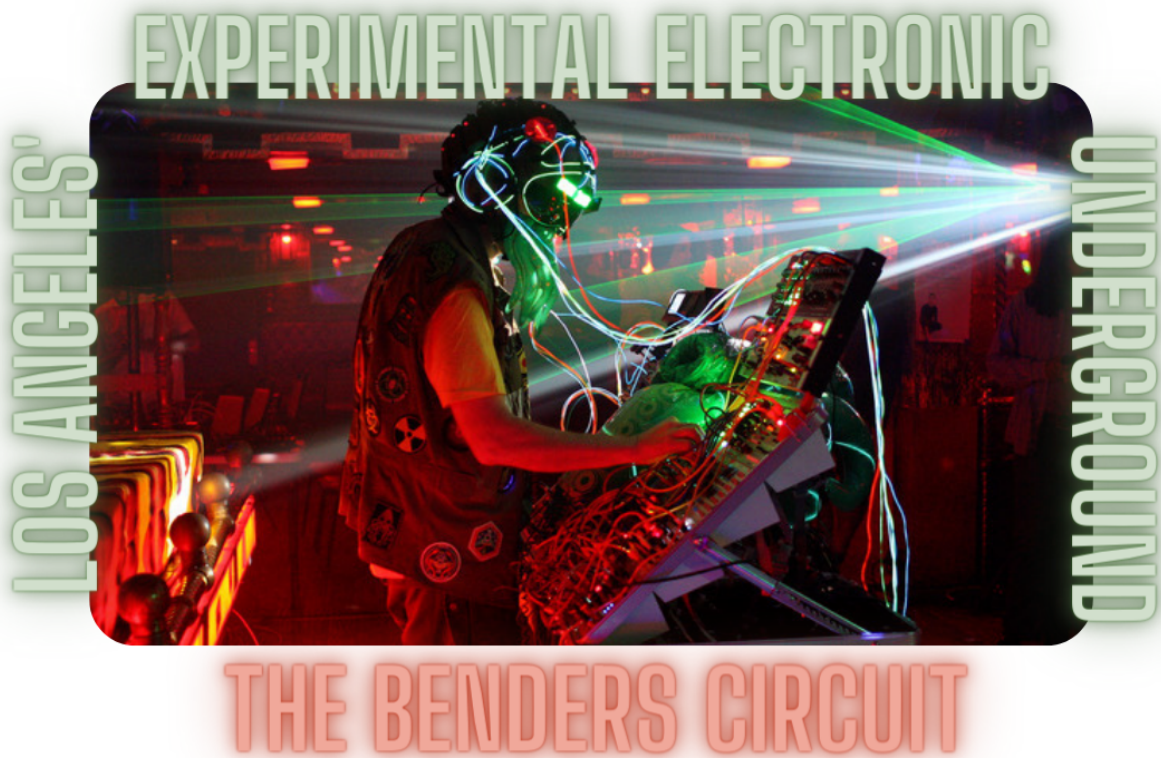
And then he was gone, and I was alone with my Walkman and my pile of tapes. Instead of going back inside I walked down to the street and headed toward my staircase, right in time for magic hour to scatter its perfect light all over everything. When I got there I climbed to the top and sat on the highest step and slid on my headphones and pressed play on the feral-cat tape. The first song was slow and rumbling, creeping along on a jittery riff scratched out on Valerie’s yard-sale guitar.

Her voice was higher and sweeter but when she screamed it was brutal—I could feel it in my throat. I wondered if she had the guitar now, if she was still writing songs and if she'd ever share them with anyone. I wondered if you could see the world in the same wild way even if you had no intention of making something out of it.

Halfway through the first side I had a new picture in my head, my secret cave made into even more of a wonderland. There were way more fruit trees, papaya and peach and pomegranate, and a little crop of artichokes left unpicked so that they sprouted those screwy purple flowers. There was a tire swing and a disco-ball piñata hanging from the pink trumpet tree, an elegant stone fountain for all the local bees to drink from, a colony of feral cats and a nice little hutch for them to live in. A patch of grass modeled after the Lollipop Woods in Candy Land, but all the lollipops were those hunks of mango candy smothered in chili salt. And a tree trunk carved with the words *Gabe Loves Val 4Eva* inside a lopsided heart, written in swoopy cursive. All the flowers were lit up like when you photographed them with flash, and the sky showed every phase of the moon, and the picture itself would be scratch-n-sniff: jasmine-scented, or banana-scented, guaranteed to never fade.

The longer I listened, the more impossible the picture became. It wasn't a magic planet; it was an untended scrap of land near a strip-mall donut shop. I hoped we'd all have a gorgeous party there someday.

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BY PAUL HANEY

Even prior to the 2020 COVID pandemic upending nightlife throughout Los Angeles, the surreptitious networks linking people searching beyond the conventions of music and sound were in a perpetual state of flux. Such is the natural precariousness of operating in a stridently do-it-yourself dynamic that explicitly circumvents the hierarchical corporatization that dominates the entertainment

options and tastes of most cities across the nation. Pop-up venues operate with tacitly-divulged addresses, whispers that evade the red-tape through which one must usually maneuver to achieve legitimacy. Undermining the authority of official channels, these concealed spaces are left unremittingly vulnerable to debilitating retaliation from law enforcement, city hall, and other powers that be. One clandestine venue is shuttered and just as soon another is established for the revolution to perpetuate in our boros continuum.

The five episodes that comprise the docu-series *The Benders Circuit*, filmed over the course of around a half decade, celebrate a scene that's found habitation in bygone artist-run institutions in Los Angeles like Il Corral and Mata, alongside tenacious survivors like Coaxial and The Handbag Factory, and gives voice to the countless musicians, artists, and patrons responsible for nurturing an outlet for artistry that subverts orthodoxy at every turn. After viewing the series, it becomes unthinkable to overstate the level of dedication and endurance required to ensure transmission of these nonconformist sonics.

While taking its name from the practice of "circuit-bending," a process that involves its practitioner reconfiguring the interior circuits and electronics in battery-powered devices, often archaic toys or other simplistic objects made to generate sound, so that the resulting modulations produced will differ radically and obtusely from the product's original intent, the series casts a net over a more disparate array of progressive electronic approaches. Whether striving for intentionally punishing and cacophonous noise or otherworldly, beat-driven

euphoria, or something in between, a correlative drive around experimentation and passionately personal expression weaves concurrent throughout these often-overlapping camps.

Filmmakers Angela Izzo and Eric A. Zimmerman met at a party in Los Angeles in 2014 and bonded quickly over comparable experiences in the behind-the-scenes milieu of music as well as a burgeoning curiosity for sounds of the radical and uncompromising which provided the impetus for what would become *The Benders Circuit*.

"I had been directing a lot of music videos in the Chicago Industrial scene, and when I moved out here, another friend of mine who was part of that scene, Adrian Diamond [who performs as Pulsating Cyst, founder of Obfuscated Records] was doing some early noise and circuit bending shows at Il Corral and The Smell," says Zimmerman, who has directed music videos for Ministry, Nine Inch Nails, KMFDM, Living Colour, Soundgarden, and others.

Adds Izzo, "I was finally making the move to L.A., and I have a history in touring and working with bands, like shooting album covers. It was more guitar-based, 'normal'...and I was searching for something different."

Zimmerman soon suggested they attend a show featuring Pulsating Cyst at the since-shuttered artist-run space Mata.

"We were blown away by everything, and it really gelled that night," Zimmerman says. "We took our cameras and shot some footage. From that point on we were like wow, we have to start [this series]."

The experimental electronic music of the city in all its multifarious designs sees a devotional representation through the run of the series. There's the nebulous and incongruous world of noise, whether the ominous, intensifying, and patient dark drone of the duo Telecaves, the chaotic, often physically turbulent performances of Endometrium Cuntplow, or the dynamically disparate harsh and gorgeous push-pull of Pedestrian Deposit and their reconciliation of electronic bombast and home-built and traditional stringed instrumentation. There's the modular synthesizer community concentrated on building and generating elaborately expanding synthesis. There are also comparatively grounded, yet unconventional projects like Kron and Baseck that foster a restless abnormality within the rhythmic bodies of techno and IDM. Over the course of filming, more overlap and osmosis manifested between these social circles and their deliberate approaches.

"I think a lot of these people support each other and what they're doing and sometimes even hybrid or overlap the music and performance form to incorporate elements of all the subgenres. Ultimately, I think it's very healthy, the cross-pollination that we've seen," Zimmerman observes.

He continues, "I think we're all minorities in terms of these are not mainstream genres. I also think there's a commonality in the ethos of DIY and experimentalism, and it comes with experimentalism that you're going to have people who gravitate towards certain styles but everyone who is in favor of supporting these underground spaces so people can experiment have a common cause. I also think that just inherent in the idea of, say, noise is a multiplicity of it and under noise it can be a lot of

different types of things, that you have many frequencies, many bandwidths, many styles. The experimentalism and the electronic approach bring people together to understand what everyone is trying to do in their own different voice.”

While subcultures of all types, from punk to rave, have often faced uphill struggles for survival against indifferent and unforgiving commercial and bureaucratic realities, the past decade’s often suffocating reliance on the corporatized promotional push of social media has brought about its own set of challenges for independent creators. The algorithmic data-mining abused by advertisers on Facebook and Instagram can often lead to a certain compartmentalization of artistic pathways, a seeming need to define any sort of “newness” within a stifling paradigm of standards while muting the voices of those not willing to pay for visibility. Yet much in the same way that the D.I.Y. approach to fabricating art inherently subverts institutional systems, the artists at the center of the film are more progressed towards a certain alluring obscurity, bringing in an audience solely on the merits of their craft and how it connects to their congregation.

“The reason we call this *The Benders Circuit* is because it’s obviously a play on circuit-bending, but also it’s inclusive of the whole circuit of people who are bending sounds, bending technology, bending the way we think and through customizing and creating their own vocabulary,” Zimmerman notes. “*The Benders Circuit* is about the circuit of the community, the underground community that forms the circuit that connects everybody and keeps it going.”

As relative outsiders when they started to document this clandestine yet tight-knit labyrinth of different scenes, both filmmakers chose to take an often unassertive approach which allowed the direction of the series to unfold naturally.

"I had worked on this other documentary called *Better Living Through Circuitry* that I edited, which was directed by Jonathan Reiss. It was about the rave scene and it was really done towards the tail end of that, but a lot of the footage was shot during the gos," Zimmerman adds. "The onset of the digital cameras was a big deal at the time; it was one of the first music documentaries that was enabled by the digital revolution. That particular documentary I really enjoyed, and I've always been kinda meshed in this electronic audio/visual culture, so when we went to Mata that night, I thought we could do something similar, but do it about this whole audio/visual electronic experimental scene in L.A."

"In the beginning, we were definitely outsiders coming in because everybody was so close knit already," Izzo says. "It was definitely interesting to just be completely fresh on the scene coming in as a photo-journalist. We didn't know what shows were happening next because there wasn't really advertising about where to find these shows. I think one of the shows I saw there was a flier for Celebrate Everything [a since defunct label and show promotion], and that's what led us to the guys like Kron and Baseck. It trailed organically."

The filmmakers remained conscious of the potential obstacle of intruding and disrupting another's community.

“We didn’t want to come off as taking advantage of this thing. We wanted to be 100% authentic with everybody,” says Izzo.

“My mentor in documentary filmmaking was Douchan Gersi, who lived with the headhunters of Borneo; he was the first guy to actually embed himself with and live with the tribes, learn their languages, get their tattoos, and learn all their customs. He was always saying for documentaries that you have to embed yourself and really understand the subjects, so we really embedded ourselves in the scene. We just started filming a ton of shows and really immersing ourselves in the whole thing,” Zimmerman says. “The style of it is also done where it’s the actual artists themselves who are doing all the dialog and telling their own viewpoint. The story is all told from the viewpoint of the artist.”

As filming commenced, it became apparent that the depth of the material being accumulated along with the instability of available spaces and settings for this music would prove too unwieldy for a stand-alone documentary. The episodic approach (the initial five episodes have been completed and screened with further episodes in post-production) was born out of the necessity to do proper justice to such an elaborately diverse and ephemeral culture.

“I think that in and of itself the constant flux is a topic that in one of the things that you do experience as you watch it and a lot of these places come and go, that’s part of the story’s drama, to see if these small venues can sustain themselves and can the scene sustain itself,” notes Zimmerman.

“We definitely captured places that no longer exist in L.A., and we didn’t realize how soon they were going to be gone after filming it,” adds Izzo. “A lot of places we shot once and twice, and then they were closing down. It moves fast.”

A few particularly tense incidents in the fifth episode underscore the precarious reality of staging these underground events. An outdoor gathering of the Modular On The Spot series, a communal-like pop-up of home taught synthesists collaborating in local parks and other natural spaces, is shut-down by park rangers. Another event, a VR multimedia exhibition put on by the Perpetual Dawn collective, at a warehouse space has the plug pulled by the LAPD before it can even begin. For many of these artists and these accessible spaces, any attention drawn brings with it the risk of intervention by municipal invasion, making the question more one of when, rather than if, a certain venue or event will have its plug pulled by the city. One of the most crucial ethics cultivated in these communities is learning to circumvent all possible set-backs rather than conceding defeat. Indeed, the Perpetual Dawn event in question simply packs up and swiftly finds an alternate location where the event can go ahead without inhibition.

"I think it kinda dovetails with some of the themes of this particular topic and subject matter which is that you have to be there to experience it when it happens, and it’s very much in the moment, and it has a Fluxus aspect to it that goes along with the spaces. There’s more encouragement to experience it while it’s happening,” says Zimmerman. “Part of this art form flourishes in underground environments whether it’s house parties, abandoned buildings, one-off gallery shows, cafes, and it’s

interesting to see how this particular art form flourishes in a variety of underground spots.”

In line with an artistic movement that seeks affirmation in ways removed from monetary gain or widespread acceptance, the series itself is as much a labor of love as the scene it depicts, finding its heart outside of the demands and hustle of the mainstream establishment.

“It takes a lot of time to commit to something that you’re not really getting paid for, and people don’t always understand why you would put so much time into something like this when there’s not an immediate, obvious monetary gain. It’s for the love of the art and seeing what it can be. I think this is an important movement that needs to be recognized.”

It’s a movement that continues to persist even amidst striking setbacks, including the 2016 Ghost Ship fire in Oakland, which brought the culture to mainstream notice in the most tragic and exploitative of circumstances. In spite of crackdowns nationwide by authorities and city officials immediately following the fire, highlighted by pundit-led fear-mongering over “illegal raves,” L.A.’s underground continued to flourish and build unabated. The lockdown beginning in March of 2020 effectively put an end to every kind of nightlife worldwide, and yet, the resilience of art, music, and community in L.A. found new means of connecting during this period of forced separation. Virtual shows at spaces like Coaxial Arts Foundation became a work-around when physical events were impossible, while outdoor events became more and more common as restrictions were relaxed. In 2023,

spaces like Coaxial still thrive, in part by a reconciliation of institutional legitimacy (non-profit status, grants, etc.) with the anything-goes autonomy of a homegrown collective, while the Handbag Factory, which has also operated a recording studio on the bottom floor of their building, will see the return of their birthday festivities this spring. Just as it had back in 2014, one space closes and another just as quickly returns, a cycle with no signs of ceasing as long as there are restless and curious minds looking for an alternative to the tastes of the status quo.

As an active participant in the Los Angeles noise scene and an interview subject and performer in a few episodes of *The Benders Circuit*, I felt a distinct connection and honesty in the delectation of the city's scene. Just as important, the series offers an insightful and inclusive portrait of time in L.A. that I missed, allowing me to reflect on the city as it stands today and the artists I cross paths with as well as to draw parallels based on my experiences as an underground musician in cities like New York and Oakland.

The gradual return of in-person concerts, exhibitions, screenings, and other means of sharing art have underscored just how vital and crucial our nurtured and passionate communities are in fostering the kind of utopian ideal we hope to manifest on a grander scale. As obtuse and inscrutable as the harsh noise of an artist like Hexpressionist or the industrialized clatter of Andorkappen may appear to someone with no frame of reference, these sounds represent something far greater for its creators and listeners, something more penetrating than sheer creation or escapism.

According to Zimmerman, “It’s about the culture surrounding the art. The kind of people that will go to a noise show or an industrial show...that’s where I want to be. I like to be challenged, and I like people who like to be challenged. That’s something that I find interesting in addition to the substance of the art, the people and culture that surrounds it. All these different underground artists, even though they may have differences in style, they have a common DIY ethic and a common philosophy that you don’t have to conform to one mainstream style of music, that you can do it differently.”

Paul Haney is an experimental musician, label owner, and writer living in Los Angeles. He currently sits on the board of Coaxial Arts Foundation and is featured in the docu-series *The Benders Circuit*. He founded the label Obsolete Units in 2006 and has performed as Rust Worship since 2007, releasing work on labels like Robert & Leopold, Black Horizons, Tape Drift Records, and Skin Trade Recordings. He also hosts the radio program “Comme À La Radio” for nettnetradio.com

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interview with



KRISTIN KONTROL



by jack skelley

Kristin Gundred,
AKA [Kristin Kontrol](#), is
perhaps best-known as
founder, leader and
singer of Dum Dum

Girls. That all-female power pop group veered into moody subgenres to spotlight Gundred's songwriting chops – a mix of catchy and sinuous, with her dark vibrato and literary lyrics. (In the intoxicating hit “Bedroom Eyes” I heard echoes of “Ode to a Nightingale,” but that’s probably just me.) Post-Dum-Dum, as Kristin Kontrol, Gundred remained on Sub Pop records, with her compositions rendered in electronica. Most recently she has applied her production and writing prowess to fashion and film scoring. Privy to a preview of her latest work, I can testify: It’s among the dreamiest tunes ever. Oh, Gundred also has a killer online radio show ["Out of Vogue" on NTS Radio](#), where she curates hypnotic gems from Loudon Wainwright to Wire.

You have many fervent admirers. People who revere your music and persona. They want to know what you're up to now. What can you share?

When I moved to L.A. from New York about five years ago, it was an abrupt stop to the artistic lifestyle I'd honed for ten plus years. I'd stepped away from Dum Dum Girls at what I felt was an impasse and my new project hadn't really stuck its landing. I was trying to get into film scoring and ended up with a real cliché baptized by Hollywood fire introduction. Simultaneously I fell in love and started a family. I guess I'm an art mom now? I was doing a lot of bespoke music for fashion web content which was easy to do while still raising a kid. My most recent project was a huge undertaking — a score for an Alice in Wonderland adaptation called Get Lost. I wrote my first real song in years for the credits. Fingers crossed it gets released because it's lovely and the score was very dream pop/shoegaze. I finished it weeks before having my second baby.

You're based in L.A., as is *Lit Angels* and many of its writers. How does your city affect your writing, or even how you choose to present yourself?

I'm from northern California so L.A. still holds some of its foreign mystique. There are a lot of issues that make it hard to live there though and I traded it for the suburbs a few years ago. I still drive into the city a lot because my neighborhood is boring and I still wear heavy black eyeliner so I guess I haven't completely integrated.

Lit Angels is a literary magazine. Its readers are writers. What are you reading now? How is your songwriting impacted by poetry, fiction or other sources?

I am very slowly reading Interview with the Vampire for the first time. I'm also always reading some parenting book or homestead-y recipe book. Plus, my husband is a real academic reader so we have a lot of incredible books lying around at all times.

In “Smoke Rings” from *X-Communicate* your voice climbs big notes – your voice really opens up during its peaks. When recording this did you have any particular vocal models in mind?

I followed my natural voice a lot more on the Kristin Kontrol stuff. I love a big voice. A Sinead, a Liz Fraser, a Kate Bush – hell, even an Ann Wilson.

In addition, “Smoke Rings,” the final song on the album, is a grand and dramatic slow-tempo burner. What are your intentions about making big statements on the way out?

I like a dramatic French exit in music and in life.

Your vibrato: So distinctive. How have you cultivated the emotional forms it assumes?

I’m sure it was informed by others over the years. As a teenager I used to imitate (loudly in the shower) Grace Slick first, then Chrissie Hynde. Whenever I was recording vocals, I kept it very dark and intimate and I was always a bit stoned. I wanted it to feel significant.

X-Communicate was a departure from the rock-band format of DDG, but these are still pop songs in your signature styles and with your enticing production touches. And there is a great deal of stylistic variety among them, despite this being an “electronic” opus. How do you feel your structures – hooks, big choruses, fade-outs, etc. – translate from one musical mode to another?

I’ll always be chasing the hook.

The song “Excommunicate,” in particular, has a mammoth chorus. It travels vertically, far up and down the scale. How did that chorus come to you?

It just did? I’ve never been one to sit down and compose a vocal melody. It just comes out. “X-Communicate” was definitely the most fun I’ve had singing.

Like a lot of your fans, I return to the *Too True* album over and over. It holds up beautifully, both in terms of its rich musical palette and many moods. Numbers such

as “Cult of Love” are full of mystery and magic and seem to speak to the other songs in ways that tie them together. Care to comment on this?

Thank you! It’s also my husband’s favorite. It feels a life away but I was very proud of that album and it sucked when it didn’t do as well as my label (Sub Pop) wanted it to. As a band, it was our peak release for press and touring success, but looking back, it was also the beginning of the end.

In moving from a gigging rock band to a solo project, you’ve stated it is liberating because you don’t have to depend on the musical abilities of others. You can control (Kontrol) the sound just how you want with whatever musicians you want. How did this affect your songwriting and recording process?

Not much as I actually always wrote and recorded alone (except the band played on the second album Only in Dreams). The main difference was that I worked with new producers after having done all the previous records with the same team.

What have been your musical inspirations in the move from rock to electronic? Any big names such as Kraftwerk, New Order, more current artists?

All of the above plus a whole lifetime of others. Dum Dum Girls was such a genre-project that I was really just trying to break out of that.

I saw a video of you performing with Best Coast and the Linda Lindas. Also Karen O from Yeah Yeah Yeahs. What was that all about?

I’d been asked to play a small festival called Girl School but didn’t really have new music or a band assembled. So I decided to put together a kids band to back me and then it kinda just evolved into a kids band. I taught them a Mazzy Star song, a Dum Dum Girls song, a Yeah Yeah Yeahs song, and a Best Coast song and since some of those artists were also

friends of mine, I called in some favors. The Linda Lindas formed out of that actually, which is a pretty cool thing to me. A real passing of the torch I guess.

Jack Skelley is the author of *Monsters, Dennis Wilson and Charlie Manson, Interstellar Theme Park*, and the novel *Fear of Kathy Acker*, from Semiotext(e) June 2023. He was editor and publisher of *Barney: The Modern Stone-Age Magazine*, an anthology series featuring major artists and writers. Jack is songwriter and guitarist for psychedelic surf band Lawndale (SST Records and, as a publicist and journalist, regularly contributes to many magazines and journals.



The Blushes are three life-long best-friends-forever from Los Angeles, California. Taking to the stage with sweet bows and frills, these three SoCal sweethearts quickly electrify the room with a surprising rawness, calling back the excitement of the early 90's west coast music scene. Setting out to inject joy, glitter and hardcore girliness into alternative rock, The Blushes walk in the footsteps of foremothers Bikini Kill, The Shangri-Las, Babes in Toyland, Poly Styrene, Courtney Love, Patti Smith and the Spice Girls - defining they're version of intersectional punk-feminism within the Southern California landscape. Visit them at <https://www.theblushes.com>

Kenny G Is Not BGM

BACKGROUND NOTES COUNT TOO

BY BRUCE BUSHEL
COVER ART BY JADE LYNN GOH



LIT ANGELS VOLUME VII: HIGH NOTES

+ listen

By Bruce Buschel

A few years ago, Ryuichi Sakamoto, the renowned musician and composer, refused to eat at his favorite Japanese restaurant because he could no longer handle the music. It ruined his meals, stole from each sublime morsel. The incoherence of Brazilian pop songs and American folk didn't match the lustrous space and animal-free cuisine called *shojin ryori*.

Sakamoto sent a letter to the chef in which he likened the food to a gorgeous palace but the music to Trump Tower. He said he would continue eating at Kajitu only if he could bring his own playlist and not be subjected to music programmed by some committee in Japan with no awareness of the environment, the day of the week, the flow of customers, the weather, the general mood of New York City on any given day. You don't play the same music on a cold rainy Monday night as you might on a sunny day after the Yankees win a World Series game.

"Normally I just leave," Sakamoto told the *NYTimes*. "I cannot bear it, but this restaurant was really something I liked, and I respected their chef. I found their BGM so bad, so bad." "BGM" is the industry term for background music and was also the title of Mr. Sakamoto's early album with his Yellow Magic Orchestra. He has composed, produced and played music for dance floors, concert halls, video games, cellphone ringtones, ecological protests and such movies as *The Last Emperor* and *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*.

The chef agreed. Sakamoto brought in an eclectic array, favoring the piano, from *I Love Music* by Ahmad Jamal to *The Seasons: Summer* by John Cage. (Covid-19 closed the restaurant, but the 45 songs are available on Spotify under "The Kajitu Restaurant Playlist.")

Most background music doesn't work because it's not background music, and it doesn't sync up with the ambience. It's familiar music or favorite songs or smooth or techno or convenient, but it's not BGM. Good BGM is compelling enough to provide a cushion for activities while neither interfering nor disappearing, music

melodic enough to distract when you need to escape the silence but ephemeral enough to vanish instantly. The sound of a brook gently rippling just outside your window may be the ideal BGM.

Restaurants can ill afford to be tone deaf: a bustling, boozy Friday night at 11 calls for different background music than a sparse Tuesday at 7:30 when you want to help the diners feel less isolated. No commercial radio will do the trick and no music service will satisfy--you can't drop Miles Davis into the slot machine and hope for the best. You might get a lyrical number from *Porgy & Bess* followed by some hard funk from *Bitches Brew*.

Let's say there are four elements that make or break any restaurant experience—food, ambience, price, and service. (Let's leave out the location and dining mates for the purpose of this conversation). When all four elements are cooking on the same stove, fitting together like notes of a chord, then the experience is enhanced for everyone, whether you or he or she or they know(s) it or not. Each piece of background music ought to be chosen with as much care as each ingredient of the day's specials--background notes count.

Dare we compare a restaurant to the Beatles? Why not? Would the Beatles have been the Beatles without all four interlocking elements? John was the meat and potatoes; Paul was the sound, or ambience; George the soul, the service; and Ringo the price point. The sum was bigger than the complementary parts.

In a similar fashion, everything about the French Laundry makes sense because everything is over-the-top fussy and delicate and expensive. *Cue Bill Evans*.

The greasy coffee shop around the corner makes as much sense because the food stinks (in a fried way), the service stinks (in a friendly way), the ambience stinks (in a nostalgic way), and everyone loves it. The songs are from Pandora. *Billy Joel, meet Billie Eilish.*

Only a tiny percentage of great music makes great BGM, and an equally tiny portion of great BGM qualifies as great music. You may love Bach, but try eating a pasta Bolognese to his fugue in D minor. *Major agita.* And best not to invite Drake to sing at a reunion dinner. The Grateful Dead may be a cool condiment at any food truck, but not at Spago's. Duran Duran might be fun at a Fish'n'Chips joint, but not Chez Panisse. Los Lobos at a taqueria, okay, but not at Mirame.

Someone at Starbucks knew about this quadrangle decades ago. They hired a man and a woman to curate all the songs that have become as integral to the brand as the logo or the loopy Italian cup sizes. Everything makes sense at Starbucks—if you like bitter coffee and sweet songs.

Excellent background music has to be easy to listen to but not easy-listening—Kenny G is not background music. His music draws attention to its own fecklessness. The only heavy metal in a fine dining establishment should be the steel beams. And movie soundtracks may remind you of other couples' romance more than your own. Good BGM is the soundtrack for *your* story. Samba is a safe go-to because no one speaks Portuguese, and when sung with a forlorn musicality, it's akin to a Castilian Yiddish purr.

Michael Jackson is never background music. Nor Taylor Swift. They bring a lot of emotional baggage. *Rhapsody in Blue* is no more BGM than Jay-Z or Puccini or the “Woodstock” soundtrack. Not even Schubert’s lovely “Trout Quintet” would be suitable BGM in a fine seafood restaurant. No knock on Beethoven to say you don’t want to hear Symphony No. 5 in C Minor during a romantic first date.

Sondheim’s cleverness would make for a lousy dinner partner, upstaging you at every turn of phrase. One may revel in Ravel or Coltrane, but their transcendentalism requires your full attention and is apt to coax ecstasies or breakdowns when you seek serenity. Straight-ahead Satie is too melancholic and Sinatra too wing-a-ding ding or too depressing. Copland will transport you to distant places when you want to remain right where you are. Geniuses stand in their own spotlight and are rarely content to reside in the aural shadows. No one cares if *Kitty’s Back in Town* when you are enjoying a profiterole with a nice ice wine.

Playing an entire CD is always dangerous. Diners may be as allergic to any one artist as they are to cashews. Forty-five minutes of Michael Bublé could make someone ill. A whole album of Kendrick Lamar or Philip Glass could really do some damage. To achieve a steady stream of suitable music — background music that resides in the space between mundane and magical — one has to pick over every song. These are ten CDs from which you could cull almost any selections, mix and mash, and collate a fine BGM playlist for almost any at-home dinner. Enjoy.

a playlist by Bruce Buschel

BACKGROUND NOTES COUNT II

- 01 BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB - BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB
- 02 CLASSICAL JAZZ QUARTET PLAYS RACHMONINOV
- 03 DAVID RUSSELL PLAYS AGUSTIN BARRIOS MANGORÉ
- 04 DEXTER GORDON - BALLADS
- 05 STAN GETZ AND JOAO GILBERTO (FEATURING A. C. JOBIM)-GETZ/GILBERTO
- 06 JACQUES LOUSSIER TRIO- SATIE: GYMNOPEDIES & GNOSSIENNES
- 07 MILES DAVIS - KIND OF BLUE
- 08 PHAROAH SANDERS - FLOATING POINTS
- 09 SPHERE - FLIGHTPATH
- 10 BILL EVANS AND JIM HALL - UNDERCURRENT

LIT ANGELS VOLUME VII: HIGH NOTES

+ listen

Bruce Buschel has written for *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Premiere*, *Sport*, *Esquire*, *Medium*, *Forbes*, Salon.com, and *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. He is the author of two books, *The Watergate File* and *Walking Broad*, published by Simon & Schuster. His work has twice been anthologized in the *Best American Sports Writing* and he won an ASCAP Award for Music Writing. In a weekly blog in the *New York Times*, Buschel chronicled the opening (and closing) of his two restaurants, one in Brooklyn, the other in Bridgehampton. He co-wrote the Off-Broadway musical, *Eli's Comin'*, winner of 5 Obies. Buschel has produced and directed a series of jazz films, *"Live at the Village Vanguard,"* featuring Freddie Hubbard, Michael Brecker, John Abercrombie, Lee Konitz, Michel Petrucciani, Ron Carter, and Grover Washington Jr.

Buschel is working on a television series called VIAL and often contributes to the *East Hampton Star*. He created the radio show "Shinnecock Nation" for WLIW, the NPR station on Long Island.

TOURING 101:



By David M. Kendrick

I had been following the path of my musical idols as closely as possible for years when, through luck and happenstance I achieved a version of a career as a rock drummer.

The year was 1981. The location, somewhere in America. The vehicle—in this case a van—proscribed reality. We spent weeks, moving from

town to town, regularly searching the left end of the dial for a college station that would play “real music,” instead of the six songs that seemed to be everywhere else on the radio. It seemed like the battle that punk rock had fought for music relevance had quickly disintegrated into a universe of mindless choruses of Linn drum disco beats and Yamaha DX7 synths, with auto tune still down the road—a universe where people pushed buttons, instead of doing damage on guitars and drum sets with sweat and voice.

No matter how much the members of the band liked one another, we were definitely spending much too much time together. The gear was in a truck, and I had my own seat, but by this time the cassette tapes everyone made had been played to death. I even read an entire novel, *Child of God*, by Cormac McCarthy, aloud to the band (which did not work for everyone). We were really over each other’s company. There were no cell phones for chatting with friends or family back home, no YouTube videos to watch—email didn’t exist yet. Even if the band was half-happening, after five and a half hours of driving every day, it didn’t feel that way.

Finally, a town appeared—the next venue—and everyone was on the same team again. Still on the road, still in the van, but heading into town thinking about set up.

Hopefully, the club was in a cool area, and there was a weekly paper from which we gleaned what we could, culturally, which almost made up for all of the boredom. With any luck, there’d be some friendly folk at the club,

too. But it was all about the one or two hours on the stage, playing for people who wanted to hear new, live music.

Towns felt a bit like colonies with a lot of space in between, and during the twenty-two hours the band wasn't on stage, we'd invent elaborate realities. In *Gleaming Spires*, we convinced ourselves that a murderous clown named "Bobo" was following us around the United States, so on guest lists, we wrote "Do NOT let Bobo-the-clown in the venue." In *Devo*, this was slightly reversed. We put 'Frank Booth,' Dennis Hopper's delightful psychopath from *Blue Velvet* on the guest list every night. But he never showed. These diversions tended to keep us sane.

There was always a two-fold aspect to touring. ONE, you were, in a sense, a tourist—seeking out the legendary espresso, cool book or record shop, Goodwill or tiki bar—whatever your poison(s). TWO, you were also part of that very night's activity, so you were not merely a tourist, but the provider of some art/damage/music/noise that actually mattered to a few hundred people, at least on that night. What I didn't realize was that a career in music occupied a full twenty-four-hour day, not merely the hour or so spent onstage. And so, as consolation, I held onto that odd inexplicable something that makes a band more than the mere sum of its three or four or five members. That, and those fun, but too few, moments when I could just be a tourist on a tour.

By 1983, I had my first taste of the mighty and iconic tour *bus* world. I spent half a year crossing the country playing ten to twenty thousand seat arenas with the band Sparks, opening for Rick Springfield—who was huge at the time. Surely, this was what my idols had done—were still doing—on the road to success. I wasn't necessarily going for Keith Moon-hotel-mayhem, or Led Zeppelin behavior, but what I found was, tour buses were infantilizing isolation capsules. Where we went, what we ate, where we slept, even toilet stops were dictated by others. The tourist aspect of the tour was no longer an option.

Most of the venues were sport arenas, or open-air Hollywood Bowl type setups, rarely located in town with the exception of a few places like Madison Square. Often miles from anywhere, in order to accommodate huge surrounding parking lots, the sameness was stultifying. There was no Uber to call up to go elsewhere, and we met few locals. On the rare occasion we were booked in a hotel where other bands might also be staying, it was not uncommon to encounter the 'I'm-going-to-go-wait-for-my-limo-in-the-lobby-while-you-go-back-to-your-bus' *Spinal Tap* stereotype. Success stratified interactions. One could also see how some poor singer might become confused by alcohol or whatnot, and might find himself uttering the famous fate-sealing line, "Helloooo, Cleveland!" when he was in fact in Columbus.

Months seemed to go by before I had a chat with music folk outside of our own tour slipstream. Eventually, Sparks was tossed from the tour for having been dropped off of Top Forty Radio.

I remember asking Dee Dee of the Ramones, also ensconced for years in the endless tour cycle, “How do you feel when you actually ‘make it?’” Dee Dee basically said, “When the *Rocket to Russia* record came out, we were already on the road playing, and got a call from Sire Records. ‘Hey guys, great news. First week we—WE—sold 72,000 copies. It’s all happening!’ We were all going, ‘Wow. this could be life changing.’ So, we kept playing and the next week no call, so we call Sire back and say, ‘How we doin?’ and Sire goes, ‘Well, YOU only sold 4000 copies on week two.’ We were all, ‘Hmm,’ and by the third week of the record’s release, after no Sire call, me and Johnny were back to our standard stop at the merchandise booth at load-out, saying, ‘So, how many T-shirts did we sell tonight?’”

They were a great, great band, that toured primarily in vans.

I feel a tad ungenerous complaining about this kind of rarefied occupational hazard, but to his day, I prefer the reality of what goes on outside the touring vehicle, to what happens inside. My current worldwide touring with the band Xiu Xiu involves vans again (yay). And though I still don’t understand what the words MAKING IT mean, one thing’s for certain. If I see a medical oddities museum, or the history of comics shop or a toy soldier museum, or a cycad nursery or used book shop and souvenir compendium, or

the Royal Hauntology Annex—I hereby warn whomever is driving—I will want to stop!

David M. Kendrick is a musician and songwriter living in California. He has served time in rock groups such as Sparks, Gleaming Spires, Devo, Xiu Xiu and the Empire of Fun. He also writes fiction and publishes arcane essays in obscure journals, (or is it the other way round?). Kendrick has also created a CD of short stories entitled *I'm Sorry Mr. Kendrick, There's a Skull Inside your Head*.

The Backporch

Carol Faw



The Backporch

By Carol Faw

The dry heat swelters in my Valley apartment where everything crumbles, from the dirty beige carpet, to the ancient fan above the stovetop that drops dust from the recent Ventura fires. I turn music on as soon as I wake, and I keep it playing until I fall asleep at night. I hate when silence fills my brain for anything other than sleep.

My phone rings and I stare at the caller ID that has NC County Correctional in block letters. I exhale a long breath before I pick up the phone. It's Tuesday. My brother always calls on Tuesdays.

"Hello?" I say. An automated voice speaks back. "An inmate at Polkton Correctional Facility." There's a pause before I hear my brother's voice on the line: "Samuel Johnston," and then the automated voice says, "would like to speak with you, press one to ans—"

I cut off the voice before it runs through the normal list of options and time restraints. It cost a dollar fifty for fifteen minutes in-state, but double that for out-of-state calls. I plan every Tuesday around these calls. Most weeks, I sit on the edge of my bed and stare at my phone until it rings.

"Hello?" I say into the phone.

"Hey," Sam says.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, everything's still okay."

"Okay, anything—new?"

Sam's chuckle back is short and bitter.

"Not much new here, no."

"Right," I say.

The silence lingers until I say, "Wanna listen to Nirvana, or Everclear?"

Sam perks up. "Yeah, put on that Santa Monica one, yeah?"

“Okay, I will,” I say, as I put the phone on loudspeaker. I pull up the YouTube video and crank the volume.

“That’s not far from you now, right? Where you live?”

“No, not too far.” The Valley is still pretty far from the beach, but I know Sam pictures the ocean close. It isn’t hours away like it is back South.

“Yeah, yeah, you been to the pier yet?”

“Yeah, I’ve been.”

“I bet it’s real nice out there.”

“Yeah, it’s okay.”

I hit ‘play’ in the silence.

“Know what this one’s really about?” Sam asks, his voice tinny compared to the blare of my laptop speakers.

I smile into the phone. I do, but instead I say, “Don’t remember. What’s it about?”

I turn down the volume and lean closer to my phone.

“Okay, so it’s about not wanting to live anymore, and the waves don’t just mean like waves, they mean more like obstacles and leaving that pain behind, washing it away..”

I close my eyes, and I can picture my brother and I on Momma’s back porch with his best friend Case.

The porch wasn’t really a porch ‘cause it didn’t have an overhang, but that’s what we called it, anyways. It was always, “Come smoke on the back porch,” or “one

more on the back porch,” or “be quiet we’re on the back porch,” or “don’t wake Momma up while we’re on the back porch.”

It was more of a patio, with red brick inlaid into the ground, but weeds had grown up in-between the bricks in geometric patterns and the small gap between our house and the surrounding pines, was also overtaken with weeds that Momma always said she’d get to when she wasn’t so tired. But I didn’t mind. It made Momma’s back porch feel like another world—a secret alcove just for Sam and me. Especially on those long summer nights where, if Sam wasn’t having Momma drive him and Case around, or if they weren’t at the skate park smoking cigars or sneaking into whoever was the current girl’s house, we were in our own little world. Plus Case. But I didn’t care, ‘cause it meant that by being there on the back porch, I was cool, too.

There was a light outside the back door, but it always needed replacing. The dead bulb sat in the socket for years. If Momma wasn’t home to fuss at us for wasting light, we’d leave the backdoor open so the kitchen light would come through. Or even better, we’d sit by the light of a full moon. Those nights were always my favorite, especially when the lightning bugs buzzed around us as my brother held court. It was always the same stories, but I didn’t care. Especially not back then.

Momma’s old boombox would be turned up loud. My brother paced around in front of it, joint unlit in his hand as he professed his greatest love and his biggest lesson to me: music. This night, with the moon full, and the lightning bugs out, it was Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth.”

“This is an old one,” Sam said, as he held out his hand for the joint Case had just finished rolling for him. Case nodded, even though he’d already heard this story, too. Often, Case looked up and smiled at me from beneath a flop of magenta hair, and I’d nod back, as in, yeah here he goes again.

“This is a real old one,” Sam said, with a repetitive head nod of his Cobain blue hair that seemed to glow turquoise in the lowlight. I mimicked the nod when he glanced up to make sure I was listening. He didn’t have to check, I always listened to him.

“And it’s not about what you think it’s about. What everyone thinks it’s about. It’s about more.” I nodded along as he lit the joint and took a long hit. Through the exhale of smoke, as his eyes reddened and the lightning bugs flicked on and off, he’d begin.

This time was different though. “Wanna hit this, Taye?” I looked from the burning joint in his hand to Case’s face, but he was smiling into the second joint he was already rolling. They both seemed so calm, as though this wasn’t my brother’s first time offering me a joint. Like this wasn’t the biggest and most important milestone of my life. I’d begged to smoke weed with him and Case for the past year and they’d refused. Said they didn’t smoke with babies. Guess this meant that I was finally grown up enough to hang with my best friend, smoke weed and listen to music on the back porch. I didn’t have a best friend yet, but I had the boys, which to me, was even cooler.

“You’re like twelve, right?”

“Uhh, eleven,” I said. Sam and Case didn’t react.

“Same age I started smoking.” Sam shrugged. “So, you wanna hit this or not?”

“Uh, okay. Yeah.”

“But you can’t tell Momma,” Sam said, holding the joint just out of reach. I leaned forward. He waved the joint in fast circles around my face until I snatched it away from him.

“Duh, I know,” I said as I placed the joint between my lips and took a hesitant pull. The smoke leaked from my lips, like spilled milk. I tried to hand the joint back quickly, the edges of my lips tasted ashy. I held my chest with my opposite hand to keep my coughs from escaping.

“Come on, now. Don’t be a pussy. Take a big hit,” Sam said.

I looked between Sam and Case, but they just waited. I took a longer hit. Sam bounced from foot to foot.

“Hold it in. Hold it. Doesn’t work if you don’t.”

Case leaned forward as he jammed his thumb in Sam’s direction. “He should know. He didn’t inhale for a year until we got into a high school party and the seniors called us out.” Sam flicked him off. “Whatever. I know what I’m doing. Always have.”

“Yeah, okay,” Case said, as he raised his eyebrows at me or the sky—it was hard to tell.

I laughed and the smoke exhaled in a long plume that stretched across the patio and into the humid night. Like ectoplasm from a séance, it lingered around our heads; a forgotten ghost, haunted by our presence.

Both boys cheered and Sam clapped me on the back, open palmed and a little too hard so that I stumbled forward onto the edge of the lawn chair.

“Feels great, don’t it?”

“What does?”

“Being fucking high.” I looked down, surprised to see my limbs still attached. My shoulders slid down the broken lawn chair until I was horizontal, more level with the bricks than the lightning bugs running from the smoke. I chased after them with my fingers in slow circles.

“Yeah,” I said, my lips slacked wide and my cheeks stretched high, taut on my face.

“Yeah, I told you, Taye. I told you!” Sam said. He took another drag, then turned to the boombox to play the song back. I caught Case’s eye roll as Sam positioned himself in front of us. Then, the song started over.

“Now, this peaked at number seven on the *Billboard* charts, and everyone thought that Buffalo Springfield had made a protest song about the Kent college shooting, but...” Sam paused here for effect, his joint still in the air as the smoke curled around him. I could see Case’s head shake out of the corner of my eye. I covered my laugh with a hand.

“Shut up, shut up. I know what I’m talking about,” Sam said, waving off our laughter.

“Yeah, yeah, Sam, we know,” Case said. We made eye contact before he leaned down to lick another joint closed. He was so handsome, so cool. He and Sam were the coolest people on Earth and now, I was cool too, by association. I wasn’t just watching anymore, I was smoking and listening to the music. I was *in*.

“Shut up, Case,” Sam said.

Case kicked the back of his kneecap, and Sam stumbled into the red brick. He got up and swung lazily at Case’s ear, but he dodged Sam easily, not even stopping his lick on the joint, his tongue a baby pink against the dark brown rolling papers. I laughed until my insides ached.

“So, Taye, it’s actually about these riots that happened on the Sunset Strip years before the shooting that no one was talking about.” I nodded as I stared at the dirty imprint of the brick’s geometric design on Sam’s knee. The dirt flaked off his skin in tiny patches, and swirled back into the brick, as if they’d never been disturbed at all.

Sam looked between us, but I was the only one that nodded. “That’s crazy.”

“Right! Crazy.”

“Sooooo crazy,” Case said, sprawled out onto the lawn chair, joint burning away in his mouth like a trapped lightning bug, dimming and brightening with each breath.

“Whatever, Taye, you know what I’m saying, right? This shit was crazy.”

I nodded, “Yeah, it was.”

Sam bounded up. He always rushed to and from somewhere, never able to sit still. Even to change the cassette on Momma’s boombox just a foot away. He had to race there before anyone else. I was never sure whom he was racing against, as he slammed another cassette in place and Live’s “Lightning Crashes” began to play.

“So, this is an old one too—not as old as Buffalo Springfield—but 1994, compared to now, is a long time.”

“Right,” I said, as Case passed me the joint to take another hit. But I was too focused on following the sway of the song and the lightning bugs as they switched on, off, on, off. I tried to open and close my fist to match their secret rhythm, but they were always one step ahead of me.

“So it’s set in a hospital room, right? But it’s like a song about so much more than that. The hospital room is like a headspace for the song, right? But it’s more than that.” I nodded along, as Sam reached forward to take the joint from my hand for another hit. When had Case given it to me in the first place? I shrugged, as more smoke exhaled from my mouth.

“Right, so it’s a song about more than that room, it’s about that journey of...of life.”

Case chuckled. “Of life.”

“Come on, Taye, you get it, right?” I smiled up at Sam, and nodded. “Yeah, I get it.”

“See, she gets it.”

“I think she’s just real high,” Case said.

They both turned to look at me. I guess I was high, cause when I smiled, they both laughed, and then I laughed. I smiled so hard, it felt like my face might crack in two. We laughed into the night. I remember the echo of us as the sound bounced off the pines—dark and stoic in the night, like an army of guardians at our backs, a shield against the world. To protect me, I guess, since the boys didn’t need protection. They floated through life with an ease and confidence that I craved within my awkward, too-long-limbs and my garbled words. Especially back then, on the back porch, where they held court and Sam schooled me on music. I thought, this, this was what all the music Sam showed me was talking about, all the love songs, all the breakup songs, and the songs about nights you’ll never forget, they were all about this. This moment of an endless summer night and the dozens that stretched out before us, like an infinite ocean. This was why music was magic, because I could come back to this moment anytime I wanted. I just had to hit play on Momma’s old boombox.

The automated voice interrupts us on the fifth run-through of the Everclear song. Sam insists I stop after each line, to fully understand the song. I picture him with the phone tucked under one ear and both hands out like a preacher at the pulpit with his shoulders raised high towards the Lord of music. A joint simmers in one hand, and he coughs with every third exhale.

“You have two minutes remaining.” The voice is cold and alien compared to the warmth of the music. The joint in my mind burns out, cold.

Sam speaks over the automation. “Well, I’ll...call you next week.”

“Yeah, lemme know if you hear anything new you want me to listen to.”

“I don’t really get to pick the music in here...” he says, with another bitter chuckle. I bite my cheek and cover my eyes at the mistake of thinking that he is just at home after a shift at the ham house, waiting for Momma to come home with food.

“Well, ain’t that a nice change,” I say, my accent thick and heavy to make him laugh.

Sam does laugh, and it’s as familiar as the Everclear song, or the smell of smoke on Momma’s back porch. I relax into the sound.

“Yeah, I was a little shit, wasn’t I?”

I don’t have to see him to know he’s rubbing the back of his head with one hand, looking up at the ceiling, as he says this.

I laugh a real laugh, and Sam does too. I know his eyes are crinkled up, and one side of his mouth is pulled higher than the other. For a moment, it’s all normal.

“You were, but it’s okay.”

The automation interrupts again. “You have thirty seconds remaining.”

“Love you, talk next week,” Sam says in a mumbled rush, the laughter, gone.

“I love you too.” I want to say more, but the line goes dead. I want to say that he isn’t just my brother, but my first friend; the coolest person I know. I don’t care what he has or hasn’t done with his life. He’s still my brother. Instead, I sit in my empty apartment in the dry California heat, and yearn for that Southern humidity to wrap its warm hug around me. I hit play on my computer, and clean the new layer of

soot from the stovetop, while Everclear's sounds of the breakers—and the memory of my brother's laughter—fill the empty spaces in

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By Penny Harris

I became a Hider when I was just about nine years old—the day my dad showed me *Schindler's List*. With my dark olive skin, my prominent nose and giant mop of curls, I was not naïve enough to imagine that I'd *actually* be able to hide, if it came to that. There would be no fair-skinned, small-nosed family charitable and dumb enough to try and raise me as their own. Still, sitting sweaty-palmed on the sofa beside my dad, watching that all too unhidden little girl in red meet her final, fucked

up fate, something deep within me activated, and I became a Hider. I'd hide small things—my friends' brushes, my parents' shoes or jackets, transplant items into other sections of the grocery store. The exact psychological mechanics are unknown to me. Maybe it was an attempt at retribution, or preparation for a future where I would one day have to hide. Or maybe it felt satisfying knowing that there were hundreds of objects tucked away in this world, that I had not concealed in fear, but with control, and autonomy, and power.

Over the years I stopped hiding items. I instead closeted things about myself: my sexuality, my disinterest in college, the robustness of my body and voice. Eventually hiding those things became too much work. I gave in and had some girlfriends. I became a career musician. I let my body and voice and spirit be full. But deep down, the Hider in me still lived. And that is why, when Kat suggested our next band be one where we concealed ourselves in costumes, it was an obvious "Yes." That, and the fact that I was in love with her.

"We are Royalcore!" Kat yells into the microphone, as I bang out one last drum fill. The makeup we caked on before the performance rolls down my face, mixed with beads of sweat. The frilly, heavy-ass costume adds to the sensation of being in a fever-dream, as the audience yells for *one more song*. In these moments of heat exhaustion, I question why we are dressed this way, like old British Royalty. My olive skin is covered in thick white makeup, and Blade is a dude in a dress, and none of it feels natural. It feels kitschy, gimmicky; yet it is the first band I've been in that's

really taken off. We have more fans and followers than I imagined was possible. People come to shows dressed like us, I've read Royalcore fan fiction, have seen multiple Royalcore tattoos. I know, from the many other bands I've drummed for, and from the many times I've tried to be something I'm not, if it's not authentic it doesn't last. Yet Royalcore has lasted, grown, gained momentum. I know it's all Kat, and wonder if maybe it's some past life shit, if she is the spirit incarnate of some powerful 1820s queen. I feel it in the room when Kat's in full force, screaming into the mic and wailing on her guitar, the way the crowd humbles, her majestic essence crashing over them like a wave.

“I kind of like wearing a dress,” Blade says, “it's growing on me.”

“That's funny. I hate it more each time we play.” I'd already changed out of my costume, immediately, into a black T-shirt and loose purple jeans. I watch Blade slide out of his poofy dress, going from feminine 18th century royalty to a guy with tattoos up and down his arms, in cut off shorts and a white ribbed tank top.

We are in a hotel room, a run-of-the-mill double queen Travelodge room, decorated in blues and beiges, with identical corporate art over each bed. When we started making actual money there was a moment where we stayed at some baller hotels, had our own rooms, but we quickly realized that touring like that we were no longer making actual money.

Kat is sprawled out across one of the beds, her pale hair in a ponytail, dressed in gym shorts and a pink baby-T. She's reading a thick book, historical fiction as

always, and has her yellow book light clipped on even though the room is well-lit enough to read without it.

“You two in for the night?” Blade asks, despite already knowing the answer.

It’s a rare night when Kat and I go out after a show.

Kat flips a page, not bothering to answer him.

I nod. “You going out?”

“Yeah, I might go to a bar to finish up the sketch for the tattoo artist.”

“Can I see how it’s going?”

Blade grabs his sketch pad out of his backpack and flips to his cartoonish drawing of the three of us, Kat, Blade, and me, decked out in our costumes. Kat is in the middle wearing a crown, all three of us in our classic dresses. There is something in the way he has drawn him and myself, a subtle lean of our bodies, the slight angle of our eyes, that alludes to the quiet truth that Kat is our queen, that each strum of his bass, each beat of my drum, is an ode, a love letter, to her.

“It looks awesome. You sure you have room for it?” I tease, eyeing the sleeves of tattoos covering both arms, collages of old pets and band insignias and bits of lyrics.

“There’s a good spot for it on my back,” he says, throwing on a hoodie and a winter jacket on top, putting his sketchpad in his backpack. Blade’s eyes are so pale blue they’re almost clear, and his skin is so fair that veins are visible in most spots that don’t have ink. His facial features are delicate, almost pretty, but he plays bass like a badass.

“Later, Ella.” He nods his head in my direction and flicks Kat’s foot as he walks by her; she does not look up. “Bye, Kat.”

I look over at Kat, absorbed in her book, oblivious to anyone’s existence besides her own. I scroll through my phone, open and close some apps. I check the weather for the last couple days of our tour, tomorrow in New York and the next day in Philly. And then I open the weather app again and check what it’s like right now, tonight, where I am, in Boston. I throw on a jacket and head out into the open night.

I make my way down the moonlit street, back to the venue where we just played. I’d seen a flier for a bunch of all girl bands playing upstairs, and had been tempted to stay, but followed Kat back to our hotel room, same as always. The bouncer remembers me and gives me a nod as I walk upstairs. The room smells surprisingly ripe for a mostly female crowd. There is a fog machine going. Soft flashes of light, pinks, blues and yellows dance across the stage. The band has a much softer sound than we do, a sweet dreampop vibe. The front woman is gently strumming her guitar and repeating the lyrics *my pepper girl* over and over, her voice ethereal and just a little scratchy. Her hair is even curlier than mine, styled into a long, layered shag. She is wearing a brown, sleeveless jumper and she’s barefoot. I think she may be hypnotizing me. They play a few more lyric-light, shoe-gazey pop songs before ending their set.

I go to get a beer at the bar and notice the curly-haired singer behind me in line.

I turn and smile at her. “You were great. You want something to drink?”

“Just water, thanks.” She looks a little closer at me. “Are you in Royalcore?”

“Yeah, you know us?”

“I saw you play tonight.” She blushes. “I’ve seen you play before in Portland, too.”

“Oh yeah, our home turf. Are you guys based in Boston?”

“Philadelphia, we’re just here for the night.”

“Oh yeah? I grew up in the Philly area. We’re playing there on Saturday.”

“I’m Abby.” She smiles at me.

“I’m Ella.” I am saying words to her, but they are just consonants and vowels strung together—they are not what I mean. My true meaning, I am expressing with my eyes, with my body, with the subtly placed gruffness and softness of my voice. I am actually saying, as loudly as I can without using my vocal cords: *Do you like women? Do you like me?*

We stand together along the side of the crowd, as the next band gets up on stage. They’re a female four-piece, all of them dressed in blue with similar mop-top haircuts.

“They look like the Beatles, right?” I whisper to her. She nods and laughs; I feel myself light up.

The music ends, and it’s time to clear out. Abby says she’ll come see us play in Philly. I give her my number and tell her I’ll put her on the guestlist. I head out into

the frigid night. The sweetness of my small adventure warms my cheeks and chest, so that I barely notice the cold.

When I get back to the room, Blade and Kat are asleep in one of the beds. I know that if I had stayed, I'd be the one asleep next to Kat, Blade in the other bed. It is the prize for staying behind or coming home early; the one most tethered to Kat gets to sleep next to her, share the same oxygen, breathe in her carbon dioxide.

The New York show is packed. Some of the crowd is dressed like British royalty, some like hipsters, some like their very own brand of weirdo. It is a quirky crowd we draw, and I am grateful for them. Though, if I'm honest, I am not truly one of them. If I was not on the stage, I would not be in this room.

The show starts and ends a little earlier than usual, by 10 pm we're finished playing. The venue is clearing out, some people still hang by the bar. I'm packing up my kit as a guy walks up to us, tall and broad shouldered. He has brown hair and a boy-next-door face and looks like someone you'd see on TV.

"Hey, Kat, been a while." Kat looks up as if she's seen a ghost. Maybe a friendly ghost, a ghost she has been waiting for.

"Liam." She says it softly, yet there is a weight to it. They have a history.

It hits me that we have been playing together for over two years and I have never seen Kat or Blade with a partner. A solid block of time in all our mid-twenties with zero love life to speak of, as far as I know. Royalcore has been our everything. I

never asked Kat about her romantic history, but I always felt a little energy from her, like maybe I had a chance.

But Liam is the opposite of me, with his movie star face and athletic build, and, of course, he's a *man*.

Kat introduces us all. "Blade, Ella, Liam. Liam and I grew up together." I feel like there is more to the story, but I don't pry. I don't really want to know.

Next to Liam, Blade looks different. I see him sliding out of his dress into the shorts and tattered tank underneath, trying to summon all his masculinity, puff himself up. But still, he looks dainty, hollow chested and covered in ink, a rescue puppy looking to Kat for affection.

For the first time in months, maybe even a year, Kat suggests we keep hanging out after a show. "It's still early, let's go to that bar on the corner."

And we all go, with Blade and me dragging ourselves along, because Kat is our queen, and we are her loyal subjects.

The night continues with Blade and me sulking into our beers. Kat and Liam talk closely, as Kat radiates the type of luminous energy she usually reserves for shows, for her fans. I am trying to piece it all together. Where is the strange, asexual royal beast on guitar that Kat has been these last couple years? And who is this new version tonight, this pretty blond girl engaging with this fairly ordinary guy at a bar? Blade and I decide to call it a night. We say goodbye to Kat and Liam, who are so engaged in their intimate conversation they barely acknowledge us. Blade and I are quiet on the walk back to the hotel, neither of us eloquent enough to express our

bitterness. Blade and I each fall asleep in our own beds. I wonder whose bed Kat will choose when she gets home—she has never been the one to make the decision.

To both of our chagrin, Kat does not make the decision; she does not come home.

She bounces in at 9 am, with the exciting news that Liam will travel with us down to Philly for the last show of the tour. I hear Blade stifle a groan, as I force a tight smile in Kat's direction.

It feels like an eternity, with Kat and Liam canoodling in the van and Blade buried so deep in his sketchbook that he is pretty much trying to crawl inside, but we finally arrive in Philly a few hours before the opening band starts. Last time we came to Philly we all crashed at my parents' house. They insisted on coming to the show, and then had so many questions about the whole thing.

Ella, you gave us such a hard time about that dress for your bat mitzvah, how come you're willing to wear one now?

Blade, do you wear women's clothing when you're not on stage?

Kat, did you ever do a zandme to see if you might actually have royal blood?

This time we unanimously decided to stay at a hotel. I plan to spend the next week or two at my parents' house before heading back to Portland.

The hotel is affordable yet unexpectedly hip. The lobby is chic with its exposed brick, sleek black and brass furniture, and minimal décor besides indoor planters with hanging vines.

Liam surprises us by saying he called ahead and reserved a separate room for him and Kat. I do not like Liam, but in all honesty, there is nothing to particularly dislike. He is not very funny or charming, and we do not have much in common, but he seems like a nice enough guy. I am uninterested in him, which is kind of fascinating in contrast to Kat, who is capable of mesmerizing a packed venue of strangers. The two of them both happen to be wearing peacoats, hers burgundy and his black. As they walk up to the desk to check in, I can't help but notice how sophisticated they look.

Blade and I sit in our hotel room, which has one wall as exposed brick, same as the lobby. We are each on a bed, sitting there, waiting for the other to turn this new, uncomfortable energy into words.

Finally, Blade speaks. "I don't want to do this anymore, in the new year. I think I'm done with Royalcore."

The words have deflated him, yet I feel them inflating me, giving me permission.

"Yeah, I've been feeling it, too. Kat's been checked out for a while. She's all in for shows, but that's about it."

He looks on the verge of tears. "I guess I've been waiting for her to fall in love with me, but clearly that's not happening."

"Yeah, maybe I've been waiting for that, too." I smile sadly at him. I don't think Kat has purposefully been manipulating us, but I also think that is her bait, keeping us close, hopeful, in servitude.

My phone buzzes. It's Abby, from the show in Boston. I tell her she's on the list.

"Let's not make any big decisions right now. I think we're all tired. We've been on tour together for a while."

Blade nods and puts in earbuds. He lies down across his bed. I can tell this is hitting him harder than it's hitting me. In a way, I am relieved. I am set free. There is something sobering about seeing Kat's choice in a partner; there is no more deluding ourselves. Even if this is a fling, if we meet back up in Portland after the holidays and she is single, it won't matter. In meeting Liam, something was made very clear to both Blade and me: we don't stand a chance with Kat.

The Philly show is a rager. We play great; I wonder if there is something false, cinematic, in our performance, or if it is real and we are dynamite because we need that to keep us together right now.

I see Abby approaching the stage after the show.

"Hey, Abby!" I wave, a little too excitedly.

She waves back, smiling, "You were great. Best show I've seen in a long time." She is wearing brown corduroys with a slight flair at the bottom, and a white button up shirt with thin outlines of flowers on it. Her hair is large and curly, like mine. Liam is making his way up to the stage, also. I notice Blade clenching his jaw. Abby waits for me while I change in the venue bathroom. The wall is covered in graffiti—cartoonish dick drawings, some with wings or faces, Maggie's phone number, Lisa's phone number, a pentagram, hundreds of tags, and a few mentions of

who is a slut and who is the best. I finish washing the white makeup off of my face for what I hope is the last time ever and go out to meet Abby.

“What should we do?” I ask.

“My housemates’ band is playing a show in our basement tonight. It’s maybe a mile from here, we can walk.”

“Sure.” I follow Abby out onto the street, avoiding Kat and Liam and Blade on the way out.

The night is chilly, and I enjoy Abby’s brisk pace. We walk side-by-side, chatting easily, through narrow streets lined with three-story row houses and leafless winter trees.

We come to a stop at one of the houses in a row. It looks well-maintained, brick with turquoise trim on its bay window, a porch with two wooden chairs.

“This is it,” Abby says, opening the door for us. We walk into the living room of the old house. It smells of Nag Champa incense and maybe a hint of cat food and is decorated with homemade art and houseplants in colorful pots. The house has an open layout, and I can see into the kitchen. The counter is lined with jars of bulk items, rice, nuts, dried lentils, and medicine droppers with paper labels I can’t read. I know this vibe, co-op grocery stores, basement shows, and collective living spaces. I’ve always felt adjacent to it, but not quite comfortable with that level of community and connection. There is something a little safer to me about the anonymity of my one-bedroom apartment, playing larger shinier venues, shopping at a normal grocery

store. It suits Abby, this warmly curated life; I smile at her, just as we are about to turn to walk down the basement stairs.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing. I like your house.”

“Oh, thanks. Me too.”

The basement feels, and smells, absolutely gross—east coast summer meets gym class dungeon. The band sounds good, though. There is a female drummer, and the rest of the band is male. There are no costumes; everyone is dressed as themselves. There are maybe twenty people packed together in the surprisingly spacious basement.

The show is in honor of someone’s birthday, and the entire crowd files out shortly after the music ends, to continue the celebration somewhere else. Abby and I stay behind.

She makes us tea and we bring it up to her bedroom, a slant-ceiling room she painted light purple, with psychedelic band posters and vintage window curtains. Her bookcase is overflowing with books—mostly graphic novels, band biographies, and old sci-fi paperbacks. But then, buried between a Patti Smith biography and a faded Philip K Dick collection, I see a book about queer culture, and then another called *The Book of Pride*, and even a random fiction book that I’d happened to read about a lesbian ghost on a train. We have, so far, acted like two friends hanging out, but these books give me hope. I spot a few other books that surprise me—a Jewish recipe book,

a book called *Learning Hebrew*, *Maus*, *Number the Stars*, and *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank.

I decide it's easier, at least slightly easier, to ask about religion than ask if there is any possibility she might like me as more than a friend. "You're Jewish?"

"Yeah, my mom is Jewish, which technically makes me Jewish. But she was an atheist, so we never celebrated any of the holidays. My dad wasn't Jewish, but I didn't really know him anyway."

"Oh, then why do you have all these Jewish books, if you were raised by an atheist?"

"I don't know, it's a part of who I am, I'm curious about it. I wish I grew up with it more in my life, but I didn't, so I'm learning about it now."

"Oh, wow. I'm Jewish, but I'm not really into the whole thing."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, it's just not my thing." I feel myself growing warm.

"You seem embarrassed. Are you embarrassed to be Jewish?"

One thing I've learned about Abby, so far tonight, is that she says whatever she's thinking.

"I'm not embarrassed," I say, and then pause, honoring the question. "Maybe a little. I guess I associate Jewishness with how my grandparents were, like my *Bubbie* sneaking jam and Sweet'n Low packs into her purse."

Abby laughs. “I think that’s more of an *I survived the Depression thing* than a Jewish thing. Is that really the reason? You don’t want to be associated with stealing Sweet’n Low?”

“I don’t know. I always saw the condiment theft as being cheap. You know, they say Jewish people are cheap.”

Abby raises one eyebrow and takes a sip of her tea. I can tell she is enjoying herself. “Are you cheap?”

I consider this. “I don’t think I am, no. I don’t think my parents are, either. But my Uncle Gary is.”

“Okay, so we have a list going. Bad associations with being Jewish: stealing Sweet’N Low, one cheap uncle. Anything else?”

“Nah, I think that sums it up. Maybe being Jewish just doesn’t feel like who I am.”

“Fair enough.”

I can tell Abby wants to dig in more, so I quickly change the subject. “I liked your roommates’ band. Do you ever play with them?”

“Nah, they started playing together a few years ago. None of them liked me too much back then.”

“How come?”

“Oh, two of them are my exes.”

There is only one female in the band, and three males. I do the math. Abby likes guys. I feel my heart sink but try not to skip more than a beat in our conversation. “You live with your exes?”

“Yeah, we’re all like best friends now. They’ve moved on, they both have girlfriends who were at the show tonight.”

I feel burned. “How come you have the queer theory book and the pride book?”

Abby looks at me curiously. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you like guys, why do you have all those books?”

She looks confused, and then laughs. “My ex-boyfriend is the bass player, and my ex-girlfriend is the drummer.”

I look into Abby’s eyes, gathering back up the parts of me that had fallen, “So, you like drummers?”

She laughs, accepting my flirtation. “Not to be a fangirl, but I can’t believe I’m sitting here with the drummer of Royalcore.”

“Yeah, about that...” I scratch my head. “I don’t know if it’s really my thing anymore.”

She tilts her head. “That’s what you said about being Jewish, *not your thing*.” I feel my breath catch, a slight raciness of my heart. What is Abby doing? Is she trying to pick a fight?

She looks directly at me, what an intense person. “What is your thing, Ella?”

“Uhh...” I am unsure what to say. I can answer what Abby’s *things* are, despite hanging out with her twice. She’s into Judaism, even though she only sort of qualifies as Jewish. She’s into the LGBTQ scene, despite sometimes being in heterosexual relationships. She’s in a band that she fronts and writes lyrics for and loves, and she has shows in her own home, where everyone can see exactly who she is and how she lives.

Abby is not hiding her things; she is embracing them, enjoying them.

“I think I’m still figuring it out,” I say nervously.

The intensity leaves her face, thank god. “Yeah, I guess we all are.”

I sip my cold tea and wonder if I’m falling in love.

In the Uber back to the hotel I replay parts of the night over in my head, the flirty parts, the awkward parts. Despite nothing *actually* happening between us, I feel electric.

Blade is asleep when I get back, one leg peeking out from the covers. He looks so pale and thin. I crawl into the other bed and fall asleep quickly.

In the morning, I shake Blade awake. “I’ve been thinking about it, what you said, about not wanting to keep it going with Royalcore.”

He nods, zombie-like, because he is half-asleep and fully-depressed.

“You mean it, you’re done?” I ask him, gently.

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Okay, me too,” I say, flatly. “I guess we better talk to Kat.”

There is a coffee shop down the street from the hotel. We sit at a small round table—Blade with his black coffee, Kat with a latte, and me with a muffin. Thankfully Liam is back at their room, catching up on work. Up until now, the plan has been for the three of us to meet back up in Portland after the holidays.

“So, Blade and I were talking, we’re not sure we want to keep doing this whole thing, Royalcore, anymore.”

Kat looks confused. “We have a contract. It’s our jobs.”

“Yeah, but people change their jobs all the time.” I have never had a confrontation with Kat, and I can feel myself wanting to crawl into myself, or under the table, or down on my knees to apologize for upsetting her.

Kat looks at Blade. “You don’t want to play anymore either?”

Blade shrugs, looking down at his coffee.

I see her face shift; it is not subtle. Sweet, quirky bandmate Kat is suddenly lawyer-faced, *we are settling this now* Kat. “I am going to keep Royalcore going. Blade, do I need to replace you, too, or just Ella?”

Blade’s voice is barely audible and mostly mumble, but I make out what he says. “I’ll keep playing, don’t replace me.”

My eyes widen in his direction. He concentrates even more on his coffee cup. Kat is still all business as she looks me directly in the eyes. “You sure about this, Ella?”

I am not sure, but I nod. “Yeah, I’m out.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around Portland,” Kat says in my direction, as she stands up to leave the coffee shop. I say nothing as I watch her storm out.

I’m about to give Blade hell, when I look over to see him softly crying. He is clearly trying to hold it together but cannot.

“I’m sorry, Ella. I don’t know how to do anything besides play bass.” He snuffles and *almost* meets my gaze. “And follow Kat around.”

I give him a hug, which is a little awkward because we are both seated, and tell him it’s going to be okay.

I decide to see if Abby wants to hang out again, before heading to my parents’ house in the suburbs. She does.

We walk arm-in-arm through the cold sunny Sunday, using the weather as an excuse to huddle closer. I’ve visited this city many times over the years, for school field trips or to see bands play, but it’s different now, walking through these streets, seeing them through Abby’s eyes. We’re headed to her favorite record store and chatting about the details of a stage they’re building in Abby’s basement, and I, honestly, have not thought about Royalcore for even a minute since arriving at Abby’s. I will tell Abby, and my parents, and deal with the practical details of leaving the band, but for now, I just want to see Abby’s favorite record store.

The record store is well-lit and just as cold as outside. We are greeted, surprisingly warmly, by a short-haired woman with stretched ears and a brown beanie. A fat orange cat sits beside her and lifts its head, giving us what could almost

pass as a smile. It is a vibration, being in possible-new-love. I think strangers can feel the buzz, want to be involved in it. Even pets seem to be trying to get in on the feeling; I smile back at the maybe-smiling fat cat.

Abby walks directly to a milkcrate with a sign that says *New (to us)* over it. There are old school records in it, the kind my friends and I used to collect as teenagers. I haven't listened to a record in so long.

We flip through the records together, realizing the similarities in our musical tastes. She lands on a vinyl of Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* and a two dollar 70's Hawaiian Rock collection, both from the New (to us) bin. I have a feeling she has thoroughly picked over every record that is not new to the shop.

Both of us are on her bed. Me, on my stomach, flipping through her *Book of Pride*, Abby, propped up with a couple pillows, face up, reading through the inserts of her new albums.

"Hey, Abby." I need to tell someone, and now feels comfortable, safe, as good a time as any.

"Yeah?"

"I quit Royalcore this morning."

She looks stunned, and I'm struck with the sudden fear that she is only here with me because I am the drummer for Royalcore, that she is going to ask me to leave.

After a speechless moment, the shock drains from Abby's eyes and the usual sincerity returns. "Good, it wasn't your thing. Now you have room for whatever is your thing to come in."

I shift in the bed so that we are both lying face up, side by side. I move my fingers toward hers. Warm distortion washes over us as Neutral Milk Hotel plays in the background, the lyrics just a little too earnest and on the nose, but I don't even care, as Abby and I inch our bodies closer together.

My parents' home is small, cheerful, and pleasantly outdated. They still have wallpaper in almost every room, bold choices that do not take into account the eclectic furniture, the stripes and florals, the uniquely patterned area rugs. It is a pastiche of styles spanning decades, and it suits my parents well.

The moment I walk through the door, it feels like a hundred-person party.

"Our Ella!" My mom shouts, as the two of them trap me in a bear hug. My parents look so much alike, with their big curly hair and tan skin, their round bodies. They both run warm, with robust, hearty personalities. I think of my apartment in Portland, coming in from the rain to the one-bedroom's cool, sleek interior. I wonder what I am seeking out on the other side of the country, so far from the coziness of my childhood, as I return my parents' hug.

Days are spent visiting my grandparents and running errands with my mom. Most nights I talk to Abby on the phone, recounting goofy things my relatives did

that afternoon; she tells me the interesting bits of her day. It feels like an eternity until the weekend. Friday, I pick up Abby from the train station just as the sun is setting. She walks toward the car I borrowed from my mom, smiling big in her turquoise puffer jacket, pastel pinks and oranges streaking the sky behind her.

My parents are out together, so it is quiet when we arrive. The house is full of items I'd been so acutely aware of when my childhood friends would come over: the mezuzah by the front door, the collection of menorahs on top of the piano in our living room, the giant photograph of me in an ugly dress, with my poofy hair, reading from the Torah at my bat mitzvah. And honestly, I am realizing now for the first time, my childhood friends didn't even notice them. They'd blow by the signs of my "otherness" to see what sugar cereals we had in our kitchen cabinet or what new video games I had in my room. I see Abby noticing everything, but I do not feel self-conscious the way I did then.

My room is half nostalgia museum, half storage space. My drum set is crammed into the corner of my small bedroom, and Abby tells me to get back there. She picks up a ukulele I bought as a teenager and begins to strum. She sings some lyrics about a girls' bedroom, and leaves space for me to improv along. I slow my drumming and add some lines about my childhood junk being on display. We play for a while, conversing in tones and beats and lyrics that could mean nothing or everything. And then we switch instruments and make up a silly song about trains that feels one million times more powerful than any Royalcore radio hit.

My mom asks Abby if she'd like to light the Hanukkah candles. She nods and takes the lit candle from my mom. My parents sing *Baruch Atah Adonai*, and I see the glow reflected in Abby's eyes, as she lights the candles, and returns the Shamash to the center. She looks at my parents singing loudly, with their kind eyes and goofy hair and unapologetic bellies, and for a moment, I imagine I see the world as Abby does. These things I'd kept closeted are the exact reasons she likes me. She likes the heartiness and quirkiness that are laced deeply into my DNA. My small, cluttered house feels like home to her. I feel like home to her.

I don't necessarily see myself moving into a wallpaper heavy townhouse in the suburbs, but I consider what it would feel like to embrace all parts of myself, to explore where I've come from, where my parents and their parents came from. I imagine what it would feel like to play in a band where I don't need to wear a costume and the front-woman is just as into me as I am into her.

Shel Hanukkah, my parents finish the prayer and smile warmly at Abby and me. My chilly apartment in Portland, the legalities of terminating a contract with the successful band I've played in for years, the heartbreaking passivity of Blade and the almighty reign of Kat feel lightyears away.

Later, as I drive Abby back to the station in time for the last train, we do not talk about the future. We do not discuss whether I will stay in Portland or what my next job might be. We enjoy the drive, the dark night and comfortable silence, as the road stretches infinitely before us.

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Excerpt from



By Daniel Weizmann

Take my word for it: From the back of a cop car, leaning on cuffed wrists, the mountains of Malibu are not your friend. Who knew lush jacaranda could look so cruel? Up Agoura Road, the destination came into view: Malibu-Lost Hills Sheriff Station, cozy as a new suburban library, with mint pyramid roof and newly painted

parking stripes. And on their low concrete banner-wall, the golden Sheriff's star, six-pointed.

The CHP schmucks that breathalyzed and cuffed me didn't seem to know their way around. After walking me up the hall, then down, they found their way to the desk of Lieutenant David Bottrell. Soft-faced and blue-eyed, Bottrell looked less like an authority figure, more like a middle-aged enjoyer of milk 'n' cookies. He greeted with boisterous cheer—then froze when he saw me. “Take his cuffs off, for crying out loud, he's not a fugitive. I want to *talk* to him—in 2A.”

“He was driving under the influence,” the CHP cop protested. “Point oh-eight-two—we BAC'd him.”

“I don't care about that,” Bottrell said. “Mr. Zantz, I'm sorry about all this—I'll catch up with you in a few minutes.”

The chastised arresting officers popped my cuffs off in silence and led me to a little pastel olive room that also didn't exactly scream tough justice. Three felt-back chairs—I got comfy, massaged my sore wrists and waited.

About fifteen minutes later, Bottrell came in with a woman.

“Sorry about the wait. This is Officer Linda Nguyen.”

They both smiled. If Bottrell was Sir Laid Back, Nguyen was Lady Compassion. Maybe a child of Viet Nam, maybe not, but she spoke gently, without accent.

“So you were Annie Linden's driver?”

“Adam Zantz.” I fished for a card, placing it on the table. “Am I under arrest or something?”

She smiled, flirty. “I don’t know, should you be?”

“He’s *fine*,” Bottrell said. “Chief Bernhardt just asked us to get a statement. He’d like some help with known associates of Bix Gelden.”

“You didn’t have to cuff me for that,” I said.

“Yeah, the DUI thing really isn’t important.” Bottrell picked up my card and handed it to Nguyen. “You were *kinda* right on the line. Let’s talk about your relationship with Bix a little—we’ll see about clearing that up.”

I breathed deep, took in the bargain. “I’m happy to cooperate anyway I can.”

Thumbing at Nguyen, Bottrell said, “This one didn’t even know who Annie Linden was before yesterday.”

“I’m more a Beyoncé gal myself,” she said. Then, to Bottrell: “How do *you* know so much about the vic?”

“*Me?*” Bottrell said. “I idolized her.”

“I didn’t know you were a music guy,” she said.

“Actually, I play a little *gee-tar* myself.”

“You do?” Nguyen seemed genuinely surprised, but their repartee came off vaudeville.

“Believe it or not,” he said, “I was in a band before Academy.”

“No way, what were you called?”

“Oh, you never heard of us. We were *Chaparral*.”

“Sounds like country,” I chimed in.

“Country *rock*.” Made eager, he fished out his phone and placed it on the table, started scrolling around. “Got an old YouTube of us live at the Palomino.” He found it and pressed play, tilted to widen the screen. There he was, younger, clean-shaven, strumming and singing in a pearl satin cowboy shirt, leading a clunky bar band through “Lying Eyes.”

I swayed a little, feigned interest. It was the most awkward half-minute of my entire life.

“Dan!” Nguyen shook her head in wonder. “That’s *terrific*.”

“Just don’t tell chief,” he said. Then he swiped the video off the screen mid-song and put his phone away. “Jammin’ with your buds—nothing better.”

“So,” Nguyen said to me, “you heard about Bix, I take it.”

I nodded.

“You know him?”

“I do, yeah, we’re sort of pals. I mean, it’s crazy.”

“What’s crazy?”

“Well.” I raised palms. “I just don’t think Bix hurt anybody.”

Nguyen nodded thoughtfully as she glossed my card. “And you were employed not by Ms. Linden but by Lyft.”

I nodded, shifted in my seat.

“But you were her exclusive driver?”

“I guess so.”

“Wow, is that—do they allow that?”

“Technically no, but you know, she’s older and . . . I guess I thought it was a worthy exception. So we, we went off-app.”

“I understand. But how long ago was that?”

“Our first ride? It’ll be three years in August.”

“And . . . you knew her strictly as her driver?”

“Well—yeah. But she had me over for a few dinners. Social stuff but—”

“Nice.” Bottrell said. “Dining with the rock star.”

Nguyen said, “Is that unusual?”

“Is what unusual.”

“Hanging out socially with your riders?”

“No. Well, yeah, in general. But with Annie—”

“Did she say *why* she had you over for dinner?”

“I guess because we . . . we hit it off. She liked me?”

They exchange lightweight glances, like approving parents. No good cop, bad cop—they were both nice. Maybe.

“Adam,” Bottrell said, “who were some of her other employees, did you know them?”

“Yeah, yeah, a bit.”

“So, who else worked for Ms. Linden that you associated with?”

“I mean, it’s not like I *associated*-associated. But, uh, she had a private chef, Nikki, a woman, three or four nights a week. Also, Lucero comes to clean on

Tuesdays. Came. Troy, of course. And once in a while there were landscapers, I don't know their names. But I can find their numbers if—”

“That’s great,” Nguyen said. “This is really terrific.”

“Not as terrific as the Lieutenant singing Eagles,” I said and they both laughed.

“Now about Bix,” she said. “On site, you mentioned to Lieutenant Guiterez that he usually stayed in the main house.”

“He did. But Bix . . . Bix’s been fired a few times.”

“How many times is a few?”

“I didn’t keep track.”

“We heard Linden could be hard to work for.” Bottrell spoke warm and easy, buddy to buddy. “Any idea *why* Bix kept gettin’ fired?”

“No, but they had a *lonnng* relationship. Like, from his childhood. I don’t really know the details.” I pursed lips, held his eyes.

“Our records show that Bix had a drug problem.” Nguyen tilted with the weight of the concerned citizen. “What kind of drugs?”

“That I don’t know.”

“Mr. Zantz. *Adam*. According to the Chief’s notes, Ms. Linden texted you for an 8:00 p.m. pickup at approximately 7:00 p.m.—*off-app*, as you say. Do you still have that text?”

I nodded, scrolled my phone, and slid it across the table to her. First Nguyen hand-wrote the message on a pad and double-checked that she got it down right,

then she took her own phone and took a shot of mine. Phone-on-phone photography, probably held up in court.

Watching her, Bottrell raised a jokey eyebrow—all this techie stuff. He'd rather be strummin' *gee-tar*. "Guiterez told *me* you said Linden didn't usually give such short notice."

"I had mentioned that to him, yeah, that it was unusual. Unusually short."

"And, uh, *come to my arms*—that's a little romantic for a Lyft call, isn't it?"

I went hot in the face. "It's just—"

"Give it to us straight. You have an amorous relationship with this old dame?"

"*Nooooo*," I said, "that was just her humor. She, she sent little lyrics in her texts. I could show you others."

Bottrell faked a baffled smile but not for long. "Where do you think she was *headed*, Mr. Zantz?"

"I have no idea. I mean, later, I found out she had, uh, an old friend named Eva in Morro Bay she might have been planning on seeing. But that's a wild guess, I never actually took her up there. And . . . Annie sometimes called for rides just to, like, ride."

"Okay. But . . ." Nguyen shifted, spun her pen—first sign of a budding impatience. "when she *did* stop somewhere, what were some places she stopped?"

"Like, besides errands and stuff?"

"Yeah. No. Like, *everywhere*."

I studied their friendly, probing faces. I said, “Did you guys speak to Lyft at all? I truly want to help but I think I’m bound by confidentiality to—”

“Adam,” Nguyen said, “we understand that you want to be a reliable employee, that’s great. But with a double homicide and a suspect in custody, the DA can subpoena your ride records—*on-app*, *off-app*, all of it. We just didn’t want to get you in trouble with your company.”

I sat up in my seat, surprised to find my back itching from sweat. Despite good manners all around, I had a growing feeling I was getting soft-pedalled somewhere not nice.

I said, “Ya know, weird as it sounds, I mostly took her to hotels. She liked to hang out in hotel lobbies. Or restaurants around Malibu, Zuma. Once in a blue moon we went to her ex-husband’s place in Venice. Kronski, I mean, Haywood Kronski.”

Bottrell nodded. “We’ve spoken with Mr. Kronski. Anyone else?”

“Annie was kind of a loner. I can make a list of the two or three bars she went to—very rare. Some restaurants. She went out alone—like, for dinner. She also . . . she liked *staycations*.”

“*Staycations*?” The word made Bottrell squint like a lemon-biter.

Nguyen said, “It means checking into a local hotel for a quick getaway.”

“Yeah, like,” I said, “sometimes she’d spend a random night at The Surfrider. Also, the Topanga Motel.”

“Alone?”

I shrugged. “As far as I know. She said it helped her write.”

“I see.” The thought of such creative vagrancy seemed to tickle Country Boy Bottrell.

“*But*,” I said, a little overeager, “I can’t imagine this was for a staycation.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, she usually planned those for weeks.”

“So—no other ideas?”

I shrugged. Other places, east, deep in Hollywood, I didn’t mention, places I’d taken her only a few times, but I didn’t want to get into it because I was pretty sure they were places she went to score. “I really want to help but—”

Nguyen cleared her throat. “Can you be sure Ms. Linden didn’t employ other drivers?”

“Like I said, I don’t know—but she wasn’t very trusting. She wouldn’t touch the app after our first ride. If she left the house at all, it was usually me that picked her up. She was kind of rigid that way, you might even say ritualistic—”

“Okay.” Nguyen smiled but her eyes frowned. I was getting talkative in a way that bugged her—too much spontaneous psychoanalysis. “Was that *rigidity* what made Bix lash out at her?”

“I don’t know that he did lash out at her.”

The room went cold.

“Oh?” she said. “Are you sure he didn’t?”

“I don’t know.” Queasy now, the ugly fluorescents cast a death glow. “This has been a really bad time. Confusing. Annie was practically a friend.”

Bottrell wasn't buying. "And Troy Banks—was he a friend?"

"No, not exactly. But I liked him."

"Any idea why somebody would want to kill *him*?"

"No. Not at all."

"Why is Bix nicknamed Spider?"

Another shrug—my heart sunk. "'Cause he drove one of those Miatas?"

Bottrell repeated "*Drove one of those Miatas*" like words from a foreign language. They danced a little two-cop eyebrow ballet—now I knew I was being played like a squeaky accordion. I couldn't tell who was good cop or bad cop.

Nguyen to Bottrell: "We may have to pull Adam's ride history, cross-ref with the timeline." And to me: "We'll c.c. you."

"The dispatch has all that," I said. "Could I get a glass of water?"

"*Absolutely.*" Nguyen gave me the forced maternal but didn't budge. "But we only have a few more questions. Now, Adam, you live in a recording studio, located at 8337 Venice Boulevard, and you were living there at the time of Ms. Linden's disappearance, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"But you use a P.O. for your mailing—"

"I stay in the studio. It belongs to my second cousin's husband. Jaime Santiago."

"Oh. Generous second cousin's husband. Lets you squat in the workspace."

"Sort of. I don't *live* there—it's temporary. A place to flop while I save for—"

Nguyen said, “We know how long you’ve lived there—”

“And don’t give a rat’s pajamas,” Bottrell added.

He meant it to be funny, but an invisible curtain dropped on the Warm and Fuzzy Show once and for all.

Inside a breath, there were no good cops.

Bottrell tapped the table to excuse himself and suddenly I was one-on-one with the Wicked Witch of Malibu.

We had a staring contest. She won.

“Am I under arrest or something?” I said. “I told you *I’m happy to help any way I can.*”

She took me in anew, as if Bottrell’s absence freed up the full spectrum of her sadism.

“Let’s . . . worry about the arrest thing later and talk about Eva Silber. Our sources say you went to speak with her today. Showed up on her doorstep claiming that you were *close* to the late Ms. Linden.”

“Did she complain about me or something? I really only just met her, I—”

“She didn’t complain,” Nguyen said. “But she is a powerful personage—bigtime political donor. And *our sources* claim you practically barged into her home uninvited.”

“No, that’s not true. I was just interested in meeting her. Annie might’ve been planning a visit to see her and—”

“But you just told us you had no idea where Annie Linden intended to go.”

“At the time I got the text, I didn’t.”

“So you decided to just show up and—”

“*I wanted to share the loss.*” High nerves, going goofy.

“Just what is it you’re looking for, Adam?”

“Looking for? I’m just—”

“We’ve got you tracked for thirty-two rides past the Linden estate in ten days.”

“Maybe I just miss her?”

Bottrell returned with a cardboard file box and dropped into his lavender chair, which had shrunk into children’s furniture under his large frame. His reappearance gear-shifted the mood to even worse—I had been badly mistaken when I read him breezy. Now, he radiated the seething *noblesse oblige* of the Burdened Frontiersman. With Nguyen at least, you knew where you stood: Indochinese testosterone and shit to prove. There was geopolitical turbulence in her snicker as she took the box from Bottrell and drew out some ancient forms from a folder—handwritten. *My* handwriting.

“We pulled your investigator’s license, in order to cancel it. But it turns out it’s been cold for almost a decade.”

“Oh *that*? That was just something I tried, like, a million years ago. My sister’s a lawyer, she got me a gig with a guy who sponsored the license. I wanted to help her, I . . . anyway, yeah, that’s . . . that thing expired a long time ago.”

“So now you’re back in action,” Bottrell said, “without a license, and you want to play private eye.”

“Nobody’s *playing* anything. I’m in shock, ya know? I knew Annie, I gave her rides. *More*. She was giving me . . . giving me songwriting lessons in a way.”

“Oh,” Nguyen said—it was her favorite word. “So you’re a musician too?”

“Was. A wannabe. That’s not a criminal offense, is it?”

They looked me over with a kind of mutual bemused disbelief. And just how did I appear in their eyes? Without a doubt, I was a scrappy little city mouse of the gig economy. I didn’t need to qualify myself as a wannabe because my very existence was wannabe.

Bottrell sucked on his teeth, adjusted his chair.

“Let’s put aside your musical aspirations for a second,” he said. “Concentrate on the murder of an innocent woman.”

“*Yes, let’s,*” I said, sounding shrill. I ached from the knees up. “I’m just . . . still trying to cope.”

Nguyen chucked my ancient investigator’s license into the box.

“A seventy-three-year-old woman,” she said. “I ask you—what kind of sick maniac does that to a person who is *already* so fragile and so defenseless.”

“I really cannot imagine.”

“Someone *furious,*” she said. “Someone who thinks an old lady owes them something.”

I said, “How could anyone possibly think—”

But she wasn’t listening. She reached back into the orange file, pulled up a short stack of photocopies. She pushed the stack toward me: Three or four photos to

each sheet. The shadowy underbelly of the pier from different angles, slick with foam, garbage strewn in Xerox gray. A mound of wet dirt before the land slopes down to water. The dark pillars, the uneven water line, brush cutting spontaneous miniature streams—it all had the eerie feeling of pre-history or post-history. This was the kind of place they'd film a movie about the world after an atom bomb, starring a dinosaur-sized cockroach coming up out of the sea to chase the last couple on Earth, their clothes all torn from the blast. . . .

She flipped open the stack revealing a second photocopy: Annie on the rocks. More than mangled. Almost folded, bloated. Not like the funeral. Wedged into a muddy ditch. From one-two-three angles. Bruised everywhere, but old people bruise easily. She didn't look peaceful. No. A kinetic frustration was made statue by rigor mortis—*annie why?*

“Okay,” I said, breathy, dry-mouthed.

“Adam, you see this black line, this tangle around her neck and wrist?”

I nodded.

“That's *cassette tape*. And we are fairly certain it's from a cassette tape owned by Mr. Gelden.”

Wide-awake fade-out, face going hot to cold. The tape—*find my tape, silly songs*.

“Okay,” I repeated, licking my lips. “She was tangled in his cassette?”

They nodded.

“But you can't kill somebody that way,” I mumbled.

No response.

“I didn’t hear about that.”

“No,” Bottrell said. “No, you didn’t. And what we are curious about is just what you think you’re doing meddling in the investigation of a high-profile double-homicide when you don’t have the legal right, you don’t possess a fraction of the available evidence, and you clearly lack the good sense to keep out of people’s way.” He pointed at me, all cop now. “If you’re not careful, you’re gonna get yourself hurt.”

There was nowhere to look away—the pictures splayed between us yanked me into seasick recklessness. “When you say *we*, who’re you talking about? You two? Eva Silber? Who’s so curious about me?”

“We can’t share that.” Bottrell reached into the box like it was a magician’s top hat—out came a slim silver laptop. He handed it to Nguyen.

“*Why am I here?*” This time it came out like a moan.

Bottrell said, “Let’s review one more time.”

“Again? I still don’t understand—*am I under arrest?*”

Bottrell said, “From the beginning.”

“The beginning?”

“Annie Linden texts you this, uh, *lyrical text*. You arrive. You’re alongside the force until about midnight.”

“Right. *Helping them*. I’ve been through all this like ten times.”

“And then you go home.”

I sucked air. “And then I go home. Well, not at first. I cruised around awhile, then I went home.”

“Cruised around?”

“I drove to Hollywood to do a shift. And *then* I went home.”

They looked at me like parents again—but this time, disappointed.

Bottrell said, “Not exactly.”

Nguyen cracked the laptop, scrolled for something and turned it to face me: a video, staticky blue-black surveillance cam, some random empty 7-Eleven parking lot. Dated: *5-31 7:06 a.m.* The morning after the night of Annie’s disappearance. Even before I saw the Jetta pull up, I knew they had me.

She reached over to click full-screen: Bix in my passenger seat, gesticulating wildly. And there I was, looking concerned, depleted, also not hiding disgust very much.

“Yeah?” I said. “So?” I gave my head a single shake. “It was nothing, I just—he was in a rehab there and—it really wasn’t some big deal.”

Over the looping clip, Nguyen spoke. “The DA’s already prepping a confession for Mr. Gelden. His possessions are on the vic at the murder site, and there’s a long history of substance abuse there. *He’s charged.* And this little clip shows us that you knew exactly where to find him the night Annie Linden and Troy Banks were killed, when you had *specifically* been asked to inform the PD should you learn of his whereabouts. That, my friend, is called accessory after the fact. Lieutenant Bottrell will read you your rights. And you’re going to need a lawyer.”

Daniel Weizmann got his start at 13 writing for the legendary punk fanzine Flipside under the nom de plume Shredder. He went on to write for *LA Weekly*, *Billboard*, *The Guardian* UK, and others, recording two spoken word CDs for the SST New Alliance label. His debut mystery, *The Last Songbird*, is slated to be published by Melville House this May. <https://www.danielweizmann.com/>
